



The Long-Term Impact of DACA: Forging Futures Despite DACA's Uncertainty

Findings from the National UnDACAmented Research Project (NURP)

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Executive Summary

For decades, undocumented youth who have grown up in the United States have entered adulthood encountering steep barriers to educational, economic, and social opportunities. Due to congressional inactivity on immigration, these young people have been forced to put their lives on hold. This changed in June of 2012 with the introduction of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, an administrative policy which offers eligible young people work authorization and temporary protection from deportation. Since 2012, more than 800,000 young people have received DACA status.

In this report, we illustrate the profound impact DACA has had on beneficiaries, their families, and their communities over the last seven years. We draw on data from the National UnDACAmended Research Project (NURP)—a longitudinal, national study launched in 2013 to understand how young people were experiencing their DACA status. Our respondents constitute a diverse sample of 408 DACA beneficiaries from six states, representing a vast array of racial, ethnic, economic, and educational backgrounds.

Prior to DACA, our respondents faced numerous barriers that impeded life course trajectories and well-being, as well as prevented them from establishing their independence. Over the course of our study, we watched our DACAmended respondents harness numerous newfound opportunities. For those who had previously left high school, DACA has provided motivation to enroll in GED and adult education programs. For those seeking higher education, DACA has improved access to vocational programs, community colleges, universities, and graduate schools. Work authorization has enabled our respondents to obtain new jobs, access higher wages, and pursue meaningful and stable careers. Together, these educational and economic opportunities have bolstered our respondents' abilities to support their families and strengthen their communities. With broader inclusion in society, our respondents have experienced improved mental health and well-being.

Despite this incredible progress, our respondents continue to face limitations due to the temporary and partial nature of DACA and the lack of protection for family members and loved ones. Ultimately, these barriers limit upward mobility and long-term well-being for our respondents and their families. Additionally, our respondents are subject to a mixed landscape of state- and local-level policies; while those living in inclusive environments may experience improved access to social institutions, those living in restrictive contexts continue to be barred from opportunities despite their DACA status.

More importantly, our respondents are facing new anxieties and fears due to the uncertain future of the DACA program. In 2017, the Trump administration moved to terminate DACA. As this decision is being challenged in the courts, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has stopped accepting new applications; current DACA beneficiaries have been permitted to renew their status. The U.S. Supreme Court is expected to hear oral arguments on November 12, 2019. For our respondents, the potential DACA termination could mean a reversal of the incredible progress made over the last seven years. Once again excluded from economic, educational, and social institutions, our respondents would be pushed out of jobs and educational programs, and they would face new financial hardships and significant psychological distress.

Introduction

Until recently, growing numbers of undocumented children and youth faced legal barriers to economic, educational, and social development.¹ Despite their inclusion in K-12 schools, broader access to the country's educational, economic, and social institutions was limited by their undocumented status. Annually, an estimated 98,000 undocumented students graduate from high schools while another 27,000 do not reach graduation.² Due to congressional inactivity on immigration, 125,000 students are forced to put their lives on hold every year.

On June 15, 2012, this untenable position changed for many young people with the introduction of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, an administrative policy that offered eligible young people temporary protection from deportation along with work authorization and other forms of legal access.³ In the program's seven years, more than 800,000 young people have become "DACAmended," accessing previously unavailable life opportunities. DACA beneficiaries have acquired driver's licenses, obtained employment that better matches their career goals and educational attainment, and improved their financial circumstances.⁴ Those who obtained DACA in their teenage years were able to gain access to these benefits on time with their peers, smoothing their transitions to late adolescence and young adulthood.⁵ DACA beneficiaries are now in a better position to support their families. Many have improved their living arrangements, purchased new cars, and enrolled their children in day care programs. They have also experienced enhanced feelings of security, belonging, and overall well-being.⁶

Shortly after DACA's implementation, we established the National UnDACAmended Research Project (NURP)—a longitudinal, national study seeking to understand how DACA beneficiaries experience their new status. In 2013, we surveyed 2,684 DACA-eligible young adults. Then, in 2015, collaborating with community partners in six different states, we recruited a diverse group of 408 DACA beneficiaries from a vast array of racial, ethnic, economic, and educational backgrounds. We have since carried out three waves of data collection with these respondents.⁷

Upon receiving DACA, our respondents expressed renewed hope in their abilities to realize their future educational and career goals. Jin from California told us, “It gave me hope that my future is not up in the air anymore.” Ahmed from New York said that “I finally feel like I am a part of the U.S., like I’m no longer living in the shadows.” And Jenny from Illinois explained, “In some ways, I feel like it saved my life.”

Seven years into DACA and six and a half years into our study, much has changed for our respondents. A lack of legal status previously impeded many respondents’ abilities to pursue higher education, find stable employment, and establish their independence. However, DACA has opened a wide range of educational, economic, and social opportunities. Many of our respondents have completed postsecondary degrees and started careers. Access to employment and driver’s licenses, for example, has improved respondents’ trajectories, and these gains have been extended to their family members and loved ones, dramatically enhancing their overall quality of life. Our respondents have taken on more responsibilities and more people depend on them now.

The tremendous improvement in our respondents’ trajectories demonstrates the powerful impact of DACA, arguably the most successful policy of immigrant integration in the last three decades. However, as an administrative policy, DACA has limited inclusionary power; it does not undo financial aid exclusions, and it does not offer a pathway to citizenship or other forms of legal immigration status.

On September 5, 2017, the Trump administration moved to terminate DACA. At the time of this writing, the future of the program is being challenged in the court system, and the U.S. Supreme Court is scheduled to hear oral arguments on November 12, 2019. While current beneficiaries may continue to apply for renewal, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is no longer accepting new applications. Hundreds of thousands of young people turning 15 each year will not have the opportunity to benefit from DACA. The uncertain future of the program has also put a damper on current DACA holders’ plans and has generated new anxiety and fear. As of April 30, 2019, 669,080 young people were holding DACA status.⁸

In this report, we summarize the experiences of DACA beneficiaries who have gone through several renewals but continue to worry about their futures in the United States. The narratives of our respondents shed important light on the positive impact of DACA, but also highlight its limitations in a time of uncertainty and heavy immigration enforcement. The results of this study have clear implications for U.S. immigration policy and practice.



DACA as a Vehicle for Social Mobility

Over the course of our study, our respondents made significant strides in their personal and professional lives. When we first met, our respondents were harnessing newfound opportunities to work, drive, establish credit, access health insurance, and enroll in postsecondary programs. In our 2013 survey, large shares of our 2,684 respondents had obtained a new job within their first year of having DACA status and many had increased their earnings. Earlier this year, another national survey of 1,105 DACA beneficiaries found that 91 percent of respondents 25 or older were employed.⁹

By our final interviews, these initial opportunities had translated to upward mobility in respondents' work, school, and personal lives, as DACA incentivized onramps to educational pathways and boosted employment options. GED enrollment and college matriculations materialized into hard-earned degrees and first jobs led to budding professional careers. Growing financial stability and a sense of security improved respondents' health and well-being and produced profound domino effects for families and communities. In the course of seven years, improved economic stability has enabled our respondents to take on new financial obligations—living independently, taking care of their families, enrolling their children in daycare programs, and managing car payments and mortgages.

New Educational Pathways and Opportunities

While DACA does not override exclusion from federal financial aid, it has, nevertheless, enabled beneficiaries to access new educational opportunities. Due to their ability to secure stable employment and earn higher wages, DACA beneficiaries now have greater financial resources to afford higher education. Additionally, many states have extended state-based benefits, like in-state tuition, to DACA beneficiaries, making college more financially feasible.¹⁰ Work authorization has also increased DACA beneficiaries' desires to pursue higher education. By establishing a link between educational investments and tangible employment opportunities, DACA has incentivized educational pursuits. While our respondents have long

recognized the intrinsic value of education, many were discouraged that they could not utilize their degrees in relevant careers upon graduation. Work authorization ensures that educational investments will pay off.

Over the course of our study, our respondents turned educational aspirations into tangible career outcomes. DACA facilitated the completion of vocational programs, associate's degrees, bachelor's degrees, and even graduate and professional degrees from master's programs to law and medical school. Respondents then acquired jobs in related fields. Many used these initial employment opportunities as stepping-stones to launch new careers.

Our interviews offer an important window into *how* these processes unfolded for our respondents. Take Laura, a DACA beneficiary from Arizona. When Laura was seventeen, her father lost his job, and her parents returned to Mexico. Everyday life became a struggle and Laura barely finished high school. Facing the emotional and financial hardships of being separated from her family, Laura put off going to college. Two years later, after learning about DACA, she pulled together the money she had saved from babysitting and cleaning houses for the application fee. It was not long before she received approval and, with it, a new lease on life. Empowered by her newfound ability to pursue lawful employment, Laura enrolled in an 8-month medical assistant training program. While not her preferred pathway to a career in nursing, the medical assistant program was a more affordable and immediate option to jumpstart a career in medicine.

“ It’s a step in the medical field. I can actually work with patients. I can get experience and [an] idea what it’s going to be like. I love the fact that I can actually work with people and help them in some way. ”

Upon graduation from the program, Laura secured a stable job as a medical assistant. Not only was this position in her field of interest, but it provided her a steady income from which to save money. She plans to soon enroll in a degree program in nursing, likely at the associate's level, and then to work her way up to a bachelor's degree.

Laura's story highlights how our respondents have utilized educational opportunities to jump-start new careers. Without access to financial aid, many DACA beneficiaries like Laura are still economically restricted from pursuing their preferred postsecondary pathway. Because licensed programs are shorter and more affordable options, they provide DACA beneficiaries with entry points to a wide range of professions. Participating in these non-residential programs has also allowed them to live at home and to save money for tuition that would otherwise go towards independent living expenses. Many DACA beneficiaries have utilized these programs as stepping-stones to four-year degrees, making incremental career moves. Others have pursued them as gateways to specialized careers in growing industries. Work authorization has provided DACA beneficiaries the assurance that they will be competitive in these industries after completion of relevant training programs.

For respondents completing certificate or licensing programs, 68 percent immediately saw hourly increases from \$5-8 an hour to more than \$14 an hour and 76 percent at least doubled their yearly salaries. Over time, our respondents have gained experience in these fields, allowing them to move up the occupational ladder.

For many of our respondents, DACA facilitated even greater mobility through enrollment in four-year colleges and universities. In our 2013 survey we found that four-year college students were more likely to obtain new jobs, increase their earnings, and obtain paid internships in their chosen fields; across all respondents, the likelihood of obtaining new jobs and increasing earnings was greatest among college graduates.

Take Gabriel from New York City, who was able to enroll in a local college prior to DACA thanks to a private scholarship. When he received DACA in his junior year, Gabriel was able to make the most of his newfound access. With aspirations to become a doctor, he was able to pair his biology major with paid positions in the science and health fields to build his resume for medical school. What's more, DACA allowed Gabriel to envision medical school as a reality—access to work authorization could make it all possible, enabling him to secure a residency position and eventually a medical career.

In 2015, Gabriel explained to us the impact of DACA on his future plans.

“ It’s opened up more doors and opportunities. Like now when I apply to medical school, because I have DACA I have a Social Security [number]. Medical schools are willing to consider me because then I can do residency and all that stuff. ”

During the course of our study, Gabriel graduated from college, took the MCAT, and enrolled in medical school. At the time of our final interview in 2019, he was in his third year of medical school, studying to become a doctor of internal medicine and hoping to one day provide healthcare to under-resourced communities.

As these stories demonstrate, DACA enabled our respondents to pursue their academic goals and complete postsecondary degrees. For many like Laura, work authorization provided the means and incentive to seek vocational training. This strategy launched careers in growing fields. For others like Gabriel, who had managed to access postsecondary education prior to DACA, early opportunities and investments paired with the ability to seek lawful employment provided a significant leg up in accessing career opportunities. While the inability to receive federal financial aid continues to disadvantage respondents, DACA has nevertheless opened new opportunities to pursue higher education and jumpstart careers.

Opening Work and Career Pathways

Since receiving DACA, beneficiaries have become increasingly integrated into our nation’s workforce and economy. Work authorization has served as an entry point towards realizing career aspirations, as well as a basis of financial support for beneficiaries and their families. Work authorization has enabled DACA beneficiaries to acquire jobs in the formal labor market, access newfound workplace agency, and achieve upward mobility.

Prior to DACA, our respondents were pressed to navigate the informal job market and often forced to accept substandard work conditions. With DACA, they have achieved notable social mobility, and as a result, they have experienced increased job satisfaction and decreased workplace vulnerabilities. Key to their success, many of our respondents had multiple men-

tors in high school, were active in extracurricular clubs, held leadership roles in their schools, were involved in their communities, and were connected to organizations. As a result, they possessed the social networks and information necessary to access job-related opportunities.

To illustrate the work and career implications of DACA, we showcase two notable pathways, highlighting the diverse ways DACA has positively impacted employment experiences for both younger and older beneficiaries.

Many of our respondents received DACA in their teenage years, so they were able to access work authorization and driver's licenses at the same time as their American-born and citizen peers. This early access allowed them to make important life course and educational transitions unencumbered by their undocumented status. Take Amir, a DACA beneficiary from New York. Both of his parents held advanced degrees from their native Pakistan. But their undocumented status limited their ability to pursue employment in New York. Amir received DACA while in high school, giving him hope that he could harness employment opportunities that were out of reach for his parents. He excelled in his information technology courses in high school, and as a result, his teacher helped him obtain an after-school job as a computer technician, serving various schools in a local school district. In addition to his work permit, DACA enabled him to obtain a driver's license, which he needed to travel to the various schools.

“ Being able to drive is very, very important. It helps speed up the day. Not just that, for my job I need to drive almost all day. Without having a driver's license, I would not be able to have the current job I do now. ”

Over the next few years, Amir received several wage increases, and he completed additional certificate programs—making as much as \$15 an hour. Amir's stable wages allowed him to save enough money to enroll in a computer science program at a local university. When we talked to Amir in 2019, he was in the final semester of his bachelor's program and had secured a full-time management position at an IT support desk for an international company. In this position he leads a global team of IT workers to improve security and company performance. Not only is Amir utilizing his technology skills, but he is also now a leader in his department,

making \$30 an hour. Obtaining DACA at a young age enabled him to gain early experience in a field that matched his interests and then to pursue an education that strengthened his skillset, making him an even more competitive job candidate.

For DACA beneficiaries who were older at the time of their initial DACA approval, early experiences navigating education and employment were much more difficult. With uncertainties and limited prospects for employment, these years were a struggle for many of our older respondents. However, DACA provided access to never-before held opportunities for employment and postsecondary education.

Oscar, a DACA beneficiary from California, was twenty-four years old when he received his DACA status. Prior to DACA, Oscar financed his education by working in California's agriculture industry, alongside his undocumented parents. Working in the fields exposed him to significant occupational health hazards and additional vulnerabilities because his employer knew he was undocumented. It took him six years to finish his undergraduate education. Ultimately, his hard work paid off in the form of academic success and acceptance into law school. Nevertheless, jobs in his field remained inaccessible, and he worried about the feasibility of pursuing a legal career.

Oscar received DACA during his first year of law school. As a result, he was able to pursue a paid legal internship that summer, keeping pace with his peers. During the course of our study, Oscar finished his law degree, and he is now working at an immigration law firm that serves under-resourced populations in his hometown in California's Central Valley. Oscar credits DACA for his major life accomplishments—a juris doctorate, home ownership, and his law career. He told us that DACA had allowed him substantial professional growth. Oscar exemplifies the possibilities that arise when DACA beneficiaries are given opportunities to realize their professional ambitions.

In the workforce, our respondents experienced newfound access to more stable jobs with higher pay, better benefits, and less stressful working conditions. Over time, access to better paying jobs and new opportunities served as important stepping-stones to career trajectories.

Supporting Families and Strengthening Communities

As discussed above, DACA has provided beneficiaries with improved access to the formal labor market, postsecondary education, and driver's licenses. We find that these opportunities have not only improved beneficiaries' quality of life but have also been extended to support larger units, such as their families. As a result, DACA has improved the quality of life for hundreds of thousands of mixed-status families living with a DACA beneficiary.

Since obtaining DACA, most of our respondents have taken on additional familial responsibilities. Higher wages have enabled many respondents to offer more substantial financial contributions to their households. With the legal ability to drive, many respondents now drive their undocumented family members to and from work and appointments. Access to state-issued identification has also permitted our respondents to act on behalf of their families in purchasing cars and homes, signing leases, and acquiring financial services. And, since DACA has facilitated access to informational networks, many respondents have helped their families access necessary services, from healthcare to organizational support. Taken together, these examples demonstrate how DACA has enabled beneficiaries to dramatically improve the economic and psychological well-being of their families.

Take Maria, a DACA beneficiary from New York City. Maria grew up in a mixed-status family—she and her mom were undocumented, and her younger siblings were U.S. citizens. As a teenager, Maria took on a significant share of household duties. She was tasked with the care of her younger siblings, getting them to and from school, and liaising with the school and other community institutions. Maria's family experienced financial difficulty and housing insecurity, but without state-issued identification, it was often difficult to access support from local social service organizations.

Upon receiving DACA, Maria felt more secure in accessing services for her family and requesting resources they needed.

“ Basically, I did not really have any other ID other than a school ID and that was very difficult for my family because we would visit a lot of social services offices and they would not let me in. Nowadays when I have to go places with [my mother], it gives me a sense of, ‘You cannot tell me I do not belong here anymore.’ ”

Thanks to DACA, Maria was also able to find a steady job, and put away money each month to help her mother secure a lease on a new apartment. With the help of supportive high school teachers, Maria secured scholarships to pay for college in full. By her final interview, Maria had graduated with a bachelor’s degree in Political Science and secured a full-time job at an immigration law firm. These opportunities helped Maria to save her family from homelessness, as her increased wages enabled them to pay rent on their apartment and to meet all their expenses. Eventually, Maria was able to move out of her mother’s house and begin a new life with her partner, continuing to support her family financially while also enjoying more independence.

Just as DACA’s impact has extended to beneficiaries’ families, it has also added a net benefit to their local communities. Many of our respondents utilized their newfound work authorization to bring essential services and resources to their communities. As we described earlier, Oscar was utilizing his law degree to provide necessary legal services in his hometown in California, and Gabriel looked forward to working as a doctor in his underserved neighborhood in New York. In addition, temporary protection from deportation enabled our respondents to watch out for undocumented family members and neighbors amid heavy immigration enforcement.

In addition to supporting their immediate local communities, our respondents have also found new agency to advocate for the broader immigrant community. Many beneficiaries have become more politically and civically engaged. With temporary protection from deportation, our respondents have felt empowered to fight for the rights of their unprotected family and community members. Through their advocacy work, these respondents have often learned new skills—such as assisting with DACA applications—and have made new connections—like immigration attorneys—that are valuable for their families and communities. Finally, by connecting to advocacy groups, respondents have also met other DACA beneficiaries who have

provided necessary emotional support. For many, community engagement has provided an added sense of purpose and drive to engage with broader community struggles, while also cultivating support systems.

For Juan, a DACA beneficiary from California, new opportunities have allowed him to activate prior experience to benefit his community. Growing up, Juan had a difficult childhood. His parents struggled with isolation and bouts of depression, owing to their undocumented status. Juan kept himself busy with extracurricular activities at school in order to keep his mind off his troubles at home. Over time, Juan grew to thrive in these settings and valued opportunities for civic and political participation. He developed important leadership skills and learned about various social justice issues affecting himself and his immigrant community. In addition, these pursuits provided Juan a support system he did not have access to in his home life. Still, at times, he felt as though his undocumented status held him back from fully participating. When he received DACA, Juan started putting his experience and connections to work. His earlier volunteer work connected him with a California state legislator who hired him to work for his office. In this new role, Juan is now able to convey the needs of his community directly to state legislators. Members of his community also feel that their state representative is much more accessible.

Since obtaining DACA, our respondents have harnessed opportunities to make significant improvements in their financial stability and well-being. In addition, they have utilized these opportunities to better support their families, neighborhoods, and broader communities. With new employment opportunities and increased wages, they are better able to financially support their families and address family members' basic needs, beyond those of their own. Finally, for many of our respondents, their DACA status has afforded new protection and agency that facilitates political learning and democratic participation.

Improved Health and Well-Being

Undocumented immigrant youth encounter a host of obstacles that challenge their well-being. Uncertain futures, exclusion from social institutions, stigmatized identities, and family

stressors can cause significant psychological distress. Before DACA, our respondents' undocumented status negatively impacted their mental health and perpetuated feelings of isolation. Everyday life was marked by fear, anxiety, and disillusion. Many of these emotional challenges created accompanying physical side effects like exhaustion, headaches, and ulcers.

DACA's deportation relief had a positive effect on respondents' sense of safety and security. In our 2013 survey, two-thirds of our respondents told us they were less afraid of law enforcement and immigration officers. More than 70 percent said they felt less stress in their everyday lives. DACA has affirmed beneficiaries' long-standing residency in the United States and has fostered a greater sense of recognition and belonging. In many cases, protection from deportation has eased beneficiaries' anxieties and enabled them to envision futures for themselves in the United States. In the example that follows, we illustrate the negative mental health impacts of growing up undocumented and demonstrate how DACA provides much-needed psychological relief and support.

In high school student, Valeria maintained a 4.0 GPA, played volleyball, and participated in various school-based clubs and extracurricular activities. Nevertheless, her high school experience was not easy. Valeria attended a politically conservative high school in California, where anti-immigrant rhetoric was common, and educators insisted that without legal status she could not have a future in this country. During her junior year, when peers started thinking about the college application process, Valeria realized that her undocumented status would make college inaccessible. She experienced severe depression and anxiety, and her grades dropped dramatically for the remainder of her high school years. She recalled one particular conversation with a counselor that left her feeling hopeless and alienated.

“ When he told me ‘You don’t have papers, you don’t deserve to be here.’ It was very hard. I went from being [a] straight-A student to getting Bs and Cs ‘cause I’m like ‘I don’t care anymore. What am I gonna do with my life? He’s right. I don’t belong here. Why am I even trying?’ It was very hard. It was a very dark period in my life. I would cry a lot. I would cry every night. I couldn’t sleep. I had a panic attack one time ‘cause I was just so frustrated. ”

After Valeria graduated from high school, she had few employment options. She found work in various low-wage job sectors—restaurants, call centers, light manufacturing—where she was paid cash. For years, Valeria experienced depression and anxiety that stemmed from shame about her status and a lack of belonging. When she obtained DACA, she finally began to visualize a positive future. She was accepted to a four-year university near her hometown and began to experience much better health. She credits DACA for affirming her personhood and providing the mental stability necessary to complete her education.

For Valeria and others, DACA has also improved their physical well-being. With new forms of access, DACA has helped many beneficiaries access health insurance. While some of our respondents have received insurance through their employers or higher education institutions, others in immigrant-supportive states have qualified for state-funded Medicaid. Possessing health insurance has enabled these respondents to seek treatment for both acute and chronic illnesses and injuries, see a healthcare provider regularly, and receive proper care and medication. In the story that follows, we see the impacts which access to health insurance had for Jesse, who has a debilitating disability.

For Jesse, a DACA beneficiary with a debilitating disability, access to health insurance had a lasting impact. As an infant, Jesse was diagnosed with a lifelong disability.¹¹ Living in the United States provided necessary access to medical professionals who understood Jesse's diagnosis. This early care allowed Jesse to maintain a positive outlook and eventually enroll in a four-year university to study science. However, as an adult, long-term options for health care were starting to dwindle.

DACA brought Jesse two major life changes. First, as of January 1, 2014, DACA afforded Jesse the opportunity to enroll in Medi-Cal, California's Medicaid program that provides free or low-cost medical services for children and adults with limited income and resources.¹² Second, work authorization enabled Jesse to obtain a new job with increased earnings. This improved financial stability enabled Jesse to become financially independent, as well as maintain full-time student status. During the course of our study, Jesse completed an undergraduate degree, married, and found a full-time job at a liberal arts college to support disadvantaged students. By enabling access to life-changing medical services, Jesse was able to live a full life.

“ I have a physical disability that I have [had] since birth. The insurance that I was able to get through DACA... I think the biggest loss for me personally would be the loss of healthcare. I wear braces, for example, on my legs, and I used to replace them every few years... [Without insurance] I could seriously do a lot damage [to] my legs and ultimately not be able to walk. ”

Jesse's increased independence means relying less on their parents, relieving them of their caretaking duties. Knowing that Jesse has access to care and support, family worries have markedly decreased.

For many of our respondents, DACA has improved feelings of confidence, security, and stability. Others have experienced improved access to health care. As a result, they feel healthier and are subsequently better able to navigate uncertain futures. Research demonstrates that the improved health and well-being of an individual results in better outcomes for their respective families, communities, and society as a whole. By extension, improved health and well-being for DACA beneficiaries advances general social progress.

Opening Access to Travel

As the above examples demonstrate, access to state-issued identification has enabled DACA beneficiaries to obtain jobs, access resources, and drive legally. Our respondents pointed to another important benefit of state-issued identification: the ability to travel without worry. While many undocumented immigrants have been able to board domestic flights with a passport from their birth country, traveling still carries significant risks. For undocumented immigrants who lack a passport, air travel is nearly impossible. Under DACA, many of our respondents began to utilize their new IDs to travel for work, explore new places, or visit family members and friends in other parts of the United States. For Sofia, a DACA beneficiary who grew up in Arizona, the ability to travel allowed her to reunite with her family and receive important support during a challenging time in her life.

After her junior year in high school, Sofia moved from Arizona to New York to live with a close family friend, who had offered to pay for Sofia's college tuition and living expenses. Sofia was hesitant to leave her family, but she knew it was the only way to afford a college education.

While Sofia loved her new high school and her college in New York, she missed her family. Without a state-issued ID or a passport, Sofia was unable to travel back to Arizona to visit her family. For Sofia, one of the biggest benefits of receiving DACA was the opportunity to reunite with her parents.

“ As soon as I got DACA, the first thing I did—it had been four years since I had seen my family—and the first thing I did was buy myself a ticket and go back to Arizona. Now I travel once or twice a year to go see them. ”

Over the course of our study, Sofia graduated with a bachelor’s degree in architecture and obtained a job at an architecture firm. With a steady income and benefits, she was able to move out of her family friend’s home and become fully independent. Regular visits to Arizona to see her family helped her to recharge, providing her the confidence and encouragement to keep going.

In addition to opening domestic travel, DACA allows beneficiaries to travel internationally through Advance Parole.¹³ Several of our respondents have benefited from this opportunity to study abroad. Others have reunited with immediate and extended family members, from whom they had been separated for years.

Isabella was born in the Dominican Republic, where she lived until she was 14. When she began struggling in high school, her parents decided to send her to live with extended family in the United States. Being separated from her parents and siblings was emotionally taxing, and Isabella struggled with feelings of hopelessness and isolation. However, DACA and more specifically, Advanced Parole, provided her with needed mental stability. Isabella applied for Advance Parole while in college to study abroad and visit her family, whom she had been separated from for nearly fourteen years.

Opening up opportunities to travel is a less visible, yet powerfully impactful function of DACA. For respondents, this meant increased comfort and freedom to board planes, trains, and buses to visit relatives and friends. Having the ability to travel also improved work opportunities. It would be no exaggeration to say that it enlarged their worlds.

The Experience of DACA Beneficiaries Varies According to State and Local Contexts

The Impact of State and Local Policies

Overall, DACA enabled our respondents to take giant steps towards the American mainstream. However, our interviews with beneficiaries in diverse state contexts underscores an important point: the ability to take full advantage of DACA's benefits is structured by where one lives. Over the last decade, as congressional action on immigration has stalled, several states, counties, and municipalities have taken steps to respond to immigration issues. In addition, where immigrants live—whether in close proximity to social and educational services, in cities with extensive public transportation options, or in locales where they feel welcomed—plays an important role in their process of integration. This uneven geography of local policies and varying responses to immigrant integration has come to shape diverse experiences, demonstrating that today, perhaps more so than ever before, one's place of residence within the United States dramatically shapes a multitude of experiences based on local opportunities and impediments.

While undocumented immigrant young people receive a K-12 education by federal law, they experience varying contexts of incorporation depending on where they live. Some states have opened up access to broader participation—offering undocumented immigrants the ability to apply for driver's licenses and in-state tuition at public universities. Others have adopted a more restrictive stance—for example, by attempting to criminalize unauthorized presence and exclude undocumented immigrants from public universities.

Many of our respondents experienced limitations to their social mobility when interfacing state and local policies which purposefully exclude DACA beneficiaries. Although DACA is a federal program, beneficiaries are subject to varying policies at the state and local levels which pattern DACA's impact. While some states and localities have passed legislation permitting the inclusion of DACA beneficiaries in the social fabric, others have attempted to further exclude them. These state and local policies can impact beneficiaries' abilities to pursue higher education, enter certain career fields, and feel safe in their own homes and neighborhoods.

Access to Higher Education

For many of its beneficiaries, DACA has significantly lowered structural barriers that have impeded undocumented students' access to a college education. DACA beneficiaries in certain states have also been able to take advantage of existing state policies designed to assist undocumented students. Presently, undocumented students in at least nineteen states and in the District of Columbia qualify to pay in-state tuition at public colleges and universities. At least seven states also allow undocumented students to receive state financial aid. And four states allow their public colleges and universities to offer private institutional aid or scholarships to students who qualify for in-state tuition, regardless of their immigration status.

However, DACA beneficiaries in some states are at a decided disadvantage because of exclusionary policies. For example, three states—Arizona, Georgia and Indiana—specifically exclude undocumented students from in-state tuition rates and two states—Alabama and South Carolina—prohibit undocumented students from enrolling at any public postsecondary institution. Additionally, Georgia excludes undocumented immigrants from its top three public university systems.

Since DACA's implementation, some states have passed legislation to provide greater inclusion specifically for DACA beneficiaries, despite otherwise restrictive policies for undocumented immigrants in general. For example, while only 12 states along with the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico extend driving privileges to undocumented immigrants, all 50 states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have passed legislation to permit driver's license eligibility to DACA beneficiaries. At least three states that previously did not have tuition equity policies on the books—Virginia, Massachusetts, and Ohio—along with certain institutions and systems in Arizona, Missouri and New Hampshire, have passed legislation permitting DACA beneficiaries to pay in-state tuition at state colleges and universities. And, while Alabama and South Carolina ban undocumented students from public higher education in their states, South Carolina has passed legislation permitting DACA beneficiaries to attend its colleges and universities while select community colleges and universities in Alabama have allowed DACA beneficiaries to enroll. In addition, several local and national scholarship funds that did not previously provide scholarships to undocumented students have extended

eligibility to DACA beneficiaries. As a result of these various actions, DACA beneficiaries in certain states have experienced improved access not otherwise extended to undocumented immigrants not covered by DACA, increasing the gap between DACA beneficiaries and their unDACAmented counterparts.

For those in our study, respondents in California, New York, and Illinois, in particular, have benefited from their state's efforts to improve college access for DACA beneficiaries. Consequently, beneficiaries in those three states had better education outcomes, as they could access in-state tuition rates. Additionally, beneficiaries in California could access state-based financial aid—including scholarships, loans, and work study positions.¹⁴ Several of the respondents profiled thus far have benefited from these inclusive educational policies. Tuition policies in New York allowed Amir and Isabella to afford college. In California, Valeria and Jesse benefited from access to state financial aid in addition to in-state tuition, making college even more affordable.

In South Carolina, recent changes have also benefited our respondents there. For Luis, a DACA beneficiary in South Carolina, changes in state laws dramatically improved his educational prospects. In 2007, the state legislature passed HB3620, excluding undocumented immigrants from receiving any form of student aid for higher education in South Carolina, including tuition assistance and scholarships. One year later, HB4400 was signed into law, making South Carolina the first state where undocumented students were altogether prohibited from enrolling in public colleges and universities in the state. However, after DACA was initiated, the state's Commission on Higher Education announced that the restrictions of HB4400 would not apply to DACA beneficiaries, allowing Luis and others access to higher education.¹⁵

This change in state policy had a profound effect on Luis, who moved to South Carolina when he was nine years old. During his senior year of high school, when Luis realized he would not be able to attend college in his home state of South Carolina because of the ban, he was crushed. Instead of pursuing college, Luis worked in restaurants after graduating from high school. He felt as though he was wasting his time and talents. Two years later, his life completely changed when he was approved for DACA. Due to the South Carolina Commission on

Higher Education’s decision exempting DACA beneficiaries from bans on college enrollment, he could finally attend a local community college. As Luis explained, “[DACA] instilled a new hope in me. It’s what’s driving me forward to do the best I can again and to focus and be responsible.”

By contrast, the other two states in our study—Arizona and Georgia—have taken measures to restrict college access for DACA beneficiaries. In these two states, our respondents experienced additional challenges in pursuing a postsecondary education. They spoke at length about how being barred from state-based financial assistance and being subject to out-of-state tuition rates made college access and completion nearly impossible. Additionally, DACA beneficiaries in Georgia cannot enroll in the state’s top public institutions—University of Georgia, Georgia Institute of Technology, and Georgia College and State University. Subject to tuition costs far beyond those of their high school peers, DACA beneficiaries in these states must often put their college aspirations on hold, despite their academic credentials.

For Melanie, a DACA beneficiary living in Arizona, state policies limited what she hoped was possible through DACA. Melanie had always dreamed of going to college, but as an undocumented student in high school, she realized that there would be roadblocks in her way. After graduation, Melanie enrolled in community college. While she had the credentials and the will to start a bachelor’s degree, restrictions from in-state tuition in Arizona meant that community college was her only option. Only able to take a few classes at a time, she worried that it would take her years to finish an associates degree, and that she would not have any remaining funds for college by the time she could transfer to a four-year university.

Melanie’s future brightened when she received DACA, which, at the time, qualified her for in-state tuition rates in Arizona. She transferred to a top public university, pursuing a bachelor’s degree in social work, and she planned to continue for a master’s degree after. On April 9, 2018, the Supreme Court of Arizona ruled that DACA beneficiaries are ineligible for in-state tuition at Arizona colleges and universities. While grateful to have a college education, Melanie accepted that she would not be able to continue for her master’s degree, as she had hoped.

“ I was hoping that once I got out of school, I would be able to get my master’s degree. And then all the sudden, DACA students don’t qualify for in-state tuition. So, that was definitely another bummer. Especially because I was pursuing a double major. There’s different policies that come out all the time that are trying to take away different rights that were granted as part of being a DACA recipient. ”

For Melanie, restrictive higher education policies derailed her educational trajectory at a critical time, forcing her to drop a second undergraduate major and forgo graduate school. Unfortunately, these barriers hampered beneficiaries’ progress and ultimately mitigated DACA’s potential to transform their lives.

Access to Occupational Licenses

In addition to shaping DACA beneficiaries’ access to college, states can also determine which professions they can pursue. Nearly 30 percent of jobs—from cosmetologist to medical doctor—require professional licenses to practice. These licensing requirements vary from state to state. Of the states in our study, California, New York, and Illinois have passed legislation to include DACA beneficiaries in licensure policies. In these states, DACA beneficiaries can enter licensed career fields after attaining the necessary academic credentials. In earlier examples, we showed how respondents were able to pursue licensed professions. Oscar, for example, was able to practice law because California allows DACA beneficiaries admission into the state bar association. Gabriel knew that he could pursue medical school, as New York allows DACA beneficiaries to receive medical licenses. Finally, Sofia has been able to study for her Architect Registration Examination, since New York enables DACA beneficiaries to receive architecture licenses.

By contrast, Arizona, Georgia, and South Carolina have not extended access to professional licensure to DACA beneficiaries. Even when DACA beneficiaries complete the relevant training programs in these states, they are denied the right to practice in licensed career fields. To this point, we showcase the story of Raul, a DACA beneficiary in Arizona who maximized the educational opportunities available to him but still could not circumvent state policies to practice the career he envisioned for himself.

Not only did Raul maintain good grades in high school, but he was also involved in sports and student government. With the support and mentorship of a teacher, Raul enrolled in college prep courses, including an arts summer program at a local university. There, Raul took an immediate interest in architecture. In his senior year, he was accepted into the architecture program at this university, but he could not afford tuition. Raul briefly attended a local community college and started taking prerequisites for architecture. But, he soon had to drop out due to financial struggles. What's more, he came to learn that architecture was a licensed career field, and that he would not be able to receive an architecture license as a DACA beneficiary in Arizona. At the time of our last interview, Raul was working at a call center. While his job was manageable, it was far from his original aspirations. Raul was considering other options, but he feels that local professional license requirements will continue to limit his opportunities.

Raul and Melanie's stories highlight the ways in which restrictive state policies can prohibit DACA beneficiaries from actualizing their academic and career potential. Both of these young people feel they could have achieved more had they not resided in Arizona, an immigrant-restrictive state.

Navigating Immigration Enforcement

State, county, and municipal policies can also impact DACA beneficiaries' feelings of safety and security, even with temporary protection from deportation. The presence of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the frequency of immigration raids, and the prevalence of deportations are neither uniform across states nor uniform across counties or communities within a state. While some states and localities have chosen to cooperate with federal immigration enforcement efforts, others have chosen to resist.

As discussed earlier, DACA beneficiaries are acutely aware of the delicate nature of their status. Many of our respondents expressed fear that DACA could be taken away at any time, leaving them vulnerable to deportation. Worries about safety and security were often heightened by the presence of ICE officers in their communities. To illustrate the extent to which feelings

of danger and vulnerability frame beneficiaries' everyday lives, we offer the reflections of Eddie, a DACA beneficiary from Arizona who, while protected by DACA, continues to worry about deportation in a state that has experienced high-profile enforcement efforts.

“ I try not to think about [being deported]. When it does happen—like saying I’m driving. I’m driving fine. Driving the speed limit, hands on the wheel, ten and two. Then, I see a cop behind me. I think ‘Was I speeding? Was I going five above the speed limit? Did I turn? When I turned, did I use the signal right? Is he looking at me? Is he looking at my skin?’ I think ‘Am I gonna get deported, if I get stopped? Am I gonna go to jail, and then get deported? If I do get deported, am I gonna get deported where I live, or used to live? Or are they gonna send me far away?’ They gonna be like, ‘Oh, he lives here? Let’s send him over there.’ If he does stop me, ‘Is he gonna take my car away? Where is it gonna go? My mom, how are they gonna get help?’—All that goes through my head. That affects me mentally, physically, emotionally. ”

The experiences of Melanie, Raul, and Eddie point to the ways in which restrictive state and local policies have limited DACA’s transformative power. While inclusive state and local policies have served to enhance DACA’s impact, restrictive state and local policies have exacerbated DACA beneficiaries’ vulnerability.



Remaining Barriers to Social and Economic Progress

While our respondents have made significant strides in their work, school, and personal lives, several remaining barriers have limited their progress. Ultimately, DACA does not provide a pathway to legalization and it does not override exclusions from federal financial aid. And while beneficiaries have enjoyed deportation relief and increased access to work authorization, driver's licenses, and educational opportunities, they remain tied to family members who remain vulnerable and are not offered the same protections. In recent years, the national debate and a turn towards exclusionary and punitive policies have had a profound chilling effect on families and communities, exacerbating vulnerability and anxiety. Ultimately, these issues have limited upward mobility and long-term well-being for our respondents and their families.

The Limitations of DACA Status

Despite the benefits afforded by DACA, beneficiaries continue to lack access to many of the economic, educational, civic, and psychological benefits afforded by legal permanent residency and citizenship. Without a permanent legal pathway, DACA beneficiaries continue to experience a sense of limbo and uncertainty.

DACA beneficiaries are permitted the opportunity to renew their status every two years. This provides an ongoing opportunity to enjoy the benefits of this status. However, the short renewal period limits beneficiaries' ability to make long-term plans. Many of the young people we spoke to told us that they felt as though they were constantly being monitored, and that this situation made them feel uneasy and anxious. The renewal process also introduces the risk of experiencing gaps in status while waiting for renewal approvals. Many of our respondents experienced delays receiving their DACA renewals because of slow processing times or financial difficulties due to steep application fees. As a result of falling out of status, several were forced to leave their jobs.

Recall Maria—the DACA beneficiary from New York who utilized her DACA status to gain lawful employment and access necessary resources for her family. With five younger siblings and a single mother, Maria’s ability to work was essential for her family to meet the costs of rent and food. While in college, Maria went through two renewals. She tried to submit her applications as soon as she could but coming up with the \$465 application fee was a huge burden on a part-time salary. Both times, Maria suffered a gap in status that left her unable to work.

“ At times, things were great. I was working part-time, going to school. I was living a life that I did not imagine I could have. But then... I remember two semesters, two summers I did not work, and that was because my DACA had expired, and I had not renewed it in time... During that time, I was in a kind of limbo, and it was just again like that band-aid was ripped off. They were like, ‘Okay you worked for a little bit, now you have to wait again.’ ”

Without her income, Maria’s family suffered bouts of food insecurity—sometimes having only eggs in their refrigerator. While DACA substantially improved Maria’s quality of life, the fear of falling out of status perpetuated status-related fear and anxiety.

In addition to these potential setbacks, the process of submitting renewals had deeper psychological effects on our respondents. Eddie, the DACA beneficiary from Arizona who described his ever-present fear of deportation, expressed his frustration with the impermanence of his DACA status.

“ Once you have to renew it, you have to start from scratch. For example, you’re working. You’ve got the [work] permit. You’re a hard worker. You’re a part of a team. Your co-workers know you. They get to understand who you are, how you act, and everything. Out of nowhere, just because two years are done, they treat you like you’re nothing. You’ve got to go through the [process] all over again. That means that you could be fired, or you could be without a job for a couple of months because you need to renew something that they already know you have. ”

When hundreds of renewal applications were delayed by the USCIS, resulting in DACA holders falling out of status and having to leave jobs,¹⁶ Lee, a DACA beneficiary from Illinois, fell

out of status. This incident not only impacted his financial security, but it also had the effect of wearing thin an already fragile sense of security.

“ I just don’t understand. I sent [the renewal application] in on time. I’ve been told there’s like, the system is backed up and they’re not processing applications on time. I don’t know, I did what I was supposed to do. But I had to wait like almost three months, and in that time, I was what they call “out of status.” It really put me right back where I was before. It was that slap in the face reminder that I’m still undocumented. I’m still vulnerable. I could be arrested and deported like that. It really brought me down. ”

As the renewal process exposed for DACA beneficiaries the fragility of their semi-legal status, persistent exclusions drew bold lines marking the limits of their belonging. Many of our respondents lamented that even though they experienced short-term gains through DACA, they still felt excluded from the political process, since they lacked the right to vote. For example, Maria explained that while she felt more secure having a state-issued ID and a Social Security card, she felt uncomfortable that these particular forms of identification marked her as different from her citizen peers.

“ My social security card says “For Work Authorization Only” in all caps. I feel like that has definitely always been like a marker for me. Employers will ask, ‘So what is this about?’ I definitely feel like it shows me in a different light. They do not know what to do, and sometimes it’s like ‘Oh, you are one of them.’ ”

For Maria, these designations served as a constant reminder that she is only partially recognized as a member in society.

In addition to leaving beneficiaries with continued anxiety and worry, the temporary and partial nature of DACA has curtailed economic opportunities and job prospects. For example, the strict requirements and long wait times of Advance Parole prevented beneficiaries from taking jobs which require international travel. Take Amir, the DACA beneficiary from New York who was studying computer science and working in IT management. Amir felt as though he had to limit his job search because of the difficulties traveling abroad. He explained that his job prospects would be limited without legal permanent residency.

“ Personally, I think that having the adjustment of status is necessary. A large part of management is being able to travel. Especially in IT management because there’s a lot of client sites that are located in other countries. And since I can’t travel, I’d be restricted in a lot of companies. [They] would see that automatically as a disqualification. ”

Additionally, DACA beneficiaries are prohibited from taking positions with the federal government, which amounts to roughly 2.8 million federal jobs off-limits to DACA beneficiaries. While Amir is interested in working in cyber security, he acknowledges that most positions fall under the jurisdiction of the federal government.

“ Government agencies, especially like the Department of Defense or other government agencies, they won’t hire you unless you’re a citizen. That’s something that I wanted to do for a long time—to work for a government agency. And that’s something that unfortunately I wouldn’t be able to do. ”

Amir is qualified for a wide range of jobs. He has plenty of relevant work experience, and he has excelled in computer science. Yet despite his qualifications, some of the highest-paying and most prestigious jobs in his career field are still out of reach.

Despite these exclusions, there are still a wide range of employment options available to DACA beneficiaries. However, many of our respondents worry that potential employers might discriminate against them if they knew they were DACA holders.

When Laura, the medical assistant from Arizona we profiled earlier, heard her supervisor refer to her as a “risk” she began to question her place at work and to worry about her future prospects there. Even though Laura had completed her medical assistant training program and secured employment as a medical assistant, her status marked her as different in her new workplace.

“ The doctor that I work for, I heard him mention one time that it was kind of a risk getting me and hiring me compared to people who could be citizens. Just because he thinks that if I were to get the papers taken away, then he would have to go through the whole process of ”

hiring somebody else. I kinda felt a little bad when he said that. I feel like I'm a good worker, and it shouldn't matter that I have DACA, because it's still status. I still have a Social Security. So, they shouldn't be saying that it's a risk.

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Finally, for our older respondents, the DACA program came into effect several years after reaching working age. These respondents possessed many years of work experience. However, their resumes were still quite thin. Prior to DACA, they were relegated to the informal economy and low-wage work sectors, and they were unable to obtain relevant work experience in their desired fields. As such, they were not as competitive as their peers who had been able to build up direct and relevant experience during these formative working years. DACA could not help them make up for lost time. Ultimately, if DACA is no longer available, long-term consequences for the DACA workforce will remain. To this point, Bo describes how the timing of his DACA receipt and his inability to claim previous work experience negatively impacted his job opportunities.

Bo migrated to New York from China at age 11. His parents planned to join him, but their visa applications were consistently denied. Nevertheless, they wanted Bo to stay in the United States and acquire a good education. Unfortunately for Bo, the separation was incredibly challenging. Bo moved around frequently to different family friends' homes, never able to settle in and feel comfortable. After graduating from high school, he began working as a server in a Chinese restaurant to support himself through college. At the time, he was constantly rotating between taking classes and work—sometimes working full-time while enrolling in school part-time, other times taking more classes, but falling behind financially. During periods when he was trying to catch up financially, he was working nearly 72 hours a week. Bo's determination and resilience enabled him to graduate with a bachelor's degree after eight years of rotating between school and work. After receiving DACA, he found an entry-level customer service job at a corporate financial institution. Bo feels that his life is moving in a positive direction, but he still feels discouraged.

“ Before DACA, I was out there working. [But] I cannot really put that on my resume. So after I graduated, I have to start [at] zero. I have to like, go through the entry level positions, and then build out my resume from there. It’s just kind of depressing, like, you’re so far behind your peers. All my friends out of high school—like my American friends—they already moved on. They’re already like, senior level. Like, they already have a house. I mean, you can’t really think about that. ”

Compared to his friends, Bo feels behind, and this has lowered his self-confidence. While he had worked extremely hard before DACA, this experience could not translate into better job prospects once he received DACA. Bo tries to remain positive and celebrate his accomplishments, but he feels discouraged by the disadvantages he faces on the job market.

For Bo and other respondents who received DACA later in life, their inability to claim their work experience prior to DACA has limited their career trajectories. Years of experience in the low-wage informal labor market has given them extensive work experience. But, it does not help them launch professional careers.

Ongoing Family Vulnerability

While DACA beneficiaries are afforded temporary protection from deportation, they are connected to family members, partners, and friends who are not afforded the same level of access and relief. As such, their loved ones remain vulnerable. Not only do our respondents shoulder additional responsibilities to assist their undocumented loved ones, they also experience ongoing stress due to their loved ones’ deportability. In our 2013 survey, 70 percent of nearly 2,700 respondents told us that they knew someone—a family member, neighbor, co-worker—who had been detained or deported. What’s more, nearly two-thirds of those respondents indicated that they worried all or most of the time that someone they know would be deported.

Our respondents spoke at length about the need for broader immigration reform not only for themselves, but also for those close to them. Some carried guilt, as they had DACA status

while their family members remained vulnerable and unprotected. Many other respondents experienced new power imbalances at home due to their access to driver's licenses and lawful employment. And all of them continued to worry about their undocumented loved ones.

Take Gabriel, the DACA beneficiary from New York who finished a bachelor's degree in biology and continued to medical school. DACA ultimately provided him the assurance that an investment in medical school would lead to a career as a doctor. Yet, these newfound benefits made Gabriel even more acutely aware of his parents' vulnerabilities. His ability to work legally, pursue a career path, and access medical care served as constant reminders of what his parents could not do. Their continued vulnerabilities caused him continued stress and anguish. He not only felt guilt for their plight, but he also felt additional pressure to try to provide for them.

“ My mom initially worked for very little pay. She's definitely not treated the best by her employers, and not respected or appreciated for the work that she did. That's really a lot of hardship my mom has faced, just having to put her head down and knowing that she had to keep her job to provide for us. I am anxious that my parents are getting older. They don't have insurance. They don't have retirement benefits. I'm definitely always anxious about that, and I'm scared that the older they get, something can happen. ”

While Gabriel was anxious about his parents' health and well-being, Sofia worried about her parents' safety and future in the United States. Growing up in Arizona, Sofia often heard stories of relatives, community members, and other acquaintances being apprehended, detained, and deported. When her stepfather and older brother were deported, the experience sowed fear and worry within her family. After Sofia moved to New York, she worried that her parents could get picked up again back in Arizona. Living outside of the city and without access to public transportation, they had few options other than to drive to work. But this put them at risk, since neither had a driver's license. Living apart from her family members, Sofia says she is “super stressed out every day.”

“ If I was scared about my parents driving around without a license in Arizona before, now, it's doubled. I am constantly scared for them and what's going to happen today or tomorrow, it's super stressful. ”

While having DACA has provided our respondents a sense of safety and security, concerns for their parents and loved ones persist. The sentiments of Angela from Georgia powerfully underscore the palpable fear and stress that continue to frame the households of DACA beneficiaries.

“ I’m always scared. What if my mother gets deported out of nowhere? What if my older sister doesn’t fix her status? What’s gonna happen with her daughters? How is my brother-in-law gonna take care of things, and how is he gonna handle it? They’re very close. They live together. It’s a lot of, there’s still fear in my family. ”

As many DACA beneficiaries worry for their families’ well-being, they have also taken on more responsibilities within their households and communities. Our respondents told us that they were proud to do it. But, these additional strains are not experienced without stress and worry. And, as a result, new household configurations have created some new problems.

The Threat of DACA Termination

With DACA’s future in question, so too are the futures of DACA beneficiaries and other DACA-eligible young adults. Comparing respondents’ first interviews in 2015 and final interviews in 2019, we have seen marked declines in self-reported mental health and emotional well-being. Whereas DACA provided opportunities for beneficiaries to feel safer and more secure, recent events and a toxic political environment have brought feelings of stress, anxiety, and fear.

Gabriel, the medical student from New York, had always been active in his community. He had volunteered at DACA clinics, helped DACA beneficiaries apply for state-based Medicaid, and advocated for medical schools to assist prospective DACAmented medical students. After the DACA termination, he became dispirited. His anxiety also affected his performance at medical school, and he felt increasingly discouraged.

“ I would say [it] almost broke me and my hope for anything getting better. It came out of nowhere and I think I struggled a lot. It definitely affected my performance in my first year ”

of med school. I think ever since, I've just become pretty burned out. I've completely lost my connection to being an activist. I'm really just feeling that the only thing I can do is focus on medical school and not much else. It's like a game. It's like all politics. No one really thinks about the human aspect.

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Many people in Gabriel's circle—family and friends—are now afraid to access health care or visit their children's schools, with increased fears of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the threat of deportation. Gabriel withdrew from many of his community activities and decided to put his head down and just focus on his studies.

In addition to the strains on beneficiaries' health and well-being, the threat of DACA expiration has put a damper on our respondents' abilities to plan for their futures. Without knowing the future of DACA, their own futures are opaque. As a result, many of our respondents are now hesitant to purchase homes, sign leases, or continue investing in their education. Many worry that their options for work will be limited to exploitative or low-paying jobs in the informal economy, despite the gains they have made in educational and professional development.

Take Ramiro, a DACA beneficiary from California who, prior to DACA, faced workplace exploitation and abuse. Still, Ramiro dreamed of becoming a doctor and providing healthcare for underserved communities. With the help of DACA and his incredible determination and resilience, he enrolled in community college, then transferred to a top-tier research university, and ultimately completed his bachelor's degree in chemistry. In 2019, Ramiro was holding two jobs—as a medical scribe and a research assistant—to build his resume and experience for medical school applications. Yet despite his progress, Ramiro was more concerned than ever about his eligibility for medical school and his ability to finance it.

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Policies have a huge impact on individuals. From my own experience, being a person who works hard, who doesn't give up—these kinds of opportunities and these kinds of policies help me go onto my next step. They are extremely important. There's a lot of people like me who are out there doing amazing things and accomplishing the impossible just with a little bit of help from these policies. Many, many of us have become teachers, many of us have become doctors, many of us have become organizers, social workers—you name it. Even business entrepreneurs. It has had a huge impact to benefit society as a whole.

So definitely, I urge politicians and other people who have a voice to stand up against xenophobic and racist policies because that is affecting a lot of people who are trying to do good for the country.

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As Ramiro’s words powerfully underscore, the socioeconomic benefits of DACA are clear—for DACA beneficiaries and their families, communities, and the broader U.S. society. If DACA were to ultimately be terminated, it would curtail, and in many ways reverse, the significant progress which DACA beneficiaries have made in their personal and professional lives.

The feelings of fear, anxiety, and stress related to the termination of the DACA program point to the profound meaning DACA has had for beneficiaries, their families, and the broader immigrant community. While the program is not the comprehensive immigration solution needed to fully lift immigrant families, ending the program would create disenfranchisement and everlasting barriers for a population that has worked so hard to realize their dreams.



Conclusion

The experiences of our respondents over the last seven years powerfully highlight the importance and success of DACA—the results are indisputable. DACA has given its beneficiaries and their families a giant boost and they have achieved significant social mobility. It has also powerfully shaped personhood and agency. Nevertheless, the temporary and partial nature of DACA leaves many issues unaddressed and has created some new dilemmas.

The findings of this report have clear implications for U.S. immigration policy and community practice. In this last section, we offer a set of recommendations for policymakers, stakeholders, and educators. Ultimately, we believe that a broader immigration reform that includes a pathway to legalization would resolve most challenges experienced by DACA beneficiaries and their families. However, we also acknowledge that needs are urgent, and that a range of community stakeholders may be able to address many issues locally and immediately.

Expanding Access to Educational Opportunities

Throughout this report, we have highlighted the positive impacts of DACA on our respondents' educational pathways. Access to work authorization has provided new hope that beneficiaries will be able to work in relevant careers upon graduation and, has, as a result, motivated young people to find onramps back to educational programs. Still, educational barriers remain for DACA beneficiaries, while a larger number of undocumented students not covered by DACA seems to be falling further behind. What's more, given the uncertainty of DACA's future, access to higher education benefits, professional development, occupational licensure, and driver's licenses must be delinked from DACA status.

The narratives of our respondents have demonstrated how DACA has inspired beneficiaries to complete their GED or high school education and to pursue a postsecondary education. In addition, tuition equity policies in certain states have provided an even greater boost to those pursuing four-year and post baccalaureate degrees. Access to in-state tuition has helped our

respondents finance postsecondary pursuits. These state policies have made community college, four-year universities, and even graduate school more attainable for our respondents. In addition, access to driver's licenses has provided respondents greater transportation options to get to educational programs and university campuses. By contrast, many respondents in exclusionary states that limit educational access and financial support had difficulty pursuing degrees and acquiring the requisite training in their fields. And, those in states without policies struggled to find additional resources for higher education.

Educators hold the responsibility of providing all students with a safe and supportive learning environment. Educators can support DACA beneficiaries and undocumented students not covered by DACA by ensuring that information about college and scholarship access is integrated into their general college-going outreach. Since higher education policies vary across the United States, these resources should be tailored to state-specific policies and practices regarding DACA beneficiaries and undocumented students, more generally. Most importantly, educators can more intentionally cultivate college-going identities regardless of students' immigration status, so that DACA beneficiaries and undocumented students have the support and fortitude to overcome additional educational barriers.

K-12 and postsecondary institutions can also foster inclusive, equitable, and diverse campus climates for all students. Campuses can provide professional development opportunities in order to train faculty and staff as trusted personnel, create visible and viable networks of support, and establish campus climates as supportive and safe. Schools and communities can also widen the menu of educational and community-based pursuits young people can pursue regardless of their immigration status. And these institutions can better connect families to legal, mental health, and social resources within the broader community.

Educators and administrators can utilize their power and community capital to advocate for inclusive policies that promote the retention and success of all students.

Bolstering Work and Career Pathways

The experiences of our respondents also demonstrate the profound career mobility of DACA beneficiaries. DACA has enabled our respondents to access jobs in the formal labor market, receive wage increases and promotions, and establish careers. Our respondents leveraged short-term training opportunities to find entrée into new professions. They found onramps back to postsecondary education that allowed them to pursue graduate programs and to be competitive in the labor market. And, they took advantage of these opportunities to move up the mobility ladder.

Yet, the career pathways of our respondents have also been conditioned by certain limitations. Despite work authorization, many respondents found certain avenues closed because, as DACA beneficiaries, they still faced certain exclusions. In particular, positions in the federal government, employment that requires overseas travel, and licensed occupations are currently all off-limits. What's more, many respondents found their employers to be either unfamiliar with DACA or unsupportive of employees with DACA. And, finally, many older DACA beneficiaries find themselves at a competitive disadvantage because of their lack of relevant experience in their fields.

To combat these challenges, policymakers and practitioners can develop trainings and workshops for human resources departments, so that employers know how to process workers with DACA. Additionally, employers can better support DACA beneficiaries themselves by recognizing the skills and abilities garnered through experience in the informal labor market.

Our respondents' experiences also highlight the importance of state-issued identification and driver's licenses. The ability to obtain a driver's license broadened respondents' possibilities for work and training. By establishing consistent and swift processes for issuing identification and driver's licenses (and, again) delinking them from DACA status, states can enhance DACA beneficiaries' abilities to harness employment opportunities and access important resources.

Finally, states can also help DACA beneficiaries actualize careers by ensuring that professional licensure is accessible. Because New York and California grant professional licenses to

DACA beneficiaries, those residing in these states have been able to pursue licensed occupations. By contrast, in states without these inclusive policies, respondents' pursuits of certain career pathways were cut short due to their exclusion from professional licensure. By passing legislation to extend licensure opportunities, states can ensure that a broader number of people can pursue careers that match their skills and education.

As DACA beneficiaries and their families await news regarding the future of DACA, and as policymakers and community stakeholders work to address the inequities perpetuated by a lack of comprehensive immigration reform, uncertainty and anxiety has shaped everyday life. Over the last seven years, DACA has proven to be successful, dramatically improving social mobility, health, and well-being for hundreds of thousands of young people and their families. Due to its success, DACA is widely popular and has been enormously beneficial to communities, the U.S. economy, and educational institutions. At a time of growing anxiety, our nation's decision makers would be best served by recognizing that DACA's success is a net benefit to our great country.



Endnotes

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6 Tom K. Wong and Carolina Valdivia, *In Their Own Words: A Nationwide Survey of Undocumented Millennials* (New York: United We Dream Network, 2014), <http://unitedwedream.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Undocumented-Millennials-Survey-Summary.pdf>; Roberto G. Gonzales, Benjamin Roth, Kristina Brant, Jae Lee, and Carolina Valdivia, *DACA at Year Three: Challenges and Opportunities in Accessing Higher Education and Employment*, (Washington, D.C.: American Immigration Council, 2016), https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/daca_at_year_three.pdf.

7 In 2015, we completed a first wave of in-depth interviews with all 408 respondents. One year later in 2016, we conducted a survey with 222 of these respondents. Finally, in 2019, we followed up with 57 of the respondents for a final interview.

8 While some undocumented youth have been pushed out of the DACA program or out of the country, others were able to adjust to a more permanent and stable legal status.

9 Tom K. Wong, Sanaa Abrar, Claudia Flores, Tom Jawetz, Ignacia Rodriguez Kmec, Greisa Martinez Rosas, Holly Straut-Eppsteiner, and Philip E. Wolgin, *DACA Recipients’ Livelihoods, Families, and Sense of Security Are at Stake This November*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2019), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/news/2019/09/19/474636/daca-recipients-livelihoods-families-sense-security-stake-november/>.

10 19 states and the District of Colombia have enacted legislation and/or policies that extend in-state tuition benefits to all undocumented students. The states are as follows: Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah and Washington. Additionally, Virginia extends in-state tuition only to DACA beneficiaries. Retrieved from “Undocumented Student Tuition:

Overview,” (Washington, D.C.: National Conference of State Legislature (NCSL), 2019), <http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/undocumented-student-tuition-overview.aspx>.

11 Jesse uses the pronouns they/them/theirs.

12 On June 28, 2013 California Governor Jerry Brown signed two key bills, ABx1 1 (Perez) and SBx1 1 (Steinberg/Hernandez), which simplified and expanded Medi-Cal for low-income adults who are U.S. Citizens, Legal Permanent Residents, or PRUCOL, including DACA beneficiaries, if their annual income is less than 138% of the Federal Poverty Level.

13 Advance Parole permitted DACA beneficiaries to re-enter the United States after traveling internationally. On September 5, 2017, the Trump administration announced a move to terminate the DACA program. After this announcement, DACA beneficiaries could no longer apply for Advanced Parole.

14 In January 2019, the New York legislature passed the New York State DREAM Act, which extended state-based financial aid and scholarships to DACA beneficiaries. While our respondents could not access these benefits during our study, they will have access in the future.

15 Despite this decision, DACA beneficiaries in South Carolina are still charged non-resident tuition rates to attend state public colleges and universities.

16 Esther Yu Hsi Lee, “Hundreds of Immigrants Are Losing Their Jobs Because Of A Federal Government Screwup,” *Think Progress*, (September 8, 2016), <https://thinkprogress.org/these-immigrants-followed-the-rules-but-they-still-may-lose-their-jobs-1df37d99b7ea/>.

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