Social Security Financing and Benefits: Myths vs Facts

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Three Legged Stool: Basis for Retirement Planning

Common wisdom—aim for 75-80 percent replacement rate

Retirement Income

- Employer Pension
- Social Security
- Personal Savings
First, A Few Facts...

WHO PAYS?
• 95 percent of workers contribute—177 million in 2019
  – 12.4% of earnings up to $132,900 (6 percent of workers earn more)

WHO BENEFITS?
• 64 million retirement, survivor, disability beneficiaries in 2019
  – 45 million retirees, plus another 3 million of their spouses and children
  – Plus 6 million survivors
  – Plus over 10 million disabled workers and their dependents
• And 155 million workers are insured against disability or death
Social Security Financing

• Basically “pay-as-you-go”
  – Current workers provide for current beneficiaries
  – Social Security cannot borrow
  – Trust Fund assets provide a “contingency reserve”

• Current OASDI reserves (excess income) = $2.9 trillion
  – Available to augment tax income as needed
  – About 3 times the annual cost of the program

• Reserves projected to deplete in 2035 under current law
  – *Expect Congress to act—as it always has*
Now, a Few Common Myths

1) Social Security is bankrupt, insolvent, running out of money
2) Increasing longevity and disability are the problem
3) The money in the trust funds has been spent
4) I should start benefits as soon as I can
5) My tax contributions have been saved up for me
6) Benefits scheduled in the law would be all I need
7) Social Security is responsible for Federal debt
8) “Fixing” the Social Security shortfall will be hard
Myth 1: Social Security Is Bankrupt, Insolvent, Running Out of Money

Facts:

a) Social Security cannot run out of money

b) Even if Congress allowed trust fund reserves to deplete…
   • Continuing income would cover 80% of scheduled benefits in 2035
   • And 75% of scheduled benefits in 2093

c) Over 84 years, Congress has always acted timely
   • Scheduled benefits have always been paid in full
SOLVENCY: OASDI Trust Fund Reserve Depletion in 2035 (one year later than last year)
  - Reserve depletion date varied from 2029 to 2042 in reports over the past 27 years (1992-2019)
  - DI Trust Fund — reserve depletion in 2052, twenty years later than last year
    - Due largely to lower recent and near-term disability applications and awards.

Social Security Trust Fund Ratios
Assets as Percent of Annual Cost
Trustees Report Intermediate Projections

Historical
Estimated

- OASDI 2019TR
- OASI 2019TR
- DI 2019TR
- OASDI 2018TR
- OASI 2018TR
- DI 2018TR
Myth 2: Increasing Longevity and Disability Are the Problem

Facts:

a) The age distribution of the population is the most important factor in Social Security cost

b) Population “aging” over the next 20 years is due to birth rates

c) Disability costs have matured, and are dropping
Social Security Cost as Percent of GDP Rises thru 2039

Rises from a 4.2-percent average in 1990-2008, to about 5.9% by 2039, then declines to 5.8% by 2052, and generally increases to 6.0% by 2093.
Aging (Change in Age Distribution) is the Cause
Mainly due to drop in birth rates

Aged Dependency Ratio 2019 TR
Population 65+/(20-64)

- Black line: Actual and TR Intermediate
- Cyan line: TFR remains at 3.0 after 1964
- Pink line: TFR remains at 3.3 after 1964
Birth Rates Have Dropped: *Malthus Was Wrong*

Average Total Fertility Rate falls from 3 to 2

![U.S. Total Fertility Rate: With and Without Adjustment for Survival to Age 10](chart.png)

**Average TFR**

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<th>Period</th>
<th>TFR</th>
<th>Adjusted TFR</th>
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<td>1865-1895</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>3.09</td>
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<td>1896-1925</td>
<td>3.36</td>
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<td>1926-1965</td>
<td>2.86</td>
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<td>1966-1990</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991-2017</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>1.96</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** TFRs prior to 1917 are for whites only and survival rates prior to 1900 use Massachusetts.
Disability Incidence Rate Falls to Historic Lows

DI disabled worker incidence rate rose sharply in the recession, and has declined since the peak in 2010 to extraordinarily low levels for 2016, 2017 and 2018.
So, Disability Prevalence Is Dropping Remarkably
Fewer now and in near term based on recent applications and incidence rates

Disabled Worker Beneficiaries
In Current Payment Status at End of Year (in thousands)
Myth 3: The Money in the Trust Funds Has Been Spent

Facts:

a) Every dollar of income is invested by law in *interest-bearing securities backed by the full faith and credit of the United States*
   - These are not “worthless IOUs”!

b) Securities are issued at market yield rates

c) Securities held by the Trust Funds have always been honored, as have all other Treasury issues
Myth 4: I Should Start Benefits As Soon As I Can

Facts:

a) Social Security retirement benefits are designed to provide about the same lifetime value regardless of when you start, on average

b) When to start is personal—you might want to wait if you are in average or better health

c) If you delay by working or using other assets, Social Security increases your life annuity at terms available nowhere else
Myth 5: My Tax Contributions Have Been Saved Up for ME

Facts:

a) Social Security is a “social contract”

b) Basically, benefits paid today are financed from contributions by recent workers

c) This is why the age distribution of the population is fundamental—the workers of the day share with the retirees, survivors, and disabled of the day

d) This is true for advance funded systems as well
Myth 6: Benefits Scheduled in the Law Would Be All I Need

Facts:

a) Recall the 3-legged stool: 75-80% in retirement
b) Social Security provides about 40% of career-average earnings (varies from 25% to over 80%)
c) So the other legs of the stool—personal savings and private pensions—are needed
d) But increasingly, Social Security is the primary source of lifetime income
Replacement Rates Based on the 2019TR

Scheduled Monthly Benefit Levels as Percent of Career-Average Earnings by Year of Retirement at age 65

Low Earner ($24,239 for 2019; 25th percentile)
Medium Earner ($53,864 for 2019; 56th percentile)
High Earner ($86,182 for 2019; 82nd percentile)
Max Earner ($132,900 for 2019; 100th percentile)

Source: Annual Recurring Actuarial Note #9 at www.ssa.gov/oact/NOTES/ran9/index.html
How About at Age 62, Where Almost 1 in 4 Start Benefits?

Source: Annual Recurring Actuarial Note #9 at www.ssa.gov/oact/NOTES/ran9/index.html
Defined Benefit Plans Replaced by DC Plans
And lump sum options increasing for DB plans

Private-Sector Workers Participating in Employment-Based Retirement Plans, by Plan Type, 1979-2014

Myth 7: Social Security Is Responsible for Federal Debt

Facts:

a) OASI, DI, HI Trust Funds do not add to the debt
b) In fact, these trust funds finance part of the debt
c) If trust fund reserves ever depleted, the programs cannot borrow
d) Thus, the common “budget scoring convention” is misleading and inconsistent with the law
So—What If We Project Federal Debt Consistent With the Law? Projection to 2090 Back in 2015

Projected Federal Debt Held by the Public: CBO Baseline (Assuming OASDI & HI Unfunded Obligations Are Paid by Borrowing From the Public) vs. Assuming Current Law

- CBO Baseline July 2015
- Less OASDI Unfunded Obligations (CBO Dec 2015)
- Less OASDI (CBO Dec 2015) and HI (Trustees 2015) Unfunded Obligations
Myth 8: “Fixing” the Social Security Shortfall Will Be Hard

Facts:

a) Need to adjust the benefits or revenue given the shift in the age distribution
b) By 2035, lower scheduled benefits by 23%, or raise revenue by 29%, or some combination
c) Question: what do the American people want?
d) Many options are already under consideration
OASDI Annual Cost and Non-Interest Income as Percent of Taxable Payroll
Persistent Negative Annual Cash-Flow Balance Starting in 2010
80% of scheduled benefits still payable at trust fund reserve depletion
Annual deficit in 2093: 4.11 percent of payroll — 0.25 percent smaller than last year

Payable benefits as percent of scheduled benefits:
2018-34: 100%
2035: 80%
2093: 75%

Expenditures: Payable benefits = income after trust fund depletion in 2035

Calendar year

Cost: Scheduled and payable benefits
Cost: Scheduled but not fully payable benefits
Non-interest Income
Some Ways to Lower Cost

• Lower benefits for retirees—not disabled?
  – Increase normal retirement age (lowers OASDI cost, but increases DI cost)
  – Can exempt long-career low earners

• Lower benefits mainly for high earners?
  – Reduce PIA above some level
  – Often combined with increasing PIA below some level, subject to work year requirements

• Lower benefits mainly for the oldest old?
  – Reduce the COLA
  – But, some say increase it with the CPI-E (based on purchases of consumers over age 62)
Some Ways to Increase Revenue

• Raise the 12.4 percent OASDI payroll tax rate?

• Raise tax on highest earners?
  – Increase taxable maximum amount
  – Some tax on all earnings above the maximum

• Tax employer group health insurance premiums?
  – Affects only middle class if taxable maximum remains
For More Information Go To
http://www.ssa.gov/oact/

• There you will find:
  – All OASDI Trustees Reports: 1941-2019
  – Detailed single-year tables for recent reports
  – Our estimates for comprehensive proposals
  – Our estimates for the individual provisions
  – Actuarial notes; including replacement rates
  – Actuarial studies
  – Extensive databases
  – Congressional testimonies
  – Presentations by OCACT employees