

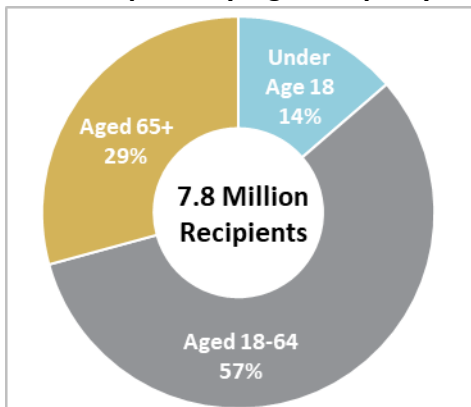


Supplemental Security Income (SSI)

Overview

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is a federal assistance program that provides monthly cash payments to aged, blind, or disabled individuals who have limited income and resources (i.e., assets). The program is administered by the Social Security Administration (SSA) and intended to provide a guaranteed minimum income for meeting basic needs, such as food and shelter. SSI provides a flat benefit of \$794 per month in 2021 (\$1,191 per month for a couple), which is reduced by any countable income. In July 2021, SSI provided federally administered payments to 7.8 million recipients, including 1.1 million children under 18 years old, 4.4 million adults aged 18-64, and 2.3 million seniors aged 65 or older (Figure 1).

Figure 1. SSI Recipients, by Age Group, July 2021



Source: SSA, “Monthly Statistical Snapshot, July 2021,” 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. SSA uses an earnings limit to evaluate SGA, which is \$1,310 per month in 2021. 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 consideration their age, education, and work experience.

Children under 18 years old 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 one or more 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 applicable exclusions—must be within certain limits. In general, SSI counts only the income and resources of the individual. However, SSI may deem (i.e., attribute) a portion of the income and resources of an ineligible spouse or parent who lives in the same household in determining the individual’s eligibility and payment amount.

The countable income limit is set at the same level as the federal benefit rate (FBR), which is the maximum monthly SSI payment. In 2021, the FBR is \$794 per month for an individual and \$1,191 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, dollar for dollar, in determining program eligibility and the payment amount (if any).

SSI counts most types of income, including earned and unearned income. *Earned income* includes wages, net earnings from self-employment, and other compensation related to work. *Unearned income* is all other income, such as Social Security, veterans’ benefits, periodic annuity or pension payments, and cash from others. SSI also counts in-kind support and maintenance (i.e., food or shelter provided by others). Certain income is not counted, 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. (These exclusions are not adjusted for inflation.) SSI also excludes federal tax refunds and credits as well as federal food and housing assistance.

The countable resource limit is \$2,000 for an individual and \$3,000 for a couple. (These limits are not adjusted for inflation.) *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 the person’s support and maintenance. Resources include checking or savings accounts, stocks, bonds, individual retirement accounts (IRAs) or 401(k) plans that cannot be claimed as periodic payments, and certain types of trusts. Certain resources are not counted, such as an individual’s primary residence, household goods and personal effects, one vehicle, property

essential to self-support, federal tax refunds and credits for a 12-month period after receipt, and the first \$100,000 in an Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) account.

Other Requirements

To qualify for SSI, a person must reside in the United States, which the program defines as the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the Northern Mariana Islands. (SSI is not available in American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.) In addition, a person must be a U.S. citizen or a qualified noncitizen who meets certain other conditions. 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. Lastly, individuals must apply for certain other benefits for which they may be eligible (e.g., Social Security, pensions).

Cash and Medical Benefits

In July 2021, the average federally administered SSI payment was \$586 (Table 1). Benefits are generally lower for seniors because some of them also receive Social Security, which reduces their SSI payments. 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, July 2021

Category	Average Monthly Payment	Total Monthly Payments (in millions)
Total	\$586	\$4,708
Under Age 18	\$693	\$757
Aged 18-64	\$617	\$2,865
Aged 65+	\$476	\$1,085

Source: SSA, "Monthly Statistical Snapshot, July 2021," Table 3.

SSI recipients are automatically eligible for Medicaid in most states. However, eight states require SSI recipients to meet more restrictive eligibility criteria than SSI criteria to qualify for Medicaid.

Financing

Federal SSI benefits and administrative costs are financed by annual appropriations from general revenues. SSI benefits are mandatory spending, while administrative costs are discretionary spending. Total federal spending on SSI in FY2020 was \$60.8 billion, with \$56.4 billion for benefits and \$4.4 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 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 and receiving the correct payment amount. Redeterminations are conducted on a periodic basis or when a recipient's circumstances change.

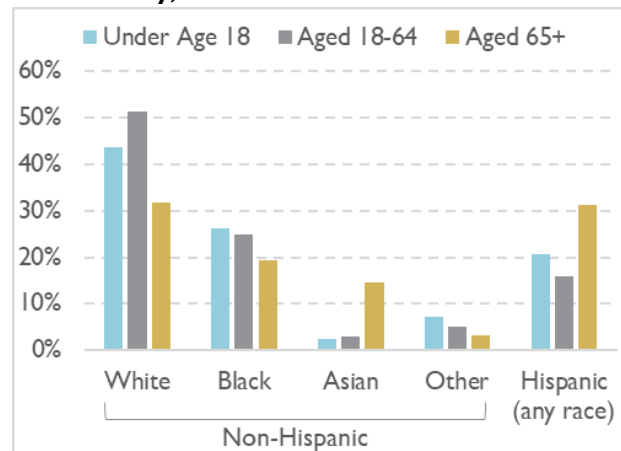
Relationship with Social Security

Although SSA administers both programs, SSI is not part of Social Security. SSI is a public assistance program that provides a flat benefit based on need. In contrast, Social Security is a social insurance program that provides benefits based on career-average earnings to qualified workers and certain 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 July 2021, one-third of all SSI recipients also received Social Security, including more than half of those aged 65 or older.

Race and Ethnicity

In 2017, more than half of all SSI recipients were members of a racial or ethnic minority group (Figure 2). Black recipients made up one-fourth of child and working-age adult recipients, while Hispanic recipients made up one-fifth of child recipients and about one-third of senior recipients.

Figure 2. SSI Recipients, by Age Group and Race/Ethnicity, 2017



Source: Katherine Giefer, *A Profile of Supplemental Security Income Recipients: 2017*, Census Bureau, May 2021.

For more information on SSI, see the following resources:

SSA, "Understanding Supplemental Security Income SSI Home Page—2021 Edition," <https://www.ssa.gov/ssi/text-understanding-ssi.htm>.

CRS Report R44948, *Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI): Eligibility, Benefits, and Financing*.

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