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DACA's Stratified Tracks for Economic Mobility and Lessons for Addressing Immigrants' Long-Term Inequality

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DACA's Stratified Tracks for Economic Mobility and Lessons for Addressing Immigrants' Long-Term Inequality

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Since 2012, the politically tenuous Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program has provided temporary deportation relief and work authorization to over eight hundred thirty-five thousand undocumented young people who fit certain criteria. This Essay draws on one hundred fifteen interviews with DACA applicants in California, New York, and Texas during the heyday of the program to better understand its impacts on recipients' school and work experiences. We confirm many of the key benefits DACA status has provided to recipients, notably opening doors for them educationally and professionally.

However, our research also confirms DACA's uneven impacts. Those without four-year college degrees have had a harder time leveraging their DACA status overall. For those with four-year college degrees, DACA generally provided a range of new opportunities, allowing them to launch promising professional pathways. Across the board, however, DACA recipients consistently reported discrimination and microaggressions, even in educational and nonprofit work settings. While DACA empowered some to speak up and even exit these environments in search of better opportunities, many still experienced consistent workplace abuses and struggled to obtain raises and promotions. Inadequate social protections also remained a critical concern for all respondents. For example, health insurance was available only to some, depending on state policy, employer benefits, and school settings.

In all, our study's findings caution against temporary relief as a singularly viable way of addressing immigrant inequality long-term. Instead, we call for a broader vision of immigration reform that focuses also on addressing systemic gaps in the social safety net and the broader history of worker precarity and racial capitalism in the United States. Relief for immigrant illegality is a moral imperative and a critical ingredient, but alone it cannot level the playing field.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2012, there was significant anticipation about how the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program would affect young undocumented immigrants benefitting from its temporary deportation relief and work authorization.[1] In the decade following, researchers have analyzed how DACA has mitigated key challenges facing undocumented youth who came of age in the United States in the shadows of the law. Notably, researchers have highlighted their educational outcomes and the larger economic benefits that DACA has provided to some beneficiaries.[2] Throughout this Essay, we refer to undocumented individuals with DACA status as "DACAmented," as other scholars have done.[3]

DACA's future, however, is increasingly uncertain amid ongoing legal and political attacks,[4] and the current eligible population is growing smaller as they age out of the program.[5] Therefore, it is important to consider what benefits are threatened if the program goes away entirely, but also the challenges that are likely to remain even if it persists. Over a decade after the program's creation, we take stock of what DACA has accomplished, and what it could never have been expected to do, given systemic gaps in the social safety net and the broader history of worker precarity and racial capitalism in the United States. This Essay draws on interviews conducted in 2016 and 2017, during the heyday of the program. We spoke with one hundred fifteen DACA applicants in California, New York, and Texas to examine DACA's uneven impacts and challenges in addressing immigrants' long-term inequality.

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1. *See* ROBERTO GONZALES & VERONICA TERRIQUEZ, HOW DACA IS IMPACTING THE LIVES OF THOSE WHO ARE NOW DACAMENTED: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM THE NATIONAL UNDACAMENTED RESEARCH PROJECT 1 (Aug. 2013), https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/daca_final_ipc_csii_1.pdf.

2. *See generally* Caitlin Patler, Jo Mhairi Hale & Erin Hamilton, *Paths to Mobility: A Longitudinal Evaluation of Earnings Among Latino/a DACA Recipients in California*, 65 AM. BEHAV. SCIENTIST 1146 (2021) (finding that DACA recipients are associated with higher wages compared to nonrecipients).

3. *See, e.g.*, Roberto G. Gonzales, Veronica Terriquez & Stephen P. Ruszczyk, *Becoming DACAmented: Assessing the Short-Term Benefits of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)*, 58 AM. BEHAV. SCIENTIST 1852, 1853 (2014); CAITLIN PATLER & JORGE A. CABRERA, FROM UNDOCUMENTED TO DACAMENTED: BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE DEFERRED ACTION FOR CHILDHOOD ARRIVALS (DACA) PROGRAM, THREE YEARS FOLLOWING ITS ANNOUNCEMENT 3 (2015).

4. *See* JENNIFER M. CHACÓN, SUSAN BIBLER COUTIN & STEPHEN LEE, LEGAL PHANTOMS: EXECUTIVE ACTION AND THE HAUNTING FAILURES OF IMMIGRATION 4 (2024); Geoffrey Heeren, *Work and Employment for DACA Recipients*, 39 YALE J. ON REG. BULL. 46, 46 (2021).

5. Ariel G. Ruiz Soto & Julia Gelatt, *A Shrinking Number of DACA Participants Face Yet Another Adverse Court Ruling*, MIGRATION POL'Y INST. (Sept. 2023), https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/shrinking-number-daca-participants.

I. DACA: UNEVEN BENEFITS AND STRUCTURAL LIMITATIONS

There is ample scholarship on how undocumented children have struggled with illegality while transitioning to adulthood in the United States.[6] While the Supreme Court's 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* ruling mandated access to a free and public K-12 education for all students regardless of immigration status,[7] undocumented youth have faced a jarring transition into higher education and the labor force due to ineligibility for certain financial aid and inability to work legally.[8] In this context, DACA was tremendously important. Access to a Social Security number and work authorization, along with a stay of deportation, created new opportunities for study and work by expanding financial aid eligibility and making licensing and credentialing possible.[9] Indeed, many of the eight hundred thirty-five thousand DACA beneficiaries to date have entered the labor force, secured better-paying jobs, built credit, acquired assets, and even started businesses.[10] In the process, DACA has improved school attendance and graduation rates,[11] while also helping to lift families out of poverty.[12]

Yet, the impacts of DACA have been uneven across the life course, family types, and institutional environments. For example, research shows that while

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6. *See, e.g.*, Leisy Janet Abrego, "*I Can't Go to College Because I Don't Have Papers": Incorporation Patterns of Latino Undocumented Youth*, 4 LATINO STUD. 212, 213 (2006); Roberto G. Gonzales, *Learning to Be Illegal: Undocumented Youth and Shifting Legal Contexts in the Transition to Adulthood*, 76 AM. SOC. REV. 602, 602 (2011); ROBERTO G. GONZALES, LIVES IN LIMBO: UNDOCUMENTED AND COMING OF AGE IN AMERICA 92–119 (2016).

7. Plyler v. Doe, 457 U.S. 202, 230 (1982).

8. *See* Gabriel R. Serna, Joshua M. Cohen & David H. K. Nguyen, *State and Institutional Policies on In-State Resident Tuition and Financial Aid for Undocumented Students: Examining Constraints and Opportunities*, EDUC. POL'Y ANALYSIS ARCHIVES, Feb. 27, 2017, at 1, 12; Michael A. Olivas, *Within You Without You: Undocumented Lawyers, DACA, and Occupational Licensing*, 52 VAL. U. L. REV. 65, 80 (2017).

9. *See* GONZALES & TERRIQUEZ, *supra* note 1; ANGELO MATHAY, LESSONS FROM THE LOCAL LEVEL: DACA'S IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING SUCCESS 14, 27 (2015), https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/DACA-Fieldwork-Report.pdf; Olivas, *supra* note 8, at 88, 93; ZENIN JAIMES PÉREZ, HOW DACA HAS IMPROVED THE LIVES OF UNDOCUMENTED YOUNG PEOPLE 5 (2014), https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/BenefitsOfDACABrief2.pdf.

10. *See generally* Xin Brown, *Labor Market Impacts of State-Level Occupational Licensing of Undocumented Immigrants*, 77 RSCH. ECON. 478 (2023) (examining the benefits of granting occupational licenses to DACA recipients); *see* Nolan G. Pope, *The Effects of DACAmentation: The Impact of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals on Unauthorized Immigrants*, 143 J. PUB. ECON. 98, 114 (2016); U.S. CITIZENSHIP & IMMIGR. SERVS., NO. I-821D, CONSIDERATION OF DEFERRED ACTION FOR CHILDHOOD ARRIVALS: REQUESTS BY INTAKE AND CASE STATUS, BY FISCAL YEAR: AUGUST 15, 2012–DECEMBER 31, 2022 (2022); Tom K. Wong, Greisa Martinez Rosas, Adam Luna, Henry Manning, Adrian Reyna, Patrick O'Shea, Tom Jawetz & Philip E. Wolgin, *DACA Recipients' Economic and Educational Gains Continue to Grow*, CTR. FOR AM. PROGRESS (Aug. 28, 2017), https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/news/2017/08/28/437956/daca-recipients-economic-educational-gains-continue-grow.

11. Elira Kuka, Na'ama Shenhav & Kevin Shih, *Do Human Capital Decisions Respond to the Returns to Education? Evidence from DACA*, 12 AM. ECON. J.: ECON. POL'Y 293, 293 (2020).

12. *See* Catalina Amuedo-Dorantes & Francisca Antman, *Can Authorization Reduce Poverty Among Undocumented Immigrants? Evidence from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Program* 2 (Inst. for the Study of Lab., Working Paper No. 10145, 2016), https://docs.iza.org/dp10145.pdf.

DACA had an immediate and positive effect on the adult trajectories of undocumented youth, DACA beneficiaries from mixed-status families often struggled with the ongoing legal and economic precarity of still-undocumented family members.[13] Unique longitudinal data also reveal that the biggest socioeconomic boosts were for undocumented youth who got DACA at a younger age and graduated college, underscoring that DACA's wage benefits are tied to the timing of both educational credentials and labor market entry.[14]

Besides DACA benefits being uneven across beneficiaries, researchers have also highlighted DACA's structural limitations writ large. Notably, DACA was not intended to offer a pathway to legalization, does not address students' exclusions from federal financial aid, and is both temporary and revocable.[15] At the same time, DACA is embedded in a web of federal and state policies that have detracted from its potential to uplift beneficiaries.[16] For example, the exclusion of a subset of DACA beneficiaries from the federal Affordable Care Act until 2024 and the lack of a universal healthcare system mean that significant healthcare access inequities remain, even in immigrant-friendly states like California.[17] Policies in immigrant-unfriendly states, including those in the southern United States, often amplify long-standing exclusionary federal policies and enforcement-focused policing practices that stunt DACA's impact.[18] Conversely, states and localities with more integrative policies have been able to mitigate the negative effects of federal enforcement-first practices, allowing youth to take better advantage of DACA's benefits.[19]

We also need to remember that DACA exists in a broader context of precarious and racialized labor and social welfare protections, such that policies

13. *See* Elizabeth Aranda, Elizabeth Vaquera & Heide Castañeda, *Shifting Roles in Families of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Recipients and Implications for the Transition to Adulthood*, 42 J. FAM. ISSUES 2111, 2114 (2021); Roberto G. Gonzales, Basia Ellis, Sarah A. Rendón-García & Kristina Brant, *(Un)Authorized Transitions: Illegality, DACA, and the Life Course*, 15 RSCH. HUM. DEV. 345, 357–58 (2018).

14. Patler et al., *supra* note 2, at 1155.

15. *See DACA*, NAT'L IMMIGR. L. CTR., https://www.nilc.org/issues/daca (last visited July 30, 2024).

16. *Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals*, NAT'L CONF. OF ST. LEGISLATURES (Apr. 16, 2020), http://www.ncsl.org/research/immigration/deferred-action.aspx.

17. *See* CLAIRE D. BRINDIS, MAX W. HADLER, KEN JACOBS, LAUREL LUCIA, NADEREH POURAT, MARISSA RAYMOND-FLESCH, RACHEL SIEMONS & EFRAIN TALAMANTES, REALIZING THE DREAM FOR CALIFORNIANS ELIGIBLE FOR DEFERRED ACTION FOR CHILDHOOD ARRIVALS (DACA): HEALTH NEEDS AND ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE 20 (2014), Megan Messerly, *Biden Finalizes Rule Opening Up Obamacare to DACA Recipients*, POLITICO (May 3, 2024, 1:12 PM EDT), https://www.politico.com/news/2024/05/03/biden-obamacare-daca-00155881 (discussing President Biden's 2024 final rule that opens up the Affordable Care Act to an estimated one hundred thousand DACA beneficiaries).

18. *See* Kara Cebulko & Alexis Silver, *Navigating DACA in Hospitable and Hostile States: State Responses and Access to Membership in the Wake of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals*, 60 AM. BEHAV. SCIENTIST 1553, 1554–55 (2016); Richard C. Jones, *Policy Implications of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) on the Educational and Occupational Fortunes of Young Mexican-Born Adults*, 4 PAPERS APPLIED GEOGRAPHY 229, 234 (2018).

19. *See* Cebulko & Silver, *supra* note 18, at 1558.

related to health, education, employment, and racial inequity also shape the experiences of DACA beneficiaries.[20] Indeed, immigrant youth must continue to navigate structural inequalities in the United States even after securing DACA status. For example, in the absence of income-generating alternatives, and given rising educational costs, some DACA-eligible immigrants have forgone opportunities to continue their schooling.[21] How easy or challenging it is for DACA recipients to continue their education also varies by type of higher education institution. While traditional four-year universities tend to be better resourced, they are less flexible than community colleges in accommodating part-time working students, who include many DACA recipients.[22] At the same time, some universities and colleges have curated far more programmatic supports for undocumented and DACAmented students than others, which can have significant impacts on student experiences.[23] In all, DACA's impact is notably influenced by other government policies and public institutions that shape the beneficiaries' daily lives.

Family and community resources also matter, though evidence is inconclusive about how and for whom. Some evidence suggests that more highly educated DACA recipients with access to supportive family networks and community organizations reap greater economic and social benefits from DACA than those lacking these resources.[24] However, other research suggests that struggling families rely on their DACAmented children to work and contribute, inadvertently forcing them to lighten their course load and slowing their academic progress.[25] Here, DACA's impact is also influenced by other stratification processes—including those related to class, race, ethnicity, age, and gender—that shape program beneficiaries' daily lives.[26]

In this Essay, we want to underscore the importance of considering DACA's socioeconomic impact on program beneficiaries in the context of existing educational, workplace, and welfare precarities. This suggests the need to understand not only the insufficient benefits and even negative impacts of

20. Patler et al., *supra* note 2, at 6.

21. Catalina Amuedo-Dorantes & Francisca Antman, Schooling and Labor Market Effects of Temporary Authorization: Evidence from DACA, 30 J. POPULATION ECON. 339, 340 (2017); Erin R. Hamilton, Caitlin Patler & Paola D. Langer, *The Life-Course Timing of Legalization: Evidence from the DACA Program*, 7 SOCIUS 1, 8 (2021).

22. Amy Hsin & Francesca Ortega, *The Effects of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals on the Educational Outcomes of Undocumented Students*, 55 DEMOGRAPHY 1487, 1491 (2018).

23. Laura E. Enriquez, Martha Morales Hernandez, Daniel Millán & Daisy Vazquez Vera, *Mediating Illegality: Federal, State, and Institutional Policies in the Educational Experiences of Undocumented College Students*, 44 LAW & SOC. INQUIRY 679, 682–83 (2019).

24. *See* Gonzales et al., *supra* note 3, at 1852.

25. Keitaro Okura, Amy Hsin & Sofya Aptekar, *Heterogeneous Effects of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) on Undocumented College Students' Educational Outcomes*, INT'L MIGRATION REV., 2023, at 9.

26. *Id.*

temporary legal status,[27] but also the ways in which immigration status operates alongside other racialized historical and contemporary policy regimes that produce immigrant precarity and inequality.[28] We make the case that it is critical not to overemphasize the importance of immigration status to the exclusion of other challenges that structure immigrant life in the United States. This includes low-wage immigrant workers navigating the realities of an at-will employment regime,[29] but also college-educated professionals of color who continue to face racial microaggressions and discrimination at school and in the workplace.[30]

II. METHODS AND DATA

We draw on one hundred fifteen semi-structured interviews with young undocumented immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area (California), the New York City Metro Area (New York), and the Greater Houston Area (Texas) to learn about their school and labor experiences. We conducted these interviews in 2016 and 2017, during the heyday of the DACA program and prior to the most intense phase of legal challenges against the program.[31] While all respondents had applied, or had intentions to apply, for DACA, only ninety-four of them were DACA recipients at the time of the interview (see Appendix, Table 1). Collectively, our respondents were born in twenty-seven different countries, but the majority (sixty-nine) were born in Mexico. A little over half of the respondents (sixty) identified as female, and about two-thirds (seventy-five) came to the United States before the age of ten. Our sample captures the experiences of those who came to the United States with temporary visas that they overstayed (forty-seven), as well as those who crossed the border without inspection or by using false papers (sixty-three). Many respondents (fifty-one) noted having mixed-status families that included undocumented, legal permanent resident, and United States citizen relatives. Respondents have a range of educational backgrounds, but more than half (sixty-seven) had less than a bachelor's degree at the time of the interview. Nearly all respondents (one hundred nine) reported having had a job in the United States, with about half (fifty-eight) mentioning they had health insurance at the time of the interview.

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27. Cecilia Menjívar & Leisy J. Abrego, *Legal Violence: Immigration Law and the Lives of Central American Immigrants*, 117 AM. J. SOCIO. 1380, 1381 (2012).

28. Darlène Dubuisson, Patricia Campos-Medina, Shannon Gleeson & Kati L. Griffith, *Centering Race in Studies of Low-Wage Immigrant Labor*, 19 ANN. REV. L. & SOC. SCI. 109, 111 (2023).

29. Shannon Gleeson & Kati L. Griffith, *Employers as Subjects of the Immigration State: How the State Foments Employment Insecurity for Temporary Immigrant Workers*, 46 LAW & SOC. INQUIRY 92, 95 (2021).

30. Suchitra Shenoy-Packer, *Immigrant Professionals, Microaggressions, and Critical Sensemaking in the U.S. Workplace*, 29 MGMT. COMM. Q. 257, 262 (2015).

31. Daniela Alulema, *DACA and the Supreme Court: How We Got to This Point, a Statistical Profile of Who Is Affected, and What the Future May Hold for DACA Beneficiaries*, 7 J. ON MIGRATION & HUM. SEC. 123, 123 (2019).

We conducted interviews in three high-immigrant metropolitan areas representing varying contexts for immigrant integration. All three regions have hourglass economies with many high- and low-skilled jobs, though there are notable differences. Houston has large construction, energy, and medical industries,[32] San Francisco stands out with a large tech industry,[33] and New York City has a diverse job market offering a wide range of opportunities across various industries, including banking, finance, fashion, and communication.[34] San Francisco and New York City are overall politically progressive places, embedded in states that have among the most immigrant- and worker-friendly policies and practices in the nation.[35] Houston is more mixed politically, and Texas state policies and practices are notably immigrant- and worker-unfriendly.[36] Houston is also home to the least dense nonprofit sector, while San Francisco and New York City have some of the strongest access to justice infrastructures.[37] In each metropolitan area, we spoke with respondents from both the central city and outlying suburbs to explore the importance of geography and residential distribution.[38]

Interviews lasted between one and three hours and, with few exceptions, were conducted both in person and in English. Interviews addressed respondents' immigration history, experiences learning about and applying for DACA, and experiences living, studying, and working with DACA status. With respondents' consent, interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed. We analyzed the transcripts through an iterative process of inductive and deductive theorizing, based on multiple rounds of identifying categories and themes, and coding and sorting the data using the software program ATLAS.ti. We use pseudonyms to protect respondents' identity.

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32. *See* Els de Graauw & Shannon Gleeson, *Metropolitan Context and Immigrant Rights Experiences: DACA Awareness and Support in Houston*, 42 URB. GEOGRAPHY 1119, 1132 (2021).

33. *See* ELS DE GRAAUW, MAKING IMMIGRANT RIGHTS REAL: NONPROFITS AND THE POLITICS OF INTEGRATION IN SAN FRANCISCO 65 (2016).

34. *See* Els de Graauw, Diana R. Gordon & John Mollenkopf, *Teeming Shores: Immigrant Reception in the Fragmented Metropolis of New York*, *in* UNSETTLED AMERICANS: METROPOLITAN CONTEXT AND CIVIC LEADERSHIP FOR IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION 49, 49 (John Mollenkopf & Manuel Pastor eds., 2016).

35. *See* ALLAN COLBERN & S. KARTHICK RAMAKRISHNAN, CITIZENSHIP REIMAGINED: A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR STATE RIGHTS IN THE UNITED STATES 261 (2020); DE GRAAUW, *supra* note 33; Els de Graauw & Shannon Gleeson, *Labor Unions and Undocumented Immigrants: Local Perspectives on Transversal Solidarity During DACA and DAPA*, 47 CRITICAL SOC. 941, 946–47 (2021); de Graauw et al., *supra* note 34, at 58.

36. *See* de Graauw & Gleeson, *supra* note 35, at 949–50; SHANNON GLEESON, CONFLICTING COMMITMENTS: THE POLITICS OF ENFORCING IMMIGRANT WORKER RIGHTS IN SAN JOSE AND HOUSTON 196 (2012).

37. Donald Kerwin & Evin Millet, *Charitable Legal Immigration Programs and the US Undocumented Population: A Study in Access to Justice in an Era of Political Dysfunction*, 10 J. ON MIGRATION & HUM. SEC. 190, 198 (2022).

38. de Graauw & Gleeson, *supra* note 32, at 1122; Shannon Gleeson & Els de Graauw, *DACA Legal Services: One Federal Policy, Different Local Implementation Approaches*, 45 LAW & POL'Y 434, 437 (2023).

III. THE DACA EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH WITHOUT COLLEGE DEGREES

Among the one hundred fifteen undocumented youth we interviewed, sixty-seven had not completed their bachelor's degree. While nine had only reached high school, the other fifty-eight had either pursued a vocational program, a two-year associate's degree, or were still progressing with their four-year college coursework leading to a bachelor's degree; fifteen of them did not have DACA status at the time of the interview. Not all were in school at the point of our interview, and many had taken breaks along the way to work and save money. These individuals were poised for a very different labor market than those with four-year college and graduate degrees. Their jobs ranged from on-campus positions to retail, restaurant, and construction jobs. These respondents' experiences are informative, as they highlight the structural limitations that immigrants—including those with DACA—face at school and work while seeking social protection in the United States.

A. EDUCATIONAL BARRIERS

Researchers have long documented that students face challenges in attaining educational credentials, from high school graduation to community college transfers and ultimately entry into a four-year degree program.[39] Many of our respondents were in the midst of navigating their educational paths, and DACA proved a mixed bag. State legislation predating the 2012 DACA program already provided in-state tuition and access to financial aid in California[40] and Texas.[41] However, respondents still struggled with funding their education given their ineligibility for federal financial aid; moreover, full-time college enrollment often meant forgoing full-time employment. For our respondents in New York, where undocumented youth qualified for in-state tuition in 2002[42] and state financial aid only in 2019,[43] the financial hardships of pursuing an education were a clearer barrier.

While DACA eased many aspects of life for young immigrants, they still had to contend with all the challenges of achieving academic success. For example, in New York, Roberto, who had just received DACA, experienced immense pressure from his mom to make good on the sacrifices his parents had

39. *See* Cynthia Feliciano & Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Gendered Paths: Educational and Occupational Expectations and Outcomes Among Adult Children of Immigrants*, 28 ETHNIC & RACIAL STUD. 1087, 1088 (2005); GONZALES, *supra* note 6; Pedro A. Noguera, *Social Capital and the Education of Immigrant Students: Categories and Generalizations*, 77 SOCIO. EDUC. 180, 181 (2004).

40. *See* Assemb. 540, 2001 Leg., Reg. Sess. (Cal. 2001); DREAM Act of 2011, Assemb. 130, 2011 Leg., Reg. Sess. (Cal. 2011).

41. *See* H.R. 1403, 2001 Leg., 77th Reg. Sess. (Tex. 2001).

42. *See* Assemb. 9612, 2002 Leg., Reg. Sess. (N.Y. 2002).

43. José Peralta New York State DREAM Act, S. 1250, 2019 Leg., Reg. Sess. (N.Y. 2019).

made fleeing Guatemala.[44] Like many young people who struggled with school, he was more interested in earning spending money and trying to get a job in fast food.[45] He was unconvinced college was for him, even with DACA.[46] "What's the point of my going to college if there is a 50/50 chance I will get a job?" he asked.[47] The matrix of barriers in front of this first-generation and low-income immigrant student of color persisted even when he received DACA.

DACA made beneficiaries eligible for some new resources that could ease the financial strain of pursuing an education, but non-traditional students and working parents continued to struggle.[48] Many managed to complete a two-year degree, often working low-wage jobs and facing notable hardships along the way. Sandra, for example, planned to transfer from her Houston community college to pursue a four-year degree, but it took her a long time given the demands of raising her two small children.[49] Her undocumented husband was deemed ineligible for DACA when he was unable to meet the education requirement.[50] The resources for working parents going back to school are limited, and DACA did little to open new sources of support specifically for them, as Sandra and other respondents explained.[51]

B. WORKPLACE PRECARITY

Beyond educational barriers, DACA recipients in our study who were in the low-wage labor force continued to confront the realities of an unregulated market where workplace violations were rampant, and at-will employment meant workers, in practice, had few opportunities to demand better without risking termination. Gaining the legal right to stay and work in the United States is not a panacea for these structural problems in the workplace.[52] DACA recipients without four-year college degrees continue to experience the inequities of the United States labor market and the proliferation of "bad jobs."[53]

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44. Interview with Roberto, DACA recipient, New York City (Mar. 10, 2017).

45. *Id.*

46. *Id.*

47. *Id.*

48. *See* Sofya Aptekar & Amy Hsin, *Stratified Entry into Illegality: How Immigration Policy Shapes Being Undocumented*, 102 SOC. FORCES 45, 54 (2023).

49. Interview with Sandra, DACA recipient, Houston (Aug. 2, 2016).

50. *Id.*

51. *Id. See also* Elyse D'nn Lovell, *College Students Who Are Parents Need Equitable Services for Retention*, 16 J. COLL. STUDENT RETENTION: RSCH., THEORY & PRAC. 187, 201 (2014).

52. *See generally* ANNETTE BERNHARDT, HEATHER BOUSHEY, LAURA DRESSER & CHRIS TILLY, THE GLOVES-OFF ECONOMY: WORKPLACE STANDARDS AT THE BOTTOM OF AMERICA'S LABOR MARKET (2008) (discussing the multiple issues—beyond legal status—that shape worker precarity); DAVID WEIL, THE FISSURED WORKPLACE: WHY WORK BECAME SO BAD FOR SO MANY AND WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE IT (2014) (same).

53. ARNE L. KALLEBERG, GOOD JOBS, BAD JOBS: THE RISE OF POLARIZED AND PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT SYSTEMS IN THE UNITED STATES, 1970S-2000S, at 3 (2011).

For example, Minchul worked for his uncle as an unlicensed plumber, flying "under the radar" in New York City's ethnic economy, and received payment in cash.[54] DACA did not lead to an increase in his $12 an hour wage nor diminished his need to work a sixty-hour, six-day work week.[55] Similarly, David's restaurant job in New York City never checked his papers, never provided raises, and paid only in cash.[56] For these young adults, the only way out was to find another job, although without a four-year college degree their options remained limited even with DACA status.

Our data also does not provide clear evidence that DACA helped respondents to do better in their current jobs. The at-will employment regime that governed many of our respondents without college degrees meant that workers still feared getting fired.[57] Though, with DACA, they at least felt they had the option to leave.[58] Andrea, for example, ultimately quit her job at a Walmart store in San Jose.[59] "The new store manager was really getting on my nerves," she said, "and I thought I deserve better than this. Every day was like constant stress and struggle to get there and deal with the customers. It's not okay to think that you want to kill yourself for a job. That's how depressed I got, so I left."[60] Still in school and waiting to transfer to a four-year university, however, she was only able to move laterally to another low-paying retail job.[61] Destiny, too, ultimately left her retail job in Houston.[62] Despite being robbed at knifepoint, she continued for nearly a year, with no raise and little sense of security or improvement in workplace safety.[63] Although she was outspoken and felt empowered, her situation changed very little during her time there, despite having work authorization through DACA.[64] Similarly, after working for six years at a well-known Latino grocer in San Jose that was notorious for labor violations, Mireya left the job after her demand for a raise was flatly denied.[65] She eventually found a job as a legal assistant, but only after transferring to a four-year state university and after receiving substantial mentorship as an

54. Interview with Minchul, DACA recipient, New York City (Mar. 25, 2017).

55. *Id.*

56. Interview with David, DACA recipient, New York City (Jan. 11, 2017).

57. *See* Interview with Mireya, DACA recipient, San Jose (Mar. 29, 2016); Interview with Ramon, DACA recipient, Houston (Apr. 3, 2016).

58. *See, e.g.*, Interview with Mireya, *supra* note 57; Interview with Ramon, *supra* note 57.

59. Interview with Andrea, DACA recipient, San Jose (Mar. 29, 2017).

60. *Id.*

61. *Id.*

62. Interview with Destiny, DACA recipient, Houston (Apr. 13, 2016).

63. *Id.*

64. *Id.*

65. Interview with Mireya, *supra* note 57.

immigrant student organizer.[66] DACA was only one of many supports that led to this success.

Self-employment is often hailed as one potential path upward for undocumented immigrants, especially when traditional professional routes are foreclosed without a four-year college degree.[67] For example, Lina, who lived in a small town outside Houston and had a child when she was sixteen years old, for years worked a minimum wage cash position under the table—and without health insurance—at an insurance company catering to the immigrant community.[68] She struggled to complete her GED while working full time and raising her son, but eventually she did.[69] When she received DACA, she was able to open her own tax preparation business.[70] Lina stood out from among our respondents in pursuing this type of entrepreneurship, which requires capital and connections. Few of our respondents were able to follow her path.

C. LIMITED SOCIAL PROTECTIONS, WITH VARIATIONS BY PLACE

While social protections are limited for most low-wage Americans and almost entirely foreclosed for undocumented immigrants, individuals with DACA fared little better. Notably, our respondents without college degrees struggled with lack of good health insurance, childcare, or income assurances, though where they lived mattered. When Juan, who was unable to get DACA, suffered a horrendous bike accident in San Francisco that left him temporarily without a portion of his skull, his recovery benefitted from local laws where even undocumented individuals can access critical medical care.[71] However, many workers in service jobs were never offered any health insurance, or it was prohibitively expensive to purchase a health insurance policy on their own.[72] Because DACA provided individuals an easier pathway to school, some students were able to access university-based health resources.[73] Pablo, for example, was diagnosed with a parasitic brain infection, and his expenses for an MRI and

66. *Id.*; *see also* Molly Weston Williamson, *Understanding the Self-Employed in the United States*, CTR. FOR AM. PROGRESS (Sept. 21, 2023), https://www.americanprogress.org/article/understanding-the-self-employed-in-the-united-states.

67. *See* Fernanda Uriegas, *Undocumented Entrepreneurs Rise Above Policy Making*, FORBES (May 16, 2018, 3:57 PM EDT), https://www.forbes.com/sites/fernandafabian/2018/05/12/undocumented-entrepreneurs-rise-above-policy-making/#5d6a5a464ee4.

68. Interview with Lina, DACA recipient, Houston (Apr. 4, 2016).

69. *Id.*

70. *Id.*

71. Interview with Juan, San Francisco (May 28, 2016) (Juan did not have DACA status at the time of the interview).

72. *See, e.g.*, Interview with Milagros, DACA recipient, Houston (Mar. 20, 2016); Interview with Alain, New York City (Mar. 16, 2017) (Alain did not have DACA status at the time of the interview); Interview with Darren, New York City (Jan. 8, 2017) (Darren did not have DACA status at the time of the interview).

73. *See, e.g.*, Interview with Pablo, Houston (Apr. 15, 2016) (Pablo did not have DACA status at the time of the interview).

eventually surgery were staggering.[74] Thanks to his University of Houston insurance, he was able to get most of the $115,000 bill covered, though he still had to pay nearly $7,000 himself.[75] Such major gaps in health coverage were rampant throughout our sample, complicating the economic security of respondents and their families.

Respondents without four-year college degrees similarly struggled to access care resources.[76] For example, many respondents with families talked about the challenges of day care and aftercare, especially as young parents juggled work and school.[77] Lina and Sandra, both quoted earlier, relied on their parents to help with their children, but they had to limit their educational and job opportunities based on the availability of parental supports.[78] Respondents also discussed struggling through times of unemployment and disability, with little to no access to income replacement or other safety net programs.[79] Despite having work authorization, DACAmented individuals without four-year college degrees are still ineligible for federal programs like unemployment and Social Security.[80] This means that in times of crisis, their options are severely limited. Many respondents were acutely aware of the irony that the taxes they paid would never translate into benefits they could access.[81] "We have been paying taxes ever since we got here," Tony—who worked as a part-time sales associate in New York City—wryly observed, "and we really never received any benefits . . . . We are giving more than we are taking."[82]

Each of these barriers combine with varying state and local practices regarding undocumented immigrants to shape immigrant experiences writ large.[83] Even in places with intentional inclusive policies, policing practices that disproportionately target communities of color, including the undocumented parents of DACAmented children, shape the experiences of our respondents.[84] The ongoing legal and political attacks on the DACA program at the federal and

74. *Id.*

75. *Id.*

76. *See* Interview with Lina, *supra* note 68; Interview with Sandra, *supra* note 49.

77. *See* Interview with Lina, *supra* note 68; Interview with Sandra, *supra* note 49.

78. *See* Interview with Lina, *supra* note 68; Interview with Sandra, *supra* note 49.

79. *See, e.g.*, Interview with Mandy, DACA recipient (June 6, 2016); Interview with Roberto, *supra* note 44.

80. Rebecca Smith, *Immigrant Workers' Eligibility for Unemployment Insurance*, NAT'L EMP. L. PROJECT (Mar. 31, 2020), https://www.nelp.org/publication/immigrant-workers-eligibility-unemployment-insurance.

81. *See* Interview with Tony, DACA recipient, New York City (Mar. 10, 2017).

82. *Id.*

83. *See* Amada Armenta, *Racializing Crimmigration: Structural Racism, Colorblindness, and the Institutional Production of Immigrant Criminality*, 3 SOCIO. RACE & ETHNICITY 82, 93 (2017).

84. *See* Robert Courtney Smith, Andrés Besserer Rayas, Daisy Flores, Angelo Cabrera, Guillermo Yrizar Barbosa, Karina Weinstein, Maria Xique, Michelle Bialeck & Eduardo Torres, *Disrupting the Traffic Stop-to-Deportation Pipeline: The New York State Greenlight Law's Intent and Implementation*, 9 J. MIGRATION & HUM. SEC. 94, 98 (2021).

state levels, combined with the enforcement-first approach of many federal policies, can cast an overwhelming pall on local inclusive efforts developed to help undocumented and DACAmented residents, despite critical advocacy efforts on the ground.[85]

IV. THE DACA EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE GRADUATES

Many of the challenges facing DACAmented individuals without a college degree persisted for those who graduated from a four-year degree program and even for those who pursued graduate training. Among the one hundred fifteen undocumented youth we interviewed were forty-eight individuals who had earned at least a bachelor's degree in the United States; six of them did not have DACA at the time of the interview. As in the case of DACA beneficiaries without a four-year college degree, DACA brought notable benefits—in both school and work settings—to the forty-two DACAmented college graduates in our sample. Indeed, respondents confirmed the profound impact of DACA on their lives. Sonya, a college graduate from San Francisco, explained that because of DACA, "my life has changed; I'm a new person."[86] Ivette, a college graduate from the City University of New York (CUNY), reflected that, "DACA was the key to all the doors that I knew existed but were always shut in my face."[87] And Katia, a college graduate from Houston, added that, "having DACA just boosted my self-esteem a whole lot . . . and that transferred professionally as well."[88]

Besides experiencing notable psychological benefits such as feeling recognized, seen, safer, and more independent, DACA allowed college graduates to pursue critical experiences in their area of study.[89] Manuel, a college graduate from San Francisco and environmental and public transit advocate, was able to pursue his dream internship with the Bay Area Regional Transit (BART) District.[90] Here, he learned control systems engineering skills, and he hoped to land a full-time job with BART afterward.[91]

A. EDUCATIONAL BARRIERS

Despite their DACA status, however, undocumented youth who earned a bachelor's degree still confronted challenges in the United States higher education system, which is stratified along socioeconomic status, race, and

85. *See* CHACÓN ET AL., *supra* note 4, at 82, 190; de Graauw & Gleeson, *supra* note 32, at 1120.
86. Interview with Sonya, DACA recipient, San Francisco (Apr. 27, 2016).
87. Interview with Ivette, DACA recipient, New York City (Jan. 12, 2017).
88. Interview with Katia, DACA recipient, Houston (Mar. 16, 2016).
89. *See, e.g.*, Interview with Manuel, DACA recipient, San Francisco (May 31, 2016).
90. *Id.*
91. *Id.*

gender.[92] Nearly all respondents discussed facing major challenges in funding their four-year college degree, given limited financial aid and few scholarships available to undocumented and DACAmented students.[93] Sammy, who attended CUNY before undocumented and DACAmented students were eligible for state financial aid, took eight years to complete his bachelor's degree in computer science.[94] Because of cost, he said, "I had to take part-time classes," while also working an overnight custodian job.[95]

Unable to afford full-time university attendance, many of our respondents diverted to more affordable, even if less prestigious, community colleges in the hopes of transferring to a four-year degree program later. This typically delayed college completion and also forced some students to shift majors.[96] Karmelita, a DACA recipient from San Francisco, had originally been accepted to San Francisco State University (SFSU), but she had to turn the school down, "because there was no way I could afford it there."[97] She instead attended a community college in California's Central Valley before transferring to SFSU several years later.[98] Similarly, Mostofa transferred to CUNY after attending a Long Island community college for three years.[99] However, once at CUNY, he had to put in sixty-hour work weeks—without overtime pay—at a local car wash to be able to afford his college tuition.[100] His GPA suffered as a result.[101] "It was very challenging for me," he reflected, "I went from being a 3.5 [GPA] student to almost a 1.6 . . . I wasn't getting enough sleep. I wasn't getting enough time to study."[102]

Respondents at four-year colleges, such as the University of Houston, often noted their school's less diverse population and lack of staff who understood their particular challenges, which left them feeling alienated and isolated.[103] While the 2001 Texas Dream Act provided undocumented students with in-state tuition rates, staff at the University of Houston seemed unfamiliar with the

92. *See* ANN L. MULLEN, DEGREES OF INEQUALITY: CULTURE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION 2 (2010).

93. *See Undocumented Students and Financial Aid*, FED. STUDENT AID, U.S. DEP'T OF EDUC., https://studentaid.gov/apply-for-aid/fafsa/filling-out/undocumented-students (last visited July 30, 2024).

94. Interview with Sammy, DACA recipient, New York City (Mar. 25, 2017).

95. *Id.*

96. *See, e.g.*, Interview with Karmelita, DACA recipient, San Francisco (May 11, 2016); Interview with Mostofa, DACA recipient, New York City (Jan. 16, 2017).

97. Interview with Karmelita, *supra* note 96.

98. *Id.*

99. Interview with Mostofa, *supra* note 96.

100. *Id.*

101. *Id.*

102. *Id.*

103. *See* Interview with Katia, *supra* note 88; Interview with Destiny, *supra* note 62; Interview with Magalit, DACA recipient, Houston (Mar. 18, 2016).

policy.[104] This forced some respondents to drop out for a semester until they could convince the school bureaucracy that they should not be charged exorbitant international student fees.[105] The international student office, one respondent commented, "[was] not particularly sensitive to the experiences of undocumented students."[106] Another respondent commented that, "for one semester, I owed the University of Houston about $13,000, but I was supposed to get in-state tuition," adding that "nobody in the financial aid office would help me."[107] This bureaucratic confusion has likely improved throughout the time DACA has been in place. However, evidence abounds that institutional responses to current DACA beneficiaries—and the growing population of non-DACA eligible students—on university campuses remain a challenge.[108]

B. WORKPLACE CHALLENGES

While DACA opened up better job opportunities for college graduates, DACA alone did not guarantee socioeconomic mobility.[109] This is, in part, because as noncitizens, even well-educated and high-skilled DACA recipients still did not qualify for many positions.[110] Off limits, for example, were jobs that required security clearances predicated on United States citizenship, such as in the aerospace and biomedical industries.[111] "I was going to study astrophysics because I wanted to work for NASA," Manuel from San Francisco said, "but as I started looking into jobs at NASA, they all require citizenship."[112] He subsequently switched his major to engineering instead.[113] Respondents with criminal justice majors also realized they could not pursue their dream of going into law enforcement, as these jobs are typically open only to United States citizens.[114] Vicente, a DACA recipient in San Francisco who majored in criminal justice and Latino studies, commented that, "I wanted to apply to the police academy, but I quickly found out that I can't because you have to be either a citizen or in the process of getting your citizenship when you apply."[115]

104. *See* Interview with Katia, *supra* note 88; Interview with Destiny, *supra* note 62; Interview with Magalit, *supra* note 103.

105. *See* Interview with Katia, *supra* note 88; Interview with Destiny, *supra* note 62; Interview with Magalit, *supra* note 103.

106. Interview with Katia, *supra* note 88.

107. Interview with Magalit, *supra* note 103.

108. Phillip Connor, *The Post-DACA Generation is Here*, FWD.US (May 23, 2023), https://www.fwd.us/news/undocumented-high-school-graduates.

109. Hsin & Ortega, *supra* note 22, at 1487.

110. *See, e.g.*, Interview with Manuel, *supra* note 89; Interview with Vicente, DACA recipient, San Francisco (June 14, 2016).

111. Olivas, *supra* note 8, at 70.

112. Interview with Manuel, *supra* note 89.

113. *Id.*

114. Olivas, *supra* note 8, at 70.

115. Interview with Vicente, *supra* note 110.

Employment constraints tied to United States citizenship also affected—to a lesser extent—those without a four-year college degree, including aspiring entrepreneurs who required licensing and other credentials.[116] For example, Lina, the DACA recipient and tax businessowner in the Houston area explained how in order to file clients' tax returns electronically, she needed an Electronic Filing Identification Number (EFIN) available only to United States citizens.[117]

DACA's limits on international travel were also an issue, especially for DACAmented college graduates needing to travel for career development.[118] DACA recipients can request permission to travel abroad on Advance Parole for work and study abroad or to visit elderly and sick relatives.[119] However, requesting this benefit can be complicated and returning to the United States could be risky.[120] Some students, such as Calixto—a public health scholar from San Francisco—still look forward to pursuing their dreams one day.[121] "I've always wanted to do [the Peace Corps], since I was in high school actually . . . . When I get a green card, that's the first thing I'm going to do!"[122] Others were left discouraged and avoided applying for more lucrative jobs that required significant international travel or prolonged periods abroad.[123] Vicente, a college graduate from San Francisco, originally aspired to a career in international real estate.[124] "Then I quickly realized I can't travel."[125] And Amalia, who is a doctoral student at the University of California, understood she would miss out on key professionalization opportunities.[126] "I won't ever go to those [international] academic conferences," she concluded sadly.[127] All of these DACA recipients understood the benefits of DACA, but also the real limitations it left in place.

Several DACAmented college graduates also recounted experiences with discrimination at work, evidence of institutional racism that permeates differences across immigration status.[128] Catalina, a college graduate from a prestigious East Coast university, landed a dream job with a prominent national

116. *See* Olivas, *supra* note 8, at 70.

117. Interview with Lina, *supra* note 68.

118. *See, e.g.*, Interview with Sonya, *supra* note 86; Interview with Vicente, *supra* note 110.

119. *Advance Parole: Weighing the Benefits and Risks*, IMMIGRANTS RISING, https://immigrantsrising.org/resource/advance-parole-weighing-the-benefits-and-risks (last visited July 30 22, 2024).

120. *Id.*

121. Interview with Calixto, DACA recipient, San Francisco (Apr. 27, 2016).

122. *Id.*

123. Interview with Vicente, *supra* note 110.

124. *Id.*

125. *Id.*

126. Interview with Amalia, DACA recipient, San Francisco (June 18, 2016).

127. *Id.*

128. *See, e.g.*, Interview with Catalina, DACA recipient, Houston (Apr. 12, 2016); Interview with Daniel, San Francisco (May 27, 2016) (Daniel did not have DACA status at the time of the interview).

civil rights organization in Washington, DC.[129] Despite this success, she explained how "being a person of color in a predominantly white organization" and daily microaggressions contributed to feelings of isolation and "wear and tear" that ultimately made her leave this advocacy organization for one in Houston with a more diverse workforce.[130] Daniel, who was working on his master's degree at a top private university in California, similarly recounted his experiences with institutional racism.[131] The white United States and European colleagues in his lab have racially profiled him and even once asked for a referral to a Spanish speaking nanny, rather than focus on his scientific contributions.[132]

Even with DACA status, speaking up about discrimination at work was not easy, and many did not feel empowered to speak up and exercise their workplace rights.[133] For Ivette, a DACAmented college graduate from New York City, discrimination "is such a norm; it's part of [my] day to day . . . it's just how it is."[134] When asked if she had tried to address the injustices experienced at work, she said that making an issue of it is a "privilege that is so invisible to someone who has never seen how it is" to be a female immigrant of color.[135] Ivette—and other college graduates with DACA status—continued to experience the endemic structural inequities of the American workplace, quite aside from formal legal protections they and other workers are afforded.[136]

C. STATE AND LOCAL POLICY CONTEXTS MATTER

The experiences of DACAmented individuals varied across place, depending on local policy factors and on the composition of the local economy.[137] Houston, for example, is dominated by the energy sector and aviation industry, and it is home to the largest medical complex in the world.[138] Jobs and internships in these sectors often require legal permanent residency or United States citizenship, as well as background checks.[139] These constraints led some respondents to rethink their path. Jason once dreamt of becoming a pediatric surgeon in Houston, but he instead shifted his major from biology to mechanical engineering, which extended his time at the University of Houston.[140] These local labor market constraints came up in conversations with

129. Interview with Catalina, *supra* note 128.
130. *Id.*
131. Interview with Daniel, *supra* note 128.
132. *Id.*
133. *See, e.g.*, Interview with Ivette, *supra* note 87.
134. *Id.*
135. *Id.*
136. *Id.*; Interview with Daniel, *supra* note 128.
137. de Graauw & Gleeson, *supra* note 32, at 1121.
138. *Id.* at 1133.
139. Olivas, *supra* note 8, at 69.
140. Interview with Jason, DACA recipient, Houston (Apr. 9, 2016).

undocumented youth without a college degree as well, though less frequently.[141] Houston's energy sector, for example, is one of the few blue-collar pathways for wage mobility.[142] However, many of these jobs require a Transportation Worker Identification Credential (TWIC) card, which is issued by the United States Transportation Security Administration and is not available to DACA beneficiaries.[143]

State policy context can likewise amplify the labor market constraints experienced by DACAmented college graduates, through limits on professional licensing and credentialing.[144] Mandy, for example, discussed her struggles with getting certified to work as a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) right out of school.[145] With DACA, she could sit for the CPA tests in California, but she also needed one year of work experience for her CPA license, something she could not access prior to receiving her work authorization.[146] Katia discussed her uncertain future as a DACAmented law student in Houston who cannot practice law in Texas if DACA is taken away from her.[147] Other DACAmented graduates, including nurses and other health professionals,[148] were also acutely aware of how policies governing their professional fields shaped and at times constrained their socioeconomic opportunities.

State and local contexts, however, can also alleviate challenges at school and work.[149] In-state tuition and state financial aid provisions in California, New York, and Texas can make obtaining a college degree more affordable for many DACAmented individuals who remain ineligible for any federal financial aid.[150] Making all state professional licenses available regardless of immigration status, as California has done with the enactment of SB 1159 in 2014, has opened up professional opportunities for DACA recipients.[151] These examples provide some bright spots for immigrant-inclusive state policies that can help immigrants take better advantage of DACA's benefits.

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141. *See, e.g.*, Interview with Sandra, *supra* note 49.

142. *Why Houston?*, GREATER HOUS. PARTNERSHIP, https://www.houston.org/why-houston (last visited July 30, 2024).

143. de Graauw & Gleeson, *supra* note 32, at 1134.

144. *See, e.g.*, Interview with Katia, *supra* note 88; Interview with Mandy, *supra* note 79.

145. Interview with Mandy, *supra* note 79.

146. *Id.*

147. Interview with Katia, *supra* note 88.

148. de Graauw & Gleeson, *supra* note 32, at 1136.

149. *See* COLBERN & RAMAKRISHNAN, *supra* note 35, at 261; Els de Graauw, *Filling the Federal Policy Void: State and Local Responses to Undocumented Immigration in the United States*, *in* TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY IMMIGRATION TO NORTH AMERICA: NEWCOMERS IN TURBULENT TIMES 265, 266 (Victoria M. Esses & Donald E. Abelson eds., 2017).

150. *Undocumented Students and Financial Aid*, *supra* note 93.

151. *Professional and Occupational Licenses for Immigrants*, NAT'L CONF. OF ST. LEGISLATURES (Jan. 17, 2017), https://www.ncsl.org/immigration/professional-and-occupational-licenses-for-immigrants.

Local mentoring programs can also ease the transition to a professional career. San Francisco's innovative DreamSF Fellowship is a publicly-funded fellowship program that annually places more than a dozen college students and recent college graduates who are undocumented, DACAmented, asylum seekers, and refugees in paid positions with local nonprofit organizations.[152] Though small in scale, this program takes advantage of the city's rich nonprofit infrastructure to provide fellows with valuable leadership and professional development experiences that are hard for them to get elsewhere.[153] Fellowship graduates like Alba reflected on the utility of this experience.[154] "This whole time, I had been working in restaurants. Yes, making money but not getting fulfilment," she commented, adding that the DreamSF Fellowship gave her the professional experience she needed and made her realize she wanted to go to law school.[155] Such local resources and programming, concentrated in a central city with good public transit, were more challenging to access for DACA recipients in suburban and rural settings with poorer public transit infrastructures.[156] This highlights the need to fund and provide supportive programming beyond urban cores.

V. CONCLUSION: DACA AND IMMIGRANTS' LONG-TERM INEQUALITY

Almost all respondents in our sample acknowledged the importance of DACA's temporary immigration relief and work authorization program in opening doors for them educationally and professionally. With DACA, many undocumented young adults worked paid internships and obtained college degrees with which they secured fulfilling employment in line with their education. DACA recipients without college degrees, in turn, had more freedom to find jobs with better working conditions and compensation. This enabled many DACA recipients, with or without college credentials, to do better socioeconomically, even as their undocumented parents struggled in the shadows of the law, without a college degree, working low-paying jobs with dim prospects of upward mobility. As new DACA applications remain halted, an estimated four hundred thousand undocumented youth who would otherwise be eligible are currently deprived of the program's opportunities for socioeconomic

152. DREAMSF FELLOWSHIP, https://www.dreamsffellows.org (last visited July 30, 2024).

153. *Id.*

154. Interview with Alba, DACA recipient, San Francisco (May 24, 2016).

155. *Id.*

156. Fanny Lauby, *Transportation and Immigrant Political Incorporation*, 47 J. ETHNIC MIGRATION STUD. 4552, 4553 (2021); Kathleen Sexsmith & Mary Jo Dudley, DACA's Forgotten Youth: Educational Exclusions among Undocumented Farmworkers in Upstate New York, Presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Sociological Society (Mar. 1, 2015).

mobility.[157] If the DACA program ended entirely, which could happen under a second Trump presidency,[158] the current five hundred eighty thousand active DACA recipients would lose their deportation protection, work authorization, and ancillary privileges that have allowed them to take care of vital daily activities.[159] These individuals could rapidly descend further into legal and economic precarity, with wider negative repercussions for their families, the communities they are part of, and the larger United States economy.

If the DACA program continues to permit only renewals, or even if it reopens to new applications, our findings caution that temporary immigration relief and work authorization in and by themselves cannot sufficiently address immigrant inequality long-term. Even with DACA, program beneficiaries confront a United States higher education system that is stratified along socioeconomic status, race, and gender.[160] Many do and will face financial challenges to pay for their college degrees, even if they are allowed to pay in-state tuition and can qualify for state financial aid. Even DACA beneficiaries must navigate a precarious low-wage labor market and professional spaces replete with discriminatory practices and microaggressions. International travel remains the highest privilege for legal permanent residents and United States citizens, though complicated for everyone else. Even with DACA, program beneficiaries still struggle with a limited and underfunded American welfare system that offers weak support, including inadequate and largely privatized access to healthcare and childcare.[161]

To address immigrant inequality more wholistically, we first and foremost need congressionally enacted immigration reform that offers a permanent form of relief and a path to citizenship. Anything less inevitably foments a state of legal liminality that intensifies immigrants' socioeconomic precarity.[162] A pathway to citizenship is imperative, because risk-averse employers often—and sometimes legally[163]—can discriminate against those with temporary work

157. Phillip Connor, *DACA 12 Years Later: From Students to Careers and Families*, FWD.US (June 10, 2024), https://www.fwd.us/news/daca-anniversary.

158. Ted Hesson, *How Would Trump Crack Down on Immigration in a Second Term*, REUTERS (June 24, 2024, 10:28 AM PDT), https://www.reuters.com/world/us/how-trump-would-crack-down-immigration-second-term-2023-11-14; Charlie Savage, Maggie Haberman & Jonathan Swan, *Sweeping Raids, Giant Camps and Mass Deportations: Inside Trump's 2025 Immigration Plans*, N.Y. TIMES (Nov. 11, 2023), https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/11/us/politics/trump-2025-immigration-agenda.html.

159. Soto & Gelatt, *supra* note 5.

160. MULLEN, *supra* note 92, at 205.

161. *See generally*, KATHRYN EDIN & LAURA LEIN, MAKING ENDS MEET: HOW SINGLE MOTHERS SURVIVE WELFARE AND LOW-WAGE WORK (1997) (arguing that official poverty thresholds underestimate poor families' needs, particularly for low-income single mothers).

162. *See* Edelina M. Burciaga & Aaron Malone, *Intensified Liminal Legality: The Impact of the DACA Rescission for Undocumented Young Adults in Colorado*, 46 LAW & SOC. INQUIRY 1092, 1094 (2021).

163. Gleeson & Griffith, *supra* note 29, at 98.

authorization, overwhelmingly workers of color.[164] To help level the playing field for immigrants, however, we need many other policy changes as well, including more equitable education policies, structural labor market reforms, stronger worker protections, and a broader safety net that includes universal healthcare and other forms of support for social reproduction. Federal reforms will be critical, but there certainly is room for state action.[165] Indeed, as California has recently shown, states can enact impressive policy innovations that address immigrant inequality on multiple fronts.[166] None of these are easily realized at any level of government, and all immigrant-inclusive policy changes will require ongoing advocacy for enactment and accountability for implementation.[167]

164. *See* RACE, GENDER AND CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL LABOR MIGRATION REGIMES: 21ST-CENTURY COOLIES? 64–72 (Leticia Saucedo & Robyn Magalit Rodriguez eds., 2022).

165. *See* Cebulko & Silver, *supra* note 18, at 2; Lina Newton & Brian E. Adams, *State Immigration Policies: Innovation, Cooperation or Conflict?*, 39 PUBLIUS: J. FEDERALISM 408, 408 (2009).

166. COLBERN & RAMAKRISHNAN, *supra* note 35, at 261.

167. *See* DE GRAAUW, *supra* note 33, at 176.

APPENDIX

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Total respondents: 115	
DACA beneficiary	N
Yes	94
No	21
Country of birth	
Mexico	69
Other	46
Gender	
Male	52
Female	60
Gender non-conforming	3
Age at arrival to U.S.	
0-5	43
6-10	32
11-15	27
16+	11
N/A	2
Initial entry to U.S.	
Temporary visa	47
Without inspection/without legal papers	63
N/A	5
Mixed-status family	
Yes	51
No	25
N/A	39
Highest degree	
High School	9
Vocational school/some college/A.A.	58

B.A./B.S.	30
Graduate/professional degree	18
Has ever worked in the U.S.	
Yes	109
No	3
N/A	3
Has health insurance	
Yes	58
No	26
N/A	31
Have children	
Yes	3
No	75
N/A	37