

UNVEILING WAGE THEFT: EXPLORING THEMES, IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Wage theft remains a persistent and multifaceted issue in contemporary labour landscapes. It is characterised by unfair practices, inadequate regulatory frameworks, and socioeconomic inequalities. This research aims to investigate key themes surrounding wage theft and its implications for individuals and society through a thematic analysis of existing literature. The findings reveal several prominent themes. These include the impact of minimum wage policy, pandemic-induced wage theft, legal, policy and institutional factors, social and economic consequences, worker vulnerability and protection, and human rights and social justice. The analysis also highlights several key takeaways. This paper also proposes recommendations to future research in terms of sampling selection, methodology, development of research questions, drafting operational definition, research design, research approach, instruments selection, study population and emerging research topics. By addressing these research gaps, policymakers, practitioners, and advocates can advance efforts to combat wage theft and promote fair and equitable labour practices in diverse work settings.

INTRODUCTION

Wages represent compensation paid to workers for their labour. The right to earn a proper wage is so fundamental to the human experience that the Universal Declaration on

Human Rights (1948) states that “Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection” (article 23 para 3). The contractual nature of the transaction for wages occurs between employers and employees, with employers paying wages in exchange for workers’ performance of duties, as well as their contributions of time and skills (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2024; U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2024; International Labour Organisation, 2006). Self-evidently, wages are crucial for meeting the basic needs of workers, reducing poverty, and encouraging labour force participation. Economically, wages impact consumer purchasing power, overall growth, and wealth distribution (International Monetary Fund, 2015). Thus, the theft of wages by an employer is a fundamental violation of the rights that workers have been globally recognised to have since the end of World War II.

The theft of wages has undoubtedly been practised since the rise of a paid labour force during the Industrial Revolution in the 1800’s (Cole et al., 2024). However, the term ‘wage theft’ was rather amorphous until recently. According to Levin (2021), the first use of ‘wage theft’ in academic literature was in 1988 when Michael Belknap defined this term as a process by which employers wrongfully withheld their employees’ pay. However, it was not until the 2000’s that the term ‘wage theft’ became part of academic lexicon.

Presently, there is no internationally accepted definition of wage theft. The United Nations itself does not provide a single, unified definition of wage theft that applies to all the bodies that it administers. Many international organisations, including the United Nations and the International Labor Organisation (ILO), define wage theft in relation to the exploitation of migrant workers but do not specifically define wage theft *per se*. For example, the

ILO defines forced labour in the ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) as “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself [or herself] voluntarily” (ILO FLC Article 2(1)). Certainly, forced labour is the quintessential definition of extreme wage theft, however, in circumstances where theft of wages occurs without compulsion to work, a robust internationally agreed definition for research purposes is lacking. At the transnational level, a good working definition of wage theft has been provided by ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking (2023) which defines wage theft as “the total or partial non-payment of a worker’s remuneration, earned through the provision of labour services ... It also includes the payment of salaries below the minimum wage, non-payment of overtime, non-payment of contractually owed benefits, the non-negotiated reduction of salaries as well as the retention of dues upon one’s contract termination”.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Given the scope of wage theft at the international level, the purpose of this study is to conduct a systematic investigation into content analysis on the topic wage theft and to address two main research questions, Further, this study will enrich scholarly discourse and inform future directions in academic enquiry into wage theft.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives of the study are as follows:

- a. To identify the major themes that have been explored within the wage theft domain.
- b. To evaluate the potential future research avenues, need to be explored in uncovering the global phenomenon of wage theft?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the academic literature, most authors acknowledge that wage theft involves the practice of the under-payment of wages to employees, either intentionally or inadvertently. It involves not only the failure to pay the correct amount of salary, but also the failure to pay benefits to which the employee is entitled, such as retirement fund contributions (Harkins, 2020; Raghunandan, 2021). In many cases, this under-payment may have been a conscious decision by the employer to withhold properly earned wages and entitlements. However, in a number of cases, wage theft arises from the inadvertent misclassification of an employee as an independent contractor or a casual worker. Whether intentional or inadvertent, the impact on employees of the loss of entitlements through underpayments may be devastating.

While the definition of wage theft may lack clarity, what is not doubted is the international scope of the issue. Wage theft is a global problem, and it is estimated that only the tip of the iceberg has been revealed in studies to date. However, there have been no international statistics gathered on the cost of wage theft to workers globally. Even at the national level, comprehensive statistics on crimes tend to be collected mainly for blue collar crimes, for example the FBI Uniform Crime Reporting program (USA) recorded 234,500 robberies in 2023 (FBI, 2023). Those robberies cost businesses and the public US \$482 million in total losses. However, these staggering numbers pale in comparison to the estimated US \$50 billion every year that employers fail to pay to their workers (Saurav Sarkar, 2022). And, this is in the US alone. In Australia, it is estimated that workers lose AUD \$850 million per year to under-payment of entitlements (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Turning to South East Asia, ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking (2023) found significant wage theft during the COVID-19 pandemic in all South East Asian countries, and whether or not that

has now been alleviated in the post-pandemic employment landscape remains to be seen.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilises thematic analysis as the primary methodological approach to collect and analyse literature on wage theft from indexed journal articles. Thematic analysis involves systematically exploring repositories or databases that contain scholarly articles, research papers, and other relevant publications on wage theft. In this study, we focus on well-known repositories to ensure comprehensive coverage of wage theft literature. Data extraction is conducted to retrieve key information, such as author names, publication dates, journal titles, abstracts, and keywords. This information is then synthesised and organised to enable further analysis and interpretation.

To facilitate the identification of key themes, we utilised Voyant Tools, a web-based text analytical software programme to analyse the research objectives of 51 articles. Voyant Tools allows for the visualisation and exploration of text data, making it an invaluable resource for predicting themes. Using Voyant, we conducted word frequency analysis, generated word clouds, and examined trends and correlations within the text corpus. This software helped in identifying prominent keywords and phrases, which were then categorised into relevant themes. Then, thematic analysis and interpretation were employed to synthesise data and identify key themes, trends, and insights in the field of wage theft. In addition to categorising extracted data into relevant themes, this paper also analyses patterns and relationships among themes. Throughout the process of thematic analysis, we have given the highest priority to ethical considerations such as copyright compliance and proper citation of sources. All retrieved articles have been attributed correctly, and the study adheres to the ethical guidelines outlined by relevant scholarly associations and institutions.

FINDINGS

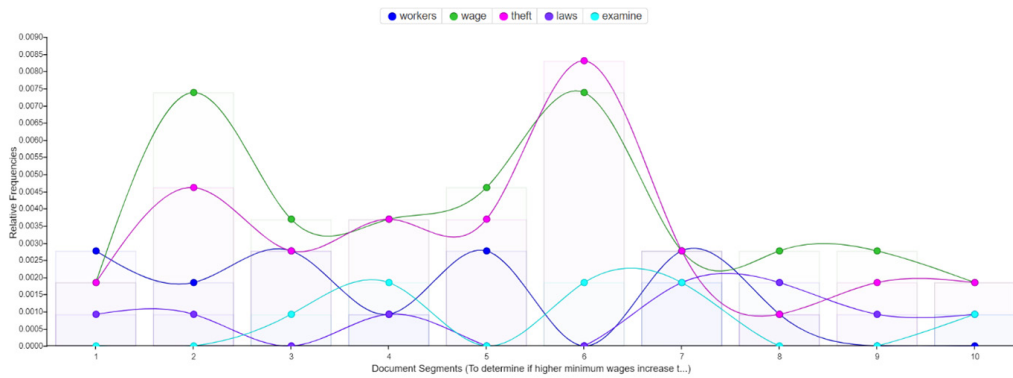


Figure 1: Relative Frequency and Document Segments Trends



Figure 2: Corpus Collocate Graph

The line graph depicts the distribution of a word's occurrence across a corpus or document. Meanwhile, collocates Graph represents keywords and terms that occur in proximity as a force directed network graph. This type of graph helps in understanding the contextual usage of words and their associative patterns. The graph clearly displays the 'node' (Target word), which is a central word around which the graph is constructed. Words such as 'wage', and 'theft' have been identified as the central words and associated collocates are around the node. The connecting edges between the words illustrate the connection among those words. The thickness of the links between words represents the strength of relationships studied in the selected articles. Stronger associations might be shown with brighter or differently coloured edges.

Major Themes

a. Impact of Minimum Wage Policies.

Up to date, much of the academic research in the wage theft space has been conducted in the United States. Clemens and Strain (2020) and Cooper and Kroeger (2017) investigated the prevalence of wage theft and the impact of minimum wage policies using different methodologies. Firstly, Clemens and Strain employed a quantitative approach, conducting statistical analysis of data from the Current Population Survey (CPS). They extracted wage-related variables from the Merged Outgoing Rotation Groups (MORG) of the CPS, which involved interviews with individuals conducted over multiple years. This method provides a nationally representative sample, enhancing the external validity of their findings. However, the internal validity relies on the accuracy of the wage-related variables collected through interviews, which may introduce biases due to respondent reporting accuracy.

By contrast, Cooper and Kroeger (2017) used a mixed-method approach. They conducted their own survey of frontline workers in three major metropolitan areas, also relying on data from the CPS Rotation Group to identify workers whose reported earnings were below the State minimum wage. While this approach allowed for a more focused investigation of wage theft experiences, there

is a possibility that sampling biases were introduced if survey respondents did not accurately represent the broader population. Additionally, the validity of their findings relies on the accuracy of the survey questions. Factors such as respondent comprehension or willingness to disclose sensitive information may have influenced the effectiveness of these questions.

Each study provides valuable insights into the prevalence and implications of wage theft. However, their methodological differences emphasise the trade-offs between using existing survey data for broad generalisations and conducting targeted surveys for in-depth exploration. Clemens and Strain (2020) focused on several key variables including minimum wage increases, the prevalence of subminimum wage payment, and the strength of enforcement regimes. Their study aimed to estimate the extent of subminimum wage payment, and to determine whether changes in the prevalence of subminimum wage payment were influenced by enforcement provisions in the relevant State labour laws. By contrast, Cooper and Kroeger (2017) focused on assessing the prevalence and magnitude of minimum wage violations in the ten most populous U.S. States. Their study examined the key variable of minimum wage violations, which are defined as workers being paid below the legally mandated hourly minimum wage. The authors found that low-wage workers were particularly vulnerable to wage theft and at risk of falling below the poverty line. Both the Clemens and Strain (2020) and Cooper and Kroeger (2017) studies align with legal definitions of wage theft by addressing non-compliance with minimum wage laws, although Clemens and Strain's approach is broader as it encompasses subminimum wage payment and underpayment. However, neither study investigated state-level minimum wage policies. It is evident from the analysis that investigating variables and measures on the impact of minimum wage policies provide more insights.

b. Pandemic-Induced Wage Theft.

During the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting recession, millions of low-wage workers have faced heightened vulnerability to exploitation. Despite this, there has been limited academic focus on the connection between increasing unemployment, violations of labour standards, and the capacity of governments to enforce these standards during economic downturns. Migrant workers, who make up a precarious segment of the workforce in a number of countries, are employed in sectors that have long been prone to labour rights violations. The pandemic has intensified the exploitation of these workers, as seen in the widespread issues of non-payment or underpayment of wages for their labour (Foley and Piper, 2021).

In a study carried out by ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking (2023), the linkages between wage theft and forced labour during the COVID-19 pandemic within five ASEAN nations – Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, the Philippines and Indonesia – was explored. Data was collected through interviews and focus group sessions. It was found that there was a strong correlation between the experiences of immigrant workers during the pandemic and under-payment of wages. For those immigrant workers who experienced serious wage theft issues, their working and living conditions were worsened during the pandemic in both the host country and on return to their country of origin. Immigrant workers were found to be highly susceptible to wage theft, and in conjunction with weak support and poor information about support structures, their plight was largely unheard by government agencies in their host countries as the policies implemented by host countries were not designed to protect this cohort of workers.

In an article commissioned by Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA) & Global Labor Justice (2023), light has been shed on wage theft in

'Big Fashion' in South and Southeast Asia. The AFWA explains how fashion corporations exploited the pandemic to under-pay workers in their supply chains in Asia and enrich themselves. One case in point is Nike Inc., who paid US 74 million in dividends to the Knight family (the company's largest shareholder) in 2020. Meanwhile, with the rationale of pandemic cutbacks, factory workers in Indonesia who stitch the famous Nike logo onto its branded gear, had their salaries cut in half, despite the fact that these workers were barely earning above-poverty line wages. Other companies with supply chains stretching into the Global South, such as Levi Strauss & Co, and the VF Corporation (which owns Northface, Timberland etc) report similar profits to shareholders while simultaneously making drastic salary cuts to workers.

The studies focusing on pandemic-induced wage theft reveal that in various parts of the world, the most vulnerable workers were exploited with companies justifying lay-offs and underpayments as financially necessary responses to uncertain times (Foley and Piper, 2021). ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking (2023) made similar findings and added a gloss on our understanding of underpayments to immigrant workers by reporting that even when migrant workers returned to their country of origin following the lifting of pandemic restrictions, they remained impoverished. Additionally, studies make it abundantly clear that large multinational companies profited from the pandemic at the expense of workers' rights to earn "just and favourable remuneration" as per the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948) (Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA) & Global Labor Justice (2023). While the studies highlight the exploitation of vulnerable workers and the role of large corporations in perpetuating wage theft, there is limited analysis on how specific government policies, both in host and origin countries, have attempted to mitigate or exacerbate wage theft during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

c. Legal, Policy, and Institutional Factors.

Legal, policy and institutional factors each present unique challenges in addressing wage theft and related issues. In India, Saha et al. (2023) highlights the complexities within the tea plantation industry, where wage appropriation occurs through strict compliance and non-compliance with different laws. In Australia, Barnes et al (2023) emphasise the prevalence of modern slavery and slavery-like practices, with a focus on the inadequacies of law enforcement responses. They argue for a vulnerability framework that recognises the role of laws, policies, and institutions in perpetuating exploitation, particularly among migrants and irregular migrants.

Employment law scholars in Australia have focused on the issue of temporary migrant workers who take on paid work during their stay. It was estimated that in 2018, there were 1.2 million such persons temporarily residing in Australia Campbell (2018). Such workers who are temporarily in the jurisdiction are extremely vulnerable to underpayment due to predatory business models. Not only does this negatively impact this cohort of workers, it also plays a role in overall wage stagnation. Australia's strict visa system is identified as a contributing factor that worsens vulnerabilities and impedes victims from accessing solutions.

With respect to legal factors impacting wage theft, two Australian jurisdictions (Victoria and Queensland) recently implemented wage theft legislation criminalising under-payment of wages and other entitlements such as superannuation (pension fund) contributions. These laws were designed to complement the powers of the Commonwealth Government to enforce civil provisions of the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) (FWA). Commonwealth legislation and pursuit of errant employers by the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO), invested with powers under the FWA, has not been enough to ensure that victims are compensated for their losses. In 2022, the FWO recovered \$532

million in stolen wages, however, not all that made its way back into the hands of the victims (Special Broadcasting Service 2023). Much of those recovered wages are instead forfeited to the Commonwealth Government.

Turning to the state of Victoria, the *Wage Theft Act 2020* (Vic) came into force in the state on 1 July 2021. Part 3 of the Act set up a dedicated Wage Theft Inspectorate which has been provided with funding to both inspect workplaces and bring criminal prosecutions of wage theft. Part 2 of the Act creates the criminal offences of the dishonest withholding of employee entitlements; and other offences. These offences may be committed by officers of a company, partners, unincorporated associations. Despite over ten successful prosecutions under this Act (including against large corporations such as NAB, CommSec, and BankWest), a High Court challenge was mounted against the validity of the legislation on constitutional grounds (Marin-Guzman, 2023). Recently, the Victorian Government announced that it will repeal its wage theft legislation, the state government having posted a message on its website that the Wage Inspectorate will assist workers to find alternative avenues to claim underpayments.

In a comparative study of both the Victorian and Queensland laws that criminalise wage theft Nikoloudakis & Ranieri (2023) conclude that the Victorian was more advanced in terms of being able to deter deliberate wage theft, however, they argue that Commonwealth legislation is needed. This comparative analysis is now moot given the stated intention of the Victorian government to repeal the law that was found to offend the Commonwealth Constitution. Commonwealth of Australia introduced a significant change to its legislation regarding wage theft through the *Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Closing Loopholes) Act 2023*. This law has been enacted to criminalise the intentional underpayment of employees, addressing the issue at the federal level, thus validating the work of Nikoloudakis & Ranieri (2023). However, the new Commonwealth offence

of wage theft, will only come into effect on 1 January in 2025. The FWO will be invested with powers to criminally prosecute cases of wage theft with severe penalties that include fines of up to nearly \$3 million for corporations and up to 10 years imprisonment for individuals (such as directors of companies). Inadvertent underpayments are specifically made immune from criminal prosecution (*Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Closing Loopholes) Act 2023* (Cth)).

Moving to the United States, Fritz-Mauer (2021) described efforts in the District of Columbia to address wage theft through enforcement schemes, noting the shift towards viewing wage theft as a personal harm to be remedied through civil justice systems. However, the author argues that such approaches overlook the systemic nature of wage theft and the need for proactive government intervention to ensure compliance and protect workers' rights. Meanwhile, Kim and Allmang (2020) in their study on the US response to wage theft, highlight legislative efforts to amend federal employment and labour policies. They illustrate the importance of comprehensive analyses to guide future policy interventions effectively. The critical juncture in US efforts to combat wage theft stress the need for evidence-based policies informed by rigorous research and analysis.

The above-mentioned studies have provided valuable insights into the policy implications of legal, policy, and institutional frameworks in specific geographical contexts. For example, Barnes, Mahmud Naser, and Aston (2023) highlight the limitations of existing law enforcement approaches in combating modern slavery in Australia. They propose a vulnerability framework that prioritises policy, legal, and institutional reforms to address structural vulnerabilities that contribute to exploitation, especially among irregular migrants. Their recommendations include establishing a national compensation scheme for victims and reforming Australia's visa system to reduce vulnerability. Similarly, Fritz-Mauer (2021) emphasises the importance of institutional reforms and public solutions in

detering wage theft and ensuring justice for low-wageworkers. They propose organisational shifts within wage and hour agencies to adopt a more empathetic understanding of workers' experiences and advocate for policy measures that do not disrupt the status. Furthermore, Kim and Allmang (2020) highlight the need for additional evidence regarding the effectiveness of advocacy efforts targeting wage theft in the United States. Their findings emphasised the ongoing challenges in addressing wage theft and the significance of evidence-based policymaking to enhance labour market experiences for vulnerable workers. The criminalisation of wage theft in Australia had a rocky start with a constitutional challenge to the law introduced by the state of Victoria, however Commonwealth legislation will take effect in 2025 (*Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Closing Loopholes) Act 2023* (Cth)). It is evident from the analysis, that all these studies stress the necessity for targeted policy interventions, institutional reforms, and evidence-based approaches to address wage theft and related labour rights violations in specific geographical contexts.

d. Social and Economic Consequences.

Social and economic consequences is a recurrent theme studied in the wage theft domain. The policy recommendations and implications proposed by each study provide valuable insights into how to address wage theft and its social and economic consequences. Fussell's (2016) analysis emphasises the importance of legal status in determining vulnerability to wage theft among migrant workers. By highlighting situations in which threats to legal status may not be effective, such as when unauthorised migrants are not at risk of arrest or deportation, Fussell suggests taking up opportunities for further research to better understand the complexities of this issue. This indicates the need for policies that improve protections for all workers, regardless of their immigration status, and strengthen enforcement mechanisms to prevent labour

exploitation. Meanwhile, Ferris and Ross (2022) propose disrupting the societal and disciplinary acceptance of wage theft through additional criminological studies. Their suggestion to document the direct and indirect harms of wage theft highlights the importance of acknowledging this form of exploitation as a serious crime with widespread implications. By bringing attention to the societal acceptance of wage theft, this approach emphasises the need for legal reforms, public awareness campaigns, and advocacy efforts to challenge established norms and hold perpetrators accountable.

Additional evidence of social and economic consequences can be gleaned from a study carried out by Ahmed (2024) in which she argues that the practice of wage theft is a major form of violence in feminised workplaces, such as the garment factories of Bangladesh. Ahmed exposes the "docile workforce" of these factory settings and emphasises how powerful actors exploit these dynamics to maintain their privileges. This author calls for structural reforms to empower workers and dismantle systems of oppression. Her work emphasises the importance of adopting a feminist and intersectional approach to labour rights advocacy, recognising the intersections of gender, class, and labour exploitation in shaping workers' experiences. It is evident from the analysis that it is important to recognise the structural factors that perpetuate exploitation and inequality, and advocate for systemic reforms to protect the rights and dignity of all workers.

The common parameter among the studies that fall under this theme is how contextual factors shape workers' experiences of wage theft. The contextual factors surrounding each study on wage theft play a crucial role in shaping the experiences of exploitation and the implications of the research findings. In Fussell's (2016) study, conducted in New Orleans, Louisiana, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the

geographical and temporal context post-disaster construction significantly influenced the prevalence of wage theft among Latino migrant workers. The socio-economic vulnerability exacerbated by the disaster, combined with the visual identifiability of Latino migrants, made them prime targets for wage theft and criminal victimisation.

Ferris and Ross's (2022) contribution to the narrative surrounding social and economic consequences is their focus on how the temporal context of neoliberal restructuring over the past three decades has influenced participants' perception of wage theft. The socio-economic context, they argue, is indicative of broader changes in economic and workplace dynamics, where neoliberal policies prioritise profit maximisation and deregulation, often disregarding workers' rights. To challenge and disrupt this acceptance, it is crucial to conduct further criminological studies that accurately depict the direct and indirect consequences of wage theft. These studies should emphasise its systemic nature and challenge prevailing narratives that obscure structural inequalities. Having grown up in Bangladesh, the Ahmed study (2024) gives a harrowing account of how she personally witnessed the violence perpetrated against low-paid women, migrants and child labourers in the garment factory industry. It is evident from the analysis of these researchers that the geographical, temporal, and socio-economic contexts surrounding each study on wage theft significantly influence the findings and implications of the research.

Worker Vulnerability and Protection:

The studies by Clemens and Strain (2023), Raghunandan (2021), and Segarra and Prasad (2024) offer distinct perspectives on the phenomenon of wage theft, focusing on different demographic groups and industries. Clemens and Strain's study examines the impact of minimum wage increases on various demographic groups, revealing disparities

in underpayment across racial and ethnic lines and age demographics. Their analysis highlights the disproportionate burden faced by young African American workers, who experience higher levels of underpayment compared to the overall population. In contrast, Raghunandan's research investigates the prevalence of wage theft within firms, emphasising its significance as the largest form of theft in the United States and its disproportionate impact on vulnerable employees. By utilising data from Violation Tracker and examining the link between managers' personal incentives and wage theft, Raghunandan sheds light on the complex dynamics contributing to this phenomenon, particularly within organisational contexts. Meanwhile, Segarra and Prasad's study focuses on undocumented Latin immigrant workers, offering insights into the systemic disenfranchisement experienced by this population. Through an exploration of the labour undertaken by undocumented immigrants and the socio-legal identities attributed to them, the researchers illuminate the intersecting factors that contribute to their vulnerability to wage theft. It is evident from the analysis that by comparing and contrasting these populations and samples, we gain a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of wage theft and the diverse contexts in which it occurs, providing valuable insights for addressing this pervasive issue through targeted interventions and policy measures.

Analysing the theoretical frameworks used in the studies in this domain reveals distinct approaches to understanding wage theft, each shaped by different conceptual foundations and methodologies. Galvin (2016) reviews and builds upon existing scholarship regarding the effectiveness of stronger penalties in reducing wage theft. The study acknowledges the theoretical expectation that higher penalties and enforcement capacities should deter wage violations by increasing the expected costs for employers. However,

Galvin highlights a persistent gap between theory and practice, where stronger penalties do not significantly reduce wage theft due to the high social costs of direct enforcement through policing and prosecutorial activities. This theoretical framework shapes the research question by focusing on the paradox between theoretical deterrents and practical outcomes. Galvin's interpretation of results emphasises the need to rethink enforcement strategies and consider alternative approaches that might bridge the gap between theoretical expectations and practical realities. In contrast, Segarra and Prasad (2024) adopt a grounded theory methodology to explore the experiences of undocumented Latin immigrant workers in the United States. Their theoretical framework is rooted in the concepts of hyper visible identity and modern slavery. By using grounded theory, they inductively develop a theory from the data collected during extensive fieldwork. This approach allows them to build a better understanding of how the socio-legal identities attributed to undocumented immigrants contribute to their systematic disenfranchisement and vulnerability to wage theft. It is evident that the grounded theory methodology shapes their research question by focusing on the lived experiences of undocumented immigrants and how these experiences illuminate broader theoretical concepts.

Human Rights and Social Justice:

Addressing wage theft from both human rights and social justice perspectives requires understanding the distinct approaches of LeBaron (2021) and Galemba (2021). LeBaron's study emphasises that wage theft is intricately linked to forced labour within global supply chains. It underscores the exploitation that arises from inadequate wages and poor labour practices, often perpetuated by multinational corporations (MNCs). The researcher raises critical questions about the conditions under

which forced labour is most likely to occur. Further, the study explores how wages factor into these exploitative practices and how the dynamics within supply chains, particularly those controlled by MNCs, shape labour conditions at the bottom. LeBaron's research aims to advance the literature on forced labour by analysing business models that incentivise or tolerate these practices. In doing so, it informs strategies to combat forced labour on an international scale. Her human rights framework advocates for comprehensive international policies and enforcement mechanisms to protect workers from systemic exploitation.

In contrast, Galemba's study focuses on social justice issues within the US, specifically systemic inequalities and legal disenfranchisement faced by day labourers. The researcher highlights the difficulties these workers encounter in asserting their legal rights due to criminalisation and societal devaluation. Galemba argues that wage theft often falls outside the definition of severe exploitation that warrants a criminal justice response. She emphasises that solely focusing on individual criminals and victims obscures broader structural forms of exploitation. Galemba discusses how day labourers sometimes resort to actions like threatening to steal tools when they are not paid, acts of desperation that further justify their criminalisation. She points to recent legislative efforts in cities like Denver and Boulder, where laws have been revised to enhance wage protections and improve access to justice for low-wage workers. Her research advocates for both legal and non-legal strategies, including community-based advocacy and local ordinances, to address gaps in federal labour standards and protect vulnerable workers. Both studies emphasise the need for systemic reforms to address the root causes of wage theft, whether in global supply chains or local labour markets.

SECTION 4: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This investigation of wage theft has revealed its widespread and intricate nature, emphasising the necessity for comprehensive strategies. Both intentional and inadvertent wage theft significantly impact workers' livelihoods and economic equality. Key areas of focus include the effects of minimum wage policies, pandemic-induced wage theft, legal and institutional responses, social and economic consequences, worker vulnerability, and human rights (Research Question 1). The analysis highlights the need for stronger enforcement mechanisms, robust legal frameworks, proactive government intervention, and systemic reforms to safeguard vulnerable workers and combat exploitation. Future research needs to prioritise comparative analyses, policy effectiveness, and socio-economic contexts to develop more impactful strategies against wage theft globally. As the gap between rich and poor widens annually, the need to address wage theft and proffer solutions is urgent. The next paragraphs will recommend suggestions for future researchers in the wage theft space (Research Question 2).

Analysis conducted on the impact of minimum wage policies provide valuable insights into the prevalence and implications of wage theft. Future researchers have various options for obtaining data, including national surveys like the Current Population Survey (CPS) in the United States, administrative records, or custom-designed surveys. It is important for researchers to carefully evaluate the strengths and limitations of each data source, considering aspects such as sample representativeness, data quality, and relevance to their research focus. Depending on their research objectives and available resources, researchers can choose appropriate sampling techniques, such as convenience sampling, random sampling, or stratified sampling. The use of stratified sampling, which involves

dividing the population into distinct subgroups or strata based on certain characteristics would be a highly effective technique to collect data. For example, in the context of studying minimum wage policies, researchers may stratify the population based on factors such as geographic location (e.g., states or regions with different minimum wage levels), industry sectors, or demographic characteristics of workers (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity). Validity and reliability should be prioritised when selecting measures to capture instances of wage theft and the impact of minimum wage policies. Future researchers may conduct pilot studies, pre-tests, or validation checks to ensure the accuracy and consistency of their measures. Given the sensitivity of the topic of wage theft, it is crucial for future researchers to obtain informed consent from participants, maintain confidentiality and data protection, and adhere to ethical guidelines and regulations throughout the research process.

It is clear that certain variables, such as increases in minimum wage, prevalence of wage theft, and enforcement regimes, play a crucial role in determining minimum wages. By being cognisant of these fundamental aspects impacting wage theft, researchers will be able to develop specific research questions and hypotheses that effectively tackle the key aspects of the impact of minimum wage policies. For example, researchers may develop specific research questions such as whether there are differential effects of minimum wage increases on the prevalence of wage theft among various demographic groups, such as minority workers, women, or immigrants? Another research question is how increases in minimum wage levels impact the prevalence of wage theft among low-wage workers in different industries and regions. Building on the operational definitions of wage theft used in previous studies, future researchers should refine their definitions and measures to ensure alignment with legal definitions and the experiences of workers. This process may include conducting qualitative interviews or

focus groups with workers in order to gain insights into their perceptions of wage theft.

Analysis conducted on the legal, policy, and institutional factors reveals that studies to date have largely focused on conducting specific research design studies to investigate wage theft policies and enforcement mechanisms, specifically targeting sectors or industries where wage theft is prevalent. However, future researchers could conduct a comparative analysis of wage theft policies. This comparative study could involve a detailed policy analysis, where researchers examine legislative frameworks, minimum wage laws, and labour regulations pertaining to specific vulnerable sectors in each country. By taking this approach, researchers could then identify differences in legal protections, enforcement mechanisms, and compliance requirements aimed at preventing wage theft and ensuring fair wages for workers. Additionally, they could investigate the enforcement practices and capabilities of government agencies responsible for monitoring and enforcing labour standards in the affected industry. Such investigations should specifically focus on inspection procedures, complaint mechanisms, and penalties for non-compliance with wage laws. By conducting comparative studies among countries and focusing on a particular industry, future researchers will also be able to identify common trends, practices, and innovative approaches in addressing wage theft in specific industries. In addition, following the lead of Australian jurisdictions that have introduced criminal laws with robust enforcement mechanisms and serious sanctions, further research is needed to determine if criminalisation of wage theft could be a viable option in other countries.

One can glean from the analysis that these studies stress the necessity for targeted policy interventions, institutional reforms, and evidence-based approaches to address wage theft and related labour rights violations in specific geographical contexts. Future researchers should examine how

policies are formulated, implemented, and their effectiveness assessed. This will enable researchers to gain insights into the gaps, challenges, and opportunities for improving regulatory frameworks and addressing labour rights violations. For instance, researchers may focus on Asian countries, such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, or China, where wage theft is a significant issue that has not yet been thoroughly explored. By conducting in-depth interviews with policymakers, labour representatives, and other relevant stakeholders, researchers can gather insights into the process of drafting minimum wage legislation, including the factors that influence policy decisions, stakeholder consultations, and political considerations. Researchers can also use surveys or case studies to assess employers' adherence to minimum wage laws, identify common violations or loopholes, and explore barriers to effective enforcement, such as limited resources or workers' lack of awareness. Through this comprehensive analysis, researchers may uncover issues such as inadequate enforcement mechanisms, disparities in wage compliance across sectors or regions, or the need for complementary policies to support low-wage workers, such as social protection measures or skills development programs. Based on their findings, researchers are able to provide recommendations that may include measures to enhance enforcement capacity, raise awareness about labour rights, involve stakeholders in policy design, and monitor the impact of minimum wage adjustments over time.

Additionally, this investigation highlights the importance of recognising structural factors that perpetuate exploitation and inequality. It advocates for systemic reforms to protect the rights and dignity of all workers. This means the legal status played a significant role in shaping vulnerability to exploitation. This structural vulnerability perpetuated a cycle of exploitation and inequality. Employers could

exploit workers' fears of legal repercussions to withhold wages and violate labour rights with impunity. Without addressing the underlying structural factors that enable and normalise wage theft, efforts to combat exploitation are likely to be ineffective and insufficient in protecting vulnerable workers. Therefore, future researchers can identify key issues related to wage theft, such as the impact of legal status on vulnerability, societal acceptance of this issue, and the role of socioeconomic vulnerabilities in perpetuating exploitation. For example, they may explore how legal status affects vulnerability to wage theft among migrant workers. By examining case studies or conducting surveys among different migrant communities, researchers can investigate the influence of factors like immigration status, documentation status, and fear of deportation on workers' experiences of exploitation and their access to legal remedies.

While the studies highlight the exploitation of vulnerable workers and the role of large corporations in perpetuating wage theft, there is limited analysis on how specific government policies, both in host and origin countries, have attempted to mitigate or exacerbate wage theft during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Future researchers may analyse the specific policies enacted to protect low-wage and migrant workers during economic downturns. For example, they may focus on Malaysia's *Prihatin* Economic Stimulus Package and examine how it aimed to protect low-wage and migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysing the *Prihatin* Economic Stimulus Package and similar policies in other jurisdictions may provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of governmental interventions in protecting vulnerable workers during economic downturns. Such research will help develop recommendations for more robust support systems in the future.

Moreover, it is observable that the geographical, temporal, and socio-economic

contexts surrounding each study on wage theft significantly influence the findings and implications of the research. Building upon the understanding that contextual factors significantly shape experiences of wage theft, a promising direction for future research could be explored the role of intersectionality in understanding and addressing wage theft among vulnerable populations. This research could investigate how intersecting identities, such as race, gender, immigration status, and socio-economic status, interact with contextual factors to influence workers' vulnerability to wage theft. For instance, a study could examine how women working in low-wage service industries in urban centres experience wage theft differently based on their immigration status, gender, and socio-economic background. This could involve conducting intersectional analyses to examine how different forms of marginalisation intersect and compound to intensify the risk of exploitation. By focusing on intersectionality in future research on wage theft, researchers would be able to gain a deeper understanding of how multiple variables shape vulnerability to exploitation and this knowledge would inform targeted interventions that address the intersecting forms of discrimination and inequality faced by marginalised workers.

Moving to analysis conducted on worker vulnerability and protection, current papers show that the grounded theory methodology shapes research questions by focusing on the lived experiences of undocumented immigrants and how these experiences illuminate broader theoretical concepts. Galvin's (2016) work, which critiques the effectiveness of stronger penalties, lays a foundation for future researchers to enhance. Other factors that may influence the effectiveness of wage theft deterrents, like employer compliance behaviours or worker awareness and reporting mechanisms, can be explored further by researchers building on this critique. For example, future researchers may undertake studies to investigate how

employer compliance behaviours and worker awareness and reporting mechanisms impact the effectiveness of wage theft deterrents. By examining employer behaviours, future studies could identify specific practices or attitudes that contribute to non-compliance, even when penalties are strong. Such studies may reveal, for example, that employers are more likely to comply when they perceive a higher probability of inspections or when they have internal compliance programmes in place. Moreover, this type of study could offer valuable insights into the level of understanding that workers have regarding their rights and the existing channels available for reporting instances of wage theft. Additionally, future studies have the potential to uncover various factors that discourage workers from reporting such cases, such as fear of reprisal or limited awareness of their legal protections or the cost of bring a case to a court or tribunal. Based on the findings, the research could potentially suggest targeted interventions to improve both employer compliance and worker reporting. For instance, policies could be recommended to increase the frequency of government funded random inspections, provide better education for both employers and workers about wage laws, and enhance protections for whistleblowers.

With respect to the theme of human rights and social justice, current research emphasises the need for systemic reforms to address the root causes of wage theft. Such a comprehensive understanding may lead to more effective and holistic solutions in the fight against wage theft and the protection of vulnerable workers worldwide. For future research, it would be beneficial to investigate the impact of recent legislative reforms in different cities and states on reducing wage theft and improving access to justice for low-wage workers. For instance, researchers could focus on specific research settings and evaluate the effectiveness of a particular wage protection Act. To do so, researchers may collect data on the number of wage

theft complaints filed before and after the Act's implementation. This research could analyse the long-term effects of these legal changes and identify best practices that could be replicated in other regions. Additionally, researchers could assess the level of awareness among low-wage workers regarding their rights under legislation and their access to both legal and non-legal support services. Such research could then determine whether there was a significant decrease in wage theft incidents since legislative implementation.

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