

**Living at the minimum: A qualitative study of low-wage workers with children during  
Seattle's minimum wage increase**

*A Letter of Inquiry to the Russell Sage Foundation*

Heather D. Hill  
Jennifer Romich  
University of Washington

In the absence of major state or federal action to improve the quality of jobs available to less-educated workers, cities have enacted workplace regulations—including minimum wage and paid sick leave laws—designed to reduce inequality in pay and work conditions. The City of Seattle is a leader in workplace regulations, having mandated paid sick leave in 2011 and a substantial increase in the city minimum wage in 2014. Starting in April 2015, the minimum wage for all workers in the city will increase gradually to become the highest in the nation. As of 2017, most low-wage jobs for large employers must pay \$15 per hour (all employers come up to this level by 2021), and the minimum wage rate will automatically increase with inflation. The law directly affects about 100,000 people working in Seattle at low wages, who are disproportionately poor or low-income (67%) and female (57%; Klawitter, Long, & Plotnick, 2014). The law has potential indirect effects—on wages, employment, and prices—on the 3.5 million people living in the metropolitan area. In addition, the Seattle experience holds lessons for the many states and locales weighing a similar policy change.

The ambitions of this policy—to reduce inequality and improve mobility—depend on its effects not only on current workers, but also on their children. While only one-quarter of minimum wage workers in Seattle have children (Klawitter et al., 2014), the policy change is potentially most consequential for these families because the economic conditions of childhood have far reaching implications for health, academic achievement, and economic success in adulthood (for review: Duncan et al., 2012). The likely effects of a minimum wage change, including changes in employment, earnings, work hours, and public assistance receipt, could alter investments in children, experiences of material hardship, parent stress, and parenting practices.

We seek support from the Russell Sage Foundation to launch a qualitative study of Seattle workers with children prior to the implementation of the City's minimum wage law. The study would include 25-30 workers, each of whom would complete a baseline in-person interview in February or March 2015 and a short follow-up phone interview 3-6 months later. A Presidential Authority Award would enable us to move into the field quickly to collect the first wave of data before the policy takes effect. If those data offer promising insights into low-wage employment and family life, we will submit a letter of intent in June 2015 for a project grant to fund subsequent waves of data collection, as well as data analysis and writing. Below we describe the study's background and significance, research design, PI qualifications, and budget in more detail.

**Background and Significance**

Seattle's minimum wage increase presents an opportunity to examine the ecology of low-wage work and to reveal the process by which policy “trickles down” to affect both individual behaviors and family wellbeing. The minimum wage increase could result in greater economic resources, fewer material hardships, and less stress, but also in more precarious employment arrangements (because employers may adjust to higher costs by reducing jobs or increasing the use of “on call” systems), and lower subsidies from federal safety net programs. Workers at the minimum wage are also consumers of products produced in minimum wage jobs, and increases in prices could alter family

budgets. Finally, less-educated workers may face a more competitive labor market if employers shift toward preferring higher skilled workers or if higher wages draw non-workers into the workforce.

Our initial research questions focus on capturing the nature of low-wage work in Seattle prior to the policy change, as well as workers' expectations about how the higher minimum wage will affect them and their families. For example, how do workers' current jobs—schedule, tasks, and compensation—support or conflict with their personal goals and family members' needs? How do workers expect the policy change to alter their own employment or the employment of others in the family? How do workers prepare for expected changes in spending or budgets? What do they anticipate for changing eligibility for public assistance?

These questions about subjective experience and process are not easily answered with extant administrative or survey data, but are ideally suited to in-depth qualitative interview techniques. The Russell Sage Foundation funded and published many of the most influential and pioneering studies of economic disadvantage using qualitative data (e.g. Edin & Lein, 1997; Duncan, Huston, & Weisner, 2007; Newman, 1999). While not designed to produce generalizable results or causal estimates, these studies are unmatched in their ability to describe processes of change, to reveal the complex ways in which individuals and families react to and shape their own economic circumstances, and to provide an authentic voice for the subjects of research.

This study is also an opportunity to contribute to rigorous mixed methods research on the Seattle minimum wage increase. The PIs are members of a University of Washington research team that submitted a proposal to the City of Seattle to evaluate the minimum wage increase.<sup>1</sup> Our proposal to the City focuses on quasi-experimental analysis of administrative and survey data, but also includes a small number of qualitative interviews with workers and a survey of employers. In the event that we are awarded the evaluation contract, support from the Russell Sage Foundation would ensure that we will have sufficient sample size and baseline data for the qualitative study of workers to stand alone and to contribute to mixed methods analysis. With funding from multiple sources, we could collect multiple waves of data in person and by phone. If the UW team is not awarded the city contract, we will seek additional foundation support to conduct future waves of qualitative data collection. Overall, the results of the qualitative study, and its quantitative counterpart, will provide value not only to the City of Seattle, but also to a broad network of municipal and state governments, policy makers, and social scientists interested in reducing economic inequality.

## **Research Design**

We propose an in-depth qualitative study of 25-30 Seattle workers with custodial children who are earning less than \$11 per hour as of early 2015. Our proposed sample size, while constrained by cost, is large enough to glean insights into family experiences and to make comparisons across key sub-groups. We plan to conduct a longitudinal study, with interviews with the same 25-30 workers approximately every 6 months for one or more years. This requested support from the Russell Sage Foundation would begin by covering the baseline interviews in January through March 2015, before the policy change occurs, and a single phone follow-up to capture experiences after the first wage increases go into effect April 1st. We will select a sample of workers purposively to ensure that the results reflect the experiences of a range of Seattle families, including immigrant, nonimmigrant,

---

<sup>1</sup>Other team members on the proposal to the City of Seattle include Scott Allard, Mark Long, Robert Plotnick, and Jacob Vigdor of the Evans School of Public Affairs, and Jennifer Otten of the School of Public Health. The City intends to award the contract in November 2014.

married, unmarried, part-time, and full-time workers. The study will be advertised at specific locations frequented by workers in low paying jobs, including Head Start Centers, budget grocery stores, and public transportation centers. A clear and simple flyer will describe the study and offer a small honorarium payment for participation. Interested participants will be asked to contact the researchers to set up an interview. As respondents make contact, we will screen them for the sub-group characteristics and track the number of participants in each sub-group to arrive at the desired quotas. If we have filled the quota for that respondent, we will offer to put them on a waitlist. Research team members will fully inform respondents about their rights as research participants and obtain their consent for study activities. All research protocols will be approved by the University of Washington Human Subjects Division.

A study of purposively selected volunteers is not designed to produce results that are generalizable to the entire population of Seattle low-wage workers with children. The advantages of this approach, however, lay in the discretion over sample composition and the identification of families who are willing to discuss their circumstances with the researchers at some length and depth. As appropriate for the first wave of a planned longitudinal study, we believe this strategy will yield information helpful for planning follow-up waves of data collection, and for generating hypotheses that can be tested using survey methods or secondary and administrative data.

The qualitative interviews will be semi-structured, guided by open-ended questions about the economic circumstances of family life. The topical areas of the protocol will include the following:

- ***A typical workday.*** Interviews begin with an open-ended invitation for the participant to tell the interviewer about a typical workday, from the time they rise to the time they go to sleep. In prior studies, the investigators have found this question to be relatively innocuous and helpful for both establishing rapport and introducing relevant topics.
- ***Current job(s).*** Participants will describe their current job, including their history with the employer, regular tasks, and general working conditions. Detailed compensation and schedule information will be collected at the first interview, and changes will be tracked over time.
- ***Monthly budget.*** Using a blank calendar, participants note all their reoccurring monthly income sources and bills and expenses. Respondents in previous studies have found this approach to be a tangible, practical way of capturing monthly budget items.
- ***Use of public assistance, community services, and network support.*** Participants will describe their use of cash and in-kind public assistance, services in the community, and help from family and friends. Changes to eligibility for and use of these supports will be tracked over time.
- ***Family life.*** Participants will be asked broad questions about key mechanisms in the link between employment and family wellbeing, including parental time, household division of labor, material hardships, and stress. They will be asked to describe one happy and one stressful moment as a family in the past month.

The follow-up phone interview will briefly ask about *changes* in employment status, pay, and schedule, public assistance receipt, and spending since the baseline interview.

Interviews will be conducted in English and Spanish, and we can consider hiring translators if we recruit participants with another spoken language preference. We expect each in-person interview to take between 1.5 and 2 hours, and each phone follow-up to last 15-20 minutes. The interviews will be audiotaped, translated (when necessary), and transcribed. We will supervise one or more PhD-

level students to analyze the transcribed data using qualitative analysis software. We will begin by developing a codebook of broad topics based on the qualitative interview protocol. Next, we will build and refine the codebook through an iterative process of coding transcripts independently, discussing coding decisions as a group, and then modifying the rules of the codebook. After this process has been completed on 2-3 transcripts, the students will code the remaining transcripts using the final codebook with systematic checks for fidelity. We will use these codes to identify themes across workers, key distinctions in worker experiences, and important exceptions to themes or distinctions. Individual cases and quotes from respondents will be used to illustrate particular findings. All of the written reports using these data will use pseudonyms for participant names.

### **PI Qualifications**

Heather Hill and Jennifer Romich will act as co-PIs on this project, jointly leading the protocol development, interview training, data collection, coding, and analysis. Dr. Hill is an Associate Professor at the Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington. Her research examines how social policy affects the economic circumstances of low-income families and how poverty affects children. She trained in qualitative methods with Kathryn Edin as a graduate student and participated in the Gautreaux II and Moving to Opportunity studies as a qualitative interviewer. Currently, Hill is co-PI on a project funded by the W.T. Grant Foundation to re-analyze longitudinal qualitative data from the Opportunity New York City-Family Rewards project.

Dr. Romich is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work, an adjunct Associate Professor at the Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington, and director of the West Coast Poverty Center. She trained in qualitative methods with Tom Weisner as a graduate student and brings both research expertise and a robust knowledge of low-income families' finances to the project. Romich has over 15 years of experience in anti-poverty research using methodologies including in-depth ethnographic fieldwork, one-time interviews and focus groups, and statistical analyses including work with data from agency management information systems. She recently completed a study of the paid leave legislation in Seattle.

### **Estimated Budget**

We request approximately \$35,000 to collect baseline data from 25-30 families. The budget covers the costs of data collection (protocol development, interviewing, and transcription), so as to maximize the number of interviews that we complete in the pilot. Both PIs have an external funding source that will provide additional salary support for protocol development and preliminary analysis.<sup>2</sup> If the data collected in the first wave offers promising insights into low-wage employment, public policy, and family life, we will submit a letter of intent in June 2015 for a full project grant to fund subsequent waves of data collection, as well as data analysis and writing. There will also be opportunities to expand the proposed study if the UW research team is awarded the contract to evaluate the policy change for the City of Seattle.

---

<sup>2</sup>We are both grantees in the *Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Scholars Network* funded by the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013-2018. These grants cover 20 percent of investigator salary during the academic year and summer for a set of investigator-defined independent and collaborative research projects related to family self-sufficiency. We both included studying the City of Seattle minimum wage increase as one of those activities for 2014-2015.

## References

- Duncan, G.J., Huston, A.C., & Weisner, T.S. (2007). *Higher ground: New Hope for the working poor and their children*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Duncan, G.J., Magnuson, K., Kalil, A., Ziol-Guest, K. (2012). The importance of early childhood poverty. *Social Indicators Research*, 108(1), 87-98.
- Edin, K. & Lein, L. (1997). *Making ends meet: How single mothers survive welfare and low-wage work*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Kalleberg, A.L. (2011). *Good jobs, bad jobs: The rise of polarized and precarious employment systems in the United States, 1970s to 2000s*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Klatwitter, M., Long, M., & Plotnick, R. (2014). "Who would be affected by an increase in Seattle's minimum wage?" Report for the City of Seattle, Income Inequality Advisory Committee. March 21, 2014. Accessed online on 8/23/2014: [http://murray.seattle.gov/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Evans-report-3\\_21\\_14+-appdx.pdf](http://murray.seattle.gov/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Evans-report-3_21_14+-appdx.pdf)
- Newman, K. (1999). *No shame in my game: The working poor in the inner city*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.