

The Senior Disconnect: Millions are Losing Billions in Benefits

One of the key priorities for an aging America is to enable older adults to live independently in their homes and communities for as long as possible. For those with limited income and resources, benefits—whether public or private—can be a critical resource to receive support to attain this goal and avoid costly institutionalization. Benefits provide recipients with access to healthy food, needed medical care and prescriptions, and a safe living environment, as well as other supportive services. They also provide community economic stimulus, as benefits are spent locally in pharmacies, grocery stores, utility companies, and health care providers.

Yet, as this data brief illustrates, many seniorsⁱ are missing out on these benefits. The reasons are varied: lack of awareness about benefits, perceived (real or otherwise) complexity of applications, stigma associated with receiving entitlements, and not understanding who may be eligible.ⁱⁱ Likewise, those who already receive one benefit may not realize that they may be eligible to receive further support from other programs.

Two valuable resources exist to help remedy this problem—BenefitsCheckUp[®] and the Eldercare Locator.

Millions of seniors, younger adults with disabilities, and their families have utilized these tools to find benefits, get assistance in applying for programs, and understand how to use them to remain healthy and independent. Yet millions more could stand to gain from these services.

The needs of older Americans

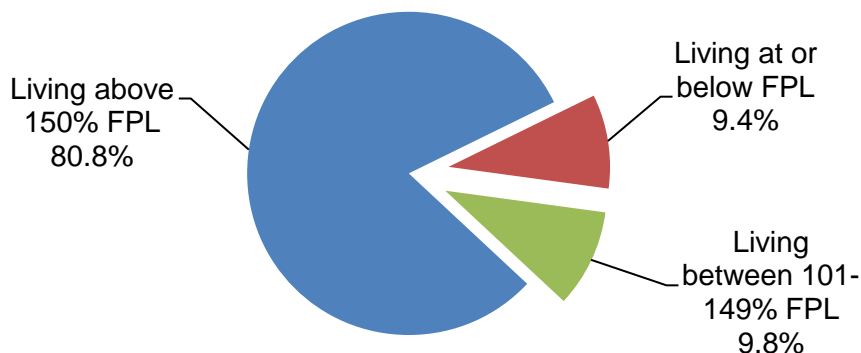
According to the most recent Census (2010), there are more than 57 million adults aged 60+ living in the United States, including 40.2 million aged 65+. Many of these older Americans struggle to pay for the basic necessities of everyday living—food, health care, medicine, home energy, and other costs.

In 2011, the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) for an individual living in the 48 contiguous states and DC was \$10,890/year. A little more than 9% of adults aged 60+ live below poverty; another 9.8% live below 150% FPL, earning less than \$16,335/year (Figure 1). While these percentages have held fairly steady during the economic downturn, the *numbers* of those in poverty has increased, as the Baby Boomer population ages.

Key Findings

- In 2011 alone, BenefitsCheckUp[®] screenings identified over \$1.2 billion in benefits that users may be eligible to receive, but are currently not getting.
- 71% of all BenefitsCheckUp[®] users were missing out on benefits they were potentially eligible to receive; 1/3 of these were already enrolled in one benefit and eligible for, but not receiving, another.
- “Financial benefits” is the number one reason people call the Eldercare Locator, a nationwide service that connects seniors and caregivers with information on senior services.
- The majority of Eldercare Locator callers (52%) who asked about a specific benefit mentioned SSI. Another 16% inquired about Medicaid, 10% about LIHEAP, and 6% asked about SNAP.

Figure 1. Poverty Status of Adults 60+



Source: 2008-2010 American Community Survey 3-year estimates. S0102, *Population 60 Years and Over in the United States*, available from: <http://factfinder2.census.gov>

In addition to facing economic struggles, many of these older adults also struggle with poor health. According to the 2010 National Health Interview Survey,ⁱⁱⁱ 85% of those aged 60+ have one or more chronic conditions—such as diabetes, arthritis, cancer, or heart disease. These conditions often result in higher health care costs, and sometimes lead to limitations in daily activities. In addition, food insecurity is much higher among this population (16%) than the general older population (6%).^{iv}

What are the core benefits available to this population?

A core set of benefits is available to low-income older adults (as well as younger adults with disabilities who receive Medicare) that can enable them to:

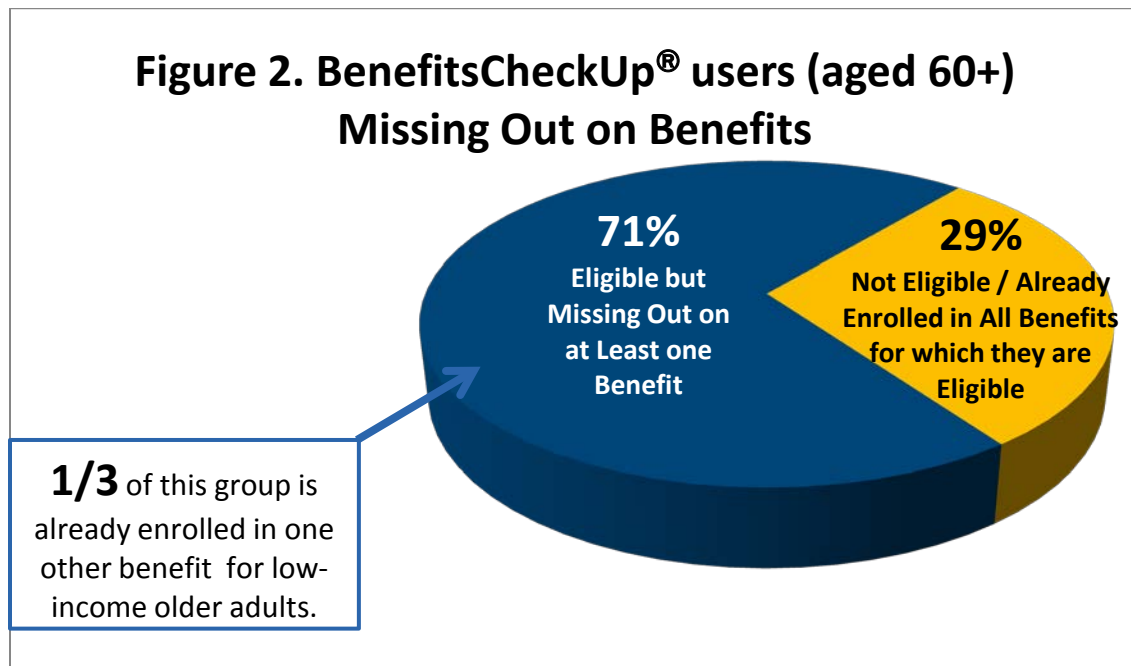
- Access nutritious food and alleviate hunger (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP).
- Obtain access to needed health care (Medicare and Medicaid, including community-based long-term supports and services, and subsidies that make Medicare affordable^v).
- Heat and cool their homes (the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP).
- Receive a rudimentary minimal source of income (Supplemental Security Income, or SSI).

These core benefits offer an important safety net for the nearly 8.4 million seniors and disabled younger adults living in poverty and an additional 13.5 million seniors and disabled younger adults living at risk of poverty.^{vi}

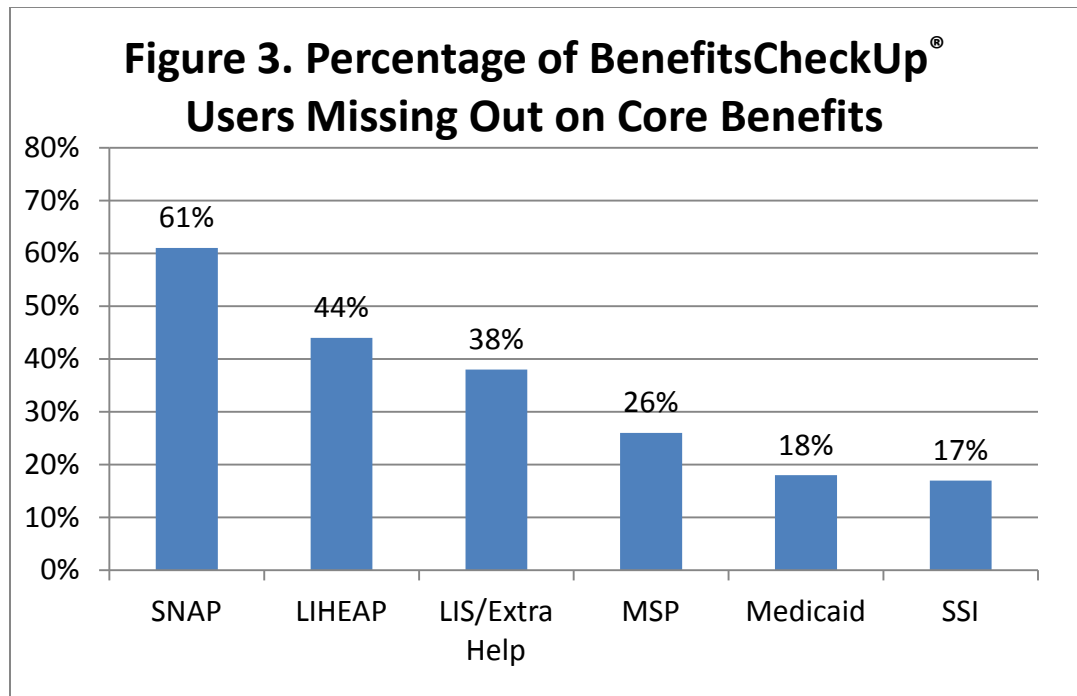
In addition to these core programs, there are numerous other public and private benefits that offer free or discounted services to low-income seniors, including respite care, tax relief, transportation, legal assistance, and in-home care. While most programs limit eligibility to those with incomes near or below the Federal Poverty Level and with little or no savings or property that can be used to meet their basic needs, some programs may be more generous in their eligibility requirements.

Who is missing out on benefits?

The core set of benefits have a demonstrated impact in improving the lives of these seniors. Yet many seniors and younger adults with disabilities who are eligible for benefits are not receiving them. Data collected using the BenefitsCheckUp[®] online screening tool reveals that 71% of all users were missing out on benefits they were potentially eligible to receive (Figures 2 and 3); one-third of these were already enrolled in one benefit and eligible for, but not receiving, another.



Source: Data based on a random sample of BenefitsCheckUp[®] comprehensive screenings since Jan. 2010 (n=1,100). Consumer comprehensive screenings are anonymous screenings completed by consumers and/or their caregivers. In a comprehensive screening, individuals provide detailed information about their current participation in programs and their income and resources which allow BenefitsCheckUp[®] to determine if they are eligible for but not receiving a benefit.



Source: Data based on a random sample of BenefitsCheckUp.org consumer comprehensive screenings completed since Jan. 1, 2010 (n=1,100).

The average value of each benefit varies by program and state (when applicable), ranging from several hundred dollars to thousands of dollars per benefit each year. For example, the annual average SNAP benefit for seniors living alone is around \$1,428 (\$119/month),^{vii} while the average Supplemental Security Income payment is approximately \$6,000 a year (\$499/month).^{viii} This means that eligible seniors who are not enrolled in these programs are collectively missing out on more than \$20 billion in help each year.

Eldercare Locator: A Door to Assistance

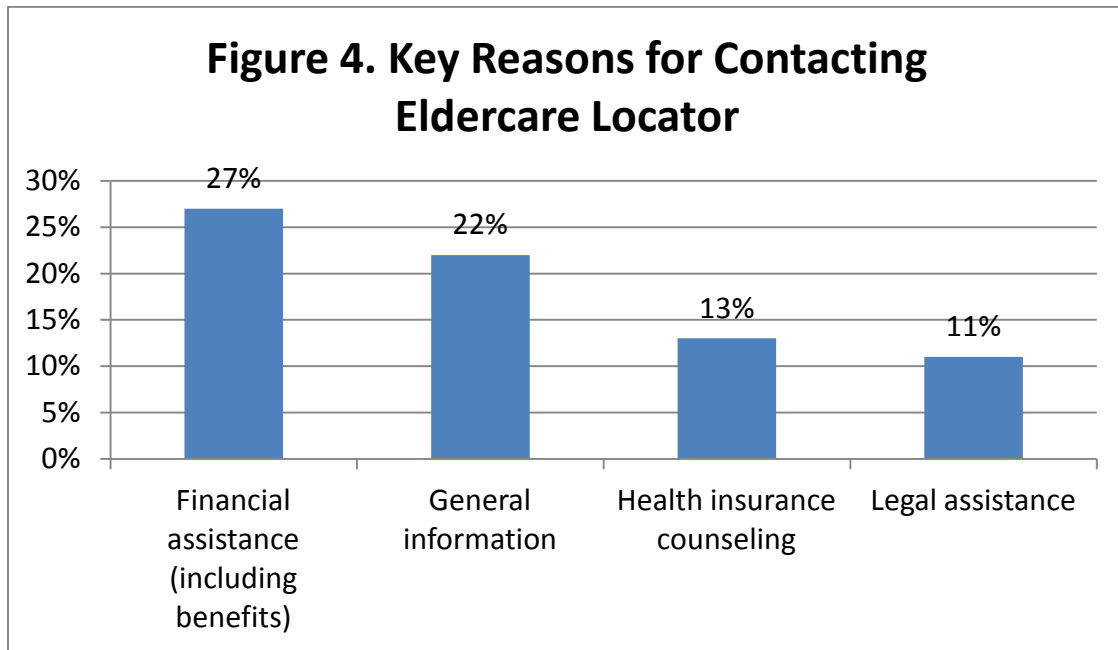
The Eldercare Locator, a public service of the U. S. Administration on Aging, is a nationwide service that connects seniors and caregivers with information on senior services. This service is administered by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a), and operates as both a toll-free hotline (1-800-677-1116) and website (<http://www.eldercare.gov>).

To meet the growing need of the Hispanic elderly, Eldercare Locator provides callers with an option to speak directly with a Spanish speaking information specialist. In 2006, the Hispanic elderly comprised 6.4% of the total United States elderly population.^{ix} Furthermore, almost 2 in 5 elderly Hispanic/Latinos who speak Spanish only are linguistically isolated.^x Over the past year, Eldercare Locator has experienced an increase from 8% to 12% of Spanish speaking callers.

The Eldercare Locator handles over 150,000 calls each year. Among those using the service^{xi}:

- Roughly 75% were calling for themselves, and the remaining were caregivers (12% children caring for elderly parent; 4% spouses).
- Three-quarters of callers were female.
- Callers came from all 50 states, with 12% calling from California, 10% from Florida, and 7% each from New York and Texas.

Figure 4 shows the key reasons people contact the Eldercare Locator for assistance.



General information refers to inquiries about in-home services, transportation, and long-term care planning; 13% of callers sought counseling specifically related to their health insurance options; and 11% were looking for legal assistance, often related to foreclosure on homes, insurance fraud, or wills.

With regards to benefits, the majority of callers (52%) who asked about a specific benefit mentioned SSI. Another 16% inquired about Medicaid, 10% about LIHEAP, and 6% asked about SNAP.

BenefitsCheckUp®: Online Help to Find Benefits

BenefitsCheckUp®, a service of the National Council on Aging (NCOA), is the nation's most comprehensive web-based service (<http://www.benefitscheckup.org>) offering information on benefits programs, specifically programs for people with Medicare and limited income and resources. After entering information about their income and assets, users get a

personalized report that describes the programs they may get help from. They can also apply for some of the programs online or download an application form.

In 2011, over 248,000 people completed a screening using BenefitsCheckUp®. Of those:

- Roughly 38% had incomes below the federal poverty level; 20% had incomes between 100-150% FPL and 14% had incomes between 150-200% FPL.
- Approximately 11.8% were screening on behalf of a parent, spouse, or sibling.
- More than 40,000 completed online applications for the Medicare Part D Low Income Subsidy, which are submitted directly to the Social Security Administration from the site.

In addition, BenefitsCheckUp® screenings identified over \$1.2 billion in benefits that users may be eligible to receive, but are currently not getting.

Get Connected

With support from the U.S. Administration on Aging, n4a and NCOA have launched a campaign—*You Gave, Now Save*—to promote the Eldercare Locator and BenefitsCheckUp® as key places where seniors and their families can seek out personalized assistance to screen and apply for benefits.

- To use the Eldercare Locator: Call 1-800-677-1116, Monday through Friday 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. EST or visit <http://www.eldercare.gov>
- To use BenefitsCheckUp: visit <http://www.benefitscheckup.org/campaign>

More information about the campaign and additional resources for consumers, professionals, and the media is available at <http://www.aoa.gov>.

ⁱ This brief contains data pertaining to the older adult population, especially those with Medicare, however, many of the benefits described herein are also available to younger adults (aged 21-64) with disabilities who have Medicare.

ⁱⁱ For more on the policy and programmatic barriers that impede benefits access, please see the NCOA white paper, *Closing the Loop: Coordination of Benefits for Seniors and People with Disabilities*, forthcoming at <http://www.ncoa.org>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm>

^{iv} NCOA analysis of the Current Population Survey, Food Security Supplement, December 2010. Data is available online via Data Ferrett at: <http://dataferrett.census.gov/>. For questionnaire, technical notes, and codebook please visit: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Data/foodsecurity/CPS/>

^v These include the Medicare Savings Programs (MSPs), which help pay Medicare Part B costs, and the Medicare Part D Low-Income Subsidy (LIS, or Extra Help), which assists with the costs of prescription drugs.

^{vi} NCOA analysis of the American Community Survey 2009, Public Use Microdata Files. For the purposes of this analysis seniors are defined as individuals aged 65+, and younger adults with disabilities are defined as individuals between the ages of 21 and 64. Poverty is defined as having incomes <100%FPL, while near poverty is defined as having incomes between 100% and 200% FPL. Data is available online via Data Ferrett at: <http://dataferrett.census.gov/>. For questionnaire, technical notes, and codebook please visit: <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/>.

^{vii} USDA Food and Nutrition Service. *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2010*.

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/MENU/Published/snap/FILES/Participation/2010Characteristics.pdf>

^{viii} 2011 data from Social Security Administration. See http://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/statcomps/ssi_monthly/2011-10/index.html.

^{ix} http://www.nhcoa.org/economic_security.php

^x <http://www.stanford.edu/group/ethnoger/hispaniclatino.html>

^{xi} Data is based on calls received from December 2010 to December 2011.