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The Labor Market Returns to Authorization for Undocumented Immigrants: Evidence from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Program

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Abstract

Over one year has now passed since President Barack Obama announced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) initiative, which provides eligible youth with a two-year reprieve from deportation and work authorization. We use data from the Current Population Survey to gauge the impact that DACA has had on the employment and wages earned by eligible youth. Despite its recent enactment, we find evidence that DACA increased the employment likelihood of eligible youth between 11 and 15 percentage points. Additionally, as we restrict our focus to populations with an increased likelihood of being unauthorized, we observe significant wage gains on the order of 8 to 10 percent for those individuals eligible for DACA. Overall, the preliminary findings point towards the promise that granting an expedited route to a lawful status might have for undocumented immigrants brought to the United States at a young age.

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I. Introduction

Immigration reform is again the subject of heated debate in the American political system, media, and public at large. One of the most contentious issues is whether immigration reform should include a path to citizenship for unauthorized immigrants already in the United States –a population estimated to be about 11.7 million in 2012 (Passel *et al*. 2013). Within this debate, special attention has been paid to whether a path to legalization should be offered to unauthorized immigrants who came to the United States as children. Advocates of these youth have pushed forward variants of the *Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors* (DREAM) *Act* over the past decade. As immigration reform and DREAM Act legislation stalled at the national level, on June 15, 2012, President Barack Obama announced that his administration would practice prosecutorial discretion for individuals meeting a set of criteria very similar to those proposed in the most recent version of the DREAM Act (Preston and Cushman 2012).[1] Under this program, individuals approved for consideration of deferred action are granted a renewable two-year reprieve from deportation proceedings and become eligible for work authorization in the United States.

In this paper, we exploit the implementation of DACA to revisit a topic of great concern in the immigration debate – the extent to which work authorization can improve the employment and wage outcomes of undocumented workers. DACA provides a special opportunity to make this assessment because the recovery of the causal effect of work authorization on labor market outcomes is generally plagued with self-selection and endogeneity concerns. Put simply, those

[1] DACA eligibility rules are outlined in the Background section below.

individuals who choose to pursue and ultimately obtain work authorization are likely to be different from those that do not in unobservable ways that are also correlated with their labor market performance. Thus, a naïve comparison of the labor market outcomes of individuals that have obtained work authorization and of individuals who have not will generally fail to reveal a causal impact. We avoid these problems by adopting a quasi-experimental approach that relies on an intent-to-treat strategy and compares individuals who were eligible for the DACA program to other likely undocumented immigrants who were not eligible before and after the policy went into effect.

Our paper is similar in spirit to the study by Gathmann and Nichols (2013), who examine the returns to citizenship in Germany by evaluating the impact of a change in program rules that affected eligibility for citizenship. Instead, we explore the returns to obtaining a two-year reprieve from deportation and work authorizations relative to the counterfactual of remaining unauthorized –a more relevant policy concern in the United States today owing to its large population of undocumented immigrants.

The paper is organized as follows. Section II describes the DACA program in greater detail, focusing on its enactment, eligibility requirements, as well as on its application and approval rates. Section III outlines our empirical strategy, Section IV describes the data, and Section V presents our preliminary findings on the impact that DACA is having on the labor market outcomes on eligible undocumented youth. Section VI summarizes our main finding and concludes the paper.

II. Background

As mentioned above, DACA's roots are closely tied to DREAM Act proposals, which preceded DACA by over a decade. Nevertheless, the upcoming presidential election in late 2012

and the resulting battle for Latino votes in the face of a potential alternative to the DREAM act presented by Obama's challengers (Wallsten 2012) resulted in a political environment in which DACA was announced suddenly and implemented swiftly. For purposes of evaluating the impact of DACA, this suggests that there were relatively little anticipation effects leading up to the program.

Although DACA does not offer the more permanent immigration status embedded in DREAM Act proposals, it does provide qualified individuals with a two-year reprieve from deportation proceedings and the ability to obtain work authorization in the United States. At the expiration of the two-year period, program beneficiaries can apply for a renewal of their DACA status, with renewals issued in two-year increments. Eligibility rules under DACA also closely mirror those suggested in variants of DREAM Act legislation. Namely, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) stipulates that an individual eligible for DACA must: (1) Be under the age of 31 as of June 15, 2012; (2) Have arrived in the United States before reaching his 16th birthday; (3) Have continuously resided in the United States since June 15, 2007, up until the time of application (4) Have been physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012, and at the time of making the request for deferred action with USCIS; (5) Have entered without inspection prior to June 15, 2012, or had his lawful immigration status expired by that date; (6) Be currently in school, have graduated from high school or obtained an equivalent degree, or have been honorably discharged from the Coast Guard or Armed Forces of the United States; and (7) Have no criminal records or pose a threat to national security or public safety.[2] For purposes of the analysis, we focus on those eligibility criteria observable to researchers, namely, age as of June 15, 2012, age at arrival in the U.S., years in the U.S., and educational

[2] For greater details, visit the section entitled: "Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Process" at http://www.uscis.gov

attainment/enrollment. We argue that these are also likely to be the most salient criteria which are the most important determinants of eligibility.

A final note that is critical for the analysis concerns the date of implementation of the DACA program which defines the dividing line between the pre- and post-DACA periods. Although DACA is considered to have been implemented on August 15, 2012 in the sense that it began to accept applications on that date, relatively few cases were actually approved until October 2012 (Passel and Lopez 2012, Batalova *et al.* 2013). Only 1,687 cases were approved in September 2012, whereas in excess of 28,000 were approved monthly after that month (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2013). Therefore, for the purposes of the analysis, we define the Post-DACA period as October 2012 and after.

III. Empirical Strategy

Our main aim is to learn about how DACA is changing the employment likelihood and wages of eligible undocumented youth relative to those of similarly undocumented youth who prove ineligible for deferred deportation. With that aim in mind, we estimate the following benchmark regression:

$$(1)\quad Y_{ist} = \alpha + \beta_1(DACA_t \times eligible_{ist}) + \beta_2 eligible_{ist} + \beta_3 DACA_t + \beta_4 Age_{ist} + \beta_5 HS_{ist} + \beta_6 HSplus_{ist} + \beta_7 YearsinUS_{ist} + X_{ist}\gamma + \mu_s + \delta_t + \lambda_s t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

The dependent variable Y_{ist} stands for the observed labor market outcome for individual *i* in state *s* in period *t*. Outcomes considered include an indicator for whether the individual is currently working and the log of real hourly wages for those employed. $DACA_t$ is a dummy variable equal to 1 after October 2012, when the first wave of individuals would have received official notification of their case approval. The variable $eligible_{ist}$ indicates whether the individual meets all three eligibility requirements observable to researchers: (1) being under the

age of 31 on June 15, 2012, (2) having entered the U.S. before his or her 16th birthday, and (3) being currently enrolled in school, having completed high school or having earned a GED. To ensure that the returns to eligibility are not driven by any one of the eligibility criteria alone, for example, picking up returns to education, we separately control for having a high school degree (HS_{ist}) or more than high school ($HSplus_{ist}$) where appropriate, as well as for age (Age_{ist}) and years in the United States ($YearsinUS_{ist}$). Note that the inclusion of the latter two variables together will effectively control for the age at arrival eligibility criterion. Other individual-level covariates (X_{ist}) include the number of own children under the age of 18, as well as dummy variables for the respondent's gender and race. Finally, the model incorporates a battery of state fixed effects, month-year fixed effects, and state-specific linear time trends to address changing policies and economic conditions at the state level. Standard errors are clustered at the state level.

The parameter of interest to us is β_1, the coefficient on the interaction term between $DACA_t$ and $eligible_{ist}$. It reveals the changes in the employment likelihood and wages earned by DACA-eligible individuals after the DACA program went into effect, relative to the changes experienced by DACA-ineligible individuals over the same time period. This difference-in-differences estimate will inform on the returns to the two-year reprieve and work authorization granted by DACA. As is true for all difference-in-differences estimators, this strategy assumes that the treatment (DACA-eligible) and control (DACA-ineligible) groups would have maintained parallel trends in the absence of treatment (DACA). While this assumption is ultimately untestable, in ongoing work we will provide support for this assumption by testing for pre-existing trends between treatment and control groups to ensure that the deviations we observe did not occur prior to the implementation of DACA. We will also run placebo tests in

which we erroneously assign an earlier year to DACA implementation to ensure that the difference-in-differences estimator does not detect any effect prior to the year of actual implementation. Thus, we will ensure that no pre-existing differences between treatment and control groups are being attributed to DACA.

IV. Data and Descriptive Statistics

To evaluate how DACA is impacting the employment and wages of eligible youth, we use individual micro-level data from the monthly Current Population Survey (CPS) spanning from January 2000 through July 2013. The CPS provides detailed information on the labor force status, hourly wages, educational attainment, race/ethnicity, and other basic demographics, such as the decade of arrival for those born outside the United States. One important limitation is that it lacks sensitive information on individuals' legal status. Therefore, following the literature (see, for instance, Loftstrom *et al*. 2011), we focus our attention on a group of workers previously shown to be a very good representation of the most likely unauthorized (Passel and Cohn 2010). This group is composed of Hispanic non-citizens. Additionally, we restrict attention to those individuals who were at least 20 years old in June 2012 and less than 45 years old at the time of the survey. Aside from focusing attention on a more homogenous set of working-age adults, the lower-bound age restriction also ensures that all individuals eligible for DACA based on the three criteria noted above will also have met the length of residency required for program participation. The upper-bound age restriction addresses the fact that a large share of undocumented migration took place during the 19980s-1990s, and the typical migration age is in the early 20s. In addition to that definition, we experiment with two other

definitions of this likely unauthorized group. First, we further restrict the sample to those who do not have more than a high school education and, subsequently, to Mexicans.[3]

Table 1 displays some of the characteristics of the likely unauthorized groups under analysis. We display these characteristics for the samples used in the employment and wage regressions –the latter being restricted to those that work. For the most part, there are not large differences across the various groups of likely unauthorized workers being considered. For example, approximately 67 to 69 percent of likely unauthorized individuals work and earn an average of $11-$12 per hour (in 2012 dollars). Additionally, about 7 to 8 percent of them fulfill the three DACA eligibility requirements noted in Section III. On average, likely unauthorized individuals in the three groups have been in the United States for approximately 11 months. Over half of them are men and approximately 30-31 years old. Between 56 and 60 percent of them are married and, on average, have just over one child. Finally, owing to our focus on the likely unauthorized, educational attainment is low. In particular, no more than one third has completed high-school and only about 16 percent of them have more than a high-school education.

Table 2 sheds some light on the impact of DACA by displaying simple difference-in-difference estimates of its effect on the employment and wages of eligible youth. Panel A shows the figures for the broadest group of likely unauthorized youth being examined, whereas Panel B and Panel C further restrict that sample by educational attainment and Mexican origin. In all instances, we find that eligible youth in all three groups experienced a significant increase in their employment likelihood and real hourly wages once DACA approvals started to roll in

[3] Passel and Cohn (2009) provide an overview of the characteristics of the unauthorized population in the U.S. Roughly half of unauthorized immigrants have less than a high school degree and about three-quarters have gone no further than a high school degree. Almost three-quarters of unauthorized immigrants are Hispanics, with Mexican-origin individuals comprising the majority of the population of unauthorized immigrants (almost 60%).

beginning October 2012. However, non-eligible youth did not experience similar increases. In fact, the two likely unauthorized groups defined in Panels B and C witnessed a reduction of approximately 2 percent in their real hourly wages over the same time period. As a result, relative to non-eligible youth, eligible youth enjoyed a 14 to 18 percentage point increase in their probability of being at work and a 9 to 14 percent increase in their real hourly wages pre- vs. post-DACA. Interestingly, the difference-in-difference estimates suggest that the employment impact of DACA might have been slightly larger among the more broadly defined group of likely unauthorized youth and less so among Mexicans; whereas the opposite appears to be the case with real hourly wages.

While evocative, the figures in Table 2 do not account for a myriad of demographic descriptors potentially responsible for such outcomes. In what follows, we address that shortcoming with a more rigorous regression analysis.

V. Preliminary Findings on the Labor Market Impact of DACA on Eligible Youth

To assess the impact that DACA has had on the employment and wages of eligible undocumented youth, we estimate equation (1). As noted earlier, our first sample is composed of Hispanic, foreign-born, non-citizens between the ages of 20 and 45 years-old. We then gradually narrow our focus to an increasingly more likely unauthorized population based on their education (no more than a high school degree) and Mexican descent.

Table 3 presents the results of estimating equation (1) for our three samples. Focusing first on the impact of DACA on the employment likelihood of likely unauthorized youth, we find that the policy appears to have increased the employment likelihood of all three groups anywhere between 11 and 15 percentage points. Interestingly, meeting the DACA eligibility requirements has a statically significant negative impact on the likelihood of employment prior to the

implementation of DACA, suggesting that the DACA eligibility criteria are negatively related to labor market performance overall. It is only after the first DACA cases are approved that DACA-eligible individuals start to enjoy some positive returns to their characteristics. These findings point to DACA-eligible individuals gaining some labor market rewards from their deportation reprieve and work authorization. Nevertheless, the positive returns to work authorization under DACA are still insufficient to override the negative returns associated with the DACA-eligibility criteria, underscoring the remaining challenges facing this group.

The two-year reprieve from deportation and work authorization are also positively impacting the wages earned by DACA eligible youth. As observed in the descriptive statistics in Table 2, the effects are strengthened as we narrow our focus to the most likely unauthorized populations. Specifically, less educated foreign-born non-citizens who are either Hispanic or Mexican (columns 4 and 6) and eligible for DACA experience between an 8 percent and a 10 percent increase in their real hourly wages following the policy implementation. Furthermore, unlike for employment, the positive wage returns to work authorization under DACA are able to override the negative wage returns associated with the DACA-eligibility criteria in the case of Mexicans, in particular.

Finally, we consider the time frame over which individuals experience the employment and wage effects uncovered in Table 3. Table 4 addresses this issue by displaying the month-to-month returns to the two-year reprieve for deportation and work authorization. The figures allow us to learn about the duration of the estimated impacts and whether they get stronger or weaker with the passage of time. Here, the statistically significant results are primarily confined to their impact on employment. Columns 1, 3, and 5 show an increase in the employment likelihood of DACA eligible youth following the implementation of the policy of approximately 8 percentage

points for each month that the individual has benefited from the DACA Program. The negative coefficient on the quadratic term for months of eligibility suggests that the impact of authorization does fall off over time, although the total effect remains positive over the short time horizon observed in our study.

V. Preliminary Summary and Conclusions

Over one year has now passed since President Barack Obama announced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) initiative on June 15, 2012. The initiative, which first began to approve a significant number of cases in October 2012, was intended to provide eligible youth with a two-year reprieve from deportation and work authorization to allow them to come out of the shadows and enjoy better educational and labor market outcomes. In this paper, we rely on data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) to gauge the impact that DACA has had on the employment and wages earned by eligible youth. We find that, despite its recent enactment, DACA appears to have increased the employment likelihood of eligible youth between 11 and 15 percentage points. Additionally, as we restrict our focus to populations with an increased likelihood of being unauthorized, we observe significant wage gains on the order of 8 to 10 percent for DACA-eligible youth. Overall, the preliminary findings point towards the promise that granting an expedited route to a lawful status might have for undocumented immigrants brought to the United States at a young age.

Table 1: Basic Descriptive Statistics of Our Samples

Group	**Hispanic Non-citizens, 20+ in June 2012 & less than 45 yrs. Old**				**Hispanic Non-citizens, 20+ in June 2012 & less than 45 yrs. Old, no more than HS**				**Mexican Non-citizens, 20+ in June 2012 & less than 45 yrs. Old, no more than HS**			
Regression Sample	**All**		**Working Sample**		**All**		**Working Sample**		**All**		**Working Sample**	
Variable Name	**Mean**	**S.D.**	**Mean**	**S.D.**	**Mean**	**S.D.**	**Mean**	**S.D.**	**Mean**	**S.D.**	**Mean**	**S.D.**
Real Hourly Wages	-	-	12.191	7.238	-	-	11.415	5.554			11.351	5.588
Working	0.691	0.462	1	0	0.685	0.464	1	0	0.668	0.471	1	0
Eligible	0.079	0.271	0.059	0.236	0.070	0.256	0.048	0.214	0.077	0.266	0.056	0.230
Months Eligible	0.024	0.391	0.019	0.325	0.016	0.322	0.012	0.256	0.022	0.372	0.016	0.290
Months in the U.S.	10.665	7.285	10.890	7.409	10.638	7.189	10.856	7.318	11.460	7.333	11.609	7.467
Male	0.539	0.498	0.669	0.471	0.551	0.497	0.691	0.462	0.550	0.497	0.710	0.454
White	0.731	0.443	0.735	0.441	0.729	0.444	0.736	0.441	0.938	0.241	0.937	0.244
Black	0.017	0.129	0.018	0.132	0.016	0.124	0.016	0.127	0.012	0.107	0.012	0.110
Age	30.526	8.290	31.604	7.358	30.238	8.427	31.478	7.387	30.855	7.967	31.622	7.296
Married	0.558	0.497	0.559	0.497	0.555	0.497	0.561	0.496	0.602	0.489	0.591	0.492
Number of Children	1.115	1.304	1.052	1.264	1.146	1.328	1.086	1.289	1.312	1.382	1.213	1.342
High School	0.258	0.438	0.283	0.450	0.306	0.461	0.340	0.474	0.302	0.459	0.327	0.469
More than High School	0.157	0.364	0.168	0.374	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Observations	62,281		37,467		52,489		31,176		30,126		17,848	

Table 2: Differences-in-Differences in Employment and Wages

	Eligible Youth				Non-eligible Youth				DD	
	Pre-DACA	**Post-DACA**	**DT**	**N**	**Pre-DACA**	**Post-DACA**	**DC**	**N**	**(DT-DC)**	**N**
Panel A: Hispanic Non-citizens, 20+ in June 2012 & less than 45 yrs. Old										
Employed	0.468 [0.499]	0.648 [0.478]	0.179*** (0.029)	4,951	0.708 [0.455]	0.703 [0.457]	-0.005 (0.009)	59,489	0.184*** (0.028)	64,440
Log Real Hourly Wages	2.287 [0.389]	2.352 [0.471]	0.065** (0.031)	2,227	2.401 [0.440]	2.376 [0.440]	-0.025 (0.011)	36,544	0.091** (0.036)	38,771
Panel B: Hispanic Non-citizens, 20+ in June 2012 & less than 45 yrs. Old, no more than HS										
	Eligible Youth				**Non-eligible Youth**				**DD**	
	Pre-DACA	**Post-DACA**	**DT**	**N**	**Pre-DACA**	**Post-DACA**	**DC**	**N**	**(DT-DC)**	**N**
Employed	0.421 [0.494]	0.596 [0.492]	0.178*** (0.037)	3,697	0.703 [0.457]	0.697 [0.460]	-0.006 (0.009)	50,508	0.181*** (0.036)	54,205
Log Real Hourly Wages	2.243 [0.381]	2.344 [0.406]	0.102** (0.041)	1,498	2.356 [0.397]	2.329 [0.389]	-0.027** (0.011)	30,711	0.129*** (0.044)	32,209
Panel C: Mexican Non-citizens, 20+ in June 2012 & less than 45 yrs. Old, no more than HS										
	Eligible Youth				**Non-eligible Youth**				**DD**	
	Pre-DACA	**Post-DACA**	**DT**	**N**	**Pre-DACA**	**Post-DACA**	**DC**	**N**	**(DT-DC)**	**N**
Employed	0.450 [0.498]	0.580 [0.495]	0.130*** (0.043)	2,305	0.685 [0.465]	0.677 [0.468]	-0.008 (0.012)	28,924	0.138*** (0.042)	31,229
Log Real Hourly Wages	2.256 [0.366]	2.372 [0.367]	0.115** (0.046)	996	2.349 [0.399]	2.327 [0.391]	-0.022* (0.014)	17,525	0.138*** (0.051)	18,521

Notes: Standard deviations are in brackets and standard errors are in parentheses. All regressions include a constant term. * $p<0.1$; ** $p<0.05$; *** $p<0.01$.

Table 3: DACA Eligibility and Labor Market Outcomes

	Hispanics Full Sample		Hispanics with HS or less		Mexicans with HS or less	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Likelihood of Being Employed	Log Real Hourly Wages	Likelihood of Being Employed	Log Real Hourly Wages	Likelihood of Being Employed	Log Real Hourly Wages
After DACA x Eligible	**0.143**	**0.029**	**0.145**	**0.078**	**0.11**	**0.101**
	(0.033)* **	**(0.039)**	**(0.025)*** **	**(0.045)***	**(0.032)*** **	**(0.049)** **
After DACA	0.009	0.012	0.009	0.059	-0.032	0.083
	(0.033)	(0.078)	(0.03)	(0.084)	(0.039)	(0.103)
Eligible	-0.244	-0.118	-0.284	-0.093	-0.232	-0.088
	(0.009)***	(0.009)***	(0.012)***	(0.012)***	(0.016)***	(0.013)***
Years in US	0.003	0.007	0.003	0.007	0.003	0.007
	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.001)***
Age	0.004	0.005	0.004	0.005	0.005	0.004
	(0.000)***	(0.001)***	(0.000)***	(0.001)***	(0.000)***	(0.001)***
Male	0.34	0.213	0.359	0.224	0.414	0.234
	(0.015)***	(0.007)***	(0.014)***	(0.007)***	(0.009)***	(0.008)***
High School (H.S.)	0.073	0.132	0.077	0.13	0.075	0.126
	(0.004)***	(0.012)***	(0.004)***	(0.011)***	(0.007)***	(0.015)***
More than H.S.	0.085	0.331				
	(0.011)***	(0.013)***				
R^2	0.19	0.17	0.21	0.15	0.25	0.15
N	62,281	37,467	52,489	31,176	30,126	17,848

Notes: * $p<0.1$; ** $p<0.05$; *** $p<0.01$. Other individual-level covariates include: number of children and indicators for white and black race. The model also includes state fixed effects, month-year fixed effects, and state-specific linear time trends. Standard errors are clustered at the state level.

Table 4: Months of DACA Eligibility and Labor Market Outcomes

	Hispanics Full Sample		Hispanics with HS or less		Mexicans with HS or less	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Likelihood of Being Employed	**Log Real Hourly Wages**	**Likelihood of Being Employed**	**Log Real Hourly Wages**	**Likelihood of Being Employed**	**Log Real Hourly Wages**
Months Eligible	**0.085**	**0.03**	**0.079**	**0.052**	**0.071**	**0.055**
	(0.016)* **	**(0.031)**	**(0.023)*** **	**(0.035)**	**(0.030)** **	**(0.036)**
Months Eligible Squared	**-0.009**	**-0.005**	**-0.009**	**-0.007**	**-0.008**	**-0.006**
	(0.002)* **	**(0.006)**	**(0.003)** **	**(0.005)**	**(0.004)** *	**(0.005**
Months Since Oct 2012	0.014	0.005	0.009	0.002	-0.017	-0.017
	-(0.025	(0.005)	(0.025)	(0.004)	(0.023)	(0.016)
Eligible	-0.243	-0.116	-0.283	-0.092	-0.232	-0.087
	(0.009)***	(0.010)***	(0.012)***	(0.013)***	(0.016)***	(0.014)***
Years in US	0.003	0.007	0.003	0.007	0.003	0.007
	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.001)***
Age	0.004	0.005	0.004	0.005	0.005	0.004
	(0.000)***	(0.001)***	(0.000)***	(0.001)***	(0.000)***	(0.001)***
Male	0.34	0.213	0.359	0.224	0.414	0.234
	(0.015)***	(0.007)***	(0.014)***	(0.007)***	(0.009)***	(0.008)***
High School (H.S.)	0.073	0.132	0.077	0.13	0.075	0.126
	(0.004)***	(0.012)***	(0.004)***	(0.011)***	(0.007)***	(0.015)***
More than H.S.	0.085	0.331				
	(0.011)***	(0.013)***				
R^2	0.19	0.17	0.21	0.15	0.25	0.15
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