

Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018

Fiscal Year 2022 Evaluation Plan



Securing today
and tomorrow



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Selected Abbreviations

DDS	disability determination services
DI	Disability Insurance
FY	fiscal year
OASDI	Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance
OASI	Old-Age and Survivors Insurance
OCACT	Office of the Chief Actuary
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
RDRC	Retirement and Disability Research Consortium
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSAB	Social Security Advisory Board
SSI	Supplemental Security Income

INTRODUCTION

The *Fiscal Year 2022 Annual Evaluation Plan* describes the significant evaluation and evidence-building activities planned for FY 2022. Our plan does not describe the entire set of activities that we will conduct in fiscal year (FY) 2022; rather it describes the most significant activities that we will complete during the year. We define significant activities as those that are required by law, or those that are aligned with the goals in our FYs 2018-2022 Agency Strategic Plan. We have identified 13 activities for the Evaluation Plan.

In the past, we have described our evaluation and evidence-building activities in three separate documents and we will continue to describe the activities in these documents. We describe many of our planned activities in a section of the *Supplemental Security Income Program Technical Materials Supporting Our Annual Budget* titled Extramural Research, Demonstrations, and Outreach. Our Annual Performance Report includes an appendix titled *Program Evaluations* that describes our ongoing studies and surveys designed to assess our programs. A description of our pilot project evaluations is located in the Pilot Project Metrics section of the Limitations on Administrative Expenses section of our annual budget. The *Fiscal Year 2022 Evaluation Plan* identifies our most significant activities from these three documents and it includes the additional information required by the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018.

When we develop our evaluation and evidence-building activities, we consult with internal and external stakeholders. For example, our Associate Commissioner for the Office of Research, Evaluation, and Statistics (ORES) sends out an annual memo to the Deputy Commissioners from all of our major offices to obtain information on their research and evaluation needs. Our Associate Commissioner for the Office of Research, Demonstration, and Employment Support (ORDES) holds regular meetings with representatives from all of our major offices to provide updates and obtain information on our demonstration projects. The external stakeholders that provide us with information on our research and evaluation activities include the Social Security Advisory Board (SSAB), the Congress, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and academics and practitioners who serve on the Technical Evaluation Panels we use to develop our research and demonstration projects.

For each significant activity, we provide the information required in the Evidence Act and in the OMB guidance described in memorandum M-19-23. More specifically, we include:

- A title;
- A description of the key questions to be addressed by the evaluation activity or evidence-building activity;
- The information needed for the evaluation or study;
- The methods to be used, the anticipated challenges, and
- The dissemination strategy.

EVALUATIONS AND EVIDENCE-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

Project 1 —Assessment of Services for SSI Disabled Child Disability Benefits Offered Online

EVIDENCE-BUILDING QUESTION
<p><i>How effective are the online services and informational materials for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) child disability benefits in assisting our customers apply for benefits?</i></p>

Context for the Evidence-Building Question: As part of our commitment to improve the services we provide to the public, we plan to assess our online informational materials and services related to SSI child disability benefits. The amount of online information on SSI child disability benefits and the filing process is limited. The i3820 Child Disability Report is available online, but this is only a portion of the application process. The applicant must also file an application for benefits with his or her local field office. The systematic collection and analysis of survey data will assist us with planning and developing enhancements and new services to improve the online experience for future applicants.

Information Needed for the Study: We propose the following topics for our systematic collection of survey data:

- **What Benefits Are Available for a Disabled Child?** The first set of survey questions will ask respondents about the accessibility of information about SSI child disability benefits. Did they understand how Social Security decides if a child is disabled and if the child meets the requirements to benefit from the SSI program? The survey will also ask what effect the information had on respondents' decisions about filing for child disability benefits.
- **What Do I Need to Do to File for Benefits for a Disabled Child?** The goal of this question is to see if the respondents understood that the online Child Disability Report was not an application and they were required to contact the Social Security Administration (SSA) to file a claim for benefits. We also want to know if the "Checklist-Child Disability Interview" was easily accessible for their review.
- **Satisfaction with Various Aspects of Service:** The survey will ask respondents to rate various aspects of service related to their filing experience. Where applicable, these questions will address satisfaction with the online Child Disability Report, the service provided on the telephone and/or in the office by SSA employees, and the overall experience filing for child disability benefits.
- **Electronic Service Delivery:** The survey will ask respondents to rate the satisfaction level of their online experience. The survey will also ask what additional tools or information the agency may provide online to better assist with the process.

Methods: We will mail the survey to a sample of 10,000 applicants who filed an application for SSI child disability benefits during a 1-month period in FY 2022. The sample will include both individual applicants as well as advocates and attorneys who filed in person, by telephone, and online. We plan to conduct the survey by mail.

We will use Likert scales to measure customer satisfaction and perceptions. The survey will measure satisfaction using a standard 6-point Likert scale: excellent, very good, good, fair, poor, or very poor. We define "satisfaction" using the combined excellent, very good, and good (E/VG/G) rating. The survey will use several 4-point Likert scales (very..., somewhat..., not very..., or not at all...) to measure perceptions.

The initial survey will provide us with a baseline on our customers' satisfaction and perceptions and we will use the baseline to assess our responsiveness to customer comments in future surveys. We will

conduct standard statistical tests that allow us to conclude whether key differences by customer characteristics (e.g., individual applicants compared to advocates/attorneys) are statistically significant. This will allow us to assess how our customers' needs are evolving with respect to:

1. The information we provide them,
2. Various aspects of the services we provide,
3. Service preferences and expectations, and
4. Various aspects of doing business with us using our electronic service delivery.

Anticipated Challenges: This is a new systematic collection of data to assess the effectiveness of our services and it will require designing a new survey, implementing the new survey, and developing a report on the results of the assessment. We plan to leverage our experience implementing similar assessments to overcome this anticipated challenge.

Dissemination: We will disseminate this report internally throughout the agency, and we will summarize the results in our *Annual Performance Report*.



Project 2 – Evaluation of the Redesigned Social Security Statement and Supplemental Fact Sheets

EVALUATION QUESTION
<p><i>What is the effect of redesigning the Social Security Statement and providing supplemental fact sheets with customized information on Social Security's programs on improving the public's knowledge of the programs, increasing the use of internet services, and reducing the amount of inquiries to our operations employees?</i></p>

Context for the Evaluation Question: In 1995, the agency began mailing annual earnings and benefit statements to workers in selected age groups. In 2000, these statements were officially renamed the *Social Security Statement*. The purpose of the *Statement* is threefold: to inform workers about their Social Security benefits, to help workers plan for their financial future, and to ensure that workers' earnings records are accurate. Aside from minor changes, the *Statement* has remained largely the same over the last two decades. Our [FYs 2018–2022 Agency Strategic Plan](#) includes an important, customer-focused objective to "Modernize the Social Security Statement to improve the public's understanding of our programs."

In 2019, we provided about 68 million *Statements*, including:

- More than 11 million automatically mailed *Statements*;
- More than 44,000 fulfilled requests for mailed *Statements*; and
- More than 56 million *Statements* accessed online by *my Social Security* accountholders.

Note that both requested mailed *Statements* and *Statements* accessed online may include multiple requests or views by the same person.

The efforts to modernize the *Social Security Statement* are based on years of research and feedback from the public. The *Statement* redesign is based on: recommendations from previous SSAB and Government Accountability Office reports, Social Security's extensive *Statement* research, examples from other pension statements, and surveys on the public's communication preferences and knowledge about Social Security on a national scale. Based on these recommendations and research, the redesigned *Statement*:

- Focuses on the legally required information, while streamlining it from four to two pages;
- Places each category of benefits into its own box to group information together for an easier read;
- Updates and streamlines the text using plain language;
- Shows monthly benefit estimates at all nine claiming ages as a bar graph;
- Adds color based on current Social Security branding (red and blue); and
- Includes a second prototype for workers with non-covered earnings, so they better understand possible implications.

The streamlined two-page *Statement* will be accompanied by the supplemental fact sheets. These fact sheets provide customized information about the Social Security program to workers based on age and earnings situations (e.g., new workers, workers who are not yet fully insured). The redesigned *Statement* and supplemental fact sheets provide workers with key program information in clear plain language and concise formatting to promote improved understanding of key program information.

Information Needed for the Evaluation or Study: We will need to obtain information on the public's understanding of the content, the public's use of the redesigned *Statement* and fact sheets, and on changes in behavior, such as changes in claiming behavior and inquiries to our operations staff, to track outcomes. We will also need information on the demographics and other characteristics of those accessing the redesigned *Statement* and fact sheets. In the methods section, we describe how we will obtain the information for the evaluation.

Methods: We will conduct both usability and cognitive testing before the release of the *Statement* and fact sheets. Usability testing allows an interviewer to engage participants one-on-one in various tasks related to using the *Statement* and fact sheets. Users will be asked to complete different tasks so that interviewers can observe and evaluate *how* users complete tasks in order to ensure they can easily and effectively navigate through the *Statement* and fact sheets to find the information they are looking for.

Cognitive testing allows an interviewer to engage participants in a one-on-one guided discussion in which they probe the participants' approach and thinking when considering the *Statement* and fact sheets as a whole, as well as of particular subsections and areas of interest. This testing will provide us with real-time feedback on the user perceptions and understanding and allow us to make adjustments if needed in the early stages of development.

We will measure changes in Social Security program knowledge using the Understanding America Study (UAS) Social Security Program Knowledge survey (done every 2 years) and customized surveys commissioned by the agency (e.g., IPSOS). We will also track increases in the number of people accessing the *Statement* online and visiting our website:

- Of the estimated 15 million *Statements* we plan to mail annually, track how many converted from paper to the online *Statement* the following year by creating a *my Social Security* account.
- Track selected links on the *Statement* and supplemental fact sheets from year to year to monitor if there is increased traffic to these web pages.
- For documents accessed from the *my Social Security* web site, add Google Analytics tags to the various documents to track user behavior.

Anticipated Challenges: We will need to update our systems to generate the redesigned *Statement*. The redesigned *Statement* may require changes to the existing print contract, requiring a new contract negotiation process. We will also need to obtain OMB clearance on the changes to the *Statement*. We have developed technical solutions to make the necessary changes to our systems to implement the redesigned version of the *Statement*. We will work with the contractor to make the necessary changes to the *Statements* we mail to certain members of the public, and we will work with OMB to obtain the necessary clearance.

Dissemination: We will disseminate the results of the evaluation in a number of ways. We will use feedback from the usability testing to make real-time adjustments to the location of the online *Statement* and fact sheets links to ensure users can find and access them through their *my Social Security* account. The results of the cognitive testing will be used to update the language and content of the supplemental fact sheets and possibly result in new supplemental fact sheets to fill information gaps. The UAS survey results will be posted online at https://cesr.usc.edu/data_toolbox/uas_data_pages. SSA staff research papers analyzing the survey responses and changes in the public's program knowledge will be disseminated at <https://www.ssa.gov/policy>. Finally, SSA provides data on claiming, including for claims filed on the internet, by telephone, in person, or by mail, at <https://www.ssa.gov/open/data/RSI.html>.

Project 3 — Retirement and Disability Research Consortium (RDRC) Service Delivery Focal Area

EVALUATION AND EVIDENCE BUILDING QUESTIONS

Our Service Delivery Focal Area for the RDRC identifies our interest in studies that help us identify and implement advancements in how we deliver quality, accurate, and timely service to our customers. Possible evaluation questions include:

1. *How do the various modes of Social Security service delivery affect consumer satisfaction? Do they affect different socio-economic groups differently?*
2. *How would simplifying administrative rules and requirements affect SSA's ability to offer accurate, efficient, and appropriate services to the public and the ability of program participants to make decisions in their best interest?*
3. *What is the impact of the numerous financial exploitation schemes that target Social Security beneficiaries, and what approaches could be considered to prevent or halt them?*
4. *Examine how other countries handle their Social Security claiming/service provision. In other words, what is their service model (field offices, websites, home visits, staffing, etc.)?*
5. *How do other countries address improper payments, including any tolerances or minimum thresholds used, methods used for identifying improper payments, and steps to correct them?*

Context for the Evaluation and Evidence-Building Questions: The RDRC is an interdisciplinary extramural research program that we fund through cooperative agreements with centers at:

- [Boston College](#) (BC)
- [National Bureau of Economic Research](#) (NBER)
- [University of Michigan](#) (UM)
- [University of Wisconsin](#) (UW)

The RDRC has three main goals:

1. Research and evaluate a wide array of topics related to Social Security's Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (OASDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs and related federal policies;
2. Disseminate information on these topics to policymakers, researchers, stakeholder organizations, and the general public; and
3. Provide training and education to scholars and practitioners in research areas relevant to these topics.

All RDRC research and activities must be relevant to one of SSA's program areas or populations. In addition, each year SSA provides the centers with research focal areas (see our website: <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/extramural/index.html>).

The current agreements run from FY2019 through FY2023. The centers' websites include completed research and other information.

Information Needed for the Evaluation or Study: The RDRC centers identify the information that they need for their proposed evaluation or study in their grant proposal. As part of our technical review of each grant proposal, we assess whether the proposed information necessary for the evaluation or study is available and is appropriate for the proposed evaluation.

Methods: We encourage research employing a variety of approaches (e.g., descriptive and causal studies, simulations), utilizing innovative methods, and drawing from new data sources (e.g., Occupation Requirements Survey [ORS] data, data collected for demonstration projects).

Anticipated Challenges: The “improving service delivery” focal area is new to the RDRC, and it might take RDRC researchers time to establish a research agenda on the new focal area. In the past, our researchers have collaborated with RDRC researchers to conduct studies on new priority areas. The collaboration has been successful in that it combines the program expertise from our research staff with the methods expertise from the RDRC research team. We might need to use this collaboration model to promote service delivery research among the RDRC researchers.

Dissemination: One of the RDRC centers’ main goals is to disseminate information on their research to policymakers, researchers, stakeholder organizations, and the public. The RDRC holds an annual meeting where researchers share findings with key stakeholders, and receive feedback on their research. Each RDRC center has a website that contains policy briefs, working papers, and other information on their research. The RDRC centers publish their findings in professional journals and other outlets.

Project 4 — Final Evaluation of Supported Employment Demonstration (SED)

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

What is the effect of offering evidence-based interventions of integrated vocational, medical, and behavioral health services to individuals with behavioral health challenges? Does providing such services significantly reduce the demand for disability benefits and help individuals remain in the labor force?

Context for the Evaluation Question: The Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act of 2015 (Public Law 113-235) appropriated funds to design, develop, and implement an early intervention demonstration to test innovative strategies aimed at helping people with disabilities remain in the workforce.

In August 2016, we awarded a contract to implement and evaluate whether offering evidence-based interventions of integrated vocational, medical, and behavioral health services to individuals with behavioral health challenges can significantly reduce the demand for disability benefits and help individuals remain in the labor force. The project is referred to as the Supported Employment Demonstration (SED).

The SED period of performance is from August 2016 through August 2022. In FY 2022, we will work with the contractor to produce a final impact evaluation and cost-benefit analysis report, and public-use data files that researchers may use to conduct additional analysis on the SED.

Information Needed for the Evaluation: We are collecting the information needed for the evaluation by:

- Interviewing participants every 3 months (over the 3-year intervention period) in-person or by telephone about topics such as their job and health status, quality of life, use of health care services, income, and health insurance coverage;
- Collecting administrative data from SSA about participants' benefits awards and award amounts, as well as data from the demonstration sites on services provided to treatment participants;
- Conducting site visits to assess the implemented fidelity of the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model of supported employment at all sites through interviews with staff and site documentation reviews; and
- Conducting additional site visits involving in-person (or telephone) interviews and focus groups with site staff and study participants, as well as ethnographic studies of participants and those who chose not to participate.

Methods: The SED evaluation uses a randomized controlled trial design. We have designed the demonstration to compare the outcomes of two treatment groups and a control group among individuals with a mental impairment who applied for Social Security disability benefits and recently received a denial of benefits. Our contractor enrolled 1,000 participants in each of three study arms, totaling 3,000 participants in 30 communities across the United States. Participants randomized to the treatment groups receive services for 3 years at local community mental health agencies selected to serve as demonstration sites.

- In the **Full-Service Treatment** group, participants receive services from an IPS, employment specialist, a behavioral health specialist, a case manager, and a nurse care coordinator.
- In the **Basic-Service Treatment** group, participants receive the same services as the Full-Service group except for nurse care coordinator.
- In the **Usual Services or Control** group, participants receive a manual of national, state, and local services, which they may seek out on their own.

The key outcomes include employment, earnings, and the receipt of SSI or DI benefits.

Anticipated Challenges: We do not anticipate significant challenges completing this evaluation.

Dissemination: We will post the interim and final reports on our public-facing website. We will present the findings from the interim final reports to our external stakeholders, including members of the Congress and their staff; the SSAB; State Directors of Mental Health and Vocational Rehabilitation who work closely with the SED sites; and the wider, national network of IPS supported employment practitioners. We will publish findings from the SED in professional journals. Results from our prior demonstrations are published in the mass media, and we expect that the findings from the SED will be published in various media outlets.



Project 5 – Final Evaluation of Promoting the Readiness of Minors on SSI (PROMISE)

EVALUATION QUESTION
<p><i>What is the effect of offering a package of evidence-based interventions to youth receiving SSI and their families on: educational attainment, employment credentials, employment outcomes, SSI payments, use of other public benefits, and total household income?</i></p>

Context for the Evaluation Question: PROMISE is a joint initiative of the U.S. Department of Education (ED), SSA, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the U.S. Department of Labor. The purpose of this initiative is to address critical issues related to supporting youth with disabilities by funding and evaluating programs designed to promote positive change in the lives of youth who were receiving SSI and their families.

Under cooperative agreements with ED, six state agencies across 11 states implemented model demonstration projects in which they enrolled SSI youth ages 14 through 16. Under contract to SSA, Mathematica Policy Research is conducting the national evaluation of how the programs were implemented and operated, their impacts on youth and family outcomes, and their cost-effectiveness.

This evaluation has already produced six site-specific process analyses on the implementation of the projects and an interim report on the services received and outcomes after 18 months. We will produce a 5-year impact evaluation and cost-benefit analysis report in FY 2022.

Information Needed for the Evaluation: We are collecting the information needed for the evaluation by:

- Interviewing participants (youth and parents) 5 years after enrollment about topics such as employment, health status, education, recent service use, income, and other information;
- Collecting SSA administrative data about participants' benefits awards and award amounts; and
- Collecting administrative data from each participating state project about participants' use of vocational rehabilitation and Medicaid services.

Methods: The PROMISE evaluation uses a randomized controlled trial design. Each state enrolled at least 2,000 youth and their families in to the study. These families were then randomly assigned into one of two study groups:

- A **Program Services or Treatment** group, who received case management, benefits counseling and financial literacy training, career and work-based learning experiences, parent training and information, education support, and other services; or
- A **Usual Services or Control** group, who received whatever services were available in the community.

Anticipated Challenges: We do not anticipate significant challenges completing this evaluation.

Dissemination: We have already posted interim reports on our public facing website and will post the final report there when it is complete. We will present the findings from the interim final reports to our external stakeholders, including: members of the Congress and their staff, the SSAB, ED, and other agencies. We will publish findings from PROMISE in professional journals. Additionally, the cooperative agreement awardees are publishing studies on their projects and will disseminate the findings to stakeholders.

Project 6 — Final Evaluation of Promoting Opportunity Demonstration (POD)

EVALUATION QUESTION

What is the effect of a \$1 for \$2 benefit offset with simplified work incentives for DI beneficiaries on earnings, benefit payments, and the Disability Insurance (DI) Trust Fund?

Context for the Evaluation Question: The Bipartisan Budget Act (BBA) of 2015 temporarily renewed SSA's Section 234 demonstration authority allowing SSA to carry out experiments and demonstration projects that promote labor force attachment and identify mechanisms that could result in savings to the DI Trust Fund. Section 823 of the BBA of 2015 directed SSA to carry out the POD for a 5-year period. Under the POD benefit offset, SSA reduces DI benefits by \$1 for every \$2 that a beneficiary earns above a threshold below the level of Substantial Gainful Activity. The policy also simplifies work incentives to promote employment, reduce dependency on benefits, and create DI Trust Fund savings.

In December 2016 and January 2017, we awarded separate implementation and evaluation contracts, respectively, to conduct the project and evaluate the effects of the benefit offset on the earnings and benefits of DI volunteers.

The participation period for DI beneficiaries in POD started January 2018 and ends June 2021. From June 2021 to December 2021, we will continue working with the contractors to produce a final impact evaluation, a cost-benefit analysis, and public-use data files that researchers may use to conduct additional analysis on POD.

Information Needed for the Evaluation: We are collecting the information needed for the evaluation by:

- Administering, by mail, phone, and the internet, three participant surveys evenly spaced throughout the January 2018 to June 2021 participation period;
- Collecting SSA administrative data about the participants' benefits, IRS annual earnings, and demographic information; and
- Conducting site visits involving in-person and semi-structured interviews with study participants and site staff.

Methods: The POD evaluation uses a randomized controlled trial design. We randomly assigned in approximately equal numbers, volunteers from sites within eight states to two treatment groups and one control group, enrolling a total 10,070 volunteers.

- The beneficiaries assigned to the control group continue to work and earn under current DI rules.
- The beneficiaries randomly assigned to the first treatment group receive the \$1-for-\$2 benefit offset intervention and benefits counseling that mimics that available under current rules.
- The beneficiaries randomly assigned to the second treatment group also receive the \$1-for-\$2 benefit offset intervention and benefits counseling that mimics that available under current rules. However, if a beneficiary in this treatment group earns enough to have their monthly benefit payments offset to \$0 for 12 consecutive months, then SSA terminates the beneficiary's eligibility to monthly benefit payments.

The key outcomes of interest are employment, earnings, and benefit payments.

Anticipated Challenges: The effect of COVID-19 on the labor market affects the evaluation of the \$1-

for-\$2 benefit offset. The public health response to the pandemic reduced study participants' ability to earn; hence, it will influence the impact of the \$1-for-\$2 benefit offset on labor market activity detected in the last evaluable year of the demonstration. Despite this set back, we will complete the demonstration within the timeframe set by the limits of our demonstration authority.

Dissemination: We will post the interim and final reports on our public-facing website. We will present the findings from the interim and final reports to our external stakeholders, including: members of the Congress and their staff, the SSAB, and professional and academic conferences. We will publish findings from POD in professional journals. Results from our prior demonstrations have been published in the mass media, and we expect that the findings from the POD will be published in various media outlets.



Project 7 — Lessons Learned from SSA Demonstrations

EVIDENCE-BUILDING QUESTIONS

What are the lessons learned from prior tests of new policies (i.e., demonstrations)? This includes, but is not limited to:

- *Which policies do or do not work and in what settings and for whom;*
- *Mechanisms for implementing policies that work;*
- *The implementation and operationalization of large-scale, applied demonstrations, including recruitment options;*
- *Lessons on making demonstrations more useful to policymakers and others for budgetary purposes; and*
- *Alternative evaluation methodologies that can improve recruitment and generalizability, given the statutory, regulatory, and real-world practical constraints on SSA's options.*

Context for the Evidence-Building Question: We promote the employment of disability beneficiaries who can work through a variety of work incentive policies and programs. We have conducted several tests of new policies and programs to improve beneficiary work outcomes. These demonstrations have covered most aspects of the DI and SSI programs/populations and have addressed topics including family supports, children, informational notices, changes to benefit calculations, and a variety of employment services and program waivers.

In FY 2020, we awarded a contract to publish a collection of papers written by researchers and practitioners that will include systematic data analysis on the above specified questions. We will publish the volume in FY 2022.

Information Needed for the Study: We will rely on experts to review existing demonstration project data, demonstration project reports, and other publications to provide an assessment of what lessons can be learned.

Methods: The contractor procured the services of experts to prepare papers and presentations on our demonstrations (and potentially other related demonstrations) and additional experts to serve as paper discussants.

Anticipated Challenges: We do not anticipate significant challenges completing these activities.

Dissemination: We will host a meeting and publish a volume for disability policy stakeholders (e.g., researchers, practitioners, administrators, policymakers). We will work with the contractor to promote the meeting through a variety of outlets including the agency's and the contractor's social media platforms, podcasts, and other means. We will make the published volume widely available at no cost on our public-facing website and for purchase through a commercial vendor, at limited cost.

Project 8 – Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Federal OASI and Federal DI Trust Funds

EVIDENCE-BUILDING QUESTION

Does the Old-Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI) program and the Disability Insurance (DI) program have sufficient trust fund reserves and projected income to pay scheduled benefits over a prospective 75-year period?

Context for the Evidence-Building Question: The Social Security Act (the Act) established the Board of Trustees to oversee the financial operations of the OASI and DI Trust Funds. The Act requires that the Board of Trustees, among other duties, report annually to the Congress on the actuarial status and financial operations of the OASI and DI Trust Funds. This report provides a vast amount of descriptive data and analysis on the financial status of the OASI and DI Trust Funds. It also includes an assessment using systematic data collection and analysis of the program's capacity to pay scheduled benefits over the course of a prospective 75-year period. While the assessment includes information on several outcomes, two key outcomes of interest to policymakers are:

1. The estimated date that each trust fund's reserves will be depleted, and
2. The estimated percentage of scheduled benefits that the program would be able to support once the trust fund reserves are depleted.

The report includes a description of the uncertainty in the outcomes using:

1. Alternative deterministic scenarios (i.e., high-cost and low-cost scenarios),
2. A stochastic model, and
3. Sensitivity analysis on key assumptions.

Our Office of the Chief Actuary (OCACT) conducts the vast majority of the research and analysis that support this annual report to the Congress. OCACT uses the results of this annual assessment as a basis for evaluating legislative proposals that affect the trust funds. The Office of Retirement and Disability Policy (ORDP) uses the results of this assessment to develop our Modelling Income in the Near Term (MINT) microsimulation model that we use to evaluate the distributional effects of proposed changes to the programs. Policymakers rely on this information when considering changes to the program to improve program solvency or for other purposes. Thus, the assessment is foundational for other important evaluation activities that the agency performs on a regular basis.

The assessment described in the annual report is among the most important activities that we support and disseminate, as policymakers rely on this report to make important decisions on the future of the OASI and DI programs.

Information Needed for the Study: The information needed for the assessment comes from a variety of sources. OCACT works closely with representatives for each Trustee to develop the demographic, economic, and program benefit assumptions that the Trustees use for the annual report. The information used to develop the assumptions comes from a variety of sources, including:

1. Analyses of historical data and relationships related to each assumption from various sources, including other government agencies and private forecasters;

2. Reports produced by the SSAB Technical Panel on Methods and Assumptions;
3. Research conducted by the RDRC; and
4. Other research relevant to the particular assumption.

The report uses information from a variety of Social Security administrative data sources, administrative and survey data from other federal agencies, and data from other sources. OCACT identifies the information needed for the evaluation in their documentation on the assumptions and methods used for the short-range evaluation and for the long-range evaluation. The documentation is located on OCACT's website at <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/TR/index.html>.

Methods: The report includes both a descriptive study of the current trust fund status, and an assessment that addresses the question, “are program finances sufficient to pay scheduled benefits over a prospective 75-year period?” OCACT provides a detailed description of the methods used in each report in the following two documents located on the website <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/TR/index.html>:

1. Long-Range OASDI Projection Methodology, and
2. Short-Range Actuarial Projections of the OASDI Program, 2010.

Anticipated Challenges: We do not anticipate significant challenges completing this assessment.

Dissemination: We use a variety of dissemination methods. The report is available on our website: <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/TR/index.html>. We send an electronic copy of the report to the President of the Senate, the Speaker of the House, and to the Congressional committees of jurisdiction. The day that the Trustees release the report to the public, we issue a press release that describes the key findings and a link to the report on our website. Our Chief Actuary participates in a discussion with members of the press to provide information on the content within the report and to respond to their questions on the report. Our Chief Actuary also meets with external stakeholders to present the findings, including, members of the Congress and their staff, the SSAB, the Bipartisan Policy Center, the National Academy of Social Insurance, and various actuarial professional organizations. In recent years, our Chief Actuary has used social media (e.g., Facebook live) to disseminate the findings, and to respond to questions from the public on the financial status of the program.

Project 9 – Annual Report of the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Program

EVIDENCE-BUILDING QUESTION

What is the current status of the SSI program and what are the estimated number of SSI recipients and SSI program costs associated with administering the program over a prospective 25-year period?

Context for the Evidence-Building Question: The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (Public Law 104-193) directs the SSA Commissioner to report annually to the President and to the Congress on the status of the SSI program. The report includes an assessment of the status of the SSI program using systematic data collection and analysis. The report must include estimates of two important SSI program outcomes: (1) the estimated number of SSI recipients over a prospective period of at least 25 years, and (2) the estimated SSI program costs through a prospective period of at least 25 years. The report also must include a comprehensive description of the SSI program; a historical summary of statutory changes to the SSI program; and summaries of any relevant research on the SSI program by SSA or others. Other requirements of the report include historical and current data relating to:

1. Claims intake and dispositions at all levels of decision making;
2. Demographic information about recipients, including program cost and prior enrollment in other public benefit programs;
3. Redeterminations, medical continuing disability reviews, and utilization of work incentives;
4. Administrative costs; and
5. State supplementation program operations.

This assessment of the status of the SSI program, the estimated number of recipients over a prospective 25-year period, and the estimated program costs of the SSI program over a prospective 25-year period provides policymakers with extensive information that they can use when considering legislative changes, regulatory changes, or policy changes to the SSI program.

Information Needed for the Study: The information needed for the assessment is described in the 2020 annual report. The demographic and economic assumptions used in the projections are based on the intermediate set of assumptions of the *Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Federal OASI and Federal DI Trust Funds (Trustees Report)* issued in that year. In addition, the projections are developed to be consistent with the projections in such *Trustees Report*. Beyond that, there are four main inputs to the current projection model for SSI recipients:

1. Historical and projected estimates of the Social Security area population by single year of age and gender;
2. Historical tabulations of the numbers of recipients in current-payment status and suspense status by whether the recipient is receiving payments based solely on age or due to disability, single year of age, and gender;
3. Historical tabulations of the numbers of recipients transitioning into and out of SSI payment status by the same characteristics as in (2) above; and

4. Historical tabulations of the total amount of federal SSI payments by the same characteristics mentioned in (2) above.

Methods: The methods for conducting the projections are described in the 2020 annual report. Using the inputs for the projection of SSI recipients described in the information needed for the evaluation or study section, transitions into SSI payment status are projected separately for: (1) new recipients resulting from an application for program payments; and (2) returns to payment status from suspended status. Movements out of payment status are projected separately for: (1) terminations due to death; (2) suspensions due to excess income; and (3) suspensions of payment for all other reasons. The programmatic assumptions and methods used by the model preparing these projections are reexamined each year and, if warranted, revised in light of recent experience and new information about future conditions. We also consider analyses of historical data and relationships related to each assumption from various sources, including other government agencies and private forecasters, as well as other research relevant to the particular assumption or set of assumptions.

Anticipated Challenges: We do not anticipate significant challenges completing this assessment.

Dissemination: We use a variety of dissemination methods. The report is available on our website: <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/ssir/SSI20/index.html>. We send electronic copies of the report to the President, the Vice-President, and the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. We also send electronic copies to the Congressional committees of jurisdiction and other interested Congressional members and staff.



Project 10 — Pre-Effectuation Review (PER) of Disability Determinations

EVIDENCE-BUILDING QUESTIONS

What is the return rate of state disability determination services (DDS) initial and reconsideration allowances of disability program applications? What is the estimated federal benefit savings attributable to PER?

Context for the Evidence-Building Questions: Title II of the Social Security Act (the Act) requires the review of at least 50% of all DI initial and reconsideration allowances made by state DDS. We consider a disability allowance policy compliant when the evidence documented in the file is sufficient to determine disability and when that determination is consistent with the evidence, federal regulations, and operating policies and procedures.

Section 221(c)(3)(C) of the Act requires us to report to the Committee on Ways and Means of the House of Representatives and to the Committee on Finance of the Senate on the PERs conducted during the previous fiscal year. More specifically, the report covers the PERs of disability determinations made by the state DDS. The legislative mandate specifies that the PER report include information on: (1) the numbers of such reviews; and (2) our findings based on such reviews of the accuracy of the state DDS determinations.

In addition, Public Law 109-171, the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, added section 1633(e) to Title XVI of the Act, requiring similar PERs of specified levels of DDS allowances of applications by persons aged 18 or older for SSI benefits based on blindness or disability. Since FY 2008, the required level of our SSI reviews is also at least 50% of initial and reconsideration allowances.

The findings from our assessment using systematic data collection and methods are used to identify areas where additional training or policy guidance is needed.

Information Needed for the Study: Disability claim folders contain the evidence used to make decisions on claims, and this evidence is reviewed during PERs. Data from our administrative records are used to estimate the program savings that result from the PER.

Methods: We select cases for PER from the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and DI cases from the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico using a statistical model to identify allowances with a high probability of containing substantive errors (i.e., potential to ultimately reverse the determination from allowance to denial). Quality reviewers within our disability quality review branches (DQB) review the cases to determine whether the evidence documented in the files is sufficient to determine disability and whether that determination made is consistent with the evidence and with federal regulations and operating policies and procedures.

We record data on:

- The total number of cases reviewed;
- The number of decisional returns (i.e., the number of cases in which the quality review performed by the DQB did not agree with the outcome determined by the DDS);
- The number of documentation returns (i.e., the number of cases in which the quality review performed by DQB revealed the evidence upon which the DDS based its decision was insufficient); and
- The total number of returns (decisional returns plus documentation returns).

We compute the return rate as the total number of cases returned divided by the total number of cases reviewed, multiplied by 100.

We use this data, combined with other data described in Table 2 in our *Annual Report on Social Security Pre-effectuation Reviews of Favorable State Disability Determinations*, to estimate the savings attributable to the PER.

Anticipated Challenges: We do not anticipate significant challenges completing this assessment.

Dissemination: We send this annual PER report to Congress, and the public may obtain this report on our website: <https://www.ssa.gov/legislation/other.html>. We also make the PER data available to the public on our Open Data website: <https://www.ssa.gov/open/data/preeffectuation-review-of-disability-determinations.html>.



Project 11 — Targeted Denial Review (TDR)

EVIDENCE-BUILDING QUESTION

What is the return rate of state DDS initial and reconsideration denials of disability program applications?

Context for the Evidence-Building Question: The TDR complements PER. It examines the return rate of all state DDS and Federal Disability Processing Branch denials of applications for disability benefits. The sample is drawn using a predictive model based on data captured in our quality assurance samples and we use that data to score each case upon DDS clearance to identify cases with a high probability of reversal.

We review disability determinations made by the DDSs and Federal Disability Processing Branches in our 11 disability quality branches (DQB) in the Office of Quality Review field sites throughout the nation. Our central office gathers the data from these reviews to produce monthly TDR reports for the agency at the national, regional, and state levels.

In the course of our review, we identify cases that are not compliant with national disability policy. When we find the disability determination does not comply with agency policy and procedure, we cite a deficiency to the DDS. The findings from our assessment using systematic data collection and methods are used to identify areas where additional training or policy guidance is needed.

Information Needed for the Study: Disability claim folders contain the evidence used to make a decision on claims, and this evidence is reviewed during TDRs.

Methods: We select cases for TDR from the DDSs in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, 7 Federal Disability Processing Branches, and DI cases from the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico using a statistical model to identify allowances with a high probability of containing substantive errors (i.e., potential to ultimately reverse the determination from denial to allowance). Quality reviewers within our DQBs review the cases to determine whether the evidence documented in the file is sufficient to support the denial determination and whether the denial determination is consistent with Federal Regulations and operating policies and procedures.

We record data on:

- The total number of cases reviewed;
- The number of decisional deficiencies (i.e., the number of cases in which the quality review performed by DQB did not agree with the outcome determined by the DDS);
- The number of documentation deficiencies (i.e., the number of cases in which the quality review performed by DQB revealed the evidence upon which the DDS based its decision was insufficient); and
- The total number of deficiencies (decisional deficiencies plus documentation deficiencies) cited.

We compute the return rate as the total number of cases returned divided by the total number of cases reviewed, multiplied by 100.

Anticipated Challenges: We do not anticipate significant challenges completing this assessment.

Dissemination: We make the data from the TDR available to the public on our Open Data website:
<https://www.ssa.gov/open/data/targeted-denial-review.html>.



Project 12 — Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (OASDI) Stewardship Review

EVIDENCE-BUILDING QUESTION

What is the payment accuracy rate related to the non-medical aspects of the Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance (OASDI) payments?

Context for the Evidence-Building Question: The OASDI stewardship review provides an accuracy measurement of the non-medical aspects of OASI payments and DI payments. The non-medical aspects of OASI payments and DI payments include changes in payment amounts due to work activity (e.g., the annual earnings test for OASI, or the performance of substantial gainful activity for DI) or changes in payment due to a provision in the law (e.g., Windfall Elimination Provision, Government Pension Offset, Workers Compensation Offset). Payment errors include both underpayments (payments issued are less than what is due to beneficiaries) and overpayments (payments issued are more than what is due to beneficiaries).

The OASI and DI stewardship review findings provide the basis for reports to monitoring authorities and meets the reporting requirements of the Improper Payments Information Act of 2019. Additionally, the agency uses these findings to establish the OASDI payment accuracy performance measure in the *Annual Performance Report*.

The OASDI stewardship review is an assessment using systematic data collection and analysis of our program and policies, and the results are used to identify: (1) areas where additional training for our employees is needed; (2) whether we need to develop legislative proposals to address issues with administering the program (e.g., obtaining data on wage amounts from a payroll information provider); or (3) whether we need to pursue program changes or pilot projects to test alternatives to the current process and how we should design those changes.

Information Needed for the Study: The information for this study is derived by quality reviewers interviewing a sample of OASI and DI beneficiaries, or their representative payees, and redeveloping all non-medical factors of eligibility to determine if the payment issued was correct according to the applicable statutes and/or regulations. We also use data from our administrative records, such as the Master Beneficiary Record (MBR), which includes the data related to the OASI or DI payment computations for beneficiaries.

For each case in the sample with a payment error, the reviewers record a specific deficiency code that represents the error associated with the improper payment, the dollar amount of the payment error, and the specific cause of the error. There may be multiple deficiencies associated with a payment amount, and we construct separate aggregate overpayment or underpayment amounts for these cases when we report our stewardship review findings.

Methods: We base the stewardship review on a monthly sample of Title II beneficiaries in current payment status. Each month, we selected approximately 88 OASI cases and 46 DI cases of beneficiaries residing in the United States. Annually, we also select 160 cases of beneficiaries who live outside of the 50 states or U.S. territories or receive U.S. totalization benefits. We interview the beneficiary, or his or her representative payee, make collateral contacts as needed, and redevelop all non-medical factors of eligibility as of the sample month. The objective of the stewardship review is to identify improper payments, and not to assess the agency's compliance with policy and procedures or predict the impact of proposed changes to policies and procedures. Therefore, we assess payment accuracy based on all the developed factors of entitlement that have any potential to affect the payment

issued in the sample month.

Anticipated Challenges: We do not anticipate significant challenges completing this assessment.

Dissemination: We report the findings from the OASDI stewardship review to OMB, provide a summary of the findings in the Annual Performance Report, and post the report on our public website: https://www.ssa.gov/improperpayments/RSDI_majorCauses.html#sb=2.



Project 13 — Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Stewardship Review

EVIDENCE-BUILDING QUESTION

What is the payment accuracy rate related to the non-medical aspects of SSI payments?

Context for the Evidence-Building Question: Our SSI stewardship review provides estimates of payment accuracy related to the non-medical aspects of SSI payments. SSI is a means-test program, and non-medical aspects of SSI payments may include living arrangements, resources, wages, and other eligibility factors. Payment errors include both underpayments (U/P) (payments issued are less than what is owed to the recipient) and overpayments (O/P) (payments issued are more than what is owed to the recipient).

The stewardship review is a significant assessment tool for the agency. Its findings serve as the basis for reports to monitoring authorities and satisfy the reporting requirements of the Payment Integrity Information Act of 2019. We use the stewardship data to identify error-prone areas and formulate initiatives to reduce improper payments.

The SSI stewardship review is an assessment using systematic data collection and analysis of our program and policies, and the results are used to identify: (1) areas where additional training is needed for our employees; (2) whether we need to develop legislative proposals to address issues with administering the program (e.g., obtaining data on wage amounts from a payroll information provider); or (3) whether we need to pursue program changes or pilot projects to test alternatives to the current process and how we should design those changes.

Information Needed for the Study: The information for this study is derived by quality reviewers interviewing a sample of SSI recipients, or their representative payees, and redeveloping all non-medical factors of eligibility to determine if the payments issued were correct according to applicable statutes and regulations. We compare the quality review findings with our administrative records, such as the Supplemental Security Record (SSR), which includes the data related to SSI payment computations for recipients.

For each case in the sample with a payment error, the quality reviewer records the specific deficiency that caused the improper payment, and the dollar amount of the payment error associated with the specific deficiency. There may be multiple deficiencies associated with an SSI payment, and we construct separate aggregate O/P or U/P amounts for these cases when we report our stewardship review findings.

Methods: We derive accuracy rates using data collected from the review of a national sample of SSI cases. For a case to be included in our sample, the agency must have issued a payment in at least 1 month of the fiscal year under review. Historically, the sample has included about 4,000 cases.

The objective of the stewardship review is to identify and quantify improper payments. It involves interviewing SSI recipients, or their representative payee, and redeveloping all non-medical factors of eligibility to determine if the payments issued were correct according to the applicable statutes and regulations. We use the resources necessary to obtain all relevant evidence needed to assess payment accuracy for every case we review. Any difference between what was actually paid and what the reviewer determines should have been paid is expressed as an O/P or U/P error. It is not feasible operationally for us to conduct this review for all cases in the SSI universe on an ongoing basis. For this reason, the review is not ideally suited to predict or assess the impact of initiatives to reduce improper payments. The O/P and U/P accuracy rates are the percentage of all dollars paid that are free of O/Ps

or U/Ps. We calculate and report O/P and U/P accuracy rates separately. The data presented in the annual stewardship report is weighted, enabling us to project the findings to the entire population of SSI recipients.

Annually, we reevaluate our study methodology and the data elements we capture, based upon audit findings and information needs identified throughout the year.

Anticipated Challenges: We do not anticipate significant challenges completing this assessment.

Dissemination: We report the findings from the SSI stewardship review to OMB, provide a summary of the findings in the Annual Performance Report, and post the report on our public website:
https://www.ssa.gov/improperpayments/SSI_progStats.html#sb=3.



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