

Boost minimum wage and babies benefit: study

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(HealthDay)—Raising the minimum hourly wage in every state by as

little as \$1 above the federal level might lead to fewer infant deaths and cases of low birth weight babies, a new study suggests.

The researchers, who looked at three decades of data, found a pattern: states that had a [minimum wage](#) that was \$1 above the federal level had a 4 percent decrease in infant deaths. At the same time, the number of newborns with a [low birth weight](#) dipped by 1 percent to 2 percent.

"This suggests that a pretty minor change in the minimum wage can make a substantial difference in [public health](#)," said lead researcher Kelli Komro, a professor at Emory University in Atlanta. But the study did not prove that higher minimum wages caused infant death rates and birth weights to improve.

Komro's team estimated that if every state had raised the minimum wage by \$1 in 2014, over 500 infant deaths would have been prevented. And nearly 2,800 more babies would have been born at a healthy weight.

The findings come on the heels of some substantial moves in minimum-wage laws.

In April, the governors of both California and New York signed laws lifting the minimum wage in those states to \$15 per hour. That's more than double the federal standard, of \$7.25 an hour.

The laws were controversial, with some arguing that employers might cut jobs in response to higher wages.

To Komro, those debates should also consider the potential public health benefits of lifting low-income workers' wages.

Lisa Dubay, a health policy researcher who was not involved in the

study, agreed.

"In the U.S., we've traditionally looked to medical interventions to improve people's health outcomes," said Dubay, a senior fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based Urban Institute.

But, she added, factors other than health care and [health insurance](#) matter, too.

"Most people making minimum wage would qualify for Medicaid," Dubay noted, referring to the government health insurance program for low-income Americans.

But, she said, higher earnings can give families more "resources," beyond health insurance: A pregnant woman might be able to eat more healthfully, work fewer hours and be less stressed, for example.

According to Komro, few studies have looked at the connection between minimum wage changes and Americans' health. She said her team focused on infant deaths and birth weight because they are particularly "sensitive" to the effects of poverty.

For the study, the researchers collected information on minimum-wage changes in all 50 states between 1980 and 2011. They then looked at the relationship between those shifts and changes in states' rates of infant mortality and low birth weight.

Overall, the study found, boosting state wages a dollar beyond the federal level was associated with a 4 percent drop in [infant deaths](#), and a 1 to 2 percent dip in the percentage of babies born weighing less than 5.5 pounds.

The findings were published online June 16 in the *American Journal of*

Public Health.

The researchers accounted for a few other social trends—including changes in states' poverty levels and cigarette sales.

Komro acknowledged that the researchers couldn't account for "everything." But she said it's unlikely that some other broad changes happened at the same time as the minimum-wage hikes.

Dubay agreed. She also said that past research has linked the earned income [tax credit](#) to reductions in low [birth weight](#) and preterm birth. The tax credit goes to low- and moderate-income working Americans.

"The [tax credit] is similar to a minimum-wage increase, in that it raises low-income families' wages," Dubay said.

According to Komro, it's possible that any public health problems that are closely linked to poverty could be somewhat alleviated by minimum-wage increases. But that has yet to be studied, she said.

Dr. Paul Jarris, senior vice president for maternal and child health programs at the March of Dimes, agreed.

"It's critical that we move beyond access to health insurance and clinical care, and also focus on the social determinants of health," Jarris said. "The conditions under which people live are even more important than [health](#) insurance."

Right now, 29 states and Washington, D.C., have minimum wages above the federal standard, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

More information: The National Conference of State Legislatures has

more on [state minimum wages](#).

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