

Social Welfare Policy: Overview

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Summary

Social welfare policy may be defined as government's response to human needs such as food, housing, healthcare, employment, and other necessities. Many contemporary U.S. social welfare policies have roots in the New Deal programs of the 1930s, which were responses to the Great Depression. The civil unrest of the 1960s, the "Great Recession" of 2008, and the COVID-19 pandemic also brought about major policy responses. There are basic philosophical differences in approaches that Americans believe the United States should take to meeting human needs, often described in liberal and conservative perspectives. Social insurance and public assistance programs are major responses to poverty and other needs. Disparities based on race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other factors may also be addressed through social welfare policies, sometimes in the form of civil rights legislation. Racism and other forms of systemic discrimination, however, continue to prevent many Americans from reaping the benefits that others enjoy. The National Association of Social Workers' code of ethics calls for social workers' political involvement. Social workers participate in all aspects of policy processes to improve the biopsychosocial well-being of Americans and people across the globe.

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Introduction and Definitions

The concept of social welfare refers broadly to the resources and opportunities people need to lead satisfying and productive lives (Midgley & Livermore, 2009). Virtually everything the government does affects social welfare, from tax and national defense to education and healthcare policy, but so does government inaction; that is, the failure to respond to human need (DiNitto & Johnson, 2016). More narrowly, definitions of social welfare policy focus on policies and programs that provide income assistance and social services to those in need.

In the United States, with its tradition of federalism or shared government, social welfare policy is made at local, state, and national levels. Policy is made by the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government in the form of laws, executive orders and administrative regulations, and

court decisions. A broad view of social welfare policy also recognizes that corporations as well as nonprofit and for-profit social service agencies make policies that affect the well-being of those they serve and the broader community and therefore have social implications. Many of today's social welfare policies address basic human needs such as food, housing, healthcare, and employment, and many of them have roots in the New Deal programs of the 1930s, which were responses to the Great Depression. The civil unrest of the 1960s, the "Great Recession" of 2008, and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 have also brought about social policy responses.

Policies, including social welfare policies, rest on who has the power to make policy and how they conceptualize and respond to human need. Poverty, unemployment, lack of healthcare and housing, and child maltreatment have been targets of social welfare policies, but the forces that vie to influence policy often view these problems differently. The same is true for policies that affect the civil rights of people who have been disenfranchised, such as women, people of color, sexual minorities, and people with disabilities. Social workers, with their intimate knowledge of human needs, influence policy by helping to define social problems and develop corresponding policy responses. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and its policy and political arms engage in the policy process, and the 2013 program Grand Challenges for Social Work, initiated by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (2021), is a major response of the social work profession to addressing human needs in contemporary society.

To meet human needs, conservatives (sometimes called neoliberals) have generally supported "residual," means-tested, time-limited social welfare policies and services, whereas liberals have argued for "universal" or "institutional" social welfare policies that provide assistance to citizens as communal rights. Universal social insurance programs (primarily the Social Security retirement and disability programs and Medicare, which focus largely on helping older people) have become part of the fabric of the U.S. social welfare system. However, institutional social welfare policies adopted by other countries that can meet needs across the lifespan have never received broad political support in the United States; instead, residual programs providing limited assistance to those regarded as having genuine need have been favored (Patterson, 2000).

Socially constructed norms strongly influence how social issues are defined. Traditions of public debate and discourse encourage interest groups to influence the definition of social problems and lobby for policies that will advantage their members. Sometimes social issues are redefined in the policy arena, such as in the passage of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965, which allowed for government financing of healthcare programs for certain populations. Before the passage of this legislation, the U.S. Congress had largely rejected the federal government's involvement in such programs. Sometimes it is the nine members of the U.S. Supreme Court rather than the 535 members of the U.S. Congress who resolve policy conflicts. For example, the Court's 1896 "separate but equal" doctrine in *Plessy v. Ferguson* defined policies regarding race for decades, but in 1954, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the court ruled that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" (DOCSTeach, n.d., p. 11). Debates about the meaning of "family" and "marriage" also exemplify how social policies, such as the Defense of Marriage Act of 1996, may enforce specific norms and delegitimize behavior deemed inappropriate by those who hold power. The federal government and state legislatures clashed over the meaning of marriage and whether

state recognition of same-sex marriage, also labeled “marriage equality,” violated federal policy until 2015, when the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage nationally in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (Street Law, Inc., n.d.).

U.S. history is rife with abuses of indigenous people and those brought as slaves and their successors who were denied the same rights as Whites, leaving a legacy of social and economic disparities. In the current social policy environment, some experts believe that corporate and business sectors have become so powerful that they dominate the policy process, making government (the president, Congress) less responsive to the social welfare needs of all but the wealthiest (Stiglitz, 2012). For example, opening public lands to oil, timber, and mineral corporations can have devastating effects for people and environments if appropriate safeguards are not in place (Gore, 2007). The dynamics of the competitive, globalized marketplace have adversely affected the industrial U.S. work force as corporations downsized, disappeared, or moved operations to other countries. The well-being of the American middle class has been affected by loss of purchasing power and reduced opportunities for upward social mobility. Tax legislation favoring the wealthiest Americans has exacerbated income inequality. The structural obstacles to social advancement faced by those with few economic resources and those who are targets of systemic discrimination remain numerous. The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and racial protests in 2020 magnified these disparities.

Discrimination can take many forms. For example, in 1941, after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and the United States entered World War II, discrimination against people of Japanese heritage resulted in the internment of Japanese Americans in camps for fear they might act against the United States. Survivors of internment eventually received meager reparations. Recently, Asian Americans again became targets of violence over beliefs about the origins of COVID-19. The early 21st century in the United States was marked by the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon and U.S. involvement in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the wake of these events, the civil rights of Muslims in the United States were threatened, and more resources were allocated to national defense and homeland security.

Given the range and importance of policy choices, social welfare competes with all other choices for attention and resources. Conservatives often oppose policies and programs directed at public social welfare provision as ineffective and inappropriate interference in the marketplace, and, at least since the Reagan administration, as causing dependency. Social policies that transferred and redistributed income from the wealthy to those who are poor, such as programs assisting women with young children struggling at the margins, have been harshly criticized and their recipients demonized. Since George W. Bush’s administration, efforts have been made to alter the structure of the Social Security system, which is the most universal and effective U.S. social welfare program for reducing poverty.

In the United States, groups such as the Poor People’s Campaign work to maintain a focus on meeting needs as social welfare policy faces continuous challenges. However, during the latter part of the 20th century, as political parties continued to debate how to promote overall economic growth, solutions to poverty and inequality largely faded from the public policy agenda (DiNitto & Johnson, 2016). The economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the deaths of Blacks at the hands of police shed new light on these issues. Joseph R. Biden’s administration sought to

address these issues by appointing a cabinet marked by racial and gender diversity and supporting legislation such as a new COVID relief package called the American Rescue Plan. This legislation provided stimulus checks to individuals and families, extended unemployment benefits, increased subsidies to help Americans afford health insurance, and aided small businesses, among other provisions. Biden also accelerated the pace of administering COVID-19 vaccinations so the country could return to normalcy. While many of the plan's provisions were short-term solutions to address the pandemic, Biden also hoped to achieve longer-term solutions that liberals or progressives identified as necessary to reduce income and wealth disparities. These proposals include a \$15 federal minimum hourly wage; an increase in taxes for the wealthy to support free prekindergarten for 3- and 4-year-olds, 2 years of free community college education, and paid medical and family leave; an extension of tax credits included in the plan; and programs to help Blacks close the homeownership gap.

Philosophical and Ideological Underpinnings of U.S. Social Welfare Policy

The notion of citizenship carries specific rights and obligations. Individualism, personal liberty, and the rights of persons to pursue activities freely and without excessive governmental intrusion are hallmarks of U.S. political philosophy that inform policymaking. Political and social conservatives support market-oriented, limited government and private activities to promote social well-being and social welfare for those who are poor. Accordingly, conservatives support social welfare policies through tax spending initiatives that focus on the private social support systems such as homeownership, small business assistance, and other programs that tend to distribute wealth upwards. Liberals also support many such initiatives. Recognizing that social conditions often limit people's ability to access opportunities that can increase self-sufficiency, liberals also promote public social programs that offer direct support to those who are economically disadvantaged, including the country's working poor. These programs include Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly the Food Stamp Program), and others that provide either direct cash or in-kind assistance and distribute wealth downward (Faricy, 2015). Both liberals and conservatives support the largest cash assistance program for lower-income workers: The Earned Income Tax Credit, which conservatives endorse because it is based on recipients' employment and liberals endorse because it provides significant cash payments to lower-income earners.

The conservative Tea Party, established in the early 21st century, proclaimed government itself to be regressive and nonresponsive to human needs. The radical left and progressive critics generally reject both conservative and liberal social policy perspectives because they believe that social inequality and social problems can be resolved most effectively by active social planning. They want to see government redistribution of wealth to those who are economically disadvantaged in order to combat the flow of wealth from the poor to the rich. For example, instead of giving tax breaks to corporations and the wealthiest Americans, government could ease the burden of skyrocketing student debt as the costs of public higher education are increasingly shifted from government to students and their families.

The Republican Party has long held that government should limit business regulation because they believe that giving entrepreneurs freer rein to take risks will create new jobs. Ostensibly, to reduce the federal debt, Republicans encourage cutting back government programs and services, including social welfare programs, but instead of using the savings from these cutbacks to pay down the debt, they use them to reduce taxes on “job creators.” Evidence of this is seen in legislation such as the Tax Cut and Jobs Act of 2017 (Williamson, 2018). Democrats argue that the best way to attack national debt is to create a more progressive tax system that will increase taxes on the wealthiest Americans to help fund critical government social programs, while offering tax incentives and other supports for businesses to sustain the workforce with a living wage (Democratic National Committee, 2021).

Social Welfare Policy History

The Progressive era at the beginning of the 20th century in the United States was marked by rapid industrialization and influxes of immigrants. Many Progressive-era policies focused on employment, such as workers’ compensation laws, which provided income support to injured workers. Conservative businessmen supported these policies because they realized it was better for the state to aid injured workers than to subject business to the uncertainties of injured workers’ negligence lawsuits and unpredictable jury verdicts (Herrick, 2009). Other improvements in labor legislation included minimum wage laws, child labor laws, and protections for women workers. Minimum wage laws favored White men since employers were less likely to offer higher wages to immigrants of color and women (Leonard, 2016).

During this era, Jane Addams and other social work and allied reformers believed that government was obligated to protect poor women and children, who were seen as victims of industrialization. Despite opposition from both business and organized labor, “maternalist” reform achieved some success. Many states enacted mothers’ pensions that provided limited cash support to women and children in dire economic need (Gordon, 1994). Some states also established assistance programs for those who were elderly, blind, or had other disabilities. These programs were administered locally, and standards used to determine eligibility or payment levels were inconsistent, allowing local prejudices and biases about who were “worthy” recipients (Abramovitz, 2018). People of color were not the targets of the meager local and state government-sponsored social welfare support that did exist. Instead, African Americans faced rampant discrimination and the horrors of lynchings, especially in the South. With leadership from prominent African Americans such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Ida B. Wells, organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and National Urban League were founded to fight for African Americans’ civil rights and meet their social welfare needs (Lewis, 2020). Separate government policies and programs for Native Americans were marked by continued cultural degradation and abuse in programs such as boarding schools, first established in the late 1800s (Bear, 2008).

A major transformative social welfare policy termed “the New Deal” was enacted in the 1930s during the presidential administration of liberal Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) in response to the Great Depression. Unprecedented unemployment, poverty, and social unrest led

FDR to note in his famous second inaugural speech in 1937 that he saw “one third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.” Policymakers understood that private charities, voluntary organizations, and local and state governments were unable to provide enough economic assistance to address the needs of millions of unemployed Americans. Nearly one third of private social-service agencies ceased operations between 1919 and 1932 (Trattner, 1998). The federal government assumed previously untapped authority to intervene in the economy, resulting in opposition from conservatives who felt New Deal policy innovations were unwarranted government interference in the lives of Americans. They branded it “socialism” to ward off support.

The Social Security Act of 1935, the most sweeping New Deal social welfare legislation (crafted in part by two social workers in FDR’s administration, Harry Hopkins and Frances Perkins), created new social insurance and public assistance programs. Social insurance included the Social Security pension (retirement) program, financed by payroll taxes on employees and employers. From the liberal perspective, Social Security was a way to transfer income to those in need, while conservatives viewed it as a cost savings measure. Unemployment insurance, a joint federal–state program, was also included. Residual “means-tested,” cash public assistance programs (often called “welfare”) were also a part of the Social Security Act. Similar to early Progressive-era programs, public assistance included Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) to help children in poor families, Old Age Assistance (OAA) for those aged 65 and older, and Aid to the Blind (AB). These programs were jointly financed by federal and state governments and administered locally. Benefits remained limited to the neediest, and discrimination persisted. Women of color, for example, were routinely denied ADC benefits on the grounds that their homes were not suitable, they were employable, or a man was living in the home, making them undeserving of aid (Nadasen, 2016). Progressive and radical critics, including some social workers, felt that the New Deal’s liberal reforms did not go far enough in addressing social inequality and the needs of working Americans; they argued for national planning and an institutional welfare state to distribute national wealth and end poverty (Reynolds, 1951; Selmi, 2005).

American social welfare programs grew incrementally, subject to political pressures and changing priorities (Jansson, 2020). In 1950, another joint federal–state public assistance program, Aid to the Permanently and Totally Disabled (APTD), was added to the Social Security Act. In 1962, ADC became Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to recognize the family unit. The Social Security retirement program expanded in many ways. Agricultural workers, many of whom were people of color living in the South, and others not originally covered such as domestic workers were added. Dependents and survivors were made eligible for benefits. As of 1956, workers who became disabled were also eligible. However, gender and racial equity continue to be concerns. Although Social Security provides a measure of economic security in retirement for those who worked for many years, those whose employment has been limited or who earned less, primarily women who have assumed home and family responsibilities, receive smaller pensions. Whether African Americans, with higher disability rates and shorter lifespans than whites, benefit equally from the program has been debated (DiNitto & Johnson, 2016). The social insurance programs do enjoy broad political and public support, and the Social Security retirement program has kept many retirees from falling into poverty.

Well-designed social policies can boost homeownership, education, and civic and political participation among less advantaged individuals as exemplified by policies such as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (Mettler, 2002). Better known as the G.I. Bill, this act continues to assist those who have served in the U.S. military. Such policies can also be undermined through discriminatory practices. For example, Blacks were denied benefits through redlining, in which banks refused to provide home loans in certain areas or denied loans to members of certain groups, exacerbating racial disparities in wealth and assets (Blakemore, 2021). President Harry S. Truman's Executive Order 9981 calling for "equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services" came in 1948. It faced opposition, and although military desegregation did follow, neither the word "desegregation" nor "integration" appear in the order (MacGregor, 2001). Furthermore, with regard to housing, the federal government did not pass the Fair Housing Act until 1968.

Social welfare policies and programs were expanded during the War on Poverty and Great Society programs of the 1960s under the administration of liberal President Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ). Major achievements in 1965 were enactment of Medicare, the federal government's health insurance program for retired workers and their spouses, and Medicaid, which provides health insurance to many in poverty. The Food Stamp Program, now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), was enacted in 1964, and the Older Americans Act of 1965 continues to support many services for older adults, including meals provided at senior centers and home-delivered "meals on wheels." The Head Start preschool program, aid for elementary and secondary school education, community health centers, major housing legislation, and many other social programs providing benefits and services were also adopted during President Johnson's term in office.

Although considered a conservative, Richard M. Nixon, a Republican, who followed LBJ as president, proposed standardizing the nation's major public assistance across states and communities and guaranteeing an annual income to those in poverty. The plan was debated, with the left asserting it provided too few benefits and the right viewing it as a deterrent to work (DiNitto & Johnson, 2016). AFDC was not reformed, but OAA, AB, and APTD became the new Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program that guaranteed those who qualified a minimum federally financed payment, which the states could supplement (Diamond, 1973; Moynihan, 1973).

Public assistance programs remained controversial, with growing ADC/AFDC and SSI program rolls at the heart of the controversy. Between 1960 and 1980, ADC/AFDC enrollment rose from 3.1% to 11.5% of U.S. families with children (U.S. House of Representatives, 1998). This encouraged critics, including President Reagan, to argue that "cheats" and "welfare queens" were abusing public assistance programs. The Work Incentive Now program, which required AFDC recipients to work to obtain aid, began a long retreat from support for families living in poverty. AFDC provided only a modicum of support, but conservative pundits and writers went on the offensive against "liberal" welfare policies.

The Reagan era brought antiwelfare sentiments to a new pitch. President Reagan was influenced by conservatives such as economist George Gilder (1981), who called public assistance programs “devastating” for the poor. The Reagan administration espoused the ideas of supply side economics with federal spending and tax cuts and business deregulation to improve the economy rather than Keynesian economics, which focused on stimulating consumers’ demand for goods and services. Reagan established a “new federalism” of “devolution,” that is, limiting federal involvement and spending and using block grants to return more responsibility for social welfare programs to the states. President George H. W. Bush, also a Republican, promised a “kinder and gentler America,” focusing on state responsibility and privatization of social services to improve efficiency. He also promised “no new taxes,” but escalating budget deficits caused him to retreat and raise taxes (Elving, 2018). A significant accomplishment during his administration was passage of the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which expanded civil rights protections for people with disabilities in employment, public accommodations, and other sectors.

President Bill Clinton, a Democrat, campaigned to “end welfare as we know it” and angered liberals when he agreed with conservative Republican legislators who took control of Congress to pass the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. The act abolished the AFDC program and ended the federal entitlement to public assistance for children in economically needy families that had existed since the New Deal. In its place, the new Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program gave states block grants to establish public assistance programs consistent with changing social priorities. New rules required a “work first” approach, limited cash assistance to 5 years, and largely ignored approaches that would provide training and services that could lead to better jobs and more stable workforce attachment (Oh et al., 2020).

President George W. Bush favored an approach he called “compassionate conservatism,” which emphasized state and charitable programs rather than federal programs. He proposed federal funding for faith-based community services, based on the premise that local service providers could deliver the most humane and cost-effective human services, and he used his executive authority to fund an array of nonprofit faith-based social services (Smith, 2007). Private charitable organizations do play an important role in social welfare, but they lack the capacity to replace public programs (Konczal, 2014).

The Great Recession began in December 2007, and the need for a strong federal response became more than apparent just as President Obama became the first African American president. The recession was due in part to stock market declines followed by the bursting of the housing bubble caused by the subprime lending debacle. Many could no longer afford their mortgage payments, and home foreclosures were rampant. Stock market losses depleted investment accounts causing many to put retirement plans on hold. Recent college graduates’ job prospects were dimmed. High unemployment (reaching a national rate of 10% in 2009) challenged local and state governments and social-service agencies to respond to increased needs for unemployment compensation, job retraining, and services to assist those in economic straits. To stave off a depression, the U.S. Congress passed two major pieces of legislation. President George W. Bush, a conservative Republican, signed the first, the Economic Emergency Stabilization Act of 2008. It

included the \$700 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program, which was primarily a bailout for financial institutions. President Barack Obama signed the second, the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009, which provided funds to aid states and localities and tax cuts for individuals and businesses, increased the Earned Income Tax Credit for low-income workers, extended unemployment insurance, and assisted unemployed workers with paying health insurance premiums. Significant funding went to help bolster Medicaid, SNAP, TANF, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development housing assistance, energy bill assistance, and public schools in low-income areas. Child care also received additional support (Smeeding et al., 2011). These were largely temporary measures to help Americans weather the economic downturn. No Republican representative and only three Republican senators voted for the ARRA. This period was also marked by corrosive political conflict, incivility, and vociferous debates about social welfare policies juxtaposed against “corporate welfare,” that is, aid to big business.

Policymaking is challenging because policymakers must contend with the competing goals of different constituent groups. In the case of social welfare, policymakers attempt to alleviate need, promote work, and decrease public assistance use among the most vulnerable Americans (Grogger & Karoly, 2005). From 1997 to 2011, TANF caseloads dropped 50% (Loprest, 2012), but many single mothers (and others) who left public assistance programs were not on stable financial footing (Radey et al., 2016). Low-wage jobs with few, if any, benefits, such as health insurance, do not offer a decent standard of living. Public, nonprofit, and for-profit agencies often provide training and temporary services to assist those transitioning from “welfare to work”; however, changes in labor markets—the disappearance of manufacturing jobs, changing skill needs, and greater reliance on contract labor—make finding stable, full-time employment difficult. Other systemic barriers include the lack of universal child care and preschool, health insurance, and sick and family leave. If the goal is to reduce the need for public assistance, those living in poverty will need help meeting their basic needs so they can engage in education and training programs that will allow them to acquire the skills needed to obtain good jobs (Andersson et al., 2005; Austin, 2004).

The Obama administration’s signature achievement was fulfilling the promise to increase the number of Americans with adequate health insurance through passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010, often called the ACA, or “Obamacare.” The ACA helped more than 20 million Americans gain access to health insurance, and it made many other reforms to the organization and delivery of healthcare. Americans could no longer be denied health insurance due to preexisting conditions. Young adults could remain on their parents’ insurance plan until age 26. Additionally, a majority of states adopted Medicaid expansion that added more low-income Americans, including adults without disabilities and children who previously did not qualify, to the Medicaid program. Many Americans, especially those without employment-related health insurance, have used the federal and state exchanges established under the ACA to shop for health insurance, and many of them have qualified for subsidies to help pay their insurance premiums (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020).

After defeating Hillary Clinton in the U.S. presidential election in 2016, Donald J. Trump pivoted to conservative government policies in both the social and economic arenas. He promised to abolish the ACA and succeeded in eroding some of the ACA's major provisions, and he was accused of exacerbating racial, religious, gender, and nativist divisions in the country. As of this writing in 2021, the administration of President Joseph R. Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris (the first woman and second person of color [Gershon, 2021] to be elected Vice President) signals a shift back to a more liberal ideology.

Poverty and Inequality

Reducing poverty and inequality has been a major focus of the social work profession since its inception. As the history of U.S. social welfare policy reveals, it generally takes a crisis to impel significant or new policy responses, and sometimes these responses are short-term. Emergency responses are necessary for at least three reasons. One is that the United States lacks universal social welfare programs such as national health insurance and children's allowances or family support programs that can help Americans maintain stability when crises arise. A second is that many Americans' wages are stretched so thin that they lack the financial assets to weather even a short-term economic crisis. Third is persistent racial discrimination and class divides that leave many Americans with insufficient income. Put another way, poverty and economic inequality are enduring social problems that underlie most other social problems.

U.S. poverty rates fluctuate along with the country's economic health. The way poverty is measured is itself a source of controversy (Madrick, 2020), but according to the federal government's official definition, in 1965, 17.3% of Americans were poor compared to 11.1% in 1973, 15% in 2012, and 11.8% in 2018 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Poverty rates also vary substantially by population group with differences persisting over time. In 2019, the U.S. Census Bureau (2021) reported that 7.3% of non-Hispanic Whites, 7.3% of Asians, 18.8% of Blacks, and 15.7% of Hispanics were poor. The poverty rate was 14.4% for those under age 18, 9.4% for those aged 18–64, and 8.9% for those aged 65 and older. The child poverty rate was 8.3% for non-Hispanic Whites, 6.3% for Asians, 25.6% for Blacks, and 20.9% for Hispanics. It is likely that the poverty rate increased again in 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying economic devastation.

Data from sources such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development have long confirmed that U.S. poverty rates exceed those of many other developed nations, with child poverty rates particularly vexing. One way these other countries avoid such high child poverty rates is with more generous work supports and cash assistance for single mothers, and in doing so they produce better health and educational outcomes for children (Smeeding & Thévenot, 2016).

The states play an important role in social welfare policy, but they vary considerably in their demographic composition, rates of need, resources, and responses to human need. For example, in 2019, poverty rates ranged from 3.7% in New Hampshire to 19.2% in Mississippi (U.S. Census

Bureau, 2021). The rate of residents without health insurance was 3% in Massachusetts and 18.4% in Texas (Keisler–Starkey & Bunch, 2020). Without federal support for social welfare programs, state disparities would likely be greater.

Income inequality in the United States has grown considerably since the 1950s. In 1950, families in the lowest–income quintile earned 4.5% of all U.S. personal income compared to 3.9% in 2019, while those in the top quintile earned 42.7% in 1950 and 49.5% in 2019 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Families in the middle quintiles have also lost income shares. During the late 20th century, as conservative, neoliberal, market–oriented perspectives came to dominate approaches to social welfare provision, the focus on the roots of structural inequality waned. As the wealth gap accelerated, some social scientists felt compelled to focus on enduring social and structural issues that impede progress. Nobel laureate economist Joseph Stiglitz noted that the income of the top 1% of Americans amounts to nearly 25% of total national income, and that the top 1% controls 40% of total wealth (Stiglitz, 2012). In addition to income and wealth (asset) inequality, rates of economic and social mobility in the United States are lower than that of many national competitors. Rates of upward economic mobility are substantially lower and rates of downward mobility are higher for U.S. Blacks and American Indians than Whites, though Hispanics are making gains in upward mobility (Chetty et al., 2020).

The U.S. Supreme Court’s 2010 ruling in the “Citizens United” case based on free speech rights opened the door for unlimited amounts of money to be used in political campaigns, thereby allowing wealthy interests to disproportionately influence candidate selection and social policy agendas. Political and government systems capitulate to powerful interests that deploy massive financial resources to influence policymaking, such as efforts to make the tax system favorable to corporate interests. The AFL–CIO (2019a) reported that, following the 2017 corporate tax cut, corporate taxes fell by \$93 billion in 2018, a 31% reduction, and that 60 of the nation’s largest profitable corporations paid no federal income tax in 2018. Effective social policy must also acknowledge the roles that campaign policy and tax policy could play in creating a much more just society.

The Future of U.S. Social Welfare Policy

Shortly before the COVID–19 pandemic struck in 2020, the stock market was bullish and the U.S. unemployment rate was 3.5%, the lowest in 50 years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a). America’s fortunes turned on a dime. In March 2020, Congress quickly approved the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act to provide economic stimulus payments to many Americans and aid for businesses. The act offered at least a modicum of financial relief to stave off economic peril. By April 2020, unemployment had skyrocketed to 14.7% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020b), and the number of those infected by the virus grew exponentially. Many blamed the lack of presidential leadership for the extent of these outcomes. By June 2020, more than 40 million Americans, or more than one in four workers, had applied for unemployment benefits (Tappe, 2020). As of June 18, 2021, the World Health Organization reported nearly 600,000 deaths due to the virus in the United States and more than 3.8 million worldwide.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, several states asked the U.S. Supreme Court to invalidate the ACA. For the third time, the high court rebuffed these Republican challenges, this time by a vote of 7 to 2. The presidential debates that preceded the 2020 election also demonstrated Democratic candidates' divisions on the best way to increase the number of Americans with health insurance. Candidates' plans ranged from Senator Bernie Sanders championing a national, single-payer health insurance plan dubbed "Medicare for All" to former Vice President, now President, Joe Biden's plan to improve the ACA. COVID-19 is a stark reminder of the need for continuous health insurance coverage and public policy that acknowledges that healthcare is a right rather than a privilege as all other developed countries have done.

At the end of 2020, attention was on state leadership's responsibility for stemming infections and administering the approved vaccines. After months of vacillation, Congress passed a second, but smaller COVID-19 relief bill in December 2020. With so many applying for or receiving unemployment compensation and others in economic peril as well, food insecurity was on the rise. Food banks ramped up efforts to meet demand. Evictions and mortgage foreclosures also loomed as the Biden-Harris administration took office on January 20, 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic may match the Great Depression in its economic, social, and psychological impacts on the United States and has sweeping implications for other countries as well.

Vaccination rates increased under the new presidential administration, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued new guidance on social distancing and masking. The hope was that new outbreaks would be abated and that economic recovery would continue. As Americans looked ahead, the time seemed prime to reassess the nation's social welfare policies and programs, but agreement on how to do this was lacking. At a minimum, liberals called for shoring up benefits in TANF, SNAP, and other programs and making work and other requirements more responsive to national, state, and local economic conditions. On the other hand, several Republican-controlled state legislatures wanted to make it more difficult to obtain and retain SNAP benefits in an effort to force people to work given labor shortages.

Progressives hoped to see more comprehensive policies to address long-standing problems of poverty and homelessness as well as mental health and substance use problems. For example, despite the Americans with Disabilities Act, people with disabilities face high unemployment rates even in the best of economic times, and they struggle to secure resources such as personal attendants to help them live in their own homes. Some policies encourage people with disabilities to work, but others threaten them with loss of Medicaid or other benefits for doing so (DiNitto et al., 2016). Attendants are scarce due to low wages.

Other social issues also need attention, including criminal justice and police reform. Civil rights and equal employment policies were attempts to increase opportunities for women, people of color, and other groups. While some have benefited, these policies have not fundamentally altered the ways many organizations and social systems operate (Ray, 2019). Women still struggle for pay equity, and reproductive rights are under constant threat of erosion. Old Jim Crow laws were replaced by policies that fueled the war on drugs and the mass incarceration of Blacks (Alexander, 2011). Voting rights are under attack. The racial wealth gap persists and racial disparities continue to ignite tensions that must be addressed. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic,

George Floyd's death from cardiopulmonary arrest while an officer had his knee on Floyd's neck and similar incidents erupted in days of protest and civil unrest across the United States. Policy alone cannot end the country's racial divides, but policies may help improve officers' responses in police encounters (Wood et al., 2020).

In 2018, the chief executive officers of S&P 500 companies earned on average 287 times more than the median employee (AFL-CIO, 2019b). Given labor market changes, residual social policy responses are insufficient to address increasing structural inequality in the United States (Stiglitz, 2012). The federal minimum wage has been \$7.25 since 2009. As the pandemic lingers, whether a bill to increase it to \$15 an hour can pass remains to be seen, although several states have raised their own minimum wages. Job training programs focused on helping more low-income individuals prepare for jobs in high-demand sectors in their immediate locales are needed along with supports like living allowances, child care, and job coaches that can help them complete training programs and secure stable employment (Oh et al., 2021). Suggestions to improve the economic situation of Blacks also include going beyond traditional approaches (e.g., higher minimum wages) that may help one generation but not necessarily the next; more fundamental changes may accrue from efforts such as reducing Whites' racial bias and fostering social interactions among racial groups (Chetty et al., 2020).

Efforts to privatize Social Security have fallen by the wayside since the Great Recession. The COVID-19 pandemic underscores that changes to Social Security's basic structure are not worth the risk. Congress stalled on making adjustments needed to ensure the program's solvency for the long run as the ratio of workers to retirees has shrunk and people are living longer. Congress may want to review how the 1983 amendments to the Social Security Act, an excellent example of bipartisan policymaking, kept the program solvent (Cohen, 1983).

Throughout the world, social workers support policies that alter social structures to reduce social, racial, and gender inequalities by giving people more power and control over government decision-making. In the United States, the election of more women and people of color to local, state, and federal office is encouraging. Increasing voter participation is essential.

Social Workers and Social Policy

Continuing the social action tradition of social work pioneers such as Jane Addams, Bertha Reynolds, and Whitney Young, social workers use their knowledge, skills, and values to advocate for those who are underrepresented in policymaking (Marsh, 2005; Schneider, 2000). Equally important is empowering others, especially those whose voices are often not heard, to do the same. The NASW's (2021) code of ethics calls on social workers to "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" (section 6.04). To prepare social workers to do this, the Council on Social Work Education (2015), the accrediting body for social work education programs in the United States, requires that social work education programs teach undergraduate and master's students about policy and how to engage in policy practice.

Social workers have critical knowledge of the human condition and engage in all aspects of the policymaking process. They advise policymakers informally and more formally by lobbying and providing legislative testimony. They also engage in advocacy through activities such as community organization and participation in public demonstrations. They administer and work on the front lines of agencies that implement public policy, serve as staff members to elected officials, and seek elected office. Social workers have held local, state, and federal elective offices, including as members of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate. They also participate in party politics and campaign for candidates of their choosing. NASW (2018) publishes the policy statements adopted by its delegate assembly, and at the federal level and through its state chapters it engages in lobbying to influence social policy development. NASW state chapters provide many opportunities for social workers to become involved in policymaking. Political Action for Candidate Election, NASW's political action committee, endorses candidates who support NASW's policy agenda. In 2010, social workers in Congress established the Congressional Social Work Caucus, which works to create a strong safety net of services and programs to achieve social, economic, and environmental justice for all Americans. The caucus collaborates with NASW and with the Congressional Research Institute for Social Work and Policy, established in 2012, to increase social workers' participation in federal policy processes.

The founding of the Special Commission to Advance Macro Practice in Social Work in 2013 (Association for Community Organization and Social Action, 2021) and the National Social Work Voter Mobilization Campaign (n.d.) established in 2017 are two examples of how social workers can be prepared to engage more effectively in influencing social policy. This includes promoting a robust macro social work education curriculum that focuses on community, organizational, and policy practice, as well as embedding voting and civic engagement in the classroom and field education. It also includes moving the Grand Challenges from policy papers to collective action (American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, 2021).

Social workers have long played a vital role in helping the United States address economic crises, political turmoil, and the need for civil rights reform by providing services and participating in policymaking processes. Today, those roles include helping the nation and the world address the public health and economic crises and racial and gender disparities posed and exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Links to Digital Materials

American Public Human Services Association [_<https://aphsa.org/>](https://aphsa.org/)

Association for Policy Analysis and Management [_<https://www.appam.org/>](https://www.appam.org/)

Brookings [_<https://www.brookings.edu/>](https://www.brookings.edu/)

Center for Budget and Policy Priorities [_<http://www.cbpp.org/>](http://www.cbpp.org/)

CLASP [_<http://www.clasp.org/>](http://www.clasp.org/)

Common Cause [_<http://www.commoncause.org/>](http://www.commoncause.org/)

League of Women Voters of the US <http://www.lwv.org/>

Malcolm Wiener Center for Social Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/wiener>

National Association of Social Workers <http://www.socialworkers.org>

Poverty Solutions, University of Michigan <https://poverty.umich.edu>

Progressive Policy Institute <http://www.ppionline.org/>

Social Security Administration <http://www.ssa.gov/>

The American Prospect <https://prospect.org/about>

Urban Institute <http://www.urban.org/>

USA.gov <https://www.usa.gov/statistics>

U.S. Census Bureau <http://www.census.gov/>

U.S. Government Accountability Office <https://www.gao.gov>

U.S. House of Representatives <http://www.house.gov/>

U.S. Senate <http://www.senate.gov/>

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Social Policy: History (1900–1950)

Social Policy: History (1950–1980)

Social Policy: History (1980 to Present)

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