

A CALL FOR INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Advancing a Human Rights-Based Approach to Criminal Justice at the United Nations



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December
2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our words matter. Language plays a critical role in shaping how we see and relate to one another, impacting perceptions, policy, and human rights outcomes. Derogatory and dehumanizing language has long “facilitated the systemic, inhumane treatment of groups of people” worldwide,¹ including those impacted by the criminal justice system. In every corner of the world, individuals convicted of a crime or otherwise involved in the justice system are often labeled “prisoners,” “inmates,” “offenders,” “convicts,” or “felons.” These labels frequently persist beyond prison walls – often for life – affecting societal acceptance, access to basic needs, and enjoyment of human rights. Women, children, minority groups, and other vulnerable populations face even greater barriers.

Despite growing awareness among academia and civil society about the power of our words, many others – particularly politicians and media outlets – continue to use stigmatizing terminology. Unfortunately, these terms have been entrenched over time within local communities, national policies, and even international institutions like the United Nations (UN). At times, labels are used to justify discriminatory policies or reinforce bias; at others, they may reflect historical norms and institutional inertia that have impeded change. For example, even as UN sectors increasingly embrace dignity-based, person-centered language, criminal justice terminology in UN discourse has changed little since the 1950s.

While the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ) and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) have examined social reintegration primarily through the lens of crime prevention and control, the UN human rights system – and Member States across all regions – have identified the need for complementary human rights-based approaches to the social reintegration of persons deprived of their liberty. Grounded in international human rights frameworks, a recent resolution of the Human Rights Council and study of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) provides a strong foundation for broader UN engagement and the systematic implementation of human rights approaches to criminal justice across the UN. As a strong first step, the UN should lead by example and eliminate stigmatizing language from its discourse on incarceration, social reintegration, and criminal justice more broadly.

This report examines the consequences of non-inclusive and stigmatizing language. By framing a person’s involvement in the system as their defining feature, labels obscure a person’s full humanity and agency, promoting implicit bias, stigma, and discrimination. This reality contributes to a person’s marginalization, and ultimately, the violation of their human rights. Notably, research further demonstrates the psychological harms of labeling, including diminished self-worth and internalized stigma, and how it can increase a person’s likelihood of returning to “deviant behavior” like crime. On the other hand, person-centered alternatives – which lead with a person’s humanity rather than their justice involvement – have demonstrated better outcomes for both reducing recidivism and safeguarding human rights. Terms like “person convicted of a crime,” “person deprived of their liberty,” or “returning citizen” have been shown to promote tolerance, societal acceptance, and constructive engagement by the public and policymakers. All things considered, potential arguments to maintain status-based labels – ease of use and historical precedent – cannot justify perpetuating the very problems that the UN seeks to address. By challenging harmful stereotypes and undermining systemic stigma, simple linguistic shifts can support the realization of human rights and dignity, particularly the rights to non-discrimination, equal treatment, and participation in civic life.

Following a review of terminology across the UN system, human rights treaties, and other soft law frameworks, it is apparent that the use of inclusive, person-centered terminology in UN criminal justice contexts lags significantly behind broader UN system-wide efforts. These include promoting and even mandating inclusive language in areas such as gender equality, disability rights, children’s rights, and health. While major UN frameworks increasingly adopt language grounded in dignity, the criminal justice field continues to rely heavily on traditional, status-based terms, resulting in clear inconsistencies in language across the UN system.

There is a striking need to close this gap by advancing inclusive language in UN discourse on criminal justice. To do this, we recommend that Member States and relevant UN bodies (1) welcome recent UN human rights system developments within the CCPCJ annual draft resolution on *Reducing Reoffending through Rehabilitation and Reintegration*, (2) introduce and adopt a CCPCJ resolution that highlights the harms of stigmatizing labels like “offender” and advances person-centered language in UN discourse, (3) review and reform terminology across UNODC-led and supported bodies, (4) develop language guidelines on crime prevention and criminal justice for UN-wide institutionalization, and (5) review, revise, and remove stigmatizing language across all UN work and encourage consistency across international and national frameworks.

In line with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and the emphasis on the dignity of all persons in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, implementing these recommendations would provide UN staff, Member States, civil society, and other stakeholders with concrete tools to combat bias and discrimination against justice-impacted individuals.² Importantly, the use of inclusive language will support the operationalization of international human rights instruments, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the Agenda for Humanity, namely the principle of “Leave No One Behind.”

I. BACKGROUND: UN CALL FOR HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO SOCIAL REINTEGRATION AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Since 2023, the Human Rights Council (the Council) has increasingly recognized social reintegration as a critical matter of human rights. At its 57th session, the Council adopted Resolution 57/9, *Social Reintegration of Persons Released From Detention and Persons Subjected to Non-Custodial Measures*, by consensus.³ Led by Costa Rica, The Gambia, Kazakhstan, Montenegro, and Romania, thirty-six States from every region co-sponsored the text.⁴ The resolution underscored that people affected by the criminal justice system face lifelong stigma and exclusion, resulting in “significant barriers to social reintegration and the enjoyment of their human rights, including in housing, food, health, education, work and social security and political participation, as well as barriers in their access to government assistance.”⁵ As requested under Resolution 57/9, OHCHR produced a study on the topic, which reaffirmed these challenges.⁶ It further emphasized that “by reinforcing human rights principles of participation, non-discrimination, accountability and indivisibility,”⁷ a human rights-based approach “complements broader crime prevention and criminal justice strategies,” including those central to the work of UN entities in Vienna.⁸ Among its recommendations, OHCHR called for cross-sectoral collaboration among international mechanisms, Member States, civil society, and other stakeholders to implement practices and programs that prioritize the rights of justice-impacted individuals and their communities.⁹

Beyond formal Council action, UN Member States worldwide have shown growing support for this complementary approach through joint statements, side events, and other advocacy in Geneva. The Permanent Mission of Costa Rica, for example, delivered a landmark joint statement on behalf of 74 States – the first time social reintegration was explicitly recognized as a human rights issue by the Council.¹⁰ After the consensus adoption of Resolution 57/9 and publication of the OHCHR study, Costa Rica delivered another joint statement on behalf of roughly 50 States, welcoming the study and urging system-wide implementation.¹¹ In parallel, a coalition of over 120 NGOs from 50 countries has expressed strong support for advancing these efforts within the Council.¹²

By interpreting existing international human rights frameworks, the UN human rights system has made clear that UN organs, agencies, and entities should integrate human rights-based practices into their respective mandates related to criminal justice. Given the UN’s extraordinary influence upon our global society, doing so would be essential to safeguarding the inherent dignity and rights of individuals affected by the criminal justice systems worldwide.

II. CASE FOR INCLUSIVE TERMINOLOGY IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE DISCOURSE

A discrete, yet meaningful, step toward advancing a human rights-based approach across the UN system – as well as at national levels – is to give greater attention to the terminology used to describe justice-impacted individuals in policy, programming, and practice. Avoiding pejorative terminology is not about political correctness. It is a necessary component of combating the stigma and discrimination faced by people affected by the criminal justice system.¹³ As advocates have noted, “the derogatory and dehumanizing terms . . . are no longer acceptable and, in fact, impede our process and progress towards human justice.”¹⁴ To effectively carry out the UN’s mission and uphold restorative principles, we must recognize that “we can’t change systems without changing our language.”¹⁵

“Labels” are social tags used to categorize individuals and define their place in society. They shape how people and groups are perceived, often in profoundly positive or negative ways. Across every region, people affected by the criminal justice system are routinely identified by derogatory and pejorative labels such as “criminal,” “offender,” “convict,” and “felon.” While incarcerated, many lose their names entirely and are referred to only as “inmate,” “prisoner,” their prisoner number, or other slurs meant to degrade and dehumanize. Even after a person has completed their sentence, terms like “former offender,” “released prisoner,” or “ex-convict” continue to define them by past conduct and status in the system rather than current identity. As such, these terms are known as “status-based” labels.

By obscuring a person’s full humanity and casting their system involvement as their defining feature, these labels shape how people are “viewed and treated, both within the [criminal justice system] and by society at large.”¹⁶ A considerable body of research shows that labels produce and reinforce stigma, facilitating stereotypes, prejudice, and social exclusion.¹⁷ Terms such as “offender” or “felon” conjure images of individuals who are dangerous, untrustworthy, or undeserving of public support and the full enjoyment of their human rights.¹⁸ As a result, even well-designed policies or programs are undermined when the surrounding language reinforces stigma. Given that stigma is a major cause of failed reentry,¹⁹ adopting respectful and inclusive terminology must be understood as a “cornerstone of reducing harm” and safeguarding the rights of people involved in the criminal justice system.²⁰

Beyond shaping public attitudes, labels inflict significant psychological harm on those to whom they are directed. As scholars have observed, “the stigmatizing effects of language can negatively affect a person’s ability to participate fully in social life and deprive people of their full personhood.”²¹ Over five decades of research on “labeling theory” demonstrate that persistent classification as “deviant” produces internalized shame, reduced self-worth, and “identity foreclosure,” or when individuals adopt the limited identities imposed on them by others.²² People subjected to such labeling are more likely to experience social isolation and, ultimately, to continue engaging in the very behaviors that led to their stigmatization.²³ Put simply, stigmatizing language can facilitate a self-fulfilling prophecy, wherein a person who is repeatedly called a “criminal” has a measurably higher probability of returning to crime. This reality is particularly the case for children in conflict with the law, who are actively developing their personal identity.²⁴ Importantly, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Nelson Mandela Rules both state that the “essential aim of [incarceration] shall be their reformation and social rehabilitation” and reintegration.²⁵ With this in mind, the continued use of stigmatizing language – particularly after a person has already paid their debt to society – conflicts with and undermines these commitments.

There are, however, many alternatives that “center a person’s humanity first and foremost,”²⁶ known as person-centered or person-first language. This kind of language offers neutral, accurate terminology that focuses on an individual’s identity, needs, and experiences, rather than their justice involvement. This includes phrasing such as “person in prison” instead of “prisoner,” and “person convicted of an offence” instead of “offender.” Studies show that inclusive terminology can contribute to greater tolerance among the public and policymakers and can “promote broader social and cultural changes in the perceptions of individuals who have been imprisoned or charged with crime.”²⁷ Advocates emphasize that the “semantic and public acceptance of terms like ‘formerly incarcerated’ or ‘returning citizens’ (rather than ex-felon, ex-offender or ex-inmate) are of fundamental importance to the process of public opinion formulation, positive media images, effective social service delivery and, most importantly, progressive policy change.”²⁸ By challenging harmful stereotypes and undermining systemic bias, simple linguistic shifts can support the realization of human rights and dignity, particularly the rights to non-discrimination, equal treatment, and participation in civic life.

In addition to countering stigma, inclusive language can also affect a person’s desistance from crime and their successful reintegration upon release.²⁹ In contrast to the psychological harms of stigmatizing labels, person-centered terminology offers individuals space to develop a positive self-identity.³⁰ When the language used by communities and institutions (particularly a leading voice like the UN) reflects a person’s humanity, rather than the aspect of themselves they may feel ashamed of, it can strengthen motivation for constructive, law-abiding behavior and support their long-term reintegration.³¹

Therefore, if the UN is to genuinely address the root causes of crime and fulfill its human rights-based commitments, it must prioritize the use of person-centered language that advances dignity, inclusion, and equality. The chart below offers guidance on status-based terminology to avoid and person-centered, human rights-based alternatives that should be utilized in criminal justice discourse on local, national, and international levels.

Terminology to Avoid & Person-Centered Alternatives		
Category of Terms	Status-Based, Pejorative Labels	Person-Centered Alternatives
Terms Defining a Person by Their Criminal Status	Offender, criminal, convict, felon, perpetrator, recidivist, repeat offender	Person accused/convicted of an offense (stage-specific); person impacted by the criminal justice system/justice-involved or justice-impacted person (inclusive of people across all phases of administration of justice); person in conflict with the law; person with a prior conviction
Terms for People Currently Incarcerated	Prisoner, offender, inmate, convict (in custody)	Person deprived of liberty; person in prison; incarcerated person
Terms for Formerly Incarcerated People	Ex-con, ex-/former offender, ex-/former prisoner, felon (post-sentence)	Formerly incarcerated person; person released from detention; person with lived experience of incarceration; person who has returned to the community; reintegrating person; returning citizen
Terms for People Under Non-Custodial Measures	Parolee, probationer, supervisee	Person under non-custodial measures; person on parole; person on probation; person under supervision
Terms Used in Pre-Trial or Detention Contexts	Detainee, remandee, suspect (as identity label)	Person in detention; person awaiting trial; person detained
Terms Related to Drug Use in Criminal Justice Contexts	Addict, drug abuser, drug user (when used as an identity)	Person who uses drugs; person with a substance use disorder
Terms for Children in Justice Systems	Juvenile offender, delinquent	Child in conflict with the law; child in juvenile detention

III. REVIEW OF TERMINOLOGY USED WITHIN UN SYSTEM AND FRAMEWORKS

A. Origins and Evolution of Terminology

UN criminal justice terminology emerged in the mid-20th century, reflecting dominant legal and criminological thinking of the time. While Member States have occasionally debated specific formulations, the UN never intentionally codified a status-based lexicon and labels like “offender” or “prisoner,” rather their use became the norm through decades of practice rather than through a single explicit mandate.

At the inaugural “UN Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders” in 1955, the UN adopted the original Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (establishing “prisoner” as the principal term for persons in custody) and institutionalized the term “offender” in its official title.³² These terms subsequently appeared throughout UN crime and justice work for decades. This language was further reinforced by regional UN-affiliated institutes, such as the Asian and Far East Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders (UNAFEI), founded in 1962, and the Latin American Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders (ILANUD), founded in 1975. They both retain “prevention of crime” and “treatment of offenders” in their official names to this day. A major structural shift occurred in 2005, when the UN Congress on the Prevention

of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders was renamed “The United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice” (hereinafter UN Crime Congress), broadening the thematic mandate, yet without expressly revising the established terminology.³³ It is also important to note that when the original Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners were revised and reissued as the “Nelson Mandela Rules” in 2015, the term “prisoner” was retained.³⁴

Across national systems, changes in terminology generally accompany broader efforts to modernize criminal justice systems, strengthen reintegration, and align practice with human rights standards. While reforms remain uneven, observable shifts – both formal and informal – toward person-centered language can be seen, particularly in the Americas, and parts of Europe and Africa. Similarly, the use of person-centered, inclusive terminology has evolved across the UN system, but the pace and consistency of that evolution differ by institution.

B. The UN Human Rights System

While there is no centralized UN terminology guidance specific to criminal justice contexts, the UN human rights system has been the strongest and earliest adopter of person-centered, non-stigmatizing terminology across the UN. Taking a leading role in shifting institutional practice, the Human Rights Council, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Special Procedures, and Treaty Bodies have consistently adopted person-centered expressions in areas including incarceration and deprivation of liberty, mental health, and drug use, aligning their linguistic choices with principles of dignity, equality, and non-discrimination.

Recent Human Rights Council resolutions, such as Resolution 57/9 and Resolution 53/27 on violence against women in criminal justice detention, reflect the same pattern – while earlier texts used more neutral but not consistently person-centered terminology, resolutions adopted within the past decade refer consistently to “persons deprived of their liberty,” “children deprived of liberty,” and “persons in detention.”³⁵ Similarly, OHCHR reports, including the 2025 study on social reintegration and human rights, repeatedly applied person-centered formulations when discussing deprivations of liberty.³⁶

Special Procedures mandate-holders reinforce this practice across thematic reports and communications to States. For instance, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has long maintained person-centered, dignity-respecting language in both thematic and country-specific work.³⁷ The Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls also adopts terms such as “women deprived of liberty,” “girls in detention,” and “women in prison.”³⁸ Likewise, the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery favors rights-based and person-centered expressions such as “persons subjected to contemporary forms of slavery,” “persons deprived of liberty,” and “incarcerated individuals who have experienced . . . exploitation,” though it does use the term “prisoners” when referencing existing UN soft law standards.³⁹

Across the UN human rights treaty system, terminology relating to deprivation of liberty reflects a mix of person-centered formulations and older, status-based terms. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Convention Against Torture, and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities generally employ language such as “persons deprived of their liberty,” “any person in custody,” and “persons with disabilities,” while terminology such as “prisoners,” “juvenile offenders,”

and “convicted persons” tend to appear in provisions addressing criminal responsibility or penal systems. That said, the Treaty Bodies’ interpretive practice trends overall toward person-centered formulations, especially the Committee Against Torture, Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture, Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and increasingly the Human Rights Committee, yet the terminology remains non-uniform across the system. The following chart summarizes linguistic patterns in both relevant treaty text and Treaty Body practice.

Terminology Used in UN Human Rights Treaties			
Treaty	Relevant Article(s) in Treaty	Terminology Used in Treaty	Terminology Used by Treaty Body
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976)⁴⁰	Art. 10(1-3), 14(2), 14(4), 15(1)	“persons deprived of their liberty;” “accused persons;” “accused juvenile persons;” “juvenile offenders;” “prisoners;” “offender”	“persons deprived of their liberty;” “anyone deprived of liberty;” “arrested or detained persons;” “prisoners;” ⁴¹ “convicted persons;” ⁴² “persons suspected or convicted of [a crime]” ⁴³
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976)⁴⁴	No specific provisions on deprivation of liberty.	N/A	“prisoners or detainees” ⁴⁵
Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990)⁴⁶	Art. 37, 40	“child alleged as or accused of having infringed the penal law;” “child deprived of liberty”	“child offenders;” “child / children deprived of their liberty” ⁴⁷
Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (2006)⁴⁸	Art. 6(3), 10, 11	“any person in custody;” “any individual subjected to any form of arrest, detention or imprisonment”	“persons deprived of their liberty” ⁴⁹
Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (2006)⁵⁰	Preamble, Art. 1, 2, 4, 5, 11, 12, 14, 19, 20	“persons / people deprived of their liberty”	Almost exclusively “persons deprived of their liberty” ⁵¹
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008)⁵²	Person-centered language in reference to persons with disabilities used throughout entire treaty. Deprivation of liberty referred to in Art. 14.	“persons with disabilities who are deprived of their liberty”	“persons with disabilities who are deprived of their liberty” ⁵³

Lastly, advocacy among Member States and civil society within and around the human rights system has also strengthened this shift. At a 2025 OHCHR expert roundtable on social reintegration and human rights, for instance, the Permanent Representative of Costa Rica in Geneva, Ambassador Christian Guillermet Fernández, emphasized the serious need to eliminate dehumanizing language within the UN lexicon as part of the implementation of a human rights-based approach.⁵⁴

C. The UN Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice System

In contrast, the UN crime system exhibits a predominantly traditional lexicon, shaped by long-standing criminal justice vocabulary that continues to rely heavily on status-based terms such as “offender,” “prisoner,” “inmate,” “accused,” and “juvenile offender.” These expressions appear across UNODC publications, technical guidance,⁵⁵ UN Crime Congress outcomes, and CCPCJ resolutions. A primary reason is that the crime system’s work is rooted in soft law standards drafted using such terminology.⁵⁶

Recent frameworks such as the 2021 UN Common Position on Incarceration, a joint effort of OHCHR, UNODC, and the Department of Peace Operations, illustrate this tension.⁵⁷ It notably utilizes a mixed approach, using terms such as “offender” and “prisoner,” alongside more person-centered expressions such as “persons deprived of liberty,” especially when referring to children.⁵⁸ UNODC’s “Prison Matters 2025” report expressly commits to using “prisoner” throughout, departing from this only when quoting external sources.⁵⁹ The outcomes of UN Crime Congresses follow the same pattern. The Doha Declaration (13th Congress, 2015),⁶⁰ the Kyoto Declaration (14th Congress, 2021),⁶¹ and the Kyoto Model Strategies on Reducing Reoffending (follow-up of 14th Congress, 2025)⁶² employ traditional status-based terms (e.g., “offenders,” “inmates,” and “prisoners”) in discussions of incarceration, rehabilitation, and reintegration, whereas more modern formulations (e.g., “children in conflict with the law”) are used sparingly and only for specific vulnerable groups. In parallel, terminology related to drug use reflects a similar evolution. Older crime-system documents use terms like “drug users” or “drug abusers” whereas more recent UN system-wide, health-aligned guidance, including the UN Common Position on Drug Policy and UNODC public health materials, favor person-centered formulations such as “persons who use drugs.”⁶³

Importantly however, the CCPCJ remains the most consistent in the traditional usage. Recent resolutions, including Resolution 79/187 (2024) on *Reducing Reoffending through Rehabilitation and Reintegration*,⁶⁴ Resolution 34/2 (2025) on *Celebrating the Bangkok Rules and the Nelson Mandela Rules*,⁶⁵ and Resolution 34/4 (2025) on *Advancing Crime Prevention at All Levels*,⁶⁶ rely almost exclusively on system-focused and status-based terminology, with only occasional person-centered phrasing in contexts unrelated to incarceration.⁶⁷

D. Terminology Used in Soft Law Standards on Criminal Justice

Across the UN system, entities frequently mirror the terminology found in the soft law instruments they apply, even when those instruments use older, status-based language. As a result, institutions that increasingly favor person-centered, rights-based formulations in their own reporting or advocacy must nonetheless rely on terms embedded in these standards. This is particularly evident in the crime prevention and criminal justice field.

- **Revised UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners [The Nelson Mandela Rules] (2015):** The updated Nelson Mandela Rules consistently rely on the status-based term “prisoners,” with subcategories such as “untried prisoners,” “sentenced prisoners,” “civil prisoners,” “young prisoners,” and “women prisoners,” as well as related terms like “offenders.”⁶⁸ While a few provisions contain formulations such as “prisoners with physical, mental or other disabilities,”⁶⁹ these remain anchored in a custodial status and therefore do not constitute genuine person-centered language. Even when setting out universal rights and safeguards, the Nelson Mandela Rules frame these protections within the category of “prisoners,” reinforcing a system-based naming approach.
- **UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders [The Bangkok Rules] (2010):** The Bangkok Rules adopt terminology parallel to the Nelson Mandela Rules, consistently using status-based correctional expressions such as “women prisoners,” “female prisoners,” “women offenders,” and “juvenile female prisoners.” The instrument rarely employs person-centered language and instead reflects the terminology of the Nelson Mandela Rules, which it supplements. Although the wording “women deprived of their liberty” appears in the instrument’s introduction, it is an exception.⁷⁰
- **UN Standard Minimum Rules for Non-Custodial Measures [The Tokyo Rules] (1990):** The Tokyo Rules rely almost entirely on status-based language such as “offenders” and “juvenile offenders.” Despite integrating human rights protections and referencing the dignity of human beings, the Tokyo Rules do not adopt person-centered language. A rare person-first formulation, “persons subject to prosecution, trial or the execution of a sentence,” appears in Rule 1, but the text immediately defines this category as “offenders,” reverting to that term throughout.⁷¹ The Tokyo Rules also include system-based expressions throughout, such as “persons under non-custodial measures,” but these describe legal situations rather than an intentional shift toward person-centered terminology.⁷²
- **UN Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of Their Liberty [The Havana Rules] (1990):** The Havana Rules rely on the core person-centered term “juveniles deprived of their liberty” throughout, reflecting the system-wide trend of favoring inclusive language when discussing particularly vulnerable populations like children.⁷³

E. Other UN Entities

Beyond human rights and crime, a number of other UN entities contribute to a broader institutional shift toward person-centered and inclusive language. Entities whose mandates center on health, education and development, such as the World Health Organization, UN Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS, UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UN Development Programme, and UN Children’s Fund to name a few, have generally moved more rapidly towards non-stigmatizing terminology than those operating in security, correctional, or labor-related fields. The former entities apply person-centered formulations such as “persons with disabilities,”⁷⁴ “children deprived of liberty,”⁷⁵ and “people living with or affected by HIV,”⁷⁶ and several have issued internal guidance to reinforce these standards.

Notably, there have been two examples of promoting person-centered language in formal and systematic UN work. First, in 2019, Secretary-General António Guterres launched the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy,⁷⁷ establishing organization-wide expectations for disability-inclusive terminology, which “aim[ed] to raise the standards and performance on disability inclusion across the UN’s work.”⁷⁸ Building on this, the UN Office in Geneva prepared the Disability-Inclusive Language Guidelines in 2021, explaining that “the use of derogatory or inappropriate language may amount to discrimination and impinge on the enjoyment of human rights.”⁷⁹ Referencing the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities as the gold standard for inclusive language, the guidelines offer detailed direction on the use of person-centered, neutral, and respectful language and easy-to-follow principles to combat ableism, celebrate diversity, and “[strengthen] the human rights model of disability.”⁸⁰

Similarly, as part of the UN System Wide Strategy on Gender Parity, UN Women and other partners developed the Gender-Inclusive Language Guidelines in 2021 to “promote gender equality and fight gender bias” within formal and informal UN work.⁸¹ These guidelines were accompanied by an online “Toolbox” for using gender-inclusive language in English, including language learning self-study courses, a two-hour educational webinar, access to training materials, and staff workshop kits to “raise awareness of the subject, better understand how to apply the Guidelines and/or promote further discussions in their teams.”⁸²

A distinct case is the International Labour Organization (ILO), whose core instruments on prison labor, most notably the ILO Convention No. 29,⁸³ employs terms like “prisoners.” As a result, while the ILO uses terminology aligned with human rights in other areas (e.g., “workers with disabilities” and “victims of forced labour”), it continues to rely on status-based correctional terms in the prison labor context.⁸⁴

VI. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Linguistic reform within the United Nations would be a practical and deeply meaningful step toward ensuring the dignity and human rights of all persons, regardless of past involvement with the criminal justice system. By aligning language with its human rights commitments and moral principles, the UN would appropriately lead by example, facilitating a ripple effect and promoting consistency across all levels. To begin this process, we recommend Member States and the relevant UN bodies pursue the following approaches:

- **Welcome human rights developments on social reintegration.** UN Member States of the CCPCJ negotiating the annual draft resolution *Reducing Reoffending through Rehabilitation and Reintegration* should recognize recent UN human rights system developments that emphasize human rights-based approaches to criminal justice. With special attention to HRC Resolution 57/9 and OHCHR study 60/55, this acknowledgment would link ongoing crime prevention work to advancing interpretations of international human rights standards.
- **Eliminate stigmatizing labels in UN discourse through a CCPCJ resolution.** UN Member States of the CCPCJC should introduce a resolution recognizing the harms of status-based terms like “offender” and calling for their elimination in UN and Member State discourse. The resolution should outline steps for revising existing frameworks and establish a phased plan for implementation.

- **Review and reform language across UNODC-led and supported bodies.** UNODC should conduct a systematic review of its own publications, guidance, and programmatic work, as well as the entities to which it provides staff support (including the CCPCJ and UN Crime Congress). Wherever UNODC has direct authority, it should replace stigmatizing terminology with person-centered language. In areas requiring Member State action, UNODC should identify needed reforms and formally recommend that Member States adopt the necessary linguistic changes to ensure coherence across the UN system.
- **Develop UN-wide language guidelines.** OHCHR, in consultation with UNODC, should prepare Language Guidelines on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, providing clear principles, terminology to avoid, and preferred person-centered alternatives. Ultimate endorsement by the CCPCJ and General Assembly would institutionalize the guidelines as UN policy and support consistent application across entities.
- **Review and revise existing UN and national frameworks.** UN organs, agencies, and entities, as well as Member States, and relevant stakeholders, should audit treaties, soft-law standards, and other instruments, including the UN Common Position on Incarceration, to wherever possible remove stigmatizing terminology and replace with person-centered language. This approach will improve coherence across international and national systems and reinforces dignity-focused approaches throughout criminal justice and human rights work.

Ultimately, a human rights-based approach to criminal justice – starting with the words we use – is a critical investment in promoting successful social reintegration, advancing the Sustainable Development Goals, operationalizing the UN’s principles and purposes, and most especially, protecting and promoting human rights. The UN itself has recognized that people who are impacted by the criminal justice system are too often denied their dignity. Let us now use language that affirms their humanity and upholds their fundamental rights.

¹ Erica Bryant, *Words Matter: Don’t Call People Felons, Convicts, or Inmates*, VERA INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE, Mar. 31, 2021, available at <https://www.vera.org/news/words-matter-dont-call-people-felons-convicts-or-inmates> [hereinafter Vera Institute of Justice].

² A justice-impacted individual is a person who has been affected at any stage by the criminal justice system, including arrest, investigation, prosecution, detention, conviction, imprisonment, non-custodial measures, supervision, or reintegration, regardless of the outcome or duration of involvement.

³ *Social Reintegration of Persons Released from Detention and Persons Subjected to Non-Custodial Measures*, H.R.C. Res. 57/9, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/RES/57/9, adopted Oct. 9, 2024, available at <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/RES/57/9>.

⁴ Co-sponsors of HRC Resolution 57/9 included Armenia, Canada, Cameroon, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Dominican Republic, The Gambia, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Guatemala, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Mongolia, Montenegro, Norway, Panama, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Spain, Switzerland, and Ukraine.

⁵ H.R.C. Res. 57/9, *supra* note 3, at Preliminary ¶ 10.

⁶ *Human Rights and the Social Reintegration of Persons Released from Detention and Persons Subjected to Non-Custodial Measures*, OHCHR, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/60/55, Aug. 25, 2025, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/a-hrc-60-55-aev.pdf> [hereinafter OHCHR 2025 study].

⁷ *Id.*, at ¶ 59.

⁸ *Id.*, at Summary.

⁹ *Id.*, at ¶¶ 62(a-c).

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⁴⁷ *General Comment No. 10: Children's Rights in Juvenile Justice*, U.N. COMM. ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD, U.N. Doc. CRC/C/GC/10, Apr. 25, 2007; *General Comment No. 24: Children's Rights in the Child Justice System*, U.N. COMM. ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD, Doc. CRC/C/GC/24, Sept. 18, 2019.

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A Call for Inclusive Language: Advancing a Human Rights-Based Approach to Criminal Justice at the United Nations

Perseus Strategies is a public interest, international human rights law firm based in Washington D.C. that advocates for the advancement of human rights throughout the UN system. This report was prepared by Hannah Pierce-Carty, Director of International Policy and Advocacy, and Jared Genser, Managing Director, of Perseus Strategies.

Dream.Org is a U.S. NGO advancing justice reform, climate action, and economic opportunity. It works to close prison doors and expand access to the green economy, bringing together unlikely allies to tackle complex national challenges and implement bold, practical solutions.

REFORM Alliance is an NGO that aims to transform probation and parole by changing laws, systems, and culture to create real pathways to work and wellbeing.

Acknowledgments: Nisha Anand, Janos Marton, and Sean Wilson from Dream.Org; Jessica Jackson and Erin Haney from REFORM Alliance; and Branimira Vedric, Legal Intern from Perseus Strategies, for their contributions to the report.

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Published in December 2025

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