

The Consequences of Inaction

A Narrative Toolkit on the Social, Mental, and Emotional Effects of
an Uncertain Future for DACA¹



Photo: Marcelo Gonzales - Cisneros Hispanic Leadership Institute

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I. INTRODUCTION

This toolkit was prepared in light of the publication of new peer-reviewed research on the social, emotional, and mental effects of living without permanent relief on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients. It is a resource for those interested in including personal narratives about the effects of having DACA discussed and argued throughout the policy's existence—including Congressional staff, media, and advocates. This toolkit contains a narrative repository of the stories of Florida Dreamers interviewed for a peer-reviewed study on the emotional, social, and mental toll of the politicization and uncertain future of DACA.

DACA is an Obama-era form of administrative relief utilizing deferred action to guard [qualifying](#) undocumented immigrants who entered the country as children against deportation. Along with deportation relief, DACA provides qualifying immigrants the opportunity to apply for a social security number, a driver's license, and a work permit. DACA has allowed nearly [800,000](#) young people to remain safely in the United States since its [founding](#) in 2012.

On May 1, 2018, seven states, led by Texas, [filed](#) a lawsuit, [Texas v. United States](#), challenging DACA. After the District Court decision was [appealed](#), the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit [ruled](#) with [Judge Andrew Hanen](#) that DACA was unlawful, but sent the case back to the district court for further consideration in light of pending regulations from the Biden administration. Judge Hanen's decision will [almost certainly](#) be [appealed](#) to the U.S. Supreme Court, and given the [current state](#) of the Supreme Court, the DACA policy is [not likely](#) to survive—especially under an increasingly conservative judiciary. As a consequence, DACA recipients will [need](#) other forms of protection.

Throughout its whole existence, DACA has been used as a bargaining chip, a wedge issue, and a rallying cry. Much of the dialogue has concentrated on what will happen to DACA recipients if DACA finally ends. However, there has been less emphasis on the consequences of leaving DACA recipients to live in uncertainty, waiting for Congress to act. What has this back-and-forth meant for people with DACA?

The [Im/migrant Well-Being Research Center](#)² and scholars from the University of South Florida and the [Cisneros Hispanic Leadership Institute](#)³ at George Washington University [partnered to examine](#) the mental and emotional impact of living with precarious legal status on DACA recipients. Over three years, they conducted in-depth qualitative research with over 50 DACA recipients living in the Tampa area, culminating in a peer-reviewed article entitled [Undocumented Again? DACA Rescission, Emotions, and Incorporation Outcomes among Young Adults](#)⁴ on the effects of DACA's 2017 rescission

² Im/migrant Well-Being Research Center seeks to bridge the gap between academic studies and immigration policies, bringing together scholars from diverse backgrounds—both disciplinary and biographical—and community partners in one place to critically realize the potential of engaged scholarship through a focus on (im)migrant well-being.

³ The Cisneros Hispanic Leadership Institute draws on the intellectual strength of George Washington University and the resources of the nation's capital to bring together innovative research focused on the Latino community and culturally competent academic programming and student support.

⁴ To request the full article for individual use, please contact [Elizabeth Vaquera](#) and [Elizabeth Aranda](#).

on Dreamers. Through in-depth interviews with undocumented young adults, they explored how the 2016 presidential election and 2017 executive action that rescinded DACA evoked emotions of sadness, grief, anxiety, and uncertainty. Their findings illustrate how even the threat of policy change impacts immigrant young adults' plans for the future. The report spotlights the negative impacts DACA recipients feel because they live in a constant state of uncertainty. **As DACA is continually used as a political wedge without any Congressional resolution, Dreamers suffer sociological, mental, and emotional damage, despite the benefits DACA provides. The wait is not neutral.**

II. PURPOSE

This toolkit takes a peer-reviewed study and compiles the real stories of Florida Dreamers to show how DACA's instability has affected each of their lives. These Dreamers' stories illustrate how DACA is not enough, and how continual public discourse affects Dreamers' ability to plan for the future and participate economically in the country they were raised in. This document compiles their words to use as a storytelling resource for those who want to center DACA recipients in their narratives. **All names have been changed to protect their privacy.**

Storytelling and Advocacy

Storytelling is a key part of persuasive advocacy. State and federal legislators put more weight on feedback from someone who is (1) from their district/state and (2) directly impacted by an issue. We can use storytelling to connect the human impact to public policies. Telling stories:

- Lends credibility to the impact of a piece of legislation
- Gives vital context to the impact on individuals' lives and futures
- Can break through rhetoric to put a human face to the problem
- Gives urgency for a solution
- Can engage your listener and move them to action

How to Use this Toolkit

Pair the talking points below with the real words and experiences of DACA recipients grappling with the consequences of Congressional inaction.

Advocates

- Bring these stories to meetings with Congressional offices, voters, and press
- Cite the [peer-reviewed study](#) in written materials—quote their narratives
- **Florida advocates**—Bring these Tampa area stories to Florida lawmakers and voters and highlight the experiences of their constituents and neighbors.
- **Service providers**—Incorporate the complex mental, social, and emotional effects of an unstable immigration status into your services, for those with and without DACA

Congress Members and Staffers

- Cite the [peer-reviewed study](#) in analyses and written materials
- Highlight these stories in speeches and public forums—bring these perspectives and experiences to the House and Senate floors
- **Florida delegations**—Highlight the experiences of your Tampa area constituents and community members

Press

- Cite the [peer-reviewed study](#) and its findings
- When reporting on the benefits of DACA and/or the consequences of its end, include context on the consequences of this current period of uncertainty on DACA recipients themselves
- To speak with the researchers or willing participants of the study, contact Dr. Elizabeth Vaquera (evaquera@email.gwu.edu) and Dr. Elizabeth Aranda (earanda@usf.edu).

III. KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The threat of losing DACA erodes emotional health.
 - **9 out of 51 interviewed had attempted suicide, and almost half had engaged in self-harm.**
- The anticipation of the loss of rights and loss in the constancy of their daily lives led some participants to reconsider future plans, affecting their aspirations for education, occupation, feelings of belonging, and civic participation.
 - **Some participants reported withdrawing from higher education to work to save money in the event of deportation.**
 - **Some participants accelerated their educational plans, but the trauma of possibly losing DACA overshadowed their educational experiences.**
 - **The prospect of losing DACA led to reluctance in pursuing occupational aspirations they had prior to the 2017 rescission.**
- **The threat of losing DACA eroded feelings of belonging, but it also increased civic participation in the form of pro-immigrant activism.**
- **Undocumented young adults with DACA reported feelings of sadness, despair, anxiety, and uncertainty about the future.** These feelings create a sense of inhibited action that affects the group as a whole and impact their individual decisions on their future.

IV. TALKING POINTS ON DREAMERS

Below are some general statistics on DACA status and talking points on the findings from the peer-reviewed article, [Undocumented Again? DACA Rescission, Emotions, and](#)

[Incorporation Outcomes among Young Adults](#).⁵ For more information on DACA advocacy, see **Section VI: Additional Resources** of this toolkit.

Talking points

- While DACA has been transformative for so many, **it was never meant as a permanent solution.**
- As DACA is continually used as a political wedge without any Congressional resolution, Dreamers suffer sociological, mental, and emotional damage, despite the benefits DACA provides. **The wait for permanent relief is not neutral.**
- Feelings of stability and predictability for the future are important factors of mental and emotional health **that are eroded for DACA recipients and their families.**
- **DACA recipients spoke about their “expiration dates,”** the date they would lose DACA, implying an end to their public lives.
- **DACA’s instability has undermined its economic benefits for many.** While DACA opened doors for educational and work opportunities, the increasing uncertainty around DACA’s future halted or altered career and educational plans for many DACA recipients, likely **constricting their overall potential economic participation and contributions.**

Statistics

- There are roughly **640,000** people with DACA status living in the United States, with about **1.3 million** more who are DACA-eligible (see the numbers for your state [here](#)).
- Over **427,000 students** in U.S. colleges and universities are undocumented, **181,000** of which have DACA or are eligible for DACA.
- Undocumented youth contribute to the economy. DACA recipients alone contribute roughly **\$42 billion** to the [annual GDP](#), **\$5.7 billion** in federal taxes, and **\$3.1 billion** in state and local taxes [each year](#).
- DACA recipients are [parents to an estimated 256,000](#) U.S. citizen children.

⁵ For individual use, please contact [Elizabeth Vaquera](#) and [Elizabeth Aranda](#).

V. NARRATIVE REPOSITORY

Mental and Emotional Health

Name: Lucian
Current Age: 26 years old
Arrival Age: 10 years old
Country of Origin: Peru

Lucian, in his second year at an urban community college when first interviewed, was working at night helping his parents clean offices. He obtained DACA in 2012 and aspired to attend a 4-year university to study engineering and architecture. He and his brother—also a DACA recipient—reacted differently to the rescission. Both were sad, but in his brother’s case those emotions led to grave consequences:

“It made me angry. It definitely. . . messed with me mentally a lot. My brother as well. Actually, my brother attempted to k—to take his life recently when we found that out. . . We stopped him from doing that. He’s just, he’s okay. He’s kind of numb. You know he’s just kind of living day-to-day going with it. I felt that feeling before. It’s just nothing I can do for him.”

Lucian discussed his relationship with depression and explained that rather than sadness, anger embodied a sense of resistance for him, pushing him toward greater civic participation.

“I was more relieved to see the reaction from people, the protest and. . . I mean DACA is famous now; before, no one knew what it was. . . Even though it still breaks me cause I, I’m, I’m waiting for the clock to run out ‘cause I have a feeling that it’s run out. . . I think it encouraged me, the anger, anger, anger is better for me than depression. . .”

Lucian’s past grief of being undocumented informed his resistance strategies. Lucian connected with a professor to form a group to raise awareness about DACA. They organized campus activities and advocated for social change. These activities seemed to breathe new life into Lucian and led him to expand his social network, facilitating greater social integration

Name: Claudio
Current Age: 26 years old
Arrival Age: 7 years old
Country of Origin: Mexico

“. . . it was really hard. I’ll be honest with you; I cried the day Trump was elected. I’ve never cried in my life [laughs]. I think that day my family we all. . . It was silent. My mom was crying. I was secretly crying. . . ‘cause in that time he was always saying, ‘Oh, you know, I’m going to get rid of DACA and everything,’ and now he did. . . I was already thinking the worst like, ‘Oh I’m going to get deported’—it was hard. . . Like honestly when you have a president, when you have someone that literally says that you’re evil. It’s like, I don’t know, it’s not the same anymore. You feel like you’re not welcomed. You feel like you’re unwanted.

The Toll of Uncertainty After 2016

Name: Claudio
Current Age: 26 years old

Arrival Age: 7 years old
Country of Origin: Mexico

Claudio's DACA expired in December of 2020, and the shift in his emotions between the first and second interviews was stark. During our first interview, he was a college student aspiring to be a medical doctor; during the second, he had graduated, was studying for the MCAT—the admissions examination for medical school—and was unemployed.

"When Trump was elected, that was one of my fears. . . thinking about [the DACA rescission], I know it's going to happen and now actually it happened. . . I felt like it was the end."

The election was traumatic for Claudio, and most participants, as it represented the anticipation of losing opportunities they had gained through DACA. Not everyone had a contingency plan in case of deportation because doing so would mean acknowledging the unthinkable. Claudio explained:

"Probably we have to realize within ourselves. . . we have to accept that we don't belong here."

He acknowledged that since he and his family did not want to accept this, they never discussed a plan for potential deportation.

Name: Cassandra
Current Age: 22 years old

Arrival Age: 2 years old
Country of Origin: Bolivia

Cassandra obtained DACA in 2013 and was a full-time university student when interviewed. She was looking for a job and aspired to be a musician, teaching music lessons in addition.

"I was definitely fearful for myself because I probably, one or two months prior, applied for my current term [of DACA]. . . So, I knew that I would be okay for about a year-and-a-half of time, but I was definitely worrying, 'What would this mean for me? Would I get to reapply for this later on? Is something going to be figured out in the next year or two years?'"

Cassandra's questions about her possibilities are intricately tied to grief at anticipating DACA's loss. By raising uncertainty about what would happen next, the ongoing threats to policy changes shattered immigrants' sense of stability.

Cassandra described life since the 2016 election:

"It's definitely been more fearful. I recall, for example, my boyfriend and I were just messaging each other over the phone as, like, we found out [Trump] was elected. And we just already knew that it was his intention to do something drastically different with immigration policy. So, that was concerning for me and

he could understand enough, like, what it could mean for me if, for example, DACA was completely rescinded, completely taken away from all its recipients. So, that was something I was definitely fearful for. And I, at the time, was staying up late at night, just doing some homework, typing up an essay, like, in our library over here. And there was not really anything I could do. I didn't really have anywhere to go. There's nothing I could really just do there but just to sit and just think about it. . . It's just something I have to live with. So, it's very heartbreaking."

Cassandra felt resignation toward events that could disrupt her future and felt powerless to change them, opting to forge on.

Name: Mariana
Current Age: 22 years old
Arrival Age: 6 years old
Country of Origin: Mexico

Marina was a full-time clerical worker for a car dealership and attended university part-time, aspiring to become either a psychologist or an immigration attorney. Marina viewed the rescission as a shared experience—a personal and a communal loss. When the announcement came, she communicated with friends in a group chat. They all had a sense of the Attorney General's announcement and were simply waiting. But once the words were uttered, their weight overwhelmed Marina:

"It felt like you had no control over what was being said or being done. And then everyone was seeing the protesters in New York like getting arrested and I think that's when it hit me. I was like, 'Are you really willing to put your body on the line?' And my answer was 'Yes.' And I remember I told Miriam, I was like, 'We have to do everything in our power to go get our voices heard. . . We need to use our anger for something good, because if we stay here and cry nothing's going to be done.'"

Marina strategized about navigating the uncertainty she and others faced, centering collective action to externalize her emotions. Through this, she navigated the rescission and converted her emotions into action.

Name: Osmael
Current Age: 23 years old
Arrival Age: 8 years old
Country of Origin: Mexico

Osmael dropped out of high school just one month before graduation to work full-time and support his family. He wished to study to become a psychologist, but his more immediate dream was becoming a YouTube celebrity. Osmael used his work permit to secure a higher-paying job, which allowed him to rent an apartment for his partner and baby. He described his life after the 2016 election:

"Stressful, 100%, because you don't know, we're in a limbo right now with the whole DACA situation."

is like, damn. It's very difficult to accept. And that's kind of where I am at. Just accepting what I have to let go."

Besides withdrawing from school, Ricardo also let go of his plan to save for a house and redirected his savings to a backup plan should he be deported.

Name: Norma
Current Age: 30 years old
Arrival Age: 6 years old
Country of Origin: Mexico

When we first spoke to Norma, she had discontinued her studies and had a full-time job. Norma planned to move out of her family home before the rescission was announced:

"I had plans of buying my own home, I had plans of like 'let me just finally be responsible, like grow some responsibilities on my own."

Norma aspired to finish university and attend law school. Yet, when DACA was rescinded, she felt uncertain.

"I felt like. . . somebody had just ripped all of that away from me. And I didn't know when or how long. . . I was going to have DACA and what that meant and what that would mean."

The urgency of completing her education set in and, rather than register as a part-time student as she had been, Norma enrolled full-time. However, she did not anticipate tuition would be unaffordable, and could not enroll for a subsequent semester. At her second interview, she still aspired to go to law school but had not been able to re-enroll. She had been promoted at her job and was now director of the organization—which would not have happened had she lost DACA.

Norma's plans and basic truths were turned upside down, leaving her uncertain and desperate to finish her education, though she could not afford it. Though Norma was promoted, further cementing labor market incorporation, she was unable to attain her university degree, a benchmark that ordinarily leads to labor market success.

Name: Jairo
Current Age: 27 years old
Arrival Age: Some months old
Country of Origin: Mexico

Jairo obtained DACA in 2013 and at the time of our first interview was attending community college part-time and working full-time as a graphic designer for a nonprofit. Jairo aspired to own his own design and photography firm.

"I was planning on actually going more to part-time and finishing school to finish school faster. But then I think after Trump got elected, I was like, 'Oh, this is the only job where I feel like. . .' because I knew if Trump was elected one of the things he promised was taking DACA away. So, I'm like, 'If I quit here, I'm not going to have a job and nobody else is going to hire me because I won't have DACA.' . . . So, I stayed full-time."

Jairo weighed the consequences of losing DACA against his goal of completing his education faster, opting to stay full-time at work rather than finishing his degree

full-time. He anticipated the DACA rescission would disadvantage his labor market position. Three years later, he had not finished his education, and had taken a break due to the pandemic, but was considering re-enrolling to finish his associate degree. He still worked for the same nonprofit.

Name: Mauricio
Current Age: 23 years old

Arrival Age: 6 years old
Country of Origin: Mexico

Mauricio, a 23-year-old native of Mexico first obtained DACA in 2012, graduated high school, and was applying to community college. He worked full-time as an interpreter, often translating in doctors' offices, which made him curious about becoming a psychiatrist or psychologist. He explained how this aspiration changed with the DACA announcement:

"If you try to do something really, really long that takes eight years or whatever, because I want to be a psychiatrist, so by the time. . . you imagine it takes eight to ten years. . . The way they play with DACA, it's not safe to be. . . DACA is the only way I can get my education. They take DACA away, it's going to be hard. . . Right now, you don't know if they're going to take DACA. Right now, I've got to change to. . . nurse or something, something quick that you can get."

Name: Alicia
Current Age: 22 years old

Arrival Age: 6 years old
Country of Origin: Mexico

Alicia obtained DACA in 2012. She was attending university full-time studying chemical engineering when interviewed. She described a feeling of stress regarding goals:

"I got really scared, like, I got sad, and I started thinking—I started feeling hopeless, you know, like, just more of, like, 'Oh, like, now, I have to really think, like—' I was also pressured, like, I felt like there was, like, a time clock thing, because my DACA will expire, like, you know, soon and everything, and I was thinking, 'Well, now, I have until this year to finish whatever I have to do, like, getting the degree and everything,' so sometimes, I feel pressured."

At follow-up two years later, Alicia had withdrawn from her program, having struggled academically. She was engaged to be married but had no job; she shared that she was contemplating enrolling in technical school. She admitted that since the Biden Administration took over, she was not as anxious about DACA's future and was beginning to make plans again.

VI. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- TheDream.US [Resource Library](#)
- FWD.us [The Case for Protecting Dreamers](#)
- CAP [Resources on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals](#)
- CAP [Analysis of DACA Renewals](#)

- USCIS [Immigration and Citizenship Data](#): Recent DACA Updates, September 29, 2022
- MPI [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals \(DACA\) Data Tools](#)
- MPI [Back on the Table: U.S. Legalization and the Unauthorized Immigrant Groups that Could Factor in the Debate](#)
- Presidents Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration [How Many Undocumented Students are in U.S. Colleges and Universities, and Who Are They?](#)