

Garfinkel, I., Rainwater, L. & Smeeding, T. (2010). *Wealth & welfare states: Is America a laggard or leader?* New York: Oxford University Press. <http://www.oup.com/us/>

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Irwin Garfinkel is co-director of the Columbia Population Research Center and the Mitchell L. Ginsberg Professor of Contemporary Urban Problems at Columbia University's School of Social Work. He is the chair of the Social Indicators Survey Center, which conducts research on inequality and survey methodology.

Lee Rainwater is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Harvard University and a founder and research director emeritus of the Luxembourg Income Study.

Tim Smeeding is the Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor of Public Affairs and Economics at the University of Wisconsin's La Follette School of Public Affairs and director of the Institute for Research on Poverty. He is also founder and director emeritus of the Luxembourg Income Study.

This book explains why all wealthy nations, including the United States, have large welfare states and how these welfare states in fact *contribute* to the wealth of these nations. With backgrounds in social work, sociology, and economics, these authors write to "the largest possible audience, citizens of all nations," but especially to social scientists. It would likely be appropriate for Masters- or Doctoral-level students. It would also be appropriate for those teaching economic and social sciences courses at all levels.

Although not explicitly about social work values and ethics, this book is very relevant to social work in that it does provide the social and economic underpinning necessary to more fully understand and apply the profession's values. NASW states that the primary mission of the social work profession

is to promote human well-being and to address social conditions in a way that helps society meet the basic human needs of its members. This book makes a significant contribution to that mission.

The authors begin by explaining that all rich nations have large welfare states, and that the socialized portion of welfare states works, along with capitalism, to enrich nations, not strangle them. They discuss the domains of healthcare benefits, pensions, education, cash transfers, and in-kind benefits. Particularly timely is the discussion about whether the U.S. gets its money's worth for healthcare expenditures. The authors go on to discuss how welfare state programs redistribute income across the life cycle and across income classes and the effects this has on inequality, education, and health. The authors assert that historically, America has been a laggard in poor relief, but a leader in providing mass education.

The unique political history of the U.S. is described, as well as the influence of the American Creed on the unity of the American people. The authors state that the U.S. faces three major challenges for the future: making Social Security fiscally sound, achieving universal healthcare while containing costs, and restoring excellence to the educational system.

One of the book's greatest strengths is that it reflects the multiple perspectives of authors from different professional disciplines: social work, sociology, and economics. This provides a broad, thorough discussion of issues that includes both a social and economic context. The authors also do a fine job explaining some very complex ideas, which

are presented in a logical fashion. It appears to be well researched, and economically-related conclusions are based upon facts that are supported by data. Politically-related conclusions are not as strongly supported by objective data.

The authors report measures of education attainment that include (a) the level of education and (b) scores on achievement tests. They state that the U.S. has lost its dramatic lead in terms of college completion, and it is nearly last in terms of average achievement test scores while spending more on education than other rich nations. They link the decline in education to the “political

right’s” failure to expand access to higher education. Using this logic, it is understandable how access may be related to completion rates, but the explanation for low test scores is unclear. I would like to have seen this outcome measure explored further.

I would recommend this book for master’s and doctoral level students and for educators teaching social policy classes. It seems a bit beyond the grasp of undergraduate level students.