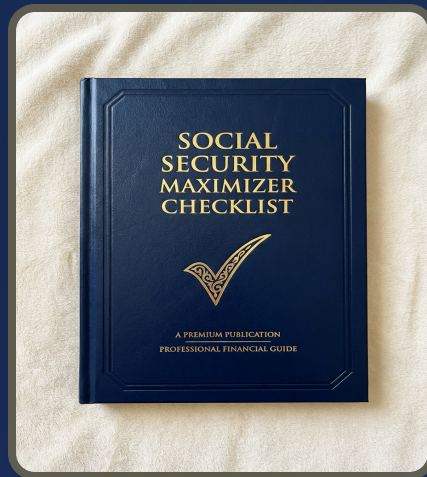




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Social Security Maximizer Checklist

Add \$100,000+ to Your Lifetime Benefits

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Welcome

Thank you for downloading *Social Security Maximizer Checklist*. My team and I wrote this guide for one reason: the retirement industry loves jargon, but real families need answers.

Everything inside is based on what we've learned helping hundreds of Arizona families transition from working years to retirement years — calmly, confidently, and without running out of money.

If anything raises a question for you, please don't guess. Call us at **(602) 376-7260** or book a free 30-minute review at **AZIRS.com/schedule**. No sales pitch, no obligation — ever.

— Dana Artzer, Founder & Licensed Insurance Producer (NPN 8965858)

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Why claiming at 62 costs the average person \$182,000
- ✓ The 8% guaranteed return for waiting past FRA
- ✓ Spousal & survivor benefit optimization
- ✓ How working in retirement affects benefits
- ✓ Taxation of benefits and IRMAA coordination
- ✓ Case studies for singles, couples, and widows
- ✓ Worksheets + printable claiming checklist
- ✓ Glossary of Social Security terms

About AZIRS: We are an independent Arizona-based brokerage specializing in retirement income, annuities, Medicare, and life insurance. We work with 30+ A-rated carriers and have no sales quotas. Our only job is to put the right plan in writing for you.

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1 Chapter 1 — The 3 Magic Ages

Age 62 — Earliest you can claim. Permanent reduction of up to 30% from your Full Retirement Age benefit.

Full Retirement Age (66–67 depending on birth year) — 100% of your earned benefit (your "PIA").

Age 70 — Maximum benefit. Each year you wait past FRA adds 8% in "Delayed Retirement Credits." No reason to wait beyond 70 — credits stop accruing.

Example: a worker with a \$3,000/month FRA benefit would receive ~\$2,100 at 62, \$3,000 at 67, and \$3,720 at 70. Over a 25-year retirement, the difference between 62 and 70 is commonly \$150,000–\$200,000 — BEFORE counting spousal and survivor impact.

2 Chapter 2 — The 8% Guarantee Nobody Offers

Between your Full Retirement Age and age 70, your benefit grows 8% per year GUARANTEED, backed by the U.S. Treasury, adjusted for inflation (COLA) on top.

There is no investment product in the world that pays 8% guaranteed, inflation-adjusted, for life. Deferring your benefit is effectively the cheapest annuity you can buy — and it's already in your name.

The "breakeven" age (where waiting pays more cumulatively than claiming early) is typically in the early 80s. If you expect to live past 82, waiting nearly always wins.

3 Chapter 3 — Checklist for Single Filers

- Pull your benefit estimate at SSA.gov/myaccount.
- Check your earnings record for errors (every \$1,000 missing = lost benefits).
- If healthy and not desperate for the cash, wait until 70 — it's a guaranteed 8%/year raise.
- Consider Roth conversions between retirement and claiming age to lower lifetime taxes.
- Model the tax impact — up to 85% of benefits may be taxable depending on other income.
- If a short life expectancy is likely, claiming earlier may be appropriate.

4 Chapter 4 — Checklist for Married Couples

- Identify the higher earner — they should generally claim LAST (age 70 if possible).
- The lower earner can claim earlier to provide household income while the higher benefit grows.
- Remember: when the higher earner dies, the surviving spouse keeps the LARGER benefit and loses the smaller one. Maximizing the higher earner's benefit protects whoever lives longest.
- Understand spousal benefits: a lower-earning spouse can receive up to 50% of the higher earner's FRA benefit instead of their own, if larger.
- Coordinate claiming with Medicare enrollment and IRMAA planning.

Chapter 5 — Divorced & Widowed

Divorced: Married 10+ years and divorced 2+ years? You can claim on your ex's record — it does NOT affect their benefit or their current spouse's benefit, and they'll never be notified.

To claim on an ex's record, you must be unmarried (remarriage before 60 usually disqualifies you).

Widowed: Survivor benefits can start as early as age 60 (50 if disabled). You can choose to claim survivor benefits first and switch to your own benefit later, or vice versa — whichever gives a larger lifetime total.

Widow(er)s often benefit from claiming the smaller benefit early and letting the larger one grow to 70.

Chapter 6 — The Earnings Test (and Why It Surprises People)

If you claim BEFORE your Full Retirement Age and keep working, Social Security withholds \$1 of benefits for every \$2 earned above the annual limit (\$23,400 in 2026).

In the year you reach FRA, the test is more generous: \$1 withheld for every \$3 earned above a higher limit (\$62,160 in 2026), and only until your birthday month.

After FRA — no earnings test. You can earn unlimited income without reduction.

Key nuance: the withheld benefits aren't "lost" — they're credited back via a benefit recalculation at FRA. But many retirees would prefer to avoid the hassle by delaying their claim or reducing hours.

Chapter 7 — Taxation of Benefits

Your Social Security may be partially taxable at the federal level based on "combined income" = AGI + non-taxable interest + ½ of your Social Security.

Single filers: 0% taxable up to \$25,000 combined income, up to 50% taxable \$25,000–\$34,000, up to 85% taxable above \$34,000.

Married filing jointly: 0% up to \$32,000, up to 50% between \$32,000–\$44,000, up to 85% above \$44,000.

These thresholds are NOT indexed to inflation — they've been frozen since the 1990s. That's why most retirees today find 85% of their benefit is taxable.

State taxation varies: most states don't tax Social Security, but a handful still do. Check yours.

Chapter 8 — Case Study: Maximizing a Couple

Tom (FRA benefit \$2,900) and Karen (FRA benefit \$1,400) are both 66. Life expectancy: Tom 85, Karen 92.

Plan A (both claim at 66): Combined monthly = \$4,300. Total over joint life = ~\$1.38M. Karen's survivor benefit after Tom = \$2,900.

Plan B (Karen claims at 66, Tom waits to 70): Years 1–4: \$1,400/mo. Years 5+: \$1,400 + \$3,828 = \$5,228/mo. Karen's survivor benefit after Tom = \$3,828.

Lifetime household total under Plan B: ~\$1.53M. Net gain: ~\$150,000 — and Karen's survivor income is nearly \$1,000/month higher for life.

Chapter 9 — Case Study: Single with Longevity in Family

Renee (62) has a \$2,500 FRA benefit. Her mother lived to 96; her aunts are still alive in their 90s.

Claiming at 62 → \$1,750/month. Claiming at 70 → \$3,100/month.

Breakeven age: ~82. At 90, cumulative benefits are roughly \$290,000 HIGHER under the age-70 strategy.

Plan: bridge ages 62–70 by drawing modestly from IRA and doing annual Roth conversions to stay in the 12% bracket. Defer Social Security to 70. Result: higher guaranteed lifetime income AND lower RMDs after 73.

Chapter 10 — Case Study: Widow Strategy

Elaine is 61. Her late husband's Social Security was \$2,800 at his FRA. Her own FRA benefit is \$1,900.

Option: Claim survivor benefit of ~\$2,450 starting at 62 (reduced for age). Then switch to her OWN benefit at 70 when it has grown to ~\$2,356.

Comparison: If her own benefit at 70 is less than the survivor, she keeps the survivor. But if she lets her own grow, it may exceed the survivor.

The strategy of claiming the smaller benefit first and switching later is unique to widows/widowers and can produce tens of thousands in additional lifetime income.

Worksheet — Your Claiming Decision

1. Your FRA benefit amount (from ssa.gov/myaccount): \$_____
2. Your benefit at 62 (multiply line 1 by 0.70–0.75 depending on FRA): \$_____
3. Your benefit at 70 (multiply line 1 by 1.24–1.32): \$_____
4. Expected lifespan (family history + health): age _____
5. Spouse's FRA benefit: \$_____
6. Higher earner's benefit locks in the survivor amount. Who is the higher earner? _____
7. Other income during ages 62–70 to cover expenses: \$_____ /year
8. Decision: target claiming age for YOU _____, for SPOUSE _____

Printable Social Security Checklist

- Created my SSA.gov/myaccount online account
- Reviewed my 35-year earnings record for errors
- Requested corrections for any missing years
- Estimated my benefit at 62, FRA, and 70
- Estimated my spouse's benefit at 62, FRA, and 70
- Modeled the survivor benefit for the likely-longer-lived spouse
- Coordinated claiming strategy with Medicare/IRMAA plan
- Reviewed earnings-test impact if working before FRA
- Reviewed federal AND state taxation of benefits
- Booked a free AZIRS Social Security timing review

PIA (Primary Insurance Amount) — Your benefit at Full Retirement Age.

FRA — Full Retirement Age. 66–67, depending on birth year.

DRC — Delayed Retirement Credits. 8%/year added to your benefit for each year you wait past FRA up to 70.

Spousal Benefit — Up to 50% of your spouse's FRA benefit.

Survivor Benefit — The larger of two spouses' benefits continues to the surviving spouse.

Earnings Test — Temporary benefit withholding if you work and claim before FRA.

COLA — Cost of Living Adjustment. Annual inflation increase.

Combined Income — AGI + tax-free interest + $\frac{1}{2}$ Social Security, used to determine tax on benefits.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

Claiming early "because it might run out" — Social Security is funded through 2035 at full benefits, then ~80% after. Decisions should be based on math, not fear.

Working before FRA and triggering the earnings test without realizing it.

Forgetting that up to 85% of benefits are federally taxable.

Ignoring survivor impact — the smaller-earning spouse will likely outlive the higher earner and inherit only ONE benefit.

Not coordinating claiming with Roth conversions, IRMAA, and RMD planning.