Social Security is more than a retirement program for older adults. It pays more benefits to children than any other federal program. Six and a half million children in the United States received part of their family income from Social Security in 2005, with many receiving assistance from Social Security’s survivors benefits program. This program serves vulnerable children who have lost a parent and who might otherwise be at risk of slipping into poverty. Remarkably, the survivors benefits program protects 98 percent of the children in the United States in the event they were to lose a parent.

Social Security provides vital financial security for our nation’s children, families, and older adults. In fact, almost a third of the more than 50 million people who receive Social Security benefits today are younger than age 65. As the nation’s most successful income protection program, Social Security manifests our intergenerational interdependence and supports families, not just individuals. Policymakers are considering reforms to address Social Security’s long-term funding shortfall. Proposals often include cutting benefits, though proponents of this option rarely address how such reductions would affect vulnerable children, families, and people with disabilities. All proposed reforms must be examined in view of their impact on families, and across generations and vulnerable groups.

Social Security protects substantial numbers of children:

- 3.1 million children younger than 18 receive Social Security benefits as dependents of deceased, disabled, or retired workers.
- While not receiving benefits themselves, 3.4 million children younger than 18 live in households in which at least one relative receives Social Security benefits.
- Almost a million adults who have been disabled since childhood receive benefits as the dependents of deceased, disabled, or retired parents.
- The program is the only major source of life and disability protection for the vast majority of the nation’s 73 million children.

Social Security provides substantial benefits:

- A young working parent with a spouse and two children younger than age 18 would need to purchase a $433,000 term life insurance policy to provide equivalent protection for his/her children.
- The disability insurance for wage earners is valued at more than $414,000 for a family with two children younger than 18.
- In 2008, a widowed mother with two children received an average benefit of $2,243 per month, or $26,916 per year; a disabled worker with a spouse and children received an average of $1,690 per month, or about $20,280 per year.

Social Security protects the most vulnerable children and families:

- Social Security kept 1.3 million children from falling into poverty in 2005. It supports more children than the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.
- Among children in families who received Social Security, approximately 42 percent, or more than 2.7 million children, would have been considered poor based on family income other

**Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC)** lost both of his parents when he was in his early twenties. His 13-year-old sister was also orphaned and over the next decade, Social Security survivors benefits helped meet her needs. According to Senator Graham, Social Security “made a world of difference to my family.”
than Social Security. With the additional benefits, the poverty rate among these children is reduced to 22.5 percent, or less than 1.5 million.\textsuperscript{14}

- Because African Americans are more likely than whites to die or become disabled before retirement, Social Security is a critical source of support for African American children, more than a fifth of whom receive benefits.\textsuperscript{15}

- Latino families have lower lifetime earnings, longer life expectancies, higher disability rates, and are generally larger than white and African American families, making Social Security insurance protection extremely important for Latino children.\textsuperscript{15}

SOCIAL SECURITY MUST BE STRENGTHENED

People of all ages have a stake in the outcome of debates about reforming Social Security. According to a recent poll, the current financial crisis has spurred strong public support for Social Security, with nearly nine in ten Americans saying its protections are at even greater risk, Social Security’s safety net is essential. This means:

- Social Security’s life and disability protections for today’s children will take on added importance for the wellbeing of families, especially in difficult economic times.

- Policymakers should consider restoring Social Security’s survivor benefits to age 22 for youth who remain enrolled in college. Removed in 1981, this benefit would increase America’s economic competitiveness by allowing more youth to enroll in and graduate from college.

- As today’s children become working adults and parents, they will need these guaranteed life and disability protections for their families.

- When today’s children retire, Social Security’s guaranteed benefits will be one important source of retirement income.

Generations United supports a strong and solvent Social Security program that meets its obligations for current and future beneficiaries. As the dialogue about how to achieve long-term solvency for Social Security continues, policymakers must consider how reforms will affect vulnerable children, people with disabilities, spouses of deceased workers, retirees - and families as a whole.

For more information on Social Security, visit www.gu.org/socialsecurity.asp

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GU’s web site, www.gu.org, contains additional information about intergenerational topics.

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References:

3 See note 1 above.
6 See note 2 above.
7 Ibid.
10 See note 2 above.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
16 Ibid.