

Report Summary

Social Security Administration Office of the Inspector General

December 2008



Objective

Our objective was to determine whether beneficiaries receiving spousal benefits were eligible to receive higher retirement benefits on their own earnings records.

Background

The Social Security Administration (SSA) administers the Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance program under Title II of the *Social Security Act*. This program provides monthly benefits to retired and/or disabled workers and their families and to survivors of deceased workers. Retired workers' families include benefits for spouses; however, spouses with sufficient earnings, referred to as quarters of coverage, may become dually entitled to Title II benefits on their own earnings record.

To view the full report, visit <http://www.ssa.gov/oig/ADO/BEPDF/A-09-08-18007.pdf>

Payments to Spouses Eligible for Higher Retirement Benefits **(A-09-08-18007)**

Our Findings

SSA's controls and procedures did not always ensure that spouses receive the highest benefits due them at retirement age. This occurred because SSA did not have procedures in place to identify and notify spouses when they became eligible for higher benefits on their own earnings records as a result of delayed retirement credits and qualifying quarters of coverage. Specifically, we estimated

- 13,580 spouses were eligible for an additional \$123.7 million in retirement benefits from February 1993 to January 2008 had they been paid on their own earnings records after attaining age 70. On average, each spouse could have received an additional \$9,112 in benefits.
- Of these individuals, 12,340 spouses could receive an additional \$209.0 million in retirement benefits over their remaining life expectancies. On average, each spouse could receive an additional \$16,937 in benefits.

We also estimate that 4,940 spouses were eligible for an additional \$27.3 million in retirement benefits from April 1986 to October 2003 had they been paid on their own earnings records between full retirement age (FRA) and age 70. On average, each spouse could have received an additional \$5,522 in benefits.

Our Recommendations

We recommend that SSA identify and notify beneficiaries receiving spousal benefits of their eligibility to receive higher retirement benefits on their own earnings records at FRA and/or age 70.