

Study: Basic income would not reduce people's willingness to work

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Fenna Poletiek and Erik de Kwaadsteniet. Credit: Leiden University

A basic income would not necessarily mean that people would work less. This is the conclusion of a series of behavioral experiments by cognitive psychologist Fenna Poletiek, social psychologist Erik de Kwaadsteniet and cognitive psychologist Bastiaan Vuyk. They also found indications that people with a basic income are more likely to find a job that suits them better.

The [psychologists](#) received a grant from the FNV union to research the behavioral effects of a basic income. They simulated the reward

structure of different forms of [social security](#) in an experiment. "We got people to do a task on a computer," says De Kwaadsteniet. "In multiple rounds, which represented the months they had to work, they did a boring task in which they had to put points on a bar. The more of these they did, the more money they earned."

The psychologists researched three different conditions: no social security, a conditional benefits system and an unconditional basic income. De Kwaadsteniet: "In the condition without social security, the test participants didn't receive a basic sum. In the benefits condition they received a basic sum, which they lost as soon as they started working. In the basic income condition they received the same basic sum but didn't lose this when they started work."

The basic income did not cause a reduction in the participants' willingness to work and efforts, say the psychologists. Nor did their salary expectations increase. "In the discussion on a basic income, it's sometimes said that people will sit around doing nothing if you give them free money," says Poletiek, who saw no indications of such a behavioral effect.

Demotivating

The conditional benefits system did prove to have a negative effect on work-seeking behavior and efforts. "As soon as you have a situation in which you lose your benefits if you start working, this is demotivating," says De Kwaadsteniet. "We saw this in nearly all the experiments."

The phenomenon in which taking on paid work leads to a reduction in benefits is also known as the benefit trap. Poletiek: "That is the disadvantage of pressurizing people to apply for jobs. You can see that this benefit trap makes people risk averse. If you are on benefits and find a job, this leads to a potentially better, but also uncertain situation in

the future. You don't have this uncertainty if you keep your benefits." To avoid this risk and uncertainty, people don't look for work.

Previous studies have shown that women may work less if they receive a basic income. "In [sociological studies](#), you see that a basic income is unfavorable to women's participation in the labor force," says Poletiek. She and De Kwaadsteniet did not see this sex difference in their own research. Poletiek: "This shows that what has been found in sociological experiments is not related to sex alone. It has nothing to do with how much women want to work. Women generally earn less than men and take on most of the caring responsibilities. That's why they are more likely to choose to swap work for caring roles if they receive a basic income."

Better match

The psychologists also found an indication that people with a basic income look for work that suits them better. "We measured whether the test participants are ambitious, whether they want to do the best they can. Are they willing to do stressful work or are they happy with a simple job as long as they earn something?" This personal attitude towards work proved to be a stronger determinant of the type of work the test participants took on in the basic [income](#) system than in the other two systems.

This is an important new finding says Poletiek. It could mean that the security of a [basic income](#) gives [people](#) the space to find the work that best suits their personal attitude, motivation and abilities. "You would then get a better match between employer and employee. That would also be an advantage to employers.

Provided by Leiden University

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