Impact on Widows of Proposed Changes in OASI Mother's Benefits

by Susan Grad*

This article examines the impact of a proposal that would terminate mother's and father's benefits when the youngest child in the care of a surviving spouse reaches age 16, rather than age 18, as in current law. Losses to families and savings to the social security program are estimated by taking into account 1977 benefit receipts and provisions in the Social Security Act that would have affected benefit size in that year. The study reveals that very few widowers would have lost any income if such a provision had been in effect at that time. Two-thirds of the families headed by widows with a youngest child aged 16–17, however, would have lost some income. Sixteen percent would have had family incomes below the poverty line without mother's benefits—10 percent already below the line and 6 percent that would have fallen below it because of the change. Fewer families with children under age 16 than with youngest children aged 16–17 would have lost benefits, but more would have been in poverty. An analysis of the characteristics of widows who might use a short-term training benefit if one were made available to them suggests that such a benefit would not be used by those widows who are neediest economically and educationally.

Since 1939 the old-age and survivors insurance (OASI) program has paid benefits to minor surviving children of deceased workers and to mothers caring for such children until the youngest beneficiary child turns age 18.[1] These benefits met a need to replace some of the income lost by families of deceased wage earners, and made it possible for mothers to remain in the home, if they so desired, until the youngest child reached age 18. Benefits have been paid to surviving fathers since 1975. In 1979, legislation was proposed to terminate benefits to mothers and fathers when the youngest child reaches age 16 while continuing children's benefits until age 18. Other proposals have called for the termination of such benefits at earlier ages of the youngest child.[2]

These proposals have been offered in response to social and demographic changes that have taken place since mother's benefits were established under the Social Security Act. Marked increases in the rates of divorce, remarriage, and labor-force participation of married women have occurred during the past 40 years. The ratio of divorces to marriages increased from 1 in 6 in 1940 to 1 in 2 in 1975.[3] Eighteen percent of the ever-married women aged 35–54 in 1975 have remarried.[4] The labor-force participation of married women aged 16 or older increased from 22 percent in 1950 to 45 percent in 1976.[5] Departures such as these from the lifelong homemaker status of wives have prompted questions about how equitable and adequate benefits are for various groups. In addition, the increasing ratio of those receiving benefits to those paying for them is

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[1] Children aged 16–17 had to be students to qualify for benefits from 1939 to 1946, when the student requirement was eliminated.
[2] Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Social Security and The Changing Roles of Men and Women, February 1979, page 55.

[3] Ibid., page 2.
[4] Bureau of the Census, "Marriage, Divorce, Widowhood and Remarriage by Family Characteristics, June 1975," Current Population Reports (Series P-20, No. 312), 1977, table G.
[5] Robert W. Rednarzik and Deborah P. Klein, "Labor Force Trends: A Synthesis and Analysis," Monthly Labor Review, October 1977, table 2, page 6.

forcing society to make choices about how to allocate limited resources. Under such constraints, the strategy for improving both equity and adequacy is not so much one of expanding the obligations of the system, but one of evaluating the relative needs of different groups and redistributing benefit dollars.

The 1979 Advisory Council on Social Security rejected a proposal to limit mother's and father's benefits pending further study of the many issues concerning women's benefits and more careful consideration of the social and economic behavior of the group that would be affected by the proposal.[6] This article reports on an examination of the economic impact on surviving spouses with minor children of losing mother's or father's benefits. Although these benefits are paid not only to surviving spouses but also to husbands and wives of retired and disabled workers, the focus here is on surviving spouses only.[7]

The economic impact of the loss of mother's or father's benefits is measured in several ways: (1) The size of the full surviving spouse's benefits these families would have collected in 1977 with no deductions, (2) the percentage of families with minor children who would have lost no income in 1977 if their surviving spouse's benefit had been cut off, (3) the distribution of the percentage loss to family income in 1977 if their surviving spouse's benefits had been cut off, (4) the percentage of these families who had incomes below the official poverty line in 1977 compared with the percentage who would have had incomes below the poverty line without these benefits, and (5) the aggregate savings to the social security system of cutting off these surviving spouse's benefits based on the estimated amounts individual families would have lost in 1977.

One alternative to paying monthly benefits to surviving spouses (most of whom are widows) would be to institute a short-term training benefit. A transition benefit for surviving spouses has been discussed in conjunction with the elimination of mother's or father's benefits at an earlier point than that provided in the current law. Various conditions of a transition benefit have been considered, including whether it should be regarded as a training benefit. Married women who have been out of the labor force raising a family and have few or outmoded skills have a difficult time finding employment. Additional training might ease a widow's transition from homemaking to supporting her family. The promotion of increased human capital formation should benefit the social security system by increasing the amount of future tax dollars collected because of increased labor-force participation and earnings. It could also lower the amount of future benefit dollars paid out by decreasing the proportion of surviving spouses applying for survivor benefits at ages 60 or 61 and by increasing the proportion applying for their own retired-worker benefits at ages 62 or older.

This article also reports on an examination of the need for additional education or training among widows with minor children, the likelihood they would seek it, and the characteristics of those who considered themselves likely to obtain job-related education in the near future. The educational plans of a group of young widows not eligible for benefits are also discussed.

The data analyzed here come from a national survey of surviving spouses with minor children, conducted in the spring of 1978 by the Social Security Administration.[8] The survey sampled families containing at least one child under age 18 who was living with a natural or adoptive parent and who was collecting social security benefits based on the earnings record of a deceased parent. No surviving spouses who had been widowed for less than 1 year were sampled. The reference year was 1977. The reference population consisted of families with surviving spouses who were not currently married.[9] The tables include information on families in which the youngest child was less than age 6, aged 6–11, 12–15, or 16–17. The discussion focuses on families in which the youngest child was aged 16–17 and briefly compares these families with those in which the youngest child was under age 16.

Provisions Affecting Mother's and Father's Benefits

The surviving spouse and minor children of a deceased worker are each entitled to a benefit equal to 75 percent of the worker's primary insurance amount (PIA), a figure based on the worker's average lifetime earnings. A family's total benefit, however, is limited to a maximum amount that, depending upon the PIA level, is between 1.5 and 1.88 times the PIA (or a full survivor benefit for no more than two beneficiaries). Each benefit in families with three or more beneficiaries is reduced in order not to exceed the maximum family amount.

The annual earnings test also affects the size of the benefit each individual may receive. In 1977, beneficiaries could earn up to $3,000 without forgoing any benefits. Beneficiaries earning more than $3,000 in a

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[6] Social Security Financing and Benefits: Reports of the 1979 Advisory Council on Social Security, December 7, 1979, pages 191-192.

[7] At the end of 1979, about 582,000 widows of deceased workers, 207,000 spouses of retired workers, and 418,000 spouses of disabled workers were being paid benefits based on having children in their care. See the Social Security Bulletin, June 1980, tables M-10 (page 40), Q-6 (page 75), and Q-7 (page 76).

[8] See the technical note on page 16 for further details.

[9] Eligibility for surviving spouse's benefits based on the care of minor children terminates as a result of remarriage. Such eligibility is reinstated if the marriage ends and the parent is still caring for one or more minor beneficiary children.

year relinquished $1 of benefits for each $2 of earnings over that amount. If earnings were high enough, it was possible to forgo all benefits.

A surviving spouse becomes eligible at age 60 for benefits that are not dependent on the presence of minor children, as mother's and father's benefits are. The size of this monthly benefit is reduced for each month it is received before age 65. A surviving spouse who takes aged widow or widower benefits as early as possible receives a benefit equal to 71.5 percent of the deceased worker's PIA. Surviving spouses who meet the definition of disability and become disabled within 7 years of widowhood are eligible for disabled widow's or widower's benefits at ages 50–59. This benefit is also reduced for each month it is received before age 65. If taken at age 50, the benefit is 50 percent of the PIA of the deceased worker.

Families would lose differing amounts of benefits if surviving spouse's benefits based on entitled children in their care were restricted to parents of children under age 16, depending on the number of beneficiaries claiming benefits on the record of the deceased worker, the earnings level of the surviving spouse, and whether or not the surviving spouse is under age 60 or disabled. Some examples will clarify this point. The examples are stated in terms of widows, but they apply to widowers as well.

(1) A widow under age 60 who is not working and has only one child aged 16 or 17 collecting a benefit is currently eligible for her full survivor's benefit. If benefit eligibility were to be cut back, she would become ineligible for a monthly benefit and would, therefore, lose her entire benefit. Families consisting of a widow and more than one minor child beneficiary will become families consisting of a widow and only one minor child beneficiary as the children age.

(2) A widow aged 60 or older who is caring for minor children is also eligible for an aged widow's benefit based on her age. A permanent reduction in aged widow's benefits is incurred if they are taken before age 65, but the aged widow's benefit, if taken at age 60, would be only slightly smaller than the young survivor's benefit (71.5 percent, compared with 75 percent, of the PIA of the deceased worker).

(3) A widow earning enough money to forgo all benefits would lose nothing by becoming ineligible for mother's benefits.

(4) A family with three or more children collecting benefits would lose no money were the widow to become ineligible for a mother's benefit because such a family would still collect the maximum amount with one fewer beneficiary.

(5) A disabled surviving widow aged 50–59 who had been collecting mother's benefits would be eligible for a disabled widow's benefit.

(6) A widow caring for a disabled child would continue to be eligible for a mother's benefit.

Family Income and Poverty Status

The survey measured earnings of all relatives of the surviving spouse living in the household and amounts of nonearned income from 18 sources for the surviving spouse and all minor children living in the household. It also contained an estimate by the surviving spouse of total family income in thousand-dollar intervals for the year 1977. Benefit record data were matched with the survey data to provide more detail on the number and type of beneficiaries on the account, and benefit levels. Total family income in this analysis is defined as the sum of income received from all sources in 1977 by the surviving spouse and minor children in the household plus earnings and social security benefits in 1977 of other children in the household.[10] Where one or more components were missing, the midpoint of the interval estimate was substituted for the total. Social security benefit amounts were taken from administrative record data rather than from the survey.

The designation of the poverty status of families was determined by money-income thresholds published by the Bureau of the Census for nonfarm families with a head of household under age 65. The thresholds vary by the size of the family.[11]

Family Income Without Mother's or Father's Benefits

The measurement of family income without mother's or father's benefits was approximated by taking into account the previously mentioned factors that affect family benefits. This measurement is an estimate of the net family income that would result from a cutback in benefit eligibility. The full amount of the benefit paid to the surviving spouse was subtracted from family income when only one child beneficiary was on the rolls and the surviving spouse was under age 60.[12] Nothing was subtracted from family income if the parent was aged 60 or older (because benefits amounting to at least 71.5 percent of the PIA of the deceased worker are available to such persons) or if there were three or more child beneficiaries in a family on the rolls (because three or more beneficiaries always receive the family maximum amount). The treatment of families with two beneficiary children depended on the PIA level. Each survi-

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[10] Since the age of earners in the household was not ascertained, the earnings of minor children cannot be distinguished from the earnings of children aged 18 or older living in the household.

[11] For more details, see Bureau of the Census, "Characteristics of the Population Below the Poverty Level, 1977," **Current Population Reports** (Series P-60, No. 119), 1979.

[12] The special provision affecting sole survivors on accounts with low PIA's would apply to less than 1 percent of this sample. The benefits for such persons can be no lower than the minimum PIA in effect at the time, subject to reduction for age, if applicable.

Table 1.—Economic impact on survivor families of loss of eligibility for mother's or father's benefits, by sex of surviving spouse and age of youngest child, 1977

Item	Widower families, by age of youngest child				Widow families, by age of youngest child			
	Under 6	6–11	12–15	16–17	Under 6	6–11	12–15	16–17
Total number	4,000	17,000	20,000	11,000	69,000	173,000	205,000	126,000
Total percent	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Size of mother's or father's full benefits:[1]								
$1—$999	(2)	22	20	24	4	3	3	4
1,000—1,999	(2)	44	54	59	21	23	20	22
2,000—2,999	(2)	26	20	15	35	41	49	51
3,000—3,999	(2)	8	6	2	28	29	27	23
4,000 or more	(2)	(3)	(3)	(3)	12	5	1	(3)
Percent with earnings in 1977	(2)	82	89	85	44	56	58	60
Percent aged 60 or older	(2)	3	9	19	(2)	1	2	6
Percent with loss of family income without mother's or father's benefits:								
None	(2)	95	96	96	57	59	42	36
1–9	(2)	2	3	3	18	12	19	20
10–19	(2)	3	1	1	14	15	17	16
20–29	(2)	(3)	(3)	(3)	8	5	9	12
30–39	(2)	(3)	1	(3)	5	3	7	8
40–49	(2)	(3)	(3)	(3)	4	4	4	6
50 or more	(2)	(3)	(3)	(3)	4	2	3	2
Percent of families—								
Currently below poverty line[4]	(2)	10	6	1	24	17	10	10
Below poverty line without mother's or father's benefits	(2)	10	6	1	31	22	17	16
Aggregate savings to social security program (in thousands)[5]	$828	$774	$1,251	$746	$54,000	$117,000	$205,000	$141,000

[1] Equal to 75 percent of the deceased worker's PIA for 12 months.

[2] Fewer than 25 sample (3,750 weighted) cases.

[3] Less than 0.5 percent.

[4] The economic unit is the surviving spouse and children living in the household. The poverty threshold in 1977 for a nonfarm family headed by a person under age 65 was $4,072 for two persons, $4,833 for three persons, $6,191 for four persons, $7,320 for five persons, $8,261 for six persons, and $10,216 for seven or more persons.

[5] The difference between the aggregate sum of total family income and the aggregate sum of total family income without mother's or father's benefits. This figure is underestimated by the exclusion from the sample of surviving families of workers who died less than 1 year before the date of sample selection.

vor beneficiary receives from 75 percent of the PIA of the deceased worker up to the family maximum, which in 1977 ranged from 1.5 times the PIA for PIA's of $230 or less up to 1.88 times the PIA for PIA's of approximately $330 and down to 1.75 times the PIA for PIA's of $433 or more. For a three-beneficiary family that would become a two-beneficiary family without mother's or father's benefits, nothing was subtracted if the PIA was under $230. Up to 35 percent of the PIA (per month paid during the year) was subtracted if the PIA was $230 or more.[13] Eligibility for benefits based on disability of either the surviving spouse or children cannot be ascertained from these data.

Economic Impact of Losing Mother's or Father's Benefits

Survey estimates indicate that far fewer families headed by a widower (11,000) than a widow

[13] For the relationship between the PIA level and the maximum family benefit, see the **Social Security Handbook**, July 1978, pages 115-124. Amounts subtracted from the income of families with two beneficiary children are zero for PIA's under $230.00, 5 percent of the PIA for PIA's of $230.00-$249.90, 15 percent of the PIA for PIA's of $250.00-$279.90, 25 percent of the PIA for PIA's of $280.00-$309.90 and $396.00 or more, and 35 percent of the PIA for PIA's of $310.00-$395.90.

(126,000) with children aged 16–17 living with the surviving spouse were on the benefit rolls (table 1). Men were less likely to lose a spouse than were women and, as survivors, were less likely than women to have had a spouse with sufficient quarters of coverage to make the surviving family members eligible for benefits. In addition, children of widowers were more likely to be living with relatives other than the parent or in institutions (18 percent) than were children of widows (5 percent).[14]

Very few families headed by widowers who were eligible for father's benefits because they had children aged 16–17 in their care would have felt any economic impact if benefit eligibility had been lost because 85 percent of the widowers were working and 19 percent were over age 60. Ninety-six percent would have lost no benefits. Without this benefit, there would have been no increase in the small proportion of families with incomes below the poverty line (1 percent). Even if all the widowers had been eligible for their full benefits, 83 percent would have collected less than $2,000 a year. When the estimated dollar amounts families would have lost under a benefit eligibility cutback were

[14] These figures are from a set of social security record data sampling all accounts with a minor beneficiary child in 1977. The sample size was approximately 12,000 cases.

Table 2.—Economic impact on families headed by widows of loss of eligibility for mother's benefits, by poverty status and age of youngest child, 1977

Item	Currently below poverty line				Currently above poverty line							
					Would fall below poverty line without mother's benefits				Would remain above poverty line without mother's benefits			
	Under 6	6–11	12–15	16–17	Under 6	6–11	12–15	16–17	Under 6	6–11	12–15	16–17
Total number	17,000	30,000	21,000	12,000	5,000	8,000	13,000	8,000	46,000	132,000	166,000	101,000
Average current family income	$5,292	$5,184	$4,728	$3,986	$6,250	$6,259	$6,221	$6,097	$12,681	$13,831	$14,308	$14,707
Median current family income	5,130	4,914	4,479	3,763	6,343	5,915	6,247	6,107	11,348	12,517	12,608	13,166
Average difference between poverty line and family income	−2,556	−2,257	−1,548	−1,848	+1,217	+1,378	+1,444	+1,430	+6,859	+7,945	+8,727	+9,555
Average family income without mother's benefits	4,973	4,981	4,270	3,294	3,934	3,848	3,872	3,805	11,857	13,132	13,331	13,581
Percent of families that would lose income	24	13	36	47	100	100	100	100	44	44	58	64
Average percent loss of family income	7	5	12	17	38	40	40	38	8	7	9	10
Average difference between poverty line and family income without mother's benefits	−2,869	−2,459	−2,003	−2,544	−1,086	−1,015	−910	−852	6,035	7,245	7,753	8,434
Aggregate savings to social security program (in thousands)	5,000	6,000	10,000	8,000	11,000	18,000	31,000	19,000	38,000	92,000	162,000	113,000

[1] For poverty threshold amounts, see table 1, footnote 4.

summed, the savings to the social security system in 1977 from eliminating benefits to surviving fathers with a youngest child aged 16–17 were estimated to be approximately $746,000. By comparison, the economic impact of the loss of mother's benefits on similar families headed by widows would have been much greater. The remainder of this discussion focuses on families headed by widows.

Seventy-four percent of the widows would have collected $2,000 or more in mother's benefits in 1977 if all widows with a youngest child aged 16–17 had been eligible for full benefits with no deductions. Widows had larger potential benefits than did widowers because the benefit formula is based on average lifetime earnings and the benefits to survivors of male workers reflect the higher earnings levels and longer work histories of men than women. Thus, the maximum amount families headed by widows could lose would be greater than the maximum losses of families headed by widowers (although not all families collect these amounts of benefits).

Almost two-thirds of the families headed by widows with a youngest child aged 16–17 would have lost some income if their surviving spouse's benefits had been cut off. Two percent of these families would have lost half or more of their income. Twenty-six percent would have lost between one-fifth and one-half of their income.

Ten percent of the families headed by widows with a youngest child aged 16–17 had incomes below the poverty line in 1977. In contrast, 16 percent of such families would have fallen below the poverty line

without mother's benefits—an increase of 6 percentage points. The elimination of benefits to surviving mothers with a youngest child aged 16–17 would have saved the social security system approximately $141 million in 1977.

The impact of such losses to the family income of widows depends on the adequacy of family income to begin with. Three groups of families can be distinguished: Families whose income is currently below the poverty line, families whose income is currently above the poverty line but would fall below it without mother's benefits, and families whose income is currently above the poverty line and would remain above it without mother's benefits. These groups constituted 10 percent, 6 percent, and 84 percent, respectively, of families with a youngest child aged 16–17. As table 2 shows, families with children aged 16–17 whose incomes would remain above the poverty line without mother's benefits had a 1977 average income of $14,707—more than three times the average for families whose incomes were below the poverty line even with mother's benefits ($3,990) and more than twice the average for families whose incomes would have fallen below the line without mother's benefits ($6,097).[15] Families with incomes below the poverty line in 1977 needed an average of $1,848 to bring them up to it. Families whose incomes would have fallen below the poverty line without mother's benefits re-

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[15] Means may give too much weight to extreme values in an income distribution in comparison to medians. Median income differs the most from mean income for high-income families but presents a similar picture (see table 2).

Table 3.—Percentage distribution of children in the households of surviving widows with minor children in their care, by poverty status and age of youngest child, 1977

Number of children	Poverty status [1] and age of youngest child											
					Currently above poverty line							
	Currently below poverty line				Would fall below poverty line without mother's benefits				Would remain above poverty line without mother's benefits			
	Under 6	6–11	12–15	16–17	Under 6	6–11	12–15	16–17	Under 6	6–11	12–15	16–17
Total number	17,000	30,000	21,000	12,000	5,000	8,000	13,000	8,000	46,000	132,000	166,000	101,000
Total percent	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
One	(2)	(2)	1	1	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)	1	1	(2)	(2)
Two	3	9	19	20	44	59	61	58	20	16	21	34
Three	14	10	19	26	30	19	15	28	32	31	35	34
Four or more	83	81	62	53	26	23	24	15	48	52	44	32

[1] For poverty threshold amounts, see table 1, footnote 4.   [2] Less than 0.5 percent.

ceived an average of $1,430 over the poverty line.

Sixty-four percent of the families whose incomes would have remained above the poverty line without mother's benefits would have lost some income under a benefit eligiblity cutback—on the average, about 10 percent. Without mother's benefits, their income would have exceeded the poverty line by an average of $8,434. By definition, all families whose income would have fallen below the poverty line without mother's benefits would have lost income under a benefit eligibility cutback. The average loss would have amounted to 38 percent of their income. Without mother's benefits, these families would have needed an average of $852 to bring them up to the poverty line. Forty-seven percent of families whose incomes were currently below the poverty line would have lost some income—on the average, about 17 percent. Without mother's benefits these families would have needed an average of $2,544 to bring them up to the poverty line.

A much larger gap existed between family income without mother's benefits and the poverty line for families currently below the line than for families that would have fallen below it. This phenomenon is a function of family size, since the money-income thresholds that determine poverty status rise with increasing family size. Families with incomes currently below the poverty line were three to four times more likely to have four or more children in the household than were families whose incomes would have fallen below the poverty line without mother's benefits (table 3).

Figures in table 4 on the group that would have lost no income under a benefit eligibility cutback indicate that some women who were eligible for mother's benefits were not collecting them. This fact is especially noticeable among women with family income below the poverty line. Close to half the women not collecting benefits whose incomes were below the poverty line had never enrolled for benefits on their deceased husband's accounts. Having enough earnings to forgo all benefits, being old enough to apply for one's own retired-worker benefit, or having many child beneficiaries on the account—possible reasons for not having applied for mother's benefits—explain very little of the nonenrollment. On the other hand, many women who had never been on the rolls had remarried since becoming widowed, and they may not have been aware that they once again become eligible for mother's benefits if a succeeding marriage ends and they are still caring for minor children from the previous marriage.

To summarize, when the poverty line was used as a measure of need, 10 percent of the widows caring for a youngest child aged 16–17 were found to be in need of more income even with this benefit eligibility although some of the widows were not collecting the benefits to which they apparently were entitled. Their family income was an average of $1,848 below the poverty line with mother's benefits, and it would have been an average of $2,544 below the line without mother's benefits. An additional 6 percent of these widows would have needed more income to raise them above the poverty line without these benefits. With mother's benefits, they had an average of $1,430 in family income above the poverty line. Without mother's benefits, they would have needed an average of $852 to bring their income up to the poverty line. The remaining 84 percent of the widows with a youngest child aged 16–17 had average incomes that would have been well above the poverty line without mother's benefits. It cannot be said that all families above the poverty line have adequate incomes because of the meager standard of living affordable by those with incomes near that line. Nonetheless, without mother's benefits, this group of widows would have had an average of $8,434 in family income above the poverty line.

Table 4.—Characteristics of widows who would lose no income under a loss of eligibility for mother's benefits, by poverty status and age of youngest child, 1977

Characteristic	Poverty status[1] and age of youngest child							
	Currently below poverty line				Currently above poverty line; would remain above poverty line without mother's benefits			
	Under 6	6–11	12–15	16–17	Under 6	6–11	12–15	16–17
Total number	11,000	21,000	11,000	4,000	24,000	62,000	58,000	28,000
Percent not paid any benefits:								
Widow never on benefit rolls	27	22	19	45	21	14	15	20
Earning enough to forgo all benefits	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)	7	4	6	11
Aged 62 or older	(2)	(2)	(2)	3	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)
With three or more child beneficiaries	7	8	1	(2)	7	3	3	1
Married since widowhood[3]	22	12	8	30	14	7	8	9
Widow benefits terminated due to remarriage[3]	3	5	3	3	7	5	3	6
Widow on benefit rolls but not paid in 1977	(2)	(2)	(2)	4	8	6	11	26
Percent aged 60 or older	(2)	(2)	8	11	1	1	5	17
Percent whose family would lose no benefits because of family maximum provision	77	89	79	45	77	83	71	36

[1] For poverty threshold amounts, see table 1, footnote 4.
[2] Less than 0.5 percent.
[3] These widows were currently unmarried. Mother's benefits are terminated as a result of remarriage but eligibility for mother's benefits is reinstated if the marriage ends and the woman is still caring for minor beneficiary children. These women may have been ineligible for benefits for some other reason or they may not have been aware of their reinstated eligibility.

Composition of Income Without Mother's Benefits

Before retirement, earnings are the major source of income for most families. Widows who have income from social security, other pensions, life insurance, or trust funds may not necessarily need to work to have adequate incomes. A distribution of the aggregate shares of family income is presented in table 5 for four sources: Earnings of the widow, earnings of the children in the household, family social security benefits without mother's benefits, and all other sources combined. Two major components of the latter category are income from assets and veterans' benefits. This distribution measures the average importance of these sources of income to families headed by widows that would be affected by a cutback in benefit eligibility.

Families that had incomes above the poverty line without mother's benefits derived 35 percent of their aggregate income from the earnings of the widow, 20 percent from the earnings of children in the household, 25 percent from family social security benefits without mother's benefits, and 20 percent from all other sources combined. The largest share of family income came from earnings of the widow. Over half the total family income without mother's benefits came from earnings of the widow and her children together. Nonetheless, almost half the aggregate income without mother's benefits came from nonearned sources.

Earnings made a far less important contribution to aggregate family income of both groups of families that would have had incomes below the poverty line without mother's benefits. Earnings of the widow made up only 6 percent of family income for families currently below the poverty line and 3 percent of family income for families that would have fallen below the line. The respective contributions of children's earnings to family income were 10 percent and 3 percent, respectively. Families with incomes currently below the poverty line also received a smaller share of aggregate income from sources other than earnings or social security benefits than did both groups of families who were currently above the poverty line (11 percent, compared with 20–25 percent).

The average dollar amounts that families who were or would have fallen below the poverty line received from earnings of the widow, earnings of children, and from sources other than earnings or social security were several times lower than those of families that would have remained above the poverty line (table 5). The average dollar amount that families who were or would have fallen below the poverty line received from social security benefits without mother's benefits was somewhat lower than that of families who would have remained above the poverty line.

It is not clear from aggregate figures to what extent individual families that had adequate incomes without mother's benefits were reliant on all four sources of income, or to what extent particular sources of income assumed major importance to different families. When the importance of the four sources of income to individual family incomes without mother's benefits was measured, it was found that 30 percent of the families who would have been above the poverty line received at least half their income from the widow's earnings, 11 percent received at least half from the children's earn-

Table 5.—Aggregate shares of family income and average dollar amounts from various sources, by poverty status and age of youngest child, 1977

Income	Poverty status [1] and age of youngest child											
	Currently below poverty line				Currently above poverty line							
					Would fall below poverty line without mother's benefits				Would remain above poverty line without mother's benefits			
	Under 6	6–11	12–15	16–17	Under 6	6–11	12–15	16–17	Under 6	6–11	12–15	16–17
Aggregate share[2]												
Total percent	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Widow's earnings	4	6	5	6	15	6	6	3	26	30	29	35
Children's earnings	2	11	4	10	2	1	10	3	5	10	18	20
Family social security benefits without mother's benefits	75	66	68	73	66	72	70	69	49	42	35	25
All other sources	18	17	23	11	17	21	14	25	20	18	18	20
Average amount												
Widow's earnings	$193	$309	$185	$191	$560	$227	$202	$95	$2,938	$3,819	$3,762	$4,643
Children's earnings	116	532	173	302	86	30	348	111	544	1,297	2,380	2,602
Family social security benefits without mother's benefits	3,680	3,317	2,732	2,235	2,468	2,669	2,557	2,441	5,436	5,297	4,331	3,159
All other sources	903	877	938	338	651	778	499	825	2,278	2,291	2,296	2,562

[1] For poverty threshold amounts, see table 1, footnote 4.
[2] Excludes families with income missing from any source. Mean family income calculated this way is 97 percent of mean family income when the widow's best estimate was substituted for any missing income items.

ings, 15 percent received at least half from social security benefits without mother's benefits, and 9 percent received at least half from all other sources. For the remaining 35 percent of these families, none of the four sources of income individually contributed more than half of family income (table 6). In contrast, at least 75 percent of the families whose income would have been below the poverty line without mother's benefits received more than half their income from the family's remaining social security benefits. Virtually all

these families derived a majority of their income from only one of these sources.

For a third of the widows who would have remained above the poverty line without mother's benefits, such income levels were achieved by the receipt of money from a diversity of sources. For another third, the main source of income was something other than the earnings of the widow. The remaining third relied on the widow's earnings as a major source of family income. Widow's earnings represented a very small share of the

Table 6.—Relative importance of income sources to individual family income without mother's benefits, by poverty status and age of youngest child, 1977

Income source and proportion of family income	Poverty status[1] and age of youngest child											
	Currently below poverty line				Currently above poverty line							
					Would fall below poverty line without mother's benefits				Would remain above poverty line without mother's benefits			
	Under 6	6-11	12-15	16-17	Under 6	6-11	12-15	16-17	Under 6	6-11	12-15	16-17
Total number	17,000	30,000	21,000	12,000	5,000	7,000	13,000	8,000	46,000	132,000	166,000	101,000
Percent having more than half and almost all of family income without mother's benefit from—												
Widow's earnings:												
50 percent or more	3	4	7	15	13	2	6	4	21	23	21	30
90 percent or more	(2)	1	1	8	4	(2)	(2)	2	(2)	(2)	(2)	1
Children's earnings:												
50 percent or more	2	6	2	4	(2)	(2)	6	(2)	3	5	9	11
90 percent or more	(2)	2	(2)	4	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)	1
Family social security benefits without mother's benefits:												
50 percent or more	76	76	67	75	73	89	85	85	47	41	29	15
90 percent or more	48	33	33	36	37	42	37	23	13	7	4	1
All other sources:												
50 percent or more	14	6	13	4	11	7	4	10	9	8	9	9
90 percent or more	(2)	(2)	1	(2)	(2)	(2)	1	4	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)

[1] For poverty threshold amounts, see table 1, footnote 4.   [2] Less than 0.5 percent.

Table 7.—Characteristics of widows by poverty status and age of youngest child, 1977

	Poverty status[1] and age of youngest child											
	Currently below poverty line				Currently above poverty line							
					Would fall below poverty line without mother's benefits				Would remain above poverty line without mother's benefits			
Characteristic	Under 6	6–11	12–15	16–17	Under 6	6–11	12–15	16–17	Under 6	6–11	12–15	16–17
Total number..............................	17,000	30,000	21,000	12,000	5,000	8,000	13,000	8,000	46,000	132,000	166,000	101,000
Total percent	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Race:												
White..	29	41	45	45	64	64	75	79	65	78	81	83
Black..	63	52	52	51	29	31	22	17	30	19	16	15
Other..	4	4	2	3	7	5	3	4	4	3	3	2
Percent with Spanish heritage	16	10	8	11	17	15	5	4	7	5	5	2
Age:												
Under 30..	30	6	1	(2)	41	18	1	(2)	36	8	1	(2)
30–39	45	36	8	1	43	19	6	4	43	40	17	6
40–49	25	46	36	45	10	42	33	37	18	40	44	37
50–59	1	12	51	46	6	21	59	59	3	11	36	51
60 or older..	(2)	(2)	4	8	(2)	(2)	1	(2)	1	1	2	6
Years of education:												
Less than 12..	81	74	72	81	50	57	60	67	36	34	38	37
12	17	18	25	17	33	31	35	27	41	42	41	39
13–16	2	8	3	3	13	10	5	5	21	20	18	21
17 or more	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)	4	2	(2)	(2)	2	5	3	4
Percent with—												
Health limitations[3]............................	34	48	57	67	17	43	62	74	20	25	33	36
Health limitations that prohibit work[3]......	18	19	35	44	3	14	34	44	5	7	11	12
Others living in the household:												
Relatives other than children....................	26	28	22	40	34	16	11	13	22	13	12	14
Friends..	5	2	1	1	(2)	(2)	(2)	4	9	2	3	1
Others in household having earnings............	7	5	1	1	21	7	1	4	8	4	3	3

[1] For poverty threshold amounts, see table 1, footnote 4.
[2] Less than 0.5 percent.
[3] Self-reported.

income of both groups of families that would have been below the poverty line without mother's benefits. Because poor families lack diversity of income and have only small amounts of income from children's earnings and sources other than earnings or social security benefits, widows' earnings have a larger role to play for them than for nonpoor families.

Factors Relating to Labor-Force Participation

Table 7 presents some characteristics of widows that relate to labor-force participation and earnings, and illustrate the disadvantage of widows who were or would have fallen below the poverty line. Two-thirds of the widows whose family income was currently below the poverty line and three-fourths of those whose family income would have fallen below the line without mother's benefits had a work limitation[16]—a rate twice that for widow's whose family incomes would have remained above the poverty line. Forty-four percent of the widows whose family income was or would have

[16] These proportions were obtained from responses to the questions "Do you have a health or physical condition that limits the kind or amount of work you can do?" and "Does this keep you from working altogether?"

fallen below the poverty line had limitations that prohibited their working—a rate almost four times that for widows whose family income would have remained above the poverty line. An undetermined number of these widows will be eligible for disabled widow's benefits beginning at age 50 if they meet the definition of disability and if they became disabled within 7 years of widowhood.

Widows whose family income was or would have fallen below the poverty line without mother's benefits had much less education than did widows whose family income would have remained above the poverty line. Eighty-one percent of those with income currently below the poverty line and 67 percent of those whose income would have fallen below it had less than a high school education, compared with only 37 percent of those whose income would have remained above the poverty line without mother's benefits. The proportions of widows within these categories with any college education were 3 percent, 5 percent, and 25 percent, respectively.

The age distributions of widows were similar whether their families would have had incomes above or below the poverty line. More than half were aged 50 or older. Approximately two-fifths were aged 40–49. Very few were under age 40.

Persons of minority races and ethnic groups predominated among families with income below the poverty line. Fifty-four percent of the families below the poverty line were of minority races and 11 percent were of Spanish heritage. Only about 20 percent of the families currently above the poverty line were of races other than white, and 2–4 percent were of Spanish heritage.

Being disabled, having little education, being middle aged or older, or being of a minority race or ethnic group are all factors that can hinder employment and depress earnings levels. Many of the women whose family income was or would have fallen below the poverty line had more than one of these strikes against them. Although poor widows need to make up for larger families and smaller amounts of income from social security, the earnings of children, and from other sources, they are disadvantaged in several ways that are correlated with lower earnings.

One way of making ends meet in the face of inadequate income is to live with other relatives whose family income, combined with yours, is above the poverty line. In fact, several times more families currently below the poverty line than families currently above it were living with other relatives (40 percent, compared with 14 percent). Fewer of their relatives, however, had earnings than did the relatives living in households of women whose income was above the poverty line.[17]

Families With Children Under Age 16

Widowers with children under age 16 were as unlikely as widowers with a youngest child aged 16–17 to feel the impact of a loss of father's benefits. About 95 percent of all widowers' families would have lost no benefits under a cutback in benefit eligibility. Without father's benefits, there would have been no increase in the proportion of widower families with incomes below the poverty line. Widowers with younger children, however, were more likely to have incomes below the poverty line: the proportions were 10 percent among those with a youngest child aged 6–11 and 6 percent among those with a youngest child aged 12–15, compared with only 1 percent of those with a youngest child aged 16–17.

Widows with children under age 16 would have experienced a smaller impact from a cutback in mother's benefit eligibility than would widows with a youngest child aged 16–17. A smaller proportion would have lost income under an eligibility cutback: two-fifths of those with a youngest child under age 12 and three-fifths of those with a youngest child aged 12–15,

compared with two-thirds of those with a youngest child aged 16–17 (table 1). Widows with children under age 16 were more likely than widows with a youngest child aged 16–17 to have more minor children in their care, and therefore, because of the family maximum, were less likely to lose benefits (tables 3 and 4). There would have been an increase in families with income below the poverty line of 5–7 percentage points. Since widows with younger children were already more likely to have income below the poverty line, a cutback in mother's benefit eligibility would have further increased the poverty rate for such women. Following a cutback in benefit eligibility, 31 percent of families with children under age 6, compared with 16 percent of those having a youngest child aged 16–17, would have had income below the poverty line.

All families who currently had incomes below the poverty line would have had incomes below the poverty line if eligibility for mother's benefits had been cut back. Without mother's benefits, the average difference between family income and the poverty line would have been no greater for families with a youngest child aged 6–11 or 12–15 than for families with a youngest child aged 16–17—$2,459, $2,003, and $2,544, respectively. It would have been $2,869 for families in which the youngest child was under age 6. For families that currently had incomes above the poverty line that would have fallen below it without mother's benefits, the extent to which income would have been below the line ranged from $1,086 for families with children under age 6 to $852 for families with children aged 16–17. For families with incomes above the poverty line that would have remained above it without mother's benefits, all the groups would have had an average income substantially above the poverty line—$6,035 above the line for families with children under age 6 up to $8,434 above the line for families with children aged 16–17. From this perspective, below-poverty-level widows with children of any age would have been well below the poverty line, and above-poverty-level widows with children of any age would have been fairly well off.

Some differences are apparent in the composition of family income for families with youngest children of varying ages, but the basic point made about families with a youngest child aged 16–17 also applies to families with younger children. Families who would have had incomes above the poverty line without mother's benefits had more income than did families who would have had incomes below the poverty line from each of the four types of income. Having less income from sources other than their own earnings, widows below the poverty line had to rely more heavily on their own earnings to provide an adequate income for their families. Widows who had children under age 16 and who had incomes below the poverty line were more likely than widows who would have remained

[17] Earnings were the only income source ascertained for persons other than the widow and her children living in the household.

above the poverty line to be of minority races, to be less well educated, and to have work limitations. Persons with these characteristics tended to have lower earnings.

Educational Plans

A low level of education stands out as a common characteristic of widows whose family income would have been below the poverty line without mother's benefits. Putting benefit dollars into short-term training benefits for widows might encourage these women to obtain more training and thereby become more marketable in the labor force. Approximately one-fifth of the widows had received some education or training since widowhood.[18] The following tabulation shows that 29 percent of the widows whose youngest child was aged 16–17 considered themselves very or somewhat likely to

Likelihood of obtaining job-related education in next 3 years	Percentage distribution, by age of youngest child			
	Under 6	6–11	12–15	16–17
Total number (in thousands)	72	176	206	129
Total percent	100	100	100	100
Very likely	26	18	15	14
Somewhat likely	24	20	18	15
Somewhat unlikely	11	13	11	11
Very unlikely	39	49	56	61

obtain job-related education in the next 3 years. Fifty percent of the widows whose youngest child was under age 6 were so inclined. The widows thus demonstrated a desire for more education both in terms of having received education or vocational training since widowhood and in terms of reporting that they were likely to obtain job-related education in the near future. But would money for training be used by those in need of more education?

Table 8 presents a multiple classification analysis of the characteristics of widows whose youngest child was aged 16–17 and who reported that they were very or somewhat likely to obtain job-related education in the next 3 years. The factors included are the age of the widow, her educational level, the family's income adequacy measured as the ratio of family income to the poverty level for that size family, the labor-force status

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[18] Forty-seven percent of those with 1–8 years of education and 17 percent of those with 9–12 years of education had missing information on the question of when education was last completed. There is no reason to suspect a different rate subsequent to widowhood among the missing cases within categories of educational level. Therefore, the percentage completing education since widowhood was determined by weighting the known proportions within educational categories by the size of the category. The proportion of known persons receiving education or training since widowhood without weighting is 23 percent, compared with 21 percent weighting as described.

of the widow, and a report by widows of their health limitations that prohibited work. In most cases, the results are discussed in terms of unadjusted coefficients because little or no change in the coefficients was found after adjusting for other factors.

Twenty-eight percent of these widows indicated that they were very or somewhat likely to obtain job-related education in the next 3 years. Age of the widow was a significant factor. A greater proportion of younger widows noted they were likely to obtain job-related education—46 percent of those under age 45, compared with 28 percent of those aged 45–54 and only 17 percent of those aged 55 or older. This difference is understandable since older women have fewer working years in which to take advantage of increased earnings and to recoup the loss of current income incurred by taking time out to obtain more education. The majority of widows with a youngest child aged 16–17 who would lose mother's benefit eligibility were aged 50 or older and were less likely to obtain more education than widows with younger children.

Educational level is also a significant factor. Forty-one percent of the widows with some college education but only 13 percent of those with 8 years or less of education indicated the likelihood of obtaining job-related education. Thus, money for training benefits might only encourage the educated to become more educated.

Health limitations that prohibit work are inhibiting factors but do not preclude planning for job-related education in the near future. Thirteen percent of the widows who were unable to work said they were likely to obtain more education, compared with 31 percent of those who were able to work.

Labor-force participation is a weak factor. A slightly smaller proportion of widows who were not in the labor force than of widows who were indicated a likelihood of obtaining job-related education. When other factors including health limitations that prohibited work were held constant, a slightly larger proportion of widows who were not in the labor force than of widows in the labor force was found to be likely to obtain job-related education.

Widows with more adequate family income were somewhat more likely than those with lower income to indicate a likelihood of obtaining job-related education in the near future. Income adequacy, however, was found to have no significant effect on the likelihood of obtaining job-related education when previous education, age, labor-force participation, and health limitations were held constant. In other words, widows who had very little education and inadequate income were no more likely to obtain further education than were widows with little education who did have adequate income, either through work or the receipt of benefits. This finding implies that simply providing the economic

Table 8.—Likelihood of obtaining job-related education in the next 3 years: Multiple classification analysis of widows with youngest child aged 16–17, by selected characteristics

Grand mean (percent)		28	
Standard error (percent)		1.6	
Sample size		791	
R²		0.093	

Characteristic	Unadjusted deviation from mean	Adjusted deviation from mean	Percent of cases
Widow's age:			
Under 45	18	16	19
45–54	0	-1	52
55 or older	-11	-9	29
	Eta² = 0.048[1]	Beta² = 0.036	
Widow's years of education:			
0–8	-15	-12	21
9–11	-1	-1	26
12	3	1	31
13 or more	13	12	21
	Eta² = 0.044[1]	Beta² = 0.029	
Widow had health limitations that prohibited work:			
Yes	-15	-12	18
No	3	3	82
	Eta² = 0.026[1]	Beta² = 0.017	
Widow was participating in labor force:			
Yes	2	-3	57
No	-3	4	43
	Eta² = 0.003[1]	Beta² = 0.005	
Ratio of family income to poverty threshold:[2]			
Less than 1.00	-7	1	10
1.01–2.00	-3	0	30
2.01–3.00	2	1	28
3.01 or more	3	-2	31
	Eta² = 0.006	Beta² = 0.001	

[1] Significant at the 0.1 level using unweighted regression.

[2] For poverty threshold amounts, see table 1, footnote 4.

wherewithal to obtain more education will not encourage those with very little education to take advantage of the opportunity.

To summarize, widows with a youngest child aged 16–17 who were more likely to obtain job-related education in the next 3 years tended to be younger, to be better educated, to have a more adequate income, and to be less likely to have health limitations that prohibited work. Those with little education were no more likely to obtain additional education if their family income was higher. Widows who would have lost mother's benefits under a benefit eligibility cutback and would have had a family income below the poverty line without these benefits tended to be over age 50, with little education, and with health conditions that limited or prohibited work. Thus, a training benefit for widows whose youngest child was aged 16–17 probably would not have been used by those objectively most in need of more education. Analyses not reported on here indicate that this finding also applies to widows with younger children.

If a training benefit were to be offered to a broader group of widows, including recent widows who are not eligible for benefits because they do not have children in their care, how would these women be likely to respond? Table 9 presents a multiple classification analysis for a group of recent widows under age 60 with no children[19] that is similar to the analysis for widows with a youngest child aged 16–17. The variables in both analyses are the same, with the exception of income. In the previous discussion, the income of widows with minor children was measured in terms of adequacy of total family income because these women were all living with children and adequacy of income depends upon family size. In the following discussion, the income of widows without minor children is measured in terms of the widow's own total money income (in intervals that approximate ratios of the poverty threshold for one person) because a comparable measure of immediate family income is not available from these data and because 70 percent of these widows were living alone.

Twenty-four percent of the widows with no minor

[19] See the technical note for further details on this group.

Table 9.—Likelihood of obtaining job-related education in the next 3 years: Multiple classification analysis of recent widows with no minor children, by selected factors

Grand mean	24
Standard error (percent)	0.9
Sample size	2,148
R^2	0.132

Characteristic	Unadjusted deviation from mean	Adjusted deviation from mean	Percent of cases
Widow's age:			
Under 45	31	27	10
45–54	1	1	48
55 or older	–8	–8	42
	Eta² = 0.073[1]	Beta² = 0.058	
Widow's years of education:			
0–8	–17	–12	14
9–11	–7	–6	21
12	0	–1	42
13 or more	18	14	22
	Eta² = 0.068[1]	Beta² = 0.040	
Widow had health limitations that prohibited work:			
Yes	–19	–12	8
No	2	1	92
	Eta² = 0.017[1]	Beta² = 0.006	
Widow was participating in labor force:			
Yes	2	–1	67
No	–4	2	33
	Eta² = 0.005	Beta² = 0.001	
Widow's total income:[2]			
Less than $3,000	–7	–2	24
3,000–5,999	–4	–2	24
6,000–9,999	1	1	25
10,000 or more	8	3	28
	Eta² = 0.017[1]	Beta² = 0.004	

[1] Significant at the 0.1 level using unweighted regression.

[2] The poverty level for one person under age 65 was $3,147 in 1977.

children responded that they were very or somewhat likely to obtain job-related education in the next 3 years. The age and education of widows with minor children were the most significant factors determining the likelihood of their obtaining job-related education. A larger proportion of younger more educated widows was likely to obtain further training. Health limitations that prohibited work decreased their likelihood of obtaining more education. In these respects the two groups of widows were similarly inclined toward more education.

It was shown previously that labor-force participation among widows with a youngest child aged 16–17 had a weak effect and that family income adequacy was not a significant factor in the likelihood of obtaining job-related education. In contrast, the income of widows with no minor children had a small positive effect on the likelihood of obtaining education, and labor-force participation was an insignificant factor. In any case the effects of income and labor-force participation on widows eligible for mother's benefits and widows not eligible for these benefits are weak. The data on both groups of widows suggest that a training benefit would not be used by those widows most in need of more education.

Conclusion

One issue this article has addressed is the potential impact on surviving spouses with minor children of eliminating mother's and father's benefits at earlier points than under current law. A second issue has been to define the characteristics of widows who would be likely to use a short-term training benefit if such a benefit were made available.

Family income without mother's or father's benefits was estimated by taking into account current benefit receipt under the social security program and provisions in the Social Security Act that affect the size of benefits, such as the earnings test, the maximum family benefit, and eligibility for aged-survivor benefits. Based on the findings, it was concluded that very few widows would lose any income under a benefit eligibility cutback since most of them forgo all benefits because of their earnings

levels. Two-thirds of the families headed by a widow with a youngest child aged 16–17 would lose some income. Without mother's benefits, 16 percent would have a family income below the poverty line, compared with 10 percent currently. Eighty-four percent would continue to have family incomes above the poverty line without mother's benefits. Fewer families with younger children would lose benefits but more would be below the poverty line. Of the estimated $141 million the program would have saved in 1977 by eliminating benefits to mothers with a youngest child aged 16–17, $113 million, or 80 percent, would have come from benefits paid to families that would remain above the poverty line without these benefits (tables 1 and 2). A similar proportion would have come from benefits paid to families that would remain above the poverty line after eliminating benefits to mothers with children aged 6 or older.

Widows whose family incomes would have remained above the poverty line without mother's benefits would have been fairly well off. Families whose income was below the poverty line or would fall below it without mother's benefits had much less income from earnings of the widow, the earnings of children, and income from other sources. Therefore, the labor-force participation of these widows would have been important for income adequacy. Widows whose family income was below the poverty line or would have fallen below it, however, were disadvantaged in several respects compared with those whose families would have remained above the poverty line. They were more likely to have health or physical conditions that limited or prohibited work, to be less well educated, and to belong to a minority race or ethnic group. In addition, the advanced age of widows with a youngest child aged 16–17 can handicap women trying to enter the labor force with few skills. The characteristics of widows likely to obtain more job-related education suggest, however, that benefits provided specifically for education would not be used by those widows who are neediest economically and educationally.

Technical Note*

The data for this analysis come from two surveys conducted in 1978 by the Social Security Administration's Office of Research and Statistics. The Institute for Survey Research at Temple University collected the data under contract with the Social Security Administration. The Division of Retirement and Survivors Studies of the Office of Research and Statistics con-

ceived and designed the studies and is performing the data analyses.[20] This technical note describes the sample of surviving spouses eligible for benefits by virtue of having minor children in their care.[21]

Background

Under the old-age, survivors, disability, and health insurance program, cash benefits are provided to dependents of insured deceased workers. Survivor benefits first became payable in 1939 and now protect the aged spouse; dependent parents; widows or widowers disabled at ages 50–59 or caring for minor children; and children under age 18, disabled, or enrolled in school full time at ages 18–21. For benefits to be payable, the deceased worker must have met the requirements for fully or currently insured status. The benefit amount is subject to reduction or suspension because of the beneficiary's own earnings above an exempt amount (specified by law in 1978 to be $3,240 for persons under age 65) or because of limitations under the family maximum provision.

The number of widows and orphans benefiting from this insurance rose steadily from 1940 to 1973 (table I). Then, after first appearing as a drop in the number of awards to orphans in 1973, declines followed in the number of children and mothers (and fathers after 1975) receiving benefits at the end of each year. These declines are mostly a function of sharply decreasing fertility in recent years, coupled with the relative youth of persons now in childbearing years (as a result of the post-World War II "baby boom").

Table I also shows that the average monthly benefit amount, now keyed to increases in the cost of living, continues to rise. Because of this factor, the total amount of benefits paid to young survivor families has continued to rise despite the decline in the number of recipients.

Sample Design

The population studied was all survivor families with children under age 18 receiving benefits in December 1977. This population included families headed by widowers and remarried widows as well as widows who were not currently married. Families in which neither

[20] See also Tim Sass, "Demographic and Economic Characteristics of Nonbeneficiary Widows: An Overview," **Social Security Bulletin,** November 1979, pages 3-14; and Robert I. K. Hastings and Philip B. Springer, **Preliminary Findings From The 1978 Survey of Survivor Families With Children** (Research and Statistics Note No. 12), Office of Research and Statistics, Office of Policy, Social Security Administration, 1980.

[21] For a description of the sample of young widows who received a lump-sum death benefit but were not eligible for mother's benefits, see Tim Sass, "Demographic and Economic Characteristics," **op. cit.**

Table I.—Awards to children and benefits payable to survivor families with children under age 18, selected years, 1940–78

[Number in thousands]

Year	Awards to children under age 18	Families with children under age 18	Benefits in current-payment status at end of year			
			Children under age 18		Mother's and father's	
			Number	Average monthly amount	Number	Average monthly amount
1940	51	(1)	48	$12	(1)	$20
1945	120	215	377	12	121	20
1950	97	437	653	28	169	37
1955	198	637	1,154	38	292	46
1960	232	838	1,530	51	395	59
1965	264	937	1,817	60	462	65
1970	338	1,114	2,161	80	512	87
1971	342	1,141	2,210	88	522	96
1972	347	1,166	2,240	107	528	115
1973	331	1,199	2,286	108	558	118
1974	303	1,188	2,245	123	555	134
1975	294	1,184	2,184	135	564	147
1976	264	1,174	2,133	148	557	166
1977	232	1,172	2,097	161	559	181
1978	212	(1)	2,022	178	553	198

1 Data not available.

Source: **Social Security Bulletin,** June 1979, quarterly tables 9 through 12, 17; December 1977, table 8; various tables from the **Annual Statistical Supplement** to the **Bulletin** for 1950, 1955, 1960, 1965, and 1970–76; and unpublished data.

parent was present (about 125,000 children in 80,000 families) were excluded. Further, because social security regulations forbid nonadministrative contact with survivors within 1 year of the death, about 185,000 children in 110,000 families were also excluded. The resultant population consisted of 940,770 families—a number that was further reduced to 910,303 when Alaska and Hawaii were excluded from the sample design.

The sampling frame consisted of an area probability design conducted in three stages. First, the 99 primary sampling units (PSU's) in the national design, including 18 self-representing PSU's, were selected. Second, ZIP codes within the PSU's were chosen with probability proportional to their size. The third stage involved the systematic selection of cases within the specified ZIP code areas using a Social Security Administration list of eligible cases. A sampling rate of 1 in 120 was used to select the sample, from which a reserve sample (which was not used) was randomly subselected at the rate of 1 in 27. This procedure yielded a final ratio of 1 in 125.

Household interviews were conducted in the period April-July 1978. Of the 6,808 selected cases, 134 (or 2 percent) were ineligible because the payee children did not live in the household during the survey year. From the remaining 6,674 eligible cases, 5,752 interviews were obtained—a response rate of 86.3 percent. This calculation assumes a 100-percent eligibility rate among the 845 cases for which household information was not obtained, so the response rate is a conservative estimate.

Weighting

The estimates of the number of survivor families with children are projected from the sample. The weight for each sample case was the inverse of the probability of selection adjusted by a noninterview factor. The latter was developed through the use of cross-tabulations of respondents and nonrespondents by race, sex of deceased, primary insurance amount, and number of children. The average weight was 158, and the weights ranged from 145 for surviving black women to 200 for surviving black men. The weighted counts provide estimates of the number of surviving families with minor children in January 1978 (with the stated exclusions).

Sampling Variability

The estimates from the 1978 Survey of Survivor Families with Children are based on a sample and thus may differ from the figures that would have resulted from an identical survey of all survivor families with minor children. The standard errors shown in table II provide a measure of this sampling variability.

The interval from one standard error above the estimated percentage to one standard error below it would contain the average estimate for all possible samples in roughly 68 percent of the samples. This level of confidence increases to 90 percent if the figures in the table are multiplied by 1.6, to 95 percent if they

Table II.—Generalized standard errors of estimated percentages, 1978 Survey of Survivor Families with Children

Size of base	Estimated percentages										
	2 or 98	5 or 95	10 or 90	15 or 85	20 or 80	25 or 75	30 or 70	35 or 65	40 or 60	45 or 55	50
8,000	2.8	4.3	5.9	7.0	7.9	8.5	9.0	9.4	9.7	9.8	9.9
10,000	2.5	3.8	5.3	6.3	7.0	7.6	8.1	8.4	8.6	8.8	8.8
15,000	2.0	3.1	4.3	5.1	5.7	6.2	6.6	6.8	7.0	7.1	7.2
20,000	1.7	2.7	3.7	4.4	5.0	5.4	5.7	5.9	6.1	6.2	6.2
25,000	1.6	2.4	3.3	4.0	4.5	4.8	5.1	5.3	5.5	5.5	5.6
50,000	1.1	1.7	2.4	2.8	3.1	3.4	3.6	3.8	3.9	3.9	3.9
75,000	.9	1.4	1.9	2.3	2.6	2.8	2.9	3.1	3.1	3.2	3.2
100,000	.8	1.2	1.7	2.0	2.2	2.4	2.6	2.7	2.7	2.8	2.8
125,000	.7	1.1	1.5	1.8	2.0	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.4	2.5	2.5
150,000	.6	1.0	1.4	1.6	1.8	2.0	2.1	2.2	2.2	2.3	2.3
200,000	.5	.9	1.2	1.4	1.6	1.7	1.8	1.9	1.9	2.0	2.0
250,000	.5	.8	1.1	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.7	1.7	1.8	1.8
300,000	.4	.7	1.0	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.5	1.6	1.6	1.6
350,000	.4	.6	.9	1.1	1.1	1.3	1.4	1.4	1.5	1.5	1.5
400,000	.4	.6	.8	1.0	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.3	1.4	1.4	1.4
500,000	.3	.5	.7	.9	1.0	1.1	1.1	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2
600,000	.3	.5	.7	.8	.9	1.0	1.0	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1
700,000	.3	.5	.6	.8	.8	.9	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.1
800,000	.3	.4	.6	.7	.8	.9	.9	.9	1.0	1.0	1.0
900,000	.3	.4	.6	.7	.7	.8	.9	.9	.9	.9	1.0

are multiplied by 2.0, and to 99 percent if they are multiplied by 2.5.

To derive standard errors that are applicable to a wide variety of items, a number of assumptions and approximations were required. As a result, these standard errors provide an indication of the order of magnitude rather than the precise standard error for any specific item.

Standard Errors of Differences

To make a rough determination of the statistical significance of the difference between two independent percentages, the following procedure may be used. Find estimates of the standard errors of the percentages in question, using table II. Square these standard errors to get the variances, and add the variances. Take the square root of this sum to get the standard error of the difference. If the absolute difference between the two percentages in question is greater than twice the standard error of the difference, they are said to be significantly different from one another at the 5-percent level.

Confidence Intervals for Medians

For confidence intervals of medians, select the standard error for a 50-percent characteristic from the table, using the appropriate base. For a 95-percent confidence interval, add and subtract two standard errors from 50 percent. Using the cumulative distribution of the variable in question, interpolate to find the values that correspond to the range about the median value.

Display of Data

Population estimates based on fewer than 25 sample cases are considered too unreliable. Thus, computations are not shown when the base of the estimate is less than 3,750 weighted cases.