



Taking Giant Leaps Forward

Experiences of a Range of DACA Beneficiaries at the 5-Year Mark

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Introduction

Over the past several years, hundreds of thousands of unauthorized immigrant children in the United States have experienced difficult transitions into young adulthood—going without driver’s licenses, college financial aid, or stable employment opportunities. These young people—who have attended U.S. K-12 schools for most, if not all, of their lives—aspire to attend college and enter well-paying, meaningful careers like their classmates. Yet with a tenuous immigration status, unauthorized youth and their families have faced undue hardships in their everyday lives and pursuit of advanced education and work opportunities.¹ On June 15, 2012, this troubling situation changed for many of these young people when then-President Barack Obama introduced Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)—a policy that temporarily defers deportations and provides renewable two-year work permits for up to an estimated 1.9 million eligible unauthorized young adults.² Now, five years later, nearly 790,000 eligible youth have been approved for DACA.³

Shortly after DACA’s implementation in 2012, a team led by Roberto G. Gonzales, an assistant professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, launched the National UnDOCUMENTED Research Project (NURP), a five-year study aimed at understanding how a diverse cross section of the DACA-eligible population accessed the program and experienced their new status. NURP, arguably the most comprehensive study on DACA to date, consists of a national survey of 2,684 DACA-eligible young adults carried out in 2013 and two waves of in-depth interviews with 481 DACA-eligible young adults in Arizona, California, Georgia, Illinois, New York, and South Carolina in 2015 and 2016.⁴ This carefully drawn sample provides a unique opportunity to understand how DACA is shaping the life trajectories of a wide range of young adult immigrants.

In the past five years, DACA beneficiaries have experienced immediate benefits and improved their outlooks.⁵ Across state and local contexts, a diverse group of DACA beneficiaries has moved up the socio-economic ladder by completing their degrees and securing higher-paying jobs. For many of these young people, DACA has significantly boosted incorporation into mainstream American society. From obtaining legal employment and driver's licenses to feeling less fear of deportation, DACA beneficiaries have transitioned into lives filled with a greater sense of belonging and future possibility. These individual successes also contribute to the United States' economic growth: As DACA beneficiaries begin to save for larger purchases such as cars and houses, states see increased revenue from title fees and sales tax.

This issue brief focuses on a group of beneficiaries in the NURP study that most research and media coverage about DACA has overlooked but that is no less important: the hundreds of thousands of DACA beneficiaries without high school or college degrees whom DACA has provided with on-ramps back into education and training programs that have increased their job mobility. There are also broader implications to the significant leaps in social and economic mobility for these particular beneficiaries. Increased incomes and financial stability lead to greater spending, which percolates directly into household spending, lifting hopes for longer-term goals such as purchasing a home.⁶ Indirectly, these DACA beneficiaries are boosting the country's economy through paying taxes that flow into the national coffers.

Specifically drawing on interviews with 319 NURP respondents who, prior to receiving DACA, dropped out of high school, finished their education with a high school degree, or did not complete college due to financial, legal, or motivational barriers, this brief illuminates the ways in which DACA has positively affected their educational and work trajectories.⁷

Finding on-ramps back to education

DACA has been instrumental in helping eligible youth find their way back to various education pathways. These pathways have led them to obtain better employment and contribute more to their families and local communities.

DACA is encouraging eligible youth to re-enroll in school

Statistically, most unauthorized immigrant youth end their schooling before entering college.⁸ Due to a combination of scarce family resources, exclusion from financial aid at the state and federal levels, and depressed motivations, the majority of unauthorized students pursuing higher education attend community colleges and struggle to persist and graduate.⁹ With access to legal employment and diminished fear of possible deportation, many of the study's respondents described their newfound motivation and interest in school. Jin, a student from New York, recalled:

I kind of went into depression during that whole college application part. I started thinking I'm never going to go anywhere and it's all because of some paper I don't have. It was really rough. I felt kind of—I was angry all the time. When the DACA program was announced it instilled a new hope in me and I think it's what's driving me forward to do the best I can again and to focus and be responsible.¹⁰

DACA has been the impetus for many young people like Jin to return to school. In order to qualify for DACA, beneficiaries must have either graduated with a high school diploma or be enrolled in a high school, a General Educational Development (GED), a literacy, or a career training program. At the program's onset, almost 20 percent of individuals who were potentially eligible did not meet the education requirement.¹¹ Dozens of the respondents who had previously not finished high school told the authors that DACA was an important impetus to re-enroll in school and training programs.

Take Sandra, for example. Sandra began working at the age of 13, cleaning houses with her mother to help support her family. Family needs, growing frustrations due to her unauthorized status, and her inability to envision a promising future compelled her to drop out of high school. When DACA was announced in 2012, Sandra was 26 years old and had two children. She enrolled in a GED program to gain eligibility and to receive DACA's benefits. But she didn't stop there. After she passed her GED exam, she pursued a medical assistant program through a local nonprofit in Arizona. Her life has dramatically improved, and she said she feels as though she can provide her children with a better life. With her new job, she is working to save money, and her next goal is to pursue a bachelor's degree in nursing.

DACA beneficiaries are investing in education and training

Gaining work authorization as a result of DACA also improves the likelihood that an investment in education can lead to a job commensurate with training and credentials. This benefit has given DACA beneficiaries an incentive to invest in education in order to enter higher-paying jobs. It has also opened up options for education and training in critical growth sectors.¹² Many of the study's respondents found job training programs by enrolling at a community college or through local community-based organizations. The respondents received training in industries such as medicine, dentistry, construction, cosmetology, teaching, law, nursing, and insurance. In addition to offering lower tuition costs, certificate programs offer flexible class schedules that allow students to work while pursuing their degrees. These programs tend to be much shorter in duration than four-year degree programs, as well as significantly less expensive. Many DACA beneficiaries view these programs as stepping stones to a four-year degree and a foot in the door to gain relevant job experience. Work authorization provides the assurance that beneficiaries will be competitive for employment in their chosen industries after completing their programs.

Before DACA, Eric said he felt that his opportunities for postsecondary education in South Carolina were limited. Moreover, his inability to acquire a driver's license under state law left him frustrated and many jobs inaccessible. When DACA was announced, Eric had just graduated from high school. His world changed almost overnight. Once he received his DACA status, he obtained his driver's license, enrolled in an insurance certification program and, soon after, landed a job selling insurance at an agency just a 15-minute drive from home. Eric does not know whether he wants to pursue a career in insurance, but the opportunity has given him some experience and a steady income that has allowed him to enroll in community college to continue exploring his options. As Eric explains, DACA has given him the self-confidence and motivation to pursue his goals:

DACA was a big turning point ... because it's a transition from when I was turning from childhood into adulthood, going to college, being able to study, having more responsibilities, having more decisions to make, having more paths to choose and directions to take. It opened a lot [of opportunities] and I saw what I had to do and how to get it and how far [DACA's] going to take me.

DACA helps break down financial barriers to education and career-building opportunities

A large proportion of the DACA-eligible population experiences postsecondary education as a revolving door.¹³ Many of the respondents had entered college before DACA, only to leave due to growing debt and an inability to afford tuition and fees. However, access to legal employment improves DACA holders' ability to save money and pay for college. In addition, several scholarship funds have expanded eligibility to allow DACA holders to apply, while internship and fellowship programs are providing the necessary job training that these young people need to be competitive when they enter the job market.¹⁴ For instance, Franco was working in the fields of California for low wages. With DACA, he will be starting a union-affiliated apprenticeship in the state's construction sector. At the time of the interview, he was completing some prerequisite classes for the apprenticeship. Once he joins the union, he will earn \$18 an hour and enjoy salary increases based on merit and experience. "Without DACA," Franco said, "I'd have not been able to do any of this."

Increased job mobility

Prior to DACA, the career goals of many unauthorized youth were often derailed because of restricted access to educational and work opportunities. Despite length of time in the United States or level of education completed, they could not legally work and were confined to the unregulated, low-wage labor market. These jobs were often grueling and did not provide opportunities for job security, safety, or benefits. Today, with the ability to legally work and the incentives to invest in education, DACA has boosted beneficiaries' mobility prospects and trajectories.

Of the 2,381 DACA recipients who responded to the survey, approximately 61 percent took on new jobs and 45 percent increased their earnings within 16 months of DACA's launch.¹⁵ As a result, respondents experienced significant financial gains, which, in turn, allowed them to save money for additional education, support family members financially, and contribute to the economy. In addition, work authorization enabled those stuck in low-wage jobs without opportunities for raises and promotions to leave and pursue employment commensurate with the education they received prior to or after receiving DACA.

Work authorization and driver's licenses are improving access to opportunities

In addition to the positive impact of secure legal employment, DACA beneficiaries who obtain an employment authorization document can apply for a driver's license in any state.¹⁶ Of the study's survey participants, 57 percent obtained a driver's license within the first 16 months after receiving DACA. This benefit provides DACA holders with the ability to travel freely and safely to school or work, a significant form of relief for both beneficiaries and their families.

Laura grew up in California's Central Valley with parents who are farmworkers. With little counseling information regarding postsecondary options and limited access to transportation, Laura labored in the fields for several years after graduating from high school. She said she felt discouraged and wondered if there was any hope for the future. After DACA was announced, she saved money to pay for the application fees, applied to the program, and received approval by the end of 2013. Her prospects quickly changed. She left her work in the fields when she was hired as a receptionist, more than doubling her earnings from \$11,500 a year to \$23,400. What's more, Laura obtained a driver's license and was able to enroll in classes at a nearby community college. With the money earned from her new job, Laura bought a car and is saving money to rent an apartment close to her college that will give her increased access to the internet, libraries, and the college itself.

DACA allows beneficiaries to get jobs that match their skills

DACA beneficiaries told the authors that they were able to match their education and training with work that was meaningful to them—an occupation that they could be proud of and that did not carry the stigma of “immigrant work.” Moreover, being DACA recipients allowed them to seek employment that matched their training and credentials. Respondents found jobs in a wide range of employment sectors, including retail and sales, manufacturing, accounting, banking, the beauty industry, real estate, the medical field, teaching, and interpreting. In many cases, they made great gains in prestige and job satisfaction.

Before DACA, Tariq was working in the kitchen of a New York restaurant for \$5 an hour, far below the city’s minimum wage. Because of his immigration status, Tariq said he feared demanding a fair wage from his employer and could not ensure that he would be paid for the full hours he worked. After being approved for DACA at age 25, he left his low-wage job and found employment as a bank teller:

I had always been doing labor work. Now I’m doing teller work, which is much more a brain thing. Honestly, I am the youngest guy in my branch, so that’s something to say. [It] makes me feel good that, okay, my mom can tell people that “My son’s working in a bank.” Even though I’m a teller, and that’s the beginning position, it’s something. Like, “Oh, he’s a waiter,” I don’t think that she’s gonna be with her chest out with that.

DACA beneficiaries also dramatically increased their earnings. In particular, DACA beneficiaries who completed certificate or licensing programs experienced significant growth in salary. For many, hourly salaries increased from \$5 to \$8 to more than \$14 an hour. Most at least doubled their previous salaries, earning between \$25,000 and \$30,000 per year. With increased purchasing power, the respondents could then, in turn, help their families while fueling their local economies and contributing to state revenue.

Conclusion

While DACA does not address the full set of challenges that DACA beneficiaries and their families face, it has provided opportunities for hundreds of thousands of unauthorized young people to take giant leaps in their education and careers. To date, the success of DACA has been illustrated in the trajectories of politically and socially active beneficiaries with advanced levels of education. However, the true magnitude of its impact is most felt by those young people who, because of barriers related to their immigration status, were forced into early exits from the school system. Because of DACA, these young people have returned to GED programs, workforce development, certificate programs, and college campuses. DACA’s work authorization has enabled them to take jobs commensurate with their education, incentivizing investments in such programs.

As such, DACA beneficiaries have experienced immediate and continued job mobility. Many DACA beneficiaries are using these new opportunities for training and work as building blocks to start careers. The personal success of these DACA beneficiaries translates to more purchasing power that allows them to invest in the United States at the local and state levels. DACA is a temporary fix—the program is not permanent, and recipients must renew their status every two years. Nonetheless, it has positively affected most of those who have received it. All of these things underscore the need for a permanent solution that provides a path to citizenship for the ongoing success of these young people and their families.

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Endnotes

- 1 Roberto G. Gonzales, *Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).
- 2 Jeanne Batalova, Sarah Hooker, and Randy Capps, “Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals at the One-Year Mark: A Profile of Currently Eligible Youth and Applicants” (Washington: Migration Policy Institute, 2013), available at <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-one-year-mark-profile-currently-eligible-youth-and>.
- 3 U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, “Number of I-821D, Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, by Fiscal Year, Quarter, Intake, Biometrics and Case Status Fiscal Year 2012-2017 (March 31),” available at https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/USCIS/Resources/Reports%20and%20Studies/Immigration%20Forms%20Data/All%20Form%20Types/DACA/daca_performance-data_fy2017_qtr2.pdf (last accessed June 2017).
- 4 The authors developed their measures in consultation with an advisory board consisting of academics, policy experts, and practitioners. They also partnered with Veronica Terriquez, an associate professor at the University of California Santa Cruz who led the development of the survey and provided infrastructure to support it, and Ben Roth, an assistant professor at the University of South Carolina who fielded a team of researchers in South Carolina. Based on the DACA requirements for eligibility, the participants screened by the authors were under the age of 31 as of June 15, 2012; had arrived in the United States before age 16; had accumulated at least five years of continuous residence in the United States; and had no felony convictions, significant misdemeanors, or more than two other misdemeanors. Because the authors were interested in a range of experiences, their sample included those young people who had not yet graduated from or were enrolled in a U.S. high school or the equivalent. While DACA eligibility is open to minors, this study focuses on young adult DACA beneficiaries. The authors recruited respondents through national and local organizations and through referrals by those who had taken the survey.
- 5 Tom K. Wong and others, “New Study of DACA Beneficiaries Shows Positive Economic and Educational Outcomes,” Center for American Progress, October 18, 2016, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/news/2016/10/18/146290/new-study-of-daca-beneficiaries-shows-positive-economic-and-educational-outcomes/>; Roberto G. Gonzales and Angie M. Bautista-Chavez, “Two Years and Counting: Assessing the Growing Power of DACA” (Washington: American Immigration Council, 2014), available at https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/two_years_and_counting_assessing_the_growing_power_of_daca_final.pdf.
- 6 See National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, Medicine, *The Economic and Fiscal Consequences of Immigration* (Washington: The National Academies Press, 2017); National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, Medicine, *The Integration of Immigrants into American Society* (Washington: The National Academies Press, 2015).
- 7 The authors draw this subsample from their larger sample of 481 interviews.
- 8 In fact, more than 40 percent of unauthorized adults ages 18 to 24 do not complete high school, and only 49 percent of unauthorized high school graduates go to college. See Jeffrey Passel and D’Vera Cohn, “A Portrait of Unauthorized Migrants in the United States” (Washington: Pew Hispanic Center, 2009), available at <http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/reports/107.pdf>.
- 9 See Leisy Janet Abrego, “I Can’t Go to College Because I Don’t Have Papers’: Incorporation Patterns of Latino Undocumented Youth,” *Latino Studies* 4 (3) (2006): 212–231, available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/palgrave.lst.8600200>; Roberto G. Gonzales, “Learning to Be Illegal: Undocumented Youth and Shifting Legal Contexts in the Transition to Adulthood,” *American Sociological Review* 76 (4) (2011): 602–619, available at <http://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/savvy/images/journals/docs/pdf/asr/Aug11ASRFeature.pdf>.
- 10 In order to protect the respondents’ anonymity and confidentiality, the authors have replaced all names with pseudonyms. Interviews were carried out between March 2015 and November 2015.
- 11 Margie McHugh, “Diploma, Please: Promoting Educational Attainment for DACA- and Potential DREAM Act-Eligible Youth” (Washington: Migration Policy Institute, 2014), available at <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/diploma-please-promoting-educational-attainment-daca-and-potential-dream-act-eligible-youth>.
- 12 Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Employment Projections—2012–2022,” Press release, December 19, 2013, available at http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/ecopro_12192013.pdf; Audrey Singer, “Immigrant Workers in the U.S. Labor Force” (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2012), available at https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0315_immigrant_workers_singer.pdf.
- 13 Stopping out, or leaving college for a certain period of time with the intention of returning, is a growing and concerning trend among college students nationwide. See Jeff E. Hoyt and Bradley A. Winn, “Understanding Retention and College Student Bodies: Differences Between Drop-Outs, Stop-Outs, Opt-Outs, and Transfer-Outs,” *NASPA Journal* 41 (3) (2004): 395–417. Unauthorized immigrant youth are three times more likely than similar youth—controlling for GPA, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status—to stop out. See Veronica Terriquez, “Dreams Delayed: Barriers to Degree Completion among Undocumented Community College Students,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41 (8) (2015): 1302–1323.
- 14 See, in particular, efforts by TheDream.US scholarship fund, available at <http://www.thedream.us>, and the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, available at <https://www.hsf.net>.
- 15 Gonzales and Bautista-Chavez, “Two years and Counting.”
- 16 At present, only 12 states plus the District of Columbia offer unauthorized immigrants eligibility for driver’s licenses.