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Call for Papers

What Families Pay in Time: Developing a Time-Cost Perspective on Programs and Services for Families

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Editors

Policy research on family wellbeing in the United States tends to focus on financial barriers to goods and services that families need to thrive (Aizer et al. 2022; Bailey et al 2022). What families pay in *time* for goods and services and the processes by which these time costs are extracted through administrative structures are, by contrast, often invisible. To understand the true costs of and inequalities in families' investments, we need a more robust analysis of the time costs that families at different points in the income distribution pay to access what they need across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

Background

Research in economics, public health, sociology, and public management increasingly recognizes time as a distinct and critical resource for securing goods, services, and well-being (Krueger et al. 2009; Gee et al. 2019; McDonnell 2025). While income can substitute for time in some domains, whether through the purchase of labor-saving devices or paid help (Hochschild 2012), acquiring services in health care, childcare, education, and social services requires extensive efforts to identify and engage with providers, with the expectation that family members, and especially women, undertake this interactional work (Calarco 2025; Collins 2020). Virtually all countries exhibit some "welfare mix" of service providers from different sectors, with evidence of increased private service provision in recent years in many countries, but the U.S. system is an extreme case of requiring service-seekers to interact with a mix of public, nonprofit, and private service-providers, both between and within service domains (Grønbjerg and Smith 2021; Henriksen et al. 2012). [1] Indeed, even organizations providing a particular

[1] Comparative analysis shows major differences among highly developed countries in the mix of organizations that provide services. From the early 20th century, Nordic countries provided nearly all health, education, and social services through the state (Salamon et al. 2004); nonprofit organizations confined themselves largely to recreation and advocacy. "Corporate" or "conservative" regimes (e.g., Germany, Netherlands, Belgium) included a major role for nonprofit providers, but in these cases, governments funded them directly, with nonprofits serving clients along traditional religious or ethnic lines. "Liberal" or Anglo regimes were more likely to leave services in the realm of the private sector, although after World War II the state took an increased role, particularly in the U.K. There is evidence that new public management has moved countries across these regimes towards a stronger market logic (contracting, performance assessment, etc.). and an increased role in some service domains for for-profit providers

service increasingly demonstrate hybrid logics from public, private, and civic sectors—at a private school, for instance, parents may both be expected to pay market rate tuition and to contribute volunteer hours (Evers 2005). A time cost perspective has tremendous potential to better illuminate the experiences of Americans across the income distribution by connecting the intimate—how people spend their days—to the market of goods and services for families that span the federal to the local, the private to the nonprofit, across the US.

The study of administrative burden has made remarkable progress in illuminating time costs as people interact with government agencies (Moynihan et al. 2015). While all citizens incur some costs in these interactions, Herd and Moynihan (2018) argue that these burdens are disproportionately borne by users of means-tested programs. Programs such as SNAP, SSI, and unemployment benefits require extensive time and effort to prove and maintain eligibility; others, such as subsidized housing, childcare, and Medicaid, add long waiting times to find an eligible provider. In other words, time costs are distributive; they are borne unequally, and in the case of many public programs, by those who are already systematically disadvantaged (Herd and Moynihan 2018). These time burdens can become a mechanism for reproducing inequality as people avoid or delay time-costly services that are intended to reduce inequality (health care; housing in a safer neighborhood) or absorb the time costs and lose time in paid work (Holt and Vinopal 2023; Damaske 2011).

The bulk of administrative burden research, popularized in journalist Annie Lowrey's *The Time Tax: How the Government Wastes Our Time—and How to Fix It,* focuses on relationships between government and citizens. By contrast, little research has analyzed how the organizational imperatives of private and nonprofit sector organizations shape the time costs of services in health, education, childcare, and welfare, or less still how the complex web of public, nonprofit, and private service delivery system in the US itself imposes emergent costs—even though for most essential services, nongovernmental actors play major roles.

Research from sociology and related fields emphasizes the contexts in which services are acquired and illuminates the structural and cultural constraints that shape people's service decisions. Neighborhood constraints on the availability of services and transit lead to class and racial differences in waiting time (Edwards, forthcoming; Holt and Vinopal 2023; Murphy et al. 2022). Field experiments show that class and racial discrimination play a role in the time it takes to secure appointments for mental health care and to acquire housing (Kugelmass 2016, Massey and Lundy 2001). Time diary data show that high-income people are less likely to wait for services than low-income people, even when accounting for flexibility afforded by professional jobs, although the protective effect of high income is smaller for Black people. Taken together, the existing evidence suggests the important roles of work flexibility, neighborhood differences, and discrimination in determining time costs (Holt and Vinopal 2023).

(Henriksen et al 2012; Smith 2017.) However, the U.S. is notable both for its strong role for for-profit providers (which has grown in recent years in some domains, notably elder care), its large role for nonprofit organizations in service delivery, and for the role of consumer-side subsidies and competitive federal and state grant making that obligate nonprofit organizations to straddle civic, market, and government logics (Grønbjerg and Smith 2021).

Yet a research agenda on time costs has the potential to move beyond conceptualizing service-acquiring time burdens as simply a downstream effect of existing inequalities. Literature across the social sciences demonstrates that subjecting marginalized groups of people to higher time costs in their interactions with institutions such as schools, jails, courts, and hospitals, serves as a mechanism of social control, *generating* subjects who internalize their low social status (Auyero 2012; Lara-Millan 2021). Meanwhile, fields adjacent to sociology, from the economics of scarcity to cognitive psychology, point to the ways in which people with higher status are able to buy out of waiting for services (Mullainathan and Shafir 2014; Shaddy and Shah 2022), strengthening the cultural link between autonomy and freedom over one's time and high social status.

At the same time, people seemingly opt into paying higher time costs when cultural scripts, often rooted in gender, ethnicity, and social class, signal that time costs are necessary, or even worthwhile. Lareau (2003) argues that class-based cultural narratives about the nature of childhood and the proper role of parents shape the choices that parents make around children's education and interactions with social institutions more generally. Research on cognitive labor illuminates the relationship between gender and invisible household work (Daminger 2019), underscoring how mother's unpaid time compensates for the absence of a robust social safety net in the United States (Collins 2020; Calarco 2025). Other work has pointed to extreme time commitments by parents to assure their children's socioeconomic success (Ramey and Ramey 2010; Milkie and Warner 2014). Sociological research reveals the sense of worth that these efforts can bring to parents, raising questions about how time costs may be perceived not simply as burdens, but as meaningful investments (Pugh 2023; Hays 1996). Yet Bandelj (2026) and others are clear that even while these time investments are meaningful, they are simultaneously exhausting and can strain parents' well-being in ways that are patterned by existing inequalities across race, class, and gender (Nelson 2010; Musick et al 2016; Nomaguchi and Milkie 2020).

Sociologists have also shown that caregiving responsibilities frequently extend beyond the nuclear family, encompassing aging parents, disabled relatives, chronically ill family members, and family members who have limited knowledge of English (Moen 2016; Calarco 2025; Kwon 2024). As public support for people who are too ill or disabled to support themselves becomes increasingly fraught (Campbell 2025), the time costs of caring for extended family members – such as arranging for transportation for medical care, figuring out eligibility for government benefits or financial assistance, or finding free or low-cost community support – falls on unpaid family members, especially women. Unequal access to care, measured by the amount of *time* that disabled, ill, or aging people receive from friends and family networks, may deepen existing income and wealth inequalities (Abramson 2015), while also bringing into play complicated moral frameworks of grief, obligation, resentment, exhaustion, and duty (Rubin 2000; Moen and DePasquale 2017). Thus, time costs to access services are problematic both because they exacerbate inequality and because they may create a lower equilibrium of well-being for parents and other caregivers seeking services. A time cost perspective considers both these negative effects for well-being, but also the sense of meaning, worth, and other complex social and psychological effects of these efforts.

The aim of this special issue is to confront *time costs* as a potentially illustrative, but not yet consistently fleshed out, organizing concept that is crucial to inequality studies. We will make

this case by building out the conceptual bridges already present in existing literature across the social sciences, where time has been analyzed as a resource with consequences for well-being, identity, and inequality. These include time use studies that map tradeoffs among different activity domains and the relationships between social position and time use, even if these studies do not use the language of costs directly (Aguiar and Hurst 2017, Bianchi et al. 2006). We will extend research on time costs beyond interactions between citizens and government into the family and nonprofit sphere, incorporating an understanding of social expectations and cultural narratives of what time costs are worthwhile, and who should bear them. Additionally, we seek improved strategies for measuring time costs, as available time use survey data are not fine-grained enough to allow us to measure inequalities in time spent such as filling out paperwork, making phone calls, or sending emails. We hope to identify new and creative ways to track time costs – how they are created, who pays them and who does not, and how such costs shape outcomes for both caregivers and care receivers.

Contributions and Research Themes

The special issue will aim to advance research on time costs with the following contributions:

- To extend consideration of time costs beyond interactions between citizens and government agencies to include nonprofit and private providers of services, and efforts needed to navigate the multiple sectors
- To develop theories on why people seem to accept time costs, incorporating an understanding of social expectations and cultural narratives of what time costs are worthwhile, and who should bear them
- To understand the impact of time costs on well-being across the income distribution
- To develop policy approaches to limit exclusions from services based on time costs.

We invite qualitative and quantitative research from the fields of sociology, economics, public management, health policy, nonprofit management, child well-being, and related fields. Paper submissions might explore the following themes:

- Differences among public, private, and nonprofit sector providers in time costs imposed, sources thereof, and policies addressing those costs
- Structural sources of time costs, including the built environment, availability of public transit, access to computing power and high-speed internet, etc.
- The role of social networks in reducing or increasing time costs, through shared values, information sharing, competition, or cooperative action
- The importance of flexible work arrangements or work autonomy in meeting time costs, with consideration of how flexible work varies by education, gender, or immigration status
- Cultural narratives rooted in gender, class, race/ethnicity, immigration status, or religion that shape time investment decisions as well as outsourcing or mitigation strategies
- Identification of critical “gateway” services (e.g., diagnoses, achievement of legal immigration status, qualification for government benefits or financial assistance) that have high payoff in well-being relative to the time investments required

- Policies that increase or reduce time costs (particularly beyond services directly provided by government agencies). For example, papers might explore non-profits' application processes for clients, cities' school choice policies, or the legal structures permitting booster clubs.

We invite papers examining access to and interactions with educational, health, childcare, social, recreational, and developmental services. We are interested in the kinds of services acquired across the income distribution, which could include "optional" services like travel sports. While we would prefer to focus on interactions requiring time, rather than access to goods and services, we are also open to research about how people use money to outsource or mitigate time costs. Research might focus on services acquired for oneself or for children, older adults, or other dependents for whom regular care is given. We are also interested in research that takes service-delivering organizations as its unit of analysis, particularly the policies or management structures that shape clients' time costs.

Anticipated Timeline

Prospective contributors should submit a CV and an abstract (up to two pages in length, single or double spaced) of their study along with up to three pages of supporting material (e.g., tables, figures, pictures, etc.) no later than 5 PM EST on **January 6, 2027, to:**

https://rsf.fluxx.io

In other words, your submission may be up to five pages in length. This includes everything, **abstract, references, etc.** Note that if you wish to submit an abstract and do not yet have an account with us, it can take up to 48 hours to get credentials, so please start your application **at least two days before the deadline.** All submissions must be original work that has not been previously published in part or in full. Only abstracts submitted to **https://rsf.fluxx.io** will be considered. Each paper will receive a $1,000 honorarium when the issue is published. All questions regarding this issue should be directed to Suzanne Nichols, Director of Publications, at journal@rsage.org. Do not email the editors of the issue.

A conference will take place at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York City on September 17, 2027 (with a group dinner of the night of the 16th). The selected contributors will gather for a two-day workshop to present draft papers (due a month prior to the conference on 8/17/27) and receive feedback from the other contributors and editors. Note that submission of the draft prior to the conference is mandatory for participation. Travel costs, food, and lodging for one author per paper will be covered by the foundation. Papers will be circulated before the conference. After the conference, the authors will submit their revised drafts by 1/12/28. The papers will then be sent out to three additional scholars for formal peer review. Having received feedback from reviewers and the RSF board, authors will revise their papers by 8/28/28. The full and final issue will be published open access on the RSF journal website in spring 2029, as well as in several digital repositories, including JSTOR and UPCC/Muse.

All papers are subject to RSF's AI guidelines: The Russell Sage Foundation does not consider the use of artificial intelligence (AI) generated text to meet the standard of authorship. Fair use of AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, large language models, machine learning, or similar technologies) includes the checking of spelling, grammar, and citations. Authors are considered the sole creators of their work. As such, authors are responsible for the content of their manuscripts, including any portions produced by AI tools. Authors are liable for any ethical breaches that may result from the use of AI. We ask all authors to provide a written disclosure that describes the use of AI in the preparation of their manuscript.

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