

The Dollar Gazette

by Financial Life Designs



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Financial Life Designs Update

From Tyler Jones

As I approach my three-year anniversary with Financial Life Designs, I'd like to share a brief update and address a few common questions.

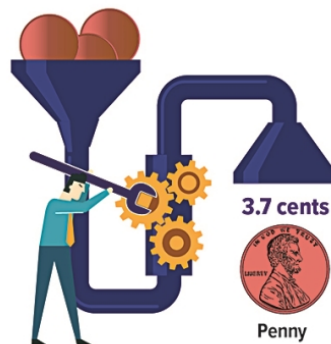
Audrey Isn't Retiring Rest assured—Audrey has no plans to step away any time soon. Instead, we are intentionally transitioning from “her” to “we.” Our goal is for clients to experience us as a unified advisory team, working together to deliver the highest level of service.

Looking Ahead

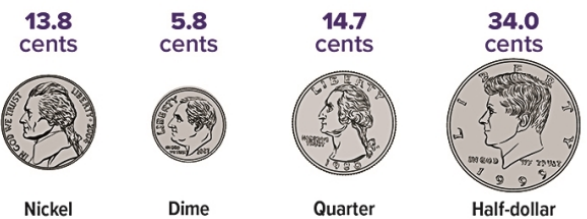
Our mission remains unchanged: to serve our clients with the same dedication that has defined Financial Life Designs since 2015. As we grow, we're also expanding our focus on comprehensive family planning and developing a High-Net-Worth-style service tailored specifically for the Middle Class.

The U.S. Penny Is History

After more than 200 years, the U.S. government is discontinuing one-cent pennies, primarily because it costs much more to mint them than they are worth. In addition, paying with cash has become much less common. The U.S. Treasury ordered the last blanks — metal pieces from which coins are struck — in May 2025 and rolled out the last pennies in November. Pennies could remain in circulation for some time, but eventually, cash transactions will need to be rounded up or down to the nearest nickel. Once made from pure copper, the penny is now composed of copper-plated zinc.



Cost to produce and distribute one coin in 2024



Sources: *The Wall Street Journal*, May 22, 2025, and November 12, 2025; U.S. Mint, 2024 (Cost amounts rounded to the nearest tenth.)

Taxing Social Security Benefits: Clearing the Confusion

When the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) was passed in the summer of 2025, there was some confusion in messaging from the Social Security Administration about taxation of benefits.¹⁻² Here is an overview that may help clarify any questions you have about the new law and taxing Social Security benefits.

What does OBBBA do and not do for seniors?

First and foremost, OBBBA does *not* change the rules for taxing Social Security benefits. The process used to pass OBBBA in the Senate — called budget reconciliation — prohibits any changes to the Social Security program.

OBBBA *does* provide an additional \$6,000 deduction for taxpayers 65 and older (\$12,000 for a married couple) for tax years 2025–2028. However, this deduction has no direct relationship with Social Security benefits. It is available regardless of whether the taxpayer age 65 and older is receiving benefits. And it is not available to taxpayers who are receiving benefits if they are under age 65. The deduction phases out at higher income levels: \$75,000–\$175,000 for single filers, \$150,000–\$250,000 for joint filers.

Taxation of Social Security benefits is based on income. That means the additional senior deduction should reduce the number of people who have to pay taxes on their Social Security benefits by reducing their taxable income. And many of those who do pay taxes will pay less.

According to the White House, 64% of Social Security beneficiaries did not pay taxes on their benefits before OBBBA, and the new senior deduction will increase that to 88%.³ Other analysts indicate that both figures are too high, because they assume that all deductions are applied directly to Social Security income, whereas many seniors receive other taxable income. The nonpartisan Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center estimates that about half of beneficiaries will still pay some taxes on their Social Security benefits.⁴

How are Social Security benefits taxed?

The tax liability for Social Security benefits is based on your *combined income*, defined by the IRS as your adjusted gross income plus tax-exempt interest plus one-half of your Social Security benefits.

If your combined income exceeds a base amount of \$25,000 for single filers or \$32,000 for joint filers, you may owe federal income taxes on up to 50% of your Social Security benefits. If your combined income exceeds a higher base amount of \$34,000 for single filers or \$44,000 for joint filers, you may owe federal income taxes on up to 85% of your benefits.

Three Deductions

The new senior deduction is available regardless of whether a taxpayer takes the standard deduction or itemizes. For those who take the standard deduction, it is in addition to the standard deduction (which applies to all taxpayers) and the already existing additional standard deduction for taxpayers age 65 and older. The combination of all three deductions could result in a substantial reduction of taxable income. These are the deductions for tax year 2025, with deductions for tax year 2026 in parentheses.

| Deduction | Filing status | | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|--|------------------------|---------------------------|
| | Single | Joint | Head of household | Married filing separately |
| Standard | \$15,750 (\$16,100) | \$31,500 (\$32,200) | \$23,625 (\$24,150) | \$15,750 (\$16,100) |
| Additional standard 65+ | \$2,000 (\$2,050) | \$1,600 each \$3,200 total (\$1,650/\$3,300) | \$2,000 (\$2,050) | \$1,600 (\$1,650) |
| OBBBA 65+ 2025–2028 | \$6,000 | \$6,000 each \$12,000 total | \$6,000 | Not available |
| Total | \$23,750 (\$24,150) | \$46,700 (\$47,500) | \$31,625 (\$32,200) | \$17,350 (\$17,750) |

Considering these rules, the only taxpayers for whom taxation of benefits will be completely eliminated by the new law are those whose combined income drops below the \$25,000/\$32,000 base amount.

Whether or not your Social Security benefits are taxed, the new senior deduction should reduce your tax burden to some extent. Unfortunately, it comes with a long-term effect on the Social Security and Medicare programs, which are funded in part by taxes on Social Security benefits. One estimate suggests that the new deduction will move the expiration date of the trust funds that help fund Social Security and Medicare up from 2033 to 2032, unless Congress takes action to strengthen the programs.⁵

Estimates are based on current conditions, are subject to change, and may not come to pass.

1) Social Security Administration, July 3, 2025

2) MarketWatch, July 25, 2025

3) The White House, July 1, 2025

4) Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center, July 9, 2025

5) Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, June 27, 2025

No More Groundhog Day for Your Finances: Time for a Financial Wellness Checkup

Just like Groundhog Day, our financial habits can repeat themselves, month after month and year after year. That is, until we consciously break the pattern. Now is a good time to check on your finances, since it's still early enough in the year to make meaningful changes. A financial wellness checkup can help you identify patterns that keep you stuck with bad habits and open the door to new behaviors that move you closer to financial stability.

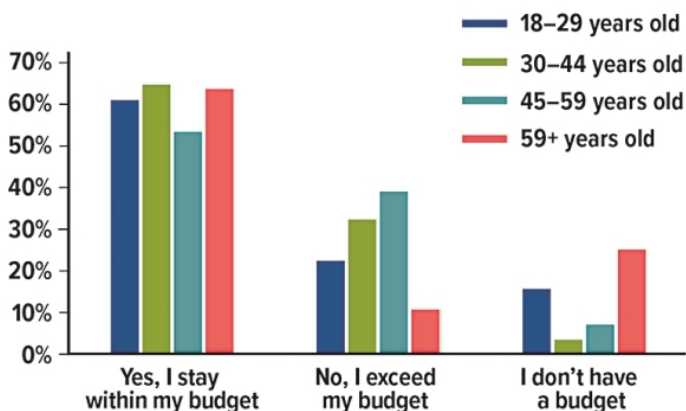
Review your spending and budget

Start out by reviewing your spending over the last month by checking your bank, credit card, and payment app statements. Next, identify what money is coming in, whether earned income or from other sources, such as investments. Add them up and compare the two totals to make sure you are spending within your means. If your expenses outweigh your income, you'll likely need to make some adjustments, such as reducing your discretionary spending.

While it's normal to stray from your budget occasionally, there are some ways to help make working within it a bit easier:

- Make budgeting a part of your daily routine.
- Build occasional rewards into your budget.
- Evaluate your budget regularly and make changes if necessary.
- Use budgeting software/apps to track your progress.

Staying On Budget, by Age Group



Source: WalletHub, September 12, 2025

Set new financial goals and reprioritize existing ones

Next, take a look at the financial goals you set for yourself — both short- and long-term. Perhaps you wanted to increase your cash reserve or save money for a down payment on a home. Maybe you wanted to invest more money towards your retirement. Did you accomplish any of your goals? Do you have any new goals that you would like to target?

Finally, have your personal or financial circumstances changed during the past year (e.g., marriage, the birth of a child, or a job promotion)? Would that warrant a reprioritization of goals?

Make sure your investment portfolio is still on target

Review your investment portfolio to ensure that it is still on target to help you pursue your financial goals. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I still have the same time horizon for investing as I did last year?
- Has my tolerance for risk changed?
- Do I have an increased need for liquidity?
- Does any investment now represent too large (or too small) a part of my portfolio?*

Focus on reducing your debt

An essential part of any financial wellness checkup focuses on reducing debt. Here are some tips to help you keep your debt in check:

- Keep track of all of your credit card balances and be aware of interest rates and hidden fees.
- Develop a plan to manage your payments and strive to avoid late fees.
- Optimize your repayments by paying off high-interest debt first or consider taking advantage of debt consolidation/refinancing programs.
- Avoid charging more than you can pay off at the end of each billing cycle.

Take steps to improve your credit health

Having healthy credit is another important part of financial wellness. Check your credit report, which contains information about your past and present credit transactions and is used by potential lenders to evaluate your creditworthiness. A positive credit history helps you obtain credit when you need it and possibly at a lower interest rate.

Review your credit report for inaccuracies. To establish a good track record with creditors, always pay your monthly bills on time and try to limit credit inquiries on your credit report. You are entitled to a free copy of your credit report every 12 months from each credit reporting company. Visit www.annualcreditreport.com for more information.

**Rebalancing involves selling some investments in order to buy others. Selling investments in a taxable account could result in a tax liability.*

All investing involves risk, including the possible loss of principal, and there is no guarantee that any investment strategy will be successful.

Goodbye Passwords, Hello Passkeys

The ever-growing threat of sophisticated phishing attacks and massive data breaches linked to password security has put more focus on the need for new authentication solutions. Enter passkeys, considered a more secure and easier-to-use option that eliminates the need for passwords. Passkeys haven't replaced passwords yet, but their adoption is growing. As major tech companies, apps, and websites make passkeys their default security option, it's likely you'll be prompted to set them up to help secure your accounts.

What is a passkey?

A passkey is a passwordless sign-in authentication method that has two parts: a public key that encrypts data and is stored on a server or application and a private key that decrypts data and is stored locally on your personal device, such as a smartphone, desktop, tablet, or laptop with a supported browser. When you sign in to an account, the website or application verifies your identity by matching these two keys. This is done by asking you to unlock your device via the authentication option you've chosen (face or fingerprint recognition, phone lock PIN, or security key, for example).

Signing in with a passkey instead of a password is generally a quicker and more seamless experience. There's no need to use a separate multifactor authentication method like entering a code delivered by a text or email, and you won't need to spend time remembering or updating sensitive credentials.

Why are passkeys considered safer than passwords?

Because passwords are user-created, their security partly depends on how weak or strong the password is. Users may choose simple passwords that are easy to guess or crack, reuse passwords across multiple sites or accounts, or inadvertently disclose them by clicking on a link to a fraudulent website. Passwords are also vulnerable to phishing and brute force attacks by hackers.

Unlike passwords, passkeys are always unique. The private key associated with your device is typically protected by biometrics and is never shared, so passkeys are highly resistant to phishing and can't be guessed by a scammer.

What's next?

Passkeys are a newer security solution and have not yet been implemented on all websites, apps, or services. Like usernames and passwords, you may need to set them up one by one, typically following prompts.

Until passkeys become broadly supported, passwords aren't going away. It's still important to help protect your identity and financial information by taking extra steps, such as using a password manager to generate complex, unique passwords or setting up multifactor authentication.

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