

Feature Story

Economic Advisor Kakoli Roy

June 2, 2021

Kakoli Roy, PhD, is the senior economic advisor in the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (NCCDPHP). As NCCDPHP's lead subject matter expert on economics, Roy serves as the final reviewer for all economics-focused publications and provides scientific leadership and guidance to support programmatic efforts and inform strategic science and policy priorities at the center.

She also oversees high priority cross-cutting economic research and analytic activities in collaboration with NCCDPHP programs and its external partners. According to Roy, "The focus of the work is to demonstrate the impact of chronic disease prevention programs in reducing the prevalence and costs of preventable conditions, with particular emphasis on addressing health disparities."

Before joining NCCDPHP, Roy served as the chief economist in CDC's Office of the Associate Director for Policy (OADP), from 2011-2019. In OADP, she led the first economic analysis team that collaborated across CDC and with external partners to conduct, promote, and strengthen capacity for innovative and policy-informing health, economic and budgetary impact analyses. The analyses addressed several public health policy interventions across a range of topics to inform agency priorities. Roy also served as the economic advisor to the OADP director and the CDC director, providing objective and scientifically sound economic analysis and evidence, often under tight deadlines.

Under the leadership of NCCDPHP Director Karen Hacker, MD, MPH, the top priority for the center is the focus on the social determinants of health (SDOH). "To provide a scientific foundation for distribution of considerable CARES Act funding and resources to assist the most vulnerable communities, we are examining how the association between county-level demographic, socioeconomic, and chronic disease risk factors and higher rates of COVID-19 cases and deaths may have changed as various public health containment measures were implemented," states Roy. "We are also examining the extent to which these underlying sociodemographic predictors of COVID-19 mirror similar associations with other indicators of long-term ill health, such as chronic disease/risk factors prevalence in communities."

In another initiative to support the center's SDOH priorities, Roy continues, "We initiated a strategic collaboration with USDA's Economic Research Service, where we link food sales and retail food environment data with sociodemographic and population health data to implement a series of pilot research projects. In addition to providing insights on program/policy impact, we hope this work will catalyze innovative research by the academic community to examine how the relationship between diet quality and diet-related chronic disease may have changed over time, vary across communities, and may be mediated by a neighborhood's retail, socioeconomic and policy environment."



Kakoli Roy with her mother on her 80th birthday in 2018.

According to Roy, these are only some examples of ongoing work that could help assess the impact of public health resources deployed, not only in combatting the pandemic but also in addressing long-standing health and economic inequities and helping communities combat future crises.

Prior to CDC, Roy was on the academic faculty at the Center for Development Research (ZEF) at the University of Bonn, Germany. She joined CDC in 2000 through the postdoctoral [Prevention Effectiveness Fellowship](#), established to build agency capacity in economic research and decision sciences. Most of her work at CDC has involved integrating economics in varied ways into public health science, programs, and policies.

Roy is dedicated to mentoring early-career researchers, as a way of “paying it forward,” noting the importance of mentors in shaping her own career. One of these mentors was the visionary public health scientist and leader, Dr. Stephen Thacker, “who truly embodied the agency’s mission and servant leadership.”

From 2003 to 2011, when she worked with Dr. Thacker, he had a small, informal working group with senior scientific leaders from different centers to brainstorm on high-priority issues. “I was not only being mentored by Dr. Thacker but indirectly by the other senior leaders—Drs. Robin Ikeda, Anne Haddix, Ben Truman, and so many others. Through those discussions and analytic work, we provided a scientific approach to inform the CDC 2004 Futures Initiative health goals, conceived the CDC Vital Signs in 2009, developed the first [CDC Health Disparities and Inequalities Report](#) in 2011, and so much more. That experience impacted me as a professional and person.”

The complete faith of her mentors allowed her to bridge economics with public health, often in unique and innovative ways. For example, Roy and her colleagues used insights from labor economics to guide human capital management and planning at CDC, published in a 2009 [supplement](#) to the Journal of Public Health Management and Practice. They also published an [article](#) on gender in career advancement at CDC in the American Journal of Public Health. However, the majority of Roy’s work, like other CDC economists, focuses on strengthening evidence on effectiveness and economic impact of public health programs and policies to guide agency decision making, recommendations, and investments, including work with partners. She co-edited a 2016 [supplement](#) on the use of economics in US public health policy in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine. The editorial to that supplement highlights the role of CDC economists and their work in shaping the field of public health economics more broadly over the past 2 decades.

“Scientific leadership, similar to what economists at CDC provide, may be less visible,” says Roy, “so those on the scientific track may need to be reminded of the impact of scientific contributions and leadership at every career stage. That the evidence we provide can have real impact on the lives of real people is something we can never forget. It’s what gives the work so much meaning and purpose.”



Roy (r) with Anne Schuchat, MD, and the cross-center team (OD/OADP and DHDSP) that won the CDC/ATSDR Honor Award for Excellence in Policy Evaluation.

