



Focus

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Pathways to Self-Sufficiency

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Pathways to self-sufficiency

This issue of Focus is devoted to some of the papers delivered at a national conference held in Madison, Wisconsin, in September 2007, designed to explore effective paths to helping families that might have been long-term welfare recipients under prior national policies achieve financial independence and stable employment. The essay that follows is by the conference organizers.

Carolyn Heinrich and John Karl Scholz

Carolyn Heinrich is Professor of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and IRP Associate Director of Research and Training; John Karl Scholz is Professor of Economics at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and a former IRP Director.

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. ■

Acknowledgment

The four articles in this issue of Focus draw upon papers presented at the September 2007 IRP conference Pathways to Self-Sufficiency. The revised conference papers will be published, in a volume titled Social Policy Approaches that Promote Self-Sufficiency and Financial Independence Among the Poor, by the Russell Sage Foundation, which has granted permission for this use, as follows:

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The purpose of *Focus* is to provide coverage of poverty-related research, events, and issues, and to acquaint a large audience with the work of the Institute by means of short essays on selected pieces of research. Full texts of Discussion Papers and Special Reports are available on the IRP Web site.

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Edited by Emma Caspar and Deborah Johnson.

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