

PAS update: Economist Raj Chetty on helping disadvantaged children get ahead

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The city and even county where children grow up often dictate their chances of becoming upwardly mobile later in life, according to economist Raj Chetty, Ph.D.

Dr. Chetty delivered the keynote speech “Improving Opportunities for Disadvantaged Youth in America: New Lessons from Big Data” at the AAP Presidential Plenary May 7 during the Pediatric Academic Societies (PAS) meeting in San Francisco. One of his missions is to develop policy solutions that help families overcome poverty and have better life outcomes.

Professor of economics at Stanford University and recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship “genius grant,” Dr. Chetty is sought-after for his research and novel views on topics ranging from social mobility to unemployment insurance to tax policy. He also has published widely and testified before Congress.

Dr. Chetty and his colleagues’ Equality of Opportunity project looks at what can be learned from the geography of economic mobility in the U.S. (www.equality-of-opportunity.org/). Their research shows that children who move to less poor neighborhoods when they are younger — under age 13 years — have a greater chance at upward mobility (more likely to attend college and earn substantially higher incomes as adults) during their lifetime.

Moving is not always an option for families with younger children, so Dr. Chetty has analyzed characteristics common to the communities that offer greater opportunity for disadvantaged kids. They include a child’s exposure to quality education; living in less racially and economically segregated regions — including areas with more two-parent families; and being part of a community with high social capital.

Dr. Chetty, 37, received his Ph.D. from Harvard University at age 23. He became a professor at University of California-Berkeley, returned to Harvard in 2009 and moved to Stanford in 2015. Born in India, he and his parents and siblings came to the U.S. when he was 9, settling in the Milwaukee area. His mother, Anbukili Chetty, is a pediatric pulmonologist in Boston, and his father, V.K. Chetty, Ph.D., a health economist and statistician at Boston University School of Medicine.

Raj Chetty also is co-director of the public economics group at the National Bureau of Economic Research.

