A Note on Popular Baby Names on the Social Security Website: An Important Onomastic Resource

FRANK NUESSEL

Department of Classical and Modern Languages, University of Louisville, Louisville, USA

This note provides a road map for the use of the Social Security "Popular Baby Names" website. It gives information on how to navigate the site and utilize all of its features for research, decision making in the selection of a baby's name, personal information, and many other possibilities.

Introduction

The United States Social Security Administration (SSA) is a separate and independent government agency founded during the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882–1945) with the passage of the Social Security Act on August 14, 1935. Although this agency has many important functions, one that interests onomasticians is its listing of the most popular (= most frequent) male and female baby names. Each year prior to Mother's Day (on the second Monday in May), the organization releases the most popular baby names for the previous year, which receives widespread coverage by the print and non-print media.

In 1998, the SSA published Actuarial Note # 139, "Name Distributions in the Social Security Area, August 1997," authored by Michael W. Shackleford (1998) on the distribution of given names. Shackleford (2016), now an acclaimed actuarial scientist and researcher on game studies and gambling studies, worked at the SSA from 1992 to 2000 before he started two websites *The Wizard of Odds* (2016) and *The Wizard of Las Vegas* (2016), which he subsequently sold to LCB Network in 2014 (Shackleford, 2016).

Shackleford's initial foray into given baby names provided the stimulus for the creation of the present Social Security "Popular Baby Names" website (SSA, 2016i). That document consisted of three tables (Shackleford, 1998):

(1)   Table 1 displays the three most frequent male given names for each year of birth from 1900 to 1997

(2)   Table 2 displays the three most frequent female given names for each year of birth from 1900 to 1997

(3)   Table 3 lists the 40 most popular given names for the year of birth of 1996.

Shackleford (1998) points out that:

Three tabulations are presented in his note. The first two are an historical perspective on the three most frequent names for both sexes for every year of birth from 1900 to 1997. The third is the 40 most frequent names for boys and girls born in 1996, the most recent year that full data is available.

Shackleford (1998) also states in the preface to his study that the following information is available on the Office of the Chief Actuary's website:

- Top 10 given names, by year of birth (1880–1919) and sex
- Top 10 given names, by year of birth (1920–1959) and sex
- Top 10 given names, by year of birth (1960–1997) and sex
- Large list of names for girls born in 1996
- Large list of names for boys born in 1996
- Large list of names for girls born in 1997
- Large list of names for boys born in 1997.

As noted, this initial effort gave rise to the sophisticated and very useful Social Security "Popular Baby Names" website (SSA, 2016i), which will be discussed in the next section.

Social Security baby name database

On the Social Security "Popular Baby Names" website (SSA, 2016i), the SSA provides valuable information on baby names. References to links within the Social Security "Popular Baby Names" website (SSA, 2016 + letter) appear in parentheses after each link name. All links appear in the bibliography with accessed dates. The following is an enumeration of the links found on the first page of the Social Security website (SSA, 2016i).

(1)   *Popularity of Baby Names by Birth Year* (SSA, 2016k). It is possible to enter the birth year and determine the most popular baby names for any year after 1879. Moreover, it is possible to access information about the most popular baby names for the top 20, the top 50, the top 100, the top 500, and the top 1,000 names. It also specifies the year in which the name was the most popular.

(2)   *Popularity of a Specific Name* (SSA, 2016j). It is possible to enter a baby name for the following time periods: 1900 and later, 1920 and later, 1950 and later, 1960 and later, 1980 and later, and 2000 and later. It is necessary to specify the time-span associated with the name. Once a baby name and a timeframe have been entered, the site produces a bar graph that represents the popularity of the name. The longer the bar, the more popular the name.

(3)   *Change in Name Popularity* (SSA, 2016c). At this site, there are three groups of name information: (i) *Names that Increased in Popularity* (SSA, 2016g). (ii) *Names that Decreased in Popularity* (2016f). (iii) *Names Having the Same Popularity* (SSA, 2016e). The popularity of the top 1,000 male and female baby names for the years 2014 and 2015 are shown; 464 male names and 478 female

names have an increase in popularity, while 549 male names and 553 female names have a decrease in popularity. Finally, 25 male names and 16 female names have no change in popularity.

(4)   *Change in Popularity of Baby Names by Decade from the 1880s to the 2010s* (SSA, 2016d).

(5)   *Popularity of Baby Names by State (1960 to date)* (SSA, 2016l). *The Top Five Baby Names for a Selected Year by State (1980 to date)* (SSA, 2016p).

(6)   *Popularity of Baby Names by the US Territories* (SSA, 2016m). Included are Puerto Rico (1998 to date), which has Commonwealth status, and the remaining US territories, which include American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, and the US Virgin Islands (1998 to date).

(7)   *Popularity of the Top Five Baby Names in Each of the Last 100 Years (1916 to 2015)* (SSA, 2016n). During the past 100 years Michael held the top spot for male name most often (44 times) and Mary the top spot for female name (40 years).

Data qualifications

The Social Security "Baby Names" site makes the following observation about the data source reproduced here (SSA, 2016a).

> All names are from Social Security card applications for births that occurred in the United States after 1879. Note that many people born before 1937 never applied for a Social Security card, so their names are not included in our data. For others who did apply, our records may not show the place of birth, and again their names are not included in our data.

> All data are from a 100 % sample of our records on Social Security card applications as of the end of February 2015.

The Social Security website also requests that people who use the data on popular names acknowledge the following qualifications, which are reproduced here (SSA, 2016a).

(1)   Names are restricted to cases where the year of birth, sex, state of birth (50 states and District of Columbia) are on record, and where the given name is at least two characters long.

(2)   Name data are not edited. For example, the sex associated with a name may be incorrect. Entries such as "Unknown" and "Baby" are not removed from the lists.

(3)   Different spellings of similar names are not combined. For example, the names Caitlin, Caitlyn, Kaitlin, Kaitlyn, Kaitlynn, Katelyn, and Katelynn are considered separate names and each has its own rank.

(4)   When two different names are tied with the same frequency for a given year of birth, we break the tie by assigning rank in alphabetical order.

(5)   Some names are applied to both males and females (for example, Micah). Our rankings are done by sex, so that a name such as Micah will have a different rank for males as compared to females. When you seek the popularity of a specific name (see "Popularity of Name") you can specify the sex. If you do not specify the sex, we provide rankings for the more popular name-sex combination.

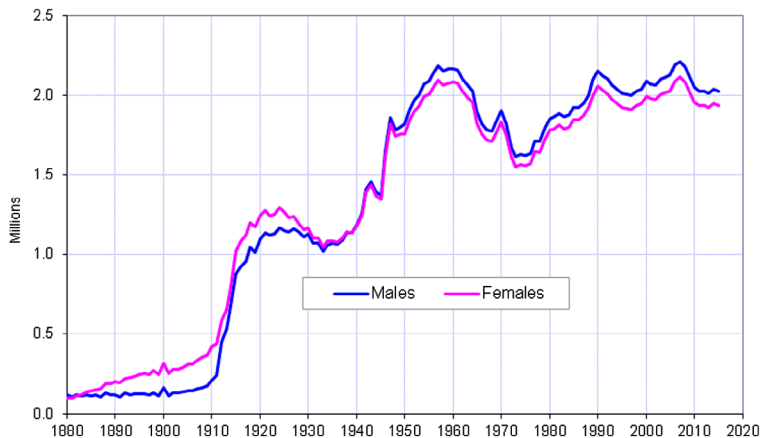FIGURE 1   Social Security number holders born in the US.

(6)   As an exception to the restriction that births be in the United States, we provide popular names for births in US territories. The data on births in US territories are *not* included in our national data.

The Social Security "Popular Baby Names" (2016i) website also points out the following information about the database, which is reproduced here (SSA, 2016o).

Our popular name data come from applications for Social Security cards. The graph [reproduced from the Social Security "Baby Names" website (SSA, 2016o) as Figure 1] below shows the number of applicants for a Social Security card by year of birth and sex. The number of such applicants is restricted to US births where the year of birth, sex, state of birth (50 states and District of Columbia) are known, and where the given name is at least two characters long.

Although today nearly everyone in the United States has a Social Security card, that was not the case in the early years of the Social Security program. Some people born before 1937 never obtained a Social Security card because their employment was not covered under Social Security or they died before it became covered. Even in more recent years, many of those who died before entering the covered work force never obtained a Social Security card. However, when the Internal Revenue Service began to require a dependent child's Social Security Number on Federal income tax returns (see Tax Reform Act of 1986) such deaths were no longer a significant factor.

One final note about Figure 1 is the fact that, in the Social Security "Popular Baby Names" website (2016i), it is possible to click on the graph to gain access to the data underlying the graph, i.e. to see the number of Social Security card holders born in the US by year of birth and sex from 1880 to 2015 (SSA, 2016h).

As a final note, the Social Security "Popular Baby Names" website (2016i) addresses names "beyond the top 1,000 names" (SSA, 2016b), as explained below.

To provide *popular* names and maintain an acceptable performance level on our servers, we provide only the top 1,000 names through our forms. However, we provide almost all names for researchers interested in name trends.

To safeguard privacy, we restrict our list of names to those with at least five occurrences. We provide these data on both a national and state-specific basis, in two separate collections of files, each zipped into a single file. The format of the data in the two files is described in a "*readme*" file contained in the respective zip files [available at the website].

Concluding remarks

This brief note is intended to provide a roadmap to the extremely useful Social Security "Popular Baby Names" website (2016i), which allows researchers and the general public to utilize this vast database for male and female baby names in the US from 1880 to date. This note cites the information included in the Social Security "Baby Names" website to ensure smooth access to the plethora of data included therein.

Bibliography

Shackleford, Michael W. 1998. "Name Distributions in the Social Security Area, August 1997." Actuarial Note Number 139, June, <https://www.ssa.gov/OACT/NOTES/note139/original_note139.html> (Accessed May 5, 2016).

Shackleford, Michael W. 2016. "Michael Shackleford," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Shackleford> (Accessed May 7, 2016).

Social Security Administration (SSA). 2016a. "Background Information." <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/background.html> (Accessed May 10, 2016).

Social Security Administration (SSA). 2016b. "Beyond the Top 1000 Names." <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/limits.html> (Accessed May 10, 2016).

Social Security Administration (SSA). 2016c. "Change in Name Popularity." <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/rankchange.html> (Accessed May 10, 2016).

Social Security Administration (SSA). 2016d. "Change in Popularity of Baby Names by Decade from the 1880s to the 2010s," <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/decades/index.html> (Accessed May 10, 2016).

Social Security Administration (SSA). 2016e. "Names Having the Same Popularity," <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/rankchange.html#&ht=2> (Accessed May 10, 2016).

Social Security Administration (SSA). 2016f. "Names that Decreased in Popularity," <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/rankchange.html#&ht=1> (Accessed May 10, 2016).

Social Security Administration (SSA). 2016g. "Names that Increased in Popularity," <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/rankchange.html#&ht=0> (Accessed May 10, 2016).

Social Security Administration (SSA). 2016h. "Number of Social Security Card Holders Born in the US by Year of Birth and Sex," <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/numberUSbirths.html> (Accessed May 10, 2016).

Social Security Administration (SSA). 2016i. "Popular Baby Names," <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/> (Accessed May 7, 2016).

Social Security Administration (SSA). 2016j. "Popularity of a Specific Name," <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/#&ht=2> (Accessed May 10, 2016).

Social Security Administration (SSA). 2016k. "Popularity of Baby Names by Birth Year," <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/#&ht=1> (Accessed May 10, 2016).

Social Security Administration (SSA). 2016l. "Popularity of Baby Names by State (1960 to date)," <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/state/index.html> (Accessed May 10, 2016).

Social Security Administration (SSA). 2016m. "Popularity of Baby Names by the US Territories," <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/territories.html> (Accessed May 10, 2016).

Social Security Administration (SSA). 2016n. "Popularity of the Top Five Baby Names in Each of the Last 100 Years (1916 to 2015)," <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/top5names.html2016> (Accessed May 10, 2016).

Social Security Administration (SSA). 2016o. "Social Security Number Holders," <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/births.html> (Accessed May 10, 2016).

Social Security Administration (SSA). 2016p. "Top Five Baby Names for a Selected Year by State (1980 to date)," <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/state/top5_2014.html> (Accessed May 10, 2016).

The Wizard of Las Vegas. 2016. <http://wizardofvegas.com> (Accessed May 7, 2016).

The Wizard of Odds. 2016. <http://wizardofodds.com> (Accessed May 7, 2016).

Notes on contributor

Frank Nuessel is Editor of *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* (2008–). He was elected a member of the *Asociación Norteamericana de Lengua Española* in 2015. He served as President of the Semiotic Society of America (2011), and Chief Reader of AP Italian (2006–2009, 2011–2012). He was President of the American Association of Teachers of Italian (2012–2014).

Correspondence to: Frank Nuessel, Department of Classical and Modern Languages, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 40292-0001, USA. Email: fhnues01@louisville.edu