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Social Security: Cost-of-Living Adjustments

Updated October 11, 2018

Congressional Research Service
https://crsreports.congress.gov
94-803

CRS REPORT
Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

Summary

To compensate for the effects of inflation, Social Security recipients usually receive an annual cost-of-living adjustment (COLA). According to parameters outlined in the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 415(i)), a 2.8% COLA is payable in January 2019. For a retired worker receiving the average monthly benefit amount of $1,422, the COLA will result in a $39 increase in Social Security benefits (after final rounding down to the nearest dollar for a total of $1,461).

Social Security COLAs are based on changes in the Consumer Price Index for Urban Wage Earners and Clerical Workers (CPI-W), updated monthly by the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The COLA equals the growth, if any, in the index from the highest third calendar quarter average CPI-W recorded (most often, from the previous year) to the average CPI-W for the third calendar quarter of the current year. The COLA becomes effective in December of the current year and is payable in January of the following year. (Social Security payments always reflect the benefits due for the preceding month.)

If there is no percentage increase in the CPI-W between the measuring periods, no COLA is payable. No COLA was payable in January 2010, January 2011, or in January 2016.

The January 2019 COLA will also be applied to Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and railroad retirement "tier 1" benefits, among other changes in the Social Security program. Although COLAs under the federal Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) and the federal military retirement program are not triggered directly by the Social Security COLA, these programs use the same measuring period and formula for computing their COLAs. As a result, their recipients similarly will receive a similar COLA payable in 2019.

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How Is the Social Security COLA Calculated?

An automatic annual Social Security benefit increase is intended to reflect the rise in the cost of living over a one-year period. The Consumer Price Index for Urban Wage Earners and Clerical Workers (CPI-W), updated monthly by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), is the measure that can trigger a benefit increase.[1] The Social Security cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) is based on the growth in the index from the highest third calendar quarter average CPI-W recorded (most often, from the previous year) to the average CPI-W for the third calendar quarter of the current year. If the CPI-W triggers a COLA, the COLA becomes effective in December of the current year and is payable in January of the following year. (Social Security payments always reflect the benefits due for the preceding month.) A COLA trigger mechanism was first adopted in P.L. 92-603, the Social Security Amendments of 1972, and triggered COLAs were first payable in 1975. Prior to 1975, Congress sporadically approved COLAs through the adoption of legislation.[2]

What Is the COLA to Be Paid in January 2019?

On October 11, 2018, the Social Security Administration (SSA) announced that a 2.8% Social Security COLA would be paid in January 2019.[3] The BLS release of the September 2018 CPI-W on that day made possible the comparison of the two July-September sets of CPI-W data needed to compute the COLA (one for 2017 and another for 2016). **Table 1** shows how the determination for a January 2019 COLA is computed under procedures set forth in Section 215(i) of the Social Security Act.

Table 1. Determination of a Potential Social Security COLA, January 2019

	CPI-W Index Points
July 2017	238.617
August 2017	239.448
September 2017	240.939
Average for Third Quarter of 2017 (rounded to the nearest one-thousandth of a point):	**239.668**
July 2018	246.155
August 2018	246.336
September 2018	246.565
Average for Third Quarter of 2018 (rounded to the nearest one-thousandth of a point):	**246.352**

[1] For more information on using the CPI-W and considering an alternate inflation index, see CRS Report R43363, *Alternative Inflation Measures for the Social Security Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA)*.

[2] The COLA is based on price growth to retain the purchasing power of monthly benefits over time for current beneficiaries. The initial computation of the base benefit amount for new beneficiaries uses a formula that is linked to overall wage growth. For more information, see CRS Report R42035, *Social Security Primer*.

[3] Social Security Administration (SSA), "Social Security Announces 2.8 Percent Benefit Increase for 2019," press release, October 11, 2018, at https://www.ssa.gov/news/press/releases/2018/#10-2018-1.

	CPI-W Index Points
Percentage increase or decrease from the third quarter average for 2017 to the third quarter average for 2018 and multiplied by 100% (*rounded to the nearest one-tenth of 1% for the final application, when positive, as required by law*):	((246.352-239.668)/239.668) * 100%= **2.8%**
Social Security cost-of-living adjustment (*zero if the percentage change is negative*):	**2.8%**

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics data series for the Consumer Price Index for Urban Wage Earners and Clerical Workers (CPI-W) for 2017 and 2018.

Note: The reference base period for the CPI-W is 1982-1984 (i.e., the period when the index equaled 100).

Scenario in Which No COLA Is Payable

Since automatic Social Security benefit COLAs began in 1975, there have been three years in which no COLA was payable: 2010, 2011, and 2016. The Social Security Act specifies that a COLA is payable automatically if the average CPI-W for the third quarter of the current year is higher than the highest average CPI-W for the third quarter of past years, which is called the "cost-of-living computation quarter." From 1975, when this provision became effective, to 2008, a new cost-of-living computation quarter was established in each subsequent year, which triggered the payment of a COLA each year.

If the average CPI-W for the third quarter of the current year is equal to or less than the average CPI-W for the cost-of-living computation quarter, no COLA is payable. For example, the average CPI-W for the third quarter of 2009 was less than the average CPI-W for the third quarter of 2008 (211.001 and 215.495, respectively). As a result, an automatic COLA in January 2010 was not triggered and the third quarter of 2008 remained the cost-of-living computation quarter (i.e., the benchmark) used to determine if a COLA would be payable in January 2011.[4] Though the average CPI-W for the third quarter of 2010 (214.136) was greater than the average CPI-W for the third quarter of 2009, it did not exceed the average CPI-W for the third quarter of 2008. The third quarter of 2008 remained the cost-of-living computation quarter for at least one more year and a COLA was not payable in January 2011.

When the average CPI-W for the third quarter of 2011 (223.233) exceeded that for 2008, a 2012 COLA was triggered and the third quarter of 2011 became the cost-of-living computation quarter. New cost-of-living computation quarters were subsequently established in each year from 2012 to 2014, when the average CPI-W for the third quarter of 2012, 2013, and 2014 exceeded that for the third quarter of each preceding year.

Similarly, since the average CPI-W for the third quarter of 2015 (233.278) did not exceed that of 2014 (234.242), no COLA was paid in January 2016. Thus, for the COLA payable beginning in January 2017, the cost-of-living computation benchmark quarter remained the third quarter of 2014 where it was compared with the average CPI-W for the third quarter of 2016.[5]

[4] Section 215(i) of the Social Security Act specifies that no COLA is payable in subsequent years until the average CPI-W for the third quarter of the current year is greater than that for the last cost-of-living computation quarter.

[5] The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) and the trustees for the Social Security trust funds both project continued annual COLAs beyond 2017. For more information, see CBO, "Social Security Old-Age and Survivors Insurance – Baseline Projections," June 2017, at https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/recurringdata/51308-2017-06-socialsecurity.pdf, p. 2, and Social Security Administration (SSA), *The 2017 Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Federal Old-Age and Survivors Insurance and the Disability Insurance Trust Funds*, section on program specific assumptions and methods, July 2017, at https://www.ssa.gov/oact/tr/2017/tr2017.pdf, Table V.C1.

See **Table 2** for a recent history of average CPI-W performance for the third calendar quarter, and how that has affected changes to the cost-of-living computation quarter and the triggering of COLAs in some years.

Table 2. Average CPI-W for the Third Quarter, 2007-2018

(cost-of-living computation quarters and COLAs)

Year	Average CPI-W for the Third Quarter	New Cost-of-Living Computation Quarter Established	Resulting COLA[a]
2007	203.596	yes	2.3%
2008	215.495	yes	5.8%
2009	211.001	no (215.495 of 2008 retained)	no COLA
2010	214.136	no (215.495 of 2008 retained)	no COLA
2011	223.233	yes	3.6%
2012	226.936	yes	1.7%
2013	230.327	yes	1.5%
2014	234.242	yes	1.7%
2015	233.278	no (234.242 of 2014 retained)	no COLA
2016	235.057	yes	0.3%
2017	239.668	yes	2.0%
2018	246.352	yes	2.8%

Source: Created by CRS using data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

a. Payable in January of the following year (when applicable).

Social Security benefit amounts cannot be reduced if the CPI-W *decreases* between the measuring periods. If the performance of the CPI-W does not trigger a COLA, benefits remain the same (prior to deductions for Medicare Part B and Part D premiums).

Medicare Premiums and a Very Small or No COLA

The absence of a COLA increase (or a very small increase) may impact certain Medicare Part B enrollees.[6] For Medicare Part B enrollees who have their Part B premiums withheld from their monthly Social Security benefits, a hold-harmless provision in the Social Security Act (§1839[f]) ensures that their net benefits will not decrease as a result of an increase in the Part B premium.

In most years, the hold-harmless provision has little impact; however, in a year in which there is a small or no increase in the Social Security COLA and a Part B premium increase, the hold-harmless provision may apply to a much larger number of people. For example, as a result of a 0% Social Security COLA in 2016 and a 0.3% COLA in 2017, an estimated 70% of Medicare beneficiaries were protected by this provision in those years and their premiums were reduced so that their Social Security benefits, net of the Medicare premium, would not decline.[7] As a result

[6] For a full discussion of this relationship, see CRS Report R45324, *The Interaction Between Medicare Premiums and Social Security COLAs*.

[7] The Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015 (BBA 2015; P.L. 114-74) provided some relief to the remaining 30% of beneficiaries not covered by the hold-harmless provision in 2016. This relief was not applicable in 2017. For more

of the relatively higher 2.0% Social Security COLA in 2018, the hold-harmless provision was not as broadly applicable in that year, and the percentage of Medicare Part B enrollees held harmless in 2018 declined to 28%.

The Medicare trustees project that 2019 Medicare Part B premiums will increase by about $1.50 per month—from $134.00 per month in 2018 to about $135.50 in 2019.[8] Under this scenario, the 2019 2.8% Social Security COLA would likely result in a further reduction in the number of Medicare Part B enrollees held harmless. In most cases, the dollar amount of the increase in enrollees' Social Security benefits, for both those who were and were not held harmless in 2018, would be more than sufficient to cover their 2019 Part B premium increases. Thus, it is likely that many of those held harmless in 2018 will not be held harmless in 2019 and will return to paying the normal standard premium amount. The actual 2019 Medicare premiums will likely be announced later in 2018 and could be higher or lower than projected.

Regardless of the size (or absence) of a COLA, beneficiaries may see a net reduction in Social Security benefits as a result of increases in their Medicare Part D premiums or changes in their Medicare Part D plan selections.[9]

What Is Affected Besides Social Security Benefits?

Other Programs

Social Security COLAs trigger increases in other programs. Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits and railroad retirement "tier 1" benefits (equivalent to a Social Security benefit) are increased by the same percentage as the Social Security COLA or are held constant when a COLA is not paid to Social Security beneficiaries. Railroad retirement "tier 2" benefits (equivalent to a private pension) are increased by an amount equivalent to 32.5% of the Social Security COLA. (If no COLA is paid to Social Security beneficiaries, then the railroad retirement tier 2 benefits are not increased.) Veterans' pension benefits often are increased in the same amount as Social Security, but legislation must be passed annually for this purpose.[10]

Although COLAs under the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) and the federal military retirement system are not triggered by the Social Security COLA, these programs use the same measuring period and formula for determining their COLAs. The COLA for recipients of Federal Employees' Retirement System (FERS) benefits equals the Social Security COLA if inflation is 2% or less, but is lower than the Social Security COLA otherwise.[11]

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information on the impact of Medicare premiums on Social Security benefits, see CRS Report R40082, *Medicare: Part B Premiums*; and CRS Report R44224, *Potential Impact of No Social Security COLA on Medicare Part B Premiums in 2016*.

[8] Boards of Trustees, Federal Hospital Insurance and Federal Supplementary Medical Insurance Trust Funds, 2018 Annual Report of the Boards of Trustees of the Federal Hospital Insurance and Federal Supplementary Medical Insurance Trust Funds, June 5, 2018, Table V.E2, https://www.cms.gov/Research-Statistics-Data-and-Systems/Statistics-Trends-and-Reports/ReportsTrustFunds/index.html.

[9] See CRS Report R40611, *Medicare Part D Prescription Drug Benefit*, for details.

[10] Congress did not adopt COLAs for veterans' pensions in 2010, 2011, and 2016 when no Social Security COLA was paid.

[11] For more information on the adjustment of federal benefits for inflation, see CRS Report R42000, *Inflation-Indexing Elements in Federal Entitlement Programs*.

Program Elements

Some Social Security program elements, like the *taxable earnings base*, the *retirement earnings test (RET) exempt amounts*, and the *substantial gainful activity (SGA) earnings level for the blind* (which applies to Social Security disability beneficiaries), are indexed to wages, as opposed to prices, but increase only when a COLA is payable.[12] Although changes to those three elements are based on growth in national average *wages* (rather than changes in *prices*), these elements can be increased only when a COLA is payable. If a COLA is payable, then these amounts increase by the percentage that the national average wage index has increased.[13] The taxable earnings base, the RET exempt amounts, and the SGA for the blind were unchanged in 2010, 2011, and 2016 when no COLA was payable.[14]

For example, had there been a COLA trigger in 2015, the taxable earnings base would have increased from $118,500 in 2015 to $122,700 in 2016.[15] Because there was no COLA trigger in 2015, the base instead remained unchanged. With the 0.3% COLA announced in 2016, the taxable earnings base increased in 2017 as well. Similar to how the COLA's reference period is calculated, the increase in the taxable earnings base is calculated on the increase in the average wage index from 2013 to 2015 (about 7.2%).[16] **Table 3** shows the history of Social Security COLAs since the automatic COLAs began in 1975.

Table 3. History of Social Security Cost-of-Living Adjustments Since Automatic Adjustments Began in July 1975

Date Increase Was Paid	Amount of Increase (percentage)
January 2018	2.0%
January 2017	0.3
January 2016	0.0
January 2015	1.7
January 2014	1.5
January 2013	1.7
January 2012	3.6
January 2011	0.0
January 2010	0.0
January 2009	5.8

[12] Changes in other Social Security elements are tied to the increase in national average wages, yet may be altered even if a COLA is not payable. These elements include the amount of earnings needed for a Social Security "quarter-of-coverage," the monthly substantial gainful activity amounts for non-blind Social Security disability beneficiaries, and the annual coverage thresholds for domestic workers and election workers.

[13] Sections 230(a), 203(f)(8), and 223(d)(4)(A), respectively, of the Social Security Act.

[14] For more information on the interactions between the taxable earnings base, the retirement earnings test (RET) exempt amounts, the substantial gainful activity (SGA) limits, and other program elements with the COLA, see SSA, October 2017, "Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) Information for 2018," at http://www.socialsecurity.gov/cola/.

[15] The average wage index in 2015 ($48,098.63) was about 3.5% larger than the 2014 average wage index of $46,481.52 and the taxable earnings base is rounded to the nearest $300.

[16] Because the national average wage index tends to increase faster than the inflation of prices, these elements that are indexed to the growth in average wages tend to increase faster than the elements that are tied to the COLA.

Date Increase Was Paid	Amount of Increase (percentage)
January 2008	2.3
January 2007	3.3
January 2006	4.1
January 2005	2.7
January 2004	2.1
January 2003	1.4
January 2002	2.6
January 2001	3.5
January 2000	2.5[a]
January 1999	1.3
January 1998	2.1
January 1997	2.9
January 1996	2.6
January 1995	2.8
January 1994	2.6
January 1993	3.0
January 1992	3.7
January 1991	5.4
January 1990	4.7
January 1989	4.0
January 1988	4.2
January 1987	1.3
January 1986	3.1
January 1985	3.5
January 1984	3.5
July 1982	7.4
July 1981	11.2
July 1980	14.3
July 1979	9.9
July 1978	6.5
July 1977	5.9
July 1976	6.4
July 1975[b]	8.0

Source: See Social Security Administration, "Historical Background and Development of Social Security," http://www.socialsecurity.gov/history/briefhistory3.html, for data prior to 1975; and "Social Security Cost-Of-Living Adjustments," http://www.socialsecurity.gov/oact/COLA/colaseries.html, for data since 1975.

a. Originally computed as 2.4%, the COLA payable in January 2000 was corrected to 2.5% under P.L. 106-554.

b. Automatic COLAs began.

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Acknowledgments

Gary Sidor, CRS technical information specialist, was the previous author of this report.

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