



**Providing alternative subject headings for controversial Library of Congress subject headings in the Alliance shared ILS:
Discussion paper by the Alliance Cataloging Standing Group**

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Introduction

In early March 2019, Mary Greci (UO) and Jesse Holden (Alliance) received an email request from Evergreen Library to consider the option of “enhancing” bibliographic records containing the authorized Library of Congress Subject Heading (LCSH) “Illegal aliens” with the additional local subject heading “Undocumented immigrants.” This request was forwarded to the Cataloging Standing Group (CSG) for consideration. During a CSG meeting, the request was discussed, and it was decided to move forward by putting together a discussion paper to present to the Shared Content & Technical Services (SCTS) Team. Although the current document specifically regards the term “Illegal aliens,” this discussion can also be applied to any terminology within Library of Congress’ Subject Headings.

Background

In 2013, Dartmouth undergraduate and former undocumented immigrant, Melissa Padilla, came across the current LCSH “Illegal aliens” while doing research. Angered, Padilla stated the term is essentially used to “criminalize the choices our parents made in order to provide us with better lives,” and is meant to demean Mexican immigrants specifically.

Padilla brought up the issue with Dartmouth students at a meeting of the Coalition for Immigration Reform, Equality and Dreamers, which, with the help of Dartmouth librarians, submitted a formal request to LC in 2014 to replace the term “Illegal aliens” with “Undocumented immigrants.” In February 2015, LC publicly responded that it would not change the heading. Following discussions in ALA including within the Subject Analysis Committee (SAC), Social Responsibilities Roundtable, and REFORMA, ALA formulated a resolution asking LC to reconsider the original request, arguing that “aliens” and “Illegal aliens” are pejorative terms.

On March 22, 2016, the Library of Congress [announced its intent to change the subject heading](#), replacing “Illegal aliens” with “Noncitizens” and “Unauthorized immigration.” Later that year, an ALA SAC working group issued [their own report](#) advocating for a slightly different approach, recommending that the subject heading “Illegal aliens” be replaced with “Undocumented immigrants” where appropriate.

However, conservative lawmakers accused the Library of Congress of pandering to immigrant rights’ advocates, and on June 10, 2016 the House of Representatives [added a provision](#) to the legislative branch appropriations bill that would require the Library of Congress to retain the current terminology.

Word of lawmakers interceding to demand that Library of Congress cease and desist from changing a subject heading hit the news, from [PBS News Hour](#) to [Fox News](#). All of these events inspired the 2016 thesis [Producing Discursive Change : from “Illegal aliens” to “Unauthorized immigration” in Library Catalogs](#), as well as the 2019 documentary [‘Change the Subject’](#).

Since then, at least 30 individual libraries, systems, and consortia around the country have begun adding the local subject heading “Undocumented immigrants” to their local bibliographic records, either

leaving the current term “illegal aliens” in the records or, in some cases, removing the term completely. These changes are made in individual institutions’ Integrated Library Systems (ILS) and not in OCLC master records.

Nationally, work continues to replace the controversial heading. At the ALA Annual meeting in June 2019, the ALCTS CaMMS Subject Analysis Committee formed the SAC Working Group on Alternatives to LCSH “Illegal aliens,” led by Violet Fox (OCLC), tasked to study the “illegal aliens” subject heading and report back to SAC during ALA Midwinter in January 2020. The working group distributed a survey in fall of 2019 in order to compile methods that individual libraries, library systems, or consortial systems have taken to supplement or change this heading locally in their ILSs. Erin Grant (UW) is a member of this working group.

For further context on this issue, see [Radical Cataloging: Using alternative subject headings locally to promote inclusiveness and diversity](#) from the Colorado State Library, as well as additional resources listed at the end of the document.

Letter that initiated this discussion paper

Portions of the letter that initiated this discussion paper are included below and provides a summary, as well as links to illustrative materials and to add additional information:

I'm a faculty research librarian, and I've been communicating with catalogers at University of Colorado Boulder who have initiated an interesting idea. **They are "enhancing" records that have the LCSH "illegal aliens" with the local LCSH "undocumented immigrants".** The official LCSH remains -- alongside a more inclusive term that might match terms some users would more naturally use when keyword or subject searching. [As you can see here](#). At Boulder, they did this once for all existing records, and now run their scripts once a month in order to catch new records.

[Yale recently implemented the same enhancements](#). [And Bard](#) seems to have gone one step further: they've replaced the official LCSH with the alternate headings.

Several other libraries around the country are said to be considering these options.

It is likely that you are more familiar with the larger context than I am, but as I understand it, the library community has tried for years to change the official LCSH for undocumented immigrants, and have only been unable to do so because of action in the House of Representatives. [This NYT story](#) provides some concise background.

We have discussed doing this enhancement locally at [my university], but have agreed to first investigate options at the Alliance level, where it would have much greater impact and yield a more consistent user experience. It seems possible, and even likely, that there has been some discussion of this somewhere within the Alliance, or at the Alliance level itself. Could you let us know what your thoughts are, and what steps might be taken to move discussion forward?

Thanks,

PS To avoid misunderstanding, I am not suggesting the Bard approach (local *replacement* of LCSHs). I am suggesting only the enhancements approach in use at Boulder and Yale.

Initial comments

Initial discussion undertaken by the Cataloging Standing Group on this issue included these following comments.

- 1) I've gotten 2 emails from librarians here wondering the same thing about adding the alternative SHs recommended by SAC. This kind of activity would support our Libraries new [Strategic Plan](#) and complement our EDI work. However, I do have reservations, mainly along the "slippery slope" variety. Once we start doing these kinds of things, where do we stop? It's pretty well-known that LC is rife with biases - this potentially opens the door for requests for all kinds of local SH changes to mitigate that. In general, it pains me to break with national standards and vocabularies - the ideal really is to improve LCSH itself, not create local workarounds. Also, hopefully the SAC proposal will indeed get approved someday, and at that point we'd have to undo all of this work (and remember to do so, which might be the more difficult part, especially if that is years away). But I could also see addressing this at the local level becoming such a symbolic large-scale local response that it gains traction and potentially causes change, which would be really great.

On the purely technical side (asking can we rather than should we), it seems to me like we could create a norm rules to add the alternative headings in 650 /7 with \$\$2 local and run that on the NZ. Then we could add that norm rule to the import profile to take care of new records and maintenance.

- 2) I recently fielded a request to add a SH for "Myanmar" to a bib record for a book, and explained to my colleague that "Burma" is the authorized form for that country, for better or for worse. I bring this up as a real-life example of the possible slippery slope. In my response to him, I explained that (someday?) we'll allow a user to search any variant term and be able to retrieve resources with the preferred term. We shouldn't be packing our data with non-preferred terms/AAPs[1] as a workaround for lack of browse function with cross-references or other mechanism in Primo that exploits authority control. (Speaking of which, might this group want to engage in advocacy around that?!)

All that said, the Illegal aliens situation is different, since it's not a one-to-one heading relationship (at least the current LCSH situation isn't). And, other libraries are already taking action. So, I could see the Alliance pursuing this as a worthy endeavor. I would want to make sure the messaging was clear about the scope of the endeavor, and that we are not in a position to locally "massage" all of our records that have problematic LCSH.

I think that technically speaking, we could gin up a process, especially with Lesley at our disposal. I believe the tagging would need to include \$\$9 local, so that the field is stored in the NZ as a localized field, and so we are not mucking with the OCLC master records, nor leaving these added fields in NZ records at risk of overlay. I definitely think we should move as an Alliance on this, since we share records anyway. (Isn't this why we do?)

[1] At least on the Alma side, ExLibris has devised a “solution”:

[https://knowledge.exlibrisgroup.com/Alma/Product_Documentation/010Alma_Online_Help_\(English\)/010Getting_Started/050Alma_User_Interface_%E2%80%93_General_Information/Searching_in_Alma/Non-Preferred_Terms_in_Repository_Search](https://knowledge.exlibrisgroup.com/Alma/Product_Documentation/010Alma_Online_Help_(English)/010Getting_Started/050Alma_User_Interface_%E2%80%93_General_Information/Searching_in_Alma/Non-Preferred_Terms_in_Repository_Search). I wonder if any libraries have actually turned on this feature... (we decided not to because of the precision problems it would cause)

Technical considerations

Replacing or enhancing the “Illegal aliens” subject heading is more complex than just one change. The SAC recommended the following in their 2016 report, which is not an exhaustive list of potential changes:

1. Replacing the subject heading “Illegal aliens” with “Undocumented immigrants”
2. Replacing “Aliens” with “Noncitizens”
3. Replacing “Alien detention centers” with “Immigrant detention centers”
4. Replacing “Children of illegal aliens” with “Children of undocumented immigrants”
5. Replacing “Illegal alien children” with “Undocumented immigrant children”
6. Replacing “Illegal aliens in literature” with “Undocumented immigrants in literature”
7. Replacing “Women illegal aliens” with “Women undocumented immigrants”

Adding these recommended headings, along with others that may be identified, at the local or Alliance level in Alma, would require a significant amount of effort. In addition to one-time subject heading additions, continuously adding these headings to new records would need to be considered, if at all possible in an automated way.

How the Alliance can address the situation

Among the various alternatives explored, the Cataloging Standing Group identified the following two as the most viable:

- 1) Leave the option of enhancing bibliographic records to each member library. In this case, the enhancement would likely be to add the local subject heading “Undocumented immigrants” in the Institution Zone to each record containing the LCSH heading “Illegal aliens”. Consideration of creating best practice guidelines, which would include instructions on running Alma jobs to add the headings, would be advisable.
- 2) Create an Alliance-wide policy to add the local subject heading “Undocumented immigrants” in the Network Zone to each record containing the LCSH heading “Illegal aliens.” To implement such a new policy, a proposal would need to be submitted to and approved by the Alliance Council.

Pros and cons of individual member libraries adding the local subject heading to the Institution Zone (IZ)

Pros:

- Each institution can decide for themselves whether or not to add local subject headings.
- The option to add local headings in the Institution Zone (IZ) is already in place and work could begin at any time.
- The Network Zone (NZ) Manager would not need to add the task of adding and maintaining the local subject headings to records in the NZ.
- Seeking Alliance-wide approval would not be necessary and the Cataloging Standing Group would not need to request permission from member libraries, the Council and/or the Board to move forward with implementation.
- The CSG would not need to create an Alliance-wide policy which would then need to go forward for approval. (Though the CSG, in this scenario, may instead need to develop best practices as described above).

Cons:

- Duplication of effort at the local level. Each participating member library would need to add and maintain the local subject headings.
- Staff responsible for adding local subject headings may not have technical expertise or time to do so in Alma.
- No automated method for ongoing maintenance to add local subject headings for new records.

Pros and cons of creating an Alliance-wide policy of adding the local subject heading to the Network Zone (NZ)

Pros:

- Adding local heading would be streamlined (i.e., no duplication of local effort).
- Action at the Alliance level signifies more solidarity/action on this issue rather than as individual member libraries.
- Automated method of ongoing maintenance for adding local subject headings for new records could be handled at Alliance level (in the Network Zone).

Cons:

- Alliance-wide approval is necessary as this impacts the shared ILS.
- The CSG would need to create the policy, which would then need to go forward for approval by the Board and Council. This task would take time away from other CSG projects.
- Adding of the local subject headings would be delayed while the policy was written and approved.
- It may not be possible to fully automate the replacement/addition of local subject headings in the Network Zone.

- Implementing such a policy would require significant effort outside of regular workflows, particularly for Alliance staff. Care would be needed to ensure the policy and any associated procedures were sustainable, so that further proposals to implement alternative subject headings in the NZ would not proliferate beyond a manageable level.

Conclusion

The state of the LCSH “Illegal aliens” brought to the attention of CSG is one we wish to bring to the greater Alliance community. An Alliance-wide policy would require approval of a higher level be it the Board and/or Council, and should have approval from ALL member libraries. Individual libraries who choose to add the local subject heading “Undocumented immigrants” may already be doing so within the Alliance. Further discussion is required on whether an Alliance-wide policy is needed, or if individual institution intervention at a local level is better suited. Regardless of the outcome of this discussion, the CSG is prepared to take whatever action is deemed necessary, for this and other potentially controversial subject headings in the future.

Additional resources

ALA and ALCTS. [Letter to Senate Committee on Appropriations](#) in opposition to inclusion of “Library of Congress Classification” provision. May 18, 2016.

Baron, Jill, Tina Gross, and Oscar R. Cornejo Casares. [“Timeline of “illegal alien” subject heading change petition, January 2014-July 2016.”](#) Cataloging and Classification Quarterly, Cataloging News, vol 5, no. 7, 2016.

Bazelon, Emily. [“The unwelcome return of ‘illegals’.](#)” New York Times magazine, First words. August 18, 2015.

Blakemore, Erin. [“The Library of Congress will ditch the subject heading ‘Illegal aliens’.”](#) Smithsonian magazine. March 29, 2016.

Dinan, Stephen. [“House orders Library of Congress to maintain ‘illegal alien’.”](#) Washington Times. June 10, 2016.

Foley, Elise. [“Republicans want to force the Library of Congress to use ‘Illegal alien’ : so what if the library decided there are better terms?.”](#) Huff Post, Politics. April 21, 2016.

Guskin, Emily. [“‘Illegal,’ ‘undocumented,’ ‘unauthorized’ : news media shift language on immigration”.](#) Pew Research Center, Factank. June 17, 2013.

Peet, Lisa. [“Library of Congress drops Illegal alien subject heading, provokes backlash legislation.”](#) Library Journal, June 13, 2016.

Qin, Sonia. "[Library of Congress to replace term 'illegal aliens'.](#)" The Dartmouth, March 28, 2019.

Rosenman, Elizabeth. "[This new year, let's stop using the word 'alien'.](#)" The Hill, Opinion [piece]. January 2, 2019.

Schultz, Denorah Wasserman. "[Statement on 2017 Legislative Branch Appropriations bill.](#)" House Committee on Appropriations, Press releases. April 21, 2016.

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