Reviewer’s report

Title: Words matter: a call for humanizing and respectful language to describe people who experience incarceration

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Reviewer: Kelly Moore

Reviewer's report:

This article addresses a critically important topic regarding the use of stigmatizing language to describe people in the criminal justice system. Incarcerated individuals are often overlooked as a stigmatized group and there is a need to develop best practices for interacting with this population in a nonjudgmental way. The authors provide useful and practical recommendations for policy, practice, and research. I have a few minor recommendations to improve the article.

The authors could integrate a bit about why people in the justice system often fall subject to such derogatory labels. In contrast to many other stigmatized groups (e.g., people with mental illness, people living with HIV/AIDS), people in the justice system are often viewed as to blame for their incarceration, a belief that may perpetuate the use of stigmatizing labels. It is important to help community members, healthcare systems, justice systems, and researchers across disciplines to understand the complex psychological, behavioral, and sociocultural determinants of arrest. Such increase in knowledge may help reduce the use of derogatory labels.

The authors might note any significant cultural differences in the use of labels for people in the justice system.

The authors might describe in more detail the process through which stigmatizing labels impact the self-concept and subsequent behavior of stigmatized individuals (i.e., self-stigma). A study by Moore, Stuewig, & Tangney (2016) describes a psychological model of self-stigma specifically applied to people with a criminal record, and states how perceptions of stereotypes can lead individuals to accept negative stereotypes as personally accurate descriptions of themselves. Self-stigma is important to highlight because it is a proposed mechanism for understanding why stigmatized individuals feel demoralized and ashamed, experiences that can lead to avoidance of community members and institutions, and ultimately health disparities.

The authors might discuss some of the barriers to changing stigmatizing language, and reducing stigma more broadly, within healthcare, legal, and other community systems. Many professionals who work with individuals in the justice system experience burn-out, which contributes to their negative attitudes about this population. The use of non-stigmatizing language, especially in the justice system, will be a challenging culture shift that may require special stigma reduction efforts such as providing training/education to increase buy-in, supervising staff in their
interactions with incarcerated individuals, and providing feedback in a non-critical way to facilitate change. It may be helpful to acknowledge that terms like prisoner, inmate, convict, etc. have up to this point been socially acceptable (and thus widely used), and at the same time, we now have decades of research showing that these labels are potentially harmful to the health and wellbeing of stigmatized groups.

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Yes

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