

Seeding policy: Viral cash and the diverse trajectories of basic income in the United States

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Abstract During the COVID-19 pandemic, cities in the United States of America developed more than 100 basic income pilots. This article examines the heretofore hidden impact of the pandemic on the future extension of basic income programmes at the sub-national level. While the super-majoritarian requirements of United States federal policy making keep the possibility of national-level basic income remote, several features of basic income, including unconditional cash transfers and broad programme eligibility, have emerged as viable tools in state and local policy. Drawing on an inventory of basic income pilots and interviews with policy entrepreneurs, this article defines and then examines the phenomenon of “viral cash” and assesses the probability that the wave of basic income pilots will continue to grow after the pandemic. Conventional approaches to evaluating the diffusion of policies across jurisdictions focus squarely on policy. Appraising viral cash’s future requires a shift to following the advocacy networks who move, adapt and combine basic income with other programmes.

Keywords social policy, cash benefit, benefit administration, COVID-19, United States of America

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Introduction

When the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 pandemic over in 2023, across the United States of America (hereafter, the United States), cities, counties and not-for-profit organizations were running at least 145 basic income pilot programmes covering tens of thousands of citizens. Envisioned as speculative tests of basic income as both policy and politics, these prolific trials mark two surprising developments: i) the emergence of a country known for its limited welfare state and aggressive workfare programmes as a surprising innovator in unconditional cash transfers (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Hacker and Pierson, 2002; Peck, 2001) and ii) the transformation of basic income from a national to a local policy tool.

Understanding this transformation has significant implications for basic income's future diffusion. Whereas national political institutions must negotiate broad political compromises to enact basic income, local pilots and implementing coalitions differ from both national-level programmes and each other. Thus, rather than simply being miniaturized national proposals for permanent, periodic and no-strings-attached cash payments to individuals, the development of local programmes entails both planned and unplanned adaptations, concessions and changes of focus. As a result, the hundreds of basic income trials underway in the United States diverge from one another in multiple, significant ways. Institutionally, they differ in terms of governance and funding sources. Furthermore, dispersing scarce pilot funding forces pilot administrators to make high-impact decisions about the amount, frequency and duration of payments, and about the specific populations cash transfers target. In short, routing basic income through sub-national government and not-for-profit bodies has converted basic income advocacy into a range of highly diverse policy experiments.

As a result, assessing basic income's future in the United States after the COVID-19 pandemic requires a thorough autopsy of the ways the pandemic changed basic income policies. Where prior analysis of basic income trials has focused on national-level politics (De Wispelaere and Haagh, 2019; De Wispelaere, 2016), early returns from the United States' sub-national path indicate that the drive to secure universal basic income per se has given way to immediately obtainable proposals to make existing welfare schemes simpler, less restrictive, and – in the memorable phrase of one city administrator – “cash-ier.” The continued expansion of basic income pilots after the pandemic indicates that the COVID-19 crisis changed basic income in the United States permanently, rather than temporarily. Understanding the mechanisms of this transformation constitutes a crucial step in evaluating the future prospects of basic income.

This article takes up that task by accounting for the phenomenon of “viral cash” in United States' basic income trials. Basic income trial programmes can be

understood as “viral” in two crucial senses. First, the 2019 novel coronavirus overwhelmed policy makers’ resistance to experimental programmes and led to the federal government authorizing hundreds of billions of US dollars of unrestricted aid to cities. Second, basic income and related cash transfers behaved like a virus, spreading through space and – crucially – mutating as one jurisdiction after the next copied these responses (Peck and Theodore, 2015). As a result of these mutations, basic income trials initially conceptualized as a form of emergency basic income have progressively taken on unpredictable lives of their own. Collectively, this positions United States basic income trials as resources for seeding new policy responses to problems that had plagued cities long before the arrival of the pandemic.

Drawing on i) long-term fieldwork conducted with urban community organizations, trade unions and economic policy entrepreneurs in the United States, ii) a database of United States basic income trials and iii) interviews with more than 50 basic income programme administrators, designers and supporters, this article shows that viral cash spread through the well-coordinated actions of a national network of basic income and social policy activists. Centring the role of this network in the surprising diffusion of basic income policy in the United States explains the transformation of time-limited emergency basic income into ongoing basic income trials and related social policy changes. Additionally, the political popularity and multiplication of local basic income trials highlights the comparative ease of building consensus to experiment with basic income in cities, regions and smaller polities operating with simpler politics than national governing bodies. Crucially, following the ongoing work of these networks provides a way to trace basic income’s growing influence on prior anti-poverty policy and programmes.

The argument is traced chronologically, by tracing the pathways from a proposed national basic income to institutionally diverse local pilots. The next section details the unstable and uneven political landscape over which basic income trials are distributed. Next, the article focuses on the role of emergency basic income in legitimizing cash transfers and then details the proliferation of diverse basic income programmes, many federally funded, over the course of the pandemic. Recent basic income pilot programmes in Chicago (Illinois), Denver (Colorado) and Louisville (Kentucky) are then used to trace the ongoing impact of basic income trials on other kinds of policy and practice.

Urban political transformation makes the United States fertile ground for basic income

The United States’ national-level political institutions and norms create significant barriers to universal basic income (Woodward-Burns, 2021; Spicer, 2018). The

United States Senate represents a particularly stout obstacle. First, the Senate's equal-representation measures give the sparsely populated and politically conservative states of North Dakota and South Dakota (combined population: 1.7 million) representation equal to California and New York (combined population: 58 million). Second, the Senate's super-majoritarian voting conventions require 60 per cent support to enact new policies.¹ Given the limited support for basic income found in simple-majority political systems with a more equitable representation of urbanized electorates, this constitutes a currently insurmountable barrier to enacting a national-scale basic income.

Additionally, support for an expansive welfare state in the United States is extremely limited in a comparative international context. Workers in the United States receive just two weeks paid vacation per year and have no national right to paid family leave. Other gaps in benefits coverage are both commonplace and uncontroversial. For example, an estimated 9 per cent of the population lacks health insurance – a condition so politically taken for granted that several state governors were able to veto federal funding to expand coverage without immediate political consequence (Fording and Patton, 2019; Tolbert, Drake and Damico, 2022). Thus, while public opinion polls show growing support for the United States to enact the basic welfare protections found in other wealthy countries, national welfare programmes remain limited.

However, both popular support and political will to enact local social protections are strong in larger cities, whose populaces and overwhelmingly Democratic Party-elected officials lean far to the left of their national counterparts. The current mayors of most large cities in the United States champion public housing, trade union membership, universal free child care, free school lunches, reduced-cost transit and a host of redistributive economic measures roughly in line with those favoured by their peers in Europe (Doussard and Schrock, 2022b). As economic inequalities and housing prices continue to mount in large cities in the United States, they provide increasingly fertile grounds for interventions such as basic income.

Two other features of the country's current urban politics suggest the possible viability of local basic income. As the rural skew and super-majoritarian rules of the United States Senate have made federal action on economic inequality prohibitively difficult (for example, the United States Congress has not raised the national minimum wage of 7.25 US dollars (USD) since 2007), trade unions, community organizations and allied activists and interest groups have built robust networks for passing sub-national policy (Doussard and Schrock, 2022a). These networks

1. The senate can vote to change these rules to a simple majority at any time. However, support for the 60-vote threshold has remained intact, even when the Senate was run by a 60-vote Democrat majority.

combine coalitions of neighbourhood, community and advocacy organizations with national-level organizations that develop, advocate and tailor policy for states and cities to enact. Since 2007, these networks have successfully raised the minimum wage to USD 15 or higher in many populous jurisdictions, including the cities of Chicago and Los Angeles, and the states of California and Florida.

Second, cities and states enjoy high levels of autonomy over economic policy. Cities can usually set their own taxes, labour standards, housing standards, social assistance programmes and other basic economic policy measures (Judd and Hinze, 2018).² At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, they used this power selectively, mainly on policies (i.e., the minimum wage) that cost local government little (Doussard and Schrock, 2022a). Policies that redistributed resources face de facto financing constraints, i.e., raising city tax rates to fund transfers risks flight by enterprises and wealthier citizens paying tax bills.

Thus, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, cities faced significant barriers to converting interest in basic income into policy. A number of legislators, such as Chicago City Council Member, Ameya Pewar, had begun to propose basic income trial programmes. Yet no significant “push” factor had materialized to overcome the problem of financing either basic income trials or policy.

Emergency basic income in ten days: The COVID-19 crisis legitimizes cash transfer programmes

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and mandated home confinements in early 2020 created an acute economic loss that overwhelmed the constraints to cities enacting cash transfers and other forms of economic redistribution (Razavi et al., 2020). As state and local governments ordered business enterprises to close and citizens to stay home unless absolutely necessary, the major sources of work and earned income disappeared for massive numbers of low-wage workers, particularly those employed in the country’s large food service, hospitality and recreation sectors (Bartik et al., 2020). The United States’ meagre welfare system, which attached conditions and time limits to most forms of aid, magnified the problem (Hacker and Pierson, 2002).

COVID-19-induced business closures so obviously overwhelmed existing social programmes that politicians of all ideological leanings voted for emergency benefits. On 27 March 2020, the United States Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, a USD 2.2 trillion economic stimulus measure that financed extensive cash transfers. Most substantively, the CARES Act provided a one-off payment of USD 1,200 per adult (and

2. However, a growing number of state legislatures have acted to limit cities’ control over their own economy. See Kim and Warner (2018).

USD 500 per child) to the 88 per cent of United States' households with individual taxable annual income less than USD 98,000; USD 198,000 for couples.

These cash payments totalled about USD 300 billion. The CARES Act also authorized USD 340 billion in aid to state and local governments (Ways and Means Committee, 2020). That aid came with few restrictions and a mandate for government to spend quickly. Many local governments obliged by financing direct cash transfers. For example, Cook County, the 5.2 million-resident jurisdiction dominated by the city of Chicago, used a portion of its CARES Act funds to make USD 600 payments to more than 13,500 households (Yin, 2022). The City of St. Paul, Minnesota, went further, developing its own one-time cash-payment programme ("Bridge Funds for Families") while Congress negotiated the CARES Act, then using CARES Act Funds to launch a large basic income trial programme ("The Peoples' Prosperity Pilot") in September 2020 (Doussard, 2023).

The CARES Act thus created extensive lived experience of cash transfers – as well as providing positive economic results. The unemployment rate, which rose to 14.7 per cent in April 2020, began to decline as the first CARES Act payments were distributed. As one basic income pilot administrator later reflected, "we learned the government can fund cash transfers just fine when it wants to". Still, the short-term situation for workers left vulnerable by the pandemic was dire. Even with the spate of government programmes devoted to remedying the pandemic's economic effects, poverty rose (Ronaghi and Scorsone, 2023). However, as the pandemic's negative economic consequences came into fuller view, cities found that the pandemic relaxed some of the common constraints on the policy making process. Unexpectedly, the rapid embrace of online "Zoom meetings" was a boon to experimental programmes. As professional routines were quickly rerouted online and non-essential decisions and programmes fell by the wayside, advocates for cash transfers found they could quickly and easily schedule online meetings with officials whose previously packed schedules extended even the simplest timeline for approving a new policy.

Additionally, the urgency to act as unemployment and infection rates soared replaced the conventionally slow pace of policy making, with fast decisions taken in favour of big changes. For example, the low-income city of Chelsea, Massachusetts, faced a budget crisis in April 2020 when costs for a city-run foodbank serving workers who had lost their jobs due to the pandemic reached hundreds of thousands of US dollars per week (Montlake, 2021). Observing the time and labour lost to staffing food pick-up sites, with queues that literally stretched around the block, Chelsea's government decided that month to replace the foodbank with gift cards for a large supermarket chain – and then to replace the gift cards with unrestricted debit cards – a programme called Chelsea Eats. The documentary film, *Raising the Floor*, memorably captures the city council

meetings in which the pandemic realities of exploding social programme costs and rising infection rates overwhelmed commonplace objections to unconditional cash transfers (Aviles, 2023). Initially, dissenters on Chelsea's city council fretted that Chelsea Eats was too big an experiment, that recipients might misuse the funds. Yet, when confronted with the city's soaring foodbank costs and the threat that long queues for food would drive community members back to jobs with high risk of infection, the critics relented.

This emergency cash transformed into viral cash thanks to the concerted efforts of national and local-level policy entrepreneurs. As the pandemic flared, these policy entrepreneurs extended their networks and cash programmes in ways that would help them outlast the pandemic. In June 2020, Michael Tubbs, former Mayor of Stockton, California, established Mayors for a Guaranteed Income, a national working group of mayors committed to propagating the policy. National-level think tanks and policy organizations, including the Economic Security Project, Community Change and Income Movement, followed by setting up coalitions to advocate for extending or making permanent many CARES Act transfers. This careful institutionalization of advocacy played out against the horrific backdrop of the murders of George Floyd, Brianna Taylor and several other black citizens by armed police. As the United States lurched towards a high-stakes presidential election, the idea that the COVID-19 pandemic had laid bare the country's increasingly intolerable social and economic inequalities was widespread, with public figures as improbable as a former United States Secretary of Defence arguing that uneven demographic exposure to the coronavirus could not be separated from systemic racism (Doussard and Schrock, 2022a).

Basic income arrives: The American Rescue Plan and disenchanting funders bankroll 100+ programmes

In December 2020, the first COVID-19 vaccinations inaugurated the pandemic's eventual decline. Viral cash received two boosters of its own. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, which was signed into law on 27 December 2020, authorized more than USD 900 billion in stimulus payments, including USD 166 billion for additional stimulus payments and USD 120 billion to extend unemployment benefits. In March 2021, newly elected President Biden signed his signature bill, the USD 1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). ARPA continued cash assistance in many forms, including the provision of USD 1,400 tax credits for most adults and combined extensions and enlargements of many refundable tax credits first authorized by the CARES Act and the Consolidated Appropriations Act (U.S. Senate Democrats, 2021; Rocco and Kass, 2022). The bill also relaxed standard means-testing criteria, opening eligibility for those tax

credits to many adult dependants and disabled people habitually excluded from means-tested programmes.

These diverse and extensive direct cash transfers provided the background to ARPA's most significant contribution to basic income, the dedication of USD 350 billion in minimally restricted aid to cities (as well as an additional USD 195 billion to states and USD 32 billion to indigenous tribal nations). In the 12 months prior to this, pandemic conditions, sustained community organizing, and ad hoc institution building had helped cities to build the infrastructure and expertise to run and evaluate a dizzying array of cash-transfer programmes. Now, ARPA flushed hundreds of billions of US dollars through this infrastructure, triggering a wave of basic income programmes, which were literally too numerous, varied and place-specific to count.

The largest basic income trials draw on ARPA's generous funding to enrol large numbers of recipients, often for monthly payments that push programme budgets to millions of US dollars. These trials eschew the term "universal basic income", which accentuates the high-tension welfare-state politics local programmes seek to avoid. Instead, policy entrepreneurs for basic income advocated for "guaranteed" basic income, emphasizing the no-strings-attached benefits of pilots while acknowledging those same pilots' selective enrolment.³ In distinction to universal basic income, guaranteed income programmes are means-tested, both as a matter of necessity given limited funding and often as a policy preference for activists rooted in prior social policy advocacy. Thus, the goals of guaranteed basic income trials differ from the goal of universal basic income. Yet, guaranteed income trials nevertheless influence the future direction of advocacy for universal basic income by developing policy, driving attention to the issue and distributing no-strings-attached cash to tens of thousands of households.

While selective, many guaranteed basic income pilots are large. For example, the Chicago Resilient Families pilot paid USD 500 per month to 5,000 participants for a year (a budget of USD 30 million plus administrative costs). The basic income trial in Cook County, which encompasses Chicago, enrolled 3,250 households for the same USD 500 payment over a 2-year period, a total disbursement cost of USD 39 million. Apart from similarly large ARPA-funded basic income trials in Los Angeles and (separately) Los Angeles County, other basic income demonstration projects have been typically smaller. In these projects, cities as geographically and economically varied as Long Beach (California), Baltimore (Maryland), Santa Fe (New Mexico) and Minneapolis (Minnesota) each enrolled 100–200 participants, typically paying about USD 500 per month. As publicly

3. Significantly, the designers of local pilots in the Netherlands also jettisoned the term "Universal Basic Income," referring instead to "trust experiments" and "experiments in low regulation". See Roosma (2022).

funded programmes, ARPA-funded pilots generally have broad eligibility criteria. For example, applications to Chicago Resilient Families were open to any household earning 250 per cent or less of the federally defined poverty level.

A majority of ARPA-funded basic income trials affiliate with Mayors for a Guaranteed Income, which has to date identified more than 100 planned, in-process or completed basic income trial programmes (Mayors for a Guaranteed Income, 2022). Affiliates of Mayors for a Guaranteed Income draw their funding from a range of sources, often including foundations and the non-ARPA portion of local government budgets. Several, including recently completed trials in New Orleans (Louisiana), Louisville (Kentucky) and Tacoma (Washington State), were funded in part by Mayors for a Guaranteed Income.

Basic income trials that minimize public funding or rely solely on private funding generally serve a more targeted population or test basic income as the solution to an enduring public policy problem. For example, in the city of Gainesville, Florida's Just Income provides basic income to formerly incarcerated people re-entering society. The programme responds to the general problems re-entering citizens face; however, programme directors emphasize a basic income's value for solving specific problems that plague recently released ex-felons, which may push them towards recidivism: lack of transportation, unstable housing and pre-existing consumer debt (O'Neill, 2023).

By early 2023, the numbers of public and, especially, private basic income pilots were growing too quickly to track. The expanding advocacy infrastructure for basic income programmes and policy provides a more reliable measure of the policy's expansion. Just as recent city-based organizing campaigns or urban economic policy, such as the Fight for \$15 minimum wage campaign, were joined by a national infrastructure of organizing and policy development institutions (Doussard and Schrock, 2022a), national advocacy for basic income draws on a well-developed infrastructure of organizations that fund, administer, evaluate and advocate for basic income.

Scaling up after the pandemic: Follow the networks, not the policy

By the time the WHO declared the pandemic's official end in May 2023, the acute conditions behind cities' expansion of basic income programmes were fading. The crisis no longer compelled swift action on deep inequalities, and ARPA cash was running out or approaching its legal spend-by date. Moreover, the booming economy had driven unemployment to a 50-year low. In the meantime, the political calculus behind pandemic cash and emergency basic income had also

changed. The Republican Party's successful capture of the United States House of Representatives in the 2022 election ended political support for ARPA-like cash programmes.

Strategies for expanding basic income by persuading larger, higher-scale and better-financed bodies of government to adopt the programme, constitute a dead end in the short term. Yet, they remain the most obvious goal for elected officials currently involved in municipal basic income pilots. The mayor of a major city with a basic income pilot described the strategy for expanding his city's ARPA-funded programme as one of "making the case" to higher scales of government to fund basic income. Simply expanding pilots with city financing, he noted, would not work – because cities levy flat (i.e., regressive) taxes, the tax revenue to finance a means-tested basic income would come from the people receiving a means-tested basic income. In light of this, federal policy is the primary path forward.

An ostensibly more modest approach to scaling up would entail consolidating the mix of county and municipal social support programmes operating in each city and county into a simplified, basic income. This approach mobilizes one of basic income supporters' strongest critiques of the status quo, in which the United States spends substantially on social support, but does so in an inefficient, patchwork way. Indeed, cities and counties enjoy so much discretion over some forms of social assistance that simply itemizing programmes currently on the books takes significant effort. The developer of a small, private basic income trial in a small Illinois city discovered this when examining potential benefits interactions for programme enrollees – even the mid-income, low-population county where the trial ran featured more than a dozen small and heavily means-tested social support programmes. Potentially, scale-up could be achieved by using the results of basic income trials as an incentive to combine, simplify and universalize these inadequate programmes (Standing, 2017). However, each of these programmes has its own administrative structure, funding source and invested parties, realities that led many administrators of United States' basic income trials to conclude that programme combination is too complicated and politically contested to be feasible.

The mismatch between local, heterogeneous basic income trials and the national-level political bargain needed to install a permanent basic income is far too wide for even the most favourable trial results to bridge. However, this does not indicate that basic income programmes lack popularity. Mayors and city council members describe the laws and votes needed to authorize their trial programmes as wholly uncontroversial. Basic income and other cash programmes have also managed to collect other supporters along the way. For example, not-for-profit organizations enlisted to recruit and enrol participants have added basic income to their organizational goals. In interviews, city

employees administering basic income trials stop without prompting to marvel at the ease and simplicity of the trials they oversee. Many point to the powerful, satisfying experience of being able to administer useful aid in dire times – a distinct improvement from the complicated and materially inadequate programmes cities relied on during the prior decade's austerity. Administrators in not-for-profit organizations with corporate representatives on their boards point to the stark turnaround in organized business interests' approach to basic income programmes, which they now embrace as a way of ensuring a continuous supply of capable workers.

Thus, moving past the aspiration of combining extant social programmes into a single basic income, opens the way for moving towards basic income by making individual programmes simpler and more generous. Many programme administrators interviewed by the author have drawn on their experience with basic income to add cash, simplify eligibility or broaden access to other public programmes. Furthermore, municipal equity offices and other personnel overseeing basic income programmes have used their position to install additional trials, establish spin-off programmes and unite community organizations with donors willing to support basic income (Doussard, 2023). More ambitiously, members of the national policy entrepreneurship network providing model policies and analysis for basic income trials have organized to win follow-up state-level legislation expanding means-tested cash transfers (Ahmad and Landry, 2023). In short, no direct pathway for converting basic income trials into universal basic income exists, but municipal basic income pilots lead some existing social programmes to look and act more like basic income (Doussard, 2023).

Previous studies of cash transfers and other mobile policies like basic income trace the semi-structured evolution of policy ideas by following the policy as it traverses jurisdictions and scales (Peck and Theodore, 2015). The rapid development of policy entrepreneurship networks in the United States, and the diffusion of basic income policy principles into other programmes suggests the need to follow policy making networks whose relationships position them to graft ideas from basic income onto other policies and programmes.

To illustrate the point, this article offers brief synopses of three varied basic income trials initiated during the pandemic. The first, Chicago Resilient Communities, was developed by a mayor's office appointee focused on inequality, with the specific goal of building support for permanent cash transfers. The second, the Denver Basic Income Project, combines private and public funding to test basic income's contributions to mitigating the challenges facing that city's homeless population. The third, Louisville, Kentucky's YALift, combines support from Mayors for a Guaranteed Income and local funders to finance a youth basic income administered by a community organization

running multiple programmes on the city's black West Side. Following the networks, rather than the policies, reveals varied pathways from these programmes to changes in public policy and programme delivery.

Chicago Resilient Communities

Administered by the city's Department of Family and Support Services, the Chicago Resilient Communities basic income pilot plays a major role in the city's multiplying policy interventions focused on inequality. The pilot came about as the result of significant political change in the city, where political novice Lori Lightfoot, a black public prosecutor, was elected in 2019 as the first Mayor in decades not attached to Chicago's Democratic Party political machine. In her first year in office, Lightfoot founded a new Office of Equity and Racial Justice and hired a Chief of Policy directed to focus on economic inequality. The Chicago Resilient Communities trial operates alongside other economic interventions ranging from a USD 15 minimum wage to affordable housing investment and reform to the city's property tax spending. The pilot has already led to other pilots in Chicago, and beyond. For example, the City of Chicago also operates the Chicago Resiliency Fund 2.0, a USD 14 million programme making one-time USD 500 cash payments to workers who fell short of meeting the eligibility criteria for federal pandemic relief funds. Chicago Resilient Communities also provided the impetus for Cook County's basic income programme, for a private Chicago basic income programme for recently incarcerated people, and for two basic income pilots in the north suburb of Evanston.

In 2023, newly elected mayor Brandon Johnson, a former organizer with the Chicago Teachers Union, succeeded Lightfoot. He identified making Chicago Resilient Communities permanent as a principal policy goal. As ARPA funding nears its end, this goal is running into the familiar fiscal barriers that limited United States' urban policy before the pandemic. The forms of tax revenue Chicago controls directly, the sales and property tax, have already reached rates likely to induce some out-migration by wealthier citizens (and poorer citizens, who disproportionately bear the burden of consumption taxes). Thus, while Johnson and many members of his team remain vocal champions of basic income, near-term prospects for expanding the policy are poor. The most likely policy spill over from Chicago Resilient Communities is state-level legislation to institute a child tax credit for Illinois (the electorate of which votes overwhelmingly for the Democratic Party), a legislative proposal that faltered in the state's spring 2023 legislative session.

Denver Basic Income Project

Denver (Colorado) adopted a homeless-focused basic income trial in early 2022. Whereas Chicago Resilient Communities was publicly developed from the start, Denver's programme was developed by a private entrepreneur and not-for-profit organizations. The programme started as a response to pandemic-specific challenges of housing shortages, exposure to COVID-19 infection and turmoil in social service delivery. Quickly obtaining donor funding, the Denver Basic Income Project was set up as a not-for-profit organization with a board comprised of homeless advocacy organizations, homeless service organizations and general social services organizations. Where broader basic income programmes were authorized by a cross-section of politicians, Denver's programme was thus developed by a cohort of specialists focused on the specific challenges of homelessness and housing. By the time the Denver City Council agreed to dedicate USD 2 million in ARPA funding to the basic income programme, this close cohort of activists and service providers had developed a detailed plan for reaching out to and staying in touch with programme participants whose defining characteristic of housing instability makes continuous contact and cash payment difficult. Thus, public funding for Denver's basic income funds a far more targeted and labour-intensive programme than the less hands-on transfers of broader programmes developed through the political process.

Focusing on the problem of homelessness also gives the Denver Basic Income Project a different pathway to future expansion. First, running the project through a board of homeless advocates and homeless-serving organizations active in local politics has rooted basic income in a specific advocacy network. Second, the high visibility of Denver's homeless population, and the city's rampant housing affordability problems, has driven public attention to the issue. As a result, the problem of homelessness, rather than interest in basic income per se, elevates basic income in the local policy agenda. This, in turn, provides specific pathways to future expansion. Most notably, Colorado instituted a permanent, refundable tax credit for low-income families in the 2023 legislative session, establishing a permanent transfer that many of those involved attribute to the visibility of basic income (Doussard, 2023).

Louisville YALift

Publicly funded basic income programmes are centred in politically progressive cities, and in states whose legislatures have not curbed cities' economic policy making power. Thus, Louisville, Kentucky's YALift, a programme targeting

young adults in three of the city's historically black neighbourhoods, stands out as a model for basic income amidst politically unfavourable circumstances. Not only does YALift receive no public funding, its administrators also dedicated significant time and resources to reminding a sceptical public that no city or state support was involved. Following its goal of supporting pilots outside large, politically progressive cities, Mayors for a Guaranteed Income provided the programme's principal funding. YALift's ties to the pandemic were comparatively limited. While the programme emphasizes COVID-19 in its framing of vulnerability, YALift functioned as a spill-over programme built on the general diffusion of basic income trials during the pandemic. The Metro Louisville United Way, the region's major charitable organization, administered and partially funded the programme. Major decisions about focus, eligibility and goals were made by the neighbourhood-focused, not-for-profit initiative Russell: A Place of Promise (RPOP). RPOP focused on alternative economic development for the low-income and historically black Russell neighbourhood on Louisville's West Side. Tying the pilot to RPOP, which had already established worker-owned cooperatives and run a job-training programme for neighbourhood residents, thus grounded basic income in an organization with dedicated working relationships with businesses, government and other community organizations.

Those organizations provide the principal conduits for building broader support for basic income. The United Way's diverse economic development activities, and its role as organizer of charity programmes supported by the city's business establishment, gave its personnel opportunities to sell business interests on basic income, with surprising success. A programme administrator recalled several significant reversals by business leaders who initially opposed YALift as an ill-advised handout to youth, then reversed course when confronted with evidence of participants' increased labour market activity. In addition to persuasion, the United Way provided a mechanism for less formal programming spill overs, including the decision to add cash stipends to job-training programmes as a way of ensuring trainees could participate without interruption or short-term economic disadvantage.

Diverse urban politics and varied experiments: From universal basic income to place-specific cash policy

The development of these unique programmes and hundreds more like them in other cities points to the stealth diffusion of basic income across the United States. In their 2017 assessment of basic income's prospects, Van Parijs and Vanderborght pointed to the possibility of implementing basic income via a figurative back door (Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017). The phenomenon of

viral cash contributes to this back-door adoption. Thanks to local policy entrepreneurs emboldened by the success of COVID-era cash transfers, local-level basic income programmes continue to expand, even as the pandemic-era stimulus that funded them dries up.

Experimental, time-limited and means-tested, none of these programmes constitute anything close to the goal of universal basic income. Instead, these efforts extend many of basic income's core principles – unconditional cash, broad eligibility, limited programme registration requirements – to extant and new policies and programmes focused on the underlying challenge of social and economic inequality. Following the diffusion of policies labelled as basic income provides a limited picture of this change.

Following basic income implementers by contrast provides a fuller picture and enables us to see the influence of basic income on other social policies. At least three features of basic income programmes in cities and counties across the United States contribute to the diffusion of basic income principles beyond the pandemic conditions that ensured the policy's breakthrough.

- First, the local institutions implementing basic income trials expand the policy directly. Public officers, such as Chicago's Director of Policy, policy offices such as the city of St. Paul's Office of Financial Empowerment, and not-for-profits, such as the Denver Basic Income Project's governing board, follow one-time basic income trial programmes by pushing (successfully) to extend their trials, replicate the policy for new areas, or apply the principles of cash and broad eligibility to other programmes.

- Second, these same mechanisms attach basic income to specific, narrow policy problems to which local government bodies already dedicate substantial time, budget and organizational resources. Thus, while the national-level politics of universal basic income continues as something close to a dead end, basic income is now part of the politics of homelessness in Denver, the response to disinvestment and segregation in Louisville and policy addressing working poverty in Chicago. Similar localizations of basic income politics are evident in numerous other programmes that cannot be covered in this article.

- Third, basic income programmes appear to spill over regionally. Chicago Resilient Families, for example, provided the foundation for Cook County's large basic income programme, for privately funded spin-off programmes in Chicago, and for multiple basic income pilots in the suburb of Evanston. Similar local diffusions are visible elsewhere, with multiple programmes branching out from initial efforts in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Atlanta, San Francisco, Los Angeles and elsewhere. Crucially, some of the diffusions, such as the founding of state-level child tax credit programmes in Colorado, Minnesota, New Jersey and Oregon, constitute permanent changes to the social safety net (Ahmad and Landry, 2023). This surprising extension and hybridization of pandemic-era basic income

programmes means that evaluating basic income's growth requires scholars to focus on a much broader range of policies and programmes than basic income per se. Distant though the prospects of fully universal basic income in the United States remain, the ethic of basic income – no-strings-attached cash as both a better approach to social policy and a smarter fix to intractable problems such as homelessness – is flourishing. The spread of cash-based programmes began with emergency basic income and the specific conditions of pandemic confinements. Yet where vaccines halted the pandemic and eventually paved the way for the return of the status quo ante, viral cash continues to spread.

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