

DROP THE I-WORD

SAMPLE LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Use these letters as a guide to craft your own.

Dear Editor,

If the Topeka Journal values its reputation as a credible, unbiased news source, then it must stop using the term “illegal” immigrants. People are not “illegals” and the term is not legally accurate. “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 the terms either.

The use of the term in the article “ICE Raids Local Rubber Plant” scapegoats an entire community, who should not be blamed for our nation’s deeply flawed economic and immigration policies.

Surely, the paper’s editors do not intend to dehumanize and criminalize whole communities of people. But that’s what you are contributing to. The Journal’s use of these words supports the acceptance of stereotypes that often lead to ineffective laws that mostly punish people of color — laws that, as a nation, we come to regret later. Racial epithets used to describe Japanese, American Indians and African Americans have paved the way for racist policies such as detention camps, reservations and Jim Crow laws. It was wrong then, and it’s wrong now.

With every reference to humans as “illegal” the Topeka Journal puts its journalistic integrity in jeopardy. These are clearly political and biased terms that have no place in legitimate reporting. The Journal would be doing itself and this community a service by discontinuing this practice.

Dear Editor,

If the Sexton Courier embraces the values of fairness and human dignity, then it must stop using the term “illegal immigrants” and its derivatives, as you did nine times in the article “ ‘Illegals’ Numbers Grow in the County.” 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. I know journalists are careful to show respect for due process and a person’s constitutional rights, but this term does not.

Using these words plays into the hands of hate groups who seek to divide our communities into “us” versus “them.” And we know where that leads us. The latest federal data on hate crimes reports that 35 percent of the cases involved bias based on ethnicity or national origin. Using language that paints whole groups of people as criminals feeds into a national frenzy that scapegoats innocent people for the faults of failed public policy.

There is clearly a small segment of our community that insists on using these words in order to further their agenda. The Courier can choose to rise above this. Spreading the news should not include spreading hate and fear.

Dear Editor,

Even my computer doesn’t recognize “illegals” as a noun. So how do you justify using the word in the article “ ‘Illegals’ Set to be Deported in James County?” How can a newspaper consumed by all audiences repeatedly use a word that is politically biased, morally wrong and grammatically incorrect? Drugs can be illegal, not people. Reporting the facts should not include the dehumanization of an entire community. A top-notch news outlet can maintain ethical standards only when it distinguishes its stylebook from that of hate-mongers.

Document your efforts and tell us all about them at droptheword@colorlines.com.