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Housing Discrimination among a Sample of Aboriginal People in Winnipeg and Thompson, Manitoba

Irwin M. Cohen and Raymond R. Corrado

There is a paucity of research on housing discrimination in Canada, generally, and even less research on housing discrimination among Aboriginal people—despite the related critical policy issues. Housing discrimination occurs when a group of people are denied equal access to housing. Typically, this discrimination involves the restriction of choices in renting or owning accommodations. There is a consensus among Canadian researchers that Aboriginal people have experienced sustained and widespread housing discrimination even though there are federal, provincial, and constitutional laws and provisions that protect equal access for all ethnic racial groups (Beavis 1995; Quann 1979).

Aboriginal people's access to housing has historically been a controversial policy issue. However, it has become a more complex issue since the large scale migration of Aboriginal people to urban centres throughout Canada. Unlike the housing issues on reserves, housing in the urban context typically involves far more subtle forms of discrimination. In turn, developing effective policy responses is particularly challenging, especially given the different municipal, provincial, and federal jurisdictional issues. Given that the Aboriginal urban migration trend will continue and that available housing will also continue to be limited and expensive, it is vital to understand the types of housing discrimination that exist and how Aboriginal migrants perceive their attempts to access housing. In effect, government housing policies need to be informed by systematic empirical research concerning the contemporary Aboriginal housing experience.

Clatworthy (1996) examined the migration, residential mobility, and housing patterns of Canadian Aboriginal people between 1986 and 1991. He found that Aboriginal people moving to urban centers are more commonly: female; younger; include large numbers of families with small children; and have less formal education than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. In

addition, Aboriginal people migrated to urban centres most frequently to improve their housing conditions. As well, Clatworthy (1996) confirmed that mobility rates for Aboriginal people to urban centres are exceedingly high in contrast to non-Aboriginal people.

Other research assessed the types of prejudices and incidences of racial discrimination in rental and ownership housing in Canada (Quann 1979). Quann, for example, claimed that housing discrimination against Aboriginal migrants is more severe than that faced by immigrants. She theorized that the key difference is that Aboriginal people are more socially and economically disadvantaged than most immigrants because Aboriginal people generally have lower education levels and fewer practical skills to compete in the job market. Consequently, Aboriginal people are less attractive clients in competitive housing markets.

The Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties reported on a study that provides “experimental” evidence for housing discrimination against Aboriginal people. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers, posing as potential buyers and renters, noted the reactions of owners, agents, and managers to racial/ethnic differences. Most importantly, non-Aboriginal people were treated more favourably in most respects. In addition to non-Aboriginal testers being directed to better housing sections of the city, Aboriginal clients were: given different listings by the housing agencies, fewer addresses, and addresses in more economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties 1988). Finally, commercial housing agencies were generally more helpful to non-Aboriginal people.

In a study conducted by Novac and Associates (1999), housing researchers, real estate professionals, lending institutions, consumer advocates, human rights agencies, community agencies that provide housing services, landlord and tenant associations, professional advocates and government agencies involved in housing policy planning or delivery were interviewed about their perspectives on the types, patterns and issues of housing discrimination in their jurisdictions. Many of the informants felt that racial discrimination was common in areas with a large proportion of Aboriginal people (Novac and Associates 1999). In another study carried out by the Race Relations Committee of Kitchener-Waterloo (1991), it was concluded that racial discrimination restricted the access of many people searching for rental accommodation and forced ethnic minorities to live in substandard housing.

Since more Aboriginal people are living in urban centers than on reserves, adequate housing is a critical problem for those seeking residences and a challenge to policy-makers at every level of government. Clearly, substandard housing has an impact on a wide range of factors related to the quality of life of Aboriginal people. Poor health, family violence, substance abuse, economic well-being, suicide, education, and other social issues are frequently associated with poor housing conditions (Galster 1991; Young et al. 1991). Given the need for Canadian research in the area of housing discrimination and Aboriginal people, this article will focus on the perceived housing discrimination experienced by samples of Aboriginal people currently living in Winnipeg and Thompson, Manitoba. In addition, this article will explore how the respondents reacted to this discrimination and what effect it had on their lives.

Methods

A non-random purposive selected sample of 300 self-identified Aboriginal people in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and 100 in Thompson, Manitoba, participated in a two-hour, one-on-one, semi-structured interview. These cities were selected primarily because of their large Aboriginal populations. Thompson and Winnipeg also serve as migration magnets for the large segments of the Aboriginal population in Manitoba who are increasingly leaving their reserve or rural communities.¹ While the samples are not random, they are generally reflective of the greater Aboriginal populations of these two cities. For the Winnipeg sample, there is nearly an equal number of males and females (males = 50.3%; females = 49.7%), while the Thompson sample is 55.6% males and 44.4% females (see Table 1).

Table 1: General demographics

	Winnipeg (n = 300) %	Thompson (n = 100) %
Gender:		
Male	50.3	55.6
Female	49.7	44.4
Aboriginal Identity:		
Status Indian	67.2	61.0
Non-Status Indian	4.7	3.0
Métis	17.0	20.0
Age:		
18 to 24 years old	20.4	16
25 to 35 years old	30.2	23
35 to 49 years old	35.7	45
50 years old and above	13.7	16
Education Profile:		
Some high school	37.4	23.1
Graduated high school	15.6	12.1
Some university or graduated university	19.7	11.0
Vocational education or diploma	14.5	37.4
Family Profile and Marital Status:		
Married	14.0	25.0
Separated	21.8	18.8
Living in a common-law relationship	14.1	20.7
Respondent has at least one child	67.3	79.8
Household Income (last 12 months):		
No declared income	6.1	11.4
Under \$10,000	19.4	12.9
\$10,000–\$19,999	18.9	25.7
\$20,000–\$29,999	17.9	8.6
\$30,000 and over	24.9	27.1

General Demographic Information

Approximately two-thirds of the sample in Winnipeg and slightly less in Thompson identified themselves as Status Indians, while approximately 5% in both samples utilized the Non-Status Indian category. One-fifth of the respondents in Thompson are Métis with a similar percentage of Métis in the Winnipeg sample. The age range is 18 to 70 and the mean age is 35.3 years old in Winnipeg, while the age range is 19 to 67 and the mean age is 36.9 years old in Thompson. The age and gender profiles for the Winnipeg sample approximate the census profiles for Aboriginal people in that city. While there is no Aboriginal census information available for Thompson, a similar inference can be made for the Thompson sample in the opinion of our demographic expert.

As demonstrated in Table 1, substantial differences are evident in the educational profiles in Winnipeg and Thompson. Given the diversity of educational and employment opportunities in Winnipeg, it is not surprising that there are higher percentages for each education category, other than for vocational training, in the Winnipeg sample. In contrast, Thompson respondents were nearly 2.5 times more likely to have “some vocational education or diploma.” This finding is not unexpected given the industrial employment opportunities available in Thompson.

A relatively small percentage (14%) of the Winnipeg sample was married at the time of the interview, and, even in Thompson, only one-quarter were married. In both samples, nearly half of those married were not currently living with their spouses. Common-law relationships were not unusual (20.7%) in Thompson, but less so in Winnipeg (14.1%). More than half (58.1%) of the Winnipeg sample had never been married compared to 35% in Thompson. It appears that the difference in age profiles between the two cities may account partly for the discrepancies in the marriage profiles, since Winnipeg has approximately double the percentage of the youngest age category of 18–24 year olds than Thompson. In addition, Thompson respondents had more children (79.8%) than Winnipeg respondents (67.3%).

With regard to the income reported in the two samples, either for obtaining a mortgage or convincing a landlord or manager about being able to afford certain rent rates, it is the combined income of all persons seeking the dwelling that typically affects housing decisions. For the Winnipeg sample, 25.5% of households earned less than \$10,000 in the past twelve months. Moreover, 24.9% of respondents came from households that earn \$30,000 or more. For Thompson, the pattern is similar. In total, 24.3% of household incomes were \$10,000 or less in the past twelve months, and 27.1% report a total household income level of \$30,000 or more. Each of the aforementioned demographic variables are important because, as mentioned above, the research literature suggests that being Aboriginal, being single, having children, having lower levels of education, being unemployed, and having low household income are all related to the increased risks of being subjected to housing discrimination.

Residential Mobility

The high degree of Aboriginal residential mobility (see Table 2) also increases the opportunity for Aboriginal people to experience discrimination in housing. Stanbury’s research (1975) suggests that the main reasons why Aboriginal people are increasingly mobile are: (1) employment and economic opportunities, (2) high number of people on-reserve depending on social assistance, (3) preference for life off-reserve, (4) the lack of housing on-reserve, (5) family movement, (6) educational opportunities, and (7) bad social conditions on reserves.

McCaskill (1981) presents a comparative analysis of selected aspects of the migration, adjustment, and integration of Aboriginal people in four Canadian cities, including Winnipeg. He found that large population increases and declining employment opportunities in rural areas forced Aboriginal people to migrate to the cities in search of a viable economic existence. However, the majority of Native people experienced serious obstacles in their efforts to establish themselves in the city. Their migration occurred at a time when the economies of most cities were not expanding to the degree they were during the migration of an earlier generation of Canadians.

As indicated by Table 2, there is a high degree of residence mobility in both samples. Only 3.7% of the Winnipeg sample and 1% of the Thompson sample have lived in their current residences for their entire lives. Most respondents have moved at least once in the past five years, while one-third of the Winnipeg sample and slightly more than one-third of the Thompson sample have moved three to five times during this time period. Even when considering more recent mobility, at least half of all respondents from both samples have changed residences during the last year. Not only are respondents moving a lot, but the moves have typically involved not only a change in residence, but a change in neighbourhood.² However, when only changes in residence during the past twelve months are considered, some degree of neighbourhood stability is evident since 74.8% of the Winnipeg sample and 67% of the Thompson sample remained in the same neighbourhood when making a residential change.

Table 2: Residential mobility

	Winnipeg (n = 300) %	Thompson (n = 100) %
Number of Residential Moves in the Past Five Years		
No moves	15.7	19.0
1–2 moves	36.9	32.0
3–5 moves	33.4	37.0
6 or more moves	14.0	12.0
Number of Residential Moves in the Past Year		
No moves	47.7	40.4
1–2 moves	40.6	49.5
3–5 moves	11.7	10.1
6 or more moves	0	0
Reasons for Moving to Current Neighbourhood		
Work	16.1	22.0
School	17.7	6.0
Family and/or friends	29.7	37.0
Better housing	35.5	41.0
Cost or price of housing	29.8	27.0
Availability of services	14.0	9.0

There are a number of reasons why respondents selected their current neighbourhood, such as proximity to work, school, or friends and family. While a large portion of respondents indicated housing-related issues, which may be related to housing discrimination, only one respondent from the Winnipeg sample, and no one from the Thompson sample, specifically mentioned that their decision to move to their current neighbourhood was the result of housing discrimination.

Housing Discrimination

Housing discrimination can be defined as occurring when a person is denied equal access to housing, or full enjoyment of housing, for reasons that are not related to one's merit as a tenant or homeowner. Unexpectedly, 54.8% of the Winnipeg sample and 67% of the Thompson sample report that they have been discriminated against with respect to housing in the past five years. Among those who did report being discriminated against, as demonstrated by Table 3, the most prevalent source of housing discrimination during the past five years was the landlord followed by the property manager. In Winnipeg, over a third of the sample (38.2%) that had experienced some form of housing discrimination identified landlords and property managers as the most likely source of discrimination, while in the Thompson sample 17% identified landlords and 11% identified property managers as the most prevalent discriminators.

Among those who live in subsidized residences in Winnipeg, 40% report that they have been discriminated against by a subletting tenant, 40.7% by a landlord, 36.2% by a property manager, 50% by a real estate agent, 50% by a community housing agency, 66.7% by a government housing agency, and 25% by a mortgaging agency. Among the Thompson sample there were very few respondents who lived in subsidized housing and only a portion of those individuals reported being discriminated against in the past five years. Specifically, five respondents indicated discrimination by a landlord, three reported discrimination by a property manager, and one person reported discrimination by a community housing agency.

Table 3: Perceived housing discrimination in the past five years

	Winnipeg (n = 300) %	Thompson (n = 100) %
Most Frequent Housing Discriminators		
Subletting tenant	6.7	1.0
Landlord	27.1	17.0
Property manager	11.0	11.0
Real estate agent	2.0	1.0
Community housing agency	4.0	3.0
Government housing agency	6.0	1.0
Mortgaging agencies	1.3	1.0
Most Common Forms of Housing Discrimination		
Shorter list of available suites	13.4	17.0
Denied a rental application	25.8	21.0
Denied a place to live because of being Aboriginal	25.1	16.0
Denied a place to live because of primary source of income	25.8	7.0
Told suite was "just rented"	30.4	10.0
Received unequal or a lack of maintenance services	24.7	19.0

In terms of specific forms of housing discrimination over the past five years, the percentage of people who reported discrimination is greater in Winnipeg than in Thompson—with the exceptions of being given a shorter list of available suites than expected by the home finding agency (see Table 3). A leading cause of housing discrimination is stereotyped beliefs about the characteristics, beliefs, and behaviours of a minority group (Galster 1992; Ondrich, Stricker, and Yinger 1998). These types of discrimination are evident in the two samples' housing experiences in the past five years. Approximately a quarter of respondents in the Winnipeg sample and one-fifth of the Thompson sample believe that they have been denied tenancy even though their merit as a tenant was acceptable. Even more explicitly, 25.1% of the Winnipeg sample and 16% of the Thompson sample believe that they were denied a place to live because they are Aboriginal.

There is also a large rate difference between the two samples that may reflect possible landlord or real estate agent's negative stereotypical views of Aboriginal people as tenants. In the Winnipeg sample, 30.4% report that, when they arrived to view a supposedly available suite, they were told that the suite was just rented, while 10% of the Thompson sample had a similar experience. Even though this indicator is not necessarily a direct measure of housing discrimination, it is just one example of informal or subtle forms of housing discrimination. Once living in a residence, 24.7% of the Winnipeg sample and 19% of the Thompson sample felt that they received unequal—or a lack of—maintenance services. This also represents a form of housing discrimination. While not uncommon for the Winnipeg sample, receiving social assistance or not having a steady paycheque was also identified as a basis for housing discrimination.

While this data does indicate some extremely high rates of certain discriminatory practices, it is important to note that the majority of people in the Thompson sample (70%) and slightly less than half of the Winnipeg sample (42.1%) did not report experiencing any of the aforementioned forms of discrimination. Of those who have moved at least once in the past five years, 61.9% of the Thompson sample and 24.1% of the Winnipeg sample stated that they have not personally experienced any of the discriminatory practices described in Table 3.

There are several negative outcomes that respondents attribute to their housing discrimination experiences. The most commonly identified result was the feeling of being provided with substantially fewer choices among available vacancies. This outcome was closely followed by being provided with fewer choices among locations or neighbourhoods in which to live. A large percentage of respondents also believed that discrimination resulted in their paying higher rents and being subjected to longer searches for a suitable place to live (see Table 4). Respondents also indicated that being the victims of housing discrimination played a direct role in the number of times they moved residences.

Table 4: Effects of housing discrimination in the past five years

	Winnipeg (n = 300) %	Thompson (n = 100) %
Few choices among available vacancies	39.0	41.0
Fewer choices among locations or neighbourhoods	41.7	41.2
Higher rent	38.5	36.1
Longer searches for a place to Live	43.7	36.1
More frequent moves	36.1	36.1
Overcrowding	17.5	10.3
Negative effect on mobility	18.9	12.2
Negative effect on education	15.2	14.1
Negative effect on employment	16.5	14.1
Negative effect on health	22.9	21.2

The research literature points out that there is likely a significant discrepancy between individual and group perceptions of discrimination (Taylor et al. 1990; Dion and Kawakami 1996). In other words, Aboriginal respondents may feel that Aboriginal people, as a group, experience high levels of housing discrimination even though they themselves may not have personal experience with being the victim of housing discrimination. In the Winnipeg and Thompson samples, despite the established research limitation that surveys typically underreport the actual level of housing discrimination (Novac et al. 2002), in general, perceptions of the degree of housing discrimination were quite high. Specifically, 42.4% of the Winnipeg sample

and 51% of the Thompson sample thought that there was “quite a lot” of housing discrimination against Aboriginal people. At least another quarter of all respondents rated the level of discrimination as “quite a bit.” In total, at least 80% of all respondents felt that there was “moderate” to “quite a lot” of housing discrimination against Aboriginal people in Winnipeg and Thompson.

Housing discrimination can have a direct effect on a number of facets of an individual’s life. A direct outcome of housing discrimination can be that people are forced to live in low standard housing characterized by poor construction, substandard conditions, and a generally lower quality home. As demonstrated in Table 4, housing discrimination can have a number of serious consequences for people and their families. Specifically, slightly more than one-fifth of respondents from both samples reported that housing discrimination resulted in living conditions that had a negative effect on their health. Housing discrimination was also associated with negative effects on a minority of respondents’ education, mobility, and employment.

While both the Winnipeg and the Thompson samples report very serious consequences associated with their perceived experiences of housing discrimination, very few people contacted any formal institution or organization to address the problem. Specifically, in the Winnipeg sample, only 6.8% of those who stated that they were subjected to housing discrimination contacted the Human Rights Commission, a lawyer, or some other human rights advocate. Only one person from the Thompson sample made a formal complaint associated with housing discrimination, and this person contacted a lawyer. These findings are similar to the research conducted by Kasozi (1989) who found that very few African immigrants in Toronto ever made a formal housing discrimination complaint. In most cases, respondents from both samples discussed the matter with a friend (94.1% in Winnipeg and 63.9% in Thompson) or with a family member (86.2% in Winnipeg and 81.2% in Thompson). However, respondents reported that friends and family members were generally unsuccessful in providing assistance. Only 24.7% of the Winnipeg sample and 33.3% of the Thompson sample felt that a friend or a family member was helpful. In fact, nearly half of the respondents from both samples (46% in Winnipeg and 30.8% in Thompson) felt that nothing made a difference in responding to their experiences with housing discrimination.

There is a wide range of reasons provided by respondents for why they did not contact any formal institution or organization about the discrimination they suffered (see Table 5).

Table 5: Reasons for not contacting a service in response to housing discrimination

	Winnipeg (n = 300) %	Thompson (n = 100) %
You did not want to get involved with arbitration, tribunals, or courts	33.2	18.0
You felt that reporting your discriminator(s) would make your situation worse	29.0	19.0
You felt the incident was too minor or it was not important enough	26.3	14.0
You dealt with it in another way	30.1	12.0
You believed that reporting the incident would not help	34.1	21.0
You did not think or know that the act(s) you experienced were against the law	17.9	12.0
Language barriers	11.0	14.0
You felt you had insufficient evidence	26.3	20.0
You felt the procedures to file a proper complaint were too complicated or time consuming	38.3	22.0

It is evident that a substantial number of respondents felt that reporting the incident would be of little help and/or that the procedures to file a proper complaint are too complicated or time consuming. In addition, 33.2% of the Winnipeg sample and 18% of the Thompson sample did not want to become involved with any type of formal procedure to address their housing discrimination victimization. It is also important to note that 17.9% of the Winnipeg sample and 12% of the Thompson sample did not think or know that the discrimination they suffered was illegal. It is also extremely troublesome that 29% of the Winnipeg sample and 19% of the Thompson sample felt that initiating a formal process to redress the discrimination they suffered would make their living situation worse.

Conclusion

The research that forms the basis for this article demonstrates the expected presence of substantial perceptions of housing discrimination among the Aboriginal people in the Winnipeg and Thompson samples. Whether these reported levels can be considered high or excessive is not easily determined, as this research did not collect any non-Aboriginal data. Moreover, there are no standard discrimination databases with which to compare our results. Nonetheless, from a policy perspective, the levels of housing discrimination described by both samples are worrisome. Certain kinds of discrimination, such as being denied a rental application, being denied a place to live due to Aboriginal descent, being denied a place to live because of the respondents' primary sources of income, or being told that a suite was "just rented" after being told the suite was available for viewing were reported for more than a quarter of the Winnipeg sample. For many of the other kinds of housing discrimination, the percentage of respondents who reported experiencing them typically varied between 10%–25% for both samples.

As expected, there was, with a few exceptions, less housing discrimination reported in the Thompson sample than for the Winnipeg sample. The migratory patterns in Winnipeg, and the younger age profile and more complex social and economic structures in Winnipeg, appears to provide a different set of housing policy challenges than the considerably smaller urban context of Thompson. In addition, the most common discriminators were landlords and property managers.

In general, in the absence of other critical data, such as economic trends, a more diverse Aboriginal sample, and intracities and interprovincial city comparisons, it is not possible to assess a more complete perspective about housing discrimination and Aboriginal people's experiences in Winnipeg and Thompson. Nonetheless, there is enough initial encouraging and discouraging data to warrant a continued debate about appropriate policies to reduce housing discrimination against Aboriginal people in an urban context.

Endnotes

1. For a full description of the methodology and findings of this research project, see Corrado Research and Evaluation Associates Inc., *Housing Discrimination and Aboriginal People in Winnipeg and Thompson, Manitoba*. Prepared for the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2003.
2. For the purposes of this research project, neighbourhood was defined as the geographic area within a fifteen-minute walk, in any direction, from the respondent's residence.

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