



Undocumented No More

A Nationwide Analysis of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA

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Introduction and summary

Immigration status has an enormous impact on the lives of millions of undocumented young people across the United States. Being undocumented can stop people's dreams, curtail their ambitions, and can mean that daily life is fraught with risks and the fear of deportation.²

In an effort to address some of the challenges that undocumented youth face, President Barack Obama announced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, program on June 15, 2012. As an exercise in administrative discretion—unlike a legislative effort—DACA does not give undocumented youth lawful permanent resident status such as a green card or provide a path to permanent residency and citizenship. Rather, it gives temporary relief from deportation to undocumented youth and work authorization that can be renewed every two years to eligible applicants.³ Nevertheless, the DACA announcement represented a victory for undocumented youth and their allies; more than half a million young people to date have applied for deferred action.

In the first year since U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, or USCIS, began accepting DACA applications on August 15, 2012, more than 573,000 people have applied and more than 430,000 people have received deferred action⁴—a remarkable feat given the short timespan to get the program up and running. More than half of people who were immediately eligible for DACA have applied for the program in less than a year.⁵

But even with these positive statistics, a number of questions remain: How is DACA being implemented across the country? Which states have been most successful with DACA outreach and implementation, and which states have lagged behind? Which national origins groups have had the most success with DACA? Have any groups been left behind? And what role do community-based organizations, new and traditional media, and the political context of individual states play in DACA implementation and outreach?

“Deferred action changed my life. It brought me back to my high school days and college days when I had goals in my mind and I had inspiration and I wanted to be a role model and contribute to the community.”¹

— DACA recipient

The primary objective of this one-year program evaluation and collaborative report is to begin to answer some of these questions. To supplement the USCIS’s publicly available data on DACA, we draw from data obtained from the Department of Homeland Security, or DHS, via two Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA, requests totaling 465,509 applications. Our purpose is to evaluate DACA using these new data and to examine the factors that shape how DACA unfolds, with a focus on analyzing the factors that help or hinder young people in applying for deferred action. We pay particular attention to the role of immigrant-serving organizations and media as potential facilitating factors, and anti-immigrant policy contexts at the state level as a potential inhibiting factor.

It is critical to evaluate and understand how DACA worked during its first year. First—and perhaps most practically—this can help identify how to make DACA as accessible as possible for eligible youth. While the benefits of transitioning from being undocumented to “DACAdmented” are clear, and while a significant number of people have benefited from DACA already, the data also show that DACA is not reaching its entire target population.⁶

Requirements to receive DACA

Eligible applicants must:

- Be under age 31 as of June 15, 2012, and have arrived in the United States before age 16
- Have been physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012, and have continuously resided in the United States since June 15, 2007
- Be at least 15 years old at time of application, unless the applicant is in removal proceedings or has been ordered to depart; people under age 15 can apply when they reach 15
- Be currently enrolled in school, or have graduated from high school, obtained a GED, or been honorably discharged from the military or Coast Guard
- Have not committed a felony, a serious misdemeanor, three or more misdemeanors, or otherwise threaten national security

Application requirements include:

- Proof of identity
- Proof of arrival to the United States before age 16 and proof of immigration status, if applicable
- Proof of presence in the United States on June 15, 2012, and proof of continuous residency since June 15, 2007
- Proof of education or military service
- A \$465 filing fee, including a \$380 application fee and an \$85 biometric services fee⁷

Since DACA represents a trial run for a larger-scale legalization program—such as the one proposed in the Senate-passed immigration reform bill, S. 744—it is important to examine how the directive is operating and how it could be improved. For example, data from this report can be used to better pinpoint geographic regions and particular racial and ethnic groups that may need more outreach.

Second, undocumented youth are an increasingly vocal part of the contemporary immigration debate. By pushing for measures that help the broader undocumented immigrant population, these youths have played an instrumental role in building momentum for broad, common-sense, and permanent immigration policy solutions. It is essential to understand a program like DACA since it is directed toward this new, increasingly influential force in America’s immigration debate.

Finally, in this critical period of the debate over immigration reform, our report helps identify the institutions and infrastructure that, to the extent that they enhance the implementation of DACA, can help chart how future immigration policies—in particular, a path to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants—should be supported, maximizing their reach and efficacy.

Below is a summary of what this report examines.

National and state demographics

- Overall, 32.5 percent of all possible applicants—including those who are currently eligible and those who are not yet eligible—have applied.
- Of those immediately eligible for DACA, a full 61.2 percent have applied—a remarkable feat in just one year.
- The DACA implementation rate among the states varies significantly, from a low of 22 percent of eligible people in Florida to a high of 48.6 percent in Indiana. Note that because a portion of the DACA population will not be immediately eligible to apply, individual state implementation rates should not necessarily be viewed as low. Nationally, 53.1 percent of the DACA population is immediately eligible.

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- Thirteen states and the District of Columbia—including some with the largest DACA-eligible populations in the country—have implementation rates that are statistically lower than expected. While it is possible that these states lag behind in DACA implementation because of an over-count in the eligible population, it is clear that more outreach is necessary in these states.

Applications by country of origin

- DACA applicants in the FOIA sample were born in 205 different countries, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Luxembourg and Norway to North Korea.
- Mexicans make up 74.9 percent of the FOIA sample; Central Americans, 11.7 percent; and South Americans, 6.9 percent. Altogether, applicants from Latin America comprise 93.5 percent of the total.
- Asians make up 4.2 percent of the FOIA sample; Europeans, 1 percent; and Africans, 1 percent.
- Compared to estimates of the DACA-eligible population, Mexicans are over-represented in the FOIA sample (+3.8 percent), while groups from North and Central America excluding Mexico (-1.8 percent), Europeans (-0.8 percent), and Asians (-1.9 percent) are underrepresented.

Gender and age

- Women represent 51.2 percent of the FOIA sample; men represent 48.7 percent.
- Men are 1.4 times more likely than women to have their applications denied.
- The average age of a DACA applicant in the FOIA sample is 20 years old, and older applicants are more likely than younger applicants to be denied.
- A male at the top end of the spectrum—just under 31—is 4.3 times more likely to be denied than a 23-year-old male applicant in the FOIA sample. A woman at the top end of the spectrum is 3.7 times more likely to be denied than a 23-year-old female. While it is too early to tell why this may be the case, the difficulties in establishing eligibility for people who are out of school may be a factor.

Denials

- Mexican applicants are half as likely to be denied DACA as other groups.
- All other applicants are 1.8 times more likely to be denied than applicants born in Mexico.
- Africans, Asians, Europeans, and Central Americans experience disproportionately higher denial rates than Mexicans.

The role of immigrant-serving organizations

- Through an analysis of the density of immigrant-serving organizations in each state, it is clear that more organizations means more applications. In fact, for every additional immigrant-serving organization, there is an increase of 70 DACA applications.
- But critically, the presence of more organizations does not correlate with the ultimate implementation or acceptance rate. Put another way, more organizations does not mean that more people—relative to the overall number eligible in a given state—have applied, or that their applications are any more accepted than those in states with fewer organizations.
- These inconclusive results are most likely the product of various factors, including how much focus each individual organization gives to DACA, differences in how long organizations have been around, institutional memories in terms of whether or not institutions took part in past legalization programs, resources available, and language-specific outreach strategies.
- Further research on immigrant-serving organizations must look at factors such as capacity to serve DACA applicants, experience, and language-oriented outreach.

Explaining the differences in DACA rates

- While it is too early to tell why discrepancies in denials exist, factors such as the active role of the Mexican consulate and broader exposure among Spanish-language press than Asian media could play a role in the differences among national origins groups and their ultimate application and denial rates. The high cost of applications may also hinder applicants, particularly those in families with multiple DACA-eligible youth. More research is needed to understand these differences.
- Both new and traditional media have played a significant role, though the paucity of information about DACA among some ethnic media sources—particularly those targeting Asian immigrants—could play a role in lower rates of applications. Social media is being utilized not just for the purposes of disseminating information, but also for proving eligibility, by proving residency and fulfilling continuous presence requirements.
- While restrictive state-level immigration policies may be designed to discourage undocumented immigrants from engaging with society, the data make it clear that this is not the case when it comes to DACA, as implementation rates are not statistically significantly lower in states with hostile policy climates.

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