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# The Richest Person Every Decade From 1820 to the Present

8-10 minutes

It would be pretty cool to be the richest person in the world. Especially today, when the richest person has a net worth well over \$100 billion. Can you even imagine that much money and what you could do with it? I mean, the obvious answer is that you could do anything you wanted to, but I was specifically thinking about the ways in which you could change the world. But hey, there were rich people, the richest, back in 1800, and 1820, and 1950, and the total net worth necessary to be that person back then was a lot less than \$112 billion or whatever [Jeff Bezos](#)'s net worth is today. For instance, the richest man of the 1820s had a net worth of \$7.5 million. Of course today, that is equivalent to \$182.2 million, but that's still a far cry from the more than \$100 billion net worth of Bezos, [Bill Gates](#), and sometimes Bernard Arnault. We thought it would be fun to take a look at the richest person from every decade from 1820 to the present. We've all got time on our hands with the Covid-19 shut down of, well, everything, so let's dive right in!





(Photo by Mike Cohen/Getty Images )

1820s – Stephen Girard

Net Worth: \$7.5 million

Adjusted for inflation: \$182.2 million

Stephen Girard was born in Bordeaux, France in 1750 and settled in Philadelphia in 1776 where he became a merchant. He made his fortune importing and exporting goods and was the richest person in the world by 1810. In 1811, Girard opened his own bank, which was the main source of credit for the U.S. Government during the War of 1812. When he died in 1831, his net worth was about  $1/150^{\text{th}}$  of the U.S. GDP. He donated nearly his entire fortune to charity including orphanages, libraries, and schools in Philadelphia and New York.

1830s – Nathan Mayer Rothschild

After Girard died in 1831, the head of the Rothschild

banking family Nathan Mayer Rothschild took over as the richest person in the world. He was born in 1777 in Frankfurt, Germany and moved to England in 1798. He set up banking and textile business that made him his fortune. He died in 1836.

1840s – John Jacob Astor

Net Worth: \$20 million

Adjusted for inflation: \$599 million

John Jacob Astor was born in Walldorf, Germany in 1763 and emigrated to the U.S. in 1784, where he got into the fur trade and built up a very lucrative monopoly. He was also in the real estate and opium industries.

1850s – Cornelius Vanderbilt

Cornelius Vanderbilt, ancestor of Gloria Vanderbilt and Anderson Cooper, was born on Staten Island in New York in 1794. He is the descendant of a Dutch indentured servant. He left school at 11, launched a ferry service at 16, and that became a booming nationwide steamboat business.

1860s – Cornelius Vanderbilt

As Vanderbilt entered his second decade of being the richest person in the world, he grew his fortune through expansion into the railroad industry. He bought the failing New York and Harlem routes in 1863. The following year, he sold his steamboat business to focus on railroads. He went on to create the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad Company, which was one of the first mega

corporations in the U.S.

1870s – Cornelius Vanderbilt

Net Worth: \$105 million

Adjusted for inflation: \$2.6 billion

In his third decade of being the world's richest person, Vanderbilt turned to philanthropy and his \$1 million seed money founded Vanderbilt University in Nashville.

1880s – William Henry Vanderbilt

Net Worth: \$232 million

Adjusted for inflation: \$6.2 billion

William Henry Vanderbilt was Cornelius' son. He picked up where dear old dad left off and expanded the family's railroad empire. By the time he died in 1885, he had more than doubled the family's fortune.

1890s – John D. Rockefeller

John D. Rockefeller was born in upstate New York in 1839. He co-founded Standard Oil in 1870 and eventually controlled 90% of all oil refined in the USA. In the 1890s he expanded into natural gas and iron ore. He also had a lot of influence over the railroad industry.

1900s – Andrew Carnegie

At the turn of the century, Rockefeller was knocked out of the richest in the world spot by his arch rival Andrew Carnegie. He was born in Dunfermline, Scotland in 1835

and was the driving force behind the expansion of the steel industry in the U.S. Carnegie Steel sold to JP Morgan in 1901 for \$480 million, which is equal to \$14.6 billion today. Carnegie was a major philanthropist who gave away 90% of his wealth before he died in 1919.

1910s – John D. Rockefeller

Net Worth: \$900 million

Adjusted for inflation: \$23.5 billion

After Andrew Carnegie died, Rockefeller regained the richest in the world title. In 1911, the Supreme Court found Rockefeller's Standard Oil to be in violation of anti-trust laws and ordered the breakup of the company.

1920s – John D. Rockefeller

Rockefeller was also a big philanthropist. He made his first charitable donation when he was 16. In the 1890s he met with Indian Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda who urged him to be more generous with his money. In the 1920s his charitable donations pretty much eradicated yellow fever and hookworm in the U.S.

1930s – John D. Rockefeller

Rockefeller remained the richest man in the world right up until his death in 1937. As his life wound down, he continued to give generously. He donated more than \$500 million to charities.

1940s – Henry Ford

Net Worth Adjusted for inflation: \$200 billion

Henry Ford, was, of course, the founder of Ford Motor Company. He revolutionized vehicle manufacturing and brought cars to the mass market. Ford sold millions of cars in his lifetime. By the time of his death in 1947, he was the richest man in the world, and rightfully so for how much he changed life as it was known back then.

1950s – J. Paul Getty

Paul Getty was born in 1892 in Minneapolis. He began investing in the oil industry in his early 20s. Getty was infamously frugal. In the 1950s, he took a chance on finding oil in the Middle East. That worked out really well for him.

1960s – J. Paul Getty

Net Worth: \$1.2 billion

Adjusted for inflation: \$9.6 billion

Getty kept his grip on both the global oil industry and the richest person in the world title throughout the 1960s. He also became a major art collector in this decade.

1970s – J. Paul Getty

Net Worth: \$6 billion

Adjusted for inflation: \$27.3 billion

In 1973, Getty made headlines when he refused to pay a \$17 million ransom to free his kidnapped grandson John Paul Getty III. Eventually he struck up a deal to get his release but only after the kidnappers cut off his ear and

mailed it to his grandfather. J. Paul Getty died in 1976.

## 1980s – Yoshiaki Tsutsumi

Net Worth: \$20 billion

Adjusted for inflation: \$45.5 billion

Yoshiaki Tsutsumi dominated the richest list in the 1980s thanks to his real estate empire. However, times soon changed for Tsutsumi when real estate values tanked in the 1990s and he was caught up in an accounting scandal in the early 2000s. As of 2006, he dropped off the list of the wealthiest people in the world.

## 1990s – Bill Gates

Net Worth: \$12.9 billion

Adjusted for inflation: \$21.9 billion

Microsoft founder Bill Gates was named the richest man in the world for the first time in 1995. He held onto that title for every year through 2007 and then again from 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017.

## 2000s – Bill Gates

Even though the dot-com crash of 2000 knocked billions off Gates' net worth, he still retained a firm hold on the richest person in the world title for nine years of this decade. In 2008, Warren Buffett was the richest person in the world. But Gates took that title right back in 2009.

## 2010s – tie: Carlos Slim Helu, Bill Gates, and Jeff Bezos

Helu net worth 2010: \$53.4 billion

Helu net worth 2011: \$74 billion

Helu net worth 2012: \$69 billion

Helu net worth 2013: \$73 billion

Gates net worth 2014: \$76 billion

Gates net worth 2015: \$79.2 billion

Gates net worth 2016: \$75 billion

Gates net worth 2017: \$ 86 billion

Bezos net worth 2018: \$112 billion

Bezos net worth 2019: \$170 billion

In the years from 2010 to 2019, Carlos Slim Helu and Bill Gates were the richest person in the world for four years each. Bezos was for only two. This marks the first appearance of a net worth of over \$100 billion as well.

2020s – Jeff Bezos

Net Worth: \$111 billion

Jeff Bezos, despite losing \$36 billion when he and his wife of 25 years, MacKenzie Bezos, divorced, remained the richest person in the world. (His ex-wife is now one of the richest women in the world.) While Bill Gates is nipping at his heels with a net worth of \$102 billion, and depending on where shares of LVMH are, Bernard Arnault isn't far behind Gates. Amazon is so dominant that it's hard to see a time when Bezos won't be the richest person in the world.



