

## Older youth receiving Supplemental Security Income are no more likely than non-recipients to drop out of school

*Numbers cited by SAIL Act proponents are inaccurate*

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### Overview

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is a federal cash assistance program for seniors, as well as for adults and children with severe disabilities in households with low incomes and limited resources. SSI benefits help offset heightened costs of care for children.<sup>1</sup> However, there is ongoing debate about whether children's SSI has an effect—positive or negative—on the long-term achievement of beneficiaries. The proposed School Attendance Improves Lives (SAIL) Act would cut SSI benefits for 16- and 17-year old recipients if they were not attending school. Proponents cite analyses of data from 2001/2002 for their proposition that a large proportion of older youth receiving SSI are not enrolled in school. These claims are inaccurate; there is no difference in drop-out rates between youth who do and do not receive SSI.



#### Objective

To compare drop-out rates between youth who do and do not receive SSI and expose critical errors in the analyses used to justify the SAIL Act



#### Dataset

2004 and 2008 panels of the Survey of Income and Program Participation



#### Sample

Youth 16-18 years old; the sample included 252 children receiving SSI and 8,856 children not receiving SSI



### Key Findings

- Among 16-17 years olds, the focus of the SAIL Act, we found that 96.7% of SSI recipients were enrolled in school or had earned their degree, compared to 95.9% of non-recipients.
- Drop-out rates cited by SAIL Act proponents are specious; they label home schooled students and students enrolled in vocational schools and other educational programs as children who have “dropped out.”

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### 2004/2005 Social Security Administration Report Fails to Include Comparison Data

Official estimates of school enrollment figures for children receiving SSI are uncommon. In its most recent publication including enrollment information, the Social Security Administration reported data collected between July 2001 and June 2002.<sup>2</sup> In that report, the Social Security Administration found that 99% of 6-12 year olds receiving SSI and 91% of 13-17 year olds were enrolled in school.<sup>2</sup> Notably, this report did not present statistics for children who were not receiving SSI, and the report further failed to account for older teens who may have already graduated high school or satisfied General Educational Development (GED) requirements.

### SAIL Act Proponents Cite Inaccurate Drop-out Rates

On the House Committee on Ways and Means website,<sup>3</sup> proponents of the SAIL Act refer to a 2009 paper by Hemmeter et al.<sup>4</sup> that analyzed the Social Security Administration data, specifically citing the paper for their contention that “30 percent of all child SSI recipients had dropped out of school. By comparison, the drop-out rate among all youth ages 16 to 24 in the general population is 10 percent.”<sup>3</sup> Representative Tom Reed, who introduced the SAIL Act, also mentioned this number during a subcommittee hearing.<sup>5</sup>

The above quote refers to a finding in the Hemmeter et al. paper that 30% of 17-18 year olds who received SSI when they were 17 fell into an education category defined as: “Dropped out/out of school/other.”<sup>4</sup> Based on the paper’s appendix,<sup>4</sup> the data dictionary for the original data,<sup>6</sup> and the original dataset,<sup>7</sup> the definition of “Dropped out/out of school/other” included home schooled children, children in sheltered work shops, job corps, or adult education programs; and children in vocational or technical schools. The 30% figure thus includes many more students than simply those who had “dropped out” of school.

**The drop-out figure cited by proponents of the SAIL Act includes many more students than simply those who had “dropped out” of school.**

### Our Analysis

To more accurately determine school enrollment among older SSI youth, we analyzed pooled data from the 2004 and 2008 panels of the nationally representative Survey of Income and Program Participation. This survey provides data on SSI recipients and non-recipients, which allowed for a direct comparison between the two groups, unlike the survey used by Hemmeter et al. For 16-18 year olds, the sample included 252 children receiving SSI and 8,856 children not receiving SSI. All percentages were weighted based on the complex design of the Survey of Income and Program Participation.

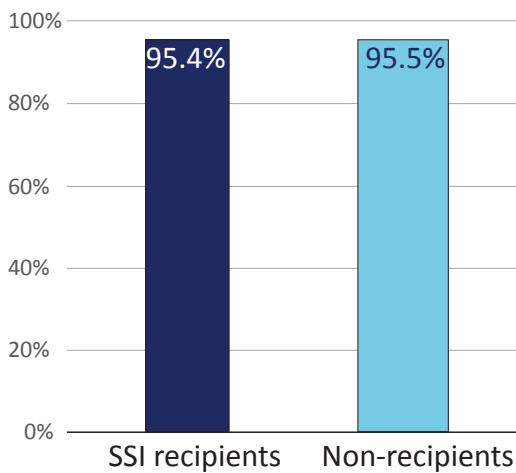
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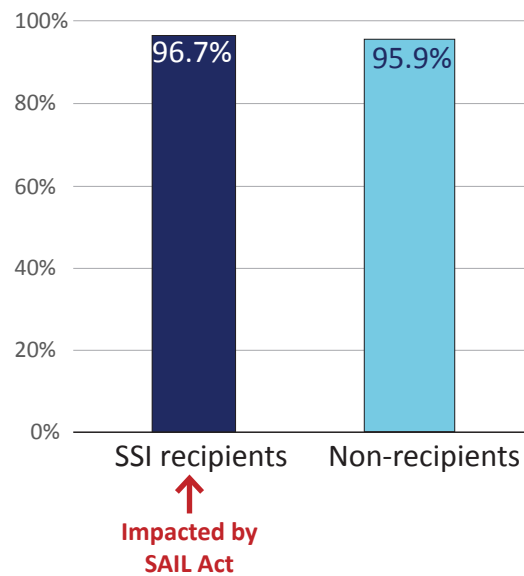
**Findings**

- 95.4% of 16-18 year old SSI recipients were either enrolled in school or had earned a high school diploma or GED, compared to 95.5% of 16-18 year old non-recipients (Figure 1).
- Among 16-18 year olds living in families with income below 200% of the federal poverty line, 95.2% of SSI recipients were enrolled in school or had earned a degree, compared to 92.1% of non-recipients.
- Breaking out just the 16-17 year olds (Figure 2) – who would be impacted by the SAIL Act – 96.7% of SSI recipients were either enrolled in school or had earned a degree, compared to 95.9% of non-recipients.
- Among 17-18 year olds, for a direct comparison to Hemmeter et al., 93.4% of SSI recipients were either enrolled in school or had earned a degree, compared to 94.5% of non-recipients.

**Figure 1. 16-18 year olds enrolled in school or earned diploma/GED**



**Figure 2. 16-17 year olds enrolled in school or earned diploma/GED**



**Summary and Recommendations**

School enrollment among older youth who receive SSI is high and statistically indistinguishable from enrollment levels for older teenagers not receiving SSI. Whether or not SSI receipt has any effect on the academic achievement of recipients, our findings make clear that SSI receipt is not associated with reduced school enrollment. These results are encouraging given the particular importance of educational services for children and youth with disabilities. Moreover, our findings have significant implications for public policy regarding the SSI program, as the numbers currently cited as the basis for the SAIL act are inaccurate.

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