

# Study explores the role of landlords in housing discrimination

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Examining the practices landlords use to screen potential tenants can offer significant insights into how racism continues to shape life outcomes. While sociological research on racial discrimination in

housing has increasingly highlighted the key role that landlords play as gatekeepers to rental housing markets, this research has largely been operating under the fundamental assumption that landlords are selecting tenants from an applicant pool of both White and non-White applicants.

But the reality of urban housing markets, shaped by historical patterns of racial segregation and other structural barriers, is that landlords are usually selecting from same-race applicant pools. So how does race influence the way these landlord-gatekeepers screen and differentiate among prospective tenants in racially homogeneous rental markets?

This is one of the questions that Eva Rosen, Assistant Professor at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy; Philip M. E. Garboden, HCRC Professor in Affordable Housing Economics, Policy, and Planning at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa; and Jennifer E. Cossyleon, a Policy Advisor at Community Change, examine in their new study, "Racial Discrimination in Housing: How Landlords Use Algorithms and Home Visits to Screen Tenants," appearing in the October 2021 issue of *American Sociological Review*.

The authors drew their data from observations and interviews with 157 landlords who rent in lower-cost housing markets in Baltimore, MD; Cleveland, OH; Dallas, TX; and Washington, D.C. The authors found that in their aim to select "good" tenants—those who will pay rent reliably and causes minimal property damage, for example—landlords rely on two types of proxies.

More professionalized and resourced landlords tend to rely on superficially objective screening algorithms that calculate a prospective tenant's eligibility based on income, credit report, criminal history, and residential history. In contrast, mom-and-pop landlords make decisions based on informal and subjective mechanisms that are racialized and gendered, such as "gut feelings" that judge a prospective tenant's

appearance, demeanor, and family status.

While evaluation through algorithm may seem fair and objective, especially when compared to the highly subjective "gut proxy," the authors argue that in both cases the burden is on the prospective tenant to defy stereotypes, ultimately limiting residential options for low-income, subsidized residents of color and compounding inequality through exclusion: "Both forms of discrimination ultimately perpetuate the sorting processes that created them in the first place." The authors see their findings as connecting to recent literatures on inequalities in other areas, such as employment and criminal justice, that highlight the perverse effect of policies and procedures that reproduce discriminatory outcomes rather than disrupt them.

How, then should landlords decide who to rent to? What systems might make this process more equitable and less discriminatory? Among their recommendations, the authors suggest eliminating the screening techniques that serve no function other than as stand-ins of race, gender, and class. Credit scores, for example, serve only as a crude proxy for poverty. "Computational screening process should focus almost entirely on a tenant's expected ability to pay, based either on wage income or housing voucher receipt, with no distinction made between the various sources of income."

"We must hold landlords using discriminatory practices to account," say the authors, "but our research also points to a larger problem: Rental assistance for low-income families in this country is not sufficient to meet demand. Private landlords are left holding the bag. And one way they attempt to mitigate risk is by using imperfect—often racist, sexist, and otherwise discriminatory—screening tools to judge tenants' worth."

The authors look to the housing voucher program for key indicators of how to build toward a non-discriminatory housing market. Their

research shows that when landlords profit from renting through the voucher program, they overcome their stereotypes of subsidized renters of color. Consequently, providing an economic safety net to [low-income](#) tenants that guarantees their ability to pay rent may reduce the intersectional discrimination they face from landlords.

Policymakers should consider programs to build and increase access to housing renters can afford, making the housing search process easier for burdened renters and reducing [housing](#) discrimination, the authors say. "We hope this work will help organizing and advocacy efforts led by renters across the country."

**More information:** [www.asanet.org/research-and-pu...-sociological-review](http://www.asanet.org/research-and-pu...-sociological-review)

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