

## **Changes in Family Structure and Welfare Participation since the 1960s: The Role of Legal Services (*with Jamein Cunningham*)**

This paper evaluates the effects of the War on Poverty's Legal Services Program (LSP) on family structure and welfare participation. LSPs hired thousands of young lawyers and operated hundreds of new centers in poor neighborhoods, and offered a willingness to tackle previously taboo family cases (largely divorce) and to challenge public bureaucracies (largely welfare offices) directly. Using the roll-out of the program across 250 counties from 1965-1975 and a range of newly entered data, we show that LSPs increased divorce rates, reduced marriage rates, and increased welfare participation and nonmarital birth rates. The package of treatments that followed LSP establishment explain about one third of the change in nonmarital birth rates and welfare participation rates between 1960 and 1980. Local-level efforts to expand poor communities' access to legal institutions thus contributed, directly and indirectly, to the unprecedented changes in family structure in the 1960s.