The evidence is unequivocal that a work-based safety net for families with children has contributed to state and local governments’ success in reducing welfare caseloads during the 1990s. Furthermore, despite weaker economic conditions during much of the past five years, caseloads have remained low relative to their early-1990s peak. Employment rates of single-parent families with children are considerably higher now than they were in the 1980s.

At the same time, there has been less systematic policy experimentation with approaches to promoting self-sufficiency, and we know much less about the best paths to helping families achieve financial independence and stable employment. Evidence from studies of welfare “leavers” and other low-income families indicates that job turnover is often rapid and wage and income growth are nonexistent for many low-skilled workers. Many families are “stuck” in low paying jobs with few or no benefits and little hope of advancement. Concern about this issue among policymakers, welfare advocates, and citizens is reflected in debates about minimum- and living-wage ordinances, health care benefits, and other factors affecting employment and wages in low-income communities.

In September 2007, IRP hosted a conference, Pathways to Self-Sufficiency, that brought together a group of distinguished scholars who were asked to look forward in the context of different safety-net domains and to describe how a set of policies and institutions might evolve to enhance the ability of low-skilled households to be self-sufficient. Each of the experts was also asked to ground their ideas in the available policy evidence, so as not to encourage the pitching of grandiose ideas with a remote chance of entering policy debates.
We expect that the full set of scholarly works, including their forward-looking policy recommendations, will be available in a forthcoming conference volume. The editors of the volume, Carolyn Heinrich and John Karl Scholz, will elaborate on these themes in their introductory chapter. The contributors to this conference volume are: Greg Duncan, Lisa Gennetian, and Pamela Morris discussing the consequences of work-oriented welfare policies for children; David Figlio on public school reform and innovations and their implications for disadvantaged children; Rebecca Blank and Brian Kovak bringing attention to disconnected families; Steve Raphael on the impact of incarceration on employment and family and child well-being; David Neumark examining the role of employers and labor market policies in encouraging skill formation and increasing incomes of those on the margin of self-sufficiency; Jay Bhattacharya on work and health among the poor; Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers discussing lessons from recent innovations in safety-net policies in other countries; and Kent Weaver addressing the political factors and constraints affecting developments in safety-net policies.

In this issue of Focus, we are featuring articles drawn from four of the conference papers. Sponsors of the conference and related publications include the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation; the Russell Sage Foundation; the Casey Foundation; and the Smith Richardson Foundation. We are grateful for their support.

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