

Immigration Coverage in the Crossfire

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Body

Readers who oppose illegal immigration often complain that The Post has too much sympathy for those living in the United States illegally and too little for those who oppose such residents.

They prefer that The Post use the term "illegal alien" and are disturbed that they sometimes are called "anti-immigrant" when they say they do not oppose legal immigration. While the Post covers many immigrant groups, most of the coverage of illegal immigration has involved Hispanics in the suburbs because that's where the controversy is.

Leslie Wilder of Alexandria wrote last fall: "Am I the only one annoyed by The Post's constant glorification of illegal immigrants? Hardly a week goes by without either an uplifting or heart-rending article."

These readers also criticize The Post's editorial page, which has consistently opposed local attempts to suppress services for immigrants, but editorials are not in my purview and do not affect news coverage.

This issue has flared nationally and locally, especially in Herndon and in Prince William County, in Virginia, and in Montgomery and Prince George's counties, in Maryland. Several readers were upset about a Feb. 23 [headline](#) on the Metro section front: "Anti-Immigrant Effort Takes Hold in Md." A secondary headline made it clearer: "Grass-Roots Movement Expands Beyond Montgomery in Targeting the Undocumented."

John Mac Michael of Alexandria wrote: "Your recent article on growing opposition to illegal aliens (immigrants?) in Maryland once again used the familiar ploy of labeling those citizens who oppose illegal aliens as being 'anti-immigrant.' This is baloney. There is a clear difference between the two classes, and I certainly welcome those who are here legally."

The headline should have been more precise. The story also drew fire from pro-immigration activists who said it didn't make clear that most people appearing at a Mount Rainier City Council meeting favored declaring the city a "sanctuary" for illegal immigrants. A correction was published.

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My review of [immigration](#) stories, mostly local, over the past year and several months, showed that the [coverage](#) was mostly straightforward and informative. Because it is a huge issue, reporters throughout the Metro staff cover [immigration](#), and three do so full time. Ashley Halsey, associate Metro editor, supervises the [coverage](#).

A Jan. 10 [story](#) by staff writer N.C. Aizenman laid out particularly well how differently illegal immigrants and their opponents view breaking the law. A Washington Post-ABC News poll also gave national and local looks at what people are thinking.

A few "anti-immigrant" references have popped up in recent stories -- and shouldn't have. The Post also went astray in a March 18, 2007, [story](#) about a federal raid on a New England plant; the story reported on what happened to illegal immigrants swept up in the raid but never quoted [immigration](#) officials. I also worry that advocacy groups on both sides of the issue are quoted uncritically.

Readers are right that some journalists tend to write sympathetically about the underdog. But you cannot ignore the human story. "It's impossible to cover this issue without the challenges faced by people who are here illegally. We have tried not to be repetitive in those stories," Halsey said.

Have the views of those against illegal immigrants been fully told? My review included many stories quoting opponents -- as well as their march on the Mall last [spring](#). Some feel they've been portrayed as racist and xenophobic. While some have been quoted expressing views that might be interpreted that way, most have not. Halsey said it has been "very challenging to write effectively about people opposed to illegal [immigration](#), because they are very passionate and seem suspicious of our motives and are less welcoming to our attention when we try to talk to them about their motivations."

But there are stories that could be done that would give readers better context. How many legal immigrants are admitted to the United States every year and from what countries and in what categories? Do some racial or ethnic groups get more visas than others -- or tend to overstay visas more? There haven't been big [immigration](#) raids locally. Why? Do businesses that hire illegal immigrants think they won't be caught doing so?

Is it possible to quantify how illegal immigrants affect public school expenditures, crime and housing? Just how bad are the problems? Halsey said this is a daunting job, because trustworthy figures are hard to come by.

On terminology, Chip Beck, a State Department officer and former U.S. consul, believes it's important to use "illegal alien." Beck, who said he was not speaking for the State Department, said, "Foreign nationals who come across the border without papers or who overstay their visa are deemed 'illegal aliens.' Those are the legally correct terms. . . . The correct terminology is not derogatory but carries precise meanings under law." He sent a copy of the [federal law](#) that says: "The term 'alien' means any person not a citizen or national of the United States."

The Post does not use "alien" in news stories and prefers "illegal immigrant." Even if "alien" is legal terminology, to me, it sounds like someone from outer space. "Undocumented workers" is also discouraged. The Post stylebook says of "undocumented": "When used to describe immigrants, this is a euphemism that obscures an important fact - that they are in this country illegally."

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