

# Immigration Reporting 101

## Reference Sheet

DEFINE  
AMERICAN

[defineamerican.com](https://defineamerican.com)

Key definitions and tips to ensure accurate, fair, and nuanced reporting on America's diverse population of over 45 million immigrants.

## Quoting Anonymous Sources

### Be sensitive to risk and privacy.

Undocumented immigrants are assuming a personal, and sometimes legal, risk when they speak to the news. Many choose to not disclose their immigration status, rather than risk deportation due to unwanted attention from this exposure. Keep in mind the risk that undocumented immigrants face when relating their personal journeys. Respect privacy preferences. Please see "Interviewing Members of Immigrant Communities" at the end of this document for a helpful tool that will ensure your sources can make informed decisions about the way they are identified.

1. There are reasons why immigrant sources—many who are fleeing persecution—don't feel comfortable using their full name, including fear of retaliation, concern it could hurt their legal cases, and trauma.
2. There are ways to verify a source's identity and show your audience that the source is credible without using their full name.
3. Communicate with sources about when and where the story will run.
4. Ask sources if they have questions for you.
5. Protect data that could identify sources in photographs. (see "Photography")
6. Remember that sources are 'doing us a favor' by talking to journalists.

### Hierarchy of Attribution

- |                |              |
|----------------|--------------|
| 1. Full name   | 4. Nickname  |
| 2. First name  | 5. Initials  |
| 3. Middle name | 6. Pseudonym |

Please see the source document, *Define American's 2022 Toolkit for Immigration Reporting*, for more. Read more about how to ethically engage undocumented storytellers in *Define American's* original report, *American Dreaming: The Roadmap to Resilience for Undocumented Storytellers*.

### Photography

#### Options for Anonymity

- Silhouette
- Back View
- Hands or feet or shadow
- Through a glass (darkly)
- Through a door
- Blur identifying objects



**Example:** Joao, a day laborer on Staten Island who gave only his nickname, said, "For two days, I didn't go out; I just didn't leave the house."

Photo by Sam Hodgson for *The New York Times*: "[Rumors of Immigration Raids Stoke Fear in New York](#)"

#### Television News & Documentary

- Get to know your subject first before filming
- No surprises
- Always ask permission to film
- Ask after taking a candid photo
- Remove geo-location data
- Do not use people as props or background.
- Provide the option of changing their voice and using a translator (if applicable)

“ I blur the focus, put them off camera or try to interview in a neutral area. I make sure I tell people that they will be in the background and for them to stand elsewhere if they don't want to be in the shot. And yes, I speak to them in Spanish.

**Armando Tonatiah Torres-Garcia,**  
ABC News Immigration Reporter

## Language

### Inaccurate vs. Preferred Terms

#### Inaccurate Terms

*illegals, illegal immigrant, alien, illegal alien*

The term "illegal" is dehumanizing and unfairly replaces complex legal circumstances with an assumption of guilt.

According to the AP Stylebook, the leading style guide used by journalists and the news industry, "except in direct quotes essential to the story, use 'illegal' only to refer to an action, not a person. Illegal immigration, but not illegal immigrant."

"Alien" is also dehumanizing. The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has [removed](#) this term from its guidelines and the Biden administration has issued guidance changing its vocabulary throughout various government agencies.

#### Preferred Terms

*undocumented immigrant, unauthorized immigrant, immigrant without legal status*

"Undocumented" or "unauthorized" offer options for neutral terminology. People can also be described in detail, for example: *a native of Cameroon whose asylum application is pending. A 20-year resident of Brooklyn, originally from Mexico.* Bring forward people's humanity whenever possible.

## Key Definitions

Please see source document: Define American's [2024 Telling Authentic Immigrant Stories: A Media Reference Guide](#), for more.

- **Asylum Seeker or Asylee** – A person applying for protection in the United States because they cannot return to their home country for fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Unlike the refugee process, those who apply for asylum must do so from inside the United States, or present themselves to authorities at a port of entry. [The right to seek asylum is protected under the law.](#)
- **Climate Migrant or Climate Refugee** – A person forced to move from increasingly non-viable areas of their countries due to major weather events like water scarcity, crop failure, heat waves, droughts, wildfires, sea-level rise, and storm surges, [among other issues](#). In 2022, [millions around the world](#) were uprooted from their homes and forced to flee due to climate-fuelled crises. Climate erosion in many areas can be linked to decades of exploitation of these regions, often by wealthier countries, including those to which climate migrants are fleeing.
- **DACA Recipient** – A subset of “Dreamers,” or undocumented youth who applied and received temporary protection from deportation through President Obama’s 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy. This status allows certain people who came to the United States as children to obtain two-year, renewable work permits and Social Security Numbers. There are an estimated 530,000 current DACA recipients as of 2024. [\(USCIS\)](#). In 2023, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas found DACA unlawful, and the government is unable to accept new DACA applications: only renewals [\(USCIS\)](#)
- **Dreamer** – The term “Dreamer” has often been used when referring to undocumented immigrants who came to the U.S. as children. Some entered the country without authorization, while others entered lawfully and became undocumented after their status lapsed. The term “Dreamer” comes from legislation introduced in 2001 called the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act), which would have granted a path to legalization for children brought to the U.S. illegally. Not all Dreamers have DACA.
- **Immigrant** – A person who migrates to another country, usually for permanent residence. [The United States is home to more than 45 million immigrants](#), roughly 14 percent of its population. [\(Census\)](#)
- **Migrant** – A broad term for people who move to another country. Some are lawfully admitted. Some are without status. Migrants may remain on the move for extended periods of time, and some may wish to return to their birthplaces one day.
- **Migrant Worker** – An individual who travels seasonally for temporary work. Not all migrant workers are undocumented, and not all undocumented individuals are migrant workers.
- **Non-immigrant** – An individual who enters the United States with a temporary visa and does not intend to leave their home country permanently. Common examples are tourists, foreign students, and corporate executives traveling for business. The majority of non-immigrant visa holders return to their home countries. The United States admitted [96,800,000 non-immigrants in 2022](#).
- **Refugee** – An individual who has been forced to flee their home country because of a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. Congress gave the President authority to set a quota each year on the number of refugees to admit. Under the Trump presidency, the United States cut its refugee cap to its lowest level ever.
- **Undocumented (or Unauthorized)** – An individual who currently does not have legal status in the United States. Generally, this person came to the United States without inspection or overstayed their visa, knowingly or unknowingly. Contrary to popular belief, undocumented individuals are not eligible for federal government benefits and, for most, there is no pathway to legalize their status.
- **Undocuqueer** – Refers to the intersection of the undocumented and LGBTQ+ struggles, to give voice to those living in both worlds and embracing both identities. [\(Northern Illinois University\)](#)

## Translation

Translating English-language news coverage to other languages continues to be a key strategy for many newsrooms trying to better serve their communities and grow their audiences.

Following are some tips from the [Institute for Nonprofit News](#) on how nonprofit newsrooms can translate stories to better reach audiences:

- **Commitment and Ownership:** Ensure there is organizational support and a designated point person accountable for translation initiatives. Without commitment throughout the organization, it’s challenging to allocate necessary resources.
- **Start Small, Stay Consistent:** Begin translation efforts with manageable, consistent content rather than aiming to translate the entire website or every story. Even translating one or two articles regularly can be valuable in reaching diverse audiences.
- **Trusted Translation Partners:** Seek recommendations from trusted sources for professional translation providers. Established community organizations, government entities, and nonprofits often have reliable translation resources.
- **Be Proactive:** Take the initiative and explore translation opportunities, as they are usually more cost-effective than perceived. Fundraise for translation costs and streamline workflow processes to make translation initiatives more manageable and achievable.

## Avoiding Mis- and Disinformation

Please see source document: Define American's report [“Immigration Will Destroy Us” and Other Talking Points](#) for more.

In your efforts to report accurately and to properly contextualize statistics, always check to make sure your sources are not connected to designated hate groups presenting themselves as neutral or educational resources, which is a common tactic. Organizations within the Tanton Network, for example, including the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), NumbersUSA, the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), and the American Immigration

Control Foundation (AICF), have been designated as official hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

While it is accurate to report on and acknowledge the historic demographic change occurring in the United States towards a more diverse population, any reporting that includes a narrative that references replacement or immigration as part of a larger conspiracy, such as “Great Replacement Theory,” is likely informed by and plays into a harmful narrative.

## Interviewing Members of Immigrant Communities

In partnership with PublicSource, a nonprofit newsroom in Pittsburgh, PA, Define American has developed a postcard that journalists can share with potential sources to ensure that they know and understand their rights: [“Talking to Journalists: What You Need to Know”](#)