Labeling, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Euphemisms

By: Jerry Ratcliffe

The February 2026 issue of the criminology discipline's flagship journal, *Criminology,* introduced us to a new euphemism intended to spare the reputational anxieties and discomfort of those apprehensive about negative characterization: PWSF. I'm not sure how many incarcerated drug dealers are regular readers of *Criminology*, but rest assured, the abbreviation PWSF ensures that "people who sell fentanyl" can read all about their admirable harm reduction practices without the associated stigma or criminal connotations.

In "'It's Such a Terrible Drug': Narratives of Fentanyl Dealers Amid the Opioid Overdose Crisis," Schwehr and Bucerius (2026) embraced the journal's person-first language, but they took a rather confrontational stance by occasionally peppering their article about PWSFs with the term dealer. Fortunately, the trauma was offset by the dealers—sorry, I guess I should say "currently indisposed brand ambassadors"—in question learning that they "demonstrated a heightened sense of responsibility for mitigating harm, whether through harm reduction efforts or accepting moral and legal accountability." Legal accountability is probably easier to accept when interviewed in prison. They can while away the time reading about how they "maintain a positive self-image" and use narratives "as tools for managing societal stigma and internal guilt."

In 2024, about 48,000 people died of opioid overdoses in the United States ("Fentanyl Continues to be the Leading Cause" 2025). This number does not include the substantial number of participants and innocent bystanders killed or seriously injured in turf battles related to drug dealing... sorry, I should say RPRA (recreational pharmaceutical retail activity).

By comparison, filtering the *Washington Post* police shootings database found 29 unarmed victims of fatal police shootings in the US in the same year, stemming from more than 80 million police interactions with the community (16+) (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2024). While every police-involved death is a tragedy, there are orders of magnitude difference with the tens of thousands of opioid deaths.

Is the field of criminology equally magnanimous in protecting the feelings of the many police officers who study criminology? Officers and their families can read scholarly language about "brutal police behavior against communities of color, and a lack of professional accountability in the wake of police violence" (Beardall, 2022). Alternatively, "police" (not apparently people who do law enforcement, or people who work in public safety) can learn—probably to their surprise—that they "criminalize minoritized communities" through "harassing, arresting, brutalizing, shooting, and killing Black individuals" (Henson & Blount-Hill, 2025). If even that restrained wordsmithing is too triggering, they can pop over to the lauded *Annual Review of Criminology* to read how their work trying to prevent crime has "its origins in colonialism, slavery, and class warfare," is "invasive," permeated by racism, "aggressive, punitive," "deals in and dispenses violence," "contribute to gentrification," reinforces "fear-based policing," engages in "segregation policing," enacts "slow violence," or that police "harms constitute cultural trauma and shape health, well-being, academic performance, government,

participation, community membership, and physical space" (Kramer & Remster, 2022). One can only wonder how this paragraph would have read if the authors had not been so sensitive in pulling their punches, as in Schwehr and Bucerius.

The lesson seems clear. In contemporary criminology, the gravest victim of the opioid crisis may not be the overdose victim, the grieving relatives, or the community ravaged by addiction and associated violence and crime, but the self-esteem of the person embracing their "plucky grassroots entrepreneurialism." Selling a substance associated with tens of thousands of deaths annually is unfortunate, certainly, but describing the seller too directly risks stigma, and there are standards to maintain. Accordingly, drug dealers become "people who sell fentanyl," their narratives are treated with interpretive generosity, their accounts are presumed sincere, and their efforts to avoid killing customers are presented as evidence of moral responsibility.

Police officers, by contrast, can apparently absorb unlimited amounts of stigmatizing language without adverse consequences. Their occupation may be characterized as colonialist, violent, racist, trauma-inducing, oppressive, harmful, corrosive to democracy, brutalizing, and destructive of communities, all without triggering the slightest concern about labeling, stereotyping, or reputational harm. The emerging rule seems elegantly simple: the more directly an individual contributes to crime, victimization, and death, the more carefully their dignity must be protected; the more directly an individual attempts to prevent crime, victimization, and death, the more freely they may be described in person-last language as a source of harm. Criminology spent decades warning society about the dangers of labeling. It now appears that the real problem was never the labels themselves, but rather who was being labeled.

References

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