

D.C. Office of the Tenant Advocate
Historical Comparison of the “Rent Control CPI” and
the Social Security Cost of Living Adjustment through 2018

In February of each year, the Rental Housing Commission publishes the “rent control CPI” percentage based on the monthly US Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index for Workers (CPI-W) for the greater DC metropolitan area.

The federal Social Security Cost of Living Adjustment (SS COLA) is used to calculate the increase in a beneficiary’s Social Security income for each calendar year. Thus it is a significant point of comparison particularly for elderly tenants and tenants with disabilities who may live on fixed incomes.

The “rent control CPI” percentage determines the maximum standard annual rent increase for any rental unit in the District that is subject to rent control. The “rent control year” begins on May 1st of each year and ends on April 30th of the following year. For elderly tenants and tenants with disabilities, the maximum standard annual rent increase is equal to the “rent control CPI,” or five (5) percent, or as of this year, the SS COLA, whichever is least. For all other tenants, it is equal to the CPI + two (2) percent or ten (10) percent, whichever is less.

The following is a list of the “rent control CPI” for each “rent control” year starting in 1985; the SS COLA that applies to each calendar year; and the difference between them during each calendar year. The “rent control year” coincides with the SS COLA from May 1st through December 31st, and coincides with the SS COLA from January 1st through April 30th.

CALENDAR YEAR	Rent Control CPI-W (May – April)	SS COLA (Jan – Dec)	DIFFERENCE (Jan–April/ May–Dec)	
1985	4.4%	3.5%	--	+0.9%
1986	4.0%	3.1%	+1.3%	+0.9%
1987	1.6%	1.3%	+2.7%	+0.3%
1988	4.7%	4.2%	-2.6%	+0.5%
1989	4.6%	4.0%	+0.7%	+0.6%
1990	5.6%	4.7%	-0.1%	+0.9%
1991	5.4%	5.4%	+0.2%	=
1992	2.7%	3.7%	+1.7%	-1.0%
1993	2.9%	3.0%	-0.3%	-0.1%
1994	2.1%	2.6%	+0.3%	-0.5%
1995	1.7%	2.8%	-0.7%	-1.1%
1996	1.9%	2.6%	-0.9%	-0.7%
1997	2.8%	2.9%	-1.0%	-0.1%
1998	1.8%	2.1%	+0.7%	-0.3%
1999	1.0%	1.3%	+0.5%	-0.3%
2000	2.1%	2.5%	-1.5%	-0.4%
2001	3.3%	3.5%	-1.4%	-0.2%
2002	2.6%	2.6%	+0.7%	=
2003	2.1%	1.4%	+1.2%	+0.7%
2004	2.9%	2.1%	=	+0.8%
2005	2.7%	2.7%	+0.2%	=
2006	4.2%	4.1%	-1.4%	+0.1%
2007	3.5%	3.3%	+0.9%	+0.2%
2008	3.4%	2.3%	+1.2%	+1.1%
2009	4.8%	5.8%	-2.4%	-1.0%
2010	0.05%	0.0%	+4.8%	+0.05%
2011	2.2%	0.0%	+0.05%	+2.2%
2012	3.6%	3.6%	-1.4%	=
2013	2.2%	1.7%	+1.9%	+0.5%
2014	1.4%	1.5%	+0.7%	-0.1%
2015	1.5%	1.7%	-0.3%	-0.2%
2016	0.0%	0.0%	+1.5%	=
2017	1.1%	0.3%	-0.3%	+0.8%
2018	1.4%	2.0%	-0.9%	-0.6%

For the 404 months between May 1985 and December 2018:

SS COLA was lower	192 months or 47.5% of the time
Rent control CPI was lower	168 months or 41.5% of the time
Rent control CPI and SS COLA were equal	44 months or 11% of the time

Over the last 15 years, the benefit of the SS COLA is more dramatic. For the 180 months between January 2004 and December 2018:

SS COLA was lower	96 months or 53% of the time
Rent control CPI was lower	56 months or 31% of the time
Rent control CPI and SS COLA were equal	28 months or 16% of the time

As of April 7, 2017, the SS COLA was added as a further cap on the standard annual rent increase for elderly tenants and tenants with disabilities, so that no such increase may exceed the least of (1) the CPI-W; (2) the SS COLA; or (3) 5 percent of the current rent charged. See Law 21-239, the “Elderly and Tenants with Disabilities Protection Amendment Act of 2016.”