THE IMPACT OF RISING MINIMUM WAGES ON TEENAGE EMPLOYMENT RATES: A STUDY IN THE TELANGANA CONTEXT

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between rising minimum wages and teenage employment in Telangana. Because official Indian labour statistics commonly define youth as persons aged 15-29, while teenagers are persons aged 13-19, the study concentrates mainly on legally employable adolescents aged 14-18 and young adults aged 18-19. Employment of children below 14 is prohibited, while adolescents aged 14-18 cannot be employed in hazardous occupations or processes. The study adopts a descriptive and analytical methodology based on secondary evidence from the Periodic Labour Force Survey, Telangana government documents, labour legislation, policy reports, and selected minimum-wage research. The analysis finds that the employment effects of a wage increase depend on its magnitude, enforcement, sector, location, economic conditions, and the availability of skills. Moderate and predictable revisions may increase earnings without causing substantial job losses, especially where employers possess wage-setting power or benefit from lower turnover and improved productivity. Large or poorly designed increases may nevertheless reduce entry-level hiring, accelerate automation, raise eligibility requirements, or displace teenagers in favour of experienced adults. Telangana's large informal sector further complicates the issue because a higher notified wage may not automatically translate into higher actual wages.
***KEYWORDS**: MINIMUM WAGE, TEENAGE EMPLOYMENT, YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT, ADOLESCENTS, TELANGANA, INFORMAL SECTOR, SKILL DEVELOPMENT, WAGE POLICY*

1. Introduction

Minimum wages are legally prescribed wage floors below which covered workers should not ordinarily be paid. They are intended to prevent exploitation, improve living standards, reduce working poverty, and promote social justice. In India, minimum-wage determination has historically been complex because rates differ across states, scheduled employments, occupational categories, skill levels, and sometimes geographical zones. The Code on Wages, 2019 seeks to provide a broader and more coherent legal framework for wage protection, including the concepts of minimum wages and a national floor wage.

The policy debate becomes particularly sensitive when the affected workers are teenagers. For this article, a *teenager* means a person aged 13-19. This social definition does not perfectly coincide with Indian legal and statistical classifications. Indian law prohibits the employment of children below 14, subject to narrowly framed exceptions, and prohibits adolescents aged 14-18 from working in hazardous occupations and processes. Persons aged 18-19 are legal adults but remain among the youngest and least experienced labour-market entrants. The Periodic Labour Force Survey generally reports youth statistics for the broader 15-29 age group. Consequently, available youth indicators must not be interpreted as exact teenage employment rates.

Teenagers enter employment for many reasons. Some combine work with education; others leave school because of poverty, family responsibilities, inadequate access to higher education, or a lack of interest in academic study. Rural teenagers may participate in agriculture, livestock care, construction support, local services, workshops, retail, or family enterprises. Urban teenagers may seek work in restaurants, shops, delivery services, warehouses, repair units, hospitality, domestic services, data entry, and digitally mediated gig activities. A section of 18- and 19-year-olds also enters formal apprenticeships, industrial employment, and office-based occupations.

A higher minimum wage can affect these workers through several channels. It directly increases the earnings of a covered teenager whose job and working hours are retained. Greater household income may improve nutrition, transport, education, and health. A better wage can make work more attractive and reduce turnover. At the same time, employers may respond to increased labour costs by hiring fewer inexperienced workers, reducing hours, raising prices, adopting labour-saving technology, or selecting adults with greater experience. In weakly regulated markets, they may also continue paying below the legal rate.

The Government of India's Periodic Labour Force Survey defines youth as persons aged 15-29. Official information reported for Telangana indicates that youth unemployment on the usual-status measure declined from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 16.6% in 2023-24. This improvement is important, but the remaining rate signals continuing difficulty in the school-to-work transition. It also masks differences by sex, education, rural-urban location, social group, and household background.
Telangana presents an appropriate context for examining the issue. Hyderabad and its surrounding areas have substantial information-technology, pharmaceutical, logistics, retail, hospitality, construction, and service activity. In contrast, many districts remain dependent on agriculture, small enterprises, informal services, and seasonal work. The state therefore contains both high-productivity modern employment and low-productivity informal work. A single discussion of minimum-wage effects can obscure these differences.

2. Conceptual and Legal Framework

2.1 Minimum wage and teenage employment

The minimum wage is a statutory lower limit on remuneration. Where it is effectively enforced, an employer covered by the law cannot legally pay below that level. A minimum wage differs from an average market wage because it specifically affects workers at or near the bottom of the wage distribution.

A fall in the employment rate does not always indicate a policy failure. Employment may fall because teenagers remain in education, undertake training, or stop unsafe work. Conversely, a high employment rate is not always desirable if it reflects hazardous work, low wages, school dropout, or economic distress. Therefore, the quality, legality, safety, and educational compatibility of teenage employment must be evaluated along with its quantity.

2.2 Legal employability of teenagers

The Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act prohibits employment of children below 14 and bars adolescents aged 14-18 from hazardous occupations and processes. These restrictions establish an essential boundary for wage analysis. A wage policy must not be used to legitimise prohibited child labour. Press Information Bureau

The teenage population may consequently be divided into three analytical groups:

Age group	Labour-market relevance
13-14	Regular employment is prohibited; education and child protection take priority.
14-17	Employment is subject to legal restrictions, including the prohibition on hazardous work; education must be protected.
18-19	Legally adult workers, but generally new labour-market entrants with limited experience.

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act also makes education central for children in the relevant age range. Minimum-wage policy must therefore complement schooling and child-protection policy, not encourage premature labour-force entry.

3. Need for the Study

This study is necessary for several reasons. First, teenagers are located at a critical point between education and employment. An unsuccessful transition can lead to prolonged unemployment, informal work, low lifetime earnings, and skill depreciation. Early access to decent work can instead build confidence, work discipline, occupational knowledge, and future employability.

Second, young labour-market entrants often possess limited experience and weak bargaining power. They are therefore more likely to be paid low wages or placed in insecure employment. A minimum wage may protect them, but a wage floor that is substantially above their productivity could restrict their initial access to employment unless training raises productivity.

Third, Telangana has significant regional and sectoral diversity. The opportunities available in Hyderabad differ from those in agricultural, tribal, or drought-prone regions. A statewide wage policy must recognise differences in living costs and enterprise productivity while maintaining basic labour standards.

Fourth, India lacks a regularly published and sufficiently detailed official series devoted exclusively to ages 13-19 at the Telangana district and sector levels. The common PLFS youth category of 15-29 combines school-age adolescents, college students, first-time workers, and adults approaching 30. A study focused on teenagers helps identify this statistical gap.

Fifth, inflation can erode the real value of wages. If nominal minimum wages are not revised periodically, legal protection becomes ineffective. Yet a sudden catch-up revision can impose a sharp adjustment on small employers. The frequency, predictability, and evidence base of revision are therefore important.

Sixth, the state's expanding service, technology, pharmaceutical, logistics, retail, and platform sectors are changing the nature of entry-level employment. Automation and digital management can either complement young workers or replace routine tasks. Wage policy must respond to this transformation.

Finally, youth unemployment in Telangana remains a policy concern despite recent improvement. The reported reduction to 16.6% in 2023-24 for persons aged 15-29 does not eliminate the need for targeted measures. It instead creates a basis for studying whether wage protection, skilling, industrial growth, and job creation can be better coordinated.

4. Importance of the Study

The study is important to policymakers because it clarifies that minimum-wage decisions should consider both income protection and access to entry-level employment. Wage rates must be based on living needs, inflation, productivity, sectoral conditions, and enforcement capacity.

It is important to teenagers and their families because higher earnings can reduce poverty and improve consumption, education, and health. At the same time, reduced job availability or school withdrawal can produce long-term harm.

For researchers, the study identifies important methodological issues. A credible estimate must distinguish teenagers from the wider youth population, legal work from prohibited child labour, wage effects from general economic trends, and nominal wage changes from real wage changes.

Finally, the issue is important for social justice. Telangana cannot achieve inclusive development if economic growth coexists with exploitative wages, unsafe adolescent work, persistent youth unemployment, or exclusion based on gender, caste, disability, and location.

5. Objectives of the Study

The principal objective is to analyse the impact of rising minimum wages on teenage employment rates in Telangana.

The specific objectives are:

1. To explain the theoretical relationship between minimum wages and teenage employment.
2. To examine Telangana's labour-market conditions relevant to teenagers and young workers.

3. To identify the potential positive effects of higher minimum wages on earnings, welfare, productivity, and job quality.
4. To examine possible adverse effects on entry-level recruitment, hours, informality, automation, and school-to-work transitions.
5. To review the legal and institutional framework governing minimum wages and adolescent employment.
6. To describe relevant central and Telangana youth-employment and skill-development schemes.
7. To identify weaknesses in available teenage employment and wage data.
8. To recommend a balanced policy framework combining wage protection, education, skills, enforcement, and employment generation.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research design

The study adopts a descriptive, analytical, and policy-oriented research design. It interprets secondary evidence rather than claiming a new causal estimate. This distinction is important because determining whether a minimum-wage increase caused a particular employment change requires microdata and a credible comparison group.

6.3 Unit and scope of analysis

The geographical scope is Telangana. The primary population of interest is ages 14-19, with special attention to ages 18-19 because they face fewer legal employment restrictions. Broader 15-29 statistics are used only as contextual indicators and are clearly identified as such.

The analysis considers rural and urban Telangana and sectors such as agriculture, construction, manufacturing, retail, hospitality, logistics, repair services, and platform-mediated work.

6.4 Analytical framework

A future empirical investigation can use a difference-in-differences model:

For Telangana alone, comparison may be made across sectors with different exposure to the revised wage, districts with different pre-revision wage distributions, or adjacent states with similar pre-policy trends. Event-study methods can test whether treated and comparison groups followed parallel trends before revision.

7. Telangana Labour-Market Context

Telangana combines a globally connected metropolitan economy with a large rural and informal workforce. Hyderabad has strong information technology, life sciences, pharmaceuticals, real estate, retail, transportation, education, hospitality, and business services. Other districts have combinations of agriculture, food processing, textiles, construction, mining-related activity, small manufacturing, and local services.

This diversity matters because teenagers are not distributed evenly across sectors. Highly organised technology firms rarely hire school-age workers and generally pay above statutory minima. Minimum-wage changes may have little direct effect there. Direct exposure is more likely in low-wage retail, food services, repair work, warehouses, security-related support, cleaning, construction, workshops, and small manufacturing.

Rural adolescents may perform unpaid or low-paid work in household agriculture and family businesses. A statutory wage may not directly regulate unpaid family work. Nevertheless, it may affect the opportunity cost of such work. If external jobs pay more, young people may shift from unpaid family labour into paid employment, provided jobs exist and schooling is not disrupted.

Gender is especially important. Teenage girls may face mobility restrictions, unpaid care responsibilities, safety concerns, early marriage, occupational segregation, and lower labour-force participation. A higher wage can encourage participation by making paid work more worthwhile, but only when safe transport, suitable hours, sanitation, workplace protection, and family acceptance are present.

The decline in Telangana's 15-29 unemployment rate from 23.3% to 16.6% between 2017-18 and 2023-24 is encouraging. Yet unemployment remains relatively high, and the figure does not capture underemployment, discouraged workers, unpaid family labour, skill mismatch, or job quality. Nor does it reveal the exact position of 14-19-year-olds.

The core policy challenge is therefore not merely to increase teenage employment. It is to expand lawful, safe, productive, adequately paid, education-compatible employment.

8. Effects of Rising Minimum Wages on Teenage Employment

8.1 Positive income effect

The most immediate benefit is higher earnings for teenagers who retain their jobs. Because young low-wage workers often come from economically vulnerable households, an income increase may support food, transportation, educational expenses, digital access, and healthcare. It can also reduce dependence on informal credit.

A higher wage can increase household consumption, creating demand for goods and services. This demand may generate additional employment and partially offset the initial increase in business costs.

8.2 Reduction in exploitation and wage inequality

Teenagers often lack knowledge of labour rights and are less able to negotiate. A statutory floor can strengthen their bargaining position and reduce extreme wage differences between inexperienced workers and adults. It may also narrow gender and social wage gaps where unequal bargaining rather than productivity explains low pay.

8.3 Productivity and retention

Low-wage sectors often experience high turnover. Workers leave when they find slightly better opportunities, forcing employers to recruit and train replacements. Higher wages may encourage punctuality, commitment, and retention. Employers may then recover part of the added cost through lower turnover and better service. For teenagers, the effect can be particularly useful when employment includes genuine training. Stable employment enables young workers to accumulate occupation-specific knowledge rather than repeatedly moving among casual jobs.

8.4 Increase in labour-force participation

An improved wage can encourage 18- and 19-year-olds to seek employment. It may also encourage young women to participate when the expected earnings justify transport and other costs. This can increase both employment and labour-force participation.

However, increased participation may temporarily raise measured unemployment if the number of new jobseekers exceeds available jobs. A rise in the unemployment rate therefore does not automatically prove that existing workers lost jobs.

8.5 Substitution against inexperienced workers

The strongest adverse possibility is substitution. If teenagers and adults must receive the same wage, employers may prefer adults with experience, physical strength, availability for longer hours, or fewer training needs. Teenagers may lose entry-level opportunities even when total employment changes little. Employers may also raise educational requirements. A position previously open to a secondary-school student may be offered only to a graduate. This is a form of credential inflation and can exclude disadvantaged teenagers.

8.6 Reduction in hours rather than jobs

An employer may retain workers but reduce weekly hours, eliminate overtime, increase work intensity, or withdraw meals and transportation. Employment counts may remain unchanged while monthly earnings or job quality deteriorate. Research should therefore examine hours and benefits as well as headcount.

8.7 Automation and organisational change

Higher labour costs can encourage self-service technologies, automated billing, warehouse systems, digital ordering, mechanised production, or consolidation of duties. Routine entry-level positions may be especially vulnerable. However, technology can create new roles in maintenance, digital operations, customer service, and logistics. Skills determine whether teenagers are displaced or complemented by technology.

8.8 Price and output effects

Firms may pass increased costs to consumers. Where customers tolerate modest price increases, employment effects may remain small. Where businesses face intense competition or price-sensitive consumers, they may reduce output, delay expansion, or close marginal units.

Large firms may absorb increases more easily than small shops or rural enterprises. Uniform implementation without transitional support may consequently have uneven effects.

8.9 Informalisation and non-compliance

In Telangana's informal economy, the adjustment may occur through evasion rather than formal job loss. Employers may pay cash off the books, misclassify workers as trainees or contractors, record false working hours, or shift activity to unpaid family labour. This produces a paradox: the notified minimum wage rises, but the effective wage does not. The employment rate may appear stable while violations increase. Enforcement and awareness are therefore as important as notification.

8.10 Education effects

Higher wages can have two opposite educational effects. Additional household income can help teenagers remain in school by easing financial pressure. Conversely, a more attractive wage may encourage some adolescents to leave education early.

The desired policy is not to maximise employment among school-age adolescents. It is to prevent exploitative work while enabling older teenagers to obtain safe, limited-hours employment, apprenticeships, or work-integrated learning that improves long-term prospects.

9. Relevant Schemes and Institutional Initiatives

Minimum-wage policy works best when supported by schemes that increase productivity and reduce the cost of employing new entrants.

9.1 Young India Skills University

Telangana established the Young India Skills University under a 2024 state law using a public-private partnership approach. Its purpose is to bridge the gap between academic education and industry requirements through practical, industry-aligned training. For older teenagers, industry-linked certificate and apprenticeship pathways can raise productivity toward the wage floor. The institution's success should be assessed by completion, placement, retention, earnings, gender inclusion, and employer satisfaction rather than enrolment alone.

9.2 Telangana Academy for Skill and Knowledge

The Telangana Academy for Skill and Knowledge, established by the state government in 2014, works with educational institutions and employers to improve employability. Its activities include domain training, workplace-readiness programmes, collaboration with industry, job fairs, and placement support. TASK can play a greater role in helping students aged 18-19 obtain lawful entry-level employment. Modules should include digital skills, English communication, financial literacy, occupational safety, wage rights, and grievance procedures.

9.3 Telangana Society for Training and Employment Promotion

The Telangana Society for Training and Employment Promotion operates skill-development facilities and can connect local youth to district-level employment. Such decentralised training is important because opportunities concentrated in Hyderabad may not reach rural teenagers.

9.4 Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana

PMKVY offers industry-relevant skill training through components such as short-term training, special projects, recognition of prior learning, and workplace exposure. Its emphasis on demand-driven training and on-the-job experience can improve the employment prospects of eligible young persons. Training should be linked to verified vacancies. Certification without placement or sustained employment is not enough.

9.5 Apprenticeship promotion

The National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme and apprenticeship framework can reduce the gap between school and work. Apprenticeships combine supervised learning with workplace exposure and stipends. They should not, however, become devices for replacing regular workers or avoiding minimum-wage obligations.

Effective apprenticeships require written agreements, defined learning outcomes, safe conditions, certified mentors, reasonable duration, and transition pathways into regular employment.

10. Merits of Raising the Minimum Wage

A well-designed increase can produce several benefits:

1. Higher income: Covered teenage workers who retain employment receive greater hourly or monthly earnings.
2. Reduced working poverty: Earnings contribute more meaningfully to household welfare.
3. Improved dignity: Legal wage protection affirms that young workers should not be treated as disposable labour.
4. Lower turnover: Better pay can improve retention and reduce repeated recruitment costs.
5. Productivity incentives: Firms have an incentive to train workers and improve work organisation.
6. Reduced wage inequality: The wage floor can compress disparities at the bottom.
7. Stronger consumption: Low-wage households tend to spend a significant share of additional income locally.
8. Formalisation incentives: Effective enforcement may encourage proper contracts, payroll records, and social-security registration.
9. Better occupational choice: Young workers may reject extremely low-paid or exploitative positions.
10. Gender benefit: A meaningful wage can make paid employment more worthwhile for young women, provided complementary safety measures exist.

These gains are most likely when revisions are moderate, predictable, enforced, and accompanied by strong labour demand and productivity-enhancing measures.

12.4 Expand quality apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are the most practical bridge between low initial productivity and a higher wage floor. Telangana should encourage firms to employ 18- and 19-year-olds in structured programmes with certified learning outcomes.

Subsidies may be provided for mentoring and verified training, but not for indefinite low-paid trainee positions. Apprentices must receive lawful stipends, safety protection, and pathways to regular employment.

12.5 Provide temporary support to compliant small firms

Time-bound payroll or training support may be considered for micro and small enterprises that hire first-time workers, register them formally, comply with wage and safety laws, and provide certified training. Support should be audited to prevent substitution of existing workers.

12.6 Strengthen enforcement without harassment

Enforcement should combine digital wage records, worker education, risk-based inspections, accessible grievance systems, and proportionate penalties. Random or complaint-based verification should focus on sectors with high vulnerability.

Teenagers need confidential reporting channels because they may fear dismissal or retaliation. Information should be available in Telugu, Urdu, English, and accessible formats.

12.7 Protect education

For adolescents aged 14-17, education must remain the priority. Permitted work should not interfere with school attendance, examination preparation, health, or rest. Hazardous work must be strictly prohibited.

Conditional support to low-income households can reduce the pressure that pushes adolescents into premature employment. Career counselling and vocational exposure within education can create safer transitions.

12.8 Address gender-specific barriers

A wage increase alone will not improve teenage women's employment if they lack safe transportation, secure accommodation, sanitation, childcare support, or protection from harassment. Employers and training institutions should establish safe commuting options, flexible but lawful schedules, and functional grievance mechanisms.

12.9 Target district and sector differences

Hyderabad's labour market should not be treated as representative of all Telangana. Policy should distinguish high-productivity urban sectors from agriculture-dependent and low-income districts.

District skill plans should be based on verified employer demand and local economic potential, including food processing, textiles, renewable energy, healthcare support, logistics, tourism, construction trades, and digital services.

12.10 Regulate gig and platform work

Young adults increasingly enter delivery, mobility, logistics, and online platform work. Wage protection should consider waiting time, fuel, vehicle maintenance, insurance, commissions, and algorithmic penalties. A nominal payment per task may fall below a reasonable hourly return after expenses.

12.11 Coordinate institutions

Labour, education, industries, skill development, rural development, women and child welfare, social welfare, and tribal welfare departments should share data and establish common outcomes. Fragmented schemes can produce repeated training without sustainable placement.

12.12 Use pilot programmes and impact evaluations

Before adopting major statewide changes, Telangana can pilot targeted youth-employment measures in selected districts and sectors. Evaluation should compare employment, earnings, hours, formalisation, school participation, firm survival, and productivity.

Minimum-wage research should avoid relying only on before-and-after comparisons. Economic cycles, migration, and industry growth may otherwise be mistaken for wage effects.

12.13 Improve employer-worker consultation

Wage boards and advisory processes should include worker organisations, employer associations, experts, youth representatives, women's groups, and officials. Consultation can identify implementation problems without weakening the principle of a fair wage.

12.14 Measure real rather than nominal wages

A higher nominal rate may not improve purchasing power if prices rise rapidly. Policy evaluation should deflate wages using an appropriate consumer-price index:

Real wage=Nominal wagePrice index×100\text{Real wage}= \frac{\text{Nominal wage}}{\text{Price index}} \times 100Real wage=Price indexNominal wage×100

Real wages, actual hours, and compliance should be reported together.

12.15 Adopt a balanced policy package

The preferred package for Telangana consists of:

Policy component	**Intended outcome**
Regular wage indexation	Protect purchasing power and prevent sudden adjustment shocks.
Skill and apprenticeship support	Raise teenage productivity and employability.
Targeted MSME assistance	Reduce avoidable entry-level job losses.
Digital and field enforcement	Convert notified wages into actual wages.
Education safeguards	Prevent wage incentives from promoting dropout.
Disaggregated data	Enable evidence-based teenage employment policy.
Gender and rural inclusion	Ensure gains are not confined to urban male workers.

13. Discussion

The Telangana experience should not be interpreted through a simple choice between a high minimum wage and high employment. A low wage does not guarantee employment because weak demand, poor skills, inadequate transport, discrimination, and lack of information can keep teenagers jobless. Similarly, a high wage does not guarantee welfare if employers avoid the law or reduce hours. The most relevant policy variable may be the effective minimum wage, not merely the notified rate. The effective wage depends on awareness, enforcement, bargaining power, coverage, and the availability of alternative employment.

The ratio between the minimum wage and prevailing wages also matters. A revision that merely restores purchasing power after inflation may produce a different effect from one that raises the real wage far above the prevailing entry-level level. Sectoral differences are equally important. A large organised employer may absorb a revision through productivity and lower turnover, while a small rural enterprise may have fewer adjustment options. Teenagers should not be treated as a source of permanently cheap labour. At the same time, the genuine cost of training inexperienced workers must be recognised. The appropriate response is not an unprotected subminimum wage but a regulated training pathway in which the worker receives instruction, protection, certification, and progression.

14. Conclusion

The effect of rising minimum wages on teenage employment in Telangana is neither uniformly positive nor uniformly negative. A higher wage can raise earnings, reduce exploitation, improve dignity, strengthen consumption, lower turnover, and encourage productivity. It can also reduce entry-level recruitment, promote substitution toward experienced adults, decrease hours, accelerate automation, and increase informal non-compliance. These effects depend on the size and timing of the revision, local economic conditions, employer market power, sectoral productivity, enforcement, and the availability of training. Telangana's economic diversity and large informal workforce make a uniform prediction particularly inappropriate.

The state's declining youth unemployment rate represents progress, but a rate of 16.6% among persons aged 15-29 in 2023-24 still indicates a difficult school-to-work transition. Moreover, this broad youth figure cannot substitute for teenage-specific evidence. Telangana needs disaggregated data for 14-17- and 18-19-year-olds, with attention to wages, hours, education, gender, district, and employment quality.

Minimum wage policy should therefore be understood as one component of a wider youth-development system. When supported by skills, formalisation, education, social protection, and expanding labour demand, it can improve teenage welfare without imposing large employment costs. When introduced in isolation, inadequately enforced, or disconnected from productivity, it may fail to protect workers and may restrict access to lawful entry-level jobs. Telangana's policy priority should be not merely more teenage employment, but safe, skilled, fairly paid, and future-oriented employment.

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