

'Migrants'? 'Refugees'? Terminology Is Contested, Powerful, and Evolving

March 24, 2022 FEATURE | By Rebecca Hamlin

The sharp rise in the number of people seeking humanitarian protections over the last decade and the increase in international migration more generally have sharpened the focus on which labels are used to refer to people crossing borders. Should they be called "migrants"? "Refugees"? Some other term? While these words may carry legal meanings, their colloquial usage varies, and language used by media organizations, politicians, and in general public discourse has increasingly come under new scrutiny. For instance, few of the millions of people fleeing Russia's invasion into Ukraine have applied for and been granted the particular and narrow legal status of a refugee, yet this is the word that has overwhelmingly been used to refer to them. Years earlier, public figures were much more divided over how to refer to the more than 2 million individuals who arrived in Europe during the crisis of 2015-16.

Often, advocates for both more and less immigration use language to bolster their positions and convey messages about individuals arriving at their borders. For example, some seek to claim labeling advantage by calling the foreign born "illegal aliens" rather than "unauthorized immigrants." Research has shown that these choices can be effective; words matter, particularly for influencing public perceptions. For instance, people in multiple immigrant destination countries are more likely to support admitting people described as "refugees" than those described as "immigrants," according to a 2019 Pew Research Center survey. A similar experiment conducted for the author's book *Crossing: How We Label and React to People on the Move* also found that respondents in the United States were significantly more likely to say their country had an obligation to help people described as "vulnerable refugees" rather than "vulnerable migrants." In other words, even when both groups were explicitly portrayed as vulnerable, people's perceptions were still impacted by use of the word "refugee" versus "migrant." These findings are supported by cognitive science research demonstrating that opinions can be swayed by strategic use of terminology, and that favorable framings of the same set of facts can significantly shape people's view of a situation.

Public narratives and legal texts are filled with binaries such as "citizen" and "noncitizen," "legal" and "illegal," and "migrant" and "refugee." Recently, however, various players in immigration debates have attempted to circumvent these kinds of binaries by employing new terminology, and therefore sidestepping the loaded political significance that they have taken on. These struggles are rhetorical, but the terms that are invoked often carry highly significant legal, political, and social meaning. This article reviews prominent debates about terminology of migration and traces how they have evolved over the last decade.

The Migrant/Refugee Binary: A Global Debate

The distinction between “refugee” and “migrant” has been hotly contested particularly since the arrival of some 2 million individuals at EU borders in 2015 and 2016. Technically, refugee status has a discrete legal meaning that usually stems from the 1951 Refugee Convention and is available only to individuals who can prove they fled their origin country due to a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Receiving refugee status can be a long and complicated procedure that involves extended processing through agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or a national government.

In popular usage, though, “refugee” is sometimes applied to a much broader category of people who have not been processed and individually assessed for formal refugee status. During 2015-16, the BBC and other major news outlets insisted upon using “migrant” as a neutral term, although Al Jazeera publicly announced it would refer to all individuals arriving in Europe as “refugees,” saying in mid-2015 that “migrant” had “evolved from its dictionary definitions into a tool that dehumanizes and distances, a blunt pejorative.”

Recent events have complicated this situation. The vast majority of people fleeing Ukraine will benefit from the European Union’s Temporary Protection Directive, which will convey residence and work rights for up to three years and is distinct from refugee status in several ways. Still, they have widely been referred to as “refugees.” For instance, the BBC in March broke from its multi-year convention when it referred to people fleeing Ukraine as a “wave of refugees,” among other terms. (Use of “wave,” “flood,” and similar water metaphors has also been reconsidered by many writers, since they suggest that arrivals at the border are uncontrollable and pose a threat on par with natural disasters). This word choice seems to be in line with the generally greater sympathy that Western media and public figures have seemed to show Ukrainians compared to those who arrived in the 2015-16 era, which critics have alleged is due to cultural similarities, geopolitical interests in countering Russia, and a legacy of racism.

Elsewhere, some advocates have described Central Americans arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border as “refugees” and compared their situation to that of Syrians in Europe in 2015 and 2016. However, Al Jazeera has continued to use “migrant” to refer to these individuals, many of whom subsequently request asylum, despite its vocal stand during the situation in the Mediterranean, when arrivals from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq predominated.

Consequences of the Binary

Media organizations are not the only ones to place “migrant” and “refugee” in binary opposition to one another; so too do politicians and nongovernmental organizations. For example, UNHCR is one of the biggest proponents of the delineation, insisting that the words refer to two fundamentally different types of border crossers. UNHCR official correspondence has repeatedly asserted that “refugees are not migrants,” and that it “does not consider itself to be a migration organization,” positions that undermine claims that “migrant” is a general umbrella term to refer to anyone living outside the country of their birth. Amid the arrivals to Europe in 2015, the agency recruited celebrities such as Cate Blanchett and Patrick Stewart for a campaign called #WordsMatter which underscored the difference between migrants and refugees and suggested that referring to the people arriving as migrants ignored the need of many for protection.

While this position may help the agency carve out a bounded institutional mandate, there may be unintended consequences to insisting that refugees are a distinct category of people, rather than a type of migrants. These tensions were brought into sharp relief in late 2021, when an inflatable boat travelling across the English Channel from France sank, killing 27 people. In the aftermath of the

tragedy, British Home Secretary Priti Patel came under intense criticism for testifying without supporting evidence to the House of Lords that most people attempting to irregularly enter Britain by sea were single men who are “effectively economic migrants” with no legal right to access the United Kingdom—not refugees, whom the United Kingdom would be obliged to protect. Many people interpreted Patel as insinuating that their status meant that the individuals’ deaths were somehow less tragic, revealing how a binary logic can serve restrictionist purposes as easily as it can help those motivated by international protection obligations.

One way out of the linguistic conundrum is to defer to whatever individuals themselves would like to be called. Unfortunately, there is no systematic or consistent answer to this question. Research has shown that people with refugee status sometimes avoid self-identifying as refugees because it can lead them to be seen as victims without agency or economic value. Conversely, some people self-identify as refugees because they have been denied access to that legal status, and so use the label to bring legitimacy to their trauma. In both instances individuals are attaching their own socially constructed meanings to the words in ways that do not align with legal status, complicating the seemingly simple question of what to call someone.

Beyond the Binary: Alternative Terms

To avoid the challenges of the migrant/refugee binary, some analysts have advocated for alternative terms. For example, within some academic and research corners the phrase “forced migrant” has arisen as an alternative to “refugee,” which focuses on the forced nature of the movement rather than the legal status. Along the same lines, scholar Alexander Betts has coined the term “survival migration” to refer to people who had to move in order to live, even if they did not meet the legal definition of a refugee. His work is part of an effort to call upon the international community to create more categories of legal protection beyond refugee status. Similarly, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has pushed the term “vulnerable migrants” to refer to people needing protection and assistance, even if they are not refugees, including victims of trafficking. IOM has organized a special task force within its agency designed to identify and help such people.

All these terms are more inclusive than “refugee.” But they notably do not have legal meaning. Their usage is intended as rhetorical framing, to remind people that there are individuals deserving of care and compassion who do not fit the legal definition of a refugee. Without visa categories and protection regimes to accommodate such people, however, the terms carry only symbolic weight.

For scholars, another problem with these alternative terms is that they might suggest that particular forms of migration are distinctly and uniquely non-voluntary, to be studied separately from the larger phenomenon of human movement. In particular, scholars such as B.S. Chimni have criticized the evolution from refugee studies to forced migration studies, which avoids a full merger with the larger field of migration studies and thus insists on a conceptual bifurcation between forced and so-called voluntary migration. Even today, academic scholarship tends to theorize and conceptualize movement in two silos, one that takes into account the drivers of “forced” migration and one that assumes migration is economically motivated and therefore voluntary. While these may feel like esoteric academic debates, there are real-world implications to studying border crossing as two separate and distinct phenomena; it can lead the general public to imagine most international movement is voluntary, rather than driven and constrained by powerful forces.

In response to these debates, UNHCR and other organizations have used the phrase “mixed migration” to refer to situations in which refugees and other categories of migrants cross borders at the same time. Rather than an inclusive and broad category, however, “mixed migration” might be read as emphasizing the need to sort people into those who are deserving and undeserving of

protection in the destination country. Due to a variety of legal, political, and other factors, UNHCR also deploys a range of unusual terms to refer to people it assists yet whom it does not technically define as refugees, including “Venezuelans displaced abroad” and “people in refugee-like situations.” By labelling people this way, the agency maintains the ability to assist these individuals while preserving the distinct category of refugee. (Interestingly, the agency has not seemed to hesitate in calling displaced Ukrainians “refugees”).

Similarly, the U.S. government often refers to the approximately 76,000 Afghan people who arrived following the Taliban’s 2021 takeover as “evacuees,” rather than refugees or another category. This status had the advantage of flexibility, and it got people out of a dangerous situation. However, “evacuee” is not a legal term, and the individuals are in a mix of statuses, with the vast majority in an indeterminate status known as parole, which permits the right to stay and work but does not lead to legal permanent residence. As of mid-March, about 74,500 Afghans were eligible to apply for Temporary Protected Status, which would grant them protection from deportation and eligibility to work in the United States. But this status is by definition temporary and will expire after 18 months without extension. Nearly 37,000 Afghans have applied for Special Immigrant Visas that would put them on a pathway to staying in the country permanently, but this is still just a portion of the overall population. While it seems very unlikely that a presidential administration would find it politically favorable to revoke parole and expel Afghans living in the United States without permanent status, many are nonetheless not on a path to citizenship, which they would be if granted refugee status.

‘Illegal,’ ‘Unauthorized,’ and Other Terminology

The migrant/refugee binary is by no means the only such contestation over the language of migration. One of the earliest such examples in the United States was the campaign, beginning in the early 2000s, to move away from using the word “illegal” to describe immigrants who lack legal status. The campaign, sometimes called “Drop the I Word,” was spearheaded by a nonprofit social justice organization called Race Forward. Campaigners invoked a quote from Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel—“no human being is illegal”—in arguing that the word was dehumanizing and contributed to a culture of violence towards people suspected of being in the United States without authorization. The campaign was grounded on the idea that the public narrative around migration affects people’s individual beliefs about the topic.

In April 2013, in direct response to this campaign, the Associated Press officially changed its stylebook to remove use of the terms “illegal” or “illegal immigrant” in its coverage. Since then, many media organizations have instead opted for the terms “undocumented” or “unauthorized.” (The Migration Policy Institute uses the word “unauthorized.”) Most recently, people with temporary protections under the government’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program have claimed the term “DACAmended” to convey their liminal position.

The word “alien,” which had long been used in U.S. immigration law to refer to foreign nationals, has also become the focus of terminological campaigns. When it was originally used in texts such as the Naturalization Act of 1790, the word was simply a synonym for “foreign” used to describe noncitizens. Technically, its legal meaning has not changed. But over time it has taken on an additional social and political meaning with dehumanizing connotations. Thus, efforts both at the federal level and in several states have sought to eliminate it from statute.

When the Biden administration came into office in 2021, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) officially switched to what it called “more inclusive language,” replacing references to “illegal” and “alien” with “undocumented” and “noncitizen.” That September, California Governor Gavin Newsom (D) signed a bill removing “alien” from all state code, calling it “outdated,”

“offensive,” “derogatory,” and a “political dog whistle to express bigotry and hate without using traditionally racist language.”

Despite these major terminological shifts, the words “illegal” and “alien” are still widely used in restrictionist circles, and the retort “what part of illegal don’t you understand?” has become a popularized shorthand for a restrictionist viewpoint. In fact, former President Donald Trump and officials in his administration insisted on using the term “illegal alien” even as it had gone out of fashion for most politicians and media figures, also favoring the term “assimilation” over “integration.” In the United States today, the terminology is so politicized that the words someone uses are a good indicator of their political positions on immigration.

A more recent example of a term that has fallen into disrepute is “low skill.” For many years, policymakers and academics discussed immigration as being differentiated into the categories of high skill (referring to people with professional degrees) and low skill (referring to people who did manual labor or had few formal qualifications). More recently, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, immigrant-rights advocates have pointed out that low-wage work often requires specific skill sets and have argued that referring to individuals as “low skill” devalues their work, which was often simultaneously being called “essential.” Writing in *The Atlantic*, Annie Lowrey called low skill “a cancerous little phrase” that suggests low-wage workers are a problem to be solved instead of important contributors to the economy.

Climate-Related Displacement

Terminology for people displaced by the consequences of climate change and environmental disasters is another extremely fraught debate that has gained visibility in recent years. These individuals usually do not meet the definition of a refugee under international law, and so do not fall under the mandate of UNHCR. Although the term “climate refugee” may have gained popularity in common parlance, the agency is clear that it does not endorse it, preferring instead “persons displaced in the context of disasters and climate change.” Advocacy organizations such as Climate Refugees have taken the opposite approach, embracing the phrase in order “to provoke conversation” and “emphasize the political responsibility of climate change,” even while acknowledging that “climate refugee” is not a legal status.

The issue is a complicated one. The World Bank’s *Groundswell* report predicted the internal “climate migration” of up to 216 million people by 2050. But the impacts of climate change often affect migration only indirectly, so some commentators have frowned on using these kinds of terms, warning that they are unnecessarily alarmist, particularly since most of the movement is not predicted to be across international borders.

This question has created strange political bedfellows. Immigration restrictionists have similarly rejected the term “climate refugees,” insisting upon the narrow definition outlined in the 1951 Refugee Convention. Immigrant-rights advocates, they allege, want to broaden the definition for the sole purpose of letting more people cross international borders. In many ways, the debate comes down to questions of which individuals are seen as deserving international protection and how the international community should respond to the changing climate.

Evolving Terms

People cross borders for multiple reasons that may change throughout the course of their journey. Law at both domestic and international levels can often fail to encompass these nuanced motivations. So too can terminology.

As debates about terminology have intensified and become more polarized, the array of alternative labels and categories has grown. Rather than making the disagreements less intense, however, recent innovations have only complicated the landscape. For example, in response to Trump's efforts to restrict immigration, activists on the left popularized the slogan "no ban no wall." This framing linked the plights of people arriving under many different statuses and by different means of transportation. However, U.S. conservatives are now claiming with increasing fervor that President Joe Biden is in favor of "open borders," a false claim but nonetheless a powerful phrase that invokes fears of chaos and invasion.

Efforts to push language in a more inclusive direction have achieved some successes, but have been met with powerful opposition. Use of alternative labels may aim to sidestep the most difficult debates about migration, but recent events have demonstrated that it cannot avoid the political dimension entirely. Words matter. But migration is an issue that speaks deeply to people's beliefs about who is deserving of humanitarian protection, what governments are obligated to offer, and the merits of a diverse society. With such core values at issue, there is only so much that labels can do to change attitudes.

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