

People with Disabilities and Social Security

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- People with disabilities are often invisible in discussions about Social Security reform. However, there are millions of people with disabilities who rely on both the cash payments and the access to health care that are provided through Social Security's disability programs: Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI).
- Although the goal for people with disabilities is to have the opportunity to earn real wages in meaningful jobs, the Department of Labor (2004) estimated that only 37% of people with disabilities were employed. For people with life-long disabilities, this number is far lower. Thus, Social Security benefits are absolutely essential for the day-to-day survival of most people with disabilities.
- In addition to a Budgetary Impact Statement, a **Beneficiary Impact Statement** needs to be done to look at both the intended and unintended consequences of any changes to the Social Security system. It is critically important that people with disabilities and their families be part of this process so that they can make it clear how changes to Social Security will affect them.
- The effect on the *family as a whole* if benefits from Social Security were to be reduced should be included in a Beneficiary Impact Statement. For example, women in general often contribute less to Social Security because of such factors as working at lower paying jobs, and working part-time as they care for their families. This is especially true for mothers of children with life-long disabilities. For these women, the demands of their caretaking role often extend throughout much of their lives, as their adult children continue to live at home and continue to require a high level of care. This lifetime of low wage earnings experienced by both the mother and adult child with a disability can negatively affect the income and the savings of the family, and can cause that family to experience a greater need for the safety net that Social Security provides.
- Although policy makers may speak of the Social Security retirement and disability systems as separate issues, the safety net for individuals with disabilities and their families is created by a combination of Social Security retirement and survivor benefits, SSDI, and SSI, as well as the health and long-term care benefits (Medicare and Medicaid) that are linked to these programs.
- While SSI is not generally included in current discussions about Social Security reform, should that change, it will be important to understand the role SSI plays in the states' ability to provide services for people with disabilities. Most states require that individuals with disabilities who live in facilities such as group homes contribute a percentage of their income from SSI to the cost of care; in New Jersey, that percentage is currently 75%. If state revenue from this source of income decreases, it could have a significant negative effect on the ability of states to meet the needs of not only those individuals receiving facility-based care, but also those who rely on essential services to continue living in their communities.