



Focus

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Poverty policy and poverty research over four decades

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The Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison has reached a unique milestone—forty years as a leading university-based research and policy center. As far as university-based multidisciplinary organizations go, this is an eternity.

To note this milestone, IRP gave itself a party. The party was held during the 28th annual research conference of

the Association for Public Policy and Management (APPAM) in November 2006. The venue was the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Monona Terrace Conference Center overlooking Lake Monona at the Institute’s home base in Madison.

The reception for this celebration was a walk down memory lane. Dozens of former research affiliates and staff reconnected, including a number of current and past government officials who supported and provided oversight to the Institute’s work. Nearly all of the former IRP Directors were able to return; a unique group picture is available on the IRP Web site <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/>.

Consistent with IRP’s mission—to sponsor and disseminate “research on the nature, causes, and cures of poverty”—the heart of this party was intellectual. With the help of APPAM, we arranged two quasi-plenary sessions designed to provide overviews and perspectives on both

poverty research and poverty policy over four decades. These were unique sessions, with five papers in each—two longer and three shorter papers. We estimate that at least 400 people attended all or part of these sessions.

The papers presented in these sessions are the subject of this special issue of *Focus*. The reader should realize that not all perspectives or approaches to poverty research or poverty policy could be included within the short time and space constraints we were given. Important topics such as poverty and health, disability policy, and other issues simply could not be included. We invited a wide range of opinions covering qualitative as well as quantitative approaches to poverty research, and both the analysis and implementation of antipoverty policy. Before reading the papers, a little background on the overall organization of the two sessions is in order.

Session I: Poverty Research over Four Decades

We asked the authors of the papers for this session to address the following question: “What do we now know about the ‘nature and causes’ of poverty that we did not know in 1965; what should be our research focus in the future?”

Over the past four decades, research has addressed a variety of causes of low income, inequality, and poverty. Explanations have ranged widely; they include the “culture of poverty,” macroeconomic performance, the labor supply incentives implicit in tax and transfer systems, intergenerational transmission processes, structural labor market changes favoring high-skill workers, racially based housing and labor market discrimination, and failures in the nation’s school systems. Poverty researchers have addressed each of these proposed explanations, and others as well. The findings have influenced poverty policy in the United States, and advanced the research tools available for understanding policy and social phenomena.

In some cases, research has supported the conjectures offered. For example, family characteristics and choices are closely related to a variety of child and youth outcomes. In other cases, little support has been found in research findings. Few now adhere to a simple “culture of poverty” explanation. However, no single explanation

on which policy could focus has been identified. Rather, the causes of poverty have been found to be complex, multifaceted, and difficult to isolate.

In the process, poverty research has contributed to the development of a variety of social science methods and analytic approaches, including social experimentation techniques, econometric methods for measuring causal impacts (such as accounting for sample selection), methods for evaluating the effectiveness of public policy interventions, and a variety of approaches to qualitative research including participant-observer techniques.

Session II: Poverty Policy over Four Decades

Most antipoverty policy has revolved around the design, implementation, and evaluation of the effectiveness of public initiatives—issues central to all fields of policy and administration. The panelists in this session discussed various perspectives on antipoverty policy and key issues in the organization and management of poverty policy over the past 40 years and looking forward. The questions this session addressed were: How has public antipoverty policy changed over the past four decades? Do we know better today how to combat poverty than in 1965? Finally, what are likely to be future antipoverty policy issues and stances?

Our starting point was a review of the evolution of public transfer programs over the past 40 years. An important point is that these policies have evolved over time for discernable reasons; public reaction against cash handouts, against support given without a quid pro quo, and against support that carries large work and other disincentives. These factors have not only affected the nature and composition of the support provided, but also the level of support. In addition to direct benefit support for the poor, indirect effects of labor market regulations and subsidies are also important, especially the way they affect specific groups, such as African American men.

Given this evolution, our authors have addressed what we have learned about the relative effectiveness of these various approaches to reducing poverty. And, given this improved level of knowledge and our understanding of the likely dynamics of political sentiments, they speculate on how policy might evolve, or how they believe that it should evolve. ■

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