

**Different Perspectives: A comparison of educational enrollment and achievement between  
DACA recipients and U.S. population**

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## Introduction

In 2016, immigrants constituted 13.5% of the entire U.S. population (“U.S. immigration,” 2018). Recent immigration reports estimate that 43 million immigrants are living in this country of which 11 million are considered to be unauthorized immigrants (Zong, Bataloya & Hallock, 2018). Understanding this information is important because 51% of unauthorized immigrants are under the age of 35 (“Profile of the,” n.d.). Throughout history and in present time, immigration has been an active occurrence as individuals from all over the world leave their country in hope of reaching the “American Dream.” The desire for a better future brings families to enter the U.S. in an unlawful manner without realizing the hardships they will endeavor (Nuñez, Sepehr & Sanchez, 2014).

One of the main hardships that unauthorized immigrants encounter relates to education. Although undocumented children and young adults are entitled to obtain a K-12 education (“Immigrant students,” 2018) in the U.S., it has been reported that 40% have less than a high school education and approximately 5-10% pursue higher education (“Undocumented and,” n.d.). Undocumented immigrants face social and economic challenges such as tuition-equity (Perez, 2014) and family responsibility that hinders their path to higher education. In response to the problem, president Obama instituted the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program (Malik, 2017), providing “Dreamers” the opportunity to legally be in the United States. As a temporary relief program, DACA has demonstrated a significant impact in various aspects within the targeted community. Here however, the interest stands in DACA and its impact on education.

In this paper, the aim is to examine the difference in higher education enrollment and education attainment between eligible DACA recipients and the U.S. population ages 18 to 32.

Additionally, an analysis on possible motives behind the outcome will also be provided. The first section of this paper presents a quantitative examination of enrollment to higher education of DACA recipients and the U.S. population. I also compare the completion of higher education between both groups. Age is also a variable being considered as the presented data focuses on DACA recipients and U.S. individuals ages 18 to 32. Information and data gathered from the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), while using Pew Research Center, American Immigration Council and Center for American Progress for context. In the second part of this paper a theoretical analysis and a discussion of policy implications regarding social inequality in the U.S will be provided.

### **Demographic Briefing**

This section of the paper focuses on: 1) definitions of terms to ensure a full comprehension of the data being presented, and 2) data representing eligible DACA population and U.S. population to outline the differences between both groups in higher education.

### **Definitions**

*DACA.* According to Wong, Richter, Rodriguez and Wolgen (2015) DACA recipients “Dreamers” are unauthorized immigrants who entered the U.S. as children and meet all requirements that make them eligible for work authorization and temporary deferrals of deportation. Eligibility requirements include entry to the U.S. before age 16, are under the age of 21 as of 6/15/12, are enrolled in school, have no convicted felonies, complete a biometrics screening, and pay an application fee (“Deferred Action,” 2018).

*Higher education.* Merriam-Webster (n.d.) define higher education as “education beyond the secondary level [meaning] education provided by a college or university.”

*Education Attainment.* The Census Bureau (2017) defines educational attainment as “the highest level of education that an individual has completed.”

*Age.* When reading this data, age is a concept that needs to be considered as it has been modified to best identity examined populations. In their analysis, Capps, Fix, and Zong (2017), examined educational attainment and school enrollment of the total U.S. and DACA-eligible populations using a sample of participants ages 15 to 32 as their analysis included high school enrollment and attainment. For this paper, high school is not being included. Considering the higher education definition, the average age that is being used for students enroll to higher education ranges from 18 to 32 years old.

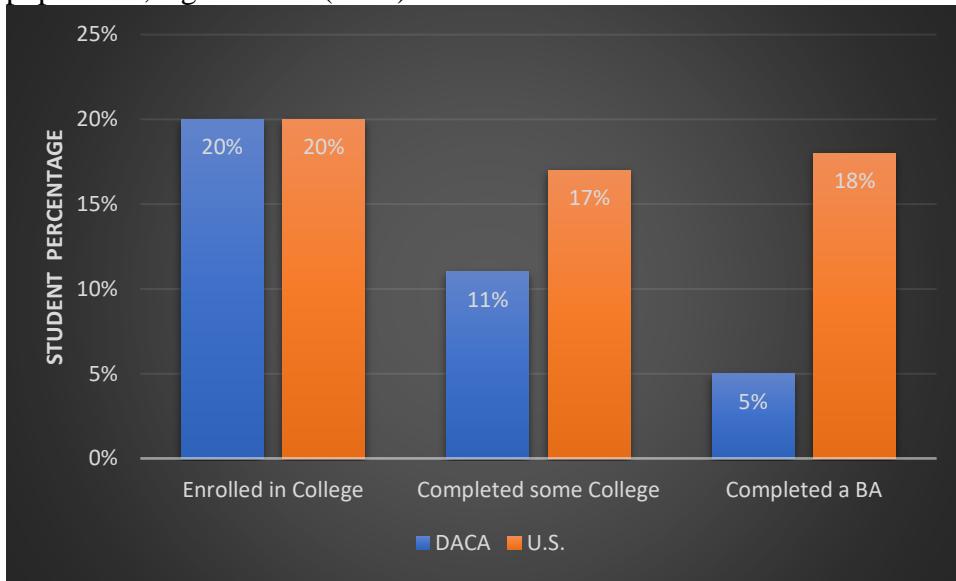
## **Demographic Report**

According to Capps, Fix and Zong (2017), as of 2014, an estimated 432,000 individuals ages 18-32 were considered eligible DACA recipients. Not a high number when compared to the 42.8 million U.S. population, ages 18 to 32. Considering the difference in total population between both groups, the outcomes when comparing education enrollment and education attainment can presumably be assumed.

As seen in *Figure 2*, there is a differences between education enrollment and education attainment of both populations. It appears that both groups experience the same enrollment rate to higher education; out of the total populations for both DACA and the U.S., 20% enroll into college. The differences become apparent when looking at college completion—when looking at the U.S., out of the 20% enrolled into college, 17% graduate college. On the other hand, out of the 20% of DACA recipients that enroll into college, only 11% complete it. There is a 6% difference in college completion between both populations. Nonetheless, the greatest discrepancy

is noticed when considering a higher level of education, such as a Bachelor's Degree; there is a remarkable 13% completion difference between both populations. According to the Migration Policy Institute analysis, 18% of the U.S. population who attend a four-year university graduate. While only 5% of DACA recipients who attend a university receive their Bachelor's Degree.

*Figure 2. Education enrollment and attainment between DACA eligible recipients and U.S. population, ages 18-32 (2014).*



Capps, R., Fix, M., Zong, J. (2017). The education and work profile of the DACA population. *Migration Policy Institute, 1-16.*

### Discussion

Current data shows that higher education obtainment differs significantly between DACA recipients and U.S. population ages 18 to 32. Although both populations have the same enrollment rate, there is an alarming gap in higher education completion. Findings show that DACA recipients are less likely to obtain a college degree or Bachelor's Degree compared to the US population. This discrepancy is most noticeable when comparing university completion—the US population is 13% more likely to receive a Bachelor's Degree than Dreamers. This information clearly demonstrates the inequality in academia between two populations and raises question to the motives behind the disparities of a minority community in higher education.

### **Analysis of Disparities**

The findings illustrate that DACA recipients have a lower rate of education attainment than the U.S. population. The following section provides an analysis of educational attainment inequality between presented populations through the lens of: stratification and cultural-ecological theory. Each theory will be followed by a critical analysis which explains the potential motives for discrepancies. Lastly, recommendations for policy implications addressing educational attainment between DACA recipients and U.S. population will be discussed.

#### **Stratification**

Societal structure is a factor that must be considered when discussing the differences of educational attainment between the DACA and U.S. populations. According to Massey (2007), the societal and political system of the U.S. is based on a stratification system. Stratification is defined as “unequal distribution of people across social categories that are characterized by differential access to scarce resources” (Massey & Russel Sage Foundation, 2007, p. 1). Specifically, resources that are consider as material (wealth), symbolic (social standing), and emotional (affection) (Massey, 2009). Thus, a stratification system promotes a categorical social structure of inequalities by ranking people as dominant (top) or minorities (bottom) based on race, ethnicity, class, and gender (Massey, 2009). This categorization results in a gap in society in that those closer to the top have greater access to essential resources for higher education attainment than those in the bottom sector of society.

Under the lens of stratification, DACA recipients are categorized as the minority group while the U.S. population is considered the dominant group. Categorization is based on citizenship status, wealth, and race/ethnicity. The Pew Research Center reports that Mexico, El Salvador, Peru, Columbia, South Korea, Philippines, India (Lopez & Krogstad, 2017) are the

common countries DACA recipients immigrate from. As individuals born outside of the U.S., Dreamers' access to resources is limited due to a non-citizenship and low-income status. On the other hand, as citizens, the U.S. population has greater accessibility to essential resources (González Canché, 2017).

González Canché (2017) states that stratification in the U.S. correlates to academic achievement. First, citizenship is a form of categorizing class and wealth status. Higher socioeconomics (SES) allows students to navigate undergraduate and graduate education easier, and students with higher SES tend to perform better academically (González Canché, 2017; Dougherty, Nienhusser, & Vega, 2010). Unfortunately for non-citizens, the lack of financial resources and support constrains their ability to continue school. As undocumented immigrants, DACA recipients are not eligible for federal or in some cases state resources (i.e., financial aid, loans, grants, or in-state tuition), resulting in drop-outs (American Immigration Council, 2017).

As discussed above, education attainment is skewed in the direction to those with a higher SES. Lower-income communities, like DACA recipients, struggle to cover the cost for higher education. As education cost increases (Biswas, 2005), like the U.S. population, Dreamers also require resources to pursue a higher education outside of a high school diploma. As stated by Biswas (2005), "colleges... [should] be providing services that specifically address the needs of undocumented and DACA students." It is clear that there is an existing societal gap between DACA recipients and the U.S. population when referencing resources for higher education.

### **Cultural-Ecological Theory**

John Ogbu developed the Cultural-Ecological (CE) theory to emphasize on minority academic performance (Foster, 2004). CE theory presents two factors that influence minority school performance: the system and community forces. The system addresses how minorities are

mistreated within the educational system and in society at large (Foster, 2004; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Community forces refers to the way minorities view and react to school as consequence to treatment (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). This theory highlights that what minorities experience in society reflects in their educational treatment. In addition, the CE theory has a classification system for minorities: autonomous (not totally dominated), voluntary (moved to the U.S. willingly), and involuntary (colonized or enslaved) minorities (Foster, 2014). In this paper, Considering Ogbu's guideline that "children of immigrants are placed under voluntary minorities" (Ogbu & Simons, 1998), DACA recipients are categorized as voluntary immigrants.

Voluntary immigrants are ingrained to be optimistic and to trust white-controlled institutions (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Children are taught to work hard, be attentive, respectful, and to follow the rules—they are held responsible for their academic performance rather than the educational system (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Correspondently, DACA recipients hold the high expectation of obtaining the "American Dream." Unfortunately, achieving this goal may not be possible due to the inequalities in the educational system.

As seen in the data, DACA recipients and U.S. population have the same rate of college enrollment. This can be explained by the theory's status frame of reference which refers to the way a situation is viewed by the person being affected (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). DACA recipients are willing to accommodate and accept inequality; understand that their parents immigrated in hope to do better; and, that the U.S. has a greater educational opportunity than at their country of origin (Gassama, 2012; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Their ideology that education in the U.S. provides a higher chance for a professional career and economic success can be interpreted as a strength to overthrow barriers. Without support or resources these individuals are overcoming stereotypes of dropouts by increasing enrollment to higher education.

Voluntary minorities believe that working hard, following rules, and obtaining a good education will result in obtaining a white-collar employment that will lead them to success in the U.S. (Foster, 2014; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Yet, this theory argues that the treatment received in society reflects the treatment received in education (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). To the misfortune of DACA recipients, systems, laws, policies, regulations and resources were established to benefit the dominant groups (American Immigration Council, 2017; Flores, 2015). For example, the educational system is often socially disadvantageous for minorities to prosper academically in higher education (Ogunyemi, 2017). Escaping the societal structure can only be done when reaching the top where resources and support is accessible (Darling-Hammond, 1998). In order to achieve that, DACA recipients would need to climb out of their current class status and increase their SES, objectives that can only be accomplished by obtaining a higher education.

Overall, Stratification and CE theory highlight the importance of categorization in the U.S. Stratification elaborates on the unequal resources between the dominant and minority groups. Minorities' lack of resources limits their social mobility. CE theory, also elaborates on group categorization and includes group experiences within the educational system. The intersectionality of both frameworks assist in answering why DACA recipients are experiencing a lower rate in higher education attainment and provide guidance for policy implications.

### **Policy Implications**

Based on the gathered data and literature review, it is fair to argue America's social inequalities facilitate education attainment discrepancies between DACA and U.S. population. This section provides policy recommendations for possible resolutions to discrepancies while considering stratification and Cultural-Ecological theory.

Attaining a postsecondary education tends to be an aspiration for most individuals in the United States (Gonzales, Terriquez, & Ruszczyk, 2014), regardless of the existing social inequalities between those on top and those in the bottom. The first recommendation to address this issue is to expand DACA from being a temporary work permit to citizenship. National and state law constrains financial resources to non-citizen individuals resulting in inaccessibility to higher education (Wangensteen, 2017). An immediate recommendation is to establish a state legislation for eligibility for in-state tuition (Muñoz, n.d.). For example, the Washington State HB 1079 bill that allows “eligible students to pay in-state tuition at state colleges and universities” (University of Washington, n.d.).

The second recommendation addresses the high expectations DACA students deal with from their families, community and educators (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). This recommendation derives from the CE theory which states that voluntary immigrants tend to accommodate and accept society’s oppressive and at times dehumanizing treatment in order to gain success. To address this issue Ogbu and Simons (1998) state that the “CE theory places a great weight on formidable non-school community forces that effect school success.” To this regard, a modification of the educational system is proposed. Training in building trust, cultural responsive instruction, and ability to deal with ambivalence and oppression (Ogbu & Simons, 1998) should be required for educators, families and communities. This can be done by structuring the involvement of all parties in students’ education plan. According to Wood and Bauman (2017), families’ engagement at home and in school correlates to school success and it increases students outcomes. With this, Dreamers may find freedom to fully engage in navigating their journey as students and therefore achieve their full potential as individuals.

## Conclusion

It is believed that “immigrants see school success as a major route to making it in the United States” (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). This analysis reviewed differences in higher educational attainment between DACA recipients and the U.S. population. Data showed that both populations shared the same enrollment rate to higher education; however, discrepancies were noted in school completion. Stratification and Cultural-Ecological Theory, were two frameworks used to further explore findings. Stratification aimed to explain the inequality minorities experience in society, specifically within the educational system. DACA recipients as non-citizens are categorized in the bottom sector of society limiting accessibility to essential resources needed to be a student in higher education.

Similarly, CE theory categorizes immigrants and explains the differences in school achievement between categories—however, it does not argue that group membership determines school success or failure (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). As voluntary immigrants, DACA recipients seek to be part of the U.S. population. They assimilate to the U.S. culture and learn the skills, behaviors, and language of the dominant group (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). They believe that in doing so, their probability of obtaining a higher education and economic success is greater. Finally, policy recommendations were proposed to address discrepancies in findings. The first policy suggests change in legislation in regards to citizenship and eligibility for in-state tuition in all states. The second policy urges educators to become aware of the struggles minority students experience and the development of tools to assist them. It is the purpose of this study to bring awareness to this topic in hopes to decrease differences in educational attainment between DACA-eligible recipients and the U.S. population.

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