

Use of Black English and Racial  
Discrimination in Urban Housing Markets:  
New Methods and Findings\*

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Abstract

In this article, we argue that much racial discrimination occurs any personal contact between landlords and those experiencing the discrimination. Prior research indicates that Americans are capable of inferring the race of the speaker from linguistic cues, thus offering landlords and rental agents to discriminate over the telephone. To test this hypothesis, we designed a audit study that compared the treatment of male and female speakers of Standard American English, Black Accented English, and Black English Vernacular. The audit was implemented with native speakers of these dialects as part of an undergraduate course in research methods conducted during the Spring of 1999 in the Philadelphia metropolitan area. Results revealed strong and persistent racial discrimination that was under some circumstances exacerbated by class and gender. We find that compared with other groups, lower class black women are treated with less courtesy, experience less sales effort, pay higher fees, and are more likely to be denied any access at all to rental housing.

Racial discrimination was institutionalized in the American real estate industry during the 1920s and well-established in private practice by the 1940s. Discriminatory behavior was open and widespread among agents until 1968, when the Fair Housing Act was passed. After this date, outright refusals to rent to African Americans became rare, given that overt discrimination might lead to prosecution. As a result, black renters came to face a more subtle process of racial exclusion. Rather than finding "white only" signs or statements that "colored need not apply," they encountered covert barriers surreptitiously placed in their way. Although each act of discrimination may have been small and subtle, together they had a powerful effect in retarding black spatial assimilation (Massey and Denton, 1993). Because the discrimination was latent, moreover, it was not directly observable, even by its victims.

At present, the only way to confirm whether or not discrimination has occurred is to compare systematically the treatment of prospective black and white renters who have similar social and economic characteristics. Differences in treatment are usually established by means of an audit study. Teams of white and black auditors are paired and sent to landlords to pose as renters seeking a home or apartment. They are trained to present comparable housing needs and family characteristics, to express similar tastes and desires for housing, and to offer a common socioeconomic profile. After each encounter, auditors fill out a report of their experiences and the results are later tabulated and compared to determine systematic differences in treatment (see Yinger, 1986, 1989).

In 1987, Galster (1990) wrote to more than 200 local fair housing organizations and obtained written reports of 50 different audit studies carried out in residential rental markets throughout the U.S. during the 1980s. Despite differences in measures and methods, he

concluded that "racial discrimination continues to be a dominant feature of metropolitan housing markets in the 1980s" (p. 172). Using a conservative measure of racial bias, he estimated that blacks averaged a 50% chance of experiencing discrimination in U.S. rental markets.

This figure was confirmed in a nationwide study conducted in 1988 by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (Yinger, 1992). Twenty audit sites were randomly selected from among metropolitan areas with central city populations exceeding 100,000 and black percentages over 12%. Real estate ads in major newspapers were randomly sampled and landlords were approached by auditors who inquired about the availability of advertised units; and about other units that might be available. Auditors were given standard incomes and family characteristics appropriate to the unit advertised (Urban Institute, 1991). Investigators found that housing was systematically more available to whites in 45% of all rental transactions, and that whites were offered more favorable rental terms in 17% of those cases where rental housing was made available (Yinger, 1995). When housing availability and rental terms were considered jointly, Yinger estimated that the cumulative likelihood of experiencing some form of discrimination in U.S. rental markets was 53%.

Audit studies represent a quasi-experimental research design (Campbell and Stanley, 1966). Even though they offer researchers more control and greater internal validity than other designs commonly used in the social sciences, they nonetheless have been criticized for too often relying on ambiguous definitions of "unequal treatment" and for confounding random and systematic effects (see Fix, Galster, and Struyk, 1992; Heckman and Siegelman, 1992). Despite these problems, however, data from audit studies are generally accepted as providing strong evidence of racial discrimination by U.S. courts (see Metcalf, 1988).

Although audit designs have many obvious attractson, the studies conducted to date suffer from two serious weaknesses. First, prior work has focused mainly on institutional landlords, or at least those offering large numbers of rental units to the market, since these are easier to sample and visit and constitute a relatively large share of the rental housing market. Nonetheless, much of the discrimination actually experienced by African Americans is probably meted out by small landlords renting one or two apartments at a time. Second, nearly all studies so far have relied on face-to-face interactions between auditors and landlords rather than more impersonal forms of contact and communication.

In this day and age, there is ample opportunity for discrimination to occur *before* a personal encounter between a landlord and a renter. Research shows that Americans are capable of making fairly accurate racial attributions on the basis of linguistic cues alone (Feagin, 1995). Not only are they quick to identify the race of someone speaking Black English Vernacular, but they are able to identify the race of code-switching blacks--those speaking standard English but with a “black” pronunciation of certain words (see Doss and Gross, 1994). Indeed, subjects in one study were capable of making accurate racial inferences based solely on hearing the word “hello” (Purnell, Idsardi, and Baugh, 1999).

Since Black English Vernacular and Black Accented English are widely spoken by African Americans in the United States, much discrimination in U.S. housing markets probably occurs *over the phone—before* white rental agents and black clients ever meet. All we need to assume is that prospective landlords are capable of recognizing black linguistic styles and associating them with the race of the speaker, an assumption that is entirely consistent with prior research. In order to discriminate, all a landlord need say when he hears a “black” voice on the other end of

the line is that the unit is “already rented.” In an era of voice mail phone tag, moreover, it is an easy matter simply not to return messages left by speakers of black English, thus letting an answering machine do the racial screening. Through technology, a racist landlord may discriminate without actually having to experience the inconvenience or discomfort of a personal confrontation.

In their qualitative interviews with middle class blacks, Feagin and Sikes (1994) uncovered considerable anecdotal evidence of this sort of discrimination. In one vignette they tell of a black woman who called about an apartment advertised in the paper:

She called, and they told her that the apartment was rented. And she called [a friend] on the phone and said, “I’d like for you to call them... because you sound like a white person.” And [the friend] called and the apartment was still unrented (p. 229).

As a result of this sort of subtle discrimination, the authors conclude, “the intentional use of a ‘white-sounding’ voice, either one’s own or a friend’s, is one painful strategy that middle-class black homeseekers have developed to get around some discrimination” (Feagin and Sikes, 1992:229).

Purnell, Isardi, and Bauh (1999) undertook a systematic audit study to document more precisely this sort of phone-based discrimination in the San Francisco Bay Area. They identified prospective landlords through classified advertisements in regional newspapers and then in separate phone calls one tridialectical experimenter spoke in three successive linguistic styles whose order of presentation was randomly varied : Standard American English, Black English Vernacular, and Chicano English. Over 989 trials, the data conclusively showed that landlords do, in fact, discriminate against prospective tenants on the basis of the sound of their voice during telephone conversations. Not only were speakers of non-standard dialects significantly less likely

to get an appointment to see a unit, but this likelihood varied systematically with the racial composition of the neighborhood. In general, the whiter the area, the less likely a speaker of Chicano or Black English was to receive an appointment.

In the present study we seek to extend this earlier work. Not only do we corroborate prior results by documenting the existence of phone-based racial discrimination in a large Eastern metropolitan area, we develop more precise measures of the incidence, severity, and nature of discrimination using the telephone. We also explore the degree to which race interacts with class and gender to influence residential outcomes, and document several mechanisms by which phone-based discrimination occurs. Methodologically, we suggest that telephone audit studies offer social scientists a cheap, effective, and timely way to measure the incidence and severity of racial discrimination in urban housing markets, and we recommend their wider application by social scientists in replications throughout the country.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study was implemented as part of an undergraduate sociology course in research design at the University of Pennsylvania taught by the first author during the Spring of 1999. The multiracial class of men and women included native speakers of Black English Vernacular (BEV), Black Accented English (BAE), and Standard American English (SAE). The distribution of the class by gender and linguistic styles permitted investigators to consider six different treatment conditions in assessing the nature of housing discrimination over the phone: male BEV, male BAE, male SAE, female BEV, female BAE, and female SAE.

Prior work suggests that Americans experience little difficulty in inferring the race of someone speaking BEV and BAE. In one study, for example, subjects rated standard SAE

speakers as more likeable and more desirable to work with than speakers of either BEV or BAE, based solely on the sound of their voice (Doss and Gross, 1994). These results suggest that language plays an important role in facilitating housing discrimination.

Although BEV and BAE may both be identified as “black sounding,” we suspect that most listeners cannot only tell the difference between the two dialects, but that they attach different class labels to each style of speech. Specifically, we hypothesize that when an African American speaks standard Egnlsih with a black pronunciation of certain words (BAE), listeners infer that the speaker is of middle class origins, whereas the combination of nonstandard grammar with a black accent (BEV) signals lower class origins. If this assumption is correct, then our six treatment conditions permit us to test for a three-way interaction between race (black-white), gender (male-female), and class (lower-middle).

Under the guidance and supervision of the first author and a postdoctoral fellow (the second author), students in the methodology class collaborated in designing an instrument for use in a telephone audit study to be conducted in the Philadelphia metropolitan area during the Spring Term of 1999. First they worked to develop a standard scripted interaction for use with prospective landlords; then they created a set of standard auditor profiles that could be employed to answer questions from curious rental agents. The audit instrument employed in the study is shown in Table 1.

#### TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

In designing this instrument, we sought to develop a standard SAE script that was simple and straightforward, which gathered salient information about the telephone encounter that could be coded up and analyzed to measure different kinds of discrimination. After a draft of the basic

script was developed, the authors worked with black students in class to translate it into BEV. When problems were encountered in translating, we returned to the original SAE script and modified to effect a smoother transition between “white” and “black” English. We conducted a small pilot survey to test both forms of the instrument, which revealed a few other problems that required additional modifications. The document shown in the table is the final version of the auditor script.

As can be seen, the first step in the scripted interaction involves establishing direct contact with a realtor. In a large share of cases (45.5%), the initial call resulted in contact with some form of voice mail. In this event, the script instructed auditors to leave a short request for a return call. Auditors were instructed to leave such a message at least three times before giving up. If and when phone contact with a rental agent was established, the auditors then proceeded through a scripted conversation designed to gather basic about the apartment, whether it was still available, and the terms under which it might be rented: the amount of monthly rent, what utilities are included, size of security deposit, whether there were application fees, and the length of the lease. After the encounter, auditors were instructed to rate the landlord or rental agent’s friendliness and sales effort on a ten-point scale, where 1 indicates very unfriendly/no sales effort and 10 indicates very friendly/high sales effort. After completing the instrument, auditors noted the date and time of the call.

Auditors were trained to follow the script as closely as possible, and only to answer questions from the rental agent if they were posed. To standardize the information provided in response to landlord questions, we created a set of common profiles that were assigned to each auditor. These profiles are summarized in Table 2. Basically, we sought to project the image of a

recent college graduate in his or her early to mid twenties with an annual income of \$25,000 to \$30,000 annually. Assuming that landlords normally expect tenants to pay 30% of their income as rent, we established a rent ceiling of about \$800 for a one-bedroom apartment, although auditors were allowed to explore higher rents for two- or three-bedroom units (telling the landlord they had a potential roommate). We deliberately chose pseudonyms that were racially neutral, and gave everyone a lower white collar job in Philadelphia's large and diverse medical sector.

#### TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Over four successive weeks in March and April of 1999, we selected listings from several different sources. In the first week, we chose listings from *Apartments for Rent* magazine, a monthly that is distributed free of charge at street corners, supermarkets, and other public places. In the second week, we undertook the same operation for *The Apartment Hunter*, a similar periodical published by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Finally, in the last two weeks we took appropriate ads directly from the Sunday real estate section of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* itself. The two monthly periodicals generally gave us access to large, professionally managed apartment complexes and real estate developments, whereas the *Inquirer* included many small one to three-unit properties that were owner-managed. The listings included in our sample covered all areas of the metropolitan area, including center city (an elite district), a variety of working and middle class neighborhoods, lower middle class suburbs, and more prestigious upper middle class suburban areas. In general, we sought to call all listing consistent with our rent ceiling.

## DATA

Over the course of the study, male and female auditors speaking SAE, BAE, or BEV made 477 actual or attempted contacts with landlords who advertised in the sources just described during March and April of 1999. The results of the study are summarized in Table 3, which presents means computed for each of the six different treatment groups. These data offer strong prima facie evidence for the existence of phone-based racial discrimination in the Philadelphia rental housing market.

### TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

As can be seen, blacks have less access than whites to rental units in the Philadelphia area; females have less access than males; and lower class blacks (those speaking BEV) have less access than middle class blacks (those speaking BAE). Among males, the percentage reaching an agent was 87% for those speaking SAE, 80% for those speaking BAE, and 71% for those speaking BEV. Among males who managed to reach an agent, 82% of SAE speakers were told that a unit was available compared with 77% of BAE speakers and 58% of BEV speakers. When these two outcomes are considered jointly, we find that speakers of white English gained access to a unit in about 75% of cases, whereas the respective figures for those speaking with black accents or black English were only 64% and 56%.

The mean ratings for friendliness and sales effort also tend to fall steadily as one moves from SAE to BAE to BEV. For males, the reported sales effort went from 7.5 among SAE speakers to 5.9 among those speaking BAE, and was only 5.6 for those speaking BEV. Blacks also were more likely than whites to have credit worthiness mentioned as a potential problem and to be assessed application fees. These differentials in access and promotional effort, however, did

not appear to be reflected in the costs of renting a unit (amount of deposit or fees), which did not vary systematically from group to group.

Although the averages for females aren't quite as clear-cut as those for males, we generally reach the same conclusions. The likelihood of contacting an agent is lowest for women speaking black English, who also experience the lowest friendliness rating, the least sales effort, the highest likelihood of being assessed application fees, and the highest proportion having credit mentioned as a potential problem. Thus, the basic data for both males and females reveals large intergroup differences that are suspiciously associated with race, perhaps interacting in complex ways with gender and class.

## **QUANTIFYING BARRIERS TO ACCESS**

Although the intergroup differentials revealed in the prior table suggest a process of structured discrimination with respect to race, class, and gender, they offer few controls and no formal tests for any of the differences observed. In order to carry out a more rigorous examination of our hypotheses, we present in Table 4 coefficients from a series of logistic regression models estimated to predict whether or not the auditor spoke to an agent, whether a unit was reported as available, whether the auditor was ultimately granted access, and if so, whether application fees were required and credit worthiness was mentioned as an issue. In each model we introduce controls, as appropriate, for the amount of rent, time of day, number of phone calls made, and number of units in the building or complex.

### **TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE**

In general, one is more likely to reach an agent and be told of a unit's availability if the rent is higher. Agents for high rent units are also less likely to require application fees or to

mention credit as a potential problem, irrespective of the caller's race, class, or gender. Access seems to be greater in the case of small (<5 units) or mid-sized (<40 units) developments than for large apartment complexes (40+ units). The time of day in which the call was placed appeared to have no effect on rental outcomes..

The top panel shows coefficients estimated for the various language/gender categories, thus permitting formal statistical tests of our leading hypotheses. In all cases, the reference category is male SAE speakers. As the plethora of negative signs indicates, compared to them, all other combinations of gender and language are less likely to speak to an agent, less likely to be told a unit is available, and thus less likely to achieve access to a rental property. The only differences that are statistically significant, however, correspond to the coefficients for male and female speakers of BEV, both of whom display markedly lower likelihoods of speaking, learning about, or otherwise gaining access to rental units in the Philadelphia area. Although the coefficient for female BEV speakers is lowest of all, it is not significantly different from that of male BEV speakers. In general, therefore, we conclude that speakers of black English Vernacular, whether male or female, are much more likely than other groups to be denied access to rental housing. To the extent that landlords distinguish between BAE and BEV to infer class origins, moreover, the denial of access to the latter suggests a bias against lower class more than middle class blacks.

Once contact with a rental agent is made, however, such class distinctions seem to fade from the consciousness of landlords. Compared to male speakers of SAE, both speakers of BAE and BEV, whether male or female, were more likely to be assessed application fees. In contrast, although the coefficient for female speakers of SAE was positive, it was not significantly different

from that of white males. We thus conclude that all blacks, irrespective of class and gender, are significantly more likely than whites to be assessed application fees when seeking a rental unit.

Finally, the last column examines the likelihood that credit was mentioned as a potential problem in qualifying for an apartment. Although all coefficients are positive compared with male speakers of SAE, only the coefficients for female BAE and BEV are statistically significant at the .05 level, and these two categories are virtually indistinguishable from one another. Thus, landlords appear to be most likely to vocalize suspicions about the credit-worthiness of blacks when they are female, irrespective of putative class origins. Knowing that a prospective renter is black and female is enough to put the rental agent on guard for possible credit problems.

It is always possible, of course, that a unit really *has* already been rented, and for this reason a landlord doesn't call back or tell auditors about its availability. Perhaps through some stochastic process, BEV auditors just happen to call or reach the landlord later than SAE auditors, and that units consequently were more likely to be off the market. In order to eliminate this possibility, we re-estimated the access models using only those cases where a unit was reported to be available to the last auditor who spoke to the landlord. These estimates are presented in Table 5.

#### TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

In this table, for every instance in which a call was not returned or a unit was reported to be unavailable, we know *for a fact* that it was offered to the last auditor who called. Although the reduction in the degrees of freedom inflates the standard errors and creates some instability in the coefficients, the overall results reinforce and even strengthen our earlier findings. Consider overall access to units, analyzed in the last two columns. As before, male and female speakers of

BEV display the very lowest odds of gaining access to a rental unit. Compared with male SAE speakers, the coefficient for male BEV speakers is -2.59 whereas for female BEV speakers the value is -2.63. Moreover, unlike the earlier analysis, the current replication offers persuasive evidence that BAE speakers likewise suffer significant, though less extreme, discrimination in access to rental housing. Among males, for example, the BAE coefficient of -1.23 is significant at the .05 level, and whereas the female BAE coefficient of -1.16 is not statistically significant, it approaches significance at conventional thresholds ( $p=.07$ ). Finally, the new estimates also provide evidence that gender constitutes an *independent* barrier to housing access, apart from issues of race or class, as female speakers of SAE (i.e. white women) likewise experience a lower probability of gaining access to rental housing compared to their male counterparts (coefficient of -1.83,  $p<.05$ ).

To illustrate more concretely the relative power of race, class, and gender in lowering access to rental housing, we used the model shown in the last two columns of Table 5 to generate predicted probabilities of gaining access to a unit. Assuming a rent of \$800, a phone call placed around noon, two calls made, and a mid-sized apartment building, the likelihood of reaching a rental agent and being told that a unit was available was .95 for a male speaker of SAE, .86 for male and female speakers of BAE, .61 for male speakers of BEV, and .60 for female speakers of BEV. In short, the probability of finding out about a rental unit over the phone is decisively reduced for blacks, especially those whose accent marks them as members of the lower class.

### **MEASURING THE SEVERITY OF DISCRIMINATION**

We conclude from the foregoing analysis that white males experience a privileged access to rental housing in the Philadelphia metropolitan area, followed in order by white females, male

and female members of the black middle class, with lower class blacks of both sexes experiencing the least access at all. Thus, the probability of discrimination seems to break clearly along the lines of race, class, and gender. In Table 6 we extend the analysis by considering the severity of this discrimination, examining the effect of gender and language on the rental agent's sales effort and friendliness, as well as the value of any additional costs imposed on renters. All equations were estimated using ordinary least squares, controlling for amount of rent time of call, and the number of units in the building or complex. In the regressions predicting deposits and fees we also control for the number of bedrooms in the unit under discussion.

#### TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

In general, the rental agent's friendliness and sales effort and the size of the deposit increased as rents rose, and the amount of the application fee was generally lower in small and mid-sized buildings. The greatest effects were not among these control variables, however, but among language and gender categories. Compared with white males (white SAE speakers), black males experience roughly a two point reduction on the ten-point friendliness scale (-2.16 for BAE and -1.79 for BEV). Female speakers of SAE also received less friendly treatment than male SAE speakers, suggesting that even among whites, women are less courteously treated than men. Female speakers of BAE experience much the same reduction in friendliness as black males—about two points on a ten-point scale; but nothing matches the reduction in friendliness accorded female speakers of BEV. To the extent that BEV is taken as a signal of lower class origins, we conclude that the most intense prejudice and discrimination is reserved for lower class black women.

The friendliness of the reception given an auditor thus falls into four distinct categories. In a class by themselves are white males. Assuming a rent of \$800, a phone call made around noon, and a mid-sized apartment building, male speakers of SAE achieved a friendliness score of 9.3 out of a possible 10. About one point lower are female SAE speakers, with a friendliness rating of 8.2. In the third category are black males of any class (BAE or BEV) and black middle class females (BAE speakers), who average friendliness scores in the neighborhood of 7.0-7.3. In the last category are lower class black women (BEV speakers) who achieve a friendliness score of just 6.2. Thus, the warmth of a caller's reception depends on a complex three-way interaction between race, class, and gender.

In contrast, class does not seem to play much of a role in the sales effort experienced by auditors, which primarily reflects race and gender. White males and females receive roughly the same sales effort (although positive, the female SAE coefficient is not even close to significant). In contrast, black males (whether BAE or SAE speakers) experience a sales effort that is 1.7 points lower than white males, middle class black females (BAE speakers) experience an effort that is 2.7 points lower, and once again the lowest score is achieved by lower class black women (BEV speakers), whose score is a full 3.3 points lower than that of white males. With respect to sales effort, therefore, whites (male or female) are the most advantaged, experiencing a sales effort of 9.4 out of 10, followed by black males (middle or lower class) who experience a sales effort of around 7.7, black middle class females (whose predicted score is 6.7) and finally black lower class females (with a score of just 6.1).

As already suggested, these differences in treatment do not appear to be translated into systematic differences in the costs of renting. For example, we detect no significant differences in

the amount of deposit that is required; and only female speakers of BEV appear to pay significantly larger application fees. To the extent that the costs of acquiring a rental unit rise through discrimination, it appears to occur through a process triggered by a race-gender-class interaction.. Only poor black women can expect to pay significantly more in the way of fees to gain access to a rental unit in the Philadelphia metropolitan area.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

We undertook a simple audit study of the rental housing market in the Philadelphia metropolitan area as part of an undergraduate course in research methods. In a quasi-experimental design, students adopted the role of auditors representing six different treatment conditions: white males, middle class black males, lower class black males, white females, middle class black males, and lower class black males. Drawing upon prior work showing that American listeners can readily infer the race of a speaker by hearing his or her voice, we argued that landlords and rental agents use linguistic cues to assign prospective renters to one of these six race-gender-class categories over the telephone, and then vary their behavior systematically so as to discriminate on the basis of race, often in interaction with class and gender.

Our audit study yields clear, consistent, and often dramatic evidence of phone-based racial discrimination in the Philadelphia rental housing market. Compared with whites, blacks are less likely to get through and speak to a rental agent, less likely to be told of a unit's availability, more likely to pay application fees, and more likely to have credit worthiness mentioned as a potential problem in qualifying for a lease. In addition, blacks experience significantly less friendly encounters with agents and a much-reduced sales effort. These persistent racial effects often interact with and are exacerbated by gender and class, with lower class blacks experiencing less

access to rental housing than middle class blacks, and females (sometimes even white females) experiencing less access than males. The most disadvantaged group, however, is clearly lower class black women. Across all measures, female speakers of Black English Vernacular consistently fare the worst, showing the lowest probability of rental access, the highest likelihood of being assessed fees, the highest likelihood of being told their credit may be a problem, the least friendliness and sales effort, and the most expensive fees.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of racial discrimination in the United States. First, our data suggest that prior audit studies have underestimated the degree of discrimination in U.S. housing markets by using audit methodologies that rely on face to face interaction rather than telephone contacts. Not only does considerable discrimination occur over the phone through a purely verbal interaction between renters and agents, but considerable discrimination occurs with *no contact whatsoever* between the two, largely through the use of voice mail and answering machines as devices to screen out black-sounding voices. Thus, the odds of getting through to a rental agent were .90 for a white male calling twice about an \$800-a-month apartment, .84 for a middle class black man, .73 for a middle class black female, .65 for a lower class black male, and just .57 for a lower class black female. Put another way, a lower class black female must make 158 phone calls to gain access to the same number of units that a white male accesses with 100 calls.

Second, as the foregoing probabilities illustrate, discrimination varies not only by race, but in subtle and complex also by gender and class. Being identified as black on the basis of one's voice clearly reduces access to rental housing; but being black and female lowers it further, and being black, female, and poor lowers it further still. The group with perhaps the greatest need for

housing-poor black women-thus have their access to rental housing decisively undermined by unusually intense discrimination. Compared to others, they are far less likely to reach a landlord; and in those cases where they do get through, they are treated with considerably less courtesy and sales effort, they are far more likely to be told a unit is unavailable, are far more likely to be required to pay an application fee, are far more likely to be cautioned about their credit worthiness, and far more likely to pay higher application fees. Through all of these mechanisms, the access of poor black women to rental housing is very substantially reduced.

Finally, our analysis suggests that telephone audits constitute a potentially cheap, easy, and efficient way of measuring and studying processes of racial discrimination in urban housing markets. In the 30 years since the passage of the Fair Housing Act, the number of audit studies conducted is probably on the order of 75, mostly unpublished (see Galster, 1990). The number of published audit studies is probably less than a dozen, including the two national studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Although both social scientists and fair housing advocates have long recognized the intrinsic value of carrying out regular housing audits to monitor trends and processes of discrimination, the principal obstacle heretofore has been the cost and difficulty of conducting them.

At least for rental housing, and possibly even for owned housing, telephone audits represent an easy and efficacious way to overcome this long-standing obstacle. All that is needed to generate high-quality, accurate measures of racial discrimination is access to a local newspaper or rental guide, a telephone, and speakers of non-standard dialects associated with race and ethnicity. The method is simple enough that it can be implemented with student assistants, and is so tractable that it can be implemented as part of an undergraduate course. The basic research

design is stronger than most of those employed in social science and the resulting data can be analyzed with simple statistical methods. We thus offer the telephone audit as a new methodology for other social scientists to use throughout the nation to build a new foundation of data and understanding about the process of racial discrimination in urban housing markets.

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Table 1. Auditor script used in study of racial discrimination in rental market of Philadelphia metropolitan area, March-April 1999.

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**If machine answers:** Hello. My name is \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_. I'm interested in the apartment you advertised in \_\_\_\_\_ Please call me back at \_\_\_\_\_ .

Number of Call Backs Before Speaking to Agent:

- \_\_\_ 1
- \_\_\_ 2
- \_\_\_ 3
- \_\_\_ Never Returned Call

**If person answers:** Hello. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I'm interested in the apartment you advertised in \_\_\_\_\_. Are any apartments still available? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No

**If units still available:**

Do you have any one-bedroom apartments? \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No

How much is the rent for that apartment? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have any other apartments available? \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No

What does the rent include? \_\_\_\_\_

- \_\_\_ Heat/AC
- \_\_\_ Electricity
- \_\_\_ Gas
- \_\_\_ Water

How much do I have to put down? \_\_\_\_\_

Are there any other fees? \_\_\_\_\_

How long is the lease? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the address? \_\_\_\_\_

How many apartments in the building/complex? \_\_\_\_\_

Is there Parking? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No

**Closing:** Thanks. I'm looking at other places, so I'll get back to you if I want to see it. Who should I ask for? Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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Table 2. Auditor profiles used in study of racial discrimination in rental market of Philadelphia metropolitan area, March-April 1999.

Characteristic	Auditor Profiles	
	Male	Female
<b>Name</b>	Michael Smith Richard Williams John Clark	Lisa Ford Jennifer Campbell Ashley Davis
<b>Place of Work</b>	Jefferson Hospital Pennsylvania Hospital U. Penn Medical Center Children's Hospital	Jefferson Hospital Pennsylvania Hospital U. Penn Medical Center Children's Hospital
<b>Kind of Work</b>	Administration: Billing	Administration: Billing
<b>Family Status</b>	Single Age 25 No kids	Single Age 25 No kids
<b>Income</b>	\$25,000-\$30,000 annually	\$25,000-\$30,000 annually
<b>Rent Ceiling</b> If questioned:	\$800 per month Might have roommate	\$800 per month Might have roommate
<b>Current Residence</b>	University City Ardmore Mount Airy Center City Moving to Philly	University City Ardmore Mount Airy Center City Moving to Philly
<b>Reason for Move</b>	Lease is up Roommate moving out	Lease is up Roommate moving out
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	Non-smoker Has car No pets	Non-Smoker Has car No pets

Table 3. Indicators of possible discrimination in rental housing market of Philadelphia metropolitan area, March-April 1999.

	Males			Females		
	White English	Black Accent	Black English	White English	Black Accent	Black English
<b>Access to Rental Units</b>						
Mean Calls Made	1.48	1.63	1.59	1.61	1.67	1.67
% Reaching Agent	87.0	80.0	71.0	74.0	74.0	64.0
% with Unit Available	82.0	77.0	58.0	41.0	41.0	57.0
% Accessible	75.0	64.0	56.0	37.0	37.0	57.0
<b>Promotional Effort</b>						
Mean Friendliness	8.52	6.48	6.69	7.53	6.35	5.29
Mean Sales Effort	7.46	5.93	5.60	7.05	4.69	3.79
<b>Other Barriers to Access</b>						
% Mentioning Credit	3.0	10.0	9.0	5.0	21.0	23.0
% Requiring Application Fees	11.0	46.0	31.0	24.0	33.0	37.0
<b>Cost</b>						
Mean Rent (\$)	610	632	627	612	681	603
Mean Deposit (\$)	1,327	1,430	1,373	1,316	1,464	1,360
Mean Fee (\$)	11	31	26	26	33	50
Number of Audits	87	80	82	72	79	77

Table 4. Logit regression of selected rental search outcomes on experimental variables.

Explanatory Variable	<u>Spoke to Agent</u>		<u>Unit Available</u>		<u>Access to Unit</u>		<u>Fees Requested</u>		<u>Credit Mentioned</u>	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
<b>LANGUAGE &amp; GENDER</b>										
White English Male	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Black Accent Male	-0.363	0.535	-0.364	0.455	-0.448	0.396	2.201*	0.540	1.266	0.871
Black English Male	-1.360*	0.491	-1.470*	0.435	-1.532*	0.381	1.104*	0.567	1.018	0.948
White English Female	-0.949	0.536	-0.628	0.478	-0.724	0.413	1.042	0.593	0.558	1.035
Black Accent Female	-0.792	0.516	-0.272	0.468	-0.569	0.395	1.417*	0.545	2.186*	0.822
Black English Female	-1.459*	0.511	-1.361*	0.450	-1.519*	0.396	1.637*	0.583	2.203*	0.850
<b>CONTROLS</b>										
Amount of Rent	0.002*	0.001	0.005*	0.001	0.004*	0.001	-0.003*	0.001	-0.006*	0.002
Time of Day	0.029	0.050	0.007	0.045	0.024	0.040	-0.006	0.055	-0.018	0.076
Number of Phone Calls	-2.030*	0.224	—	—	-1.187*	0.171	—	—	—	—
Number of Units										
<5	0.975*	0.316	1.104*	0.292	1.027*	0.259	-1.819*	0.438	-0.600	0.549
5-39	0.936*	0.476	3.633*	0.772	2.180*	0.419	0.224	0.458	0.037	0.628
40+	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Intercept	3.780*	0.981	-2.139*	0.856	-0.008	0.742-1.590	1.054		-1.677	1.703
X <sup>2</sup>	160.464*	86.027*		144.651*		56.529*		20.219*		
Log Likelihood	355.245*	354.708*		486.882*		261.874*		157.445*		
Number of Audits	463		369		463		269		260	

\* p<.05

Table 5. Logit regression predicting access to rental units after selecting only those cases where unit was available to last caller.

Explanatory Variable	<u>Spoke to Agent</u>		<u>Unit Available</u>		<u>Access to Unit</u>	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
<b>LANGUAGE &amp; GENDER</b>						
White English Male	—	—	—	—	—	—
Black Accent Male	-0.517	0.682	-1.954	1.121	-1.227*	0.647
Black English Male	-1.563*	0.645	-3.365*	1.067	-2.593*	0.613
White English Female	-1.274	0.676	-2.228*	1.131	-1.830*	0.643
Black Accent Female	-1.170	0.665	4.904	15.030	-1.157	0.652
Black English Female	-1.917*	0.638	-3.255*	1.079	-2.633*	0.619
<b>CONTROLS</b>						
Amount of Rent	0.000	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001
Time of Day	-0.010	0.060	0.029	0.068	0.046	0.053
Number of Phone Calls	-1.790*	0.256	—	—	-1.556*	0.225
Number of Units						
<5	0.500	0.400	-0.680	0.458	-0.102	0.348
5-39	0.496	0.560	1.301	0.859	0.632	0.510
40+	—	—	—	—	—	—
Intercept	5.394*	1.254	3.112*	1.605	4.172*	1.103
X <sup>2</sup>	81.416*	51.223*		101.844*		
Log Likelihood	255.775*	289.401*		307.925*		
Number of Audits	353		296		353	

\* p<.05

Table 6. OLS regression of rental outcomes on language, gender, and selected control variables.

Explanatory Variables	Friendliness		Sales Effort		Amount of Deposit		Extra Fees	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
<b>LANGUAGE &amp; GENDER</b>								
<b>Males</b>								
White English	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Black Accent	-2.164*	0.496	-1.664*	0.608	73.36	68.98	16.37	12.59
Black English	-1.794*	0.504	-1.696*	0.605	56.29	76.52	7.94	13.97
<b>Females</b>								
White English	-1.095*	0.517	-0.690	0.619	5.78	75.88	15.32	13.85
Black Accent	-2.129*	0.537	-2.743*	0.664	30.63	71.69	16.87	13.09
Black English	-3.050*	0.542	-3.253*	0.681	78.89	80.32	37.23*	14.66
<b>CONTROLS</b>								
Amount of Rent	0.002*	0.001	0.003*	0.001	1.69*	0.11	-0.01	0.02
Time of Phone Call	0.077	0.051	0.167*	0.061	2.22	7.56	0.98	1.38
Number of Bedrooms	—	—	—	—	107.97	71.21	-6.71	13.00
Number of Units								
<5	0.312	0.373	0.286	0.484	91.84	66.14	-48.99*	10.51
5-39	0.679	0.504	1.779*	0.626	133.63	70.71	-38.26*	12.91
40+	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Intercept	6.060*	1.006	3.209*	1.253	67.83	151.18	38.21	27.59
R <sup>2</sup>	0.175		0.215		0.514		0.136	
Number of Audits	254		222		260		260	

\* p<.05