

# Economic Crisis Fuels Support for Social Security

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Americans' Views  
on Social Security

August 2009

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Virginia P. Reno

1776 Massachusetts Avenue, NW  
Suite 615  
Washington, DC 20036  
Telephone (202) 452-8097  
Facsimile (202) 452-8111

E-mail [nasi@nasi.org](mailto:nasi@nasi.org)  
Website: [www.nasi.org](http://www.nasi.org)

The National Academy of Social Insurance (NASI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization made up of the nation's leading experts on social insurance. Its mission is to promote understanding of how social insurance contributes to economic security and a vibrant economy. Social insurance encompasses broad-based systems for insuring workers and their families against economic insecurity caused by loss of income from work and the cost of health care. NASI's scope covers social insurance such as Social Security, Medicare, workers' compensation, and unemployment insurance, and related public assistance and private employee benefits.

This poll is part of NASI's project on *Improving Social Security for Retirees and Working Families*. The purpose of the poll is to bring the voices of American workers and retirees into current policy debates about the future of Social Security in light of current economic conditions. It is funded by the Rockefeller Foundation's Campaign for American Workers Initiative, which supports new rules and new tools for the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy through innovative products and policies to increase economic security within the U.S. workforce, particularly among poor and vulnerable workers.

The Academy contracted with the Benenson Strategy Group to complete 1,488 telephone interviews between July 7-14, 2009. The poll was conducted using random digit dialing and respondents were screened to ensure they were age 18 or older. The margin of error for the poll is +/- 2.25% at the 95% confidence level and it is higher for subgroups.

The Academy is grateful for professional support and advice on this project from staff of the Rockefeller Foundation, the Benenson Strategy Group, and Freedman Consulting, LLC. Virginia Reno, Vice President for Income Security Policy, and Joni Lavery, Senior Policy Associate, at the National Academy of Social Insurance prepared this report from information provided by Benenson Strategy Group. Jill Braunstein, NASI's Director of Communications, oversaw layout and production of the report.

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by

Virginia P. Reno and Joni Lavery

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## Highlights

On the eve of the 74<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Social Security, nearly nine in ten (88%) Americans say Social Security is more important than ever as a result of today's economic crisis. Three-quarters of Americans say it is critical to preserve Social Security even if it means that working Americans have to pay higher taxes to do so, according to a poll sponsored jointly by the National Academy of Social Insurance (NASI) and the Rockefeller Foundation.

The poll of 1,488 Americans, conducted between July 7-14 by the Benenson Strategy Group, sends a strong message to policymakers about the value that Americans place on Social Security benefits for themselves and the country as a whole – with over 75 percent of Americans saying that Social Security is or will be an important part of their retirement and nearly half of recipients stating that they would be unable to afford food, clothing or housing without it.

With the vast importance that Social Security has in the lives of so many Americans, an overwhelming number – 90 percent – want Congress to act within the next two years to preserve Social Security. Americans are willing to pay for Social Security because they value it for themselves (72%), for their families (75%), and for the security and stability it provides to millions of retired Americans, disabled individuals, and children and widowed spouses of deceased workers (87%).

“The recession underscores the critical role Social Security fills for working families and retirees across the nation,” said Kenneth S. Apfel, Chair of the NASI Board of Directors and Commissioner of Social Security from 1997 to 2001. “On the eve of the 74<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Social Security Act, it is striking to see how deeply Americans value the program, they want to preserve and improve it, and they are willing to pay for it.”

“In these challenging economic times, Americans are calling on their leaders to ensure that Social Security remains a strong, sustainable

safety net,” said Judith Rodin, the Rockefeller Foundation’s president. “Seventy-four years ago, the Rockefeller Foundation helped inform Social Security’s inception and implementation. Today, we’re proud to build on that legacy by supporting a new generation of products and policies that bolster resilience to economic risk and protect Americans’ retirements.”

“The recession has changed the way Americans think about their future,” said Joel Benenson, President of the Benenson Strategy Group. “Americans have re-learned that we can’t always count on the stock market, so we need to be able to count on Social Security. Americans are willing to invest in the peace of mind Social Security provides,

With about 31 million Americans expected to retire in the next decade, the impact of today’s economic situation on worker insecurity is clear from the poll, as 65 percent of Americans want to see an increase in Social Security as a result of a lost savings and large majorities of Americans support improving benefits for those who rely on them most.



## Introduction

This report highlights findings from a poll jointly sponsored by the National Academy of Social Insurance and the Rockefeller Foundation's Campaign for American Workers Initiative. The Benenson Strategy Group completed 1488 telephone interviews during July 7-14, 2009. On the eve of the 74<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Social Security Act the results are timely. Upon signing that act, President Franklin D. Roosevelt explained:

*...we have tried to frame a law which will give some measure of protection to the average citizen and to his family against the loss of a job and against poverty-ridden old age. This law, too, represents a cornerstone in a structure which is being built, but is by no means complete.... It is...a law that will take care of human needs and at the same time provide for the United States an economic structure of vastly greater soundness.*

- Franklin D. Roosevelt, August 14, 1935

The current economic crisis shines a new light on the Social Security program that began 74 years ago. Declining home values, foreclosures, lost savings, and corporate pressures to cut pension and labor costs are undermining retirement security for seniors and jeopardizing workers' dreams of a secure retirement. In these difficult times Americans express strong support for Social Security. Faced with a time of intense economic insecurity and large federal deficits, Americans say that they are willing to contribute more into the Social Security system to ensure its strength.

## **Americans say they need Social Security now more than ever in light of the financial crisis.**

Nearly nine in ten (88%) Americans say that with the economy and the stock market as bad as it is right now, Social Security benefits are more important than ever to ensure that retirees have a dependable income when they retire. This widely held belief extends across all age and

income categories: 78% of Americans with family incomes over \$100,000 a year agree with this statement, as do 88% of younger Americans, ages 18-34 years (Table 1).

Americans assert a commitment to Social Security's future even in the face of federal deficits and short-term economic hardship. In response to a forced choice question regarding how the recession affects Social Security:

- ✓ 66% agree that “with the economic crisis and stock market crash, it’s more important than ever to strengthen Social Security to make sure that retirees and the disabled can count on secure benefits for generations to come.”
- ✓ 28% agree that “with our economy in crisis and our national deficit reaching \$2 trillion we should focus on ways to cut taxes and government spending, including things such as Social Security benefits, so people can keep more of their income” (Table 2).

Further, Americans consistently say that the response to the economic crisis should be a renewed commitment to strengthening Social Security. Three times as many Americans say that we spend not enough on Social Security (45%) as believe that we spend too much (15%). People under age 65 are more likely than seniors to say that we should be spending more on Social Security: 46% of those under 65 say we don’t spend enough on Social Security, while 37% of those over 65 say so (Table 3).

For Americans under age 65, having enough money for retirement is a key financial concern – more are concerned about having enough money to retire than about paying monthly bills, affording the cost of health care, or losing a job (Table 4). Eight in ten in each age group under age 65 express concern about retirement finances.

## **While Americans lack confidence in the future of Social Security, they want it to be there.**

Ninety percent of Americans say they are concerned about the program’s ability to pay benefits for the next generation. Just 44% of non-recipients say they’re confident that Social Security will be available to them when they retire (Table 5).

But there is a clear sense that Americans want the benefits to be there, as 88% agree with the statement: “I don’t know if I’m going to need Social Security money when I retire, but I want to know it is there just in case I do need it.” This view resonates across age groups, with 91% of 18-34 year-olds agreeing with the statement.

Current beneficiaries say Social Security is a very important part of their monthly income. More than nine in ten (93%) say it is important, including 72% who consider it extremely important. Nearly half (43%) of beneficiaries say that without it they would not be able to afford the basics, such as food, clothing and shelter (Table 6). Those not yet receiving Social Security also think it will be an important part of their monthly income (79%) including 38% who expect it to be extremely important.

## **Americans are willing to pay for Social Security because they value it for themselves, their families, and the millions of others who rely on it.**

Large majorities of Americans say that they don’t mind paying Social Security taxes because it helps millions of other people, and they or their families might need it one day (Table 7).

- ✓ 87% agree that “I don’t mind paying Social Security taxes because it provides security and stability to millions of retired Americans, the disabled, and the children and widowed spouses of deceased workers.”
- ✓ 76% agree that “I don’t mind paying Social Security taxes because I know that if my parents, grandparents or other family members did not receive Social Security, I would have to support them in their retirement.”
- ✓ 72% agree that “I don’t mind paying Social Security taxes because I know that I will be receiving the benefits when I retire.”

Many Americans are willing to contribute more to the program in order to ensure its future. Indeed, 77% agree (including 42% who strongly agree) that “it is critical that we preserve Social Security for future generations, even if it means increasing working Americans’ contributions to Social Security.”

While Americans don't mind paying for Social Security, there is a clear sense that the wealthiest Americans should also be contributing more to the program, as there is broad-based support for the following revenue-raising ideas for Social Security (Table 8):

- ✓ 83% support lifting the Social Security tax cap so that all workers pay the same payroll tax rate, regardless of income.
- ✓ 70% support dedicating the estate tax solely to Social Security.
- ✓ 69% support adding a 5% tax on families earning over \$250,000 and individuals earning more than \$125,000.

At the same time, 58% of Americans support waiting until 2020 to increase the Social Security tax rate for workers by 1% and then increasing it by another 1% in 2050.

## **Americans support benefit improvements and favor raising taxes over reducing benefits.**

Americans support improving Social Security benefits for particular vulnerable groups (Table 9). For example:

- ✓ 78% support extending benefits for “children whose working parents have died or become disabled from the current cut off of 19 years to 22 years old if the child is in college or vocational school.”
- ✓ 76% support increasing benefits “by \$50 a month for recipients over the age of 85 because they generally depend more heavily on Social Security.”
- ✓ 76% support improving “benefits for widowed spouses of low income working couples who generally have inadequate benefits from lifelong low-pay work.”
- ✓ 69% support “guaranteeing that Social Security benefits for steady workers exceed the poverty line, even if workers choose to receive early benefits at the age of 62.”
- ✓ 64% support “counting the time that working parents take off to care for children toward workers’ future Social Security benefits so they do not receive lower benefits because of this gap in paid work.”

Moreover, two out of three Americans (65%) agree “we should increase Social Security benefits because millions of Americans have lost savings and pensions in the current economic crisis (Table 7).

Americans appear most resistant to proposals that would reduce benefits. When asked a forced choice question on how they would prefer to protect Social Security’s ability to pay out benefits for decades to come, raising taxes was the most popular.

- ✓ 46% say raise taxes on workers.
- ✓ 31% say raise the retirement age.
- ✓ 11% say reduce benefits for workers.
- ✓ 12% don’t know.

## **Americans want Congress to act to keep Social Security solvent and guarantee the benefits.**

There is a very strong sense among the American public that Congress needs to act in order to secure this important program. Seven in ten Americans (70%) say it’s “very important” for Congress to make adjustments in the next two years to keep Social Security financially solvent and guarantee income for recipients, and 90% agree that is “very or somewhat” important to do so. This belief extends across party lines as 98% of Democrats, 87% of Independents, and 85% of Republicans agree it is important for Congress to act in the next two years.

**Table 1 – The Economy and Social Security**

*[I'm going to read you a list of statements and after each one, please tell me if you agree or disagree with the statement.]*

*With the economy and the stock market as bad as it is right now, Social Security benefits are more important than ever to ensure that retirees have a dependable income when they retire.*

*Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with this statement?*

Total, Age and Income	Total		Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
	Number	Percent			
<b>Total Respondents</b>	745	100	88	11	0
<b>Age</b>					
18-34	171	100	88	12	0
35-49	224	100	86	13	1
50-64	209	100	89	11	0
65+	141	100	90	8	2
<b>Family Income</b>					
Less than \$30,000	176	100	92	8	1
\$30,000 - \$49,999	141	100	90	10	0
\$50,000 - \$74,999	129	100	91	9	0
\$75,000 - \$99,999	101	100	90	10	0
\$100,000 or more	104	100	78	20	1

Source: Social Security Survey sponsored by the National Academy of Social Insurance and the Rockefeller Foundation, July-August 2009.

**Table 2 – The Economy, Taxes, Spending, and Social Security**

*[Now I am going to read you two statements and get your view.]*

*Some people say that with our economy in crisis and our national deficit reaching 2 trillion dollars, we should focus on ways to cut taxes and government spending, including things such as Social Security benefits, so people can keep more of their income.*

*Other people say with the economic crisis and stock market crash, it's more important than ever to strengthen Social Security to make sure that retirees and the disabled can count on secure benefits for generations to come.*

*Which comes closer to your view?*

Total, Age and Income	Total		Cut Taxes & Govt. Spending, including Social Security	Strengthen Social Security	Both, Neither, Don't Know
	Number	Percent			
Total	1448	100	28	66	5
<b>Age</b>					
18-34	343	100	38	58	4
35-49	440	100	32	63	5
50-64	417	100	23	72	5
65 +	282	100	19	69	12
<b>Family Income</b>					
Less than \$30,000	380	100	19	76	4
\$30,000- \$49,999	281	100	24	70	6
\$50,000- \$74,999	247	100	31	65	4
\$75,000- \$99,999	188	100	38	58	4
\$100,000 or more	205	100	40	57	4

Source: Social Security Survey sponsored by the National Academy of Social Insurance and the Rockefeller Foundation, July-August 2009.

**Table 3 – Views on Spending for Social Security**

*In general, do you think we spend too much, not enough, or about the right amount on Social Security?*

Total, Age and Income	Total		Too Much	Not Enough	About the Right Amount	Don't Know
	Number	Percent				
Total	1488	100	15	45	31	9
<b>Age</b>						
18-34	343	100	23	46	23	7
35-49	440	100	17	45	30	7
50-64	417	100	12	48	33	7
65+	282	100	7	37	41	14
<b>Family Income</b>						
Under \$30,000	380	100	11	58	24	8
\$30,000- \$49,999	281	100	12	41	39	8
\$50,000- \$74,999	247	100	20	46	26	8
\$75,000- \$99,999	188	100	15	40	39	6
\$100,000 or more	205	100	20	39	36	6

Source: Social Security Survey sponsored by the National Academy of Social Insurance and the Rockefeller Foundation, July-August 2009.



**Table 4 – Financial Concerns**

*How concerned are you about keeping up with your monthly bills? Are you very concerned, somewhat concerned, not very concerned, not concerned at all?*

*How concerned are you about losing your job or a household member losing their job?*

*How concerned are you about affording the cost of health care?*

*How concerned are you about having enough money for retirement?*

Type of Concern	Total	Age			
		18-34	35-49	50-64	65+
Percent “very” or “somewhat” concerned about:					
Enough for retirement	78	81	82	83	58
The cost of health care	77	78	77	80	74
Keeping up monthly bills	64	63	65	68	56
Losing a job	55	62	64	55	34

Source: Social Security Survey sponsored by the National Academy of Social Insurance and the Rockefeller Foundation, July-August 2009.

**Table 5 – Views on the Future of Social Security**

*How concerned are you that Social Security will pay benefits for the next generation (very concerned, somewhat concerned, not very concerned not concerned at all)?*

*How confident are you that all of your expected Social Security benefits will be available to you when you retire? Are you very confident, somewhat confident, not very confident or not at all confident?*

*[I'm going to read a list of statements and after each one, please tell me if you agree or disagree with the statement.] Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with this statement: "I don't know if I'm going to need Social Security money when I retire, but I want to know it is there just in case I do need it."*

Views	Total	Age			
		18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 64	65+
Number of Respondents	1488	343	440	417	282
Total Percent	100	100	100	100	100
<b>Concerns about Social Security</b>					
Very concerned	65	62	68	70	59
Somewhat concerned	25	27	24	21	29
Not very concerned	5	7	3	5	6
Not concerned at all	4	4	5	3	5
Don't know	1	1	0	1	1
Number of Non-recipients	1086	324	420	320	19
Total Percent	100	100	100	100	100
<b>Confidence in Social Security</b>					
Very confident	10	6	8	15	41
Somewhat confident	34	27	32	46	5
Not very confident	31	35	34	25	20
Not at all confident	24	32	26	14	8
Don't know	1	0	0	1	25
Number of Non-retirees	1110	335	431	308	33
Total Percent	100	100	100	100	100
<b>Want it to be there at retirement</b>					
Strongly agree	68	67	63	78	71
Somewhat agree	20	24	21	14	15
Somewhat disagree	4	5	5	3	5
Strongly disagree	7	5	11	5	3
Don't know	1	0	0	1	7

Source: Social Security Survey sponsored by the National Academy of Social Insurance and the Rockefeller Foundation, July-August 2009.

**Table 6 – Importance of Social Security in Monthly Income**

*How important would you say Social Security benefits are to your monthly income (asked only of recipients)?*

*How important do you think Social Security benefits will be to your monthly income when you retire (asked only of non-recipients)?*

*And if for some reason you did not receive your Social Security benefits, which of the following statements best describes the effect it would have on your lifestyle? “It would have no effect.” “My budget would be tighter but I would get by.” “I would have to make significant sacrifices.” Or “I would not be able to afford the basics such as food, clothing or housing.”*

<b>Role of Social Security</b>	<b>Recipients</b>	<b>Non-recipients</b>
Total Number	402	1086
Total Percent	100	100
<b>Role of Social Security in monthly income</b>		
Extremely important	72	38
Somewhat important	21	41
Not very important	5	11
Not at all important	2	9
Don't know	1	1
Total important	93	79
Total not important	7	20
<b>Effect on lifestyle if did not receive Social Security benefits</b>		
It would have no effect	6	
Tighter budget but would get by	28	
Make significant sacrifices	23	
Not able to afford the basics	43	
Don't know	1	

Source: Social Security Survey sponsored by the National Academy of Social Insurance and the Rockefeller Foundation, July-August 2009.

**Table 7 – Willingness to Pay Social Security Taxes**

*[I'm going to read a list of statements and after each one, please tell me if you agree or disagree with the statement. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with the statement.]*

*I don't mind paying Social Security taxes because it provides security and stability to millions of retired Americans, the disabled, and the children and widowed spouses of deceased workers.*

*I don't mind paying Social Security taxes because I know that if my parents, grandparents or other family members did not receive Social Security, I would have to support them in their retirement.*

*I don't mind paying Social Security taxes because I know that I will be receiving the benefits when I retire.*

*It is critical that we preserve Social Security for future generations, even if it means increasing working Americans' contributions to Social Security.*

*To provide a more secure retirement for working Americans, we should increase Social Security benefits because millions of Americans have lost their savings and pensions in the current economic crisis.*

Reasons	Total		Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
	Number	Percent			
Provides security/stability to millions of Americans	1488	100	87	12	2
Family members would need my financial support without Social Security	1488	100	76	21	4
I will receive benefits	1488	100	72	24	4
Critical to preserve Social Security even if it means increasing taxes	745	100	77	22	2
Increase benefits due to losses incurred by economic crisis	1488	100	65	33	2

Source: Social Security Survey sponsored by the National Academy of Social Insurance and the Rockefeller Foundation, July-August 2009.

**Table 8 – Ways to Increase Revenue for Social Security**

*[I'm going to read you some ways to increase revenue for Social Security in order to ensure Social Security benefits for generations to come. After each one, please tell me if you support or oppose it.]*

*Lift the Social Security tax cap of \$106,800, so that workers earning more than that would pay Social Security tax on their entire salary just like everyone else.*

*Dedicate the tax on estates worth more than \$3.5 million solely to Social Security.*

*Add a 5% tax on families earning over \$250,000 or individuals earning \$125,000 a year and dedicate this revenue to Social Security.*

*Wait until the year 2020 to increase the Social Security tax rate by 1% for workers and employers and then increase it by another 1% in 2050.*

	Total		Support	Oppose	Don't Know
	Number	Percent			
Raise the tax cap	1488	100	83	16	1
Dedicate estate tax to Social Security	1488	100	70	26	4
5% tax on high earners	1488	100	69	29	2
Delayed tax rate increase	1488	100	58	39	3

Source: Social Security Survey sponsored by the National Academy of Social Insurance and the Rockefeller Foundation, July-August 2009.

**Table 9 – Views on Benefit Improvements**

*[Social Security is the main source of income for the majority of elderly Americans. About 6 in 10 retirees get at least half of their total income from Social Security. Now I am going to read you a few ways which have been suggested to strengthen Social Security. After each one, please tell me if you support or oppose this proposal.]*

*Extend Social Security benefits for children whose working parents have died or become disabled from the current cut off of 19 years to 22 years old if the child is in college or vocational school.*

*Increase benefits by \$50 a month for recipients over the age of 85 because they generally depend more heavily on Social Security.*

*Improve benefits for widowed spouses of low-income working couples who generally have inadequate benefits from lifelong low-pay work.*

*Guarantee that Social Security benefits for steady workers exceed the poverty line, even if workers choose to receive early benefits at the age of 62.*

*Count the time that working parents take off to care for children toward workers' future social Security benefits so they do not receive lower benefits because of this gap in paid work.*

	Total		Support	Oppose	Don't Know
	Number	Percent			
Student benefits	1488	100	78	21	1
Increase benefits for 85+	745	100	76	23	1
Benefits for widowed spouses	1488	100	76	22	2
Guaranteed minimum above poverty level	1488	100	69	28	3
Count childcare years towards Social Security benefits	1488	100	64	32	4

Source: Social Security Survey sponsored by the National Academy of Social Insurance and the Rockefeller Foundation, July-August 2009.

**Table 10 – Importance of Congressional Action**

*[Now I would like to tell you a little about the current taxes and requirements for Social Security.*

*Social Security is funded by taxes on wages, with workers paying 6.2 percent of their wages up to \$106,800, and employers paying an additional 6.2 percent of workers' wages. Any income above \$106,800 is not taxed by Social Security. Social Security benefits are first paid at age 62 and full retirement benefits are paid if claimed starting at age 66.*

*The Social Security system currently has a surplus of revenue and is projected to be able to pay full benefits until the year 2037. After that, current taxes will only cover three fourths of the current level of benefits for recipients.]*

*How important is it for Congress to make adjustments in the next two years to keep Social Security financially solvent and guarantee income for retirees, disabled Americans, and children and widowed spouses of deceased workers? Is it very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not important at all?*

	Political Party			
	Total	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Number of respondents	743	253	298	193
Total Percent	100	100	100	100
<b>Importance of Action</b>				
Important	90	98	87	85
Very	70	84	67	56
Somewhat	20	14	20	29
Not Important	8	1	12	12
Not very	4	1	6	5
Not at all	4	0	6	7
Don't know	2	1	1	3

Source: Social Security Survey sponsored by the National Academy of Social Insurance and the Rockefeller Foundation, July-August 2009.