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Words cloud 'illegals' debate

Experts say how we label those who cross the border does affect public opinion.

Jean Hopfensperger, Star Tribune

What should you call the men and women who sneak across U.S. borders? The answer goes to the heart of an issue dividing the nation.

To Dell Eriksson, they're "illegal aliens." 'Immigrant' -- as a term -- is someone here lawfully," said Eriksson, a retiree from Brooklyn Center who thinks the country lets in too many foreigners.

Nathan Thompson contends these people are "undocumented workers." "The word 'illegal' conjures images of hardened criminals coming to the U.S. ... and that is completely false," said Thompson, a teacher who lives in St. Paul. "The phrases 'illegal alien' and 'illegal immigrant' appeal to base-level emotions and cut off debate."

Few issues rile up immigration activists more than the words used to describe men and women who cross the border without permission. They are the subject of 30 U.S. House "field hearings" on immigration reform this summer, including one scheduled for Sept. 1 in Dubuque, Iowa, that Minnesotans are planning to attend.

The war of words is more than semantics, say researchers who study such matters. What you call these men and women shapes public opinion of them, and that in turn frames the debate over how to change immigration laws.

For example, if these people are "undocumented workers," the Senate's plan to create a guest-worker program so they can work here legally would seem to be the logical solution. But if they are "illegal aliens," the House immigration proposal that focuses on tightening border security sounds like a sensible approach.

The problem is, none of the descriptions is really accurate, said former U.S. Immigration Commissioner Doris Meissner, now an analyst at the Migration Policy Institute in Washington, D.C. "This is not a simple thing," Meissner said.

Many "undocumented" workers actually entered the country with documents, but then overstayed their visas, she said. And immigrants can be legal or illegal based simply on what country they're coming from.

A Cuban whose raft lands in the United States can lawfully enter the country and become a U.S. resident within a year, she said. But a Mexican who swims across the Rio Grande River has virtually no path to legal residency -- ever.

Meanwhile, individual immigrants are not necessarily illegal, but there can be illegal immigration, Meissner said. Even the federal government can't make up its mind. The U.S. Census Bureau calls them "unauthorized immigrants." Other federal agencies refer to them as "illegal aliens."

Emotional issue

At a Minnesota News Council forum this summer on how the news media cover immigration, the language of immigration sparked pointed debate. Eriksson, a self-described "old-school environmentalist" long concerned about U.S. population growth, was among those in the audience. He thinks immigrant rights groups are watering down the problem when they call people crossing the border "unauthorized workers" or "undocumented workers." "If these people are 'unauthorized workers,' does that mean a bank robber is making an 'unauthorized withdrawal?' " he asked after the forum.

Others argued that people cannot be illegal. Or at the very least, people who hire the workers should be labeled "illegal employers."

Lucy Smith, also in the audience, said the immigration language war is deeply personal to her. She is a Polish Jew who survived the Holocaust by living underground for years, during an time when she was considered "illegal" and to capture her would have been legal.

"I survived because I had the documents of someone else," said Smith, an artist from St. Paul. "What is legal and illegal is very changeable. How could we consider people's desire to simply get a job to support our families to be illegal, particularly when we are not letting them in legally?"

Even the news media are divided on the wording. Fox News, for example, calls them "illegal aliens." Most major newspapers call them "illegal immigrants," although the National Association of Hispanic Journalists calls that term "dehumanizing."

George Lakoff, a linguistics professor at the University of California-Berkeley, argues that defining the issue as a question of "illegal immigrants" or "undocumented workers" is too narrow to describe the immigration problems facing the country. Those problems encompass business hiring practices, U.S. foreign policy, the labor market and other issues.

"It takes a complicated problem and frames it so that the sole source of the difficulty is the people who are crossing the border," Lakoff said.

Paul Westrum of Albert Lea, Minn., founder of Minnesota Coalition for Immigration Reduction, says language has actually improved for immigrants over the years. He recalled his grade school

teachers calling migrant workers "wetbacks" and also "Operation Wetback," which was launched during the Eisenhower administration to repatriate Mexicans.

Calling these immigrants anything but "illegal" is simply wrong, he said. Look up the words in the dictionary.

"All it does is fog the issue, and pretty soon people don't know what to think," Westrum said.

Even Meissner grapples with wording. She said she has been using the terms "unauthorized migrant" or "unauthorized immigrant" -- but not exclusively. And she also uses the term "illegal" to describe the phenomena of immigration, and sometimes to describe people as well.

"There's a lack of precise language," she laments.