

The Washington Post

The debate over DACA: a guide to the numbers used by politicians

Glenn Kessler

January 23, 2018

“A lot of people say 800,000; some people said — yesterday, first time I heard 650 [thousand]. I also heard 3 million. The fact is, our country was such a mess, nobody even knows what the numbers are.”

— **President Trump, remarks at a bipartisan meeting with lawmakers, Jan. 10, 2018**

“There were 10 million people that would have been on some path to staying in this country for indefinitely in the proposal that [Sens.] Dick Durbin and Lindsey Graham put forward.”

— **Former senator Rick Santorum (R-Pa.), in remarks on CNN’s “State of the Union,” Jan. 21, 2018**

In congressional debate over young undocumented immigrants, lots of numbers are being tossed around, often without context. But now that lawmakers have agreed to reopen the federal government and proceed to debate on legislation to protect Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, the numbers are important. A key vehicle in the Senate is a bill co-sponsored by Sens. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) and Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.), which is being modified by the so-called “gang of six” senators.

Is it limited to 650,000 — or could it be as high as 10 million, as Santorum (and some White House officials) suggest?

Here’s a guide to what’s real and what’s not.

The Facts

DACA was intended to let “dreamers” — undocumented immigrants brought to this country as children, who in many cases knew no other home — avoid deportation and get work permits that are renewed every two years. A survey of about 3,000 DACA applicants found the median age on arriving in the United States was 6.

Under the program, the Obama administration set forth requirements for qualifying for DACA, including having resided in the United States continuously from June 15, 2007, to June 15, 2012. Applicants also needed to have arrived with a parent and before turning 16, be in school or be a graduate of high school, or be a military veteran and not convicted of a felony, significant misdemeanor or three or more misdemeanors.

Essentially, Obama ordered a program of “prosecutorial discretion” that would not target for deportation undocumented immigrants who meet these qualifications, but he had said it was intended as a temporary action, pending congressional action. In September, President Trump decided to terminate DACA, effective in six months, forcing the problem back on Congress. (*Watch the video above on how Trump has twisted and turned on DACA over the years.*)

Now let’s take a tour through the numbers used by politicians in the debate.

650,000 — This is a low-ball figure for the number of active DACA recipients as of Sept. 4, 2017, when Trump ended the program. The actual number is 689,800, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. About 80 percent are from Mexico.

800,000 — This is approximately how many people have been approved under DACA between 2012 and 2017, according to USCIS. The precise figure is 798,900, with 71,680 rejected and 36,033 pending. Why is this number bigger than the current number? Nearly 40,000 received legal permanent residence (green cards), though such paths as marrying a U.S. citizen, being a victim of a crime and helping police or a procedure known as “advance parole.” (We discussed this in a previous fact check.) Others failed to renew or were rejected upon renewing their application.

1.7 million — The number of people who may be eligible for legal permanent residence (LPR) under the Dream Act sponsored by Graham and Durbin, though the proposal has become more restrictive in recent weeks. This estimate comes from the Migration Policy Institute, which first estimated the maximum population that could be considered under each bill, then the subset that would meet minimum educational requirements to gain conditional legal status, and then finally the subset of those in conditional legal status who would meet additional postsecondary education, military or work requirements to get a green card.

2 million — The number of people estimated by the Congressional Budget Office who would receive LPR status after 10 years under the Graham-Durbin proposal. But as we noted, it’s already become more restrictive through the gang of six talks.

3 million — This is Trump’s number at the bipartisan meeting but it is unclear what he’s talking about. The Migration Policy Institute estimates that about 3.6 million unauthorized immigrants entered the United States before the age of 18. But that’s a much larger universe than the people who would qualify under Graham-Durbin, or just about any bill pending in Congress with the exception of the American Hope Act sponsored by Rep. Luis V. Gutiérrez (D-Ill.).

10 million — This is Santorum’s eye-popping figure. He did not respond to a request for comment, but White House officials have also used it in conversations with lawmakers and reporters, suggesting it reflects the impact of “chain migration.” White House officials declined to explain how it was calculated, but we have some clues.

“Chain migration” refers to the practice of immigrants bringing other members of their families to the United States. Under U.S. law, there is a preference for relatives already living in the United States, so a U.S. citizen can petition for a green card for spouses, children, parents or siblings. So, for example, a sibling of a U.S. citizen could come to the United States, bringing

along spouses and minor children. The rules are stricter for green-card holders: they can only petition for a spouse or unmarried children.

House Republicans have pushed proposals that would eliminate family-sponsored immigration for parents, siblings and married adult children of U.S. citizens, as well as any for green-card holders. The Cato Institute estimates this legislation would reduce the number of legal immigrants by more than 400,000 people in 2019.

Jessica Vaughan, director of policy studies at the Center for Immigration Studies, which favors limits on immigration, in 2017 wrote a study that estimated each new immigrant has sponsored an average of 3.45 additional immigrants. Even using that figure as a multiplier against the 2 million CBO estimate does not yield 10 million, however. (It adds up to 8.9 million, which is 2 million plus 6.9 million).

However, Vaughan has a higher figure for Mexico — 6.38. Assuming 80 percent of the dreamers are from Mexico, that would easily yield 10 million, in addition to the dreamers. But given the ten-year path to citizenship placed on dreamers under Graham-Durbin, it's doubtful the same metrics would apply.

Indeed, the Migration Policy Institute, which favors immigration, has a significantly lower estimate for chain migration by dreamers if the Graham-Durbin plan became law — an average of 0.65 to 1.03 family members getting a green card over their lifetime. “The estimates assume, for example, that every parent or sibling residing outside the United States would be interested in and able to apply for a green card despite the costs and long wait times (which can reach two decades for a sibling coming from Mexico, for example),” the report said.

NumbersUSA, which wants to reduce immigration, also offers a 10 million figure for Graham-Durbin. But it's based on fuzzy math that assumes 3.4 million dreamers would get legal status as well as 6.7 million parents. But it's silly to assume two parents per dreamer, as not all parents came in pairs and not all families just have one child and two parents. The Migration Policy Institute estimates there are at most 1.57 parents per dreamer, so by MPI's estimate, depending on how the final proposal is crafted, between 2.7 million to 3.4 million parents would obtain conditional legal status.