

# UNNATURAL CAUSES

...is inequality making us sick?

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## Prize-Winning PBS Series Now Available in Spanish, Other Languages

### ***UNNATURAL CAUSES: IS INEQUALITY MAKING US SICK? Changing the Way Americans Think about Health***

San Francisco – While Congress debates health care reform, the documentary series *Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?* asks what makes Americans healthy – or sick – in the first place, and offers new remedies for an ailing society.

The prize-winning, four-hour DVD now contains both Spanish language audio and subtitles as well as English. What's more, Episode Four: "Place Matters," can be accessed in five Asian languages: Vietnamese, Hmong, Lao, Mandarin and Cantonese.

*Unnatural Causes* crisscrosses the nation to show that health is determined by far more than health care, bad habits, or unlucky genes. **Unnatural Causes** circles in on a slow killer in plain view: the class and racial inequities in the rest of our lives – in the jobs we do, the wealth we enjoy, the neighborhoods we live in - can get under our skin as surely as germs and viruses and kill more Americans in a day than do global pandemics in a year. It turns out that class, exposure to racism, and zip code are even stronger predictors of health and life expectancy than smoking.

**Unnatural Causes** raises unsettling questions with far-reaching political and social implications:

- Why does the most powerful nation in the world now rank 29<sup>th</sup> in life expectancy and 31st in infant mortality (worse than Slovenia) despite spending twice per person on health care than the average rich nation?
- Why do CEOs tend not to get heart attacks, but their subordinates do?
- Why do recent Latino immigrants, though typically poorer, enjoy better health than the average American, yet suffer a rapid decline the longer they are here?

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- Why are some African American and Native American populations less likely to reach age 65 than people from Bangladesh?

Seven production teams, filming across America, captured stories on the ground, weaving together human dramas with scientific data. The series reveals how at each step down the class pyramid—from the rich to the middle class to the poor—people tend to be sicker and die sooner. The poor die on average seven years earlier than the rich. But even middle-income Americans are dying two years sooner than those at the top. Poorer smokers face a greater chance of getting sick than rich smokers. Further, life-long exposure to racism seems to impose an additional health risk on many populations of color. For many diseases, African Americans, Native Americans and Pacific Islanders – at all income levels – fare worse on average than their white counterparts.

But why? How can class and racism disrupt our physiology? Through what channels might inequalities in housing, wealth, power, and education translate into poor health? What is it about our poor neighborhoods, especially neighborhoods of color, that is so deadly? How are the behavioral choices we make (e.g. diet and exercise) constrained by the choices we have?

Solutions, the evidence suggests, lie not in more pills but in more equitable social policies. Top researchers like Harvard's Dr. David Williams argue that secure, living-wage jobs, affordable housing, racial justice, good schools, safe streets and green spaces, access to produce and full-service markets and not just fast-food joints and mom and pops, are health issues just as critical as diet, tobacco and exercise. As a society, we have a choice: invest in the conditions for health now. Or pay to repair our bodies later.

More than 20,000 community dialogues, policy forums, trainings, and town hall meetings built around *Unnatural Causes* have been convened by hundreds of outreach partners and countless others since the series' initial Spring 2008 broadcast and are reframing the way we think about health. DVDs, interactives, video clips, lesson plans and other resources can be found on the series' website at [www.unnaturalcauses.org](http://www.unnaturalcauses.org).

*Unnatural Causes* has won praise from pundits around the country along with a duPont-Columbia Award, Best Film/Radio/TV Program of 2009 by the National Academies of Sciences and Institute of Medicine, the Congressional Black Caucus Health Braintrust Excellence in Journalism Award, the Council on Foundations Henry Hampton Award and other honors.

*Unnatural Causes* was produced by the San Francisco-based film production and distribution center California Newsreel ([www.newsreel.org](http://www.newsreel.org)) with Vital Pictures ([www.vitalpix.org](http://www.vitalpix.org)) of Boston and presented on PBS by the National Minority Consortia of public television. It received major funding from the Ford Foundation, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the California Endowment, the Joint Center Health Policy Institute, Kaiser Permanente and the Nathan Cummings Foundation. Additional outreach funding was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Open Society Institute.

**To purchase DVDs and more information, visit: [www.unnaturalcauses.org](http://www.unnaturalcauses.org).**

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