RESEARCH BRIEF
Moving Beyond $15: Comparing Hardships among Healthcare Workers Earning Below and Above $20/hour | July 2021

PURPOSE
The Fight for $15 focused attention on the struggles of many workers to make ends meet. Yet, the question remained: Is $15 an hour enough? The Pittsburgh Wage Study considered this question and found that workers making between $15.16 and $18.76 per hour did not experience fewer hardships than workers making less per hour across many measures (Is $15 Enough? Understanding the Struggles of Low-Wage Workers). In another analysis, our team used a basic needs budgeting calculator to assess the extent that hardships existed for families making above a basic needs budget and found that significant hardships remained (Can Healthcare Workers' Family Incomes Support Their Families?). This research brief extends those prior analyses to address a newer question: Is $20 per hour enough? We focus on differences in hardships among a sample of healthcare workers, comparing those making above and below $20/hour.

METHOD
This research brief uses data from the Healthcare COVID Survey, which was conducted from March 2021 through May 2021. Participants were recruited by email and by Hustle, a peer-to-peer text messaging system. The sample consists of 536 unionized healthcare workers, including nurses as well as service, clerical, and technical workers, from four Pittsburgh-area hospitals. The survey asked a series of questions regarding respondents' experiences of hardship during the last three months across multiple domains, such as finance, utility, medical care, housing, and essential expenses. Descriptive statistics were used to report the experience of material hardships among these workers and chi-square tests were used to compare the Below $20 and Above $20 groups on their experiences.

Note. Additional analyses compared 3 groups – Below $20, Between $20-$30, Above $30. The Below $20 group had a significantly higher number of hardships across all measures than both of the other groups. We report Below and Above $20 findings for simplicity of presentation.

KEY FINDINGS
- Compared with those above $20/hour, workers earning below $20/hour are more likely to be Black, tend to be younger, and are less likely to have a college degree.
- Workers below $20/hour experience more hardships than those above $20/hour.
- Food insecurity among workers below $20/hour is almost 3 times that of workers above $20/hour.
- Almost 90% of workers earning below $20/hour are financially insecure.
**BACKGROUND: BELOW $20 VS. ABOVE $20**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Below $20 (167 workers)</th>
<th>Above $20 (369 workers)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nurse. 19%</td>
<td>Service 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical. 19%</td>
<td>Clerical. 6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical. 18%</td>
<td>Technical. 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nurse. 75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Nurses** are more likely to earn **above $20** per hour. **Service, clerical, and technical workers** are more likely to earn **less than $20**.

In both groups, workers are **predominantly female**.

![Gender Distribution](image)

![Race/Ethnicity Distribution](image)

Most workers in both groups are White, but the **proportion of Black workers is higher in the Below $20 group**.

- Smaller race/ethnicity groups are included in the “Other” category, such as Latino/a, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American Indian, and multiracial.

Workers in the **Above $20 group** are **slightly older** than those in the Below $20.

![Age Distribution](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Median Age</th>
<th>31</th>
<th>37</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Below $20</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Above $20</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A larger proportion of the **Above $20 group** have an **associate degree or higher**.

![Education Distribution](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Had an Associate Degree or Higher</th>
<th>34%</th>
<th>83%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Below $20</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Above $20</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is a **huge difference (almost $13 an hour) in median wage levels** between the Below and Above $20 groups.*

![Median Hourly Wage](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Median Hourly Wage</th>
<th>$16.15</th>
<th>$29.19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Below $20</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Above $20</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also, there is an **enormous difference ($40,000) in the median annual household income** between the two groups.

![Median Household Income](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Median Household Income</th>
<th>$32,500</th>
<th>$72,500</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Below $20</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Above $20</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The range of hourly wage is $12.5-19.68 for the Below $20 group and $20-50 for the Above $20 group.
**Food Insecurity:** Almost half earning less than $20/hr worry about food

![Graph showing food insecurity](image)

**Housing Hardships:**
Over 20% earning less than $20/hr cannot pay rent or mortgage on time

![Graph showing housing hardships](image)

**Essential Expense Hardships:**
More than 1/3 earning less than $20/hr cannot afford essential expenses

![Graph showing essential expense hardships](image)

*Note: All comparisons presented are statistically significant at the .01 level.*
Utility & Medical Hardships and Overall Financial Insecurity

**Utility Hardships:** Over 1/3 earning less than $20/hr cannot pay their utilities

- Unable to pay utility bills on time: 28% below $20, 10% above $20
- Cell phone disconnected due to unpaid bills: 10% below $20, 3% above $20
- Unable to pay bills in full: 36% below $20, 16% above $20
- Any Utility Hardship: 42% below $20, 21% above $20

**Medical Hardships:** Almost 1/3 making less than $20/hr have medical debt

- Could not afford medical treatment: 16% below $20, 5% above $20
- Delayed/postponed needed medical care: 24% below $20, 16% above $20
- Could not afford prescription medications: 15% below $20, 4% above $20
- Owed money for medical treatment: 32% below $20, 20% above $20
- Any Medical Hardship: 42% below $20, 28% above $20

**Financial Insecurity: 80% making less than $20/hr live paycheck to paycheck**

- Living from paycheck to paycheck: 80% below $20, 54% above $20
- Not living comfortably within my budget: 54% below $20, 26% above $20
- An emergency would financially ruin me: 79% below $20, 53% above $20
- Any Financial Insecurity: 88% below $20, 65% above $20

*Note.* All comparisons presented are statistically significant at the .01 level.
The Below $20/hour and Above $20/hour groups were demographically different. The Below $20/hour group had a higher proportion of service/clerical/technical workers, male workers, and Black workers. Workers in the Above $20/hour group were slightly older and more likely to have higher education, earn higher wages, and report higher annual household income than those in the Below $20/hour group.

Workers earning less than $20/hour experienced more hardships than those earning above $20/hour. Most notably, almost half of workers earning below $20/hour were food insecure, while 17% of workers earning above $20/hour were food insecure. Housing hardships were not as prevalent as other forms of hardships. Still, housing hardships were more often reported by workers earning below $20/hour. Additionally, workers earning below $20/hour more often experienced hardships related to essential expenses such as transportation and clothes, utility bills, and medical care. Both groups experienced high levels of financial insecurity (Below $20: 88%; Above $20: 65%).

1. **$20/HOUR IS A BETTER GOAL IF WE WANT TO ALLEVIATE MATERIAL HARDSHIPS**

Workers earning above $20/hour had much lower levels of food insecurity, housing hardships, and essential expense hardships than those earning below $20/hour, suggesting that $20/hour is a better goal than $15/hour to alleviate material hardships among workers. Reducing hardships is essential because hardships are related to stress, health and mental health ([Pathways from Hardships to Health among Low-wage Workers](#)).

2. **WE NEED TO HELP STRUGGLING WORKERS PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE**

Nearly half of workers earning below $20 were concerned about food or cut the size of their meals or skip meals. We need to do more to make sure that food insecure workers have access to healthy food by increasing access to food assistance programs such as SNAP.

3. **WE NEED TO DO MORE TO ENSURE ACCESS TO QUALITY MEDICAL CARE**

Ironically, healthcare workers are often unable to afford medical care, with one-third of those earning below $20/hour and one-fifth of those earning above $20/hour reporting medical debt. Disturbing proportions of both groups have delayed or postponed needed medical treatment because of cost.

4. **WE NEED POLICIES TO PROMOTE WORKERS’ LONG-TERM FINANCIAL SECURITY**

With 80% of workers earning below $20/hour – and still over half of workers earning above $20/hour – living paycheck to paycheck, we need to continue to develop and advocate for social policies that provide long-term financial security for everyone and that ensure minimum wages are livable wages.