

Labeling Immigrants: “illegal,” “undocumented,” or “unauthorized”?

Writers hostile to immigrants invariably refer to persons who overstayed their visas or who entered the United States without first obtaining visas, as “illegal immigrants” or “illegals” as if these people were, somehow, tainted. But almost no other category of persons who violate one or another law are labeled “illegal.” Drivers lacking licenses are “unlicensed drivers” not “illegal drivers.” And businesses that violate immigration laws are never referred to as “illegal businesses.”

The same immigration opponents attack the use of the expression “undocumented worker.” For example, CNN senior analyst Jeff Greenfield (April 13, 2006) asserted, “Undocumented, that suggests the problem here is some kind of bureaucratic snafu that could happen to anyone, showing up at the DMV without the right paperwork... It doesn’t suggest anything about the act of getting into this country in the first place, by breaking the law and by surreptitiously crossing the border.”

In fact, fifty percent of the “illegal” immigrants did not “surreptitiously cross thye border;” they overstayed their visas after legally entering the country (GAO.gov May 21, 2004).

A recent Pew Institute Report recommended the term “unauthorized immigrants” as a more neutral term. Unfortunately, however, much of the mainstream press has adopted the label “illegal immigrants” thereby biasing the national debate over immigration. At its worst, it encourages hatred and potential violence against immigrants. Prominent journalists such as CNN anchor Lou Dobbs have encouraged hatred, saying things like “illegal alien smugglers and drug traffickers are on the verge of ruining some of our national treasures,” (11/19/03); or “the invasion of illegal aliens is threatening the health of many Americans.” Glenn Beck, recently hired by CNN headline news, announced on his radio show (3/27/06), saying “Mexico is a country that has been overtaken by lawbreakers from the bottom to the top. And now, what you’re protesting for is to have lawbreakers come here.” Or CNN anchor Jack Cafferty, speaking of the recent protest marches: “America’s illegal aliens are becoming ever bolder. March through our streets and demand your rights. Excuse me? You have no rights here... At some point this could all turn very violent as American become fed up with the failure of their government to address the most pressing domestic issue of our time.” (April 10, 2006). It’s obvious that Cafferty, himself “fed up,” is suggesting that violence is an appropriate reaction to “illegal aliens” who protest. Under the U.S. Constitution everyone in this country, whether “legal” or not, has rights—a fact Cafferty chooses to ignore.

A more accurate and compassionate attitude was expressed by James K. Galbraith (*Guardian* April 13, 06): “The fact that their presence may be illegal is a problem not with the people but with the law... These marches are, mainly, about work. They are about the right to work, and to live from work, in simple dignity, independence and freedom.”

Let's not label anyone "illegal." These persons are good people who are in violation of what is universally acknowledged to be a very bad immigration law. They are almost all hard-working people who are taking jobs almost no Americans want. They deserve our sympathy even as we debate the best way to reform our immigration system.