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FIXES

Baby Steps Toward Guaranteed Incomes and Racial Justice

In Mississippi, a pilot project to distribute incomes to poverty-stricken single African-American mothers shows the plausibility of a more equal America.

By Courtney E. Martin

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A mother and her son participate in a family learning program provided by the Springboard to Opportunities organization. Credit...Sarah Stripp

Last of three articles.

This Sunday, all over America, little hands will prepare trays with bowls of cereal and small glasses of orange juice. They will leave trails of well-intentioned milk behind them as they approach tired, smiling moms in rumpled beds. It's all pretty cute.

And very much a departure from the daily reality of motherhood in 2019, when many of us are experiencing existential dread over how climate change will affect our children and are all too aware of the scourge of inequality that shapes their lives.

“We Live for the We: The Political Power of Black Motherhood,” by Dani McClain, quotes the activist Trina Greene Brown, saying, “People who are raising kids who were meant to survive have a lot to learn from us.”

Ms. Brown continued: “We can teach resilience. We can instill pride. We can instill values around compassion and love. We can also instill a sense of joy and play in horrible conditions.”



A family at a Springboard to Opportunities block party. Credit...Sarah Stripp

Approaching poverty alleviation in that manner is countercultural in many ways. As outlined in [a report](#) on which the New America Foundation and Springboard to Opportunities collaborated in November 2017, “Low-income women and families in Mississippi are living, working, and raising their children within a state policy context that has all but eliminated cash assistance, continuously constructed barriers to other forms of support, and prioritized perceptions of fraud and abuse over human needs.”

Nearly half of black children in Mississippi are in families living below the poverty line, compared with just 17 percent of white children. Yet only 8 percent of families living in poverty participate in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

For six years, Springboard to Opportunities has run a range of programs, like after-school tutoring for children and job-readiness support for their parents. “Our [two-generation](#) approach has been measurably successful,” said Aisha Nyandoro, the executive director. Indeed, 76 percent of adults who went through the program went back to school or found a job. “But they also consistently told me, ‘What we really need in order to reach our goals is cash,’” Ms. Nyandoro said.

Ms. Nyandoro had heard about guaranteed income at a conference and realized it might be a way of responding to their call. She teamed up with the [Economic Security Project](#), network devoted to furthering the conversation on guaranteed income. The leadership team there, including the philanthropist Chris Hughes, who has become one of guaranteed income’s most vocal proponents, supported a task force of mothers in thinking about the best structure for the Magnolia Mother’s Trust.

The broader conversation about guaranteed income often focuses on the rise of artificial intelligence and the inevitable loss of jobs that will follow. That is the hook for many in the tech world. But another set of champions isn’t looking forward as much as back. The Movement for Black Lives, a network that includes Black Lives Matter, has [endorsed](#) a guaranteed-income proposal called Universal PLUS Basic Income. It would provide a modest income to everyone, funded by divestment from the prison system, with a prorated additional amount for African-Americans.

In other words, guaranteed income could be a plausible policy akin to reparations. But if the cash is intended to heal, those who design its distribution need to reduce the possibility of unintended side effects. Annie Lowery points out in her 2018 book “Give People Money” that the idea of guaranteed income may be bipartisan, but the implementation is certainly not. She wrote, “The ends and means would never end up pleasing both sides of the aisle.”

The average annual income of the people whom Springboard to Opportunities works with is \$11,030. All of them receive government benefits, so they were understandably concerned: Would a cash transfer of this nature reduce those benefits? And if so, by how much? Springboard worked with an economist to run the most likely scenarios, which is how they landed on \$1,000 a month, but there were still plenty of unknowns. Ms. Nyandoro told interested residents: “You know better than anybody what additional income does to your benefits. You make an informed decision about whether this is the right thing for your family.”



Tia Cunningham, a participant in the Magnolia Mother's Trust, and her two youngest children. Credit...Sarah Stripp

Ciara McDonald, a 30-year-old mother of three, has used the money for a wide range of expenses, like buying textbooks, and buying Christmas presents for her children and relatives for the first time in years.

Have friends been jealous? “They’re just happy they don’t have to put me on the tab anymore!” Ms. McDonald said, laughing. “Sometimes I didn’t want to go places because I didn’t have the money, and my friends would say, ‘I got you.’ It feels so good to be the one to say that to them now.”

“The dignity is as psychologically important as the cash,” said Carol Wishcamper, the head of the Springboard to Opportunities board.

Ms. McDonald has also seen her own health improve in these six months. “Before all this, I was having anxiety attacks so bad that I had to go the doctor and he said, ‘What’s on your mind?’ and I said: ‘The bills! Not being able to do things. Not being able to make sure things are paid, getting the baby his Pampers.’”

“Since getting the money, I’ve been able to go off my medication,” she said. “It was such a relief.”

This kind of data is significant, said Dr. Amy Castro Baker, an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Social Policy and Practice. She is part of the team

researching [another notable guaranteed-income pilot](#) project taking place in Stockton, Calif. “The science shows us that financial stress shows up in the body over time,” she said. Referring to Ms. McDonald, she added: Imagine this kind of effect happening at scale across the United States or a state or even just a city. Imagine the potential we would be unlocking.”

The Magnolia Mother’s Trust doesn’t challenge only other people to question how they see single black mothers; the moms themselves are challenged to see themselves anew. Ms. Nyandoro said many of those who participated have felt that the extra cash has allowed them to be good parents for the first time.

“You are showing up every day with all of this trauma, and yet the ability to now say yes to McDonald’s makes you feel like you are a good mom?” Ms. Nyandoro reflected, exasperated: “It’s understandable in our consumerist society, but heartbreaking.”

So what’s next? After the six remaining months of this pilot program are over, the Magnolia Mother’s Trust hopes to expand. It will need to raise significant resources to conduct a three-year randomized control trial, in which they not only track families’ data but also see how a guaranteed income at a larger scale affects the local economy.

“These kinds of pilots are a good role for philanthropy,” Natalie Foster, a co-chairwoman of the Economic Security Project, said. “They open up the political imagination and show what’s possible. I’ve been surprised how quickly the policy conversation has moved in the wake of these pilots.”

For example, the presidential candidate Senator Kamala Harris has proposed what she calls the [LIFT the Middle Class Act](#), a tax credit of up to \$6,000 a year for married couples whose joint annual income is less than \$100,000 and a \$3,000 credit for single individuals earning under \$50,000 a year.

Ms. Harris’s office estimates that 80 million Americans would benefit. Ms. Foster said these kinds of policy platforms are a direct result of the leadership of people like Ms. Nyandoro and Mayor Michael Tubbs of Stockton.

Mia Birdsong, host of a soon-to-be-released podcast called “More Than Enough” that focuses on guaranteed income, frames the big picture: “In this country we still act as if fundamental human rights like housing and food are conditional — in part, because of who wrote our founding documents: landowning white men. We have been reckoning with their conditionality for personhood for hundreds of years. What excites me most is the conversation this experiment forces us to have about deservingness.”

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