

## Is It Fair to Pay Teens Less Than Adults?



February 29, 2016

**Young people face the highest unemployment rate of all age groups in the United States. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 15 percent of 16- to 19-year-olds who are actively looking for work can't find jobs. Some lawmakers believe they have a fix: lowering the minimum wage for teens, to encourage businesses to hire them. In Washington state, lawmakers are debating a bill that would lower the minimum wage for anyone under 20 to \$8.05 an hour, compared with \$9.47 an hour for adults. A similar measure is in effect in Michigan, and another is being considered in South Dakota.**

**YES**

You need experience to get hired, but unless you get hired, you can't get experience.

Many young people across the country face this dilemma. A lower minimum wage for

teens would encourage businesses to hire them. That would give teens more opportunities to gain work experience and learn valuable life and career skills, such as the importance of showing up to work on time and how to be professional and reliable.

Federal law limits what teens can do while on the job. At grocery stores, for example, teens under 18 can bag goods, but they aren't allowed to operate a cardboard-box compactor. When young people can't do parts of the job, employers have to hire someone else to do those tasks. If there are going to be legal restrictions on what teens can do, then it makes sense that their pay is lower as well.

Students with part-time jobs usually earn higher wages in the future compared with classmates who don't work.

Plus, your average teen doesn't have the same kinds of skills that workers in, say, their 20s have. When employers have to pay everyone the same

starting wage, it often makes more sense for them to hire older, more-skilled workers instead of teens.

But a high youth unemployment rate is bad for society. Research shows that unemployed teens are more likely to drop out of high school and become involved with the criminal justice system. Studies have also found that students with part-time jobs are more likely to earn higher wages in the future compared with their classmates who don't work.

The bottom line is that lowering the minimum wage for teens makes it easier for them to find jobs. And putting all Americans back to work will ultimately help improve our nation's economy.

**—Bob Battles, General Counsel & Government Affairs Director Association of Washington Business**

---

**no**

Why should a worker get paid less simply because he or she happens to be a teenager? If they're performing the same tasks as a 20-year-old, they should earn the same amount of money.

Teens often need jobs as much as any other workers. Many have to work to help support their families. Others live on their own or are trying to save money for college. In recent years, the cost of higher education has skyrocketed. According to the College Board, average tuition and fees at four-year public colleges and universities has

increased by 40 percent—or nearly \$3,000—since 2006. If teens are forced to accept lower wages, it will be even harder for them to afford college. And research shows that people who have graduated from college typically earn higher wages.

Young people aren't the only ones who would be affected by creating a lower teen wage. It could also displace older workers. Employers might prefer to hire a rotating series of teens because it would be cheaper.

There's already a lot of pay inequality in the United States. For example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that women earn on average about 78 cents for every dollar a man makes. We shouldn't pass laws that reinforce wage discrimination—especially when there's little evidence to suggest that businesses would be more likely to hire teens if they could pay them less than adults.

Many teens have to work to help support their families. Others live on their own or are trying to save money for college.

There's also a broader economic reason not to pay teens less. The health of the U.S. economy depends heavily on consumer spending, and teens spend more than \$250 billion a year. If young people earn less money, they won't spend as much. That's bad for the economy.

Every hardworking American deserves fair compensation, and that includes teens. After all, isn't paying people an honest wage for honest work a fundamental American value?

**—Marilyn Watkins, Policy Director, Economic Opportunity Institute**

---