Inadequate compensation and lack of benefits such as healthcare can have a significant impact on worker health. When people are forced to take multiple jobs to make ends meet, work long hours, and forego health care, most experience long-term stress. People under stress are more likely to become ill or injured. If workers become ill or injured and can’t get medical treatment, the stress only increases.

When individual workers suffer, the rest of society suffers as well. Public services are stretched beyond capacity, communities become weaker, and the quality of family life deteriorates.

How does the lack of decent wages and benefits affect health? Here are some recent findings:

**Low Wages Can Make Workers Sick**

- Stressful circumstances, like poor wages or lack of decision-making control over work, can expose workers to multiple psychosocial risks: anxiety, insecurity, worry. In the long run, these stressors increase the likelihood of serious health problems. Workers can experience cardiovascular problems and weakened immune systems. The stressors can also increase the risk of infections, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart attacks, strokes, and depression.
- Without decent wages, workers often have to work long hours, and may work more than one job. These extended hours of work do not allow for the time their bodies need to rest and recover. Insufficient rest can cause chronic fatigue, decreased vitality, depression, inattentiveness, and even serious mental illness.

**No Money, Poor Health**

A study compared the health status of poor women with that of women who had incomes above 200 percent of the federal poverty level. According to the authors:

“Poor women were more than three times as likely as nonpoor women to report fair or poor health. They were also significantly more likely to report such health conditions as hypertension, diabetes, arthritis, and heart disease. Thirty-four percent of participants reported the presence of two or more health conditions compared to 23 percent of nonpoor women.”
Work Stress and Disease

According to a study reported in the British Medical Journal, there may be a link between chronic job stress and heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain other conditions. Here are some highlights of the study:

- Researchers followed 10,308 British civil servants age 35-55 over a 14-year period to study the role of chronic job stress in the development of heart disease and type 2 diabetes.
- They examined the link between chronic job stress and metabolic syndrome, which is a group of factors that, together, increase the risk of these diseases. The factors in metabolic syndrome include high blood pressure, insulin resistance, central obesity (excessive abdominal fat), and others.
- They found that higher levels of job stress did indeed increase people’s chances of developing metabolic syndrome. The higher the stress level, the greater the risk.
- Social factors played a role as well. Subjects with higher status jobs were less likely to have the syndrome, and those with lower status jobs were at a higher risk.
- The authors suggest that these results may be explained by the effect of chronic stress on the body’s nervous system and/or hormonal balance, both of which can play a role in the development of metabolic syndrome.

Inadequate Health Benefits Can Aggravate Illness

- Without health coverage, including preventive and primary care, workers are more likely to ignore any health condition. This may lead to chronic physical and mental health issues. For example, diabetes, if diagnosed early, can be treated and even reversed. If left unaddressed, it can become life-threatening.
- Workers who have no health benefits are much less likely to seek prompt medical attention for job-related injuries and illnesses. Although the workers’ compensation system is intended to provide treatment for work-related conditions, accessing medical care through workers’ compensation has become increasingly difficult for workers. In practice, workers who fail to get workers’ compensation use health insurance to cover their medical care. If they don’t have health insurance, they don’t get care, period. Yet prompt medical attention for job injuries has proven to be a primary factor in limiting disability and supporting timely return to work.

Lack of Paid Sick Days Contributes to the Problem

- If workers do not have paid sick days, they are more likely to report to work sick. This makes it harder to maintain a healthy workplace. Sick workers are more likely to spread contagion to other workers. Each worker with the flu infects, on average, 2 out of every 10 coworkers.
- Sick workers employed in the service industry, especially food and retail, also risk spreading contagion to the public.
- Sick workers are more likely to have an accident on the job.

What Happens to People Without Health Insurance?

According to a state-by-state study reported recently in Hospitals and Health Networks:

- Nationally, 41% of uninsured adults said they could not see a doctor when they needed to in the past 12 months because of cost, compared to 9 percent of people who have health coverage.
- Nationally, 56% of adults without health care coverage said they do not have a personal doctor or health care provider, compared to 16% of people who have health coverage.
- Adults who are uninsured are much more likely to report being in poor or fair health than insured adults. Nationally, one in five uninsured adults said their health is poor compared to about one in nine adults who have health coverage.
Families Suffer

- Workers who do not earn enough at their primary job may need to have multiple jobs to support their families. Long work hours can reduce quality time with the family.\textsuperscript{xiv}

- To minimize expenses, low-wage workers may need to live with other families, sometimes creating overcrowded conditions. This can increase stress and contribute to the spread of infectious diseases.\textsuperscript{xv}

- Low-wage workers and their families are less likely to have safe and decent housing and access to good schools. They may need to live in areas that suffer from high rates of crime and violence. These workers’ children may not receive quality education because schools in these communities are often underfunded and lack resources.\textsuperscript{xvi}

Communities Suffer

- If workers do not receive wages that support their families, the community foots the bill through publicly-funded assistance programs. Families may be forced to depend on the state for services such as medical assistance, child care subsidies, and food.\textsuperscript{xvii}

- When workers are in ill health and/or are forced to work more than one job to make a living, they are unable to participate in civic life.

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**Inadequate Wages and Benefits Cost Everyone**\textsuperscript{xviii}

Jobs with low wages and few benefits can shift costs to the public. The University of California, Berkeley’s Center for Labor Research and Education has cited Wal-Mart as an example of the degradation of the quality of jobs:

**Low wages and benefits**

“Wal-Mart workers in California earn on average 31 percent less than workers employed in large retail as a whole, receiving an average wage of $9.70 per hour compared to the $14.01 average in large retail (firms with 1,000 or more employees). In addition, 23 percent fewer Wal-Mart workers are covered by employer-sponsored health insurance than large retail workers as a whole.”

**Reliance on public assistance**

“At these low wages, many Wal-Mart workers rely on public safety net programs—such as food stamps, Medi-Cal, and subsidized housing—to make ends meet. The presence of Wal-Mart stores in California thus creates a hidden cost to the state’s taxpayers.”

**Costs to society**

“Reliance by Wal-Mart workers on public assistance programs in California comes at a cost to the taxpayers of an estimated $86 million annually; this includes $32 million in health-related expenses and $54 million in other assistance. . . If other large California retailers adopted Wal-Mart’s wage and benefits standards, it would cost taxpayers an additional $410 million a year in public assistance to employees.”

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Living wage ordinances
Local laws in some communities establish a minimum “living” wage that can ensure a basic standard for worker income, and can sometimes require other benefits. These laws define and mandate a wage (higher than the federal or state minimum) that covers basic costs of housing, food, utilities, transportation, health care, and recreation. Several communities in the U.S. have been successful in passing living wage ordinances, citing the importance of maintaining public welfare, health, safety, and prosperity for workers and their families.\textsuperscript{xix}

For more information on living wage ordinances, contact:

\textbf{Economic Policy Institute}\nphone: (202) 775-8810\ne-mail: researchdept@epi.org\nweb: www.epi.org/content.cfm/issueguides_livingwage_livingwage

\textbf{Living Wage Resource Center}\nphone: (718) 246-7900 x230\ne-mail: natacorndc@acorn.org\nweb: www.livingwagecampaign.org/index.php?id=2071

\textbf{Santa Fe Living Wage Network}\nphone: (505) 983-9563\ne-mail: info@santafelivingwage.org\nweb: www.santafelivingwage.org/finalordinance.html

Collective bargaining agreements
These are legally-binding contracts established between workers and their employers. Contracts can cover various workplace issues including wages, health and safety conditions, grievance procedures, health benefits, and educational benefits. Unions or other groups (such as worker centers) are organizing low-wage workers to achieve such agreements. For more information on collective bargaining agreements, contact:

\textbf{AFL-CIO}\nphone: (202) 637-5000\ne-mail: http://www.aflcio.org/siteguides/contactus.cfm\nweb: www.aflcio.org

\textbf{Change to Win}\nphone: (202) 721-0660\ne-mail: info@changetowin.org\nweb: www.changetowin.org

\textbf{UC Berkeley Labor Center}\nphone: (510) 642-0323\ne-mail: laborcenter@berkeley.edu\nweb: www.laborcenter.berkeley.edu

How can we promote healthy jobs with decent wages and benefits?
Universal health care
This is health coverage which is extended to all eligible residents of a governmental region. Many systems are possible, some privately-operated, some publicly-operated, and some involving both private and public sectors. The U.S. is the only wealthy industrialized nation that does not provide some type of universal health care. Several organizations are actively promoting the adoption of a universal health care system in the U.S. For more information, contact:

Physicians for a National Health Program
phone: (312)-782-6006
e-mail: info@pnhp.org
web: www.pnhp.org

California Nurses Association/National Nurses Organizing Committee
phone: (510) 273-2200
e-mail: chicagooffice@nnoc.net
web: www.guaranteedhealthcare.org

American Public Health Association
phone: (202)-777-APHA
e-mail: comments@apha.org
web: www.apha.org/advocacy/reports/facts/advocacyfacthealthcare.htm

Employers, workers, and community leaders all have a stake in creating and protecting healthy jobs. Wages and benefits are critical components of the of worker health and well-being.

For more information or assistance in ensuring the health of your workplace, contact:

The Labor Occupational Health Program, UC Berkeley
phone: (510) 643-2929
e-mail: info@lohp.org
web: www.lohp.org


xi Ibid.

xii Ibid.


xvii Dresser L. When work doesn’t pay; The hidden cost of low-wage jobs in Wisconsin. COWS: Center on Wisconsin Strategy with UC Berkeley Labor Center. 2006: 1-2, 4.
