

FACTS from EBRI

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The U.S. Retirement Income System

History

- The first public-sector retirement income plan was the New York City Police Force Plan, which was set up in 1857. The first private-sector retirement income plan was established by American Express Company in 1875. The federal government established the Civil Service Retirement System in 1920. In 1984, the federal government started funding a separate plan for the military and created the Federal Employees Retirement System and Thrift Savings Plan for federal employees hired after 1984.
- Significant federal legislation affecting retirement income plans over the years:
 - 1921—The Revenue Act of 1921 exempted from current taxation interest income on trusts holding stock bonus or profit-sharing plans. Under this act, trust income was taxed as it was distributed to employees only to the extent that it exceeded employees' own contributions. The act did not authorize deductions for past service contributions.
 - 1926—The Revenue Act of 1926 exempted income of pension trusts from current taxation.
 - 1928—The Revenue Act of 1928 allowed employers to take tax deductions for reasonable amounts paid into a qualified trust in excess of the amount required to fund current liabilities. It changed the taxation of trust distributions that are attributable to employer contributions and earnings.
 - 1935—The Social Security Act was signed into law
 - 1942—The Revenue Act of 1942 tightened standard qualifications for pension plans, limited allowable deductions, and allowed integration of plans with Social Security.
 - 1948—The National Labor Relations Board ruled that Congress intended pensions to be part of wages and to fall under "conditions of employment" mentioned in the act, although the term was not specifically defined.
 - 1974—The Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 (ERISA) was passed. It was designed to secure the benefits of participants in private pension plans through participation, vesting, funding, reporting, and disclosure rules, and established the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC). ERISA provided added pension incentives for the self-employed (through changes in Keoghs) and for persons not covered by pensions (through individual retirement accounts (IRAs)). It established the legal status of employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs) as an employee benefit, codified stock bonus plans under the Internal Revenue Code, and established requirements for plan implementation and operation.
 - 1978—The Revenue Act of 1978 established qualified deferred compensation plans (sec. 401(k)) under which employees are not taxed on the portion of income they elect to receive as deferred compensation rather than direct cash payments. It created simplified employee pensions (SEPs) and changed IRA rules.
 - 1986—The Tax Reform Act of 1986 tightened the nondiscrimination rules and reduced the maximum annual amount that could be deferred into a 401(k) plan.
 - 1994—The Uniformed Service Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994 (USERRA) provided reemployment and benefits rights to military reservists and others who return to civilian employment after most types of leave of absence 'uniformed services' duty.
 - 1996—The Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996 created the savings incentive match for employees (SIMPLE) for small establishments.
 - 1997—The Taxpayer Relief Act of 1997 created a new, nondeductible, IRA, the Roth IRA, which can be used to save for retirement, first-time home purchase, and college expenses. More individuals are eligible for a Roth IRA than for a deductible IRA.

- 2001—The Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001 (EGTRRA) increased contribution limits to 401(k), 403(b), 457, SIMPLE plans and IRAs, permitted “catch-up” contributions to IRAs and employer-sponsored plans for individuals 50 and older, permitted after-tax “Roth” contributions to 401(k) and 403(b) plans, enhanced portability, and modified current top-heavy rules.

Types of Retirement Income Plans

- Most retirement income plans are employment-based. There are two basic types of retirement income plans: defined benefit (DB) and defined contribution (DC).
- In a DB plan, benefits are calculated according to a formula or rule. Formulas are more common and are usually based either on years of service and a percentage of pay or on a negotiated flat-dollar amount per year of service. Benefit levels, as determined by the formula, are guaranteed as a stated retirement income commencing at a specified age. Although retirement benefits are usually expressed as a life annuity, lump-sum distributions are increasingly available.
- In a DC plan, contributions are allocated to individual accounts according to a predetermined formula. Individual benefits are equal to account contributions (less any unpaid loans or withdrawals) and investment returns thereon, and are usually paid in the form of a lump-sum distribution. The benefit can also be paid as a life annuity at retirement if the employer offers this option.
- The most commonly known type of DC plan is a 401(k) plan. The name 401(k) is derived from the section of the U.S. tax code that sets the regulations for this type of retirement income plan. A 401(k) plan allows an employee to make pre-tax salary reduction contributions to a DC plan. Under current law, salary reduction contributions are limited to \$14,000 in 2005. Tax-exempt employers, such as colleges, universities, other education institutional institutions, research organizations, hospitals, churches and other religious groups, charitable organizations, can provide a similar benefit linked to Sec. 403(b) of the tax code, and thus are known as 403(b) or tax-sheltered annuity (TSA) plans. State and local government employers may sponsor a 457 plan, known for that section of the tax code and also referred to as a deferred compensation plan.
- Hybrid plans combine elements of both DB and DC. The most common and well-known type of hybrid plan in the private sector is cash balance. A cash balance plan is a DB plan that incorporates DC features. Each participant has an account that is credited with a dollar amount that resembles an employer contribution and is generally determined as a percentage of pay. Each participant’s account is also credited with interest. The plan usually provides benefits in the form of a lump-sum distribution or annuity. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, in 1999 there were 1,324 cash balance plans in the U.S. with 3,555,000 active participants and holding \$405.2 billion in assets. While cash balance plans do exist among public-sector employers, a more frequently used type of hybrid is one that combines a traditional defined benefit plan, with a reduced benefit, with a traditional defined contribution plan, such as a 401(k) plan.
- Another distinction among retirement income plans is whether the plan sponsor is a private-sector employer or a public-sector employer (federal, state, and local governments). The distinction between public and private sector is important because of differing applicable rules. Public-sector retirement income plans are products of a legislative process. Private-sector plan sponsors, while also subject to the legislative process, are relatively free to establish, maintain, and modify their plans. Federal regulation of state and local government plans has evolved over time. State and local government plans are regulated through the Internal Revenue Code (IRC), but otherwise are exempt from most of ERISA's reporting, disclosure, and funding requirements (Title I) and termination insurance (Title IV).

Number of Plans

- One of the most discussed trends in retirement income plans is the declining number of DB plans and the increasing number of DC plans. Data on this trend exist only for the private sector. The reporting requirements of ERISA make it possible to obtain an accurate count of

the number of private-sector plans operating in a given year. In 1975, the number of DB plans was 103,346. This number increased to 170,172 by 1985. Since 1985, the number of DB plans has steadily declined. In 1999 there were 49,895 private-sector DB plans; most of this decline occurred among small employers—those with fewer than 250 employees (see *EBRI Issue Brief* no. 249, September 2002). Over the same time period, 1975–1999, the number of DC plans steadily increased from 207,748 to 683,100. Much of the growth in DC plans is attributed to the growth in the number of 401(k) plans. The number of 401(k) plans increased from 17,303 in 1984 to 335,121 in 1999.

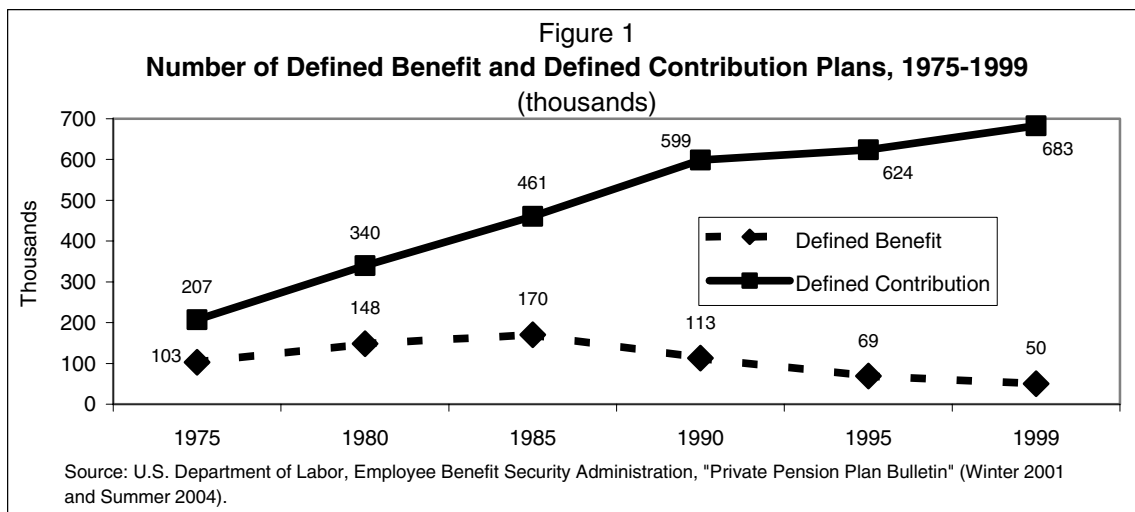


Figure 2
Number of Retirement Plans 1950–1999

	1950	1960	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	1999
Private Industry	a	a	a	311,094	488,901	632,135	712,308	693,404	732,995
Defined benefit	a	a	a	103,346	148,096	170,172	113,062	69,492	49,895
Cash Balance	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	1,324
Defined contribution	a	a	a	207,748	340,805	461,963	599,245	623,912	683,100
401(k)	a	a	a	a	a	17,303 ^b	97,614	200,813	335,121
State and Local Governments ^c	a	2,346	2,304	3,075	3,075	2,589	2,387	2,284	2,211

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Employee Benefit Security Administration, *Private Pension Plan Bulletin*, (Summer 2004) www.dol.gov/ebsa/publications/main.html; U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, www.census.gov/govs/www/retire.html.

^aData not available.

^b1984 data.

^cBecause of data availability, past years for state and local governments do not match with other categories. The data years for state and local governments apply to the years in the table headings: 1960 is represented with 1962 data, 1970 is represented with 1971–1972 data, and 1975 is represented with 1976–1977 data, 1980 is represented with 1981 data.

- The reasons for this trend are complex. One factor becomes apparent when the trend is viewed by plan size. The vast majority of plan terminations have occurred among the very small DB plans, those with two to nine active employees. Some suggest that the very small plans were top-heavy plans used by employers as tax shelters. The decline in the number of these DB plans is thought to be a result of federal legislation passed in the 1980s, most notably the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982 and the Tax Reform Act of 1986.
- Mergers and acquisitions partially account for the decline in the number of DB plans. When two firms offering DB plans merge, the result is usually a single, larger plan.

- The increase in the number of DC plans is greater than the net decrease in the number of DB plans. This suggests that the growth in the number of DC plans is a result of something other than a shift from DB to DC plans.
- For more details on the trend in the number of DB and DC plans see the September 2002 *Issue Brief* www.ebri.org/ibs/249ib.htm

Participation

- As the American work force has grown, so has the number of individual participants in employment-based retirement income plans. Total participation in private-sector retirement income plans increased from 44.5 million in 1975 to an estimated 101.8 million in 1999. In the following table, total participation includes employees currently participating in their employers' plans (also includes double counting of individuals who are participating in more than one plan with their current employer if more than one plan is offered), employees who have left employment with an employer and have chosen to leave the assets in that employer's plan, and individuals who are currently retired and receiving benefits from a retirement income plan.

Figure 3
Total Retirement Plan Participants 1950–1999

	1950	1960	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	1999
(millions)									
Private Industry	a	a	a	44.5	57.9	74.7	76.9	87.4	101.8
Defined benefit ^b	a	a	a	33.0	38.0	39.7	38.8	39.7	41.4
Cash Balance	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	6.2
Defined contribution	a	a	a	11.5	19.9	35.0	38.1	47.7	60.4
401(k)	a	a	a	a	a	a	20.8	31.4	46.2
State & Local Governments ^c	a	5.4	9.1	11.0	14.7	15.2	16.9	14.7	16.2

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Employee Benefit Security Administration, *Private Pension Plan Bulletin*, (Summer 2004); U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, www.census.gov/govs/www/retire.html.

^a Data not available.

^b Data may not add to 100 percent because individuals may have both types of plans.

^c Because of data availability, past years for state and local governments do not match with other categories. The data years for state and local governments apply to the years in the table headings: 1960 is represented with 1962 data, 1970 is represented with 1971–1972 data, 1975 is represented with 1976–1977 data, and 1980 is represented with 1981 data.

- Active participants are those individuals who are participating in an employment-based retirement income plan that is sponsored by the employer they are presently working for.
- Active participation increased among private-sector employees at an average annual rate of 6.7 percent between 1950 and 1960. This rate of increase slowed over time. From 1960 to 1970 it was 3.5 percent; from 1970 to 1990 it was 3.2 percent; from 1980 to 1990 it was 1.6 percent; and from 1990 to 1999, it was 1.9 percent.
- By comparison, rate of increase in active participants in the Social Security program was lower than the participation rate among private-sector employees. From 1950 to 1960, the rate of increase of individuals covered by Social Security was 4.1 percent; from 1960 to 1970, it was 2.5 percent; from 1970 to 1980 it was 2.0 percent; from 1980 to 1990, it was 1.7 percent; and from 1990 to 1997, it was 1.3 percent.
- Among state and local government employees, the average annual rate of increase in active retirement income plan participation from 1960 to 1970 was 5.3 percent. This was higher than the participation rate among private-sector employees. The average annual rate of increase among state and local government employees slowed to 2.1 percent between 1970 and 1980. From 1980 to 1990, the rate of increase was 0.9 percent.

Figure 4
Active Retirement Plan Participants 1950–1999

	1950	1960	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	1999
(millions)									
Private Industry ^a	9.8	18.7	26.3	30.7	35.9	40.4	42.0	46.1	54.1
Defined benefit ^b	c	c	c	26.8	29.7	28.9	26.3	23.4	22.6
Defined contribution	c	c	c	3.9	6.2	11.6	16.1	20.9	22.8
State & local governments ^d	c	5.0	8.4	9.7	10.3	10.4	11.3	12.5	13.5
Social Security	48.3	72.5	93.1	100.2	113.0	119.8	133.6	138.2	146.7 ^e

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Employee Benefit Security Administration, *Private Pension Plan Bulletin*, (Winter 2001 and Summer 2004); U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, www.census.gov/govs/www/retire.html; and U.S. Social Security Administration, *Annual Statistical Supplement, 2004* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005) Use table 4.B1.

^aData for active participants in a DC and DB plan are private wage and salary workers. The numbers are mutually exclusive since the data reported for DC plan active participants are those participants where the DC plan is the primary plan. When a DB plan is present it is automatically considered the primary plan.

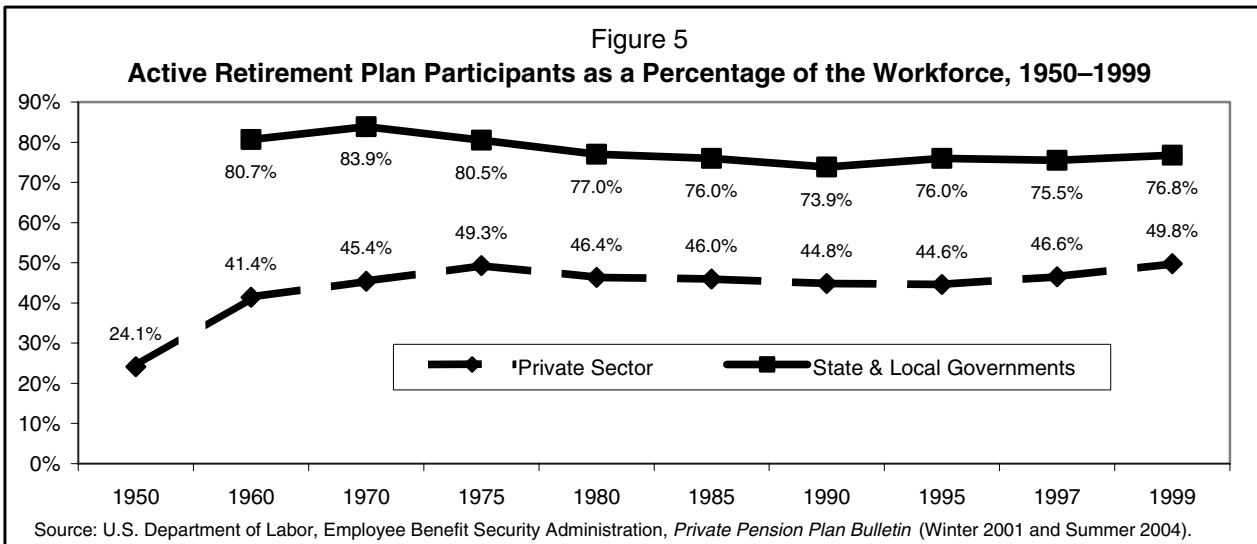
^bData may not add to 100 percent because individuals may have both types of plans.

^cData not available.

^dBecause of data availability, past years for state and local governments do not match with other categories. The data years for state and local governments apply to the years in the table headings: 1960 is represented with 1962 data, 1970 is represented with 1971–1972 data, 1975 is represented with 1976–1977 data, and 1980 is represented with 1981 data.

^ePreliminary data

- The percentage of all state and local government workers who participated in a retirement income plan remained fairly constant from 1980 to 1999, at around 75 percent (Figures 5 and 6). Among private-sector employees there was a sharp increase from 1950, when 24.1 percent of all private-sector workers participated in a retirement income plan, to 1960, when 41.4 percent participated in a retirement income plan. From 1970 to 1999, participation in a retirement income plan among all private-sector workers ranged from 45.4 percent to 49.8 percent.



Assets

- The total amount of assets held in various retirement plans has increased substantially over the years. In 1950, \$21.6 billion was held in all retirement income plans. By 2003, this amount had increased to \$11,439.0 billion. The following table also shows assets held in the Social Security Old Age and Survivors Insurance trust fund at the end of each year. These assets are not reflected in the “Total Assets” line because of the unique nature of the financing of the trust fund. Social Security assets are shown here for comparison purposes and for completeness because of the program’s central importance to so many Americans’ retirement income.
- Several factors account for the increase in retirement plan assets. The increase in the number of employees participating in a plan necessarily increases the amount of assets held by these plans. From 1950 to 1999, diversity in the types of retirement income plans increased, exemplified most notably by 401(k) plans, created in 1978, and individual retirement accounts (IRAs), created in 1974 as part of ERISA.

Figure 7
Retirement Plan Assets 1950–2003

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2003
(\$ in billions)									
Total Assets	\$21.5	\$86.7	\$236.1	\$1,035.2	\$2,383.2	\$3,985.1	\$6,764.5	\$11,409.0	\$11,439.0
Private trustee	7.1	38.1	112.0	563.6	1,231.0	1,572.0	2,756.0	4,286.0	3,961.0
Defined benefit	a	a	a	401.5	814.0	896.0	1,444.0	2,014.0	1,715.0
Defined contribution	a	a	a	162.1	417.0	676.0	1,312.0	2,272.0	2,246.0
401(k)	a	a	a	a	91.8 ^b	384.9	863.9	1,739.0	1,900.0
Private insured	5.6	18.9	40.8	158.2	346.7	636.1	871.3 ^c	1,527.0	1,573.6
State & local governments	4.9	19.7	60.3	197.6	398.7	800.6	1,308.1	2,124.3	1,966.8
Federal government ^d	6.7	14.1	27.5	77.2	172.1	340.4	541.1	799.2	959.0
IRA/Keogh Plans	a	a	a	38.6 ^e	234.7	636.0	1,288.0	2,629.0	2,979.0
Social Security	13.7	20.3	32.5	22.8	35.8	214.2	458.5	931.0	1,355.3

Source: Employee Benefit Research Institute, *Pension Investment Report*, Federal Reserve Board, *Flow of Funds Accounts* www.federalreserve.gov/releases/Z1/Current/data.htm; and U.S. Social Security Administration, *2004 OASDI Trustees Report* www.ssa.gov/OACT/TR/TR04/

^aData not available.

^b1984 data.

^c1996 data.

^dData for the Federal Government's retirement plans is for civilian employees only until 1985. The Military Retirement System was unfunded until October 1, 1984.

^e1981 data.

Asset Allocation in 401(k) Plans

- Since their inception in 1978, 401(k) plans have come to represent a significant component of U.S. households' financial net worth and will be a significant source of income in retirement for many individuals. A key feature of these plans is that individuals have control over how the assets in their account will be invested. Given the growing importance of 401(k) plans as a source of retirement income, how individuals are investing these assets is a very important public policy question.
- Age is one of the most important demographic factors in analyzing asset allocation. Financial planners typically suggest that young workers invest more of their account balance in equities, which tend to have relatively higher risk but offer greater returns over time, rather than stable-value investments such as cash or bonds. As an individual ages and approaches retirement, financial planners typically suggest that portfolios include more stable-value investments in order to produce an income stream with lower investment risk. Data from the EBRI/ICI 401(k) database suggest that most 401(k) participants generally follow this kind of asset allocation advice, and diversify their accounts across a range of investments, with younger participants more heavily invested in equities than older participants.
- Company stock accounted for 16.4 percent of all 401(k) account balances at year-end 2003, according to the EBRI/ICI 401(k) database, although that proportion varied by age and by type of investment options the plan offered.

Figure 8
Average Asset Allocation by Age, 2003
(percentage of account balances)

Age Cohort	Total	Equity Fund	Balanced Fund	Bond Fund	Money Fund	Stable Value Funds ^a	Company Stock	Other	Unknown
All	100.0%	44.6%	9.5%	9.8%	4.7%	12.9%	16.4%	1.5%	0.6%
20s	100.0	51.3	11.8	9.0	5.8	6.1	14.4	0.8	0.8
30s	100.0	54.2	9.8	8.1	4.2	5.9	16.0	1.1	0.8
40s	100.0	48.6	9.8	8.6	4.3	9.3	17.5	1.3	0.7
50s	100.0	42.0	9.6	10.2	4.8	14.3	16.9	1.5	0.6
60s	100.0	35.1	8.5	12.5	5.6	22.1	14.0	1.7	0.6

Source: Sarah Holden, ICI, and Jack VanDerhei, Temple University and EBRI Fellow, "401(k) Plan Asset Allocation, Account Balances, and Loan Activity in 2003." *EBRI Issue Brief* no. 272 (August 2004).

^aIncludes guaranteed investment contracts (GICs) and other stable value funds.

- On average, participants in their 20s have 51.3 percent of their account balances invested in equity funds, compared with about 35.1 percent of account balances for participants in their 60s. Participants in their 20s invest only 15.1 percent of their assets in GICs and bond funds combined, while those in their 60s invest 34.6 percent of their account balances in these assets.
- Allocations to company stock show a mixed pattern by age. Participants in their 20s have 14.4 percent of their plan balances in company stock, while participants in their 40s have nearly 17.5 percent, while participants in their 60s have 14 percent.
- The tendency of younger participants to favor equity funds and older participants to favor fixed-income securities holds up even when accounting for investment options offered by the 401(k) plan sponsor.

For more information, contact EBRI at (202) 659-0670, or see EBRI's Web site at www.ebri.org.

Source: *EBRI Databook on Employee Benefits*, fourth edition, 1997, *Fundamentals of Employee Benefit Programs*, fifth edition, 1997, and David Rajnes, "an Evolving Pension System: Trends in Defined Benefit and Defined Contribution Plans." *EBRI Issue Brief no. 249* (September 2002); *Pension Investment Report: Third Quarter 2003*; U.S. Department of Labor, Employee Benefit Security Administration, *Private Pension Plan Bulletin: Abstract of 1999 Form 5500 Annual Reports* (Summer 2004) www.dol.gov/ebsa/publications/main.html; U.S. Federal Reserve Board, *Flow of Funds Accounts of the United States* www.federalreserve.gov/releases/Z1/; Social Security Administration, *2004 OASDI Trustees Report* www.ssa.gov/OACT/TR/TR04/; *Annual Statistical Supplement, 2004* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005) www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/statcomps/supplement/; U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, www.census.gov/govs/www/retire.html; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtbl1.htm