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Regional

Carter teaches effects of inequalities in society

Inequalities have always plagued society, but it seems that the current world financial crises have made things much worse for many more people. And the negative results have led many researchers to study the effects of inequality and to try to remediate them. One of those researchers is Kimberly Carter, an assistant professor in the department of social work at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. While her original plan was to become a medical doctor, she said that her current position allows her to do exactly what she always wanted.

"I knew I wanted to help people," said Carter. Born in New Orleans, La., she received her bachelor's degree in psychology, and her master's and doctorate in social work from Washington University in St. Louis. Carter explained that social workers try to understand how people think, live, and function in the context of their environments and how social justice issues impact their lives, from the roots of poverty to issues of health care. Her own doctoral dissertation dealt with the question of why many African-Americans don't use public health care more frequently, particularly in relation to mental health issues. She found that the reason is not just a matter of poverty.

"They have learned to turn to family, grandma, the minister or priest," Carter said, instead of the health care system. "Resilience for African-Americans when it comes to health means that they are turning to each other for help. They are not going to the psychiatrist or therapist and perhaps they never will because it's the culture that has evolved. Maybe what we need to do is strengthen these natural support systems. Many ethnic minority cultures have learned to function independent of formal health care institutions because they had to, so they have learned to take not having and have turned that into a strength. We need to ask how we can learn from that strength." Given these realities,



Dr. Kimberly Carter in her class.

what impact will the Affordable Care Act passed by Congress in 2010 have on minority communities?

"We have spent a lot of time thinking and worrying about that," Carter said. "Some social workers are not for the Obama plan because it has implications in multiple ways. Yes, we have this myth that all we do is help people in poverty,

but as social workers we work with the "haves" as well, and universal care coverage will impact them. They are going to go through distress because that transition is going to be huge for them."

One area in which Carter works concerns a phenomenon more common than people think: child suicide. "Suicide is the second highest reason for teens

to die and we have to pay attention to that," she said. "It is a huge problem but it's one of those things people don't want to talk about. It is a growing problem and we have noticed over the past decades that teen suicide has increased and we think it is in large part because society is much different. The natural support systems – extended families

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– are not there as in the past. People no longer live in communities where they know their neighbors." When asked about what parents can do to avoid this tragedy, she was very clear.

"Intrude but in a healthy way," she said. "Talk to them about it, have a very open dialogue about life, drugs, sexuality, images on the TV or computer. I think when you have this open healthy dialogue, then I think it helps and it's ok to intrude. We were given these little angels to care for and direct and part of directing any person is sometimes kind of being nosy to help guide them." Carter points to modern culture as part of the problem.

"Kids are in a digital age that can separate people from human contact," she said. "Then we have the issue of bullying, which is a huge issue now. Cyberbullying is becoming even more prevalent, but what do you do with that? How do you help when at the end of the day there is not necessarily anybody for the kids to turn to? We have talked about the field growing and the pressure in the field, but school districts don't have the money to hire social workers, so who is that kid supposed to turn to when bullying is happening?"

Carter's current work is focused on public health disparities in cancer treatment. "We know cancer affects all kinds of people, but in many instances is getting diagnosed at later stages for most minority groups."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.

SIUE Photo by Orlando Phillips