



CONNECTING SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY TO FIELDS OF PRACTICE

EDITED BY

Ira C. Colby Catherine N. Dulmus Karen M. Sowers



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Preface

The provisions or benefits provided through public policies are at times somewhat difficult to understand and reconcile. This is true for liberals and conservatives alike. Conservatives typically note that welfare program benefits are too liberal and encourage dependency; liberal commenters argue that benefits are minimal at best. What is interesting to consider is when two people, looking at the exact same data or pieces of information, are drawn to different conclusions.

An interesting experiment is to take the following “facts” and survey people asking if these cash benefits are too high, just right, or too low.

In 2011:

- The maximum SNAP (Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program) benefit for a family of three was \$526 monthly or approximately \$17 per day.
- The maximum SSI (Supplemental Security Insurance) benefit was \$674.
- The maximum Social Security Disability payment was \$2,366.
- Unemployment benefits differ by state and in Texas, state law limits unemployment benefit payments to less than \$415 a week, though due to the economic recession the benefit period was increased from 26 to 93 weeks.

You might also ask if the following program policies are too limiting, appropriate, or too liberal.

In 2012:

- TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) continues to enforce a lifetime limit of 5 years for benefit eligibility.
- In most jurisdictions, runaway, throwaway, or push-out youth (e.g., homeless youth without an adult caretaker) are not allowed to stay in homeless shelters.
- In most areas, a teenager up to age 16, unless she or he has parental consent, generally is not allowed to engage in mental health counseling.
- It is common practice for “food banks” to limit the number of times an individual or family may seek assistance.

- Adults can post bail or bonds following an arrest; juveniles are not able to post bail or bond.
- In many states, pleading guilty to a crime by reason of insanity is not an option.

You will find diverse opinions from people looking at the same information. Why? The answer is very simple—people’s accumulated life experiences, their personal values, and their beliefs lead them to certain conclusions.

The same holds true for elected officials, agency administrators, and individuals who sit on boards of directors in the nonprofit organizations. They create policy to address a specific problem or issue. Their assessment of the issue and how they frame a policy is based on their own experiences, personal values, and beliefs.

Social work practice is framed by these decisions. As employees in a nonprofit or in a governmental agency, practitioners simply cannot do whatever they feel is appropriate in a worker/client, agency-based situation. In effect, policies, generally crafted by others, limit the practitioners’s scope of practice and the benefits/services that can be made available to the organization’s clients.

The role and importance of policy in social service organizations results in two critical options or choices for social workers. First, the social worker can remain passive and follow the particular policy or policies even if the practitioner believes the policies are questionable at best. Or, second, the social worker proactively engages in *policy practice* to influence a particular policy. This text is organized in a manner that builds on the second option. In addition, it is designed as a social welfare policy practice text book for undergraduate and graduate students in social work programs. The text provides a broad overview of social policy practice in the United States and an introduction to policy practice within a global context. The book addresses policy practice with specific populations (disability, aging, persons with HIV-AIDS) and in specific practice arenas (mental health, child welfare, health care, housing). This book addresses the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) required competencies for accreditation. Specifically, the book addresses the following required accreditation competencies:

- Educational Policy 2.1.1—Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly (advocate for client access to the services of social work).
- Educational Policy 2.1.4—Engage diversity and difference in practice.
- Educational Policy 2.1.5—Advance human rights and social and economic justice.
- Educational Policy 2.1.8—Engage in policy practice (analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance social well-being; collaborate with colleagues and clients for effective policy action).

- Educational Policy 2.1.9—Respond to contexts that shape practice.
- Educational Policy 2.1.10—Engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate with organizations and communities.

The contributors to this text provide a variety of perspectives on different topics including mental health, persons with disabilities, health, housing, HIV/AIDS, and child welfare. Purposefully, many of the authors introduce their topical areas through global lenses to help us better understand how other nations address common issues. The authors also take clear-cut positions; they do not hide from the reader their own beliefs or perspectives.

Each chapter begins with a brief reflective overview in which the editors share their thoughts and poses general, overarching questions. The editors encourage, actually expect readers to develop their own additional questions. To be honest, the reader's individual questions are much more important and relevant to the individual. Questioning is a sound exercise that facilitates critical thinking by building different scenarios. At the end of each chapter, there is a set of suggested key words, online resources, and additional discussion questions. Again, these are simply tools to encourage you to build on the author's particular thesis: to search through various websites, do your own "data mining," open yourself to diverse opinions, form your own opinions, and propose policy solutions.

We firmly believe that social workers must be directly engaged in policy development. The social work profession can no longer afford those who do not work with individuals, families, groups, and communities to create policies. The time has arrived for the social work profession to support the crafting of just and fair public policies. Then and only then will our communities be able to grow with all people realizing their full potential. Our clients depend on the profession to fully engage in policy practice. To do otherwise will only continue to further marginalize the poor and disenfranchise certain ethnic and racial population groups.

Ira C. Colby
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About the Editors

Ira C. Colby, DSW, is dean of the Graduate College of Social Work, University of Houston, in Houston, Texas. Dr. Colby has served on, chaired, or held elective positions in a number of national social work associations, including past president of the Council on Social Work Education, and serves on a number of journal editorial boards. Dr. Colby has served as principal investigator on many research projects, accumulating approximately \$8 million in external funding; he has authored more than 60 publications and presented more than 70 papers at national and international forums. He has been recognized with a number of awards, including an Honorary Doctorate of Humanities from Springfield College, his baccalaureate degree institution; induction as a Fellow into the National Academies of Practice; the Distinguished Alumni Award of the Virginia Commonwealth University, and awarded Honorary Professorship, East China Technological University, Shanghai.

Catherine N. Dulmus, PhD, LCSW, is associate professor, associate dean for research, and director of the Buffalo Center for Social Research at the University at Buffalo and research director at Hillside Family of Agencies in Rochester, New York. She received her baccalaureate degree in Social Work from Buffalo State College in 1989, a master's degree in Social Work from the University at Buffalo in 1991, and a doctoral degree in Social Welfare from the University at Buffalo in 1999. As a researcher with interests that include community-based research, child and adolescent mental health, evidence-based practice, and university–community partnerships, Dr. Dulmus has focused on fostering interdependent collaborations among practitioners, researchers, schools, and agencies critical in the advancement and dissemination of new and meaningful knowledge. She has authored or co-authored several journal articles and books and has presented her research nationally and internationally. Prior to obtaining her PhD, she acquired almost a decade of experience in the fields of mental health and school social work.

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