



Kenneth Chay

Professor of Economics

Kenneth Chay was an undergraduate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology when he discovered that by studying economics, he could bring “the credibility of science” to interesting social issues, such as civil rights and social policy. Now specializing in applied microeconomics, Chay brings to Brown research expertise that is relevant to policy in the areas of health, labor and the environment.

After earning a B.A. in economics from MIT in 1991, Chay attended Princeton University, where he received his M.A. in 1993 and Ph.D. in 1996. He was most recently the Michael R. Peevey and Donald Vial Associate Professor in the economics department at the University of California–Berkeley. Chay has also served as a visiting professor at Princeton and MIT and held posts at the National Bureau of Economic Research. He was the recipient of an Outstanding Teaching Award at Berkeley in 2005, the Kenneth J. Arrow Award for best paper in health economics in 2004, an Alfred P. Sloan Research Fellowship and research grants from the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation.

Chay says the main thrust of his work is about finding causal relationships. His numerous research publications include studies on the relationship between high-stakes testing laws and student performance; the impact of air pollution on infant mortality; and the effect of civil rights laws on the economic status and health outcomes for African Americans.

Currently, Chay is exploring whether one’s social status can be linked to one’s life expectancy.

“To identify any type of causal relationship, you need random assignment, as if something happened by luck,” Chay said. “It’s hard to think of instances in life where status is assigned randomly.”

He and his colleagues came up with using induction to the Baseball Hall of Fame as a measurement of one’s status for every Major League Baseball player born before 1946. Examining induction voting histories along with player obituaries, Chay found that inductees do not live longer, on average, than players who were not inducted. However, players who narrowly missed induction have a significantly shorter lifespan than all other players.

“The players who barely missed getting inducted are living a shorter life than those who never had a shot,” Chay said. “They’re being told they’re just not quite good enough and our research suggests that message could be hurting them.”

A professor in Brown’s Department of Economics, Chay is stationed at the Population Studies Training Center and has big plans to collaborate across disciplines at Brown, including work with the Center for Environmental Studies, Taubman Center for Public Policy, and Department of Community Health.

“Most of my work is viewed as multidisciplinary and I know that’s part of the ethos on this campus,” Chay said. “That’s definitely one of the things I’m looking forward to at Brown.”

– Deborah Baum