Anti-Black Racism in Canadian Housing

The Need for Race Based Data

by Adriano Tesolin

My name is Adriano Tesolin and I am a graduate of Dalhousie University's 2022 Spring class. At Dalhousie, I completed my undergraduate program with a major in Political Science with Honours, as well as a minor in the Law, Justice and Society program.

I became a fellow at the UofMosaic because I am interested in obtaining a better understanding of the processes of discrimination and how to support members of my community. For my research paper, I chose to write on a topic that interested me during the latter years of my undergraduate degree. In this article, I argue the importance of collecting race-based data as a critical step in the long road to reaching an equal society. Additionally, this publication discusses the historical shortcomings of Canadian governance and itsgeneral unwillingness to collect race-based data.

This topic embodies some of the core lessons from the UofMosaic like inclusion at both a community and national level. I hope that this publication can contribute to the ongoing discussions around race-based data collection and how we can improve this through policy.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout my university career, one of my only truly negative experiences was having to move from apartment to apartment two separate times. There were many challenges throughout the process, including finding a place relatively close to my university campus, and moving out of one apartment and into the other in less than two days. In all my privilege and albeit ignorance, I truly had no idea what challenges to housing really looked like until I started to read more about it.

As a white man born in Canada, I never truly considered the various problems that minorities (Black, Indigenous and people of colour) have historically faced in housing in general, let alone student housing. For me, convincing a landlord that my 3 friends and I were not heavy partiers was the extent of our social obstacles. In both a national and global context, anti-Black racism is permeated across major institutions. This includes racial inequality that is income related, with racialized women earning $0.59 for every dollar that non-racialized men earn (1). Additionally, systemic racism in Ontario's education system intertwines with income inequality - as children of families from low-income levels are half as likely to pursue higher education as those from top income levels (2).

Following a discussion of the history of anti-Black racism and racial discrimination in Canadian housing, this article will focus on presenting potential mitigation agents for this well-documented

A CONDENSED HISTORY:
ANTI-BLACK RACISM IN CANADIAN HOUSING

One of the earliest instances of racially discriminative housing in Canada occurred before Canada gained its independence in 1867. After the American Revolution in the late 18th century, many Black settlers relocated to Halifax, Nova Scotia, to form a community now referred to as Africville. Upon arrival, they were promised their own land and liberty following a grueling war (4). While they did receive some land to live on, the already established white settler community pushed many of the Black settlers to almost inhabitable lands (5). However, the perseverance and determination of these settlers fought against these inequalities to sustain communities such as Africville (6).

1 - New Youth, "Anti-Black racism," sec 2.
2 - New Youth, "Anti-Black racism," sec 3.
3 - CERA, "Housing Discrimination."
4 - McRae, "Story of Africville", sec 1.
5 - McRae, "Story of Africville", sec 1.
6 - Nelson, "Racialized Knowledge," 121.

Despite establishing such a community, residents continued to be racially discriminated against by the existing group of white settlers in rural Nova Scotia (7). Although Africville residents paid their taxes to the government like the rest of the province, the government refused to provide amenities, such as sewage, access to clean water, and garbage disposal (8). This was a vast difference compared to the existing white community, who had little to no problems with basic human needs (9). Instead of providing basic needs for the residents of Africville, the City of Halifax chose to make it as inconvenient as possible for the people of Africville to live even somewhat comfortably. Undesirable buildings and sites like a garbage dump, prison, and an infectious disease center were all constructed in close proximity to Africville (10).

Furthermore, once Africville was eventually destroyed (partly due to these conditions), the displacement of its residents triggered further human rights violations. Despite no meaningful conversation taking place between the city and residents of Africville, these people were uprooted from their homes and displaced into government housing. Ironically, the City of Halifax utilized human rights language to justify displacement into social homes, citing that relocation would improve the living standards for new residents (11). According to Sunday Miller, former Executive Director of the Africville Heritage and Trust, residents of Africville were stripped of their dignity when they became a ward of the government (12). Although residents of Africville were already living in poverty because of lack of government aid, the destruction of the neighborhood pushed residents into a steeper economic and social decline (13). According to Miller, it took no longer than three years to dismantle all support structures that were designed to assist former occupants in these housing projects (14). Until 2010, nearly 40 years after the complete destruction of Africville, residents had never received any formal apology or recognition from the City of Halifax (15).

Matilda Newman's store in Africville, 1964. Local businesses were demolished during the relocation. Photo: Library and Archives Canada, Ted Grant, e002283006

7 - McRae, "Story of Africville", sec 2.
8 - Tesolin, "Manipulated and Mismanaged", 63-70.
9 - McRae, "Story of Africville", sec 2.

10 - McRae, "Story of Africville", sec 2.
11 - McRae, "Story of Africville", sec 2.
12 - McRae, "Story of Africville", sec 2.

13 - Tesolin, "Manipulated and Mismanaged", 63-70.
14 - McRae, "Story of Africville", sec 3.
15 - Nelson, "Panthers or Thieves", 122.

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT:
THE ONGOING IMPACT OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Although manifesting in different forms compared to the initial experiences of Africville residents, racial discrimination and anti-Black racism continues to persist in the Canadian housing market today. According to the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, economic barriers, cultural differences, and discrimination by landlords and real estate agents continue to reinforce racial and ethnic segregation in urban housing (16). In various accounts of Canadians of African descent, they share that they have difficulty finding housing because "landlords believe they are criminals or have too many children" (17). Despite these stereotypes still holding influence over landlords selecting tenants, the experiences of these marginalized people are rarely heard on a wide scale because of Canada's reluctance to collect race-based data (18). A common assumption about racial discrimination is that it takes the form of being explicitly racist, like calling somebody a racial slur or not assisting someone solely because of their skin colour. However, racial discrimination can also take the form of ignoring the presence of various inequalities (19). Canada's reluctance to collect race-based data serves as an example of such negligence. By neglecting race-based data in the financial and education sector, the experiences of those who face perpetual systemic racism will continue to be underrepresented. Without government collected race-based data to support claims of racial discrimination from BIPOC (20) communities, amending policy to reduce discrimination is incredibly challenging.

Africville resident Dorothy Carvery was moved from her home by a City of Halifax garbage truck.
Photo: Library and Archives Canada, Ted Grant, e002283990

16 - Springer, "Living in Colour," sec 2.
17 - Springer, "Living in Colour," sec 2.
18 - Springer, "Living in Colour," sec 2.
19 - Springer, "Living in Colour," sec 2.
20 - Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour

Part of the issue is the language that the Canadian government uses when collecting race-based data. The Canadian census collects data on those who identify as a visible minority according to Statistics Canada (21). The Employment Equity Act defines a visible minority is defined as "non-Indigenous persons, non-Caucasian in race and non-White in colour" (22). According to Menezes et al., the language used to describe a visible minority "implies an identity assigned by society to describe individuals based on their appearance, assigning perceived cultural norms, and assumed ethnic and national origins while ignoring the self-perceptions of the individual" (23).   This metric is also not comparable to international standards on race, which means it limits meaningful measurements of the impacts of racial discrimination for the Canadian population (24).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:
WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Anti-Black racism and racial discrimination continue to persist in Canada. A very recent article published by the Center for Equality Rights and Accommodation (CERA) offers tangible steps to address problems of anti-Black racism in Canadian housing. CERA offers recommendations for all levels of government in Canada to combat issues of anti-Black racism. CERA suggests that better data collection is crucial to capture the true experiences of Black home seekers. In Canada, the collection of race-based data has been historically poor and often described as moving at a "glacial pace" (25). In Ontario, it is very difficult to find concrete data regarding Anti-Black racism partially because of a lack of funding (26). Therefore, to collect a higher quality and quantity of race-based data, more funding is required. COVID-19 has substantially exacerbated racial discrimination, such as the rise of anti-Asian racism and therefore, the need for improved race-based data continues to increase (27). It is also important that potential Black homeowners/seekers are provided with education on their rights as either a tenant or an owner. When experiencing racism, those who face it usually have little to no resources to pursue their own legal rights in any given situation (28).

21 - Menezes et al., "High Time," p 1.
22 - Statistics Canada, "Visible minority."
23 - Menezes et al., "High Time," p 1.

24 - Menezes et al., "High Time," p 2.
25 - Paradkar, "Canada's glacial pace," p 1.
26 - CERA, "Addressing anti-Black racism," sec 3.

27 - CERA, "Addressing anti-Black racism," sec 3.
28 - CERA, "Addressing anti-Black racism," sec 3.

CONCLUSION

CERA's recommendations advocating for tangible efforts to combat racial discrimination in Canadian housing point to the glaring socio-economic injustices of the Canadian housing market. As long as projects to collect race-based data receive minimal funding, racial discrimination in housing and larger society will persist and potentially get worse for potential homeowners/seekers. Looking past the economic portion of the issue, thorough data collection can only help to a certain extent. To suppress racial discrimination on the ground level, Black home seekers must be continually provided with adequate resources. Education, for one, is extremely important because it can aid making sense of often complicated legal rights. To me, building stronger educational foundations for those who have not received it in the past is the first large step on a long road to an equitable society.

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