

*Women Aged 65 or Older Receiving SSI Payments, December 1996**

Background

Since the middle 1960s, the proportion of the aged U.S. population living in "official" poverty has decreased dramatically, although the decline has been greater among men than among women.¹ During the same period, the public forum has been replete with research and discussions on the reasons for the more fragile economic status of older women.² During this time, various proposals have surfaced (and some have been enacted), amending the Social Security Act to improve the economic status of older women.

Whatever the reason, a substantial number of women continue to reach age 65 with so little income and resources that they are eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments. The maximum amount of SSI payable to an individual, when annualized, is well below the official poverty threshold. These women are very poor, and they are of an age where it is unlikely that they will gain new sources of income. Any change to the programs, which constitute the "social safety net," may affect these women greatly.

This note presents information on the SSI program, and on the economic and demographic characteristics of those women aged 65 or older who receive SSI. The major source of the data is the SSI One-Percent Sample File.

Older Women and SSI

Size of Caseload

Eligibility for SSI is based on age (65 years or older), blindness or disability, and income and resources that are within the statutory and regulatory limits. Beginning January 1997, the maximum monthly Federal SSI payment to an individual with no countable income was \$484.

SSI payments have been made since January 1974. At the start of the program, persons aged 65 or older represented about 56 percent of the caseload (1.8 million out of 3.2 million in January 1974). However, as time has gone on, the population served by the SSI program has become younger. In December 1996, those persons aged 65 or older represented 32 percent of the caseload (2.1 million out of 6.6 million).³

Women have always been the majority of SSI recipients aged 65 or older. This is expected, since the percentage of women in this age group who are officially poor is twice as high as that for men of the same age.⁴ Women receiving SSI payments represent about 8 percent of all women aged 65 or older in the United States.⁵

Table 1 shows the changes since 1975 in the number of women aged 65 or older who have received SSI payments, and the impact that this group of recipients has on the program. At the end of 1975 older women accounted for 40 percent (1.7 million) of all SSI recipients, but the proportion has declined over the years, to 23 percent (1.5 million) in 1996. During the same period, the SSI caseload has more than doubled.

Table 1.—Number and percent of women aged 65 or older receiving SSI payments, by reason for initial eligibility, selected years, 1975–96

Month and year	Total	Aged	Blind/disabled
December:			
1975.....	1,736,367	1,621,895	114,472
1976.....	1,667,785	1,522,717	145,068
1980.....	1,564,077	1,312,445	251,632
1985.....	1,433,451	1,120,829	312,622
1990.....	1,436,660	1,089,077	347,583
1993.....	1,564,306	1,085,821	478,485
1995.....	1,552,053	1,052,776	499,277
1996.....	1,544,000	1,039,100	504,900
Percent of SSI caseload			
December:			
1975.....	40.2	70.3	5.7
1976.....	39.3	70.9	6.9
1980.....	37.8	72.6	10.8
1985.....	34.6	74.5	11.9
1990.....	29.8	77.1	10.3
1993.....	26.1	73.6	10.6
1995.....	23.8	72.8	9.9
1996.....	23.3	73.6	9.7

Source: 1996 data from SSI One-Percent Sample File; other years from the *Annual Statistical Supplement* to the *Security Security Bulletin*.

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The majority of women aged 65 or older first became eligible for SSI at or after their 65th birthday, and are classified as "aged" for SSI program purposes. However, some women first receive SSI payments before age 65 based on their own blindness or disability and continue their eligibility, and their program classification, after age 65.

Women in the blind/disabled group have shown the largest increase in the SSI caseload since 1975, from 114,000 to 505,000 in 1996, and from almost 6 percent to about 10 percent of all disabled recipients. The fact that 1 out of 10 of all disabled SSI recipients are women aged 65 or older is certainly of interest when the potential for successful rehabilitation and back-to-work efforts are considered.

Age and Income in 1996

Of the 1.5 million women aged 65 or older who received SSI in December 1996, 1 out of 4 (26 percent) were aged 65–69 at the end of 1996, while 44 percent were in their seventies. The remainder were aged 80 or older (table 2).

Sixty-three percent of all women aged 65 or older received a Social Security benefit. Over half of these benefits were based at least partly on their own earnings. Almost all of the remainder (31 percent) were receiving a widow's benefit. Interestingly, the proportion receiving Social Security did not vary much as their ages increased.

A small number of women—10,300—were receiving their Social Security benefits as disabled adult children based on the account of their own parent. It is likely that these women, now aged 65 or older, have been severely disabled almost all of their lives. Benefits for disabled adult children were first payable in 1957.

The average amount of Social Security benefits that SSI recipient women aged 65 or older received was \$356 in December 1996. This was just more than half of the average Social Security benefit paid to all women aged 65 or older in the same month.⁶ All but \$20 of this benefit would be countable income for purposes of determining the amount of their SSI payment. Very few of these women had any source of cash income other than Social Security. Only 4,000 of them had earnings, while about 4 percent had payments from the Veterans' Affairs, and another 4 percent had income from assets, in almost all cases, interest on a bank account.

Almost 10 percent had "in-kind" income on their records. This type of income is developed when the recipient lives with someone else and/or receives food, clothing, and shelter from another person. This assistance is generally counted for SSI income purposes at no more than one-third of the maximum Federal SSI payment.

Only about 6 percent of these older women received their SSI payments through a representative payee. This is smaller than the proportion of all SSI recipients who had a representative payee (34 percent), but larger than the same proportion for all SSI recipients who were aged (4 percent). This probably reflects the impact of the 500,000 aged women who were also blind or disabled.

Age at Initial SSI Eligibility

In general, the women aged 65 or older who had been receiving SSI at the end of 1996 had been dependent on the program for a long time. About 42 percent of them had been receiving SSI since 1984, and nearly 30 percent had been recipients since 1979. Probably a large proportion of this latter group had been on the rolls since the program began in 1974 (table 3).

If the focus is confined to the more recent arrivals, you can get a sense of how old these women were when they first applied for SSI. For those who applied in the 1995–96 period based on their age, most (62 percent) did so between the ages

Table 2.—Number of women aged 65 or older receiving SSI payments, by selected characteristics and Social Security benefit, December 1996

Selected characteristics	Total	With Social Security	Without Social Security
Total recipients..	1,544,000	975,800	568,200
Age in 1996:			
65–69.....	396,100	247,300	148,800
70–74.....	384,500	245,400	139,100
75–79.....	292,500	187,800	104,700
80–84.....	228,100	143,300	84,800
85 or older.....	242,800	152,000	90,800
Type of Social Security: ¹			
Worker.....	537,800	537,800	(2)
Spouse.....	120,100	120,100	(2)
Child.....	10,300	10,300	(2)
Widow.....	306,900	306,900	(2)
Other.....	700	700	(2)
Average Social Security benefit amount.....	\$356	\$356	(2)
Type of other income:			
Earnings.....	4,000	3,100	900
Veterans' payments.....	57,700	50,600	7,100
Pensions.....	33,100	27,400	5,700
Assets.....	68,600	49,300	19,300
In-kind income....	146,300	48,900	97,400
Other.....	19,300	10,600	8,700
Number with representative payee.....	98,300	45,900	52,400

¹ Primary entitlement. Some persons may be dually entitled.

² Not applicable.

Source: SSR One-Percent Sample File, December 1996.

of 65 and 69. Nevertheless, a substantial portion did not apply until they were aged 70 or older. This is at least some evidence that these women do not always need assistance as soon as they become age 65.

Living Situations

More than 90 percent of older women recipients continue to reside in households as they age (table 4).⁷ Most of these women rented their homes (47 percent), but about 1 woman out of 5 (about 20 percent) reported sharing a home or an apartment. A few (approximately 1 percent) lived in noninstitutional care situations, and 6 percent were in institutions, mostly private medical or proprietary facilities.

A significant number of women owned their homes (22 percent). These homes were identified very generally as "nonfarm," but about 7 percent of the homeowners said that they owned either a trailer or mobile home. In most cases, an owner occupied home is not a countable resource for SSI purposes.

More than half (52 percent) of the women aged 65 or older who lived in households reported that they were living alone, while approximately 30 percent lived with one or two

other persons. Larger households, three or more persons in addition to the recipient, were reported by about 14 percent.

Citizenship

Since the beginning of the SSI program, payments have been available to any person who is a resident of the United States and who is either a citizen or an alien lawfully admitted for permanent residence or otherwise permanently residing in the United States under color of law.⁸ Public Law (P.L.) 104-193 made some changes in eligibility requirements for persons who are not U.S. citizens. These changes are not reflected in the data in this note, as they were to become effective in 1997. (In fact, some of these changes were rendered moot by the provisions of P.L. 105-33, enacted August 5, 1997.)

Of the 1.5 million women aged 65 or older who received SSI in December 1996, approximately 1 out of 5 (329,000) were not U.S. citizens. This proportion is high compared with the 11 percent of all SSI recipients in the same month who were not citizens.

Like the data in table 2, table 5 presents characteristics such as age and type of income, but this data is distributed by

Table 3.—Number and percentage distribution of women aged 65 or older receiving SSI payments, by year of first payment and age at initial eligibility, December 1996

Year of first SSI payment	Age at initial eligibility							
	Total	Under 50	50-64	65-69	70-74	75-79	80-84	85 or older
	Number							
Total.....	1,526,900	66,400	459,500	691,800	170,900	76,300	35,800	26,200
1974-79.....	453,900	64,700	210,400	130,500	38,400	7,500	1,800	600
1980-84.....	194,300	1,700	75,500	90,900	17,200	6,200	2,100	700
1985-89.....	322,500	(1)	98,300	159,000	38,000	17,800	6,000	3,400
1990-94.....	431,200	(1)	73,300	234,100	59,700	33,000	18,500	12,600
1995.....	66,100	(1)	2,000	42,600	8,900	4,600	3,400	4,600
1996.....	58,900	(1)	(1)	34,700	8,700	7,200	4,000	4,300
	Percent							
Total.....	100.0	4.3	30.1	45.3	11.2	5.0	2.3	1.7
1974-79.....	100.0	14.3	46.4	28.8	8.5	1.7	.4	.1
1980-84.....	100.0	.9	38.9	46.8	8.9	3.2	1.1	.4
1985-89.....	100.0	(1)	30.5	49.3	11.8	5.5	1.9	1.1
1990-94.....	100.0	(1)	17.0	54.3	13.8	7.7	4.3	2.9
1995.....	100.0	(1)	3.0	64.4	13.5	7.0	5.1	7.0
1996.....	100.0	(1)	(1)	58.9	14.8	12.2	6.8	7.3

¹ Not applicable.

Source: SSI One-Percent Longitudinal File, December 1996.

citizenship. When data from both tables are compared, some similarities and differences become apparent:

- Although not *young*, the noncitizens are somewhat younger than the citizens; 56 percent of noncitizens were between ages 65–74 in 1996, compared with 47 percent of the citizens.
- The noncitizens were far less likely to be receiving Social Security benefits than were citizens, 20 percent compared with 75 percent, respectively. Among all SSI recipients aged 65 or older, the rate of concurrent receipt was 62 percent, while among all persons of that age, the rate was 91 percent.⁹
- For those noncitizens who did receive both Social Security and SSI, one-half, about the same proportion as among the citizens, were getting a benefit based at least partly on their own work. More of the noncitizens

Table 4.—Women aged 65 or older receiving SSI payments, by type of residence, October 1994–September 1995

Type of residence	Number	Percent
Total recipients ¹	1,424,400	100.0
Household (total).....	1,302,100	91.4
Owner.....	319,500	22.4
Nonfarm.....	287,400	20.2
Farm.....	4,600	.3
Trailer/mobile home...	21,500	1.5
Other.....	6,000	.4
Renter.....	671,300	47.1
Shared.....	311,300	21.9
Size of household:		
Recipient lives alone.....	676,800	47.5
One other.....	277,000	19.4
Two others.....	119,500	8.4
Three others.....	73,800	5.2
Four others.....	75,900	5.3
Five or more others.....	55,300	3.9
Unreported.....	23,800	1.7
Noninstitutional care (total).....	22,900	1.6
Institutional care (total).....	86,500	6.1
Public medical.....	5,800	.4
Private nonprofit.....	6,800	.5
Private medical.....	42,600	3.0
Proprietary.....	29,700	2.1
Other.....	1,600	.1
Unreported (total).....	12,900	.9

¹ The midpoint of the sample year was March 1995. Thus, the total number of recipients in this table is smaller than that in other tables in this note.

Source: SSI Quality Assurance File and Supplemental Security Record (SSR).

were receiving a wife's benefit, and fewer were receiving benefits as widows.

- The average amount of the monthly Social Security benefit was \$359 for citizens, and \$313 for noncitizens. This may reflect many factors, including a lower amount of earnings, a shorter time in covered employment, and a higher proportion of wives' benefits. The benefits payable to wives are generally 50 percent of that payable to primary beneficiaries.
- When income other than Social Security is considered, noncitizens are far less likely than citizens to have any type of income, except in-kind income. This is not surprising, since with very little cash income, these

Table 5.—Number of women aged 65 or older receiving SSI payments, by selected characteristics, Social Security benefit, and citizenship, December 1996

Selected characteristics	Total	Citizen	Noncitizen
Total recipients.....	1,544,000	1,214,700	329,300
Age in 1996:			
65–69.....	396,100	301,700	94,400
70–74.....	384,500	291,300	93,200
75–79.....	292,500	228,600	63,900
80–84.....	228,100	183,100	45,000
85 or older.....	242,800	210,000	32,800
Number with Social Security.....	975,800	911,100	64,700
Type of Social Security benefit: ¹			
Worker.....	537,800	504,900	32,900
Spouse.....	120,100	102,400	17,700
Child.....	10,300	10,300	0
Widow(er).....	306,900	292,800	14,100
Other.....	700	700	0
Average Social Security benefit amount.....	\$356	\$359	\$313
Type of other income:			
Earnings.....	4,000	3,500	500
Veterans' payments.....	57,700	57,000	700
Pensions.....	33,100	28,100	5,000
Assets.....	68,600	57,300	11,300
In-kind income.....	146,300	71,300	75,000
Other.....	19,300	14,400	4,900
Number with representative payee.....	98,300	87,700	10,600

¹ Primary entitlement. Some persons may be dually entitled.

Source: SSR One-Percent Sample File, December 1996.

elderly women are less likely to be able to pay for their own food, clothing and shelter, and may require some assistance from others. In such situations, SSI rules require that in-kind income be charged.

Amount of Federal SSI Payments

The average Federal SSI payment to women aged 65 or older in December 1996 was \$237. This was approximately one-half of the maximum amount payable, \$484. Table 6 shows average amounts, and distributions of the amount of Federal SSI payments to women with and without Social Security, and by U.S. citizenship. The data reinforce the close relationship between Social Security and SSI, and the importance of both programs in the income picture of elderly women. The average Federal SSI payment was \$137 for women with Social Security, and \$394 for those without it.

Three out of four SSI recipients who were women aged 65 or older were also receiving Social Security, and of these women, 40 percent had an SSI payment of less than \$100 per month. For this group, it is reasonable to assume that the amount of SSI is not as important as Medicaid eligibility, which usually accompanies SSI eligibility.

Only 1 percent of those women with Social Security were receiving \$400 or more in Federal SSI payments, indicating little or no countable income. This is in contrast to the distribution of payments for the almost 600,000 women who do not receive Social Security benefits along with their Federal SSI payments. Sixty percent of this group got the maximum amount of Federal SSI payable—\$484—in January 1997. This indicates no other countable income for these women.

The contrast between women with and without Social Security increases if we consider the 25 percent of those whose

Federal SSI was between \$300–\$399. Many women in this group are those who have in-kind income because they are living in someone else's home, and are receiving support and maintenance there. The value placed on this type of income for SSI purposes in 1997 is \$166 monthly, so these women also have little or no cash income.

The distribution of Federal SSI payments by citizenship shows the same pattern. Women who are citizens have lower Federal SSI payments (\$201 on average, compared with \$365 among the noncitizens). More women who are citizens have SSI under \$100, 33 percent compared with 8 percent of noncitizens. Also, 16 percent of those who are citizens were receiving the maximum Federal SSI payment, compared with 43 percent of the noncitizens. The common thread appears to be the receipt of Social Security. As indicated earlier, citizens are far more likely to have Social Security benefits than are noncitizens.

Summary

Older women who, even if they do receive Social Security benefits, are still eligible for Supplemental Security Income payments are certainly among the most vulnerable segments of our society. At the end of 1996, there were more than 1.5 million such women aged 65 or older who were receiving SSI payments. It is likely that these women have been poor for much of their lives, as they appear to become eligible for SSI before or close to their 65th birthday.

These women represent 23 percent of the SSI caseload, and 8 percent of all women aged 65 or older in the country; almost one-third are aged 80 or older. In addition to the health limitations that accompany increasing age, about a third of

Table 6.—Total number and percentage distribution of women aged 65 or older receiving Federal SSI payments, by amount of payment, Social Security benefit, and citizenship, December 1996

Amount of Federal SSI ¹	With Social Security	Without Social Security	Citizen	Noncitizen
Average amount of Federal SSI.....	\$137	\$394	\$201	\$365
Total number.....	975,800.0	568,200.0	1,214,700.0	329,300.0
Total percent.....	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
None ²	10.6	.3	7.7	3.5
Under \$50.....	20.1	9.2	19.5	4.3
\$50–\$99.....	18.2	.4	13.9	3.5
\$100–\$199.....	26.7	.7	20.2	6.1
\$200–\$299.....	19.2	3.3	15.1	6.8
\$300–\$399.....	4.2	24.8	6.6	30.9
\$400–\$483.....	.9	1.8	1.0	2.0
\$484.....	.1	59.5	16.0	42.9

¹ Amount due to be paid January 1, 1997.

² Persons receiving only federally administered State supplementation.

Source: SSI One-Percent Sample File, December 1996.

these women appear to have been blind or severely disabled for many years, and had been receiving SSI even before they reached age 65. Their SSI payments averaged \$237 per month (\$137 if they also received Social Security, \$394 if they did not).

Sixty-three percent of the SSI population who were women aged 65 or older were also getting a Social Security benefit averaging \$356 per month, but other than Social Security, they had almost no cash income. A few of these women were institutionalized, and almost 1 out of five reported owning their own home. Approximately half lived alone, and another 20 percent lived with only one other person.

Of women aged 65 or older receiving SSI payments, 1 in 5 was not a U.S. citizen, and this group was even less likely to have Social Security benefits, or any other cash income. As a result, their SSI payments were higher. Data are not yet available to judge the impact of the complex series of changes made to SSI eligibility for noncitizens by legislation enacted in 1996 and 1997.

Notes

¹ *Annual Statistical Supplement to the Social Security Bulletin, 1996*, tables 3.E1 through 3.E8, pp. 169–174.

² One of the most recent studies focuses on the relationship between a woman's economic status in earlier life and her poverty in old age: Choudhury and Leonesio, "Life-Cycle Aspects of Poverty Among Older Women," *Social Security Bulletin*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (1997), pp. 17–36.

³ For SSI recipients, the program category is not changed when the person becomes age 65. Therefore, to count the number of recipients aged 65 or older, we must include the aged—those who first gain eligibility when they are already age 65, and blind and disabled individuals who become eligible before age 65, but whose eligibility continues.

⁴ *Annual Statistical Supplement to the Social Security Bulletin, 1996*, table 3.E4, p. 172.

⁵ Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1996*, 116th edition, table 14.

⁶ *Social Security Bulletin*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (1997), p. 73.

⁷ The data on living situations comes from the Quality Assurance Sample File for the period October 1994 through September 1995. The data is developed by SSA's Office of Program and Integrity Review, through interviews with a sample of recipients.

⁸ Social Security Act, Section 1614(B).

⁹ Susan Grad, *Income of the Population 55 or Older, 1994*. Social Security Administration, Office of Research and Statistics, table 1.8, p. 22.