

Stanford lab explores experiments in universal basic income

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As officials in several U.S. cities consider experimenting with universal

basic income, a Stanford lab aims to educate policymakers and the public about the latest research on what happens when people receive unconditional cash on a regular basis.

Universal basic [income](#), or UBI, refers to a range of programs in which members of a community receive a regular sum of money from the government or a private entity with no strings attached.

Tech leaders Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg, political scientist Charles Murray and other scholars have suggested the idea as a way to address the loss of jobs from rapid advances in artificial intelligence and automation as well as the general rising income inequality in the United States. Several American cities, including Stockton and Santa Monica in California, are already conducting or about to start their own basic income pilots. Others, such as Chicago, are considering proposals.

"What is exciting about [universal basic income](#) is that it forces us to think hard about what we owe each other," said Juliana Bidadanure, assistant professor of philosophy in the School of Humanities and Sciences at Stanford. "We do need more evidence for what happens when a particular form of UBI gets piloted. But what's as important as that data is the opportunity to spark more conversations about the present and future of work."

In early 2017, Bidadanure founded the Stanford Basic Income Lab at the McCoy Family Center for Ethics in Society to help foster discussions about various aspects of basic income and to gather and analyze a growing body of research on previous and ongoing UBI experiments in countries across the world, which include Finland, Kenya, India and Canada.

Encouraging ethical experimentation

Those discussions include some fundamental questions. "What is the value of employment? What counts as a contribution?" Bidadanure asked. "We need to have those conversations more than ever. And basic income experiments are a way to fuel those conversations."

Bidadanure recently co-authored a toolkit for city leaders across the U.S. who are considering piloting universal basic income experiments.

The document, called "Basic Income in Cities," highlights the history of UBI and emerging [best practices](#) for designing universal basic income experiments in an ethical and rigorous way. Stanford psychology graduate student Catherine Thomas, representatives from the National League of Cities and the director of the San Francisco Office of Financial Empowerment also co-authored the toolkit.

One of the recommendations to city leaders considering a UBI pilot is to involve their local community during the design phase of the experiment, Bidadanure said.

"Putting communities at the center of these types of pilot projects is really essential," she said, adding that she and other co-authors of the toolkit were inspired by the Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration. "It's important that research is done not just about but with the communities."

Old idea making a comeback

The concept that each citizen should have the right to share in the achievements of past generations dates at least to the 18th century. And supporters of the idea of unconditional cash for Americans have included a group as diverse as founding father Thomas Paine, civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr., economist Milton Friedman and former President Richard Nixon.

Bidadanure, who is originally from France, became interested in basic income around 2008 in the context of European debates on cash assistance.

"I grew increasingly frustrated at how politicians of mainstream parties were attacking existing benefits and public assistance in general for supposedly encouraging free riders," said Bidadanure, who joined Stanford in 2015 after finishing her Ph.D. in political philosophy at the University of York in England. "The situation felt very stuck, and it also felt like unnecessary demonization of the poor. That's when I realized that UBI could help the discussion. Because it's universal and unconditional, the poor would be less easily stigmatized and the working poor would be less likely to resent 'benefits scroungers.'"

In the last 10 years, the support for possible basic income policies has increased among politicians and the public in Europe partly because of growing evidence that—contrary to popular belief—unconditional cash does not cause massive disengagement from the workforce, Bidadanure said. According to a 2017 poll, 68 percent of 11,000 people interviewed across 28 European Union countries said they would support a referendum on introducing basic income.

"Giving cash to those most in need seems to be an efficient way to improve their prospects and welfare," the authors write in the "Basic Income in Cities" guide. "With cash in hand, individuals can fulfill their most pressing needs and pursue their unique goals. And while some individuals use cash to retrain, others buy livestock or a car, putting themselves and their families in a better position to face economic adversity."

Mapping basic income research

The lab's current main project centers on creating a comprehensive

online resource for research and literature on universal basic income and its experiments. The tool, scheduled to be completed in 2019, will map philosophical claims for and against basic income to a set of empirical evidence from experiments and pilots that have been conducted around the world.

"The online map is the first step for us in identifying the questions that have already been answered related to UBI," Bidanure said. "If we better understand what the research gaps are, we'll be in a better position to advise experimenters to ensure new pilots help increase the evidence base."

Avshalom Schwartz, a [doctoral candidate](#) in political science, and Olga Lenczewska, a doctoral student in philosophy, are among several graduate students who joined the lab as research fellows to help with the effort. The two spent part of the past year reading and summarizing hundreds of pages of literature on basic income.

"The UBI policy has potential to be supported by people holding different political ideologies and values, and that is fascinating," Lenczewska said. "It could bring different people together, which is very difficult in today's political climate."

Schwartz, who is also researching the role of imagination in politics of Ancient Greece, said he became drawn to the idea of basic income from the first time he heard about it.

"My sense is that one of the biggest problems in politics today is a lack of imagination," Schwartz said. "That's why UBI fascinates me. I think it's an innovative and imaginative policy that challenges our current political perceptions."

Provided by Stanford University

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