Terminology for Describing Groups of People

We want the words we use to describe people to recognize the dignity inherent in every human being. Sometimes it is difficult to know the best word to describe people, so this document offers some guidance. If you find out that you are using a term that is not preferred by the people you are describing, take it as a learning opportunity and change your wording. Appropriate terminology can shift over time. If you are speaking to a person, you can ask them what descriptor they prefer.

GENERAL ADVICE

If you are unsure how to describe someone, use "person first" language, which means you call them "a person who…" or "people who…" This shows that you recognize their humanity. For example, instead of saying illegal immigrants, perhaps say "people who are undocumented." Another example is saying "enslaved people" or "people who are/were enslaved" rather than the term "slave."

SEX (often referring to the body, both anatomy and physiology)

Assigned birth sex: Classification of boy vs. girl (or male vs. female) based on reproductive anatomy. Typically assigned based on limited information (external genitalia only).

Sex: Sex is not a binary category, but much of the Western world has historically seen it as such. Sex can be defined based on several factors, not all of which always agree:

- Having female or male genitalia
- Chromosomes (which are not always XY or XX)
- Mixture of hormones: estrogen, progesterone, testosterone

Female: One of the two most-often recognized sexes. Most often: chromosomally XX, more estrogen and progesterone and less testosterone, vulva as external genitalia. There are many variations from the average that are still classified as female, for example some people with XY chromosomes have hormonal profiles and genitalia that align with female sex.

Male: One of the two most-often recognized biological sexes. Most often: chromosomally XY, more testosterone, less estrogen and progesterone, penis and testicles as external genitalia, but again, not all of the anatomical and physiological markers are present in every male.

Intersex: An individual is born with reproductive and/or sexual anatomy that do not align with the binary definition of male or female biological sex. This can be accompanied by a wide range of physiology.

Transsexual: Use this term with caution, as in some places it is considered offensive. Individuals who do not identify with their assigned birth sex and may alter their body hormonally and/or surgically. In some places this term has been used in a derogatory way or is considered outdated, so many people prefer the term *transgender* instead (see below).

GENDER

Gender: Socially constructed classification that ascribes qualities and characteristics to males and females. Many people consider sex and gender to be different things, however many cultures don't have distinct words for these two concepts, and many cultures do not consider sex or gender to be binary.

Gender expression: The way one externally expresses their identity via clothing, hair style, etc.

Gender identity: One's internal concept of self - what we perceive and call ourselves.

Gender roles: The behaviors and or roles that a society has assigned/associated with being male or female.

Sexual orientation: The direction of one's attraction to others.

Sexual identity: How we view ourselves sexually and refer to ourselves, e.g. gay, bisexual, etc.

GENDER/SEXUALITY

Androgynous: Having female and male characteristics.

Cisgender: Someone whose gender identity and expression match their assigned sex at birth. A cisgender person is someone who is not transgender.

Genderqueer: A fluid and non-traditional gender identity. Someone who is gender queer does not ascribe to a binary woman/man gender identity.

Transgender: In some countries, a term that describes those whose gender identity and gender expression does not conform to stereotypical masculine or feminine norms. In the US, describes those whose gender identity does not match their assigned sex at birth.

SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

There are 5 classes that are typically used to describe socioeconomic status: upper, upper-middle, middle, working, and lower. These may not always be useful in our descriptions. A person-first description is helpful here, as elsewhere.
Examples:
-People experiencing homelessness
-families who are low-income
-people with incomes below the federal poverty threshold
-people experiencing poverty
-people enjoying wealth

ETHNIC AND RACIAL CLASSIFICATIONS

Ethnicity: Typically refers to a combination of a person’s ancestry and culture. The ethnicities listed below are some American ones.

Race: typically refers to the socially constructed categories of race that a person is assigned to. Often (but not always) has an overlap with ethnicity (ethnicity is sometimes used to categorize someone into a race). Races are NOT genetically determined nor are they biological populations. Nonetheless, races have important impacts on people (as an analogy, governments are socially constructed entities that don’t exist in nature, but they are real because we have constructed them and they have impacts on us). The number and identities of races have shifted over time as societies change.

African American (Ethnicity): People of African and/or Caribbean ancestry who live in the US. People of Egyptian ancestry should be included under the Middle Eastern American category. People of Cuban, Dominican, and Puerto Rican ancestry should be included under the Latino/Hispanic American category. Excludes all foreign nationals who do not hold an American citizenship or are not permanent residents of the United States.

Black (race): Currently, many African Americans prefer to be called Black rather than African American. Black can refer to people anywhere in the world who have African ancestry, and because of this, two Black people from different parts of the world may not share many cultural/ethnic or genetic characteristics.

East Asian American: People whose ancestry is from one or more of the following Asian countries: Azerbaijan, Brunei, Burma (or Myanmar), Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, North Korea, South Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. Excludes all foreign nationals who do not hold an American citizenship or are not permanent residents of the United States.

European American: People whose ancestry is from one or more of the following European, Western, Eastern, or Mediterranean countries (Individuals who consider themselves to be Caucasian should be included in this category): Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malta, Moldova, Monaco, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, San Marino, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovakia (Slovak Republic), Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, and Vatican City. Excludes all foreign nationals who do not hold an American citizenship or are not permanent residents of the United States. European Americans are typically considered to be part of the white race.

International: People who do not hold an American citizenship or are not permanent residents of the United States.

Latino/Hispanic American: People whose ancestry is from one or more of the following countries: Argentina, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, French Guiana, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Suriname, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Excludes all foreign nationals who do not hold an American citizenship or are not permanent residents of the United States.

Native American: People indiginous to the Americas, sometimes specifically North America. Typically of American Indian, Inuit, or Aleut ancestry.

Indiginous: “Indigenous peoples, also referred to as first peoples, first nations, aboriginal peoples, native peoples, or autochthonous peoples, are culturally distinct ethnic groups who are related to the earliest known inhabitants of a particular geographic region.” -Wikipedia

Middle Eastern American: People whose ancestry is from one of the following countries: Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Excludes all foreign nationals who do not hold an American citizenship or are not permanent residents of the United States.

Multiracial American: People who identify with more than one ethnic/race heritage. Exclude all foreign nationals who do not hold an American citizenship or are not permanent residents of the United States.

Pacific Islander American: People whose ancestry is from one or more of the following: Hawaii, Australia, New Zealand, New Guinea. Excludes all foreign nationals who do not hold an American citizenship or are not permanent residents of the United States.

South Asian American: People whose ancestry is from one of the following countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Excludes all foreign nationals who do not hold an American citizenship or are not permanent residents of the United States.

Person/People of Color, POC: Typically used to refer to ethnicities/races other than European/white. If you are talking about only one of those groups, it is clearest to refer specifically to that group rather than to say People of Color. National Association of Independent Schools considers 'People of Color' as individuals who are permanent residents or U.S. citizens and belong to one of the following racial/ethnic groups: African American, Latino/Hispanic American, Asian American/South Asian, Native American, Middle Eastern American, Multiracial American, and Pacific Islander.

BIPOC: An acronym meaning *Black, Indigenous, and People of Color* OR *Black and Indigenous People of Color* (this is a newer term and the usage is still being worked out). It is used to point to the fact that Black people and Indigenous people have a history of greater oppression and often continue to experience prejudices and oppression greater than other groups of People of Color.

Compiled by Bonnie Flint (2020; most recent update: Jan 2022)
SOURCES:
NAIS Guidelines for Ethnic and Racial Classifications
Olive Branch Education Consultants
The T About Biological Sex by AstraSubDomina
Discussions and statements from individuals within these different groups