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Lessons from DACA will help create better immigration policy

Washington, D.C. – A first of its kind report from the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program combines government data with field interviews in eight metro areas to assess the implementation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Insights from the implementation and administration of DACA can inform future efforts to address the legal status of unauthorized immigrants.

The report, “**Local insights from DACA for implementing future programs for unauthorized immigrants**,” uses data from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services agency (USCIS) and draws on interviews with immigrant service providers, advocates, and local government officials in eight metropolitan areas (Boston, Charlotte, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix, and San Francisco) to understand both how places implemented DACA and how applications varied across states and local areas and by country of origin.

The authors, Brookings Senior Fellow Audrey Singer, Brookings Research Analyst Nicole Prchal Svajlenka, and Brookings Senior Research Analyst and Associate Fellow Jill H. Wilson, find that four factors affected implementation and outcomes of the DACA program:

- DACA’s implementation requires coordination by civic organizations and state and local governments; however the federal government provides no funding or structure to these intermediaries.
- Local contexts—unique policies and immigration history—shape the DACA experience on the ground, impacting availability of outreach and services, and ultimately application outcomes.
- Key stakeholders learned over time that the DACA-eligible population included immigrants who didn’t fit the typical DREAMer profile, and they expanded outreach efforts to individuals and communities that weren’t taking advantage of their eligibility.
- The decision to apply for DACA is influenced by individual, family, and immigrant origin-community concerns.

These findings are relevant in light of the program's possible expansion and the announcement of another deferred executive action program, DAPA, for unauthorized parents of U.S. citizens or legal residents.

"DACA and DAPA are part of a complex conversation about the need for more sustainable reform to the immigration system that, among other things, will address the unauthorized population in the United States," said Audrey Singer, senior fellow at the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program.

Based on their findings, the authors offer recommendations to policymakers and practitioners for DACA's future, as well as future immigration policy targeting unauthorized immigrants:

- Reinforce that DACA is an ongoing program, and that renewals are important.
- Engage hard-to-reach populations who are not taking full advantage of their eligibility to apply.
- Prepare for requests for documents required by the program and provide support for potential applicants.
- Provide employers and employees with information about work authorization.
- USCIS should maintain strong communication channels with practitioners, advocates, and applicants through all phases of the program.
- Use immigrant integration infrastructure to connect more people to educational, language, and employment support.

Ultimately DACA, and similar future policy, is an integration program allowing unauthorized immigrants to more fully participate in and contribute to the U.S. economy and society. DACA removes the fear of deportation and facilitates access to jobs, helping local communities and economies. Since DACA is temporary and could be ended at any time, it is critical that Congress use the experience of this program to inform any future policy that offers permanent legal status to unauthorized immigrants.

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