

TALKING ABOUT REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS:

a Glossary



Many different terms are used to describe refugees and immigrants. Some have particular legal meanings, some are mean and offensive. Using terms properly is an important way to treat people with respect and advance an informed debate on the issues.

REFUGEE TERMS

REFUGEE – a person who is forced to flee from persecution and who is located outside of their home country.

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.

REFUGEE CLAIMANT OR ASYLUM SEEKER – a person who has fled their country and is asking for protection in another country. We don't know whether a claimant is a refugee or not until their case has been decided. 'Claimant' is the term used in Canadian law.



Amalia and Roberto Gomez, with daughter Loren and son Robert, are Colombian refugees who were resettled to Canada in 2006. Credit: Mennonite Central Committee/Joanie Peters.

RESETTLED REFUGEE – a person who has fled their country, is temporarily in a second country and then is offered a permanent home in a third country. Refugees resettled to Canada are selected abroad and become permanent residents as soon as they arrive in Canada.

Resettled refugees are determined to be refugees by the Canadian government before they arrive in Canada. Refugee claimants receive a decision on whether they are refugees after they arrive in Canada.

STATELESS PERSON – a person that no state recognizes as a citizen. Some refugees may be stateless but not all are. Similarly, not all stateless people are refugees.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A REFUGEE AND AN IMMIGRANT?

A refugee is forced to flee for their lives. An immigrant chooses to move to another country.

Once a refugee has become a citizen of another country (such as Canada) they are no longer a refugee.

YOU MAY ALSO HEAR...

POLITICAL REFUGEE, ECONOMIC REFUGEE, ENVIRONMENTAL REFUGEE – these terms have no meaning in law. They can be confusing because they incorrectly suggest that there are different categories of refugees.



Residents and staff members at Matthew House in Toronto, a shelter for refugee claimants. Credit: Matthew House.

PROTECTED PERSON – according to Canada's *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*, a person who has been determined to be either (a) a Convention Refugee or (b) a person in need of protection (including, for example, a person who is in danger of being tortured if deported from Canada).

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSON – a person who is forced to leave their home, but who is still within the borders of their home country.

TERMS FOR IMMIGRANTS

IMMIGRANT – a person who has settled permanently in another country.

PERMANENT RESIDENT – a person granted the right to live permanently 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.

OTHER TERMS FOR PEOPLE OUTSIDE THEIR HOME COUNTRY

TEMPORARY RESIDENT – a person who has permission to remain in Canada only for a limited period of time. Visitors and students are temporary residents, and so are temporary foreign workers such as agricultural workers and live-in caregivers.

MIGRANT – a person who is outside their country of origin. Sometimes this term is used to talk about 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.



*A Guatemalan migrant worker on a farm in Quebec.
Credit: canadabrian/GetStock.com.*

ECONOMIC MIGRANT – a person who moves countries for a job or a better economic future. The term is correctly used for people whose motivations are entirely economic. Migrants' motivations are often complex and may not be immediately clear, so it is dangerous to apply the "economic" label too quickly to an individual or group of migrants.

¹ Permanent residents used to be called 'landed immigrants' – this term is still sometimes used.



Bayan, Rakeb and Oban al-Rekabi and Asia Taher. Rakeb and Asia, of Iraqi origin, have lived in Canada for nearly fifteen years without status.

PERSON WITHOUT STATUS – a person who has not been granted permission to stay in the country, or who has stayed after their visa has expired. 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.

YOU MAY ALSO HEAR:

ILLEGAL MIGRANT/ILLEGAL IMMIGRANT/ILLEGAL – these terms are problematic because they criminalize the person, rather than the act of entering or remaining irregularly in a country. International law recognizes refugees may need to enter a country without official documents or authorization. It would be misleading to describe them as "illegal migrants". Similarly, a person without status may have been coerced by traffickers: such a person should be recognized as a victim of crime, not treated as a wrong-doer.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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