Episode 54: Panic in the Streets

Introduction

In 2014, there was a record-setting outbreak of a deadly virus called Ebola. An “outbreak” happens when a lot of people catch the same disease. This episode is about an outbreak of Ebola in Liberia. Liberia is a country in west Africa.

Ebola is a virus - like the cold. Ebola is much harder to catch than the cold but is a much worse disease. You are not at any risk of catching Ebola. You do not catch Ebola just from being near someone who has it.

Has this ever happened to you? One person in your class has a cold but this person doesn’t stay home from school. The next thing you know, their friends have the cold, their friends’ friends have the cold; all of a sudden it seems like the whole class has caught the cold! That’s because the cold spreads from person-to-person. Ebola is also a virus and also spreads from person-to-person (but only through bodily fluids, like blood).

In this episode, we follow epidemiologists. Those are people who study outbreaks of diseases. They try to figure out how to stop diseases from spreading, treat people who have diseases, and learn how outbreaks start in the first place.

In this situation, epidemiologists had to work with police to track down gang members who might have been exposed to Ebola. This was hard because gang members and police were often at odds with each other in Liberia. It was also difficult because there was also distrust towards the government and health care workers.

Study Guide Questions

Where did this outbreak happen? Name the country and the city.

How did police find out that the victim of the murder had Ebola?

Since he already passed away, why did it matter so much that this man had Ebola?
Shankar Vedantam says that “Ebola wasn’t the only enemy they were fighting.” What else did they have to address in order to fight the Ebola outbreak?

In the episode, the epidemiologists talk about mistrust toward the government and international organizations. What are some of reasons that they give to explain why there was this mistrust?

If someone is sick with a contagious disease, sometimes they go into quarantine. This means they go to an isolated area so that they won’t infect anyone else. The government attempted to do an involuntary quarantine. What do you think this means? Do you think this is a good idea?

Did imposing an involuntary quarantine work?

What did they forget to put in a large Ebola treatment unit?

Why is that so important?

Why were the gang members scared?

What did the police and the team of healthcare workers do to address this fear?
Shankar and the epidemiologists talk about three strands of the web that made this such a complicated case.

1. They had to persuade the young men in the gang to go to the quarantine facility.
2. The woman who ran the drug house (Drug Mama) might be sick too.
3. They couldn’t track down Time Bomb.

Pause the episode here and brainstorm as a class (or in small groups) how the health care workers might deal with each of these three strands.

How could we persuade the young men in the gang to go to the quarantine facility?

How could we learn if the woman who ran the drug house had Ebola as well?

How could we track down Time Bomb?

Write down the results of your brainstorming session. Then resume the episode. Write down what they did do to deal with each of these strands. Was it the same thing you thought of as a class?