

# The Effect of DACA Eligibility on Full-Time Employment: A Difference-in-Differences Analysis

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## Abstract

This study examines the causal impact of eligibility for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program on full-time employment among Mexican-born Hispanic individuals in the United States. Using data from the American Community Survey (2006–2016) and a difference-in-differences research design, I compare employment outcomes between DACA-eligible and non-eligible non-citizens before and after DACA implementation in 2012. The preferred specification, controlling for demographics and including state and year fixed effects, estimates that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment probability by approximately 0.94 percentage points ( $SE = 0.0037$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ). Heterogeneity analysis reveals that effects are concentrated among women (3.1 percentage points) rather than men. Event study analysis shows effects emerging and growing in 2015–2016, consistent with gradual program take-up, though some evidence of pre-trends warrants caution in interpretation.

**Keywords:** DACA, immigration policy, employment, difference-in-differences, labor market outcomes

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# 1 Introduction

The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, implemented on June 15, 2012, represents one of the most significant immigration policy changes in recent U.S. history. The program provided temporary relief from deportation and work authorization to undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States as children, commonly known as “Dreamers.” Given that DACA explicitly provides legal work authorization, a natural question arises: did the program improve employment outcomes for eligible individuals?

This study addresses the following research question: *Among ethnically Hispanic-Mexican Mexican-born people living in the United States, what was the causal impact of eligibility for DACA on the probability of full-time employment, defined as usually working 35 hours per week or more?*

Understanding the labor market effects of DACA is important for several reasons. First, employment is a fundamental measure of economic integration and well-being. Second, the debate over DACA’s economic effects has significant policy implications. Third, as a quasi-experimental policy change, DACA provides an opportunity to study how legal status affects labor market outcomes.

I employ a difference-in-differences (DiD) research design, comparing changes in full-time employment between DACA-eligible and non-eligible Mexican-born Hispanic non-citizens before and after program implementation. Using data from the American Community Survey (ACS) spanning 2006–2016, the analysis controls for demographic characteristics and includes state and year fixed effects.

The main finding is that DACA eligibility is associated with a statistically significant but modest increase in full-time employment of approximately 0.94 percentage points. This effect is primarily driven by women, with little effect detected among men. Event study analysis provides some support for the causal interpretation, though evidence of pre-trends in 2010 suggests caution.

The remainder of this report is organized as follows. Section 2 provides background on the DACA program. Section 3 describes the data and sample construction. Section 4 outlines the empirical strategy. Section 5 presents the main results. Section 6 discusses robustness checks and limitations. Section 7 concludes.

## 2 Background: The DACA Program

### 2.1 Program Overview

DACA was announced by the Obama administration on June 15, 2012, and began accepting applications on August 15, 2012. The program grants eligible individuals a two-year

renewable period of deferred action from deportation and eligibility for work authorization.

## 2.2 Eligibility Requirements

To qualify for DACA, applicants must meet the following criteria as of June 15, 2012:

1. **Arrived before age 16:** The individual must have entered the United States before their 16th birthday.
2. **Age requirement:** The individual must have been under 31 years old on June 15, 2012 (i.e., born after June 15, 1981).
3. **Continuous residence:** The individual must have lived continuously in the United States since June 15, 2007.
4. **Present in the U.S.:** The individual must have been present in the United States on June 15, 2012.
5. **Undocumented status:** The individual must have lacked lawful immigration status on June 15, 2012.
6. **Educational/military requirement:** The individual must have graduated from high school, obtained a GED, been enrolled in school, or been honorably discharged from the military (not modeled in this analysis due to data limitations).
7. **No serious criminal history:** The individual must not have been convicted of a felony or significant misdemeanor (not observable in survey data).

## 2.3 Program Take-up

In the first four years of the program (2012–2016), nearly 900,000 initial applications were received, with approximately 90% approved. Given that the eligible population was estimated at 1.7–1.9 million, this suggests a take-up rate of approximately 50%. Due to the large Mexican-origin share of the undocumented population in the United States, the vast majority of DACA recipients are Mexican-born.

## 2.4 Expected Effects on Employment

DACA could affect employment through several mechanisms:

- **Legal work authorization:** DACA provides employment authorization documents (EADs), allowing recipients to work legally and access formal-sector jobs.

- **Reduced deportation fear:** Deferred action reduces the risk of workplace enforcement, potentially increasing labor supply.
- **Driver’s license access:** In many states, DACA recipients can obtain driver’s licenses, facilitating job search and commuting.
- **Human capital investment:** Legal status may encourage investments in education and skills.
- **Improved job matching:** Access to better jobs may reduce underemployment and increase hours worked.

## 3 Data and Sample Construction

### 3.1 Data Source

The analysis uses data from the American Community Survey (ACS) as provided by IPUMS USA. The ACS is the largest household survey in the United States, providing detailed demographic and economic information for approximately 3 million households annually. I use the one-year ACS files from 2006 through 2016.

Key advantages of the ACS for this analysis include:

- Large sample sizes enabling precise estimation even within narrow subgroups
- Detailed information on birthplace, citizenship, and year of immigration
- Consistent variable definitions across years
- Person-level sampling weights for population-representative estimates

### 3.2 Variable Definitions

#### 3.2.1 Target Population

The analysis focuses on individuals who are:

- **Hispanic-Mexican:** HISPAN = 1 (Mexican origin)
- **Born in Mexico:** BPL = 200 (birthplace is Mexico)

This reflects the instruction to focus on “ethnically Hispanic-Mexican Mexican-born people.”

### 3.2.2 DACA Eligibility

I construct a DACA eligibility indicator based on the following criteria, measurable in the ACS:

1. **Arrived before age 16:** Calculated as  $(\text{YRIMMIG} - \text{BIRTHYR}) < 16$
2. **Under 31 in 2012:** Implemented as  $\text{BIRTHYR} \geq 1982$  (conservative approach given lack of birth month data)
3. **Arrived by 2007:**  $\text{YRIMMIG} \leq 2007$
4. **Non-citizen:**  $\text{CITIZEN} = 3$  (not a citizen)

An individual is classified as DACA-eligible if all four criteria are met. Note that I cannot verify the educational requirement or criminal history in the ACS data, nor can I distinguish between documented and undocumented non-citizens. Following the instructions, I assume non-citizens who have not received immigration papers are undocumented for DACA purposes.

### 3.2.3 Outcome Variable

The outcome is full-time employment, defined as:

- $\text{EMPSTAT} = 1$  (employed) AND
- $\text{UHRSWORK} \geq 35$  (usually works 35+ hours per week)

This aligns with the standard definition of full-time work.

### 3.2.4 Control Variables

The analysis includes the following demographic controls:

- Age and age squared
- Sex (male indicator)
- Marital status (married indicator)
- Educational attainment (categorical)

Fixed effects are included for:

- State of residence (STATEFIP)
- Survey year (YEAR)

### 3.3 Sample Restrictions

Table 1 documents the sample construction process.

Table 1: Sample Construction

Restriction	Observations	Remaining
Full ACS 2006–2016	33,851,425	—
Mexican-born Hispanic-Mexican	991,261	991,261
Working age (16–40)	473,012	473,012
Exclude 2012 (transition year)	431,062	431,062
Non-citizens only	355,188	355,188
<b>Final analysis sample</b>	<b>355,188</b>	—

Notes: Sample construction from ACS 2006–2016. The year 2012 is excluded as a transition year since DACA was announced mid-year (June 15, 2012). The sample is restricted to non-citizens to create a meaningful comparison between DACA-eligible and ineligible individuals who share similar legal disadvantages.

The final sample includes 355,188 observations: 80,300 in the treatment group (DACA-eligible) and 274,888 in the control group (not DACA-eligible).

### 3.4 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents summary statistics by DACA eligibility status.

Table 2: Summary Statistics by DACA Eligibility Status

Variable	DACA-Eligible	Control
Full-time employment rate	0.404	0.552
Age (years)	22.4	32.0
Male (%)	55.1	55.5
Married (%)	21.7	54.3
Education (0–11 scale)	5.1	4.3
Population (weighted, millions)	10.9	39.3
Observations	80,300	274,888

Notes: Summary statistics for the final analysis sample (2006–2011 and 2013–2016). DACA-eligible individuals are younger on average and have higher educational attainment but lower marriage rates. Full-time employment is lower for DACA-eligible individuals, partly reflecting age differences.

The DACA-eligible group is substantially younger (22.4 vs. 32.0 years), less likely to be married (21.7% vs. 54.3%), and has higher educational attainment on average. These

differences underscore the importance of controlling for demographics in the regression analysis.

## 4 Empirical Strategy

### 4.1 Identification Strategy

I employ a difference-in-differences (DiD) research design to estimate the causal effect of DACA eligibility on full-time employment. The key comparison is between:

- **Treatment group:** Mexican-born Hispanic non-citizens who meet DACA eligibility criteria
- **Control group:** Mexican-born Hispanic non-citizens who do not meet DACA eligibility criteria

The control group includes individuals who:

- Arrived after age 16 (violated age-at-arrival requirement)
- Were too old in 2012 (violated age requirement)
- Arrived after 2007 (violated continuous residence requirement)

The identification relies on the **parallel trends assumption**: absent DACA, employment trends for eligible and ineligible individuals would have been similar. This assumption is tested using placebo tests and event study analysis.

### 4.2 Econometric Specification

The baseline DiD model is:

$$Y_{ist} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Eligible}_i + \beta_2 \text{Post}_t + \beta_3 (\text{Eligible}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + \epsilon_{ist} \quad (1)$$

where:

- $Y_{ist}$  is a binary indicator for full-time employment
- $\text{Eligible}_i = 1$  if individual  $i$  meets DACA eligibility criteria
- $\text{Post}_t = 1$  if year  $t \geq 2013$
- $\beta_3$  is the DiD estimand (effect of DACA eligibility)

The preferred specification adds demographic controls and fixed effects:

$$Y_{ist} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Eligible}_i + \beta_3 (\text{Eligible}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + X'_i \gamma + \delta_s + \theta_t + \epsilon_{ist} \quad (2)$$

where:

- $X_i$  is a vector of demographic controls (age, age<sup>2</sup>, male, married, education)
- $\delta_s$  are state fixed effects
- $\theta_t$  are year fixed effects (which absorb the main effect of Post)

All models use heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors.

### 4.3 Event Study Specification

To examine dynamics and test the parallel trends assumption, I estimate an event study model:

$$Y_{ist} = \alpha + \sum_{k \neq 2011} \gamma_k (\text{Eligible}_i \times \mathbf{1}[\text{Year}_t = k]) + X'_i \delta + \mu_s + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{ist} \quad (3)$$

where 2011 (the year immediately before DACA) is the reference year. The coefficients  $\gamma_k$  trace out the treatment effect relative to the pre-DACA period. Under parallel trends, pre-period coefficients should be close to zero.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Full-Time Employment Trends

Table 3 presents full-time employment rates by treatment status and time period.

Table 3: Full-Time Employment Rates by Group and Period

Group	Pre-DACA (2006–2011)	Post-DACA (2013–2016)	Change
DACA-Eligible	36.67%	44.99%	+8.32 pp
Control	55.53%	54.58%	-0.95 pp
<b>Simple DiD</b>			<b>+9.27 pp</b>

Notes: Full-time employment rates (working 35+ hours per week) for Mexican-born Hispanic non-citizens by DACA eligibility and time period. The simple DiD is (44.99 - 36.67) - (54.58 - 55.53) = 9.27 percentage points.

The raw data show a striking pattern: full-time employment among DACA-eligible individuals increased by 8.32 percentage points after DACA, while employment among

the control group slightly declined. The simple difference-in-differences is 9.27 percentage points.

However, this simple comparison does not account for compositional changes or the different demographic profiles of the two groups. The regression analysis addresses these concerns.

## 5.2 Main Regression Results

Table 4 presents the main difference-in-differences estimates.

Table 4: Effect of DACA Eligibility on Full-Time Employment

	(1) Basic DiD	(2) + Demographics	(3) + State/Year FE	(4) Weighted
DACA Eligible × Post	0.0927*** (0.0040)	0.0185*** (0.0037)	0.0094** (0.0037)	0.0059 (0.0045)
95% CI	[0.085, 0.101]	[0.011, 0.026]	[0.002, 0.017]	[-0.003, 0.015]
DACA Eligible	-0.1886*** (0.0029)	0.0172*** (0.0031)	0.0102*** (0.0031)	0.0117** (0.0039)
Demographics	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
State FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Weighted	No	No	No	Yes
Observations	355,188	355,188	355,188	355,188
R-squared	0.017	0.219	0.226	—

Notes: Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1. The dependent variable is an indicator for full-time employment (working 35+ hours per week). Demographic controls include age, age squared, male, married, and education dummies. The preferred specification is Model (3).

### 5.2.1 Interpreting the Results

**Model 1 (Basic DiD):** Without controls, the estimated effect is 9.27 percentage points, matching the simple calculation in Table 3. This large effect is driven partly by different age profiles.

**Model 2 (+ Demographics):** Adding age, sex, marital status, and education reduces the estimate to 1.85 percentage points. This dramatic reduction reflects that DACA-eligible individuals are younger and at earlier career stages.

**Model 3 (+ State and Year FE):** The preferred specification includes state and year fixed effects to control for local labor market conditions and time trends. The

estimated effect is 0.94 percentage points ( $SE = 0.0037$ , 95% CI: [0.002, 0.017],  $p = 0.012$ ).

**Model 4 (Weighted):** Using person weights yields an estimate of 0.59 percentage points that is not statistically significant ( $p = 0.19$ ). The difference between unweighted and weighted estimates suggests some heterogeneity across population subgroups.

### 5.3 Preferred Estimate

The preferred estimate comes from **Model 3**, which includes demographic controls and state/year fixed effects:

**Preferred Estimate:** DACA eligibility increased full-time employment by **0.94 percentage points** (95% CI: 0.21 to 1.67 percentage points).

This effect is statistically significant at the 5% level but economically modest. Relative to the pre-DACA treatment group mean of 36.67%, the effect represents a 2.6% relative increase in full-time employment.

### 5.4 Event Study Results

Figure ?? and Table 5 present the event study estimates.

Table 5: Event Study Estimates

Year	Coefficient	Std. Error	p-value
<i>Pre-DACA Period</i>			
2006	0.0011	0.0081	0.891
2007	0.0034	0.0080	0.666
2008	0.0126	0.0080	0.117
2009	0.0153*	0.0079	0.054
2010	0.0170**	0.0078	0.029
<b>2011 (reference)</b>	—	—	—
<i>Post-DACA Period</i>			
2013	0.0091	0.0077	0.238
2014	0.0114	0.0078	0.143
2015	0.0240***	0.0079	0.002
2016	0.0264***	0.0080	0.001

Notes: Event study coefficients showing the interaction between DACA eligibility and year indicators, with 2011 as the reference year. Estimates include demographic controls and state fixed effects. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

The event study reveals several patterns:

1. **Pre-trends concern:** The 2010 coefficient is statistically significant (0.017,  $p = 0.029$ ), suggesting possible violations of the parallel trends assumption. However, 2006–2008 coefficients are close to zero and insignificant.
2. **Immediate post-DACA effects:** Coefficients for 2013–2014 are positive but not statistically significant, possibly reflecting gradual program take-up.
3. **Growing effects over time:** Coefficients for 2015 and 2016 are larger and highly significant (2.4 and 2.6 percentage points respectively), consistent with cumulative effects as more individuals obtained DACA status and work authorization.

## 6 Robustness and Heterogeneity

### 6.1 Placebo Test

To assess whether pre-existing differential trends might explain the results, I conduct a placebo test using only pre-DACA data (2006–2011) and treating 2010 as the “fake” treatment year.

Table 6: Placebo Test: Fake Treatment in 2010

	Coefficient
DACA Eligible $\times$ Post-2010	0.0061 (0.0049)
p-value	0.216
Observations	233,897

Notes: Placebo test using only 2006–2011 data with 2010 as the fake treatment year. The coefficient is not statistically significant, providing some support for the parallel trends assumption.

The placebo coefficient is small (0.61 percentage points) and not statistically significant ( $p = 0.22$ ), providing some support for the parallel trends assumption. However, combined with the significant 2010 coefficient in the event study, this suggests marginal evidence of pre-trends.

### 6.2 Sensitivity to Age Restrictions

Table 7 examines sensitivity to the age restriction.

Table 7: Sensitivity to Age Restrictions

Age Range	Coefficient	Std. Error	N
16–40 (baseline)	0.0094**	0.0037	355,188
18–35	0.0230***	0.0043	253,373

Notes: DiD estimates under different age restrictions. The effect is larger with tighter age restrictions, possibly due to better overlap between treatment and control groups.

Restricting to ages 18–35 yields a larger estimate (2.3 percentage points), suggesting that effects may be concentrated among prime working-age individuals with better overlap between treatment and control groups.

### 6.3 Heterogeneity by Gender

Table 8 presents results separately by gender.

Table 8: Heterogeneity by Gender

	Coefficient	Std. Error	p-value
Male	0.0035	0.0050	0.484
Female	0.0307***	0.0053	<0.001
Difference (Female – Male)	0.0272		

Notes: DiD estimates from separate regressions by gender, including demographic controls and state/year fixed effects.

There is substantial heterogeneity by gender:

- **Men:** The effect is small (0.35 percentage points) and not statistically significant.
- **Women:** The effect is large (3.07 percentage points) and highly significant.

This pattern may reflect that undocumented women face greater barriers to formal employment than men, making legal work authorization more impactful for their labor market outcomes.

## 7 Discussion

### 7.1 Summary of Findings

This study finds that DACA eligibility is associated with a modest but statistically significant increase in full-time employment of approximately 0.94 percentage points among Mexican-born Hispanic non-citizens. The effect is:

- Statistically significant at the 5% level ( $p = 0.012$ )
- Economically modest (2.6% relative increase from baseline)
- Concentrated among women (3.1 percentage points) rather than men
- Growing over time (2.4–2.6 percentage points by 2015–2016)
- Robust to alternative age restrictions but sensitive to weighting

## 7.2 Interpretation

The modest effect size may reflect several factors:

1. **Incomplete take-up:** Only about 50% of eligible individuals applied for DACA by 2016. The intent-to-treat effect captures the average effect across all eligible individuals, not just recipients.
2. **Gradual implementation:** The growing effects in 2015–2016 suggest cumulative benefits as more individuals obtained work authorization.
3. **Already working informally:** Many undocumented individuals work in the informal sector. DACA may facilitate transitions to formal full-time employment rather than moving people from non-employment.
4. **Outcome measure:** Full-time employment may not capture all employment effects; part-time employment, wages, or job quality might show different patterns.

The concentration of effects among women is noteworthy and may reflect:

- Greater barriers for undocumented women in accessing formal employment
- Cultural factors affecting women's labor force participation
- Industry-specific effects in female-dominated sectors

## 7.3 Limitations

Several limitations should be noted:

1. **Eligibility measurement:** I cannot verify all DACA requirements (education, criminal history) or distinguish documented from undocumented non-citizens.
2. **Pre-trends:** Some evidence of pre-trends (significant 2010 coefficient) suggests caution in causal interpretation.

3. **Cross-sectional data:** The repeated cross-section design prevents tracking individuals over time.
4. **Weighted vs. unweighted:** The weighted estimate is not statistically significant, suggesting population heterogeneity.
5. **Intent-to-treat:** The analysis estimates eligibility effects, not treatment-on-treated effects for actual DACA recipients.

## 8 Conclusion

This study provides evidence that DACA eligibility had a modest positive effect on full-time employment among Mexican-born Hispanic non-citizens. The preferred estimate suggests that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment probability by approximately 0.94 percentage points (95% CI: 0.21 to 1.67 percentage points).

The effect is concentrated among women and grows over time, consistent with gradual program take-up and cumulative benefits. While statistically significant, the economic magnitude is modest, potentially reflecting incomplete take-up, informal sector employment, or measurement limitations.

These findings contribute to the growing literature on immigration policy and labor market outcomes. While DACA appears to have improved employment outcomes for some eligible individuals, particularly women, the effects are more nuanced than simple before-after comparisons might suggest. Future research with administrative data on actual DACA recipients could provide more precise estimates of the program's effects.

## A Appendix: Additional Tables

### A.1 Full Regression Output: Preferred Specification

The preferred specification (Model 3) includes the following covariates with their estimated coefficients:

Table 9: Full Regression Output: Model 3

Variable	Coefficient (SE)
DACA Eligible	0.0102*** (0.0031)
DACA Eligible $\times$ Post	0.0094** (0.0037)
Age	0.0542*** (0.0008)
Age <sup>2</sup>	-0.0008*** (0.00001)
Male	0.2628*** (0.0018)
Married	0.0849*** (0.0020)
Education dummies	Yes
State fixed effects	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes
Observations	355,188
R-squared	0.226

Notes: Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors.

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05.

### A.2 Sample Composition by Year

Table 10: Sample Size by Year and Treatment Status

Year	DACA-Eligible	Control	Total
2006	6,631	31,072	37,703
2007	7,051	31,327	38,378
2008	7,450	32,221	39,671
2009	7,669	31,963	39,632
2010	8,005	31,746	39,751
2011	7,924	30,838	38,762
2013	8,660	26,232	34,892
2014	8,988	20,455	29,443
2015	9,159	19,838	28,997
2016	8,763	19,196	27,959
Total	80,300	274,888	355,188

### A.3 Variable Definitions from IPUMS

Table 11: Key Variable Definitions

Variable	IPUMS Name	Definition
Year	YEAR	Survey year (2006–2016)
Hispanic origin	HISPAN	1 = Mexican
Birthplace	BPL	200 = Mexico
Citizenship	CITIZEN	3 = Not a citizen
Year of immigration	YRIMMIG	Year first arrived in US
Birth year	BIRTHYR	Year of birth
Age	AGE	Age in years
Hours worked	UHRSWORK	Usual hours per week
Employment status	EMPSTAT	1 = Employed
Sex	SEX	1 = Male, 2 = Female
Marital status	MARST	1 = Married, spouse present
Education	EDUC	Educational attainment (0–11)
State	STATEFIP	State FIPS code
Person weight	PERWT	Person-level sampling weight