

## **Making social justice a priority: minimum wage hike to achieve health equity**

While Canada is a first world country for many of its citizens, it is not for the working poor. The living wage in Ontario in 2018 was estimated to be \$16.10, with Toronto standing at \$18.52, according to the [Ontario Living Wage Network](#). Nonetheless, a significant portion of Ontarians earned well below this average in 2017; [23% of Ontario's workforce](#) earned under \$15, with 60% representing women, and 82% adults over the age of 20. Furthermore, 35% of immigrant workers disproportionately earned below \$15 in 2017, compared to only 22% of non-immigrant workers.

The minimum wage hike in Ontario is the necessary policy stride towards achieving health equity. The top one-fifth of citizens in Ontario earn an astounding [9.6 times](#) the citizens at the bottom. The socio-economically advantaged at the top, on average, demonstrate better health and longevity compared to the disadvantaged. According to Health Quality Ontario's [Health Equity Report 2016](#), the poorest in Ontario have a lower life expectancy, significantly higher physical inactivity, smoking, and inadequate nutrition rates compared to the richest, and to the provincial average.

Dear Ordinary Tax-payer, why should you care? Socioeconomic health inequities impose a direct economic burden of at least [\\$6.2 billion](#) annually, with Canadians in the lowest income group accounting for 60%. [Hospitalization rates](#) for conditions that can be managed outside of a hospital for the poorest are 2.5 times higher compared to the richest, given the poorest are twice as likely to suffer multiple chronic conditions. A lack of access to healthcare, prescription medication insurance, and inescapable unhealthy lifestyle choices results in the emergency department to often be the first point of contact with the healthcare system. Thus, the cost of health inequities, and social injustice, is incredibly pricey – and it is paid for by all of us.

Healthcare costs simply decline with an increase in income and stable employment. The elimination of avoidable expenditure on healthcare will potentially stimulate productive investment of tax-payer money into improving healthcare, and other government sectors such as education. Given [Canada's increasing immigrant and refugee population](#), a more efficacious distribution of resources will divert chances of increasing taxes to afford an exacerbation of widening income gaps and inequities. According to the [TD bank cost analysis report](#), while the initial 0.5% slower growth rate of the economy will compromise jobs which will not be created because of the hike, and require anticipatory strategies for its potential economic repercussions, the policy is predicted to be cost-saving in the long-run.

However, claiming the minimum wage increase as the magic bullet to eradicating poverty or achieving health equity is naïve. To achieve health equity, an intersectoral approach consisting of the coordinated engagement of government sectors like the education, labour, housing, finance, and transportation will be imperative. Identification of the policy aims of each sector will better facilitate intersectoral collaboration, given their importance in constructing the background social determinants of health. Not only will increased minimum wage provide an income that makes healthy living more tangible, but also can prevent avoidable healthcare costs and stimulate effective long-term management of public finances.

Health inequities are [systematic disparities in health](#) that are unjust. The massive income gap in Ontario contends the logic that a person earning below living wage has full autonomous choice over their decisions and behaviours concerning their health. The money, and time, to invest in health simply does not exist. Holding the marginalized solely responsible for their choices, such as buying cheap unhealthy foods rather than organic produce, only perpetuates existing injustices and marginalization. Minimum wage below \$15 makes choice an illusion; not only is it officially “unlivable”, but it also simply punishes the already most disadvantaged of society.

Ontario’s minimum wage, which rose to \$14 an hour from \$11.40 in May 2017, is expecting another rise to \$15 as of January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019.

The hike will require trade-offs. The relevant question moving forward will be one of how much we prioritize social justice.

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