

## Audio Report Transcript

Headline: Can Raising the State's Minimum Wage Improve Public Health?

Report/Produced by: Rachel Dornhelm  
Publication: *California Healthline*  
Date Posted: July 9, 2014

### Text:

California health officials now have joined economists to weigh in on the effects of a higher minimum wage. This month, the state's minimum wage jumped to \$9 an hour -- the first increase in six years. As policy makers throughout the state debate additional increases, some health professionals are pointing to studies that show wage hikes lead to overall gains in health. This is a report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Rachel Dornhelm.

***(Bhatia): "Which ones do you think are the most sort of salient and powerful to share in our infographic?"***  
***(Selitsky): "Cancer..."***

Lea Selitsky is a medical student at Wayne State University. She is spending the summer working on a project with UC-Berkeley School of Public Health visiting scholar Rajiv Bhatia. Bhatia is looking over her shoulder at a computer screen. Selitsky points to a graphic of U.S. states.

***(Selitsky): "All the ones that are blacked, are, that's the federal, those are the states that have the federal minimum wage in effect..."***

It seems an odd topic. If they work in health care research, then why are they talking about the minimum wage?

Bhatia is the author of a new study that found raising the state's minimum wage to \$13 an hour would not only raise the income of 7.5 million lower income Californians -- but in the process it would improve that population's health, would prevent hundreds of premature deaths in California each year and save millions in health costs.

***(Bhatia): "Money is kind of at the root of a lot of the stressors that we have. Having enough, or the right kind of food, the right kind of housing, being able to pay for child care."***

Poor food and poor housing can lead to worse health, Bhatia said. And then being sick amplifies the effect further, because it can lead to even lower income. A high number of life stressors, he said, means they don't live as well or as long.

***(Bhatia): "It affects our health because it gets under the skin. When we're stressed our hormones change, our blood pressure rises, that's a stress on the body, on the organ systems."***

Health economists studying state minimum wage increases found they were tied to decreased hypertension in populations and lower obesity rates. Bhatia says there are many pathways at work here. With increases in wages, studies show smoking rates fall. People can afford to live in better conditions, without mold, with proper heating, and better access to exercise. Intervening and improving conditions sooner means more lasting impacts because the negative health affects accumulate.

***(Bhatia): "Basically giving people the tools and ability to take care of themselves, to meet their needs is going to, in the long term, prevent a lot of health conditions."***

Bhatia points to a study out of UCSF that households without the income to meet their food needs had a harder time following dietary recommendations and that led to erratic blood sugar levels.

State Senator Mark Leno proposed the \$13 an hour minimum wage that Bhatia's study considered. The bill didn't pass an Assembly committee, but Leno says the health analysis helped him communicate to policy makers that the lower people's wages the less likely their access to supermarkets with fresh food, for instance, or to nearby parks for exercise.

***(Leno): "And so for people who are living below the federal poverty line, earning poverty wages, those things are not a part of their lives. And there is a cumulative effect and I think we're only now beginning to learn in greater detail what that cumulative effect is, not only on one's physical health, but also on one's emotional health and mental health."***

This is not the first time a public health study has been used to support a wage increase. In Minnesota earlier this year, the state's public health commissioner advocated for a raise in the minimum wage with a white paper about potential positive health effects of a raise, before legislators there voted to increase the wage.

Mike Schommer is communications director for the Minnesota Department of Health.

***(Schommer): "Having the white paper out there was a good reference for those who are up doing the work of having those conversations with legislators, with officials. I think really it is helpful to have that touchstone because then you have the***

***opportunity to not only cite the evidence but also leave something behind."***

The policy brief included details like Minnesotans with low incomes are more likely to have an infant die in first year of life. It also detailed how very low-income Minnesotans have higher rates of diabetes.

The Affordable Care Act is designed to extend medical care to more people, and that could have an effect on some socioeconomic health disparities. But Gerald Kominski, director of the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, says important work has shown that even when you account for access to health care in countries with national health systems, wages still play an important part.

***(Kominski): I think these studies are encouraging because it supports a commonsense notion that's been around among health professionals and in the field of public health for years and that is that improving the economic status of populations will also improve health."***

Kominski says there is growing recognition that many policies can impact people's health and should be evaluated with what is called "health impact assessments." He says increasingly studies are being done to look at the health effects of everything from city development plans to spending on after school care.

***(Kominski): "So I think that there is an increasing awareness that we need to be looking for health consequences in social and economic policy and this issue of the minimum wage is an ideal opportunity to explore the potential positive health benefits."***

Kominski says one of the studies he is very interested to see about the minimum wage is just how the positive health effects could reduce society's overall health care costs.

This has been a report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at [CHL@CHCF.org](mailto:CHL@CHCF.org). I'm Rachel Dornhelm, thanks for listening.