

# Improving the legal status of our country's newest arrivals is not only humane but smart, says sociologist

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“DACA has been a very quick, policy-driven infusion of rights that is having enormous positive consequences in the lives of these undocumented children,” says Helen Marrow. Credit: Alonso Nichols

Immigration is a hot topic again, as Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton recently announced she would support President Barack Obama's efforts to extend the work permits of young undocumented immigrants and protect their parents from deportation.

Those administration efforts are being challenged in Congress and the courts, but still could make a lasting difference for immigrants, says Helen Marrow, an assistant professor of sociology in the School of Arts and Sciences who studies the issue.

Announced in 2012, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program allowed some undocumented immigrant youth to receive renewable two-year work permits and exemption from deportation—provided they had entered the country before their 16th birthday and prior to June 2007 and were enrolled in school or had earned at least a high school diploma or its equivalent.

Just this past November, the administration proposed an expansion of DACA that would extend employment authorization to three years from two years. The expansion would include individuals who have lived in the United States continuously since at least January 1, 2010, and people of any age would be able to apply.

The administration also issued an executive order that created the Deferred Action for Parental Accountability (DAPA) program, a mechanism to give work permits and protection from deportation to the undocumented parents of children who are U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents.

Originally set to go into effect this February, both DACA and DAPA have been suspended by a federal court order. The administration is appealing. Taken together, DACA and DAPA could affect up to 4.4 million people, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

"DACA has been a very quick, policy-driven infusion of rights that is having enormous positive consequences in the lives of these undocumented children," says Marrow. It will help them become socially upwardly mobile, which will have "a constructive ripple effect for their families and communities."

As many as 1.9 million undocumented young people were immediately eligible for the DACA program when it began in 2012. Through March 2014, about 643,000 applications to the program have been approved,

according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, an agency of the Department of Homeland Security.

## **The benefits and liabilities**

"DACA gets them social security numbers. It gets them driver's licenses. They can therefore get jobs, access to higher education at public institutions, and sometimes even health insurance in some states," Marrow says. "It not only gives them positive material things, it gives them a positive sense of belonging."

But because recipients of DACA in its original form must renew their status every two years, and because the law is vulnerable to being overturned by the courts or the next president, its benefits go only so far, Marrow says.

"It provides a limited set of political and emotional privileges that might end, which would reverse these children's personal progress and that of their communities," she says.

Marrow believes that if Obama's proposed expansion of DACA and the creation of DAPA survive current legal challenges, they could form the foundation for permanent immigration reform. That, however, would require partisan politics to be put aside, a tall order given the current divisive political climate.

"Being undocumented is not a form of permanent exclusion," Marrow says. One study of the last amnesty program, passed in 1986, shows that the sense of exclusion "can be reversed almost immediately with enormous positive effects for the families themselves and also for the rest of the society," she says. "You let people work, you let people earn, you let people go to school, and they participate, they do well. And that is good for American society."

Decades of research also show that easing consequences for people in the United States illegally will not encourage more people to come here illegally. Contrary to public opinion, Marrow says that welfare levels and benefits in the U.S. do not affect migration flows, which are more influenced by economic conditions in the U.S. and the migrants' home countries.

In the countries where most [undocumented immigrants](#) originate, Marrow says, it is often impossible to come to the U.S. legally if one is too poor to meet the financial and bureaucratic requirements for a visa. And wait times are sometimes greater than 20 years.

"This is what most Americans don't understand," says Marrow. "Coming in legally is often filled with bureaucracy, uncertainty and unpleasantness. But most undocumented immigrants never even have that. As we like to say, 'There is not even a line to wait in.'"

## **Dealing with the policy gap**

With no national political consensus on immigration reform, institutions are devising their own policies. For example, this April Tufts joined a number of colleges and universities nationwide, including Dartmouth, Stanford, Duke, Harvard, Princeton and the University of Chicago, in considering all undocumented student applicants to the university, including, but not limited to, students with DACA status.

But only a handful of institutions, including Tufts, offer these students the financial aid they need to attend. "In keeping with our current undergraduate financial aid policy, Tufts will meet 100 percent of the demonstrated need of every undocumented student offered undergraduate admission to Tufts," according to a university statement.

The policy was applied retroactive to the incoming Class of 2019. At

least five [undocumented students](#) were accepted and offered [financial aid](#).

This kind of action is important, Marrow says, because sociologists have shown that lack of legal status has negative effects not just on immigrants themselves, but also on later generations of their family. The 1986 amnesty program study showed that legalizing an undocumented Mexican immigrant mother in 1986 raised her child's educational level from 11.5 years—the equivalent of dropping out of high school—to 13 years—more or less the equivalent of graduating and getting a bit of college-level training. Legalization even raised her grandchildren's schooling.

"One of the worst things that you can do is have people here with no rights and no access to education—that's the worst thing not only for them but for the U.S. as a society," she says.

Provided by Tufts University

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