



Illegal vs undocumented: The heated divide over how we talk about immigration

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"Illegals should be immediately deported," roared a Fairhope man.

"We cannot trust our safety from these illegal invaders," warned a Semmes woman.

"Send them home, not to Alabama," a Foley woman said.

And on and on the hot political rhetoric went on the change.org petition that surfaced last week.

The online petition, tallied with more than 6,100 signatures by Friday, is aimed at stopping the potential of two tent cities housing up to 25,000 "illegal immigrants" in Baldwin County.

The online reactions were mostly opposite of the more humane reasons county officials gave for their opposition: The airfields targeted for the tent cities do not have running water, electricity, sewer, and could be vulnerable during hurricane strikes.

But the reaction in this deep red part of Alabama, dominated for generations by a majority of Republican voters, is reflective of the divisiveness of the ongoing immigration policy debate nationwide.

And in this debate, words matter.

"It's hard to use words that one side or the other doesn't say that's the wrong word to use or that is the right word to use," said Leo Chavez, an anthropology professor at the University of California at Irvine who studies media representation of immigration. "It's such a politicized discussion right now that it's hard to come up with words that are neutral."

Illegal aliens

Both sides of the partisan dispute have their terminology and are using it for partisan purposes, expert say.

In using such phrases as "illegal immigrants" or "illegal aliens," left-leaning politicians and academics argue that conservatives are utilizing terms meant to dehumanize people who flee violence in Central America and Mexico for the United States.

On the flip side, phrasing such as "undocumented immigrants" plays up to unnecessary political correctness, conservatives argue. They also believe it devalues what they view as an "illegal" activity of people crossing the border without proper authorization.

The scramble over the proper phrasing has been illuminated in recent weeks as the Trump Administration has moved forward with "zero tolerance" enforcement at the U.S.-Mexico border.

The issue has created sharp divisions in the country. A Pew Research poll taken last month shows that less than a quarter of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents say the nation has a responsibility to accept refugees into the country. Among Democrats, the poll shows 74 percent supporting this notion.

A Pew Research report, released on Thursday, also showed that only 36 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents believe that most immigrants are living in the U.S. legally.

Right-leaning references of unauthorized immigrants often insert the word "illegal" into their descriptions.

According to a Cato Institute analysis over the linguistics of the immigration policy debate, the term "illegal alien" is the most accurate one used.

Chavez said it's the one used in legal descriptions, if not by academics who prefer the term "unauthorized immigrant" or "undocumented" immigrant.

Dave Ray, spokesman with the Federal for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) - an organization that supports hardline immigration policies - said the term "illegal alien" is the most "legally precise" of the terms available.

"It clearly delineates between one of only two possible categories; one either has legal status to be on U.S. soil or one is residing here illegally," said Ray. "It is also used by legal professionals across the board including the United States Supreme Court. In short, it's a widely accepted, non-derogatory term."

Chavez disagrees.

"The term 'illegal aliens' is often not helpful because those so described may actually be in the process of acquiring legal status in some form, usually through family sponsorship or through their work," said Chavez. "The problem is further complicated because inflammatory rhetoric does not help us understand why people migrate to begin with, either as refugees or economic migrants."

Illegal or undocumented?

Another term used to replace "illegal aliens" is "illegal immigrant."

As The New York Times once found out, that term is just as inflammatory. According to the newspaper's account of a portrait it ran on 11 million unauthorized immigrants in the U.S., the

use of "illegal immigrants" in the story's headline drew comments that some saw as partisan and offensive.

Chavez said by using the use of words like "illegals" is considered inflammatory rhetoric "meant to rile people up more than explain what is happening."

On the other hand, the use of the term "undocumented immigrants," was viewed as overly sympathetic, according to The New York Times.

As the Cato Institute points out, the term "undocumented immigrant" is an euphemism that isn't quite accurate since most immigrants possess some sort of useful documentation when they arrive into the U.S.: Library cards, drivers licenses, debit cards, etc., even if they are not necessary immigration forms.

But the term is still used, Chavez said, as migrants often travel without the proper documentation.

Plus, he said, it's much softer of a term than "illegal."

"Academics try to use words with less political baggage to them," said Chavez. "Mainly, if you use the words like 'illegal,' it sets everyone off."

Dehumanize or political correctness?

The heated political rhetoric goes even further over the relatively new term, "anchor baby," which is used to describe children born to foreign nationals who are in violation of their immigration status while in the U.S.

Another phrase, "catch and release," describes the act of apprehending unauthorized immigrants and subsequently releasing them.

Lisa Graybill, deputy legal director at the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, said that phrasing is "part of the dehumanization."

For instance, the phrase "catch and release," is meant to criticize a non-hardline stance toward immigrant policy, even though the phrase is more commonly accepted as a term about fishing.

"That's a painful aspect of where the discord is at now," said Graybill. "We have a lack of compassion in that we would turn such a blind and cruel shoulder to people coming here in desperation. They wouldn't be coming here if they weren't running for their lives."

Ray, the spokesman with FAIR - an organization labeled by the SPLC as a "hate" group, which FAIR argues against -- said efforts to change the linguistic description of people crossing the border without proper documentation from anything but "illegal," represents political correctness.

"Those who wish to change the term to something different are simply bowing to political correctness and attempting to mask the criminal nature of illegal immigration," said Ray.

"Calling an illegal alien an 'undocumented worker' is like calling a bank robbery an 'unauthorized withdrawal.'"

Preventing confusion

Chavez said that labels are misleading. "For example, an asylum seeker is not technically an immigrant. They are refugees fleeing violence or a natural disaster and arrive at a country requesting help in the form of asylum."

Granting asylum, Chavez points out, is a humanitarian response to a crisis and is a principle of international cooperation and United Nations protocols.

Migrants, meanwhile, often leave home for economic reasons, not necessarily fleeing the U.S. for safety. They leave their home countries for work, get an education, reunite with families or seek a better life, he said.

"Such migration can be assisted by a state's laws or hindered," Chavez said. "Unauthorized migrants are those who move without documentation."

The linguistic debate over immigration policy has worked its way into the classrooms at Auburn University, where journalism professor Phillip Rawls is urging students to avoid the term "illegal immigrant" or "illegal alien" unless they are used in exact quotes.

"In the text of their stories, they should use 'illegal' to refer to an action, such as 'illegal immigration,' but not to a person," said Rawls, a former longtime Associated Press reporter, who is teaching his courses in line with the Associate Press Stylebook considered a universal standardized guide for journalists and other communication professionals.

Rawls said his students are advised not to describe someone as "illegal" without providing attribution to whoever made that reference.

Said Rawls, "Reporters don't decide who is legal and who is not. It is the same standard reporters use for American citizens accused of crimes. We don't call someone a robber until a jury convicts them or a judge accepts their guilty plea. Until then, we report that they are accused of robbery or they are charged with robbery."

'They aren't human'

Critics of the Trump Administration's approach toward the immigration policy believe the discourse is wrought with inhumane references.

Jennifer Kenney, an assistant professor at the University of Alabama's department of criminology and criminal justice, said the discourse starts at the top, where Trump has referred to some people coming into the country as "animals."

"When you hear the most powerful man in the world calling these folks 'animals' then, 'they aren't human' and 'we can do anything we want with them,'" said Kenney. "It's like Native Americans once being called savages and African Americans, during slavery, being called 'monkeys' and 'apes.'"

"It's, 'If they aren't like us human beings, then we can do whatever we want with them.'"

Michael Olivas, director of the Institute for Higher Education Law & Governance at the University of Houston, argues that the policy is so inhumane, that people apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border aren't given a similar treatment as native U.S. criminals.

"Calling them criminals doesn't make them criminals," said Olivas, who wrote a blistering Op-Ed piece in The New York Times in 2015 about Alabama's HB56, the anti-illegal immigration law passed in 2011.

"If they are criminals, they get lawyers," said Olivas. "We make them out to be 'bad hombres' and lawbreakers, but they aren't given legal rights."

He added, "Crossing the border isn't, in of itself, a crime. It may be a violation of our civil laws. But if it was a crime, they would get Miranda warnings and lawyers at the government's expense. They get neither."

'Compassion'

In Baldwin County, not everyone is using inflammatory terms to describe the potential to house 25,000 people from outside the U.S.

Said Chris Elliott, a Baldwin County Commission: "I have compassion for these folks, there is no question about it. They are often fleeing a bad situation economically and from a crime and safety standpoint. It has to be pretty bad to make someone pack up their entire family and move."

Baldwin County Sheriff Huey "Hoss" Mack said everyone he spoke with at a recent church service "expressed concerns or had questions about how this was going to impact our area."

But Mack also said the church-going residents also were sympathetic toward the plight of those seeking refuge elsewhere: "All were sympathetic to the issue of immigrant housing and human welfare but all were concerned about placing people in tents this close to the coast during hurricane season."