

Your Questions Answered: Seniors Are Serious About Social Security

At our August *Seniors Are Serious About Social Security* conversation, you shared thoughtful and important questions about how Social Security works today and what the future may hold. We've compiled answers to many of those questions here so you can find clear, reliable information from our discussion in one place.

Social Security Eligibility & Benefits

- **What options are available for a senior over 70 who has not paid enough into Social Security to qualify for benefits?** If you are over 70 and do not have the 40 work credits typically required for Social Security retirement benefits, you may still have options. Depending on your situation, you could qualify for Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), spousal benefits, or survivor benefits. Eligibility is based on factors like income, resources, disability status, and the work record of a current or former spouse. The best next step is to contact the Social Security Administration directly, so they can review your personal circumstances and determine what benefits you may be entitled to.
- **I worked full time until I was 80 and lived in West Virginia for the last 30 years. Will those years still count toward my Social Security benefits?** You will need to contact the Social Security Administration to get a definitive answer based on your personal work record. In general, the maximum age you can delay starting Social Security retirement benefits at is 70. Your monthly benefit amount increases the longer you wait to claim, but only up to age 70. Waiting beyond that age will not increase your payments any further. For example:
 - If you claim at your full retirement age (67 for many people), you receive 100% of your benefit.
 - If you wait until age 70, you receive about 124% of your full retirement age benefit (an 8% increase for each year you delay past 67).

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- **What is the “take back” provision for recovering 100% of overpaid Social Security funds? What does this mean for benefits? Will they be reduced?** The “take back” provision allows the Social Security Administration to recover money you were overpaid in the past by withholding part or all future monthly benefits until the overpayment amount is reached. To prevent individuals from facing unexpected financial challenges, the Biden Administration reduced the maximum withholding amount to 10% of your monthly benefit. The Trump Administration has stated that it will change this policy to allow withholding of up to 100% of your benefit until the overpayment is repaid in full. This means you could temporarily receive no monthly benefit if the overpayment amount is large, which may cause significant financial hardship if you rely on Social Security as a primary source of income.

Retirement Age

- **What changes are being considered for the full retirement age?** Your full retirement age (FRA) depends on your year of birth. Originally set at 65, it began increasing under 1983 legislation. For example, if you were born in 1938, your FRA is 65 years and 2 months; if you were born in 1939, it's 65 years and 4 months, and so on. For anyone born in 1960 or later, the FRA is now 67.
- **With life expectancy increasing for some, is raising the retirement age a fair way to strengthen Social Security, or does it disproportionately harm certain populations?** Raising the retirement age would reduce benefits for all retirees and could disrupt the long-term plans of people who have paid into Social Security for decades and are now nearing retirement. The exact size of the cut depends on the age at which you claim your benefits. For a median-wage retiree turning 62 in 2034, it could mean losing between \$4,100 and \$8,900 per year, depending on when you start collecting benefits.

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Social Security Outlook

- **If Social Security is projected to be insolvent by 2034 and only able to pay partial benefits, how will this affect Medicare?** Social Security and Medicare are funded through separate trust funds. While Social Security's retirement trust fund is projected to be depleted by 2034, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates that Medicare's main trust fund for hospital insurance will remain fully solvent until 2052.
- **What steps can be taken to ensure that Social Security funds remain solvent?** One of the most effective ways to strengthen Social Security is to require the wealthiest Americans to pay more into the system. Currently, there is a cap on the amount of income subject to the Social Security payroll tax, so high earners pay a smaller share of their total income than most workers. Eliminating or raising this cap would generate more revenue and fund the system more fairly. For example, the Social Security 2100 Act proposes applying the payroll tax to income over \$400,000.
- **Are there any plans or strategies being discussed to protect Social Security, so seniors can prepare for potential changes?** Currently, there are no changes to your Social Security benefits. While some Republican lawmakers have proposed raising the retirement age or making other changes, Democrats are committed to protecting Americans' hard-earned benefits. Despite some misinformation—including from the agency itself—Trump's One Big Beautiful Act (OBBA) does not eliminate taxes on Social Security. Instead, it temporarily provides a new tax deduction for certain seniors whose incomes are high enough to qualify them for taxation. In fact, two-thirds of seniors already pay no Social Security tax, and this law does nothing for them.
- **Promoting Social Security Solvency By Ensuring Everyone Pays Their Fair Share:** Most jobs require employers and employees to contribute to Social Security through payroll taxes, with amounts withheld from each paycheck. Some workers—such as student employees, railroad workers, and

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certain state and local government employees—may not pay into the system.

For those who do pay in, the Social Security payroll tax applies only up to a limit known as the maximum taxable earnings. This cap is adjusted annually and is set at \$176,100 for 2025. Earnings above that amount are not taxed for Social Security purposes, and only income up to that limit is used to calculate benefits.

Removing the cap—or applying payroll taxes again at very high income levels, such as above \$400,000 as proposed in the Social Security 2100 Act—would significantly increase revenue for the Social Security Trust Fund. This change would ensure that the wealthiest Americans contribute at the same proportional rate as lower-income workers. As income inequality continues to grow, addressing this cap could close much of the trust fund’s projected shortfall and help ensure the program can meet its promises to American workers for decades to come.

- **Given the substantial reduction in services, how should seniors best address any issues or difficulties with Social Security?** An important first step is to create a “my Social Security” account at www.ssa.gov, where you can access many services online. You also still have the option to call your local Social Security office to schedule an appointment if you need in-person assistance.

Other Questions

- **Does the current cost-of-living adjustment formula accurately reflect the real inflation seniors experience, especially in healthcare costs?** Currently, the Social Security cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) is based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which does not specifically account for the spending habits and needs of older Americans, such as higher healthcare expenses. A better measure would be the Consumer Price Index for the

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Elderly (CPI-E), which gives more weight to costs like health care and housing that make up a larger share of seniors' budgets.

- **Please discuss Musk's involvement in DOGE and its impact on Social Security, including data access, staff and field office closures and what Democrats have done to stop him.** Earlier this year, DOGE attempted to gain access to Americans' sensitive personal data through Social Security Administration systems—an effort that was initially halted by the courts. In June, however, the Supreme Court issued an unsigned order from its emergency docket greenlighting DOGE access to the data while the litigation on this issue continues.

The Trump Administration's reorganization plan for the Social Security Administration calls for consolidating and closing several field offices nationwide, and reducing staff by at least 7,000. While Elon Musk is no longer involved with DOGE, Democrats have introduced legislation to stop these actions and protect Social Security. These efforts include the Taxpayer Data Protection Act and the Protecting Americans' Social Security Data Act, which would prevent unvetted special government employees and others from accessing sensitive data, and the Keep Our Field Offices Open Act, which would prohibit any reductions to current field office operations.

If you have a question that isn't answered here, please visit www.ssa.gov or **contact our Casework Manager, Sandra Jackson, at (614) 602-9720 for additional information and assistance.**