

# Introduction

Since the release of the second edition of *Australian Social Policy and the Human Services*, there has been considerable political instability and unrest at the international, national and local levels, leading to social and institutional changes that include growing inequality and polarisation, even in relatively stable and developed countries such as Australia. This has created increasing threats to individual and community wellbeing and presented both challenges and opportunities for governments, policy-makers and people such as human services workers, who have been required to devise means to address those threats and promote wellbeing. The development and implementation of social policy is a key mechanism by which society can be made more just, fair and equitable, and the focus of this book is on how this has been operationalised and implemented in a changing social and policy environment, with varying degrees of success.

Social policy resists a neat, narrow definition, but broadly speaking it provides the framework for the welfare state – that is, the set of institutional arrangements established to achieve citizen wellbeing. The institutions most relevant to this discussion are generally categorised as the *human services*, and this draws a narrower focus than public policy, which is taken to refer to all elements of government intervention. The boundaries are blurred, however, because many aspects of public policy (such as taxation and, increasingly, climate change policies) involve the distribution and redistribution of resources, and generally aim for outcomes that are broadly compatible with those of social policy.

The term ‘social policy’ refers to both a field of study (examining the causes of social problems and social need) and a set of practices (such as government and human services actions to shape the distribution of wellbeing and improve the circumstances of members of society who are experiencing disadvantage). Typically, the practices aim to maintain or enhance wellbeing in relation to what the famous UK economist William Beveridge (1942) named the ‘five giant evils’ (want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness), which he saw as standing in the way of social progress and the creation of the welfare state. These concepts are relevant today (categorised as poverty, poor health, lack of education, inadequate housing and unemployment), although in recent times there have also been other drivers of disadvantage that warrant analysis, including racism, misogyny and homophobia. Social policy in Australia and overseas also aims to address areas of

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concern, such as the special needs of minority groups, social cohesion in the face of immigration and what constitutes citizenship rights. This adds to the complexity of social policy, but recognising the current and historical context is a precondition of human services professionals being able to pursue social change with the aims of promoting social justice and human rights, increasing wellbeing and reducing inequality.

Almost all social policies benefit some groups in society (sometimes by stimulating behaviour and often by redistributing resources) rather than everyone, so policy decisions are usually contested by some interests and lobby groups. How do we save and enhance democracy without degenerating into short-term populist self-interest within local and regional groupings, as appears to be happening in many locations at the beginning of the 2020s? Debates over how those 'deserving' of welfare are distinguished from those deemed 'undeserving', how much people are prepared to pay in taxation to support public and merit goods and how much they are willing to support redistribution to the less well-off all involve legitimate disagreement between well-meaning people. In what ways have welfare strategies been the outcomes of tensions between alternative perspectives on appropriate behaviour in modern democratic society? How did any specific contested issues come to be nominated as social problems and by whom? Which ideological forces are proposing change or opposing it? One way to progress better understanding, and to achieve potential resolution, of these debates is to understand the role of dominant values and perspectives on the issues. Institutions such as the family and population groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, those who are ethnically or sexually diverse and those who have mental ill-health or disability have all been affected by our society's dominant predominantly white, male, Christian values. It is thus important to be aware of how values have developed and changed over time and of their impact on any given social policy.

## The study and practice of social policy

As an academic study discipline, social policy is a research-oriented field that draws on ideas and analytical methods from sociology, economics and political science as well as the historical dimensions of these three frameworks. It overlaps with more specialised applied disciplines, including psychology, demography and criminology. This makes social policy analysis eclectic but also relevant to the complexity of real life. Finally, underpinning all social policy analysis is an element of philosophy, since competing value decisions about social justice and fairness drive analysis and practice, as does the ethics of individual decision-making and action.

As a set of practices, social policy consists of initiatives intended to address social needs, and it typically entails a range of public interventions and activities of governments at all levels as well as activities of non-government organisations (NGOs) and, increasingly, the private sector entering into partnership with

government to determine need and provide resources. The term ‘social policy’ is used to describe various stages of initiative development, including the following:

- the identification of social problems and the development of commitments to address them (for example, government interventions intended to alleviate poverty)
- the mechanisms and arrangements to achieve those interventions (such as needs assessments and subsequent cash transfers in the forms of pensions and benefits)
- the impacts and outcomes of specific interventions (such as the effects of the Age Pension on the wellbeing of older citizens).

Social policy analysis should not necessarily focus only on the visible outputs of government welfare or social services departments, and non-government welfare organisations; it is much more than the assistance provided through institutions involved in human services delivery, which are explicitly labelled as social policy. The study of Australian social policy needs to be much broader than an examination of institutional arrangements such as pensions and benefits, or of welfare services provided by housing or healthcare charities, which are explicitly and visibly delivered to assist ‘the poor’ or ‘the needy’; rather, it should encompass the full range of factors that affect Australians’ standard of living. For example, healthcare policy is not simply the product of the Departments of Health in the States or Territories since Australian Treasury decisions about taxing tobacco or alcohol have dramatic impacts on health. The study of social policy should therefore include a range of initiatives and interventions that are broader in scope than explicit welfare services, including the regulation of state–market relationships and government revenue raising through taxation. This is because decisions about economic management have a fundamental influence on the wellbeing of citizens that is often more far-reaching than any explicit policies and programs labelled as welfare mechanisms. A key point is that all decisions made which impact on the wellbeing of citizens are choices, and those choices have consequences which can be positive or negative for certain groups of people. Finally, it must be remembered that government and organisational inaction can also be an important element in shaping social policy.

Equally, social policy is not developed only in parliament and other powerful decision-making institutions; it is implemented, reworked and lived at the grass-roots level of human services practice, in what are often trying and highly complex circumstances. It is only through sound knowledge of what social policy is and how it is formed, implemented and evaluated, and through the capacity to bring critical analysis to their work, that human services practitioners can operate in systematic ways for the benefit of their clients. In this book, while cognisant of broad trends in public policy, we restrict the focus to what is commonly understood to be social policy, and particularly to the human services institutions intended to deliver social policies and the implications for human services practitioners of specific social policies and their associated interventions.

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Our primary focus is Australia and the development of Australian social policy. We do not emphasise comparative social policy, although inevitably we use some comparative analyses of other countries' policies and welfare regimes in consideration of the development of particular aspects of social policy in Australia. More generally, the international context of Australian political life at a time of heightened awareness of globalisation and the prevalence of international social policy transfer provides a framework for discussions of substantive areas of Australian social policy.

## Organisation of the book

This edition retains the basic structure of the first two editions; however, every chapter has been thoroughly rewritten to refine the arguments and analysis and to update developments since the last edition. Part 1 considers fundamental debates and principles in social policy analysis and human services practice, and highlights contested concepts that we believe underpin many elements of social policy debate, concerning life-course risks, responsibility for wellbeing, eligibility for assistance, entitlements and redistribution of resources. It relates these contested concepts to selected aspects of social policy analysis and human services delivery that are discussed later in the book. Part 2 sets the scene for subsequent analysis by providing a brief overview of Australian social policy history and outlining models of policy-making. Part 3 discusses the human services sector, in particular presenting analytical models that categorise change over time in the relationship between the state and human services NGOs, and between the state and the private sector. It also identifies changes in the human services workforce as consequences of changing service delivery models and funding arrangements. Finally, Part 4 covers a series of discrete social policy areas. Each chapter presents a brief historical overview of policy in the selected area and identifies how changes over time illustrate the outcome of contestation over basic questions of priorities in social policy. A significant addition to this third edition is the inclusion of an interactive resource, which gives access to immediate practical examples of the material covered plus up-to-date debates on the concepts. In this way, the reader is provided with expanded opportunities to link theory and practice, continually reflect on their learning and use their skills in critical analysis to deconstruct policy decisions.

## Aims of the book

Readers are expected to be students of social work or related human services or practitioners in the field. They are therefore likely to be committed to principles of fairness and social justice and to hope that their work will ultimately lead to improvement in the lives of people experiencing distress or disadvantage. They may be planning to work directly with clients experiencing obvious disadvantage (such as those who are homeless and long-term unemployed) or with clients experiencing less visible forms of disadvantage (such as family and domestic violence, poverty

and old age). Through dealing with many clients and considering patterns of disadvantage, however, they may find themselves asking the question, ‘Why, in a rich country like Australia, which possesses services to help people, does such disadvantage continue to exist?’ This is a fundamental question about the unequal distribution of society’s resources and why this situation is perpetuated. It will lead readers to further questions, such as, ‘Why has there been a concerted effort in the past 20 years to transfer responsibility for managing social risks from governments to households?’ and ‘What can human services practitioners do to address those patterns beyond the amelioration of individual disadvantage?’ One aim of this book is to encourage readers to consider such questions as they learn about the fundamentals of social policy. In essence, we repeatedly return to the questions, ‘Who gets what?’, ‘Who decides?’ and ‘On what basis are those decisions made?’

Readers are at the centre of learning in this book, which has been constructed primarily to assist in the development of informed practice through an understanding of social policy, given that social policy provides the framework in which human services practitioners operate on a daily basis. Its analytical framework will generate policy literacy – that is, it will provide readers with not merely the ability to describe policy-related legislation but also the skills to understand the impacts of social policy in specific policy areas. It also offers critiques built on informed questions about why and how particular policies have come to be developed, administered and implemented, how their outcomes are measured and who determines their success or failure. The book aims to assist with skills development in making links between policy and practice, in order to develop readers’ capacity to deliver appropriate and effective services and to advocate improved social policy.

In accordance with learning outcomes for students required by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) and the Australian Community Workers Association (ACWA), we aim to introduce students to the following areas of study:

- the structure of society and the influence of class, gender, age, intellectual and physical ability, sexuality, race and ethnicity on inequality and disadvantage
- the contextual development of the distribution of resources and social welfare arrangements, and their history and organisation
- the nature of social problems and the organisational locations where they might be resolved
- the social structures and ideologies that generate and maintain disadvantage and oppression, and particularly the tensions of working from a social justice perspective in a neoliberal political climate (AASW 2013; ACWA 2014a)

It is vital that links between policy and practice are understood and implemented by readers as they develop their practice skills and knowledge base. Accordingly, we have sought to incorporate the AASW’s (2013) and ACWA’s (2014b) practice standards in the theory, concepts and exercises presented in each chapter. After completing each chapter and its set of exercises, and in conjunction with their educators, readers are encouraged to identify which of the following practice standards

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are most relevant for the chapter's particular focus and to explain why and how the chapter and exercises have enhanced their policy literacy as part of their skills development. The practice standards require practitioners to develop their knowledge and practice skills, including their understanding of the following areas:

- micro and macro levels of social policy and social systems, and their impacts
- the legislative context of their area of practice
- the impacts of sociopolitical, economic and environmental factors on individuals, communities and groups
- the effects of inequality, disadvantage and discrimination
- underlying theories and concepts from other related disciplines and how these align with and differ from social work theory and concepts
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and ways of knowing
- culture, equity and diversity, and their impacts on practitioners and clients
- practitioner cultural values and experiences and their impacts on practice (AASW 2013; ACWA 2014b).

The practice standards also require practitioners to possess the ability to carry out the following tasks:

- respond to requests for information and comment on policy issues when appropriate and when the opportunity arises
- critically analyse their area of practice with respect to power, disadvantage and sociopolitical factors at all levels
- review and analyse social policy and challenge social policy that impacts clients negatively
- identify and recognise organisational systems and procedures that may be oppressive or discriminatory, and advocate change
- think through and recognise ethical issues
- recognise their personal responsibility for, and defend, their decisions and recommendations (AASW 2013; ACWA 2014b).

In addition to embodying the practice standards outlined above, each chapter has a set of nominated learning objectives, with the intention of encouraging readers to link theory and practice at all times and to constantly reflect on their own reaction to and perception of the material presented. This is in order to ground their learning and enhance their capacity to question the assumptions underpinning government and organisational decisions about the formulation and implementation of social policy. Specifically, readers are guided to develop and articulate their own critiques of how government positions on the contested concepts of welfare, which we introduce in Chapter 1, shape the scope of the welfare state and the extent to which the amelioration of disadvantage is undertaken by the state. A key theme, to which we return throughout the book, is the roles that the values, ethics and ideas of morally sound decisions play at all levels, including those of governments, organisations and the practitioner's own frame of reference and standpoint. We encourage an analysis

of social policy cognisant that it is about choices and consequences, including any unintended consequences of further entrenching disadvantage and deepening divisions within society. To minimise such consequences first requires an awareness of their existence.

## Terminology

Contemporary terminology varies regarding organisations delivering human services in the welfare state. The sector includes voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutual societies. Common phrases used in the literature include ‘not-for-profit welfare organisations’, ‘non-government organisations’, ‘community services organisations’, ‘human services organisations’ and ‘third-sector organisations’. We have used the term ‘non-government organisations’, or ‘NGOs’, in this edition, which we take to mean organisations that exist parallel to government organisations and that are values driven and generally reinvest any surpluses to further social, environmental or cultural objectives. We generally use the term ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’, but sometimes it is necessary to use the term ‘Indigenous’ to describe these cultural groups.



# PART 1

## Debates and principles



# 1

## Fundamental debates in social policy

### Learning objectives

Engagement with this chapter will assist students to do the following:

- **UNDERSTAND** and critique the ideological debates upon which contested concepts of welfare are based
- **IDENTIFY** competing positions on key conceptual principles underpinning welfare state provision
- **SPECIFY** the difference between equality and equity and understand the role of that difference in relieving or exacerbating disadvantage
- **UNDERSTAND** the basic structure of Australia's political system
- **RECOGNISE** that government provision of resources and benefits is underpinned by political ideology, and understand the ways in which such provision may be implemented, adjusted or indeed stopped as governments change
- **LOCATE** the role of human services workers in implementing social policy and appreciate how this role has the potential to be either emancipatory or disempowering for the end users of services



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Social policy encompasses both the academic study of the causes of social problems and social need, and the practicalities of policies and administrative arrangements undertaken by governments and other key players such as non-government organisations (NGOs) with the intention of improving citizen wellbeing, especially the wellbeing of members of a society who are experiencing disadvantage. It is much broader than the government provision of social security and personal support to protect people from life course risks that may appear in childhood, sickness or old age.

Such government spending on tangible welfare services is really just the tip of the social policy iceberg (Dean 2012). Social policy is a more comprehensive part of the welfare state and includes a substantial range of human services, as well as occupational welfare and fiscal welfare, which we explain more fully in the next section. Briefly, in addition to income support and personal care, social policy is concerned with provisions and services that are believed to reduce inequality and to contribute to the achievement of socially acceptable minimum standards, such as health care, housing, family policy, employment services and employment regulation (Fitzpatrick 2011a; Hudson, Kuhner & Lowe 2015). To address these wide-ranging social issues, it must also deal with broadly economic matters that have everyday effects on most people's lives, such as industry policy and taxation policy, as well as issues of public and national concern such as climate change and immigration. Social policy invariably involves the activities of a combination of government departments and non-government human services organisations, and may include the actions of private organisations that impact citizen wellbeing. In considering how governments and the human services define *citizen wellbeing* and take steps to achieve it, however, we must consider contested definitions of *need* and options to address it as well as questions regarding the distribution of resources in society (such as income, education, health care and housing).

Human need may be a result of individual physical or psychological health, life stage (childhood, youth or old age) or broader social or cultural factors – in particular, social processes like changing patterns of family formation and the operation of the labour market. In turn, these may result from economic or social forces, such as economic downturns and unemployment, that create disadvantage and dependency in sections of the population. Social policy concerns methods of supporting people who are deemed to have a range of socially acceptable dependencies (such as ageing and child care) as well as those with less socially acceptable dependencies (such as unemployment or drug addictions). There are variations over time and between governments regarding what constitutes need and which dependencies are seen to be acceptable, as well as in how they respond to those experiencing disadvantage. An example is the introduction by governments of tighter eligibility criteria for a range of benefits, as we discuss throughout this book. Making sense of the debates that surround this subject requires familiarity with social science traditions and paradigms, which we cover in subsequent chapters. These are not always consistent with each other, which underscores the complexity of the enterprise we call *social policy*.