

number of LGBT people in this country does not exist. The most commonly held estimate, based on the famous Kinsey report on sexuality (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1953), is that 1 in 10 people is gay or lesbian (Hildago, Peterson, & Woodman, 1983). More recent research, based on data from four national and two state population surveys, holds that about 8 million adults, or 3.5 percent of the US population, identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Gates, 2011). Gallup polling data from 2016 found that about 4 percent of the population identifies as LGBT. Interestingly, these data also showed that the percentage is higher among younger Americans. This suggests that the percentage of LGBT Americans will likely continue to grow (Allen, 2017). However, as long as the threat of discrimination and violence toward members of the LGBT population persists, it is likely that some members of the population will not disclose their sexual orientation to researchers. Thus, it is likely that population estimates are low.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), about one out of every five adults in the United States has some type of disability. This means that roughly 53 million people live with some type of condition that affects their lives (CDC, 2015). Disability can include a temporary injury that makes a person unable to work, a severe mental illness, and/or physical limitations of daily living skills that may or may not allow a person to be employed. A sizable number of people with physical, developmental, or other limitations need to be recognized as members of distinct groups within social work practice. Advancing medical capabilities and longer life expectancies mean that more people will spend part of their lives with physical or cognitive disabilities, creating a greater need for services for and sensitivities to people living with disabilities.

In addition to variation in gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and physical ability, Americans have numerous religious affiliations, ideological beliefs, political affinities, mental and developmental abilities, national origins, and social ranks. There is no one typical American, although all have a place in the nation's social, economic, and political makeup. This vast diversity of people presents a challenge to social work practitioners as they strive to provide meaningful and relevant service.

Historical Background

The diversity of the United States came about as the result of numerous forces and historical events. Some of the forces were positive, and some were negative; some of the events happened by design, and others were unintended. Vast numbers of people representing hundreds of cultures and identities found a home in the United States, creating the nation's vast diversity.

Exploration and Colonization

Americans are proud that the United States came about through the courage and persistence of explorers. For example, Columbus Day honors the man

credited with discovering this land for Europeans. Lewis and Clark are esteemed for exploring the Northwest Passage. The drive to explore the vast continent paved the way for settlement and population growth. Settlers followed the explorers, creating communities that reflected their behaviors, beliefs, and values.

The land that is now the United States was home to many nations before Columbus "discovered" it. The **colonization** of these First Nations was supported by the federal and state governments, which passed laws that allowed, encouraged, or mandated forcing the indigenous Peoples from their homes to provide land for white settlers. Entire nations were uprooted and moved to desolate lands, where they were often forced to live among other nations without any recognition of the vast cultural differences among them. Oppression, discrimination, and prejudice based on race also involved massacres by whites and decimation of native cultures. Children were forced to attend boarding schools where they had to forsake their cultures, including their religious, spiritual traditions, and languages, and learn to behave according to the dominant European American culture.

Forced Relocation and Enslavement

Not only were the First Nations forcibly relocated to unwanted and barely habitable land, but more than a million Africans were ripped from their homes and families and shipped against their will to the American continent to be enslaved. Before the American Revolution, an estimated 1 million people of African descent were enslaved, making up almost 20 percent of the population in the American colonies. Enslaved women, men, and children endured tremendous brutality and were kept powerless by laws that shaped every facet of their lives. This included the loss of control over personal relationships and of economic freedom and the outlawing of the rights to gain access to education, own land, and vote and participate as citizens.

The impetus for the institution of slavery was primarily economic. Agriculture, particularly the cultivation and harvesting of tobacco and cotton, required numerous workers who could endure severe working conditions. Enslaving people of African descent provided a cheap source of labor. Slave laws were reinforced with race laws, thereby socially constructing an economic system that benefited the white landowners who controlled most of the wealth. By the time slavery was repealed in 1863, many generations had passed, and people of African descent were far removed from their lands and cultures of origin.

Expansion into Mexico

Believing that the United States was destined to extend westward across the continent (an ideology termed *manifest destiny*), white settlers continued to take lands from Indigenous Peoples as they migrated into what are now the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Utah, and Nevada in the southwest. During the 1800s, these areas were part of Mexico. In 1845, the government declared that Texas was part of the United States, which led to what US history books call the Mexican-American War. At the conclusion of