NRTA PENSION EDUCATION TOOLKIT

Public Pension Fact Sheet

Highlights...

- Pensions serve 4.5 million public sector and 10 million private sector retirees. They are a critical lifeline to America's seniors.

- Group pension plans provide guaranteed, monthly income for life, enhancing retirement security for those who have them. COLAs help protect the value of the benefits retirees have earned.

- Pensions are the most economically efficient way to fund an adequate retirement, making them a good use of taxpayer dollars. States that have studied the issue have concluded that continuing to provide retirement benefits via DB pension plans meets the joint interests of fiscal responsibility for employers and taxpayers, and retirement security for employees.

- Pension expenditures also help to boost local economies, especially in tough economic times, making them good for local businesses nationwide.

- Public pension plans—like all investors—took a hit in the economic crisis, but are recovering. Most funds were well-funded before the crisis, and DB plans have achieved superior investment returns even during the crisis. Moreover, because of the long-term nature of pensions, funding gaps can be filled gradually, over time.

- In most state and local pension plans, unlike the private sector, employees contribute to their pension directly out of their own paychecks. Keeping the pension plan well-funded is typically a shared responsibility between employees and employers.

- In response to the financial crisis, states have already made significant pension reforms. Forecasts show that in most cases, these reforms should full offset the effects of the economic downturn.

NRTA
AARP's Educator Community

NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON
Retirement Security
Reliable Research. Sensible Solutions.

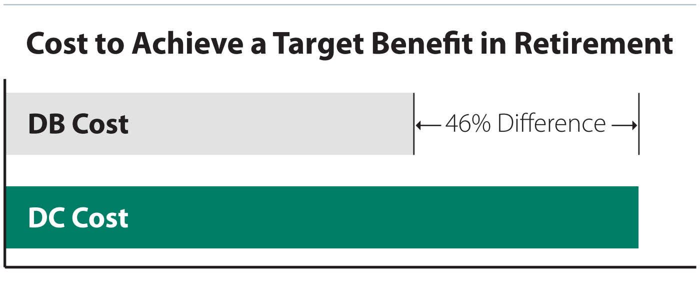
Pension Plans Deliver for Employees, Employers, and Taxpayers

Traditional, defined benefit (DB) pensions are vitally important to the retirement security of American workers. State and local government pension plans serve more than 14 million current workers, while private sector pensions serve an additional 18 million active workers.[1]

Group pension plans provide reliable, monthly income for life, which makes retirement security much more achievable for Americans who have them. While defined contribution (DC) plans were meant to be supplements and were not originally intended to replace DB pension plans, unfortunately, there has been a gradual trend in the private sector away from group pension plans and toward DC plans, such as 401(k)s.

DB pensions often provide other benefits as well, such as disability benefits, spousal protections, and cost of living adjustments (COLAs), each of which makes DB plans unique. COLAs in particular are important for retirees, because inflation can very quickly erode the value of retirement income. COLAs do cost money, however; any COLA benefits that are promised should be pre-funded, or paid for in the year that they are given.[2]

Not only are pensions good at providing retirement security to American workers, but they are also a good deal for taxpayers, because they are an economically efficient way to fund an adequate retirement. By pooling and professionally managing assets, DB plans are able to achieve economies of scale. Research has found that a group pension can achieve a target retirement benefit at about half the cost of DC accounts[3]



Pensions also help boost local economies, especially in tough economic times. In 2009, expenditures made out of public pension benefits supported more than 6.5 million new American jobs and over $1 trillion in total economic output nationwide.[4]

Financing Pensions is a Shared Responsibility

Another reason why pensions work well is because they are "prefunded" systems—regular contributions for each employee are made into a retirement fund during the course of that employee's career. In most state and local pension plans, these contributions come from both employers (the city or state) and employees, who contribute to the pension directly out of their own paycheck each month.[5]

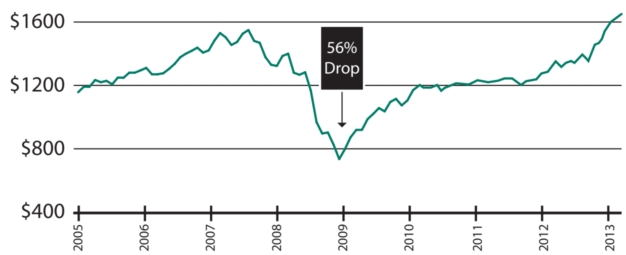
Thanks to pre-funding, investment returns have historically made up the bulk of public pension receipts. Between 1993 and 2011, about 63% of receipts came from investment earnings alone. Another 12% came from employee contributions, and about 25% came from employer (state) contributions.[6]

The Economic Crisis and Public Pensions

Pension plans were not immune to the recent stock market decline that began in the fall of 2007 and lasted through the spring of 2009. When the Standard & Poor's 500 Index fell 56% between October 2007 and March 2009, like all investors, pension plans were hurt.

Public pension holdings fell in value by $889 billion between 2007 and 2008. Since that time, as the stock market has rebounded, so has the value of public pension funds—as of June 2013, their aggregate value was nearly $3 trillion.[7] But those gains have not fully made up for the huge prior losses.

Figure 1. **Performance of the Standard & Poor 500 Index**



At the same time, the economic crisis has also negatively impacted state budgets. States have implemented various changes in order to balance their budgets in 2010 through 2013, including furloughs and layoffs of state employees.[8]

By and large, however, public plans are positioned to recover well, for two main reasons.

First, as a group, most states have been diligent about funding their pensions, especially in recent years. On average, nearly 90% of the annual required contribution (ARC) was received by the largest state and local retirement systems in the country. Most funds (more than 6 in 10) received payment for the full amount of their ARC or something close to it in 2012.[9] As a result, most public pensions have enough money on hand to keep paying benefits for decades.[10]

Secondly, DB pension plans weathered the financial storm better than other investors, particularly, individual investors in DC plans. A recent analysis by the consulting firm Towers Watson found that DB plans outperformed DC plans in 2011,[11] continuing a long-term trend of superior investment returns.

Pension Obligations Are Manageable

Even with pre-funding, unfunded pension liabilities can sometimes emerge, especially in the wake of stock market volatility. It's important to distinguish between plans whose funding gaps are the result of unprecedented market conditions and those where there has been a lack of funding discipline. Today, even states that have done a good job keeping up with their pension contributions in the past are facing growing contribution requirements, due to the significant economic downturn.

But some plans face greater challenges. In the past several years, some governmental employers have failed to contribute their full ARC. If a state or city fails to make contributions on time and in full, pension costs will almost assuredly increase in later years.[12]

Unfunded liabilities do need to be filled, but they may not be so problematic, depending on the specifics of each plan. Because of the long-term nature of pensions if the plan is able to continue to pay promised benefits and the employer can make its required contributions without causing fiscal stress, then the funding gap can be closed gradually.[13] In fact, funding gaps do not need to be closed in a single year, but the payments can be amortized over a number of years, according to governmental accounting standards.

Legislatures around the country are generally taking a careful approach to examining benefit levels and financing structures to ensure that pension plans will have what they need to be sustainable over time. Uniqueness in plan design, benefit structure, and governance arrangements may dictate different responses among different systems.[14]

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, the actions taken by states to date have been quite substantive and varied. Measures have included increasing employer or employee contributions; changing the benefit calculation in some way; increasing age and service requirements; implementing provisions to limit "spiking" abuses; changing post-retirement COLA increases; and increasing the vesting time period.[15]

These reforms already made have proven financially significant. Forecasts from Boston College show that in most cases, these reforms will fully fill the funding gaps caused by the financial crisis, over time.[16]

Keeping the Promise

Preventing funding gaps from occurring and closing gaps that do emerge is hard work, and requires a disciplined approach to pension fund stewardship. The good news is that a well-managed group pension plan is still the most economical way to achieve retirement security.

Across the nation, states and localities remain committed to their pensions, largely rejecting proposals to substitute DC plans for pensions.

In fact, time and again, states that have carefully studied the issue have concluded that, even in tough economic times, continuing to provide retirement benefits via cost-effective group pension plans meets the joint interests of fiscal responsibility for employers and taxpayers, and retirement security for employees.

The bottom line is that DB pensions are a critical lifeline to America's seniors. More than 4.5 million retired public employees and nearly 10 million retired private sector employees rely on a pension to make ends meet.[17] Keeping these vital systems healthy should be a high priority for decision-makers at every level, so that pensions can continue to keep the promise for future generations.

---

[1] Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation. 2012. *PBGC 2010 Databook*. Washington, DC: PBGC. and U.S. Census Bureau. 2013. State and Local Government Employee-Retirement Systems. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.
[2] Peng, J., and Boivie, I. 2011. *Lessons from Well-Funded Public Pensions: An Analysis of Six Plans that Weathered the Financial Storm.* Washington, DC: National Institute on Retirement Security.
[3] Almeida, B., and Fornia, W. 2008. *A Better Bang for the Buck: The Economic Efficiencies of Defined Benefit Pension Plans.* Washington, DC: NIRS.
[4] Boivie, I. 2012. *Pensionomics 2012: Measuring the Economic Impact DB Pension Expenditures.* Washington, DC: NIRS.
[5] Munnell, A.H., Haverstick, K., and Soto, M. 2007. *Why Have Defined Benefit Plans Survived in the Public Sector?* Chestnut Hill, MA: Center for Retirement Research at Boston College.
[6] U.S. Census Bureau. 2013. State and Local Government Employee-Retirement Systems. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.
[7] Lambert, L. 2013. U.S. public pension investments jump, costs surge too. *Reuters*, September 23.
[8] Johnson, N., P. Oliff, and E. Williams. 2011. *An Update on State Budget Cuts: At Least 46 States Have Imposed Cuts That Hurt Vulnerable Residents and the Economy.* Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.
[9] Brainard, K. 2013. *Public Fund Survey Summary of Findings for 2012*. NASRA.
[10] Brainard, K. 2012. *Public Fund Survey Summary of Findings for 2011*. NASRA.
[11] Towers Watson. 2013. *Defined Benefit Plans Outperform Defined Contribution Plans Again*. July.
[12] Logue, D.E., and Rader, J.S. 1998. *Managing Pension Plans: A Comprehensive Guide to Improving Plan Performance*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
[13] Brainard, K. 2009. *Public Fund Survey Summary of Findings for 2008*. NASRA.
[14] Brainard, K. 2009. *Public Fund Survey Summary of Findings for 2008*. NASRA.
[15] Martel, L. and Rivale, T. 2013. *State Retirement Reform Legislation: NCSL Legislative Summit*. Washington, DC: National Conference of State Legislatures.
[16] Munnell, A.H., J.P. Aubrey, A. Belbase, and J. Hurwitz. 2013. *State and Local Pension Costs: Pre-Crisis, Post-Crisis, and Post-Reform*. Chestnut Hill, MA: Center for Retirement Research at Boston College.
[17] Porell, F., and Oakley, D. 2012. *The Pension Factor 2012: The Role of Defined Benefit Pensions in Reducing Elder Hardships.* Washington, DC: National Institute on Retirement Security.