Job Loss in a Booming Economy 2nd Edition

The Employment Policies Institute
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A Note about "Job Loss in a Booming Economy 2nd Edition"

The first edition of "Job Loss in a Booming Economy" (January 1998) compares average employment during the 11 months that the $4.75 federal minimum wage was in effect (Oct. 1996 - Aug. 1997) with average employment during the same 11 months one year earlier (Oct. 1995 - Aug. 1996), when a $4.25 minimum wage was in effect. It is important to compare the same specific months because of seasonal fluctuations in the teen employment data. (September, the omitted month, is especially volatile because teens with summer jobs leave work and return to school.)

One inherent problem with this comparison is that employers probably made some adjustments for the new mandate before its Oct. 1, 1996, effective date. This would bias against finding job loss associated with the wage hike mandate. To account for this possibility, EPI has updated the original January 1998 study. This update compares average employment during the 11 months that the $4.75 federal minimum wage was in effect with average employment during the same 11 months one and two years earlier (Oct. 1994 - Aug. 1995 and Oct. 1995 - Aug. 1996). Using employment data for 22 rather than 11 months to construct the comparison period reduces the unknown impact of any employer adjustments shortly before the Oct. 1, 1996, effective date. Doubling the comparison period also increases the precision of our estimates.[*]

This second edition of "Job Loss in a Booming Economy" does, indeed, indicate that employer adjustments biased our original job-loss estimates downward. Whereas the earlier version of this study indicated that 128,000 teen job opportunities were destroyed by the 1996 wage hike, our updated analysis indicates that approximately 215,000 teen job opportunities were destroyed.

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[*]*The estimates upon which our job loss figures are based are statistically significant at better than the 1 percent level.*

The Minimum Wage, Welfare Reform and Jobs for Low-skilled Workers

During the fourth week of August 1996, President Clinton signed into law two bills with serious implications for the ability of low-skilled workers to find jobs. On the 20th, he signed a bill that would increase the federal minimum wage from $4.25 to $4.75 effective October 1, 1996, and from $4.75 to $5.15 on September 1, 1997. On the 22nd, he signed a bill that would "end welfare as we know it," in part by requiring adult welfare recipients to find work within two years or lose their benefits. Lost in the fanfare over the signing of these two bills were the pernicious interactions that the new laws would have in the entry-level job market. Just as the welfare reform bill would be forcing hundreds of thousands of low-skilled adults into the job market, the higher minimum wage would be destroying the very jobs that could have offered these welfare recipients a first step on the ladder of economic success. Now, just as the clock is running out on those welfare recipients, organized labor and its supporters are pushing for yet another round of increases in the minimum wage.

The effect of such increases can only serve to further undermine the potential for welfare reform to succeed. Even in a booming economy, one key fact about welfare recipients cannot be ignored: most of them simply do not possess the skills needed to fill existing job vacancies. The classified ads are thick with job listings each week, but many welfare recipients lack the education and work skills required by employers. For example, two-thirds of welfare recipients scored in the bottom quartile of the Armed Forces Qualifying Test, with one-third in the bottom *decile*.[1] They might qualify for entry-level jobs if the wage rates reflected the skill levels of these applicants. Sadly, with each upward increment in the minimum wage, hundreds of thousands of entry-level job opportunities are destroyed.

Recently, in championing further increases in the minimum wage, Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) relied upon two erroneous claims: (1) "employment does not go down because the minimum wage goes up";[2] and (2) benefits from minimum wage increases go primarily to low-income families. In this article we outline the solid economic analysis that refutes these two claims. First, we calculate from official government employment data that the October 1, 1996, 50-cent minimum wage increase destroyed approximately 215,000 teen jobs, affecting about 3.5 percent of the 6.2 million teens that were working before the increase. In other words, employment *does* go down when the minimum wage goes up, and it went down after the 1996 increase despite strong performance in the economy as a whole.[3] The more recent September 1, 1997, minimum wage increase has undoubtedly destroyed even more jobs, but it is still too early to accurately measure these additional losses. Second, we calculate from the same data that the average family income for minimum wage workers is more than $35,000, hardly what most Americans would classify as "low-income." Thus, the minimum wage increase does not target low-income families.

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Did the 1996 Increase in the Minimum Wage Destroy Jobs?

Supporters of the minimum wage legislation claimed that it would benefit millions of low-wage workers without causing significant job loss. Opponents challenged this free-lunch notion, citing overwhelming evidence to the contrary from academic studies that examined the employment effects of previous increases in the federal minimum wage (see Deere, Murphy and Welch, *American Economic Review* 85:2, 1995, pp. 232-237). We add to this existing body of evidence by providing the first comprehensive study of the employment effects associated with the October 1, 1996, minimum wage increase.

Both supporters and critics of the minimum wage agree that any negative employment effects associated with minimum wage increases are most easily detected by observing data on teenaged workers, who account for approximately one-third of all minimum wage workers. Based upon an analysis of changes in teen employment following the 1996 increase in the federal minimum wage, we estimate that 215,000 teen jobs were destroyed by that increase. These lost jobs represent about 3.5 percent of the 6.2 million teens that were working prior to the increase. To the extent that teenaged workers are representative of all minimum wage workers, these findings imply that approximately 645,000 entry-level jobs were destroyed by the 1996 minimum wage increase.

Change in Employment-to-Population Ratios Following the 1996 Minimum Wage Increase

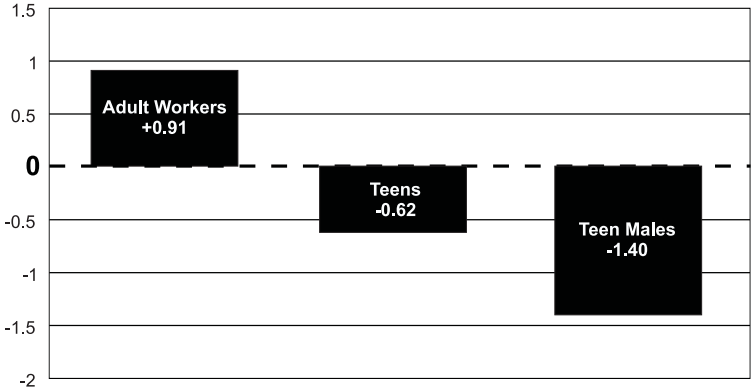

Figure 1

We used employment data from the U.S. Department of Labor in a straightforward test of whether or not the 1996 increase in the federal minimum wage reduced employment from what it would have been in the absence of the increase.[4] As shown in Panel A of Table 1, we found that the employment rate for prime-aged workers age 25-64 increased by 0.91 percentage points, from 76.05 percent to 76.96 percent. For teen workers age 16-19, however, the employment rate *declined* by 0.62 percentage points, from 43.75 percent to 43.13 percent.[5] For teen males, the decline was especially severe, falling 1.40 percentage points from 44.14 percent to 42.74 percent.[6]

To put these teen employment changes into perspective, it is useful to translate them into job losses. In order to do this, however, we need a benchmark to control for the effect on employment of changes in economic conditions across the two measurement periods. From October 1995 through August 1997, strong economic growth led to the creation of more than 4.5 million jobs. The most logical benchmark for measuring changes in teen employment is the change in the employment rate for prime-aged workers, i.e., the change in employment that would have occurred if the teen employment rate had increased by 0.91—the average employment-rate change for prime-aged workers from the period before to the period after the 1996 minimum wage increase. Previous research has shown that teen employment closely tracks aggregate employment

(again, see Deere, Murphy and Welch, 1995). Therefore, we calculate employment changes due to the minimum wage increase as the actual change in employment relative to the change in employment projected using this benchmark.

As shown in Panel B of Table 1, we calculate that teen employment would have increased by 128,073 jobs had the teen employment rate increased by 0.91 percentage points—the employment-rate change for all workers and the expected employment change for teens had there not been an increase in the minimum wage. Actual teen employment, however, declined by 87,258 jobs. Hence, for all teens, the number of lost jobs due to the minimum wage increase is the combined projected (unrealized) increase and actual decrease, or 215,331 (128,073 and 87,258). Because teen workers account for only one in three minimum wage workers, this analysis suggests that approximately 645,000 job opportunities were destroyed by the 1996 minimum wage increase from $4.25 to $4.75. Moreover, there are at least twice as many workers who were affected by the yet-unexamined September 1, 1997, minimum wage increase from $4.75 to $5.15. The number of jobs destroyed by that increase is likely to be large, especially coming so soon (11 months) after the prior increase.

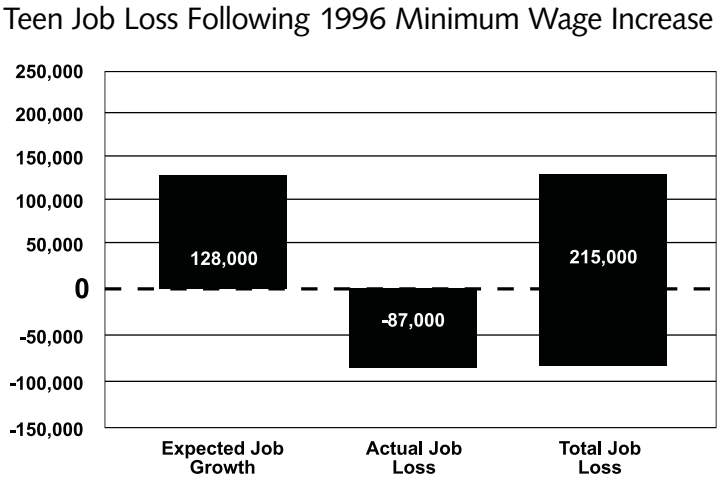

Figure 2

The 1996 wage hike (50 cents) was the first mandated increase to follow several years of strong economic growth. (Prior to 1996, the minimum wage last increased in 1991.) Thus, the effects of the 1996 wage hike were, to some extent, muted by the fact that market wages had risen with the strong economy, making the initial 50-cent increase less "binding" in the work force. The second wage hike (40 cents, in 1997) may have had a larger impact because the new mandated pay floor was much closer to — if not above — the market rate of pay for entry-level employees nationwide. However, we won't be able to accurately measure that number until the increase has been in effect long enough to trigger all adjustments. Empirical research suggests about one year of data are needed to accurately measure such employment effects (see Deere, Murphy and Welch, 1995).

Table 1 also breaks out by gender teen job losses due to the minimum wage increase. This breakout reveals that the pain of the minimum wage increase was borne disproportionately by teen male workers. Of the 215,331 teen jobs that were lost, teen males lost 164,934, accounting for three-fourths of the total teen job loss. This asymmetry of job loss shows how important it is to consider the effects of minimum wage legislation on demographic subgroups as well as the aggregate effects.

Table 2 breaks out teen job losses due to the minimum wage increase by race and ethnicity as well as gender.[7] Because of the small sample sizes in the Bureau of Labor Statistics survey database, the results for Black and Hispanic teens are less reliable (statistically) than the overall teen numbers or the results for White teens. Nonetheless, the change in employ-

ment for Black and Hispanic teens is instructive. The figures in Panel A of Table 2 reveal that teen Black, non-Hispanic males suffered the most from the minimum wage increase. For this demographic group, the employment rate declined by 1.33 percentage points, from 25.54 percent to 24.21 percent at the same time the overall employment rate was increasing by 0.91 percentage points. As shown in Panel B of Table 2, this suggests that job losses among teen Black, non-Hispanic males total to 24,204, or almost 9 percent of the 275,965 workers in this demographic group. Yet these are the types of workers minimum wage advocates would have us believe are the beneficiaries of the minimum wage increases. The data in Table 2 also suggest that teen Hispanic males suffered as a result of the 1996 minimum wage increase, with job losses at 12,459 or almost 4 percent of the 328,826 workers in this demographic group.

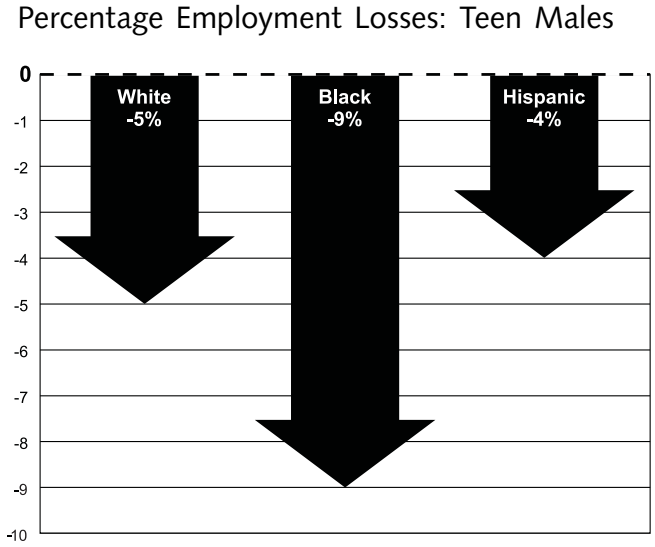

Figure 3

In summary, the data are now in and the evidence is clear. The October 1996 increase in the minimum wage from $4.25 per hour to $4.75 per hour was not so painless as its proponents would profess, despite a strong job market. A straightforward review of government employment data demonstrates that this increase hit minimum wage workers with job losses, and hit them hard. The analysis here suggests that as many as 645,000 jobs were lost, with one-third of these losses concentrated among teenagers aged 16-19. Especially vulnerable were Black males aged 16-19, as well as teen males in general. These are the faces of the "losers" from the 1996 minimum wage increase. And the pain does not stop here. During 1998, as the full effects of the second step increase in the minimum wage from $4.75 to $5.15 come into play, hundreds of thousands of additional entry-level jobs will be at risk.

Did the Minimum Wage Increase Go to Low-Income Families?

The most often cited justification for raising the minimum wage is that such increases benefit low-income families. To quote Sen. Kennedy, "No one who works for a living should have to live in poverty."[8] However, this raises a fundamental question: Do increases in the minimum wage primarily benefit low-income families? If the answer is no, then policymakers should pursue proven, effective anti-poverty tools such as the earned income tax credit, and abandon efforts to increase the minimum wage.

We used official government data from the U.S. Department of Labor to calculate who benefited from the 1996 minimum wage increase.[9] As shown in Table 3 (and Figure 4), more than 70 percent of the minimum wage gains went to families and individuals in the upper four income quintiles (those earning more than $15,777 per year), and *more than half* of the minimum wage gains went to those in the upper three income quintiles (earning more than $29,424 per year). We find that less than 18 percent of the minimum wage gains went to families and individuals living below the federally defined level

of poverty, which in 1996 was $12,516 for a family of three.

We are not the first to show that the benefits of minimum wage increases go in large part to upper income families. In an analysis of the 1989 law that raised the minimum wage from $3.35 to $4.25, researchers found that the increases "yielded more income for low-wage workers living in upper income households than it did for low-wage workers who lived in poor households."[10]

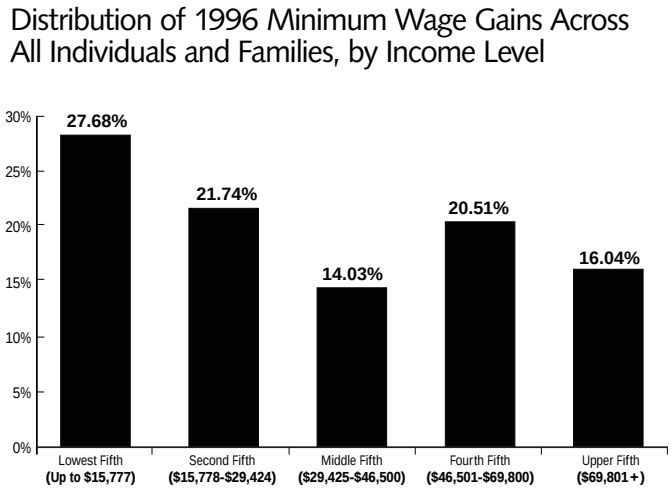

Figure 4

When we restrict the analysis to traditional families (i.e, exclude single persons living alone), the trend is even more instructive. Almost 80% of the gains went to families in the upper four income quintiles, and *every family* in those quintiles has an income that far exceeds the poverty level for a family of four. From these numbers, it is clear that increases in the minimum wage *do not* go predominantly to low-income families, despite the rhetoric to the contrary. Even former Labor Secretary Robert Reich, a strong and vocal advocate for a higher minimum wage, has conceded that "most minimum wage workers are not poor."[11]

Conclusion

In this article, we answer the two most important questions that should be asked about increases in the minimum wage. Do increases cause job loss? Yes, and those losses traditionally have fallen most heavily on male Black teens. Do most of the gains from increases go to low-income families? No. Less than one dollar in five goes to low-income families living in poverty, while more than half of the gains go to families and individuals with annual incomes greater than $29,000. Taken together, these answers imply that the minimum wage does nothing to combat poverty. Other researchers have come to a similar conclusion. For example, Neumark and Wascher ("Do Minimum Wages Fight Poverty?" NBER Working Paper No. 6127, August 1996) conclude, "On average, minimum wages appear to slightly increase the proportion of families that are poor." In other words, the number of families that fall into poverty because of job loss is greater than the number of families that rise out of poverty because of the higher minimum wage.

When 1998 draws to a close, the hundreds of thousands of low-skilled adult welfare recipients forced to seek work by the "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996" will face even fewer opportunities for work than they could have imagined. Do we really want to exacerbate this already bleak situation by increasing the minimum wage yet again, and destroying even more jobs? Or should we be looking for alternative policy prescriptions to help the working poor, such as exempting them from payroll taxes, or expanding the earned income tax credit? These are the questions we should be asking legislators as they face these important policy decisions.

Table 1: Employment Effects of the October 1, 1996, Increase in the Federal Minimum Wage from $4.25 to $4.75: Grouped by Age
(standard errors in parentheses)

Panel A: Average Monthly Populations and Employment-to-Population Ratios: Workers Age 16 to 64

	Average Monthly Population (in thousands)		Average Monthly Employment-to-Population Ratio		
	Oct. 1994–Aug. 1996[a]	Oct. 1996–Aug. 1997	Oct. 1994–Aug. 1996[a]	Oct. 1996–Aug. 1997	Change in Employment Rate
All	199,021	202,417	62.88	63.59	0.71
			(0.07)	(0.10)	(0.12)
Age 25-64	135,178	137,840	76.05	76.96	0.91
			(0.07)	(0.10)	(0.12)
Age 16-19	14,074	15,285	43.75	43.13	-0.62
			(0.25)	(0.36)	(0.44)
Male 16-19	7,140	7,786	44.14	42.74	-1.40
			(0.36)	(0.51)	(0.62)
Female 16-19	6,934	7,499	43.35	43.54	0.19
			(0.36)	(0.51)	(0.62)

[a] To avoid introduction of bias due to seasonal employment fluctuations, data from September 1995 is excluded.

Panel B: Employment Changes due to the 1996 Increase in the Federal Minimum Wage: Workers Age 16 to 19

	Projected Employment Change[a]	Actual Employment Change[b]	Employment Change Due to Minimum Wage Increase[c]	Difference Relative to Workers Age 25-64[d]
All 16-19	128,073	-87,258	-215,331	-1.53[e]
				(0.46)
Male 16-19	64,974	-99,960	-164,934	-2.31[e]
				(0.63)
Female 16-19	63,099	13,174	-49,924	-0.72
				(0.64)

[a] Projected Employment Change is calculated as the 0.91 percentage-point change in the employment-to-population ratio for workers age 25-64 multiplied by the Oct. 94-Aug. 96 average monthly population of teen workers age 16-19.

[b] Actual Employment Change is calculated as the percentage point change in the employment to population ratio for workers age 16-19 multiplied by the Oct. 94-Aug. 96 average monthly population of teen workers age 16-19.

[c] Employment Change due to Minimum Wage Increase is the difference relative to workers age 25-64 multiplied by the Oct. 94-Aug. 96 average monthly population of teen workers age 16-19.

[d] Difference Relative to Workers Age 25-64 is calculated as the change in the teen employment-to-population ratio less the change in the adult employment-to-population ratio.

[e] Indicates that the difference is statistically significant at least at the 1% level.

Table 2: Employment Effects of the October 1, 1996, Increase in the Federal Minimum Wage from $4.25 to $4.75: Workers Age 16-19 by Race, Ethnicity and Gender
(standard errors in parentheses)

Panel A: Average Monthly Populations and Employment-to-Population Ratios: Workers Age 16 to 19

	Average Monthly Population (in thousands)		Average Monthly Employment-to-Population Ratio		
	Oct. 1994–Aug. 1996[a]	Oct. 1996–Aug. 1997	Oct. 1994–Aug. 1996[a]	Oct. 1996–Aug. 1997	Change in Employment Rate
White, Non-Hispanic	9,596	10,136	50.72 (0.30)	49.95 (0.44)	-0.77 (0.53)
White, Non-Hispanic Male	4,893	5,176	50.66 (0.43)	49.25 (0.61)	-1.41 (0.75)
White, Non-Hispanic Female	4,703	4,961	50.78 (0.43)	50.68 (0.62)	-0.10 (0.75)
Black, Non-Hispanic	2,184	2,349	25.93 (0.62)	26.64 (0.89)	0.71 (1.08)
Black, Non-Hispanic Male	1,081	1,157	25.54 (0.89)	24.21 (1.23)	-1.33 (1.52)
Black, Non-Hispanic Female	1,103	1,192	26.30 (0.85)	29.00 (1.27)	2.70 (1.53)
Hispanic	1,754	2,074	33.34 (0.73)	32.98 (1.03)	-0.36 (1.26)
Hispanic Male	890	1,084	36.95 (1.06)	36.46 (1.49)	-0.49 (1.83)
Hispanic Female	864	990	29.59 (1.00)	29.18 (1.40)	-0.41 (1.72)

[a] To avoid introduction of bias due to seasonal employment fluctuations, data from September 1995 is excluded.

Panel B: Employment Changes due to the 1996 Increase in the Federal Minimum Wage: Workers Age 16 to 19

	Projected Employment Change[a]	Actual Employment Change[b]	Employment Change Due to Minimum Wage Increase[c]	Difference Relative to Workers Age 25-64[d]
White, Non-Hispanic	87,321	-73,887	-161,208	-1.68[e] (0.54)
White, Non-Hispanic Male	44,526	-68,991	-113,517	-2.32[e] (0.76)
White, Non-Hispanic Female	42,795	-4,703	-47,498	-1.01 (0.76)
Black, Non-Hispanic	19,872	15,505	-4,368	-0.20 (1.09)
Black, Non-Hispanic Male	9,833	-14,371	-24,204	-2.24 (1.52)
Black, Non-Hispanic Female	10,040	29,788	19,748	1.79 (1.53)
Hispanic	15,957	-6,313	-22,270	-1.27 (1.27)
Hispanic Male	8,098	-4,361	-12,459	-1.40 (1.83)
Hispanic Female	7,859	-3,541	-11,400	-1.32 (1.73)

[a] Projected Employment Change is calculated as the 0.91 percentage-point change in the employment-to-population ratio for workers age 25-64 multiplied by the Oct. 94-Aug. 96 average monthly population of teen workers age 16-19.

[b] Actual Employment Change is calculated as the percentage point change in the employment to population ratio for workers age 16-19 multiplied by the Oct. 94-Aug. 96 average monthly population of teen workers age 16-19.

[c] Employment Change due to Minimum Wage Increase is the difference relative to workers age 25-64 multiplied by the Oct. 94- Aug. 96 average monthly population of teen workers age 16-19.

[d] Difference Relative to Workers Age 25-64 is calculated as the change in the teen employment-to-population ratio less the change in the adult employment-to-population ratio.

[e] Indicates that the difference is statistically significant at least at the 1% level.

Table 3: 1996 Minimum Wage Gains Across All Individuals and Families, by Income Level

	Individuals and Families			Families		
	Minimum Wage Share	Average Family Size	Upper Income Limit of Quintile	Minimum Wage Share	Average Family Size	Upper Income Limit of Quintile
Lowest Fifth	27.68%	2.56	$15,777	21.63%	3.51	$19,200
Second Fifth	21.74%	2.93	$29,424	21.37%	3.43	$33,815
Middle Fifth	14.03%	3.24	$46,500	17.79%	3.58	$50,000
Fourth Fifth	20.51%	3.62	$69,800	22.46%	3.80	$73,139
Upper Fifth	16.04%	3.84	*	16.76%	3.91	*

*This quintile includes the richest American families and has no upper income limit.

Data Source: Monthly Statistics from the Bureau of Labor Statistics *Current Population Survey*.

Endnotes

[1] See Krista Olson and LaDonna Pavetti, *Personal and Family Challenges to the Successful Transition from Welfare to Work*, The Urban Institute, 1996.

[2] Statement of Senator Edward M. Kennedy, *U.S. Congressional Record*, July 11, 1997, Vol. 143, No. 98 p. S7303.

[3] This is generally accepted by economists. A recent survey of labor economists co-authored by Alan Krueger (who has written that higher minimum wages may *increase* employment) states that "the median labor economist reported that a 10 percent increase in the minimum wage would be associated with a 1 percent decrease in teenage employment." See p. 6 of Victor Fuchs, Alan Krueger and James Poterba, "Why do Economists Disagree about Policy," NBER Working Paper, August 1997.

[4] Specifically, we used data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics *Current Population Survey* to compare the average monthly employment-to-population ratio ("employment rate") during the full 11 months for which the $4.75-per-hour minimum wage was in effect (October 1, 1996-August 31, 1997) with the average monthly employment rate during the same 11 months one and two years earlier (October 1, 1994-August 31, 1996 excluding September 1995). This type of comparison avoids problems of seasonality that arise when comparing different time periods within the calendar year. As we are looking at 11-month and 22-month averages, this approach also minimizes the effects of monthly fluctuations in the data. We look at 11 months of data because the minimum wage increased from $4.75 to $5.15 on September 1, 1997, so that the $4.75 minimum wage was in effect for only 11 months.

[5] The -0.62 decline in teen employment is statistically different from the +0.91 increase in adult employment at the 1% level.

[6] The -1.40 decline in teen male employment is statistically different from the +0.91 increase in adult employment at the 1% level.

[7] Because of the small sample sizes for Black and Hispanic teens in the available data, the measured changes in their employment-to-population ratios cannot be reliably distinguished from the employment ratio change for all workers, using standard statistical techniques.

[8] Senator Edward M. Kennedy, speech to the National Press Club luncheon, Washington, D.C., December 12, 1997.

[9] Specifically, we used data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics March 1996 *Current Population Survey* to examine how the income gains from the minimum wage are distributed across income quintiles. We looked at workers whose hourly wages were in the range that would be affected ($4.25-$4.74) by the 1996 increase and then calculated their hourly increase based on the new minimum of $4.75. This value was multiplied by their annual hours worked in 1995 to arrive at the annual gains from the minimum wage hike. Within each quintile we maintained equal numbers of persons rather than equal numbers of families to avoid the equal families-unequal persons (and hence earners) problem. The minimum wage gain shares were then easily calculated by quintile.

[10] See p. 91 of Richard Burkhauser, Kenneth Couch and Andrew Glenn, 1996, "Public Policies for the Working Poor: The Earned Income Tax Credit versus Minimum Wage Legislation," *Research in Labor Economics* 15, 65-10.

[11] Robert B. Reich, Memorandum to the President of the United States, July 20, 1993.

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