

UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM

The Economist Explains

ADVENTURES *in the*
SURPRISINGLY TRUE

Edited by

TOM STANDAGE

The
Economist

BOOKS

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Introduction: in praise of unconventional wisdom

THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM – that body of knowledge that is generally assumed to be true – has its limits. It is certainly incomplete; it can be out of date; it may contain errors. The wise man, as Socrates put it, is he who knows what he does not know, and thus understands that his wisdom has limits. So it is with the conventional wisdom. Rather than pretending that it is perfect, it is surely better to acknowledge that it has flaws, and strive to address them by extending, maintaining and updating it.

That is where unconventional wisdom comes in, in the form of new knowledge, unexpected findings and deeper explanations of what is already understood – which can only be found by venturing beyond the intellectual frontier of what is already known. The resulting discoveries are often surprising, exciting and counter-intuitive. They may also be incorrect. Unconventional wisdom must be tested carefully against the conventional kind. But where it passes that test, it can be gradually integrated into the body of conventional wisdom as it becomes more widely known and accepted. And then the cycle continues.

This book is a collection of reports from beyond that boundary of accepted knowledge, on a wide range of topics, drawn from *The Economist's* output of explainers and charts. It brings together new findings and explanations that are not merely surprising, but that also, as far as we can tell, happen to be true. And knowledge that is surprisingly true, though it starts out as unconventional wisdom,

is destined to end up becoming widely accepted as conventional wisdom.

So join us on our adventures in some of the wilder reaches of the surprisingly true. For anyone interested in how our understanding of the world is changing, this is the place to look: beyond the limits of knowledge, where old certainties are challenged and new and unexpected ideas are jostling for acceptance. Why, for example, does height matter in politics? Why is it better for the planet for you to be a part-time vegan than a full-time vegetarian? Do friends prefer sloppily wrapped Christmas gifts? Does cannabis really give you the munchies? Should your dog fear Easter more than fireworks night?

By keeping an eye on the places where unconventional wisdom is emerging, you can see what is coming next, and watch the conventional wisdom of the future taking shape. In the process, you can steal a march on other people who are not paying such close attention. Unconventional wisdom encourages you to challenge your preconceptions. It invites you to look more deeply into how the world works. And as well as being informative, it is often amusing or entertaining. We hope you will find that the same is true of this book.

Tom Standage
Deputy Editor, *The Economist*
June 2020

How pregnancy makes people more law-abiding

Almost any parent will agree that once you have a child, life is never quite the same again. Having to provide for another, utterly dependent, human being can spur new mums and dads to find reserves of generosity, care and energy they never knew they had. Their behaviour changes before the birth, too. A paper entitled “Family formation and crime”, published in February 2020 by Maxim Massenkoff and Evan Rose, two economics PhD students at the University of California, Berkeley, suggests that before a child is born, the prospect of impending parenthood makes people much more law-abiding.

Using data on more than 1m babies born in Washington state between 1996 and 2009, and records of thousands of crimes committed there between 1992 and 2015, the authors find that when women become pregnant, they are much less likely to be arrested, for a wide range of crimes. The effect is most marked for “economic” crimes, such as theft and burglary, but is also true of assaults, vandalism, and alcohol and drug offences. Arrest rates fall by 50% almost as soon as women become pregnant and fall much further as the pregnancy goes on. Although they bounce back somewhat after childbirth, arrest rates stabilise at about half pre-pregnancy levels.

More surprisingly, the same pattern holds for fathers. Men are much likelier than women to commit crimes of all sorts in the first place, and the decline in some types of crime is less dramatic for dads than for mums. But arrest rates drop by around 25% once their partners become pregnant, and stay around this mark even after birth. In a blog post commenting on the paper, Alexander Tabarrok of George Mason University described the effect as “astoundingly large”. A study by Mr Tabarrok published in 2007 concluded that the threat of an additional 20 years of prison made criminals 17% less likely to reoffend; the prospect of fatherhood, it seems, is more salutary than that of two decades of incarceration.

Alas, Mr Massenkoff and Mr Rose also reach other, less encouraging, conclusions. Arrests of men for domestic violence

soar immediately after birth. The authors suggest this may be because new parents are living together for the first time. Whatever the cause, for some, parenthood can bring misery as well as joy.

How much does being haunted reduce a house's value?

Haunted houses are not for the faint of heart. Deceased former tenants – normally those who have suffered violent, untimely deaths – are said to remain in residence. Living occupants may complain of creaking doors and floorboards, shifting furniture, and of hearing knocking sounds, footsteps or voices. Ghostly apparitions may terrorise children; pets flee eerie spectres.

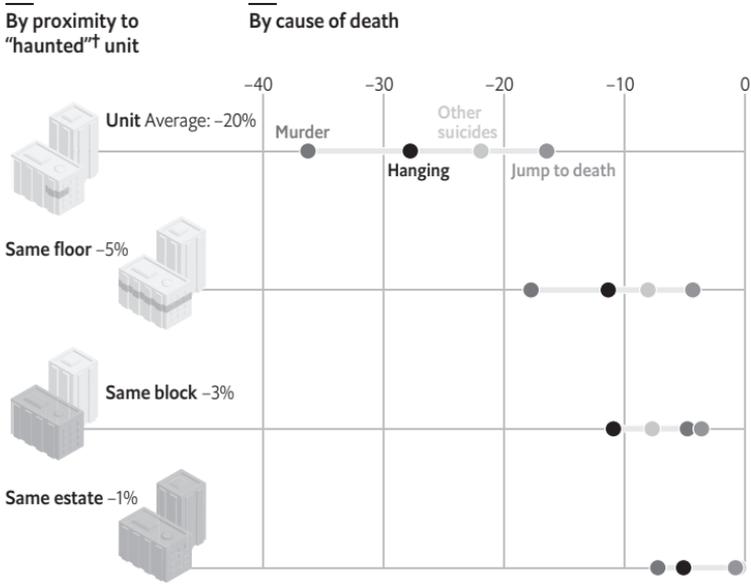
Sceptics might write off such claims as the product of paranoia or an overactive imagination, but haunted houses do spook the property market. That ghosts depress prices, especially in some Asian cities such as Hong Kong, has long been recognised. But a working paper published in 2019 by Utpal Bhattacharya and Kasper Meisner Nielsen of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and Daisy Huang of Nanjing Audit University, attempts to calculate the size of the ectoplasmic discount. It estimates that Hong Kong properties that are considered to be haunted – owing to the unnatural death of a former inhabitant from an accident, murder or suicide – lose a fifth of their value on average. The price of such *hongza*, or haunted flats, can remain depressed for years.

Using a database of more than 1.1m residential real-estate transactions, combined with data from four commercial haunted-house websites (including that maintained by squarefoot.com.hk), the authors identify 898 haunted properties that changed hands between 2000 and 2015. After controlling for size and age, long-term price trends and seasonal fluctuations in demand, they find not only that the price of haunted flats is depressed by an average of 20%, but that there is also a clear “ripple effect” in the local market. Neighbouring properties fall by 5%; those in the same block drop by 3%; and those in the same housing complex by 1%.

So ghosts and ghouls are a factor for discerning Hong Kong house-hunters to weigh. But the process by which a property becomes haunted matters, too. Suicides (which account for nearly three-quarters of hauntings in the territory) reduce the value of

Ghost-benefit analysis

Hong Kong, estimated effect of "haunted" houses on property sale prices*, %



Source: "Spillovers in asset prices: the curious case of haunted houses", U. Bhattacharaya, D. Huang and K. Meisner Nielsen, HKUST Institute for Emerging Market Studies, working paper, 2019

*2000-15
 †Due to an unnatural death

affected properties by between 16% and 28%, depending on the method used; deadly accidents depress prices by 20%. Murders, meanwhile, have the most chilling effect on values, sending prices tumbling by a whopping 36%. But look on the bright side: bargains are available for long-term buyers who have the psychological fortitude to ignore the gruesome history of their prospective purchase – or are willing to ignore things going bump in the night.

The link between air pollution and violent crime

Air pollution is nothing to sniff at. Perhaps a third of all deaths from strokes, lung cancer and respiratory diseases can be linked to toxic air. In some cities, breathing outdoors is as dangerous as smoking 25 cigarettes a day. But whereas the health problems associated with air pollution can take years to manifest themselves, research highlights a much more immediate – and violent – risk.

Breathing dirty air is linked to aggressive behaviour, according to a paper published in 2019 by Jesse Burkhardt and his colleagues at Colorado State University and the University of Minnesota. Using crime data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and air-pollution data from the Environmental Protection Agency, the authors analyse the link between air pollution and violent crime in 397 American counties between 2006 and 2013.

They find that a 10% increase in same-day exposure to $PM_{2.5}$ (particulate matter less than 2.5 microns in diameter) is associated with a 0.14% increase in violent crimes, such as assault. An equivalent increase in exposure to ozone, an air pollutant, is associated with a 0.3% jump in such crimes. Pollution levels can easily rise by much more than that. In November 2018, owing to wildfires, $PM_{2.5}$ levels in San Francisco reached seven times the usual average. Correlation is not causation, of course (there may, for example, be a third variable affecting both pollution and crime), and the authors are cautious not to speculate about the precise mechanism by which contaminated air might lead to more rapes or robberies.

But this is not the first time researchers have identified a relationship between pollution and crime. In the 1970s, America banned lead-based paint and began phasing out leaded petrol; two decades later, crime fell. Many researchers have since argued that the two developments were linked. In a paper published in 2007, Jessica Wolpaw Reyes, an economist at Amherst College, estimated that the drop in lead exposure experienced by American children in the 1970s and 1980s could explain more than half of the decline in violent crime during the 1990s.

The findings of Mr Burkhardt and his co-authors suggest that cleaner air could reduce violent crime still further. The benefits would be substantial. The authors estimate that a 10% reduction in daily $PM_{2.5}$ and ozone exposure could save America \$1.4bn a year through reduced assaults (the savings range from the cost of the immediate police response to lost productivity due to injuries). A lot of people get angry about pollution. Evidently they may get angry because of it, too.

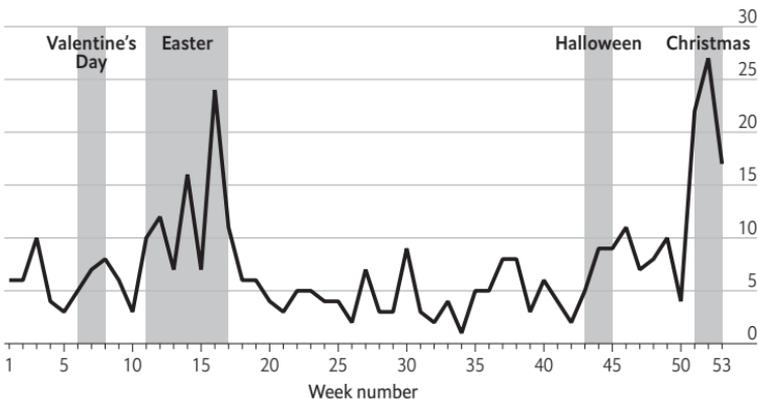
Why Easter is dangerous for dogs

Easter-egg hunts are a delight for children, a pain for parents to organise – and potentially lethal for the family pooch. The worst a chocolate binge can do for a mischievous four-year-old child is a dizzying sugar high. For dogs, however, the theobromine found in cocoa beans can cause vomiting, diarrhoea and seizures. A study published in 2017 of British veterinarian clinics between 2012 and 2017 found a large spike in canine chocolate intoxication in the weeks around Easter. Some 60% of British vets reported such a case in 2018. A similar problem occurs at Christmas.

Peaks of chocolate exposure around Valentine’s Day and Halloween, found in previous studies carried out in Germany and America, were not found in Britain, “perhaps reflecting alternative romantic gift choices, or more fastidious curation by their recipient”, the researchers noted. Instead, Britain’s specific seasonal pattern “merits highlighting this risk to clients, particularly in the run-up to Christmas and Easter”, they concluded. No particular breed was associated with risk, but younger dogs (less than four years old) were found to be most likely to have a sweet tooth.

Toxic choc syndrome

Britain, vet consultations per week for dogs with chocolate intoxication, 2012–17 average



Source: “Heightened risk of canine chocolate exposure at Christmas and Easter”, P.-J.M. Noble *et al.*, *Veterinary Record*, 2017

Fortunately, all of the poorly pets in the sample responded to treatment and recovered from their snack-induced ailments. But owners should beware: a pup with a sweet tooth will stop at nothing to get its fill. The study's authors reported examples of dogs slurping chocolate liqueurs and cups of cocoa. Chocolate oranges and Toblerone bars were especially popular, with one naughty pooch guzzling six of both. The worst offender managed to consume an entire "garden of Easter eggs hidden for a large party of small children". Pity the parents who had to deal with the consequences.

Why societies change their minds faster than people do

As recently as the late 1980s, most Americans thought gay sex was not only immoral but also ought to be illegal. Yet by 2015, when the Supreme Court legalised same-sex marriage, there were only faint murmurs of protest. Today, two-thirds of Americans support it, and even those who frown on it make no serious effort to criminalise it.

This surge in tolerance illustrates how fast public opinion can shift. The change occurred because two trends reinforced each other. First, many socially conservative old people have died, and their places in polling samples have been taken by liberal millennials. In addition, some people changed their minds. Support for gay marriage has risen by some 30 percentage points within each generation since 2004, from 20% to 49% among those born between 1928 and 1945 and from 45% to 78% among those born after 1980. But this shift in opinion makes gay marriage an exception among political issues. Since 1972 the University of Chicago has run a General Social Survey every year or two, which asks Americans their views on a wide range of topics. Over time, public opinion has grown more liberal. But this is mostly the result of generational replacement, not of changes of heart.

For example, in 1972, 42% of Americans said communist books should be banned from public libraries. Views varied widely by age: 55% of people born before 1928 (who were 45 or older at the time) supported a ban, compared with 37% of people aged 27 to 44 and just 25% of those aged 26 or younger. Today only a quarter of Americans favour this policy. However, within each of these birth cohorts, views today are almost identical to those from 47 years ago. The change was caused entirely by generational replacement, with the share of respondents born before 1928 falling from 49% to nil, and that of millennials – who were not born until at least 1981, and staunchly oppose such a ban – rising from zero to 36%.

Not every issue is as extreme as these two. But on six of the eight questions for which the data were analysed by *The Economist*

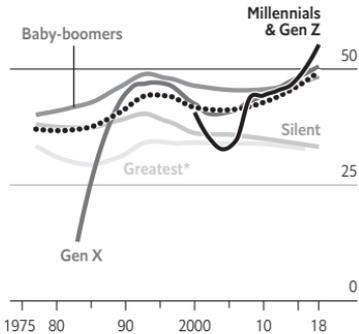
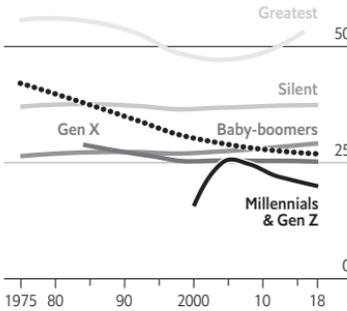
On most issues, public opinion changes mainly as younger generations replace older ones

United States, % agreeing by generation

..... National average

Communist books should be removed from public libraries 75

Abortion should be allowed for any reason 75

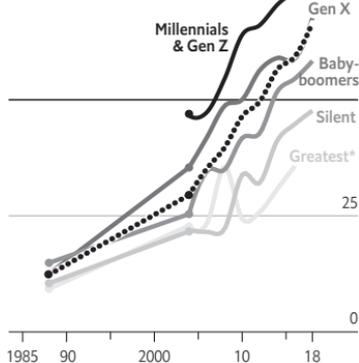
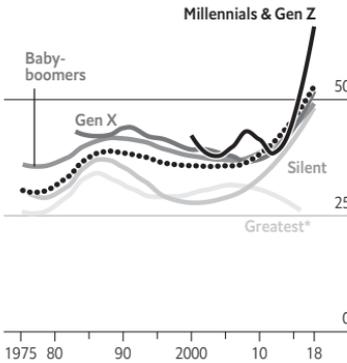


Tolerance for communist speech has risen solely because older generations have died off

Until recently, boomers were more pro-choice than both their parents and their children were

The government spends too little on improving black people's lives 75

Gay people should be allowed to get married 75

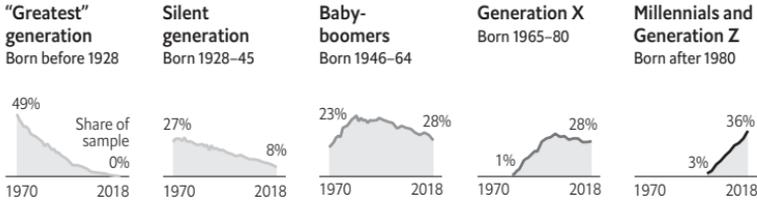


The share of people who think minority groups suffer from injustice has surged since 2013

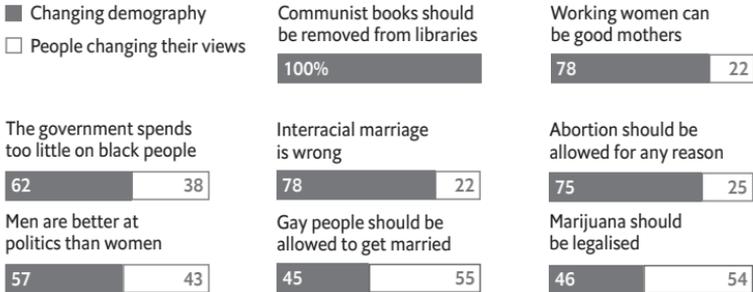
Support for gay marriage has grown steadily within all age groups

Sources: General Social Survey; *The Economist*

*And earlier



Share of change in opinion explained by:



*And earlier

– all save gay marriage and marijuana legalisation – demographic shifts accounted for a bigger share of overall movement in public opinion than changes in beliefs within cohorts. On average, their impact was about twice as large. Social activists devote themselves to changing people’s views, and sometimes succeed. In general, however, battles for hearts and minds are won by grinding attrition more often than by rapid conquest.

Are extraterrestrials extra patriotic?

In the final scene of *Independence Day*, a blockbuster film from 1996, Captain Steve Hiller (Will Smith), who has just saved the world from alien annihilation, watches as exploding debris from an extraterrestrial mothership lights up the sky, just in time for the American holiday. Turning to his stepson, he says with a smile, “Didn’t I promise you fireworks?” For Americans, such pyrotechnic displays are an important Fourth of July tradition. Can the same be said for UFOs?

Perhaps. According to the National UFO Reporting Centre (NUFORC), an American non-profit organisation that has collected reports of unidentified flying objects since 1974, UFO sightings tend to spike on July 4th. Between 1995 and 2018, around 2% of all sightings recorded by NUFORC fell on this date – seven times more than would be expected by chance. What, other than an other-worldly surge of American patriotism among extraterrestrials, could explain this strange phenomenon?

Hollywood may be partly to blame. In the two years before the release of the Will Smith film, NUFORC recorded an average of seven UFO sightings on July 4th (eight in 1995 and six in 1996). In 1997, a year after aliens burst onto the big screen, there were 74 – more than ten times as many. Traditions associated with the July 4th holiday may also help explain the spike. Independence Day is typically spent outdoors. Heavy alcohol use is not uncommon. Intoxication may cause some people to confuse celebratory fireworks with alien spacecraft.

UFO sightings cannot be blamed entirely on drunkenness. They often have earthly explanations. Some of the biggest spikes in reported UFO sightings in recent years have later been explained by meteors (such as that observed in the Midwest in November 1999), missiles (such as a US Navy launch in November 2015) or debris from satellites re-entering the atmosphere. Or so the government would have you believe.

What waffle restaurants reveal about hurricanes

Waffle House, a breakfast chain from the American South, is better known for reliability than quality. All its restaurants stay open every hour of every day. After extreme weather, such as floods, tornadoes and hurricanes, Waffle Houses are quick to reopen, even if they can serve only a limited menu. That makes them a remarkably reliable, if informal, barometer for weather damage. In 2011, both the Waffle House restaurants near Joplin, Missouri stayed open during a devastating tornado that killed 158 people and caused \$3bn in damage. Because of that, government officials responding to hurricanes have taken to monitoring the so-called “Waffle House Index”.

The index was invented by Craig Fugate, a former director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in 2004 after a spate of hurricanes battered America’s east coast. “If a Waffle House is closed because there’s a disaster, it’s bad. We call it red. If they’re open but have a limited menu, that’s yellow,” he explained to NPR, America’s public radio network. Fully functioning restaurants are tagged in the Waffle House Index in shining green. The company is leaning into its reputation. When a dangerous hurricane approaches, the firm activates a Waffle House Storm Centre to monitor it and provide guidance to its restaurant managers.

A blog post from FEMA, published in 2011, explained why the index is not merely endearing, but also informative: “The sooner restaurants, grocery and corner stores, or banks can reopen, the sooner local economies will start generating revenue again – signalling a stronger recovery for that community.” Though the first-order effect of hurricanes is the destruction of homes and displacement of people, they can also prove devastating to local economies. New Orleans lost more than half its population after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 – and 40% of its jobs. So the Waffle House Index provides an indicator of economic resilience.

Climate scientists think that a warming planet makes for

more frequent and more destructive hurricanes. Humanity's unhelpful tendency to build homes and cities along coastlines does not help matters. Swiss Re, an insurance firm, estimates that global disasters inflicted \$140bn in economic losses in 2019. With countries shuffling their feet on emissions reductions, it is likely that disasters will only become more costly – because not every business is as hardy as America's indomitable waffle chain.