

## Top 10 Myths of Social Security

If I had the space, I probably could write a column called "The Top 100 Social Security Myths." I see examples of them almost every day in the emails I get from my readers. Alas, I'll barely have room to cover the top 10. With Social Security, there are misunderstandings about programs and policies. And then there are political myths. I will give examples of the former today. In some future column, I will tackle all the silly myths, half-truths and outright lies being spread (mostly on the Internet) about the politics and financing of Social Security.

**Myth 1:** Social Security retirement benefits are based on your last 10 years of earnings. Other misunderstandings say benefits are determined using a "high five" or a "last three" base of earnings. None are true. All retirement benefits are based on a person's highest 35 (not necessarily consecutive) years of earnings with each year being adjusted for inflation. If you don't have that many years of Social Security-covered work by the time you retire, "zero" years are factored into your benefit computation to get to the 35-year base.

**Myth 2:** You can take reduced benefits at 62 and later switch to full benefits on your own or a spouse's record. With very few exceptions (the major one applying to widows), you simply can't do that. If you apply for any kind of Social Security benefit before age 66, you must file for all other benefits you are due at the same time. But those rules change dramatically if you wait until age 66 to file. At that age, you can apply to receive half your spouse's Social Security and then at 70, switch to 132 percent of your own retirement benefits.

**Myth 3:** If you are due benefits on two different Social Security accounts, you will get both full benefits. Whenever you are due two Social Security benefits, you don't get them both. You will only get the benefit that pays the higher amount, or you will get combined benefits that cannot exceed the higher of the two accounts. Quick example: Mary is due \$200 from her own Social Security account and \$700 in wife's benefits on her husband's record. She will get \$200 from her account and \$500 from her husband for a total of \$700.

**Myth 4:** You must be married for at least 10 years to qualify for spousal benefits from Social Security. That 10-year duration of marriage rule applies only to divorced spouses. For currently married couples, there usually is a one-year marriage requirement.

**Myth 5:** A wife gets half of her husband's Social Security. She only gets half IF she waits until age 66 to claim benefits. Most spouses start benefits before then. In that case, her benefit is reduced roughly one-half of one percent for each month she is under age 66.

**Myth 6:** You can't get any of your ex-husband's Social Security until he dies. There are millions of divorced women who get monthly benefits from an ex-husband's Social Security account while he is still living. But you can get such benefits only if both you and your ex are 62 or older. Also, you would only get benefits if what you are due from the ex (between 35 to 50 percent of his benefit) exceeds what you are due on your own Social Security account. And one other point: Your ex does NOT have to be drawing Social Security in order for you to claim benefits on his account.

**Myth 7:** You can get Social Security from a former husband even though you have remarried. As long as you are married to husband number two, you cannot get any of husband number one's Social Security. But if your marriage to number two ends, then you can go back and claim benefits from your first husband.

**Myth 8:** If your ex-husband has remarried, you must share benefits with the new spouse. Each spouse potentially due benefits on a guy's Social Security record is treated independently. They do not offset one another. By the way, that does not mean that Social Security rolls are overrun with multiple ex spouse cases. In my 32-year career with Social Security, I only once saw a record for a guy who had three ex wives collecting on his account. I never saw four or more. In fact, even a record with two ex wives was not that common. That's because most women remarry (see Myth 7) or they get higher benefits on their own record (see Myth 3).

Before moving on to Myth 9, here is a quick aside. You will note that Myths 5, 6, 7, and 8 all referred to woman as spouses. Social Security is gender neutral. But society hasn't been. Men traditionally have made more money than women. And many women take time off from careers to raise a family. For that and other reasons, they get smaller Social Security benefits than men. So that's why they tend to qualify for spousal benefits on a husband's (or ex-husband's) Social Security record.

**Myth 9:** Social Security disability benefits are welfare. Where does this idea come from? (Actually, I think I know, and it's explained in the answer to the next myth.) Let's look at two people. Joe has worked and paid Social Security taxes all his life. He retires at age 62 and gets Social Security retirement benefits. Jack has also worked and paid Social Security taxes all his life. Unfortunately, he comes down with prostate cancer at age 58 and starts getting Social Security disability benefits. Why do so many people think Joe is getting a benefit he earned while Jack is getting some form of welfare? They are both getting Social Security benefits they have earned by working and paying taxes.

**Myth 10:** SSI is some kind of Social Security benefit. Supplemental Security Income is a federal welfare program that has nothing at all to do with Social Security other than the fact that it is managed by the Social Security Administration. SSI benefits are funded by general tax revenues, not by Social Security taxes. SSI pays a very small monthly stipend to poor people who are over age 65 or who are under 65 but disabled. Unfortunately, many people confuse SSI disability payments with Social Security disability benefits. They are two distinct programs. The former is a welfare payment. The latter is an earned benefit.

If you have a Social Security question, Tom Margenau has the answer. Contact him at [thomas.margenau@comcast.net](mailto:thomas.margenau@comcast.net) To find out more about Tom Margenau and to read past columns and see features from other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at [www.creators.com](http://www.creators.com).

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