



A DCI Issue Guide

Balancing Liberty and General Welfare: The Case of Social Safety Nets

Are the ideals of liberty and general welfare compatible in American society, and what role should social safety nets play in balancing them?

About the Deliberative Series on American Values

As the United States nears the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the nation's founding, this Deliberative Series on American Values invites participants to reflect on the foundational ideals shaping our republic for centuries. Approaching this milestone in an era marked by historical amnesia and selective memory, the series aims to foster a more complete understanding of our nation's past and present. Each forum draws from both the Declaration and the Constitution's Preamble to explore a pair of core American values that often complement each other but also have exposed deep tensions during moments of national change. Through dialogue grounded in history and informed by current policy challenges, we encourage thoughtful deliberation on how best to uphold and balance these enduring commitments in an ever-changing democracy.

Background

Introduction

There has long been an inherent tension within American society between the individual and the group. The Declaration of Independence is often recognized as the ideological foundation on which America was founded,¹ and no phrase is perhaps as recognizable as the one that states that all men are "endowed...with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." The fundamental importance of liberty as a right is captured by Patrick Henry's 1775 revolutionary exhortation to "give me liberty or give me death."² The national anthem, the Star-Spangled Banner, also famously proclaims that the United States is the "land of the free."

¹ "[America's Founding Documents](#)." National Archives. 2024.

² "[Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death](#)." Patrick Henry. 1775.

The Preamble of the Constitution builds on the foundation laid by the Declaration, laying out six essential objectives of our nation, including both securing “the Blessings of Liberty” and promoting “the general Welfare.” General welfare in this sense has both symbolic and substantive significance. It both implores us to be mindful of the less fortunate surrounding us while also reminding us that the health and vitality of American society is the responsibility of every citizen.

The meaning of 'general welfare' has been contested since the United States' founding. James Madison argued in Federalist No. 41 that this phrase was limited to the enumerated powers that follow it, not an independent grant of authority. Others, like Alexander Hamilton, interpreted it more broadly and argued that it granted Congress an additional spending authority alongside the enumerated powers. Although the Supreme Court rejected Madison's view in the 1930s, this debate remains central to discussions about the proper role of government in addressing social needs.

General welfare can be interpreted as reflecting several core American aspirations. **Public safety and public health**, for example, are highly valued aspects of American life. When this attribute comes under threat, whether by the COVID-19 pandemic, police brutality, or protests associated with riots and violence, it becomes clear how much we value safety and well-being in our communities.

Economic security and ensuring that our basic needs are met is a constant goal of all Americans and particularly those who live paycheck-to-paycheck. Welfare programs are one solution to support the disadvantaged and their economic security, but they have their own costs and controversies. Another approach is to promote the ideal of the American Dream and the idea that everybody can make their way to the top by ensuring that everyone has equal access to opportunities and resources necessary to succeed.

Lastly, general welfare also depends on **public infrastructure**, which can be interpreted in a literal sense (e.g., public education, highways, public transit, internet access, clean water) and/or in an economic sense (free markets in which buyers and sellers freely exchange goods and governments that enforce contracts and protect property rights).

The quest to promote both individual liberty and general welfare creates a dynamic between the interests of the group and the interests of the individual that manifests itself in several different ways. For example, gun policy debates have been driven by both an emphasis on the individual's right to bear arms and attention to the effects of mass shootings and gun violence on American communities. The Gadsden flag, with the phrase “DONT TREAD ON ME” under a

rattlesnake, has become a common symbol of individualism and liberty,³ while the phrase E PLURIBUS UNUM (“Out of Many, One”) is enshrined on the Great Seal and US currency and captures the country’s commitment to general welfare for all.⁴ This tension between the group and the individual is evident in the varying state mottos of different states – New Hampshire’s state motto is “Live free or die,” while Missouri’s Latin motto, *Salus populi suprema lex esto*, translates to “The Welfare of the People is the Highest Law.”⁵

Social safety nets are a classic policy area where the goals of promoting the general welfare and preserving individual liberty come into friction. A 2023 study by the Department of Health and Human Services estimates that approximately 99 million Americans participated in one of the ten major safety net programs in 2019, such as child support, housing assistance, and medical insurance. This study did not include Medicare and Social Security, which provide benefits that are only available to older Americans and are not based on financial need. Nevertheless, they can also be considered social safety net programs that provide benefits to approximately 70 million Americans every year.⁶ While these social safety nets are critical parts of America’s support infrastructure, they take up a large portion of the federal budget that is paid for by American taxpayers.⁷ This money could instead be spent by Americans to pursue their own personal interests. Social safety nets thus raise important questions about the most effective way to support general welfare without unduly restricting individual economic freedoms.

This guide is designed to stimulate conversations about the substantive compatibility of liberty and general welfare as well as the tensions that inevitably arise when two fundamental American values are relevant to an issue of public concern.

The Concept of Liberty and General Welfare

Before we can understand how liberty and general welfare interact, it is important to explore what these ideas mean conceptually. Both concepts are deeply rooted in American history and are written directly into the Declaration and the Constitution. This section will break down some of the broader terms used in the founding documents of America into concrete ideas and frameworks to consider. We’ll first start with liberty; then we’ll move on to general welfare.

³ [“The Gadsden Flag: One of America’s Iconic Revolutionary Symbols.”](#) Liberty Flags. 2024.

⁴ [“E Pluribus Unum. from A gazetteer of the United States of America.”](#) Smithsonian. 2025.

⁵ [“Missouri State Symbols.”](#) Missouri Secretary of State. 2025.

⁶ [“Monthly Statistical Snapshot, June 2025.”](#) Social Security. 2025.; [“Medicare Monthly Enrollment.”](#) U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services Data. 2025.

⁷ [“New Report Shows More Americans Dependent on Welfare Checks, at the Expense of Work”](#) United States House Committee on Ways & Means. 2025.

LIBERTY

Positive and Negative Liberty

One way to analyze liberty is to split it into two distinct forms: positive and negative. First defined by Isaiah Berlin, positive liberty is the ability to be your own master; in other words, to be able to act in pursuit of your own goals towards self-realization. A person with positive liberty is free when they have the power or capacity to make meaningful choices and fulfill their potential. In contrast, negative liberty is the absence of external constraints or interference from others. Negative liberty means being free to do whatever you want without anyone stopping you.⁸

Concrete examples might help us understand the difference between these two different types of freedom. The First Amendment explicitly prevents the federal government from “prohibiting the free exercise” of religion, meaning that American citizens have negative liberty with regards to religion. At least on paper, Americans have the freedom to practice our own religions without anyone interfering.

Positive liberty means that you have freedom that stretches beyond what is on paper. If someone is too poor to get an education or feed themselves, they may theoretically have the freedom to attend school or get a job, but without proper resources or support, that freedom is limited. Positive liberty is the genuine ability to pursue one’s interests and make one’s own choices.

Put more simply, negative liberty is when nobody is literally stopping us – there are no laws preventing or interfering with our choices. Positive liberty is a higher aspiration and represents a true capacity to take control of our lives and make meaningful choices without being bound by our circumstances.

⁸ [“Positive and Negative Liberty.”](#) Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 2021.

Below is a table providing more context about these two types of liberties.

	Negative liberty	Positive liberty
Key focus	Freedom from interference	Freedom to achieve self-realization
Examples	Freedom from government censorship or legal restrictions on speech	Ability to express oneself meaningfully without fear or social exclusion
	Freedom to engage in economic activity without state-imposed constraints or undue taxes	True ability to live a stable and fulfilling life, above simply surviving
Relevance to society	Minimal government or societal intervention , focus on individual rights, promoting individual freedom and choice	Emphasis on state or societal responsibility to provide opportunities and resources for all citizens

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

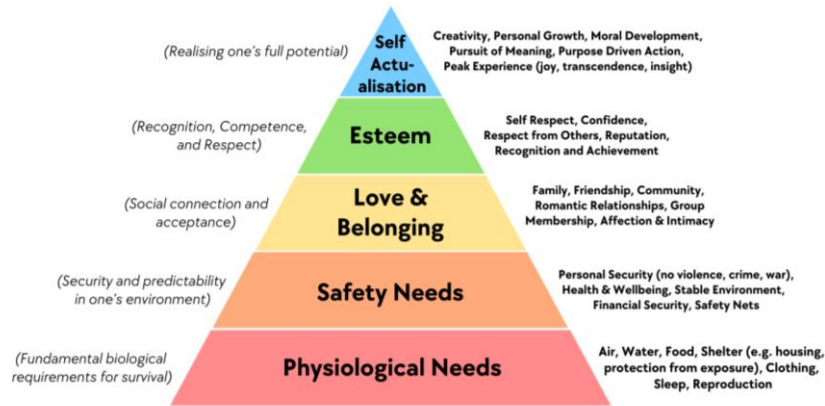
Closely related to the idea of positive and negative liberty is Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which is a theory that establishes five sets of basic needs that any human must achieve to reach their full potential (Maslow coins this final state as "self-actualization").

Maslow's Hierarchy (see below for a visual example) provides a helpful way of understanding the relationship between negative and positive liberty. Negative liberty, the ability to live without interference, is similar to Maslow's belief that physiological and safety needs must be met first before any progress can be made on the higher-level emotional needs.⁹

In other words, Maslow's Hierarchy implies that negative liberty is a prerequisite that must be achieved before positive liberty is possible. This suggests that general welfare policies – which aim to secure basic needs like food, shelter, and healthcare – can be seen as laying the groundwork for individuals to pursue higher forms of freedom and fulfillment. However, and as this guide will explore, there is significant disagreement about how those needs should be met.

Some argue that the government can help provide these needs through social safety net programs. Others argue that private charity and civil society can help people meet these needs without government coercion, or that economic growth fueled by the free market can help create jobs and boost wages so that individuals can earn enough to meet their own needs.

⁹ "[Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#)." Simply Psychology. 2025.



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GENERAL WELFARE

Four Components of General Welfare

Maslow's hierarchy of needs can also be seen as components of the public's general welfare, which like liberty can also manifest itself in different forms. While the word "welfare" may bring up thoughts of Social Security and food stamps, those programs did not exist when the Constitution was written. The phrase "[to] promote the General welfare" was an indicator that "issues such as poverty, housing, food and other economic and social welfare issues facing the citizenry" were considered by the Founding Fathers as they discussed what the purpose of the Constitution was.¹¹ While society has rapidly changed in the centuries since the ratification of the Constitution, promoting the welfare of the nation has long been a priority of the government.¹²

Today, general welfare can be examined through four distinct lenses that are discussed in more detail below. All four of these types of general welfare can be supported by both state and non-state mechanisms – federal, state, and local government programs as well as market-based strategies, family and community networks, civil society initiatives, credit markets and capital provision (e.g., venture/crowd-funding). The focus of these efforts may be on material provision as well as agency (the ability to act, choose, and direct one's life). There are arguments for and against each of these approaches, but they are all possible ways to support promote both negative and positive liberty and the general welfare.

¹⁰ "[File: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Diagram.png](#)." Wikimedia Commons. 2025.

¹¹ "[To Promote the General Welfare](#)." American Constitution Society. 2011.

¹² "[Thinking about 'General Welfare' in the Preamble](#)." Law & Liberty. 2019.

1) Public Health and Safety

While the specific threats to public health and safety have changed dramatically since the 18th century, the stability, security, and well-being of communities were central reasons why the Founders included “general welfare” in the Preamble of the Constitution. In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic and the death of George Floyd have symbolized two major challenges to community stability – one rooted in public health, the other in public safety and social trust. Americans continue to seek safer, healthier neighborhoods, reflecting a broader desire for policies that protect and promote the public health and safety of the nation as a whole.

2) Economic Security

Many Americans believe that along with community stability, we have a collective obligation to ensure that all individuals have a basic standard of living, through reducing poverty, hunger, and economic insecurity. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who signed the first national welfare program into law in 1935, famously said that “the test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.”¹³ Today, various government assistance programs are tangible examples of that ideal of providing for the less fortunate. Still, there are enduring concerns about the effectiveness of welfare, its potential abuse, and the long-term dependency on the system that it can engender.¹⁴

3) Social and Economic Opportunity

A core American value is the idea that everybody should be treated equally and that everybody should have a fair opportunity to pursue the American Dream. Keeping these pathways open is another conceptualization of the general welfare; in this sense, social mobility should be high in a healthy society.¹⁵ Citizens and policymakers differ on whether a more active or passive approach should be employed to promote such mobility. The more active approach can include affirmative action programs that promote opportunity for the least well-off and most disadvantaged by reducing systemic injustices and accounting for decades of discrimination. Critics of this approach fear that it undermines merit-based principles and has discriminatory effects on those that they do not include. A more passive approach focuses on ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed by providing basic education and eliminating discriminatory practices, but it does not attempt to identify and compensate particular social groups for past social wrongs that were widely diffused and currently difficult to measure. Critics of this approach fear it locks in inequalities created by those wrongs and does not do enough to establish meaningful equality of opportunity.

¹³ [“Franklin D. Roosevelt.”](#) FDR Library. 2025.

¹⁴ [“Welfare Dependence, Revisited.”](#) American Enterprise Institute. 2023.

¹⁵ [“The Importance of Social Mobility.”](#) NYU Insight. 2021.; [“Social mobility and equal opportunity.”](#) OECD. 2022.

4) Infrastructure and Public Goods

Public infrastructure and services are concrete examples of areas where general welfare is a shared priority. In one sense, general welfare through infrastructure means the provision of public goods and the guarantee of basic living standards, like public education, public transit, internet access, and clean water, but in another, the focus on infrastructure means having structural access to the market and economic opportunities. Public goods and services are funded primarily through taxpayer dollars, which creates yet another area where financial liberty and societal responsibility collide. As the section below discusses, taxes are a primary source of support for general welfare and social safety nets, but they can also restrict both the negative and positive liberty of citizens by reducing their disposable income.

The Relationship between Liberty and General Welfare

Throughout the history of America, the promotion of liberty and general welfare have interacted in nuanced and important ways. We'll now explore some of those relationships, both in how they complement and conflict with one another.

Complementarities

Positive liberty often depends on policies enhancing general welfare. Many disadvantaged Americans have the negative liberty to improve their lives, but lack the support and resources required to achieve positive liberty. In many ways, positive liberty aligns with the American Dream: the idea that everyone should have the freedom and opportunity to pursue a better life. Welfare programs that help lift people out of poverty and into stable, long-term jobs can strengthen communities and promote a healthier and more prosperous society as a whole.

At the same time, economic freedom and individual autonomy are crucial for people to build their own paths to prosperity without undue government interference. Adam Smith's famous "Invisible Hand" metaphor suggests that in a truly free market economy, self-interested individuals unconsciously promote the general welfare of society, even if unintended.¹⁶ This reflects the idea that a free market creates the greatest number of pathways to economic freedom and opportunity.

Tensions

However, policies that promote general welfare may also conflict with economic and negative liberty. Taxes can help provide public goods or fund comprehensive welfare programs, but they also reduce the economic freedom of taxpayers. Regulations in both the social and economic

¹⁶ ["What Is the Invisible Hand in Economics?"](#) Investopedia. 2024.

spheres can create more equality and protect the vulnerable, but they simultaneously can limit the negative liberty of individuals.

Similarly, policies intended to promote people's welfare can result in reducing their positive liberty and economic opportunities. For example, raising the minimum wage can help some workers while also encouraging automation and job displacement that harms other workers. Redistributive taxation that reduces the savings and investments of higher income earners risks slowing long-term economic growth that may reduce future general welfare even as it delivers short-term relief to lower income earners.

Likewise, too much emphasis on personal liberty can undermine the promotion of general welfare. For example, allowing smoking in public spaces and not enforcing vaccine mandates in the name of protecting individual freedoms can harm the health of the public at large. Thus, when general welfare is neglected in favor of absolute negative liberty to the extent that no efforts are made to help disadvantaged members of society, economic inequalities, social divides, and political conflicts can deepen.

These tensions can also emerge as intergenerational tradeoffs. For example, policy choices that help people today (e.g. through greater fiscal spending) can reduce the choices of future generations (e.g. through the constraints created by rising debt). Policies designed to promote greater individual freedom for the current generation (e.g. cutting taxes that pay for road maintenance) can also result in harming the welfare of people in the future (e.g., transportation challenges due to poor roads).

The table below provides some historical examples of federal efforts to advance the general welfare that provoked concerns about their impacts on personal freedoms. In thinking about these examples, it is important to remember that not only can tensions arise between efforts to protect liberty and efforts to advance the general welfare, but also between different conceptions of freedom and different conceptions of the general welfare. For example, one person's economic negative liberty (low taxes) might infringe on another's positive liberty to access affordable education. Similarly, spending on one form of general welfare (e.g., large infrastructure programs) may reduce funding for another form (e.g., public health and safety). Thus, neither liberty nor welfare are monolithic, and their different forms may interact with each other in complex ways.

Historical Example	General Welfare Goal	Liberty Concern
Alexander Hamilton's National Bank Plan (1791)	Establish a national financial infrastructure to stabilize the economy	Opponents viewed it as an unconstitutional expansion of federal power over states and individual economic freedom
Suspension of Habeas Corpus during the Civil War (1861)	Maintain national security and suppress rebellion	Critics argued it violated constitutional rights to due process and personal liberty
Progressive Era Reforms (early 1900s)	Promote economic fairness, labor rights, and public health	Business leaders and libertarians resisted government intervention and regulation
New Deal Programs (1930s)	Provide economic relief, jobs, and security during the Great Depression	Libertarians and conservatives opposed increased government control and taxation
Great Society Programs (1960s)	Combat poverty and promote civil rights and equal opportunity	Concerns about bureaucratic overreach and dependency on government aid
Affordable Care Act (2010)	Expand healthcare access and reduce the number of uninsured Americans	Critics argued it infringed on individual choice and imposed mandates on private entities
COVID-19 Mandates (2020-2022)	Protect public health and prevent healthcare system collapse	Resistance to mask/vaccine mandates as infringements on personal freedom
Student Loan Forgiveness Efforts (2020s)	Alleviate debt burdens for millions of Americans and reduce economic inequality	Critics argue it oversteps executive authority and penalizes taxpayers who paid debts

In Practice: Social Safety Nets

Welfare programs, or efforts to provide a social safety net for all members of a society, represent a classic example of the complex interactions between the values of liberty and general welfare. To enable a deeper exploration of this relationship, this section will provide some brief background about the twelve major federal social safety net programs in the United States.

Safety Nets in American Society

Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security are the three largest programs. **Medicare and Social Security** are designed primarily for elderly Americans above 65 years of age or older, with Medicare providing federal health insurance and Social Security providing a fixed, supplemental income for living. **Medicaid** is a joint federal-state program that provides health insurance and benefits for low-income and disadvantaged Americans with no age restrictions.¹⁷ In 2022, nearly one in four Americans received Medicaid, while one in five received Medicare and/or Social Security.¹⁸

The **Child Care and Development Fund, or CCDF**, is a federal program that helps low-income families access child care so they can work or attend a job training or educational program.¹⁹ The **Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)** provides low to moderate-income working parents a tax credit based on their income, with additional credits available for each child.²⁰ The **Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)** helps low-income families with energy costs from home energy bills, energy crises, and minor home repairs.²¹ The **Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)** provides health insurance to uninsured children with moderate incomes that don't qualify for Medicaid but are too low to afford private or group health plan coverage.²² The **Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)** provides healthcare and nutritional support to low-income pregnant women and children under the age of five.²³ **Supplemental Security Income (SSI)** provides direct cash transfers to disabled and low-income Americans.²⁴ **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**, more commonly known as food stamps, provides food benefits to low-income families so they can supplement

¹⁷ [“What’s the difference between Medicare and Medicaid?”](#) U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2022.

¹⁸ [“How many people receive government assistance?”](#) USAFacts. 2024.

¹⁹ [“Child Care Assistance.”](#) Indiana Family and Social Services Administration. 2025.

²⁰ [“What is the earned income tax credit?”](#) Tax Policy Center. 2024.

²¹ [“Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program \(LIHEAP\).”](#) Office of Community Services. 2025.

²² [“CHIP Eligibility & Enrollment.”](#) Medicaid. 2025.

²³ [“Women, Infants, & Children Nutrition Program.”](#) Commonwealth of Massachusetts. 2025.

²⁴ [“Supplemental Security Income \(SSI\) Overview.”](#) Social Security. 2025.

their grocery budget.²⁵ Lastly, **TANF, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families**, helps low-income families with children achieve economic security.²⁶

Safety Nets in Context

These programs form a major part of the social safety net of American society and are primarily directed towards helping low-income Americans with various needs, such as energy, food, childcare, and medical care. A study looking at ten of these welfare programs (not including Medicare or Social Security) found that in 2019, 99.1 million people participated in one of the programs, representing 30 percent of the U.S. population. Nearly one in every two children participated in a safety net program (49 percent).²⁷

The scale of this participation may raise questions about the scope and function of the social safety net. A liberal, for example, might view the statistic as a positive indication of the breadth of America's social welfare programs and their capacity to provide assistance to families. A conservative, by contrast, may interpret it as evidence that federal anti-poverty programs have moved beyond their intended role as targeted, temporary support, instead fostering widespread reliance on government aid. A libertarian perspective might raise additional concerns, emphasizing that the sheer scale of participation reflects an expansion of government authority into areas traditionally addressed by families, communities, and civil society.

One challenge that the study cites is **program cliffs**, which are the set income limits of many welfare programs. Once a family's income rises above those limits, it can trigger a partial or complete loss of benefits, even if the income is only barely above the limit.²⁸ Another related issue is what scholars call "**benefit plateaus**," where for each dollar earned, benefits lessen by a similar amount, meaning the income gained is matched with benefits lost.²⁹ Both of these dynamics suggest a fundamental tension: programs designed to help people escape poverty may inadvertently trap them in it by disincentivizing the behaviors (e.g., work, earning more) that enable upward mobility.³⁰ Likewise, another study found that the effective marginal tax rate remained extraordinarily high (51 percent) for families just above poverty, when accounting for the loss of benefits from an increase in income.³¹ The relationship between benefits and earnings complicates the effectiveness of social safety net programs and creates

²⁵ "[Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#)." United States Department of Agriculture. 2025.

²⁶ "[Temporary Assistance for Needy Families \(TANF\)](#)." Office of Family Assistance. 2022.

²⁷ "[How Many People Participate in the Social Safety Net?](#)" Office of Human Services Policy. 2023.

²⁸ "[Introduction to Benefits Cliffs and Public Assistance Programs](#)." NCSL. 2024.

²⁹ "[Benefit Cliffs and Benefit Plateaus: Do Higher Wages Result in Higher Incomes for New York City's Home Care Aides?](#)" Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute. 2017.

³⁰ "[The benefits cliff, explained](#)." FedCommunities. 2023.

³¹ "[What Happens When People Increase Their Earnings? Effective Marginal Tax Rates for Low-Income Households](#)." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2019.

contradictory incentives for recipients of government assistance even as they provide direct assistance to millions of people.

Ideological Perspectives on Safety Nets

Efforts to create social safety nets have historically been perceived through two distinct but necessarily not incompatible lenses.

A common conservative perspective views employment as the best antidote to poverty. This perspective emphasizes the importance of the welfare-to-work paradigm, which holds that welfare should not be a long-standing support system, but rather a temporary bridge to an employment opportunity that will provide an income stream and empower individuals, rather than create a culture of dependency.³² Ultimately, advocates of this perspective contend that while short-term safety nets may be necessary, excessive government assistance disincentivizes hard work and cultivates a weak work ethic. This relates to the image of the “welfare queen,” the individual who lives off the government with little effort put into furthering his or her employment prospects. The fundamental idea is that while a welfare check can buy an extra day of rent or a meal, a paycheck from a job can buy a future.³³ Governmental policy should be focused on steering individuals towards self-sufficiency through work programs, especially since they have proven to be effective,³⁴ and not trap them into permanent dependency. Opportunity, and ultimately employment, is what is needed, not just a check from the government.

A common liberal perspective asserts that while such economic autonomy should indeed be our long-term goal, systemic realities make it difficult to achieve. Poverty often traps individuals in a brutal cycle that crosses generations, and hiring biases, wage gaps, and underfunded programs further sabotage those who persistently seek stable employment. Proponents of this view cite academic studies and public surveys that find the American Dream is nearly impossible to achieve with growing economic inequalities and rising prices in every part of life.³⁵ For them, the problem is less about promoting personal responsibility and combating laziness and more about ensuring collective care and fighting apathy towards the least well-off among us. A 2021 study from the University of Chicago estimated that “53% of people living in homeless shelters and 40% of unsheltered people were employed, either full or part-time”

³² [“Why the U.S. Has a Culture of Dependency.”](#) The Heritage Foundation. 2012.

³³ [“Work and Marriage: The Way to End Poverty and Welfare.”](#) Brookings. 2003.

³⁴ [“Self-Sufficiency Project \(SSP\).”](#) SRDC – SRSA. 2024.

³⁵ [“Americans are split over the state of the American dream.”](#) Pew Research Center. 2024.

between 2011 and 2018.³⁶ It is simply unfair and unkind to ignore the difficult realities of life facing the most disadvantaged in society. Rising prices, stagnant wages, and an increasing cost of living make long-term social safety nets economically critical and morally necessary.

This table summarizes the two viewpoints. **A third perspective** emphasizes the importance of civil society in meeting social needs. From this point of view, large-scale federal welfare programs can be overly bureaucratic, inefficient, and vulnerable to abuse.³⁷ Instead, local governments, faith-based organizations, and private charities are seen as more responsive and better equipped to address the diverse needs of those in need.³⁸ [In the 1920s](#), for example, there were 10,000 fraternal orders in the US, with 100,000+ separate lodges. 18 million Americans, or 30% of adults over twenty, were members. These orders served as mutual insurance agencies to provide social welfare to their members in need.³⁹ Proponents argue that fostering voluntary support networks and community-driven solutions upholds individual liberty while cultivating civic virtue.⁴⁰ Additionally, they contend that federal anti-poverty programs have "crowded out" the central role that these institutions historically played in helping the poor.⁴¹

A fourth perspective might contend that a mixed model—one that tempers government involvement with strong local initiative and individual empowerment—can avoid the extremes of either dependency or neglect.

	A Common Conservative Viewpoint	A Common Liberal Viewpoint
Purpose of Welfare	Temporary benefits, focus on independence from the government and self-sufficiency	Long-term support system to ensure basic dignity and provide true equality
Recipients	Americans want to work, but the system encourages dependency due to excessive assistance	Most recipients can barely survive, and they are plagued by systemic barriers, not a lack of effort
View of Poverty	Usually caused by individual choices or a breakdown in community values/support	Usually caused by structural inequality, racism, lack of opportunity, and inherent biases in the system

³⁶ [“Employed and Experiencing Homelessness: What the Numbers Show.”](#) National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2022.

³⁷ [“The American Welfare State: How We Spend Nearly \\$1 Trillion a Year Fighting Poverty—And Fail.”](#) Cato. 2012.

³⁸ [“The Rise of Global Civil Society.”](#) Don Eberly. 2008.

³⁹ [“The Poor Before Welfare.”](#) David Beito. *The Independent*. 1996.

⁴⁰ [“America’s Crisis of Civic Virtue.”](#) Journal of Democracy. 2024.

⁴¹ [“Less Welfare, More Charity.”](#) Michael Tanner. Cato Institute. 2014.

Questions to Consider

The purpose of this guide is to deepen our understanding of liberty and the general welfare in American history, reflect on the complementarities and conflicts between these foundational values, and consider how they are relevant to contemporary debates about social safety nets. Below are some questions that will help us consider different perspectives as well as reflect on our own thoughts about the topic.

Understanding Liberty and General Welfare

Liberty and general welfare are two abstract concepts, so let's start by establishing our general perceptions of what they mean.

1. What words and images come to mind when you think of "liberty" and "general welfare?"
2. Do you have an initially positive or negative association with either concept?

Connecting with Other Values

Welfare and liberty can both be seen as ends in themselves and means to achieve an ultimate goal. For example, negative liberty is important because it ensures that individuals are free of interference on paper, while general welfare is important because it reduces poverty and inequality and contributes to the overall health of society. As such, it becomes important to identify which values are most important to us, so we can evaluate the order of liberty and general welfare. Below are some examples of values and ideas that might resonate with you.

Equality	Progress	Individualism
Independence	Justice	Acceptance
Nationalism	Inclusion	Freedom
Privacy	Innovation	Success
Opportunity	Diversity	Social mobility
Achievement	Wealth	Prosperity

1. Which of these values (or others not listed) matter the most to you?
2. How do you see them connecting with the values of liberty or general welfare, if at all?

Exploring Interactions between Liberty and General Welfare

Now that we've explored what liberty and general welfare mean, we'll turn to how they interact. Can freedom exist without basic security? Does guaranteeing welfare enhance liberty, or limit it? This section invites you to consider whether these two ideals are in tension — or whether they depend on one another in a just society.

General Welfare and the Different Dimensions of Liberty

We defined some ways to view liberty, including through a positive/negative lens and by using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. If we use the example of a man in poverty, while they may have negative liberty to apply for school, without the financial or community support, they may not have positive liberty to attend in a practical sense. One solution would be to provide financial assistance, but that may be an infringement on the personal financial freedom of other citizens, since taxpayer money is the most likely source of that assistance.

- Can liberty truly exist without the material conditions to exercise it — or is it enough for liberty to exist only as a legal or moral principle?
- Is government intervention necessary to achieve positive liberty, or does it risk infringing on others' freedoms in the process?
- In practice, which should take priority in a just society: promoting personal liberty or ensuring general welfare — or can both be pursued without contradiction?

Liberty and the Different Dimensions of General Welfare

General welfare can be conceived of as having four distinct spheres: Public Health and Safety, Economic Security, Social and Economic Opportunity, Infrastructure and Public Goods.

- Which component is most relevant to the success of general welfare in American society today? Which is most important?
- Should either or any of the four values be prioritized over the other, and why or why not? Are they in concert or in conflict?
- Which sphere is most compatible and most conflicted with liberty?

Compatibility of Liberty and General Welfare

Next, let us consider whether liberty and general welfare are compatible. It may be the case that welfare and liberty are intrinsically opposed to each other, or it may be the case that they can both be pursued simultaneously to achieve the ends that we prioritize.

- Does the pursuit of general welfare create liberty, or constrain it? Is there an inherent contradiction between the two ideals, or are they mutually reinforcing?

Let's also consider the role of the government in this topic. The government administers welfare programs, but it also enforces liberties, so it is certainly an important actor to consider.

- Is the role of the state to protect individual autonomy from interference, or to actively create the conditions under which autonomy is possible?
- Is the government the proper actor to enforce liberty and administer general welfare?

Applying Liberty and General Welfare to Social Safety Nets

So far, we have focused on different conceptions of liberty and general welfare. We can now explore the policy applications of what we've explored today.

- Which viewpoint (conservative or liberal) do you lean towards when thinking about social safety nets?
- Does providing a safety net strengthen or weaken citizens' freedom to pursue their own goals, and why?
- Where do we draw the line between supporting people in need and encouraging independence?
- Are social safety nets temporary measures or ongoing support systems meant to guarantee a basic standard of living?
- What would you change about our current social safety net system?

Identifying Value Priorities in Social Safety Nets

Finally, we can analyze our value priorities in our policy considerations. Ultimately, the goal of this section is to encourage a greater awareness of how we prioritize liberty and general welfare, especially in relation to social safety nets.

1. How did you incorporate considerations of liberty and general welfare into your assessment of social safety nets?
2. How are considerations of liberty and general welfare reflected in American legislators' and the American public's approach to social safety net programs?
3. How should we take into account the values of liberty and general welfare when we engage with debates about safety nets?
4. Should liberty or general welfare be prioritized above the other in our approach to safety net programs, or should they be equally balanced?

About this Guide

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The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative: The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (DCI) is dedicated to the creation of opportunities for Davidson students, faculty, staff, alumni, and members of the wider community to productively engage with one another on difficult and contentious issues facing our community and society. The DCI regularly hosts facilitated deliberations on a wide range of topics and organizes training workshops for deliberation facilitators. To learn more about these opportunities, visit www.deliberativecitizenship.org.

DCI Deliberation Guides: The DCI publishes Deliberation Guides as a foundation for such conversations. They provide both important background information on the topics in question and a specific framework for engaging with these topics. The Guides are designed to be informative without being overwhelming and structured without being inflexible. They cover a range of topics and come in a variety of formats but share several common elements, including opportunities to commit to a shared set of Conversation Agreements, learn about diverse perspectives, and reflect together on the conversation and its yield. DCI staff, faculty, and students are the authors of these guides; generative AI is sometimes used to improve the clarity of the writing, identify errors, and provide background information, but all final text is confirmed by the authors. The DCI encourages conversations based on these guides to be moderated by a trained facilitator. After each conversation, the DCI also suggests that its associated Pathways Guide be distributed to the conversation's participants.

DCI Pathways Guides: For every Deliberation Guide, the DCI has also developed an associated Pathways Guide, which outlines opportunities for action that participants can consider that are related to the covered topic. These Pathways Guides reinforce the DCI's commitment to an action orientation, a key deliberative disposition. While deliberation is itself an important contributor to a healthy democracy, it becomes even more valuable when it leads to individual or collective action on the key issues facing society. Such action can come in a range of forms and should be broadly understood. It might involve developing a better understanding of a topic, connecting with relevant local or national organizations, generating new approaches to an issue, or deciding to support a particular policy.

DCI Issue Guides and Issue Briefs: Issue Guides are similar to Deliberation Guides but do not include the structured format for group conversations. Issue Briefs provide an outline of the main ideas that are presented in the Issue Guides. While both include a similar list of questions to consider about the topic, they are designed for personal reflection, perhaps in association with a panel or speaker event.

If you make use of this guide in a deliberation, please provide attribution to the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative, and email dc@deliberativecitizenship.org to tell us about your event. To access more of our growing library of Deliberation Guides, Pathways Guides and other resources, visit www.deliberativecitizenship.org/readings-and-resources.