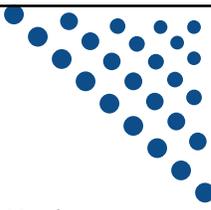


*Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, Winter 2026*

## The Economics of Public Policy Issues

Berkshire Community College

Host: Geoffrey Woglom, Director  
National Economic Education Delegation



## Course Schedule

### The Economics of Public Policy Issues

- Week 1 (1/23): Economic Update & Central Bank Independence Geoffrey Woglom, Amherst College
- Week 2 (1/30): Federal Debt and Deficits, Kathryn Wilson Kent State University
- Week 3 (2/6): Climate Change Economics Sarah Jacobson, Williams College
- **Week 4 (2/13): An Introduction to Cryptocurrencies, Geoffrey Woglom, Amherst College**
- Week 5 (2/20): Saving Social Security, Jon Haveman, Executive Director NEED
- Week 6 (2/27): AI and Inequality, Geoffrey Woglom, Amherst College



# Cryptocurrencies & The Future of Money

Geoffrey Woglom,  
Professor of Economics  
Amherst College, emeritus  
March 29, 2023



## Submitting Questions

- **Raise your digital hand or submit questions in the chat.**
  - I will try to handle them as they come up.
- **We will do a verbal Q&A once the material has been presented.**
- **Slides will be available from the NEED website tomorrow ([https://needelegation.org/delivered\\_presentations.php](https://needelegation.org/delivered_presentations.php))**

## Outline of the Talk

- **Fun Facts about Bitcoin**
- **A little bit on the underlying technology of cryptocurrencies.**
- **Evaluation of 3 uses of this technology**
  1. Bitcoin as a financial investment.
  2. Smart Contracts and Defi.
  3. Crypto Currencies as a “Means of Payment:” Stablecoins.



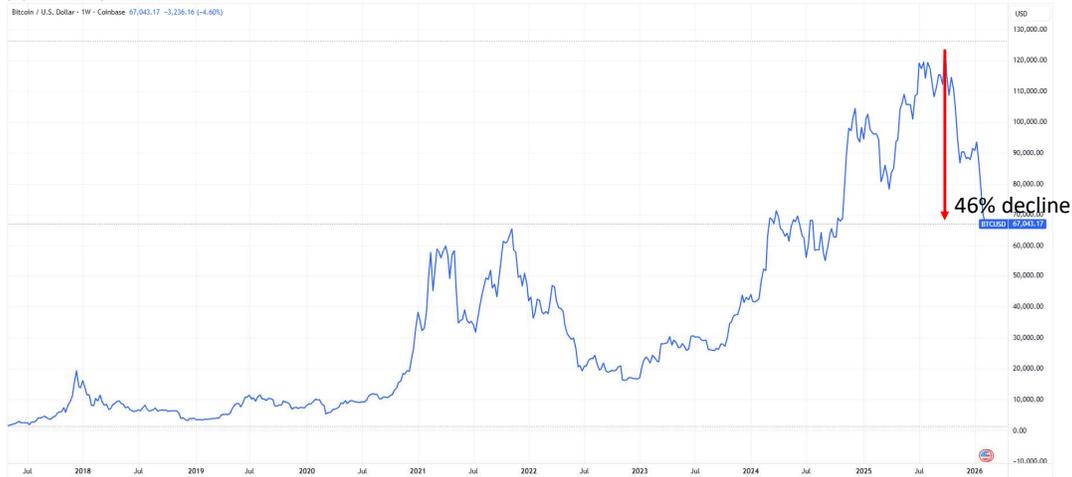
## But First, What is Bitcoin?

- **Bitcoin is the first cryptocurrency and was invented in 2008.**
- **Cryptocurrencies are a form of digital money (viz. data on a computer) where account ownership is confidential and where record keeping is decentralized over a multitude of computers**
- **Little regulation; no reliance on trusted third party; no government!**



# Bitcoins: What Was All the Excitement About?

grwoglom created with TradingView.com, Feb 13, 2026 07:30 UTC-5  
Bitcoin / U.S. Dollar - 1W - Coinbase 67,043.17 -3,236.16 (-4.60%)



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# Bitcoins: What Was All the Excitement About?

grwoglom published on TradingView.com, Mar 28, 2023 17:15 UTC-4

Bitcoin / U.S. Dollar, 1W, BITSTAMP 3305.93%  
GOLD, TVC 63.10%



\$27,300, at  
5PM

TradingView



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# One of the Over 30,000 Bitcoin ATMs



# Give Me a Break?

## Big Crypto News! Fidelity will allow Bitcoin 401k!



- ❖ First major retirement plan provider to offer 401k plans that allow direct bitcoin investments
- ❖ Full-time employer ERISA-only plans
- ❖ Rollout in mid-2022
- ❖ Up to 20% allocation
- ❖ Bitcoin only
- ❖ Custodied at Fidelity
- ❖ Fees: account fee of 0.75%-0.90% plus trading fee (TBD)



As of 1/10/2024, Fidelity also offers Bitcoin, Ethereum and Solana ETFs

## An Origin Story Worthy of a Pulp Novel!

- **The Mysterious Satoshi Nakamoto:**
  - Lehman Brothers Bankruptcy, 9/2008
  - Halloween 2008: a white paper is published on the Internet laying out the idea and design for Bitcoin. The author (or authors) used Satoshi Nakamoto as a pseudonym.
  - January 2009: Satoshi releases the first version of the Bitcoin software.
  - 2009-2010: Satoshi releases new versions of the software and is actively involved in Internet Chatter about Bitcoin.
  - April 2011: Satoshi ceases all known and/or verified communications.
- **To this date the identity or identities of Satoshi are unknown.**

## The Possible Economic Role for Bitcoin

**Satoshi's Vision: "A purely peer-to-peer version of electronic cash [that] would allow online payments to be sent directly from one party to another without going through a financial institution."**

### More, prosaically

#### 1. Facilitate payments at lower costs with speed and security

1. E.g., Credit Card Fees (3 percent).
2. Merchant doesn't get paid for at least 2 days.
3. More importantly, cross-border transactions costs were \$1.9 trillion in 2018.
4. 2019 Capital One hackers access personal information of 106 m users

#### 2. Meet the needs of previously unbanked.

1. Particularly a problem in the Developing World, but
2. Fed estimates that 50 million US adults have little or no banking relationships.

## Facts about Cryptocurrencies (as of 2/13, 7AM)

- Bitcoin was the first and is the largest in terms of market cap (total value of all bitcoins) of about \$1.37 trillion.
- Ethereum is in second place with a market cap of about \$236 billion; tether a “stablecoin” is third at \$183 billion.
- Presently, 20,000 different varieties with a total market cap of about \$2.4 trillion (<https://www.coingecko.com/en>)
- Market cap of domestically listed US companies is about \$62 trillion.



## Underlying Technology of Bitcoin

1. Digital Token (exists only as data on a computer) whose ownership is cryptographically protected.
2. Distributed Ledger, Block Chain Technology.
3. Software protocol the provides a “consensus” mechanism on the validity of new transactions.

Payments based on trust, without a “trusted third party.” (i.e, a bank or the Fed).



## So, how does it work?

- Jack, the owner of a bitcoin is given a public number or key and a private encrypted key.
- Jack can trade his bitcoin with Jill by using Jill's public key and verifying the transaction with his private key.
- The new transaction is then posted on a a number of different computers and can be read by anyone.
- The clearing of the transaction is done with public database or distributed ledger called a blockchain through a process know as bitcoin mining.
- First, Bitcoin Miners gather about 3000 new transactions into a "block."
- The next step is to provide a decentralized mechanism to add the new block to the block chain and agree that the transactions are valid



## Proof of Work: Bitcoin "Mining"

- The miners' competition involves generating long, random numbers ("hashing") until one of the numbers fits a precise set of attributes.
- Presently, miners produce on the order of 200 million trillion random numbers per second.
- The winning miner then adds the new block to the previous block in the blockchain. The total process takes about 10 minutes
- The incentive for miners is that the winner of the competition gets compensated with new bitcoins and transaction fees.
- However, the miner will not get the reward unless other miners subsequently add new blocks to the first miner's block.
- In this way transactions are added to the chain via a "consensus" of miners.

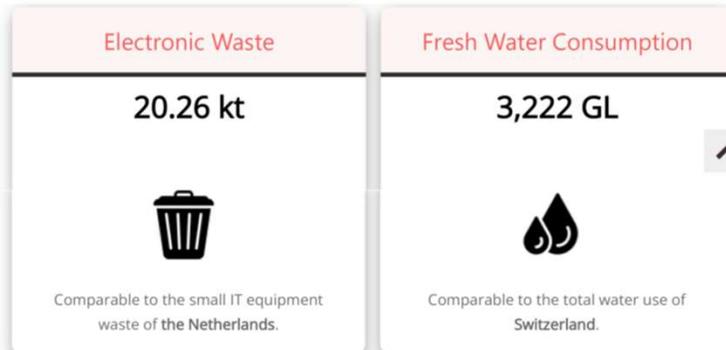


# Bitcoin Mine



# Bitcoin's Environmental Impact

## Annualized Total Bitcoin Footprints



Bitcoin Mining uses something between 40 and 60 percent of Data Centers usage.

## Bitcoin's Environmental Impact

### Single Bitcoin Transaction Footprints

#### Carbon Footprint

444.69 kgCO<sub>2</sub>



Equivalent to the carbon footprint of 985,591 VISA transactions or 74,115 hours of watching Youtube.

#### Electrical Energy

797.28 kWh



Equivalent to the power consumption of an average U.S. household over 27.33 days.

#### Electronic Waste

445.00 grams



Equivalent to the weight of 2.71 iPhones 12 or 0.91 iPads. (Find more info on e-waste [here.](#))



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Source: <https://digiconomist.net/bitcoin-energy-consumption>

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## The Merge: Ethereum and Proof of Stake

- **Potential Block Creators place cryptocurrency in specialized wallets that are locked while they are acting as blockchain “validators” (as opposed to “miners”).**
- **Validators are selected randomly, where the odds of being selected are proportional to the value of the currency “staked” in the wallet.**
- **The rest of the process of validation is similar: transaction fees only paid if subsequent blocks are added, but!!**
- **If an invalid block is discovered the staked deposit is forfeited.**



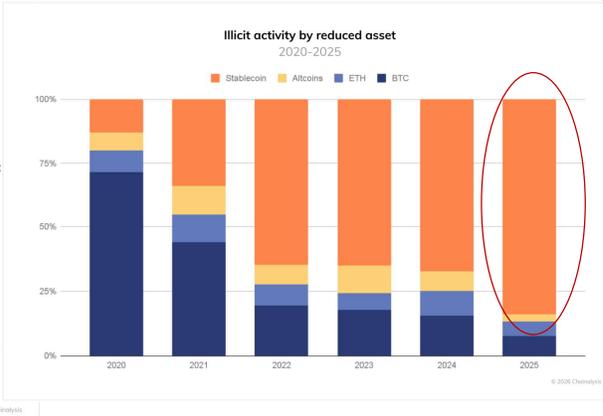
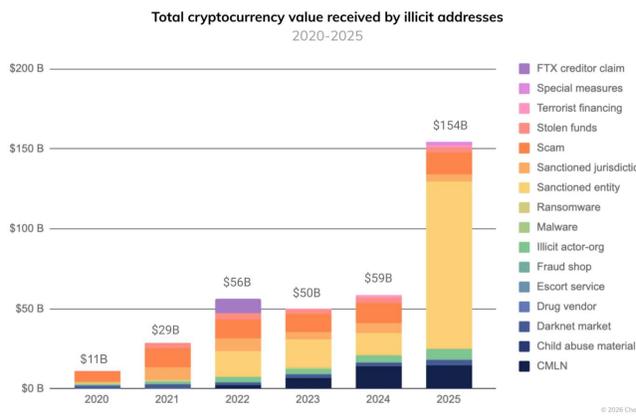
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# What Role Does Bitcoin (or Ether) Play?

- For some it plays the same role as \$100 bills: 32.8% of all bills in circulation (more than the number of \$1 bills): **Illegal Activity.**

# Illegal Activity and Bitcoin



## But What about as a Financial Investment?

- It is hard to argue with the fact that Bitcoin had provided outsized returns for many, albeit very volatile.
- Financial Assets are Promises by the Issuer
- The “fundamental value” of a financial assets is the value of those promises based on the time value of money and the risk that the promises will not be kept.
- What does Bitcoin promise?

## How Do Economist Think About Investments?

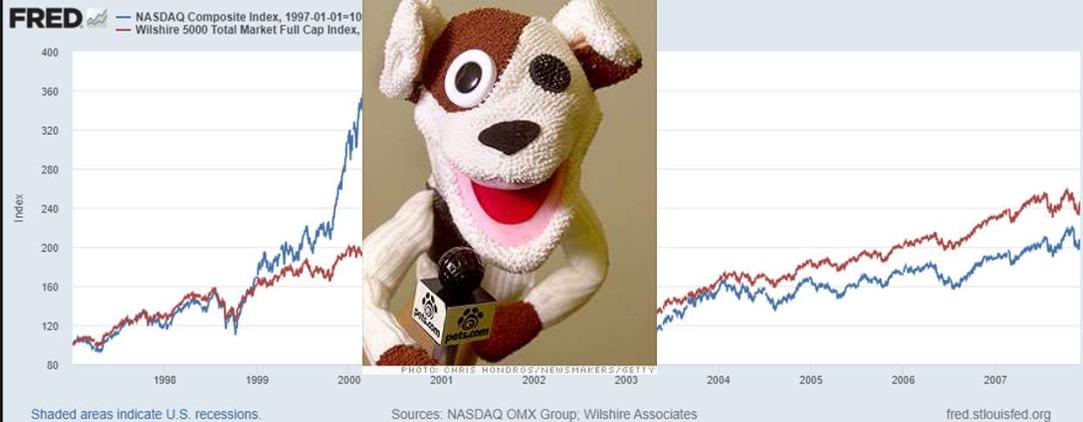
- Good Starting Place

“In the short term the stock market behaves like a voting machine, but in the long term it acts like a weighing machine.”

What is being weighed is prospective payments from the security, or other intrinsic value, i.e. its fundamental value.

Bitcoin?

## Does Voting Ever Get it “Wrong?”



## Smart Contracts on the Blockchain

- **A Smart Contract is a computer code that resides on the block chain and is executed based on incoming information.**
- **Example, Parametric Hurricane Insurance via the Blockchain:**
  - Computer program on Ethereum continuously monitors Charleston Executive Airport wind speed for 1 year.
  - If the windspeed is greater than 150 miles per hour, immediately transfers 100 bitcoin to the Seabrook Island Property Association.
  - If the windspeed is less than 150 miles per hour, but more than 125 miles per hour, immediately transfers 75 bitcoin; etc.
- **Smart Contracts are Automatic, Immediate, Irreversible and Uncontestable.**

## Real World Example: Lemonade & Kenyan Farmers

- “In 2023, 7000 farmers in Kenya who signed up for the insurance were paid out claims due to the occurrence of a drought. No claim adjuster, claims, or processors were needed. Because information like rain data is easily measured for an oracle to transmit, a multitude of use cases exist.”
- Sadly, the vast majority of smart contracts are all in the crypto world: e.g. process stable coin transactions, run derivative exchanges for crypto currencies.



## Desirable Attributes of a Means of Payment

1. Accepted for most, if not all transactions and widely available. (wire transfers?).
2. Stable value. (Bitcoin?).
3. Low transactions costs. (3 percent credit card fees?).
4. Time to clear. (Venmo payments?).
5. Risk Use (Dollar Bills & counterfeits).
6. Irreversibility (Bad Checks ?)
7. Confidentiality (?) (Bank Checks and the Bank Safety Act)



## Car The Digital World Do Better

Yes!

1. Kenya's M- Pesa (2007!): Cell phone app for storing digital currency.  
(<https://www.m-pesa.africa/>).
2. India's UPI (2016): Universally accepted "Apple Pay."  
(<https://www.imf.org/en/publications/fandd/issues/2025/09/india-as-frictionless-payments-maria-peria>).
3. Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC): Digital Yuan (although recently became a "tokenized" bank deposit).



## Stablecoins

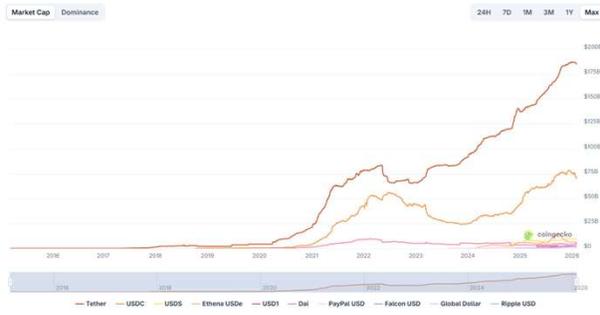
- **Cryptocurrency whose value is pegged to a national currency. We will focus on the dollar stable coins.**
  - Reserve Backed (?): when coins are issued, assets are purchased to "back" the coins value.
  - Algorithmically Backed.
- **Pioneered by Tether in 2014, it is now the largest, but it has a checkered past.**
- **Prior to the current administration, financial regulators were negative towards stable coins.**
- **E.g., Facebook and Diem in 2019: Proposed blockchain enabled stablecoin, where all Facebook users would have diem wallets.**
- **Regulators lodged lots of objections: Should a potentially ubiquitous private currency be run by one company?**
- **What could go wrong?**
- **Meta (Facebook) dropped out of the Diem project on 1/31/2022.**



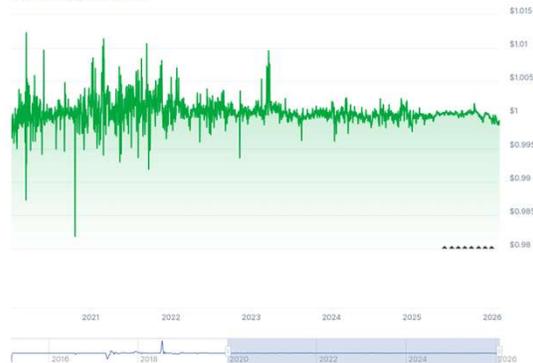
# Stablecoins

Top USD Stablecoin Coins Market Cap Chart

The chart below shows the market capitalization and dominance across top USD Stablecoin including Tether, USDC, USDS and others over a period of time.



Tether Price Chart (USD)

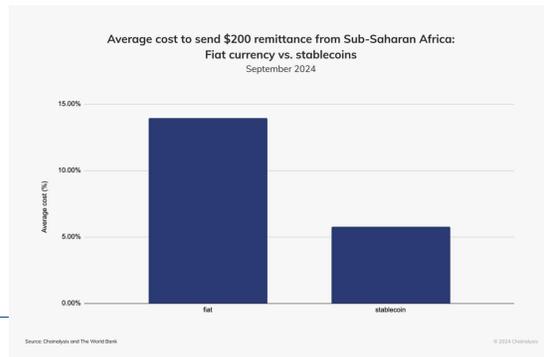


<https://www.coingecko.com/en/categories/usd-stablecoin#key-stats>

Tether's price fell to \$.95 on May 22 2022 because of collapse of an algorithmic stable coin called terra

# Uses of Stable Coins

- Smart Contracts “lock” stablecoins for payments when the contract is executed
- Peer-to-Peer Transactions in regions with unreliable banking.
- Cross-border Transactions and Remittances.



<https://www.chainalysis.com/blog/stablecoins-most-popular-asset/>

## Uses: Continued

- **Store of value in the face of instability and inflation.**
- **Illicit Activity: maybe less than 1%, but still major source of illegal activity.**
- **Sanction Evasion, but also**
- **Getting funds to insurgents in countries like Iran.**

## Recent Congressional Legislation

- **Genius Act (passed): Stable Coin Issuers**
  - 100% liquid asset backing of stable coins (but includes uninsured bank deposits.
  - Regulated by bank regulators, not CFTC nor SEC (which had been tough)
  - Cannot pay interest.
  - Must use blockchain technology.
  - Must Comply with the Bank Secrecy Act.
- **The Anti-CBDC Surveillance State Act (House passed): prohibits the Fed from issuing or even investigating a Fed digital currency.**
- **The Clarity Act (House Passed): Regulatory definitions for other crypto coins; awaiting a Senate vote. At the last minute, Crypto-advocates objected**

## Should Stablecoins Be Allowed to Pay Interest?

- Some stablecoins pay about 3.5% in “rewards.”
- If they can, they would be like a “tokenized” money market mutual fund serving as a more attractive means of payment.
- Estimates of losses in bank deposits range from \$500 billion to \$6.6 trillion.
- So, what is the harm?



## Economic Role of Banks

1. Accept deposits and manage check payments.
2. Make Commercial Loans and Mortgages
  - Money Market Mutual Funds ( MMMF ) do 1, but not 2.
  - Stable coins would be a crypto version of MMMF with more convenient payment options.

### Unintended Consequences?

- The primary source of credit for small business 500 or fewer employees) is from small and regional bank lending.
- Small business:
  1. Number: over 38K
  2. Employment: over 62 million employees, or over 45% total private sector employment.



## Small Banks (less than \$300 billion total assets)

- Deposits \$5.6 trillion out of a total of \$18.6 trillion.
- Loans and Mortgages \$2.8 trillion out of \$5.8
- Understated because while a \$400 billion bank is classified as “large,” its lending is more like a small bank.
- “Large Banks” include JPMorgan Chase at \$3.8 trillion and New Valley Bank and Trust Co at \$366 billion.

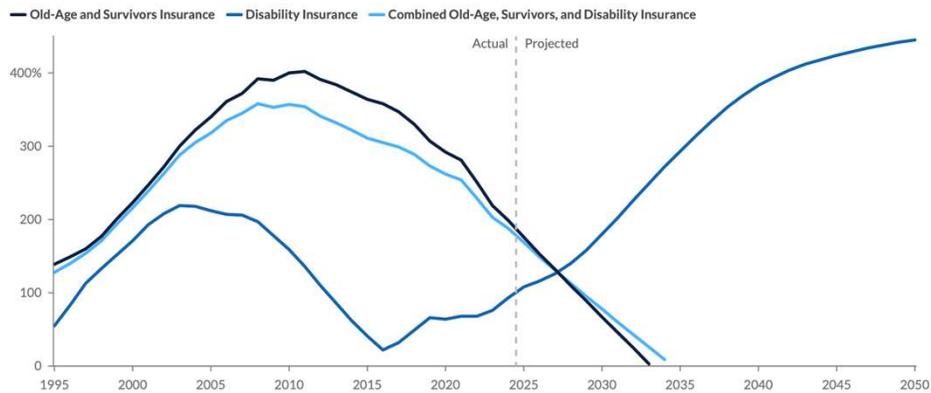
Unintended Consequences of current Crypto enthusiasm?



## Next Week: Trajectory of Funds

Social Security's retirement fund will be depleted in eight years

Asset Reserves at the Beginning of Calendar Year (% of Annual Cost)



Source: Social Security Administration • Embed • Download image

Note: Under law, a trust fund cannot incur a negative balance. The OASI Trust Fund will be depleted in 2033 while the DI Trust Fund will not be depleted within the 75-year long-range projection period. Combined, the trust funds would be depleted in 2034.



**Let's Hear from You!**

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