

Scarce Housing Assistance Is Crucial to Bergen and Passaic County Seniors Who Fall below the Economic Security Line

Part of a WOW series assessing the economic security of NJ elders



JOAN, A LOW-INCOME ELDER in Passaic County, counts herself lucky to have obtained a handicap-accessible subsidized housing unit after waiting for more than five years. While housing assistance is not the only assistance that can help close the gap between low incomes and security, it is usually the most impactful—and the most difficult to secure.

More than 250,000 elders in New Jersey live in households that struggle to reach economic security.ⁱ More than 9-in-10 New Jersey elders receive Social Security, which provides nearly 100% of retirement income for more than 1-in-4 seniors. Average Social Security payments are not high enough for elders to even approach economic security, but are too high to allow elders to qualify for important public assistance programs, such as Medicaid or Supplemental Security Income.

Public assistance accessibility is crucial to seniors who live above the poverty line but remain vulnerable. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, 60% of single elders and 28% of elder couples in Bergen County lack an economic security income and fall below the “economic security line.” More than 61% of single elders and almost 34% of elder couples live below the economic security line in Passaic County. They are at risk of lacking basic needs such as housing, food or health care. They are also at risk of falling into poverty and/or entering a public institution if they have a financial or health crisis. Elder women in both counties do even worse than elder men. Among single elders, nearly 64% of women in Bergen County and over 66% of women in Passaic County live in economic insecurity, compared to just under 46% of men in Bergen County and nearly 49% of men in Passaic County.ⁱⁱ



I was in the hospital and a woman who lived here said, ‘I’m going to bring you an application because you can’t live in your house anymore.’ I waited 5 ½ years because I needed my (new) unit to be handicap-accessible.

- Joan B,
Bergen County

ⁱ New Jersey Foundation on Aging. *New Jersey Elder Economic Security Index: Addressing Basic Needs*. 2012. <http://www.njfoundationforaging.org/NJElderEconomicIndex2012.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. The number of seniors who lack economic security incomes is calculated by comparing individual New Jersey seniors’ actual incomes, reported by the US Census Bureau, to the New Jersey Elder Index, by county.

Figure 1: Economic Security and Insecurity Rates for Elders Living in Bergen County, NJ, 2012

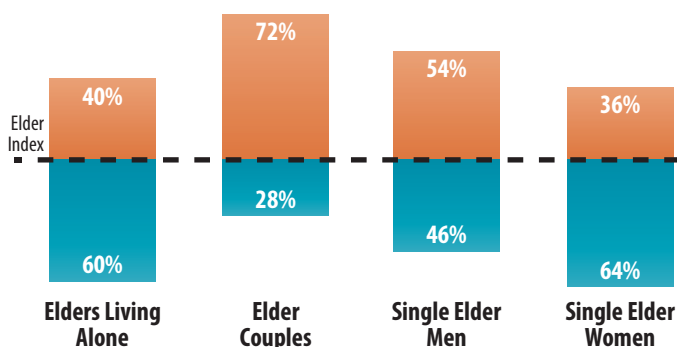


Figure 2: Economic Security and Insecurity Rates for Elders Living in Passaic County, NJ, 2012

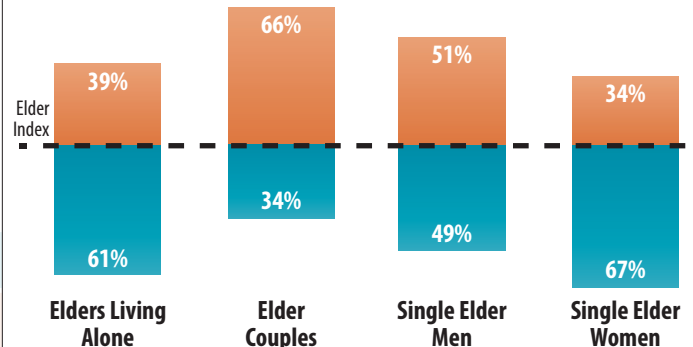
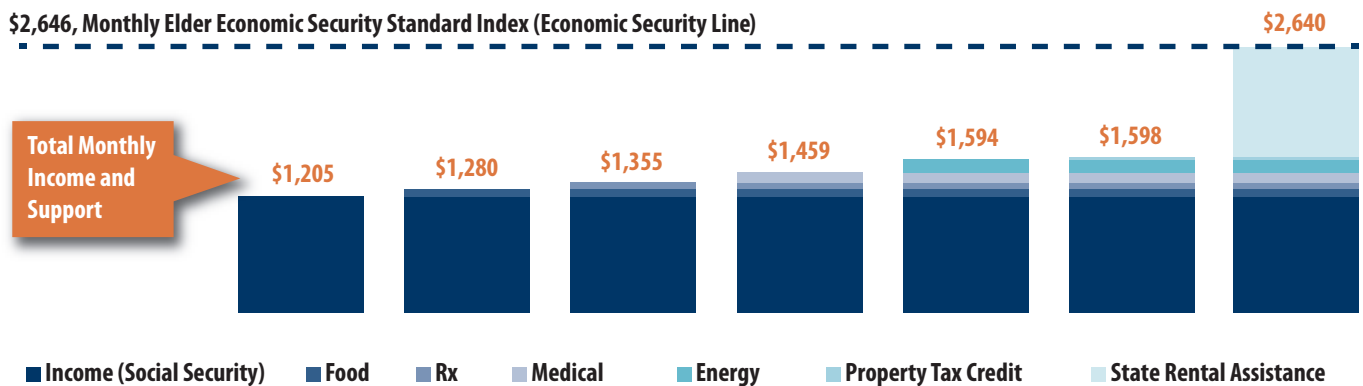


Figure 3 shows how important public assistance programs are to an elder woman renter who lives alone in Passaic County. Her income is the average Social Security benefit for Passaic County senior women. Because she has less than \$2,000 in the bank, she is eligible for food, prescription, medical, energy, and rental assistance, as well as a small property tax credit.

Assuming she receives all assistance she is income eligible for, which is very rare, the elder remains far below the economic security line until she is able to obtain rental assistance. State Rental Assistance moves the elder from 56% to 99% of the **Elder Economic Security Standard Index**. Rental assistance is a powerful tool to aid elders struggling to avoid destitution, but it is

in short supply: In Bergen and Passaic Counties, only 6,300 federal housing vouchers are available in each county. Even with the laudable elder set-asides built into the State Rental Assistance Program, which is much smaller than federal housing assistance programs, many elders are unable to access this vital support.

Figure 3: The Impact of Public Programs on the Economic Security Gap for a Single Woman Elder Renter Living on Average Social Security in Passaic County, NJ, 2013



The number of New Jersey seniors who lack security is calculated using WOW's Elder Economic Security Index (Elder Index), which demonstrates the incomes elders require to meet basic needs and remain at home during

retirement. The Elder Index includes the basic costs required for health and safety: housing, food, transportation, health care and miscellaneous household costs such as a telephone and clothing.

Table 1: Annual Elder Index, Bergen and Passaic Counties, by Housing Status, 2013

	Elder Person			Elder Couple		
	Owner w/o Mortgage	Renter, One Bedroom	Owner w/ Mortgage	Owner w/o Mortgage	Renter, One Bedroom	Owner w/ Mortgage
Bergen County	\$28,584	\$31,872	\$44,472	\$39,888	\$43,176	\$55,776
Passaic County	\$27,852	\$31,752	\$40,992	\$39,156	\$43,056	\$52,296

Note: Elder Indexes are for those in good health.

Source: [The Economic Security Database](#), [Wider Opportunities for Women](#) and the [Gerontology Institute](#), University of Massachusetts Boston.