



A seat at the (dinner) table: Food, eating, and the Ontario Basic Income Pilot

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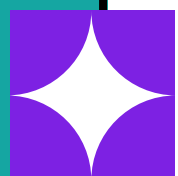
Outline



Policy and literature context



Research questions and methods



**Findings: Food as survival, nutrition,
connection, responsibility, and pleasure**



Discussion and implications



Context and approach

- From 2018-2019, the Ontario Basic Income Pilot (OBIP) disbursed \$16,989 and \$24,027 to singles and couples, plus \$500 monthly for those with disabilities (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2017)
- While the relationship between poverty and food insecurity is well-documented, a more nuanced understanding of the implications of a basic income for food access, quality, and reliability through a qualitative lens is lacking
- Drawing on 79 interviews (53 and 26, respectively) with pilot participants from two research projects to explore the following question: *How did the receipt of a basic income affect Ontario pilot participants' day-to-day relationships with food and eating, particularly compared to their previous contexts?*

Food as *survival*

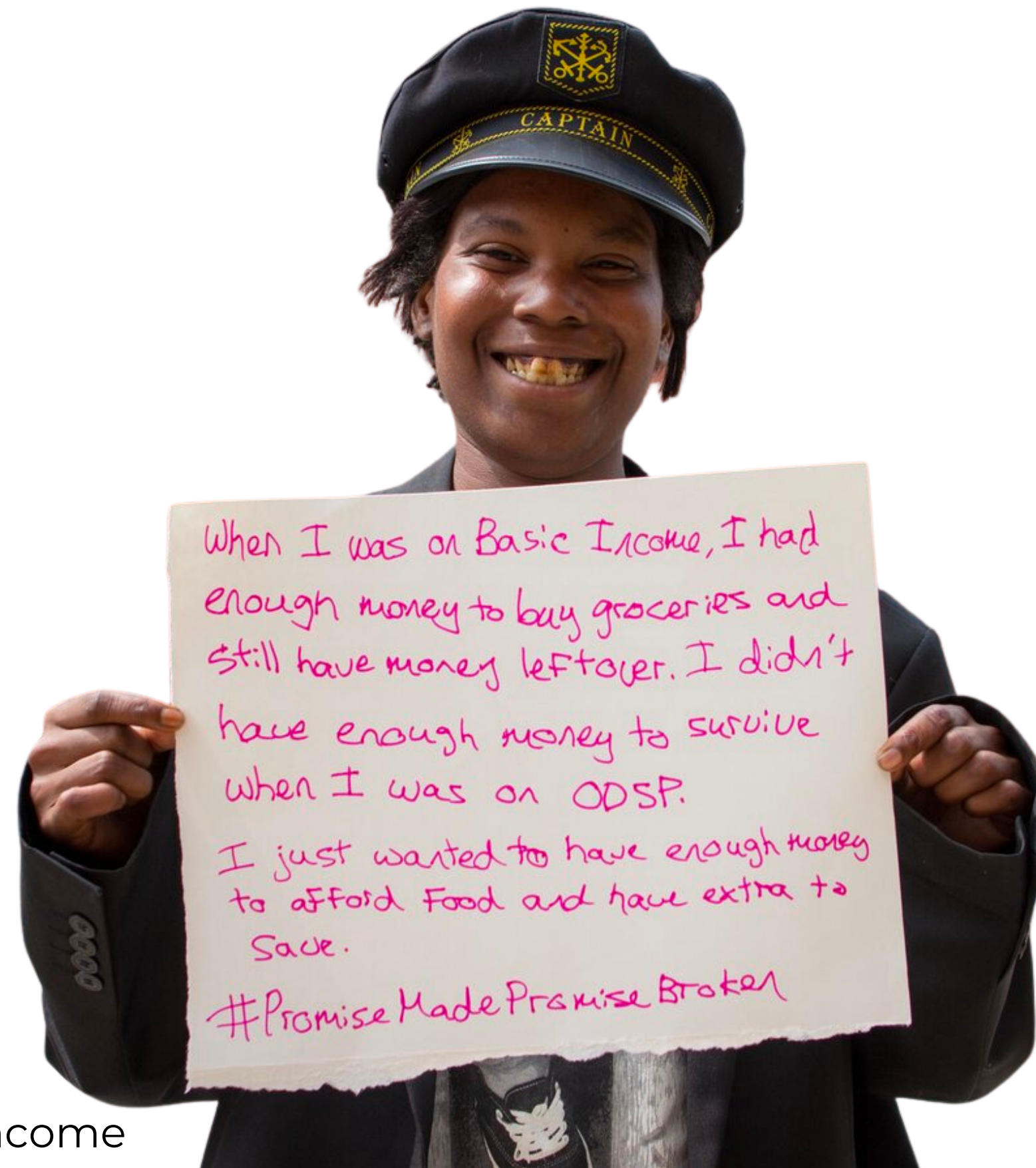


Image credit: Jessie Golem/Humans of Basic Income

From struggle to sufficiency

- Interviewees widely described not having enough food to eat prior to the pilot, and perceived immediate and substantial improvements in food security with greater access to income
- The significance of this went beyond avoiding hunger: it meant abandoning (often ineffective or dehumanizing) survival strategies like food banks, reduced stress and anxiety around groceries, and a renewed sense of dignity

"We were eating fuller meals at dinner time. No one was going hungry at any point. We had constant snacks in the cupboard."

"I don't like using [the food bank]. I didn't when I was on basic income. I didn't need it. It makes me upset that I have to go...I don't like to beg, and that's what I'm doing...In this supposedly-great country of ours, nobody should have to beg for food. People should have money to go out and buy groceries. Nobody should have to use a food bank."

"It helps with your emotional, your mental well-being, because you're not stressing that if you spend a little extra on food that you're going to be broke."

“I don't think that [my wife] would have went back to school at all if we didn't get that money...She never would've felt it was okay to do that if we didn't have our basic needs taken care of. **Having a roof over our heads and being able to have a full fridge, that changes the game in terms of perception in what your choices can be...**There could be a prize-winning physicist who was trapped in poverty who may never get the luxury to use their brain to advance humanity. That's a huge, ridiculous example, but even on a smaller scale **there could be somebody out there who would be able to change their community if only they weren't so worried about what they're going to be able to get from the fucking food bank to feed their kids.**”

Food as *nutrition*



Image credit: Jessie Golem/Humans of Basic Income

Access to health

- While Canada's Food Guide (2022) insists that "making healthy food choices doesn't have to cost more," it is estimated that the average monthly cost of nutritious food for a single person in Canada's capital is \$392, 45% of an Ontario Works recipient's monthly income (Graham et al., 2022)
- Greater autonomy and choice at the grocery store often translated to more fresh, nutritious food for participants and their families
- Many attributed improvements in their health to these dietary changes

"I didn't have to have my calculator open...to see if I could make it to the dairy fridge at the end of the store...before I ran out of money. If I wanted a cauliflower, I could have a cauliflower. You can't do that on ODSP. On ODSP, you eat bread, pasta, rice, all the cheap and cheerful carbs that you can, because you've got to get filled up and you've got to do it as cheaply as possible. It changed the way I interact with the world."

"The better foods I had, the more energy I had, the better health I had, my illness didn't affect me so much...I was swimming an hour and a half three times a week when I was on basic income because I was eating healthy. I had the fuel for my body to do it."

"Healthy eating"

- In a neoliberal context where health is a) highly individualized and b) used as a marker for "good" citizenship, access to "healthy eating" practices becomes a strategy for survival and belonging for those in poverty (Beagan et al., 2016)
- Pilot participants' ability to buy nutritious foods has both practical and symbolic significance

"A lot of the healthier foods, the organic foods, they're more expensive. I don't know why they do that, because if they want to encourage people to eat healthy, then make it affordable for people to eat that way."

"It makes no sense: one of the things doctors tell you is eat right, rest, no stress, and exercise. And except for the exercise portion, everything else is related to income in some way, shape, or form. It's almost as if you're non-compliant if you're living in poverty."



Food as *connection*

Relationships without food stress

- Beyond food sufficiency and quality, the additional security and stability afforded by basic income offered many improved access to the social relations of food and eating
- Reduced stress about food insecurity created more space to cultivate relationships, while greater others had better access to food as a measure of care, gratitude, or appreciation

“It made [our family] closer because I felt more able to talk with them. I was always afraid of talking with them, that I’d be saying ‘no, I’m out of food, I’m out of money...’ I didn’t want to complain about anything. When I was on basic income, we just had conversations and food and transportation never came up.”

“It made us happier when my kids would come [with] the grandkids...I could put a meal on the table and sit down and have a family meal on a Sunday with my children and my grandchildren, and have a little treat in the house for them. Just that alone brought pleasure.”

Eating and being together

- Several participants reflected on the ability to partake in social activities that relied on disposable income (either to purchase food as part of these activities or avoid sacrificing food security to participate)
- The effects of this were widespread: people perceived stronger and more reciprocal relationships with friends and family, less isolation and more time spent in community, and a greater sense of belonging and support

“I think we were able to be a little more social, because maybe we did have \$20 to...go down to the farmers market and be among people and part of the community. Whereas when you’re on ODSP, you really don’t have that extra money to do that kind of stuff.”

“I was able to have more contact with friends because when people would be going out for dinner or out for lunch or something then I could come. I didn’t have to worry about if I have to borrow money, or they have to pay for me, or what happens when the bill comes and I don’t have money?”

Image credit: Jessie Golem/Humans of Basic Income

Food as *responsibility*



Meeting obligations

- With more income, many found themselves able to fulfill a range of social norms and obligations related to food and eating; this took a range of forms (e.g., providing for oneself or one's family, conscious or ethical purchasing decisions, etc.)
- In a society that prizes self-sufficiency and adherence to many of these expectations, this offered a sense of inclusion and dignity

“I could go and spend a week with my daughter and be a contributing member, bringing my own food and not taking from her. For a long time when the kids came to visit me...they’d have to bring the snacks, because I don't have them. As a nana, that really bites, because we’re supposed to.”

“[Basic income] made me feel like I was contributing to society in having the extra money, spending it locally, helping the farmers market, helping the local stores...Before I had to always go Food Basics. That’s the only place I could afford anything.”



Food as *pleasure*

Treat yourself

- In many cases, basic income meant being able to experience food and eating as pleasure, joy, or curiosity without stress, anxiety, or guilt

“It was easier to have fun because I wasn’t thinking every second about spending money... If we ordered a pizza, I wasn’t stressing about, ‘okay, we ordered a pizza, the kids are happy, but I could’ve used that money for this this and this...’ I just enjoyed the pizza.”

“My daughter was trying all kinds of different things. She tried dragonfruit, she tried papaya, she tried honey melon. She's absolutely obsessed with dragonfruit right now.”

"I could say, 'you know what? Let's go walk down the street and get ice cream...' It was nice to be able to do that, instead of saying 'sorry, guys, we had to buy food and we had to pay bills, we can't...'"

“I was very conscious when I started [basic income] that I did want to buy things I hadn’t been able to buy in a very long time. A lot of it was food choices, like Nutella - which is nutritionally zero and it costs a lot relative to other things - but it’s tasty and I love Nutella.”

Discussion and implications

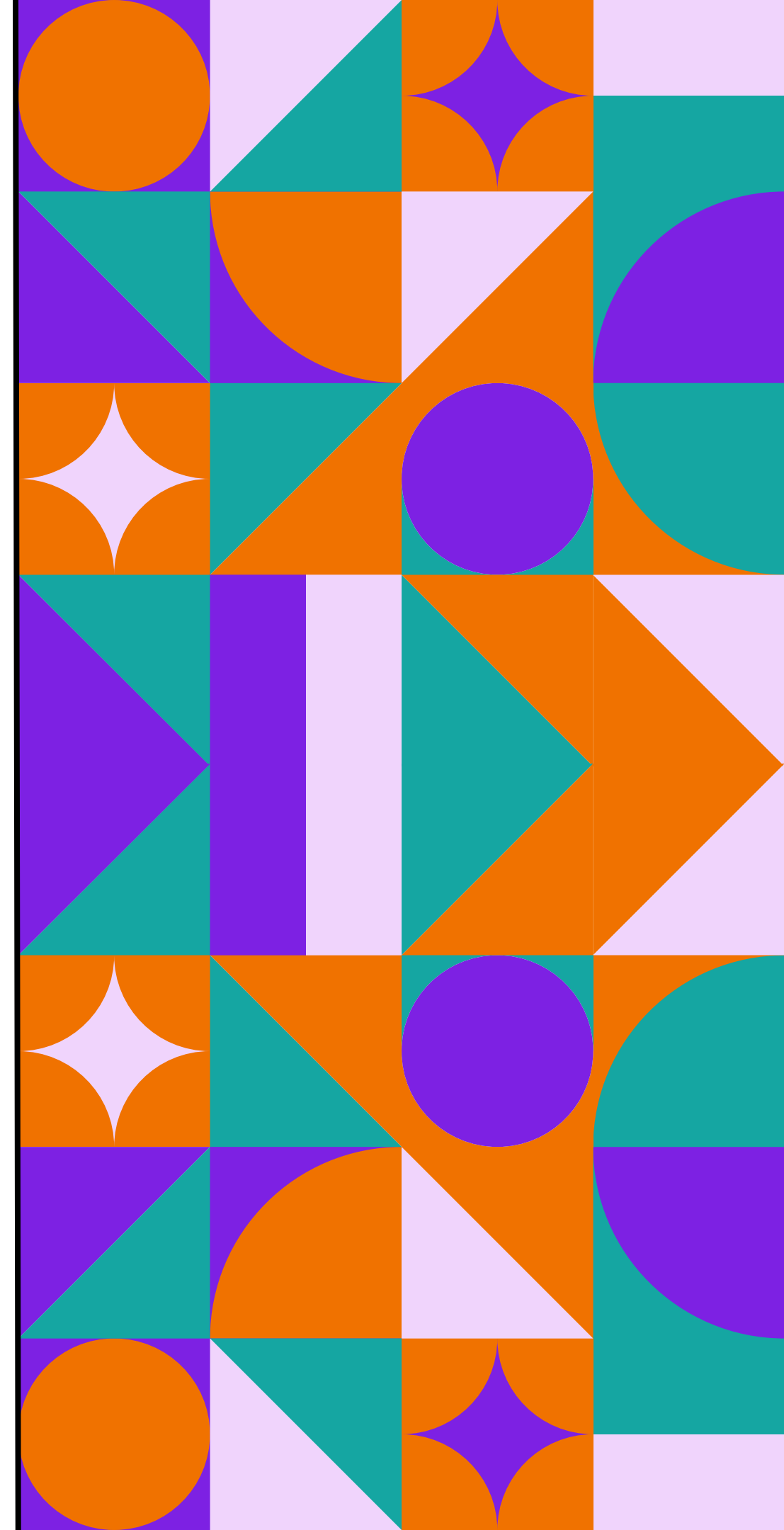
- In the context of basic income, shift to thinking of food as nourishment: physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, and social fulfillment, all of which are mediated by access to income
- Qualitative data also suggest that:
 - 1) Food insecurity is about income: people didn't lack the knowledge or skills to purchase affordable food options or cook healthy meals, but the means to do so
 - 2) Access to a guaranteed income was the reason for these shifts: people spoke to a "before" and "after," with basic income being what made the difference



Thank you!



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