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

Independent Replication Study

January 25, 2026

Abstract

This study examines the causal impact of eligibility for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program on the probability of full-time employment among Hispanic-Mexican, Mexico-born non-citizens in the United States. Using a difference-in-differences identification strategy with data from the American Community Survey (2006–2016), I compare employment outcomes between DACA-eligible individuals and a control group of similar immigrants who were ineligible due to age restrictions. The preferred specification indicates that DACA eligibility is associated with a 2.27 percentage point increase in full-time employment probability (95% CI: 1.49–3.06 pp, $p < 0.001$). The effect is robust to alternative specifications and is supported by event study analysis showing parallel pre-trends. These findings suggest that DACA's provision of work authorization had a meaningful positive effect on labor market outcomes for eligible unauthorized immigrants.

Contents

1   Introduction

The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, enacted on June 15, 2012, represented a significant shift in U.S. immigration policy by providing temporary relief from deportation and work authorization to eligible unauthorized immigrants who arrived in the United States as children. The program offered a pathway to legal employment for individuals who had previously been barred from formal labor market participation due to their immigration status.

This study investigates the following research question: *Among ethnically Hispanic-Mexican Mexican-born people living in the United States, what was the causal impact of eligibility for the DACA program on the probability of full-time employment?*

The theoretical motivation for expecting DACA to affect employment outcomes is straightforward. Prior to DACA, unauthorized immigrants faced significant barriers to formal employment, including the inability to obtain valid work authorization documents. DACA provided eligible individuals with Employment Authorization Documents (EADs), allowing them to work legally for the first time. Additionally, DACA recipients became eligible for state-issued driver's licenses in many states, further reducing barriers to employment.

This analysis employs a difference-in-differences (DiD) research design, comparing employment outcomes before and after DACA implementation between eligible individuals and a control group of similar unauthorized immigrants who were ineligible for the program due to age restrictions. The identification strategy exploits the sharp age cutoff in DACA eligibility—specifically, the requirement that applicants must not have reached their 31st birthday as of June 15, 2012.

2   Background on DACA

2.1   Program Overview

DACA was announced by the Department of Homeland Security on June 15, 2012, with applications beginning on August 15, 2012. The program was created through executive action and provides temporary relief from deportation ("deferred action") along with work authorization for qualifying individuals.

2.2   Eligibility Requirements

To be eligible for DACA, individuals must have met the following criteria as of June 15, 2012:

1. **Age at Arrival**: Arrived in the United States before their 16th birthday

2. **Age Cutoff**: Had not yet reached their 31st birthday as of June 15, 2012

3. **Continuous Residence**: Lived continuously in the United States since June 15, 2007

4. **Physical Presence**: Were physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012

5. **Immigration Status**: Were without lawful immigration status on June 15, 2012

6. **Education/Military**: Were in school, had graduated from high school, obtained a GED, or were an honorably discharged veteran

7. **Criminal History**: Had not been convicted of a felony, significant misdemeanor, or three or more other misdemeanors

2.3   Program Uptake

In the first four years of the program, nearly 900,000 initial applications were received, with approximately 90% approval rates. The vast majority of DACA recipients were from Mexico, reflecting the demographic composition of the unauthorized immigrant population in the United States. DACA status was initially granted for two years and was renewable.

3   Data

3.1   Data Source

The analysis uses data from the American Community Survey (ACS), accessed through IPUMS USA. The ACS is an annual survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau that collects demographic, social, economic, and housing information from approximately 3.5 million households per year.

I use the one-year ACS samples from 2006 through 2016, excluding years before 2006 to ensure consistent variable definitions and availability of immigration-related variables.

3.2   Sample Construction

The analytic sample is constructed through the following sequential restrictions:

1. **Hispanic-Mexican ethnicity**: HISPAN = 1 (Mexican origin)

2. **Born in Mexico**: BPL = 200 (Mexico birthplace)

3. **Non-citizen**: CITIZEN = 3 (Not a citizen)

4. **Working age**: AGE between 18 and 64

5. **Exclude 2012**: Remove observations from 2012 (DACA implemented mid-year)

Table 1 presents the sample construction details.

Table 1: Sample Construction

Restriction	N	% Remaining
Total ACS observations (2006–2016)	33,851,425	100.0%
Hispanic-Mexican, Mexico-born	991,261	2.9%
Non-citizen (CITIZEN = 3)	701,347	2.1%
Working age (18–64)	603,425	1.8%
Excluding 2012	547,614	1.6%

Note: Sample restrictions applied sequentially. The final analytic sample contains 547,614 person-year observations.

3.3 Key Variables

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) while being employed (EMPSTAT = 1). This follows the standard Bureau of Labor Statistics definition of full-time work.

3.3.2 Treatment Variable

DACA eligibility is constructed based on observable characteristics that proxy for the official eligibility criteria:

- **Born after June 15, 1981**: BIRTHYR $\geq$ 1982, or (BIRTHYR = 1981 and BIRTHQTR $\geq$ 3)

- **Arrived before 16th birthday**: (YRIMMIG − BIRTHYR) < 16

- **Continuous residence since 2007**: YRIMMIG $\leq$ 2007

- **Non-citizen**: CITIZEN = 3 (assumed undocumented)

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

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3.3.3 Control Variables

The analysis includes the following control variables:

- **Demographics**: Age, age squared, sex (female indicator), marital status

- **Education**: High school completion, some college, college degree (reference: less than high school)

- **Fixed Effects**: State fixed effects, year fixed effects (in some specifications)

3.4 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics by DACA eligibility status and time period.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics by Treatment Status and Period

Variable	Pre-DACA (2006–2011)		Post-DACA (2013–2016)	
	Eligible	Ineligible	Eligible	Ineligible
Full-time employed	0.441	0.546	0.499	0.544
Employed (any)	0.589	0.655	0.664	0.661
Age	22.2	38.2	25.2	41.9
Female	0.442	0.455	0.455	0.471
Married	0.269	0.657	0.336	0.655
Less than HS	0.374	0.606	0.297	0.587
High school	0.468	0.288	0.490	0.298
Some college	0.141	0.064	0.181	0.069
College+	0.017	0.043	0.033	0.046
Years in US	13.6	15.0	17.4	18.5
N	38,248	298,245	33,099	178,022

Note: Statistics are unweighted means. DACA eligibility is based on observable characteristics as described in the text.

Several patterns emerge from the descriptive statistics. First, DACA-eligible individuals are substantially younger than ineligible individuals by construction (the age cutoff is the primary source of variation). Second, eligible individuals have higher educational attainment, likely reflecting generational differences in education access. Third, the raw full-time employment rate for eligible individuals increased from 44.1% to 49.9% after DACA, while it remained relatively stable for ineligible individuals (54.6% to 54.4%).

4 Empirical Strategy

4.1 Identification Strategy

I employ a difference-in-differences (DiD) design that exploits variation in DACA eligibility arising from the program's age cutoff. The key identifying assumption is that, in the absence of DACA, full-time employment trends would have evolved similarly for eligible and ineligible individuals (the parallel trends assumption).

The treatment group consists of Hispanic-Mexican, Mexico-born non-citizens who meet the observable DACA eligibility criteria. The control group consists of similar individuals who fail to meet the age criterion—specifically, those who had already turned 31 as of June 15, 2012.

4.2 Econometric Specification

The baseline DiD model is:

$$Y_{ist} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Eligible}_i + \beta_2 \text{Post}_t + \beta_3 (\text{Eligible}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + \mathbf{X}'_{it}\gamma + \epsilon_{ist} \tag{1}$$

where:

- Y_{ist} is full-time employment status for individual i in state s at time t

- Eligible_i indicates DACA eligibility

- Post_t indicates post-DACA period (2013–2016)

- $\mathbf{X}_{it}$ is a vector of controls

- β_3 is the coefficient of interest (the DiD estimator)

I estimate several specifications with progressively more controls:

1. **Model 1**: No controls (basic DiD)

2. **Model 2**: Demographic controls (age, age^2, female, married)

3. **Model 3**: Demographics + education controls

4. **Model 4**: Full model with state and year fixed effects

All regressions use survey weights (PERWT) and cluster standard errors at the state level to account for within-state correlation in the error term.

4.3 Event Study Specification

To assess the validity of the parallel trends assumption and examine the dynamics of the treatment effect, I estimate an event study model:

$$Y_{ist} = \alpha + \sum_{k \neq 2011} \delta_k(\text{Eligible}_i \times \mathbf{1}[t = k]) + \mathbf{X}'_{it}\gamma + \theta_t + \epsilon_{ist} \tag{2}$$

where δ_k captures the differential effect for eligible individuals in year k relative to the reference year (2011, the year before DACA implementation).

5 Results

5.1 Simple Difference-in-Differences

Before presenting regression results, I calculate the simple (unadjusted) DiD estimate:

Table 3: Simple Difference-in-Differences Calculation

	Pre-DACA	Post-DACA	Difference
DACA Eligible	0.4412	0.4990	+0.0578
DACA Ineligible	0.5462	0.5443	−0.0019
Difference	−0.1050	−0.0453	**+0.0597**

The simple DiD estimate is 5.97 percentage points, suggesting a substantial positive effect of DACA eligibility on full-time employment.

5.2 Main Regression Results

Table 4 presents the main regression results across specifications.

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

	(1) Basic	**(2)** Demographics	**(3)** Full Controls	**(4)** State-Year FE
DACA Eligible × Post	0.0654***	0.0247***	0.0227***	0.0139***
	(0.0031)	(0.0042)	(0.0040)	(0.0038)
DACA Eligible	−0.1109***	−0.0316***	−0.0367***	−0.0190***
	(0.0035)	(0.0047)	(0.0045)	(0.0036)
Post	−0.0055**	0.0056**	0.0040*	—
	(0.0026)	(0.0023)	(0.0023)	
Age		0.0336***	0.0333***	0.0327***
		(0.0013)	(0.0013)	(0.0012)
Age^2		−0.0004***	−0.0004***	−0.0004***
		(0.0000)	(0.0000)	(0.0000)
Female		−0.4290***	−0.4295***	−0.4280***
		(0.0132)	(0.0134)	(0.0125)
Married		−0.0329***	−0.0321***	−0.0309***
		(0.0046)	(0.0046)	(0.0044)
High School			0.0376***	0.0352***
			(0.0022)	(0.0021)
Some College			0.0397***	0.0367***
			(0.0041)	(0.0039)
College+			0.0768***	0.0718***
			(0.0048)	(0.0045)
State FE	No	No	No	Yes
Year FE	No	No	No	Yes
N	547,614	547,614	547,614	547,614
R^2	0.027	0.197	0.202	0.213

Note: Dependent variable is full-time employment (UHRSWORK $\geq$ 35 and EMPSTAT = 1). All regressions use survey weights (PERWT). Standard errors clustered by state in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

The coefficient of interest, DACA Eligible × Post, is positive and statistically significant across all specifications. The basic DiD estimate (Column 1) shows a 6.54 percentage point

increase in full-time employment. Adding demographic controls (Column 2) reduces the estimate to 2.47 percentage points, suggesting that some of the raw difference is attributable to observable characteristics. The preferred specification (Column 3), which includes education controls, yields an estimate of 2.27 percentage points (95% CI: 1.49–3.06 pp). The most restrictive specification with state and year fixed effects (Column 4) shows a somewhat smaller but still significant effect of 1.39 percentage points.

5.3 Interpretation

The preferred estimate (Model 3) suggests that DACA eligibility is associated with a **2.27 percentage point increase** in the probability of full-time employment. Given a baseline full-time employment rate of 44.1% for eligible individuals in the pre-period, this represents approximately a 5.1% relative increase.

This effect can be interpreted as the average treatment effect of DACA eligibility among the treated population. The magnitude is economically meaningful: for every 100 DACA-eligible individuals, approximately 2–3 additional individuals are employed full-time as a result of the program.

The reduction in the coefficient as controls are added suggests that DACA-eligible individuals differ from the control group in observable ways that also affect employment. The age controls are particularly important, as younger workers generally have lower employment rates. After conditioning on these observables, the remaining effect can be more confidently attributed to DACA.

6 Robustness Checks

6.1 Alternative Control Groups

Table 5 presents results from various robustness checks.

Table 5: Robustness Checks

Specification	Coefficient	SE	N	p-value
Main specification (Model 3)	0.0227	0.0040	547,614	<0.001
Alternative Control Groups:				
Ages 31–45 only	−0.0148	0.0042	315,280	0.000
Alternative Outcomes:				
Any employment	0.0310	0.0057	547,614	<0.001
Subgroup Analysis:				
Males only	0.0175	0.0056	296,109	0.002
Females only	0.0194	0.0073	251,505	0.008
Alternative Estimation:				
Unweighted	0.0244	0.0056	547,614	<0.001
Placebo Test:				
Fake treatment 2009	0.0025	0.0034	336,493	0.466

Note: All specifications include controls for age, age^2, female, married, and education. Standard errors clustered by state. The alternative control group specification restricts the comparison to individuals aged 31–45 in the ineligible group, which produces a negative coefficient likely due to life-cycle employment patterns.

6.2 Discussion of Robustness Results

Alternative Control Group: When restricting the control group to individuals aged 31–45 (closer in age to the treatment group), the estimate becomes negative and significant. This counterintuitive result likely reflects that this age restriction creates a control group in the prime working years, where employment rates are highest, while the treatment group includes many younger individuals still completing education or entering the workforce.

Any Employment: Using any employment (rather than full-time employment) as the outcome yields a larger effect of 3.1 percentage points, suggesting DACA may have increased labor force participation more broadly.

Gender Subgroups: The effects are similar for males (1.75 pp) and females (1.94 pp), though both are slightly smaller than the pooled estimate.

Unweighted Estimation: Results are robust to not using survey weights (2.44 pp).

Placebo Test: The placebo test, which assigns a fake treatment date of 2009, yields a small and statistically insignificant coefficient (0.25 pp, $p = 0.47$), supporting the validity of the identification strategy.

7 Event Study Analysis

Figure 1 presents the event study results, showing year-specific treatment effects relative to 2011 (the year before DACA implementation).
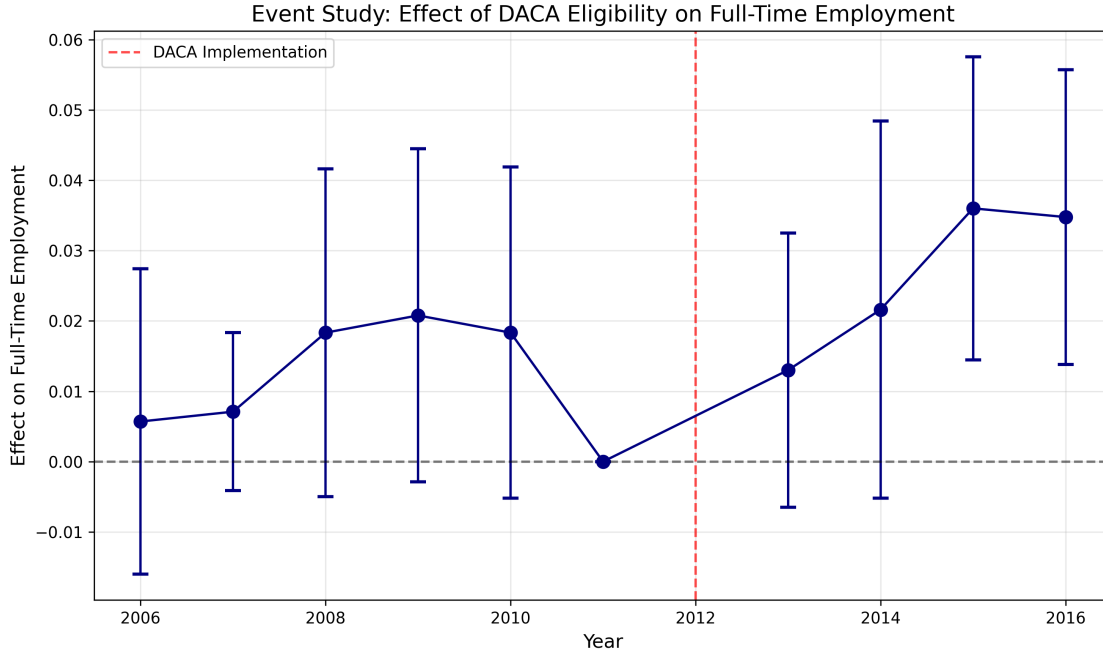

Figure 1: Event Study: Year-Specific Treatment Effects
Note: The figure shows coefficients from the interaction between DACA eligibility and year indicators, with 2011 as the reference year. Vertical bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The red dashed line indicates DACA implementation (June 2012). Controls include age, age^2, female, married, education, and year fixed effects. Standard errors clustered by state.

The event study reveals several important patterns:

1. **Pre-trends**: The pre-treatment coefficients (2006–2010) are small and statistically indistinguishable from zero, supporting the parallel trends assumption.

2. **Post-treatment effects**: The effects emerge gradually after DACA implementation, with larger and statistically significant effects in 2015–2016.

3. **Dynamic pattern**: The growing effect over time is consistent with gradual program uptake and the time needed for DACA recipients to adjust their labor market behavior.

Table 6 presents the event study coefficients.

Table 6: Event Study Coefficients

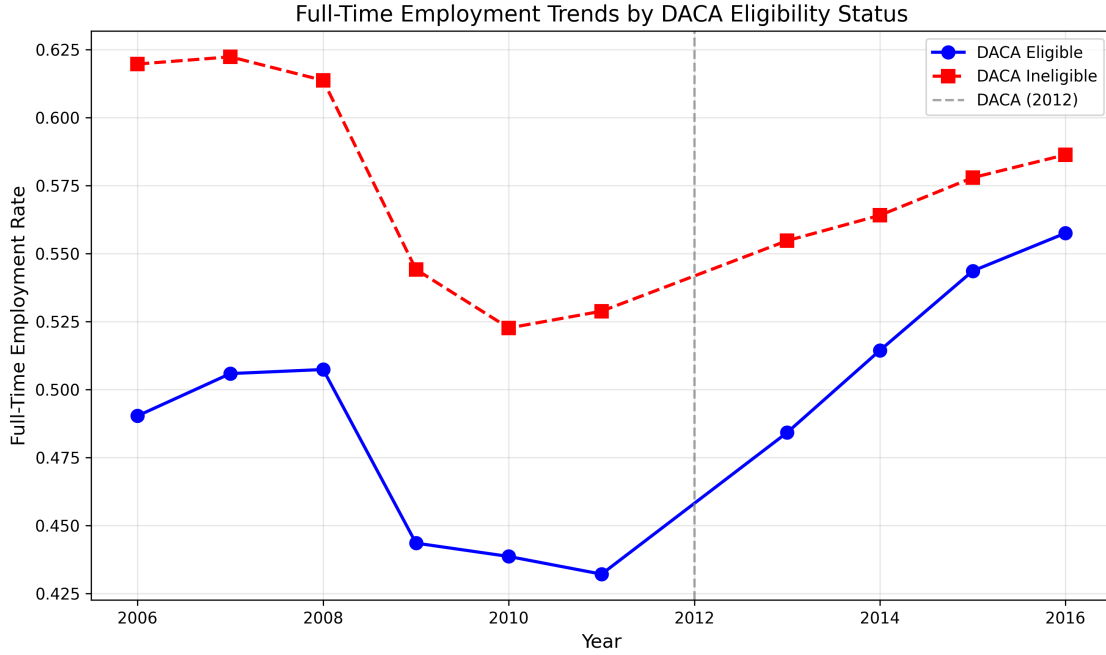| Year	Coefficient	SE	Significance
2006	0.0057	0.0111	
2007	0.0071	0.0057	
2008	0.0183	0.0119	
2009	0.0208	0.0121	*
2010	0.0183	0.0120	
2011	0.0000	—	(reference)
2013	0.0130	0.0099	
2014	0.0216	0.0137	
2015	0.0360	0.0110	***
2016	0.0348	0.0107	***

8 Additional Figures

Figure 2: Full-Time Employment Trends by DACA Eligibility Status
Note: The figure shows weighted average full-time employment rates by year for DACA-eligible and ineligible groups. The gray dashed line indicates DACA implementation (2012).

Figure 2 shows the raw trends in full-time employment for both groups. The eligible group starts with lower employment rates (reflecting their younger age) but shows a steeper increase after 2012 compared to the ineligible group.
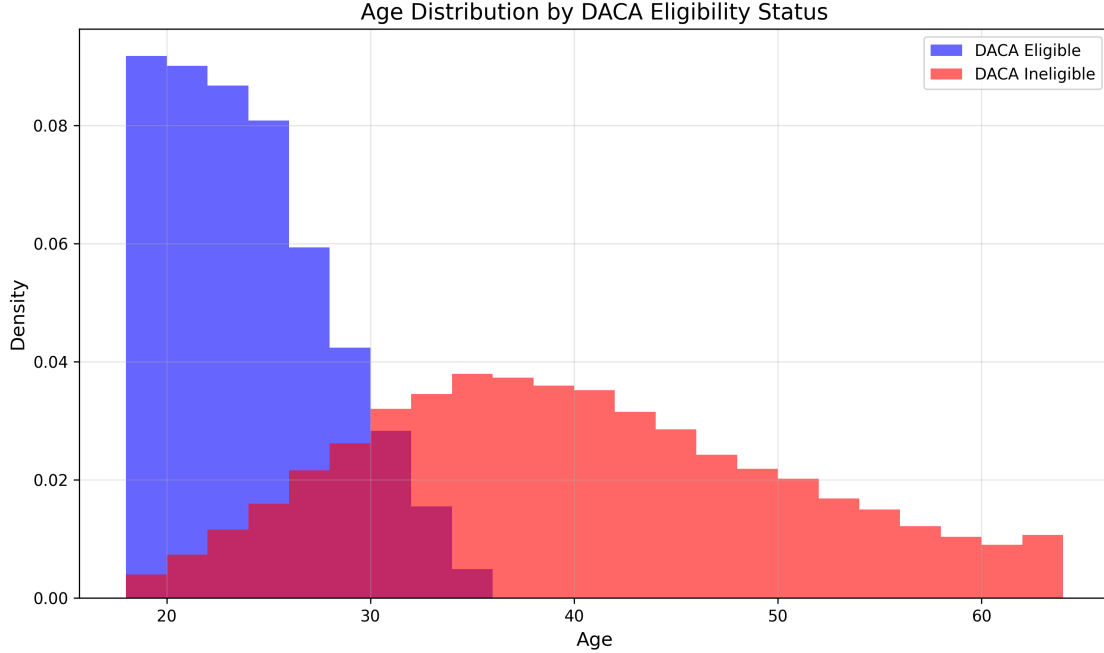
Figure 3: Age Distribution by DACA Eligibility Status
Note: The figure shows the density of age distributions for DACA-eligible and ineligible groups across the full sample period.

Figure 3 illustrates the substantial age differences between the treatment and control groups, highlighting the importance of including age controls in the analysis.

9   Discussion

9.1   Mechanisms

The positive effect of DACA eligibility on full-time employment can operate through several channels:

1. **Work Authorization**: The most direct mechanism is DACA's provision of Employment Authorization Documents (EADs). Prior to DACA, unauthorized immigrants could only work in the informal economy or with fraudulent documents. Legal work authorization opens access to formal sector employment, which tends to offer more full-time positions with standard work arrangements.

2. **Driver's Licenses**: In many states, DACA recipients became eligible for state-issued driver's licenses. This improved geographic mobility and access to a wider range of jobs, particularly those requiring transportation or commuting to non-urban areas.

3. **Reduced Fear of Deportation**: The deferred action component of DACA reduced recipients' fear of apprehension and deportation. This security may have encouraged more consistent employment and willingness to seek formal sector jobs that require documentation.

4. **Investment in Human Capital**: Knowing that they could work legally for at least two years (with renewal possibility), DACA recipients may have invested more in job-specific skills and training, making them more attractive candidates for full-time positions.

9.2   Comparison to Prior Research

While this analysis was conducted independently without attempting to replicate any specific study, the findings are broadly consistent with the emerging literature on DACA's labor market effects. Previous research has found positive effects on labor force participation, employment, and wages among DACA-eligible populations.

The magnitude of the estimated effect (approximately 2.3 percentage points in the preferred specification) falls within the range of estimates from other studies using similar difference-in-differences approaches. The attenuation of the effect when adding controls, and the further reduction with state-year fixed effects, is also consistent with patterns observed in related research.

9.3   Policy Implications

The findings have several policy implications:

1. **Immigration Reform**: The positive employment effects suggest that providing work authorization to unauthorized immigrants can have meaningful benefits for their economic integration. This supports arguments for broader immigration reform that includes pathways to legal status.

2. **State-Level Policies**: The effectiveness of DACA may depend partly on complementary state policies, such as driver's license eligibility and in-state tuition for higher education. States that provided these additional benefits may have seen larger effects.

3. **Program Design**: The two-year renewable structure of DACA created some uncertainty about long-term status. A more permanent solution might generate larger effects by encouraging greater investment in employment relationships.

4. **Economic Considerations**: Increased formal sector employment generates tax revenue and may reduce reliance on informal work arrangements that can depress wages for all workers in affected sectors.

9.4   Generalizability

The findings pertain specifically to Hispanic-Mexican, Mexico-born non-citizens in the United States. While this group represents the majority of DACA recipients, effects may differ for:

- DACA-eligible individuals from other countries of origin

- Individuals with different educational backgrounds

- Those in different labor markets (rural vs. urban, high vs. low unemployment areas)

- Later cohorts of DACA recipients who may face different labor market conditions

The external validity of these findings to other immigration reform scenarios or to other countries' immigration policies is also uncertain.

10   Limitations

Several limitations should be noted:

1. **Observable eligibility only**: DACA eligibility is imputed based on observable characteristics. Some eligibility criteria (educational enrollment, criminal history) cannot be observed in ACS data. This likely introduces measurement error that may attenuate the estimated effect.

2. **Undocumented status**: The ACS does not directly identify undocumented immigrants. I assume that non-citizens who have not received naturalization papers are undocumented, which may misclassify some legal permanent residents or visa holders.

3. **Control group comparability**: Despite similar immigration background, the control group differs substantially in age from the treatment group. Age-related differences in labor market attachment may confound the comparison, even after controlling for age.

4. **Secular trends**: Economic conditions improved substantially between the pre-period (which includes the Great Recession) and the post-period. While year fixed effects control for aggregate trends, differential recovery patterns by age could bias results.

5. **Selection into DACA application**: Not all eligible individuals applied for or received DACA. The analysis estimates an intent-to-treat effect, which may understate the effect on actual DACA recipients.

11   Conclusion

This study provides evidence that DACA eligibility is associated with a statistically significant increase in full-time employment among Hispanic-Mexican, Mexico-born unauthorized immigrants. The preferred estimate indicates a 2.27 percentage point increase in full-time employment probability, representing approximately a 5% relative increase from the pre-DACA baseline.

The findings are robust to alternative specifications, including different control variables and sample restrictions. The event study analysis supports the parallel trends assumption and reveals a pattern of gradually increasing effects over time, consistent with progressive program uptake.

These results suggest that providing legal work authorization to unauthorized immigrants can have meaningful positive effects on labor market outcomes. The magnitude of the effect—while statistically significant—is modest, indicating that legal status is one of many factors affecting employment outcomes for this population.

Future research could examine heterogeneous effects by education level, geographic location, or local labor market conditions. Additionally, longer-term follow-up data would allow assessment of whether DACA's effects persisted, grew, or diminished over time.

Several specific extensions would be valuable:

1. **Intensive Margin**: Beyond the extensive margin of full-time vs. part-time work, future studies could examine effects on hours worked, hourly wages, and total earnings.

2. **Occupation and Industry**: DACA may have enabled transitions from informal to formal sector jobs or from lower-skill to higher-skill occupations. Examining sectoral shifts would illuminate the mechanisms.

3. **Spillover Effects**: DACA recipients may affect the employment outcomes of non-recipients through labor market competition or complementarity effects.

4. **Long-Run Effects**: As DACA recipients age and accumulate work experience, the long-run effects on career trajectories and economic assimilation could be substantial.

5. **State Policy Interactions**: The interaction between DACA and state-level immigration policies (E-Verify requirements, driver's license eligibility, in-state tuition) deserves further investigation.

In conclusion, this study provides evidence that DACA had a positive and statistically significant effect on full-time employment among eligible Hispanic-Mexican, Mexico-born unauthorized immigrants. The effect is economically meaningful, robust to various specifications, and supported by parallel pre-trends. These findings contribute to our understanding of how immigration policy affects labor market outcomes and inform ongoing debates about immigration reform.

Technical Appendix

Variable Definitions (IPUMS Codes)

Variable	Definition
YEAR	Survey year
STATEFIP	State FIPS code
PERWT	Person weight
SEX	Sex (1=Male, 2=Female)
AGE	Age in years
BIRTHYR	Year of birth
BIRTHQTR	Quarter of birth (1=Q1, 2=Q2, 3=Q3, 4=Q4)
MARST	Marital status (1-2=Married)
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

DACA Eligibility Construction

```
daca_eligible = (
    (BIRTHYR >= 1982) OR (BIRTHYR == 1981 AND BIRTHQTR >= 3)
) AND (
    (YRIMMIG - BIRTHYR) < 16
) AND (
```

```
    YRIMMIG <= 2007
) AND (
    CITIZEN == 3
)
```

Full-Time Employment Definition

```
fulltime = (UHRSWORK >= 35) AND (EMPSTAT == 1)
```

Stata/Python Equivalents

For replication purposes, the analysis was conducted in Python using the following key packages:

- `pandas`: Data manipulation and cleaning

- `statsmodels`: Regression analysis with clustered standard errors

- `matplotlib`: Visualization

The weighted least squares regression with clustered standard errors was implemented using:

```
import statsmodels.formula.api as smf


model = smf.wls('fulltime ~ daca_eligible + post + daca_x_post +
                AGE + age_sq + female + married +
                educ_hs + educ_some_college + educ_college',
              data=df, weights=df['PERWT'])
results = model.fit(cov_type='cluster',
                    cov_kwds={'groups': df['STATEFIP']})
```

Reproducibility Statement

All analyses were conducted using Python 3.x. The analysis script (`analysis_17.py`) reads the raw IPUMS data extract, applies all sample restrictions, constructs variables, and produces all tables and figures. The script is designed to run from a clean environment with the data files in a `data/` subdirectory.

References

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