

THE DIGNITY DIVIDEND

LESSONS LEARNED
FROM GUARANTEED
INCOME PILOTS
IN MASSACHUSETTS



Wide-Ranging Research Questions

- How do cash payments affect employment?
- How is the money spent?
- Does GI improve long-term career trajectories and financial security?
- Does GI improve physical or mental health?
- Does GI improve housing stability?
- What payment amounts and durations are most effective?
- How do administrative costs for GI compare to traditional programs?
- Do short-term gains persist after payments stop?
- How does GI compare to other anti-poverty interventions?
- If done at scale, does GI contribute to inflation?

The Research Backdrop

COVID-19 context

- Overlapping interventions and rapid macroeconomic rebound make isolating GI impact tricky.

Programs were time-limited

- Participants knew payments would stop, affecting spending behavior (e.g., long-term leases).

Modest monthly payment levels

- e.g., \$500/month for a household of 4 means only \$125/person

Flexibility of cash leads to diffuse benefits

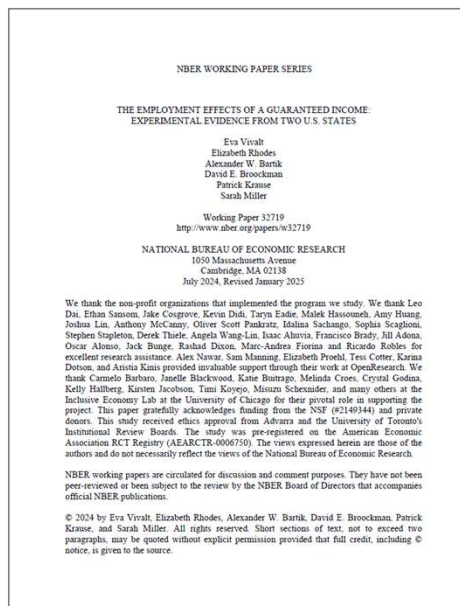
The Unconditional Cash Study by OpenResearch

Scale of Program

- Three-year duration, longer than most
- \$1,000/month, higher than most
- 3,000 low-income individuals across two states (Texas and Illinois)

Evaluation Details

- Control group received \$50/month
- Very low attrition rate
- Paired survey responses with administrative data (credit reports, health metrics).
- Ongoing tracking of participants post program



Conflicting interpretations of the same study...

Noahpinion



BI Business Insider

The basic income myth: cash discourages work

Guaranteed basic income critics often argue cash discourages work. Experts and participants say that's a myth.

Sep 28, 2024



3. More disappointing results for basic income

Three weeks ago, I [flagged some mildly disappointing results](#) from a basic income project in Denver. Now we have the results of a [far bigger and longer randomized controlled trial](#) of basic income in northern Illinois and central Texas, and the results are even more disappointing. This is from a [paper by Vivalt et al.](#) summarizing the main results:

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

Research Note: With Stronger Income Support, Young Adults Shifted Focus From Work to School, Major Study Finds

A study in Texas and Illinois found that giving young adults in their 20s a sizable guaranteed income for three years increased the time they spent in...

Jan 29, 2025



BI Business Insider

New findings from Sam Altman's basic-income study challenge one of the main arguments against the idea

New findings from Sam Altman's basic-income study show recipients valued work more after getting monthly payments.

Dec 2, 2024



John Arnold ✓
@JohnArnoldFndtn



Consensus among academics is that results of the OpenResearch UBI study were between mixed and disappointing. Yet most articles in the popular press (Forbes, Bloomberg, Vox, NPR, Quartz) characterize the results in a positive tone and ignore or bury the null/negative results.

The New York Times

The Report Card on Guaranteed Income Is Still Incomplete

A three-year analysis of unconditional cash stipends concluded that the initiative has had some success, but not the transformational impact...

Aug 30, 2024



Fortune

How a Sam Altman-backed study into guaranteed income was widely misinterpreted

The takeaway for many reporters and pundits from OpenResearch's Unconditional Cash Study was that guaranteed income makes people "less..."

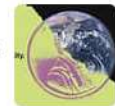
Sep 4, 2024



economicsecurityproject.org
<https://economicsecurityproject.org/news/new-open...>

New OpenResearch Results Further Prove Guaranteed ...

OpenResearch's findings further underscore how guaranteed income can serve as a mechanism to help people plan for the future, to foster economic mobility, ...



BOSTON INDICATORS

Chelsea Eats

- Launched at height of COVID in Chelsea
- Led by city and Shah Foundation to supplement food distribution efforts
- ~2,200 households (15% of city households)
- Monthly cash payments of \$200–\$400
- Relatively short 6-to-9-month duration
- RCT design with low attrition
- Paired survey responses with administrative data (e.g. Chelsea Public Schools)

The Chelsea Eats Program: Experimental Impacts

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Pamela Portocarrero^a

Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston Working Paper
December 2022

Abstract

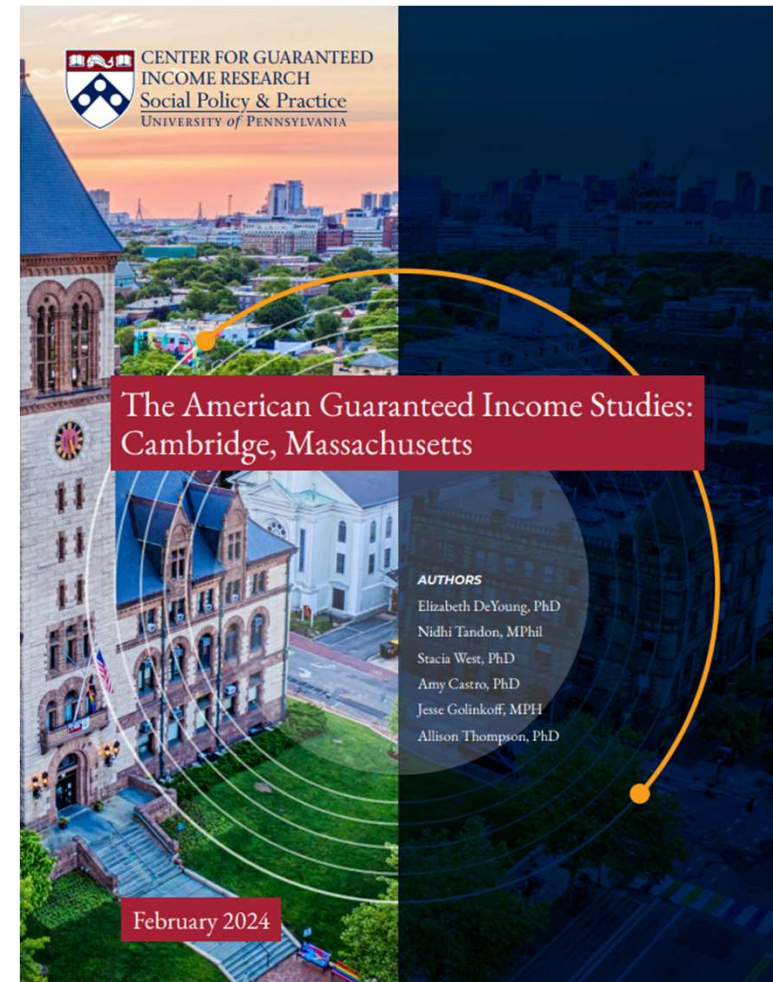
In the midst of the 2020 Covid economic shutdown, 2213 households from a highly food-insecure population in Chelsea, Massachusetts were selected by lottery to receive a cash card that was restocked with up to \$400 each month for nine months. This program, called Chelsea Eats, provides an opportunity to assess the causal effects of income on food consumption, financial well-being, and a variety of potential downstream impacts using a randomized controlled design. As 15 percent of Chelsea households received a cash card, it also offers the opportunity to assess some of the broader impacts of a basic income program operating at scale. We find that the treatment group had higher food expenditures, greater consumption of fish and fresh meat, and greater food satisfaction than the control group. The treatment group also had lower levels of financial distress. In early months of the program, we observed a decline in food insecurity for the treatment group compared with the control group, but that difference did not persist. There were no statistically significant treatment-control differences in the two pre-specified primary downstream outcomes: self-reported physical/mental health and child school attendance. Receiving the cash cards did not reduce employment or hours of work. Among secondary outcomes (results that should be seen as tentative because of the risk of type I error when many endpoints are examined), there was a reduction in residential moves and an increase in pregnancy.

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Cambridge RISE

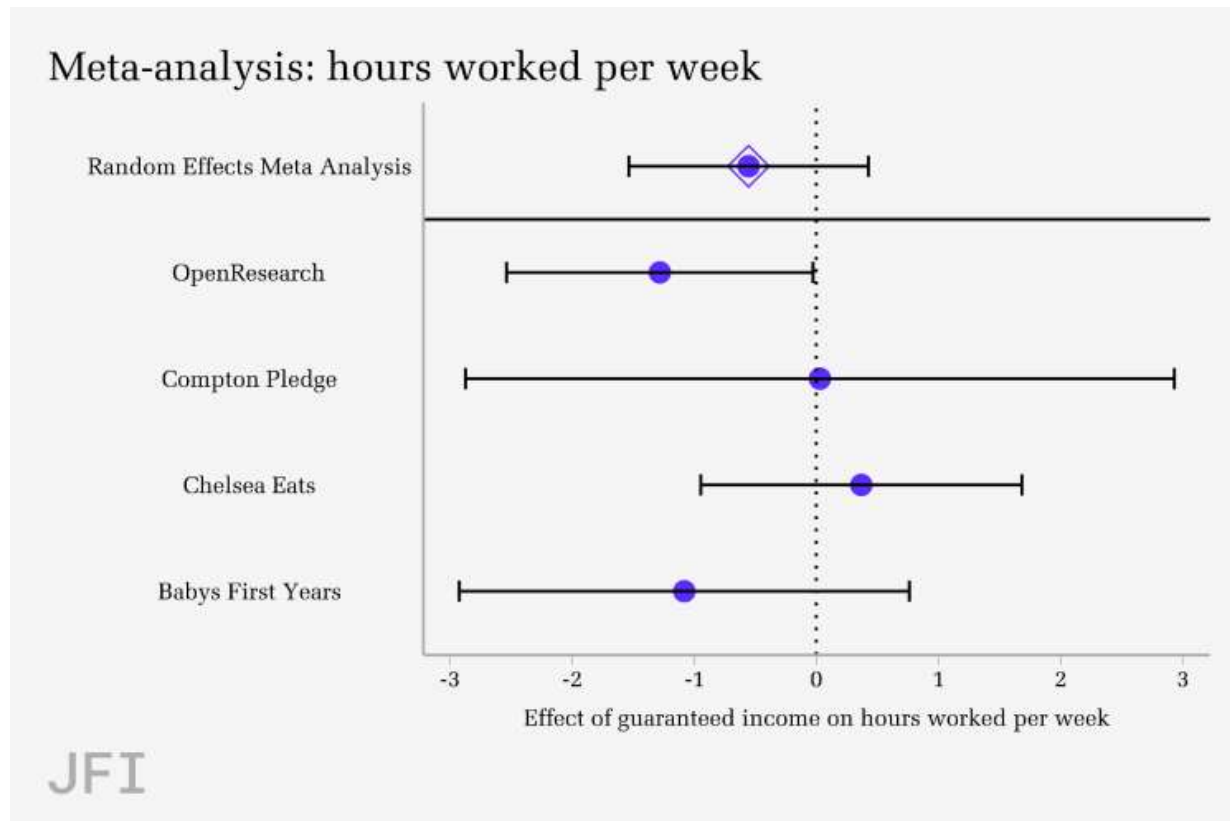
- City of Cambridge has emerged as a leader in GI, launching multiple efforts in recent years.
- Initial Cambridge RISE pilot (2021) used an RCT.
- Small program size (130) and somewhat high attrition rate (30%) over 18 months.
- Precursor to Rise Up Cambridge (June 2023-Feb 2025), which expanded program significantly with a universal approach covering ~2,000 households
 - Evaluation of Rise Up is underway.



Labor Force Participation

- Chelsea Eats and Cambridge RISE showed no meaningful employment reductions.
 - Cambridge=most optimistic local results. Participants saw full-time employment rise from 36 percent to 40 percent, while control group's rate declined by 2 percentage points.
- OpenResearch found a small reduction: 2 percentage points less likely to be employed, 1.3 fewer hours per week. And earned income decline by about 5 percent.
 - This reduction was concentrated among participants under 30 who used some of the time for education or caregiving
 - Leisure time went up for all age groups.

Labor Force Participation



Meta-analysis from *Guaranteed Income In The Wild: Summarizing Evidence From Pilot Studies and Implications for Policy*, Jain Family Institute

Spending, Savings, and Debt

Short-term spending

- Funds overwhelmingly used for essentials: food, housing, transportation.
- Helps participants reduce financial stress.
- No increase in spending on non-essentials or luxury goods.
- OpenResearch: Credit scores increased by an average of six points.

Savings and Debt

- OpenResearch: Participants slightly more likely to pay down debt and build emergency savings.
- Other studies (Compton Pledge) found some people able to avoid new debt or pay off small balances.

Education & Entrepreneurship

- Participants more likely to engage in job training or entrepreneurial activity, especially younger adults
- Cash allowed financial risk taking, reduced hours at low-wage jobs, paid for course fees/startup expenses
- Increased entrepreneurial intention, though no direct business creation during short pilots
- Cambridge RISE found modest improvements in children's academic outcomes and increased parents' expectations for their children's education.

Health & Mental Health

Health

- Chelsea Eats: 27% decrease in emergency room visits. Other studies don't find this reduction.
- Baby's First Years: Saw some faster brain development among infants in families receiving cash transfers.
- There are some new MA pilots focused on birth outcomes, child development, and disease management.

Mental Health

- Qualitative research consistently finds strong appreciation for how unconditional cash provides flexibility, dignity and personal agency.
- Most find improvements with stress, depression, or self-reported mental health. Some effects fade.

Housing & Food Security

Housing:

- Participants feel better able to pay rent, cover utilities. And less likely to face eviction.
- But...rare to see statistically significant changes in housing stability or rent burden.
- Denver Basic Income Project (targeting homeless adults): Homelessness declined, but not statistically significant for treatment vs. control in long-term stability

Food Security:

- Chelsea Eats and OpenResearch: Early improvements in food security. Some gains faded.
- Baby's First Years, Chelsea Eats, OpenResearch all found improvements in food quality – i.e. more fresh produce and higher satisfaction with meals
- Interestingly, use of food distribution in Chelsea actually increased among treatment group, suggesting trust building and complementarities

Beyond Local Pilots: Lessons From Longer-Running Cash Programs

- Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend
- Eastern Cherokee Casino Revenue Payments
- Unconditional Cash Transfers in Low- and Middle-Income Countries
- COVID-19 Federal Stimulus Payments
- Expanded Child Tax Credit

Thank you!

Please sign up for the Boston Indicators email distribution list to receive our latest research:



BOSTON INDICATORS

Today's Presentation:

- **Overview** of 24 guaranteed income programs across Massachusetts
- **Key themes** from interviews with program administrators
- **Spotlight** on Camp Harbor View's successful model
- **Strategic pathways** for scaling and implementation




LESSONS LEARNED FROM GUARANTEED INCOME PILOTS IN MASSACHUSETTS

Catalog of Guaranteed Income Programs in Massachusetts

Catalog of Guaranteed Income Programs in Massachusetts

Search in table Page 1 of 3 >

Program (Location)	Total Participants	Target Population	Duration of Payments/Timeframe	Payment Amount	Funding Source
BAY-CASH (Greater Boston)	60	18–24-year-olds experiencing homelessness	24 months (anticipated launch in fall 2025)	\$1,200/month + \$3,000 one-time payment	ARPA, philanthropic
Beautiful Seed Fund (Greater Boston)	35	Black community leaders	12 months (2024–2025)	\$500/month + \$2,000 lump sum at enrollment + two lump sum payments of \$1,000 at midpoints	Philanthropic
The Bridge Project (Boston)	TBD	Mothers with low incomes, pregnancy through first 1,000 days of baby's life	36 months (anticipated launch in 2025)	one-time prenatal stipend of \$1,125, followed by monthly payments of \$750 for the first 15 months, and \$375 for the final 21 months	Philanthropic
Bridge to Prosperity (Boston, Worcester, Springfield)	18	People participating in at least one DTA-administered benefit and self-identified as having and being committed to pursuing financial or career goals	24 months (2025–2027)	\$300, \$500, or \$700/month (based on projected benefit cliff), and \$10,000 at program completion	ARPA, state, philanthropic
Cambridge RISE (Cambridge)	130	Residents age 18+, below 80% AMI, single caregivers with at least one child under 18	18 months (2021–2022)	\$500/month	ARPA, philanthropic
Rise Up Cambridge (Cambridge)	1,900	Households with a child under the age of 21, at or below 250% FPL	18 months (2023–2025)	\$500/month	ARPA
Camp Harbor View Pilot, phase 1 (Boston)	50	Participants of Camp Harbor View Summer Camp and the Leadership Academy programs, income below \$70,500 and not receiving income-based housing assistance	24 months (2021–2023)	\$583/month	Philanthropic
Camp Harbor View Pilot, phase 2 (Boston)	38	Participants of Camp Harbor View's Leadership Academy, below 80% AMI and not receiving income-based housing assistance	28 months (2024–2026)	\$652.90/month	Philanthropic

 Complete catalog of all 24 programs available in the full report appendix



- **Research Approach:** 9 in-depth interviews with 17 individuals across 12 organizations, plus review of evaluations, websites, and media coverage
- **24** Total GI Programs, **12** Organizations Interviewed
- **Interview Participants**
 - **Program Leaders** Directors and coordinators from GI programs across the Commonwealth
 - **Municipal Staff** City officials from Cambridge, Chelsea, Somerville, and Salem
 - **Evaluators & Nonprofits** Research teams and nonprofit administrators implementing programs



SYNTHESIS OF MASSACHUSETTS GUARANTEED INCOME PROGRAMS

Key Themes from Interviews

- 💰 **Responsible Spending** Across all programs, participants overwhelmingly use cash for essentials: food, housing, transportation, and utilities. No evidence of misuse.
- 🏠 **Dignity & Choice** "GI restores dignity and choice to people that they should have had from the beginning" - Program Administrator
- 👨‍👩‍👧 **Family Impact** United South End Settlements: Nightly reading to children rose from 7% to 33% in just months. "Mom happy, baby happy."
- ⚖️ **Stabilization vs. Mobility** Programs show evidence of stabilization enabling other positive changes, rather than direct economic mobility transformation.

Core Finding: GI creates conditions for advancement rather than directly producing economic mobility, providing essential stability that enables families to pursue longer-term goals.

Program design approaches

Funding Models:

- Private Philanthropy
- Federal Relief Funds
- Public-Private Partnerships

Target Population Strategies:

- Income-Based Targeting
- Program Participation
- Experience-Based

Payment Structure Variations:

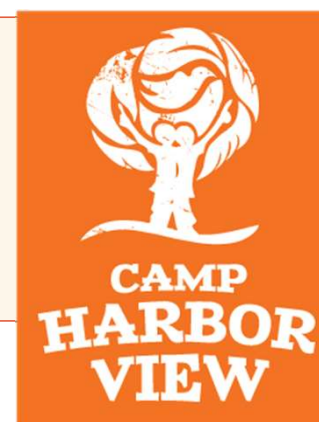
- Amount Range: \$200-\$2,000/month (most programs \$400-\$600)
- Duration: 12-36 months (18 months most common)
- Special Models: Completion bonuses, step-down payments, etc.

Key Design Decisions: Massachusetts programs made strategic choices about funding, targeting, payment structure, and duration based on local needs and constraints.



Program Spotlight - Camp Harbor View Guaranteed Income Program

Why This Program Stands Out: One of the largest privately funded GI programs in the U.S., targeting the "mighty middle" - families earning too much for benefits but still struggling financially.




Program Design


- **Target:** Families connected to youth programming earning less than \$70,500 per adult household member - above typical housing assistance thresholds to avoid benefit cliffs.
- **Approach:** Monthly payments of \$583-\$653 for 24-28 months, plus optional EmPath mobility mentoring and regular community gatherings.

Camp Harbor View Success Factors

 **Strategic Targeting** Focuses on "benefit cliff" families - those earning too much for public assistance but facing serious financial strain.





 **Community Connection**
Builds on existing relationships through youth programming, ensuring trust and engagement.

 **Private Funding Model** Entirely philanthropically funded, demonstrating sustainability through donor engagement and proven outcomes.

 **Research-Informed** Independent evaluation with treatment/control groups showed improvements in financial stability and family well-being.

Key Outcomes: Evaluation found significant improvements in financial stability, reduced anxiety, and enhanced family well-being. The model informed permanent program design and expansion.

Pathways Forward

-  **Go Big at State Level** - Create state-level GI program, expand EITC to increase its generosity, cover additional populations like those with no earned income, and/or scale up Child and Family Tax Credit significantly for transformative reach.
-  **Make Programs More "Cash-Like"** - Redesign existing programs to capture GI benefits. Add cash supplements to food distribution, home visiting, and other services.
-  **Support Targeted Populations** - Immigrant households, young adults aging out of foster care, people reentering from incarceration, and those facing medical crises.
-  **Cash Benchmarking** - Evaluate new programs against simple cash transfers. If programs don't outperform cash alone, choose cash-based supports instead.

Core Insight: Trusting people with resources and giving them freedom to decide how to use them works. The question is how Massachusetts will build on this foundation.