

DACA Uncertainty May Undermine its Positive Impact on Wellbeing

By Caitlin Patler, Erin Hamilton and Robin Savinar, UC Davis

Young, undocumented Latino immigrants face many challenges in the United States. Undocumented Latino youth are less likely to graduate from high school and attend college than native-born youth and are more likely to live in poverty and report clinical levels of depression. Our research examines the impact of changes in legal status related to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program on Latino immigrant young adults in California, with a focus on distress and psychological wellbeing. Our results show that levels of distress for DACA-eligible young adults dropped significantly in the 2013-14 time period after DACA's implementation. However, by 2015-16, their distress levels began to increase when they became aware of the program's limitations and possible termination.

The United States is home to 11 million undocumented immigrants, including five million children and young adults under age 30, the majority (78 percent) of whom are from Latin America.¹ Young Latino immigrants are more likely to live in poverty and have higher rates of clinical depression than native-born youth.^{2,3} Evidence suggests that DACA-eligible young adults faced poverty rates of 30 percent in the years just prior to the program.⁴ In addition to poverty, undocumented immigrants in the U.S. face many other challenges.^{1,5} To explore the disparities between undocumented immigrants and the native-born, researchers have studied whether inequalities in legal status are partly responsible.

DACA Presents a Unique Opportunity to Study the Impact of Legal Status on Psychological Wellbeing

Our new study examines the impact of changes in legal status related to the DACA program on the psychological wellbeing of young, undocumented Latino immigrants in California from 2007-16. The DACA program was announced by President

Obama in June of 2012 and sought to provide legal status to young people who had arrived with their undocumented parents as children. However, in September 2017, the Trump administration announced plans to phase out the program, making DACA's future uncertain.

Our study looked at the psychological wellbeing of DACA recipients in California both before and after receiving DACA using two sources of data: the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS), and the DACA Study, which uses original longitudinal data and in-depth interviews with 502 Californians who considered applying for DACA.

We analyzed information on participants' psychological wellbeing in a pre-DACA period (2007-11) compared to a post-DACA period (2013-16) using the Kessler Six-Question Psychological Distress Scale (K6). We used a difference-in-differences estimation to compare the DACA-eligible population both to itself prior to DACA, and to an ineligible control group. The members of the ineligible group were similar to the DACA-eligible except they already had legal immigrant status.

¹ Patler, Caitlin, 2017. "Undocumented Disadvantage, Citizen Advantage or Both? The Comparative Educational Outcomes of Second and 1.5-Generation Latino Young Adults." *International Migration Review*.

² Passel, Jeffery S. and D'Vera, Cohn, 2009. "A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States." Pew Hispanic Center.

³ Potochnick, Stephanie R., et al., 2010. "Depression and Anxiety Among First-Generation Immigrant Latino Youth: Key Correlates and Implications for Future Research." *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*.

Key Facts

Young Latino immigrants have reduced access to healthcare, education, employment and higher rates of clinical depression, and DACA-eligible young people have poverty rates of up to 30%.

Our study of data from California shows that DACA-eligible young people had a significantly lower distress level in the post-DACA period (2013-14) than in the pre-DACA period (2007-11), compared to documented immigrants.

By 2015-16 initial improvements in psychological wellbeing declined, perhaps due to uncertainty about the program's future.

Understanding poverty, shaping the future of poverty research

DACA Improved Psychological Wellbeing in the Short-Term

Our results show that the DACA-eligible had a significantly lower distress level in the 2013-14 post-DACA period than in the 2007-11 pre-DACA period. In the 2013-14 period, DACA-eligible Latino immigrants had predicted distress scores that were 60 percent lower than during the pre-DACA period (2.42 points compared to 4.0 points), whereas the scores of documented immigrants were not statistically significantly different from the pre- to post-DACA period.

The in-depth interview responses to the DACA Study in 2014 help to explain these results. DACA recipients reported a newfound sense of security and safety in their temporary status, and they felt less excluded, and more integrated into American sociocultural and political life. Recipients also

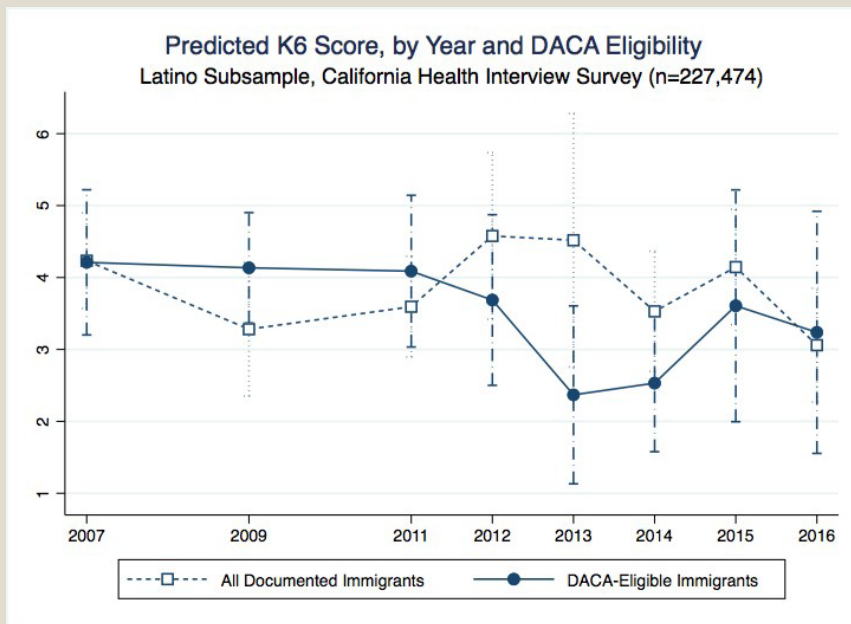
16, the distress levels of the DACA-eligible were not statistically different from their pre-DACA distress levels.

In order to find out why this might be, we drew on DACA Study interviews from 2015 and 2016, which showed that by that time, many of the DACA-eligible began to realize that the DACA program might not be a permanent solution for them. Some felt that their goals were still out of reach, because their legal status was not permanent. With the initiation of the 2016 presidential campaign, respondents feared that the program might be rescinded.

Our study supports the idea that providing undocumented immigrants legal status supports psychological wellbeing. However, it also suggests that undocumented young people are vulnerable to the stress of the uncertainty that characterizes the

“ Undocumented young people are vulnerable to the stress of the uncertainty that characterizes the DACA immigration policy. ”

Figure 1: Predicted K6 Score, by Year and DACA Eligibility



During the post-DACA period, Latino immigrants had predicted distress scores that were 60 percent lower than during the pre-DACA period (2.42 points versus 4.0 points).

reported that the work authorization provided by DACA helped to relieve the distress related to finding work and the economic hardship they had faced.⁶

Declines in Distress Related to Receiving DACA Have Diminished Over Time

Despite the positive nature of these preliminary results, a more in-depth look at the data year-by-year shows that distress declined dramatically in both 2013 and 2014 but increased later. By 2015-

DACA immigration policy. Our results suggest that a permanent legalization program would better support the psychological wellbeing of undocumented young people in California.

Caitlin Patler is Assistant Professor of Sociology at UC Davis (patler@ucdavis.edu)

Erin Hamilton is Associate Professor of Sociology at UC Davis (erhamilton@ucdavis.edu)

Robin Savinar is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at UC Davis (rfsavinar@ucdavis.edu)

⁴ Amuedo-Dorantes, Catalina and Antman, Francisca, 2016. "Can Authorization Reduce Poverty Among Undocumented Immigrants? Evidence from the Deferred

*Center for American Progress, 2017. The Facts on Immigration Today: 2017 Edition. Washington D.C.

⁵ Turner, R. Jay, et al., 1995. "The Epidemiology of Social Stress." *American Sociological Review*.

About the Center

The mission of the Center for Poverty Research at UC Davis is to facilitate non-partisan academic research on poverty in the U.S., to disseminate this research and to train the next generation of poverty scholars. Our research agenda spans four themed areas of focus:

- Labor Markets and Poverty
- Children and the Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty
- The Non-traditional Safety Net, focusing on health and education
- The Relationship Between Poverty and Immigration

For more information, visit us online at: poverty.ucdavis.edu

Center for Poverty Research
University of California, Davis
1 Shields Ave | Davis, CA 95616
(530) 752-0401