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The Problem with a \$15 Minimum Wage in Canada

An Express Employment Professionals White Paper

"I believe people calling for a higher minimum wage have the very best intentions. Unfortunately, when the government tries to raise wages artificially, some people will win, but many more people will lose."

– Bob Funk, CEO and Chairman of the Board
Express Employment Professionals

RIGHT QUESTIONS, WRONG ANSWERS: A \$15 Minimum Wage

Express Employment Professionals is on a mission to put people to work. Once we find people jobs, we want to help them seize opportunities to increase their earnings. It is our commitment to these goals that leads us to believe so strongly against the minimum wage increase.

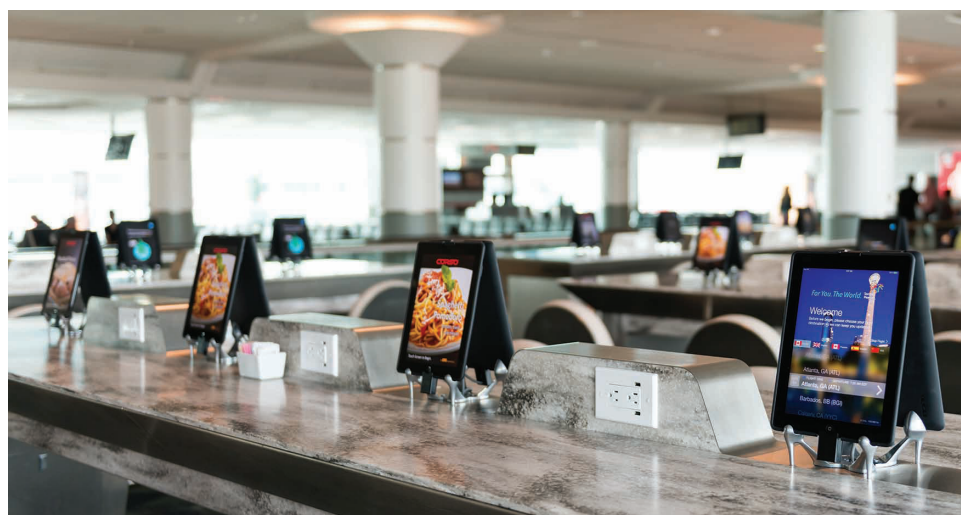
As experts with real-world, day-to-day experience in the labour market, we urge advocates of minimum wage hikes, including as much as a \$15 minimum wage in Alberta, to seriously consider the consequences. From our view, it is a policy with good intentions that could have devastating consequences for many workers, particularly the young and inexperienced.

Families are feeling the effects of sluggish economic growth, so it's no surprise activists have mobilized. Politicians have seized the issue. And, across the country, calls for increases to minimum wages continue to grow and increasingly dominate employment policy debate. Provinces and territories are now raising or considering raising their minimum wages with insufficient consideration about who benefits and who loses.

Is this really the solution we need? Is a \$15/hour minimum wage, as planned in Alberta, the right way to lift incomes?

If the minimum wage increased so dramatically, we would love to tell the job seekers coming through our doors that their earnings will go up, and they will all get hired. But we shudder at the prospect of having to report that jobs in their region or their field have become scarce—because companies cannot afford to hire, decided to downsize or because jobs once done by humans are now automated. The risk is that good intentions will lead to bad outcomes for Canadian workers.

As experts with real-world, day-to-day experience in the labour market, we urge advocates of a \$15/hour minimum wage to seriously consider the consequences.



iPads replace servers at an airport food court.

A government-mandated wage increase means some people will see a raise while others will see pink slips. Many won't even get a chance at a job at all. And everyone will feel the impact in the form of higher prices.

We live and breathe the job market every day. We know why businesses hire. We know why they cut back. Express employs more than 500,000 people each year, including a significant number who are paid the minimum wage. We know the frustration our clients are already facing and the future challenges they dread.

Canadians deserve a raise. The best way to do it is by growing the economy, not trying to control it.

ASK THE EXPERTS ON “MAIN STREET”

Across the country, Express owners and operators work every day to match jobs with job seekers. They understand the real world consequences of the regulatory policies debated in Ottawa and provincial legislatures across Canada. So we asked the experts, and their predictions of the effects of a minimum wage hike are anything but encouraging.



BRUCE HEIN

Franchise Owner and Developer, Express Employment Professionals

Sarnia, Ontario

“The challenge with automatically increasing the minimum wage to \$15 an hour is companies cannot pass this increase along to clients. Companies will simply hire fewer people to meet their wage budgets. It’s far more preferable to earn your way to a higher wage. Employees who demonstrate the right attitude and the right work ethic will be rewarded with better wages. If employers don’t reward good employees with a good wage, they risk losing them to a competitor. Demonstrating what I call the ‘right stuff’ earns you a better wage you can rely on.”



JESSICA CULO

Franchise Owner, Express Employment Professionals

Edmonton, Alberta

“When minimum wage increases, we immediately see increased prices from local restaurants, stores and service companies. This, combined with difficult economic times, is making it challenging for average consumers (including those earning minimum wage themselves) to buy their usual products and services. Compounding the problem—it’s extremely difficult (with decreased sales) for some businesses to keep their doors open. In the best case scenario, they downsize. Either way, full-time jobs are gone. As for large employment drivers like call centers, manufacturers and distributors; we are seeing that some are simply leaving our market altogether, which is devastating.”



SHANE DECOSTE

Franchise Owner, Express Employment Professionals

Halifax, Nova Scotia

“The impact of a mandated \$15 an hour minimum wage would have a dramatic negative impact on our already struggling province—that’s a 40 per cent increase in labour costs for a minimum wage worker. This change would mean employers are forced to pass on increases in their products and services, potentially close their business, lay people off, potentially cut corners in areas like safety or training or reduce hours worked. A \$15 minimum wage is not a solution!”

ASK BOB FUNK

CEO and Chairman of the Board, Express Employment Professionals

“People deserve a raise, and the best way to provide it is through a growing economy where workers are in high demand. Unfortunately, when the government tries to raise wages artificially, some people will win, but many will lose.

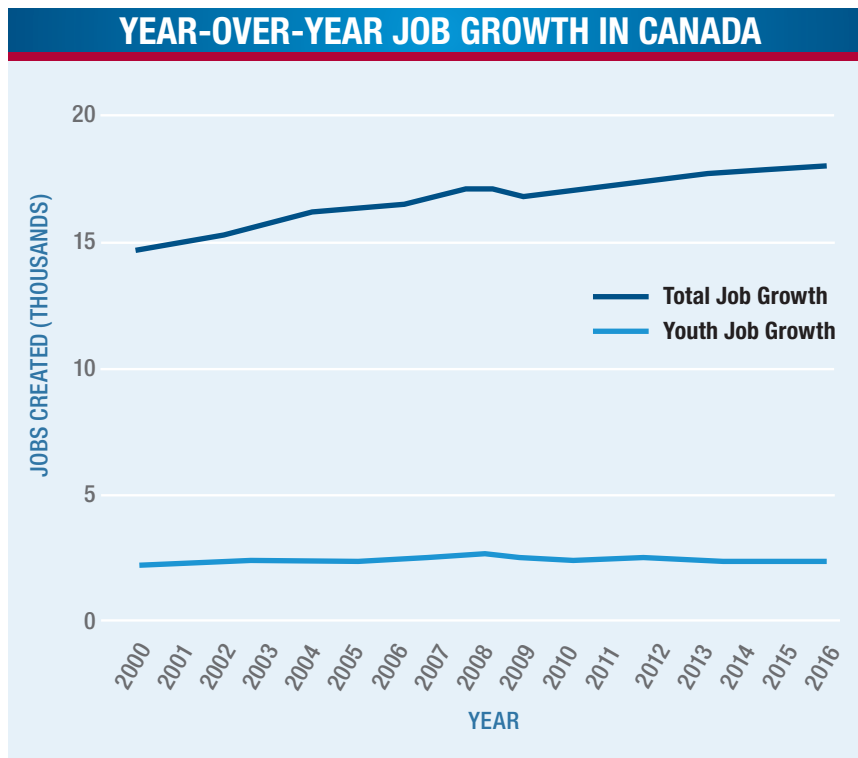
I think people calling for a higher minimum wage have the very best intentions. But I’d encourage policymakers to spend their energies finding ways to unleash economic growth that will create more opportunities for everyone instead of artificially raising incomes for a few.”

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

It is not surprising that many have been calling for an increase in the minimum wage. Despite emerging from the recession in a stronger position relative to many other countries, Canada's sluggish economy has left some Canadians feeling the pinch.

Consider how slow job growth has been, particularly for younger Canadians. Average year-over-year employment growth has been 1.3 per cent for all Canadians since 2000, but less than half of one per cent for those aged between 15 and 24 over the same period.¹ Only three of the last eight years have seen positive job growth for Canada's younger generation.²

**FIGURE 1:
YEAR-OVER-YEAR
JOB GROWTH
IN CANADA
SINCE 2000,
IN REAL NUMBERS**



The combination of slow employment growth and concerns for low-income workers have contributed to calls for minimum wage hikes around the country, including in Alberta where the government has responded with a new \$15 minimum wage to take effect in 2018.

At Express, we recognize and understand the frustration. But the presence of a problem does not mean that any proposed solution is the right one. From our perspective, the best answer is not to raise wages artificially, but to get the economy growing faster and employment growth to climb higher, and improve workers' skills so that the market rewards them with higher wages—without hurting job opportunities for others.

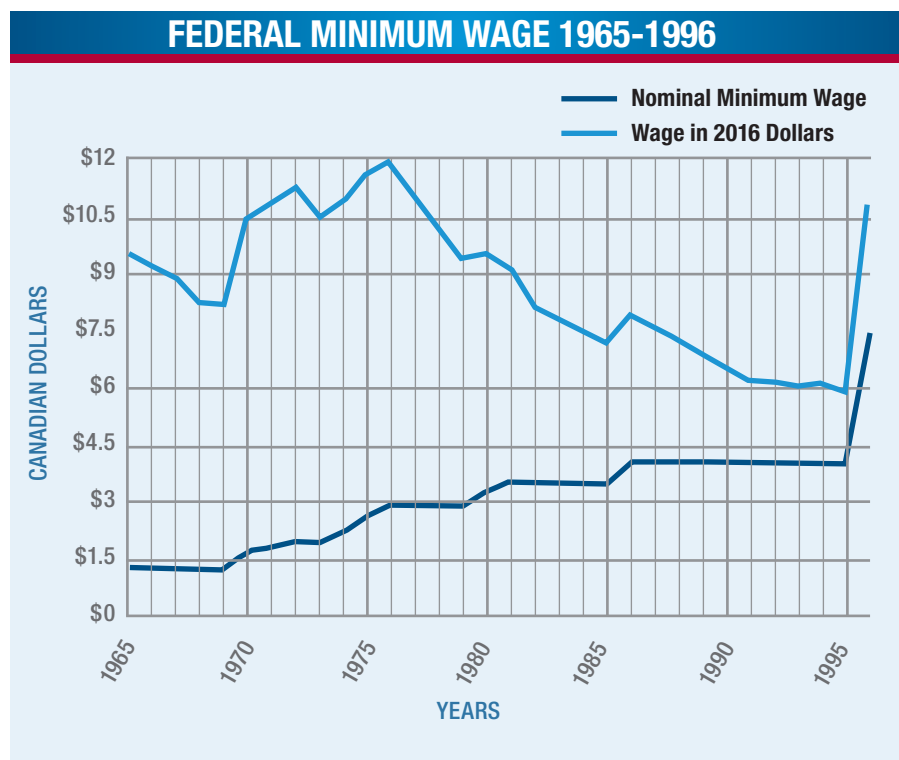
A SHORT HISTORY LESSON

In Canada, provinces and territories are responsible for regulating minimum wages and each have their own method for setting wage rates. Some provinces consult various “Wage Boards” comprised of government and industry representatives. Others tie wage adjustments to fluctuations in the Consumer Price Index inflation. In all scenarios, minimum wages are established after accounting for factors such as the cost of living, economic conditions and other circumstances.³

In the past, the federal government played a role in establishing minimum wage for federally-regulated industries (e.g., telecommunications, banks and rail transportation), but this practice ended in 1996. Federally-regulated industries are now subject to the minimum wages in the various provinces and territories.

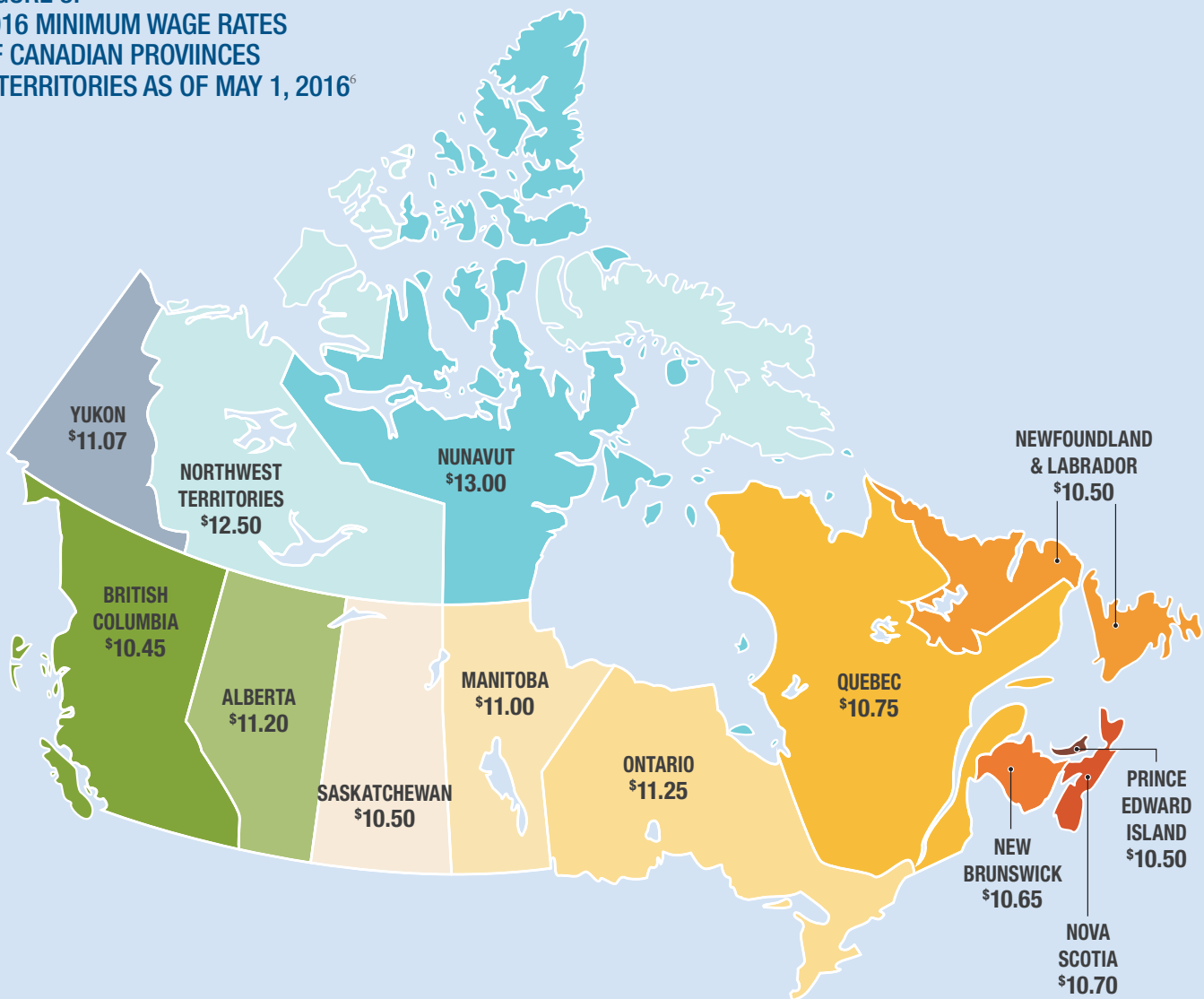
The first federal minimum wage in Canada was established in 1965 at \$1.15 per hour, or \$8.78 in 2016 dollars. British Columbia was the first province to establish a minimum wage for women in 1918 and for men in 1925.

FIGURE 2:
FEDERAL
MINIMUM WAGE
1965-1996,
NOMINAL AND
2012 DOLLARS⁴



Provincial and territorial wages are not uniform. Today, the highest minimum wage is set in Nunavut at \$13 per hour, and the lowest is in British Columbia at \$10.45 per hour. Since 1965, minimum wages in all provinces and territories have increased by an average of nearly 10 per cent.⁵

**FIGURE 3:
2016 MINIMUM WAGE RATES
OF CANADIAN PROVINCES
& TERRITORIES AS OF MAY 1, 2016⁶**



While groups at both the federal and provincial levels continually debate the merits of raising minimum wages to levels beyond that of simply keeping up with inflation, some provincial governments have taken action.

The Government of Alberta has committed to lifting the province's minimum wage by \$3.80 to \$15 per hour by 2018,⁷ becoming the first province to institute a minimum wage increase above \$1.00 over any length of time. In Alberta, between 1965 and 2016, minimum wages have increased by an average of 10 per cent.⁸

Similarly, restoring the federal minimum wage and setting it at \$15 was an issue in the 2015 federal election with one political party making such a commitment.

THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

To listen to advocates of raising the minimum wage to \$15, the case sounds pretty simple: People making less than \$15 an hour now will get a raise and have an easier time providing for their families. End of story.

But research and experience show it is not that simple. To understand the unintended consequences, it is first helpful to know who is most likely to be a minimum wage worker.

Using the most recent data from Statistics Canada, one major Canadian study identified the key characteristics of Canadian minimum wage earners in 2014.⁹

According to the report:

- Almost 60 per cent of minimum wage earners were under 24 years of age;
- Nearly 57 per cent of minimum wage recipients were living with a family;
- Roughly 58 per cent of minimum wage employees work part time;
- Only 2 per cent of minimum wage earners were unmarried, homeowners and supporting at least one child.

The report suggests that those earning minimum wage are not the common image of single parents struggling to raise a family on limited income. They tend to be younger, part-time workers who are obtaining useful job experience and earning disposable income to defray the cost of education, buy a used car or have a bit of spending money.

It is therefore not surprising that research by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business finds that the “vast majority of minimum wage increases do not reduce poverty.”¹⁰ Such a finding makes sense when one realizes that roughly 88 per cent of minimum-wage earners are above the Low Income Cut-Off, a popular measure used to calculate relative poverty.¹¹

The Young and the Jobless

With those facts in mind, if a minimum wage increase forces some people out of the workforce, young people are likely to be disproportionately hit. For some, this could mean more trouble finding their first job—that important first rung on the ladder of personal advancement—making it harder to climb higher.

Indeed, a study published by the Fraser Institute estimated that increasing the minimum wage by 10 per cent can lead to a decrease in teen employment rates of 3 to 6 per cent.¹²

Another study by University of Toronto professor Michele Campolieti, published in the prestigious Canadian Journal of Economics, concluded that a 10 per cent increase in the minimum wage could reduce national employment for minimum-wage earners by 10 to 20 per cent.¹³

The result is that rather than targeting low-income earners, a minimum wage hike could exacerbate youth unemployment and cause young workers to miss out on critical experience and skills development.

Now Hiring: Robots

A hike in minimum wages may also lead some businesses to search for labour alternatives.¹⁴

Dr. Morley Gunderson is a professor in the Department of Economics at the University of Toronto, the CIBC Chair for youth employment and one of Canada's leading labour economists.

His research shows heightened minimum wages will reduce the demand for low-wage employment and could ultimately lead companies to look for substitutes for low-wage labour. These changes could come in the form of self-service cafeterias replacing waiters, online purchasing replacing retail clerks, pre-packaged food replacing food handlers in grocery stores and many other low wage jobs replacements.

CD Howe Institute President Bill Robson also found that significant increases to the minimum wage can cause technology to take more jobs from minimum-wage earners.¹⁵

And for good reason. According to the Brookfield Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Toronto's Ryerson University, during the next two decades, more than 40 per cent of Canada's workforce is at risk of being replaced by technology.¹⁶

The study, published in 2016, warns that Canada's youth are most vulnerable to this modernization of the workplace. Massive minimum wage hikes will only exacerbate this trend.

The fast-food industry has been the focus for many minimum wage advocates. But the effect on fast-food workers may not be what they hope. Ed Rensi, the former President and CEO of McDonald's USA, explains in a Forbes opinion piece:

"Let's do the math: A typical franchisee sells about \$2.6 million worth of burgers, fries, shakes and Happy Meals each year, leaving them with \$156,000 in profit ... For some locations, a \$15 minimum wage wipes out their entire profit.

"Recouping those costs isn't as simple as raising prices ... In the real world, our industry customers are notoriously sensitive to price increases ... Instead, franchisees can absorb the cost with a change that customers don't mind: The substitution of a self-service computer kiosk for a full-service employee."¹⁷

There's good reason to believe Rensi. In many other countries where wages are higher, companies have embraced models that involve higher prices, more automation or both.¹⁸

"I can assure you that a \$15 minimum wage won't spell the end of the brand. However, it will mean wiping out thousands of entry-level opportunities for people without many other options."

- Ed Rensi, former president and CEO, McDonald's USA¹⁹

The Rise of the iWaiter

If you've flown through a major airport recently, you may have noticed a growing trend: the seating areas at restaurants and food courts are all equipped with tablets. And those tablets are ready to take your order.

With a few taps you pick your food and drink, then swipe your card. Soon, a server drops off your food, and that will likely be the one and only time you see him or her. Even some full-service restaurants have equipped their tables with tablets, minimizing server-diner interactions.

But what does this mean for workers?

Imagine a restaurant with 20 tables, each seating four people. Say it takes four waiters serving five tables each. The waiters make multiple trips to the table—to greet customers, take drink orders, deliver drink orders, take food orders, deliver food orders, ask about dessert, bring the check, pick up the payment and bring back the receipt.

Now imagine that restaurant, under pressure from rising costs, decides to install tablets. The devices do the greeting, order taking and payment transaction. All that's left for the waiter is the food delivery.

Now 20 tables can be served by two waiters. The restaurant pays half as much in wages. The remaining two servers rake in more tips by serving more tables, but the other two servers are out of a job. What's more, fewer job openings will exist as other restaurants shift to this model.



Automation is already happening; increasing the cost of hiring people by raising the minimum wage will accelerate it. It's good news for some, but bad news for others.

From Now Hiring to Not Hiring

We cannot be 100 per cent sure of the magnitude of job loss or displaced workers from a minimum wage increase, but researchers have spent countless hours doing their best to provide an estimate.

One study from the Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) found that a 10 per cent increase in provincial minimum wages could trigger a loss of between 95,000 and 326,000 jobs across the country.²⁰ Many of these job losses come in the form of lost opportunities that would never be created as a result of higher costs on Canada's small businesses.

This is consistent with a previous study by the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, which found that a 10 per cent increase in the minimum wage could result in a 2.5 per cent decline in employment. The risk therefore is that artificial wage hikes lead to fewer jobs and opportunities, particularly for younger workers at a time when Canadians are rightly concerned about youth unemployment.²¹

And more and more high-quality research reaches the same conclusion. Large increases to the minimum wage such as the one proposed by the Alberta government will have the inadvertent consequence of layoffs and less hiring and young workers will disproportionately lose out.

It's Complicated

Automation. Displaced workers. Reduced opportunity. Unemployed youth. The potential consequences do not end there.

Small businesses with tight profit margins could be pushed over the edge if they cannot absorb the cost of higher wages through higher prices or smaller payrolls.

Some people may feel compelled to employ people off the books, paying them lower wages under the table, which could create a whole host of other tricky legal issues.

At Express, we will not go so far as to say every one of these consequences is a foregone conclusion. Other economic forces, such as global instability or uncertainty here at home, could exacerbate these problems. Or a surge in consumer confidence and economic growth could partially mitigate these concerns.

But the bottom line is this: The effects of raising the minimum wage are not as straightforward or positive as its proponents would have us believe. At the end of the day, we have to weigh giving a raise to some versus giving a pink slip to others.

WHAT DO BUSINESSES SAY?

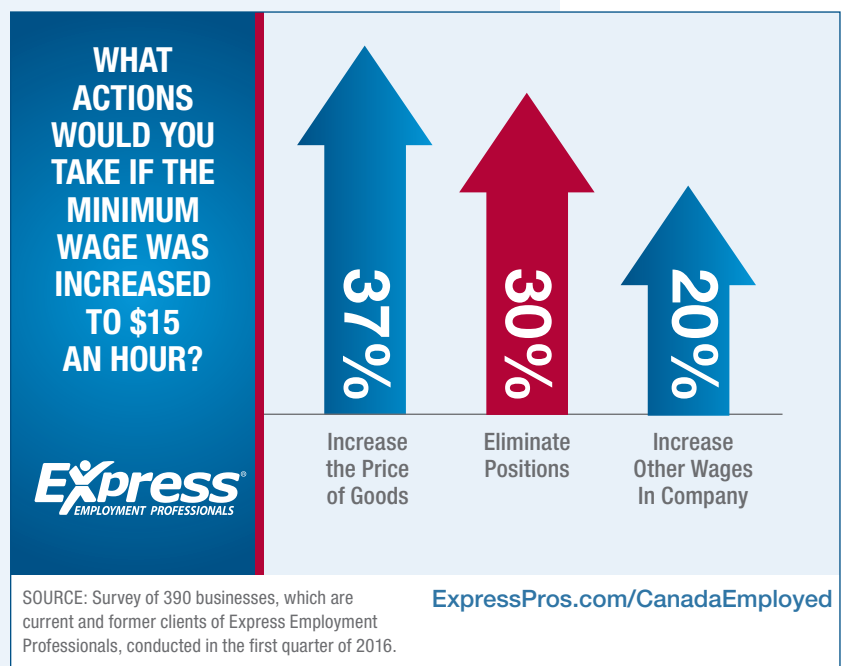
We have laid out what those on the front lines think and what some economic experts think, but what about other players in this debate?

What about businesses? What about the unemployed? What about the Canadian public?

Earlier this year, Express conducted a survey of businesses to get their opinion on the minimum wage. Respondents were asked, "What actions would you take if the minimum wage increased to \$15 an hour?"

More than a third (37 per cent) said they would increase the price of goods or services, and 30 per cent said they would eliminate positions. On the other hand, 20 per cent reported that they would increase other wages in their companies.

Of those surveyed, 18 per cent pay the current minimum wage for some positions, while 82 per cent do not.



CASE STUDY: ALBERTA

In 2014, the province of Alberta enacted a new \$15 minimum wage, set to come into effect gradually by 2018. Wages will rise incrementally from \$12.20 in 2016 to \$13.60 in 2017. Even though the policy is not yet fully in place, Alberta has provided a good case study for researchers interested in the observable effects of a substantial wage increase.

At a time when the provincial economy is experiencing significant challenges, several groups across different industries have cautioned against the wage hike. Many citing concerns that the \$15 wage would force them to cut jobs, raise prices or look for other ways to remain viable.

Restaurants Canada, an organization representing more than 10,000 local Alberta restaurants in an industry with 150,000 employees, predicts that a \$15 an hour minimum wage would “force the average restaurant with 25 employees to cut three jobs or reduce 3,300 hours.”²²

The province’s tourism industry is also expected to take a hit. The executive director of the Banff and Lake Louise Hospitality Association, Darren Reeder, said the hike would increase operating costs and signal to businesses that “more has to be done with less,” particularly at a time when Bow Valley is experiencing record high visits.²³

Recent analysis published by Maclean’s suggests that the province’s significant minimum wage hike will hinder rather than help Alberta’s economic situation. Combining Statistics Canada data for Alberta with employment modeling from three different sources, the analysis suggests Alberta could experience a loss of 1,475 to 58,500 jobs due to the \$15 minimum wage.²⁴

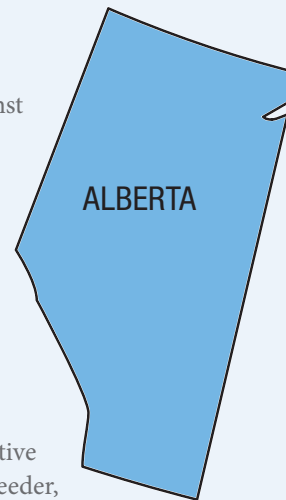


FIGURE 4:
ESTIMATED JOB LOSSES IN ALBERTA RESULTING FROM \$15 PER HOUR MINIMUM WAGE²⁵

ESTIMATING ALBERTA'S JOB LOSSES FROM \$15/HR MINIMUM WAGE BY 2018*					
	TOTAL	EMPLOYEES BY AGE COHORT			
		15-19	20-24	25-54	55+
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES BY AGE	1,900,000	100,000	200,000	1,300,000	300,000
Effective Real Increase in the Minimum Wage Inflation-adjusted increase from \$11.20 to \$15 in 2018		25.0%	25.0%	25.0%	25.0%
ESTIMATES USING TEEN ESTIMATES FROM DUBE ET AL. (2016)					
Employment Percentage Change (Per 10% minimum wage increase)		-0.59%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Employment Change (Non statistically significant)	-1,475	-1,475	0	0	0
ESTIMATES USING ESTIMATES FROM BROCHU & GREEN (2013)					
Employment Percentage Change (Per 10% minimum wage increase)		-2.50%	0.50%	0.00%	0.00%
Employment Change	-8,750	-6,250	2,500	0	0
ESTIMATES USING ESTIMATES FROM CF1B REPORT "REFRAMING THE DEBATE"					
Employment Percentage Change (Per 10% minimum wage increase)		-4.00%	-4.00%	-1.20%	1.40%
Employment Change (Non statistically significant)	-58,500	-10,000	-20,000	-39,000	10,500

*Using employment by age from CANISM 282-0151 and 282-0002. To estimate your own employment loss, apply this formula: X * (number from first row) *2.5, where X is whatever you think the sensitivity of employment is per 10% increase in the minimum wage.

The Alberta Chamber of Commerce has also studied the issue considerably. According to a survey of 1,500 Albertan businesses, nearly half said a \$15 minimum wage would cost them \$10,000 or less a year, 17 per cent claimed the increase would set them back in the range of \$10,000 to \$25,000 and almost 6 per cent responded that their business would lose more than \$200,000 a year.²⁶

Even Alberta government officials have advised the Minister of Labour of the potential harm a \$15 wage could have on provincial job creation. In a briefing note obtained by the CFIB, the Department of Labour states that "significant job loss is one realistic possibility" resulting from the wage hike.²⁷

And to make matters worse, there is a risk that those who benefit from the \$15 minimum wage will see a reduction in government benefits. Minimum wage earners bringing in \$15/hour risk eligibility for the Child Tax Benefit, GST Credit and the Working Income Tax Benefit.²⁸ All told, a single parent supporting one child would only bring in \$6,900 under a \$15 wage instead of \$9,600 in government benefits – a 40 per cent difference.

While other provinces and territories examine other methods aimed at lifting incomes, all eyes will be on Alberta to see how the new policy will unfold and the early evidence suggests that it is the wrong plan to help low earners and unemployed youth.

CONCLUSIONS:

There is no denying that momentum is growing for raising the minimum wage. Just a few years ago, a \$15 minimum wage was unthinkable. Today, the country's third-largest province has legislated a \$15 minimum wage.

Meanwhile, the debate continues at the federal and provincial levels with several groups in Ontario and other regions urging to follow suit. Our recommendations for policymakers are straightforward:

1. Pay attention to the unintended consequences.

Think about the entrepreneurs and small business owners who will struggle to hire. Think about the workers who will see their hours cut or their jobs replaced by automation. Think about the young person who will miss out on that formative early work experience because jobs are not available for them.

2. Avoid cookie-cutter solutions.

In a country as diverse as ours, one size does not fit all. Resist the temptation to assume what's good for Alberta is good for Quebec, or other provinces.

3. Focus on growth, and wages will follow.

A strong and robust economy is the best recipe for lifting wages. If we get the economy growing faster across the country, we can secure jobs for more workers. Higher wages will follow as the demand for labor rises.

4. Learn the lessons of early adopters.

In the coming years, more provinces and territories will move toward a \$15 minimum wage. Those without a \$15 minimum wage should watch closely. What are the negative consequences? Would the economy be stronger without the higher wage? Are businesses relocating—or are they adapting? Are other factors masking the consequences, good or bad? How have small businesses, the backbone of the Canadian economy, responded to the change?

5. Develop our workforce.

Workers without skills are at a disadvantage in the modern economy and are most susceptible to job loss and most likely to work for minimum wage. Our economic and education policies should focus on equipping these workers with in-demand skills. That will not only improve their employability, but also their potential to earn more for their families, regardless of minimum wage laws.

A government mandated minimum wage of \$15 per hour is a mistake because it will hurt the very people it intends to help. Too many existing jobs are at risk and many will never be created if governments veer toward an unproven and risky policy that forces businesses to pay more or downsize instead of growing with market demand.

We hope elected leaders will listen to those on the front lines of the job market and make economic growth that helps everyone the top priority, rather than policies that help a few.

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About Express Employment Professionals and Express in Canada

Express Employment Professionals puts people to work. It generated \$3.02 billion in sales and employed a record 500,002 people in 2015. Its long-term goal is to put a million people to work annually.

Express launched in Canada in July 1996, with a franchise in London, Ontario, and since then, has expanded and grown across Canada significantly. There are currently 37 Express franchises in Canada – six in British Columbia, five in Alberta, two in Saskatchewan, 23 in Ontario and one in Nova Scotia.



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