

Quoting Immigrants:

A Media Toolkit for
Anonymous Sources

2022 Edition



DEFINE
AMERICAN

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Introduction

As journalists continue to cover the polarizing topic of immigration amid a climate of distrust in the media, they must also navigate the increasing risks for their undocumented immigrant sources.

“It’s not a matter of life and death,” an editor may say.

But it can be. And it already has been:

- Immigrants in government or privately-run detention centers have been **physically assaulted** in retribution for speaking on the record to a reporter.
- An asylum-seeker from Colombia landed on the radar of their persecutors who tracked them down in the United States and threatened them.
- A federal trial attorney cited a newspaper article against a defendant in an immigration case, saying they didn’t include those facts in their testimony.

Define American has created this toolkit to inform journalists on how best to quote sources anonymously across all media: print, digital, television, audio and documentary journalism.

This is not a definitive list of best practices, but an evolving one. Each case, each person, each story is different. No matter the situation, you still must follow ethical guidelines—your organization’s and your own. For you, it is your job and integrity at stake. For your source, it is their life.

The internet remembers forever.

“As a journalist who happens to be undocumented, I see the value in both putting sources on the record and protecting people from any possible consequences for being public about their status.

But I also know that among the undocumented community, sources are a lot less willing to be quoted by name than they were ten years ago. Why? Immigration reform is stalled, DACA protections may be eliminated, and we are living in a perpetual state of anxiety. Recounting our stories can be traumatic. Reporters and their editors need to understand this new landscape to cover immigration—and immigrants—with proper context.”

Jose Antonio Vargas, Founder, Define American

Recommendations on Anonymity

1 First ask a source if they are comfortable giving their name. If not, follow this hierarchy of attribution.

Communicate with your editor or news manager so that you agree on what attribution you will use and why.

1. Full name.
2. First name.
3. Middle name.
4. Nickname.
5. Initials.
6. Do not use a pseudonym *unless* it is the only way this story—one that could potentially change policy or expose an abuse—can come out.

“ If it’s a profile or a narrative about one person, I wouldn’t build it around someone who remained anonymous. To use an anonymous source, it’d have to be a really earth-shattering revelation, one that must be brought to light and can only be exposed in this way.”

Miriam Jordan, lead immigration reporter,
The New York Times

2 Explain to your audience why you are not naming a source.

If you do not use a full name, then you must explain why. That explanation must be in enough detail that justifies the anonymity, but does not provide identifying markers.

3 If you use a partial name, include supporting information that does not endanger the source, but shows they are credible.

Name the source’s attorney, so it shows that the source is a real person. If the source consents, include details such as age and home country. If you need to be more vague because those details could endanger the person, include region (like Central America) and general age (young adult). Avoid identifying descriptors (short brown hair) and where a person lives.

4 Get a phone number, social media account and/or ask for a relative’s number to verify independently that the source is who they say they are. Take their full name, but do not publish it.

Tell the source that you will write the full name on a scrap of paper, show it to your editor, and then either rip it up or put it in a locked drawer until after the story runs. This is for your own accountability purposes.

5 Assess the level of physical danger sources would be in if giving their full name. Research prior incidents, even on a tight deadline.

“ If I use a pseudonym it’s usually because people are fearful of physical retribution inside of the detention centers, as well as it harming their immigration case. There have been immigrants who said they had been beaten up for talking to the press. It’s not worth it and Documented thinks so, too. It’s not worth it to put someone’s livelihood at risk when there’s still a way of getting the story out there.”

Giulia McDonnell Nieto del Rio, *Documented*
(New York-centered immigration news outlet),
Report for America corps member

How to Talk to Sources About Using Their Name

1 Discuss the conditions of the interview prior to the interview.

If the source has no lawyer—perhaps you come across them on the street or in the field—you should let the person know the risks, along with the potential benefits of the situation.

2 Tell the source the language you will use to explain the anonymity.

Try to alleviate the anxiety by telling them how you will refer to them. When asking for the spelling of their name, make sure to ask sources for their pronouns. Do not use a birth name in referring to a transgender source, unless the source agrees.

3 Explain where and when the report will run.

The source can then alert family members or friends, and be prepared for any reaction.

4 Explain the potential risks and benefits.

Sometimes, by being public, if the government did take punitive action, then it might bolster support around that person and put pressure on officials to walk back the retribution. There could also be unintended consequences. See the next section, “Know the Risks,” for more information.

5 Give sources a chance to ask you questions.

This can shift the power balance and help establish trust.

6 Never promise anything.

You are not a lawyer who can change their case.

7 Give the source agency to make their own decision.

Lawyers are important, and they are cautious on behalf of their client. But a source should still decide whether to speak for themselves.

“There’s such a strong power dynamic between a journalist and the person who’s being asked to speak to you. People may feel obligated to speak to you. I often try to talk people out of talking to me! If you don’t feel comfortable sharing your story, I don’t want you to have to relive your trauma, that’s not what I’m seeking out.

When they say, ‘No, I want people to know why I’m migrating from Haiti. I want people to know what I went through and maybe someone will see this and understand, maybe this will penetrate in some way.’ I think, OK, if that’s coming from you and you see the value, then we’re on good terms.”

Monica Campbell, independent immigration editor and reporter

Know the Risks

This section is for editors and producers as well as reporters. Quoting an undocumented immigrant who is currently in a legal battle for asylum protections or is otherwise fighting a removal order could put a subject at risk in these ways, according to immigration lawyers:

1 Retribution.

Giving a full name if a person is escaping a gang or abusive family member might enable enemies in their home country to track them down in the United States. Not only could they harass or harm them, they might also trick them into returning home.

“ I have had clients where the persecutor was more sophisticated (narco-traffickers, FARC/paramilitary, governments) where they actually feared their persecutors knowing where they were here in the United States. For instance, I had a Colombian client where his persecutors somehow got his phone number and started threatening him here in the U.S. by phone, saying they were immigration and he had 24 hours to leave the country and return to Colombia.”

Heather Axford, immigration lawyer at Central American Legal Assistance, Brooklyn, New York

2 Court consequences.

Some subjects worry that if they have a case pending, what they say and how they say it could be used against them in immigration court. And that, depending on the judge, it could sway the decision in their case.

Even if you and the source’s lawyer are careful, sometimes the source’s description of events could still be used against them in their case.

“ Blanca spoke to me for two hours the day after then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions ruled on Matter of A-B, when he made it nearly impossible for victims of domestic violence to be granted asylum. She detailed her horrific abuse. She was later granted asylum.”



The New York Times: “She was Raped and Threatened with Death. Now She has Lost Hope of Asylum.”

Photo: Marian Carrasquero/*The New York Times*

But the government appealed the decision, referencing details from *The Times* article that Blanca did not mention in court. Her lawyers told me they knew the risks and they would do the same thing again. I would, too. That’s because Blanca wanted to speak to expose the cruelty and injustice of the Trump administration’s policies.”

Liz Robbins, Director of Journalism Partnerships for Define American, former *New York Times* Metro immigration reporter



Monica Campbell interviews a subject. *Photo by Harold Isaac, provided by Monica Campbell*

3 Targets for deportation.

Activists who spoke to the press have been targeted for deportation, especially if they had already served time for a crime, such as [Ravi Ragbir](#) and [Jean Montrevil](#).

4 Putting other household members at risk.

Often people living in one household may have different legal statuses. Sometimes sharing your source's name could put the other undocumented people in the family at risk. Do not ask the source to discuss family details unless they are willing.

5 Trauma for the source.

Define American authored a [research study](#) about the negative psychological impact on undocumented sources who have shared their stories, and how they endured stress and PTSD from recounting their trauma. Be aware that sources may not tell you their story in the first or even fifth meeting. And that when they do, they could be deeply affected.

For journalists, listening to a source tell their traumatic experience can also be upsetting for an empathetic reporter. See these resources from The Dart Center For Journalism and Trauma, from Columbia University, including its [style guide](#) for trauma-informed reporting.

6 Potential policy changes.

Under the Trump administration, any immigrant living undocumented was subject to an order of removal. During targeted ICE arrests, agents would often arrest other members who were there in the home, called "collateral arrests."

Under the Biden administration, DHS changed the policy to revert to priority arrests of those with criminal convictions. The administration also said it was eliminating workplace raids and focusing on employers, instead. But the fear is palpable. Even if it is unlikely that a source could be at risk of a raid now, this information could be used by a future administration that returns to those policies. As a journalist, you must be careful not to downplay a person's fear.

Visual Media

Photography

Photos are essential for a piece to humanize the story and to encourage audience engagement. If a source does not want their full name used, then you should likewise be careful about using their full image. There are options beyond a full portrait:

- Silhouette
- Back view
- Hands or feet or shadow
- Through a glass window
- Through a door
- Blur identifying objects

“ Instead of getting frustrated that you can’t show their face, take it as an exercise. This is a new way of using visual language, how can I make this interesting?”

The glass was really about layers. What I think about is, instead of something straight on, how do you use a frame and composition in an interesting way? How can you make things reflective and layered and multi-dimensional?”

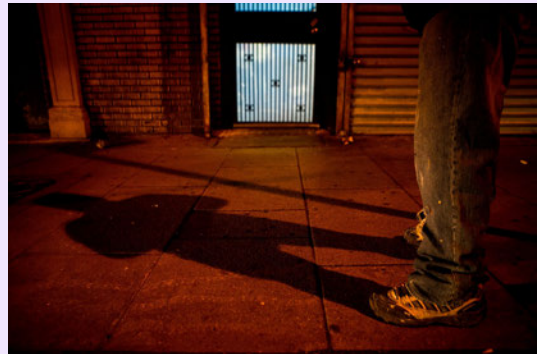
Mark Abramson, freelance photographer



The New York Times:
“Post Office Fails to Deliver on Time, and DACA Applications Get Rejected”



Examples from *The New York Times:*
“Rumors of Immigration Raids Stoke Fear in New York”



Joao, a day laborer on Staten Island who gave only his nickname, said, “For two days I didn’t go out; I just didn’t leave the house.” *Sam Hodgson for The New York Times*



Maria, a 22-year-old from Ecuador who asked to be identified by only her given name, said her brother had heard “that the police are stopping drivers and asking for papers.” *Sam Hodgson for The New York Times*

Other Recommendations on Anonymity

1. If you are photographing near a sensitive or identifying location, know what data your gear records (like geo-location). Remove EXIF data so that it can't be used to trace a source. iPhones have this feature.
2. In writing captions, do not include the full name for reference if the person wishes to use a partial name. Even if your publication won't use it, there is a chance it could be syndicated and another outlet would use it.
3. If asking sources for historical photos, ask the source to transmit these photos in a secure way. Tell them how you will then discard the sensitive, identifying information. This way, they know that they will remain the sole owners of the photos.
4. If it alleviates some fear and allows the subject to feel more comfortable, show them the image through the viewfinder. This will demonstrate the technique you use to illustrate without identifying the source. Reporters do not show sources their stories in advance. Photographers generally do not do this either, and some publications prohibit this. But, there are times when a photographer must judge the situation on the spot.
5. After taking a candid shot, always ask to use a photo. Sometimes, stopping for permission interrupts the spontaneous scene. But consent is essential so you do not endanger or exploit the subject. "They are not just objects in the frame," Abramson said.

Television News & Documentary

1. **Migrants crossing the border should not serve as a backdrop for a standup.** This is not "College GameDay," where it becomes a **set for a Sunday talk show**. These are real people, taking a dangerous trip because they often have no recourse. Sometimes showing their faces could endanger them or their families back home.
2. **Always ask permission to film**, and notice if people might be in the background. For those sources who do not feel comfortable being shown, there are options:

“ I blur the focus, put them off camera or try to interview in a neutral area. I make sure I tell people that they will be in the background and for them to stand elsewhere if they don't want to be in the shot. And yes, I speak to them in Spanish.”

Armando Tonatiuh Torres-García, ABC News immigration reporter

3. **Get to know your subject in a preliminary chat before going on camera.** Summarize what you intend to ask them. Be honest so that there are no surprises for anyone.

“ The way you portray people matters. Language has an impact. Just understand that these are human beings and you might need to make accommodations. They are giving journalists information that we want. They are doing us a favor by talking to us.”

Camilo Montoya-Galvez, CBS News immigration reporter

Reporting on Minors

In the past eight years, we've seen toddlers appearing without lawyers in immigration court. Teenagers, apprehended at the border while traveling without parents, are held on floors in frigid immigration detention centers. Children, of course, were separated from their parents by the Trump administration.

“ If they were in a detention center, just because they are separated from their parents, that does not give you the right to film them as if they were adults.”

Armando Tonatiuh Torres-García, ABC News immigration reporter

1 Treat migrant children as you would minors in any other reporting context.

Their legal status does not rob them of their right to privacy.

2 Get consent.

If you report on children, you should get consent from adults. With children, it may not be possible to get consent because they do not have a lawyer or parent with them.

Work hard to get consent in other ways. Track down a parent, grandparent or relative, wherever they are.

“ What I seek is their agreement. Or also, I seek their parent's or guardian's agreement. In my experience, there's always someone. They may be in a different country, they may be in detention, they may be imprisoned. Someone who can see it as a parent sees it, really looking out for their kid. Then the parent can give that free, prior and informed consent.”

Aura Bogado, immigration reporter for *Reveal*, on covering minors

3 Follow these guidelines on interviewing children.

This guide by the Education Writers Association alludes to the Hippocratic oath: “First, do no harm.”

4 To find young adults who could be sources, or to understand more about their circumstances, contact legal advocacy groups whose clients are minors.

- KIND: Kids In Need of Defense
- Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights



Example from *The New York Times*:
“Hundreds of Separated Children Have Quietly Been Sent to New York”

Photo credit: Hiroko Masuike/*The New York Times*

Summary of Recommendations

1

Push for the highest level of attribution. But understand when to back off.

2

There are reasons why immigrant sources—many who are fleeing persecution—don't feel comfortable using their full name, including fear of retaliation, concern it could hurt their legal case, and trauma.

3

There are ways to verify a source's identity and to show your audience that the source is credible without using a full name.

4

Migrant children deserve the same consideration for anonymity as any other child.

5

Communicate with the source about when and where the story will run.

6

Ask sources if they have questions for you.

7

Protect data that could identify sources in photographs.

8

Remember that sources are 'doing us a favor' by talking to journalists.

About & Contact

Define American

Define American is a culture change organization that uses the power of narrative to humanize conversations about immigrants. Our advocacy within news, entertainment, and digital media is creating an America where everyone belongs.

Contact Journalism Partnerships

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Disclaimer

This document is a summary of journalistic practices and not intended to provide specific legal advice, for which the reader should consult counsel.

Photography

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