



Journalist Stylebook Reference Guide

Offensive Terms To Avoid

Offensive: “illegal immigrant,” “illegal alien,” and the shorthand i-word used as a noun, “illegals” are inaccurate by legal and journalistic standards.

Use instead: “unauthorized immigrant,” “undocumented Immigrant,” or “immigrant without papers.” 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).

Offensive: “anchor baby”

Use instead: “citizen child of undocumented immigrants.”

Offensive: “illegal worker”

Use Instead: “undocumented worker”

Offensive: “undocumented alien”

Use Instead: “undocumented immigrant” or “immigrants entering without inspection,” “immigrant seeking status.” Use accurate and nuanced descriptors that are specific to the stories of the people you are writing about.

Colorlines 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.

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.
- 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.



Other Stylebook Guidelines

illegal immigration Entering or residing in a country in violation of civil or criminal law. Except in direct quotes essential to the story, use illegal only to refer to an action, not a person: illegal immigration, but not illegal immigrant. Acceptable variations include living in or entering a country illegally or without legal permission.

Except in direct quotations, do not use the terms illegal alien, an illegal, illegals or undocumented.

Do not describe people as violating immigration laws without attribution. Specify wherever possible how someone entered the country illegally and from where. Crossed the border? Overstayed a visa? What nationality?

People who were brought into the country as children should not be described as having immigrated illegally. For people granted a temporary right to remain in the U.S. under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, use temporary resident status, with details on the program lower in the story.

illegal immigration In covering both individuals and groups, the goal is to provide relevance and context and to avoid labels. Use the term “illegal immigration” to describe the phenomenon of entering or residing in a country in violation of the law. Avoid using “illegal immigrant” or “undocumented immigrant” to describe individuals except when necessary in direct quotations.

Other guidelines for usage:

Do not specify a person’s immigration status unless it is relevant to the story. Immigration laws are complex. Do not state as a fact that someone has violated the law without sufficient attribution.

Be specific whenever possible in describing an individual's status:

- “Authorities said he crossed the border illegally.”
- “She entered the country to attend college but overstayed her student visa.”
- “He was brought here as a child by his parents, who entered the U.S. without a visa.”

This guidance applies to groups as well:

“The federal government estimates that 11 million immigrants have entered the country illegally or overstayed their visas.”

Do not use “illegal alien,” “an illegal” or “illegals” except in rare cases in direct quotes; they should not be used in headlines or other display type.