

Super Freakonomics

Global Cooling, Patriotic Prostitutes, and Why Suicide Bombers Should Buy Life Insurance

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Introduction & Core Thesis

Super Freakonomics applies the "economic approach" to unconventional questions, demonstrating that **people respond to incentives**—though not always in predictable ways. The authors challenge conventional wisdom through data-driven analysis, revealing that the law of unintended consequences is one of the most powerful forces in the universe. Rather than relying on anecdotes or emotional reasoning, they let numbers speak the truth, often uncovering counterintuitive findings that reshape our understanding of human behavior.

Key Chapters & Topics

- **Ch 1: Prostitution Economics** – Market forces, price discrimination, and the "pimpact" vs "rimpact"
- **Ch 2: Terrorism & Data** – Birth effects, identifying terrorists through banking patterns
- **Ch 3: Altruism Revisited** – Kitty Genovese myth debunked; lab experiments questioned
- **Ch 4: Cheap & Simple Solutions** – Semmelweis, seat belts, car seats, and unintended consequences
- **Ch 5: Global Warming** – Externalities, geoengineering, and Intellectual Ventures' radical solutions

Main Insights

- **Incentives drive behavior** – Understanding incentives reveals true motivations
- **Unintended consequences** abound – The ADA reduced disabled employment; Endangered Species Act endangered species
- **Cheap fixes work** – Hand washing, seat belts, and aspirin save more lives than expensive interventions
- **Altruism is overrated** – Lab experiments on generosity don't reflect real-world behavior
- **Data beats intuition** – Emotional narratives often mislead; statistics reveal truth

Final Takeaways

- Human behavior is more predictable when viewed through incentives
- Technology often solves problems that seemed insurmountable (horses → cars)
- Behavioral change is hard—design solutions that don't require it
- Experts have informational advantages they may exploit; verify claims
- The best solutions are often cheap, simple, and counterintuitive

Surprising Findings

- Walking drunk is **8x more dangerous** per mile than driving drunk
- Terrorists are typically **well-educated, middle-class**—not poor and uneducated
- Car seats are **no safer than seat belts** for children aged 2+
- Pimps provide **better value** than real estate agents (Pimpact > Rimpact)
- Cable TV **empowered Indian women** more than government programs
- The Kitty Genovese "38 witnesses" story was **largely false**

Practical Applications

- **Question assumptions** – Conventional wisdom is often wrong; seek data
- **Design incentives carefully** – Anticipate how people will game systems
- **Embrace simple solutions** – Complex problems often have inexpensive fixes
- **Look for externalities** – Consider unintended costs imposed on others
- **Use natural experiments** – Real-world data variations can reveal causation

Core Message: By stripping away moral judgments and emotional thinking, and letting data guide analysis, we can better understand human behavior and find surprisingly simple solutions to complex problems. People respond to incentives—always—but not necessarily in ways that are predictable or manifest.