

## Episode\_121\_\_The\_American\_DREAM.mp3

**Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich** [00:00:08] It's mid-March and we've just sailed past the Trump administration's expiration date for DACA protections for DREAMers, the undocumented immigrants brought to this country as young children. But still, there's no clear resolution on the horizon. This week's episode is part of our No Jargon 3-part mini-series on undocumented immigrants in the US in which we look closer at the research, stories, and consequences of immigration policy and the debate surrounding reform. Today, we're exploring the economic and educational outcomes for young DACA recipients or DACA recipients who receive temporary protections. Some say these immigrant populations hurt the economy, lower wages, or take jobs away from U.S. born individuals, but is that really the case? And how do immigration policies impact the way young undocumented people seek out higher education and better work opportunities? Hi, I'm Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich and this is the Scholars Strategy Network's No Jargon. Each week, we discuss an American policy problem with one of the nation's top researchers without jargon. This week, I spoke to Amy Hsin. She's an associate professor in the department of sociology at Queens College CUNY and has studied the economic impacts of DACA. Here's our conversation. Amy, thanks so much for talking to us.

**Amy Hsin** [00:01:20] Thank you for having me.

**Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich** [00:01:21] So Amy, a lot has been happening with the immigration debate. Can you just briefly walk us through how we got here and what's the current situation?

**Amy Hsin** [00:01:31] Sure. We are in the current situation which is a mess right now largely because Congress has failed to pass comprehensive immigration for nearly four decades. The last major policy that legalized undocumented immigrants was in 1986, and since then nothing has occurred in terms of policy. But in the meantime, the U.S. continues to demand cheap labor. Countries around the world continue to experience political turmoil and families and individuals around the world continue to want a better life for themselves and for their children. And so both legal and unauthorized immigration continues. And unfortunately during this time the U.S. has also continued to rapidly militarize the U.S. Mexico border and what that means is that a common form of migration, which is circular migration -- meaning that when laborers would come across the border to work in the United States for seasonal work for two, three, four months a year and then go back and return to their families in Mexico -- that type of migration has become increasingly much more dangerous, more expensive and because borders have become much less porous. And so as a result, families tend -- immigrants tend to cross the border, settle, and bring their families here. And as a result of these factors, we now have an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States. Since 1986 there have been several failed attempts to pass legislation.

**Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich** [00:03:14] And let's talk about those policies then individually, just about DACA and potentially the DREAM Act. We're interested in, you know, what are the differences between those two things?

**Amy Hsin** [00:03:22] The main difference between DACA and the DREAM Act is the temporary versus permanent nature of the two policies. The DREAM Act offers eligible undocumented youth who are brought into the United States as children pathways to legal residency and then to citizenship. DACA does not offer that. DACA offers two-year renewable work permits that allow undocumented youth to work legally in the United

States. During those two years, they also are not subject to deportation. And so one, the DREAM Act offers pathways to legal citizenship. The other is just a temporary work permit program. And that difference is key and as a result, undocumented youth face very different schooling and work decisions based on those differences.

**Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich** [00:04:17] And just to further clarify, DACA was passed by an executive action from the Obama-era administration versus the DREAM Act was legislation that we were attempting to pass through Congress, correct?

**Amy Hsin** [00:04:29] That's right. Because of the two decades of a failure of congressional action because the DREAM Act was not able to pass through Congress in 2012, President Obama responded to that impasse by enacting deferred action. This was a policy that was enacted through executive action as opposed to through normal legislative channels which means that the fate of DACA was always very uncertain. It means that at any time, any incoming administration can repeal DACA at will and that's what we saw in September 2017 when the new president tried to rescind DACA.

**Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich** [00:05:09] And how many people are we talking about at this point? There's those who came to the country without papers. You gave us a great big picture overview of who's here, then there's folks who qualify for DACA and then there's those who have actually received it. Can you talk about that?

**Amy Hsin** [00:05:24] So it's estimated that about 1.5 million are undocumented youth. These are the people who we call DREAMers. These are undocumented youth who were brought to the country illegally or came legally but overstayed visas. Many of these were eligible for DACA but only about 50 percent of those who are eligible actually took up DACA. So there's approximately eight hundred thousand DACA recipients now, although every week that we do not extend DACA more and more people fall out of that category.

**Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich** [00:06:01] And now that we supposedly passed the deadline that this administration had given for something to be done, do you have any idea about what's happening with the population of DACA-protected young immigrants right now?

**Amy Hsin** [00:06:12] Well they're back to living a life in limbo. Right now, we have a couple of court injunctions and as we speak now, DACA recipients can continue to renew their DACA status. But the Department of Homeland Security is not accepting new applications, so this 800,000, 700,000 continue to receive DACA benefits but their fate is still highly uncertain. And what is really unfortunate is what we saw with the passage of DACA is that even though DACA was a temporary work permit program, it really improved the mental health of recipients and it gave them a sense of hope and gave them a sense of security and the hopes were high after DACA and during the five years that DACA was in place. What we see now with the repeal of DACA and the political turmoil that is occurring is a heightened trauma within the community. People are living again -- people are going back into the shadows. They feel besieged and there's just a lot of uncertainty around -- around the political environment right now.

**Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich** [00:07:30] And so political debates often seem to be about what's right and wrong using moral terms even the term DREAMers kind of has a moral edge to it. You and your specific work looked at this from a slightly different angle from an economic perspective. Can you tell us exactly some of the specifics of your study?

**Amy Hsin** [00:07:48] One of the things that we look at is this key difference between DACA and the DREAM Act. So we'd like to understand how policies like DACA and the DREAM Act actually affect immigrants -- legalized immigrants in terms of their work and schooling decisions, how these policies affect the wages of those who are legalized and the wages of U.S. born workers. With legal work options those who are legalized will actually be able to find jobs that match their skills. They'll be able to earn higher wages because they won't be exploited. They'll become more productive because they will be able to work without the threat of deportation, without the stigma of being considered illegal and all of these things are good for workers, right? They're good for workers and they're also good for the economy because a more productive -- more productive workers means a more productive workforce.

**Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich** [00:08:40] And so I actually think there's a common misperception about undocumented immigrants which is that they don't pay taxes. And you know this is not true. Can you talk a little bit about that and how would you see legalizing these people as increasing the government's tax revenue? How does that actually work?

**Amy Hsin** [00:08:59] Currently, it's estimated that undocumented immigrants pay about 12 billion dollars a year in taxes and so these are automatically garnered from wages. With -- with legalization, their wages would increase both because they become more productive and because they'll be able to work in jobs that are actually commensurate with their skills. Higher wages means that workers are paying more taxes. More taxes means more revenue for the government and that lowers the deficit. So all in all, we think that the DREAM Act and legalization of undocumented youth would have positive effects on the economy.

**Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich** [00:09:39] And a counter to offering these types of protections and work authorization is that they threaten jobs and wages of U.S. natives or people who've been born in the United States to -- to parents who are documented citizens. Is that true?

**Amy Hsin** [00:09:53] So our study shows that legalization would have no significant effect on -- on the wages of U.S. born workers both because undocumented immigrants are only a small fraction of the labor force, so legalizing this group of DREAMers would not have an effect on wages of U.S. born workers. Also because under the DREAM Act, undocumented youths must have graduated high school in order to qualify and obtaining a college degree is a condition of obtaining citizenship. So what that does is that it kind of incentivizes legalized workers to invest in education. And what that means is that these legalized immigrants would not come in direct competition with the least skilled U.S. born workers who do not have a high school degree or do not have a college degree. And this group of the lowest skilled U.S. born workers are traditionally the ones that are the most vulnerable to new inflows of immigrants in the labor force.

**Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich** [00:10:56] So let's talk about your second study. In your research, you look at what DACA protection have meant for undocumented young people in their pursuit of higher education. What did you find?

**Amy Hsin** [00:11:05] What we find is that as a temporary work permit program, DACA incentivizes work over schooling and we find that DACA causes many students who are already enrolled in college to either drop out of school entirely or to significantly reduce the number of courses they take so that they can work. What DACA means is for DACA recipient is that they are likely the only person in their household who can legally work. And so that puts a lot of pressure on them to work and to contribute to the family. So it's

really the temporary nature of DACA that prevents undocumented immigrants who are in school to fully invest in their education because if you don't have a certain future, if you're not sure that there will be a payoff to getting that degree then it really makes schooling choices really difficult and it prevents you from fully investing in your -- in your schooling and your future in ways that they shouldn't be allowed to. And while DACA has certainly improved the lives of many recipients in numerous ways the -- their schooling decisions and their investments continue to be disrupted because of the temporary nature of DACA.

**Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich** [00:12:25] And are there differences between say, a four year research university and a community college or trade schools?

**Amy Hsin** [00:12:33] We find that DACA increases dropout rates at four year colleges. At community colleges, DACA doesn't seem to have an effect on dropout rates but it does reduce the proportion of undocumented students who attend school on a full time basis. We think that DACA has these differing effects by two-year and four-year colleges because these institutions differ in how they accommodate working students. In some ways, community colleges are designed to accommodate working students. It's much cheaper to attend college on a part-time basis by taking one or two courses per semester. Students can have more flexibility in taking evening classes or weekend courses and we think that this flexibility allows undocumented students to go to school and work at the same time. At four year colleges, it's not as easy to combine school and work even though many do. But we think that this lack of flexibility increases dropout rates among four year college students when legal work options become available because of DACA.

**Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich** [00:13:47] That sounds like a flexible school system that is allowing and potentially encouraging work outside of school, that it's more likely for undocumented students to seek out continuing education, is that correct?

**Amy Hsin** [00:14:00] That's right. That's what we find.

**Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich** [00:14:01] In a previous episode, we spoke with Roberto Gonzalez about DREAMers who attended college but weren't able to use their degrees because of their undocumented status and often ended up in low-paying jobs despite their education. So how -- how do you see the current reforms or protections mitigating an effect like that?

**Amy Hsin** [00:14:20] Well, I think that a permanent fix would mean that undocumented students will be able to actually invest in their education. They won't have to face an uncertain future and as a result they'll be able to plan. And if you know that you can legally work and that once you get out of school and graduate and do the work to graduate, that you'll be able to use your degree in the labor force, then you're much more likely to invest in education and that's good for those students who were legalized. It's good for the economy and it's good for society overall.

**Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich** [00:14:56] And so knowing what you know from the research you've conducted so far, if you were able to give a message today to members of Congress who are still thinking about this issue, especially in these times when it seems like hugely important but vastly different issues are just moving so quickly through government, what would you say to them as they're looking to continue this debate about the fate of DREAMers, their parents, or other immigrants?

**Amy Hsin** [00:15:19] I would really encourage politicians to not let political rhetoric and the opinions of a small group of extremists to dominate and dictate policy decisions. I think we

need to realize that beyond the rhetoric, over 80 percent of the American public support the legalization of undocumented youth. And so I think the question really should be why shouldn't we legalize these youth? And as we think about the DREAM Act, why shouldn't we pass the DREAM Act? I mean our research shows that there really is no economic reason to oppose legalization. The legalization certainly benefits those who are legalized. It has no real effect on U.S. born workers in terms of their wages. And these undocumented youth are our neighbors. They are our co-workers. They contribute billions of dollars to the national economy and pay billions of dollars in taxes. And so there's no economic rationale against legalization. I think it comes down to whether there are compelling moral arguments against legalization. And I personally don't find any compelling arguments against it. And I don't see how society benefits in any way from marginalizing people who live here. And you know what religion teaches us to criminalize our neighbors or tie an individual's humanity to their legal status? So I don't find a compelling reason and there's massive widespread support of -- of the American public for the DREAM Act. Really, I question why a Dream Act hasn't been enacted yet.

**Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich** [00:17:01] Thank you so much for those insights, Amy.

**Amy Hsin** [00:17:02] Thank you.

**Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich** [00:17:03] And thank you everyone for listening. No Jargon is the podcast of the Scholars Strategy Network, a nationwide association of over 900 researchers in 46 states. The producers of our show are Shira Rascoe and Dominik Doemer. Our sound engineer is J.M. Baez. If you liked the show today, please subscribe and rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your shows. You can give us feedback on Twitter, @nojargonpodcast or at our email address, nojargon@scholars.org. For more on what you heard on this week's episode check out our show notes at scholars dot org slash no jargon. Thanks again Amy. Thank you.