



BREAD-IGC virtual PhD course on social protection 2025

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Welcome to the course!



Different organizations have different definitions

“Social protection refers to policies and actions which enhance the capacity of poor and vulnerable people to escape from poverty and enable them to better manage risks and shocks.”
– OECD

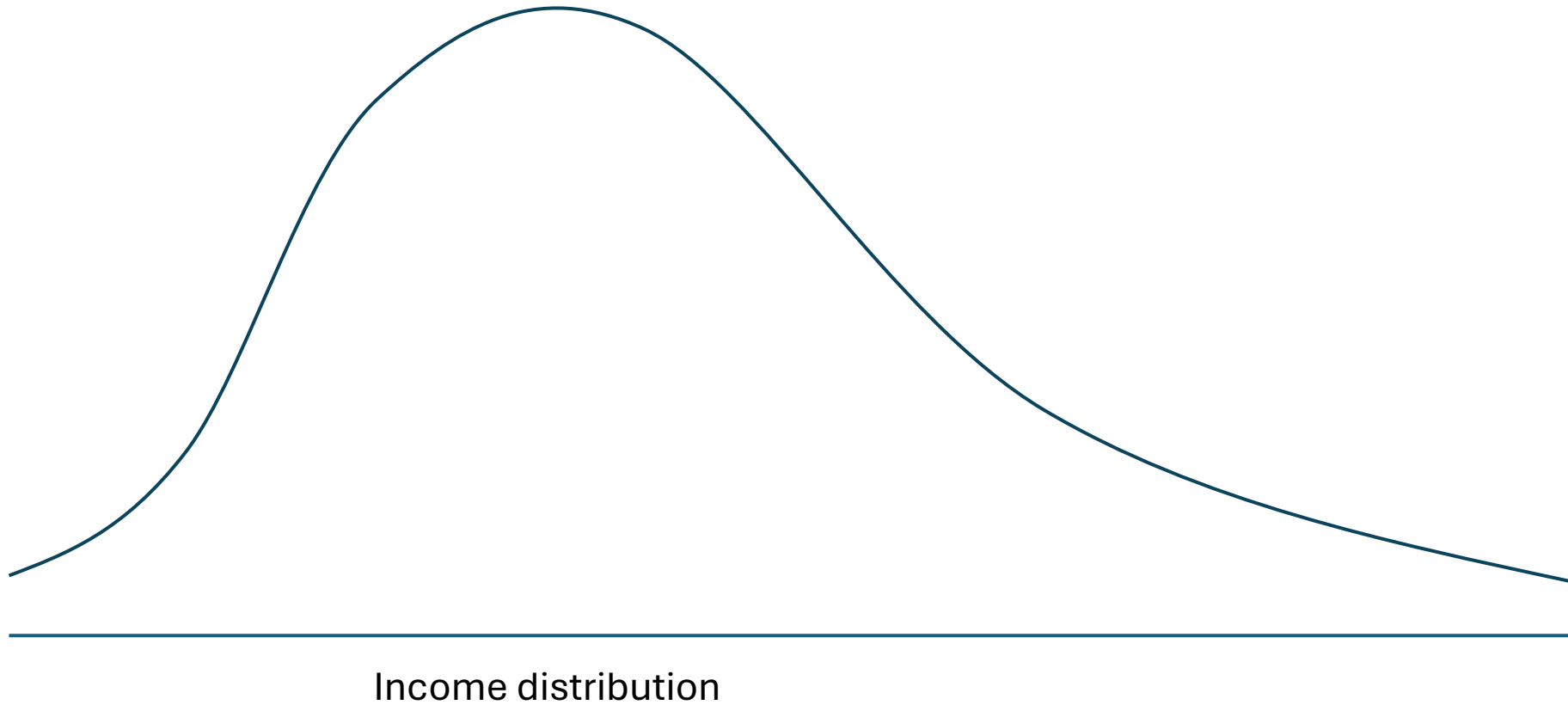
“Social protection and labor systems, policies, and programs help individuals and societies manage risk and volatility and protect them from poverty and destitution—through instruments that improve resilience, equity, and opportunity” – World Bank

“Social protection can be understood as a set of public actions which address not only income poverty and economic shocks, but also social vulnerability, thus taking into account the interrelationship between exclusion and poverty.” – UNICEF

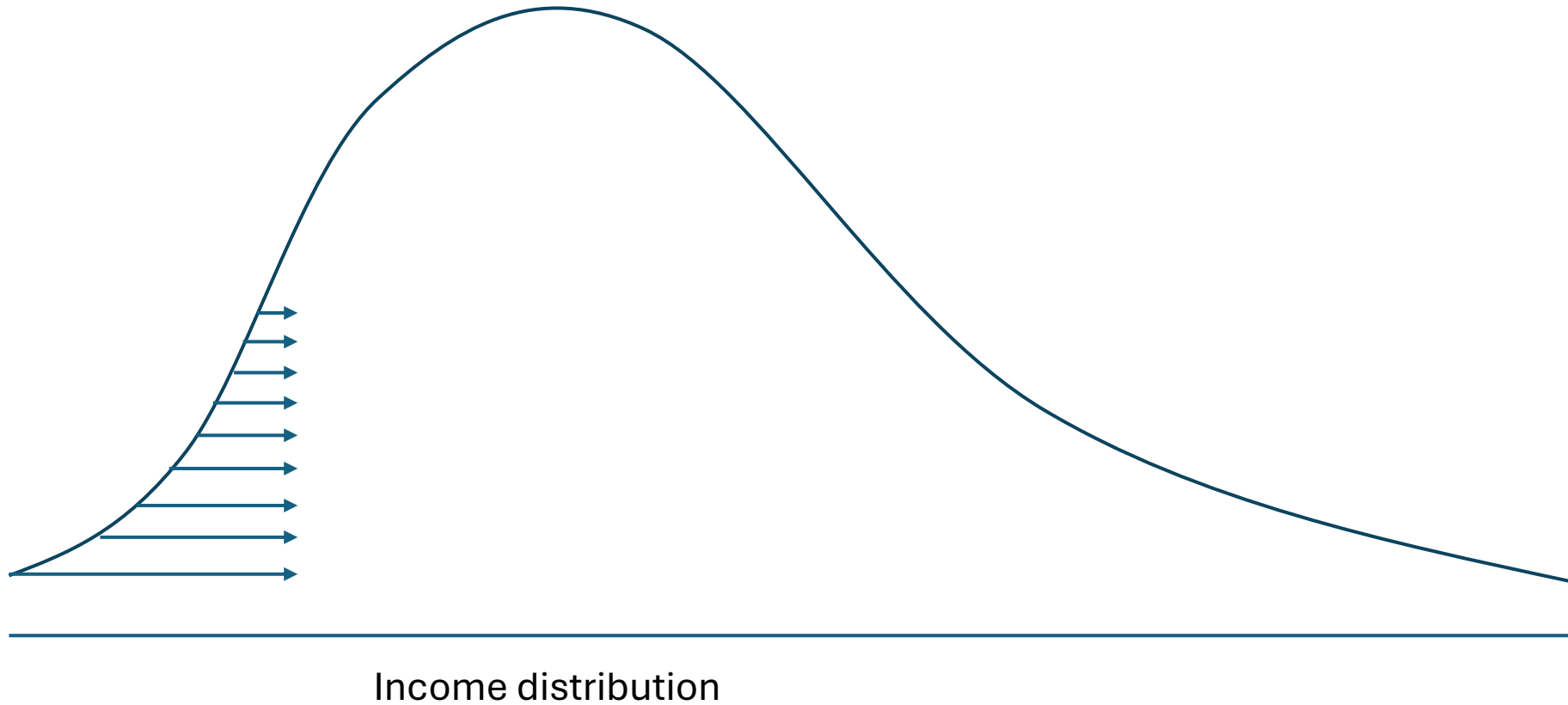
In this course...

- Broadly speaking, we'll see key goals of social protection programs
 - Supporting basic levels of **standard of living**
 - Helping people manage the financial costs of risks through **social insurance**

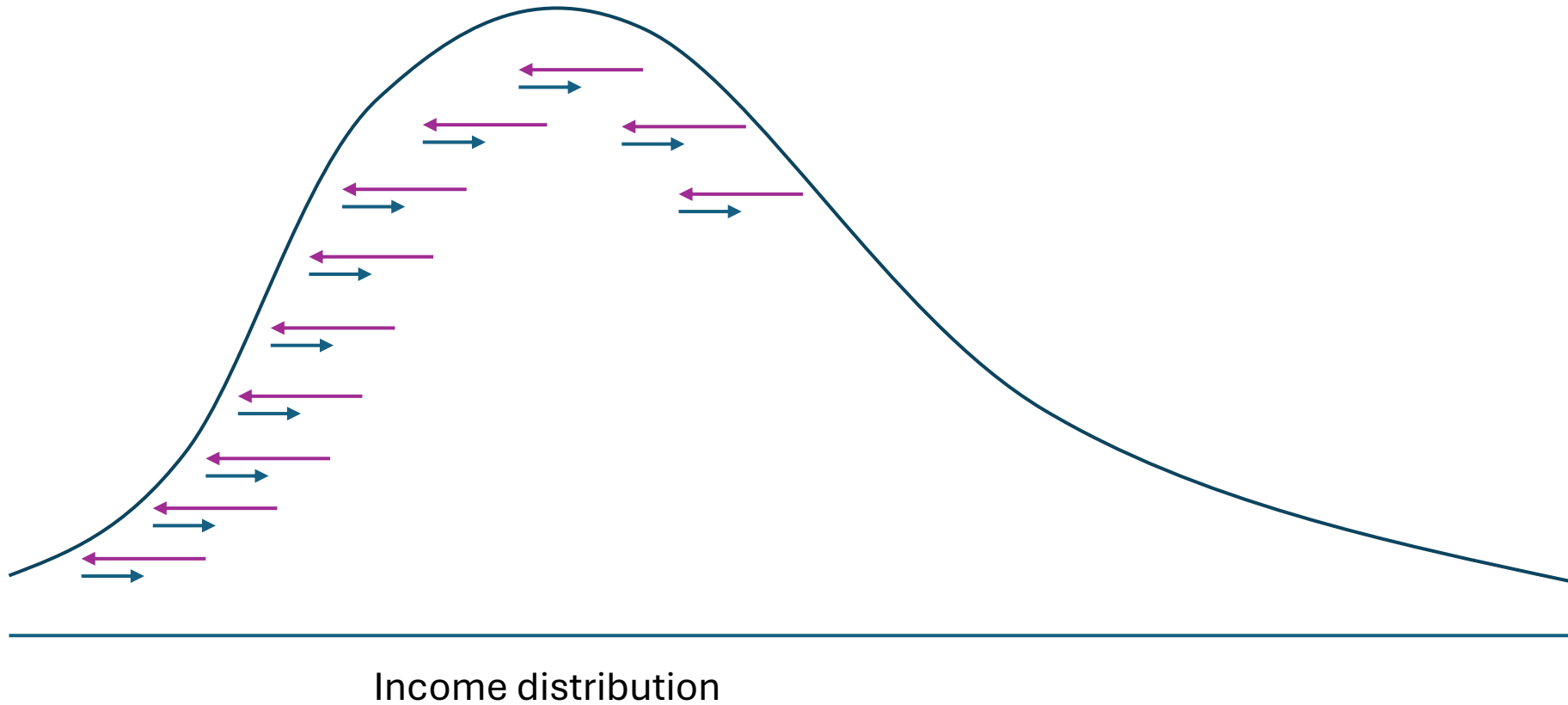
Standard of living support vs. social Insurance



Standard of living support



Social Insurance



In this course...

- Broadly speaking, we'll see key goals of social protection programs
 - Supporting basic levels of **standard of living**
 - Helping people manage the financial costs of risks through **social insurance**
- But as we will see, we'll explore a wide variety of programs that encompass these plus additional goals. For example:
 - Conditional cash transfers also seek to break the intra-generational cycle of poverty as well as supporting current income
 - Graduation programs seek to provide capital and training to help current generations escape poverty in the future
 - Workfare programs may provide a mix of income support to the temporarily unemployed and and social insurance against risk of job loss



Social Protection is important

- **Cash transfers and food support programs** help people meet their basic needs
- **Conditional cash transfers** can invest in the health and education of children, supporting the current generation while also reducing the transmission of intergenerational poverty
- **Pensions** can help the elderly from falling into poverty
- **Health insurance** can help people get necessary health care, while also helping to ensure that a health emergency does not drive someone into debt or poverty

How pervasive is it?

- Over 2.5 billion people covered by at least one type of social protection program
- Some type of cash transfer for the poor in more than 120 countries
- Some type of social pension program in more than 70 countries

Research Explosion in Recent Years

- Banerjee et al (2024) JEL reviewed over 300 papers
- Crosta et al (2025) meta-review of cash transfers alone included 115 papers
- Over 1000+ citations in the Handbook of Social Protection, forthcoming in 2026

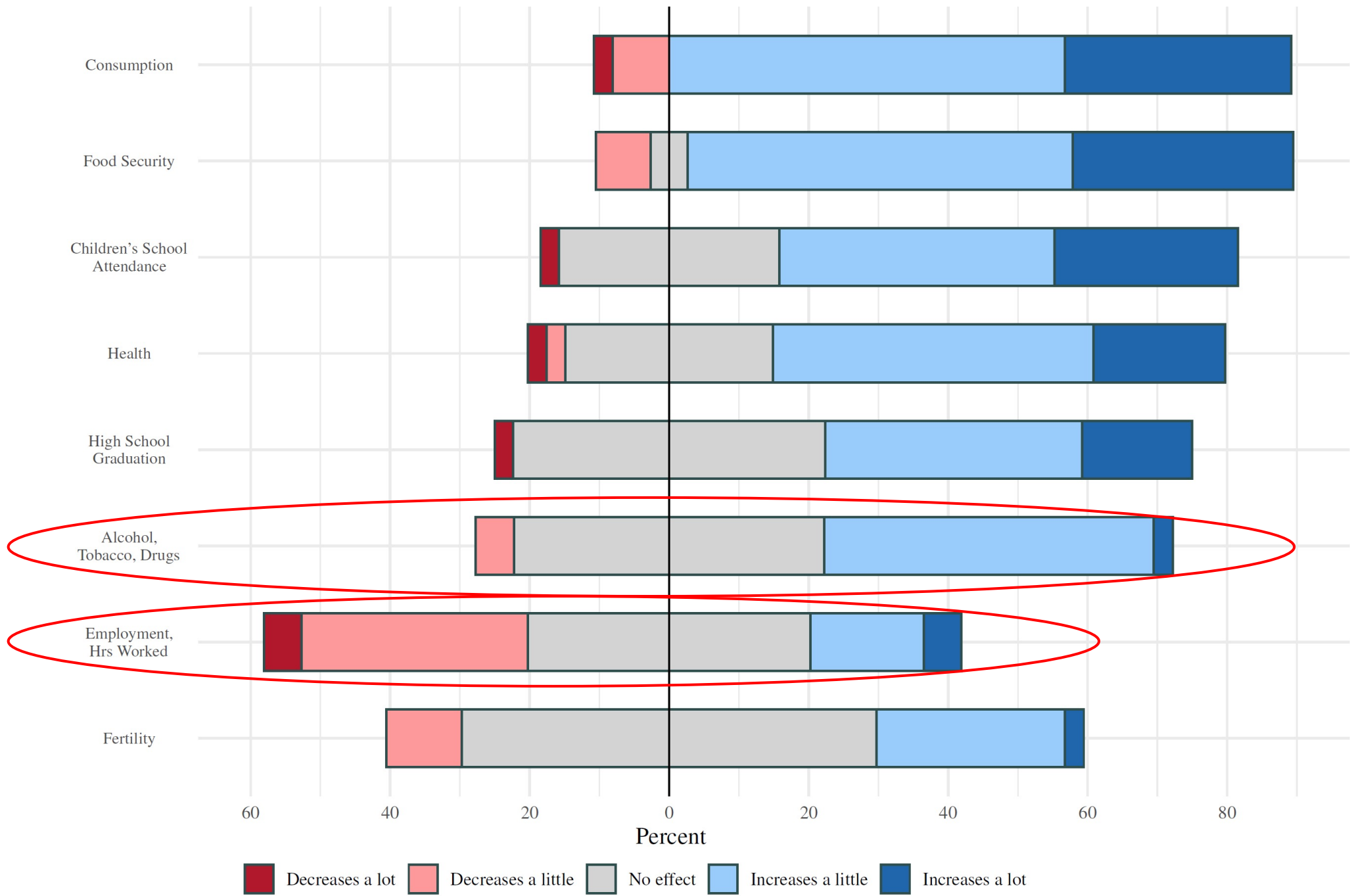
Politically contentious, driven in part by
a series of myths



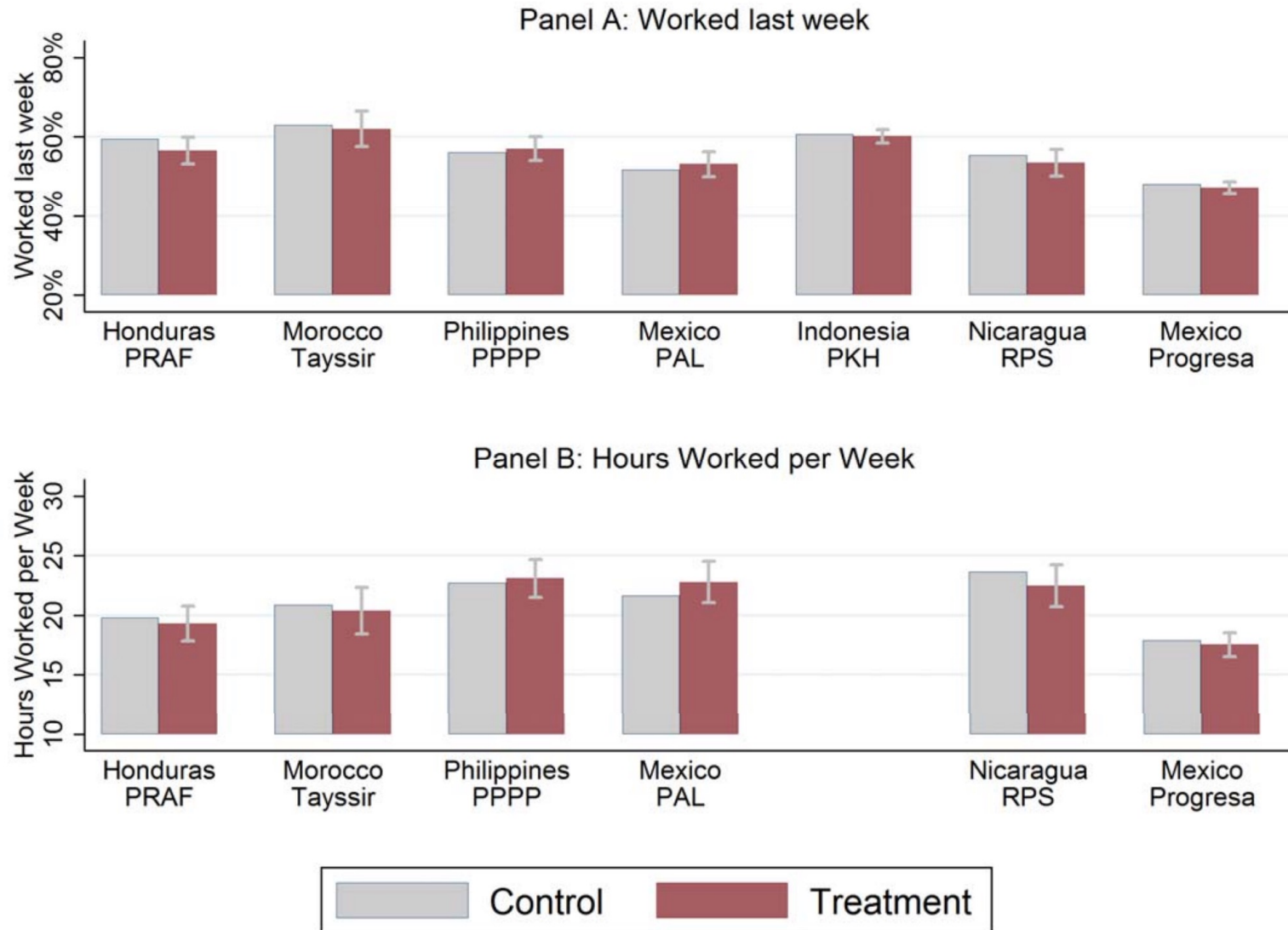
Myth #1: Programs Create Negative Incentives

People who get these programs are lazy, prefer to be on the “dole”

They spend their money on the ills of society—cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs.



No evidence of dis-incentive effects for work

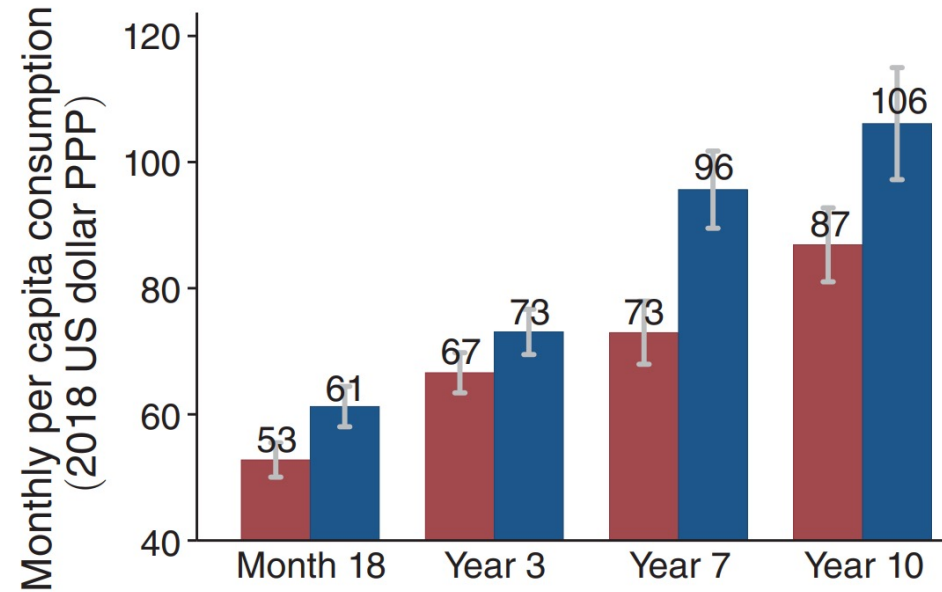


Emerging evidence that some of these programs can even boost productivity

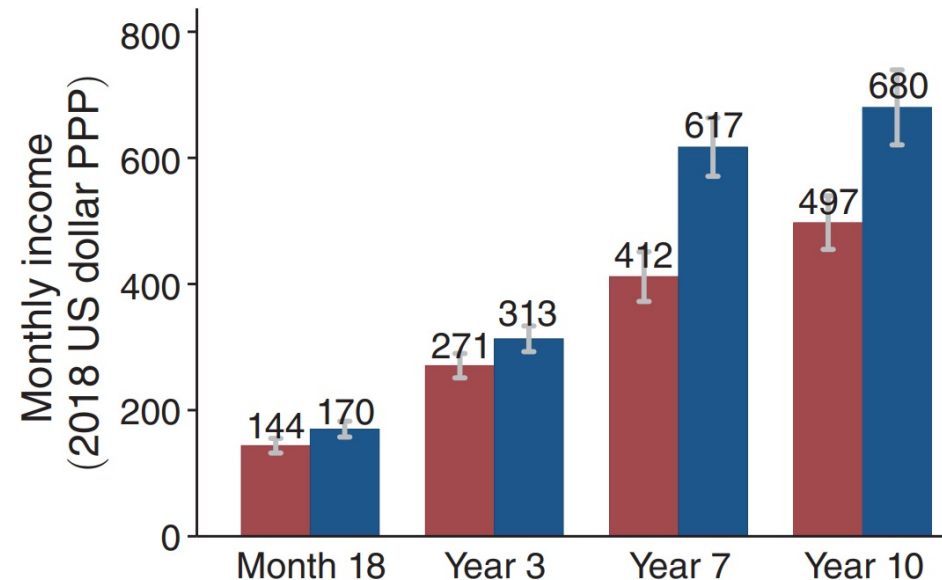
- Increasing health and educational investments for kids (e.g., Barham, Macours, and Maluccio 2018; Araujo and Macours 2021; Parker and Vogl 2023)
- Increasing investments in business or farms (e.g., Gertler, Martinez, and Rubio-Codina 2012; Bandiera et al. 2017; Banerjee et al. 2015)




Panel A. Per capita consumption
(2018 US dollar PPP)



Panel C. Income (2018 US dollar PPP)



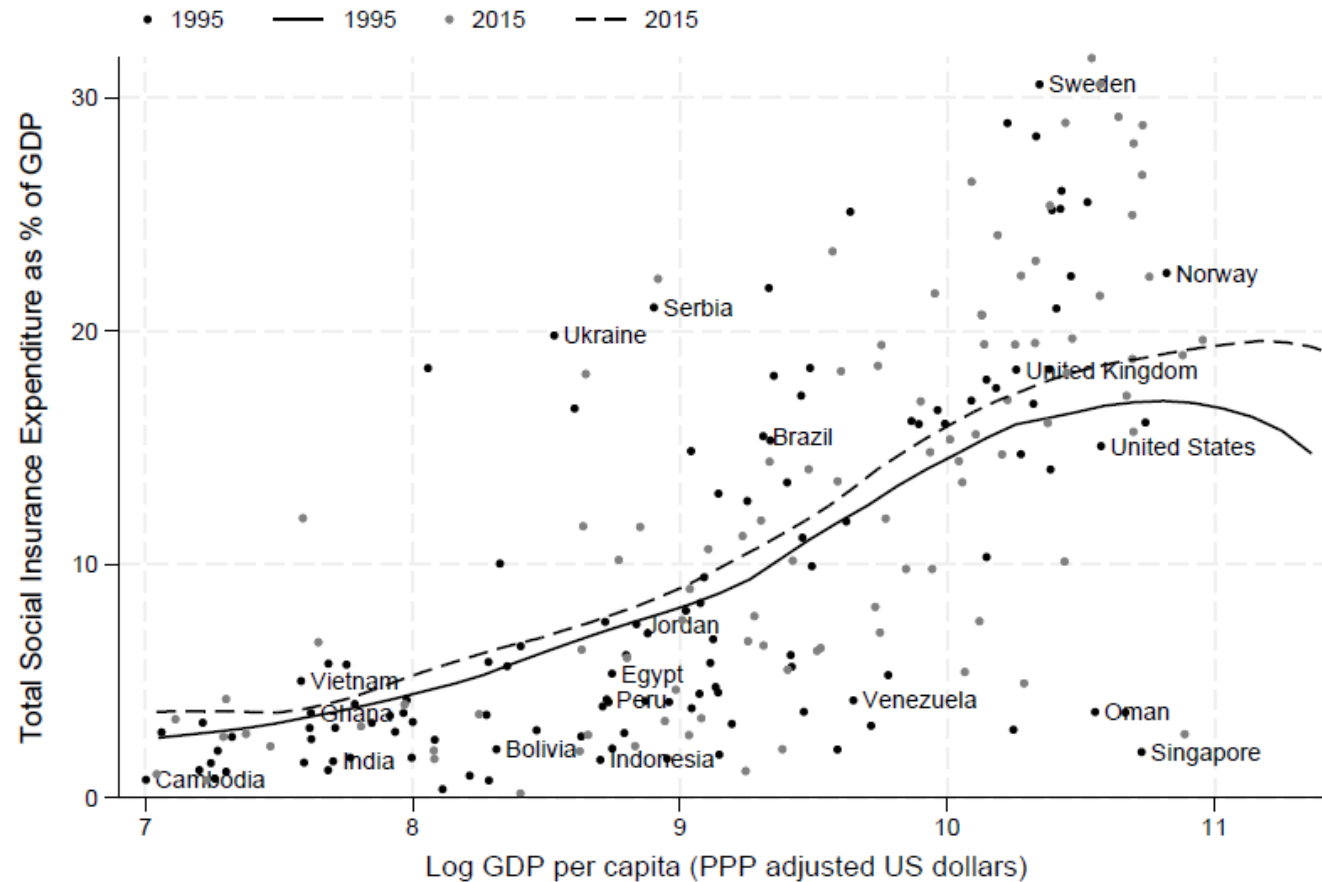
- “Big-push” programs provide a large asset transfer to the poorest Indian households.
- Treatment effects persist 10 years out
- One channel for persistence is that treated households take better advantage of opportunities to diversify into more wage employment, especially through migration.



Myth #2: These programs are no longer necessary

Social protection is
seen as “anti-
poverty” programs

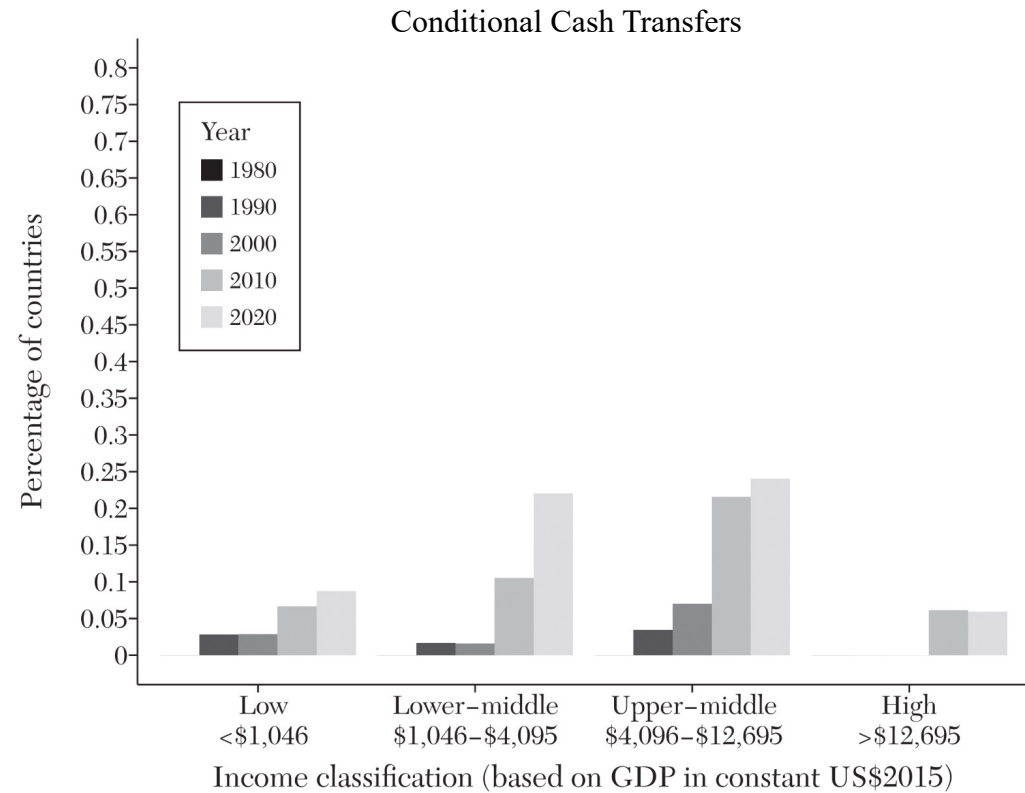
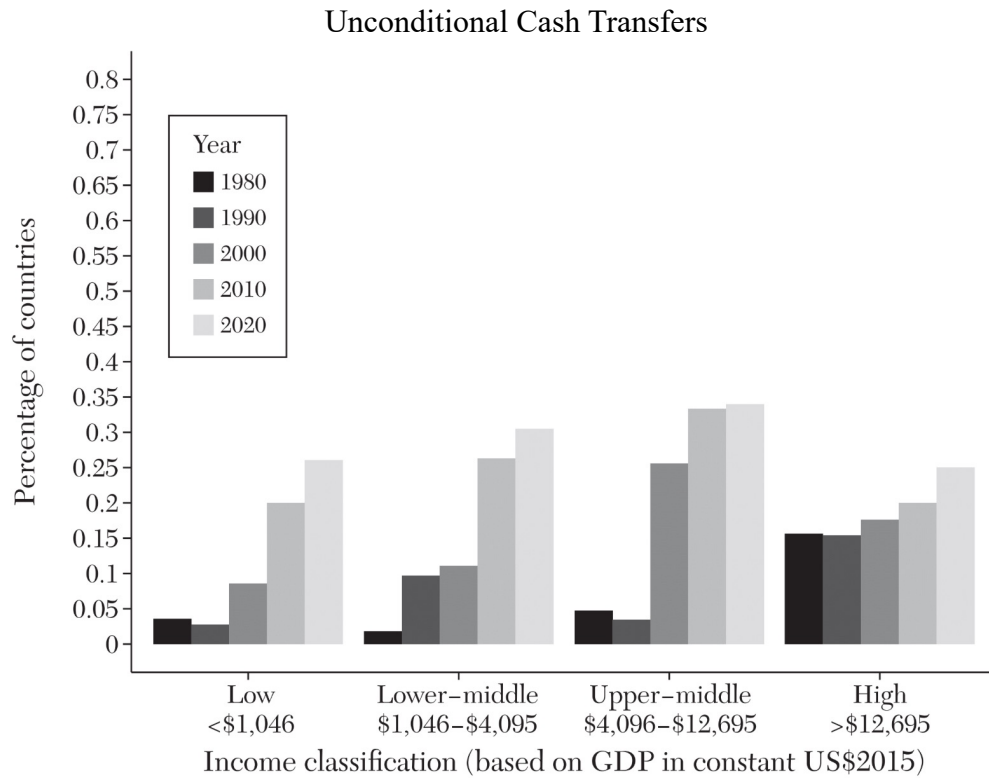
As countries grow,
and they transition
out of poverty, these
programs are
obsolete



- We plot social insurance expenditures as a share of GDP
- Clear upward slope: richer countries, in general, spend much more on social insurance than poorer countries
- The 2015 line is uniformly above the 1995 line: even at a given income level, countries tend to be doing more social protection than before

Notes: This is an updated and expanded version of Chetty and Looney (2006), which plots these data for 1996.

Increase social protections throughout income distribution and over time



Important to note though....

- The fact that these programs exist does not mean that they have sufficient budget to cover all of those who are in need
- Some programs, such as Brazil's Bolsa Familia conditional cash transfer, are enormous – Bolsa Familia in 2023 reached over 23 million families, or about 30 percent of the country (gov.br 2023).
- Other programs are much smaller, such as Cote d'Ivoire's Productive Social Safety Net project, which reaches less than half of 1 percent of the population (World Bank 2019).



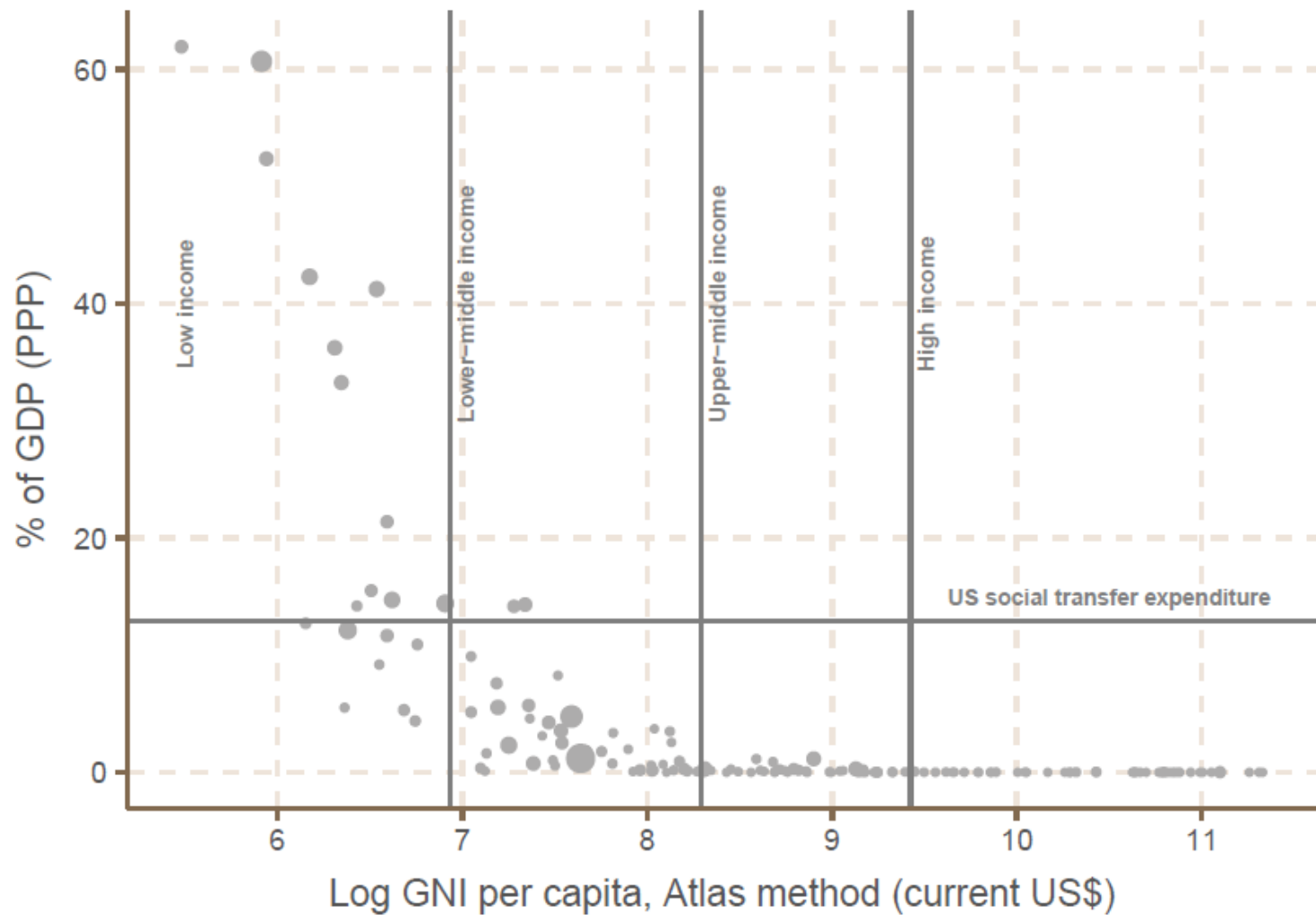
Myth #3: These programs are expensive and are unaffordable

...more complex,
depending on the
politics, societies'
varying goals

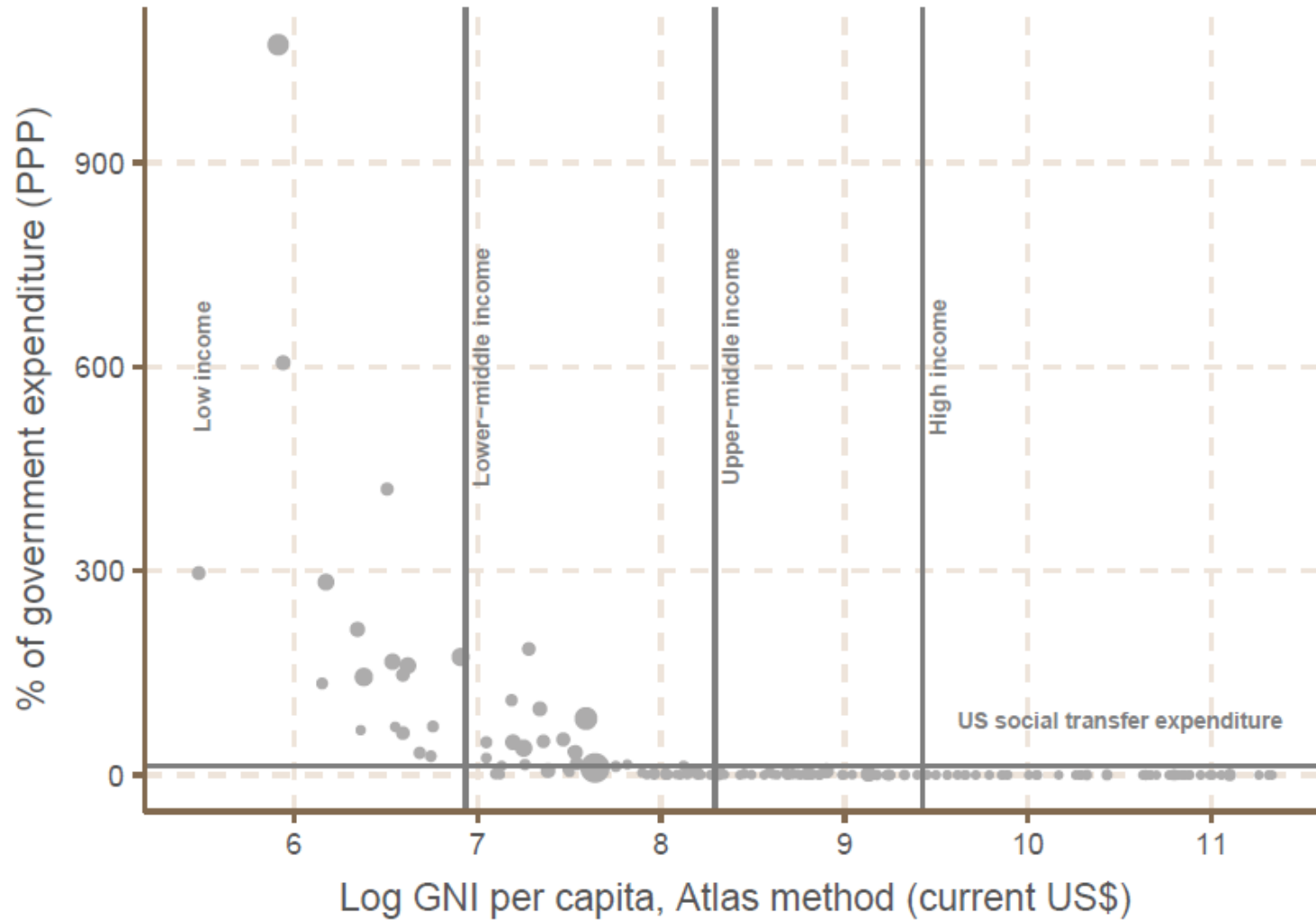
...whether we
consider both
domestic resource
mobilization and
foreign aid

We conduct a simple exercise

- What are the resources that each country would need to give everyone below the poverty line a transfer of PPP\$2.15?
- This is not perfect, but provides a benchmark to think about:
 - In principle, one could bring everyone to the poverty line for less money than this if one could give larger transfers to those further away from the poverty line, and smaller amounts to those closer to it—but this is harder logistically and so we assumed equal transfers.
 - On the other hand, this may understate the extent of the problem, since giving transfers only to those below the poverty line assumes that one can solve targeting challenges.



- Most middle-income countries, including many lower-middle countries, are likely to be able to finance large, meaningful social assistance programs themselves.
- Low-income countries cannot and will either need to have much more limited social assistance goals, or additional external assistance – or both.



- Similar story when you examine the need as a function of government expenditure
- Highlights financing challenge for lower-middle income

Could we solve global poverty?

- We can calculate how much each country could contribute to combating poverty domestically if each country were to spend the same share of its national budget on social assistance as the United States
- We then calculate how much additional financing is needed to provide a transfer of PPP\$2.15 to every poor person in the world beyond that.

Money is not the issue....

It would take **\$100 billion per year** total in global financing

To compare, in 2023, the OECD countries collectively gave **\$223 billion in official development assistance (OECD 2023)** – more than 1.5 times what would be needed to cover cash transfers to eliminate poverty globally.

What are the challenges to doing so?

- **Budget**

- Not every country can solve on its own, need global coordination
- Not the *only* program and policy we need to ensure people thrive, and countries face budgetary challenges and tradeoffs between programs

- **Policy Design and Logistics**

- This assumed perfect targeting – but this is hard in practice! How do we deliver the program funds? Is this even the right program, or is there a design that is better? In general, how do we think about how to design programs and policy?

- **Conflict**

- About 40 percent of the global poor live in conflict zones, and the World Bank predicts this is expected to rise
- LMICs host 73 percent of the world's refugees (UNHCR)

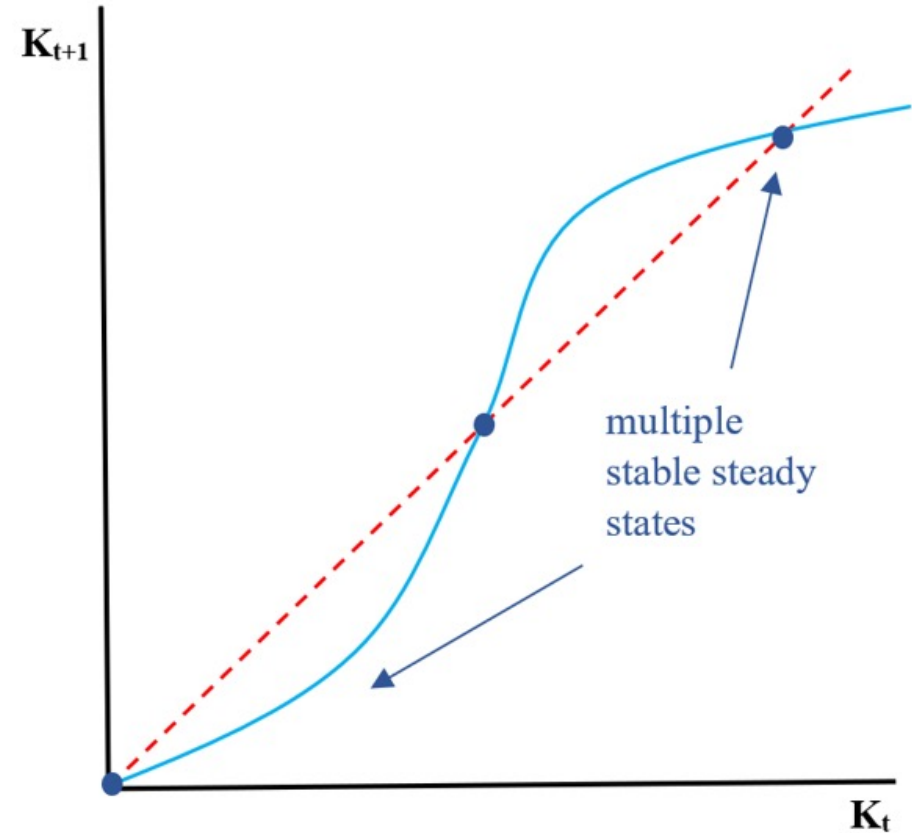
- We will try to explore these questions in the course
- Each lecture will cover a different aspect of social protection, exploring what we know in the literature and open questions and debates
- Each class mirrors a chapter in the “Handbook of Social Protection,” and advanced readings from it are provided online



Lecture 2: Graduation Programs

Lecturers: Oriana Bandiera, Munshi Sulaiman

- Are people trapped in poverty?
- Do big push programs have the potential to alleviate poverty traps?
- What are they? How do they do so? How to best design and think about these programs?

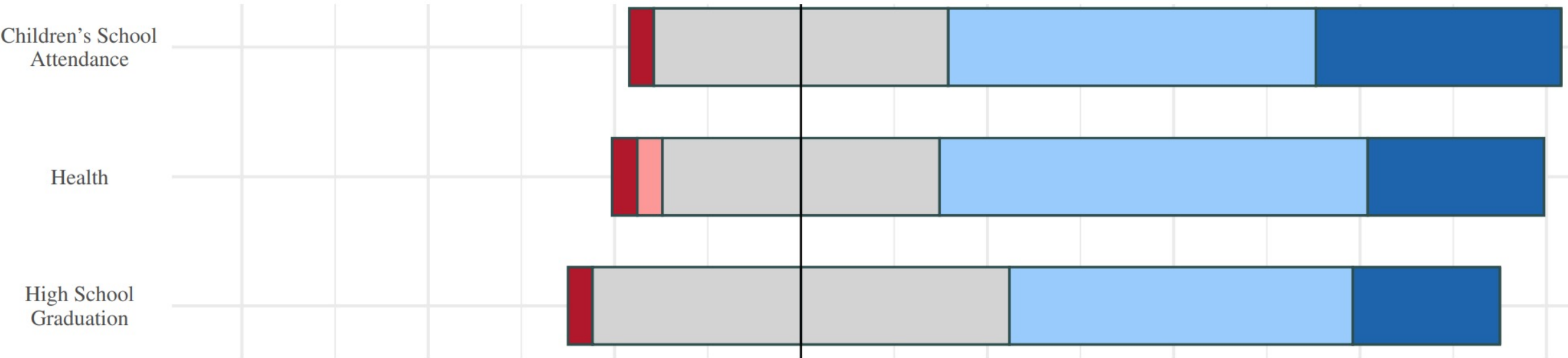


Lecture 3: Cash transfers

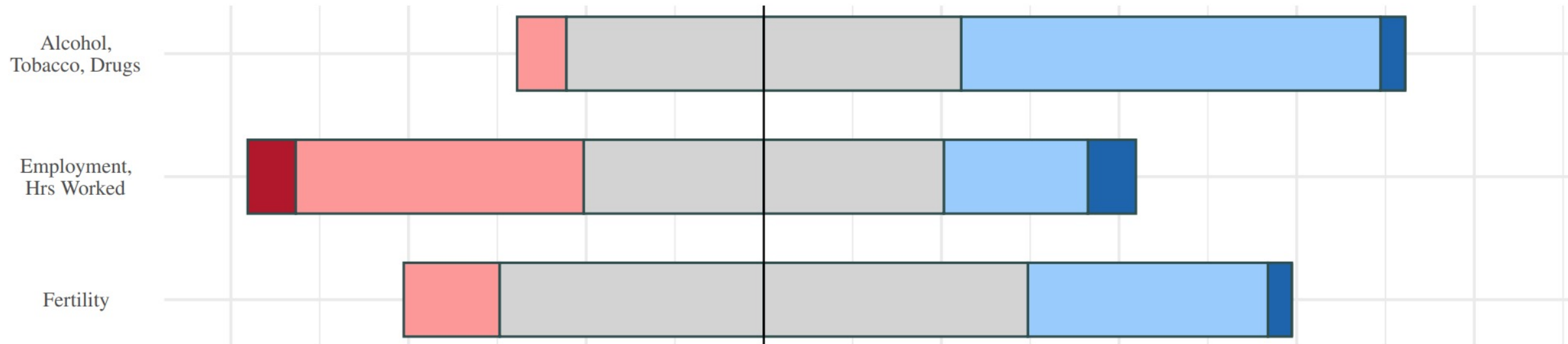
Lecturers: Paul Niehaus, Tavneet Suri

- Lots of debates about cash transfer programs...

What do they do?

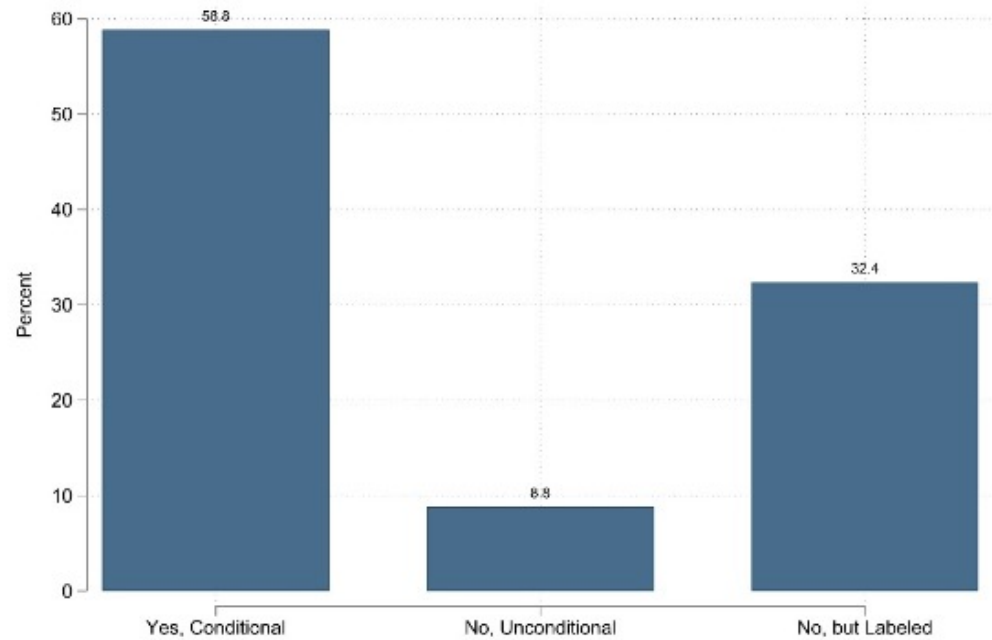


Do they encourage “bad” behaviors?



How should they be designed? How much should you give? How do you give? Should they be conditioned?

Figure 8: Policymakers' Beliefs about Whether Poor Households Should Have to Meet Conditions to Receive Cash Transfers



Lecture 3: Cash transfers

Lecturers: Paul Niehaus, Tavneet Suri

- Lots of debates about cash transfer programs...
- This lecture will offer thoughts on some of the big picture policy debates around cash transfers

Lecture 4: The form of transfers: cash, in-kind, vouchers

Lecturers: Lucie Gadenne, Monica Singhal

- Debates over the best way to provide transfers

Table 1: Best Way to Provide Transfers to Household

	Mean Ranking
Cash	1.94
Voucher	2.21
In-Kind Transfer	2.85
Energy Subsidy	3.06
Observations	35

Table 4: Which Programs Would Be Most Popular Among Voters?

	Mean Ranking
Targeted Cash Transfer	2.10
Universal Cash Transfer	2.93
Conditional Cash Transfer	3.58
Energy Subsidy	3.71
Health Insurance	3.83
In-Kind Transfer	4.00
Observations	35

Lecture 5: Measuring the long-run impact of cash transfers

Lecturers: Karen Macours, John Maluccio

- Does it impact long-run health? Does it impact long-run employment opportunities? Would it decrease intergenerational poverty transmission?

Table 2: Policymakers' Most Important Metric to Judge Whether a Cash Transfer Program is Successful

	Mean Ranking
Food Security	2.80
Targeting	3.39
Consumption	3.90
Children Schooling	3.81
Spending Type	4.17
Health	4.47
Employment/Business Ownership	5.14
Observations	38

Lecture 6: Identifying program beneficiaries

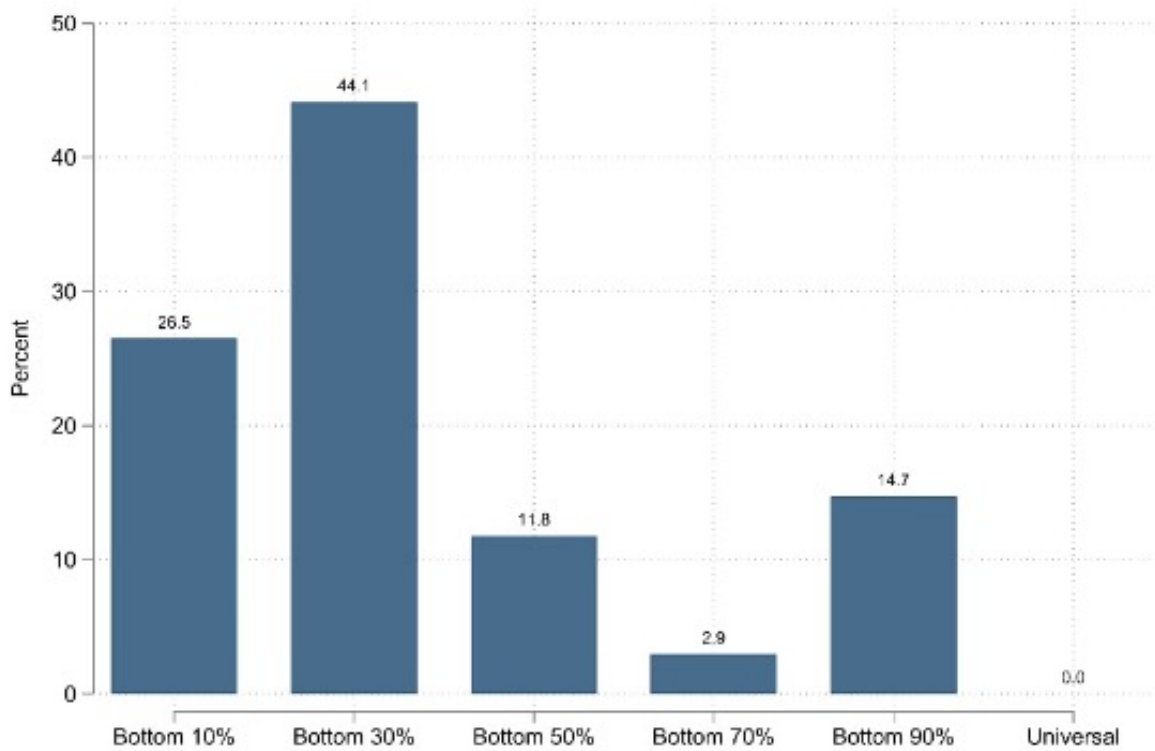
Lecturers: Vivi Alatas, Abhijit Banerjee

- Earlier in the lecture, we calculated how much funding it would take to provide everyone in poverty a transfer
- But this is hard to do, and there is a lot of debate on the right methods.
 - Which methods work best? Data driven or soft information?
 - Do we want to target on *poverty* or other characteristics?
 - Should we even target?

Table 3: Best Way to Identify Household Eligibility for Targeted Programs?

	Mean Ranking
Multiple Verification	3.08
Categorical	3.27
Proxy Means Test	3.55
Geographic	4.24
Community-Targeting	5.04
Tax Records	5.10
Work Requirements	5.17
Self-Reported Income	5.27
Observations	27

Figure 6: Should Cash Transfers be Targeted or Universal?



Lecture 7: Digital technology and social protection

Lecturer: Sandip Sukhtankar

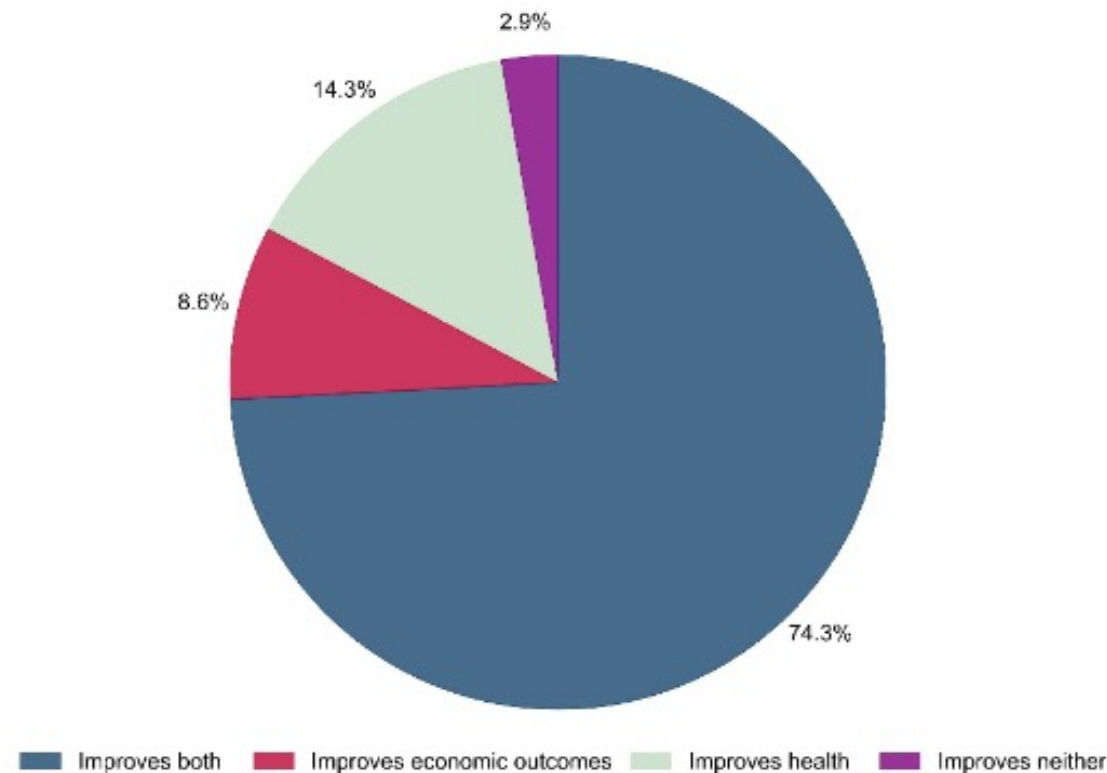
- Technology is rapidly changing and will drastically change options available for social protection programs
- From how we identify beneficiaries (e.g., electronic forms of enrollment) to how we distribute benefits (e.g., electronic debit cards, mobile money)
- How do these new approaches compare to traditional approaches?

Lecture 8: Public health insurance

Lecturers: Pascaline Dupas, Radhika Jain

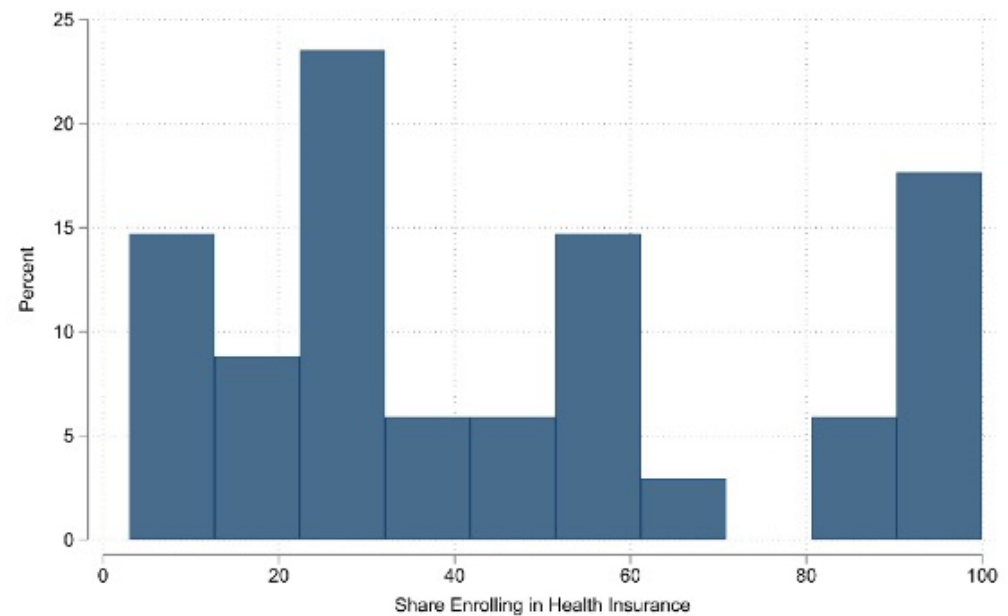
- What does health insurance do?

Figure 11: Policymakers Beliefs about Impacts of Free or Subsidized Health Insurance on Poor Households



How do we
deliver insurance
when there is
informality in the
market?

Figure 10: Policymakers Beliefs about Share of Informal Workers Who Would Enroll in Premium-Based Health Insurance

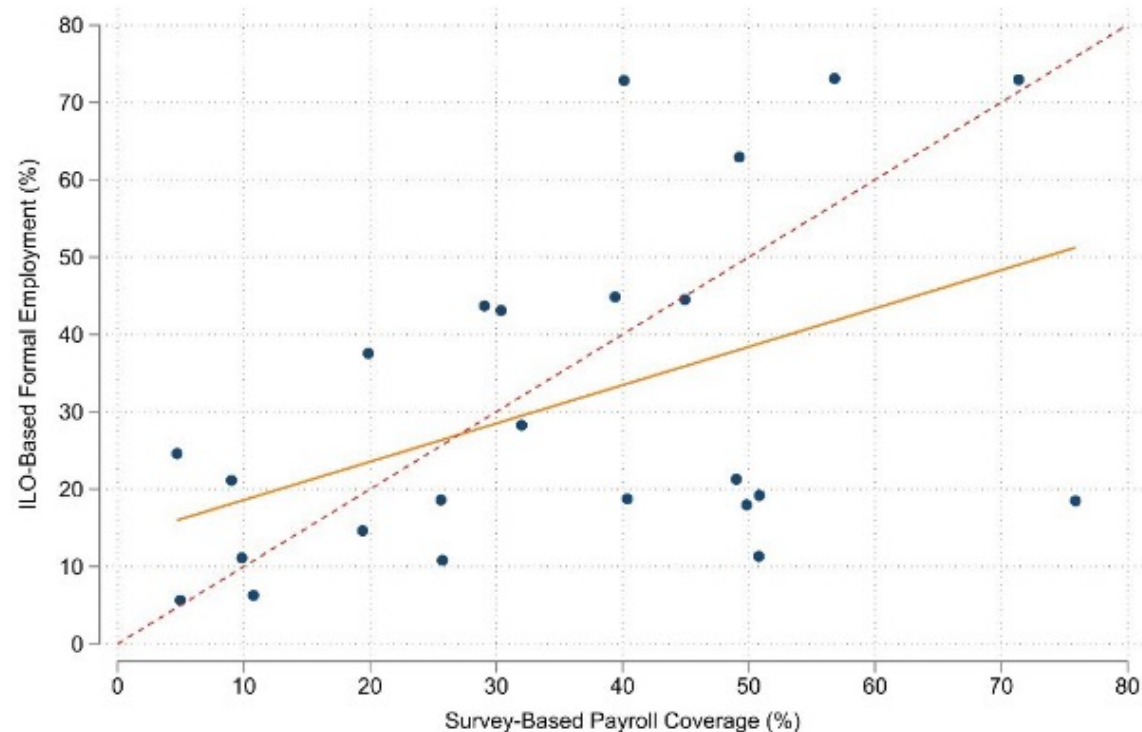


Lecture 9: Job displacement insurance

Lecturers: Francois Gerard, Gustavo Gonzaga, Joana Naritomi

- Similar to health insurance, unemployment insurance is difficult to deliver due to informality
- Covers different ways of providing job displacement insurance given these issues

Figure 9: Payroll Coverage: Respondent Estimates versus Formal Employment Rates



Lecture 10: Public works programs

Lecturers: Arthur Alik-Lagrange, Clément Imbert

- What are public works programs?
- Are they an efficient means of redistribution?
- Do they target the right people?
- What are the effects on labor markets?

Lecture 11: Spillovers and General Equilibrium Effects

Lecturer: Ted Miguel

- While we believe that spillovers and GE effects are important to understand in evaluating social protection programs, both logistical constraints (e.g., sample size) and methodological constraints prevent us from doing so
- This lecture will dig into the current literature to examine what we know, but also propose directions for future research

Lecture 12: Social Protection, Conflict, and Reparations

Lecturers: Arlen Guarin, Juliana Londoño-Vélez

- As we discussed earlier, many of the poor live in conflict zones and a large share of the world's refugees live in LMICs
 - What are impacts of social protection in conflict zones?
 - How do you deliver aid effectively under these challenging conditions?
 - Should you integrate refugees into existing programs, or have separate programs? Are there political costs of doing so?
 - Are reparations a victim-centric tool for transitioning from conflict to peace? What are the politics behind these social protection tools?

If you want to
learn more....

Handbook of Social Protection will be coming out in 2026

Preview of some of the chapters through lectures and the associated readings

Covers *even more* topics including politics, gender, pensions, psychology, impacts on youth, energy subsidies, and more...