Some of us got names our parents just liked. Some of us are named after parents, grandparents, or family friends. And some of us are named after vampires, Disney princesses, witches, wizards, Kardashians, or the mermaid from *Splash…*even if we don’t know it. In fact, our parents might not even know it.

The US Social Security Administration has a database documenting popularity for every name given to more than five babies of a given gender in a given year from 1880 through 2017, letting me take a look at trends in the names of fictional and nonfictional pop-culture icons and their relationship to a name’s popularity. I looked at *a lot* of names—far more than are included here—and found a few key phenomena worth highlighting:

1. **Names and Gender**

Society is constantly grappling with redefining what we consider a “girl thing” or a “boy thing,” and the trends around baby names shine an interesting light on that. Sometimes as a name becomes more popular for girls, it becomes less popular for boys, and vice versa. Other times, a name’s increasing popularity for girls will actually make a name either more popular for boys or even coincide with its usage for boys for the first time.

1. **Alternate Spellings and Nicknames Vs. Full Names**

My middle name is Kaitlin. My mom chose that spelling; I know that for sure because my dad still doesn’t know what spelling I use. In his defense, figuring out the number of unique ways to spell Kaitlin/Caytlin/Katelyn could be a word problem in a middle school math class on permutations.

The advanced students can toss in whether they go by Kate or Cait or Katy or Catie—except that might mean their name is Katharine/Katherine/ Catherine/Kathryn—which might mean they go by Cat or Kathy (or Kat or Cathy).

Then you have names like Stephen/Steven and Ann/Anne where you’ve got a 50% chance at getting it right—33% if you’re counting whether they go by Steve or Annie.

The point is that spellings and nicknames evolve the same way words and expressions do—some people are doing the thing and then more people start doing it. We don’t often get to see how that plays out.

1. **Virality and Secondary Effects**

We pick up colloquialisms from our friends, the internet, celebrities, and more. There are a lot of expressions I’ve started to use that have a 100% correlation with how much I’ve been binge watching Ru Paul’s Drag Race (answer: too much).

However, when someone tells me they have a juicy story to tell me and I literally make a cup of tea for the conversation, it’s because I heard people saying things like “spill the tea” or saw the Kermit “but that’s none of my business” meme long before I started watching Drag Race and understood that the “T” evolved from Black Drag Culture and isn’t just about drinking tea while listening to dramatic stories.

Names are similar—one trend sparks a different trend, and eventually we build our own associations with it, until we may not even know the origins.

OR

Even if I didn’t first here “the lady doth protest too much” or “though she be but little she is fierce” from Shakespeare, I know that those are from Willy S.

That being said, I got the phrase “This is what dreams are made of,” from the Lizzie McGuire movie/classic Hilary Duff number, not “such stuff that dreams are made on,” and it took me a *long* time to realize that Smash Mouth was lying to me that “All that glitters is gold,” because I definitely thought that was the actual expression for a lot of years.

Names are an interesting microcosm of this sort of language evolution—the idea that things can go viral without the internet, that popularity can build on itself and also how trends morph and spark one another. \*\* nicknames = slang

1. **Cultural Capital**

Media and pop culture are so profoundly intertwined with our society and have so much meaning both in our own individual and broader cultural histories. Looking at their impact on naming trends is one small way to see the impact of individuals or works.

## Madison Ave

The movie *Splash* has the distinction of being the 10th highest grossing movie of 1984, the first movie with Tom Hanks that wasn’t a total flop, and popularizing the name Madison.

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This is a pretty clear example of virality: In 1984, the main character from *Splash* christened herself “Madison” based on the famous east side Avenue, and by the end of the year, more girls were given the name Madison (42) than in the last 100 years combined (30). By the end of the decade, 3, 789 girls had been named Madison. The popularity peaked in 2001, when 22,164 girls were named Madison in a single year. Most people probably weren’t named after the movie, their parents just liked the name. I’m not the first one to note this—*Freakonomics* got there before me.

What’s less frequently discussed: Madison was a used consistently year to year but infrequently overall for boys, with an average of about 34 uses per year. The trend we saw with girls actually was duplicated for boys on a *much* smaller scale. From 1983 to 1984, the name’s usage increased from 23 to 42, and rose over the next decade, peaking in 1995 with 269 uses before declining slowly again. Madison’s popularity levels as a boy’s name are comparable to the pre-*Splash* average as of 2017, unlike its usage as a girl’s name.

Perhaps most interesting is the adjacent trend—the name Madeline also increased significantly in popularity through the ‘80s and ‘90s, whether because people wanted to call their daughters “Maddy” or the similar qualities between the two names helped it trend.

## Can you wiggle your nose?

Chart

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The TV show *Bewitched* and it’s impact on the name Samantha is probably the next best known example of viral pop culture impact on a relatively obscure baby name. Many baby name sites will include reference to the show in the name’s origins.

A closer look tells us a few things—one way to get a better understand of causality is to look for adjacent trends. *Splash* introduced Madison onto the scene but its cultural cache is not massive—names of other characters didn’t get a major bump and it’s not that frequently referenced today.

*Bewitched* has a lot more cultural capital, and one way to see that is the trends around Darren—Samantha’s husband’s name, Tabitha, starting with the birth of the couple’s daughter in 1966, and perhaps most telling, the introduction of the name Endora, after Samantha’s mother, albeit modest in scale and short-lived.

The ongoing trends around the names Samantha and Tabitha probably have much more to do with the name’s virality than the show, but the bursts of popularity across the board tell us what this show meant to people in its heyday.

From a gender perspective, the TV show actually coincided with the use of the name “Samantha” for boys for the first time—which surprised me given the era, but at the same time the 60s was a decade in which we were pushing at gender boundaries quite a bit.

We can also see, however, the much larger trend in the popularity of the name Samuel (for boys, although it did trend upward slightly for girls). Like Madison and Madeline, the popularity of one name created a trend that extended to similar ones.

## The one where they named their kids

Chart

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Among my favorite insights in this data is that the name Chandler had been trending upward for both genders from the mid-80s, and 1993 was the first time it was more popular for girls than boys. It feels very on brand for Ms. Shandellar Bong.



Among the more surprising findings is that while the name’s popularity skyrocketed for boys with the release of the show, the trend for girls actually reversed itself, and Chandler become more solidly a “boy’s name.”

If anything, I would have expected this trend to look like the one we saw for “Samantha,” and, had I expected that Samantha had been a boy’s name at all, I’d have guessed that trend would look more like this one.

Among the most profound results is that while Monica *may* have been subtly reversing after *Friends* began airing, but when the Lewinsky-Clinton Scandal began making headlines, the name’s usage went off a cliff. As the latest dramatization of the Clinton impeachment is slated to begin airing this month, this provides one tiny representation of both how much the incident permeated American society and how Monica Lewinski was perceived throughout.

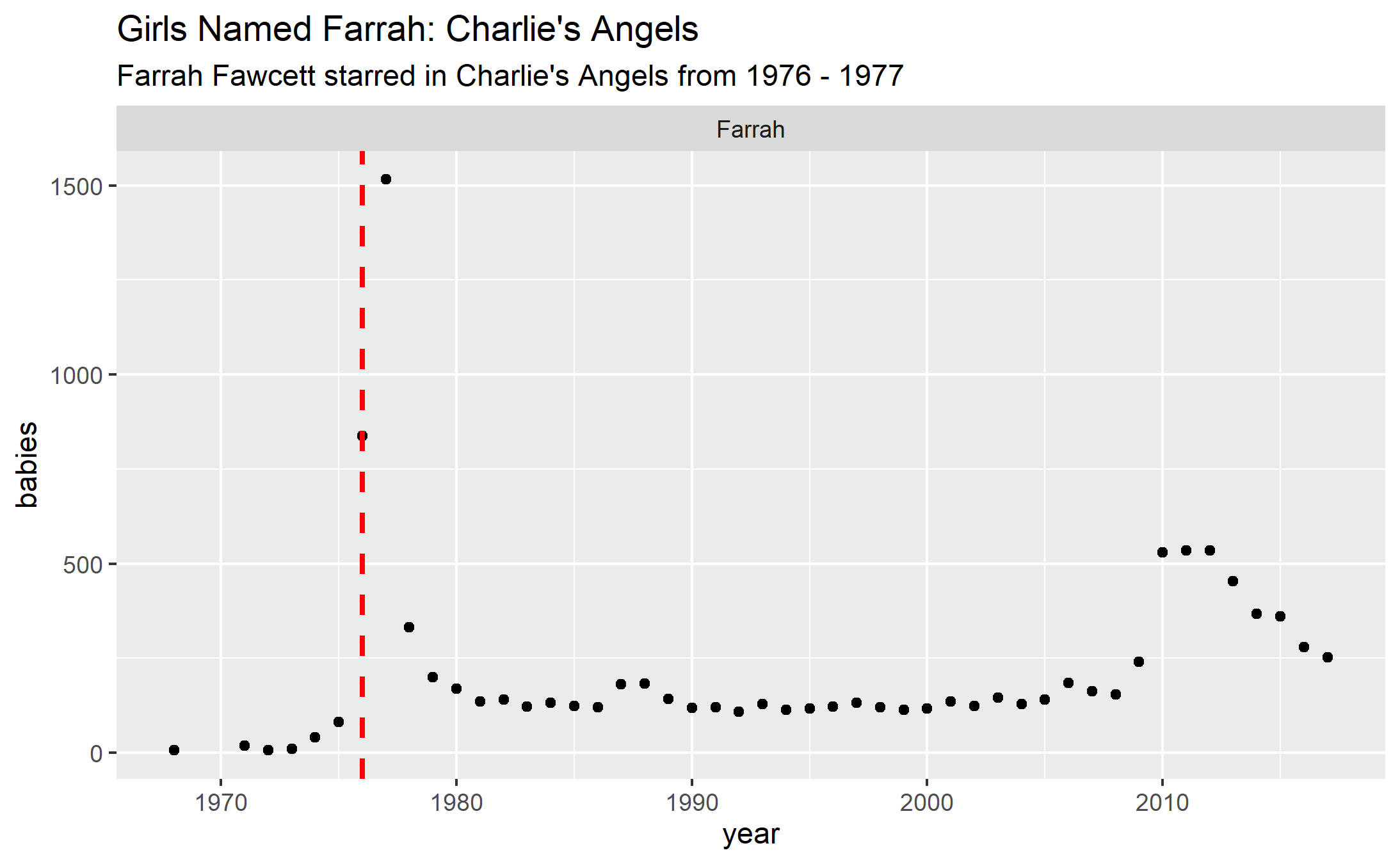
## Once Upon a Time, There Were 3 Little Girls Who Went to the Police Academy

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Overall, there are some pretty obvious trends here for the names of both the actresses, and the characters, but there are actually really interesting trends when you look at a lot of these up close:

**Farrah Fawcett aka Jill Munroe**

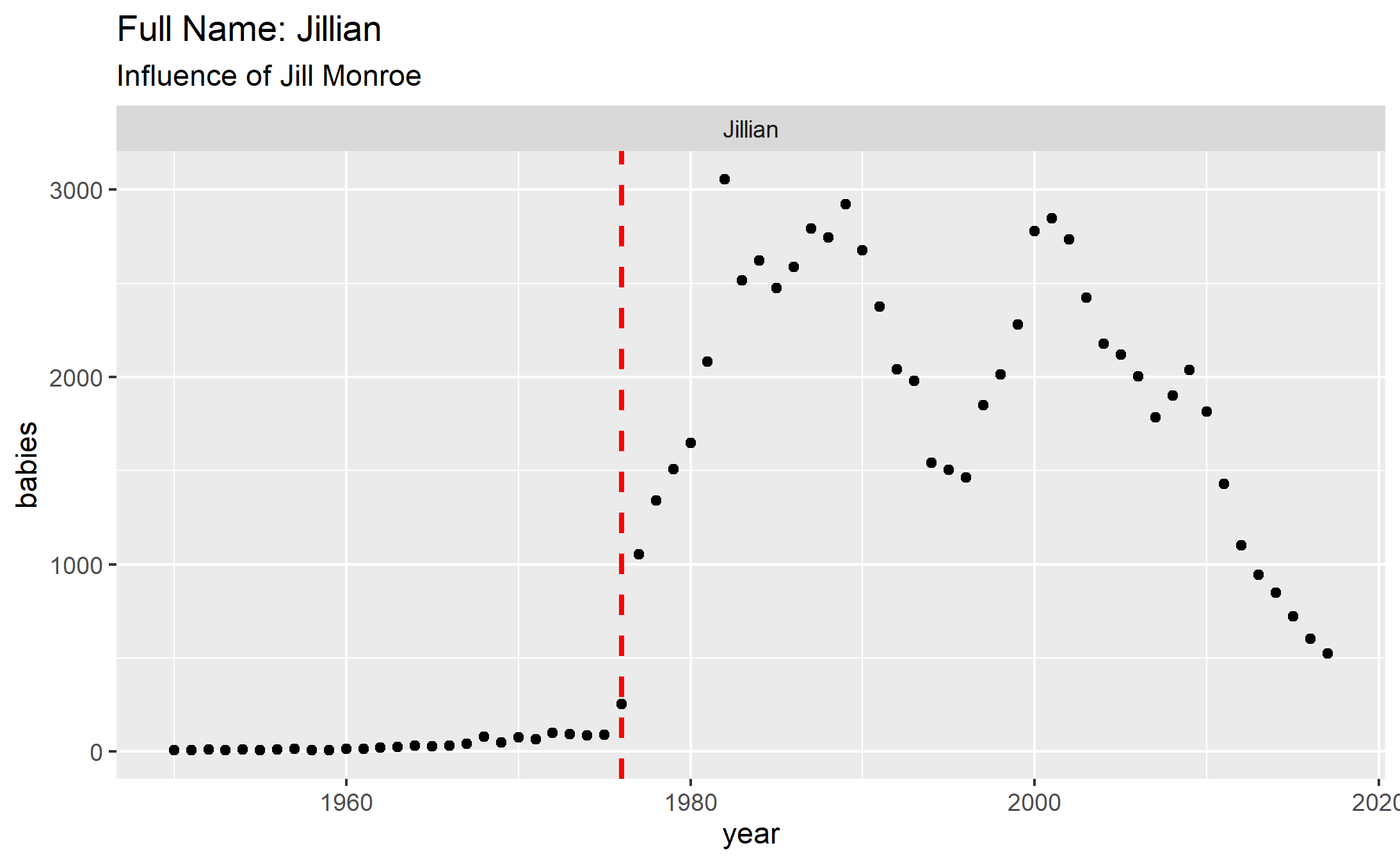
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The relatively uncommon name “Farrah” has a small jump coinciding with the actress’s appearance on the show: pretty standard. **Chart, scatter chart

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The more interesting one is Jill which looks like the only name that doesn’t show a response to the show’s release.

Except…check this out:



People didn’t start naming their children Jill outright, but the name “Jillian” did get a sizeable bump.

**Kate Jackson aka Sabrina Duncan**

**Chart, scatter chart

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The name Kate was already trending up but experienced a nice jump and an intensifying trend after the release of the show before beginning to decline in the mid-80s. If you’re wondering why the trend goes back up in the mid-90s: Kate Winslet. Yes, the name Leonardo took a nice big jump in 1997 too, as did Rose. **Chart, scatter chart

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As for Sabrina, the name had a big jump in ’76, and actually had its next big trend shift at the same time as Kate: the mid-90s. My best guess is that’s because of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, but I didn’t find any related trends (i.e. Melissa, Harvey), so it’s definitely harder to say.

You’re probably also wondering, if Jill made the name Jillian get more popular, did Kate make the name Katherine/Catherine get more popular? The answer: maybe, at least for Kate Jackson.

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With a more popular name, it’s *way* harder to say because there are so many potential influences (I spent like 4 hours trying to track Katharine Hepburn’s influence and got nowhere), but there’s a definite jump in the “Katherine” spelling from ’76 to ’77, and the declining trend for the “Catherine” spelling reverses at the same time.

**Jaclyn Smith AKA Kelly Garrett**

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Again, the movement of the name Kelly is pretty standard: big jump but quick reversal.

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What happens to Jaclyn I think is one of the coolest examples because it shows really solid cause and effect. Not only does Smith popularize the nontraditional spelling of “Jaclyn” she reverses the trend on the spelling “Jacqueline”, which peaked, unsurprisingly, during Jackie Kennedy’s tenancy in the White House.

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Further evidence of the specific impact of *Charlie’s Angels*: Jackie Kennedy did not have any impact on the nontraditional spelling, but she did impact the popularity of naming a baby girl just Jackie, while Jaclyn smith did not.

## “You got people to name their children after you?” “What, like it’s hard?”

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The name Reese was already trending up as a boys’ name in 1999 when the release of *Cruel Intentions,* starring Reese Witherspoon, started an upward trend in its popularity for girls, which was intensified after the release of *Legally Blonde*. As Reese’s popularity for girls surpassed boys, it started trending downward as a boys’ name.

In 2005, the name’s popularity for girls jumped again with the release of *Walk the Line.*

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As for the characters she played, there wasn’t a really strong trend around Annette (*Cruel Intentions)*, but both Elle and June responded to their respective movie releases.

Other notable shifts: After the release of *Walk the Line,* the name Joaquin took a big jump even by the standards of its sharply inclining popularity since the release of Gladiator. As for characters, the names Sebastian (*Cruel Intentions*) and Johnny (*Walk the Line*) also responded to their respective movies.