Chapter 2: THE HISTORY OF SOCIAL WORK

Learning Objectives
After reading this chapter, you should be able to

1. Recognize the forces shaping the American social welfare system and social policy.
2. Identify the historical relevance of major social welfare programs that assist people in need.
3. Explore the lives of social work pioneers.
4. Describe the relationship between social welfare policy and the social work profession.
5. Explain why social welfare policies that address people’s immediate needs are inadequate for promoting social justice.

Brian Organizes Farmworkers

Brian is a community organizer for an organization that supports farmworkers who travel throughout the northwestern United States. His job involves educating the public about farmworkers’ significant contribution to the American economy and the food supply. With the farmworkers, Brian focuses primarily on the health needs associated with the pesticides and herbicides found in the agriculture industry. Since he is bilingual, Brian is often called on by health care providers to translate critical information and medication dosages to farmworkers and their families. Of late, Brian’s focus has turned to immigration and health care policies. After researching the nation’s history of farm labor relations, he has helped organize local and regional forums on citizenship and social welfare benefits and services for farmworkers. Also, Brian has connected farmworkers to other advocacy organizations.

The purpose of this chapter is to convince you that history matters. Specifically, the characters, landmark decisions, and political environments that encompass the history of social welfare and the development of the social work profession support a variety of educational purposes that extend beyond the memorization of facts, dates, and events. You will discover that the profession’s history introduces you not only to social welfare policy and the practice of social work but also to American politics, diverse and marginalized groups, social reform movements, leadership strengths and weaknesses, and critical thinking. Perhaps most important, you will begin to consider how history can guide your development as an advocate for clients and causes, someone who challenges social injustices.

The historical context of American social welfare policy is a progression of dynamic events, leading incrementally to an expanded role for government in the human pursuit of the things needed to survive and even thrive. Examining the history of social work will help you consider two key points: the influence of political, social, and economic forces on policy development, and the parallel development of social welfare policy and the social work profession.

TIME TO THINK 2.1

What large-scale events have happened in your life and stand out in your mind? Have any of these events changed the way you think about places, people, or yourself? When you relive these events, what are your emotions? Why do you think these events affect you that way?
SOCIAL WELFARE

A critical concept in the history of social work is social welfare, or the array of governmental programs, services, and institutions designed to maintain the stability and well-being of society (Axinn & Stern, 2005). Social welfare requires both a common understanding and a formal arrangement between a government and its people. From this relationship, people have a sense of what they should receive and contribute to their well-being. Social welfare reflects the beliefs and values of a nation. It involves the allocation of resources such as money, personnel, and expertise.

Take a moment to consider the services that citizens of the United States receive from the government. The list you generate might include education, transportation systems, national defense, and health care. All these services support people’s well-being, and all could be considered social welfare. Despite this broad perspective, social welfare issues are hotly debated and central to local, state, and national politics. They are tied up with social trends, political ideologies, and notions of social control and social justice.

SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY

The services and programs made available to certain people for a specified period of time, based on established criteria, are the product of social welfare policy. Ever-changing social, economic, and political environments influence policy development and implementation, and so the services associated with policy are constantly changing. Depending on events, the role of government in improving people’s lives also expands and contracts. For example, during the 1960s, when the United States experienced considerable public unrest associated with urban migration, urban violence, persistent poverty, discrimination, and an increasingly unpopular war, there was a significant expansion of support to poor people and an increase in the civil rights of a large spectrum of the nation’s population.

Your conclusions on policy questions and social welfare concerns necessitate a vision of society and a sense of fairness in the redistribution of resources. Your ideas on social welfare policy are likely to include biases and value conflicts as you move forward in an effort to orchestrate reform or even a restructuring of the American welfare system.

In the United States, social welfare policies are generally intended to provide a safety net for citizens, services that protect people from spiraling downward economically or socially and hitting bottom. Eligibility for “safety net” services depends on meeting specific criteria, or means testing. Means testing is assessing whether the individual or family possesses the means to do without a particular kind of help. If not, the government will provide assistance for a designated period of time. Unfortunately, this assistance often produces only a temporary bounce upward and does little to improve the person’s or family’s overall status in life.

Decisions regarding the direction of social welfare policy in the United States and around the world are always being made. Your conclusions on any given issue depend on your vision of society and sense of fairness in the redistribution of resources. How you think about policy issues reflects your political, social, religious, and economic ideologies. It is also likely to reflect your biases and values. Here are some current examples of policy-related questions for you to consider:

- Should we assist persons in poverty through direct cash transfers or through services, through a combination of the two, or through a new approach that guarantees a universal standard of living?
- Which programs should be funded through local revenues, which through states, and which through federal revenues?
- What is the role of the faith-based community in providing social services?
- How do social welfare policies in the United States affect or influence the policies of other nations? How can the social welfare policies of other nations guide the United States?

For social workers, social welfare policy is extremely important. It defines the profession’s clients, specifies what services
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will be made available to designated populations, describes how services will be delivered, outlines the duration of services, and indicates how intervention outcomes will be evaluated and measured.

CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL IDEOLOGIES

In the United States today, political ideology has a great deal of influence on how people feel about the social safety net. People with conservative political leanings tend to favor personal responsibility for one’s own well-being over any form of government support or federally sponsored relief. The underlying premise is that people in the top echelon of society have worked hard, made smart choices, and earned their lot in life; similarly, people in distress have caused their own problems and should “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.”

Conservative political platforms often take firm stances against taxation (federal income tax, Social Security taxes, inheritance taxes, state income taxes, and local levies), which is the revenue source for many social welfare programs. More specifically, many conservative politicians and their constituents are of the opinion that the nation’s income tax system is counterproductive and undermines a free enterprise, market-oriented economic system. Usually, conservatives oppose any form of graduated tax rates, which raise the percentage of taxes paid, or the tax rate, as a person’s income increases. They think this so-called progressive program of taxation and the government intervention that goes with it place an unfair burden on businesspeople and entrepreneurs, who create economic expansion, employment opportunities, and the promise of subsequent wealth.

Liberal politicians also support a capitalist, free-market form of government, but they have a different view of the role of the federal government in social welfare. Liberals typically support a more robust safety net for poor people, one that attempts to address social issues through moderate or incremental forms of social intervention and change. Generally, liberals support various types of checks and balances within government, as well as regulatory and protective policies to help ensure fair competition in the marketplace.

As for taxes, liberals usually want a tax structure that rewards the work of people rather than the profits to be made through financial investment and manipulation. Liberal leaders also argue that the nation’s tax code favors the wealthy through unique tax breaks and loopholes benefiting the rich. As a result, middle-class workers and families are seen as often paying proportionately higher taxes than do those from the upper class. Liberals generally want to help distribute more wealth and resources to people toward the lower end of the nation’s socioeconomic structure.

Aid-in-Dying

OREGON, Washington, Montana, Vermont, California, Colorado, and the District of Columbia have legalized aid-in-dying through legislation, referendums or court cases. If additional states adopted aid-in-dying laws, advocates might actually want to bring a federal case that could establish constitutional protection in every state.

1. What does aid-in-dying legislation tell you about the citizens of states and possible political and the changing voter trends across the nation?
2. What are your thoughts on the aid-in-dying legislation?
3. What are the possible unintended consequences?
SOCIAL CONTROL

The nation’s social welfare system raises issues of social control, those policies and practices designed to regulate people and increase conformity and compliance in their behavior. Some people see social control as a motive embedded in social welfare policy (Trattner, 1999). They point out that many of the social welfare policies of the 1960s provided people in poverty with government housing, food stamps, and other kinds of relief in place of training and employment opportunities. Thus, reliance on the government increased while inequities in education and unemployment went unchecked (Trattner, 1999). Some would argue that these policies kept people socially controlled and regulated and separated from the rest of society, locked into unemployment, underemployment, and substandard living conditions (Harrington, 1962).

Social workers are in a position to build on individual and structural strengths while connecting to larger-scale change. The involvement of social workers in the policy arena helps our society address individual needs and confront social control—and perhaps shift or redistribute economic and political power so the poor and vulnerable can better help themselves.

TIME TO THINK 2.2

Read through the definitions of the conservative and liberal political perspectives one more time. Where do you consider your political leanings to be and why? What were the influences that pointed you in that particular political direction? Are you registered to vote? If so, do you vote? Consider why you do or do not vote.

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SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social workers share the common goal of social justice: the endless effort to protect human rights and provide for everyone’s human needs, such as housing, food, education, and health care, particularly for those in greatest need. The goal of social justice is what motivates social workers to be advocates. As you will learn, there are many forms of advocacy; however, here we are concerned with the advocacy that social workers undertake to challenge the “what is” in society with the “what should be” (Cohen, de la Vega, & Watson, 2001). Although this form of advocacy reflects the political, economic, and social environment in which it is conducted, some goals are consistent among social advocates across time and circumstance:

- **Fairness:** All citizens have the right to access resources and opportunities.
- **Equality:** All people are entitled to human rights without regard to race, gender, economic, or educational status, or other distinguishing features.
- **Freedom:** People share the need for independent thought and a sense of security.
- **Service:** The most needy of any society require the most commitment.
- **Nonviolence:** A peaceful approach to collaboration, mediation, or negotiation is more respectful of others’ rights than is any form of violence.

If you take on a career as a social worker, you will recontextualize many of these goals of social advocacy in light of your personal and professional experiences.

THE INTERTWINED HISTORY OF SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY AND SOCIAL WORK

As the history of social welfare in the United States has unfolded, so has the history of the profession of social work. Social and environmental issues confronting various population groups in America (poverty, unemployment, discrimination, war, oppression, and the like) have helped shape human services and social programs as well as the nature of social work as a profession.

At times, the United States has developed positive strategies to address specific social problems; consequently, some groups within the population have made tenuous social and economic gains. However, lasting change for the larger society has been limited when measured against complex problems of human need and social justice.

The history of social work and social welfare can be divided into a series of policy eras, designated by landmark policy decisions and initiatives. Considering history in this way integrates the development of social work with a series of political issues and environmental factors that have affected what the nation has been willing and able to do for its citizens’ welfare. The advocacy of social workers has helped ensure a degree of social justice when the government has addressed social concerns.

COLONIAL AMERICA: 1607 TO 1783

The early settlers who came to the United States carried with them the traditions, customs, and values of their countries of origin. Because the majority of the colonists were from England, they conceptualized and sought to address social problems such as poverty as they would have in England.

In colonial America, welfare assistance took the form of mutual aid; colonists relied on one another in times of need. It was the community’s responsibility to provide assistance when an individual experienced a hardship such as a disease or home fire. Relatives and neighbors responded with the necessary assistance until the crisis situation passed or was somehow resolved. As churches took root in the colonies, they, too, would offer assistance to needy people. Overall the public attitude toward poor and needy people was respectful and benevolent, particularly since the harsh living conditions of the colonies placed all the colonists potentially in harm’s way.

Although the initial systems of colonial assistance were informal, the severe economic and environmental conditions experienced by the American settlers prompted a more complex system of welfare assistance. The colonists turned to the principles outlined in the Elizabethan Poor Laws, which were instituted in England in 1601 (Axinn & Stern, 2005). These laws were a response to social and economic forces associated with the breakdown of England’s feudal system, the reduction of the labor force, and industrialization, which increased the need for healthy workers. Further, the laws stipulated that taxes would be levied to finance welfare assistance (Axinn & Stern, 2005).

A concept underpinning the Elizabethan Poor Laws, and the poor laws of colonial America, was the distinction between the deserving poor and the non-deserving poor (Tice & Perkins, 2002). The deserving poor included orphan children, elderly individuals, and people with debilitating physical conditions, who could not provide for themselves through no fault of their own. In contrast, the non-deserving poor were able-bodied vagrants or drunkards, judged as lazy and unwilling to work for a living. Consequently, work and a person’s capability or willingness to be self-supporting through work became an integral part of America’s social welfare system.

Settlement laws were another feature of the Elizabethan Poor Laws. Designed to control the distribution of public assistance, the settlement laws were the domain of small units of government and specified a period of residence for the receipt of assistance.
They were implemented throughout the 13 colonies as a standard requirement for receiving welfare assistance and as a method for localities to monitor the cost of such assistance.

The colonists adapted other forms of relief from Elizabethan Poor Laws. **Outdoor relief** provided assistance to the deserving poor in their own homes and communities; **indoor relief** provided assistance in institutions where the nondeserving poor were sent to work (Rothman, 1971). Other approaches to poverty involved auctioning poor people to wealthy families who were willing to care for them in return for labor and services, and placing poor and sick individuals under the supervision of couples who were willing to assume responsibility for their care (Axinn & Stern, 2005).

**TIME TO THINK 2.3**

After reading the definitions of outdoor and indoor relief, please consider examples of those service perspectives today. For example, what perspective does the meals-on-wheels program represent? What about a mental health or long-term care facility? Are you able to recognize the influence of the Elizabethan Poor Laws on current social policies and services?

**NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICA: 1784 TO 1890**

During the 1800s, the U.S. population expanded westward. In the new settlements, mutual aid remained the main source of help to those in need. An example of this expansion is the orphan trains that ran from about 1853 to the early 1900s, transporting more than 120,000 children, who were often abandoned and alone, from urban centers to 45 states across the country, as well as to Canada and Mexico. This controversial and unusual social experiment marked the beginning of the foster care concept in the United States.

However, the 1800s also saw the rise of advocacy on behalf of people who were poor, who had recently immigrated to the United States, or who were challenged on the basis of physical or mental ability. These people often faced unjust, inhumane, and harsh treatment. The early advocates were often trying to change conditions that had been created by local and governmental policies, ordinances, and rules. Dorothea Dix, for example, was a social activist who lobbied state and federal governments in the mid-1800s to create asylums for those who were mentally ill, especially those who had no other homes (Ezell, 2001, p. 20).

Advocacy also occurred as social workers became politically active and promoted legislation to protect children from oppressive labor practices and adolescents from severely punitive juvenile court systems. Activism by social workers eventually extended to the advancement of the rights of children, workers, women, the elderly, and racial and sexual minorities.

**THE PROGRESSIVE ERA: 1890 TO 1920**

By the end of the 1800s, the nation was rapidly urbanizing. There was an enormous influx of immigrants, and the economy had begun shifting from agriculture and resource based to industry based. These massive social disruptions led to the economic crisis of the 1890s. There was growing awareness in the United States of the value of social reform.

Some of the reformers of this era astutely recognized that documentation of human need through written records was a vital component of advocacy for new policies, practices, and laws. They realized that the general public and government decision makers could be influenced by numbers, categorizations, and qualitative accounts and descriptions of social phenomena. Importantly, they laid the foundation in social work practice for modern data collection systems, comprehensive community needs assessments, and precise descriptions of human conditions.

At the same time, two new social welfare movements—the Charity Organization Society and the settlement movement—emerged for dealing with dependency (Reisch, 1998). Each offered a significant contribution to the development of the social work profession.

The **Charity Organization Society** (COS) was imported from England to the United States in 1877. The COS focused on the individual factors related to poverty, such as alcoholism, poor work habits, and inadequate money management. In general, the COS asked a family in need of relief to fill out an application, which was investigated to ensure a level of need. Then a **friendly visitor**, a volunteer committed to helping COS clients, was assigned to the family and asked to conduct regular home visits. Friendly visitors would attempt to address individual character flaws and encourage clients to gain independence and live moral lives (Chamber, 1986). The direct exchange of cash was strictly avoided.

In light of the growing need for a trained staff, charity organizations developed the paid position of “agent” to visit indigent persons and families and to investigate applications for charity. These agents were the forerunners of professional social workers (Chamber, 1986). Mary Richmond of the Baltimore and Philadelphia COS and Edward T. Devine of the New York COS were early leaders in training agents. In 1898, Devine established and directed the New York School of Philanthropy, which eventually became the Columbia School of Social Work, America’s first school of social work.
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The settlement movement turned attention on the environmental factors associated with poverty. In 1889, Jane Addams, along with Ellen Gates Starr, founded Hull House in a poor Chicago neighborhood where immigrants lived in overcrowded conditions. Hull House was not the first settlement house in America; however, it pioneered advocacy roles in social welfare. Its staff collected information about Hull House’s clients and the residents of the surrounding area and then used this information to influence legislation and social policy (Dolgoff, Feldstein, & Skolnik, 1993, p. 278). In response to the poverty that surrounded Hull House, the settlement house also offered day care for children, a club for working women, lectures and cultural programs, and a meeting place for neighborhood political groups (Axinn & Stern, 2005).

As a result of these efforts, settlement houses and their staff contributed community organization, social action, and social group work to the nascent social work profession. However, although Addams and many others in the settlement movement recognized the existence of class conflict as a reality in the U.S. economic system, they did not build a mass political organization. Consequently, they did not effectively confront social class differences on a national level and failed to challenge the overall distribution of the nation’s resources (Galper, 1975). Instead, settlement house workers supported labor unions, lobbied city officials for sanitation and housing reforms, and fought discrimination in employment practices.

With the rare exception of Addams and a few other settlement house leaders, those involved in the social movements of the Progressive Era were not attuned to the needs of racially diverse populations, especially African Americans (Blau & Abramovitz, 2004). Most reformers took the second-class citizenship of African Americans for granted and did little to challenge racial barriers and assumptions. It was not until 1909 that W. E. B. Du Bois, the first African American to earn a PhD from Harvard University, formed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). That organization gave African Americans a movement for fighting segregation in a mobilized and organized fashion (Blau & Abramovitz, 2004).

With social movements of the Progressive Era came the notion of a helping profession oriented toward social action—in other words, social work. In 1917 Mary Richmond wrote the first social work book, Social Diagnosis, which introduced a methodology and common body of knowledge for the practice of social work. Importantly, Richmond embraced assessment and understanding of human relations, social situations and surroundings, neighborhood conditions, and economic realities. Richmond’s second book, What Is Social Case Work (1922), used six cases from industrialized urban areas to illustrate her definition of social case work. Thus, the case method of working with individuals and families provided an orderly process of practice with individuals, with an emphasis on documenting both needs and social conditions to advocate for social change and reform.

WORLD WAR I: 1914 TO 1918

The political environment of the United States in the years before and following World War I supported the development of social work as a profession but marked a drastic change in its focus. The 1917 Russian Revolution caused a heightened fear of communism, “radicals” were under attack in the United States, and social workers retreated from reform to avoid the political arena and persecution. This turn was recognized at the 1928 Milford Conference, an annual meeting of social work leaders. It was here that Porter Lee, the director of the New York School of Social Work, reported that social workers had shifted their professional
attention from “cause to function”—from a concern with politics to a concern with the efficient day-to-day administration of a social welfare bureaucracy (Blau & Abramovitz, 2004, p. 249).

The turn toward the “function” of social work gave rise to an expansion of practice settings for the profession, to include private family welfare agencies (as most charity organizations were then called), hospitals, schools, mental health facilities, guidance centers, and children’s aid societies. The American National Red Cross employed social workers to provide case work services to families of servicemen and disaster victims in cities, small towns, and rural areas.

It is important to note that throughout this time period, segregation within the profession continued. The National Urban League was developed by African Americans in response to their exclusion from much of mainstream social work services and settings.

The changes in the development of social work were also seen in the number of schools joining the American Association of Schools of Social Work, which was founded in 1919. The association standardized curricula and promoted a master’s degree in social work. Both undergraduate and graduate programs became members of the association (Ginsberg, 2001).

**THE GREAT DEPRESSION: 1929 TO EARLY 1940s**

The stock market crash of 1929, followed by a far-reaching economic depression, brought the United States to the brink of economic disaster. Social service agencies were unprepared to address the mounting needs of not only the indigent but also members of the working class. In time, after listening to the narratives of their clients, social workers began to focus on individual deficits with a growing appreciation for the social and economic factors associated with dependency and need (Axinn & Stern, 1988). Social workers rekindled the “cause” orientation that had been abandoned in the 1920s and lobbied the government to provide an adequate standard of living for all Americans in this time of extraordinary need (Trattner, 1999).

In 1932, the governor of New York, Franklin D. Roosevelt, was elected the nation’s 32nd president. He called for bold government action and instituted a large federal relief program for the needy. The vast majority of social workers endorsed President Roosevelt’s New Deal, which included unemployment insurance and a social security system to deal with the financial insecurity experienced by older persons, dependent children, and individuals.
with physical challenges. Harry Hopkins, a social worker, was appointed head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. This was the first federal program to provide relief to the nation’s citizens on a major scale since the years following the Civil War (Trattner, 1999).

The New Deal provided additional employment opportunities for social workers, who were responsible for state and local public relief. The funds came from a combination of local and federal agencies. Unfortunately, the relief measures neglected to address racial discrimination; minority groups experienced more economic hardship than other Americans.

**RANK AND FILE MOVEMENT**

In the 1930s, progressive social workers organized the “rank and file movement” and began analyzing and criticizing aspects of the New Deal. More specifically, as new social service programs appeared, social workers were hired to administer the programs and serve people in need. The social workers themselves realized they suffered as workers; they earned very low wages, faced massive case loads, and had living standards that were barely better than those of their own clients. Consequently, large numbers of progressive social workers joined the rank and file movement to build labor unions at relief agencies. Additionally, they organized study groups on capitalism and socialism, established a newspaper called *Social Work Today*, and formed labor unions at relief agencies all over the country (see www.rankandfile.net/about-the-contributors/). Some core leaders of the movement joined socialist and communist groups, and connected their efforts as social workers to a broader movement of poor people and workers to fight for a more just economic system.

After World War II, the rank and file movement was disbanded with the nation’s mounting anticommunist sentiments. In fact, the leaders and spokespeople for the movement were fired from welfare agencies and from their jobs at social work schools. The labor unions in welfare departments built by the rank and file movement were outlawed and broken.

The Great Depression and the New Deal had a lasting effect on the nation’s social welfare system—most notably, enactment of the Social Security Act of 1935. Exhibit 2.1 details the major programs that were part of the act, which was the result of noisy political compromise. Whatever faults may be found in the legislation, the Social Security Act widely expanded welfare activities and advanced services and programs for poor persons. It helped prevent destitution and dependency. The fact that it provided cash benefits to recipients was a major step toward enhancing human dignity and personal freedom (Axinn & Stern, 1988; Trattner, 1999).

**WORLD WAR II: 1939 TO 1945**

World War II placed the United States squarely on the global scene and provided near full employment for most Americans. So during this time, issues of poverty were not on the national agenda or on the forefront of social work. Still, throughout the war, social workers were involved in services to the armed forces and their families. In addition, the gains in jobs and income did not apply evenly across races, although Roosevelt did issue Executive Order 8802 prohibiting discrimination in the defense industries, a significant advancement toward civil rights in the workplace (Skocpol, 1995; Trattner, 1999).

World War II, and the prosperity that followed victory, changed the nation’s political climate. But the Great Depression and the New Deal had lasting effects on the social work profession. There were new jobs for social workers, a deeper understanding of human needs in urban and rural areas, and a renewed interest in reform efforts. Private and public welfare agencies acknowledged the social work profession as both a “cause” and a “function” within various fields of practice. The National Association of Social Workers formed in 1955, helping unite the profession through guidelines and a code of ethics that defined roles and responsibilities associated with social work practice.

**AMERICA’S WAR ON POVERTY: 1960 TO 1967**

The 1960s was a time of social unrest and political change in the United States. With the Vietnam War escalating, students and like-minded individuals protested the war across the country. Other movements formed to protest against the lack of rights for women, people with physical and mental challenges, gay people, and people of color. It was the civil rights movement that educated Americans on the extent of prejudice and discrimination in our society and its costs. Books such as Michael Harrington’s...
The Other America made the issue of poverty a public concern and a rallying point for citizen protests. President John F. Kennedy’s New Frontier and President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society programs were federal responses to issues such as these. Both administrations spoke of poverty and instituted a variety of new social welfare initiatives, including Head Start, a program providing preschool education for disadvantaged children; Medicaid, health care for the poor; Medicare, health care for older persons; and the Food Stamp program, a food purchasing program for needy people. Exhibit 2.2 lists some of the programs from this era that have had a lasting effect on social welfare.

A greater number of baccalaureate-level social workers were needed to fill the increasing demand for trained staff as these programs were established. The National Association of Social Workers and the Council on Social Work Education began accepting the Bachelor of Social Work as the entry-level professional degree in the field.

Tired of civil turmoil and the Vietnam War, Americans turned politically conservative and embraced the conservative ideals and concern with civil order promised by Republican President Richard Nixon (1969–1974). President Nixon left the presidency after his participation in the cover-up of the Watergate scandal, a breaking-and-entering scheme at the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C. Vice President Gerald Ford became president (1974–1976) and eventually lost his election bid to one-term Democratic President Jimmy Carter.

Although President Carter (1977–1981) promoted social programs and showed compassion for disenfranchised Americans, his administration was marred by high inflation rates, spiraling gas prices, and an international crisis involving the taking of American hostages in Iran. These events contributed to President Carter’s political demise and failure to gain reelection, while setting the stage for the election of President Ronald Reagan.

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**EXHIBIT 2.1 Programs Instituted With the Social Security Act**

1935: President Franklin Roosevelt signs the Social Security Act, the foundation of the nation’s social welfare system, in response to widespread economic insecurity during the Great Depression.


1939: Social Security expands to include children, survivors of workers, and retirees.

1940: First monthly retirement check is issued for $22.54. About 222,400 people receive Social Security benefits.

1950: President Harry Truman signs an amendment to the Social Security Act to provide a cost-of-living adjustment to offset inflation.

1950s: Social Security benefits expand to include farmworkers, domestic workers, and self-employed people. Cash benefits are added for disabled workers. Early retirement, with reduced benefits, is approved for women at 62 years old.

1961: President John F. Kennedy approves amendments that allow male workers to select early retirement benefits at 62 years old, with reduced benefits.

1965: Medicare program is enacted, partially funded through Social Security payroll taxes.

1965: To address signs of future insolvency in the Social Security Trust Fund, from which benefits are paid, Congress enacts an increase in the self-employment tax, partial taxation of benefits to early retirees, and a gradual increase in the retirement age.

2000s: Amendments to the Social Security Act are discussed, but all reform efforts fail. By 2010 the system is paying out more than it receives in payroll taxes, putting its future at risk.

Source: Adapted from “Social Security Timeline” (n.d.).
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Social Movements

As stated by President Lyndon B. Johnson, the goal for the nation’s involvement in Vietnam was not to win the war but for U.S. troops to support defenses until South Vietnam could take over. By entering the Vietnam War without a clearly stated goal to win, Johnson set the stage for future public and troop disappointment when the United States found itself in a stalemate with the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong (Rosenberg, n.d.).

1. Several movies depict the Vietnam War. Watch one of them and consider why social movements emerged from the Vietnam War that changed the way many people think about military service and issues of society.

2. What similarities does the nation’s current involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan share with the Vietnam War?

3. What, if any, is the impact of voluntary military service on social movements about war?

CURRENT TRENDS

EXHIBIT 2.2 New Frontier and Great Society Programs

NEW FRONTIER, PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY, 1961 TO 1963

- 1961: Peace Corps is established by Executive Order 10924 to promote world peace and friendship.
- 1961: Area Redevelopment Act provides $394 million in benefits to “distressed areas” to combat chronic unemployment in impoverished cities and rural areas by increasing their levels of economic growth.
- 1962: Rural Renewal program provides technical and financial assistance for locally initiated and sponsored programs aimed at ending chronic underemployment and fostering a sound rural economy.
- 1962: Aid to Families with Dependent Children replaces the Aid to Dependent Children program, as coverage is extended to adults caring for dependent children.
- 1963: Community Mental Health Act provides assistance in improving mental health through grants for construction of community mental health centers and for other purposes.

GREAT SOCIETY, PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON, 1963 TO 1969

- 1964: Community Action programs founded by Economic Opportunity Act to fight poverty by promoting self-sufficiency and depending on volunteer work.
- 1964: Job Corps formed to provide free vocational training and education to young adults.
- 1964: Office of Economic Opportunity created by Economic Opportunity Act to oversee a variety of community-based antipoverty programs.
- 1964: Food Stamps Act designed to alleviate hunger and malnutrition of low-income families and individuals by providing the ability to purchase food.
- 1965: Medicare part of Social Security Act enacted to provide federal funding for many of the medical costs of older Americans.
- 1965: Medicaid part of Social Security Act enacted to provide medical care for families and individuals with low income and resources.
- 1965: Volunteers in Service to America founded as the domestic version of Peace Corps, designed to fight poverty (incorporated into AmeriCorps in 1993).
- 1965: Teachers Corp established by Higher Education Act to improve teaching in predominantly low-income areas.
- 1965: Head Start established to provide early childhood education, health, nutrition, and parent-involvement services to low-income children and their families.
- 1966: Model Cities Program established to develop antipoverty programs and alternative forms of local government.
REAGANOMICS: 1981 TO 1989

In 1980, the Republican presidential candidate, Ronald Reagan, beat the incumbent President Carter with a conservative platform that emphasized individual responsibility for one’s own problems rather than the reform of existing systems for social welfare. Reagan called for a smaller federal government, a safety net for only the truly needy, and a lifetime limit on social services. He also embraced trickle-down economics (a version of classical economic theory also known as supply-side economics). The underlying idea was that reducing the tax obligations of the rich would stimulate them to spend more on the consumption of goods and services. In theory, the prosperity of the rich would “trickle down” to middle-class and poorer Americans via the creation of new industries and jobs. There was, however, nothing to prevent the rich from simply hoarding onto their profits, purchasing existing enterprises, or investing in enterprises overseas.

President Reagan’s administration was largely successful in implementing his vision. It shrank government and social welfare programs and services at the federal level through budget cuts and the implementation of means-tested programs and services. It also curtailed programs sanctioned and funded by the Social Security Act, such as Medicaid, food stamps, loans for higher education, and legal assistance for poor people. To offset these federal reductions and maintain some programs and services, many states and communities increased taxation.

After President Reagan’s two terms in office, the 1988 election of his vice president, George H. W. Bush, to the presidency continued Reagan’s conservative approach. President Bush focused his energy on international affairs, showing little inclination to address social issues or domestic policy. Responsibility for social programs shifted from the public to the private sector. President Bush promoted a “thousand points of light” campaign, where communities would develop and often privately fund services and programs to address local needs. Impoverished communities had few resources to dedicate to such points of light, however.

Pushback against the nation’s conservative era came by way of the election of William Clinton. President Clinton (1993–2001) was the first Democratic president since Franklin D. Roosevelt to win a second term of office. In revamping the welfare system, Clinton engaged in political compromise. One result was the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which reversed six decades of federal policy guaranteeing at least a minimum level of financial assistance, or a safety net, for indigent people.

PARTISAN GRIDLOCK

After a two-term Clinton presidency, Republican George W. Bush won the 2000 election. It was one of the closest and most controversial presidential elections in history, and was ultimately decided in the Supreme Court. A prior governor of Texas, President Bush described his political philosophy as “compassionate conservatism,” a view that combined traditional Republican economic policies with concern for the underprivileged. His administration targeted education and volunteerism within faith-based and community organizations as a way of providing social services to the needy.

However, it was not domestic issues that marked the Bush administration. On September 11, 2001, terrorists attacked the World Trade Center towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., by flying passenger jets into them. A fourth suicide flight, en route to the White House or the Capitol building, was thwarted by its passengers. All in all, some 3,000 people died. The event, now referred to as 9/11, defined Bush’s tenure (see www.history.com/topics/9-11-attacks). He declared a “war on terror” and launched two wars in the Middle East. He also established the Department of Homeland Security, a vast bureaucracy charged with preventing any attack on the United States in the future. At the same time, he maintained his pledge to reduce taxes. The result was a huge national debt, a faltering economy, and a national and worldwide credit crisis.

The effect of many of his social initiatives was dwarfed by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the fight against terrorism, and the global war on terror. By the end of his term, President Bush had a public approval rating of 20%, the lowest recorded for any sitting president (Pew Research Center, 2008).

The 2008 election was remarkable for the victory of Democrat Barack Obama, the first African American president. During the campaign, Obama had proposed a platform of change and reform in Washington, with domestic policy and the economy as central themes. In the midst of a downward spiral in the national economy, which became known as the “Great Recession,” he had several serious domestic and international issues to address: the transgressions of Wall Street, America’s financial district, and the damage to the world economy; burgeoning, and suspect, foreclosures on American homeowners; a dysfunctional and unfair health care system; costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; increasing dissatisfaction with immigration policy; and increasing signs...
of global climate change. The Obama administration experienced intransigent pushback on nearly every issue from the Republican members of the House of Representatives and the Senate, who were committed to a smaller federal government and a reduction in the national debt.

The Obama administration’s signature social welfare policy is the Affordable Care Act (ACA), signed into law on March 23, 2010. A controversial piece of social welfare policy because it expands the role of the federal government, the policy enacted comprehensive reforms to improve access to affordable health coverage and to alter insurance company practices. Ideally, the ACA will decrease the nation’s health care costs and make insurance companies more accountable for how premiums are spent.

The ACA primarily affects health care coverage in three ways: through health exchanges, which went into effect in 2014; by expanding Medicaid coverage; and when states decide to create their own basic health programs. In each case, social workers will help people “navigate” the new systems of health care to ensure they receive proper coverage and benefits. Further, the expanded health care provisions address mental or behavioral health, which represents another significant service area where social workers play a vital role.

Donald J. Trump shattered expectations on November 9, 2016, with an election night victory over Hillary Clinton that revealed deep antiestablishment anger among American voters. President Trump achieved one of the most improbable political victories in modern American history, despite a series of controversies that would easily have destroyed other candidates, extreme policies that have drawn criticism from both sides of the aisle, and a lack of conventional political experience (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/topic/trump-administration).

Why did Trump win the election? It appears as though key groups of voters overlooked his personal character and political shortcomings and instead embraced him as an agent of change against corrupt government officials who seemed to pay more attention to the poor than to the middle class.

To keep his campaign promises, President Trump’s administrative agenda highlights several key issues that will result in subsequent changes in policy and budgetary allocations. Included on the agenda are efforts to

- Rebuild the military to give America a firmer footing in pursuing peace through strength.
- Withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement.
- Propose a moratorium on new federal regulations, along with an order that heads of federal agencies and departments identify regulations that challenge employment opportunities.
- Deport illegal immigrants with violent criminal records.
- Safeguard Second Amendment rights.

President Trump’s biggest challenge involves the ACA, which he vowed to repeal and replace. When he took office, approximately half the population was covered by employer-sponsored health insurance, with the other half covered by Medicare, Medicaid, and individual private insurance (Miller, 2016). Changes in the ACA will alter health care coverage for the most vulnerable people, those being covered under Medicaid. Some health policy analysts believe the ACA’s employer mandate might be repealed in the fiscal year 2017 reconciliation bill, meaning it would influence the parts of the ACA that have to do with federal funding. It would pertain to massive parts of the law, including Medicaid expansion, the mandate that everyone must buy insurance, and all taxes and tax credits under the law. The ACA then might be replaced in a fiscal year 2018 reconciliation bill.

**TIME TO THINK 2.5**

What stands out in your mind as you consider the development of social work and social welfare policy over time? What seems to drive the development of social welfare policy?

Is there a point in this history that you find particularly interesting? Why? What are the significant events in the development of the social work profession that draw you to consider social work as a career option?

**THE LIMITATIONS OF SOCIA WELFARE**

Although social reforms have enriched the lives of millions of Americans (Jansson, 1999), they sometimes fail to meet stated or ideal goals. Consider how the notion of the “deserving poor” has affected the provision of social welfare. Our belief in supporting children and older people has characterized American society since colonial times. This fact sends a strong social signal to families that they should be responsible for their own.

Most of the social services that target young and old age categories are crisis interventions rather than preventions. For instance, policies such as the Social Security Act and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families provide a safety net for children and older adults. However, the basic needs of food and clothing are met in a modest fashion under the guise of cost containment. In such an environment, clients live with uncertainty and the practice of social work is restricted.

Although the United States is a rich country, many people are working hard every day but living from paycheck to paycheck. Far too many Americans live in poverty, relying on social programs for their most basic needs. Ideally, changes in social policy would give these underprivileged groups greater access to jobs that pay
a **living wage** and equip them with the tools, such as a good education, to raise their status in society. However, the nation’s social welfare system does little to move working-class and poor people from their current socioeconomic class.

Tellingly, some communities experience persistent poverty and social inequality. In America, these groups are often the victims of racism. There are no policy examples and few social service programs that draw from and honor the cultural backgrounds and personal experiences of people of color. How can the effects of racism be challenged by the profession of social work? The history of social welfare policy suggests the need to address the root causes of social, economic, and political inequality. The 1963 March on Washington, followed by the 1964 Civil Rights Act, demonstrated that organizing people and taking united action can change the course of a nation.

For a more recent example of how movements for social justice can change society, consider the evolution of sexuality-based issues. History illustrates a long, hard struggle among women, lesbians, and gays for equality in all spheres of American life. Individually and collectively, they have been actively involved in civil rights. Through resilience and resourcefulness, this broad-based population has tackled barriers to its own growth and participation in society. Subsequently, political institutions, American corporations, families, faith organizations, and other major American entities have changed power arrangements to ensure a greater degree of equality.

### TIME TO THINK 2.6

What social issues concern you? Do you have student loans or pay taxes? Are you concerned about the environment, affordable health care, voting rights, military engagement, immigration, net neutrality, or legalization of marijuana?

What action could you take to influence a policy or concern? Do you see the federal government as a vehicle to address your concerns? What is your role in bringing a particular issue to the public’s attention? For example, do you vote, volunteer for campaigns, post to blogs, call in to radio shows?

Are organizations on your campus or in your neighborhood working on social issues? Have you participated or will you participate in such an organization? Why or why not?

### SUMMARY

Approaches to social welfare have changed over the past few centuries of American life, and the social work profession has evolved alongside those changes. However, despite improvements in many realms of life, the problems to which social welfare responds have remained.

There is a rhythm of social responses to social welfare problems and social issues. As this chapter indicates, economic ups and downs, wars, political shifts from conservative to liberal perspectives, and attitudes toward individual responsibilities are all factors that influence development of the social welfare system. The result is a fragmented approach to addressing human needs.

Currently many issues are facing the social welfare system. Debates over the nation’s health care system and immigration policies, for instance, continue as cutbacks are made in programs to assist those in need. Determining how to intervene in issues such as these has always been a problem for our nation. This is particularly true in relation to providing assistance for those who are poor and appear to be able to work. Much depends on our willingness to commit to helping those in need.

### TOP 10 KEY CONCEPTS

- conservative
- deserving poor
- liberal
- means testing
- nondeserving poor
- safety net
- social control
- social justice
- social welfare
- social welfare policy
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Think about your political ideologies and where they came from throughout your lifetime. Do they align with your parents’ ideologies? Is this an issue? Why or why not? What experiences formed your opinions on social welfare services and social work?

2. As you read through the history of the development of social work, what period of time most captured your attention? What is it about this time that piques your interest?

3. Define the current political scene, environmental conditions, human needs, and social justice issues in the United States or your country of origin. How have these factors contributed to debate on a policy issue and a specific social welfare policy?

4. Take time to review Exhibit 2.1, the Social Security Act timeline. Discuss the issues and actions you think have been the most effective in helping the needy.

EXERCISES

1. Learn more about various political parties and their stances on social welfare by going to their websites. In addition to the Democratic and Republican parties, seek information about the Libertarian Party, the Green Party, the Progressive Party, the Constitution Party, or others that run candidates in your locale. Focusing on the issue of social welfare, locate the parties on a spectrum from most liberal to most conservative.

2. Read an editorial from one of the nation’s leading newspapers or news websites. What political perspective does the editorial reflect, and how did you reach this conclusion?

3. Role-play a situation in which you must ask for public assistance. How did you feel about being in need and asking for help?

4. Create a policy timeline using the periods of the Elizabethan Poor Laws, colonial America, the Progressive Era, the Great Depression, the War on Poverty, the Great Society, Reaganomics, the period of reforming the welfare state, the Obama presidency, and the Trump administration. Select one landmark event from each period and read about the relevant political situation, environmental factors, human needs, and social justice issues of the time.

5. Choose a social welfare service available in your community. Gather the history of this agency. In what ways does its history compare to what you read in this chapter?

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Great Depression (www.history.com/topics/great-depression): Defines the Great Depression and how it impacted the lives of people. Provides text, images, and video about the era that launched many new social programs
- Settlement movement (www.cfsettlements.org): Examines how the movement changed public health and working conditions for many workers
- Social Security Act (www.ssa.gov/history/pdf/histdev.pdf): Considers the significance of the Social Security Act from a historical perspective and as a safety network for Americans
- Social Welfare History Project (www.socialwelfarehistory.com): Provides more information about the Charity Organization Societies and other relevant topics
- Social Work Pioneers (http://www.naswfoundation.org/pioneers/): Describes social work leaders and advocates in the context of their contribution to the profession
- War in Vietnam (www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war): Covers the relevance of the war in terms of public unrest
- White House website (https://www.whitehouse.gov/): Provides an updated list of the administration’s social welfare priorities and associated activities

STUDENT STUDY SITE

SAGE edge (edge.sagepub.com/cox2e)

Sharpen your skills with SAGE edge at edge.sagepub.com/cox2e

SAGE edge for Students provides a personalized approach to help you accomplish your coursework goals in an easy-to-use learning environment.