



WORDS MATTER

Today, there are approximately 2 million people incarcerated in the United States’ jail and prison system. Incarcerated people are referred to in an array of dehumanizing labels, such as “inmates,” “criminals,” “prisoners,” “convicts,” “delinquents,” “felons,” and “offenders.” Even after people complete their sentence of incarceration and return to the community, oftentimes these labels follow. Terms such as: “ex-inmates,” “ex-prisoners,” “ex-convicts,” “ex-felons,” and “ex-offenders” are used to categorize and stigmatize people affected by the criminal justice system.

Dehumanizing labels stereotype and marginalize people rather than support them while they rebuild their lives. Individuals with justice system involvement are not defined by their conviction history. The words we use to reference them should reflect their full identities and acknowledge their capacity to change and grow.

Be mindful of how you speak about The Fortune Society’s mission, the people we serve, our dedicated staff, and board members. We encourage you to use humanizing language— your example will inspire others.

WORDS TO AVOID	WORDS TO USE INSTEAD
Ex-offender; Ex-inmate; Ex-felon; Ex-convict; Ex-con; Ex-prisoner	Individual, person, man, woman with prior or current justice system involvement; Individual, person, man, or woman with justice involvement; Formerly incarcerated individual, person, man, or woman; Returning citizen; People affected by the justice system
Inmate; Prisoner	Person that is currently incarcerated; Incarcerated individual, person, man, or woman
Convict; Offender; Felon; Criminal; Delinquent; Juvenile Delinquent; Juvenile Offender	Incarcerated individual, person, man, or woman; Individual, person, man, or woman with justice involvement
Parolee; Probationer; Detainee	Person on parole; Person on probation; Person in detention

