

Words Matter: Respectful and Inclusive Language



When discussing undocumented individuals, the words we use shape perceptions and impact lives.

Here's a guide to help ensure that language used in conversations, media, and policies respects the dignity of all people, regardless of immigration status.



Avoid Dehumanizing Terms

- **"Illegal"**
 - **Why it's harmful:** referring to someone as "illegal" reduces a person's entire identity to a legal violation.
 - **Alternative:** Use "undocumented" instead. This term focuses on the person's lack of legal status without implying criminality.
- **"Alien"**
 - **Why it's harmful:** "Alien" has a cold and foreign connotation, painting undocumented individuals as outsiders who don't belong, rather than people who contribute to society.
 - **Alternative:** Use non-citizen or "immigrant". These terms maintain accuracy while respecting the humanity of the person.



Language that Honors Identity

- **Use "Undocumented"**
 - Refers to individuals living in a country without current legal status. It's a more accurate and respectful term that doesn't imply criminal activity.
- **Use "Mixed-Status"**
 - Refers to families where members have varying legal statuses, acknowledging the complexities of these households.
- **Use "Migrant" or "Immigrant"**
 - Refers to individuals moving from one country to another and focus on the movement, not the legality of their status.

Recognizing Contributions and Humanity

Words shape attitudes and policies.

Undocumented individuals are community members, workers, students, and neighbors. Using respectful language contributes to more inclusive communities and policy discussions.

Why Language Matters

Research demonstrates that language plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of undocumented individuals. Dehumanizing terms like "illegal" or "alien" fuel hostility and reinforce harmful stereotypes, creating barriers to social inclusion and making individuals feel unwelcome. In contrast, **using inclusive language fosters empathy, enhances social cohesion, and reduces stigma towards marginalized groups.** Dehumanizing language deepens divisions between immigrants and non-immigrants, while respectful language promotes unity and understanding (Santos & Menjivar, 2013).



Call to Action

We can all make a difference by using language that respects people's humanity. **As we raise awareness and advocate for change, let's commit to being mindful of our words.**



FOR QUESTIONS REACH OUT TO DREAMERS@CSUSM.EDU

