A Million Dollars Is Not What It Used to Be

When the first season of Survivor aired on CBS in 2000, the top prize of $1 million seemed huge. The average American family earned about $42,000 a year. The average house cost around $120,000. A million dollars could pay off a home loan or change a family's life for many years. More than 20 years later, the show still gives the same prize at the end of every season. But the dollar is worth much less now because of inflation. In other words, the famous Survivor prize used to be "crazy, life-changing money." Today, it is more like a one-time bonus that needs careful planning to be useful.

Savannah Louie won Survivor's 49th season at the end of 2025. She thought about this when she signed her tax forms. About 38% of her prize went to taxes. She still had a large sum of money, but it could not buy what a million dollars used to buy. "When the show first started, $1 million, that is crazy, life-changing money," she said. "In 2026, it doesn't quite hit as hard." If we add the effect of inflation, the prize from 2000 would need to be almost $1.9 million today to have the same value. Today, the average house costs about $405,000. A Survivor winner can no longer simply buy a house with cash in many parts of America.

Meanwhile, other reality TV shows pay much more. Dancing with the Stars pays each star about $125,000 just for joining, and up to $295,000 if they stay longer. Celebrity Big Brother gives $100,000 for being on the show and another $250,000 to the winner. Survivor, by comparison, still asks players to spend almost a month sleeping on the ground and eating very little rice. CBS has not told the public why the prize money has stayed the same for 25 years.

However, the bigger story is not really about the size of the check. A million dollars can still change a person's life, but only if the winner knows how to use it well. The history of game show winners has many sad examples. Richard Hatch, the first Survivor winner, spent more than four years in federal prison because he did not pay taxes on his prize. Brian Heidik, who won Survivor: Thailand, used much of his prize money to buy sports cars. Research shows that many big prize winners run into money trouble within just a few years.

More recent winners have tried hard not to make those mistakes. Maryanne Oketch won season 42. She said she knew almost nothing about money when she joined the show at age 23. "I heard of so many stories: 'I won the million dollars, and within two years I had none of it,'" she said. After winning, she paid a financial advisor and slowly learned the basics of investing and taxes. Louie also invested most of her prize money instead of wasting it on expensive things. She did treat herself to one special item, a Cartier watch, as a personal trophy for surviving the show.

That careful approach shows what financial advisors often try to tell people who suddenly become rich. A big sum of money is rarely a permanent answer. The same amount can disappear in 18 months or last a whole lifetime. This depends almost completely on the choices made in the first few weeks. The prize may still look impressive on TV, but the real value behind all those zeros is shrinking each year. Protecting what is left becomes completely the winner's job.

1) If you suddenly got one million dollars tomorrow, what is the first thing you would buy?
2) Have you ever received unexpected money, like a gift, a bonus, or a prize? What did you do with it?
3) Have you ever made a bad choice with money that you regret now?
4) Would you spend one month sleeping outside with strangers and very little food for a chance to win one million dollars?
5) In Korean culture, when someone suddenly gets a lot of money, what do their family and friends usually expect?
6) Do you think TV shows should give bigger prizes every year because of inflation, or is just being on TV enough?
7) Why do you think so many lottery winners and game show winners run into money problems just a few years after winning?
8) Who should teach young people about money: the school, the parents, or themselves?
9) Why do you think people enjoy stories about winners, but also feel happy when those winners lose everything?
10) What is more important: the amount of money a person receives, or their habits with money before they got it?
11) Do you think money can really make a person feel free and safe, or does this feeling come from something else?

Air	(v)	to broadcast a program on television or radio	The new comedy show will air on Monday evenings starting next month.
Pay off	(phr v)	to finish paying all the money you owe	It took her ten years to pay off her student loans completely.
Worth	(adj)	having a certain value, especially in money	This old painting is worth more than five thousand dollars today.
Inflation	(n)	the general rise in prices over time	Because of inflation, a cup of coffee now costs twice as much as it did ten years ago.
Sign	(v)	to write your name on something to show you agree or that it belongs to you	Please sign the bottom of the form before you give it back to me.
Sum	(n)	an amount of money	He inherited a large sum of money from his grandfather last year.

Hit as hard	(exp)	to have as strong an effect or impact	The cold weather did not hit as hard this winter as it did last year.
Buy a house with cash	(exp)	to pay the full price of a house at once, without a loan from the bank	Very few young people today can buy a house with cash because prices are so high.
Check	(n)	a piece of paper that you sign and use to pay money to someone	She wrote a check for two hundred dollars to pay her electricity bill.
Federal	(adj)	connected to the central government of a country, especially the United States	He works for a federal agency that helps protect the environment.
Pay taxes on	(exp)	to give part of your earnings or winnings to the government	You must pay taxes on any money you win in a competition.
Run into	(phr v)	to experience problems or difficulties	The new restaurant ran into trouble after only three months of business.
Advisor	(n)	a person whose job is to give advice about something	She talked to her advisor before choosing her university classes.
Treat oneself	(v)	to give yourself something special and enjoyable	After working hard all week, she decided to treat herself to a nice dinner.
Approach	(n)	a way of doing or thinking about something	His new approach to learning English helped him improve very quickly.
Permanent	(adj)	lasting forever or for a very long time	She finally found a permanent job after years of short contracts.
Impressive	(adj)	very good and causing admiration	The young student gave an impressive presentation in front of the whole class.