

Are Younger Disability Beneficiaries Unhealthier than Ever?

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Key Findings and Policy Implications

This paper uses a unique dataset that combines administrative SSDI and SSI records from the Social Security Administration with health measures and personal characteristics from the Survey of Income and Program Participation to examine whether SSDI and SSI applicants are more likely to report negative health outcomes one year or more before application, and whether their health differs by age or the application's ultimate success. The paper finds that:

- Using simple descriptive measures, there are clear upward trends in poor self-reported health, work limitations, and limitations in the Activities of Daily Living for all ages and for both allowed and denied applicants.
- The regression-adjusted trend lines, however, are flat, suggesting that shifts in the composition of applicants – notably, the increase in college-educated applicants, who are likely to apply only when health problems are severe – are responsible for the observed upward trend in negative health measures.

The results are important in helping to explain rising SSDI enrollment, and particularly the increasing incidence rate among younger applicants. An informative result is that better educated individuals are growing as a proportion of applicants, but because they only apply for disability benefits when they are in very ill health, their increasing numbers is making the average applicant look less healthy over time.

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