



# FiveThirtyEight

## How to Tell Someone's Age When All You Know Is Their Name

By [Nate Silver](#) and [Allison McCann](#)

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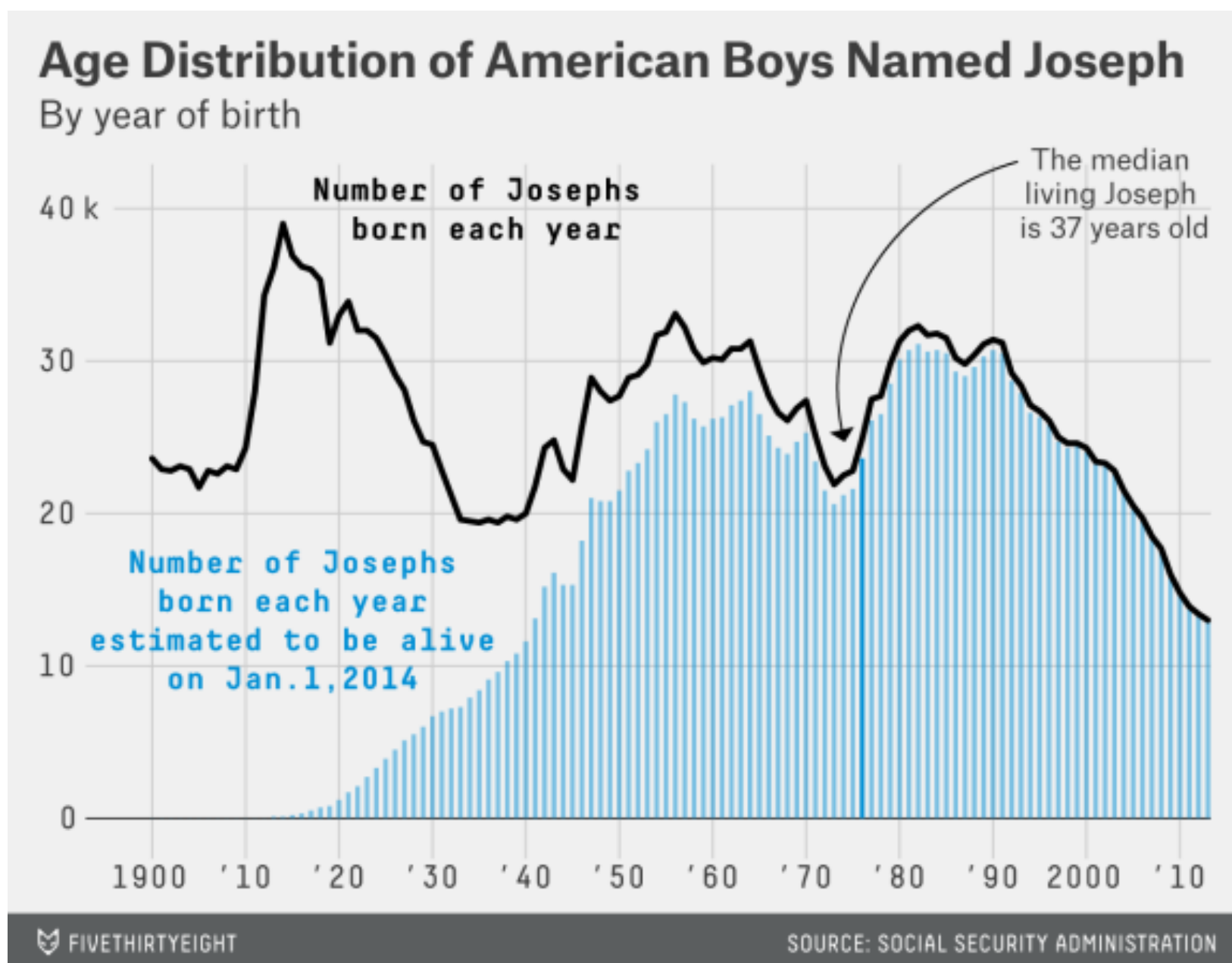
Picture Mildred, Agnes, Ethel and Blanche. Perhaps you imagine [the Golden Girls](#) or your grandmother's poker game. These are names for women of age, wisdom and distinction. The median living Mildred in the United States is now 78 years old.

Now imagine Madison, Sydney, Alexa and Hailey. They sound like the starting midfield on a fourth-grade girls' soccer team. And they might as well be: the median American females with these names are between 9 and 12 years old.

There are quite a lot of websites devoted to [tracking the popularity](#) of American baby names over time. (The data [ultimately comes from the Social Security Administration](#), which records birth names dating back to 1880.) But we haven't seen anyone ask the age of living Americans with a given name.

The method for determining the answer is quite simple<sup>1</sup>: All you really need is the SSA's baby name database and [its actuarial tables](#), which estimate how many people born in a given year are still alive.<sup>2</sup>

Below, for example, is a chart of Josephs. It shows how many American boys named Joseph were born in each year since 1900. And it shows how many of them are still alive today,<sup>3</sup> assuming that Josephs die at the same rate as other American males.<sup>4</sup>



The peak year for boys named Joseph was 1914 — when about 39,000 of

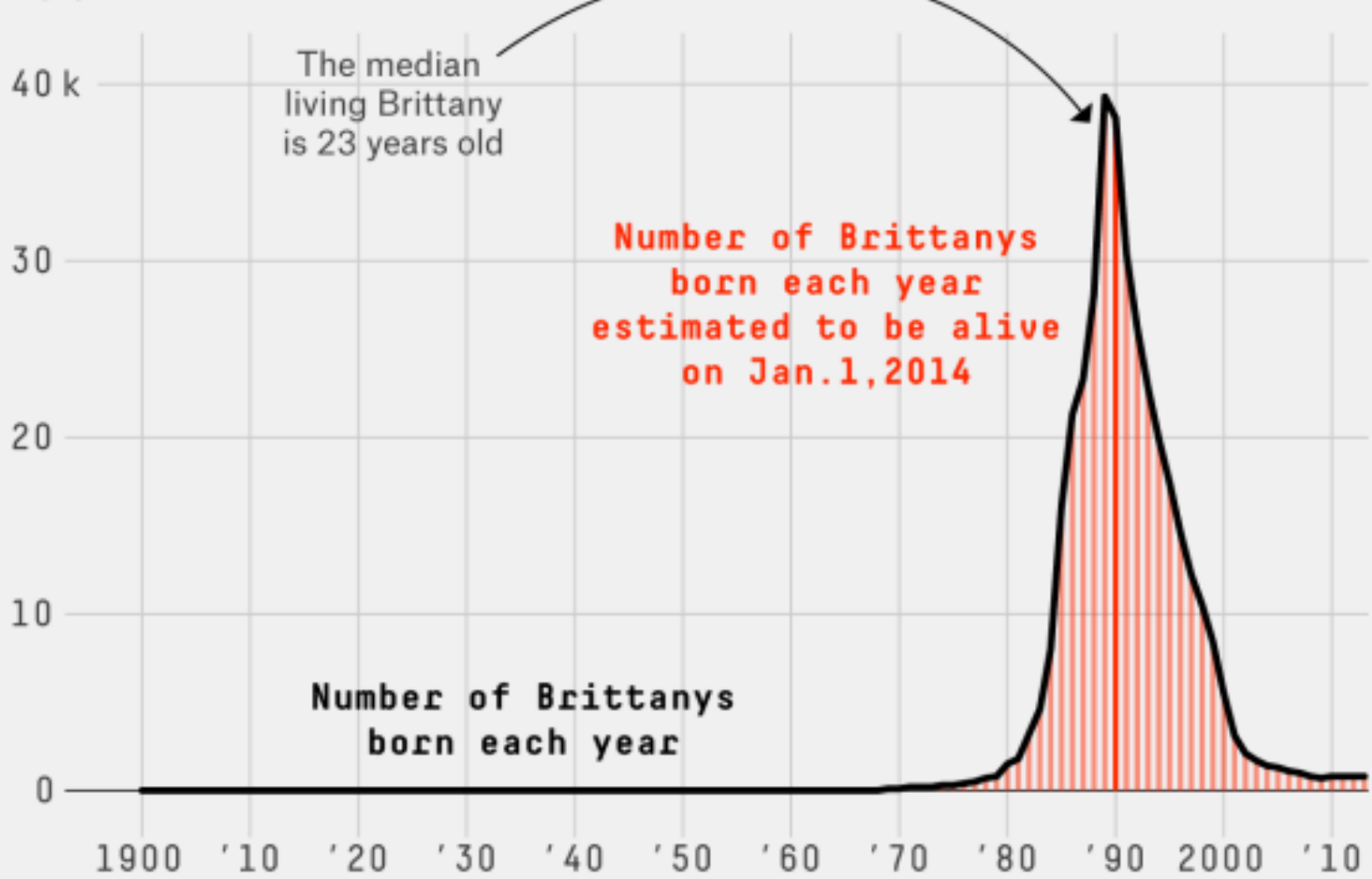
them were born. Those 1914 Josephs would be due to celebrate their 100th birthdays at some point this year. But only about 130 of them were still alive as of Jan. 1.

Joseph has been one of the most enduring American names; it's never gone out of fashion. So knowing that a man is named Joseph doesn't tell you very much about his age. The median living Joseph is 37 years old, and the [interquartile range](#) (that is, the range spanning the 25th through 75th percentiles) runs from 21 to 56. In other words, a quarter of living Josephs are older than 56 and a quarter are younger than 21; the rest are somewhere in between. Not very helpful.

By contrast, you can make much stronger inferences about a woman named Brittany. That name was very popular from the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s, but it wasn't all that common before and hasn't been since. If you know a Brittany, she is probably of college age or just a bit older. Half of living American Brittanys<sup>5</sup> are between the ages of 19 and 25.<sup>6</sup>

# Age Distribution of American Girls Named Brittany

By year of birth



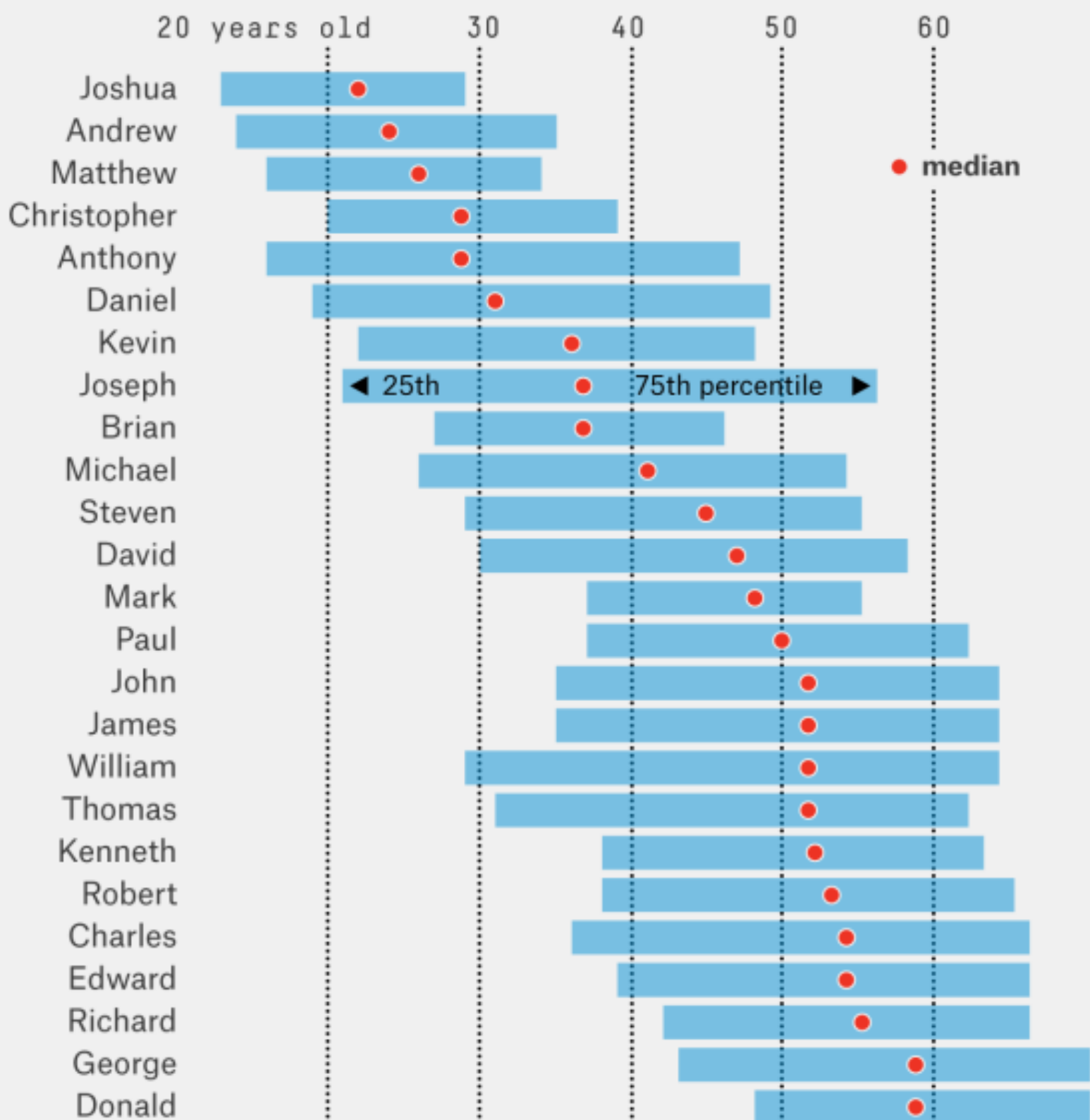
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SOURCE: SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

We can run these calculations for any name in the SSA's database — for instance, for the 25 most popular male names since 1900. Joshuas, Andrews and Matthews are the youngest of these, with median ages of 22, 24 and 26. Georges and Donalds are the oldest, each with a median age of 59.

# Median Ages For Males With the 25 Most Common Names

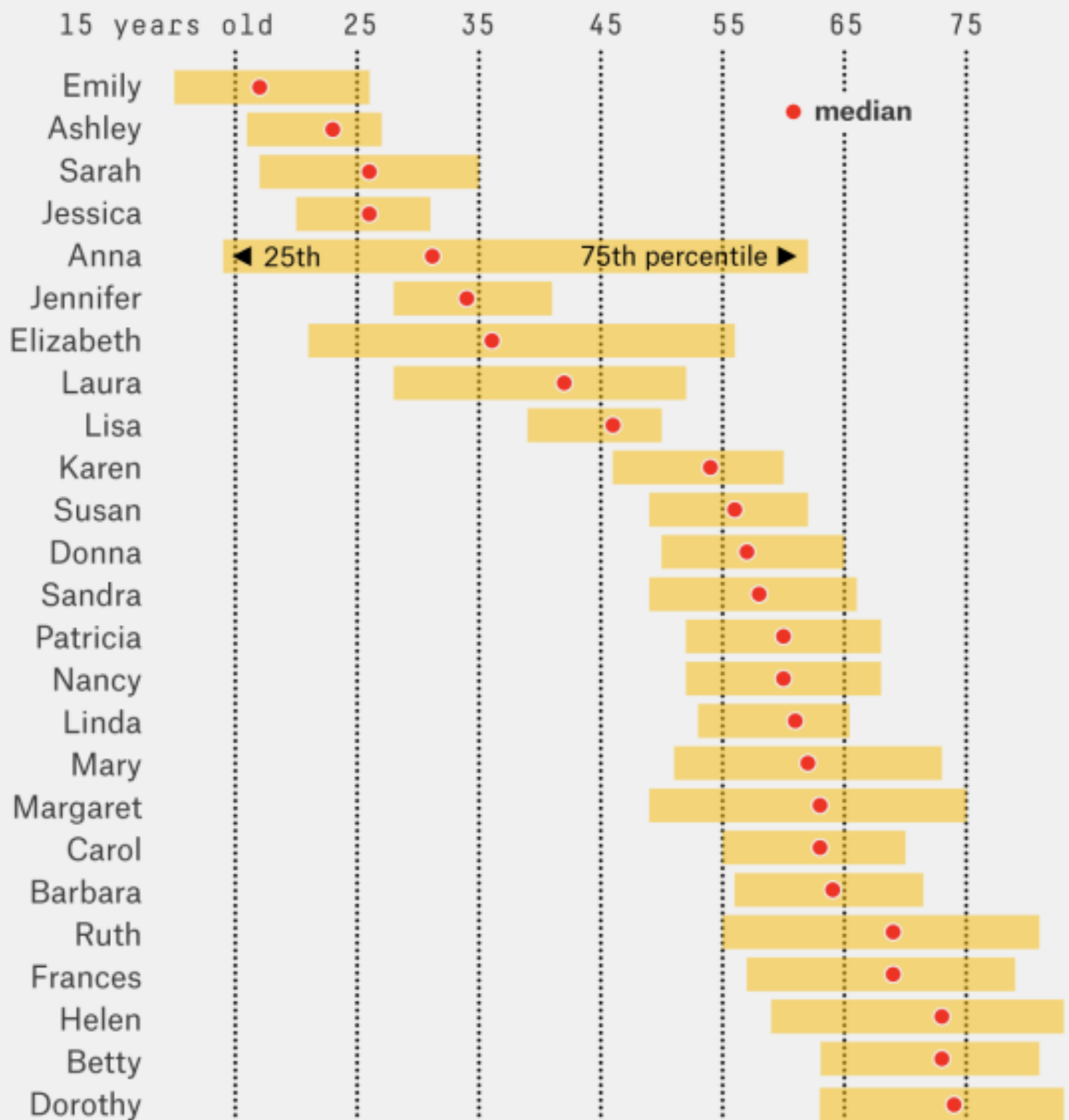
Among Americans estimated to be alive as of Jan. 1, 2014



The data for the top 25 female names is more dynamic. The median Emily is just 17 years old; the median Dorothy is 74.

# Median Ages For Females With the 25 Most Common Names

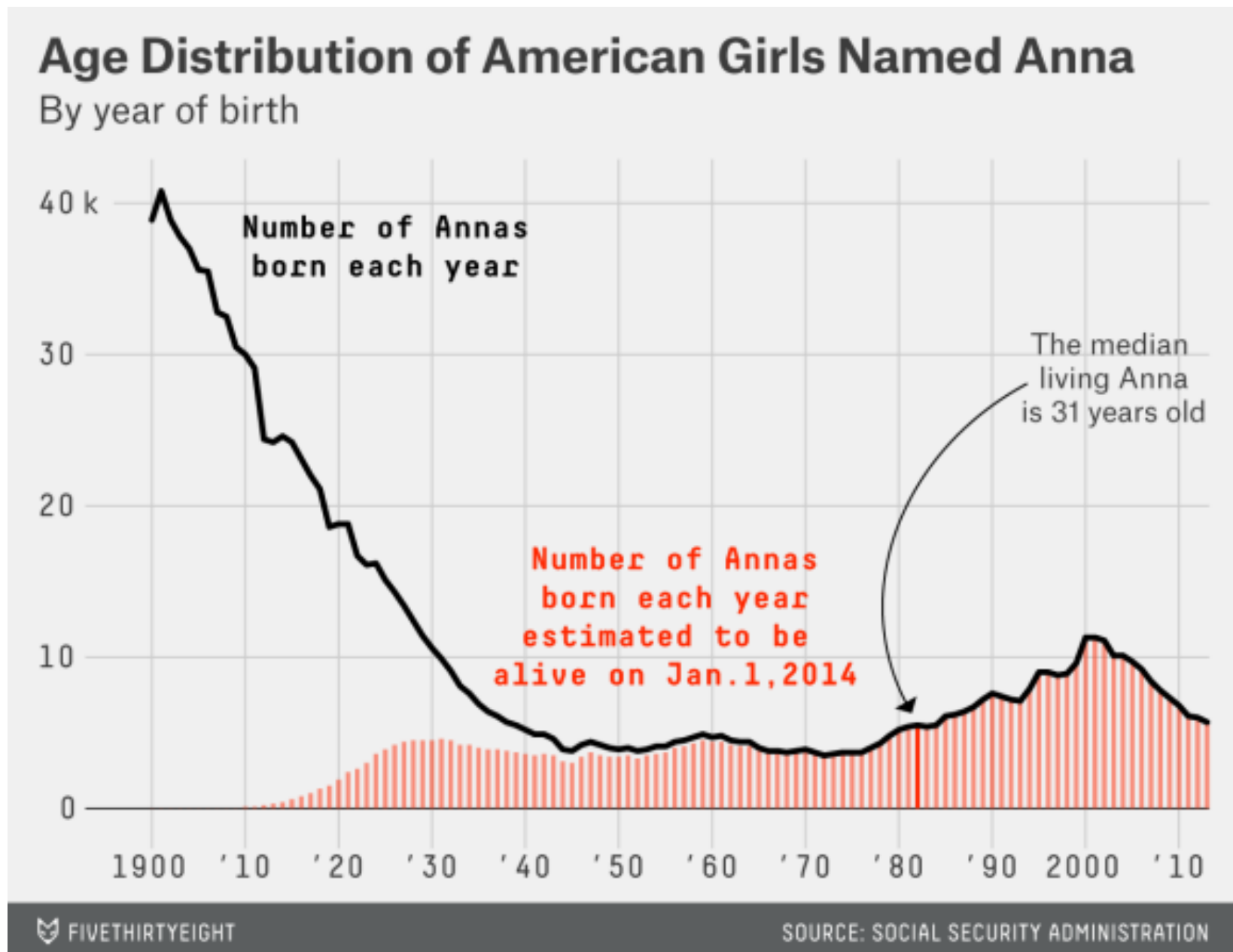
Among Americans estimated to be alive as of Jan. 1, 2014



Girls' names typically cycle in and out of fashion more quickly than boys' names, which means that they have narrower interquartile ranges. For instance, almost half of living Lisas are now in their 40s, meaning that they were born at some point between 1964 and 1973.

However, there are some exceptions — most notably Anna, which is a

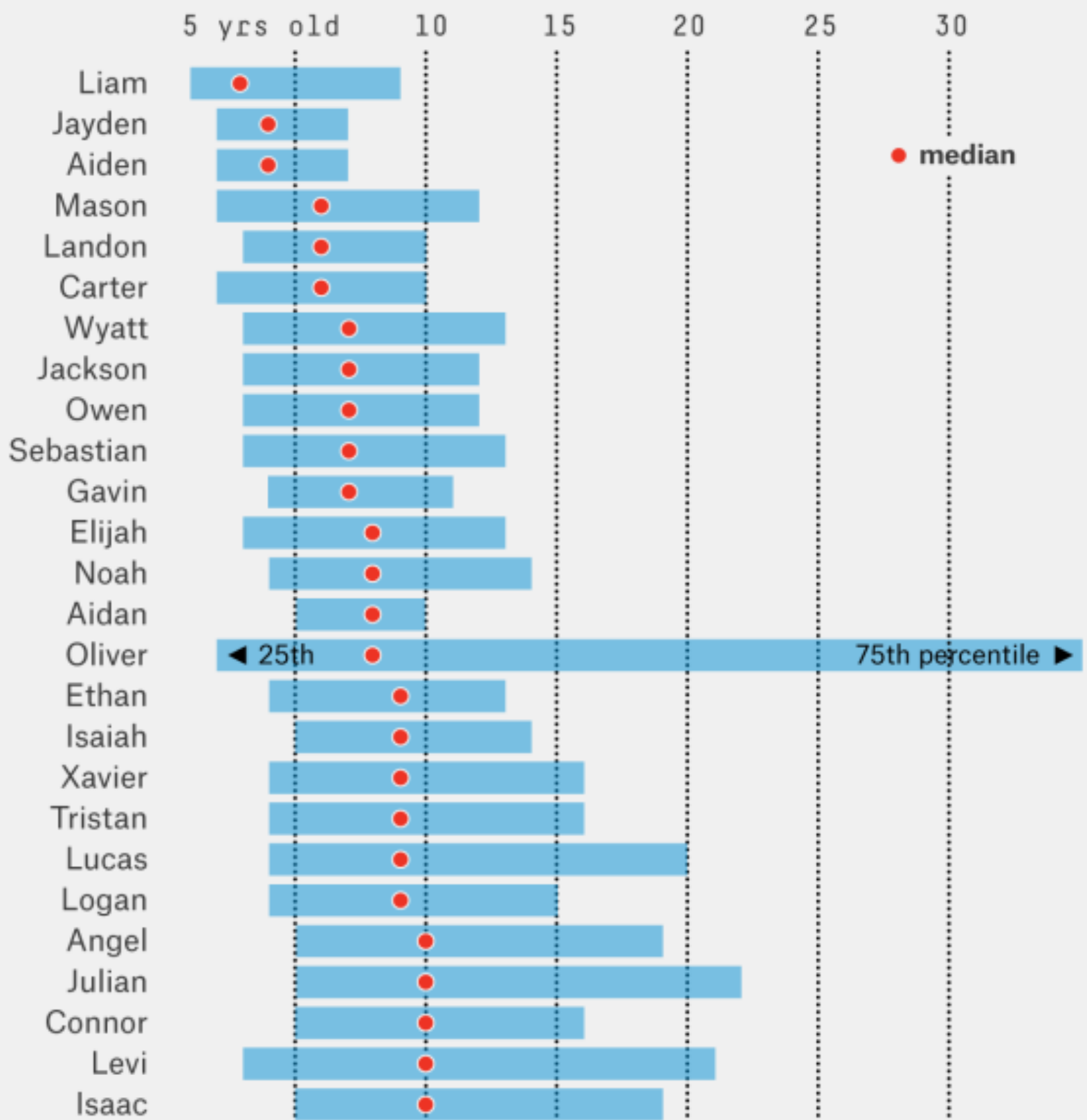
remarkably well-enduring girl's name. The name Anna steadily declined in popularity from 1900 to 1950; however, many of those older Annas are no longer with us, and the name has remained at reasonably steady levels of popularity since then. Thus, while a quarter of living Annas are younger than 14, another quarter are older than 62.



Boys are catching up when it comes to fashionable names that reveal a lot about their age. Do you know a Liam, an Aiden, a Jayden or a Mason? Their median ages are 3, 4, 4 and 6, respectively. How about a Noah, an Elijah or an Isaiah? They are 8, 8 and 9. (The charts that follow are restricted to birth names given to at least 100,000 Americans of a particular gender since 1900.)

# Youngest Male Names

By estimated median age for Americans alive as of Jan. 1, 2014

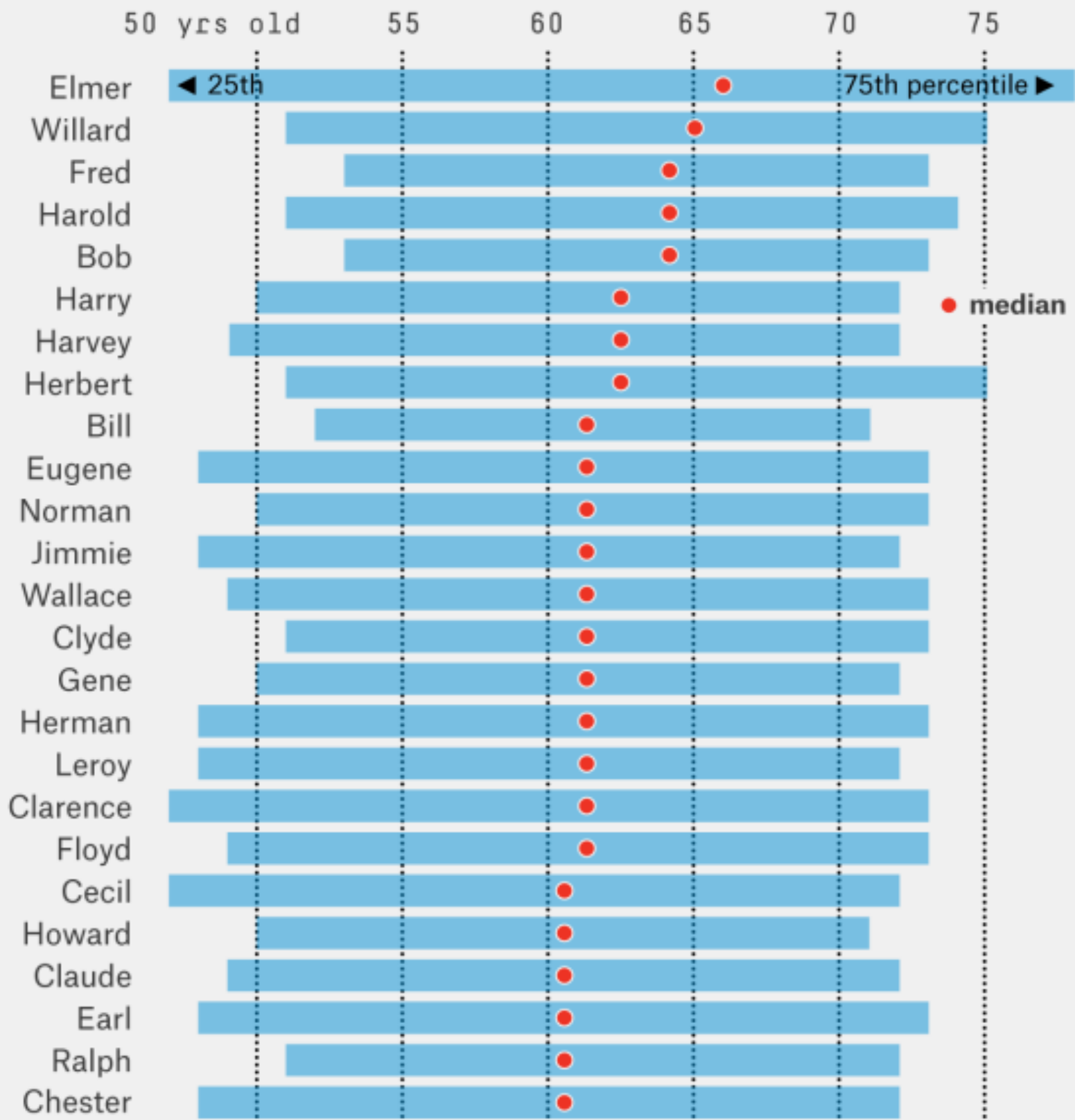


By contrast, the majority of living Hermans, Howards, Harrys, Harolds, Harveys and Herberts are in their 60s, or older. And the oldest male name is Elmer, with a median age of 66.



# Oldest Male Names

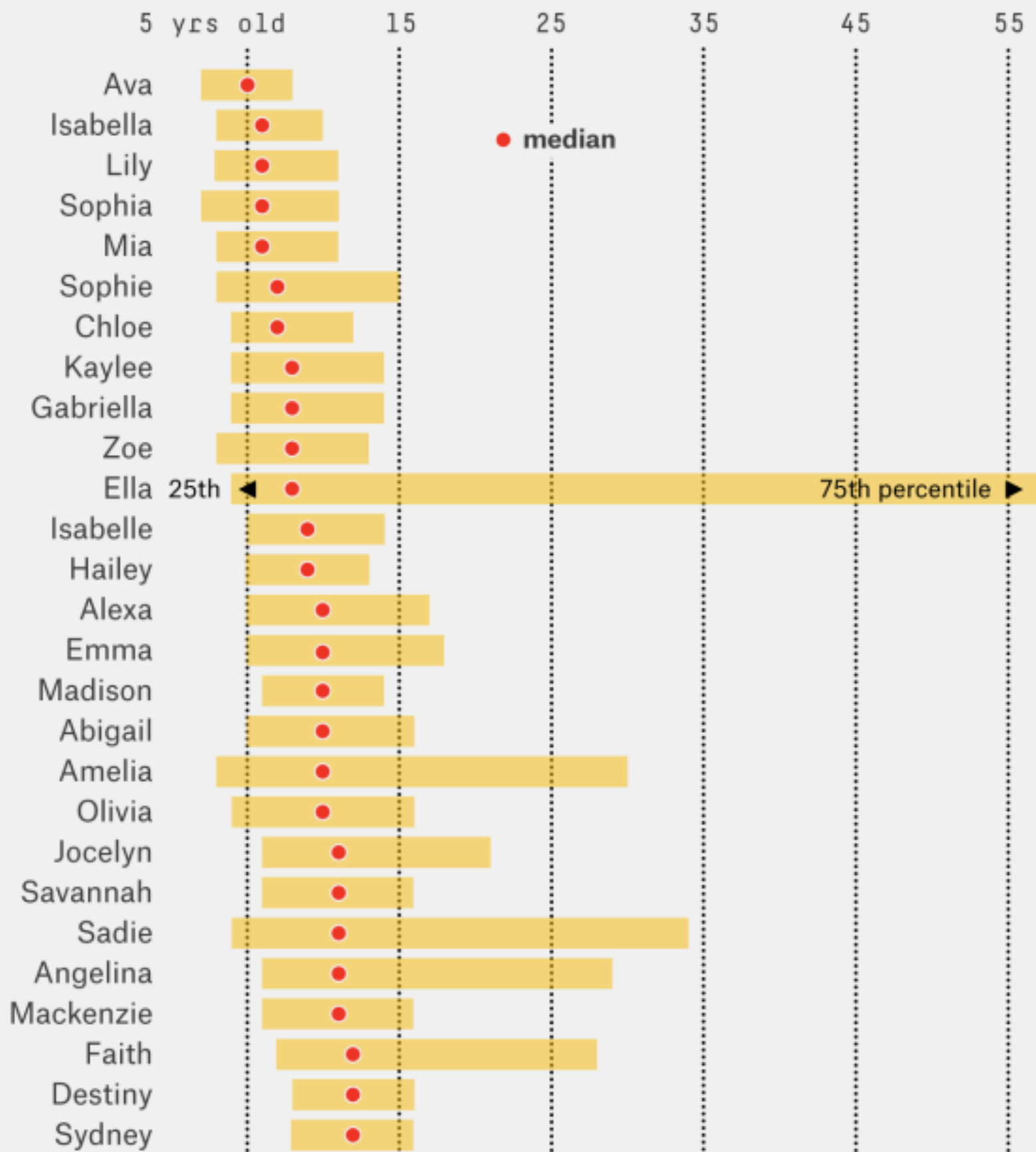
By estimated median age for Americans alive as of Jan. 1, 2014



Eva, Mia, Sophia, Ella and Isabella might be friends with Mason and Liam in their kindergarten classes. The median girls with these names are between 5 and 8 years old.

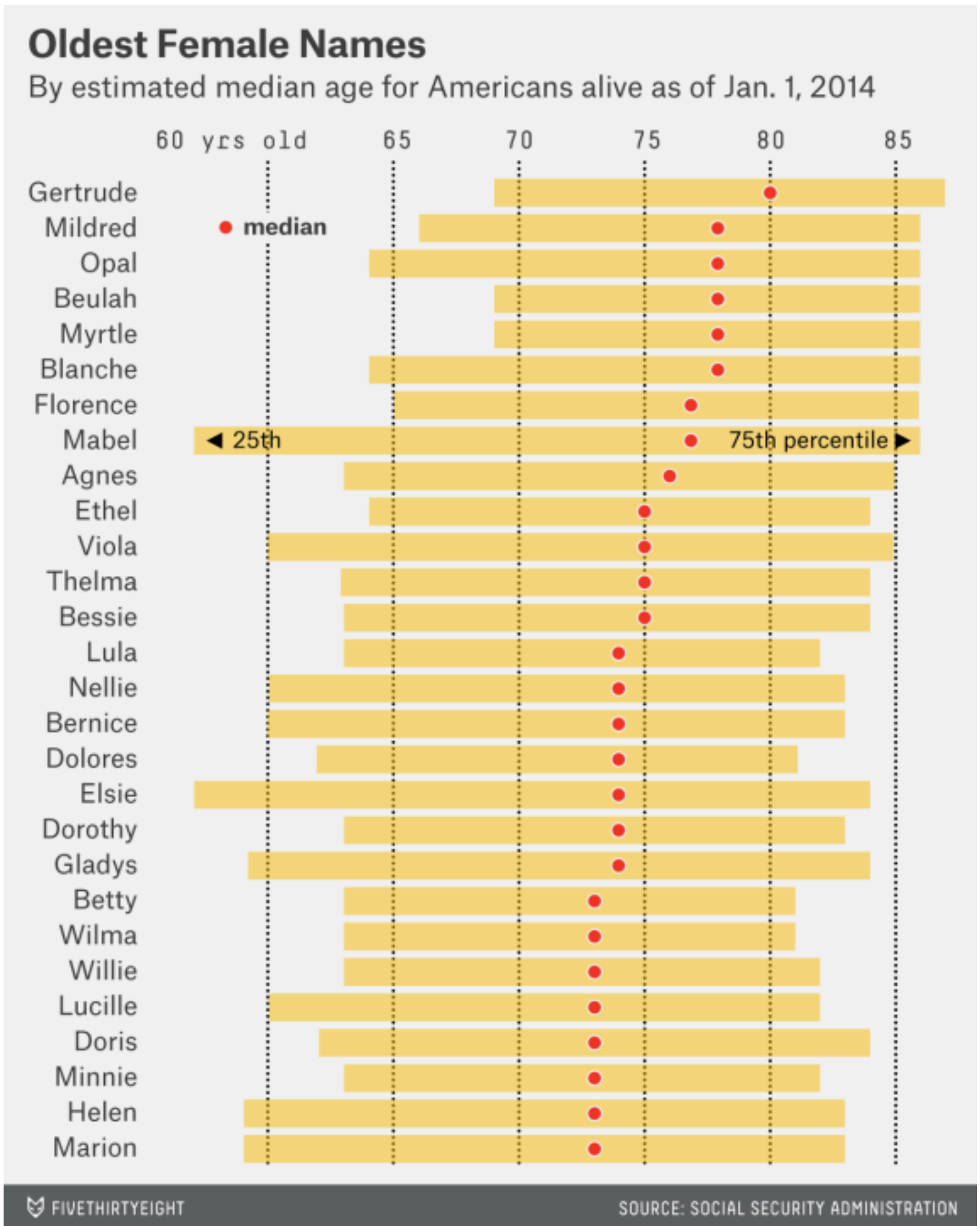
# Youngest Female Names

By estimated median age for Americans alive as of Jan. 1, 2014



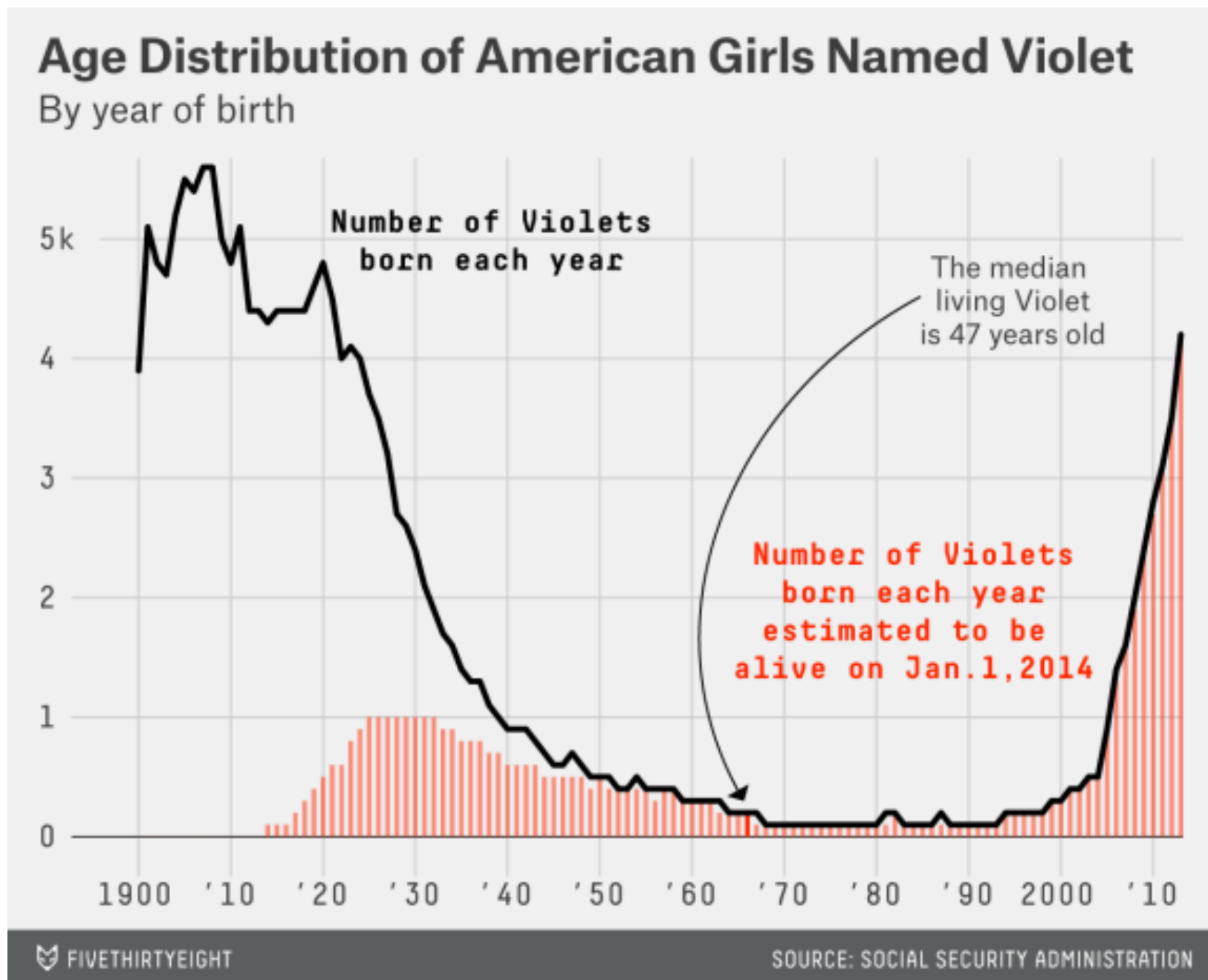
We've already listed some of the oldest female names, but we didn't mention the oldest of all: Gertrude. The median living Gertrude is 80 years old; a quarter of Gertrudes are older than 87. (Note also the presence of Betty and Wilma, the names of the ["Flintstones" wives](#), on the oldest names list. Betty

and Wilma are not quite prehistoric. But they are each now a median of 73 years old.)



Other names have unusual distributions. What if you know a woman — or a girl

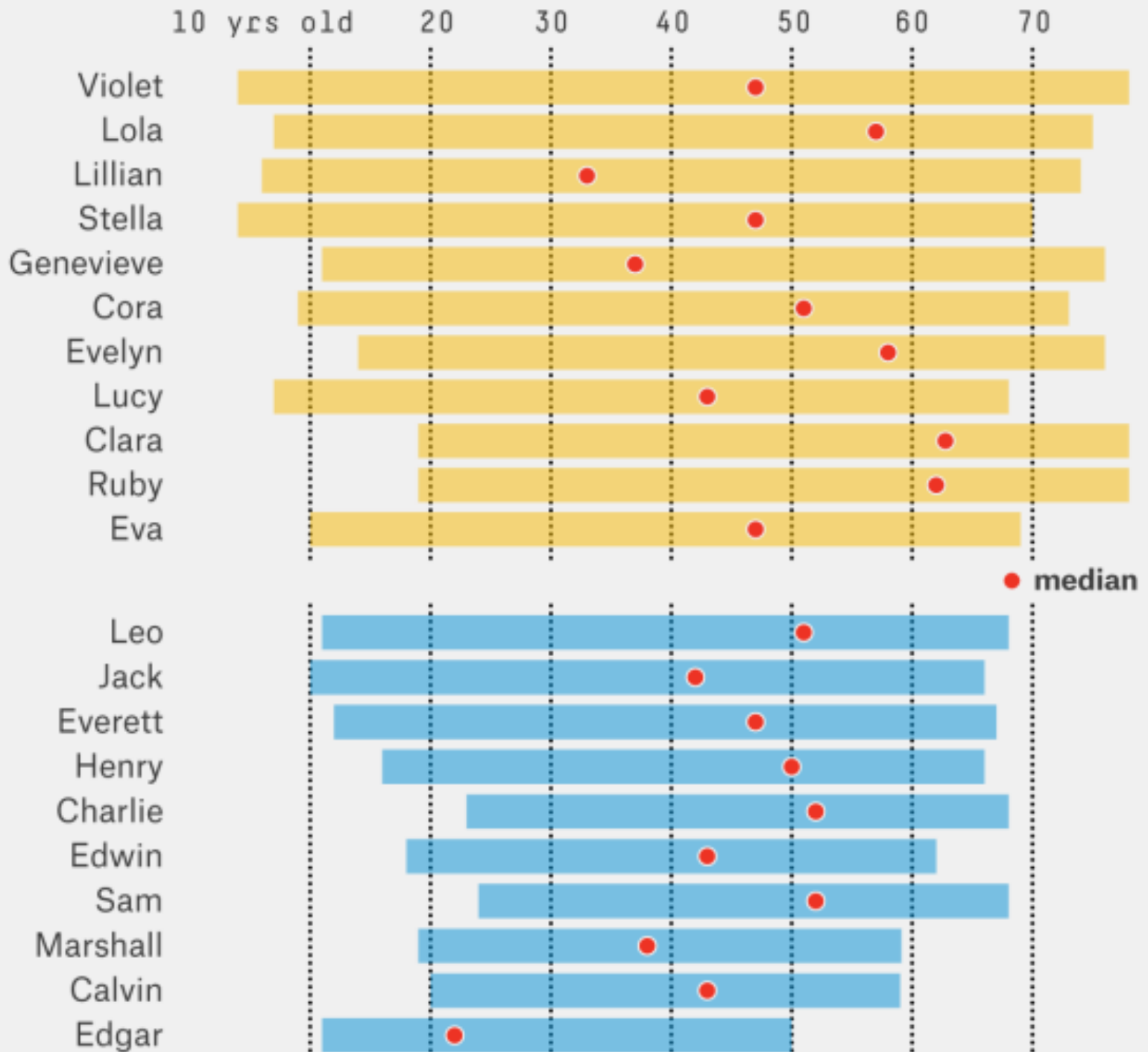
— named Violet? The median living Violet is 47 years old. However, you'd be mistaken in assuming that a given Violet is middle-aged. Instead, a quarter of Violets are older than 78, while another quarter are younger than 4. Only about 4 percent of Violets are within five years of 47.



Lolas, Stellas and Claras also have highly bimodal distributions.

# Names With the Widest Age Spreads

Estimated interquartile range of ages for Americans alive as of Jan. 1, 2014

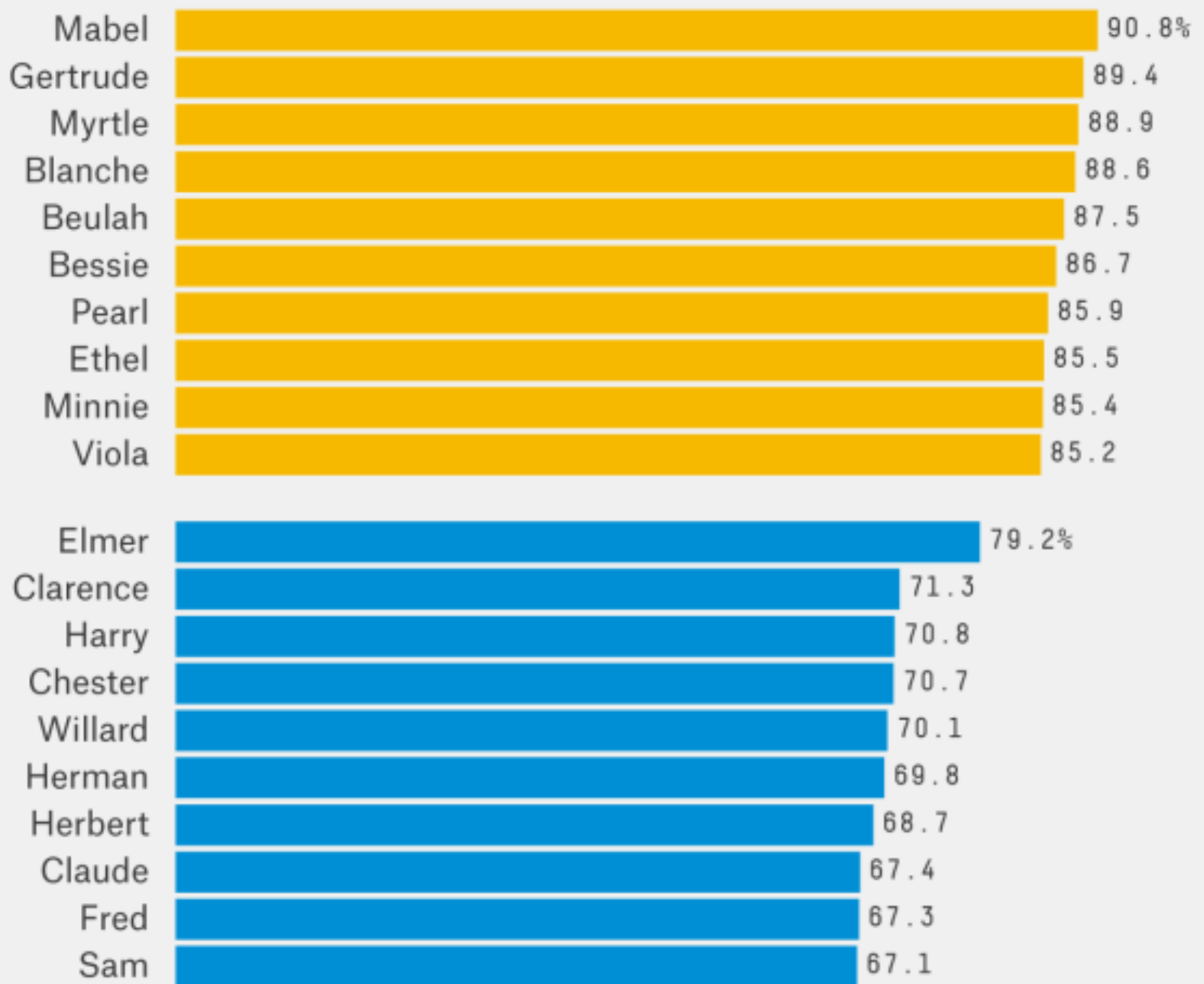


This pattern is slightly less common among male names. But it does occur occasionally, perhaps partly as an unfortunate consequence of the movie "Titanic." The two male names with the widest age spreads are Leo (as in DiCaprio<sup>7</sup>) and Jack (as in Dawson, the character he played in the film).

Jack died in the end, so let's end on a morbid note. Out of all Americans given a particular name since 1900, how many have since died?

# Deadest Names

Estimated percentage of Americans with a given name born since 1900 who were dead as of Jan. 1, 2014



These results are highly similar to the lists of the oldest names, although slightly more Mabels (90.8 percent) have died than Gertrudes (89.4 percent). Elmer is the deadest common male name, at a 79.2 percent fatality rate. But if the list were liberalized to include more infrequent names, Hyman (91.3 percent), Eino (89.7 percent) and Isidore (87.2 percent) would do a better job of keeping up with the ladies, 'til death did they part.