



The New Challenges Facing Young Undocumented Immigrants

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In 2012, President Obama implemented Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a program that helped young undocumented immigrants brought to the United States under the age of 16 prior to June 15, 2012. Criteria for inclusion in this program included attaining a high school diploma or equivalent and proof of continuous residence in the United States since 2007. Those granted protection could have the threat of possible deportation suspended for two years and receive a work permit and other government documents, if they volunteered identification information to the federal biometric registry and paid a \$465 processing fee.

Benefits have been clear for undocumented young adults in Florida. Many have opened their first bank accounts and lines of credit, gained lawful employment, and obtained legal drivers' licenses. Daily life has improved, as these young adults strengthen ties to the economy and educational system. Most of all, temporary stays of deportation threats go a long way toward reducing the anxieties these young people experienced before Deferred Action – when they worried they could, at any time, be detained and expelled from the country they consider home. Yet our research highlights new challenges faced by these partially protected young people.

Conflicting Roles and Unexpected Repercussions

After initial excitement about new Deferred Action protections, young recipients find themselves negotiating new responsibilities and unexpected burdens. One recipient we interviewed got a driver's license and was pressed to become the family chauffeur transporting her sister to and from school because her undocumented mother feared being pulled over and possibly detained if she drove without a license. Out of familial duty, this young woman took on this role at the expense of getting a steady job. Like her, many other Deferred Action beneficiaries feel a sense of moral duty to their families, which complicates meeting the usual challenges of young adulthood by seeking to advance their educational and financial goals. They can end up taking responsibility for protecting, providing, and caring for parents, who are of working age but do not have the legal standing to command better jobs or move around independently. An overwhelming sense of duty to use personal advantages to help their families becomes a version of "survivor's guilt" – the sense that they are protected while loved ones are not. Such internal turmoil can offset some of the psychological benefits from Deferred Action protections.

In short, in the absence of protections for entire families, new access to rights and resources for young undocumented adults can lead to new conflict. Young adults can end up burdened at home and, ironically, impeded from achieving some of the very goals Obama's Deferred Action program aims to help them attain. Every time a young adult chauffeurs family members, at the cost of missing work or school or delaying a search for a better-paid and more demanding job, he or she puts off social and educational advancement. This risks long-term educational and economic stagnation for young adults and may weaken their ties and potential contributions to the larger U.S. community.

Shifting Insecurities

Deferred Action beneficiaries not only report stress related to the exclusion of family members from their new rights. Many also still cope with fears about family separation and sudden demands to serve as heads of households – as in the case of one recipient whose father had been detained, and another whose mother had been deported. The same sorts of stresses that existed prior to the Deferred Action program persist in the subsequent period for mixed-status families. President Obama tried to give further help to such families in 2014 through the Deferred Action for Parental Accountability Program, extending relief from deportation and other benefits to parents with a son or daughter who is a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident in the country as of November 20th, 2014, who can prove continuous residence in the country since January 1st,

2010. The announcement of this extension was well-received in immigrant communities across the country, but before long officials in the state of Texas and 25 other states filed suit in federal court to block implementation, which happened when the fifth Circuit stayed Obama's initiative. Recently, an evenly divided Supreme Court left the federal court's stay intact.

The temporary nature of the original Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program also creates new anxieties. One young woman feared that if she lost protected status or had it taken away, her name could come up on "the list" for deportation. Prior to the Deferred Action program, she had endeavored to remain anonymous. Her case is typical. Although many young adults feel that the Deferred Action program has improved their ability to be active in their communities, they must still confront the worry that a future presidential order, Congressional legislation, or judicial ruling could reverse their status to "illegal" once again. This time, they would be easy to identify on government lists. Some Deferred Action participants described life in the program as a new form of limbo, not too different from their former undocumented status. As one stated, "Now, it's just again back to insecurity."

The Continuing Need for Comprehensive Immigration Reform

Should a future nine-member Supreme Court lift the injunction blocking the 2014 program for undocumented parents, the country could see greater returns from Obama's 2012 Deferred Action program for young adults. Rather than delay their individual goals to take care of the undocumented members of their families, they will be better able to leverage the new benefits Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals has given them. Transitions to fully participating in adulthood will be spurred along, especially for those whose parents gain new protections.

In sum, initial steps such as those in Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program work as intended only when they become part of a succession of immigration reforms. The overall goal must be to help families and individuals come out of the shadows and become full participants in their communities, schools, and the economy. When only single family members are protected, they remain hampered if others in their households remain under threat of detention or deportation. Although the 2012 Deferred Action program is still being implemented and has opened some doors for undocumented youth, full attainment of its goals awaits further protections for entire immigrant families – which can happen, now, only if the courts reopen the challenge to Obama's 2014 program and Congress and a new President work together on all parts of comprehensive immigration reform.