

# On the Mechanics of Top Wealth Inequality

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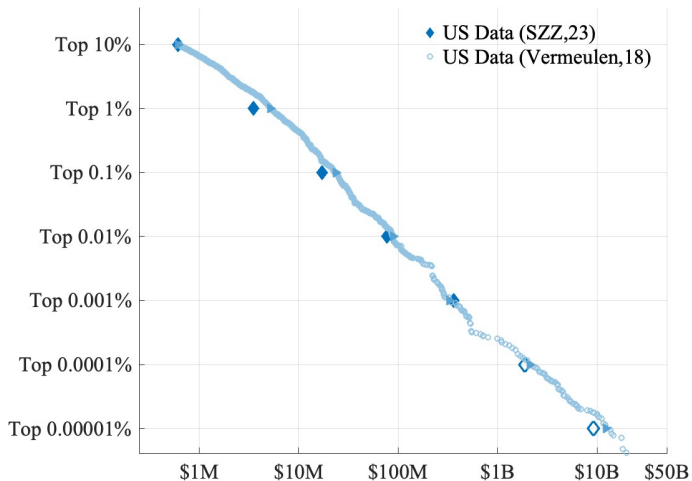
*NBER SI - Inequality and Macroeconomics*

*July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2025*

# Wealth is Extremely Concentrated at the Top

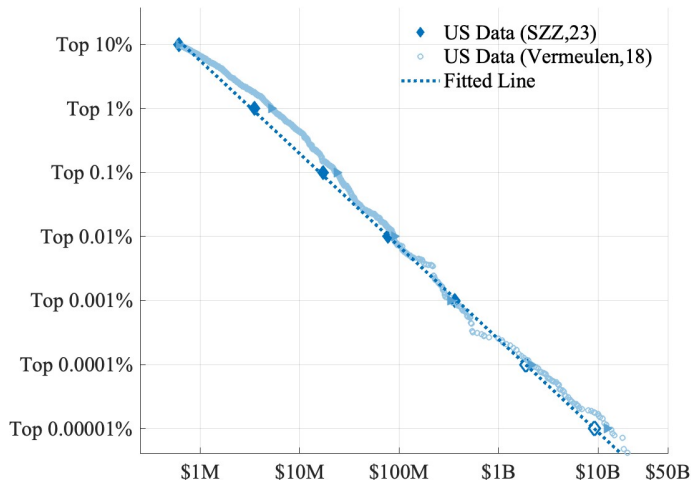
# Wealth is Extremely Concentrated at the Top: US

**Right Tail:** Log Counter-CDF ( $\Pr(w > x)$ ) vs Log Wealth



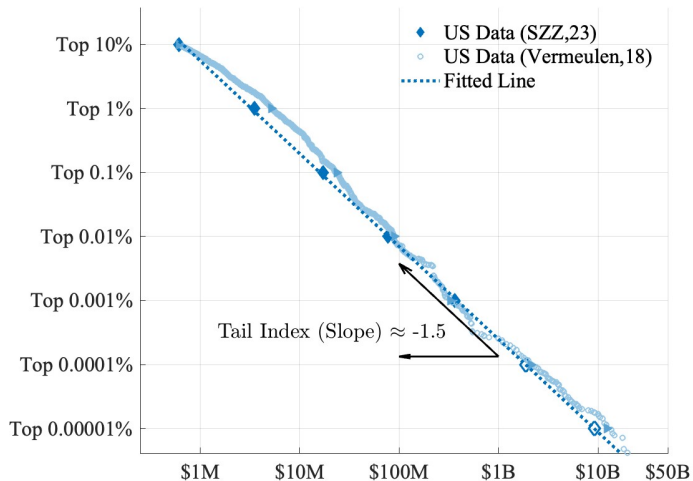
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**Shape:** A straight line implies a **Pareto distribution**:  $P(w > x) \sim x^{-\alpha}$



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**Thickness:** Slope gives the tail index  $\alpha$



# True in Most of the Developed Economies

Pareto Tail Index for Wealth										
	Germany	Austria	Portugal	US	Italy	France	Spain	UK	Belgium	Finland
Tail Index	1.39	1.46	1.47	~1.50	1.58	1.62	1.69	1.74	1.87	1.88

*Source:* Vermuelen (RIW, 2018). Tail indices are estimated from country level surveys merged with Forbes' billionaires list.

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- ▶ **Thickness:** All countries with  $\alpha < 2$ . Very thick tail! (technically,  $\text{Var}(\text{wealth})$  does not exist)
  - **Matters in practice:** Models with thick Pareto tail are harder to solve accurately.



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- ▶ **Why care about Pareto?** No super rich without Pareto...Even if top 1% share matched
  - Many policy debates are (were!) about taxing 100-millionaires, billionaires, etc.

# What Drives Wealth Inequality? **Six Mechanisms**

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- ▶ **Today:** Models that feature **1 through 5**. How (well) do they generate wealth inequality?
- ▶ **Not Today:** Stochastic-beta, Heterogeneous risk aversion, Non-homothetic pref., etc.

*(Largely because we already have a good guess about their impact.)*

▶ Example

# Horse Race: Three Frameworks

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*(Fagereng, Guiso, Malacrino, Pistaferri, ECMA, 2020; Smith, Zidar, Zwick, QJE, 2023; etc)*

**Two versions:** (i) Entrepreneurship-based full-fledged macro model

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**3 Life cycle dynamics of wealth accumulation:** **Incredibly fast wealth growth** in the data

**55+% of billionaires** have **10,000-fold wealth growth** over life cycle

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**3 Demographic structure** and wealth distribution: **Who holds the wealth?**

# **General Framework**

# I. Preferences and Demographics: 2 Versions

**Version 1:** CRRA Utility + Warm-Glow Bequests + **Perpetual-Youth** (cons. surv.  $\phi$ )

$$U = \mathbb{E}_0 \sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \beta^t \underbrace{(\phi \times u(c_t))}_{\text{Survival prob.}} + (1 - \phi) \times \underbrace{v(b)}_{\text{Warm-glow bequest}}$$

$$u(c) = \frac{c^{1-\sigma}}{1-\sigma} \qquad v(b) = \chi \frac{(b + b_0)^{1-\sigma}}{1-\sigma}$$

→ Used for Framework 1: **Awesome-State Model**

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**Version 2:** CRRA Utility + Warm-Glow Bequests + **Finite Horizon T** + **Stoch. Death** ( $\phi_t$  from data)

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► Perpetual-youth will be critical ...as we will see

## II. Household Consumption-Savings Problem

- Consumption-savings problem at the core of all 3 frameworks (ignoring bequests)

$$\begin{aligned}\mathcal{V}_t(a_t^i; \mathbf{Y}_t^i) &= \max_{c_t^i, a_{t+1}^i} \{ U(c_t^i) + \beta \phi_{t+1} \mathbb{E} [\mathcal{V}_{t+1}(a_{t+1}^i; \mathbf{Y}_{t+1}^i) \mid \mathbf{Y}_t^i] \} \\ \text{s.t. } c_t^i + a_{t+1}^i &= R a_t^i + \mathbf{Y}_t^i, \\ a_t^i &\geq -B_{\min},\end{aligned}$$

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    - **No wealth Pareto** (without thick tail inc shocks; Stachurski, Toda, 2019; Sargent, Wang, Yang, 2021)



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  - **In Power-Law models** (Framework 3), **risk** comes from stochastic  $\mathbf{R}_t$ 
    - **Generate Pareto tail in wealth** (thicker than income!)
    - But: How thick? How long does it take to emerge? → Empirical questions

### III. Return Process: Two Options

#### 1 Fully-fledged model: Entrepreneurial returns (Güvenen, Kambourov, Kuruscu, Ocampo, Chen, QJE, 2023)

- Individuals differ in *entrepreneurial ability*  $z_t^i$  (permanent + transitory components)
- Returns from entrepreneurial profits

$$\pi_t^i = \max_{k_t^i \leq \vartheta(\bar{z}^i) \times a_t^i} \mathcal{P} \times \left( z_t^i k_t^i \right)^\mu - (R + \delta) k_t^i$$

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#### 2 Simple benchmark: Markovian returns consistent with wealth inequality facts

$$R_t^i = R \times \exp(z_t^i) \quad \text{where } z_t^i \text{ follows a Markov Chain}$$

- Later allow for permanent types

# Calibration of Models

	Frameworks		
	Awesome-State	PEER Model	Return Heterogeneity
1. Max $T$	$\infty$	$\phi_t$ from data; ages 25-100	$\phi_t$ from data; ages 25-100

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3. Wealth-to-Income Ratio		4	
4. Average HH. Earnings		\$60,462	

► Earnings correspond to total wages and salaries per household in 2016 (BLS; Census)

► Wealth level determined by average returns to wealth

► details



# Road Map

## 1 Income Dynamics:

1 Income Processes

2 Models vs Data

## 2 Wealth Inequality: Models vs Data

## 3 Demographics and Wealth: Models vs Data

## Income Processes: 1. Awesome-State Model

<i>Stationary Distribution of Income, <math>Y</math></i>				
	$s_1$	$s_2$	$s_3$	$s_4$
$Y$	<b>1.00</b>	3.15	9.78	1,061
$\pi$	<b>61.1%</b>	22.4%	16.5%	0.0389%

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**Today:** I will focus on Castañeda, Díaz-Giménez, Ríos-Rull (2003) version

We have also studied Kaymak and Poschke (2016); Grinwald, Leombroni, Lustig, Van Nieuwerburgh (2021); Kindermann and Krueger (2022); Boar and Midrigan (2022); etc.

## Income Process: 2. PEER Model

Very rich income process with **21 parameters** *(Guvenen, Karahan, Ozkan, Song, ECMA, 2021)*

► details

Normal mixture persistent + transitory shocks; Non-employment shocks with scarring effects;  
Shocks are age-income dependent; More!

- Matches 2000+ moments of **nonlinear and non-Gaussian** income dynamics

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Also consider alternative model with higher income inequality at the top *(more on this later!)*

## Income Process: 3. Return Heterogeneity Model

- **Deliberately very standard:** Canonical persistent-plus-transitory income process:

$$\log y_t^i = \alpha^i + g(t) + \eta_t^i;$$

$$\eta_t^i = \rho \eta_{t-1}^i + \varepsilon_t^i.$$

- All random objects are Gaussian  $(\kappa^i, \nu_t^i)$



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Other features skipped for today:

Heterogeneous income growth over the life cycle; Income persistence of top earners;  
Distribution of income changes over longer horizons; Asymmetric Impulse response functions.

# I. Income Inequality

## Ratio of Top Percentile Threshold to Median Earnings

	Percentile Threshold		
	99%	99.9%	99.99%
US Data			
Awesome-State			
PEER Model			
Gaussian-AR			

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US Data	8.5		
Awesome-State	9.8		
PEER Model	14.8		
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	99%	99.9%	99.99%
US Data	8.5	<b>30.4</b>	
Awesome-State	9.8	9.8	
PEER Model	14.8	33.6	
Gaussian-AR	6.6	13.9	

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	Percentile Threshold		
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US Data	8.5	30.4	<b>135.8</b>
Awesome-State	9.8	9.8	<b>1061.0</b>
PEER Model	14.8	33.6	<b>65.0</b>
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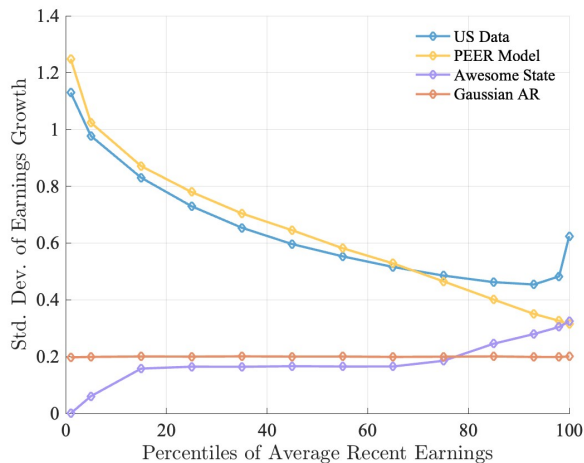
► Alternative PEER Model modified for higher income inequality  $\rightarrow \frac{y^{99.9}}{y^{50}} = 72$ ;  $\frac{y^{99.99}}{y^{50}} = 334$

■ Thick *income* Pareto tail but *wealth* results qualitatively unchanged

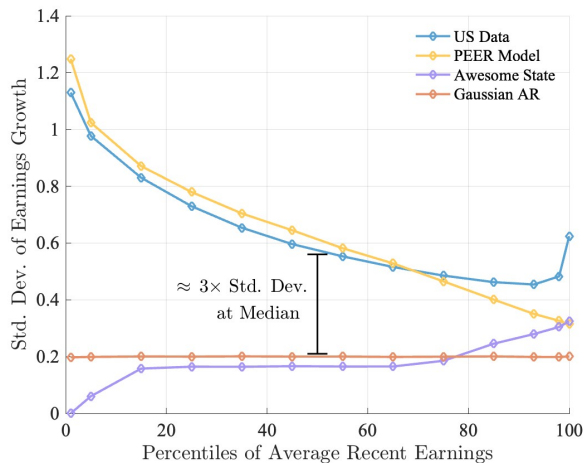
► Income Pareto



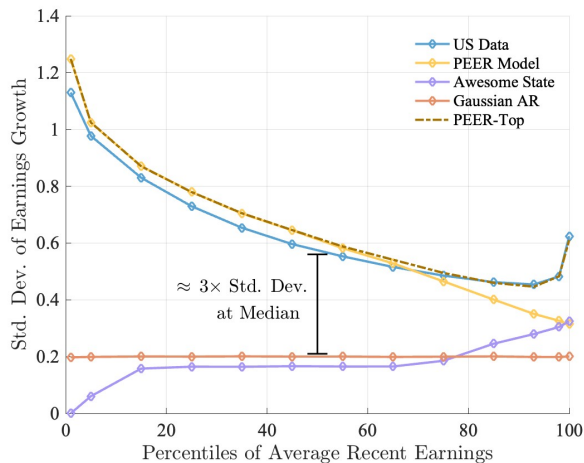
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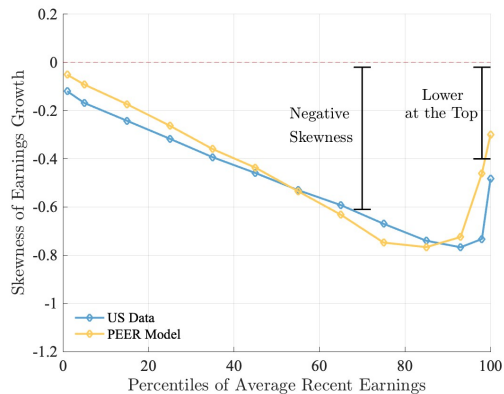


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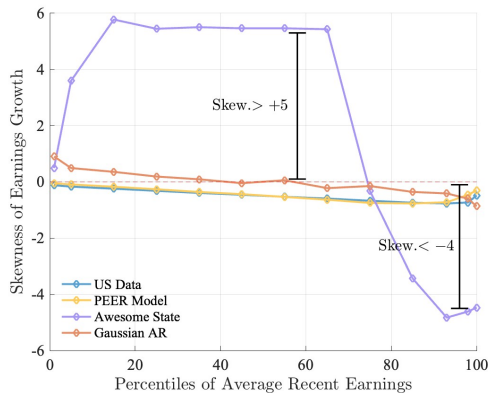
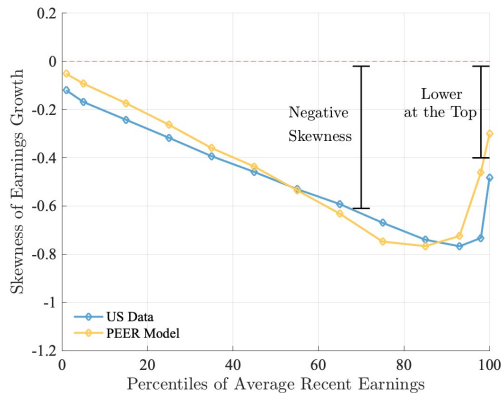
### III. Income Risk: Skewness of Income Growth

► More



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► More



# Road Map

## 1 Income Dynamics: Models vs Data

### 1 Income Processes

### 2 Models vs Data

## 2 **Wealth Inequality:**

### 1 Return Heterogeneity

### 2 Models vs Data

## 3 Demographics and Wealth: Models vs Data

# Return Heterogeneity

	Cross-Section		Life-Time		
	Average	p90-p10	Std. Dev.	p99	p99.9
PEER Model & Awesome State	3.0	—	—	—	—
Markovian Returns	12.2				
Entrepreneurial Returns	8.3				
Norway	3.8				
	(Private equity: 10)				

**Notes:** All statistics are wealth-weighted. Norwegian statistics from Fagereng, Guiso, Malacrino, Pistaferri (ECMA, 2020).

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	Average	p90-p10	Std. Dev.	p99	p99.9
PEER Model & Awesome State	3.0	—	—	—	—
Markovian Returns	12.2	23.6	6.7		
Entrepreneurial Returns	8.3	17.3	3.8		
Norway	3.8	14.2	6.0		

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**Notes:** All statistics are wealth-weighted. Norwegian statistics from Fagereng, Guiso, Malacrino, Pistaferri (ECMA, 2020).



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	Cross-Section		Life-Time		
	Average	p90-p10	Std. Dev.	p99	p99.9
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Markovian Returns	12.2	23.6	6.7	15.6	19.8
Entrepreneurial Returns	8.3	17.3	3.8	11.2	15.8
Norway	3.8	14.2	6.0	11.6	23.4

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# Return Heterogeneity and Entrepreneurship

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(Private equity: 10)

**Notes:** All statistics are wealth-weighted. Norwegian statistics from Fagereng, Guiso, Malacrino, Pistaferri (ECMA, 2020).

For **Entrepreneurial Returns** model:

- ▶ Entrepreneurship: **10.6% vs 11.5% in US** (Model: Entrep. Inc.>50% of Inc.; Data: Cagetti, DeNardi, 2006)
- ▶ Entrepreneurs hold **80% of wealth among top 1%** wealth holders

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► Cap. Inc + Cons

3 **Life-cycle wealth dynamics** of super wealthy:

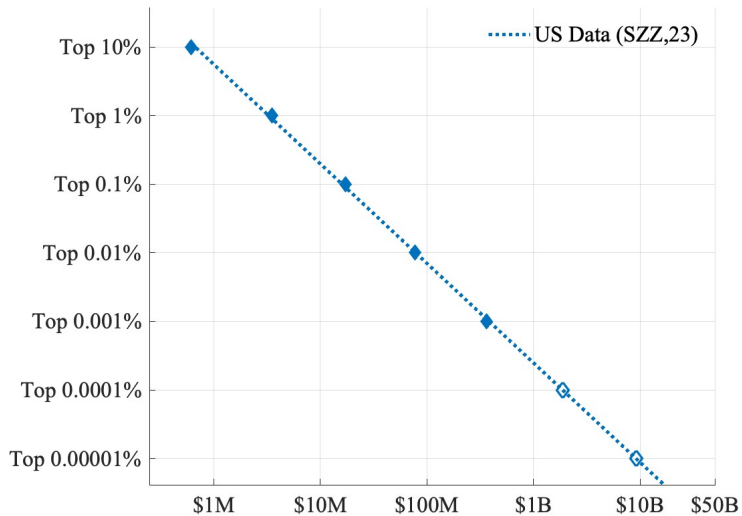
■ 55% of US Forbes billionaires **are self-made** (see also Hubmer, Halvorsen, Salgado, Ozkan, 2024)

→ 10,000- to 20,000-fold increase in wealth over 30-40 years.

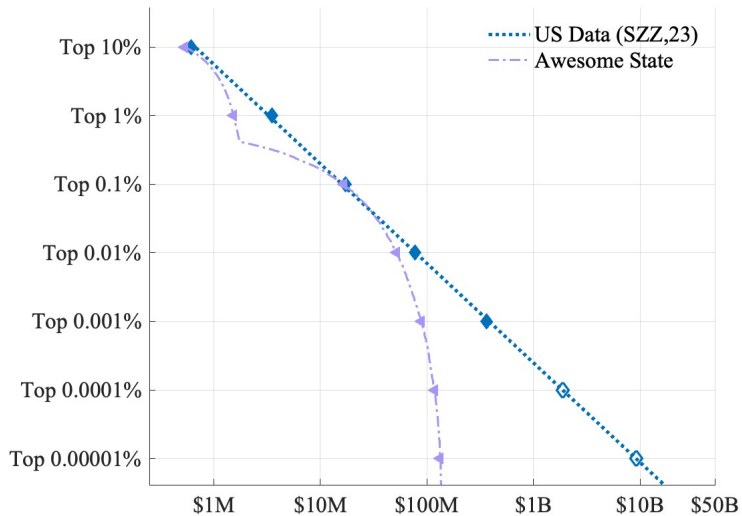
# Pareto Tail: Models vs US Data



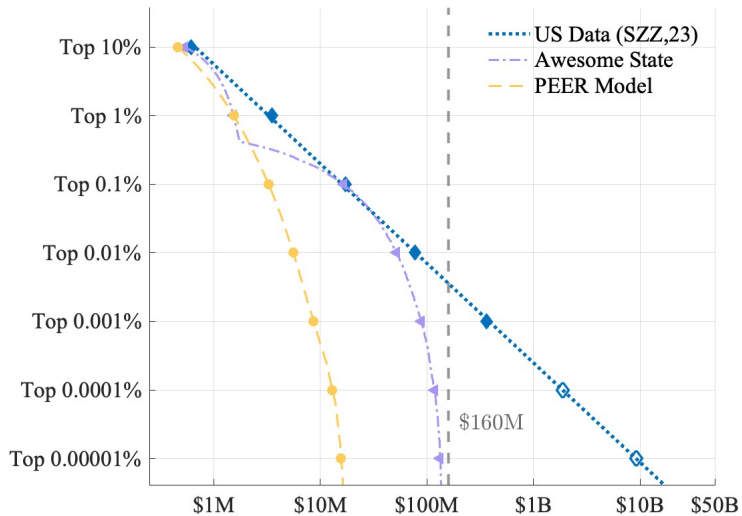
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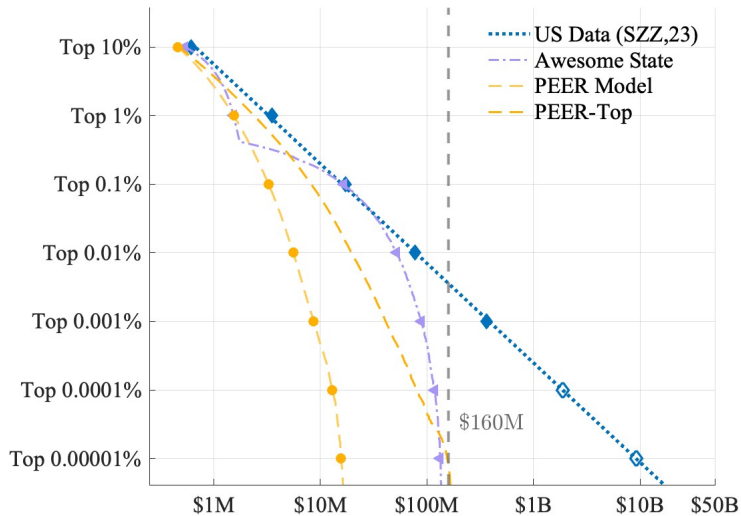


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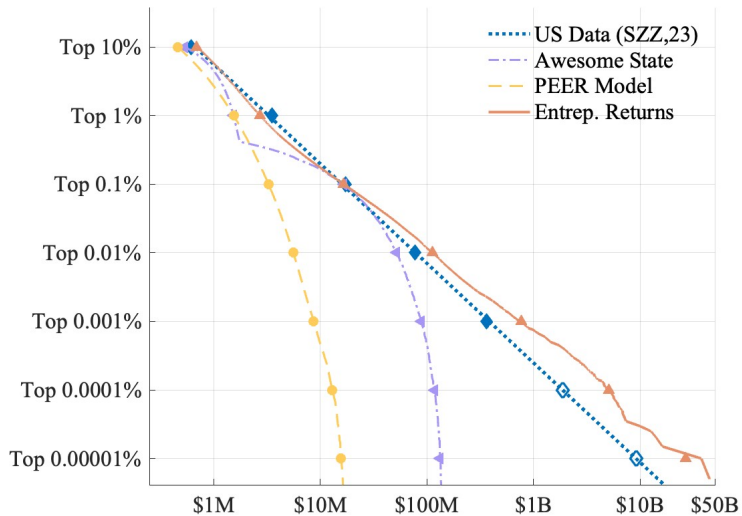


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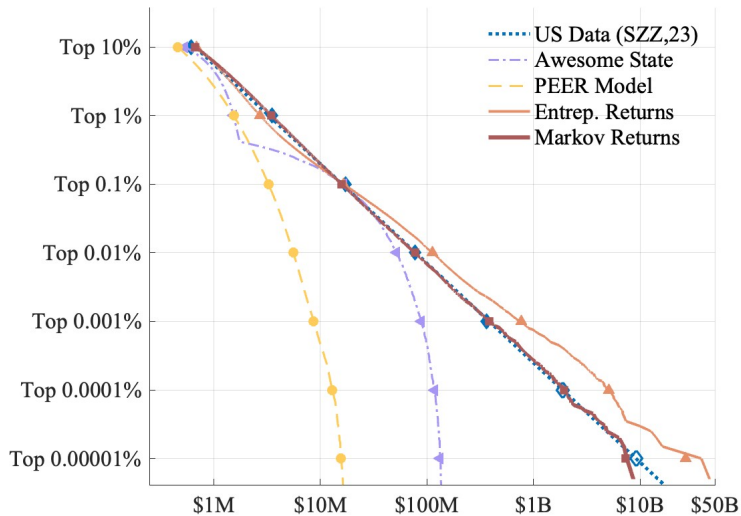
► High R PEER



## Pareto Tail: Models vs US Data



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## Wealth Inequality: Gini

	Frameworks				
	US Data	Awesome State	PEER Model	Return Heterogeneity	
				Markov	Entrepreneurial
<b>Gini</b>	<b>0.85</b>	<b>0.84</b>	<b>0.72</b>	<b>0.79</b>	<b>0.78</b>
Top 10%	68.6	71.5	54.2	67.3	64.6
Top 1%	33.7	30.0	13.5	31.5	34.9
Top 0.1%	15.7	15.4	2.5	14.8	22.2
Top 0.01%	7.1	3.3	0.4	7.0	13.0
% Self-made	55	0.4	0.0	0.0	57.5

**Source:** US Data from *Smith, Zidar, Zwick* (QJE, 2023) complemented with Forbes data.

## Wealth Inequality: Top Shares

	Frameworks				
	US Data	Awesome State	PEER Model	Return Heterogeneity	
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Gini	0.85	0.84	0.72	0.79	0.78
<b>Top 10%</b>	<b>68.6</b>	<b>71.5</b>	<b>54.2</b>	<b>67.3</b>	<b>64.6</b>
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Gini	0.85	0.84	0.72	0.79	0.78
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\* **Awesome-state model: only 0.002% above empirical 0.01% wealth threshold.**

► Millionaires

## Wealth Inequality: Fraction Self-Made

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<b>% Self-made</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>0.4</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>57.5</b>	<b>21.3</b>

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# Road Map

## 1 Income Dynamics: Models vs Data

### 1 Income Processes

### 2 Models vs Data

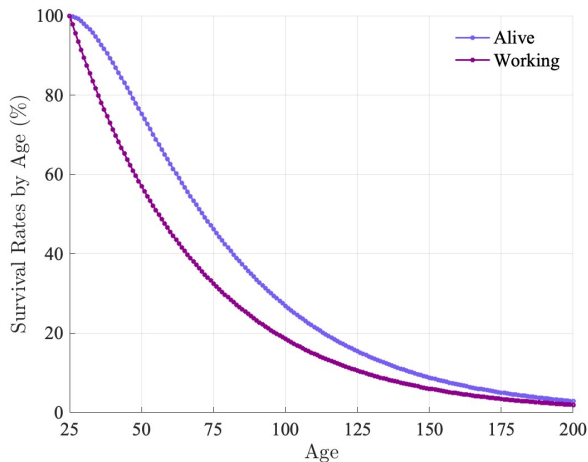
## 2 Wealth Inequality:

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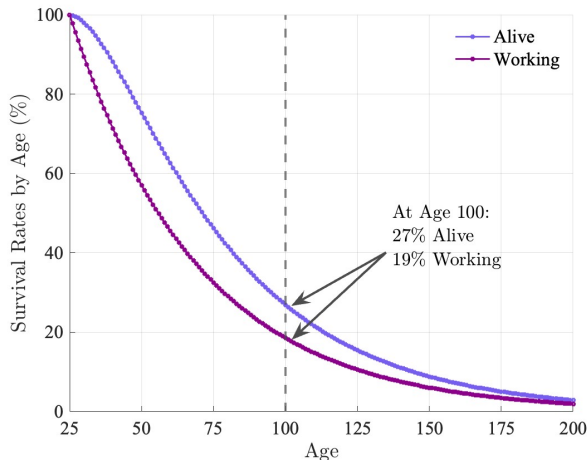
## 3 **Demographics and Wealth:** Models vs Data

## Age Distribution: Awesome-State Model



**Notes:** Perpetual-youth with constant probability of retiring of  $1/45$  and constant probability of dying after retirement of  $1/15$ .

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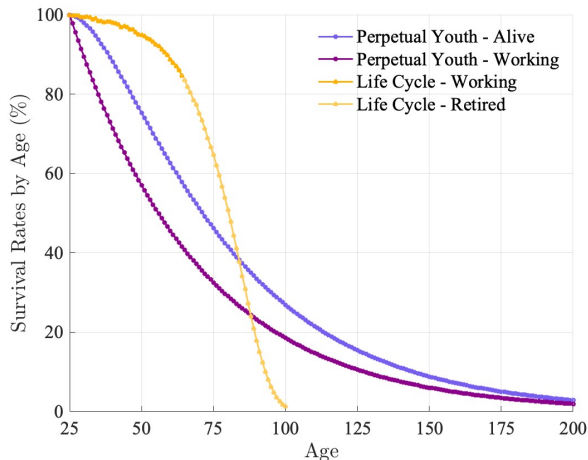


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► US has 97,000 centenarians. **Or 0.029% of population**

◀ US Data

## Age Distribution: Awesome-State Model vs Life Cycle Models



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## Representation of the Very Old in **Top 1%**

Age	Awesome State		Markov Returns	
	Population Share	Wealth Share	Population Share	Wealth Share
65+	81.1	67.0	43.6	41.3
85+				
100+				
120+				

**Notes:** SCF overall wealth shares for 65+, 38%, and 85+, 4.8%. For Markov Returns 65+, 36.6%, and 85+, 2.7%.  
Among top 1%, 32.5% are 65+ and hold 35.9% of wealth; 5.4% are 85+ and hold 4.6% of wealth.

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100+	<b>61.2</b>	<b>39.1</b>	NA	NA
120+	<b>39.8</b>	<b>25.0</b>	NA	NA

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Among top 1%, 32.5% are 65+ and hold 35.9% of wealth; 5.4% are 85+ and hold 4.6% of wealth.

## Recap: Comparison of Models' Performance

Model:	Pareto Tail		Overall Inequality	Lyfe Cycle Dynamics
	Shape	Thickness	Gini + Top Shares	Self-made
1. PEER model	No	No	No	No
2. Awesome-State model	No	No	<b>Yes</b>	No
3. Return heterogeneity	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>

# Conclusions

## ► “Awesome-State” Model:

- Perpetual youth creates highly questionable demographics.
  - Centenarians hold 2/5 of top 1% wealth
- Income process contradicts a large number of facts that are now well established.
- Model does not generate a Pareto tail, and nobody has more than 150 million in wealth.

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## ► PEER Model:

- Realistic income + demographics go some way toward creating high wealth inequality
- Minimal effect of top 1% wealth holdings and beyond.

## ► “Rate of Return Heterogeneity” Model:

- Matches salient features of the wealth distribution with empirically reasonable returns.
- Substantially different & interesting policy implications (than Aiyagari framework).

# APPENDIX



# Limited effect of saving rates with finite lives

Simple wealth accumulation process:

$$w_{h+1} = R \cdot w_h + s \cdot y_h \longrightarrow w_h = R^h w_0 + \sum_{t=0}^{h-1} R^{h-1-t} s y_t$$

- ▶ Set  $w_0 = \$1M$ ,  $R = 1.03$ , and  $s = 1$
- ▶ High and constant income:  $y_h = y$  with  $y \in \{p90, p99, p99.9\}$

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- ▶ High and constant income:  $y_h = y$  with  $y \in \{p90, p99, p99.9\}$

Takes over 100 years to accumulate \$1B (even for the earnings-rich!)

Years to	Income		
	p90 (\$108K)	p90 (\$309K)	p99.9 (\$927K)
\$100M	106	78	48
\$1B	183	153	118
\$10B	260	230	195

## Limited effect of saving rates with finite lives II

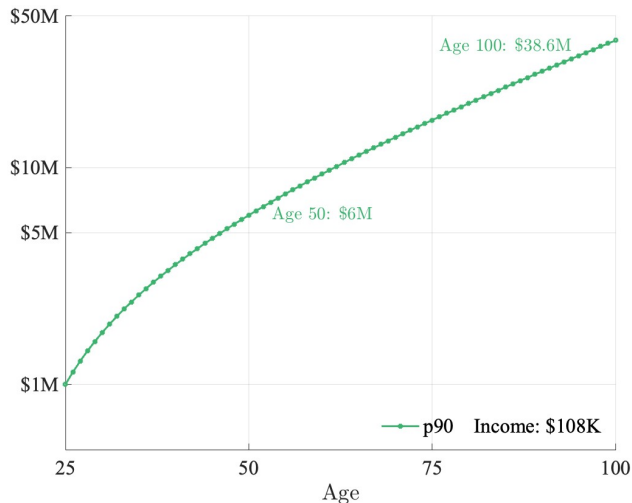
[< back](#)

$$w_{h+1} = R \cdot w_h + s \cdot y_h \quad \text{Set } R = 1.03; s = 1; \text{ High+Constant Income}$$

## Limited effect of saving rates with finite lives II

[◀ back](#)

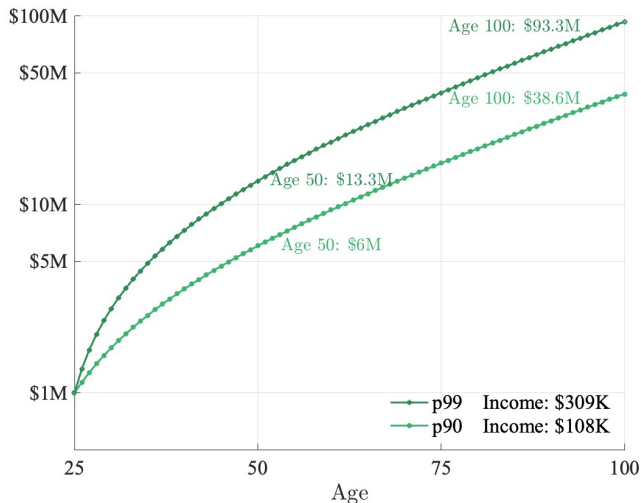
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[< back](#)

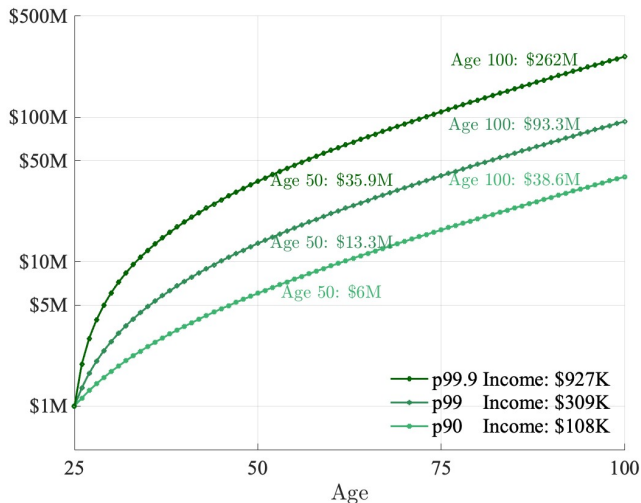
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## Limited effect of saving rates with finite lives II

[◀ back](#)

$$w_{h+1} = R \cdot w_h + s \cdot y_h \quad \text{Set } R = 1.03; s = 1; \text{ High+Constant Income}$$



- ▶ We fix average labor income (~\$60K) and the wealth to income ratio (4)

$$4 = \frac{W}{\text{Labor Income} + \text{Capital Income}}$$

- Labor income = Working-Share  $\times$  Avg. Labor Inc.

- ▶ Level of wealth depends on returns to wealth

$$4 = \frac{W}{\text{Labor Income} + R \times W} \quad \longrightarrow \quad W = \frac{4}{1 - 4 \times R} \times \text{Labor Income}$$

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	US Data	Awesome State $R = 3\%$	PEER $R = 3\%$	Markov Returns $R = 12\%$
Avg. Wealth	\$320K	\$200K	\$170K	\$330K



# Labor Income, Returns, and Wealth Levels

[< back](#)

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- ▶ Wealth concentration results unchanged when matching average wealth

[▶ High R PEER](#)

Level of earnings:  $\tilde{Y}_t^i = (1 - \nu_t^i) e^{(g(t) + \alpha^i + \theta^i t + z_t^i + \varepsilon_t^i)}$  (1)

Persistent component:  $z_t^i = \rho z_{t-1}^i + \eta_t^i$ , (2)

Innovations to AR(1):  $\eta_t^i \sim \begin{cases} \mathcal{N}(\mu_{\eta,1}, \sigma_{\eta,1}) & \text{with prob. } p_z \\ \mathcal{N}(\mu_{\eta,2}, \sigma_{\eta,2}) & \text{with prob. } 1 - p_z \end{cases}$  (3)

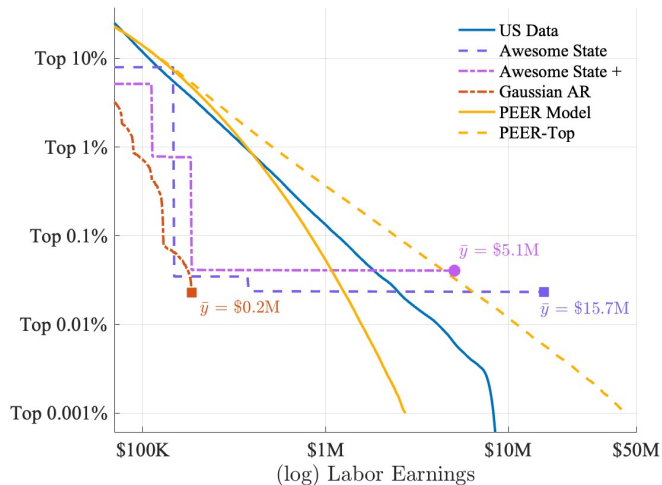
Initial condition of  $z_t^i$ :  $z_0^i \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_{z_0})$  (4)

Transitory shock:  $\varepsilon_t^i \sim \begin{cases} \mathcal{N}(\mu_{\varepsilon,1}, \sigma_{\varepsilon,1}) & \text{with prob. } p_{\varepsilon} \\ \mathcal{N}(\mu_{\varepsilon,2}, \sigma_{\varepsilon,2}) & \text{with prob. } 1 - p_{\varepsilon} \end{cases}$  (5)

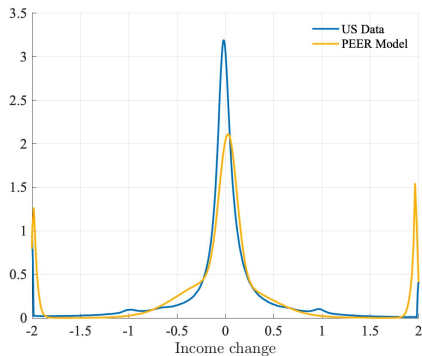
Nonemployment duration:  $\nu_t^i \sim \begin{cases} 0 & \text{with prob. } 1 - p_{\nu}(t, z_t^i) \\ \min \{1, F_{\text{exp}}(\varphi)\} & \text{with prob. } p_{\nu}(t, z_t^i) \end{cases}$  (6)

Prob of Nonemp. shock:  $p_{\nu}^i(t, z_t) = \frac{e^{\xi_t^i}}{1 + e^{\xi_t^i}}$ , where  $\xi_t^i \equiv a + bt + cz_t^i + dz_t^i t$ . (7)

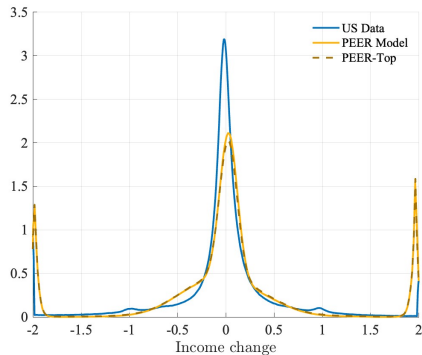
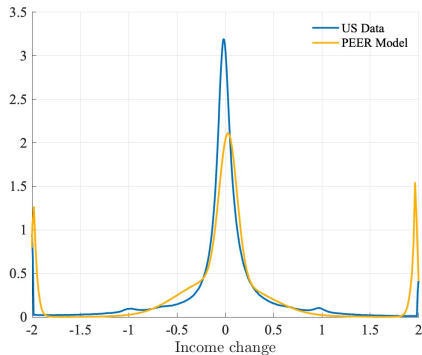
## I.A. Income Inequality: Top Tail of Income Distribution

[◀ back](#)

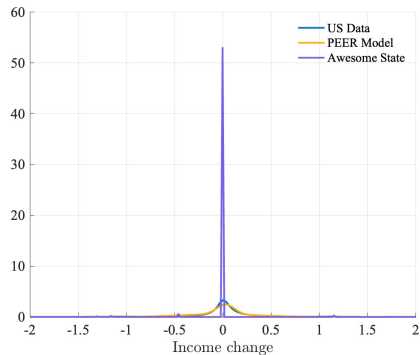
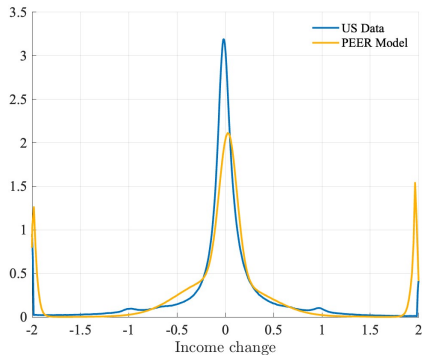
## Histogram of $\Delta \log Y$



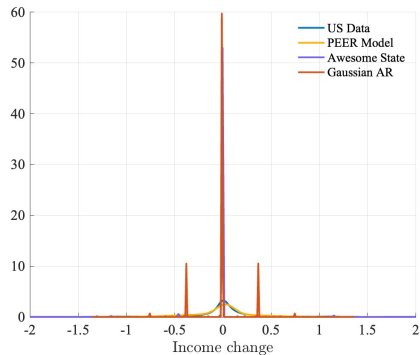
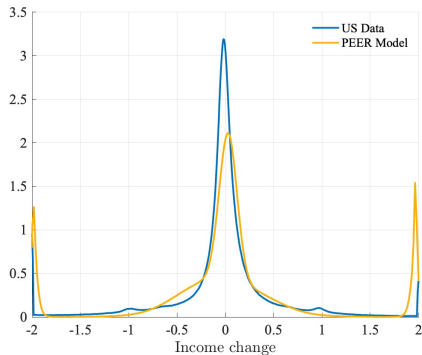
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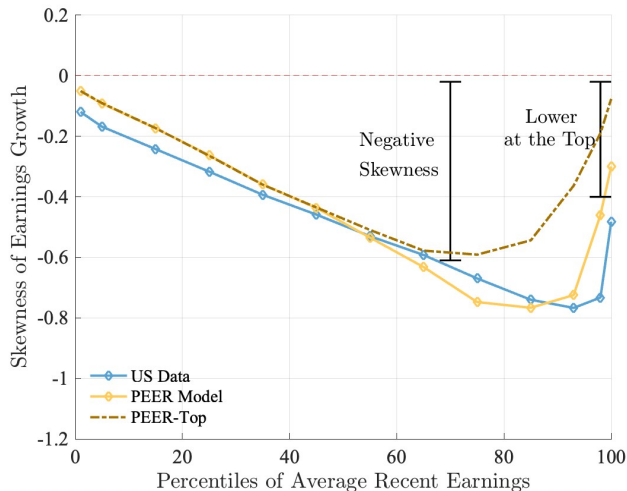
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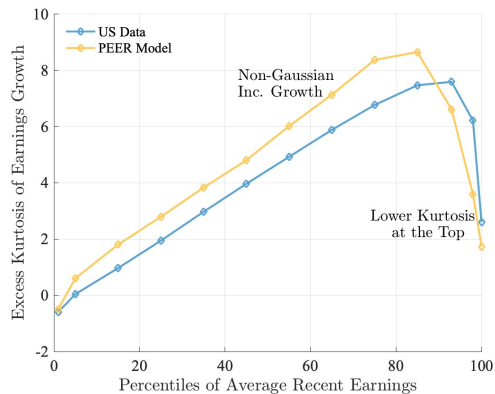


### III.A Income Risk: **Skewness of Income Growth**

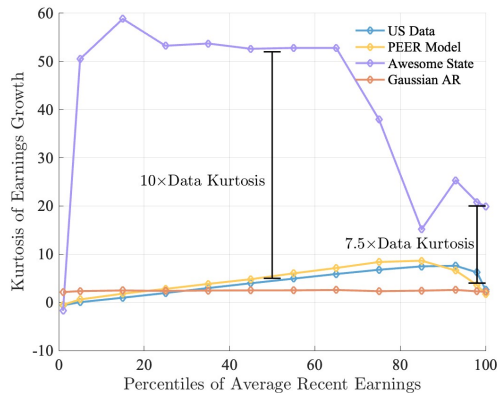
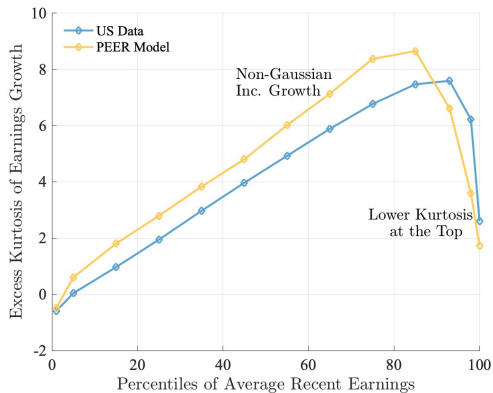
[◀ back](#)



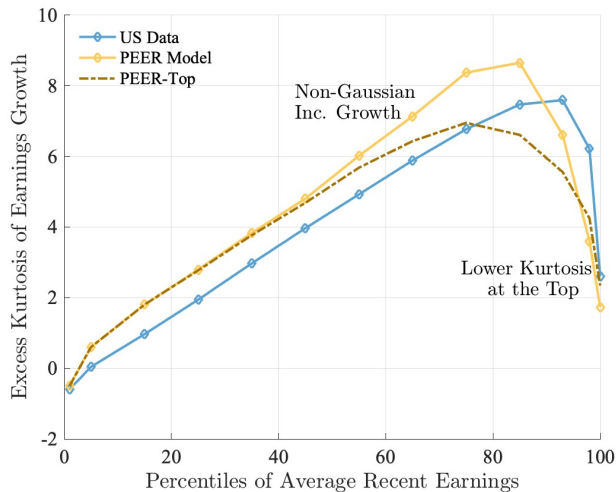
## IV. Income Risk: Kurtosis of Income Growth

[▶ More](#)

## IV. Income Risk: Kurtosis of Income Growth

[▶ More](#)

## IV.A Income Risk: Kurtosis of Income Growth

[◀ back](#)

## Increasing $R$ to Match Wealth Levels

[▶ more](#)[◀ back 1](#)[◀ back 2](#)

- ▶ Calibrate PEER model with  $R = 11\%$  + Wealth-to-income ratio of 4

## Increasing $R$ to Match Wealth Levels

[▶ more](#)[◀ back 1](#)[◀ back 2](#)

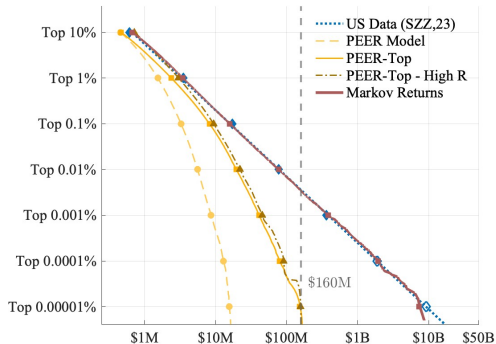
- Calibrate PEER model with  $R = 11\%$  + Wealth-to-income ratio of 4

	US Data	PEER	PEER-Top	PEER-Top + $R = 11\%$	Markov Returns
Avg. Wealth	\$320K	\$170K	\$200K	\$314K	\$330K

# Increasing $R$ to Match Wealth Levels

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	Gini + Top Shares			Top Wealth Thresholds		
	US Data	PEER Model	PEER Top	US Data	PEER Model	PEER Top
Gini	<b>0.85</b>	0.72	0.79			
Top 10%	<b>68.6</b>	54.2	65.2	0.6	0.5	0.5
Top 1%	<b>33.7</b>	13.5	24.1	3.5	1.5	2.4
Top 0.1%	<b>15.7</b>	2.5	6.6	<b>17.2</b>	3.3	8.2
Top 0.01%	<b>7.1</b>	0.4	1.4	<b>77.8</b>	5.6	19.6

Source: US Data from *Smith, Zidar, Zwick* (QJE, 2023) complemented with Forbes data.

## Cutoff Values in Millions of US Dollars

Threshold for top	US Data	Frameworks				
	Millions USD	Awesome State	PEER Model	Return Heterogeneity		
				Markov	Entrepreneurial	Markov +
1%	<b>3.5</b>	1.5	1.5	3.5	2.7	3.4
0.1%	<b>17.2</b>	16.5	3.2	15.9	16.5	13.4
0.01%	<b>77.8</b>	51.4	5.6	77.6	112.2	63.2

Source: US Data from *Smith, Zidar, Zwick* (QJE, 2023).



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# Millionaires in the Model: Population Above Data Cutoffs

[◀ back](#)

Cutoff (Millions USD)	US Data	Frameworks				
	Pop Share Above Cutoff	Awesome State	PEER Model	Return Heterogeneity		
				Markov	Entrepreneurial	Markov +
3.52	1.00	0.32	0.08	0.99	0.66	0.95

Source: US Data from *Smith, Zidar, Zwick* (QJE, 2023).

# Millionaires in the Model: Population Above Data Cutoffs

[< back](#)

Cutoff (Millions USD)	US Data	Frameworks				
	Pop Share Above Cutoff	Awesome State	PEER Model	Return Heterogeneity		
				Markov	Entrepreneurial	Markov +
3.52	1.00	0.32	0.08	0.99	0.66	0.95
17.2	0.10	0.09	0	0.09	0.10	0.07

Source: US Data from *Smith, Zidar, Zwick* (QJE, 2023).

# Millionaires in the Model: Population Above Data Cutoffs

[◀ back](#)

Cutoff (Millions USD)	US Data	Frameworks				
	Pop Share Above Cutoff	Awesome State	PEER Model	Return Heterogeneity		
				Markov	Entrepreneurial	Markov +
3.52	1.00	0.32	0.08	0.99	0.66	0.95
17.2	0.10	0.09	0	0.09	0.10	0.07
77.8	0.01	0.002	0	0.010	0.017	0.008

Source: US Data from *Smith, Zidar, Zwick* (QJE, 2023).

- ▶ How concentrated are capital income and consumption relative to wealth?

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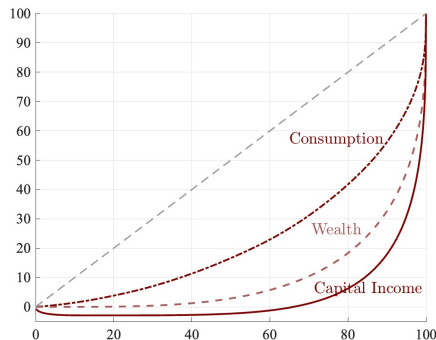
**Lorenz:** Consumption is less concentrated than wealth; Capital income is more

# Wealth, Capital Income, and Consumption

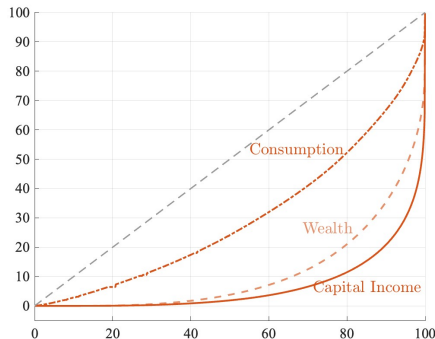
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**Markov Returns**



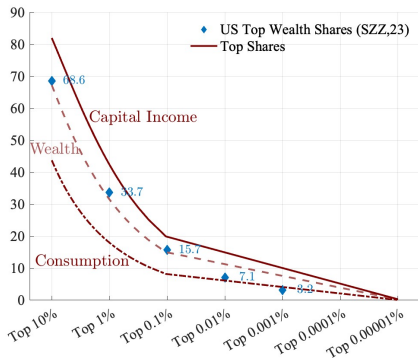
**Entrepreneurial Returns**



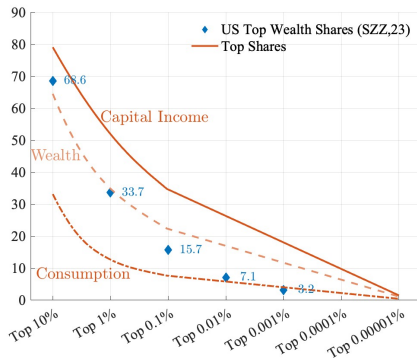


**Top Shares:** Consumption is less concentrated than wealth; Capital income is more

## Markov Returns



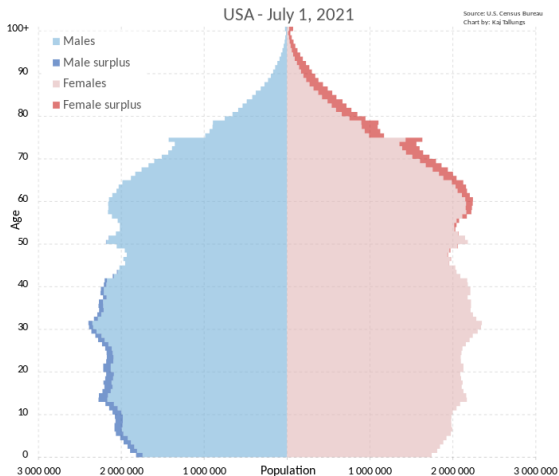
## Entrepreneurial Returns



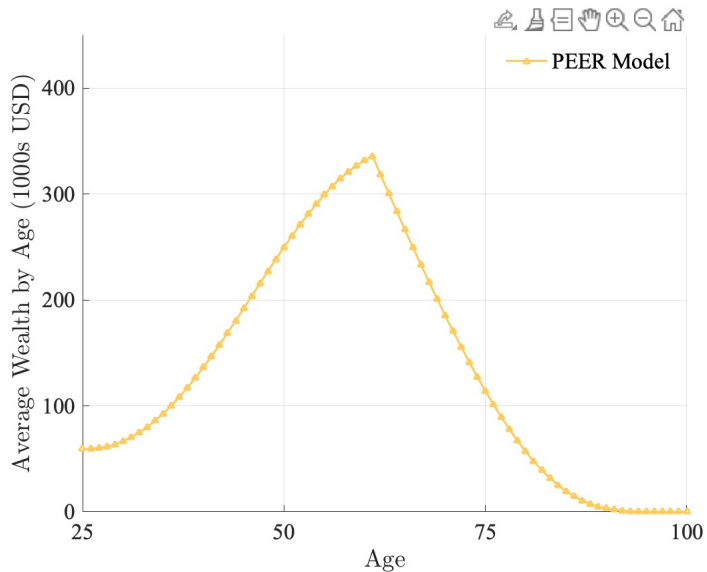
# Age Distribution: US Data

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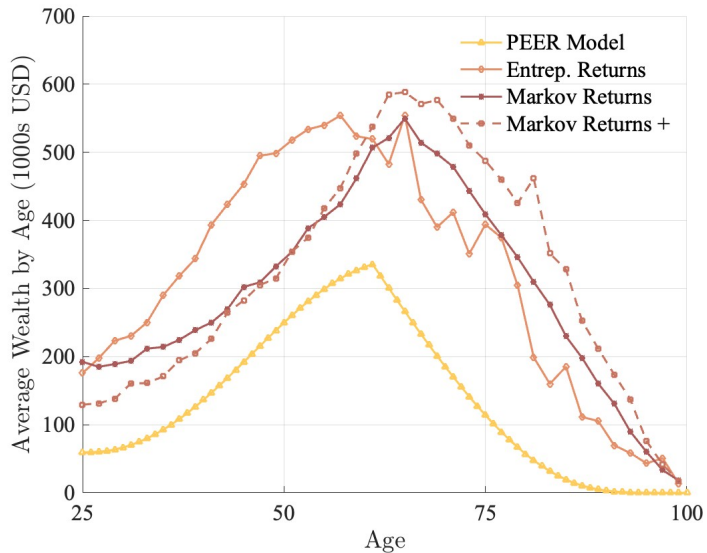
US has 97,000 centenarians. **Or 0.029% of population**



# Average Lifecycle Wealth Profiles

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