

These Days

Mon-Thurs at 9 a.m. on KPBS Radio

# Report Reveals More San Diego Seniors Not Making Ends Meet

By [Megan Burke](#), [Maureen Cavanaugh](#)

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MAUREEN CAVANAUGH (Host): I'm Maureen Cavanaugh, and you're listening to These Days on KPBS. A new report on the true cost of living for San Diego seniors proves once again one size does not fit all. That 'one size' is the federal poverty guideline. Authors of a localized cost of living report called the Elder Index say California's seniors need incomes twice the federal poverty level to make ends meet. Many San Diego public agencies are now using the Elder Index to determine how best to set their own guidelines for programs that help seniors. And there's an effort underway to get this index accepted statewide. The results of the 2010 Elder Index are being released today, and here to tell us more are my guests. [Susan Smith](#) is Director of the California, that is, Elder Economic Security Initiative, for the [Insight Center for Community Economic Development](#). And, Susan, welcome to These Days.

SUSAN SMITH (Director, California Elder Economic Security Initiative, Insight Center for Community Economic Development): Thank you for having me.

CAVANAUGH: [Mary Mazyck](#) is a registered nurse. She's vice president of Programs and Services for [Senior Community Centers](#) here in San Diego. Mary, welcome.

MARY MAZYCK (Vice President, Programs and Services, Senior Community Centers): Thank you very much.

CAVANAUGH: And we would like to invite our listeners to join the conversation. Are you or are your parents on social security? Is it enough to make ends meet? Do you think the federal government has a reasonable idea about how much it takes to live in California? Share your stories and give us your questions. Our number here is 1-888-895-5727, that's 1-888-895-KPBS. Now, Susan, let me start with you. We'll be talking a lot about the Elder Index in comparison to federal poverty level guidelines so let's start out defining what the federal poverty guidelines are. How does the federal government determine what the poverty level is?

SMITH: Sure. So the federal poverty guidelines are \$10,830 for a single person living alone. And that is the same amount no matter whether you live in San Diego County, Tulare County, or Topeka, Kansas. The same dollar figure. The federal poverty guidelines were developed in 1962 by an economist named Molly Orshansky at the Social Security Administration. The best consumer expenditure data at that time suggested that households spent about a third of their after-tax income on food, and this data comes from the 1950s, so what the federal government did is that they figured out the cost of a basket of food in the 1950s and multiplied that cost times three. So that is essentially how we have our poverty line. It's been indexed for inflation but, again, it's the same dollar amount no matter where you live, and it doesn't consider the actual costs that people face for housing, healthcare, child care—at the time, it was assumed that the mom would be staying home and taking care of the kids—or transportation. And

housing is particularly important because housing is the biggest driver of costs, and healthcare for older adults is the second. So the fact that the poverty line only relies on the cost of food, and looking at that basket of food from the 1950s is a very archaic method of calculating poverty in this country.

CAVANAUGH: I think this is even more limited than most people would imagine. I thought that perhaps they took some sort of average of how much it costs to – the actual cost of living in various areas of the country but you're telling us they don't even do that.

SMITH: They don't even do that. They take this data, this consumer expenditure data from the 1950s and at the time that it was developed that – the cost of food is what they used, and looked at the ratio for how much households spend on food. And whereas we know now today, households spend much more money. The biggest expenses, as I mentioned, are housing and healthcare and childcare for families. And so it's not looking at all at what people actually spend, and it's looking at this very old, archaic formula that doesn't have any relevance for today's cost of living.

CAVANAUGH: So, Susan, tell us how then is the Elder Index established?

SMITH: Sure. So, the Elder Index is different in that we take federal and state public data sources like data from the Housing and Urban Development, data from the Department of Agriculture, and we look at based on consumer expenditure surveys today, what are older adults actually spending on rent, food, housing, healthcare expenses, transportation, and then we calculate in each county of the state what those local market goods and services cost in older adults. We average that out and say for San Diego, for example, an older adult who rents an apartment needs \$23,434 a year to cover their basic expenses. So we're looking at the true cost that seniors are paying based on surveys that are conducted and are collected through public data sources that anyone could check.

CAVANAUGH: Now as I said, the 2010 Elder Index is being released today. How long have people – has your group been calculating the Elder Index?

SMITH: Sure. We first released the Elder Index in 2008 and this is our second release of the Elder Index. We have another project that looks at the cost of living for younger adults, for families, and that we've been – we've released, it's since the last 12 years. So this is part of a larger project that's trying to reform the way we measure poverty for all populations and with the growing senior population and from the growing senior needs, we said, well, you know what, we need to look specifically at the cost of older adults because they're very different than the cost of younger adults.

CAVANAUGH: Now, as you mentioned and as I said in my introduction, it takes twice the income that the federal poverty level says it takes to – for California seniors to meet their basic needs according to the numbers on the Elder Index. Tell us where the biggest gap arises. What kind of seniors are in the most trouble, so to speak, when it comes to the difference between the federal poverty guideline and what it is they actually need to make ends meet.

SMITH: Sure. So we did a study about a year ago based on the first Elder Index that looked at how many seniors are living on incomes below this Elder Index, and we found in San Diego County that 42% of older adults in San Diego County were living on incomes below this roughly \$23,000 a year. That equates to 131,000 older adults in San Diego. In contrast, the federal poverty guideline, the poverty rate for San Diego County in 2007 was 7.7%, about 8%, and that equates to 24,000. So we have this huge number of older adults whose income might be a dollar over the poverty line but far below what they need to make ends meet. In San Diego, that's over 100,000 older adults, 34% of the total, and the problem is that as a result many of those seniors don't qualify for public and private support because the poverty line is used as a gatekeeper to say if your income is below this amount, then you can get access to certain services; if your income is above then you cannot. And so there's this huge group of folks that

I kind of call – it's a hidden population of need where they're not officially counted as poor so they often fall under the public radar but they're far below what they need to cover their basic expenses and they get kind of caught in between and don't get the help that they often need.

CAVANAUGH: And as you say, because the federal poverty guideline is what it is, they have trouble accessing any services.

SMITH: That's right.

CAVANAUGH: I'm speaking with Susan Smith. She's director of the California Elder Economic Security Initiative. And my other guest, who I'm about to speak with, is Mary Mazyck. She is vice president of Programs and Services for Senior Community Centers here in San Diego. We're taking your calls with your questions and your comments about the Elder Index and how much it costs to make ends meet if you're a senior here in San Diego. Our number is 1-888-895-5727. So, Mary, help us break down these numbers. What are the biggest money problems facing the seniors in your experience?

MAZYCK: In our experience, the biggest problem is housing and food. At the Senior Center, we serve breakfast and lunch downtown at our 4th and Beech site seven days a week, 365 days a year, and we fill up the dining room twice every day for lunch. And that's the draw that gets them in. The housing is living in possibly a room downtown, in an SRO where they're paying more than 75% of their monthly social security, and so when they have very little left after taking care of their basic needs of food and shelter, then they really have to start making some choices about what other things they can afford, whether or not it's their medications or whether they cut their medications in half to make them last longer, or maybe they just don't take care of their getting eyeglasses, getting their teeth fixed, those other things that they can't afford at all.

CAVANAUGH: Now I'm wondering, the seniors that you see at the community center, are a lot of the people – are people who have struggled with money issues all their lives? Have they been poor all their lives? Or do you see some people who have unexpectedly become poverty stricken in their older years?

MAZYCK: It's a combination of both but mostly I would say the great majority of our seniors did work their entire lives. We do have retired schoolteachers, we have retired nurses, we have retired psychologists. People have had some unplanned challenges whether it be a chronic illness or a spouse with a chronic illness or children that required more care growing up than they had money for and so their social security is not covering their needs. And these people think – thought at the time that they would have enough to get by so now that they're struggling, they really think that this is something they've done wrong and this is their fault and so this index allows us to reassure them that it's not their fault.

CAVANAUGH: And if you just worked on the federal poverty guidelines, what kinds of access would that deny people, seniors, who are struggling with – because of no fault of their own, they simply need more money to live than the federal poverty guidelines allow you to have and seek services.

MAZYCK: I would say 70% of the people we see are not eligible because of what the federal poverty level is.

CAVANAUGH: Now when did you start noticing that perhaps there was an increase in seniors struggling to make ends meet in San Diego County, Mary?

MAZYCK: I say around 2000. Excuse me. The – there was a decrease in the inventory of affordable housing at that time. Affordable units were going away at a rapid rate, and seniors were struggling. They didn't know where to go. And, of course, the rents of the ones existing went up, the supply and demand, and so that gap got smaller and smaller and smaller.

CAVANAUGH: And you're talking primarily in the city of San Diego.

MAZYCK: Yes, in the city, yes.

CAVANAUGH: We're taking your calls at 1-888-895-5727. Right now, Don is on the line from Hillcrest. And good morning, Don. Welcome to These Days.

DON (Caller Hillcrest): I have a question about how the poverty numbers are calculated. In regard to either the senior or even the general population, how do you take into account the assets of the people? In other words, the ability of the senior to – who has some substantial liquid assets to use, to eat into that principle in order to sustain their standard of living?

CAVANAUGH: Thank you for the call, Don. And, Mary, I'll give that question to you.

MAZYCK: The assets are taken into consideration when you're applying for MediCal and other benefits such as that, and when you have food stamps as well. But – And they do calculate that in and I know – I don't have the specifics here in front of me. Each case is individual. So they do count the assets in that, yes.

CAVANAUGH: Susan, I'm wondering, when people get social security, it's sort of based on their length of employment and what kind of employment they did to an extent and their age but it's not based on where they live. Would you like to see a change to that?

SMITH: Yeah, I think that what we're seeing is that there's huge variations in the cost of living depending on where you live. And so our government programs and our social safety nets and social insurance programs like social security need to take into account what the local cost of living is. And so it's a huge problem that the cost varies so tremendously yet the government doesn't account for that in the kinds of benefits that are distributed to folks.

CAVANAUGH: We have to take a short break and when we continue, we will continue to talk about the 2010 Elder Index and how it's being used by some agencies around San Diego to increase and direct their benefits. And we're taking your calls at 1-888-895-5727, that's 1-888-895-KPBS. You're listening to These Days on KPBS.

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CAVANAUGH: I'm Maureen Cavanaugh, and you're listening to These Days on KPBS. The 2010 Elder Index says California's seniors need incomes twice the federal poverty level to make ends meet, and that's what we're talking about during this portion of These Days. My guests are Susan Smith. She is director of the California Elder Economic Security Initiative for the Insight Center for Community Economic Development, and they're the people who come out with the Elder Index. Mary Mazyck is also here. She is a registered nurse and vice president of Programs and Services for Senior Community Centers here in San Diego. We're taking your calls at 1-888-895-5727. Susan, I failed to ask you this in our previous segment, and I wonder if you know the answer to this question. What is the average social security payment?

SMITH: Sure. So the average social security payment for San Diego County is \$11,526.

CAVANAUGH: Per year.

SMITH: Per year. Exactly. So what we find is that the true cost of living for older adults in San Diego is more than double that. And what that tells me is that this is not a problem of just, quote, unquote, poor people. This is a problem that's universal, that it's seniors who have worked hard, they've worked their entire lives often, they've saved, they've played by the rules, done what society has told them to do,

and yet they find in their older years that they still don't have enough to cover their most basic expenses. And so looking at the social security...

CAVANAUGH: Right.

SMITH: ...benchmark, it tells us that it's really a problem that could be your neighbor, your mother, your grandmother. It's much more universal than just kind of a small portion of the population.

CAVANAUGH: So this is telling us in clear relief if, indeed, you or your parents don't have a private little nest egg that social security is really not going to pay enough for them to live on.

SMITH: That's right.

CAVANAUGH: Now do you think – I want to ask you both, Susan and Mary, let me start with you, Susan. Do you think that this situation, this plight of many seniors in California is a well known situation or is this a problem that is under the radar in many cases?

SMITH: I think it's under the radar in many cases. And I think in part because we have this faulty measurement of poverty things look okay. Oh, there's only 7, 8% of seniors in San Diego County that are struggling because that's the percentage under the poverty line. It's not a huge portion of the population, more like the 42%. And so I think because we have these faulty benchmarks the problem often gets hidden from public view. And I also think, to the extent that in some cases policymakers might know about it because we've done a big effort to educate policymakers across the state about this information and some kind of refuse to look at the reality of the situation and kind of bury their heads in the sand and say, well, we don't want to count these people right now because we don't have the funding to actually do anything about expanding services. And so I think in part it's people don't – you know, they don't know, they don't have the education, it's not something that they see in their daily lives necessarily, and in part it's, well, even if I had – am in a position of power and I know something about it, I don't want to admit it, at least, you know, certain – certain policymakers we've had some struggles with.

CAVANAUGH: And, Mary, it sounds as if the policymakers who don't want to make a big issue of this are actually getting some help from seniors who basically, you said, kind of feel responsible and maybe don't want to broadcast...

MAZYCK: Umm-hmm. Yes.

CAVANAUGH: ...this position themselves.

MAZYCK: Umm-hmm. Yeah. There's a lot of embarrassment within their families. They don't like their children or their grandchildren to know. I've heard them say that they don't want them to see how they ended up because they feel that they've done something wrong.

CAVANAUGH: So in your experience though, however, are there a lot of families collectively dealing with this particular situation, kind of taking care of mom and dad?

MAZYCK: Yes. There are a lot of families who have had to help out mom and dad but I know in the last two years I've noticed a lot of seniors have had to move back in with family to help the family because their social security check is adding to what the family has lost in the current economic crisis.

CAVANAUGH: Wow. Let's take a call. 1-888-895-5727 is the number. Barbara is calling from La Mesa. Good morning, Barbara. Welcome to These Days.

BARBARA (Caller, La Mesa): Oh, good morning. I appreciate your taking my call. I wonder if I now will be as clear as I was with the lady I just talked to but...

CAVANAUGH: That's okay. We'll work through it.

BARBARA: Okay. I am curious about people in my position because I am below poverty, almost half of what the poverty level is and I get per month, I receive social security of almost \$700. I think it's \$695. And then I have, since Schwarzenegger took \$70 out of my SSI, I have \$150 or maybe it's \$165, I'm sorry.

CAVANAUGH: Okay. Okay.

BARBARA: Still, it's very difficult, and they never mention – I mean, people in my position below poverty are never mentioned on shows such as yours. There isn't anybody to represent me and people. I don't mean just me...

CAVANAUGH: Right.

BARBARA: ...obviously people – I represent a good amount of people, I think.

CAVANAUGH: I think you're right.

BARBARA: And I cannot understand why this – I made this call because I do not qualify for food stamps...

CAVANAUGH: Right.

BARBARA: ...because anyone who receives any portion of SSI cannot get food stamps. And I'm way below. It's very difficult. And I have sons. They are out of the state. They live elsewhere. And I have never, ever laid on them any negative thing.

CAVANAUGH: You haven't told them that you're struggling.

BARBARA: Never. Never. Never have told them. Hmm-umm.

CAVANAUGH: Well, Barbara, we're going to talk about the food stamp issue. I want to thank you very much for calling, and I'm very glad we're talking about this now. Thank you for your call. Susan – Susan and Mary, let me talk to you first, Mary, about the issue of not being able to get food stamps. Tell us more about that.

MAZYCK: I know one of the requirements or limitations is if you're on SSI, you don't – you can't apply for food stamps. And that is an issue with a lot of seniors, especially some of the younger seniors sixty and over but not yet 65. They really don't have enough money and they're not qualified for food stamps so...

CAVANAUGH: Is this one of the issues that you would like to address with the Elder Index and compiling all the information that you have, Susan?

SMITH: That's right, and California's a little bit of a unique situation with the food stamps, so seniors that are on SSI, which is an income support program for the lowest income seniors, California has increased their SSI payment by \$10.00 and historically had had a generous SSI amount compared to other states. So as a result, they added a little bit to the SSI dollar amount and then didn't give them food stamps. Over the years, SSI has been cut significantly and so now with the budget cuts, seniors that

are on SSI, their income is below the poverty level. That's the situation of the caller. Used to be, actually just two years ago when we released the report, SSI put seniors slightly above the poverty level. Now, they're below. And so they can't...

CAVANAUGH: Right.

SMITH: ...get food stamps, and that's one of the issues, one of the policy issues, that we've looked at is can we get food stamps – can we get back the food stamps program for low income seniors.

CAVANAUGH: And what is SSI?

SMITH: SSI is Supplemental Security Income.

CAVANAUGH: I see.

SMITH: And it's essentially for seniors who didn't work enough to pay into social security so that they don't – they wouldn't get social security payments. They then can get a program that, you know, that's like social security but it's for very, very low income folks that didn't pay into the system enough quarters.

CAVANAUGH: Susan, how do agencies use the Elder Index to improve or to refocus their services?

SMITH: Sure. So, agencies and Senior Community Centers and Elderhealth in San Diego or some of our leaders across the state, service providers are taking this data and making the case to foundations, to individual donors and to other investors to say we need more support. There's a whole population of need that we're not getting funding for from public sources. And so they use the information to raise more funds so they can provide more meals served at the congregate food centers, so they can develop more affordable senior housing and programs around that, and more longterm care services so seniors can age independently at home. They're also using it to measure the impact to show, okay, the program that I'm providing, between the housing subsidy that I provide and the two meals a day that I provide, I'm saving a senior \$10,000 a year that they would otherwise have to take that money out of the limited SSI or social security payments and so they're able to show the return on investment that when foundations or an individual investor put – give dollars to a particular program, they can show this is the impact that you're having, this is the amount of money you're saving the number of seniors that otherwise would be made homeless if you didn't actually invest in this program.

CAVANAUGH: Mary...

SMITH: So...

CAVANAUGH: ...how does Senior Community Centers actually benefit from the results of the Elder Index, from these numbers that this organization puts out?

MAZYCK: Well, like Susie said, it helps us go to our donors and foundations and we do have a total of 350 units of permanent supportive housing that is subsidized, so we do have 350 seniors that are living below the local rent rates, and they also are eating at our senior centers and in the housing and so they're not having to spend that money, and so we are seeing the fruit of that and the impact is amazing. In one of our buildings, more than half of the people living there had been homeless and many of them have remained stable now in housing for years.

CAVANAUGH: We're taking your calls at 1-888-895-5727. Ann is on the line from El Cajon. And good morning, Ann. Welcome to These Days.

ANN (Caller, El Cajon): Good morning. How are you?

CAVANAUGH: Just great. Thank you.

ANN: Yeah, I'm enjoying the program. I would like to – I'm glad you talked about SSI, though, because for some of us that are still paying into social security, I think you may be sending the wrong message that what we're paying in is directly related to what we're going to get when we retire.

CAVANAUGH: Uh-huh, what wrong message do you think that we're giving out?

ANN: Well, you're – I think you're blaming social security for the lack of income for people that have retired or choose to retire early.

CAVANAUGH: Okay, well, I – Let me go back to you, Susan, so that we're very clear. The average social security payment in San Diego is really not adequate to make ends meet in San Diego, is that what we've learned?

SMITH: That is what we've learned. When you look at the median social security payments so half are getting above this amount, half are getting below, it's \$11,500 and so, you know, it's less than half of what we're finding seniors need to meet their basic needs according to the Elder Index.

CAVANAUGH: So if people got the upper end of their social security payment, would that be enough to cover what they needed to make ends meet in San Diego? Just barely perhaps?

SMITH: If they got the upper end then, yes, perhaps they would be able to make ends meet but most of the folks are not in that upper end.

CAVANAUGH: Gotcha. Okay, thank you. Thank you very much, Ann, for the phone call. Let's talk about – a little bit about Medicare here and how that might fit in. Do any of these guidelines address gaps in that program as well, Susan?

SMITH: In terms of the Medicare program?

CAVANAUGH: Yes.

SMITH: So some of these programs, there are programs like the low income Medicare subsidy which helps with prescription drug costs and for co-pays that are – do provide that extra support to help seniors with the out of pocket healthcare expenses. But those use the poverty line as the benchmark in terms of eligibility. I mean, the prescription drug plan, that has definitely made a difference in terms of the amount that seniors have to pay out of pocket. When we released the data in 2008, that hadn't yet rolled out and now that it has rolled out, healthcare costs have come down a bit in some counties but the reality is some of the programs that are used like the low income subsidy to help seniors cover the out of pocket costs are still using the poverty line as the benchmark in terms of who gets that access to that service.

CAVANAUGH: Mary, do you still hear stories from seniors about them not taking as much prescription medicine as their doctors tell them they should be because of the cost?

MAZYCK: I think it's decreased with the new benefit from Medicare. I think it's helped a lot. And most of the seniors we serve are eligible for the low income subsidy and we make sure that they all have it, so it's helped.

CAVANAUGH: I'm wondering, when a senior comes to the Senior Community Centers, what kind of a

drill do you put them through, so to speak? I mean, what is it that you examine about the kinds of resources that they're accessing and the kinds of supplemental income that they're getting so that they can be eligible for as much help as possible if they need it.

MAZYCK: That's exactly right. When they come in, we – and they choose to sit with a social worker, we go over all of the benefits and all of the things in their lives that they're doing, how much they're paying for rent, what are they paying for medications, are they living alone? Where do they live? Is it safe? And all of that, and then we see if they're eligible for, and make sure they're getting, everything that they're entitled to, and can we get them some benefits that they may not know that they're eligible for.

CAVANAUGH: Let's take another call. We're taking your calls at 1-888-895-5727. Alyssa is calling from North County. Good morning, Alyssa, and welcome to These Days.

ALYSSA (Caller, North County): Good morning. Thanks for taking my call. I just wanted to share a experience that my family had that I think echoes what your guests have been explaining in regards to this much larger population of elderly people in San Diego County who really are struggling hard to survive. I was involved in caring for my elderly uncle the last several years of his life and my eyes were really opened in that process to the situation that I think a lot of people face. He was a World War II veteran who'd worked hard his whole life and found himself in the situation, and had worked well into his seventies until a heart condition caused him to have to retire. And he was on social security and as I became aware slowly of his struggles and his need for help, I started to step in and try to get him access to some programs that might be able help him, and I learned over and over again that on his roughly \$1200 a month he fell about \$12.00 short of the requirement for lots of programs that would've helped pay some of his healthcare or support him on his utility bills and things like that. So, you know, it was a perfect example of a person who didn't meet that cutoff but still desperately needed the help. And fortunately he was able – we were able to find a Salvation Army apartment that cost about a third of his income but he had to be on a waiting list for about two years to qualify for that. And the experience made me walk away with kind of a sense of sadness and care because I thought over and over, what do people do who don't have family members out there? And to be old in America and not have any resources is today, I think, a really grim prospect. I mean, we were his safety net and, fortunately, we're in a position to be able to help but there are many, many people who don't have and – and we also were not aware for quite awhile because he was embarrassed, because he was proud, that he was struggling. And I think that's typical of a lot of people who were of that generation who were used to taking care of themselves and didn't want to admit that here they were vulnerable and helpless and I think he still felt like very much of a burden, and I think that's a very sad thing.

CAVANAUGH: Alyssa, I think we're going to end it on your comments because you were so eloquent and I think you've hit all the things that we've been talking about today. Thank you so much for your comments. And Susan Smith, thank you.

SMITH: Thank you.

CAVANAUGH: And Mary Mazyck, thank you. Thank you for all your work in San Diego.

MAZYCK: Thank you very much.

CAVANAUGH: And if you have comments or additional questions, please go online, [KPBS.org/thesedays](http://KPBS.org/thesedays). Coming up, not one but two Neil Simon comedies at the Old Globe. That's as These Days continues right here on KPBS.

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