

# UNNATURAL CAUSES ..is inequality making us sick?

A documentary and public engagement campaign from California Newsreel



## PRESS HIGHLIGHTS

UNNATURAL CAUSES won extensive media coverage and was hailed by the press as a fresh and invaluable contribution to the national dialogue on health. *USA Today* called the series “riveting.” On *The Today Show* Matt Lauer called it “disturbing [and] startling,” adding, “Hopefully it will get a lot of people asking serious questions.” *Newsweek* noted that the series “offers plenty of background...but the film’s power comes not from experts or statistics but stories of real people.” The *New York Daily News* described it as “instructive, informative, depressing, and occasionally infuriating,” while the *Louisville Courier-Journal* called it “amazing...a real-life CSI investigation.”

The NPR radio shows *Tell Me More* and *News & Notes* ran extended segments, as did other syndicated public radio shows such as *Living on Earth* and *Forum*. Many AM talk radio shows, such as *The Thom Hartman Show*, ran interviews with the series producers and advisors. Five PBS stations ran companion local shows with outreach partners: Columbus (WOSU), Kentucky (KET), Santa Rosa, CA (KRCB), Pittsburgh (WGBH), and Kansas City (KCPT). A follow-up piece produced by *Bill Moyers Journal* is awaiting air.

Outreach partners organized launch events and some even released companion reports, generating additional coverage in many local TV newscasts and newspapers, including three front-page stories. For example, Alameda County (CA) Public Health Department released a report titled “Life and Death from Unnatural Causes” during the broadcast. The report (and the series) received front-page, above-the-fold coverage in all three major San Francisco Bay Area daily newspapers: the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Oakland Tribune*, and *San Jose Mercury News*. King County (Seattle), Duval County (Jacksonville, FL) and the Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative (BARHII) also released companion reports, while UNNATURAL CAUSES outreach campaigns in Eugene, Oregon, Chicago, Peoria, Tulsa, Minneapolis, Lansing, Louisville, Seattle, Raleigh-Durham, Santa Rosa and elsewhere have received local TV and print media coverage.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Minneapolis Post*, *San Jose Mercury News*, *Lansing State Journal*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Contra Costa Times*, *AFL-CIO News*, and *Indian Country*, among others, ran op eds, while the *Louisville Courier-Journal* also ran an editorial in support of the series.

Unfortunately, WNET’s decision to schedule UNNATURAL CAUSES in their Saturday afternoon documentary slot rather than the national Thursday 10:00PM PBS feed slot hurt our efforts to win extensive New York publicity. The *New York Times*, for example, has a policy of not reviewing daytime broadcasts, and therefore only included the series in its weekly television highlights.

We were pleased that not only the op eds but much of the other coverage addressed the core themes of the series. *USA Today* wrote that the series “explores why your bank account, race, and zip code are more powerful predictors of healthiness than your medical coverage, habits, and genes.” *The Seattle Times* said, “Inequality is killing us. Behavior, diet, and environment aren't always the answer. The stress of living in a win-or-lose society is.” The *Los Angeles Times* tied health inequities to “the fetishistic worship of the so-called free market that increases the distance between the poor and the tax-averse rich,” adding, “[The series] makes clear that only political will can provide a remedy.” The longer-form radio interview shows also provided an opportunity to explore the roots of health inequities and their solutions in greater depth.

However, perhaps the biggest media coverage hurdle we faced was helping the press distinguish between “health” and “health care.” The health *care* story is so deeply imprinted in journalists’ minds that many just assumed the series was about inequities in health care and insurance. That health is *more* than health care became a major part of our messaging.

Our press outreach work, both to individuals and through professional associations, continues. We are using the series to help journalists scrutinize their own coverage of health and the root causes of health inequities. To date, we have presented at the National Association of Health Care Journalists and the Annenberg / California Endowment Health Fellows program, and keynoted the annual fellows program of the Investigative Reporters and Editors at the Annenberg School at the University of Southern California. Recognizing that media interest in the series would extend beyond the broadcast, our media consultants McKinney & Associates have generously extended their contract at no charge and are continuing to place radio and newspaper stories.

As an added bonus, our advisors and on-camera scholars are now regularly serving as sources for related stories and have been featured in a number of press reports. With PBS continuing to rebroadcast the series and thousands of groups using it for education and advocacy, we expect UNNATURAL CAUSES to continue drawing media attention through the coming year.