THIRD EDITION

SOCIAL POLICY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF A DIVERSE SOCIETY

MICHAEL REISCH
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MICHAEL REISCH, PH.D., M.S.W., IS THE DANIEL THURSZ DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK.
Rapid and unpredictable changes on a global scale and increasingly hyper-partisan politics in the United States have created a tumultuous environment in which cultural, political, and civil conflict have become the “new normal.” Media coverage of such issues as poverty and inequality, employment and health care, housing and homelessness, public education, climate change, terrorism, and police-community relations emphasizes the divisions that exist—both in the U.S. and around the world—along racial, ethnic, class, gender, religious, geographical and generational lines. Today, Americans cannot seem to find common ground even on issues where consensus once long reigned, such as the preservation of the Social Security system. In this environment, it is not surprising that controversial issues—abortion, Affirmative Action, same sex marriage, police violence, and the rights of transgender persons—cannot be resolved. Social and political movements at all points of the ideological spectrum—from the Tea Party to Occupy Wall Street to Black Lives Matter and, most recently, #MeToo and #NeverAgain—focus on our differences rather than our common needs and aspirations. Nowhere has this been clearer than in the rhetoric of the 2016 Presidential campaign and the ensuing turmoil generated by the policies and politics of the Trump administration.

Yet these divisions are hardly new. Throughout its history, the United States has been a contentious multiracial, multicultural, and multi-religious nation, often riven by intense class, racial, and ideological divisions. This diversity has frequently been a source of strength, vibrancy, energy, and creativity, and it continues to be. Yet, the nation’s heterogeneity has also both facilitated and impeded its progress toward social justice and produced barriers to the development of a social welfare system that addresses the evolving needs of individuals, families, and communities effectively and efficiently.

Despite recurrent nostalgia for a mythic past when these conflicts did not exist, there is no turning back. The United States, already the most diverse nation on Earth, if not in human history, will become even more diverse in the decades ahead. By the 2040s, a mere quarter century away, there will be no “majority” racial or ethnic population in the U.S. This demographic dynamic has already transformed social and political relations in states such as California and in virtually every major North American city. Today, it is the not-so-underlying cause of both “racial panic” and unprecedented cultural and social change.

These demographic and cultural transformations are not occurring in isolation. At the same time, longstanding gender roles, particularly those involving sexual relationships, are being challenged, and societal attitudes toward sexual orientation and the rights of transgender persons have evolved rapidly during the past decade alone. New family constellations with new and different needs now exist in virtually all regions of the nation. New social movements...
have inspired new social policy developments on such issues as same sex marriage, parental leave, and universal pre-k programs. Emerging social movements are demanding changes in areas such as gun control, environmental and immigration policy, racial inequities in the criminal justice system, and gender norms in schools and the workplace.

At the same time, the proportion of the U.S. population dependent on some form of social supports is steadily increasing. The “baby-boomers” have already begun to retire. This demographic wave will increase the fiscal pressures on already strapped programs such as Social Security and Medicare and stimulate new attitudes toward the retirement needs of older Americans, even as the problems facing children, youth, and working age families continue to grow. A major challenge for the U.S. in the years ahead is how to avoid inter-generational conflict in responding to these diverse needs with finite fiscal resources.

Finally, the forces unleashed by economic globalization and rapid technological change will grow even more powerful in the future. They have already produced unprecedented socio-economic inequality and revealed the inadequacies of our nation’s institutions and physical and social infrastructures. Much of the anger Americans have expressed in the present political climate reflects their widespread and growing insecurity about what the future holds for themselves and their children and increasing cynicism about the ability of our existing structures to develop effective responses to the problems they face.

In isolation, each of these changes would have significant consequences for social policies and for social work practice. Their combined effects—unpredictable though they may be—will surely be even more dramatic. The overall goal of this book, therefore, is to enable students and practitioners to confront these emerging realities by enhancing their understanding of the context, substance, underlying assumptions, and goals of contemporary U.S. social policy. It was written based on the belief that the best preparation for an uncertain future is to face reality squarely, honestly, critically, and knowledgeably.

PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

Throughout my career I have been fortunate to teach and conduct research about social policy and to engage in policy advocacy. In recent years I noticed that I was increasingly dissatisfied with the texts that were available, particularly for introductory policy courses. Most of them lacked a clear theoretical framework and covered excluded and marginalized populations superficially. Few texts present content in a manner that stimulates critical thinking, self-reflection, and analysis. Students’ backgrounds and changes in k-12 and undergraduate education have also created obstacles to learning and teaching. Many social work students today have taken few courses in history, politics, and economics. Most of them have been taught to think descriptively, rather than analytically and conceptually. They often enter social work programs with the belief that studying social policy is not relevant to their interests in becoming effective practitioners with individuals and families. As a consequence of digital technology and the spread of social media, they frequently resist reading text-based materials, no matter how much professors pare down reading requirements.

While no book can respond satisfactorily to all of these concerns, this book represents an attempt to provide today’s students and tomorrow’s practitioners with a comprehensive, in-depth overview of U.S. social policy and the policymaking process. It includes the critical contextual components of social policy (history, ideology, political economy, and culture), the major substantive areas of policy (e.g., Social Security, health and mental health care, welfare), and content designed to strengthen students’ skills in
policy analysis, critical thinking, and advocacy. The authors are scholars and activists in the field who possess up-to-date knowledge, broad experience, and commitment to the social justice goals of social policy.

The book intentionally has a “hybrid” design that attempts to combine the best features of a standard text and an anthology. It has a strong theoretical foundation and consistent themes which are applied by expert scholars in their particular areas of research and practice. It also includes case examples to illustrate the impact of social policies, particularly on excluded and marginalized populations; analyses of the relationship between social justice and social policy, and of the roles that ideology and politics play in shaping social policies; and exercises to encourage the development of critical thinking and reflection. Each of the book’s three parts begins with a brief introduction highlighting the key themes in the chapters that follow and how they fit within the book’s overall framework.

Several themes run through the entire book. They include:

- The relationship of social policy to economic, social, and cultural transformation
- The impact of economic and social changes on conceptions of need and helping, which are ultimately reflected in social policy development
- The role of social policies and social services in promoting or preventing social and political change
- The ways in which cultural, racial, ethnic, gender, and religious identity affect the development and implementation of social policies
- The impact of the ongoing conflict between universal and population-specific conceptions of social welfare

While many of these themes have been expressed for years in scholarly discourse and public debates, they are of increasing importance today as the U.S. struggles to address the implications of global and domestic developments for our social welfare system. Given the enormity of demographic, cultural, and social changes underway, it is particularly important to hear the “voices” of populations that have largely been ignored throughout our history: racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities, and women.

**CHANGES IN THE THIRD EDITION**

Since the publication of the second edition of *Social Policy and Social Justice*, there have been dramatic changes in U.S. social policy and the environment that shapes it. These include the full implementation of the Affordable Care Act, efforts by the Trump administration and Congressional Republicans to repeal or undermine its provisions, and the legal and political controversies that continue to surround it; the impact of the Black Lives Matter Movement on race relations and the nation’s perception of its criminal justice system; major Supreme Court decisions regarding such critical issues as voting rights, reproductive rights, marriage equality, gun control, the drawing of legislative district lines, and the limits of executive authority; persistent gridlock and hyper-partisanship in Congress and state legislatures; ongoing conflicts over immigration, environmental, and economic policy; and the unpredictable ultimate consequences of the Trump presidency.

The third, revised edition of the book integrates an analysis of these changes into each chapter with both up-to-date information and insightful interpretations of their implications by experts in the field. Its highlights include:
• An analysis of the ongoing effects of the Great Recession, globalization, trade and tax policies, and increasing socio-economic inequality on the nation’s political climate and the well-being of individuals, families, and communities.
• The emergence of environmental justice and climate change as key social policy issues.
• An assessment of the Trump administration’s impact on social policy—to date—and the implications of the Trump presidency for the future of social welfare and social work in the United States.
• Discussions of how political stalemate has affected the budgeting process in Congress, and how political polarization has shaped policy advocacy at the state and federal levels.
• The implications of the Black Lives Matter Movement for the development of race-conscious social policies in such fields as criminal and juvenile justice, education, and social services, and for women’s leadership roles in the policy advocacy arena.
• The effects of political conflicts over marriage equality, reproductive rights, contraceptive services, transgender rights, and gender relationships in schools and the workplace on social policies that affect women.
• The consequences of recent Supreme Court decisions on health policies affecting women and low-income persons, the limits of executive authority, voting rights, state vs. federal power, and environmental regulation.
• The changing nature of work and workforce participation in the United States and its implications for trade, employment, and workplace policies.
• The relationship of increased chronic and deep poverty to people’s health and life expectancy, and the persistent problem of homelessness.
• The impact of the Affordable Care Act on health care access, cost, and quality, and the consequences of recent efforts to repeal or reduce its scope.
• The future of Social Security and Medicare in the context of Congressional failure to respond to their looming financial crises.
• An examination of the effects of welfare reform over two decades after its implementation.
• The challenges involved in developing effective social services for racial and ethnic minorities and immigrants and socially just immigration policies in the context of rapid demographic, political, and cultural changes.

The original development of this book and the revisions to this revised third edition would not have been possible without the contributions of colleagues whose chapters combine in-depth substantive knowledge and astute insights. I thank them for their wisdom, hard work, and timely responses to my persistent requests. I would also like to thank the reviewers of the first two editions, whose suggestions helped guide the production of this updated version and improved the book’s content, clarity, and focus. Any errors in the manuscript are entirely my responsibility.

In addition, I would like to thank my research assistants at the University of Maryland, Pamela Parnell Dysart, MSW, and Katie Januario, MSW, who assisted with the first edition, for their help, patience, and good humor. Finally, I would like to thank the staff at Cognella for their assistance with all aspects of the book’s production. Above all, I would like to thank Kassie Graves, Cognella’s Editorial Vice President, for her encouragement, wisdom, and ongoing support.
The chapters in Part I provide a conceptual foundation for the rest of the book and a broad overview of its cross-cutting themes.

Chapter 1 begins by posing the provocative question: Why care for strangers? It then discusses the meaning of social welfare and social policy, and why social policies are needed in complex, modern societies. Next, it outlines the stages of social policy development and addresses how the social problems addressed by social policies are socially constructed. It presents several contemporary perspectives on social welfare, the major approaches to social policy, and the relationship between social policy and social justice. It analyzes the role of the state (government) in social policy formation and implementation and how social class and race influence the focus and goals of social policies. The chapter then presents models of policy development and key policy concepts and briefly discusses the roles of economics and politics on social policy. It presents a concise framework for the analysis of contemporary social policies and defines several key evaluative concepts; in subsequent chapters these tools are applied to specific policy areas, particularly in Part III. The chapter’s themes are reinforced throughout the book, particularly in the brief chapter introductions and the longer introductions to each of the three sections.

Chapter 2 presents a broad historical overview of U.S. social policy, from colonial times to the present, including the policy initiatives and policy challenges that emerged during the Obama Administration and those proposed or implemented by his successor, Donald Trump. The chapter’s content emphasizes the economic, social, demographic, political, and cultural forces that shaped and continue to shape the evolution of the U.S. social welfare system and the relationship of these forces to struggles for social justice. More than in any other nation, the development of social welfare and social work in the United States reflects an ongoing synthesis of ideas derived from many different sources. These diverse sources have created a pluralistic social welfare system that is unusually complicated and often full of contradictions.
The chapter includes content on the influence of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities; ideas derived from other nations and cultures; the role of women; and the impact of radicals and reformers on the development of social policy. It emphasizes the dynamic relationship that exists between majority and minority populations, institutions, and communities in the development of U.S. social policies and the relationship of social policy formation to changes in the nation's political-economy, demographics, and cultural environment. Understanding the impact and implications of this complex history is particularly important today in order for students, practitioners, scholars, policymakers, and the general public to respond effectively to the dramatic changes already underway in the 21st century United States. Because understanding history is critical to comprehending the complexity of current issues and contemporary policy debates, content on the history of social welfare and social policy is also included in Chapters 4 and 5 in Part I, in Chapter 10 in Part II, and in the chapters in Part III that cover the evolution of Social Security, employment, welfare, health and mental health policies, and social services.

Chapter 3 by Joel Blau begins with a presentation of the key features of the contemporary U.S. political-economy. It then dissects several conservative myths about the relationship between the economy and social welfare and discusses the relationship between the U.S. economy and social policy development and the current status of this relationship. Blau explores the interaction of social policy and the political economy of the contemporary United States—a complex interaction that involves both costs and benefits. These costs include taxes and the maintenance of an unemployed, and partly unemployable, segment of the population. The benefits include political quiescence, increased aggregate demand, and during economic downturns, the positive effects of countercyclical programs such as unemployment insurance. Because the long-standing requirement that social welfare benefits must provide less income to recipients than the lowest paying job (the concept of “less eligibility”) circumscribes all these functions, the chapter places a special emphasis on how the multiple permutations of these functions sometimes conflict and sometimes mesh together. It also discusses the impact of globalization on the political–economic environment of the United States and provides the latest data on the role of social welfare in the U.S. political economy. The chapter concludes by assessing the connection between social policy and social justice—both today and in the future.

Chapter 4 by Jerome H. Schiele examines how throughout U.S. history the nation’s social policies have intentionally and unintentionally regulated the lives of people of color and immigrants and identifies some strategies to render these policies more just in their treatment of these populations. The chapter applies a racism-centered perspective of social policy analysis—based on critical race theory and related conceptual frameworks—that are particularly well-suited to the current climate in which the “Black Lives Matter” and “Dreamers” movements have focused increased attention on the various manifestations of racial inequality in the U.S. A racism-centered perspective underscores the role that white racial hegemony has played historically in social policy development and implementation in the U.S. It uses racism as an “organizing theme” to explain how social policy development and implementation have disadvantaged people of color by advancing the shared but varied political, economic, and cultural interests of non-Hispanic white Americans, and highlights the racial control function of U.S. social policies that persists into the 21st century.

Chapter 4 also discusses how this racial control function has changed over time from more overt expressions that included explicit legal and other political restrictions to more contemporary forms of what many commentators refer to as color-blind racism. Specific examples from various groups of color are employed to illuminate this racial control function and demonstrate the shared and divergent consequences for people of color. Finally, the chapter offers some recommendations on how to alleviate and
eliminate racism's effects on social policy development and implementation by highlighting several roles that social policy practitioners can assume as community organizers, policy formulators, analysts, and cultural mediators. Additional recommendations focus on the need to transform the political-economy of U.S. society by examining the limitations of its core values for bringing about greater inclusion and meaningful participation for all people.

Using conceptual frameworks derived from critical and postmodern theory, including neo-feminism, Chapter 5 by Susan J. Roll focuses on the impact of social policy on women in the United States and traces the relationship between women and social policy over the course of U.S. history. The chapter analyzes how U.S. social policies reproduce the social construction of women's roles, women's problems, and women's status in the nation's families, political economy, and society. While it acknowledges how social policies have perpetuated gender-based inequalities and oppression, the chapter also discusses how, through their individual and collective agency, women have influenced the development and implementation of policy—for example, in the ways they negotiated systems of charity and welfare and in the development of a “maternalist” model of social policy.

This chapter begins by presenting a framework for understanding the overall context of policy development and how it affects women. This is followed by a brief overview of the historical evolution of the major social policies that have shaped the experiences of American women. Through the use of several vivid examples, the third section discusses the role of women in affecting social policy, through both formal and informal means, down to the present leadership of women in the #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and #NeverAgain movements. The final section outlines several significant policy issues affecting women today. These help illustrate the processes by which social workers, as advocates, can influence the development and implementation of contemporary and future social policies in such major areas as employment, family policy, domestic violence, and welfare. The discussion of these policy areas complements and provides a context for more detailed discussions of these issues in subsequent chapters.
INTRODUCTION: MAKING DIFFICULT POLICY DECISIONS

Why should we care for strangers? Under what circumstances should we care for them and to what extent? These may sound like unusual questions with which to begin a book written for prospective social workers and those in related health and human service fields, the so-called “helping professions.” But, if you think about it, these questions are at the heart of systems of social welfare and the policies, programs, and services they produce. The answers to these questions reflect a society’s values, the prevailing interpretation of its past, present, and future, and the priorities it establishes in the allocation of its finite resources. To illustrate these points, let’s look at the following scenarios:

• Scenario 1: As a result of a “natural disaster,” such as a hurricane, tornado, flood, fire, or earthquake, an entire community is destroyed. Its residents are displaced, their homes are in ruins, and whatever industry and commerce supported the community will take years to recover, if ever. While volunteer organizations, such as the Red Cross and local churches, can provide temporary assistance (food, shelter, health care), their resources and personnel are limited, and they serve, at best, as a short-term “fix” that cannot solve the community’s long term rebuilding problems. Under these circumstances, what role should the local, state, and federal government play in assisting the community and its residents? Who has the responsibility to ameliorate this immediate situation and solve the
community’s long-term problems? When is it appropriate to spend revenues from taxpayers who do not live anywhere near this community to help these people whom taxpayers will probably never meet? How much help should be provided? Should all residents be helped equally or should other factors be taken into consideration? For example, if two homeowners lost their houses in the disaster, and one home was worth ten times the value of the other, should both homeowners receive the same amount of assistance? Or, what if a homeowner knowingly built a home in a flood plain, too close to the ocean threatened by rising sea levels, or on an earthquake fault, should society be obligated to help them rebuild? If so, how many times? What is the rationale for helping (or not helping) them?

- **Scenario 2**: What if a disaster was the consequence of “human error”—such as the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, or institutional neglect—such as lead poisoning the water supply of Flint, Michigan, or a corporate decision to maximize profit—such as the transfer of manufacturing sites and jobs overseas? Such disasters create serious and lasting economic, public health, or environmental problems for affected communities, problems which then produce increased social and psychological distress that further exacerbate the crisis. What role should government play in such crises? Which level of government has the primary responsibility to intervene? In what ways would this intervention be most effective? For how long should this intervention continue? How should it be paid for? Should all affected residents be assisted to the same extent? If not, what criteria should be used to determine how much aid they should receive and for how long?

- **Scenario 3**: What if the “disaster” was at the individual level, such as a veteran returning home who develops post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a victim of domestic violence or sexual assault, a person who is permanently disabled due to a car accident, a child born with a hereditary illness, an individual who has abused opiates or alcohol, or a formerly incarcerated person who is now homeless and is attempting to reintegrate into his community, reestablish his
family, and obtain decent employment? Where does the responsibility lie to help these strangers? What role, if any, does individual responsibility play in determining who should be helped?  

- **Scenario 4**: Finally, what if the “disaster” were the consequence of the accumulation of long-term historical forces, such as institutional racism? To what extent does society have an obligation to address such consequences? Should individuals who recently arrived in the United States contribute equally to the cost of solutions? Should these solutions focus on individuals, families, groups, or communities? Should they be in the form of a “one time” payment (such as reparations) or ongoing structural change?

In each example, ask yourself:

1. To what extent should government or the nongovernmental sector assist the people who are victims of these disasters?
2. What is government (or society) obligated to provide? What is the extent of individuals’ responsibility to help?
3. Should all persons who are similarly affected be treated equally? What factors matter?
4. Who should have the authority to answer these questions?
5. Which perspective on social welfare and social policy does your answer reflect?
6. How do you justify your responses to the four different examples?

Every society grapples with these questions regularly on a massive scale. At best, its answers are consistent; they reflect long-standing values, established through democratic means, rather than mere personal whimsy or short-term priorities. Ideally, they are institutionalized, through legislation, judicial and administrative regulations, and
day-to-day practice, rather than products of individual bias or caprice. Collectively, the answers to these questions influence the goals and processes of a society’s social welfare system. Unfortunately, throughout its history the United States has not always lived up to these ideals. The failure to do so in the past and today produces patterns of inequality, social exclusion, injustice, and even oppression that require the collective action of concerned individuals, groups, and communities. This book will analyze some of these patterns and the reasons they exist, and suggest ways to disrupt and correct them. This chapter will define some key concepts and terms that will help establish the relationship between social policy and social justice.

**THE MEANING OF SOCIAL WELFARE**

Although every society must address problems such as those presented in the above scenarios, there is no universal definition of social welfare either in terms of its scope or limitations. Each society creates its own definition based on its history, culture, and current context and issues. All societies acknowledge in their own way, however, that the concept of social welfare implies some recognition of human need and human interdependence, what Trattner (1999) termed collective responsibility for collective need. Ironically, although they may have been established to help strangers, systems of social welfare also often create mechanisms of social control that perpetuate an unequal or unjust status quo. They so this through various means of distributing or redistributing material resources, power, opportunities, rights, and status, and through the “social reproduction” of prevailing economic, social, and political relationships and cultural values (Foucault, 1979; Gorz, 2010).

On close examination, therefore, systems of social welfare reveal a great deal about the societies that create them. They reflect a society’s priorities and goals; its view of the reciprocal relationship between individuals and the community; its assumptions about human nature (e.g., whether people are “naturally” altruistic or selfish, hardworking or lazy); its definition of human needs; its interpretations of the past; its ideas about the nature and desirability of change; and its future goals. To implement these ideas, systems of social welfare create assigned roles, such as policymakers and policy analysts, social workers and clients, advocates and constituents. These roles reflect and perpetuate prevailing cultural concepts of need and helping. Through their policies, social welfare systems determine who deserves to be helped and in what manner, whether certain individuals and groups should be treated differently, and if the receipt of assistance constitutes a legal entitlement (a right) or a reason to be marginalized and stigmatized.

The evolution of the U.S. social welfare system during the past several centuries reflects ongoing conflicts over broad values and goals, and the specific policies designed to achieve them. New issues have emerged due to changes in the nation’s political-economy, demographic composition, and cultural norms, and new conceptual frameworks and vocabulary have been developed to address them. In contrast to this pattern of constant change, there have also been persistent ideological and political conflicts that seem to resist permanent resolution. One of these conflicts involves the tension between individual and societal responsibility for people’s problems and how to respond to the wide range of human needs. For nearly a century, a related conflict centers on whether the nation should rely on market forces, the government, or the nonprofit sector to respond to these needs. On a more abstract level, these conflicts reflect different ideas about equality, freedom, and social justice. [See Chapter 2 in this volume for a discussion of the history of U.S. social welfare and social policy.]
WHAT IS A SOCIAL POLICY?

Definitions of the terms policy, social policy, and social welfare overlap and may be initially confusing. Some are quite expansive; others are more narrowly focused. Popple and Leighninger (2008) provide an example of both definitions. While “policies may be laws, public or private regulations, formal procedures, or simply normatively sanctioned patterns of behavior” (p. 34), the term social policy reflects a philosophic position that is often “synonymous with increasing government involvement in social life and the pursuit of greater equality, equity, and social justice” (p. 27). In the broadest sense, policies are part of “a system of laws, programs, benefits and services that strengthen or assure provisions for meeting social needs recognized as basic for the welfare of the population and for the functioning of the social order” (Friedlander & Apte, 1974, p. 4). They constitute the sum of a society’s actions that affect individual and social development. As such, they both reflect and shape social norms of behavior. Social policies can also be construed as statements of social goals or appeals to do something comprehensive about a social problem such as poverty, which then are translated through social programs, often by acts of government, to effect change around specific issues or conditions.

According to Tropman (1984), in its simplest form a policy is “an idea reduced to writing, approved by legitimate authority, which gives direction or guidance” (p. 2). From this perspective, a policy could range from an organization’s handbook of personnel practices, to a piece of legislation, executive order, or judicial decision. In addition, organizations develop policies, procedures, and guidelines that influence how government policies are implemented—for example, through establishing eligibility requirements for the receipt of a benefit.

Jansson (2016) identifies eight policy sectors that comprise the network of U.S. social programs and policies: children and families; health; gerontology; mental health (now increasingly labeled behavioral health); education and job development; corrections; the safety net; and the global sector (p. 2). Social welfare policies constitute a smaller subset of social policies that regulate benefits to persons defined by society as “needy.” These policies include cash assistance, health care, and housing subsidies, and assistance in such areas as education, transportation, child welfare, and environmental justice. Ideally, their goals are to optimize individual and family well-being and to redistribute societal resources more equitably. In the real world, however, they also serve the functions of social control and social reproduction—that is, they use societal institutions to replicate and perpetuate dominant cultural values and norms (Gorz, 2010; Jimenez, et al, 2015).

As Richard K. Caputo discusses in Chapter 6 of this volume, social policy can also be conceptualized in four other ways: as (a) an expression of a philosophical concept or value position about a society’s purposes; (b) as a product, such as a law, regulation, or program guideline; (c) as a process of identifying issues, providing alternative explanations for problem causation, and various methods to solve problems; and (d) as a framework for political or social action around broader goals.

WHY DO WE NEED SOCIAL POLICIES?

What if we tried to resolve the questions raised by the four scenarios at the beginning of this chapter? What might be the results? What is the likelihood that different decisions would be made in each situation? When you consider these questions, it is clear that one reason for creating social policies is to enhance the
consistency with which we respond to these circumstances. In an increasingly diverse nation of nearly 320 million people, without the guidelines and standards social policies provide our decisions would be random and probably ineffective, at best, highly discriminatory and unjust at worst.

Addressing the need for consistency is necessary, but insufficient in developing a clearer understanding of the purpose of social policies. Interpreting their overall purpose requires us to recognize that our environment is constantly changing and that these changes produce unprecedented problems and often exacerbate and complicate problems that have existed for some time. In other words, rapid and inevitable change produces costs—both material and social. The overarching question guiding social policy, therefore, is: Who should bear the costs of these changes (Kapp, 1972)? This is obviously a broad question, but it helps provide a foundation to understand the wider context of social policy development and implementation. Looking at social policies through a broader lens, particularly in an environment in which different policy areas are viewed in isolation from each other (the so-called “silo effect”), helps us recognize how social policies in one area, such as housing, affect and are affected by policies in other areas, such as employment and education.

Social policy development also involves deciding whether these costs should be absorbed by the private sector (the “market”), the non-profit sector, or the public sector (the “state”). If we decide that the state (government) should bear primary responsibility for covering these costs, what level of government should shoulder the greatest burden? If the private sector is to play a significant role in this regard, should the for-profit sector (e.g., corporations) or the nonprofit sector (e.g., social service agencies) play the major role?

Finally, as the four introductory scenarios illustrate, which costs should be absorbed at all? For example, to what extent should society absorb the costs of unemployment and retraining that result from the consequences of global economic changes, as discussed in Scenario 2? Or, as posed by Scenario 3, to what extent should society absorb the costs of individuals’ personal misfortunes (bad luck) or bad choices? In Scenario 4, how should policymakers factor in long-term historical forces?

Finally, by examining social policies through this broader lens we can understand more clearly:

1. How problem-solving strategies are developed and implemented at the local, state, national, and international levels
2. How the results of policies are measured, using what criteria, and by whom
3. How policies distribute resources, power, opportunities, rights, access, and status
4. How policies and the policy development process reflect conflicting interpretations of a society’s past, different explanation of its current problems, and competing visions of its future.

FROM PRIVATE TROUBLES TO PUBLIC ISSUES: THE STAGES OF POLICY DEVELOPMENT

How do the problems described in the scenarios above become issues worthy of being addressed through social policy intervention? There are several ways this could occur. It could occur as the “natural by-product” of widespread changes that affect large numbers of persons. Examples include mass unemployment during a recession or the impact of environmental pollution or climate change. Another way is through growing awareness of the effects of demographic changes, such as increasing numbers of children, elderly persons, or immigrants in need of assistance; changing family patterns; or greater racial and ethnic diversity. A third factor might be a consequence of unforeseen catastrophes such as natural disasters or epidemics.
fourth could be a result of increasing discontent with the status quo due to changing standards and expectations. Finally, issues emerge—usually gradually—because of the development of new societal priorities in response to the environmental changes described above, the influence of social movements and the conflicts they produce, or external threats.

This transition, from a private problem to a public issue worthy of societal intervention through social policy, occurs through various developmental stages. They can be summarized as follows:

1. **Recognition.** As stated above, a private trouble (or problem), such as domestic violence or substance abuse, is converted into a public issue in numerous ways. It could occur as the consequence of socioeconomic changes such as industrialization, the transition from a goods-producing to a service-oriented economy, or the consequences of economic globalization. Demographic developments, such as changes in family size, gender roles, the aging of the population, or the racial and ethnic composition of the community, can also transform people's problems into issues of broader concern. Other sources of this transformation are unprecedented epidemics, environmental disasters, or external threats such as war and terrorism (Titmuss, 1958). Finally, increased dissatisfaction with the status quo resulting from new cultural norms and expectations, political conflicts, new scientific discoveries, or the introduction of new technologies can change our perceptions of longstanding private problems.

2. **Legitimation.** As a stage of policy development, **legitimation** refers to the process by which an issue becomes worthy of being placed on the public agenda—that is, it becomes an issue that society is obligated to address and attempt to resolve through its existing institutions. A private trouble can become a legitimate issue for a variety of reasons. New or different information could become available, for example, about the causes of mental illness as a result of research; or information that has existed for some time, such as the extent of police violence against African Americans, could be communicated more widely or more effectively through new channels such as social media. Old information could be interpreted in new ways because of the introduction of new cultural norms, new ideological perspectives, a new vocabulary, or the presence of new evaluators of the situation. Attitudes about same sex marriage are a good illustration of this type of transformation. New standards of behavior could emerge as a result of social activism, such as #MeToo, that affect societal expectations and social policies, such as Title IX regulations regarding acceptable conduct in the workplace. Finally, decision makers could acquire new values or prioritize social needs differently as a result of political or social pressure from advocacy groups or social movements. The passage of legislation extending rights to persons with disabilities is an excellent example of the latter process.

3. **Mobilization.** Once a private trouble is legitimized as a public issue, key actors inside and outside the political system must decide to do something about the problem because it will not disappear by itself and the situation is of sufficient urgency to demand prompt attention. Often such situations are characterized as a “crisis” (the HIV/AIDS crisis, for example) in order to justify increased public and political attention to the issue. At this juncture of the policy development process, the role of policy advocates is particularly critical. They must ensure that the public does not lose interest in the issue or become distracted by other matters or tangential concerns.

4. **Formulation.** At this stage, policy makers create an official, legally sanctioned plan to do something about the issue—such as a citywide plan to address homelessness. Various policy options are proposed—usually in the legislative arena—where conflicting interests, from inside and outside the policymaking apparatus, interact. In this stage, agenda setting is critical—it establishes policy goals, determines what alternatives are considered, assesses the cost of the policy, and defines the possible outcomes of the policymaking process.
5. **Implementation.** Once a policy is adopted at whatever level of government, it needs to be put into effect by the executive branch. Administrative departments draft regulations that stipulate the details of policy implementation. For example, if Congress appropriated funds for universal pre-k programs, the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services (and possibly the Department of Labor) would draft regulations regarding such details as eligibility requirements, mandated or optional components of these programs, health standards, and criteria for program staff. Once these regulations go into effect after a period for public commentary, the policies they shape are then translated into specific programs, a process that requires funding (through government budgets) and planning at the state and local levels, often with the assistance of private sector organizations. After these programs are implemented, both the executive branch and external advocacy groups monitor the implementation process to ensure that policies are delivered in a manner consistent with administrative regulations and the legislature’s intent. Lastly, the judicial system is often the final arbiter of whether policies are being implemented in a manner consistent with the law. The number of court cases involving the 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA) is a good example of the latter. [See Chapters 10 and 14 for further discussion of the role of the judiciary in social policy development.]

6. **Evaluation.** Ideally, all policies and programs are periodically evaluated to determine to what extent they achieved their goals and objectives, and, if possible, what components of a policy or program were most critical to its success or failure. (The latter is often the focus of so-called “intervention research.”) During the evaluation process, a set of similar-sounding concepts—effectiveness, efficiency, and effect—are used to measure a policy’s impact. Understanding the differences between these similar-sounding terms is important to grasp the entirety of a policy or program’s consequences.

**Effectiveness** refers to the extent to which a program’s service or a policy’s benefit achieves its original goals or terminal values. That is, did the policy actually address its target issue? Did the policy produce what it was intended to produce—e.g., a reduction in the number of persons who lacked health insurance or an increase in the number of families who obtained affordable, quality child care?

In comparison, assessing the **efficiency** of a policy involves identifying and measuring all short-term and long-term costs and benefits of the service or benefit it provides. This aspect of evaluation poses such questions as: How much did each child care “slot” cost? Which approach to increasing high school completion rates was most cost-effective? A focus on efficiency is often associated with the use of cost-benefit analyses and a utilitarian approach to social policy—that is, an approach that evaluates a policy in terms of its consequences (such as the maximization of the well-being of the most possible persons) rather than its underlying values (such as the right of all persons to a particular standard of living). Difficulties with this approach include distinguishing between short-term and long-term costs and benefits, weighing different types of costs and benefits (e.g., those that can be quantified and those of a more qualitative nature), and factoring in unforeseen or indirect consequences including the impact of policies on third parties—people who are not directly affected by the policy such as residents of neighborhoods in which halfway houses for homeless persons are developed.

Finally, measuring the **effect** of a social policy requires analyzing the extent to which a service or benefit achieved the goals associated with instrumental values—that is, its overall impact on society and not merely its consequences for the target population. There are numerous examples of policies whose effect and effectiveness varied considerably. China’s one-child policy is a pointed example. Although it was highly effective in slowing the nation’s population growth, in terms of its overall societal effect, the policy also produced several undesirable consequences, including a marked increase in voluntary abortion or the
infanticide of female children, a gender imbalance among marriageable adults, a future labor shortage, and a lack of children available to assume filial caretaking responsibilities for elderly relatives.

7. Feedback. The implementation of a policy alters the original conditions in which the issue emerged and may transform the lives of persons it affects. At the same time, the context in which policies are implemented is constantly changing as well. A “feedback loop” is essential, therefore, to assess whether the original policy requires revision or may no longer be needed. This assessment has both objective components (i.e., those that can be determined through scientific observation) and subjective components (i.e., those that are influenced by political or ideological perspectives). A recent example concerned whether some of the core provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that monitored states’ election processes were still necessary. A sharply divided Supreme Court agreed with the states (primarily in the Southern U.S.) who argued that changes during the past half century rendered these legislative provisions unnecessary. In light of the numerous laws these states have subsequently passed, such as voter ID laws that restrict access to the ballot, those who argue that the original provisions of the Voting Rights Act should be retained could claim that the “feedback loop” in this particular instance was flawed.

Finally, to conclude this section, when assessing how a private trouble is transformed into a public issue (Mills, 1959), it is important to ask the following questions: How is the problem being defined at various stages of this process and for whom is it considered a problem? Who has the power to define the condition as a problem? What social, economic, political, cultural, and technological forces created this newfound awareness? What are the underlying assumptions about the nature of the issue? Who are the potential winners and losers if society attempts to address the issue through social policy? In what ways can the issue be defined differently? What are the implications of defining the issue in these different ways? Much like the assessment of a client or community’s problem, how a public issue is framed influences from the outset how policy responses to the issue evolve. It is important, therefore, to recognize the role that the social construction of social problems plays in policy formulation.

**EXERCISE** APPLYING THESE STAGES TO REAL WORLD PROBLEMS

Think about the following questions:

1. How would you apply the distinction between private troubles and public issues to the four scenarios described above?
2. Which of them are solely private matters?
3. Which of them constitute a public issue or falls somewhere in between?
4. How would you make the distinction?
5. What steps would be required to transform each problem into a public issue?

**THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS**

Think about the issues that society considers important today such as those mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Although we would like to believe otherwise, none of these issues are inevitably significant enough to require societal attention. Nor is the current interpretation of any of these issues the only way
they could be explained and understood. Our views and responses to particular situations are shaped by our interpretation of history, and by their presentation in the media. They are also influenced by existing laws, customs, traditions, and values, including culturally-based, often unacknowledged, biases. Concepts such as poverty, mental illness, crime, substance abuse, homelessness, and sexual deviance are not fixed. They are socially constructed for specific, if often unacknowledged purposes. Our current interpretation of these issues evolved as a result of a variety of environmental factors and shifting societal priorities. Conversely, many conditions are no longer viewed as problems to the same extent, or are now interpreted in significantly different ways—for example, homosexuality, divorce, single parenting, sexual harassment, and women’s participation in politics and the workforce.

The social construction of issues is, in effect, a subtle means of exercising control over societal institutions and the persons affected by their policy decisions. This occurs in several ways. It presents (and popularizes) false or misleading narratives about marginalized and socially excluded individuals and groups. It explains social problems in a manner that does not challenge existing structural arrangements or their underlying values. It interprets the goals and outcomes of policies on such issues as welfare, Social Security, same-sex marriage, and domestic violence in a manner that validates dominant cultural goals. As a consequence of social construction, social policies in virtually every society largely reflect the views and interests of the dominant groups.

**EXERCISE**

**THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS**

1. Select one of the following issues:
   - Poverty
   - Unemployment
   - Substance Abuse
   - Homelessness
   - Immigration
   - Crime
   - Mental Illness
   - Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

2. Discuss how the social construction of this issue
   - Reflects dominant cultural concepts of need and “helping”
   - Stigmatizes some needs but not others
   - Maintains social roles and norms regarding race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability status
   - Reinforces existing power dynamics in society
   - Combines social care and social control
   - Creates false narratives about excluded and marginalized groups
   - Interprets problems and their potential solutions in ways that maintain the status quo
   - Is a means of social control
Because of their varied histories, even nations at similar stages of economic development have different perspectives on the purposes of social welfare and the desirable scope of social policy. These perspectives reflect their diverse ideologies and goals, and wide-ranging views on the relationship between government and the market and between individuals and the society as a whole. In short, they answer the question: “who should bear the costs of change?” in significantly distinctive ways.

For example, throughout most of its history, dating back to the colonial era, U.S. social policy embodied a **residual view of social welfare**, based on values derived from conservative ideas about the state, a harsh view of human nature, and a desire to maintain the existing social structure. Its key features included minimal government intervention in the market economy, the preservation of individual freedom, the exaltation of self-reliance, and protection of the sanctity of private property (Jansson, 2016). Modern libertarians share these beliefs about social welfare.

During the 20th century, the social welfare systems of many Western European nations, such as Great Britain, as well as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand evolved to reflect a liberal or **institutional view of social welfare**. Proponents of this perspective argued that the purpose of social policy is to ameliorate social and economic problems such as unemployment—what Titmuss (1958) referred to as the “diswelfares” of the market economy—promote greater equality of opportunity, and gradually expand the concept of citizenship beyond political rights to include social rights (Marshall, 1950). To some extent, U.S. social policies between 1933 and 1980 also reflected this perspective (Katz, 2001).

A third social democratic or **developmental view of social welfare** emerged in the Scandinavian nations during the 20th century and, for a time, in post-World War II Great Britain. Policies in such systems would not only seek to correct the “diswelfares” of the market economy, they would also attempt to eliminate poverty and enhance human well-being. In nations such as Sweden that have created a “social welfare state,” social policies are not merely directed at specific populations in need; they are the basis of “cradle-to-grave” protections that support the normal process of human development at all stages of the life cycle (Chatterjee, 1996; Esping-Andersen, 2002; Fitzpatrick, 2001). The U.S. has adopted only a few policies of this nature: Medicare and Social Security for the elderly and, more recently in a few cities and states, universal pre-k for young children.

During the past four decades, a **neoliberal** perspective on social welfare has emerged concurrently with the advent of economic globalization. Although neoliberals, like conservative and libertarian supporters of residual systems, believe that government should play a smaller role in society and prefer market-oriented solutions to social problems, they recognize that specific social policies can advance the public good in a limited way. For example, they are likely to support increased funding for human capital development—such as education and job training—to make the United States more competitive in the global economy (Abramovitz, 2012; Stoesz, 2015).

**CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO SOCIAL POLICY**

These diverse perspectives on social welfare systems, in general, are often translated into differences in the scope (coverage) of social policies. Nations with institutional and developmental systems of social welfare rely primarily upon **universal social policies**. These provide societal benefits to everyone regardless of
income and other personal circumstances and, in most cases, without specific obligations being imposed on recipients, such as mandatory employment. By contrast, nations whose social welfare systems combine elements of residual and institutional perspectives favor selective social policies. Their benefits are determined by income (through a means test) or through membership in a specific age cohort, group with a common problem, or residency in a particular geographic area (a needs test). In the United States, Social Security, Medicare, and public education are examples of policies that reflect universality, while TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, aka welfare), Medicaid, and SNAP (formerly food stamps) are policies that reflect a selective approach. The differences between these approaches to social policy mirror debates over whether systems of social welfare should provide minimal or optimal assistance, take a reactive (or residual) approach versus a proactive (institutional or developmental) approach, and provide short-term (temporary) or long-term (permanent) benefits. They also determine whether benefits should be conditioned on other behaviors, such as work, and whether they should be provided in institutions or in people's homes.

Finally, a wide range of administrative issues shape how social policies are delivered. Should their implementation be centralized (like Social Security) or decentralized (like TANF)? Should their programs and services be integrated or segmented? Should these programs be delivered by the public or private sector? Should beneficiaries be involved in program design, implementation, and evaluation? Finally, how should social policies and programs be funded and by what level of government?

In the United States today, competing visions of social welfare and social policy produce more divisions than at any other time during the past century. In part, this is because U.S. social policy attempts to address two overarching goals that on the surface appear to contradict each other. On one hand, social policy serves as an instrument to support and sustain existing structures, institutions, and values (the so-called status quo) and to adapt these structures to dynamic internal and external environmental changes. At the same time, however, policies that are adopted (or fail to be adopted) alter that environment through the incentives or disincentives they create and the intended or unintended consequences they produce.

The contradictory roles played by social policy have several important implications. First, as Joel Blau points out in Chapter 3 of this volume, analyses of contemporary social policy must examine the interrelationship of economics, politics, and ideology. Although often obscured by the myth that the United States is a non-ideological society, this relationship exists in the ways our society addresses every issue it confronts. Second, issues of resource distribution and power are omnipresent at all levels of the policymaking and implementation processes, from the federal government to the day-to-day interactions of social workers and their clients. Third, in assessing current social policies and designing strategies to change them, analysts and advocates must recognize the contradiction involved in using the system to change itself and that policy change can be both qualitative (e.g., a shift in societal goals) and quantitative (i.e., an increase or decrease in the number of persons affected by a policy or the size of benefits they receive).

Fourth, the history of social policy, particularly in the United States, demonstrates the ongoing impact of various invidious "isms," such as racism, sexism, and homophobia, which lead to the exclusion, stigmatization, and marginalization of many populations in need. Understanding both the historical and contemporary impact of these isms on policymaking is, therefore, vital. [See Chapters 2, 4, 5, 12, 13, 14, and 15 in this volume for specific examples.]

Fifth, it is equally important to understand how various social problems are interconnected. For example, malnutrition in children due to poverty has been linked to the onset of chronic health and mental health problems and poor educational and employment outcomes; individuals' future employment status and
income are consequences of their education and receipt of welfare benefits; substance abuse is associated with crime and family breakdown; and immigration and migration patterns are major consequences of economic globalization.

Finally, it is important to distinguish policies that designate particular ends and those that stipulate specific methods to achieve those ends. For the broader social welfare field, the fundamental question is not if change is to occur but how and under whose control?

To summarize, a nation's approach to social policy is informed by its views of

- the nature of society itself, whether it is individualistic or cooperative/collectivist at its core;
- the socioeconomic system that determines how goods will be produced, distributed, and consumed;
- the legitimacy and effectiveness of the state (government) and its decision-making processes;
- individual and social morality, particularly as they affect human nature and human needs;
- the degree of mutual responsibility between individuals and society;
- the definition of community and its obligations;
- its value priorities and social goals;
- its history; and
- the nature, desirability, and preferred means and pace of change.

**SOCIAL POLICY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

As the above discussion indicates, values are at the foundation of social policy development. They shape the process of policy development every bit as much as the best evidence derived from research. One of the central value conflicts in the United States is the relationship between social policies and social justice. Since the early 20th century when proponents of social justice in the U.S. became more vocal expressing their concerns, activists and scholars have attempted to use social policies as instruments to achieve a more socially just society. These efforts have often been stymied, however, not only by powerful resistance, but also by the presence of considerable differences in how social justice is defined (Reisch, 2002). These ideological differences about the meaning of social justice inform the various perspectives on social welfare described above. They can be briefly characterized in the following ways:

- **Conservative views** of justice focus on the preservation of individual liberty, property rights, and economic and social order (Stoesz, 2014).
- **Liberal views** of justice emphasize the more equal distribution of societal benefits and burdens and the expansion of civil rights and civil liberties (Reisch, 2014).
- **Social Democratic conceptions** of justice promote the goals of social and economic equality and greater civic participation (Rawls, 1999).
- **Postmodern ideas** about social justice stress the inclusion of marginalized groups in socially just decision-making processes (Leonard, 1997).

During different periods, one or more of these perspectives has been dominant in the U.S. The promotion of social justice through social policies, therefore, has reflected several distinct interpretations of social justice. These include
• Fair play: a more equal distribution of rights and opportunities by removing discriminatory barriers (Ryan, 1981);
• Fair shares: more equal outcomes through redistributive taxation and spending policies (Rawls, 2001);
• A meritocracy: equal distribution of resources based on personal merit or productivity;
• A human needs or capabilities approach: unequal distribution based on unique individual needs or requirements, such as disability (Dover, 2016; Nussbaum, 2011);
• The preservation of privilege: unequal distribution based on status, political position, or religious beliefs;
• Compensation: unequal distribution based on compensatory principles to remedy past injustices, such as Affirmative Action (Kennedy, 2013; Sabbagh, 2011).

Given this complicated array of definitions of social justice, a recurrent issue for policymakers in the U.S. is: How can we apply a concept of social justice based on individual rights to solve problems that are created by group membership (e.g., race, gender, social class)? Today, the diverse values all claiming to reflect a social justice approach to social policy development and implementation include: the equal worth of all human beings; the equal right of people to be able to meet their basic needs; the importance of distributing opportunities and life chances as widely as possible; the reduction or elimination of unjustified inequalities; and the expansion of people's capabilities (Reisch & Garvin, 2016; Reisch, 2014; National Association of Social Workers, 2018; Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2009).

For more than a century in the United States, efforts to achieve these value-driven ends through social policy have taken various forms and produced mixed results. On the positive side, they have created a limited social safety net, expanded economic opportunities by removing a number of discriminatory barriers to employment and education, and enhanced access to health and behavioral health care. Some policies, such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, have modestly redistributed resources to the least advantaged members of society. Attempts to promote better balance between employment, family, education, and leisure and to promote greater security across the life cycle have been less successful. Social policies have only recently begun to address such needs as paid family leave, affordable child care, work/life balance, and support for caregivers of the elderly, infirm, and disabled.

As a result of advocacy efforts, in recent decades the goals of social policy have also been linked to the creation of a more egalitarian, multicultural, and democratic society (Marable, 2009). This type of society would pay greater attention to equitable decision making in determining the allocation of resources, the promotion of self-determination at the individual and community level, and the construction of an economic system centered on human needs and human rights rather than mere economic gain. It would represent an attempt to infuse policymaking with a common sense notion of ethics and values that challenge long-standing structures of oppression, power, and privilege within the dominant social and cultural order (Wilson, 2009).

In examining the substance of social policies and the means by which they are developed and implemented, it is important, therefore, to assess whether a policy is intended to have a redistributive effect as part of its overall strategy to promote social justice. Assessing the redistributive components of a social policy requires answering the following questions:

• Is this redistributive effect intentional?
• What resources does the policy attempt to redistribute?
• What are the intended and potential consequences of this policy for third parties?
• Who benefits from the policy or is harmed by it directly or indirectly? How? To what extent?
• What type of cost is involved in implementing or failing to implement the policy (social, fiscal, other)? How much is the cost? Who pays the cost?
• To what extent does the policy involve a shift in power or an alteration of status, social roles, and cultural norms and values?

In the United States, two major concepts have often constrained the nation’s ability to apply principles of social justice to the social policy arena: our concept of property and our concept of the state (or government). In combination, these two concepts produce an ideological superstructure that explains, defends, promotes, and reproduces existing systems, values, and institutions (Althusser & Balbar, 2009). They determine who should bear the social and economic costs of change, how these costs should be calculated, and who makes these critical decisions.

Our concept of property determines the means by which our society produces, distributes, and consumes resources. This influences the nature of ownership of goods; ideas about what constitutes work and what types of work should be rewarded and at what level; how we should distribute material resources; the kinds of social relationships that are preferred or required; and the focus of our cultural institutions. For example, our ideas about the sanctity of property influence our views about taxation, which in turn determine the revenues we have available to address issues that affect individuals, families, and communities. In addition, our notion that property ownership resides primarily in individuals or in entities like corporations that have the legal status of individuals reinforces our prevailing view that individual responsibility should be a cornerstone of our social policies.

The connection of our concept of property to our ideas about social policy and social justice has been taken for granted for so long that its existence is rarely acknowledged or disputed. The same cannot be said for our concept of the state. Since Independence, this concept has been a topic of ongoing, often violent conflict in our society. This conflict continues today as contemporary political rhetoric frequently demonstrates.

**THE STATE AND SOCIAL POLICY**

Our concept of the state is linked to social policy development in two ways. First, it establishes the degree of responsibility government assumes for social welfare and human well-being through the regulation of the market economy, and the support government provides to the ancillary economic, social, and cultural institutions and relationships that preserve the prevailing distribution of societal goods. Second, it determines how the state will mediate the many conflicting interests and competing needs of individuals and groups in our increasingly diverse and complex society. The concept of the state also influences how power is distributed, the nature of formal authority in government and other major institutions, and our definition of individual and social responsibility.

Throughout history, a variety of different perspectives have been put forward about the role of the state. In the early modern period in the West (roughly the 16th and 17th centuries), European proponents of absolute monarchies or divine right theory (like Thomas Hobbes) proclaimed that God was the sole source of political authority, and that His will could only be interpreted by humans, like kings, who possessed the authority to do so. This view prevails today in nations such as Iran and Saudi Arabia and has adherents among some fundamentalist Christians in the United States.
Advocates of natural law theory from ancient times through the Middle Ages, such as Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas, regarded the state as a “natural phenomenon” whose existence must be presumed and whose authority could not be questioned. In a similar vein, 19th century adherents of force theory, such as the German philosophers Hegel and Nietzsche, regarded the state as the most powerful and total form of human organization, an institution distinctly above the people (Murphy, 2006). In its most extreme form, the application of force theory produced the totalitarian states of the 20th century.

By contrast, proponents of social contract theory, including John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Jefferson, and 20th century philosophers such as John Rawls, posit that the state is the creation of all the individuals and groups within it and that those invested with state authority govern solely by the consent of the governed. These ideas are expressed clearly in the language of the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address. This concept of the state, which remains popular among 21st century liberals, regards it as an instrument that mediates class and racial/ethnic conflicts by applying the principle of “popular sovereignty.” It is the primary principle underlying contemporary pluralist theories of policymaking (Lassman, 2011; Rawls, 1999).

Finally, in Marxist theory, the state is regarded as the “executive committee” of the ruling class. The implication of this theory is that the interests of the state are viewed as identical to those of ruling elites (Miliband, 1969). Ironically, members of both the Occupy and Tea Party movements, who represent different points on the political spectrum, may subscribe to this view even if they do not consciously embrace Marxism.

These different conceptions of the state produce four views of the relationship between the state and social policy and different perspectives on the state’s connection to social welfare as a whole. One conception of this relationship, a contemporary corollary of social contract theory, regards the state as a neutral or benevolent force that balances competing interests, smooths over the inequalities of the socioeconomic system, and provides minimal regulation in a society dominated by the free market. This perspective, common among libertarian philosophers like Nozick (1974) and some politicians, such as Senator Rand Paul (R-KY), reflects a residual view of social welfare in which the state is a vehicle of last resort, after other societal institutions such as the family and the market have failed.

A second conception of the relationship between the state and social policy regards government as a positive, occasionally paternalistic force in society and a critical source of intervention in economic and social development. The state’s role within this perspective, however, is limited to correcting the excesses of modernity such as industrialization. This leads to an institutional view of social welfare that formed the basis of social policy provision in the United States from the 1930s to the 1980s and is still somewhat influential today. (See above discussion about concepts of social welfare.) Its key features include:

- an increased role for government in the promotion of greater equality of opportunity and in responding to new and more complex human needs;
- an often paternalistic focus on needs, not rights, through the adoption of policies that are, for the most part, selective rather than universal;
- an embrace of the concept of the “common good” as something greater than the aggregate good of individuals, coupled with the belief that the promotion of the common good is compatible with the preservation of individual freedom—in brief, the assumption that the state can “do good” without sacrificing anyone’s interests (Gaylin, Glasser, Marcus, & Rothman, 1978);
- efforts by the state to reconcile class conflict and restore community—This was the view of government that shaped the ideas of leaders of the Progressive Movement, such as John Dewey, Louis Brandeis, and
Jane Addams (Elshtain, 2002; Knight, 2005; Puckett, Harkavy, & Benson, 2007). [See Chapter 2 in this volume.]
• a belief that an expanding economy can achieve most desired social goals, including the reduction of poverty and inequality, without fundamentally restructuring the socioeconomic system—This belief was an underlying assumption of the policies developed during the New Deal and the War on Poverty and, to some extent, has shaped the policies of both Democratic and Republican administrations from the late 1970s to the present (Alperovitz, 2011) [See Chapter 2 in this volume.]; and
• a belief that no adversarial relationship exists between the state and recipients of services or benefits, because the state is exercising the collective will of the people in the interest of the common good (Mansbridge, 1980).

A third conception of the state, most popular in Scandinavian nations, sees it as a vehicle for economic and social transformation, the redistribution of resources, and the facilitation of human development at all stages of the life cycle. This conception underlies the policies of welfare states, based on a developmental view of social welfare, as discussed above. It relies on higher rates of taxation to support policies that provide a more extensive sense of social and economic security for its citizens (Russell, 2018).

Finally, since the 1980s there has been a resurgence of anti-statist, neoconservative views in the United States that have attacked many of the premises on which modern social policies are based. According to this perspective, most forms of social welfare provision restrict individual liberty and are destructive of human potential. They are unnecessary in a free market society and are, ultimately, antithetical to its purposes (Friedman, 1962). Neoconservatives and neoliberals also assert that in an increasingly competitive global economic system the United States can no longer afford the “inefficiencies” of the welfare state and that the provision of private social services through the market would be less costly, more effective, and more consistent with American cultural values of self-reliance and individual freedom. Opponents of the Affordable Care Act within both the Tea Party movement and Congress often rely on such arguments (Stoesz, 2014). [See Chapter 14 in this volume.]

In addition, unlike liberal proponents of institutional social welfare systems, and even their neoliberal counterparts, critics of government-funded policies argue that the preservation of freedom and the promotion of social equality are antithetical goals, and that state-sponsored efforts to create a more egalitarian society (e.g., through redistributive tax policies, welfare benefits, Affirmative Action) have deleterious economic, social, and moral effects. They reject the concepts of legal entitlements and human rights at the heart of the welfare state and do not regard disparities of income and wealth as excessive or socially harmful (Nozick, 1974). In fact, they are more concerned about the impact of a coercive state apparatus than about the impact of socioeconomic inequality. The recent budget blueprint approved by the Republican majority in the House of Representatives and President Trump’s proposed FY 2019 budget reflect this orientation clearly (Parrott, et al, 2018).

SOCIAL CLASS AND SOCIAL POLICY

U.S. social policy has also been shaped by two persistent beliefs about the nature of American society. One is that the United States lacks the social class divisions of other industrialized nations, such as those in Europe; the other is that whatever boundaries exist between classes are very fluid. The former belief feeds the myth that the United States is a “middle-class nation.” The latter is reflected in the frequent individually-focused “rags-to riches” stories that saturate the media regularly.
As several chapters in this volume indicate, however, the distribution of resources, power, and life outcomes in U.S. society is very much related to factors of income and wealth. During the past three decades, the United States has become increasingly stratified. It is now more economically unequal than at any other time since the Great Depression (Eidelson, 2018). The myth that most Americans are middle class obscures the existence of class differences and how recent changes in the nation’s economy and policy decisions during the past several decades have affected the distribution of resources, life chances, and even life expectancy in the United States (Kukaswadia, 2017). For most Americans, even students of social policy, the term social class is therefore, ambiguous and often confusing.

To clarify this ambiguity, there are three ways to analyze the nation’s class structure, each of which has different implications for how we can assess the relationship between social class and social policy. Each method of analysis, however, both reveals and masks different aspects of the nation’s class structure.

One way to analyze class structure is by income distribution, which involves dividing all U.S. households into quintiles (fifths of the population). [See Chapter 3 in this volume for further discussion of this issue.] Many reports on income inequality by government agencies and nongovernmental research and advocacy organizations use this measure (Stone, Trisi, Sherman, & Taylor, 2018). The problem with this method is that it raises as many questions as it answers. It is not clear, for example, how income should be defined. Should we count income from wages, from investments, and from government programs in the same way? Should nonmonetary income (e.g., food stamps, health benefits, educational vouchers) be included? Should individuals with the same income but very different types of jobs—for example, social workers and sanitation workers—be considered members of the same social class? A final problem with this approach is that measuring income alone does not reveal the effects of vast, often inter-generational racial differentials in the distribution of wealth, which have intensified since the Great Recession (Badger, Miller, & Quealy, 2018; Kochar & Fry, 2014; Shapiro, Meschede, & Osoro, 2013) or considerable differences in the cost of living in different regions.

A second definition of social class, based on Marxist theory, emphasizes what Marx termed individuals’ relationship to the “means of production”—land, capital, and labor. According to classical Marxism, industrial societies are divided into four primary classes: the haute bourgeoisie, who own the means of production (factories, banks, etc.); the petite bourgeoisie, which consists of small business owners, shopkeepers, and civil servants; the proletariat, people who work for wages (largely in factories); and the lumpen proletariat, beggars, criminals, and social deviants, who are sometimes referred to in contemporary society as the “underclass” (Marx, 1852). In response to dramatic changes during the 20th century in the nation’s occupational structure, neo-Marxists have created an additional category, the “professional managerial class,” which is situated between the two former divisions of the bourgeoisie (Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, 1978). Yet, are all salaried workers in the same class? For example, should a social worker, public school teacher, or nurse who has a graduate degree be considered in the same class as a factory worker with a high school education even if they earn the same wage? Are they members of the same class as high salaried Wall Street executives, professional athletes, or entertainers?

Responding to this criticism, a third method of analyzing class structure has appeared in recent decades based on sectoral divisions in the labor market. According to this perspective, the labor market is divided into three sectors. The primary sector consists of big business and finance, which are largely capital intensive. It is characterized by relatively high wages and, in some manufacturing industries, stronger unions (such as the United Auto Workers). The secondary sector is highly competitive, consisting of small and midsized businesses with few or no unions. This sector is labor intensive. The tertiary sector includes government and nonprofit organizations. It is also labor intensive and, among some government employees,
increasingly unionized, although it requires large external infusions of capital, primarily through taxes and philanthropy. The professional/technical labor market described above cuts across all three sectors and has also been growing in recent years. More creative opportunities exist for these workers in the primary sector than in the secondary sector. These changes underlie the emphasis of some policymakers on job retraining and the importance of higher education. Nevertheless, according to this analytical framework, workers and their families in each sector require different types of support through social policies and programs as discussed in Chapter 12.

RACE AND SOCIAL POLICY

Similar to the relationship between social class and social policy, two conflicting perspectives shape discussions of the role race plays in the construction of U.S. social policy. One perspective asserts that the economic changes of the past half century, combined with the expansion of social welfare programs and the passage of antidiscrimination legislation, have raised the socioeconomic status of African Americans and other persons of color. Proponents of this view assert that these changes have substantially lowered the poverty and unemployment rates among these formerly marginalized groups, created a viable middle class among persons of color, and eliminated the need for compensatory programs such as Affirmative Action or civil rights policies such as the 1965 Voting Rights Act because the United States is now a “post-racial” society (Coates, 2017). In its most extreme form, individuals who adopt this position oppose government-funded social programs on the grounds that they help only “others” (the so-called “47%” in the words of 2016 Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney) who no longer need such assistance and ignore the needs of many hard-working Americans.

A second perspective is based on the premise that in the development of social policies and programs, African Americans and Latinos, in particular, are often equated with welfare recipients, criminals, substance abusers, and individuals who prefer government handouts to work or are qualified only for low-paying, low-responsibility jobs. According to this view, the failure of minorities of color to share fully in the nation’s economic prosperity and to take advantage of existing opportunities results from their cultural, psychological, or moral shortcomings (Harding, 2016; Katiuzhinsky & Okech, 2014; Young, 2011; Marable, 2009; Wilson, 2009). Proponents of this view prefer social policies and programs that correct individual behavior, such as job-readiness programs, parenting classes, and nutrition education.

The facts about race and social policy paint a very different picture from both of these interpretations. Although African Americans and Latinos have experienced some upward mobility in terms of occupational status since the 1960s, the class structure of the African American and Latino communities does not mirror that of the broader society. Official statistics reveal that African Americans and Latinos are still 2 1/2 to 3 times more likely to be poor than are whites and that substantial numbers live in deep poverty, less than 50% of the federal poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018; Edin & Schaefer, 2015; see Figures 1.7a and 1.7b). In addition, the distribution of wealth and health outcomes is even more skewed along racial lines (Badger, Miller, & Quealy, 2018; Ingraham, 2017; Shapiro, Meschede, & Osoro, 2013; Kochar & Fry, 2014; see Figure 1.8c). Recent economic developments, particularly globalization and the Great Recession and its lingering consequences, and conscious policy choices have also had a disproportionately negative impact on persons of color. In combination, they have produced a marked decrease in the number of entry-level industrial jobs, cutbacks in public-sector employment (a major path to middle-class status for persons of
Figure 1.7a
Poverty Rates by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1959 to 2010
Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Figure 1.7b
Who the Poor Are
color in the United States), reductions in expenditures on education and social services, and increased rates of incarceration, homelessness, housing foreclosures, evictions, and hunger (Alexander, 2010; Desmond, 2016; Lofstrom & Raphael, 2016; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2017; Owens, 2015; Singer, 2016; U.S. Department of Education 2017). To a considerable extent, the response of the African American community to recent incidents of police violence has been fueled by its anger over these inter-connected developments. Figures 1.7a and 1.7b illustrate the persistent disparities in the poverty rates between whites and persons of color in the U.S.

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 1.8a


Image omitted due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 1.8b


Source: U.S. Census Bureau.
As Jerome H. Schiele points out in Chapter 4 of this volume, the subordinate status of persons of color in the United States is not a historical aberration or the result of institutional deficiencies alone. It is an intrinsic part of the operations of the nation’s socioeconomic system. Racial inequality and institutional racism, therefore, are not separate from the issue of class but, rather, closely related to it in the following ways.

First, policies and practices produced by institutional racism reduce the wages and employment prospects of all workers. (See Figures 1.8a and 1.8b) They lower the floor on income while providing a “wedge issue” that divides workers with common interests along racial lines, thereby reducing the possibility of multiracial social justice coalitions. Second, they reduce the supply of essential public services, such as health care, education, and housing, to low- and middle-income individuals of all races because the “needy” are stereotyped as belonging primarily to certain less capable races or ethnic groups, a phenomenon intensified by increasing geographic segregation (Owens, 2015; Rothstein, 2017; Wright, Ellis, Holloway, & Wong, 2014). Finally, the presence of racial conflict reduces political pressure on government to provide other public services that would have a progressive distributional effect and promote social justice.

**MODELS OF POLICY DEVELOPMENT**

There are several ways of analyzing the process of policy development—that is, the means by which a private trouble, through the phases described above and filtered through the lens of social construction, becomes a public issue. The most commonly used models are listed below.
**Systems Model:** This approach focuses on the interaction of three components, what systems theorists refer to as inputs, throughputs, and outputs. Policy inputs include identified issues and the populations they affect, available resources, demographics, the distribution of power, and dominant value perspectives. They also include the impact of political parties, interest groups, policymakers, and the public’s perception of the seriousness of the problem. Throughputs consist of the political “rules of the game,” governmental and nongovernmental authority structures, and the interpretation of the issue by the media and key policymakers. Policy outputs include laws, regulations, budgets, judicial decisions, and the programs and services policies create. They also include unintended consequences and so-called “waste,” such as bureaucratic “red tape.”

**Elite Model:** The elite model is based on the assumption that a few individuals and groups dominate the policymaking process by shaping the agenda (Bottomore, 1991) and thereby limiting the possible outcomes of policy debate. One version of this model refers to the “Iron Triangle” of policymaking, which consists of major Congressional committees responsible for legislation in a particular area, the departments of the executive branch of government responsible for developing regulations and implementing legislative policies, and powerful interest groups that influence policy development and implementation through lobbying and political contributions (see Figure 1.9). The development of foreign and military policy is a prime example of how the elite model works. In the domestic sphere, education policy provides a useful illustration; here, the “iron triangle” consists of elected officials, the Department of Education, education experts in universities or think tanks, and teachers’ unions.

**Rational Choice Model:** This model is popular today, particularly among market-oriented policy analysts who have adopted a neoliberal approach to social welfare and social policy development. Proponents of this approach regard policymaking as an objective process in which the costs and benefits of policy options can be quantified, measured, and used to inform policy decisions. They also assume that all costs can be calculated in this manner and that comparisons between different types of costs and benefits can be useful to policymakers in determining which policy options are most efficient and effective (Eriksson, 2011).

**Interest Group Model:** For many years, this model, which is based upon pluralist theory, has been a popular explanation of the policymaking process in the United States. It assumes that policy outcomes are the products of compromise between...
competing interest groups and that these groups have relatively equal access to decision-making circles. In addition, pluralist theorists assume that all parties will primarily work within the “system” and strive to reach common ground through negotiation. Although all sides in this competition for resources and influence engage in advocacy and popular education in their attempts to sway public opinion, they remain committed to achieving some resolution of the issue (Lassman, 2011). The development of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) of 2010 provides a recent illustration of the strengths and limitations of pluralism. [See Chapter 14 in this volume for further discussion of the process by which the ACA was created.]

**Incremental Model:** This explanation of policymaking, referred to by Charles Lindblom (1980) as “The Science of Muddling Through,” complements the pluralist model. It views the evolution of social policy as a gradual process in which small steps are taken that, over time, produce major policy changes. The gradual expansion of Social Security from 1935 to the present is often cited as a good example of incremental policy development.

**Conflict Model:** Unlike the interest group or pluralist model, this model assumes that policies emerge from conflicts between forces that are unwilling or unable to reach consensus or to compromise. Through a variety of “contests,” including elections, legislative battles, and judicial decisions, one side wins and determines the policy results. Conflict approaches assume that competing interests will use a variety of forms of advocacy, both inside and outside the “system,” join forces with and mobilize social movement supporters to advance their cause and, if necessary, engage in protest tactics to arouse public opinion and change the view of policymakers in their favor (Acemoglu, Egorov, & Sonin, 2011). Examples of the use of conflict approaches include the labor struggles of the 1930s, the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s, the work of AIDS activists in the 1980s, and the Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street, and Black Lives Matter movements in recent years.

**KEY POLICY CONCEPTS**

Understanding social policy and the policymaking process requires some familiarity with frequently used policy concepts, so that the process does not remain solely the province of policy “wonks” or powerful
institutional leaders. Some of these concepts refer to the nature of policy itself; others help explain key components of the policymaking process and the role of key players.

**THE SOCIAL DIVISION OF WELFARE**

When they think of social policy or social welfare most people imagine a system of benefits that primarily assist low-income persons. Policies such as welfare (TANF), Medicaid, food stamps (now called the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, or SNAP), energy assistance, and subsidized housing (such as Housing Choice, formerly Section 8 housing) often come to mind. This limited perspective on the nature of social policy often leads to the stigmatization of individuals and families who receive these benefits and reflects a misunderstanding about the extensive role that social policy plays in contemporary society.

In a classic article, the great British social policy theorist Richard Titmuss (1976) provided an alternative perspective called the social division of welfare. Titmuss argued that the purpose of a nation’s social policy system is to promote redistribution—that is, efforts to redirect resources (both income and in-kind) to specific groups, which thereby affect their standard of living and quality of life. According to Titmuss, the issue of redistribution is addressed by social policy in three different ways. The most obvious type—social welfare—consists in the United States of direct payment to individuals (via cash assistance or in-kind benefits) through the Social Security retirement program, Unemployment Insurance, welfare (e.g., TANF), or veterans’ benefits. In Great Britain, these benefits are often called “social services.” Titmuss referred to them as forms of social welfare. In the United States, they are sometimes referred to generically as “welfare” and, at other times, as “entitlement programs.” Note how both American labels contain subtle pejorative assumptions about the recipients of these benefits, although to different extents.

A second type of welfare, fiscal welfare, provides aid to people of all social classes through tax expenditures—that is, ways the government allows people to keep more of their income, provided they engage in certain behavior. Examples of fiscal welfare that assist individuals and families include exemptions for people who have dependent children, the home mortgage and property tax deductions for homeowners, the child care tax credit for families that have children in child care, and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). [See Chapters 7 and 12 this volume for further discussion of the EITC.] Corporations, which are treated as “individuals” by the U.S. legal system, also receive a number of types of fiscal welfare, such as the oil depletion allowance, funds to promote overseas exports, and various subsidies to different industries. With the exception of the EITC, most fiscal welfare in the United States benefits the middle and upper classes.

The third form of welfare is occupational welfare, which consists of benefits people receive through their employment. Often called “fringe benefits,” these benefits include health or life insurance, pensions, housing and transportation allowances, and on occasion child care. As Mimi Abramovitz (2001) has frequently pointed out, taking this broader view of the nation’s social welfare system reveals that “everyone is on welfare.” The irony, of course, is that only certain individuals are looked down upon for receiving “welfare” benefits, while most of the population considers the benefits they receive as “natural,” if they think of them at all. As some contemporary political and media rhetoric reflects, this misunderstanding fuels a great deal of the insecurity, anger, and mistrust underlying today’s intense political conflicts.

**TAXES AND SOCIAL POLICY**

Either directly or indirectly, all three of these forms of “welfare” require a source of revenue and affect the distribution of tax burdens (or fiscal costs) in a society. In determining whether a given policy promotes social justice, it is important, therefore, to assess both the goals and substance of these policies and how
they are funded. As discussed in Chapter 7, most policies in the United States are funded through taxes of some sort, which are collected at every level of government. One way to analyze if the impact of tax policy is just is to examine whether a given method of taxation is “progressive” or “regressive.”

A progressive tax places a heavier burden on individuals or households with higher incomes. The federal income tax is the prime example of a moderately progressive tax. Higher earners pay a higher rate of taxes on their taxable “earned income” incomes (i.e., from wages), which the new tax law decreased from 39.6% to 37%. It is important to note that in 1980, the highest “marginal” tax rate was 70% and, in the prosperous 1950s it was 90%. This dramatic change is the result of tax cuts that have primarily benefited affluent Americans.

There are other features of tax policy, however, that make even the income tax considerably less progressive. Numerous tax expenditures (see “fiscal welfare” above), such as the home mortgage deduction and child care tax credit, provide a benefit primarily to middle- and upper-income households. Corporations are taxed at a lower rate than individuals, although—as mentioned above—they often have the legal status of individuals. In addition, certain types of income—so-called “unearned income,” such as dividends, interest, and capital gains on the sale of stocks or real estate—are taxed at a different rate (currently 15–20%). These policies can create unjust outcomes as the following example illustrates.

Take two individuals, Mary and Mark, who each have a taxable income of $100,000/year (i.e., this is their income subject to federal and state taxes after all deductions are taken into account). Mary has a well-paying job as an executive of a major nonprofit social service organization. According to the new tax law, her federal tax liability in 2018 would be about $24,000/year. Mark is not employed and derives his income from a combination of real estate investments, stocks, and bonds he inherited from his parents. His taxable income is also $100,000/year, but unlike Mary, he will pay only about $15,000/year in federal taxes. (This example assumes that all other aspects of Mary's and Mark's tax returns are identical.) How would you rationalize this difference? What does it reveal about the justice of our tax system?

In contrast to progressive taxes, the impact of a regressive tax falls more heavily on lower-income households. Two common examples of regressive taxes are the "payroll tax" (which funds Social Security and Medicare) and the sales tax. All wage earners in the United States must pay the payroll tax, which is currently 7.65–8.55% (twice that for the self-employed). On the surface, this would appear to be equitable as it applies to everyone who is employed. However, this tax is regressive for two reasons. First, individuals whose income is derived entirely from capital gains do not pay this tax; only wage earners do. In addition, even individuals whose income is primarily from wages pay the bulk of this tax on only the first $128,700 they earn in 2018. (They pay the Medicare portion of the payroll tax, 1.45%, on all earned income [salary] up to $200,000; this increases to 2.35% (regular 1.45% Medicare tax plus 0.9% additional Medicare tax on earned income above $200,000, $250,000 for joint returns).

The same reasoning applies to sales taxes. All individuals, regardless of the size or source of their income, pay the same-percentage tax on those items their state (or county) taxes (e.g., clothing or cleaning products in some states). Again, this would seem to be fair. Yet, analysts have demonstrated that while wealthier individuals may pay more sales tax each year in absolute dollars, lower-income persons pay a higher proportion of their income in sales taxes (Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, 2017).

Two glaring examples of how the tax system can produce inequities came to light during the 2012 and 2016 Presidential campaigns. In 2012, when Mitt Romney, the Republican candidate, released his tax returns, the public responded negatively to the revelation that he paid a much lower proportion of his (substantial) income than the average taxpayer. In another incident that year, billionaire investor, Warren
Buffett, reported that he paid a lower overall tax rate than his secretary did. Unlike Romney, however, who justified his low tax rate in part by the large amount he contributed to charity, Buffett publicly decried the unfairness of a system in which his secretary paid a higher proportion of her income. Ironically, in 2016, candidate (now President) Donald Trump, who often bragged about his wealth, refused to release his tax returns; he continues to do so today despite increased concern about the nature of his investments and the relationships they create with foreign governments.

Consequently, the manner in which the government collects taxes has become particularly significant for social policy development in recent decades for several reasons. First, federal and state tax cuts since the 1980s have resulted in middle- and lower-income households bearing a larger share of the nation’s overall tax burden—that is, paying more to help fund government programs, from military expenditures to social services. As the chart in Figure 1.11 indicates, most of the benefits of recent tax cuts have gone to upper-income households (Huang, Herrera, & Duke, 2017; Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, 2017).

Second, during the past several decades, as states have been given more and more responsibility for funding social policies and programs—a process referred to as policy devolution—a higher percentage of social policies are now paid for by state and local governments. These levels of government rely more heavily on regressive taxes for their revenue (primarily the sales tax) than does the federal government (which relies primarily on the income tax). [See Chapter 7 in this volume for further discussion of the relationship between tax policy and government spending.]

Third, anti-tax movements during the past four decades (from the movement that produced California’s landmark Proposition 13 in 1978 to today’s Tea Party) and opposition to tax increases by the Republican Party and some segments of the Democratic Party, have made it increasingly difficult for governments to

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**Historical US Income Inequality**

*Source: US Census Bureau, Income Limits for Each Fifth and Top 5 Percent of Households (Current Dollars)*

![Graph showing historical U.S. income inequality from 1967 to 2011.](image)

*Figure 1.11*

U.S. Income Inequality, 1967–2011
fund essential services, particularly in tough economic times, such as the Great Recession, when regular tax revenues decreased (Horton, 2018; Skocpol & Williamson, 2012; Stocker, 1991). During and after the Great Recession, hundreds of thousands of public-sector employees—teachers, firefighters, police officers, and social workers—were laid off and many cities and counties eliminated long-standing programs, closed libraries and parks, and reduced service hours (Johnson, Oliff, & Williams, 2011). For the most part, these cuts have not been restored even as the economy has grown during the past decade (McNichol & Waxman, 2017). A fundamental social policy question for the future, therefore, is: How will the nation pay for the services required to maintain its competitiveness in a global economy, meet the basic needs of its growing and increasingly diverse population, and repair its decaying physical and social infrastructure?

DEFICITS AND THE DEBT

During the past quarter century, there has been considerable controversy over the size of the federal deficit and the national debt and their impact on the overall health of the U.S. economy. [See Chapters 3 and 7 in this volume for a more detailed discussion of these concepts.] Since 2011, opposition to increasing the nation's debt ceiling, which used to be a mere formality, has become an instrument of policymaking, as conservative legislators demand spending cuts in return for their approval. (Ironically, at the end of the Clinton Administration, the federal government had a large surplus, and during the 2000 Presidential election policy debates centered on how that surplus should be used—to pay off the national debt within a generation or to secure the funding of Social Security and Medicare for the “baby boomers.”) Without going into the details of how this surplus became a deficit, it is important to understand the distinction between the federal deficit and the national debt, and their implications for social policy.

As discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, the **deficit** refers to the **annual** difference between the revenues the federal government receives (primarily through taxes) and its total outlays or expenditures. Since the government cannot spend funds it does not have, in fiscal years when expenditures exceed revenues (most years since the 1930s), the government has to borrow money to make up the difference. Sometimes, government expenses are a form of investment in the future; the construction of bridges, roads, universities, libraries, and hospitals is a good example, as is the funding of long-term projects such as the space program and development of the Internet. (This is comparable to families borrowing money to buy a home or pay for college tuition.) In such instances, the government makes up the difference between revenues and expenditures by selling Treasury bills and bonds to banks, foreign governments, and individual investors, who are essentially lending the government money. In order to induce them to do so, the government pays them interest. (To make this even simpler, think of your household budget. In those months when your expenses exceed your income, you may have to borrow money—often by charging purchases to a credit card. In return for lending you these funds, the credit card company charges you interest.) The total amount that the government owes to all its creditors, principal plus interest, accumulated over the years constitutes the national **debt**. Each year that the federal government runs a deficit, it must borrow more money and the national debt increases.

Unlike the federal government, state and local governments are generally prohibited by their constitutions or charters from running a fiscal deficit or from borrowing funds to pay for general operating expenses. They can borrow money (largely through the sale of bonds) only for capital projects such as road construction or the development of a new college campus. This is why increased fiscal pressures on state and local governments—the combined product of policy devolution, federal cutbacks, and economic slowdowns or recessions—have become so severe and pose a serious threat to the maintenance of adequate
levels of spending for social policies and programs. [See Chapter 7 this volume for further discussion of the federal budget process.]

Figures 1.12a, 1.12b, 1.12c, and 1.12d illustrate how the government spends its revenues. In reviewing these charts, it is important to note the different perspectives they provide. For example, if you looked solely at Figure 1.12a, you would get the impression that Social Security, Medicare, and other so-called “entitlement programs” comprise the bulk of the Federal budget. This impression is often used to buttress arguments in favor of reining in spending on entitlements because of their impact on the federal budget deficit and the national debt. As discussed in Chapters 7 and 11, however, this would be a false impression. These mandatory expenditures (Figure 1.12b) are largely funded from targeted taxes, such as the payroll tax, not from general revenues. When this mandatory spending is subtracted from the total federal budget and only discretionary spending is analyzed (Figure 1.12c), a very different impression is revealed: Military expenditures...
Figure 1.12c
Source: OMB. National Priorities Project.

Figure 1.12d
Share of FY 2018 Budget Under Current Law

Share of Spending Growth

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions.
(including veterans’ benefits, some portion of expenditures on energy, (e.g., for weapons research, and part of the interest for past military expenditures) now comprise nearly 2/3 of the budget. This demonstrates that the budget can be used both as a tool of policy development and for policy advocacy (Figure 1.12d).

Ironically, recurrent concerns of fiscal conservatives over federal deficits and the debt appear to apply only when the government incurs deficits to expand social welfare programs. Recent steps by Congress and the Trump Administration vividly illustrate this contradiction. In combination, the December 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, the recent budget deal approved by Congress, and—if enacted—Trump’s FY 2019 budget will dramatically increase the deficit and the debt. By burdening future generations and administrations with the costs of financing the government, they also significantly reduce current resources available for addressing the nation’s physical and social infrastructure needs. Perhaps of even greater concern, the deficits provide right-wing legislators with a rationale for further cuts in social protections, under the guise of “reforming entitlements.”

ECONOMICS AND SOCIAL POLICY

Economists differ on the impact of deficits and debt on the health of the nation. Some argue that excessive government borrowing reduces the amount of capital available to the private sector and raises interest rates on business and consumer loans. Others assert that, particularly during recessions or periods of economic slowdown, government spending is necessary to stimulate the economy by providing a floor on consumption and creating jobs. In addition, many analysts believe that only government possesses sufficient resources to make the investments in human capital development and physical infrastructure required by a global market system (Krugman, 2012; Reich, 2016).

Since the 1930s, policies that reflect views on the relationship of government to the economy have been guided primarily in both Republican and Democratic Administrations by one form of Keynesian economic theory or another. Based on the ideas of the British economist John Maynard Keynes (1936), Keynesians posit that modern, so-called “mixed economies” (i.e., those in which some items, such as consumer goods, are purchased in the marketplace, and others, such as education and social services, are at least partly funded by government) require some level of government intervention to regulate the business cycle and avoid the dramatic ups and downs that occurred throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.

According to Keynesians, governments can accomplish this goal through three means:

1. Monetary policy—The Federal Reserve (in the U.S.) and central banks (in most other industrial nations), attempt to control the money supply to stimulate or “cool down” the economy when it is “overheated” (growing too fast). Since the 2008 recession, the Federal Reserve has kept interest rates at record low levels to make it easier for banks and businesses to obtain capital and for some consumers to acquire home mortgages in order to revive the flagging economy. Recently, however, the Fed has begun to raise rates gradually to combat the “threat” of inflation.

2. Tax policy—Tax cuts are designed to stimulate the economy in the midst of a recession while tax increases during a period of rapid economic growth attempt to slow it down and reduce the likelihood of inflation. During the past decade, the U.S. government has used tax policy to promote economic growth in at least two ways: The Obama Administration temporarily extended the Bush Administration’s income tax cuts and approved a temporary reduction in the payroll tax. In December 2017, Congress approved and President Trump signed tax legislation that significantly reduced both
corporate and individual tax rates—the latter with a sunset provision—while limiting long-standing deductions for mortgage interest payments and state and local taxes. As of this writing, the lasting economic effects of the legislation are unclear, although many analysts are pessimistic (Bryan, 2017; Phillips, 2018).

3. **Government spending**—Government revenues are used to “prime the pump” of the economy and to maintain a floor on consumer spending, which accounts for about 70% of the nation’s gross domestic product (GDP). The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which included a combination of tax rebates and government spending, is the most recent example of a government “stimulus package.” If adopted, President Trump’s proposal to invest in the nation’s physical infrastructure could potentially have a similar effect, although it would probably be heavily skewed toward the private sector.

There are three schools of thought among Keynesians, each of which emphasizes a different perspective on government’s role in regulating the economy. Conservative Keynesians focus on providing tax breaks for corporations to spur industrial production and economic growth, creating what is sometimes referred to as a “trickle-down” effect. Advocates of so-called “supply-side economics,” although they emphasize the importance of shrinking the size of government, actually promote a form of conservative Keynesianism.

Liberal Keynesians, such as those who inspired the New Deal and the War on Poverty (see Chapter 2 in this volume), favor increased social expenditures and tax cuts or credits to individuals and families as a means to stimulate demand. These are primarily “top-down” efforts to redistribute income and wealth. Finally, Radical Keynesians support policies such as guaranteed full employment; controls on prices, rents, and interest rates; a major overhaul of the tax code; demilitarization of the nation’s economy; and a general reordering of national priorities (Arestis & Sawyer, 2010; Ventelou, 2005).

**POLITICS AND SOCIAL POLICY**

As discussed throughout this volume, the development of social policies involves the resolution of fundamental issues about the current status and future direction of a society. In a democratic nation, this resolution occurs in the political arena at various levels and increasingly in the media. But what is this “political arena”? Many Americans have a narrow view of politics; they believe that it involves only electoral contests in which there are clear winners and losers. Yet, because politics is essentially about the acquisition and use of power, it is an inescapable feature of all aspects of our lives. Compare the following interpretation of “politics” with those with which you are familiar:

A statement is political when either the content of the issue is viewed differently by people from different social groups … or the decision has consequences for different social groups or both…. As long as society is differentiated along ethnic, sex, or social class lines, politics pervades all of social life. You are involved in politics and so is your mother (Goldberg & Elliott, 1980, p. 478).

According to this perspective, politics cannot be separated from practice or from the policies that shape the parameters of practice (Reisch & Jani, 2012). Instead, politics defines the issues that policymakers will address, determines the alternative solutions available, and establishes the criteria by which the success or failure of policies will be evaluated. Virtually every policy debate—whether at the local, state, national, or international level, or in the public, non-profit, or private for-profit sector—is, therefore, framed by
political discourse. Because politics is at the core of all decisions about our priorities, conflicts recur over the respective roles of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government, about the appropriate balance of power between the federal government and the states, and regarding the most desirable relationship between government and the market. How these conflicts are resolved is just as important as what they resolve. In general, their resolution is the product of a combination of individual and group self-interest and the influence of wide-ranging ideological perspectives.

More specifically, politics determines how inclusive a policy will be—that is, whether it will be universal or selective in application. It reflects public opinion about government’s potential to solve people’s social and economic problems and the biases of policymakers toward certain issues, groups, or strategies. Politics determines whether the goals of a policy are considered feasible and whether we provide adequate resources to achieve them. Above all, politics influences who has the power to define a condition as a problem worthy of attention.

The politics of problem definition is reflected, therefore, in a variety of ways: in the history of how the problem was addressed, in the underlying assumptions about the causes of the problem, in defining the “population-at-risk” (see below), and in assessing which interventions are most likely to produce desired results, how they should be funded, and how they should be implemented.

**Political Feasibility**

While many social policies may be desirable from a value-based perspective, or widely recognized as necessary, obstacles to their enactment may still exist. One barrier is the lack of adequate resources. Even in the best economic times, resources are finite and problems are seemingly without limit. Another obstacle is cultural intransigence—that is, resistance to a policy initiative because it challenges and overturns long-standing cultural norms. Recent examples include opposition to same-sex marriage or the rights of transgendered persons. In other eras, proponents of women’s suffrage, supporters of civil rights for racial minorities, and advocates for organized labor encountered similar resistance.

Because political resistance to policy change is the norm, rather than the exception, policy advocates must consider the political feasibility of their goals when they consider which change strategies would be most effective. Political feasibility, therefore, refers to the level of acceptability of a particular proposal within the present political context. Political partisanship, public opinion, entrenched ideological positions, groups’ self-interest, the unequal societal distribution of power and influence, and the existence of other policy priorities all determine the feasibility of a policy proposal. Political feasibility also influences how proponents frame a policy initiative to make its acceptance by policymakers and the general public more likely. For example, in promoting the Affordable Care Act, the Obama Administration emphasized how it would reduce the costs of health care far more than it focused on the humane or egalitarian aspects of the legislation. More recently, a rare bipartisan consensus is emerging in Congress and in a number of state legislatures about the need for criminal justice reform. This consensus did not develop because conservatives or liberals underwent an ideological conversion. Rather, what is gradually bringing disparate political forces together is mutual recognition of the staggering costs of imprisoning so many non-violent offenders in U.S. society.

The feasibility or acceptability of a policy proposal, therefore, can increase (or decline) as a result of changes in the environment. Advocates can shape public opinion through popular education campaigns or the use of media. They can also help mobilize groups that have a stake in policy change to pressure policymakers to take action as appears to be occurring today around the issue of gun violence. The power of these groups is enhanced through the development of new organizations, such as coalitions, and the
possibility of new rewards, including indirect benefits to the public. As the public views a particular issue with greater understanding and sympathy, the issue becomes more legitimate in its eyes as discussed earlier in this chapter. Recent changes in popular attitudes about marriage equality, climate change, gun control, and police-community relations in African American communities are good illustrations of this process.

THE PRIVATIZATION OF SOCIAL POLICY

Over the past 3–4 decades, as a result of global economic forces and the ideological rationales that have accompanied them, a major trend within the United States has been to shift the responsibility for social policy implementation from both the federal and local government to the private sector. This phenomenon, referred to as privatization, involves “shifting into non-governmental hands some or all roles in producing a good or service that was once publicly produced or might be publicly produced” (Bendick, 1997, p. 98). There are two broad categories of privatization. One version of privatization is sometimes referred to as “load shedding;” it involves the transfer of government services or costs to the private sector. The other—also the product of conscious policy decisions—reflects the goal of empowering so-called “mediating institutions” at the community level both to bridge the gap between the market and the state and to serve as a buffer that protects localities from their divisions (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977).

Although often used interchangeably, the transfer of responsibility from government to the private, nonprofit sector is a very different form of privatization from the transfer of the public sector’s role to for-profit entities such as privately owned charter schools or prisons. The former reflects what Dennis Young (1999) termed the longstanding “complementary” and “supplementary” relationships between the nonprofit sector and government that uniquely exist in the U.S. In Young’s formulation, the “complementary” relationship involves cooperation between nonprofits and the government to provide essential supports. Examples include government contracting for health and behavioral health care to nonprofit hospitals and community agencies. The “supplementary” relationships refers to the role nonprofits have traditionally played in filling gaps in services that neither government nor the market can provide or chooses to provide. Often, these services are for hard-to-reach or highly stigmatized populations, such as persons experiencing homelessness or opioid addiction, formerly incarcerated individuals, disabled veterans, or persons with HIV/AIDS (National Law Center, 2015; Singer, 2016). The collaboration between government and the nonprofit sector, therefore, can be used for multiple purposes: to cut program costs (i.e., make services more cost efficient), promote increased service innovation, and provide services that are more responsive to community needs.

The increased use of for-profit entities to deliver essential programs and services, however, is a more recent development. It reflects the growing preference among some U.S. policymakers for market-oriented solutions to social problems. Examples range from corporate implementation of welfare-to-work programs after welfare reform, managed care behavioral health programs, charter schools, and the construction of private prisons. Proponents of this approach argue that the for-profit sector can deliver services more efficiently, that competition keeps costs down, and that privatization protects people’s freedom by preventing the expansion of the size and scope of government. Critics of this approach, however, assert that short-term cost savings have largely occurred by lowering employees’ wages, reducing services, diminishing service quality, limiting access, and shifting the focus of programs to more affluent, fee-paying clients. They also maintain that privatization perpetuates the exclusion and marginalization of low-power, low-resource individuals and communities. Finally, they assert that privatization does not produce the results its proponents frequently claim. Recent data on charter schools appear to support this assertion (Baker, 2016).
There are two aspects of this form of privatization that critics find particularly troubling. One is that it is part of a broader effort to shift control of formerly public assets (parks, airwaves) to the private, for-profit sector. This diminishes the common space collectively owned by all members of society and alters the meaning of community and a democratic society. A second consequence is that by applying market-oriented concepts and models to both public- and nonprofit-sector activities, agencies that used to be part of government (e.g., AMTRAK and the postal service) are now treated like corporations. Since the 1980s, this phenomenon of “marketization” has had a major impact on nonprofit social service agencies as well. Researchers have found this trend has altered the mission and basic character of these organizations and produced greater competition for increasingly scarce resources at a time when more inter-organizational collaboration is needed (Alexander, 1999; Gronbjerg & Salamon, 2002).

**EXERCISE**

**THE PRIVATIZATION OF SOCIAL POLICY & SOCIAL SERVICES**

The privatization of social welfare programs raises a number of fundamental questions. Ask yourself:

1. When is it appropriate for a particular service to be privatized?
2. If the responsibility for policy implementation is transferred to the for-profit sector, what is an acceptable rate of profit?
3. How can the goal of profit (or revenue) enhancement be balanced with service quality?
4. To what extent should government regulate services delivered by the private sector or determine what constitutes an acceptable rate of profit?
5. Should such services be standardized—that is, treated like a commodity?
6. Which services should be coercive, and which should be voluntary?
7. Which approach to privatization best promotes social justice goals? How will services to the most difficult clients be assured?

Since the mid-1990s the emergence of two other issues has further complicated the picture. One was the insertion of the “Charitable Choice” initiative into the 1996 welfare reform legislation; it required states to spend 10% of their TANF block grants through “faith-based” social service agencies. Although sectarian (religiously-based) organizations, such as Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services, and Associated Jewish Charities, have played a major role in social service delivery for decades and congregations of all religious faiths have provided valuable aid to needy populations throughout U.S. history (Cnaan & Boddie, 2002), recent policy initiatives have funded some religious organizations of a different nature. These faith-based organizations often have staff with fewer professional credentials and limited accountability for their actions, which have included using funds from government grants and contracts to engage in religious activities. Some critics have charged that the promotion of faith-based services threatens to breach the “church–state” wall and endanger the civil rights of religious minorities and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) persons, while delivering services of questionable effectiveness (Belcher, Fandetti, & Cole, 2004; Daly, 2006).

More recently—as discussed in Chapter 10 of this volume—sectarian organizations and family-owned companies have engaged in judicial challenges to the provision of the Affordable Care Act that requires
employers to include coverage of contraceptives in the health insurance plans their employees receive. During the Obama administration, they even refused to submit a form requesting a waiver of this requirement as part of a proposed compromise. The current standoff on this issue raises questions about the meaning of “religious freedom” and the extent to which the exercise of this freedom can be used to limit the rights of others. As of this writing, pending Supreme Court cases may resolve this issue.

A FRAMEWORK FOR POLICY ANALYSIS

To assess the various dimensions of a social policy, Gilbert and Terrell (2013) developed a useful framework for policy analysis, a topic that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6 of this volume. Their framework is constructed around four central questions:

1. What kind of benefits does the policy offer? Answering this question involves determining the nature, size, and frequency of the benefits it provides. Examples of policy benefits include cash assistance, in-kind benefits (e.g., food), services such as counseling or job training, vouchers (e.g., for housing or education), enhanced power, increased opportunity, and the promise of future assets (such as through Individual Development Accounts or IDAs).

2. What are the criteria for receiving these benefits? In other words, who is entitled to receive the benefits offered? This question refers to the eligibility criteria that have been established by the policy and the type of risks it covers. Criteria may include marital or employment status (past and present), geographic residence, family size, health, age, educational level, gender, military service, race/ethnicity, religion, IQ, or income.

3. How are the policy’s benefits delivered? This involves examining the structure and character of the institutions developed to administer the policy. Subsidiary questions include: What level of government should deliver the benefits? What is the best mix of public, nonprofit, and private for-profit sector participation? Should policy implementation be centralized or decentralized? Should it be standardized or tailored to specific situations? Should a policy’s benefits be delivered separately or integrated into other policy systems? Should the policy be delivered through a distinct, “categorical” program or folded into a “block grant”?

4. How are the benefits financed? For example, are they financed through taxes (and of what type?), fees, or charitable contributions? Who will bear the fiscal cost of the policy?

A fifth question might be: How is the policy evaluated and by whom? In other words, who determines if the policy is working as intended?

As you analyze the policies presented in this book, keep in mind (a) the range of alternatives within each dimension of the above questions; (b) the values underlying these alternatives; and (c) the assumptions or theories implicit in these alternatives (Gilbert & Terrell, 2013). Ask yourself: Is the policy fair (or just)? Does it fit within contemporary cultural norms? Have the policy’s underlying assumptions been empirically tested? Are they feasible in the real world? Who benefits from the policy—directly or indirectly—from its current construction? What are the potential consequences for third parties, intended or unintended? Finally, is the policy as designed capable of achieving its intended goals (i.e., is it effective?) and is it reasonably efficient in terms of financial and social costs?
ADDITIONAL EVALUATIVE CONCEPTS

The following are some additional evaluative concepts that policymakers and advocates use to analyze social policy. [Further details about the process of policy analysis can be found in Chapter 6 in this volume]. As you read the chapters in Part III of this volume, which address specific areas of social policy, it would be useful to apply these concepts to both contemporary policies and proposals for policy change.

Since most social policies target a specific issue or problem, it is important to understand the population-at-risk the policy is attempting to address. Population-at-risk refers to the number and character of persons who are vulnerable to a particular social, economic, or environmental hazard. This could be determined by looking at such factors as gender, geography, age, ability status, occupation, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, immigration status, and employment status. In determining the population-at-risk, it is important to ask two questions. First, in what ways are we measuring risk? Second, what are the conditions that create this risk?

A related concept is inclusiveness of coverage. This measures the extent to which a defined population-at-risk is protected against a specific hazard—for example, how many persons who are currently jobless are receiving unemployment benefits? This concept is linked to the determination of eligibility for a specific benefit. Generally, the number of persons protected by a policy (in theory) is greater than the number actually receiving benefits. For example, in the United States, less than two-thirds of the individuals eligible to receive SNAP (food stamps) obtain this benefit.

Another way to examine the connection between a policy’s goals and its impact is to assess the policy’s horizontal adequacy. This measures the accessibility of a service or benefit to all persons who are eligible to receive it. It addresses the question: Does the policy reach the target population? In some instances, the horizontal adequacy of a policy changes over time. For example, when the Social Security Act was passed in 1935, it covered about 60% of the U.S. workforce. Today, it covers about 95%. [See Chapter 11 in this volume for further details.]

The receipt of an assigned benefit, however, does not mean that a service or benefit is sufficient to meet the needs of recipients. To determine the vertical adequacy of a policy, ask whether each recipient is covered satisfactorily. Again, using Social Security policy as an illustration, while the policy’s horizontal adequacy is now very high, it is not yet vertically adequate. This is because the average retirement benefit (about $1,404/month in 2018) does not lift an individual above the federal poverty line.

The concepts of horizontal and vertical adequacy, however, do not assess the extent to which a particular policy promotes social justice. To do this, we need to apply the concept of equity, or fairness. Just as there are different definitions of social justice, so, too, there are different ways of examining the equity of a social policy.

One approach, individual equity, essentially states that “you get what you pay for.” For example, the concept of individual equity is used to rationalize why higher wage earners receive higher Social Security retirement or unemployment insurance benefits, and why individuals who can afford “Cadillac” health insurance plans get superior coverage. By contrast, the concept of social equity is based on the premise that individuals should receive the benefits they need regardless of their past, current, or potential future contribution to society. This principle more closely aligns with the use of redistributive policies to achieve the goal of social justice.
Two related concepts are **horizontal** and **vertical equity**. According to the principle of **horizontal equity**, all persons in the same circumstances should be treated equally regardless of other factors (e.g., income or past contributions). This concept complements universal approaches to social policy.

The concept of **vertical equity** is used to justify the differential treatment of persons in different circumstances—for example, the allocation of greater resources to a person who has a more serious health condition or to a student who has special needs. According to Rawls (1999), vertical equity supports the idea of using policy as a redistributive tool in that it posits that inequalities in the distribution of societal resources are justified solely if they serve the needs of the least advantaged.

It is also important to distinguish between equity in benefits and equity in financing. A state’s policy might distribute resources equitably—for example, through its funding for public schools. Yet, the state may collect the revenues to pay for these programs through inequitable means—for example, through greater reliance on regressive taxes, such as a sales tax.

Finally, although they sound alike, the concepts of equity and equality are not identical. Equality implies equal treatment regardless of circumstances. Equity, particularly social equity, implies differential treatment according to circumstances. In application, a policy based on equality without social equity would produce unfairness and inequality—if, for example, all children received the same allotment for their education, regardless of family income or their specific educational needs. Social equity, however, does not necessarily correlate with adequacy, particularly in times of fiscal austerity such as the present. In other words, people with greater needs might be given a larger share of available resources, but the resources available may still be insufficient to address these needs.

**EXERCISE** APPLYING EVALUATIVE CONCEPTS

Select a program or service within your place of employment or internship and identify the policy on which it is based. Answer the following questions based on the evaluative framework and concepts discussed above:

1. What kind of benefits does the policy provide?
2. What are the eligibility criteria for receiving these benefits?
3. How are the benefits delivered?
4. How are the benefits financed?
5. What is the targeted population-at-risk?
6. How inclusive is the coverage of these benefits?
7. To what extent are the benefits provided horizontally adequate? To what extent are they vertically adequate?
8. To what extent are the benefits based on the concept of individual equity? To what extent are they based on the concept of social equity?

**CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF SOCIALLY JUST SOCIAL POLICY**

The Preamble to the U.S. Constitution commits the nation to the establishment of social justice. Given this commitment, why does the gap between this rhetoric and reality continue to grow? Although the
remaining chapters of this book will address this question in more detail, several possible explanations are presented briefly here.

One is that the façade of national unity and a periodic focus on external enemies (as in the Cold War or the “global war on terror”) often obscures, perhaps deliberately, the persistence of entrenched social inequalities. Another is that images of prosperity (the “American dream” and American “exceptionalism”), promoted by Madison Avenue, the media, and some political leaders, hide long-standing social divisions and isolate disadvantaged groups. Finally, to thwart efforts to address the structural causes of persistent inequality and injustice, proponents of social justice, including some social workers, have frequently been labeled subversive and marginalized both politically and culturally.

Developing socially just social policies in the future will require policymakers and policy advocates to take three critical steps. First, they must question and, where necessary, challenge the assumptions underlying contemporary views of social issues and the policies that address them. This includes recognizing that the social and cultural divisions in U.S. society are far more complex than generally conceived and that policy solutions to the problems these divisions create will be much more complicated than previously assumed (Reisch, 2018). We must recognize that the expansion of social welfare benefits cannot by itself create a more egalitarian and socially just society. We must strive to change our cultural norms and values through education and dialogue. In addition, we must acknowledge, however painfully, that due to dramatic developments such as globalization and climate change, our political system, as currently constructed, cannot correct contemporary problems that are occurring on an unprecedented scale (Reisch, 2013). This may require major revisions in the basic governing institutions of our society.

A second step involves moving beyond outdated assumptions about the goals of social policy and the policy development process. One of these assumptions is that divisions in U.S. society occur along a clear “majority–minority” axis. In fact, the definition of what constitutes a “minority group” has undergone rapid changes due to recent demographic and cultural developments. This requires us to adjust our social justice goals and policy framework, to reassess the relationship that currently exists between government and the market economy, and to stop dealing with major issues within current policymaking “silos.”

A third step involves creating a revised vision of a socially just society that fits 21st century realities. This vision would emphasize both socially just means and ends. It would address people’s material needs and the non-material, often intangible assets they require to achieve what Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen refer to as their capabilities (Sen, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011). Finally, it would reconcile an approach based on the concept of universal human rights with respect for cultural diversity (Wronka, 2014). The chapters in this book will explore these issues in more detail.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Identify a policy developed at the local, state, or federal level that affects the clients or constituents of the agency where you work or are placed as a student. What are the underlying assumptions of this policy about the causes of the problem(s) it is designed to address? In what ways do the policy’s provisions reflect these assumptions?
2. In small groups, develop a budget for a family of four in your metropolitan area that you believe would enable them to lead a “minimally decent life.” Compare your results with those of other groups. What assumptions did you make in constructing your budget? How did your results compare with the current federal poverty line? What does this exercise reveal about the adequacy of our social welfare system?

3. Select an issue about which you are concerned or which affects you and your family directly. If this issue is currently being addressed by social policy, how did the issue come to the attention of policymakers and the general public? If the issue is not being addressed, or is being addressed inadequately, how might advocates increase the public’s awareness of the issue?

4. What is your definition of “social justice”? Select an issue you care about and discuss how you would apply your definition of social justice to the development of a social policy that addresses this issue.

5. Apply Gilbert and Terrell’s analytical framework to the policy you identified in #1 above. Pay particular attention to the underlying assumptions of the policy and the alternatives that might be created to address the issue it is designed to address. Look at the alternatives proposed by policy research and advocacy organizations that have different ideological perspectives and identify their underlying assumptions.

**SUGGESTED WEBSITES**

**GOVERNMENT RESOURCES**
- The Library of Congress (Thomas)—for legislative information: thomas.loc.gov
- National Association of Counties: www.naco.org
- National Conference of State Legislatures: www.ncsl.org
- National Governors Association: www.nga.org
- National League of Cities: www.nlc.org
- Poverty Statistics at the Census Bureau: www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty.html
- U.S. Census Bureau: www.census.gov
- U.S. Supreme Court Decisions: www.fedworld.gov/supcourt/index.htm

**LIBERAL POLICY RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY GROUPS**
- Brookings Institution: www.brook.edu
- Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: www.cbpp.org
- Center for Law and Social Policy: www.clasp.org/
- Economic Policy Institute: www.epinet.org
- Families USA: www.familiesusa.org/
- Urban Institute: www.urban.org
CONSERVATIVE OR LIBERTARIAN POLICY RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY GROUPS

American Enterprise Institute: www.aei.org
Cato Institute: www.cato.org
The Heritage Foundation: www.heritage.org
Hudson Institute: www.hudson.org

MAJOR NEWSPAPERS

The Economist: www.economist.com
The Washington Post: www.washingtonpost.com

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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CREDITS

Fig 1.1: Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hurricane_Maria_(23544536688).jpg.
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