General Session

Barbara R. Silverstone
Executive Director of NOSSCR
Committee Rosters

Submitted By:
Barbara R. Silverstone, Executive Director of NOSSCR
Copyright 2017, CQ Roll Call
Current as of Feb. 28, 2017

House Committee on Ways and Means

- Full Committee
- Subcommittee on Health
- Subcommittee on Human Resources
- Subcommittee on Oversight
- Subcommittee on Social Security
- Subcommittee on Tax Policy
- Subcommittee on Trade

Full Committee
(202) 225-3625
Fax: (202) 225-2610
1102 Longworth Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20515
waysandmeans.house.gov

Jurisdiction: The panel oversees revenue measures, including: customs revenue, collection districts, and ports of entry and delivery; reciprocal trade agreements; revenue measures relating to the insular possessions; bonded debt of the United States; deposit of public monies; transportation of dutiable goods; tax-exempt foundations and charitable trusts; national Social Security, except health care and facilities programs that are supported from general revenues as opposed to payroll deductions and work incentive programs.

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<th>Republicans (24)</th>
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<td>Kevin Brady, Texas—Chairman</td>
<td>Richard E. Neal, Mass.—Ranking Member</td>
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<td>Sam Johnson, Texas</td>
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<td>Pat Tiberi, Ohio</td>
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<td>Adrian Smith, Neb.</td>
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Subcommittee on Health
(202) 225-3943
Fax: (202) 226-1765
1135 Longworth Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20515

Jurisdiction: Programs providing payments from any source for health care, health delivery systems or health research; bills and matters relating to the health care programs of the Social Security Act, including Titles V, XI (Part B), XVIII and XIX; tax credit and deduction provisions of the Internal Revenue Code dealing with health insurance premiums and health care costs

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Subcommittee on Human Resources
(202) 225-1025
Fax: (202) 225-9480
B-317 Rayburn Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20515

Jurisdiction: Public assistance provisions of the Social Security Act, including temporary assistance for needy families, child care, child and family services, child support, foster care, adoption, supplemental security income social services, eligibility of welfare recipients for food stamps and low-income energy assistance; bills and matters relating to Titles I, IV, VI, X, XIV, XVI, XVII, XX and related provisions of titles VII and XI of the Social Security Act; federal-state system of unemployment compensation, and the financing thereof, including the programs for extended and emergency benefits; unemployment compensation under titles 111, IX and XII of the Social Security Act, chapters 23 and 23A of the Internal Revenue Code, and the Federal-State Extended Unemployment Compensation Act of 1970 and related provisions

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Subcommittee on Oversight
(202) 225-5522
Fax: (202) 225-0787
1136 Longworth Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20515

Jurisdiction: Matters within the scope of the full committee’s jurisdiction but limited to existing law; concurrent jurisdiction with other subcommittees; shared jurisdiction with the full committee on Internal Revenue Code and other revenue matters

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<td>George Holding, N.C.</td>
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Subcommittee on Social Security
(202) 225-9263
Fax: (202) 225-5286
1129 Longworth Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20515

**Jurisdiction:** Federal Old Age, Survivors’ and Disability Insurance System, the Railroad Retirement System, and employment taxes and trust fund operations relating to those systems. More specifically, the jurisdiction of the Subcommittee on Social Security shall include bills and matters involving Title II of the Social Security Act and chapter 22 of the Internal Revenue Code (the Railroad Retirement Tax Act), as well as provisions in Title VII and Title XI of the act relating to procedure and administration involving the Old Age, Survivors’ and Disability Insurance System.

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Subcommittee on Tax Policy
(202) 225-5522
Fax: (202) 225-0787
1136 Longworth Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20515

**Jurisdiction:** Revenue measures that, from time to time, shall be referred to it specifically by the chairman of the full committee

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Subcommittee on Trade

(202) 225-6649
Fax: (202) 226-0158
1104 Longworth Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20515

Jurisdiction: Customs and customs administration including tariff and import fee structure, classification, valuation of and special rules applying to imports, and special tariff provisions and procedures which relate to customs operation affecting exports and imports; import trade matters, including import impact, industry relief from injurious imports, adjustment assistance and programs to encourage competitive responses to imports, unfair import practices including antidumping and countervailing duty provisions, and import policy which relates to dependence on foreign sources of supply; commodity agreements and reciprocal trade agreements involving multilateral and bilateral trade negotiations and implementation of agreements involving tariff and non-tariff trade barriers to and distortions of international trade; international rules, organizations and institutional aspects of international trade agreements; budget authorizations for the customs revenue functions of the Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. International Trade Commission, and the U.S. Trade Representative; and special trade-related problems involving market access, competitive conditions of specific industries, export policy and promotion, access to materials in short supply, bilateral trade relations including trade with developing countries, operations of multinational corporations, and trade with non-market economies.

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Senate Committee on Finance

- Full Committee
- Subcommittee on Energy, Natural Resources and Infrastructure
- Subcommittee on Fiscal Responsibility and Economic Growth
- Subcommittee on Health Care
- Subcommittee on International Trade, Customs and Global Competitiveness
- Subcommittee on Social Security, Pensions and Family Policy
- Subcommittee on Taxation and IRS Oversight

Full Committee
(202) 224-4515
Fax: (202) 228-0554
219 Dirksen Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510
finance.senate.gov

Jurisdiction: The panel oversees revenue measures, including tax policy, and bonded debt of the United States, except as provided in the Congressional Budget Act of 1974. The committee has jurisdiction over customs, collection districts, and ports of entry and delivery; deposit of public moneys; general revenue sharing; health programs under the Social Security Act and health programs financed by a specific tax or trust fund; Social Security; reciprocal trade agreements; revenue measures relating to the insular possessions; tariffs and import quotas; and the transportation of dutiable goods.

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<td>Tim Scott, S.C.</td>
<td>Bill Cassidy, La.</td>
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Subcommittee on Energy, Natural Resources and Infrastructure
(202) 224-4515
Fax: (202) 228-0554
219 Dirksen Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

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Subcommittee on Fiscal Responsibility and Economic Growth
(202) 224-4515
Fax: (202) 228-0554
219 Dirksen Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

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Subcommittee on Health Care
(202) 224-4515
Fax: (282) 228-0554
219 Dirksen Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

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Subcommittee on International Trade, Customs and Global Competitiveness
(202) 224-4515
Fax: (202) 228-0554
219 Dirksen Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

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Subcommittee on Social Security, Pensions and Family Policy
(202) 224-4515
Fax: (202) 228-0554
219 Dirksen Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

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Subcommittee on Taxation and IRS Oversight
(202) 224-4515
Fax: (202) 228-0554
219 Dirksen Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

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Column: Trump’s Proposal to Eliminate the Social Security Payroll Tax May Be His Worst Idea Yet

Submitted By:
Barbara R. Silverstone, Executive Director of NOSSCR
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Column Trump's proposal to eliminate the Social Security payroll tax may be his worst idea yet

President Trump meets with his fiscal brain trust, budget director Mick Mulvaney, center, and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin. Are they plotting to eviscerate Social Security? (Evan Vucci / Associated Press)

By Michael Hiltzik

APRIL 10, 2017, 1:00 PM

President Trump's tax reform agenda is in trouble. That’s not news, but one proposal that his team has floated as a way, ostensibly, to cut taxes on the middle class is. According to the Associated Press, they’re toying with the idea of eliminating the payroll tax, which funds Social Security and part of Medicare, or cutting it drastically.

This is an absolutely terrible idea, partially because it smells like a back-door way of cutting Social Security benefits. It needs to be nipped in the bud.
“This proposal is a Trojan horse,” the veteran Social Security advocate Nancy J. Altman told me. “It appears to be a gift in the form of middle-class tax relief, but would, if enacted, lead to the destruction of working Americans’ fundamental economic security.”

To understand why, one needs to examine the history and mechanics of Social Security, something the Trump team hasn’t tried or doesn’t care to do. But we can.

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This proposal is a Trojan horse ... [that] would, if enacted, lead to the destruction of working Americans' fundamental economic security.

— Social Security advocate Nancy J. Altman

The “contributory” nature of Social Security, through which beneficiaries pay for their eventual benefits via the payroll tax, dates back to its very origins in 1935.

The most commonly quoted defense of the payroll tax comes from Franklin Roosevelt, who called the feature “straight politics” and explained: “We put those payroll contributions there so as to give the contributors a legal, moral and political right to collect their pensions. ... With those taxes in there, no damn politician can ever scrap my social security program.” But FDR didn’t say that until 1941, six years after enactment, when he was interviewed for a government study.

The real rationale for the payroll tax was more nuanced. FDR’s Committee on Economic Security, which drafted the program in 1934, had engaged in a spirited debate over whether to fund Social Security via general government revenues or from worker contributions.

There were several reasons to choose the latter. One was to make clear that Social Security wouldn’t be a welfare program, but a retirement insurance benefit provided by right. Inevitably, the committee reported, a “gratuitous” pension — one funded by the general budget, “must be conditioned upon a ‘means’ test,” which meant it would be delivered only to the poorest Americans and fulfill only the slighted needs.

“The gratuitous pension, in fairness to the legitimate demands of other needy groups, must hold all grantees down to a minimum standard,” the committee advised Congress. A contributory system that amounted to an annuity, “can be ample for a comfortable existence, bearing some relation to customary wage standards.” That’s essentially the Social Security retirement system we have today.

Social Security’s creators thought that the contribution system would not only ensure that benefits would be reasonably large, but that they wouldn’t get too large. The idea was that the strain on workers’ take-home pay resulting from too much expansion in the program would stay Congress’ hand. As it happened, Social Security proved to be so popular that the public remained on board through several expansions, including
coverage of spouses and dependents, and the addition of disability insurance in 1956.

As FDR foresaw, endowing Social Security with its own revenue stream has protected it over the years from grasping politicians — mostly conservatives, who have aimed since 1935 to eviscerate the program. The weekly or bi-weekly payroll deductions that go to the program have given workers a proprietary interest in benefits that has been hard to undermine.

That’s why President Obama’s 2010 deal with Congress to cut the employee share of the payroll tax temporarily — to 4.2% of wage income from 6.2% — also was a terrible idea. (Employers pay another 6.2%, but their share wasn’t affected by the 2010 deal.)

The tax cut was a device to put a few more bucks into families’ pockets during the depths of the Great Recession. But although it was understood that the lost revenues would be made up dollar for dollar from the federal budget, the arrangement risked permanently undermining the system’s finances. Making it worse, the cut failed to steer the additional funds to the families who needed it the most. Every worker got the same tax break — billionaires got the same maximum $2,136 cut as anyone else earning the maximum $106,800 in wages subject to the payroll tax at the time.

Under the targeted Making Work Pay program that was replaced by the payroll tax cut after Republicans refused to continue the program, low-income families were entitled to up to $800 — any family earning $40,000 or less would have received more from Making Work Pay than the tax cut, while everyone else, including CEOs and members of Congress, did better under the new arrangement.

The full payroll tax eventually was restored after two years, but the erosion of the link between wages and Social Security has lived on; to this day, some people still think Social Security is financed by the federal budget, even though that’s not the case.

The Trump proposal potentially raises the manipulation of the payroll tax to a new level. The details reported by the Associated Press are sketchy and preliminary. But thus far, there’s no indication that Trump views this change as a temporary measure. If it’s designed as a permanent conversion of Social Security’s revenue stream from the payroll tax to general revenues, that’s a wide-open door to budget-cutting at the expense of retirees and workers.

Already, conservatives and budget hawks repeat as a mantra that the cost of Social Security is “unsustainable.” That’s their claim even though the program runs a surplus today and ensuring its fiscal stability for the future would require a modest increase in the tax rate or removal of the cap on taxable wages ($127,200 this year).

Scraping the payroll tax would make it easier for Congress to cut Social Security benefits under the guise of saving the government money. And that’s just another way to funnel more money to the rich, at the expense of the working class. And who needs that, other than people who already have enough?
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Disabled, or Just Desperate?
Rural Americans Turn to Disability as Jobs Dry Up

Submitted By:
Barbara R. Silverstone, Executive Director of NOSSCR
By: Terrence McCoy, Copyright 2017, The Washington Post

Correction: Due to an error in the Post’s data analysis, an earlier version of this story misstated the number of counties with the nation’s highest participation rates in federal disability programs. The correct calculated estimate is 102 counties, not 136. The story, maps and graphics have been revised. For further explanation of the data error, please see the revised methodology box.

BEAVERTON, ALA.
The lobby at the pain-management clinic had become crowded with patients, so relatives had gone outside to their trucks to wait, and here, too, sat Desmond Spencer, smoking a 9 a.m. cigarette and watching the door. He tried stretching out his right leg, knowing these waits can take hours, and winced. He couldn’t sit easily for long, not anymore, and so he took a sip of soda and again thought about what he should do.

He hadn’t had a full-time job in a year. He was skipping meals to save money. He wore jeans torn open in the front and back. His body didn’t work like it once had. He limped in the days, and in the nights, his hands would swell and go numb, a reminder of years spent hammering nails. His right shoulder felt like it was starting to go, too.

Disabled America:
Between 1996 and 2015, the number of working-age adults receiving federal disability payments increased dramatically across the country—but nowhere more so than in rural America. In this series, The Washington Post explores how disability is shaping the culture, economy and politics of these small communities.

But did all of this pain mean he was disabled? Or was he just desperate? He wouldn’t even turn 40 for a few more months.

An hour passed, and his cellphone rang. He picked it up, said hello and hung up—another debt collector. He rubbed his right knee. Maybe it would get better. Maybe he would still find a job.

His mother had written a number the night before and told him to call it, and he had told her he’d think about it. She wanted him to apply for disability, like she had, like his girlfriend had, and like his stepfather, whom he now saw shuffling out of the pain clinic, hunched over his walker, reaching for a hand-rolled cigarette. Spencer got out of the truck. He lit his own.

“Remember we were talking about it last night?” he asked Gene Ruby. “Remember we were talking about signing up?”

“Yeah,” said Ruby, 64.

“Remember Mama said there was a number you got to call?” “She’s got the number,” Ruby said. “The Social Security number.”
Spencer kept asking questions. What would Social Security want to know? How often are people denied? But he didn’t mention the one that had been bothering him the most lately: Was he a failure?


Then: “I could probably still work.”

He put his stepfather’s walker in the truck bed, got behind the wheel, started another cigarette and, pulling out of the pain clinic’s parking lot, headed for home.

Desmond Spencer, 39, and his girlfriend, Tasha Harris, 34, hang out at the house they share with Spencer’s mother and stepfather in Beaverton, Ala.

The decision that burdened Desmond Spencer was one that millions of Americans have faced over the past two decades as the number of people on disability has surged. Between 1996 and 2015, the number of working-age adults receiving disability climbed from 7.7 million to 13 million. The federal government this year will spend an estimated $192 billion on disability payments, more than the combined total for food stamps, welfare, housing subsidies and unemployment assistance.

The rise in disability has emerged as yet another indicator of a widening political, cultural and economic chasm between urban and rural America.

Across large swaths of the country, disability has become a force that has reshaped scores of mostly white, almost exclusively rural communities, where as many as one-third of working-age adults live on monthly disability checks, according to a Washington Post analysis of Social Security Administration statistics.

Rural America experienced the most rapid increase in disability rates over the past decade, the analysis found, amid broad growth in disability that was partly driven by demographic changes that are now slowing as disabled baby-boomers age into retirement.

The increases have been worse in working-class areas, worse still in communities where residents are older, and worst of all in places with shrinking populations and few immigrants.

All but two of the 102 counties with the highest rates—where at minimum about one in six working-age adults receive disability—were rural, the analysis found, although the vast majority of people on disability live in cities and suburbs.

The counties—spread out from northern Michigan, through the boot heel of Missouri and Appalachia, and into the Deep South—are largely racially homogeneous.

Sixteen of the counties were majority black, but the remaining counties were, on average, 90 percent white. In the 2016 presidential election, the majority-white counties voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump, whose rhetoric of a rotting nation with vast joblessness often reflects lived experiences in these communities.

Most people aren’t employed when they apply for disability—one reason applicant rates skyrocketed during the recession. Full-time employment would, in fact, disqualify most applicants. And once on it, few ever get off, their ranks uncounted in the national unemployment rate, which doesn’t include people on disability.

The decision to apply, in many cases, is a decision to effectively abandon working altogether. For the severely disabled, this choice is, in essence, made for them. But for others, it’s murkier. Aches accumulate. Years pile up. Job prospects diminish.
“What drives people to [apply for] disability is, in many cases, the repeated loss of work and inability to find new employment,” said David Autor, an economist with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who has studied rising disability rates. “Many people who are applying would say, ‘Look, I would like to work, but no one would employ me.’”

In that position now, Spencer, a slight man with luminous blue eyes, drove deeper into western Alabama. He steered through Walker County, where nearly one in five working-age adults are on disability, and into Lamar County, where the disability rate has more than doubled over the past 20 years, arriving in the town of Beaverton, population 273, where even the 55-year-old mayor is drawing a disability check.

He pulled up to a small house alongside a quiet country road, got out and looked around. There was only forest and hills and sun. “Man, I love it out here,” he said.

“Ain’t going nowhere,” Ruby agreed.

Spencer, who wears mud-caked boots and camouflage and brags of burning trash “like a proper redneck,” has grown so enamored of rural life that he’s sometimes surprised when he remembers that he spent most of his life elsewhere. He grew up just outside of Peoria, Ill., dropped out of school at 14, secured his GED, served two stints in prison for felony burglary before he turned 20 and started working roofing jobs, following other family members into manual labor, like his grandfather who built bridges, and his mother, who worked at a stove factory.

His work as a roofer had been a constant thread through his life, from one state to the next, one job to another. And so it had been again in 2005 when he followed family members to Lamar County, which is 86 percent white and 11 percent black, and was then navigating a long decline in population and manufacturing jobs—one plant moved to Mexico, another to the Dominican Republic. He nonetheless found a roofing job quickly, settling into a life that, for a time, felt as safe as it was comfortable. But then came the recession, and the uneven recovery, and jobs started drying up, and four years ago, as the county poverty rate climbed to 24 percent, the roofing company let him go.

He figured he’d find more work right away. But weeks became months, and he started doing what he calls “odds and ends”—work as a welder, a ranch hand, even a full-time garbage collector—but nothing restored the stability that had gone missing.

He opened the front door to his house. He walked past a small sign in a living room cabinet that said, “BELIEVE in the beauty of your dreams,” and into a bathroom that he had recently remodeled and where another sign said, “DON’T QUIT: Stick to the fight when you’re hardest hit; it’s when things seem worst that you must not quit.”

He had been reading a book lately about the power of positivity. He would sometimes think about it when putting in job applications, or when he was behind his house, looking at his possessions. There was the old Kia that hadn’t run in two years. The pile of aluminum cans for which he’d make 40 cents on the pound. The dozens of used tires a repair shop had paid him to haul away. He never knew what would turn out to be worth something.

He was blessed, he always tried to remind himself.

But increasingly there were days when Spencer knew he was faking a belief, once so strong, that everything would work out. There were days like today, when he sat in a pew in a small church in Lamar County, listening to members of the congregation ask for prayers for health issues:

“My mother-in-law is in the hospital this week, and she has some heart problems,” a man said.
“My body is not cooperating with my job whatsoever,” a woman said. “I got my back surgery,” another man said. “I hope it takes this time.”

An hour later, Spencer was home again. His knee was hurting once more, as it had on and off ever since he fell from a roof during a construction job two years ago. He’d never had it checked out because he’d never had insurance, and he didn’t mention it now because everyone at the house seemed worse off than he was. His mother, Karen Ruby, 60, who has cirrhosis of the liver, was sitting at the kitchen table with her head in her hands, saying, “I don’t know when I’m going to be able to get back into church.” His stepfather was stooped beside her, next to a wheelchair, smoking a cigarette. His girlfriend, Tasha Harris, 34, a thin, ashen woman whose back was often thrown out, was upstairs in the dark after leaving church early because she hadn’t felt well.

“I need angel food cake,” his mother told him before he headed out to the store. “Write it down.”

“Angel food cake? All right, I’ll be back,” he said, walking toward the door. “I feel like crap,” said Harris, who had come downstairs to see him off.

“I’m sorry,” Spencer quietly told her, then went outside to his truck and pulled onto the road.

This is how Spencer spends most of his days, ferrying to the dollar store and back, collecting soda, cigarettes and whatever else his family may want, and consoling them when he’s around. Most days he doesn’t mind. He likes feeling like the strong one when it seems as though almost everyone he knows is either applying for or already on disability. Just the night before, during a family dinner, it had struck him again.

“She walks, and it breaks her bones,” his cousin, who applied for disability after a nervous breakdown, had said of another relative receiving disability.

“She falls a lot,” added his aunt, who collects $733 monthly in disability checks because of back pain.

Spencer, listening to the conversation, had looked around. At the table was another cousin, who has bipolar disorder and receives $701 per month. Beside her was her boyfriend, whose mom had applied for disability, too. Spencer glanced at the ceiling and sighed.

“The whole world is on disability,” he said.

“It’s a tough world,” someone else said.

And now that world was spread out before him as he drove through downtown Beaverton, past a value store, a post office that closes at noon, a bank that shuttered during the recession, a gas station that hasn’t been open for as long as Spencer has been here.

He saw a large roadside banner that said, “APPLY NOW IMMEDIATE OPENINGS,” and cursed to himself. He didn’t know how many times he’d gone in that upholstery factory and asked about a job, any job, and was turned away. He saw another factory, this one an equipment supplier, where he thought he’d need an act of Congress to get hired. Up ahead was a horse-trailer shop. Three consecutive months he had gone through the door, and each time they’d said, “Next month, try us.” Meanwhile, he tried to sign up for a welding class at a community college, but failed the enrollment math exam.

He pulled up to the Piggly-Wiggly. He collected cake mix and three 12-packs of Mountain Dew for Harris, who he knows can go through 24 cans in a day, and was driving home, passing everywhere he couldn’t get a job, when he thought of another opportunity. There was still that
place that might need help with welding, a skill he’d picked up after he lost his roofing job. He had told himself he’d go first thing on Monday morning. Arrive by 8:30 a.m. Show the enthusiasm and dedication of someone worth hiring.

Walking back into his house, he placed the cake mix on the counter and heard his mother, who was in her room, with the curtains drawn and the television on, holding an unlit cigarette.

“Desmond?” she said, her voice raspy from a case of strep throat. “Is that black lighter in there?”

“Black lighter?” he said.
“I got a sore throat,” she said.
“I don’t see it,” he said of the lighter.
“Me and Gene, neither of us got a lighter now,” she said.
He began placing empty soda cans into a plastic bin and clearing the kitchen table of the dishes from the night before, then heard Harris at the bottom of the steps.

“Baby?” she said. “My head is still killing me.”
“I got you something for your headache,” he said, handing her some medicine and a 12-pack of Mountain Dew, and went back to the kitchen.

“Desmond,” Harris softly called after him.

“Yeah?” he said, returning.

“Do you have a cigarette?”
He gave her one, finished with the kitchen, then limped to the living room. He lowered himself onto the couch, his knee hurting worse than earlier, and flipped on the television.

Something had to change.
Everyone in his life has been telling him what that something is.
You’re hurting more and more, his mother said. And not getting any younger.
There aren’t jobs for you here, a friend said. Think that’ll change anytime soon?
We all need help now and again, his girlfriend said. Don’t be ashamed of being on disability.
You’re a grown man, his stepfather said. Bring in some money.
That was what Spencer was thinking about—money, and not having any—when one day Harris found him sitting alone on the back porch in the quiet, going through another cigarette. “Checks are in,” she said of his parents’ monthly disability payments, which are cumulatively worth $3,616 and support everyone in a house that, at that moment, was low on just about everything.

“We’re going to the store,” Harris said.
“How you getting there?” he asked.
“The truck.”
“It ain’t got no gas, though.”
“I got to take your mom to the bank.”
“Maybe she’ll loan you 10 for gas.”

Harris disappeared back into the house, and Spencer went back to his cigarettes and thoughts. It didn’t seem right to him, living off his parents’ disability checks and borrowing money from them. But he felt trapped. He couldn’t leave Lamar County with his mother so sick. And the only money he had coming in was the monthly $425 an elderly friend paid him to tend his horses and keep him company on lonely afternoons, and it was never enough to cover everything. This
mouth it was socks. Harris needed socks. And what kind of man can’t afford socks? His grand-
father used to tell him that a man isn’t a man unless he owns land, and now here he was, years
later, not feeling like one at all.

He found Harris in the kitchen. “Ask him for $40,” she told him. “And I’ll get 10 more from
him to buy socks.”

Gene Ruby was at the computer when Spencer approached him. The question came quickly
and quietly. “Could I borrow 40? And give it back to you right here soon?” he asked. “I promise.”

A few hours after pocketing the money, Spencer climbed back into the truck Gene made the
payments on and started it with the gas Karen had paid for. Harris got in beside him. They had
been together for seven years and rarely disagreed, except for that day two years before when
Harris said she was thinking of applying for disability on account of back pain. He told her not
to do it. People would look down on them. They would find jobs. Don’t lose hope.

A light blinked on the dashboard.

“Transmission’s hot,” Harris said. “I told you it did that to me the other day.”

He pressed down on the accelerator.

“No, don’t do that,” she said. “Just put it in neutral and coast. Try not to mash the gas at all.”

“We’re running it into the ground, is what we’re doing,” he said, lighting another cigarette.

Harris looked at him. She could tell he was getting frustrated. Just about everything these days
made him that way. He had begun complaining more, not just about the truck or the pain in his
knees and hands, but about all of Lamar County. He told her there would never be jobs here for
them. Maybe she had been right about applying for disability. His injuries weren’t getting better,
and he wasn’t getting hired, and how much longer could he ask for help with groceries? Help
with gas? Help with transportation? Help with everything?

He moved the truck out of neutral and back into drive. The store was 20 miles up the road in
Hamilton, the largest town in the area, with a population of 6,814. Harris’s brother and his wife
lived on its outskirts, and in the falling light, they went to visit, pulling up to a tidy mobile home
set beside a large field. Harris’s sister-in-law, Chastity, who was working full time at a calling
center, came outside. Then followed Harris’s brother, Josh, 28, broad-shouldered and shirtless.
They handed a plate of barbecue pork to Spencer and Harris, both of whom had skipped lunch
that day. The plate went back and forth between them.

“I just went and got a job at Wrangler,” Josh said of a distribution center in nearby Hackleburg.

Spencer stopped eating. He looked up.

“That right, man?” Spencer asked, and Josh nodded. “That’s great. I’m proud of you. Man,
I’m happy about that. I’m happy you got that.”

“Me, too,” Josh said. “It pays good.”

“Monday, I’m going to go back to that shop where … I heard they need help,” Spencer said.

“Hopefully, I can weasel my way in there.”

“You can,” Josh said. “Put it in your mind, and you can do it.”

“I had an inspiration book,” Spencer said. “You wake up and put it in your head: ‘God’s got
my back. I got this job.’ ”

There was a moment of quiet.

“I’m glad you got that, man,” Spencer said again. “I’m proud of you.”

“Sometimes, it’s just the right place at the right time.”
Spencer and Harris finished the barbecue, hugged their relatives goodbye and got back into the truck. He drove to a strip mall that had a Shoppers Value Foods, a Check Into Cash and a title loan shop. He glanced at a sign outside a Sonic fast-food restaurant: “Now Hiring All Shifts.” He sometimes considered applying for a fast-food job. But how, after making $20 an hour at some jobs, could he take one paying $7.25?

He parked and went inside the grocery store.

Desmond Spencer howls with one of his mother's dogs. Several wheelchairs around the family's house and two on the porch are used for seating. Spencer strives to remain upbeat about his situation, saying, “I'd rather be fake happy than real sad.”

Spencer was looking at a piece of paper on the coffee table. It was the number to the Social Security office his mother had given him. He and Harris sat on the couch in the living room, and she handed him a telephone.

“You got to call,” she said.

“I'm nervous,” he said.

“Don’t be nervous,” she said. “They’re not going to reach through the phone and get you.”

He didn't say anything for a moment, just held the phone.

“What do I do and say?” he asked.

“Call that number and do whatever they tell you to do.”

He took in a breath and exhaled slowly.

“I guess I'll call,” he said, punching in the number, and then came a voice on the other end, with that question again, the one he rarely had the courage to ask himself:

“Are you disabled?”

“Yes, ma'am,” he said.

“How long have you been disabled?”

“Two years.”

“How are you supporting yourself?”

“Living off my mom.”

“Is this a permanent disability?”

“Uhh,” he began. “I don’t think . . .”

He looked at the floor and leaned forward.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “Yeah, I don’t think it's getting no better.”

He scheduled an appointment for an interview at the local Social Security office the following month. He hung up, stood and, appearing dazed, told Harris, “I didn’t like it at all.” She gave him a sympathetic look and left him alone on the couch.

He was there again four days later on a Monday morning.

The entire house was dark. Spencer was in his pajamas, watching television. Harris was soon beside him, also in pajamas. “I think I’m getting sick,” she said, and he didn’t answer. She went to another room and came back with Ruby’s laptop, which she uses every Monday morning to look at job listings.

“I ain’t checked it in a week,” she said.

“Oh my God,” he sighed, flipping through channels.

“Do you know anything about pop-ups?” she asked, looking at the computer. “Man, I've had, like, a hundred pop-ups.”
“Look, the new ‘Walking Dead,’ ” Spencer said, coming to another channel.

She pulled up her email and clicked on one that listed service positions within 25 miles.

“Okay,” she said. “Here we go.” She saw three postings: “Customer Service/Telecommute,”
“Telecommute Consultant” and “Product Tester.” She didn’t investigate any of them, instead
going back to her inbox. She found another email with more listings.

“Erber?” she asked. “We don’t even have an Erber place around here.”

“Uber,” Spencer said.

“Uber, Erber, whatever,” she said, closing the computer.

An hour passed, then another, and Spencer stayed on the couch. He would not apply for the
welding job today. He wanted to focus on securing disability.

“I got to go get dressed,” he said, looking down at his clothing. “What a loser.”

He returned in torn jeans and, with nothing better to do, went outside. He limped to the
truck and fiddled with jumper cables. He set a fire inside an iron bin and burned some trash.
He inspected a sheet of aluminum he had found, wondering how much he could sell it for. He
walked into the woods and walked out. He looked at the road. A car hadn’t passed in a long
while. It was 1 in the afternoon. The day already felt over.

About the data:

Editor’s note: The Post’s earlier calculated estimates of working-age disability rates for coun-
ties incorrectly included some non-disabled children. The Social Security Administration data
tables for residents receiving benefits in each county mix disabled adult children and non-dis-
abled minor dependents in the same category. The Post has revised the estimates to remove the
minor dependents. Below is an explanation of the methodology for the revised estimate.

There are 13 million working-age Americans—ages 18 to 64—receiving disability payments.
This number includes every working-age person who receives benefits through the Supplemental
Security Income (SSI) program, the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) program or both.
The Social Security Administration publishes those numbers for the nation for each year dating
to 1996. An annual rate was calculated using working-age Americans. The Washington Post
calculated a disability prevalence estimate among the working-age population at the county
level. The Social Security Administration publishes county recipients of SSI and SSDI disabled
workers. The SSA also publishes county-level counts of people receiving support under both SSI
and SSDI. Those figures were subtracted to avoid double counting.

SSA does not publish county figures for two smaller groups of working-age disabled benefi-
ciaries in the SSDI program, disabled adult children and disabled widows and widowers. SSA
publishes broader categories with a mix of disabled and non-disabled beneficiary children and
widows and widowers at the county level. The Post used published figures for the disabled
adult children and widows and widowers groups in each state to apportion the number across
the counties according to each county’s share of the state’s beneficiary children, widows and
widowers. The estimated rate was created with the county working-age population. To make a
rate the Post uses resident population age 18–64. Beneficiaries move from disability programs
to retirement programs. Under current rules some beneficiaries do not reach full retirement
age until between 65 and 66, but the SSA tables do not provide counts of that group by state
or county.
The Post classified counties from urban to rural using qualifications defined by the six-step scale of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Center for Health Statistics. Counties were grouped into three sets to divide metro areas with at least 1 million people, smaller metro areas and non-metro areas.

Spending figures were taken from the proposed 2017 federal budget and SSA’s projected payments for 2017. Social Security Disability Insurance ($149 billion) was combined with Supplemental Security Income for people with disabilities ($43 billion). The spending does not include money states spent to supplement the programs.

Five-year data from the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey were used for county-level demographics. The county estimated rates and the numbers used to create those rates for 2004 and 2015 are available here.
General Session Section AA

Statement on Washington Post series, “ Disabled America”
Co-Chairs, CCD Social Security Task Force
March 31, 2017

Submitted By: Barbara R. Silverstone, Executive Director of NOSSCR

Washington, DC—Our Social Security system provides basic economic security for us all. Not only does Social Security provide the foundation for a secure retirement, it also insures nearly all American workers and their families against the possibility of a life-changing disability that prevents substantial work and earnings.

The Washington Post has launched a series to explore “...how disability is shaping the culture, economy and politics ...” of rural America. Its first article featured Desmond Spencer of Beaverton, Alabama and followed his difficult decision to call his local Social Security office to ask about applying for disability benefits. Mr. Spencer acquired painful, ongoing injuries during many years working as a roofer, welder, ranch hand, and garbage collector.

Responsible reporting not only highlights powerful stories such as Mr. Spencer’s, but also provides context and facts for readers to understand how economic and social forces shape individual struggles, and to separate symptoms such as deep poverty and failing health from root causes. As the Washington Post continues its series, we urge the Post to inform its readers of important facts about our Social Security system, including disability insurance, and to explore systemic solutions to reducing poverty in rural areas including for people with disabilities.

Social Security: Essential Insurance for Retirement, Death, and Disability

- About 57 million Americans, or 1 in 5, live with disabilities; about 38 million, or 1 in 10, have a severe disability. Only people with disabilities that meet the Social Security Act’s stringent standards can receive disability benefits from our Social Security system. Approximately 14 million Americans with severe and work-limiting disabilities receive Social Security Disability Insurance, Supplemental Security Income, or both.
- Workers and their employers pay for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) through payroll tax contributions of 6.2 percent on earnings, each. Earnings above a taxable maximum ($127,200 in 2017) are not taxed.
- In return for their contributions, about 90 percent of workers age 21 to 64 in covered employment are fully insured under Social Security in the event of a qualifying disability.
- On average, people work and pay into Social Security for 22 years before becoming eligible for SSDI.
Most workers have little savings to fall back on in the event of a life-changing disability, so Social Security disability benefits are critical. Only about 1 in 3 civilian workers has long term disability (LTD) insurance through their employer, and private LTD benefits are often less adequate than those received under Social Security.

Social Security's Disability Standard is Strict: Most Applications Are Denied

- The Social Security Act's disability standard is one of the strictest in the developed world. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the U.S. has the most restrictive and least generous disability benefit system of all OECD member countries, except Korea.
- Most applicants for Social Security disability benefits are denied. Only about 1 in 3 applications are approved, even after all stages of appeal.
- Social Security has a uniform, nationwide standard for disability benefits. If Social Security determines that an applicant has the capacity to perform a previous job or any other job in the national economy, their application is denied even if those jobs are not available near where the applicant lives.
- Beneficiaries have severe impairments and conditions such as cancers, kidney failure, congestive heart failure, emphysema, and multiple sclerosis.
- Many are terminally ill: 1 in 5 male SSDI beneficiaries and nearly 1 in 6 female SSDI beneficiaries die within 5 years of receiving benefits. SSDI beneficiaries are three times as likely to die as other people their age.

Fewer People Are Receiving Social Security Disability Benefits

- As the baby boomers age into retirement, growth in SSDI has already begun to level off and is projected to decline further in the coming years.
- As of February 2017, the number of SSDI disabled worker beneficiaries decreased in 8 of the past 9 quarters and all of the past 15 months.
- The number of SSDI disabled worker applications and awards has declined each year since 2010.
- While economic downturns tend to boost applications for benefits, research finds that they have a much smaller effect on awards. While applications for SSDI increased during the Great Recession, the award rate declined, suggesting that applicants for benefits who did not meet Social Security's strict disability standard were screened out.

CCD is a working coalition of national disability organizations working together to advocate for national public policy that ensures the self-determination, independence, empowerment, integration and inclusion of children and adults with disabilities in all aspects of society. The CCD Social Security Task Force focuses on disability policy issues in the Title II disability programs and the Title XVI Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program.
The CCD Social Security Task Force Co-Chairs are: Lisa Ekman, National Organization of Social Security Claimants’ Representatives, lisa.ekman@nossr.org; Kate Lang, Justice in Aging, klang@justiceinaging.org; Jeanne Morin, National Association of Disability Representatives, jmorin.ppa@gmail.com; Web Phillips, National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare, phillipsw@ncpssm.org; T.J. Sutcliffe, The Arc of the United States, sutcliffe@thearc.org.

Endnotes:


12. Id.

Letters to the Editor: Disability and Desperation Are Not Mutually Exclusive

Submitted By:
Barbara R. Silverstone, Executive Director of NOSSCR
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Regarding the April 2 front-page article “Disabled or just desperate?”:

I am a physician who, from 2009 to 2011, worked part time at the Social Security Administration in Baltimore reviewing adult claims for disability. The applications I saw may not have been representative, but many claimants whose papers I saw (often handwritten, with spelling errors) resembled Desmond Spencer and his relatives: They had serious musculoskeletal problems; they had worked for years, which is required to obtain Social Security Disability Insurance; and they wanted to continue to work but could find no one to hire them. Moreover, as Princeton University professors Anne Case and Angus Deaton recently demonstrated, they are dying early, suffering so-called deaths of despair, from suicide, alcohol and drugs.

What would you do in Mr. Spencer’s shoes? Sell your property, move and rent somewhere with more jobs? Doesn’t sound promising. Maybe Social Security should help people like these find jobs and help them move. Or government could subsidize new employers. Or we could fund infrastructure projects. Or require companies planning to leave to help their about-to-be-abandoned employees. But the richest country in the world can’t designate them “losers” and abandon them to their fate. That’s not just immoral, it’s also dangerous.

Caroline Poplin, Bethesda
The April 2 front-page headline “Disabled or just desperate?” implied that the rise in disability benefits in rural America can be explained by desperation, not disability. The only expert cited, an economist from MIT, observed that more people apply for disability benefits in tough economic times but did not address whether they are approved for benefits. As a lawyer who represents people with disabilities, I can tell you that Social Security does not relax its standards just because people are feeling desperate. The disability standard is as rigorous as ever, and the vast majority of applicants are not approved.

The realities that cause people to need lifesaving disability income range from inadequate or nonexistent health care to backbreaking manual labor that often leads to career-ending injuries. The article’s subject, Desmond Spencer, wants to work and struggles with the decision to apply for disability. Articles such as this stigmatize people who rely on disability benefits to survive, calling into question whether those benefits are deserved. Because of this stigma, some people with disabilities may not apply for benefits, forgoing the help they truly need and deserve.

Jennifer Burdick, Philadelphia
Disability Isn’t So Easy, Even for the Desperate

Submitted By:
Barbara R. Silverstone, Executive Director of NOSSCR

By: Lynda Waddington Copyright 2017, The Gazette
Disability isn't so easy, even for the desperate

Wheelschairs sit empty as several disabled veterans head down the trail on horseback during the 2013 National Veterans Training, Exposure and Experience Tournament at the Riverside Casino and Golf Resort in Riverside on Wednesday, September 11, 2013. (Cliff Jette/The Gazette)

Apr 3, 2017 at 11:39 am I Print View

As much as I need to stop thinking about the Washington Post story on Social Security disability benefits reprinted in The Gazette on Sunday, I'm having trouble letting it go.

As the youngest child of elderly parents — my mother went to the doctor for concerns about menopause only to discover she was pregnant with me — I grew up on Social Security dependent benefits. So, in addition to my parents' Social Security retirement checks, our family received a little more than $200 each month earmarked for me.

In order to better make ends meet, my father and mother worked odd jobs. Until bone cancer made it impossible, my mother took in sewing projects. My dad mowed lawns and did handyman or mechanic work when he could find it.
During high school when I competed for and earned a spot on an activity squad, the expenses created a strain. I walked into the kitchen the morning after making the announcement, the morning after my parents had told me how proud they were and Mom had made my favorite foods for a celebratory dinner, and found my father grimly sipping his morning coffee. My mother’s nose and eyes were bright red — clear signs of crying that I unfortunately inherited.

There was no big drama that morning. My parents did their best to brush off my questions. But I knew the added expenses had put us in a bind. Not yet old enough for a steady job, I began to search for work. I helped with morning milking at a dairy, baby-sat in the evenings and detailed teachers’ cars after school.

When I was old enough to get a job, I opted for the steady paycheck instead of school activities.

While my stint on Social Security was different — in many aspects easier than those who apply for disability benefits — it drove home something important that often gets forgotten in the erroneous caricatures of “welfare queens” and “disability kings”: No one gets rich off government entitlements.

The article from The Post gives readers a glimpse into some very real problems that have long plagued rural America. These are the pockets of the country where high unemployment and economic hardship have flourished. The same pockets where support for Donald Trump ran high on hopes he could save or bring back jobs. In many cases, these pockets are in states that still refuse to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, effectively forcing people like the man featured in the Post’s report to neglect or ignore injuries.

Still, glimpses are never full pictures.

The article documents the decision by one man to pursue an application for disability benefits, but stops once that decision is made. The reality is such an application is only the first step, and that most who apply never obtain benefits.

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Even after all possible appeals are exhausted — a process that can take months — less than half of those who apply for disability benefits will receive them. The qualifications are strict — one or more medically determined physical or mental disabilities that will last for a year or more, or end in death. The disabilities must make it impossible for the person to “engage in substantial gainful activity,” which means a job that pays about $14,000 each year.
The Post also focuses on the semi-recents uptick in the number of people who do receive disability benefits, emphasizing the number of work-aged people who have joined the program. But as Stephen Goss, chief actuary for the Social Security Administration explained to Congress in the summer of 2014, these increases were predicted years ago. Population growth is one factor. Another is the influx of women into the workforce, making them eligible for disability insurance. Finally, baby boomers have aged into high-risk years.

When considering these demographic factors, analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities shows only a modest rise in the share of insured workers receiving benefits. And, those demographic indicators are beginning to subside. Growth in the number of disability beneficiaries has slowed to its lowest rate in 25 years — recent enrollments have been virtually flat.

Narratives like those in the Post’s article have been circulating for some time — providing misguided cover for politicians and advocacy groups who seek to degrade or defund these protections.

Following similar reporting by NPR, eight former Social Security Administration commissioners penned an open letter in 2013 to address these misconceptions. The commissioners noted that about one out of every five male beneficiaries and one out of every seven female beneficiaries die within five years of receiving benefits.

“Without Social Security or SSI, the alternatives for many beneficiaries are simply unthinkable,” the group wrote.

Because Mick Mulvaney, budget director for the Trump administration, is already attempting to separate disability benefits from the rest of Social Security (which Trump promised not to touch), it’s clear that our nation needs a comprehensive conversation.

Narratives are wonderful. They can personalize an experience, provide understanding to those outside of a situation. But there’s a danger in zooming so closely that anecdotal evidence is all that remains.

As much as my parents wanted me to have an active high school experience, there were not enough resources to support it. Likewise, as much as this Post narrative wanted to tell a story, there are not enough facts to support it.
The Social Security Disability Program Needs Reform

Submitted By:
Barbara R. Silverstone, Executive Director of NOSSCR
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A POIGNANT article in The Post by Terrence McCoy explored the decision-making of an impoverished former construction worker as he weighed the pros and cons of applying for Social Security Disability Insurance, a federal program that has become a lifeline for many in the rural Alabama county where he lives, and in similar hardscrabble places across the country. Much recent controversy has surrounded SSDI’s growing costs—$143 billion in 2015, plus billions for Medicare, which SSDI recipients get—and the causes thereof. The debate is sharpened by official forecasts showing that the disability portion of the Social Security Trust Fund will be exhausted by 2022, if present trends continue, triggering sharp automatic benefit cuts.

Congress probably would step in with a fix of some sort before letting that happen, as it did in 2015, when lawmakers transferred funds from Social Security’s main trust fund to shore up disability. Nor is the program’s growth the result of rampant fraud, as sometimes alleged; structural factors such as population aging explain much recent growth. Nevertheless, at a time of declining workforce participation, especially among so-called prime-age males (those between 25 and 54 years old), the nation’s long-term economic potential depends on making sure work pays for all those willing to work. And from that point of view, the Social Security disability program needs reform.

In particular, SSDI’s rules require that applicants be unable to engage in any significant paying work, or “substantial gainful activity,” in the program’s argot. Would-be recipients thus have every incentive to cease working completely to qualify—and to avoid rehabilitation lest they lose cash benefits and that all important health care. And, in fact, only a tiny percentage of SSDI beneficiaries return to the labor force once they exit. “The decision to apply, in many cases, is a decision to effectively abandon working altogether,” as Mr. McCoy wrote. “For the severely disabled, this choice is, in essence, made for them. But for others, it’s murkier. Aches accumulate. Years pile up. Job prospects diminish.” The typical SSDI recipient now is a middle-aged worker whose main ailment is musculoskeletal or psychological.

It is this group, those who are physically or psychologically challenged but employable with appropriate aid and opportunity, that reform would seek to reconnect with the labor force. Specifically, SSDI should no longer present applicants with a binary choice between work and benefits. Instead, benefits, including health insurance, should phase out gradually as earnings from employment rise. Economist David H. Autor and Mark Duggan proposed such a plan, which relied in part on subsidized private-sector disability insurance, in a 2010 paper jointly published by the Center for American Progress and the Brookings Institution. There are other ideas.
Budget savings are not the main goal, although they might well materialize. The point, rather, is to strike a better balance between what we spend to support people for whom work is, indeed, not an option and resources we devote to help people with disabilities retain the earnings and dignity that come from work.

Read more on this topic:

- Letters to the Editor: Disability and Desperation Are Not Mutually Exclusive
- The Post’s View: Social Security Disability Insurance Needs Major Reform
- George F. Will: Slouching Toward Disability
Earlier this month, The Washington Post ran a front-page story about Social Security disability benefits in rural counties, followed this past Sunday by an editorial calling for a wholesale restructuring of Social Security Disability Insurance. Several SSDI experts, including our colleague Rebecca Vallas, as well as Kathleen Romig of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and Dean Baker of the Center on Economic Policy Research, published responses explaining what the Post missed in their reporting. But it turns out the article’s problems go even deeper than they thought. Not only does the Post’s reporting paint a misleading picture about SSDI, but the data analysis they published is just plain wrong.

The Post’s central assertion—flanked by an interactive map—was that as many as one-third of working-age adults in rural communities are living on monthly disability checks. But the data analysis supporting this argument doesn’t hold up.

In a sidebar to the article, the Post says they used publicly available county-level data from the Social Security Administration (SSA) to count “every working-age person who receives benefits through the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) program or both.” But the Social Security Administration doesn’t publish the data needed for that calculation. In an email response to our request for these data, the SSA confirmed that these data are “not readily available.”

The Center for American Progress also reached out to the Post to ask about their data. The Post confirmed in an email exchange that they did indeed rely on publicly available data, and identified the specific reports, tables, and figures they used.

We tried to replicate their analysis, and here’s why their numbers are flat-out wrong. (Warning: We are about to dive head-first into the weeds.)

The analysis overcounts working-age people receiving disability benefits by nearly 500,000. The SSA doesn’t publish county-level data on SSDI beneficiaries in the age range the Post defines as “working age” (18 to 64). SSA’s OASDI Beneficiaries by State and County report does provide county-level data on SSDI beneficiaries (Table 4), including disabled worker beneficiaries. However, of the 8,909,430 disabled worker SSDI beneficiaries whom the table breaks down by county, 472,080—or about 5 percent—are age 65 or older. Including these older disabled workers would inflate the share of working-age people with disabilities.

It overcounts “disabled adult children” by about 750,000. About 1 million SSDI beneficiaries are disabled adult children (DACs)—people whose disability onset occurred before age 22 and who are insured for SSDI benefits based on a parent’s work record. Since the Post claims...
to count working-age people receiving SSDI, SSI, or both, they need to include working-age DACs. But—contrary to the *Post* data sidebar—there are no data available on working-age DACs at the county level.

The same SSA table from above does provide county-level data on one group of “children” receiving SSDI—totaling 1,755,276 in 2015. The problem is, these children aren’t disabled adults—they’re actually the *offspring of disabled workers*. Most are under age 18, and most are not disabled. Not only does erroneously using these data mean including minors without disabilities, it also inflates the number of DACs by about three-quarters of a million, since the total number of DACs aged 18–64 is 977,776. What’s more, offspring of disabled workers and DACs are likely differently distributed across counties, creating problems in county-level comparisons.

**It can’t accurately adjust for double-counting the 1.3 million working-age people who receive both SSDI and SSI (a.k.a. “concurrent beneficiaries”).** About 1.3 million working-age Americans receive a small amount in benefits from both SSDI and SSI—generally people with very low incomes and limited resources. To avoid double-counting these folks, the *Post* would need county-level figures on concurrent beneficiaries. But here they run into another problem: SSA doesn’t publish county-level data on working-age concurrent beneficiaries. The Social Security Administration does provide the number of people receiving both SSI and Social Security benefits of *any type* (Table 3), but that figure also includes people receiving *any other kind of Social Security benefit* (like survivor or retirement benefits). What’s more, they also include concurrent beneficiaries who are children and adults 65 and older. Both of these issues make it impossible to calculate for working-age beneficiaries receiving both SSDI and SSI at the county level. So these county-level figures can’t give the *Post* what they need to accurately mitigate their double-counting problem.

**It’s missing data for a whopping 106 counties.** Mostly because of small population size, SSA doesn’t publish county-level data on SSI beneficiaries for 106 counties. This would be problematic for any county-level analysis. But it’s especially notable given that the *Post*’s article focuses on rural counties—as some 97 of the counties with missing data are rural. It’s unclear how the *Post* treats these counties in their analysis.

This might seem like a lot of trouble to go through to explain two inaccurate newspaper articles. But the thing is, misleading media reports have consequence—particularly in political climates like the one we’re living in right now. Just this week, White House budget director Mick Mulvaney once again opened the door to cutting Social Security Disability Insurance, despite President Trump’s pledge not to cut Social Security. Misleading media reports based on inaccurate data analysis risk giving Mulvaney and others cover to slash critical programs like SSDI.

Media covering this important program should get their facts straight before going to press.