

Subscribe →



Inequality and opportunity in America |

Fran works six days a week in fast food, and yet she's homeless: 'It's economic slavery'

by [Dominic Rushe](#) with video by [Tom Silverstone](#)

Fran Marion, who is living at her friend's house while she tries to save for a deposit on a new home by working two jobs.
Photograph: Tom Silverstone

Inequality and opportunity in America is supported by



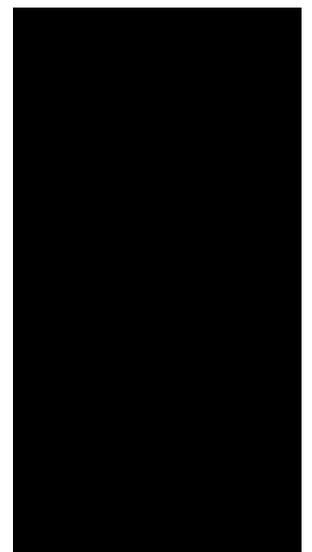
[About this content](#)

Mon 21 Aug 2017 06.31 EDT

Once a customer has barked their order into the microphone at the Popeyes drive-thru on Prospect Avenue, Kansas City, the clock starts. Staff have a company-mandated 180 seconds to take the order, cook the order, bag the order and deliver it to the drive-thru window.

The restaurant is on “short shift” at the moment, which means it has about half the usual staff, so Fran Marion often has to do all those jobs herself. On the day we met, she estimates she processed 187 orders - roughly one every two minutes. Those orders grossed about \$950 for the company. Marion went home with \$76.

Despite working six days a week, Marion, 37, a single mother of two, can't make ends meet on the \$9.50 an hour she gets at Popeyes (no apostrophe - founder Al Copeland joked he was too poor to afford one). A fast food worker for 22 years, Marion has almost always had a second job. Until recently, she had been working 9am-4pm at Popeyes, without a break, then crossing town to a janitorial job at Bartle Hall, the convention center, where she would work from 5pm to 1.30am for \$11 an hour. She didn't take breaks there either, although they were allowed.



0:00 / 6:41



[The homeless Popeyes worker fighting for fair wages in Missouri](#) Guardian

“I was so tired,” she says. “If I took a break I would go to sleep, so I would work straight through,” she says.

Even with those two jobs, Marion was unable to save - and when disaster struck she found it impossible to cope financially. Last month, the city condemned the house she rented - the landlord had refused to fix faulty wiring and the leaking roof - and she was made homeless.

Her children, Ravyn, 15, and Rashad, 14, are now living with a friend, two bus rides away. Because of the time and distance, Marion hasn't seen them in a week. She and her dog Hershey, a goofy milk-chocolate colored pitbull, are sleeping at the apartment of fellow fast food worker, Bridget Hughes: Marion on the sofa, Hershey on the balcony.

It's a downtrodden two-bedroom apartment in a sketchy neighborhood. Sex workers stake out the busier street corners; many of the houses are boarded up or burnt out. The detritus of drug addiction litters the streets.

While she tries to save for a deposit on a new home, Marion is sharing with Bridget's husband, Demetrius, and their four children. “Not having a home, honestly, you guys, it makes me feel like I am a failure. Like I have let my kids down,” says Marion, sitting among the plastic bags that hold her life. The rest of her family's belongings are stored in a van downstairs, a van she can't drive because she hasn't got the money to get it insured.

Marion at her friend's house. Photograph: Tom Silverstone

After she quit her janitorial job, hoping to find something more flexible so she could see more of her children, Marion started interviewing for a second job in fast food. “I have always needed two jobs. You basically need two jobs to survive working on low wages,” she says. Working so hard for so little security makes her feel “like I am getting nowhere,” she says. “My family is not benefiting. I’m working so hard to come home, and still I have to decide whether I am going to put food on the table or am I going to pay the light bill, or pay rent.

“It makes me feel like a peasant. In a way it’s slavery. It’s economic slavery.”

Unsurprisingly, Marion seems depressed. She looks down when she talks, raising her big, sad eyes only when she has finished. But her whole face lights up when she talks about her kids. “They are my world,” she says. “[They] brighten up my soul.” She worries that all this pressure is bad for her - self-diagnosed - high blood pressure. Like [28 million](#) other Americans, she doesn’t have health insurance. She hasn’t seen a doctor in her adult working life.

Bridget and Demetrius are hardly doing better. She earns \$9 an hour at Wendy’s, Demetrius makes \$9.50 an hour working at a gas station. Rent and bills, including childcare, come to about \$800 a month, and they are barely scraping by, living paycheck to paycheck. Hughes says she has missed her children’s graduations, doctors’ appointments. She tears up as she explains how economic necessity meant she was forced to return to work two weeks after she last gave birth, and had to give up breastfeeding.

Marion with her niece. Photograph: Tom Silverstone

* * *

But Marion and Hughes are fighters, figureheads in what some see as the next wave of the civil rights movement. The pair are leading voices in **Stand Up Kansas City**, the local chapter of the union-backed Fight for \$15 movement, which is campaigning for a nationwide increase in the minimum wage. And they are determined to make a difference.

The Fight for \$15 movement is probably the most high profile, and successful, labor movement in the US, and has successfully pushed for local raises in the minimum wage across the country, mostly in Democratic strongholds. Trump comfortably won **Missouri** in 2016, although the major cities - Kansas City, St Louis and Columbia - voted

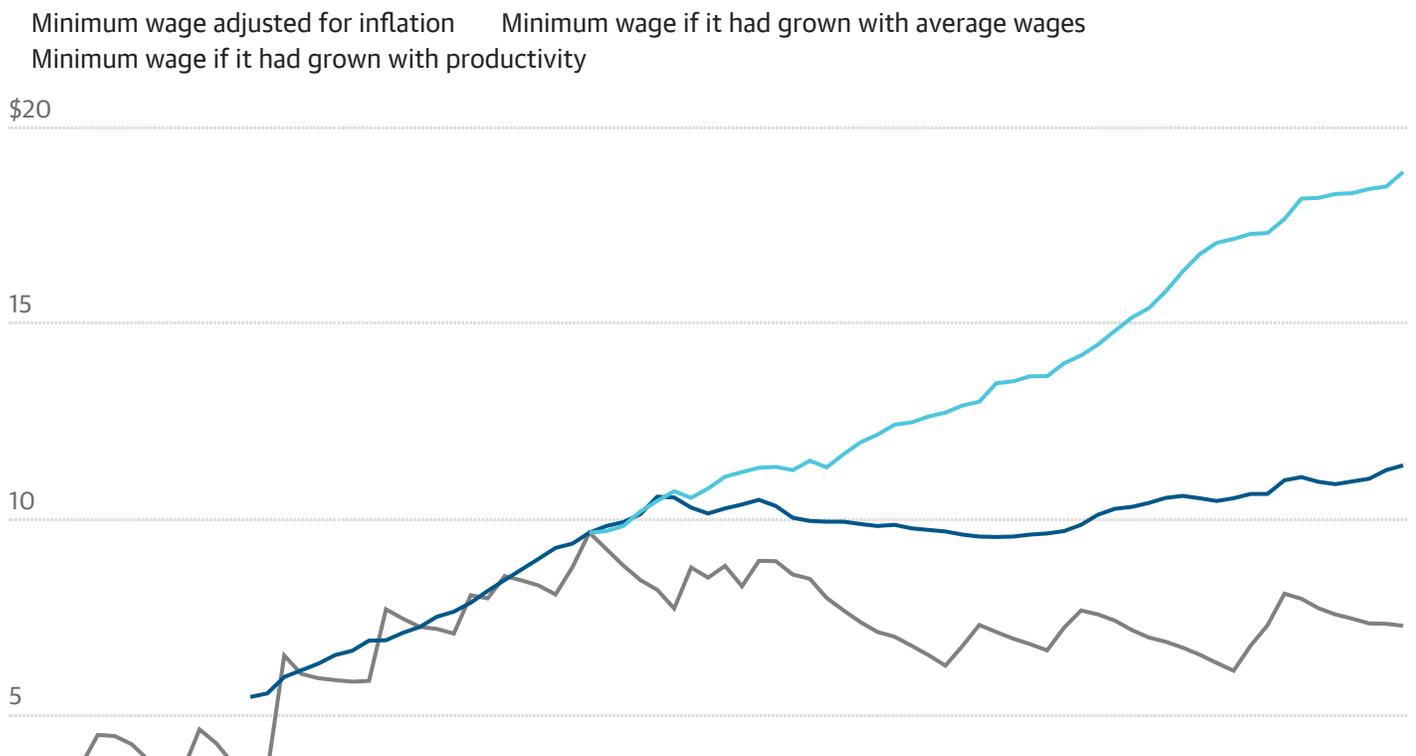
Democrat. But the pair are confident that by coming together, the millions of Americans working low wage jobs can effect change even now.

“It’s not just us, it’s all across America,” says Hughes. She says she felt “invisible” before the Fight for \$15 movement.

On 14 April 2015, campaigners held what was then the **largest ever protest** by low-wage workers in US history. About 60,000 workers took to the streets in cities across the country calling for an increase in the minimum wage.

When protesters came to Marion’s restaurant, she says most of the staff moved to the back of the restaurant to distance themselves from the activists while her corporate boss “smirked and laughed” as they read their demands and said what they needed. “I looked at him and I thought, ‘You don’t have these worries’,” she says. “How can you laugh at someone else’s pain? And I am going through the same thing. That’s when I joined the Fight for \$15.

If wages had grown as fast as productivity, the minimum wage would be more than double what it is now



“There is wave. There is momentum. I think that with all of working together, we will win \$15 in the end,” she says.

It’s been almost a decade since the Great Recession, and America has witnessed a record 82 months of month-on-month jobs growth. The national unemployment rate

...decades of months of months on months job growth. The national unemployment rate now stands at a 4.3%, [a 16-year low](#). But month after month, it is the low-wage sectors - fast food, retail, healthcare - that have added new jobs. Wage growth has barely kept pace with inflation. The national minimum wage (\$7.25) was [last raised in 2009](#).

Across the US, 58 million people earn less than \$15 an hour; 41 million earn less than \$12. In Missouri, Kansas City and St Louis councils recently passed local ordinances that would have increased the minimum wage - to \$13 an hour by 2023 in [Kansas City's case](#).

But backed by local and national business interests, Missouri's governor, Eric Greitens - a bestselling author, former Navy Seal and a rising Republican star - has moved to roll back the increases, arguing businesses can't afford raises and will leave. "Liberals say these laws help people," Greitens said in a [statement](#). "They don't. They hurt them."

Not so, says David Cooper, senior economic analyst at the Economics Policy Institute. "We have [decades of research](#) on this and it all concludes that increases in the minimum wage have had negligible impact on jobs growth," he says. The academic debate is currently about whether that impact is a small gain in growth or a small drop. Either way, he says, a small rise in the minimum wage has an outsized impact on low wage workers. A \$1 an hour rise from the current minimum of \$7.25 would give the average low wage worker \$2,000 more a year, says Cooper. "That is a huge injection of income," he says.

The intense lobbying against an increase is "simply a device to keep wages as low as possible so that employers can capture as much profit as they can", he says. Polls show that the majority of Americans are in favor of an increase. At least 40 cities and states around the country will raise their minimum wages in 2017, thanks largely to ballot measures. Those measures will deliver raises of around \$4,000 a year for more than one-third of the workforce in states like New York and California, according to the National Employment Law Project.

But Greitens is not alone in fighting back, helped by a study of the impact of Seattle's minimum wage hike by the University of Washington, which seemed to suggest higher wages had translated to fewer jobs. That the methodology of that study has been heavily criticized ("[utter BS](#)", according to Josh Hoxie, director of the Project on Opportunity and Taxation at the [Institute for Policy Studies](#)) and stands in contrast to piles of studies that found the opposite hasn't negated its popularity with anti-wage hikers.

Marion: 'At the top of America, when it comes to Trump and them, their goal is to keep us down.' Photograph: Tom Silverston/Tom Silverstone

* * *

Marion isn't in it for the politics. She is in it for the money, money that means one thing for her: getting her family back together and giving them a secure life. We pick her up at Popeyes and drive to a pleasant Kansas City suburb. Cicadas thrum as she beams strolling from the car to hug her daughter Rayven and goddaughter Shi' Ann.

Shi' Ann, in her rainbow hued "LOVE" T-shirt (the "O" is a butterfly), plays with princess flip-flops and squirms, giggling in Marion's arms. "Princesses don't put their fingers in their mouths," laughs Marion. I ask Rayven how it is living without her mum. The idyll is over. Tears fill her eyes. Marion goes inside so we can't see her cry.

Later, Marion says Rayven wants to leave school at 16 and get a job in fast food to help out. Ideally, her mum wants her to go to college but nothing is ideal for the Marion family at present.

After the visit, we drive back into the city to All Souls Unitarian church where Marion and Hughes are set to address a panel of academics, union leaders and others. The neighborhood is a world away from their own. A giant Louise Bourgeois spider menaces a manicured lawn at the Kemper art museum close by. The two women are

unintimidated. They hold the room with ease as they talk about their fight with humor and a confidence that things will change.

Guests ask why they don't go back to school, get higher paid jobs. Hughes has a college degree but as the daughter of a low wage worker said she could only afford community college. Employers saw her degree as "worthless", and she ended up \$13,000 in debt. She did have a job in a tax office but lost it only to find that thanks to Missouri's business-friendly rules, she was barred from working for another tax office by a non-compete agreement. (Fast food franchisor Jimmy John's imposed a similar agreement on its workers but [dropped it](#) last year after a public backlash.)

Barred from tax office work, Hughes said fast food was all she could find.

Marion says the argument that fast food workers should leave for other, better paid, jobs misses the point. People like fast food. The companies that make it make fortunes. "We are the foot soldiers for these billion-dollar companies. We are the ones doing the work and bringing the money," she says.

"At the top of America, when it comes to Trump and them, their goal is to keep us down," she says. "Between these billion-dollar companies and Trump, it's a power trip."

They can afford to pay more and, she believes, eventually they will. "We are still coming. No war has been won over night and we are not giving up."

More than that, she likes working in fast food. "I love it. I'm good at it. Just like Martin Luther King said, 'If you are going to be a road sweeper, be the best damn sweeper there is'," she says. "I don't know. It's just this society is all messed up."

... we have a small favour to ask. Millions rely on the Guardian for independent journalism that stands for truth and integrity. Readers chose to support us financially

more than 1.5 million times in 2020, joining existing supporters in 180 countries.

With your help, we will continue to provide high-impact reporting that can counter misinformation and offer an authoritative, trustworthy source of news for everyone. With no shareholders or billionaire owner, we set our own agenda and provide truth-seeking journalism that's free from commercial and political influence. When it's never mattered more, we can investigate and challenge without fear or favour.

Unlike many others, we have maintained our choice: to keep Guardian journalism open for all readers, regardless of where they live or what they can afford to pay. We do this because we believe in information equality, where everyone deserves to read accurate news and thoughtful analysis. Greater numbers of people are staying well-informed on world events, and being inspired to take meaningful action.

We aim to offer readers a comprehensive, international perspective on critical events shaping our world - from the Black Lives Matter movement, to the new American administration, Brexit, and the world's slow emergence from a global pandemic. We are committed to upholding our reputation for urgent, powerful reporting on the climate emergency, and made the decision to reject advertising from fossil fuel companies, divest from the oil and gas industries, and set a course to achieve net zero emissions by 2030.

If there were ever a time to join us, it is now. Every contribution, however big or small, powers our journalism and helps sustain our future. **Support the Guardian from as little as \$1 - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Support the Guardian →

Remind me in May

VISA



comments (745)

[Sign in](#) or [create your Guardian account](#) to join the discussion.
