

THE STUDENT'S COMPANION TO

# SOCIAL POLICY

EDITED BY

Pete Alcock, Tina Haux,  
Vikki McCall and Margaret May



SIXTH EDITION

WILEY Blackwell

# The Student's Companion to Social Policy



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# Notes on Contributors

**Pete Alcock** is Emeritus Professor of Social Policy and Administration at the University of Birmingham. He had been teaching and researching in social policy for over thirty years, and has written widely on social policy, the voluntary sector, social security, poverty and social exclusion, and anti-poverty policy.

**Elizabeth Cookingham Bailey** is a Lecturer in Public Service Management at the University of South Wales and teachings across the fields of social policy, public policy and public administration. Her research interests include education policy, the policymaking process, social policy history and voluntary sector.

**Laura Bainbridge** is a Lecturer in the School of Law at the University of Leeds. Her scholarly interests lie at the nexus between social policy, criminology and political science. She specialises in enforced alcohol abstinence and the multi-level processes in which violence reduction policies ‘travel’ across the globe.

**Derek Birrell** is Emeritus Professor of Social Policy at Ulster University. He has published on a wide range of social policy issues, including social security and devolution and health and social care. His work includes books on devolution in the UK, Direct Rule and Northern Ireland and multi-level governance in the UK.

**Catherine Bochel** is Associate Professor in Policy Studies at the University of Lincoln. She has undertaken research across a variety of areas of social and public policy and has particular interests in the policy process, participation and petitions systems, on all of which she has published widely.

**Hugh Bochel** is Professor of Public Policy at the University of Lincoln. His wide-ranging teaching and research interests across social policy come together around concerns with the policy process and the politics of social policy.

**Claire Callender** is Professor of Higher Education Policy both at University College London (UCL) Institute of Education and at Birkbeck, University of London. Her research focuses on higher education student finances and its consequences for the sector, prospective students, students and graduates.

**Eleanor Carter** is a Research Fellow at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford and is also Research Director for the Government Outcomes Lab. Eleanor’s research investigates challenges in coordinating complex public service delivery networks and collaborations.

**Paul Chaney** is Professor of Politics and Policy at Cardiff University. He is Co-Director of Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data (WISERD). His research and teaching interests include: territorial politics, public policymaking, civil society, and equality and human rights on which he has written widely.

**Daniel Clegg** is Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Edinburgh. His research focuses on the comparison of welfare states in Europe with a particular focus on unemployment benefits, social assistance and labour market policies.

**Bob Coles** is an Honorary Fellow at the University of York. He has a long-standing interest in youth

policy and helped to establish it as a sub-area within social policy, developing links between policy, research and practice. His research has focused on vulnerable young people.

**Micheál L. Collins** is Assistant Professor of Social Policy at University College Dublin. His research and teaching interests focus on the economics of social policy, income distribution, taxation, fiscal welfare, pensions, economic evaluation and public policy.

**Guy Daly** is Professor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Coventry University. His research interests are in health policy, social care, housing and local government, and the governance of public services generally. He also has significant practical experience of the governance of public services, including as current social housing provider trustee and NHS non-executive director.

**Howard Davis** is an independent researcher and academic. He previously served as Professor of Social and Local Policy, Coventry University, and Director of the Local Government Centre, Warwick Business School, as well as having membership of governmental and partnership bodies and advisory panels. His research covers local government and public service governance.

**Hartley Dean** is Emeritus Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics. Prior to his academic career he had been a welfare rights worker. His enduring academic interests stem from concerns with social disadvantage, human need and welfare rights.

**Peter Dwyer** is Emeritus Professor of Social Policy at the University of York. His teaching and research focused on issues related to social citizenship, inclusion/exclusion, welfare and migration, and welfare conditionality.

**Nick Ellison** is Professor of Social Policy at the University of York. His research and teaching interests are wide ranging and include UK welfare politics in historical and contemporary perspective, citizenship in theory and practice, policy analysis, and global and international social policy.

**Jane Falkingham** is Professor of Demography and International Social Policy at the University of Southampton, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, and the Director of the ESRC Centre for Population Change. Her research interests lie at the intersection of demographic change and social pol-

icy and span both developed and developing country contexts, with a particular focus on ageing and the changing life course.

**Kevin Farnsworth** is Reader in Comparative, International and Global Social Policy at the University of York. His work focuses on broad questions relating to the political economy of welfare states, including the influence of business on social policy, economic crisis and corporate welfare.

**Deirdre Flanigan** is a practising discrimination lawyer with a background in human rights law.

**Gerardo Javier Arriaga-García** is a Research Associate at the Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship (CREME) at Aston University. His research interests lie in the areas of poverty, inequality, conditional cash transfers and welfare.

**Jon Glasby** is Professor of Health and Social Care at the University of Birmingham. A qualified social worker by background, he is currently Director of 'IMPACT' (the UK centre for implementing evidence in adult social care).

**Howard Glennerster** is Professor Emeritus of Social Policy at the London School of Economics. His research and teaching have focused on the finance and economics of social policy and its post-war history. He has published widely on these areas and also been an advisor to HM Treasury and the Secretary of State for Health.

**Ann Marie Gray** is Professor of Social Policy at Ulster University and Co-Director of Access, Research, Knowledge, a joint Ulster University/Queen's University Social Policy research centre. Her research and teaching interests include devolution and policymaking, adult social care, gender and social policy, policymaking and governance of services, equality and social justice.

**Ian Greener** is Professor of Social Policy at the University of Strathclyde. His research is in the area of health and social policy governance, on which he has published widely, and his teaching focuses on social theory and research methods.

**Scott L. Greer** is Professor of Health Management and Policy, Global Public Health, and Political Science (by courtesy) at the University of Michigan. He researches the politics of health policies, with a special focus on the politics and policies of the European Union, the politics of public health and the impact of federalism on health care.

**Lee Gregory** is a Associate Professor in Social Policy, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham. His research interests relate to debates regarding poverty, welfare theory and ideology and alternative forms of welfare provision. His teaching focuses on key concepts in social policy and issues related to poverty, class and inequality.

**Jackie Gulland** is a Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Edinburgh. Her work is interdisciplinary and crosses the fields of social policy, sociology, social work, history and law. Her research focuses on disability, older people, caring and gender and how law both reflects and affects inequalities in the welfare state.

**Kate Hamblin** is Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for International Research on Care, Labour and Equalities, University of Sheffield. Her research has focused on technology and its role in the care of older people with complex needs; the balance between unpaid care and paid employment; self-employment and ageing; 'active ageing' employment and pension policies.

**Linda Hantrais** is Emerita Professor in European Social Policy at Loughborough University and an associate in the International Inequalities Institute at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research interests span international comparative research, particularly public policy and institutional structures in the European Union, the implications of Brexit, and European comparisons of the impacts of COVID-19.

**Bernard Harris** is Professor of Social Policy at the University of Strathclyde. In addition to the history of social policy, he has conducted research into different aspects of the history of health, height, morbidity and mortality.

**Tina Haux** is the Director of the Children and Families Team at the National Centre for Social Research. Her research focuses on separated families and the impact of research on policy-making.

**John Hills** was the Richard Titmuss Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics, where he had also been Director of the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion and Co-Director of the International Inequalities Institute. His research interests included inequalities of income and wealth, the distributional effects of public policy and the evolution of the welfare state. He was knighted for his contribution to social policy development in 2013.

Sadly, he died after a serious illness in December 2020.

**Chris Holden** is Reader in International Social Policy in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of York. He has published widely on the relationships between the global economy, transnational corporations and health and social policy.

**Alison Hosie** has been the Research Officer at the Scottish Human Rights Commission since its creation in 2008. Prior to this she taught and researched in social policy, with a particular interest in young people's right to healthcare, pregnant and parenting teenagers' right to education, and methodological approaches to researching sensitive questions.

**John Hudson** is Professor for Social Policy at the University of York and specialises in comparative analysis of the politics of social policy. Recent projects include an examination of the impact of culture on welfare states and an analysis of the impact of cash and in-kind benefits on child well-being outcomes.

**Shona Hunter** is Reader in the Centre for Race Education and Decoloniality, Leeds Beckett University. She undertakes interdisciplinary research into the relations between governance subjectivity and emotion with special interests in whiteness, masculinities and power.

**Steve Iafrazi** is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Wolverhampton. His main research and teaching interests focus on people's access to welfare and well-being, particularly the experiences of people facing vulnerability, marginalisation and/or discrimination. His publications explore the social impact of economic change coupled with welfare retrenchment.

**Zoë Irving** is Reader in Comparative, International and Global Social Policy at the University of York. Her work includes publications on the social politics of economic crisis and austerity, the relationship between population size and social policy development, and the social policy of Iceland and other small island states.

**Misa Izuhara** is Professor of Social Policy at the University of Bristol. She has been undertaking research extensively both nationally and internationally in the areas of housing and social change, intergenerational relations, and comparative policy analysis involving East Asia.

**Rana Jawad** is Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Bath. Her research interests are in the role of religion in social policy and the welfare systems of the Middle East and North Africa region, with major works covering faith-based welfare as well as religion and social welfare in the Middle East.

**Patricia Kennett** is a Professor in Comparative and International Public Policy in the School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol, UK. She has conducted comparative and international research on governance and citizenship; the political economy of the welfare state; urban homelessness; gender equality; the global financial crisis and, most recently, critical human security and sustainable urban development.

**Rob Macmillan** is a Principal Research Fellow at CRESR, the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, at Sheffield Hallam University. His research focuses mainly on the role and development of voluntary action in the UK.

**Nick Manning** is Professor of Sociology at King's College London, following twenty years as Professor of Social Policy and Sociology at the University of Nottingham where he founded the Nottingham Institute of Mental Health and an International Centre for Mental Health in Shanghai. He has written widely on sociological aspects of social policy, health, mental health, Russia and China.

**Catherine Marchand** is a researcher specialised in organisational behaviour in health and social care at the Centre for Health Services Studies at the University of Kent. Her work has included research on climate and wellbeing focusing on the role of front-line workers, patients, and service users.

**Peter Matthews** is a Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Stirling. His current research focuses on the experiences of public services by people who identify as LGBT+, and environmental outcomes in neighbourhoods and inequalities between neighbourhoods.

**Margaret May** is External Associate at the Centre on Household Assets and Savings Management (CHASM) at the University of Birmingham and has taught across the span of both social policy and human resource management. Her research interests include employment policy, taxation, occupational welfare, social security and comparative social policy.

**Vikki McCall** is a Senior Lecturer in Social Policy (Housing) at the University of Stirling. Her work has included extensive research on housing and ageing,

museums, cultural policy and policy integration focusing on the role of front-line workers, service users, volunteers and the policy process.

**Stephen McKay** is Distinguished Professor in Social Research at the University of Lincoln. He has conducted extensive research on poverty, social exclusion and financial inclusion, generally applying quantitative methods to large-scale data on these topics.

**David Mullins** is Emeritus Professor of Housing Policy in the Housing and Communities Research Group at the University of Birmingham. He has thirty years of experience of research, publication and teaching on housing policy and practice.

**Rebecca E. Murray** is a Research Associate working across the Department of Sociological Studies and the School of Education at the University of Sheffield. The focus of her research and work as a practitioner is on the role of education in both mitigating and exacerbating migrants' experiences of belonging in the UK and EU context.

**Catherine Needham** is Professor of Public Policy and Public Management at the Health Services Management Centre, University of Birmingham. She has undertaken research on a wide range of issues relating to adult social care, including system design, markets and funding mechanisms.

**Tim Newburn** is Professor of Criminology and Social Policy at the London School of Economics and Official Historian of Criminal Justice. His research interests span policing, policy making and policy transfer, riots and public order.

**Adeline Otto** is a postdoctoral researcher at the KU Leuven Centre for Sociological Research. Her research interests include comparative social policy analysis, focusing primarily on social inequalities, social inclusion, eco-social policies and public attitudes in the transition to low-carbon societies.

**Robert M. Page** is Reader in Democratic Socialism and Social Policy at the University of Birmingham. He has written on a wide range of social policy topics. His current work focuses on Conservative and Labour approaches to the welfare state since 1940.

**Louisa Parks** is Associate Professor of Political Sociology at the School of International Studies and the Department of Sociology and Social Research at the University of Trento, Italy. Her main research interest is in how social movements and civil society contribute to democracy both within and beyond states.

**Richard Parry** is Honorary Fellow in the Centre on Constitutional Change at the University of Edinburgh, where he was formerly Reader in Social Policy. His major research projects include the development of the British welfare state, public employment, the role of central budget agencies in social policy, and the impact of devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

**Ruth Patrick** is Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of York. Her research focuses on exploring the lived experiences of poverty, social security receipt, and welfare reform and based on participatory approaches, working in partnership with people experiencing poverty to develop policy recommendations.

**Simon Pemberton** is Professor of Social Policy and Criminology at the School of Social Policy, University of Birmingham. His research and teaching interests include the measurement and lived experience of poverty, social exclusion, low income and social mobility in the UK and internationally, and he has published widely on these issues.

**Lynne Poole** teaches social policy and criminology at the Open University and the University of the West of Scotland. Her current research interests centre around developments in Scottish social policy, especially problematising the ‘Scottish National-Popular’, UK asylum seeker policy, Citizen Assemblies and the future of social care policy.

**Martin Powell** is Professor of Health and Social Policy at the Health Services Management Centre, School of Social Policy, University of Birmingham. His main research interests and publications are in the areas of the National Health Service in the UK, and on the social policies of recent UK governments.

**Mark Priestley** is Professor of Disability Policy at the University of Leeds and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. He was the founding Scientific Director of the European Commission’s Academic Network of European Disability experts and has published widely in disability studies.

**Dame Carol Propper** is Professor of Economics at Imperial College London. Her research interests include the use of market and financial incentives to enhance quality, productivity and innovation in healthcare and the determinants of health. She was made a Dame in the 2020 New Year’s honours list for services to economics and public health.

**Jessica Pykett** is Senior Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Birmingham. Her research to date has centred on the geographies of citizenship, education, behavioural forms of governance and the influence of applied and popular neuroscience on policy and practice. She teaches on the spatial politics of welfare, work and wealth.

**Stacey Rand** is Senior Research Fellow at the Personal Social Services Research Unit at the University of Kent. Her research focuses on the impact of social care services on unpaid carers’ quality of life; carers policy in England; and measurement and application of social care outcomes for service users and carers in research, policy and practice.

**Angelique Retief** is a Doctoral student at the University of Bristol’s School for Policy Studies and also works in policy and research at Black South West Network, a racial justice organisation in Bristol, UK. Having emigrated from South Africa in 2006, Angelique’s work thus far has focused on social policy in South Africa.

**Enrico Reuter** is Lecturer in Public and Social Policy at the University of York. His research and teaching centre on changes in employment conditions and labour market policies, in particular regarding self-employment, as well as the democratisation of public services.

**Karen Rowlingson** is Professor of Social Policy and Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Engagement and Impact at the University of Birmingham. She is also Chair of the Social Policy Association. Her research and teaching have focused on poverty, wealth and inequality.

**Sally Ruane** is Reader in Social Policy at De Montfort University, Leicester. Her research focuses on health policy and taxation, with a particular interest in health service reform, the political economy of taxation and the role of taxation in social policy.

**Halima Sacranie** is the Research Lead of the Housing and Communities Research Group and Lecturer in Housing Policy at the University of Birmingham, where she completed her PhD in Urban and Regional Studies in 2011.

**Adrian Sinfield** is Emeritus Professor of Social Policy, University of Edinburgh. His main areas of research and teaching have been poverty and inequality, especially the prevention of poverty; the



social division of welfare, especially fiscal welfare; and social security and the labour market.

**Phillip Singer** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Utah. His work analyses health and social welfare politics and policy in the United States, focusing on comparative state policy, programs for vulnerable populations, and infectious disease.

**Kitty Stewart** is Associate Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science and Associate Director of LSE's Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion. Her research focuses on childhood poverty and inequalities, with particular interests in policy drivers and solutions, and in the wider impact on children's lives and opportunities.

**Rebecca Surender** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Dept of Social Policy and Intervention at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of Green Templeton College. Her research and teaching are primarily in the area of health policy and social policy in developing countries, and in particular, South Africa. She is currently a Visiting Professor at the Institute of Social and Economic Research at Rhodes University, South Africa.

**Peter Taylor-Gooby** has been Professor of Social Policy at the University of Kent since 1989. His main research interests lie in social policy theory, attitudes to the welfare state and comparative social policy. He was awarded the University of Kent Research Achievement Award, April 2018.

**Amrit Virk** is a Lecturer in Health Policy at the University of Edinburgh. Her research, teaching, and writing is broadly focused on health in low- and middle-income countries, including Malaysia, India, Thailand and Sierra Leone. Amrit also has an active portfolio of work in participatory approaches and qualitative methods.

**Athina Vlachantoni** is Professor of Gerontology and Social Policy at the Centre for Research on Ageing and the ESRC Centre for Population Change in the University of Southampton. Her research interests span the broader areas of ageing and social policy, and currently focus on pension protection, informal care, social care and living arrangements across the life course.

**Aniela Wenham** is a Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of York. Her teaching and research interests include youth transitions, youth policy and qualitative longitudinal methods with 'hard to reach' groups.

**Adam Whitworth** is Professor of Employment Policy in the Scottish Centre for Employment Research, University of Strathclyde. He has extensive academic and applied policy experience around employment support policies and has written over 50 journal articles, chapters and government reports on related topics including critical policy design, socio-spatial impacts and inequalities and work-health.

**Sharon Wright** is Professor of Social Policy at the University of Glasgow. She researches lived experiences of social security and welfare reform in Scotland and the UK in the international context.

**Nicola Yeates** is Professor of Social Policy at The Open University. She teaches and researches in global social policy and social policy in 'developing' country contexts. Her special interests include international organisations' involvement in social policy and welfare provision, especially with regard to issues of employment, social security, occupational welfare, and health and social care.

**Wenjing Zhang** is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Health Services Studies, University of Kent. Her research and teaching interests focus on adult social care, international social policy and migration.

# Introduction

This *Student's Companion to Social Policy* is a resource book that will be of practical use to students of social policy throughout their undergraduate or postgraduate study of the subject. It aims to acquaint them with the study of social policy by covering all the main themes and issues likely to be included in any curriculum in the UK, and indeed in many other countries. Readers are introduced to current theoretical and ideological debates, historical developments, service areas, key policy issues and the broader UK and international context in which social policy operates. Each chapter includes a short guide to further sources, which points to some of the literature that pursues the issues addressed in the chapter in more depth and also alerts readers to major web-based sources. The *Companion* will be of value to students studying social policy on its own, as part of another undergraduate or postgraduate programme (for instance, sociology, politics, applied social science or management studies) or as part of a professional course in a related field (for instance, social care work, nursing and health studies, public and civil society sector management or criminology).

For this sixth edition of the *Companion* existing authors have updated their contributions and, in some cases, previous authors have been replaced with others leading in research and teaching in those areas. As in the last edition we have asked contributors to provide readers with a short bullet point summary of key points at the beginning of each

chapter and to conclude with some brief speculations on emerging issues. There has also been a change in the editorial team for this edition. Sharon Wright has taken on other responsibilities since the publication of the fifth edition and has been replaced as fourth editor by Vikki McCall. The current editors and the publisher would like to thank Sharon for all her work on previous editions. We are pleased that Vikki has been able to join us, and her role has meant that the editorial process has remained much the same for this latest edition.

All the contributors to this book are researchers and teachers in the forefront of social policy studies in the UK and beyond. Contributors were selected on the basis that their expertise in their particular areas would provide readers with an authoritative introduction to a range of thinking and scholarship. Because the book has been prepared as a handbook and guide, rather than as a single text that focuses on one or two main themes, not all readers will necessarily want to read it from cover to cover. Indeed, most readers are likely to use it as a source of reference for consultation throughout their studies; hence the chapters have been written so that they can be read in any order, separately or in groups.

- Part I introduces students to the concepts and approaches that underpin the study of social policy. These include a brief history of the scope and development of the subject and the ways in which it is studied and researched, together

with discussion of the key concepts that students are likely to encounter in their studies.

- Part II provides readers with a guide to the theoretical and ideological context of social policy. Readers are introduced to the central themes and perspectives that provide the intellectual foundations of debates about the focus and aims of the subject.
- Part III surveys key themes and issues in the historical development of social policy in the UK including considerations of nineteenth-century welfare arrangements, the growth of state welfare in the first half of the twentieth century, the policies of Conservative and Labour administrations in the second half of the century and those of recent governments.
- Part IV examines the impact of the devolution of political powers to the separate administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- Part V explores the social, political and economic context in which policies are developed and implemented, and some of the crucial challenges facing policymakers.
- Part VI focuses on the organisation and production of social policy. The different providers of welfare are examined by looking at the five main sectors of welfare – state, commercial, occupational, civil society and informal – setting these in the context of a brief examination of the ways in which welfare is financed and how taxation policy operates.
- Part VII considers different dimensions of the governance of welfare, including the role of regional and local government.
- Part VIII comprises chapters that examine the key domains of welfare provision, with each providing up-to-date summaries of policy developments, planning and current debates.
- Part IX focuses on the provision of services to particular social groups and the extent to which these groups are advantaged or disadvantaged by different aspects of policy development.
- Part X explores the international context of social policy. There are introductory chapters on comparative and international analysis, policy learning and transfer and the European Union, followed by chapters summarising the varying policy experiences of different groups of nations across the world.

The *Companion* first set out to produce a collection of chapters written by some of the most distinguished teachers and lecturers in social policy in the

UK, an approach maintained in this sixth edition. We asked all our contributors to write in as accessible a way as possible, while introducing complex issues in a short space. Authors in social policy are no different from other authors, however; some write sharply and clearly, others are more difficult to follow and pack complex ideas together. This collection reflects the range of styles of writing and the array of ideological and political positions that students of social policy are likely to encounter. All the chapters, of course, only provide a short summary of a wide range of issues and information in their area. The aim therefore is to encourage readers to investigate further and read more widely.

While we, as editors, made the difficult, and occasionally contentious, decisions about what should be included, what should be left out and who should be asked to write, we were successful in persuading many of our authors to contribute to the *Companion* because of its long-standing links with the Social Policy Association (SPA) – the professional association for academics in Social Policy (see Appendix). We should also like to thank Justin Vaughan, Charlie Hamlyn and Clelia Petracca at Wiley-Blackwell for their support in the production of this new edition, and the anonymous reviewers of the proposals for updating who all gave us such helpful advice.

We are also grateful to the following contributors to the fifth edition whose chapters have provided a base for the updates in this one: Stuart Adam, Pete Alcock, Rob Baggott, Saul Becker, Edward Brunson, Tony Fitzpatrick, Jeremy Kendall, Majella Kilkey, Linda Pickard, Lucinda Platt, Tess Ridge, Barra Roantree, Anne West, Jay Wiggan, and Noel Whiteside. Sadly, one of our contributors and an outstanding social policy analyst and government advisor, John Hills, passed away during the publication of this edition and we would like to thank Howard Glennerster for his assistance in updating John's chapter.

As editors we are very grateful for the work put into this volume by the contributors, particularly given the pressures arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope that what we have produced is worthy of all this support and will continue to be of value to the social policy community as a whole. Any shortcomings in the collection as a whole are, however, our responsibility.

Pete Alcock  
Tina Haux  
Margaret May  
Vikki McCall






# What is Social Policy?

*Pete Alcock*



## Overview

- Social policy is the use of policy measures to promote the welfare of citizens and social well-being.
  - It is also the term for the academic study of these measures, having changed its name from 'social administration' to reflect a broadening concern with the theory as well as the practice of welfare arrangements.
  - The welfare reforms in the UK in the period following the Second World War were critical in establishing the context for subsequent policy development.
  - Social policy analysts adopt a range of theoretical perspectives, leading to varying conclusions about the viability and desirability of different measures and interventions.
  - In the future social policy will have to face up to the challenges resulting from environmental change to ensure that welfare remains sustainable for all citizens.
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## The Subject of Social Policy

Social policy has a dual meaning. It is used to refer to the actions taken by politicians and policymakers to introduce or amend provisions aimed to promote individual welfare and social well-being. Social policy is what societies do to promote welfare. However, it is also used to refer to the academic study of these policy actions, and their outcomes. Students study

social policy as an academic subject, perhaps in a single honours degree, or perhaps alongside other social science subjects such as sociology or politics, or as part of professional training for social work or nursing and a wide range of careers in public, commercial and voluntary organizations. In essence social policy is both social action, and the study of it.

The later chapters in this book explore in more detail some of the key concepts and perspectives which have underpinned the study of social policy,

the major issues which inform policy development, and the main areas of policy practice. Much social policy analysis concerns the actions of national governments; and most of the chapters focus on the national context of the UK. However, as is discussed in Part IV, since the turn of the century much policymaking in the UK has been devolved to the separate administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; and the national programmes pursued by the parliaments and assemblies there are increasingly different to the policies developed for England by the UK parliament at Westminster.

Social policy is not just a UK phenomenon, however. Most countries across the world have developed measures to promote the welfare of their citizens. Some, particularly in the developed West, follow similar patterns of public support to that found in the UK, although the organisational forms and political priorities differ significantly. In the global South and in East Asia, however, social policy often takes a very different form. The study of social policy includes the comparative analysis of these differences (and similarities) and the varying histories of policy development in countries across the world; and the chapters in Part X of this book take up some examples of this comparative and international research.

This does not just involve exploring and comparing the different models of policy developed in different countries – sometimes referred to as welfare regimes. Comparative scholars also use statistical data gathered across different countries to analyse international trends in welfare arrangements. Such data is gathered by international bodies like the Office for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and in Europe by the Commission of the European Union (EU), and has been used to explore to what extent social policies may be ‘converging’ on a common model, or to what extent economic pressures may be leading to reduced commitments to policy action – sometimes referred to as welfare ‘retrenchment’.

An introduction to some of these aspects of international and comparative analysis is provided in Chapter 62. And Chapter 63 explores another dimension of international policy development, the extent to which comparative analysis of different welfare regimes can be used to inform policy development in others, through ‘policy transfer’. International bodies like the OECD and EU do not just gather comparative data about social policy action, however. In the case of the EU the Commission has the power to introduce policy

measures that apply across all member states, as highlighted in Chapter 65, although these no longer of course apply to the UK. There are other international bodies seeking to influence policy developments on a global scale, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF); and, as discussed in Chapter 71, these agencies have become more powerful and influential in shaping social policy on an international scale.

The study of social policy therefore includes not just the actions of national governments and their impacts on the citizens living in their jurisdictions, but also the comparative analysis of different welfare regimes across the world, their influences on each other – and the role of international agencies seeking to shape policy development on a global scale. Although many of the chapters in this book focus on the UK, and in many cases England only, students of social policy will need to address the wider international dimensions introduced in the later chapters. The study of social policy in the UK also, however, needs to take account both of the history of policy development in this country and changes in its analysis, for to some extent current issues and current practices are a product of that historical journey.

## The Development of Social Policy

Social policy action has a long history in the UK; for instance, the first Poor Laws were introduced in 1601 at the time of Elizabeth I (see Chapter 16). However, much recent policy development, in particular public policy, has its roots in the political and policy debates of the early twentieth century and the reforms which followed from these.

At the centre of the arguments for public action at this time was the *Fabian Society*, established in 1884 to campaign for state intervention to tackle the social problems and economic inequalities which its members argued had failed to be addressed by the capitalist markets of nineteenth-century Britain. Leading members of the Society were Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Sidney was a civil servant who later became a Labour MP, and Beatrice served on the Poor Law Commission discussed below. The Fabians used research evidence, such as the pioneering work by Booth and Rowntree, whose research revealed that the extent and depth of poverty in the UK at the end of the nineteenth century was both serious and widespread. This challenged conservative political

assumptions that markets could meet the welfare needs of all; and the Fabians used it to promote policy intervention through the state to protect people where the market had failed them.

As Sidney Webb's role as a Labour MP revealed, however, the Fabians' academic arguments were closely linked to the establishment and growth of the Labour Party as the political vehicle through which policy innovation and reform through the state could be achieved. In fact though, it was some time before the Labour Party gained political power, and it was the Liberal governments of the early twentieth century who introduced some of the first major state measures for social policy.

These early reforms to social policy were informed by the recommendations of a Royal Commission established in 1905 to review the *Poor Laws*, the mainstay of nineteenth-century welfare policy. The commissioners themselves could not agree on the right way forward and so they produced two separate reports:

- a *Minority* Report, which was largely the work of Beatrice Webb; and
- a *Majority* Report, which was largely the work of Helen Bosanquet, who with her husband Bernard was a leading figure in the Charity Organisation Society (COS), a body which coordinated voluntary action to relieve poverty.

Both reports stressed the need for reforms to improve welfare provision; but, whilst the minority Fabian report saw the public provision of state services as the means of achieving this, the majority COS report envisaged a continuing central role for voluntary and philanthropic activity. This debate about the balance between state and non-state provision of welfare continued to influence the development of social policy throughout the twentieth century, as the chapters in Part III reveal; and, as is discussed in subsequent chapters, the issue of securing the appropriate mix between public and other provision remains a key element in social policy planning.

In practice, however, it was the Fabian arguments of the Minority Report which largely won the day in the development of social policy in the early twentieth century. The Liberal government of Asquith and Lloyd George in the early twentieth century introduced a range of measures to provide public resources through the state to tackle the social and economic problems identified by the Fabian

researchers (as is discussed in Chapter 17). What is more, academic study and research evidence were expanded to support this, in particular by the establishment by the Webbs of the London School of Economics (LSE) and the incorporation within it of the COS's School of Sociology to form a new Department of Social Sciences and Administration. This was the first major academic base for the study of social policy. Its first new lecturer was Clement Attlee, who became prime minister in the reforming Labour government after the Second World War; and it remains a major centre for teaching and research on social policy today.

## The Welfare State and the Welfare Consensus

The welfare reforms of the early twentieth century were followed in the middle of the century by what was probably the most important period of policy reform in the UK. As mentioned, a Labour government under the leadership of Attlee was elected after the war with a manifesto commitment to introduce a range of comprehensive measures to provide for the welfare of citizens – to create what later came to be called a 'welfare state'.

This commitment had been prefigured to some extent in Beveridge's famous report on the need for comprehensive social security reform, published in 1942 and included in Labour's manifesto promises. Beveridge had written about the *Five Giant Social Evils* that had undermined British society before the war: ignorance, disease, idleness, squalor and want. He argued that it was in the interests of all citizens to remove these evils from British society, and it was the duty of the state, as the representative body of all citizens, to act to do this.

In the years following, between 1945 and 1951, comprehensive state provision to combat each of Beveridge's evils was introduced:

- free education up to the age of 15 (later 16), to combat ignorance;
- a national health service (NHS), free at the point of use, to combat disease;
- state commitment to securing full employment, to combat idleness;
- public housing for all citizens to rent, to combat squalor;
- national insurance benefits for all in need, to combat want.



All of these required the development of major state services for citizens and they resulted in a major extension of state responsibility – and state expenditure. The reforms were not only supported by the Labour government, however – indeed, the state education plans were introduced by a Conservative member of the wartime coalition government (R. A. Butler) in 1944. And the Conservative governments that followed in the 1950s supported the spirit of the reforms and maintained their basic structure. This cross-party consensus on state welfare was so strong that it even acquired an acronym – *Butskellism* – comprising the names of the Labour Chancellor (Gaitskell) and his Conservative successor (Butler).

For Fabian social policy, therefore, the post-war welfare state could be seen as the culmination of academic and political influence on government, after which analysis and debate focused more on the problems of how to administer and improve existing state welfare programmes than on the question of whether these were appropriate mechanisms for the social promotion of well-being. However, this narrow Fabian focus within post-war social policy provision and analysis did not last for long. It was soon under challenge from other perspectives that queried both the success and the desirability of state welfare.

## Theoretical Pluralism

From the 1970s onwards the focus of the study and analysis of social policy began to move beyond the narrow confines of the Fabian welfare state and to consider both non-state forms of provision and a wider range of political and policy issues. This was symbolized most dramatically by a change (at the annual conference of the academic association in 1987) in the name of the subject from social administration to social policy, primarily because it was felt that *administration* was associated too closely with a focus on analysing the operation of existing welfare services, whereas *policy* encompassed a more general concern with the political and ideological bases of welfare provision. This change was representative of more general trends within academic and political debate to embrace a wider range of conflicting perspectives challenging the orthodoxy of Fabianism, and moved the study of social policy towards a more open theoretical pluralism in which questions of *whether* or *why* to pursue state welfare became as important as questions of *how* or *when*.

## *The New Left*

The predominant focus of Fabianism on the success and desirability of state welfare was challenged in the 1960s and 1970s by critics on the left. Drawing on Marxist analysis of capitalist society, they argued that welfare services had not replaced the exploitative relationships of the labour market; and that, although they had provided some benefits for the poor and the working class, these services had also helped to support future capitalist development by providing a secure base for the market economy to operate. Unlike the Fabian socialists of the early twentieth century, these New Left critics did not necessarily see the further expansion of the existing state welfare base of social policy as resolving this dilemma. Indeed, for them state welfare was in a constant state of contradiction, or conflict, between the pressure to meet the welfare needs of citizens and the pressure to support the growth of capitalist markets.

## *The New Right*

In the 1970s and 1980s rather different criticisms of state welfare began to appear from the right of the political spectrum. Right-wing proponents of free market capitalism, most notably Hayek, had been critical of the creation of the welfare state in the 1940s, but at the time these had been marginal voices in academic and political debate. From the 1970s on, as the advent of economic recession revealed some of the limitations of state welfare, these voices became both more vocal and more widely supported, in particular under the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. The essence of the New Right critique was that the development of improved state welfare services was incompatible with the maintenance of a successful market economy, and that in any event it was undesirable because it undermined the responsibility of individuals to provide for themselves and their families. For the New Right, therefore, extensive state welfare was both impractical and undesirable.

## *New Social Movements*

The failings and limitations of state welfare were also questioned in the late twentieth century from perspectives outside the traditional left/right political spectrum. Most significant here was the challenge by feminism to the unequal treatment of men

and women in the development and delivery of welfare services. As feminist critics pointed out, the provision of welfare was ‘gendered’ in that in many cases service provision treated men and women differently. Other critics have also challenged traditional analysis of state welfare, arguing that welfare provision could also operate to the disadvantage of many black and ethnic minority citizens, could fail to recognise the needs and the capabilities of people with disabilities, and could overlook the needs and rights of those with differing sexual preferences. Thus feminists, anti-racists and other campaigners have challenged many traditional welfare services, though in general they do not represent or promote any single political platform.

### *The New Pragmatism*

The new radical voices that began to influence social policy towards the end of the last century have widely varying, and sometimes mutually conflicting, implications. They challenged state welfare and the orthodoxy of Fabianism, but they were also critical of the New Left and the New Right. At the beginning of this century these differing perspectives have resulted in a theoretical pluralism that has not only transformed academic study but has also shifted the focus of policymaking itself. The Labour governments at the beginning of the new century openly eschewed the policy programmes of the Fabian left and the New Right, and appealed instead to a ‘third way’ for social policy combining private and public provision in a ‘mixed economy’ of welfare rather than a welfare state. They also argued that, rather than policy being determined by theoretical or ideological preferences, it should be based on empirical evidence of the impact of policy measures – captured in the phrase ‘what counts is what works’.

### *Austerity and Brexit*

Following the economic recession of 2007–8 and the change of government in the 2010 election, however, the incremental expansion in social policy that had accompanied third-way pragmatism came under challenge. Under Labour public expenditure on welfare had begun to rise (see Chapter 20), and initially this was retained at the time of recession. However, as explained in Chapter 21, the coalition government of 2010 was committed to reducing the growing public deficit left by Labour through extensive reductions in public spending – referred to by

commentators as the introduction of a new public austerity. This was continued under the Conservative governments elected in 2015 and 2017. However, the vote to leave the European Union in the referendum held in 2016 began to overtake the straightforward Conservative approach to reduced public expenditure. Despite the promises to the contrary, securing a departure from the EU actually meant incurring additional public expenditure; and following the further election in 2019 the new government suggested that public expenditure might need to rise more generally in the future. However, this future came much earlier than anticipated with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to massive increases in public expenditure in 2020 to combat the epidemic and to support an economy devastated by the lockdowns on social life.

## Emerging Issues: The Future of Social Policy

Contemporary social policymaking and analysis has developed from its Fabian roots and its support for the welfare state reforms of the early post-war years to encompass a wide range of diverse – and conflicting – theoretical debates about both the value and the success of public welfare provision and a wider conceptualisation of the role of local and global action as well as national politics in policymaking. Social policy is now characterised by theoretical and geographical pluralism. It is also characterised by ‘welfare pluralism’: the recognition that state provision is only one feature of a broader mixture of differing forms and levels of welfare service. This is sometimes referred to as the shift from the *welfare state* to the *welfare mix*.

Quite how this mix will continue to evolve in the future is inevitably hard to predict, although some broad trends are likely to continue to be influential both in policymaking and implementation and its analysis. In particular, as the rest of the later chapters in this book suggest, there are likely to be further moves:

- from centralised public services of the welfare state towards partnerships between public and other welfare providers and a focus on the role of the state as a contractor, a subsidiser or a regulator of the actions of others;
- from the ‘provider culture’ focus on who delivers welfare services towards a greater emphasis

on the role of citizens and users in defining and delivering welfare, including the transfer of power to service users through mechanisms such as personal budgets and co-production and greater reliance on self-provision;

- from a dependence upon ever further economic growth and towards a recognition of the need to secure sustainable services in a changing environmental context;
- from the support and direction of the European Union towards a more independent position for the UK in global policymaking – tempered by the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the social and economic costs flowing from it.

## Guide to Further Sources

There are no textbooks dealing with the history and development of the study of social policy, but Bulmer, M., Lewis, J. and Piachaud, D. (eds) (1989) *The Goals of Social Policy*, London: Unwin Hyman, is an interesting, if dated, review and history of the work of the leading department at the London School of Economics (LSE). An overview of the importance of collective welfare provision can be found in Alcock, P. (2016) *Why We Need Welfare: Collective Action for the Common Good*, Bristol: Policy Press.

A number of authors have sought to provide introductory guides to the subject. Hill, M. and Irving, Z. (2009) *Understanding Social Policy*, 8th edn, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, provides a service-based review of welfare policy. Alcock, P. and Gregory, L. (2022) *Social Policy in Britain*, 5th edn, Basingstoke: Palgrave, takes a broader approach, covering also key questions of structure, context and issues, and also includes extensive coverage of the impact of devolution in the UK on social policy

(new edition in preparation). Baldock, J., Mitton, L., Manning, N. and Vickerstaff, S. (eds) (2011) *Social Policy*, 4th edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, is a collection which covers both contextual issues and service areas. Bochel, H. and Daley, G. (2021) *Social Policy*, 4th edn, London: Routledge, is a more recent introductory collection.

Castles, F., Leibfried, S., Lewis, J., Obinger, H. and Pierson, C. (eds) (2010) *The Oxford Handbook of The Welfare State*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, is an extensive collection on the international and comparative analysis of social policy. Alcock, P. and Powell, M. (eds) (2011) *Welfare Theory and Development – 4-Volume Set*, London: Sage Publications, is an international collection of previously published key texts. Hill, M. and Irving, Z. (2020) *Exploring the World of Social Policy*, Bristol: Policy Press, takes a global approach to introducing social policy. The Policy Press also publish a major series of textbooks on social policy in their *Understanding Welfare* series, edited by Saul Becker. The Social Policy Association and the Policy Press also produce an annual collection of topical essays, *Social Policy Review*.

A useful website providing introductory material on social policy is maintained by Paul Spicker at [www.spicker.uk](http://www.spicker.uk).

## Review Questions

1. What is *Fabianism* and how did it influence the development of social policy in the twentieth century?
2. What was *Butskellism* and how did it shape post-war policy development in the UK?
3. To what extent did the New Left and New Right agree that the ‘welfare state’ had failed?
4. What is *welfare pluralism* and how accurately does it describe current social policy planning?

# Researching Social Policy<sup>1</sup>

*Vikki McCall*



## Overview

- Rigorous, robust, empirical and theory-led research is an important aspect of social policy as a discipline and as practice.
- Research requires rigorous theoretical inquiry and informed empirical data.
- Students reading, analysing and conducting social policy research should be ethical and reflective regarding approaches, actions and principles.
- Social policy draws from the full range of social science research approaches including quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods.
- Emerging issues include the increase of remote methods and opportunities for social policy research, social policy integration and global challenges.



## The Role of Social Policy Research

The narratives and discourse around social policy can be a contentious field of struggle. Social policy is negotiated within political arenas and connected to assumptions around ideology, societal 'norms' and cultural understandings. We have seen the rise of 'fake news', an increasing role for social media and

the importance of clear information. This struggle has been highlighted in social policy recently in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and, in the context of the United Kingdom (UK), the new processes and governance implications flowing from devolution and leaving the European Union (known as 'Brexit') in 2020. Social policy is an ever-changing field of power and struggle, with many attacks on

<sup>1</sup>This chapter is based on *Researching Social Policy*, originally written by Pete Alcock and Saul Becker, that appeared in the Fifth Edition of *The Student's Companion to Social Policy*.

expertise, science and the foundations of the welfare state. For the UK, Beveridge's post-Second World War key pillars of welfare, social security, education, health, employment and housing are areas where people can become entrenched in misinformation and ideology.

One way to counter misinformation can be through good research. Rigorous, robust, empirical and theory-led research underpins social policy as a discipline and as a practice. Ethically led research evidence can provide a counternarrative, inform decision-making and develop knowledge on social policy and practice.

Students of social policy are therefore expected to have a good knowledge of research methods and approaches. They will need to:

- be aware and make use of the more significant sources of data about social welfare and the main research methods used to collect and analyse data;
- seek out, use, evaluate and analyse qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods data derived from social surveys and other research publications;
- understand the strengths, weaknesses and uses of social research and research methods;
- develop a critical ability to assess, summarize, synthesize and comment on different forms of research evidence;
- undertake investigations of social questions, issues and problems, requiring skills in problem identification; collection, storage, management, manipulation and analysis of data; the construction of coherent and reasoned arguments and the presentation of clear conclusions and recommendations.

This raises the question of what 'counts' as research. There is no formal definition of this, but academics in particular agree that it must be conducted in a systematic, disciplined and rigorous way, making use of the most appropriate research designs and methods to collect and analyse data and to answer specific research questions.

This takes us back to consider why we really need social policy research (including research for and of policy delivery, creation and implementation). Much social policy research is motivated by the potential to make or instigate positive change. Often the focus of social policy research is on helping and improving people's lives one way or the other – to help certain groups that do not have as

many chances, opportunities or privileges as other groups

– and to equalise (or make more equitable) the playing field of society. Research helps us to understand what works, what is progressive, or regressive, and to make recommendations for improvement. Social policy research is often applied, focused on increasing knowledge and creating action, impact or change.

## Taking an Ethical Approach to Social Policy Research

An ethical approach to understanding and researching social policy is important. One of the most comprehensive guidelines for researchers includes the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), whose core principles are that:

- research should aim to maximise benefit for individuals and society and minimise risk and harm;
- the rights and dignity of individuals and groups should be respected;
- wherever possible, participation should be voluntary and appropriately informed;
- research should be conducted with integrity and transparency;
- lines of responsibility and accountability should be clearly defined;
- independence of research should be maintained and where conflicts of interest cannot be avoided, they should be made explicit.

More specific ethical guidance for social policy from the Social Policy Association (SPA) mirrors these considerations but also emphasises engaging with welfare services and connecting with academia, policy and practice.

Ethical research engages fully with both the strengths and limitations of any given approach, method or theory. This means that those studying social policy need a diverse and comprehensive knowledge of different approaches that will help critical engagement with a variety of research.

The key steps to gaining this knowledge require engagement with the research process in the academic literature and how that relates to practice. To gain knowledge that will be needed for both studying and conducting social policy research, students

must reflect on their own approaches and understandings of the world, have a good grip on the theoretical foundations of different approaches, and take a holistic approach to engaging with research and the research process to critically engage with topics and methods.

Consideration of the strengths and limitations of given approaches and developing a critical lens are also key aspects of researching social policy. To understand approaches to reading, analysing and conducting research, it is useful to know the limitations around different methods. Engaging with those limitations – and all social research methods have some limitations – helps research and analysis to be more transparent and robust. Critical thinking helps social policy research develop from individual to structural implications and has led to some of the major developments in social policy.

## Approaches, Methods and Designs

Social policy draws from the full range of approaches, research designs and methods that are used in the social sciences. In terms of *approaches*, these can include, for example, feminist research, service user-led research, action research, evaluation research and poststructuralist approaches. These each have their own assumptions about the nature of the social world and the researcher's and research participants' place within it, and about knowledge creation and the research process itself. These

assumptions help to inform the way in which the research is carried out, the selection of methods, the data analysis techniques and the way in which research is written up and reported.

Research reports will often outline different research designs and methods they employed. A *research design* is a structure or framework within which data are collected, for example, an experimental or longitudinal design. A *research method* is a technique for gathering data, like a questionnaire, interview or observation (see Table 2.1 for some examples of these different methods).

Research methods can serve different designs. Thus, a method of data collection such as a questionnaire can be employed in connection with many, if not all, research designs. Decisions about appropriate research methods are in a sense subsidiary to decisions about an appropriate design, since it is the design that provides the framework for answering research questions; and the choice of research design will be critically informed by what is already known about an issue and what still needs to be found out.

An early stage of the research process therefore involves a review of the available literature. This needs to be as comprehensive as possible – there may be answers here already to the questions that are of current concern. It is important to have some explicit and transparent way of distinguishing between different publications and for deciding which to include in the literature review, not least because of the sheer volume of information that is now publicly available and the need to recognise that not everything can or

**Table 2.1** Some typical research methods linked to qualitative and quantitative approaches.

<i>Qualitative Methods</i>	<i>Quantitative Methods</i>
Interviews (structured, semi-structured, open)	Survey/questionnaires
Focus groups	Secondary data analysis (often including large survey data e.g household surveys)
Observation (also participant observation)	Experiments
Secondary data analysis (often involving archived qualitative data)	Structured (or standardised) interviews
Documentary analysis	Structured observation
Diaries (open, reflective, deliberative, written, audio)	Longitudinal (recurring) survey
Media analysis	
Videos	
Discourse analysis	
Conversation analysis	
Longitudinal qualitative approaches (such as recurring interviews)	