

Ⓒ We can't hide Dallas' subtle, yet dirty little secret of discrimination

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You may recall that my colleague Steve Blow and I recently chatted in a "Talking Race" column about John Wiley Price's outburst. You know the one: "You're all white. Go to hell."

I made one private observation that's worth amplifying now.

"Steve, you know, while I disagree with what [Commissioner Price](#) said and how he said it, there are institutions that tell black people to go to hell every day. They just do it in subtle ways."

"Good point," Steve said. "You ought to say that."

"No," I countered. "If I dare bring that up, many of our readers will assume I'm merely rationalizing Price's behavior or, worse still, making excuses for him."

But the observation isn't without merit. Study after study has pointed up that racial discrimination persists in housing and the workplace.

It didn't take long for yet another audit to come along to illustrate the point: A report released Thursday by the North Texas Fair Housing Center found that minorities, namely blacks and Hispanics, often get charged higher rents and security deposits than their white counterparts.

They're lucky to get that far, because some, the report found, are slapped in the face another way: Prospective black and Hispanic tenants are more likely to be told, untruthfully, that there aren't any rental units available.

Like other groups that have evidenced discrimination in housing or the workplace, the Dallas-based center employed a team of well-trained "testers" to assess the marketplace.

They sent 40 pairs of testers to 40 complexes in predominantly white areas of Dallas, Tarrant and Collin counties. Typically, a black or Hispanic tester would ask about an apartment and then, within an hour, a white tester came a knocking.

They were all dressed about the same.

"We ask them to dress business casual — slacks, polo shirts, or jeans and a nice shirt," explained Frances Espinoza, executive director of the center, a federally funded nonprofit group that opened its doors in Dallas just last summer.

So nobody walked in with disco shirts from the '70s, sagging pants or baseball caps turned backward.

In fact, the black and Hispanic testers looked better on paper than their white counterparts. They came in with slightly higher incomes and credit scores and more established work histories than their white counterparts.

Still, the minority testers tended to be treated differently — as in worse, nearly 40 percent of the time for the black testers and 33 percent of the time for the Hispanics.

As disturbing as this should be, it's no surprise.

"The only thing that surprised me," Espinoza said, "is that we didn't find higher percentages" of discrimination.

There is hope, though.

Having the housing center here will go a long way toward educating landlords about the federal Fair Housing Act, investigating complaints and doubling down on enforcement efforts.

But public and private attitudes matter, too. To that end, I was pleased to hear that the Apartment Association of Greater Dallas was among the first to reach out to Espinoza in response to the report.

Gerry Henigsmann, executive vice president of the apartment association, said it's "archaic" and "not good business" for apartment complexes to discriminate against tenants.

But you can rest assured that not everyone feels that way.

Just ask Shanna Smith, president and chief executive of the National Fair Housing Alliance in Washington. She said public reaction to such findings usually comes in three forms: "First, people are very surprised ... or they say something like that happened to me."

Second is the "very professional" response like the one from Henigsmann. "Apartment associations and owners call and say, 'Is there a way we can get some training so we don't engage in these activities?'" Smith said.

The third reaction: "Hate emails, hate calls, allegations of social engineering."

I'm bracing myself for much of the latter.

Yet this pernicious problem won't go away until we, as a society, can muster as much outrage for institutional discrimination as we do for the onion-breath outbursts of a politician.