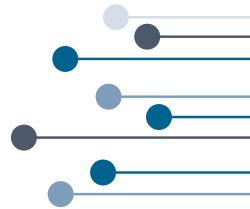




# Introduction



Social justice is the premise “that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities.”<sup>1</sup> This is the rationale for the focus of this text, which analyzes key social problems and the social policies designed to address them in the United States. It features issues that have resonance for social work professionals who carry the commitment to social justice to neighborhoods, state legislatures, and national policy arenas across the country

Why do social workers need to know about social policy? Social policies are the frameworks that inform, limit, or advance social work practice and the goal of social justice. The aim of this book is to analyze the limitations of those social policies that have developed to solve social problems in the United States as well as to suggest new ideas for more socially just and equitable policies.

Contemporary social policies will be linked to the historical values, economic structure, and legacy of discrimination and oppression in the United States, with the goal of promoting policy changes that enhance the profession’s commitment to social and economic justice.

## Social Construction of Social Problems and Social Policies

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All social problems in the United States, along with our responses to them, have an important historical context that needs to be understood. Policies put in place many years ago often remain unchallenged and unchanged—as if they were somehow inevitable, rather than socially constructed answers reflecting the desires and shortcomings of the people who crafted them.

For instance, the educational system in the United States is an entirely socially constructed arrangement that may or may not be related to real learning. It is often dependent on

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<sup>1</sup>National Association of Social Workers (NASW), “Social Justice,” accessed August 20, 2013, <http://www.socialworkers.org/pressroom/features/issue/peace.asp>.

the absorption of material by students, and reflection back to instructors who will judge performance and offer certification. Does traditional academic education prepare social workers, for example, to work effectively with a wide variety of persons toward goals of social justice? Students, professors, and administrators in social work schools and departments across the country rarely ask such questions; instead they typically operate within the established academic structure with few questions and ready compliance.

The majority of institutionalized education, not just social work, suffers from this same lack of critical thinking about the utility of our educational practices. Other social institutions, such as marriage, are also socially constructed by law and custom. Some of our social constructs are seen as not only immutable but sacred, so suggesting revision of them elicits angry opposition. Consider the reaction to the prospect of gay and lesbian marriage in some quarters.

Other socially created arrangements, including democracy and the market economy, are not only defended in the United States but thought to be far superior to other arrangements, a belief that has legitimized their exportation, sometimes under military force, to other areas of the world.

Socially constructed attitudes toward some groups have historically worked to their disadvantage in the United States; these views include false narratives about African Americans; Latinos; American Indians; lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transsexuals; as well as women. These beliefs about group differences were historically fashioned for reasons of social control; the continual process of re-creation resting on the continued assent of many Americans supported their ongoing viability for many generations. Only over the past 60 years has the socially constructed nature of these beliefs been revealed and subsequently rejected by others.

Social problems that may seem intractable, however, can be changed through collective will. Poverty and inequality are conditions that are taken for granted in the United States today. Few public policy movers or politicians pay any attention to the obstacles and suffering persons living in poverty experience. Yet poverty and inequality could clearly be substantially reduced if not eliminated in the United States, if enough persons agreed that it should be. Just as poverty is socially constructed, so too are the problems of homelessness, marginalized housing, food insecurity, and inadequate health care—every problem social workers and their clients experience. Social policies such as welfare reform, the Social Security system, and the child welfare system are likewise socially constructed. What this means for social workers is that social problems can be reduced or eliminated and social policies can be changed. This is true even though these social policies have been legitimized so thoroughly that few real alternatives are ever considered by policymakers. The recognition of the socially constructed nature of social problems and of social policies offers an

empowering message to social workers. The profession must advocate for new policies that come closer to the goal of social justice for all members of society.

## A Theory of Social Problems and Social Policies

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How are social problems created in the United States? The perspective of this book is that in the United States social problems are created by (a) *the interaction of our unique historical values and ideologies*; (b) *our economic structure*; and (c) *our legacy of discrimination and oppression against certain ethnic groups, individuals with varying sexual orientations, and women*. These three factors also inform and limit our policy solutions to these social problems. Without conscious awareness of the powerful role of these factors, the inequities and failures of previous social policies are bound to be repeated—perhaps many times over.

Other countries have economic systems that can be characterized as a market economy, similar to the United States. In many of those nations, however, government control of the forces of production, labor, capital, and credit is minimal; private economic transactions are more or less freely made, and they tend to express the will of individual economic participants. The U.S. economic system has produced great abundance over many eras, as well as an unparalleled diversity of consumer goods, opportunities for great wealth accumulation, and technological innovation. But our economic system has also led to economic insecurity, unemployment, and economic marginalization and suffering for many persons, whose number expands with the cycles of recession and depression.

The natural cycles of the market economy—including its by-products of unemployment and poverty—have been mitigated in many other industrialized countries through the creation of social welfare policies that seek to soften the impacts. In the United States, a distinct set of historical values and ideologies has limited the number and impact of such social welfare policies; in many instances, development of such policies was delayed.

Another factor that operates to create unique social problems and limit social policies in this country is our legacy of discrimination and oppression against women, people of color, people of different sexual orientation, as well as other marginalized groups. As a result of this entrenched and extensive pattern of historical discrimination and oppression, these groups have suffered disproportionately from the inequities of the economic system.

These three factors—our historical ideologies, our economic system, and our legacy of discrimination/oppression—also inform and limit social policies that were created to address the social problems. Each policy discussed in this book has limitations based on

the interaction of these three factors. Each policy demonstrates the power of our historical ideologies and values; each policy illustrates the continuing inequities of the market economy; and to varying degrees, each policy also fails to meet the needs of groups who have experienced discrimination and oppression.

The analyses offered in this book are intended to encourage social workers to look beyond the current realities when searching for policy solutions. New proposals will be offered, and students will be encouraged to develop their own policy models to reduce or at least ameliorate the most glaring current disparities.

## Organization of the Book

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This book has been designed for students of social work and related human services. The objectives are to (1) describe how the interaction of historical and current values and ideologies, market capitalism, and ethnic and gender oppression cause social problems in the United States; (2) document the limitation of selected social welfare policies in addressing them; (3) demonstrate how a social policy analysis framework can identify the history of a social problem, the theories that explain its evolution, its goals and objectives, target group, intended or unintended effects, implications, and proposed alternative policies; and (4) inspire readers to advocate for social and economic policies that are commensurate with the major principles of the National Association of Social Work (NASW) *Code of Ethics*: competency, dignity, integrity, human relationships, service, and social justice.

After this introduction, the remaining chapters begin with questions that serve to guide students through the content, and conclude with open-ended questions to stimulate discussion. Each chapter has vignettes which feature persons who have challenged oppression and demonstrated moral courage in working for social and economic change. A policy analysis framework is offered in Chapter 2. Chapters 7 through 10 provide specific examples of how a policy analysis can illuminate the goals and objectives of policies and determine their outcomes. A brief overview of each chapter's content is provided as follows:

**Chapter 1** welcomes social workers and other colleagues to the study of social policies. The book's premise is provided and the organization outlined. The assumption that reality is socially constructed is advanced, and the concept of social justice is discussed.

**Chapter 2** examines the definition and meaning of social policy in the United States and discusses how social problems are identified and achieve the salience necessary to lead political actors to construct social policies. Broadly conceived, social policies include those related to taxes, farms, defense, and education. Social welfare policy is a subset of the

broader category of social policies. The dominant political ideologies in the United States—liberal, conservative, radical, and libertarian—are discussed in terms of their views about the relationship of government to individual liberty. Social policies emerge out of the struggle among various political ideologies about the proper role of government in individual life. The importance of policy analysis to social policy change and advocacy is discussed, and a framework for policy analysis is presented. The chapter concludes with a description of select major social welfare policies in the United States.

**Chapter 3** looks at the history and philosophy of the social work profession and examines how our profession has advanced social justice in the United States. The gendered nature of the social work profession is explored, along with the role of Christianity in the early formation of the profession. The role of social workers in the creation of major social policies in the United States is also included. The commitment to social policy change evident in the early days of the profession is traced throughout its history, and the contemporary commitment to social advocacy is explored. The unique role of the social work profession in the United States as the only one with a self-defined mission of pursuing social justice is discussed, with implications for economic justice, as well.

**Chapter 4** considers important historical values and ideologies contributing to social problems and informing social policies in the United States today. The historical origins of the belief in the value of hard work and wealth, self-reliance, and individualism are discussed, along with the belief in upward mobility, equal opportunity, and social Darwinism. The salience of these ideologies for contemporary social policies in the United States is examined. The commitment to civil liberties outlined in the Bill of Rights is discussed as the basis for movements for equality and social justice. The idea of U.S. exceptionalism is also explored, including how and why the U.S. is different from other industrialized nations, and the impact these differences have on our social policies.

**Chapter 5** examines how the market economy has contributed to the creation of social problems and to the current policies intended to solve them. The philosophical foundations of the market economy are explored, along with the relationship of the market economy to poverty. The ideal operations of the market economy are contrasted with the actual workings of the market economy in the United States. Labor market theory is presented, with an emphasis on dual labor market theory and the importance of the secondary labor market. Income and wealth inequality in the United States is described, with special attention paid to economic inequality experienced by certain ethnic groups and women. The concept of poverty is explored, with a discussion of the official definition of poverty in this country. The role of tax policy and tax cuts in the distribution of wealth and the promotion of inequality is examined, along with the Earned Income Tax Credit policy of the federal government. Supply-side economics and its impact on inequality and the federal deficit over the past 30 years are detailed. The question of who should bear the social costs and externalities associated with market capitalism is explored,

and the positions of conservatives and liberals are contrasted. This chapter also examines the interrelationship between the primary and secondary labor markets, the social welfare system, the black market, immigration, outsourcing, and globalization.

**Chapter 6** discusses both the history and the legacy of discrimination/oppression in the United States and elaborates on the ways that discrimination has operated to limit resources and rights of ethnic groups; women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons; and persons who are differently abled. The chapter uses critical race theory to examine the meaning of race and racism in the United States. The concepts of aversive racism and White privilege are explored as subtle but powerful variations on overt discrimination, along with the dangers of essentialism in describing oppressed groups. The history of institutional racism experienced by certain ethnic groups is described, as is the relationship between poverty and membership in those groups.

The economic, social, and institutional discrimination experienced by women, LGBT persons, and persons with disabilities is described. Finally, social movements begun by oppressed groups over the past 50 years that have challenged the status quo are examined, and their impact is discussed.

The following chapters (7, 8, 9, 10) integrate the theoretical framework—*the interaction of historical ideologies, the economic structure, and the legacy of discrimination/oppression*—in the discussion of specific social policies and the social problems that they are designed to address. These social policies are the ones most directly affecting social work clients and oppressed groups.

**Chapter 7** addresses the major income maintenance policies in the United States—welfare for women and children (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF) and Social Security for older Americans—and examines their impact on women and children, and the elderly people.

**Chapter 8** includes the government's definition of homelessness, the face of the homeless population, and the factors that contribute to the lack of affordable housing in the United States. Housing policies in the United States are described, and their impact on the national housing problems is explored. Special attention is given to youth and persons with mental illness.

**Chapter 9** provides a historical account of how child maltreatment was addressed and related policies in the United States from the 18th century to current child welfare practices. This chapter examines the shift from considering children to be of economic benefit to valuing their safety and well-being as future contributing members of society. Special issues related to child protection, family foster care, kinship care, and adoption policies are also presented.

**Chapter 10** questions why it took so many decades to get more effective health care legislation passed; why health care is so expensive, unaffordable, and inaccessible for many;

and the drawbacks and successes of publically funded health programs. The chapter also considers how access to health and mental health care is affected by age, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, immigration status, and incarceration.

**Chapter 11** identifies several major social and economic justice issues that social workers must consider in the second decade of the 21st century. Changing national demographics due to immigration patterns and longevity will require attention to shifting service needs. The reality of post-9/11 America creates concerns regarding privacy and racial profiling. Human trafficking, adoption, terrorism, and the economy have become global issues that all countries involved need to address cooperatively. These developments require social workers to think and act beyond our national borders.

## Social Workers and Social Policy Change

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Many social workers think they live in a world far removed from social policies. Social workers think of themselves as professionals and expect to function in an environment that maximizes their autonomy and practice, not in a context where external policies limit their work. As a result, social workers do not always appreciate the need to understand and transform the social policies that inevitably underlie their professional roles.<sup>2</sup> Whether working as practitioners, educators, administrators, community organizers, or researchers, all social workers act within a social policy field, empowered and constrained by the channels for action determined by others. Funding sources, client characteristics, content and amount of services offered—all these variables are found in policies designed by federal, state, or local policymakers. Yet far more important than recognizing the constraints inherent in policies is the fact that policies are of human origin and can be changed through collective political will. It is commonplace to say that policies drive practice; it is equally important to say that practice can reveal the problems with policies, and this insight can lead to the desire to change unjust policies. The relationship between policy and practice is reciprocal. Practice should guide policy change; social workers should know which policies are constraining and which fail to solve the social problems that limit the full potential of the individuals with whom they work.

## Social Justice

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Who is responsible for inspiring public will and political interest to maximize social and economic justice? Social workers have been involved in many significant policy changes thus far in American history, and the future is wide open for the struggle to refashion social welfare policy. Social workers have a professional commitment to engage in actions that will

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<sup>2</sup>Philip Pool and Leslie Leighninger, *The Policy Based Profession* (Boston: Pearson, 2005), 17.

promote social justice. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics* has six major principles: “being competent, having dignity, using integrity, believing in the importance of human relationships, providing service, and advocating for social justice,”<sup>3</sup> which includes addressing issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice.<sup>4</sup> Social workers tend to be more skilled in the first five principles; advocacy is sometimes more elusive whether on a case or cause basis.

Traditionally the social work profession has been concerned with access to economic resources and has taken up the struggle against various forms of discrimination and oppression. According to the *Code of Ethics*, however, social work professionals must do more than pay lip service to the concept of social justice; they should “engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully.”<sup>5</sup>

So what is social justice exactly? It is the fair distribution of goods, services, rights, and duties. A socially just society is one where all, not just a privileged few, have a say in how these fundamental necessities and freedoms are shared. Social justice does not imply absolute equality but demands that each person receive the same basic rights and unobstructed access to economic and political resources, not mediated by gender, ethnicity, level of education, economic status, or other demographic characteristics. In a socially just society, for example, all would have the same access to the same quality health care, regardless of other factors. Similarly, everyone would have access to quality education, political participation, and freedom of association and speech. In a socially just society economic resources would not be concentrated in the hands of a few but would be shared more equitably. Globally, we are far from approaching the ideal of social justice but, even within the United States, there are serious problems with access to economic resources, health care, housing, education, the welfare of children and seniors, and political power, as this book will demonstrate. Some refer to social and economic justice as though they are two separate entities; in this book the concept of social justice includes economic justice. A society that embraces historically based values that form obstacles to social justice, supports an economic system that thwarts social justice, or fosters systematic oppression and prevents access to economic and political resources should be unacceptable to social workers. Social and economic justice in the United States can be viewed as a socially constructed concept open to wide debate. There are specific impediments to social and economic justice in the United States that could be transformed through collective understanding and political action. This book aims to inspire advocacy for social and economic policies that would bring the United States far closer to the ideal of social justice.

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<sup>3</sup>National Association of Social Workers (NASW), *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers* (Washington, DC: Author, 2008), 5.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 27.

## Constituencies for Social Change

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How does the failure to pursue socially just policies hurt Americans? Many historical U.S. values are oppressive to everyone who experiences poverty and other economic downturns inherent in the market economy. These historical values, including self-reliance, individualism, and the Protestant work ethic, are punishing in times of economic recession, unemployment, housing market collapse, and lack of health care—all problems affecting the middle class and poorer people. As all economic crises evidence—from the Great Depression of 1929 to more recent upheavals—virtually no one is impervious to the actions of an unregulated market economy. Even those who considered themselves economically stable slid into economic insecurity during the recession of 2008. Economic realities trump the belief in self-reliance, and the commitment to hard work means little in the face of rising unemployment.

As this book will show, many of our social problems are shared by all ethnic groups and people from all economic levels; the survival of Social Security and the viability of our health and mental health care system affect all Americans, as does the stability of the housing market and the welfare and safety of children and elders at risk for maltreatment. Social justice is not just a concern for oppressed groups but affects all individuals who live in the United States.

Social policy change is most likely to occur when the common interest in socially just policies is recognized; discontent with accepted ways of organizing social and economic reality grows, and the dissatisfaction is expressed through social movements and political action. Social workers can seize these moments to work with others to fashion socially just policies that move beyond the limits of our historical values, the worst effects of the market economy, and our patterns of discrimination and oppression. Such policies can be liberating for all.

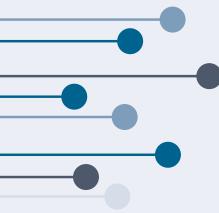
## Conclusion

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At the core of the social work profession is an insight about the socially constructed nature of our economic and social arrangements, as well as a deep commitment to embrace the struggle to change unjust policies. By understanding the historical origins of our policies, their relationship to our economic well-being, and their complicity with our legacy of discrimination/oppression, social workers can begin to transform unjust policies into ones that hold the promise of social justice for everyone. Through this book we hope to inspire actions that address the following statement by Michael Reisch from 20 years ago, which is still relevant today:

We are now making fundamental political decisions about our society choices which literally involve matters of life and death, health and illness, opportunity and oppression, hope and despair, for millions of

people. These choices are integral to the core concerns of social work as a profession and to our integrity as caring human beings. They have a major impact on the lives of our clients and the day-to-day work we do in our agencies and communities. They require us to make political action a central ongoing component of our work, to abandon the false image of professionalism which separates professional responsibilities from the harsh realities of poverty, power, and politics.<sup>6</sup>



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Provide examples of socially constructed values, institutions, or everyday practices that are evident in your work, your own life, or larger society.
2. What are several deeply held socially constructed values or beliefs in the United States?
3. What is your definition of social justice?
4. What do you believe is a fair distribution of resources and rights?
5. What is an example of an agency policy you want to change, a child or family needing an advocacy intervention, or a cause you believe in?
6. Do you agree or disagree with the following quote? Why or why not?

Social workers must be involved in advocacy practice if clients' situations are to improve. If social workers do not act as advocates, their policy ideas and, even more important, their values, will not be well represented in policymaking circles. When social workers engage in advocacy practice, they bring with them specialized knowledge about the human condition and a belief that service provision to clients must consider individuals within their environment. Social workers also want to focus on client strengths, rather than pathology. When social workers share their knowledge and beliefs, decision makers are exposed to a fresh point of view.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Michael Reisch, "If You Think You're Not Political, Guess Again," *NASW Network* 21, no. 13 (1995): 1, 10.

<sup>7</sup>Richard Hoeffler, *Advocacy Practice for Social Justice* (Chicago: Lyceum Press, 2006), 21.