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Welfare Without Stigma

Contribution to GTI Forum [Universal Basic Income: Has the Time Come?](#)

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I will first situate myself as a basic income advocate, but not a basic income true believer. I came to support it after conducting several research studies with people actually living in poverty in Canada who were trying to work or study their way out of the poverty trap and witnessing firsthand the dehumanizing, stigmatizing rigmarole through which poor people have to go in order to access the welfare state supports many UBI critics are worried about a basic income replacing. I fully agree that our health, education, and other systems of public goods need more investment and need to be defended. But I cannot shake what I know to be true after working with and advocating alongside people who live in poverty: that even people living in a fairly generous welfare state machine need money to grease its wheels. And wherever we develop a more complex bureaucracy to dole out money, the people just trying to live have to jump through more hoops, plead their case to more bureaucrats, and prove their worth or their desperation to more committees—and their lives get harder.

What I have found through my research with people struggling to make ends meet is that they are most deeply affected by the shame and exclusion of not being able to get or retain employment in a society where, even with social assistance payments, bare survival hinges on selling one's labor in exchange for a paycheck. While the people I have surveyed and interviewed for my research—poor, rich, or in between—want to be, and find meaning in being, productive, they are also demonstrably harmed by the way our societies value human beings mainly in terms of their waged work. I have not seen any proposal, other than basic income, that simultaneously addresses poverty and challenges the wage-centric determination of human worth. I am open to alternatives.

A problem with some of the recurring critiques of basic income is that they assume that a basic income would be introduced in a social policy vacuum—that nothing else would have to be changed at the same time, and therefore all manner of unintended consequences would fall like dominoes. The potential unintended consequences—reactions from employers and investors, individual labor market behaviors, all of them theoretical—are not convincing reasons to walk away from a basic income. Admittedly, this is true of any change in the redistributive architecture. Raising the minimum wage, changing the length of the workweek, introducing publicly funded child care—all of these have unintended consequences that have to be anticipated and mitigated. If we rejected every proposal for change because it would require some additional tinkering with established institutions, we would never do anything bold.

About the Author



Karen Foster is Associate Professor in Dalhousie University's Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, where she holds the Canada Research Chair in Sustainable Rural Futures for Atlantic Canada and leads the Rural Futures Research Centre. An expert in social research methodology, she teaches and researches in the areas of rural sociology; work, economy, and development; and poverty and social inequality. Her current research includes studies of rural occupational succession, rural housing and disability, perceptions of climate change in Atlantic Canada, and the global footprint of Nova Scotia's local food production. She is the author of three books, including *Productivity and Prosperity: A Historical Sociology of Productivist Thought*. She holds a PhD in sociology from Carleton University.

About the Publication

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