

Migration Terminology: Comparison Chart

Comparison of Migration-Related Terms

Term	Legal Meaning	Connotation	Controversy
Alien	Non-citizen or foreign national (U.S. legal term)	Cold, othering, non-human	Seen as dehumanizing; many agencies now avoid it
Immigrant	Person moving permanently to another country	Neutral to slightly political	Often politicized; paired with 'illegal' becomes stigmatizing
Migrant	Anyone moving across borders (any reason)	Neutral, but vague	Blurs distinctions between refugees and economic migrants
Refugee	Person fleeing persecution protected by UN law	Sympathetic, vulnerable	Sometimes misused for all migrants; legal status matters
Asylum Seeker	Person applying for refugee status	Neutral, bureaucratic	Often conflated with 'refugee'; can sound technical and cold
Illegal Immigrant	Person residing without legal authorization	Criminalizing, negative	Frames migration as crime; widely criticized by advocates
Undocumented Person	Person lacking official immigration documents	Humanizing, softer tone	Criticized as euphemistic; lacks legal precision

Discussion Questions

Choose which questions you would like to discuss between you. What answers are you able to come up with?

- Which term in the chart feels most neutral to you? Why?
- How does the connotation of a word like 'alien' differ from 'undocumented person'?
- Do you think legal precision should outweigh humanizing language? Why or why not?
- How might the choice of terminology influence public opinion or policy?
- Is 'undocumented person' an accurate term, or does it obscure important legal distinctions?
- Should journalists prioritize clarity or empathy when reporting on migration?
- How do these terms reflect power dynamics between governments, media, and migrants?
- If you were writing a headline about migration, which term would you choose and why?
- Can changing language change attitudes? Give examples from the chart.
- Do you think any of these terms should be banned or replaced? Why?