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**OFFICE OF  
THE INSPECTOR GENERAL**

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**SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION**

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**SUPPLEMENTAL SECURITY INCOME  
RECIPIENTS RECEIVING SOCIAL  
SECURITY-ADMINISTERED PAYMENTS  
IN EXCESS OF FEDERAL LIMITS**

February 2012

A-06-10-21066

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**AUDIT REPORT**

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# SOCIAL SECURITY

## MEMORANDUM

Date: February 22, 2012

Refer To:

To: The Commissioner

From: Inspector General

Subject: Supplemental Security Income Recipients Receiving Social Security-administered Payments in Excess of Federal Limits (A-06-10-21066)

## OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to determine whether individuals concurrently entitled to Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments and Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance (OASDI) benefits received combined payments in excess of Federal limits.

## BACKGROUND

The OASDI program provides benefits to wage earners and their families in the event the wage earner retires, becomes disabled, or dies. The SSI program provides payments to financially needy individuals who are aged, blind, or disabled. In December 2010, approximately 2.7 million individuals received both OASDI benefits and SSI payments (concurrent beneficiaries).<sup>1</sup>

Under the SSI program, each eligible individual living in his/her own household and having no other countable income is provided a maximum monthly Federal cash payment of \$674.<sup>2</sup> SSA reduces SSI payments by a recipient's countable income,<sup>3</sup> less certain exclusions.<sup>4</sup> An example follows.

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<sup>1</sup> SSA Publication No. 13-11976, Table 1, *SSI Recipients by State and County, 2010* (July 2011).

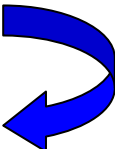
<sup>2</sup> Also referred to as the Federal Benefit Rate (FBR). The maximum SSI payment increases with the annual cost-of-living adjustments that apply to Social Security benefits. The FBR has remained unchanged at \$674 for individuals and \$1,011 for couples since 2009 because, under the automatic adjustment provisions of the *Social Security Act*, SSA did not make cost-of-living adjustments in 2010 or 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Countable income includes both countable earned and countable unearned income.

<sup>4</sup> SSI recipients can have \$20 per month in unearned income without affecting their SSI payment. SSA considers OASDI benefits as countable unearned income. Monthly unearned income in excess of \$20 results in a dollar-for-dollar reduction in SSI payments.

A concurrent beneficiary receives a \$600 monthly OASDI payment and has no other countable income. Because the beneficiary's OASDI payment is less than the FBR plus the \$20 unearned income exclusion, the SSI payable to the individual is \$94 (see computation below).

Unearned Income (OASDI Benefits)	\$600	
Less: Unearned Income Exclusion	<u>(20)</u>	
Equals: Countable Income	\$580	
2011 FBR	\$674	
Less: Countable Income	<u>(580)</u>	
SSI Federal Benefit Payable	\$94	



In a prior audit,<sup>5</sup> we identified over 7,000 cases where SSA paid concurrent beneficiaries excess SSI payments because the SSI computation incorporated OASDI benefit amounts that were less than the amounts SSA actually paid. We recommended that SSA correct system errors that resulted in excessive SSI payments. SSA initially agreed with our recommendations. However, in September 2010, SSA informed us it determined the issue was more complex than originally anticipated. SSA stated it did not have sufficient resources to implement a system correction. SSA further stated that such a correction would likely require a Strategic Information Technology Assessment Review to support the changes.

Based on the results of the September 2009 audit, we reviewed all instances where combined SSA payments to concurrently entitled beneficiaries exceeded the FBR. In December 2010, we obtained data from SSA's payment records that identified approximately 29,000 concurrently entitled beneficiaries who received combined SSA payments that exceeded the FBR plus the \$20 unearned income exclusion by at least \$3. Our review focused on payments to these beneficiaries. (See Appendix B for additional information on our scope and methodology.)

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<sup>5</sup> SSA OIG, *Supplemental Security Income Overpayments to Concurrent Beneficiaries Resulting from Incorrect Benefit Calculations* (A-06-09-29103), September 2009.

## RESULTS OF REVIEW

In December 2010, SSA issued more than 29,000 concurrent beneficiaries combined SSA payments that exceeded Federal limits.

- SSA improperly issued 2,073 concurrent beneficiaries combined payments in excess of Federal limits as the result of 2 systems-related payment computation errors.
  - ✓ The individuals' Master Beneficiary Records (MBR) did not contain an SSI data (SID) segment.<sup>6</sup> As a result, SSA did not count OASDI benefits against SSI payments for 1,006 concurrent beneficiaries.
  - ✓ A systems input intended to prevent double counting<sup>7</sup> unintentionally froze OASDI benefit amounts used in subsequent SSI unearned income computations at amounts lower than actually paid for 1,067 concurrent beneficiaries.
- Most of the remaining cases identified where SSA issued concurrent beneficiaries combined payments in excess of Federal limits were not overpayments. SSA paid the beneficiaries amounts in excess of Federal limits because of retrospective monthly accounting (RMA).

In April 2011, we forwarded SSA data files that identified the 2,073 beneficiaries and requested SSA take action to correct the payment errors. SSA Operations disseminated the cases to applicable regional offices for action. SSA completed reviews of these cases in September 2011 and provided information indicating that Office of Operations staff had corrected the payment errors, identified \$5,475,209 in excess payments, and established overpayments on applicable payment records. Had SSA not corrected these errors, we estimate it would have made approximately \$2.2 million in additional erroneous payments over the next 12 months (see Appendix C).

### Missing SID Segment

We identified 1,006 concurrent beneficiaries who had received excessive SSI payments because SSA did not count their OASDI benefits against their SSI payments. This occurred because SSA did not properly link the individuals' OASDI and SSI payment records. To illustrate, in June 2010, SSA began paying an individual \$674 in monthly SSI. In September 2010, SSA also began paying the same individual \$1,807 in monthly Disability Insurance (DI) benefits. Initiation of the DI payments should have made the

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<sup>6</sup> This SID segment establishes a link between the OASDI and SSI payment records.

<sup>7</sup> Refers to amounts SSA withholds from a beneficiary's OASDI payment in satisfaction of a prior overpayment. If SSA determines (1) the beneficiary was concurrently entitled when an OASDI overpayment occurred and (2) SSA offset the overpaid amount from the beneficiary's previous SSI payments, SSA excludes withheld amounts from the SSI payment computation.

individual ineligible for an SSI payment. However, SSA continued to issue the \$674 SSI payment.<sup>8</sup>

In September 2011, SSA provided information indicating that Operations staff had reviewed each of the 1,006 cases, corrected the payment errors, and established applicable overpayments.

### **Unearned Income Reduction Indicator Code “Y”**

We identified 1,067 beneficiaries who received excessive SSI payments because of computation errors caused when SSA staff input an Unearned Income Reduction indicator code of “Y” on their payment record. This code indicated that field office staff determined double counting applied, and SSA should not consider amounts withheld from the beneficiaries’ OASDI payments as unearned income. However, it also appeared that this indicator erroneously froze the OASDI benefit amount used in the SSI payment computation during the entire period SSA recouped OASDI overpayments from the beneficiaries. Once SSA input the indicator code on the payment record, the SSI payment computation no longer considered benefit payment increases awarded to these beneficiaries.

In these cases, SSA used smaller OASDI benefit amounts in the December 2010 SSI payment computation than it actually paid these individuals. To illustrate, in October 2007, an SSI recipient began receiving \$751 in monthly DI benefits.<sup>9</sup> In December 2008, SSA determined it had overpaid the individual \$2,305 in DI benefits and initiated collection of \$40 a month from the individual’s DI benefit payment. SSA input an unearned income reduction indicator code “Y” on the individual’s SSI payment record. For an unknown reason, the SSI payment computation used \$0 as the DI benefit amount, which resulted in the erroneous initiation of a \$674 monthly SSI payment beginning in January 2009.<sup>10</sup>

In September 2011, SSA provided information indicating that Operations staff had reviewed each of the 1,067 cases, corrected the payment errors, and established applicable overpayments.

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<sup>8</sup> In July 2011, SSA reviewed this case, terminated the SSI payment and established a \$9,436 overpayment on the individual’s SSI payment record.

<sup>9</sup> At the time of the audit, the beneficiary’s cost-of-living adjusted monthly benefit payment had increased to \$773.

<sup>10</sup> The SSI payments included an additional \$87 in monthly state supplemental benefits that SSA should also have partially reduced. In July 2011, SSA reviewed this case, suspended the SSI payments, and established a \$20,547 overpayment on the individual’s SSI payment record.

## RMA

SSA computes SSI payments using RMA.<sup>11</sup> Under RMA, SSA generally reduces a concurrent beneficiary's SSI payment using known countable income from 2 months earlier. This time lapse reduces the administrative burden associated with establishing and collecting overpayments caused when SSA becomes aware of a recipient's countable income shortly after it issues an SSI payment.

Cash benefits received under various governmental assistance programs are exempt from RMA and reduce beneficiaries' SSI payments in the month received.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, OASDI benefit increases that result from cost-of-living allowances are also exempt from RMA.<sup>13</sup> However, Federal law does not exempt other OASDI benefit payment increases from RMA. Accordingly, a concurrent beneficiary with no other countable income who receives a non-cost-of-living allowance OASDI benefit increase generally will not see a corresponding decrease in SSI payments for 2 months. As a result, we identified thousands of concurrent beneficiaries who received combined December 2010 OASDI and SSI payments in excess of the FBR.<sup>14</sup>

### Sample Results

We reviewed SSA payment records for 50 of the 29,008 concurrent beneficiaries whose combined December 2010 SSA payments exceeded Federal limits. In 41 of 50 cases, application of RMA to non-cost-of-living OASDI benefit payment increases allowed the beneficiaries to receive SSA payments in excess of the Federal limits.<sup>15</sup> For example, the Automatic Earnings Reappraisal Operation (AERO) is a computer operation that reexamines an individual's earnings record to determine whether the worker is due a benefit recomputation to include earnings not previously considered.<sup>16</sup> AERO is run twice for each earnings year, usually in late October and late the following March. SSA issues payments reflecting any benefit increases due in December and May. If AERO results in a benefit increase, SSA pays the beneficiary not only the increased amount for the current month, but also any retroactive benefits

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<sup>11</sup> Pub. L. No. 97-35, enacted August 13, 1981.

<sup>12</sup> Pub. L. No. 100-203, enacted December 22, 1987, exempted amounts received under Aid to Families with Dependent Children/Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, foster care, refugee cash assistance, Cuban-Haitian entrant assistance, and general and child welfare assistance provided by the Bureau of Indian Affairs from RMA.

<sup>13</sup> Pub. L. No. 98-369, enacted July 18, 1984.

<sup>14</sup> Although these beneficiaries received combined SSA payments in excess of Federal limits, we determined that SSA computed and issued the payments in accordance with RMA.

<sup>15</sup> The 41 beneficiaries received \$4,750 (average of \$116) in combined payments in excess of the FBR plus the \$20 unearned income exclusion.

<sup>16</sup> SSA, POMS, TC 11001.110B (October 24, 2002).

due.<sup>17</sup> Because RMA applies to these benefit payment increases, concurrent beneficiaries receive increased OASDI benefits for 2 months with no corresponding reduction in their SSI payment.

**RMA Case Example**

In November 2010, SSA paid a concurrent beneficiary \$273 in DI and \$421 in SSI. Based on 2009 earnings information identified during the 2010 AERO process, SSA determined the individual’s monthly DI benefit *should have been* \$311 in 2010.

On November 5, 2010, SSA notified the individual that her December 2010 DI payment would consist of the new \$311 benefit amount plus the \$380 difference between \$273 and the \$311 that SSA should have paid each month from January through October 2010. Since RMA applied, SSA did not count the OASDI benefit increase paid in December 2010 against the beneficiary’s SSI payment until February 2011, causing the beneficiary to experience significant fluctuations in total SSA payments over several months (see Table 1).

Table 1. Payments to a Sample Concurrent Beneficiary					
November 2010 Through March 2011					
	Nov 2010	Dec 2010	Jan 2011	Feb 2011	Mar 2011
DI Payment	\$273	\$691	\$311	\$311	\$311
SSI Payment	\$421	\$421	\$421	\$3	\$383
<b>Total SSA Payments</b>	\$694	<b>\$1,112</b>	<b>\$732</b>	<b>\$314</b>	\$694

Such large benefit fluctuations can result in unnecessary financial hardship. While this beneficiary initially received a temporary increase in total payments, her combined SSA payments in February 2011 totaled only \$314—less than half the FBR. The benefit fluctuations can also confuse affected beneficiaries and result in expenditure of additional administrative resources. In the case above, SSA mailed the beneficiary three separate notices to explain the payment changes that occurred from December through March. Further, discussion with SSA personnel indicated the written notices are not always effective in explaining the payment fluctuations, and beneficiaries sometimes make multiple field office visits with payment questions.

When SSA issues SSI payments to concurrent beneficiaries, it also knows the amount of OASDI benefits payable. Legislation allowing current monthly OASDI benefits to be immediately counted against current SSI payments would better ensure a consistent income stream to this vulnerable population, avoid confusion, and reduce the administrative burden associated with explaining the payment fluctuations.

<sup>17</sup> As part of this review, we did not determine whether SSA correctly applied SSI windfall offset provisions to the retroactive OASDI benefit payments.



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In December 2010, more than 2,000 concurrent beneficiaries received excess SSI payments because SSA did not accurately count OASDI benefits against their SSI payments. We recognize this is a small number of payment errors relative to the 2.7 million beneficiaries who receive both OASDI and SSI payments each month. However, because of the errors, SSA paid the beneficiaries approximately \$5.5 million to which they were not entitled. Had these payment errors not been identified and corrected, we estimate SSA would have made an additional \$2.2 million in erroneous payments over the next 12 months.

Thousands of additional concurrent beneficiaries received combined SSA payments in December 2010 that exceeded Federal limits because SSA computed their payments using RMA. Exempting OASDI benefit increases from RMA would better ensure a consistent income stream to these SSI recipients, avoid confusion, and reduce the administrative burden associated with explaining payment fluctuations.

As a result, we recommend that SSA:

1. Determine whether it can implement cost-effective system enhancements that address the payment computation errors.
2. Consider pursuing a legislative proposal to exempt OASDI benefit payments from RMA.

## AGENCY COMMENTS AND OIG RESPONSE

SSA agreed with Recommendation 1 stating it had implemented a change to address the types of payment computation errors discussed in the report. SSA also stated it would continue evaluating other cost-effective system enhancements that address payment computation errors.

SSA disagreed with Recommendation 2 stating that before it considers proposing legislation on this issue, it must study the benefits, feasibility, and costs of such a proposal and ensure the proposal does not result in unintended consequences. We look forward to the results of this study.

In this case, completion of a preliminary cost-benefit study is an important part of the consideration process. As a result, we believe SSA's comments are responsive, address the findings discussed in the report, and meet the intent of our recommendations.



Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr.

# *Appendices*

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APPENDIX A – Acronyms

APPENDIX B – Scope and Methodology

APPENDIX C – Sample Results and Estimate of Funds Put to Better Use

APPENDIX D – Agency Comments

APPENDIX E – OIG Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

## Acronyms

AERO	Automatic Earnings Reappraisal Operation
DI	Disability Insurance
FBR	Federal Benefit Rate
MBR	Master Beneficiary Record
OASDI	Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
Pub. L. No.	Public Law Number
RMA	Retrospective Monthly Accounting
SID	Supplemental Security Income Data
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSI	Supplemental Security Income
UMR	Unearned Income Reduction Code
U.S.C.	United States Code

# Scope and Methodology

To accomplish our objective, we:

- Reviewed applicable sections of the *Social Security Act* and Social Security Administration (SSA) regulations, rules, policies, and procedures.
- Reviewed relevant Office of the Inspector General reports.
- Researched the Master Beneficiary/Supplemental Security Record interface and discussed the interface with Office of Systems personnel.
- Obtained data identifying 2,690,020 concurrent beneficiaries in current payment status as of December 2010. We then removed records where
  - ✓ current date of entitlement was from November 2010 to July 2011 because of the lag between the date of entitlement and actual date the beneficiary received benefits,
  - ✓ the beneficiary received windfall amounts from March 2010 to March 2011 because of the lag when beneficiaries actually received windfall amounts,
  - ✓ the beneficiary did not receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments but received State supplemental payments, and
  - ✓ combined SSA payments exceeded the Federal limit by less than \$3.
- Identified 29,008 records where concurrent beneficiaries received combined SSI and Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance (OASDI) payments that exceeded the Federal Benefit Rate (FBR) plus the \$20 unearned income exclusion by \$3 or more.<sup>1</sup> We reviewed 50 randomly selected records and identified the following (see Table B-1).

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<sup>1</sup> Our audit population did not include concurrent beneficiaries who received less than \$694 in combined SSA payments due to receipt of countable income from non-SSA sources. As a result, our audit results understate the number of beneficiaries affected by the payment errors and anomalies discussed in the report.

<b>Table B-1 Review of 50 Concurrent Beneficiaries with Combined SSA Payments in Excess of FBR</b>		
<b>Reason Combined Payments Exceeded FBR</b>	<b>Records</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Application of Retrospective Monthly Accounting to OASDI Benefit Increases	41	82
No Supplemental Security Identification Data (SID) Segment	3	6
Unearned Income Reduction Code (UMR) Indicator Code "Y"	3	6
Unknown <sup>2</sup>	3	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100</b>

- Identified 2,073 of the 29,008 records where concurrently entitled beneficiaries received SSA benefits in excess of the Federal limit because either no SID segment existed on the Master Beneficiary Record or a "Y" UMR indicator code existed on the Supplemental Security Record. Of these 2,073 records, we selected a random sample of 50 records for detailed analysis. For each sampled case, we
  - ✓ calculated beneficiaries' past SSI payments over the FBR,<sup>3</sup>
  - ✓ identified records SSA corrected between December 2010 and March 2011, and
  - ✓ estimated beneficiaries' future SSI payment errors.<sup>4</sup>

We conducted our audit between December 2010 and August 2011 in Dallas, Texas. We determined the data used for this audit were sufficiently reliable to meet our audit objective. The entities audited were the field offices and program service centers under the Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Operations and the Offices of Retirement and Survivors Insurance Systems, Disability Systems, and Applications and Supplemental Security Income Systems under the Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Systems. We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective.

<sup>2</sup> We could not determine why SSA issued these beneficiaries combined SSA payments in excess of the FBR. We forwarded these cases to SSA's Office of Operations for review.

<sup>3</sup> We calculated past payment errors based on amounts SSA paid before April 2011.

<sup>4</sup> We estimated future payment errors based on March 2011 payment errors multiplied by 12 months.

## Sample Results and Estimate of Funds Put to Better Use

We identified 2,073 concurrent beneficiaries who improperly received combined December 2010 Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance (OASDI) payments in excess of Federal limits. We determined the payment errors occurred either because

- the beneficiary’s Master Beneficiary Record (MBR) did not contain an SSI data (SID) segment so SSA did not count OASDI benefits against the beneficiary’s SSI payments or
- a systems input intended to prevent double counting unintentionally froze OASDI benefit amounts used in subsequent SSI payment computations at amounts lower than actually paid.

We reviewed 50 randomly selected records and estimated the amount of additional SSI payment errors that SSA would make over the next 12 months if Agency staff did not correct the errors (see Table C-2).<sup>1</sup>

Table C-1: Population and Sample Size	
Population Size	2,073
Sample Size	50

Table C-2: Estimate of Future Payment Errors	
Number of Records	Erroneous Payments
42 <sup>2</sup>	\$52,921

<sup>1</sup> Based on erroneous SSI amounts SSA paid the individuals in March 2011 multiplied by 12 months.

<sup>2</sup> Between December 2010 and March 2011, SSA appeared to have corrected the payment errors on eight records. We excluded the eight records from our estimate.

Projecting these results to our population of 2,073 cases, we estimate that SSA would have paid approximately \$2.2 million in additional erroneous payments over the next 12 months if Agency staff had not corrected these errors (see Table C-3).

Table C-3: Estimated Future Erroneous SSI Payments	Erroneous Payments
Sample Results	\$52,921
Point Estimate	\$2,194,103
Projection Lower Limit	\$1,252,655
Projection Upper Limit	\$3,135,551

**Note:** All projections are at the 90-percent confidence level.

## Agency Comments





## SOCIAL SECURITY

### MEMORANDUM

**Date:** January 30, 2012 **Refer To:** SIJ-3

**To:** Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr.  
Inspector General

**From:** Dean S. Landis /s/  
Deputy Chief of Staff

**Subject:** Office of the Inspector General Draft Report, "Supplemental Security Income Recipients Receiving Social Security-Administered Payments in Excess of Federal Limits" (A-06-10-21066)—INFORMATION

Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft report. Please see our attached comments.

Please let me know if we can be of further assistance. You may direct staff inquiries to Teresa Rojas at (410) 966-6784.

Attachment

**COMMENTS ON THE OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL DRAFT REPORT,  
“SUPPLEMENTAL SECURITY INCOME RECIPIENTS RECEIVING SOCIAL  
SECURITY-ADMINISTERED PAYMENTS IN EXCESS OF FEDERAL LIMITS” (A-06-  
10-21066)**

**Recommendation 1**

Determine if it can implement cost-effective system enhancements that address the payment computation errors.

**Response**

We agree. We recently implemented a change to address incorrect payment computation for some of the types of cases mentioned in the audit. We will continue to evaluate other cost effective systems enhancements that address payment computation errors.

**Recommendation 2**

Consider pursuing a legislative proposal to exempt Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance (OASDI) benefit payments from Retrospective Monthly Accounting (RMA).

**Response**

We disagree. Before we consider proposing legislation on this issue, we must study the benefits, feasibility, and costs (including administrative and program costs) of such a proposal, and make certain there would be no unintended consequences, including creating inequities by continuing to count other types of income.

[SSA also provided a technical comment that we incorporated into the report.]

## OIG Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

### ***OIG Contacts***

Ron Gunia, Director, Dallas Audit Division

Jason Arrington, Audit Manager

### ***Acknowledgments***

In addition to those named above:

Wanda Renteria, Senior Auditor

Joseph Cross, Information Technology Specialist

Renalda Stallworth, Senior Information Technology Specialist

Chuck Zaepfel, Information Technology Specialist

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