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a magazine on poverty, inequality, and social policy

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Editors' Note

The Great Recession, now widely acknowledged as the worst postwar recession in U.S. history, has been tagged as "great" in part because its effects on the labor market have been broad, deep, and long lasting. Nearly five years after the recession's official start, the unemployment rate still stands at 7.9 percent (for October 2012), and the official poverty rate at 15.0 percent (for 2011). The future of the economy and labor market remain, of course, less clear than we'd like. Time and again, we've found ourselves breathing a sigh of relief and thinking the worst is behind us, only to wake up to a new crisis and a new round of pessimism and anxiety.

But what about the *social* effects of the recession? Have these been just as profound? Have crime rates shot up, immigration and fertility rates plummeted, and health outcomes worsened?

It's easy enough to weave compelling and even alarmist stories about such effects (and, indeed, many have). For some types of social behaviors, the recession may be consequential simply because it changes the costs and benefits associated with those behaviors. In explaining, for example, the falloff in immigration to the United States, it's obviously relevant that the incentives to come to the United States are lessened when employment opportunities in immigrant-intensive sectors (e.g., construction) are reduced. The same type of shifts in the underlying cost–benefit calculus may obtain for other population groups: The downturn may make children and other "durables" less affordable, burglaries and other types of crime more attractive, and shared living quarters more necessary.

The four cover stories in our fall issue reveal that some of these individual-level effects are in evidence. Although the effects prove to be sizable in some domains, they're rather weak in others. There clearly hasn't yet been any cataclysmic fallout. The Great Depression was, by contrast, a period of more fundamental change because it ushered in the New Deal and altered the very institutions within which individuals make their cost–benefit calculations.

We can't rule out the possibility of Roosevelt-style reform in the future. If the current halting recovery is delayed or undermined, then support for such reform might ultimately surface, and more fundamental institutional change could again be in store. This isn't an entirely implausible scenario: indeed, were the 2014 midterm elections to restore Democratic control of the House, one could imagine President Obama establishing a Roosevelt-caliber legacy via just such reform. The comparatively small effects that have so far been observed may, in this sense, be understood as the natural consequence of superimposing a recession, even a major one, on a static constellation of labor market institutions.

The current issue of *Pathways Magazine* is but an opening effort, then, in tracking the effects of the recession, an effort that we think is appropriately timed with the five-year anniversary of the start of the Great Recession. In collaboration with the Russell Sage Foundation, the Center on Poverty and Inequality will be continuing to monitor these effects through a new website, www.recessiontrends.org, that provides ongoing expert commentary on the effects of the downturn, as well as a new graphing utility that brings together hundreds of time series and allows visitors to create customized graphs, impose key sample restrictions, and export the resulting graphs and data. Please check it out!

—David Grusky, Michelle Poulin, & Christopher Wimer, Senior Editors