



The COVID-19 pandemic has led to steep drops in employment, income, and access to markets, pushing tens of millions of people in low- and middle-income countries into poverty. Social protection programming has emerged as a critical response to the social and economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these programs are social assistance measures, which provide benefits to individuals even if they have not previously paid contributions into the program. Before the pandemic, cash-based social assistance has been shown to successfully reduce poverty and enhance wellbeing along a number of dimensions, across many different countries. **But what is known about the extent to which cash transfers have mitigated the worst social, economic, and health impacts of the pandemic? And who has benefitted the most from such assistance?**

This review collates the current evidence on cash during the pandemic across a range of outcomes including food security and nutrition, livelihood support, health behaviors, and inequalities. It does so by highlighting rigorous impact evaluations of cash-based programs from countries across Latin America, Asia, and Africa. These programs include cash transfers (CTs), universal basic income (UBI), and public works programs (PWP). This review is not exhaustive, but rather examines a variety of cases for which there is rigorous evidence to highlight findings emerging from the use of cash in large-scale crises. The goal of the review is to draw out key lessons about the implementation of these programs which can inform policy in the future.

Based on the research, the following are key policy lessons to consider:



Access to cash or guaranteed wages can partially mitigate the worst effects of a large-scale crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Some programs can also have positive effects on health behaviors and knowledge.



Where social assistance interventions are already in place, it is necessary to plan a proper transition out of social assistance programming to avoid negative income shocks.



The provision of non-cash supports in the form of psychosocial and other services is needed to address mental health in the context of widespread crisis.



Quickly responding social assistance during a crisis requires infrastructure in the form of social registries, automated access to identity documents, and digital payment instruments. Mobile phone apps may be useful for targeting interventions to reach those not in social registries.



Given potential delays, it is crucial to strengthen existing programs and develop systems for quick emergency relief. Large-scale social protection programs in place prior to a crisis may also enhance beneficiaries' resilience, but more research is needed.

* For key findings and further details, see the section on "Key findings" on page 6.

The Impacts of Cash in a Pandemic

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July 29, 2021