Feel like you've been getting nowhere on an economic treadmill? Or even falling behind?

You may have made more progress than you think.

If several of America's most prominent economists are right about some arcane disputes over how to measure the Consumer Price Index, then wages have been growing much faster than previously believed, poverty is fast receding and the economic prospects of future generations look much brighter.

"This could revolutionize the whole standard-of-living story," said Harvard University's Dale Jorgenson, one of the revisionists. "It's just momentous."

The usual, bleak story is still very much in circulation. A recent press release from the liberal Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington, D.C., citing data from the U.S. Census Bureau, decried "a long-term upward trend in poverty rates" compounded by "wage erosion among low- and middle-income workers."

A steady barrage of such claims over the past few years has left many Americans positively gloomy about the economy.

"The notion of a falling standard of living affronts the American dream," observed the 1993 annual report of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas. "Most broadly, it threatens Americans' faith in the free enterprise system at the very moment of its historic triumph over communism."

But a plausible, if largely unknown, case now exists that Americans' faith wasn't misplaced, after all.

Instead of falling 12 percent from 1979 to 1994, as the official numbers suggest, median weekly earnings for full-time male workers may actually have risen 14 percent over the past decade and a half.

Instead of creeping up only 7 percent during the same period, women's real earnings may have soared 35 percent.

And, looking to the future, Americans can look forward to a doubling of their real wages by the year 2030 and a solution to federal deficit problems without any radical budget cuts if the revisionist case is right, said Dean Baker at the Economic Policy Institute, a liberal think tank in Washington,
How could all this be?

The government's basic data on wages, productivity and economic output haven't changed. What is changing is some experts' assessment of how to correct those figures over time to account for inflation.

If your wages double, but so does the price of everything you buy, you're no better off than before. To figure out what paychecks can really buy, economists adjust wages by some measure of the cost of living, usually the Consumer Price Index, or CPI. "Real" wages and incomes over many years are expressed in constant dollars of one particular year.

In September, a commission of economists, headed by Stanford University's Michael Boskin, concluded that the CPI in recent years has overstated the rise in the cost of living by about 1.5 percent per year.

That report got a lot of attention because it estimated that correcting the CPI downward by a mere 1 percent per year could save the Treasury $634 billion over the next 10 years. Savings would come from reduced cost-of-living adjustments to Social Security and other retirement programs, and smaller adjustments in tax brackets to offset inflation.

But the report's implications go far beyond the budget and directly to your pocketbook.

Say your boss gave you a 3 percent raise last year, but prices rose 2 1/2 percent, according to the government. That left you thinking you came away with only half a percent more purchasing power after inflation. (Forget taxes for the purpose of this discussion.)

Now say the government got its figures wrong and prices really climbed only 1.5 percent. In that case your buying power actually rose 1.5 percent --three times as much as you originally thought.

Over a decade, that difference would compound into sizable sums.

Changing the way we measure your real wages doesn't by itself make you better or worse off today. It won't change your paycheck, or the current price of bread or BMWs. But it can make a difference in how you perceive your economic progress and that of other Americans.

For example, if you accept the commission's 1.5 percent annual correction to the CPI, then even poorly educated and low-wage men, who appeared to have suffered huge pay losses in the 1980s, come away barely if at all scathed.
This correction also would have a big impact on the government's count of the number of people living below the official poverty line. That line, defined back in 1963, is adjusted upward each year with the CPI.

Using $15,029 as the official poverty line for a family of four last year, the government estimated that 38.1 million Americans were poor last year.

But if the Consumer Price Index has been overstated by 1.5 percent per year since 1967, the number of people living below the poverty line would really be only 15.4 million, according to the Census Bureau.

Scholars fight over the best way to define poverty. But as Daniel Weinberg, chief of the Census Bureau's Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division, said, "The question in my mind is not whether the number is totally accurate, it's whether comparisons over time are correct. If the CPI is wrong, that's critical."

These revisions to the wage and poverty picture may seem fancifully rosy, but they fit with other facts about improvements in people's material well-being: From 1970 to 1990, Americans' life expectancy rose to 75 years from 71 years, the share of households without a telephone fell to 5 percent from 13 percent, the share of households with color TVs soared to 96 percent from 34 percent, and the number of households with cable TV jumped to 55 million from 4 million.

One thing the CPI revision does not do is change statistics showing a growing income disparity between rich and poor. But instead of the usual story of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, the new story would be the rich got a lot richer while the poor held their own.

The CPI is a measure of price changes in a fixed market basket of goods and services that reflects what consumers were buying in the early 1980s. (The Bureau of Labor Statistics, which calculates the index, usually updates that basket every decade, but hasn't yet finished the latest revision.)

The Boskin Commission identified several reasons why it thought the CPI, as currently calculated, overstates the cost of living because it partly overlooks these facts:

-- As the price of some goods rises, consumers buy substitutes, like chicken instead of beef.

-- Over time, the quality of many goods increases: refrigerators use less energy, TV picture tubes become sharper -- so you get more for your money.

-- Consumers have been switching in droves from regular grocery and department stores to discount outlets.
-- New products such as VCRs and CDs expand choices available to consumers, improving their welfare even if prices of other goods don't fall.

No one disputes the eminence of the commission members. Harvard's Jorgenson, for example, is former winner of the John Bates Clark award for best American economist under the age of 40 and is an expert on measuring economic growth and productivity.

Another commissioner, Zvi Griliches, also at Harvard, is a former president of the American Economic Association and an authority on measuring quality changes in goods and services.

Their credentials haven't quieted critics, however. Katherine Abraham, commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, said that while some of its points are well taken, the Boskin Commission exaggerates some errors and makes unjustified leaps of faith.

One such leap is its assumption about the importance of quality improvements. Research on quality changes is still in its infancy, she said. Some scholars think the CPI actually overstates quality improvements in cars and health care, for example. Some new appliances may offer more features but fall apart faster.

``There's a whole, whole lot of stuff that hasn't been looked at," Abraham said. "I don't feel comfortable drawing a conclusion" about the proper adjustment to make to the CPI.