

Benefits for Coal Miners with Black Lung Falling Behind

Tens of thousands of coal miners across the country are disabled by or have died from black lung disease. These miners and their families rely upon black lung benefits to pay for their healthcare and provide monthly compensation as the miner can no longer work. In 1969, when the federal black lung benefits program was created, a miner received \$144.50 each month¹ to help support their cost of living. In today's currency, adjusting for inflation, that would equate to \$1,204.70². Unfortunately, the monthly benefit rate has not kept up with the cost of living. Today miners receive nearly 40% less than the value of the original amount, \$738 a month (Table 1). Miner benefit levels have not kept pace with inflation and the cost of living.

Table 1: Black Lung Monthly Benefit Rates, 2019 – 2023³

Year	Black Lung Monthly Benefit Rate (1 Miner)	Black Lung Monthly Benefit Rate (Miner + Dependent)
2019	\$669	\$1,004
2020	\$687	\$1,030
2021	\$693	\$1,040
2022	\$709	\$1,063
2023	\$738	\$1,107

By law, miner benefit levels are tied to the federal pay scale rather than the cost of living. Thus, though inflation levels have skyrocketed, miners' black lung benefits have barely budged. Entering 2022, the inflation rate was 4.7%, but benefits for miners only increased by 2.2%. Entering 2023, the inflation rate was 8% but miner benefits increased by under 4%. (Figure 1, Table 1). These adjustments lag behind even social security benefits, which increased by 5.9% in 2022 in response to inflation and by 8.7% in 2023. In addition, in years when there is a federal pay freeze, such as 2011 - 2013, black lung benefit levels do not change at all.

¹ See: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/owcp/dcmwc/statistics/PastPartBBenefitRates>

² Adjusted from January 1969 to December 2022 using inflation calculator: https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm

³ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/owcp/dcmwc/statistics/PastPartBBenefitRates>

Black Lung Benefits, Inflation, and the Cost of Living (2012 - 2023)

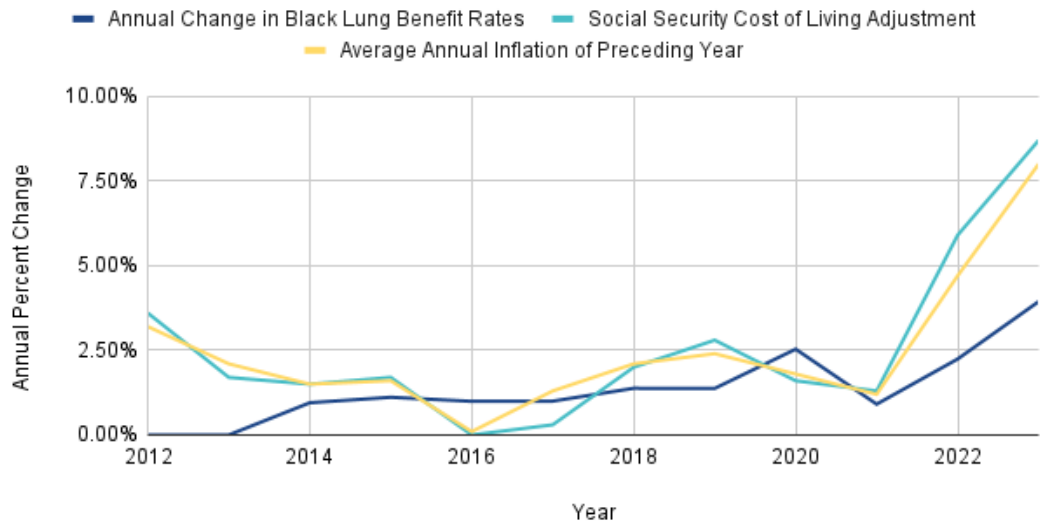


Figure 1: Black lung benefit rate annual increase as compared to social security cost of living adjustment and inflation.⁴

Benefit levels have never been sufficient to cover a mining family's cost of living, but now they are falling even further behind. As an example, the current cost of living in the coal-mining counties in Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia is approximately three-and-a-half to four times as much as the monthly rate (Figure 2, Table 2).

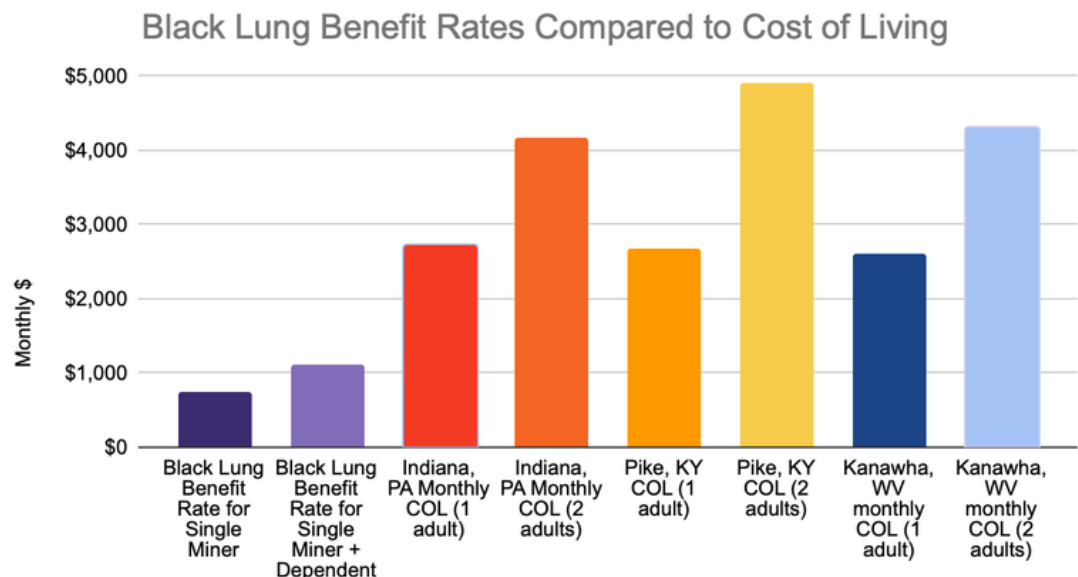


Figure 2: Cost of living for a single person and a single person with a dependent in three coal mining counties compared to monthly black lung benefit rates.⁵

⁴ <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/inflation/current-inflation-rates/>, <https://www.ssa.gov/cola/>; <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/owcp/dcmwc/statistics/PastPartBBenefitRates>

⁵ Source Data for Figure 2 and Table 2: Cost of living is calculated on a monthly basis from the typical annual expenses detailed in the MIT living wage calculator for a single adult with no children and two adults (one working) with no children. Accessed via <https://livingwage.mit.edu/>

Table 2: 2023 Black Lung Benefit Rates and Cost of Living in 2022 for Three Coal Mining Counties⁶

Single Miner	Miner + Dependent	Indiana Co, PA COL 1 Adult	Indiana Co, PA COL 2 adults (1 working)	Pike Co, KY COL 1 Adult	Pike Co, KY COL 2 adults (1 working)	Kanawha Co, WV COL 1 Adult	Kanawha Co, WV COL 2 adults (1 working)
\$738	\$1,107	\$2,730	\$4,172	\$2,666	\$4,908	\$2,609	\$4,320

Congress Can Help Miners with Black Lung

It doesn't have to be this way. While our country faces rising inflation, miners and their families don't have to be left behind. Congress can pass a bill to update miners' black lung benefits by calculating the benefits based on the actual cost of living instead of the current system - which ties benefits to federal employee pay scales, not to inflation.

Last year the Congressional Budget Office estimated that updating the way that benefits are calculated by tying them to the cost of living would cost only \$5 million per year - but it will go a long way toward ensuring coal miners and their families can pay their bills.⁷ While inflation is a major issue facing every level of government, Congress can respond quickly to protect miners by passing legislation to update miners' benefit levels and ensuring that the miners with black lung and their families who sacrificed so much for our country have the safety net they deserve.

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This report was prepared January 2023 by the Appalachian Citizens' Law Center and Appalachian Voices. Contact Rebecca Shelton at rshelton@aclc.org or Chelsea Barnes at chelsea@appvoices.org for more information.

⁶ See footnote 5 above, <https://livingwage.mit.edu/>

⁷ This CBO estimate was calculated for the Black Lung Benefits Improvement Act (H.R. 6102), which included a provision to calculate benefits based on annual cost of living adjustments. The CBO estimate calculated that the cost of updating the benefits would fall on the Black Lung Disability Trust Fund (BLDTF). Though the BLDTF is still over \$4 billion in debt, since the mid-1990s revenues to the BLDTF have actually exceeded the cost of benefit payments. It is the interest payments on the BLDTF's outstanding debt (accrued prior to that time) that has kept the fund in a position whereby its total expenditures continued to exceed its total revenues. For example, in FY 2022, the revenues were \$180M and the benefit payments themselves cost just \$140M.