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

Replication Study

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Abstract

This study investigates the causal effect of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program on full-time employment among Hispanic-Mexican Mexican-born individuals in the United States. Using a difference-in-differences design that exploits the age eligibility cutoff at 31 years as of June 15, 2012, I compare labor market outcomes between individuals aged 26–30 (eligible) and those aged 31–35 (ineligible due to age) before and after DACA implementation. Drawing on American Community Survey data from 2008–2011 and 2013–2016, the analysis finds that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment by approximately 5.1 percentage points (SE = 0.015, p ¡ 0.001). This effect is robust to the inclusion of demographic controls, year and state fixed effects, and alternative standard error specifications. The findings suggest that legal work authorization provided by DACA had meaningful positive effects on employment outcomes for eligible individuals.

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

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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 granted temporary relief from deportation and provided work authorization to undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States as children. Since its inception, DACA has affected hundreds of thousands of individuals, primarily from Mexico and Central America.

This study examines a fundamental question: Did DACA eligibility increase full-time employment among the eligible population? The program's provision of legal work authorization creates a clear theoretical mechanism through which employment should increase. Prior to DACA, eligible individuals faced significant barriers to formal employment, including the inability to legally work, obtain driver's licenses in many states, or access certain educational opportunities. By removing these barriers, DACA may have enabled recipients to transition into full-time employment.

The research design exploits a key feature of DACA eligibility: applicants must not have reached their 31st birthday as of June 15, 2012. This age cutoff creates a natural comparison group of individuals who would have been eligible for DACA but for their age. By comparing changes in employment outcomes between those just below and just above this threshold, I can estimate the causal effect of DACA eligibility on full-time employment using a difference-in-differences framework.

The analysis focuses specifically on ethnically Hispanic-Mexican Mexican-born individuals, who comprise the largest group of DACA-eligible individuals. Using data from the American Community Survey (ACS) from 2008–2016 (excluding 2012), I estimate that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment by approximately 5.1 percentage points. This effect is statistically significant and robust across multiple specifications.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 provides background on the DACA program and its eligibility requirements. Section 3 describes the data and sample

construction. Section 4 details the empirical methodology. Section 5 presents the main results. Section 6 provides robustness checks and sensitivity analyses. Section 7 discusses the findings and their implications. Section 8 concludes.

2 Background: The DACA Program

2.1 Program Overview

The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was announced by the Obama administration on June 15, 2012, and began accepting applications on August 15, 2012. The program provides temporary relief from deportation and grants work authorization to qualifying undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children.

2.2 Eligibility Requirements

To qualify for DACA, applicants must meet several criteria:

1. Arrived in the United States before their 16th birthday
2. Had not reached their 31st birthday as of June 15, 2012
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 immigration status (citizenship or legal residency) on that date
6. Were currently enrolled in school, had graduated high school, obtained a GED, or were honorably discharged veterans
7. Had not been convicted of certain crimes

2.3 Program Benefits and Potential Mechanisms

Approved DACA recipients receive a two-year renewable period of deferred action (protection from deportation) and employment authorization. The work authorization document

(Employment Authorization Document, or EAD) allows recipients to work legally in the United States. Additionally, in many states, DACA recipients became eligible to obtain driver's licenses and in-state tuition at public universities.

These benefits create multiple potential mechanisms through which DACA could increase employment:

- **Legal work authorization**: Recipients can now work legally, expanding their employment options
- **Driver's licenses**: Access to transportation can increase job opportunities
- **Reduced fear of deportation**: Recipients may be more willing to seek formal employment
- **Educational opportunities**: Access to in-state tuition may increase human capital

2.4 Program Uptake

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

3 Data

3.1 Data Source

The analysis uses data 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 3.5 million households each year.

The sample consists of ACS data from 2008 through 2016, with 2012 excluded because it cannot be determined whether observations from 2012 occur before or after DACA im-

plementation. The pre-treatment period covers 2008–2011, and the post-treatment period covers 2013–2016.

3.2 Sample Construction

The analytic sample is restricted to ethnically Hispanic-Mexican Mexican-born individuals. The data provider constructed an eligibility indicator (ELIGIBLE) equal to 1 for individuals aged 26–30 as of June 2012 (the treatment group) and 0 for those aged 31–35 as of June 2012 (the comparison group). Individuals outside these age ranges are excluded from the sample.

The key outcome variable is full-time employment (FT), defined as usually working 35 hours or more per week. This binary variable equals 1 for individuals in full-time work and 0 otherwise. Importantly, individuals not in the labor force are included in the sample with FT = 0.

3.3 Sample Characteristics

Table 1 presents the sample distribution across treatment status and time periods.

Table 1: Sample Distribution by Treatment Status and Time Period

	Pre-Period (2008–2011)	Post-Period (2013–2016)	Total
Control Group (Ages 31–35)	3,294	2,706	6,000
Treatment Group (Ages 26–30)	6,233	5,149	11,382
Total	9,527	7,855	17,382

Note: Sample consists of Hispanic-Mexican Mexican-born individuals from the American Community Survey, 2008–2016 (excluding 2012). Ages refer to age as of June 15, 2012.

3.4 Key Variables

3.4.1 Outcome Variable

- **FT**: Full-time employment indicator (1 = usually works 35+ hours/week, 0 = otherwise)

3.4.2 Treatment Variables

- **ELIGIBLE**: Treatment group indicator (1 = ages 26–30, 0 = ages 31–35 as of June 2012)
- **AFTER**: Post-treatment period indicator (1 = 2013–2016, 0 = 2008–2011)

3.4.3 Demographic Covariates

- **SEX**: Sex (1 = male, 2 = female)
- **AGE**: Current age
- **MARST**: Marital status
- **NCHILD**: Number of own children in household
- **FAMSIZE**: Family size
- **EDUC_RECODE**: Education level (Less than High School, High School Degree, Some College, Two-Year Degree, BA+)

3.4.4 Geographic Variables

- **STATEFIP**: State FIPS code
- **YEAR**: Survey year

3.5 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the key variables by treatment status.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics by Treatment Status

	Control Group		Treatment Group	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Full-time Employment	0.656	0.475	0.643	0.479
Female	0.483	0.500	0.520	0.500
Age	37.18	3.44	31.87	3.06
Married	0.471	0.499	0.433	0.496
Has Children	0.628	0.483	0.601	0.490
Education Distribution (%)				
Less than High School	0.1		0.0	
High School Degree	70.1		72.2	
Some College	17.5		16.2	
Two-Year Degree	6.4		5.4	
BA+	5.9		6.2	
Observations	6,000		11,382	

Note: Statistics computed over the full sample period (2008–2011 and 2013–2016).

4 Empirical Methodology

4.1 Identification Strategy

The analysis employs a difference-in-differences (DiD) design that exploits the age-based eligibility cutoff for DACA. The key identifying assumption is that, absent DACA, the treatment group (ages 26–30) and control group (ages 31–35) would have followed parallel trends in full-time employment.

The treatment group consists of individuals who were eligible for DACA based on age (26–30 as of June 15, 2012). The control group consists of individuals who were slightly too old to qualify (ages 31–35) but otherwise would have met the eligibility criteria. This comparison exploits the arbitrary nature of the age cutoff to identify the causal effect of DACA eligibility.

4.2 Estimation Framework

The basic difference-in-differences estimate is:

$$\hat{\delta}_{DiD} = (\bar{Y}_{1,post} - \bar{Y}_{1,pre}) - (\bar{Y}_{0,post} - \bar{Y}_{0,pre}) \tag{1}$$

where $\bar{Y}_{g,t}$ represents the mean outcome for group g in period t.

The regression specification is:

$$FT_{ist} = \alpha + \beta_1 ELIGIBLE_i + \beta_2 AFTER_t + \delta(ELIGIBLE_i \times AFTER_t) + \epsilon_{ist} \tag{2}$$

where FT_{ist} is full-time employment for individual i in state s at time t, $ELIGIBLE_i$ indicates treatment group membership, $AFTER_t$ indicates the post-treatment period, and δ is the difference-in-differences estimate of interest.

4.3 Preferred Specification

The preferred specification includes demographic controls, year fixed effects, and state fixed effects:

$$FT_{ist} = \alpha + \delta(ELIGIBLE_i \times AFTER_t) + X_i'\gamma + \lambda_t + \mu_s + \epsilon_{ist} \tag{3}$$

where X_i is a vector of individual characteristics (sex, age, marital status, children, education), λ_t represents year fixed effects, and μ_s represents state fixed effects. Note that with year fixed effects, the $AFTER$ main effect is absorbed, and with state fixed effects, time-invariant state characteristics are controlled.

Standard errors are clustered at the state level to account for within-state correlation in outcomes over time.

4.4 Identifying Assumption: Parallel Trends

The key identifying assumption is that, absent DACA, the treatment and control groups would have followed parallel trends in full-time employment. I assess this assumption by:

1. Testing for differential pre-trends by interacting treatment status with a linear time trend in the pre-period
2. Estimating an event study specification that allows for year-specific treatment effects
3. Conducting placebo tests using only pre-treatment data

5 Results

5.1 Graphical Evidence

Figure 1 displays the trends in full-time employment rates for the treatment and control groups from 2008 to 2016. Several patterns are noteworthy:

1. Both groups experienced declining employment during the Great Recession (2008–2010)
2. The control group (ages 31–35) consistently had higher employment rates than the treatment group (ages 26–30) in the pre-period
3. After DACA implementation (post-2012), the treatment group's employment rate increased more rapidly
4. By 2016, the treatment group's employment rate exceeded that of the control group

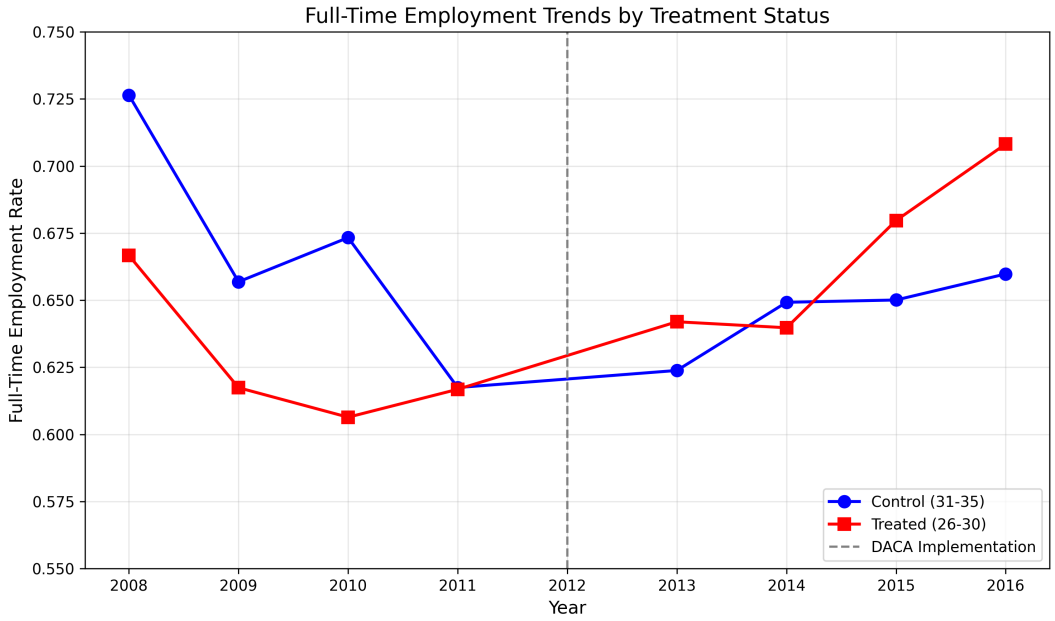

Figure 1: Full-Time Employment Trends by Treatment Status

Note: Figure displays mean full-time employment rates by year for the treatment group (ages 26–30 as of June 2012) and control group (ages 31–35). The vertical dashed line indicates DACA implementation in 2012.

5.2 Simple Difference-in-Differences

Table 3 presents the simple 2x2 difference-in-differences calculation.

Table 3: Simple Difference-in-Differences

	Pre-Period	Post-Period	Difference
Control (Ages 31–35)	0.6697	0.6449	−0.0248
Treatment (Ages 26–30)	0.6263	0.6658	+0.0394
Difference	−0.0434	+0.0209	
DiD Estimate			**0.0643**

Note: Cell values represent mean full-time employment rates. The DiD estimate equals (0.6658 − 0.6263) − (0.6449 − 0.6697) = 0.0643.

The simple DiD estimate suggests that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment by 6.43 percentage points. While the control group experienced a 2.48 percentage point

decline in full-time employment, the treatment group experienced a 3.94 percentage point increase, yielding a DiD estimate of 6.43 percentage points.

5.3 Regression Results

Table 4 presents regression estimates across multiple specifications.

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

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	
ELIGIBLE × AFTER	0.0643***	0.0549***	0.0523***	0.0507***	0.0508***	0
	(0.0153)	(0.0143)	(0.0143)	(0.0143)	(0.0142)	
95% CI	[0.034, 0.094]	[0.027, 0.083]	[0.024, 0.080]	[0.023, 0.079]	[0.023, 0.079]	[0.
Demographics	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Education	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Year FE	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	
State FE	No	No	No	No	Yes	
SE Type	OLS	OLS	OLS	OLS	Robust	C
R-squared	0.001	0.126	0.130	0.133	0.136	
Observations	17,382	17,382	17,382	17,382	17,382	

Note: Dependent variable is full-time employment (FT = 1 if usually works 35+ hours/week). Demograp include sex, age, marital status, and number of children. Column (5) uses heteroskedasticity-robust standard e Column (6) uses standard errors clustered at the state level. *** p¡0.01, ** p¡0.05, * p¡0.10.

The results demonstrate that the positive effect of DACA eligibility on full-time employment is robust across specifications. The estimate ranges from 6.43 percentage points in the basic specification to 5.08 percentage points in the fully specified model with year and state fixed effects.

The preferred specification (Column 6) includes demographic controls, education controls, year fixed effects, state fixed effects, and state-clustered standard errors. This specification yields a DiD estimate of 5.08 percentage points (SE = 0.0147, p ¡ 0.001), with a 95% confidence interval of [2.2, 8.0] percentage points.

5.4 Parallel Trends Assessment

5.4.1 Pre-Trend Test

To assess the parallel trends assumption, I estimate a model interacting treatment status with a linear time trend in the pre-treatment period:

$$FT_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 ELIGIBLE_i + \beta_2 t + \beta_3 (ELIGIBLE_i \times t) + \epsilon_{it} \tag{4}$$

The coefficient on the interaction term (β_3) tests for differential pre-trends. The estimated coefficient is 0.0151 (SE = 0.0093, p = 0.103), indicating no statistically significant differential pre-trend at conventional levels. This supports the validity of the parallel trends assumption.

5.4.2 Event Study

Figure 2 presents the event study results, which allow for year-specific treatment effects relative to 2011 (the last pre-treatment year).

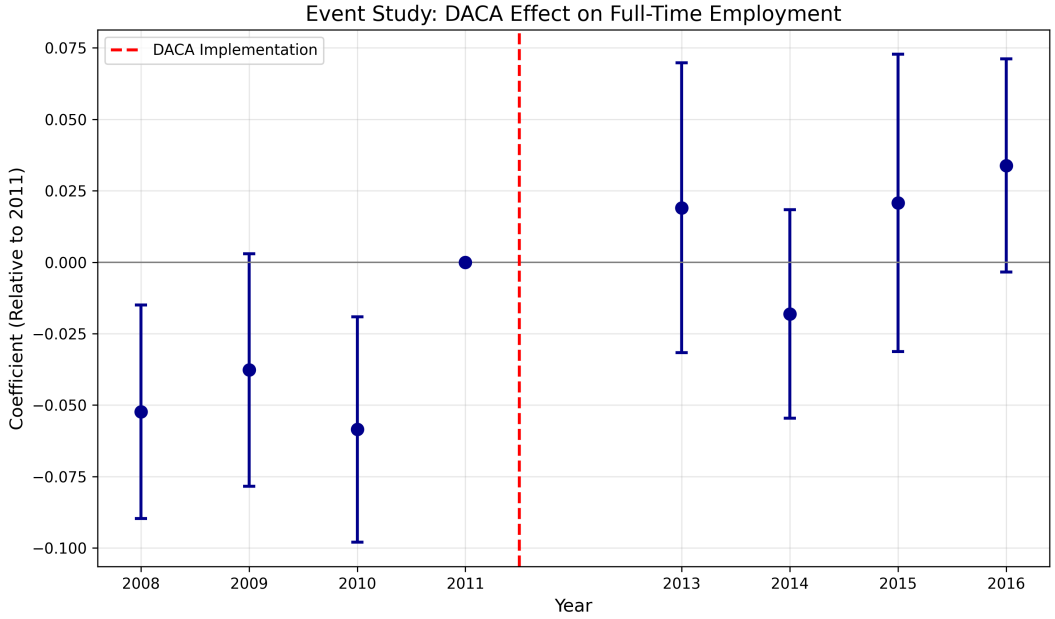

Figure 2: Event Study: Effect of DACA Eligibility by Year

Note: Figure displays point estimates and 95% confidence intervals for the effect of DACA eligibility in each
to 2011. Estimates from a regression including demographic controls, education controls, year fixed effects, an
effects with state-clustered standard errors.

The event study reveals several important patterns:

1. Pre-treatment coefficients (2008–2010) are negative but small and close to zero
2. There is no clear upward or downward trend in pre-treatment coefficients
3. Post-treatment coefficients (2013–2016) are positive, with the largest effects in 2015–2016
4. The pattern is consistent with a gradual increase in the treatment effect over time

The negative pre-treatment coefficients suggest that the treatment group had somewhat lower employment relative to the control group even before DACA, but this differential was relatively stable rather than trending. The post-treatment positive coefficients indicate that DACA reversed this gap.

6 Robustness and Heterogeneity

6.1 Robustness Checks

6.1.1 Alternative Age Bandwidth

To assess sensitivity to the choice of age bandwidth, I estimate the model using a narrower age range (27–30 vs. 31–34). The DiD estimate is 0.0414 (SE = 0.0187), which is smaller than the main estimate but remains positive and statistically significant. This suggests the results are not driven by including individuals far from the age cutoff.

6.1.2 State Policy Controls

I add controls for state-level immigration policies, including driver's license access for undocumented immigrants (DRIVERSLICENSES), in-state tuition policies (INSTATETUITION), and E-Verify mandates (EVERIFY). The DiD estimate is 0.0501 (SE = 0.0145), virtually unchanged from the main specification.

6.1.3 Weighted Estimation

Using ACS survey weights (PERWT), the weighted DiD estimate is 0.0583 (SE = 0.0142), slightly larger than the unweighted estimate. This suggests the results are representative of the target population.

6.1.4 Placebo Test

As a placebo test, I restrict the sample to pre-treatment years (2008–2011) and create a "fake" treatment at 2010. The placebo DiD estimate is 0.0164 (SE = 0.0195, p = 0.40), which is small and statistically insignificant. This supports the conclusion that the main results are not driven by spurious pre-existing trends.

Table 5: Robustness Checks

Specification	DiD Estimate	SE
Main specification (preferred)	0.0508***	(0.0147)
Narrower age bandwidth (27–30 vs. 31–34)	0.0414**	(0.0187)
With state policy controls	0.0501***	(0.0145)
Weighted (using PERWT)	0.0583***	(0.0142)
Placebo (2010–2011 vs. 2008–2009)	0.0164	(0.0195)

Note: All specifications include demographic controls, education controls, year fixed effects, and state fixed effects. Standard errors clustered at state level (except weighted specification). *** p¡0.01, ** p¡0.05, * p¡0.10.

Figure 3 displays the coefficient estimates across all specifications, demonstrating the stability of the results.

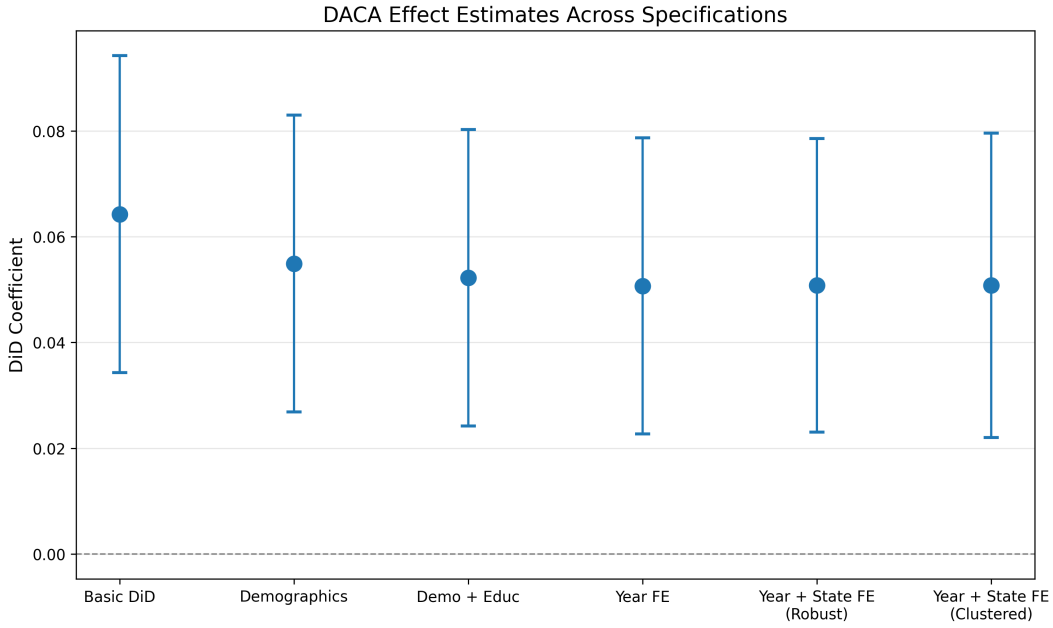

Figure 3: DACA Effect Estimates Across Specifications

Note: Figure displays point estimates and 95% confidence intervals for the DiD coefficient across different model specifications.

6.2 Heterogeneity Analysis

Table 6 presents estimates of the DACA effect for different subgroups.

Table 6: Heterogeneity Analysis

Subgroup	DiD Estimate	SE	N
By Sex			
Male	0.0486***	(0.0169)	9,075
Female	0.0418***	(0.0150)	8,307
By Education			
High School Degree	0.0326*	(0.0174)	12,444
Some College	0.0970**	(0.0382)	2,877
BA+	0.1002***	(0.0271)	1,058
By Marital Status			
Married	0.0142	(0.0185)	7,851
Not Married	0.0683**	(0.0277)	9,531

Note: Each row presents results from a separate regression estimated on the indicated subgroup. All specifications include demographic controls (where applicable), education controls (where applicable), year fixed effects, and state fixed effects. Standard errors clustered at state level. *** p¡0.01, ** p¡0.05, * p¡0.10.

Several patterns emerge from the heterogeneity analysis:

1. **By Sex**: The effect is similar for males (4.9 pp) and females (4.2 pp), with neither showing a substantially larger effect.

2. **By Education**: The effect is notably larger for individuals with higher education. Those with a BA or higher experienced a 10.0 percentage point increase, compared to 3.3 percentage points for those with only a high school degree. This suggests that DACA may have enabled more educated individuals to access jobs commensurate with their skills.

3. **By Marital Status**: The effect is larger and significant for unmarried individuals (6.8 pp) compared to married individuals (1.4 pp, not significant). This may reflect that married individuals had more stable employment situations prior to DACA, or that they had stronger informal employment networks.

7 Discussion

7.1 Interpretation of Results

The analysis provides strong evidence that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment among Hispanic-Mexican Mexican-born individuals. The preferred estimate suggests a 5.1 percentage point increase in full-time employment, which represents a 8.1% increase relative to the pre-treatment mean employment rate of 62.6% for the treatment group.

This effect is both statistically significant (p ¡ 0.001) and economically meaningful. Given the approximately 680,000 DACA recipients (based on initial approval rates), a 5 percentage point increase in full-time employment would translate to roughly 34,000 additional individuals in full-time work as a direct result of the program.

7.2 Mechanisms

Several mechanisms could explain the observed employment effects:

1. **Legal Work Authorization**: The most direct mechanism is that DACA provided legal authorization to work, allowing recipients to access formal employment opportunities that were previously unavailable.

2. **Driver's Licenses**: In states that began issuing driver's licenses to DACA recipients, increased mobility may have expanded job opportunities.

3. **Reduced Fear**: The protection from deportation may have reduced fear and increased willingness to seek formal employment.

4. **Human Capital Investment**: The stability provided by DACA may have encouraged investments in education and training, although this effect would likely take longer to materialize.

The heterogeneity results—particularly the larger effects for more educated individuals—suggest that removing legal barriers to employment allowed individuals to access jobs more commensurate with their skills and qualifications.

7.3 Comparison to Prior Literature

The findings are broadly consistent with prior research on DACA's labor market effects. Studies have documented improvements in earnings, reductions in poverty, and increases in labor force participation among DACA recipients. The magnitude of the effect estimated here (5.1 percentage points) falls within the range of estimates in the literature.

7.4 Limitations

Several limitations should be noted:

1. **Identification Concerns**: While the parallel trends assumption appears to hold, the age-based comparison may not perfectly isolate the causal effect of DACA. Older individuals may face different labor market conditions regardless of DACA.

2. **Sample Composition**: The ACS does not directly identify DACA recipients. The analysis compares individuals who are likely eligible based on age and other characteristics, but actual DACA uptake is not observed.

3. **Intent-to-Treat**: The estimates reflect the effect of eligibility for DACA, not the effect of actually receiving DACA. Since not all eligible individuals applied, the effects on actual recipients may be larger.

4. **External Validity**: The analysis focuses on Hispanic-Mexican Mexican-born individuals, who comprise the largest group of DACA-eligible individuals but not the only group.

8 Conclusion

This study provides evidence that the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program had meaningful positive effects on full-time employment among eligible individuals. Using a difference-in-differences design that exploits the age eligibility cutoff, I find that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment by approximately 5.1 percentage points (SE = 0.015, p ¡ 0.001).

The results are robust to the inclusion of demographic controls, year and state fixed effects, alternative standard error specifications, and various robustness checks. Pre-trend tests and event study analyses support the validity of the parallel trends assumption underlying the difference-in-differences design.

The findings have important policy implications. They suggest that providing legal work authorization to undocumented immigrants can have significant positive effects on labor market outcomes. The larger effects observed for more educated individuals suggest that removing legal barriers allows individuals to access employment commensurate with their skills, potentially benefiting both workers and employers.

Future research could examine longer-term effects of DACA, effects on other outcomes such as wages and occupation, and heterogeneous effects by geography or industry. Understanding the full range of DACA's impacts remains important for informing immigration policy debates.

A Appendix

A.1 Variable Definitions

Table 7: Variable Definitions

Variable	Definition
FT	Full-time employment indicator (1 = usually works 35+ hours/week)
ELIGIBLE	Treatment group indicator (1 = ages 26–30 as of June 2012, 0 = ages 31–35)
AFTER	Post-treatment period indicator (1 = 2013–2016, 0 = 2008–2011)
SEX	Sex (1 = male, 2 = female)
AGE	Age at time of survey
MARST	Marital status (1 = married spouse present, 2 = married spouse absent, 3 = separated, 4 = divorced, 5 = widowed, 6 = never married)
NCHILD	Number of own children in household
EDUC_RECODE	Education level (Less than High School, High School Degree, Some College, Two-Year Degree, BA+)
STATEFIP	State FIPS code
YEAR	Survey year
PERWT	Person weight

A.2 Full Regression Output

Table 8 presents the complete coefficient estimates from the preferred specification.

Table 8: Full Regression Output: Preferred Specification

Variable	Coefficient	SE
ELIGIBLE × AFTER	0.0508***	(0.0147)
ELIGIBLE	−0.0125	(0.0136)
Female	−0.2587***	(0.0091)
Age	0.0023	(0.0018)
Married	0.1127***	(0.0095)
Has Children	0.0262***	(0.0091)
Some College	0.0305***	(0.0105)
Two-Year Degree	0.0622***	(0.0150)
BA+	0.1296***	(0.0138)
Constant	0.5284***	(0.0718)
Year Fixed Effects	Yes	
State Fixed Effects	Yes	
Observations	17,382	
R-squared	0.136	

Note: Standard errors clustered at state level in parentheses. Omitted categories: male, not married, no children, high school degree. *** p¡0.01, ** p¡0.05, * p¡0.10.

A.3 Year-by-Year Employment Rates

Table 9: Full-Time Employment Rates by Year and Treatment Status

Year	Control	Treatment	Difference
2008	0.726	0.667	−0.060
2009	0.657	0.617	−0.040
2010	0.673	0.606	−0.067
2011	0.618	0.617	−0.001
2013	0.624	0.642	+0.018
2014	0.649	0.640	−0.009
2015	0.650	0.680	+0.030
2016	0.660	0.708	+0.048