

## OPINION

### 'Dreamers' Put Their Trust in DACA. What Now?

By JOSE ANTONIO VARGAS, THE NEW YORK TIMES, SEPT. 9, 2017



Protestors marched to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement headquarters in Washington on Tuesday. Credit Tom Brenner/The New York Times

Past the Ferris wheel, a line of young immigrants snaked into the crowded hallways of an event space on Chicago's Navy Pier. It was August 2012. I overheard two women wondering whether they should have showed up and gotten in the line, to apply for a new program that would let some undocumented people who had come to this country as children get a work permit.

5 "I don't know if we should trust the government," one of the women said.

"I don't know, either," the other replied. "But I really want to work and help my mom pay rent."

It wasn't your choice to come to America. But once you realize you're here illegally, it becomes your choice to figure out who gets to know that.

10 Can you tell your classmates that you can't join the overseas choir trip because you don't have a valid passport? Can you tell your coach that you have to stay in the area and can't be recruited by an out-of-state college? Can you tell a human resources manager that you can't get a driver's license because you don't have a Social Security number?

When you exist in a legal maze shrouded in doubts, every decision is a gut check.

15 In 2002, Pat Foote, a recruiter at The Seattle Times, told me that she couldn't offer me a summer internship because I am in the United States illegally. I later made my way to Seattle just so that I could look her in the eye and ask that she not share my secret. She was a stranger, the first potential employer I'd ever told, and I asked for her trust.

The scariest stranger of all is the United States government. It could deport you from the place you call home. That's a fear I live with.

20 The landscape of trust shifted dramatically in 2012, when President Barack Obama issued a directive to establish the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. In addition to protecting immigrants who were brought to the United States before the age of 16 from deportation for a renewable two-year period, it granted a work permit to qualified immigrants who were under age 31 on June 15, 2012, the date of its announcement. Applicants paid a \$465 fee for processing and  
25 gave all their contact information (name, address, phone number) to the government they had grown up fearing. In effect, the Obama administration said, "Trust us."

I did not qualify for DACA — I turned 31 four months before the policy was announced — but was thrilled for my younger undocumented friends who did qualify. I carried that thrill with me to Chicago on the first day that people could apply. Since then, an estimated 800,000 undocumented  
30 Americans across the country have received this deferred action.

As soon as news started leaking that President Trump, who campaigned on ending the program, would deliver on his promise, the questions came flooding in. Friends whose lives and livelihoods depended on this promise the government had made needed to know: Will my boss still keep me on when DACA expires? Will my scholarship continue? How can I pay my mortgage? Who can we  
35 trust now?

Can we trust President Trump, whose conflicting messages illustrate his ignorance of how DACA works?

Contradicting what the attorney general and the president have said in public, a White House talking points memo on DACA is making the rounds among my friends and colleagues, in group  
40 text messages and private Facebook groups. "The Department of Homeland Security urges DACA recipients to use the time remaining on their work authorizations to prepare for and arrange their departure from the United States — including proactively seeking travel documentation — or to apply for other immigration benefits for which they may be eligible," the memo says. After reading it, a friend who's a DACA recipient texted our group: "This is not a time for us to get fooled. This  
45 memo is telling us pack our bags."

Can we trust Congress, especially given that some Democrats and Republicans have historically used so-called Dreamers, named after the long-stalled Dream Act, as bargaining chips?

50 We can't know what President Trump and Congress will do. But we do know who to trust now — the people we had to trust before. To me, that means the teachers who see up close the injustice of life as an undocumented immigrant in this country.

The first adult I ever told I was here illegally was Mrs. Denny, my high school choir teacher. It's a story I've told many times, and written about too, because the moment meant so much to me.

55 After she announced to our class that we were going to Japan for spring break, I pulled her aside and said that I couldn't go. "I don't have the right passport," I said. Confused, Mrs. Denny replied: "Oh, it's O.K., Jose. We'll get you the right passport." I told her it was more complicated than that, that I didn't have any piece of legal document that I could show, that I wasn't supposed to be here. Her eyes widened, her lips pursed, and she didn't say another thing. A couple of days later, to my surprise, she told the class that we were going to Hawaii instead. Years later, she told me: "You were my kid. I wasn't going to leave any of my kids behind."

60 How many more Mrs. Dennys have made and will continue to make that decision?

*Jose Antonio Vargas, a journalist and filmmaker, is the founder of the organization \*Define American.*

65 \*About Define American: Our Mission: Define American is a nonprofit media and culture organization that uses the power of story to transcend politics and shift the conversation about immigrants, identity, and citizenship in a changing America (<https://defineamerican.com/about/>)