

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

Independent Replication Study

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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 data from the American Community Survey (2006-2016), I employ a difference-in-differences research design comparing DACA-eligible non-citizens to ineligible non-citizens before and after the program's implementation in June 2012. The preferred specification indicates that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment probability by approximately 3.0 percentage points (95% CI: 2.1 to 3.8 percentage points). This effect is robust across alternative specifications and subgroup analyses. Event study estimates suggest growing effects over time, with the largest impacts observed in 2015-2016. These findings indicate that DACA had a meaningful positive effect on labor market outcomes for eligible individuals.

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 allowed qualifying undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States as children to obtain temporary protection from deportation and work authorization for a renewable two-year period. This study investigates whether DACA eligibility causally affected full-time employment rates among the target population.

Understanding the labor market effects of DACA is important for several reasons. First, the program’s primary mechanism—legal work authorization—directly targets employment outcomes. Second, employment effects represent a key metric for evaluating the program’s economic impact. Third, the quasi-experimental variation in eligibility created by DACA’s age-based criteria enables causal identification.

This analysis uses data from the American Community Survey (ACS) spanning 2006-2016 to estimate the effect of DACA eligibility on full-time employment. I focus on Mexican-born Hispanic non-citizens, who constitute the majority of DACA-eligible individuals. Using a difference-in-differences design, I compare employment outcomes for DACA-eligible individuals before and after program implementation, relative to comparable non-citizens who did not meet eligibility criteria.

The preferred estimate indicates that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment by approximately 3.0 percentage points. This represents a meaningful improvement in labor market attachment for the eligible population, whose baseline full-time employment rate was 37.1 percent in the pre-DACA period.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 provides background on DACA and its eligibility requirements. Section 3 describes the data sources and sample construction. Section 4 presents the empirical methodology. Section 5 reports main results and robustness checks. Section 6 discusses interpretation and limitations. Section 7 concludes.

2 Background

2.1 The DACA Program

DACA was announced by President Obama on June 15, 2012, through an executive memorandum. The program provided two primary benefits to eligible individuals: (1) deferred action on deportation for two years, and (2) eligibility for work authorization. These protections were renewable, and many recipients renewed their status in subsequent cycles.

Applications began to be accepted on August 15, 2012. In the first four years of the program, nearly 900,000 initial applications were received, with approximately 90 percent approved. The program disproportionately affected immigrants from Mexico due to the structure of unauthorized immigration to the United States.

2.2 Eligibility Requirements

To qualify for DACA, an individual had to meet all of the following criteria as of June 15, 2012:

1. **Arrival before age 16:** The individual must have entered the United States before their 16th birthday.
2. **Age requirement:** The individual must have been under 31 years of age (i.e., born after June 15, 1981).
3. **Continuous presence:** The individual must have lived continuously in the United States since June 15, 2007.
4. **Physical presence:** The individual must have been physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012.
5. **Immigration status:** The individual must have been without lawful immigration status on June 15, 2012.

Additional requirements included meeting education or military service criteria and passing a background check. However, the primary eligibility criteria create observable variation that can be leveraged for causal identification.

2.3 Expected Effects on Employment

DACA could affect employment through multiple channels. The most direct mechanism is legal work authorization, which allows recipients to work in the formal labor market without fear of employer sanctions. Prior to DACA, undocumented workers faced significant barriers to formal employment, often being restricted to informal or underground labor markets with lower wages and fewer protections.

Beyond work authorization, DACA recipients gained eligibility for Social Security numbers and, in some states, driver's licenses. These additional forms of identification could further reduce barriers to employment. Additionally, reduced fear of deportation may have encouraged greater labor market participation and job search activity.

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 demographic, social, economic, and housing information from approximately 3.5 million households per year.

I use the one-year ACS files from 2006 through 2016. This period spans six years before DACA implementation (2006-2011), the implementation year (2012), and four years after implementation (2013-2016). The 2012 data are excluded from the main analysis because the ACS does not record the month of data collection, making it impossible to distinguish pre- and post-DACA observations within that year.

3.2 Sample Construction

The analytical sample is constructed through the following restrictions:

1. **Hispanic-Mexican ethnicity:** HISPAN = 1 (Mexican)
2. **Mexican birthplace:** BPL = 200 (Mexico)
3. **Non-citizen status:** CITIZEN = 3 (not a citizen)
4. **Working age:** Age 16-64 in the survey year
5. **Valid immigration year:** YRIMMIG > 0

The restriction to non-citizens serves as a proxy for undocumented status, as the ACS cannot directly identify documentation status. While this may include some lawful permanent residents who have not naturalized, the majority of non-citizen Mexican immigrants without citizenship papers are likely undocumented.

Table 1 reports sample sizes after each restriction.

Table 1: Sample Construction

Restriction	N	Reduction
Full ACS sample (2006-2016)	33,851,424	—
Hispanic-Mexican (HISPAN = 1)	2,945,521	30,905,903
Mexican-born (BPL = 200)	991,261	1,954,260
Non-citizen (CITIZEN = 3)	701,347	289,914
Ages 16-64	618,640	82,707
Excluding 2012	561,470	57,170

Note: Sample sizes shown after each successive restriction.

3.3 Treatment and Control Groups

I define DACA eligibility based on the criteria observable in the ACS data:

- **Under 31 as of June 2012:** Calculated from BIRTHYR and BIRTHQTR. Individuals born in quarters 3-4 are assumed not to have had their birthday by June 15.
- **Arrived before age 16:** Age at immigration calculated as YRIMMIG minus BIRTHYR.
- **Present since 2007:** $YRIMMIG \leq 2007$.

An individual is classified as DACA-eligible if all three conditions are satisfied. The final sample includes 83,611 observations in the treated (DACA-eligible) group and 477,859 observations in the control (not eligible) group.

3.4 Outcome Variable

The primary outcome is full-time employment, defined as:

$$\text{FullTime}_i = \mathbf{1}[\text{UHRSWORK}_i \geq 35 \text{ and } \text{EMPSTAT}_i = 1] \quad (1)$$

where UHRSWORK captures usual hours worked per week and EMPSTAT indicates employment status. This definition aligns with the Bureau of Labor Statistics definition of full-time work and the specification provided in the research instructions.

3.5 Control Variables

The analysis includes the following control variables:

- **Demographic:** Age, age-squared, female indicator, marital status
- **Education:** Categorical indicators based on EDUC
- **Geographic:** State fixed effects (STATEFIP)

- **Time:** Year fixed effects or post-DACA indicator

Survey weights (PERWT) are used in the preferred specification to account for the ACS complex survey design.

4 Empirical Strategy

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 basic DiD model compares changes in outcomes for the treated group (DACA-eligible) to changes for the control group (not eligible) before and after program implementation.

The identifying assumption is that, absent DACA, full-time employment would have evolved similarly for both groups. This parallel trends assumption cannot be directly tested but can be assessed by examining pre-treatment trends.

4.2 Estimation Equation

The main specification estimates:

$$Y_{ist} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Treated}_i + \beta_2 \text{Post}_t + \delta(\text{Treated}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + X'_i \gamma + \mu_s + \varepsilon_{ist} \quad (2)$$

where:

- Y_{ist} is the full-time employment indicator for individual i in state s at time t
- Treated_i indicates DACA eligibility
- Post_t indicates post-DACA period (2013-2016)
- X_i includes demographic controls

- μ_s are state 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 the control group after program implementation.

4.3 Standard Error Calculation

Standard errors are clustered at the state level to account for within-state correlation in outcomes across individuals and time periods. With 51 state clusters, this approach provides consistent variance estimates under heteroskedasticity and serial correlation.

4.4 Alternative Specifications

I consider several alternative specifications as robustness checks:

1. **No controls:** Simple two-way comparison without covariates
2. **Year fixed effects:** Replace Post_t with year dummies
3. **Unweighted:** Analysis without survey weights
4. **Restricted age range:** Focus on ages 20-40 for closer comparability
5. **Alternative outcome:** Any employment (vs. full-time only)

4.5 Event Study Specification

To examine the evolution of treatment effects over time and assess pre-trends, I estimate an event study model:

$$Y_{ist} = \alpha + \sum_{k \neq 2011} \beta_k (\text{Treated}_i \times \mathbf{1}[t = k]) + \sum_{k \neq 2011} \gamma_k \mathbf{1}[t = k] + X_i' \delta + \mu_s + \varepsilon_{ist} \quad (3)$$

This specification interacts treatment status with year indicators, with 2011 as the reference year (immediately before DACA). The β_k coefficients trace out the dynamic treatment effects and reveal any pre-treatment differences.

5 Results

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents summary statistics for the analysis sample in the pre-DACA period (2006–2011), separately by treatment status.

Table 2: Summary Statistics by DACA Eligibility (Pre-DACA Period)

Variable	Control	Treated	Difference
Full-time employed	0.546	0.371	-0.174***
Any employment	0.654	0.506	-0.148***
Age	38.16	21.14	-17.02***
Female	0.455	0.444	-0.011
Married	0.656	0.224	-0.432***
Less than high school	0.606	0.474	-0.132***
High school diploma	0.288	0.396	0.108***
Some college	0.063	0.115	0.052***
College or more	0.043	0.014	-0.028***
Observations	298,978	46,814	

Note: Means reported. *** indicates difference significant at 1% level.

The treated group (DACA-eligible) is substantially younger than the control group (average age 21 vs. 38), reflecting the age-based eligibility criterion. The treated group also has lower baseline full-time employment rates (37.1% vs. 54.6%), partly explained by age differences. The treated group is less likely to be married and has somewhat higher educational attainment, though both groups have substantial shares without a high school diploma.

Table 3 shows the distribution of observations across treatment status and time period.

Table 3: Sample Sizes by Treatment Status and Period

	Pre-DACA (2006-2011)	Post-DACA (2013-2016)
Control (Not Eligible)	298,978	178,881
Treated (DACA-Eligible)	46,814	36,797
Total	345,792	215,678

5.2 Simple Difference-in-Differences

Table 4 presents the simple 2×2 difference-in-differences calculation for full-time employment rates.

Table 4: Simple Difference-in-Differences

	Pre-DACA	Post-DACA	Change
Control	0.5455	0.5419	-0.0037
Treated	0.3714	0.4515	+0.0800
Difference	-0.1741	-0.0904	+0.0837

The raw difference-in-differences estimate is 8.37 percentage points. The control group experienced a slight decline in full-time employment (-0.37 pp), while the treated group saw an increase of 8.00 percentage points. The difference of 8.37 pp represents the unadjusted treatment effect.

However, this simple comparison does not account for compositional differences between groups. The large age difference, in particular, suggests the need for regression adjustment.

5.3 Main Regression Results

Table 5 presents the main difference-in-differences regression results across multiple specifications.

Table 5: Difference-in-Differences Regression Results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	No Controls	With Controls	Year FE	Weighted
DiD Coefficient (δ)	0.0837*** (0.0056)	0.0305*** (0.0061)	0.0256*** (0.0060)	0.0297*** (0.0043)
Treated	-0.1741*** (0.0043)	-0.0370*** (0.0054)	-0.0263*** (0.0048)	-0.0413*** (0.0044)
Post-DACA	-0.0037 (0.0024)	-0.0042* (0.0024)	—	-0.0016 (0.0022)
Controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	No	No	Yes	No
State FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Weighted	No	No	No	Yes
Observations	561,470	561,470	561,470	561,470
Clusters	51	51	51	51

Note: Standard errors clustered by state in parentheses. * $p<0.10$, ** $p<0.05$, *** $p<0.01$. Controls include age, age-squared, female, married, and education category fixed effects.

The results show:

1. **Column (1):** Without controls, the DiD estimate is 8.37 pp, matching the simple calculation.
2. **Column (2):** Adding demographic controls and state fixed effects reduces the estimate to 3.05 pp. The substantial reduction reflects the importance of accounting for

compositional differences.

3. **Column (3):** Replacing the post-DACA indicator with year fixed effects yields a similar estimate of 2.56 pp.
4. **Column (4):** The preferred specification adds survey weights, producing an estimate of 2.97 pp (95% CI: 2.12 to 3.81 pp).

All specifications produce statistically significant positive effects, ranging from 2.56 to 8.37 percentage points. The controlled estimates cluster around 3 percentage points, suggesting this is the most credible estimate of the treatment effect.

5.4 Preferred Estimate

The preferred specification (Column 4) indicates that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment probability by **2.97 percentage points** (SE = 0.0043, p < 0.001).

Key statistics for the preferred estimate:

- Effect size: 0.0297
- Standard error: 0.0043
- 95% Confidence interval: [0.0212, 0.0381]
- t-statistic: 6.87
- Sample size: 561,470
- Number of state clusters: 51

Relative to the treated group's baseline full-time employment rate of 37.1%, the 2.97 pp increase represents an 8.0% relative improvement.

5.5 Robustness Checks

Table 6 presents results from various robustness checks.

Table 6: Robustness Checks

Specification	Coefficient	SE	95% CI	N
<i>Alternative Sample Definitions</i>				
Restricted ages (20-40)	0.0300	0.0041	[0.022, 0.038]	324,432
<i>Alternative Outcomes</i>				
Any employment	0.0434	0.0097	[0.024, 0.062]	561,470
<i>Subgroup Analyses</i>				
Males only	0.0267	0.0062	[0.014, 0.039]	303,717
Females only	0.0242	0.0079	[0.009, 0.040]	257,753
<i>Placebo Test</i>				
Fake treatment (2008)	0.0156	0.0056	[0.005, 0.027]	345,792

Note: All specifications include demographic controls, education FE, and state FE. Standard errors clustered by state.

5.5.1 Restricted Age Range

Limiting the sample to ages 20-40 creates more comparable treatment and control groups. The estimate of 3.00 pp is nearly identical to the main result, suggesting the findings are not driven by extreme age differences.

5.5.2 Alternative Outcome

Using any employment (EMPSTAT = 1) rather than full-time employment yields a larger effect of 4.34 pp. This suggests DACA increased overall employment, with some of the increase being in part-time positions.

5.5.3 Gender Subgroups

The effects are similar for males (2.67 pp) and females (2.42 pp), with overlapping confidence intervals. This suggests DACA affected both genders approximately equally.

5.5.4 Placebo Test

Assigning a fake treatment date of 2008 and using only pre-DACA data (2006-2011) yields an estimate of 1.56 pp, which is statistically significant ($p = 0.006$). This raises some concern about pre-existing differential trends. However, the placebo effect is substantially smaller than the main effect (1.56 vs. 2.97 pp), and the event study analysis below provides more nuanced evidence on pre-trends.

5.6 Event Study Results

Figure ?? presents the event study estimates, with 2011 as the reference year.

Table 7: Event Study Estimates (Reference Year: 2011)

Year	Coefficient	Std. Error	95% CI
<i>Pre-DACA Period</i>			
2006	-0.0191	0.0079	[-0.035, -0.004]
2007	-0.0130	0.0056	[-0.024, -0.002]
2008	-0.0047	0.0069	[-0.018, 0.009]
2009	-0.0000	0.0058	[-0.011, 0.011]
2010	0.0058	0.0074	[-0.009, 0.020]
<i>Post-DACA Period</i>			
2013	0.0091	0.0075	[-0.006, 0.024]
2014	0.0153	0.0140	[-0.012, 0.043]
2015	0.0299	0.0077	[0.015, 0.045]
2016	0.0309	0.0088	[0.014, 0.048]

The event study reveals several patterns:

1. **Pre-trends:** There is some evidence of differential trends in 2006-2007, with the treated group showing lower relative employment. However, these differences diminish over time and are close to zero by 2009-2011.
2. **Convergence before treatment:** By 2009-2010, the pre-treatment coefficients are small and statistically insignificant, suggesting the parallel trends assumption is approximately satisfied in the years immediately before DACA.
3. **Gradual post-treatment effects:** The post-DACA coefficients show a pattern of gradual increase. Effects in 2013-2014 are positive but not statistically significant at conventional levels. By 2015-2016, effects are larger (around 3 pp) and statistically significant.

4. **Growing effects over time:** The pattern of increasing effects is consistent with gradual DACA uptake. Many eligible individuals may not have immediately applied, and the benefits of work authorization may have taken time to translate into formal employment.

5.7 Interpretation of Effect Magnitude

The preferred estimate of 2.97 percentage points can be interpreted in several ways:

1. **Absolute effect:** DACA eligibility increased the probability of full-time employment by about 3 percentage points.
2. **Relative effect:** Given the treated group's baseline rate of 37.1%, this represents an 8.0% increase in full-time employment.
3. **Comparison to control group change:** While the control group's full-time employment declined slightly (-0.37 pp), the treated group increased substantially ($+8.00$ pp raw, or about $+3$ pp after adjustment).

The effect is economically meaningful. If approximately 1.2 million individuals were DACA-eligible, a 3 pp increase in full-time employment would translate to roughly 36,000 additional individuals in full-time work.

6 Discussion

6.1 Mechanisms

The positive effect of DACA eligibility on full-time employment likely operates through several channels:

1. **Legal work authorization:** The most direct mechanism. DACA recipients can legally work, eliminating employer concerns about sanctions for hiring unauthorized workers.
2. **Access to formal labor markets:** Without work authorization, undocumented individuals are often restricted to informal employment. DACA opened access to jobs that require legal work status.
3. **Reduced deportation fear:** Deferred action reduces the risk of apprehension and deportation, potentially increasing willingness to seek visible employment.
4. **Documentation benefits:** DACA recipients can obtain Social Security numbers and, in many states, driver's licenses. These documents facilitate employment and job search.

6.2 Comparison to Existing Literature

The findings are broadly consistent with prior research on DACA and immigration policy effects on labor market outcomes. Studies using alternative identification strategies or outcome measures have also found positive employment effects of DACA.

The magnitude of the estimated effect (approximately 3 pp) falls within the range of estimates from related studies, though direct comparisons are complicated by differences in sample definitions, outcome measures, and identification strategies.

6.3 Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these results:

1. **Identification of undocumented status:** The ACS cannot distinguish documented from undocumented non-citizens. Using non-citizenship as a proxy may include some legal permanent residents, potentially attenuating the estimated effect.

2. **Pre-trends:** The event study reveals some evidence of differential pre-trends in 2006-2007, though trends converge by 2009-2011. This raises some concern about the parallel trends assumption, though the pattern of convergence is reassuring.
3. **Control group comparability:** The control group (older non-eligible non-citizens) differs substantially from the treatment group in age and other characteristics. While regression controls address observable differences, unobserved differences may remain.
4. **YRIMMIG measurement:** Year of immigration may be subject to recall error or strategic misreporting, potentially leading to misclassification of eligibility status.
5. **Repeated cross-section:** The ACS is a repeated cross-section, not a panel. We cannot track individuals over time or observe within-person changes in employment.
6. **Compositional changes:** Changes in the composition of the Mexican-born non-citizen population over time (due to changes in immigration flows, naturalization, or emigration) could affect the estimates.

6.4 Policy Implications

The finding that DACA increased full-time employment has several policy implications:

1. **Work authorization matters:** Legal work status appears to have meaningful effects on employment outcomes for undocumented populations.
2. **Economic integration:** DACA facilitated economic integration of eligible individuals into the formal labor market.
3. **Fiscal effects:** Increased formal employment likely generated additional tax revenue and reduced reliance on informal employment.

4. Program design: The age-based eligibility criteria created variation that enabled causal analysis but also limited coverage. Alternative designs could reach different populations.

7 Conclusion

This study examines the effect of DACA eligibility on full-time employment among Mexican-born Hispanic non-citizens in the United States. Using American Community Survey data from 2006-2016 and a difference-in-differences research design, I find that DACA eligibility increased full-time employment by approximately 3 percentage points.

The effect is robust across alternative specifications, including models with different control variables, sample restrictions, and weighting schemes. Event study analysis shows that effects grew over time, with the largest impacts observed in 2015-2016. Some evidence of pre-treatment differential trends in 2006-2007 raises minor concerns about the parallel trends assumption, though trends converge before DACA implementation.

These findings indicate that DACA had a meaningful positive effect on labor market outcomes for eligible individuals. By providing work authorization and protection from deportation, the program appears to have enabled greater participation in full-time formal employment.

The results contribute to the literature on immigration policy effects and inform ongoing policy debates about the future of DACA and related programs. They suggest that legal work authorization can substantially improve employment outcomes for undocumented populations.

A Appendix

A.1 Variable Definitions

Table 8: IPUMS Variable Definitions

Variable	Definition
YEAR	Survey year
HISPAN	Hispanic origin (1 = Mexican)
BPL	Birthplace (200 = Mexico)
CITIZEN	Citizenship status (3 = Not a citizen)
BIRTHYR	Year of birth
BIRTHQTR	Quarter of birth (1-4)
YRIMMIG	Year of immigration
AGE	Age in years
SEX	Sex (1 = Male, 2 = Female)
MARST	Marital status
EDUC	Educational attainment
EMPSTAT	Employment status (1 = Employed)
UHRSWORK	Usual hours worked per week
STATEFIP	State FIPS code
PERWT	Person weight

A.2 Additional Sample Details

Table 9: Sample Distribution by Year

Year	Control	Treated	Total
2006	49,052	7,781	56,833
2007	49,744	8,089	57,833
2008	47,783	7,932	55,715
2009	49,312	7,943	57,255
2010	50,702	8,053	58,755
2011	52,385	7,016	59,401
2013	45,812	9,539	55,351
2014	45,158	9,643	54,801
2015	44,264	9,099	53,363
2016	43,647	8,516	52,163
Total	477,859	83,611	561,470

A.3 Full Regression Output

Table 10: Full Regression Output: Preferred Specification

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error
DiD (Treated \times Post)	0.0297***	(0.0043)
Treated	-0.0413***	(0.0044)
Post-DACA	-0.0016	(0.0022)
Age	0.0259***	(0.0008)
Age ²	-0.0003***	(0.0000)
Female	-0.2057***	(0.0022)
Married	0.0619***	(0.0022)
Education FE	Yes	
State FE	Yes	
Observations	561,470	
R-squared	0.120	

A.4 DACA Eligibility Criteria Implementation

The following criteria were used to determine DACA eligibility in the data:

1. Under 31 as of June 15, 2012:

- Calculate age as of June 2012: $age_{2012} = 2012 - BIRTHYR$
- Adjust for birth quarter: If $BIRTHQTR \in \{3, 4\}$, subtract 1 from age (birthday not yet occurred by June 15)
- Eligible if $age_{2012} < 31$

2. Arrived before age 16:

- Calculate age at immigration: $\text{age}_{\text{immig}} = \text{YRIMMIG} - \text{BIRTHYR}$
- Eligible if $\text{age}_{\text{immig}} < 16$

3. In US since June 15, 2007:

- Eligible if $\text{YRIMMIG} \leq 2007$

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

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this analysis come from the American Community Survey as provided by IPUMS USA. The analysis sample includes the 2006-2016 one-year ACS files. Full replication code is available upon request.