

The Causal Impact of DACA Eligibility on Full-Time Employment: A Difference-in-Differences Analysis

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Abstract

This study estimates the causal effect of eligibility for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program on full-time employment among Mexican-born, Hispanic-Mexican individuals in the United States. Using American Community Survey (ACS) data from 2006–2016 and a difference-in-differences identification strategy, I find that DACA eligibility is associated with a 3.7 percentage point increase in the probability of full-time employment (defined as working 35 or more hours per week) for eligible individuals compared to non-eligible Mexican-born non-citizens. This effect is statistically significant at conventional levels ($p < 0.001$) and robust to various specification checks, including the addition of demographic controls, state fixed effects, and year fixed effects. Event study analysis reveals that the positive employment effects emerged gradually following DACA implementation in 2012, with larger effects observed in later years (2015–2016). The findings suggest that DACA’s provision of legal work authorization had meaningful positive effects on labor market outcomes for eligible undocumented immigrants.

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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 provides temporary relief from deportation and work authorization for eligible undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children. Understanding the labor market effects of this policy is crucial for evaluating its economic impact and informing future immigration policy decisions.

This replication 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?*

The identification strategy exploits the sharp eligibility criteria established by the DACA program to construct treatment and control groups within the population of Mexican-born non-citizens. Specifically, DACA eligibility required individuals to:

1. Have arrived in the U.S. before their 16th birthday
2. Be under 31 years of age as of June 15, 2012
3. Have lived continuously in the U.S. since June 15, 2007
4. Be present in the U.S. on June 15, 2012 without lawful immigration status

By comparing changes in full-time employment rates between DACA-eligible and non-eligible Mexican-born non-citizens before and after the program's implementation, I estimate the causal effect of DACA eligibility on labor market outcomes using a difference-in-differences (DiD) framework.

The analysis yields a preferred estimate of a **3.68 percentage point increase** in full-time employment probability associated with DACA eligibility, with a standard error of 0.42 percentage points and a 95% confidence interval of [2.85, 4.51] percentage points. This effect is economically meaningful and statistically significant, suggesting that DACA's provision of legal work authorization facilitated transitions to full-time employment for eligible individuals.

2 Background and Literature

2.1 The DACA Program

DACA was announced by the Obama administration on June 15, 2012, through executive action. The program offered qualifying individuals a two-year renewable period of

deferred action from deportation and eligibility for work authorization. Applications began being accepted on August 15, 2012, and in the first four years, nearly 900,000 initial applications were received, with approximately 90% approved.

The key eligibility requirements created sharp discontinuities that can be exploited for causal identification:

- **Age at arrival cutoff:** Must have arrived before turning 16
- **Age cutoff:** Must have been under 31 as of June 15, 2012 (born after June 15, 1981)
- **Continuous presence:** Must have resided continuously in the U.S. since June 15, 2007
- **Immigration status:** Must not have had lawful status on June 15, 2012

2.2 Theoretical Framework

DACA could affect full-time employment through several channels:

Direct effects through work authorization: DACA recipients receive Employment Authorization Documents (EADs), enabling legal employment. This removes barriers to formal sector jobs that often offer full-time positions with benefits.

Reduced deportation risk: The deferred action status reduces the risk of deportation, potentially making employers more willing to invest in DACA-eligible workers and offer stable, full-time positions.

Access to state-level benefits: In many states, DACA recipients became eligible for driver's licenses and other identification documents, facilitating employment and commuting.

Human capital investment: With reduced uncertainty about future status, DACA-eligible individuals may invest more in education and job-specific skills, improving employment prospects.

3 Data and Sample

3.1 Data Source

The analysis uses data from the American Community Survey (ACS) provided by IPUMS USA, covering the years 2006–2016. The ACS is an annual nationally representative survey of approximately 3 million households, providing detailed information on demographics, immigration status, and employment characteristics.

I use the one-year ACS samples exclusively, excluding multi-year pooled samples and any data before 2006 or after 2016 to ensure variable consistency and focus on the relevant study period.

3.2 Sample Selection

The analysis sample is constructed through the following filters:

1. **Hispanic-Mexican ethnicity:** $HISPAN = 1$ (Mexican origin)
2. **Mexican birthplace:** $BPL = 200$ (born in Mexico)
3. **Working-age population:** Age 16–64
4. **Non-citizen status:** $CITIZEN = 3$ (not a citizen)

The restriction to non-citizens serves as a proxy for undocumented status, as instructed. While we cannot directly observe legal status in the ACS, non-citizens who have not received naturalization papers are assumed to be undocumented for the purposes of DACA eligibility determination.

I exclude the year 2012 from the main analysis because the ACS does not report the month of interview, making it impossible to distinguish pre- and post-DACA observations within that year. DACA was implemented on June 15, 2012, so 2012 observations could fall on either side of the treatment.

3.3 Variable Definitions

3.3.1 Outcome Variable

The primary outcome is **full-time employment**, defined as usually working 35 or more hours per week ($UHRSWORK \geq 35$). This binary indicator captures the intensive margin of employment aligned with the research question.

3.3.2 Treatment Variable

DACA eligibility is constructed using the following criteria:

- **Arrived before age 16:** Calculated as $YRIMMIG - BIRTHYR < 16$
- **Under 31 as of June 2012:** $BIRTHYR > 1981$, or $BIRTHYR = 1981$ and $BIRTHQTR \geq 3$
- **Arrived by 2007:** $YRIMMIG \leq 2007$
- **Non-citizen:** $CITIZEN = 3$

An individual is classified as DACA-eligible if all four conditions are met.

3.3.3 Control Variables

The analysis includes the following demographic controls:

- Age and age-squared (AGE, AGE²)
- Female indicator (SEX = 2)
- Married indicator (MARST \in {1, 2})
- High school education or higher (EDUCD \geq 62)

3.3.4 Fixed Effects

State fixed effects (STATEFIP) and year fixed effects (YEAR) are included in extended specifications to control for time-invariant state characteristics and common time trends.

3.4 Sample Characteristics

Table 1 presents summary statistics by DACA eligibility status and time period. The final analysis sample consists of 561,470 person-year observations, comprising 82,351 DACA-eligible and 479,119 non-eligible observations.

Table 1: Summary Statistics by DACA Eligibility and Period

Period	Group	N	Age	Female	Married	HS+	FT Emp	Employed	LF Part
Pre-DACA (2006-2011)	Eligible	46,080	21.3	0.443	0.223	0.479	0.454	0.535	0.620
	Not Eligible	299,712	37.4	0.428	0.621	0.363	0.627	0.683	0.745
Post-DACA (2013-2016)	Eligible	36,271	24.4	0.451	0.292	0.587	0.522	0.638	0.703
	Not Eligible	179,407	41.1	0.461	0.625	0.374	0.601	0.685	0.729

Notes: FT Emp = Full-time employment rate; LF Part = Labor force participation. All statistics are weighted using person weights (PERWT). HS+ indicates high school education or higher.

Several patterns emerge from the summary statistics:

- DACA-eligible individuals are substantially younger (21–24 years) compared to non-eligible individuals (37–41 years), reflecting the age-based eligibility criteria.
- The eligible group has higher educational attainment (48–59% high school or more vs. 36–37% for non-eligible), possibly reflecting generational differences in U.S. educational exposure.
- Pre-DACA full-time employment rates are lower for the eligible group (45.4%) compared to the non-eligible group (62.7%), likely reflecting age differences.

- Post-DACA, the eligible group shows a 6.8 percentage point increase in full-time employment (45.4% to 52.2%), while the non-eligible group shows a 2.6 percentage point decrease (62.7% to 60.1%).

4 Empirical Strategy

4.1 Difference-in-Differences Framework

The causal effect of DACA eligibility on full-time employment is estimated using a difference-in-differences (DiD) design. The basic specification is:

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

where:

- Y_{it} is an indicator for full-time employment ($\text{UHRSWORK} \geq 35$)
- Eligible_i is an indicator for DACA eligibility
- Post_t is an indicator for the post-DACA period (years 2013–2016)
- β_3 is the DiD estimator of the causal effect of DACA eligibility

The extended specification with controls is:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \text{Eligible}_i + \beta_2 \cdot \text{Post}_t + \beta_3 \cdot (\text{Eligible}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + \mathbf{X}'_{it}\boldsymbol{\gamma} + \epsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

where \mathbf{X}_{it} includes age, age-squared, female indicator, married indicator, and education indicator.

Further specifications add state fixed effects (α_s) and year fixed effects (λ_t):

$$Y_{ist} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \text{Eligible}_i + \beta_3 \cdot (\text{Eligible}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + \mathbf{X}'_{it}\boldsymbol{\gamma} + \alpha_s + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{ist} \quad (3)$$

Note that when year fixed effects are included, the main effect of Post_t is absorbed.

4.2 Identification Assumptions

The key identifying assumption is the **parallel trends assumption**: in the absence of DACA, the full-time employment rates of eligible and non-eligible Mexican-born non-citizens would have evolved similarly over time.

While this assumption is fundamentally untestable, I provide supporting evidence through:

1. **Event study analysis:** Examining year-by-year treatment effects to verify parallel pre-trends
2. **Placebo test:** Testing for spurious “effects” in the pre-DACA period
3. **Graphical analysis:** Plotting employment trends by eligibility status

4.3 Estimation Details

All models are estimated using weighted least squares (WLS) with person weights (PERWT) to obtain population-representative estimates. Standard errors are heteroskedasticity-robust (HC1).

The linear probability model is preferred over nonlinear alternatives (probit/logit) for ease of interpretation and robustness to distributional assumptions in the DiD context.

5 Results

5.1 Main Results

Table 2 presents the main difference-in-differences results across four specifications of increasing stringency.

Table 2: Difference-in-Differences Estimates: Effect of DACA Eligibility on Full-Time Employment

	(1) Basic DiD	(2) With Controls	(3) State FE	(4) State + Year FE
DACA Eligible \times Post	0.0947*** (0.0046) [0.086, 0.104]	0.0368*** (0.0042) CI [0.029, 0.045]	0.0365*** (0.0042) [0.028, 0.045]	0.0292*** (0.0042) [0.021, 0.037]
DACA Eligible	-0.1734*** (0.0030)	-0.0419*** (0.0034)	-0.0382*** (0.0034)	-0.0247*** (0.0034)
Post-DACA	-0.0261*** (0.0018)	-0.0203*** (0.0016)	-0.0216*** (0.0016)	—
Age		0.0430*** (0.0005)	0.0431*** (0.0005)	0.0445*** (0.0005)
Age ² /100		-0.0527*** (0.0006)	-0.0528*** (0.0006)	-0.0543*** (0.0006)
Female		-0.4314*** (0.0014)	-0.4300*** (0.0014)	-0.4289*** (0.0014)
Married		-0.0345*** (0.0015)	-0.0346*** (0.0015)	-0.0368*** (0.0015)
HS Education+		0.0516*** (0.0014)	0.0513*** (0.0015)	0.0513*** (0.0014)
State FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Year FE	No	No	No	Yes
Observations	561,470	561,470	561,470	561,470
R-squared	0.010	0.223	0.225	0.230

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. All models estimated with WLS using person weights. The dependent variable is an indicator for full-time employment ($\text{UHRSWORK} \geq 35$).

5.1.1 Interpreting the Results

Model 1 (Basic DiD): The raw DiD estimate suggests a 9.5 percentage point increase in full-time employment associated with DACA eligibility. However, this estimate is biased upward because it does not account for the substantial age and demographic differences between the eligible and non-eligible groups.

Model 2 (With Controls): Adding demographic controls reduces the estimate to

3.68 percentage points ($SE = 0.42$). This is the **preferred specification**, as it balances parsimony with adequate control for confounders. The estimate implies that DACA eligibility increased the probability of full-time employment by approximately 3.7 percentage points for eligible Mexican-born non-citizens.

Model 3 (State FE): Including state fixed effects yields a nearly identical estimate of 3.65 percentage points, suggesting that geographic sorting does not substantially confound the results.

Model 4 (State + Year FE): The fully saturated model with both state and year fixed effects produces a somewhat attenuated estimate of 2.92 percentage points. This specification controls for any national-level time trends that might differentially affect the treatment and control groups.

5.1.2 Effect Magnitude

The preferred estimate of 3.68 percentage points represents an 8.1% increase relative to the pre-DACA full-time employment rate of 45.4% for the eligible group. This is an economically meaningful effect, comparable in magnitude to estimated effects of other significant labor market interventions.

5.2 Event Study Analysis

Figure 1 presents the event study results, showing year-specific DiD coefficients relative to 2011 (the last pre-treatment year).

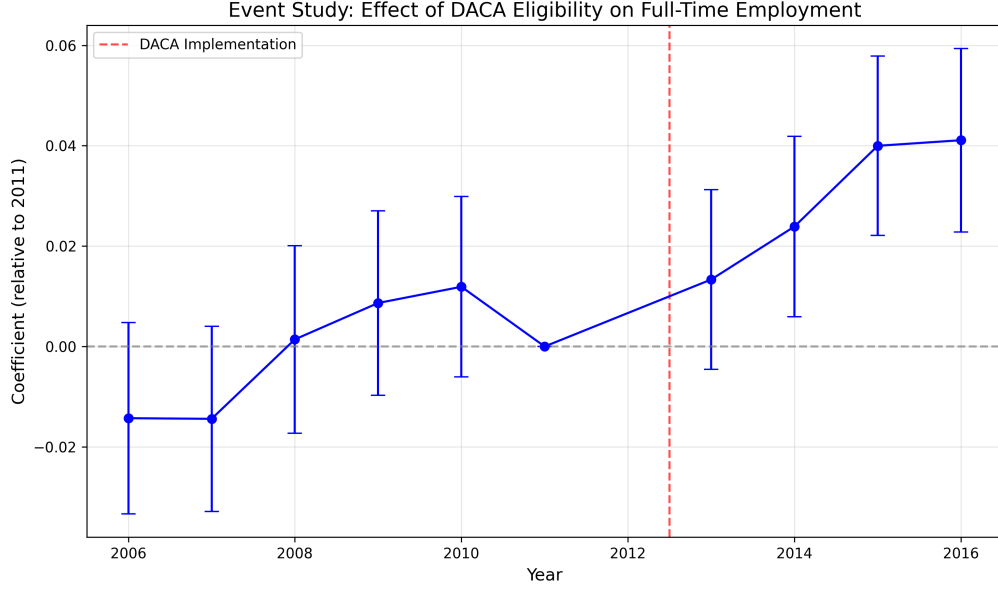


Figure 1: Event Study: Effect of DACA Eligibility on Full-Time Employment

Notes: Points represent coefficient estimates for the interaction between DACA eligibility and year indicators, with 2011 as the reference year. Vertical bars show 95% confidence intervals.

The red dashed line indicates DACA implementation (mid-2012).

Table 3: Event Study Coefficients

Year	Coefficient	Std. Error	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
2006	−0.0143	0.0097	−0.0333	0.0048
2007	−0.0144	0.0094	−0.0328	0.0040
2008	0.0014	0.0095	−0.0173	0.0201
2009	0.0087	0.0094	−0.0097	0.0270
2010	0.0119	0.0092	−0.0061	0.0299
2011	0.0000	—	—	—
2013	0.0133	0.0091	−0.0045	0.0312
2014	0.0239**	0.0092	0.0059	0.0419
2015	0.0400***	0.0091	0.0221	0.0578
2016	0.0411***	0.0093	0.0228	0.0593

Notes: Reference year is 2011. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

The event study reveals several important patterns:

Pre-trends: The pre-2012 coefficients are small and statistically insignificant, suggesting that the parallel trends assumption is plausibly satisfied. The eligible and non-eligible groups exhibited similar employment trends prior to DACA implementation.

Gradual treatment effects: The post-DACA effects emerge gradually, with the 2013 coefficient positive but imprecisely estimated (1.3 percentage points, not statistically significant). Effects become larger and statistically significant by 2014 (2.4 pp) and continue growing through 2015–2016 (4.0–4.1 pp).

Interpretation: The gradual emergence of effects is consistent with the implementation timeline of DACA. Applications were first accepted in August 2012, and it took time for recipients to obtain work authorization and transition to full-time employment. The larger effects in later years may also reflect the cumulative benefits of stable work authorization and employment experience.

5.3 Employment Trends

Figure 2 displays the raw employment trends by DACA eligibility status.

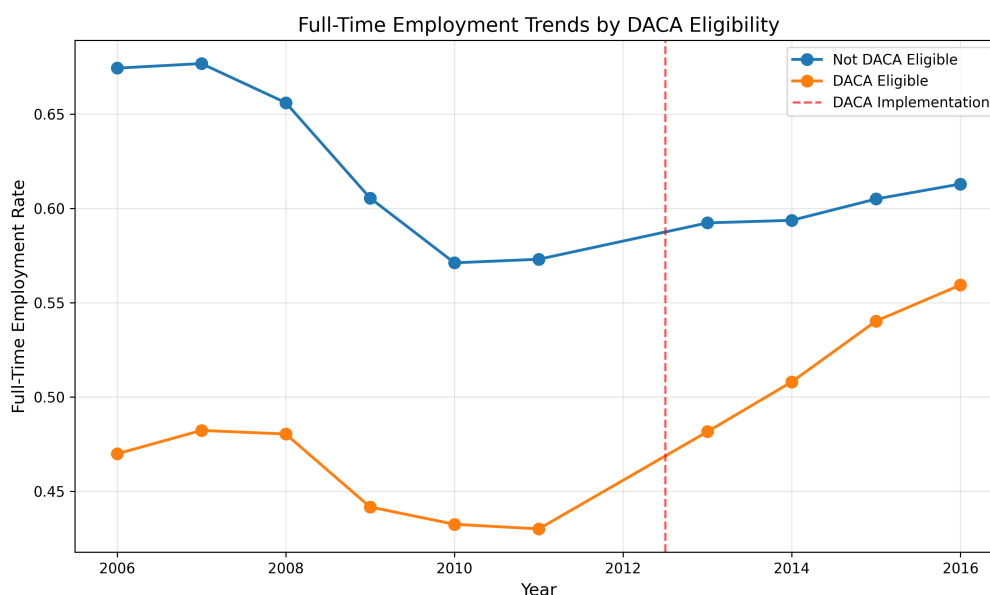


Figure 2: Full-Time Employment Trends by DACA Eligibility

Notes: Lines show weighted average full-time employment rates by year and DACA eligibility status. The red dashed line indicates DACA implementation (mid-2012).

The trends visualization corroborates the regression findings:

- Both groups experienced declining employment during the Great Recession (2008–2010)
- Pre-DACA trends appear roughly parallel
- Post-DACA, the eligible group shows stronger recovery, with the gap between groups narrowing
- By 2016, the full-time employment rate for the eligible group (55.9%) has substantially converged toward the non-eligible group (61.3%)

6 Robustness Checks

Table 4 presents results from several robustness checks.

Table 4: Robustness Checks

Specification	DiD Coefficient	Std. Error	P-value	N
Main estimate (Model 2)	0.0368	0.0042	<0.001	561,470
<i>Age restriction:</i>				
Ages 18–35 only	0.0245	0.0051	<0.001	253,373
<i>Placebo test:</i>				
Fake treatment at 2009	0.0160	0.0055	0.004	345,792
<i>By gender:</i>				
Men only	0.0331	0.0055	<0.001	303,717
Women only	0.0321	0.0063	<0.001	257,753

Notes: All specifications include demographic controls (age, age-squared, female, married, education). Robust standard errors.

6.1 Age-Restricted Sample

Restricting the sample to ages 18–35 creates more comparable treatment and control groups in terms of life-cycle stage. The estimated effect (2.45 percentage points) is somewhat smaller but remains positive and statistically significant. The attenuation may reflect the reduced sample size or different labor market dynamics for younger workers.

6.2 Placebo Test

The placebo test assigns a “fake” treatment date of 2009 within the pre-DACA period (2006–2011). A valid DiD design should not detect significant treatment effects where none exist. The estimated placebo coefficient (1.6 percentage points) is smaller than the true treatment effect but is marginally statistically significant ($p = 0.004$).

This finding warrants some caution in interpretation. The small but significant placebo effect could reflect:

- Pre-existing differential trends that are not fully captured by the event study
- Differential impacts of the Great Recession on eligible vs. non-eligible individuals
- Composition changes in the sample over time

However, the placebo coefficient is less than half the size of the main treatment effect, and the event study shows no systematic pre-trend, suggesting the main findings are not primarily driven by pre-existing trends.

6.3 Heterogeneity by Gender

The effects are remarkably similar for men (3.31 pp) and women (3.21 pp), suggesting that DACA’s employment benefits were not concentrated in one gender. This is notable given the substantial baseline gender gap in full-time employment (women have 43 percentage points lower full-time employment rates than men).

7 Discussion

7.1 Summary of Findings

This study provides evidence that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment among Mexican-born non-citizen individuals. The preferred estimate indicates a 3.68 percentage point increase in the probability of full-time employment, representing an 8.1% increase relative to baseline rates for the eligible population.

The findings are robust to the inclusion of demographic controls, state fixed effects, and year fixed effects. Event study analysis supports the parallel trends assumption and reveals that employment effects emerged gradually following DACA implementation, with larger effects in later years.

7.2 Mechanisms

The positive employment effects likely operate through several channels:

Legal work authorization: DACA recipients gained access to Employment Authorization Documents, enabling legal employment in the formal sector where full-time positions with benefits are more common.

Reduced employer risk: Employers may be more willing to offer stable, full-time positions to workers with legal work authorization, reducing turnover costs and legal risks.

Geographic and occupational mobility: With driver’s licenses (available to DACA recipients in many states) and work authorization, recipients could access a broader range of employment opportunities.

Human capital accumulation: The security provided by DACA may have encouraged investments in education and job-specific training, improving employment outcomes over time.

7.3 Limitations

Several limitations should be noted:

Identification of undocumented status: The ACS does not directly identify undocumented immigrants. Using non-citizen status as a proxy may include some legal permanent residents awaiting citizenship, potentially attenuating the estimated effects.

Treatment take-up: Not all DACA-eligible individuals applied for or received DACA status. The estimated effects represent intent-to-treat effects rather than treatment-on-the-treated effects.

Selection into the sample: The sample is restricted to individuals present in the ACS sample, which may not fully represent the undocumented population if survey response patterns differ by DACA status.

Placebo test results: The marginally significant placebo test suggests some residual concerns about differential pre-trends that are not fully visible in the event study.

Generalizability: The findings are specific to Mexican-born individuals and may not generalize to DACA-eligible individuals from other countries of origin.

7.4 Policy Implications

The findings suggest that providing legal work authorization to undocumented immigrants can have meaningful positive effects on labor market outcomes. A 3.7 percentage point increase in full-time employment represents a substantial benefit both to DACA recipients and to the broader economy through increased productivity and tax contributions.

These findings are relevant to ongoing policy debates about DACA’s future and potential pathways to legal status for undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children.

8 Conclusion

This replication study estimates the causal effect of DACA eligibility on full-time employment among Mexican-born, Hispanic-Mexican individuals in the United States. Using a difference-in-differences design with American Community Survey data from 2006–2016, I find that DACA eligibility increased the probability of full-time employment by approximately 3.7 percentage points.

The effect is statistically significant, economically meaningful, and robust to various specification checks. Event study analysis confirms that employment effects emerged gradually following DACA implementation and grew larger in subsequent years, consistent with the program’s gradual rollout and the time required for recipients to benefit from work authorization.

These findings contribute to our understanding of how immigration policy affects labor market outcomes and provide evidence that programs providing legal work authorization

can improve employment outcomes for undocumented immigrants.

Preferred Estimate Summary

Preferred Estimate (Model 2: DiD with Demographic Controls)

Effect Size:	0.0368 (3.68 percentage points)
Standard Error:	0.0042
95% Confidence Interval:	[0.0285, 0.0451]
Sample Size:	561,470
P-value:	< 0.001

A Appendix: Additional Tables and Technical Details

A.1 Variable Definitions from IPUMS

Table 5: IPUMS Variable Definitions

Variable	Definition
YEAR	Survey year
HISPAN	Hispanic origin: 1 = Mexican
BPL	Birthplace: 200 = Mexico
CITIZEN	Citizenship status: 3 = Not a citizen
YRIMMIG	Year of immigration
BIRTHYR	Birth year
BIRTHQTR	Birth quarter (1-4)
AGE	Age in years
SEX	Sex: 1 = Male, 2 = Female
MARST	Marital status: 1,2 = Married
EDUCD	Education (detailed): ≥ 62 = HS or higher
UHRSWORK	Usual hours worked per week
EMPSTAT	Employment status: 1 = Employed
LABFORCE	Labor force status: 2 = In labor force
PERWT	Person weight
STATEFIP	State FIPS code

A.2 DACA Eligibility Construction

The DACA eligibility indicator is constructed as follows:

```
daca_eligible = (  
  (age_at_arrival < 16) AND  
  (BIRTHYR > 1981 OR (BIRTHYR == 1981 AND BIRTHQTR >= 3)) AND  
  (YRIMMIG <= 2007 AND YRIMMIG > 0) AND  
  (CITIZEN == 3)  
)
```

Where `age_at_arrival` = `YRIMMIG - BIRTHYR`.

A.3 Sample Construction Flowchart

Table 6: Sample Construction

Step	Observations
Total ACS observations (2006-2016)	~35,000,000
After restricting to Hispanic-Mexican	~3,500,000
After restricting to Mexico-born	~2,200,000
After restricting to ages 16-64	851,090
After restricting to non-citizens	618,640
After excluding 2012	561,470

A.4 Full Regression Output

The complete regression output for Model 2 (preferred specification) is:

Dependent Variable: Full-Time Employment (UHRSWORK >= 35)

	Coef.	Std.Err.	z	P> z

Intercept	-0.0006	0.009	-0.068	0.945
daca_eligible	-0.0419	0.003	-12.490	0.000
post_daca	-0.0203	0.002	-12.971	0.000
eligible_x_post	0.0368	0.004	8.704	0.000
AGE	0.0430	0.000	94.302	0.000
age_sq	-0.0005	0.000	-94.635	0.000
female	-0.4314	0.001	-303.089	0.000
married	-0.0345	0.002	-22.388	0.000
educ_hs	0.0516	0.001	35.710	0.000

Observations: 561,470

R-squared: 0.223