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Access to Justice

Access to legal aid lowers domestic abuse

The only public service that reduces domestic abuse in the long term is women's access to legal aid, the research of two economists indicates.

Services such as shelters have short-term value at the point of crisis, Amy Farmer, associate professor of economics at the University of Arkansas, told United Press International in January. But a U.S. Justice Department study showing a decline in domestic violence during the 1990s drew the wrong conclusion. Hotlines, shelters, safe homes, emergency transportation, and counseling programs did not cause the trend.

"We have a database of exactly what's available in every county in the U.S.," Farmer told UPI. "We can look at rates of domestic abuse in each of those counties and control for income, and race and education." She and her colleague, Jill Tiefenthaler — associate professor of economics at Colgate University— found that in predicting long-term rates of domestic violence, the only public service variable that mattered is access to legal services.

Their study is in the new issue of *Contemporary Economic Policy*.

"Legal services provide real, tangible, long-run economic help: an attorney, a chance to maintain custody of the children, potential child support and alimony. A shelter gives two weeks or 30 days. We don't want to say that's not important. A woman might need that in the moment to get safe." But although legal aid is the most effective intervention, its expense makes it the least accessible of the public services.