

# UNNATURAL CAUSES

...is inequality making us sick?

For Immediate Release

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## NEW HEALTH EQUITY MOVEMENT ENERGIZED BY PBS SERIES

What do the SEIU, the March of Dimes, Chi Eta Phi, Minnesota churches, and public health agencies across the country have in common?

Along with other public interest, civic, business, government, and policy groups, they are using the new documentary series *UNNATURAL CAUSES: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?*, which premiered on PBS this past spring, in a unique public engagement campaign. These groups are looking beyond the narrow debate over health insurance to ask why so many Americans get sick in the first place, and why patterns of health and illness are so differentially distributed by class and by race.

This growing “health equity” movement is reframing the national debate over health by focusing attention on the underlying social and economic conditions that render zip code and household wealth even stronger predictors of health outcomes than personal behaviors, genetic profile, or even access to healthcare.

Over 400 outreach partners and countless others are using *UNNATURAL CAUSES* and its companion tools to bring these issues out of the shadows of academic journals and into the public arena in a growing grassroots effort. To date, they have convened more than 12,000 community dialogues, policy forums, trainings, town hall meetings, and other events based around the series.

*UNNATURAL CAUSES* reveals that an African-American child in some poor neighborhoods can expect to live 15 years less than a white child in a wealthy neighborhood just a few miles away, and that the rest of Americans fall somewhere in-between. The big killers are not violence, drugs or HIV/AIDS, but rather lifelong chronic stress and deprivation that “weather” the body prematurely and manifest in chronic diseases and, too often, early death. Furthermore, the country’s alarming socioeconomic and racial health gaps have actually been widening since the early 1980s, paralleling the country’s growing economic inequality. As a nation, we are falling further and further behind other countries in health indicators. In 1980, the U.S. was ranked 14th in life expectancy. By 2008, 29th. Costa Ricans live longer than we do. Per capita, Cyprus loses fewer infants in their first year of life.

The following examples provide just a sample of how *UNNATURAL CAUSES* is helping to

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reframe the national debate over health. These actors are building understanding and looking at ways to put into practice a new approach to health that embodies the words of Harvard's Dr. David Williams, interviewed in the series: "Housing policy is health policy. Educational policy is health policy. Anti-violence policy is health policy. Neighborhood improvement policies are health policies. Everything that we can do to improve the quality of life of individuals in our society has an impact on their health and is a health policy."

- Premieres and kick-off health equity forums were held in two dozen cities. The Boston opening at the Kennedy Library, for example, was introduced by Boston Mayor Thomas Menino; featured Massachusetts Secretary of Health and Human Services, Dr. Judyann Bigby; and attracted a standing-room-only crowd of 750.
- Twenty-two state and hundreds of city and county public health departments are using the series in community dialogues, internal trainings, and policy forums to build understanding and buy-in for "upstream" health equity interventions. The Chicago Public Health Department, for example, trained 80 discussion leaders for community outreach. The Mecklenberg County (NC) Public Health Department organized more than two dozen events for audiences from county supervisors to book clubs.
- Among the hundreds of other campaigns led by outreach partners:
  - The ISALAH / Gamaliel Interfaith Network of 90 congregations, community groups, unions, and public health officials in Central Minnesota is building a "transformative health" campaign around *UNNATURAL CAUSES* forums to drive state health policy debates beyond the narrow issue of health insurance.
  - Black Women's Agenda, a coalition of 16 national African-American women's organizations, such as The Links and Delta Sigma Theta sorority, is using the series to mobilize members around the issue of pre-term births, through a racial justice framework. During the Congressional Black Caucus Legislative Weekend conference on September 25, 2008, leadership of BWA member organizations attended a six-hour training on how to use the series in their own work.
  - The SEIU has used the series in their "Community Strength" campaign to advocate for social policies that improve community well-being.
  - The California Pan-Ethnic Health Network incorporated the series into series of convenings across the state addressing the interplay between health and land use, bringing together local community leaders and public health experts as part of a long-term effort to develop policy solutions.
  - The Healthcare George Foundation is providing support to 100 Black Men of Georgia chapters to host screenings and foster dialogue about how each chapter can advocate for health equity at the local level.
- Four companion health equity reports have been released to date, such as Alameda County's (CA) *Life and Death from Unnatural Causes*, attracting additional press coverage and the attention of local officials.
- Several local PBS stations—including Chicago, Pittsburgh, Columbus, Kansas City, Santa Rosa (CA) and Louisville—produced their own local companion television shows alongside the national PBS broadcast.

- King County (Seattle) executive Ron Sims announced a new “Equity and Social Justice” initiative that will evaluate social policy through an equity lens. The initiative is using *UNNATURAL CAUSES* to build understanding and buy-in among stakeholders.
- The Health Trust of Silicon Valley provided 15 mini-grants of up to \$1500 each for community organizations to convene screenings and dialogues as part of the Healthy Silicon Valley initiative. They are hosting a conference among grantees in winter 2009 to consider next steps.
- Policy forums on Capitol Hill and at four state capitols have already been held, and more are being organized, including a California State Capitol event in January 2009 hosted by the Speaker of the Assembly and the President Pro Tem of the Senate.
- The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) have acquired hundreds of DVDs and are integrating *UNNATURAL CAUSES* into several of their programs, including Project REACH, the Leaders Conference, the National Center for Chronic Disease Control and Prevention, and their Social Determinants of Health working group.
- Continuing Education credits for an online course structured around the series are offered through San Francisco State University in association with the American Public Health Association. The Boston Public Health Commission has developed and tested lesson plans for high school health courses, to be rolled out this winter.
- The National Association of Latino Elected Officials is incorporating the series in to a leadership program for elected officials, linking health outcomes to social and economic policies.
- Thousands have accessed and downloaded the Action Toolkit, Discussion Guide, Policy Guide, interactivities, handouts, backgrounders, and other resources from the series companion web site at [www.unnaturalcauses.org](http://www.unnaturalcauses.org)

With layoffs, foreclosures and cuts in social services threatening the health of increasing numbers of Americans, use of *UNNATURAL CAUSES* continues to grow. More information about this emerging health policy trend and how organizations are using the series to educate, organize, and advocate for health equity can be found at [www.unnaturalcauses.org](http://www.unnaturalcauses.org).

*For a press kit, review DVDs, or interviews with series spokespeople, please contact Rachel Poulain ([rp@newsreel.org](mailto:rp@newsreel.org)) or Andrea Des Marais ([adm@newsreel.org](mailto:adm@newsreel.org)) at 415 284 7800.*