WORDSMATTER

The debate over word choice to describe immigrants and immigration is often as contentious as the subject itself. What words you use can suggest bias, and lend a rhetorical advantage to a political agenda. In today's climate when we are confronted with a government which uses language to dehumanize people and push extreme policy, words matter more than ever before.

Describe the Action, Not the Person

In April 2013, the Associated Press (AP) informed AP Stylebook users that they no longer sanctioned the terms "illegal immigrant" or "illegal." This change was due in part to public pressure from Define American and other advocacy groups. Another part of its reasoning was to ensure consistency – to describe actions rather than label persons. In the same way that labeling a person an illegal fisher is a poor way to describe someone fishing without a license, calling someone an illegal immigrant is a poor way to describe someone who has broken an immigration law.

Avoid Inaccurate Terminology

Phrases such as **"illegal immigrant"** and **"illegal alien"** replace complex and ever-changing legal circumstances with an unspecified assumption of guilt.

Living in the U.S. without legal authorization (unlawful presence) is a **civil offense**, while **improper entry** (crossing the border), is a misdemeanor. It should be noted, that because many undocumented immigrants arrived legally, they have not committed a crime. Other examples of civil offenses include traffic tickets, hunting on a wildlife refuge, theft of a newspaper, mailing a lottery ticket, or refusing to answer questions on the Census.

"As a general rule, it is not a crime for a movable alien to remain in the United States."
- U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy
Source: **Arizona v. United States, 567 U.S. 387 (2012)**

Neither of these terms clarify if a person came here legally, and their visa expired, or if a person is in a state of legal limbo, waiting for paperwork to be processed, nor does it explain if that person (regardless of whether they are an adult or child) has been processed in an immigration court, and is awaiting a decision regarding their application for asylum. A person's legal status could change because of a variety of other factors, and "illegal" obscures this complexity. Moreover, it should be noted that people accused of other misdemeanors are not referred to as "illegal" in any context.

Resist Blanket Statements with an Agenda

The **U.S. Justice Department has instructed** U.S. attorneys offices to refer to someone illegally in the U.S. as "an illegal alien." This is part of a coordinated strategy, and **the decision was celebrated** by **anti-immigrant groups with documented ties** to the administration, to **"weaponize" mundane terms** in pursuit of political advantage.

Other terms

Chain Migration: This term is used by anti-immigration groups to refer to the well-established legal process of issuing "**Family-Based Immigrant Visas**." This is how lawful permanent residents or U.S. citizens apply for their relatives to become lawful permanent residents. It is also the historical backbone of American immigration, as one family member often sponsored the travel and naturalization of their larger family. Melania Trump's parents **are confirmed to have become American citizens** through this process.

Anchor Baby: This term is often used to refer to a child born to a non-citizen parent, under the false assumption that the child will provide them a pathway to securing naturalization. This and other terms assume intent, and are widely considered to be offensive, in part because of their exclusive application to people of non-White backgrounds.

Alternatives

At Define American, we use the term "undocumented Americans" for the over 11 million people living in the U.S. without a path to legalization. Here are some other terms that have been used to properly humanize: newest Americans, newcomers, undocumented citizens, unauthorized immigrants, families who have moved from one place to another, and people who weren't born in the United States.

DefineAmerican.com/wordsmatter