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Editors' Note

Two decades ago, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act came into effect, a landmark event in our country's tortured efforts to take on poverty. The simple purpose of this *Pathways* issue is to examine whether that reform delivered as intended and whether it's time to undertake a new round of reform. We have asked key leaders from industry, politics, and academia to weigh in on these two questions. The articles in this issue have been drawn in part from a conference on welfare reform at the Brookings Institution that was organized by Marianne Bitler, Hilary Hoynes, and James Ziliak.

The cynic who makes a quick pass through the articles in this issue might argue that nothing ever changes in the world of U.S. welfare debates. We're still worrying about the large number of prime-age workers who are not working. We're still debating whether welfare programs are increasing the size of this nonworking population by creating disincentives to work. We're still discussing whether marriage is an antidote to poverty. And we're still adopting positions on these issues that can be reliably predicted by that single variable—political party—that is becoming the great binary of our time.

But these questions, as important as they are, are not the only ones that today's reformers are discussing. There is also a new and more disruptive debate that's fast emerging and that shows up throughout this issue. We're referring to the debate between advocates of thick and thin reform, where "thick reform" is all about building new and innovative welfare-preserving institutions, while "thin reform" is all about daring to think about institution-free approaches to poverty. This new debate may prove to be *the* poverty debate of the 21st century.

The classic thin reform, as laid out by Sam Altman and Elizabeth Rhodes, is that of basic income. It of course relies on the "institution" of money, but otherwise it's thin in the sense that it lets money itself do all the poverty-abating work. It's that rare anti-poverty proposal that, instead of championing some new program or service, is instead about providing the money needed to take advantage of existing jobs, programs, and services. The other main thin reforms are those that look to Silicon Valley innovations, like machine learning or big data, to reduce poverty by lowering transaction and information costs (e.g., efficiently matching workers to jobs) or to usher in a new evidence-based policy world. These "thin reform" movements are post-ideological in the sense that they draw widely from all ideological quarters.

The thin-reform movement, as popular as it is, coexists with an emerging thick-reform movement that looks to new institutions to solve new problems. How should we respond to the gig economy and the specter of rising displacement? The thick-reform answer: We need new flexicurity-styled social insurance institutions of the sort that Elizabeth Warren describes. How should we deal with low rates of prime-age employment and the possibility of further automation-induced declines? The thick-reform answer: We need new public jobs programs of the sort that H. Luke Shaefer and Kathryn Edin have previously described in *Pathways*. These thick-reform proposals, which come principally from the left, rest on the view that we need another New Deal and that we're well past the time when simply patching up existing institutions will suffice.

We dedicate this issue to nourishing this emerging debate between thin and thick reforms. If the landscape of 21st-century poverty is truly to be transformed, it will likely reflect how this new debate—not just the old one—is decided.

—David B. Grusky, Charles Varner, Marybeth Mattingly, and Stephanie Garlow