

the science of Inequality

What the numbers tell us

By Gilbert Chin and Elizabeth Culotta

In 2011, the wrath of the 99% kindled Occupy movements around the world. The protests petered out, but in their wake an international conversation about inequality has arisen, with tens of thousands of speeches, articles, and blogs engaging everyone from President Barack Obama on down. Ideology and emotion drive much of the debate. But increasingly, the discussion is sustained by a tide of new data on the gulf between rich and poor.

This special issue uses these fresh waves of data to explore the origins, impact, and future of inequality around the world. Archaeological and ethnographic data are revealing how inequality got its start in our ancestors (see pp. 822 and 824). New surveys of emerging economies offer more reliable estimates of people's incomes and how they change as countries develop (see p. 832). And in the past decade in developed capitalist nations, intensive effort and interdisciplinary collaborations have produced large data sets, including the compilation of a century of income data and two centuries of wealth data into the World Top Incomes Database (WTID) (see p. 826 and Piketty and Saez, p. 838).

It is only a slight exaggeration to liken the potential usefulness of this and other big data sets to the enormous benefits of the Human Genome Project. Researchers now have larger sample sizes and more parameters to work with, and they are also better able to detect patterns in the flood of data. Collecting data, organizing it,

INSIDE

NEWS

[The ancient roots of the 1%](#) p. 822

[Our egalitarian Eden](#) p. 824

[Tax man's gloomy message: the rich will get richer](#) p. 826

[Physicists say it's simple](#) p. 828

[Can disparities be deadly?](#) p. 829

[While emerging economies boom, equality goes bust](#) p. 832

[Tracking who climbs up—and who falls down—the ladder](#) p. 836

RESEARCH REVIEWS

[Inequality in the long run](#) p. 838

[Skills, education, and the rise of earnings inequality among the "other 99 percent"](#) p. 843

[Income inequality in the developing world](#) p. 851

[The intergenerational transmission of inequality: Maternal disadvantage and health at birth](#) p. 856

[On the psychology of poverty](#) p. 862

SEE ALSO

▶ EDITORIAL p. 783

▶ PERSPECTIVE p. 809

▶ BOOK REVIEWS pp. 811 & 812

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