



The Impact of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) on the Psychological Wellbeing of Young Immigrants

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October 5, 2017 marked the beginning of the phasing out of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program – called DACA for short. This measure, announced in 2012, was introduced to temporarily address some of the barriers facing young immigrants who came to the United States as children. DACA granted these young immigrants a deferred action status which provided temporary relief from the threat of deportation, the temporary right to work and to obtain drivers licenses, and other related benefits. As of the early 2017, 925,921 individuals had applied for DACA, with 26% of applications coming from California, mostly from immigrants of Latin American origin. A recent research study shows, for the first time, that DACA has a positive impact on recipients' psychological wellbeing.

Undocumented Youth and Psychological Wellbeing

Undocumented immigrant youth in the United States face a host of challenges that can undermine their psychological wellbeing. They grew up in the United States, only to discover that they risk deportation and lack many basic rights. As a result, many have experienced hopelessness, shame and self-blame, anxiety, fear of deportation, and concern about blocked social mobility. There have even been reports of suicide among undocumented young people who felt they could not overcome the barriers imposed by their irregular status.

Though the legal marginalization faced by undocumented immigrants can have detrimental health effects, until now, there has been little research tracking effects of changes to legal status – even temporary ones – on young peoples' psychological wellbeing.

DACA provided a unique opportunity to understand the experiences of individuals who transition from undocumented status into other, even slightly less marginalized, statuses. My colleague Whitney Pirtle and I completed a study investigating how changes in legal status due to DACA can influence health, particularly psychological wellbeing. Put simply: can getting DACA make recipients feel better?

Our research provides the first statistical analysis of differences in psychological wellbeing among immigrant young adults, retrospectively measured before and after a transitioning from undocumented status to DACA status. Specifically, we examined four outcomes related to immigrants' psychological wellbeing:

- **Distress** – including reports of stress, nervousness or anxiety
- **Negative emotions** – including reports of anger, fear, sadness, shame, and embarrassment
- **Worry** – about deportation of one's self
- **Worry** – about deportation of one's family

Key Findings

Our study revealed several key findings. We began by analyzing psychological wellbeing during the time when everyone in the study was undocumented (either prior to receiving DACA, for recipients, or in the past year, for respondents without DACA). Statistical tests of responses to these questions show that those who were worse off financially reported higher levels of distress, negative emotions, and deportation worry. However, *current* psychological wellbeing is most strongly predicted by whether or not someone has DACA status. For example, the predicted probability of experiencing distress and negative emotions started out at around 70% for both undocumented and DACA-covered individuals, but current distress and negative emotions for DACA recipients dropped to under 20%, but were over 40% for those without DACA.

These results suggest that the change from 'undocumented' to DACA's 'lawfully present' status is associated with improvements to psychological wellbeing. What might explain these results? In response to our question "*What do you think has most changed for you since receiving DACA?*" DACA recipients offered explanations such as:

- "I have a better job, I am more stable, and not afraid to drive around. I have an ID now and I am more capable to do what I want. I feel better emotionally, physically, and psychologically."
- "Peace. [I can] breathe better. Hope. And knowing I exist. I feel like I belong and other people know I exist."

Looking Forward

Although we are encouraged by these findings, we remain cautious about recipients' long-term wellbeing. Now that President Trump has announced the end of the program, it is possible that the emotional health benefits we observed may decrease and even reverse. What is more, access to permanent status and citizenship may very well remain uncertain for DACA recipients for years to come.

In the absence since the 1980s of any large-scale program to legalize immigrants, an entire generation of children has grown up without legal status. However, DACA provides individual relief from deportation and does not apply to family members. In our study, DACA recipients were no less likely than non-recipients to report ongoing worry that a family member will be deported. This fear would likely remain even if DACA were reinstated or replaced with another programming targeting only immigrant youth.

We know that a lack of legal status undermines immigrants' lives in many ways, including by impacting their health and wellbeing. And when individuals are unhealthy, larger communities also suffer. Our research on the DACA experience shows that legal status can improve immigrants' psychological wellbeing. This result suggests that the United States, as a whole, stands to gain by extending opportunities for full legal participation to members of undocumented communities.