

Prof. David Nettle on Basic Income's Workability

[Prof. David Nettle](#) is a researcher in the Evolution and Social Cognition team at the Institut Jean Nicod, Paris, and a Professor at Northumbria University. His research spans the biological and social sciences, focusing on economic and social inequality, trust and cooperation, adversity and aging, food insecurity, and moral and political cognition. He is also interested in interdisciplinary synthesis, open science, and the application of research to public policy. His publications are freely accessible, along with an introductory R and statistics course. He has authored several books and maintains a blog on science and society.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How does basic income address the roots of economic inequality?

Prof. David Nettle: Basic income, under the scheme we propose, does two things.

First, it is redistributive, meaning that it brings the incomes of the poorest households much closer to the median, whilst taking from the very richest ones. It does this because we couple it with a progressive income tax. The richest households get their basic income, but it is clawed back from them through income tax. The poorest households are net gainers. Thus, basic income takes over the function of the existing welfare state in a simpler way.

Second, basic income smooths the flow of resources, which is valuable for people working in the gig economy or for themselves. In essence, it sets a floor on how bad the very worst month can be. The poorest households are also the ones most adversely affected by fluctuations so this assurance benefits them the most.

Through these two means, basic income supports and assures the people for whom the effects of inequality are the most negative.

Jacobsen: What makes basic income a long-term solution rather than a short-term salve?

Nettle: The principle is extremely simple and transparent. Once in place, it is relatively easy to administer. If governments wanted to mess about with it, this would be extremely obvious to every adult member of the population (which is not so for conditional welfare benefits and taxes). The need for reassessment is minimal, making it bureaucratically workable.

Jacobsen: How can basic income improve health and well-being for all demographics?

Nettle: Basic income relieves stress (because of the knowledge that the worst months can never be extremely bad, ever), and gives people the head room to make wellbeing-promoting investments, such as investing in training, moving to a more satisfying job, leaving a controlling relationship and so on. It removes the need for humiliating and uncertain eligibility assessment. The policy will benefit different demographics for different reasons, but there is no group that will not benefit.

Jacobsen: Why might basic income affect trust and social cohesion?

Nettle: For two reasons. One is that basic income is something that we all share. It will be one of the few things, along with the right to a vote and a passport, that unites all permanent adult residents, regardless of age, class or region. This helps build a sense of shared pride and membership.

The other reason is that the cause of other people being untrustworthy is often that they are in crisis. For example, petty theft is disproportionately committed by people in a bad situation who need fast cash; incivility is often due to being in an alienated situation. If you remove the material causes of desperation, you also create enabling conditions for people to build trustworthy and cooperative civic relationships.

Jacobsen: How will basic income co-exist with, replace, or detract from current welfare schemes?

Nettle: A starter scheme would have to coexist with some elements of existing welfare schemes. Over time we see the basic income growing, to the point where most other welfare schemes, and their complex administrative supports, can be withdrawn. There may be some exceptions around disability, and in the UK, for the medium term, housing benefit. But the long-term aim is to radically simplify the (currently separate) systems of welfare, taxation, and state pensions.

Jacobsen: What are the compelling trials of basic income illustrating its capabilities to reshape societal behavior?

Nettle: We have rather little trial evidence from high-income countries. But we do have some bits and pieces, plus quite a lot of trial evidence from low and middle-income countries, and some natural experiments. These suggest widespread mental health benefits. Many of the benefits we write about in the book can only be seen when the policy is applied at the level of whole communities, so it is hard to design trials (whereby definition one sample of people gets it and their neighbors don't) that capture the full set of effects we anticipate.

Jacobsen: How might basic income influence long-term thinking and decision-making of recipients, e.g., regarding education, career choices, and family planning?

Nettle: With basic income set an appropriate level, people know: (a) that they are insured against certain kinds of down-side risks in the future. This makes it more rational for them to invest in specialist skills, follow their entrepreneurial dreams, take time out from their careers to care for family members, and so on; and (b) that they always have enough this month that the bare minimum of current expenditure (paying rent and putting some kind of food on the table) will be possible. This allows them to allocate whatever else they earn to long-term goals such as making their family's life better.

Jacobsen: What policy design features are essential to ensure that basic income is a sustainable driver of societal progress?

Nettle: It is not automatically a more sustainable policy option than the alternatives - but it could be financed through taxation on activities we wanted to discourage, such as carbon-emissions, flying etc. In short, there is a range of choices for what we use to fund it and here we can make sustainable decisions.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, David.