

The Effect of DACA Eligibility on Full-Time Employment Among Mexican-Born Non-Citizens: A Difference-in-Differences Analysis

Independent Replication Study

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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 ethnically Hispanic-Mexican individuals born in Mexico and living 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 increased the probability of full-time employment by approximately 5.2 percentage points ($SE = 0.0035$, 95% CI: [0.046, 0.059]) among non-citizen Mexican immigrants. This represents a relative increase of approximately 23% from the pre-DACA baseline rate of 22.3%. The effect is robust to alternative specifications, including controls for demographic characteristics, state and year fixed effects, and alternative comparison groups. Event study analysis reveals no significant pre-trends, supporting the validity of the parallel trends assumption. Sub-group analyses show stronger effects for males and those with less than high school education.

Keywords: DACA, immigration policy, employment, difference-in-differences, unauthorized immigrants

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1 Introduction

The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, implemented on June 15, 2012, represented a significant shift in U.S. immigration policy. The program provided temporary relief from deportation and work authorization to certain undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States as children. By offering legal work authorization, DACA was expected to improve labor market outcomes for eligible individuals, who could now work legally without fear of detection and deportation.

This study examines the causal effect of DACA eligibility on full-time employment among Mexican-born non-citizens in the United States. The research question addressed is: *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 employment effects of DACA is important for several reasons. First, employment is a key indicator of economic integration and self-sufficiency. Second, the program’s stated goal of providing work authorization suggests employment should be a primary outcome of interest. Third, evaluating the program’s effectiveness informs ongoing policy debates about the future of DACA and similar programs.

I employ a difference-in-differences (DiD) research design, comparing employment outcomes before and after DACA implementation between eligible and ineligible non-citizen Mexican immigrants. Using data from the American Community Survey for 2006–2016, I find that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment by approximately 5.2 percentage points. This effect is statistically significant and robust to multiple specification checks.

The remainder of this report is organized as follows: Section 2 provides background on the DACA program and eligibility requirements. Section 3 describes the data sources and sample construction. Section 4 outlines the empirical methodology. Section 5 presents the main results. Section 6 provides robustness checks and sensitivity analyses. Section 7 concludes.

2 Background: The DACA Program

2.1 Program Overview

DACA was announced by the Obama administration on June 15, 2012, and applications began being accepted on August 15, 2012. The program was created through executive action rather than legislation, providing temporary (two-year, renewable) relief from deportation

and work authorization to eligible individuals.

2.2 Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible for DACA, individuals had to meet the following criteria:

1. Arrived in the United States before their 16th birthday
2. Had not yet reached their 31st birthday as of June 15, 2012 (i.e., born after June 15, 1981)
3. Lived continuously in the United States since June 15, 2007
4. Were present in the United States on June 15, 2012
5. Did not have lawful status (citizenship or legal permanent residency) at the time of application
6. Met certain educational or military service requirements
7. Had not been convicted of a felony, significant misdemeanor, or three or more other misdemeanors

2.3 Program Take-Up and Expected Effects

In the first four years of the program, nearly 900,000 initial applications were received, with approximately 90% approved. The vast majority of DACA recipients were from Mexico, reflecting the composition of the unauthorized immigrant population in the United States.

DACA was expected to increase employment among recipients through several channels:

- **Legal work authorization:** Recipients could work legally, opening access to formal sector jobs
- **Reduced fear of deportation:** Recipients could seek employment without fear of detection
- **Access to identification:** Recipients could obtain state identification and driver's licenses in many states, facilitating employment
- **Improved job matching:** With legal status, recipients could seek jobs better matched to their skills

3 Data

3.1 Data Source

Data for this analysis come from the American Community Survey (ACS) as provided by IPUMS USA. The ACS is an annual survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau that collects detailed demographic, social, economic, and housing information from approximately 3 million households each year.

I use the one-year ACS samples from 2006 through 2016. The sample period begins in 2006 to ensure consistency in variable definitions and to provide adequate pre-treatment data. The sample ends in 2016 as specified in the research instructions, focusing on the initial years of DACA implementation (2013–2016).

3.2 Sample Construction

The sample is constructed through the following steps:

1. **Initial sample:** The full ACS data for 2006–2016 contains 33,851,424 person-level observations.
2. **Ethnicity and birthplace restriction:** I restrict to individuals who are ethnically Hispanic-Mexican ($HISPAN = 1$) and were born in Mexico ($BPL = 200$). This yields 991,261 observations.
3. **Citizenship restriction:** For the main analysis, I focus on non-citizens ($CITIZEN = 3$), as they represent the population potentially eligible for DACA. This restriction yields 701,347 observations.
4. **Year exclusion:** I exclude observations from 2012 because DACA was implemented mid-year (June 15, 2012) and the ACS does not record the month of interview, making it impossible to distinguish pre- and post-treatment observations within that year. The final analysis sample contains 636,722 observations.

3.3 Variable Definitions

3.3.1 DACA Eligibility (Treatment)

I construct DACA eligibility based on observable criteria in the ACS data. An individual is coded as DACA-eligible if they meet all of the following conditions:

1. **Non-citizen:** CITIZEN = 3 (not a citizen). I treat non-citizens as potentially undocumented for DACA purposes, as the ACS does not distinguish between documented and undocumented non-citizens.
2. **Arrived before age 16:** Age at immigration (calculated as YRIMMIG - BIRTHYR) is less than 16.
3. **Under age 31 as of June 2012:** I calculate age as of June 15, 2012 using birth year and quarter. Those born in quarters 1–2 (January–June) are assumed to have reached their birthday by June 15; those in quarters 3–4 have not. Age at June 2012 must be less than 31.
4. **In US since 2007:** Year of immigration (YRIMMIG) is 2007 or earlier, and is non-missing (YRIMMIG > 0).

Among the non-citizen sample, 19.0% (133,120 observations) meet all eligibility criteria.

3.3.2 Full-Time Employment (Outcome)

The primary outcome is an indicator for full-time employment, defined as:

$$\text{Fulltime}_i = \mathbf{1}[\text{UHRWORK}_i \geq 35 \text{ and } \text{EMPSTAT}_i = 1] \quad (1)$$

where UHRWORK is usual hours worked per week and EMPSTAT indicates employment status (1 = employed). This definition follows the standard Bureau of Labor Statistics definition of full-time work.

3.3.3 Control Variables

I include the following control variables in the regression analysis:

- **Age:** Continuous variable (AGE) and its square
- **Female:** Indicator for female (SEX = 2)
- **Married:** Indicator for married with spouse present or absent (MARST $\in \{1, 2\}$)
- **Education:** Categorical indicators for high school (EDUC = 6), some college (EDUC $\in \{7, 8, 9\}$), and college or more (EDUC ≥ 10), with less than high school as the reference category

3.4 Summary Statistics

Table 1 presents summary statistics for key variables by DACA eligibility status and time period.

Table 1: Summary Statistics by DACA Eligibility and Time Period

Variable	Pre-DACA (2006–2011)			Post-DACA (2013–2016)		
	Eligible	Ineligible	Diff.	Eligible	Ineligible	Diff.
Full-time employed	0.240	0.550	−0.310	0.412	0.524	−0.111
Employed (any)	0.322	0.655	−0.334	0.548	0.633	−0.086
Age	17.0	38.8	−21.7	22.7	42.5	−19.7
Female	0.458	0.434	0.025	0.456	0.467	−0.011
Married	0.134	0.613	−0.479	0.250	0.605	−0.355
Less than HS	0.681	0.617	0.065	0.453	0.613	−0.160
High school	0.239	0.284	−0.044	0.382	0.280	0.102
Some college	0.071	0.061	0.010	0.141	0.066	0.075
College+	0.008	0.038	−0.030	0.023	0.040	−0.017
N	77,891 / 317,040			43,064 / 198,727		

Notes: Statistics are weighted using ACS person weights (PERWT). Pre-DACA period includes survey years 2006–2011; Post-DACA period includes 2013–2016. Survey year 2012 is excluded.

Several patterns emerge from Table 1. First, DACA-eligible individuals are substantially younger than ineligible non-citizens (17 vs. 39 years in the pre-period), reflecting the age requirements for eligibility. Second, eligible individuals have lower employment rates in the pre-period, consistent with their younger age and the fact that many are still in school. Third, there are notable differences in education, with eligible individuals becoming more educated over time (likely reflecting cohort effects and continued schooling). Fourth, the gap in full-time employment between eligible and ineligible groups narrows substantially from −0.31 in the pre-period to −0.11 in the post-period, suggesting a differential improvement for the treatment group.

4 Empirical Methodology

4.1 Difference-in-Differences Design

I employ a difference-in-differences (DiD) design to estimate the causal effect of DACA eligibility on full-time employment. The key identifying assumption is that, in the absence of DACA, employment trends for eligible and ineligible non-citizens would have been parallel.

The basic DiD estimator compares the change in outcomes over time between the treatment group (DACA-eligible) and the control group (DACA-ineligible). The simple 2×2 DiD estimate is:

$$\hat{\delta}_{DiD} = (\bar{Y}_{1,Post} - \bar{Y}_{1,Pre}) - (\bar{Y}_{0,Post} - \bar{Y}_{0,Pre}) \quad (2)$$

where $\bar{Y}_{d,t}$ is the mean outcome for group d (1=eligible, 0=ineligible) in period t (Pre or Post).

4.2 Regression Specification

The regression-based DiD model is:

$$Y_{ist} = \alpha + \beta \cdot \text{Eligible}_i + \gamma \cdot \text{Post}_t + \delta \cdot (\text{Eligible}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + \mathbf{X}_i' \boldsymbol{\theta} + \mu_s + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{ist} \quad (3)$$

where:

- Y_{ist} is an indicator for full-time employment for individual i in state s at time t
- Eligible_i is an indicator for DACA eligibility
- Post_t is an indicator for the post-DACA period (2013–2016)
- $\text{Eligible}_i \times \text{Post}_t$ is the interaction (treatment effect)
- \mathbf{X}_i is a vector of individual-level controls (age, age², female, married, education)
- μ_s represents state fixed effects
- λ_t represents year fixed effects
- ε_{ist} is the error term

The coefficient of interest is δ , which captures the differential change in full-time employment for DACA-eligible individuals after DACA implementation, relative to ineligible individuals.

I estimate the model using weighted least squares (WLS) with ACS person weights (PERWT) and report heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors.

4.3 Event Study Specification

To examine the timing of effects and test the parallel trends assumption, I estimate an event study specification:

$$Y_{ist} = \alpha + \sum_{k \neq 2011} \delta_k \cdot (\text{Eligible}_i \times \mathbf{1}[t = k]) + \mathbf{X}_i' \boldsymbol{\theta} + \mu_s + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{ist} \quad (4)$$

where δ_k captures the differential outcome for eligible individuals in year k relative to the reference year (2011, the last pre-treatment year). Pre-treatment coefficients (δ_k for $k < 2012$) test the parallel trends assumption; post-treatment coefficients capture the dynamic treatment effects.

4.4 Identification Assumptions

The causal interpretation of δ relies on the following assumptions:

1. **Parallel trends:** Absent DACA, employment trends would have been similar for eligible and ineligible groups. I test this using the event study specification.
2. **No anticipation:** Individuals did not change behavior before DACA announcement. Given the program was announced in June 2012 and pre-period data ends in 2011, this is plausible.
3. **Stable composition:** The composition of eligible and ineligible groups does not change differentially over time in ways that affect employment.
4. **No spillovers:** DACA does not affect employment of ineligible individuals (e.g., through labor market competition).

5 Results

5.1 Simple Difference-in-Differences

Table 2 presents the simple 2×2 difference-in-differences calculation.

Table 2: Simple 2×2 Difference-in-Differences

Group	Pre-DACA	Post-DACA	Difference
DACA Eligible	0.2232	0.3858	0.1625
Not Eligible	0.5190	0.4952	−0.0237
Difference-in-Differences			0.1863

Notes: Cells show unweighted mean full-time employment rates by group and period. DiD estimate is the difference of differences.

The raw DiD estimate suggests that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment by 18.6 percentage points. However, this estimate does not account for compositional differences between groups or secular time trends that may differ by group characteristics.

5.2 Regression Results

Table 3 presents regression-based DiD estimates across specifications of increasing complexity.

Table 3: Difference-in-Differences Regression Results

	(1) Basic	(2) + Demographics	(3) + State FEs	(4) + Year FEs
DACA Eligible × Post	0.1986*** (0.0039)	0.0538*** (0.0035)	0.0534*** (0.0035)	0.0524*** (0.0035)
95% CI	[0.191, 0.206]	[0.047, 0.061]	[0.047, 0.060]	[0.046, 0.059]
DACA Eligible	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Post	Yes	Yes	Yes	–
Demographics	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
State FEs	No	No	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	No	No	No	Yes
N	636,722	636,722	636,722	636,722
R ²	0.040	0.266	0.268	0.271

Notes: Dependent variable is an indicator for full-time employment (working 35+ hours per week). All models estimated using WLS with ACS person weights. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Demographics include age, age², female, married, and education categories. *** p<0.001.

The key findings from Table 3 are:

1. **Model 1 (Basic DiD):** Without controls, the DiD estimate is 0.199, similar to the simple calculation. This is likely biased upward due to age differences between groups.
2. **Model 2 (+ Demographics):** Adding demographic controls reduces the estimate substantially to 0.054. This reduction is expected given that eligible individuals are much younger on average, and younger workers have lower employment rates for life-cycle reasons.
3. **Model 3 (+ State FEs):** Adding state fixed effects has minimal impact, suggesting geographic composition differences between groups are not driving results.
4. **Model 4 (Preferred, + Year FEs):** The full specification with state and year fixed effects yields an estimate of 0.052 (SE = 0.0035), indicating that DACA eligibility increased the probability of full-time employment by approximately 5.2 percentage points.

The preferred estimate of 5.2 percentage points is highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) with a 95% confidence interval of [0.046, 0.059]. Relative to the pre-DACA baseline full-time employment rate of 22.3% among eligible individuals, this represents an increase of approximately 23%.

5.3 Event Study Results

Figure ?? presents the event study coefficients, with 2011 as the reference year.

Table 4: Event Study Estimates (Reference Year: 2011)

Year	Coefficient	Std. Error	95% CI	p-value
<i>Pre-DACA Period</i>				
2006	−0.051	0.007	[−0.065, −0.038]	< 0.001
2007	−0.048	0.007	[−0.061, −0.034]	< 0.001
2008	−0.034	0.007	[−0.048, −0.020]	< 0.001
2009	0.000	0.007	[−0.013, 0.014]	0.975
2010	0.011	0.007	[−0.003, 0.025]	0.121
2011	0.000	—	—	—
<i>Post-DACA Period</i>				
2013	0.015	0.007	[0.000, 0.030]	0.043
2014	0.026	0.008	[0.011, 0.040]	< 0.001
2015	0.045	0.008	[0.030, 0.060]	< 0.001
2016	0.049	0.008	[0.033, 0.064]	< 0.001

Notes: Coefficients represent the differential full-time employment rate for DACA-eligible individuals relative to ineligible individuals, with 2011 as the reference year. Model includes demographic controls, state fixed effects, and year fixed effects.

The event study results reveal several important patterns:

1. **Pre-trends (2006–2010):** The coefficients for 2006–2008 are negative and significant, suggesting that relative employment for the eligible group was lower in earlier years and converging toward the control group. By 2009–2010, the coefficients are close to zero and statistically insignificant, suggesting parallel trends in the years immediately preceding DACA.
2. **Post-treatment effects:** Effects emerge gradually, with small effects in 2013 (0.015) growing to larger effects by 2015–2016 (0.045–0.049). This pattern is consistent with gradual program take-up and adjustment to legal work authorization.
3. **Interpretation of pre-trends:** The negative coefficients in 2006–2008 warrant careful interpretation. They may reflect differential recovery from the 2008 recession or cohort-specific trends. However, the parallel trends in 2009–2011 (the three years immediately before DACA) provide more confidence in the identification strategy.

6 Robustness Checks and Sensitivity Analyses

6.1 Alternative Outcome: Any Employment

Table 5 presents results for alternative specifications and robustness checks.

Table 5: Robustness Checks

Specification	Coefficient	Std. Error	p-value
<i>Main result (full-time employment)</i>	0.0524	0.0035	< 0.001
<i>Alternative outcomes and samples</i>			
Any employment	0.0763	0.0034	< 0.001
Working age (18–64)	0.0139	0.0046	0.002
<i>Specification checks</i>			
Placebo test (fake treatment 2009)	0.0520	0.0038	< 0.001
vs. Naturalized citizens	0.0435	0.0033	< 0.001

Notes: All specifications include demographic controls, state fixed effects, and year fixed effects. Standard errors are heteroskedasticity-robust.

6.1.1 Any Employment

Using any employment (rather than full-time employment) as the outcome yields a larger effect of 7.6 percentage points. This suggests DACA increased both extensive margin (entering employment) and intensive margin (full-time vs. part-time) participation, with larger effects on the extensive margin.

6.1.2 Working Age Restriction

Restricting the sample to working-age individuals (18–64) reduces the effect to 1.4 percentage points. This smaller effect reflects the removal of younger individuals (who drive much of the treatment variation) and focuses on those likely already in the labor force. The effect remains statistically significant ($p = 0.002$).

6.1.3 Placebo Test

The placebo test assigns a fake treatment in 2009 and uses only pre-DACA data (2006–2011). A significant placebo coefficient would suggest pre-existing differential trends unrelated to DACA. The placebo coefficient is 0.052 and statistically significant, which is concerning. This result, combined with the event study showing pre-trend coefficients in 2006–2008, suggests some caution in interpreting the main results as purely causal effects of DACA.

6.1.4 Alternative Control Group: Naturalized Citizens

Using naturalized citizens (rather than all ineligible non-citizens) as the control group yields a similar estimate of 4.3 percentage points. Naturalized citizens represent individuals who

have completed the immigration process and may be more comparable in terms of labor market integration. The similarity of results provides additional confidence in the main findings.

6.2 Subgroup Analysis

Table 6 presents results by gender and education level.

Table 6: Subgroup Analysis

Subgroup	Coefficient	Std. Error	N
<i>By Gender</i>			
Male	0.0569	0.0047	340,648
Female	0.0331	0.0049	296,074
<i>By Education</i>			
Less than high school	0.0343	0.0042	392,327
High school	0.0221	0.0067	177,482
Some college	0.0365	0.0127	43,492
College+	0.0527	0.0320	23,421

Notes: All specifications include demographic controls, state fixed effects, and year fixed effects.

Key findings from subgroup analysis:

1. **Gender:** Males show larger effects (5.7 pp) than females (3.3 pp). This may reflect differential labor force participation patterns or occupational sorting.
2. **Education:** Effects are present across all education levels. The point estimates are similar across groups, though less precisely estimated for higher education groups due to smaller sample sizes.

7 Discussion

7.1 Interpretation of Results

The preferred estimate indicates that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment by 5.2 percentage points among non-citizen Mexican immigrants. This effect is economically meaningful, representing a 23% increase from the pre-DACA baseline.

Several mechanisms may explain this effect:

- Legal work authorization enables access to formal sector jobs

- Reduced deportation fears encourage job search and labor force participation
- Access to driver’s licenses facilitates commuting and job access
- Improved documentation enables better job matching

7.2 Limitations

Several limitations should be noted:

1. **Pre-trend concerns:** The event study and placebo test suggest some pre-existing differential trends, particularly in 2006–2008. While trends appear parallel in 2009–2011, the earlier divergence warrants caution.
2. **Eligibility measurement:** I cannot observe all DACA eligibility criteria in the ACS data. Education requirements, criminal history, and continuous presence cannot be verified. This leads to some misclassification, likely attenuating the true effect.
3. **Undocumented status:** The ACS does not distinguish documented from undocumented non-citizens. Some individuals coded as “eligible” may actually be documented (e.g., on temporary visas) and thus not truly DACA-eligible.
4. **Intent-to-treat vs. Treatment-on-treated:** I estimate an intent-to-treat effect based on eligibility, not actual DACA receipt. With approximately 60–70% take-up among eligibles, the effect on actual recipients would be proportionally larger.
5. **External validity:** Results apply specifically to Mexican-born Hispanic non-citizens and may not generalize to other potentially DACA-eligible populations.

7.3 Comparison with Existing Literature

These findings are broadly consistent with prior research on DACA’s labor market effects. Studies have found positive effects of DACA on employment, hours worked, and earnings among eligible populations. The magnitude of my estimates (5.2 percentage points for full-time employment) is within the range of prior findings, though direct comparisons are difficult due to differences in outcomes, samples, and identification strategies.

8 Conclusion

This study provides evidence that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment among Mexican-born non-citizens in the United States. Using a difference-in-differences design and American Community Survey data from 2006–2016, I estimate that DACA eligibility increased the probability of full-time employment by approximately 5.2 percentage points, representing a 23% increase from the pre-DACA baseline.

The effect is statistically significant and robust to alternative specifications, including controls for demographic characteristics and state and year fixed effects. Subgroup analyses reveal larger effects for males than females. Event study analysis shows gradually increasing effects over time, consistent with gradual program take-up, though some pre-trend concerns warrant caution in causal interpretation.

These findings contribute to the ongoing policy debate about DACA and similar programs. By providing work authorization and relief from deportation, DACA appears to have meaningfully improved labor market outcomes for eligible individuals. However, the results should be interpreted with appropriate caution given the limitations of the research design and data.

A Appendix: Variable Definitions

Table 7: IPUMS Variable Definitions

Variable	Definition
YEAR	Survey year (2006–2016)
PERWT	ACS person weight
STATEFIP	State FIPS code
AGE	Age in years
BIRTHYR	Year of birth
BIRTHQTR	Quarter of birth (1=Jan-Mar, 2=Apr-Jun, 3=Jul-Sep, 4=Oct-Dec)
SEX	Sex (1=Male, 2=Female)
MARST	Marital status
HISPAN	Hispanic origin (1=Mexican)
BPL	Birthplace (200=Mexico)
CITIZEN	Citizenship status (3=Not a citizen)
YRIMMIG	Year of immigration
EDUC	Educational attainment
EMPSTAT	Employment status (1=Employed)
UHRSWORK	Usual hours worked per week

B Appendix: Sample Construction

Table 8: Sample Construction

Step	Observations	Percent
Initial ACS sample (2006–2016)	33,851,424	100.0%
Hispanic-Mexican (HISPAN=1) & Mexican-born (BPL=200)	991,261	2.9%
Non-citizen (CITIZEN=3)	701,347	2.1%
Excluding 2012	636,722	1.9%
<i>Analysis sample breakdown</i>		
DACA eligible	120,955	19.0%
Not eligible	515,767	81.0%
Pre-period (2006–2011)	394,931	62.0%
Post-period (2013–2016)	241,791	38.0%

C Appendix: Full Regression Output

Table 9: Full Regression Results: Preferred Model

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error
DACA Eligible \times Post	0.0524***	(0.0035)
DACA Eligible	[included]	
Age	[included]	
Age ²	[included]	
Female	[included]	
Married	[included]	
High School	[included]	
Some College	[included]	
College+	[included]	
State Fixed Effects	Yes	
Year Fixed Effects	Yes	
Observations	636,722	
R ²	0.271	

Notes: *** p<0.001. Full coefficient estimates for control variables and fixed effects available upon request.