



At **Common Justice**, we believe that language matters.

As a project that works with both those responsible for crime and those harmed by it, we are called to develop terminology that reflects our values about crime, violence, accountability, and healing.

We believe people retain their inherent dignity not only when they have been harmed by crime but even when they have caused that harm—and that people are much more than the worst thing done to or by them.

We seek, therefore, to use language that acknowledges all people deserve respect, fairness, and care and enables us to talk about crimes as events within the whole context of people's lives.

Beyond Offender and Victim

Toward a Humane, Event-Centered Language for Talking about People Involved in Crime and Violence

Common Justice uses the terms “harmed party” and “responsible party” to describe the person who survives harm and the person who causes harm, respectively.

Harmed party is the person harmed in a given crime (aka “victim”). This term recognizes someone's role in a given event and acknowledges that that role does not constitute the person's entire identity. A harmed party is owed certain things by the responsible party and others as a result of the harm he or she endured.

Common Justice prefers the term “harmed party”, in part, because it defines a victim *in relationship to an event*—that is, as the one harmed in a particular incident or series of incidents—but does not reduce his or her identity to victimization alone. This event-centered language allows for the harmed party to fully claim other positive identities—such as brother, sister, father, mother, student, person of color, working person, etc. The language also leaves room for the possibility that a harmed party may also be the responsible party in another incident or series of incidents and, as such, is *nonetheless* (a) deserving of support for the harm he or she suffered in this incident(s) and (b) accountable for the harm he or she caused in the other incident(s).

For many people, the term “victim” also carries a significant stigma. Some associate the term with weakness. Others associate it primarily with people of a different gender, race, or ethnicity. At Common Justice, we find “harmed party” offers a degree of neutrality that permits a victim the self-determination to define his or her own experience and identity.

Responsible party is the person responsible for a given crime (aka “offender”). This term recognizes someone's role in a given event and acknowledges that that role does not constitute the person's entire identity. A responsible party owes certain things to the harmed party and others as a result of the harm he or she caused.

Common Justice prefers the term “responsible party”, in part, because it defines the person who caused the harm *in relationship to an event*—that is, as the one responsible for a particular incident or series of incidents—but does not reduce him or her to the harmful action(s) alone. This event-centered language allows for the responsible party to fully claim other positive identities—such as brother, sister, father, mother, student, person of color, working person, etc. The language also leaves room for the possibility that a responsible party may also be the harmed party in another incident or series of incidents and, as such, is *nonetheless* (a) deserving of support for harm he or she suffered in that incident(s) and (b) accountable for the harm he or she caused in this incident(s).

We also use the term “responsible party” because “offender” carries too much stigma and fails to recognize a person’s accountability for the harm he or she has caused. We understand accountability to mean much more than simply enduring punishment. It includes assuming responsibility for one’s actions by acknowledging one’s role and agency in causing harm, recognizing the impact of one’s actions on others, working to repair that harm to the extent possible, and upholding a commitment not to cause further harm.

About Common Justice

Common Justice, a demonstration project of the Vera Institute of Justice, is an innovative victim service and alternative-to-incarceration program based on restorative justice principles. Located in Brooklyn, New York, the program works with young people, 16 to 24 years old, who commit violent felonies, and those they harm. Common Justice aims to reduce violence, facilitate the well-being of those harmed, and transform the criminal justice system’s response to serious crime. The program provides participants with a respectful and effective means of accountability, an equitable and dignified avenue to healing, and the tools to break cycles of violence.

For more information, visit <http://www.vera.org/project/common-justice>.