

DROP THE I-WORD

COLORLINES.COM'S IMMIGRATION STYLEBOOK

Colorlines.com adheres to professional and ethical journalistic standards when covering immigration. Institutions that are dropping the i-word can also use this guide to cover immigration fairly.

This guide outlines why Colorlines.com writers don't use the i-word, "illegals," in any form to describe people. We use terms that are both accurate and avoid racially and politically charged labels when reporting about immigrants without proper immigration documentation. People residing in the U.S. without a visa can include those who overstay, fall out of status, or enter the country without inspection – there is no one word that can describe all types of situations. ***Importantly, visa violations are civil rather than criminal infractions and residents charged with them are processed through administrative rather than criminal courts.***

We use language that is professional and responsible.

The terms "illegal immigrant" and "illegal alien" are inaccurate by legal and journalistic standards. The shorthand i-word used as a noun, "illegals," is also problematic grammatically and, like the other related terms, is dehumanizing and racially charged. As writers and editors, we know that our words matter deeply and, thus, we choose them carefully. We don't use the term out of respect for our craft and the human dignity of the people we report about.

The i-word is legally inaccurate.¹

"Illegal alien" and "illegal immigrant" are incoherent terms from the standpoint of immigration law. Immigration judges and ICE attorneys don't use the terms because they are meaningless in the context of immigration proceedings. The Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA), the highest administrative body for interpreting and applying immigration laws, does not use them either.

Use of the i-word denies due process.

Ethical journalism includes respect for due process. It's accepted practice to use the words "accused," "purported," or "alleged" before a case is resolved legally. In covering immigration we respect due process and a person's constitutional rights. The [San Antonio Express News](#)² and the [Miami Herald](#)³ have cited this fact as one reason they don't use the i-word.

The i-word is part of a long-term political strategy to criminalize immigrants.

The i-word is not neutral. It is racially charged and has been promoted by restrictionist advocacy organizations like [Numbers USA](#)⁴ and the [Federation for American Immigration Reform \(FAIR\)](#),⁵ founded by eugenicist John Tanton.⁶ Frank Luntz, a Republican Party strategist, recommended operatives promote use of the term "illegal immigrants" in a 2005 [memo](#)⁷, explaining that it would encourage an understanding of immigrants as criminals and create politically useful division among voters. With clear direction to use "illegal immigrant," the shorthand slur has become just as common among media pundits and political campaigns.

While the i-word was originally used and championed by restrictionists, it's also now used by Republicans and Democrats alike, as well as by some advocates of comprehensive immigration reform. [Pollsters](#)⁸ like Stan Greenberg, Celinda Lake and Guy Molyneaux, engaged by liberal advocacy groups, have recommended that Democrats also adopt tougher language on immigration in order to engage more voters on the topic of immigration reform. Political consultant Drew Westen has also recommended that Democrats use the i-word to be more effective. Whatever political strategists on either side of the immigration debate believe, it is not the role of journalists to embrace their talking points. The term remains inaccurate, politically loaded and dehumanizing to the people it describes.

Colorlines.com Stylebook Entry on Immigration

Never use the shorthand “illegals” as a noun. Do not use the terms “alien,” “criminal alien,” “illegal immigrant,” “illegal worker,” or related terms except in quoted matter; the terms are pejorative, incorrect and biased. Do not use the slur “anchor baby” to refer to a child of immigrants. Use accurate and nuanced descriptors that are specific to the stories of the people you are writing about. Preferred terms include:

Immigrant
Undocumented immigrant
Immigrant without papers
Immigrants entering without inspection
Immigrant seeking status
Unauthorized immigrant
Citizen child of undocumented immigrants

It is acceptable to use migrant or foreign national; when possible use a specific reference to nationality (e.g.: Briton, Cambodian, Canadian, Jamaican, Mexican, Pakistani).

Colorlines.com disagrees with the Associated Press Stylebook

While the Associated Press Stylebook is often cited as the industry standard, the current entry on how to refer to immigrants without papers does not meet Colorlines.com’s standards for professional and ethical reporting. The AP Stylebook created its entry, “illegal immigrant,” in 2004, in response to the heightened debate over border security and the enforcement of immigration laws after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. “Together the terms describe a person who resides in a country unlawfully by residency or citizenship requirements,” AP’s deputy standards editor David [Minthorn said in an e-mail interview](#).⁹ “Alternatives like undocumented worker, illegal alien or illegals lack precision or may have negative connotations. Illegal immigrant, on the other hand, is accurate and neutral for news stories.” This statement ignores the facts of immigration law and the long political history behind the i-word.



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¹ Dave Bennion. “Illegal Immigrant’Is the Real Euphemism.” July 02, 2009. <http://bit.ly/eJpxNR>

² Bob Richter. *Express-News*. “A policy change on illegal immigration terminology.” July 4, 2010 <http://bit.ly/jUEy2B>

³ LatinaLista. The Associated Press’ continued sanction of offensive term to Latinos underscores disconnect with Hispanic readers. November 2010. <http://bit.ly/aKdx64>

⁴ <http://www.numbersusa.com/content/>

⁵ <http://www.fairus.org/site/PageServer>

⁶ Center for New Community: The John Tanton Network and the Anti-Immigrant Movement in America <http://www.newcomm.org/content/view/2131/108/>

⁷ Luntz, Maslansky Strategic Research. “Respect for the Law and Economic Fairness: Illegal Immigration Prevention.” October, 2005. <http://bit.ly/CH62eg>

⁸ Carrie Budoff Brown. Politico.com. Dems’ tough new immigration pitch. 6/10/10 <http://politi.co/bxEaxR>

⁹ Karen Carmichael and Rabiha Alicia Burks American Journalism Review. Undocumented or Illegal? <http://bit.ly/mUQ8z5>