

**Testimony before the Subcommittee on Social Security
of the Committee on Ways and Means**

“The Rise in SSDI Enrollment, the Impact on the Labor Market, and the Need for Reform”

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Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Becerra, and members of the Committee, it is truly an honor to be here with you today. The Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) program currently provides insurance against the risk of disability to more than 150 million American adults. This program represents an extremely important part of our nation’s safety net as it protects workers and their families from the risk of a disability that prevents or greatly inhibits a person’s ability to work.

Nearly 9 million adults received SSDI disabled worker benefits in May 2013 and total program expenditures exceeded \$140 billion in the 2012 calendar year. SSDI recipients also receive health insurance through the Medicare program (after two years from onset of disability), with those costs financed by Medicare. SSDI expenditures currently exceed program revenues by almost 30 percent and as a result the program’s trust fund is rapidly being depleted, having fallen from \$216 billion at the end of 2008 to \$115 billion in May 2013. Current projections from the OASDI Trustees (under the intermediate scenario) suggest that the SSDI trust fund will hit zero in 2016.

As shown in Figure 1, enrollment in the SSDI program has grown steadily since the late 1980s, from 2.3 percent of adults aged 25-64 in 1989 to 5.0 percent by 2012. This increase has coincided with a reduction in employment rates among individuals with disabilities (Autor and

Duggan, 2010). In my testimony today, I will briefly summarize the factors that are responsible for this growth. I will then outline the implications of this growth for the U.S. labor market. Finally, I discuss the potential for changes to SSDI that could increase employment and improve economic well-being among individuals with disabilities while also reducing the fiscal burden of the program.

Why Has SSDI Enrollment Increased?

One contributor to the growth in SSDI enrollment has been the aging of the baby boom generation. Individuals in their fifties and early sixties are significantly more likely to receive SSDI benefits than their counterparts in their thirties and forties. However, as the following table demonstrates, the percentage of adults receiving SSDI has also risen sharply within age groups.

Age Group	% of Adults on SSDI		% of Men on SSDI		% of Women on SSDI	
	1989	2011	1989	2011	1989	2011
25-39	0.8%	1.4%	1.1%	1.5%	0.5%	1.4%
40-49	1.9%	3.7%	2.5%	3.8%	1.2%	3.6%
50-59	4.3%	8.2%	5.8%	8.7%	2.9%	7.6%
60-64	7.8%	13.0%	11.0%	14.5%	5.0%	11.5%
25-64	2.3%	5.0%	3.0%	5.2%	1.5%	4.7%

Consider individuals between the ages of 50 and 59. In 1989, 1 out of 23 adults in this age group was receiving SSDI benefits. But by 2012, this had almost doubled to 1 in 12. The increase was similarly dramatic for adults in their forties and also substantial for adults in their early sixties and those between 25 and 39. The aging of the population explains just 18 percent of the increase in SSDI enrollment from 2.3 percent to 5.0 percent during the 1989 to 2012 time period.¹

To be insured for SSDI benefits, a person must have worked in at least five of the ten most recent years. Because employment rates have increased among women since the 1980s, the fraction of women insured for the program has risen as well, from 66 percent to 76 percent during the 1989 to 2012 period. This has also contributed to enrollment growth in the SSDI program and partially explains why SSDI has grown more rapidly among women than among men during this time period.

¹ Put another way, if age-specific rates of SSDI enrollment had remained unchanged from 1989 to 2012, the percentage of adults 25-64 on SSDI would have increased from 2.3 percent to 2.7 percent.

But this factor explains just 12 percent of the rise in SSDI enrollment. Taken together, the aging of the baby boom population and changes in the fraction of adults insured for SSDI can explain less than one-third of the growth in the program depicted in Figure 1 from 1989 to 2012.

A much more important determinant of the growth in SSDI enrollment since the 1980s is the liberalization of the program's medical eligibility criteria that occurred in the mid-1980s (Duggan and Imberman, 2009). As shown in Figure 2, there has been a dramatic increase in award rates for mental disorders and diseases of the musculoskeletal system (e.g. back pain). In contrast, award rates for neoplasms (cancer) and circulatory conditions (e.g. heart attack, stroke) have remained roughly constant. This shift is important because, as shown in recent research (von Wachter et al, 2011), the employment potential of SSDI applicants with these more subjective conditions is substantial and it is often difficult to verify the severity of these conditions (in contrast to cancer or heart conditions).

A fourth contributor to the rise in SSDI enrollment has been the reduction in the generosity of OASI retired worker benefits. Individuals born in 1937 or earlier could receive 80 percent of their full retirement benefit if they claimed retired worker benefits at the age of 62. As a result of federal legislation passed in 1983, this has gradually fallen to 75 percent for individuals born from 1943 to 1954 and will soon fall to 70 percent for individuals born in 1960 or later (with an associated increase in the full retirement age from 65 to 67 as well). No corresponding changes were made to SSDI benefits and thus SSDI has become relatively more attractive financially. More specifically, SSDI benefits were 25 percent more generous than retirement benefits at age 62 for those born in 1937 or earlier but will be 43 percent more generous for those born in 1960 or later. Recent research demonstrates that the declining generosity of retired worker benefits has induced a substantial number of adults to apply for and ultimately receive SSDI, and that this explains a substantial fraction of the growth in SSDI enrollment since the late 1980s (Duggan et al, 2007).

Another important driver of the growth in SSDI enrollment is the sensitivity of the program to economic conditions. As shown in Figure 3, applications to the SSDI program are highly

responsive to the unemployment rate, with applications rising substantially during economic downturns and falling when the economy improves. Previous research has shown that the SSDI program has become much more sensitive to economic conditions since the early 1980s and that individuals who lose their job or who are unable to find a new job are increasingly likely to exit the labor force and apply for SSDI benefits (Autor and Duggan, 2003). Thus the program is to some extent serving as a form of long-term unemployment insurance for some workers, which is troubling when one considers the low exit rate from the program back to the labor force.

A sixth contributor to the growth in SSDI enrollment is the rise in replacement rates for the typical low-skilled worker, which is caused by the interaction of two factors (Autor and Duggan, 2003). First, SSDI (like OASI) uses a progressive 90-32-15 benefit formula with “bend points” that increase each year with average earnings growth. Second, earnings for low-income workers have grown more slowly than the average, and as a result workers replace an increasing fraction of their earnings at a 90 percent rate rather than 32 percent rate. This has increased the financial incentive to apply for SSDI benefits and enrollment in the program.

Other factors have also contributed to the steady rise in SSDI enrollment since the late 1980s. Individuals who are initially rejected when they apply for SSDI have become more likely to appeal those decisions and are increasingly likely to be represented by a lawyer or other professional if/when they ultimately appear before an administrative law judge.² The fraction of recipients receiving a continuing disability review and exiting the program for no longer meeting SSDI’s medical eligibility criteria has also declined. For all of these reasons, enrollment in the SSDI program has grown steadily and rapidly while average health has if anything improved among non-elderly adults during this period (Duggan and Imberman, 2009).

² In the average year from 2000 to 2008, administrative law judges made awards in 72 percent of their decisions (SSA, 2012). This is striking when one considers that ALJs consider appeals only among those rejected twice previously by SSA. One potential contributor to the high award rate is that SSA is not represented at the hearing – only the applicant and/or his/her representative are typically present with the ALJ (Autor and Duggan, 2006).

Labor Market Effects of the Rise in SSDI Enrollment

While providing valuable insurance to tens of millions of Americans, the SSDI program reduces the incentive to work both for individuals on the program and also for those applying for SSDI benefits. In order to receive an SSDI award, a beneficiary must be deemed unable to engage in substantial gainful activity (SGA, currently \$1,040 per month). Once on the program, an SSDI recipient has little incentive to return to work, as earnings above the SGA threshold will lead to a termination of benefits. And given that the present value of the average SSDI award is \$270,000 (including Medicare benefits), that is a risk that many SSDI recipients would be reluctant to take.

The growth in SSDI enrollment has coincided with a substantial reduction in employment rates among individuals with disabilities. For example, from 1988 to 2008, the employment rate of men in their forties and fifties who reported a work-limiting disability fell from 28 percent to 16 percent while the corresponding rate for men without a disability rose slightly from 87 to 88 percent (Autor and Duggan, 2010). As shown in Figure 4, the gap in employment rates grew similarly rapidly for women with and without disabilities in this same age range.

Previous research has shown that workers have become increasingly likely to respond to adverse labor demand shocks by applying for SSDI rather than seeking a new job (Autor and Duggan, 2003). This serves to reduce both the unemployment rate and the labor force participation rate below what it otherwise would be. It also reduces the eventual employment rate as SSDI recipients rarely leave the program to return to the workforce. For example in 2010, only 0.7 percent (7 out of 1,000) of SSDI recipients left the program for improving health and/or to return to work.

This responsiveness of the SSDI program to economic conditions can be seen visually in Figure 2, with increases in the unemployment rate leading to large increases in the SSDI application rate. My analysis of this application data reveals that there have been approximately 2.5 million “extra” SSDI applications since 2008 as a result of the economic downturn. Many of these applicants have withdrawn from the labor force, either because they have been awarded SSDI benefits or are

still in the process of applying given the long lags in the process (especially at the appeal stage). Still others have likely withdrawn because their attachment to the labor force has declined during the application process (even if ultimately denied) and thus their potential wages as well.

The steady increase in SSDI enrollment since the late 1980s has contributed to a differential decline in labor force participation among both men and women in the U.S. relative to other industrialized countries. For example, the labor force participation rate declined by 4.7 percentage points (from 93.4% to 88.7%) among men 25-54 in the U.S. during the 1990 to 2011 period while falling just 1.5 percentage points (from 93.6% to 92.1%) among the EU-15 (OECD, 2013).³ Similarly while the labor force participation rate was almost unchanged among women 25-54 in the U.S. from 1990 to 2011 (rising slightly from 74.0% to 74.7%), it increased by 14.8 percentage points (from 63.7% to 78.5%) among women in the EU-15 during this same period. Thus labor force participation rates for both men and women in the 25-54 age range were in 2011 substantially higher in the EU-15 than in the U.S. While there are of course many factors that influence both the level and the trend in labor force participation, previous research indicates that the SSDI program is an important factor.

Improving Work Incentives in the SSDI Program

The disability determination process that is currently used by the SSDI program awards benefits to individuals who are deemed unable to engage in substantial gainful activity. This reduces the incentive to work among those who have filed an initial application for SSDI and among those appealing a rejection. According to data from the Social Security Administration, approximately 40 percent of SSDI awards are now made on appeal and the time between the initial application and the ultimate decision is very long for this group. For example, the average lag for an applicant who appeals to an Administrative Law Judge (ALJ) is 27 months (SSA, 2008). This is problematic

³ These differences are even larger when focusing on men between the ages of 25 and 64 and are somewhat smaller when restricting attention to the 1990 to 2008 period. Declines in labor force participation among men aged 25-54 were also much lower in Australia, Canada, and Japan than in the U.S. during this same period.

because those initially rejected are likely to be in better health on average than those receiving an initial award and thus to have higher employment potential. And the longer that a person remains out of the workforce, the more that their earnings potential declines. Thus even if an applicant never receives an SSDI award, the program's application process can permanently harm his/her employment prospects (Autor et al, 2011).

One way to improve incentives in the SSDI program is to intervene sooner for individuals with work-limiting conditions so that they can continue working. Many individuals with more subjective disorders – such as back pain – could benefit from such early intervention. In a recent paper, David Autor and I proposed adding a “front end” to the SSDI system that would include early intervention through rehabilitation and related services with the goal of keeping workers with work-limiting disabilities in the labor market (Autor and Duggan, 2010). Employers would contract with private insurers to administer this coverage and would have a financial incentive to keep their workers off the SSDI system (much as the Unemployment Insurance and Workers' Compensation programs provide employers with these types of financial incentives).

The payoff to keeping a potential SSDI applicant in the workforce is very high. The average present value of an SSDI award (including Medicare expenditures) is approximately \$270,000. Additionally, to the extent that the program reduces employment, it also reduces tax revenue and GDP. While many awarded SSDI benefits are completely unable to work, recent research makes clear that a substantial number of them could work (Autor and Duggan, 2003; Burkhauser and Daly, 2011; von Wachter et al, 2011; Maestas, Mullen, and Strand 2012; French and Song, 2013).

Increasing employment among individuals with disabilities could improve their economic well-being and increase their autonomy while also reducing the fiscal strains on Social Security. Past efforts to achieve this goal have unfortunately had little impact. For example, the Ticket to Work program, which was authorized by Congress in 1999, allowed SSDI recipients to have a trial work period of 9 months during which they could retain their benefits. But takeup of the program was very

low, perhaps because these incentives arrived too late after most SSDI recipients had been out of the labor force for years. Recent efforts to increase work incentives among disability insurance recipients have had some success in other countries (see Kostol and Mogstad, 2013 for evidence in Norway) and thus modifications to the Ticket-to-Work approach may have a higher payoff.

There are other potential reforms that could improve the functioning of the SSDI program. For example, currently only the applicant and his/her representative are present at appeal hearings before ALJs. Thus SSA does not have someone present explaining why they rejected the application twice and this may partially explain why 72 percent of those initial decisions that appeal a second time are overturned by ALJs (SSA, 2011). Additionally, there has been a substantial decline in recent years in the share of SSDI recipients receiving a continuing disability review (CDR) with this partially explaining the lower exit rate from the program. Careful consideration of the appropriateness of the program's medical eligibility criteria also seems warranted given the major shift in the conditions with which individuals qualify for SSDI benefits as shown in Figure 2. And to the extent that economic (rather than only health) factors are considered by a disability examiner or administrative law judge when making an SSDI award, one could consider a form of time limit or a mandatory CDR for some awardees.

The lack of progress in improving work incentives in the SSDI program stands in marked contrast to the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. Reforms introduced in the 1990s (along with changes to the Earned Income Tax Credit) led to substantial gains in employment among past, current, and potential future TANF recipients and to a steady drop in program enrollment and expenditures. Based on my own research and that of many others, I believe that similar progress is possible within the SSDI program. The need for such progress is indeed urgent, both because of the pending expiration of the SSDI program's trust fund and because of the trends in the U.S. labor market described above.

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Figure 1: % of Adults 25-64 Receiving SSDI Benefits

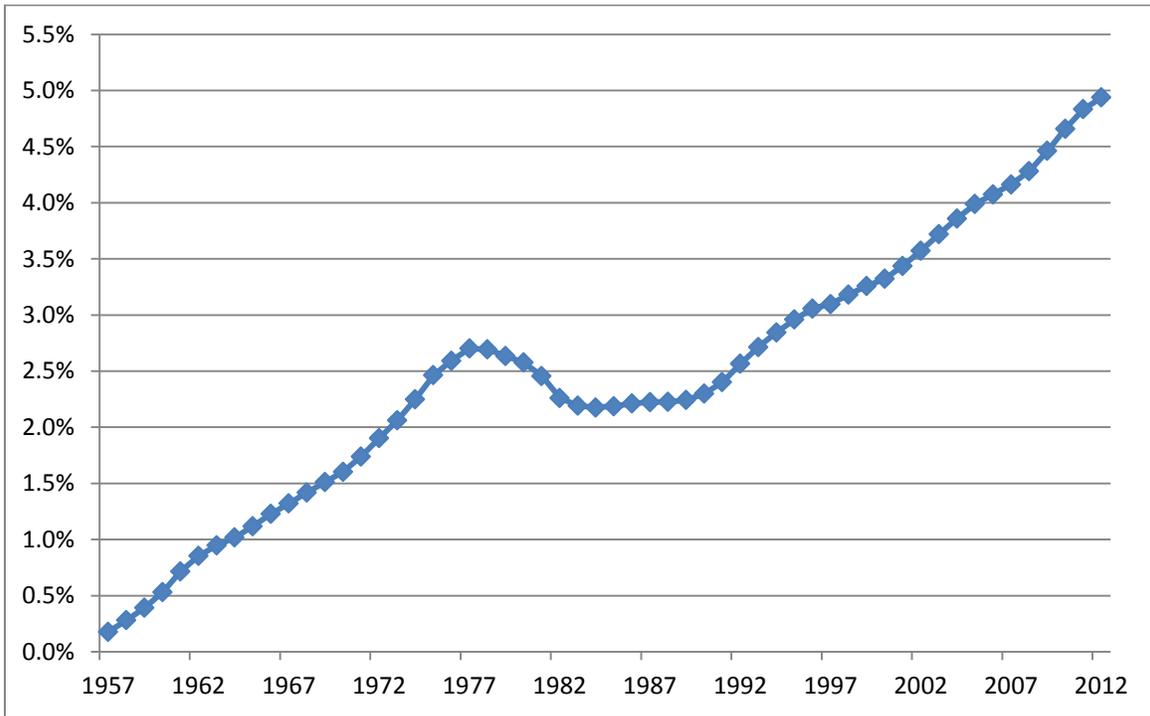


Figure 2: Awards per 1000 Insured for SSDI by Diagnosis Category in 1983, 1989, 1999, 2009

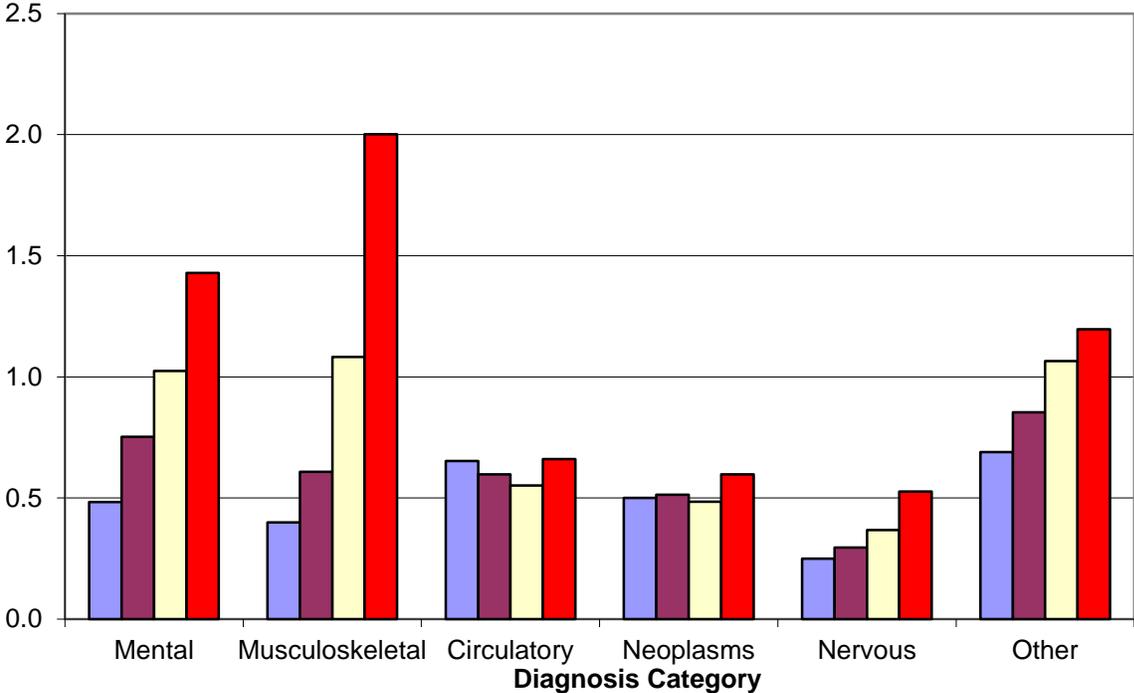


Figure 3: SSDI Applications per 1000 Insured Workers and Unemployment Rate

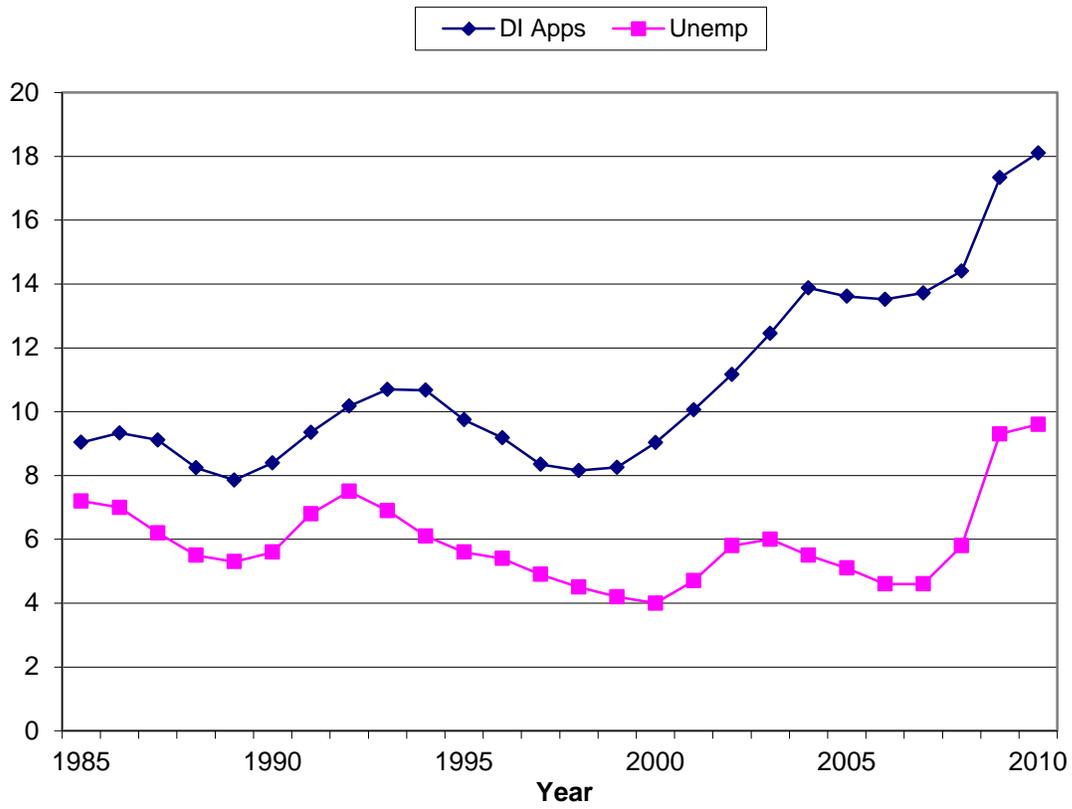


Figure 4: Employment Gap: Men and Women Ages 40 - 59 with Disabilities Relative to those without Disabilities, 1988 - 2008

