



Analyzing Immigration Policy: The DREAM Act and its National Impacts



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Introduction

The DREAM Act stands for the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors. This bill was born to address undocumented immigrants brought into the country when still young who have limited or no opportunities at all to pursue education and seek employment because of their unresolved unlawful status in the land—first introduced in the Senate by Senators Dick Durbin and Orrin Hatch in 2001. These individuals, known as "DREAMers," who grew up in the United States, attended American schools, and were, at least in a cultural sense, American, faced barriers in their pursuit of higher education, employment, or military service due to legal obstacles and undocumented status.

The DREAM Act was meant to be a straightforward path toward legal status. Eventually, citizenship would be granted to this group of young immigrants provided they satisfy requirements, including graduating from a US high school, having good moral character, and completing at least two years of college or military service. The goal was to allow these young people to give back to American society without concern that they would be deported.

The DREAM Act launched a nationwide debate on immigration reform and undocumented immigrant rights. Supporters of the bill reasoned that the DREAMers had lived in America most of their lives, often identifying as Americans more so than with their country of birth. They attended school in America, contributed to their communities, and listened in on the values and culture of the nation. This was not only a moral issue but also an economic opportunity lost by denying these immigrants the ability to apply for legal status whereby the so-called DREAMers could contribute much to the workforce, the military, and institutes of higher learning.

Over the years, the DREAM Act has received considerable opposition despite its altruistic aims. Critics counter that the law will encourage more illegal immigration since it provides a pathway for undocumented people to gain citizenship, which would weaken border control. They further say such a policy is unfair because it gives status to those who can enter without proper procedures and may be considered rewarding illegal activity. This bill has hung in Congress a variety of times while insufficient bipartisan support has shown up.

Although the DREAM Act has been introduced in various forms and reintroduced multiple times since 2001, it has never passed into law. This issue gained significant attention during the Obama administration and prompted the creation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program in 2012. This was not permanent status but did provide a two-year reprieve from deportation and work authorization for eligible DREAMers. This program allowed the DREAMers an opportunity to go through higher education and employment but did not put them on the path to citizenship, thereby hanging their futures in limbo.

The DREAM Act remains critical to the overall immigration reform debate, and its passing would put DREAMers on track for long-term solution determinations. Supporters argue that DREAMers should not be held responsible for the decisions of their parents or guardians and, therefore, deserve a chance at life with no fear of deportation. They also promise that the receiver will be allowed to socially and economically contribute to society after receiving legal status. Many hoped to pursue education, health, business, and military service.

Aside from solving the humanitarian issue, the DREAM Act is also beneficial economically. Several studies indicate that its passage would benefit the US economy through an increase in skilled labor and the rise in tax revenues. DREAMers who attain a legal status are more likely to pursue better-paying jobs, purchase homes, and start businesses, eventually driving further economic growth. Their addition to the labor market in general, or their added presence in the healthcare, education, and technology sectors, now also goes to mitigate shortages in these critical fields, therefore underlining the possible long-term benefits of the Act.

Through politicization and competition of legislative priorities, the DREAM Act has hung continuously in limbo. However, the resilience of the DREAMers and their advocates has kept the issue alive. The whole debate on immigration has put real faces to the problem as many undocumented youth, now referred to as DREAMers, have shared their stories and called for reform. Through their activism and determination, the DREAM Act has become a beacon of hope for undocumented youth, yet simultaneously a reminder of the complex task associated with setting immigration policy in America.

Demographic Data

The demographics of DREAMers show that many diverse young immigrants from different backgrounds are involved with having the DREAMer status and make up the overall DREAMer population. Around one-fifth of the total population of undocumented immigrants in the US (2.3 million immigrants) were eligible under the 2023 DREAM Act, with more than 1 million eligible for DACA (fwd.us). Two-thirds of potential beneficiaries of the DREAM Act are under 30 years old, with nearly 600,000 being under 18.

Regarding the origins of DREAMers, roughly half (1 million DREAMers) of the DREAMer population eligible under the 2023 DREAM Act were from Mexico, around 17% (370,000 DREAMers) were from Asia, around 17% (320,000 DREAMers) were from Central America, around 7% (160,000 DREAMers) were from South America, around 7% (160,000 DREAMers) were from Europe or Canada, around 6% (120,000 DREAMers) were from the Caribbean, and around 5% (110,000 DREAMers) were from Africa or the Middle East (fwd.us). North Dakota had the youngest percentage of potential beneficiaries of the 2023 DREAM Act, with 88% of the DREAMer population under 18 years old.

Despite having these origins, around a third of DREAMers were brought to the United States as children, a reason that many argue that they should receive citizenship. Over half of all DREAMers in each state of the United States of America entered the United States before being 13 years of age, with a majority (excluding Alaska and Louisiana) having DREAMers in their states who have been in the United States for over 10 years. These numbers all point to roughly three-fourths of eligible DREAMers living and growing up in the United States for most of their lives.

Regarding the education of qualified applicants, most DREAMers have already earned a high school diploma or have met military service requirements, which are necessary to be eligible for legal status. Around 73% (1.6 million DREAMers) of potential beneficiaries of the DREAM Act have already completed this requirement. Around 11% (250,000 DREAMers) have also added a college diploma or degree to this baseline requirement (fwd.us). Although most of the DREAMer

demographic is on the younger side, many qualified applicants of the DREAM Act continue to work toward meeting the requirements and completing their education. Around 600,000 DREAMers are pursuing education from kindergarten to twelfth grade, and around 300,000 DREAMers are pursuing education in college or university (fwd.us). However, many of these younger applicants also arrived too early to receive additional protections under DACA.

Concerning DREAMers in the workforce, more than 1.3 million potential beneficiaries are in the United States workforce today. Many are employed in industries that are facing significant labor shortages but are necessary and proper for the functioning of society. Around 1 million qualified applicants work in industries experiencing 5% or higher job-opening rates (fwd.us). This is impressive when considering that many DREAMers are of the younger demographic as well. Some of the jobs of highest employment for DREAMers include construction (190,000 qualified DREAMers) and accommodations and food services (170,000 qualified DREAMers) (fwd.us). Furthermore, DREAMers are so crucial to the economy that without their contributions, the United States would lose 685,000 employees from the workforce and around \$460.3 billion in GDP over the next decade (George W. Bush Presidential Center). The involvement of DREAMers in the economy proves how many people who are against DREAMers fail to realize how key they are to the economy of their own country.

Compared with the broader immigrant population, the DREAMer population aligns with many of the same trends seen in the broader population. While most of the DREAMer population is younger, the broader immigrant population ranges over many different ages due to having a long history of arrivals. Mexico and Asia remain the top places of origin for both the DREAMer and broader immigrant populations. While the majority of the broader United States immigrant population have lower levels of education compared to that of people born in the United States (around 25% not completing high school), over and around 35% of the broader immigrant population have bachelor's degrees which is greater than the 11% of DREAMers. Both the larger immigrant population and DREAMers significantly impact the workforce with high percentages respective to each of their overall populations participating in it. There are 30 million of the broader immigrant population in the US workforce and 1.3 million of the DREAMer population (Moslimai et al.). While DREAMers do not make up the most significant percentage of the overall broader

immigrant population, their contribution to advocating for immigrants and immigration policy has great significance in the United States.

General Benefits and Potential Concerns

The DREAM Act is a proposal to help young people brought to the United States as children without proper documentation. This idea of allowing the DREAM act is filled with discussion at high levels because there are many positive and negative factors.

The DREAM Act offers significant benefits to the U.S., both socially and economically, and its adoption is crucial for the country's future. Not enacting the DREAM Act would be a deeply inhumane decision. It would deny hundreds of thousands of young individuals, brought to the U.S. as children, the rights and opportunities their peers enjoy, leaving them in a constant state of uncertainty and fear, with limited prospects. Furthermore, these individuals would face the harsh reality of being sent back to countries where violence, persecution, and extreme poverty are rampant.

According to Doctors Without Borders (MSF) and the UN Refugee Agency, Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) are experiencing "unprecedented levels of violence outside a war zone," with widespread impunity for murders, daily kidnappings, and rampant extortion. These conditions have forced approximately 600,000 refugees and asylum seekers to flee the region, with 76% of parents citing violence as a key reason for their departure. Additionally, undocumented workers in the U.S. face severe workplace safety and health risks. A 2017 report by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) found that these workers are more likely to suffer injuries or fatalities, particularly in high-risk industries such as construction, agriculture, and services. Many are exposed to hazardous materials and unsafe working conditions, further jeopardizing their well-being.

The failure to pass the DREAM Act is not only a moral failure but a crisis that threatens the lives and futures of millions of immigrants. At least 3.6 million DREAMers face significant barriers to education, employment, and social integration, with the constant risk of deportation to countries where they could face violence or even death. The inaction on the DREAM Act places these young people's lives in jeopardy and undermines the values of humanity and justice

The DREAM Act brings significant economic advantages and, as a result, improves the quality of life for American citizens. Research has pointed to the DREAM Act generating billions of dollars for the American economy. This is because when DREAMers acquire a work permit or become citizens to join the American workforce, there is more taxable income. Their work raises the GDP. "The Economic Benefits of Passing the DREAM Act," from americanprogress.org, found that if the DREAM Act were passed, it would add \$22.7 billion annually to the US GDP and up to \$400 billion over the next decade. The DREAM Act would create 1.4 million new jobs by 2030. Giving DREAMers proper legal status and fair work opportunities will result in a superior economy. This shows how adopting the DREAM Act will ultimately impact all Americans with more jobs, better health, and a better quality of life.

Adopting the DREAM Act is necessary to ensure a just and equitable society that values the contributions and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their legal status. The failure to adopt the DREAM Act perpetuates a cycle of inhumane treatment and puts the lives of innocent immigrant youth at risk.

Despite multiple attempts in Congress, the DREAM Act has failed to pass. Given its history, it might be worthwhile to consider other options that could more effectively address the needs of young immigrants. One such option is the SUCCEED Act, which shares many of the DREAM Act's objectives but may offer a more feasible path forward. While the SUCCEED Act has shown a higher success rate, with 84.1% of applicants completing the process in 2019, compared to just 38% under the DREAM Act, evaluating its continued effectiveness and impact is crucial. The SUCCEED Act may be more cost-effective and efficient, allowing more immigrants to gain citizenship and contribute to the economy. However, this does not mean that efforts to pass the DREAM Act should be entirely abandoned, especially if the SUCCEED Act's implementation is still in progress and subject to improvement.

Ultimately, depending on a person's values and perspectives, the DREAM Act could be a great solution or a negative impact.

Predicted Economic Impacts of DREAM Act Based on DACA Recipients

While the DREAM Act has never been passed, looking at the contributions of DACA(Delayed Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients can indicate the economic impact of the DREAM Act if and when it is passed.

Tax Contributions

Receipts of the DREAM Act would make significant contributions to federal, state, and local tax revenues. DACA recipients alone contribute \$6.2 billion in federal taxes and \$3.3 billion in state and local taxes annually(Lawrence 2022). This substantial tax contribution bolsters America's economy and helps support various government programs and services such as education systems, transportation, and other necessary frameworks.

Job Creation and Labor Force Participation

DREAMers play a crucial role in the US labor market, particularly in essential industries. Approximately 343,000 DACA recipients are employed in sectors deemed necessary by the Department of Homeland Security (Lawrence 2022).

This includes:

- 20,000 educators
- 34,000 healthcare workers in patient care
- 11,000 individuals working in healthcare facilities in non-patient-care form
- 100,000 food supply chain workers

These individuals have been instrumental in supporting and sustaining the basic needs of society, especially during challenging times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Consumer Spending and Housing Market

DREAMers contribute significantly to the US economy through their spending power and participation in the housing market. DACA recipients hold \$25.3 billion in spending power, contributing massively to local economies (Svajlenka & Truong 2021).

DACA households (Lawrence 2022):

- Own more than 68,000 homes across the country
- Contribute \$760 million in mortgage payments annually
- Pay \$2.5 billion in rental payments each year

This level of economic activity stimulates local economies and supports various industries.

Long-term Economic Benefits

The economic impact of DREAMers extends beyond their immediate contributions. Studies have shown that providing legal status to DREAMers could lead to substantial long-term economic benefits:

- A DACA fix to allow longer-term solutions could allow eligible individuals to contribute at least \$390 billion in wages and \$117 billion in combined taxes over the next decade (Connor 2022).
- Passing the DREAM Act could increase GDP by around 0.08% (or \$15.2 billion), which amounts to an average of \$15,371 for each legalized worker (Ortega, Francesc, et al. 2018).

Educational Attainment

DREAMers often have higher educational attainment compared to other undocumented immigrants.

The DREAM Act's requirements for educational attainment serve as an incentive for higher education (Ojeda, Raul, et al. 2011):

- Approximately 850,000 immigrants would attain an Associate's degree
- Nearly 1.2 million immigrants would attain at least a Bachelor's degree

- Around 34,000 would go on to a Master's degree
- Almost 12,000 would attain a Doctorate or first professional degree

This higher level of education translates into increased earning potential and greater economic contributions.

Labor Force Participation

DREAMers have a high labor force participation rate. An estimated 96 percent of DACA recipients are either employed or in school (Wong et al., 2019). This high level of engagement in the workforce or education system contributes to their overall economic impact.

Economic Mobility

Studies have shown that DACA recipients experience significant economic mobility. Between 2012 and 2016 (Lawrence 2022):

- The number of DACA recipients with a Bachelor's degree tripled
- Professional job attainment for DACA recipients grew by 34%
- The typical income of DACA recipients more than doubled

This upward mobility allows DREAMers to contribute more to the economy through increased earning power and consumer spending.

Conclusion of Economic Impact

DREAMers contribute substantially to the US economy through tax payments, labor force participation, consumer spending, and educational attainment. Their unique position as long-term residents with strong ties to their communities allows them to contribute in ways that are both economically significant and socially valuable.

Ultimately, DACA recipients' economic contributions highlight the potential benefits of the DREAM Act, which would provide pathways to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who have grown up in the United States. As policymakers consider immigration reform, the economic impact of "DREAMers" serves as a compelling argument for creating more inclusive policies that allow these individuals to fully participate in and contribute to the US economy.

Social and Cultural Impact

The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act has made quite a significant social and cultural impact in the United States on the lives of undocumented immigrants who came into the country as children. Though it has never been passed into law, the act inspired policies like the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program to confer temporary relief from deportation and work authorization to eligible young immigrants. By offering an opportunity for higher education and legal employment, the DREAM Act has been advanced to integrate into the American economy and society, which is a very vulnerable population. It does so to further the ideals of fairness and equality associated with the United States. The DREAM Act represents, at the same time, a contentious debate on immigration policy and citizenship rights, a struggle over national identity that has had a profound impact on American political life.

The DREAM Act has also socially shaped public perception of undocumented immigrants by attaching a face to the issue: some of the youngest of people who came to the United States through no fault of their own. Despite their legal status, many of these so-called "DREAMers" have become emblems of the American DREAM through their pursuit of education and self-improvement. They have been part of communities in every corner of this country, thriving in our schools, contributing to our civic life, and joining our professional ranks to help advance our country. The law and the DACA policy that followed granted DREAMers permission to plan a future in the only country they have ever called home, creating in them for the first time a sense of belonging and stability many had never known.

The DREAMers' movement has been a culturally catalyzing force for immigrant rights activism, placing the experiences of undocumented youth into the modern discussion. By challenging the

argument that citizenship is solely a privilege of birthplace or legal documentation, the movement has helped frame an increasingly inclusive narrative of American identity. DREAMers and their advocates have provided that standard set of values of hard work, education, and community engagement, which positions them as integral members of American society. This resonates with the mood of most Americans who feel that offering a pathway to legal status for people who are culturally American, though they may be undocumented, is desirable.

On the other hand, the DREAM Act has also revealed and further deepened divisions in America over immigration. Opponents of the act view granting undocumented immigrants legal status or a pathway to citizenship as an encouragement of illegal immigration and as an erosion of the rule of law. They also believe such initiatives will likely put more pressure on public resources, such as education and health care. This tension reflects broader conflicts over the future of US immigration policy and how to balance compassion with enforcement. These debates have profoundly impacted the political landscape as both parties grapple with challenges to immigration reform.

In conclusion, even without having passed into law, the DREAM Act has arguably had a continued social and cultural impact in the United States. Documenting the plight of undocumented immigrants, particularly young people, at the same time it shaped debates over immigration politics, the act brings into sharp view the complexity of issues of belonging, national identity, and justice-perpetuating support as much as opposition. Its legacy remains alive in the continued debate over the role of immigrants in American society and what future immigration reform will look and feel like.

Comparative Analysis

The United States' issue regarding how to resolve the DREAMers is complex. This problem isn't unique to the United States; it is common among many countries worldwide.

Firstly, South Korea, a liberal democracy in East Asia, has a similar issue. It is estimated that 20,000 undocumented children below the age of 18 (Bo-gyung) live in the country, and it has implemented policies for these children. If the child is still in primary, middle, or high school on

the application date, the child is still allowed to stay in the country until they graduate from high school. In this case, the parents can also apply for a visa to stay with the child until the child's visa expires. It should be noted that if the child drops out of school, fails to reach the next grade level, or breaks the law, extensions of their permit for up to 6 months can be granted, while further extensions are made based on whether the child makes improvements. On the other hand, if the child has already graduated from high school by their application date or they have become 19 years old, they can legally stay in South Korea for up to 1 year from that date. The eligibility criteria are shown in Figure 1.0. During the application process, parents who are illegally in South Korea are fined based on the number of days the infraction occurs. It is important to note that these are just the essential criteria, and there are cases of exceptions and special rules being applied based on the scenario. An important exception is North Korea; any North Korean who defects to South Korea, regardless if they are undocumented, becomes a South Korean citizen automatically.

	Criteria	
Born in Korea or who entered as infants (under 6 years old)	Resided for over 6 years	Currently enrolled in primary, middle, or high school in Korea, or have graduated from high school at the time of application
Who entered Korea after infancy	Resided for over 7 years	

Figure 1.0

France has this same issue as the United States. France is a semi-presidential republic in Europe that has many undocumented children who enter and live in the country. It is clear that these children live settled lives; most of them live with their parents, likely live in poverty, and experience chronic and toxic stresses (Picum). France does not require children to have a residence permit for children before the age of 18, which is when their undocumented status becomes a reality. Children need to know that when they become adults, they lose access to education, health

care, financial support, and no further legal support from a guardian, among other benefits. Additionally, these children are not treated with care, which is a common trend across Europe. According to The Guardian, “Europe treats undocumented children with less care than livestock.”

India is a parliamentary republic in South Asia that has very different laws concerning undocumented children than the countries mentioned before. India clearly states that children of illegal immigrants who enter the country, which therefore makes the children also undocumented, cannot gain citizenship or legally stay in the country in any way. This is mostly the case, though there have been exceptions, like when a news report stated that some groups of illegal immigrants were exempted: “[i]n September 2015 and July 2016, the central government exempted certain groups of illegal migrants from being imprisoned or deported. These are illegal migrants who came into India from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, or Pakistan on or before December 31, 2014, and belong to the Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, or Christian religious communities. Illegal migrants from this group cannot be imprisoned or deported for not having valid travel documents” (Library of Congress).

The United States’s issue with how to approach the issue with the DREAMers is a complex case. Various countries have different solutions to this issue. Though the United States may not agree with every part of these solutions, they may look to other countries for inspiration. They could integrate parts of how undocumented children should be allowed in the country till 18 years old, and then they would have to apply to get legal status or give these children status in cases where they don’t have a parent or guardian with them. The United States must resolve this decades-old problem.

Conclusion

The issue of undocumented immigrant youth and their legal status can be found in countries across the globe (e.g., France, India, and South Korea), many of which have adopted vastly different approaches to the issue. The United States is no exception to this, as American lawmakers have continuously struggled to pass official legislation on the legalization of

undocumented immigrant youth, with various propositions being discussed over the years but never enforced.

Originally proposed in 2001 by congressmen Dick Durbin and Orrin Hatch, the DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) sought to protect young undocumented immigrants at risk for deportation. The bill advocated to provide these youth easier accessibility to legal status and, more specifically, advocated to grant undocumented youth permanent US residence so long as they adhered to a particular set of eligibility requirements (graduating from a US high school, maintaining good moral character, college enrollment and GED) and participated in at least one of the following pathways: higher education, employment, or the military force. These youth, who arrived in the United States from an early age, were given the title of DREAMers.

Despite having been introduced in Congress over ten times and with a total of three different versions, the DREAM Act has yet to be passed into proper legislation; however, the persisting presence of the DREAM Act in Congress acted as the catalyst for initiation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) by the Obama administration in 2012. DACA does not provide DREAMers access to legal status as outlined by the DREAM Act; instead, it gives them a reprieve (2 years) from deportation and access to higher education and work authorization. Despite being more moderate compared to the DREAM Act in establishing the rights and reform of undocumented immigrant youth, DACA was widely controversial and met with criticism, particularly from the right. Accordingly, the DREAM Act has been the subject of highly contentious debate amongst American legislators since its original proposal, a reflection of the broader conversation surrounding undocumented immigrants at large in the United States.

Proponents of the DREAM Act argue that a substantial number of DREAMers (over half of each state), having grown up in the United States since thirteen or before, identify culturally as Americans and consequently deserve citizenship similarly to children born in the United States. The population of DREAMers in the United States, as eligible in the 2023 version, have diverse origins, with over half coming from Mexico, 17% from Asia, 17% from Central America, 7% from South America, 7% from Europe/Canada, 6% from the Caribbean and 5% from Africa/the

Middle East. Still, an estimated three-fourths of the 2.3 million eligible immigrants grew up in the United States from an extremely early age. Therefore, proponents reason that not providing these youth the support necessary to continue their residency permanently, especially when they did not choose to immigrate, would be morally wrong.

However, aside from the humanitarian advantages of the bill, proponents argue that the DREAM Act presents extremely promising economic advantages. Regarding those who are potential beneficiaries of the DREAM Act, an overwhelming portion are integral to the United States workforce and already contribute extensively to industries with labor shortages. Using the contributions of DACA recipients as a baseline, recipients of the DREAM Act would boost the economy substantially. DACA recipients have not only contributed \$9.5 billion in federal and state/local taxes combined but have also contributed significantly to the medical (patient and non-patient care), food supply, and education industries. With the support provided by the DREAM Act, these immigrants will have even greater access to higher-paying jobs requiring skilled labor, allowing them to stimulate the economy even further.

The economic advantages of the bill become more promising given the statistics regarding the education of potential DREAMers. The large majority of qualified applicants for the DREAM Act have already earned a high school diploma or completed military service, either of which are requirements to obtain legal status (according to the DREAM Act of 2023). Roughly 11% have earned a college diploma. This statistic is even more impressive when one considers that so many applicants have yet to reach the age where they can finish their education requirements. With such a significant proportion of potential DREAMers showing enthusiasm for their education, proponents reason that there is no doubt they will contribute (or are actively contributing) to both social and economic facets of society, given the incentive provided by the DREAM Act.

Common criticisms of the DREAM Act are that the process to obtain legalization, as outlined by the bill, is highly rigorous and requires that potential DREAMers undergo a stressful application process that still puts them at risk for deportation. In comparison to the SUCCEED Act, a similar but officially enforced act that provides legalization for undocumented youth, the DREAM Act's

application process is much less likely to be completed and, therefore, less effective (it's important to note, however, that the SUCCEED Act has its own criticisms, including the separation of immigrant families, the stripping of due process rights, and ineligibility for alternative forms of relief).

While the official passage of the DREAM Act remains uncertain, the discourse surrounding it indicates a growing awareness of undocumented immigrant rights and reform in the United States. As immigrants become increasingly crucial to the makeup of American society, establishing communities and cultures that are American in their own right, one thing remains undoubtedly certain: people will continue to fight for the equity and opportunities of undocumented immigrants in America.

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