



## Talking About Refugees and Immigrants: A Glossary Of Terms

Many different terms are used to describe refugees and immigrants, some with particular legal meanings, some with offensive associations. Using terms properly is an important way of treating people with respect and advancing an informed debate on the issues.

### REFUGEE TERMS

**Refugee** – a person who is forced to flee from persecution.

**Convention refugee** – a person who meets the refugee definition in the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. This definition is used in Canadian law and is widely accepted internationally. To meet the definition, a person must be outside their country of origin and have a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

**Asylum-seeker** – a person who is seeking asylum. Until a determination is made, it is impossible to say whether the asylum-seeker is a refugee or not.

**Refugee claimant** – a person who has made a claim for protection as a refugee. This term is more or less equivalent to asylum-seeker and is standard in Canada, while asylum-seeker is the term more often used internationally.

**Resettled refugee** – a refugee who has been offered a permanent home in a country while still outside that country. Refugees resettled to Canada are determined to be refugees by the Canadian government before they arrive in Canada (whereas refugee claimants receive a determination in Canada).

**Protected person** – according to Canada's *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*, a person who has been determined by Canada to be either (a) a Convention Refugee or (b) a person in need of protection (i.e. a person who may not meet the Convention definition

but is in a refugee-like situation defined in Canadian law as deserving of protection, for example because they are in danger of being tortured.

**Internally displaced person** – a person who has been forcibly displaced but is still within the borders of their home country.

**Stateless person** – a person who is not recognized as a citizen by any state. Some refugees may be stateless but not all are, and similarly not all stateless people are refugees.

**You may also hear... Political refugee and Economic refugee** – these terms have no meaning in law, and can be confusing as they incorrectly suggest that there are different categories of refugees.



## TERMS FOR IMMIGRANTS

**Immigrant** – a person who has settled permanently in another country. Immigrants choose to move, whereas refugees are forced to flee.

**Permanent resident** – a person who has been granted permanent resident status in Canada. The person may have come to Canada as an immigrant or as a refugee. Permanent residents who become Canadian citizens are no longer permanent residents.

**Landed immigrant** – this term, still sometimes used, has officially been replaced by the term “permanent resident.”

### Other terms for people outside their home country

**Foreign national** - a person who is neither a Canadian citizen nor a permanent resident (according to Canada's *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*).

**Temporary resident** – a person who has permission to remain in Canada on a temporary basis (the main categories are students, temporary workers and visitors).

**Migrant** – a person who is outside their country of origin. Occasionally this term is used to cover everyone outside their country of birth (including people who have been Canadian citizens for decades). More often, it is used for people currently on the move or people with temporary status or no status at all in the country where they live. It tends to be applied to people at the bottom of the economic ladder. For example, we don't often hear of migrant businessmen.

**Economic migrant** – a person who moves countries in order to take up a job or seek a better economic future. The term is correctly used for people whose motivations are entirely economic. However, migrants' motivations are often complex and may not be immediately obvious, so it is dangerous to apply the “economic” label too quickly to an individual or group of migrants.

**Person without status/ Undocumented** – a person who has not been granted permission to stay in the country, or has overstayed their visa. The term can cover a person who falls between the cracks of the system, such as a refugee claimant who is refused refugee status but not removed from Canada because of a situation of generalized risk in the country of origin. The term “undocumented” can be confusing, because it is also used in Canada to refer to refugees who lack identity documents from their country of origin.



### YOU MAY ALSO HEAR:

**Illegal migrant/illegal immigrant** – these terms are considered problematic because they criminalize the person, rather than the act of entering or remaining irregularly in a country. Using the term can also have the disadvantage of prejudging the status of the person. If a person is fleeing as a refugee, international law recognizes that they may need to enter a country without authorization and it would therefore be misleading to describe them as an “illegal migrant”. Similarly, a person irregularly in the country may have been coerced by traffickers: such a person should be recognized as a victim of crime, not a wrong-doer.

**Illegal** – this term is similarly problematic, because it transfers the illegality from the status to the person. Its use has provoked as a response the slogan “no one is illegal.”

**Alien** – this term is used in some countries, notably the US, to designate non-citizens. Many people find the term dehumanizing.

**Worth thinking about...** Refugees and migrants seem to attract water imagery. We hear of refugee flows, floods of migrants, pools of refugees... What impact do these images have on our attitudes to the people under discussion?

**For more information or to arrange for a media interview, please contact:**

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