



The rise and fall of poverty as a policy issue	3	Neither here nor there: Incarceration and family instability	21
Family complexity in America	9	How did the Great Recession affect fertility?	26
Family structure and children's behavior	11		
The cost of breaking up	15		

On the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty in January 2014, poverty remains a salient policy issue, and dramatic changes in family life have made it even more difficult to design and carry out effective antipoverty policies. I am happy to introduce this issue of *Focus*, which includes an important essay on the rise and fall of poverty as a policy issue since the declaration of the War on Poverty, and summaries of papers by emerging social science scholars on topics related to family complexity. The set of four family complexity articles is introduced by the conveners of IRP's Family Complexity, Poverty, and Public Policy conference held in July 2013. The senior scholars' papers and commentaries from that conference will be published in July 2014 in the *ANNALS* of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (vol. 654).

We lead off with an engaging essay from researcher and IRP affiliate Tom Corbett, adapted from introductory remarks he delivered at IRP's inaugural Teaching Poverty 101 Workshop. This event brought together over two dozen instructors for an intensive four-day workshop on developing college-level courses in poverty and inequality. Corbett served as Associate Director of IRP, and had a long and varied career as a poverty researcher and policymaker. He has worked on welfare reform issues at all levels of government, including as a senior policy advisor at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. He also created the Welfare Peer Assistance Network (WELPAN) concept in the mid-1990s, and worked with current IRP Associate Director Jennifer Noyes in bringing together senior state welfare officials for discussions on welfare reform. Using personal observations from his many vantage points, Corbett provides a detailed and compelling summary of the history of poverty as a policy issue in the United States, its rise and its wane.

Next is a set of articles summarizing work commissioned by IRP as part of a major three-year research project on family complexity, poverty, and public policy that began in 2011. Big changes in family complexity have been one of the most important demographic shifts of the past 50 years. Marriage rates have declined, while divorce rates have risen, and individuals tend to marry later, or not at all. Cohabitation before marriage has become much more common, and the rate of births to unmarried parents has risen dramatically. Importantly, many children born to unmarried parents will experience complex families; in fact, the majority will have at least one half-sibling by their father or their mother from the time of birth. Together, these changes have resulted in an increase in family instability, and have broad implications for poverty policy. Marcia Carlson and Daniel Meyer begin this set with a concise introduction of the topic, and a description of the research questions addressed by each article. The first article in the set, by Rebecca Ryan, Amy Claessens, and Anna Markowitz, examines how changes in family structure are related to changes in children's behavioral problems. They argue that family changes early in a child's life, particularly those from two-biological-parent families to single-parent families, may in fact increase children's behavioral problems, but that these effects are not uniform across income levels. Instead, they suggest that children in disadvantaged families, though they tend to experience a higher degree of family instability, are less affected by this instability—both for better and for worse—than are children in more advantaged families.

Second, Laura Tach and Alicia Eads look at the economic costs of family dissolution. They argue that while the net economic consequences of divorce for women and children have changed little since the 1980s, the economic consequences of cohabitation dissolution have increased substantially over that time, so that mothers' income losses after the end of a cohabiting relationship now more closely resemble those of divorced mothers. They attribute this to the rising earnings of male cohabiting partners, combined with smaller growth in women's earnings and compensating government transfers.

The third article, by Kristin Turney, examines the relationship between incarceration and relationship dissolution, and finds that among couples with children, incarceration leads to a higher likelihood of a breakup while the children are young, with

no significant differences in how incarceration affects the relationships of married, cohabiting, and nonresidential couples. She argues that this association is explained by the suspended status of incarcerated men who are at once members of families, but also isolated from those families.

Finally, Christine Percheski and Rachel Kimbro consider how the Great Recession affected fertility for married women, cohabiting women, unpartnered women, and teenagers. They argue that poor economic conditions are generally associated with a lower likelihood of pregnancy, although the effects differ by population subgroup. Unpartnered and married women showed the largest decreases in pregnancies in response to the recession, though married Hispanic women had higher rates of pregnancy as state poverty rates rose.

As always, IRP is on the lookout for good opportunities to stimulate research, train young researchers, analyze policy, and improve program performance and practice to better the lot of the poor. We welcome any ideas you may have that will help us to achieve these goals.

—Timothy M. Smeeding, IRP Director

FOCUS is a Newsletter put out twice a year by the

Institute for Research on Poverty
1180 Observatory Drive
3412 Social Science Building
University of Wisconsin
Madison, Wisconsin 53706
(608) 262-6358
Fax (608) 265-3119

The Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, university-based research center. As such it takes no stand on public policy issues. Any opinions expressed in its publications are those of the authors and not of the Institute.

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.

Focus is free of charge, although contributions to the UW Foundation–IRP Fund sent to the above address in support of *Focus* are encouraged.

Edited by Emma Caspar

Copyright © 2014 by the Regents of the University of Wisconsin System on behalf of the Institute for Research on Poverty. All rights reserved.

This publication was supported by Grant Number AE00102 from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), and awarded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Its contents are solely the responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of ASPE or SAMHSA.
