

# CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

## Social Security Taxes: Where Do Surplus Taxes Go and How Are They Used?

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### Summary

The costs of the Social Security program, both its benefits and administrative expenses, are financed by a tax on wages and self-employment income. Commonly referred to as FICA and SECA taxes (because they are levied under the *Federal Insurance and Self-Employment Contributions Acts*), these taxes flow each day into thousands of depository accounts maintained by the government with financial institutions across the country. Along with many other forms of revenues, these Social Security taxes become part of the government's operating cash pool, or what is more commonly referred to as the U.S. treasury. In effect, once these taxes are received, they become indistinguishable from other monies the government takes in. They are accounted for separately through the issuance of federal securities to the Social Security trust funds — which basically involves a series of bookkeeping entries by the Treasury Department — but the trust funds themselves do not hold money. They are simply accounts. Similarly, benefits are not paid from the trust funds, but from the treasury. As the checks are paid, securities of an equivalent value are “written off” the trust funds.

Generally speaking, the federal securities issued to any federal trust fund represent “permission to spend.” As long as a trust fund has a balance of such securities, the Treasury Department has legal authority to keep issuing checks for the program. In a sense, the mechanics of a federal trust fund are similar to those of a bank account. The bank takes in a depositor's money, credits the amount to the depositor's account, and then loans it out. As long as the account shows a balance, the depositor can write checks that the bank must honor. When more Social Security taxes are received than spent, the balance of securities posted to the Social Security trust funds rises. Simply put, these balances, like those of a bank account, represent a promise — a form of IOU from the government — that if needed to pay Social Security benefits, the government will obtain resources equal to the value of the securities. The surplus taxes themselves are then used for any of the many functions of government.

## A Few Basics About Social Security Financing

Financing to cover the costs of the Social Security program — both its benefits and administrative expenses — is provided by flat-rate taxes levied on payrolls and self-employment income (FICA and SECA taxes). The FICA tax is levied on a worker's earnings and is paid both by employees and employers; the SECA tax is levied on self-employment income. More than 95% of the

work force is required to pay them. Nonwork income is not taxed. Both the FICA and SECA rates have three components: one for Old Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI), another for Disability Insurance (DI), which together comprise what is commonly thought of as Social Security, and a third for the Hospital Insurance (HI) portion of Medicare. In 2000, the OASDI portion will be levied on earnings up to \$76,200. This amount rises annually to reflect increases in average earnings in the economy. The HI portion is levied on all earnings.

**Social Security and HI Tax Rates  
Under Current Law (in percent)**

| CY   | Employee rate |     |       |      | Total | Combined<br>employee/<br>employer |
|------|---------------|-----|-------|------|-------|-----------------------------------|
|      | OASI          | DI  | OASDI | HI   |       |                                   |
| 1999 | 5.35          | .85 | 6.20  | 1.45 | 7.65  | 15.3                              |
| 2000 | 5.30          | .9  | 6.20  | 1.45 | 7.65  | 15.3                              |

The rate for the self-employed is the same as the combined employee/employer rate; however, only 92.35% of net self-employment earnings is taxable and half of the taxes so computed is deductible for income tax purposes.

## Where Do Surplus Social Security Taxes Go?

Contrary to popular belief, Social Security taxes are not deposited into the Social Security trust funds. They flow each day into thousands of depository accounts maintained by the government with financial institutions across the country. Along with many other forms of revenues, these Social Security taxes become part of the government's operating cash pool, or what is more commonly referred to as the U.S. treasury. In effect, once these taxes are received, they become indistinguishable from other monies the government takes in. They are accounted for separately through the issuance of federal securities to the Social Security trust funds — which basically involves a series of bookkeeping entries by the Treasury Department — but the trust funds themselves do not receive or hold money.<sup>1</sup> They are simply accounts. Similarly, benefits are not paid from the trust funds, but from the treasury. As the checks are paid, securities of an equivalent value are removed from the trust funds.

## Does This Mean That the Government Borrows Social Security Taxes?

Yes. When more Social Security taxes are received than spent, the money does not sit idle in the treasury, but is used to finance other operations of the government. The surplus is then reflected in a higher balance of federal securities being posted to the trust funds. These securities, like those sold to the public, are legal obligations of the government. Simply put, the balances of the Social Security trust funds represent what the government has borrowed from the Social Security system (plus interest). Like those

<sup>1</sup> P.L. 103-296 requires the Secretary of the Treasury to issue "physical documents" to the trust funds. Under prior practice, trust fund securities were only recorded electronically.

of a bank account, the balances represent a promise that if needed to pay Social Security benefits, the government will obtain resources equal to the value of the securities. The Social Security trustees project that the balances of the trust funds would reach nearly \$1.1 trillion by the end of CY 2000. (See the following table.)

| <b>Projected Social Security Trust Funds' Income, Outgo, and End-of-Year Balances</b> |            |                 |              |       |                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|-----------------|--------------|-------|---------------------|
| Calendar Year                                                                         | Tax Income | Interest Income | Total Income | Outgo | End-of-year balance |
| (\$s in billions)                                                                     |            |                 |              |       |                     |
| 2000                                                                                  | 501        | 65              | 566          | 410   | 1,052               |
| 2005                                                                                  | 635        | 120             | 755          | 539   | 2,022               |
| 2010                                                                                  | 810        | 194             | 1,004        | 737   | 3,263               |
| 2015                                                                                  | 1,035      | 281             | 1,315        | 1,045 | 4,640               |
| 2020                                                                                  | 1,310      | 352             | 1,662        | 1,492 | 5,739               |
| 2025                                                                                  | 1,650      | 376             | 2,026        | 2,065 | 6,008               |
| 2030                                                                                  | 2,078      | 316             | 2,394        | 2,762 | 4,866               |
| 2035                                                                                  | 2,620      | 136             | 2,757        | 3,572 | 1,729               |

Source: 2000 Social Security Trustees' Report, March 30, 2000.

### **Are the Federal Securities Issued to the Trust Funds the Same Sort of Financial Assets That Individuals and Other Entities Buy?**

Yes. While generally the securities issued to the trust funds are not marketable, they do earn interest at market rates, have specific maturity dates, and by law represent obligations of the U.S. government. What often confuses people is that they see these securities as *assets* for the government. When an individual buys a government bond, he or she has established a financial claim against the government. When the government issues a security to one of its own accounts, it hasn't purchased anything or established a claim against some other person or entity. It is simply creating an IOU from one of its accounts to another. Hence, the building up of federal securities in federal trust funds — like those of Social Security — is not a means in and of itself for the government to accumulate assets. It certainly establishes claims against the government for the Social Security system, but the system is part of the government. Those claims are not resources that the government has at its disposal to pay future Social Security benefits.

### **What Then is the Purpose of the Trust Funds?**

Generally speaking, the federal securities issued to any federal trust fund represent "permission to spend." As long as a trust fund has a balance of securities posted to it, the Treasury Department has legal authority to keep issuing checks for the program. In a

sense, the mechanics of a federal trust fund are similar to those of a bank account. The bank takes in a depositor's money, credits the amount to the depositor's account, and then loans it out. As long as the account shows a positive balance, the depositor can write checks that the bank must honor. In Social Security's case, its taxes flow into the treasury, and its trust funds are credited with federal securities. The government then uses the money to meet whatever expenses are pending. The fact that this money is not set aside for Social Security purposes does not dismiss the government's responsibility to honor the trust funds' account balances. As long as they have balances, the Treasury Department must continue to issue Social Security checks. The key point is that the trust funds themselves do not hold resources to pay benefits — rather, they provide authority for the Treasury Department to use whatever money it has on hand to pay them.

The significance of having trust funds for Social Security is that they represent a long-term commitment of the government to the program. While the funds do not hold “resources” that the government can call on to pay Social Security benefits, the balances of federal securities posted to them represent and have served as financial claims against the government — claims on which the treasury has never defaulted, nor used directly as a basis to finance anything but Social Security expenditures.

### **Is This Trust Fund Arrangement Really Different From That Used by Other Programs of the Government?**

The Treasury Department maintains accounts for all government programs. The difference is that many other programs, particularly those not accounted for through trust funds, get their operating balances — i.e., their permission to spend — through the annual appropriations process. Congress must pass legislation (an appropriations act) each year giving the Treasury Department permission to expend funds for them. In technical jargon, this permission to spend is referred to as “budget authority.” For many programs accounted for through trust funds, annual appropriations are not needed. As long as their trust fund accounts show a balance of federal securities, the Treasury Department has “budget authority” to expend funds for them.

Another difference is that a trust fund account earns interest, since it is comprised of federal securities. In the case of the Social Security trust funds, the interest is equal to the prevailing average rate on outstanding federal securities with a maturity of 4 years or longer. This interest is credited to the trust funds twice a year (on June 30 and December 31) by issuing more securities to them. So in effect, a trust fund account can automatically build future “budget authority” for the program, but other accounts, dependent on annual appropriations, cannot.

### **Does Taking Social Security Out of the Federal Budget Change Where the Surplus Taxes Go?**

Legislation enacted in 1990 (the Budget Enforcement Act, included in P.L. 101-508) removed Social Security taxes and benefits from calculations of the budget. In large part this was done to prevent Social Security from masking the size of federal budget deficits and to protect it from benefit cuts motivated by budgetary concerns. It was based on the supposition that Congress would act *differently* in trying to reduce budget deficits if Social Security surpluses were not counted in reaching the budget totals; i.e., that Congress

would ignore Social Security in devising the Nation's overall fiscal policies. *It was not done to change where Social Security taxes go.* The federal budget is not a cash management account. It is simply a summary of what policymakers want the government's financial flows to be during any given time period. Whether this summary is presented in a unified or fragmented form will not *in and of itself* change how much money the government receives and spends, and it will not alter where federal tax receipts *of any sort* go. Social Security taxes will go into the treasury regardless of whether the program is counted in the budget. Social Security taxes will go elsewhere only if Congress decides they will go elsewhere.

### **Are Surplus Social Security Taxes Giving the Government More Money to Spend?**

The fact that surplus Social Security taxes are used by the government to meet other financial commitments does not necessarily mean that the government has more money to spend than it otherwise would. Decisions about Social Security and the finances of the rest of the government have not been made in isolation of one another and those decisions have had overlapping influences. Increases in Social Security taxes may have made it more difficult for Congress to raise other forms of taxes. For instance, Social Security taxes were raised in 1977 to shore up the program's financing, but the following year Congress enacted reductions in income taxes to offset the impact of these hikes. Similarly, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which reduces incomes taxes or permits a refundable credit to be paid to low-income workers, is intended in part to offset the Social Security tax bite. Hence, other taxes might have taken the place of the surplus Social Security taxes if Social Security tax rates were lower than they are. Thus, whether these surplus taxes are allowing the government to spend more is largely conjecture.

### **Are Surplus Social Security Taxes Allowing the Government To Reduce Its Publicly-Held Debt?**

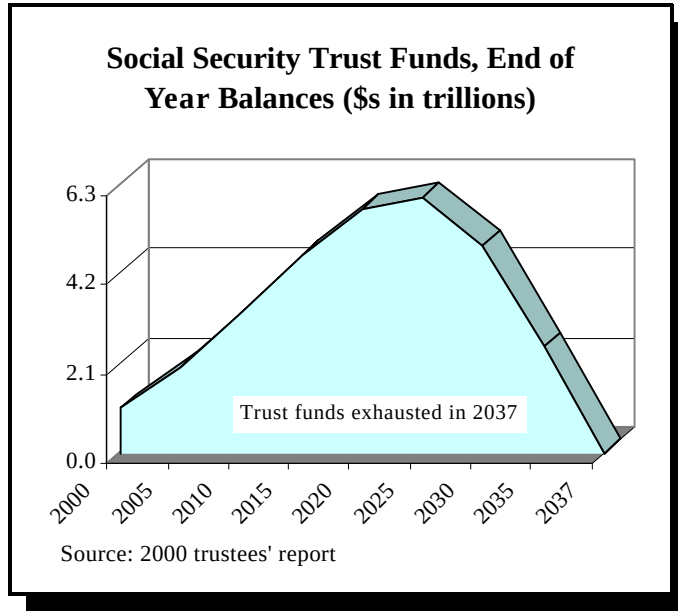
Today, the government has outstanding debts to the public totaling approximately \$3.5 trillion, an amount which has been declining in recent years because of unified budget surpluses. When the Treasury Department takes in more than it spends, the excess receipts are used automatically to retire outstanding federal debt. In short, the Treasury Department reduces the outstanding amount of the government's past borrowings.

No single activity of the government determines the amount of a budget surplus. To say surplus Social Security taxes are reducing the amount of the government's publicly-held debt assumes that all other past spending and taxation decisions have been made without any regard for Social Security's income and outgo, and vice versa. If increases in Social Security taxes in the past caused other taxes to be reduced or kept from rising, they may have added little to the government's total revenues. By the same token, when Social Security's taxes are less than its expenditures — as they were for all but five fiscal years from 1958 to 1984 — it is not clear that this shortfall causes the government to borrow more than it would otherwise. Government borrowing from the public is not clearly linked to any particular aspect of what the government does. It borrows as it needs to for whatever obligations it has to meet. Thus, whether surplus Social Security taxes are now allowing the government to reduce its past debt is largely conjecture.

## Isn't There Some Way To Actually Save the Social Security Surpluses?

Perceiving that surplus Social Security taxes simply give the government more money to spend, people sometimes ask why they can't be invested in stocks or bonds. They feel that this would really save the money for the future.

Actually, the surplus Social Security taxes being collected today are not the means through which much of the future cost of the system will be met. Most of today's taxes are used to cover payments to today's retirees (in 2000 the system's taxes are estimated to be \$501 billion; its expenditures, \$410 billion). At their peak in 2024, the balances of the Social Security trust funds are expected to equal only 3 years' worth of payments. The promise of future benefits rests primarily on the government's ability to levy taxes in the future, as is the case today, not on the balances of the trust funds.



The more immediate concern about investing the surplus taxes elsewhere is that doing so would reduce the government's revenues. How would the government make up this loss? What other taxes would take their place, what spending would be cut, or would the government simply keep its outstanding debt higher than it otherwise would be?

In a sense, the concept of investing surplus Social Security taxes in private investments is only half an idea. If the government kept its publicly-held debt higher than it otherwise would be to make up the loss, it simply would be putting money into the markets with one hand and taking it back with another. On balance, it would not have added any new money to the Nation's pool of investment resources. If, on the other hand, the government were to reduce its spending or raise other taxes to make up for the loss, it would not have to keep its outstanding debt as high. This presumably would result in a net increase in savings in the economy. The bottom line is that it is not simply how surplus Social Security taxes are invested that determines whether or not real savings is created. It is the steps that fiscal policymakers take to reduce the government's overall draw on financial markets that really matter.

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**For additional reading, see:** CRS Issue Brief IB98048, *Social Security Reform*, by David Koitz. CRS Report 88-709, *The Social Security Surplus: A Discussion of Some of the Issues*, by David Koitz and CRS Report 91-129, *Social Security: Investing the Surplus*, by Geoffrey Kollmann. For a shorter discussion, see CRS Report 95-543, *The Financial Outlook for Social Security and Medicare*, by David Koitz and Geoffrey Kollmann; CRS Report, 98-195, *Social Security Reform: How Much of a Role Could Private Retirement Accounts Play?* by David Koitz; CRS Report 95-206, *Social Security's Treatment Under the Federal Budget: A Summary*, by David Koitz; and CRS Report RS20165, *The Social Security "Lock Box,"* by David Koitz.