

Using Inclusive Language In The Movement For Gun Violence Prevention

DON'T SAY THIS

INSTEAD, SAY THIS

“Keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people and criminals. ”	“Keep guns out of the hands of people convicted of violent or gun-related crimes. ”
“People with mental illness shouldn't be able to acquire guns.”	“People who are experiencing a mental health crisis and pose a risk to themselves or others shouldn't be able to acquire guns.”
“It is absurd to allow guns to be sold to felons and convicts. ”	“We need to ensure that people who pose a heightened risk to community safety , such as domestic abusers and people convicted of violent crimes, do not have easy access to guns.”
“ Gangbangers and thugs should be kept away from guns.”	<i>Really, just don't do this!</i>



LAUREN FOOTMAN, PHILADELPHIA, PA

“Words like ‘dangerous people’ are subtly but clearly color-coded. When you look at the news, people of color are often described and portrayed as dangerous. When people think of a dangerous person, they often categorize the person before they get to know the actual story.”



SARAH CLEMENTS, WASHINGTON, DC

“We know that often times communities of color are policed at higher rates, which has resulted in a criminal justice system that is full of people who have committed nonviolent crimes. Therefore, grouping nonviolent offenders into the same category as violent offenders can be isolating and unfair.”



JOSIE BRADY, DENVER, CO

“If we just use the words ‘mentally ill,’ it assumes that everyone who has a mental condition is violent and irresponsible. We can't use this broad term to single out a whole group of people.”



CAMIELLA WILLIAMS, CHICAGO, IL

“The word ‘criminal’ stereotypes a specific person, usually a person of color. Because of the disparities in our criminal justice system and depictions of people of color in the media, this kind of language stigmatizes communities, pushes minorities away, and makes them believe they don't have a seat at the table.”



CHELSEA PARSONS, CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS

“We need to be very mindful and purposeful in the language we use to describe gun violence prevention policy proposals and resist the urge to use linguistic shortcuts that can have the unintended effect of stigmatizing or alienating certain communities who would otherwise be allies in our efforts.”

Why Language Matters

When we talk about keeping guns away from “dangerous people,” “convicted felons,” and the “mentally ill,” who are we really talking about? These words can reinforce harmful stereotypes that paint all people with a criminal record or a mental illness as dangerous or violent. As a movement, we must make sure that we are not further marginalizing people who already face significant stigma, many of whom may otherwise be a part of our movement.

Equating a Criminal Conviction with Dangerousness

“What has changed since the collapse of Jim Crow has less to do with the basic structure of our society than with the language we use to justify it. In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don’t. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color ‘criminals’ and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind.”

– Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*

The process of enforcing all laws, including laws meant to punish people for illegal gun possession, operates under the assumption that we have a truly fair criminal justice system. Unfortunately, this is not the case in today’s system.

The criminal record of one person is often a reflection of biased laws or the selective enforcement of laws that target certain individuals and communities. Because criminality and blackness have often been conflated by the media, the policies crafted to punish criminal acts have disproportionately targeted African Americans and other communities of color.

Consequently, the language we use to talk about who should have access to their guns as a result of their criminal records can stigmatize and marginalize groups of people who have been negatively impacted by the existing criminal justice system. Stigmatized language also plays into the gun lobby’s claim that the gun violence prevention movement is trying to prevent people of color from obtaining guns.

Equating Mental Illness with Violence

Each time there has been a mass shooting, the discussion has immediately shifted to the mental condition of the perpetrator, implying that mental illnesses cause gun violence. This is not only inaccurate, it stereotypes a diverse population of people who have been diagnosed with psychiatric conditions.

Very little evidence supports the idea that people diagnosed with mental illnesses are more likely to commit gun crimes. In fact, they are at exponentially greater risk of being assaulted. Other factors, such as alcohol and drug use, are a stronger predictor of gun violence (Henry Steadman and others, *Rethinking Assessment: The MacArthur Study of Mental Disorder and Violence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Increasingly, blaming psychiatric conditions rather than the proliferation of guns has become a common tactic to avoid conversations about the need for strong gun laws and for psychiatric and mental health services.

The takeaway: be as specific as possible on who you think should be a prohibited purchaser.

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