

What is Social Justice?

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Summary

- Social justice refers to a political and philosophical theory that focuses on the concept of fairness in relations between individuals in society and equal access to wealth, opportunities, and social privileges in a society.
- The concept of social justice first emerged in the 19th century, as there were wide disparities in wealth and social standing perpetuated through the social structure of the era.
- The five main principles of social justice include access to resources, equity, participation, diversity, and human rights.

History and Evolution of Social Justice

The concept of social justice first arose in the 19th century during the Industrial Revolution as attempts were made to promote more egalitarian societies and reduce the exploitation of certain marginalized groups due to the vast disparity between the rich and poor at the time. Social justice initially focused on issues such as the distribution of capital, property, and wealth due to the extreme levels of inequality and economic distress prevalent at the time, resulting from the European social class structure.

Today, social justice has shifted towards a stronger emphasis on human rights and improving the lives of disadvantaged and marginalized groups that have historically faced discrimination in society. Many of these groups have been discriminated against on the basis of factors such as sex, age, wealth, ethnicity, heritage, social status, religion, and others. Social justice often leads to efforts to redistribute wealth to some of the underprivileged groups through providing income, jobs, and education support and opportunities.

Social Justice and the Government

While activists and advocates significantly influence the widespread emphasis on social justice in the world today, the actual implementation of social justice policies is often left to administrators, such as the government, [non-profit organizations](#), foundations, or agencies within the bureaucracy. Such organizations are responsible for shaping public policies to address social justice issues, and as a result, political factors influence the extent to which social justice plays a role in the policies shaped by the government and administrators of the day.

Social justice initiatives can be pursued through many different types of government programs via wealth and income redistribution, government subsidies, protected legal status in employment, and even legalized discrimination against privileged groups through fines and taxes or even through purges historically. Social justice initiatives are commonly seen in [socialist](#) and communist countries, which integrates them into their economic policies, as well as in the platforms of left-leaning political parties within democracies.

Five Principles of Social Justice

There are five main principles of social justice that are paramount to understanding the concept better. Namely, these are access to resources, equity, participation, diversity, and human rights.

1. Access to Resources

Access to resources is an important principle of social justice and refers to the extent to which different socioeconomic groups receive equal access to give everyone an equal start in life. Many societies offer a multitude of resources and services for their citizens, such as [healthcare](#), food, shelter, education, and recreational opportunities. However, unequal access to such services often exists.

For example, individuals from wealthy households among the upper and upper-middle classes are often better able to afford to attend good schools and access post-secondary education, which leads to a greater chance of obtaining jobs with higher income in the

future. In contrast, those from the lower classes face fewer opportunities. It, in turn, limits access to education for future generations and continues the cycle of facing disadvantages.

2. Equity

Equity refers to how individuals are given tools specific to their needs and socioeconomic status in order to move towards similar outcomes. It contrasts with equality, where everyone is offered the same tools to move towards the same outcome.

As such, often, things that are equal are not equitable due to the more advanced needs of some individuals and groups. Social justice, integrated with addressing equity issues, might include advancing policies that provide support to overcome systemic barriers.

3. Participation

Participation refers to how everyone in society is given a voice and opportunity to verbalize their opinions and concerns and have a role in any decision-making that affects their livelihood and standard of living. Social injustice occurs when a small group of individuals makes decisions for a large group, while some people are unable to voice their opinions.

4. Diversity

Understanding diversity and appreciating the value of cultural differences are especially important because policymakers are often better able to construct policies that take into consideration differences that exist among different societal groups. It is important to recognize that some groups face more barriers in society, and by considering the inequities, policymakers and civil servants will be in a stronger position to expand opportunities for marginalized or disadvantaged groups.

Discrimination in employment on the basis of factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, sex, age, and other characteristics are constant issues in society, and enforcing policies to countermand discriminatory practices are one way in which [diversity](#) is taken into consideration.

5. Human Rights

Human rights are one of the most important principles of social justice and form a foundational part of the concept. Human rights and social justice are certainly interrelated, and it is impossible for one to exist without the other.

Human rights are fundamental to societies that respect the civil, economic, political, cultural, and legal rights of individuals and governments, organizations, and individuals must be held responsible if they fail to ensure the upholding of these rights. They are extremely important in many societies and are recognized internationally through institutions such as the International Criminal Court and the [United Nations Human Rights Council](#).