

# The Uncertain Future of 124,000 DACA Recipients In Texas

We talked to the professor who has spent his life researching undocumented youth.

By [Caitlin Cruz](#)

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Robert E. Lee student Karina Fraga, a DACA recipient, closes her eyes in prayer as she holds a sign during a silent vigil in honor of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) at T.B. Butler Fountain Plaza in Tyler, Texas, on Tuesday, Sept. 5, 2017. Chelsea Purgahn/Tyler Morning Telegraph

At the beginning of September, the Trump administration announced the end of the Deferred Action For Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, an Obama-era executive action protecting 800,000 people who were brought to the U.S. as children from deportation. On September 13, Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer and Representative Nancy Pelosi announced that they had **reached a deal** with Trump to protect the program's beneficiaries, but with no clear reversal from President Trump, much at remains at stake for DACA recipients.

For hundreds of thousands of young Americans, the DACA documentation has enabled them to work, attend school, and come out of the shadows. If the program is rescinded, that all could chance, creating what experts say is an

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all-consuming fear among recipients. “Illegality is a master status,” says Roberto G. Gonzales, a Harvard professor who studies the education of immigrant students and the author of *Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America*. “It’s a trait that overwhelms all of their achievements.”

After working with immigrant youth in Chicago and Los Angeles, Gonzales observed that undocumented adolescents who were brought here as children face the same struggles regardless of location. As adolescents, “they were finding themselves on the outside, looking in, for the first time in their lives,” Gonzales says, be it getting their first job, going to college, or getting a driver’s license.

Those experiences led to a twelve-year study where Gonzales followed 150 undocumented young adults in Los Angeles, all of whom came to the country before the age of twelve. He followed one group who attended college, and another who left school at or before high school graduation. Gonzales saw the college attendees succeed, but eventually, they ran out of schooling. After finishing their undergraduate education and postgraduate degrees, they were unable to find work in the U.S., the country they had always known. “Nothing had changed: the law hadn’t changed and their status hadn’t changed,” he says. “They found themselves limited to the same very limited options.”

As DACA and its recipients are at risk, *Texas Monthly* talked to Gonzales about the history of making education accessible to undocumented students in Texas, the stress of young adults protected under DACA, and reconciling the promise of the American dream.

***Texas Monthly:*** Texas has about 124,000 DACA recipients. That’s the second-largest DACA population after California. Could you talk about the state’s relationship to DACA and similar policies?

**Roberto Gonzales:** Texas is really important because it passed one of the first in-state tuition bills [in 2001]. Young people in Texas have had access to in-state tuition and state-financial aid since early on, which really sowed fertile ground for DACA beneficiaries. So by the time DACA was announced [in 2012], you’ve got cohorts of young people who’ve successfully gone through college thanks to these important policies. Texas is certainly a model in certain ways for integrating this group of immigrants. If DACA is ended, we’ll see losses across the country, but potentially the biggest losses in the state of Texas. Both in terms of the number, and in terms of DACA beneficiaries who were allowed to become successful as a result of early integration.



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By Cat Cardenas

**TM:** The *Houston Chronicle* reported there were about 80,000 DACA recipients in Houston alone, which was ravaged by Hurricane Harvey less than two weeks ago. They're experiencing a double whammy of threats to their lives in this country.

**RG:** The double whammy thing is really profound, and it puts into clear focus what's at stake here. In my book, I argue that illegality is a master status. I think we can certainly agree that these young people and their family have agency, but when you've got big events like this, like natural disasters and emergencies within families, it really brings into focus structural limitations. For example, in Texas, when undocumented individuals are being denied access to FEMA and ICE agents are picking up people right in the midst of a catastrophe, it brings into really clear focus what people can do, what people cannot do, and what their structural limitations are. At the end of the day, one status really overrides everything. When we're thinking about the potential of this mass disenfranchisement caused by the end of DACA, it's really important to note that there will be really dire implications in people's lives.

**TM:** During the storm, I couldn't believe that people might be denied access to hurricane shelters or that the border checkpoints were still up.

**RG:** People were having to make very difficult decisions in very real time about what to do, especially as border checkpoints were still up. I pay some attention to social media and I was reading stuff from folks who are saying, "Well, nobody gets a free ride." I think it's really difficult. Can we have compassion for people? That's a really important philosophical question we're looking at in this country: are we a country that has compassion?

**TM:** Because when you apply for DACA, you're required to give the federal government information that could potentially be used against you. Could you talk about the betrayed promise of rescinding DACA?

**RG:** Every message at every turn was: “We will not use this information against you.” For very good reason, young people and their parents had cause for concern. Over time people become successful at making ends meet every month so they can get home safely every day and can take care of their families. You adjust. But then you’ve got this program that’s offering a lot. The potential of this program was great and it definitely made good on the promise, but families were really weighing risks and rewards. A sizable number determined that the rewards were greater than the risks, especially as the government and academic institutions urged people that this is something that’s safe. People put their trust in our government.

But now we’re looking at a very different administration that has been openly hostile toward immigrants. We’re in a really different situation that has young people and their family members concerned. People didn’t only provide their information—they had to prove five-year continuous residence. Those applicants who weren’t young and presently in school had to provide check stubs, which often that showed they were working under either a bogus social security number or someone else’s social security number.

**TM:** Which is an illegal act.

**RG:** Yes, so then people put a lot of faith in our government that it would not use this information. There’s no new information suggesting our government is going to do so, but the context of our current government gives people reason to worry. What will happen if DACA is rescinded, there’s no legislation, and people go from documented to being undocumented and a priority for immigration enforcement?

**TM:** Could you talk about the mental and physical health concerns of being undocumented?

**RG:** DACA helped to make good on this promise of the American dream. Finally, DACA beneficiaries were able to envision futures that were connected to their work, and get jobs that matched their credentials or their education experience. Young people could actually see a future and they can work toward something tangible, which has really helped to boost mental outlooks over the last five years. They’ve also been less afraid of police and of being deported, and therefore worry a lot less. As a result, they’re better able to take care of themselves and their families, their children and also their parents. They’re living in better homes, either renting or able to put a down payment down on a house. They’ve got car payments now. They’re putting their kids into daycare. They’re able to help out their parents in significant ways.

So what's going to happen if DACA is rescinded and their status is taken away from them? They're going to be confronted with some very tough decisions around how to maintain any level of adult life with much fewer points of access. That's going to prompt some really difficult decisions around day care, what they can afford to give parents, and economic decisions around how they spend their money, which certainly will be stressful. There will also be other kind of stressors: what does it look like to have an experience of widened access and increased mobility, and then to have it stop?

**TM:** It's truly a situation where if everything you could imagine could go wrong, it goes wrong.

**RG:** Overnight, too. This move with DACA represents a great loss—not just a material loss, but loss of a way of life and loss of belonging. How can young people and their families reconcile with it?

**TM:** In the past week, I've been considering if you could you ever trust with this country again, or love it even, if recipients lose their documentation.

**RG:** I think that's a really hard thing, because this American dream—that if you work hard enough, if you dream boldly enough, you can experience some mobility—is *so* seductive. It brings people here from all corners of the world. Young people trust in these kind of ideals about hard work, about playing by the rules, about dreaming big, about our elected officials. Moving forward, especially if DACA is rescinded, there's going to be a really big issue of trust within immigrant communities in this country, about this country's ability and willingness to take them in and provide for them a set of equal opportunities.

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