



# No strong effect of unconditional cash transfers on cognition

A recommendation by [Chris Chambers](#)  based on peer reviews by [Charlotte Pennington](#)  and [Matúš Adamkovič](#)  of the STAGE 2 REPORT:

Barnabas Szaszi, Bence Palfi, Gabor Neszveda, Aikaterini Taka, Péter Szécsi, Christopher Blattman, Julian C. Jamison, Margaret Sheridan (2022) Does alleviating poverty increase cognitive performance? Short- and long-term evidence from a randomized controlled trial. Missing preprint\_server, ver. 2, peer-reviewed and recommended by Peer Community in Registered Reports. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/4gyzh>

Submitted: 13 July 2022, Recommended: 24 October 2022

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Recent studies have revealed potential benefits of unconditional cash transfers (UCTs) on a variety of health and social outcomes, including self-reported happiness and life satisfaction (Haushofer & Shapiro, 2016), economic and financial well-being (Blattman et al., 2013; Baird et al., 2018) and educational attainment (Baird et al., 2016). Although the effects of UCTs do not always out-perform rigorous control conditions (Whillans & West, 2022), these findings prompt the question of whether the alleviation of poverty via UCTs can also influence cognitive processing and performance. In the current study, Szaszi et al. analysed the results of a previous randomised trial of UCTs by Blattman et al. (2017) to test whether a \$200 lump sum – equivalent to three months of income – administered to a sample of young men in Liberia carries both short- and long-term benefits for a range of executive functions, including attention, response inhibition, and working memory capacity. Overall, the results suggest minimal if any consequences of the intervention – the observed effects of UCTs on cognition were several times smaller than suggested by previous research, and the evidence for a positive effect was inconclusive. Extensive multiverse analyses showed that these findings were robust to a range of alternative analytical specifications, and the authors estimate that a sample size of nearly 5000 would be required to provide strong evidence. In their Discussion, the authors explore a range of reasons for the negative findings compared with previous research, including the more rigorous and severe causal test enabled by the randomised trial design, the demographic homogeneity of the sample demographic, the use of pen-and-paper tests (cf. computerised tests in previous studies), and the delivery of a lump-sum cash transfer compared with a regular monthly installment. In addition, although the results were negative or inconclusive, there were hints that a positive effect of UCTs may be more evident in some cognitive domains than in others –

in this case, potentially benefiting working memory more than inhibitory control. Further research would be required to confirm this hypothesis. The Stage 2 manuscript was evaluated over one round of in-depth review. Based on the responses to the reviewers' comments, the recommender judged that the manuscript met the Stage 2 criteria and awarded a positive recommendation. **URL to the preregistered Stage 1 protocol:** <https://osf.io/k56yv> **Level of bias control achieved: Level 2.** *At least some data/evidence that was used to answer the research question had been accessed and partially observed by the authors prior to Stage 1 acceptance, but the authors certified that they had not yet observed the key variables within the data that would be used to answer the research question AND they took additional steps to maximise bias control and rigour.* **List of eligible PCI RR-friendly journals:**

- [Cortex](#)
- [F1000Research](#)
- [Peer Community Journal](#)
- [PeerJ](#)
- [Royal Society Open Science](#)
- [Swiss Psychology Open](#)

#### **References:**

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# Reviews

## Evaluation round #1

DOI or URL of the preprint: <https://psyarxiv.com/4gyzh>

### Authors' reply, 08 October 2022

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### Decision by [Chris Chambers](#) , posted 06 August 2022, validated 24 October 2022

#### Revision invited

The two reviewers who assessed the Stage 1 submission kindly returned to evaluate the completed Stage 2 manuscript. As you will see, both are positive and constructive, and based on my own reading the manuscript comes close to meeting the Stage 2 criteria. The reviews highlight a range of minor-to-moderate issues to address in revision, including presentation (and verification) of the results, increasing the depth of synthesis and precision of critical evaluation in the Discussion (including additional consideration of limitations), and justification of specific claims. The reviewers also note several parts that would benefit from presentational improvements. In revising, please ensure that the manuscript fully conforms to the the PCI RR [TOP policy](#), particularly in terms of data accessibility.

Based on these reviews, I am happy to invite a revision and point-by-point response to the reviewers.

### Reviewed by [Charlotte Pennington](#) , 21 July 2022

Please see attached for my Stage 2 review.

Best wishes,

Charlotte

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### Reviewed by [Matúš Adamkovič](#) , 02 August 2022

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