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Chetty: Exploring the causes of life expectancy variation in the US

Raj Chetty, professor of Economics at Stanford University, was in Trento at the Economics Festival to discuss the variation in life longevity and income in cities across the United States.
Chetty's research sought to explain the relationship between income and life expectancy. It is well known that higher incomes are associated with longer life expectancies, however, Chetty wanted to better understand why these two factors are related and what can be done to change the gap.

Countries such as Japan and San Marino have the highest average life expectancies. The United States is near the top, but the figures of variation within America were striking. Life expectancies for men from the four different income levels ranged more than 15 years. Compared to a global benchmark the numbers were even more surprising, a male from the poorest income level in the United States has the same life expectancy of a man from Pakistan.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLnvHKvuv6E

Chetty analyzed four variables that could contribute to the variation in life expectancies across America. All four, access to health care, environmental factors, income inequality, and economic decline proved little relationship to the variation. A fifth variable, health behaviors, had the strongest correlation to life expectancy amongst the lower class. To this Chetty attributes the greatest factor in determining life expectancies.

“Affluent, educated, urban areas have higher life expectancies among the poor” Perhaps this is because in areas such as San Francisco or New York, revenue spills over from the rich to the poor and there is greater exposure to healthier behavior. The remedy to this variation, Chetty concluded, lies in local government policies to promote healthier behaviors.

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