The Shrinking Million

When the first season of *Survivor* aired on CBS in 2000, the grand prize of $1 million seemed almost unimaginable. The median American household earned about $42,000 a year, while the average home cost roughly $120,000. A million dollars could pay off a mortgage, go a long way toward retirement, or change a family's path for generations. More than two decades later, that same prize is still handed out at the end of every season, even though the dollar itself has lost significant ground to inflation. In other words, the famous *Survivor* jackpot has quietly turned from "crazy, life-changing money" into a one-time bonus that demands careful planning just to keep up with everyday life.

Savannah Louie, who won *Survivor's* 49th season in late 2025, found herself thinking about exactly that as she signed her tax forms. After roughly 38% of her winnings went to taxes, she was left with a sum that, while substantial, would not buy what a million had once promised. "When the show first premiered, $1 million, that is crazy, life-changing money," she said. "In 2026, it doesn't quite hit as hard." Adjusted for inflation, the original prize from 2000 would need to rise to nearly $1.9 million to match its old purchasing power. Today's median home value sits around $405,000, meaning a *Survivor* champion can no longer simply buy a house outright in many American markets and call it a day.

Lower-placed contestants feel the squeeze even more. The first person voted off receives $2,500, which has the same buying power as roughly $1,300 in 2000 dollars. Second place earns $100,000, worth only about $52,000 in the show's original terms. Each step down the ladder loses more real value with every passing year, even though the cast still spends nearly a month on a remote island with no shelter and almost no food.

Other reality shows have responded to the times in different ways. *Dancing with the Stars* pays its competitors a base of around $125,000 just to show up for rehearsals and the early weeks, with potential earnings climbing close to $295,000 the longer they remain on the show. *Celebrity Big Brother* offers $100,000 for participation and another $250,000 to whoever takes the crown. *The Real Housewives* franchise pays anywhere from $25,000 to well over $1 million per cast member.

Survivor, by comparison, still asks contestants to spend nearly a month sleeping in the dirt, surviving on rationed rice, and outwitting 17 other competitors, all for a top prize that has barely changed in 25 years. CBS has not publicly explained why the pot has stayed flat. *The Amazing Race*, another early-2000s hit on the same network, has also kept its million-dollar prize untouched.

The bigger story, however, is not the size of the check itself. A million dollars, even a shrunken one, can still transform a life, but only if the winner knows how to handle it. The history of game show champions is filled with sobering examples of money gone wrong. Richard Hatch, the original *Survivor* winner, ended up serving more than four years in federal prison for failing to pay taxes on his winnings. Brian Heidik, who took home *Survivor: Thailand*, reportedly burned through much of his prize on sports cars. Lottery winners across the country have followed similar paths, with research suggesting that a striking number of large-prize recipients run into financial trouble within just a few years.

More recent winners have made a clear effort to avoid those mistakes. Maryanne Oketch, who won season 42, admitted she knew almost nothing about money when she joined the show at 23. "I heard of so many stories: 'I won the million dollars, and within two years I had none of it,'" she said. After her victory, she chose a paper check over a wire transfer simply because she wanted to hold a million-dollar slip of paper in her hands at least once in her life. She then took the unusual step of paying a financial advisor by the visit, slowly learning the basics of investing, taxes, and long-term planning. When she later enrolled in medical school, she made a calculated decision to take out interest-free federal student loans rather than spend her savings, allowing the prize money to keep growing in the background.

Her approach reflects a quiet shift among recent winners, who often share advice and reading lists with one another behind the scenes. Louie, for example, said she invested most of her winnings rather than blowing it on flashy purchases. She did treat herself to one symbolic item, a Cartier watch, which she considered her personal trophy for surviving the experience. Beyond that, the money has mostly stayed in the market, providing what she described as the simple feeling of being able to breathe.

That sense of relief points to what financial advisors often try to communicate to clients who suddenly come into wealth. A windfall is rarely a permanent solution. It is a tool, and a fragile one without the knowledge required to use it. The same dollar amount can disappear in 18 months or last a lifetime, depending almost entirely on the choices made in the first few weeks. A check that looks like the answer to every problem can quietly become the start of a much larger one.

When a young contestant wins what looks like a fortune on television, viewers absorb the same impression, especially younger ones who rarely see honest conversations about taxes or long-term planning attached to those oversized novelty checks. The prize may still be eye-catching when held up for the cameras, but the real buying power behind those zeros is shrinking each year, and protecting what remains becomes entirely the winner's responsibility.

1) If a one-million-dollar wire transfer landed in your bank account tomorrow, what is the very first thing you would actually do with it?
2) Have you ever received a smaller windfall, such as a bonus, refund, or cash gift, and later felt either proud or regretful about how you spent it?
3) Have you ever made a financial decision that you later realized was unwise because you didn't fully understand the taxes, fees, or long-term costs involved?
4) Do you think you are the type of person who would be more likely to invest a sudden windfall, or to spend most of it on something memorable?
5) Would you be willing to spend a month sleeping outdoors with strangers and almost no food for a chance at one million dollars?

6) In Korean society, if someone receives a massive financial windfall, are there unspoken expectations about how they should spend, invest, or share that money with family?
7) Do you think television networks have an ethical obligation to adjust their prize pools for inflation, or is the exposure and experience already a fair trade for the contestants' time?
8) Why do you think so many lottery winners and game show champions end up in financial trouble within just a few years of their big win?
9) Whose responsibility is it to teach financial literacy: the schools, the parents, or the individual?
10) Why do people often admire stories of sudden wealth but also seem to take quiet pleasure when those same winners lose everything?
11) In the long run, which matters more for a person's financial future: the size of the windfall they receive, or the habits and knowledge they had before the money arrived?
12) Do you believe money can genuinely buy a sense of freedom and security, or is that feeling something that ultimately has to come from somewhere else?

Median	(n)	the middle value in a set of numbers when arranged from lowest to highest	The median age of the residents in this neighborhood is much higher than the national figure.
Go a long way toward	(idm)	to be very helpful in achieving something	A small apology can go a long way toward repairing a damaged friendship.
Lose ground	(idm)	to lose an advantage or position that one previously had	The company has lost ground to its competitors after failing to update its main product.
In other words	(exp)	used to introduce a clearer or simpler explanation of something just said	He didn't return any of my calls or messages. In other words, he was avoiding me.
To find oneself	(exp)	to gradually realize that one is in a particular situation	After the layoffs, she found herself searching for a new career path at the age of forty-five.
Hit as hard	(exp)	to have as strong an impact or effect	The second wave of the recession did not hit as hard as economists had originally feared.
Outright	(adv)	completely or directly, with no conditions attached	He couldn't afford to buy the car outright, so he agreed to monthly payments instead.
Call it a day	(idm)	to decide to stop doing something, especially work	We have been editing this report for six hours, so let's call it a day and finish tomorrow.
Feel the squeeze	(idm)	to experience financial pressure or difficulty	Small businesses are starting to feel the squeeze as rent and supply costs continue to climb.

Show up	(phr)	to arrive or appear at a place, especially when expected	Only half of the guests actually showed up to the wedding because of the snowstorm.
Take the crown	(idm)	to win first place or become the best at something	The young chef took the crown at the national cooking competition for the second year in a row.
Cast member	(n)	a person who performs in a film, television show, or play	Every cast member had to attend rehearsals six days a week before opening night.
Ration	(v)	to limit the amount of something that each person is allowed to have	During the long expedition, the climbers had to ration their water carefully to avoid running out.
Outwit	(v)	to defeat or trick someone by being cleverer than them	The detective managed to outwit the suspect by asking questions that revealed contradictions in his story.
Pot	(n)	the total amount of money available as a prize or reward	The pot for this year's poker tournament has grown to over two million dollars.
Hit	(n)	something, such as a song, film, or product, that is very popular and successful	Her debut album turned out to be a massive hit and sold millions of copies worldwide.
Sobering	(adj)	making someone feel serious and thoughtful, especially about a difficult truth	The documentary about climate change was a sobering reminder of how much work still needs to be done.
Striking	(adj)	noticeable or unusual in a way that attracts attention	There is a striking difference between how the two brothers approach their careers.
Behind the scenes	(idm)	happening privately, away from public view	A great deal of negotiation goes on behind the scenes before any major political deal is announced.
Blow it	(idm)	to waste or lose an opportunity or amount of money through carelessness	He had a real chance at the promotion, but he blew it by showing up late to the final interview.
Flashy	(adj)	designed to attract attention by being bright, expensive, or showy	She prefers simple, classic clothing and avoids anything too flashy or trendy.
Treat	(v)	to give oneself or another person something special and enjoyable	After finishing her exams, she decided to treat herself to a weekend at a quiet beach resort.
Symbolic	(adj)	representing or standing for an idea, quality, or feeling	The handshake between the two leaders was largely symbolic, but it gave the public a sense of hope.

Come into	(phr)	to receive money or property, usually through inheritance or a sudden event	He came into a substantial amount of money when his grandfather passed away last spring.
Windfall	(n)	an unexpected piece of good fortune, especially a sum of money	The tax refund came as a welcome windfall just before the holiday season began.
Fortune	(n)	a very large amount of money	He spent a small fortune renovating the old farmhouse he had bought at auction.
Novelty	(n)	the quality of being new, original, or unusual	The novelty of working from home wore off quickly once she realized how isolated she felt.
Eye-catching	(adj)	immediately attractive or noticeable	The bookstore designed an eye-catching display in the front window to draw in passing tourists.