

Health Policy Forums

Public Health Law Research: Making the Case for Laws to Improve Health

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An eager standing room-only audience filled the space at February's Health Policy Forum to listen to Scott Burris, JD, Professor of Law at Temple University. Mr. Burris is the Director of the Center for Law, Policy, and Practice at Temple and Director of the Public Health Law Research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Public Health Law Research (PHLR) is a five-year initiative aimed at promoting regulatory, legal, and policy solutions to improve public health nation-wide. Focused on expanding the field of public health law research, PHLR funds studies that provide evidence about how law can be used to improve population health. PHLR is making evidence more accessible to policy-makers and the public.

Mr. Burris is well known for his work in HIV policy, and his forum presentation drew upon that expertise to provide a historical frame of reference to the arena of law, policy, and public health. Reflecting back to the earlier time period of the HIV epidemic, reporting requirements were a big topic of discussion, even

prior to the widespread availability of HIV testing. Although law was identified as a possible influence on HIV testing in 1983, the first serious studies on its influence occurred in 1995. Similarly, laws related to injection drug users and the availability of needle exchange programs raised complex issues, and were not researched rigorously until 1995.

Mr. Burris describes public health law research as, "the scientific study of the relation of law and legal practices to population health."¹ Mr. Burris discussed the different categories or fields within public health law research: interventional law, infrastructure law, and incidental law. Interventional laws are laws that intend to influence health outcomes or mediators (e.g., smoking bans). Infrastructural laws are laws that establish the powers, duties, and structure of public health agencies (e.g., state and local infrastructure laws that affect population health outcomes). Incidental laws are laws that originally may have been adopted for reasons unrelated to public health, but ultimately have resulted in an

unintended public health impact. The example Mr. Burris referred to was a study that explored land use zones and walkability.

The specifics of research design, data sets, and coding laws were also discussed. Mr. Burris explained some of the challenges involved with conducting this type of research, including the logistics of coding laws across numerous variables.

Burris encouraged the audience to get involved and take advantage of the resources of the Public Health Law Research program. The program offers free educational tools online, and it recently posted a Call for Proposals for both short- and long-term studies. ■

For more information on the Public Health Law Research program visit: www.phlr.org.

Health Policy Forum podcasts can be downloaded by visiting: <http://jdc.jefferson.edu/hpn/>

REFERENCES

1. Burris S, et al. Making the case for laws that improve health: A framework for public health law research. *The Milbank Quarterly*. 2010;88(2):169-210. www.milbank.org/quarterly/8802featBurris.pdf.