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## Older Californians need twice the poverty level income

Mary Anderson, Redwood Times  
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A study conducted by the UCLA Center for Community Economic Development finds that older Californians need an income twice the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) to make ends meet in California.

The FPL is the minimum amount of income persons need to meet survival-level living expenses. The calculations used to determine the FPL have remained the same since 1965 and do not account for regional variations. In contrast, the Elder Economic Security Standard of California, or the Elder Index, uses the actual costs of housing, medical care, food and transportation experienced by older adults in each county in California. It measures income adequacy and economic security based on a basic, dignified standard of living for those who do not receive public welfare benefits.

The high cost of living in California makes it impossible to determine a minimal standard of living as the FPL does. The FPL also places limitations on the amount of assistance programs can provide. For example, California's Supplemental Security Income (SSI) provides cash assistance to the poorest older adults, people with disabilities and the blind. The FPL is used as the benchmark for the SSI and this makes it appear that couples with benefits of \$18,220 a year have an adequate income. But when the actual costs of basic needs are calculated using the Elder Index, an older California couple who rents needs \$30,634 yearly, meaning that their SSI income is about \$12,500 short of their basic needs.

Social Security benefits alone are not adequate to maintain a basic standard of living for California seniors. Nationally, older adults with low and modest incomes rely on Social Security for more than 80% of their total income. The median Social Security income for a single California elder is \$11,640 annually.

Although the FPL guideline for all counties in California is \$10,380, a single adult renter in Humboldt County will need an annual income of \$20,224 to maintain a basic standard of living. Housing costs for homeowners without a mortgage in Humboldt County average \$323 a month. With a mortgage, that figure climbs to \$1,143 a month. A one-bedroom apartment will cost the elder \$624 a month.

The state budget crisis in California has resulted in cuts to a number of safety-net programs for older adults. The maximum benefit the state now pays the poorest older adults through SSI has fallen from its peak of \$10,844 per year for a single person in January, 2009, to a proposed \$9,960 in September, 2010. This pushes the elderly further into poverty. While states, counties and cities have developed alternative poverty metrics, ultimately federal action is required to impact federal programs and funding formulas.

With the state's older population projected to double in the next 20 years, understanding the actual costs faced by older adults in California is necessary for effective planning of senior services and reports.

Note: This report can be viewed or downloaded in its entirety at Generations Beat Online (<http://network.newamericamedia.org>).

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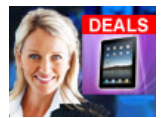
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