

UNNATURAL CAUSES ...is inequality making us sick?

A documentary and public engagement campaign from California Newsreel



Produced by California Newsreel with Vital Pictures. Presented by the National Minority Consortia of public television. Public engagement campaign in association with the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Health Policy Institute.

DVD SCENE GUIDE

UNNATURAL CAUSES is a four-hour documentary series divided into seven program segments. The hour-long opening episode sets out the main themes of the series: health and longevity are correlated with socioeconomic status; people of color face an additional health burden, and our health and well-being are tied to policies that promote economic and social justice.

Each of the six 30-minute program segments, set in different ethnic/racial communities, provides a deeper exploration of the ways in which social conditions affect population health and how some communities are extending their lives by improving them.

EPISODE 1: IN SICKNESS AND IN WEALTH (56 MINUTES)

What connections exist between healthy bodies, healthy bank accounts and skin color? Follow four individuals from different walks of life to see how their position in society – shaped by social policies and public priorities – affects their health.

- 1. Health in America** - The U.S. spends \$1 trillion dollars per year on medical care, yet our outcomes are among the worst in the industrialized world.
- 2. Louisville** - Data maps reveal a five- and 10-year gap in life expectancy between Louisville's rich, middle and low-income neighborhoods.
- 3. Jim Taylor / Whitehall** - Wealthy Americans like Jim Taylor live longer, healthier lives on average than those in the middle and at the bottom of the class pyramid.
- 4. Gradient / Tondra Young** - In Tondra Young's middle class neighborhood, health outcomes are worse. Education helps improve chances, but is increasingly unaffordable.
- 5. Corey Anderson** - Corey and his wife struggle to get by; conditions in their neighborhood are stressful.
- 6. Mary Turner** - Mary Turner is an unemployed mother who struggles to overcome deprivation and feelings of hopelessness.
- 7. Biology of Stress** - Pressure and lack of control trigger a chronic stress response which over time, wears down the body's systems, increasing risk of disease.
- 8. Monkeys / Cold Virus** - Studies of monkeys and humans reveal that lower social position corresponds to elevated levels of stress hormones that can damage the body.
- 9. Demands vs. Control** - Stress isn't just about pressure, but also having the power and resources to manage those demands and find relief.
- 10. Children and Poverty** - The chronic, unremitting stress of childhood poverty can have lifelong health consequences.
- 11. Racism's Impact** - Racial discrimination creates an added health burden for people of color.
- 12. Social Reforms** - During the 20th century, increased prosperity and more equitable social policy helped improve population health.

13. Wealth Gap - Since 1980, the wealth gap between the rich and the rest of us has grown, resulting in a greater health gap.

14. Other Countries - Most developed countries have more social spending, greater equality, and better health than we do.

15. Community Initiatives - Communities are working on a local level to improve their health but national policies are needed.

16. Credits

EPISODE 2: WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS (29 MINUTES)

African American infant mortality rates remain twice as high as for white Americans. African American mothers with college degrees or higher face the same risk of having low birth-weight babies as white women who haven't finished high school. How might the chronic stress of racism over the life course become embedded in our bodies and increase risks?

1. Race Gap in Birth Outcomes - Researchers are studying a hypothesis that might explain the persistence of the large and alarming Black-White infant mortality gap.

2. Kim Anderson's Story - Kim Anderson is one of many women whose baby was born premature despite eating right, exercising and getting excellent pre-natal care.

3. SES, Genetics and Health - Although higher income and education are associated with better health for all populations, racism - not genetics - is an added risk factor for African Americans.

4. Civil Rights Gains - The 1960s brought social change and better health to African Americans. Today, growing inequality threatens those gains.

5. Chronic Stress and the Lifecourse - The accumulation of the additional chronic stress burden of racism across the lifecourse offers one explanation for preterm births.

6. Institutional Racism - Racism persists on many levels; researchers find an eternity of difference in the experiences of white and Black women.

7. Everyday Racism - A group of African American women share their experiences of everyday racism.

8. Coda / Credits - Kim's daughter grew up to be healthy; many others are not so lucky. Where do we go from here?

EPISODE 3: BECOMING AMERICAN (29 MINS)

Recent Mexican immigrants tend to be healthier than the average American. But those health advantages erode the longer they're here. What causes health to worsen as immigrants become acculturated to life in America? What can we all learn about improved wellbeing from new immigrant communities?

1. Arriving Healthy - Many new immigrants arrive in the U.S. healthier than the average American. Some, like Amador Bernal, haven't been to a doctor in 25 years.

2. Latino "Paradox" - The good health of immigrant Latinos seems an exception to the health-wealth gradient. Strong social ties may play a role.

3. Social Inclusion - Americans are working harder than ever and increasingly isolated, putting us at higher risk for disease.

4. Community Resources - Kennett Square, a Quaker town, provides good support services and helps residents, new and old, build ties with one another.

5. Wealth Equals Health - The longer immigrants live in America, the worse their health becomes, and the more their health status corresponds to their wealth.

6. Making Ends Meet - Like many American families, the Bernal's work hard and live from paycheck to paycheck.

7. When Ties Fray - Younger arrivals experience higher levels of depression and anxiety. Among workers, the rate of chronic diseases is on the rise.

8. Lessons for All of Us / Credits - Understanding and translating the health protective benefits of new immigrants is key to improving health for all of us.

EPISODE 4: BAD SUGAR (29 MINS)

O'odham Indians, living on reservations in southern Arizona, have perhaps the highest rates of Type 2 diabetes in the world. Some researchers see this as the literal 'embodiment' of decades of poverty, oppression and loss. A new approach suggests that communities may regain control over their health if they can regain control over their futures.

1. Tohono O'odham & Pima - Native Americans in Arizona have the highest diabetes rate in the world.

2. Genetic Research - Researchers have studied the Pima for decades. Now they are searching for a genetic cause for their diabetes.

3. Poverty as Risk Factor - But the stress of poverty increases blood sugar levels. Obesity, closely tied to income, is also a risk factor for diabetes. As is hopelessness.

4. Stolen Water - The diversion of river water to upstream white settlements, ranches and mines destroyed Pima agriculture, their economy and traditional ways.

5. Diabetic's Nightmare - The O'odham became dependent on surplus government commodities to survive: white flour, cheese, lard, canned foods.

6. Staying Hopeful - Managing diabetes is difficult, but studies show hopefulness is important.

7. Rebuilding Community - After a long battle, the Pima finally regained their water rights and are now beginning to farm again.

8. Taking Control / Credits - To reduce diabetes rates and improve health, Native communities need to regain control over their collective destinies.

EPISODE 5: PLACE MATTERS (29 MINS)

Increasingly, recent Southeast Asian immigrants, along with Latinos, are moving into long neglected African American urban neighborhoods, and now their health is being eroded as a result. What policies and investment decisions create living environments that harm—or enhance—the health of residents? What actions can make a difference?

1. Where You Live - Why is your neighborhood such a good predictor of your health?

2. Gwai's Story - Gwai Boonkeut, a refugee from Laos, experiences firsthand how living in a neglected urban neighborhood is bad for your health.

3. Poverty Tax - Paradoxically, residents of poor communities pay more for goods and services than those in affluent communities.

4. Boomtown - WWII brought economic prosperity to Richmond, but discriminatory postwar government policies channeled resources to segregated white suburbs, while cities like Richmond fell into decline.

5. Chronic Stress - Those living in neglected areas are subject to constant stress with few resources to cope, heightening their risk for serious illness.

6. Living with Violence - Community activists are working together to address health challenges, especially those stemming from violence.

7. High Point, Seattle – In Seattle's High Point neighborhood, residents and local officials worked together to create a mixed-income community with health as its focus.

8. Complicated Solutions / Credits - Solving the health problems of disadvantaged communities isn't easy, but it begins by looking at health through a social policy not just a medical lens.

EPISODE 6: COLLATERAL DAMAGE (29 MINS)

In the Marshall Islands, local populations have been displaced from their traditional way of life by the American military presence and globalization. Now they must contend with the worst of the “developing” and industrialized worlds: infectious diseases such as tuberculosis due to crowded living conditions and extreme poverty and chronic disease stemming from the stress of dislocation and loss.

1. Tuberculosis on Ebeye - Tuberculosis rates in the Marshall Islands are especially high in places like Ebeye, a poor, densely populated community.

2. Rich Island, Poor Island - Americans living on the U.S. military base on Kwajalein enjoy a suburban environment, while Marshall Islanders on nearby Ebeye endure squalid, overcrowded conditions.

3. Worst of Both Worlds - The Marshallese must contend with the health problems of both developing and industrialized nations.

4. Atomic Testing - The U.S. conducted extensive nuclear tests in the area and studied the effects of nuclear fallout on the Marshallese people.

5. Dislocation - Problems on Ebeye stem largely from the complex presence of the nearby U.S. military base.

6. History of Tuberculosis - During the early 20th century, social reforms helped dramatically reduce tuberculosis rates in the U.S.

7. Springdale, Arkansas - Many Marshallese have been displaced again. They come to the U.S. mainland seeking a better life. Some find a hard adjustment.

8. Credits

EPISODE 7: NOT JUST A PAYCHECK (30 MINS)

Residents of western Michigan struggle against depression, domestic violence and higher rates of heart disease and diabetes after the largest refrigerator factory in the country shuts down. Ironically, the plant is owned by a company in Sweden, where mass layoffs - far from devastating lives - are relatively benign because of government policies that protect and retrain workers.

1. Plant Closure - When Electrolux closed its plant in Greenville, MI, workers lost more than a job.

2. Effects of Job Loss - Laid-off workers discuss their increased stress, depression and worry.

3. Stress under the Skin - Prolonged stress triggers cortisol, which increases the risk of both acute and chronic health problems.

4. Loss of U.S. Jobs - As more companies move manufacturing to other countries, middle-class American families are having a harder time making ends meet.

5. Haves and Have Nots - The wealthiest Americans are getting richer and richer, reflecting a growing divide in the U.S.

6. Resources / Control - Economic status predicts health. Those on the top have more resources and control; lack of control increases health risks.

7. Sweden – When Electrolux closed their Swedish plant, Swedish policies protected workers and guaranteed citizens economic security.

8. A Shared Future / Credits - People in other countries have a sense of shared responsibility about the fate of workers; what about us?

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