

Report of the SAC Working Group on Alternatives to LCSH "Illegal aliens"

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Introduction

In June 2019, representatives from the American Library Association (ALA), ALA's division the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS), and representatives from the Library of Congress (LC) met before the ALA Annual Conference in Washington, D.C. During the meeting, ALA and ALCTS representatives asked for an update on the status of changes proposed to the authorized Library of Congress Subject Heading (LCSH) "Illegal aliens." During their meeting, LC declined to provide more information or give a timeframe regarding changing this subject heading. The ALCTS Board determined their priority would be to help libraries make such a change outside of using LCSH, while continuing to keep lines of dialogue open with LC. This working group, the *SAC Working Group on Alternatives to LCSH "Illegal aliens,"* was formed to that end under the auspices of [SAC \(ALCTS's Subject Analysis Committee\)](#)¹.

Background

The history of the proposed changes to the "Illegal aliens" subject heading has been well documented through blog posts, [Cataloging and Classification Quarterly](#), and even a [documentary film](#).² In 2014, Dartmouth College students Óscar Rubén Cornejo Cásares and Melissa Padilla, along with other members of Dartmouth College's student organization, the Coalition for Immigration Reform, Equality and DREAMERs (CoFIRED), called for a change to the subject heading in the library catalog. Specifically, the students advocated for Dartmouth College Libraries to drop the term "Illegal aliens" from their catalog, and use the term "'undocumented' instead of 'illegal' in reference to immigrants."³ This prompted Dartmouth College librarian John DeSantis to submit five proposals in June 2014 through the Library of

¹ More information about the ALCTS CaMMS Subject Analysis Committee, including the charge and membership of the committee, can be found at: <http://www.ala.org/alcts/mgrps/camms/cmtes/ats-ccssac>

² The "Change the Subject" documentary released in 2019 documents the story of students – now alumni – who produced a film in partnership with Dartmouth staff to capture the students' effort to confront an instance of anti-immigrant sentiment in their library catalog, namely the "Illegal aliens" Library of Congress subject heading.

³ Violet B. Fox, "Cataloging News." *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 54, no. 7 (October 2, 2016). <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01639374.2016.1218707>.

Congress' Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO). The following revisions were proposed:

- "Illegal aliens" would be replaced by "Undocumented immigrants,"
- "Illegal aliens in literature" would be replaced by "Undocumented immigrants in literature,"
- "Illegal alien children" would be replaced by "Undocumented immigrant children,"
- "Children of illegal aliens" would be replaced by "Children of undocumented immigrants,"
- "Women illegal aliens" would be replaced by "Undocumented women immigrants"

The proposed revisions to the five subject headings were ultimately rejected by the Library of Congress in their [Summary of Decisions dated December 15, 2014](#). At the 2016 ALA Midwinter Meeting, Tina Gross submitted a "[Resolution on Replacing the Library of Congress Subject Heading 'Illegal Aliens' with 'Undocumented Immigrants'](#)," written in collaboration with others (and with input from Sandy Berman), to the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT), which voted to bring the resolution forward for consideration by ALA Council. The Resolution gained the support of several ALA groups beyond the SRRT, including the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking (REFORMA), the Ethnic and Multicultural Exchange Round Table (EMIERT), the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM), ALA's Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC), the Intellectual Freedom Round Table (IFRT), and SAC. ALA Council passed the Resolution unanimously and SAC formed a working group, led by Tina Gross, to determine an appropriate replacement heading for the LCSH "Illegal aliens."⁴

That working group resulted in the 2016 [Report from the SAC Working Group on the LCSH "Illegal aliens"](#), which concurred with the Library of Congress' decision to change the subject heading 'Aliens' to 'Noncitizens', but recommended that 'Illegal aliens' be replaced with 'Undocumented immigrants,' where appropriate.⁵ The report also indicated that "where the subject heading Illegal aliens has been assigned to works about nonimmigrants, more specific terms should be assigned."⁶

In LC's [Summary of Decisions dated March 21, 2016](#), they announced that the "heading Illegal aliens [would] be cancelled and replaced by two headings, 'Noncitizens' and 'Unauthorized

⁴ Fox, "Cataloging News."

⁵ Tina Gross, Subject Analysis Committee Working Group, "Report from the SAC Working Group on the LCSH 'Illegal aliens'," American Library Association Institutional Repository, last modified July 13, 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/11213/9261>.

⁶ Gross, Subject Analysis Committee Working Group, "Report."

immigration,’ which may be assigned together to describe resources about people who illegally reside in a country.” The full decision was outlined in a statement on the LC website, [Library of Congress to Cancel the Subject Heading “Illegal Aliens.”](#)

In May 2016, several members of Congress [drafted wording into a report](#) accompanying the 2017 Congressional appropriations bill that would restrict the Library of Congress from moving forward with their planned changes. HR 4926, the “Stopping Partisan Policy at the Library of Congress Act,” stated that subject headings should coincide with legal language used in Title 8 of the United States Code (namely, “Illegal aliens”). While the appropriations bill passed the House of Representatives with this wording intact, the legislation that was ultimately enacted is reflected on page H4033 of [Congressional Record, Vol. 163 No. 76 Book III \(May 3, 2017\)](#):

Subject Headings: In lieu of report language related to the Library of Congress’ subject headings, the Library of Congress is directed to make publicly available its process for changing or adding subject headings. It is expected that the Library use a process to change or add subject headings that is clearly defined, transparent, and allows input from stakeholders including those in the congressional community. The process should consider appropriate sources of common terminology used to refer to a concept, including current statutory language and other legal reference sources; and other sources, such as reference materials; websites; and, titles in the Library of Congress’ collection.

In May 2016 LC stated they would be accepting public feedback for their proposal to change the “Illegal aliens” heading and have made no formal public statements regarding revisions to LCSH “Illegal aliens” since that date.

The 2019 release of the documentary [Change the Subject](#),⁷ focusing on the activism of the students at Dartmouth in 2014 that led to movement to change the “Illegal aliens” subject heading, revitalized the conversation to change the subject heading. Library staff across the country began to ask what they could do to address the term “Illegal aliens” in their local catalogs, as they await a revision from LC.

In June 2019, the Subject Analysis Committee formed the *SAC Working Group on Alternatives to LCSH “Illegal aliens”* focused on compiling the various methods for individual libraries, library systems, or consortial systems to change this heading on a local basis.

⁷ Directed by Sawyer Broadley and Jill Baron. Produced by Jill Baron, Óscar Rubén Cornejo Cásaes, and Melissa Padilla.

Methodology

In order to get a better frame of reference for what institutions were doing to address the continued use of LCSH “Illegal aliens,” the working group designed a survey to gather information from staff at a variety of libraries and cultural heritage institutions about how they address the subject heading in their systems.

Survey design

The survey was designed and administered using Google Forms. The survey was not anonymous; name, email address, and institution affiliation for the individual filling out the survey were requested within the survey. Participants were also asked to identify the Integrated Library System or Library Services Platform used as their library catalog, in addition to what discovery interface. The survey also asked respondents to identify whether the library catalog was used by a single institution, a library system, or a consortium.

Regarding the use of LC subject heading “Illegal aliens” in local catalogs, participants were asked whether any changes were made in their local catalog; if changes were made, whether it was a one time change throughout their system or an ongoing change (e.g. as new records are being brought in)? If changes were made, participants were asked to state who was responsible for making the changes at the institution (e.g. a cataloger, cataloging department, etc.), and what changes were made to accommodate a local heading. Survey participants were also asked to state how long it took to implement these changes.

Further questions include: what challenges libraries ran into during the project, who else (in the library) was included in the project, whether/how the project was communicated to stakeholders outside the implementation team, and whether there has been any response to the changes made. The survey ended with a request for participants to share any workflow documentation created by the institution during the project, followed by an open ended question for further comments or questions for the working group.

Who was surveyed?

The working group drafted an email call for participation for the survey, which was then sent out to various listservs and individuals who were known for having made changes to the heading locally. The listservs that the email was posted to included LITA, ELUNA, ALMA, AUTOCAT, PCC-LIST, SALALM, OLAC, MOUG, Radcat, REFORMA, PLG, and SRRT. Additional posts were made on the Open Cataloging Rules Google Group, the Troublesome Catalogers Facebook Group, and via Twitter using the #critcat hashtag.

Some libraries were brought to the group's attention as organizations that have undertaken this task, including the Orbis Cascade Alliance Cataloging Standing Group,⁸ University of Colorado at Boulder, Yale University, Denver Public Library, Bard College, Williamsburg Regional Library, Michigan State University, Lawrence Public Library, Regis University, and Hennepin County Library. Working group members reached out to individuals from these organizations and requested their participation in the survey.

Survey results

What types of libraries were represented?

Overall, the survey received 40 individual responses. The types of libraries represented in the responses include academic, public, special, and school libraries. Libraries from across the United States are represented as well as one from Canada and one from the United Kingdom. The size of libraries also vary from small, local church, school collections to large universities and county library systems.

What library systems were represented?

All of the major Integrated Library Systems (ILS) and Library Services Platforms (LPS) systems are represented in the survey. III's Sierra accounts for 25% of the responses followed by Ex Libris' Alma, SirsiDynix's Horizon and Symphony, and III's Millennium with 10%. Ex Libris' Voyager represented 7.5% while Follett's Destiny and the open source Koha each represented 5%. Representing 2.5% of the total responses is Biblionix's Apollo, the open source Evergreen and OPALS, LibraryWorld, and III's Polaris. Two respondents listed their ILS as either SirsiDynix and Workflows.

A number of popular discovery interfaces are represented in the survey as well including Blacklight, Ex Libris' Primo, and Summon.

Trends in the results

There appears to be several trends among libraries making changes to the "Illegal aliens" subject heading:

- adding a new heading into the record in a local or MARC field without removing the corresponding "Illegal aliens" subject heading;

⁸ Orbis Cascade Alliance Cataloging Standing Group, "Providing Alternative Subject Headings for Controversial Subject Headings in the Alliance Shared ILS," discussion paper, December 2019, accessed January 23, 2020, <https://www.orbiscascade.org/cataloging-standing-group/>

- replacing the “Illegal aliens” authority record in the bibliographic records;
- creating a local authority record in the backend library system;
- or creating a local authority record in the discovery system.

Of those who did add alternative language to their system, the vast majority opted to use “Undocumented immigrants” for “Illegal aliens” and all other instances where subject heading contained “illegal aliens.” For example, “Women illegal aliens” became “Women undocumented immigrants” and “Children of illegal aliens” became “Children of undocumented immigrants.” Some of the institutions also opted to add a local heading for “Noncitizens” to use in place of the LCSH “Aliens,” and noted that this was to help clarify language across bibliographic records. During record cleanup work, they reported discovering “Aliens” subject heading being misapplied to titles about extraterrestrial beings rather than noncitizens.

One subject heading that had a myriad of different changes to it was “Alien detention centers.” Some libraries changed (or planned to change) “Alien detention centers” to “Undocumented immigrant centers,” others suggested “Immigrant detention centers,” “Detention centres for undocumented immigrants,” or “Noncitizen detention centers.”

Strategies: adding additional access points

Retaining the “Illegal aliens” LCSH and adding additional terms has the benefits of providing the maximum subject and keyword access to bibliographic records. Libraries mentioned that simply adding new headings (usually coded \$2 local) was quicker than revising headings. Adding additional access points as local subject headings also prevents these headings from being removed or overlaid when bringing in a newer version of the bibliographic record.

On the other hand, the January 2016 ALA resolution CD#34 formally recognized that “Illegal aliens” terminology is “dehumanizing, offensive, and inflammatory.” Retaining this vocabulary means that harmful and insensitive language continue to display in library catalogs, thereby softening the impact of adopting inclusive language for better search and discovery. From a public services angle, continued use of problematic language as subject headings may lead to possible confusion among library users and fellow library workers regarding acceptable terminology to search and discover items related to undocumented immigrants.

Strategies: replacing “Illegal aliens” directly in records

For smaller institutions and those without more advanced ILS/discovery systems, replacing the “Illegal aliens” heading in bibliographic records with alternate terminology may be a good strategy. This approach has the benefit of being simple to implement

On the negative side, manual replacement of this term requires additional workflows and recataloging of materials, which may not work for certain institutions depending on cataloging priorities and staffing support on ongoing record maintenance. Individual bibliographic level maintenance is also not sustainable for large collections and libraries with mixed formats (print, electronic), and so forth.

Some libraries advised their cataloging staff to accept bibliographic systems into their catalog with the “Illegal aliens” headings, instead of expecting each cataloger to make this change at the point of cataloging; systematic conversion of the headings were then undertaken on a regular basis (once a month was a typical maintenance period). Batch replacement and automation create an efficient ongoing system of reviewing headings in bibliographic records, both for previously-cataloged materials and new purchases. This would also make it feasible for most catalogers and record maintenance staff to take on with little overall impact to their current workloads. Automation or batch replacements still need some human intervention, so staff time for periodic review should still be accounted.

Strategies: replacing display terms with alternate vocabularies

Some discovery systems allow for maintaining the “Illegal aliens” heading in the library’s bibliographic data, while displaying a variant phrase in the library’s public catalog. This may be the best alternative where it is available. The benefits of this approach are maintaining the integrity of the core data, and, with many systems, maintaining keyword access to searches for “Illegal aliens”. This also ensures that when LC does revise this heading in the official LCSH, libraries using this approach can allow their traditional authority control methods to update bibliographic records as they normally would.

An example of this approach was undertaken by Villanova University’s Library, which created mappings in VuFind’s MARC record indexing rules and created a custom record driver to display “Undocumented immigrants” where “Illegal aliens” existed within subject fields. The codes they created are available on the [library’s blog](#).

Systems differ in their capability, so institutions need to investigate the capacity of their catalog systems to make similar changes.

Challenges encountered

The most frequently encountered challenges reported included:

- deciding how to make changes on a consortium-wide basis
- deciding on which alternative vocabulary/terminology to use

- unanticipated bibliographic maintenance, especially confusion around “aliens” versus extraterrestrials
- database syncing issues causing delay in displaying revisions
- forgetting to revise headings that aren’t alphabetically near “Illegal aliens” (like “Children of illegal aliens”)
- keeping up with revising headings in newly imported bibliographic records
- workload/staffing issues

One challenge that many libraries grappled with was automated authority programs, such as Sierra’s AACP (Automated Authority Control Program) or those undertaken regularly by vendors, potentially overwriting/reverting the manual revisions that had been made to these headings. A number of workarounds were created to address this issue, but those strategies varied greatly depending on the systems and vendors involved.

Responses to changes made

The overwhelming majority of our respondents reported positive or neutral responses to this change. Of the 34 respondents who replied to our question “Have you received any response to the changes? If so, was it positive or negative?,” 26 expressed hearing only positive comments, primarily from staff or administration. Very few libraries reported hearing any comments from the public.

Six institutions reported that they had had no response to the changes, and three reported mixed results. Comments received about the changes included questions about the scalability similar projects and finding/prioritizing other offensive LCSH. Negative responses to the changes included one library that received questions from a conservative news site: after emailing the site with information about the proposal and the alternative vocabularies used, the library did not hear from the site again. One respondent stated that “some catalogers were less enthusiastic” about the change (though it was not clear whether because of workload issues or ideological disagreements) and another respondent noted that they had made changes consortium-wide without asking permission, so there was discontent about the method but not about the change itself.

Communicating changes

Most respondents reported sharing information about changes made only within their own library, often via administrative comments or internal newsletters. Some went beyond this to share information about the changes to their institution (campus or school), or with the public at large. Examples of public communication about revising this heading include statements from the [California State University Libraries](#) and [Villanova University’s Falvey Memorial Library](#).

Alternative controlled vocabularies

A list of alternative controlled vocabularies was originally included in the appendix of the [2016 report](#) from the working group (see the appendix document titled “ATT-3-other-controlled-vocabularies”). These sources have been consulted again in December 2019-January 2020 to see if any change in terminology has occurred since the original list was compiled. One source, Academic Search Premier by EBSCO, has changed its preferred term to “UNDOCUMENTED immigrants” from “ILLEGAL aliens.” EuroVoc has changed its preferred term to “illegal migration” from “illegal immigration.” Of the other sources for which access was available, some have made minor changes; none of them have replaced a term containing “undocumented” with one containing the word “illegal.”

Conclusion / recommendations

The survey asked participants “What would you do differently if given the chance to make these changes again?” The most frequently given answer was “Nothing,” with the second most frequent comment being, “Make the changes sooner.” The working group suggests that any change you can make to implement less offensive language in your catalog is better than doing nothing, because we don’t know when LC will move forward with changing the LCSH.

Recommendations for the “best” solution for each institution will vary greatly, depending on the community’s needs, the organizational structure that governs decisions within their catalog, and the capacity of the system(s) used to display the catalog. This working group has taken a broad approach in attempting to compile options and pointing out pros/cons of each alternative.

We asked respondents if they had any comments or questions for the working group, and many comments were enthusiastic about the work of the group and the work that had been done in their library (and others) to make this change. They saw this challenge as a unique opportunity for cataloging and public services library workers to collaborate on an issue that they saw as being important to their library’s users. Many commented that they were interested in learning more about other LCSH which might be considered outdated or disparaging.

The delay in the decision from the Library of Congress to revise this heading is truly unfortunate and the library community should not lose sight of the real pain and alienation that having this offensive terminology in our catalogs can entail for members of a marginalized community. However, one silver lining of this situation is that it has provided library and other cultural heritage institution workers the opportunity to take concrete steps towards ensuring that the terminology we use in our work is inclusive and respectful.

References

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