

CRS Report for Congress

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Supplemental Security Income (SSI): A Fact Sheet

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The Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, Title XVI of the Social Security Act, was implemented in 1974 to assure a minimum cash income to all aged, blind, or disabled persons with limited resources (the *countable* resource limit is \$2,000 for an individual and \$3,000 for a couple).¹ The aged are defined as persons 65 years and older. The blind are individuals with visual acuity of 20/200 or less with the use of a correcting lens in the person's better eye, or those with tunnel vision of 20 degrees or less. Disabled individuals are those unable to engage in any substantial gainful activity by reason of a medically determined physical or mental impairment expected to result in death or that has lasted, or can be expected to last, for a continuous period of at least 12 months. Pursuant to P.L. 104-193, signed into law on August 22, 1996, a child under age 18 may qualify as disabled if he or she has an impairment that results in "marked and severe" functional limitations.

SSI, administered by the Social Security Administration (SSA), operates in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the Northern Mariana Islands. To qualify for SSI a person must (1) be a citizen of the United States or if not a citizen, (a) be a refugee or asylee who has been in the country for less than 7 years, or (b) be a "qualified alien" who was receiving SSI as of August 22, 1996 or who was living in the United States on August 22, 1996 and subsequently became disabled; (2) be a resident of the United States or the Northern Mariana Islands, or a child of a person in the military stationed outside the United States; (3) apply for all other benefits to which he or she is entitled; and (4) if he or she is disabled, accept vocational rehabilitation services if they are offered.

The *maximum* federal SSI benefit is \$494 per month for an individual living independently, and \$741 for a couple living independently. SSI maximum benefits are higher in 26 states and the District of Columbia. These jurisdictions supplement the federal SSI benefit by varying amounts. Federal SSI benefit standards are increased annually in January to reflect price inflation. Most SSI recipients have other income; their countable income is subtracted from the federal SSI guarantee amount to determine SSI eligibility and benefit amount.²

¹ In determining resources, more than 20 items are excluded (e.g., individual's home, and with specified limitations, an automobile, household goods and personal effects, and life insurance).

² SSI provides for unearned and earned income exclusions (e.g., the first \$20 of monthly (continued...))

In most states, SSI eligibility confers automatic eligibility for Medicaid. Moreover, SSI recipients living alone or in a household where all members receive SSI benefits are categorically eligible for Food Stamps.

The SSI program generally counts all types of income (including support and maintenance furnished in cash or in kind) in determining eligibility status and benefit amount. The maximum federal SSI benefit for an aged, blind, or disabled individual or couple who live in another person's household (and receive in-kind support and maintenance) is two-thirds of the federal SSI guarantee amount. When an SSI recipient lives in a medical institution for which Medicaid pays a major part of the bill, the monthly SSI benefit guarantee is reduced to \$30. This personal needs allowance is intended for personal expenses. (Pursuant to P.L. 104-193, the \$30 standard also applies to disabled children in medical institutions who have private medical insurance.) The program also requires that some of the income of ineligible family members be deemed available to meet the needs of an SSI recipient (spouse-to-spouse, parent-to-child).

SSI Recipients (December 1997)

Adults: 5.6 million (aged, 24.3%; disabled, 74.4%; blind, 1.3%—classification at time of enrollment)

Children (under age 18): .880 million (disabled, 99.2%; blind, 0.8%)

Sex: men, 37.9%; women, 62.1%

Race: white, 58.8%; black, 23.8%; other, 14.9%; not reported, 2.5%

Living arrangement: own household, 93.6%; another's home, 4.1%; medical institution, 2.3%

With income (53.5%): social security, 37.1%; other unearned income, 11.9%; earnings, 4.5%

Average monthly payment amount: aged, \$268; disabled, \$373; blind, \$382

NOTE: The aged proportion rises to 31.6%, the disabled proportion falls to 67.4%, and the blind proportion drops to 1%, if one counts as aged the disabled and blind persons who reached age 65 after joining SSI.

Generally, SSA sends the monthly SSI check directly to the recipient. However, SSA assigns representative payees to (1) minors; (2) individuals incapable of physically or mentally managing their own benefits; (3) individuals declared legally incompetent by a court; and (4) SSI recipients medically determined to be drug addicts or alcoholics. Recipients who were classified as drug addicts or alcoholics are no longer eligible for SSI (effective January 1, 1997—P.L. 104-121). As of March 29, 1996, applicants were not eligible for SSI if they were disabled solely on the basis of drug addiction or alcoholism.

For more information on the new rules regarding SSI and noncitizens (i.e., aliens), see *CRS Report 96-617*.

Federal SSI benefits are paid from federal general revenues and state supplements by state funds. In FY1997, estimated **total** SSI benefits amounted to \$29.4 billion, of which 90% were federal payments (\$26.4 billion) and 10% were state payments (\$3.0 billion).

² (...continued)

income from nonmeans-tested income, plus \$65 of monthly earnings plus one-half of remaining earnings).