SOCIAL SECURITY AND MEDICARE INFORMATION SOURCES

October 2018
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Objectives and Methodology

- **Objectives**: To learn where people go for information about Social Security retirement benefits and Medicare coverage, what influences their decisions related to these benefits, and what they wish they had known when they first started receiving the benefit.

- **Methodology**: Survey was fielded online as well as by phone for AARP by NORC at the University of Chicago using NORC’s probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel.

- **Sample**: NORC AmeriSpeak Panel®, n=1,236 adults age 65+ who are receiving Social Security retirement benefits and/or covered by Medicare.

- **Fielding Dates**: September 21-27, 2018

- **Weighting**: The data are weighted by age, gender, education, race, Hispanic ethnicity, and census division to benchmarks from the February 2018 Current Population Survey (CPS) for persons age 65 and older who are receiving Social Security retirement benefits and/or covered by Medicare.

- **Questionnaire length**: 8 minutes (median).

- **Margin of error**: ± 4.06 percentage points at the 95% confidence level for all respondents; ± 4.33 percentage points at the 95% confidence level for Social Security retirement beneficiaries; ± 4.00 percentage points at the 95% confidence level for Medicare beneficiaries.
Key Findings: Social Security

Nearly four in ten (39%) Social Security retirement beneficiaries claimed benefits at age 62, which is the earliest age at which one can receive Social Security retirement benefits. The next most common claiming ages were ages 65 (25%) and 66 (11%).

Most (73%) waited until within two years of when they ultimately claimed Social Security benefits before trying to decide when to claim. In fact, more than four in ten (43%) didn’t start trying to decide when to claim until less than one year before they ultimately claimed.

More than seven in ten indicated that receiving the highest possible monthly check (75%) and getting Social Security as soon as they could (71%) were very or somewhat important factors in their claiming decision.

When asked what they wish they had understood better about Social Security when they decided to claim their benefits, just over one in three (36%) identified a particular wish. The most common wish was that they had waited longer to claim.

The Social Security Administration (or SSA.gov) is by far the most common source of information about Social Security, consulted by over six in ten (62%) Social Security retirement benefit recipients.
Key Findings: Medicare

- When asked **what they wish they had understood better about Medicare when they first enrolled**, one in three (33%) identified a particular wish. The most common wish was that they had better understood the costs.

- Nearly nine in ten (87%) Medicare enrollees are **aware of the Medicare open enrollment period**.

- Half (51%) of Medicare enrollees **review and compare their coverage options at least once a year**.

- Most Medicare enrollees (76%) feel that they **have enough information about their Medicare coverage options**.

- Fewer than half (44%) are **aware that they can get free help with Medicare through their state’s health insurance assistance program**.

- Health insurance companies **are the most common source of information about Medicare coverage options**, consulted by 44 percent of Medicare enrollees to learn about Medicare.
Implications

While the majority of Social Security retirement beneficiaries and Medicare beneficiaries do not feel that they lack information, these survey results point to opportunities for increasing understanding and awareness of key issues.

Overall, Social Security recipients place equal importance on getting benefits as soon as possible and getting the highest monthly amount, which suggests that they have conflicting priorities when it comes to choosing their claiming age. While some who claim early state that they did so out of financial necessity, others wish they had understood more about how monthly benefits would have increased if they had delayed claiming. Continued efforts to educate future beneficiaries about the effect of claiming age on monthly benefits will be critical to enable informed decision making.

Although most Medicare enrollees feel that they have enough information about coverage options, the fact that only half review their coverage options once a year suggests that they may be missing an important opportunity to improve their coverage. Furthermore, the low awareness of the free help available through state health insurance assistance programs suggests a need to publicize this important resource. In addition to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, health insurance companies and health care providers are important vehicles for disseminating information about Medicare and may be useful in spreading awareness of this free help.
62 is the age at which people most commonly started receiving their Social Security retirement benefits.

Nearly four in ten (39%) Social Security retirement beneficiaries claimed benefits at age 62, which is the earliest age at which one can receive Social Security retirement benefits. The next most common claiming ages were ages 65 (25%) and 66 (11%), which are the Social Security “full retirement ages” for the adults surveyed. Only four percent waited until age 70 (the maximum claiming age). Those with high incomes were less likely to claim early.

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*All survey respondents were ages 65+ (i.e. born before 1954), which means that they reached their Full Retirement Age (FRA) when they were either age 65 or 66. Specifically, those who were born before 1938 reached their FRA at age 65, those born between 1938 and 1942 reached their FRA at age 65 and a certain number of months, and those who were born between 1943 and 1953 reached their FRA at age 66. For more information about the Social Security FRA, see www.SSA.gov.

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Soc1. Earlier you indicated that you are currently receiving Social Security retirement benefits based on your own work history or based on your spouse’s work history. At what age did you start receiving those benefits? Base: Social Security Retirement Benefit Recipients (n=1,071)
Most (73%) waited until within two years of when they ultimately claimed Social Security benefits before trying to decide when to claim.

More than four in ten (43%) didn’t start trying to decide when to claim until less than one year before they ultimately claimed. More than half (52%) of those with household incomes under $30,000 waited until within one year of claiming, compared to just 36 percent of those with household incomes of $100,000 or more.

How Far in Advance of Claiming Their Benefits Did Social Security Retirement Benefit Recipients Start Trying to Decide When to Claim?

- Less than 1 year before: 43%
- 1 - 2 years before: 30%
- 3 - 4 years before: 12%
- 5 - 9 years before: 8%
- 10 or more years before: 3%
- Don’t know/Refused: 3%

Soc2. Now, think about the age at which you first started collecting Social Security retirement benefits. How long before that did you start trying to decide when to collect benefits? Base: Social Security Retirement Benefit Recipients (n=1,071)
Getting Social Security as soon as possible and receiving the highest possible monthly amount are top considerations.

More than seven in ten Social Security retirement benefit recipients indicated that receiving the highest possible monthly check (75%) and getting Social Security as soon as they could (71%) were very or somewhat important factors in their decision about when to claim their benefits. This is somewhat paradoxical since claiming early leads to a lower monthly amount. As might be expected, those who claimed at age 65 or later rated receiving the highest possible monthly check as more important than those who claimed before age 65.

### Important Factors in the Decision About When to Start Collecting Social Security Retirement Benefits

- **Receiving highest possible monthly check**: 42% Very Important, 33% Somewhat Important
- **Getting Social Security as soon as you could**: 44% Very Important, 27% Somewhat Important
- **Understanding how monthly check would grow if you wait**: 31% Very Important, 34% Somewhat Important
- **Ensuring spouse receives highest possible monthly check**: 33% Very Important, 25% Somewhat Important
- **Getting Social Security while working**: 16% Very Important, 14% Somewhat Important

### Actual Claiming Age and Receiving Highest Possible Monthly Check

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actual Claiming Age</th>
<th>Receiving Highest Possible Monthly Check (very/somewhat important)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>62 - 64</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 or older</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Soc3. When you were deciding when to collect Social Security retirement benefits, how important were each of the following factors in your decision? Base: Social Security Retirement Benefit Recipients (n=1,071) (* The asterisked item was asked only of married respondents (n=510).*
Fewer than four in ten (36%) Social Security retirement benefit recipients name something that they wish they had understood better when they claimed benefits.

When asked what they wish they had understood better about Social Security when they started collecting their benefits, just over one in three (36%) identified a particular wish. The most common wish was that they had waited longer to claim (8%). More than four in ten (45%) say that there is “nothing” that they wish they had understood better.

What do you wish you had understood better about Social Security?

- 45% Nothing
- 36% More Information
- 19% Don't Know/Refused

Top 5 Things That Social Security Beneficiaries Wish They Had Better Understood

1. Should have waited longer to get benefits (8%)
2. Wish I had known more (4%)
3. Health / financial circumstances forced me to take benefits (4%)
4. Eligibility for and understanding of spousal benefits (3%)
5. Amount I would receive (3%)
The Social Security Administration (or SSA.gov) is by far the most common source of information about Social Security.

More than six in ten (62%) Social Security retirement beneficiaries have used the Social Security Administration or its website to learn about Social Security retirement benefits. The next most common sources of information about Social Security include friends (38%), family members (32%), magazines or books (30%), and AARP (25%).

### Sources of Information about Social Security

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Source</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Security Administration (or SSA.gov)</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family member</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines or books</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AARP</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional financial advisor</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current or former employer</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial websites, online blogs, or online forums</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV or radio</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial services firm</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local community organization</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Soc5. Have you used any of the following information sources to learn about Social Security retirement benefits?**

**Household Income**
- Less than $30,000: 8%
- $100,000 or more: 35%

**Financial websites, blogs, online forums**
- TV or radio: 7%
Only one in three (33%) Medicare enrollees name something about Medicare that they wish they had understood better when they first enrolled.

Among the 33% who named something that they wished they had understood better, the most common wish was that they had better understood the costs. Other relatively common wishes included a general wish that they had known more at the time and that they had better understood what was covered. Roughly half (49%) say that there is “nothing” that they wish they had understood better.

M1. Think back to when you first enrolled in Medicare. What, if anything, do you wish you had understood better about Medicare coverage at that time? (Open-Ended) Base: Medicare Enrollees (n=1,208)

Top 5 Things That Medicare Enrollees Wish They Had Better Understood

1. Costs involved (6%)
2. Wish I had known more (5%)
3. Benefits/coverage (5%)
4. Supplemental insurance options (4%)
5. Difference between parts A/B/C/D (3%)
The vast majority are aware of the Medicare open enrollment period.

Nearly nine in ten (87%) Medicare enrollees are aware of the open enrollment period at the end of every year during which time people with Medicare can review and compare their coverage options and make changes. Although awareness is lower among low-income enrollees, still three in four (77%) enrollees with household incomes under $30,000 are aware of it.

### Awareness of Medicare Open Enrollment Period (% Aware)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By Household Income</th>
<th>(% Aware)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total (n=1,208)</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $30,000 (n=410)</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000 - $59,999 (n=389)</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$60,000 - $99,999 (n=220)</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,000 or more (n=189)</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

M2. At the end of every year, there is a period of time for people with Medicare to review and compare their Medicare coverage options and make changes to their coverage. This time of year is called the annual "open enrollment period." Before taking this survey, were you aware of the open enrollment period or not? Base: Medicare Enrollees (n=1,208)
Half (51%) of Medicare enrollees review and compare their coverage options at least once a year.

Four in ten (41%) Medicare enrollees say that they rarely (17%) or never (14%) review or compare their coverage options or that they have not done so since signing up (10%). Individuals with lower household incomes are more likely than those with higher incomes to do this at least once a year.

**How Often Medicare Enrollees Review or Compare Their Coverage Options**

- **At least once a year:** 51%
- **Once every few years:** 8%
- **Rarely:** 17%
- **Never:** 14%
- **Only once when signed up:** 10%

**By Household Income**

- Less than $30,000: 56%
- $100,000 or more: 42%
Most Medicare enrollees (76%) feel that they have enough information about their Medicare coverage options.

Only one in ten (11%) say that they do not feel that they have enough information, while another 12 percent are not sure.

Do you feel you have enough information about Medicare coverage options?

- Yes: 76%
- No: 11%
- Not Sure: 12%

M4. Do you feel you have enough information about the Medicare coverage options available to you, or not? Base: Medicare Enrollees (n=1,208)

*Note: In addition to the 12% who selected “not sure,” a few respondents (less than half a percent) skipped this question.
Fewer than half (44%) are aware that they can get free help with Medicare through their state’s health insurance assistance program.

Nearly half (49%) say that they are not aware of this free help, while another seven percent are not sure.

Are you aware of the free personalized help with Medicare offered by your state’s health insurance assistance program?

- Yes: 49%
- No: 44%
- Not Sure: 7%

M5. Anyone who has questions about their Medicare coverage options can get free personalized help through their state’s health insurance assistance program. Before taking this survey, were you aware of this free service or not? Base: Medicare Enrollees (n=1,208)
Health insurance companies are the most common source of information about Medicare coverage options.

More than four in ten (44%) Medicare enrollees have consulted their health insurance company to learn about their Medicare coverage options. The next most common sources of information about Medicare include the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (37%), friends (33%), family members (31%), and AARP (30%).

### Sources of Information about Medicare

- **Health insurance company**: 44%
- **Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (or Medicare.gov)**: 37%
- **Friends**: 33%
- **Family member**: 31%
- **AARP**: 30%
- **Magazines or books**: 28%
- **Doctor or health care provider**: 27%
- **Health web sites, online blogs, or online forums**: 19%
- **Local pharmacy or pharmacist**: 16%
- **TV or radio**: 16%
- **Current or former employer**: 14%
- **Professional financial advisor**: 13%
- **Local community organization**: 9%

### Household Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>Less than $30,000</th>
<th>$100,000 or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctor or healthcare provider</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health websites, blogs, online forums</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV or radio</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*M6. Have you used any of the following information sources to learn about your Medicare coverage options? Base: Medicare enrollees (n=1,208)*
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About AARP

AARP is the nation’s largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering Americans 50 and older to choose how they live as they age. With nearly 38 million members and offices in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, AARP works to strengthen communities and advocate for what matters most to families with a focus on health security, financial stability and personal fulfillment. AARP also works for individuals in the marketplace by sparking new solutions and allowing carefully chosen, high-quality products and services to carry the AARP name. As a trusted source for news and information, AARP produces the nation's largest circulation publications, AARP The Magazine and AARP Bulletin. To learn more, visit www.aarp.org or follow @AARP and @AARPadvocates on social media.

Resources

For more information from AARP about Social Security and Medicare, visit AARP’s Social Security Resource Center at www.aarp.org/socialsecurity and AARP’s Medicare Resource Center at www.aarp.org/medicare.

Acknowledgements

NORC at the University of Chicago administered these survey questions through its probability-based NORC AmeriSpeak panel. Laura Skufca of AARP Research assisted with questionnaire development. Oscar Anderson and Karen Turner of AARP Research assisted with design and formatting. Jeff Love and Lona Choi-Allum of AARP Research assisted with proofing.
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