

Library of Congress to Cancel the Subject Heading “Illegal Aliens”

March 22, 2016

Executive Summary

*In response to constituent requests, the Policy and Standards Division of the Library of Congress, which maintains Library of Congress Subject Headings, has investigated the possibility of cancelling or revising the heading **Illegal aliens**. PSD also explored the possibility of revising the broader term **Aliens**. It concluded that the meaning of **Aliens** is often misunderstood and should be revised to **Noncitizens**, and that the phrase illegal aliens has become pejorative. The heading **Illegal aliens** will therefore be cancelled and replaced by two headings, **Noncitizens** and **Unauthorized immigration**, which may be assigned together to describe resources about people who illegally reside in a country.*

*Other headings that include the word aliens or the phrase illegal aliens (e.g., **Church work with aliens**; **Children of illegal aliens**) will also be revised. All of the revisions will appear on a Tentative List and be approved no earlier than May 2016; the revision of existing bibliographic records will commence shortly thereafter.*

Introduction

In response to constituent requests, the Policy and Standards Division of the Library of Congress, which maintains *Library of Congress Subject Headings*, has thoroughly examined and discussed the status of the headings **Aliens** and **Illegal aliens**. PSD has determined that the heading **Aliens** should be revised to **Noncitizens**. The heading **Illegal aliens** will be cancelled and replaced by two headings, **Noncitizens** and **Unauthorized immigration**, which may be assigned together to describe resources about people who are in a country illegally.

This announcement provides the background and purpose of the headings **Aliens** and **Illegal aliens** and then explains the rationale for the revisions to LCSH. Finally, it describes the scope and timeline of the project.

Background and Rationale

The heading **Aliens** is one of the oldest headings in *Library of Congress Subject Headings*, having appeared in the first edition of *Subject Headings Used in the Dictionary Catalogues of the Library of Congress* (published in parts between 1910 and 1914), the precursor to today’s LCSH. According to the current scope note for the heading, it refers to “persons who are not citizens of the country in which they reside.” The heading has been somewhat problematic over time because the word *aliens* has several dictionary definitions, one of which corresponds to the LCSH scope note and another that means beings

from another planet.¹ Because of the resulting confusion, PSD decided that it would be useful to reconsider the heading **Aliens** during its reconsideration of **Illegal aliens**.

The heading **Aliens, Illegal** was established in 1980 and was revised to its current form, **Illegal aliens**, in 1993. As with all LC subject headings, **Illegal aliens** was based on literary warrant: it was needed to describe the topics being covered in published literature, and it employed the terminology used in the literature and in reference sources. The literature addressed the legal status of persons who entered and lived in a country illegally, the social conditions under which those persons lived, and the services provided to them, including education, health, and employment, among other topics.

The phrase *illegal aliens* has taken on a pejorative tone in recent years, and in response, some institutions have determined that they will cease to use it. For example, in April 2014 the Associated Press announced that *illegal* would not be used as a descriptor for any individual.²

In fall 2014, Dartmouth College submitted a formal request that LC revise the heading **Illegal aliens** to *Undocumented immigrants*. PSD chose not to approve Dartmouth's proposal after consulting with LC staff, including the Law (Cataloging) Section and the Law Library of Congress. The rationale was twofold. First, while *undocumented immigrants* is often used as a synonym for *illegal aliens*, the phrases are not synonymous. Not all "undocumented" people are, or intend to be, immigrants, and many of them do in fact have documents of some type. Second, the authoritative sources for legal terminology that are generally referenced by PSD when establishing or revising headings, including *Black's Law Dictionary*, use *illegal aliens* as their established term. Since Dartmouth's proposed terminology was problematic, PSD chose to retain the established heading and to study the situation further.

At the American Library Association's Midwinter Meeting in 2016, the ALA Council adopted a resolution calling on the Library of Congress to change the heading **Illegal aliens** to *Undocumented immigrants*.³ Because PSD still viewed the terminology being proposed as problematic, it decided to convene a formal meeting of LC stakeholders, with the goal of determining whether the heading should be changed, and if so, what the new heading should be.

The February 19, 2016 meeting was attended by representatives from the Law (Cataloging) Section, the Law Library of Congress, the Congressional Research Service, the Cooperative and Instructional Programs Division, and PSD. Also in attendance was the director of LC's Acquisitions and Bibliographic Access Directorate, Beacher Wiggins. The problems with the headings **Aliens** and **Illegal aliens** were thoroughly discussed, as were several alternatives for new terminology. The meeting participants reaffirmed that the phrase *undocumented immigrants* is problematic, for the reasons discussed above.

¹ The heading **Extraterrestrial beings**, which corresponds to the second definition, was not added to LCSH until 2007.

² AP The Definitive source: Colford, Chad. 'Illegal immigrant' no more, April 2, 2013. <https://blog.ap.org/announcements/illegal-immigrant-no-more>

³ Resolution on Replacing the Library of Congress Subject Heading "Illegal Aliens" with "Undocumented Immigrants," January 12, 2016. http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org.aboutala/files/content/governance/council/council_documents/2016_mw_council_documents/cd_34_Resol_on_LC_Headings_11216_FINAL.pdf.

After deliberation, the meeting participants determined that the heading **Aliens** will be revised to **Noncitizens**. For **Illegal aliens**, the meeting decided that a heading referring to the act of residing in a place without authorization should be used rather than a heading that describes the people as illegal or unauthorized. For resources about people who reside in a country without authorization, two headings will be assigned, **Noncitizens** and **Unauthorized immigration**.

The existing subject heading **Immigrants**, whose scope is defined as “foreign-born persons who enter a country intending to become permanent residents or citizens,” will remain unchanged. **Noncitizens** will be assigned to resources about persons who are not citizens of the country in which they reside, including resources that discuss collectively those who intend to emigrate and those who reside in the country temporarily (e.g., tourists, students, people on limited-term work visas).

Scope and Timeline

PSD will undertake a project to make the revisions discussed above. The subject heading **Aliens** will be revised to **Noncitizens**, and all of the related headings and subdivisions will also be revised (e.g., **Aliens (Roman law)** will become **Noncitizens (Roman law)**; **Church work with aliens** will become **Church work with noncitizens**).

The heading **Illegal aliens** will be cancelled and will become a “former heading” reference to both **Noncitizens** and **Unauthorized immigration**. Other headings that include the phrase *illegal aliens* will also be revised or cancelled, as appropriate (e.g., **Children of illegal aliens**; **Women illegal aliens**).

The proposed revisions will appear on a Tentative List no earlier than May 2016 (List 1605). Headings on existing bibliographic records in the Library of Congress’ catalog will be updated as expeditiously as possible after the heading changes are approved.

Questions or comments on these revisions may be directed to Libby Dechman (edec@loc.gov).