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RELEASE; February 28

TEENAGE UNEMPLOYMENT

The high unemployment rate of black teenagers is one of the most tragic blots on our present economy. In the age group of black youths age 16 to 24, unemployment is over 28 percent. In some urban areas, black youth unemployment is estimated as high as 60 percent.

The large differential between black and white teenage unemployment is a recent phenomenon. In the 1940s and 1950s, the unemployment of black teenagers was not significantly different from white teenagers. Black youth labor force participation was then higher than labor force participation of white youths.

The reason for the difference cannot be that our country is more racially discriminatory in employment and education than several decades ago. Surely the opposite is true.

Several recent studies by economics scholars provide impressive data which show that the real cause is the artificial minimum wage law. Although the studies vary in their numerical estimates, their consensus is that the minimum wage law operates to hurt the very people it is supposed to help.

The strongest supporters of the minimum wage law are the labor unions whose members are unaffected by it because they are already making well over the minimum wage. Among the strongest opponents are 61 percent of academic economists. Although generally supportive of government welfare programs, their analysis of economic data has convinced them of the correlation between minimum wage laws and teenage unemployment.

If wages of $2.30 per hour must be paid no matter who is hired, employers will not hire inexperienced teenagers (particularly high school dropouts) whose productivity is not worth $2.30 an hour. Obviously a minimum wage doesn't do any

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good for the person who is not paid any wage at all.

The minimum wage law makes it impossible for the unskilled teenager to acquire the initial work experience that teaches the virtues of dependability, self-discipline, and pride in honest work well done. It deprives the teenager of the self-respect that comes from being self-supporting and the maturity that comes from learning to get along with fellow-workers.

Job hunting without hope breeds frustration and resentment with the system. Idleness opens up endless opportunities to fill empty hours with alcohol, drugs and crime.

The minimum wage law is especially hurtful to disadvantaged minorities because it deprives them of the opportunity to acquire the initial work experience that can enable them to enter the mainstream of American society. There is no way to calculate the deprivation of the lost years of job experience, essential even for unskilled jobs.

Some will argue that we should not permit employers to exploit those willing to work for less than the minimum wage. But all values cannot be measured by money. The millions of Americans, especially women, who hold volunteer "jobs" prove that the rewards of work are great even when performed without any wage at all.

Black economist Walter E. Williams of Temple University is among the growing voices demanding that the minimum wage law be abolished because of its harmful effect on teenagers in general and black teenagers in particular. Failing that, he calls for amendments to the existing laws in order to provide for a substantial wage differential for persons under age 21.

Professor Williams also recommends a reduction in the age at which a teenager may leave school. This would enable many youths, to whom high school is nothing more than a day-care center, to begin their working career, and perhaps continue their education later after they have learned its value.