

Study links social security improvements to longer life span

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New findings from researchers at New York Medical College suggest that when Social Security benefits are improved, people over the age of 65 benefit most, and may even live longer.

According to a new study published in the *Journal of Public Health Policy*, Americans over the age of 65 experienced steep declines in the rate of [mortality](#) in the periods that followed the founding of and subsequent improvements to [Social Security](#). The authors urge that as Congress and the President discuss changes to Social Security they consider the benefit of reduced mortality and improved health among older Americans.

"Social Security and Mortality: The Role of Income Support Policies and Population Health" will be published online in the *Journal of Public Health Policy* on February 17, 2011.

"The political discourse around Social Security focuses exclusively on the system's long-range financial problems rather than on the benefits of improved health and reduced poverty," said Peter Arno, Ph.D., the study's lead author and professor and director of the doctoral program in the Department of Health Policy and Management of the School of Health Sciences and Practice at New York Medical College. "If Social Security is put on the chopping block, lawmakers will jeopardize the most important safety net for America's elderly."

Arno—whose work is funded through a Robert Wood Johnson

Foundation® Investigator Award in [Health Policy](#) Research—and his colleagues analyzed the effect of Social Security on mortality over the course of the 20th century. After controlling for factors such as changes in the economy, access to medical care, and Medicare, they found that although mortality rates for all adults fell during the 20th century, rates of decline for those 65 and older changed more than 50 percent in the decades following the introduction of Social Security in 1940. Rates of decline for the younger age groups remained virtually the same during this period. The trend was particularly pronounced following marked improvements in Social Security benefits between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s.

This finding supports earlier studies that have demonstrated that beneficiaries with higher lifetime earnings experienced lower mortality rates, and that higher supplemental security income benefit levels reduced mortality and disability for those recipients. Improved health status among elders could have other fiscal impacts, including lower Medicare costs.

Many policy-makers are proposing cuts to Social Security benefits as a way of addressing long-term federal budget deficits. "If policy-makers are going to have a well-informed discussion on Social Security, it is critical that they fully appreciate the program's role in improving the health and well-being of our nation's elderly," says Arno. "By not considering the benefits of reduced mortality and poverty reduction, policy-makers are grossly underestimating Social Security's benefits to society."

Provided by New York Medical College

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