

BASIC INCOME GUARANTEE

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# B.I.G. AND FIRST NATIONS:

## CAUTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

By Dr. Gayle Broad and Jessica Nadjiwon-Smith

Research Paper No. 19

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# Contents

- Who We Are \_\_\_\_\_ 2
- About the Author \_\_\_\_\_ 3
- Abstract \_\_\_\_\_ 4
- Introduction \_\_\_\_\_ 5
- A Basic Income Guarantee and First Nations \_\_\_\_\_ 6
  - A Different Face to Poverty in First Nations Communities \_\_\_\_\_ 6
  - Administering Social Assistance in First Nations \_\_\_\_\_ 8
  - First Nations Autonomy \_\_\_\_\_ 9
- Conclusions \_\_\_\_\_ 10
- References \_\_\_\_\_ 12
- Related Research \_\_\_\_\_ 13



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Gayle's background includes twenty-five years as a practitioner of community economic and social development, working with women, low-income and Indigenous communities.

Her research interests include community economic development; the social economy, and public legal education. Some of Gayle's recent and current work includes research on the social economy in Northern Ontario; working with the "Understanding the Strengths of Indigenous Communities (USIC)" project (a national project involving five First Nations from across Canada); developing a strategic planning toolkit for use with First Nations communities; conducting a community based research project with Nog-Da-Win-Da-Min Family and Community Services.

### Jessica Nadjiwon-Smith



Jessica Nadjiwon-Smith is a band member of the Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation and was raised by her grandmother in the community. After leaving home to attend school she returned to her community to raise her family and work in a grassroots capacity. She is married and has three children. She is a firm believer in life-long learning and supporting First Nations and Indigenous communities through community development at the grassroots level.

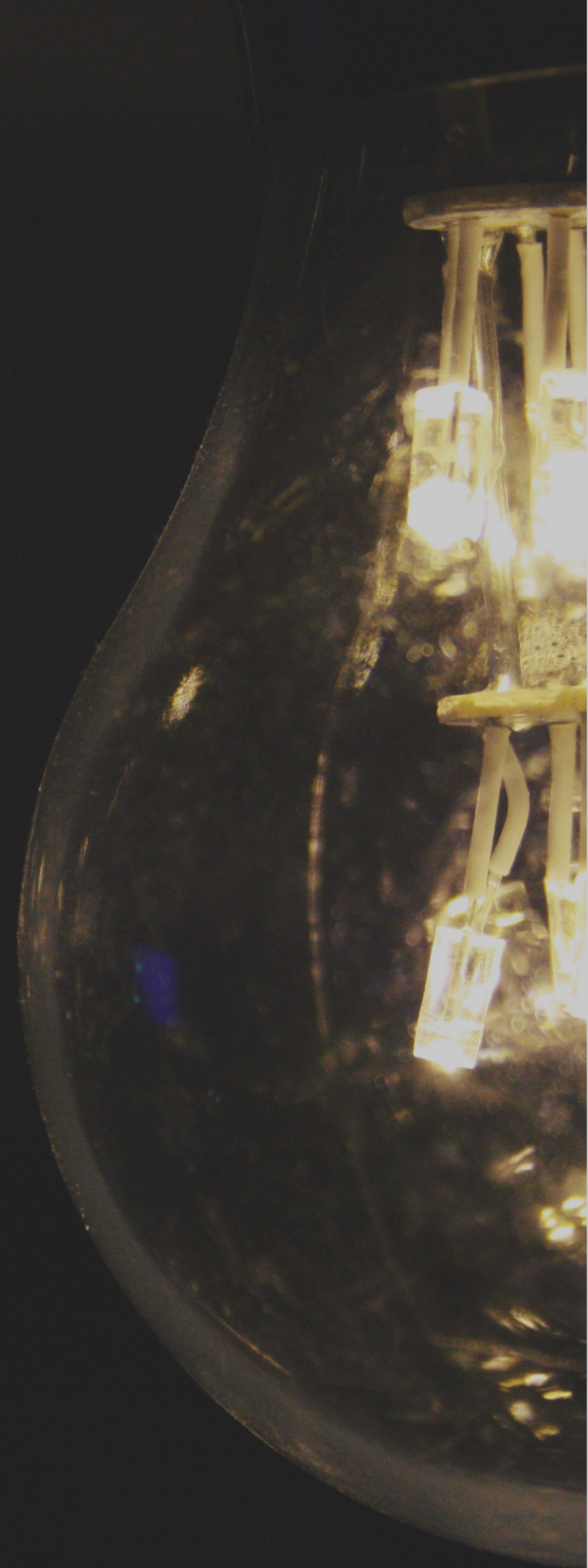
Jessica has over 15 years experience and expertise in First Nations management, finance and delivery of social assistance in First Nations communities. She has sat on several Boards of Directors throughout her career in varying capacities from arts to social assistance.

Jessica has been the Executive Director of the Ontario Welfare Administrators' Association (ONWAA) for two years. Before that, she sat on the ONWAA Board of Directors for the organization for several years during her role as the Ontario Works Administrator at Neyaashiinigmiing.

# Abstract

Ontario's policies regarding social assistance in First Nations have been fraught with court challenges, accountability issues, and challenging relationships, although recent years have brought some improvements. As Ontario considers implementing a basic income guarantee (B.I.G.), First Nations might wish to consider the relative advantages of such a policy for them. Several areas of concern exist. First, poverty in First Nations communities differs substantially from that in other municipalities and rural communities; will First Nations also gain the possible benefits that these communities obtain from a B.I.G.? Second, welfare administration in First Nations also tends to reflect cultural differences; will eliminating local administration realize benefits for First Nations communities? Third, Canadian governments historically have underfunded and sometimes undermined programs in First Nations; what evidence supports the likelihood that the implementation of a B.I.G. would be any different?

This paper concludes that these questions may only be definitively answered through pilot site(s) testing with a comprehensive evaluation component attached, but implementation of a B.I.G. without such research may have unforeseen negative consequences for communities already experiencing the highest rates of poverty in Ontario.



## Introduction

“ [I]ncome is the most significant determinant for the health of an individual or community....It will take generations to restore our nations to the levels of health and prosperity that existed before residential schools and colonization, even with a **guaranteed basic income**. But it will reduce the hardships people face, and bring First Nations to the starting line. ”

-- Max FineDay, Sweetgrass First Nation (2015)

Poverty is a pernicious problem within society today and, as FineDay suggests, a significant challenge facing First Nations communities as they aim for greater equity within and alongside Canadian society. Ending poverty or reducing its level is a necessary goal: there is ample evidence that poverty is a key determinant of health. One option under consideration for addressing health and other inequities that result from disparities in income levels is a basic income guarantee (B.I.G.).

To better understand how an income guarantee program might affect First Nations communities in Ontario, in August 2016 the board of directors of the Ontario Native Welfare Administrators Association (ONWAA) authorized the authors to explore the Ontario government's proposal to introduce such a program across the province.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, we noted concerns about the plan that had already been voiced by various members of ONWAA and conducted a literature review on issues arising from the introduction

of the basic income concept in other jurisdictions. In this paper, we first explore some key differences between poverty rates and levels in First Nations compared with those in other Ontario communities. We then examine the challenges regarding the administration of a B.I.G. that might adversely affect its implementation in First Nations. Third, we briefly review the literature on implementing such a program. Finally, we suggest some questions that ought to be explored during the evaluation phase of any pilot tested of a basic income guarantee program.

<sup>1</sup> ONWAA's board of directors is composed of ten administrators representing regions across the province and over one hundred member First Nations.

## A Basic Income Guarantee and First Nations

After a review of the literature and discussions with a number of First Nations welfare administrators, we identified three main factors that might affect the introduction of a basic income guarantee in different municipalities across Ontario: first, poverty, and the lived experience of poverty, in First Nations communities might be quite different from the experience in other communities; second, differences in the administration of welfare, or Ontario Works, in First Nations communities might result in a net community loss with the introduction of a B.I.G.; and third, relationships between First Nations and provincial and federal governments, may risk lower rates for First Nations members and might also result in the loss of the ability to advocate cohesively for the poorest of Ontario's peoples.

### A Different Face to Poverty in First Nations Communities

“ In 2000 the median total income of status Indians on- and off-reserve was reported at \$13,932 and \$16,949 respectively, compared to \$30,023 for the non-aboriginal population. ”

— Pamela Palmater (2011, 115)

In Canada, only one province to date has attempted to introduce a basic income guarantee, and that was a pilot study undertaken in Dauphin, Manitoba, in the 1974–79 period, collaboratively sponsored by both the province and the federal government (Forget 2011). Often referred to as MINCOME, the pilot was introduced in a rural, primarily agricultural community of approximately ten thousand people. Interestingly, the people who demonstrated most benefit from the pilot were not those in receipt of social assistance, but the “working poor,” the self-employed, and others (Forget 2011). Given that Canadian culture and society generally have changed substantially since the 1970s, and that First Nations' culture and socio-economic status differ substantially from those of Canadians as a whole, can the MINCOME study results reasonably be applied to First Nations communities in Ontario today?

There are 133 First Nations in Ontario, with slightly over 200,000 members (Statistics Canada 2011), including both on- and off-reserve members. Ranging in population from fewer than 100 to more than 10,000, 82 of these communities have fewer than 500 residents and 113 have fewer than 1,000. Although approximately half the community members live off-reserve, there are substantial fluctuations in residency

and long waiting lists for on-reserve housing, which in some cases contribute to the choice of where to reside.

Communities also vary substantially in terms of their proximity to other communities, and can be categorized as:

- urban (within 50 km of a major centre) — 32 First Nations communities;
- rural (between 50 km and 350 km of a major centre — 59 First Nations communities;
- remote (over 350 km from a major centre — 5 First Nations communities; and
- air access — 31 First Nations communities (Spotton n.d.).

Remote and air access communities, all located in the north, are particularly challenged to provide access to quality health care, education, and affordable and nutritional food. Although the Northern Allowance attempts to address some of the additional costs, it is insufficient to address the realities of most communities,

which have only one grocery store. Additionally, the lack of employment opportunities and other social service infrastructure provided in larger urban settings through United Way and other funding also reduces access to key services for First Nations people. As well, growing populations and less out-migration of youth (Southcott 2004, 3) are creating overcrowding and straining already-limited community infrastructure and services. According to ONWAA records, over 75 percent of the ten thousand Ontario Works cases are located in Northern Ontario (Broad and Nadeau 2012).

As Palmater outlines in “Stretched Beyond Human Limits: Death by Poverty in First Nations” (2011), almost every measurement of poverty indicates that First Nations members’ incomes fall significantly below those of the average Canadian. In addition to absolute incomes noted in the quote above, Palmater asserts that Aboriginal people are “the most disadvantaged group in Canada” (115):

In the 20-year period from 1981 to 2001, Statistics Canada found that the **gap** in educational attainment (completion of high school) between the non-Aboriginal population and the status Indian population had increased from twice as high (66% vs. 30%) to **three times as high** (51% vs. 15%)....The gap also widened slightly for university education from 5 times as high (15% vs. 3%) to a little **over 5 times as high** (26% vs. 5%). The employment rates between 1981 and 2001 also showed a widening gap between Status Indians and the non-Aboriginal population from 56% vs. 75% to 58% vs. 80%. (2011, 114)

Spotton (n.d.), in a presentation for the Ministry of the Attorney General and using 2001 census data, highlights some key characteristics affecting the economic health and well-being of Indigenous peoples across the province,<sup>2</sup> including the following:

- 84 percent more Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal families are headed by a lone parent;
- 145 percent more Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal people are unemployed (14.7 percent versus 6 percent);

- the average individual income of Aboriginal peoples in Ontario is \$11,205 less than that of other Ontarians; and
- 48 percent more Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal people are considered low-income

Although family composition, income, and educational levels provide some insight into the individual experience of poverty, other data illustrate the compounding effect on First Nations communities as a whole:

- in 2014, over half of Ontario's First Nations were under “boil-water advisories” and 10 communities — all located in Northern Ontario — had not had potable water for more than ten years (Porter 2014);
- 41.5 percent of homes on reserves needed major repairs compared with 7 percent of non-Aboriginal households (Porter 2011, updated 2014);
- funding for children's benefits is 7 percent lower in First Nations communities than in other communities; and
- life expectancy for First Nations people is 7.4 years less for males and 5.2 years less for females than for non-Aboriginal people.

Taken together, these data paint a picture of poverty in First Nations communities that includes the complexities other communities face, but with so many additional factors that a strong argument can be made for a social assistance program and delivery system designed uniquely for them. The picture also raises concerns that benefits that other jurisdictions might realize from a B.I.G. cannot be automatically assumed to apply to First Nations. For example, would a B.I.G. that reduced food insecurity in an urban setting be sufficient to do so in a remote First Nation where three bananas might cost \$18? With such a contrasting “face of poverty” evidenced in First Nations communities, can a policy that might be viable in municipalities and rural communities be adequate for the needs of First Nations members and communities?

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the 2001 census figures quoted here are for all self-identified Aboriginals; First Nations income levels, unemployment rates, and educational attainment would be expected to illustrate even greater disparities.



## Administering Social Assistance in First Nations

“First Nations have it right. Welfare [Ontario Works] offices need to be the place of “first response” in responding to people’s needs, not the last resort.”

— Mike Nadeau, Chief Administrative Officer,  
Sault Ste. Marie Social Services Board

Although welfare benefits are only 4 percent of all income security expenditures in Canada, Canadians demonstrate a split in attitudes between those who recognize poverty as a structural issue arising from inequities facing some groups within society, and others who view it as a “personal deficit” (Stapleton 2008). This latter attitude has been dominant in the administration of Ontario Works in municipalities, but, as the above comment by the former executive director of ONWAA illustrates, First Nations administrators understand that poverty is a structural issue facing their communities, and administer benefits accordingly, including direct payments to service suppliers.

Social assistance — in Ontario also known as Ontario Works benefits — is administered in First Nations in Ontario as laid out in the 1965 Indian Welfare Agreement.<sup>3</sup> Funding for administration is cost-shared between the federal and provincial governments. Within First Nation communities, as Mike Nadeau notes above, community members view the welfare office as the place of “first response” when a family is in need or in crisis. This perception is reinforced by the extent of services welfare administration offices provide, including funding for funeral services, child care, health travel, housing, and a myriad other services.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps most important, the administration of social assistance in most First Nations includes employment support and assistance, including pre-employment support and counselling, basic education (completion of Grade 12), volunteering, community social development such as food banks and community gardening, as well as training.

People living in the ninety-five First Nations in the province that are remote or located at some substantial distance from an urban centre have little or no access to employment readiness or job training programs or any of the other employment support services that might be available elsewhere.

Additionally, of course, the services provided within First Nations themselves are culturally appropriate and responsive to local needs. Indeed, for over forty years, First Nations welfare administrators and staff, through ONWAA, have implemented a training and support program to ensure high-quality and culturally appropriate services. Since 2010, ONWAA, in partnership with Algoma University, has graduated more than three hundred workers across the province with a Certificate in First Nations Welfare Administration, which has established a consistent standard of services provision (Broad and Nadeau 2012). This professional development continues to build capacity in small, rural, and remote communities in a culturally appropriate manner.

3 For a detailed description of the application of this agreement, see Canada (2012).

4 See, for example, the website of Sandy Lake First Nation, Treaty No. 5, at <http://sandylake.firstnation.ca/?q=band-office>.

Based on the above factors, a number of questions arise from the potential centralization of administration of a basic income guarantee program:

- With the high unemployment levels, lower rates of literacy and high school completion, and higher rates of poverty experienced by people living in so many rural and remote communities, how would these employment-related essential services be delivered under a basic income program?
- If a delivery method for employment services were developed, how could the quality of services delivery be guaranteed, including their cultural appropriateness, especially given the diversity of First Nations across the province and their diverse locales?
- What would be the loss of capacity by First Nations, particularly those in rural and remote areas, of professional staff currently employed in welfare administration? What would be the costs of the loss of employment?



## First Nations' Autonomy

As the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada 1996) and the more recent Truth and Reconciliation (2015) reports outline, First Nations have strong reasons to be skeptical about the introduction of new policies and programs whose stated intent is to improve their social conditions. Canada, to date, has a poor record of success, with funding for some programs provided at lower rates for First Nations; the introduction of programs without addressing First Nations' concerns; and a lack of long-term commitment to programs demonstrating success. In short, the autonomy of First Nations has not been well respected.

The National Child Tax Benefit, for example, built along the lines of a B.I.G., is considered one of "the most effective new social support programs in Canada" (Forget 2011, 6). Yet its application to First Nations recipients has not addressed inequities of funding for children living in First Nations, nor has it incorporated any additional benefits related to the additional costs of living in rural and remote communities. Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada still has not complied with the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal order of January 26, 2016, finding that Canada racially discriminates against over 163,000 First Nations children by providing flawed and inequitable child welfare services and failing to properly implement Jordan's Principle.<sup>5</sup> The decision was based in part on the fact that benefits provided to First Nations children are 7 percent lower than those transferred to non-Indigenous children.

The introduction of Ontario Works in 1998 "largely ignored First Nations' concerns" (Broad and Nadeau 2012, 75), and its constitutionality was subsequently challenged by the Muskegowuk Cree Council. Some of the key issues in the challenge included the lack of both consultation in the program design and funding for the program's administration. Similarly, to date, there has been little consultation with First Nations regarding the implementation of a B.I.G. and no engagement with key players such as ONWAA.

A third area of concern related to First Nations' autonomy in program delivery is related to government's actual commitment to ongoing funding of programs once they have been introduced. As Frideres notes: "In 2008, the First Nations Student Success Program and the Education Partnerships Program were touted as the programs that would solve some of the problems with First Nation students staying in school and graduating from secondary school. Yet these programs only have a shelf life of three years

and then they will be abandoned" (quoted in Broad and Nadeau 2012, 75). The MINCOME experiment in Dauphin lasted only five years, and reduced funding to the program meant that much of the research data was never analyzed (Forget 2011), leading to a conclusion that government commitment to social programs and pilot site evaluations is, at best, limited, and will not necessarily result in broader application and/or benefit.

One study of the introduction of a B.I.G. reveals that "political leaders and electoral cycles inevitably play a central role in the lives of ambitious anti-poverty programs" (Houtzager 2008, 60). Moreover, the introduction of a basic income guarantee eliminated a cohesive advocacy on behalf of low-income people: "The original hypothesis was that the income grant or transfer programmes would contribute to relatively silent relations between the state and actors representing poor communities," but the actual reason for the silence was even more disconcerting — namely, "[it] was manufactured politically" (Houtzager 2008, 61). For First Nations, which historically have faced exclusion from policy-making, this is of particular concern, and although the program Houtzager examines was introduced in Brazil, First Nations have good reason to be skeptical that their voices will be carefully considered, given the historical lack of consultation and current lack of cohesive advocacy on behalf of low-income people generally, and of low-income First Nations members in particular.

Once again, a number of questions arise regarding First Nations' autonomy and influence over policies related to the issue of poverty in their communities:

- Will a B.I.G. program result in equitable benefit rates (and benefits) for First Nations members?
- Will there be adequate consultation and pilot-site testing with a diversity of First Nations communities?
- If the program shows success, is there sufficient political and government commitment to full implementation?
- If such a program is implemented, will advocacy on behalf of the poor survive? Or will it be silenced?

5 "Ottawa accused of failing to provide for Indigenous children," Toronto Star, January 4, 2017, available online at <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2017/01/04/ottawa-accused-of-failing-to-provide-for-indigenous-children.html>. Jordan's Principle, in sum, states that in cases where jurisdictions dispute payment for children's treatment, the child should be treated first, and resolution of the jurisdictional conflict resolved later.

## Conclusions

First Nations communities differ substantially from non-Aboriginal municipalities, with exceedingly diverse histories, cultures, and contexts – including vastly differing geographies, access to urban centres and their attendant services, and in their political and legal relationships with both the provincial and federal governments. A pernicious social issue such as poverty has a very different “face” in First Nations communities from that in more urban, mostly larger communities. First Nations, more than other Canadian communities, experience extremely high rates of poorly maintained housing, unemployment, unsafe drinking water, and lack of access to basic services such as health care and education. Implementing a basic income guarantee in communities that differ so substantially from other Ontario municipalities requires thoughtful consideration and a great deal of insight that can be provided only by a thorough consultation with First Nations communities themselves.

Historically, neither the provincial nor the federal government has acquitted itself well in responding to the socio-economic challenges facing First Nations. Certainly, increasing the incomes of individuals and families is necessary — there is more than

ample evidence that current benefits are severely disadvantaging First Nations people. Increases in income, however, should be equitably distributed to realize improved health, higher levels of educational achievement, and other benefits for First Nations. Additionally, such a commitment should extend beyond pilot-site testing. It cannot be extended and then withdrawn, as governments have done in the past; such a breach in fiduciary duty is not admissible in this post-Truth and Reconciliation Commission era.

Finally, First Nations have demonstrated their commitment to skills and community capacity-building and professional services delivery to the most vulnerable members of their communities. They have adapted Ontario Works legislation to the history, culture, and context of their members, and provided a place of “first response” to individuals and families in crisis. Determining the extent of these benefits to the community, and how such resources can best be used in a new program delivery, is essential prior to implementation, so that a basic income guarantee results in a net gain – not a net loss – to First Nations in Ontario.

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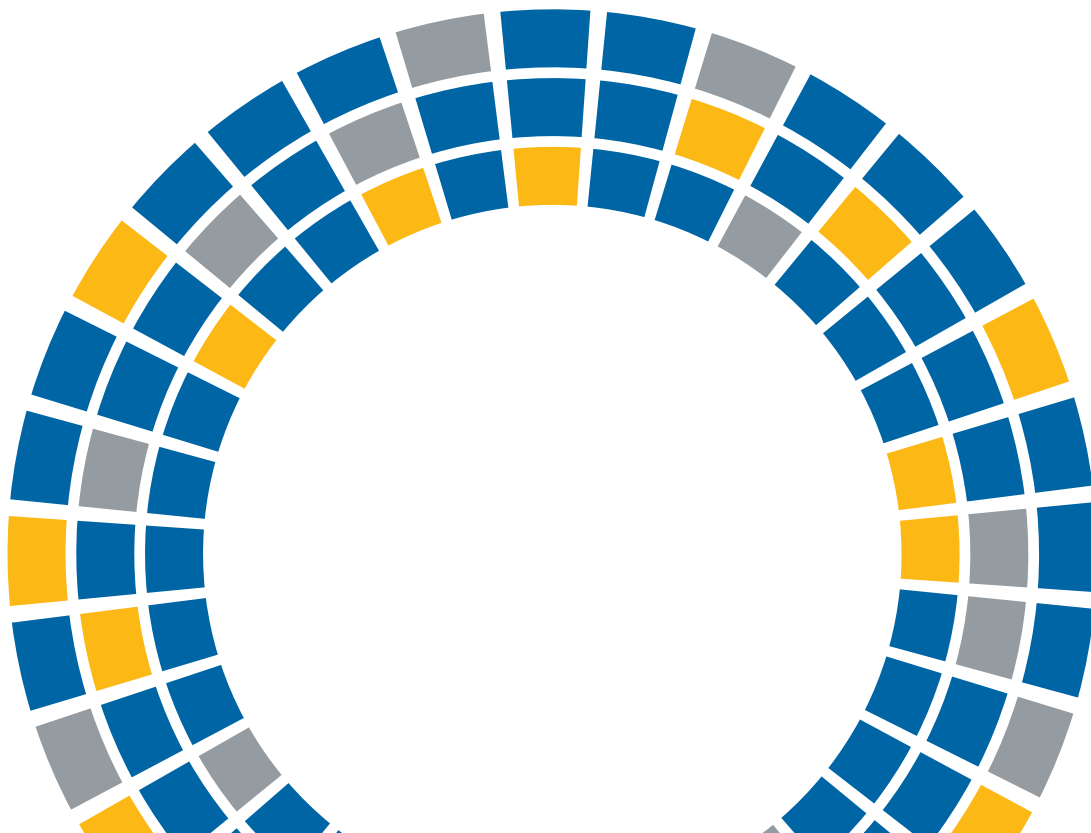
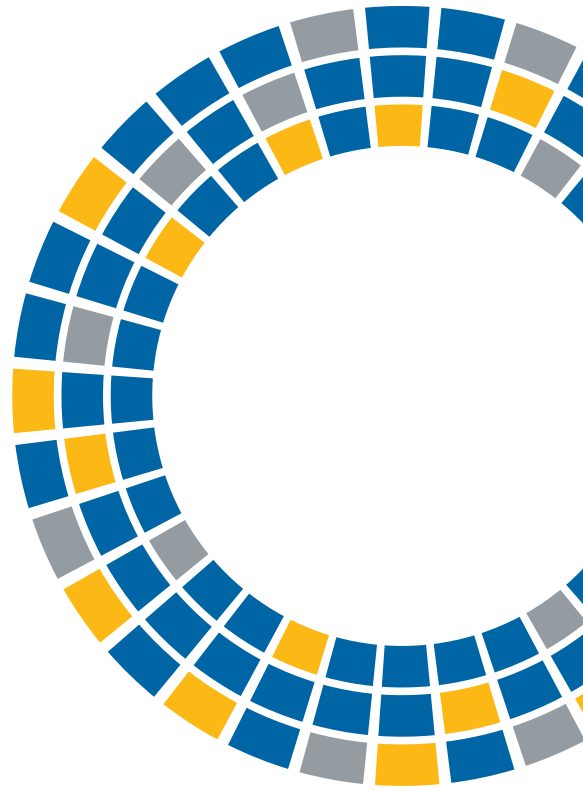
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