

Teaching "The Wire": A Novel Approach to Understanding Social Determinants of Health and Community-based Programs

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While the burgeoning population health movement appears focused on keeping patients out of hospitals, improvements in population health will ultimately come from addressing the root causes of health inequities. With post-industrial American cities the focus on much conversation on social justice in the past year and with 52% of hospital discharges from urban teaching hospitals (AHRQ HCUP, 2013), urban settings are critical to the study of the social determinants of health. Urban clinical settings may not fully illuminate the root causes of health inequities. Martinez (2014) discusses how such topics are not included in most medical school curricula, and recommends development of strategies to teach them.

Over the past five years, a novel approach to teaching about health inequities has been employed using the television show "The Wire" as a case study of the health ills so common in Baltimore: the significant morbidity and mortality from trauma and gun violence; the drug trade and drug use that correlates with the surge in heroin deaths and the high rates of "the bug," HIV; the failing schools that seem to be like prisons. Urban life as depicted in The Wire makes the point better than any text.

In this healthcare management course that includes public health students, physicians and other health professionals, students design innovative yet feasible solutions to urban health issues. Students make short documentary films to share their work on topics such as remedies for food deserts, naloxone for opioid overdoses, novel job training programs; and afterschool enrichment programs.