



UNNATURAL CAUSES

...is inequality making us sick?

Policy Guide

www.unnaturalcauses.org

Produced by California Newsreel with Vital Pictures. Presented by the National Minority Consortia. Public Engagement Campaign in Association with the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Health Policy Institute.

Social Policy is Health Policy

What does social policy have to do with health? Decisions that governments and corporations make every day benefit some and burden others. Unfortunately, they often reinforce class, racial and gender inequities that contribute to unequal patterns of illness and premature death. Building a social movement that can advocate effectively for more equitable social policies is critical to changing our economic, physical and social environments so that they promote rather than threaten our health.

In other words, tackling health inequities is unavoidably a matter of politics; of engaging in struggles over how we want our government to allocate resources, regulate corporate power, and implement the principles of democracy. It is also a matter of empowering communities and reshaping institutions to address the social and economic conditions that profoundly shape our health.

Tony Iton, MD, director of the Alameda County Public Health Department in California, points out that social policies that produce and reproduce socioeconomic and racial inequality have, over time, “taken many forms, including racially restrictive covenants on property, economic redlining in banking practices, school segregation, [unfair] housing and urban renewal policies, disinvestment in public transportation, discriminatory zoning practices, law enforcement racial profiling, [discriminatory] incarceration policies, and other deliberate governmental policies and practices.”¹

But we’ve also made many changes during the last century that have improved health equity by improving peoples’ lives: the eight-hour work day, universal public high school, the right to collective bargaining, social security, civil rights, environmental standards... There’s no reason why we can’t do so again.

Opportunities for change abound. Iton and others suggest a wide range of tangible policy options, including quality universal preschool, improved public school funding, living wage laws, affordable housing, zoning reform, improved public transit, fair immigration policies, criminal justice reform, and, of course, full employment, fair trade and even progressive tax policy.²

¹ Iton, Anthony, “Tackling the Root Causes of Health Disparities through Community Capacity Building” in Hofrichter, Richard, Tackling Health Inequities Through Public Health Practice, National Association of County and City Health Officials: 2006; p. 124.

² *ibid*

Below you will find a menu of policy ideas that can improve health equity. While this list is organized by issue area, the policies follow three general types:

- **Tackling inequality and improving living standards.** These policies aim to close the gap between the rich and the rest of us, and between white people and people of color.
- **Protecting those at the bottom of the pyramid.** These policies protect under-resourced households and communities from health threats posed by the chaos and uncertainty of free markets. They promote not only additional programs and services, but more equitable allocation of public resources for social investments (such as quality schools, housing, and infrastructure) so that the means for achievement are more available to those with fewer individual resources.
- **Reforming decision-making.** These policies aim to open and democratize decision-making processes that are too often dominated by concentrated economic and political power.

Such policies are intertwined, of course. Together, they help shape patterns of advantage and deprivation, health and illness. Which specific policies you choose to advocate will depend on your opportunities, your organization's capacity, and the readiness of your allies, constituents and the public to struggle for change.

Developing Your Policy Approach

In reviewing the policy suggestions below, consider:

- Which policies do your community, colleagues or constituency deem most vital for their health?
- What level of understanding and sense of urgency characterize those groups?
- Do community leaders, the public, the media and policy makers understand the root causes of health inequities?
- In which arenas are promising (or destructive) initiatives or political activity already underway?
- Which policies lend themselves to building partnerships and alliances?
- What is your own organizational capacity and where will you encounter obstacles and resistance?

NOTE: This guide is intended for use in conjunction with the UNNATURAL CAUSES action toolkit and discussion guide, both of which are available at www.unnaturalcauses.org.

Successful policy change depends more than anything else on those most affected by injustice working together to set priorities, generate solutions, make their voices heard, and to organize effectively to hold government accountable.

For more information on developing a public policy strategy that advances health equity, please see:

- The Praxis Project's "Advocating for Better Policies" (PDF): www.unnaturalcauses.org/assets/uploads/file/UC_PolicyAdvocacy.pdf
- The Praxis Project's "Planning for Media Advocacy" (PDF): www.unnaturalcauses.org/assets/uploads/file/UC_MediaAdvocacy.pdf

Policy Recommendations

Please note that the suggestions below represent only a partial list of organizations working on policies that will advance health equity and is not intended to be comprehensive.

General

Two initiatives that will recommend new public policies addressing health inequities are underway:

- The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Commission to Build a Healthier America was launched in February, 2008: www.commissiononhealth.org
- The World Health Organization Commission on the Social Determinants of Health will make its final report in August, 2008: www.who.int/social_determinants/en/

In the United Kingdom, the 1998 Independent Inquiry into Inequalities in Health Report (otherwise known as the Acheson Report) concluded with 39 policy recommendations to improve health: www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/doh/ih/contents.htm

1. Promote Understanding of the Social Determinants of Health

Educate decision-makers and the general public about how patterns of inequity in the larger environment—where we live, work and play—influence inequities in health. Identify strategies that address key economic, political and community factors that affect health.

- Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Health Policy Institute: http://www.jointcenter.org/index.php/current_research_and_policy_activities/health_policy_institute
- National Association of County and City Health Officials - Health Equity and Social Justice: www.naccho.org/topics/justice/index.cfm
- PolicyLink: www.policylink.org
- Prevention Institute – THRIVE: The Tool for Health and Resilience in Vulnerable Environments: www.preventioninstitute.org/thrive/index.php
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Commission for a Healthier America: www.commissiononhealth.org
- World Health Organization Commission on the Social Determinants of Health: www.who.int/social_determinants/en/

2. Improve Income and Reduce Wealth Inequalities

Raise the minimum wage to a livable level; increase income supports, including unemployment insurance and the earned income tax credit; improve protections against layoffs; strengthen on-the-job learning opportunities, training for the unemployed and job placement assistance; support local ownership (homes and businesses) and community re-investment; ensure secure retirement and pension plans and expand access for non-standard workers; support the right to organize; increase saving incentives; regulate business and banking; support efforts to improve wages and working conditions in developing countries to protect jobs at home; repeal tax cuts and loopholes for the rich; reduce the influence of money and lobbyists over politics.

- ACORN's Living Wage Campaign: www.livingwagecampaign.org
- Economic Policy Institute: www.epi.org
- Jobs With Justice: www.jwj.org
- Partnership for Working Families: www.communitybenefits.org
- United for a Fair Economy: www.faireconomy.org
- Walmart Campaign: www.wakeupwalmart.com

3. Improve the Physical and Built Environment

Create more quality low-cost housing; tighten zoning to restrict noise and pollution; create more safe and inviting parks and green spaces; provide appropriate clean-up and removal of toxic material, “brownfields” and other environmental hazards; promote farmers’ markets and produce sales in local stores; improve traffic safety; ensure safe sidewalks and streets for pedestrians and bicyclists; provide reliable and low-cost public transit; encourage “green” development and pedestrian-oriented planning; discourage sprawl through incentives and restrictions; limit promotion and availability of harmful products; eliminate harmful targeted marketing, and minimize liquor, fast food and cigarette outlets.

- ACORN (Association of Community Organization for Reform Now): www.acorn.org
- Asian Pacific Environmental Network: www.apen4ej.org
- Designing and Building Healthy Places: www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/default.htm
- Environmental Justice Resource Center: www.ejrc.cau.edu
- International Making Cities Livable: www.livablecities.org
- National Association of County and City Health Officials - Health Equity and Social Justice: www.naccho.org/topics/justice/index.cfm
- National Low Income Housing Coalition: www.nlihc.org
- PolicyLink – Why Place Matters: www.policylink.org/documents/WhyPlaceMattersreport_web.pdf
- Prevention Institute: www.preventioninstitute.org
- Strategic Alliance for Healthy Food and Activity Environments: www.eatbettermovemore.org

4. Promote Racial Justice

Strengthen and rigorously enforce existing anti-discrimination, voting rights and equal opportunity laws; promote affirmative action; desegregate schools and neighborhoods; support housing mobility strategies; provide resources for jobs and educational access and retention;; monitor and eliminate environmental health threats, including lead paint; address arrest and sentencing discrimination and promote rehabilitation in corrections facilities; increase access, quality and cultural competence of medical care and social services; protect the civil rights of undocumented workers.

- Applied Research Center: www.arc.org
- Equal Justice Society: www.equaljusticesociety.org
- Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies: www.jointcenter.org
- Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity: www.kirwaninstitute.org
- Leadership Conference on Civil Rights: www.civilrights.org
- Poverty and Race Research Action Council: www.prrac.org
- Strategic Actions for a Just Economy: www.saje.net
- The Opportunity Agenda: www.opportunityagenda.org
- The Praxis Project: www.thepraxisproject.org

5. Promote Better Working Conditions

Decrease job strain by increasing job autonomy, control over the pace of work, employee involvement and participatory management; provide flexible work hours and job security; reduce disruptive shift changes and extended hours; provide in-service training and jobs with career ladders; strengthen and enforce occupational health & safety laws; legislate paid sick leave (including parental and family leave) and vacations; remove unfair barriers to unionization and strengthen collective bargaining; ensure that jobs are occupationally safe and ergonomically sound; increase protections for undocumented workers; expand benefits and increase protections for workers in non-standard arrangements.

- AFL-CIO: www.aflcio.org
- California Paid Family Leave: www.paidfamilyleave.org
- Change to Win: www.changetowin.org
- Job Stress Network: www.workhealth.org
- San Francisco Paid Sick Leave Ordinance: www.sfgov.org/site/uploadedfiles/olse/KeyComponentsPaidSickLeaveOrdinance.pdf
- Take Back Your Time: www.timeday.org

6. Improve Conditions for Children

Support and invest in families by providing living wage jobs, family allowances, paid parental family and sick leave, and increasing the earned income tax credit; guarantee universal quality pre-school and daycare; provide quality public schooling (including art, music and physical education) and safe places to play; ensure good nutrition and preventive care (including oral care); provide nutrition, resources and support to women before, during and after pregnancy, including prenatal care and post-delivery home visitation; support stimulating parent-child relations from birth; promote reading; eliminate advertising aimed at children, including junk food in schools; provide in-school clinics and after-school programs; equalize school spending; increase supports for single parents; promote family planning.

- Child Friendly Cities: www.childfriendlycities.org
- Child Welfare League of America: www.cwla.org
- Children Now: www.childrennow.org
- Children's Defense Fund: www.childrensdefense.org
- Labor Project for Working Families: www.working-families.org
- MomsRising.org: www.momsrising.org
- National Scientific Council on the Developing Child: www.developingchild.net
- Society for Equity in Child Health: www.equitychildhealth.org

7. Improve Social Inclusion:

Strengthen democratic decision-making, community organizations and opportunities for civic engagement; strengthen labor, education, community development and family welfare policies that reduce inequality and social stratification; strengthen laws against discrimination and segregation; invest in jobs and public infrastructure in resource-poor communities, promote local hiring and benefit agreements and reduce geographic barriers to opportunity; guarantee minimum incomes; remove barriers to health care, social services and affordable housing.

- ACORN (Association of Community Organization for Reform Now): www.acorn.org
- Applied Research Center: www.arc.org
- Center for Social Inclusion: www.centerforsocialinclusion.org
- Poverty and Race Research Action Council: www.prrac.org
- The Praxis Project: www.thepraxisproject.org

8. Improve Education:

Require small class sizes; reform school financing to equalize school spending and access to quality K-12 education; improve teacher compensation, training and support; increase resources for special needs children; reform educational policies based on high-stakes testing; promote partnerships with families; provide quality universal preschool; increase after-school programs and open facilities for community use; reduce financial barriers to college; improve nutrition standards in school meals; ensure opportunities for quality physical activity, art and music.

- American Federation of Teachers: www.aft.org
- Center for Education Reform: www.edreform.org
- National Education Association: www.nea.org
- National Writing Project: www.nwp.org
- Public Education Network: www.publiceducation.org
- Rethinking Schools: www.rethinkingschools.org
- The Civil Rights Project: www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu

9. Improve Food Security and Quality

Provide affordable and nutritious food for all, especially the most vulnerable. Enforce rigorous regulation and monitoring of food safety standards; reform the subsidy program that rewards producers of processed foods; limit fast-food and alcohol outlets; improve and increase the federal food stamp program; support sustainable agriculture and local food production, especially organics; encourage community and school gardens; promote work and commuting patterns that give families the time and energy to prepare meals and eat together; post accurate nutrition labeling in restaurants; reduce chronic stressors that trigger binge eating and junk food as a form of coping; include cooking classes and food education in schools; regulate advertising and targeted marketing, especially to children; ban sales of soft drinks and junk food in schools.

- Community Food Security Coalition: www.foodsecurity.org
- Center for Science in the Public Interest: www.cspinet.org
- Edible Schoolyard: www.edibleschoolyard.org
- Food First / Institute for Food and Development Policy: www.foodfirst.org
- Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy: www.iatp.org
- Strategic Alliance for Healthy Food and Activity Environments: www.eatbettermovemore.org
- Community Food Security Coalition also provides a list of other food security organizations at: www.foodsecurity.org/links.html

10. Improve Public and Sustainable Transportation

Give precedence to cycling and walking on roads; discourage out-of-town malls and residential sprawl through land-use and zoning restrictions; improve public transit, especially for underdeveloped and isolated urban and inner-ring suburban communities as well as to rural areas; develop light rail, electric buses and other “green” modes of mass transit; reduce emissions and fuel consumption; establish dedicated bus lanes; promote neighborhood planning that favors walking.

- Bus Riders Union: www.busridersunion.org
- International Making Cities Livable: www.livablecities.org
- PolicyLink: www.policylink.org
- Prevention Institute: www.preventioninstitute.org
- Smart Growth Online: www.smartgrowth.org

11. Health Impact Assessments

Require the use of Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) to evaluate the consequence of proposed developments and policy initiatives on population health.

- A Guide to Health Impact Assessment: A Policy Tool for New Zealand [www.phac.health.govt.nz/moh.nsf/pagescm/764/\\$File/guidetohia.pdf](http://www.phac.health.govt.nz/moh.nsf/pagescm/764/$File/guidetohia.pdf)
- Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative: www.barhii.org
- Health Impact Assessment: www.ph.ucla.edu/hs/health-impact/
- Healthy Development Measuring Tool: www.thehdmtool.org
- HIA Gateway: www.apho.org.uk/default.aspx?QN=P_HIA
- Human Impact Partners: www.humanimpact.org

12. Universal Health Care

Support guaranteed and culturally competent, quality health care, access and treatment for all.

- Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum: www.apiahf.org
- Health Care for All – CA: www.healthcareforall.org, MA: www.hcfama.org
- National Alliance for Hispanic Health: www.hispanichealth.org
- National Association of Community Health Centers: www.nachc.com
- Physicians for a National Health Program: www.pnhp.org
- SiCKO: www.michaelmoore.com/sicko/index.html
- The Opportunity Agenda - www.opportunityagenda.org

UNNATURAL CAUSES is a four-hour documentary series that explores racial and socioeconomic inequities in health. Produced by California Newsreel with Vital Pictures. Presented by the National Minority Consortia of public television. Outreach in association with the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Health Policy Institute.