

# Responsible criminal justice reporting

## Writing guide



The media has a powerful influence on society; it can play a key role in both educating the public about criminal justice and holding policy makers to account. On the other hand, the media can contribute to myths and misconceptions about criminal justice.

When it comes to reporting on criminal justice issues, using the right language is crucial. It should be clear, straightforward, and respectful. Here is a simple guide to improve your writing:

-  **Put people first**  
Research shows that the public tend to 'other' people who have served time in prison. By putting individuals at the centre of the narrative, you emphasise that every person's experiences and identity matter.
  
-  **Be inclusive**  
Avoid language that stereotypes, discriminates, or sensationalises. The language you use can actively foster more equitable and respectful environments.
  
-  **Avoid judgmental or stigmatising language**  
Opt for neutral terms like 'repeatedly involved in criminal activity' over 'career criminal'.
  
-  **Ensure headlines reflect nuance**  
While sometimes out of your control, headlines should encapsulate the complexity of the articles as accurately as possible, avoid sensationalism and strive for balance.
  
-  **Stay positive and practical**  
Keep a positive tone and focus on practical solutions. If you're highlighting issues within the criminal justice system, mention ways these could be improved.

Instead of this	Try this
Prisoners / Inmates / Offenders	People in prison
Criminals	People involved in (a) crime, people with convictions
Juveniles	Young people, youth in the justice system
Ex-prisoners	People leaving prison
Ex-offenders	People who have served time in/left prison
Probationers	People on probation
Suspects, defendants	People awaiting trial
Poor, disadvantaged	People living on low incomes, people living in poverty
Victims	People impacted by crime
Rape victim	Survivor of rape
Prostitute, prostitution, use of prostitution, use of sex workers	Sex worker, sex work, people who sell sex, people who buy sex
Gang member	Person involved in gang activity
Re-entering society ( <i>this suggests prisons are not a part of society</i> )	Life after prison, post-release
Recidivism	Returning to prison, recommitting crime
Drug addict, drug users	People who use drugs, people experiencing drug dependency
Committed suicide, unsuccessful suicide	Completed suicide, attempted suicide



Only refer to someone's race and ethnicity if it is relevant to the story

Instead of this	Use this
black people	Black people <i>N.b., Convention is to capitalise Black, not white. When discussing race, be as specific as possible. I.e., 'one third of Black Caribbean people'.</i>
The Black community The Asian community	Use 'communities' not 'community' as there are multiple
BAME BME  <i>N.b., This UK-specific acronym is outdated and widely rejected so it is only acceptable to use when commenting on (e.g.) reports that have used the term.</i>	Black, Asian and minority ethnic people, Racialised and ethnic people/groups
Immigrant / foreign national	Migrant
Ethnic minority	Minoritised ethnic person/people, racially minoritised person/people  <i>N.b., Be careful when using umbrella terms and grouping people together, especially when there is significant diversity between them. Only use if you cannot be more specific.</i>

As language is ever-changing and nuanced, we welcome any suggestions, amendments or additions to this document. Contact us:

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## Do you know what you're talking about? Breaking down criminal justice jargon

### A

**Acquitted:** The accused person has been found not guilty of committing an offence.

**Abscond:** An escape that does not involve overcoming a physical security restraint such as that provided by a wall or fence, locks, bolts or bars, a secure vehicle, handcuffs or the direct supervision of staff.

**Aggravating factors:** Factors that indicate a higher degree of guilt for an offence (or a more than usual serious degree of harm such as previous convictions or the presence of children during the commission of a crime).

**Appeal:** A challenge to an accused person's conviction and/or sentence.

**Appropriate adult:** When a young person or vulnerable adult is in police custody, they must have an appropriate adult representing their interests during police procedures and interviews. This can be a parent, friend volunteer or other professional.

### B

**Bail:** The temporary release of a person awaiting trial or – if already convicted – awaiting sentencing.

**Breaching:** Breaking, or 'breaching', the rules of a probation licence such as, for example, missing an appointment or not keeping to a curfew can mean an individual has to attend court or even return to prison.

### C

**Categorisation:** People convicted of a crime are assigned a security category (A, B, C, D) based on the likelihood they will try to escape and the risk of causing harm they pose to other people in prison and staff.

**Caution:** A caution is when an individual must attend a police station to be spoken to formally by a senior police officer, they will be warned about their behaviour and the consequences if a further offence is committed. The caution is then recorded in writing.

**Charge:** A charge means that someone has been formally accused of a crime.

**Community sentence:** A sentence served in the community entailing unpaid work as well as restrictions such as curfews and exclusion from certain areas and requirements to participate in activities such as drug and alcohol or mental health treatments.

**Court of Appeal:** The second tier of the hierarchy of courts in England and Wales, subordinate to the Supreme Court. Split into two divisions, Civil and Criminal.

**Crown Court:** The third tier in the hierarchy of criminal courts in England and Wales, above the Magistrates' Court and below the Court of Appeal. The Crown Court is the primary court for serious criminal offences but will also hear appeals from the Magistrates' Court and may also sentence those convicted in the Magistrates' Court as well as those found guilty in the Crown Court.

**Crown Prosecution Service (CPS):** The primary public agency responsible for prosecuting criminal cases investigated by the police.

**Custody:** When a person is remanded in custody, they are kept in prison while awaiting a trial (unless they are in police custody, then they are kept in a police cell). *The majority of people in custody in prison have not been convicted of a criminal offence and are awaiting trial following a not guilty plea.*

**Custodial sentence:** A sentence mandating a term of imprisonment for a convicted person. 'Non-custodial' means outside of prison.

## D

**Desistance:** 'The long-term abstinence from criminal behaviour among those for whom offending has become a pattern of behaviour.' (McNeill and others, 2012)

**Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS):** Previously known as the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB), the DBS provides employers with information about criminal records and whether a person has been barred from working in a particular sector, particularly for work involving children, young people or vulnerable adults.

**Diversion:** A programme whereby a person guilty of a criminal offence takes steps to address the reasons behind their criminal behaviour and so avoids conviction or a criminal record. This is a particularly important process for young people to prevent them being unnecessarily caught up in the criminal justice system.

**E** **Electronic monitoring (EM):** Also known as 'tagging', EM uses an electronic device, normally an ankle bracelet, to track an individual's movements through GPS or by radio frequency. An EM order can be made by a court as part of sentencing or may form part of an individual's licence on release from prison.

**H** **Hearing:** Any time that part of the trial takes place in a court. There can be several hearings in the course of a trial.

**His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMI Prisons):** An independent inspectorate reporting on prisons, young offender institutions, secure training centres, immigration detention facilities, police and court custody suites, customs custody facilities and military detention. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons is appointed by and reports directly to the Justice Secretary.

**His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMI Probation):** An independent inspectorate reporting on the treatment of adults and young people on probation and the effectiveness of work to reduce their risk of reoffending. The Inspectorate is funded by the Ministry of Justice and reports directly to the Justice Secretary.

**His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS):** Replaced the **National Offender Management Service (NOMS)** in April 2017 as the agency responsible for the operational management of offenders in custody and the community.

**Immigration Removal Centre (IRC):** A facility to hold in custody people awaiting either permission to enter the UK or deportation. *Immigration detention is not a criminal process.*

**Imprisonment for public protection (IPP):** A sentence without a fixed term introduced by the Criminal Justice Act 2003 where the individual is not released until a minimum tariff is served and the Parole Board considers them 'safe' to release. *IPP sentences were abolished in 2012 but there are still 2,892 people in prison serving these sentences (as of 31 December 2022).*

**Independent Monitoring Board (IMB):** A group of ordinary members of the public with responsibility for monitoring the day-to-day life of people in prison. Every prison and IRC has its own IMB of voluntary and independent members.

**Indictable:** Indictable offences are generally more serious offences and, accordingly, must be tried in the Crown Court, not in a Magistrates' Court. All criminal cases begin in the Magistrates Court but indictable only offences are sent by the Magistrates' Court to the Crown Court – Indictable only offences are dealt with by a judge and jury.

## J

**Joint enterprise:** A legal doctrine that attributes liability to the members of a group involved in a crime for everything that results from that enterprise, allowing people, for example, to be convicted for murder even if they did not deliver the killing blow. The Supreme Court ruled in February 2016 that in order for an individual to be convicted under the joint enterprise doctrine, they must be found to have intended to assist in the resulting crime. This corrected a 1984 ruling that mere foresight was sufficient.

**Justice Select Committee:** Composed of MPs, this Select Committee checks and reports on the work of the Ministry of Justice.

## L

**Labelling:** A criminological theory that a person's behaviour and self-identity may be influenced by the words used to describe them, i.e. if you repeatedly label someone an offender, that it increases the likelihood that person will go on to commit an offence.

**Legal aid:** Financial aid for people requiring legal representation who may not otherwise be able to afford it. Legal aid for criminal cases is managed by the Legal Aid Agency.

**Licence:** The set of conditions that a person must keep to upon release from prison, breach of which may result in a recall (return to prison).

## M

**Magistrate:** An unpaid member of the local community, appointed by the Lady (or Lord) Chief Justice, to hear cases at the lowest level of the criminal courts. Magistrates, or 'Justices of the Peace', make up around 85% of the judiciary and hear around 90% of all criminal cases in England and Wales.

**Magistrates' Court:** The fourth tier in the hierarchy of criminal courts in England and Wales, all criminal cases start in a Magistrates' Court. There is not a jury in this court.

**Ministry of Justice (MoJ):** The government body responsible for courts, prisons and probation. The Justice Secretary is also Lord Chancellor.

**Mitigating factors:** Factors that indicate a lower level of guilt for an offence such as age, mental health issues and remorse.

## O

**Open prison:** Also known as Category D prisons, open prisons have the lowest levels of security across the prison estate and are intended for people who present low risk. Open prisons give people the opportunity to begin the process of resettlement before release.



## P

**Parole:** A provisional release from prison before the completion of a maximum sentence, subject to conditions.

**Parole Board:** An independent body that determines whether an individual is safe to be released from custody.

**Plea:** A formal statement of either guilt or innocence by a person charged with an offence.

**Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC):** Introduced in 2012 to replace police authorities, PCCs are elected appointments with responsibility for creating a policing plan for their region, commissioning services and holding the local Chief Constable to account.

**Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO):** The PPO is responsible for carrying out independent investigations into deaths in custody as well as responding to complaints from prisoners and offenders under probation who have exhausted the internal complaints systems.

**Probation:** The portion of a sentence served outside prison, for example, because a person has received a community sentence or because they have been released on parole.

## R

**Recall:** Where a person on parole violates a condition of their licence, they may be 'recalled' back to prison.

**Recidivism:** The occurrence of a person reoffending.

**Remand:** Being put on remand means an accused person will be placed in custody (police cell or prison) pending either a trial or sentencing. *Remand prisoners make up around 18% of the total prison population (as of 31 December 2023).*

**Reparation:** Compensation, normally financial, to a victim of crime from the perpetrator.

**Restorative justice:** The process of bringing together a perpetrator and the victim or victims of their crime in order to attempt to mend the harm created and move forward.

**Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL):** A mechanism that allows someone coming to the end of their sentence to temporarily leave prison for a short period of time (normally a day or a weekend) to aid their rehabilitation and resettlement when transitioning out of custody.

# S

**Sentencing Council:** The body responsible for promoting consistency in sentencing through sentencing guidelines and monitoring and reviewing sentencing decisions. Replaced the Sentencing Guidelines Council in 2010.

**Spent conviction:** A conviction that can effectively be ignored because a sufficient amount of time has passed. The more serious an offence, the longer it will take for a conviction to become spent, which may impact employment in certain areas. However, for most jobs there is no legal requirement to declare a conviction, regardless of whether it is spent or unspent.

**Stop and search:** A policing tactic that allows a police officer to search a person where there are reasonable grounds to suspect the person is in possession of illegal drugs, a weapon, stolen property or something that could be used to carry out a crime.

**Section 60:** S60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 is a power given by an Inspector or above which allows police officers to stop and search anyone in a specific area without needing to have reasonable grounds.

**Strict liability:** A strict liability offence, such as speeding, means a judge only has to determine whether an illegal act occurred, regardless of whether the accused was at fault.

**Summary offence:** Usually considered to be less serious offences, summary offences are heard in the Magistrates' Court and often do not even require the defendant to be present.

**Supreme Court:** The highest court of appeal for criminal cases in England and Wales, above the Court of Appeal.

**Suspended sentence:** A custodial sentence that is delayed for a period of time in order to allow the offender to complete a period of probation first. If no further offences are committed and the person keeps to the terms of their probation, the sentence may be dismissed.

# T

**Tagging:** see Electronic monitoring.

**Triable either way:** Where an offence can be heard in either the Magistrates' Court or the Crown Court.

**V**

**Victims' Commissioner:** The office of the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales was created under the 2004 Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act. The Victims' Commissioner is appointed by the Justice Secretary and is responsible for promoting the interests of victims of crime.

**W**

**Warnings/reprimands:** These only apply to defendants under the age of 18 – it means that the defendant will have to attend a police station to be spoken to by a police officer.

**Y**

**Youth Justice Board (YJB):** The public body responsible for overseeing the youth justice system in England and Wales.

**Youth Offender Institution (YOI):** Prisons for young people aged 15-21.

This document contains terms that are most likely to be relevant when reporting on the criminal justice system. For a more extensive version, refer to the CJA's Criminal Justice Dictionary: [criminaljusticealliance.org/dictionary](https://criminaljusticealliance.org/dictionary)

The Criminal Justice Alliance (CJA) is a network of 200+ organisational and academic members working towards a fair and effective criminal justice system. We advocate for sensible changes to make the criminal justice system work better.

Our insight comes from our members, their broad remits enable us to piece together the right formula for lasting change. Our drive comes from the recognition that a fairer and more effective system will help communities across England and Wales, with positive effects that can be felt far beyond crime and justice.



This guide is part of a toolkit promoting responsible criminal justice reporting to journalism students, created by Holly Brooks-Burgin, CJA Communications and Engagement Manager and journalist Albie Matthews.

We acknowledge the invaluable contributions from CJA members and are grateful to everyone who took part in focus groups for this project.

For more information about the project visit:  
**[criminaljusticealliance.org/reporting](https://criminaljusticealliance.org/reporting)**