

Probation Quarterly: Guidance on the use of language

'Stigmatising language dehumanises the individual and widens the gap between probation and people under probation supervision.'

David, person with lived experience of the CJS

'Language needs to be kept as neutral and respectful as possible, otherwise it can make people feel not worthy and lead to reoffending.'

Jahmaine, person with lived experience of the CJSⁱ

The relationships between probation practitioners and people under supervision are critical to supporting rehabilitation. A sense of mutual respect is necessary for these relationships to be positive and productive, and the language we use to describe people supervised by probation is critical for helping to demonstrate such respect. People with experience of criminal justice have made important contributions to knowledge and understanding around the way language serves to stigmatise (reflected in HMPPS's recently published guidance on using person centred language).

Probation Quarterly would like all contributors to avoid exclusionary and stigmatising language. *PQ* exists as a vehicle for people working in probation to access academic research. One potential outcome of this is that the magazine improves the quality and effectiveness of probation practice, meaning that staff serve people on probation better, helping them to lead meaningful and satisfied lives, often after a period of marginalisation, deprivation, and criminalisation.

The belief in the ability of people to change is an underlying value amongst probation staff and is the first of the Probation Institute's [Code of Ethics](#). At times, however, the need for punishment, risk assessment and risk management gets in the way of putting those values into practice. This is most neatly captured by the tendency in official documents, political rhetoric and practice discourse to call people on probation 'offenders'. This word is problematic because it ignores the root causes of offending such as trauma, poverty and multiple disadvantage. Moreover, it elides the fact that not everyone on probation is actively offending and labels people with reference to only the bad rather than good things they have done in life.ⁱⁱ In short, it refers to *what* they are rather than *who* they are. One way in which we can avoid further stigmatisation and marginalisation is to use person-centred language when writing about probation and people under probation supervision. Person-centred language is 'a destigmatizing approach to people who face innumerable consequences—politically, socially, and psychologically—as a result of being affixed with a label that identifies them as "criminal"' ([Cox, 2020](#)).

We therefore ask contributors to avoid using the word offender (unless quoting a historical document or research participant). Similarly, please avoid phrases such as: damaged individual, deficient, or high-risk as these phrases locate the 'problem of crime' in the individual, rather than broader social contexts. Wherever possible, please use descriptive, neutral, person-centred language such as: person on probation, person under probation supervision, person in prison, supervised individual or person with lived experience of the criminal justice system.

Should you need any further guidance on the appropriate use of language in your submission, please get in touch with the Editor (details below).

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ⁱ Thank you to the Revolving Doors lived experience team members for their input on this guidance and permission to use their quotes.

ⁱⁱ For a discussion of the problems of stigmatising language and the benefits (and debates around) person-centred language please see: Cox, A. (2020). The language of incarceration. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2632666320940859>