

# 1 *Social Justice*

2 *(Old Title: Peace and Social Justice)*

## 3 **ISSUE STATEMENT**

4 The issue of social justice as a cornerstone of America's national ethos is rooted in the 19th  
5 century with the slavery abolitionists, women's rights movement, and then the anti-Jim Crow  
6 movement. Over time, especially during the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s, reframing social  
7 justice as a fundamental human right became a value that is embraced by most of the world.

8

## 9 ***Definition of Social Justice***

10 Social justice is the belief that everyone deserves equal rights, opportunities, and treatment  
11 regardless of their race, economic status, sexuality, or gender identity (Dolan-Reilly, 2013).

12 Social justice must be considered in the context of historical systemic inequities in America's  
13 social, economic, and political systems, and the long-term generational consequences of  
14 systemic injustice.

15 Social justice is, by definition, a broad term that encompasses a range of injustices that  
16 have, in the past and currently, impacted various populations in the United States. However, it is  
17 undisputed that from a racial/ethnic standpoint, Black, Latinx, and Native American people  
18 have felt the brunt of systemic inequality over centuries. Similarly, women, members of the  
19 LGBTQ community, people with disabilities, and members of religious communities such as  
20 people of the Jewish and Muslim faith have been the victims of institutional disparate and unfair  
21 treatment.

22

### 23 ***Setting Social Justice Priorities***

24 Because injustices have been far-ranging in America, many social justice advocates and  
25 organizations have found it useful to periodically identify five to 10 social justice issues on  
26 which to focus. For example, in 2020, Yeshiva University (2020) identified nine priority social  
27 justice issues for social workers:

- 28 • Voting rights
- 29 • Climate justice
- 30 • Healthcare
- 31 • Refugee crisis
- 32 • Racial injustice
- 33 • Income gap
- 34 • Gun violence
- 35 • Hunger and food insecurity
- 36 • Equality

37 Though many universities and social justice advocacy organizations establish social justice  
38 priorities that reflect present-day injustice urgencies, there are no formal guidelines for  
39 determining which social justice issues to prioritize. It is often the case that existing or  
40 emerging national human rights crises often dictate prioritization for advocacy and social action  
41 by those groups. Often a consensus emerges among advocates. For instance, there has been a  
42 national consensus that criminal justice reform, immigration reforms, health equity (think  
43 COVID-19), and gun violence are social justice priorities. However, it is not rare when a highly  
44 impactful urgency arises that every social justice advocacy group prioritizes action. A case in

45 point was the Supreme Court’s Dobbs decision making abortion illegal (*Dobbs v. Jackson*  
46 *Women’s Health Organization*, 2022).

### 47 ***Human Impact of Injustice***

48 Those realities are often devastating to millions of families and children, most of whom are  
49 from communities of color and/or very low-income communities. The human impact of  
50 injustice is real and quantifiable. For example, the Dobbs ruling declaring abortion illegal not  
51 only had an impact on reproduction freedom in general, but also meant that Black women were  
52 disproportionately affected, especially in Southern states, as it severely limited their access to  
53 reproductive healthcare and increased the risks of maternal mortality, poverty, and  
54 discrimination. Black women in Southern states already have one of the lowest health  
55 insurance coverage rates in the nation (Zhou & Zhou, 2022). Prior to Dobbs, they encountered  
56 multiple barriers to obtaining safe and legal abortions. In the aftermath of Dobbs, Black women  
57 could be left with zero access to abortion and reproductive health services. Similar cases of  
58 disparate impact resulting from social injustice can be made about economic-related issues  
59 such as food insecurity, healthcare disparities, and criminal justice, among many others.

### 60 ***Equity as a Fundamental Tenet of Social Justice***

61 The foundation of a social justice paradigm is the premise that the ultimate objective of social  
62 justice advocacy is the achievement of universal equity. In that context, the following statement  
63 is useful:

64       Equity means meeting community members where they are by providing resources to  
65       people that are proportionate to what they need in order to thrive. Social justice  
66       typically refers to fighting for fairness for historically oppressed people—especially  
67       Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) who have disproportionately faced

68 institutional discrimination or systemic racism. Social justice and equity go hand in  
69 hand. (United Way of the National Capital Area, 2021, para. 1)  
70 Equity as an overarching goal of social justice policies and legislation is not universally  
71 embraced (Prokop, 2023). There are those who view universal equity as being an aspirational  
72 ideal, but not a practical solution to injustice. However, there is an undeniable consensus  
73 among social justice advocates and stakeholders that it is essential that the term “equity” be the  
74 fundamental value and goal of social justice policies, legislation, and programs.

### 75 ***Emergence of Environmental Justice as a Priority Social Justice Area***

76 Because of the existing worldwide environmental crisis caused by climate change, the issue of  
77 environmental justice as a national priority warrants being individually referenced in this  
78 policy statement. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (n.d.) defines *environmental*  
79 *justice* as follows:

80 Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people  
81 regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development,  
82 implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

83 (para. 1)

84 To some extent, the impact of environmental injustice is felt by communities of color and  
85 economically challenged people. In the United States, “people of color are more likely to be  
86 exposed to polluted air, water, soil, and poorer industrial working conditions” (Degnarain,  
87 2020, para. 7). These environmental justice disparities are also evident worldwide, as climate  
88 change and related environmental problems disproportionately impact people of color from  
89 poorer countries (Degnarain, 2020).

90 Public and private sector environmental organizations need to prepare more

91 comprehensive racial impact assessments when setting environmental policies (Degnarain,  
92 2020). In addition, there is a need for greater diversity among environmental leadership that  
93 could result in more innovative solutions that mitigate possible conflicts between human  
94 welfare needs and environmental protection (Hewlett et al., 2013).

### 95 ***Health Equity***

96 The COVID pandemic exposed an already open secret about how unequal the nation’s health  
97 care system is. As is now well known, individuals from Black and minority ethnic groups,  
98 those from precarious socioeconomic backgrounds, those from rural areas with limited  
99 healthcare resources, and vulnerable groups throughout the society were far more likely to  
100 become extremely ill or die from COVID-19. The pandemic reinforced existing calls for  
101 measures to be taken to improve equality and provide equitable distribution of healthcare  
102 resources among underprivileged and underserved communities.

### 103 ***Intersectionality***

104 The concept of intersectionality from a social justice perspective embraces the view that there  
105 are “complex social inequalities” that are interlinked with “systems of oppression and  
106 privilege, including race, gender, sexuality, social class, nation, age, religion,” and physical  
107 (and intellectual) ability” (Grzanka, 2020, abstract). The concept of intersectionality is  
108 important to social justice policy and planning because it helps to understand how different  
109 forms of oppression and discrimination interact and affect people’s lives in complex and often  
110 unforeseen ways. Moreover, intersectionality can help to identify the root causes of social  
111 problems, the gaps and barriers in existing policies and services, and the potential solutions that  
112 are more inclusive and effective for diverse groups of people.

113 This policy statement purposefully intersects with (and complements) other policy

114 statements such as racism, criminal justice, affirmative action, economic justice, and other  
115 similar statements that deal with an individual area of injustice.

### 116 ***Importance of Social Justice Policy to the Social Work Profession***

117 Social justice policy is important to the social work profession because it reflects the core values  
118 and ethical principles of social work, which include promoting social change and challenging  
119 social injustice. Of equal importance, social work values encourage a commitment to advocating  
120 for and serving those who are vulnerable, oppressed, marginalized, or discriminated against. A  
121 social justice policy statement is meant to be a set of standards that help social workers to  
122 address the root causes of social problems and advocate for systemic changes that can improve  
123 the lives of their clients and society.

### 124 ***Importance of Coalitions for Social Justice Policy Development and Advocacy***

125 In recent years, it has been clear that the coalition model for social justice policy and action has  
126 been useful for effectively responding to the many social justice–related national crises that  
127 have plagued the nation. Coalitions are groups of like-minded organizations or individuals who  
128 unite to create policy change (National PTA, n.d.). Coalitions build or enhance advocacy  
129 networks and connect with similar organizations to advance a policy goals. They also facilitate  
130 relationships between diverse stakeholders, such as social workers, policymakers, activists,  
131 researchers, and media by:

- 132 • Sharing resources, contacts, and knowledge to increase the capacity and effectiveness of  
133 advocacy efforts.
- 134 • Building sufficient momentum and influence to sway legislation and public opinion in  
135 favor of social justice goals.
- 136 • Providing support and solidarity to each other in the face of challenges and opposition.

137 *Non-Profit Quarterly* has developed the following six principles that may be helpful for  
138 organizations with a social justice mission as guidelines for their coalition work:

- 139 1. Explicitly address issues of social and economic injustice and structural racism.
- 140 2. Employ a community development approach in which residents have equal power in  
141 determining the coalition's or collaborative's agenda and resource allocation.
- 142 3. Employ community organizing as an intentional strategy and as part of the process. Work  
143 to build resident leadership and power.
- 144 4. Focus on policy, systems, and structural change.
- 145 5. Build on the extensive community-engaged scholarship and research over the last four  
146 decades that show what works, that acknowledge the complexities, and that evaluate  
147 appropriately.
- 148 6. Construct core functions for the collaborative based on equity and justice that provide basic  
149 facilitating structures and build member ownership and leadership. (Wolff et al., 2017)

### 150 ***Advocacy and Activism***

151 An issues statement on social justice must speak to the impact on vulnerable populations, and  
152 the social policy changes needed to help mitigate that impact. The initial steps in this process  
153 are through advocacy and activism.

154 *Social justice advocacy* has been defined as  
155 organized efforts aimed at influencing public attitudes, policies, and laws to create a  
156 more socially just society guided by the vision of human rights that may include  
157 awareness of socio-economic inequities, protection of social rights as well as racial  
158 identity, experiences of oppression, and spirituality. (PennState Educational Equity,  
159 n.d., para. 1)

160 Social workers have a history of advocacy and working for societal changes. Social work  
161 policy advocates often work in coalitions of individuals, businesses, and organizations with  
162 common interests. There are numerous approaches to social justice advocacy, and choosing the  
163 most effective approach for any given situation requires knowledge of several factors  
164 including:

- 165 • **Knowledge of existing policies.** If social workers want to create new policies, they must  
166 first understand why existing policies were developed. They must be able to identify  
167 problems in these policies, find ways they could be improved, and design concrete  
168 proposals toward this end.
- 169 • **Knowledge of political and legislative processes.** Social workers engaging in policy  
170 advocacy must understand how local, state, and federal policies are created and changed.  
171 Legislation is developed in line with the democratic process; knowing how governments—  
172 from federal bodies to city councils—change laws is crucial.
- 173 • **Knowledge of service delivery.** Service delivery refers to how resources, including goods  
174 and services, are actually provided. Social workers must understand how policies are  
175 implemented to create actual results and must be able to identify bottlenecks in the path  
176 from policy to tangible change. (Tulane University School of Social Work, 2021, para. 8)

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## 178 ***POLICY STATEMENT***

179 The basic tenets of social justice are broad and inclusive. The social justice policy positions and  
180 values of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) are in alignment with the  
181 consensus point of view that social justice is “dedicated to creating and sustaining a fair and  
182 equal society in which each person and all groups are valued and affirmed” (John Lewis



183 Institute of Social Justice, n.d., para. 1). NASW embraces the term “equity” as the fundamental  
184 goal of the social justice process. This position is especially important in the face of the current  
185 overt rise of intolerance and movements towards totalitarianism in America.

186 NASW also believes that in the effort to achieve social justice, social workers must  
187 remain committed to joining other social justice advocates and governmental entities in  
188 vigilantly monitoring for injustices, and collectively—and appropriately—responding to such  
189 injustices. With that in mind, NASW supports the following national social justice policies,  
190 actions, and positions:

- 191 • It is important to recognize that injustices against large segments of the population continue  
192 to be pervasive. Therefore, there is an ongoing need for advocacy for policies and  
193 legislation aimed at protecting vulnerable people from injustice and inequities.
- 194 • Advocacy and social action for social justice have proven to be effective. Therefore,  
195 NASW is fully supportive of strategic national social justice advocacy.
- 196 • Advocacy and social action are strengthened when organizations with strong social justice  
197 values join. Therefore, NASW strongly supports the work of social justice coalition and  
198 recommends that social work organizations actively participate in such coalition activities.
- 199 • Long-term and systemic injustice have quantifiable consequences for millions of  
200 Americans—including children and families. Therefore, NASW supports fully funded  
201 safety net policies and programs targeting vulnerable people impacted by inequities.
- 202 • Intersectionality is an important social justice concept and is invaluable for developing  
203 policies and strategic advocacy. For example, this statement should be viewed in the  
204 context of how it intersects with other NASW policy statements on topics such as racism,  
205 affirmative action, LBGTQ issues, economic justice, criminal justice, and health equity, to

206 name a few.

- 207 • In any given year, there will be multiple national social justice urgencies that will  
208 simultaneously directly affect millions of Americans. Therefore, NASW and other  
209 organizations with social justice and human rights agendas should use tirage-type methods  
210 to prioritize their work.
- 211 • Environmental justice is a social justice issue that is, to some degree, under the radar. That  
212 is unfortunate because the impact of climate change falls disproportionately on low-income  
213 communities of color and communities in rural areas, especially Native Americans. NASW  
214 supports national policies that address climate change–related disparities within Black,  
215 Brown, and Native communities, as well as all low-income communities.
- 216 • Relatedly, NASW supports increased advocacy and public information campaigns that  
217 speak to the need for policies and programs to end climate change disparities.
- 218 • NASW takes the position that unanticipated highly impactful disparities and injustices that  
219 have national implications emerge on a regular basis. An obvious example is the COVID-  
220 19 pandemic. Therefore, NASW urges social work organizations that have a committed  
221 social justice agenda, to develop “quick reaction” advocacy and social action plans.

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