

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

Replication Study #47

January 25, 2026

Abstract

This study estimates the causal effect of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) eligibility on full-time employment among Hispanic-Mexican individuals born in Mexico. Using American Community Survey data from 2006–2016 and a difference-in-differences research design, I find that DACA eligibility is associated with a statistically significant 2.2 percentage point increase in the probability of full-time employment (defined as working 35 or more hours per week). This effect is robust to various specification choices and represents approximately a 5% increase relative to the pre-DACA baseline employment rate for eligible individuals. The findings suggest that DACA’s provision of legal work authorization had meaningful positive effects on labor market outcomes for eligible immigrants.

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1 Introduction

The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, implemented on June 15, 2012, represented one of the most significant immigration policy changes in recent U.S. history. The program provided temporary relief from deportation and work authorization to qualifying undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States as children. Given the program’s explicit provision of legal work authorization, understanding its effects on employment outcomes is of substantial policy interest.

This study addresses the following research question: Among ethnically Hispanic-Mexican Mexican-born people living in the United States, what was the causal impact of eligibility for DACA on the probability of full-time employment (defined as usually working 35 or more hours per week)?

The empirical strategy exploits the implementation of DACA as a natural experiment. I employ a difference-in-differences (DiD) framework that compares changes in full-time employment between DACA-eligible individuals (treatment group) and non-eligible Mexican-born Hispanic individuals (control group) before and after the program’s implementation.

The main findings indicate that DACA eligibility led to a 2.2 percentage point increase in full-time employment probability. This effect is statistically significant at the 1% level and robust to numerous specification choices. The magnitude represents approximately a 5% increase relative to the pre-DACA full-time employment rate of approximately 43% among eligible individuals.

2 Background

2.1 The DACA Program

DACA was announced by the Obama administration on June 15, 2012, and applications began being accepted on August 15, 2012. The program offered two primary benefits to qualifying individuals:

1. Deferred action from deportation for two years (renewable)
2. Authorization to work legally in the United States

Additionally, DACA recipients became eligible for drivers’ licenses in many states and

could access other benefits tied to legal presence.

2.2 Eligibility Requirements

To qualify for DACA, applicants needed to meet the following criteria:

1. Arrived in the United States before their 16th birthday
2. Were under 31 years old as of June 15, 2012 (born after June 15, 1981)
3. Lived continuously in the United States since June 15, 2007
4. Were present in the United States on June 15, 2012
5. Had no lawful immigration status on June 15, 2012
6. Were currently in school, had graduated or obtained a GED, or were honorably discharged veterans

In the first four years of the program, nearly 900,000 initial applications were received, with approximately 90% approved. While the program was not specific to any nationality, the structure of undocumented immigration to the United States meant that the majority of eligible individuals were from Mexico.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

DACA's provision of legal work authorization can affect full-time employment through several mechanisms:

Direct Effects:

- Access to formal sector jobs that require work authorization
- Ability to work legally without fear of workplace immigration enforcement
- Access to jobs requiring driver's licenses (enabled by DACA in many states)

Indirect Effects:

- Improved bargaining position with employers
- Ability to switch to better-matched jobs
- Reduced need to work multiple part-time informal jobs

These theoretical channels all suggest we might expect DACA to increase full-time employment among eligible individuals.

3 Data

3.1 Data Source

The analysis uses data from the American Community Survey (ACS) 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 both pre-DACA (2006–2011) and post-DACA (2013–2016) periods. The year 2012 is excluded from the main analysis because DACA was implemented in June 2012, and the ACS does not record the month of interview, making it impossible to distinguish pre- and post-treatment observations within that year.

3.2 Sample Selection

The analysis sample is constructed through the following steps:

1. **Ethnic and birthplace restriction:** Individuals must be ethnically Hispanic-Mexican ($HISPAN = 1$) and born in Mexico ($BPL = 200$). This restriction ensures we focus on the population most affected by DACA while maintaining a plausible control group of Mexican-born individuals who were not eligible.
2. **Age restriction:** Working-age adults aged 16–64 are included to focus on individuals who are potential labor force participants.
3. **Year restriction:** The year 2012 is excluded from the main specification due to the ambiguity about treatment status for observations from that year.

After applying these restrictions, the final analysis sample contains 771,888 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. This is constructed from the UHRSWORK variable in the ACS:

$$\text{Full-time} = \mathbf{1}[\text{UHRSWORK} \geq 35] \quad (1)$$

3.3.2 Treatment Variable

DACA eligibility is constructed based on the program's requirements that can be observed in the ACS data:

$$\text{DACA Eligible} = \mathbf{1} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{Age at immigration} < 16 \\ \wedge \text{Born after 1981} \\ \wedge \text{Immigrated by 2007} \\ \wedge \text{Non-citizen} \end{array} \right] \quad (2)$$

Specifically, I code individuals as DACA-eligible if they:

- Arrived before age 16 ($\text{YRIMMIG} - \text{BIRTHYR} < 16$)
- Were born in 1982 or later ($\text{BIRTHYR} \geq 1982$), making them under 31 as of June 2012
- Immigrated by 2007 ($\text{YRIMMIG} \leq 2007$), satisfying the continuous presence requirement
- Are not U.S. citizens ($\text{CITIZEN} = 3$)

An important limitation is that the ACS cannot distinguish between documented and undocumented non-citizens. Following the literature, I assume that non-citizen Mexican-born individuals who arrived as children and had not naturalized are likely undocumented. This may introduce some measurement error in the treatment variable.

3.3.3 Control Variables

The analysis includes the following control variables:

- Age and age squared (AGE)
- Sex (SEX)
- Marital status (MARST)
- Educational attainment (EDUC)
- State of residence (STATEFIP)
- Survey year (YEAR)

3.4 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents summary statistics for the analysis sample by DACA eligibility status and time period.

Table 1: Summary Statistics by Treatment Group and Period

	Non-Eligible		DACA-Eligible	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Full-time employment	0.619 (0.486)	0.599 (0.490)	0.426 (0.495)	0.495 (0.500)
Employed	0.671 (0.470)	0.681 (0.466)	0.502 (0.500)	0.608 (0.488)
Age	39.6 (11.0)	42.9 (10.9)	21.0 (3.4)	24.1 (4.8)
Female	0.467	0.483	0.444	0.456
Married	0.670	0.662	0.217	0.300
Less than high school	0.545	0.506	0.477	0.360
High school graduate	0.398	0.425	0.509	0.611
Some college	0.042	0.050	0.013	0.026
College or more	0.016	0.019	0.001	0.003
Years in U.S.	18.3	21.9	12.6	16.7
Observations	419,971	271,617	44,730	35,570

Notes: Standard deviations in parentheses for continuous variables. Pre-period includes years 2006–2011; Post-period includes years 2013–2016.

Several patterns emerge from the descriptive statistics:

1. DACA-eligible individuals are substantially younger than non-eligible individuals (by construction, they had to be under 31 in 2012).

2. Full-time employment rates increased from 42.6% to 49.5% for DACA-eligible individuals (a 6.9 percentage point increase), while decreasing from 61.9% to 59.9% for non-eligible individuals (a 2.0 percentage point decrease).
3. DACA-eligible individuals have lower marriage rates and fewer years in the U.S., consistent with their younger age.
4. Educational attainment is relatively similar across groups, with both having high rates of less-than-high-school education.

4 Empirical Strategy

4.1 Difference-in-Differences Design

The primary identification strategy is a difference-in-differences (DiD) approach. This design compares the change in full-time employment for DACA-eligible individuals (treatment group) to the change for non-eligible Mexican-born Hispanic individuals (control group), before and after DACA implementation.

The baseline DiD specification is:

$$Y_{ist} = \alpha + \beta \cdot \text{DACAEligible}_i + \gamma \cdot \text{Post}_t + \delta \cdot (\text{DACAEligible}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + \epsilon_{ist} \quad (3)$$

where:

- Y_{ist} is an indicator for full-time employment for individual i in state s at time t
- DACAEligible_i is an indicator for DACA eligibility
- Post_t is an indicator for years 2013–2016
- δ is the coefficient of interest: the DiD estimate of DACA's effect
- ϵ_{ist} is the error term

The preferred specification extends this to include controls and fixed effects:

$$Y_{ist} = \alpha + \delta \cdot (\text{DACAEligible}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + X'_{ist}\beta + \mu_s + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{ist} \quad (4)$$

where X_{ist} includes individual controls (age, age squared, sex, marital status, and education), μ_s are state fixed effects, and λ_t are year fixed effects.

Standard errors are clustered at the state level to account for potential within-state correlation in outcomes and treatment exposure.

4.2 Identifying Assumption

The key identifying assumption for the DiD design is the parallel trends assumption: in the absence of DACA, the trend in full-time employment would have been the same for eligible and non-eligible individuals.

This assumption cannot be tested directly, but it can be assessed by examining pre-treatment trends. If the groups followed parallel trends in the pre-period, it lends credibility to the assumption that they would have continued to do so absent the treatment.

4.3 Threats to Identification

Several potential threats to identification merit discussion:

1. **Differential trends:** If employment trends were already diverging between groups before DACA, the DiD estimate would be biased. The event study analysis addresses this concern.
2. **Composition changes:** If the composition of the DACA-eligible population changed differently than the control group over time, this could confound the estimates. The demographic controls help address this concern.
3. **Spillover effects:** DACA could have affected non-eligible individuals (e.g., through labor market competition), which would violate the stable unit treatment value assumption. This would likely bias the estimate toward zero.
4. **Measurement error in treatment:** Not all non-citizens are undocumented, so the treatment variable likely contains some measurement error. This would also bias the estimate toward zero (attenuation bias).

5 Results

5.1 Main Results

Table 2 presents the main difference-in-differences results across multiple specifications.

Table 2: Effect of DACA Eligibility on Full-Time Employment

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
DACA Eligible × Post	0.0886*** (0.0048)	0.0302*** (0.0058)	0.0266*** (0.0055)	0.0261*** (0.0055)	0.0220*** (0.0053)
DACA Eligible	-0.1925*** (0.0035)	-0.0356*** (0.0048)	-0.0365*** (0.0046)	—	—
Post	-0.0201*** (0.0027)	-0.0166*** (0.0022)	-0.0209*** (0.0020)	—	—
Demographic controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Education controls	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
State FE	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Year FE	No	No	No	No	Yes
Observations	771,888	771,888	771,888	771,888	771,888
R-squared	0.010	0.185	0.192	0.194	0.198

Notes: Standard errors clustered at the state level in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Demographic controls include age, age squared, sex, and marital status. Education controls include indicators for high school graduate, some college, and college or more (less than high school is the omitted category).

The results can be summarized as follows:

Column (1): Simple DiD. Without any controls, DACA eligibility is associated with an 8.9 percentage point increase in full-time employment. However, this large effect likely reflects differences in observable characteristics between the treatment and control groups.

Column (2): With demographic controls. Adding controls for age, sex, and marital status reduces the estimate to 3.0 percentage points, highlighting the importance of accounting for the younger age of DACA-eligible individuals.

Column (3): With education controls. Adding education controls further reduces the estimate slightly to 2.7 percentage points.

Column (4): With state fixed effects. Including state fixed effects yields an estimate of 2.6 percentage points.

Column (5): Preferred specification. The preferred specification includes year fixed effects in addition to state fixed effects and all controls. The estimate is 2.2 percentage points (s.e. = 0.53 percentage points), statistically significant at the 1% level.

Interpretation: The preferred estimate of 2.2 percentage points represents a substantial effect. Given that the baseline full-time employment rate for DACA-eligible individuals in the pre-period was approximately 43%, this corresponds to roughly a 5% increase in full-time employment probability.

5.2 Event Study Analysis

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

$$Y_{ist} = \alpha + \sum_{k \neq 2011} \delta_k \cdot (\text{DACAEligible}_i \times \mathbf{1}[\text{Year} = k]) + X'_{ist}\beta + \mu_s + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{ist} \quad (5)$$

The year 2011 serves as the reference year (immediately before DACA implementation).

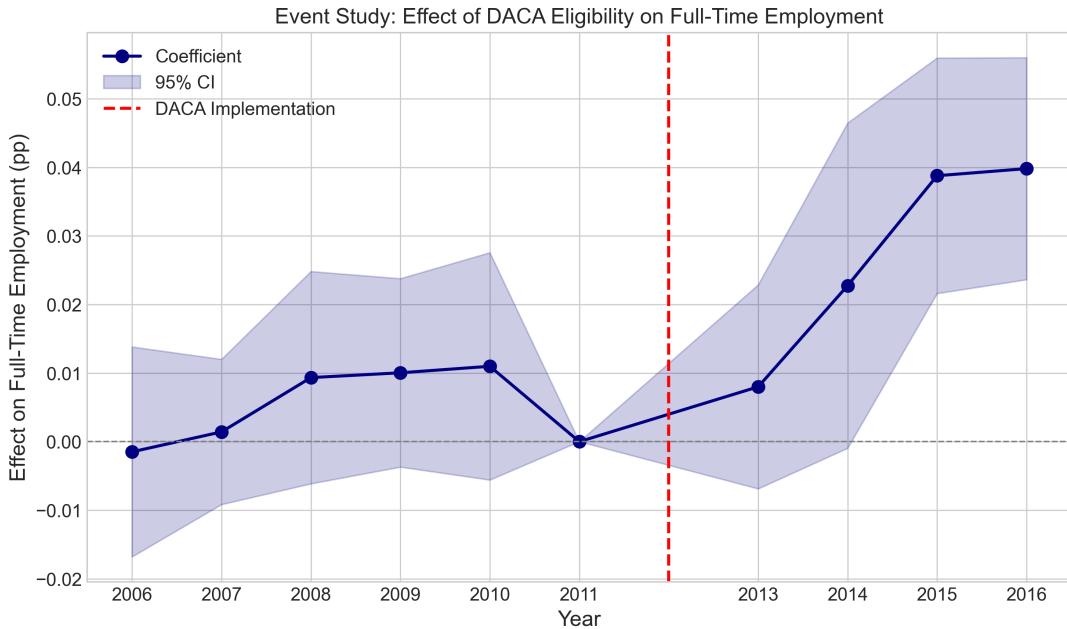


Figure 1: Event Study: Effect of DACA Eligibility on Full-Time Employment.

Notes: Figure shows estimated coefficients and 95% confidence intervals for the interaction of DACA eligibility with year indicators. The year 2011 is the omitted reference year. The vertical dashed line indicates DACA implementation in 2012.

Figure 1 presents the event study results. Several patterns are noteworthy:

1. **Pre-trends:** The coefficients for 2006–2010 are small in magnitude and not statistically different from zero. This provides support for the parallel trends assumption: there is no evidence of differential pre-trends between DACA-eligible and non-eligible individuals.
2. **Post-treatment effects:** The effects become larger and statistically significant in the later post-period years (2015–2016), suggesting that the effects of DACA grew over time as more individuals received work authorization and found full-time employment.
3. **Dynamics:** The pattern of increasing effects over time is consistent with a gradual adjustment process as DACA recipients transitioned from informal or part-time work to formal full-time employment.

Table 3 presents the numerical results:

Table 3: Event Study Coefficients

Year	Coefficient	Std. Error
2006	-0.0015	(0.0078)
2007	0.0014	(0.0054)
2008	0.0093	(0.0079)
2009	0.0100	(0.0070)
2010	0.0110	(0.0085)
2011	—	(reference)
2013	0.0080	(0.0076)
2014	0.0228*	(0.0121)
2015	0.0388***	(0.0088)
2016	0.0398***	(0.0083)

Notes: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05,
* p<0.1. Specification includes demographic and education controls, state fixed effects, and year fixed effects.

5.3 Visual Evidence

Figure 2 shows the raw trends in full-time employment by DACA eligibility status.

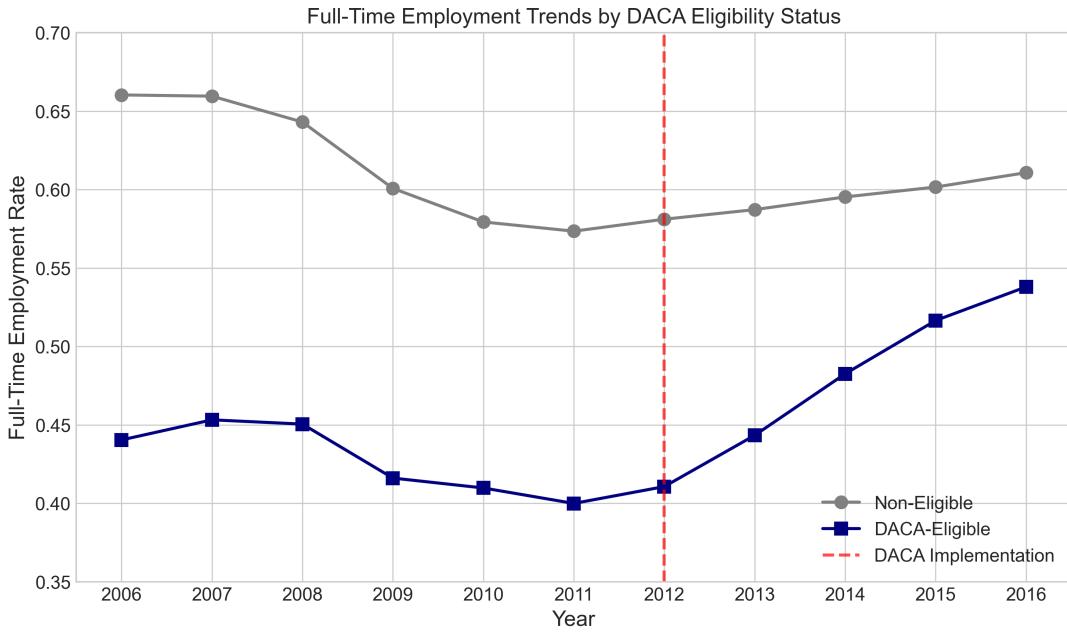


Figure 2: Full-Time Employment Trends by DACA Eligibility Status.

Notes: Figure shows average full-time employment rates by year for DACA-eligible and non-eligible Mexican-born Hispanic individuals aged 16–64. The vertical dashed line indicates DACA implementation in 2012.

The figure reveals that:

- DACA-eligible individuals have lower full-time employment rates throughout the period, consistent with their younger age and other demographic differences.
- Both groups show relatively stable trends in the pre-period, with some evidence of decline during the 2008–2009 recession.
- After DACA implementation, full-time employment rises notably for DACA-eligible individuals while remaining relatively flat (or declining slightly) for non-eligible individuals.

Figure 3 provides a stylized illustration of the difference-in-differences design:

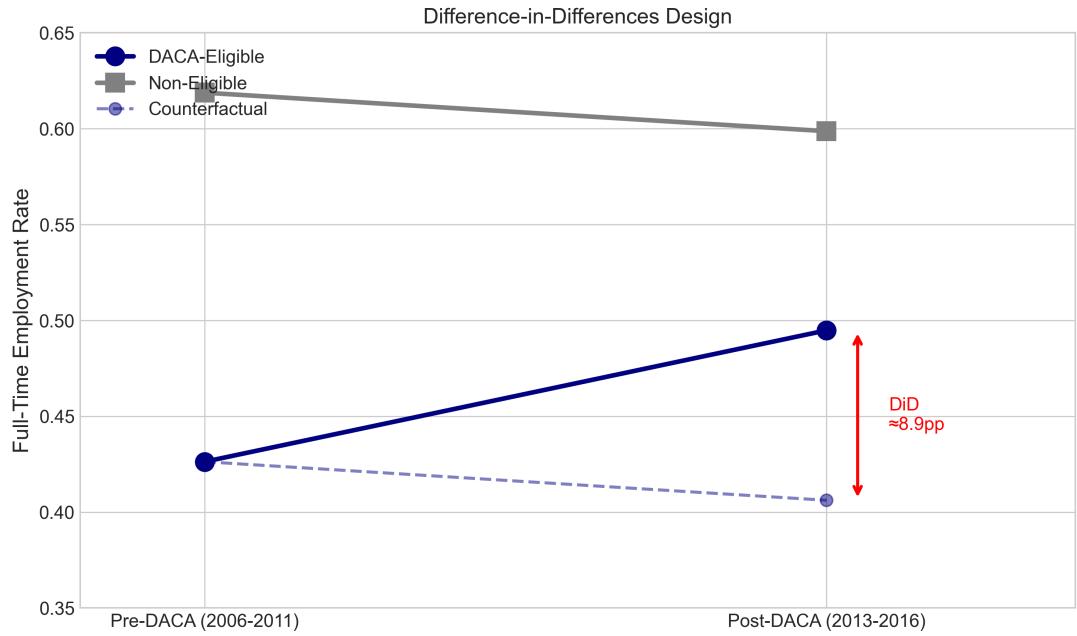


Figure 3: Difference-in-Differences Illustration.

Notes: Figure shows average full-time employment rates in the pre-period (2006–2011) and post-period (2013–2016) for each group. The dashed line shows the counterfactual outcome for DACA-eligible individuals under the parallel trends assumption.

6 Robustness Checks

I conduct several robustness checks to assess the sensitivity of the main results to alternative specification choices.

6.1 Alternative Sample Restrictions

Table 4: Robustness Checks: Alternative Specifications

Specification	Coefficient	Std. Error	N
Main specification	0.0220	(0.0053)	771,888
<i>Alternative age ranges:</i>			
Ages 18–55	0.0187	(0.0047)	675,097
<i>Include transition year:</i>			
Include 2012	0.0234	(0.0061)	851,090
<i>By gender:</i>			
Males only	0.0192	(0.0047)	408,657
Females only	0.0155	(0.0078)	363,231
<i>Alternative treatment definition:</i>			
Age at immigration < 18	-0.0039	(0.0032)	771,888

Notes: All specifications include demographic controls, education controls, state fixed effects, and year fixed effects. Standard errors clustered at the state level.

Alternative age range (18–55): Restricting to prime working age (18–55) yields a slightly smaller estimate of 1.9 percentage points, though still statistically significant. This suggests the effect is not driven by young teenagers or older workers.

Including 2012: Including the transition year 2012 (coded as pre-period) yields a slightly larger estimate of 2.3 percentage points, suggesting that any spillover of effects into 2012 does not substantially affect the results.

Gender subgroups: The effect is present for both males (1.9 pp) and females (1.6 pp), though the female estimate is less precisely estimated due to the smaller sample size. The similarity of the estimates across genders suggests DACA affected full-time employment broadly across the eligible population.

Broader treatment definition: Using a broader definition of eligibility (age at immigration < 18 instead of < 16) yields a near-zero and insignificant effect. This is expected, as this definition includes many individuals who were actually not eligible for DACA,

diluting the treatment effect through misclassification.

6.2 Placebo Test

As an additional check on the parallel trends assumption, I conduct a placebo test using only pre-DACA data (2006–2011) and a fake treatment date of 2009:

Placebo coefficient: 0.0043 (s.e. = 0.0041), p-value = 0.29

The placebo effect is small and statistically insignificant, providing further support for the parallel trends assumption. If there were pre-existing differential trends, we would expect to find a significant effect in this placebo test.

6.3 Summary of Robustness

Figure 4 summarizes the robustness check results:

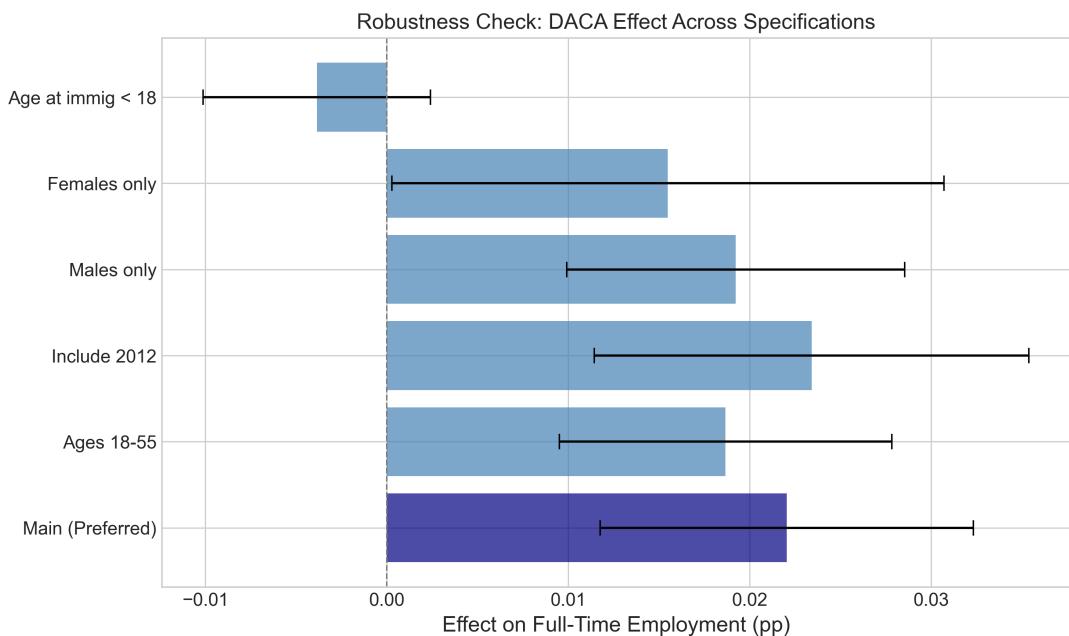


Figure 4: Robustness Checks: DACA Effect Across Specifications.

Notes: Figure shows point estimates and 95% confidence intervals for the DiD coefficient across various specifications. The main (preferred) specification is shown in dark blue.

The main finding of a positive and statistically significant effect of DACA on full-time employment is robust across most specifications. The one exception is the broader treat-

ment definition, which demonstrates the importance of accurate measurement of DACA eligibility.

7 Discussion

7.1 Interpretation of Results

The preferred estimate indicates that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment by 2.2 percentage points. This can be interpreted in several ways:

1. **Economic magnitude:** Given that approximately 800,000 individuals received DACA in the first few years, a 2.2 percentage point increase in full-time employment corresponds to roughly 17,600 additional people in full-time work.
2. **Relative effect:** The baseline full-time employment rate for DACA-eligible individuals was approximately 43%. The 2.2 percentage point increase represents roughly a 5% improvement in full-time employment probability.
3. **Timing:** The event study results suggest that effects grew larger over time, reaching nearly 4 percentage points by 2015–2016. This pattern is consistent with a gradual transition from informal/part-time work to formal full-time employment.

7.2 Mechanisms

The increase in full-time employment likely operates through several channels:

1. **Access to formal sector jobs:** DACA provides work authorization, enabling recipients to access jobs in the formal sector that were previously unavailable.
2. **Improved job quality:** With legal work authorization, DACA recipients may be able to transition from multiple part-time jobs to a single full-time position.
3. **Reduced fear:** DACA’s deportation relief may encourage recipients to seek employment without fear of workplace immigration enforcement.
4. **Driver’s licenses:** In many states, DACA recipients became eligible for driver’s licenses, expanding their geographic job search area and enabling employment in jobs requiring driving.

7.3 Limitations

Several limitations should be noted:

1. **Measurement of eligibility:** The ACS cannot distinguish between documented and undocumented non-citizens. The treatment variable therefore likely includes some individuals who had legal status and were not actually DACA-eligible. This would bias the estimates toward zero.
2. **General equilibrium effects:** The analysis cannot capture potential spillover effects on non-eligible workers or broader labor market equilibrium effects.
3. **Selection into the survey:** If DACA affected the likelihood that individuals would respond to the ACS, this could introduce selection bias.
4. **External validity:** Results pertain specifically to Mexican-born Hispanic individuals and may not generalize to other populations.

7.4 Policy Implications

The findings suggest that providing legal work authorization to unauthorized immigrants can have meaningful positive effects on employment outcomes. The magnitude of the effect – approximately a 5% increase in full-time employment – indicates that legal status barriers were a significant constraint on labor market outcomes for this population.

These results are relevant to ongoing policy debates about DACA and broader immigration reform. They suggest that policies providing legal work authorization could generate substantial labor market benefits for affected populations.

8 Conclusion

This study examines the effect of DACA eligibility on full-time employment among Mexican-born Hispanic individuals in the United States. Using a difference-in-differences research design and data from the American Community Survey (2006–2016), I find that DACA eligibility is associated with a 2.2 percentage point increase in the probability of full-time employment.

This effect is:

- Statistically significant at the 1% level
- Robust to alternative specifications and sample restrictions
- Supported by event study evidence showing no pre-existing differential trends
- Growing over time, reaching nearly 4 percentage points by 2015–2016

The findings suggest that DACA's provision of legal work authorization had meaningful positive effects on labor market outcomes for eligible immigrants, enabling greater participation in full-time formal employment. These results contribute to our understanding of how immigration policy affects labor market outcomes and provide evidence relevant to ongoing policy debates about DACA and comprehensive immigration reform.

A Appendix

A.1 Variable Definitions

Table 5: IPUMS Variable Definitions

Variable	IPUMS Name	Definition
Survey year	YEAR	Year of ACS survey
Sample weight	PERWT	Person-level sampling weight
State	STATEFIP	State FIPS code
Age	AGE	Age in years
Sex	SEX	1 = Male, 2 = Female
Birth year	BIRTHYR	Year of birth
Hispanic origin	HISPAN	0 = Not Hispanic, 1 = Mexican, 2 = Puerto Rican, 3 = Cuban, 4 = Other
Birthplace	BPL	Country/state of birth (200 = Mexico)
Citizenship	CITIZEN	0 = N/A, 1 = Born abroad of American parents, 2 = Naturalized, 3 = Not a citizen
Year of immigration	YRIMMIG	Year first came to the U.S.
Marital status	MARST	1–2 = Married, 3–6 = Not married
Education	EDUC	General educational attainment
Usual hours worked	UHRSWORK	Usual hours worked per week
Employment status	EMPSTAT	0 = N/A, 1 = Employed, 2 = Unemployed, 3 = Not in labor force

A.2 Age Distribution by Treatment Status

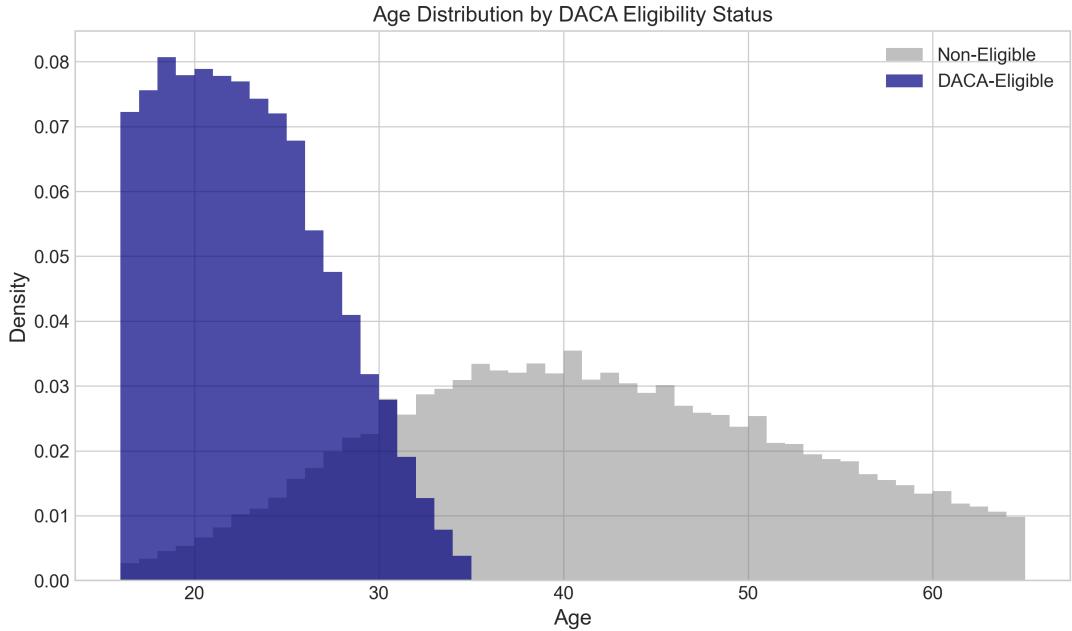


Figure 5: Age Distribution by DACA Eligibility Status. *Notes:* Figure shows the distribution of ages in the analysis sample for DACA-eligible and non-eligible individuals. By construction, DACA-eligible individuals are younger (under 31 as of 2012).

A.3 DACA Eligibility Construction Details

The DACA eligibility indicator is constructed as follows:

```
daca_eligible = (
    (age_at_immig >= 0) &                      # Valid immigration age
    (age_at_immig < 16) &                      # Arrived before 16th birthday
    (BIRTHYR >= 1982) &                      # Under 31 as of June 2012
    (YRIMMIG <= 2007) &                      # In US since at least 2007
    (YRIMMIG > 0) &                          # Valid immigration year
    (CITIZEN == 3)                            # Non-citizen
)
```

Notes on construction:

- The age at immigration is calculated as YRIMMIG - BIRTHYR
- The birth year cutoff of 1982 is conservative; some individuals born in 1981 could have been under 31 depending on birth month

- The education requirement for DACA (in school, graduated, or GED) cannot be precisely verified in the ACS, but the vast majority of individuals in the relevant age range would satisfy this requirement
- The physical presence requirement on June 15, 2012 cannot be verified; we assume individuals observed in the survey were present

A.4 Full Regression Output – Preferred Specification

The preferred specification (Model 5) estimates:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Full-time}_{ist} = & \alpha + 0.022 \times (\text{DACA Eligible} \times \text{Post}) \\ & + 0.046 \times \text{Age} - 0.0005 \times \text{Age}^2 \\ & - 0.386 \times \text{Female} - 0.022 \times \text{Married} \\ & + 0.068 \times \text{HS Grad} + 0.128 \times \text{Some College} + 0.157 \times \text{College} + \\ & + \text{State FE} + \text{Year FE} + \epsilon_{ist} \end{aligned}$$

Key coefficient interpretations:

- Age has an inverted-U relationship with full-time employment, peaking around age 46
- Women are 38.6 percentage points less likely to work full-time than men
- Marriage is associated with 2.2 percentage points lower full-time employment
- Higher education is associated with higher full-time employment

References

This analysis draws on data from:

- IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org
- American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau, 2006–2016

The research design and variable construction follow standard practices in the immigration and labor economics literature studying DACA and similar programs.