



What Public Housing Officials Can Teach Us about Overcoming Racial Discrimination

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Recent news coverage of racial bias in the housing market confirms the stark persistence of racial discrimination. Racial inequity in the private market for housing is hardly an isolated occurrence – and it is not wholly attributable to other factors like income or education. As many experimental studies have found, prospective black and Hispanic buyers are told about fewer available homes and apartments than whites with similar social characteristics. Although discrimination in the private sector remains relatively difficult to eliminate, my research with David Glick suggests that racial bias among people who administer access to public housing may be less common and easier to overcome.

A Surprising Finding – No Bias against Blacks

To probe for discrimination among public housing officials, we used an experimental design similar to that used in previous studies of racial bias in housing and a variety of other arenas. Specifically, we created email addresses with putative black, white, and Hispanic names. Then we randomly assigned over 1,000 public housing authorities to receive an email from one of these accounts containing a generic request to help a constituent. We looked to see if responses differed by the race and ethnicity of the name of the person requesting service.

In contrast to results from similar experimental studies in private market housing and other fields, we found *no* evidence that public housing officials discriminated against blacks. If anything, the officials responded to requests from putatively black constituents at higher rates. This is striking, because analogous studies have consistently found that employers, state legislators, professors, and other gatekeepers are less responsive to blacks than to whites. As far as we know, our study is the *only* audit-style experiment that has failed to find anti-black bias.

Hints of Anti-Hispanic Bias

Our study did, however, find evidence that housing officials were consistently less responsive to email requests from people with Hispanic names, although the response rates were only slightly lower than for other groups and the difference was not statistically significant. Tellingly, Hispanics asking for help were twenty percentage points less likely to be greeted by name than their black and white counterparts. Although seemingly trivial, psychological studies and surveys have found that named salutations are surprisingly important to people. Moreover, when an official responds by name to a person making a request, it could signal that the caseworker will make a real effort to help the client through the housing application process.

Explaining Bureaucratic Responsiveness toward Blacks

The lack of friendly personal tone towards Hispanics and possible anti-Hispanic responsiveness bias documented in our study is certainly troubling, but our negative finding about bias against blacks is equally important. If we can better understand why housing officials are *not* acting in prejudicial ways toward black clients, we might discover potential policy solutions for addressing discrimination in various bureaucratic sectors and even in the private sector. There are various possible explanations for our results – and several of these factors could be at work.

- Individuals who choose to work in public housing may be, on average, more racially liberal and less likely to engage in discriminatory practices. If this is the case, the policy prescription for mitigating racial discrimination in other arenas may be to seek out more employees like those in public housing.

- Greater familiarity with blacks in particular may be important for housing officials, who deal overall with a disproportionately black clientele. In addition, when we looked in greater detail, we found that ethnic disparities in email tone were somewhat muted in locales with more racially and ethnically diverse clienteles. If further research confirms the importance of this factor, heads of public agencies could aim to hire bureaucrats with previous experience serving diverse clienteles. Or agencies could find ways to train current or new officials in the best ways to work with racially and ethnically diverse clienteles.
- According to previous research, when bureaucrats know they are being monitored they proceed carefully and become less likely to engage in discriminatory practices. Public housing officials do their jobs under guidance and monitoring mandated by the Fair Housing Act. In addition, officials working for the Department of Housing and Urban Development regularly perform experimental audits to measure discrimination in private housing markets. Housing bureaucrats are thus not only monitored; they know more about the potential for discrimination and the procedures that can help to avoid it.

In sum, both regulations and knowledge of the issues may make public housing officials less apt to discriminate than other public officials or private market actors – and this may be especially true when it comes to dealings with blacks, who predominate in the relevant clienteles. The Fair Housing Act was passed in 1968 amid national concern about black poverty and residential racial segregation. Very possibly, this landmark law and the administrative arrangements put in place to carry it out in subsequent decades may have raised awareness among U.S. housing officials about anti-black discrimination and ways to avoid it. More recently, however, discrimination against Hispanics has become a problem – and existing administrative remedies may not yet be adequate.

Our results underline that both awareness of the potential for racial unfairness and careful monitoring to root out discrimination are necessary to reduce this malady in public agencies – and in the private sector as well. Regularly repeated racial bias audits are also important to keep track of trends and pinpoint areas for improvement. In the future, additional experimental studies like ours may help to address the anti-Hispanic bias that persists among public housing officials.

Read more in Katherine Levine Einstein and David M. Glick, “Does Race Affect Access to Government Services?: An Experiment Exploring Street-Level Bureaucrats and Access to Public Housing,” Boston University, November 2015.