

Leveraging State Minimum Wage Policies to Prevent Maltreatment Among Infants and Toddlers

Executive Summary

Research suggests that higher income and economic capital for families is one component of a holistic approach to preventing child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement among very young children. States have significant control over minimum wages for workers in their states. This guide highlights promising minimum wage policies indicated by nonpartisan research to help lower rates of child maltreatment and welfare system involvement.

Promising minimum wage policies include:

- **Increasing statewide minimum wages** beyond federal minimums.
- **Supporting cities and counties** in increasing local minimum wages.
- **Increasing minimum wages for specific industries or sectors**, such as home health care workers or seasonal employees often paid sub-minimum wages.
- **Establishing equitable minimum wages** for special parent populations, including workers under age 18 or those with disabilities who have historically been eligible for sub-minimum wages.

Take action! State policymakers and their partners can use this information to develop goals and action plans and implement state policies aimed at increasing minimum wages with the explicit goal of impacting child welfare outcomes. These actions may benefit families of very young children and have the potential to reduce rates of child maltreatment in your state.

Need more information? See the rest of this Primer and Action Guide for more details on the research behind these ideas and visit the Measuring Up website for more resources (<https://www.childtrends.org/project/measuring-up>).

Primer and Action Guide

Research shows clear associations between economic challenges and risk for child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement. Evidence suggests that increased minimum hourly wages may be one beneficial component of a holistic approach to preventing child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement.

This resource was created to support the work of:

- **State policymakers** interested in promoting child and family well-being and preventing maltreatment through wage-related policymaking
- **Advocates and partners** working with state-level policymakers and administrators

Through these connections, state leaders can explore together how state policies related to minimum wages might ultimately influence child welfare system involvement among very young children.

This document contains:

1. An **overview** summarizing the research evidence on the intersection of child maltreatment and minimum wages.
2. A summary of **state-level minimum wage policy options** and research on the effect these policies have on child maltreatment.
3. **Discussion prompts** for use as a part of intra- or inter-agency discussions, as well as dialogue with child welfare advocates and partners.



Part I: Overview

This overview provides high-level information on child maltreatment, child welfare system involvement, and minimum wages' influence on child and family well-being.

Maltreatment and child welfare system involvement among infants and toddlers

- In the United States, risk of maltreatment and child welfare system involvement is highest among infants and toddlers. In 2022, ~28 percent of child maltreatment victims were under 3 years old, and ~15 percent were under 1 year of age.¹
- Importantly, reports to the child welfare system do not equate to child maltreatment victimization. In 2021, about half of reports did not receive a formal investigation after initial screening. Of the ~three million children who received an investigation or “alternative response” (e.g., resource provision), nearly two and a half million children were determined not to be victims of maltreatment,² but perhaps in need of other resources or erroneously reported.
- Experts increasingly advocate for a holistic public health approach to *preventing* child maltreatment³ and promoting family well-being.⁴ This approach acknowledges the complex needs and challenges of parents and families.⁵

Low family incomes and child welfare

- In the U.S., 1 in 6 children under age 5 lives in poverty—this is a higher rate than older children.^{6,7}
- Family income has been linked to risks for child maltreatment, with income losses and material hardships emerging as some of the most consistent predictors of maltreatment risk.⁸
- However, about 75 percent of reports allege neglect as a primary concern,¹ and neglect is cited as a primary reason for over 60 percent of child removals.⁹ Among children deemed victims of maltreatment in 2022, ~74 percent were considered victims of neglect, not abuse.¹⁰
- Neglect definitions vary between states,¹¹ but generally refer to a failure to meet a child’s basic needs, including clothing, shelter, medical care, supervision, safety, and food.¹²
- Neglect is widely considered as deeply intertwined with (and in many cases conflated with) poverty.¹³ States vary significantly in their policies that exempt financial inability to provide for children from their legal definitions of what constitutes child neglect.¹⁴
- As such, many families come into the child welfare system for reasons related to poverty, insufficient resources, or unmet needs of support or assistance. About 85 percent of families investigated for child neglect have household incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty line.¹⁵

Raising state minimum wages as a tool for preventing child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement

- The federal minimum hourly wage is \$7.25—a figure set in July of 2009;¹⁶ this equates to \$10.63 in 2024.¹⁷ This is the longest span of time that the federal minimum wage has not increased.¹⁸
- Over one million U.S. workers earn \$7.25 per hour or less.¹⁹

- According to federal poverty guidelines for a family of four, a person working 40 hours per week for all 52 weeks each year is considered to live above the poverty line if earning at least \$15 per hour in DC and all other states except Hawaii and Alaska, where minimum wages needed for life above the poverty line is higher.²⁰ However, about 32 percent of all U.S. workers earn less than \$15 per hour.²¹ Within this group are over half of all single working parents and over 25 percent of all parents.²²
- State policies increasing the minimum wage by \$1 between 2008-2018 were consistently associated with decreases in foster care placements in those states.²³
- Simulations suggest that state policy changes increasing household incomes and assets, for example through increases in minimum wages,²⁴ are associated with lower rates of child welfare system involvement among infants and toddlers.²⁵
- Analyses combining data on child maltreatment and state minimum wage policy changes have found that state implementation of a policy increasing the minimum wage is associated with decreases in reported and substantiated neglect allegations among White, Black, and Latinx children.²⁶
- Higher minimum wages have been associated with less harsh parenting, a reduction in risks for child abuse,²⁷ and lower odds of neglect that results from increased resources.²⁸
- A \$1 increase in the hourly minimum wage has been linked to an 11 percent decline in neglect reports among children under 5.²⁹

Key contexts and considerations

The contextual information below may be helpful for state policymakers in their efforts related to minimum wage policy.

Racial justice

Black and Latinx families are more likely than White families to live in poverty;³⁰ to be reported to the child welfare system;^{31,32} and to have more extensive involvement with the system, including parent-child separation through foster care placements and terminations of parental rights.^{33,34} Policymakers should consider economic reforms as part of efforts to reduce racial disproportionalities in child welfare system involvement.³⁵

State-specific factors and diversity

States are diverse in terms of policy landscape, economic activity,³⁶ and population characteristics. Policymakers should consider their state's unique demographics, needs, and other factors when considering minimum wage policies. Policymakers can also commission analyses of their state's minimum wage to support these efforts (e.g., PA).³⁷

Impacts on small businesses

Multiple states have enacted policies modifying minimum wage requirements for small businesses—defined as businesses with fewer than a certain number of employees (e.g., WI) or businesses earning less than a particular amount of revenue (e.g., MN, OH).³⁸

Part II: State-Level Minimum Wage Policy Options and Effects on Child Maltreatment

This section summarizes nonpartisan research evidence on associations between specific state-level minimum wage policy actions and state-level rates of child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement. It also discusses promising options in need of research. This section can support policymakers in understanding how these policy variations intersect with child welfare outcomes.

Increasing statewide minimum wage beyond federal minimums

- Given the links between poverty and maltreatment and the high prevalence of child welfare system involvement among lower income families, increasing minimum wages could be one important part of a holistic approach to preventing child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement.³⁹
- As of 2024, 30 states, three territories, and DC have minimum hourly wages exceeding \$7.25.⁴⁰
- Some states implement gradual increases in minimum wages over time. For instance, Florida increased minimum wages to \$10 per hour in 2021, followed by scheduled annual hourly increases of \$1 until reaching \$15 per hour in 2026.⁴¹

Supporting cities and counties in increasing local minimum wages

- Adjusting minimum wages requires considering the cost of living, workforce issues, and the minimum wages required to help alleviate poverty in a given area.⁴²
- Within states, at least 53 cities and 8 counties have set their own minimum wages beyond the federal and/or state minimums.⁴³
- In 2014, Seattle, Washington was the first U.S. city to commit to a \$15 minimum hourly wage, phased in from 2015-2021.⁴⁴
- A rigorous evaluation of minimum wage increases across six cities found stronger private sector growth than comparable cities with lower minimum wages, with no negative effects on overall earnings or employment rates.⁴⁵

Increasing minimum wages for specific industries or sectors

- States may also consider raising minimum wages for industries or sectors that currently allow for sub-minimum wages (i.e., lower than required hourly minimum) under federal law, (e.g., businesses operating fewer than seven months per year).⁴⁶
- States may consider raising minimum wages for high-demand sectors. For instance, New York increased minimum hourly wages for home care workers to \$17 in 2022 and \$18 in 2023.⁴⁷

Establishing equitable minimum wages among special parent populations

- Under federal law, employers are allowed to pay sub-minimum wages to individuals younger than 20 years old⁴⁸ or individuals with certain disabilities.⁴⁹
- Given higher risk of child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement for children of young or adolescent parents,⁵⁰ ensuring equitable wages for workers under 18 years of age may help alleviate economic hardship, associated stressors, and risks for child welfare system involvement.
- Child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement are also more common among children of parents with disabilities.^{51,52} Ensuring equitable wages for workers with disabilities may help alleviate economic hardship and associated risks for child welfare system involvement.

Part III: Discussion Guide

This section offers prompts to help state policymakers partner with program administrators, state agency leaders, advocates, and other partners around promoting families' economic well-being, which may in turn reduce incidences of maltreatment and child welfare system involvement among very young children. Questions are intended to spur inquiry, dialogue, and reflection to ensure that everyone has a common understanding of the scope and shape of problems, and to help inform action planning and next steps where needed. This guide is designed to be flexible, so users can choose to focus on selected subtopics and question prompts, or the full guide, depending on the needs and priorities in your state. Child welfare leaders may also choose to work through the guide internally to support their own goal setting and planning. To access data, resources, and other information that may help you think about answers to the questions below, see our Annotated Resource Compilation.

Step 1: Gather information.

Infant and toddler maltreatment data

- What are the reasons that young children are being reported to our child welfare system?
- Who are the key players and partners influencing policy and programming related to maltreatment of infants and toddlers in our state, and what are their perspectives and priorities?
- Are state legislators aware of child abuse and neglect trends and issues in our state?
- What are the trends in reported and confirmed abuse and neglect among infants and toddlers?
- Among young children being reported to Child Protective Services, what is the rate of “unsubstantiated” or unconfirmed allegations?

Poverty and economic hardship

- What can data tell us about the prevalence of poverty and economic hardship in our state?
- What communities in our state are disproportionately affected by low wages and poverty?
- What are the key drivers of poverty and economic hardships in our state?
- How effective has our state been at addressing child and family poverty in recent years?
- How effective has our state been at increasing wages in recent years?
- Who are the key players influencing policy and programming related to poverty and economic hardship in our state, and what are their perspectives and priorities?

The intersection: low family incomes and child maltreatment

- What percentage of families reported to the child welfare system are living in poverty and struggling with low earnings?
 - How many parents reported to the child welfare system are earning minimum wage?
- What supports does our state provide to families with young children experiencing poverty?
 - How involved is our state's child welfare agency in providing or making connections to these services? What collaborations with other state agencies might support families' access to these supports?

- What supports does our state provide to individuals seeking higher wage opportunities and associated credentials or educational attainment?
- What portion of parents involved in the child welfare system participate in the formal labor market?

Minimum wage policy

- What percentage of individuals in our state earn the minimum hourly wage or less?
- What, if any, minimum wage-related policies are being considered currently?
- Has minimum wage policy historically been set by legislation or ballot measures in our state?
- What limitations or challenges exist for minimum wage-related policymaking in our state? For example, does state policy allow people with disabilities to receive sub-minimum wages?
- Who are key players on this issue and what are their positions on minimum wage policy?
- What has historically affected minimum wages, and wages more broadly, in our state (e.g., economic shifts, market forces, public health crises, changes in particular industries, etc.)?

Step 2: Reflect on nuances, challenges, and policy opportunities.

This section lists specific aspects of minimum wage-related policies that require more focused reflection, followed by topic-specific questions to help identify areas of opportunity in your state. Some questions below may offer opportunities to think about opportunities for improvement and potential barriers (e.g., *Is there room for improvement? If yes, what barriers and opportunities exist?*).

Interaction between minimum wages and employment rates

- What are workforce participation rates in our state?
- What data or research have we used to consider the potential impacts of minimum wage increases on employment rates in our state?
- Are concerns about employment rates raised in conversations about minimum wage increases in our state?

Sub-minimum wages for special parent populations and poverty

- What data do we have about the percentage of teenage parents and parents with disabilities who depend on tipped or sub-minimum wages for their family income?
- What are sub-minimum wages for adolescents and individuals with disabilities in our state?
- How are these restrictions affecting the income and poverty status of children in such families?
- What are the opportunities to change these restrictions to increase the minimum wage and make it more equitable?

Step 3: Take action! Move from understanding to impact.

After reflecting on the prompts above, state policymakers can use this information to develop goals, action plans, and policies aimed at strengthening minimum wages. These actions may benefit families of very young children and have the potential to reduce rates of child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement in your state. Users of this resource are encouraged to collect and monitor data on policy impacts over time to assess their success.

Action planning prompts

- How do we define “successful” minimum wage-related policymaking in our state?
- What data are collected that could be used to evaluate the impacts of minimum wage-related policy change on rates of child maltreatment, child welfare system involvement, and child well-being? What pieces of information or data are needed?
- Who in our state should collect and analyze the necessary data? Do they have the appropriate authorizations and resources?
- How can we pivot if assessments indicate that changes are needed in our state?
- What questions remain about the status of wages and minimum wage policies in our state?

Engaging workers in policymaking

- How are workforce participants engaged in policymaking in our state?
- How are employers and business owners engaged in policymaking in our state?
- How can policymakers work to co-design changes with those who earn and pay wages? How can policymakers support these co-design efforts?

For more information on our work and original analyses of minimum wage policies and child welfare system data, see: <https://www.childtrends.org/project/measuring-up>

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