



How to Frame Guaranteed Income Policy

A review of literature

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 implementation 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 2014 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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Introduction

The resurgence of public interest in guaranteed income (GI) policy has created a window of opportunity to build public support for GI as an essential component of a robust social safety net. It is clear, however, that the growing body of research demonstrating the effectiveness of GI is not sufficient to create the kind of public support necessary to make the transition from idea to reality. The greatest obstacle to a national guaranteed income policy is not a lack of evidence, but a lack of political will. Building that political will requires consistent and effective messaging that can gradually change public attitudes toward GI, poverty, and the welfare state over time.

This document provides an overview of existing research on GI-related messaging and public attitudes, including relevant attitudes toward social support programs more broadly. The sections are organized as follows:

- [Section 1](#): provides a discussion of the various names used to describe GI policies.
- [Section 2](#): surveys recent polling on both temporary cash assistance in response to crises and guaranteed income, providing a view of the current state of national support for unconditional cash transfer programs.
- [Section 3](#): reviews recent research on the relative effectiveness of different ways of framing GI policy for the public.
- [Section 4](#): focuses on the ways in which different frames can influence how recipients of cash transfers feel about themselves and the programs they participate in.
- [Section 5](#): focuses more broadly on research into public attitudes toward poverty and welfare. These broader attitudes are essential to understanding why different GI frames are more or less effective and may provide clues to the development of more effective messaging strategies.
- [Section 6](#): covers additional work that may be relevant to GI messaging research.

A clearer account of existing research related to GI messaging allows us to both refine our messaging in the short-term and clarify the open questions that still need to be researched to develop a fuller understanding of public attitudes toward guaranteed income policy. This task is particularly urgent because there is so little evidence available on this topic. While it appears that attitudes toward guaranteed income are correlated with attitudes toward welfare policies more broadly, we simply do not know which frames or labels generate the broadest support for GI policy. We also do not know much about how different demographic groups perceive GI beyond supporting or opposing it. This document should be understood to provide more questions than answers, reviewing the limited research available to identify key points which warrant further research.

Naming Guaranteed Income

The most basic question for messaging around guaranteed income—or any policy—is what to call it. While contextual frames are important, it is the name of the policy that will be repeated and remembered most. The values and attitudes associated with how GI is labeled are therefore a primary consideration for messaging research. In addition to these associations, it is important to remember that the actual policy details associated with the various names for guaranteed income are not always clear. Efforts should be made to be explicit about the kind of policy being described by a given label when designing survey questions or presenting research.

In recent years *guaranteed income* has become the preferred term for **recurring, unrestricted, and unconditional** cash transfer policies for many major organizational proponents of direct cash support (including JFI, Economic Security Project, and the Aspen Institute) as well as for many prominent pilot programs, including Stockton SEED, The Magnolia Mothers Trust, and the task forces exploring pilots in Newark and Chicago. *Recurring* means that cash transfers happen repeatedly on a regular schedule. *Unrestricted* means that recipients are free to spend the money however they choose without being restricted to certain goods like food. *Unconditional* means that recipients do not have to perform certain activities, like working or attending school, in order to qualify.

While guaranteed income is always unconditional, it may be *targeted* toward people below a certain income threshold. Targeting can take place at the *front end* through means-testing or at the *back end* through an income phase-out, meaning that everyone receives the benefit but people with higher incomes pay back some or all of this benefit through taxes. This targeting is distinct from conditionality, which refers to behavioral requirements for benefit recipients. Guaranteed income can be both unconditional and targeted.

Universal basic income (UBI) refers to a guaranteed income that is both unconditional and untargeted. UBI has significantly more public recognition as a description of guaranteed income policies in the United States and is the term most commonly used by U.S. media outlets. This popularity has been reinforced in recent years by Andrew Yang's 2020 presidential campaign which advocated for a "freedom dividend" described as a UBI of \$1,000 per month, bringing significant public attention to the policy. Polling and surveys measuring public attitudes often use the more familiar "UBI" label rather than guaranteed income. A UBI is also sometimes referred to as an "unconditional basic income," though this term is less common. It is also worth noting that while the term "basic income" has often been used to describe an income sufficient to meet basic needs, many in Europe—and increasingly in the U.S.—do not view basic income as implying a particular amount in this way.

It is important to keep in mind that there is still not a universal consensus around how to define these various terms for cash transfers. In their 2020 report [Universal Basic Income: What's in a Name?](#), the Stanford Basic Income Lab presents universality as a key distinction between UBI and guaranteed income, with the latter presented as means-tested based on income by definition. This differs from the alternative understanding of guaranteed income as a broad category which includes both targeted programs and universal ones such as a UBI. In this document, guaranteed income will be used in the more expansive sense, with a UBI understood as one form that a guaranteed income program might take.

The related concept of a “negative income tax” is also sometimes included in discussions of guaranteed income. A negative income tax would provide an annual tax rebate (potentially distributed in monthly installments) to anyone with income below a certain threshold sufficient to bring their earnings up to an established baseline, ensuring that everyone received at least this minimum level of income each year. This idea gained broader popularity in the 1960s as a result of advocacy by the economist Milton Friedman, though its roots in economic thinking stretch back further than this. Unlike a UBI, a negative income tax would result in payments only to those with low earnings in order to bring them up to the established level. This means that it would involve the kind of front end means-testing that often acts as an administrative barrier for eligible households.

In addition to their effects on public support, these different labels for guaranteed income policies can have cultural and historical connotations that should be taken into consideration. For example, the concept of a “negative income tax” is unlikely to be a particularly effective label as it is both framed as “negative” and centers the idea of a “tax,” which is historically unpopular in American political discourse. Even when this idea had its greatest levels of political support during the Nixon administration, its name was changed to the more appealing “Family Assistance Plan.”

Anne Price has [argued](#) that the term “UBI” has developed connotations that reduce its effectiveness when engaging with advocates for racial and economic justice. In her view, its use by wealthy businessmen like Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, and Andrew Yang, has reduced its effectiveness in other contexts, since those tech leaders present it primarily as a response to automation-driven job loss while ignoring other important forms of structural inequality that this kind of policy can address. The term “guaranteed income,” on the other hand, is directly connected to older struggles against racial and economic inequality. Martin Luther King Jr. used “guaranteed income,” making it more resonant for advocates focusing on these issues. Questions of the relative responsiveness of different demographic and political groups to different labels for guaranteed income remain important topics for future messaging research.

Polling

Overall conclusions from recent polling are that **national support for a \$1,000 per month guaranteed income stands somewhere between 40 and 50%**, while support for temporary but recurring cash transfers in response to the COVID pandemic is somewhat higher at around 60-65%. Taking the difference, this indicates that **there may be a significant part of the population that supports *temporary recurring cash transfers in response to a crisis but not a permanent GI***. In future research it may be worthwhile to confirm this by asking about both temporary and permanent transfers within the same sample and to investigate whether this group (a) has demographic or attitudinal similarities, and (b) is more receptive to pro-GI messaging.

It is also notable that polling on guaranteed income has focused primarily on the idea of a \$1,000 per month UBI. There is not very much research on how levels of support might change if that amount were, say, \$600 per month or less—amounts that might not be sufficient to meet basic needs but would have a major impact on the financial security of low- and middle-income households.

There are several recent polls focused on gauging public support for cash transfers as a response to the COVID pandemic as well as guaranteed income as a permanent policy. [The Economic Security Project together with Lake Research](#) released polls of about 1,200 registered voters in late 2020 which showed significant public support for both an additional round of \$1,200 checks (77% support) and for “regular relief payments” until the crisis is over (61% support).

Data For Progress has also released polls showing [similar levels of support](#) (65%) for monthly \$2,000 payments “for the duration of the pandemic” as well as [support for automatic stabilizers](#) through which payments would continue until economic conditions improve (60% support). **These recurring stimulus checks’ support numbers are about twenty percentage points higher than support for GI as a permanent policy, demonstrating an openness to the idea of cash transfers in response to a sufficiently urgent problem.**

A 2020 [poll by GenForward](#) at the University of Chicago (Cohen 2020) found that between 40 and 54% of young adults (ages 18-36) strongly support a UBI of \$1000 per month, with upwards of 60% support overall across race and ethnicity. That number increases up to 72% for young Democrats, and 54% for Independents (n=3,365). A 2019 poll of 1,001 registered voters from [The Hill-HarrisX](#) shows about 49% support and 51% opposition for a \$1,000/month UBI, framed as a response to increasing automation. This is consistent with an earlier [Gallup poll](#) from 2017 that showed 48% support and 52% opposition to a universal basic income framed “as a way to help Americans who lose their jobs because of advances in artificial intelligence” (n=3,297). In 2019 questions gauging UBI support were added to USC’s [Understanding America Study](#), which reported 37% support, 40% opposition, and 23% no opinion (n=3,824). However, the question

frames GI as an idea proposed by “business executives” which may have reduced reported support. The inclusion of a “no opinion” category—not present in the first two polls—also helps explain the reduced levels of reported support.

The largest recent poll on this question in the U.S. comes from [Pew Research](#) in August 2020 (n=11,001). When asked about a \$1,000/mo UBI with no policy framing (e.g. as a response to automation) support stood at 45%. The Pew poll also provides insight into the variation in support between different demographic groups (see right).

White respondents were much less supportive (35% support) than those who identified as Black (73%) and Hispanic (63%).

Support also decreases significantly with age: 67% of respondents between the ages of 18 and 29 supported a UBI, compared with only 26% of those over 65.

Income is also a significant predictor of support, with lower income respondents reporting significantly higher support (63%) than upper income (37%).

The largest difference in support is between liberals (75%) and conservatives (13%), consistent with broader [attitudes toward social support policies](#).

A more [recent Pew poll](#) (from Nov. to Dec. 2020, n=4096) surveyed support among adults in the U.S., France, Germany, and the UK for a variety of economic policies, including a UBI. In the U.S., roughly one third of adults found it very important for the government to provide a UBI, with drastically greater support among lower-income individuals in the U.S. particularly. However, across all proposed policies in the survey, UBI had the least support within all four countries.

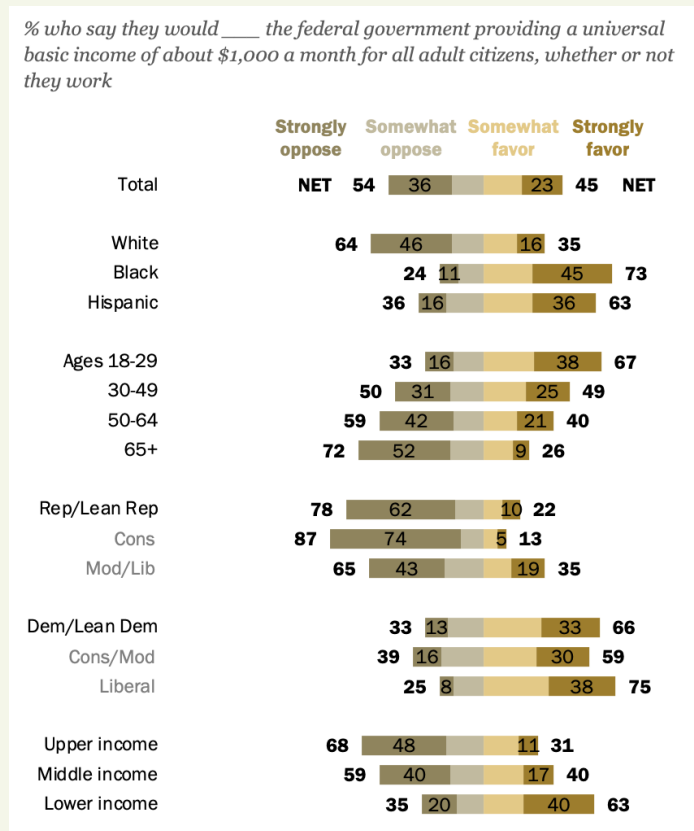


Table 1: Surveys of U.S. Support for Guaranteed Income or UBI

Poll	Year	Support %	Size	Error	Policy	Frame
Gallup	2017	48	3,297	±2%	UBI (no amount specified)	response to job loss due to advances in AI
The Hill-HarrisX	2019	49	1,001	±3.1%	\$1,000/mo UBI	response to job loss due to automation
Understanding America Study*	2019	37	3,824	not listed	UBI (no amount specified)	proposed by “business executives” so people can “afford a basic level of shelter, healthcare, and food”
Pew Research	2020	45	11,001	±1.5%	\$1,000/mo UBI	“for all adult citizens, whether or not they work”
Pew Research	2021	31-52**	1,003	±3.7%	UBI (no amount specified)	“___ important for the government to provide a UBI” prefaced by rating the “current economic system”
GenForward Survey (Young Adults)	2020	46-77**	3,365	not listed	UBI of \$1000/mo for each American 18+	“UBI benefit,” no other details

* Unlike the other surveys, the UAS includes a “no opinion” option. As a result, it is not directly comparable to the others but useful for understanding how including this option may affect support.

**The range indicates average strong support (lower limit) to average support of those both somewhat or strongly supportive (upper limit).

Framing Guaranteed Income for the Public

The key questions for guaranteed income messaging are: which frames are people most receptive to, and how does this receptivity vary between groups? A frame can be thought of as an associational device; to frame something in a certain way is to describe it using words that cause an audience to (consciously or unconsciously) think of a set of other related ideas and to associate their feelings about those ideas with the framed entity. Effectively framing ideas and policies in ways that generate positive associations is fundamental to effective communication and advocacy. At this point there is simply not enough evidence to state with any certainty which ways of framing guaranteed income are most effective, but the work that has been done can still provide ideas and insights about which questions to ask in future research.

The available research on this topic falls into two categories. First, some research on GI framing in the U.S. has been carried out but is either private or not yet published and so cannot be linked to

here. This is attributable to the fact that GI has not had a significant presence in American political discourse until very recently, so messaging research around this issue remains in very early stages. The second category is publicly available work from European researchers on messaging around basic income, which has had a more consistent presence in European policy discourse. It is important to note that in Europe “basic income” does not necessarily mean that benefits are sufficient to meet basic needs. While the findings from this research cannot be generalized to the U.S. due to both different understandings of basic income and to differences in existing safety net systems in each country, they can provide ideas for designing future research. This section will cover both the private/unpublished research (which cannot be cited here) and the European research.

Private research has found that public attitudes toward guaranteed income are often not as rigid and polarized as attitudes toward more familiar policies. One 2021 survey found that a majority of respondents had never heard of a UBI before. In line with this finding, another survey from 2017 found that support for regular cash payments can increase by ten percentage points or more when people are provided with information about the forms that a guaranteed income might take and how it might be funded. In other words, one of the biggest communications challenges is not necessarily persuasion but simply making people aware of GI as a policy option. Respondents in this survey were also most receptive to paying for cash support programs through higher taxes on the wealthy.

JFI affiliated researchers are also in the process of conducting survey research on guaranteed income messaging that is not yet published. Preliminary results indicate that differences in labels for GI policy (e.g. freedom dividend, UBI, negative income tax) do not significantly impact levels of support. This research, conducted in 2021, has also identified a significant segment of Republican voters that are ambivalent toward or supportive of guaranteed income. The persuadability of young Republicans emerged as a significant finding in a separate 2017 survey as well, inviting future research into who these more receptive Republicans are and how they think. On this topic, an additional 2020 survey found that conservatives were more receptive to a UBI framed as “promoting autonomy and getting government out of Americans’ decisions” than to a frame that emphasized “promoting financial stability and protecting citizens from job losses,” indicating that strategic framing may be effective in building Republican support.

Some research has also investigated the effects of different payment sizes and frequencies on public attitudes. One 2017 survey found a significant difference in support between a \$500/mo and a \$1,000/mo UBI, with 48% preferring \$500 compared to 20% for \$1000. Another recent study from [Hamilton et al. \(2021\)](#) found that respondents were more likely to expect recipients of monthly benefits to reduce hours worked and recipients of yearly lump sum payments to spend the money paying down debts.

European researchers have also produced work on framing basic income which, while perhaps not directly generalizable to the U.S., may help inform future research and strategies for an American audience. [Roosma and van Oorschot \(2019\)](#) have conducted research into European attitudes toward Basic Income policy based on data from the European Social Survey from 23 different countries. The BI-related questions in this survey describe it as (1) a universal and unconditional program that is (2) funded through taxes and (3) would replace some existing benefits and services. Consistent with U.S. polling, they find that support for BI is higher for people with lower incomes, people who support egalitarian values, and people who lean to the left politically. In line with these findings, countries with higher levels of material deprivation tend to report higher levels of support for BI policy. At the same time, people who expect welfare benefits to be abused by recipients are more likely to reject a BI.

In Belgium, [Legein et al. \(2018\)](#) tested whether three metaphors used to frame a basic income proposal effectively reinforced a set of related arguments for participants. The first frame tested was the “pocket money” metaphor, which described a basic income as “like pocket money that citizens receive from the state, like children receive it by the very fact that they are members of the family.” This frame had the counterproductive effect of focusing participant attention on the costs of a basic income. The second was the “springboard” metaphor, which described a basic income as being like “a springboard supplied by the state so that the citizens can freely launch themselves into life without any material constraints.” Like the first metaphor, this one increased participants' attention to funding issues, as well as the issue of free riders. The third frame they tested was the “base frame” metaphor, which described a basic income as being like “a base frame supplied by the state so that citizens can build their life freely without having to be concerned about material conditions.” This third frame appeared to more effectively reinforce positive argument for BI than the other two, though the design of the experiment—comparing uptake of various positive and negative considerations about basic income—does not explicitly address the straightforward impact of these metaphors on support.

In the U.K., the RSA has conducted polling research on attitudes toward UBI policy, releasing a [report](#) in late 2020. They ask respondents about a range of values including whether they “love to learn new things,” whether they “have a lot of respect for traditional British values,” and whether they feel that diversity has made Britain a better place. Based on patterns in these attitudes, they seek insights into four groups determined by levels of support for a UBI: **pathfinders** (19% of the population, strongly support UBI), **curious** (26% of population, lean support), **undecided** (35% of the population, no opinion), and **stubborn** (16% of the population, oppose UBI).

Pathfinders are younger, more urban, more educated, more likely to get their news online than the general population, and demonstrate the highest levels of support for a UBI. The **curious** report a higher level of respect for “British values” (47%) but many also believe in the value of diversity (41%). They have egalitarian values—supporting universal benefit systems—but fewer than half believe that people would spend the money from a UBI responsibly and 40% feel that a

UBI would dissuade people from working. The **undecided** do not have strong attitudes toward a UBI due to a lack of exposure. They also report higher support for “British values” and lower support for diversity. For these latter two groups, the researchers suggest that more accessible information and appeals to the connection between UBI and broadly shared values like the importance of “good work” may be more effective than arguments that emphasize the need for economic equality and redistribution, which they may be less receptive too given more skeptical attitudes toward the spending habits of benefit recipients and lower support for diversity. Finally, the **stubborn** tend to be older, more conservative, and value “tradition” over diversity. They are the least persuadable, but future research may identify more effective messaging strategies for this group.

The suggestion that advocates emphasize widely shared values focused on work rather than more egalitarian arguments focused on the need for economic equality and redistribution finds some support in the Finnish experience with basic income advocacy. In her article “Legitimising a radical policy idea: framing basic income as a boost to labour market activity,” [Perkiö \(2020\)](#) discusses the framing strategy advocates used to successfully push for a two-year government-run unconditional basic income pilot in Finland. This strategy, which she calls ‘value amplification,’ was based on idealizing ‘activity’ as a value and framing a basic income as a policy that would promote this value. Pushing back against the widespread narrative of recipients as passive ‘free-riders,’ Finnish advocates claimed that a basic income would have a positive effect on work incentives and depicted beneficiaries as active citizens who were being held back by existing benefit systems. A basic income, they claimed, would empower people to actively improve their condition. Some American UBI pilots like [HudsonUP](#) have similarly argued that a UBI would facilitate entrepreneurship, though its effectiveness in the U.S. is unknown. The success of this strategy in Finland was rooted in tying the basic income to a value that was accepted across the political spectrum. Through it, the medium-sized Green Party was able to build broad support, with other parties in the center eventually adopting the same action-focused framing in support of the pilot.

This growing support culminated in the creation of a two-year basic income pilot by the center-right coalition government from 2017 to 2018. At the same time, the emphasis on activity narrowed the focus of the pilot, which distributed cash to a sample of 2,000 unemployed Finns with the aim of studying the impact on work incentives and portrayed a basic income as a technical solution to incentive problems. However, limits on the funding and time provided to researchers—along with the fact that many pilot participants had to forego other social benefits they had been receiving as a result of receiving funds through the pilot—[prevented the pilot from generating robust results](#). After investing in this work-incentive perspective, the researchers’ finding that the effects on employment incentives were insignificant removed much of the momentum behind the movement. While the research limitations and outcomes were disappointing in this case, the preceding process of building public acceptance of the potential of UBI as a viable policy provides support for the power of value amplification and the focus on

shared values—rather than egalitarian arguments that appeal more to younger and educated audiences—as framing strategies.

Framing Guaranteed Income for Recipients

In addition to understanding how framing affects broad public support for guaranteed income policy, it is also important to think about how framing influences the perception of guaranteed income by the beneficiaries of these policies. The language used to describe the purpose and intended effects of such policies can influence, for example, whether recipients feel empowered by receiving support or shame and stigma about needing assistance. For a guaranteed income policy designed to empower beneficiaries to live with dignity and pursue new opportunities in addition to providing financial security, research suggests that language matters.

[Catherine Thomas et al. \(2020\)](#) have conducted research into cash transfer programs in Kenya and found that while “stigmatizing narratives around poverty and aid can impose psychological, behavioral, and economic costs by undermining recipients’ beliefs in their capabilities to realize their goals. . .representing aid not as a remedy for deficiency but, instead, as an opportunity to realize one’s capabilities and culturally resonant goals can mitigate these costs and advance recipients behavioral and psychological outcomes.”

In order to test this, they focused on designing frames that mitigated the stigma associated with poverty and promoted empowerment in culturally responsive ways and compared the effects of these frames with the effects of a “poverty alleviation” frame which described the purpose of the aid as “reducing poverty and helping the poor meet their basic needs.” The alternative frames focused on framing the purpose of the aid as individual empowerment—“enabling individuals to pursue personal goals and become more financially independent”—and community empowerment—“enabling people to support those they care about and help communities grow together.” Recipients of aid that received the empowerment frames demonstrated behavioral and psychological differences: they chose to watch more of the business skills videos provided and reported a greater sense of self-efficacy, anticipated social mobility, and a lower feeling of social stigma about their economic position.

In another example, Commonwealth implemented the [Worker’s Strength Fund](#) in 2019, a one-time cash transfer program for gig workers experiencing financial hardship. In addition to temporarily improving recipients’ financial security, researchers found that while recipients were initially skeptical about the program, the trust embodied in the rapid dissemination of funds and the removal of barriers like legal documentation generated feelings of mutual trust and goodwill. The ways in which cash support generates feelings of trust may be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Attitudes Toward Welfare and Poverty

Developing an effective communications strategy around guaranteed income means not just understanding which frames people are receptive to, but also why. By understanding public attitudes toward poverty and the welfare state, it becomes possible to not only create messaging that more effectively taps into existing attitudes but also to work on changing those underlying attitudes and narratives. In this way, framing can be thought of as a short-term communications strategy while the mapping of deeper attitudes opens the door to long-term approaches to narrative change and effective storytelling. This review of public attitudes toward poverty and welfare programs is intended as a starting point for researchers interested in messaging around guaranteed income rather than a comprehensive overview of this literature, which is beyond the scope of this document.

In *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, [Gilens \(1999\)](#) explores some of the attitudes and narratives underlying support for safety net programs in the United States. Surveying the research, he finds support for several explanatory factors underlying support for welfare spending. The first is self-interest, with lower-income individuals more likely to support welfare spending than people with higher incomes—though this effect is rather modest and not nearly as significant as political ideology. Individualistic beliefs are also associated with lower support for welfare spending. Two of the strongest predictors of welfare attitudes he found were attitudes toward the poor and toward racial minorities, perceived as making up much of the population living below the poverty line.

Gilens finds that white Americans' attitudes toward welfare is rooted in a distinction between the "deserving poor" who are worthy of support and the "undeserving poor" who could get by without support if they simply worked harder. However, his research finds that this distinction is often closely intertwined with racial attitudes, with Black people more likely to be viewed as "undeserving." His survey research finds that the top two strongest predictors of attitudes toward welfare spending are the perception of Black people as "lazy" and the perception of poor people as "lazy," with individualistic attitudes coming in third.

These findings can be understood in the context of deservingness theory ([van Oorschot 2000](#); [Mueleman, Roosma, and Abts 2020](#)) which posits that public attitudes toward social welfare programs are rooted in distinctions between deserving and undeserving recipients. Public support is then contingent on how deserving recipients of a program are perceived to be. In this framework, people consider five basic deservingness criteria: Control, Attitude, Reciprocity, Identity, and Need (known as the CARIN criteria).

- *Control* refers to the degree to which people are personally responsible for being in a situation where assistance is needed.

- *Attitude* refers to the degree of docility or gratefulness recipients show; more compliant groups are perceived as more deserving.
- *Reciprocity* refers to the degree to which recipients of aid are perceived to give back to society through work or other beneficial activities.
- *Identity* refers to the perception of recipients as members of a shared in-group, with outsiders viewed as less deserving.
- *Need* refers to overall level of need, with those in greater need perceived as more deserving of assistance.

These criteria provide a helpful framework for bringing together studies within the broader literature on welfare attitudes, which often focus on one or a few of these dimensions. For example, [Federico \(2004\)](#) investigates the racialization of welfare policy (i.e. its association with particular racial groups) through the lens of education and finds that while more education generally attenuates negative racial perceptions, it simultaneously increases the ability to connect general predispositions with specific policy attitudes. However, this effect only emerges when assistance is described as “welfare.” In a second survey, he finds that “education strengthens the relationship between perceptions of welfare recipients and global welfare attitudes only when recipients are black.” This research, along with other work in this vein ([Sears and Citrin 1985](#); [Smith 1987](#)), explores the “identity” criterion in the U.S. by examining how associations between racial outgroups and welfare policy impacts support. In the context of a UBI, [Hamilton \(2020\)](#) has discussed the ways that a lack of empathy for racial outgroups contributes to the deficiencies of existing welfare programs. Understanding the extent to which the racialization of welfare policy perceptions extends to guaranteed income or how this narrative might be transformed are important tasks for future messaging research.

Researchers have also approached welfare attitudes from the “control” and “reciprocity” angles. [Fong \(2001\)](#) finds that the belief that poverty is caused by circumstances beyond individuals’ control is a strong predictor of support for economic redistribution. The significantly higher levels of public support for temporary cash infusions during a major crisis compared to a permanent guaranteed income policies identified earlier in the polling section also indicates that the perception of control over circumstances significantly influences support for assistance.

[Fong, Bowles, and Gintis \(2006\)](#) provide a review of the evidence that support for welfare programs is associated with the belief that the poor work hard. This is a key component of what they describe as a broader ethic of *strong reciprocity*, defined as “a propensity to cooperate and share with others similarly disposed, even at personal cost, and a willingness to punish those who violate cooperative and other social norms, even when punishing is personally costly and cannot be expected to entail net personal gains in the future.”

In order to understand public attitudes toward guaranteed income in the U.S. it is important to identify which deservingness criteria are most salient for different audiences, as well as how

these criteria interact with perceptions of different social groups. For example, research on the racialization of welfare attitudes shows that identity is very clearly a significant factor underlying perceptions of deservingness for whites in the U.S., with perceptions of non-white recipients as an outgroup heavily influencing opposition to more generous social support. Strong individualistic attitudes are also associated with the perception that people living in poverty have greater control over their lives, reducing their perceived deservingness. Deservingness theory provides a useful framework for future research into the attitudes underlying support or opposition to guaranteed income and other cash transfer policies.

As a starting point, the CARIN criteria suggest some messaging strategies that may effectively build support by increasing the perceived deservingness of recipients. First, one of the advantages of more universal social programs with less restrictive means-testing is that they do not create salient boundaries between recipients and everyone else; people are less likely to view program recipients as undeserving if they and people like them are also recipients. Emphasizing commonality and solidarity between groups may be key to building broad support for guaranteed income policies.

Second, the influence of strong individualistic attitudes in the U.S. increases the perception of people in need as both more in control of their lives and (in part as a result of this) less genuinely needy. Communications that shift narratives about poverty by highlighting the degree to which people are trapped by a lack of opportunity and a vulnerability to economic shocks (i.e. that they have less control and greater need) may play an important role in increasing the perceived deservingness of program beneficiaries.

Finally, the reciprocity criterion underlies public support for things like work requirements as a condition of receiving assistance. Building support for a guaranteed income will also depend on overcoming opposition rooted in the view that receiving benefits without work requirements violates an ethic of reciprocity. Effective messaging might overcome this by framing benefits not just as money passively received, but as a way of stimulating *activity*—similar to the strategy employed in Finland but without the narrower focus on work incentives. A guaranteed income could be framed in this way not just as a means of lifting people out of poverty (passive), but as a financial foundation that *empowers* people to pursue new opportunities. Additionally, it may be effective to emphasize that unpaid labor is aligned with an ethic of reciprocity; for example, if people receiving benefits do less paid work but spend time caring for family members and children, they are contributing to society. Future research on messaging around guaranteed income can use this framework to develop strategies for both framing and long-term narrative change, including whether it is more effective to directly challenge expectations of reciprocity or to try to redirect them toward alternative understandings compatible with unconditional cash support.

In addition to understanding perceptions of deservingness, messaging research can also benefit from a related focus on different ways that people perceive poverty. The common framing of guaranteed income as an anti-poverty policy makes this particularly important. Research on how poverty is perceived by different groups as structurally or individually driven may be key to the kind of narrative change that shifts evaluations of deservingness rooted in perceptions of control over circumstances. A [2001 NPR/Harvard/Kaiser](#) poll of American attitudes toward poverty found that about 20% of the population views the poor as having lower moral values than other Americans—including a quarter of respondents who were poor themselves. Additionally, 52% of respondents believed that a lack of motivation was a major cause of poverty with another 35% believing it was a minor cause. [Kluegel & Smith \(1986\)](#) find that people who explain poverty in individualistic terms are less supportive of welfare policies. As they put it, “antiwelfare sentiment seems to be linked to a . . . victim blaming view of the poor as lazy, lacking thrift and good morals, etc.” They also find that individualistic attitudes predominate in the U.S. and are more strongly associated with higher income, older, and white populations.

The distinction between blaming individuals and blaming structural forces for poverty is the most consistent thread running through this literature and should be taken into consideration when designing guaranteed income messaging research. The racialization of poverty perceptions is also an important thread, with decades of media coverage conditioning Americans to perceive the population living in poverty as predominantly people of color ([Gilens 1996, 1999](#)).

[Hunt \(2004\)](#) investigates how the structural/individual dichotomy varies between racial groups in southern California, finding that while all groups favor individual explanations for *wealth*, Black and Latino populations are both more structuralist and more individualistic in their beliefs about poverty than whites. This ambivalence, which he describes as a “dual consciousness” characterized by simultaneously acknowledging systemic limitations and blaming the poor for their plight invites further study.

[van Oorschot and Halman \(2000\)](#) find that the majority of people in industrialized European states favor social explanations for poverty rather than blaming individuals. They also find that there is no clear relationship between popular perceptions of poverty and type of welfare state regime, inviting further consideration of alternative explanations for differences in welfare state structure (see: Esping-Andersen 1990).

Unpublished qualitative research from Olson Zaltman and the Bill & Melinda Gates foundation suggests that attitudes toward poverty can be understood as falling into several camps. The first group is **progressives**, who view poverty as a systemic issue in which individuals are trapped in cycles of poverty by institutions that inhibit their ability to attain financial stability. The **conflicted** group sympathizes with people living in poverty and recognizes systemic disadvantages, but places responsibility for improving their condition on individuals. **Strivers** view poverty primarily in terms of connection, with isolation and a lack of community support understood as central to the

persistence of poverty. Finally, **bootstrappers** perceive poverty as a problem of individual effort, with anyone able to build financial security if they are willing to work hard enough. Apart from the “strivers” group, these categories can be placed on a spectrum from more individualistic to more structural beliefs about poverty in line with past research on this topic. The “strivers” group, focused on the role of community, can be understood as a somewhat structural view but invites further investigation.

Other Relevant Research

[Freeland \(2019\)](#) has noted that after questions gauging guaranteed income support were added to the 2019 Understanding America Study, the order of questions had a noticeable impact on reported support. In the survey, they included two questions about UBI. The first asked respondents about their support for a policy proposed by “business executives” in which the U.S. government would provide “every American with a Universal Basic Income, that is a minimum amount of money each month so they can afford a basic level of shelter, healthcare and food.” The second questions asked respondents whether they would support a policy proposed by “charities and international aid organizations” to use “their funds to provide people living in the poorest parts of Africa with a Universal Basic Income.”

Freeland found that when respondents were asked about the U.S. case before the African case, support for a charitable UBI in Africa dropped by seven percentage points (from 44% to 37%). Conversely, when asked about the African case first, support for an American UBI *increased* by 9 percentage points (from 33% to 42%). These results suggest two things. The first is that Americans are generally more supportive of a UBI in the context of NGOs using their own funds in a foreign country than they are of the U.S. government implementing such a program. The second is that when evaluating support for a UBI, question ordering and the anchoring effects that this ordering creates can have a significant impact on reported support. This is perhaps because public familiarity with UBI policy is not especially high, so respondents are more influenced by short-term anchoring effects than by more established associations between the policy and their partisan or ideological identification.

Conclusion

Research on public attitudes toward guaranteed income and UBI policy in the U.S. remains in a nascent state. Some preliminary research has been conducted by organizations like the Economic Security Project and JFI, but the results should be taken more as a starting point than as providing anything like a conclusive empirically grounded answer to how best to design a pro-GI messaging strategy. A few academics like Leah Hamilton and Catherine Thomas have also undertaken small still-unpublished projects relevant to the topic, but there is nothing like an

established body of findings that provide clear guidance about which frames or labels are most effective for which audiences in the United States.

There is a somewhat larger body of European research on public attitudes toward a basic income, but cultural and political differences mean that this work is most useful as a source of ideas for what to investigate rather than providing findings that are generalizable to the United States. Research on public attitudes toward welfare more broadly may also provide a helpful guide for identifying which attitudes are most relevant for GI messaging, particularly by focusing attention on perceptions of “deservingness.”

What we can say with some certainty is that it appears that 40-50% of the U.S. public supports a UBI when asked about the policy with minimal context, and that this level of support can likely be increased by providing more information about what a UBI would look like and how it would be funded. Polls also show that 60-70% of the population supports recurring cash transfers as a response to crisis, suggesting that there may be a relatively persuadable group of people who currently support temporary but not permanent cash transfers. Reach out to jfi@jainfamilyinstitute.org for our overview factsheet of this material for practitioners and a summary of some of the key research questions that emerge from the preceding review of existing work.

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