

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL SECURITY  
RETIREMENT BENEFITS

**BLACKROCK®**



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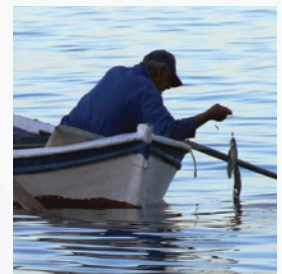
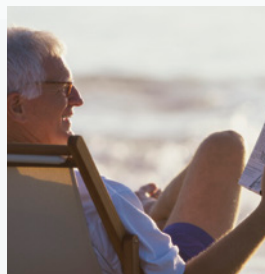
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Popular wisdom suggests jumping at the opportunity to collect Social Security retirement benefits as soon as possible, which currently is age 62. While this strategy may have been prudent for millions of Americans in the past, longer life expectancies have changed the face of retirement planning. Waiting to collect Social Security benefits may well be a more advantageous option. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, this much is universally clear:

**DECIDING WHEN TO BEGIN TAKING SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS IS AN IMPORTANT AND MULTIFACETED CONSIDERATION** that should be factored into each individual's broader retirement plan.

In the following pages, we review key details to consider in your Social Security decision-making. We encourage you to consult with your financial and tax professionals to ensure your Social Security strategy complements your overall retirement plan.



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# Individual Collection Decision

## QUALIFYING FOR BENEFITS

When you work and pay taxes as mandated by the Federal Insurance Contributions Act (FICA), you earn “credits” toward Social Security retirement benefits. The credits are based on your annual earnings, with a maximum accrual of four credits per year. Once you have acquired 40 credits (approximately 10 years of employment), you are fully insured and eligible to receive retirement benefits. FICA tax (often displayed on pay statements as OASDI, for old-age, survivors and disability insurance, tax) is withheld from each paycheck until you have earned up to the taxable earnings base for the year.

*You must be fully insured (40 credits) to be eligible to receive benefits.*

## 2015 FICA AMOUNTS

**\$118,500**

Taxable Earnings Base

**\$1,220**

Earnings Required for One Credit

**\$4,880** (\$1,220 x 4)

Earnings Required for Max (4) Credits per Year

## COLLECTING BENEFITS AT FULL RETIREMENT AGE

Your primary insurance amount (PIA) is the monthly benefit for which you are eligible at your full retirement age (FRA). FRA varies based on year of birth. Originally age 65, the federal government has increased FRA for anyone born after 1937 in recognition of longer life expectancies.

## FULL RETIREMENT AGE

Year Born	FRA
1937 or earlier	65
1938–1942	65 + 2 months for every year after 1937
1943–1954	66
1955–1959	66 + 2 months for every year after 1954
1960 +	67

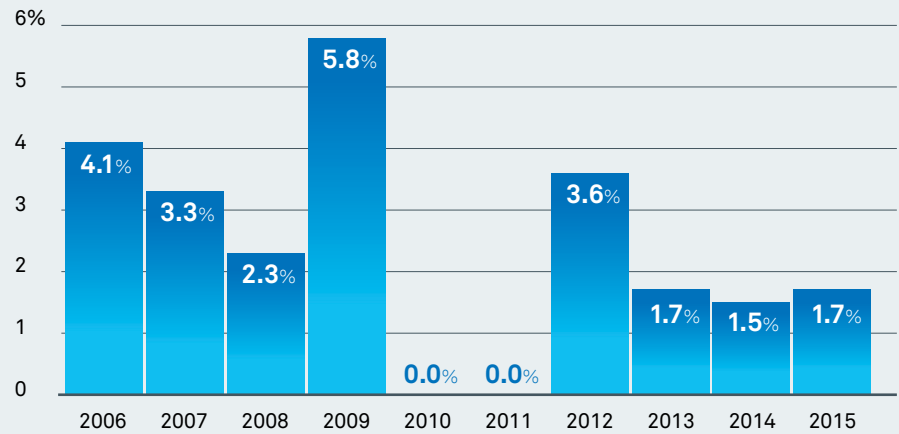
To determine your PIA, the Social Security Administration (SSA) uses your best 35 years of employment to arrive at your Average Indexed Monthly Earnings (AIME). If you have not worked for 35 years, some of the included earnings may be zero. For more information, please visit [www.ssa.gov](http://www.ssa.gov). If you continue working after reaching FRA, the SSA will automatically recalculate your benefits each year you continue to work. If your current income is greater than any of your previously calculated “best 35 years,” your benefits will be adjusted upward. The increase generally will be made in October of the following year, but will be retroactive to January 1.

*Your Primary Insurance Amount is calculated based on your best 35 years of employment.*

Social Security retirement benefits are automatically modified each year for Cost-Of-Living Adjustments (COLAs), which are either positive or zero—never negative. COLAs are based on the Consumer Price Index and have averaged around 2.5% over the past 10 years.

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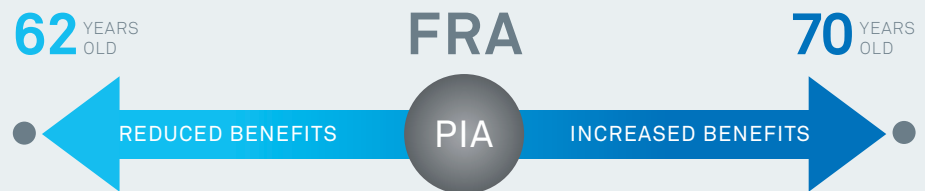
### HISTORICAL COLAs



### COLLECTING BENEFITS EARLIER

While your PIA is payable at your FRA, you are entitled to collect benefits as early as age 62. However, if you choose to collect early, you will permanently reduce the size of your benefits. Your benefits will not be adjusted upward when you attain FRA. The amount of your reduction will depend on two factors—your FRA and the number of months before it that you start collecting. If you begin taking benefits on your 62<sup>nd</sup> birthday, you are subject to the maximum reduction. That reduction will be smaller for each month you delay benefits after age 62 but prior to reaching FRA.

### COLLECTION AGE IMPACTS BENEFIT AMOUNT



When collecting before FRA, always consider the net (after-tax) benefits you will receive. A working spouse may cause more of your benefits to be taxed, and at potentially higher tax rates.

### WORKING WHILE COLLECTING BENEFITS PRIOR TO FULL RETIREMENT AGE

Since Social Security benefits are intended to be supplemental retirement income, there are consequences to collecting your benefits early (i.e., if you are not retired and are still receiving wages). If you opt to collect benefits prior to FRA, you are subject to an earnings test every year until you reach FRA. If your earnings exceed certain thresholds, the SSA will withhold part or all of your benefits. The earnings test for individual and survivor benefits looks only at the salary or wages of the individual collecting early benefits. It does not consider any other type of income, nor does it consider the salary or wages of a spouse. However, spousal benefits (see page 6) may take into account both of the spouse's wages if both are under age 62.

### Withheld Benefits

Benefits withheld by the SSA due to early collection will not be refunded. However, your benefits will be adjusted at FRA to account for the benefits that were withheld. For example, if your FRA was 66 and you began collecting benefits at age 62, the SSA would have reduced your benefit by 25%. Assuming you returned to work at age 64; the SSA may have withheld two years' worth of benefits by the time you

reached FRA. The SSA would then lessen your 25% reduction to give you credit for the two years of lost benefits. Your new reduction would be as if you started collecting benefits at age 64 (13.3% reduction) rather than age 62.

### 2015 RETIREMENT EARNINGS LIMIT

#### Under FRA

- ▶ \$1 of benefits withheld for every \$2 in earnings above \$15,720
- ▶ Earned \$25,720 – \$15,720 = \$10,000 over x 1/2 = \$5,000 withheld

#### Year individual reaches FRA

- ▶ \$1 of benefits withheld for every \$3 in earnings above \$41,880 for months prior to attaining FRA
- ▶ Earned \$51,880 – \$41,880 = \$10,000 over x 1/3 = \$3,333 withheld

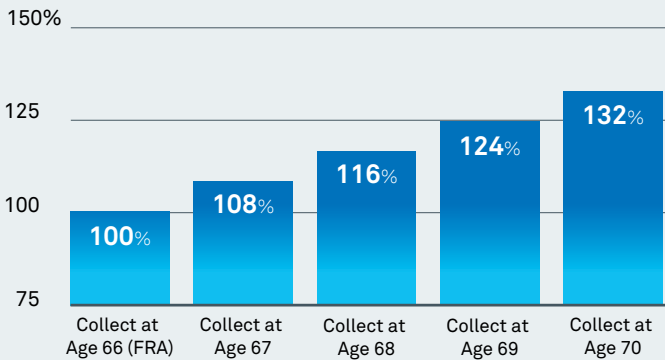
#### Month individual reaches FRA and beyond

- ▶ Unlimited

### WAITING TO COLLECT BENEFITS

If you elect to defer collecting benefits beyond your FRA, the SSA will give you a delayed retirement credit (DRC) for every month you defer between FRA and age 70, the age at which your benefits max out. This increase will be in addition to the annual COLA, if applicable. Depending on your year of birth, your increase will amount to 7% to 8% annually.

### PERCENT OF PIA COLLECTABLE BY AGE

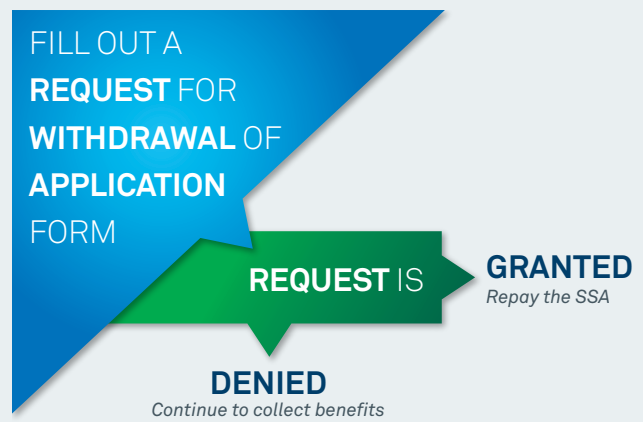


Assumes full retirement age of 66 and individual born in 1943 or later

### CHANGING YOUR MIND—APPLICATION WITHDRAWAL

If you start collecting Social Security benefits and change your mind you can file a “Request for Withdrawal of Application” form with the SSA. Assuming your withdrawal request is granted, you must repay the SSA all of the payments you and anyone else collected based on your work history. There is no penalty or interest on the amount repaid and you may subsequently refile

### WITHDRAWAL OF APPLICATION



for your Social Security benefits. Importantly, withdrawal requests must occur within 12 months of commencing benefits and you are allowed only one withdrawal request in your lifetime.

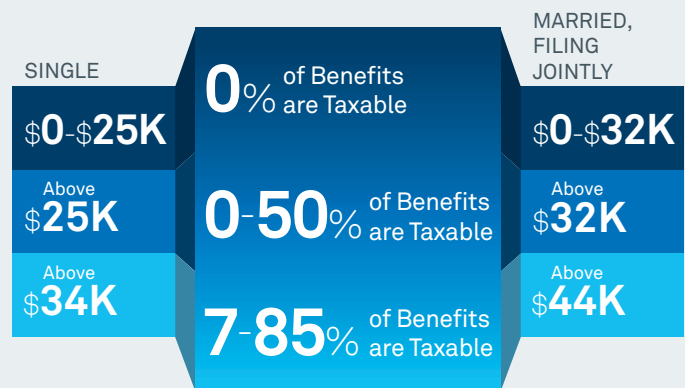
If any of the benefits repaid were subject to federal income tax (see next section), you may be entitled to an itemized deduction on your tax return in the year of repayment. We encourage you to consult with your tax professional to ensure your deduction is appropriately applied.

### TAXATION OF BENEFITS

About one-third of people who collect Social Security benefits are required to pay income taxes on them. Individuals with high total incomes must include up to 85% of their benefits as income for federal income tax purposes. Special step-rate “thresholds” on provisional income determine the amount which you may be taxed. The thresholds for taxation of your benefits are not currently indexed for inflation.

### TAXATION OF SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS

Provisional Income =  
1/2 Social Security Benefits + Modified Adjusted Gross Income



# Family Collection Decision



## SPOUSE

Eligible if:

- ▶ Age 62 or over
- ▶ Any age if caring for your child who is under 16 or disabled before age 22
- ▶ Age 60 if widower



## CHILD

Eligible if:

- ▶ Under age 18, or up to age 19 if in high school
- ▶ Any age if disabled before age 22

## BENEFICIARIES ENTITLED TO COLLECT OFF YOUR BENEFITS

Once you file for benefits, certain other individuals may be entitled to collect benefits based on your work history. If you have been married for at least one year, your spouse may be entitled to collect spousal benefits. Under certain conditions, your children also may be entitled to benefits.

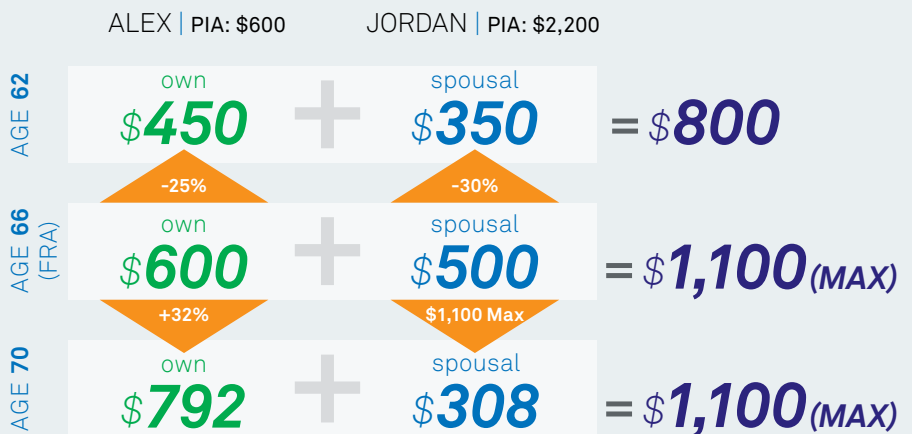
## MAXIMUM FAMILY BENEFITS

The amount of benefits that members of a family may receive on the earnings record of one worker is limited. The limit varies between 150% and 188% of the worker's PIA. If the total benefits due to your spouse and children push your family's benefits above the limit, their benefits will be reduced proportionately to bring the total within the limit. Your benefits will not be affected. Any benefits payable to an ex-spouse (addressed later) are not included in the family maximum.

## COLLECTING SPOUSAL BENEFITS

If you are married to an individual who files for Social Security retirement benefits and you are at least age 62, you may be entitled to collect spousal benefits. Spousal benefits will be equal to 50% of your spouse's PIA if you collect benefits at FRA or later. If you are entitled to your own benefits and your PIA is less than 50% of your spouse's PIA, spousal benefits will be paid in addition to your own. These combined benefits will equal 50% of your spouse's PIA, assuming you start collecting both benefits at FRA or later.

## COLLECT MORE INCOME BY COMBINING SPOUSAL AND INDIVIDUAL BENEFITS



*Jordan must file and collect or file and suspend in order for Alex to collect spousal.*

## Collecting Spousal Benefits Early

If you collect spousal benefits prior to your FRA, your adjusted spousal benefits (amounts in addition to your own benefits) will be reduced. Your spouse's collection age has no impact on your spousal benefits.

## Waiting to Collect Spousal Benefits

Unlike your own benefits, spousal benefits are not subject to guaranteed annual increases if you defer collecting them beyond FRA. Spousal benefits are at their maximum when you reach FRA, so there is no advantage to be gained by deferring collection.

## FILING AND SUSPENDING BENEFITS

If you are at least FRA, you can elect to file for benefits and suspend collection of those benefits until a later date. This would enable your current spouse to collect spousal benefits while your own benefits earn DRCs. Filing and suspending also enables you to retroactively start collecting as of your filing date if you change your mind about suspending.

## COLLECTING SURVIVOR BENEFITS

If you have been married for at least nine months and your spouse passes away, you may be entitled to survivor benefits. If you remarry before age 60, survivor benefits will not be paid unless the subsequent marriage ends. Remarriage after age 60 does not prevent or stop entitlement to benefits. The amount of your survivor benefits depends on when your spouse began taking benefits. If the death occurs prior to your spouse collecting benefits, your survivor benefits will equal 100% of your spouse's PIA when you attain FRA. If your spouse was collecting benefits at the time of his or her death, your survivor benefits will equal his or her actual benefits, assuming you have attained FRA. The only exception is if he or she was collecting benefits that were reduced more than 17.5%. In that case, your survivor benefits will be 82.5% of your spouse's PIA. The survivor benefits, if higher, will replace your other benefits.

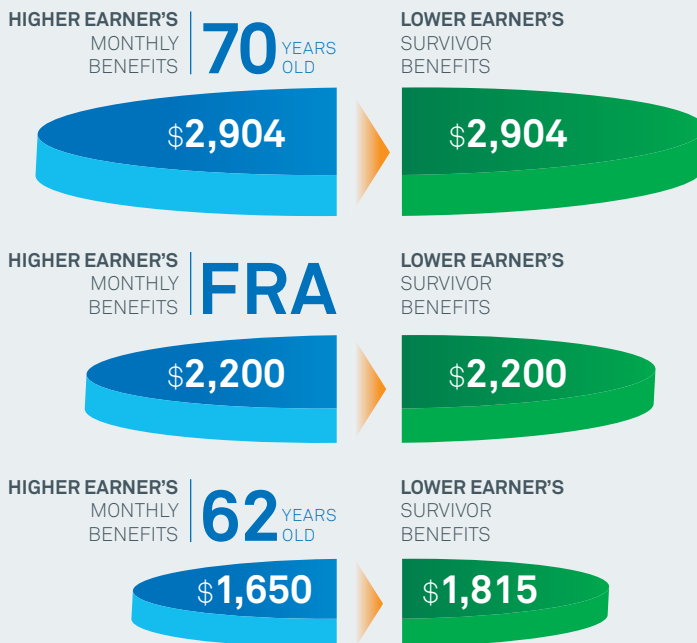
## Collecting Survivor Benefits Early

You can collect survivor benefits as young as age 60. If you collect at age 60, your survivor benefits will be reduced by up to 28.5%.

## CHOOSING BETWEEN BENEFITS

If you are entitled to both individual and survivor benefits, you can choose to begin collecting one and then switch to the other at a later date. It is possible to collect reduced survivor benefits at age 60, and then convert to your own unreduced benefits at FRA or later. You also have the option to collect individual benefits and then switch to survivor benefits.

## DECISION OF INDIVIDUAL BENEFITS AFFECTS SURVIVOR BENEFITS



Assumes higher earner has full retirement age of 66 and PIA of \$2,200. Assumes lower earner has attained FRA prior to collecting survivor benefits.

Similarly, if you are at least FRA and married, you can claim spousal benefits only and then switch to your own benefits (including any earned DRCs) at a later date.

## SPOUSAL AND SURVIVOR BENEFITS AFTER DIVORCE

If you are not married but previously had been married to the same individual for at least 10 years, you may be entitled to collect spousal and/or survivor benefits based on your ex-spouse's work history, as described earlier. To collect spousal benefits you and your ex-spouse must be at least 62. You are not required to wait until your ex-spouse files for benefits.

## IMPACTS OF GOVERNMENT PENSIONS

If you worked for an employer who did not withhold FICA taxes from your salary, such as a government agency, the pension you receive based on that work may reduce your Social Security retirement benefits. This reduction, part of the windfall elimination provision (WEP), affects individuals who earned a pension in any job where FICA taxes were not paid and who worked in other jobs long enough to qualify for Social Security retirement benefits.

The Government Pension Offset reduces your spousal and/or survivor benefit amount received if you earned a government pension where FICA taxes were not paid.

Individuals who receive a pension from a federal, state or local government based on work where FICA taxes were not withheld may also have the spousal and/or survivor benefits they collect reduced. Social Security benefits will be reduced by two-thirds of the government pension.

### GOVERNMENT PENSION OFFSET EXAMPLE

Pension $\$1,500 \times \frac{2}{3} =$ Offset $\$1,000$	
<b>Spousal Benefits</b>	<b>Survivor Benefits</b>
\$1,250	\$2,500
<u>-\$1,000 Offset</u>	<u>-\$1,000 Offset</u>
<b>\$250</b>	<b>\$1,500</b>

### GETTING STARTED

Clearly, there are many considerations when it comes to claiming Social Security benefits. What works for others may not be your best strategy, and vice versa. Being informed is the first step toward good decision-making. Visit the Social Security Administration's website at [www.ssa.gov](http://www.ssa.gov) to download your Social Security Statement. Meet with your advisor to review how a Social Security strategy fits into your financial plan.

### Want to know more?



[blackrock.com](http://blackrock.com)

Sources: BlackRock; Social Security Administration; Internal Revenue Service. Please see the Social Security Administration's website at [www.ssa.gov](http://www.ssa.gov) for more information, restrictions and limitations about Social Security benefits.

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