

American baby names are trending more and more unique even as other parts of culture go traditional

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A societal shift toward individualism may be responsible for the uptick in uniqueness of baby names. Credit: San Diego State University

What's in a name? The answer to that question has changed over time.

New research suggests that American parents are choosing more unique names for their children than they did a decade ago, bucking what many thought would be a return to more traditional names following recent economic turmoil. Instead, a societal shift toward individualism may be responsible for the uptick in uniqueness.

"The results are bit surprising, as many speculated that the Great Recession would 'reset' American culture toward more group-oriented values, such as choosing traditional names," said the study's lead author, San Diego State University psychology professor Jean Twenge. "Instead, parents are now even more likely to want their children to stand out rather than fit in."

Twenge, author of the book "Generation Me," analyzed data from the U.S. Social Security Administration's database of names given to 358 million babies born between 1880 and 2015 who were issued a Social Security number.

She found that between 2004 and 2006, 34 percent of boys and 24 percent of girls received one of the 50 more common names for that time period. Fast-forward to 2011-2015, and only 28 percent of boys and 21 percent of girls received one of the 50 most common names for that time period.

Delving deeper into the data, Twenge searched for trends connected to historical economic indicators, such as [stock market performance](#) and unemployment numbers. Some researchers have theorized that during lean economic years, parents tend to choose more common names for their children as society shifts toward more traditional, communal values. But Twenge's analysis didn't bear this out, finding that these variables were only weakly linked to baby naming trends.

Geographic trends further supported this finding: The trend toward

uniqueness was found both in California, which was severely affected by the recession, and in Texas, which was less affected. The findings, co-authored by Lauren Dawson, a 2013 SDSU graduate, and W. Keith Campbell of the University of Georgia, were published this week in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*.

"The Great Recession did see the return of some communal values, such as charity donations and saving energy," Twenge said. "However, American parents continued giving their children more and more unique names."

She suspects that rising cultural individualism is responsible for the nontraditional names.

"Most parents in the 2010s are millennials, a generation raised to value the unique self," Twenge said. "In naming their children, they may have been more influenced by their individualistic childhood than by their experiences during the recession."

More information: Jean M. Twenge et al. Still standing out: children's names in the United States during the Great Recession and correlations with economic indicators, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/jasp.12409](https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12409)

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