

Words Matter

#WordsMatter

We are committed to a conference framework that truly supports children and families impacted by incarceration. We encourage presenters to include content that will combat stigma by using language that does not label children, stereotype families or demonize incarcerated parents.

In addition, perspectives that highlight an intergenerational cycle of crime or incarceration should be carefully crafted to accurately support the underlying causes of parental incarceration such as poverty, trauma and racism.

Think of how a child might feel when their parent is called a “criminal.” To children they are moms and dads first and forever. #WordsMatter and can signal to a child struggling with their parent’s incarceration that you are a safe space. Creating safe spaces for children whose parents are incarcerated can reduce stigma and negative effects of separation from a parent. Join us in using thoughtful language when speaking of and with people with carceral system involvement and their families.

Together we can change the narrative.

Three quick tips

1 Children are not targets! Please refrain from using the word “target” when discussing an area of focus for policy or practice. Instead use “designed to support” or “will focus on the needs of.”

2 When referring to Native Americans, please refer to that person as a Native Person, Indigenous, or use their tribal association. Please refrain from using the term American Indian.

3 When discussing incarceration we can use justice involved, justice impacted, incarcerated people, people convicted of crimes to describe individuals experiencing incarceration.

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Preferred phrasing surrounding justice related issues & the incarcerated

Instead of...	Try...
"Bad guys" or "crooks"	People charged with or accused of a crime
Balancing safety and reform	Advancing safety and fairness
Child prostitutes	Victims of human trafficking, sexually exploited children
Children at risk	Children of promise and resilience
Criminals, Convicts	People convicted of crimes
Criminal justice system	Criminal legal system
Dangerous neighborhoods	Communities experiencing high levels of violence
Defendants	People accused of crimes
Ex-cons	People who have paid their debt to society
Federal, state and local governments	Federal, state, tribal and local governments
Felons	People convicted of felonies
Homosexual, gay lifestyles	Gay, lesbian, queer, LGBTQ people and their lives
Illegal immigrants, Illegal aliens	People without documentation
Inmates	People in prison or jail, people who are incarcerated
Intergenerational cycle of incarceration	Intergenerational trauma or poverty, or systemic racism
Juveniles	Youth or young people
Law and order	Accountability, rehabilitation, restoration, equal justice, due process
Minorities	BIPOC – Black, Indigenous People of Color, Latino, Latinx, Asian American, Pacific Islander
Non-violent offenders	People who have been convicted of non-violent offenses
Offenders	People who have committed offenses
Parolees	People on parole
Poor, at risk	Underserved, neglected, marginalized communities
Prisoners	People who are currently incarcerated
Punish crime	Prevent harm, promote community safety
Racial disparities, gaps	Obstacles to equal justice, systemic racism, discriminatory school justice, racial profiling, implicit bias, unconscious bias, resulting in unequal rates of arrest, incarceration, long sentences
Rape victim	Sexual assault survivor
Sex offenders	People convicted of a sex crime
Tough on crime	Smart and appropriate responses
Victims versus offenders	Promoting healing for all who have been harmed
Violent offenders	People who have been convicted of violent offenses
Worst of the worst	People who have committed serious offenses

