

Zipcode Destiny: The Persistent Power Of Place And Education

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The stories we tell about ourselves — stories of success and stories of failure — often have their beginnings in the distant past. Sometimes, they start in our childhoods. Sometimes, before we were even born.

This idea may sound poetic, but when it comes to economic mobility, there's evidence to back it up. Raj Chetty, an economist at Harvard, is responsible for some of the most powerful evidence, drawing on data from many millions of Americans.

Raj has found that early variables in your life, from the quality of your kindergarten teacher to the neighborhood you grew up in, can have lasting effects. And those effects often result in dramatically divergent outcomes in different parts of the country.

"People ask... is the American dream alive or not today? And I actually think the question itself is sort of ill-posed," Raj says. "The term 'the American Dream' --really we should think of it as 'the Iowa Dream' or 'the Atlanta Dream' or 'the California Dream' because there's so much variation within this country."

Today we ask some questions that carry big implications: can you put an economic value on a great kindergarten teacher? How is it that two children living just a few blocks from each other can have radically different chances in life? What gives Salt Lake City an edge over Cleveland when it comes to offering people better prospects than their parents? The state of your American Dream, this week on Hidden Brain.