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Low-Income Workers' Perception Regarding Wage Theft and Barriers to Addressing Prevention in Southeast Florida

Marcia Carvlho-Donaldson
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

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Marcia Carvalho-Donaldson

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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

Low-Income Workers' Perception Regarding Wage Theft and Barriers

to Addressing Prevention in Southeast Florida

by

Marcia Carvalho-Donaldson

MA, Strayer University

BS, Columbia Southern University

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

November 2023

Abstract

Many low-income workers are vulnerable to becoming victims of wage theft. Studies have shown that even when these workers know their rights, they still face certain obstacles should they complain or report such theft. Extensive research has been conducted at the federal level to establish the impact and consequences of wage theft, but few researchers have examined wage theft at the state and local level in states such as Florida. The experiences and perceptions of low-income worker participants in Southeast Florida were investigated in this phenomenological study, and rational choice theory was the conceptual framework used to investigate this phenomenon. Data were collected from 17 wage theft victim participants using 12 semistructured interview questions along with follow-up questions. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, and the results generated five themes: types of wage theft occurrences; weighing the cost, consequences, and benefits of reporting; encountering barriers; enduring economic hardship; and health impacts. The findings of this study suggested that wage theft severely impacted the low-income worker participants, and these victims faced multiple barriers to reporting their claims and complaints. They instead felt that it was more beneficial to keep their jobs than to file a complaint or report their wage theft claims. This study has implications for positive social and policy change for policymakers, community leaders, advocates, and low-income workers who are considering asserting their wage and hour rights under the Fair Labor Standards Act. Recommendations include the establishment of coenforcement and supportive community initiatives to assist low-income workers affected by wage theft.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to God, Wisdom, my children, and my grandchildren.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Gary Kelsey, my committee chair, and my cochair, Lori Demeter.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Wage theft is a term that originated in the early 2000s. Bobo (2008) explicitly defined wage theft as a crisis that violates the law and deprives workers of their right to their legally required wages. Wage theft is also known to occur when workers are not paid all their wages earned, or they are denied pay for hours worked beyond 40 hours in a workweek, known as overtime, and therefore not paid for work performed. Wage theft was also defined by Ahmed (2019) as an employer failing to pay the minimum wage, failing to pay for overtime, refusing to pay a worker for all work produced and hours worked, asking workers to work off the clock, misclassifying them, improperly deducting money from their wages, and stealing tips.

Additionally, wage theft can take many different forms, but the most common ones are not paying the legal minimum wage set by the federal or state government, failing to pay hourly workers overtime pay when they work more than 40 hours per week, incorrectly classifying workers as independent contractors, adjusting timeclocks, improperly deducting funds from paychecks, and giving workers cash payments rather than enrolling them in insurance programs that would benefit them (Bobo, 2008). While the problem and incidence of wage theft in the United States are difficult to measure, Bernhardt et al. (2009) noted that it is pervasive in fields that employ low-income, low-age individuals.

According to Bobo (2011), most Americans are frequently shocked to learn that wage theft by employers is a common issue. Bobo (2011) reported that this issue has

reached epidemic proportions and that the existing safeguards are insufficient or not enforced. Additionally, wage theft is a neglected endemic, according to Hallett (2008); one that inflicts harm on the working poor in the United States. Further, the pervasiveness of wage theft has left low-wage workers struggling to make financial ends meet. These struggles include the inability to pay their bills, evictions, the threat of homelessness, mental trauma, and other economic consequences (Fritz-Mauer, 2021). According to Cooper and Kroeger (2017), studies indicate that up to 17% of low-paid workers face minimum wage violations, costing these workers \$8 billion annually. To further expound on the effect of these violations, Cooper and Kroeger indicated that the amount of stolen earnings in the United States exceeds the total amount of money taken in robberies, thefts, larcenies, and vehicle thefts. Additionally, research done in major cities such as New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago indicate that 26% of low-income individuals who worked over 40 hours in the previous week suffered minimum wage violations, and 76% of these workers experienced violations of the overtime pay policy.

As public awareness of the severity of pay theft grows, advocacy and community groups' attempts to halt wage theft practices and advance the implementation of anti-wage-theft policies have also increased. Researchers from a variety of fields, including political science, law, sociology, and labor studies, have also provided theoretical and empirical knowledge on the problem, but no real solutions, particularly in many places such as Florida, have been implemented. Galvin (2016) stated that the Department of Labor implemented policies to enforce the law yet the agency's enforcement arm, the Wage and Hour Division (WHD) created in 1948 to investigate violations, only

employed 1,000 investigators at that time, to cover a workforce populace of approximately 23 million. Even so, the more things changed, the more they remained the same. Fine (2017) stated that as the workforce population grew to approximately 135 million people, rather than employing more investigators, the WHD employed even fewer than the original 1,000 investigators. Based on this decrease, investigations into wage and hour violations also decreased, and the number of investigations conducted by the WHD, according to Cooper and Kroeger (2017), decreased by 63%. It was pointed out that this decline leaves a gap between prevention and enforcement and causes what is now recognized as wage theft. As a result, fighting wage theft requires a lot of effort, especially in places such as Florida and its cities, which have no wage and hour agencies. It was further pointed out that there have not been many thorough and insightful studies of the wage theft issue in the United States, or policy interventions to mitigate and answer the impact of wage theft on low-income workers and the barriers and challenges to tackling and addressing prevention in states like Florida; these are required to address this problem and drive future policy and research initiatives.

Based on this background, I sought to provide a critical analysis of the wage theft crisis to obtain a clear understanding of its impact on low-income workers. Further, based on research findings, I delineated the impact based on their experiences and perceptions of the issue. The study also explored the significant hurdles these workers endure and highlighted the disproportionate attention wage theft from workers is given versus wage theft from employees (Bittle & Snider, 2018). Because states and localities handle and respond to the problem of wage theft in a variety of ways, an assessment on the different

strategies and policies currently used is described in this study. I utilized rational choice theory (RCT) for my qualitative study. Using RCT, I examined the barriers to addressing wage theft prevention and policy enforcement in Southeast Florida as well as the shortcomings of the current enforcement agencies and policy reform strategies in addressing this crisis. Information included in this study will be relevant statistical details and evidence, documented discrepancies, along with other scholarly facts that will indicate the urgency and significance of the issue.

Background

Historically, the foundational regulation that enforces wage and hour violations is the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). This Act has been in existence for more than 85 years; however, there has been an erosion of the enforcement requirements. Given the economic and workforce changes that have occurred over the decades, any enforcement from this 20th-century, 85-year-old act has waned in effectiveness (Weil, 2018) because there have been minimal amendments to many of the provisions within the act. Additionally, while inflation has increased over the years, provisions in the act such as the federal minimum wage have remained torpid, causing employers to pay workers “30% less per hour than they did 50 years ago” (Cooper, 2017). According to Hacker and Pierson (2010), the average individual makes a lot less in wages than what they work or produce. Additionally, the erosion of the FLSA also impacts the wage and hour protections of low-income workers, and according to Fritz-Mauer (2021), because minimum wage violations are significant in scope and size, low-income workers are left with no recourse but to balance their obligations while enduring monetary hardship.

Despite preventative measures offered by federal wage and hour laws (Green, 2019), workers who bring claims to enforcement agencies regarding wage theft receive minimal attention. As a result, the normalizing of the exploitation of low-income workers ensues (Bittle & Snider, 2018), thereby creating social and economic hardship for these workers. Furthermore, according to Minkler et al. (2014), numerous employers have robbed from their employees and record fewer hours than their workers work, do not pay the mandated minimum wage, do not pay overtime, or have misclassified their workers as independent contractors.

Even though wage theft is prevalent, many people in the nation are unaware that this is a critical problem or that wage theft even exists. Bittle and Snider (2018) indicated that studies conducted regarding employer wage theft often focus on the egregious levels of exploitation based on race, color, and immigration status; however, wage theft regardless of these categories, and unbeknownst to people, happens often across the nation. Additionally, employer abuse of wage theft is high. Galvin (2016) stated that the enormity of this problem is still unknown. Data for 2008 analyzed by Bernhardt et al. (2013) showed that 61% of those who were evaluated were subjected to at least one type of wage theft. This included 25% receiving less than the required minimum wage; approximately 75% receiving no overtime; 70.8% working extra hours after their shifts and receiving no pay for work performed; 57% receiving no pay slips; and 73% working during meal and rest periods. Bernhardt et al. (2013) also specified that there are hardly any incentives to comply with the various implemented laws because the chance of detection and penalties is minimal.

Wage theft has become a widespread problem and a matter of grave concern; Hernandez and Stepick (2022) stated that this problem is pervasive across a wide range of industries in Florida, with many of these industries being in migrant communities. Moreover, some of the industries affected by wage theft in Southeast Florida are industries that are essential to the Florida economy, such as tourism, retail, and construction. Additionally, individuals typically impacted by wage theft in these areas are those who are least able to afford the cost of living. Florida's workforce is left unprotected because of the lack of dedicated enforcement individuals, limited capacity to enforce the laws, and other inadequate enforcement methods (Hernandez & Stepick, 2022).

The enforcement of wage theft violations by agencies and courts is minimal, and there is also minimal adherence to wage and hour statutes implemented to protect workers. Green (2019) wrote that the enforcement of the wage and hour provisions is weak, and therefore employers do not comply with or adhere to these laws. This situation makes noncompliance with anti-wage-theft measures more attractive to employers. Numerous employers are well aware that they can get away with it, and as a result, there is no fear of being sanctioned (Hernandez & Stepick, 2022) or penalized. Lee and Smith (2019) stated that it is unlikely that legislation regarding wage theft will be enacted in certain states and localities, and even if it is implemented, there will be little impact if it is not strongly enforced. Considering wage theft to be a current crisis, Lee and Smith (2019) unequivocally stated that companies employ a variety of tactics to commit wage theft and because of these tactics, workers think that they are being paid lawful wages.

This is troubling because this has caused low-income workers to bear a harmful burden and suffering because they struggle to make ends meet economically. According to Cooper and Kroeger (2017), workers who experience wage theft because of minimum-wage violations are presumably more likely to live in poverty than those who do not experience these violations.

I used the phenomenological technique to examine low-income workers' experiences and perceptions regarding wage theft. Creswell (2014) indicated that the phenomenological technique allows a researcher to get in-depth information from individuals to describe the significance of these individuals' experiences. A total of 17 individuals considered to be low-income workers in a variety of industries in Southeast Florida were solicited. These individuals were interviewed to understand their lived experiences and their perceptions regarding the impact of wage theft on their lives, and the barriers they experienced in the prevention of wage theft. In this study, I attempted to provide additional insight through the comprehensive analysis of wage theft within Southeast Florida. The objective was to provide insight to community leaders, policymakers, and decisionmakers about lived experiences related to the impact that wage theft has had on these low-income workers, and the need to implement policy decisions around preventative measures across Southeast Florida counties.

Problem Statement

All individuals who perform work are expected to be paid for the work they perform and paid in accordance with the federal or state minimum wage requirements. Previous research into wage theft has indicated that it is a neglected endemic, is

prevalent, and causes those impacted to struggle to make financial ends meet (Fritz-Mauer, 2021). Additionally, researchers have focused on the complexities of wage theft and harm inflicted (Hallett, 2018) in certain industries and social groups; however, few have examined the lived experiences and perceptions of those individuals considered to be low-income workers. Moreover, research is needed to study wage theft as a neglected endemic and unveil the impact it is having on the low-income workers in Southeast Florida, along with the barriers to addressing enforcement or prevention of wage theft in Southeast Florida.

The extent and impact of wage theft in Southeast Florida are not known and thus are given minimal attention by policymakers and government agencies. As a result, gleaning insight into the impact wage theft has on the low-income workers in Southeast Florida and obtaining information on the barriers to addressing enforcement can assist with effecting change and contribute to anti-wage-theft resource decisions. Additionally, analysis of the information gathered can determine the scope and severity of the problem and bring forth the impact and harm to the low-income worker.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine and describe low-income workers' perceptions regarding the impact of wage theft on their livelihood and the barriers they face when they bring forward their complaints or report a wage theft occurrence. Additionally, by using a qualitative and phenomenological approach, this study examined the experiences of these low-income workers and what it was like to experience having their wages stolen by their employers. To ascertain insight into each impacted low-

income worker's experience, interviews were conducted with 17 participants who met the criteria of being a victim of wage theft because they were not paid the minimum wage, which is the lowest hourly rate mandated by federal or state law; were not paid overtime pay for work performed in a 40-hour work week; or experienced other means of wage theft over the past 3 years. These individuals were from various industries, ethnicities, and demographic areas throughout Southeast Florida.

The goal of this study was to contribute to the field of knowledge around the impact of wage theft on low-income workers in Southeast Florida and to gain an understanding of what the barriers are to addressing wage theft prevention. Additionally, anti-wage-theft policy decisions to prevent or employer wage theft or enforce measures against it are included as background information. Green (2019) stated that despite various protections provided by federal wage and hour laws, workers who bring claims to enforcement agencies regarding wage theft receive minimal attention. Bittle and Snider (2018) noted that this is the normalization and exploitation of low-income workers. Kim (2021) agreed that it the exploitation of workers' vulnerabilities, something that creates social and economic hardship on them. Further, numerous employers, according to Bittle and Snider, have robbed their employees by recording fewer hours than the employees worked, failing to pay minimum wage, and misclassifying workers to avoid paying appropriate taxes.

Research studies have attempted to quantify the volume of wage theft based on complaints submitted to the Department of Labor, and according to Danziger (2009), there have also been multiple attempts to identify noncompliance rates across the United

States. Borjas (2009) specified that economists view employers' noncompliance with minimum wage laws through the lens of costs and benefits. This includes the benefits that an employer accrues through stolen wages and weighing the payment of the worker's wages against the potential cost of being caught by the Department of Labor. When analyzing noncompliance, obtaining information from low-income workers and being able to view the issues through their lens will provide valuable insight to this study.

Nature of the Study

This study focused on Florida because wage theft is a prevalent issue in the state. According to Hernandez and Stepick (2022), wage theft in Florida has become a pervasive issue that is quickly turning into a financial burden on the state. To address the problem and research questions, a qualitative study was conducted to uncover the occurrences and actual experiences of low-income workers. Wilkinson et al. (2016) stated that when a researcher is conducting a study of a person or a group, the qualitative method will bring about new insights into the study. Yin (2015) indicated that qualitative research is used by scholars to gain direct insights into a phenomenon. Additionally, the qualitative approach, as defined by Bakersville and Wood-Harper (1998), is a process used to assess how individuals feel about a situation; and lastly, according to Lewis (2015), qualitative research can be conducted through an interview, in which a group of people is studied through the collection of data and analysis of the data collected.

The phenomenological approach was used when interviewing chosen participants to uncover their perceptions, opinions, and outlook based on their experiences with wage theft. Khan (2014) specified that the phenomenological design is used by researchers to

investigate the meanings of participants' lived experiences. Based on this information, the phenomenological approach was effective for this study because it provided the opportunity to obtain information on what the wage theft victim endured throughout their tenure with the employer who stole their wages. Further, it allowed me to gain in-depth insight into the experiences and obstacles faced by those impacted. Moreover, this approach allowed for enquiry into the interviewees' frustration, challenges, and issues based on their individual stories. Also, the phenomenological approach in research, according to Tavellael and Abutalib (2010), permits the researcher to gain a profound understanding of how the "phenomenon" is experienced by the subject. Creswell (2014) noted that phenomenological studies generally utilize approximately 15 participants as a sample size.

Research Questions

Through this research, I attempted to answer questions around the problems described above with a focus specifically on wage theft in Southeast Florida. These questions were tailored specifically to why and how wage fraud occurred to improve awareness of the specific issues and contribute to future study on wage theft. The main research question (RQ) and two subsequent questions (SRQ) framed and directed this research.

Research question: To what degree have low-income workers experienced wage theft in their current positions or positions held in the past 3 years?

Sub-Research Question 1: What is the impact of wage theft on low-income workers' livelihoods based on their experience?

Sub-Research Question 2: What barriers exist that prohibit wage theft from being enforced and dealt with if reported by a victim?

Theoretical Framework

The theory for this study was RCT. This conceptual framework was used to explore and examine the behavior and decision-making responses of the low-income workers, the choices they made if their wages were stolen, and whether they reported it to the appropriate enforcement agencies. According to Creswell (2007), use of a theory in research serves different purposes depending on the research being conducted. For example, in qualitative research, the theory describes the attitudes and behaviors of individuals and serves as the portal used to get an understanding of the individual's behavior. Ogu (2013) elucidated that rather than looking at groups, social situations, or multiple people interacting together, the starting point for RCT is the individual and their interest. Historically, the foundation of RCT notably began in Cesare Beccaria's 1764 essay *On Crimes and Punishments* and Jeremy Bentham's 1789 work, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*.

Additionally, this theory indicates that victims' decision of whether to report what is considered a crime occurs after they consider and analyze their options from a cost and benefit standpoint (Mehlkop & Gaeff, 2010). According to Vanberg (2002), RCT is also called the "economic model of man" and offers a way of explaining the decisions and actions taken by individuals. Additionally, it was specified that there are three primary concepts. One concept is that individuals normally consider a set of alternative actions and base their behavior on the rational examination of a situation. Second, individuals

always obtain information to help them predict the consequences of their choices and thereby act with rationality when making these choices; and third, individuals use a criterion to decide their actions and make the choice to profit or maximize their pleasure. According to McCarthy and Chaudhary (2014), Bentham supported the idea that self-interest and the desire to maximize pleasure and minimize pain are typically the foundations upon which an individual acts.

According to Ogu (2013), RCT is prototypical to economic and social behavior. It maintains that social behavior results from the actions of people, and these individuals are responsible for their decisions, assessing and maximizing advantages while minimizing any disadvantages. Moreover, this theory provides a way to examine the individual's "purposeful and intentional action" (Ogu, 2013, p. 118). Rational choice theorists made three assumptions regarding the theory. These assumptions, outlined by Abell (2000), are that individuals are "self-calculating, self-interested, and self-maximizing," and therefore, their social actions become the ultimate source of a bigger social outcome. Individuals decide the best course of action based on their circumstances as they see them, and whether an action is advantageous to them. Lastly, individuals act in a manner that is to their advantage and are more likely to follow a course of action that they believe is the best option and one that would be greatly beneficial to them.

The premise of RCT denotes that individuals who engage in wrongdoing do so after weighing the benefits of this crime against the cost of being caught or penalized (Becker, 1968; Cornish & Clarke, 2000). Therefore, employers who engage in wage theft are considered to have committed a crime and do so after weighing the cost and effect of

their actions. Further, these employers who engage in wage theft are seeking the greatest reward for the least amount of money. Likewise, RCT has significant influence on crime reporting (Asiama & Zhong, 2022). As a result, the proposition of this theory suggests that the victim's decision to report wage theft involves their consideration of the cost to them, and whether it would be beneficial for them to do so without consequences or repercussions. Finally, utilizing RCT allows for the exploration of the decisions made by the various actors based on the given circumstances and environmental setting in which the actors are present. RCT was related to this research and the research questions, whose main aim was to establish the effect of low-income workers' perception of wage theft. Using the theory demonstrated how wage theft impacted the lives of the low-income worker and, based on weighing the costs and benefits of their choices, how it consequently affected their way of life. Additionally, utilizing RCT as a valid method allowed for the examination of why wage theft occurs and the barriers to addressing prevention in Southeast Florida.

Definitions

Employer: A business, company, enterprise, or organization that hires people, known as *employees*, and pays them a just, fair, and sufficient wage or salary (Heathfield, 2022).

Employee/worker: An individual employed by a company, organization, or entity to perform a specific job for wages (Heathfield, 2022).

Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA): A law that establishes and governs the minimum wage, overtime pay, recordkeeping, and youth employment standards for employees working in the United States (Department of Labor, n.d.-a.).

Federal Insurance Contributions (FICA): Legislation that mandates a percentage of money be deducted from employees' earnings, and that employers match the amount deducted from the employee. This deduction then funds Social Security, Medicare, and public health insurance (Social Security Administration, 2023).

Final pay: The last payment owned to an employee whose employment ends with a company. This amount includes wages, bonus, and paid time off as applicable by state law (Law Insider Dictionary, n.d.-a.).

Independent contractor: An individual who directs and control their own work, sets their own schedules, and utilizes their own tools and equipment. These individuals are also considered to be self-employed (Internal Revenue Service [IRS], n.d.-a).

Low-income worker: A person whose rate of pay is very low and whose yearly pay falls 200% or more below the federal poverty line (Law Insider Dictionary, n.d.-a.).

Minimum wage: This is the lowest amount of income that an employer is required by law to pay a worker for work performed during a given period. This amount is not to be reduced by agreement or contract (Department of Labor [DOL], n.d.-a).

National Labor Relations Act (NLRA): This is legislation that protects and provides employees in private-sector companies with the fundamental right to collectively bargain to seek better working conditions without fear of retaliation (National Labor Relations Act [NLRA], n.d.-a).

National Labor Relations Board (NLRB): A federal agency created to independently enforce the National Labor Relations Act (National Labor Relations Board [NLRB], n.d.-a).

Overtime hours: Any hours worked that exceed an employee's normally scheduled or standard working schedule (Department of Labor [DOL], n.d.-a).

Overtime pay: Pay for hours worked over 40 hours in a workweek of at least time and one-half times the regular rate of pay (Department of Labor [DOL], n.d.-a).

Rational choice theory (RCT): This theory maintains that people make choices by weighing their options and whether a choice is beneficial to them (Mehlkop & Graeff, 2010).

U.S. Department of Labor: A government agency created to make sure employees have a fair and safe work environment that is conducive and beneficial to them, including being paid at least minimum wage, receiving overtime pay, and having protection from workplace discrimination (Department of Labor [DOL], n.d.-a).

U.S. General Accountability Office (GAO): A nonparticipant and independent agency that is considered the "congressional watchdog" of the legislative branch of government. This agency was implemented to assist Congress and other government agencies to improve government efficiency by examining how monies are distributed and provide fact-based information to help the government conserve funds and save money (United States Government Accountability Office [GAO], n.d.-o).

Wage and Hour Division: An extension arm of the Department of Labor that is responsible for the enforcement of protections around the minimum wage rules, overtime

pay rules, child labor requirements, and so forth at the federal government level (Department of Labor [DOL], n.d.-a).

Wage Theft Prevention and Recovery Act: A legislative bill that mandates that employers compensate employees at a pay rate higher than minimum wage and specify said rate in employment agreements. It also establishes civil and criminal penalties if FLSA wage violations occur, including referral of wage theft matters to the Department of Justice (United States Congress, n.d.-a).

Assumptions

This study involved the assumption that low-income workers would agree to participate and answer the questions in a clear and honest manner. A further assumption was that each participant's response would be unequivocal and reflective of their own experience and memory as a victim of wage theft. Further, each participant was asked to complete and provide informed consent; they were assured of anonymity, obscurity, and confidentiality pertaining to all the information they provided. Lastly, other assumptions that were made included the understanding that each participant in this study had been a victim of wage theft and impacted by this adversity and that these participants worked for employers who had stolen their wages for various wage theft reasons over the past 3 years.

Limitations

This study incorporated interviews from individuals in Southeast Florida and in counties such as Palm Beach, Broward, Pinellas, Hillsborough, and Orange. The sampling, however, does not allow for conclusions to be made based on a broad

population as it is inappropriate to use a small sample to make conclusions about a general population. As such, the sample in this research may be considered too small for a conclusion to be drawn from the low-income workers' experiences, and therefore, there are no generalizations in this study.

According to Patton (2002), the quality of information obtained from participant interviews is determined by the researcher (p. 341). Furthermore, because this was a qualitative study, the information provided by the participants was considered sensitive, and thus these participants were carefully selected while ensuring that minors (individuals under the age of 18) were not included. Researchers must be aware of potential biases that may influence the findings of their study. For the past three decades, I have worked in compliance and human resources and have handled employment liability matters including wage and hour violation issues. As a result, I recognized that I could potentially bring predetermined notions about wage and hour violations, wage theft, and other related issues into this study. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative researchers must acknowledge any existing or previous association with the phenomena under investigation. Based on this statement, it is important to note that while I continued to handle employment practice matters, my knowledge, skills, and experience did not influence my interpretation of the results obtained from the study. Additionally, over the period of 1 year, I withdrew from taking on and handling all wage and hour matters submitted to my department. Nonetheless, participants in this study were recruited through a variety of channels, and none of them were known to me professionally or personally. Many of these limitations were abated through an open and transparent

interview process, and I remained objective and unbiased when evaluating and interpreting data, while also ensuring that the information obtained was trustworthy.

Scope and Delimitations

For this study, I explored and described the perception and experiences of low-income workers regarding the impact of wage theft on their livelihood, and the barriers they had faced in addressing wage theft prevention in Southeast Florida. The scope of this study included interviews with victims who encountered wage theft through a variety of means such as minimum wage, overtime, or other methods throughout the past 3 years. This study did not include individuals who were not considered to be low-income workers, or those who had been terminated by their employers for egregious reasons such as theft or illegal activities. Additionally, this study solicited participants from counties such as Palm Beach, Collier, Broward, and Martin. Further, identification of participants was done virtually through flyers posted on social media platforms and acquaintances known throughout the Southeast Florida area. Participants were selected based on a few things: They identified as a victim of wage theft, they indicated readiness to take part in this study, they acquiesced to be interviewed, they showed willingness and cooperation to respond clearly and unambiguously to the questions, and they were willing to share and describe their experiences and perceptions.

This study was limited to the understanding of low-income workers, their perception and impact as victims of wage theft, and barriers that prevent wage theft from being addressed within Southeast Florida. Interviews were conducted with impacted participants who had their wages stolen over the last 3 years. The expectation is that this

study may contribute to further discussion around policy improvement, enforcement, and prevention and spark initiatives of change regarding wage theft in Southeast Florida.

Significance of Study

According to Fritz-Mauer (2009), low-income workers have limited resources to combat wage theft and are unaware of their rights, hence the inability to assert these rights. It is noted that studies have focused more on the impact of wage theft on marginalized groups, and specific ethnicities and genders. This study, however, allowed for the in-depth collection of information from low-income workers in the geographic area of Southeast Florida and involved an attempt to estimate the scope of wage theft in counties such as Broward, Palm Beach, and Collier. This allowed me to gain an understanding of the participants' experiences and identify the common themes that presented obstacles to finding wage theft solutions in Southeast Florida. The findings of the research have the potential to give voice to low-income workers who experienced wage theft and help others glean the impact it has on low-income workers, their livelihood, and their families. Additionally, this study was an extension of previously conducted wage theft research in which I endeavored to focus narrowly on the perceptions and experiences of these workers in the Southeast Florida area. I sought to fill the gap in the literature concerning the geographic impact of wage theft, as well as identify what the barriers are to addressing the enforcement of anti-wage-theft policies. The implications of this study as it pertains to social change suggest the promotion of coenforcement and community support initiatives that would bring about compliance

with wage and hour laws, wage theft deterrence, and help to low-income worker victims in the community.

It is important to note that participants in this study were given the chance to inquire about, request, and obtain information pertaining to the types of wage theft, wage theft laws where applicable, or information regarding the findings and content of this study. The study's findings will be valuable to people in the local areas as well as other readers or audience members.

Social Implications

Most people within the United States do not know what wage theft is, the scope of the problem, how it occurs, or the impact this issue has on millions of workers within the country. It is my hope that the outcome of this research will contribute to making wage theft a focal policy matter and influence social change within Southeast Florida. Social change is important because it allows individuals to change their understanding of particular social norms or issues. Callahan et al. (2012) defined social change as having three components: knowledge, attitudes, and skills (p. 3). This study can add to the empirical knowledge about wage theft and provide stakeholders with important information based on low-income workers' lived experiences. It may also help the families of low-income workers understand what their loved ones are experiencing and assist them if needed. Equally, this study can serve as a springboard for policymakers to use to review and determine what the barriers are to addressing anti-wage-theft enforcement and prevention of wage theft in the Southeast Florida area.

Summary

Wage theft is a neglected endemic that is prevalent throughout the United States and causes those impacted to struggle to make financial ends meet. The scope and impact of the wage theft problem in Southeast Florida are unknown. Therefore, gaining insight into the impact this issue has on low-income workers will assist with effecting change. Extensive research has been conducted to establish the impact and consequences of wage theft from low-income workers at the federal and at some state levels; however, the problem remains widespread in places such as Florida, and more specifically Southeast Florida. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine wage theft and the different types of wage theft, and to describe low-income workers' perception and experiences concerning the impact that wage theft has on their livelihood and what the barriers are to addressing wage theft. The perception and experiences of the low-income worker participants may help to identify how wage theft as experienced by these individuals occurs; social harms of wage theft, if any; and the impact of wage theft on their livelihood. The results of this study can contribute to the development of policy solutions, eliminate the barriers to addressing prevention and enforcement, and develop initiative strategies around prevention and enforcement. In Chapter 2, the various types of wage theft are explored, including relevant sources to identify the gap in literature pertaining to the perception of wage theft from low-income workers in southeastern Florida.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

A large number of workers are affected by wage theft in this country, resulting in low-income workers being disproportionately impacted with millions of wages stolen from them (Bobo, 2009; Danziger, 2009; GAO, 2009). Although wage theft is not an issue that is new or unknown, it has increasingly become a complex and prevalent problem in the workforce. Wage theft varies by industry and is found to impact low-income workers. Kuang (2021) described wage theft as employers' failure to pay their employees the wages that they earn; Cooper and Kroeger (2017) further indicated that wage theft happens when an employer neglects to pay employees their wages and benefits owed to them. Likewise, Bernhardt et al. (2009) stated that wage theft has become multifaceted and widespread. Foley and Piper (2021) called it a global problem; meanwhile, Fine et al. (2020) expressed worry that the era of the Covid-19 pandemic would also cause an increase in employers' offenses pertaining to wage theft, which, in turn, would disproportionately target certain groups of people.

Further, Lee and Smith (2019) asserted that wage theft causes harm that resonates amongst individuals regardless of ethnicity; moreover, it permeates amongst those with less formal education, including women and people of color. Moreover, those considered to be vulnerable individuals are also affected by this issue. Danziger (2009) affirmed that some of these vulnerable individuals are in fact low-income, disadvantaged, undocumented immigrants and people of color. It is noted that these people do not get the

help they seek even when they stand or speak up for themselves (Fritz-Mauer, 2016; Meixell & Eisenbrey, 2014).

Activist and wage theft author Bobo (2011) said that there are billions of dollars in earned wages that are stolen from workers of all ethnicities, classes, and professions yearly. These wages are intentionally withheld to lower the operational cost of a business. Cooper and Kroeger (2017) similarly implied that there are many forms of wage theft endemically affecting millions of people, and this costs the United States a loss of billions of dollars in wages, taxes, and benefits. Most people in the United States are unaware that wage theft is a widespread problem in the country and more so in states such as Florida. The Florida Policy Institute (2022) called wage theft an increasing problem that is rampant in Florida because of the failure to create an oversight agency to enforce wages and wage and hour laws for all workers in Florida. It is for these reasons that the state is ranked the 15th worst state to recoup stolen wages, all because there are no laws or statutes to prevent employers from engaging in wage theft.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine and describe low-income workers' perception regarding the impact of wage theft on their livelihood and the barriers they face in addressing wage theft prevention. For this study, I explored and described the scope of the problem, the types of employees impacted, and the industries known to commit wage theft in Southeast Florida. The literature focuses on the various types of wage theft, including minimum wage, misclassification, and discrimination based on gender, race, or nationality. Often, specific information pertaining to low-income workers' challenges, impacts, and responses to wage theft are overlooked in

articles and literature. However, this study explored in detail the low-income workers' experiences regarding wage theft, the alarming rate at which it is increasing (Green, 2019) in states such as Florida, and the workers' perceptions of the barriers preventing wage theft from being addressed. Called a pervasive endemic (Galvin, 2015), wage theft inflicts harm on disadvantaged workers. Hallett (2018) revealed that wage thefts are indeed inflicting harm on the poor working class throughout the United States. This study specifically examined wage theft as a neglected endemic in an effort to uncover more about employer wage theft's impact and barriers to addressing prevention and enforcement in Southeast Florida.

In the literature synthesis, I look at the research gap in relation to the continued existence and prevalence of employer wage theft in Florida; describe wage theft, including types of wage theft; outline wage and hour regulations; and synthesize and examine the role of federal and local laws that govern wage theft.

This chapter contains the literature search strategy and the theoretical foundation to explain what wage theft is, the different types of wage theft, the prevalence of wage theft, the impact it has on low-income workers, the low-income worker's perception of wage theft, and the barriers to addressing prevention and policy enforcement. This chapter also outlines the theoretical foundation of RCT and what influences the employer's behavior to commit wage theft as well as what influences low-income workers' perception regarding the impact that wage theft is having on their livelihood.

The next section of the chapter details the research on the experiences of low-income workers and their perception of the challenges they face because of wage theft.

The chapter concludes with a summary of the current literature and identification of gaps in the wage theft research, if applicable. It is laser focused on the experiences and hardship that the low-income workers face, their reaction to being shortchanged of their wages, and their perception of the barriers to addressing prevention and enforcement, thus adding to academic knowledge.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature review was based on recently published peer-reviewed articles related to wage theft, low-income workers, and barriers to addressing prevention and enforcement. The literature search for this study was pulled from EBSCOHOST, GoogleScholar, SAGE, and Thoreau@ Walden University. In addition, the search included government agency websites, policy study websites, and news articles. These supplemented the literature review and provided background information, specifics, regulations, statistics, and context to better understand wage theft, the industries affected, wage theft violations, and the effect that wage theft has on low-income workers.

The key words and phrases selected to conduct this research included *wage theft*, *federal minimum wage*, *Florida state minimum wage*, *labor law*, *wage law*, *unpaid wages*, *pay equity*, *low-income worker*, *equal pay*, *wage and hour*, *pay inequity*, *Department of Labor*, *DOL*, *FLSA*, *Fair Labor Standard Act*, *independent contractor*, *wage regulations*, *fair wages*, *barriers to fair wages*, *pay differentials*, *obstacles to fair pay*, *wage impact*, *Florida workers' pay index*, *wage theft experience*, and *wage theft perspectives*.

The keywords individually qualified and limited the scope of the search and identified literature appropriate to this study's research problem and purpose. Terms were combined and used to narrow the results to pull articles that supported the research questions and provide an understanding of the low-income workers' experience in Florida and more specifically Southeast Florida. The search yielded no dissertations on this specific topic.

Each peer-reviewed article was evaluated to determine whether it applied to the dissertation problem and purpose and included literature specific to the topic of wage theft, regulations, and legislation; the impact and harm caused upon low-income workers; the lack of regulations in Florida; and the role companies play in contributing to wage theft. Additionally, the peer-reviewed articles were reviewed to determine what the barriers are to addressing wage theft prevention in Southeast Florida.

Theoretical Foundation: Rational Choice Theory

Creswell (2007) explained that a theory describes people's behaviors and attitudes and serves as a lens through which to determine and review things. The theoretical foundation and conceptual lens that grounded this study was RCT.

Derived from the utility model in fields such as economics, criminology, sociology, and political science, RCT denotes that the motivation to commit theft or a crime comes from self-interest. Referred to as *choice theory*, RCT models social, economic, and individual behavior. The conceptual foundations of RCT originated through Cesare Beccaria in his 1764 *Essay on Crimes and Punishments* and Jeremy Bentham in his 1789 work, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*.

Additionally, Bentham formalized that the driver behind an individual's actions, whether or not they are criminal, are collectively grounded in that person's selfishness and need to capitalize on their pleasure while minimizing pain. Wittek (2013) remarked that people have selfish motives and do not make decisions without first considering their own interests or how the decision would benefit them. Uzonwanne (2016) explained that prior to deciding, an individual will first do a rational analysis, weigh the facts, and then make a choice. Further, Mehlkop and Graeff (2010) concurred that before deciding, people tend to consider their options, the effect, and whether it is beneficial to them. Utilizing RCT in this study made it possible to explain the behaviors behind those employers' decisions to shortchange or inappropriate pay their workers. Further, RCT was used to review and explain the behavior behind the lower income workers' decision to continue to accept the wages paid knowing that their wages were being pilfered.

From a theory popularity standpoint, Gary Becker, a 1992 Nobel Prize Laureate in Economic Science, was one of the first people who widely popularized this theory. Elster (1989) wrote that the essence of RCT is that people will usually do what they believe is likely to be the best outcome for themselves when faced with several courses of action. Friedman (1953) broadly asserted that RCT means that an individual will balance the cost against the benefits to arrive at an action that capitalizes or gives them a personal advantage. The RCT model illustrated by Lehtinen and Kuorikoski (2007) provided a valid method that can be used to examine "purposeful, intentional, action."

Vanberg (2002) called RCT "the economic model of man" (p. 10) and explained that RCT also puts forth a way of revealing purposeful human action. Vanberg delineated

that Herbert A. Simon's model of RCT engages in three central tenets. The first tenet puts forward that an individual will consider a set of alternative actions; the next tenet states that individuals obtain information to help predict the consequences of their choice; and the last tenet implies that an individual will apply a criterion to determine which action gives them the most advantage (p. 10). The significant assumptions of RCT are that individuals are rational, selfish, and egotistical; it states that individuals will frequently decide a course of action to maximize their advantage (Ogu, 2013, p. 90). Ogu (2013) also put forth that people make decisions that benefit themselves (p. 93). The idea of using these central tenets was to determine via the lens of RCT whether employers pay lower wages because they perceive that workers need the job and have no other options. Also, it was used to understand the decision behind why a low-income worker would take or remain in a job based on the wages offered and knowing that they are being shortchanged by the employer.

The research questions addressed how low-income workers perceive wage theft occurrences by employers and described challenges and obstacles such as lack of preventative enforcement policies, along with the impact on their livelihood. The questions were also asked to gain in-depth insight into the problem based on the workers' experiences, and to obtain their reactions to the limitations in enforcement policies and the barriers to getting wage theft addressed or prevented. The resulting research may inform community leaders, advocates, and policymakers of the realistic and perceived effects that employer wage theft decisions or lack thereof are having on low-income workers in Southeast Florida.

Perspectives on Wage Theft

The prevalence of wage theft in the United States is hard to estimate (Bernhardt et al., 2013). Accordingly, studies on the prevalence focus more on gross levels of exploitation based on class, race, and gender, thereby creating the perception that the victims of wage theft are only marginalized (undocumented immigrant, uneducated, or female) individuals. The U.S. Department of Labor averred that wage theft is widespread within low-wage industries such as construction, retail, healthcare, and restaurants. Defined as the employer's failure to pay employees proper wages (Kuang, 2021), wage theft has many descriptions. It is also known as an employer's practice of not paying wages (Kim & Allman, 2021), amongst other definitions. Consequently, there is a substantial loss of wages and benefits (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021); further, things such as employment tax violations, wage and hour violations, and noncompliance to federal legislation have resulted in more than US \$91 billion of the nation's annual gross tax gap (U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), 2021; GAO, 2017). Referred to as the systemic underpayment or nonpayment of wages, Bobo (2011) expounded that wage theft occurs when an employer fails to pay at least minimum wage or accurate overtime, among other wage disparities.

Cooper and Kroeger (2017) estimated that stolen wages in the United States are more than any money stolen because of robbery, theft, or larceny. Preceding studies have documented that 17% of low-income workers experience minimum wage violations, thereby resulting in an annual loss of US \$8 billion (Cooper & Kroeger, 2017). Moreover, Bobo (2009) remarked that wage theft is a huge problem that millions of low-

income workers face in the United States. Called a widespread problem by policy makers, wage theft costs workers \$15 billion annually (U.S. Congress, 2019). The theft of wages by employers is an abusive issue that impacts disadvantaged individuals. Danziger (2009) explained that the most vulnerable individuals prone to wage theft within society are those individuals who are poor.

This literature review includes the occurrences of wage theft, its prevalence, the social and economic harm associated with it, and the noncompliance of employers. Borjas (2009) stated that economists view the situation of wage theft through the lens of costs and benefits such as the benefits a company reaps by illegally paying its employees below minimum wage, and then weighing the cost of being caught by the Department of Labor, especially because the Department of Labor estimates that most cases of wage theft typically go unnoticed. Based on weighing the cost versus benefit, oftentimes the employer will keep the difference between the minimum wage and what they pay the worker. Borjas (2009) further elaborated that in a worst-case scenario, noncompliance by an employer is treated as an interest-free loan that is equal to the total wages they take for themselves.

Moreover, when there are no punitive actions taken, such as fines or other punishments, employers are encouraged to continue to pay beneath minimum wage (Borjas, 2009). Describing this as a grave concern, Meixell and Eisenbrey (2014) explained the occurrence of wage theft as an epidemic across the United States.

According to the authors, many workers in the United States are struggling to make ends

meet on low wages that do not include employment benefits, medical benefits, pensions, paid time off, or paid sick leave.

They further described that the difficulties experienced by low-income workers come from the inadequacy of the employer to appropriately compensate them for the work that they were hired to perform. Meixell and Eisenbrey (2014) further explained that wage theft also negatively impacts the economy to the tune of billions of dollars. The practices used by employers to justify the act of wage theft to benefit the company's profitability were also discussed, along with the fact that workers are having their wages stolen so that companies can make profit.

Overall, wage theft manifests in a variety of forms and includes thefts such as furnishing payment with bounced checks or insufficient funds; adjusting timesheets or time clocks; paying off the clock; paying below the required minimum wage; misclassifying workers as exempt to avoid paying overtime for hours over 40 hours worked, and so on. Milkman et al. (2013) indicated that wage theft is not only done by failing to pay overtime, but is done through violations of rest and meal break regulations, altering time punches of employees on time clocks, altering time records, rounding employees' time instead of paying for it, and improperly deducting money from wages for things that the company should be responsible for, thereby bringing the worker below the required and regulated minimum wage.

Wage Theft Defined

Bobo (2009) denoted that wage theft is where employers use various methods to illegally withhold wages and benefits legitimately earned by employees. Moreover, wage

theft occurs when the workers are deprived of all payment for all the work they performed. Prior to the use of the term wage theft originated in the early 2000s, experts in policy writing, government agencies and other advocates used terms such as “wage and hour violations” (O’Brien 2005); “theft of services” (Verga 2004); payment “below minimum wages” (Phillips & Massey 1999). When reviewed, these are all terminologies that would have been considered wage theft.

As more scrutiny into the theft of wages by employers Congress introduced a wage theft bill called the Wage Theft Prevention and Wage Recovery Act (S.2101) in 2019. The bill was introduced to amend the FLSA of 1938 and the Portal-to-Portal Act of 1947 as a wage theft prevention mechanism that would allow workers to recover stolen wages. During this process, Congress referred to wage theft as an endemic problem that depresses the wages of working family who are already struggling to make ends meet; strains the funds of social services, state, and federal tax revenues; impacts consumer spending power; hurts local economies; burdens commerce; lowers labor standards and places compliant employers at a competitive disadvantage (The United States Congress, 2019).

Definition of Low-Income Worker

For the purposes of this study a low-income worker are individuals who work in low-income jobs. Cooper and Kroeger (2017) stated that these are workers in the bottom twenty percent (20%) of all earners; Galvin (2016) explained that these individuals are workers who earn no more than one and a half times minimum wage. McKay et al. (2015) defined the low-income worker as someone that is paid less per hour than two-

thirds of the medium income earned in their state or local areas. Further, the U.S. Department of Human and Health Services (US DHHS) defined a low-wage worker as someone whose hourly pay rate is severely low to the point where even if the individual works full-time or an entire year, the income that they earn on an annual basis would still fall below the United States poverty line for a family of four (4).

Additionally, the US DHHS illustrated that approximately one-third of these working individuals earn low wages; about 44% of these workers live in low-income families; a quarter of these individuals are in low-income families with children, and lastly, individuals who live by themselves and earn minimum wage is considered also considered to be a low-income worker. To summarize, many low-income earners earn minimum wage; therefore, using the federal minimum wage of \$7.25, an individual who works forty (40) hours per week would earn \$290 per week, which equates to a gross amount of \$1,160 per month and \$13,920 annually. Table 1 extracted from the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, an arm of the Department of Labor, highlighted by certain characteristics (genders and ages) workers who are paid hourly and whose earnings are at or below the prevailing federal minimum wage amounts.

Table 1*2021 Annual Average Hourly Rates of Workers Paid at or Below the Federal Minimum*

Characteristic	Number of workers (in thousands)				Percent distribution						
	Total paid hourly rates	At or below minimum wage			Total paid hourly rates	At or below minimum wage			Percentage of workers paid hourly rates at or below minimum wage		
		Total	At min. wage	Below min. wage		Total	At min. wage	Below min. wage	Total	At min. wage	Below min. wage
Age and gender											
Total, 16 years and older	76,125	1,091	181	910	100	100	100	100	1.4	0.2	1.2
16 to 24 years	15,153	484	111	373	19.9	44.3	61.5	40.9	3.2	0.7	2.5
16 to 19 years	4,776	190	62	128	6.3	17.4	34.1	14.1	4	1.3	2.7
25 years and older	60,973	607	70	538	80.1	55.7	38.5	59.1	1	0.1	0.9
Men, 16 years and older	38,089	398	87	311	50	36.5	48	34.2	1	0.2	0.8
16 to 24 years	7,544	159	51	108	9.9	14.6	28	11.9	2.1	0.7	1.4
16 to 19 years	2,309	72	29	43	3	6.6	16.1	4.7	3.1	1.3	1.9
25 years and older	30,545	239	36	203	40.1	21.9	20	22.3	0.8	0.1	0.7
Women, 16 years and older	38,036	693	94	599	50	63.5	52	65.8	1.8	0.2	1.6
16 to 24 years	7,608	325	61	264	10	29.8	33.5	29	4.3	0.8	3.5
16 to 19 years	2,467	118	33	85	3.2	10.8	18	9.4	4.8	1.3	3.5
25 years and older	30,428	368	34	335	40	33.7	18.5	36.8	1.2	0.1	1.1
Full- and part-time status											
Full-time workers (2)	58,259	520	47	473	76.5	47.6	26.1	51.9	0.9	0.1	0.8
Men	31,827	202	27	175	41.8	18.5	14.9	19.3	0.6	0.1	0.6
Women	26,432	318	20	297	34.7	29.1	11.2	32.7	1.2	0.1	1.1
Part-time workers (2)	17,757	567	134	433	23.3	52	73.9	47.6	3.2	0.8	2.4
Men	6,205	193	60	133	8.2	17.7	33.1	14.6	3.1	1	2.1
Women	11,552	374	74	300	15.2	34.3	40.8	33	3.2	0.6	2.6

Note. Adapted from *Median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers by union affiliation and selection characteristics*

by U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistical Department, 2022, (<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.t02.htm>).

Federal Laws on Wage Theft

There are federal laws that cover matters such as wage and hour violations. One of these critical wage laws is the FLSA. This act was signed into law in 1938 and requires employers to pay workers the minimum wage amount of \$7.25 per hour and the payment of 1.5 times regular rate of pay for any overtime hours worked in a 40 hours work week. The FLSA also restricts child labor, requires employers to maintain accurate records for all hours work by their employee and for all wages paid to said employee. Nonetheless, the FLSA is only applicable to those employers who “engage in interstate commerce, produce goods for interstate commerce, or handle, sell or work on goods or materials that have moved in or produced for interstate commerce” (United States Department of Labor). To expound further on federal wage laws, Kim and Allmang (2021) specified that there are approximately five (5) federal laws within the United States which sets national minimum standards applicable to employees’ wages, hours, and benefits.

First, there is a statute called the National Labor Relations Act. This statute was enacted in 1935 through the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to create a balance between U.S. employers and their employees. Further, the act grants employees the right to have protected concerted activities at work, the right to organize via unions and to collectively bargain for the improvement of wages, benefits, compensation, and working conditions. (Kim and Allmang, 2021). Secondly, there is the 1935 Federal Insurance Contributions Act (FICA), which is a federal insurance system that establishes payroll taxes for the purposes of providing basic income security for employees. This was implemented to prevent the loss of earnings for retirement, disability, and illness (Social

Security.gov). The third law, as previously noted in the literature, is that of the 1938 FLSA, which mandates minimum wage requirements as well as the need for private and public employers to pay wages of at least US\$7.25 per hour (higher in states with higher minimum wage rates) and pay overtime at the rate of time and a half regular wage for hours exceeding 40 hours per week. The FLSA also mandates the keeping of time and payment records for most private and public employers (DOL, 2022). The fourth law is that of the unemployment tax known as Federal Unemployment Tax Act (FUTA) of 1939. Under this act, employers are required to pay FUTA taxes so employees can obtain temporary income replacement or unemployment wages should they become unemployed (IRS, 2022). Lastly, there are federal and state Workers Compensation (WC) programs that were founded in the early 1900s through 1949. This program pays lost wages and medical bills when an employee experiences work-related injury (DOL.gov).

Although the FLSA dates all the way back to the 1930s, changes were minimal until the 2000s when there was a significant shift by the Department of Labor to increase the threshold of certain workers. Kim and Allmang (2021) pointed out that the Department of Labor issued a rule in 2019 to raise the threshold for white collared workers that were making US \$455 per week (US \$23,660 annually). This threshold was increased to US \$684 per week equating to US \$35,568 annually. This change in the FLSA rule also extends the overtime pay coverage to over one (1) million workers nationwide, with the intention to reduce the practices of wage theft against low-income white collared workers.

Despite all the protections provided by various federal wage and hour laws (Green, 2019) workers who bring claims to enforcement agencies regarding wage theft still receive minimal to no attention; hence the normalization and exploitation (Bittle and Snider, 2018) of low-income workers; which then creates social and economic hardship for them. Likewise, numerous employers keep stealing the wages of their employees (Bittle and Snider, 2018). They record fewer hours than the worker actually works; do not pay them the mandated minimum wage; or they misclassify workers as independent contractors (Minkler, et al., 2014). These stolen methods according to Kim (2021) are considered an exploitation of workers vulnerabilities.

Florida Laws on Wage Theft

Huizar (2019) found that Florida's state government made multiple attempts to enact laws against wage theft but have been unsuccessful. Since there are no state laws preventing wage theft, several counties implemented ordinances to combat the issue. These counties are Hillsborough, Miami-Dade, Pinellas, Osceola, and Broward. Moreover, Florida has not taken any enforcement action on wage and hour issues in more than ten years. Huizar (2019) explained that this is because Florida eliminated its department of labor in the early 2000s and no enforcement authorities exist in the state.

Different Types of Wage Theft

Additionally, there are different laws that cover and address wage violations in the United States because wage theft exists in many different forms (Bernhardt et al., 2009). In other words, wage violations occur when minimum wages are not paid, when overtime hours are not factored in, and when deductions taken by the employer bring the

worker's pay below the minimum wage amount required to be paid to them. This literature review will introduce the common types of wage theft that currently exists in the United States. The common types include:

- employee misclassification
- minimum wage violations
- final paycheck theft
- cash payment
- improper deductions
- meal and rest breaks

Employee Misclassification

Employers knowingly misclassifying employees may be considered payroll fraud because it is being done with the intention to dishonestly avoid the payment of taxes to the government (Ehrlich & Gerstein, 2019). Additionally, the authors explain that every year there are workers who are paid off the books and are improperly classified. These improprieties result in billions of dollars not being reported to the government. Ehrlich and Gerstein (2019) further stated that this cost to society is an exorbitant amount, a liability, and “robs the unemployment insurance and workers compensation funds of billions of dollars.” Most importantly, employers also tend to use the misclassification of their workers under the exemption status to avoid paying them overtime for hours worked over forty (40) hours. Typically, employers must first conduct a job duties test to determine if the duties the worker performs falls under the exempt or non-exempt status.

Therefore, setting up a worker as exempt, without conducting a job duties test is considered a wage and hour violation (Department of Labor).

According to the FLSA, exempt employees include executive, administrative, professional, outside salespeople, and computer workers that receive salaries within the minimums dictated under the FLSA. Further, under the FLSA employees are not exempt because they are paid on a salary basis but involves additional requirements that outlines the employee's duties that they perform, the type of compensation they receive such as commissions, fees, etc. Still, authors of the Florida Policy Institute Tag et al. (2021) express that although there are state mandated minimum wages that are higher than the federal minimum wage, there are some states' wage laws such as Florida's that explicitly defer to the employee definitions of exempt and nonexempt noted in the federal FLSA.

Misclassification of Individuals as Independent Contractors

Independent contractor misclassification is one of the most prevalent and damaging types of wage theft. This misclassification occurs across many areas and sometimes every industry; however, it is known to be significant and brazen in industries such as the construction industry, the restaurant industry, the cleaning industry, and the trucking industry (Carre 2015). It is also important to note that in the United States workers fall into two categories. In these categories an individual is either considered to be an employee or an independent contractor. Someone who falls in the employee category works for a single employer who exercises control over their performance. The definition of employer as noted by the United States Department of Labor (USDOL) under the FLSA is someone employed by an employer, and who is permitted to work

(USDOL). An independent contractor on the other hand is defined as someone with specific skills who is self-employed, who runs their own business, has the autonomy, and has a variety of clients that they do business with. In some states there are established a “presumptive employee status” laws which presumes that workers are employees and not considered independent contractors unless proven otherwise using tests such as the “three factor test” or the “ABC test” (Leberstein and Ruckelshaus, 2016). The three-factor test according to Leberstein and Ruckelshaus (2016) follows three factors: (1) the individual is free from control or performance direction by the company; (2) the service provided is outside the typical work done by the company; and (3) the individual has an established business, profession, or skillset.

Minimum Wage

Based on the FLSA and other noted information, an employer who pays a worker less than minimum wage is committing wage theft. The current federal minimum wage is \$7.25, meanwhile in Florida, the current minimum wage is \$11.00 per hour for regular employees and \$7.98 for tipped employees. While the amount of minimum wage is minimal, the scope of the minimum wage violations is significantly prevalent across the country. Cooper and Kroeger (2017) specified that according to Census Bureau researchers, approximately 17% to 26% of low-income workers experience minimum wage violations each year, costing employees nearly a quarter of their pay. Additionally, minimum wage jobs are generally worked by workers who are believed to be vulnerable individuals in the labor force. It is for these reasons why employers find it relatively easy to appropriate their wages and pay them below the minimum wage. Bernhardt et al.

(2009) also state that employers usually do this through several means which include paying lower than federal and state wages, deducting items and cost from the worker's wages thereby bringing them below the minimum wage, or illegally deducting items such as training, housing, safety wear, etc.

Bernhardt et al. (2009) indicated that a previous 2009 survey conducted with approximately 4,400 low-income workers in cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York city shows that 60% of these workers were underpaid by more than \$1.00 per hour and on an annual basis a low-income worker loses approximately \$3,300, which then reduces their net earnings by approximately \$10,500 annually. Further, Fritz-Mauer (2016) stated that employees are protected by wage and hour laws, and have the right to benefits, the right to form unions, the right to workers compensation, unemployment insurance, and the right to pay less taxes on their earnings. Employers on the other hand are required to pay taxes for each of their employees, which includes taxes such as Social Security, Medicare, and unemployment insurance.

Yaniv (2006) asserted that minimum wage laws will have no effect if there are no preventative measures taken or the enforcement of these laws. Further, the noncompliance of these laws by employers lowers the market rate of labor and allows them to retain these workers. Danziger (2009) explained that increasing minimum wages may reduce the number of workers kept by an employer, may influence the number of hours worked by these workers, all of which remains unclear. Danziger also wrote that the increase in minimum wages affects the younger workforce such as teenagers because they are likely to be terminated when there is a minimum wage increase.

Final Paycheck

When employees terminate or resign from a job they are entitled to their final paycheck for any hours or weeks work, or their last week of pay. Oftentimes the employees have their final paycheck either stolen or reduced by their employer when their employment ends. The Department of Labor handles thousands of final paychecks claims every year (Bobo, 2009). Additionally, failing to give a worker their final paycheck also occurs when companies go out of business or relocate.

Overtime

When an employer fails to pay a worker time and a half their regular rate of pay after they have worked forty (40) hours of work in a week, that is also considered wage theft. The FLSA requires overtime pay to be at least one and one-half times an employee's regular rate of pay after 40 hours of work in a workweek. There are some exceptions that apply under special circumstances for certain job groups such as police, firefighters and employees of hospitals and nursing homes (USDOL.gov). Known as one of the most abused labor laws in the United States, Ruckelshaus (2008) noted that calculating overtime pay for workers can be confusing and because of these employers tend to violate the wage and hour laws and fail to pay the employee the overtime they are owed. Likewise, there are states that have their own overtime laws and as a result, employees who work in those states are entitled to both the state and federal overtime laws based on the higher standard of overtime pay which is for the greater benefit of the employee.

Additionally, to add to the confusion, the USDOL FLSA states that paying an employee extra for working nights or the weekends is based on an agreement between the employer and the employee or the employee's representative. Bobo (2009) wrote that overtime laws in the United States are difficult to comprehend because of the different loopholes and exemptions for a variety of specific positions. Further most low-income workers are eligible for overtime if they earn under a minimum threshold of the FLSA required 23, 660 per year. Also, workers such as professionals, teachers, farm workers, etc., are exempt from overtime based on certain industries. The lack of understanding of overtime requirements is a contributing factor to misclassification as well resulting in employers illegally telling their workers that they are exempt from overtime pay when in fact they are not.

Meal and Rest Breaks (Working off the Clock)

There are a variety of ways that companies find ways for their employees to work off the clock. One such way is requiring or asking workers to work through their lunch or other required rest breaks; or coercing the worker into working after they have "clocked out" for lunch or after their work hours have ended for the day. According to Cooper and Kroeger (2007) these are considered wage theft.

Although federal law does not require that workers be given breaks, the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) under Title 29, section 785, states that, "Rest periods of short duration, running from five (5) minutes to approximately twenty (20) minutes, are common in industry. They promote the efficiency of the employee and are customarily paid for as time worked" (29 CFR, section 785.18). In an example of this, the Code of

Federal Regulations also states that “An office worker who is required to eat at his or her desk, or a factory worker who is required to eat near his or her machine is working while eating” (29 CFR, section 785 .19). Furthermore, Bobo (2011) indicated that this type of theft of wages occurs when the worker is not paid for time spent on “donning and doffing,” time spent cleaning company equipment or protective clothing, or time spent traveling in between job sites. Further, if a worker is unable to use their time effectively for their own purposes, then it is deemed time that is controlled by the employer (29 CFR, section 785.38).

Cash Payment

Bernhardt et al. (2009) explained that a documented study conducted in 2009 found that 93% of workers paid in cash by their employer did not receive a pay stub or an itemized summary of the paid wages received. Typically, this is because taxes are not being withheld from the cash that is paid out to these workers. Further, a motivation to pay a worker by cash is oftentimes done to avoid paying the required taxes that benefit the worker such as social security taxes, Medicare taxes and unemployment taxes, etc. Moreover, Bobo (2011) professed that this is considered payroll fraud and the type of fraud that cheats both the employees and the government out of money due to them; and is the type of fraud that shifts the burden of these taxes on to the workers.

Improper Deductions

Illegal or improper deductions are another way that employers pay their workers less than minimum wage. In these types of theft, the employer deducts money from a worker’s pay for missing cash from the cash register, damaged equipment, merchandise,

uniforms, and tools needed for their jobs, etc. The Wage and Hour Department's (WHD) Publication and Wage and Hour Department's (WHD) Fact Sheet 16 state that these deductions are illegal if they cause the workers rate of pay or their overtime pay to go below the required minimum wage or overtime rate (WHD Publication 1283:1; WHD Fact Sheet # 16).

Social Harm/Problem

Bernhardt et al. (2009) reviewed a study on a 2009 National Employment Law Project investigation that was conducted to determine labor law violations. In this study it was found that interviews conducted with 4,387 low-income workers in three (3) large cities within United States show that labor laws in these cities were being violated by employers. It also found that these violations have had significant impact on the low-income workforce. It was also reported that workers surveyed were paid below minimum wages and workers who worked overtime were not paid for the overtime that they worked. It was further explained that wage theft not only cost low-income workers thousands of dollars annually, but that it also undermines the basic protections in the workplace and costs the government billions of dollars annually as well. Cooper & Kroeger (2017) states that the harm to society is not only economic but also its victims experience devastating physical and emotional harm such as hunger, homelessness, anger, mental health issues and beyond. Therefore, wage theft must be treated as a social problem. Also, the personal impacts because of wage theft hurts society as billions of dollars are being siphoned out of the low-income communities and by this means it is

trapping families into the vortex and cycle of poverty (Cooper & Kroeger, 2017). Other detriments and impact also include health, housing, increase crime, pollution, etc.

According to Mansfield & Novick (2012) wage theft is a contributing factor to an individual's poor physical health because it is exacerbated by poverty which has been known to have a negative outcome on one's health. Likewise, researchers estimate that violations based on failure to pay minimum wage is a factor that forces thousands of people into poverty, and this include those who technically does not fall below the poverty line. Additionally, it was conveyed that people who are poor are more likely to experience a variety of chronic health conditions, including life threatening diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, stress, headaches, etc. This according to Mansfield & Novick (2012) is because low-income workers do not have the basic benefits from their employer such as health insurance and therefore because of this as well as their poverty, they are less likely to seek healthcare treatment.

Similarly, to having poor health because of wage theft, the low-income worker also experiences housing issues such as substandard housing, potential eviction, and in more severe cases homelessness. Fitz-Mauer (2021) explained that wage theft from low-income workers causes them to not have the same opportunities to flourish, grow, and be successful as others. Mansfield & Novick (2012) further elaborated that low-income people live in substandard housing in poor neighborhoods and are exposed to pollution and crimes. They have minimal access to healthy food or active lifestyles because of the neighborhoods they have no recourse but to live in. Conway (2016) elucidated that impoverished adults live an average of seven (7) to eight (8) years less than those who

have incomes four (4) times or more above the poverty level. Further, the chronic and costly nature of wage theft tends to create a vicious cycle of poverty in low-income workers, and as a result, it imposes severe impact and increasing costs on them, their family, neighbors, and their community.

Lastly, wage theft causes social harm and impacts honest employers as well because these honest employers who want to run their business genuinely and honestly in compliance with the applicable laws. However, these employers are left with no recourse but to compete in industries where wage theft is prevalent, because there is an incentive to violate certain laws (Fitz-Mauer, 2021). Likewise, these employers are also affected because they are undercut by their unscrupulous competitors in the industry. Although it is a challenging landscape, some states and cities within the United State passed various wage theft laws to mitigate labor law violations. Currently there are seventeen states that have passed wage theft laws, including large states such as California, Texas, and New York.

Wage Theft in Southeast Florida

There are certain reports that monitor wage theft as a widespread problem in Florida and these reports show that low-income workers are more likely to have their wages stolen than other workers (Hernandez & Stepick, 2022). Accordingly, the enforcement methods are weakened because of insufficient and limited capacity within agencies at the state and local branches of the federal labor department, thus leaving low-income workers unprotected from wage theft. Data compiled and analyzed in Southeast

Florida by the Florida International University Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy Center for Labor Research and Studies found that

- The Wage and Hour Division in Florida recovered \$28 million in unpaid wages based on Miami-Dade's Wage Theft Ordinance and information from community groups.
- Key industries in Florida equated for the highest numbers of reported wage and hour violations in the tourism, retail, trade, and construction industries.
- The Wage and Hour Division within the United States Department of Labor (USDOL) reported an average wage and hour violations in the amount of 3,036 annually.
- Based on the implementation of the Wage Theft Ordinance in Miami-Dade County in 2010, the Small Business Development agency of Miami-Dade has recovered wages for 313 workers who had their wages withheld illegally. This amounted to approximately \$400,000.

The (Employment Policy Institute, 2021) approximated that twenty-five (25) percent of low-income workers experience minimum wage violations in Florida. As a result, workers in Florida experience and lose more than \$1.1 billion dollars in minimum wage violations annually. Levine (2018) states that researchers recognize that the high rate of wage theft that exists in Florida is because Florida does not have a state agency responsible for the enforcement of wage theft violations unlike most other states. This, according to Levine (2018), is because the Florida legislature voted in 2000 to dismantle and abolish the state's Department of Labor and Employment Security (DOLES). This

agency was then replaced with Workforce Florida and the Agency for Workforce Innovation, both of which are non-profit organizations and do not supervise, process, or handle wage and hour complaints. Additionally, a 2018 investigation disclosed that unlike other states, Florida failed in taking on any form of enforcement actions, adding to the high rate in stolen wage.

Despite all the evidence of the prevalence of wage amongst low-income workers, there has not been any civil action taken by the Florida Attorney General's office to enforce the state's minimum wage law which according to Levine (2018) is embedded into Article X of the State of Florida's constitution. Florida Policy Institute author Tsoukalas (2021) stated that only a few Floridian employees file wage and hour complaints which is an indicator that there is system failure because oftentimes workers in Florida do not know their rights or how to seek recompense if their rights have been violated. Additionally, the Florida Constitution along with the will of the people is never fully understood.

Further, in a 2009 report released by the GAO found that the office of the Miami-Dade Wage and Hour Department of Labor (WHD-DOL) failed to return phone call claims or record all the case claims in their database. Additionally, it was stated in the GAO report an investigator told the GAO researcher that backlog would take eight (8) to ten (10) months to begin investigating a new case (GAO, 2009). Sharma et. al., (2022) elucidated that the enforcement of the state's wage and hours will protect Florida's workforce and especially the low-income workers. Additionally, these authors mentioned

that workers are left vulnerable to wage theft based on inadequate enforcement (Sharma, et. al).

Additionally, the Social and Economic Policy Center for Labor Research examined several populous counties in southeast Florida to analyze the number of reported cases per county between the dates of September 2008 and January 2011. The report uncovered that 9,109 cases of wage theft were investigated in the state of Florida and the investigation resulted in companies agreeing to pay back wages to the impacted workers. The wages recovered equated to \$28,263,094 for this period. Additionally, the data obtained found that most wage theft offender cases came out of populated counties such as Miami-Dade, Palm Beach, Broward, Pinellas, Hillsborough, and Orange Counties. Of the six (6) counties analyzed by the Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy Center, and noted in Table 2, Miami-Dade County recovered \$5,920,338 dollars and accounted for the most workers affected by wage theft which amounts to 7,641. The county with the least number of recovered wages was that of Orange County, equating to \$1,028,290 but had over 221 more wage theft cases than the county of Palm Beach. Additionally, figure 2 also shows the amount that each worker recovered in wages. As noted below the largest average amount recovered by a worker is \$775 and the lowest amount is \$428.

Table 2*Wages and Number of Employees With Wage Theft Cases in Populous Southeast Florida*

County	Total wages recovered	Number of employees with wage theft cases	Average wage recovered per employee
Miami-Dade	\$ 5,920,338.00	7,641	\$ 775.00
Broward	\$ 2,246,687.00	3,894	\$ 577.00
Palm Beach	\$ 1,578,701.00	2,181	\$ 724.00
Hillsborough	\$ 3,266,775.00	4,705	\$ 694.00
Pinellas	\$ 1,874,978.00	3,615	\$ 519.00
Orange	\$ 1,028,290.00	2,402	\$ 428.00

Note. Adapted from “Wage theft: A growing problem in Florida,” by FPI Staff, 2022, Florida Policy

Institute (<https://www.floridapolicy.org/posts/wage-theft-a-growing-problem-in-florida>).

The data referenced above only includes amounts where the employer agreed to pay the back wages after the investigation and does not include information for employers who refused to pay, where an actual lawsuit was not filed, or where litigation was not brought by the Department of Labor (DOL). In a 2021 joint report by the Florida Policy Institute and Rutgers University, it was discovered that based on the increase in the state’s minimum wage in 2005, the number of minimum wage violations and wage theft doubled, thereby impacting low-income workers or approximately 250,000 workers annually. Lead author of the report, Alexis Tsoukalas (2021) wrote that Florida workers account for a loss of \$1.32 dollars per hour between 2005 through 2019; thereby representing approximately 20% decrease in minimum wage owed to workers. This according to Tsoukalas (2021) does not account for lost income above the minimum wages that were promised or owed to workers; therefore, the wage theft experienced may be higher. As a result, the full scope of the wage violations in Florida remains underreported and unclear. While there are no known legislative bills pending to address

wage theft within Florida, there are several municipalities that had passed ordinances to address the issue of wage theft within their community. Two such municipalities are that of Miami Dade county and Broward County.

Miami-Dade County

The Wage theft ordinance was unanimously passed in 2010. This ordinance covers all workers in the Miami-Dade area and has a minimum unpaid wage threshold of \$60. Huizar (2019) found that the enforcement of this ordinance is effective because between 2010 and 2014, the enforcement agency recovered more than two (2) million dollars in back wages, and between 2013 and 2018, they recovered approximately 4 million dollars in back wages, all of which are well above the average recovered by federal agencies.

Broward County

The Broward County ordinance was passed in 2013 and mirrors the Miami-Dade ordinance except for two (2) main components. The Broward County ordinance requires employees to follow a numerous set of administrative procedures before filing their complaint and should an employer be found guilty the liquidated damages will only equal the back wages due, unlike the Miami-Dade ordinance which requires twice the back wages due.

Impact of Wage Theft on Low-Income Workers

Wage theft impacts low-income workers and creates various hardships on these individuals (Cooper and Kroger, 2017; Bernhardt et al., 2009) which also affects their life expectancy. As a result, life expectancy for these individuals appears to be co-related to

the income that they make (Bor et al., 2017). Furthermore, wage theft reduces the quality of health and life expectancy of impacted workers and worsens their probability to live a longer life based on the life expectancy inequity. A life inequity, according to (Chen et al., (2016) that is now exacerbated and intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic. Even though there has been requests for studies or public health research on wage theft (Minkler et al., 2014) life expectancies and inequities have not been examined.

Bosworth (2018) affirms that based on research it is noted that an increase in the amount of money an individual earns is also associated with an increase in their life expectancy. For instance, Chetty et al. (2016) estimated that the average life expectancy inequity percentile for someone that is 40 years of age will increase by 10.1 years in women between the highest and lowest household income and 14.6 years of age amongst men between the highest and lowest household income. Likewise, research indicates that increased income is pivotal to life expectancy (Muennig, 2008; Kroger et al., 2015; Lindahl, 2005). Muntaner et al. (2015) explained that increasing the take home wages for low-income workers may increase the life expectancy for these workers and abate the inequities in their life expectancy. Lee and Smith (2019) indicated that an individual that experiences wage theft also experiences harm that resonates beyond them because it impacts and deprives their families of necessities, it deprives the neighborhoods, and communities of money as well. Moreover, it reduces their income, perpetuates poverty in the family and community thereby bringing thousands of them and their families below the established poverty line.

Wage theft has become a direct barrier to the progression and advancement of the low-income worker, generationally, economically, and personally. For low-income workers it becomes a distinct threat to them because being denied even “one hundred dollars” could displace an individual and place them on the wrong side of hunger, cause them to be homeless, desperate, and living in despair. Furthermore, low-wage workers are cognizant of being mistreated by their employers and because of this they experience depression, anger, and frustration because they know that they are being manipulated by their employers and are victims of wage theft.

Muntaner et al. (2015) revealed that since an employer’s profits are inversely associated to labor costs, then the abundance of wealth and health that they experience is fundamentally dependent on the deprivation of workers. Reallocating resources from those who benefit the most and giving it to the low-income worker could mitigate the inequity seen in the low-income worker’s life expectancy (Eisenberg-Guyot et al., 2022).

Background on Current Enforcement Strategies

Recent literature examined current enforcement tactics used in accordance with municipal and state anti-wage theft ordinances, and researchers from different fields have also studied and examined the problem (Kim & Allmang, 2019); but barriers to addressing enforcement at the state, and municipal levels still exists. Kim and Allmang (2021) indicated that the Department of Labor launched state and federal collaborative “Misclassification Initiative” in 2010 aimed at combatting FLSA violations and employee misclassifications. The reason for this collaboration is to cross enforce and trigger other agencies to act should the violation falls under their jurisdiction.

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Eisenbrey (2014) used information from court case data along with statistical data from the United States Department of Labor (USDOL) and found that over one billion US dollars were recovered as a result of court cases filed in 2012. Meixell and Eisenbrey (2014) elucidated that the data they obtained supplements USDOL statistics because the US DOL data does not reflect court cases and only reports on cases when the employer willingly agrees to pay back wages.

Anti-Wage-Reformation Efforts

Anti-wage theft reformative strategies have been at the forefront of numerous scholars and researchers. Bernhardt and Osterman (2017) indicated that despite the limitation in addressing the enforcement of wage theft the only reasonable choice to combatting wage theft would be to create a wide- or far-reaching changes that include amending the FLSA, educating workers on their rights, strengthening deterrent methods, and rigorously enforcing penal measures through interagency collaboration. Kim and Allmang (2021) suggested amending the National Labor Relations Act to revise the definition of employees, revise employee misclassification, and ensure the worker's right to bargain collectively is protected. Further, reforming and enforcing wage theft is critical because it would allow individuals joining the workforce to mitigate their risk of being a victims of wage theft.

Collaborative efforts have been at the forefront of anti-wage reformation efforts. To encourage strategic enforcement, numerous community advocates have joined to bring forward collaborative options of enforcement between local government agencies

and worker companies (Kerwin & McCabe, 2011). An ineffective option according to Kerwin and McCabe is the limited way that agencies try to combat wage theft solely using ineffective tools and resources to document worker complaint responses. Fine (2017) argued that a better and effective way to enforce workplace standards would be for companies to play a greater role in proactively co-enforcing workplace compliance and regulatory standards. This would be more effective than agencies trying to singlehandedly enforce wage theft based on the complaints of the workers. Additionally, Fine and Gordon (2010) maintained that there are case studies that has shown that integrating worker companies and enforcement agencies will allow the focus to be on those employers that are non-compliant, problematic, and where workers are afraid or more unlikely to come forward with their complaint.

Community groups are working with enforcement agencies to expand the wage theft complaint process along with the investigation process for the complainants (Fine, 2017). Lee and Smith (2019) outlined several strategic categories and efforts that are being employed, and it was explained that less than 40% of the laws studied, facilitate, or authorize employees to sue in a court of law or engage in the administrative claim enforcement process. Some of these strategies include having anti-wage theft plans in place; anti-retaliation tactics; penalties; expanded liability; and information requirements. Lee and Smith (2019) expounded that the worker complaint strategy gives workers the private right of to bring litigation directly to the employer; and the ability to engage in the administrative process to file claims and have their claims investigated or adjudicated. Another strategy would be to increase the ability of workers to file or preserve their

complaints by extending or tolling the statute of limitations should they decide to file their claim at a further date. Lastly, the anti-retaliation strategy prohibiting retaliation, allows for confidential complaints to be filed, and gives the complainant the ability to shift the burden of proof from them to the company if they terminate a worker. Next, the imposition of penalties is another wage theft strategy. This strategy authorizes the court or agency to impose monetary fines or penalties when an employer commits wage theft. Other penalties include lien to be levied against a company's property as well as requiring companies who commit wage theft to post bonds to obtain licensing to operate.

There is also the expanded liability strategy that expands the ability of workers to seek wages, litigate against companies who are considered joint employers or successor companies and hold them liable for wage theft. The last strategy examined by Lee and Smith (2019) based on the previously enacted wage theft laws, is the information requirement strategy. This strategy requires companies to provide mandatory disclosures to employees at time of hire and annually, around matters such as pay rate, hours worked per pay period and how to file an administrative complaint should a violation occur. A breakdown and more detailed picture of the strategic efforts are noted below.

Table 3*Anti-Wage-Theft Approaches*

Worker complaints	Anti-retaliation	Penalties	Expanded liability	Expanded liability
Private right to action	Prohibiting retaliation	Civil	Broader definition of the employer	Mandatory disclosures
Administrative processes	Confidential complaint	License revocation	Successor liability	Employer recordkeeping
Increases/toll statute of limitations	Burden shifting	Negative publicity	Joint and several liability	Posters
		Criminal		Burden of proof shifting
		Lien		Agency data collection or reporting
		Bond		Worker education
				Employer education

Note. Adapted from “Regulating Wage Theft” by J. Lee and A. Smith, 2019, *Washington Law Review*, 94(2), p. 759 (<https://digitalcommons.law.uw.edu/wlr/vol94/iss2/6>).

Given the anti-wage theft efforts and strategies noted, there continues to be a need to examine how these strategies should successfully function. Lee and Smith (2019) concluded that while there are anti-wage theft strategies available, they are unlikely to significantly reduce wage theft, and especially wage theft from the low-income worker.

Barriers to Addressing Enforcement of Wage Theft Nationally

According to the findings of Congress Senate bill S.2101, the barriers to addressing wage theft is still prevalent despite the signing and enactment of the 1938 FLSA 84 years ago (Congress.gov). Research and surveys purport that oftentimes wage theft goes unreported because there are limited resources, and insufficient bandwidth at

the federal and state level to handle the various instances and reporting of wage theft by claimants. Additionally, the marginal social status of many low-income workers and the consequences they may endure is another barrier to addressing wage theft (Yaniv, 2006). Workers are likely to be terminated or retaliated against if they were to report wage theft (Bernhardt et al., 2009; GAO, 2009; Yaniv, 2006).

Further, the findings from the US Congress outline that the statute of limitations noted under section six of the Portal-to-Portal Act of 1947 limits workers from bringing forward wage theft claims after two years of the cause of action and three years if the wage theft was willful (Congress.gov). As a result, this statute of limitations restricts the worker and thereby deprives them of filing a claim for the theft of their wages if it occurs after that period. Researchers David Weil and Amanda Pyles discovered that only a small number of workers filed complaints with the DOL about wage and hour violations using data from 2001 to 2004 from the Department of Labor (DOL) and Wage and Hour Division (Lee & Smith, 2019). This is approximately 25 workers out of 100,000 workers and is a barrier to addressing enforcement of wage theft.

Alexander and Prasad (2014) substantiated that another barrier to enforcement is because low-income workers are unlikely to complain for various reasons. Based on the study 57% of the workers only complained to their employer, with only 4% opting to file a claim or lawsuit (Alexander and Prasad 2014). Additionally, it was noted that 77% did not know to complain to outside or the employer nor how to file a complaint; those who knew how to do so chose not to because they are not confident that it would be effective. Likewise, there are other workers who fear retaliation if they complain, while others are

restricted because they are subject to arbitration agreements signed at the time of onboarding with their employer (Ruan, 2012). Huizar (2021) indicated that while there are anti-retaliation provisions included in all the wage theft laws previously enacted, retaliation in low-income workplace still exists and has created a pervasive “culture of helplessness and hopelessness.”

Further, Lee and Smith (2019) illuminated that studies show that penalties because of worker retaliation for reporting wage theft are hardly ever imposed. Moreover, low-income workers rarely have the money or savings required to cover their bills should they lose their jobs for complaining. Milkman, et al. (2013) explained that a worker who are out of employment status and no longer authorized to work within the United States could be retaliated against by being reported to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Furthermore, while reporting undocumented or out of status workers to ICE is considered illegal, the courts are powerless in enforcing any wage theft or able to protect the workers when they are detained or deported. Another barrier to addressing enforcement is the ineffective standards within the agencies when imposing penalties or fines for wage violations. Farber (1999) stated that penalties are problematic and ineffective to changing the behaviors of the companies being penalized. The insufficient threat of real enforcement will truly cost companies and will fail to create deterrence. Additionally, according to Lee and Smith (2019) setting a “one size fits all” standard for penalties will not change employers’ behavior or deter them from continuing to violate wage and hour laws.

A major barrier to addressing wage theft enforcement is the inadequate agency resources available to do so. Estlund (2005) stated that most agency lacks “adequate staff”, and enforcement takes a lot of resources. Further, an agency’s lack of experience in enforcing anti-wage theft laws, or their unwillingness to impose penalties is seen as a barrier to enforcement. Hallett (2016) explained that despite the availability of criminal prosecution for wage theft, authorities at the local level, such as the local police or criminal prosecutor might not view the combatting of wage theft as something that is a part of their job descriptions, or they may be hesitant to file criminal charges against business entities. Likewise, Lee and Smith (2019) wrote that a barrier to addressing enforcement based on criminal prosecution might impact or harm a prosecutor’s or sheriff’s chance of being reelected when election occurs. From a labor enforcement standpoint, scholars indicate that the enforcement of wage theft is failing because of the lack of enforcement, the inability to detect wage theft, and consequences because of violations are minimal for employers (Fine and Bartley et. al, 2019; Weil, 2011). There are 26 of 50 states with less than ten (10) investigators in their Wage and Hour Department (WHD) offices, and six (6) states with zero investigator (Lee and Smith, 2019). Thus, based on the limited number of investigators, an employer’s chances of claims having claims against them investigated are minimal. Moreover, even if employers are caught, the penalties according to Bobo (2008) are not severe enough and thereby ineffective in changing an employer’s future behavior. Bobo (2008) further elucidates that two (2) of the main penalties utilized by the Department of Labor (DOL) are civil penalties and liquidated damages. For example, an employer who willfully and

repeatedly violates the minimum wage and overtime requirements would potentially be subjected to civil monetary penalties up to US\$1100 per violation. However, these penalties are seldom used or enforced. Lee and Smith (2019) revealed that criminal penalties are seldom used even though the FLSA specifies that a willful violation of the FLSA is considered a misdemeanor that may be punishable via jail time. Gavin (2016) points out that a penalty for wage theft may cost perpetrators nothing financially, and therefore any expected cost of wage theft set up to supposedly deter employers would make no difference.

Regardless of the efforts at federal, state, and local levels to enforce anti-wage theft measures, there is still an area of opportunity for enforcement (Galvin 2019; Lee and Smith, 2019). Oftentimes, the wage theft statutes rely on the employee to take action and exercise their rights; nevertheless, because low-income workers are less likely to file a claim or take legal action, enforcement is ineffective (Kim and Allmang, 2021). Bernhardt (2012) argued that there is a need for national reform to stop wage theft and deliver a good policy nationwide, but it would require the scaling of federal resources, federal standards, and the coordination and dissemination of these resources and reforms.

Summary

The literature review has shown a continued gap in wage theft from low-income workers. It does not consider the barriers to addressing prevention in states such as Florida. Additionally, the gap does not consider the low-income workers' perceptions or experiences on having their wages stolen or being victims of wage theft. Despite the various efforts and written protections provided at the federal level and some state levels,

states like Florida remain without wage theft laws and enforcement of these laws by enforcement agencies remain minimal. The research presented in the literature address wage theft, various wage and hour laws, the different types of wage theft, the social harm that wage theft causes low-income workers, its prevalence in Southeast Florida, and the elimination of wage and hour agencies within Florida, which has resulted in a lack of enforcement. Additionally, the research presented strategies and anti-wage theft efforts being utilized; the barriers preventing enforcement of these strategies and efforts from being addressed. Applying the RCT would help to uncover how companies that commit wage theft does so after weighing the benefits against the cost of being caught (Becker, 1968; Cornish and Clark, 1986, 2000) and the wage theft policies that needs to be enforced. Cornish and Clark (1986) asserted that those who commit a crime engage in calculated behavior seeking maximum reward against maximum cost. From this assertion, companies are assumed to have a rational choice because they would first determine the cost of their behavior before committing wage theft against low-income workers; in other words, they first determine whether they should commit the act or not, and what will occur if they are caught.

According to the literature the RCT may be used to examine and understand its application to the low-income workers' perceptions, experiences, and reactions. It would demonstrate how low-income workers determine and make the choice to remain victims of wage theft rather than reporting the perpetrators who have stolen their wages, and consequently, impact their way of life. This study would be crucial for low-paid workers in Southeast Florida since there is a dearth of state-level enforcement in Florida whereas

a considerable percentage of the literature concerns wage theft, its prevention, and enforcement at the national level. The literature addresses wage theft as the direct barrier to a low-income worker's living condition, as well as a direct barrier to their generational, economical, and personal progression in society. It addresses the low-income workers living paycheck to paycheck, the struggle to pay bills, their inability to provide for their family or cope with stress, frustration, physical health, and mental trauma challenges. It is noted that these are all repercussions that come with being the victims of wage theft. The literature also documents the types of wage theft, the impact of wage theft, the efforts and strategies utilized to ensure compliance and penalize for employers for non-compliance.

Although there has been extensive research conducted to establish the impact and consequences of wage theft from those considered low-income workers, it is done at the federal and some state levels. The study explores the gap that wage theft is not only endemic nationally but severely impacts individuals at the state level in states such as Florida, and specifically in Southeast Florida. No research exists regarding wage theft from low-income worker in Southeast Florida or how it impacts these individuals. There are a few counties that have enacted a variety of wage theft ordinances, with one (1) county, Miami-Dade County venturing to incorporate and enforce ordinance that prevents employers from shortchanging their workers of their wages. Nonetheless, the Miami-Dade ordinance does not prevent or enforce wage theft in other counties throughout the state. This qualitative research described low-income workers' perceptions and experiences regarding wage theft, and the impact this has had on their livelihood. Lastly, the research examines and gain insight into the barriers to addressing wage theft

prevention in Southeast Florida. The information in Chapter 3 explains how this study was carried out, the methods used to collect the data, how the data would be stored, how participants were chosen for the study, and how the data was compiled.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the perspectives and experiences of low-income workers and understand the barriers to addressing prevention and enforcement of wage theft violations. As a result, the standard of this study is fair, respectful, and trustworthy. This chapter provides the details pertaining to the methodology and includes aspects of how the study was conducted. It includes my role as a researcher, the population for this study, and the steps utilized to identify participants. Further, this chapter includes the instrument used to connect with participants so that data on their perceptions and experiences with wage theft could be obtained. Moreover, I outline the research process and procedures as well as the data analysis process. Lastly, the credibility of this study is addressed. The final section of this chapter outlines the strategies used to promote credibility as well as the trustworthiness of the research and the guarantee that the privacy of the participants would be maintained so that their mental, physical, economical, personal, and legal risks would be mitigated.

Research Questions

The primary research question and sub-research questions are as follows:

RQ: To what degree have low-income workers experienced wage theft in their current positions or position held in the past 3 years.

SRQ 1: What is the impact of wage theft on the low-income workers' livelihoods based on their experience?

SRQ 2: What barriers exist that prohibit wage theft from being enforced and dealt with if reported by a victim?

Research Design and Rationale

The strategic approach chosen for this study was that of a qualitative research design. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research relies heavily on the understanding and interpretation of individuals or groups in a specific social setting. Tisdell (2009) explained that qualitative research is interpretive study that underlies constructivism. This, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), means that the overall purpose of qualitative study is to glean how people conceptualize their lives and experiences. Merriam (2002) also stated that the researcher is the primary instrument used to collect and analyze data. Additionally, the approach used was the phenomenological approach because it allowed me to focus on the lived experience of the wage theft victim, which was a part of the purpose of the study as well as the research questions. Using a phenomenological study, according to Moustakas (1994), gives the researcher the opportunity to gain an understanding of the lived and subjective experience of a particular phenomenon based on the experiences of a group of individuals or a person. Creswell (2013) established similar views, explaining that one of the key components in phenomenology is the focus on participants' commonly lived experiences of a phenomenon. Additionally, Patton (2002) expounded that phenomenology denotes matters such as the exploration of a philosophy, inquiry patterns, interpretative theories, social science analysis, or research methods.

To illustrate further the history of phenomenology, Patton (2002) explicated that the philosophy of phenomenology was first used by German philosopher Husserl. Husserl, according to Patton (2002), established that the phenomenology approach is the study into how people describe and experience things via their minds. It was also noted that investigation is needed to understand a person's experience, and one way to do this is to look at the perceptions and the implications within the person's conscious awareness. Lastly, since this was a qualitative study to glean information from low-income workers on what their perspectives and experiences were on wage theft, along with perspectives on the barriers to addressing prevention, the best approach utilized for this study's purpose and research questions was phenomenology.

The Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher was to find the participants, conduct interviews, obtain applicable data, and conduct an analysis of said data. Additionally, in my role, I independently collected descriptions of the participants' reactions, challenges, experiences, and perceptions. This allowed me to identify and determine what the themes of their collective experiences were around being victims of wage theft. It is important to note that the researcher is a "central instrument" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) in qualitative research. Therefore, it was my goal to seek out answers by interacting with research participants and document their perceptions, their experiences, and the impact that being a victim of wage theft had on their lives. As the researcher in this study, I have over 30 years of experience in compliance, human resources, and employment practice liability matters. I have always been unbiased regarding violations and have made certain that I

purposefully remove myself from handling wage-and-hour-related claim matters within my department and organization. Additionally, I made certain that there was no bias in my questions. Further, I made certain that I refrained from any form of opinions, gestures, or perspectives when asking the interview questions. I also made certain that I framed my questions in an unbiased manner. Further, all interviews were recorded once consents were obtained. I performed the process of bracketing to ensure that the research process remained untainted. Burkholder et al. (2022) explained that using bracketing in qualitative research allows the researcher to bracket their personal experiences, biases, and perceptions prior to conducting research. By bracketing, a researcher is not able to control, change, or affect participants' responses. Utilizing these methods ensured that I remained completely unbiased regarding wage theft violations or claims review as I went through this research and study. It was also my goal to distinguish effectively and accurately between my own opinions and those of the individuals who participated in this study. Lastly, because I utilized research sites, I ensured that all ethical matters were taken into consideration.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach and semistructured interviews as the data collection method to examine how low-income workers in Southeast Florida perceived wage theft and the barriers to addressing prevention. Use of the semistructured interview method allowed for the gathering of in-depth information on each participant's thoughts, perception, and experience as a victim of wage theft. Similarly, use of the qualitative research method allowed me to obtain multiple perspectives required to

answer the research questions in this study. An interview guide with open-ended questions was used to guide the interviews. This allowed me to uniformly collect and analyze data and build theory based on the information and understanding of a phenomenon. Furthermore, utilizing the qualitative methodology coupled with open-ended interview questions created more interactions and allowed me to glean statistical information based on the impact that wage theft has on low-income workers in Southeast Florida. It also allowed me to get a better understanding of what the barriers were to addressing wage theft prevention and enforcement. Gaining insight into the participants' personal experiences and perceptions also gave meaning to the impact stolen wages had on each of these individuals and contributed to gleaning more about the challenges they faced in their daily lives.

Participant Selection

Each participant's unique experience gave meaning to this study and contributed to a better understanding of low-income workers' perception of their challenges, the experiences endured, and the barriers preventing wage theft from being addressed in Southeast Florida. The probability of selection of low-income workers impacted by wage theft was unknown, and therefore a sample size of 17 participants was selected using purposive sampling, with recruitment in the Southeast Florida areas of Broward, Collier, Palm Beach, Martin, and Miami-Dade Counties. This was done because there was a need to obtain specific information and details around the low-income worker segment to obtain their perspectives on what the impact of wage theft has been on this population. Purposive sampling, according to Burkholder et al. (2022), is known as the selection of

samples based on a particular purpose to meet the needs of the research. Further, this method was used whenever there was interest in specific characteristics that only particular individuals had, such as specific life experiences or skills (Burkholder et al., 2022).

The sampling logic that was used based on this qualitative study was nonprobability sampling, otherwise known as purposive sampling. One of the goals in this research was to obtain multifaceted, decisive information and minimize generalizations; therefore, using purposive sampling was ideal for this study. To be more specific, Schwandt (2015) defined purposive sampling as the ability to identify individuals who can provide the necessary data for a study. Patton (2002) explicated that purposive sampling studies involve looking at a lot of information to produce insights and bring a comprehensive understanding on the matter rather than rely on experimental generalities. Purposive sampling was further described by Patton as the selection of “information rich” cases used for deeper studies so that researchers can glean a lot more about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research inquiry. He further recommended that the ideal group size would generally be between five to eight participants, which is known as a homogenous sample. Nonetheless, to ensure data saturation was reached, 17 low-income worker participants across various industries within southeastern Florida were selected for this study. This sample size of participants was best because it was considered a small sample size and allowed for more focus to be placed on individualized experiences.

Smith et al. (2009) illustrated that using smaller sample sizes in qualitative research allows the researcher to focus on individual experiences, in contrast to large sample sizes, which can overwhelm the researcher. Moreover, Mason (2010) claimed that the sample size in qualitative study tends to be smaller than that of quantitative studies. Likewise, the sample size should be large enough to ensure that the required perceptions are covered in the data analysis but should not be too large, as it can become redundant (Mason, 2010). Lastly, Schwandt (2015) indicated that there are two critical concerns when using purposive sampling in qualitative research. These concerns, according to Schwandt, are (a) being able to establish the right criteria when selecting the participants for the study and (b) being able to describe the strategy used to determine that the participants were chosen to meet the established criteria. This information allows the researcher to obtain the data necessary to answer the research questions.

At the start of this research, I utilized a virtual announcement and flyer to describe the study and invite individuals across various industries to participate in the study. These industries included the hospitality, construction, restaurant, healthcare, commercial janitorial/cleaning services, and manufacturing industry. The announcement and flyer were posted on my social media platform and distributed through acquaintances in the Southeast Florida area because the population selected would be from targeted counties within Southeast Florida. My contact information was provided so that interested participants could reach me by text or phone. Individuals who were interested and ready to participate in the study were provided with the informed consent form; we discussed the interview protocol and scheduled a time and place to meet to conduct face-to-face

interviews. Four prequalification questions were used to determine who would participate in this study. These were as follows:

1. Are you over 18 years of age and less than 65 years of age?
2. Do you reside and work within a 3-year period in any of these Southeastern Florida Counties (Palm Beach, Broward, Collier, Martin, Miami-Dade)?
3. What were your wages earned hourly and yearly during this time?
4. Have you been a victim of wage theft where your employer did not pay you fairly for your work performed (e.g., Not paying you the legally required minimum wage; not providing overtime pay; requires work off the clock)?

Instrumentation

The tool used in the data collection process was in the form of open-ended interview questions, which were documented via audio recordings. To start, the data collection instrument included a specific number of questions that served as a guide to responses that would help answer research questions for this study. The interview questions allowed for the collection of the participants' experiences, perceptions of the challenges, and the obstacles faced as victims of wage theft. Singleton and Straits (2018) wrote that open-ended interview questions will give the participants the opportunity to share their experiences using their own words. Further, open-ended interviews allow the researcher to glean more about the phenomenon and eliminate any influence on the responses by the researcher. The interview questions were also semistructured. Using semistructured interview questions allows participants to expound on their responses

where applicable. The data collection process also involved the taking of copious notes on each participant's attitude, behavior (Creswell, 2009), and body language.

Other instruments utilized included an audio recorder. Before the interview, I recorded the participant's consent to be on record. Use of the audio recordings allowed me to capture responses effectively and accurately for transcription and analysis while getting the firsthand experiences from these participants on being victims of wage theft and what impact it had on their lives.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment of participants was done over a 1-month period to obtain 17 participants. Purposive sampling was used, the targeted locations were virtual, and recruitment was done using a virtual announcement and posted flyers. These flyers were distributed through known acquaintances with footprint throughout Southeast Florida and posted on a variety of social media platforms that I have a presence on. In addition, this recruitment was gender neutral and spanned the age groups of 18 through 65 years, as 65 is typically the age of retirement. Participants were provided with electronic informed consent forms. Once the participants agreed to be interviewed, they received direct messages with the date and time of their scheduled interview.

To ensure reliability in this qualitative study, the participant selection criteria were established as follows:

1. Workers must be over 18 years of age and less than 65 years of age.
2. Workers must live and work in one of the southeastern Florida counties within a 3-year period.

3. Workers will be required to disclose their wages earned hourly and annually.
4. Workers will be required to self-report as victims of wage theft based on actual wage theft experienced where their employer did not pay them fairly for work performed. These wage thefts include but are not limited to illegally paying them below the required state minimum wage, not paying overtime pay for work performed over 40 hours in a workweek, working off the clock, paying cash to avoid paying taxes, and so on.

Although 17 participants were interviewed, data were collected until data saturation was reached. To protect the privacy of individuals, their names were not used. Additionally, participants were reassured that they could withdraw or refuse to participate if they felt uncomfortable speaking about their experiences or if they did not want to expound on things that they felt were too confidential.

Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis for this study included a review of all participants' responses obtained via the open-ended interview process to identify and extrapolate themes and patterns. The results were then amalgamated through the coding process. Additionally, QDA Miner Lite was the software analysis tool used to assist with analyzing and documenting participants' perceptions and experience. One of the first strategies to complete an analysis, according to Guest et al. (2013), is to plan in a timely manner. The careful and proactive planning and implementation of an analysis is important for a field investigation to occur (Guest et al., 2013, p. 178).

Creswell (2009) specified that when doing qualitative research, it is best practice to concurrently perform data collection and analysis to identify and describe the patterns and themes noted by everyone. Therefore, the next important step was to embark on the exploratory process and to move the raw data obtained from the participants into findings. One way to obtain this was through the coding of the information. It is important to note that showing how each conclusion is reached is central in a study and can be acquired through coding (Pratt, 2009). Further, the analysis determined and connected information on the impact and barriers perceived and experienced by the participants as victims of wage theft; getting their claims of wage theft addressed; and their reaction on enforcement or lack thereof. Thematic analysis approach to the data (Saldana, 2015) was used to delve into the subjective nature of the participants' experiences.

To analyze and explore the participants' responses obtained from the open-ended interview questions, inductive coding was used. Using the right coding in a qualitative study is imperative because it ensures validity and gives the researcher an opportunity to search for any indication of contradictory data in the material (Charmaz, 2014). As such, being able to store, organize notes, narratives, documents, and code the data (Baxter & Jack, 2008) was important for this qualitative study. Lastly, I ensured that coding was properly done to identify the various patterns, similarities and differences in the participants' perspectives and experiences and ascertain discrepant information where applicable. To facilitate this coding and visualize data, the QDA Miner data analysis software tool was used.

Issues of Trustworthiness

One of the first steps to establishing and preserving the authenticity of the data obtained in this research was to ensure that that trustworthiness exists. Trustworthiness is a term used in qualitative data research (Burkholder, 2022) and parallel the terms objectivity, reliability, and validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) that is known to exist in quantitative research. The strategies that were employed to ensure trustworthiness included systemic review of the intake field notes, the documented information obtained, and confirmation of each participant's perception and experience. To mitigate any potential inaccuracies, internal validation of the documentation was done, and participants were asked to verify the information they provided to confirm accurate interpretation of their experiences and perceptions. Additionally, the four (4) criteria used to determine trustworthiness were (a) transferability, (b) credibility, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability.

To ensure transferability, I provided a description of the setting and assumptions of the study (Trochim, 2006) so that the study's findings would be clear to the reader. Copious descriptions and extensive variations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) supported the concept of transferability. To make certain that credibility was established in this study several approaches were employed. These approaches are prolonged engagement, progressive subjectivity, member checking, and triangulation.

Utilizing prolonged engagement was important to build trust with each participant that was interviewed, while ensuring that the details of each participant's experience were explored. Use of progressive subjectivity ensured that the researcher archived their

expectations and assumptions where necessary to mitigate bias. Additionally, the member checking technique was established to ensure that participants interviewed were able to review and confirm the data recorded, any reports, and that the researcher's interpretation of the information was accurate. This allowed the qualitative inquiry to be credible because obtaining verification from the participants ensured that their responses were valid and accurate and as a result, the credibility of the research would be maintained. Lastly, triangulation of the findings was done using multiple data collection methods and sources of information.

The dependability of this study was established through an audit trail. Information such as interview questions, field notes, reports, and participant's responses along with other notes, were made available to the Walden dissertation committee for review. This ensured adherence to the credibility and transferability standards and ensured that trustworthiness was maintained and not diminished. The standard of confirmability was addressed to assess any impact of potential bias on the researcher's part. Guba and Lincoln (1989) explicated that when the data is being studied there should be an expectation of confirmability that other informed researchers will have the same deduction when the same qualitative data is studied. To ensure adherence to confirmability standards a confirmability audit (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) was also done.

Ethical Procedures

Ethics is a fundamental part of a research study. Therefore, it was of central importance and the nucleus when conducting this study. When obtaining information from participants I made certain that adherence to Walden University's ethical practices

were followed. Additionally, the ethical considerations followed these important principles (Bryman & Bell, 2007):

- Participants will not be subject to any form of harm.
- The respect and dignity of these participants will be prioritized.
- Participants will be required to complete informed consents before participating in the study.
- The privacy of all participants will be protected and made a priority.
- Confidentiality of the data will be maintained, and the data will be protected to prevent unintentional or unauthorized access.
- Participants anonymity will be maintained.
- The objective of the study will be transparently and honestly conveyed to each participant.
- Any bias regarding primary data findings or ambiguous information will be circumvented.

Additionally, all participants in this study were 18 years or older and participation into this study was completely voluntary. All precautionary measures were taken based on the principles indicated by Bryman and Bell (2007); obtaining information from each participant was done without coercion (Samaranayake, 2012); and the participants were made aware of what the study entailed prior to participating (Williamson 2007). Furthermore, information received and documented from field notes was saved in electronic folders that is only available solely to the researcher. Retention of the

information follows the applicable record retention guidelines established at Walden University and will be compliantly destroyed when the retention period ends.

Likewise, participants were informed that their identities would not be divulged, and they were given the option to opt out or withdraw from the study if they felt uncomfortable. Lastly, no data was redacted or changed; all information and field notes obtained was compiled precisely based on the responses of each participant.

Summary

This chapter presented the research methodology and the steps that taken when conducting the study regarding low-income worker's perception on being victims of wage theft, along with the barriers to addressing prevention experienced in Southeast Florida. This chapter began with an introduction and progressed to the rationale for the research design; my role as the researcher; the instrumentation that was used to collect data; participant recruitment and selection; data analysis; issues of trustworthiness; and ethical considerations. Additionally, it addressed information on informed consent; how the analysis was done, the ability for participants to exit the study if applicable, and confidentiality, privacy and complying with the information retention period. The results of the qualitative assessment, as described in the previous chapter, is presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and describe the experiences and impact of wage theft on low-income workers as perceived by participants in the Southeast Florida area. There were one main research question and two sub-research questions.

In this study, I examined and described the perception of low-income workers who had been victims of different types of wage theft and the impact that wage theft had on their livelihood and the valuable insight and occurrences pertaining to the barriers they faced when they brought forward their complaints or reported the wage theft occurrence.

The research question provided the framework for the development of the 12 questions and follow-up questions asked in the study. The main research question asked the following: To what degree have low-income workers experienced wage theft in their current positions or position held in the past 3 years? The sub-research questions were as follows:

SRQ 1: What is the impact of wage theft on the low-income workers' livelihoods based on their experience?

SRQ 2: What barriers exist that prohibit wage theft from being enforced and dealt with when reported by a victim?

The sections of Chapter 4 address the following: (a) an overview of the research study setting, the research participants, and demographics; (b) the data collection process; (c) the data analysis process; (d) the outcomes of the research question and its

subquestions as related to the interview questions; (e) the emergent themes from the raw data; (f) the evidence of the study's validity; and (g) a chapter summary.

Research Settings

This research was conducted within an average 50-mile radius of each Southeast Florida county identified in the study. This study included interviews with 17 participants, and each one took place at predetermined local locations. My commuting distance between each Southeast Florida county was on average 50 miles. The setting included neighborhood libraries, as well as nearby coffee or smoothie shops and public community centers. For the open-ended discussions relevant to the research questions, each interview location offered a comfortable and relaxing setting for the participants, and during the sessions, there were no significant hindrances or distractions. Before I began the interview, each participant read and signed the informed consent form. I greeted them and thanked them for agreeing to take part in my study. I informed each participant that the data I collected would be kept private and that they could opt out of the study at any moment or decline to answer any questions. I requested each participant's consent to record their interview and asked if I might contact them later if I had any additional questions. I gave each participant a \$25 Visa gift card as a thank you for their time.

Research Participants

The study's research participants were individuals who had experienced wage theft and who lived and worked in southeastern Florida. I spoke with each participant and explained the study's goals first and gave them the opportunity to ask any questions they

had to ensure that they were comfortable and to assure them that the information conveyed to me would be held in confidence. I scheduled 3 days every week and made myself available for interviews and arranged the interviews to accommodate the time and schedules of the participants. I met and spoke with 20 people, and I interviewed 17 participants in total: 11 women and six men. One participant willingly resigned from their company and is currently pursuing a wage claim and is currently in between employment. I observed during the interview process that 16 of the 17 participants were employed, with 11 of them continuing to work for their present employer. Nine individuals had high school degrees, four had both elementary and high school degrees, and four had some college education.

RCT was important in this qualitative study to learn more about the phenomenon and its application in the participant's decision to report wage theft. This was essential because each participant had to decide whether to report wage theft, consider what it would cost them to do so, and determine whether it was advantageous for them to do so without suffering any repercussions or consequences. The primary method of data gathering in this study was interviewing, and inductive analysis helped identify the patterns that emerged (Rudestam & Newton, 2001). The data gathered from the participants' lived experiences and the interpretation of the information were made easier by the application of RCT.

I gave each participant a pseudonym, starting with RP1 and going all the way to RP17, to safeguard their anonymity and confidentiality. My first priority was to make certain everyone was at ease, and therefore effectively preparing for the interviews was

my top priority. I reassured each participant that given the nature of the study, their names would be withheld and never be used. I gave each participant a brief introduction, explained the study's goals and procedures, and let them know what to expect. For this study, I employed and proceeded with semistructured interview questions. With the help of semistructured interview questions, I was able to be conversational with the participants, and as the interview went on, most of them became more at ease and open with their personal stories and experiences. I was also able to establish an open rapport with them, which allowed all the participants to freely speak as they took part in the study. Some of the participants seemed excited to talk about their experiences, the impact of having their wages stolen, and the challenges they faced at their place of employment. The participants freely responded to each question they were asked and were prepared to share further details in response to subsequent questions. Seven participants were from Broward County, five were from Palm Beach County, three were from Miami-Dade, one was from Collier County, and another was from Martin County; all counties were in southeastern Florida.

All 17 of the interviewees were generally open and willingly participated; they also willingly shared their perceptions, experiences, and opinions on the events that took place in their lives and livelihoods because of the various things that happened on the job that impacted their wages. Their answers to the questions posed were intelligent and informative. Throughout the interview process, I had no issues.

Some participants were unaware of what wage theft was, but they were aware that their hard-earned money was being unlawfully stolen away. Others were aware of wage

theft and were interested in learning more about it. I responded to inquiries and unbiasedly gave each participant details on the definition of wage theft and what it encompasses. When asked whether participants were the main source of income, many indicated that they were indeed the main source of income, and approximately 70% stated that they supported two or more people not including themselves (see Table 4).

Table 4

Main Source of Income and Support for Two or More People

Participant code	Main source of income (Y)	Support 2 or more people in household	Income below the poverty level
P1	X	X	X
P2			
P3	X	X	
P4	X		
P5	X		X
P6	X	X	X
P7	X	X	
P8	X	X	X
P9	X	X	X
P10	X	X	X
P11	X	X	X
P12	X		
P13	X	X	X
P14	X	X	X
P15	X		
P16	X	X	X
P17	X	X	X

According to the information gathered from the participants, 12 of the 17 participants provided support and were responsible for two or more individuals in their family, excluding themselves, and 15 of the 17 participants interviewed were the primary earners. Additionally, it was discovered during the data collection phase that, according

to the Department of Health and Human Services' comprehensive 2023 national poverty rules, seven of the study's 17 participants had gross incomes that fell below the poverty level criterion. The poverty thresholds for all states, excluding Alaska and Hawaii, are shown in Table 5, and the participants' yearly incomes are shown in Table 6.

Table 5

2023 Poverty Guidelines for All States Except Alaska and Hawaii

Persons in family/household	Poverty guideline
1	\$14,580
2	\$19,720
3	\$24,860
4	\$30,000
5	\$35,140
6	\$40,280
7	\$45,420
8	\$50,560

Note. Adapted from the *2023 Poverty Guidelines for All States Except Alaska and Hawaii* by Department of Health and Human Services (<https://www.healthcare.gov/glossary/federal-poverty-level-fpl/>).

The data referenced above include the family size within a household and the gross annual household income level for 2023.

Table 6*Low-Income Participants' Current Annual Income*

Research participants	Persons in family/household	Annual income
P1	3	\$20,800
P2	1	\$19,200
P3	3	\$21,000
P4	1	\$21,840
P5	1	\$14,000
P6	5	\$32,000
P7	4	\$47,000
P8	5	\$33,000
P9	5	\$29,000
P10	3	\$23,000
P11	2	\$19,200
P12	1	\$22,000
P13	6	\$36,000
P14	3	\$24,560
P15	2	\$25,480
P16	3	\$16,560
P17	4	\$17,400

Twelve of the participants were showing as being below the poverty level income thresholds based on the number of people within their household, with some participants being 100% below the poverty level. Of the 17 participants, there were only five who were above the income poverty level by a few thousand dollars; and of these five participants, there were two who were at the poverty level income. Information from U.S. Health and Human Services established that the utilization cost for the average person in Florida is \$50,689 per year, with housing and utilities being \$9,656 per year.

All 17 participants were interviewed in the months of May, June, and July 2023, with each interview lasting an average of 45 to 120 minutes. The data depended on the

interviewer's ability to gather reliable evidence and the interviewee's capability to provide accurate information, as conducting interviews involves empathy, practice, listening, and patience (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). I adopted a researcher's stance and accepted how the responses and data came to me during each interview. By signing the Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved consent form, each participant gave his or her approval to participate in the study.

Demographics

The research plan called for 15 participants, but I raised it to 17 for data saturation purposes to collect enough data to be able to draw conclusions about the impact wage theft has had on the low-income worker participants' lives and livelihoods. I also wanted to get everyone's perspectives and experiences about the issue. Participants were diverse in terms of their racial backgrounds and demographics, and they were all from southeastern Florida. Overall, everyone was older than 18 years old. As a researcher, I saw that the participants' average age was close to 42. Three of the participants were Hispanic, two were mixed or another race, eight were African Americans, including people from the Caribbean Islands, and four were White. There were seven men and 10 women.

Table 7*Research Demographics*

Characteristic	Number of participants
Race, ethnicity, nationality	
White	4
African American (including Caribbean)	8
Mixed or another race	2
Hispanic	3
Gender	
Female	10
Male	7
Age group	
18–30	6
31–50	5
51–64	6

Note. $N = 17$.

Data Collection

After I obtained Walden IRB approval, the recruitment plan was activated as follows: 60 recruitment flyers were disseminated throughout the Palm Beach, Broward, Miami-Dade, Collier, and Martin County areas by friends, family members, and me. Additionally, the flyer was posted online, but while I received likes for the post, I did not receive any calls or direct messages. Flyers were also posted at three workforce agencies in Broward County. These efforts identified 25 potential participants. As a result of these efforts, eight participants expressed interest upon receipt of the flyer and provided their contact information, and nine individuals contacted me telephonically to get more information and confirmation of what the study entailed, including the gift card information. Five individuals did not meet the selection criteria, and three individuals

expressed interest in participating but changed their minds afterward for several personal reasons.

I began this investigation by enlisting possible volunteers using the inclusion criteria and deliberate sampling. All the participants who were chosen to fit the requirements were receptive and eager; however, despite their eagerness, three of them spoke minimal to no English, and while I was open to using a translator, they came back and stated that they were concerned about their job situation and the upcoming changes to Florida's new E-Verify regulations. As a result of this new Florida law, three participants opted out. Finding appropriate venues to conduct each participant's interview and coming to an agreement on those locations were the next phases in the data gathering process. Based on the study participants' availability, I set dates and times for the interviews to start and continued to do so until all 17 participants had their interviews arranged. Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays were designated as the days for these interviews. To determine each participant's eligibility for the study, I asked them each two prequalification questions: (a) Are you 18 years of age or older? and (b) Have you experienced and been a victim of wage theft? I also explained what wage theft is to ensure that each participant clearly understood before the interview was conducted. If the participants answered the first question with yes and were victims of wage theft, I continued with the interview. I began the process on May 23, 2023, and on June 30, 2023, I finished all 17 interviews. I met each participant at the agreed-upon prearranged interview locations on the day of the interview.

There were 12 primary interview questions and several supplementary questions; some responses and answers prompted me ask additional questions for clarification purposes. I introduced myself to each participant and then I explained the purpose of the study to them. To establish a rapport, I began the conversation by asking about themselves, about their day, the weather temperature in Florida, conversation to break the ice and to get to know them better. I also inquired if they needed anything, such as refreshments and whether they were happy sitting where they were. All the attendees were receptive and agreed to participate in the interview; as such, I proceeded with the interviews. There were seven participants who were unaware of what wage theft was but knew that they were not being compensated appropriately by their employers. I started the interviews by obtaining information on each participant's county of residence, employment background, family, and household. These open-ended questions allowed them to relax as they talked about themselves and beamingly described their family; this also helped everyone get over any initial shyness. Once the interview concluded, I thanked the participants for their cooperation and time. I informed each participant that when the study concluded they would be provided with the results.

I had in-person interviews with each research participant. A digital recorder was used to record each interview, and I also made field notes to record each participant's nonverbal cues and inflections. The length of the interviews ranged from well over an hour for the first four to just over 40 minutes for the shortest interview. To record comments that would help with the coding and data analysis process, I took notes

throughout the interview. I clarified things by asking more questions, which reduced the need to call participants for more details.

To gather the research data and respond to the main research question and the two sub-research questions of this study, I employed 12 primary semistructured interview questions as well as several secondary questions. To ensure uniformity, an interview guide, which is shown in Appendix A, was used. I probed and followed-up with participants as necessary to help them clarify their answers. The extra questions offered the participants the chance to elaborate on their answers. Participants voluntarily shared details about themselves, their living arrangements, their experiences with wage theft, as well as the many barriers and obstacles they faced as victims of wage theft. The interview questions served as a guide for the discussion and helped to keep the participants on topic. All participants offered valuable insight into their opinions and experiences regarding the difficulties and incidents encountered because of wage theft; and their perspectives on the barriers and difficulties to addressing enforcement and prevention if they filed claims.

To maintain the validity and reliability of this study, I used bracketing, member checking, and triangulation to assure the integrity of the research data collected. I refrained from letting my opinions on wage theft taint or influence the study's findings.

Data Analysis Process

Knowing that I would be conducting in-depth interviews made it necessary for me to be completely aware of all the subtleties involved in a person-to-person, inquiry-based, question and answer process. As a result, I understood that I had to utilize a dual data

analysis procedure. While the data was being gathered, the analysis's first stage was underway. Yu et al. (2014) claimed that the "primary data analysis" stage entails a reflective introspective analysis of the data. The face-to-face interviews, verbatim transcription of the audio recordings, field notes, and recording of observations were all done during this stage, which also involved getting the data ready for analysis. I largely followed Saldana's (2016) pragmatic advice for the second phase of the data analysis since it provided insight into the significance of the broad selection and application criteria for coding. I was able to think broadly about my initial choice of codes while narrowing my focus to a second cycle coding process by realizing that coding is an iterative process that probably has to be modified over time. Chapter 3 of this study provided a description of the data analysis procedure. Following transcription, I hand-coded the data by marking the various codes and themes I had discovered. From the comments provided by the research participants, several themes emerged. The first coding of the study data was guided by the research questions. Once the initial codes and themes were established, I uploaded the interview data into the QDA Miner Lite program for additional analysis.

Data Coding

According to Creswell (2013), "coding" is the act of disassembling interview responses into more digestible, smaller clusters or pieces of data. Data analysis, according to Yu et al. (2014), involves "breaking up, separating, disassembling, and later reassembling" study data (p. 253). The procedure entailed meticulously dissecting, isolating, and assembling the research data. Transcribing each participant's interview

responses after listening to the audio recordings served as the first stage. I used my field notes to make sure that each participant's comments were appropriately recorded on the transcripts. To organize and choose the areas for analysis (Elo & Kyngas, 2007), I reviewed the transcripts several times while making notes and coding, as well as identifying keywords and themes. Colored highlighters were used to mark phrases, quotations, observations, and comments that related to a particular theme. I let the initial coding of the research data be guided by the research questions. I created a list of outliers in the participant responses to the interview questions as I was coding the data (Creswell, 2009). I imported all the data into the QDA Miner Lite software application after establishing the initial codes and themes, and then I used the categories to create "nodes." Entering the information into the QDA tool made it easier because the data was reduced to manageable "clusters (Yu et al. 2014, p. 254). A total of six themes, fifteen categories, and twenty-nine codes were identified and then the data became repetitive.

For the first research question, a total of two themes, with categories and fifteen codes were recognized. The sub-research questions had a total of three themes, eight categories and thirteen codes each. Finding recurrent replies was the next stage in developing themes from the research data. I conducted a word search on the coded data to find recurring concepts and establish themes. These themes developed because of a mixture of recurrent words, phrases, and ideas that appeared frequently in the participants' answers. The next stage of the data analysis process was crucial; during this stage, I used the themes to delve into the subjective nature of the participants' experiences and to help explain and connect the data on the impact and barriers perceived and

experienced by the participants as victims of wage theft, getting their claims of wage theft addressed, and their reaction to enforcement and the absence of enforcement. The final part of the data analysis process required giving a thorough explanation of the connection between the study's findings, any developing themes, and how those findings relate to the literature review in Chapter 2 in general. According to Patton (2002), it is important to be thorough when describing how the facts, themes, and conceptual framework relate to one another. A "thick description" of the connections between the concepts should serve as the foundation for any data analysis (Patton, 2002, p. 503).

The following steps made up the data analysis process. The first step was transcription of the interviews, basic data coding, and importation of the transcripts into the QDC Miner Lite software for additional assessment. I utilized the interview questions to categorize each participant's responses. This aided in my effective hand coding of the research material and my search for new themes. With the aid of the program, I made a chart of the themes, expressions, and keywords gleaned from the transcripts in order to locate and verify potential connections in the data. For instance, the major response to Interview Question 9 regarding working off-the-clock was "there is no working of the clock because I am paid a salary." I coded the responses to Interview 9 as "Wage Theft Occurrences." It should be noted that not all the answers related directly to the interview questions. I removed the irrelevant comments from the analysis of the research data. To find more keywords and topics, I used a word search to pull out unusual word combinations and relevant results. I was able to focus on the recurring themes and analyze the significance of the research findings thanks to this technique.

As I considered the commonalities of the participants' insights, experiences, thoughts, opinions, and sentiments about wage theft, the impact, and occurrences in their life, the themes for this study began to emerge. The topics that came out of this research will aid in filling in the gaps in the body of knowledge on wage theft in Southeastern Florida. The themes are described and interpreted in more detail later in this chapter.

Discrepant Cases

Discrepant examples were defined by Creswell (2009) as "variations or exceptions in the data that run counter to the themes." A researcher should look for data that might not confirm the study's initial assumptions. A "deliberate and articulated search for disconfirmation" is advised by Morrow (2005). The science of qualitative research is not exact and therefore investigating the lived experiences of participants with various viewpoints and insights might produce a variety of results that might not be consistent with the study's purported theoretical framework. Discrepant examples should be considered when analyzing the study's findings since they can provide important new information about the phenomena. I tried to look for contradictory and disconfirming evidence and cases. I carefully went over each participant's response to look for any discrepancies and variations from other relevant questions. A summarized description of any discrepant case is included in the themes section of the study.

Results by Research Questions

The research questions for this study asked: To what degree have low-income workers experienced wage theft in their current positions or position held in the past three years? The two sub-research questions explored, based on their experience, the impact of

wage theft on their livelihood, their frustrations, challenges, issues faced, and the barriers that exist that prohibits wage theft from being enforced and addressed when reported. These questions sought to find out if the decision of low-income wage theft victims to report wage theft involves their consideration of the cost to them, and whether it would be advantageous for them to do so without any consequences or negative outcome. The data analysis and findings of my study determined that the participants' responses for this study were consistent with other studies that examined wage theft and wage theft from low-income workers nation-wide. Additionally, this study made noteworthy differences, which can help to identify new themes and concepts to fill the gap in the literature regarding how low-income workers experience and perceive of wage theft in relation to their lives and livelihood as well as the difficulties and barriers experienced should they report a claim. Due to the limited research that examined the lived experiences of low-income workers as wage theft victims in Southeast Florida, the results of this study can lead to a better understanding of what the barriers are to addressing wage theft prevention.

The results of the study can aid, community advocates, community leaders, and stakeholders, and the participants themselves, understand the compounded difficulties and barriers low-income workers experience and face when they have had their earnings stolen. Since the issues, concerns, and problems are seen through the eyes of the participants, it will provide invaluable insight into the issues because they have had first-hand experience and encounters with wage theft. Most participants said that learning more about their rights regarding their salaries and how to locate information on state

wage regulations would be helpful. The need to better understand one's rights as an employee was also brought up by several participants, who said that they were unaware of the rules governing these rights, which are crucial to both their employment and daily lives. One participant claimed that she has been paid below the minimum wage and only found out in February 2023 that the minimum wage increases as of September 2022 from \$8.46 to \$11.00. She also claimed that when she found out she spoke with her employer and informed them that her wage needed to be increased to the new 2022 requirement and that she should also receive a retroactive amount for the time she was not paid between September 2022 and when she found out in February 2023. Nevertheless, she still has not received the retroactive pay. While the participant felt that her employer was holding her retroactive money “hostage” she did not perceive it as wage theft. The level of knowledge on wage theft, and lack thereof seems to be a barrier that exists that prohibits wage theft from being enforced and dealt with when reported by a victim.

Participants provided valuable information and insight into their experience as wage theft victims, and the impact that the different types of wage theft has had on their lives. Their responses helped to understand why when their wage and hour rights have been violated, they are not likely to navigate the issue and report the wage theft violation.

Next, I gave a detailed summary of the results of the study in relation to the main research question and the sub-research questions. The themes that emerged from this investigation are also identified and described in the following sections. I used quotes and excerpts from participant interviews in the next two sections to support the results of my study.

Research Questions and Sub-Research Questions

One main research question led the focus of this study. I wanted to know the extent that low-income workers in Southeast Florida have experience wage theft in their current positions or position held in the past three years. I wanted to know if the participant's perception, experiences, and the barriers to addressing the theft catered to the RCT framework. Do low-income workers consider the costs and benefits of reporting their stolen wages to the appropriate enforcement agencies? The interview questions helped to ascertain the answers to the research question. Interview questions 7, 9, 10, and 11 helped to answer the main research question and Sub-research question 1.

The reasons given by participants on their experiences on wage theft and the impact were very similar. Some participants knew what wage theft was and some of their rights but many other expressed that they do not feel that they know what it is, how they can be protected and what their rights are under wage and hour laws. Some participants hesitantly and timidly expressed their understanding of wage theft and when explained that it is stolen wages and the different types of theft, they began to talk about their experiences with issues such as being paid late or not paid for all hours worked and being allowed to work off the clock. One participant who is a clerk at a convenience store stated, "There is no working off the clock because I do not get paid hourly, I am paid a set salary, and while I do clock in and out each day, my manager told me that I am a salaried employee so I wouldn't be paid for the hour and whether or not I take lunch the salary I receive will not change." Another participant when asked whether he was paid below minimum wage stated, "I don't really know if I'm being paid minimum wage

because I have been working for the same company for 3 years and I get paid a salary of \$400 per week; but when you do the calculation, I am technically paid \$10 an hour.”

Sub-Research Question 1

What is the impact of wage theft on low-income workers' livelihoods based on their experience? Interview questions 10 and 11 helped to answer this research question. The RCT was the foundation used to look at this question. The RCT was used as the conceptual framework to examine the behavior and decision-making responses of the participants on whether to report a claim of wage theft once they consider their options from a cost and benefit standpoint (Mehlkop & Gaeff, 2010). As it relates to the impact wage theft has had on their lives and whether to report it to the necessary authorities and enforcement agencies, an individual may decide that the benefit of keeping their jobs, far outweighs the cost of negative impact to their jobs. Some participants outlined the various impact that wage theft had on their lives and livelihood, including homelessness, eviction, medical issues, but many felt that it would be better to take the benefit of keeping their jobs versus losing it. For example, one participant stated, “I am constantly angry and depressed, and trying to get food stamps, but I would rather deal with not getting paid overtime than not getting paid at all and having to go on unemployment which will only pay me a fraction of what I currently earn.” Five participants stated that having their wages stolen affected their health. Participant 7 stated that she has bad anxiety, panic attacks, stress, and these things are affecting her mental health because she has shut herself off from people and sometimes found herself wanting to commit suicide. She stated, “My mental health was so bad that my family considered Baker Acting me.

My relatives stepped in, and I weighed my options and made the decision to quit because my family threatened to show up to my place of employment” Participant 9 stated that the stress on the job and constantly being paid late, working overtime but not being paid for the overtime because she is salaried constantly made her blood pressure high. She stated that her blood sugar periodically dropped because she either did not have enough money to buy lunch or to bring lunch to work. She stated, “aspirins are my best friend because when I get mad that I only make \$557 every week as a single mother with three children, I have to pop two aspirins to calm the pressure in my heart, but I would rather deal with taking aspirins versus being homeless with my kids.”

Interview question 11 asked if they have sought help as victims of wage theft a question that was asked to determine if they would utilize this help to determine their choices, next steps, and actions. Each participant answered this question based on his or her own experiences and opinions. Most participants indicated that asking for help will only create issues of retaliation for them from their employers. One participant who is over 40 stated, “I did not seek help because I do not want to start over. No one will hire me at my age; therefore, I have no reason to reach out for help and create more issues for myself.”

Sub-Research Question 2

What barriers exist that prohibit wage theft from being enforced and dealt with if reported by a victim? Interview question 12 asked, what do you think are some of the barriers to address wage theft? The follow-up question was, do you think that victims of wage theft get the appropriate help they need from enforcement agencies? Thirteen out of

seventeen participants stated that one of the barriers is the fear of retaliation from their employers. Six participants stated that they didn't know what wage theft is and therefore that is a barrier to getting it addressed. Eight participants indicated that they have researched and taken steps to get help from different government agencies but get "stuck" trying to understand the different steps that it involves reporting the claim. Two participants said that they call the USDOL, but the call wait time was very long, and the things that they needed to provide to get their claim started were "too much" which causes them to give up reporting the wage theft claim. Other participants felt that some of the barriers include not knowing what needs to be on their paystub or what taxes are to be taken out of their wages. Three participants stated that some of the things that they were enduring was difficult to pinpoint as wage theft and therefore took no action. For example, one participant who had worked for their company for four years stated that his manager refused his paid time off and his need to take leave under the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) when his mother had cancer because they felt that taking the leave would hurt the department's productivity. The participant stated that he was very angry and wanted to quit. He stated, "I was going to leave this job, but I realized that I needed the money to help with my mother's medical bill." When I asked if he was aware that FMLA was a federally protected leave and that qualifying employers were required to approve an employee's leave if it met the FMLA eligibility reason and other requirement; the participant stated that he did not. He said I left it alone, and stated, "I was extremely angry that they would do this to me after I have worked for them for so long." When

asked if he reported the matter to his upper management, he said, “Man I did not, because I do not want these people to fire me. I gave them five years!”

Summary of Results

In this study, I outlined the full range of experiences and impact on the low-income workers’ lives and livelihood because of wage theft. The responses of many of the participants indicated that they were unclear on what wage theft was, the different types of wage theft, and the different wage and hour laws. Additionally, some participants did not think that what their employers did was illegal. While they were unable to name their encounters as wage theft, to a greater degree they felt that their employers were disrespectful and disloyal instead of stealing wages from them. In Chapter 5, I discussed in more detail how these findings compare to other research on low-income workers perception and experiences on wage theft and the barriers to addressing prevention if they were to report a claim.

As the participants expressed their perception on being victims of wage theft many felt that they received no help from their human resources department or corporate offices. Many of these participants felt that they had no champion for their rights or a path forward beyond quitting their jobs. Participant #5, a 44-year-old man with two children stated, “I have given so much to that man” referring to his manager; he further stated, “I would even help him with things at his home, and I have never been paid a dollar outside of my \$11 an hour no matter how much time I work. I feel less than a man when I look at my children, and I feel like I am personally being offended because he knows I need the money and jobs are hard to find for men like me.” Participant 5 use of

the words, “Man like me” was in reference to his assumption that he is unable to find any other jobs because he was previously incarcerated.

The results of the study indicated that most of the participants would weigh the cost and benefits of wage theft and whether there would be any harm to them before deciding to report wage theft. Seven out of seventeen participants stated that while they encounter emotional, mental, and physical hardship, it is better to have those issues than to get no wages which would lead to much more problems for them. One participant stated that when she weighs the cost of homelessness, going to a shelter versus earning at least an income to help her children, she will “settle” for the stolen wages so that she can keep the roof over her children’s heads.

The responses from the participants provided insights and perceptions of their lived experiences regarding the impact of wage theft on their lives and livelihood. The findings indicated that the participants responses vary in experiences, mindsets, their principles, and knowledge of wage theft. Nevertheless, the themes of the data are similar. As previously suggested, most of the participants considered the benefits of keeping their jobs over reporting a claim of wage theft. Likewise, four participants claimed that they would rather have enough to help their children and family than to not have anything at all. The next section discusses the emergent themes generated from a detailed review and analysis of the data.

Themes

With the use of the 12 interview questions and the follow-up interview questions, the first assessment of the data produced 15 initial themes. I was able to merge and

condense the topics into five key themes after carefully reviewing and hand coding the data. According to Saldana (2015), the process of condensing the themes into four merged themes enables the researcher to ascertain the fundamental significance of the phenomenon under study. The use of themes in qualitative research was also endorsed by Creswell (2013), who claimed that using themes gives researchers the chance to delve deeper into the meaning of the data. Similarly, Creswell (2013) endorsed the activity of condensing the number of ideas into five or six main themes. Some of the interview questions answered the same research question; likewise, the themes generated have similar interaction. I provided explanations and descriptions of each theme in its own section. I used quotes from the participant transcripts to support each of the five themes that were produced. See Tables 8 through 13 for more detail.

The purpose of this study was to examine and described the perceptions and experiences of the participants regarding the impact of wage theft on their lives and livelihood and the barriers they face when they bring forward their complaints or report the wage theft issue. The task was completed while I was interviewing each participant for the data gathering process. I transcribed the participant interview responses, examined the information, and came up with five key themes. The data analysis process is ongoing in qualitative research; although the study data might lead to several primary themes and hypotheses, the researcher must choose the themes that best answer the research questions (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008). To determine the central significance of each response, this approach entailed reading and reviewing the data. The themes found in this study came from examining the participants' points of view and perceptions.

The themes discovered through the analysis of interview data are shown in Tables 8 through 13.

Table 8

Themes and Respondents

Themes	Respondents	Percentage
Various wage theft occurrences suffered	17	100%
Weighing cost, benefits, & consequences	8	47%
Encounter barriers	15	88%
Endure economic hardships	17	100%
Health has been impacted	12	70%

The Types of Wage Theft Occurrences Suffered

The first theme of the “Types of Wage theft Occurrences Suffered” developed from the participants responses to Interview Questions 5, 6, 7, and 9. These responses also provided data to answer the main research question. All 17 participants discussed the various examples of the different types of wage theft. Excerpts to the questions can be found in Table 9.

Table 9*Types of Wage Theft Occurrences Suffered*

Participant's responses	Perceptions	Observations
P1: "During the pandemic I have been paid late and sometimes I am not paid because they keep saying that there are issues with the payroll or there was a lack of sales. It did not sound right to me because the government gave them money to pay us. They told us to come in to work and assured us that we will be paid but didn't and said that they wrote down the amounts that they owe us and promise to pay those money at a later date. I am still waiting on the later date to come."	Employer is using them for their own gain. Felt deliberately exploited. Employer committed a crime because it is rumored that they got the government employer retention tax.	Participant was cautious at first, then angry and facial expression was one of hurt.
P2: "I am a part time employee and many times, I work over 40 hours a week at this job but my manager keeps on changing my hours and putting it at 30 hours even when I work 35 or 40 hours a week. When I ask her why he keeps doing it he said he does it because I am part time, not full-time. I said, but I work those hours! But he shrugs his shoulder and say, you are part-time and work up to 30 hours! I am not paid for any hours worked over 30 hours."	Manager is stealing her money. Company does nothing to help, which is why her manager continues to do it.	Soft spoken and teary eyed but spoke eloquently.
P3: "Because I am paid commission, the owner of the salon takes 60% of total cost of nails and I get 40% of the total. After that he asks us to pay him for the use of the supplies in the salon and deducts that from the 40%. I know for a fact that he is stealing from all of us as the nail techs and to top it off he pays us using his personal check. I am currently looking for something else and will be quitting soon."	No rules, free for all. No enforcement or audit. Gets away with everything.	Engaged, spoke confidently. Eager to talk but angry.
P5: "Many times I work overtime but they keep saying I wouldn't get paid for it because they pay me a salary which is unfair because I make only \$480 gross each week and they are the ones who ask me to work the overtime to help them meet their deadlines."	Feels insecure and concerned about being exploited.	Engaged, spoke confidently and with candor.

I thoroughly reviewed each participant's transcript and field notes. I observed that all 17 participants experienced multiple types of wage theft on an ongoing basis. Nine of the participants have been a victim of multiple forms of wage violations ranging from unpaid overtime, working off the clock, having no paystub, having no taxes taken from their wages, paid by cash, and paid late on multiple occasions. Six of the participants are still experiencing these wage theft issues, and two participants have considered filing claims with the department of labor wage and hour department and with the Miami-Dade wage agency.

Weighing the Cost, Consequences, and Benefits of Reporting Wage Theft

The next theme of "Weighing the Cost Consequences and Benefits of Reporting Wage Theft" emerged from interview questions 9h, and 11, and generated data that addressed the research question and the sub-research questions 1 and 2 of the study. Many of the participants noted that for them, the benefits of not reporting their wage issue outweighed the cost and consequences that they would have endured from their employer if they complained or report it. They weighed their options because they want to keep their jobs until they make their own decision to leave of their own volition. Eight of the seventeen participants stated that they want to leave on their own terms; five participants stated that they are hoping to get their children through high school before leaving or filing a claim. One participant stated that they were aware of the statute of limitation around wage and hour claims reporting and is pulling together evidence and documentation to support filing. Two participants have reportedly filed claims. Excerpts to the questions are noted in Table 10.

Table 10*Weighing the Cost, Consequences, and Benefits of Reporting Wage Theft*

Participant's responses	Perceptions	Observations
P4: "I live paycheck to paycheck and have no financial help, therefore even though I feel like they are trying to take advantage I need the money. If I leave this job with inflation happening right now I might not get hired because of my age so I made the decision to remain with them, stay under the radar, and hopefully remain there until I retire."	Employer bias because of age and ethnicity. May lose job if complain.	Respondent had few nonverbal cues but spoke confidently.
P7: "These people have me classified as a contractor and not an employee, I can't be bothered to challenge it because I have no taxes taken out of my pay right now and I am not going to file taxes and owe the government any money for taxes. I do not get taxes taken from my pay so why should I be the only one paying taxes when they don't pay any taxes for me."	Don't want to file a claim because could owe taxes to IRS.	Respondent was talkative, charming but sarcastic.
P8: "My work permit expired while I was employed with this company and they still kept me on with them. They cut my pay because they were no longer deducting taxes and while I am grateful to be employed with them, they do work me like a horse without pay, but I can't leave until my immigration employment status is adjusted which will be soon but in the meantime I must provide for my family and keep a roof over their heads."	Won't be able to get another job because of employment status. Being manipulated because of immigration status.	Respondent was matter-of-fact and occasionally smiled throughout.
P10: "The negative part about Working at this job is the fact that my supervisor keeps going in and changing my overtime hours when I work over 40. She said I did not get her approval to work overtime even though there is a lot of work to be done. She even wrote me up for it but did not pay me for the time I worked. I try to keep calm because I know that my daughter will be graduating soon and I made the decision to walk off that job once she graduates because she is smart and will get scholarships."	Waiting on daughter to graduate. Trying to save some money first.	Respondent seemed angry but was proud about daughter graduating.

As noted previously when asked what the benefits, cost, or consequences are to not reporting a claim, participants felt that it is better to “let the money go versus losing their jobs.” Eight of the seventeen participants made the decision to stay in their jobs rather than leave; and rather than reporting their employer for wage violations because they felt that it was more beneficial to them to remain employed which is in line with the RCT.

Encountering Barriers

The theme of encountering barriers came from interview question 12. This theme targeted the data to answer the sub-research question 2, “What barriers exist that prohibit wage theft from being enforced or dealt with if reported.” Eleven of the seventeen participants saw the main barrier as fear of retaliation from their employers. The participants felt that they would be more inclined to report a claim if they did not have to deal with retaliation from their employer or if they knew how to navigate the wage claim system to get the money that is owed to them. Four participants felt that lack of knowledge about their rights is a barrier, while others felt that they have nowhere to file their claims because they expected to be able to walk into a wage and hour claims office to discuss and have someone help them. Excerpts to the question can be found in Table 11.

Table 11*Encountering Barriers*

Participant's responses	Perceptions	Observations
P6: "I honestly don't know how to report this issue. I have been paid late, work and not get my overtime pay, I simply don't know where to start. My barrier is me not know where to start or have any knowledge on where to go because if I could get the money they owe me, I would definitely try and report it but honestly I don't know how or what it all involves."	No training for them. Managers need training. No information available to read and know their rights (such as poster).	Respondent was emotional when talking about rights being violated and no information available.
P9: "Retaliation from the people I work with is my biggest fear, it holds me hostage from fighting and escalating this because I know for a fact that I could lose my job."	Retaliation. No communication from HR.	Respondent was responsive but reserved.
P11: "My friend told me that the government is backlog with a lot of claims and thing. I tried calling once last year and left a voicemail I have not been called back as yet."	Government agencies backlog. Government agencies nonresponsive.	Respondent was upset giving opinion about the government backlog and nonresponsiveness.
P12: "There is no communication about wage theft. I didn't even know this was a thing, or that I could get it addressed. I know my pay was being stolen time and time again by my company but they use the policies against me so I just give up. Wish I knew more about my rights."	No communication available. No help, and nowhere to seek help.	Respondent seemed happy to participate in the study. Constantly used both arms to wrap around herself.

All participants felt that talking about the barriers they encountered would be important to hopefully help drive change in their communities. They felt that their community leaders should help more to drive and breakdown the barriers people are experiencing, and to help to advocate for them because ultimately their lack of money and resources can impact the community as well. One participant felt that there should be local advocates or more volunteer legal help available to drive down the insurgence of wage theft in Florida. Another participant stated, "Until I am ready to leave this job, I cannot report my stolen pay because the biggest barrier facing me is my supervisor making things difficult for me. I made the mistake of going to HR about my supervisor

shaving my hours and since then, she finds fault with everything I do, and I am disciplined for things that were not an issue before.” These are clear barriers to addressing prevention when faced with reporting a claim.

Enduring Economic Hardship

The theme of “Enduring Economic Hardship” emerged from Interview questions 10 and 11. Multiple participants expressed the various economic hardships they endured. Participant 3 and participant 5 stated that they have gotten “eviction notices” because they are unable to pay their rent time and time again. Participant 4 said, “I knew the pay wasn’t much, but I didn’t factor in being paid late sometimes, and because of that I was once evicted.” She also claimed that she was aware that the company’s payroll company sends back the checks late, but this was because her employer submitted the payroll to them late. Sixteen of the seventeen participants stated that they have unpaid bills, barely making ends meet, and all seventeen stated that they live paycheck to paycheck. See Table 12 for respondent data for this theme.

Table 12*Enduring Economic Hardship*

Participant's responses	Perceptions	Observations
P13: "I have my car repossessed because I missed multiple payments. I tried to work overtime so I can catch up on bills but when I do my supervisor challenges the hours and I am paid less than what I worked."	Employer is disrespectful. Feels neglected.	Respondent was quiet and appeared stressed.
P14: "My light cut off for nonpayment and I had to pay the bill and the late fee. Had to borrow money to put it back on."	Wage theft is the reason for the struggle.	Respondent was interested in what the study would achieve. She answered all the questions self-assuredly.
P16: "Take home pay is not enough for large family. Wife is disabled, and we are trying to get approved for food stamp and disability to supplement the income I bring in weekly.	Need public assistance. No company accountability.	Respondent was soft-spoken and somber.
P17: "Took a \$2,000 loan from my company to avoid eviction only to have them take back the entire loan from my paycheck every week for 5 weeks. Every week I go home with zero paycheck and when I ask for more time they say no, because that would mean they would have to give everyone more time. It feels loan sharky. I am right back where I started."	Need enforcement in Florida. Stealing wages is abuse. Feels financially abused by employer.	Stoic, showed frustration and sometimes bowed his head.

All the participants felt that wage theft is causing them economic hardship. One participant stated that she currently focuses on her rent and everything else "falls along the wayside" because she doesn't want to be evicted and face going into a homeless shelter. It was apparent from the interview responses that the participants needed economic help as well as information about wage theft as some were unable to name what they encountered or experienced as wage theft. However, they knew that the things that they faced with their employers were causing them severe economic harm. I discussed this observation further in Chapter 5.

Health Has Been Impacted

The theme “Health has been Impacted” came from the responses to interview questions 10 and to provide data to address sub-research question 1. This theme addressed the question that asked the impact wage theft has had on participants lives and livelihood. I asked participants to describe the impact wage theft has had on their lives and the lives of their families. Thirteen of the seventeen participants indicated that the impact and consequences of wage theft has caused numerous health issues ranging from stress, high blood pressure, mental health, and heart issues. Four participants stated that they have been hospitalized for stress and heart problems that arose from having to deal with their employers and fear of asking for more pay; this includes the need to challenge their employers on their wage issues, but they fear losing their jobs which would impact their financial needs. See Table 13 for excerpts of respondents’ responses.

Table 13

Health Has Been Impacted

Participant's responses	Perceptions	Observations
P10: “My mental health is bad and my heart constantly races because I am overworked and underpaid.”	Hard to put health first over job. Cannot afford health insurance.	Respondent answered all questions asked; emotional.
P14: “I have chronic high blood pressure and have to take it easy I try to do that because I have no health benefits.”	Employer doesn't care. Workers are replaceable.	Respondent gave insightful responses.
P15: “I am stressed, I don't sleep well. Sometimes I cry and get anxiety attacks. The monies I earn in tips is distributed to everyone including my manager. I've passed out at work before from stress.”	Stolen wages cause chronic high blood pressure. No employer accountability.	Respondent was talkative and wanted an avenue to vent about the issues.

Many of the participants lamented their health issues and the need to hold their employers accountable. One participant stated that she was excited about her job in the

beginning but when she recognized that her supervisors were approving timesheets and submitting them late causing her to get paid late, she brought it to HR attention only to be redirected back to her supervisor and manager. They began to cut her hours and would send her home if they feel there is not enough work. She further stated that the issue became unbearable, and her blood pressure gets high and because of this she goes through anticipatory stress each time she must go to clock in for work. It was evident based on the participants' responses that there was an impact on their health because of the wage theft they endured.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The ability of the researcher to exhibit, adhere to, and maintain the highest standards of data collection and research participant respect, as well as the ethical considerations of the research participants, is essential for qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). According to Patton (2002), opponents argue that the data collecting, and evaluation strategies of qualitative research render the technique excessively subjective (p.50). He advised scholars to strike a "middle ground" between becoming overly connected with their subject and becoming utterly detached (p.50). Creswell (2007) proposed that in qualitative research, the concept of trustworthiness is preferable to concepts like validity and dependability. According to Creswell (2007), the first step in guaranteeing trustworthiness in research is to remove all prejudices and prior ideas about the research issue. This process of putting aside any personal biases and preconceived notions is known as "bracketing," according to Creswell (2009). Credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability were suggested by Creswell (2009) as

the four often employed techniques for qualitative research evaluation and validation.

The four pillars of trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are discussed below, with the goal of demonstrating the greatest level of data collection, assessment, participant values, and application throughout the research study and beyond.

Credibility

The internal validity of the findings, which assesses whether the study's conclusions make sense, is related to the credibility of a qualitative study (Shenton, 2004). There are many techniques used to validate the validity of a qualitative investigation. Making sure I accurately identified and described the participants was one way I made sure the validity of my study (Elo, Kaariainen, Kanste, Polkki, Utriainen, & Kyngas, 2014). I performed member checking to be sure this study was credible. To ensure that the study's findings accurately reflected the data gathered, I carefully listened to the digital recordings and read through the field notes. I asked followed up questions to participants during the interviews as needed to get obtain further information and clarification around ambiguous responses. A few minor adjustments were made to the transcripts based on the field notes and follow-up responses. To confirm the veracity of the participants' responses I provided a few selected participants with the interview transcripts and findings so that they could verify their responses and the emerging themes of this study.

Another tactic used was to guarantee the sincerity of the participant responses. To ensure that the data gathered only contains the responses of consenting participants,

Shenton (2004) proposed that participants must be given the option to decline participation in the study (p. 66). The first thing I did was build a camaraderie with each participant. I explained the purpose of the study, reassured them that there were no wrong answers, that the proverbial floor was theirs, and let them know that they could leave at any time if they did not want to answer a question. Finally, I assured the participants that I would keep their information confidential.

Transferability

The ability to generalize findings to different contexts or locations is typically referred to as transferability in scholarly research. Transferability in qualitative research, however, denotes that there are linkages between study elements and the experiences of other people who are not study participants (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). I employed the same techniques throughout the investigation to guarantee the study's transferability. Since I was the only researcher working on this topic, there were no competing coding systems or interpretations of the data. I used three separate data collection techniques and sources in this study. Some of the data sources and data gathering techniques I employed in this study were previous research studies, in-depth interviews, field notes, and observations of respondents' nonverbal signs. I took note of each participant's body language, speaking pace, and vocabulary while also recording their speaking tone and intonation. To maintain uniformity throughout all semi-structured interviews, I also employed an interview guide. These four primary qualitative research procedures each contributed to the validity of this study and are used to evaluate and validate qualitative research.

Dependability

For a qualitative study to be dependable, the researcher must describe the methods used in the study in enough detail for other researchers to replicate them (Shenton, 2004). Further, Shenton (2004) discovered that a thorough and adequate explanation of the study design enables the reader to ascertain whether the researcher adhered to best practices. I thoroughly described the research strategy and the procedures employed to carry it out to assure the reliability of this study. I also included comprehensive details about the technique used to gather and evaluate the data. An example of this is my use of semi-structured interview questions to guide the interview process.

Conformability

I double and triple examined the research data throughout the study to confirm its conformability. I played back the digital recordings of the interviews numerous times. As I analyzed the data and developed the codes and topics for the study, I also reviewed the interview transcripts several times. Likewise, I looked over the data to find and characterize any discrepant cases, and if it was necessary, I resorted to the raw data while summarizing and figuring out study themes. Although it is unlikely that a qualitative evaluation can be guaranteed to be accurate beyond doubt, Chapter 3 particularly emphasized that there are aspects of the methodology, such as how the interviews are performed, and how the data is coded that can help to verify and support the findings of the study. Within the context of this research study, this is still true.

Summary

This chapter presented the study's findings in relation to the main research question and its supporting questions. A description of each participant, the procedures used to gather and analyze the data, assurances of validity, and the study's conclusions were also included. In this work, I made use of several evaluation techniques, including a modified bracketing procedure, manual data coding, and a description and characterization of discrepant cases. To better grasp the circumstances and implications of the participants' responses, I provided my impressions of their nonverbal reactions to the interview questions asked.

The themes of the study evolved from the original codes, which I presented using research questions. The responses to the participant interviews, the field notes, and the researcher's observations all directly contributed to the study's findings. I condensed the codes into five key themes after the initial evaluation of the data produced 15 original themes. The study's findings, put simply, show that victims of wage theft would want to report their claims of stolen wages if they were not worried about the repercussions of doing so; as a result, the need to maintain employment outweighs the expense of filing their wage theft claims. The findings imply that the participants' choice to stick with their employer as opposed to quitting and reporting them is consistent with the RCT.

The participants were quite open with their perceptions, opinions, and personal encounters. Many people shared their perceptions and opinions, stating that what they went through as wage theft victims was a social and economic issue that harmed them and their families. The first theme suggests that the participants endured a variety of

wage theft occurrences that impacted their daily lives. One participant claimed that it is difficult to “pull up your bootstrap” financially when there is money in his savings account to do so. He stated, “I have had my pay reduced without notification, my hours shaved when I work overtime, and to add insult to injury, I am paid late.” He also stated, “Every check I get goes towards keeping the roof over me and my family’s head.” Prior to deciding to file a wage theft complaint against their employers, participants, according to the second theme, considered their options before making the decision to do so. The third theme revealed that participants faced a variety of obstacles, one of which is ongoing retaliation from their employer if they attempt to hold their employer accountable for the wage and hour violations, they suffered because of wage theft.

The fourth theme implies that participants consistently experienced financial troubles, such as being evicted, homeless, having their furniture and cars repossessed, and not being able to pay their rent. The participants may have believed that their experiences of having their paychecks stolen had a negative impact on their lives and personal economies. The participants' perceptions of how their experiences of having their paychecks stolen have impacted their health are suggested by the fifth and final theme. The link between poverty and health has been well-established in medical literature, according to Mansfield and Novick (2012). Some participants stated that they avoid going to the doctor because they lack the money, health insurance coverage, and ability to take time off from work because their employers do not offer paid time off; therefore, they run the risk of being penalized by their employer if they were to call off sick to go to the doctor.

The results and conclusions of this study were presented in Chapter 4, although it should be noted that Chapter 5 includes more information, interpretations of the results, and links the findings to the literature review and conceptual framework. Along with describing the methodology, theoretical implications, study limits, and practice-oriented recommendations, Chapter 5 also presents the possible influence for good social change at the relevant levels. A summary of the five chapters and the study's significance and importance are presented in the conclusion in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Through this study, I explored wage theft from the perspective of low-income workers and looked at perceived obstacles to addressing wage theft by looking at how much wage theft low-income workers have encountered. Many public policy conversations center on wage theft, but there is little research that examines wage theft from the perspectives of low-income employees in Southeast Florida. I chose the topic of Southeast Florida's low-income workers' perceptions of wage theft and the barriers to prevention to better understand their perspectives and the factors that influence their decisions. I specifically selected the Southeast Florida area as the focus of this study to explore the impact that wage theft has on low-income workers in this area, along with the decisions these individuals make when they weigh their options with consideration to factors such as cost, consequences, and benefits of reporting their stolen wages.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to identify, characterize, and analyze the perceived effects that wage theft has on low-income worker participants' lives and livelihood. I asked 17 research subjects to take part in my investigation. All the participants were low-wage earners who lived and worked in Southeast Florida and confirmed that they had been the victims of wage theft following one or more incidents. Seventeen research participants were interviewed in depth for my study using semistructured interview questions. The focus of this study was driven by one primary research question and two research subtopics, which also assisted in the development of the 12 interview questions and related questions.

In Chapter 5, the research findings are interpreted in relation to the main research question and its sub-research questions. The study's limitations are also described in this chapter. I discuss the connection between this study's conceptual framework and the research outcomes. I also compare the interpretation of the findings with the outcomes of the literature review in Chapter 2. Additionally, I examine the implications for social change, offer suggestions for additional action, and propose directions for future study. Finally, I offer my comments on the research process to bring my study to a close.

Interpretation of Findings

This qualitative study's results provide a broad and insightful view of the impact of wage theft on low-income workers and the barriers to addressing enforcement based on their perspectives and experience in Southeast Florida. I used one research question and two sub-research questions to guide the focus of this study; in this section, I review the findings as they relate to the research question. Likewise, I compare the findings of this study with the results of the literature review to determine whether other research studies support the results of my study.

The findings of this qualitative study offer an extensive and comprehensive account of the impact of wage theft on low-income workers and the barriers to addressing prevention and enforcement. These findings were based on the opinions and experiences of low-income workers in Southeast Florida. In this section, I reviewed the results as they pertained to the main research question and two sub-research questions. Likewise, I compared the findings of this study with the results of the literature review to determine whether other research studies support the results of my study.

Research Question

To what degree have low-income workers experienced wage theft in their current position or positions in the past 3 years? As noted in the findings, low-income workers experienced a variety of wage theft and obstacles; however, only less than half (47%) attempted to report their claims and even less (39%) sought help. According to the data, most of the participants found it difficult to navigate the laws, and 40% of them were not aware that what they were experiencing was wage theft. In fact, they thought that the decisions made by their employer to withhold pay, to not pay overtime, to pay by cash or personal checks, to pay late, and so on were actual business and company policy decisions, and not a violation of their rights under the FLSA, or wage theft. Sixty percent of the participants were generally aware that they were victims, and their wages were being stolen by their employers, and during the interviews there were strong emotional reactions from these participants.

In the interviews, participants informed me of their experiences with wage theft and how they felt. Throughout the interviews, the participants were transparent and emotional, and their emotions permeated their responses as they outlined the types of wage theft that occurred, the barriers they experienced, and the impact and hardship on their lives and the lives of their family members. As noted by one participant,

When my company steals my wages it puts me behind in all my critical priorities; my entire life is at risk, how I eat is at risk, paying my rent on time is at risk and everything in my life and household is thrown off course.

Another participant noted, “Sometimes I borrow money from friends and family when my pay is late, but after a while nobody wants to lend you any money because you are always borrowing from them.” A further finding based on the research question was that 80% of participants did not know what the state minimum wage was, or whether they were being paid below or above the minimum wage. Low-wage workers, according to Alexander and Prasad (2014), have a poor understanding of their rights. According to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), over 25% of low-paid workers face minimum wage violations, costing these individuals more than \$1 billion annually. Furthermore, according to Hallett (2018), a raise in the minimum wage does not always translate into higher pay for low-income workers.

As it pertains to Question 9a regarding whether participants are being paid minimum wage, Participant 13 stated,

In September last year Florida increased the minimum wage from \$10.00 to \$11 an hour and it was only when I found out about it February of this year that my manager changed my pay rate from \$10 to \$11. They changed it but never paid me any back pay from September through February which I know is owed to me.

Participant 5 expressed similar sentiments by stating, “I am paid a salary each week and my set salary when I calculate it on my own does not equal to the new state minimum wage.” Participant 6 stated,

There is no transparency from my employer because I am paid by personal checks, and he doesn’t think I know that. Plus, I don’t get a paystub to show how much I truly make and what taxes are taken out of my pay.

According to Hallett (2018), a minimum wage increase will only benefit low-income workers provided their employers follow the minimum wage regulations. Likewise, some research participants felt that wage theft severely affected them, and they saw no end in sight unless they “win the lottery” to get out of poverty. Participant 9 stated, “Workers like me is being sacrificed for employers to meet their financial bottom-line and that is very unfair.”

Existing research shows that low-income workers frequently suffer minimum wage and overtime violations, as well as misclassification as independent contractors, improper deductions, and time shaving; these things are noted as common violations (Bernhardt et al., 2009; Galvin, 2016). Based on the qualitative nature of my study, I was able to spend a significant amount of time with participants to discuss their experiences and explore a broad range of wage theft violations in detail. I was able to explore a variety of wage theft violations that each participant experienced. Table 14 includes the list of questions asked of the participants and the number of responses.

Table 14*Participants' Responses to Wage Theft Experienced*

Wage theft experienced	Number (%) – <i>n</i> = 17
Paid below state minimum wage requirements	8 (47%)
Late payment by your employer or not paid at all	7 (41%)
Not paid for all hours worked	5 (29%)
Worked for more than 40 hours in a workweek but not paid any overtime pay or at the rate of time and a half your regular rate of pay	8 (47%)
Worked off the clock (during lunch, prior to, and/or after your scheduled shift)	3 (17%)
Had time deducted for scheduled breaks/lunch	4 (24%)
Not classified as an employee but as an independent contractor who works for themselves	2 (12%)
Faced retaliation from employer for complaining, going to Human Resources, or reporting it	11 (65%)

Overall, the findings noted in the table are consistent with prior research. All my participants reported having experienced wage theft along with other negative issues they encountered because of it. The findings of this study concur with the results of the literature review. There is a need for additional research on how wage theft can be proactively deterred.

Sub-Research Question 1

What is the impact of wage theft on the low-income workers' livelihoods based on their experience? Participants in this study were eager to talk about the impact on their lives, their livelihood, and that of their family as well. For this sub-research question, I captured the variety of impacts such as economic hardships, health issues, and harms that

the participants endured due to wage theft. According to Fritz-Mauer (2016), wage theft has an influence on the lives of low-income workers because they regularly struggle to make ends meet, and a little delay in payment threatens substantial economic hardship and consequences such as unpaid bills, starvation, medical concerns, evictions, and so forth. Some participants discussed the economic hardships they experienced, which included being evicted, having their cars repossessed, and going into the hospital for chronic medical issues such as high blood pressure and low blood sugar, and so on. As previously suggested, most research on wage theft has explored the complexities and harm inflicted on certain social groups and industries. However, few studies have explored the lived experiences and perceptions of those individuals. The participants of this study acknowledged the impact wage theft had had on their lives and the different barriers they faced to addressing prevention and enforcement. As explained through the lens of the participants, the scope and severity of the problem brought forth financial and health harm to them and their family. Low-income workers' lost income leads to increased poverty (Cooper & Kroeger, 2017), making it difficult for these individuals to provide the fundamental needs for themselves and their family.

Participant 10 expressed that she made \$20,800 per year, and even with this income, her hours were reduced, which made her annual rate of pay lower each year. She stated that this impacted her ability to provide for her children and to pay for their daycare each week. Some participants expressed that the late payment of their paychecks put their personal lives into a tailspin of stress, anxiety, and fear of losing their homes and being evicted. Participant 5 made the following statement:

I am working my butt off to keep the lights on and the roof over my head only for the lights to be disconnected, and the eviction notice to be posted on my door because my pay was short by my boss, or they pay me late!

Other participants informed me about the difficult experiences they had had and the difficult conversations they had had with their employers about their unpaid wages. It is important to note that the discussion and responses of the participants on their various situations and circumstances involved the day-to-day requirements and obligation to live and survive while meeting their basic needs.

Other participants expressed that they experienced depression, mental and emotional anguish, as well as anger and frustrations. These emotional reactions were also present as the participants relived the things that happened to them because of wage theft. My research details the “texture” of the impact and hardship that the participants suffered due to wage theft. My research suggests that should there be a delay in getting paid, participants who struggle to make ends meet would have their economic and financial safety threatened and negatively impacted.

Sub-Research Question 2

What barriers exist that prohibit wage theft from being enforced and dealt with when reported by a victim? To answer this question, I asked participants two interview questions. The first question asked, “What do you think are some of the barriers to addressing wage theft? The second question asked, “Do you think that victims of wage theft get the appropriate help they need from enforcement agencies?” When asked if they get the appropriate help from enforcement agencies, Participant 6 stated, “No, there are

no wage and hour agencies in Florida, and when you report your claim to the Department of Labor your claim goes nowhere.” Another respondent, Participant 8, simply stated, “I don’t know because I don’t know how to file a formal claim.”

When asked about the barriers encountered, Participant 7 stated, “My goal is to keep my job because I have bills to pay. Therefore, until I find something else, I don’t want to upset the apple cart at this time.” Participant 11 stated, “I know I can go to the Department of Labor, but I will not because the process is pretty time consuming, and I can’t miss work.” My findings are consistent with this body of research. For various reasons, low-income workers who believe they have valid reasons to report a claim are reluctant to do so because of fear of retaliation, not enough knowledge regarding the matter, inability to navigate the filing of the claim and the system, and inability to obtain protection from anyone should they face any ramifications from their employer for reporting a claim.

Support for the Rational Choice Theory Framework

The theory that framed this study was RCT. This theory was used to examine and explore how wage theft affected the lives of the low-income worker participants and the decisions they made on whether to report their stolen wages. According to RCT, individuals make decisions after they consider the perceived benefit that each choice brings (Dietrich & List, 2013; Mehlkop & Graeff, 2010). Additionally, Mehlkop and Graeff (2010) suggested that the victims make the decision of whether to report what they think is a crime after they consider and analyze their options from a cost and benefit standpoint.

Interview Questions 6, 7, 9, and 11 provided data in support of the RCT conceptual framework. The participants' responses to Questions 10 and 12 also provided additional data to support the result of the study. In Chapter 1, I provided a definition for this theory and described how the theory related to the phenomena under investigation.

RCT is predicated on two important assumptions: completeness and transitivity (Levin & Milgrom, 2004, p. 3; Manzo, 2013, p. 363). The concept of completeness suggests that when presented with two options, an individual will choose the option that benefits them (Levin & Milgrom, 2004, p. 3). Most of the participants weighed the potential benefits in doing so against the lack of trust in the system and the cost of losing their jobs. Some participants yielded that it was not worth the time and effort and that it was unlikely to yield any beneficial results to them. Three of the participants made the decision to hold their employers accountable versus remaining with the companies that constantly stole their wages.

Two participants indicated that they were still awaiting a response from the agency and lamented that they wished there was an office for them to go to and speak directly with someone about their claims. Another participant quit her job and is currently in the process of speaking with an attorney to file her claim. All the participants claimed that before considering taking any action, they first determined whether it was in their best interest to do so, and if so, whether it would have the best outcome for them. According to Zemans (1982), workers weigh the potential success of alternative mechanisms, including the rational option to do nothing, due to high opportunity costs and lack of trust in the legal system.

Limitations of Study

This study included interviews with individuals in the southeastern Florida area who identified themselves as low-income workers and victims of wage theft. The limitations considered for this qualitative study was that the sampling did not allow for conclusions to be made based on a broader population and therefore it would be difficult to draw conclusions about the general population. Therefore, the sample from this population was recruited and selected across different southeastern Florida counties in Broward, Miami, Collier, Martin, and Palm Beach. Interviews were conducted with seventeen participants until data saturation was met. Several procedures were employed to ensure that information was pulled from the experiences of the participants, and as a result, no generalizations were made in this study. To verify the data's validity and reliability, all seventeen participants were interviewed and recorded with their consent. The recordings contained detailed interviews, and the transcribed interviews were reviewed by research participants. For complete data analysis, consistent measures were employed in manual coding and notes, as well as a code sheet and the usage of QD Miner Lite software. Another limitation of the study was the participants' capacity to recollect first-hand accounts of personal experiences as a wage theft victim based on observed and experienced contacts. At the individual level, I observed that each recounting could be imprecise or dependent on a participant's honest account of their personal experience (Simon, 2011). This restriction, I emphasized, must be accounted for in the formulation of study questions, follow-up probing questions, and an open and honest communication

loop. Despite being mentioned, this constraint did not prove to be significant in truth or practice.

Participants were not only open and eager to engage in up to an hour-long discussion about their opinions and experiences, but they also expressed appreciation on multiple occasions for being asked about their stolen pay and the impact on their life. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative researchers must acknowledge existing associations with a phenomenon under investigation, so it is important to note that if my background in compliance was a hindrance to my ability to effect an open, honest dialogue, it did not manifest in the types, scope, or thoroughness of the responses that I received. Therefore, any limitations regarding my experience in compliance did not influence or create any bias and there was no preconceived notion about the study. Each participant was candid and welcomed the opportunity to share their experience with me. No other notable limitations to the study can be established without conjecture for their existence. With these limitations in mind, I submit that the participants' responses represent their honest opinions, insight, and perceptions on the research phenomenon.

Recommendations

After reviewing the participants' responses and the finding results of my study, I have three recommendations for action. The first one involves the policy makers and policy implementation. The second is to safeguard and protect low-income worker victims of wage theft, and the third is to implement community programs to help low-income worker wage theft victims. To begin, I recommend that policymakers in Southeast Florida give employees the full right to recover their wages, including back

wages without fear of retaliation. This can be achieved through the extension of the unpaid wage statute of limitation where claimants are given more time to file their wage claims. Currently, in Florida the statute of limitation is 2 years for unpaid wages and if the violation is willful, the statute of limitation is 4 years. To effect change, my recommendation is that the time to file be extended to 4 years for unpaid wages and 7 years if it is deemed that the employer willfully violated their wage and hour rights. This recommendation relates to two themes presented by this study; the theme of “Wage Theft Occurrences” and “Encountering Barriers.” All the participants expressed their desire to see the complete prevention of wage theft someday, However, some participants felt that this is a battle that will not end until employers begin to get penalized or if they start losing their business licenses.

The second recommendation as noted previously is to safeguard and protect low-income worker victims from wage theft. This recommendation should involve the implementation of a policy for business in Southeast Florida to sign attestations indicating that they will adhere to all FLSA regulations including not being involved of wage theft because failure to do so would not only impose a fine, but also a fine payable to the worker for everyday that they remain unpaid, improperly classified, or awaiting any back wages. This is also tied to the two themes noted above.

The third recommendation involves the promotion of help and co-enforcement by establishing programs within the community to help low-income workers who have been victims of wage theft. I based this recommendation on the theme “Enduring Economic Hardship” and “Health has been Impacted.” When I asked participants what the impact

that wage theft has had on their lives and livelihood the majority expressed the hardship that they endure, including the inability to pay their bills, rent, including medical challenges and chronic health issues that they are going through. Community programs are a good way to help low-income workers and provide valuable information to them on how to report and navigate wage claim filings as well as help with ways to mitigate their immediate hardships.

Implications for Social Change

This study examined the lived experiences, perceptions, attitudes, opinions, and beliefs of low-income worker victims of wage theft in Southeast Florida. This study asks to what degree have low-income workers experienced wage theft in their current positions or positions held in the past three years? The wage theft debate along with the theft itself is prevalent and is a current issue facing workers nationwide and in states like Florida. According to Hernandez and Stepick (2022), the state of Florida currently has no resources or manpower to investigate or manage wage theft claims and cases. Instead, the state's department of labor and employment security (DOLES) was replaced by a nonprofit corporation that does not take wage theft accusations.

This research study has the potential to influence local, state, and federal policymakers' decision-making processes. It will serve as a starting point for policymakers to analyze and identify the difficulties that low-income workers face when attempting to address or prevent a wage claim. Policies are often developed by policymakers based on their worldview and therefore few studies ask low-income workers for their opinions and perspectives on wage theft in Southeast Florida.

Additionally, the current system of rulemaking and policy development asks for public comments before implementation, however few members of the public take part in this process. Community leaders, professionals, and advocates should encourage more residents to get involved and let the policy makers know their concerns. A better understanding of the decision-making processes of low-income worker victims can assist with the development of possible policies and resource allocation decisions in Southeast Florida.

Furthermore, this study also has the potential to contribute to the development of policy solutions to eliminate barriers that victims face to addressing prevention and enforcement should they report a claim. As previously noted, this study can inform policy makers, community leaders, and advocates and provide stakeholders with important information based on the lived experiences of the low-income worker victims. Participating in this study motivated the participants to seek out and gain a better understanding of their rights as workers. In addition, partaking in this study helped the participants understand the importance of knowing their rights in order to stand up for those rights. Lastly, the positive social change implications of this study are only limited in scope and focus by the willingness of those individuals most entrenched in the work of anti-wage theft initiatives and community leaders, community advocates, and local agencies. Much could be done to ensure better work experience for low-income workers when it comes to being paid for work performed.

Positive Social Change: The Organization

Any meaningful and lasting opportunity for anti-wage theft changes should occur at the national, state, local and community levels. The U.S. Department of Labor has an opportunity to proactively ensure that workers are not having their FLSA rights violated, or their wages stolen. Low-income workers who fear coming forward to report their employer, do so and suffer the consequences of their actions because they are retaliated against by their employer. By proactively auditing certain industries and other employers would not only ensure that low-income workers are being paid and classified accurately, but it would also offer a significant and lasting opportunity to improve and enhance the personal lives of these individuals.

Additionally, if possible, neighborhood and community initiatives should look for ways to assist these workers who are victims of wage theft. These programs include help with bus passes to and from work, access to local food pantries, assistance with applying for food stamps or housing, and a variety of other supports that can help these low-income workers succeed and support their families.

Positive Social Change: The Individual

Individuals may have the biggest impact on social change. These low-income participants showed a strong and lasting desire to work to obtain their wages for the work performed. They are dignified, and want to support their families; however, when they tried to take action to address the theft of their wages they were met with a slew of roadblocks, including the inability to obtain an attorney, the inability to navigate the system in order to report their claim, and those who do decided to pursue their claims

found it to be a difficult procedure. As a result, it would be extremely beneficial for these individuals to have advocates support their attempts to remedy their stolen earnings by, for example, equipping them with the tools to do so which includes conducting training on their rights to fair pay and teaching them about the process for reporting wage theft if they have a claim. Additionally, it would be ideal if low-income workers formed an alliance and partner with community leaders to promulgate a narrative that portrays wage theft as a significant wrong that should be harshly condemned.

Positive Social Change: Societal

Basically, many people will benefit by supporting and assisting low-income employees. Participants in this study expressed a great desire to spread the word about the necessity to overcome the different barriers that they confront if they report their claims. Some participants indicated the desire to create a social media community for persons who satisfy requirements. According to one participant, this will allow everyone to communicate openly and receive advice and encouragement from one another. Nine of the seventeen interviewees stated that they wish to move past this issue by researching and assisting others in understanding what wage theft is and what their recourse should be.

Positive Social Change: Theoretical

The RCT is a theoretical framework that provides researchers and practitioners with a way to visualize social, economic, and individual behaviors where they can make decisions after they weigh and consider their options and the benefits to them. It is a theory that provides criteria for researchers to adopt certain principles from which to

uncover the experiences and perceptions of low-income workers affected by wage theft in the southeastern Florida area. It describes these "actors" as weighing their options on whether to report their employers for wage theft or keep their jobs and avoid retaliation. Now would be a good time for community leaders, advocates, and grassroots activists to use this research study to create an intervention plan by examining and identifying the reasons why businesses in southeastern Florida move towards the choices they make and the motivation to steal the wages of low-income workers in the community.

Conclusion

My objective in conducting this research study was to understand wage theft from the low-income workers and the barriers they face in addressing prevention and enforcement should they report a claim. This is also aligned with the purpose of this study which was to examine and describe low-income workers' perceptions regarding the impact of wage theft on their lives and livelihood, and the barriers they face should they report a claim. I also wanted to connect with and engage with these low-income worker participants directly to hear their stories, experiences, and perceptions in order to clearly convey their experiences and reaction regarding the violations and obstacles they experience pertaining to wage theft. I accomplished this task by interviewing people who identified themselves as having their wages stolen by their employer in a variety of ways. The interview questions focused on the experiences, perceptions, thoughts, opinions, and attitudes of seventeen interview participants. During this study one of the pertinent questions that I asked was "Do you know what wage theft is?" The results of this study showed that many of the participants lacked knowledge about wage theft and this kept

them from identifying that what they experienced was wage theft. Some participants knew that they were being taken advantage of by their employers and others knew that their rights were being violated. While many studies focused on marginalized groups and specific ethnic and gender groups, this study fills the gap in literature concerning the impact wage theft has on low-income workers in the geographic area of Southeast Florida.

Wage theft remains a pervasive issue across the country. According to Meixell and Eisenbrey (2014), Florida has one of the highest rates of wage theft in the country, but there is no state labor agency to assist claimants in recovering their overpaid and stolen earnings. It is crucial to note that, while there are two counties in Southeast Florida with wage theft ordinances, it is still necessary for wage theft victims to come forward and submit their claims. The outcomes of this study support Fritz-Mauer's (2019) contention that workers can gain by understanding their rights and how those rights are being violated. Nonetheless, policymakers, community leaders, and advocates should evaluate the impact of wage theft on low-income workers in the community. According to Fritz-Mauer (2019), labor exploitation has become the norm, yet one cannot remain passive, hence the status quo must be interrupted.

Considering the experiences and perspectives of these low-income worker participants, as well as the examples they have shared, it is accurate to state that low-income workers tolerate employer mistreatment and, rather than filing a wage claim or leaving their jobs, prefer to remain because they believe it is more advantageous to do so rather than stepping into what they believe to be the unknown. This is consistent with

what Bernhardt et al (2009) stated: low-income workers face pay theft at an alarming rate, yet according to Galvin (2016), they rarely take action. My research discovered that a major issue with the impact of wage theft from low-income workers is that many thefts go unreported, and as a result, businesses are not held accountable. My findings also revealed that many of the participants were unaware of basic wage and hour legislation, such as the minimum wage rate in Florida and what it means to have deductions wrongfully deducted from their salary. Employees are given limited information about their rights at the time of hire. In contrast to states such as New York and California, which require companies to advise all employees in writing of their rate of pay and overtime rate of pay when they join the company. Unfortunately, this is not a requirement for companies in Florida. Another finding from my research was that, even if the participants were unaware that wage theft was taking place or that their wage and hour rights were being violated, they had the logic to recognize that something was wrong and that they were being exploited or taken advantage of.

Another finding was that most wage thefts were not reported because of the barriers that the employee encounter. For example,, those who were bold enough to take action regarding their wage theft would back off once they feel they are being retaliated against, For example, three participants indicated that they spoke with t heir managers about their overtime pay, late payment and shaving off of their hours and instead of remedying the situation, these participants felt that their managers were making things difficult by holding them accountable for things that they generally hadn't done in the

past. As a result, these participants reframed from continuing to pursue the unpaid wages that they felt were due to them.

Furthermore, my findings suggested that wage theft causes excessive hardship for low-income workers. During the participant interviews, it was observed that individuals displayed intense emotional reactions when discussing their stolen wages. According to Cooper and Kroeger (20017), the economic consequences of wage theft cause workers to lose unfathomable sums of money each year. My research backs up this claim, claiming that wage theft causes deep and long-term harm for many low-income workers because unpaid wages can lead to serious economic hardship and negatively impact the individual's mental and physical health and well-being, affecting their family and the communities in which they live.

Some Florida counties have enacted local ordinances to combat wage theft. However, because victims are not coming forward as they should, enforcement and adjustments are rendered ineffective. It has been discovered that in order to obtain legislative changes that benefit low-income workers in southeastern Florida, it is vital to organize and mobilize individuals at the local and neighborhood level who will campaign for these people's rights. Doussard and Gamal (2016) discovered that organizing communities would be an excellent strategy to effect change within the community since there is an obvious need for policy reforms pertaining to wage theft.

Lastly, safeguards pertaining to workers' wages have eroded over time, necessitating increased efforts to combat wage theft against low-income workers in Southeast Florida through anti-wage theft measures. These individuals will benefit from

the establishment or expansion of anti-wage theft efforts. According to Fritz-Mauer (2019), this would assist in stabilizing these workers' wages and reduce their anxieties of eviction, illness, hunger, stress, instability, and uncertainty. The findings of my study corroborate this view, and they show that these activities and efforts is necessary to reduce the impact of wage theft on low-income workers, as well as any barriers they experience in reporting their claims.

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Appendix A: Interview Question and Guide

1. Do you currently reside and work in Southeast Florida?
 - a. If so, what county?

2. How old are you?
 - a. Do you live in a single or multiple family household?
 - b. Are you the main source of income in your household? If so, how many people do you currently support?

3. Are you currently employed?
 - a. How long have you worked for your employer?
 - b. [If less than 3 years ask]: How long were you employed with your previous employer?
 - c. [If unemployed refer to question 3b above]

4. Do you work full-time or part-time?
 - a. How many hours do you work per week?
 - b. Are you paid weekly, bi-weekly, semi-monthly, monthly, piece rate (by task), tips, or commission only?

5. How much do you currently earn annually?
 - a. Are you paid by the hour, or given a set salary weekly/biweekly/monthly/semi-monthly?

6. Are you paid via check, direct deposit, or cash?

7. Each time you are paid, do you receive a paystub that outlines how much you earn, your hours worked, tax deductions, etc.?

8. Do you know what wage theft is? If so, explain [confirm their definitions and explain what it is].

9. In the past three (3) years have you experienced any of the following?

a. Paid below state minimum wage requirements. **Yes** **No**

If yes, explain: _____

b. Late payment by your employer or not paid at all. **Yes** **No**

If yes, explain: _____

c. Not paid for all hours worked. **Yes** **No**

If yes, explain: _____

d. Worked for more than 40 hours in a workweek but not paid any overtime pay or at the rate of time and a half your regular rate of pay. **Yes** **No**

If yes, explain: _____

e. Worked off the clock (during lunch, prior to and/or after your schedule shift).
Yes **No**

If yes, explain: _____

f. Had time deducted for scheduled breaks/lunch. **Yes** **No**

If yes, explain: _____

g. Not classified as an employer but as an independent contractor who works for themselves. **Yes** **No**

If yes, explain: _____

h. Faced retaliation from employer for complaining, going to Human Resources, or reporting it. **Yes** **No**

If yes, explain: _____

10. How has wage theft impacted your life and the lives of your family?

11. Have you sought help as a victim of wage theft? If so, from who? – Listen for agencies, family, HR, attorney, or other sources (identify who or what the other source is).

12. What do you think are some of the barriers to addressing wage theft?
 - a. Do you think that victims of wage theft get the appropriate help they need from enforcement agencies?

A RESEARCH STUDY Seeks Participants!



The purpose of this research is to understand each participant's experience, views, and the impact wage theft has had on them. Further, this research will explore and describe the challenges, obstacles, barriers, and perspectives that each participant experience because of wage theft in the Southeast Florida area.

Participants will need to meet the following criteria:

1. *Participants must be 18 – 65 years of age.*
 2. *Participants must reside and work in the Southeast Florida area within a two-year period. This area includes, Broward, Collier, Palm Beach, Martin, and Miami-Dade, counties.*
 3. *Participants must be a victim of wage theft based on actual wage theft experienced.*
 4. *Participants names will not be used in this study to protect their privacy and information received will be kept confidential.*
 5. *Participants can withdraw or refuse to participate if uncomfortable.*
- *Study procedures includes an interview that will last for approximately 45 minutes to an hour and consist of 10 questions.*
 - *Each participant will be given a \$25 gift card for participating.*