

DROP THE I-WORD

WHY DROP THE I-WORD AND FAQs

Learn more about the movement to eradicate this hateful slur.

Why Drop the I-Word?

Linking immigrants to language like “illegals” (the i-word) is dehumanizing, racist, confuses the immigration debate and it’s just not legally accurate. This anti-immigrant strategy has been moved into the media by a web of people and organizations committed to halting and derailing reasoned, informed debate and policy on immigration.

[John Tanton](#), the founding father of America's modern anti-immigration movement, helped spawn a host of organizations like the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), Center for Immigration Studies and Numbers USA which leverage hate language against immigrants to promote fear and encourage division, they are often quoted by mainstream media outlets.

Back in 2005, political strategist Frank Luntz issued a language memo¹ to Republicans to guide how they framed immigration. “Illegals” is shorthand for “illegal immigrants,” the preferred term used to describe undocumented immigrants in his memo. It is no wonder that with clear direction to use “illegal immigrant,” the shorthand slur has become just as common among media pundits and political campaigns.

In addition [pollsters](#) like Stan Greenberg, Celinda Lake and Guy Molyneaux, engaged by beltway organizations Center for American Progress and America’s Voice, recommended that democrats adopt tougher language on immigration to engage more voters and create bipartisanship to achieve immigration reform. At this time political consultant Drew Westen, also recommended that democrats use the i-word to be more effective. Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) became one of the biggest cheerleaders for use of the term.

Here are the top 3 reasons to eradicate this hateful term:

Reason #1 It’s dehumanizing. The i-word is shorthand for other harmful racially charged terms that dehumanize people. The i-word promotes violence and discrimination. It sends the message that immigrants are sub-human and undeserving.

Reason #2 It’s racist. Use of the i-word affects attitudes toward immigrants and non-immigrants alike, most often toward people of African, Asian, and Latin American descent. The discriminatory message is not explicit, but hidden, or racially coded.

Reason #3 It’s inaccurate legally and confuses the debate. [Immigration judges and attorneys](#)² don’t use the i-word. [Journalists](#)³ who treat all transgressions as “alleged,” – a tenet of ethical and professional journalism, don’t use it either. The i-word finds many people guilty before they are tried and ignores the fact that our laws are unjustly applied. Immigrants without documents are regularly hired as cheap, exploited labor with a limited ability to protect their own rights. No one else who benefits from the set up, including the employers who recruit and hire these migrants, is labeled this way.

The i-word is used to unfairly label and scapegoat people who are out of status due to a variety of systemic circumstances. For example, many people:

- Are brought to the country against their will or by employers who often exploit them for cheap labor.

¹ Luntz Memo PDF via Daily Kos <http://bit.ly/cH62eg>

² “Illegal Immigrant” Is the Real Euphemism by Dave Bennion. July 02, 2009 <http://bit.ly/eJpxNR>

³ “A policy change on illegal immigration terminology” by Bob Richter. Express-News. July 4, 2010 <http://bit.ly/IDMsNO>

- Fall out of status and overstay their VISAS because of school or employment.
- Risk being killed in their country of origin due to political or religious beliefs or sexual orientation.
- Are affected by natural disasters and/or other reasons beyond their control.
- Are forced by economics and harmful policies like NAFTA to leave their country to simply provide for their families.
- Are on a backlog waiting years to get processed, even when they are eligible to get papers through a relative. [Reason.org](#) illustrates this well with a chart of [“Our Nation’s Broken Immigration and Naturalization System.”](#)

Frequently Asked Questions

1. *What is the appropriate term to use in place of the i-word?*

The Colorlines.com style guide in this toolkit includes terms that journalists and others can use to accurately describe a person’s situation (e.g. undocumented immigrant, unauthorized immigrant, and immigrant without papers) without being dehumanizing or compromising professional journalistic standards.

The Drop the I-Word campaign’s focus is on eradicating the dehumanizing i-word (“illegals”) from common usage and public discourse. We are not focused on settling on a new term because a single phrase will not be adequate to describe the status of all people caught up in the broken immigration system.

2. *Is dropping the i-word about being politically correct?*

Dropping the i-word is about protecting humanity and dignity. Accusations of political correctness divert the public from a serious conversation about race and the responsibility that media has in reporting the news in a complete and responsible way.

Political parties, interest groups and even some media outlets use anti-immigrant talking points and catch phrases to influence the American public. [Language matters – especially if it comes down to labeling human beings and determining their future.](#) It’s time we reject all hateful racist language.

3. *Does dropping the i-word ignore rule of law?*

The U.S. is a country of laws, but if the laws are causing inhumane treatment of people, racial profiling and lack of human rights protections, we need to look at how to fix our laws so that they also match our values. Currently, corporations and products have more rights to move across nations than some immigrants do. While businesses freely cross borders, they are not marginalized, penalized or criminalized the same way immigrants have been. There should not be a double standard about our laws, about who gets to break them, and who gets treated humanely.