

Housing Discrimination in Massachusetts

Fox Undercover Tests Landlords

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(FOX 25 / MyFoxBoston.com) - New research obtained exclusively by Fox Undercover shows your race and ethnic background can play a role in your ability to find a place to live here in Massachusetts.

Investigative reporter Mike Beaudet did his own test and it didn't take him long to find evidence of what one expert says is discrimination.

A Boston property manager thinks she's showing an apartment to a prospective tenant named Matthew O'Brien. But it's really a producer for Fox Undercover. She's one of the landlords Fox Undercover tested.

"Do you discriminate against people based on the sound of their name?" Beaudet asked. The property manager responded, "I do not. No."

Read on and decide for yourself if you believe her. But first, some background information.

Dr. Samantha Friedman is an associate professor at the Albany campus of the State University of New York.

"Does it help to be white if you're trying to rent an apartment in Boston?" asked Beaudet.

"Absolutely," said Friedman.

Friedman wrote a study with George Washington University professor Gregory Squires and SUNY doctoral student Chris Galvan.

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The researchers responded by email to more than 700 apartment listings on the Boston Craigslist website. Each landlord received three emails: One from a black sounding name, one from a Hispanic sounding name, and one from a white sounding name.

"Our people were Tyrone, Tremayne, Pedro, Jorge, Neil and Matthew," said Friedman.

The landlords responded to about 75 percent of all the emails they received. Dr. Friedman says the results reveal some Massachusetts landlords are discriminating.

"It's more subtle. It's discrimination with a smile. It's getting an initial response," said Friedman. "The further steps into the process are where you see the real disparities emerge."

Landlords invited 62 percent of whites to see the advertised apartment compared to 58 (57.8) percent of Hispanics and 51 (50.9) percent of blacks.

Dr. Friedman says an even more disturbing result surfaces when looking at how each individual landlord responded to the three emails.

Fifty-eight Massachusetts landlords (7.8 percent) invited the white sounding person to look at the apartment, but did not invite the black sounding or Hispanic sounding person.

"Do you believe this is evidence of discrimination?" Beaudet asked.

"I definitely believe that's the case, especially because in some cases the white tester was the last person to send the email," said Friedman.

"The study is very revealing," said Michael Aleo, an attorney for the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights in Boston. "It demonstrates that in fact in the 21st century there is a lot of discrimination based on race and national origin."

Aleo says there are real victims of racial discrimination by landlords in Massachusetts. One of his black clients received a settlement from a white landlord in the Boston suburbs.

"What did the landlord say to your client?" Beaudet asked.

"The landlord said to my client, something to the effect of, I don't want your people here," said Aleo.

Karen Coffin is the property manager for Charles River Realty Group in West Roxbury who was quoted at the beginning of this story. She's one of six landlords advertising on Craigslist that Fox Undercover tested.

Fox Undercover sent three emails to each one using the same names in the study: Jorge Rodriguez, Tyrone Jackson, and Matthew O'Brien. Everyone except Coffin responded to all the emails.

"You never responded to an email from Tyrone Jackson. Can you tell me why?" Beaudet asked Coffin.

"I didn't get the email for whatever reason," she said.

Coffin did get Jorge's email and responded saying she was going away for a week and could show him the apartment when she returned. Matthew emailed last and Coffin's response was detailed. She indicated she actually had two units for rent.

She also told Matthew she was going on vacation but wrote, "...If you can make it here today by 5:30 pm I will be happy to show them to you."

"You told Jorge Rodriguez you'd show him the apartment when you got back from vacation yet you invited Matt O'Brien right over today. Would you rather rent to a white tenant?" Beaudet asked.

"No sir and I don't know where this is even coming from to be honest with you," said Coffin.

"Why could Matt come today but Jorge has to wait a week?" asked Beaudet.

"I believe it was the fact that, I think the timing was, when we emailed him, I mentioned I was going on

vacation and he was able to come. Matt said he could come today at 3:30," said Coffin. "I actually had a cancellation so I was able to squeeze him."

While Matt did say he could come at 3:30, remember Coffin's email. Coffin wrote to him first, saying she could show the apartment anytime, as long as he got there by 5:30. On top of that, Matt hadn't even suggested