

Getting by with the minimum

Low wage workers say they live check to check, stay with relatives to survive

By [Robert McCoppin](#) and [Lolly Bowean](#), Tribune

reporters 8:02 a.m. CST, February 2, 2014

In the bitter cold, dark hours of the night, as many others are sleeping, [Rocio Caravantes](#) begins her hourlong journey on public transportation from her home in Logan Square to one of her two jobs downtown.

Once she arrives at work, Caravantes spends hours vacuuming and scrubbing floors, polishing sinks and toilets,

cleaning the bar areas and event spaces and tidying up the rugs in an upscale luxury hotel where she can't afford to spend a night. Panic at times grips her as she thinks about how she will pay all her bills, she said.

"It is impossible to live on \$8.25 an hour," [Caravantes](#) said in Spanish, through an interpreter. "Not even three jobs are enough. I earn \$495 biweekly. The first check goes to rent — it's \$500 a month. The second is for transportation, food, (phone) and education."

Caravantes, 40, is one example of the minimum wage workers who have become the focus of a national conversation about salaries for the working poor.

It's a political debate in the Illinois governor's race, and Gov. Pat Quinn used his State of the State address last week to renew his push for an increase in the state minimum wage. President Barack Obama weighed in on the issue too when he asked Congress to increase the federal wage to \$10.10.

Caravantes is part of a cadre of workers who prepare food, clean rooms, serve customers at department stores and take care of children, all while struggling to pay bills and provide food for their own families. Cobbling together three part-time jobs to earn a living, Caravantes thought if she worked hard, she'd be offered pay increases as a reward.

"I thought I could earn more," Caravantes said. "I was wrong."



Caravantes is struggling to make ends meet because she makes minimum wage at three different part-time jobs. (Abel Uribe/Chicago Tribune)

Nationally, there are about 1.6 million workers who earn the federal minimum wage of \$7.25, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In Illinois, there are about 85,000 hourly paid workers who earn at least the federal rate of \$7.25, according to a 2012 bureau report, the most updated figures available.

Government agencies don't track how many residents in Illinois earn the state's minimum wage, which is \$1 higher than the federal mandate, officials said. That makes it difficult to say exactly how many workers are on the low end of the pay scale here.

The bureau report says that typically, those making the minimum wage tend to be young — under 25 years old — and work in hospitality and leisure industries, such as restaurants and food services.

But the Economic Policy Institute, a nonpartisan research organization in Washington, D.C., paints a broader portrait of low-wage workers.

"People tend to think of low-wage workers as teenagers who are working on the weekends for extra spending money," said David Cooper, an analyst with the institute. "While that is a portion of these workers, the vast majority don't fit that stereotype."

According to the institute's research, more than half of low-wage workers are older than 30. The institute estimates that about 733,000 workers in Illinois earn less than \$10.10, and about 394,000 slightly more than that, all of which could be affected by a minimum wage increase.

To understand the potential impact of a minimum wage hike, the Tribune talked to people who are living on the bottom rung of the pay scale.

They include single mothers in Elgin, laborers on the South Side and fast-food workers on the West Side, whose lives have common struggles. These workers worry about getting sick and missing a day's pay, or working enough hours to cover their rent. Some want better jobs but work so much they can't find the time to find better-paying positions.

It's never enough

Akila Rose Thompson, 25, of Humboldt Park, didn't intend on working for \$8.25 an hour. She'd prefer to do clerical work and fits in more in an office environment, she said.

But desperate for work, the mother of an infant took a job at McDonald's earning its entry-level wage. It wasn't until she got her first paycheck that she realized how much money she was earning.

"As the hours go by, you make the quick calculation in your head — 'I made \$30 today. Is that enough to get a bus pass? Pay the phone bill?'" she said. "It is always on your mind. It's a lot of stress. Simple things like laundry and food, you wonder if you will have enough money in your pocket."

Like Caravantes, Thompson works more than one part-time job. She recently got a pay raise at McDonald's and earns \$8.38 an hour. She also waits tables at a Red Lobster restaurant for \$4.95 plus

tips. But even after working every day of the week, she doesn't have enough money to pay for gas, buy clothes or pay a decent rent to her great-grandmother, with whom she lives.

"I was going to school — online classes — but I couldn't pay to keep the Internet on. So I had to drop it," Thompson said, speaking through tears. "I have a daughter, and I desperately need my own place. But I don't know if I'll ever be able to afford it. How can I look for better jobs when I'm always working? I can't lose these jobs. I can't afford to."

Nancy Salgado, 27, of Logan Square, said she has worked at McDonald's for more than a year without a pay raise.

"It is very hard to make ends meet," she said. "Many of us that work have children and families. I can't sleep sometimes thinking about my bills. There are no other jobs that pay more. When you get your check, it's just not enough."

Besides the low pay, Salgado said she never knows how much she'll actually earn, so it's impossible to budget.

"They may say, 'It's slow, go home,'" she explained. "You don't get hours, you don't get pay. If I miss a day, I earn no money."

In a snow-covered parking lot in Elgin last week, a group of workers at a temporary employment agency were told their checks would be delayed. They grumbled about having bills to pay and having to make do until the checks came through.

For many minimum- and low-wage workers, getting by means sharing homes with family and friends, borrowing cars or pooling gas money for transportation. In some cases, they postpone health care until they can get public assistance or go into work sick to avoid losing a day's pay. Planning for the future, and saving any money, is difficult.

Rolando Guzman is 21 and lives with his parents in Elgin. He's been working for two years at a pizza factory in Schaumburg, now on the 3:30 p.m. to 1 a.m. shift, and still makes \$8.25, the same as when he started.

The schedule varies from 50-plus hours a week during high demand to 12 hours during slow weeks. After he helps pay for rent, he's left with, at most, about \$150 a week.

"\$8.25 an hour is not cutting it," Guzman said. "It's crap."

Tough hours

Another occupational hazard of minimum wage earners is erratic work.

Jaime Mendoza, a 37-year-old waiter, knows that well. He moved to Chicago to follow a job with the J. Alexander's restaurant chain, but the site in the city didn't make it, and he had to find other jobs. He was laid off and has been on unemployment since the busy season last summer.

When he did work, Mendoza, who had 12 years in the service industry, still made minimum wage. In Illinois, that's \$4.95 an hour for workers who also get tips. Mendoza would like to see tipped employees get the same hourly minimum wage as other workers, plus tips. But any increase, he said, would help "tremendously."

"We want to have a life," he said.

To make ends meet, Mendoza kept moving west, from an apartment in Lakeview to share a cheaper three-bedroom apartment in Logan Square, where he pays \$366 a month. He has considered other careers but enjoys the freedom serving gives him to pursue other interests, such as working as a personal trainer.

Low-wage workers like him forgo many of the luxuries of the people they serve.

"It doesn't feel good to be my age and not have my own place," he said. "It would be nice sometime to enjoy a steak you didn't serve yourself and have a nice bottle of wine, but I can't afford that."

Some people make even less than minimum wage.

After Thad Smith, 48, was convicted of forgery for writing bad checks, he knew he would need help to get a job. He entered a program that helps convicts find employment and found he loved a job he never anticipated: beekeeping in Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood.

The job only pays \$250 a month, Smith said, but he works part time on the side to earn extra money. He's in a transitional housing program that provides free rent for his studio in Pilsen, but in the spring he will have to pay his own way.

"I'm tired of surviving," Smith said. "I'd like to live a little bit. Money is not my main goal, but money is what you need to eat."

Hoping for better

From the time she immigrated to Chicago, Caravantes has lived in a small, one-bedroom basement apartment with her teenage daughter. She doesn't make enough money to save for a car or bigger apartment. She can't even spare enough for a movie or a quality pair of snow boots.

Every morning, as she leaves work, she choreographs her commute to meet her daughter before school. The two spend about 15 minutes together.

But the brief meeting isn't just to chat. They have to exchange a monthly bus pass — they can only afford one. Caravantes uses it to get to work. Her daughter uses it to get to school.

"I'm always looking for a full-time job," Caravantes said. "I'm not able to speak English. I have tried. It is so hard when I am not working, I am sleeping."

Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXpaMvZROWw>

rmccoppin@tribune.com lbowean@tribune.com