

## From 'Dream Jobs' to Bussing Tables Again

The end of DACA would mean the end of economic mobility for hundreds of thousands of people.



Jacquelyn Martin / AP

ALANA SEMUELS

SEP 11, 2017 | BUSINESS

America Hernandez, who is now 34, can divide her working life into two periods: before DACA protections kicked in, and after. Before the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program was created in 2012, Hernandez, whose parents brought her to the U.S. from Mexico when she was three months old, was not eligible to work legally in the United States. Until her late 20s, she cobbled together a living working at various restaurants—not what she'd wanted to do when she graduated with a bachelor's degree from Fresno State in 2003. She'd had two job offers in marketing “in the six figures” upon graduating, she told me, but she'd had to turn them down because she didn't have the proper papers.

But DACA, which was created by President Obama without congressional input, allowed Hernandez to work in the type of job that college had prepared her for. She returned home to Fresno, from Chicago, where she'd been working in a restaurant, and got what she calls her "dream job," providing free legal representation for unaccompanied children with an organization called Kids In Need of Defense, or KIND. "Once DACA happened, I could come back here and do what I love to do," she told me. Hernandez, whose work permit expires in October of 2018, told me that now that the Trump administration has rescinded DACA, she'll sell the house she bought in 2015, put that money towards living expenses, and then go back to working restaurant jobs, if Congress doesn't extend DACA or pass a more permanent fix.

---

**"Now we are pulling the rug out as they are hitting their strides in their lives and careers."**

---

Across the country, tens of thousands of immigrants who benefited from DACA are now facing the prospect of returning to lives they thought they'd left behind, in which they can't do the jobs their education allows them to. They will again have to work grueling jobs in tenuous and unlawful arrangements, moving down the economic ladder they worked so hard to climb. "We enabled DACA recipients to take a crack at what their economic potential is—now we are pulling the rug out as they are hitting their strides in their lives and careers," Tom K. Wong, a political science professor at the University of California, San Diego, told me.

Before President Trump suspended it last week, DACA had been protecting roughly 800,000 people who had been living in the U.S. since at least 2007, were younger than 16 when they arrived, and were younger than 31 when DACA was created. DACA recipients were assured by the federal government that they could pursue employment and that they wouldn't be deported—an assurance that lasted two years, after which recipients could apply to renew their protections.

The reversal of DACA has huge implications for recipients' lives, and also for the larger economy as a whole. "You want people operating in work environments and jobs where we're making the most out of their abilities," Joseph Parilla, a fellow at the Brookings Institution, told me. Having people work in jobs they're far overqualified for leads to lost output for the economy. What's more, economists have increasingly emphasized that college education is a key to upward economic mobility. But once current DACA recipients' work permits expire, they won't be able to put their college degree to use—often after spending tens of thousands of dollars of their own money on it, since they weren't eligible for loans.

DACA helped many achieve a kind of economic mobility typically unavailable to undocumented people; its success is perhaps an indicator of what even more immigrants, given the proper papers, could achieve. According to a [survey](#) of 3,063 DACA recipients by Wong for the left-leaning Center for American Progress, 69 percent of respondents moved to a job with better pay after receiving DACA; 54 percent moved to a job that "better fits my education and training," and 54 percent moved to a job that "better fits my long-term career goals." The respondents said their hourly wages increased by 69 percent after they received DACA protections, with average wages jumping to \$17.46 an hour from \$10.29 an hour. A separate [survey](#) of 452 DACA recipients from UCLA found that 79 percent of recipients got what they considered to be a "better job" after DACA, and 64 percent earned a higher salary. "DACA allowed people to build a career—that was a game-changer," Wei Lee, the program coordinator for ASPIRE, a group advocating for pan-Asian undocumented youth, told me.

The program didn't just help people with a college degree, according to Roberto Gonzales, a sociologist at Harvard who has conducted some of the most extensive studies of DACA's effects. It also helped people with less education pursue vocational education and workforce-development opportunities that would have been unavailable to them. Such workers went from jobs that paid \$5 to \$7 an hour to jobs that paid \$14 to \$16 an hour, Gonzales told me. "Because they could work legally, they felt empowered to pursue these kinds of investments in human capital," he said.

DACA also meant that recipients could push back against employers who treated them poorly—something that wasn't usually possible for people without papers. According to Wong's survey, 56 percent of recipients moved to a job with better working conditions. For Hugo Romero, DACA meant the difference between being a warehouse worker forced to put in unpaid overtime, and being able to use his economics degree from Cal State Fullerton as a project manager and organizer at the UCLA Labor Center. Romero, now 26, remembers sitting in his car before his early shift at the warehouse, listening on the radio to President Obama describe DACA, and thinking his life might change. Romero had worked at a car wash in addition to his warehouse job, and says he saw employers abuse workers like him who couldn't push back because they were undocumented. Those experiences pushed him toward labor advocacy. "DACA allowed me to do that without having to work two to three minimum wage jobs on the side—without it, my advocacy would be limited to volunteerism on top of trying to survive," he told me.

In addition to letting recipients hold jobs they previously couldn't have, DACA also put people on the economic grid: They could finally get driver's licenses, qualify for health insurance, and legally buy cars and homes. Hernandez, the KIND worker, had left Fresno initially because she was afraid of driving to work without a license, which she couldn't previously get because of her immigration status. She'd already been pulled over twice and given tickets for driving without a license; she knew a third infraction might lead to jail time. DACA allowed her to get a license. Romero was finally able to get health insurance after DACA. Jonathan Jayes-Green, who migrated to Maryland from Panama when he was 13, was able to get a loan and finish college in four years, rather than stringing together jobs to pay for his education. Last year, he bought a house.

Now, these privileges have been put on hold. Romero had been planning to buy a car, but is no longer sure he can fulfill a five-year loan. He's gearing up for losing his job and his health insurance when his permit expires in 2019. I talked to a 35-year-old DACA recipient in Fresno named Maria Duran, who had been planning to buy a house soon, after having established good credit under DACA. DACA allowed her to get a full-time job for a California Assembly member and start donating some of

her income to nonprofits in her community. “It really opened a lot of doors for me that had not been open before,” she said.

Gonzales, the Harvard professor, says DACA recipients have grown into lifestyles that gave them better careers, which allowed them to spend more, buying houses and cars and putting their kids into daycare. If Congress doesn’t revive the program, onetime DACA recipients will likely pare down their lifestyles, taking kids out of daycare, losing their cars, getting foreclosed on their homes. “This mechanism allowed them to live out the American Dream. If it gets taken away, what’s going to happen?” he said. The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, [estimates](#) that immediately deporting DACA recipients—something that Trump has said will not happen—could lead to \$280 billion in lost economic growth over the next decade, mainly due to lost tax revenues and the absence of immigrants’ children, who tend to earn more than their parents.

And there are other dimensions to losing a job. When undocumented youth initially find that they won’t be able to live “normal” lives, they become disillusioned and depressed, according to Gonzales, who has [studied](#) how undocumented people react when they find out they are undocumented. They struggle mentally as they adjust their expectations of what they can achieve in American society, knowing that they can’t hold professional jobs. They “experience a tremendous fall,” he writes, after realizing that their hard work and educational achievement won’t garner the rewards they had thought they would. Many DACA recipients are now preparing for a similar fall.

Angel Barragan already got a taste of what it’s like to lose DACA protections. Barragan, who came to the U.S. in 2002, when he was 10, received DACA protections in 2012, but because of a paperwork glitch, he lost his deferred-action status temporarily in 2015. Barragan was working as a teacher at the time, and had to stop teaching and give up his driver’s license. He became depressed, he told me, because he could no longer do the job he loved. “It made me feel like I had wasted my time,” he said. “My whole life has been geared towards being an amazing educator, and I couldn’t do it anymore.”

If DACA goes away entirely, tens of thousands of people will be similarly crushed. Still, none of the DACA recipients I talked to said they were considering leaving the United States, even if Congress does not keep any parts of the program. What they'll do instead is leave behind their careers and their education, and return to the underground economy.

---

## Related Video

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

---



**ALANA SEMUELS** is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*. She was previously a national correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*.

 [Twitter](#)