

The following article is taken from Ken State University Public Administration Blog, and can be accessed here: <https://onlinedegrees.kent.edu/political-science/master-of-public-administration/community/five-principles-of-social-justice>

THE FIVE PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

We have all heard the term ‘social justice,’ but its importance and history remain unclear to many of us.

In the mid-1800s, the Italian Jesuit Luigi Tapparelli d’Azeglio¹ first introduced the term as an economic concept. Seeing extreme levels of inequality and economic distress caused by the social class system in Europe, Tapparelli d’Azeglio derived the term based on Thomas Aquinas’ idea that, in addition to doing the right thing, we should strive to do what is necessary for the betterment of others.²

Today, the concept of social justice often refers to human rights, centered around improving the lives of groups historically marginalized based on race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion and disability.

In this post, we’ll consider goals and obstacles involved in the pursuit of social justice, and five principles at its heart.

The Goal of Social Justice

Typically, those who strive for social justice seek the redistribution of power to enhance the well-being of individuals through equal access to healthcare, justice and economic opportunity.

While activists have been part of the push toward social justice, the proactive changes required often fall to public administrators—in government, non-profit organizations, foundations, public health and regulatory agencies—who are responsible for shaping policies and proposals.

The work of public administrators is often quieter and less dramatic than that of the activists pushing for reform or politicians making promises to constituents. Progress toward social justice requires carefully crafted public policies. In today’s highly polarized political climate, effective policies also require a nuanced understanding of political, economic and social systems, as well as a strong grasp of the legal and social implications of any action.

Access³

[Access to resources](#) is a fundamental principle of social justice. Unfortunately, in many areas of society, communities have had different levels of access based on factors such as

socioeconomic status, education, employment and environment. Education, for example, is associated with better opportunities for employment, higher-paying jobs and economic advancement. It follows, then, that when quality, equitable education is not available, that lack feeds the cycle of unemployment, low-wage occupations and poverty, limiting access for future generations. By leveling the playing field, we expand underserved communities' access to resources affecting health, education and the community.

In broad public policy terms, that could mean offering free public education for everyone, thereby eliminating the financial barriers created by economic disparities in the educational system. We could implement more equitable funding distribution for essential resources, improving the quality of education for students in disadvantaged communities.

Equity³

It's easy to confuse the terms 'equity' and 'equality,' but those things which are equitable are not always equal. The effort and resources required for two different people to achieve a common goal can vary widely. For example, in order to complete a college degree, some students may need more support and educational resources than their peers do. To achieve social justice and ensure equal opportunities for success, it is important to provide equitable resources that focus on the specific needs of communities and the individuals within them.

Advocating for justice could mean promoting policies that address systemic barriers. Implementing policies for inclusive education and adding more educators for students, based on their needs, would be important first steps.

Diversity⁴

[Public administrators](#) will be better equipped to craft policies that address everyone's needs when they acknowledge the differences that exist between individuals and groups. To be effective, policy-makers must recognize and accept all factors that create barriers, then work on ways to overcome them. By understanding diversity and embracing cultural differences, we expand opportunities and access.

We can improve access to healthcare by increasing diversity among administrators and requiring written resources in multiple languages. We can reduce employment discrimination by implementing policies that bar it when it's based on race, gender, gender identity, religion, marital status, sexual orientation, age, physical ability and a host of other human traits.

Participation³

Social justice requires that individuals have the opportunity and platform to participate in making the policies that affect their well-being. Even well-meaning public administrators can create exclusionary policies when they fail to bring diverse voices to the table.

Policies are often created by a select group of people in powerful government positions. Public administrators can prevent this by carefully considering who will be part of the decision-making process, purposely inviting [advocates](#) for groups not adequately represented, and encouraging them to apply for long-term and permanent positions.

Human Rights³

Perhaps the most important principle in this discussion, human rights are inherent to all individuals, regardless of socioeconomic status. Human rights and social justice are inevitably intertwined, and it's impossible to have one without the other. In this country, these rights are manifest in laws that grant freedom of speech, voting rights, criminal justice protections, and other basic rights.

What Social Justice Means for Public Administrators

Social justice is a broad term that affects many areas of public policy and public administration, including healthcare, gender equality, reproductive rights, education, employment and voting.

It can be divisive, especially in light of conflicting ideas about equality, fairness and the allocation of limited resources. Advances in equality often disrupt the status quo, which can be a threat to those people or groups who are in power. As a result, public administrators often have to balance the need for social change with the realities of political and economic structures, and then work within the system to improve it.

Progress toward social justice may be slow, but the effort is offset by reduced inequality and improved lives.

Sources:

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