

# Three Timely Reasons to Protect DACA

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Implemented during the Obama administration, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a quasi-legal status that provides beneficiaries temporary relief from deportation and work permits. As a temporary protection derived by the executive, rather than legislative bodies, DACA has always been subject to political jockeying. Shortly after Trump took office, he used his executive powers to terminate DACA. Numerous legal challenges, including lawsuits and three court injunctions, allowed DACA recipients to continue renewing their statuses, but the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services no longer accepts new applications. Nearly seven hundred thousand DACAdmented Americans have since stood on precarious ground, and with the Supreme Court deciding over the legality of the rescission, they continue in legal limbo.

It is important to understand how in light of multiple unprecedented national crises, including the onset of a pandemic, a Supreme Court ruling affirming Trump's termination of DACA, which would remove ability to work and strip protections from deportation,

could cause negative long-term consequences for immigrant communities and the country as a whole. In the Los Angeles metropolitan region alone, over 82,000 recipients, the largest population of DACA beneficiaries in the country, would face DACA loss. Here are three long-term consequences of terminating DACA:

**1). Cancellation of DACA would negatively affect DACA recipients' healthcare access and health outcomes.**

Immigration status is a social determinant of health. In other words, an individual's immigration status, in tandem with other social positionings such as socioeconomic status and race, determines access to health resources and health outcomes. Lack of legal status precludes access to federal-funded health insurance coverage. The Affordable Care Act and federal-funded Medicaid excluded DACAmented persons. However, holding work permits entitles DACA beneficiaries to employer-sponsored or university-sponsored health plans. One study found that after receiving DACA, 57% of DACAmented respondents then attained a job with health insurance. However, DACA termination can lead to loss of healthcare for beneficiaries relying on employer-sponsored plans, and may dissuade many thereafter from seeking healthcare.

Although differentiated by state and local contexts, in its early implementation years DACA created a greater sense of belonging, reduced depressive symptoms, and improved physical health. Terminating DACA can reverse health gains. Research demonstrates that undocumented young adults contend with isolation, chronic stress, and shame. Similarly, for DACA recipients who have aged into parenthood, potentially reverting to undocumented status poses negative consequences to the health of their children including psychological distress and developmental delays. DACA termination would negatively affect the health of DACAmented individuals and their children at a time when the focus is on improving health conditions.

**2). Cancellation of DACA will push DACA recipients into the economic margins with consequences for their mixed-status families, particularly their underage American citizen dependents who rely on their provision during the pandemic.**

DACA beneficiaries are embedded in families, communities, and institutions, and as such, benefits derived from DACA have often extended to their families and communities. One study found that with DACA, recipients had newfound opportunities for post-secondary education; 30% of survey respondents returned to higher education. Furthermore, individuals tended to enter job opportunities that better reflected their educational preparation, and had better wages and working conditions. Average hourly wages increased on average by 45% after DACA potentially providing a source of economic

stability within families. DACA recipients are on average 28 years old and many have started families. While the cancellation of DACA would directly impact more than 700,000 individuals, an additional estimated 256,000 U.S. citizen children would have their parents lose their DACA status and economic gains.

The majority of DACA recipients are Latinx, a historically economically marginalized population that is now bearing heavy economic losses of the pandemic as a result of loss of jobs and wages. At a time when Congress has written out tax-paying undocumented immigrant families from COVID-19 relief, such as the March 27th CARES Act, families should not bear the added economic consequences of DACA termination.

**3). Cancellation of DACA would breach the faith placed in the federal government from people who have filed DACA renewals, but also has potential to create distrust during a pandemic when the success of public health interventions requires trust in federal, state, and local governments.**

Applying for any legal status requires individuals to identify themselves to federal agencies. Immigrants' personal disclosure is an act of courage and good will. While DACA eased beneficiaries' deportation fears, studies found continued fear of deportation for undocumented family members and anxiety over DACA's temporariness. The potential cancellation of DACA brings existential anxieties for self and family to the fore. A rescission has potential to create institutional distrust among those who have placed their faith in the only viable, albeit temporary, immigration solutions offered by the federal government. The aftermath of Deferred Action for Parental Accountability (DAPA), a similarly proposed temporary status, demonstrates how the promise of legal protection and subsequent promise-breaking, suspends hope and challenges belonging.

At a time when public health interventions require the public's trust, cancelling DACA signals exclusion and challenges immigrant communities' trust. Cancelling DACA will further challenge public health concerns, as it already builds on an array of policies and laws, such as public charge, that have sought to exclude immigrants from social services.

**Conclusion**

A cancellation of DACA will affect individuals and families and increase risks to broader society already in crisis. Black and Latinx communities, specifically, are already reeling from the health and economic effects of the pandemic. Data demonstrates that racial minorities are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, as death and hospitalization

numbers are significantly higher for Black patients. The disproportionate health impact is compounded by economic inequities, as communities of color have lost jobs and wages due to the pandemic and hold fewer financial protections for times of crisis.

As such, the effects of cancelling DACA will exacerbate an already existing racialized crisis. The overwhelming majority of DACA recipients are Latinx and 5% of DACA beneficiaries hail from Africa and the Caribbean making it very clear that cancellation of DACA during a pandemic deepens racialized systemic inequities. Of course, Congress could take up the issue and pass comprehensive immigration reform with a legal status for all, a move largely supported by the American public, to avoid these negative consequences.