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The Glass Ceiling Is Getting Thinner

By David Wessel

The glass ceiling is still there, but it's getting thinner.

A trio of economists, wielding big data from **Social Security's** records, says that in 1981-85, women constituted just 1.9% of the top 0.1% of earners (based on average earnings for those years) and 3.2% of the top 1%.



Safra Catz of Oracle regularly ranks among the highest-paid women, according to Forbes and Fortune.

Getty Images

But a quarter-century later, in 2008-12, women were 10.5% of the top 0.1% and 16.4% of the top 1%.

Among the top 0.1%, virtually all of that increase came in the 1980s and 1990s.

"The last decade has seen almost no further improvement," they say in a working paper soon to be posted by the **National Bureau of Economic Research**.

The research was done by [Fatih Guvenen](#) of the **University of Minnesota**, [Greg Kaplan](#) of **Princeton University** and [Jae Song](#) of the **Social Security Administration** using administrative data that includes age, sex, race, earnings and industry of employment – and allows the scholars to track the same individuals over time.

The economists also find that what they call the paper floor – the tendency of women to fall out of the top tier of the workforce – has become less of an issue.

"The high tendency of top earners to fall out of the top earnings groups was particularly stark for females in the 1980s," they write. "But the persistence of top-earning females has dramatically increased in the last 30 years, so that today the paper floor has been largely mended."

Women were once twice as likely as men to drop out of the top-earner category; today they are no more likely than men to do so.

By the way, a worker had to make at least \$291,000 to make the top 1% in 2012, and \$1,018,000 to make the top 0.1%.

(An earlier version of this post incorrectly said women account for 5.2% of the top 1% in 1981-85 and 27.5% of the top 1% in 2008-12.)

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