
RESEARCH

The Role of Research in the Basic Income Debate in the UK

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This paper will explore a variety of aspects of the current debate on Basic Income in the UK. It will survey the different kinds of research that have been carried out, and will identify where research results have informed the debate, where they have been abused, and where they have been ignored. It will discuss the importance of clear definitions, and of choosing appropriate research methods. International comparisons will be offered where appropriate. Three different kinds of research that will be important to future debate on Basic Income will be discussed: microsimulation modelling, pilot projects, and public opinion surveys.

Keywords: Basic Income; microsimulation; pilot projects; public opinion surveys

JEL: I380

Introduction

A Basic Income (also known as a Citizen's Income, a Citizen's Basic Income, or a Universal Basic Income) is an unconditional regular income paid to every individual. The level might vary with someone's age, but otherwise it would not be affected by someone's assets, employment status, household status, other income, or anything else.

The debate about Basic Income has seen peaks and troughs during the past two centuries or so, but never before has it been subject to as widespread and diverse a debate as it is now. The increasing automation of jobs is creating turbulence in the workplace, with some types of jobs vanishing, while others materialise, or change in fundamental ways. Although no-one can accurately predict the future employment market, there are concerns that it will destroy more jobs than it creates, that certain groups without the requisite skillsets for the new economy will be 'left behind,' and that the turbulence alone could cause great instability to individuals' lives. If any combination of these possibilities is realised, the marketplace will be unable to provide stable jobs for all individuals, and many may become dependent on the state for their livelihoods.

The traditional solution is for such individuals to rely upon means-tested benefits, but they are increasingly understood to be demeaning and demotivating, and, in the context of the coronavirus crisis, they have proved to be difficult to administer and grossly inadequate for addressing the financial fall-out. However, the crisis has highlighted to the public how easy it can be to fall into financial precarity, generating a more sophisticated and empathetic awareness as to the value of a solid financial platform on which to build [1, 2].

In addition, as Ian Gough puts it, a Basic Income

... would provide more freedom of choice over citizens' life courses; it would promote a better work-life balance, enhance gender equality and expand choices between paid and unpaid work. It might enable more people to contribute to the 'core economy' ... [it would] reduce division and stigma and enhance social solidarity... [it would contribute to] a realistic transition strategy from the present to a post-growth society [3 pp 184–6].

This article studies the modern debate in the UK, and in particular asks about the place of social science research in that debate. It considers the evolution of the Basic Income debate in the UK, before considering the more modern research developments that have taken place. Here, it examines the advantages and disadvantages of particular methodologies, highlighting a promising microsimulation based approach. More critically, it shows how data can be cynically misrepresented for ideological purposes, and argues that politicians need to approach the concept in good faith. For those genuinely considering the construction of a Basic Income system, the paper considers the role of opinion surveys, and how pilot schemes can be used to show a Basic Income's potential efficacy and value.

The Evolution of the Basic Income Debate in the UK

It is difficult to know when debate about the introduction of an unconditional income first began, but it is easy to find the first instance of it in modern British politics. In 1982 Brandon Rhys Williams, a Conservative Member of Parliament, presented a scheme for unconditional incomes to a parliamentary committee [4 p459, 5, 6 p100]. Hermione Parker, Williams' research assistant, helped develop the scheme, and in both the scheme and her later book, *Instead of the Dole* [6], she offered illustrative Basic Income schemes, as well as calculations relating to the costs of schemes and their effects on different household types [4 pp424–53, 6 pp121–37, 305]. There was little substantive action following Williams' proposal to the committee, but the flurry of interest it generated led to the establishment of the Basic Income Research Group (now the Citizen's Basic Income Trust) in 1984 and its biannual publication of the *BIRG Bulletin* (now the quarterly *Citizen's Income Newsletter*).

True to its original name, this group has quietly continued to publish, disseminate and commission research into the ethics, politics, and financial aspects of Basic Income, providing an abundance of material for those considering the viability of Basic Income today and informing current leading research on the topic [2, 6–19].

Contemporary research on financially feasible Basic Income schemes

Much of the UK's debate on Basic Income has focused on its financial feasibility. Implementing a Basic Income would require changes to be made elsewhere in the tax and benefits system, with the precise detail of any changes dependent on the choices politicians and policy-makers make as to the type of Basic Income package to be offered. Such choices are broad, including the size of the basic income, whether other benefits should be maintained or abolished, and whether taxes should increase for all or just for some. Such details matter on both a macro level, in terms of how much the scheme would cost, and on a micro level, in terms of who would benefit and who would lose out under the new regime.

The choice of research methodology plays a large role in assessing questions of financial feasibility. There were initially only two methods available for calculating the financial aspects of illustrative Basic Income schemes. First, a 'national accounts' method that used census data to work out the cost of providing a Basic Income, and then used national accounts data to net this against the money saved by abolishing existing benefits and the additional revenues collected by changing tax systems, creating an effective overall cost. Second, a 'typical household' method that calculated the net gains and losses for households with specified housing costs, numbers of children, earned incomes, and so on. The latter method was employed by Parker in Williams' 1982 scheme [4 pp424–53, 6 pp385–95], and the former in the scheme submitted by the Citizen's Income Trust to a parliamentary inquiry in 2006 [20].

These two methods are still in use, although both have limitations [21–23]. The 'national accounts' method is designed to provide a macro picture of overall costs, but cannot accurately do so for all funding scenarios. It can determine how much money would be made available by abolishing selected means-tested benefits, but it cannot calculate how these benefits, if left in place or altered, would be affected by the introduction of Basic Income as households' eligibilities for these benefits changed. This limitation became an issue as the Basic Income debate shifted from asking whether a Basic Income was a good idea to whether it was feasible to implement. For example, there was the question as to whether a Basic Income scheme could be funded out of a reduction in the Personal Allowance, an increase in Income Tax rates, and the abolition of most means-tested benefits, while being revenue neutral and not reducing the net incomes (inclusive of benefits) of low-income households. Although the 'typical household' method could answer the more micro question about net income losses for the specific household types chosen for study, it could not provide an overall picture of the losses that might occur; and the 'national accounts' method had nothing to say about income losses at the individual level.

The answer is microsimulation. This computational method, first developed by Tony Atkinson, uses a coding of all tax and benefit regulations in a country, alongside using large sample survey data on households' financial affairs, to produce income statistics at a micro level. By altering the taxes and benefits (creating the different 'simulations') the programme can then generate statistics on the impacts on household matters ranging from taxes paid to household net disposable incomes. Holly Sutherland, who continued Atkinson's work, developed EUROMOD [6], a programme of this nature. Using this programme, comparisons can be easily drawn between current and proposed systems, including a Basic Income system. Because the programme can efficiently generate insights at a granular level, these can be easily aggregated up to answer questions on how specific groups would be impacted (as the 'typical household' method does) or on overall costs (as the 'national accounts' method does). Moreover, it can perform these tasks flexibly for a wide range of scenarios, not just restricted to means-tested benefit abolition or other crude changes to the benefit and tax codes.

Research projects using EUROMOD in 2012 and 2014 highlighted a major issue with the idea of funding a Basic Income scheme in the UK through increasing Income Tax rates, reducing Personal Allowances, altering National Insurance thresholds and Contributions rates, and abolishing means-tested benefits. Any scheme that made changes to these factors within the bounds of what was 'acceptable' would have resulted in substantial net disposable-income losses for low income households [24–26]. The default approach has therefore shifted to considering schemes that leave every means-tested benefit in place, and estimating how many households would be taken off means-tested benefits when their Basic Incomes and other changes are taken into account [27–31]. This kind of approach has been used for two of the most recent research projects, by Luke Martinelli at the Institute for Policy Research (using EUROMOD), and Howard Reed at Landman Economics (using a similar model) [32–33].

Both of these projects test a variety of illustrative schemes, and find that they tend to produce significant disposable income losses for low income households, or that funding from outside the tax and benefits system would be required. An impression of financial infeasibility is the inevitable result [27–31].

I take a different approach [17, 26, 34–37], framing the analysis around a clear research question: ‘Given a reasonable set of criteria for the financial feasibility of a Basic Income scheme, does such a feasible scheme exist?’ This entails the selection of criteria for financial feasibility, including those suggested by Donald Hirsch, a ‘friendly critic’ of Basic Income. They are as follows:

- Minimal changes (so far as possible) to the current tax and benefits system;
- Revenue neutrality, taken to be a net cost or saving of no more than £2bn per annum;
- Funding for Basic Incomes to only come from: changes to existing benefits, to the Personal Allowance, to income tax rates, and to National Insurance Contributions rates and thresholds [38];
- Income tax rates to rise by no more than three percentage points [38];
- Reductions in inequality (measured by the Gini coefficient) and in all poverty indices;
- Reductions in the numbers of households receiving means-tested benefits;
- For fewer than 2% of low income households to suffer a reduction in their disposable income of more than 5% (given the complexity of households’ circumstances and the tax system, this problem is unavoidable. The aim can only be to minimise so far as possible).

These are stringent requirements that are challenging to meet. Through trialling a range of Basic Income schemes in EUROMOD, the model suggests that the maximum payment that could be made to a working age adult would be £70 per week, alongside small increases to Child Benefit [17, 39]. Despite seeming negligible at first glance, the guaranteed receipt of approximately £600 per month for a two parent family would significantly enhance income security for many.

It would be possible to fund such a Basic Income by implementing a carbon tax or charging Income Tax rates higher than those envisaged in the feasibility criteria listed above. While this could be advantageous for Basic Incomes and for secondary issues (such as, in the case of a carbon tax, responding to the climate emergency), it would also introduce further unknowns. For instance, carbon taxes might increase the costs of fuel and transport, which would in turn impact the disposable incomes of all households, and poorer households especially [40]. Likewise, substantially higher income taxes could make working less appealing, causing some to reduce their hours or even leave the workforce. These types of changes – that fundamentally alter the current taxation system – are more likely to have these kinds of unintended consequences, and could introduce substantial complexity in assessing the impact of a Basic Income scheme and its associated funding structure. Hence the requirement that for an illustrative initial Basic Income scheme, as few changes as possible should be made to the current tax and benefits system.

This difficulty exemplifies the key limitation of microsimulation – that it is a static method. It only tells us what would happen to factors like disposable income and poverty levels the day the scheme is implemented. It is impossible for such models to predict the long-term, or even medium-term, impact of such an implementation, such as on the labour market or earned income. Unfortunately, there is no straightforward solution to this at present, and we must hope that the technology develops to the point where robust prediction becomes possible.

However the Basic Income debate evolves, the question of financial feasibility – both the feasibility of paying for the Basic Incomes, and the avoidance of significant losses for low income households – will remain central to that debate. High quality research that employs the best available methods, and that responds to clear research questions, will be essential.

The abuse and exclusion of research results

A Westminster Hall debate

Debates in Westminster Hall, which sits adjacent to the two Houses of Parliament, provide opportunities for Members of Parliament to discuss issues beyond the current legislative agenda. In 2016, the question of a Basic Income was raised by the Scottish National Party MP Ronnie Cowan, who has for some years understood the advantages of Basic Income and is sympathetic to the policy. This sympathetic understanding was not shared by Julian Knight, a Conservative MP, who, citing a paper I had produced, asked if Mr. Cowan had seen ‘the part of the report in which it is stated that, in order to support a universal basic income, the basic rate of Income Tax would have to rise to 48 pence in the pound. Can he say how on earth that is supportable in the modern economy?’ [41].

Unfortunately, Mr. Cowan did not have that paper available and so could not respond by pointing out that the paper relied upon by Mr. Knight also rejected that particular scheme for being unsustainable in a modern economy. Instead, what that paper did conclude was that a different Basic Income scheme that was revenue neutral, and only raised the Basic Rate by three percentage points, would be feasible.

Mr. Knight was not alone in his errors of comprehension, with Damian Hind, the then Minister for Employment, later in the debate claiming that

UBI would create too many losers among the poorest families and dramatically increase the number of children living in poverty – a point confirmed through modelling even by the Citizen’s Income Trust [41].

Once more, the particular scheme that had produced this outcome was also rejected in the working paper. Alongside this, the Minister ignored the range of other schemes proposed in that paper and others, which avoided losses for low income households and reduced child poverty.

While not directly relevant to a government's agenda, such debates are not without consequence, and in this case the selective quotation led to the Citizen's Basic Income Trust's trustees taking the decision not to publish any more research results relating to infeasible schemes. This is clearly unscientific, and particularly unfortunate in the light of a trend in medical research to publish negative results as well as more positive ones; and it is surely a loss to the academy to undertake research that shows what would not be feasible and then not make the results available. However, given the tendency for some unsympathetic actors to misuse such data, whether deliberately or not, it is difficult to see what other path could have been taken.

A parliamentary committee oral hearing

Politicians are, understandably, wary of introducing policies that represent a dramatic break from past practice. However, in considering such policies, it would be advantageous for them to hear from those engaged in the best possible research methods. This was not the case in a hearing on Basic Income held in 2017 by the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee.

Three researchers who had undertaken microsimulation research on Basic Income schemes applied for invitations: Luke Martinelli, Howard Reed, and myself. None received invitations. Annie Miller, who uses the national accounts method to cost Basic Income schemes, was somewhat surprised to receive an invitation given that she had not applied for one.

The Committee asked about the effects of the current tax and benefits system on households, possible effects of a Basic Income, and a range of other questions relating to the feasibility of a Basic Income scheme. Much of the committee's focus was on the potential higher rates of Income Tax, with rates of 55–65% mentioned. Giving evidence, Louise Haagh, the Chair of BIEN, referred to my research, including that which showed that a meaningful Basic Income scheme might be achievable at a basic rate of 23 percent and that such a scheme could avoid most net disposable income losses, take a substantial number of households off means-tested benefits, and substantially reduce both poverty and inequality [17, 42]. However, there was no-one present who could answer committee members' questions about financial feasibility on the basis of microsimulation research, and the Chair's summary of the committee's report was that:

A universal Citizen's Income would either require unthinkable tax rises or fail to deliver its objectives of simplification and a guaranteed standard of living. There are problems in the welfare system, but CI is not the solution to them. Rather it is a distraction from finding workable solutions [43].

Such a conclusion is only to be expected when Committees fail to take evidence from those using the most advanced and appropriate methods. It is impossible to know if such experts were deliberately excluded, but regardless, such failures bring Parliament into disrepute. This should not demotivate those engaged in this research, however. Shortly after the report, Declan Gaffney and Karen Buck MP, who had been present at the committee hearing, published an article recommending a small Basic Income [44].

Pilot projects

Microsimulation research results rarely capture the public's imagination, even though they provide a sophisticated projection of how such projects may play out. What does capture public interest is pilot projects, particularly those close to home. While pilots in Namibia, India and Kenya have shown the advantages of Basic Income, including increases in economic activity, educational achievement, health indicators, and women's empowerment, it is the Finland experiment that has sparked interest in the UK [45–51, 76–79].

Admittedly, much of this interest was due to a misconception over the scale of Finland's project. Press articles appeared implying that the whole of Finland's population was to be paid a Basic Income, the misunderstanding perhaps stemming from some ambiguous wording in an article in the *New Statesman* [52]. The misinformation gave rise to Neal Lawson, Chair of Compass and a trustee of the Citizen's Basic Income Trust, being interviewed on BBC's *Newsnight*, and a *Money Box Live* programme being given to a discussion of Basic Income. Eventually, the message got through that Finland had not launched itself into a nationwide Basic Income scheme, but was running a minor experiment involving 2000 unemployed citizens who were to receive unconditional benefits for two years [53–54]. During the second year of this scheme, a small increase in employment market activity occurred. Some commentators have taken a positive stance, viewing the unconditional income as not reducing the participants' market activity. Others have taken a more pessimistic position, disappointed that it has not sparked more employment market activity than it did. Beyond its economic impact (or lack thereof), the scheme has, however, positively affected the recipients' wellbeing and their trust in politicians [55–60].

In the UK, four Scottish boroughs, alongside the English cities of Sheffield, Liverpool, Leeds and Hull, are hoping to run community-wide Basic Income pilot projects. These proposals are to be welcomed, although their local nature means that they are unlikely to model a Basic Income scheme on a national level. For any local pilot project to provide a

true sense of any Basic Income scheme's effects on factors such as household net disposable incomes, it would have to make the same changes to taxation and benefits for a single community that would be rolled out to the entire nation – something that would require positive central government engagement. The question of whether a local project that did not do this could serve as a truly valid pilot project is therefore a legitimate one [61–62]. In the UK, the difficulties of paying either a national or a local Basic Income are exacerbated by a lack of centralised data, with there being no national database containing every individual resident's name, contact details, and bank account details. It is this problem that made it impossible to pay the kind of emergency Basic Income that would have been helpful during the coronavirus crisis. Such a database would be necessary for any national Basic Income scheme to be implemented, and a local version would be needed for a local pilot project.

In spite of the difficulties, if there was sufficient political will to stage a genuine Basic Income pilot project, a government of a country with a developed economy would be able to create one. Such a project would make a considerable contribution to research on Basic Income, as we currently lack strong empirical evidence in general, and especially from within developed contexts.

Opinion surveys

Opinion surveys are an important tool for deciding on changes to social policy. In a 2018 survey, Populus found that 41% of respondents were in favour of Basic Income in principle, with 17% against; while 45% thought such a scheme would be superior to the current benefits system, with 13% preferring the status quo. However, affordability was where the issue fell down, with 38% believing it to be unaffordable, in contrast to 16% thinking it affordable. In terms of paying for a Basic Income, 30% wanted it funded through 'progressive taxation, wealth taxes, levies on data ... and reducing expenditure on benefits,' with only 20% preferring increased Income Tax rates [63]. Lack of affordability is the primary reason that most give for opposing Basic Income (73%), while the idea that it would disincentivise work follows closely behind at 72%. Similar concerns were shared by those who were neutral on the issue, showing that more research and education on affordability and work incentives is required [64].

The degree of support for a Basic Income varies widely across European nations, according to a 2017 survey. Russia is broadly supportive, with 73.2% in favour, while Norway is the most sceptical, at 33.7%, with the UK falling at the midpoint, with 50.8% in favour [65, 66]. Awareness of Basic Income as an economic policy is however growing. Dalia Research conducted a follow-up survey, also in 2017, which found that 63% of respondents were familiar with the idea of a Basic Income (an increase of 5% from 2016), and more in favour of the idea, with 68% saying they would vote for it (an increase of 4% from 2016) [67]. While Dalia Research did not poll the UK, an Ipsos MORI survey in 2016 estimated the approval rate at a similar level [68].

Of the European countries, Switzerland has held the most thorough opinion survey. A referendum was conducted in 2016 which sought to ascertain whether the population wanted the government to implement a Basic Income. Unfortunately, a book published at the same time by Christian Müller and Daniel Straub proposed a Basic Income of 2,500 Swiss francs per month and dominated the media landscape [69]. This distorted the debate, and arguably played a part in the Basic Income proposal being defeated in the referendum [70].

In conducting such surveys, it is crucial that the questions being asked are clear, and that subjects are given any necessary information or definitions before offering their opinion, so that their answers can be interpreted as a true opinion on the issue at hand. A survey in Japan, ostensibly on a Basic Income, framed the questions around whether 'the government should cover the minimum necessary cost of living.' Such a vague question, which could easily be assumed to relate to means-tested or social insurance benefits, makes it difficult to assess popular support for Basic Income. Unfortunately, the data in this case was presented as though it related to public opinion on Basic Income [16, 71].

Public opinion is a vital ingredient in any policy process. Research needs to use clear definitions and high quality research practices to ensure interviewees understand that Basic Income is being discussed. Rigorous past research should be heeded, while new research will be constantly required to generate understanding of how public opinion is changing. In particular, it will be essential to ensure that it is Basic Income that is being discussed, and not Negative Income Tax (which is administratively very different from Basic Income, and would therefore have substantially different effects), Participation Income (the participation conditions for which would be almost impossible to administer), or a Minimum Income Guarantee (which sets levels below which household net incomes would not be allowed to fall, and fills the gaps between those levels and actual income levels with means-tested benefits) [16 pp126–30, 72].

Clear definitions

Every kind of research that we have discussed requires clear definitions to be stated at the beginning of any research project, and sufficient detail to be given so that no confusion can arise. This is clearly essential in relation to public opinion surveys; it is essential that pilot projects test genuine Basic Income schemes; and it is equally important that microsimulation research tests only very carefully specified genuine Basic Income schemes, with their relationships with existing tax and benefits systems specified in minute detail.

In relation to reports on research projects, the reader needs to be particularly careful as to what an author might mean by the word 'unconditional' [73]. In relation to Basic Income, the word 'unconditional' is generally taken to mean that the amount of Basic Income paid never varies except in relation to someone's age. However, in some reports [74],

'unconditional' does not imply non-means tested, and so it could be wrong to describe the systems discussed as Basic Incomes. Even more problematic are those experiments that are labelled 'Basic Income' when they are not, as with Ontario's 'Basic Income' experiment, which was for a means-tested and household-based income [75].

Clear definitions are essential if debate about Basic Income is to be rational. Accurate and valuable discussion can only take place if the participants are talking about the same thing [71].

Conclusions

The Basic Income debate, both globally and in the UK, has been intelligent and thoughtful because it has benefited from a wide variety of kinds of research, much of which has been of the highest quality. It is crucial that as Basic Income research becomes more prevalent, researchers continue to use clear definitions, draw on a wide variety of methods, use high quality data and bring together expertise from a variety of relevant sectors. The London School of Economics has a clear role to play here. It is home to a wide variety of social sciences, and it justifiably prides itself on the highest research standards. The LSE could provide the rapidly expanding and deepening global debate on Basic Income with a dedicated research hub, ensuring the intelligence of the debate in a way in which no other institution could. It owes it to the world to do that.

Competing Interests

The author is General Manager of BIEN, the Basic Income Earth Network, and was until May 2020 the Director of the Citizen's Basic Income Trust, both in a voluntary capacity. He was a Visiting Senior Fellow in the Social Department at the LSE until June 2020.

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How to cite this article: Torry M. The Role of Research in the Basic Income Debate in the UK. *LSE Public Policy Review*. 2020; 1(2): 4, pp. 1–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.11>

Submitted: 30 March 2020

Accepted: 27 October 2020

Published: 07 December 2020

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