

# Is this the year you join the one percent?

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Mark Rank, PhD, the Herbert S. Hadley Professor of Social Welfare at the Brown School and co-author of the influential book 'Chasing the American Dream: Understanding What Shapes Our Fortunes,' finds in a new study that there is a 1 in 9 chance the typical American will join the wealthiest 1 percent for at least one year. Credit: James Byard/WUSTL Photos

Here's some good news for the New Year: According to new research by Washington University in St. Louis and Cornell University, there's a 1 in 9 chance that a typical American will hit the jackpot and join the wealthiest 1 percent for at least one year in her or his working life.

And now the bad news: That same research says only an elite few get to stay in that economic stratosphere - and nonwhite workers remain among those who face far longer odds.

The study was conducted by Mark Rank, PhD, the Herbert S. Hadley Professor of Social Welfare at the Brown School at Washington University, and Tom Hirschl, PhD, professor of development sociology at Cornell.

Rank is one of the country's foremost academic experts on poverty, [social welfare](#), economic inequality and social policy.

"Rather than static groups that experience continual high levels of economic attainment, there would appear to be more movement into and out of these [income](#) levels," the authors write in "The Life Course Dynamics of Affluence," [published Jan. 28 in the journal PLOS One](#).

"Education, marriage and race are among the strongest predictors of top-level income, and in particular the race effect suggests persistent patterns of social inequality," the authors write.

The research builds upon findings presented in their 2014 [book](#) "Chasing the American Dream: Understanding What Shapes Our Fortunes," which analyzed social mobility at the lower end of America's economic spectrum. The latest research from Rank and Hirschl uses a new "life course" methodology to examine [social mobility](#) at the top levels of income distribution.

Relying on data collected regularly since 1968 as part of the University of Michigan's Panel Study of Income Dynamics, this life-course approach analyzed thousands of people from ages 25-60, and examined long stretches of their work lives to track economic movement.

This large-scale, long-term observation provided some surprising results:

- By age 60, almost 70 percent of the working population will experience at least one year in the top 20 percent of income earners.
- More than half (53 percent) will have at least one year among the top 10 percent.
- Slightly more than 11 percent will spend at least one year as members of the top 1 percent.
- While Rank and Hirschl found substantial fluidity among the ranks of America's wealthiest, they also noticed that very few get to stay among the ranks of the super rich for very long.

While 70 percent of the working population may hit the top 20 percent of earners, barely 20 percent will stay for 10 consecutive years or more. At the very top, while 1 in 9 Americans may at some time in their careers be among the top 1 percent, fewer than one in 160 (0.6 percent) will stay for a decade or more.

"Attaining 10 consecutive years at the top is rare, and reflects the idea that only a few persist at this elite level," the authors write.

The researchers note that the generally high level of turnover among the top ranks of earners can work to buffer [economic inequality](#). They also found this higher-than-expected fluidity to be a double-edged sword - while it demonstrates relatively widespread opportunity for top-level income, it also creates a very real insecurity among those who reach those heights.

Lastly, Rank and Hirschl uncovered another "contentious social implication" in their research: When looking at demographic patterns among the people whose data was analyzed, being educated, being married and being white were among the strongest predictors of reaching

the economic peak.

"It would be misguided to presume that top-level income attainment is solely a function of hard work, diligence and equality of opportunity," they write. "A more nuanced interpretation includes the proposition that access to top-level income is influenced by historic patterns of race and class inequality."

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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