

Freakonomics Study Guide

Freakonomics by Steven Levitt

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Introduction

What trait is shared by both Ku Klux Klan members and real-estate agents? In what way do the working worlds of Chicago schoolteachers and Japanese sumo wrestlers intersect? These questions might seem puzzling at first glance, but the answers provided in *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* reveal that fundamental notions of economics can be used to interpret just about everything in modern society.

One of the authors, Steven D. Levitt, is an award-winning economist; the other, Stephen J. Dubner, is a former writer and editor for *New York Times Magazine*. The two met when Dubner was working on a profile of Levitt for the magazine. The article was a huge success, and the two men guessed that a book-length discussion of Levitt's work would prove equally popular. Indeed, *Freakonomics* reached number two on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and it was chosen as a *New York Times* Notable Book for 2005.

The book has generated an astounding amount of interest among mainstream readers, most notably for its controversial assertion that the legalization of abortion in the 1970s led to a significant drop in crime in the United States. The authors also tackle well-worn examples of conventional wisdom—for example, the notion that Head Start preschool programs lead to smarter kids or the idea that guns are a greater threat to young children than swimming pools—and use hard data to show that they are wrong. Instead of offering a book focused on a single theme, the authors say they "opted instead for a sort of treasure-hunt approach" so that they might "follow whatever freakish curiosities may occur to [them]."

Author Biography

Steven D. Levitt was born on May 29, 1967. He attended St. Paul Academy and Summit School in St. Paul, Minnesota, followed by undergraduate work at Harvard and doctoral studies at MIT, where he earned his doctorate in economics in 1994. Since then, Levitt has written numerous academic papers related to the application of economic principles in the real world. In 2003, he was chosen by the American Economic Association to receive the John Bates Clark Medal, awarded for outstanding work by an American economist under the age of forty. His research served as the basis for the best-selling book *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, which was released in 2005.

In addition to numerous articles for magazines such as the *New Yorker* and *Time*, Dubner has also written *Turbulent Souls: A Catholic Son's Return to His Jewish Family* (1998) and *Confessions of a Hero-Worshiper* (2003). He is also the author of a children's book titled *The Boy With Two Belly Buttons*. As of 2006, Dubner is working on several books, including a sequel to *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* with Levitt. He lives in New York with his wife and two children.



Plot Summary

The book *Freakonomics* is composed of a series of essays in which a journalist and an economist demonstrate how, by applying basic principles of economics, data often reveal fascinating truths about how the world works. Along the way, the authors discuss a myriad of seemingly unrelated topics, ranging from sumo wrestlers to drug dealers to baby names. The book, however, is not about any of these topics *per se*. Rather, it is "about stripping a layer or two from the surface of modern life and seeing what is happening underneath." The reader is told that the authors will use objective data to honestly assess some of these topics. Moreover, the book proposes to demonstrate the following five fundamental ideas: "incentives are the cornerstone of modern life"; "the conventional wisdom is often wrong"; "dramatic effects often have distant, even subtle, causes"; "experts use their information advantage to serve their own agendas"; and "knowing what to measure and how to measure it makes a complicated world less so."

The book begins in Chapter 1 with a general discussion of the basic concept that economics is "at root, the study of incentives: how people get what they want, or need, especially when other people want or need the same things." As the book explains, an incentive is simply a way to get people to act in a specific way, such as a way that benefits society. Moreover, even a slight tweak in an incentive can dramatically affect behaviors and results. With the proper incentives, everyone can be motivated to cheat, and two examples are given. First, the book demonstrates that the data show that high-stakes testing in schools is a strong incentive for teachers to cheat on their students' tests. Second, the data show that sumo wrestlers cheat to lose because of the incentive scheme that rules sumo wrestling. Finally, the authors note that, although there are incentives in life for people to cheat, data show that people are actually honest around 87% of the time. The highlights of Chapter 1 are that people are driven by incentives to do good or bad things; that objective data can reveal what is really going on behind seemingly complicated matters, such as high-stakes testing and sumo wrestling; and that, even when they know they will not be caught in their misdeeds, people are honest generally 87% of the time.

In Chapter 2, the authors discuss the concept known as "information asymmetry," which refers to when a person uses an information advantage to gain power to the detriment of others. As the book explains, people often gain and retain their power by hoarding information that is not available to others. For instance, the Ku Klux Klan rises to prominence in the 20th century in part because the group is very secretive. However, the book tells how a man named Stetson Kennedy infiltrates a Klan group in Atlanta, learns all of their secret rituals, handshakes, and other traditions and then gives that information to the popular radio show *Adventures of Superman*. The radio show then broadcasts many of the Klan's secrets to its many viewers around the country. Once many of the Klan's secret rituals are known, membership plummets. The authors state that experts often use their information advantage to the detriment of others. For instance, real estate agents use their expertise to sell their own houses for more than they will typically fetch for their clients. Finally, Chapter 2 argues that the information that people present to the world is often very different from what they know is true.



In Chapter 3, the book suggests that experts often have incentives to skew their data and sometimes even to deceive the public. Often, however, what an expert says will turn into the conventional wisdom. Because of this, much of the conventional wisdom is faulty. The reader is asked to consider, for instance, the belief held by many people that drug dealers make a ton of money. The authors put forward data to support the idea that most drug dealers do not make much money at all. The authors use the data from a drug dealing gang's financial records to argue that a drug dealing gang is actually structured like the typical American corporation, with a few people at the top of the corporate pyramid making a ton of money and most everyone else making very little.

In Chapter 4, the authors argue that data reveal that the primary reason for the plummeting crime rates in the United States in the 1990s is the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion. The authors argue that because of *Roe v. Wade*, babies that would have been born in the 1970s are not born at that time. These same babies are the most likely to end up being criminals, and they would hit the peak of their criminal careers by the 1990s, just as the crime rates begin to plunge. The notion of abortion as a crime-reduction tool is offered as an example of "how dramatic effects often have distant, even subtle, causes" and further demonstrates that the type of analysis used in the book is not interested in the morality of what objective data represents. In other words, *Freakonomics* is concerned with how life *is*, instead of with how life should be.

In Chapter 5, the authors discuss how data can reveal that the conventional wisdom is often wrong. For instance, the authors expound that research refutes the conventional wisdom held by most parents that what a parent *does* (like read books to his child), as opposed who a parent *is* (a highly educated person), has an effect on a child's school performance. More specifically, the data show that the following factors affect a child's school performance, either negatively or positively: the child has highly educated parents, the child's parents have high socioeconomic status, the child's mother is thirty or older at the time of her first child's birth, the child has low birth weight, the child's parents speak English in the home, the child is adopted, the child's parents are involved in the PTA and the child has many books in his or her home. The data also show that the following factors do not affect a child's school performance, either negatively or positively: the child's family is intact, the child's parents recently moved into a better neighborhood, the child's mother does not work between birth and kindergarten, the child attends Head Start, the child's parents regularly take him or her to museums, the child is regularly spanked, the child frequently watches television, and the child's parents read to him or her nearly every day.

In Chapter 6, the authors explore the topic of names and, specifically, whether a person's given name affects his or her outcome in life and why people give their babies certain names to begin with. The authors discuss the phenomenon of blacks and whites naming their babies very differently and whether having a distinctively black-sounding name affects one's life outcome. As the book presents it, the data reveal that the mere fact of having a distinctively black-sounding name such as DeShawn, as opposed to a white-sounding name such as Jake, does not cause a person to have a poor life outcome. Instead, having a name like DeShawn is merely correlated with having a



poorer life outcome than someone named Jake because the types of parents who name their children DeShawn happen to be in a lower socioeconomic class than parents who name their children Jake.

Finally, a significant portion of Chapter 6 is devoted to merely listing and comparing the most popular names in certain years given to babies of blacks and whites, high income and low income people and high education and low education people. The authors say that the data reveal that families in the highest socioeconomic groups drive the trends for baby names. A name will become popular among the richest, best-educated parents, will trickle down through the population and then will eventually go out of style entirely. *Freakonomics* ends with the observation that there is a random aspect to life that precludes researchers from predicting with certainty how a particular child will turn out.



Introduction

Introduction Summary

The Introduction begins with a discussion of how, in the 1990s, experts predict a dire and dramatic increase in crime, particularly in murder by teenagers. The predicted crime wave never happens, however, and, in fact, crime rates for all types of crimes begin to plunge all over the country. Experts credit the dramatic decrease to various factors, such as the robust 1990s economy, gun control laws and smart policing strategies. The authors argue in the Introduction, however, that the primary reason for the dramatic decrease in the crime rate is the Supreme Court's 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade*, which recognizes a woman's constitutional right to have an abortion. As the authors explain, because of *Roe v. Wade*, the types of children who are most likely to become criminals - those born into an adverse family environment - are never born. Therefore, by the mid-1990s, when those children would have been reaching the peak of their criminal careers, the crime rates begin to plunge.

The Introduction next turns to a discussion of how real estate agents and other experts use their information advantage to the detriment of others. For instance, real estate agents have very little incentive to work harder to sell a house for \$310,000 rather than for \$300,000. This is so because the agent will only net about \$150 more dollars in commissions on the extra \$10,000 that she fetches for her client. The book notes, home sales data show that real estate agents typically sell their own houses for about 10% more than the prices they get for their clients. Therefore, although most homeowners believe that their agents share their incentive to sell a house for as much as possible, the data show that this is simply not the case.

The Introduction next turns to a discussion of campaign money and how the data reveal that the conventional wisdom that money wins elections is simply not true. As the book details, one can determine whether money wins elections by examining the results of two separate elections in which the same two candidates, Candidate A and Candidate B, run against each other. If Candidate A raises more money in one election and wins that election but loses the election in which he raises less money, it will seem that spending more money *does* win elections. The data show, however, the amount of money spent on an election makes very little difference in the outcome. For instance, a winning candidate can spend half the amount of money and only lose 1% of the vote. On the other hand, a losing candidate who spends twice as much only raises his chance of winning by the same 1%. Thus, the authors argue that it does not matter how much a candidate *spends*. Rather, what matters is who the candidate *is*, and no amount of money can win an election for the politician who is simply less appealing to voters.

The Introduction ends with the explanation that *Freakonomics* is not about campaign spending, unscrupulous real-estate agents or how legalized abortion reduces crime. Instead, it is about using objective data, without regard to the morality of a particular issue, with the goal of "stripping a layer or two from the surface of modern life and



seeing what is happening underneath." The authors say that the topics discussed in the book will demonstrate the following five fundamental ideas: "incentives are the cornerstone of modern life"; "the conventional wisdom is often wrong"; "dramatic effects often have distant, even subtle, causes"; "experts use their information advantage to serve their own agendas"; and "knowing what to measure and how to measure it makes a complicated world less so."

Introduction Analysis

The Introduction to *Freakonomics* begins by throwing out some seemingly random trivia and darting from one subject to another - from the crime rate in the 1990s, to real estate agents' commissions, to campaign spending. Initially, this random approach leaves the reader to wonder what the book is all about. Not to leave the reader in despair, the authors explain at the end of the Introduction that the book is not going to be about any of these topics *per se*, but that, instead, it will attempt to demonstrate at least five basic principles that are tied to economics. By beginning with the intriguing anecdotes about the crime rate plunging in the 1990s, and therefore hinting that this book is about offering answers to intriguing social issues, the Introduction draws the reader in. The reader senses immediately that this will be a book about perhaps the most intriguing subject of all, human nature.

The book proposes some cause-and-effect relationships that may seem counterintuitive, and others that will generate strong emotional reactions in some people. Many people will not want to consider the idea that legalizing abortion may reduce crime rates. In each of these issues, the authors support their ideas with data, and as readers, we can consider the validity of the authors' analyses. Are there other factors at work, factors that work with or separately from the data presented? Is there a cause-and-effect relationship here or simply a correlation? However, in evaluating the authors' hypotheses, it is important to ask ourselves: do we truly question the data the authors present because of a perceived flaw, or are we questioning it because we do not *want* to believe it? As readers, it is important to critically review the authors' points, but it is also important to critically review our own, sometimes emotional, reaction to the data.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

In Chapter 1, *Freakonomics* demonstrates how incentives affect human behavior. As the book explains, economics is the study of incentives, which are ways to get people to do good rather than bad things. There are three different types of incentives - economic, social and moral. The book states that economists love to manipulate incentives to try to affect human behavior, but sometimes an incentive will have unintended consequences. As an example, the authors first cite a study of daycare centers in Haifa, Israel, in which a \$3 fine is assessed to parents who pick their children up late from the centers. After the fine is introduced, the number of late pick-ups immediately goes up. The researchers find that the \$3 fine turns out to be a poor incentive for parents to pick their children up on time because the fine is too low. Furthermore, the fine takes away the parents' guilt over showing up late, so it actually acts as an incentive for the parents not to pick their children up on time. As another example of how economists use incentives, the authors cite a 1970s study in which researchers want to figure out what motivates people to give blood donations. They offer the donors a small stipend for giving blood. The researchers find that people actually donate less blood when they are paid for it than when they simply receive praise. Thus, the study teaches that the incentive behind giving blood donations is altruism rather than monetary gain.

Next, the book presents a discussion of cheating and how, with the proper incentives, everyone can be motivated to cheat. For instance, the authors argue that high-stakes testing in schools is a strong incentive for teachers to cheat on their students' tests and that data taken from the Chicago Public School system reveals that teachers in fact do cheat because of this incentive. The book notes that, with high-stakes testing, teachers may either be rewarded (with bonuses, raises, etc.) or punished (demoted, fired, refused pay raises, etc.) based on their students' test scores. Teachers also have a strong incentive to cheat because there is little likelihood they will be caught. Before the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, which implements high-stakes testing nationwide, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) already implements high-stakes testing in 1996. The CPS policy mandates that each third, sixth and eighth grade student is required to obtain a minimum score on a standardized, multiple-choice exam. Under this policy, a school with low reading scores is put on probation and faces closure.

To test whether teachers are cheating, the CPS makes available to researchers the test answers for all CPS students from third through seventh grade from 1993 to 2000. The researchers then create an algorithm to show what a cheating teacher's classroom might look like. For instance, the researchers look for unusual answer patterns, such as blocks of identical answers in a single classroom, particularly among the harder questions. The researchers also look for strange patterns in the answers of individual students, such as a student who answers hard questions correctly while answering easy questions incorrectly. Finally, the researchers use the algorithm to detect the classrooms



where, over the three-year period, students' scores are low the first year, go way up the second year (the cheating year) and then go way back down the third year.

Freakonomics discusses the answer strings from students in two sixth grade classrooms who take the same math test. The answer strings in one of the classrooms reveals suspicious patterns. For instance, in one classroom, there is a pattern of identical answer strings in many of the students' answers. These identical answer strings indicate that a teacher has erased students' answers and replaced them with a string of correct answers. The results also show that with this one classroom, the students perform very poorly the year before the suspicious patterns showed up, and their scores drop significantly the year after the suspicious patterns. In the classroom where there are no suspicious patterns in the algorithm, the students' grades are also poor. Those students' grades are, however, *consistently* poor throughout the three years, indicating no cheating.

The CPS study ultimately reveals evidence of teacher cheating in about 5% of all classrooms per year. This blatant form of cheating does *not* include the more subtle types of cheating that data could not reveal. Cheating in one form or another is probably higher than 5%. The CPS study also reveals that the average cheating teachers are equally likely to be male or female, are younger, are not as qualified as the average teacher and are in the lowest-scoring classes. On the positive side, the study also finds some good, non-cheating teachers who have helped their students improve their scores. As a result of the CPS study, Arne Duncan, the then CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, decides to readminister tests in classes with suspected cheating as well as in those classes with teachers who are not suspected of cheating. The results affirm that some teachers have been cheating on their students' tests, and the system ends up firing 12 of the teachers. Finally, the study and the subsequent firing of the 12 teachers apparently gives the other teachers an incentive not to cheat. The next year, cheating among teachers is down by more than 30%.

Freakonomics then turns to a discussion of cheating and sports. As the authors explain, sports is rife with cheating because cheating is most common in the face of clear incentives, such as winning or losing. The authors then argue that the data reveal that sumo wrestlers cheat to lose because of the incentive scheme that rules sumo wrestling. In the study of sumo wrestling and cheating, the data are the results from almost every official sumo match among the top-ranking Japanese sumo wrestlers between January 1989 and January 2000, which amounts to 32,000 bouts fought by 281 wrestlers. The book notes, a sumo wrestler's ranking affects every aspect of his life, including how much money he earns, the size of his personal entourage and how much he eats and sleeps. For instance, the 66 highest-ranking Japanese wrestlers are considered the sumo elite, and a wrestler at the top of this elite group might make millions of dollars and enjoy great prestige. The top forty wrestlers bring in a minimum of \$170,000 a year. However, the wrestler who is ranked seventieth makes a mere \$15,000 a year. Furthermore, low-ranked wrestlers must provide personal services to their superiors.



Freakonomics next explains the structure of sumo wrestling tournaments, noting that elite tournaments are held six times a year. Each wrestler fights in 15 bouts each tournament, one each day for 15 straight days. If a wrestler finishes the tournament with a winning record (8 or more wins), then his ranking will go up. If, however, he finishes the tournament with a losing record (7 wins or less), his ranking will go down. Therefore, a wrestler who enters the last bout of the tournament with a 7-7 record has a great deal more to lose than one who enters a bout with an 8-6 record, since the latter wrestler has already secured his rise in the rankings. As the authors explain, the data reveal that sumo wrestlers with an 8-6 record will throw a bout so another wrestler with a 7-7 record can win the last bout. In other words, sumo wrestlers cheat to lose under these conditions. The authors note that a wrestler with a 7-7 record has a *predicted* 48% chance of winning a bout against a wrestler with an 8-6 record. The data reveal, however, that the *actual* winning percentage is 79.6%. Other factors also point to cheating. For instance, when the 7-7 wrestlers and the 8-6 wrestlers meet for the next bout, when neither of them has a 7-7 record (and doesn't need the win), the winning percentage is no longer 79.6%. In that case, the wrestlers with the 7-7 record win only 40% of the rematches. It appears that the wrestlers make quid pro quo agreements with each other to let each other win bouts that are crucial to ranking. Finally, whenever public allegations of cheating surface, immediately afterwards the 7-7 wrestlers win less than the usual 79.6% of the matches against their 8-6 competitors. This is a final indication of cheating in sumo wrestling.

Next, the authors raise the question of whether people are generally inherently honest or dishonest. The authors suggest that the answer to this question can be found in an experiment conducted by a man named Paul Feldman. Feldman runs a business selling bagels in which he delivers bagels to offices and leaves a box for people to pay for the bagels they eat. Feldman keeps strict records of his sales, and Feldman's data reveals that his customers pay for their bagels around 87% of the time. Feldman's data also show that on holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, when stress levels tend to be higher, people are less honest. People are also less honest on bad weather days, according to this information. Finally, Feldman's data reveals that executives of the companies cheat more than the rank-and-file employees. Although Feldman theorizes that this perhaps demonstrates that the executives have a sense of entitlement, the *Freakonomics* authors suggest, alternatively, that perhaps executives cheat their way to the top.

Chapter 1 ends with a discussion of two opposing views of human nature. The first is that held by Socrates and economist Adam Smith, who both believe that people are generally good even without enforcement. The latter view holds that people will commit all sorts of evil as long as they know they will not get caught. In describing this latter view, the authors tell the story of "The Ring of Gyges." Gyges is a shepherd who finds a ring that makes him invisible. Without anyone witnessing his behavior, Gyges goes on to do horrible things, such as seducing a queen and murdering a king. The tale of The Ring of Gyges raises a moral question - can anyone resist evil if they know that no one will find out? As the authors note, after conducting his bagel experiment, Feldman "sides with Socrates and Adam Smith - for he knows that the answer, at least 87 percent of the time, is yes."



Chapter 1 Analysis

In Chapter 1, the reader is told that economics is "at root, the study of incentives: how people get what they want, or need, especially when other people want or need the same things." The authors further explain to the reader how tweaking an incentive, even slightly, can greatly affect the results. Finally, the authors offer high-stakes testing and sumo wrestling tournaments as two examples of activities that are structured in such a way that the unintended consequence is that there is a built-in incentive to cheat. The intent of Chapter 1 is to teach the layperson a basic premise of economics by using evidence of how certain incentives affect human behavior. Chapter 1 also contains a sidebar on human nature itself by presenting to the reader the two opposing theories of human nature. One states that people are basically good and usually honest (as shown by the Feldman bagel experiment), and the other states that people are basically bad and will do whatever they can get away with (as shown by the Ring of Gyges story). Through this highly controversial question, the authors attempt to show that economic data can tell us about the nature of mankind. The Feldman bagel experiment is a measure of honesty only under specific conditions. Would people be more or less honest if the bagels were for charity? Would they be more or less honest if the bagels were from a big corporation? What if their reward was much higher than the cost of a bagel?



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

In Chapter 2, the authors discuss the economic term known as "information asymmetry." As the book explains, the term information asymmetry refers to when a person uses his information advantage to gain power to the detriment of others. The discussion of information asymmetry begins with a brief history of the Ku Klux Klan. According to the authors, much of the Klan's power in the 1940s lies in the fact that it maintains so much secrecy in everything it does. After World War II, a man named Stetson Kennedy leads to the Klan's ultimate downfall by exposing many of its secrets. Kennedy infiltrates the Klan by becoming a member of a Klan group in Atlanta, where he learns all of the group's secret rituals, names and handshakes, as well as its hierarchy. Kennedy contacts the producers of the then-popular radio show *Adventures of Superman* and convinces them to create some episodes about Superman going after the Klan. For the episodes, Kennedy gives them the Klan's secret information, and this secret information is broadcast nightly into homes across America. Once the Klan's secrets are revealed to the public, membership plummets. The authors note, Kennedy's acts turn the Klan's highly valued secrecy into fodder for the nation's mockery.

The book suggests that the Klan's strength is derived less from the *actual* violence it propagates than from the *threat* of violence. Indeed, the number of nationwide lynchings actually go down during the Klan's peak years. Records show that there are more lynchings of blacks between 1900 and 1909, when the Klan is dormant, than during the 1920s when membership is in the millions. Furthermore, contrary to what most people believe today, lynchings at the time are in fact extremely rare in comparison to the size of the black population. The authors argue that the low number of actual lynchings demonstrates that the mere threat of lynchings is enough to keep blacks terrified. Thus, blacks are driven by a strong incentive not to rebel against the white establishment and that incentive is the threat of random violence and even death.

In discussing the effects of information asymmetry, *Freakonomics* next turns to a discussion of how the Internet has served as a great leveler in information asymmetry. For instance, sometime after 1996, customers start paying \$1 billion less for term life insurance. The reason is a Web site called Quotesmith.com, which posts the different rates being charged for term life insurance. Once customers have access to information - that is, the comparable rates for life insurance - the insurance companies that had been overcharging are forced to cut their rates. *Freakonomics* cites changes in the funeral casket business as another example of how the Internet has helped reduce information asymmetry. Whereas in the past, grieving customers could be talked into buying an outrageously expensive funeral casket by an overzealous funeral director, the Internet suddenly gives the grieving families a way to look up prices for caskets so they can see when they were being duped. Finally, the authors note that the Internet has not completely eroded information symmetry, as demonstrated by the recent financial scandals at Enron and other companies.



The book goes on to say that experts often use their information advantage to the consumers' detriment by playing upon a strong human instinct: fear. For instance, real estate agents play upon two specific fears of their clients: the clients' fear that they will sell their house at too low of a price and the fear that they will not sell their house at all because the asking price is too high. Real estate agents use these fears to their advantage. For instance, as the Introduction notes, a real estate agent's monetary incentive to sell a house for \$310,000 instead of \$300,000 amounts to only \$150. Thus, in the interest of pushing a deal through quickly so he or she can move on to other homes and other clients, the agent has an incentive to get the homeowner to sell for less than he or she would like, while at the same time signaling to potential buyers that they should bid low. The authors explain that agents use certain code words in their listings that signal buyers to bid low. *Freakonomics* finally explains that information asymmetry is not limited to real estate agents and funeral directors. Indeed, as the authors state, we all use information asymmetry to our advantage. The reader is asked to consider, for instance, how a person present himself or herself during a job interview, as opposed to how that same person presents himself or herself on a first date.

Freakonomics next turns to a discussion of the popular television game show *The Weakest Link* and results from online dating profiles to demonstrate how discrimination can be detected on a game show and how the difference between the information that people present to the world as true and the information that they know is true is often very different. The game show *The Weakest Link* is generally set up so that contestants will try to get rid of the worst players in the beginning of the game and the best players towards the end of the game. Researchers study the elimination of contestants at the beginning of the game to see whether certain contestants are being discriminated against. The data show that women and blacks (two groups historically subject to discrimination) are *not* discriminated against, which reveals either that there is no discrimination, or that the contestants are acutely aware of the possible *appearance* of discrimination. The data reveal that two groups *are* discriminated against - the elderly and Hispanics. The book suggests that elderly contestants on *The Weakest Link* suffer from "taste-based" discrimination, in which one person discriminates against a group simply because he or she does not want to associate with the other type of person. Hispanics, on the other hand, suffer from "information-based" discrimination, in which one person believes that the other person has inferior information.

Next follows a discussion of Internet dating to show how people often say one thing and do another, particularly with regard to their discriminatory attitudes. The authors begin with a general discussion of the myriad false claims made by Internet daters. First, a study of statements made by Internet daters reveals, among other things, that Internet daters are "a lot richer, taller, skinnier, and better-looking than average." The authors further note that the data also reveal that people who post photos of themselves receive far more e-mails than those with no photo. For instance, a man who does not post a photo receives one quarter the number of e-mails of a man who does post a photo. Women who do not post their photos get one-sixth the response of those who do post photos.



The authors also note that the data are consistent with many of the stereotypes for men and women. For instance, men who emphasize finding a lasting relationship get more responses than men who seek casual relationships, while the opposite is true for the women. Also, women respond more positively to men who make the most money. On the other hand, men's responses to women's income levels reveal a bell-shaped curve. Men don't want to date women who earn very little, but once a woman's income reaches a certain high level, men are scared off. Men want their women to be students, artists, musicians, veterinarians and celebrities, whereas women prefer military men, policemen and firemen. Women don't like to date short men, although they don't mind if men are slightly overweight. On the other hand, for a woman being overweight is a definite deal breaker. Men, of course, prefer blondes. Finally, when it comes to online daters' attitudes about dating someone outside their race, what online daters say and do are two very different things. For instance, about 50% of the white women and 80% of the white men state in their online profiles that race does not matter to them. The same white men, however, send 90% of their e-mail queries to white women, and the white women send 97% of their e-mail queries to white men. *Freakonomics* concludes from this data about online dating that "[t]he gulf between the information we publicly proclaim and the information we know to be true is often vast."

Chapter 2 Analysis

In Chapter 2, *Freakonomics* conveys the idea that information is power and that people often hoard information to hold onto this power. The authors discuss how people often take advantage of the imbalance of information, referred to as "information asymmetry." As the authors explain, however, the Internet has had a flattening effect on the information supply. The authors give the specific examples of the funeral and term life insurance businesses. Finally, through presenting objective data, the book argues that what people often present to the world as true is different from what people in fact know to be true. Thus, it appears that the objective data reveal that in civilized society it is necessary, or at least people *believe* it is necessary, to participate in some form of deception in order to manage one's place in the world.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

In Chapter 3, *Freakonomics* tackles the subject of conventional wisdom and, in providing information from a study about drug dealers, argues that often the conventional wisdom is simply not true. The chapter begins by discussing the concept of conventional wisdom itself, noting that the phrase "conventional wisdom" is first coined by economist John Kenneth Galbraith, who observes that the conventional wisdom "must be simple, convenient, comfortable, and comforting - though not necessarily true." The authors point out that experts often work with journalists to form the conventional wisdom, and very often experts will skew data, and even lie, to serve their own agendas. For instance, in the 1990s, homeless advocate Mitch Snyder testifies before Congress that there are 3 million homeless people in America. The problem with this statistic is that it means that one out of every 100 Americans is homeless, which seemed a bit high. Snyder eventually admits that he has fabricated the 3 million homeless figure. As another example of how experts skew data to serve their own agendas, women's advocates often claim that 1 in 3 women has either been the victim of rape or attempted rape, whereas the figure is actually about 1 in 8 women. As the last example, *Freakonomics* points to the fact that in the early 1990s, when Atlanta is a contender for the 1996 Olympics, Atlanta police intentionally underreport crime so that Atlanta will appear safer. At the same time, however, other cities in the 1990s are touting their high crime levels so they can receive more funding to fight the nascent crack cocaine scourge. Police departments often get the money they request because they emphasize the drug dealers' endless supply of cash, perpetuating the image of the millionaire crack dealer.

The authors ask, where does this image of the millionaire crack dealer come from, and is it actually true that crack dealers make a ton of money? They then ask: if drug dealers make so much money, why are so many of them still living with their mothers? To find out the answer, the authors look to the economics of drug dealing. *Freakonomics* points to data obtained by Sudhir Venkatesh, a University of Chicago graduate student who spends years studying an inner-city drug gang in Chicago. During Venkatesh's stint with the gang, one of the members gives him access to the gang's financial books, which reveal that the conventional wisdom about drug dealers making a ton of money is simply not true. In fact, a drug operation is actually set up very much like an American corporation, and specifically like McDonalds.

A few people at the top of the corporate pyramid make lots of money, while most everyone else makes much less. As *Freakonomics* explains, the gang that Venkatesh studies operates like a franchise, and the leader of the franchise, J.T., reports to a group of 20 men called the board of directors. In exchange for his right to sell crack in a designated area, J.T. pays the board almost 20% of his revenue. Three officers report to J.T. directly, and below the officers are street level salesmen who are known as foot soldiers. At any given time, J.T. may have from 25 to 75 foot soldiers on his payroll.



Beneath the foot soldiers are about 200 men who are not even employees and who are referred to as "rank and file." The gang's financial records reveal that the hundred or so leaders on J.T.'s level make as much as \$100,000 a year, and the 20 or so top leaders could make as much as \$500,000. Thus, 120 men on the top of the gang's pyramid made a lot of money, but the pyramid is huge. For instance, about 5,300 other men work for those 120 bosses, and there are another 20,000 unpaid rank-and-file members. J.T.'s three officers each make about \$7 an hour, whereas the foot soldiers make only about \$3.30 an hour. The data reveal, therefore, that most drug dealers do not make a ton of money. In fact, most drug dealers do not make much money at all.

Having determined that most drug dealers in fact do not make much money at all, the authors ask the next logical question: if most drug dealers make below the minimum wage in a job where their lives are constantly in danger, why do they do it at all? They answer that, like acting and other competitive fields, drug dealing is a "glamour profession," in which people are often willing to get paid a small wage because they are essentially participating in a "tournament." A person must start at the bottom of the profession to have a chance at the top. As a glamour profession, drug dealing is appealing because of the hope that one day the foot soldier will become one of the bosses who is making \$500,000 a year. This phenomenon is tied back to the idea of incentives. In other words, "[o]n the south side of Chicago, people wanting to sell crack vastly outnumbered the available street corners."

Chapter 3 ends with a discussion of how and why the crack cocaine business explodes in the 1980s and how that leads to a crime surge. The effect of crack cocaine is first analogized to nylon stockings. Nylon stockings are invented in 1939. As opposed to the earlier silk stockings that are fragile, costly and hard to find, nylon stockings are very affordable, incredibly appealing and almost addictive. Similarly, cocaine is a commodity that is available at one time to only a few, but, like nylon stockings, it suddenly becomes freely available to the masses in the form of crack cocaine. A Nicaraguan named Oscar Blandon leads a massive crack boom and changes American history by creating a link between the Colombian drug cartels and inner-city crack merchants. Crack cocaine creates a way for street gangs to make money for the first time, which causes more crime, and within a five-year period the homicide rate among young urban blacks quadruples. The violence of the crack cocaine wave coincides with a general increase in crime in America, and by the 1990s experts are predicting that crime will surge even more. The crime surge, however, never happens. In fact, crime begins to decrease nationwide. At the end of the chapter, the question is posed: why does the crime rate fall?

Chapter 3 Analysis

In Chapter 3, the authors discuss how data can reveal that the conventional wisdom is often not true. The authors use as an example research by a University of Chicago student that refutes the conventional wisdom that drug dealers make a lot of money. The research reveals that, in fact, most drug dealers make very little money. However, the reader should remember that this is a study of one type of drug dealer (specifically



cocaine) operating in one city. Do other drug organizations operate differently, in other area, selling other drugs?

The authors also discuss how experts will often skew data to serve their own agendas, and this can sometimes result in faulty conventional wisdom. The story about drug dealers, and specifically the Chicago crack cocaine gang, is particularly fascinating, but Chapter 3 most significantly teaches the reader to be more skeptical of what experts say and to question conventional wisdom.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

In Chapter 4, the authors argue that data reveal that the primary reason for the plummeting crime rates in the United States in the 1990s is the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision generally legalizing abortion. The authors argue that because of *Roe v. Wade*, babies that would have been born are not being born in the 1970s. These same babies are the most likely to end up being criminals, and they would have hit the peak of their criminal careers by the 1990s, just as the crime rates begin to plunge. Chapter 4 begins with a discussion of how, in the 1960s, the Communist Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceauzescu bans almost all abortions in that country. The result of the abortion ban is that the children born during that time lead wretched lives. The children born during the abortion ban do much worse than children born before the ban, when Romania has one of the most liberal abortion policies. For instance, the children born during the abortion ban have lower test scores, less success with employment and are more likely to become criminals. The authors argue that the story of the abortion ban in Romania is relevant to the story of the dramatic decrease in crime in America in the 1990s because it is the opposite image of American crime in the 1990s.

When the crime rates for all crimes begin falling dramatically in the early 1990s, many crime experts are stunned. They have predicted just the opposite, that America is going to be hit in the 1990s with a violent and horrifying crime wave. When the crime rates go down, those same experts rush in to explain that the decrease in crime is due to, among other things, smart policing tactics, increased use of prisons, changes in crack and other drug markets, the aging of the population, tougher gun control laws, a stronger economy and more police. *Freakonomics* argues that most of these factors do not lower crime at all during the 1990s, and much of Chapter 4 is devoted to refuting these factors.

First, the authors argue that the strong 1990s economy does not affect criminal behavior in any significant way. They say that a change in the economy tends to affect financially motivated crimes as opposed to violent crimes. The authors further assert that the data show that the increased reliance on prisons in the 1990s accounts for roughly one-third of the drop in crime. The authors next address the increased use of capital punishment as an often-cited reason for the drop in crime. Between the 1980s and the 1990s, the number of executions in the United States quadruples. Some experts, therefore, attribute the drop in the crime rate to capital punishment. The authors argue, however, that this theory leaves out two important facts. First, since executions are carried out so rarely and the process from conviction to execution takes so long, the threat of capital punishment cannot be a true deterrent to crime. Second, the authors cite a study which tends to show that the small number of executions in any given year actually prevents a relatively small number of homicides. Based on these figures, the book suggests that, at best, capital punishment explains only 1/25th of the



drop in the homicides. The authors add that since the death penalty is rarely imposed for crimes other than homicides, its deterrent effect does not account for a decline in other crimes. The authors conclude that capital punishment's effect on crime rates is infinitesimal at best.

The authors next address smart policing tactics and an increased number of police as possible reasons for the drop in the crime rate. First, to show causality between an increased number of police and less crime, research has to find a scenario in which more police are hired for reasons completely unrelated to rising crime. Politicians often create this situation by hiring more police to secure the public safety vote even when there is no increase in crime. To measure the effect of increased police on the crime rate, one could compare the crime rate in one set of cities just after an election (when more police have just been hired) with a set of cities that has no election (when no more additional police have been hired). This comparison shows that hiring more police does lower the crime rate substantially, and the increased number of police officers serves the dual purposes of deterring criminals and leading to more arrests. In sum, the authors argue that hiring additional police accounts for about 10% of the drop in the 1990s crime rate.

The authors next address smarter policing tactics as an explanation for the reduction in crime, beginning with a discussion of New York City and the policing strategies implemented in the 1990s by its former mayor Rudolph Giuliani and his police commissioner, William Bratton. Bratton comes up with bold new ideas for the police force. The most notable of these is the "broken window theory," which asserts that if minor nuisances are not fixed, they will lead to major nuisances. In implementing this broken window theory, officers start to police minor offenses such as aggressive panhandling and public urination. New Yorkers readily embrace this new concept as a means to combat major crimes, and when in the 1990s homicide rates in New York fall dramatically, many people attribute the drop in crime to these new tactics.

The authors go on to argue, however, that the smarter policing tactics in New York City most likely do not cause the sharp decrease in the crime rate. First, Giuliani is not elected mayor and does not appoint Bratton until 1994, and the crime rates have already started falling several years before that. Significantly, the policing strategies are being implemented alongside a substantial hiring of new officers. The fact that there are simply more police is most likely the reason for the reduced crime rate, rather than the smarter policing tactics. The authors add that the most significant evidence that New York's smarter policing tactics do not reduce the crime rate is the obvious fact that the crime rate plummets *everywhere* in the country during the 1990s, including in the cities and towns where those tactics are *not* implemented.

The authors next consider two additional possible explanations for the reduction in crime in the 1990s: tougher gun laws and changes in the crack cocaine and other drug markets. First, the authors argue that gun initiatives such as the Brady Act, which requires a criminal check and a waiting period before a gun may be purchased, are ineffective in lowering the crime rate because criminals are not likely to submit themselves to the criminal check and waiting period when they can simply buy a gun



illegally. They also argue that similar gun initiatives implemented on the state and local levels, including gun buyback programs, have done nothing to reduce the crime rate. The authors note that one deterrent that *has* been effective is stiffer penalties for possessing an illegal gun. The authors next consider the opposite argument, that if there were *more* guns, there would be less crime. This argument is primarily espoused by economist John R. Lott, Jr., in his book *More Guns, Less Crime*. Lott argues that violent crime has decreased in areas where there are concealed weapons laws. The authors note that Lott is a controversial figure and is suspected of falsifying his data. Other scholars who have applied Lott's research techniques have found that right-to-carry laws simply do not bring down crime.

The end of the crack cocaine boom is also offered as an explanation for the drop in crime rates. The authors explain that the violence associated with crack begins to wane in 1991. Although the crack problem does not go away, the huge profits for selling cocaine begin to wane because crack has increasingly gotten cheaper and cheaper. As a result of the bursting of the crack bubble, the violence abates, and the authors conclude that the crash of the crack cocaine market causes about a 15% drop in the crime rate in the 1990s. However, the authors say that crack is to blame for *more* than 15% of the crime *increase* in the 1990s. Finally, the authors quickly discredit the aging population as a possible explanation for the drop in the crime rate, arguing that demographic change is too slow and subtle to be a possible reason for any sudden drop in crime.

The authors argue that although some of the above-discussed factors do contribute to the reduction in the crime rate, none of those factors is the primary reason for the decrease. Instead, the authors argue that the primary reason for the decrease in crime in the 1990s is legalized abortion. Whereas at one time it had been legal to have an abortion up to a certain number of months in pregnancy, by 1900 abortion is illegal throughout the country. By the late 1960s, some states allow abortion under a few narrow circumstances, such as in the cases of rape, incest or risk of harm to the mother. By 1970, New York, California, Washington, Alaska and Hawaii have made all abortions legal. Then, on January 22, 1973, the United States Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* finds a constitutional right to privacy, which encompasses a woman's general right to have an abortion. In the first year after *Roe v. Wade*, 750,000 women have abortions in the United States, and by 1980, there are 1.6 million abortions.

Before *Roe v. Wade*, the females most likely to obtain abortions comes from middle or upper-class families who can afford a very expensive, but safe, illegal abortion. Thus, the females the most likely to be affected by *Roe v. Wade* are poor, single teenagers, who cannot afford the more expensive but safe abortions. Given that the two primary indicators for future criminal behavior are poverty and growing up in a single-parent home, the babies not being born after *Roe v. Wade* are those that are most likely to become criminals. These babies that are not being born in the shadow of *Roe v. Wade* would have hit their late teens by the 1990s, which would have coincided with the peak of their criminal careers.



The authors go on to refute the argument that abortion and crime are merely correlated but do not share a causal relationship. First, the authors state, the crime rates in the five states (New York, California, Washington, Alaska and Hawaii) where abortion is made completely legal before *Roe v. Wade* begin going down before all other states and the District of Columbia. Additionally, the states that have the most abortions in the 1970s also see the greatest drops in crime in the 1990s. Conversely, the states with the fewest abortions experience the *lowest* drop in the crime rates. The authors say that there is no causal relationship between a state's abortion rate and its crime rate *before* the 1980s. Finally, the authors cite several additional factors as other indications that legalized abortion is the primary reason for the drop in the crime rate. In states with more abortions, the drop in crime is among the age group that would have been affected by *Roe v. Wade* rather than among older criminals. Studies in Australia and Canada have shown a similar causal relationship between abortion rates and crime. Finally, the generation affected by *Roe v. Wade* is not only missing the thousands of young male criminals, but it is also missing thousands of unwed teenage mothers, who also would have been born if not for *Roe v. Wade*.

In arguing that legalized abortion makes the crime rate go down, the authors are careful to point out that they are not making any moral judgments in coming to that conclusion. They acknowledge that their theory is likely to be repugnant to some people. (Indeed, this theory has recently created a firestorm of debate. In September 2005, conservative thinker and author of *The Book of Virtues* William Bennett comes under intense scrutiny when, in a discussion of the abortion/crime reduction theory in *Freakonomics*, he states that if all black babies were aborted the crime rate would fall. He simultaneously denounces such thinking as "morally reprehensible," but many people still criticize his statement as racist.) Furthermore, the authors use statistics to show that in strict economic terms the use of abortion as a crime-reducing tool is very inefficient. The authors conclude Chapter 4 by stating that the link between the abortion rate and crime does *at least* show that when women have the right to make the decision whether to have an abortion, more often than not they calculate accurately whether they can raise the baby well. Moreover, if a woman decides that she cannot raise the baby well, she will usually have an abortion.

Chapter 4 Analysis

In Chapter 4, the authors present the controversial theory that the crime rate in America plummets in the 1990s because of the Supreme Court's 1973 decision of *Roe v. Wade* legalizing abortion. In asserting this argument, the authors systematically and persuasively refute the other reasons that are often cited as the reasons for the plummeting crime rate. Of all of the chapters in *Freakonomics*, Chapter 4 is perhaps the most notable, and the most controversial, because of its argument that legalized abortion has led to less crime. Regardless of how the reader feels about abortion, the arguments set forth by the authors are persuasive and thought-provoking. Like the research cited by the authors in all of the other chapters, however, the reader must take at face value the authors' assertions regarding studies cited to support their argument.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

In Chapter 5, the authors argue that research refutes the conventional wisdom held by most parents that what a parent *does* makes a difference in whether a child succeeds. The chapter begins with a discussion of the recent proliferation of parenting experts who have presented conflicting opinions on good parenting. *Freakonomics* explains that, despite their contradictory advice, the experts all appear extremely confident that their position is correct. In fact, they must project this confidence because an expert who seems to doubt his own theories will get less attention. The authors note that experts thrive on people's fear of what might happen if the experts' advice is not heeded. Since fear is the driving force for parents, parents are particularly susceptible to expert advice, even if it is bunk. Thus, much of the conventional wisdom of parents is flawed. For instance, most parents are more afraid of letting their children play in a house with a gun in it than at a house that has a swimming pool. However, swimming pools are by far more statistically dangerous than guns.

Indeed, the authors note that people are generally very poor risk assessors. For instance, most people are much more afraid of mad cow disease than they are afraid of food-borne pathogens in the average kitchen, although food-borne pathogens are a much more common threat than mad cow disease. Risk communications consultant Peter Sandman has reduced risk analysis to the following equation: Risk = hazard + outrage. Sandman theorizes that the risks that a person controls are much less a source of outrage than those out of a person's control, which may explain why most people are afraid of flying but not driving. That is, most people are less afraid to drive a car since they believe that they can control whether they crash, whereas when they fly they are at the mercy of many external factors. The authors also point to what Sandman refers to as the "dread factor," which affects whether something is scary to people. For instance, death by a terrorist attack or mad cow disease is for some reason scarier to most people than death by heart disease. Fear is the strongest when the danger is thought to be imminent, which explains why Congress will always be able to get more funding to combat terrorism than heart disease. The authors further suggest that perhaps the familiarity of a certain danger, such as a swimming pool, lessens the outrage. Finally, parents often take extreme precautions for dangers that are much less risky than swimming pools, and these precautions often coincide with new products being marketed, such as flame-resistant child pajamas.

The authors next turn to a discussion of whether and to what extent parents have an impact on the outcomes of their children's lives and whether there is a way to measure the impact with objective data. The first problem is figuring out exactly which factors should be measured. For instance, one could measure the child's personality, morality, his grades, his creative skills, his income as an adult and other factors. It is also difficult to figure out how to assign weight to the many factors that affect a child's outcome, such as hereditary factors, home environment, his parents' income level and schooling. The



reader is asked to consider, for instance, the lives of two different boys, one white and one black. The white boy grows up in a Chicago suburb with parents who read books to him and who are active in school reform. The boy makes good grades and is happy. His teachers believe he may be a math genius. The black boy, on the other hand, is born to a mother who abandons him when he is two years old. The boy's father drinks heavily and sometimes beats the boy. The little black boy makes no effort at school and begins selling drugs and carrying a gun. By the age of 12, with his father in jail for sexual assault, the boy is on his own. One would reasonably predict that the white boy would fare better in life than the black boy.

The authors leave the question of the fate of the two little boys unanswered and move on to observe that although research cannot measure certain aspects of a child's outcome such as the child's morality, research *can* show whether a child's school performance is affected by their parents. In the beginning of the discussion of school performance, the authors first note that the conventional wisdom that school choice matters is wrong. The data that the authors present show that students who opt out of their neighborhood schools do no better statistically by changing schools. The authors suggest that perhaps the data show that school choice does not matter because the research examines high school students, and by the time students enter high school it is too late for school choice to make any difference. Indeed, studies show that in examining the gap in income levels between white and black adults, the black-white income gap is primarily due to a black-white education gap that begins in eighth grade.

Next the authors discuss a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in the late 1990s called the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, which attempts to measure the academic progress of more than 20,000 children from kindergarten through fifth grade. The data show that the following factors affect a child's school performance, either negatively or positively: the child has highly educated parents, the child's parents have high socioeconomic status, the child's mother is thirty or older at the time of her first child's birth, the child has low birth weight, the child's parents speak English in the home, the child is adopted, the child's parents are involved in the PTA, and the child has many books in his home. Of these factors, low birth weight, being adopted and being in a non-English-speaking home affects a child's school performance negatively. The data also show that the following factors do not affect a child's school performance, either negatively or positively: the child's family is intact, the child's parents have recently moved into a better neighborhood, the child's mother does not work between birth and kindergarten, the child attends Head Start, the child's parents regularly take him to museums, the child is regularly spanked, the child frequently watches television, and the child's parents read to him nearly every day. The authors note that, generally, the factors that do *not* tend to affect the child's school performance, either negatively or positively, are things that parents *do*, whereas the factors that *do* tend to affect the child's school performance are what the parents *are*.



Chapter 5 Analysis

In Chapter 5, the authors use data to disprove some of the conventional wisdom held by parents, including the belief that a gun is more dangerous than a swimming pool and that what a parent does in raising a child greatly affects the child's school performance. The authors meticulously discuss a study in the Chicago Public School system that measures children's school performance with other variables and finds that certain factors do not at all affect a child's school performance. The authors argue that most of the factors that have no effect on a child's school performance - either negatively or positively - tend *generally* to be things that a parent does, such as reading a book to the child or taking the child to museums. Again, the authors focus here on one particular study, and its completeness and interpretation must be evaluated by readers. The authors use the evidence about parenting to reveal another basic concept that is covered in other chapters as well - that experts, and particularly parenting experts, thrive on the basic human instinct of fear.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

In Chapter 6, the authors explore the topic of names and, specifically, whether a person's given name affects his or her outcome in life and why people give their babies certain names to begin with. The authors discuss, more particularly, how blacks and whites name their babies very differently and whether having a distinctively black-sounding name affects one's life outcome. Finally, a significant portion of Chapter 6 is devoted to merely listing and comparing the most popular names in certain years given to babies of blacks and whites, high income and low income people and high education and low education people.

Chapter 6 begins with the observation that most parents believe that the name that they give their child will affect their child's life outcome. One black man seems to experiment with whether this notion has any validity by naming his two sons Winner and Loser. As it turns out, Winner ends up as a career criminal. Loser, on the other hand, goes on to work as a police officer for the New York City Police Department. The authors state that these two brothers' given names make no difference whatsoever in their life outcomes. As another example, the authors tell a story of how a young black girl named Temptress ends up in criminal court in New York on charges that she has let men come into her home and perform sexual acts with her while her mother was at work. The reader is asked, did the girl's name seal her fate, or would she have ended up in the same place if her name had instead been Chastity? In other words, how much does one's name affect one's live outcome, and, more specifically, does having a distinctively white name or a distinctively black name affect a person's life outcome?

The authors first note that researchers have conducted audits to find the answer to this question by sending in fake resumes to employers, with either white-sounding names or black-sounding or minority names. The resumes with the white-sounding names always get more interviews. Thus, having a black-sounding name like DeShawn Williams apparently receives an economic penalty, whereas having a white-sounding name like Jake Williams does not. The authors criticize the audits, however, noting that they do not reveal why the person with the black name does not get the interview. For instance, a DeShawn may not get the call because the employer is racist and believes that the applicant is black. On the other hand, the employer may instead assume that the applicant is from a low-income, low-education family. As is further noted, the audit studies also do not tell what would happen in the interviews. For example, a black person with a white-sounding name could get the interview but could then face discrimination once the employer realizes he is black. Thus, the authors conclude that the audit studies fail to assess the broader ramifications of having a distinctively black name.

According to the authors, the broader ramifications of having a distinctively black name *can* be assessed, however, by looking at the findings of Roland G. Fryer, Jr., a black



economist at Harvard known for his studies in black underachievement and the differences between black and white cultures. For his study, Fryer obtains the birth certificate information for every child born in California since 1961. The data includes information such as name, gender, race, birth weight and whether the parents are married. The data also includes other information about the parents such as indicators of their socioeconomic status. The data reveals, among other things, that blacks and whites name their children very differently, that white and Asian-American parents give their children very similar names and that the name gap between whites and Hispanics is not nearly as wide as the gap between blacks and whites. The birth certificate records also show that the black-white name gap only begins in the 1970s. Many of the names given to black babies today are uniquely black, and the California data shows that the type of parent most likely to give a baby such a distinctive name is a poor, single, teenage mother with little education and who lives within a primarily black neighborhood.

The California data also includes information about the mother's education, income and her own birth date. Having the mothers' birth dates helps researchers link the mothers to their own birth records. The mothers' birth records give the researchers an opportunity to identify a group of children who are born under similar conditions and then to locate the children about 20 or 30 years later to see what has happened to them. By using regression analysis to control for other factors that might affect the children's life outcomes, the researchers are able to measure the impact of a woman's first name on her education, income and health. The data reveal that, generally, a person with a distinctively black-sounding name does not fare as well in life as someone with a white-sounding name. The data further reveals, however, that a person's name does not *cause* his life conditions. In other words, if two black boys named Jake Williams and DeShawn Williams are born into the same socioeconomic conditions, they will probably have similar life outcomes. However, the sort of parents who name their son Jake *do not* tend to live in the same type of neighborhoods as parents who name their son DeShawn.

Next the authors discuss why names, whether black or white, are generally given in the first place, why certain names become popular and how they migrate through the population. The California data reveal that there is a discernible pattern to the movements in the popularity of names and that the families with a higher socioeconomic status set the trends for baby names. Slowly, the names trickle down to the people in a lower socioeconomic group, and eventually the names go out of style. In summing up Chapter 6, the authors note that the California data demonstrate that parents name their children based on the parents' *own* ambitions for their children. Even though having a particular name does not affect one's life outcome, it makes the parents feel good to at least *think* that it can.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter 6 is devoted wholly to the topic of names. Why do blacks in America name their children very different names from whites? Does a person's name affect his or her life



outcome? Why do certain names become popular in the first place? A study of names given to babies in California shows that people in the high socioeconomic groups start the trend for names. The names then migrate through the population, down to the people in lower socioeconomic groups, and eventually the names will fall out of popularity altogether. Much of Chapter 6 is devoted to simply providing lists of names classified by different segments of the population, such as black/white, rich/poor and high education/low education. In this way, Chapter 6 differs from the extensive analysis in the preceding chapters. Still, Chapter 6 is consistent with the rest of the book in that it uses data to reveal various intriguing trivia about people and human nature, such as why a young black mother might name her son DeShawn rather than Jake and why white girl babies tend to not to be named Brenda anymore.



Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

In the Epilogue the authors state that their particular style of economics is concerned with thinking sensibly about how the world really works as opposed to how people think it does or should work. They tell the reader that although applying *Freakonomics* may not dramatically improve the reader's life, it may at least result in the reader putting a better gate around his swimming pool or motivating his real estate agent to work harder. It may have an even subtler effect of making the reader more skeptical of conventional wisdom, looking for signs that things may not be what they first appear to be. Perhaps it will motivate the reader to search out data and come up with a new idea. Some of these ideas, such as the abortion/crime link, might make the reader uncomfortable. However, the authors again state that their analysis is not concerned with morality, and the most likely result of having read *Freakonomics* is that the reader will asking himself many questions. Some of these will lead to interesting answers. As an example, the reader is asked to consider what the data show about parenting and how some things that parents do make a big difference and some things do not matter at all. Finally, the authors note that despite patterns and predictability, there is also a random aspect to life, despite the best parenting efforts. For instance, the reader is asked to recall the two boys - one black and one white - introduced in Chapter 5. "The second child, now twenty-seven years old, is Roland G. Fryer, Jr., the Harvard economist studying black underachievement. The white child also made it to Harvard. But soon after, things went badly for him. His name is Ted Kaczynski."

Epilogue Analysis

In the Epilogue, the authors explain that *Freakonomics* has done what is set out to do, namely, to make the reader think about things in a new and different way. The Epilogue reiterates a common theme throughout the book, that with the right questions and the right data, one can get past what *appears* to be going on in certain aspects of life and, instead, figure out what is *really* happening. Thus, certain outcomes can be predicted if the correct data are used. The authors concede at the end, however, that there is also a random quality to life that the data simply can never predict. The type of data that this book uses is broad data, showing general trends. It is not a specific indicator for any one person's life. The Epilogue serves somewhat as a caveat to one of the book's primary premises. In other words, by applying the *Freakonomics* principles one can usually predict and figure out how the world works. Since there is still some randomness in life, however, one cannot always verify or quantify or predict an outcome simply by looking at the data.



Characters

James Alan Fox

Arne Duncan

Roland G. Fryer

Peter Sandman

Paul Feldman

Stetson Kennedy

John Kenneth Galbraith

Mitch Snyder

Sudhir Venkatesh

Black Gangster Disciple Nation

Nicolae Ceauzescu

Rudolph Giuliani

John R. Lott

Judith Rich Harris



Objects/Places

Chicago

Much of the data in the book is from Chicago, and co-author Steven Levitt is a professor at the University of Chicago. For instance, data from the Chicago Public School system is used to support the authors' arguments that high-stakes testing acts as a strong incentive for teachers to cheat, that school choice does not make a difference in school performance and that what a parent *does* matters less than what a parent *is* in determining a child's school performance. Chicago is also the home of the Black Gangster Disciple Nation, a drug-dealing gang whose financial records are used to support the authors' argument that, despite the conventional wisdom to the contrary, most drug dealers do not make much money.

New York City

New policing tactics are implemented in the 1990s in New York City by the city's former mayor Rudolph Giuliani and his police commissioner, William Bratton. The authors suggest that although Giuliani and Bratton are praised for their new policing tactics when the crime rate drops in New York, the real reason for the drop is the simple fact that, along with the new tactics, there are more police patrolling the streets of New York.

Haifa, Israel

Economists conduct a study of daycare centers in Haifa to determine the effectiveness of a \$3 fine for parents who pick their children up late. The researchers find that the \$3 fine is a poor incentive for parents to pick their children up on time because it is too low. Furthermore, the fine takes away the parents' guilt over showing up late, so it actually acts as an incentive for the parents to show up late.

California Birth Certificate Information

Harvard economist Roland G. Fryer, Jr. obtains the birth certificate information for every child born in California since 1961. The data represents more than 16 million births and includes information such as name, gender, race, birth weight and whether the parents are married. As the book presents it, the data reveals intriguing information about how and why people choose their babies' names and what a name says about a person's background.



The Weakest Link

The Weakest Link is a popular game show in which contestants answer trivia questions. The game is structured so that players try to get rid of the worst players in the beginning and the best players in the end. A study of the contestants who are eliminated shows that women and blacks are not discriminated against on the show. Instead, the data reveal that Hispanics and the elderly are the two groups most likely to be discriminated against.

Adventures of Superman

The *Adventures of Superman* is a popular post-World War II radio show in America. Stetson Kennedy infiltrates the Klan in Atlanta and gives their secrets to the producers of the show. The producers create some episodes about Superman going after the Klan. The Klan's secrets are revealed to the public through airing of the show, and the Klan's membership plummets.

Funeral Caskets

Freakonomics cites changes in the funeral casket business as an example of how the Internet has helped reduce information asymmetry. As the authors note, at one time overzealous funeral directors could talk grieving families into buying outrageously expensive funeral caskets. With the advent of the Internet, however, comes a way for the grieving families to look up prices for caskets so they can see when they are being duped.

High-end Families

The authors present data to show that families in the higher socioeconomic groups drive the trends for baby names. Once a name catches on among high-income, highly educated parents, it starts working its way down the socioeconomic ladder. Low-end families go name shopping by looking at the names that high-end families have given their children. Once a high-end name filters down and is widely adopted, the high-end families abandon it.

Sumo Wrestlers

Data from sumo wrestling tournaments strongly suggest that in a bout where a wrestler's ranking is not at risk, a sumo wrestler will cheat to help his opponent move up in rankings. Because in sumo wrestling ranking is highly important, sumo wrestlers have an incentive to cheat to lose. Similarly, in high-stakes testing in schools, teachers have an incentive to cheat to improve their students' test scores. The examples of cheating by teachers and sumo wrestlers demonstrate how data can reveal what is going on

underneath the surface of complicated matters. These examples further demonstrate how certain activities are structured in such a way that there is actually an incentive to behave unethically, or cheat.

Bagels

Paul Feldman's bagel-selling business gives economists intriguing data on the honesty of most people. Feldman delivers bagels to businesses and leaves a box for people to pay for the bagels that they eat. At the end of each day, Feldman collects the money box and the remaining bagels. He keeps strict records of his sales, and years of data show that Feldman's customers are honest in paying for the bagels about 87% of the time.

Themes

Incentives are the Cornerstone of Modern Life

An incentive is simply a means of urging people to behave in a certain way. The authors explain that incentives play a substantial part in the lives of economists, as economists are always trying to figure out how to tweak incentives in just the right way to affect human behavior. The primary example of a study of how incentives affect human behavior is the Israeli daycare center study, in which parents are fined \$3 for picking their children up late. The \$3 is supposed to be an incentive for parents to pick their children up on time, but it turns out to be a strong incentive for parents *not* to pick up their children on time. The authors note that the fine takes away the parents' guilt over picking up their children late. Furthermore, given the high cost of day care, it may be well worth it for the parents to pick their children up late and pay the relatively low fine of \$3. To make the incentive more effective, an economist would suggest raising the fine. At some point, parents will find that picking up their children late is not worth paying the fine. The book explains, however, that the fine cannot be raised too high or else resentment will grow among the parents. This resentment will lead some of them to begin searching for a daycare that does not have such high fines.

The book also discusses high-stakes school testing and sumo wrestlers and how there is a strong incentive for participants to cheat in both activities. For instance, with high-stakes testing, teachers have an incentive to cheat to raise their students' test scores because high scores may lead to promotions, raises and bonuses, whereas low scores may lead to demotion and even firing. Similarly, the culture of sumo wrestling itself and the way the tournaments are structured gives an incentive for wrestlers to cheat to lose at certain times to help their competitors rise in rankings.

As another example of how incentives are a cornerstone of modern life, the authors discuss how real estate agents have a low incentive to work hard to get \$10,000 more for their clients on the sale of a \$300,000 house. Because the agent's profit is only a few more hundred dollars if he or she sells the client's house for \$310,000 rather than \$300,000, the agent has a strong incentive to sell the house more quickly at \$300,000 and move on to other sales.

The Conventional Wisdom is Often Wrong

A theme recurring throughout *Freakonomics* is the notion that data can show that the conventional wisdom is often wrong. As a primary example of the conventional wisdom being wrong, the authors discuss the idea that most parents are more afraid to let their children play in a house with guns than they are afraid to let their children go over to a house with a swimming pool. Playing at a house with a swimming pool is, however, statistically far more dangerous than playing at a house with a gun.



Another example of how the conventional wisdom is often wrong is that parents think that what they do matters greatly in their child's outcome. The authors put forth data to show that what the parents *are* is more determinative, at least when it comes to a child's school performance. In other words, a parent's own educational upbringing matters, but whether the parents read books to the child does not. As another example, it does not matter whether a parent spansks a child, but whether the home is primarily English-speaking does matter.

Finally, the book states that the conventional wisdom is that drug dealers make a ton of money, when in fact most drug dealers make very little at all. Indeed, a drug dealing enterprise is set up with a pyramid structure much like a typical American corporation, and particularly like McDonalds. In other words, a few people at the top of the corporate pyramid make a ton of money, while most everyone else makes very little money.

In all of the above-cited examples, the conventional wisdom is disproved by examining objective data and by knowing how to look at the data. In this way, the discussion of the theme of conventional wisdom overlaps with other themes, such as knowing what to measure and how to measure it and the importance of incentives. Specifically, in discussing drug dealers and the conventional wisdom that drug dealers make a ton of money, the authors explain that many drug dealers are willing to work for very little pay because they are driven by the perhaps illusory incentive that they might one day make a ton of money like the dealers at the top of the gang.

Dramatic Effects With Subtle Causes

One of the main themes in this work is that data reveal that dramatic effects often have distant, even subtle causes. As the primary example, the book argues that the crime rate in America plummets in the 1990s because of the Supreme Court's 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade* legalizing abortion. As the authors note, the drop in crime in the 1990s is widely attributed by criminologists and other experts to various factors such as smart new policing tactics, increased police forces, more reliance on prisons and gun control laws. A closer examination, however, causes the authors to conclude that none of these factors is the primary reason for the drop in crime. The authors argue that because of *Roe v. Wade*, the babies most likely to grow up and become criminals are simply not being born in the 1970s. By the 1990s, when crime rates begin to drop throughout the country, those babies would have been in their late teens and, therefore, at the peak of their criminal careers. In discussing abortion and the crime rate, the book highlights the difference between the study of economics and morality. That is, the notion of abortion as a tool in crime reduction is no doubt abhorrent to many, if not most, people. The authors take the position, however, that the pure study of economics is interested in reality, rather than morality.



Experts Serve Their Own Agendas

As the primary example of how experts use their information advantage to serve their own agendas, the authors use the example of how data reveal that real estate agents use their information advantage to their detriment of their clients. Specifically, the data reveal that real estate agents sell their own houses at higher prices than their clients' houses. As the authors explain, when it comes to selling their clients' houses, a real estate agent has very little incentive to work harder to get \$10,000 more on the selling price of a \$300,000 house for their client. Furthermore, the data reveal that real estate agents use their expert knowledge to their own advantage and to their clients' detriment. That is, a real estate agent will hold out to sell his or her own house for the additional \$10,000, whereas he or she will push a client to sell the house for \$10,000 less.

The authors also explain how the Internet has been extremely effective in reducing what is referred to as "information asymmetry," in which the person on one side of a transaction has superior information to the other person. The book notes that, in areas such as the sale of funeral caskets and term life insurance, thanks to the Internet the consuming public can now shop around and compare prices before buying. Thus, the rates for term life insurance and funeral caskets have been forced down because of the Internet.

Knowing What to Measure

The authors stress that by applying basic economic principles and by looking at the objective data, one can find the answers to many questions about how the world actually works. As the book explains, the secret is to know what the right questions are. As an example of this premise, the authors note that data show that after the implementation of high-stakes testing, some teachers in the Chicago Public Schools begin cheating on their students' tests. With high-stakes testing comes an incentive for teachers to cheat. In studying this, researchers measure certain factors. They look at students' scores on tests over a three-year period during which a teacher is suspected of cheating in the second year. They also create a complicated algorithm to detect suspicious answer strings on the tests. Researchers are able to conclude with reasonable certainty that at least 5% of the teachers in the Chicago Public Schools are cheating on their students' tests. The theme of knowing what to measure and how to measure it is particularly salient in that it teaches the reader to look at the world in a completely new and different way. In other words, *Freakonomics* offers the reader a life tool by teaching that if one simply knows the right questions to ask, one can find out what is really going on underneath the surface.

Conventional Wisdom

Though the authors contend that *Freakonomics* has no unifying theme, they do note several basic ideas that form the core of their shared perspective. Among those is the notion that "conventional wisdom is often wrong." "Conventional wisdom" can be



thought of as a collection of beliefs that seem to make sense and are accepted as fact, even though they have not been proven.

In *Freakonomics*, the authors offer many examples of conventional wisdom that turn out to be just plain wrong. For instance, most parents would be less likely to let their young children play at a friend's house that held a gun than at a friend's house with an unfenced pool in the backyard. However, looking only at the statistics, a child is about one hundred times more likely to die in a backyard swimming pool than from a gunshot.

The authors spend much of *Freakonomics* examining various examples of conventional wisdom and comparing those beliefs with what the data suggests is true. Sometimes, conventional wisdom is upheld. Such is the case with the notion that the children of highly educated parents perform better on standardized tests than children with less-educated parents. Often, however, popular notions of what is truth, such as that the Head Start preschool program boosts student performance in later years, are shown to be nothing more than illusion.

Incentive

Another recurring notion in *Freakonomics* is the idea that incentives play a crucial role in human behavior. When attempting to explain why a person would act a certain way in a given situation, the authors ask, "What incentive is the person responding to?" They use incentives to explain why some teachers cheat on their students' standardized tests. Incentives also reveal why charging a fine of parents who are late to pick up their children from daycare just might have the opposite of the intended effect.

The authors describe an incentive as "simply a means of urging people to do more of a good thing and less of a bad thing." However, failing to fully understand incentives can lead to unexpected and unwanted results, as in the case of blood donors being offered a small amount of cash for their donation. According to researchers, the donation rate goes down because donors suddenly feel as if they are exchanging their blood for money, instead of doing it out of charity and kindness.

An unabridged audio recording of *Freakonomics* was released by HarperAudio in 2005. The book is read by co-author Dubner, and it is currently available on compact disc or as an audio download through www.audible.com.

An electronic book version of *Freakonomics* was released by HarperCollins e-books in 2005 in both Adobe Reader and Microsoft Reader formats. Both versions are currently available for purchase through www.amazon.com.

Cause and Effect

Many of the findings in *Freakonomics* deal with determining the causes of certain behaviors or trends, such as the reduction of crime rates in America in the 1990s. Even when the authors are not directly searching for a cause—for example, when trying to

spot cheating teachers in a sea of test results data—the idea of cause and effect still plays an important part in shaping their hypotheses and search criteria. Knowing that cheating is the end result or effect, the authors must ask, "What would cause a schoolteacher to cheat?" Their answer helps them determine *how* a schoolteacher might cheat, which leads to a strategy for spotting cheaters within the data.

The authors focus much of their attention on cause-effect relationships that do not seem obvious to not just the casual observer, but appear to have been overlooked even by experts. Such is the case with the link they assert exists between legalized abortion and a dramatic drop in crime rate. As the authors state in the introduction, "Dramatic effects often have distant, even subtle, causes."

Style

Point of View

In "An Explanatory Note" at the beginning of *Freakonomics*, the authors explain how they end up collaborating to write the book. Stephen Dubner is an author and journalist for the *New York Times Magazine*. In the summer of 2003, Dubner is assigned to write a profile of Steven D. Levitt, a young economist at the University of Chicago. Dubner finds Levitt's particular slant on economics to be fascinating in that Levitt asks intriguing and unusual questions. The two men - one a journalist and the other an economist - collaborate to write this book with the "underlying belief . . . that the modern world, despite a surfeit of obfuscation, complication, and downright deceit, is *not* impenetrable, is *not* unknowable, and - if the right questions are asked - is even more intriguing than we think. All it takes is a new way of looking." The book is written, then, from the personal perspectives of the two authors. While much of the book gives statistics, data and research results, the voice of the narrative is the voice of two men who believe that the world can be best understood through economics.

Language and Meaning

Freakonomics takes the very complicated theme of economics and distills it down into concepts that are easily understandable by the layperson. Indeed, the book does not discuss what are considered traditional principles of economics that one might learn, for instance, in an introductory college course. In other words, the authors are more concerned with what motivates human behavior than with esoteric theories of supply and demand. The authors' primary meaning is to promote the rational, objective analysis of facts, instead of relying on our somewhat inconsistent human "gut reactions." By using real-life examples and straightforward language, the authors communicate their message in an enjoyable style that makes the reader open and receptive to sometimes controversial ideas.

Structure

Freakonomics is separated into six chapters, with an Introduction and an Epilogue. Each chapter generally addresses the five themes discussed above, although the chapters often overlap in discussing the various themes. At the beginning of each chapter is a blurb from the *New York Times Magazine*, which generally touts Steven Levitt's economic theories as brilliant. There is no formal structure to *Freakonomics*. Indeed, it is written in an informal, conversational style, with the authors often bouncing from one topic to another as one might do at a cocktail party. Although there are recurring themes throughout, much of the book contains smatterings of intriguing trivia. The informational, conversational, informal and even somewhat random style makes the



authors seem likeable and believable, and perhaps this even makes us more likely to accept the authors' views.

Studies and Research

The core of *Freakonomics* is Levitt's academic research in the field of economics. A great deal of the book is devoted to describing the conditions and results of various experiments and studies. For each topic covered, the authors walk the reader through the process of developing a hypothesis and comparing it with the available data. For example, when examining the issue of schoolteacher cheating, the authors offer one possible scenario that would result in an identifiable pattern of teacher misconduct. They then present actual sets of data so the reader can identify the pattern independently. By doing this, they encourage the reader to participate in the scientific inquiry and gain a fuller understanding of what the results mean.

Historical Context

Throughout the book, the authors include anecdotes and brief asides that explain the historical context of certain subjects related to their research. For example, when discussing the economics of a drug-dealing gang in Chicago, the authors include a brief history of how crack cocaine became the drug of choice for many inner-city Americans. These short history lessons provide context for the research discussed, and they also allow the authors to tell narrative stories within the larger framework of a book about economics.

Personal Profile

Each chapter of *Freakonomics* opens with a brief excerpt from a feature article written by Dubner about Levitt for the *New York Times Magazine* in 2003. This article is as much a profile of Steven Levitt as it is an exploration of his work; it includes candid conversations with Levitt, as well as physical descriptions of the man himself. These vignettes serve to present the reader with a fuller, more interesting picture of a man whose academic work, while interesting, does not convey the extent of his personality or character. They also function as transitions between the topics covered in consecutive chapters. This excerpt appears before chapter 1:

"I'd like to put together a set of tools that let us catch terrorists," Levitt said. "I don't necessarily know yet how I'd go about it. But given the right data, I have little doubt that I could figure out the answer."

It might seem absurd for an economist to dream of catching terrorists. It probably seemed absurd to a Chicago schoolteacher to learn that a skinny man with thick glasses had developed an algorithm that determined that she was a cheater—and that she was being fired. Steven Levitt may not believe in himself, but he does believe in

this: Teachers and criminals and politicians may lie, as may real-estate agents and CIA analysts. But numbers do not.



Historical Context

The Evolution of Economics

The term "economics" is derived from the Greek terms *oikos* ("household" or "estate") and *nomos* ("law" or "norm"). Economics, then, was first defined as a study of the laws and norms governing the function of a household or estate. The term was not coined until the late nineteenth century, when economic theory flourished.

From the 1500s onward, as countries began developing sophisticated methods for producing and distributing goods, early economic theories were devised to explain the best way for a country to achieve and sustain wealth. Most theorists of the time argued that a nation's wealth depended on both its gold reserves and its balance of trade. By exporting more goods than it imports, a nation could gain wealth from other countries while still keeping its own wealth within its borders. This idea became known as "mercantilism."

Adam Smith was the first person to present a sweeping theory of economics that expanded beyond the narrow view of mercantilism. For this reason, Smith is often considered to be the "Father of Economics." His 1776 book *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* helped establish and popularize the notion of a "free market" society, a defining characteristic of capitalism. Smith also noted that people tend to act with their own self-interests in mind when making decisions and try to achieve the maximum worth for their resources.

The field of economics has since grown into numerous branches of study, including macroeconomics (the study of the economic behaviors of large groups or populations) and microeconomics (the study of the economic behaviors of individuals). Although it often deals heavily with mathematics and statistics, economics is generally considered a social science much like psychology or sociology. Today, economists play a key role in nearly every major aspect of American life and culture. Steven D. Levitt, co-author of *Freakonomics*, represents a new breed of economists who apply economic theory to various aspects of modern life in an attempt to gain new insights into human behavior.

The Rise of Crack Cocaine in America

Chapters 3 and 4 of *Freakonomics* briefly outline the history of crack cocaine as it relates to crime and gangs in inner-city America. Although humans have ingested derivatives of the coca plant for thousands of years, it was not until the mid-1800s that chemists first isolated the intoxicating alkaloid that makes cocaine the drug it is. Soon after, many consumable products sold in the United States touted the presence of cocaine for its medicinal qualities. By the twentieth century, however, the drug's highly addictive nature and its damaging effects on frequent users became clear. In 1914, the United States outlawed the sale or use of cocaine.



Cocaine in powdered form resurfaced as a popular recreational drug in the 1970s. However, due to its price, powdered cocaine was considered a "status drug" available only to the rich. In the 1980s, a new type of cocaine appeared on the streets of Los Angeles: "crack" cocaine, a cheap but powerful form of the drug that quickly became popular among lower-income drug users.

Oscar Danilo Blandon, a former Nicaraguan government official-turned-smuggler whom Levitt and Dubner refer to as the "Johnny Appleseed of Crack," is often named as the primary source of America's crack cocaine in the 1980s. Supplying the demand for the cheap and abundant form of cocaine is, in turn, considered the fuel that fed the proliferation of inner-city gangs throughout the United States in the 1980s and 1990s.

High-stakes Testing and No Child Left Behind

In 2002, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act into law, which instituted several measures and requirements intended to improve the quality of education for American grade-school and high-school students. One of the most controversial elements of the new federal law was the requirement that students demonstrate adequate yearly progress by taking assessment tests at the end of the school year. As authors Levitt and Dubner note, "The stakes are considered high because instead of simply testing students to measure their progress, schools are increasingly held accountable for the results."

In chapter 1 of *Freakonomics*, the authors explain how such weighty testing—and the subsequent liability of individual teachers in such a system—can provide teachers with the incentive to cheat, with some going as far as to fill in correct answers on their students' answer sheets before turning them in for scoring. High-stakes testing has also been criticized for other reasons, including the risk that standardized tests routinely exhibit cultural and socioeconomic bias in favor of white, upper-class students, or that the tests simply do not foster improved education in general.

Roe V. Wade

In the early 1800s, although no state or federal laws had yet been enacted about it, abortions in the United States were generally considered acceptable if they occurred during the first three months of pregnancy. This was based on an old standard found in English common law, in which "quickening"—when a woman can first feel a fetus move in her womb, usually in the fourth month of pregnancy—was considered the cut-off for deliberately terminating a pregnancy.

In the mid-1800s, through a movement largely supported by feminists such as Susan B. Anthony, many states began to outlaw abortion completely. By the turn of the century, it was nearly impossible for a woman to obtain a legal abortion in the United States unless her pregnancy posed an imminent threat to her own life.

Abortions continued, but they were done illegally and often in unsafe conditions. In the 1960s, some states began to reverse their previous restrictions on abortion. With public support shifting in favor of a pregnant woman's right to choose whether or not to be pregnant, activists in Texas filed a lawsuit seeking to overturn the state's strict anti-abortion law. In the suit, the plaintiff was named only as "Jane Roe" to protect her identity. The case eventually reached the U.S. Supreme Court, where in 1973, the Court voted 7-2 to strike down the Texas law. This paved the way for a return to legalized first-trimester abortion across the United States.



Critical Overview

A book that examines the world through the principles of economics might seem an unlikely candidate for mainstream success. However, upon its initial release in 2005, *Freakonomics* became an instant hit, reaching number two on the *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list.

Critical reception of the book, when positive, was enthusiastic, with many critics noting the appeal of Levitt's unusual research in particular. In a review for *Time*, Amanda Ripley noted, "Each chapter is an enlightening field trip"; Benjamin Svetkey, in a review for *Entertainment Weekly*, called the book "the funkiest study of statistical mechanics ever by a world-renowned economist." Cass R. Sunstein from the *New Republic* wrote, "it is fun and even exhilarating to see how a real social scientist goes about testing competing hypotheses. Some of Levitt's inquiries read like good detective stories." An unnamed reviewer for the *Economist* applauded: "Far more intelligent, modest and orthodox than it pretends, the book is a delight; it educates, surprises and amuses."

However, Levitt's research as presented in the book evoked an altogether different response from many other critics. Lyn Millner, in a review for *USA Today*, argued that the book "needs more meat," and that "it's one of those fad books with fab titles that doesn't dig deep enough to stand the test of time." Philip Hensher, in a review for the *Spectator*, asserted that the book is "best enjoyed ... as a series of music-hall turns, tall tales and outrageous paradoxes rather than anything resembling an argument." Hensher also noted of Levitt's research, "Having asked us to believe all those impossible things before breakfast, he could have given us something a bit more concrete to go away with." Although Sunstein complimented Levitt's contributions, the reviewer also noted that "some of his findings are not terribly exciting." Similarly, Dan Rosenheck, writing for the *New Statesman*, asked, "Is anyone surprised that some athletes cheat, that some funeral salesmen are unscrupulous, or that parents give their children names they associate with success?" Rosenheck concluded his review with the warning that "those seeking an intellectual mother-lode at the end of the 'treasure hunt' will surely be disappointed."

Some went even further in their criticisms of the book's content. An unnamed reviewer for *Psychology Today* pointed out one of the limitations of the authors' methods: "Rather than tackle the complexities of actual human beings, the data-dog authors prefer to rummage through the statistics we humans leave behind." Robert P. Holdstock, writing for the *American Enterprise*, claimed that the book exhibits "scholarly lassitude" and noted that the authors "seldom miss a chance to surprise readers with brash comparisons that are less impressive than advertised." Holdstock also charged that the book "contains many careless arguments" and "displays an adolescent mentality that relishes shock value and iconoclasm for its own sake."

The authors' writing style was also an issue for some other reviewers. Many noted dissatisfaction with the title, which Sunstein called "stupid"; according to the unnamed reviewer for the *Economist*, the title suggests "an airport-ready, dumbed-down romp."



Millner stated that the book contains "a lethal dose of hype," and the reviewer for the *Economist* blames co-author Dubner for what he called "the book's frequently tiresome breathlessness." According to Sunstein, "The authors seem to fear that their substantive material might be boring, and they try too hard to create major drama." Rosenheck is one of the few reviewers to praise the book's style, calling it "lively" and "conversational."

In the wake of the book's wild popularity, many readers have become polarized by some of the book's reported findings—most notably those related to the link between abortion and crime. Additionally, several economists and statisticians have questioned both Levitt's methodology and the validity of some of his conclusions. Still, *Freakonomics* was selected as the 2006 Adult Nonfiction Book of the Year by Book Sense, and its continued success has prompted the authors to begin work on a sequel.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2



Critical Essay #1

Wilson has written essays and articles examining a wide range of topics related to popular culture, from video games and mass-market fiction novels to modern poetry and classic literature. In this essay, he argues that the authors of Freakonomics make a number of missteps in the book that ultimately damage the credibility of their work.

In the book *Freakonomics*, economist Steven D. Levitt and journalist Stephen J. Dubner present surprising and enlightening examples of how economics can be used to describe why people do the things they do. But for all of the authors' clever use of data and scientific methods to reach conclusions both entertaining and accessible to the layperson, they frequently make missteps that undermine the scientific premises on which the whole enterprise is based.

It must be tough to write a mainstream book that attempts to distill insights gained from mountains of complex research performed by economists and statisticians. What Levitt and Dubner have created—a sort of whimsical fantasia of incentive and risk analysis, with some fascinating historical footnotes thrown in—certainly provides an entertaining experience for the reader. But scientific research is filled with all sorts of conditions, caveats, and clarifications that do not translate well into simple bits of engaging prose. In this book, such dry material tends to get glossed over for the sake of entertainment.

To begin with, regression analysis—the statistical method by which many of the correlations described in the book have been discovered—is more complicated and controversial for these applications than the authors suggest. They do eventually concede this to some degree, though only after the reader is already more than three-quarters of the way through the book:

It should be said that regression analysis is more art than science.... But a skilled practitioner can use it to tell how meaningful a correlation is—and maybe even tell whether that correlation does indicate a causal relationship.

More art than science. So which is it, science or art? In fact, the authors state quite explicitly in the introduction, "Economics is above all a science of measurement." The whole point of the book is ostensibly to apply a scientist's objectivity to huge amounts of data in an attempt to judge the conventional wisdom on a variety of subjects. Many readers may not recognize that they have been offered conclusions that not only are unscientific, but also in some ways reflect the exact *opposite* of the scientific method.

Using the scientific method, a researcher observes some phenomenon in the natural world and thinks up a hypothesis that might explain the phenomenon. The scientist then devises a carefully controlled experiment to test that hypothesis. The experiment must be reproducible, so the results can be confirmed or disproved by other scientists. As it is used throughout *Freakonomics*, regression analysis is essentially an examination of (often uncontrolled) observations that have already been recorded and cannot be reproduced. The results are in before the hypotheses are formed.



In the book, the authors provide due warning about mistaking correlation for a causal relationship. For example, snowfall is always found in conjunction with cold temperatures (correlation), but that does not mean cold temperatures are the direct cause of snowfall (causal relationship). However, the authors themselves issue some rather definitive statements about causal relationships that are not altogether airtight.

In what is certainly the most infamous section of the book, the authors declare that the nationwide legalization of abortion in the 1970s was one of the main causes of a drop in crime twenty years later. They do not stop at merely suggesting a correlation between legalized abortion and a subsequent drop in crime. If they had, they might have spared themselves the wrath of not only pro-life activists, but also those concerned with the preservation of scientific rigor. Their "proof" of a causal relationship is hardly compelling. Most of it merely correlates legalized abortion and lower crime. The authors note that the first states to legalize abortion before the Supreme Court decision of *Roe v. Wade* paved the way for nationwide legalization were also the first states to see a drop in crime years later. That may well be, but there may be plenty of reasons why those same states, generally considered some of the country's most progressive, would be the first to experience any number of nationwide trends. And since the authors only mention figures for the two groups as whole entities—early-legalizing states versus later-legalizing states—how do the figures hold up on a state-by-state basis? The answer might be found in the guts of Levitt's co-authored work for the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, but it is nowhere to be seen here.

When it comes to the abortion issue, the authors also paint a deceptive picture of the average abortion recipient in the early 1970s. As the authors describe her, "Very often she was unmarried or in her teens or poor, and sometimes all three." This is an important part of their argument that the women most likely to seek abortion were those who could not adequately care for their children. The authors carefully employ wobble words like "very often" and "sometimes," but still deliberately offer a description that does not match the known data. According to the Centers for Disease Control, over two-thirds of all women who obtained abortions in 1972 were at least twenty years old. (More than one-third were over twenty-five years old.) On top of that, the percentage of abortions obtained by teens *dropped* steadily over the next two decades before stabilizing at about 20 percent.

Additionally, three-quarters of all abortions in 1972 were obtained by white women. (The percentage dropped to about two-thirds by 1976, where it remained steady for over a decade.) According to these figures, it seems that the "average" woman seeking an abortion in the early 1970s was an adult white woman—who, as the authors point out elsewhere, was much less likely to be living in poverty than a black woman of the same age. This does not prove that their conclusions are wrong, but it does suggest that the authors intentionally slant the facts to support their arguments.

Another nagging problem with the book is that the explanations offered for people's behavior often rely on wild speculation about what those people were thinking. This is evident in the section about the television game show *The Weakest Link*. The authors assume that, in an ideal world, every player on every episode of the show would use the



exact same strategy: Vote off other players who do not know the answers early in the game, when the pot increases based on everyone's combined efforts; and vote off those who *do* know the answers later on, since they are the player's strongest competition.

The authors might consider this the only sensible strategy, but it is hardly the only strategy contestants use. To unequivocally state that, in later rounds, "contestants want to keep Hispanics around to weaken the field" seems presumptuous and unfair. In addition to performance, the personality of a player has a lot to do with how long he or she lasts on the show. If other players consider someone arrogant or annoying, they may vote that player off regardless of performance. Also, players who commit egregious errors—like not knowing the name of the vice president of the United States—might get voted off even if other players have made more mistakes.

Another misstep the authors make is to either overstate the significance of data that favor their argument, or understate the significance of data that contradict it. For example, when discussing a survey of data from Internet dating websites, they note that the applicants, based on their own descriptions, must be "a lot richer, taller, skinnier, and better-looking than average." Computer users may indeed be wealthier and healthier than the average American. Why should we assume that they are not? Only with random sampling is it valid to assume the characteristics of the sample mirror those of the population, and this sample is self-selected, not random at all. The authors go on to mention that these applicants reported themselves to be about an inch taller than the national average. One inch of height may or may not fall within a reasonable statistical margin of error, but in the real world, one inch does not fall within the description "a lot taller." Their point may be valid, but it is undermined by a broad and sloppy overstatement.

Similarly, when discussing possible cheating among professional sumo wrestlers, the authors note with great emphasis that a wrestler who desperately needs a win in his final tournament match to improve his ranking—the most important factor in his professional status—tends to have a success rate of about 80 percent against a wrestler who has already achieved that ranking but is not in contention for higher honors. The authors concede that conventional wisdom suggests that the wrestler who needs the win will try harder than the wrestler who does not. However, they go on to point out that, because the winning wrestlers then lose 60 percent of their subsequent matches against those same opponents, there must be some sort of cheating involved. "The most logical explanation," the authors write, "is that the wrestlers made a quid pro quo agreement: you let me win today, when I really need the victory, and I'll let you win next time."

Unfortunately, the very numbers that the authors provide do not suggest a quid pro quo agreement at all. If there were indeed such an agreement between the wrestlers, one would expect to see the winner of the first match lose the next tournament match at a rate of about 80 percent—a perfect symmetry that suggests an equitable transaction between the two wrestlers. In reality, a given loss rate of 60 percent is not much higher than the "all things equal" expected rate of 50 percent that the authors assume at the start of a new tournament. Conventional wisdom might suggest that the wrestler who



lost the first match is slightly more motivated to win the second time (though not as motivated as the first wrestler, since ranking is not directly at stake in the second match). But as the authors say, conventional wisdom is often wrong.

The authors are so concerned with providing surprising information that they sometimes present obviously artificial "conventional wisdom" just so they can prove it to be false. For example, in the section on Paul Feldman's "honor system" bagel business, they mention that employees at smaller offices are generally more honest than those at big offices. This is all well and good until the authors proclaim, "This may seem counterintuitive. In a bigger office, a bigger crowd is bound to convene around the bagel table, providing more witnesses to make sure you drop your money in the box." If that were the case, bigger cities would have less crime than small towns because of all those extra witnesses. The authors do eventually explain the findings well enough, but only after suggesting that they contradict what reasonable people would expect—which they certainly do not. Such "conventional wisdom" is simply a straw man they erect just to knock down.

Overall, *Freakonomics* is one of those rare bestsellers that actually encourages readers to think critically, and the authors certainly deserve some praise for that. Unfortunately, that message is undermined by many examples of wild speculation, obfuscation, and otherwise sloppy presentation. But at least readers are forewarned in the introduction when the authors write, "Experts—from criminologists to real-estate agents—use their informational advantage to serve their own agenda." It is true with all experts who have informational advantages and agendas, economists included.

Source: Greg Wilson, Critical Essay on *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, in *Literary Newsmakers for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.



Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Wilson criticizes some of the conclusions presented in Freakonomics, and contends that its strength lies with the questions it asks, rather than the answers it offers.

During my many years of lecturing on crime, invariably the first two questions I would be asked were: "What do you think of the death penalty?" and "What do you think of gun control?"

No more. Now the first question is whether I believe that legalized abortion has cut the crime rate. For this I can thank *Freakonomics*, the weirdly named book by Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner that has been high on the *New York Times* best-seller list for weeks now. My answer, by the way, is no: I do not believe the evidence shows a causal link between legalized abortion and our reduced crime rate.

Levitt, an acquaintance of mine, is a immensely talented economist whose restless mind has inquired into all sorts of fascinating topics. The book, written with the journalist Stephen J. Dubner (who in 2003 published an admiring article about Levitt in the *New York Times Magazine*), is a popular account of the many studies Levitt has done on subjects as diverse as real-estate agents, schoolteachers, sumo wrestlers, drug dealers, parenting, and the names given to black and white children. Also on abortion and crime.

The Tipping Point (2000), by Malcolm Gladwell, is a "popular science" book in much the same vein as *Freakonomics*. Gladwell, a sociologist, offers the premise that small groups of people are often responsible for huge changes in society. After reaching a critical "tipping point," trends spread through a population much like viruses. He develops his argument through numerous examples throughout history, and by linking seemingly unconnected phenomena much like Levitt and Dubner do.

The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century is Thomas L. Friedman's sweeping portrait of the swift economic globalization taking place in the world around us. By "flat," Friedman means that the world has become much more interconnected across national and continental borders, which creates both challenges and opportunities for all members of the global community. The book, originally published in 2005, was reissued in 2006 with significant revisions and an additional one hundred pages of new material.

Collapse: How Societies Choose to Succeed or Fail is Jared Diamond's 2004 follow-up to his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. Both books focus on how environmental factors play a key role in the development and evolution of human society. In *Collapse*, Diamond concentrates on several societies that have failed throughout history—including the Anasazi and the Greenland Norse—and argues that a better understanding of our environment might help prevent similar collapses in the future.



Though originally published in 1994, *Burglars on the Job: Streetlife and Residential Break-Ins* picks up where *Freakonomics* leaves off in its study of criminal behavior: Instead of relying on statistics for their information, sociologists Richard T. Wright and Scott H. Decker interview burglars and other criminals to find out how they choose which house to rob, their most common or favored methods of entry, and what they do with the goods they steal.

The problem with a journalistic book about a serious scholar is that journalism does not tell you much, if anything, about the techniques the scholar has used, the challenges to his data that others have raised, or the scholar's response to those criticisms. While I am glad this book has exposed Levitt to a broad audience, I hope that anybody who is excited by it will go to his original studies and examine them carefully. Luckily, most of what he has written is quite accessible to the general reader.

Back to abortion and crime. Levitt's argument is that, with the legalization of abortion by the Supreme Court's 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade*, many fetuses were killed in America that would otherwise have led to the birth of unwanted children. Such unwanted children, receiving little affection and guidance, would have been more likely to commit crimes when grown. Ergo, their removal from the population had something to do with our lowered crime rates.

Why should we think such children would have been unwanted? Because, Levitt contends, they would have been born to thousands of poor, single, teenage mothers. Levitt conspicuously refrains from saying so, but a very large fraction of these poor, single, teenage mothers would have been African American: over 60 percent of all black children are born out of wedlock, and the abortion rate is roughly three times greater among black than among white women.

To prove that abortion reduced crime, Levitt and his coauthor on the original paper, John Donohue, examined crime rates 15 to 18 years after the *Roe* decision, and found a drop. Moreover, they pointed out that five states had already legalized abortion three to four years *before* the decision; in these early-legalizing states, crime rates fell sooner than in states that did not permit abortion until *Roe*.

You would never know it from this book, but not only have these claims been criticized but several scholars have offered rival theories. On the issue of abortion rates alone, the economists John Lott and John Whitley have written that, even before *Roe*, many anti-abortion states allowed abortion if the life or health of the mother was at risk; in these states, there were at least as many abortions per 1,000 live births pre-*Roe* as in states that had made abortion legal. Why, then, attribute falling crime rates to legalized abortion?

Levitt and Donohue have rejoined that, in those states where abortions were still nominally illegal, it was well-to-do white women who mainly availed themselves of the loopholes in the system. But there is no evidence of this; to the contrary, black women were over-represented among those having abortions in such states.



Now look at homicide rates by the age of suspected offenders. In the late 1990's, roughly a quarter-century after *Roe*, the murder rate was falling for offenders aged twenty-six and older—a class of offenders much too old to have been affected by *Roe* one way or the other. As for the youngest offenders, those between sixteen and twenty, their murder rate had jumped up in the early 1990's, probably because of involvement in the crack cocaine trade. Again, no *Roe* effect.

George Akerlof, Janet Yellen, and Michael Katz have argued that legalized abortion actually *increased* the number of out-of-wedlock first births—because the availability of abortion, along with the advent of new contraceptive devices, rendered sex "cost-free" for men but not necessarily for the women they impregnated. Were the children who were increasingly likely to be born to unmarried women "unwanted"? Perhaps they were, but we do not know; Akerlof and his colleagues have not given us sufficient evidence.

As of now, no one is entitled to decide who is correct in this matter, whether Levitt or any of his critics. But it is certainly premature to say that Levitt is right, and positively disconcerting to take the word of an enamored journalist that Levitt *must* be right.

On another controversial matter, however, Levitt is clearly right, and I am his victim. I once wrote that the proportion of juveniles in the population was going up and that therefore the crime rate would go up. Levitt correctly takes me to task for this unwarranted assertion, which was later proved wrong. His criticism reminds me of something my Ph.D. adviser once said, no doubt quoting someone whose name I have forgotten: social scientists should never try to predict the future; they have trouble enough predicting the past.

The abortion-crime connection takes up only a small portion of this book; I have dallied on it because it has drawn so much attention, and because it may be symptomatic of a general disposition on the part of Levitt or his coauthor to avoid being thought politically incorrect. For just as this book's discussion of abortion ignores race, so its chapter on the gap in educational achievement between blacks and whites soft-pedals some indisputably important facts.

The chapter begins by considering how little influence parents may exert over their child's personality, given that half of the difference among personalities can be attributed to genes. This is quite correct. But genes also account for well over half (in some studies, as much as three-quarters) of differences in intellectual ability. If we are to explain the black-white gap in educational achievement, we cannot turn away from the fact that on average, African Americans have a lower IQ than white Americans.

There are, of course, many highly talented blacks and many really stupid whites. But these important *individual* differences are not relevant to explaining the average difference between black and white school achievement. That difference is not the product of racist innuendo; the matter has been measured for decades, often by means of tests that do not require the use of words.



It is true enough that black IQ scores have risen—owing, one suspects, to improvements in the social condition of blacks over the last several generations. But the black-white gap in educational attainment has not narrowed. In *Freakonomics*, the authors assert that this gap is the result of differences in incomes between blacks and whites. Such differences certainly exist. But income differences are themselves in large measure the result of differences in intelligence, so one cannot explain the gap in IQ-based school scores by "controlling" for income.

The best test of this was done by Sandra Scarr and Richard Weinberg. They looked for changes in the IQ scores of black children who had been adopted by white families, mostly middle-class and well-educated. Over a ten-year period, there was not significant gain in the IQ's of the adopted black children. (Nor was there any gain in the IQ's of adopted white children.) The data strongly suggest that parental environment, even in well-to-do families, has only a modest and probably short-lived effect on educational ability.

If you bothered to look up Levitt's original paper on the black-white test gap, written with Ronald G. Fryer, you would find that the authors are indeed aware of the many other studies that have been done of this issue. But they also think that once one "controls" for socioeconomic status, black and white schoolchildren become "observationally equivalent." Observationally, perhaps; but not actually. As they themselves note, moreover, the gap between black and white test scores increases as children get older, and this widening gap cannot be explained by socio-economic differences in the quality of the schools the children attend. Experts on genetics have long known that heritability increases with age, and so, as a result, will the average gaps in school achievement between white and black children.

After wrongly minimizing the role of IQ, *Freakonomics* returns to the issue of parental influence on educational achievement. Here, Levitt and Dubner make some excellent points. Whether a mother works, whether the neighborhood is depressing, whether the child watches a lot of television, whether he or she attends a Head Start program—all of these factors have next to no educational effect. The fact is that parental behavior has a limited impact—which means that many of the villains allegedly responsible for our children's low school achievement are not villains at all.

There is much else to praise in this book as well, and much to learn from Levitt's observations. Did you know, for example, that real-estate brokers get more money for their own homes than they do for others'? That sumo wrestlers and some Chicago schoolteachers cheat? That swimming pools are more dangerous than guns? That drug dealers live at home with their moms? That people select names for their children in ways that differ tellingly by race and social class?

In general, the great strength of Levitt's work is that he asks interesting questions and searches hard for facts that can help answer them. Since he is an economist, he is not telling people how they ought to behave, only trying to explain how they do behave. And unlike some economists, he does not believe that human behavior can be understood simply on the basis of how much money people earn. In 1976, on the bicentennial of

American independence, I recall talking to a friend who later won the Nobel Prize in economics. He refused to accept that the Revolutionary war had cost Americans heavily in higher taxes and a depreciated currency. If we looked hard enough, he assured me, we would discover that we Americans started the Revolution in order to become economically better off.

Levitt does not make mistakes like that, which is one reason I urge people to read this book, even though much that is crucial has been left out or ignored. My advice in this: if you find something that intrigues you in *Freakonomics*, do not rely on the book to give you a full explanation of it. Instead, look up in a college library or on the Internet the articles Levitt has written, and study them. I wish he had assembled these articles and published them as a book. He would have made much less money, but his ideas would have been much clearer and, even in their scholarly form, easier to deal with.

Source: James Q. Wilson, "Dismal Science," in *Commentary*, Vol. 120, No. 1, July-August 2005, pp. 67-69.



Quotes

"Morality, it could be argued, represents the way people would like the world to work - whereas economics represents how it actually does work." Introduction, pg. 13

"If you learn how to look at data in the right way, you can explain riddles that otherwise might have seemed impossible. Because there is nothing like the sheer power of numbers to scrub away layers of confusion and contradiction." Introduction, pg. 14

"Since the science of economics is primarily a set of tools, as opposed to a subject matter, then no subject, however offbeat, need be beyond its reach." Introduction, pg. 14

"This isn't a book about the cost of chewing gum versus campaign spending per se, or about disingenuous real-estate agents, or the impact of legalized abortions on crime. It will certainly address these scenarios and dozens more, from the art of parenting to the mechanics of cheating, from the inner workings of the Ku Klux Klan to racial discrimination on *The Weakest Link*. What this book *is* about is stripping a layer or two from the surface of modern life and seeing what is happening underneath. Introduction, pg. 12

"It is well and good to opine or theorize about a subject, as humankind is wont to do, but when moral posturing is replaced by an honest assessment of the data, the result is often a new, surprising insight." Introduction, pg. 13

"Economics is, at root, the study of incentives: how people get what they want, or need, especially when other people want or need the same thing. Economists love incentives. They love to dream them up and enact them, study them and tinker with them. The typical economist believes the world has not yet invented a problem that he cannot fix if given a free hand to design the proper incentive scheme. His solution may not always be pretty - it may involve coercion or exorbitant penalties or the violation of civil liberties - but the original problem, rest assured, will be fixed. An incentive is a bullet, a lever, a key: on often tiny object with astonishing power to change a situation." Chapter 1, pg. 20

"For every clever person who goes to the trouble of creating an incentive scheme, there is an army of people, clever and otherwise, who will inevitably spend even more time trying to beat it. Cheating may or may not be human nature, but it is certainly a prominent feature in just about every human endeavor. Cheating is a primordial economic act: getting more for less." Chapter 1, pg. 24

"If economics is a science primarily concerned with incentives, it is also - fortunately - a science with statistical tools to measure how people respond to those incentives. All you need are some data." Chapter 1, pg. 28



"One or two lynchings went a long way toward inducing docility among even a large group of people, for people respond strongly to strong incentives. And there are few incentives more powerful than the fear of random violence - which, in essence, is why terrorism is so effective." Chapter 2, pg. 62

"The Ku Klux Klan was a group whose power - much like that of politicians or real-estate agents or stockbrokers - was derived in large part from the fact that it hoarded information. Once that information falls into the wrong hands (or, depending on your point of view, the *right* hands), much of the group's advantage disappears." Chapter 2, pg. 66

"Information is a beacon, a cudgel, an olive branch, a deterrent, depending on who wields it and how. Information is so powerful that the *assumption* of information, even if the information does not actually exist, can have a sobering effect." Chapter 2, pg. 67

"In the world of online dating, a headful of blond hair on a woman is worth about the same as having a college degree - and, with a \$100 dye job versus a \$100,000 tuition bill, an awful lot cheaper." Chapter 2, pg. 83

"The gulf between the information we publicly proclaim and the information we know to be true is often vast." Chapter 2, pg. 84

"In the early 1990s, just as the first cohort of children born after *Roe v. Wade* was hitting its late teen years - the years during which young men enter their criminal prime - the rate of crime began to fall. What this cohort was missing, of course, were the children who stood the greatest chance of becoming criminals. And the crime rate continued to fall as an entire generation came of age minus the children whose mothers had not wanted to bring a child into the world. Legalized abortion led to less unwantedness; unwantedness leads to high crime; legalized abortion, therefore, led to less crime." Chapter 4, pg. 139

"The typical parenting expert, like experts in other fields, is prone to sound exceedingly sure of himself. An expert doesn't so much argue the various sides of an issue as plant his flag firmly on one side. That's because an expert whose argument reeks of restraint or nuance often doesn't get much attention. An expert must be bold if he hopes to alchemize his homespun theory into conventional wisdom. His best chance of doing so is to engage the public's emotions, for emotion is the enemy of rational argument." Chapter 5, p. 148

"The likelihood of any given person being killed in a terrorist attack [is] infinitesimally smaller than the likelihood that the same person will clog up his arteries with fatty food and die of heart disease. But a terrorist attack happens *now*; death by heart disease is some distant, quiet catastrophe. Terrorist acts lie beyond our control; french fries do not." Chapter 5, pg. 151

"Here is the conundrum: by the time most people pick up a parenting book, it is far too late. Most of the things that matter were decided long ago - who you are, whom you married, what kind of life you lead. If you are smart, hardworking, well educated, well



paid, and married to someone equally fortunate, then your children are more likely to succeed. (Nor does it hurt, in all likelihood, to be honest, thoughtful, loving, and curious about the world.) But it isn't so much a matter of what you *do* as a parent; it's who you are. In this regard, an overbearing parent is a lot like a political candidate who believes that money wins elections, whereas in truth, all the money in the world can't get a candidate elected if the voters don't like him to start with." Chapter 5, pg. 175

"The belief in parental power is manifest in the first official act a parent commits: giving the baby a name. As any modern parent knows, the baby-naming industry is booming, as evidenced by a proliferation of books, websites, and baby-name consultants. Many parents seem to believe that a child cannot prosper unless it is hitched to the right name; names are seen to carry great aesthetic or even predictive powers." Chapter 6, pg. 179



Topics for Discussion

In discussing the bagel experiment, the authors state that the data show that smaller offices are more honest than bigger offices. The authors observe that this seems counterintuitive. Do you agree? Explain why or why not.

Compare a sumo wrestler who cheats to lose so that his competitor can move up in wrestling status with a baseball team that throws the World Series so that gamblers can make money. Is one form of cheating better than the other? Explain why or not.

Now suppose that the baseball team knows that a person needs a liver transplant or else he'll die, and he has bet his entire life savings on the game to pay for the transplant. Is it okay for the team to cheat now? Explain why or why not.

Now suppose the team knows that this person was once convicted of rape. Or instead, suppose that the team knows that the person has spent his life ministering to the poor. Does this make a difference? Is cheating *ever* okay? Explain why or why not.

Discuss whether the authors of *Freakonomics* care about whether cheating is good or bad.

In Chapter 2, *Freakonomics* explains how the Internet has reduced information asymmetry in the businesses of term life insurance and funeral caskets, thus lowering prices of these two commodities. Discuss other examples of the effects the Internet has had on information asymmetry.

Imagine how you would describe yourself in a job interview. Now imagine how you would describe yourself on a first date. Would there be differences in how you would portray yourself? Explain.

In Chapter 3, the authors offer several examples in which conventional wisdom is proven wrong, such as the conventional wisdom that drug dealers make a lot of money. Discuss other examples of the conventional wisdom being incorrect.

In Chapter 4, the authors argue that a strong economy cannot be the reason for the dramatic decrease in crime in the 1990s, stating that although a stronger job market may make certain crimes relatively less attractive, "that is only the case for crimes with a direct financial motivation - burglary, robbery, and auto theft - as opposed to violent crimes like homicide, assault, and rape." Do you agree with this statement? Explain why or why not.

Do you agree with the authors that legalized abortion is the primary reason for the drop in the crime rate in the 1990s? Explain why or why not. To what extent do your own morals affect your answer?

The authors state in Chapter 4 that, regardless of the morality of abortion, the link between the abortion rate and crime *at the very least* shows that "when the government



gives a woman the opportunity to make her own decision about abortion, she generally does a good job of figuring out if she is in a position to raise the baby well. If she decides she can't, she often chooses the abortion." What do the authors mean by this statement? Do you agree with this assertion? Why or why not?

In Chapter 5, the authors of *Freakonomics* assert generally that a child's school performance can be attributed more to who a parent *is* than to what a parent *does*. Do you agree? Why or why not?

In Chapter 6, the authors discuss how parents choose their children's names. Do you know why your parents chose the name you were given? Do you think that your own name has affected the outcome of your life in any way? Finally, do you think that other people's names affect the way you perceive them initially?

What is the authors' purpose in finishing the book with the Roland G. Fryer and Ted Kaczynski story? Explain.

- One of the fundamental principles in *Freakonomics*—and, indeed, in economics in general—is the notion that human behavior is shaped by incentives. Someone in need of money will likely respond to the incentive offered by a paying job. Similarly, someone concerned about the environment is likely to respond to the moral incentive offered by volunteering for a conservation group. What kinds of incentives do you encounter in your daily life? Are they economic, social, or moral? Are they positive or negative incentives? Which incentives have the most dramatic effect on your behavior? Write a report detailing some incentives you have encountered. Be sure to discuss how these incentives affect behavior, as well as cases where they fail to work as intended.
- In chapter 3 of *Freakonomics*, the authors describe the economics at play in a gang of Chicago drug dealers. The "foot soldiers" of the gang work for very little pay and incur a huge amount of risk to do what they do. Each foot soldier endures these conditions because he hopes someday to become the next leader of the gang, with all its power and financial rewards. However, there is only one leader position, and hundreds of foot soldiers are all vying for the spot. This type of labor market is known as a "winner take all" market, where just one or a few people succeed while all others are left with nothing for their efforts. Think of another real-world example of a "winner take all" job market, and discuss your thoughts with a group. What do the participants hope to achieve? What is the likelihood of their success? Why do they keep trying, even though the odds are against them?
- Conventional wisdom is a collection of accepted beliefs, not necessarily truths, about how the world works. The authors of *Freakonomics* contend that "conventional wisdom is often wrong." Think of an example of conventional wisdom and devise a plan for testing it. What kind of experiment would you create to prove or disprove the statement? How would you make sure to weed out other factors that might affect your results? Write a report detailing your plan of action. Remember to explain the example of conventional wisdom you would test, as well as what you expect the results to show.



- The authors of *Freakonomics* have been criticized for studying topics some people find offensive. For example, in addition to investigating the link between legalized abortion and crime, the authors also engage in an exercise where they place a "value" on an unborn fetus (equal to 1 percent of the value of a newborn baby). Are there moral lines that scientists are obligated not to cross? Or should scientists be free to study any topic they wish, regardless of the moral consequences? Write a brief position paper stating your opinion on the subject. Remember to include examples and arguments to support your position.



Further Study

Smith, Adam, *Wealth of Nations* (Great Minds Series), Prometheus Books, 1991, originally published in 1776.

This seminal work from the "Father of Economics" provides the first comprehensive discussion of economics in free-market societies. Though originally published in 1776, the book continues to be regarded as one of the most important economics texts in print.

Smith, Adam, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Great Books in Philosophy), Prometheus Books, 2000, originally published in 1759.

This early Smith work—referenced twice in *Freakonomics*—focuses on the author's explorations of morality and ethics in humans. His arguments support the idea that morality is, in some sense, innate; this serves as an effective complement to what some perceive as the "every man for himself" view found in *Wealth of Nations*.

Becker, Gary S., and Guity Nashat Becker, *The Economics of Life: From Baseball to Affirmative Action to Immigration, How Real-World Issues Affect Our Everyday Life*, McGraw-Hill, 1998.

Gary S. Becker is a Nobel Prize-winning economist and pioneer in the application of economic methods to other aspects of the modern world. Here, he presents an entertaining overview of how economics plays an important part in every person's daily life.

Wheelan, Charles, *Naked Economics: Undressing the Dismal Science*, W. W. Norton, 2003.

In this easy-to-read introduction to the basics of modern economics, Wheelan shares everything a layperson should know about the subject, but does not. The author relies on simple, relatable examples instead of complicated math to explain fundamental economic principles.



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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's "For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently



studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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