

Social Security Administration



Supplemental Security Income Program

What is SSI?

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is a means-tested, income maintenance program of last resort for aged, blind and disabled individuals whose income and resources are below the levels specified in law. The program--established in 1972--is designed to help provide monthly cash benefits for the basic needs of food and shelter for individuals with little or no other means of support.

The basic SSI amount is the same nationwide (\$698 a month for an individual in 2012). However, not everyone gets the same amount. An individual may receive more if they live in a State that adds money (called a "State supplement") to the Federal SSI payment. In addition, where and with whom recipients live can make a difference in the amount of the SSI payment. On average, SSI benefits bring the income of recipients up to about 75 percent for of the Federal poverty level.

An individual's benefit is determined by deducting his or her countable income from the basic SSI amount, and is generally based on known circumstances from a period two months prior to the present month. When an individual is entitled to a State supplementary payment, this amount is added to the monthly SSI payment. In most States, individuals who are eligible for SSI are also automatically eligible for Medicaid.

Income and Resources

SSI eligibility and payment amounts depend on an individual's income and resources. Income is money received such as wages, Social Security, and pensions. Income also includes the value of items received from someone else, such as food and shelter. In determining SSI eligibility, SSI excludes certain types of income. Among them: the first \$20 a month of most income received; the first \$65 a month earned from working, and half the amount over \$65; Food stamps (SNAP); and Home energy assistance.

If married, part of the spouse's income and resources are considered when determining SSI eligibility. Part of parents' income and resources are also considered for a child under age 18. Wages used to pay for items or services that help disabled individuals work are not counted as income for SSI purposes.

A single individual can have resources worth up to \$2,000 and be eligible for SSI. A couple can have resources worth up to \$3,000. Some of the resources counted for SSI purposes include cash, checking and savings accounts, stocks and U.S. savings bonds. The following are examples of assets not counted (i.e. excluded) toward the resource limits: a home, life insurance policies with a face value of \$1,500, a car, burial plots, and burial funds up to \$1,500.

Other Eligibility Requirements

In order to receive SSI, an individual (in addition to being aged, blind, or disabled) must live in the United States, or the Northern Mariana Islands and be a U.S. citizen or national. In some limited cases, noncitizens can qualify for SSI.

How is SSI Administered?

SSA administers the SSI program, but it is financed through Treasury general funds, not the Social Security trust funds. Much of the program administration is done in the more than 1,300 local SSA field offices, where individuals come in person to apply for SSI and report changes in income, resources, or living arrangements. Administering SSI is much more costly than administering the Social Security program. As an illustration, the percentage of the administrative cost of SSI in comparison to total SSI benefit payments is 7.0 percent. The comparison of Social Security administrative and total benefit payments is 0.7 percent.

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Quick Reference

Total beneficiaries (12/10): 7.9 million Federal payments (FY 10): \$48.2 billion Average payment --\$501