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Are low wages an occupational health hazard?

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Source: Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine

Summary: Low wages should be recognized as an occupational health threat, according to a new editorial. The authors believe that low wages should be considered among the psychosocial factors -- such as long work hours and high job strain -- identified as occupational risks to health.

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FULL STORY

Low wages should be recognized as an occupational health threat, according to an editorial in the May *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, official publication of the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (ACOEM).

"Workers earning low wages may be at greater risk for disease and injury than workers earning high wages," write J. Paul Leigh, PhD, and Roberto De Vogli, PhD, MPH, of University of California Davis School of Medicine. They believe that low wages should be considered among the psychosocial factors -- such as long work hours and high job strain -- identified as occupational risks to health.

While the reasons for the link between low wages and adverse health outcomes aren't clear, most hypotheses suggest that "[A]t least part of the correlation between wages and health can be attributed to low wages resulting in poor health or health behaviors rather than vice versa," the researchers write. Low wages may also have indirect health effects -- for example, if workers are forced to choose between essentials such as rent or healthy food.

Several lines of evidence suggest that higher wages lead to improvements in health or health behaviors. For example, a study using a "natural experiment" design found reduced anxiety and depression among people affected by an increase in the UK minimum wage. In addition to health benefits, higher wages have been shown to improve workplace outcomes such as absenteeism and productivity.

The link between low wages and health has important implications for legislation and policies related to minimum wage/living wage and labor unions, Drs. Leigh and De Vogli believe. Although there's room for debate as to how minimum wages affect overall employment, the researchers conclude, "There is little debate about the effects of hikes in minimum wages on the health of low-income employees."

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