

PERSPECTIVES ON **OPPORTUNITY**

Small-Dollar Demonstration Projects Can't Hide That a National Guaranteed Income Program Would Cost Trillions

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While some have declared that short-term guaranteed income demonstrations (patterned on universal basic income schemes) are working almost universally, such cheerleading misses a major drawback: the enormous costs that would arise if such programs operated at a national level, as proponents intend. This report reviews the costs of some recent proposals to operate such national guaranteed income programs, which stretch into trillions of dollars per year and are generally layered on existing welfare and related programs. Without even considering such proposals' other negative effects, they are impossibly expensive, requiring massive new federal debt or taxes—or both.

It's hard not to notice the proliferation of guaranteed income (GI) programs—generally small, more targeted versions of universal basic income (UBI) schemes—popping up around the country (Ford 2023). These “demonstration” programs offer a relative handful of recipients guaranteed monthly checks, with no strings attached, on top of other government benefits. But the proliferation of these local programs masks an important fact few supporters are willing to discuss, much less quantify: Such small-dollar UBI-like programs, if expanded nationwide as supporters intend, would cost trillions of dollars, making them utterly unaffordable without equally massive tax increases.

Recent Local Demonstrations

Many of the best-known recent GI programs have operated in California.

For example, from 2019 to 2021, the city of Stockton ran a program that provided \$500 per month to 125 randomly selected residents “with no strings attached and no work requirements” (SEED 2021). Since 2021, pregnant black women in low- to modest-income households in several California counties have been eligible for \$1,000 per month during their pregnancies and the first six months of their children's lives (Schilke 2022). In 2022, Los Angeles County started a GI program paying

\$1,000 per month to handpicked lower-income adults living in specific neighborhoods (Blasi 2022). Starting this year, Palm Springs, California, has run a GI program paying up to \$800 per month to 30 low-income individuals, initially targeting members of “the transgender and non-binary community” (TransPower Project n.d.; Albani-Burgio 2022). In all, more than 40 such programs have benefited over 12,000 Californians in various parts of the Golden State, who received a combined \$180 million in public and private funds in recent years (Kuang 2023).

The demonstrations, however, aren’t reserved to California. Similar programs are operating, or recently operated, in several other states, including Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Minnesota, and New York (Napoleto 2022). These programs have been supported by a mix of philanthropic and public funds, including the massive federal stimulus funds provided to states during the pandemic (Weidinger 2022b).

While the programs generally are designed to benefit a limited number of recipients for a short period, supporters’ real goal is far broader: to expand them nationwide and make them permanent, with federal taxpayers perpetually bearing the costs. As a *Washington Post* article described, the ultimate objective of Michael Tubbs, the former mayor of Stockton and founder of its GI demonstration project, was “to run a demonstration project so successful that national politicians would have no choice but to consider adopting guaranteed income as national policy” (Greenwell 2022).

How much would “adopting guaranteed income as national policy” cost, exactly? The comparatively tiny cost of individual demonstration projects offers little insight. For example, the Palm Springs demonstration allocates just \$500,000 for its benefits (TransPower Project n.d.). Those minimal costs result from demonstrations’ strict limits on the number of individuals served (Palm Springs serves just 30 people) and short-term duration, with programs providing checks for often just 12 or 18 months. Neither restraint would apply to the broad-based and permanent national GI program supporters seek.

Pandemic GI Programs

In contrast with limited local GI demonstrations, UBI-like policies enacted during the pandemic or otherwise

proposed in recent years provide far more clarity on the huge costs of a national GI program.

The closest approximation to a UBI program’s widely paid, no-strings-attached checks were the federal stimulus checks paid to approximately 85 percent of US households during the pandemic—including adults and children (Weidinger 2022a; Peter G. Peterson Foundation 2021). Those stimulus checks (officially called “economic impact payments”) were paid in three installments across 2020 and early 2021. Like most UBI proposals, stimulus checks were paid to working and nonworking households alike and on top of other government benefits.

Despite those similarities, stimulus checks differed markedly from UBI checks in two key respects: their frequency and ultimate duration. Stimulus checks were paid to households following three separate laws enacted in March 2020, December 2020, and March 2021. In contrast, under the various proposals discussed below, benefit checks would be paid every month (or at least no less frequently than every quarter). Far more consequentially for their ultimate cost, those checks would be paid permanently. Despite those considerable differences, according to the nonpartisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, stimulus checks nonetheless cost taxpayers a staggering \$859 billion, which exceeds the annual US defense budget (CRFB 2023; CBO 2022).

If the three rounds of stimulus checks paid during the pandemic are considered a single program, over approximately 12 months, benefits totaled \$3,200 per adult and \$2,500 per child, offering a typical family of four \$11,400 in total payments (Weidinger 2022a). That places the monthly average payment to a family of four at \$950, solidly in line with recent GI programs in Los Angeles and other California counties that provide \$1,000 per month per household. That indicates that operating a permanent national GI program offering similar monthly checks to most Americans would likely match stimulus checks’ \$859 billion annual cost, with total costs approaching \$9 trillion or more over a decade. That price tag reflects just the cost of monthly federal checks, without considering any resulting decrease in work among recipients and resulting loss in payroll and income tax revenue.

A second, and somewhat smaller, GI benefit was created during the pandemic when, as one report put it, Democrats’ American Rescue Plan temporarily offered

“a form of guaranteed income in its new expanded Child Tax Credit” (CTC) (Bedayn 2021). That expansion provided monthly GI payments to parents during the second half of 2021, in the form of \$300-per-month checks for children under age 6 and \$250-per-month checks for children age 6 through 17 (Doar and Weidinger 2021). Expanded CTC checks were paid to all except the highest-earning parents in flat amounts, regardless of whether a recipient adult worked. That not only differed from the entire prior history of the CTC (which restricted its payments to working adults) but effectively revived work-free welfare checks repealed under bipartisan national reforms enacted in the 1990s (Weidinger 2021b; Weidinger 2021e).

Unlike stimulus checks, the expanded CTC checks were reserved for households with children; CTC checks were paid to roughly 35 million households including some 65 million children. Those households comprised about 27 percent of all US households, or about one-third of the number that collected stimulus checks (Greig, Deadman, and Sonthalia 2021). Nonetheless, the expanded CTC’s still-enormous cost (which added about \$110 billion for just one year to the CTC’s already-considerable cost, an amount that would have grown to nearly \$1.6 trillion had the expanded policy been in effect for a decade) drove its Democratic sponsors to authorize only a one-year expansion. That expansion subsequently lapsed when Congress failed to extend it, due to considerations including cost (Weidinger 2021a; York and Li 2021; Weidinger 2023a).

Other Recent GI Proposals

While those twin pandemic benefit programs suggest the enormous cost of a national GI program, they fall far short of other recent proposals with even greater annual costs. A prominent example is the Monthly Economic Crisis Support Act, a legislative proposal that then-Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) introduced in May 2020.¹ While never enacted, the legislation called for \$2,000 monthly payments to most US residents throughout the pandemic and beyond. As supporters noted, Harris’s bill “would essentially be a UBI, or

universal basic income, for as long as the pandemic lasts” (Berlatsky 2020a).

In fact, Harris’s proposal was the broadest and most costly UBI proposal ever introduced in Congress and far outstripped UBI proposals by other Democratic presidential candidates. For example, during the 2020 presidential campaign, Andrew Yang touted a monthly \$1,000-per-adult “Freedom Dividend,” while Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) proposed \$2,000 monthly payments “to every household in America . . . for the duration of the crisis” (Yang 2020 2020; Lim 2020). Harris’s legislation significantly upped the ante. For example, instead of offering a maximum of \$2,000 *per household* each month, as Sanders suggested, she proposed \$2,000 payments each month “to every individual, including children and other dependents” for the duration of the health emergency plus three additional months (Office of Sen. Kamala Harris 2020).

Under Harris’s legislation (which Sen. Sanders cosponsored), most US residents would have received \$2,000 payments each month.² Ineligible individuals included only those in high-income households and children in large families, who make up a relatively small share of US residents. For example, in 2018, only 14.4 percent of married-couple households had incomes at or above the phaseout range Harris proposed (US Census Bureau 2023). And of nearly 64 million parent-child US households in 2019, just 5.7 percent had more than three children—the maximum number who could qualify for Harris’s UBI payments (US Census Bureau 2021). As a result, supporters estimated that Harris’s proposal would benefit some 90 percent of US residents, at a staggering cost of \$590 billion *per month* (Berlatsky 2020b).

Even assuming a cost of \$500 billion per month, with the public health emergency lasting until mid-2023, Harris’s legislation would have dispensed an astonishing \$21 trillion in federal UBI checks over 42 months (Reuters 2023; Weidinger 2023b). With Democratic-aligned economists arguing that 2021’s \$2 trillion American Rescue Plan contributed to the recent bout of 40-year-high inflation, it’s hard to imagine the full implications of such an enormous expansion in federal spending, which would have more than doubled

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

2 Monthly Economic Crisis Support Act, S. 3784.

annual on-budget federal spending and increased federal deficits by \$6 trillion per year (Williams 2021; OMB n.d.).

In individual terms, under Harris’s proposal households of five would have received \$10,000 per month, or an astonishing \$420,000 across three and a half years. Such households would have collected \$120,000 per year in UBI checks, or nearly double the US median household income of \$67,521 when Harris introduced her legislation in 2020 (Shrider et al. 2021). Importantly, these pandemic UBI payments would have added to other state and federal benefits, including enlarged unemployment checks, stimulus checks, and more (Weidinger 2020).

The checks would have ended only when the public health emergency declaration expired, placing extraordinary political weight on that administrative decision (Weidinger 2023b). Indeed, if Harris’s bill had been enacted, every time the secretary of the US Department of Health and Human Services reissued the public health emergency declaration, another \$1.5 trillion in federal benefits would have been paid (Weidinger 2022c). With far less at stake, the Biden administration declared an official end to the COVID-19 health emergency only in May 2023, a full eight months after President Joe Biden himself said, “The pandemic is over” (Cox et al. 2023; NPR 2023; Weidinger 2022c).

By offering up to \$10,000 per household per month, Harris’s proposal was far more generous than any recent GI demonstrations, which, as noted above, typically offered recipients a maximum of around \$1,000 per month per household. Indeed, considering the effects of offering just *one-tenth* of the benefits Harris proposed is revealing. If, instead of offering most Americans the \$2,000-per-month checks Harris suggested, her proposal were adapted to offer \$200-per-month checks to all (subject to the same exceptions for households with high income and those with more than three children), it would yield a maximum payment of \$1,000 per month per household, generally consistent with recent GI demonstration programs. Doing so would lower the likely cost of the proposal to “only” around \$50 billion per month and \$600 billion per year. That extraordinary figure seems modest only in comparison

with the blowout cost of Harris’s original proposal—over \$500 billion per month and \$6 trillion per year.

In its monthly benefit per individual, that truncated proposal would resemble another recent congressional GI plan. Introduced most recently in 2021 by Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), the Building Our Opportunities to Survive and Thrive (BOOST) Act would permanently provide all lower-income individuals \$250 per month and lower-income households up to \$500 per month, or a total of \$6,000 per year. Full benefits would be guaranteed to non-earners, and payments would phase out as income rose, ending for single individuals earning more than \$50,000 and couples earning above \$100,000.³

These monthly payments would add to other state and federal assistance and, like key pandemic benefits, their value would be disregarded when determining eligibility for other means-tested benefits, which would expand welfare eligibility (Weidinger 2023d). The estimated cost (modeled on a pre-pandemic version of the BOOST Act) would be \$380 billion per year (ITEP 2019). Given the far larger monthly payments under Sen. Harris’s pandemic UBI proposal, that annual cost, if enacted, likely would be just the starting point for an ultimately far higher price tag, as supporters called to raise the program’s monthly payouts.

Another congressional proposal would provide additional federal funds to create new GI demonstration projects. Under the Guaranteed Income Pilot Program Act that Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-NJ) introduced in September 2023, the Department of Health and Human Services would operate a three-year pilot program providing 20,000 adults with monthly GI payments averaging almost \$25,000 per year. As with the BOOST Act, the value of those payments would be disregarded when determining eligibility for other means-tested benefits. Unsurprisingly, the legislation directs the final report evaluating the program to review “the feasibility of expanding the program . . . to include a larger number of participants.”⁴

Outside Congress, several experts have offered their own national UBI and GI plans. For example, Brookings Institution scholar William Gale proposed a UBI with a \$600 billion annual price tag. Gale’s proposal was part

3 Building Our Opportunities to Survive and Thrive Act, H.R. 6051, 117th Cong., 1st sess. (2021).

4 Guaranteed Income Pilot Program Act, H.R. 5776, 118th Cong., 1st sess. (2023).

of a broad tax-reform plan that included creating a new European-style value-added tax, which is effectively a new national consumption tax (Gale 2020). That marks Gale’s UBI proposal as one of the few that suggest ways to cover its own enormous costs.

Other proposals from outside Congress, such as one by authors from the New School in 2021, would cost still more. The authors’ *A Guaranteed Income for the 21st Century* proposal focused on income redistribution, offering each very-low-income adult (including those without earnings from work) monthly payments that would total up to \$12,500 per year and each child in very-low-income households up to \$4,500 per year (Zewde et al. 2021). Those payments would start phasing down at low incomes (\$10,000 for single-adult and \$15,000 for two-adult households) and phase out completely at approximately the median household income (\$50,000 for single-adult and \$70,000 for two-adult households).

By the New School authors’ estimates, their proposal “would cost approximately \$876 billion per year.” The authors admit their proposal “would require new sources of revenue, additional borrowing, or trade-offs with other government funding priorities” but do not recommend specific offsets. A footnote suggests the \$876 billion estimated cost “does not take into account potential positive economic effects from mitigating inequality,” among other ills; the authors also note their estimate “does not include possible economic effects of taxes or government borrowing to fund the program” (Zewde et al. 2021, 27, 19, 27 n. 9).

The new payments’ rapid phaseout would constitute a significant new effective marginal tax on work, yet the authors generally dismiss any work disincentives and assign no additional benefit costs or tax losses to that likely effect. Similarly, they note their proposal “allows for a larger—but less than double—phase-out schedule for married couples” but don’t admit that amounts to a new marriage penalty or associate additional costs with that dynamic (Zewde et al. 2021, 29).

The New School authors distinguish the cost of their GI proposal from that of more traditional UBI-like plans, finding it “would cost less than other basic income programs proposed by academics and policymakers in recent years.” For example, they note that a proposal from law professors Miranda Perry Fleischer and Daniel

Hemel, which provides a flat \$6,000 to all adults and children, “would cost an estimated \$1.8 trillion per year” (Fleischer and Hemel 2020; Zewde et al. 2021, 27). And “Andrew Yang’s broader universal basic income proposal—which provides a \$12,000 grant and does not include a phase-out—would cost an estimated \$2.8 trillion per year” (Zewde et al. 2021, 27).

Other analyses offer simple but still useful context. A 2017 review published by the Roosevelt Institute found that a universal child allowance of \$250 per month would cost \$208 billion per year, while an adult UBI of \$500 per month would cost \$1.5 trillion, and an adult UBI of \$1,000 per month (generally matching the outlines of Yang’s plan) would cost \$3 trillion (Nikiforos, Steinbaum, and Zezza 2017).

Comparing Costs

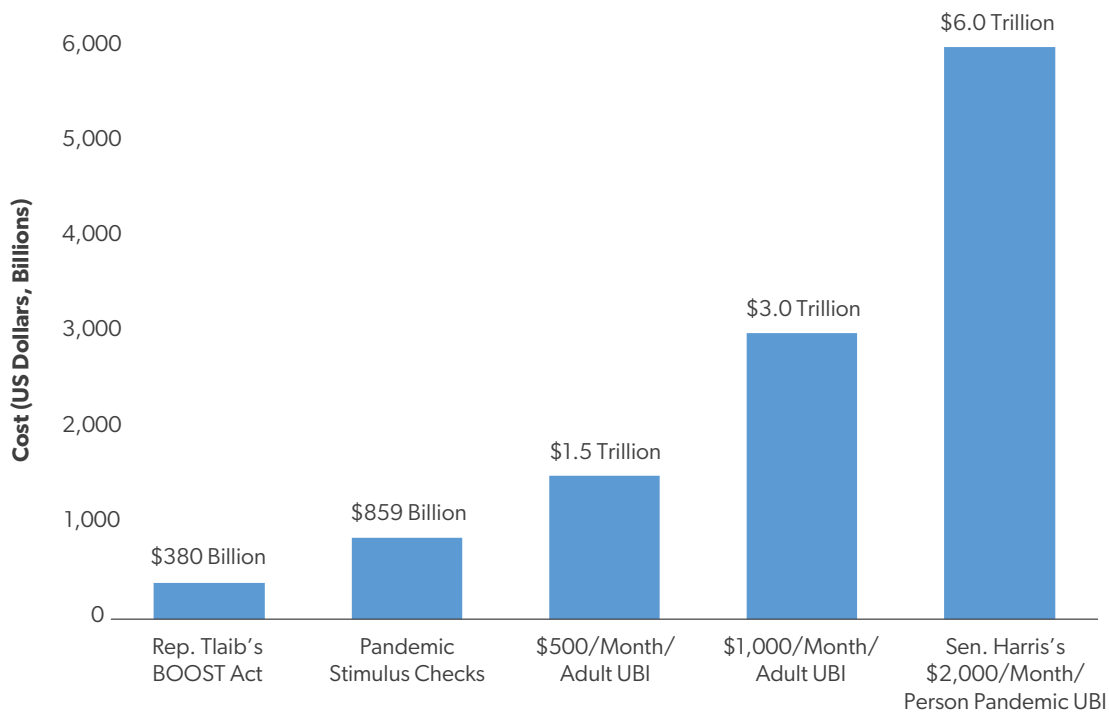
Figure 1 offers a simplified comparison of the annual costs of the major proposals described above.

At the low end, Rep. Tlaib’s BOOST Act (as scored in 2019) would cost \$380 billion per year, with its costs mitigated by a relatively low household maximum payment of \$6,000 per year (at least as proposed at the program’s start) and income phaseouts limiting the overall number of recipients. Nonetheless, that new cost would be significantly greater than the current combined annual cost of major means-tested safety-net programs, including food stamps and other food assistance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families welfare checks and other family assistance, Supplemental Security Income checks, and the refundable shares of the earned income tax credit and CTC (Rachidi, Weidinger, and Winship 2022).

Reviving a program resembling pandemic stimulus checks, which cost \$859 billion per year, would cost more than double that amount, driven by higher maximum payments per household and still-higher income phaseouts. As noted above, that expense would exceed the annual US defense budget. That expense would also roughly match the cost of the New School proposal (not displayed in Figure 1), which would offer significantly larger payments to very-low-income households that would phase out rapidly as income rose.

UBI proposals offering all adults \$500 and \$1,000 per month would cost still more, at \$1.5 trillion and

Figure 1. Annual Costs of Key Recent GI Proposals



Source: Author's calculations based on ITEP (2019); Williams (2021); Nikiforos, Steinbaum, and Zezza (2017); and OMB (n.d.).

\$3 trillion per year, respectively. Compared with pandemic stimulus checks, those significantly higher costs would result from still-larger monthly payments, which would extend universally across the income spectrum.

Finally, former Sen. Harris's pandemic UBI proposal sits at the upper end of potential costs at roughly \$6 trillion per year. Driving this cost are \$2,000 monthly payments per adult and child and an extraordinarily high annual cap of \$120,000 in payments per household, well above the level other proposals contemplate. As noted above, her proposal, which included no offsets, would more than double on-budget federal spending.

Note that the costs reflected in Figure 1 are annual figures, meaning the 10-year cost of making permanent these proposals would range from a "low" of around \$4 trillion to a high of \$60 trillion or more. As noted above, such costs generally reflect just the expense of paying the proposed checks, not the extraordinary toll such massive new federal spending programs might take on the economy through inflation, higher interest rates, work disincentives, and more.

Concluding Thoughts

While supporters have quickly declared that short-term UBI-like GI demonstrations are "working nearly universally," such cheerleading avoids considering the enormous costs of expanding those demonstrations on a national scale, as supporters intend (Venutolo-Mantovani 2023). As described above, those massive costs are well-known. Indeed, while UBI and associated GI proposals range widely in their proposed monthly check amounts and intended recipients' income levels, all ultimately share one common feature: their extraordinary cost.

Americans need look no further than to pandemic programs to appreciate those enormous costs. During the once-in-a-lifetime pandemic, supporters managed to enact temporary UBI-like policies. Those temporary policies were part of trillion-dollar spending bills designed to address unprecedented income losses due to the pandemic—the entire cost of which added to exploding federal deficits.

The cost of pandemic stimulus checks and expanded CTC payments alone combined to approach \$1 trillion for effectively one year of benefits. That huge cost contributed to those policies' expiring as quickly as they started, as even members of President Biden's own party were unwilling to continue policies such as the temporarily expanded CTC due to their enormous expense and anti-work policy downsides (Weidinger 2023a; Doar 2021).

The experience of the expanded CTC during the pandemic is particularly instructive. Instead of enacting the permanent policy that President Biden and other supporters said they wanted, Democrats authorized the expanded CTC for just one year specifically to avoid incurring the \$1.6 trillion 10-year cost of making that expansion permanent (Rubin 2021; Weidinger 2021c). Supporters assumed that once the costly new monthly CTC checks for parents were in place, future lawmakers would have no choice but to continue them—and somehow find a way to pay for them through higher taxes. They were wrong, including because Americans widely opposed work-free benefit checks, and key members of the president's party agreed with that opposition (Weidinger 2023e; Weidinger 2021d).

Meanwhile, those checks were part of an explosion of some \$5 trillion in deficit spending during the pandemic, which even Democratic economists argued contributed to recent 40-year-high inflation (Powell 2022; Washington Free Beacon 2022). Everyday Americans, especially the poor, continue to feel the pain of that extraordinary spending spree whenever they pay more for gas, groceries, rent, and other commodities (Weidinger 2023c). As economist Mark Zandi noted, due to inflation, the typical household today pays on average \$709 more per month than it did two years ago (Thaler 2023).

Despite that recent experience, supporters of nationalizing local GI demonstration programs now make a similar bargain and assume Americans will ignore the extraordinary cost of doing so. To their credit, a few GI supporters admit massive new tax hikes would be needed to cover their proposals' enormous costs. But

most assume Americans will somehow tolerate trillions of dollars in new deficit spending and the declining living standards that will inevitably result from still-higher inflation and interest rates in a national GI program's wake. Americans' newly heightened appreciation that someone has to pay for massive government largesse suggests that this assumption is misplaced and that GI supporters are unlikely to succeed in their extraordinarily expensive legislative quest.

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About AEI's Center on Opportunity and Social Mobility

The Center on Opportunity and Social Mobility, directed by Scott Winship, conducts rigorous research and develops evidence-based policies aimed at expanding opportunity in America by reducing entrenched poverty, increasing upward mobility, and rebuilding social capital.

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AEI's Perspectives on Opportunity is a policy report series published by the Center on Opportunity and Social Mobility (COSM). Contributions to this series include empirical and theoretical analysis of issues related to opportunity in the United States and evidence-based policy proposals to expand opportunity, promote upward mobility, and strengthen social capital. COSM Deputy Director Kevin Corinth is the editor of Perspectives on Opportunity.

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