

Social welfare

Social work has often been taken as a synonym for social welfare. However, the term social welfare has a very loose meaning, and may mean different things in different jurisdictions in the world. Social welfare generally refers to states' services designed to protect citizens from the economic risks and insecurities of life. The western style social welfare programmes were installed in response to industrialization in urban cities. Over the decades, a general consensus is reached that states are responsible for protecting all those unable to care for themselves for whatever reasons. Social welfare is a matter of right rather than of need. Financing of states' social welfare programmes basically comes from public revenue. In this regard, social welfare is one of the systems of transfer payments to bridge the gap between the poor and the rich. As the format and nature of social welfare programmes becoming more comprehensive and diversified, covering increasingly more sectors of the society, meeting more identified needs; the earlier version of social welfare has changed substantially in the modern era.

In the modern era social welfare is often interpreted with a broad meaning to include public provisions of education, health, housing and public assistance. In this manner, it is more appropriately connected to the conception of the welfare state. In an ideal welfare state the government plays a key role in the protection and promotion of the economic and social well-being of its citizens, based on the principles of equality of opportunity, equitable distribution of wealth, and public responsibility for those unable to avail themselves of the minimal provisions for a reasonable standard of life.

Definition of Social Welfare

What is social welfare? A broad definition may well include all organized societal responses that promote the social well-being of a population. This would include education, health, rehabilitation, protective services for adults and children, public assistance, social insurance, services for those with physical and mental disabilities, job training programs, marriage counselling, psychotherapy, pregnancy counselling, adoption, and numerous other related activities designed to promote social well-being.

In the *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, P. Nelson Reid (1995) defines social welfare in this way:

Social welfare is perhaps best understood as an idea, that idea being one of a decent society that provides opportunities for work and human meaning, provides reasonable security from want and assault, promotes fairness and evaluation based on individual merit, and is economically productive and stable. The idea of social

welfare is based on the assumption that human society can be organized and governed to produce and provide these things, and because it is feasible to do so, the society has a moral obligation to bring it to fruition. (p. 2206)

The term **social welfare**, then, refers to the full range of organized activities of public and voluntary agencies that seek to prevent, alleviate, or contribute to solving a selected set of social problems. For some who view social welfare broadly—from the concept that a society pools its resources for the general welfare of all—social welfare encompasses public facilities such as libraries, public parks, and hospitals. Others include social support to corporations, sometimes called “corporate welfare,” or the extensive investment that some countries such as the United States make to businesses in addition to investment in people with need. Still others view social welfare more narrowly, to consist of programs that address issues such as poverty and child maltreatment. The length and breadth of the list of social problems typically depend on the values perspective of the person compiling the list, the historical time in which the list is developed, and the perceived economic resources available to meet the social welfare problems listed. As you read on, consider how individual and professional values shape one’s views about what constitutes social welfare.

Social welfare is the well-being of the entire society. Social welfare is not the same as standard of living but is more concerned with the quality of life that includes factors such as the quality of the environment (air, soil, water), level of crime, extent of drug abuse, availability of essential social services, as well as religious and spiritual aspects of life. Standard of living means financial health of a population, as measured by per capita income and consumption of goods and services by individuals or households. Quality of life means daily living enhanced by wholesome food and clean air and water, enjoyment of unfettered open spaces, conservation of wildlife and natural resources and security from crime. While social services means benefits and facilities such as education, food subsidies, health care, and subsidized housing provided by a government to improve the life and living conditions of the children, disabled, the elderly, and the poor in the national community.

Social work is the primary profession that works within the social welfare system and with those the system serves. Social workers implement planned social change activities prescribed by social welfare institutions. They facilitate change by working with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities and at the societal level to improve social functioning. Social workers advocate for social and economic justice within the social

welfare system, making needed resources available to members of vulnerable populations—children, elderly people, those with disabilities, and those living in poverty.

Social workers within the social welfare system assist abused and neglected children and their families, pregnant and parenting teens, the homeless and others living in poverty, individuals with health and mental health problems, youth and adults within the criminal justice system, employees in the workplace, refugees across the world, and individuals with a myriad of other needs. They organize neighbourhoods and communities to strengthen or create programs and policies to better meet human needs, and advocate for change in a variety of roles at state, national, and global levels. Individuals involved in other helping professions work closely with social workers in planned change at all levels.

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