

Social Security Keeps Americans of All Ages out of Poverty: State-Level Estimates, 2010–2012

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Social Security keeps both old and young Americans out of poverty, providing critical income support to those who need it the most. For older Americans and their families, the Social Security program provides a guaranteed lifetime stream of retirement income that keeps pace with inflation. The program also provides vital income to younger workers and their families if they can no longer work because of disabilities, as well as critical financial support to workers' families should they die.

Social Security Kept More Than 22 Million Americans out of Poverty

In 2012, Social Security kept more than 22 million Americans of all ages out of poverty, more than many other government programs combined.¹ That included keeping about 1 million children under age 18 and almost 6 million people between the ages of 18 and 64 out of poverty (table 1). Social Security had an even greater impact on older Americans (age 65 and older), keeping 15 million of them out of poverty in 2012.

Social Security Is Vital to the Retirement Security of Older Americans

Nearly nine out of ten (88 percent) older Americans (age 65 and older) lived in a family that received Social Security benefits. Among all older Americans, Social Security kept more than one in three (35 percent) out of poverty (table 1). Even after accounting for Social Security income, 9 percent of older Americans remained in poverty.

As individuals become older, they are more likely to either lose a spouse (which reduces the income to the family) or outlive some forms of retirement income. These changes make Social Security income even more vital to retirement security as people age. Social Security kept almost 12 percent of individuals between ages 62 (the earliest age of eligibility for retirement benefits) and 64 out of poverty (table 2). The percent kept out of poverty rose to 23 percent for people age 65 to 69, 35 percent for people age 70 to 74, and nearly 45 percent for people age 75 and over.

Broad Differences by State and Age

Across the states, between 26 percent (Alaska) and 44 percent (Kentucky) of older Americans were kept out of poverty because of Social Security income (table 3). In addition to Kentucky, Arkansas (43 percent), Iowa (43 percent), and Tennessee (43 percent) had the greatest shares of older Americans lifted out of poverty.

Despite the support that Social Security provides many older Americans, significant poverty levels remain in some states. Louisiana (14 percent), South Carolina (13 percent), and Tennessee (12 percent) had the highest senior poverty rates even though Social Security kept between 36 and 43 percent of older Americans in each of these states out of poverty (table 4).

Because younger Americans are less likely to live in a family that receives Social Security benefits, the program has a smaller impact on their poverty rates. Without Social Security benefits, state poverty rates for working-age adults (age 18 to 64) would rise from between 1.5 percent in Colorado to about 6 percent in West Virginia, Alabama, and Arkansas.

Social Security reduces poverty rates for children who receive benefits themselves (because a parent qualifies for a benefit) and for those who do not receive benefits but live in a household where someone else receives them. Without Social Security, state poverty rates for children would increase 0.7 percent in Colorado and 3.2 in West Virginia—a 14 percent increase (from 23.1 to 26.3 percent) for children in West Virginia. Without Social Security income, child poverty rates would rise by about 10 percent in Kentucky, New Hampshire, and South Carolina.

Social Security Keeps More Older Women out of Poverty Than Men

In general, Social Security raised a greater percentage of older women

(38 percent) out of poverty than older men (33 percent). However, a greater percentage of older women remained in poverty: 11 percent of women compared to 7 percent of men (table 5). Across the states, Social Security kept between 26 percent (Hawaii) and 46 percent (Iowa) of older women above the poverty threshold. The range is even wider for older men—between 20 percent (Alaska) and 44 percent (Arkansas). Despite the importance of Social Security income to older Americans, almost 19 percent of women and 13 percent of men remained in poverty in the District of Columbia. States with the highest poverty rates include Louisiana (18 percent of men) and South Carolina (12 percent of women).

Technical Note

The U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS), the survey data used to produce these estimates, is not designed to be representative at the state level. As a result, the sample size for an individual state for one year may be too small to yield a precise estimate for the subpopulation of the different age categories. To remedy this problem, this Fact Sheet provides estimates based on the average of three years of data (2010–2012). The Census Bureau’s federal poverty thresholds are based on the number of persons in the family and the age of the head of the household. For reference, the poverty threshold for a single person age 65 and older was \$10,458 in 2010, \$10,788 in 2011, and \$11,011 in 2012.

Endnotes

¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, “A Different Way of Measuring Poverty,” <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/poverty/cb13-183.html>. Note: The Census Bureau’s infographic uses the Supplemental Poverty Measure, which is different from the Official Poverty Measure used in this report. However, a greater percentage of individuals fall into poverty using the Supplemental Poverty Measure than the Official Poverty Measure. Therefore, the findings in “A Different Way of Measuring Poverty” will also apply using the Official Poverty Measure. See also U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage: 2009,” http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/pdf/09-16-10_slides.pdf.

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Table 1
Effect of Social Security Income on Poverty Status, by Age, 2012

	Total		Under 18		18–64		65+	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Above Poverty	241,957,000	77.8	56,619,000	76.3	161,258,000	83.3	24,080,000	55.6
SS Keeps Out of Poverty	22,196,000	7.1	1,027,000	1.4	5,888,000	3.0	15,281,000	35.3
Below Poverty	46,962,000	15.1	16,541,000	22.3	26,496,000	13.7	3,926,000	9.1
Total	311,115,000	100.0	74,187,000	100.0	193,642,000	100.0	43,287,000	100.0

Source: AARP Public Policy Institute estimates from the March 2011–2013 Current Population Survey, U.S. Bureau of the Census.
 Note: Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand.

Table 2
Effect of Social Security Family Income on Poverty Status for Individuals Age 62 and Older, 2012

	62–64		65–69		70–74		75+	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Above Poverty	7,967,000	78.0	9,938,000	68.8	5,812,000	56.6	8,330,000	44.8
SS Keeps Out of Poverty	1,212,000	11.9	3,366,000	23.3	3,625,000	35.3	8,290,000	44.6
Below Poverty	1,034,000	10.1	1,133,000	7.8	828,000	8.1	1,965,000	10.6
Total	10,213,000	100.0	14,437,000	100.0	10,265,000	100.0	18,585,000	100.0

Source: AARP Public Policy Institute estimates from the March 2011–2013 Current Population Survey, U.S. Bureau of the Census.
 Note: Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand.

Table 3
Number and Percent of Persons Not in Poverty Because of Social Security Income, by State, Averages for 2010 to 2012

State	Total		Under 18		18–64		65+	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Alabama	458,000	9.6	26,000	2.3	177,000	6.0	255,000	39.9
Alaska	29,000	4.1	NA	NA	11,000	2.4	16,000	25.8
Arizona	400,000	6.0	NA	NA	92,000	2.2	295,000	33.9
Arkansas	315,000	10.9	16,000	2.3	105,000	6.0	194,000	43.2
California	1,932,000	5.1	117,000	1.2	531,000	2.2	1,284,000	29.3
Colorado	249,000	4.9	8,000	0.7	50,000	1.5	191,000	32.0
Connecticut	203,000	5.8	8,000	0.9	51,000	2.3	145,000	29.6
Delaware	65,000	7.3	2,000	1.2	16,000	2.9	47,000	34.0
District of Columbia	22,000	3.6	NA	NA	7,000	1.6	14,000	18.5
Florida	1,655,000	8.7	56,000	1.4	376,000	3.3	1,223,000	36.7
Georgia	589,000	6.1	35,000	1.4	171,000	2.8	383,000	37.5
Hawaii	73,000	5.5	5,000	1.6	17,000	2.1	51,000	25.3
Idaho	108,000	6.9	7,000	1.7	21,000	2.3	80,000	36.8
Illinois	807,000	6.3	29,000	1.0	193,000	2.4	585,000	34.9
Indiana	509,000	8.0	28,000	1.8	133,000	3.5	347,000	38.5
Iowa	223,000	7.4	7,000	1.0	47,000	2.5	168,000	42.6
Kansas	188,000	6.7	11,000	1.5	41,000	2.5	135,000	34.1
Kentucky	406,000	9.4	30,000	2.9	125,000	4.6	250,000	44.2
Louisiana	335,000	7.5	NA	NA	110,000	4.0	208,000	35.7
Maine	109,000	8.3	4,000	1.6	28,000	3.4	76,000	36.3
Maryland	288,000	5.0	17,000	1.3	68,000	1.8	203,000	27.7
Massachusetts	439,000	6.7	NA	NA	97,000	2.3	328,000	34.2
Michigan	892,000	9.2	51,000	2.2	290,000	4.8	550,000	38.7
Minnesota	336,000	6.4	13,000	1.0	59,000	1.8	264,000	37.3
Mississippi	277,000	9.5	18,000	2.4	94,000	5.3	165,000	41.7
Missouri	529,000	8.9	25,000	1.8	165,000	4.5	340,000	40.1
Montana	89,000	9.0	NA	NA	22,000	3.8	62,000	36.7
Nebraska	103,000	5.6	NA	NA	24,000	2.1	76,000	31.9
Nevada	169,000	6.3	10,000	1.5	46,000	2.7	114,000	33.1
New Hampshire	93,000	7.1	3,000	1.2	22,000	2.5	68,000	37.9
New Jersey	514,000	5.9	25,000	1.2	124,000	2.3	365,000	30.5
New Mexico	158,000	7.8	11,000	2.2	51,000	4.1	96,000	32.2
New York	1,216,000	6.3	39,000	0.9	290,000	2.4	886,000	33.2
North Carolina	810,000	8.5	42,000	1.8	209,000	3.6	559,000	42.2
North Dakota	36,000	5.4	NA	NA	7,000	1.6	28,000	33.4
Ohio	902,000	7.9	40,000	1.5	225,000	3.2	638,000	38.7
Oklahoma	252,000	6.8	NA	NA	66,000	2.9	174,000	33.8
Oregon	290,000	7.6	15,000	1.8	80,000	3.3	194,000	35.8
Pennsylvania	1,098,000	8.7	52,000	1.9	272,000	3.4	773,000	39.5
Rhode Island	80,000	7.7	3,000	1.5	17,000	2.6	60,000	37.8
South Carolina	428,000	9.3	31,000	2.9	143,000	5.0	254,000	39.0
South Dakota	54,000	6.6	3,000	1.7	9,000	1.8	41,000	36.5
Tennessee	571,000	9.0	27,000	1.8	172,000	4.3	372,000	42.6
Texas	1,375,000	5.4	96,000	1.4	408,000	2.6	871,000	32.4
Utah	142,000	5.0	10,000	1.2	32,000	1.9	100,000	35.5
Vermont	48,000	7.7	NA	NA	11,000	2.6	36,000	38.6
Virginia	392,000	4.9	22,000	1.2	108,000	2.1	262,000	26.2
Washington	405,000	5.9	16,000	1.0	108,000	2.5	281,000	32.1
West Virginia	193,000	10.6	13,000	3.2	70,000	6.1	110,000	41.9
Wisconsin	414,000	7.3	20,000	1.5	98,000	2.8	296,000	36.7
Wyoming	32,000	5.7	2,000	1.3	8,000	2.2	22,000	32.6

Source: AARP Public Policy Institute estimates from the March 2011–2013 Current Population Survey, U.S. Bureau of the Census.

Note: Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand.

NA: The number of observations in this cell is too small to accurately predict estimates.

Table 4
Number and Percent of Persons in Poverty, by State, Averages for 2010 to 2012

State	Total		Under 18		18–64		65+	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Alabama	775,000	16.3	287,000	25.0	438,000	14.8	50,000	7.8
Alaska	81,000	11.5	31,000	16.4	45,000	9.9	6,000	9.2
Arizona	1,220,000	18.4	460,000	27.3	684,000	16.8	76,000	8.5
Arkansas	527,000	18.2	186,000	26.3	287,000	16.5	53,000	11.9
California	6,204,000	16.5	2,240,000	23.9	3,580,000	15.0	385,000	8.8
Colorado	638,000	12.6	219,000	17.4	374,000	11.6	45,000	7.6
Connecticut	341,000	9.7	108,000	13.4	201,000	9.1	31,000	6.3
Delaware	118,000	13.2	44,000	21.0	64,000	11.6	10,000	7.5
District of Columbia	121,000	19.5	36,000	32.6	72,000	16.6	12,000	16.2
Florida	2,924,000	15.5	916,000	22.8	1,684,000	14.6	324,000	9.7
Georgia	1,797,000	18.5	659,000	25.9	1,043,000	17.0	95,000	9.4
Hawaii	169,000	12.8	58,000	19.1	94,000	11.6	17,000	8.5
Idaho	232,000	14.8	88,000	20.7	127,000	13.8	16,000	7.4
Illinois	1,755,000	13.7	630,000	20.5	985,000	12.3	139,000	8.3
Indiana	1,006,000	15.8	411,000	25.7	524,000	13.6	71,000	8.0
Iowa	316,000	10.5	106,000	14.7	186,000	9.9	23,000	5.9
Kansas	403,000	14.4	172,000	24.0	208,000	12.3	24,000	6.0
Kentucky	753,000	17.4	267,000	26.5	435,000	15.9	51,000	9.0
Louisiana	954,000	21.4	357,000	31.2	516,000	18.8	82,000	14.3
Maine	171,000	13.0	49,000	18.6	105,000	12.5	17,000	8.1
Maryland	586,000	10.1	180,000	13.4	348,000	9.3	58,000	7.8
Massachusetts	721,000	11.0	220,000	15.4	427,000	10.2	74,000	7.8
Michigan	1,442,000	14.8	499,000	21.8	835,000	13.8	108,000	7.6
Minnesota	541,000	10.3	186,000	14.5	303,000	9.2	52,000	7.4
Mississippi	607,000	20.8	229,000	30.0	331,000	18.8	47,000	11.8
Missouri	909,000	15.3	324,000	23.0	530,000	14.3	55,000	6.5
Montana	146,000	14.8	49,000	22.3	83,000	13.9	14,000	8.2
Nebraska	200,000	11.0	76,000	16.6	107,000	9.5	17,000	7.0
Nevada	430,000	16.0	154,000	23.0	245,000	14.6	31,000	9.1
New Hampshire	99,000	7.6	27,000	9.8	60,000	7.1	11,000	6.4
New Jersey	919,000	10.6	310,000	15.2	521,000	9.6	89,000	7.4
New Mexico	418,000	20.5	157,000	30.6	231,000	18.9	29,000	9.7
New York	3,187,000	16.5	1,070,000	24.7	1,817,000	14.7	300,000	11.3
North Carolina	1,588,000	16.8	609,000	26.1	841,000	14.5	138,000	10.4
North Dakota	76,000	11.3	24,000	15.5	45,000	10.4	7,000	8.6
Ohio	1,746,000	15.4	606,000	22.7	1,012,000	14.4	128,000	7.8
Oklahoma	604,000	16.2	239,000	25.3	322,000	14.3	43,000	8.3
Oregon	547,000	14.3	186,000	21.6	330,000	13.5	31,000	5.7
Pennsylvania	1,647,000	13.0	520,000	19.0	954,000	12.0	174,000	8.9
Rhode Island	142,000	13.6	46,000	20.6	82,000	12.5	13,000	8.3
South Carolina	812,000	17.6	275,000	25.6	455,000	15.8	82,000	12.5
South Dakota	112,000	13.8	38,000	19.1	65,000	13.0	9,000	8.0
Tennessee	1,101,000	17.3	380,000	25.6	614,000	15.4	107,000	12.1
Texas	4,549,000	17.8	1,845,000	26.3	2,418,000	15.2	286,000	10.7
Utah	304,000	10.7	128,000	14.3	157,000	9.4	20,000	7.1
Vermont	70,000	11.3	21,000	17.2	42,000	10.4	7,000	7.7
Virginia	873,000	11.0	269,000	14.3	500,000	9.9	104,000	10.4
Washington	820,000	12.1	288,000	17.8	479,000	11.1	54,000	6.2
West Virginia	313,000	17.2	91,000	23.1	195,000	16.9	27,000	9.9
Wisconsin	659,000	11.7	236,000	17.8	381,000	10.8	42,000	5.2
Wyoming	57,000	10.2	18,000	13.4	35,000	9.8	4,000	6.0

Source: AARP Public Policy Institute estimates from the March 2011–2013 Current Population Survey, U.S. Bureau of the Census.

Note: Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand.

Table 5
Number and Percent of Older (65+) Persons in Poverty and Not in Poverty Because of Social Security, by State and Gender, Averages for 2010 to 2012

State	Not in Poverty Because of Social Security Family Income				In Poverty			
	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Alabama	104,000	37.0	151,000	42.1	11,000	3.8	39,000	10.9
Alaska	6,000	19.6	10,000	31.7	2,000	7.3	3,000	11.1
Arizona	134,000	32.1	161,000	35.5	34,000	7.8	42,000	9.2
Arkansas	91,000	44.2	103,000	42.3	16,000	7.9	37,000	15.3
California	531,000	26.8	753,000	31.3	143,000	7.2	242,000	10.1
Colorado	78,000	29.6	113,000	34.0	16,000	5.8	29,000	9.0
Connecticut	56,000	26.2	89,000	32.2	13,000	5.9	18,000	6.6
Delaware	18,000	30.4	28,000	36.8	3,000	5.7	7,000	9.0
District of Columbia	5,000	17.8	9,000	18.9	4,000	12.6	9,000	18.5
Florida	541,000	36.1	682,000	37.2	110,000	7.4	213,000	11.6
Georgia	162,000	36.3	221,000	38.5	26,000	6.0	68,000	12.0
Hawaii	22,000	24.7	29,000	25.8	6,000	7.1	11,000	9.7
Idaho	32,000	32.5	48,000	40.3	6,000	5.8	10,000	8.8
Illinois	232,000	32.4	353,000	36.7	43,000	6.0	96,000	10.0
Indiana	132,000	32.0	215,000	44.0	24,000	5.9	48,000	9.8
Iowa	63,000	37.7	105,000	46.2	7,000	4.0	16,000	7.3
Kansas	55,000	30.9	80,000	36.8	7,000	3.8	17,000	7.7
Kentucky	98,000	39.8	152,000	47.7	18,000	7.1	33,000	10.4
Louisiana	77,000	33.0	131,000	37.6	21,000	9.2	61,000	17.7
Maine	35,000	34.8	41,000	37.6	5,000	4.9	12,000	11.0
Maryland	75,000	23.2	128,000	31.2	20,000	6.2	37,000	9.1
Massachusetts	130,000	30.8	198,000	37.0	22,000	5.1	53,000	9.8
Michigan	221,000	35.2	329,000	41.4	31,000	5.0	77,000	9.7
Minnesota	101,000	32.9	164,000	40.7	18,000	5.8	34,000	8.5
Mississippi	59,000	37.5	106,000	44.5	16,000	9.8	31,000	13.1
Missouri	128,000	35.3	211,000	43.8	16,000	4.4	39,000	8.0
Montana	27,000	32.7	35,000	40.6	6,000	7.5	7,000	8.8
Nebraska	28,000	25.9	48,000	36.8	5,000	4.7	12,000	8.9
Nevada	54,000	33.1	60,000	33.0	11,000	6.8	20,000	11.1
New Hampshire	28,000	33.8	41,000	41.3	4,000	5.0	7,000	7.5
New Jersey	130,000	26.3	236,000	33.4	30,000	6.2	58,000	8.3
New Mexico	42,000	30.2	54,000	34.1	12,000	8.7	17,000	10.7
New York	322,000	29.0	565,000	36.2	91,000	8.3	209,000	13.4
North Carolina	219,000	37.4	340,000	45.8	46,000	7.9	93,000	12.4
North Dakota	10,000	27.0	18,000	38.4	3,000	7.5	4,000	9.5
Ohio	254,000	36.8	383,000	40.1	33,000	4.9	95,000	9.9
Oklahoma	72,000	31.8	103,000	35.3	12,000	5.5	30,000	10.3
Oregon	84,000	33.4	110,000	37.9	7,000	2.8	24,000	8.3
Pennsylvania	306,000	35.4	466,000	42.7	52,000	6.0	122,000	11.2
Rhode Island	22,000	32.3	37,000	42.0	6,000	8.5	7,000	8.2
South Carolina	104,000	35.4	150,000	42.0	34,000	11.5	48,000	13.3
South Dakota	16,000	33.2	25,000	39.2	3,000	6.1	6,000	9.4
Tennessee	151,000	41.3	221,000	43.6	32,000	8.3	75,000	14.8
Texas	362,000	29.9	509,000	34.5	84,000	6.9	202,000	13.7
Utah	43,000	33.0	57,000	37.5	5,000	3.8	15,000	10.1
Vermont	15,000	35.8	20,000	41.0	3,000	6.2	4,000	9.0
Virginia	93,000	21.6	169,000	29.7	31,000	7.1	73,000	12.8
Washington	110,000	26.7	171,000	36.8	15,000	3.6	39,000	8.4
West Virginia	45,000	37.9	65,000	45.2	12,000	10.0	14,000	9.8
Wisconsin	114,000	31.1	183,000	41.2	13,000	3.7	29,000	6.4
Wyoming	10,000	28.9	13,000	36.1	1,000	4.1	3,000	7.9
National	6,277,000	32.5	9,005,000	37.5	1,282,000	6.6	2,643,000	11.0

Source: AARP Public Policy Institute estimates from the March 2011–2013 Current Population Survey, U.S. Bureau of the Census.

Note: Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand. "National" figures include only the March 2013 Current Population Survey data.