A Roshanda by Any Other Name

How do babies with super-black names fare?

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 today's excerpt, the first of two, authors Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner explore the impact of a child's first name, particularly a distinctively black name. Tomorrow's excerpt shows how names work their way down the socioeconomic ladder.*

It has been well established that we live in an age of obsessive, even competitive, parenting. The typical parent is led to believe that her every move will greatly influence her child's future accomplishments. This belief expresses itself in the first official act a parent commits: giving the baby a name. Many parents seem to think that a child will not prosper unless it is hitched to the right one; names are seen to carry great aesthetic and even predictive powers.

This might explain why, in 1958, a New York City father named Robert Lane decided to call his baby son Winner. The Lanes, who lived in a housing project in Harlem, already had several children, each with a fairly typical name. But this boy—well, Robert Lane apparently had a special feeling about him. Winner Lane: How could he fail with a name like that? Three years later, the Lanes had another baby boy, their seventh and last child. For reasons that no one can quite pin down today, Robert decided to name this boy Loser. Robert wasn't unhappy about the new baby; he just seemed to get a kick out of the name's bookend effect. First a Winner, now a Loser. But if Winner Lane could hardly be expected to fail, could Loser Lane possibly succeed?

Loser Lane did in fact succeed. He went to prep school on a scholarship, graduated from Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, and joined the New York Police Department, where he made detective and, eventually, sergeant. Although he never hid his name, many people were uncomfortable using it. To his police colleagues today, he is known as Lou. And what of his brother? The most noteworthy achievement of Winner Lane, now in his late 40s, is the sheer length of his criminal record: more than 30 arrests for burglary, domestic violence, trespassing, resisting arrest, and other mayhem. These days, Loser and Winner barely speak. The father who named them is no longer alive. Though he got his boys mixed up, did he have the right idea—is naming destiny? What kind of signal does a child's name send to the world?

These are the sort of questions that led to "The Causes and Consequences of Distinctively Black Names," a research paper written by a white economist (Steven Levitt, a co-author of this article) and a black economist (Roland G. Fryer Jr., a young Harvard scholar who studies race). The paper acknowledged the social and economic gulf between blacks and whites but paid particular attention to the gulf between black and white culture. Blacks and whites watch different TV shows, for instance; they smoke different cigarettes. And black parents give their children names that are starkly different than white children's. The names research was based on an extremely large and rich data set: birth-certificate information for every child born in California since 1961. The data covered more than 16 million births. It included standard items like name, gender, race, birthweight, and the parents' marital status, as well as more telling factors: the parents' ZIP code (which indicates socioeconomic status and a neighborhood's racial composition), their means of paying the hospital bill for the birth (again, an economic indicator), and their level of education.

The California data establish just how dissimilarly black and white parents have named their children over the past 25 years or so—a remnant, it seems, of the Black Power movement. The typical baby girl born in a black neighborhood in 1970 was given a name that was twice as common among blacks than whites. By 1980, she received a name that was *20* times more common among blacks. (Boys' names moved in the same direction but less aggressively—likely because parents of all races are less adventurous with boys' names than girls'.) Today, more than 40 percent of the black girls born in California in a given year receive a name that not *one* of the roughly 100,000 baby white girls received that year. Even more remarkably, nearly 30 percent of the black girls are given a name that is unique among every baby, white and black, born that year in California. (There were also 228 babies named Unique during the 1990s alone, and one each of Uneek, Uneque, and Uneqqee; virtually all of them were black.)

What kind of parent is most likely to give a child such a distinctively black name? The data offer a clear answer: an unmarried, low-income, undereducated, teenage mother from a black neighborhood who has a distinctively black name herself. Giving a child a super-black name would seem to be a black parent's signal of solidarity with her community—the flip side of the "acting white" phenomenon. White parents, meanwhile, often send as strong a signal in the opposite direction. More than 40 percent of the white babies are given names that are at least four times more common among whites.

So, what are the "whitest" names and the "blackest" names? Click here for the top 20 each for girls and here for the top 20 each for boys. (For the curious, we've also put together a list of the top 20 crossover names—the ones that blacks and whites are most likely to share.) And how much does your name really matter? Over the years, a series of studies have tried to measure how people perceive different names. Typically, a researcher would send two identical (and fake) résumés, one with a traditionally white name and the

other with an immigrant or minority-sounding name, to potential employers. The "white" résumés have always gleaned more job interviews. Such studies are tantalizing but severely limited, since they offer no real-world follow-up or analysis beyond the résumé stunt.

The California names data, however, afford a more robust opportunity. By subjecting this data to the economist's favorite magic trick—a statistical wonder known as regression analysis—it's possible to tease out the effect of any one factor (in this case, a person's first name) on her future education, income, and health.

The data show that, on average, a person with a distinctively black name—whether it is a woman named Imani or a man named DeShawn—does have a worse life outcome than a woman named Molly or a man named Jake. *But it isn't the fault of his or her name*. If two black boys, Jake Williams and DeShawn Williams, are born in the same neighborhood and into the same familial and economic circumstances, they would likely have similar life outcomes. But the kind of parents who name their son Jake don't tend to live in the same neighborhoods or share economic circumstances with the kind of parents who name their son DeShawn. And that's why, on average, a boy named Jake will tend to earn more money and get more education than a boy named DeShawn. DeShawn's name is an indicator—but not a cause—of his life path.

The 20 Whitest Girl Names

1. Molly
2. Amy
3. Claire
4. Emily
5. Katie
6. Madeline
7. Katelyn
8. Emma
9. Abigail
10. Carly
11. Jenna
12. Heather
13. Katherine
14. Caitlin
15. Kaitlin
16. Holly
17. Allison
18. Kaitlyn
19. Hannah
20. Kathryn

The 20 Blackest Girl Names

1. Imani
2. Ebony
3. Shanice
4. Aaliyah
5. Precious
6. Nia
7. Deja
8. Diamond
9. Asia
10. Aliyah
11. Jada
12. Tierra
13. Tiara
14. Kiara
15. Jazmine
16. Jasmin
17. Jazmin
18. Jasmine

19. Alexus
20. Raven

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The 20 Whitest Boy Names

1. Jake
2. Connor
3. Tanner
4. Wyatt
5. Cody
6. Dustin
7. Luke
8. Jack
9. Scott
10. Logan
11. Cole
12. Lucas
13. Bradley
14. Jacob
15. Garrett
16. Dylan
17. Maxwell
18. Hunter
19. Brett
20. Colin

The 20 Blackest Boy Names

1. DeShawn
2. DeAndre
3. Marquis
4. Darnell
5. Terrell
6. Malik
7. Trevon
8. Tyrone
9. Willie
10. Dominique
11. Demetrius
12. Reginald
13. Jamal
14. Maurice
15. Jalen
16. Darius
17. Xavier
18. Terrance
19. Andre
20. Darryl

Most Popular Girl Crossover Names

1. Andrea
2. Whitney
3. Alicia

4. Kendra
5. Alexandria
6. Natasha
7. Tiffany
8. Brittany
9. Amber
10. Talia
11. Erika
12. Brianna
13. Ariel
14. Gabrielle
15. Veronica
16. Alana
17. Kyra
18. Ashley
19. Breanna
20. Erica

Most Popular Boy Crossover Names

1. Vincent
2. George
3. Troy
4. Christian
5. Martin
6. Corey
7. Brandon
8. Eric
9. Craig
10. Frank
11. Cameron
12. Shawn
13. Micah
14. Gregory
15. Nathaniel
16. Marc
17. Aaron
18. Dominic
19. Theodore
20. Isaac

Regression analysis is a powerful—if limited—tool that uses statistical techniques to identify otherwise elusive correlations. *Correlation* is nothing more than a statistical term that indicates whether two variables move together. It tends to be cold outside when it snows; those two factors are positively correlated. Sunshine and rain, meanwhile, are negatively correlated. Easy enough—as long as there are only a couple of variables. But with a couple *hundred* variables, things get harder. Regression analysis is the tool that enables an economist to sort out these huge piles of data. It does so by artificially holding constant every variable except the two he wishes to focus on, and then showing how those two co-vary.

In the case of a complicated data set that concerns, for instance, the test scores of 20,000 schoolchildren, it might help to think of regression analysis as performing the following task: converting each of those schoolchildren into a sort of circuit board with an identical number of switches. Each switch represents a single category of the child's data: his first-grade math score, his third-grade math score, his first-grade reading score, his third-grade reading score, his mother's education level, his father's income, the number of books in his home, the relative affluence of his neighborhood, and so on. Now a researcher is able to tease some insights from this very complicated set of data. He can line up all the children who share many characteristics—all the circuit boards that have their switches flipped the same direction—and then pinpoint the single characteristic they *don't* share. This is how he isolates the true impact of that single switch on the sprawling circuit board. This is how the effect of that switch— and, eventually, of every switch—becomes manifest. (From pages 161-162 of *Freakonomics*.)