

A life without hunger: Can a basic income address food insecurity?

Jennifer Sumner, PhD

Adult Education and Community Development Program

OISE/University of Toronto

Advancing Food Insecurity Research in Canada

PROOF, University of Toronto

November 18, 2016

Basic Income

- A grant paid to every citizen, regardless of occupational situation, marital status, work performance or availability for work
 - Guaranteed annual income
 - Guaranteed minimum income
 - Basic income guarantee
 - Negative income tax
- Both support and opposition across the political spectrum
 - We should be wary of quick rejection or acceptance

Arguments *for* a Basic Income

From the Left Perspective

- Poverty
- Health and wellbeing
- Security
- Education
- Government and bureaucracy
- Work
- Independence
- Cost
- Capitalism
- Gender, power, values and society

From the Right Perspective

- Poverty
- Health and wellbeing
- Security
- Education
- Government and bureaucracy
- Work
- Independence
- Cost
- Capitalism

Arguments *Against* a Basic Income

From the Left Perspective

- Government
- Society
- Immigrants
- Individualism
- Employment
- Commodification
- Gender
- Taxation
- Neoliberalism
- Poverty
- Power

From the Right Perspective

- Government
- Society
- Immigrants

Discussion

- Persuasive arguments for and against a basic income from sources on both the left and the right
- What is the basic difference between left and right perspectives?
 - Overlaps (e.g., Red Tories)

If it operates on behalf of extended material enablements, it qualifies as left; and if it operates on behalf of reduced material enablements, it qualifies as right (McMurtry 1979)

- No measure, in and of itself, is left or right – it becomes that way by the values regulating its use

Basic Income

- Neither a left nor right measure
- Becomes left or right by the values regulating its use
- Those on the left
 - Pushing for extended material enablements
 - Worrying that they will be curtailed
- Those on the right
 - Pushing for reduced material enablements
 - Worrying that they will be extended

Can a basic income address food insecurity?

- Two important considerations:
 - The concept of a basic income itself
 - The values that underlie the development of the policy

Can a basic income address food insecurity?

Under neoliberal values, a basic income would

- Replace the expense of the welfare state
- Be a handout to those who were not good competitors in the economy
- Support the global market by spending money
- Be gobbled up by
 - Landlords jacking up rents
 - Retailers hiking food prices
 - Public support services being privatized and morphing into priced commodities
 - All competing to get a piece of the “government handout”
- The poor would be in the same, or even worse, position with respect to food insecurity than they were before a basic income policy was developed

Can a basic income address food insecurity?

Under life values, a basic income would be

- A universal program to which all were entitled when needed
- Part of a suite of supportive universal programs such as public education, healthcare, childcare and eldercare
- A cushion of security so food-insecure people can purchase adequate food on a regular basis
- Backed by programs that ensure their income will not be 'eaten up' by aggressive players in the global market
- The poor would be in a better position with respect to food insecurity than they were before a basic income policy was developed

Can a basic income address food insecurity?

- Another point to consider
- Basic income = income transfer
- Puts money in the pockets of individual recipients
- Does nothing to change the status quo of the market
- Does nothing to create another unit of affordable housing or one new child care space (Yalnizyan 2016)
- Does nothing to create a sustainable food system in which everyone is fed, within the ecological limits of the planet (Sumner 2012)

Conclusion

It is time to identify policy interventions that would fundamentally improve the material well-being of food-insecure households (Dachner and Tarasuk 2016, xx)

- A basic income
 - Backed by a duty of care (Morgan and Morley 2014)
 - Based in life values
 - Part of a suite of programs that provide material enablements to all Canadians
- Can a basic income can address food insecurity?
- Yes, if we clearly understand
 - The role of a basic income
 - The political climate in which it is enacted
- Without this layered understanding, those in poverty might never experience a life without hunger