Minimum Wages and Employment: A Case Study of the Fast-Food Industry in New Jersey and Pennsylvania

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On April 1, 1992, New Jersey's minimum wage rose from \$4.25 to \$5.05 per hour. To evaluate the impact of the law we surveyed 410 fast-food restaurants in New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania before and after the rise. Comparisons of employment growth at stores in New Jersey and Pennsylvania (where the minimum wage was constant) provide simple estimates of the effect of the higher minimum wage. We also compare employment changes at stores in New Jersey that were initially paying high wages (above \$5) to the changes at lower-wage stores. We find no indication that the rise in the minimum wage reduced employment. (*JEL* J30, J23)

How do employers in a low-wage labor market respond to an increase in the minimum wage? The prediction from conventional economic theory is unambiguous: a rise in the minimum wage leads perfectly competitive employers to cut employment (George J. Stigler, 1946). Although studies in the 1970's based on aggregate teenage employment rates usually confirmed this prediction,[1] earlier studies based on comparisons of employment at affected and unaffected establishments often did not (e.g., Richard A. Lester, 1960, 1964). Several recent studies that rely on a similar comparative methodology have failed to detect a negative employment effect of higher minimum wages. Analyses of the 1990–1991 increases in the federal minimum wage (Lawrence F. Katz and Krueger, 1992; Card, 1992a) and of an earlier increase in the minimum wage in California (Card, 1992b) find no adverse employment impact. A study of minimum-wage floors in Britain (Stephen Machin and Alan Manning, 1994) reaches a similar conclusion.

This paper presents new evidence on the effect of minimum wages on establishment-level employment outcomes. We analyze the experiences of 410 fast-food restaurants in New Jersey and Pennsylvania following the increase in New Jersey's minimum wage from \$4.25 to \$5.05 per hour. Comparisons of employment, wages, and prices at stores in New Jersey and Pennsylvania before and after the rise offer a simple method for evaluating the effects of the minimum wage. Comparisons within New Jersey between initially high-wage stores (those paying more than the new minimum rate prior to its effective date) and other stores provide an alternative estimate of the impact of the new law.

In addition to the simplicity of our empirical methodology, several other features of

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[1]See Charles Brown et al. (1982, 1983) for surveys of this literature. A recent update (Allison J. Wellington, 1991) concludes that the employment effects of the minimum wage are negative but small: a 10-percent increase in the minimum is estimated to lower teenage employment rates by 0.06 percentage points.