

# Meet the Dreamers redefining American identity

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**'I consider myself an American; in your eyes, what does that make me?'** This question was addressed during a public debate on immigration reform by a student brought to the US when she was five months old. Young people like her, who are usually referred to as Dreamers – after the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, or Dream Act, the legal reform they are mobilising for – have significantly transformed the immigrants' rights debate in the United States.

The act – or rather bill, since it's not yet enacted in law, despite repeatedly being on the Congressional agenda since 2001 – would provide a legal status to youth who arrived in the US as minors.

In the absence of national action, an increasing number of states have passed their own 'Dream Acts', abolishing legal and financial barriers for undocumented youth to attend higher education. Recently, New Jersey's Governor Chris Christie – one of the likely leading Republican presidential candidates for 2016 – signed his own 'Dream Act', which came into force last month.

The Dream Act activists are claiming their American identity and their right to gain citizenship in a society in which they grew up and where they feel they belong. Many of the activists started to 'come out' in 2010, collectively asserting that they were undocumented, unafraid and unapologetic.

In public discourse the story of Dreamers is typically presented as a story of great success against all odds. They are portrayed as high-achieving people who attend schools of the Ivy League, and are valedictorians at their high schools.

President Barack Obama defines them as "Americans" in their minds, in every single way but one: on paper. He emphasises that "it's heartbreaking to see these incredibly bright, gifted people barred from contributing to our country and to our economy."

The courage of the Dreamers to step out of the shadows is admirable, and the increasing support for them in many US states remarkable. The discourse about them, however, at the same time reinforces a good immigrant/bad immigrant dichotomy, creating an idea about who is desirable and worthy of being an American, and who is not. The invocation of the highly successful immigrant by default leaves out all of those who are less fortunate. This dichotomy is also enshrined in the Dream Act itself.

To qualify as Dreamer, applicants do not only need to have arrived to the US as minors but must also be under the age of 35, have to be high-school graduates and enrolled in higher education or in the military, and have no criminal convictions.

But what about those now over the age of 35 who arrived as minors, and are also not morally culpable for being in the US without authorisation? What about those immigrants who work in multiple jobs under difficult work conditions and simply do not have the resources to prepare and enrol in higher education programmes?

These are the pressing questions the political elites have to likewise think about.

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