# Immigration Headings

This is a summary of the work the SWAN DEI in Metadata Working Group has done regarding immigration subject headings.

## History

In 2021, SWAN’s DEI in Metadata Working Group made some decisions regarding subject headings containing the terms “illegal aliens” and “aliens.” These terms had been controversial for many years and garnered public attention following an attempt in 2016 by the Library of Congress to change these terms that was ultimately shelved following congressional backlash.

Not long after we implemented our local changes, the Library of Congress Policy and Standards Division announced a decision to replace these terms. Reactions to this decision were mixed, and some librarians and organizations felt the decision did not go far enough or was not an ideal implementation.

In summer of 2022, the SWAN working group revisited this topic to evaluate our approach in light of the Library of Congress change. Using as a reference an early unpublished draft of the recommendations of the Immigration Working Group (a subgroup of the DEI in Metadata Networking Group), we settled on a modified approach to these headings with some supplemental terms to better align our description with patron search behavior.

## Summary of decisions

The Library of Congress terminology update affected subjects with the words “aliens” and “illegal aliens”. These were handled differently.

### Aliens

Subject headings with the term “aliens” generally had that term updated to “Noncitizens.” For example, “Alien criminals” was updated to “Noncitizen criminals”. The only exception is the term “Alien property”, which was updated to “Foreign property.” We agree with the Library of Congress update and propose no changes to these terms with one exception.

The Library of Congress updated the term “Alien detention centers” to “Noncitizen detention centers.” While there is no problem with this term, we will supplement records containing this term with “Immigration detention centers,” which we believe is more commonly understood and have verified is more commonly searched in our catalog.

### Illegal aliens

Subject headings with the term “illegal aliens” underwent a more complex change. The Library of Congress outlines two terms to refer to one concept: “noncitizen” and “illegal immigration”. For example, a record with the subject heading “Illegal alien children” would replace that heading with two headings: “Noncitizen children” and “Illegal immigration.”

Both the Immigration Working Group and SWAN’s working group find this to be a flawed approach for a few reasons:

1. A term describing a person has been replaced with terms describing a person and a concept respectively. This can lead to confusing descriptions. For example, a memoir by an undocumented immigrant may not necessarily be about “illegal immigration.”
2. Since the terms are meant to describe a person, use of the term “illegal” is still problematic. While an action can be illegal, a person cannot. This was one of the primary objections to the term “illegal aliens” when this conversation first began.
3. The terms do not align with SWAN’s observed patron search behavior. Using Google Analytics to examine common search terms in our online catalog, we found “undocumented immigrants” and “undocumented immigration” to be searched more often than “illegal immigration” or “noncitizens”.

### Conclusion

SWAN will follow an approach laid out in the DEI Networking Group’s toolkit and update headings in the following ways:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **LC Term** | **SWAN Term** | **Action** |
| Noncitizen detention centers | Immigration detention centers | Supplement |
| Children of noncitizens + Illegal immigration | Children of undocumented immigrants | Replace |
| Noncitizen children + Illegal immigration | Undocumented immigrant children | Replace |
| Noncitizens + Illegal immigration | Undocumented immigrants | Replace |
| Noncitizens in literature + Illegal immigration in literature | Undocumented immigrants in literature | Replace |
| Illegal immigration | Undocumented immigration | Replace – Use only to describe the concept of immigration. |
| Illegal immigration in literature | Undocumented immigration in literature | Replace |
| Women noncitizens + Illegal immigration | Women undocumented immigrants | Replace |

Because the use of two terms may not sustain itself in practice as future catalogers create new records, SWAN staff will periodically examine records containing the term “noncitizens” to determine if these records would be better served with headings relating specifically to undocumented immigrants.

## Resources

* [ALA Welcomes Removal of Offensive ‘Illegal Aliens’ Subject Headings](https://www.ala.org/news/member-news/2021/11/ala-welcomes-removal-offensive-illegal-aliens-subject-headings) – ALA Member News (Nov 2021)