



The Benefits of President Obama's Program to Protect Undocumented Immigrants Who Arrived as Children before 2007

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August 15, 2014 marks the second anniversary of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, the Obama administration program to protect young undocumented immigrants originally brought to the United States as children. If these young people were brought across the border before 2007 as minors under the care of adults, America is effectively the country they have grown up in and, the President argued, it makes no sense to threaten them with removal. Under the Deferred Action program, if such youths and young adults have stayed out of legal trouble and go through a specified application process that includes paying a hefty \$465 fee, they are exempted from the threat of deportation for two years at a time and granted Social Security numbers and renewable work permits. As of March 2014, 673,417 young people had applied to the program and 553,197 were approved for its protections and benefits. Very soon, temporary protection will begin to expire for the earliest Deferred Action applicants. Many beneficiaries have begun to apply for renewals, but community-based organizations realize that they need to mobilize, both to encourage renewals and to draw more eligible applicants into the program.

My research speaks to the clear benefits of expanded and continued protected status for young people eligible for the Deferred Action program. Although this program does not offer a path to legalization – and thus is not a permanent solution – it does help to move large numbers of eligible young adults into the social mainstream, improving their social and economic well-being and allowing them to be stronger contributors to American society. Shortly after the program was announced, I put together a team of researchers and stakeholders to field a national survey to study the impact of Deferred Action on young beneficiaries. With 2,684 respondents completing the survey, this study represents the largest data collection effort to date on this population.

The Benefits of Protected Status

Survey results show that since successfully applying to the Deferred Action program, young adult immigrants have become more integrated into mainstream economic and social life, so they are better positioned to help their families and contribute to their communities.

- Almost 60 percent have obtained a new job and 45 percent have increased their earnings. Because new jobs and increased earnings translate into more taxes paid, those benefitting from Deferred Action have given a boost to the U.S. economy.
- Just over one-fifth of our respondents have obtained an internship since they qualified for Deferred Action, likely obtaining valuable career training not typically available for young adults with limited employment histories.
- Fifty-seven percent of respondents qualified for Deferred Action have obtained a driver's license. This makes it possible for young immigrants to take advantage of opportunities for education and work, and their ability to drive legally enhances safety for all drivers.
- Almost half of the Deferred Action beneficiaries surveyed have opened their first bank account, and one-third of them have obtained their first credit card. Although undocumented immigrants are not necessarily prohibited from opening bank accounts, many banks require an identification number and a picture identification card, so the new forms of identification obtained through the Deferred Action program ease the process.

- Twenty-one percent of the Deferred Action respondents have obtained health care coverage, typically through college enrollment or new employment-based plans. Undocumented immigrants are not eligible for coverage through the national Affordable Care Act, but California, Washington, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, and Washington, D.C. all offer health insurance to low-income participants in Deferred Action.

Remaining Challenges

Constructive as Deferred Action has been, eligible young people continue to face barriers in paying for college. Many need additional support after years living on the margins, and they are connected to siblings and parents who are still awaiting benefits from immigration reform.

With Congress currently unwilling to enact broader immigration reforms, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program is the most valuable ongoing effort to integrate undocumented immigrants into mainstream American life. In coming months, many beneficiaries will need to renew their deferred status; and others who are eligible have not yet applied. Across the country, community associations have an important role to play in assisting these young people. More than nine out of ten have indicated that they want help with applications. To provide essential information and encouragement to young undocumented immigrants, supportive organizations need resources and careful planning. Venues with adequate space and privacy must be found; staffers must be hired and volunteers trained.

Ideally, many groups and institutions can get involved. In addition to community-based organizations and local “Dreamer” groups, legal service providers can offer advice and banks can provide low-interest loans to support services and help Deferred Action applicants cover the fees they owe. Ethnic civic leaders and media can help get the word out. And local foundations can offer resources to support and sustain the full range of community efforts needed to enroll eligible young undocumented immigrants in the valuable Deferred Action program.

As Congress stalls on broader immigration reforms, President Obama is considering whether to open administrative relief to additional sets of undocumented newcomers living and working in communities across America. Communities that support enrolling undocumented youth may also be open to a broadening of Deferred Action to other law-abiding undocumented residents. In the meantime, research shows what common sense suggests: Assisting young people who grew up as full-fledged Americans in all but legal name enhances life for immigrant families and communities – and boosts economic prosperity and social well-being for everyone in the United States.

Read more in Roberto G. Gonzales and Angie Bautista-Chavez, “Two Years and Counting: Assessing the Growing Power of DACA,” Immigration Policy Center, June 2014.