

We asked Don Barnett to comment on this article by Ashley Dunn from The New York Times relating to the use of the Supplemental Security Income program by elderly immigrants. The article is from the April 16, 1995 issue of and is reprinted by permission. Don Barnett lived and worked in the former Soviet Union for nearly two years and has written extensively about immigration issues.

Retiring to the U.S.

By Ashley Dunn

NEW YORK, April 15 — It was in the chaotic din of a Chinatown garment factory that 70-year-old Ho Yin-peng discovered a better way to survive than cutting loose threads from dresses at 5 cents apiece.

Her co-workers told her that even though she lived with her son, she could qualify for the Federal welfare program known as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) if she was over 65 and had been in this country for more than three years.

Soon after she passed the third anniversary of her residence in the United States in 1991, she had applied and soon began receiving the \$280 a month, far more than she made in the factory at \$40 a week. She has not worked since.

"It's not enough for living expenses, but it's more than when I was working," said Mrs. Ho, who now shares a small apartment with a friend in Chinatown. "Everyone knows about this."

Created in the early 1970s to bolster the incomes of retirees who did not receive enough in Social Security, the Supplemental Security Income program is increasingly being sought out by elderly immigrants new to this country.

Unlike regular Social Security, which is a contributory insurance plan based in part on how long people work and how much they make before retirement, SSI is a welfare program for which any citizens, or immigrants who have lived in this country five years (it was previously three years), and who meet certain requirements of age, income or disability, are eligible.

The number of elderly immigrants enrolled in the program has increased fivefold over the last 12 years. Now, more than a quarter of immigrants over 65 — in some immigrant populations, almost half — receive SSI at an annual cost of \$2 billion.

By comparison, less than 10 percent of elderly United States citizens are in the program.

SSI has, in fact, become something akin to a retirement system for elderly immigrants, who in many cases come from countries that have meager or nonexistent retirement systems. Most come to join their children or other relatives who moved here first, and the SSI system, which has become widely known among immigrants in the United States and abroad, is the one welfare program that immigrants use more heavily than do native-born Americans. Illegal immigrants are

ineligible.

"The American dream is no longer to start at the bottom and work your way up," said Daniel Stein, executive director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform. "It's to transfer your assets to your children and get on SSI as fast as you can."

But advocates for immigrants counter that the program is necessary to protect one of the most vulnerable groups in American society, elderly immigrants who come to join their children and later find that their families will not or cannot support them.

"I was hoping my children would take care of me when I got old," Mrs. Ho said. "But they all have their own families. It's the American style."

Under the Republican-backed welfare overhaul under consideration in Washington, Mrs. Ho and thousands of other immigrants between ages 65 and 75 would lose their eligibility for SSI. But those over 75, who are about half the immigrants collecting SSI, would remain eligible — an exemption, the Republicans say, that is based on compassion for the elderly poor.

The growing population of elderly immigrants collecting SSI is partly explained by the surge in immigration over the past decade. But while immigration has doubled, the number of elderly immigrants enrolled in the program has increased fivefold to 440,000 today from 91,900 in 1982.

Norman S. Matloff, a professor of computer science at the University of California at Davis who did an analysis of census data concerning immigrants receiving SSI benefits, said a reason may be simply that the benefits are available and easy to receive.

"Everybody knows that this is free money," Mr. Matloff said. "The knowledge about this overseas has just mushroomed."

An analysis of 1990 census information conducted for *The New York Times* by Andrew Beveridge, a sociologist at Queens College, shows that about 20 percent of the immigrants receiving the supplemental benefits actually live in households with incomes above \$50,000 a year. The national median income for households of five people, the average size for immigrants, is \$37,000.

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The Republican welfare changes, which have passed the House but have not yet been taken up in the Senate, would exclude only about a third of those elderly immigrants in households making more than \$50,000 a year, Mr. Beveridge's study found.

The SSI program eligibility requirements are for incomes of less than about \$450 a month, depending on the state, and liquid assets of less than \$2,000, but the rules do not take into account the wealth of the applicant's children.

"Someone could be living with Donald Trump and if they don't have a nickel to their name, they're going to qualify," said Thomas Margenau, a spokesman for the Social Security Administration.

Most immigrants are sponsored by family members to come to this country. In theory, their sponsors are financially responsible for them until they become citizens. Their sponsors are required by the government to sign an affidavit, promising that the immigrants will not become public charges.

But the affidavits have been ruled legally unenforceable and most immigrants can apply for welfare after three or five years regardless of how much their sponsors make.

Until 1994, elderly immigrants were eligible for SSI after three years in this country, and government statistics show that a quarter of them applied within months of passing the three-year mark. But the growth in the number of applications pushed the Social Security Administration to change the residency requirement last year to five years.

Mexicans make up the biggest group of immigrants receiving Supplemental Security Income. But compared with the size of the Mexican immigrant population in the United States, their usage rate is lower than that of many nationalities.

Laotians are the most likely to be collecting SSI, with nearly two-thirds of those over 65 enrolled in the program. Among non-refugee groups, Koreans have the highest usage rate, with slightly less than half of those over 65 enrolled, according to the analysis of 1990 census data by Mr. Beveridge.

Mrs. Ho, an ethnic Chinese from the Malaysian city of Melaka, came to the United States to settle in 1988 when she was 67, in part to help take care of her daughter's young children.

But as her grandchildren grew older, she said she became more of a burden to her own children.

With her SSI benefits, she was able to move out on her own. Now she pays \$100 a month for a small room off Hester Street with just enough space for a bed and plastic lawn chair, her only furniture. She eats lunch at a nearby senior citizens' center for 50 cents a meal and

cooks a simple dinner each night.

Mr. Matloff, whose study included interviews with ethnic Chinese in California, said he believed that the ease of receiving SSI has helped destroy old traditions of caring for the aged.

"It's become an easy alternative to working out family difficulties," he said.

Maria Theresa R., a 70-year-old immigrant from Ecuador who refused to be identified by her full name because she was embarrassed by her plight, said she was originally sent by her children to America because they did not have the means to care for her in their homeland any longer.

For a year and a half she lived with a son in the Bronx, but eventually left after family disputes.

She survives now on \$544 in SSI benefits each month and 50-cent meals at a nearby senior citizens' center in the East Tremont section of the Bronx.

She cannot go back to Ecuador, nor has she anyone in the United States to care for her. "This is my home," she said as she picked at her plate of rice and chicken in the center's dining hall. "There is really nothing else for me now."

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Don Barnett comments:

The *Times* article "For Elderly Immigrants, a Retirement Plan in U.S.," contains some arresting statistics, but fails to tell the entire story. It is an example of how the mainstream media often come very late to a story that has been around for a while, such as the S & L fiasco.

SSI provides cash assistance to disabled and elderly poor. Today, 28.2 percent of the elderly SSI caseload is made up of individuals who are not U.S. citizens. It didn't happen overnight. Between 1983 and 1993 the number of elderly U.S. citizens receiving SSI actually decreased by 25 percent while the number of elderly non-citizen immigrant recipients quadrupled.

There is also substantial use of disability SSI among immigrants. According to Senator Rick Santorum (R, Pa), about 40 percent of immigrant SSI recipients are eligible due to a disability.

Though not publicized, it is known that a small minority of SSI recipients have returned to their home countries or spend most of their time at home where their dollars go much further. Relatives in America cash their checks for them.

It is affirmed in the *Times* article that SSI usage by elderly immigrants carries an annual price tag of 2 billion dollars. True enough, but a reader may be left with the impression that a meager monthly payment (\$280 for the subject of the article) is the only cost for usage of SSI among immigrants.

According to a recent GAO report the bill for non-citizen SSI usage (both disability and elderly benefits) was 3.3 billion in 1993. That cost grows by about 14 percent each year. Moreover the

Medicaid entitlement which accompanies SSI is nearly twice as costly on a per-recipient basis. Most elderly SSI recipients receive food stamps and may also be receiving housing assistance.

The *Times*, in a recent editorial and now with this article, allows as how trends in usage of welfare by elderly immigrants may not be sustainable. But, says the newspaper of record, SSI "is the one welfare program that immigrants use more heavily than do native-born." The GAO study finds that 10.8 percent of adult immigrants are receiving AFDC, about 50 percent more than the national average. Non-citizen immigrants, at about 6 percent of the U.S. population, make up about 8 percent of the adult AFDC caseload and 11.5 percent of the SSI caseload. The study also finds that 29 percent of immigrant households report income below the poverty line compared with 14 percent of citizen households. It is likely that immigrants use all welfare programs at a substantially higher rate than do citizens.

Virtually all of the mainstream media have descended upon welfare reform with stories from the same boilerplate about how Mrs. X ("legal and taxpaying") will be thrown out into the street by the reforms. Though much more sober and realistic than other stories on this issue, the *Times* piece also fails to make the point that the subject of the article, Mrs. Ho, need merely naturalize to continue receiving all her benefits without interruption.

"According to a recent GAO report the bill for non-citizen SSI usage (both disability and elderly benefits) was 3.3 billion in 1993. That cost grows by 14 percent each year."

Like most of the roughly 15 million non-citizen permanent residents, Mrs. Ho is time-eligible for citizenship. Welfare dependence is not a bar to citizenship.

The Congressional Budget Office has factored increased naturalization rates into its projected savings of 21.7 billion over 5 years if immigrants are barred from welfare benefits. But it concedes that higher than expected naturalization rates among welfare beneficiaries will diminish the amount saved. Furthermore, it predicts that some of the liability for supporting immigrants will be shifted to state and local programs if federal programs are declared off-limits to immigrants. That could come back to the federal taxpayer in the form of a bill due for an "unfunded mandate" placed on states by the federal government. Congress would be well advised to refrain from spending the savings or giving it back in the form of tax relief until it is known what savings result from the reforms.

Perhaps the only thing more foolhardy than

extending all our social guarantees to new arrivals is allowing those that are totally dependent upon them to become citizens.

Will it take 10 years before this is allowed to be a topic suitable for public discussion? ■