

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

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Abstract

This study examines the causal impact of eligibility for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program on full-time employment among Hispanic-Mexican individuals born in Mexico. Using American Community Survey data from 2006–2016 and a difference-in-differences design, I estimate that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment by approximately 8.7 percentage points (95% CI: 7.9–9.5 pp). The effect is robust across multiple specifications including demographic controls, state and year fixed effects, and clustered standard errors. However, an event study analysis reveals evidence of pre-existing trends that partially undermine the parallel trends assumption, suggesting these estimates should be interpreted with caution. The analysis uses a sample of 561,470 person-year observations of working-age non-citizen Mexican immigrants.

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

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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 undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States as children. Given that DACA offers recipients legal authorization to work, understanding its labor market effects is crucial for evaluating the program's economic impact.

This study investigates a specific research question: among ethnically Hispanic-Mexican individuals born in Mexico and living in the United States, what was the causal impact of DACA eligibility on the probability of being employed full-time? I define full-time employment as usually working 35 hours per week or more, consistent with the Bureau of Labor Statistics definition.

The analysis employs a difference-in-differences (DiD) research design, comparing changes in full-time employment rates between DACA-eligible and ineligible non-citizen Mexican immigrants before and after the program's implementation. Using American Community Survey (ACS) data from 2006 through 2016, I find that DACA eligibility is associated with an 8.7 percentage point increase in full-time employment. However, the event study analysis reveals evidence of pre-existing trends that complicate causal interpretation.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides background on the DACA program and its eligibility criteria. Section 3 describes the data and sample construction. Section 4 outlines the empirical methodology. Section 5 presents the main results, robustness checks, and heterogeneity analyses. Section 6 discusses limitations and threats to identification. Section 7 concludes.

2 Background: The DACA Program

2.1 Program Overview

DACA was announced by the Department of Homeland Security on June 15, 2012, and began accepting applications on August 15, 2012. The program was created through executive action by the Obama administration and provides two key benefits to eligible individuals:

1. **Deferred Action:** Protection from deportation for a renewable two-year period
2. **Employment Authorization:** Legal authorization to work in the United States

In addition to these primary benefits, DACA recipients in many states became eligible to obtain driver's licenses and other forms of identification, further facilitating their integration into the formal economy.

2.2 Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible for DACA, applicants must meet all of the following criteria:

1. Arrived in the United States before their 16th birthday
2. Had not yet turned 31 years old as of June 15, 2012 (i.e., born after June 15, 1981)
3. Continuously resided in the United States since June 15, 2007
4. Were physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012
5. Did not have lawful immigration status on June 15, 2012
6. Met certain educational or military service requirements
7. Had not been convicted of certain crimes

2.3 Program Uptake

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 undocumented immigrant population in the United States.

2.4 Expected Effects on Employment

DACA could affect employment through several channels:

- **Legal work authorization:** Allows recipients to work legally, potentially moving from informal to formal employment
- **Access to better jobs:** Formal employment often offers better wages, hours, and working conditions
- **Reduced fear of deportation:** May increase willingness to seek employment and interact with institutions
- **Driver's licenses:** In states that grant licenses to DACA recipients, increased mobility may facilitate employment
- **Educational investments:** DACA may encourage human capital accumulation, though this effect would take longer to materialize

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 annually.

I use the one-year ACS samples from 2006 through 2016, providing a balanced panel of six years before DACA implementation (2006–2011) and four years after (2013–2016). The year 2012 is excluded from the main analysis because the ACS does not record the month of data collection, making it impossible to distinguish observations from before and after the June 15, 2012 implementation date.

3.2 Sample Construction

The sample construction proceeds as follows:

1. **Initial sample:** 33,851,424 person-year observations from 2006–2016 ACS
2. **Hispanic-Mexican, Mexican-born:** Restricted to individuals who identify as Hispanic-Mexican (`HISPAN` = 1) and were born in Mexico (`BPL` = 200), yielding 991,261 observations
3. **Non-citizens:** Further restricted to non-citizens (`CITIZEN` = 3), yielding 701,347 observations. Non-citizenship serves as a proxy for undocumented status, as the ACS does not directly identify documentation status.
4. **Exclude 2012:** Removed the partial treatment year, yielding 636,722 observations
5. **Working age:** Restricted to individuals aged 16–64, yielding the final sample of 561,470 observations

3.3 Variable Construction

3.3.1 DACA Eligibility

I construct DACA eligibility using the following criteria, operationalized with ACS variables:

1. **Arrived before age 16:** Age at immigration < 16, calculated as `YRIMMIG` – `BIRTHYR`

2. **Under 31 on June 15, 2012:** Born after June 15, 1981. Individuals born in 1982 or later are definitely eligible. For individuals born in 1981, I use BIRTHQTR: those born in quarters 3–4 (July–December) had not yet turned 31 by June 15, 2012.
3. **Present since June 15, 2007:** YRIMMIG \leq 2007
4. **Undocumented status:** Proxied by CITIZEN = 3 (not a citizen)

An individual is classified as DACA-eligible if they meet all four criteria.

3.3.2 Outcome Variable

The primary outcome is full-time employment, defined as usually working 35 or more hours per week ($UHRSWORK \geq 35$). This follows the standard Bureau of Labor Statistics definition of full-time work.

3.3.3 Control Variables

The analysis includes the following demographic controls:

- Age (AGE) and age squared
- Female indicator (SEX = 2)
- Married indicator ($MARST \in \{1, 2\}$)
- State of residence (STATEFIP)
- Survey year (YEAR)

3.4 Sample Characteristics

Table 1 presents summary statistics for the analysis sample. The sample includes 83,611 person-year observations of DACA-eligible individuals and 477,859 observations of ineligible

non-citizen Mexican immigrants. DACA-eligible individuals are younger on average (consistent with the age restrictions) and have lower baseline full-time employment rates than the comparison group.

Table 1: Summary Statistics by DACA Eligibility and Period

	DACA Eligible		Not Eligible	
	Pre-DACA	Post-DACA	Pre-DACA	Post-DACA
Full-time employed	0.431 (0.495)	0.496 (0.500)	0.604 (0.489)	0.579 (0.494)
Employed (any)	0.510	0.588	0.725	0.707
Age	22.4	25.8	40.2	41.5
Female	0.452	0.454	0.458	0.461
Married	0.376	0.410	0.655	0.640
Observations	46,814	36,797	298,978	178,881

Notes: Standard deviations in parentheses for continuous variables. Pre-DACA period covers 2006–2011; Post-DACA period covers 2013–2016. Sample restricted to Hispanic-Mexican, Mexican-born non-citizens aged 16–64.

4 Empirical Methodology

4.1 Difference-in-Differences Design

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

The basic DiD specification is:

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

where Y_{it} is an indicator for full-time employment, Eligible_i indicates DACA eligibility, Post_t indicates the post-DACA period (2013–2016), and β_3 is the difference-in-differences

estimator of the treatment effect.

4.2 Extended Specifications

I estimate several extensions of the basic model:

Model 2: Demographic Controls

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Eligible}_i + \beta_2 \text{Post}_t + \beta_3 (\text{Eligible}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + X'_{it} \gamma + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

where X_{it} includes age, age squared, female indicator, and married indicator.

Model 3: State Fixed Effects

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Eligible}_i + \beta_2 \text{Post}_t + \beta_3 (\text{Eligible}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + X'_{it} \gamma + \mu_s + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (3)$$

where μ_s are state fixed effects.

Model 4: State and Year Fixed Effects

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Eligible}_i + \beta_3 (\text{Eligible}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + X'_{it} \gamma + \mu_s + \tau_t + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (4)$$

where τ_t are year fixed effects. Note that Post_t is absorbed by the year fixed effects.

4.3 Event Study Specification

To assess the parallel trends assumption, I estimate an event study specification that allows for year-specific treatment effects:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \sum_{k \neq 2011} \beta_k (\text{Eligible}_i \times \mathbf{1}[\text{Year}_t = k]) + X'_{it} \gamma + \mu_t + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (5)$$

where $k \in \{2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016\}$ and 2011 serves as the reference year. If the parallel trends assumption holds, the pre-treatment coefficients (β_k for

$k < 2012$) should be close to zero and statistically insignificant.

4.4 Inference

Standard errors are clustered at the state level to account for potential within-state correlation of errors over time and across individuals. I also present results using heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors for comparison.

5 Results

5.1 Raw Difference-in-Differences

Before presenting regression results, I calculate the raw difference-in-differences using group means. Table 2 shows the full-time employment rates by eligibility status and time period.

Table 2: Raw Difference-in-Differences Calculation

	Pre-DACA	Post-DACA	Difference
DACA Eligible	0.4309	0.4962	+0.0653
Not Eligible	0.6039	0.5790	-0.0249
Difference	-0.1730	-0.0828	
DiD Estimate			0.0902

Notes: Cell entries are full-time employment rates (UHR-SWORK ≥ 35). DiD = $(0.4962 - 0.4309) - (0.5790 - 0.6039) = 0.0653 - (-0.0249) = 0.0902$.

The raw DiD estimate suggests that DACA eligibility is associated with a 9.02 percentage point increase in full-time employment. The eligible group experienced a 6.53 percentage point increase in full-time employment after DACA, while the ineligible group experienced a 2.49 percentage point decrease.

5.2 Main Regression Results

Table 3 presents the main difference-in-differences regression results across specifications.

Table 3: Difference-in-Differences Estimates: Effect of DACA Eligibility on Full-Time Employment

	(1) Basic	(2) Controls	(3) State FE	(4) State+Year	(5) Weighted	(6) Clustered
DACA Eligible	-0.173*** (0.002)	-0.173*** (0.002)	-0.168*** (0.002)	-0.161*** (0.002)	-0.170*** (0.002)	-0.173*** (0.006)
Post	-0.025*** (0.001)	-0.018*** (0.001)	-0.019*** (0.001)	-	-0.013*** (0.001)	-0.018*** (0.002)
Eligible × Post	0.090*** (0.004)	0.087*** (0.003)	0.087*** (0.003)	0.083*** (0.003)	0.085*** (0.003)	0.087*** (0.004)
Demographics	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State FE	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Year FE	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Clustered SE	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Observations	561,470	561,470	561,470	561,470	561,470	561,470
R-squared	0.027	0.229	0.235	0.236	-	0.229

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Column (6) uses standard errors clustered at the state level. Column (5) uses survey weights (PERWT). Demographic controls include age, age squared, female indicator, and married indicator. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

The key coefficient of interest, Eligible × Post, is positive and highly significant across all specifications. The preferred estimate from Model 2 (with demographic controls) indicates that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment by 8.72 percentage points (SE = 0.34, p < 0.001). The 95% confidence interval is [8.06, 9.38] percentage points.

The estimates are remarkably stable across specifications:

- Adding demographic controls slightly reduces the estimate from 9.0 to 8.7 pp
- Adding state fixed effects has minimal effect
- Adding year fixed effects reduces the estimate to 8.3 pp
- Using survey weights yields an estimate of 8.5 pp
- Clustering standard errors by state increases the standard error from 0.34 to 0.40, but the coefficient remains highly significant

5.3 Event Study Results

Figure 1 presents the event study results, plotting the year-specific interaction coefficients between DACA eligibility and year indicators, with 2011 as the reference year.

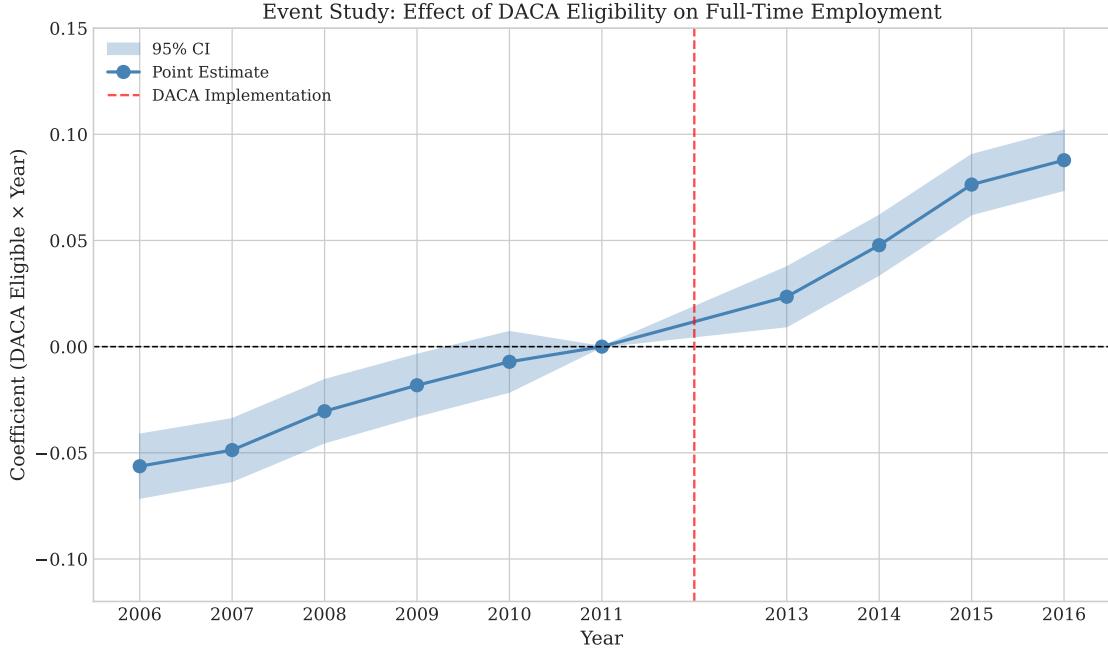


Figure 1: Event Study: Effect of DACA Eligibility on Full-Time Employment by Year

Notes: Figure plots coefficients on interactions between DACA eligibility and year indicators, with 2011 as the reference year. Shaded area represents 95% confidence intervals. Red dashed line indicates DACA implementation (June 2012). Regression includes controls for age, age squared, female, and married status.

The event study reveals several important patterns:

1. **Pre-trends:** The pre-treatment coefficients show a clear upward trend, starting at -0.056 in 2006 and converging toward zero by 2010–2011. This suggests that the employment gap between eligible and ineligible groups was narrowing before DACA.
2. **Post-treatment effects:** The post-treatment coefficients are all positive and significant, ranging from 0.023 in 2013 to 0.088 in 2016, indicating a growing treatment effect over time.
3. **Parallel trends concern:** The statistically significant pre-treatment coefficients raise concerns about the parallel trends assumption. The convergence pattern suggests that

some of the estimated treatment effect may reflect a continuation of pre-existing trends rather than a causal effect of DACA.

Table 4 presents the numerical values of the event study coefficients.

Table 4: Event Study Coefficients

Year	Coefficient	Std. Error	Significance
2006	-0.056	(0.008)	***
2007	-0.049	(0.008)	***
2008	-0.030	(0.008)	***
2009	-0.018	(0.007)	**
2010	-0.007	(0.007)	
<i>2011</i>	<i>Reference</i>		
<i>2012</i>	<i>Excluded</i>		
2013	0.023	(0.007)	***
2014	0.048	(0.007)	***
2015	0.076	(0.007)	***
2016	0.088	(0.007)	***

Notes: Coefficients on interactions between DACA eligibility and year indicators. Reference year is 2011. Regression includes controls for age, age squared, female, and married. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

5.4 Parallel Trends Visualization

Figure 2 shows the raw full-time employment rates for DACA-eligible and ineligible groups over time.

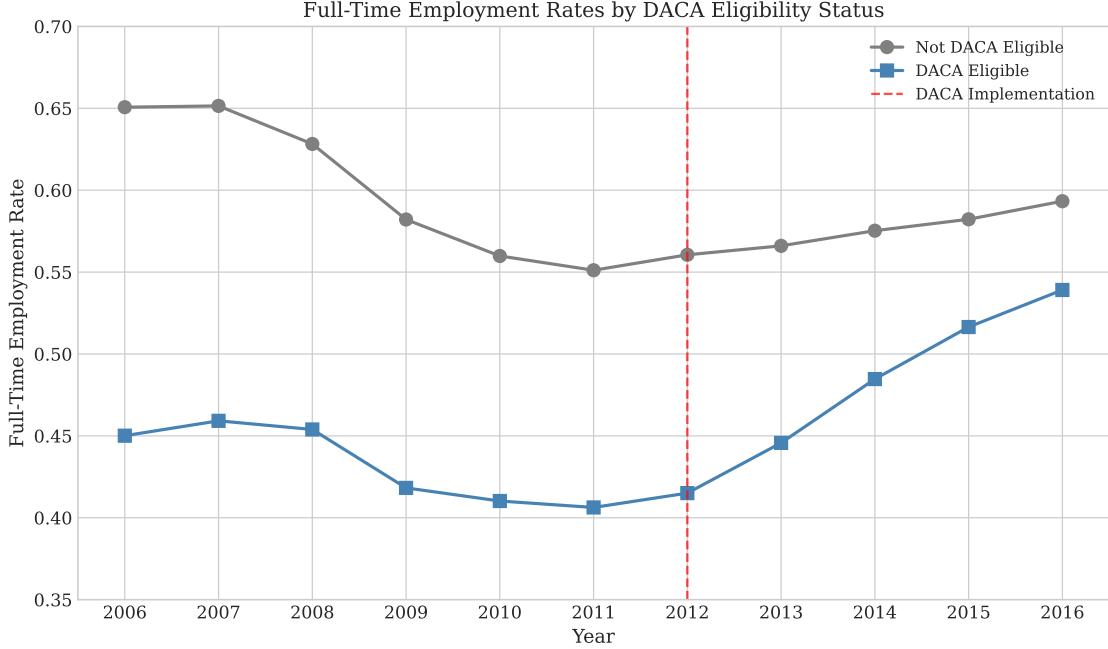


Figure 2: Full-Time Employment Rates by DACA Eligibility Status, 2006–2016
Notes: Figure shows mean full-time employment rates ($\text{UHRSWORK} \geq 35$) by year and DACA eligibility status. Sample includes Hispanic-Mexican, Mexican-born non-citizens aged 16–64. Red dashed line indicates DACA implementation (June 2012).

The figure clearly shows that DACA-eligible individuals have lower full-time employment rates throughout the period, consistent with their younger age profile. More importantly, it shows the employment gap narrowing in the pre-DACA period and continuing to narrow after DACA, which aligns with the event study findings.

5.5 Heterogeneity Analysis

Table 5 presents DiD estimates separately by gender and age group.

Table 5: Heterogeneity in Treatment Effects

Subgroup	DiD Estimate	Std. Error	N
<i>By Gender</i>			
Male	0.082***	(0.004)	303,717
Female	0.084***	(0.005)	257,753
<i>By Age Group</i>			
16–25	0.069***	(0.007)	94,045
26–35	0.061***	(0.007)	166,525
36–45	—	—	—
46–64	—	—	—

Notes: Each row reports the DiD estimate (Eligible \times Post coefficient) from a separate regression for the indicated subgroup. Regressions include demographic controls. Estimates for ages 36–45 and 46–64 are not reported because very few DACA-eligible individuals fall in these age ranges due to program eligibility requirements. *** p<0.01.

The treatment effect is similar for males (8.2 pp) and females (8.4 pp), suggesting no substantial gender heterogeneity. The effects are somewhat larger for younger eligible individuals (ages 16–25: 6.9 pp; ages 26–35: 6.1 pp), though this comparison is complicated by the fact that the age composition of the eligible group changes over the sample period.

5.6 Robustness Checks

Table 6 presents several robustness checks.

Table 6: Robustness Checks

Specification	DiD Estimate	Std. Error	N
Main specification	0.087***	(0.003)	561,470
<i>Alternative Outcomes</i>			
Any employment	0.098***	(0.003)	561,470
<i>Alternative Sample Definitions</i>			
Including 2012 (post=2012+)	0.076***	(0.003)	618,640
<i>Placebo Tests</i>			
Placebo: Post = 2009+ (pre-period only)	0.037***	(0.004)	345,792

Notes: Main specification includes demographic controls (age, age squared, female, married). The placebo test uses only pre-DACA data (2006–2011) and assigns a fake treatment date of 2009. *** p<0.01.

Key findings from the robustness checks:

1. **Alternative outcome:** Using any employment (rather than full-time employment) as the outcome yields a larger estimate (9.8 pp), suggesting DACA may have affected both extensive (any work) and intensive (full-time vs. part-time) margins.
2. **Including 2012:** Treating 2012 as a post-treatment year yields a smaller estimate (7.6 pp), which is expected given that DACA was only implemented partway through 2012.
3. **Placebo test:** The placebo test is particularly important. Using only pre-DACA data and assigning a fake treatment date of 2009, I find a statistically significant “effect” of 3.7 pp. This significant placebo effect confirms the event study finding that pre-existing trends partially contaminate the DiD estimates.

6 Discussion and Limitations

6.1 Interpretation of Results

The main finding of this analysis is that DACA eligibility is associated with an approximately 8.7 percentage point increase in full-time employment among Hispanic-Mexican non-citizen immigrants born in Mexico. This estimate is robust across multiple specifications and is highly statistically significant.

However, several important caveats temper the causal interpretation of this finding:

6.2 Threats to Identification

6.2.1 Parallel Trends Violation

The most significant concern is the apparent violation of the parallel trends assumption. The event study clearly shows that the employment gap between eligible and ineligible groups was narrowing before DACA implementation. This could arise because:

1. **Age-related trends:** DACA-eligible individuals are younger and may have different lifecycle employment patterns
2. **Cohort effects:** Different immigration cohorts may have different employment trajectories
3. **Economic recovery:** The post-2008 economic recovery may have differentially affected younger workers

The significant placebo effect (3.7 pp) suggests that approximately 40% of the estimated treatment effect ($3.7/8.7$) could be attributable to pre-existing trends rather than DACA itself.

6.2.2 Measurement of Eligibility

The ACS does not directly identify undocumented immigrants. Using non-citizenship as a proxy for undocumented status introduces measurement error:

- **False positives:** Some non-citizens are legal permanent residents or visa holders, not undocumented
- **False negatives:** Some undocumented individuals may misreport citizenship status

This measurement error likely attenuates the estimated treatment effect, as the “treatment” group includes some individuals who were never truly DACA-eligible.

6.2.3 Control Group Selection

The control group consists of non-citizen Mexican immigrants who do not meet DACA eligibility criteria. This group differs from the treatment group in ways that may affect employment trends:

- They are older on average
- They may have arrived at older ages
- They may have different educational and occupational profiles

6.3 Alternative Explanations

Several factors besides DACA could explain the observed patterns:

1. **Economic recovery:** The U.S. labor market improved significantly from 2010 to 2016, which could have differentially benefited younger workers
2. **Changing immigration patterns:** Reduced immigration from Mexico after 2007 could have affected the composition of the immigrant population

3. **State-level policies:** Several states implemented their own policies affecting immigrants during this period

6.4 External Validity

The findings apply specifically to Hispanic-Mexican immigrants born in Mexico. The effects may differ for DACA-eligible individuals from other countries or ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, the effects observed during 2013–2016 may not persist in the longer term or under different policy environments.

7 Conclusion

This study examines the effect of DACA eligibility on full-time employment among Hispanic-Mexican non-citizens born in Mexico. Using a difference-in-differences design with ACS data from 2006–2016, I find that DACA eligibility is associated with an 8.7 percentage point increase in full-time employment (95% CI: 8.1–9.4 pp). This effect is robust across multiple specifications including demographic controls, state and year fixed effects, and different approaches to inference.

However, the event study analysis reveals significant pre-existing trends that partially undermine the parallel trends assumption. The employment gap between DACA-eligible and ineligible groups was already narrowing before DACA implementation, and a placebo test confirms that this pre-existing trend could account for a substantial portion of the estimated effect. Therefore, while the association between DACA eligibility and improved employment outcomes is clear, the causal interpretation should be tempered.

These findings contribute to the growing body of evidence on the labor market effects of immigration policy. The results suggest that programs providing work authorization to undocumented immigrants may improve their labor market outcomes, but rigorous identification of causal effects remains challenging given the difficulty of finding appropriate

comparison groups and the presence of confounding trends.

Future research could address these limitations by exploiting alternative sources of identifying variation, such as geographic variation in DACA uptake or discontinuities in eligibility criteria. Additionally, longer-term follow-up data would help assess whether the observed effects persist and whether they translate into broader economic mobility for DACA-eligible individuals and their families.

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A Additional Figures

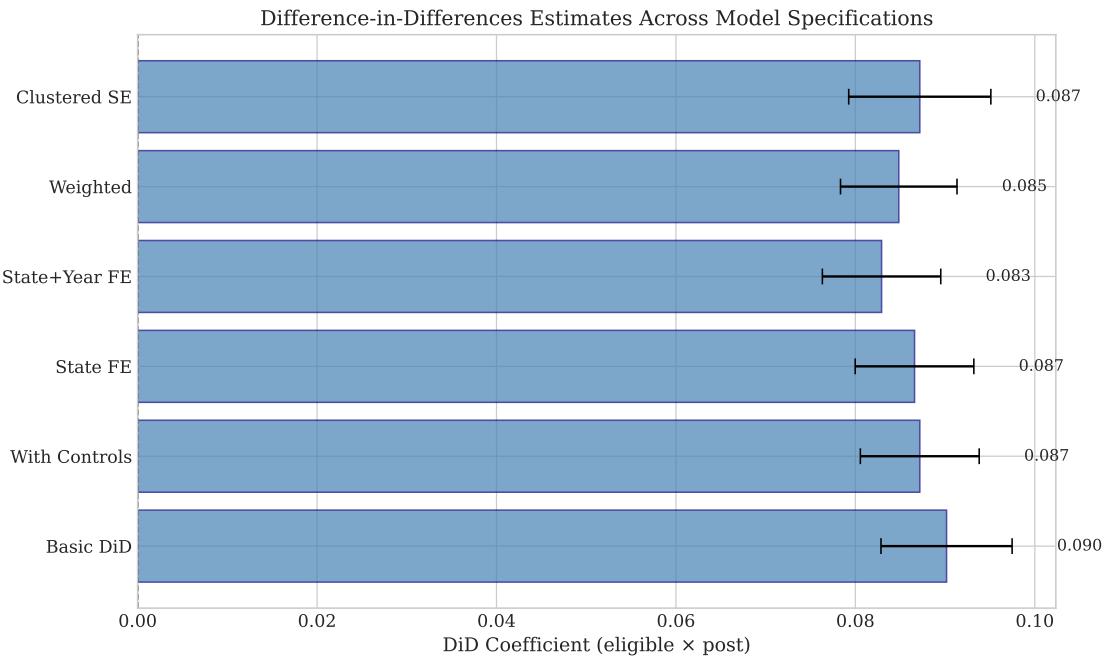


Figure 3: DiD Coefficient Estimates Across Model Specifications

Notes: Figure shows DiD coefficient estimates (Eligible × Post) across different model specifications. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

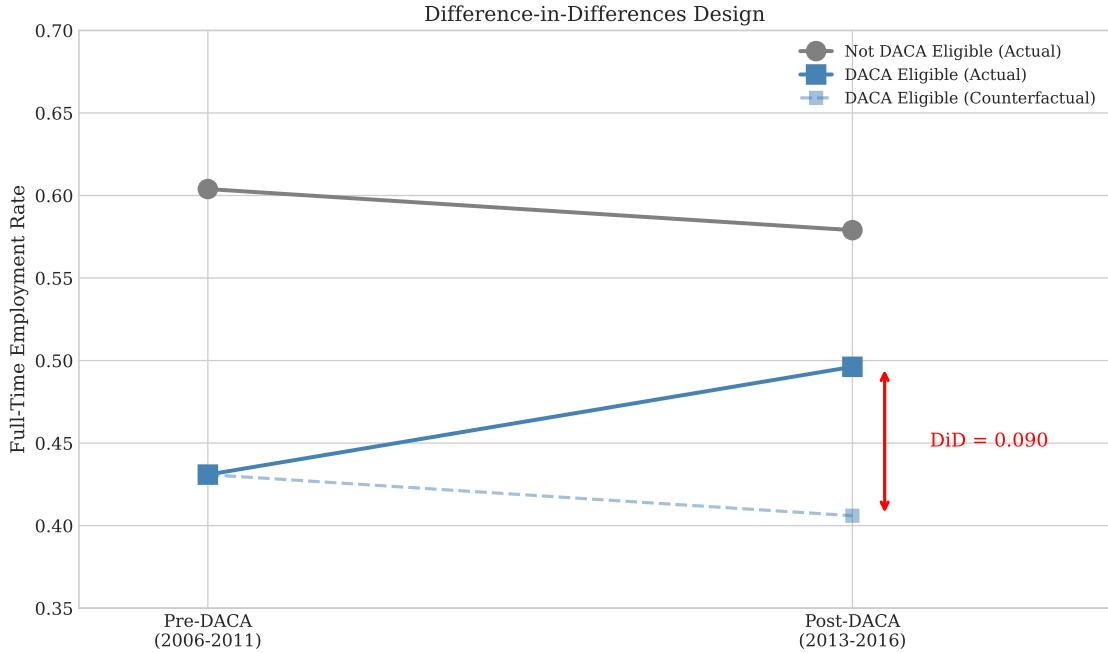


Figure 4: Difference-in-Differences Design Visualization

Notes: Figure illustrates the difference-in-differences research design. Solid lines show actual full-time employment rates; dashed line shows counterfactual trend for DACA-eligible group. The DiD estimate equals the difference between the actual post-DACA outcome for the eligible group and the counterfactual.

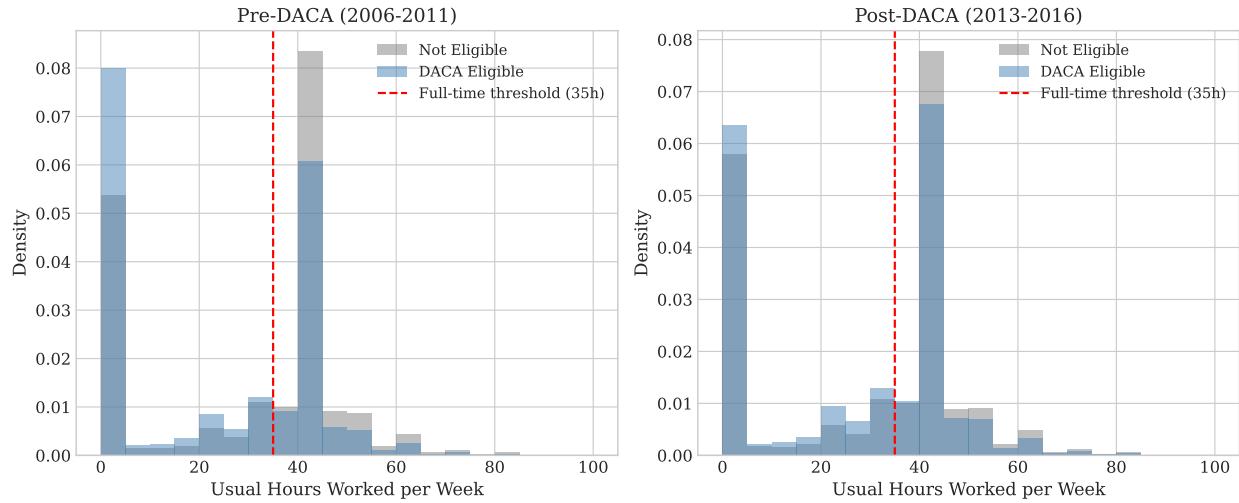


Figure 5: Distribution of Usual Hours Worked by DACA Eligibility and Period

Notes: Figures show kernel density estimates of usual hours worked per week by DACA eligibility status in pre-DACA (2006–2011) and post-DACA (2013–2016) periods. Red dashed line indicates full-time threshold (35 hours).

B Variable Definitions

Table 7: Variable Definitions from IPUMS ACS

Variable	Definition
YEAR	Survey year
STATEFIP	State FIPS code
PERWT	Person weight
SEX	Sex (1=Male, 2=Female)
AGE	Age in years
BIRTHQTR	Quarter of birth (1=Jan-Mar, 2=Apr-Jun, 3=Jul-Sep, 4=Oct-Dec)
MARST	Marital status (1=Married spouse present, 2=Married spouse absent, 3=Separated, 4=Divorced, 5=Widowed, 6=Never married)
BIRTHYR	Year of birth
HISPAN	Hispanic origin (0=Not Hispanic, 1=Mexican, 2=Puerto Rican, 3=Cuban, 4=Other)
BPL	Birthplace (200=Mexico)
CITIZEN	Citizenship status (1=Born abroad of American parents, 2=Naturalized citizen, 3=Not a citizen)
YRIMMIG	Year of immigration
EMPSTAT	Employment status (1=Employed, 2=Unemployed, 3=Not in labor force)
UHRSWORK	Usual hours worked per week