**Social Policy =** The area of government that aims to help people and solve social problems– eg. Education, health, welfare, crime etc.

**Arguments that Sociology should/does affect Social Policy**

* If Sociologists’ perspectives tie in with the government’s ideas then they may affect social policy. Examples would be **Wilson and Kelling’s** New Right zero tolerance policies on crime that were adapted by the Republican Party under Ronald Reagan in the USA in the 1980s and more recently by Conservative British governments, or New Right ideas on the marketization of education which were taken on by British governments since the 1980s (Conservatives in the 80s, Labour in the 90s, and Conservatives today). Charles Murray’s New Right ideas which blamed the breakdown of the nuclear family for rises in crime and the creation of an underclass were also taken on by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, and more recently in David Cameron’s “troubled families” programme.
* The **Labour Party has traditionally been more influenced by sociology than the Conservatives,** with the latter often more influenced by economists. The Sociologist **Frank Field** was actually a minister in Tony Blair’s Labour government in the 1990s and argued for welfare reform (more benefits for the poor).
* Tony Blair’s Labour Party was influenced by **Giddens**’ **structurationist** ideas of a “third way” combining structuralism and social action. This led to Blair’s “mixed economy” combining government control with private companies in education and health.
* Sociological research in the 1960s showed that poverty remained an issue in Britain and criticised the excessive wealth of some within capitalism. This led to Labour policies to increase educational equality (comprehensivisation), improvements in the benefits system and higher levels of tax.
* However, New Right theorists argued that increases to welfare caused a reliance on benefits.
* Jeremy Corbyn’s more left-wing Labour Party today might be more likely to accept more **Marxist** flavoured policies, such as high levels of taxation.
* **Marxist** policy has also had some impact through the campaigns of groups like **occupy** against tax avoidance by multinational companies like Amazon.
* The government will sometimes base policy on official statistics, which would suggest that they are influenced by **positivist sociology**. For instance, the Department of Education might pay for research into areas of education. However, this is only likely to be published if it reflects the view of the government.
* **Bauman** and committed Sociologists would argue that the government should be influenced by sociology or society will worsen. He pointed to the marginalisation of the welfare state in today’s society.
* **Liberal Feminists** would argue that they have had an impact on improving policy by providing greater equality and employment for women, pointing to actions like the 1970 Equal Pay Act and to influence on international campaigns to support women by the UN, as in widening the education of girls worldwide.
* However, **Radical and Socialist Feminists** would argue against their sociology influencing social policy because they see the government as a tool of patriarchal oppression and refuse to work with it, although **radical feminist research on domestic violence has had an impact on how the Police treat victims.**

**Arguments that Sociology should NOT/does NOT affect Social Policy**

* **Positivists like Durkheim** argued that in order for their Sociology to be objective and value-free they needed to avoid any kind of links to governments. However, **Comte**, a Positivist in the 1800s argued that it was better for sociologists to influence government policy than for religion to do so (this is less of an issue today).
* **Weber** also agreed that Sociology should not guide social policy. He saw deciding policy as the government’s job, although sociologists could evaluate policy once it was introduced (eg investigating the impact of academies on education).
* The postmodernist **Lyotard** said that government’s use of sociology was a negative thing since they often used sociology to justify oppression – for instance the use of New Right ideas to justify cutting benefits to the underclass by conservatives.
* **Marxists** would agree that governments often use the ideas of sociologists to justify inequality. They would point to **Durkheim’s** ideas on social solidarity and **Parsons’** on competition in education+ the organic analogy as examples of ideas that governments can use to justify the inequalities of society. Therefore, for **radical Marxists** the government and its social policy are corrupt, and the whole system need changing. For instance, they might see welfare policy as an attempt to distract the proletariat from revolution or the NHS as an attempt to keep the proletariat fit to work.
* **Marxists** are also critical of governments supporting their policies with sociological research because they see research as controlled and paid for by governments and capitalist businesses.
* However, **Marxism** has been discredited to some extent by the fall of Communism in Russia.
* **Cost:** Often policies that Sociologists espouse (put forward) are too expensive for governments to implement or would involve putting up taxes, which would lose votes. For example, Feminists might argue for more free childcare to free women from the home and allow them to work. However, this would be very expensive for governments to implement.
* Governments are often more influenced by **Economists** (another type of social scientist) than sociologists. “Think tanks” like Conservative Ian Duncan-Smith’s Centre for Social Justice also influence governments at the expense of sociologists.
* **Votes:** Governments will also tend to follow policies that are popular with voters to ensure success at the ballot box, rather than policies that are supported by sociological research. Therefore groups that don’t tend to vote, **like the underclass**, are less likely to be receive support, even if **Marxist research** suggests they are in dire need of help. This relates to cost because expensive sociological policies will often lose votes from taxpayers.
* Sociology may also not be relevant to government policy. For instance ,some sociological problems (eg. why boys play with certain toys) are not social problems and so are not relevant to governments.