

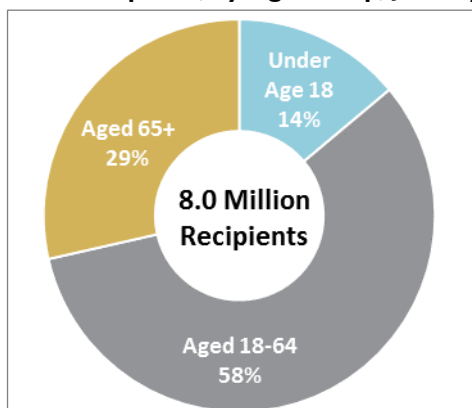
Updated February 20, 2020

Supplemental Security Income (SSI)

Overview

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is a needs-based public assistance program administered by the Social Security Administration (SSA) that provides monthly cash benefits to the aged, blind, and disabled. The program is intended to provide a minimum level of income to adults who have difficulty meeting their basic living expenses due to age or disability and who have little or no Social Security or other income. It is also designed to supplement the support and maintenance of needy children with severe disabilities. SSI is commonly known as a program of “last resort” because claimants must first apply for most other benefits for which they may be eligible; cash assistance is awarded only to those whose income and resources (if any) are within prescribed limits. In January 2020, SSI provided federally administered payments to 8.0 million recipients, including 1.1 million children under 18 years old, 4.6 million adults aged 18-64, and 2.3 million seniors aged 65 or older (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1. SSI Recipients, by Age Group, January 2020



Source: SSA, “Monthly Statistical Snapshot, January 2020,” Table 3.

Eligibility Requirements

To qualify for SSI, a person must (1) be aged, blind, or disabled as defined in federal law; (2) have limited income and resources; and (3) meet certain other requirements.

Categorical Requirements

The term *aged* refers to individuals aged 65 or older. The term *blind* refers to individuals of any age who have 20/200 or less vision in the better eye with the use of a correcting lens or tunnel vision of 20 degrees or less.

Adults aged 18 or older are considered *disabled* if they are unable to engage in any *substantial gainful activity* (SGA) due to any medically determinable physical or mental impairment that is expected to last for at least one year or to result in death. In 2020, the SGA earnings limit is \$1,260 per month. Adults generally qualify as disabled if their impairments are of such severity that they are unable to do

any kind of substantial work that exists in the national economy, taking into account their age, education, and work experience.

Children under age 18 are considered disabled if they have a medically determinable physical or mental impairment that results in *marked and severe functional limitations* and is expected to last for at least one year or to result in death. Children typically qualify as disabled if they have severe impairments that limit their ability to engage in age-appropriate childhood activities at home, in childcare, at school, or in the community. In addition, their earnings must not exceed the SGA limit.

Financial Requirements

To be financially eligible for SSI, a person’s countable income and resources—gross income and resources minus all applicable exclusions—must be within certain limits.

The limit for countable income is equal to the *federal benefit rate* (FBR), which is the maximum monthly SSI payment available under the program. In 2020, the FBR is \$783 per month for an individual and \$1,175 per month for a couple if both members are SSI eligible. The FBR is adjusted annually for inflation by the same cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) applied to Social Security benefits. Countable income is subtracted from the FBR in determining SSI eligibility and the payment amount.

SSI counts most types of income, including support and maintenance furnished in cash or in kind. The income of certain ineligible family members (such as a spouse or parent) may be deemed available to meet the needs of the SSI recipient, and as such, may be included in the recipient’s countable income. The program excludes certain income in determining SSI eligibility and the payment amount, such as the first \$20 per month of any income (earned or unearned) and the first \$65 per month of earned income plus one-half of any earned income above \$65. *Unearned income* refers to income not derived from current work, such as Social Security, veterans’ benefits, interest income, and cash from friends or relatives. *Earned income* includes wages, net earnings from self-employment, and other compensation related to work. Certain in-kind support is also excluded, such as food and housing assistance.

The limit for countable resources is \$2,000 for an individual and \$3,000 for a couple. Resources are cash or other liquid assets or any real or personal property that a person owns and could convert to cash to be used for his or her support and maintenance. Resources include bank savings and checking accounts, stocks, bonds, IRA and 401(k) plans under certain conditions, and certain types of trusts. The resources of ineligible family members may be deemed available to the SSI recipient and counted against the

applicable resource limit. Certain resources are not counted in determining SSI eligibility, such as a person's primary residence, household goods and personal effects, one vehicle, and property essential to self-support. The resource limits are not adjusted for inflation and have remained at their current levels since 1989.

Other Requirements

To qualify for SSI, a person must (1) reside in one of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, or the Northern Mariana Islands and (2) be a U.S. citizen or a noncitizen who meets a qualified alien category and certain other conditions. (SSI is not available in Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands, or American Samoa.) Individuals who are outside of the country (as defined above) for 30 consecutive days or more are ineligible for SSI. Residents of public institutions (such as jails or prisons) are generally ineligible for SSI, except for situations involving certain medical facilities. Additional requirements related to filing for other benefits and fugitive felon status also apply.

Cash and Medical Benefits

In January 2020, the average federally administered SSI payment was \$575 (**Table 1**). Benefits are generally lower for seniors because some of them also receive Social Security, which reduces their SSI payment. Benefits for children are typically higher because they often do not have income of their own. Some states use their own funds to supplement the federal SSI payment to provide a higher overall benefit level than is prescribed in federal law.

Table 1. SSI Payments, by Age Group, January 2020

Category	Average Monthly Payment	Total Monthly Payments (in millions)
Total	\$575	\$4,819
Under Age 18	\$680	\$790
Aged 18-64	\$603	\$2,958
Aged 65+	\$466	\$1,071

Source: SSA, "Monthly Statistical Snapshot, January 2020," Table 3.

In most states, SSI recipients are automatically eligible for Medicaid, which is a joint federal-state program that finances the delivery of primary and acute medical services, as well as long-term services and supports (LTSS), to certain needy populations. SSI recipients often have medical conditions that require significant health care resources. However, many SSI recipients are unable to work enough to gain health insurance through an employer or to pay for insurance on their own. Medicaid provides most SSI recipients with health care coverage, including some LTSS that private health insurance and Medicare do not cover.

Financing

Federal SSI benefits and administrative costs are financed by annual appropriations from general revenues. SSI benefits are considered mandatory (direct) spending

whereas related administrative costs are considered discretionary spending. Total spending on SSI in FY2019 was \$60.3 billion, with \$55.9 billion for benefits and \$4.5 billion for administrative and other costs.

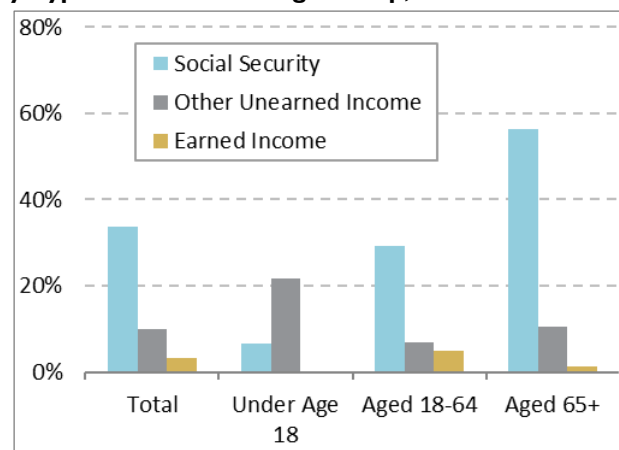
Program Integrity

SSA conducts several types of reviews to assess continuing eligibility for SSI. *Continuing disability reviews* (CDRs) are periodic medical reviews of blind or disabled recipients to determine if they continue to meet the statutory definition of blindness or disability. Blind or disabled recipients whose medical condition may improve are scheduled for a CDR at least once every three years and those with the most severe conditions are scheduled at least once every five to seven years. Child SSI recipients undergo a special reevaluation at age 18 to determine if they meet the adult standard of disability. SSA also performs *redeterminations* of non-medical factors (i.e., income, resources, and living arrangements) to verify that a recipient is still financially eligible for SSI and is receiving the correct payment amount. Redeterminations are conducted on a periodic basis or when a recipient's circumstances change.

Relationship Between SSI and Social Security

Although SSA administers both programs, SSI is not part of Social Security. SSI is a public assistance program based on need, whereas Social Security is a social insurance program that provides benefits to insured workers who worked for a sufficient number of years in jobs covered by Social Security and to their eligible family members. However, one of SSI's goals is to supplement the income of individuals who have low levels of Social Security and other income. In December 2018, one-third of SSI recipients also received Social Security, including more than half of those recipients aged 65 or older (**Figure 2**).

Figure 2. Share of SSI Recipients with Other Income, by Type of Income and Age Group, December 2018



Source: SSA, *Annual Statistical Supplement, 2019*, Table 7.D1.

Notes: Recipients may have more than one type of income. The share of children with earned income was 0.2%.

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