

Point/Counterpoint

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DO WE NEED MORE UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME EXPERIMENTS?

While the notion of universal basic income (UBI) has been around for many decades, the idea has recently gained more traction in the United States. A 2020 poll from the Pew Research Center found that almost half (45 percent) of survey respondents would support a guaranteed payment of \$1,000 per month to all adults, regardless of their working status. Several politicians have campaigned in recent years on implementing a local or federal UBI, and stimulus payments during the COVID-19 pandemic have further heightened the debate.

As more cities, states, and countries have experimented with implementing UBIs, there have been growing opportunities for researchers to understand the potential implications of this policy. For example, the Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration, which provides \$500 monthly payments to a random selection of the city's residents, found that the payments increased financial stability, full-time employment, and health and wellness. These findings, along with those of other experiments, have drawn much attention as other cities consider implementing similar programs both in the U.S. and worldwide. However, researchers and policymakers are now facing a critical question: how much more evidence on the impacts of universal basic income is needed? That is, do we have enough evidence to support rolling out these programs more broadly, or are more experiments needed in order to further refine UBI policies and understand their potential effects?

In this issue, Bru Laín, of the University of Barcelona, argues that while further experiments can be useful, the extensive evidence base that has already accumulated renders them unnecessary. Therefore, he feels that the establishment and implementation of UBI policies should not wait for further evidence. Amy Castro, of the University of Pennsylvania, and Stacia West, of the University of Tennessee – Knoxville, respond to Laín's argument by highlighting remaining gaps in the body of evidence on UBI. They assert that further experimentation is needed before widespread UBI adoption to ensure that well-intentioned programs do not result in far worse outcomes for the populations that they aim to support. In his response, Laín argues that the evidence is clear that UBI generates positive effects for the targeted population, hence justifying UBI policies, while he agrees with Castro and West about the need for additional research on effective UBI implementation.

BETWEEN EPISTEMIC NECESSITY AND POLITICAL UTILITY: THE ROLE OF BASIC INCOME EXPERIMENTS

Bru Loáin

INTRODUCTION

The idea that every member of society should be granted an individual, unconditional, and sufficient cash payment has attracted much attention over the last few years. Initially viewed merely as a utopian idea upheld by a handful of scholars, Universal Basic Income (UBI) is now considered a policy proposal with real chances of being implemented.¹ Beyond academia, UBI is attracting the attention of politicians, policymakers, and the public in general, who usually understand it as a tool to reinforce traditional social protection systems. Nevertheless, it is also seen as a core element of a new rationale for future welfare regimes: less targeted, more universal, less strings-attached, more unconditional.

After several decades discussing theories of justice and normative principles justifying UBI,² the debate is now turning towards its empirical and policymaking challenges. The limitations and pitfalls of traditional conditional cash transfer policies and means-tested benefits have clearly contributed towards advancing the idea of UBI. As these limitations have come into sharper focus, several governments worldwide have realized these policies are not well-equipped to eliminate new forms of poverty and social exclusion and hence they are exploring innovative policies to deal with these problems. In doing so, many governments are giving priority to so-called “evidence-based policies,” a research-based policymaking agenda, under the auspices of international institutions. So far, some experiments on UBI (or quasi-UBI) schemes have been conducted in places such as Namibia, Finland, Barcelona, the Netherlands, Canada, Iran, and India. Others are still running in the USA, Kenya, Uganda, Macau, Brazil, and South Korea, while others are being designed in Germany, France, Wales, Scotland, and Catalonia, to mention just a few.

Previous experiments with Negative Income Tax schemes in the USA and in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s provided important insights on topics such as fiscal effects (Widerquist, 2005), health, well-being, happiness, and community engagement (Forget, 2011). Current policymakers, however, need to assess the potential effects of UBI in markedly different economic, social, and political scenarios to those studied in North America 40 or 50 years ago. While it is true that evidence may be obtained from lab experiments (Deaton, 2004; Levitt & List, 2007) or microsimulations (Arcarons, Raventós, & Torrens, 2014; Gamel, Balsan, & Vero, 2006), more

¹ Illustratively, in its editorial board report of April 4, 2020, the *Financial Times* states that “policies until recently considered eccentric, such as basic income and wealth taxes, will have to be in the mix.”

² The two main philosophical strategies most often deployed to normatively justify UBI are the left-libertarian or liberal-egalitarian (Van Parijs, 1995; Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017) and the republican one (Casassas, 2007; Domènech & Raventós, 2007).

robust evidence, at both individual and societal levels, is expected to be obtained from larger-scale field experiments such as randomized controlled trials and saturation studies (de Groot, 2006; Gelman, 2014; Virjo, 2006).

However, the initial wave of enthusiasm for these experiments is now giving way to more skeptical positions that contest the advisability of continuing to carry out such experiments or pilot projects. Have we not already gathered enough empirical evidence to illustrate the benefits of UBI? If the goal is to implement it, is it really necessary therefore to continue experimenting? In what follows, I will first set out three reasons why I believe it is not necessary to continue experimenting with UBI. I will then argue that this question is not adequate, not least because it generates a sterile debate for discussion and policymaking. The hypothesis that I will finally defend is that experiments are indeed useful in advancing towards the adoption of the UBI, within certain epistemic and political parameters.

NO, EXPERIMENTS ARE NOT NECESSARY

If the question is whether experiments are necessary to justify UBI, the answer is No, they are not. Of all the possible reasons for this answer, I will focus on the three that I think are most suggestive for the debate at hand.

Counterproductive or Harmful Reasons

As well as unnecessary, experiments can be counterproductive (Torry, 2021). They can be a distracting factor for UBI activists by taking time and effort away from their mobilization and lobbying campaigns. They can also hamper political processes and dynamics. By prioritizing the logic of evidence gathering and scientific evaluation, the parameters with which political processes usually operate may be altered or even replaced by a dynamic in which traditional political agents (parties, trade unions, social movements, the general public, etc.) lose their capacity for advocacy in favor of “scientific” procedures that are apparently neutral, conflict-averse, and therefore limited to a few “non-political” experts. Experiments can even be harmful. When results are not properly interpreted or communicated, they can end up hindering the advancement of UBI. This is what had supposedly happened in the USA in the 1970s (Lenkowsky, 1986; Widerquist, 2005) and in Finland, where a poor pedagogy of results cut short the debate that had been growing in the country by presenting UBI as a “thoroughly wrongheaded idea” (Ezrati, 2019).

Ethics First; Empirics Second

Beyond the negative or counterproductive effects on the policymaking process or deficiencies in the communication and dissemination of experimental results, the main justification for UBI stems from ethical arguments that need not (and cannot) be empirically tested. As I have argued on other occasions (Laín, 2021), poverty, like slavery, threatens people’s dignity. It follows that the justification of UBI, like the abolition of slavery, does not rely on the provision of more or less empirical evidence, but on the fact that it is an ethically desirable measure as it has the capacity to remove a phenomenon—poverty—that we socially identify as degrading to human dignity. There may always be other measures capable of responding to the moral challenge poverty poses to our societies, but this does not undermine the ethical desirability of UBI. In short, as Guy Standing (2021, p. 77) argues, “the fundamental justifications for basic income are ethical.”

Weak Epistemic Validity

Debates on the epistemic status of scientific knowledge are as old as science itself, and UBI experiments are no exception (Knobe & Nichols, 2008; Teele, 2014). Experiments based on controlled randomization are criticized for not being able to replicate their results or adhere to the principle of generalizability (Deaton, 2014; Deaton & Cartwright, 2018). In addition, as there are always non-parameterizable social, economic, political, or cultural factors at play, their internal methodological validity is very weak (Banerjee & Duflo, 2014). As an alternative, arguments are made for the epistemic superiority of the results obtained in laboratory experiments or microsimulations (Levitt & List, 2007). The problem is that their supposedly greater internal validity is based on an “artificial environment” (Noguera & De Wispelaere, 2006) construed from the scientists’ assumptions on the socio-institutional parameters and the behavioral responses that the agents will hypothetically adopt within it. Thus, there is always an epistemic-methodological trade-off: while “laboratory experiments have higher internal validity, field experiments have higher external validity” (Füllbrunn, Delsen, & Vyrastekova, 2019, p. 179). In conclusion, the problem is that the epistemic validity of the experimental results will never be robust enough to justify UBI from a strict “evidence-based policy” point of view (Lain & Merrill, 2021).

Based on these three objections, (i) the counterproductive effects of the experiments, (ii) the superiority of ethical reasons, and (iii) the poor epistemic robustness of the results, it can be argued that experiments are not necessary to justify UBI. However, the evidence shows that there is some acceptance of the idea of UBI in countries where experiments have been carried out, suggesting that they are precisely the countries where such a policy may have greater chance of being implemented (Perkiö, Rincón, & van Draanen, 2019; Simanainen & Kangas, 2020). This suggests that the question we should be asking is not whether experiments are necessary, but rather whether they are useful and to what extent. This new question, more fruitful for social analysis and policymaking, allows for more precise identification of the most relevant causal factors in identifying and understanding the prospects of UBI in each country. In this sense, we can identify two major areas in which experiments are or can be useful in justifying the adoption of a measure such as UBI.

YES, EXPERIMENTS ARE USEFUL

The Usefulness of Empirical Evidence

From a strictly scientific perspective, experiments can be expected to be useful to the extent that their results are positive and meaningful enough to convince those who do not have an existing opinion about UBI, and those reticent but willing to change their minds if the evidence is sufficiently compelling. However, although the qualitative effects of most experiments have generally been more significant and conclusive than the effects on the labor market, the latter continue to capture almost all the social and media attention. Indeed, labor participation always “attracts attention because it is a nice, neat, apparently-easy-to-understand number” (Widerquist, 2018, p. 117). This asymmetry in the social perception of the results suggests the limited usefulness of empirical evidence and “purely scientific” reasoning as the main mechanisms to justify the implementation of UBI.

Indeed, “although some important disagreements about UBI’s effects exist, the disagreement is more of an ethical debate about the desirability of its effects than an empirical debate about what those effects are” (Widerquist, 2018, p. 87). Let’s face it: the evidence experiments provide will never be enough to convince anyone

who is opposed to UBI for ethical or ideological reasons. Discussions about experiments are not so much about the validity or significance of their results but “on the ethical desirability of UBI’s known effects” (Widerquist, 2018, p. 14). This leads us to conclude that: (i) experiments can be useful in justifying UBI to the extent that they obtain significant evidence but, (ii) such usefulness is restricted to those who heed logical reasons and scientific evidence. The problem is that the debate on experiments is rarely defined by calm and reasoned argumentation. After all, experiments and the entire set of “social policies are to be judged by ethical principles” (Davala et al., 2015, p. 11). The fact that evidence cannot be separated from its ethical and political implications compels us to discuss some of the central issues of our welfare states. To what extent should employment be the main means of livelihood? Should we be obliged to perform any given task in return for social assistance? To what extent should material existence be an unconditional right? Does unconditionality contradict reciprocity? Faced with these (and other) questions, it is illusory to view experiments as purely and strictly scientific endeavors while disregarding their inevitable ethical and political implications.

The Political Utility of Experimentation

Hence, experiments would be better understood as a “source of political strategy or as an advocacy tool, than [simply] as a source of politically-neutral findings that inform academic debates” (Neves, 2021, p. 27). Spelling out the political nature of experiments allows us to discover the second role that they can play in furthering the adoption of UBI. If the aim of an experiment is not simply to extract scientific evidence in a “politically neutral” way to determine the pros and cons of UBI, but to implement it by sheer political will, the experiment can be useful in establishing the best way to achieve this while minimizing the setbacks that may arise as a result of tailoring the policy to each institutional, economic, and political environment.

For example, the abruptly cancelled Finnish experiment shows us to what extent UBI experiments are “political” endeavors rather than just “scientific” projects, and therefore they rely on the same political problems and policy challenges (De Wispelaere, Halmetoja, & Pilkka, 2018). The Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration (SEED) in California illustrates how a municipal UBI could coexist with other state or federal conditional aid programs and how they could be made compatible in certain groups (Baker et al., 2020). As the B-MINCOME in Barcelona has shown, experiments can also be useful in suggesting to what extent a national UBI could be made compatible with other much more focused benefits, such as municipal child benefits (Todeschini & Sabes-Figuera, 2019). Likewise, a saturation experiment that emulates the universality of UBI in a specific region or town, as in the case of Otjivero-Omitara in Namibia, is very informative on the supposed “pull effect” attributed to UBI and how it can lead to positive outcomes for depopulated regions (Haarmann, Haarmann, & Nattrass, 2019; Merrill, Neves, & Laín, 2021). The universality of Iran’s policy makes it possible to foresee and eventually readjust the design of a UBI so that it does not reinforce traditional gender roles and the subordination of women.³ The case of Barcelona is also useful in predicting institutional arrangements that could be necessary to mitigate negative externalities

³ Every household was granted a regular cash payment, assigned *de facto* to the head of the family—meaning basically men. In this case, the experiment’s design reinforced men’s traditional role while perpetuating women’s subsidiary position.

that may arise from the universality of UBI, such as controlling the price elasticity of the real estate market in specific urban areas (Esmkhani, Favilukis, & Van Nieuwerburgh, 2021; Goodman & Danson, 2019). Similarly, the gradual universalization of the number of *renda básica* recipients in Maricá, Brazil (currently about 50,000; more than a quarter of the state's population) and the broad support it has generated, have made Bolsonaro's attempt to eliminate the program too politically costly (Lavinás, 2020). As these and other examples show, discovering the political utility of experimentation with UBI allows us to shed light on some of the problems, contradictions and also potentialities of our welfare states, and this can only benefit the debate about UBI.

CONCLUSIONS

The counterproductive effects, the superiority of ethical justification, or the poor epistemic robustness of the results call into question the need for experiments to justify the adoption of UBI. However, this does not deny they can be useful. The empirical evidence they provide can play an important role. Admittedly, however, this evidence may be epistemically weak and therefore only convincing for those willing to change their minds for compelling reasons. However, while such evidence may be of little use in "scientifically" persuading those opposing UBI for ethical or ideological reasons, recognizing such a limitation allows us to discover the "political utility" of experimentation. On the one hand, it helps us to foresee the challenges or setbacks an eventual adoption of UBI may face in each institutional, political, and economic environment and, on the other, it invites us to debate the nature and functioning of current welfare states. And this is surely no small thing.

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THE CASE FOR BASIC INCOME EXPERIMENTS

Amy Castro and Stacia West

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has accelerated the policy discourse on unconditional cash,¹ conflating decades of universal basic income (UBI) advocacy and research with other unconditional transfers such as guaranteed income (GI), basic income, or one-time stimulus payments.² As Laín (2022) articulates, UBI migrated quickly from an idea promoted by a smaller group of scholars and advocates into mainstream policy discourse around the world. Nonetheless, the momentum surrounding unconditional cash is moving faster than data can be collected, analyzed, or disseminated. On the one hand, this provides advocates with an opportune policy window that is likely

¹ Unconditional cash is money provided to an individual or household without means-testing, employment requirements, or conditional participation in a program. This essay uses unconditional cash as an umbrella term for research and experiments with recurring cash. Terms such as universal basic income, basic income, and guaranteed income are used when appropriate.

² Universal basic income (UBI) references a fixed amount of recurring unconditional cash payments provided universally to all residents without means-testing that is sufficient to keep them above the poverty line (Bidadanure, 2019). Guaranteed income (GI) is a fixed amount of recurring unconditional cash that does not require means-testing but is not provided universally. Basic Income is a fixed amount of recurring unconditional cash that is sufficient to cover one's basic needs (Jain Family Institute, ND).

to close as countries continue recovering from the pandemic. On the other hand, social policy history is replete with implementation and take-up gaps that generate new forms of path-dependent inequality and social constructions of deservedness that remain difficult to remediate. The response to these dynamics varies, with some advocating that pilots and experiments should cease in favor of reallocating efforts solely towards political advocacy, while others question the ethics of continued experimentation when so many remain mired in poverty. Here, we articulate the rationale for continued study of unconditional cash outcomes and implementation approaches, with specific attention to the historical examples of well-intentioned social programs that, when implemented without critical assessment, have led to poor take-up at best and reproduction of social and economic inequalities at worst. We begin with an overview of the existing empirical gaps followed by our rationale for continued experimentation while simultaneously working towards unconditional cash policies.

EXISTING EMPIRICAL GAPS

The study of guaranteed income is not new. Plenty of cash transfer experiments conducted internationally and within the U.S. context in the mid-20th century indicate positive impacts on health, well-being, and economic mobility (Hasdell, 2020; Marinescu, 2017).³ Despite this, data remain missing about how unconditional cash functions in varying policy subsystems, modern markets, and geographic contexts, as well as how subpopulations historically targeted for economic risk and marginalization may respond to cash programs. Given that policy implementation success rests, in part, on nuanced understanding of complex local systems (Hudson, Hunter, & Peckham, 2019), building permanent, robust support for effective unconditional cash policies requires attention to empirical gaps.

The current body of literature leaves the following questions open. What measurable effects does guaranteed income produce and how does it occur? What should be the cadence of unconditional cash payments? What amount should households or individuals receive? Should it be based on geography or household size? How should systemically minoritized individuals and vulnerable subpopulations be privileged? And, how does variability in policy subsystems interact with distributing unconditional cash? The answers to these questions are entirely necessary if our aim is to create just economic policy.

THE STUDY OF INDIVIDUAL EFFECTS

Two of the most recent U.S. pilots, Magnolia Mother's Trust in Jackson, Mississippi, and the Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration (SEED) in California, have provided operational and research models for well over 50 pilot studies currently operating. These pilots were undeniably catalyzed by persistent economic inequality that the pandemic magnified, as well as by prominent political figures that campaigned on a platform of guaranteed income or universal basic income. While some of these have deployed rich ethnographic and non-experimental methods to document the impact of guaranteed income, over two dozen operate their pilots as mixed methods randomized controlled trials (RCTs). These trials, which we lead under the Center for Guaranteed Income Research (CGIR) within the School of Social Policy and Practice at the University of Pennsylvania, leverage the original research methods used in SEED.

³ Please see Lain's (2022) initial essay for an in-depth overview of the empirical literature.

The aim of studies is two-fold: to determine how guaranteed income impacts individual outcomes in the current socio-political and economic context, and to study how best to implement unconditional cash at scale. To determine individual outcomes, current RCTs use a common instrument repeated at six-month intervals to measure changes in physical and mental health (Kessler-10 and Short Form Health Survey-36), financial fragility and capability, education and employment, household and parenting dynamics (Confusion Hubub and Order Scale), mattering (Adult Mattering Scale), hope (Adult Hope Scale), food security (Household Food Insecurity and Access Scale), and housing stability. In addition to these quantitative measures, parallel strands of qualitative research operate alongside, with data integration and meta-inferences occurring at the end (Tashakkori, Johnson, & Teddlie, 2021). At the conclusion of these experiments, CGIR will hold a database of approximately 13,000 research participants, a Big Qual⁴ archive, and have the capability to determine how guaranteed income may impact key drivers and consequences of social and economic inequality. The second aim of these studies is to uncover how to best implement guaranteed income at scale by determining how different disbursement mechanisms and policy subsystems and regulations interact with the previously mentioned outcomes.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS, DESERVEDNESS, AND IMPLEMENTATION GAPS

From the racialized myth of the welfare queen in the United States (Gilman, 2013) to assumptions about laziness attributed to the unemployed (Golding & Middleton, 1982; van Oorschot et al., 2017) and migrants in the European Union (Runfors, Saar, & Fröhlig, 2021; van Oorschot et al., 2017), punitive social constructions about who is deemed deserving of benefits drive social policy design. Although policy is the primary vehicle by which governments attempt to alter the deserving and undeserving calculus (Schnedier & Ingram, 2005), social constructions rarely shift without addressing pejorative narratives attached to populations locked out of benefits and upward mobility (Poo & Shafir, 2018). The framing in these narratives drives public perceptions of deservedness (Petersen et al., 2011; Thomas et al., 2021), while serving as deterrents for historically marginalized groups to participate in public programs even when they do qualify. This can lead to poor policy take-up.

Participation in unconditional cash programs has been linked to a more expansive view of deservedness; but, thus far, data do not indicate this shift extends to broader societal discourses of stigma and shame associated with material hardship. The ideological framing of the 1970s Canadian Mincome experiment notably blurred normative deserving and undeserving categories leading it to appear “normal in the eyes of participants” (Calnitsky, 2016, p. 64)—a choice Calnitsky (2016) credits with leading participants to view unconditional cash pragmatically in lieu of moralistic assumptions or dependency narratives, but these findings were limited to programmatic perceptions and did not extend to reducing stigma of poverty or recipients of welfare. Similarly, baseline data from our experiment in Stockton⁵ indicated that

⁴ Big Qual references studies or qualitative databases with primary or secondary qualitative data from 100 or more participants. Big Qual methods, in tandem with rapid ethnography, are being utilized in these guaranteed income experiments to “closely examine phenomena at the micro or individual level and then dial out to view phenomena at the macro level or societal level” (Brower et al., 2019, p. 3).

⁵ In 2019 the Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration began providing 125 randomly selected Stocktonians with a \$500 monthly guaranteed income for two years on a debit card. Potential participants were randomized into treatment or control after responding to address-based recruitment in census tracts at or below Area Median Income (Baker, Martin-West, Samra, & Cusack, 2020). A total of 475 respondents completed the baseline survey referenced here.

survey respondents (N = 475) rejected the deservedness, irresponsibility, and vice narratives ordinarily associated with receipt of government benefits when asked how they believed most people would spend the \$500 guaranteed income (Castro Baker et al., 2019).

As Thomas et al. (2021) demonstrates, providing details about basic income policies are insufficient to build broad public support for UBI, but grounding policy narratives in a values framework that appeals to conservative opposition mitigates negative stereotypes and increases support for unconditional cash. Nonetheless, the reduction in negative stereotypes was limited to UBI recipients and failed to carry over to other programs or the experience of struggle. To be clear, these results are promising for the public discourse surrounding unconditional cash, but the durability of stigma, shame, and dehumanization of the “other” transcends how a government may operationalize UBI, GI, or any other basic income scheme. The experience of marginalization accumulates over time, produces new forms of inequality, and drives policy take-up when narrative remains intact, creating the distinct risk that stigma and stereotypes surrounding benefits and poverty may shift onto unconditional cash. There is no shortage of historical examples of this phenomenon.

The policy choices made by the United States when responding to the Great Depression and the COVID-19 pandemic illustrate how policy failures exacerbate accumulated inequality, causing the policy gaps of the past to generate inequality in the present. Prohibiting Black and Brown neighborhoods and women from the housing and lending policies embedded in the New Deal contributed to the racial and gender wealth gap over generations, effectively building the White middle class at the expense of everyone else (Baker, 2014; Faber, 2020). Consequently, this placed those previously excluded groups at risk of predatory extraction, reverse redlining, and asset depletion in the 2010 housing crisis (Faber, 2020; West, Baker, Ma, & Elliott, 2021), leaving them with fewer resources to weather financial shocks such as the pandemic. More recently, the unconditional cash responses to the pandemic in the U.S. risk mimicking some of these mistakes by failing to account for historically marginalized groups who, based on prior exploitation, do not trust institutions to act in their best interest and may avoid policy take-up when they qualify, are stymied by complex benefit paths, or face eligibility exclusion altogether from implementation oversights (Bernstein, Gonzalez, & Karpman, 2021).

Members of mixed-documentation status households likely offer the most salient example considering the first two CARES Act stimulus payments excluded approximately 14.4 million households because cash disbursement rested on filing taxes with a social security number and offered no mechanism for those filing with individual tax identification numbers until the third payment (Gelatt, Capps, & Fix, 2021). This benefit exclusion mechanism was duplicated in the initial iteration of the child tax credit leaving some of the most vulnerable households with children to receive unconditional cash later than everyone else, effectively prolonging and exacerbating preexisting inequality (Singletary, 2021). First year data from the Stockton pilot demonstrated that prior negative experiences with markets, policies, and government impacted program engagement and take-up, and some randomized into treatment declined enrollment when the risk of losing benefits such as housing, insurance, or Social Security was too high due to benefits-cliff penalties (West, Baker, Samra, & Coltrera, 2021). While a relatively small RCT, when considering these findings alongside the aforementioned uneven roll-out of unconditional cash, it offers a cautionary signal to policymakers and advocates committed to passing legislation on UBI, GI, or basic income indicating far more work is necessary to address Bidadanure’s (2019, p. 500) caution that the “devil is in the...seemingly small details of UBI implementation.”

Imagine, if you will, a scenario in which the U.S. provides an unconditional cash transfer of \$1,000 per month per adult over the life course. A young adult in the

Northeast with a full-time job with benefits and no dependents could see increases in liquidity and reductions in debt. A young adult in the Southwest with three dependents working full-time and receiving various safety net services could see their benefits actually decrease or disappear as a result of the additional income. The net gain for one may be the full \$1000, yet the net gain for another may only be \$200. Certainly, none of us would consider this just policymaking. By answering the above questions, we have the opportunity to not only understand if and how unconditional cash produces positive effects in the current socio-political and economic landscape, but also to determine how policy and regulations that govern the treatment of cash, particularly for those in poverty, must be tailored to maximize its effects.

The appeal of unconditional cash for many relies on an ethos of justice, simplicity, emancipation from dehumanizing employment, the possibility of disentangling deservedness from tropes long associated with poverty, and the potential to address the consequences of prior policy failures. However, if the design of unconditional cash policies fails to learn from prior exclusionary policy, we instead carry the potential to leave some of us worse off.

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POLICY DETAILS AS A PLEA FOR BASIC INCOME EXPERIMENTS

Bru Loín

Amy Castro and Stacia West (2022), with whom I have had the opportunity to exchange ideas on these pages, defend the need to continue experimenting with cash transfer policies through new experiments or pilot projects such as the Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration (SEED) that they personally helped to design and evaluate. I agree with them. As I argued in my first contribution to this debate, I sincerely believe that experiments on unconditional income schemes can provide very useful and valuable information in moving towards the full establishment of an unconditional basic income (UBI). In this regard, we should welcome the recent creation of the Center for Guaranteed Income Research at the University of Pennsylvania, which will surely contribute to the systematization of study and the accumulation of a scientific corpus on income policies in general, and on UBI in particular.

Castro and West defend the appropriateness of continuing to experiment with unconditional cash transfer policies, i.e., UBI, for two reasons. On the one hand, and despite the large number of experiments carried out so far, they argue that we still need to gather more empirical evidence on the possible effects of UBI on individuals, especially on those who are more vulnerable and more likely to be marginalized. The scientific literature, they argue, has not provided conclusive answers as to what measurable effects UBI could have on people, what amount would be most appropriate, or what the frequency of payments should be, for example. On the other hand, they defend the need to continue experimenting to determine the best strategy for implementing a UBI at the national level, given the particularities of each political and institutional system. Their laudable aim is to ensure that an eventual UBI does not repeat or perpetuate the mistakes associated with the design and implementation of traditional policies that, although well-intentioned in most cases, have relied on narratives and conceptual frameworks that feed and legitimize stereotypes, the singling out and the stigmatization of the most vulnerable and historically excluded people and groups.

To illustrate this characteristic (and even constitutive) feature of our welfare states, they give as an example of the way in which the housing policies implemented during the New Deal era, or the stimulus package implemented in the U.S. to mitigate the economic consequences of COVID-19, have carried over these same errors and biases both in their design and in their implementation, and have therefore ended up exacerbating certain racial and economic inequalities. Paradoxically, they point out, even the SEED program itself has been marred to some extent by these same gaps and pitfalls, both in its design and its implementation. Despite its good intentions, this program could not prevent some of its potential beneficiaries from refusing to participate for fear of losing other benefits or public aid to which they were already entitled, or to avoid having to interact with a public administration

with which they have never had a good relationship and that they have always distrusted. Indeed, as they note paraphrasing Bidadanure (2019), “the devil is in the details of the UBI implementation.”

I agree with this analysis, although their doubts regarding the possible effects or individual impacts of the UBI should be qualified in light of the empirical evidence accumulated by the numerous experiments carried out so far in very different economic, social, cultural, and historical contexts. I believe that we have already collected enough data and information to infer that the unconditionality and individuality associated with UBI generally lead to positive individual results, for example, regarding subjective well-being, health, happiness, food, reduced stress and debt, increased interpersonal and institutional trust, and community participation, to name just a few indicators (Laín, 2021). On the other hand, if they are concerned about questions as to the amount of UBI or the frequency of payments, it should be noted that the scientific literature offers strong arguments to answer these questions. For example, regarding the amount, several authors have argued that it should be set, as a general rule, near the poverty threshold established in each country (Arcarons, Raventós, & Torrens, 2014) or, more generally, that it should be “high enough” to secure a decent life (Torry, 2019, pp. 23–24).¹ As for the frequency of payments, there are powerful reasons put forward by Philippe Van Parijs or Carole Pateman, for example, that recommend a regular monthly payment as opposed to a one-off payment or the idea of the “basic grant” defended by Bruce Ackerman or Anne Alstott, among others (Olin Wright, 2006). Thus, although there may always be questions worth discussing along these lines, I believe that, by themselves, they do not justify the need to continue carrying out UBI experiments.

While continuing to conduct UBI experiments would not be justified by the need to obtain more empirical evidence in relation to these first questions, I do believe, as Castro and West defend in their second argument, that it is justified by the need to find the best strategy for implementing UBI on a large scale. There is no shortcut or panacea, nor a single magical policy able to solve all the social, economic, or gender problems plaguing our societies by itself at a single stroke. This includes UBI, however universal and unconditional it may be. The key, again, lies in the details. On the theoretical and analytical level of debate, for example, Simon Birnbaum and Jurgen De Wispelaere (2021) have argued that the “power to say no” (Casassas, 2018; Widerquist, 2013) that we usually associate with UBI, and that should allow recipients to take a stand against contractual relationships that they consider degrading or unacceptable, must be upheld with caution and always with careful consideration paid to the starting or the background position from which each of these recipients declare this “no.” Also, some authors and commentators from various feminist perspectives have also suggested that the unconditionality of UBI could discourage some women from entering the labor market. This would perpetuate their subordinate position in the public sphere in favor of the greater visibility and power of their partners and of men in general (Baker, 2008; Federici, 2012; Miller, Yamamori, & Zelleke, 2019).

At the most empirical level, the rationale of some unconditional policies similar to UBI, as in the case of the subsidies launched in Iran in 2010, for example, shows that the design of any economic benefit is always highly sensitive to issues that have

¹ The general assembly of the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) held in Seoul in 2016 discussed this reference to a “high enough” amount. Although there is no specific criterion shared by all the organizations affiliated to the BIEN, it is understood that this minimum amount, along with regularity, individuality, universality, and unconditionality, is one of the key features of the definition of universal basic income. The resolution of this debate is available at <https://basicincome.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Basic-Income-definition-longer-explanation-1.pdf>.

to do with structural relations of power and domination. In the Iranian case, the beneficiary of the allowance was by de facto the head of the household, which in that country, as in most, continues to mean the man. Thus, as Castro and West criticize, the design of a well-intentioned social policy can lead to questionable or even negative results from the perspective of gender equality. Obviously, none of these three examples, nor the low take-up rates recorded for the SEED project, call into question the potential factual virtues of a UBI or challenge its normative desirability. Rather, they call attention to how the eventual design and implementation of such a policy must always consider the details, so its emancipatory potential does not become a perpetuation or reinforcement of the ideological biases and the administrative errors carried over from more conservative traditional conditional policies.

Other UBI experiments, such as the B-MINCOME project in Barcelona, Spain, which I had the opportunity to take part in, considered some of these “details” and tried to deal with them from the outset. Thus, for example, we were aware that, although the conditions of participation were quite lax (basically, the requirements were to live in one of the participating neighborhoods for at least one year prior to the experiment, to have a low income, and to be or have been a user of the municipal social services), there would be a contingent of potential beneficiaries who, for some reason, would not apply to participate. To mitigate these foreseeable low take-up rates, letters were sent to the 4,824 people who made up the target population. These letters included the detailed information about the project in three different languages, along with the application form that they could fill out and send back to the city council for free. In addition, 2,383 of these candidates were successfully contacted by telephone to briefly explain the project again.

Anticipating that this would not be enough, the letters and phone calls also included an invitation to attend one of the 400 information sessions held in the candidates’ neighborhoods. These sessions were attended by 2,203 people, 92.5 percent of those who had been contacted by phone, or 45.7 percent of the total number of candidates. Finally, a total of 2,525 applications were received: 2,039 (92.4 percent) were delivered in person during the briefings, and only 486 (19.2 percent) were sent by post. Thus, as we demonstrated (Lain & Julià, 2018), the fact of attending the information sessions had a determining effect on the take-up rate: 92.3 percent of the attending candidates completed and handed in their application forms for participation. Likewise, it should also be noted that from the beginning of the project, about 250 candidates were identified as having a postal address that was unknown, who were nomadic people, or who were suffering in situations of such vulnerability that they had been rendered “invisible” to the system. Despite meeting all the eligibility requirements, these people would never have been aware of the pilot—and therefore would never have signed up—were it not for the intense effort made by the team of social workers assigned to the project who exhaustively localized and informed most of these “invisible” potential participants. Thus, a population that is usually “non-existent” to public administration was able to participate in a project that undoubtedly would be beneficial to them economically and relationally for 24 months.

In most similar projects or experiments, the existence of the project is simply advertised, and potential participants are informed that they can sign up to participate. What the experience of Barcelona showed is that such an information strategy is highly inadequate, especially when the program or policy in question has the most excluded and vulnerable groups as its target population. This supports the criticism made by Castro and West when they emphasize that many social policies are designed under conceptual frameworks based on negative stereotypes and the stigmatization of the most vulnerable population—which, in the Spanish case, mostly applies to the gypsy, Roman, and nomadic population. This ultimately causes the details of the design and implementation of these policies to reinforce

the dynamics of exclusion and stigmatization, and thus perpetuating many forms of discrimination and inequality. The phenomenon of low take-up rates is an example of this since, as a general rule, those who apply the least often for benefits or social policies are paradoxically the groups that are most vulnerable and excluded from these very circuits and programs of social protection. Again, the case of non-take-up or the compatibility with other public benefits should not seem to affect UBI due to its unconditional and universal nature. Although this may initially appear to be the case, the problem is that we do not have the empirical evidence to show that UBI would circumvent all these (or other similar) problems. In fact, we must be very cautious, because the examples of Stockton, Barcelona or Iran warn that there are always fundamental “details” that can raise questions not only about the viability of social policies but, above all, about their ethical and moral implications.

These “details” should concern us because we know that being excluded from a benefit that one is entitled to is not so much a result of rational, individual decisions as it is the obstacles that are created by the very functioning of public administrations and the communications strategies they employ. It is morally uncontroversial for a person in a vulnerable situation to decide not to apply for a benefit. But that they do ultimately not apply for it because they have been inadequately informed, because they do not understand the application form, because this form can only be obtained from an office at a certain time, or because they lack the language or digital skills needed to fill out the paperwork online, is an unacceptable fact that challenges us and should make us reflect on what kind of society we live and desire to live in. We can focus our attention on the profile of some particular groups and continue to ask ourselves why they do not apply for a benefit that “we have so carefully designed for them,” but I believe it is more efficient, more effective, and above all more honest, to devote this attention to analyzing how our welfare states, our social policies, and our public institutions work. UBI experiments provide us with an incomparable opportunity to carry out this exercise of collective reflection. Let us not squander it.

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