

Timely insights that you can use.

“We can never insure one hundred percent of the population against one hundred percent of the hazards and vicissitudes of life, but 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.” — Franklin D. Roosevelt

The death of a family member is incredibly difficult. If the decedent contributed to the family’s finances, the situation can be even more stressful.

This article provides information about **Social Security Survivor Benefits** for the surviving spouse and dependents. This information can then serve as a starting point for reviewing the overall financial picture to determine if any gaps remain between survivor needs and what will be available if there is a death of a working spouse.

Eligibility for Social Security Survivor Benefits

You must be either “currently insured” or “fully insured” by Social Security for family members to receive Social Security survivor benefits when you die. See the chart below for a summary of key information:

	Requirements	Family Members Eligible for Benefits
Currently Insured	Worker has earned at least 6 credits during the 13-quarter period ending with the quarter in which the worker died. ¹	A spouse, if caring for a dependent child. A divorced spouse, if caring for a dependent child. A dependent parent (or parents)
Fully Insured	Worker has earned at least 40 credits, generally by working 10 years in covered employment. ²	A spouse A divorced spouse A dependent child (or children) A dependent parent (or parents)

Lump-Sum Death Benefit³

The Social Security Lump-Sum Death Benefit is a one-time payment of \$255 that is paid to the surviving spouse or, in some cases, to a child of the deceased worker who was either fully or currently insured under Social Security. To be eligible the surviving spouse must have been living with the deceased worker at the time of death, or if the worker and

¹ SSA Handbook § 206.

² EN-05-10703 pdf (ssa.gov).

³ <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43637/11>.

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the spouse were living apart, the spouse was already receiving benefits on the deceased worker's record or became eligible to receive survivor benefits at the worker's death.

If there is no surviving spouse to receive the death benefit, the benefit is paid to a child or children eligible to receive benefits on the worker's record. If there is more than one eligible child, the death benefit is split evenly between the children.

Eligibility for Monthly Benefits.

Now let's further break down the conditions that various family members must meet to receive benefits and the amounts that they could receive. See the chart⁴ that follows:

Beneficiary	Conditions	Benefit Amount ⁵
Surviving Spouse	Age 60 or older, and Were married for at least 9 months before the decedent's death, and Didn't remarry before age 60.	Full benefits at the surviving spouse's full retirement age, ⁶ or reduced benefits at age 60.
Disabled Surviving Spouse	Age 50 to age 59, and Were married for at least 9 months before the decedent's death, and Didn't remarry before age 50.	Depends on the age at which you file for benefits
Surviving Spouse Caring for the Decedent's Child	The surviving spouse can be any age, but the decedent's child must be younger than age 16, and Be receiving Social Security benefits on the deceased worker's record.	75% of the decedent's benefit amount.

⁴ <https://www.ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10084.pdf>.

⁵ The survivor benefit is based on the earnings of the deceased worker.

⁶ Full retirement age is the age when you become eligible for unreduced Social Security benefits. It is based on the year and the month you were born.

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Beneficiary	Conditions	Benefit Amount ⁵
Former Spouse	Age 60 or older (or between 50 and 59 with a disability) and Were married at least 10 years. NOTE: Neither the age nor the 10-year marriage rule needs to be met if the former spouse is caring for the decedent's child who is younger than 16 or has a disability and entitled to receive benefits on the decedent's record.	Depends on the age at which you file for benefits.
Decedent's Unmarried Children	Younger than age 18 (or up to age 19 if attending elementary or secondary school full-time), OR At any age if they were disabled before age 22.	75% of the worker's benefits amount.
Dependent parents	At least age 62 AND Decedent provided at least half of their support.	82.5% of the decedent's benefit if there is one parent, or 75% to each parent if there is more than one parent.

Maximum Family Benefits⁷

There is a maximum family benefit rule which ensures the total amount paid to a family on a deceased worker's record does not exceed a certain amount. The limit typically ranges from 150% to 180% of the deceased worker's Social Security benefit amount. If the total benefits for eligible family members exceed the maximum amount, then each family members' benefit will be proportionately reduced to stay within the limit.

Important Things to Know⁸

If you are eligible for survivor benefits, you should apply promptly because, for some types of claims, benefits are paid from the time of application and not from the time the worker died. An application can be made by telephone or in person at any Social Security office, but not online.

It is also important to know that if you are covered by a pension for work not covered by Social Security, then survivor benefits may be reduced by the Government Pension Offset rules.⁹ This is similar to reductions of your own Social Security benefits from the Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP), which is a formula that effectively reduces Social

⁷ <https://www.ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10084.pdf>.

⁸ <https://www.ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10084.pdf>.

⁹ <https://www.ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10007.pdf>.

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Security retirement and disability benefits for certain retirees who receive a pension for work not covered by Social Security, in addition to their Social Security payments.

If you are a surviving spouse, you may want to be **strategic** about claiming a survivor benefit. For example, if your spouse earned significantly more than you, you may want to consider claiming your own retirement benefit first and then wait until your full retirement age to claim the larger survivor benefit. You cannot receive both survivor benefits and your own Social Security retirement benefits at the same time. Let's look at an example:

James is 60 years old and eligible for both his own Social Security retirement benefit and a survivor benefit from his deceased spouse. At his full retirement age (67), James' own benefit would be \$1,500 per month, and his survivor benefit would be \$1,600 per month.

Age	Action	Benefit Amount
60	James claims a reduced survivor benefit.	\$1,144/month
67	James continues receiving a survivor benefit.	\$1,144/month
70	James switches to his own retirement benefit, which has grown because of Delayed Retirement Credits.	\$1,860/month

Seek the Help of a Financial Advisor

Dealing with the death of a loved one is extraordinarily stressful. Your COUNTRY Trust Bank Financial Advisor can provide you with guidance on claiming Social Security survivor benefits, as well as assisting you with other financial decisions that affect your future.

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