



Stigmatizing Labels Used for Individuals Involved in the Criminal Legal System: A Meta-Study of Academic Literature

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Abstract

Labels for individuals involved in the criminal legal system (e.g., prisoner, offender, inmate) are dehumanizing and perpetuate stigma, contributing to re-offense as well as mental and behavioral health issues. There is a growing movement towards using person-centered language for individuals involved in the criminal legal system, however, it is unclear if such language has been adopted in academic literature. We examined empirical articles from four criminology journals to determine whether the use of labels has changed over a recent 10-year period and explore differences in label use across articles by identifying characteristics of articles that discuss individuals involved in the criminal legal system. Results yielded that the predicted probability of label use decreased from 99% in 2013 to 88% in 2022. While this is a significant decrease over time, more efforts are warranted to further decrease this high rate and examine how language choice in academic publications and other forms of media impact policy and public opinion. Authors affiliated with Criminology or Sociology/Anthropology departments had the highest rates of containing a label anywhere in the article. The findings demonstrate the research community's trend towards decreasing the use of stigmatizing language, however, more research and conversation about humanizing language in academic research is vital in the pursuit of reducing stigma and discrimination for individuals involved in the criminal legal system.

Keywords Dehumanizing · Incarceration · Labels · Person-centered · Stigma

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Introduction

Individuals involved in the criminal legal system experience a high degree of stigma. Broadly speaking, while incarcerated, individuals who experience stigma are more likely to socially isolate, use substances, engage in antisocial behaviors (criminal and high-risk sexual behavior), and adopt antisocial attitudes; and less likely to utilize facility healthcare and adhere to medical guidance (Martin et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2024). These experiences are also associated with an increase in psychological distress and depression symptoms (Martin et al., 2020). Following release, stigma associated with involvement in the criminal legal system shapes an individual's perception of themselves and increases the likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviors and re-offense (Corrigan et al., 2006; Quinn-Hogan, 2021).

Stigma is a multidimensional construct. Link and Phelan (2001) conceptualize stigma as an interplay between labeling, stereotyping, status loss, and discrimination in a situation of power, such as a carceral system. These conditions yield treatment that can lead to negative outcomes for members of stigmatized groups (Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014). In this manner, stigma serves as a “resource” that allows people in power to put or keep others down (Link & Phelan, 2014; Phelan et al., 2008). While incarcerated, individuals are labeled with terms such as “criminal” or “offender”, that define their existence and power status within society (Becker, 1963; Bernburg, 2019). These labels prolong punishment and limit both the impacted individuals' and others' ability to see the individual who has been incarcerated as something other than a “criminal” and therefore, an outsider or “other” (Triplett & Upton, 2015). Almost all individuals who are incarcerated will return to the community (Hughes & Wilson, 2004), potentially carrying those labels and associated stigma with them (Triplett & Upton, 2015). Being “othered” may lead to social exclusion and, thus, re-engagement with communities that participate in criminal behavior, resulting in reincarceration (Chiricos et al., 2007; Quinn-Hogan, 2021; Triplett & Upton, 2015). The act of labeling is a key component in the perpetuation of stigma. Therefore, understanding the mechanisms, such as the use of labeling, which drive and maintain stigma associated with carceral experience is imperative.

Labeling is a social process of categorization in an effort to define group boundaries and reduce social and cultural complexity, yet some labels can pose negative consequences for the labeled individuals (Galinsky et al., 2003; Link & Phelan, 2001; Link et al., 1991). Although labeling may serve to reduce cognitive load (Link & Phelan, 2001), labeling theory¹ posits that social labeling can directly impact behavior. Drawing from symbolic interactionism,² labeling theory was established in the 1960s, partially in response to questions regarding deviant and criminal behavior (Bernburg, 2019; Blumer, 1969; Lemert, 1967). According to the theory, negative images or stereotypes have been attached to deviant or criminal labels,

¹ For a thorough review of past and present literature on labeling theory see Bernburg (2019).

² Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory that centers the idea that an individual's concept of themselves is shaped by their experiences of interacting with others, both in the past and present (Lemert, 1967).

socially and culturally. These deviant labels carry more weight and override other characteristics or social positions, thereby characterizing an individual as “generally rather than specifically deviant” (Becker, 1963). Compared to person-centered descriptors (e.g., incarcerated person/individual), labels increase the public’s belief that the person will reoffend (Denver et al., 2017) and are often associated with negative traits, such as dangerousness (Elderbroom et al., 2021). Moreover, the term “ex-convict” has been associated with public desire for greater distance and support for punitive laws (Harris & Socia, 2016; Jackl, 2023). As a member of a labeled group, an individual’s social identity and interactions, as well as their self-image are altered (Boppre & Reed, 2021; Corrigan et al., 2006). Therefore, being labeled a “criminal,” perpetuates stigma and provides a person who has committed a crime with the rationalizations, motives, and attitudes that support their criminal behavior (Becker, 1963; Bernburg, 2019).

Research to date has both supported and challenged labeling theory. In support of the theory, research has demonstrated that labels are internalized and labeling functions as social feedback that shapes and solidifies one’s identity and behavior over time, increases negative stigma, and is linked to higher rates of adult crime (Bernburg & Krohn, 2003; Boppre & Reed, 2021; Link, 1982; Matsueda, 1992; Perry, 2011). However, the impacts of labeling may be more complex. Some individuals choose acceptance, defiance, or reclamation of labels (Boppre & Reed, 2021; Ortiz et al., 2022) and find shared community and support from members of the same labeled group (Perry, 2011). This evidence highlights limitations of labeling theory and the need for a more nuanced understanding of the underlying process of labeling and stigma.

Expanding upon labeling theory, modified labeling theory characterizes the process by which social and cultural perceptions of labeled groups impact individuals’ lives. Within a society, people internalize the social and cultural perceptions of labeled groups, wherein rejection and discrimination of the labeled group is expected (Link et al., 1989). When an individual receives a label, the social perceptions of the label become personally relevant and can lead to perceived stigma (i.e., perception that society holds negative views of one’s stigmatized identity), as well as anticipated stigma (i.e., expectation that one will experience discrimination due to their stigmatized identity; Corrigan et al., 2006; Moore et al., 2016). As a result, the stigma associated with the “criminal” label becomes internalized: the individual has accepted society’s stigmatizing beliefs of themselves (self-concurrence) as well as all incarcerated people (stereotype agreement). The internalization of stigma leads to a host of negative outcomes: reduced self-esteem (self-esteem decrement) and value (Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Corrigan et al., 2006; Link et al., 1989); a sense of dehumanization and deindividualization (Boppre & Reed, 2021); increase in feelings of shame, discouragement, and anger (Boppre & Reed, 2021); social isolation from individuals not involved in the legal system (Boppre & Reed, 2021; Moore & Tangney, 2017); poorer community reintegration (Brehmer et al., 2024); and increased likelihood of criminal behavior and re-offense (Chiricos et al., 2007; Quinn-Hogan, 2021). Ultimately, these consequences produce a significant vulnerability to psychological distress and reduced social support to cope (Link et al., 1989).

Although labeling of individuals involved in the criminal legal system appears to contribute to negative self and public perception, the use of criminal labels is common and widespread (Elderbroom et al., 2021). Many people who have been incarcerated believe that shifting to more person-centered language would be an effective step to reshape perceptions of reality and reduce stigma, both in the carceral setting and broader society (Bamenga, 2021; Bartley et al., 2021; Elderbroom et al., 2021; Richards, 2013). Across the country, nonprofit, professional, and governmental organizations have propelled efforts at stigma reduction by dedicating resources to inform the public of the power of language, increase awareness of the dehumanizing nature of labels, and promote systemic change with the use of person-centered language. Non-profit organizations such as the Osborne Association and The National Commission on Correctional Health Care (NCCHC) argue that identity-first labels categorize people solely on their incarceration status, prioritize incarceration over personhood, and undermine the goal of honoring human dignity and an individual's capacity to change (National Commission on Correctional Health Care, 2021; Osborne Association, 2023). To this end, The Community and FWD.us established The Correcting the Narrative campaign and the People First campaign, respectively, as a call to action for the public to recognize individuals involved in the system as people first and promote acceptance of people with criminal records as equal citizens (FWD.us, 2023; The Community, n.d.). Accordingly, language guidelines released by other organizations emphasize that words do matter, that people are not solely the labels forced upon them, and an individual should not be defined by a singular experience (Cerdeira-Jara et al., 2019; Prison Policy Initiative, 2024; The Fortune Society, 2022; The Opportunity Agenda, 2022).

The National Institutes of Health (NIH), American Medical Association (AMA), and American Psychological Association (APA), and Center for Disease Control (CDC) have provided guidelines on the differentiation and use of person-first language, herein referred to as person-centered language³ (e.g., person who is incarcerated), versus identity-first labels (e.g., prisoner, inmate) as a method for underscoring personhood, including alternatives to these stigmatizing labels in such guidelines⁴ (American Medical Association, 2021; American Psychological Association, 2021; CDC, 2022; National Institute of Health, 2024). The key principle of person-centered language maintains that an individual's personhood should be centered and emphasized, rather than identifying an individual by one element of their identity, membership in a community, or their participation in an experience (DuPont-Reyes et al., 2020). This explicit application of person-centered language

³ We recognize that person-first and person-centered language are not interchangeable (Ortiz et al., 2022). Person-first language entails putting the person before any descriptive characteristic, whereas person-centered prioritizes a focus on personhood and honoring community or individual preferences. Therefore, we have chosen to use the term person-centered (Turnage & Radecki, 2024).

⁴ The AMA has highlighted the role of person-centered language as conduit for preventing the use of dehumanizing language, and although the APA does not provide explicit guidelines for language referring to individuals involved in the criminal legal system, they urges scholars to 'Be sensitive to labels' (American Psychological Association, 2022). The Center for Disease Control (CDC) also emphasizes the importance of preferred terms for selected populations, in a section titled "Corrections & Detention" that specifies alternatives to stigmatizing labels (CDC, 2022).

to incarcerated populations by federal and professional agencies is an invaluable complement to the efforts of nonprofit organizations in this arena.

With the awareness that empirical research shapes public perceptions, public sources have called upon researchers, as well as those working within correctional facilities, policy makers, and journalists to use person-centered language in written and oral communication (National Commission on Correctional Health Care, 2021; Okeke & La Vigne, 2018; Tran et al., 2018). The NCCHC released a position statement directly appealing to these public-facing entities to prioritize person-centered language. Tran et al. (2018) summarize the impact of dehumanizing and stigmatizing language for incarcerated populations and stress ending the use of these harmful words within policies, programs, and research publications. Furthermore, The Urban Institute, a nonprofit research organization, created a guide that not only advises researchers to be aware of the power they hold to represent or misrepresent the experiences of others and reduce stigma whenever possible, but also includes alternative language suggestions (Okeke & La Vigne, 2018). As it relates to language in prison research, Cox (2020) provides a thorough argument for following the trends within the broader discipline.

Given the widespread use and impact of academic publications, researchers have a responsibility to attend to the language they use and mitigate the perpetuation of stigma for individuals involved in the criminal legal system. Research is used widely in healthcare and clinical settings, the media, and public policy (Almeida & Báscolo, 2006; Folkman, 1995; Hanney et al., 2003; Rozado, 2022; Tseng, 2012). Patients expect healthcare providers to apply research in their clinical practice at diagnosis, prognosis, and intervention (Folkman, 1995). Moreover, beyond publication, the dissemination and impact of research serve an important purpose in policymaking as policymakers are receivers and consumers of research (Hanney et al., 2003; Tseng, 2012). To this end, Hanney et al. (2003) argue that evidence-based policies should be prioritized as secondary outputs of research. For a given issue, research provides innovative contributions throughout policymaking from legitimizing and persuading others of its importance, developing well-informed arguments, implementing it effectively (and identifying potential barriers and facilitators to implementation), and evaluating its successes and failures (Almeida & Báscolo, 2006; Hanney et al., 2003; Tseng, 2012). Therefore, the language used in scientific writing has the capacity to empower these systems to approach systemic challenges with a humanizing lens by utilizing person-centered language, which could ultimately reduce stigma.

Criminology research informs criminal justice policy, and therefore, can pave a path towards reducing stigma surrounding incarceration through language. The number of articles published in criminology and criminal justice journals has greatly increased since 1985 and has changed the narrative of “nothing works” to a critical understanding of behavior and rehabilitative considerations for incarcerated people (Cullen, 2005; Roche et al., 2019). In the highly cited work of Conrad and Myren (1979), Conrad argues that “Criminology is the application of the scientific method to the explanation of the phenomena generated by the interactions of the processes in law-making, lawbreaking, and the reactions of society to these processes.” (Conrad & Myren, 1979). On the other hand, criminal justice is more practitioner oriented and focuses on the application of research (Steinmetz et al., 2014). In other

words, criminology is an interdisciplinary field of social science and criminal justice is an action-oriented application of research. The dissemination of knowledge from criminology research can substantially benefit policy by providing a grounded understanding of crime and criminal behavior that informs public policy by supporting improved solutions to criminal legal system concerns (Currie, 2007; Hodgkinson et al., 2024; Welsh & Farrington, 2013). Formerly incarcerated academics have been discussing language in criminology since the 1990s. The Division of Convict Criminology (DCC), a division of the American Society of Criminology established in 2020 and partially comprised of formerly incarcerated individuals, has criticized the use of dehumanizing institutional and practitioner terms in academia, as these terms further stigmatize system-involved individuals (Jones et al., 2009; Ortiz et al., 2022; Richards, 2013). In the words of DCC scholars, “criminology has a long history of producing research used to justify discriminatory and exclusionary practices against system-involved individuals” (Ortiz et al., 2022, pg. 265), indicating that the field may be perpetuating stigma of a population they are intending to serve. Given the considerable impact that criminology research has on educating the public and informing policy, the language used in this particular field should be reflective of broader conversations across disciplines for promoting a humanizing approach (Cox, 2020; Ortiz et al., 2022; Richards, 2013).

The possibility for scholarly work to have impact, and therefore influence widespread language use, is subjected to several factors, one of these being the Journal Impact Factor (JIF). JIF continues to be a highly viewed and widely used measure of journal quality, impact, and prestige (McKiernan et al., 2019; Padmalochanan, 2019). JIF is a citation-based value that measures a journal’s significance and performance (Glänzel & Moed, 2002). Despite some concern about the use of JIF, university faculty and authors report that journal reputation and status are key factors that influence decisions on where to submit their research (DeSanto & Nichols, 2017; Klobas & Clyde, 2010; Niles et al., 2020). Inherent to its meaning, articles published in journals with a higher JIF are cited more often, making the information in the articles consumed more often (Garfield, 2006). The content of articles, such as the title and abstract, methods, and author characteristics can significantly influence the impact of published work (Chamorro-Padial & Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2023; Goodman et al., 2001; Jimenez et al., 2020; Sorensen & Pilgrim, 2002; Subotic & Mukherjee, 2014; Tewksbury et al., 2005; Woodward et al., 2016).

The twenty-first century has seen a renewed commitment and energy to address stigmatizing language used for people involved in the criminal legal system. Early scholars established the role of labels in public and internalized stigma (Becker, 1963; Corrigan et al., 2006, 2011; Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Link et al., 1989; B. G. Link & Phelan, 2001). During the 2010s there has been an increase in research on the importance of language and the harmful effects of labeling (Cox, 2020; Denver et al., 2017, 2024; Harris & Socia, 2016; Willis, 2018). In fact, in 2016 the Department of Justice announced that the Department of Justice’s Office of Justice Programs (OJP) would no longer use stigmatizing labels, changing to person-centered language in an effort to reduce recidivism and support reentry (Jackman, 2016a). With the plethora of information surrounding stigmatizing labels, we would

expect a broad decrease in use. Given the dominance of this conversation surrounding language and labels, particularly in criminology, we sought to characterize the use of labels in academic literature over a period that intersects with this renewed focus on language choice as a means of underscoring humanization rather than stigmatization.

The overall goal of the current study is to characterize the use of stigmatizing labels for people involved in the criminal legal system in academic literature, specifically within criminology journals with the highest JIF. Using a meta-study approach (Crockett et al., 2012; McLaren et al., 2023; Saks et al., 2020), this project has two primary objectives: (1) determine whether the use of identity-first (dehumanizing) labels has changed over a recent 10-year period, and (2) elucidate differences in label use across articles published in various journals, written by authors with various departmental affiliations, and employing various methodologies.

Materials and Methods

Journal Article Coding

Journals with high impact factors were selected using the Journal Citation Reports (JCR) database, managed by Clarivate (Clarivate, 2025a). Journals listed in JCR are directly pulled from the Web of Science Core Collection database (Clarivate, 2024). Editorial decisions regarding journal selection for the Web of Science Core Collection are conducted by “expert in-house editors” with no affiliations to publishing houses or research institutes (Clarivate, 2025b). For a detailed description of the evaluation steps and criteria see Clarivate (2025a, 2025b) and Clarivate (2025b).

In the JCR, the ‘Criminology & Penology’ category was grouped under ‘Psychiatry/Psychology’ along with 15 other categories (e.g., Behavioral Sciences; Psychiatry; Psychology; Psychology, Applied; Psychology, Biological; Psychology, Clinical). To review articles from criminology journals that are most commonly cited, journals with the top five highest JIF as of 2022 were selected (Clarivate, 2022). The selected journals were: (1) *Annual Review of Criminology* (ARC; JIF=6.9); (2) *Trauma Violence & Abuse* (TVA; JIF=6.4); (3) *Criminology* (CRIM; JIF=5.8); (4) *American Journal of Criminal Justice* (AJCJ; JIF=5.6); and (5) *Journal of Criminal Justice* (JCJ; JIF=5.5). ARC was then excluded given that the journal was first published in 2018 and, therefore, did not contain data over a ten-year period. Articles published in the remaining four journals were included.

Articles published between 2013 and 2022 were obtained via the journal’s primary website and reviewed. Article characteristics of interest were identified based on published meta-study guidelines (Anderson et al., 2021; Crockett et al., 2012; Erford et al., 2010, 2011, 2012; McLaren et al., 2023; Saks et al., 2020; Siegler et al., 2020). Article coding was completed by a trained graduate student and trained undergraduate research assistants. All articles were coded by two coders, with study characteristics coded into a spreadsheet for the analysis. Coders adhered to a detailed coding guide that was created prior to coding of the first journal and included thorough instructions and steps for coding each variable, as advised by

previous literature (Syed & Nelson, 2015). The guide was modified throughout coding when additional details or clarification was necessary. Reliability of coders was tracked weekly for each journal independently, by documenting the number (percentage) of discrepancies between coders for each variable. In the event that reliability was below 85%, coders met to discuss reasons for coding discrepancies and how to code more reliably moving forward. Discrepancies were reviewed and rectified by the graduate student and research assistant who created the coding guide.

Coding began with screening each article for inclusion. Articles were included if they primarily discussed individuals involved in the criminal-legal system or individuals who committed a criminal offense. Next, the title, abstract, and body of the article were reviewed for the presence of identity-first labels, defined as terms that refer to an individual by their involvement with the criminal legal system or an offense. Given the considerable number of articles, coders searched for seven commonly used labels (*prisoner*, *criminal*, *offender*, *inmate*, *detainee*, *convict*, *felon*; Richards, 2013; Tran et al., 2018). For both journals, but primarily TVA, the labels *batterer* and *abuser* were also considered identity-first labels as they are considered “hate words” (Richards, 2013). In the event that the article concerned youth, coders also searched for youth-specific labels (i.e., *delinquent*, *juvenile*). The presence of a label was coded as yes or no (1 or 0) and the label/s used were recorded for the title, abstract, and body⁵ separately (refer to the results in Table 1 for all coded article characteristics).

We documented publication date based on the date the article was available for public viewing, whether the article examined or reviewed programs or interventions, and the data collection method (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, or review/report). Given the interdisciplinary nature of criminology as a field (Conrad & Myren, 1979; Steinmetz et al., 2014) and that conversations concerning language have been widespread, we also coded the departmental affiliation of the first author.

Data Analysis

Effect of Time on Label Use

To examine the change in label use over time, four logistic regression models for each journal were run to assess whether the effect of time predicts the presence of labels in empirical articles published in criminology journals, which was a dichotomous dependent variable (1=yes or 0=no). The time variable was operationalized as the amount of time (days) since time zero (start of the study time period; December 31, 2012) and was converted into a fraction of a year for interpretability of the model output. Journal (categorical variable) was included as a predictor (label~time_fraction * journal). Four models were run to assess 1) the effect of time on the presence of labels

⁵ We chose to examine whether labels were present in the body of the article as there were many instances in which an article did not contain a label in the title or abstract but did contain a label in the full text. Specifically, there were 446 articles that contained a label in the body but not the title or abstract.

Table 1 Article Characteristics

Variable	N (percentage)				
	All Journals	TVA	AJCJ	CRIM	JCJ
Total # of articles published	1944	518	503	271	652
<i># of articles that discussed individuals involved in the criminal-legal system or individuals who committed an offense</i>	952 (58.97%)	180 (34.75%)	213 (42.35%)	147 (54.27%)	412 (63.19%)
Labels					
<i>Title</i>	175 (18.38%)	22 (12.22%)	44 (20.66%)	14 (9.52%)	95 (23.06%)
<i>Abstract</i>	396 (41.60%)	47 (26.11%)	104 (48.83%)	54 (36.73%)	191 (46.36%)
<i>Body</i>	874 (91.81%)	148 (82.22%)	206 (96.67%)	131 (89.12%)	389 (94.42%)
<i>Anywhere</i>	875 (91.91%)	148 (82.22%)	206 (96.67%)	131 (89.12%)	390 (94.66%)
First author affiliation					
<i>Psychology/Psychiatry</i>	113 (11.87%)	43 (23.89%)	5 (2.35%)	3 (2.04%)	62 (15.05%)
<i>Sociology/Anthropology/Social Work</i>	126 (13.24%)	35 (19.44%)	28 (13.15%)	38 (25.85%)	25 (6.07%)
<i>Criminology/Law</i>	453 (47.58%)	19 (10.56%)	121 (56.81%)	72 (48.98%)	241 (58.50%)
<i>Biology</i>	2 (0.21%)	1 (0.56%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.24%)
<i>Medicine/Nursing</i>	15 (1.58%)	11 (6.11%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (0.97%)
<i>Multiple affiliations</i>	73 (7.67%)	11 (6.11%)	23 (10.80%)	18 (12.24%)	21 (5.10%)
<i>Other affiliation</i>	169 (17.75%)	60 (33.33%)	35 (16.43%)	16 (10.88%)	58 (14.08%)
Method					
<i>Quantitative</i>	598 (77.46%)	NA	149 (69.95%)	106 (72.11%)	343 (83.25%)
<i>Qualitative</i>	53 (6.87%)	NA	25 (11.74%)	21 (14.29%)	7 (1.70%)
<i>Mixed-Methods</i>	35 (4.53%)	NA	18 (8.45%)	15 (10.20%)	2 (0.49%)
<i>Review/Report</i>	266 (27.94%)	180 (100%)	21 (9.86%)	5 (3.40%)	60 (12.56%)
Program Assessment	75 (7.88%)	27 (15.00%)	31 (14.55%)	2 (1.36%)	15 (3.64%)

Note. Calculations for total and percentage included articles with an available online date in 2012. Author affiliation, method, and program assessment characteristics were documented, and percentages were calculated only for the articles that met inclusion criteria. Trauma, Violence, and Abuse is a review journal; therefore, the method characteristic was not relevant (i.e., "NA"). The values for method used by all articles did not include articles published in TVA ($N=772$), except for the review/report value. Label values represent the number of articles that had a label in the title, abstract, body, or anywhere across the 10-year span

in the title, (2) the effect of time on the presence of labels in the abstract, (3) the effect of time on the presence of labels in the body of the article, and (4) the effect of time on the presence of labels anywhere in the article. Additionally, exploratory analyses were conducted with each journal as the reference (i.e., coded as 0) to examine the relationship between label use and time for each journal. To limit the type II error rate, likelihood ratio tests were conducted on the raw parameter estimates using the *Car* package (*Anova* function) in RStudio (Fox & Weisber, 2019).

Meta-Study

Following meta-study guidelines (Anderson et al., 2021; Crockett et al., 2012; McLaren et al., 2023; Saks et al., 2020; Siegler et al., 2020), descriptive statistics were run to identify characteristics (e.g., first author department affiliation, data collection method, program assessment) of articles that discuss individuals involved in the criminal legal system.

Results

Coding Reliability

During the first week of coding for each journal, reliability for coding article characteristics was between 72.41% and 100%. In accordance with (Syed & Nelson, 2015), article coding was an iterative process where coders met frequently to discuss and adjust the coding guide throughout to increase team consistency. For all journals, coding for inclusion (i.e., topic relevance) and first author department affiliation proved challenging for all coders. Thus, coding reliability of these characteristics varied throughout the duration of the study. Coders met to discuss tools for assessing topic relevance and methods for identifying the correct author affiliation, which were subsequently written into the coding guide for future use. These tools proved useful, as coding reliability of topic relevance and author affiliation increased to a minimum of 86.66%. Coding of all other variables was 93.75% or higher. Although the term “perpetrators” was not originally included in the group of stigmatizing labels, TVA largely used this term to discuss individuals who have committed a criminal offense. Therefore, this label was considered a stigmatizing label.

Predicted Probability Over 10 Years

The predicted probability of label use anywhere in articles published in any of the four journals was 99% in 2013 and significantly decreased to 88% in 2022. The predicted probability of label use anywhere in articles published in TVA was 97% in 2013 and significantly decreased to 52% in 2022; CRIM was 98% in 2013 and significantly decreased to 69% in 2022; JCJ was 98% in 2013 and significantly

decreased to 89% in 2022; and AJCJ decreased from 97% in 2013 to 96% in 2022, which was not statistically significant.

Effect of Time on Label Use in the Title

Label use (1=yes or 2=no) in the title, abstract, body, and anywhere, was analyzed separately in generalized linear models (GLM) that included time, journal, and their interaction as regressors. The binomial family with the logit link function was used for the GLM because the dependent variable, label, was dichotomous. The journal variable was dummy coded. To obtain the effect for each journal, the journal variable was recoded with each journal as the reference (i.e., coded as 0). The raw parameter estimates from the GLM and the odds ratio to quantify effect size of significant effects are reported.

Over the 10-year period and across the four journals, the effect of time on label use in the title, abstract, body, and anywhere in the article were significant (see Table 2). The odds of a label use in the title decreases by a factor of 0.94 per year (Fig. 1); the odds of label use in the abstract decreases by a factor of 0.92 per year (Fig. 2); the odds of label use in the abstract decreases by a factor of 0.82 per year (Fig. 3); the odds of label use in the abstract decreases by a factor of 0.81 per year (Fig. 4).

The effect of time on label use in the title was only significant for articles published in TVA, indicating that the odds of label use in the abstract decreases by a factor of 0.77 per year. The effect of time on label use in the abstract of articles published in TVA and AJCJ was significant, which indicates that the odds of label use in the abstract decreases by a factor of 0.85 per year in TVA and 0.86 per year in AJCJ. The effect of time on label use in the body of articles published in TVA, CRIM, or JCJ were significant, such that the odds of label use in the body decreases by a factor of 0.75 per year in TVA, 0.76 per year in CRIM, and 0.86 per year in JCJ. Finally, the effect of time on label use anywhere in an article was significant for articles published in TVA, CRIM, or JCJ, which indicates that the odds of label use anywhere in an article decreases by a factor of 0.75 per year in TVA, 0.76 per year in CRIM, and 0.84 per year in JCJ (see Table 2).

Rates of Specific Labels

Across all journals, *offender* was the most commonly used label with 780 (81.93%) of the included articles using the label at least once, followed by *inmate* (24.89%), *prisoner* (20.17%), *criminal* (17.12%), *juvenile* (12.61%), *delinquent* (10.19%), *felon* (3.68%), *detainee* (2.84%), and *convict* (2.21%).

Meta-Study of Article Characteristics

Between January 2013 and December 2022, the number of articles published across the four journals ranged from 271 to 652, with roughly 35–63% of the articles included (see Table 1). In total, 952 articles were reviewed, 28 of which did not

Table 2 Model results. Effect of time on label use

Title				Abstract				Body				Anywhere				
β	SE	χ^2	p	β	SE	χ^2	p	β	SE	χ^2	p	β	SE	χ^2	p	
<i>All</i>	-0.06	0.03	3.88	.049	-0.09	0.02	13.04	<.001	-0.20	0.04	17.68	<.001	-0.21	0.05	19.73	<.001
<i>TVA</i>	-0.03	0.10	7.10	.008	-0.16	0.07	4.91	.027	-0.29	0.09	11.13	<.001	-0.29	0.09	11.07	<.001
<i>AJCJ</i>	-0.07	0.06	1.50	>.05	-0.15	0.05	8.64	.003	-0.03	0.14	0.05	>.05	-0.03	0.14	0.05	>.05
<i>CRIM</i>	-0.10	0.10	0.91	>.05	-0.07	0.06	1.31	>.05	-0.27	0.10	7.69	.006	-0.27	0.10	7.65	.006
<i>JCJ</i>	-0.01	0.04	0.08	>.05	-0.04	0.03	1.85	>.05	-0.15	0.08	3.97	.047	-0.17	0.08	4.88	.027

Note. Significant results are indicated by the bolded *p*-value

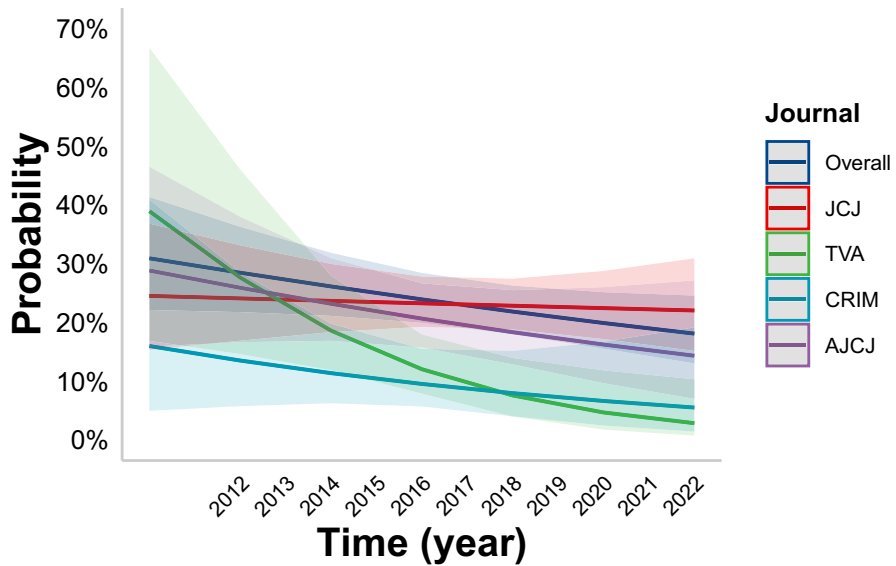


Fig. 1 Predicted probability of stigmatizing label use in the title. Effect of time on label use in the title of articles was statistically significant. The predicted probability of stigmatizing label use in the title was significant for articles published in TVA

include an abstract. Across the four journals, between 124 and 338 articles were excluded from each journal (i.e., not topically relevant) as the article primarily focused on content other than individuals involved in the criminal legal system, such as youth bullying, victimization, crime rates more generally, jury decision making, policy, the carceral system as a whole, perceived fear of crime/public perception of crime, correctional staff, police/policing, or at-risk youth. The number of articles that met inclusion criteria per year, including 2012, ranged from three to 52 across all journals. In terms of methods utilized, TVA is a review journal and thus, the occurrence of review articles across all journals ranged from 3–100%. Across the other three journals, the majority of the articles utilized were quantitative at roughly 70–83%. Regardless of methodology (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, or review) label use occurred in 86–96% of articles (see Table 3).

For three of the journals (AJCJ, CRIM, and J CJ) the most common first author department affiliation was criminology at roughly 50–60% of the articles. Alternatively, the most common first author department affiliation for TVA was the “other affiliation” category at 33.33% (e.g., organizations, research institutes/centers, public affairs, political science) with Psychiatry/Psychology as the second most common (23.89%). Across all journals, the most common affiliation was Criminology

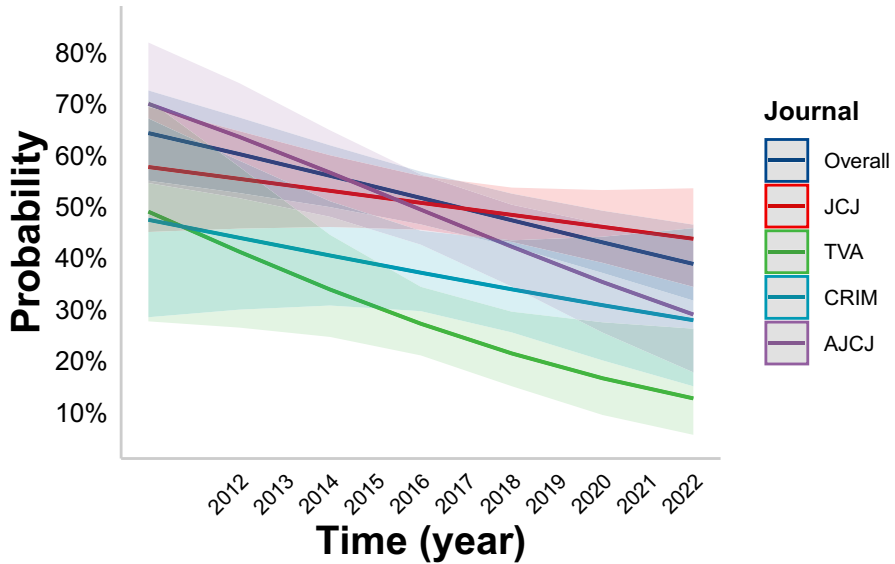


Fig. 2 Predicted probability of stigmatizing label use in the abstract. Effect of time on label use in the abstract of articles was statistically significant. The predicted probability of stigmatizing label use in the abstract was significant for articles published in TVA or AJCJ

(47.58%), followed by Other Affiliation (17.75%), Sociology/Anthropology (13.24%) and Psychology/Psychiatry (11.87%).

Articles published by first authors with a Criminology⁶ or a Sociology/Anthropology⁷ department affiliation had the highest rates of containing a label anywhere in the article (94.48%), followed by Psychology/Psychiatry⁸ (93.81%) and Other department⁹ (86.39%). Articles published by authors with a Psychology/Psychiatry (34.51%) department affiliation had the highest rates of containing a label in the title, followed by Criminology (17.44%), Sociology/Anthropology (17.44%), and Other department (16.57%). These rates varied by journal (see Table 4).

⁶ Articles whose first authors had only a Criminology/law department affiliation and multiple affiliations including Criminology were included.

⁷ Articles whose first authors had only a Sociology/Anthropology department affiliation and multiple affiliations including Sociology/Anthropology were included.

⁸ Articles whose first authors had only a Psychology/Psychiatry department affiliation and multiple affiliations including Psychology/Psychiatry were included.

⁹ Articles whose first authors had only an Other department affiliation and multiple affiliations including Other were included.

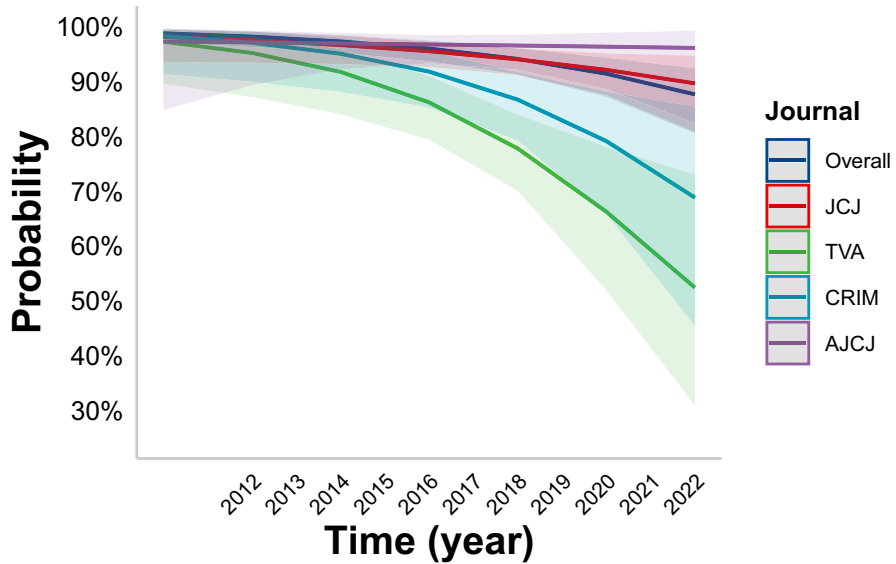


Fig. 3 Predicted probability of stigmatizing label use in the body of an article. Effect of time on label use in the body of an article was statistically significant. The predicted probability of stigmatizing label use in the body of an article was significant for articles published in TVA, CRIM, or JCJ

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to characterize language, specifically stigmatizing labels, used to refer to individuals involved in the criminal legal system in published academic work. Dehumanizing labels have the power to reinforce stigmatizing narratives of individuals involved in the criminal legal system. The language used in academic publications is widely utilized and therefore plays a role in the continual cycle of stigmatizing attitudes towards system-involved individuals. We coded article characteristics over ten years from four criminology journals with the highest impact factor to conduct a meta-study and assess the effect of time on label use.

An investigation of label use in the title, abstract, and body of articles over time revealed that the use of labels has significantly decreased by 11% between 2013 and 2022. Nonetheless, after 10 years, the likelihood of an article containing a label for individuals involved in the criminal legal system in criminology journals remained high at 88%. Over time the use of dehumanizing labels in the title and abstract significantly decreased; this result was driven primarily by a significant decrease in the titles of articles published in TVA and the abstracts of articles published in TVA and

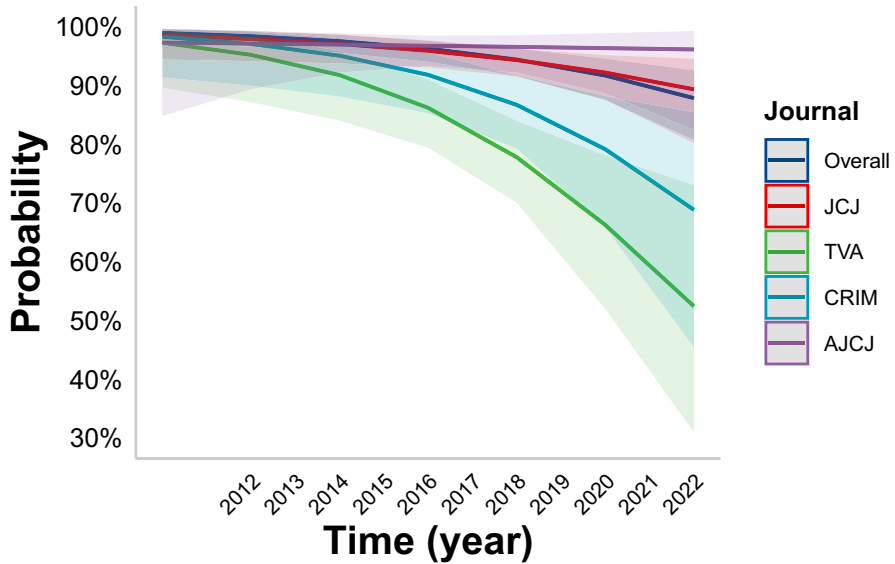


Fig. 4 Predicted probability of stigmatizing label use anywhere in the article. Effect of time on label use anywhere in an article was statistically significant. The predicted probability of stigmatizing label use anywhere in an article was significant for articles published in TVA, CRIM, or JCI

AJCJ. The title and abstract present an initial impression for potential readers on the content and quality of an article (Chamorro-Padial & Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2023). The average readers spends less than a minute reviewing the title, abstract, and keywords of an article (Chamorro-Padial & Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2023). These components can attract or detract readers and inform the reader on the content and merits of the article (Goodman et al., 2001; Jimenez et al., 2020). Given the significance of these components and the likelihood that people may only read a limited amount of information from the title and abstract that contain dehumanizing language, it will likely significantly impact their perception of the content. Therefore, their consumption of a limited amount of information that uses dehumanizing labels may be a means of perpetuating the use of this language.

We also found that across all journals, the most common first author department affiliation was Criminology. The rate of label use for the various first author department affiliations ranged from roughly 17–94%. Of the four journals examined in the current work, Criminology was the only journal that provided clear guidance on language in the author submission guidelines by referring to the principles for reducing bias declared by the APA. Criminology societies and academies have offered suggestions for respecting the rights of all people, reducing discrimination, and encourage

Table 3 Label use by method

N (percentage)

	Journal				
	<i>All</i>	<i>TVA</i>	<i>AJCJ</i>	<i>CRIM</i>	<i>JCJ</i>
Quantitative					
<i>Total # of Articles</i>	599	NA	149	106	343
<i>Title</i>	125 (20.87%)	NA	31 (20.81%)	9 (8.49%)	85 (24.78%)
<i>Anywhere</i>	563 (93.99%)	NA	143 (95.97%)	95 (89.62%)	324 (94.46%)
Qualitative					
<i>Total # of Articles</i>	53	NA	25	21	7
<i>Title</i>	12 (22.64%)	NA	7 (28%)	2 (9.52%)	3 (42.86%)
<i>Anywhere</i>	51 (96.23%)	NA	25 (100%)	19 (90.48%)	7 (100%)
Mixed Methods					
<i>Total # of Articles</i>	35	NA	18	15	2
<i>Title</i>	9 (25.71%)	NA	5 (27.78%)	2 (20%)	1 (50%)
<i>Anywhere</i>	32 (91.43%)	NA	8 (100%)	12 (80%)	2 (100%)
Review/Report					
<i>Total # of Articles</i>	266	180	21	5	60
<i>Title</i>	29 (10.90%)	22 (12.22%)	1 (4.67%)	0 (0%)	6 (10%)
<i>Anywhere</i>	230 (86.47%)	148 (82.22%)	20 (95.24%)	5 (100%)	57 (95%)

Table 4 Label use by department affiliation

N (percentage)

	Journal				
	<i>All</i>	<i>TVA</i>	<i>AJCJ</i>	<i>CRIM</i>	<i>JCJ</i>
Criminology					
<i>Total # of Articles</i>	453	19	121	72	241
<i>Title</i>	79 (17.44%)	5 (26.32%)	25 (20.66%)	7 (9.72%)	42 (17.43%)
<i>Anywhere</i>	428 (94.48%)	19 (100%)	117 (96.70%)	63 (87.50%)	229 (95.02%)
Other					
<i>Total # of Articles</i>	169	60	35	16	58
<i>Title</i>	28 (16.57)	4 (6.67%)	10 (28.57%)	1 (6.25%)	13 (22.41%)
<i>Anywhere</i>	146 (86.39%)	43 (71.67%)	33 (94.29%)	16 (100%)	54 (93.10%)
Sociology/Anthropology					
<i>Total # of Articles</i>	126	35	28	38	25
<i>Title</i>	14 (11.11%)	4 (11.43%)	4 (14.29%)	2 (5.26%)	4 (16%)
<i>Anywhere</i>	116 (92.06%)	31 (88.57%)	28 (100%)	33 (86.84%)	24 (96%)
Psychology/Psychiatry					
<i>Total # of Articles</i>	113	43	5	3	62
<i>Title</i>	39 (34.51%)	7 (16.28%)	2 (40%)	2 (66.67%)	28 (45.16%)
<i>Anywhere</i>	106 (93.81%)	40 (93.02%)	4 (80%)	3 (100%)	59 (95.16%)

sensitivity various identities in academic work (ACJS Code of Ethics, 2000; ASC Code of Ethics, 2016). As one example, the guide for conference presenters by the Academic Consortium on Criminal Justice Health (AC CJH) urges the use of person-centered language for individuals involved in the criminal legal system to reinforce the humanity of all people (AC CJH, n.d.). Therefore, it is plausible that the persistently high rate of label use in these journals may be due to a lack of published guidelines or widespread adoption of current guidelines.

Identity-first labels are widely used as a means of identifying and categorizing individuals involved in a legal case (Cox, 2020; Link & Phelan, 2001; Richards, 2013), thus the prominent use of the label *offender* may be explained by the institutionalized use of this term in legal settings. Within courtrooms, judges often use labels, which may perpetuate myths and stereotypes about the relationship between criminal behavior and mental health (Black & Downie, 2013). For example, legal officials often use the term *offender-victim relationship*, which we found to be heavily used in TVA. In the Marshall Project's¹⁰ recent platform entitled The Language Project,¹¹ one piece highlights that the word *offender*, in particular, is used to keep people in their place (Bamenga, 2021). Due to the perpetual use of this term, especially in legal settings, more education on this term is necessary to understand its use and impacts.

Some individuals working within the legal system that have historically used labels in their roles have acknowledged the stigmatizing nature of labels and supported efforts to increase person-centered language. Labels are used in the legal field and correctional institutions as short descriptors of an individual's situation (Willis, 2018), yet professionals in these settings have recognized the dehumanizing nature and impact of specific terms. In an essay entitled, "Eradicating the Label 'Offender' From the Lexicon of Restorative Practices and Criminal Justice," law professor Lynn S. Branham argues for the elimination of the term *offender* as it harms the individuals who receive the label, imposes limitations on labeled individuals, and impedes systemic and cultural change (Branham, 2020). Judges and other legal professionals in Canada are working towards being mindful of language use for people with mental health conditions in court (Black & Downie, 2013). Furthermore, the Justice Department Office of Justice Programs (Jackman, 2016a) and the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (Jackman, 2016b) have publicly denounced the use of stigmatizing labels in favor of person-centered language. Whereas labels are associated with undesirable and negative characteristics and perceived risk of recidivism (Denver et al., 2017; Elderbroom et al., 2021; Jackl, 2023), person-centered language and the broad recognition of individuals as persons, rather than solely through the lens of their involvement with the legal system, contributes to stigma reduction (Denver et al., 2024).

¹⁰ The Marshall Project is a nonprofit news organization reporting on topics related to the criminal legal system in the U.S.

¹¹ The Marshall Project has continually engaged with currently and formerly incarcerated individuals to create a dedicated platform known as The Language Project (Bartley et al., 2021). This platform is designed to draw attention and awareness to the impact of labels through a series of pieces written by individuals who have lived experience with incarceration on ways dehumanizing labels have impacted them personally, publicly denouncing the use of certain labels, and providing alternative language for this population.

It is important to note that depending on the community and the individual, person-centered language may not be preferred. Some communities, such as the disabled (Andrews et al., 2019), deaf (Crocker & Smith, 2019), and autistic communities (Botha et al., 2023) have recently reclaimed identity-first labels to reflect pride in their membership in the community. Members of the DCC have spoken on their use of the word “convict” in the group’s name as an intentional choice, ultimately emphasizing the necessity of prioritizing efforts of advocacy for justice-involved individuals towards policy changes within academia and criminal justice broadly (Ortiz et al., 2022). Therefore, context within a community is critical and we must defer to communities and individuals with lived experience to acknowledge and exemplify their language preferences (American Medical Association, 2021; National Institute of Health, 2024; Taboas et al., 2023). The support for shifts in language and the reclaiming of identity-first labels highlight the ever-evolving nature of language, and that language is only a part of the picture in reducing stigma.

Shifting to person-centered language, albeit a critical step in reducing stigma, must be accompanied by global changes that shift the perception of individuals with carceral experience. Changes in language alone may hide underlying systemic issues perpetuating stigma (Denver et al., 2024). For one, DCC scholars have stressed the necessity for structural changes within academia (e.g., discrimination against individuals involved in the legal system in college admissions and faculty hires) that perpetuate stigma (Ortiz et al., 2022). Additionally, addressing systemic issues that contribute to stigma, such as negative beliefs about people involved in the legal system, require intentional approaches at the policy level and public-facing sources. Public policy contains embedded cultural perspectives of populations affected by policies, which shape citizens’ attitudes and behaviors towards that population as well as whether the population is deserving (i.e., theory of social construction of target populations; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). In fact, most people agree with social constructions that traditionally deviant groups, such as individuals involved in the criminal legal system, are less deserving (Maltby & Kreitzer, 2023). Furthermore, media representation of the legal system greatly shapes public perception of prison and individuals involved in the legal system (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Mirroring the findings of the current work, use of dehumanizing labels in the press has decreased over time; nevertheless, the rates remain strikingly high based on a report released by the FWD.us in 2021 (Elderbroom et al., 2021). Findings in the report demonstrate that dehumanizing labels also bias readers to view people involved in the criminal legal system negatively, perpetuating damaging stereotypes, and impeding efforts towards reforming the criminal legal system. As a public-facing source of information, the media significantly influences public perception. The work presented here could be enriched by examining the use of language in the media more broadly. As positive information pertaining to an individual can be more influential on stigma reduction than specific terminology (Denver et al., 2024), the media and public policy must acknowledge their role in perpetuating harmful attitudes towards individuals involved in the legal system and utilize their position to deconstruct systemic barriers to stigma reduction.

Limitations

One inherent limitation to this study is that change takes time, and the published recommendations to shift to person-centered language is a relatively new concept. Most published recommendations were released between 2020 and 2024. Other than ACCJH's presenters guide, the published recommendations for academics are primarily from psychological, psychiatric, and medical communities, which may not necessarily be consumed by those within the criminology field. Second, the label *perpetrator* (compared to other labels) was predominantly used in articles published in TVA compared to other journals and it was not identified in the early stages of coding. Therefore, coding for journals other than TVA did not include the search for the label *perpetrator*. Similar to the labels identified in this study, *perpetrator* can be highly stigmatizing and should be coded as a label in future investigations of label use. Finally, the low number of articles within each author affiliation category made it challenging to ascertain any patterns within the data. Third, this study was also limited by the review of only criminology journals. Considerable research on incarcerated populations is taking place in fields outside of criminology, such as Criminal Justice and Psychology. Due to the policy-oriented focus of Criminal Justice (Conrad & Murray) and human-subjects research focus of Psychology, these field may have more contact with individuals involved in the criminal legal system and therefore, prioritize humanizing language.

Future Directions

The findings from this investigation provide foundational knowledge on the use of stigmatizing labels for individuals involved in the legal system. However, further research is needed to build upon these initial insights. One imperative next step is to code published articles from 2022 and beyond to determine whether the observed decrease in stigmatizing label use has continued. This additional data would help reveal whether the observed changes reflect a consistent, or perhaps accelerating, trend. Additionally, future research would benefit from examining research published in non-criminology journals, such as Criminal Justice and Psychology.

To further characterize the impact of dehumanizing labels, another promising direction for future research is the collection and integration of quantitative and qualitative methods. We found that among the reviewed articles pertaining to individuals involved in the criminal legal system, the majority utilized quantitative methods. Collection of more qualitative data could enrich our understanding of involvement in the criminal legal system, and moreover, the power and impacts of language related to incarceration. Interviews are a powerful tool that allows us to “enter the other person’s individual’s perspective” (Patton, 2014). The implementation of qualitative interviews provides an avenue for posing questions such as *How have the words used to describe you during your incarceration affected your view of yourself?* or *How have the words used to describe you during your incarceration affected the way others view you?* to characterize how language use

can shape an individual's view of themselves and internalized stigma. Qualitative investigation could also explore the perspectives of correctional staff and officials regarding the language used in carceral settings. Together, the qualitative perspective may provide a deeper understanding of people's experiences and the "how and why" of the potentially damaging and stigmatizing influences of language.

Finally, taking a community-engaged research (CEnR) approach offers a unique avenue for addressing the relationship between label use and stigma within research contexts. By partnering with community members involved in the criminal legal system in the research process, especially in the dissemination of findings, the language used in academic publications reflects the language preferences of community partners with lived experiences of incarceration (Israel et al., 2005). Furthermore, research related to the carceral system should amplify perspectives from convict criminologists with lived and academic expertise (Ortiz et al., 2022). These types of academic-community partnerships have the potential to facilitate and produce more relevant research findings.

Conclusion

Currently and formerly incarcerated individuals experience various types and degrees of stigma during incarceration and after release. The language and labels used to refer to people directly involved in the criminal legal system can be a means of perpetuating this stigma. Although published research has made strides in understanding criminal behavior and the detrimental impacts of stigma related to criminal legal-system involvement, the continual use of identity-first labels may support a system that continues to stigmatize and dehumanize individuals. Given the awareness that language directly impacts societal perceptions (Puhl et al., 2013) and that the research community shapes dominant perceptions through language (National Commission on Correctional Health Care, 2021), academics have the opportunity and responsibility to utilize humanizing language in the pursuit of reducing stigma and discrimination for the individuals impacted by their work. Moreover, for some time federal agencies and nonprofit organizations have called attention to and practiced the use of appropriate and respectful language; the research community should be no different. Highlighting the current use of labels presents an opportunity to shift narratives in order to prioritize the humanization of system-involved individuals.

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Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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