

A silhouette of a man in a suit looking out a window at a cityscape. The background is a blurred view of buildings and a street.

# Why Jamal Can't Get a Job

By Patricia Briske

Economists and sociologists have long agreed that African Americans have more trouble landing a job than their white counterparts do. But what stops employers from opening the door to candidates who look good on paper? Associate professor of economics **Marianne Bertrand** and **Sendhil Mullainathan** say it's all in the name.

Looking for a job is hard work, no matter what shape the economy is in. It all starts with the resumé—a one-page chance to sum up a lifetime of accomplishments in a way that stands out from a hundred others. But many employers never get past the name, according to a study by Bertrand and Mullainathan, associate professor of economics at M.I.T., titled, “Are Emily and Brendan More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination.”

Between June 2001 and May 2002, they sent out about 5,000 resumé in response to 1,300 help-wanted ads in Boston and

Chicago. They found that resumé with white-sounding names received 50 percent more calls than those with African American-sounding names, despite identical qualifications.

The result didn't surprise them. “In the 1960s, [University Professor of Economics and of Sociology] **Gary Becker** wrote about taste-based discrimination, which is that employers are prejudiced and that they have a real dislike for dealing with African American employees,” she said. But economic theory also takes into account statistical discrimination, Bertrand added. “We know that, on average, African Americans



Dan Dry

Marianne Bertrand, a member of the GSB faculty since 2000, is associate professor of economics. Bertrand's research interests include corporate finance and labor economics.

have lower education. People use race as a signal of these unobserved characteristics. In our study, the names are clearly triggering race, but the issue is that they might also be triggering social background. And you've got to be careful there because African Americans, on average, are more likely to be unemployed, earn lower wages, and have less education than whites."

But the authors were alarmed by another aspect of the study. Improving the credentials on the resumés brought more responses for white applicants, but it had no effect for black job seekers, Bertrand said. "What is the incentive, being African American, to invest in those extra skills—to take that evening class, to really fight to get that extra experience? What we're finding is that you have much less reward for engaging in all those investments. That was the most distressing thing we found."

### Creating the "Candidates"

To generate fictitious job candidates, Bertrand and Mullainathan culled actual resumés that had been posted on Web sites six months earlier from various job categories: sales, administrative support, clerical, and customer service. They kept the structure, such as number of jobs and level of education. "But we replaced the Boston schools

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with Chicago schools, and the Boston employers with Chicago employers of the same industry, size, and category," Bertrand said.

To choose names, they reviewed birth certificate data from Massachusetts from 1974 to 1979, noting which names were given most often to African Americans and to whites (all of whom would now be in their mid- to late 20s). Student assistants headed to local train and bus stations with lists of the names to check the public perception of which names were considered distinctively African American and distinctively white. Bertrand and Mullainathan then omitted some names, including Maurice and

Jerome, which didn't strike people as distinctively African American even though they were more often given to black men.

In creating fictitious addresses for the candidates, the researchers used every residential neighborhood in Chicago and Boston. They also chose schools that were integrated. "We made sure not to put a white person in a 100-percent-black high school. This was totally balanced, and that was essential to us because if you start putting people with African American names in worse schools, then you're back to, 'Maybe that's not discrimination. I know this person must have lower human capital, or a lower education, than a white person,'" Bertrand said.

Finally, Bertrand and Mullainathan also decided to boost qualifications on two of the four resumés they sent in response to each ad. "There was an extra year of experience, some honors at school . . . small manipulations that would make the resumé look better but would not make the person too qualified for the job," Bertrand said.

They then randomly allocated two white-sounding names and two African American-sounding names. "That was the only thing that differed across the two groups."

Bertrand and Mullainathan found various forms of discrimination. "I think the most clear thing is that there's name discrimination," she said. "And our inclination is to jump from name discrimination to racial discrimination." The researchers also found social discrimination. "Whoever you are, whatever your resumé is, we find people who live in 'worse' neighborhoods—meaning low income, black, low education—those people have lower response rates. What was interesting was that this was not different for whites and blacks. Living on the South Side [of Chicago] hurts you whether you're white or black."

### Corporate Culture

While most of the help-wanted ads did not list a company name, the researchers were able to identify several of the employers. But Bertrand said they were not interested in individual company names, only statistics about the firm—the type of industry, the size, the company's location. Com-

# What's in a Name

Polling the public, researchers determined that names they used in their study—both first names and surnames—are perceived as “typically white” or “typically African American.”

White Female	Black Female	White Male	Black Male	White Last Names	Black Last Names
Emily	Aisha	Neil	Rasheed	Baker	Jackson
Anne	Keisha	Geoffrey	Tremayne	Kelly	Jones
Jill	Tamika	Brett	Kareem	McCarthy	Robinson
Allison	Lakisha	Brendan	Darnell	Murphy	Washington
Sarah	Tanisha	Greg	Tyrone	Murray	Williams
Meredith	Latoya	Todd	Jamal	O'Brien	
Laurie	Kenya	Matthew	Hakim	Ryan	
Carrie	Latonya	Jay	Leroy	Sullivan	
Kristen	Ebony	Brad	Jermaine	Walsh	

panies located on Chicago’s South Side, which has a large African American population, might be more likely to employ black human resources managers, which would affect the callback rate slightly. “Employers located in a neighborhood that was slightly more African American were slightly more likely to call blacks,” she said. But it never reached a rate that would point to reverse discrimination. In fact, she said, “[An African American would] have to be in a neighborhood that’s about 97 percent black to get equal treatment.”

The study drew a strong response from the media, including mentions in the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune* and on CNN. Bertrand also received dozens of phone calls and e-mail messages from individuals who told her the study had struck a chord. “I got loads of e-mail from people with those African American names we used, explaining how difficult it’s been. Even the reverse—people who were African American with very white names, telling me how terrible it is for them when they get called for an interview. They get there and feel like they’re being stared at, like, ‘Are you really Emily Walker?’ I got a lot of e-mail from those people.”

Bertrand also heard from one man with an Arabic name who said he got little response after sending out his resumé. “He changed the name on his resumé, toned down the qualifications a bit and sent it out again, and

he got plenty of responses,” she said. “This is just one data point, but it’s interesting that the study resonated with lots of people’s personal experiences as well.”

She and Mullainathan would have liked to include Hispanic, Asian, and Middle Eastern names in the study, but logistics prevented it. “I think it would have been great to do other ethnic groups. For instance, there are different theories floating around Asians, with some people saying they perform better than whites. But we would have had to double the size of the study, and it would have been a really long process,” she said.

Bertrand also received calls from people who train human resources managers, wanting to see the study, as well as other researchers interested in applying the methodology to other work, like testing medical students by putting white- and black-sounding names on medical records.

While the results of Bertrand and Mullainathan’s study illustrate how discrimination continues to affect the corporate landscape, she cautions that it does not mean there has been no progress in race relations. “We don’t have a benchmark. I don’t know what this would have looked like 20 or 30 years

**ON THE WEB**

**SOUND OFF!** What do you think about Bertrand’s findings? E-mail us at [editor@gsb.uchicago.edu](mailto:editor@gsb.uchicago.edu).