

Racism that lurks beneath

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Say you're white, as most Oregonians are. You'd be crazy to tell a black person not to park in front of your house, to move on down the line, right?

Likewise, if you're black or Asian or Latino, it's unthinkable you'd tell a white person he or she has no business in your kid's classroom. Either way, you might end up in court -- federal and state laws ensure as much.

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Or so it seems in everyday Oregon life: a reasonably tolerant, at times happy, coexistence.

But that's not anything like what field investigators discovered recently when

they tried to rent apartments in **Beaverton** and **Ashland**, model communities both. Black folks posing as prospective tenants trying to rent apartments were misled or waded on more than 78 percent of the time in Beaverton and two thirds of the time in Ashland -- this as units remained available.

To say this is unacceptable underestimates the problem. To say this is an artifact of the testing program is to deny an undiluted bias running to the core of who we are.

The findings, by the **Fair Housing Council of Oregon** and reported in The Oregonian by Nikole Hannah-Jones, contrast with those of **a federal study in 2000** that examined renting patterns in America's major cities. That study, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, showed black renters received unfavorable treatment about 22 percent of the time -- grim enough but a block party of equality by comparison.

Oregon, despite Portland's increasing diversity, is not at all like Chicago or Miami when it comes to race. Statewide we're only 2 or so percent black and 11 or so percent Latino. While Beaverton shows a higher proportion of Latinos, it conforms to the state in showing just 2 percent of its citizens as black; in Ashland the number slips beneath 1 percent.

But is that to intone cultural naivete? Do white folks so infrequently consort with blacks or other minorities that they just don't "get it"?

No. Racism in housing exposes a disturbing truth in Oregon, and it's hardly borne of innocence. The Fair Housing Council's black testers were denied apartments white testers could easily get; in some instances they were quoted higher rents, steered to inferior apartments, or left uninformed about specials.

We could catch up, if late. **The 1866 Civil Rights Act** prohibited discrimination based on race or color. **The 1968 Fair Housing Act** prohibited discrimination on the basis of race and color and also because of religion, sex and national origin.

The challenge is that laws offer remedies only to those who file complaints -- a fraction of those being discriminated against. Many people just don't know they're being lied to when told the apartment was just rented. It took a near-sting operation to uncover such practices.

To their credit, Beaverton and Ashland had sought out housing assessments that resulted in the testing. And they are yet more concerned. Ashland will augment its efforts at assuring equality by hiring a fair housing officer. Beaverton will step up testing and deepen a citywide conversation on race.

But this goes far beyond two communities. It belongs to every town and city in Oregon.

Federal money is at stake -- about \$39 million statewide in community block grants designed to promote fair housing. For those counting, slippage in the protection of civil rights could ding a few budgets. But at the end of the day, that's small change.

Achieving something that approximates racial equality has a far higher value. It creates decency and prosperity, each priceless.

Let's fix this fast. Laws can only guide. Open minds and hearts are needed.