Social Security Benefits, Finances, and Policy Options

A Primer

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What is Social Security?
More than 61 million people receive Social Security each month, in one of three categories:

- Retirement insurance
- Survivors insurance
- Disability insurance

Nearly 1 in 5 Americans gets Social Security benefits.

About 1 in 4 families receives income from Social Security.
Who Receives Social Security?

- 41.9 million retired workers
- 8.8 million disabled workers
- 4.1 million widows and widowers
- 2.5 million spouses
- 1.1 million adults disabled since childhood
- 3.1 million children

SSA, 2017a.
## How Much Does Social Security Pay? (June 2017)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By Beneficiary Type:</th>
<th>Average Monthly Benefit</th>
<th>Average Yearly Benefit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retired workers</td>
<td>$1,369</td>
<td>$16,428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabled workers</td>
<td>$1,172</td>
<td>$14,064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widows or widowers (60 or older)</td>
<td>$1,307</td>
<td>$15,684</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By Family Type:</th>
<th>Average Monthly Benefit for Family</th>
<th>Average Yearly Benefit for Family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retired worker and spouse (62 or older)</td>
<td>$2,278</td>
<td>$27,336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed mother or father (under 60) and two children</td>
<td>$2,664</td>
<td>$31,968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabled worker and one or more children</td>
<td>$1,798</td>
<td>$21,576</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SSA, 2017a; SSA, 2017b.
Replacement Rates for Retired Worker Age 65, 2017

Earnings Level

- "Low": $22,215, 52% of Career-Average Wages, $11,517 Benefits
- "Medium": $49,366, 38% of Career-Average Wages, $18,971 Benefits
- "High": $78,985, 32% of Career-Average Wages, $25,150 Benefits
- "Maximum taxable": $120,418, 25% of Career-Average Wages, $30,560 Benefits

SSA, 2017c.
84% of all people 65 and older get Social Security.

Over 3 in 5 (61%) beneficiaries of Social Security get *half or more* of their income from Social Security.

About 1 in 3 (33%) beneficiaries of Social Security get *almost all* (90% or more) of their income from Social Security.

### Reliance on Social Security By Race

Percent of beneficiary households 65 or older whose Social Security benefits make up:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Half or more of their income</th>
<th>90% or more of their income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Reliance on Social Security By Gender and Family Type

### Percent of beneficiaries 65 or older whose Social Security benefits make up:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By Gender:</th>
<th>Half or more of their income</th>
<th>90% or more of their income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried women</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried men</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Percent of beneficiary households 65 or older whose Social Security benefits make up:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By Family Type:</th>
<th>Half or more of their income</th>
<th>90% or more of their income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married couples</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried people</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Increase in Full Retirement Age (FRA) Lowers Retirement Benefits at Any Age Claimed

Gregory et al., 2010.
Net Social Security Replacement Rates Will Fall

Medium Earner’s Replacement Rate at 65
(after Medicare Parts B & D premiums and taxation of benefits)

Percent of Prior Earnings

- 38% in 2010
- 34% in 2020
- 31% in 2030

Munnell, 2013.
Disability Insurance (DI) pays monthly benefits to 8.8 million workers who are no longer able to work due to illness or impairment.

It is part of the Social Security program.

Benefits are based on the disabled worker's past earnings.

To be eligible, a disabled worker must have worked in jobs covered by Social Security.
What are the Most Common Disabilities for DI Recipients?

- Mental Impairments: 30.6%
- Musculoskeletal Conditions: 20.1%
- Circulatory System: 9.4%
- Nervous System/Sense Organ Impairments: 8.2%
- Injuries/Cancers/Other Conditions: 31.7%

SSA, 2016b: Table 21.
3 in 10 disabled workers have incomes below 125% of the poverty threshold.

Disabled worker beneficiaries are more likely than other adults to be:

- older (65% are over 50);
- African-American;
- and have a lower educational attainment:
  - almost half have a high school diploma or less;
  - 10% did not finish high school.

Bailey and Hemmeter, 2015; SSA, 2015
Who Pays for Social Security?

- Workers and their employers pay with Social Security contributions under the Federal Insurance Contributions Act (FICA).
How Much Do Workers and Employers Pay?

- Workers contribute 6.2% of their earnings for Social Security.
- Employers match these worker contributions (6.2%).
- The total Social Security contribution is 12.4%.
- Earnings above $127,200 are exempt from Social Security contributions.
It is credited to the Social Security trust funds. Of the 6.2% tax rate:

- 5.015% goes to the retirement and survivor insurance fund
- 1.185% goes to the disability insurance fund

Projections of income and outgo of the trust funds are made by the Social Security Administration actuaries.
The Financial Outlook
2016 Finances

Trust fund income = $957.5 billion
Trust fund outgo = $922.3 billion

Increase in trust fund reserves = $35.2 billion

- By law, surpluses are invested in U.S. Treasury securities and earn interest that goes to the trust funds.

Board of Trustees, 2017.
Where is Social Security Income From?
Shares of Income to the Trust Funds, 2016

- Workers' and employers' Social Security contributions (87%)
- Interest on reserves (9%)
- Income taxes on benefits (3%)
Social Security income that is not used immediately to pay benefits and costs is invested in special-issue Treasury securities (or bonds).

The bonds earn interest that is credited to the trust funds.

The accumulated surpluses held in Treasury securities are called Social Security reserves, or trust fund assets.

The Treasury securities are secure investments that are backed by the full faith and credit of the United States government.
By law, Social Security has two separate trust funds:
- **Disability Insurance (DI)** trust fund
- **Old-Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI)** trust fund

With the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015, Congress temporarily rebalanced the distribution of Social Security payroll contributions between OASI and DI, extending solvency of the DI trust fund.

According to the 2017 Social Security Trustees Report, the DI trust fund is projected to be able to pay full benefits until 2028.
How Large are Social Security Trust Fund Assets?

- 1985: $0.04 trillion
- 2016: $2.8 trillion
- 2021: $3.0 trillion (projected)

Board of Trustees, 2017: Table VI.G8.
Social Security Income and Outgo

Amount (in billions of current dollars)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Income</th>
<th>Outgo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>957.5</td>
<td>922.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>1013.8</td>
<td>955.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>1056.2</td>
<td>1011.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Board of Trustees, 2017: Table VI.G8.
1) Review the past: birth rates, death rates, immigration, employment, wages, inflation, productivity, interest rates.

2) Make assumptions for the next 75 years (longer than the rest of the government).

3) Three scenarios:
   - Low cost;
   - High cost;
   - Intermediate.
In 2022, revenues plus interest income to the trust funds are projected to be less than total expenditures for that year. Reserves will start to be drawn down to pay benefits.

In 2034, trust fund reserves are projected to be depleted. Income is projected to cover 77% of benefits due then.

By 2090, assuming no change in taxes, benefits or assumptions, revenue would cover about 73% of benefits due in that year.
Other Scenarios

Low Cost:
Social Security would be solvent for 75 years and beyond.

High Cost:
Trust fund reserves would be depleted in 2029, instead of 2034.
The long-range deficit is projected to be 2.83% of taxable payroll.

This means:

The gap would be closed if the Social Security contribution rate were raised from 6.2% to 7.7% for workers and employers each.
The number of Americans over age 65 will grow because:

- Boomers are reaching age 65
- People are living longer after age 65

Birth rates are projected to remain at replacement levels.

People 65 and older will increase from 15% to 23% of all Americans by 2090.
Percent of the Population Receiving Social Security and Percent Age 65+, 2015-2090

- 2016: 18%
- 2040: 23%
- 2090: 24%
- 2016: 15%
- 2040: 21%
- 2090: 23%

Board of Trustees, 2017: Tables V.A3 and IV.B3.
Can We Afford Social Security in the Future?
Social Security in the Broader Economy

Social Security Outgo as a Percent of the Economy (GDP), 2015-2090

- 2015: 5.0%
- 2016: 5.0%
- 2035: 6.1%
- 2090: 6.1%
Taxable Payroll and Social Security Outgo as a Percent of the Economy (GDP), 2015-2090

- **2016:** Taxable Payroll: 36.2%, Social Security Outgo: 5.0%
- **2037:** Taxable Payroll: 36.2%, Social Security Outgo: 6.1%
- **2090:** Taxable Payroll: 34.4%, Social Security Outgo: 6.1%
Strengthening Social Security
Options that would improve the adequacy of benefits include:

1) Updating the special minimum benefit to ensure that long-serving, low-paid workers can remain out of poverty when they retire.

2) Reinstating student benefits until age 22 for children of disabled or deceased workers (currently, benefits for these children stop at age 18-19).

3) Allowing up to 5 childcare years to count toward benefits.

4) Increasing benefits for widowed spouses in low-earning couples.

5) Modestly increasing benefits for all by changing the benefit formula (to increase the first PIA bend point by 15 percent)
Options that would help *raise revenues* include:

1) Lifting or eliminating the cap (now $127,200) on the earnings on which workers and their employers pay Social Security contributions.

2) Gradually increasing the Social Security contribution rate from its current level of 6.2%.

3) Subjecting income from investments to Social Security contributions.

4) Treating all salary reduction plans like 401(k)s (subjecting income paid into them to Social Security contributions).

5) Restoring estate tax to 2000 level and dedicating to Social Security.
Some proposals would **reduce benefits for some or all beneficiaries** in order to extend solvency.

- For example, raising the retirement age amounts to an **across-the-board cut in benefits**, and hence reduces the program’s cost.
- Switching to the chained CPI as the basis for Social Security’s cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs) would reduce benefits and hence program cost as well.

Public Opinion on Social Security
In 2014, the Academy conducted a multigenerational study to understand Americans’ perspectives on Social Security.

In focus groups, Americans expressed concern about benefits being too low.

77% said it is critical to preserve Social Security benefits, even if it means raising taxes on working Americans.

Walker, Reno, and Bethell, 2014.
In the trade-off analysis, the package preferred by 71% of respondents would:

- Gradually **increase taxes** in two ways:
  - for high earners by eliminating the taxable earnings cap;
  - For all workers by raising the tax rate by 1/20 of 1% per year.

- **Increase benefits** in two ways:
  - For low earners by increasing the special minimum benefit;
  - For all beneficiaries by basing COLAs on the inflation experienced by the elderly.

Walker, Reno, and Bethell, 2014.
Majorities of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents Agree

Percent agreeing: It is critical that we preserve Social Security for future generations, even if it means ...

- ... increasing the Social Security taxes paid by working Americans
- ... increasing the Social Security taxes paid by wealthier Americans

Walker, Reno, and Bethell, 2014.
Demographic Support for Package of Policy Options Preferred by 71% of Americans

- Generation (Year of Birth)
  - Early Boomers & Older (Before 1956): 74%
  - Late Boomers (1956-1964): 70%
  - Generation X (1965-1979): 69%
  - Generation Y (1980 and later): 71%

- Family Income
  - Under $35,000: 68%
  - $35,000-$74,999: 75%
  - $75,000 or more: 71%

- Party Affiliation
  - Republican: 68%
  - Democrat: 74%
  - Independent: 73%

Walker, Reno, and Bethell, 2014.
Recap

- Benefits are modest (dollars and replacement rates). Yet they are most beneficiaries’ main source of income.

- Social Security benefits will replace a smaller share of earnings in the future than they do today (replacement rates are declining because of the increase in the retirement age).

- Revenue increases or benefit cuts will be needed to balance Social Security’s future finances.

- Lawmakers have many options to raise revenues, lower future benefits, or increase benefits to improve adequacy.

- Americans value Social Security and are willing to pay for it.

- Americans report they would rather pay more than see future benefits reduced.
References


