

Review protocol

The impact of Universal Basic Income: A scoping review of evaluations and outcomes

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What Works Scotland is a Scottish Government and ESRC-funded research collaboration which aims to improve the use of evidence in decision-making about public service development and reform.

The concept of providing a basic level of income unconditionally to all citizens as of right is attracting growing interest. Basic income schemes have been piloted in a number of low and middle-income countries (LMICs), and pilots are under development in several high income countries (HICs). In HICs, increasing inequality and economic insecurity in a labour market which is failing to generate sufficient good quality employment, combined with fears about the impact of future automation on the availability of less skilled employment, have contributed to the rapid growth in interest.

A popular basic income model which is proposed for the UK would entail replacing the majority of existing social transfers with a fixed rate weekly or monthly payment to all individuals regardless of income, employment status or any other eligibility criteria (ICAEW 2016, RSA 2015). The sum involved would be insufficient to provide a comfortable lifestyle, but would be designed to cover the very basic requirements of life (RSA 2015). Any income over and above this amount would be withdrawn through the tax system, such that the level of payment would be the new effective tax threshold.

The rapid growth in political interest has been facilitated by an effective and vocal international movement which has been researching and campaigning for basic income for some decades. A number of civil society organisations and think tanks have recently added their support to calls for a basic income, including the World Economic Forum, the Royal Society of Arts, and the Adam Smith Institute. The concept has been debated by Parliamentary Committees at both UK and Scottish levels. Three Scottish local authorities are currently discussing piloting basic income schemes.

Arguments for and against basic income

As noted, the idea of basic income is attracting interest in a context of increasing economic insecurity, in-work poverty, and concerns about the impact of automation on lower skilled jobs. However, there is considerable controversy around the idea, with proponents and detractors coming from both left and right of the political spectrum. There is a wide range of arguments for and against basic income, which are briefly outlined below.

Arguments in favour. Basic income would:

- Provide greater security in the context of increasingly insecure employment and the potential for automation of many lower skilled jobs
- Give individuals greater autonomy and control over their live
- Free people to devote time to caring, education, community work, and creative or business projects
- Remove the need for expensive and intrusive means testing or conditionality
- Promote gender equality by permitting women to leave abusive relationships

- Reduce work disincentives inherent in the current system due to the high effective marginal tax rates for those on benefits
- Allow people to take on part-time or low paid work without fear of losing benefits
- Alter perceptions of work and how unpaid labour is valued
- Improve health behaviours by reducing the stress associated with insecure employment and time poverty
- Have wider positive social implications, including reducing property crime, reducing health service use, and increasing educational attainment
- Increase workers' power by allowing them to refuse poor quality work
- Promote economic development by increasing consumption.

Arguments against. Basic income would:

- Disincentivise work
- Be too costly
- Reduce gender equality by encouraging women to take on more caring work
- Provide justification for the removal of other services currently provided by the state such as social care
- Cause inflation to rise
- Allow employers to pay lower wages
- Lead to greater poverty among the poorest, as other social transfers would be withdrawn
- Provide payments to wealthy people who don't need the money
- Promote unsustainable immigration
- Not support people with more complex needs
- Not address the issue of housing costs
- Have negative environmental effects by increasing consumption.

Interestingly, many of the arguments on either side are essentially the converse of one another. This reflects the unknown nature of many of the potential effects.

Another issue that has been identified is how a basic income would interact with existing benefit systems. In particular, additional payments for people with disabilities would still be necessary, but this would require assessments, potentially negating the proposed advantage of simplifying the benefits system. It is not clear how basic income would affect other benefits designed for specific groups (child benefit, carer's allowance etc.) Similarly, no existing proposal of which we are aware has addressed the issue of housing costs and associated benefits.

Basic income models

The definition of a 'true' basic income proposed by the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN; a prominent basic income advocacy organisation) states that a basic income should be regular and frequent, paid to individuals, universal and entirely unconditional. In most proposals envisaged, it is intended to provide sufficient income to cover the very basic requirements of life and no more. A number of other variations exist which come close to, but do not meet, all of these conditions.

Definitions/variations

Negative Income Tax/guaranteed minimum income: All are eligible for a regular payment which will maintain income above a certain level, but this is withdrawn as earnings increase. A range of thresholds and taper rates have been tested. Since it is withdrawn when income increases, it does not meet the definition of a universal, unconditional basic income.

Unconditional cash transfer (UCT): These are usually targeted, and are often one-off payments.

Conditional cash transfer (CCT): These may be one-off or regular payments. They are usually targeted, and can be conditional on a wide range of activities, such as vaccinating children, levels of school attendance etc.

Other social transfers: A number of other social transfers come close to meeting some of the criteria for a basic income. Old age pensions involve a regular, fixed payment to all citizens above a certain age. Child and family allowance payments are similar, but targeted at families with children. In-work tax credits have similarities with NIT schemes, in that they provide an income floor and are withdrawn as income increases, but they are conditional upon working.

Dividends: A number of dividend schemes exist such as the Alaskan oil fund and the Native American casino dividends, which provide regular but fluctuating payments to all citizens/members of the tribe. A *de facto* basic income funded by the removal of subsidies on basic goods existed in Iran for some years.

Issues with existing studies/gaps in knowledge

A universal, unconditional basic income scheme that meets the BIEN definition has never been tested in an HIC. The NIT model was tested in the United States and Canada in the 1970s, but as seen, this does not fulfil the definition of universal basic income. Upcoming and proposed pilots in HICs including Finland, the Netherlands, Barcelona and Ontario also fall short of basic income schemes in that they are targeted at those on low incomes or unemployment benefits, and/or are withdrawn as income increases.

Both UCTs and CCTs have been trialled extensively in LMICs. In addition, there have been several experimental studies of unconditional, universal basic income schemes in Uganda, Kenya, Zambia and India. A number of other studies are in development or starting in the near future. There are

many observational studies of the effects of social transfers, and some studies of varying designs which have investigated the impact of the various dividend schemes.

As noted above, a scheme which meets the BIEN definition of a basic income has not been tested in an HIC. Although versions tested in LMICs are much closer, they are geographically bounded, and thus are not universal in the sense of being provided to every citizen of a given nation. In addition, they are time-limited, in that they are only provided for the duration of the study. In these situations, the effects could be influenced by interaction between individuals receiving and not receiving payments, differing behavioural effects depending on the duration of payments, or economic changes which also affect those not receiving payments. Thus it is very difficult to predict the effects of full-scale, permanent implementation of a basic income on the basis of existing evidence. However, there may be information in some of the studies previously conducted which would permit a more informed consideration of how the potential impacts might be identified were a basic income to be piloted in Scotland.

The design of any such evaluation could also be informed by existing evidence on the nature of the programmes implemented and evaluation methods used. In addition, identification of outcomes measured and any issues around implementation of pilots or intervention/context interaction would be a useful contribution.

Aim

A number of studies have been conducted which may provide information which is relevant to the evaluation and development of pilots in Scotland. This scoping review is intended to be broad so as to capture the range of existing literature. Inclusion criteria will be developed iteratively based on the findings of the database and hand searches. The searches, screening and article selection will however be guided by the following research questions.

Research questions

What programme designs have been/are being evaluated?

What study designs have been/are being used to evaluate them?

What outcomes have been measured?

What is known about how methodological issues in previous studies may have influenced impacts?

What is known about how implementation issues in previous studies may have influenced impacts?

What is known about intervention/context interaction in previous studies?

Can we learn anything about potential impacts if basic income was scaled up?

What practical lessons can be learned to inform the evaluation of pilots in Scotland?

Methods

This scoping review will follow the framework developed by Arksey and O' Malley (2005) and refined further by Levac et al (2010). In line with Levac et al, the research questions are broad at the outset, but following Arksey and O' Malley, the concept has been delineated, and the intended outcome of the review has informed the research questions. In this case the review is intended to potentially inform the development of evaluation plans for a Scottish pilot, therefore the RQs seek to locate evidence with practical application.

Searching: a search strategy has been developed in conjunction with our information scientist, which includes the many synonyms for basic income, terms intended to retrieve evaluation studies, and publications discussing implementation issues. Key social science databases (Planex, Scopus, Copac, WorldCat and Web of Science) will be searched. Google and Google Scholar will be searched, in addition to the websites of known advocacy organisations. The Basic Income journal will be handsearched. No limits on dates or language will be applied, although it is unlikely that any studies conducted prior to the 1960s will be identified.

Study selection: Inclusion and exclusion criteria will be refined iteratively, but will initially be informed by the following parameters:

Population

General population, low income or unemployed people.

Intervention

Programmes involving regular cash transfers which are not conditional on labour market participation will be included, whether this is a fixed sum or fluctuates in response to earned income.

Existing policy-level interventions provided by governments to specific populations (e.g. pensioners, families with children) will be excluded.

Cash payments which are conditional upon employment, health service use, educational attendance/attainment, or any other behavioural requirement will be excluded.

One-off cash payments will be excluded.

Comparison

Comparison groups will comprise either no treatment or study arms providing variants of the intervention.

Outcome

It is not envisaged that there will be any restrictions on study inclusion by outcome reported. Identifying the outcomes reported by previous studies is one of the purposes of the review.

Study design

Evaluation studies with a comparison group, including RCTs and cluster RCTs, quasi-experimental studies, and controlled before and after studies will be included. Process evaluations and qualitative studies will be included. Modelling studies may be included. Methodological publications which provide information on the role of study or intervention design, implementation or context in relevant completed studies will be included.

As there has been a recent upsurge in pilots of basic income and similar interventions, mapping ongoing and planned studies will also be a focus of the review.

Data management: The information scientist will keep a search diary detailing search terms used and databases searched. The search results will be uploaded to Endnote. Inclusion decisions will be recorded and reasons for exclusion will be noted in Endnote.

Critical appraisal:

As this is a scoping review with a primary purpose of mapping the available evidence, no critical appraisal will be conducted.

Data extraction and coding: A data extraction form reflecting the information required by the research questions will be developed and refined as necessary. Two reviewers will trial the form independently on a small number of studies. Information will be gathered on:

Study design

RCT, quasi-experimental, controlled before and after, qualitative, process evaluation. Individual or area level implementation, any other relevant information.

General commentary and advocacy publications which do not include empirical analysis will be excluded from the outset.

Programme design

The specific intervention content, including the model of basic income evaluated, the level of payments, withdrawal rates (if relevant), the level at which the payment is made (i.e. household/individual), method of payment, etc.

Population

The population targeted by the intervention.

Outcomes

Names and descriptions of all outcomes reported by the included studies, and method of data collection. Impact data will not be extracted.

Summary of impacts

Although full impact data will not be extracted, a brief summary of effects as reported by study authors will be provided.

Methodological issues

Any known methodological issues which may have influenced the study findings as reported by the study authors or other commentators.

Implementation/context

Any information about how implementation issues or intervention/context interaction, including the wider policy context, might have affected study findings.

Scaling up

Any information about the potential effects of a basic income if it were implemented at scale, e.g. if it was paid universally and/or without time limits.

Author orientation

Any information on how study authors' perspectives or values might have influenced their interpretation of study findings.

Synthesis: As this is not a systematic review, a full synthesis will not be undertaken. Instead, we will follow the process recommended by Levac et al (2010), which involves 'analyzing the data, reporting results, and applying meaning to the results'. Analysis includes tabulating the study characteristics and conducting a qualitative thematic analysis of the study content. Reporting involves the presentation of the results in the most suitable format, e.g. thematically, in tabular form etc. Applying meaning requires a consideration of the results and their implications within the broader context of research, policy, and practice.

Research outcomes: This scoping review will provide an important contribution to the evidence base at a time when basic income is receiving serious consideration as a potential policy both in Scotland and further afield. A greater understanding of what can be learned from studies of programmes previously implemented will assist in the development and evaluation of any potential Scottish pilots.

Dissemination: We will produce a paper for a refereed journal, along with a report for What Works Scotland, and an accompanying blog. We shall also develop a presentation for use at What Works Scotland or externally organised events.

References

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