



JUST FUTURE PROJECT

Language Guidance for Advocates & Legislators

The way we talk about people with sex-related convictions impacts perception and policy

People with sex-related convictions are targets of some of the most dehumanizing, toxic, and radioactive labels in our society. Language that defines someone based on a crime of conviction, strips them of their humanity, and restricts their capacity for change. Terms like “predator,” “child molester,” and “sex offender” reduce a person to their worst decision in life, and communicate a degraded permanent identity. The purpose of these labels is to signal that the audience should not care about that person — and therefore the laws and policies that apply to them should be of no concern. This myopic and one dimensional approach to human beings who have caused harm does not contribute to our understanding or ability to effectively prevent crime. And when those in positions of power try to persuade us ‘there is nothing to see here,’ we should pay even closer attention to what they seek to hide.

Stop letting exceptionalism drive the discourse. Sex is not different. The things that help people live crime-free lives — employment, education, stable housing, social support and connection, a sense of belonging and purpose — are also the most effective approaches to reducing sex-related crime. Policy reforms that are good for everyone else in the criminal legal system because they increase access to opportunity and inclusion in our society are equally important for persons living with an historical sex-related conviction. Politicians like to offer second chances to people they view as politically sympathetic, but this approach is backward: We need to invest the most resources and support into providing pathways to success for the people we *least* want to reoffend — those are the people who have caused the most harm in the past. Most sex-related crime committed by a person leaving prison is committed by someone *without* a prior sex-related conviction.

People change. The vast majority of persons returning to our communities after spending time in prison for sex-related behavior do not reoffend. And the longer someone remains in the community the less likely they will ever reoffend.

Stop calling people what you don’t want them to be. It doesn’t make any sense to label someone the opposite of what you want them to be. The term “sex offender” implies that the person is presently at risk of reoffending, yet most people will never commit another sex-related crime.

Awkwardness is your friend. We need to disrupt the automatic thinking that happens so frequently around this subject. The term “sex-related” is *deliberately* awkward and effectively shifts the framing to increase openness to creating change.

Model Language » The DOs

THE PERSON

- Person living with a sex-related conviction
- Person with an historical sex-related conviction
- Person living on the registry
- Shadow prisoner

THE BEHAVIOR

- Sex-related offense / crime / conviction
- Harm from illegal sex-related behavior
- Illegal images

Harmful & Dehumanizing Language » The DONTs

- Predator / Sexual predator
 - Sex offender / Sexual offender
 - Pedophile / Child molester / Rapist
 - Monster / Animal / Beast
- Never use animalistic references*

- Whenever possible, avoid graphic or triggering language describing crime in a way that might provoke a “reptilian brain” fear response.
- Deliberate language choices to avoid foreclosing rational discussion do not need to downplay the serious harm caused by some of these behaviors.