Some states, and perhaps soon the federal government, are considering increasing the minimum wage. President Joe Biden voiced his support for raising the federal minimum wage to $15 per hour while on the campaign trail, and also included it in his recent economic stimulus package. A ballot initiative in Florida to raise the statewide minimum by 2026 passed in November 2020. While discussions around raising the minimum wage typically center on the economic benefits and potential labor force impacts that would affect low-wage workers, there are also population health benefits to consider. These range from better physical and mental health outcomes to indirect influences on individual behaviors that affect health—but the existing research is limited at best. However, what we do know suggests that raising the minimum wage may not be uniformly helpful. Should policy makers pursue raising the minimum wage, it will be key to do so in a way that does not exacerbate long-standing inequities in both income and health.

Effects of a $15 Minimum Wage

The federal minimum wage has held steady at $7.25 since 2009, although 29 states have set a higher rate. Many states that have not are in the southern United States, where the highest proportion of minimum-wage workers is found. These are also the states that report some of the worst health outcomes, including high rates of obesity and low birth weights. Some of the strongest existing research on health outcomes associated with wage increases hint at what could happen if the federal minimum wage were increased to $15 per hour. Researchers have observed associations between increased wages and decreases in both suicide mortality and hypertension, better birth outcomes, and lower rates of sexually transmitted infections among women. Some research suggests that wage increases can improve health by influencing the individual behaviors that affect health, such as increased fruit and vegetable consumption, or even better mental health as a result of increased leisure time or job satisfaction.

The Minimum Wage and Existing Disparities

As state and federal policies regarding minimum wages have been enacted over the years, researchers have been able to observe associations with health outcomes, but the reported outcomes vary widely, as do the methods used and populations studied. This makes it difficult to fully understand exactly how an increase in the federal minimum wage would affect different subpopulations, and it would be unwise to assume that all populations will experience the effects the same way.

Despite the weaknesses of the evidence base, a broad look at the impact of increasing the minimum wage on health suggests that it can positively improve health outcomes for the entire population—but not without trade-offs. Depending on the state, increasing incomes could make people ineligible for public benefits assistance, including Medicaid, and ultimately harm instead of improve health. Some of the same research that suggests increased wages are associated with overall increases in fruit and vegetable consumption in the entire population shows that this does not hold true for all subpopulations, specifically Black men.
A recurring argument against raising the minimum wage is that it could decrease work hours or increase unemployment among low-skilled workers. It is also important to understand who these individuals are. Black and Hispanic men are particularly at risk of this type of job loss because they are disproportionately represented in low-pay occupations, such as construction, landscaping, or agricultural work.

**Enhancing Public Health, Improving Health Equity**

Significant race-based and gender-based wealth disparities are prevalent in the United States, and raising the minimum wage could make a small contribution in reducing or widening them. The potential for health benefits further enhances the value of a minimum wage increase. In assessing the social value of minimum wage increases, all potential benefits to health and well-being should be considered.

But so too should the potential harms. To strengthen our understanding of the connection, future research should focus on how minimum wage increases would particularly affect the health of marginalized and underrepresented populations. If research indicates that certain subpopulations might be more at risk of economic displacement and thus poorer health outcomes, there is a public health imperative to find other avenues of assistance that are not only helpful but also culturally appropriate.

It is natural for policy makers to consider raising the minimum wage, especially when more individuals are struggling to make ends meet, a situation the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic has only exacerbated. More and more US residents report delayed care due to cost or having to choose between paying bills or buying food for their families. However, to use economic policy to improve lives, we need better and more nuanced data. Researchers have the opportunity to fill a gap in the literature, asking specifically: who will benefit from a wage increase, and who will be harmed? What strategies exist that can be used to protect workers who may be harmed?

In turn, policy makers need to support such evaluation and heed its findings to craft inclusive policies that do not inadvertently exacerbate racial and economic inequity. Members of racial and ethnic minority groups have significantly different experiences simply existing in this country, ranging from discriminatory hiring practices to White-centered medical care, and the assumption that a blanket policy will have universal impacts is not substantiated by evidence. While a federal minimum wage increase is overdue, to maximize benefits and minimize harms, it has to be done with a degree of sensitivity to disparate impacts across subpopulations not often present in broad legislative agendas. Alongside considering increasing the minimum wage, policy makers should consider alternative policies to advance protections for frequently marginalized populations. This could include supporting job training for displaced workers, increasing earned income tax credits, or establishing a universal basic income.

Our experience with the minimum wage reveals general truisms often overlooked—economic policy is also health policy. Furthermore, the benefits of economic policies often do not accrue to those most in need.

**ARTICLE INFORMATION**

**Correction:** This article was corrected on January 28, 2021, to fix an error in the first paragraph.

**Open Access:** This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [CC-BY License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). © 2021 Avila CJ et al. *JAMA Health Forum.*

**Corresponding Author:** Cecille Joan Avila, MPH, School of Public Health, Boston University, 715 Albany St, Boston, MA 02118 (cecille@bu.edu).

**Author Affiliations:** School of Public Health, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts (Avila, Frakt); Partnered Evidence-Based Policy Resource Center, Veterans Health Administration, Boston, Massachusetts (Frakt).
Conflict of Interest Disclosures: None reported.

REFERENCES