



Social Security Is Vital to Older Women's Financial Security

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Social Security is a social insurance program intended to replace earnings lost due to a worker's retirement, disability, or death. Social Security provides guaranteed benefits that keep up with increases in the cost of living, and its benefits are progressive, meaning benefits make up a higher share of a worker's previous earnings for workers at lower earnings levels. In 2023, it is estimated that almost 67 million people per month will receive Social Security benefits.¹ While modest, these benefits lifted nearly 22 million people, including more than 15 million older adults aged 65 and over, above the poverty line in 2021.²

Although most of its beneficiaries receive retirement benefits, Social Security is more than just a retirement program. It also provides life insurance and disability insurance protection. Nearly one in six Social Security beneficiaries (16%) received Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or were young survivors of deceased workers in January 2023.³

- Around 90% of individuals aged 21-64 were insured through Social Security in case of severe disability in 2022.⁴
- Nearly 2.7 million children under 18 received Social Security benefits as dependents of retired, disabled, or deceased workers in 2021.⁵

Social Security is critically important to older women's economic security.

Women receive Social Security benefits both as workers and as spouses or survivors of workers. While women's employment rates have increased significantly since the 1960s, progress has been stalled in recent decades.⁶ Women continue to face a disproportionate risk of economic insecurity in their older years due to longer life expectancies than men, gender and racial inequities in the workplace, caregiving responsibilities, and less savings accumulated over the years. With the COVID-19 pandemic further widening gender and racial disparities, older women depend on Social Security for financial stability now more than ever.

- Women made up over 55% of Social Security beneficiaries aged 62 and older and 63% of beneficiaries aged 85 and older at the end of December 2022.⁷
- In 2021, the average Social Security benefit received by retired women 65 and older was \$18,049, compared to \$22,339 for retired men 65 and older.⁸
- Women are more likely than men to outlive their spouses. As a result, women make up 95% of Social Security survivor beneficiaries.⁹

- Among people 65 and older, unmarried women and widows rely more heavily on the income they receive from Social Security (45%) than men (33%) or couples (28%).¹⁰

Social Security is a key anti-poverty program for older women, who are more likely than older men to fall below the poverty line.

In 2021, women made up more than six in ten people aged 65 and older (61%) who lived in poverty.¹¹ The official poverty rate for women 65 and older was 11.6% in 2021, compared to 8.8% for older men.¹²

- Women aged 80 and older had the highest poverty rate (14.7%) among older persons in all age groups.¹³
- Older women who are not married are more likely than married older women to live in poverty. Among women aged 65 and older, about 16% of widows, 17% of divorced women, and nearly 20% of never-married women had incomes below the official poverty line compared with 5.8% of married women.¹⁴
- Social Security has proven successful in protecting millions of older women from falling into poverty. In 2021, Social Security lifted 18.1 million people aged 65 and older out of poverty as measured by the Supplemental Poverty Measure, of whom 10.4 million were older women compared to 7.7 million older men.¹⁵

Older women of color especially depend on Social Security.

Women of color face compounding barriers to building wealth, ranging from wage disparities, other forms of racial and gender employment discrimination, lack of access to credit, student loan debt, to unpaid caregiving. As a result, women of color have even lower lifetime earnings, have fewer assets in retirement, and are at greater risk of poverty than white women or white men.¹⁶ While these barriers mean that their Social Security benefits are lower, it also means that Social Security often becomes their primary source of income in retirement.

- Older women of color experience poverty at much higher rates than their white counterparts. Among older women 65 and older, 19.1% of Black women, 19.8% of Latinas, and 18.5% of Native women lived in poverty compared to 9.1% of white, non-Hispanic women.¹⁷
- Latinas have the lowest average retirement wealth at \$8,571 (in 2019 dollars), and Black women have the second-lowest average at \$11,157. In comparison, white, non-Hispanic women have on average \$33,007 in retirement wealth and white, non-Hispanic men have on average \$57,180 in retirement wealth.¹⁸
- In 2021, Social Security lifted 10.4 million women ages 65 and over out of poverty as measured by the Supplemental Poverty Measure, including nearly 1.3 million older Black women, 885,000 older Latinas, 329,000 older Asian women, and 7.8 million older white, non-Hispanic women.¹⁹

Protecting and expanding Social Security would advance civil rights, gender justice, and economic justice.

Without significant systemic changes and long-overdue public investments, women's financial insecurity in retirement will continue to grow. As the only national retirement program that provides nearly universal coverage and lifelong, inflation-protected benefits, Social Security plays a vital role in providing economic security to millions of older women who have experienced a lifetime of disparities. Strengthening and expanding Social Security would ensure that millions of people, especially women and people of color, can age with dignity.

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