**Chapter 2: Deciding When to Challenge the Status Quo**

***Policy Advocacy Learning Challenges and Exercises***

***Selected from the book***

**POLICY ADVOCACY LEARNING CHALLENGE 2.1**

Discuss with others how your religious background or affiliations have shaped your views about social policy. In what ways are your views consonant *or* dissonant with the NASW’s Code of Ethics? Can you identify religious views that are not consonant with this Code? Why do you think some people of faith have views like these? Why are other people, like the late Senator Ted Kennedy, convinced that the New Testament mandates policies akin to his liberal views? (When asked why he was such a dedicated advocate for vulnerable populations, he impatiently asked his questioner, “Haven’t you *read* the New Testament?”)

**POLICY ADVOCACY LEARNING CHALLENGE 2.2**

Take any important social issue in contemporary America. Discuss how conservatives, libertarians, liberals, and radicals would differ with respect to:

1. Whether it is an important issue

2. How it is caused

3. How it might be addressed or resolved

What strengths and weaknesses do you believe exist in each of these perspectives? Do the views of any of these groups appear to conflict with the NASW’s Code of Ethics—and, if so, how?

**POLICY ADVOCACY LEARNING CHALLENGE 2.3**

**Identifying Subgroups Within Vulnerable Populations**

Take any of the 16 vulnerable populations. Identify several subgroups within one of them. What kinds of social policies are needed by each of them? Do tensions exist between the subgroups that make it difficult for them to work together to achieve reforms?

Each of the vulnerable populations is represented in political venues by advocacy groups, such as the National Association of Colored Persons (NAACP) for African Americans, the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF) for Latino/as, the National Organization for Women (NOW), the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF), and the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) for low- and moderate-income individuals.

Locate additional advocacy groups that work to improve policies for specific vulnerable populations on the Internet.

**POLICY ADVOCACY LEARNING CHALLENGE 2.4**

**Are Women a Vulnerable Population?**

Take the criteria that we listed earlier in this chapter that allow us to describe specific populations as vulnerable. Using materials from this historical overview, as well as additional information you possess, answer these questions:

* Are women a vulnerable population?
* Are specific subgroups within the overall population of women *particularly* vulnerable—and, if so, which ones?
* Is *any* subgroup of the overall population of women *not* vulnerable? If so, why?
* Has the United States made progress addressing causes of women’s vulnerability in the last 50 years?
* Do the five 2012 incidents in the historical overview above suggest that progress has been uneven?
* Are Republicans generally more insensitive to women’s issues and needs than Democrats? If so, why?
* Take another vulnerable population, such as African Americans, Native Americans, Latino/as, immigrants, Asian Americans, or LGBT persons. Can you identify recent incidents that illustrate policies and incidents that reflect how the broader society marginalizes them?

**POLICY ADVOCACY LEARNING CHALLENGE 2.5**

**Confronting Negative Stereotypes and Myths**

1. As an exercise, consider the 16 vulnerable populations. Imagine yourself as a member of one of the populations of which you are not a member. Imagine yourself applying for a job. Ask what stereotypes an employer might possess about you that would lead him or her to refrain from hiring you for a relatively high-level position. For example, veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan *often* confront assumptions that they have brain trauma and mental problems that would make them inferior employees.
2. Locate research or other materials that *refute* the stereotype. For example, find research or evidence that veterans who return from Iraq and Afghanistan are often high-performing employees.

**POLICY ADVOCACY LEARNING CHALLENGE 2.6**

**Identifying Policies to Help Vulnerable Populations**

As an exercise, take any of the following statements and ask yourself what kinds of policies would be helpful to the specific vulnerable population mentioned.

Poverty

The American poverty rate was 12.67% in 2006—or almost 1 percentage point higher than in 2001. It rose to 15.1% by 2010—the highest level since 1992.

Homelessness

About 744,000 people are homeless on any given night in the U.S.—and between 2.5 million and 3.5 million people experience homelessness over the course of a year.

Lack of Medical Insurance

The number of Americans who lack health insurance rose to 47 million in 2006—or 15.8% of the population. Included in this number are 8.7 million children—or 11.7% of all children.

Failed Transitions From Foster Care

About 20,000 of the nation’s 500,000 foster children “graduate” from foster care each year at age 18—only to encounter a difficult transition into life in the community. About 30% of America’s homeless people were once in foster care.

Lack of Reentry Help

Seventy percent of the 650,000 people released annually from state and federal prisons will commit new crimes within three years. The vast majority of them receive no reentry help before they leave prison.

Low Wages

About one in five (or 41 million) people fall into a “hardship gap” where their earnings, when combined with work benefits (such as health insurance and child care), together with assistance from programs such as SNAP and the Earned Income Tax Credit, do *not* meet their basic needs. (See Albelda & Boushey, 2007.)

Feminization of Poverty

If the poverty rate for all women 18 years and older was 12.7% in 2004, the poverty rate for women in households with no spouse present was 24.8%. Many of these female heads of household hold two or more jobs and still cannot reach, or barely reach, above-poverty levels.

Economic Victimization of Immigrants

More than 55 million immigrants have settled in the United States since its founding, yet every wave of immigrants has encountered hostility. The roughly 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States are no exception. American corporations, food growers and processors, contractors, restaurants, and hotels depend on their labor, yet Americans grant them few rights. Congress has repeatedly failed to enact legislation to clarify their rights, most recently in 2007. Immigrants work for minimum wage—and, in some cases, even less when employers’ reimbursement of them is not monitored by the Department of Labor. Many immigrants do not even receive some or all of their pay when fraudulent employers believe they will not dare to go to authorities for fear of being deported.

Lack of Upward Mobility

Americans have prided themselves on the ability of low-income people to be upwardly mobile. Generations of Americans have contended that people have only to work hard to enter the middle or even upper reaches of their society. Has not this been the script for tens of millions of Americans from the colonial period onward? Have not many of the great corporate leaders—including most recently Steve Jobs— become highly successful entrepreneurs? This American dream has recently been tarnished by five large studies in recent years that have revealed that the United States has lower rates of mobility than some European nations and Canada (DeParle, 2012). One research project discovered that 42% of males raised in the bottom fifth of incomes stayed there as adults, compared to only 25% in Denmark and 30% in Britain. Research by the Pew Charitable Trusts found that 62% of males and females raised in the top fifth of incomes *stay* in the top two fifths—and 65% born in the bottom fifth stay in the bottom two fifths. Another study found that 22% of Americans raised in the bottom tenth of the income distribution stay there as adults, compared with only 16% of Canadians (DeParle, 2012).

On a more positive note, researchers discovered more mobility by individuals raised in the middle fifth of the income distribution as compared to the highly “sticky” top and bottom rungs, where people tend to stay where they are raised.

Tensions between the rich and poor were also increasing in 2011 and 2012. A Pew Research Center study found that “conflict between rich and poor now eclipses racial strain and friction between immigrants and the native-born as the greatest source of tension in American society” (Morin, 2012). Two thirds of Americans (or a larger number than in any poll since 1992) believe there are “strong conflicts between rich and poor in the United States” (Tavernise, 2012) This belief is common among inde­pendents (68%), Democrats (73%), and persons earning from $40,000 to $75,000 annually (71%). When polled in 2009, only 47% of the last group had held this belief (Tavernise, 2012).

Criminalizing Poor People on the Street

According to the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (n.d.), many jurisdictions enacted ordinances that criminalized poor people during the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009 and beyond. These ordinances included bans on begging; restrictions on lying, sitting, or sleeping on sidewalks or loitering in the streets; and authorizations to raid shelters at night to find men with outstanding warrants. Some cities made it a crime to share food with people in public places, even as a federal judge declared it to be unconstitutional in Orlando, Florida (Ehrenreich, 2009).

Different Police Standards for People of Color

An incident in 2012 reminded Congressman John Lewis, an African American leader in the civil rights movement, of the racial violence of the 1950s and 1960s. Trayvon Martin, a high school student in Sanford, Florida, was shot to death on February 26, 2012, by George Zimmerman, a white person who served as a neighborhood watch captain. Zimmerman had called 911 to report a suspicious person—and had been told by police not to follow Martin, but to leave the matter to local police, who would soon arrive. Zimmerman followed Martin. Zimmerman claimed he was attacked by Martin, who bloodied his nose, threw him to the ground, and beat him. Zimmerman says he opened fire on the unarmed Martin for self-defense, as allowed under a Florida statute called “Stand your ground.” Local police did not question him at the scene, collect evidence, take photographs, or even ask him what happened. They did not take him into custody as a suspect in a homicide, so he remained free a month later. They took no steps to establish the identity of the slain teenager—not even calling numbers on his cell phone—so his parents did not learn he had died for three days. The case became national as the press came to learn these details. African Americans protested across the nation that Zimmerman had not been arrested pending trial. They doubted that local police would investigate the case fairly because they had not investigated cases of homicides against other black youth in the area in recent years. Many people wondered if the police would have taken a different course of action and launched a more thorough investigation if the alleged murderer had been an African American and the victim a white person. The decision by a jury to acquit Zimmerman during summer 2013 appeared to justify the fears of many people and brought renewed energy to the movement to repeal “Stand your ground” statutes in Florida and elsewhere.

No Restrictions on the Interrogation of Immigrants

Immigration statutes enacted in various states in 2010, 2011, and 2012 gave police the right to detain and interrogate anyone who they believed *might* be an undocumented person. These statutes gave no criterion that police would use in making this determination. Would not this legislation greatly increase the apprehension of Latino/as, including citizens?

Restriction of Black Voting

Conservatives launched an ambitious effort to cut the voting rates of low-income individuals (who were likely to vote for Democratic candidates) in many jurisdictions in 2011 and 2012. They enacted state ordinances to require voters to show identification photographs at polls as a requirement for voting. They knew that this seemingly innocuous policy would reduce voting rates in low-income areas because considerable numbers of low-income people do not have documents with photographs. Many of them do not have licenses because they do not own cars or passports. Conservatives claimed that the measure would cut voter fraud, but they lacked evidence that fraud was a significant problem in the United States. Enactment of laws to restrict voting continued into 2013 and 2014 in the wake of a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court that they did not violate the federal Voting Rights Act.