

the dismal science

Trading Up

Where do baby names come from?

By Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner

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Which is more dangerous: a gun or a swimming pool? How much does campaign spending really matter? What truly made crime fall in the 1990s? These are the sort of questions raised—and answered—in the new book [Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything](#). In [yesterday's excerpt](#), authors Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner explored the impact of a child's first name, particularly a distinctively black name. Today's excerpt shows how names work their way down the socio-economic ladder.

The [California names data](#) tell a lot of stories in addition to the one about the segregation of white and black first names. Broadly speaking, the data tell us how parents see themselves—and, more significantly, what kinds of expectations they have for their children.

The actual source of a name is usually obvious: There's the Bible, there's the huge cluster of traditional English and Germanic and Italian and French names, there are princess names and hippie names, nostalgic names and place names. Increasingly, there are brand names (Lexus, Armani, Bacardi, Timberland) and what might be called aspirational names. The California data show eight Harvards born during the 1990s (all of them black), 15 Yales (all white), and 18 Princetons (all black). There were no Doctors but three Lawyers (all black), nine Judges (eight of them white), three Senators (all white), and two Presidents (both black).

But how does a name migrate through the population, and why? Is it purely a matter of zeitgeist, or is there a more discernible pattern to these movements?

Consider the [10 most popular](#) names given to white girls in California in 1980 and then in 2000. A single holdover: Sarah. So, where do these Emilys and Emmas and Laurens all come from? Where on earth did *Madison* come from? It's easy enough to see that new names become very popular very fast—but why?

Let's take a look at the [top five girls' names](#) and [top five boys' names](#) given during the 1990s among high-income white families and low-income white families, ranked in order of their relative rarity in the opposite category. Now [compare](#) the "high-end" and "low-end" girls' names with the most popular ones overall from 1980 and 2000. Lauren and Madison, two of the most popular high-end names from the 1990s, made the overall top-10 list in 2000. Amber and Heather, meanwhile, two of the overall most popular names from 1980, are now among the low-end names.

There is a clear pattern at play: Once a name catches on among high-income, highly educated parents, it starts working its way down the socioeconomic ladder. Amber, Heather, and Stephanie started out as high-end names. For every high-end baby given those names, however, another *five* lower-income girls received those names within 10 years.

Many people assume that naming trends are driven by celebrities. But how many Madonnas do you know? Or, considering all the Brittanys, Britneys, Brittanis, Brittanies, Brittneys, and Brittnis you encounter these days, you might think of Britney Spears; but she is in fact a symptom, not a cause, of the Brittany/Britney/Brittani/Brittanie/Brittney/Brittni explosion—and hers is a name that began on the high end

and has since fallen to the low. Most families don't shop for baby names in Hollywood. They look to the family just a few blocks over, the one with the bigger house and newer car. The kind of families that were the first to call their daughters Amber or Heather, and are now calling them Alexandra or Katherine. The kind of families that used to name their sons Justin or Brandon and are now calling them Alexander or Benjamin. Parents are reluctant to poach a name from someone too near—family members or close friends—but many parents, whether they realize it or not, like the sound of names that sound "successful."

Once a high-end name is adopted en masse, however, high-end parents begin to abandon it. Eventually, it will be considered so common that even lower-end parents may not want it, whereby it falls out of the rotation entirely. The lower-end parents, meanwhile, go looking for the next name that the upper-end parents have broken in.

So, the implication is clear: The parents of all those Alexandras and Katherines, Madisons and Rachels should not expect the cachet to last much longer. Those names are just now peaking and are already on their way to overexposure. Where, then, will the new high-end names come from? Considering the traditionally strong correlation between income and education, it probably makes sense to look at the most popular current names among parents with the most years of education. [Here](#), drawn from a pair of databases that provide the years of parental education, is a sampling of such names. Some of them, as unlikely as it seems, may well become tomorrow's mainstream names. Before you scoff, ask yourself this: Do Aviva or Clementine seem any more ridiculous than Madison might have seemed 10 years ago?

Obviously, a variety of motives are at work when parents consider a name for their child. It would be an overstatement to suggest that all parents are looking—whether consciously or not—for a smart name or a high-end name. But they are all trying to signal *something* with a name, and an overwhelming number of parents are seemingly trying to signal their own expectations of how successful they hope their children will be. The name itself isn't likely to make a shred of difference. But the parents may feel better knowing that, from the very outset, they tried their best.

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Most Popular Overall White Girl Names

1980

1. Jennifer
2. Sarah
3. Melissa
4. Jessica
5. Christina
6. Amanda

2000

1. Emily
2. Hannah
3. Madison
4. Sarah
5. Samantha
6. Lauren

- | | |
|-------------|-----------|
| 7. Nicole | 7. Ashley |
| 8. Michelle | 8. Emma |
| 9. Heather | 9. Taylor |
| 10. Amber | 10. Megan |

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Most Popular High-End White Girl Names in the 1990s

1. Alexandra
2. Lauren
3. Katherine
4. Madison
5. Rachel

Most Popular Low-End White Girl Names in the 1990s

1. Amber
2. Heather
3. Kayla
4. Stephanie
5. Alyssa

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Most Popular High-End White Boy Names

1. Benjamin
2. Samuel
3. Jonathan
4. Alexander
5. Andrew

Most Popular Low-End White Boy Names

1. Cody

2. Brandon
3. Anthony
4. Justin
5. Robert

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1. Emily
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Most Popular High-End

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1. Alexandra
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4. Madison
5. Rachel

Most Popular Low-End

1990s

1. Amber
2. Heather
3. Kayla
4. Stephanie
5. Alyssa

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Most Popular Girls' Names of 2015?

Annika
 Ansley
 Ava
 Avery
 Aviva
 Clementine
 Eleanor

Ella
Emma
Fiona
Flannery
Grace
Isabel
Kate
Lara
Linden
Maeve
Marie-Claire
Maya
Philippa
Phoebe
Quinn
Sophie
Waverly

Most Popular Boys' Names of 2015?

Aidan
Aldo
Anderson
Ansel
Asher
Beckett
Bennett
Carter
Cooper
Finnegan
Harper
Jackson
Johan
Keyon
Liam
Maximilian
McGregor
Oliver
Reagan
Sander
Sumner
Will

Steven D. Levitt teaches economics at the University of Chicago and is a recipient of the John Bates Clark Medal, awarded every two years to the best American economist under 40. Stephen J. Dubner is a New York City journalist and author of two previous books: [Turbulent Souls](#) and [Confessions of a Hero-Worshiper](#).

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