

Why the U.S. Needs a \$15 Minimum Wage

How the Raise the Wage Act would benefit U.S. workers and their families

The federal minimum wage is just \$7.25 and Congress has not increased it since 2009. Low wages hurt all workers and are particularly harmful to Black workers and other workers of color, especially women of color, who make up a disproportionate share of workers who are severely underpaid. This is the result of structural racism and sexism, with an economic system rooted in chattel slavery in which workers of color—and especially women of color—have been and continue to be shunted into the most underpaid jobs.¹

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The Raise the Wage Act of 2021 would gradually raise the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour by 2025 and narrow racial and gender pay gaps. Here is what the Act would do:

- Raise the federal minimum wage to \$9.50 this year and increase it in steps until it reaches \$15 an hour in 2025.²
- After 2025, adjust the minimum wage each year to keep pace with growth in the median wage, a measure of wages for typical workers.
- Phase out the egregious subminimum wage for tipped workers, which has been frozen at a meager \$2.13 since 1991.³
- Sunset unacceptable subminimum wages for workers with disabilities employed in sheltered workshops and for workers under age 20.

The benefits of gradually phasing in a \$15 minimum wage by 2025 would be far-reaching, lifting pay for tens of millions of workers and helping reverse decades of growing pay inequality.

The Raise the Wage Act would have the following benefits:⁴

- Gradually raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 by 2025 would lift pay for nearly **32 million workers—21% of the U.S. workforce**.
- Affected workers who work year round would **earn an extra \$3,300 a year**—enough to make a **tremendous difference in the life of a cashier, home health aide, or fast-food worker** who today struggles to get by on less than \$25,000 a year.
- **A majority (59%) of workers whose total family income is below the poverty line would receive a pay increase** if the minimum wage were raised to \$15 by 2025.
- A \$15 minimum wage would **begin to reverse decades of growing pay inequality** between the most underpaid workers and workers receiving close to the median wage, particularly along gender and racial lines. For example, minimum wage increases in the late 1960s explained 20% of the decrease in the Black–white earnings gap in the years that followed, whereas failures to adequately increase the minimum wage after 1979 account for almost half of the increase in inequality between women at the middle and bottom of the wage distribution.⁵
- A \$15 minimum wage by 2025 would **generate \$107 billion in higher wages** for workers and would also benefit communities across the country. Because underpaid workers spend much of their extra earnings, this injection of wages will **help stimulate the economy and spur greater business activity and job growth**.

Raising the minimum wage to \$15 will be particularly significant for workers of color and would help narrow the racial pay gap.

- **Nearly one-third (31%) of African Americans and one-quarter (26%) of Latinos** would get a raise if the federal minimum wage were increased to \$15.⁶
- **Almost one in four (23%) of those who would benefit is a Black or Latina woman.**
- African Americans and Latinos are paid 10–15% less than white workers with the same characteristics, so **The Raise the Wage Act will deliver the largest benefits to Black and Latino workers: about \$3,500 annually for a year-round worker.**⁷
- **Minimum wage increases in the 1960s Civil Rights Era significantly reduced Black–white earnings inequality and are responsible for more than 20% of the overall reduction in later years.**⁸

The majority of workers who would benefit are adult women—many of whom have attended college and many of whom have children.

- **More than half (51%) of workers who would benefit are adults between the ages of 25 and 54; only one in 10 is a teenager.**
- **Nearly six in 10 (59%) are women.**
- **More than half (54%) work full time.**
- **More than four in 10 (43%) have some college experience.**
- **More than a quarter (28%) have children.**

The Raise the Wage Act follows the lead of the growing number of states and cities that have adopted significant minimum wage increases in recent years, thanks to the 'Fight for \$15 and a union' movement led by Black workers and workers of color.

- Since the Fight for \$15 was launched by striking fast-food workers in 2012,⁹ **states representing approximately 40% of the U.S. workforce**—California, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Virginia, and the District of Columbia—**have approved raising their minimum wages to \$15 an hour.**¹⁰
- Additional states—including Washington, Oregon, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Vermont, Missouri, Michigan, and Maine—have approved **minimum wages ranging from \$12 to \$14.75 an hour.**¹¹

Not just on the coasts, but all across the country, workers need at least \$15 an hour *today*.

- **Today, in all areas across the United States, a single adult without children needs at least \$31,200—what a full-time worker making \$15 an hour earns annually—to achieve a modest but adequate standard of living.**¹² By 2025, workers in these areas and those with children will need even more, according to projections based on the Economic Policy Institute's [Family Budget Calculator](#).¹³
- **For example, in rural Missouri, a single adult without children will need \$39,800 (more than \$19 per hour for a full-time worker) by 2025** to cover typical rent, food, transportation, and other basic living costs.
- **In larger metro areas of the South and Southwest—where the majority of the Southern population live—a single adult without children will also need more than \$15 an hour by 2025** to get by: \$20.03 in Fort Worth, \$21.12 in Phoenix, and \$20.95 in Miami.
- **In more expensive regions of the country, a single adult without children will need far more than \$15 an hour by 2025** to cover the basics: \$28.70 in New York City, \$24.06 in Los Angeles, and \$23.94 in Washington, D.C.

Workers in many essential and front-line jobs struggle to get by on less than \$15 an hour today and would benefit from a \$15 minimum wage.

- **Essential and front-line workers make up a majority of those who would benefit from a \$15 minimum wage.**¹⁴ The median pay is well under \$15 an hour for many essential and front-line jobs; examples include **substitute teachers** (\$13.84), **nursing assistants** (\$14.26), and **home health aides** (\$12.15).¹⁵
- **More than one-third (35%) of those working in residential or nursing care facilities would see their pay increase**, in addition to home health aides and other health care support workers.
- One in three retail-sector workers (36%) would get a raise, including **42% of workers in grocery stores.**
- **More than four in 10 (43% of) janitors, housekeepers, and other cleaning workers would benefit.**

- **Nearly two-thirds (64%) of servers, cooks, and other food preparation workers** would see their earnings rise by \$5,800 on a year-round basis.
- **Ten million workers in health care, education, construction, and manufacturing would see a raise**—representing nearly one-third (31%) of the workers who would see a raise.

Growing numbers of business owners and organizations have backed a \$15 minimum wage.

- In states that have already approved \$15 minimum wages, **business organizations representing thousands of small businesses have endorsed a \$15 minimum wage.**
- Business groups that have endorsed a \$15 minimum wage include Business for a Fair Minimum Wage,¹⁶ the American Sustainable Business Council,¹⁷ the Patriotic Millionaires,¹⁸ the Greater New York Chamber of Commerce,¹⁹ the Long Island African American Chamber of Commerce,²⁰ and others.
- **Growing numbers of employers have responded to pressure from workers and raised their starting pay scales to \$15 or higher.** These include retail giants Amazon,²¹ Whole Foods²² (owned by Amazon), Target,²³ Walmart,²⁴ Wayfair,²⁵ Costco,²⁶ Hobby Lobby,²⁷ and Best Buy;²⁸ employers in the food service and producing industries, such as Chobani,²⁹ Starbucks,³⁰ Sanderson Farms (Mississippi),³¹ and the Atlanta, Georgia locations of Lidl grocery stores;³² health care employers including Michigan’s Henry Ford Health System³³ and Trinity Health System,³⁴ Ohio’s Akron Children’s Hospital³⁵ and Cincinnati Children’s Hospital,³⁶ Iowa’s Mercy Medical Center and MercyCare Community Physicians,³⁷ Missouri’s North Kansas City Hospital and Meritas Health,³⁸ and Maryland’s LifeBridge Health;³⁹ insurers and banks such as Amalgamated Bank,⁴⁰ Allstate,⁴¹ Wells Fargo,⁴² and Franklin Savings Bank in New Hampshire⁴³; and tech and communications leaders such as Facebook⁴⁴ and Charter Communications.⁴⁵

Our economy can more than afford a \$15 minimum wage.

- Workers earning the current federal minimum wage **are paid less per hour in real dollars than their counterparts were paid 50 years ago.**⁴⁶
- Businesses can afford to pay the most underpaid worker in the U.S. today substantially more than what her counterpart was paid half a century ago.⁴⁷
- The economy has grown dramatically over the past 50 years, and workers are producing more from each hour of work, with **productivity nearly doubling since the late 1960s.** If the minimum wage had been raised at the same pace as productivity growth since the late 1960s, **it would be over \$20 an hour today.**⁴⁸

Research confirms what workers know: Raising wages benefits us all.

- High-quality academic scholarship confirms that modest **increases in the minimum wage have not led to detectable job losses.**⁴⁹
- After the federal minimum wage was raised to its highest historical peak in 1968, wages grew and racial earnings gaps closed without constricting employment opportunities for underpaid workers overall.⁵⁰

- Comprehensive research on 138 state-level minimum wage increases shows that all underpaid workers benefit from minimum wage increases, not just teenagers or restaurant workers.⁵¹
- Multiple studies conclude that total annual incomes of families at the bottom of the income distribution rise significantly after a minimum wage increase.⁵² Workers in low-wage jobs and their families benefit the most from these income increases, reducing poverty and income inequality.
- By providing families with higher incomes, **minimum wage increases have improved infant health and also reduced child abuse and teenage pregnancy.**⁵³

An immediate increase in the minimum wage is necessary for the health of our economy.

- **Raising the minimum wage now will tilt the playing field back toward workers who have dangerous jobs and little bargaining power during the pandemic.**⁵⁴
- Providing underpaid workers with more money will directly counter the consumer demand shortfall during this recession.⁵⁵
- Even the Congressional Budget Office's 2019 study of the impact of raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 by 2025 clearly showed that the policy would raise incomes of underpaid workers overall and significantly reduce the number of families in poverty.⁵⁶

Low wages threaten the economic security of workers and their families, who then turn to social benefits programs to make ends meet.

- In states without laws to raise the minimum wage to \$15, nearly half (47%, or 10.5 million) of families of workers who would benefit from the Act rely on public supports programs in part because they do not earn enough at work.⁵⁷
- These workers and their families account for nearly one-third of total enrollment in one or more public supports programs.⁵⁸
- In states without a \$15 minimum wage law, public supports programs for underpaid workers and their families make up **42% of total spending** on Medicaid and CHIP (the Children's Health Insurance Program), cash assistance (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or TANF), food stamps (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP), and the earned income tax credit (EITC), and **cost federal and state taxpayers more than \$107 billion a year.**⁵⁹

Notes and Sources

This fact sheet is an update of *Why America Needs a \$15 Minimum Wage*, published by EPI and the National Employment Law Project, February 2019.

Unless otherwise indicated, the figures presented in this fact sheet come from a forthcoming EPI analysis of the 2021 Raise the Wage Act.

Endnotes

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