



Economic Security for Black and Hispanic Families

By Molly Cain and Sunny Frothingham June 2016

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

One of the biggest concerns for millions of working parents across the United States is their families' economic security, especially as costs increase and incomes stagnate. Many black and Hispanic families face an even more challenging path to financial stability and economic prosperity, as they typically face lower median incomes and higher poverty and unemployment rates. These families should have the opportunity to achieve economic security. Progressive policies—such as paid family and medical leave; paid sick days; increased access to high-quality, affordable child care; and fair wages—would help offer them that opportunity. Unfortunately, conservative policies fail to substantively address—and at times even exacerbate—the challenges that families of color face. Through obstructionism, poor policy proposals, and program cuts, many conservatives create additional hurdles for black and Hispanic families.

Black and Hispanic families are major groups within the rising American electorate—which includes Millennials, people of color, and women—and will have an increasing impact on future elections. The voting power of nonwhite voters is growing, and their policy priorities will affect elections now more than ever.¹ In 2016, nearly one in three eligible voters on Election Day will be a person of color.² Among women voters, 74 percent of newly eligible voters since 2000 will be women of color.³ While work-family policies poll well with American voters overall, new polling finds that these issues are especially compelling for black and Hispanic women voters. This spring, Latino Decisions conducted a groundbreaking poll for the Center for American Progress of black and Hispanic women who are registered to vote across four battleground states in the 2016 election: Colorado, Nevada, Virginia, and Florida.⁴ The poll explored key policy priorities for black and Hispanic women, above and beyond well-established support around issues such as immigration reform and civil rights.⁵ Latino Decisions finds that black and Hispanic women face significant sources of work-related worry and hardship due to an absence of paid sick leave, a lack of reliable child care, and low pay. Nearly 90 percent of black and Hispanic women voters said that the economic well-being of working families was the “top most important priority” or “one of a

few important priorities” for the next president. And data from the polling suggest that both communities, like members of other American demographics, strongly support action on issues related to economic security. The poll showed high support for policies such as paid family and medical leave, affordable child care, and equal pay—policies that conservative elected officials frequently have opposed.

This report explores the economic challenges that black and Hispanic families disproportionately face and how these challenges are only made worse by conservative policies—or conservative obstructionism of progressive policies—across an array of economic security issues. Below is a brief summary of the inadequacy of conservative policies, which the following report will elucidate in greater detail:

- **Paid family and medical leave.** Black and Hispanic workers, like every worker, should not have to choose between work and caring for themselves during an illness, caring for a new baby, or caring for an ill family member. Without paid family and medical leave, however, too many workers face impossible choices between work and family. Instead of supporting comprehensive paid family and medical leave, conservatives have proposed insufficient alternatives—such as “pregnancy 401(k)s” and tax incentives—that would do little to help black and Hispanic workers balance work and family.
- **Paid sick leave.** Black and Hispanic workers are, on average, less likely to have access to paid sick days than white workers. All workers need to be able to earn paid sick leave so that they do not have to choose between a necessary paycheck and their health. Instead, conservative proposals rely on compensatory time, or “comp time,” which requires workers to work extra hours without pay in order to possibly take off time in the future—and there are no requirements on employers to actually allow workers to take it. Comp time fails to provide the support workers need or to keep families and workplaces healthy.
- **Child care.** In 2015, child care for an infant and a preschooler in a child care center cost, on average, more than one-half of the median income for black households with children and nearly one-half of the median income for Hispanic households with children.⁶ Conservative policies would do little to make child care more affordable for black and Hispanic families, as they have sought to slash federal funding for state child care programs, a move that puts child care further out of reach.⁷

- **Pay equity.** Even as they are working hard to support their families, black and Hispanic women are not paid fairly compared with white, non-Hispanic men. Conservatives have obstructed comprehensive attempts to address this wage gap and instead have offered limited proposals that would do little to change the status quo.⁸
- **Unions.** Workers, especially black and Hispanic women, earn more money, on average, when they are members of a union. Despite this fact, conservatives have continued to attack unions through right-to-work laws and other legislation, undermining wages for black and Hispanic women.
- **Overtime.** In May 2016, the U.S. Department of Labor announced its final rule expanding overtime protections for workers, which would directly benefit nearly one-third of all salaried black and Hispanic workers if implemented as planned in December 2016.⁹ Yet as soon as the rule was announced, conservatives in Congress mobilized to delay or block it, undermining millions of black and Hispanic workers' ability to be paid for overtime hours they work.¹⁰
- **Minimum wage.** If the federal minimum wage were increased to \$12 by 2020, more than one-third of black and Hispanic workers would receive a raise.¹¹ Despite the benefits, however, conservatives have consistently opposed increasing the federal minimum wage.

With declining median household incomes and a variety of other economic challenges, black and Hispanic families need more than the insufficient policies and outright obstructionism offered by conservative lawmakers, which do not give black and Hispanic women the tools they need to strengthen their families' economic security. This report examines the challenges these families face, as well as the gap between conservative rhetoric and the economic realities of black and Hispanic working families.

Elusive economic security

Working- and middle-class families across the country are being economically squeezed by rising costs and stagnant wages. Black and Hispanic families, in particular, face economic insecurity due to the fact that they have lower median incomes than white, non-Hispanic families, and their median incomes have fallen faster than white families' incomes over the past decade.

In 2014, the median household income for black families was \$35,481, more than \$24,000 less than the median household income for white, non-Hispanic households, who earned an average of \$59,622 that year. The median Hispanic household income was \$42,748 in 2014, nearly \$17,000 less.¹²

Not only is the income gap between white families and black and Hispanic families significant, but it also has grown substantially over the past decade, causing black and Hispanic families to fall even further behind. From 2006 to 2014, the median household incomes for black, Hispanic, and white families all declined.¹³ During the same time period, however, the median household income for black and Hispanic families declined by more than twice the rate that the median household income for white, non-Hispanic families declined.¹⁴ If black and Hispanic median household incomes had fared as well as the white, non-Hispanic median household income over this time period, they would have been nearly \$1,400 higher in 2014.¹⁵

Between outdated work-family policies, lack of paid sick days, rising child care costs, and lower incomes, black and Hispanic families are feeling squeezed. Without policy solutions to update the nation's workplace protections and practices, many black and Hispanic families are working harder than ever only to find themselves falling further behind.

If black and Hispanic median household incomes had fared as well as the white, non-Hispanic median household income over this time period, they would have been nearly \$1,400 higher in 2014.

Black and Hispanic families face extra challenges to economic security



Gender pay gap

Black and Hispanic women working full time, year round earn just **60 cents** and **55 cents**, respectively, for every \$1 earned by white, non-Hispanic men.

In comparison, the pay gap between white, non-Hispanic women and white, non-Hispanic men is **79 cents**.

Over the course of a 40-year career, this adds up to almost **\$900,000** in lost wages for black women and **more than \$1 million** in lost wages for Hispanic women.

Families are more likely to rely on a female breadwinner

67 percent of black mothers serve as the primary breadwinners for their families, and a full **83 percent** act as primary or co-breadwinners for their families.



43 percent of Hispanic mothers are primary breadwinners for their families, and **61 percent** are either primary or co-breadwinners.



In comparison, **36 percent** of all mothers in the United States are primary breadwinners, while **62 percent** are either primary or co-breadwinners.



Unemployment

In May 2016, the national unemployment rate was **4.7 percent**.

However, in that same month, **8.2 percent** of black people and **5.6 percent** of Hispanic people in the labor force were unemployed and looking for a job.

National



Black people



Hispanic people



Poverty

32.1 percent of black families with children and **28 percent** of Hispanic families with children are facing poverty, which is significantly more than the **11.7 percent** of white, non-Hispanic families with children facing poverty.



Child care

In 2015, child care for a family with two children enrolled in a child care center cost an average of **\$17,852**, or:

- **Nearly one-fourth** of the median income of white, non-Hispanic households with children
- **More than one-half** of the median income of black households with children
- **Nearly half** of the median income of Hispanic households with children

Black children are the most likely demographic of children to be enrolled in low-quality child care programs and the least likely to be enrolled in high-quality child care programs.

Hispanic children are less likely than their peers to have access to child care in general.



Median household income

In 2014, the median black household earned **\$35,481**, and the median Hispanic household earned **\$42,748**.

In comparison, the median white, non-Hispanic household earned **\$59,622**.



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Paid sick days

46 percent of Hispanic workers and **62 percent** of black workers have access to paid sick days.

In comparison, **63 percent** of white workers have access to paid sick days.

The significant challenges of conservative policies

Instead of acting to help black and Hispanic families get ahead, conservatives have obstructed policies that would strengthen the economic security of these families. By contrast, conservatives offer policies that provide no help or make it even harder for these families to climb the economic ladder, such as tax incentives for businesses or personal savings accounts instead of comprehensive paid family and medical leave and comp time instead of paid sick days.

Black and Hispanic families need progressive policies that strengthen their economic security. Policies such as comprehensive paid leave, paid sick days, affordable child care, and equal pay legislation would help these families better balance work and family expenses. And progressive policies such as strengthening unions, following the Department of Labor's new overtime rule, and increasing the federal minimum wage could help raise incomes for black and Hispanic families.

Paid family and medical leave

Every employee potentially will need time off from work to recover from an illness, take care of a new baby, or care for a sick partner or family member. Without paid family and medical leave—which only 12 percent of private-sector workers have—many workers must make impossible choices between taking care of their families and keeping their jobs.¹⁶ According to the recent Latino Decisions polling, 79 percent of black women voters and 75 percent of Hispanic women voters report that a paid family and medical leave insurance program would benefit families such as theirs.¹⁷ But conservative proposals such as tax incentives for businesses with qualifying programs¹⁸ and pregnancy 401(k)s,¹⁹ as detailed below—miss the mark on providing the stability families need.

Formerly introduced by Sen. Deb Fischer (R-NE) and Sen. Angus King (I-ME) as the Strong Families Act and most recently championed by former Republican presidential candidate Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL), tax incentives for businesses that

expand paid family and medical leave are the main conservative response to these challenges. Unfortunately, tax incentives alone are unlikely to be enough to compel employers to embrace paid family and medical leave or to expand leave for the families that need it the most.²⁰ Providing a nonrefundable tax credit to businesses that voluntarily offer 4 weeks to 12 weeks of paid family leave to their workers might encourage certain companies to implement paid family and medical leave, but all American families deserve a fair shot—not only those whose employers choose to participate. Employers who invest in their workers already know that paid family and medical leave is good for business. After New Jersey implemented a paid family leave policy, many employers reported increases in morale and decreased stress levels.²¹ Tax incentives for businesses are not enough to compel employers who do not offer paid family and medical leave to start doing so. This is especially true for low-wage employers, whose workers stand to benefit the most from guaranteed paid family and medical leave.²²

Other plans by conservative organizations suggest making workers save up to fund their own paid family and medical leave after having a child, much like a 401(k). In this proposal, known as a pregnancy 401(k), workers would set up and contribute to “Personal Care Accounts,” which they could draw on later to supplement their income when they took unpaid, job-protected leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act to provide care for a family member or a new baby.²³ Like the tax incentives for business discussed above, this proposal likely also would fail to address working families’ need for paid family and medical leave. Accounts structured like this generally benefit families who are already financially secure. For example, two-thirds of 401(k) tax benefits, which also tend to contain personal savings, go to the top 20 percent of households by income.²⁴ And workers in higher-wage jobs who have the ability to save in these types of accounts are also more likely to have paid family and medical leave in the first place:²⁵ The top 20 percent of earners are five times more likely to have paid sick days and four times more likely to have paid vacation than the bottom 20 percent of earners.²⁶ In addition, because workers tend to have children fairly early on in their working years—and far before the peak earning periods of their careers²⁷—the average worker would not be able to contribute very much to these accounts before having a child, and there would be very little time for contributions to compound enough to make a difference.²⁸ While retirement savings are different because employers—especially high-wage employers—also often pay into them, they are an instructive example here: According to an Urban Institute analysis, black and Hispanic families are even less likely to benefit from a 401(k) account. In 2013,

white families had more than 10 times the liquid retirement savings of Hispanic families and almost 7 times the liquid retirement savings of black families.²⁹ Paid family and medical leave is a worthwhile investment in America's working women and families, but plans such as tax incentives for businesses and pregnancy 401(k)s are empty promises for black and Hispanic families.

As laid out by CAP and the National Partnership for Women & Families, a true paid family and medical leave solution must: be available to all workers; contain specific language to cover serious family and medical needs; be affordable and cost effective; be inclusive of diverse family dynamics; and be accessible to workers without adverse employment consequences.³⁰ Today, there are two models which would meet these conditions and implement the comprehensive paid family and medical leave that working families need: a national social insurance model and a publicly funded program. Almost 150 progressive lawmakers have co-sponsored the Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act, or FAMILY Act, introduced by Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), which would set up a national social insurance fund for paid family and medical leave.³¹ Under the act, employers and employees would both pay into the program—as with Social Security—ensuring that workers across sectors and income levels would have access to paid family and medical leave, not only those whose employers do the right thing.³² Another possibility for comprehensive paid family and medical leave is the publicly funded model. One example of the publicly funded model is the business-government partnership outlined in the recent CAP report “Administering Paid Family and Medical Leave,” which draws on Australia’s paid family and medical leave approach. The program would be administered by federal agencies in coordination with employers to efficiently expand paid family and medical leave to all eligible employees.³³ Both the FAMILY Act and the business-government partnership are designed to ensure that every family has a chance at economic prosperity—whereas conservatives are pushing for paid family and medical leave programs that do not actually require paid leave.

In 2013, white families had more than 10 times the liquid retirement savings of Hispanic families and almost 7 times the liquid retirement savings of black families.

Paid sick leave

All working families, especially black and Hispanic families, need access to paid sick leave, but 38 percent of black, private-sector workers and 54 percent of Hispanic private-sector workers lack even one paid sick day.³⁴ And conservative proposals centered on compensatory time are not enough. According to the Latino Decisions

polling, black and Hispanic women strongly support paid sick leave. In four key battleground states, 77 percent of black women voters and 74 percent of Hispanic women voters said that requiring all employers to “allow all workers to earn up to seven paid sick days a year” would help families such as theirs.³⁵

Unfortunately, comp time—a go-to conservative policy response to paid sick days—fails to ensure that workers have enough flexibility or paid time off for family or personal medical emergencies. Conservative lawmakers have offered two pending comp time legislative proposals: Under Sen. Mike Lee’s (R-UT) Working Families Flexibility Act and Sen. Kelly Ayotte’s (R-NH) Family Friendly and Workplace Flexibility Act,³⁶ workers who are eligible for overtime under the Fair Labor Standards Act may be able to work extra hours without pay in exchange for future paid time off. However, workers would not be able to use their earned compensatory time whenever they need it; instead, they would have to seek approval from their employers, who would not be required to grant requests made for medical or family reasons. Comp time proposals put family and personal decisions in the hands of employers—instead of allowing employees to access paid sick days when they need them. Working additional hours without pay puts yet another pressure on families trying to make ends meet—especially families that have to pay a child care provider to cover those extra hours. Many working families are already strained by unpredictable hours and work schedules, which undermine their ability to balance work and family, especially in a crisis, a related issue that progressive leaders such as Sens. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Tom Harkin (D-IA) have worked to address with the Schedules That Work Act.³⁷

Like paid family and medical leave, paid sick days are critical for working parents, allowing them to take time off to recover from an illness or care for a sick child without risking their jobs or their paychecks. But today, about 43 million U.S. employees—or around 40 percent of the nation’s workforce, including 54 percent of Hispanic workers—do not have access to paid sick days.³⁸ The key provision of paid sick time is that workers are able to take leave when a crisis arises, enabling them to better meet work and family responsibilities. In addition, paid sick days are good for business and the broader economy. Without them, employers face lost productivity, increased spread of infection, higher health care costs, and increased turnover.³⁹ When workers are not forced to choose between their income and their health or their family’s health, they are more likely to stay in their jobs, providing stability for families and employers.⁴⁰ Where comp time

falls short, earned paid sick days—as outlined/proposed in the Healthy Families Act, introduced by Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) and Rep. DeLauro⁴¹—provides a common-sense solution that enables families to remain financially stable, plan for the future, and recover from emergencies together.⁴²

Child care

As black and Hispanic workers balance their job and family responsibilities, accessing high-quality, affordable child care is critical to make ends meet. According to the Latino Decisions polling, more than two-thirds of black and Hispanic women voters in key states report that universal prekindergarten for every 3- and 4-year-old child would help families such as theirs. The response to tax credits to make child care more affordable was even stronger, with 75 percent of black women voters and 71 percent of Hispanic women voters reporting that the tax credits would help families such as theirs.⁴³ For a family with an infant and a preschooler, the average center-based child care costs exceed median rent in every state and can be an especially heavy burden for parents of color.⁴⁴ Today, almost two out of three children under age 6 have all available parents in the workforce—which means that most families do not have a full-time stay-at-home caregiver—and the vast majority of parents need high-quality, affordable child care to gain economic security.⁴⁵

In addition to strengthening working families, child care is a great investment: Research suggests that children who participate in high-quality early learning programs gain anywhere from 4 to 12 additional months of reading and math skills,⁴⁶ and high-quality programs also can boost children’s social-emotional development and physical health.⁴⁷ However, the United States is one of the few developed countries in the world that has not invested significantly in early childhood education and care programs—despite strong evidence that early childhood programs work, when they are adequately funded. The programs that the United States currently has—such as the Child Care and Development Block Grant, or CCDBG,⁴⁸ and the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, or CDCTC—only reach a small number of the families who need assistance and are not enough to cover child care costs.⁴⁹ And conservatives stymie even these investments, as they continue to oppose or stall substantial investments in early childhood programs, including President Barack Obama’s proposal to triple the CDCTC for families and expand the CCDBG to reach all low-income children within 10 years.⁵⁰ Far from supporting child care programs that would help black and Hispanic families

For a family with an infant and a preschooler, the average center-based child care costs exceed median rent in every state and can be an especially heavy burden for parents of color.

get the child care they need, conservatives have sought to undercut funding for existing child care programs. Previous versions of the House majority’s budget proposed to undermine federal government funding for state child care programs by combining funds used for child care and other social safety net programs with block grants that could reduce the funding made available to states for assisting low-income families.⁵¹

Congressional majority leaders also have failed to embrace progressive solutions or offer any alternatives to extend child care to all children. By contrast, the Child Care Access to Resources for Early Learning, or Child CARE, Act, as introduced by Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA) and Rep. Joe Crowley (D-NY), would extend child care to all children in families earning below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.⁵² Another promising alternative, as CAP has proposed in recent products, would create a High-Quality Child Care Tax Credit, which would go to low-income and middle-class families to provide them with affordable, high-quality child care, including many black and Hispanic families.⁵³

Research shows that high-quality child care works, but as long as conservatives underfund child care and preschool year after year, the resulting programs will continue to be inherently limited in scope and impact. As a nation, the ability to lay the groundwork for a strong future workforce and provide relief for families who are struggling depends on Congress’ commitment to providing adequate resources and promoting quality child care.

Ensuring fair wages

Black and Hispanic families, on average, have lower household incomes than white, non-Hispanic families. Over the past decade, their median household income has declined at a faster rate than that of white, non-Hispanic families, further undermining their economic security.⁵⁴ In light of this economic context, it is clear that raising wages for black and Hispanic workers—especially black and Hispanic women, many of whom serve as primary or co-breadwinners for their families—would strengthen the economic security of these families.⁵⁵

Polling shows that black and Hispanic women want policymakers to address wages. In the recent Latino Decisions poll, more than 60 percent of black and Hispanic women voters surveyed said that a “significant” challenge they face is low pay. Additionally, the poll found that black and Hispanic women agreed that the top economic issue politicians should address in the 2016 election is low wages and the lack of well-paying jobs.⁵⁶

Progressive policy solutions—such as passing comprehensive pay equity legislation, strengthening unions, expanding overtime protections to more workers, and raising the federal minimum wage—would help raise wages for black and Hispanic workers, thereby helping strengthen the economic security of black and Hispanic families. Instead of supporting these progressive policies, however, conservatives either have proposed insufficient alternatives or have obstructed them outright, instead of supporting real, effective policies.

Pay equity

Fair pay should be a basic, fundamental protection for all workers. But even as women are working hard to support their families, women are paid less than men in all but one occupation for the 535 occupations for which data are available.⁵⁷ And black and Hispanic women face even larger median income gaps than women overall in comparison with white, non-Hispanic men. Pay equity would strengthen all working families, especially black and Hispanic families, who are more likely to face steeper wage gaps and more likely to have a mother as the family’s primary breadwinner.⁵⁸ Unsurprisingly, black and Hispanic women are strongly in favor of strengthening equal pay laws. According to the Latino Decisions poll, 83 percent of black women voters and 77 percent of Hispanic women voters said that strengthening the law to ensure equal pay for equal work would benefit families such as theirs.⁵⁹

The wage gap is complex and requires comprehensive solutions that address the realities of working families today, including strengthening legal protections to protect workers from discrimination, as well as implementing a broader range of workplace policies that support working families. Unfortunately, since the passage of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act in 2009,⁶⁰ there has been very little substantive movement in Congress regarding equal pay.

Instead of embracing comprehensive progressive proposals in Congress, a few conservative lawmakers have put forward their own, more limited proposals, perhaps as cover for the lack of action regarding pay equity. The Workplace Advancement Act, introduced by Sen. Fischer, purports to protect employees from retaliation for discussing pay—but only if they can show that they were trying to find out if their employer is providing equal pay for equal work. This proposal is overly narrow, and it is not clear if it would protect employees in other situations, such as more general conversations about pay. Without more clear and robust protections, employees could still be subject to retaliation for discussing pay.⁶¹ Sen. Ayotte’s Gender Advancement in Pay Act includes additional provisions purportedly to address employer defenses and penalties, but the provisions are inadequate and the bill, overall, is far from the comprehensive solution to the pay gap that black and Hispanic families need. The bill would moderately increase penalties on bad employers but likely not enough to deter unfair pay practices. The bill purports to close existing loopholes that allow employers to justify pay disparities by including a provision that would require employers to show that such disparities are business related. However, this standard is still loose enough to allow employers to rationalize pay differences. Further, the bill would do little to strengthen civil rights enforcement overall, such as by requiring employers to disclose pay data that enforcement agencies can use to ensure compliance with the law.⁶²

Two strong proposals—the Fair Pay Act, introduced by Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.) and the Paycheck Fairness Act—were designed to address many of the remaining barriers to equal pay for workers. Both bills would bolster protections for workers who talk openly about their pay—employers currently can punish workers for discussing their compensation—and increase the damages available to victims of discrimination. The Fair Pay Act would protect workers from being misclassified by broadening the understanding of “equal work” to “equivalent work.”⁶³ The Paycheck Fairness Act, as introduced by Sen. Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) and Rep. DeLauro, would require employers to demonstrate a business necessity and job-related reason for pay differences, as well as require employers to report pay data on a regular basis.⁶⁴ Both bills contain critical steps forward in combating pay discrimination and strengthening economic security for millions of American families. In recent years, however, congressional leadership generally has opposed these policies.

Ultimately, congressional obstruction of comprehensive action on pay equity means less stability for working families, especially black and Hispanic families, who face the steepest gaps. Moving forward, a comprehensive approach to pay

equity should include policies such as those that promote transparency; require pay disclosure; clarify the meaning of equal work to reflect today's workplace; protect workers who ask about pay practices; ensure that any disparities are business related; and target enforcement efforts where they are most needed.⁶⁵ Conservative plans—even those that incorporate some of these elements, such as Sen. Ayotte's—continue to fall short of meeting working families' need for fair pay.

Unions

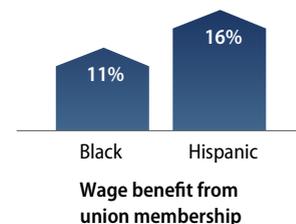
As inequality grows and middle-class incomes continue to stagnate, unions are more important than ever to help boost workers' wages and benefits, especially for black and Hispanic women workers. Unions help workers secure higher wages and better benefits, which is incredibly important today as families are squeezed by rising costs and stagnating wages. However, union membership has been declining: In 2015, the percentage of private-sector workers in unions in the United States was almost one-fourth of its 1973 level.⁶⁶ The disappearance of unions hurts working- and middle-class families. In fact, declining union coverage explains about one-third of the falling share of middle-class workers.⁶⁷

Unions are beneficial, not only for black and Hispanic families but for all families as well. They are also popular among all Americans.⁶⁸ And their impacts align with black and Hispanic women's policy preferences: According to the Latino Decisions poll, black and Hispanic women want politicians to address low wages and the pay gap, two issues that unions help mitigate.⁶⁹

Unions are especially important for black and Hispanic families: Workers in unions earn more, on average, than workers who are not in unions—especially black and Hispanic women workers. On average, black women earn 11 percent higher wages if they are union members. And Hispanic women workers' wages are 16 percent higher in unions, on average.⁷⁰ Additionally, unions help close the gender wage gap for black and Hispanic women: The wage gap between black women and white, non-Hispanic men is nearly 14 percent smaller for workers in a union; the wage gap between Hispanic women and white, non-Hispanic men is 34 percent smaller.⁷¹ Conservatives have made attacking unions a cornerstone of their economic policy. In recent history, conservatives have launched an unprecedented attack on unions and have obstructed the process to improve workers' collective bargaining rights. Last March, 53 Senate Republicans voted to kill a National Labor Relations Board rule to streamline the union election process and make it harder for employers to undermine their employees' collective bargaining rights.⁷²

FIGURE 1
Unions raise wages for black and Hispanic women

Average raise above similar nonunion workers



Note: Analysis includes controls for age, age squared, gender, marital status, education, race, industry, occupation, metropolitan area status, part-time status, and region.

Sources: Authors' analysis of wage benefits using Center for Economic and Policy Research, "Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group Extract" (2015), available at <http://ceprdata.org/cps-uniform-data-extracts/cps-outgoing-rotation-group/cps-org-data/>. Model based on Barry T. Hirsch and Edward J. Schumacher, "Match Bias in Wage Gap Estimates Due to Earnings Imputation," *Journal of Labor Economics* 22 (3) (2004): 689–722, available at http://www2.gsu.edu/~ecobth/JOLE_Match%20Bias%20200307.pdf.

At the state level, conservatives are leading the attacks on unions, especially through right-to-work laws.⁷³ Right-to-work laws allow some workers to receive the benefits of unions—including higher wages and better benefits—without shouldering the costs of negotiating the contracts, which undermines the ability of unions to bargain collectively for their workers.⁷⁴ Conservative governors in 13 states passed legislation undermining public-sector-employee unions, and Indiana and Michigan passed right-to-work laws, all in 2011 and 2012.⁷⁵ Overall, 25 states have passed right-to-work legislation that undermines their unions.⁷⁶ Former Republican presidential candidate and current Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker has been one of the loudest opponents of unions, signing a law making Wisconsin a right-to-work state; a Dane County Circuit judge struck it down in 2016.⁷⁷ Conservative think tanks also have supported right-to-work laws. In a Senate hearing, a representative from the Heritage Foundation said in his testimony to support right-to-work laws that unions “hurt low-income and middle-income workers,” despite the fact that research shows being in a union gives low- and middle-income workers a clear wage benefit.⁷⁸

Overtime

One clear solution to ensure that more black and Hispanic workers are paid fairly for the hours they work is to implement the Department of Labor’s new overtime rule, which would directly benefit 12.5 million American workers and extend overtime benefits to 4.2 million workers.⁷⁹ Overtime protections have eroded over the past several decades: In 1975, 62 percent of full-time workers qualified for overtime pay based on their salary, compared with only 7 percent of full-time workers today.⁸⁰ The rule updates overtime protections to cover millions more American workers by doubling the overtime salary threshold, which is the salary level under which most salaried workers are guaranteed compensation for the overtime hours they work.⁸¹ According to analysis from the Economic Policy Institute, the new overtime protections would directly benefit 1.5 million black workers and 2 million Hispanic workers, or nearly one-third of salaried black and Hispanic workers. Black and Hispanic workers disproportionately benefit from these new overtime protections, as do women and younger workers, because these groups are now likely to earn salaries that fall under the new overtime threshold.⁸²

Despite the fact that the new overtime rule will give many black and Hispanic families a raise, conservatives opposed the Department of Labor’s expanded protections as soon as they were announced. House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-WI), who lamented that American families “never get a raise” when he was sworn in

as speaker in 2015,⁸³ was a vocal critic of the rule, calling it “an absolute disaster”⁸⁴ and announcing his commitment to “fighting this rule.”⁸⁵ After the rule was announced, Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN) said that he would introduce a motion to overturn it and was “looking for every way [members of Congress] can to block it.”⁸⁶ Additionally, congressional majority leaders may also be planning to attach a rider to an appropriations bill to block the rule.⁸⁷ This effort directly contradicts the policy preferences of black and Hispanic women voters, who want politicians to address low wages and the lack of well-paying jobs.⁸⁸

Minimum wage

Increasing the federal minimum wage is another important policy that would help raise black and Hispanic families’ incomes, especially because it would help more black and Hispanic women earn higher wages. Still, conservatives oppose increasing the federal minimum wage above \$7.25 per hour. When asked at a 2014 fundraiser about the minimum wage, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) dismissed it and implied that efforts to raise the minimum wage were a waste of time: “We’re not going to be debating all these gosh darn proposals.”⁸⁹ Also in 2014, all but one senator in the majority voted to kill an increase in the federal minimum wage, whereas all senators in the minority voted in favor.⁹⁰ Conservative-leaning think tanks also have attacked the minimum wage. The Heritage Foundation went so far as to say that the minimum wage “is a completely ineffective anti-poverty policy.”⁹¹ Although conservatives’ doomsday rhetoric implies that raising the minimum wage would kill jobs, a review of the past two decades of research indicates that this is untrue.⁹² In fact, there is very scant evidence that raising the federal minimum wage leads to fewer jobs.⁹³

Despite opposition from conservatives, raising the minimum wage would help many black and Hispanic families. If the federal minimum wage were increased to \$12 per hour by 2020, more than one-third of black and Hispanic workers would receive a raise.⁹⁴ And women are the majority of the 35 million workers who would benefit from an increase in the federal minimum wage.⁹⁵

Conclusion

Between lower wages and rising costs for the basics of middle-class life, black and Hispanic families are being economically squeezed now more than ever. Nearly 9 out of 10 black and Hispanic women voters in the four battleground states surveyed by Latino Decisions say that the economic well-being of working families is one of their top priorities in the upcoming election, and a large majority reported that progressive policies such as paid family and medical leave, affordable child care, and equal pay would help families such as theirs. These communities are poised to have an unprecedented impact on the presidential election, and they demand policies and politicians that take their families' needs seriously. The next president will have an opportunity to drive critical updates to American workplace standards, which have fallen too far behind the needs and realities of the working families that drive the U.S. economy forward. By catalyzing the implementation of smart work-family policies and ensuring fair pay for all workers, our next president can continue the Obama administration's legacy of supporting working families and help struggling families build a strong foundation for their futures. As long as conservatives continue to stand in the way of progressive solutions that would help black and Hispanic families get ahead, they stand in the way of their economic security.

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The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

