Steve Levitt of the University of Chicago is notorious for his creative work in the field of economics, a field not often thought to explore creative social programs. Winner of the prestigious John Bates Clark Medal for an Economist under the age of 40, Levitt has made a name for himself among the staid practitioners of his field, the younger generation of his peers, and among society in general for his methodologically innovative approach to answering provocative social questions.

Brought to Ohio State by Mershon, the Department of Economics and the Criminal Justice Research Center, Levitt could have presented on a variety of topics. Corruption in sumo wrestling. The finances of drug gangs. The effectiveness of prisons for deterring or containing crime. Dishonesty and fraud in school teachers’ assessments of their students’ performances. During this talk, he discussed the causes and consequences of distinctively black names.

Extant literature, and specifically previous audits of resume research, indicates that the distinctively black names that have grown in popularity among certain segments of the African American population has a negatively causal impact on individuals with such names. Levitt disagrees.

Through the analysis of birth data from the state of California, Levitt and his co-author Roland Fryer, traced demographic data from the 1970s through the year 2000. They found that there has been a marked increase in what they called distinctly black names, those likely to be given to African American children only, resulting from the popularity of the black movement in the 1970s.

He said that there was a bit of a splintering among the black population along demographic and economic lines in terms of naming: those African Americans who live in predominantly Black communities are more likely to select distinctively Black names for their children, as are African Americans of lower socioeconomic classes.

In comparison, Hispanic communities show a similar trend along economic and community lines, although not nearly so marked. This is also true, to an even lesser extent, in White and Asian communities, where naming can be linked to social standing, but not with as great a degree of contrast as in the African American communities.

By tracing the life histories women born in the early seventies, the height of the Black Power movement in California, which Levitt said inspired an increase in the use of distinctively black names, Levitt and Fryer statistically concluded that that audit information was incorrect. Women with unique names were likely to earn less, but only a very small amount. They were likely to have only statistically slightly less education. The only significant finding was that women with unique names were more likely to give unique names to their children.