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PERSPECTIVES ON OPPORTUNITY

Evaluating Guaranteed Income Projects

Leslie Ford

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Local lawmakers are currently piloting their desired next nationwide expansion of the welfare state. Dozens of guaranteed income pilots are running across the country at the local and state level, sometimes funded by COVID-19 relief funds, to encourage federal policymakers to implement cash grants without work requirements, restrictions, or conditions. These guaranteed income pilots are a precursor to these policymakers' ultimate goal: establishing a universal basic income, an extraordinarily expensive proposal that can lead to less work, particularly among low-income recipients. When considering these initiatives, policymakers should ensure that the primary long-term outcomes are more work attachment and hours worked, less safety-net dependence, and better overall outcomes for children, including improving children's likelihood of being raised in a married household.

Dozens of new welfare experiments, called guaranteed income pilots, have launched in cities throughout the United States over the past few years. Their goal is to prove that important outcomes such as economic stability, child educational attainment, and even mental health will improve if low-income citizens are given direct cash aid without work or other requirements (Campos et al. 2023; West et al. 2021).

The local guaranteed income pilots are purposely similar to the Biden administration's expanded child tax credit (CTC). In its 2022 year-end report, Mayors for a Guaranteed Income (2023), which now consists of 125 mayors with dozens of pilots in 34 states, has highlighted that its pilots' intended purpose is to encourage the federal movement to relaunch: "There is a very real chance to revive the expanded CTC," which it defines as "a guaranteed income for families with children."

From the evidence currently available, if guaranteed income is nationally implemented, it could harm lower-income Americans by disincentivizing work. In the long run, this would likely have negative consequences for the citizens the programs seek to help because employment, not merely transfer payments, is key to overcoming poverty and exiting dependency.

As these experiments progress, it's essential to assess the pilots by a holistic set of outcomes over an appropriate time frame. State- and local-level experiments should measure medium- to long-term impacts of work attachment, hours worked, safety-net dependence, and overall child educational outcomes. Carefully constructed experimental design is crucial to ensuring researchers can effectively measure outcomes and inform public policy.

However, even if these experiments possess a flawless experimental design, they would still be unable to simulate what effect guaranteed income would have on social norms regarding work, marriage, and dependence if the programs were nationalized. At best, researchers may be able to draw inferences on the possible local effects of the programs if they were permanently implemented, but the experiments' localized nature is insufficient to draw national conclusions.

New Guaranteed Income Experiments

Guaranteed income is a policy to provide unrestricted funds intended to regularly help meet basic needs, paid out either biweekly or monthly. The programs generally target groups by income, age, parental status, or occupation.

Since 2019, dozens of cities throughout the United States have initiated guaranteed income experiments. The Stanford Basic Income Lab (n.d.) has tracked 153 US sites, 68 of which are active as of January 2024.

The benefit size and pilot duration vary by location, but many pilots listed on the Guaranteed Income Pilots Dashboard (n.d.) provide benefits of roughly \$500–\$1,000 per month to low-income individuals for one to two years. For example, to receive a guaranteed income benefit in Los Angeles, an individual must have at least one dependent child and earn below 120 percent of the area median income.

Most of the pilots are "no strings attached," meaning the cash aid doesn't have any restrictions on how the payment can be spent or any form of work requirement. These state and local guaranteed income pilots have clearly stated their goal is to supplement federal safety-net programs, not replace them. Researchers highlight the need for waivers so the monthly benefit does not count as income from state departments of social services and their federal counterparts in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. They emphasize that some programs, like housing and Supplemental Security Income, don't have available waivers (Broadus and Airi 2023).[1]

Many of the recent and current local guaranteed income pilots are philanthropically funded by a mix of private, corporate, and foundation donors, such as the ones associated with Mayors for a Guaranteed Income. However, many newer pilots are using leftover federal pandemic funds to finance their experiments. One of the largest to do so is the Chicago Resilient Communities Pilot (n.d.), using \$31.5 million in federal COVID-19 relief funds allocated by Chicago's city council. The program selects 5,000 Chicagoans via lottery to receive \$500 per month for 12 months. Nearby Cook County, Illinois, is using the same federal funds to pilot its Promise Guaranteed Income Pilot.[2]

The San Diego for Every Child program also uses \$7.5 million in federal pandemic stimulus money the county received for its program, although its benefit is lower: \$500 a month to 150 families (Kim 2022). Alexandria (2023), in Virginia, is using COVID-19 funds to pilot a 170-person, 24-month project to distribute \$500 a month to participants. Neighboring Fairfax, Virginia, launched a similar project, sending \$750 to 180 eligible families for 15 months. This project also uses \$1.5 million in American Rescue Plan funds (Hoang 2023).

Newark, New Jersey (n.d.), has a guaranteed income pilot program, Newark Movement for Economic Equity, that targets city residents experiencing housing instability. It uses a mix of private funds and federal COVID-19 relief dollars. Saint Paul, Minnesota, is funding its 18-month People's Prosperity Guaranteed Income Pilot with \$290,000 in Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act funding (Nelson 2020).

These programs are also being implemented on a state level. By 2023, while 29 states have initiated or expanded their state-level CTCs or earned income tax credits, 11 states have fully refundable CTCs, which mimic guaranteed income's lack of employment requirements and unrestricted funds (Davis and Butkus 2023; Broadus and Airi 2023). There are several important distinctions between the fully refundable state CTCs and the local guaranteed income pilots. First, the state CTCs are generally an annual disbursement. Second, state CTC amounts range substantially based on the state—from Massachusetts at \$180 per child to Colorado at \$1,200 per child (Davis and Butkus 2023).

1 For instance, the Alexandria Recurring Income for Success and Equity pilot has permission from the Virginia Department of Social Services to count the \$500 benefit as a gift rather than earned to avoid eligibility concerns in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, Medicaid, and the Child Care Subsidy. See the City of Alexandria (2023).

2 See Cook County American Rescue Plan (n.d.).

The largest guaranteed income experiment was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Democrat-majority Congress and President Joe Biden created a guaranteed income program by expanding the CTC. Before the American Rescue Plan, the CTC was $2,000 per child, of which up to $1,400 was refundable if the family worked. The American Rescue Plan expanded the CTC into a guaranteed income program for parents, with a maximum monthly payment of $300 for each child younger than age 6 and $250 for each child age 6–17 (coming out to $3,000–$3,600 a year per child) (Deparle 2021).

The expanded CTC authorized these monthly payments from July through December 2021, with the second half of payments provided in a lump sum as part of recipients' 2022 tax filings. While the non-expanded CTC phased in as earnings increased, the entirety of the expanded credit was sent to families, even if they were completely detached from the labor force. If continued, the expanded CTC also would have come with a $1.6 trillion price tag over the next decade, according to estimates from the Tax Foundation (York and Li 2021). With concerns about employment and cost, the expanded 2021 CTC was not renewed after it expired in December 2021.

The end of the expanded CTC reinvigorated local leaders' efforts to prove guaranteed income's promise through city-level pilots. As Mayors for a Guaranteed Income clearly stated in its 2022 annual report, the leaders intend for the local pilots' success to relaunch a federal program: "There is a very real chance to revive the expanded CTC," which it defines as "a guaranteed income for families with children."

The expanded CTC, at its core, is a universal basic income (UBI) for families. Both the expanded CTC and these local guaranteed income pilots have their roots in the decades-old push for a UBI, sometimes referred to as negative income tax (NIT). This idea has been tested since its inception, and the central concern remains the same: Implementing unconditional benefits will lead to less work. Without work, more families will be blocked from economic mobility, remaining in poverty longer.

The Roots in UBI

UBI is a policy nearly identical to guaranteed income: It's unconditional (i.e., no work requirements allowed) and sufficiently generous and provides continuous cash payments to meet an individual's basic needs (Hoynes and Rothstein 2019; Bidadanure 2019). In the US, these payments range between $500 and $1,000 a month. The major difference between UBI and guaranteed incomes is whether the benefit is available to a large proportion of the population without means testing or whether it is targeted to a particular subset (e.g., single mothers or parents). Despite this difference, the central concern remains the same: Benefits without expectations disincentivize work.

In Milton Friedman's 1962 *Capitalism and Freedom*, the economist proposed alleviating poverty by eliminating the various categories of welfare benefits and replacing them with an NIT. Under the NIT, if a citizen's income declined, the IRS would send the low-income citizen a check instead of collecting taxes. Friedman's goal was to empower low-income citizens to spend the money as they saw fit.

The idea inspired several national efforts. In 1969, President Richard Nixon's administration introduced the Family Assistance Plan, which proposed replacing Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—founded in the Social Security Act of 1935—with expanded assistance for working-class Americans, providing benefits adjusted by age, income, and family size (Department of Health and Human Services n.d.). In 1971, while the Family Allowance Plan passed the House,[3] Senate Democrats and Republicans joined to oppose it, citing concerns it would create more dependency that was beginning to plague AFDC.

By 1972, President Nixon's administration had dropped support for the proposal (Rachidi 2021), but President Jimmy Carter carried on Nixon's dream of a basic allowance. As Carter campaigned, he promised a program that could deliver "uniform national payment, varying according to cost-of-living differences between communities" that at the same time "encourages work and encourages family life and reflects both

3 An Act to Amend the Social Security Act, H.R. 1, 92nd Cong. (1972).

the competence and compassion of the American people" (Califano Jr. 1981).

The idea continues to animate serious political discussion. AEI scholar Charles Murray (2016) proposed a UBI that would replace the current US safety net with an annual $10,000 grant for all citizens 21 or older. In the 2016 election cycle, Andrew Yang campaigned on providing a UBI of $12,000 per person annually to all citizens (Yang 2020).

Most recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, House Democrats introduced the Emergency Money for the People Act.[4] This bill would immediately pay $2,000 a month to every American over age 16 and $500 for each dependent, without work requirements. This would amount to $60,000 annually in welfare and transfer payments to households of two adults and two children—including households with up to $260,000 in income. In May 2020, then-Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) proposed the Monthly Economic Crisis Support Act,[5] a similar proposal of monthly payments of $2,000 per person until three months after the official public health emergency ended. This would amount to $96,000 a year to households of four—including households with up to $200,000 in income.

UBI has a serious drawback: It's expensive. Sending checks to the large beneficiary base (i.e., everyone) or even just middle-income and moderately high-income families would cost an incredible amount of money. Hoynes and Rothstein (2019) highlight the tremendous amount of new revenue that would be required to fund UBI. To pay for a universal $1,000-a-month proposal without adding to the debt, taxes would have to increase substantially. Estimates range from consumption taxes increasing by 22.3 percentage points to a 70 percent increase in federal taxes (Luduvice 2021; Henderson 2019). Even a basic UBI that allotted $10,000 for every US adult is estimated to cost about $2.5 trillion every year (Kearney and Mogstad 2019). Conservative estimates of the $2,000-per-person COVID-19 UBI proposals rang in at $21 trillion over 10 years (Weidinger 2023). Concern for cost has led many policymakers otherwise inclined to support UBI to advocate for guaranteed income's limited beneficiary base.

What the Research Says About UBI and Employment

Much of the UBI research has focused on employment: Does giving a recurring cash benefit without any conditions lead to less work and therefore less economic mobility?

As presidential administrations debated whether UBI or NIT would lead to less work, the Commission on Income Maintenance Programs in the Office of Economic Opportunity began to test the theory of work disincentives in one of the largest US safety-net experiments (Rachidi 2021). The evidence found unconditional benefits led to less work.

The test consisted of four large-scale random-assignment-controlled NIT experiments in the 1970s. These unconditional cash grants tested the behavioral effects and found anti-work effects (Winship 2021). The experiments varied by maximum benefit and phase-down rates and showed that increasing the maximum cash benefits led to reductions in work and earnings among recipients. Gary Burtless (1986, 28) found that each $1,000 in added benefits was offset by a $660 reduction in earnings.[6]

Because of this break-even effect from the policy to the individual, the programs were extremely inefficient at raising overall income. Although the NIT experiments lasted only three to five years, they had a negative effect on participants' earnings that persisted long after the programs ended. Each dollar of benefits provided by the experimental programs led to a $3.04 drop in recipients' lifetime earnings (Price and Song 2018). An important drawback, however, of the experimental design evaluated by Burtless is the nonrandom nature of participant attrition (Ashenfelter and Plant 1990). Even with this consideration, Derek Hum and Wayne Simpson (1993) still found small negative labor-supply

4 Emergency Money for the People Act, H.R. 6496, 116th Cong., 2nd sess. (2020).

5 Monthly Economic Crisis Support Act, S. 3784, 116th Cong., 2nd sess. (2020).

6 These specific figures represent the impact in the largest negative income tax experiment: the Seattle-Denver Income Maintenance Experiment (SIME/DIME).

effects for men and women and reductions in hours worked.

Despite this, other UBI researchers point to another US program with some UBI features that appears to be without major drawbacks—but also without significant benefits. The Alaska Permanent Fund was established in 1983 when Alaska's newfound oil wealth created a significant budget surplus. As the state was constitutionally constrained in how to spend those funds, Alaska created a universal and permanent cash transfer paid to current state residents. In 2022, Alaska distributed $3,248 to every state citizen.[7] While the fund does benefit all citizens, it is an annual payment and therefore not reoccurring enough to count as "income." Even if distributed monthly, the payment would come to $270 a month, therefore not meeting what economists consider "basic."

Even with these caveats, many advocates point to this program as an ideal UBI for policymakers to follow because several evaluations have not found a negative effect on labor supply. There is evidence for an increase in part-time employment. Damon Jones and Iona Marinescu (2022) posit that cash payments increase consumption and subsequently create a greater demand for labor. Additionally, J. P. O'Brien and D. O. Olson (1990) find an increase in personal income that indirectly generates higher employment. These findings, however, are at odds with Chang-Tai Hsieh (2003), who finds that Alaskans did not experience a significant change in personal consumption, nor fewer liquidity constraints, greater savings, or increased spending on semi-durable goods relative to other US households.

Another US program that resembles UBI includes transfers funded through casino profits and paid every six months to all members of Native nations, regardless of employment, income, or other household characteristics. Randall K. Q. Akee et al. (2010) focus on these payments' effects on childhood outcomes. Observing the differences in children from Native families that receive the payments relative to non-Native households that do not receive the payments, they find children in households receiving the payments have higher levels of education and fewer incidences of criminality, though the effect sizes vary by initial poverty level.

Some researchers have attempted to model the expected effect of UBI, finding that a universal benefit would lead to losses by individuals currently dependent on the safety net, with few positive outcomes for middle- and high-income recipients. Juan Carlos Conesa, Bo Li, and Qian Li (2023) employ a model to simulate the effects of replacing the current welfare transfer system with UBI. They find significant well-being losses for all sizes of UBI payments, with well-being losses increasing as UBI generosity increases. Small payments allocate resources away from those who need the payments most, and large payments result in large efficiency losses.

Diego Daruich and Raquel Fernández (2021) also simulate a UBI policy in a framework able to capture potential costs and benefits associated with providing households with $11,000 per year, financed through increased taxes. They find that the groups that benefited most were the oldest cohorts and low-skilled and noncollege-educated individuals, while younger cohorts experienced significant losses in social well-being.

At the height of the pandemic, in 2020, Spain (n.d.) launched the Ingreso Mínimo Vital (Minimum Vital Income) program, one of the most ambitious guaranteed income programs, particularly for a wealthier country. *Nature* heralded the effort as what "might just be remembered as the world's biggest economics experiment" (Arnold 2020). The program targeted 850,000 families by income that received a monthly payment of up to €1,015 ($1,145). Initially, the benefit was flat until the household worked a minimum amount; then it phased out on a dollar-for-dollar (or euro-for-euro) basis. For single individuals, this came to about two days a week, and for single parents it roughly meant 30 hours a week (Hyee and Immervoll 2022). However, by 2022, Spain introduced a work incentive, allowing recipients to keep their net earnings below 60 percent of their Minimum Vital Income entitlement.

Aid to Families with Dependent Children

On a federal level, guaranteed income pilots closely mirror the AFDC program. This program was originally to supplement the work of 40 states that had begun to provide cash benefits to widowed mothers with children. Soon, the AFDC program targeted all

7 See State of Alaska, Department of Revenue, Permanent Fund Dividend (n.d.).

low-income single parents, primarily mothers. AFDC essentially operated as a guaranteed income program for nonworkers, providing low-income recipients with monthly cash payments based on their income and household makeup, without requiring them to work or engage in work-related activities. According to the Department of Health and Human Services (1995), by 1994, the average payment was $420 a month per household. Adjusting for inflation using the consumer price index, this amounts to an $882 monthly payment, coming close to the amount chosen by many guaranteed income projects.

Over the nearly six decades the program was in place, work among the recipient parents was low. Initially, there was a 100 percent benefit-reduction rate, where the beneficiaries lost a dollar in benefits for every dollar they earned. This led to a huge work disincentive. According to data from the US Department of Health and Human Services, only a little over one in 10 families included a worker by 1994. Most families were also stuck in long-term poverty, and most families on AFDC received the benefits for more than eight years. All of this made intergenerational child poverty worse, with one in seven US children living in households dependent on AFDC benefits.[8]

The contentious 1996 welfare reform bill serves as an example of what happens when a guaranteed income program is reformed to require activity in exchange for benefits. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act required participants to partake in work or training in exchange for receiving benefits and established a five-year time limit.[9]

Many on the left condemned President Bill Clinton (Edelman 1997) and predicted that poverty would increase after the 1996 reforms (Zedlewski et al. 1996). But the exact opposite occurred. Dependency declined for the first time in a half century. Employment rose, particularly among single mothers who didn't graduate high school. The employment-to-population ratio for never-married mothers grew from 46.4 percent in the five years before the 1996 bill to 62.6 percent in the five years after the bill's passage (Winship 2016).

However, the lessons of the 1996 reform appear to have been forgotten. The question of work attachment has been resurrected again in the guaranteed income debate. This was the central concern when President Biden's expanded CTC was not renewed at the end of 2021 (Adamczyk 2021). While the non-expanded CTC increased as poor families worked more, President Biden's expanded CTC was sent to families whether they worked or not.

Some continue to claim that federal guaranteed income, or child allowance, would cut child poverty without employment repercussions. In 2019, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NAS) issued a consensus report that claimed an expanded CTC would lower child poverty without substantially affecting work. They estimated a 39 percent reduction in deep poverty. They assumed it would operate similarly to some programs, like the earned income tax credit (which requires work and increases as work increases), and thus lead to more workforce participation.

However, Kevin Corinth et al. (2021) reevaluated the NAS report's core assumption that poverty would decline without affecting work in 2021 and concluded that if the expanded CTC were made permanent, it would disincentivize work or decrease work hours, particularly among single mothers (Corinth et al. 2021). The authors linked survey and administrative data, correcting the substantial survey income underreporting. The previous NAS report mistakenly overlooked the pro-work incentives in the CTC and the similarly structured earned income tax credit. When the authors corrected for underreporting and NAS's error, they concluded that if the expanded CTC were permanent, families that make less than $30,000 would reduce work between 7 percent and 10 percent. This would lead to 1.5 million workers—2.6 percent of all working parents—exiting the labor force. They said that there would be no effect on deep child poverty (families making less than $18,945)—considerably different from the 39 percent reduction in deep poverty estimated by the NAS report. If fully implemented, the expanded CTC would wipe out the employment gains of the 1990s for single mothers.

8 Section 8. Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Related Programs (TITLE IV-A). https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/private/aspe-files/210906/08tanf.txt.

9 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-193.

How to Evaluate Guaranteed Income Projects

The local guaranteed income pilots are pursuing various goals. First, they seek to achieve economic goals by providing a basic standard of living and reducing income volatility. However, many also attempt to have psychosocial effects, such as improving psychological health and overall well-being through regular payments. Rarely is one of their stated objectives that their beneficiaries retain or obtain full-time employment.

For pilot projects to be valuable to researchers and policymakers, they must set measurable, timely, and relevant outcomes at the outset of the experiments. Furthermore, pilots should possess a robust experimental design, preferably the gold standard of experimental design, the randomized control trial (RCT). RCTs are trials that randomly assign participants with similar demographic characteristics to two study groups, one control and one treatment, in order to compare their outcomes. These are most conducive to causal-inferential approaches that establish the relationship between the implemented policy and the observed outcome.

Measure Work Effects. Guaranteed income risks moving away from requiring that an individual work or look for work, returning to the pre-1990s cash-benefit structure of handouts rather than a "hand up," taking vulnerable Americans off a work trajectory. Precisely because guaranteed income projects serve vulnerable populations, changes in employment and income should be the ultimate measure of success for guaranteed income pilots.

Employment is a key to economic stability and ending individual poverty. While the safety net is effective at relieving material deprivation—lack of food, housing, or cash—the long-term goal should be for all parents and their children to break out of the cycle of poverty through self-support. Without even entry-level work, it is nearly impossible for low-income citizens to build the work-based skills necessary to obtain promotions and higher wages.

Of the local pilots that have initial or final reports published, none so far have a study design or report that meets the RCT standards. While most of the guaranteed income pilots are ongoing, at least four have issued reports. Most of these reports include glaring study designs, including the lack of control group or small group sizes, that make it difficult to meaningfully rely on changes in outcomes. Many reports also omit key information, preventing thorough analysis of their outcomes, particularly on employment.

One of the first US pilots in regular cash payments with final, published results is the Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration in California, a mayor-led effort to give 125 citizens who earn less than $46,033 a benefit of $500 a month for 24 months (West et al. 2021). In its first-year report, the project highlighted that the members of the treatment group receiving the payments saw less monthly income volatility, were healthier, and reported less depression and anxiety. However, there are many concerns with the method and results. First, with just 125 treatment participants and 200 control participants, the study did not have a sufficient sample size to detect meaningful changes in employment.

While the report did measure employment, reporting that the percentage of treatment recipients in full-time employment moved from 28 percent to 40 percent, compared to those in the control group who were employed full-time moving from 32 percent to 37 percent, it did not include data on hours or part-time work (West et al. 2021). The project's second year encountered significant variability due to the COVID-19 lockdowns; however, by the end of the second year, the authors reported no statistically significant differences in employment changes between the control and treatment groups. Again, in the second-year report, there were many concerns with this conclusion, one of which is the lack of data description on what the authors considered to be work (West and Castro 2023). They did not distinguish between full-time and part-time work. They also included caretakers as employed, without distinguishing whether those individuals were originally caretakers or moved into this role due to the subsidy or a health emergency.

New York's Ulster County ran a program called Project Resilience to provide $500 a month to 100 recipients (DeYoung et al. 2023). Unfortunately, the Ulster project was constrained by small sample sizes, which inhibited the detection of statistically significant outcomes. Additionally, differences between the treatment and control groups exist that present challenges to inferring causal outcomes. For instance, only 41 percent of the control group was employed either part- or full- time at the start, as compared to 69 percent of the treatment group. The trial also appeared to have substantial attrition in program participation, which can result in biased results if attrition is not random.

The Thrive East of the River program, located in Washington, DC, was another pandemic-era pilot (Bogle et al. 2022). Though referred to as a guaranteed basic income pilot, it was not structured as a randomized control trial. While guaranteed basic income experiments do not by definition need to be randomized control trials, this experimental design is requisite to make causal claims concerning the outcomes as a result of the intervention. Because Thrive East of the River was not a randomized control trial, it was unable to yield any causal evidence. Evidence from the pilot was further undermined by the experiment's short duration, variation in intervention delivery (e.g., participants could elect to receive monthly payments or a lump sum payment), and attrition. Program outcomes were measured using self-reported survey data from program participants. At the outset of the program, the survey response rate was 82 percent, but it fell to 28 percent by the conclusion of the program. Finally, the authors reported that 66.6 percent of program participants were unemployed at the time the second survey was conducted, but no baseline employment measure was given, nor did they tell us how employment changed by the conclusion of the program.

Finally, the Magnolia Mother's Trust program was operated in Jackson, Mississippi. The program has been running since 2018 in four cohorts, sending $12,000 to 87 black, single, low-income mothers for 12 months (Campos et al. 2023). Unfortunately, this experiment was constrained by a small sample size and did not include a control group. The report did not detail how mothers were selected for inclusion in the program. The authors reported better survey and responses (86 of 87 beneficiaries), including check-ins every other month and frequent outreaches by staff. They reported employment moving from 28 percent to 45 percent, but hours worked are not reported. This was likely part-time work, as average monthly income was still between $500 and $1,000. They did track the number of safety-net programs the mothers relied on, which slightly decreased.

If a federal child allowance or guaranteed income program led to outcomes like Corinth et al. (2021) estimates, with 1.5 million workers—2.6 percent of all working parents—exiting the labor force, these interventions would result in a devastating setback for low-income families.

Measure Medium- to Long-Term Employment. The success of guaranteed income pilots should be measured by not only short-term employment rates but also the employment effects observed over a sufficiently long period of time. Stable employment over the medium to long run is fundamental to escaping poverty and achieving upward mobility. Therefore, pilots that have the stated goal of alleviating poverty must concern themselves with labor force attachment. At a minimum, the ongoing US pilots should measure the three-to-five-year implementation effects of labor force attachment and employment.

Although the NIT experiments lasted only three to five years, the Burtless analysis of the 1970s NIT projects found income impacts years into implementation—and lasting several years after the experiment or program ended (Burtless 1986; Verlaat, Todeschini, and Ramos 2023). Note that the longer unemployment lasts—even if just beyond six months—the more difficult it will be for low-income individuals to overcome poverty. The Burtless study was based on three-year experiments. A separate analysis of two of the 1970 NIT experiments conducted by Philip Robins and Richard West (1980) found that "the estimated time periods required for 90 percent adjustment are 2.4 years for husbands, 3.6 years for wives, and 4.5 years for single female heads." Other analysis found a lasting impact on participant earnings even after the programs ended. Each dollar of higher benefits provided by the experimental programs led to a $5 drop in recipients' lifetime earnings (Price and Song 2018).

The real question is the impact of policies after one to two decades, but very few pilots, much less studies, last this long. Policymakers must therefore be aware that the true labor-supply responses of cash transfer programs will likely not be visible until at least five years after implementation—if the pilot lasts that long.

Likewise, when studying the broader population, particularly after a recession, research has found that prolonged unemployment makes it harder to return to self-sufficiency. Finding a new job after long-term unemployment results in skills stagnation, due to the loss of work connections or even because of the stigmatization frequently associated with unemployment. This compounds into sustained lower wages and mobility, causing many to experience as much as a 5 percent annual loss for 20 years (Barnette and Michaud 2017; Jacobson, LaLonde, and Sullivan 1993). In the broader population, when unemployment lasts more than six months, researchers find decreased well-being (Davis and Von Wachter 2011) including substantial mental health effects, such as depressive symptoms (Nichols, Mitchell, and Lindner 2013). Prolonged unemployment also comes with significant physical health declines and even shorter life spans, measurably affecting mortality by as much as a year and a half for a 40-year-old worker (Barnette and Michaud 2017).

If a pilot is not in place for a sustained period, the impact on long-term employment attachment may revert to previous levels. For instance, a robust randomized controlled trial of a 2016 municipal antipoverty program targeting more than 1,000 economically vulnerable households in disadvantaged neighborhoods of Barcelona, Spain, found significant negative employment impacts. Subjects receiving the benefit were 20 percent less likely to work than subjects assigned to a control group. The effect was particularly present in households with children. Even social activation programs did not blunt the disincentive. When the authors looked at impacts after the benefit ceased, they found "negative employment effects briefly diminish toward the end of the trial before quickly reverting to previous levels" (Verlaat, Todeschini, and Ramos 2023).

Measure Earnings and Hours Worked—Particularly for Parents of School-Age Children and Individuals Without Dependents. Researchers should also measure employment based on the number of hours worked. Both the Burtless study and the Corinth et al. (2021) analysis highlight that guaranteed income payments may reduce work. The Burtless examination of the 1970s NIT experiments found a reduction in work hours, with husbands reducing work by approximately 7 percent and wives and female-headed households by 17 percent (Burtless 1986). This matches what Corinth et al. (2021) found when they analyzed what would happen if the expanded CTC were permanent: Between 7 percent and 10 percent of families with children that make less than $30,000 would reduce work.

If individuals exit the labor force to work more than 40 hours per week caring for small children, policymakers may be willing to make the trade-off of a slower pathway to self-sufficiency in exchange for the positive benefits that increased parental time with young children could produce. However, if individuals without dependents or parents of school-age children are reducing hours below even part-time work, any benefits may not be worth the setback to their journey to self-sufficiency.

A recent US study found that mothers of young children did indeed reduce their work hours after they began to receive unconditional transfer payments. Baby's First Years is a guaranteed income experiment that specifically focused on mothers of children under age 3. The pilot targeted 1,000 mothers in 12 hospitals between 2018 and 2019. It gave the mothers in the treatment group $333 a month and the mothers in the control group $20 a month for 76 months. The authors found that while the mothers didn't significantly change whether they worked (an effect of a 1 percentage-point reduction, totaling –3 percent), they were more likely to reduce hours of work (an effect of a 6 percentage-point reduction in full-time work, totaling –27 percent), representing a decrease of six hours per week (Sauval et al. 2022).

Measure Continued Safety-Net Dependence. Guaranteed income pilots should quantify the impact on continued safety-net dependence. Unfortunately, many guaranteed income pilots waive income and asset requirements from similar safety-net support programs, including Medicaid, SNAP, and TANF.

Some argue that safety-net benefits like guaranteed income can have a net positive effect for not only workers but their families, even if a family was detached from work. But past evidence does not appear to support this claim.

In fact, several comprehensive studies demonstrate that safety-net receipt has a negative impact on children whose parents do not work, even when the total income was held even, and that increasing benefits does not produce better outcomes. When researchers studied mothers who returned to work because of welfare reform, they found that as mothers secured employment, financial strain and food insecurity dropped. However, if they remained in the safety net long-term, incomes, physical health, and psychological well-being declined (Coley et al. 2007). Long-term dependence may also be associated with poorer mental and physical health outcomes (Slack, Magnuson, and Berger 2007).

Measure Long-Term Impacts for Children. Pilots should be structured to evaluate the long-term impact on the children of recipients who receive an unconditional cash benefit. Previous research has shown a connection of better health and behavioral outcomes for children whose mothers moved from welfare dependence to work (Coley et al. 2007). A 1994 study found that a mother's welfare dependence, whether single or married, was associated with a reduction in her child's math and verbal-ability test scores (Hill and O'Neill 1994). A 1992 study found that girls raised in aid-recipient families were 1.4 times less likely to graduate high school than their peers whose parents did not receive aid (Forste and Tienda 1992). A similar 2003 study found that "exposure to one year of welfare in early adolescence is associated with a reduction in schooling of about 0.3 of a year" (Ku and Plotnick 2003).

It's important to note here that these studies controlled for income or compared families for which each extra dollar in benefits would represent a net increase in overall financial resources. If benefits disconnected from work are incontrovertibly beneficial, the extra income should have had positive effects on the well-being of the children, yet the evidence demonstrates the opposite. While individual studies cannot fully capture the totality of confounding factors, it's vital that any pilots continue to measure and study the long-term impact on children.

After the 1996 welfare reform, one of the impacts of improving participants' employment rate was on child poverty. As the employment-to-population ratio for never-married mothers rose from 46.4 percent over the five years to 62.6 percent, child poverty, which had been stagnant for decades, fell by more than 60 percent (Winship 2016). There is evidence of increased physical, emotional, and psychological health and better health and behavioral outcomes for children when mothers who were formerly dependent on welfare find employment (Slack, Magnuson, and Berger 2007).

Similarly, researchers studied the impact of Supplemental Security Income payments on infants with a low birth weight. Supplemental Security Income functions as a cash payment for people, including children, with disabilities, and low birth weight is one of the qualifying conditions. The researchers examined a multitude of outcomes similar to the goals sought by UBI programs, including health care use and mortality in infancy, educational performance in high school, postsecondary school attendance and college degree attainment, earnings, public assistance use, and mortality in young adulthood. The report found no improvements for the infants or their older siblings in any of the study outcomes (Hawkins et al. 2023).

Measure the Impact on Children Raised in Married Families. More US children under age 18 live with one parent and no other adults than in any other country in the world. In fact, the US rate—23 percent—is more than three times the average share of children around the world, which is 7 percent (Kramer 2019). The number of US children living with an unmarried parent is now 32 percent (Livingston 2018). (This includes another parent in the home.)

These trends are driven by both a rise in children born outside marriage and a decline in marriage itself. When the War on Poverty started in 1964, only 7 percent of children were born to single mothers; it is now 42 percent (CDC 2023). In 1960, only 9 percent of Americans over age 25 had never been married. By 2012, that share of adults over age 25 has grown to 20 percent (Wang and Parker 2014).

Children living in a household headed by a single or unmarried parent are more likely to be low income. CDC data don't track births by income but do track births by education levels. What we find is that nonmarital childbearing occurs overwhelmingly among less-educated, lower-income women. Less than 10 percent of mothers who attend college have children outside marriage, and 60 percent of children have mothers who didn't graduate high school (Livingston and Cohn 2013).

Decades of social science research show that married households are better for children on a wide variety of outcomes (Sawhill 2014). Children raised in the context of marriage have substantially better life outcomes, including higher educational attainment and better emotional health (Jeynes 2015). But when fathers are absent, the consequences are dire: Boys are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior as teens, and girls are seven to eight times more likely to experience a teenage pregnancy (Yoder, Brisson, and Lopez 2016).

From the evidence available, unconditional cash benefits are at least correlated with whether children grow up in married-parent households. Before the 1996 welfare reform, there was a persistent decline of children living in two-parent families. In 1970, 85 percent of children resided in married two-parent families; by 1996, the number had fallen to 68 percent. After the 1996 reform that transformed AFDC into TANF, the trend line stabilized. However, if the trend had continued uninterrupted, only 53 percent of children would currently reside in married two-parent families, or put differently, an additional nine million children would now reside in single-parent homes (Rector, Hall, and Ford 2022). If implemented nationally, reestablishing unconditional cash benefits may increase the likelihood that low-income children will be born and raised in single-parent households (Winship 2021).

Conclusion

The goal of many local guaranteed income pilots is to relaunch the expanded CTC, which amounts to an unconditional transfer payment. Various forms of unconditional transfer payments have been tested since its inception, and the central concern remains the same: Implementing unconditional benefits will lead to less work. Without work, economic mobility will be further out of reach for more low-income families.

While the guaranteed income pilots have the stated goal of convincing Congress to nationalize their programs, federal policymakers should be extremely careful in appraising their evidence. Fundamentally, these programs are not set up well to provide sufficient evidence to make their case. As currently established, these pilots are not measuring the correct outcomes with sufficient experiment duration. Federal policymakers should evaluate these pilots by the key outcomes for vulnerable citizens, whether there is more work attachment and hours worked, less safety-net dependence, or better child outcomes, particularly whether children have an increased chance of being raised in a married household.

Within the current safety net, for families with small children (under age 6), policymakers may be willing to make the trade-off of a slower pathway to self-sufficiency in exchange for the positive benefits from increased parental time with young children. But it is a trade-off that may not be worth the long-term costs. The story isn't the same for those without dependents or parents of school-age children. If these households reduce hours below part-time work, the interruption in their journey to self-sufficiency may result in intergenerational poverty.

A nationalized policy patterned after guaranteed income pilots would be extremely expensive. Many of the guaranteed income pilots are privately funded, and private philanthropy can deploy its funds at its discretion—even if participants incur more costs than benefits. However, taxpayer funds should not be used to, at best, subsidize a program that has no real demonstrable benefits or, at worst, result in long-term dependency and intergenerational poverty for vulnerable citizens.

Current evidence indicates that unconditional cash transfer payments—whether a UBI or guaranteed income—will lead low-income Americans to decrease work, despite employment being key to escaping poverty and dependency. Applied broadly, these policies will have detrimental, long-term effects for low-income Americans. Policymakers looking to alleviate poverty should promote policies that lead to more employment and the acquisition of job-related skills to relieve long-term dependency and promote upward mobility.

About the Author

Leslie Ford is an adjunct fellow at the American Enterprise Institute's Center on Opportunity and Social Mobility. She is also president of Ford Policy Solutions and a member of the State Board of Social Services at the Virginia Department of Social Services.

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