

**TIME THEFT:**  
**EXPOSING A SUBTLE YET SERIOUS DRIVER OF SOCIOECONOMIC INEQUALITY**

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## **Time Theft: Exposing a Subtle yet Serious Driver of Socioeconomic Inequality**

### **Summary**

Socioeconomic inequality is perpetuated and exacerbated by an overlooked yet serious epidemic of time theft: the act of causing others to lose their time without adequate cause, compensation, or consent. We explain why time theft goes unnoticed, how it drives socioeconomic inequality, and what businesses and policymakers can do to address it.

### **Keywords**

time theft, social inequality, time poverty

*“[Exposure] is justly commended as a remedy for social and industrial diseases. Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman.”*

–Louis Brandeis, former U.S. Supreme Court Justice

Socioeconomic inequality remains a highly debated topic among scholars, organizational leaders, and policymakers. This is unsurprising given the negative consequences it can yield for members of all social classes, including skewed distributions of resources, increased crime rates, and political unrest. Most, if not all, of these conversations focus on socioeconomic inequality in terms of material wealth (e.g., assets, income). The potential to secure material wealth, however, depends greatly on one’s capability to procure and preserve a more valuable resource: *time*.

Given this often-ignored dependency, we propose that socioeconomic inequality is exacerbated by a heretofore unaddressed epidemic of time theft: the act of causing others to lose their time without adequate cause, compensation, or consent. Examples of time theft abound.

Consider, for instance, how job candidates are robbed of numerous hours when they are invited to apply and interview for jobs *after* managers already decided to hire someone else. Or how collaborators in various endeavors (e.g., business ventures, legal cases, or academic research) face willful time theft when they are deliberately cut out of projects to which they have significantly contributed. And how citizens of lower socioeconomic status experience time theft when compelled to navigate excessive bureaucratic requirements to access essential social services (Rose, 2021).

Although such incidents might seem inconsequential individually, the aggregate and long-term impact of such occurrences is profound: people are robbed of countless hours, days, or even years they could spend on more positive (e.g., socializing) and productive activities (e.g., professional development), diminishing their potential to contribute to business and society.

Following Judge Brandeis' wisdom, we aim to expose time theft as a social disease by identifying its causes, elaborating on its consequences, and exploring remedial measures. We further argue that comprehensive mitigation of time theft will require a combination of isolated and systemic changes in the institutions and structures that currently enable it.

### **Causes of Time Theft**

Societies have endeavored to identify, criminalize, and penalize most forms of theft. Time theft, however, remains a notable exception, particularly its ordinary forms. Whereas extreme instances of time theft, such as human trafficking, are met with warranted outrage and legal action, mundane forms are either overlooked or met with quiet resignation by victims and the legal systems designed to protect them. We see three reasons why this occurs.

First, the subjective utility of time, contrasted against the objective value of material assets, means that its loss is often unfelt (Okada & Hoch, 2004). Whereas most of us viscerally react to

losing \$100, our reactions to losing an hour vary and tend to be muted because its true cost can only be appreciated by counterfactually imagining what else we would have done with that time (Zhao et al., 2015). Indeed, the true cost of time theft manifests as unrealized opportunities to use the stolen time differently (e.g., for professional development, mentoring, resting).

Second, many, if not all societies, normalize various forms of time theft by regarding them as mere inconveniences. Yet, those who can least afford to bear these “inconveniences” are compelled to accept them as a normal aspect of everyday life.

Third, inverted terminology obscures time theft. The term “time theft” is regularly used to refer to employees claiming pay for unworked hours (e.g., padding time sheets). In contrast, the term “wage theft” is used to refer to employers neglecting to pay employees for hours worked. However, these uses are inverted because thievery refers to unwarranted taking rather than keeping. What is stolen in the former case is money (not time) and what is stolen in the latter case is time (not money). As long as these terms remain inverted, it will be challenging to foster simple and straightforward collective discourse about time theft.

### **Consequences of Time Theft**

Grasping the insidious consequences of time theft requires proper appreciation of time as a fundamental resource. Although economic prosperity is often equated with material wealth, several economists and philosophers have argued that time is more crucial and fundamental. Karl Marx (1990), for instance, posited that privileged social classes achieve and maintain their status by monopolizing the time of the masses and converting it into power and wealth for themselves. This dynamic perpetuates socioeconomic inequality parallel to how other common practices do.

Just as day-to-day practices subtly reinforce class boundaries (Prasad & Segarra, 2023), time theft by default or design tends to benefit the elite at the expense of the poor. Because the

poor must spend more time meeting their basic needs, experiencing time theft more severely impedes their ability to invest in self-enhancement and economic advancement. The repercussions of time theft, thus, are not just the loss of mere moments. Rather, time theft robs those of limited economic means of opportunities to improve their stations in life by investing in themselves (e.g., education, training). Regularly falling victim to time theft thus exacerbates the dual burden of having less material and temporal resources to survive and thrive.

Overall, time theft emerges not just as a theft of the present, but of the future as well. It not only takes away victims' present moments, but it also takes away their opportunities for a better life, locking them in a cycle of socioeconomic stagnation and widening the gap between the privileged and the underprivileged.

### **Combating Time Theft**

To mitigate time theft, we must increase social awareness and rejection of it. We, thus, call on policymakers and business leaders to introduce educational and investigatory campaigns that enhance time literacy, promote time-related rights, and document the causes and consequences of time theft.

It strikes us as tragically ironic that countries around the world intervene by prosecuting theft of assets regardless of value yet require time theft victims to spend more time *and* money (which they may not have) to hold time thieves accountable through civil litigation. Instead, lawmakers and regulators should institute formal protections for time, like those currently protecting material possessions. Moreover, criminalizing willful time theft would send a strong message that people's time deserves equal, if not more, respect than other assets.

Additionally, service providers can minimize unnecessary time burdens through better use of technology without undermining service quality. Just as airline scheduling services inform

customers of delays through email and text messages, agencies that handle licensing and social services could allow citizens to make scheduled appointments online as is now standard in some parts of the world. Medical offices could inform patients via text messages when their providers are behind schedule to minimize wait times and avoid crowding in waiting rooms.

Both public and private organizations can also play a vital role in leveraging data analytics to proactively identify and reduce time-intensive tasks. Data analytics can help eliminate unproductive activities like redundant meetings and governments could leverage efficient data management and automation to ease the burden of time-consuming mandatory activities for citizens such as filing income taxes.

Finally, fighting time theft will require collaborative efforts from scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. These collaborations could manifest in various forms, such as incorporating both time and financial metrics in policy evaluation, rewarding companies that demonstrate a commitment to time equity, and conducting joint academic-practitioner research to rigorously study the phenomenon of time theft and its potential remediation.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Social diseases cannot be controlled or corrected unless they are exposed. In addition to shining a light on time theft, we have contended that mitigating it and its role in exacerbating socioeconomic inequality will require a shift in social perspectives and structures. Until societies recognize time as a fundamental resource deserving equity and justice, time theft will persist. We hope this commentary will spark constructive dialogue about time theft and motivate collective action to ensure time equity and prosperity for all.

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