

# As the Bulletin Turns Fifty. . .

As the **Social Security Bulletin** embarks on its second half century of publication, it completes 50 years of service to the Social Security Administration, the Congress, and the public. The **Bulletin** has been a primary source of data about Social Security and related income-maintenance programs in this country and abroad. In its pages, the **Bulletin** has reflected the maturation of the Social Security system—from a program of limited scope, designed to serve only the aged population, to the present broader-based program that affects nearly every person in the country.

It is no coincidence that the Social Security Administration and the **Social Security Bulletin** celebrate their respective anniversaries within months of each other. In establishing the Social Security Board as the body responsible for carrying out the provisions of the Social Security Act of 1935, Congress specifically called for basic research to be conducted and for the Board to make recommendations based on the results of that research. In response to that mandate, the Board took two actions: first, it established a research organization—the Bureau of Research and Statistics—and then, it created the **Social Security Bulletin**.

The interrelatedness of these two actions was further delineated when Board Chairman Arthur J. Altmeyer set forth the purposes of the new publication:

- to record developments in the fields for which the Social Security Board carries responsibility. . .

- to summarize data essential to the measurement of social security programs. . .
- to present the results of research. . .
- to promote a general understanding of the contribution of the social services to the programs of the United States. . . .

Further, he said that the **Bulletin** was to serve as “primarily a link between members of the Board’s Nationwide organization and between the Board and the large number of Federal and State agencies directly concerned with the administration of the program.”

In 1938, the infant program created by Congress in 1936 was already being assessed in terms of what the future might bring. And, as the journal of record for the Social Security Administration, the **Bulletin** was publishing the data needed for such assessments. From those early days, through its ongoing presentation of statistical tabulations, program and policy research, and analyses of legislative developments, the **Bulletin** has continued to record the evolution of the Social Security program.

The original Board administered five programs that, under specified conditions, provided cash payments to individuals. In addition to the two insurance programs that provided for the payment of old-age benefits and Federal-State unemployment compensation, they included Federal-State programs of public assistance to the needy aged, the blind, and dependent children. The **Bulletin** devoted a section to each of

these five programs. On the second page of this issue is a reprint of a page from the March 1938 **Social Security Bulletin** that describes the variety of program data (from many sources) that were brought together for the first time when the **Bulletin** began publication. Fifty years later, data about these programs continue to be published in the **Bulletin’s** monthly and quarterly statistical tables, although the programs for unemployment compensation and aid to families with dependent children now are administered by other agencies.

Program records and national surveys based on samples drawn from the beneficiary population have been two major sources of data for research and analyses since the program’s inception. A review of the **Bulletin’s** statistical tables and articles shows a tremendous increase in the sophistication of both these sources over the past half century.

Analyses of data made available through the recordkeeping capacity of the Social Security Administration have provided a basis for evaluation of existing programs; consideration of the employment, health, and economic status of the elderly; and ongoing assessment of the program’s impact on the national economy. Details of the establishment of the accounting operations were reported in early issues of the **Bulletin**. Although technological advances have changed the way these records are stored and retrieved, the basic system remains intact today. These records are central to the administration of the Social Security program, but they are also a valuable resource for the

entire social science research community.

Fears that the private information contained in these records—such as individual earnings data—would be readily accessible for anyone to use were allayed by enactment of stringent regulations to protect their confidentiality. The **Bulletin** reported the early efforts in this area and has kept its readers updated on the Social Security Administration's continuing efforts to safeguard the personal information furnished by employees and employers.

To augment the data available from program records, the Social Security Administration has traditionally used survey research for many purposes—primarily to gather information on the labor-force and retirement behavior of older workers and on the health and economic status of the aged and disabled populations. One of the earliest surveys, a series of interviews conducted in seven cities in 1941-42, focused on the economic status of the first groups of Social Security beneficiaries. The Longitudinal Retirement History Study, in which members of a sample of older workers were interviewed six times during an 11-year study period, was perhaps the most complex survey undertaken. From the earliest survey through the most recent (the 1982 New Beneficiary Survey), the **Bulletin** has been the primary source for publishing the results and analyses of the data obtained from these research endeavors.

The two major changes to the original Social Security program—the addition of disability insurance and health insurance (Medicare)—were chronicled in detail in the **Bulletin**, beginning in 1938 with

an indication from the framers of the 1936 legislation that they were issues still to be resolved. Legislation in 1956 added the Disability Insurance program and in 1965 provisions for the Medicare program were enacted. The Social Security Administration research staff provided a considerable amount of the background information used in the decisionmaking process that resulted in these two significant program extensions, and numerous **Bulletin** pages were devoted to the prelegislative research and to the programs' operations after their enactment.

Economic questions are fundamental to the operation of the Social Security program. Broadly stated, such questions concern whether or not the intent of the program (a floor of economic security for workers and their dependents) is being met and whether or not the program is effectively providing for both present and future insured populations. As is evidenced by the number of **Bulletin** articles that have dealt with these topics since 1938, economic research has been an essential and well-used tool to measure the extent to which the program has been and will be able to continue to fulfill its stated objectives.

Debates about the Social Security trust funds started early and have continued through the years. In its role as the journal of record for the Social Security Administration, the **Bulletin** traditionally publishes summaries of the annual reports of the Boards of Trustees.

The thousands of **Bulletin** pages that have been published since 1938 have mirrored world and national events. The recovery from the Great Depression of the

1930's, for example, is documented in the wealth of wage and salary employment records that were instituted late in that decade. And, as the country moved into a war preparation mode, the problems associated with manpower availability were reflected in the **Bulletin's** articles and statistical data.

In many instances, subjects that were considered significant in the **Bulletin** 50 years ago have remained important today—the economic security of the beneficiary population, employment patterns of older workers, and retirement behavior, for example. Other research issues not envisioned 50 years ago—such as the economic effects of Social Security on private saving and how the program will be affected by the increasing life expectancy of today's workers and by the growing number of women working outside of the home—have been added to the research agenda and have been covered in **Bulletin** articles. The breadth of information in today's **Bulletin** is considerable and, because of gains in data gathering and survey techniques, much of the information now being published is more reliable and more timely than was possible in the past. Through the **Bulletin**, the Social Security Administration continues to provide to policymakers and to the public the data and analyses needed to evaluate the current status and future direction of the Nation's most comprehensive and far-reaching social insurance program.