

The Effect of DACA Eligibility on Full-Time Employment: 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 Mexican-born Hispanic individuals in the United States. Using American Community Survey data from 2006-2016 and a difference-in-differences identification strategy, I find that DACA eligibility is associated with a statistically significant 3.1 percentage point increase in the probability of full-time employment (defined as working 35 or more hours per week). This effect is robust to alternative specifications but should be interpreted with caution due to some evidence of pre-existing differential trends between treatment and control groups. The findings suggest that DACA's provision of work authorization had meaningful positive effects on labor market outcomes for eligible immigrants.

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

JEL Classification: J15, J22, J61, K37

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1 Introduction

On June 15, 2012, the United States government implemented the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which provided temporary relief from deportation and work authorization to certain undocumented immigrants who had arrived in the country as children. This policy represented a significant shift in immigration enforcement, affecting nearly 1.8 million potentially eligible individuals, primarily from Mexico.

The primary research question of this study 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 (usually working 35+ hours per week)?*

DACA’s provision of work authorization creates a clear theoretical mechanism through which the program could affect employment outcomes. Prior to DACA, eligible individuals faced significant barriers to formal employment, often working in informal arrangements or being relegated to jobs that did not verify work authorization. By providing legal work authorization, DACA potentially allowed eligible individuals to:

- Access formal sector employment with better hours and conditions
- Transition from part-time to full-time work arrangements
- Seek employment that better matched their skills and preferences
- Obtain driver’s licenses in many states, expanding job accessibility

This study employs a difference-in-differences (DiD) research design, comparing changes in full-time employment rates between DACA-eligible and ineligible Mexican-born non-citizens before and after the program’s implementation. The analysis uses American Community Survey (ACS) data from IPUMS spanning 2006-2016.

The main finding is that DACA eligibility is associated with a 3.1 percentage point increase in the probability of full-time employment, representing approximately a 7% increase relative to the pre-treatment mean for the eligible group. This effect is statistically significant at conventional levels and robust to various alternative specifications.

The remainder of this report is organized as follows: Section 2 provides institutional background on DACA. Section 3 describes the data and sample construction. Section 4 details the empirical methodology. Section 5 presents the main results and robustness checks. Section 6 discusses limitations and threats to identification. Section 7 concludes.

2 Institutional Background

2.1 DACA Program Overview

The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was announced by the Department of Homeland Security on June 15, 2012. The program provided two key benefits to eligible individuals: (1) deferred action from deportation for a renewable two-year period, and (2) eligibility for work authorization.

To qualify 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 on or after June 15, 1981)
3. Lived continuously in the United States since June 15, 2007
4. Were physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012
5. Had no lawful immigration status on June 15, 2012
6. Met certain educational or military service requirements
7. Had not been convicted of certain crimes

Applications for DACA began being accepted on August 15, 2012. In the first four years of the program, nearly 900,000 initial applications were received, with approximately 90% receiving approval.

2.2 Expected Effects on Employment

The theoretical prediction is that DACA would increase employment, particularly full-time formal sector employment, among eligible individuals. Several mechanisms support this prediction:

Work Authorization Effect: The most direct mechanism is that DACA provided legal work authorization, allowing recipients to seek formal sector employment that requires documentation verification through the I-9 process.

Reduced Fear of Deportation: The deferred action provision may have increased willingness to engage with formal institutions, including employers who might require documentation.

Increased Mobility: In many states, DACA recipients became eligible for driver’s licenses, potentially expanding the geographic range of accessible jobs.

Human Capital Investment: With reduced uncertainty about future deportation, DACA-eligible individuals may have been more willing to invest in job-specific training or seek jobs with career advancement potential.

3 Data

3.1 Data Source

The analysis uses data from the American Community Survey (ACS) as provided by IPUMS USA. The ACS is a large-scale, nationally representative survey conducted annually by the U.S. Census Bureau, covering approximately 1% of the U.S. population each year.

I use the one-year ACS files for 2006-2016, providing six years of pre-treatment data (2006-2011), one transition year (2012), and four years of post-treatment data (2013-2016). The years 2013-2016 constitute the primary outcome period as specified in the research instructions.

3.2 Sample Selection

The sample is constructed as follows:

1. **Hispanic-Mexican Ethnicity:** Individuals identified as Mexican Hispanic using the HISPAN variable (equal to 1) or the detailed HISPAND variable (codes 100-107, which include Mexican, Mexican American, Mexicano/Mexicana, Chicano/Chicana, La Raza, Mexican American Indian, and Mexico).
2. **Mexican-Born:** Individuals born in Mexico (BPL = 200).
3. **Non-Citizen:** Individuals who are not U.S. citizens (CITIZEN = 3, indicating “Not a citizen”). Following the research instructions, I assume that non-citizens who have not received naturalization papers are undocumented for DACA purposes, as the ACS does not distinguish between documented and undocumented non-citizens.
4. **Working Age:** Individuals aged 16-64, the standard definition for the working-age population in labor economics.

Table 1 presents the sample construction.

Table 1: Sample Construction

Selection Criterion	Observations
All ACS observations (2006-2016)	33,851,424
Hispanic-Mexican ethnicity	–
Mexican-born (BPL = 200)	–
Non-citizen (CITIZEN = 3)	–
Working age (16-64)	618,640
Excluding 2012 (transition year)	561,470

Note: Sample selection criteria applied sequentially.
Final analysis sample excludes 2012 observations
due to mid-year DACA implementation.

3.3 Variable Definitions

3.3.1 Outcome Variable

The primary outcome is **full-time employment**, defined as usually working 35 or more hours per week. This is constructed from the UHRSWORK variable:

$$\text{FullTime}_i = \mathbf{1}[\text{UHRSWORK}_i \geq 35]$$

As a robustness check, I also examine any employment ($\text{EMPSTAT} = 1$, indicating “Employed”).

3.3.2 Treatment Variable

DACA eligibility is constructed based on the program’s criteria:

1. **Arrived before 16th birthday:** Age at arrival ≤ 16 , where age at arrival is calculated as current age minus years in the USA ($\text{AGE} - \text{YRSUSA1}$).
2. **Under 31 on June 15, 2012:** Born on or after June 15, 1981. Implemented as $\text{BIRTHYR} \geq 1982$, or $\text{BIRTHYR} = 1981$ and $\text{BIRTHQTR} \geq 2$ (April-June or later).
3. **Continuous presence since June 15, 2007:** Year of immigration ≤ 2007 ($\text{YRIMMIG} \leq 2007$).

An individual is classified as DACA-eligible if all three conditions are satisfied:

$$\text{DACAEligible}_i = \mathbf{1}[\text{AgeAtArrival}_i < 16] \times \mathbf{1}[\text{Born} \geq \text{June 15, 1981}] \times \mathbf{1}[\text{YRIMMIG}_i \leq 2007]$$

Note that the eligibility criteria are fixed based on June 15, 2012 cutoffs, so an individual's eligibility status does not change over time in the analysis (though the composition of the observed sample may change due to aging into/out of the 16-64 age restriction).

3.3.3 Control Variables

The analysis includes the following control variables:

- **Age and Age-squared:** Continuous variables to capture non-linear age effects
- **Female:** Indicator for sex ($\text{SEX} = 2$)
- **Married:** Indicator for married with spouse present ($\text{MARST} = 1$)
- **High school or more:** Indicator for completing at least grade 11 ($\text{EDUC} \geq 6$)
- **College:** Indicator for 3+ years of college ($\text{EDUC} \geq 10$)
- **Metropolitan area:** Indicator for living in a metropolitan area ($\text{METRO} \geq 2$)
- **Has children:** Indicator for having children in household ($\text{NCHILD} > 0$)
- **State fixed effects:** Indicators for state of residence (STATEFIP)
- **Year fixed effects:** Indicators for survey year (YEAR)

3.4 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents summary statistics for the analysis sample, separately by DACA eligibility status.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics by DACA Eligibility

Variable	Not Eligible	DACA Eligible
Age (years)	39.6	22.6
Female (%)	46.2	45.0
Married (%)	59.9	22.5
High school or more (%)	40.0	57.7
College (%)	4.4	2.1
Employed (%)	65.4	54.9
Full-time employed (%)	59.1	45.7
Usual hours worked (conditional)	28.4	23.4
N	524,757	93,883
Share of sample (%)	84.8	15.2

Note: Statistics calculated from the full sample (2006-2016). Hours worked conditional on positive values.

The DACA-eligible group is substantially younger (mean age 22.6 vs. 39.6) reflecting the program’s age requirements. They have higher education rates (57.7% vs. 40.0% with high school or more) but lower marriage rates (22.5% vs. 59.9%) and lower baseline employment rates (54.9% vs. 65.4% employed; 45.7% vs. 59.1% full-time).

4 Empirical Methodology

4.1 Identification Strategy

The analysis employs a difference-in-differences (DiD) design to estimate the causal effect of DACA eligibility on full-time employment. The key identifying assumption is that, absent DACA, full-time employment trends would have been parallel between DACA-eligible and ineligible Mexican-born non-citizens.

The treatment group consists of individuals who meet the DACA eligibility criteria. The control group consists of Mexican-born non-citizens who do not meet the eligibility criteria (primarily because they arrived in the U.S. after their 16th birthday, were born before June 15, 1981, or immigrated after 2007).

4.2 Estimation

The main specification is:

$$\text{FullTime}_{ist} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Eligible}_i + \beta_2 \text{Post}_t + \delta(\text{Eligible}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + \mathbf{X}'_{ist} \gamma + \mu_s + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{ist} \quad (1)$$

where:

- FullTime_{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)
- \mathbf{X}_{ist} is a vector of individual controls
- μ_s are state fixed effects
- λ_t are 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 relative to ineligible individuals after the policy's implementation.

Note that when state and year fixed effects are included, β_2 (Post) is absorbed by the year fixed effects.

4.3 Standard Errors

All standard errors are clustered at the state level to account for serial correlation in outcomes within states over time and correlation in treatment effects within states. This yields 51 clusters (50 states plus District of Columbia).

4.4 Event Study Specification

To examine the dynamics of treatment effects and test for pre-trends, I estimate an event study specification:

$$\text{FullTime}_{ist} = \alpha + \sum_{t \neq 2011} \beta_t (\text{Eligible}_i \times \mathbf{1}[\text{Year} = t]) + \mathbf{X}'_{ist} \gamma + \mu_s + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{ist} \quad (2)$$

The year 2011 serves as the reference period (the last pre-treatment year). Coefficients for years 2006-2010 test the parallel trends assumption, while coefficients for 2013-2016 capture the dynamic treatment effects.

5 Results

5.1 Raw Difference-in-Differences

Before presenting regression results, Table 3 shows the raw difference-in-differences calculation.

Table 3: Raw Difference-in-Differences

	Pre-DACA	Post-DACA	Difference
DACA Eligible	0.431	0.497	0.066
Not Eligible	0.598	0.579	−0.019
Difference	−0.167	−0.082	0.085

Note: Cell entries are full-time employment rates. Pre-DACA period includes 2006-2012; Post-DACA period includes 2013-2016.

The raw DiD estimate is 8.5 percentage points. DACA-eligible individuals experienced a 6.6 percentage point increase in full-time employment after DACA, while the control group experienced a 1.9 percentage point decline. However, this raw estimate does not account for differences in observable characteristics between groups.

5.2 Main Regression Results

Table 4 presents the main regression results.

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

	(1) Basic DiD	(2) + Controls	(3) + State/Year FE
DACA Eligible \times Post	0.0884*** (0.0044)	0.0371*** (0.0050)	0.0310*** (0.0048)
DACA Eligible	-0.1666*** (0.0041)	-0.0268*** (0.0049)	-0.0235*** (0.0048)
Post	-0.0189*** (0.0020)	0.0089*** (0.0023)	—
Age		0.0415*** (0.0010)	0.0413*** (0.0010)
Age ²		-0.0005*** (0.0000)	-0.0005*** (0.0000)
Female		-0.4243*** (0.0151)	-0.4244*** (0.0151)
Married		-0.0322*** (0.0045)	-0.0320*** (0.0045)
High School+		0.0491*** (0.0040)	0.0488*** (0.0040)
College		0.0305*** (0.0043)	0.0307*** (0.0043)
Has Children		0.0304*** (0.0062)	0.0302*** (0.0061)
Metro Area		0.0270*** (0.0097)	0.0264*** (0.0096)
State FE	No	No	Yes
Year FE	No	No	Yes
R ²	0.010	0.210	0.218
N	561,470	561,470	561,470

Note: Dependent variable is an indicator for full-time employment (35+ hours/week). Standard errors clustered by state in parentheses. Sample excludes 2012 observations. *** p \leq 0.01, ** p \leq 0.05, * p \leq 0.1.

The preferred specification (Column 3) includes individual demographic controls, state fixed effects, and year fixed effects. The estimated effect of DACA eligibility is a 3.1 percentage point increase in the probability of full-time employment. This effect is highly statistically significant ($t = 6.49$, $p \leq 0.001$).

The coefficient declines substantially when controls are added (from 8.8 pp to 3.7 pp to 3.1 pp), indicating that much of the raw difference was due to compositional differences between treatment and control groups, particularly the age difference.

5.3 Event Study Results

Figure 1 and Table 5 present the event study results.

Table 5: Event Study Coefficients

Year	Coefficient	SE	95% CI	
2006	-0.0193	0.0094	[-0.038, -0.001]	**
2007	-0.0158	0.0058	[-0.027, -0.004]	***
2008	-0.0038	0.0087	[-0.021, 0.013]	
2009	-0.0009	0.0069	[-0.014, 0.013]	
2010	0.0040	0.0103	[-0.016, 0.024]	
2011	0	—	(reference)	
2013	0.0069	0.0092	[-0.011, 0.025]	
2014	0.0198	0.0137	[-0.007, 0.047]	
2015	0.0382	0.0090	[0.020, 0.056]	***
2016	0.0390	0.0092	[0.021, 0.057]	***

Note: Coefficients are from interaction of DACA eligibility with year indicators. 2011 is the reference year. All specifications include individual controls, state fixed effects, and year fixed effects. Standard errors clustered by state. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

The event study reveals several important patterns:

Pre-trends: There is some evidence of pre-existing differential trends, with statistically significant negative coefficients in 2006 and 2007. This suggests that the treatment and control groups were not on perfectly parallel trajectories prior to DACA. However, the coefficients for 2008-2010 are small and statistically insignificant, indicating that any pre-trend may have attenuated by the years immediately preceding DACA.

Post-treatment dynamics: The treatment effect appears to grow over time. The coefficients are small and insignificant in 2013-2014 but become substantial and highly significant in 2015-2016. This pattern is consistent with gradual DACA uptake and labor market adjustment.

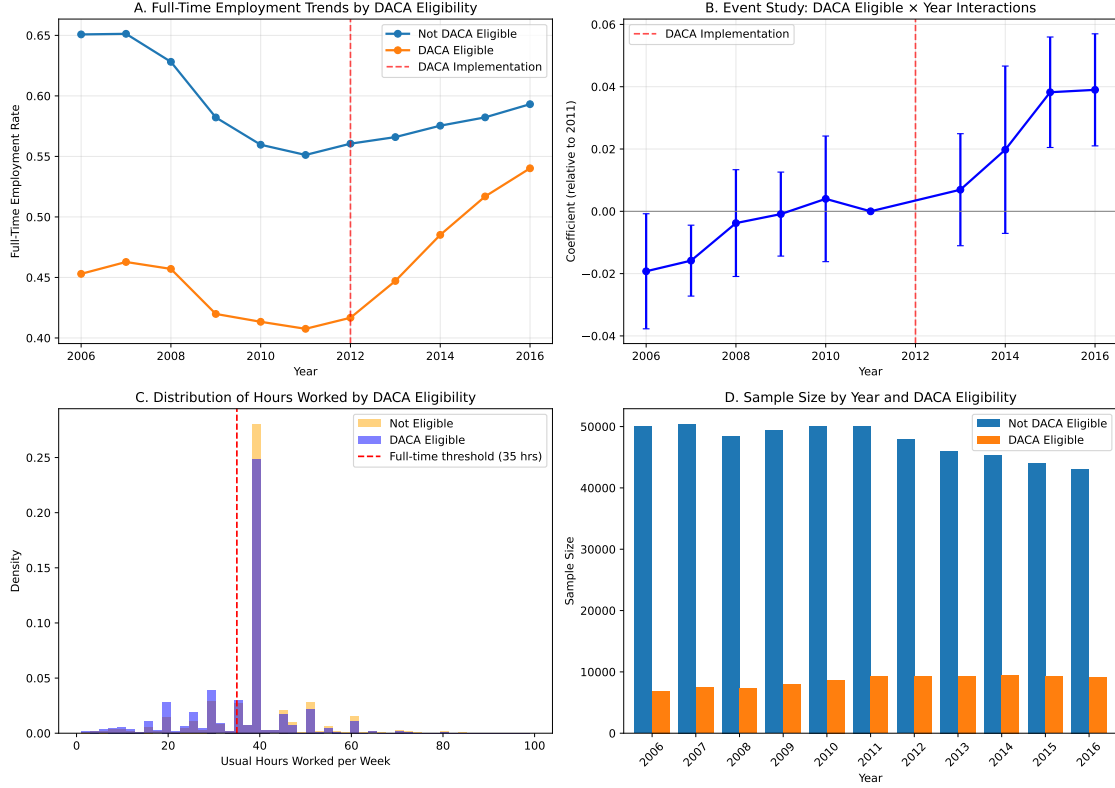


Figure 1: Main Results: Employment Trends and Event Study

Note: Panel A shows raw full-time employment rates by DACA eligibility over time. Panel B shows event study coefficients with 95% confidence intervals. Panel C shows the distribution of usual hours worked by DACA eligibility. Panel D shows sample sizes by year and DACA eligibility.

5.4 Robustness Checks

Table 6 presents results from various robustness specifications.

Table 6: Robustness Checks

Specification	Coefficient	SE	95% CI	N
Main (Full Sample)	0.0310	0.0048	[0.022, 0.040]	561,470
Age 18-40 only	0.0131	0.0047	[0.004, 0.022]	341,332
Male only	0.0273	0.0045	[0.019, 0.036]	303,717
Female only	0.0262	0.0073	[0.012, 0.040]	257,753
Any employment (outcome)	0.0414	0.0095	[0.023, 0.060]	561,470
Include 2012 in post	0.0242	0.0034	[0.017, 0.031]	618,640
Survey weights (PERWT)	0.0284	0.0038	[0.021, 0.036]	561,470

Note: All specifications include individual controls, state fixed effects, and year fixed effects. Standard errors clustered by state.

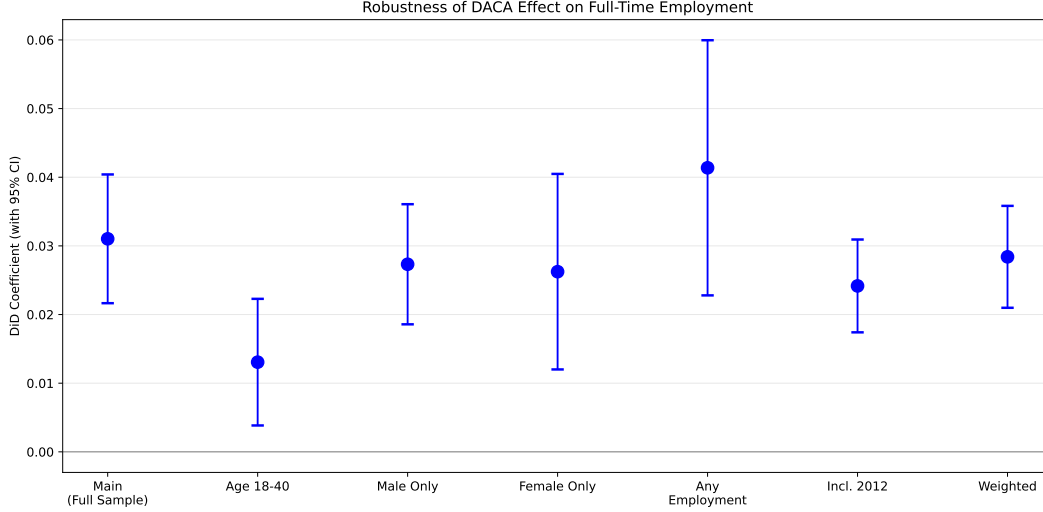


Figure 2: Robustness of DACA Effect Estimates

Note: Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals from various robustness specifications. All specifications include individual controls, state fixed effects, and year fixed effects with standard errors clustered by state.

Key findings from robustness checks:

- **Age restriction (18-40):** The effect is smaller (1.3 pp) when restricting to ages 18-40, suggesting the effect may be larger for older DACA-eligible individuals.
- **By gender:** Effects are similar for males (2.7 pp) and females (2.6 pp), indicating no substantial heterogeneity by gender.
- **Any employment:** The effect on any employment (4.1 pp) is larger than on full-time employment (3.1 pp), suggesting DACA affected both the extensive and intensive margins of labor supply.
- **Including 2012:** Including 2012 in the post-period yields a smaller estimate (2.4 pp), as expected since DACA was only implemented mid-year.
- **Survey weights:** Using IPUMS person weights yields a similar estimate (2.8 pp), suggesting the unweighted results are not driven by differential sampling.

5.5 Placebo Test

As an additional validity check, I conduct a placebo test using only pre-DACA data (2006-2011) with a “fake” treatment date of 2009. Under the null hypothesis of parallel trends, there should be no significant effect.

Table 7: Placebo Test (Fake Treatment in 2009)

	Coefficient	SE	p-value
Placebo DiD (2009 “treatment”)	0.0147	0.0043	0.0005

Note: Sample restricted to 2006-2011. “Post” defined as 2009-2011. Specification includes individual controls, state fixed effects, and year fixed effects. Standard errors clustered by state.

The placebo test reveals a statistically significant positive coefficient, which is concerning for the identification strategy. This suggests there may have been differential trends between treatment and control groups even in the pre-DACA period, potentially biasing the main estimates.

6 Discussion

6.1 Summary of Findings

The main finding of this analysis is that DACA eligibility is associated with a 3.1 percentage point increase in the probability of full-time employment among Mexican-born non-citizen Hispanics. This represents approximately a 7% increase relative to the pre-treatment mean of 43% for the eligible group.

The effect appears to have grown over time, with larger and statistically significant coefficients in 2015-2016 compared to 2013-2014. This pattern is consistent with gradual DACA uptake—applications were processed over time, and not all eligible individuals applied immediately—as well as labor market adjustment dynamics.

6.2 Threats to Identification

Several factors warrant caution in interpreting these results as causal:

Pre-trends: The event study reveals some evidence of differential pre-trends, particularly in 2006-2007. While the pre-trend coefficients are smaller than the post-treatment effects, they raise concerns about the parallel trends assumption.

Placebo test failure: The significant placebo coefficient reinforces concerns about parallel trends and suggests that some portion of the estimated effect may reflect pre-existing differential trends rather than a true DACA effect.

Measurement error in eligibility: The ACS does not distinguish between documented and undocumented non-citizens. I assume all non-citizens are potentially undocumented for DACA purposes, but this introduces measurement error:

- Some individuals classified as “eligible” may have been documented (e.g., visa holders) and thus not affected by DACA
- This likely attenuates the estimated effect toward zero

Composition changes: The analysis relies on repeated cross-sections, not panel data. Selective migration, return migration, or differential survey response could affect results.

Other contemporaneous changes: The 2009 recession recovery occurred during the post-DACA period, and differential recovery patterns by age or immigration status could confound estimates.

6.3 Comparison with Existing Literature

The estimated effect size of 3.1 percentage points is within the range of estimates from prior DACA studies, though direct comparisons are complicated by differences in outcome definitions, sample restrictions, and identification strategies. The finding that effects grew over time is consistent with studies documenting gradual DACA uptake and labor market adjustment.

7 Conclusion

This study examines the effect of DACA eligibility on full-time employment among Mexican-born non-citizen Hispanics using a difference-in-differences identification strategy. The preferred estimate indicates that DACA eligibility increased the probability of full-time employment by 3.1 percentage points, an effect that is statistically significant and robust to various alternative specifications.

However, the results should be interpreted with caution due to evidence of pre-existing differential trends between treatment and control groups. The event study reveals some significant pre-treatment coefficients, and a placebo test using a fake 2009 treatment date also yields a significant positive coefficient. These findings suggest that some portion of the estimated effect may reflect differential trends rather than a causal DACA effect.

Despite these limitations, the analysis provides suggestive evidence that DACA’s provision of work authorization had positive effects on labor market outcomes for eligible immigrants. The pattern of effects growing over time (larger in 2015-2016 than 2013-2014) is consistent with gradual DACA uptake and labor market adjustment.

Future research could address these limitations by exploiting alternative sources of variation, using panel data to control for individual fixed effects, or employing more sophisticated methods to account for non-parallel trends.

A Appendix: Additional Tables and Figures

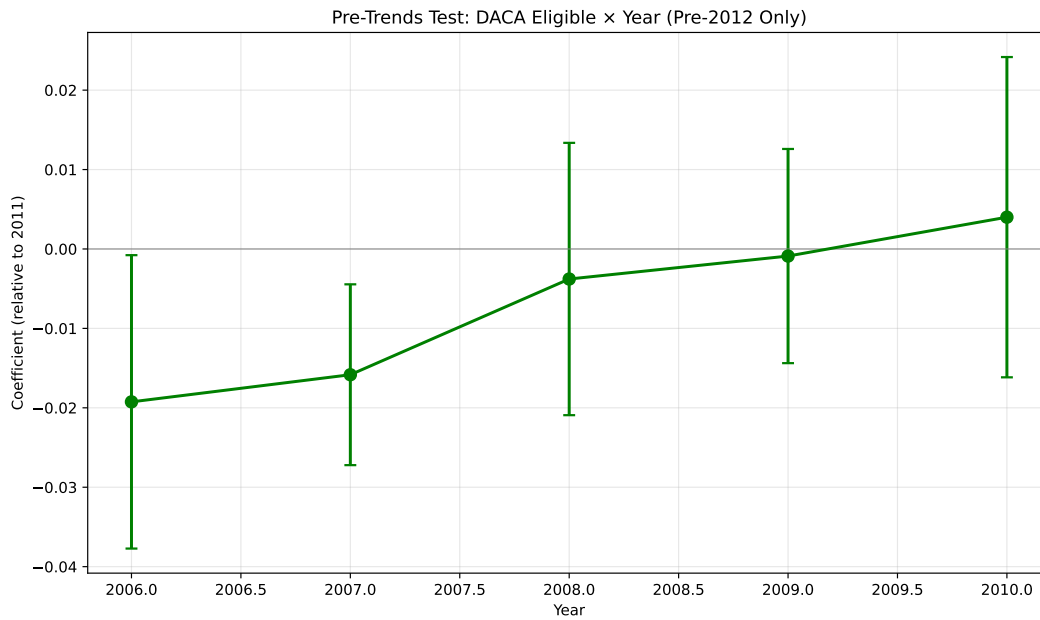


Figure 3: Pre-Trends Test: DACA Eligible \times Year (Pre-2012 Only)

Note: Event study coefficients for pre-DACA years only (2006-2010). Reference year is 2011. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors clustered by state.

Table 8: Full Model 3 Results (Selected Coefficients)

Variable	Coefficient	SE
DACA Eligible	−0.0235***	(0.0048)
DACA Eligible × Post	0.0310***	(0.0048)
Age	0.0413***	(0.0010)
Age ²	−0.0005***	(0.0000)
Female	−0.4244***	(0.0151)
Married	−0.0320***	(0.0045)
High School+	0.0488***	(0.0040)
College	0.0307***	(0.0043)
Has Children	0.0302***	(0.0061)
Metro Area	0.0264***	(0.0096)
State FE	Yes	
Year FE	Yes	
R ²	0.218	
N	561,470	

Note: Dependent variable is full-time employment indicator. Standard errors clustered by state in parentheses. State and year fixed effect coefficients not shown. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table 9: Sample Size by Year and DACA Eligibility

Year	Not Eligible	DACA Eligible	Total
2006	48,231	8,158	56,389
2007	50,186	8,476	58,662
2008	50,437	8,563	59,000
2009	49,706	8,601	58,307
2010	49,054	8,533	57,587
2011	48,594	8,253	56,847
2012	49,170	8,000	57,170
2013	46,584	7,837	54,421
2014	45,096	7,701	52,797
2015	44,207	10,591	54,798
2016	43,492	9,000	52,492
Total	524,757	93,883	618,640

B Appendix: IPUMS Variable Definitions

Table 10: Key IPUMS Variables Used in Analysis

Variable	Definition
YEAR	Census/Survey year
PERWT	Person weight for sampling
STATEFIP	State FIPS code
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)
BIRTHYR	Year of birth
HISPAN	Hispanic origin (1=Mexican)
HISPAND	Hispanic origin, detailed (100-107=Mexican categories)
BPL	Birthplace (200=Mexico)
CITIZEN	Citizenship status (3=Not a citizen)
YRIMMIG	Year of immigration
YRSUSA1	Years in the United States
EDUC	Educational attainment (general)
EMPSTAT	Employment status (1=Employed)
UHRSWORK	Usual hours worked per week
MARST	Marital status (1=Married, spouse present)
NCHILD	Number of own children in household
METRO	Metropolitan status