



# TWO YEARS AND COUNTING: ASSESSING THE GROWING POWER OF DACA

*By Roberto G. Gonzales and Angie M. Bautista-Chavez*

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# DACA TURNS TWO

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**This week marks the two-year anniversary of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Program, first initiated by President Obama on June 15, 2012.<sup>1</sup> This research brief presents current findings from the National UnDACAmented Research Project (NURP) national survey on the impact that DACA has had on some of the young people who have received it. We find that DACA beneficiaries have experienced a pronounced increase in economic opportunities, and that these benefits appear to be the strongest for those attending four-year colleges and those with college degrees. In addition to the importance of postsecondary education, our findings also highlight a strong work ethic among DACAmented young adults that has significant implications for their new status as contributors to our nation's economy. Our study findings also demonstrate the important role played by community organizations in assisting DACA applicants and in helping them make the most of their benefits.**

While our study shows that DACA is having a positive impact on many of its beneficiaries, its benefits are only partial. Based on our research, we provide recommendations aimed at bolstering DACA's effectiveness and more fully addressing the needs of immigrant young adults and their families.

## THE NATIONAL UNDACAMENTED RESEARCH PROJECT

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**Over the last several years, as growing numbers of undocumented children have made critical transitions to young adulthood, the barriers they face to higher education and professional jobs have resulted in wasted talent.<sup>2</sup> This untenable situation imposes economic and emotional costs on undocumented young people themselves and on U.S. society as a whole.<sup>3</sup> But, due to congressional inactivity on immigration, many have been forced to put their lives on hold.**

With the initiation of DACA in 2012, hundreds of thousands of these young people have enjoyed the benefits of widened access to the American mainstream. This change in the Obama Administration's enforcement policy temporarily defers deportations from the U.S. for eligible undocumented youth and young adults, and grants them

access to renewable two-year work permits and Social Security Numbers.<sup>4</sup> As of March 2014, 673,417 young people have applied to the program and 553,197 have been approved.<sup>5</sup> While DACA does not offer a pathway to legalization, it has the potential to move large numbers of eligible young adults into mainstream life, thereby improving their social and economic well-being.

Shortly after the beginning of the program, the National UnDACAmented Research Project (NURP) was launched in an effort to better understand how DACAmented young adults were experiencing their new status.<sup>6</sup> In 2013, the NURP research team carried out a national survey of DACA-eligible young adults between the ages of 18 and 32. A total of 2,684 respondents completed the survey.<sup>7</sup> NURP efforts represent the largest data collection effort to date on this population.

NURP respondents come from 46 states and the District of Columbia, and generally reflect the demographics of the U.S. undocumented immigrant population. Respondents' median age is 22.7, while 40 percent are male and 60 percent are female. More than three-fourths of respondents grew up in a 2-parent household. Nearly three-fourths of respondents' households are low-income.

What follows is an analysis of the experiences of young people who received DACA within the first 16 months of implementation of the program. We also provide a nuanced presentation of the DACA program by presenting findings based on a subsample of eligible non-applicants—those individuals who meet the DACA qualifications, but did not apply. The results of this study have clear implications for policy and community practice.

## KEY FINDINGS

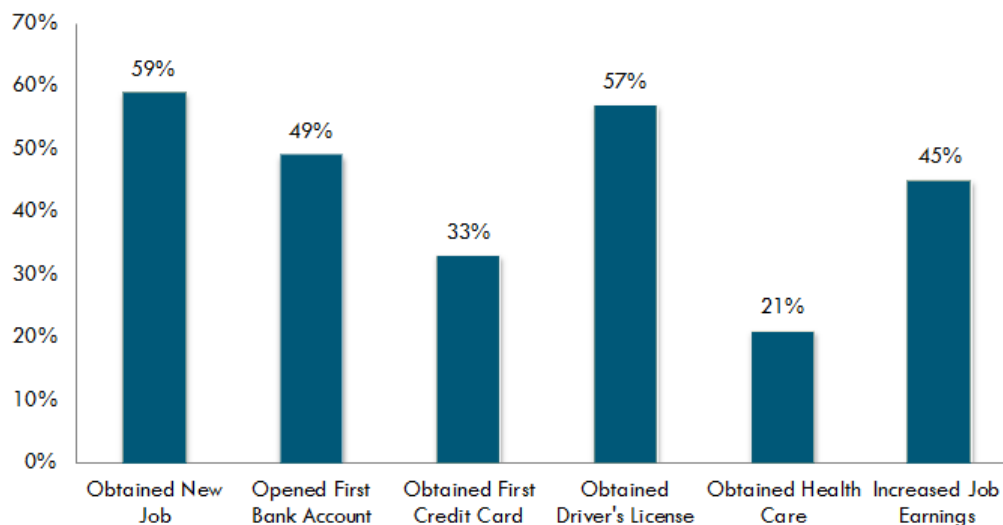
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**The following discussion focuses on the 2,381 individuals in our study who had received DACA by the time they filled out the survey.**

### **DACA Increases Opportunity**

Without Social Security Numbers or the ability to work legally in the United States, undocumented young adults did not previously have access to a wide range of resources and opportunities afforded to their legal peers. However, since receiving DACA, these young adult immigrants have become more integrated into the nation's economic and social institutions.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 1. Resources Accessed by DACA Receipts**



### *New Jobs*

Almost 60 percent of DACA beneficiaries surveyed have obtained a new job since receiving DACA, and 45 percent have increased their earnings. These findings provide direct evidence of the economic boost provided by DACA. Because new jobs and increased earnings translate into a greater tax base, DACA is also providing an important boost to the economy.

### *Internships*

Our results also show that just over one-fifth of NURP respondents (21 percent) have obtained an internship since DACA, which likely provides some valuable career training not typically available for young adults with limited employment histories.

### *Driver's Licenses*

Additionally, 57 percent have obtained a driver's license. The ability of DACA beneficiaries to legally drive means better safety for all drivers. This important form of access has also likely widened beneficiaries' educational, employment, and other options.

**M**iguel was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. He came to the U.S. with his two parents and older brother when he was six years old. Growing up in El Monte, California, Miguel worked hard in school. He graduated from his high school in 2011, and started taking classes at a local community college—the first in his family to pursue higher education. DACA was initiated during Miguel's first year of college. With a work permit he started working at a print shop and was able to enroll as a full-time student. Having a driver's license also made life much easier for Miguel. In Southern California, one could easily spend two or more hours a day on the bus. After working for a year and establishing credit, Miguel pooled his money together with his father and they opened up a cell phone store in nearby La Puente. Miguel is also hoping to start his own business as a web designer and app developer. He credits DACA for providing opportunities to work and drive, as he strives for a better future for himself and his family.

## *Bank Accounts and Credit Cards*

Meanwhile, almost half of our DACA beneficiaries (49 percent) have opened their first bank account, and one-third (33 percent) have obtained their first credit card. While undocumented immigrants are not necessarily prohibited from opening bank accounts, many banks require an identification number and a picture ID.<sup>9</sup> The new forms of identification obtained through DACA allow young people to overcome bureaucratic hurdles and to avoid sometimes awkward or uncomfortable situations.

## *Health Care*

Over one-fifth of NURP respondents (21%) obtained health care since receiving DACA. This is likely due to college enrollment or new employment-based plans. While DACA recipients are not eligible for the Affordable Care Act at the national level, California, Washington, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, and Washington, D.C. offer health insurance to low-income individuals granted deferred action.<sup>10</sup>

## **Benefits of DACA Greatest Initially for Those with the Most Education**

Economic benefits appear to be greatest for those who attend four-year colleges and have already received their bachelor's degree.<sup>11</sup> Respondents who attended community and four-year colleges are more likely than their peers with no college experience to obtain a new job and increase their earnings. However, these economic benefits appear to be greatest for those who have already obtained a bachelor's degree: those with bachelor's degrees were more than 1.5 times more likely to obtain new jobs and increase their earnings, relative to those who never went to college. These findings suggest that those with college degrees fared the best in the job market by leveraging their credentials.

Meanwhile, four-year college students were 1.6 times more likely to obtain an internship, relative to their non-college going peers. It is likely that these college students obtained internships in connection to their colleges.

**P**rior to DACA, financing higher education for Elisa was an ongoing struggle. However, thanks to DACA she is now pursuing a master's degree in Communication Studies and has enjoyed the most financially stress-free years of her life as a student. Being DACAmented means that Elisa can work on her university campus. This past year she was able to successfully land an assistantship which not only paid her a monthly stipend, it also waived her tuition. Prior to DACA, undocumented students were not eligible for these kinds of opportunities and, as a result, faced steep barriers to graduate studies. Elisa will enter into the second year of her Master's program next year with high hopes buoyed by DACA. She is the Academic Initiatives coordinator for the department of Housing and Residential Life and will continue to have this position next year.

Key to their success, our DACAmented college graduates had multiple mentors in high school, they were active in clubs and in leadership roles in school, they were involved in their communities, and they were connected to organizations. As a result, these young people likely possess the social networks and information key to accessing job-related opportunities.

## **DACA Beneficiaries Display High Propensity to Work**

Our findings underscore another important aspect of the DACA experience: DACA beneficiaries work hard. The vast majority of NURP respondents (86 percent) report ever having worked for pay. More than two-thirds of these young adults (67 percent) were employed at the time of the survey, and one-third of our DACA beneficiaries (34 percent) indicated that they held more than one current job. Many of these young people work to contribute financially to their low-income parents.

These young people work at levels comparable to or higher than their legal peers (controlling for grade-point average, ethnicity, and socio-economic status). Before DACA their choices were severely restricted. But the work permits provided by DACA ensure greater levels of contribution to the high-skilled workforce, and show us that further investments in this population that is poised to fill job shortages would go a long way.

## **Access to DACA Often Turned on Connections to Community Organizations**

Organizations are vehicles for DACA implementation, and our study finds several ways in which NURP respondents benefited from organizations—either through using community organization resources or being a direct member, or both.

NURP respondents benefited from community organizations and civic institutions by receiving assistance in filling out and compiling the paperwork for DACA applications. They turned to organizations, legal clinics, schools, religious institutions, and private attorneys within their communities. In fact, the overwhelming majority of our DACA beneficiaries (93 percent) received some assistance with DACA applications.

Not only were community organizations helpful in the DACA application process, they have been an important source of resources and support for many individuals pre-dating DACA. It is worth noting that our respondents who participated in community organizations were much more likely than those who did not to reap the job-related benefits of DACA. As members of such organizations, these young people have developed skills, strengthened their social networks, and have acquired the information critical to accessing job-related opportunities.



# NOT EVERYONE ELIGIBLE FOR DACA CHOOSES TO PARTICIPATE

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While a significant share of the DACA-eligible population has applied to the program, hundreds of thousands of eligible youngsters have yet to come forward. To shed some light on these eligible non-applicants, we now turn our attention to a smaller subsample of 244 respondents within our study who meet the DACA requirements, but have not applied to the program.

Compared to DACA-eligible young adults in our study who applied and received DACA, eligible youth who did not apply to DACA have less schooling, they work longer hours, they report less trust in institutions, and they are more likely to have children of their own. These young people live in rural and urban communities, but are less connected to the schools and institutions in their neighborhoods.

In order to better understand the barriers they face, we asked these respondents why they had not applied to DACA. As we might suspect, the number one barrier to applying was economic limitations. More than 43 percent of DACA-eligible non-applicants indicated that they could not afford the \$465 application fee. An additional, 10 percent indicated that they did not know how to apply. Given low family income and limited social networks, a lack of resources appears to be a large barrier for many DACA-eligible young adults.

In addition, 22 percent of our non-applicant respondents indicated that they did not apply because of missing paperwork, and another 17 percent did not apply because of legal concerns. These young people likely have less straightforward DACA cases, due to length of time in the U.S., time out of school, and legal issues for which additional legal assistance and resources are required.

Importantly, nearly 15 percent of these respondents report not applying because they fear sending their personal information to the government. And as many young people are making risk and cost to reward calculations, almost one-third of this group of non-applicants (30 percent) indicated that they are waiting for better options.

# DACA'S BENEFITS ARE PARTIAL

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**U**ndoubtedly, DACA is reducing some of the challenges undocumented youth must overcome to achieve economic and social incorporation. But as an executive memorandum that shifts bureaucratic practice in U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), DACA has limited inclusionary power. While DACA addresses some of the needs of a critical segment of the immigrant population, these young people do not live in isolation—they are part of families and communities that also require relief. Additionally, our findings point to demographic variations in how this diverse population of young people is able to access new resources that advance their incorporation.

## DACA Improves Postsecondary Access to Education

Our findings have important implications for the benefits of higher education. However, we find that DACA benefits are greatest among younger college graduates. For a segment of older DACAmented adults who have been out of school for several years, undocumented status has not allowed them to accumulate work experience in occupations that match their educational credentials and training. As a result, they are likely to have the requisite education, but lack the experience.

Most young adults in the U.S. aspire to some type of postsecondary education. Undocumented young adults are no different. While DACA has provided its beneficiaries an important avenue to better jobs and increased earnings to assist in their college enrollment, DACA does not override current federal and state exclusions from financial aid. Given that most American college students rely on some form of financial aid, such exclusions precipitate heavy financial obstacles.<sup>12</sup>

A large share of the DACA-eligible population experiences post-secondary education as a revolving door. Of our NURP respondents, 42 percent report not completing their plan of study within the normal time schedule, as limited finances and family responsibilities forced them to leave school for significant chunks of time.

“Stopping out,” or leaving college for a certain period of time with the intention of returning, is a growing, and concerning, trend among college students nationwide.<sup>13</sup> A majority of “stop-outs”

in our study made multiple exists from college. Undocumented immigrant youth are three times more likely than similar youth (controlling for grade-point average, ethnicity, and socio-economic status) to stop-out.<sup>14</sup> Prior research suggests that academic preparation is the biggest factor to stopping-out, but for undocumented youth, finances are the most important factor.

## **DACA Improves Human Capital**

As our survey findings demonstrate, the role of community organizations is critical to the success of DACAmented young adults. Many of these young people come from low-income households with parents who did not attend college. Many have also lived in an undocumented status for several years.

Additionally, as our results above indicate, individual and family resources condition the ability to maximize DACA's benefits. Low-income, low-skilled youth are less able to reap the benefits of DACA. These findings point to an inequality of access, rather than a weakness in the program itself. And, while college-goers in general are better positioned to access DACA benefits over those who are not in higher education, community college students are not faring as well as those in four-year postsecondary institutions.

DACA has opened up important legal avenues for a large number of its beneficiaries. But many of these young people require additional supports that could assist them in gaining job skills while also helping to connect them to opportunities. In particular, community organizations can assist DACA applicants to make connections to the kinds of additional services—transportation, child care, mentoring—they may need to access, persist, and complete education and job training programs.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, if community organizations are able to partner with adult education and occupational training programs, they will be able to better reach the young adults who are not college bound, enabling them to earn the credentials and certificates that lead to employment and to wages that will allow them to support their families.

Strengthening community organizations' capacity to better engage these institutions will help to support DACA-eligible and DACAmented young adults' efforts to build important forms of human and social capital.

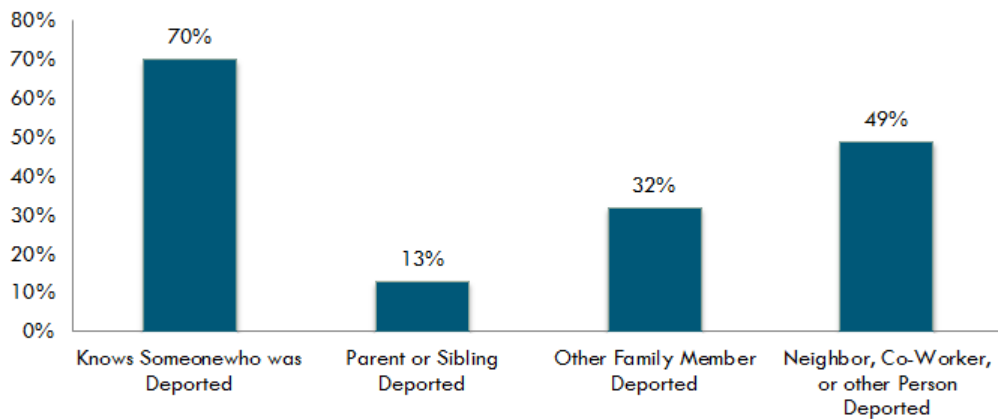
## **Additional Relief is Needed for Families**

Importantly, DACA beneficiaries can enjoy a two-year period free from worry that they will be detained and deported. This has important psychological benefits, as these young people can more comfortably move through their daily routines without

having to constantly look over their shoulders. Our findings show that two-thirds of NURP respondents report being less afraid of law enforcement and of being deported. In addition to giving young people better peace of mind, this likely has positive correlations with public safety as it reduces victimization and relieves individuals of the fear over reporting criminal activity in their communities.

However, DACAmented young adults are not alone in their experiences. They belong to families and communities that lack important forms of access and are vulnerable to the threat of deportations and victimization because of their undocumented status. Seventy-six percent of our respondents told us that they continued to be worried about people they know being deported “some” to “all of the time.” These worries are connected to their firsthand experience with deportation within their communities, as 70 percent know someone within their immediate surroundings (parents, siblings, other family members, neighbors, and co-workers) who have been deported.

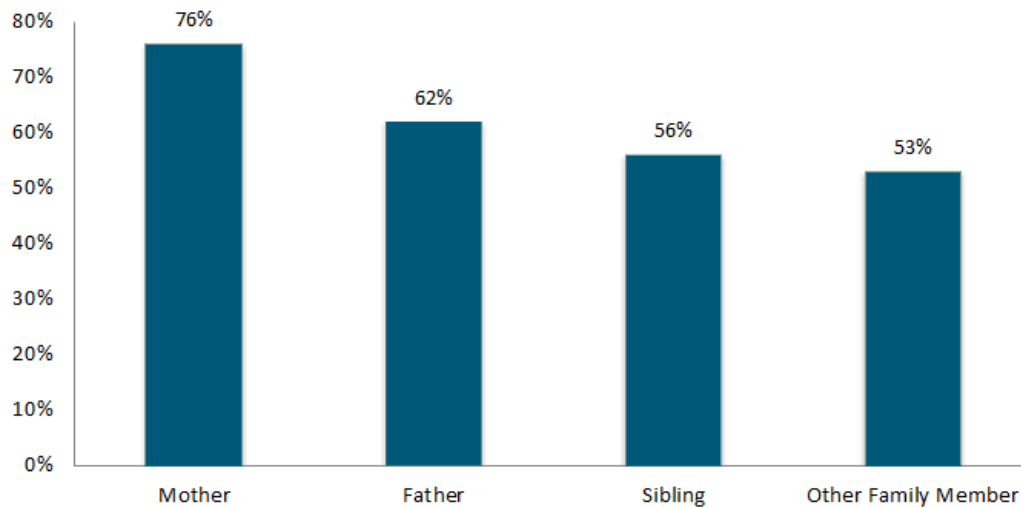
**Figure 2. DACA Recipients’ Connections to Deported Individuals**



## Recipients

When we asked DACA beneficiaries about the effects on their families if immigration reform would pass, 90 percent said that someone in their family would benefit. More than three-fourths (76 percent) have mothers they said would benefit, 62 percent said they have fathers who would, and 56 percent have siblings who would. Immigration is a family affair, and providing relief to family members is critical to the success of DACAmented young adults.

**Figure 3. Family Members Potentially Impacted by Comprehensive Immigration Reform**



The NURP survey represents the largest data collection effort to date studying DACA-eligible immigrant young adults. As such, our findings have important implications for policy and community practice. The responses of our nearly 2,400 DACA beneficiaries provide clear evidence of DACA's success in providing benefits. Today, two years after the program was initiated, hundreds of thousands of young people are experiencing everyday lives of widened access to their communities, educational institutions, and the U.S. economy. As a result, they are better poised to contribute to their families, communities, and the nation as a whole.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## **Broaden DACA's Impact**

The DACA renewal process will soon begin. It is important that community institutions continue to avail their services to DACAmented youth, encouraging them to reapply and providing them the assistance they need. The success of the program, and its ability to shine an important light on the importance of widened access for immigrant young adults, rests on communities' abilities to help DACA beneficiaries to successfully submit renewal applications.

But as communities work with young people on the renewal process, continued efforts are needed to reach the populations of young people who have not applied.<sup>16</sup> Our findings from the subsample without DACA indicate that the biggest barriers these young people face are cost and access to resources and information. DACA loan programs, mobile legal clinics to resource-limited communities, and targeted outreach efforts are just a few of the efforts needed to move more young people into a DACAmented status.

## **Expand Postsecondary Access to Education**

Naturally, some of the program's recipients are doing better than others. We find that those in four-year colleges are faring better, and that age is positively associated with taking advantage of benefits. But there are diminishing returns. DACA has likely improved educational and employment options for many of its beneficiaries, but financing postsecondary education remains a challenge.

While DACA has certainly widened the access of its beneficiaries, many other issues are left unaddressed. In particular, DACA recipients remain locked out of opportunities to receive federal financial aid and state aid in most parts of the country. To expand relief for youth, the U.S. must address the restrictions DACAmented young adults face to financial aid. Given the soaring costs of college, and that the majority of American students receive some form of federal or state financial aid, restrictions will continue to disadvantage DACAmented students, particularly those from low-income families.

## **Bolster Community Education and Workforce Development Initiatives**

Since DACA's announcement on June 15, 2012, community-based organizations, DREAMer groups, legal clinics, schools, and religious organizations have worked tirelessly to provide information and to assist young people with DACA applications. These services have been of utmost importance to potential DACA beneficiaries and their families. In addition, community organizations have provided DACA beneficiaries important sources of social capital as well as information on how to access job-related opportunities.

With additional resources, they can do more. In particular, supplemental education programs and workforce development efforts could help to provide DACA-eligible young adults important sources of support that could assist them in pursuing higher education—as well as being competitive in the workforce by accessing programs that develop their skills and lead them to certificates and industry-recognized credentials that lead to employment. These efforts should target younger segments of the population, allowing them to experience their transitions more seamlessly. In addition, workforce development efforts need to target low-income and lesser-skilled young adults, and community outreach efforts will need to target community colleges, where the vast majority of the college-going eligible population attends. And finally, these efforts should not leave behind many of the older young adults within the eligible population. These men and women are the original intended benefactors of DREAM Act efforts, but their circumstances have left them with few options to gain important job skills and experience needed to be competitive in the professional workforce. Internships, on-the-job training, apprenticeships, and other job-training programs that engage employers could greatly benefit this older segment.

## **Offer Relief for Immigrant Families**

Although DACA is an important program, it should be seen as a partial solution. DACAmented young people have lived in the U.S. most of their lives and long to be recognized as full members. What they urgently need is a pathway that will allow them to be recognized as full members. But these young people are also members of families and communities. Their ability to lead successful lives depends greatly on the options available to their parents, siblings, and neighbors. Addressing the untenable circumstances of the 11 million undocumented immigrants (young and old) living in this country is the best way to ensure that the investment made in the lives of these young people will realize its full potential.

# ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is an executive memorandum authored by the Obama Administration, and implemented by the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano. It directs United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP), United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), and United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to practice prosecutorial discretion towards certain individuals who came to the U.S. as children and are living in an unauthorized residency status.

<sup>2</sup> Roberto G. Gonzales, “Learning to be Illegal: Undocumented Youth and Shifting Legal Contexts in the Transition to Adulthood,” *American Sociological Review* 76, no. 4 (2011): 602-619; Leisy J. Abrego, “‘I Can’t Go to College Because I Don’t Have Papers’: Incorporation Patterns of Latino Undocumented Youth,” *Latino Studies* 4, no. 3 (2006): 212–231.

<sup>3</sup> Roberto G. Gonzales, *Wasted Talent and Broken Dreams: The Lost Potential of Undocumented Students* (Washington, DC: Immigration Policy Center, American Immigration Law Foundation, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> In order to qualify for DACA, applicants must have arrived in the U.S. before the age of 16 (and have proof), and must have been under 31 years old and without lawful immigration status when the program was first announced on June 15, 2012. Eligible youth must have resided in the U.S. continuously since June 15, 2007. Applicants must attend school or a GED or other alternative education program, have a high-school diploma or equivalent, or have been honorably discharged from the U.S. Armed Forces or the U.S. Coast Guard. Finally, individuals are barred from receiving DACA if they have been convicted of certain crimes or otherwise pose a threat to public safety or national security. Youth who meet this set of criteria must undergo an application process involving a background check, and pay \$465. Once approved, DACA recipients must apply separately for Social Security Numbers, driver’s licenses, and bank accounts.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, “Number of I-821D, Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals by Fiscal Year, Quarter, Intake, Biometrics and Case Status: 2012-2014,” March 2014.

<sup>6</sup> NURP is a five-year study comprised of a national online survey and follow-up interviews with DACA-eligible adults living across the United States.

<sup>7</sup> NURP is a national effort, with a research team that spans the country. Professor Veronica Terriquez of the University of Southern California and her team provided infrastructure and technical assistance with the survey. The survey was carried out during the latter half of 2013. To help ensure that survey participants were eligible to participate in the study, we required them to register for the study in advance of completing the survey. We then sent out survey links to eligible respondents. In addition, we recruited a small proportion of individuals who met the study criteria in hard-to-reach communities directly through organizations without requiring advance registration. We eliminated responses from those we could not verify and from duplicate IP addresses. Given these measures to safeguard our survey from non-eligible or repeat respondents, we

are confident that we have a good sample. Of this larger pool of respondents, we have confidence that 2,684 responses were provided by young people between 18 and 32 who met DACA requirements. Our sampling efforts compare with University of California, San Diego Professor Tom K. Wong and his team’s sample of 1,472 DACA-eligible young adults.

<sup>8</sup> Findings are based on NURP survey questions that ask respondents if they have, since receiving DACA: a) obtained a new job; b) increased their job earnings; c) obtained an internship; d) opened their first bank account; e) obtained their first credit card; f) obtained a driver’s license; and g) obtained health-care.

<sup>9</sup> Federal laws do not prohibit banks from serving people who do not have a Social Security Number. However, under the USA PATRIOT Act, banks are required to ask a person’s name, birth date, street address, and an identification number.

<sup>10</sup> These states have worked around the ACA restrictions because they are not using federal funds for the programs.

<sup>11</sup> Results are based on logistic regression analyses that investigate how factors traditionally correlated with stratification shape their ability to access the above resources. We assess the role of educational attainment by comparing respondents who have not attended college to those others with different levels of educational attainment.

<sup>12</sup> Although, states are not precluded from offering in-state tuition and state financial aid to DACA recipients or undocumented individuals.

<sup>13</sup> Jeff E. Hoyt and Bradley A. Winn, “Understanding Retention and College Student Bodies: Differences between Drop-outs, Stop-outs, Opt-outs, and Transfer-outs,” *NASPA Journal* 41, no. 3 (2004): 395-417.

<sup>14</sup> Veronica Terriquez, “Dreams Delayed: Barriers to Degree Completion among Undocumented Community College Students” (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>16</sup> National Skills Coalition, “The Role of Immigrant Integration in Meeting Our Skilled Workforce Needs,” May 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Audrey Singer and Nicole Prchal Svajlenka, *Immigration Facts: Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2013), pp. 1-10; Tom K. Wong, Angela S. García, Marissa Abrajano, David FitzGerald, Karthick Ramakrishnan, and Sally Le, *Undocumented No More* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2013).

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