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## **Going it Alone: Legal Mobilization and Efficacy in the Foreclosure Crisis**

My dissertation explores how recent economic upheaval interacted with existing social inequality in the context of one of the central phenomena of the Economic Crisis: residential foreclosures. A growing body of research highlights the relationship between social inequality and increased rates of mortgage default. However, less attention has been afforded to the role of the foreclosure process as a source of inequality. My dissertation addresses this gap by investigating whether variation in access to legal representation among homeowners facing foreclosure is associated with less favorable outcomes in individual foreclosure cases, and considers the broader implications of homeowners' behavior within the foreclosure process.

To address these topics, I developed an original dataset on a random sample of 955 residential foreclosure cases initiated between 2007 and 2011 in the five boroughs of New York City. With funding support from the National Science Foundation and the Center for the Study of Inequality at Cornell University, I collected and reviewed the court documents from each case. Combining the information gleaned from these records with data from land records, publicly-available information on properties and lawyers, and census data, I explore the judicial foreclosure process in greater detail than has previously been possible.

In the first chapter, I consider the implications of homeowners' actions in the foreclosure process for lenders' adherence to legal standards governing the transfer of mortgages and civil actions to foreclose. While it is known that there was widespread 'robo-signing' by lenders, and that many foreclosure proceedings were initiated by lenders to whom mortgages had not been properly assigned, there is little systematic empirical evidence of lenders' behavior or homeowners' reactions. I find that many homeowners do not engage in the legal foreclosure process, despite indications in the pleadings that the lender may be unable to offer evidence of standing to bring the foreclosure action. In light of this, I argue for alternatives to the adversarial process to enforce regulations regarding the assignment of mortgages, which are necessary to preserve clarity in the land title system and maintain the legitimacy of the foreclosure process.

In the second chapter of my dissertation, I propose a conceptual framework for analyzing the dispute processing behavior of individuals who must respond to a legal claim, and apply it to the context of judicial foreclosure. In the final chapter, I focus on the consequences of homeowners' decision to retain legal counsel. I assess the relationship between legal representation for homeowners and case outcomes and find that homeowners with legal representation are more likely to avoid foreclosure than homeowners who are unrepresented. However, this association is diminished after taking into account legal reforms that increased homeowner participation and court intervention in the foreclosure process.