INTRODUCTION

Rosa Perez-Koenig, DSW, and Barry Rock, DSW

What shall we tell the American poor, once we have seen them? Shall we say to them that they are better off than the Indian poor, the Italian poor, the Russian poor? That is one answer, but it is heartless. I should put it another way. I want to tell every well-fed and optimistic American that it is intolerable that so many millions should be maimed in body and spirit when it is not necessary that they should be. My standard of comparison is not how much worse things used to be. It is how much better they could be if only we were stirred.

Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (1962)

INEQUALITY IN A BOOMING ECONOMY

On August 11, 1998, two articles on the same page of the *International Herald Tribune* dramatized the term "devolution." One headline read, "Plagued Health Care System: Now More Than 41 Million Americans Lack Insurance" (p. 3). The other, smaller article, "A Deeper Look at Poverty," reported that "Three in 10 Americans lived below the poverty line for at least two months during a three year period." And the lead headline of the *New York Times* on July 6, 1998, was: "Largest HMOs Cutting the Poor and the Elderly" (p. 1). The MSNBC website reported on October 15, 1998: "A new survey of emergency food programs in New York City showed that hunger is on the rise, and city soup kitchens and food programs are having a hard time keeping up with the demand. The survey showed that hunger rose most dra-

matically among children and the elderly" ("Hunger Increased in NYC").

This book includes chapters written by professional social workers who, as individuals and as representatives of their respective organizations, are committed to the promotion of social justice—especially among oppressed and vulnerable populations. Today, social workers and the social service delivery system face great challenges. While the profession places stricter demands for professional competencies and effective accountability, current social, political, and economic forces in the era of devolution have resulted in drastic changes in the social welfare system that we have known since 1935. This book addresses the implications of this dismantling of the safety net for the social work profession.

Regarding health care, the latest report from the U.S. Census Bureau indicates that 16% of the American population (43.4 million) lack any form of coverage (Pear, 1998). The reasons included welfare reform and the elimination of health benefits for employed people. Is this bad news surprising? The U.S. economy is said to be at a pinnacle. As we are writing in early January 1999, the New York, NASDAQ, and S&P 500 stock indices are at record highs.

It is no surprise to former secretary of labor Robert Reich, who said: "Most Americans don't have it so good. They have jobs, but most wages and benefits are stuck or continue to drop. Wealth has exploded at the top, but the wages of people in the bottom half are lower today in terms of purchasing power than they were in 1989, before the last recession. This is in sharp contrast to every previous recovery in the postwar period. . . . The reality is that Wall Street's advance hasn't been widely shared" (Reich, 1998, pp. 32–33).

Inequality has increased in spite of an unusually strong economy. The wealthiest 5% of families had 15.6% of the national income in 1969; by 1996 it had grown to 20.3%. However, in 1969 the poorest 20% of families had 5.6% of the income; by 1996 their share was reduced to 4.2% (Levinson, 1999, citing Levy, 1999; Thurow, 1999).

DEVOLUTION

The term “devolution” refers to several current social, political, and economic processes. One meaning is that social policy domains previously the responsibility of the federal government have “devolved,” or been delegated, to the states. Another meaning is that devolution is the opposite of evolution—a form of social regression. It thus refers to the dismantling of the infrastructure of the welfare state and of the system of federally guaranteed entitlements. Facing these and other forms of cost cutting, cost containment, managed care, downsizing, and reengineering, social workers and their clients are feeling threatened by ominous social, political, and economic forces while the overall American economy seems to be thriving. These contradictions and factors are having a profound effect on how services are being provided and how practice is being conducted to very vulnerable, at-risk populations.

From a conservative (if not neo-populist) perspective, government has been perceived as too big, complex, intrusive, and generally greedy and incompetent. Devolution is thus welcomed by many because it is anti-dependency, communal, and empowering. A middle ground that might be embraced by social workers would criticize the destructive consequences of devolution and advocate for client services, entitlements, and rights—demanding a preservation of a federally institutionalized safety net—but also maximize opportunities for less bureaucratic intrusion by self-sufficiency, empowerment, and return to greater community control. In the chapters that follow, the reader will see these themes and this dual approach to devolution—critical of the dismantling of the safety net but supportive of individual and community empowerment—as both a negative and a potential.

SOCIAL INDICATORS

At the conference upon which this book is based, one of the keynote addresses focused on social indicators. Since Dr. Mirin-

goff's remarks are not represented in a chapter, a brief summary of social indicators will now be presented, based on several of his previously published works as well as his keynote address.

Social indicators are the equivalent in the social realm of economic indicators in the financial realm: "The Index of Social Health is a method of monitoring the social well-being of American society. It is the only current measure that examines cumulatively so many social problems, affecting so many sectors of society, in a single assessment. While measures like the Index of Leading Economic Indicators routinely combine economic statistics to signal large-scale shifts in the economy, social data are almost never integrated in this way" (Miringoff, 1997, p. 4). The elements of Miringoff's index include infant mortality, child abuse, children in poverty, teenage suicide, drug abuse, high school dropouts, unemployment, average weekly earnings, health insurance coverage, poverty among those over 65, out-of-pocket health costs for those over 65, homicides, alcohol-related traffic fatalities, food stamp coverage, access to affordable housing, and the gap between rich and poor (Miringoff, 1997). The index measures the social health of a community, city, state, and/or the nation. It quantifies inequality, the gap between economic and social realities, and can be a means of assessing need or evaluating how well government programs and policies are progressing in problem solving.

Among some of the conclusions through 1997 are: "During the 1990's, the social health of the nation decreased by 6 percent. Thus far, the 1990's have recorded six of the eight lowest years since 1970"; and, "Health insurance coverage has worsened at a faster rate during the 1990's than any other problem" (Miringoff, 1997, p. 6). Those indicators which worsened through 1997 are health insurance coverage, drug abuse, average weekly earnings, high school dropouts, and food stamp coverage (Miringoff, 1997). A longer-term view is pessimistic as well: "Over the last several decades, while cumulative economic indicators portray an economy fluctuating between recession and recovery, but growing overall, most key social indicators show a long downward spiral and a severely declining quality of life" (Miringoff, Miringoff, & Opdycke, 1996, p. 17).

In his keynote address, Dr. Miringoff gave examples of com-

munity-based organizations utilizing social indicators in social action endeavors, and he encouraged the audience to engage in this kind of data-informed advocacy. In the final chapter of this book, Natalie Riccio makes use of social indicators in this way—at both the local level and the global level.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social justice is another important framework of this book. We are vulnerable to charges of being “naysayers” or “party poopers” by bringing attention to what is wrong in America while the economy seems to be in such superb condition. But as social workers we are primarily concerned with those whom the economy leaves behind. There is a danger that in the great enthusiasm that all is going well, the least advantaged citizens will be forgotten. After the boom of the postwar era into the 1960s, Michael Harrington was compelled to write his classic and influential book *The Other America* (1962) in order to help the country rediscover the considerable poverty that existed at that time.

An example of this attitude is found in a recent “Talk of the Town” in the *New Yorker* (Klein, 1999): “The President is on trial for high crimes and misdemeanors, and the State of the Union is, well, great. Almost every social and economic indicator is moving in the right direction” (p. 22). Then this after several columns of elaborating on this euphoria, as almost an afterthought: “Of course, one can point to imperfections in this glowing state of national affairs—the widening income gap between rich and poor” (p. 22).

The widening gap between rich and poor is of the utmost concern to social workers. It is a central issue of the principles of social justice. As we find in the writings of philosopher John Rawls (1971), but consistent with the profession’s century-long traditions, conditions of inequality are justifiable only if the least advantaged benefit. If America is doing so very well but a minority of the population is falling further behind, there is a major breach in the mechanisms of redistribution of goods, services, and income.

Social work as a profession has a longstanding commitment

to social justice. This is clearly evident in the most recent version of the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) Code of Ethics (1996), in which the mission of the profession is identified as rooted in six core values: service, social justice, dignity and worth of a person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. The value of social justice is translated into the ethical principle that "Social workers challenge social injustice" (NASW, 1996, p. 5), which is further defined as follows:

Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people. (NASW, 1996, p. 5)

These principles are further expanded into a section of ethical standards of social justice—"Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to the Broader Society"—which include social welfare, public participation, public emergencies, and social and political action (see NASW, 1996, pp. 26–27). The accrediting body for social work education in the United States, the Council on Social Work Education, also places social justice at the core of its mission and standards of accreditation. The Fordham University Graduate School of Social Service, whose faculty contributed many chapters to this book, has social justice as its core mission. Social justice's place at the heart of the American social work profession could not be clearer.

SOCIAL POLICY AS CONTEXT FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The social work profession has always been committed to "contextual knowledge." Social workers have long subscribed to a contextual perspective, the "person-in-environment" being the best-known. This has been the bedrock of social work. The "person" stands for all client systems (individuals, families, groups,

organizations, communities, and societies), and "environment" represents all levels of the external environment (the micro, mezzo, exo, and macro levels) and the internalized environment of the external world.

However, there are many contexts, since "context" refers to something that defines or influences that which occurs within. Contexts may include physical surroundings and conditions, social institutions, policies and laws, cultural values and practices, history, language, and people. People cannot be understood apart from contexts, nor can contexts be understood apart from the people to whom they refer (Witkin, 1999). In contextual knowledge, time and place are essential variables. The first section of the book focuses on policy as context, mainly in the United States (place) in current times, known as the era of devolution (time).

Tropman (1984, p. 268) defines "policy" as "an idea that is embodied in a written document which is ratified by legitimate authority and serves as a guide to action and is a result of policy process, a decision making process by the legislative, the courts and or executive directors." Policy is dynamic and as such involves a circular process: the development of the idea, its implementation, evaluation, and feedback that leads to the reformulation of the idea. Social welfare policy "can be approached by examining the character and functioning of . . . essential social functions—child-rearing; the production, consumption, and distribution of goods and services; social protection, and so forth" (Gilbert & Terrell, 1998, p. 2). Social welfare may be defined as the organization and "enduring patterns" of "these fundamental institutions" (Gilbert & Terrell, 1998, p. 2). Governmental policies usually reflect the climate and ideology of the dominant discourse.

The current era, known as the era of devolution, reflects the conservative climate that started in the late 1970s and culminated in conservative policies such as the social welfare policy known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRA). Although this policy claims to address the right to work, particularly of poor women with children, it really fails to capture the spirit of human rights. The spirit of human rights is clearly stated in the United Nations'

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, signed in 1948. In the United States, while civil and political rights have been generally accepted, economic human rights have been virtually ignored. Economic human rights, as expressed in Articles 23, 25, and 26, capture the true spirit of the right to work. Article 23 addresses the right to jobs at a living wage and just conditions; Article 25, the right to well-being of a person and his or her family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care, and necessary social services; and Article 26, the right to education. As we compare the U.S. federal social welfare policy with the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights international policy, the PRA fails to capture the true spirit of human rights. The PRA is harsh and punitive in its mood. This policy has for the first time instituted a 5-year limit to public assistance for poor mothers and their children. This approach of threatening, punishing, and blaming the victim is evidence of disregard for poor and marginalized women and children, adding tremendous pressure to the already very stressful lives of poor people. The right to work must be implemented in ways that truly foster the well-being of people. Gil (1998) suggests reframing the concept of work in order to truly implement justice in this society.

It is through agency-based practice that social work can truly address the breadth and depth of the profession and the integration of all its essential areas, such as practice and its administration, research, and social policy. It is in the agency, the organization, that policy meets practice. It is through direct services to clients that policy is actualized, and from clients' feedback, policies are evaluated and then reformulated through social action.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book will provide a framework for understanding the relationship between these macro-level forces and the micro-level delivery and practice of social services. It will provide knowledge, skills, and support for practicing social workers, human service workers, and health care practitioners to survive and to prevail in this environment. There are sections that cover macro

and micro practice. The struggle for social justice is often thought of as being played out in the macro arenas of agency, community, local, state, and national social policy; however, this book also emphasizes that social justice issues are of major concern in direct practice.

From the early years of the 20th century through the early 1960s, there was a separation—if not at times a polarization—between those social workers who perceived their *function* as exclusively helping individuals and families, and social workers who perceived their *cause* as social action and the struggle for social equality. In the past several decades, a synthesis was established through the generalist practice model, based on ecological and systems perspectives. The strengths perspective is also very influential in contemporary social work (Saleebey, 1997). These themes are all evident in the chapters and reports that follow.

This book is based on a professional conference on this topic that took place at Fordham University's Lincoln Center Campus on January 12, 1998. The Fordham University Graduate School of Social Service and five community social service agencies in the greater New York City area sponsored the conference. The sponsoring community agencies were: Jewish Board of Family and Children Services, Agenda for Children Tomorrow, Steinway Child and Family Service, Harlem Dowling Westside Center, and Lakeside Family and Children Services. The volume is not intended to be the published proceedings of the conference, but rather a book based on and inspired by the conference. Many of the faculty of the conference have made contributions to the book based on their workshop materials and presentations.

This volume focuses on the effect of the dramatic changes taking place in the United States on the *practice* of social work and human and health services—specifically, welfare reform, child welfare reform, managed care, and cultural diversity. Although publications are available in these areas, no texts of this kind are directed *at practitioners*. The book will present a framework for understanding the impact of these macro-level changes on the practice of social work itself.

The structure of the book is a variation on a musical ABA

pattern: the A motif is macro, and the B is micro. Following prefaces by leadership of the several sponsoring organizations, this introduction by the editors sets the stage for the book and the frameworks to be advanced. Based on several of the keynote addresses from the conference plus other writings, the first section ("The Policy Context: Social and Economic Justice in the Era of Devolution") focuses on the social forces, processes, and policy changes and their implications. The first chapter, by volume co-editor Rosa Perez-Koenig, provides an in-depth explication of the concept of social justice. The next chapter, by Robert Hill, describes contemporary welfare reform and devolution in historical context, from the Social Security Act through the reforms of 1996. It is followed by a chapter based on one of the keynote addresses of the original conference, "The Ramifications of Welfare Reform on Vulnerable Populations," by Shirley Better. Dr. Better explores the long-term historical roots of today's devolution, but concentrates on the current impact of welfare reform on the inner city. In the fourth chapter, Patricia Brownell and Marilyn Moch examine policy changes directed at the aging population. Managed care is an important element in the process of devolution. In the fifth chapter, volume co-editor Barry Rock discusses diverse aspects of managed care and their implications for social work practice, organization, and education.

The next section ("Context Meets Practice: Public Issues/Private Troubles—Devolving Systems and Their Human and Practice Consequences") explores the consequences for practice of the policy context presented in the previous section. It covers practice issues in which devolution affects selected vulnerable populations: children and families, immigrants, persons with AIDS, and the elderly. This section has its own introduction. The concluding section ("Call to Action: Strengthening Communities"), which also has a separate introduction, contains chapters and reports from the field dealing with macro-level interventions at the grass roots—community planning and interagency collaboration, spirituality and ethics, and building community—including a discussion of community action and the use of social indicators at the global level. Thus this book attempts to integrate policy, practice, organizational, and community perspectives utilizing an ecological/system theory approach to social

work practice and a strong value commitment to the strengths perspective and social justice.

REFERENCES

- A deeper look at poverty. (1998, August 11). *International Herald Tribune*, p. 3.
- Gil, D. (1998). *Confronting injustice and oppression*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gilbert, N., & Terrell, P. (1998). *Dimensions of social welfare policy* (4th ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Harrington, M. (1962; 1997 ed.). *The other America: Poverty in the United States*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Hunger increased in NYC according to new survey 15 October 1998. [Http://www.msnbc.com/local/WNBC/156214.asp](http://www.msnbc.com/local/WNBC/156214.asp).
- Klein, J. (1999, 18 January). Giving Clinton the silent treatment ["Talk of the Town"]. *New Yorker*, pp. 21–22.
- Largest HMOs cutting the poor and the elderly. (1998, 6 July). *New York Times*, p. 1.
- Levinson, M. (1999, 10 January). Show me the money: A study of why Americans are wary of the future despite a bull economy [Review of Frank Levy's *The new dollars and dreams: American incomes and economic change*]. *New York Times Book Review*, p. 19.
- Miringoff, M. (1997). *1997 Index of Social Health*. Fordham Institute for Innovation in Social Policy.
- Miringoff, M.-L., Miringoff, M., & Opdycke, S. (1996). The growing gap between standard economic indicators and the nation's social health. *Challenge*, July–August, 17–22.
- National Association of Social Workers. (1996). *Code of ethics*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Pear, R. (1998, September 26). Americans lacking health insurance put at 16 percent. *New York Times*, p. A1.
- Plagued health care system: Now more than 41 million Americans lack insurance. (1998, August 11). *International Herald Tribune*, p. 3.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Reich, R. (1998, 25 January). When naptime is over. *New York Times Magazine*, pp. 32–34.
- Saleebey, D. (1997). *The strengths perspective in social work practice*. New York: Longman.
- Thurow, L. (1999, 18 January). The boom that wasn't. *New York Times*, p. A17.
- Tropman, J. E. (1984). Policy analysis: Methods and techniques. *Encyclopedia of social work* (18th ed.) (pp. 268–283). Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Witkin, S. L. (1999). Editorial: Identities and contexts. *Social Work*, 44(4), 293–297.