

## More jobs preferred over guaranteed ‘basic income’

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At first blush, the concept of guaranteed “basic income” is attractive. The government would give every adult a monthly paycheck, whether they were employed or not, and poverty would be eliminated. The idea behind this movement is that as technology whittles away jobs once performed by people, the lost wages will be returned to every American, with no strings attached.

What could possibly be wrong with everyone receiving a monthly paycheck of about \$1,000 to keep one person from falling below the poverty line?

As we all were taught as kids, when something sounds too good to be true, it usually is.

The universal basic income movement may seem new, but it’s actually been around for decades. In the 1960s and early ’70s, several prominent conservatives pushed it as a way to dismantle President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs aimed at alleviating poverty in America. And after a period of dormancy, the idea has come roaring back recently, backed by some leaders in the technology sector.

There’s no question that we have far too many people living below the poverty line, as job-churning from middle-class jobs to low-wage service-sector jobs continues. But combating poverty calls for precision, which, by definition, basic income ignores.

Tackling poverty starts with creating opportunity. And opportunity is a good-paying job that one can raise a family on. It also means financing programs that directly and immediately support those suffering in poverty, like Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

The price tag of basic income for every American would be about \$3 trillion a year, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Conservative Cato Institute senior fellow Michael Tanner finds basic income “intriguing” because he and other conservatives see it as a way to slash decades of popular anti-poverty programs, including Social Security. A very steep price to pay.

And, as some economists point out, giving everyone a check in the form of basic income regardless of socio-economic status pushes wealth upward, meaning fewer dollars actually go into the hands of the poor. That, in turn, fuels inequality.

The new push for basic income suffered a significant setback this month. Voters in Switzerland had the opportunity to approve a measure to provide about \$2,500 monthly to all citizens. Wary of the cost and unintended consequences on the labor market, the Swiss overwhelmingly rejected the referendum.

But by no means will one failed vote doom the idea. Backers are proposing basic income programs in other countries. And, a Bay Area company, Y Combinator, recently announced that it is planning a pilot project in Oakland.

As we consider the future of work and basic income, there's a bigger question to be considered than its price tag. Is the only value in work the value of a paycheck?

I'd argue, emphatically, the answer is no. America's great middle class was built by working people who continue to be the backbone of our country's greatness. Work helps organize our lives. It provides a sense of accomplishment. It builds character and instills values.

The problem today is that big corporations are outsourcing our jobs, slashing wages and hours, and cutting retirement simply to pad their own bottom line and the pockets of their well-heeled executives. Instead of basic income alleviating that problem, it could make it worse by bestowing even more power in the hands of the corporate elites who stand to benefit from a robots-take-our-jobs future.

Contrary to the popular narrative, automation isn't having a significant effect on jobs in the United States, at least not now. The real culprits in the hollowing out of our middle class include flawed trade policies that encourage the outsourcing of good jobs, the loss of worker bargaining power as a result of the decades-long assault on labor unions and an economic model generally rigged to benefit Wall Street barons at the expense of Main Street shop owners.

We don't know what the world will look like in 20 years or 50 years. The evolution of technology is not linear. But we do know that there's value in earning a paycheck, teaching our kids the benefit of hard work and standing together in a workplace to demand fair treatment in return for the fruits of our labor. Those are American values as important to our future as they've been to our past.

Basic income may indeed be necessary someday in response to fewer jobs. But that's not something for which we should strive. To the contrary, it's a future we'd be wise to avoid.