

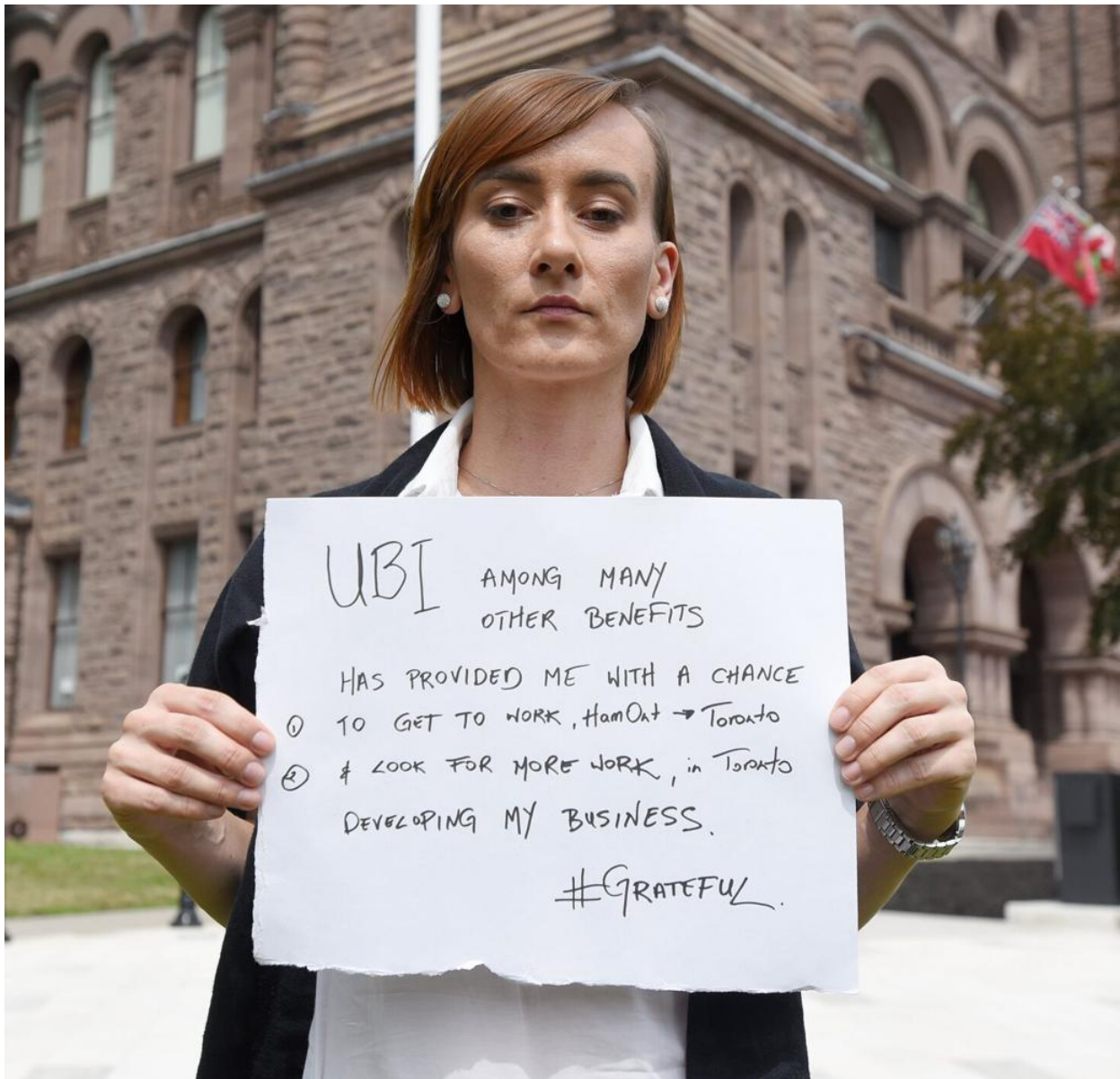
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CONTRIBUTORS

Opinion | Part 2: Basic income experiment continues to inspire

As automation and AI reshape the workplace, the question of income security is becoming impossible to ignore.

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Monika Ciolek, a basic income recipient, poses with a sign in 2018 saying what the program meant to her after a visit to Queen's Park.

John Rennison/Hamilton Spectator file photo

By Tom Cooper

Tom Cooper is the director of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction.

Ten years after Ontario announced its bold basic income pilot, one thing is clear: the experiment may have been deep-sixed early, but the evidence of its positive impact proved much harder to bury.

When the program was cancelled in 2018, the official provincial evaluation was suddenly axed: A little like ending a medical trial halfway through and then declaring the medicine didn't work.

But the evidence remained, mainly because the former pilot participants refused to stay quiet about the positive impacts of receiving a basic income.

[📌 Part 1: Bringing basic income back into focus](#)

The most important study came from right here at McMaster University in a report called [southern Ontario's Basic Income Experience](#). A remarkable research team analyzed survey data from hundreds of pilot participants in Hamilton after the program was cancelled.

As lead researcher Wayne Lewchuk summed it up, "to a person, participants were better off."

The findings on health were particularly striking. Nearly 80 per cent of those receiving a basic income reported their health improved while on the pilot. Participants also saw significant reductions in anxiety and depression, along with improved access to healthier food and more stable housing.

This is important considering the billions we spend on the health-care system each year. As Dr. Danielle Martin has noted, basic income "would do more to improve health than any single other policy our government could promote."

The research also challenged one of the most common criticisms of basic income, that people would stop working.

That didn't happen.

When the pilot started, around one-third of the participants were among the community's "working poor" — many toiling at multiple low-wage, part-time gigs. Almost all continued working. However, the financial stability of a guaranteed income helped people make better employment decisions. Some returned to school or upgraded their skills. Others reduced unstable or unsafe work while searching for more secure employment.

Rather than discouraging work, the pilot often gave people the stability needed to

pursue it more effectively.

Researchers at Carleton University [later revisited the interview data](#) and reached the same conclusion: income stability reduced stress and restored dignity and control over daily life.



Hamilton's Tim Button, seen in 2017, was a participant in the province's basic income pilot. He was also a part of the documentary "A Human Picture" made about the program.

Rob Gillies/The Associated Press file photo

The human stories behind the pilot were captured in "The Case for Basic Income," a book by Elaine Power and Jamie Swift that documents the lived experiences of participants, several in Hamilton, whose lives were transformed by the program.

Those stories were also told through a short documentary we produced with Powerline Films called "[A Human Picture](#)." The film followed several pilot participants, capturing the simple but profound ways a modest guaranteed income changed their lives.

Even though the experiment was cancelled early, the results continue to inspire.

Taken together, the research points to a remarkably consistent conclusion: Basic income works.

So what's taking so long?

Well, in truth Canada already operates several targeted forms of basic income.

Seniors receive the Guaranteed Income Supplement, which has dramatically reduced poverty among older Canadians. Families benefit from the Canada Child Benefit, which provides direct income support to households with children. More recently, the federal government introduced the new grocery rebate to help low-income Canadians cope with rising food prices.

Each of these programs reflects a simple principle: Sometimes the most effective way to support people is simply to provide income.

The question now is whether Canada is ready to extend that principle more broadly. Working-age adults (those between 18 and 65) remain largely excluded. And the stakes go beyond poverty and inequality. As automation and artificial intelligence reshape the workplace and the risk of job losses grows, the question of income security is becoming impossible to ignore.

One of the strongest voices advancing a national basic income conversation has been Sen. Kim Pate.

Pate has introduced legislation in the Senate calling for a national framework for a guaranteed livable basic income, requiring the federal government to work with provinces, territories and Indigenous governments to examine how such a system could be implemented across Canada.

The idea has also found supporters in the House of Commons.

Winnipeg MP Leah Gazan has long advocated for a guaranteed livable income, noting it was a key recommendation of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Burlington MP Karina Gould championed basic income during her run for the Liberal leadership last year. Toronto MP Nate Erskine-Smith, a potential Ontario Liberal leadership candidate, also supports the policy. Nunavut MP Lori Idlout, who recently crossed the floor to join the Liberal caucus, has likewise spoken about rethinking income security for communities facing deep economic challenges.

Ten years after Ontario first announced its basic income experiment, the evidence from that pilot continues to echo.

And this August, Canada will host the world's leading researchers, policymakers, and advocates when the [Basic Income Earth Network](#) holds its international congress in Toronto.

A decade ago, Ontario helped ignite the conversation.

The question now is whether Canada is ready to take the next step.

Opinion articles are based on the author's interpretations and judgments of facts, data and events. More details