

# Guaranteed Income in the U.S. - Abridged Toolkit

Best practices, resources, and existing models of  
planned and ongoing research in the U.S.,  
from JFI experts

*For the full, unabridged toolkit, please reach out to [jfi@jfiresearch.org](mailto:jfi@jfiresearch.org)*

## **About the Jain Family Institute**

The Jain Family Institute (JFI) is a nonpartisan applied research organization in the social sciences that works to bring research and policy from conception in theory to implementation in society. Within JFI's core policy area of guaranteed income, JFI is the design and research partner on The Compton Pledge and has consulted on the Stockton, CA SEED pilot, the Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend, and related policies in New York City and Chicago, as well as on forthcoming pilots in Newark and Atlanta. JFI is leading an evaluation of a 42,000-person guaranteed income program in Marica, Brazil, a keystone of the movement for a solidarity economy. JFI has also provided expert commentary on a range of cash transfer policies from relief checks to the EITC and CTC. Founded in 2015 by Robert Jain, JFI focuses on building evidence around the most pressing social problems. The Phenomenal World is JFI's independent publication of theory and commentary on the social sciences.

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## Jain Family Institute

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## What is in this toolkit?

This toolkit, of which this document is an abridged version, is designed to provide a concrete starting point for anyone interested in supporting a guaranteed income for their community, particularly by launching a guaranteed income pilot. It begins by answering some of the key questions that arise in this undertaking, including what guaranteed income is, why it is gaining attention right now, what the open questions are that a pilot might answer, and what is involved in the creation of a local pilot.

For those who are interested in creating a pilot accompanied by a research program, it outlines the current state of guaranteed income research and describes how new research can be designed to make a valuable contribution and avoid repeating findings. It also provides advice on how to design an effective messaging strategy to maximize the impact of your pilot through storytelling, consistent framing, and thoughtful communication of research results.

Finally, it provides an overview of the current state of the guaranteed income movement including ongoing and planned municipal pilots, past examples of guaranteed income in practice, and a description of the network of lawmakers, advocates, and philanthropists pushing the movement forward today.

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## Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit is built for a variety of audiences that are interested in the field of guaranteed income but who are unsure where to begin work: policymakers working in local, state, or federal government in the U.S. or abroad; philanthropic leaders interested in effecting change through guaranteed income programs; and practitioners or non-profit leaders focused on economic inclusion, equity, and justice. For all of these audiences, this document provides tools to evaluate whether and how to pilot guaranteed income in a given community, and other ways to both learn from and contribute to the movement around direct cash policy.

## Why did JFI create it?

JFI is a leading applied research organization in guaranteed income and cash policy. We have worked with many public servants, local governments, foundations, international governments and media in their exploration of guaranteed income policy. This report provides answers to some of the questions we receive most frequently based on our research and insights from working in the field.

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## The Basics

### What is guaranteed income?

Guaranteed income is a type of cash transfer program that provides continuous unconditional cash transfers to individuals or households. This differs from typical social safety net policies by providing a steady, predictable stream of cash to recipients to spend however they see fit without limitations or eligibility requirements.

A universal basic income (UBI) is a form of guaranteed income that provides everyone in a given community with enough money to meet their basic needs. A guaranteed income policy would be less robust but nevertheless capable of having a major impact on well-being. For example, cash transfers of a few hundred dollars a month would not be enough to live on, but they could make a considerable difference in the financial security of low-income families. While the idea of a UBI has gained much attention in recent years, this toolkit is focused on the broader category of guaranteed income policy and advocacy, particularly through local pilots.

### Why are many policymakers turning to guaranteed income policy?

Over the last several years guaranteed income has exploded in popularity across the United States. A first round of pilots in 2017, led by Stockton's SEED program and The Magnolia Mother's Trust in Mississippi, brought increased attention to the need for guaranteed income as a policy tool to fight poverty, improve social mobility, and reduce economic inequality. These pilots, along with the creation of [Mayors for a Guaranteed Income](#), have fueled the creation of numerous local guaranteed income pilots across the country, including large pilots in Compton, CA, Chelsea, MA, and Newark, NJ (see section: "[Planned and ongoing pilot research in the U.S.](#)," on page 23). This is a growing movement driven by the recognition that existing policies have failed to break cycles of poverty or promote widespread prosperity and that new approaches are needed.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, federal, state and local governments as well as non-profit organizations provided [effective](#) cash relief to millions of individuals who became unemployed, had to stay home from work due to public health risks, or lost necessary income when they were already living paycheck to paycheck. Yet, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the deficiencies of the U.S. social safety net, with its patchwork of modest, targeted, means-tested, employment-conditioned programs, had become apparent. The limited assistance offered leaves the U.S. with a financially fragile middle class, highest post-tax poverty rate in the developed world, and dramatic racial inequality. These issues became more dire during the pandemic and economic downturn of 2020. Safety net targeting means young adults, non-custodial parents,

and others considered “undeserving” fall through the cracks; means testing imposes upfront burdens on the eligible and leads to delays and incorrect rejections; and employment-conditioning punishes recipients for labor market conditions and can exacerbate economic downturns.

This system could be greatly improved. After all, Canada, the U.K., and other countries with similarly structured welfare regimes have managed to reduce poverty with more generous benefits, less onerous upfront paperwork, and gentler phase out of means-tested benefits. But decades after the U.S. declared a War on Poverty, the ongoing stalemate has led to calls for a broader rethinking of how we structure our welfare state. And that is what U.S. guaranteed income advocates hope to accomplish.

## Key components for effective guaranteed income

An effective guaranteed income is not a complete replacement for the existing network of safety net programs, but it can be designed to correct for many of its shortcomings. Above all, guaranteed income programs should be **universal** (available to all rather than subject to burdensome upfront means-testing), **unconditional** (not contingent on labor market participation, training, or other activities), and **unrestricted** (allowing recipients to decide how to spend funds). It is also important that they be designed while keeping in mind their interactions and potential conflicts with other safety net programs.

### Universal

Targeting and means testing—limiting aid based on income or household characteristics—has obstructed the efficient disbursement of funds and other benefits through existing welfare programs. It overburdens the most vulnerable with circuitous qualification tests and bureaucratic forms that hinder their ability to receive urgently needed support for which they are technically eligible. In addition to limiting access, means testing can also create a “benefits cliff” in which, for example, a family’s increased income means that they no longer qualify for benefits, but the value of the lost benefits is greater than the increase in income. The result is that an increase in household income can actually leave a family worse off financially.

Some may object to a system that includes people who need the cash assistance less, or not at all. **But a universal cash transfer simply means the government pays first and taxes later**, with wealthier households paying more through, for example, progressive income or wealth taxes (depending on the mechanism used to finance such a program). To shift from our means-testing regime to a guaranteed income would be above all an administrative choice—a choice not to impose an upfront paperwork burden on needy households that cannot afford a delay in aid. A universal program is both simpler to

administer and more likely to ensure that nobody who needs assistance falls through the cracks.

### **Unconditional**

Safety net programs in the U.S. are often accompanied by a set of conditions that must be met to continue receiving support. Conditioning aid on employment status often undermines its own purpose. Perversely, it is when the economy is in recession and the need for assistance greatest that a work-conditioned safety net is least effective. When work is scarce, so too is assistance. For example, the EITC provides benefits only to people who are employed. As a result, recipients can be punished for forces outside of their control, including the hiring practices of employers.

Unconditional cash transfer programs avoid these issues. They remove the administrative burden of repeatedly demonstrating compliance. And by eliminating work requirements they ensure that people are able to receive support even during economic downturns and in the face of unemployment discrimination.

### **Unrestricted**

Unlike benefits like food stamps or housing vouchers, a guaranteed income is intended to allow recipients to decide how to use the funds in the ways that best fit their needs. Unrestricted aid programs place value on recipients' autonomy and judgment while recognizing their expertise over their own financial lives. Spending restrictions in existing welfare programs are ultimately rooted in a lack of trust in recipients, but research consistently supports the fact that when provided with cash support people use the money responsibly. As a policy principle, unrestricted aid is about recognizing that poverty results from a lack of resources, not a lack of judgment.

### **Regular, predictable payments over time**

Financial security is rooted in stable and predictable income. Though research is inconclusive on the optimal disbursement frequency (monthly versus yearly or otherwise), existing research suggests that a regular, and therefore predictable, pace of cash transfers affords families the financial stability for long-term financial planning.

### **In tandem with other safety net programs**

Guaranteed income policy is not a panacea. While it can better serve the role of income support than TANF, SNAP, or EITC, it cannot replace important public insurance programs like Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, or Medicaid/Medicare. And it is no substitute for direct government intervention where markets simply don't work (well) such as in healthcare, child care, and education. For a deeper look at ways a guaranteed income could fit into the existing safety net, see JFI's recent white paper on this topic, "[Reweaving the Safety Net.](#)"

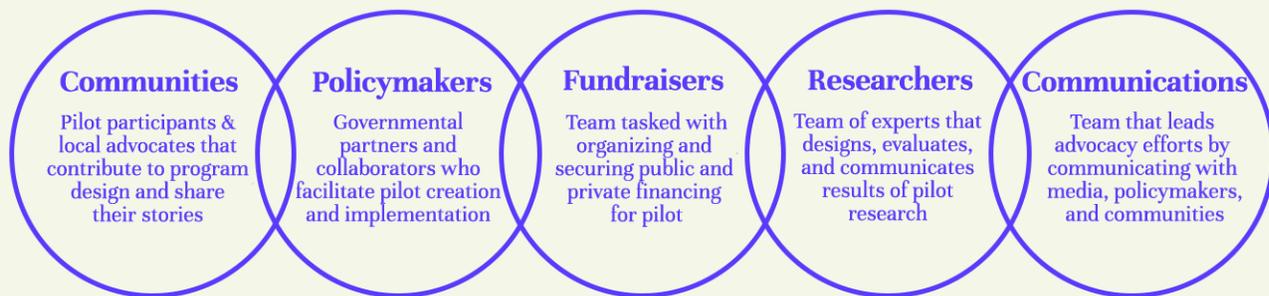
## What is a guaranteed income pilot?

A guaranteed income pilot is a program that provides cash transfers to a limited group of participants for a specific period of time while collecting data that can inform policymakers and researchers as well as contribute to ongoing public discourse around guaranteed income policy.

While this can take the form of a rigorous quantitative study of participant outcomes, there are a range of means by which a pilot can make a valuable contribution. For example, there is much room for experimentation with different methods of administering guaranteed income through partnerships with financial institutions and local organizations. And in addition to quantitative measures, there is much to be gained from qualitative research and storytelling which sheds light on the experience of recipients. This is also a [research interest](#) of the Center for Guaranteed Income at the University of Pennsylvania.

Local pilots have typically been privately funded through philanthropic donations or institutional grants. That is, in part, because sustainable public financing of a guaranteed income policy is difficult to achieve at the local level. As a result, the long-term goal of the guaranteed income movement is the establishment of a guaranteed income policy at the state or federal level where this kind of large-scale public financing would be feasible. While there is much to be gained from local pilots in terms of research and influence on public opinion, it is important to remember that these pilots are advocacy opportunities that represent small steps toward this larger goal.

## Anatomy of a guaranteed income pilot



The graphic above outlines the key stakeholders that form the core of any guaranteed income pilot, drawing on the Stanford Basic Income in Cities [guide](#), and corroborated by JFI's work. **Communities** are important participants at every stage of the process, from early consultation on pilot design to long-term advocacy and storytelling around the pilot's vision. **Policymakers** facilitate the pilot or policy implementation through coordination with existing social service programs and communications that channel public buy-in for sustained advocacy even after the pilot has ended. The **Funding Team** secures financing for the pilot, including funds for distribution to participants and the costs of administration and research evaluation. Recent municipal pilots have most often been funded through philanthropic donations and institutional grants, but in some cases local governments may be able to fund a pilot by drawing on discretionary funds.

**Researchers** are in charge of designing the guaranteed income program in ways that will provide insights into open questions around the impact of GI on the community and the optimal methods of program implementation. The next section will cover these questions of research design in more depth. Finally, the **Communications Team** plays a key role in using the pilot as an opportunity to build widespread support for guaranteed income. This involves direct engagement to share community members' stories with the broader public, ensuring that the pilot gains the attention of media and legislators, while developing a consistent messaging strategy that clarifies the pilot's guiding vision throughout. The team also collaborates with researchers to ensure that research results are communicated effectively. The elements of an effective messaging strategy are discussed below in the "Pilot Messaging" section.

Although there will often be overlap between these different stakeholder groups, it is useful to distinguish them functionally from the very beginning in order to effectively coordinate the key elements of a successful guaranteed income pilot.

## What to know if you are considering a guaranteed income research project for your community

There are several ways to contribute to the movement around guaranteed income. One of those ways is to pilot a guaranteed income program in your community and research its effects. If you are considering doing so it is important to understand what research has already been done, what the open questions about guaranteed income are, and what it takes to collect evidence on GI. In this section we provide an overview of each of these topics to help you think through whether a pilot is right for your community.

### What evidence do we already have about guaranteed income's effects?

Although there has been a surge of recent interest and research on GI, scholars have been studying cash transfer policy for decades. This includes research on guaranteed income-like pilots and policies like the North American Negative Income Tax experiments in the 1970s and the Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend, which has offered checks annually to residents since 1982. But it also includes research into inheritances, lottery winnings, conditional cash transfer programs, and pensions. Cash is cash, so much of what we know about the effects of additional income in general on household wellbeing and choices applies to guaranteed income specifically.

Extensive social science research on cash transfer programs around the world shows that cash transfers increase expenditure on education and training, improve food security, increase durable good consumption (buying a car, a refrigerator, etc.), and improve measures of well-being. The positive impact of guaranteed income has been studied for decades, with [evidence](#) indicating that cash transfers are an effective anti-poverty measure with an array of welfare benefits. [Empirical evidence](#) also indicates that people keep their jobs and [spend](#) the extra money on groceries, utilities or other basic needs; those who work fewer hours largely invest that time in education, job training, or caring for children. Key findings include:

- There is [little evidence](#) that cash transfers decrease the motivation to work.
- Cash transfers [do not](#) lead to spending on “temptation goods.”
- Cash transfers [reduce](#) inequality, and have had multiple [positive impacts](#) on [recipients'](#) welfare, alongside positive [spillover effects](#) for [non-recipients](#).

In other words, there is already a robust literature on the employment, poverty/material hardship, and consumption effects of GI. We do not need to demonstrate that GI will not lead to a major

reduction in the labor supply nor increased drug/tobacco/alcohol consumption; researchers have already established this several times across several countries. To the extent that this message has not been absorbed by the public, that is best rectified through further communication efforts rather than additional research.

## What are the open questions around guaranteed income?

In light of the above, why pilot guaranteed income at all? It is useful to break that question down into two separate ones:

- Do we need to pilot guaranteed income before moving forward with efforts to enact one on a state or federal level?
- Are there important unanswered questions that further research can address that would be of value to policy makers?

The answer to the first question is, as regards more evidence needed, no. We already know enough about how GI works and its effects for GI advocates to push for GI legislation. Still, local piloting efforts can have an impact for short-term poverty alleviation, and serve a key role in building public awareness and support for the policy, as addressed in later sections. The answer to the second question, however, is definitely yes. There are several important outstanding questions around guaranteed income policy that researchers should address. It is also worth looking into what pilots are currently being developed or are underway to answer some of these open questions. See the section on “planned and ongoing pilots” in our unabridged toolkit to check if there are existing initiatives in your area or on the questions you might want to answer. If GI were enacted tomorrow nationwide in some form or another, researchers would continue to study it to learn more about how best to disburse cash, what to pair it with, how to finance it and more. In other words, researchers will continue to explore how to optimize cash transfer policy — in much the same way that economists and social scientists investigate the effects of ongoing social safety net policies. Some of the urgent questions for researchers include:

- What are the macroeconomic effects of GI (e.g. price, wages, or inflation effects) and how can it be responsibly financed?
- How much money should each individual receive considering the need to fund other important safety net policies?
- How often should the money be disbursed? Yearly? Quarterly? Biweekly?
- How do we build a cash disbursement infrastructure that quickly and efficiently gets money into recipients’ hands?
- What are the long-term effects of GI on education, criminal justice involvement, civic and political engagement and other lesser studied outcomes?
- What programs should GI be paired with to maximize its benefits?
- What are the broader political effects of GI on public perception of the safety net, the stigma attached to government assistance, etc.?

## Where can pilot research usefully contribute/which of these questions can pilots help answer?

There is, as noted above, research still to be done on guaranteed income. Pilots can contribute answers to some but not all open questions—though it is worth emphasizing that the cost of high-quality research, persuasive to academics and policymakers, is substantial. That said, an RCT of significant scale could definitively solidify the shape of an ideal guaranteed income policy. Pilots can also provide important data on the effects of variation in disbursement amount and frequency or of pairing GI with other services. Still, they are ill-equipped to investigate things like different financing schemes or macroeconomic effects. This is because GI pilots are by necessity limited in size and duration and will not generate the sorts of economy-wide economic effects on prices, wages, and interest rates that scholars are interested in exploring. Such questions have been more usefully investigated through models and sophisticated [simulations](#) of local and national economics than real-world pilots.

Pilots can contribute to our understanding of guaranteed income in important ways by focusing on the open questions discussed above. Additionally, as discussed below in the messaging section, pilots can play a valuable role in bringing public attention to the need for and benefits of guaranteed income policy even without a significant research component. If a more ambitious impact analysis is not feasible, making an effort to publicize the stories of recipients and developing a consistent messaging strategy can allow a guaranteed income pilot to have real impact on public opinion. Even small pilots can contribute to research by helping us develop best practices for implementation.

## How can guaranteed income pilots and programs be funded?

Almost all guaranteed income pilots currently underway in the U.S. have been privately funded with philanthropic dollars and/or institutional grants, with the exception of St. Paul's pilot. Typically the majority of the program dollars have come from high-net-worth individuals but recently, and in response to the pandemic, philanthropic foundations have begun to express interest in funding pilots and associated research.

Guaranteed income pilots with a significant research component generally require initial funding of at least \$5-10 million, with about 20% of funds going to research and administrative costs. Smaller pilots focused more on messaging and sharing recipient stories can be launched with a smaller budget and less overhead.

A universal guaranteed income policy at the state or federal level can potentially be funded through a wealth tax, an increase in progressive income tax, a VAT tax, a carbon tax, a budget reallocation, or dividend from sources including natural resource royalties, casino revenue, or

other social wealth funds. This is an area of substantial interest to the research community though, as noted, this work is typically done through modeling and simulation. In 2021, JFI will release a deep dive analysis of the implications of financing choice for guaranteed income as part of its whitepaper series, "[From Idea to Reality: Getting to Guaranteed Income.](#)"

## What kinds of research can accompany pilots?

Pilot programs need not include a rigorous research study, but policymakers and researchers are often interested in studying the implementation and impact of the pilot program to draw lessons that can be applied in future policy design. Those interested in exploring a study should be mindful that research can be expensive, operationally complex, and potentially burdensome for participants.

There are two main types of research projects typically attached to a pilot (often together): Impact analysis and Implementation analysis. Impact analysis is an exploration of the effect that the program had on participants, their households, and/or their communities; implementation analysis explores the development and roll-out of the pilot itself, including what went well and what did not.

### Impact analysis

Impact analyses can be performed using a wide variety of methodologies. This includes qualitative analyses like interviews and focus groups as well as formal statistical analysis of outcomes using administrative and survey data. Formal impact analysis includes attempts to identify and establish a counterfactual: what would have happened in the absence of the program? For example, if a program participant started the program with a \$35,000/year salary and ended it with a \$45,000/year salary, how much of that change can be attributed to participation in the program? Might this change have occurred anyway?

The techniques researchers use to establish the counterfactual and thus estimate the "impact" of the program are complex and outside the scope of this document. However, generally speaking, researchers either devise an experiment or a "quasi experiment." Experiments involve random assignment of participants to the program group(s) to create two or more groups that are broadly similar. This allows researchers to rule out differences in individual or household characteristics or circumstances as potential causes in any observed differences in outcome. Quasi-experiments typically use coincidences, arbitrary eligibility thresholds, and other statistical tricks to mimic experimental conditions.

All impact analyses, whether qualitative or quantitative, must be approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB), an entity that reviews research proposals to ensure they are ethical and protect participants' data and privacy. Universities and non-profit research organizations typically have their own IRBs or work with an external board.

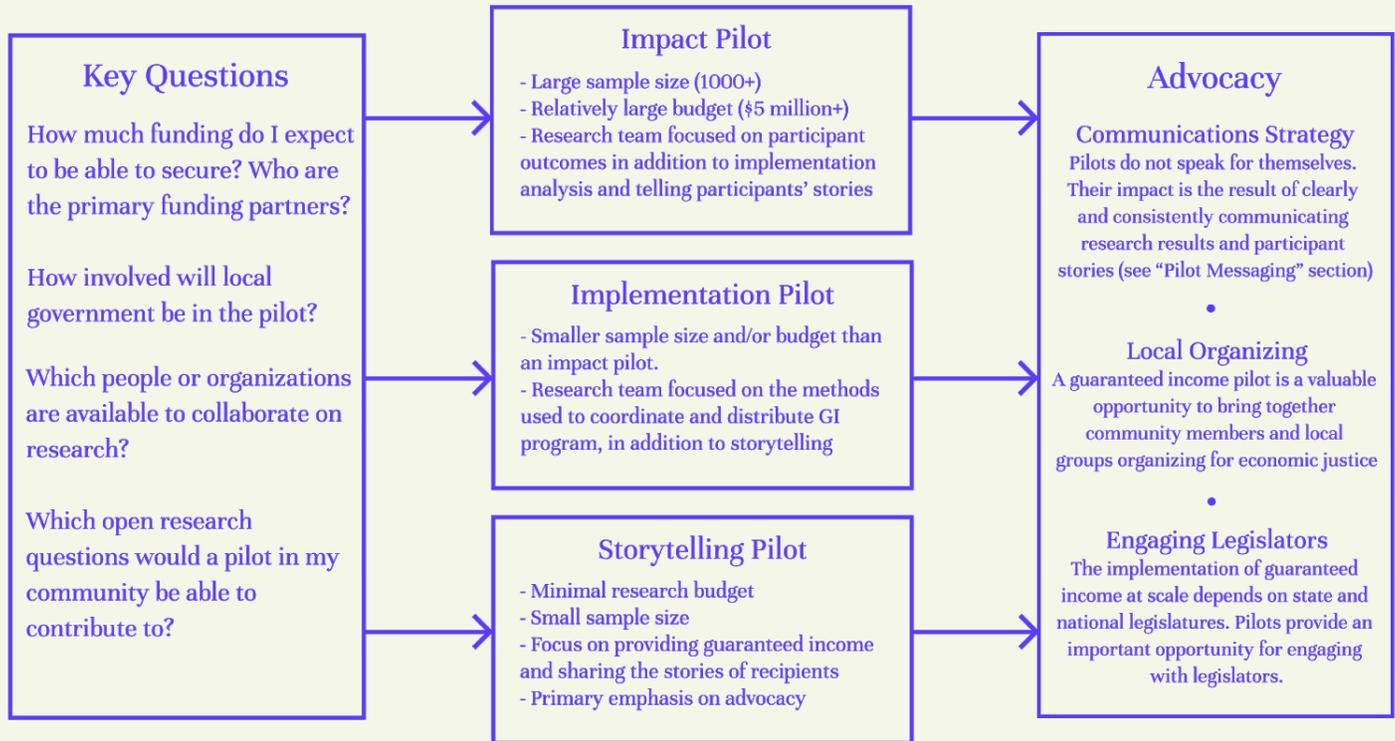
For those interested in impact analysis but unable to absorb such costs, there are generally two good contingencies. The first is to pool resources with other organizations and/or municipalities to build a sufficient sample. A “multi-site” study where each individual site is small can, through pooling, potentially generate precise impact estimates. The second is to focus on qualitative impact analysis rather than on statistical modeling. Qualitative research fleshes out impact analysis and helps scholars understand the “why” behind observed impacts (some examples include an ongoing study of [Baby’s First Years](#), an unconditional cash program for mothers after childbirth, led by researchers Greg Duncan and Lisa Genetian). It is valuable on its own or, when paired with statistical analysis, in a so-called mixed-methods design.

It is, by contrast, not advisable to attempt an experiment with a very small sample or to use a non-experimental method to generate impact estimates (e.g. a pre/post design). These approaches will not generate useful data for the field and will thus make demands on pilot participants’ time for minimal gain.

### Implementation analysis

Implementation analysis explores the development and roll-out of a program and can be immensely useful in helping policymakers better understand the logistical challenges in serving a population and how to effectively and quickly administer aid. While we understand a great deal about the impacts of cash assistance on individual and household wellbeing, we have considerably less knowledge of how best to get cash into people’s hands. Whether it be government officials investigating the failures in federal aid disbursement during the COVID-19 crisis or nonprofits looking to better identify, reach, or reimburse clients, there is great need for analysis of what works and what doesn’t in cash infrastructure design. Therefore government and nonprofit organizations running pilots can contribute meaningfully to the research around GI policy by focusing all or part of their research on these topics. This is typically done through qualitative analysis: interviews and focus groups with study participants and with employees and leaders of the organizations involved in the pilot efforts. It may also include an analysis of record keeping practices, computer systems, and any materials or methods used to interact with (potential) cash recipients.

With these different avenues of research in mind, you can think of your options in terms of three broad categories of pilot, depicted below along with some of the key questions that should inform your decisions about pilot design from the beginning. In general, impact analysis will require the largest budget and sample size, while a pilot that emphasizes storytelling rather than formal research can be executed with the fewest resources. But regardless of type, any pilot can make a valuable contribution to the guaranteed income movement through messaging and advocacy.



## What are some best practices for pilot design?

We find that pilots are most successful when they are built in consultation with community members and their specific needs. Having worked with multiple municipalities in the U.S. and internationally, JFI researchers can help you evaluate appropriate guaranteed income policies for your locality alongside community-based organizations that should fundamentally inform the design. Moreover, a clear messaging strategy is a core component of a successful pilot, rather than relying on program structure alone to “speak for itself.”

Many cities have also found it valuable to create a dedicated **task force**, assembling multiple stakeholders to define the community needs motivating the pilot and to collaborate on its vision, design, and implementation. Such a coalition of local nonprofits, community leaders, academics, and residents also can help generate public attention and strengthen the pilot’s connection to local perspectives and expertise. A task force may also provide a forum to discuss research design and any supportive programs. Task forces typically produce reports (e.g. [Newark’s](#), or [Atlanta’s](#)) which may be of use in subsequent fundraising efforts.

Though each pilot should be designed for the specific needs of its community there are several best practices designers should consider. A fuller look at each of these best practices is included in the unabridged version of this toolkit.

- **Target low-income or marginalized individuals**
- **Provide full-package services**
- **Enhance individual agency**
- **Promote long-term economic inclusion**
- **Provide regular, not one-time, support**
- **Offer simple, efficient enrollment procedures**
- **Serve a long-term guaranteed income agenda**

## Pilot Messaging

The greatest obstacle to the implementation of guaranteed income policy is not a lack of research, but a lack of political will. At this point, much of the impact of local guaranteed income pilots will come from their ability to influence established attitudes and narratives rather than to provide more empirical evidence reaffirming the benefits of guaranteed income. **The purpose of a guaranteed income pilot should be understood to include its effects on public opinion through messaging, not just its research findings.**

This broader shift in public opinion is essential for building popular support for implementing guaranteed income as a permanent program at the state or federal level. Every pilot, large or small, can contribute to this effort—and make a positive impact in the lives of local residents.

This section will focus on three aspects of effective communication around guaranteed income pilots: storytelling (highlighting the lives and experience of recipients), framing (communicating the benefits of GI by strategically focusing on key elements), and communicating research.

### Storytelling

In order to effectively shift public attitudes towards a guaranteed income, it is important to first understand the established narratives and arguments supporting it. A few of the most common such arguments are:

1. That it can **eliminate poverty** and **increase well-being** by providing an income floor for everyone
2. That it increases **economic and social mobility** by providing people with the economic security they need to pursue new opportunities and weather economic shocks
3. That it ensures that **everyone in need of support receives it** rather than erecting barriers through means-testing and administrative requirements
4. That it **reduces economic inequality** and helps **close racial wealth gaps** by redistributing income

In our experience, the strongest opposition to these claims comes less from doubts about their accuracy, but from doubts about whether they are goals that we should collectively pursue—or whether the government should allocate additional resources towards these goals. Many might grant that a guaranteed income would reduce poverty while also denying that poverty-reduction through redistribution should be a policy goal. This belief is a matter of values rather than evidence.

The two most prevalent rebuttals, firmly refuted by empirical research, are that a guaranteed income would:

1. Induce people to become “freeloaders” who receive income without working
2. Be spent irresponsibly on “temptation goods” by low-income recipients

That empirical evidence from decades of cash transfer study runs counter to these claims is insufficient to dislodge them, for they are rooted not in evidence but in long-established narratives about poverty. We believe these attitudes can be transformed not by more evidence, but rather through changes in rhetoric and attitudes.

Many of these established narratives are closely associated with the concept of “welfare” propagated within pernicious and racially-charged myths about an “undeserving” poor, rooted in race and class prejudice. Every life touched by a guaranteed income program, whatever its size, is an opportunity to rebut such harmful stereotypes in the public imagination. In lieu of abstract stereotypes about poverty, pilot storytelling can offer humanized and relatable examples of people fighting to get ahead in a system that too often works against them.

**The key storytelling message is that poverty is the result of a lack of resources, not a lack of character**, and that a guaranteed income makes a significant and positive impact on peoples’ lives. Stories transform attitudes and narratives at an emotional level through rich, embodied stories. This is especially important because the voices of low-income populations are so often absent in mainstream discourse.

## Framing

As a fast-growing policy area with a wide range of social and economic effects, guaranteed income resonates for different reasons with particular audiences. Accordingly, an effective messaging strategy should make use of one or more frames most effective for its intended audience(s).

Through our work on guaranteed income and across a number of key messaging studies conducted by other scholars, JFI has found certain frames particularly effective in mobilizing support for guaranteed income. Of the list below, pilots would do well to choose some, but not all, to place at the heart of their messaging strategy. That choice, in turn, will depend on your local social and political context. For example, forthcoming research from Catherine Thomas (alongside Markus, H. and Walton, G.) suggests that conservative audiences respond more positively to frames that center the effects of GI on individual freedom and autonomy rather than economic security or financial stability, a conclusion consistent with the recommendations of progressive messaging experts for communications around welfare policy more generally. Stanford Basic Income Lab has also [examined](#) the impacts of different names used to describe cash policy and pilots. In general, **your framing strategy should be based on careful consideration of your audience's values, political orientations, and the local and national issues that are most salient to them.** Whatever you choose to focus on, it is important to be consistent in your framing approach over time.

Guaranteed income frames discussed in the larger toolkit include:

- Poverty Alleviation
- Economic Stimulus and Community Development
- Agency and Social Mobility
- Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Poverty
- Racial and Economic Equality

## Communicating Research

The above discussions of storytelling and framing are important for any guaranteed income pilot whether or not it has a research component. But for pilots that *are* designed as research programs it is also important to think about how research findings are communicated. Communicating research to the public involves several different actors, including researchers, politicians, activists, and journalists, which creates many opportunities for miscommunication.

[Karl Widerquist](#) has argued that the different preconceptions of each of these audiences can create a game of “telephone” as findings grow distorted while communicated across audiences with different expectations. For example, researchers are trained to answer specific empirical questions in a balanced way, often hedging their findings with potential challenges, doubts, and further questions. The public, on the other hand, often expects more clear-cut answers not just to empirical questions but also to ethical questions about what policies ought to be implemented. Ethical social science research can tell us what is the case, not what we ought to do with that information. The resulting absence of clear ethical conclusions invites various actors to spin the research in ways that support their views and sow confusion about the meaning of the results.

Widerquist suggests four strategies for ensuring that such research-oriented guaranteed income pilots contribute effectively to public understanding. We expand on each of these strategies in the larger toolkit:

1. Work back and forth from public discussion to the experiment
2. Focus on the effects rather than the side effects
3. Focus on the bottom line
4. Address the ethical controversy

Finally, it is important to consider the public perception of the need for additional pilots. [Almaz Zelleke](#) has argued that new pilots can actually hinder progress toward the implementation of a permanent guaranteed income by falsely signalling to the public that it is still an untested policy whose significant unknowns must be tested before any large-scale implementation.

When creating a research pilot, you should be sure to communicate that new research on guaranteed income is valuable not because it will tell us whether guaranteed income “works,” but because it can help refine our understanding of how to a) optimize the design of GI policy and b) contribute to a shift in the narrative around guaranteed income. In other words: emphasize both the questions your pilot seeks to answer and the ones—like impact on overall well-being—that are already well-established.

## The Guaranteed Income Movement

Although the concept of a guaranteed income is not new, the movement that has developed in support of it in recent years represents an exciting boost in public awareness and support for guaranteed income policy. Much of this momentum has been driven by the explosion of local pilots created in the wake of the Stockton SEED demonstration and as part of the creation of [Mayors for a Guaranteed Income](#). Andrew Yang’s 2016 presidential campaign, which promoted a \$1,000 per month universal basic income, also had a significant impact on public awareness of guaranteed income as a policy option.

Most recently, the economic crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic has created an immediate need for expanded cash transfers through universal cash assistance and large increases in unemployment benefits. These policies have the benefits of direct cash transfers and add to the public momentum in support of guaranteed income not just as a response to crises, but as a permanent part of the social benefits system. This section provides further context for guaranteed income advocacy today by compiling lists of recent local pilots, past examples of guaranteed income in practice, and some of the key individuals and organizations advocating for guaranteed income today. For an updated list of past, ongoing, and planned guaranteed income pilots please also consult the [Stanford Basic Income Lab's global map](#).

To outline the landscape of this movement in the U.S., we include a list of planned and ongoing pilot research, a map of past and ongoing cash policy, organizations and individuals working on guaranteed income, academic and other researchers focused on cash policy, as well as a look at key policy advocates at the state and federal levels. We also include a look at civil society advocates and key philanthropies engaged in cash policy.

## Joining the Movement

If you are interested in contributing to guaranteed income research and advocacy through a community pilot, research or advocacy, JFI can be a resource and partner to guide you through additional questions that may not be addressed in this report. As a non-profit, non-partisan research group, we are ready to offer our network and support to initiatives that build on the evidence for a guaranteed income in the US. Reach out to us at [jfi@jainfamilyinstitute.org](mailto:jfi@jainfamilyinstitute.org) and we'll set up a call to discuss potential next steps.

## Further Reading and Global Perspectives

**JFI's publication *Phenomenal World* provides a thorough review of existing academic research on guaranteed income, UBI, and other cash policies - see [here](#).**

JFI also publishes an ongoing whitepaper series titled *From Idea to Reality: Getting to Guaranteed Income*. The series is designed to provide a concrete analysis of the path toward guaranteed income policy in the U.S. by examining specific implementation questions and challenges. View the series [here](#).

Stanford's Basic Income Lab has created a useful and practice-oriented guide for those looking to create municipal basic income pilots. You can access their guide, *Basic Income in Cities*, [here](#).

The Aspen Institute's Financial Security Program released a three-part report bringing together what is known about the need for, innovations in, and the effects of cash transfer programs. You can view the report [here](#).

Ugo Gentilini, along with others at the World Bank, have put together a comprehensive review of social protection programs—including cash transfers—implemented around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. View the report [here](#).

### Brazil's Bolsa Família

Brazil has been, since 2004, the only country in the world to legislate every citizen's right to a basic income. That same year, Brazil introduced a transformative cash assistance program that proponents see as the first step toward securing that right. Known as Bolsa Família, the program provides families with direct cash transfers in return for keeping their kids in school and attending preventative health care visits. After ten years, Bolsa Família [helped cut](#) the percentage of Brazilians living in extreme poverty in half, from 9.7% to 2.7%. It remains the largest conditional cash transfer program in the world, reaching about a quarter of the population (50 million people).

Within Brazil, the city of Maricá has recently launched an ambitious guaranteed income policy providing more than 42,000 residents with income equivalent to about three quarters of the national poverty line. JFI is closely involved with the accompanying research program designed to study the effects and administration of large-scale guaranteed income policies. You can learn more about Bolsa Família and the Maricá program [here](#).

## GiveDirectly program in Kenya

GiveDirectly has been running one of the largest and longest guaranteed income research programs in the world in Kenya, where they are providing cash transfers to 20,000 individuals across 197 villages. Some recipients will receive regular payments for as long as twelve years. By varying the lengths of time that individuals receive benefits, as well as whether they receive the cash monthly or all at once in a lump sum, researchers hope to learn more about the long-term effects of guaranteed income and the impact of different disbursement patterns.

In addition to the primary pool of subjects, two additional villages are receiving monthly payments for twelve years without being a part of the main study so that researchers can have more in-depth qualitative conversations with them about their experience. This group is very much aligned with the storytelling aspect of pilots discussed earlier. You can read more about the study [here](#).

## Other global implementations

- The Iranian government created a universal basic income program in 2011, providing monthly transfers amounting to 29% of median household income. [Research on its effects](#) did not find evidence of a significant effect on labor supply outside of people in their twenties who were more likely to enroll in higher education.
- Finland conducted a guaranteed income experiment for two years from the beginning of 2017 to the end of 2018. During this time 2,000 unemployed persons received 560 Euros every month, regardless of any other income they had or whether they were looking for work. However, this program had major design and implementation [flaws](#). Read more about the experiment [here](#).
- Many European countries have long-established child allowance programs which provide recurring cash transfers to parents based on the number of children they have. For example, in Germany parents receive a little over 200 Euros per month for each child. You can read more about child allowance policy in various European countries [here](#).
- During the COVID-19 pandemic Spain has introduced a targeted guaranteed minimum income program with the intention of continuing it indefinitely. The program would reach over three million of the country's poorest households and be means-tested according to the type of family, number of children, and financial need.
- During the pandemic, Japan has provided direct cash transfers of \$930 to every citizen in addition to doubling the existing child allowance, bringing it to approximately \$200 per month per child.