

September 2021

Key words: ethnic discrimination, rental housing market, field experiment, Barcelona

The key can be in a name. Detection of evidence of ethnic discrimination in access to the rental housing market in Barcelona

Ariadna Fitó. Consultant and public policy analyst at the Broll cooperative. Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB)
afito@broll.cat, [@AriadnaFitó](https://twitter.com/AriadnaFitó), [@broll_sccl](https://www.broll.cat)

A field experiment carried out with the aim of detecting and analysing the presence of ethnic discrimination in the housing rental market. Using the correspondence analysis method, fictitious names were assigned that unequivocally pointed to differences in ethnic origin: Arabic names and Catalan/ Spanish names. Internet real estate platforms were used as a field of analysis. One thousand emails requesting information were sent regarding 500 properties advertised across all the districts of Barcelona, with the aim of analysing the reactions of the estate agents to the named applicants. The results of the experiment show that applicants with an Arabic name received 18% fewer responses than those applying under a Catalan/ Spanish name. A lower percentage of applicants with an Arabic name were also offered viewings. In higher-priced rental segments, the level of discrimination was lower. The results show that people with an Arabic name have access to fewer flats in the rental market, and that those they do have access to are more expensive.

1. Introduction: What is discrimination and how can we measure it?

Discrimination refers to the unequal treatment of individuals or groups on the basis of their personal characteristics. Unequal treatment that favours members of certain groups to the detriment of others, and that reinforces and perpetuates disadvantage in terms of access to resources and opportunities.

Even today, one of the main obstacles to tackling discrimination is how the phenomenon is measured. There are many questions regarding the actual incidence of discrimination, due to the difficulty in detecting cases. Among the efforts to generate data on this phenomenon in Barcelona, the initiatives promoted by the Human Rights Resource Centre and the Office for Non-Discrimination of Barcelona City Council stand out. Together with the 18 organisations¹ that make up the Bureau of Organisations providing Services for Victims of Discrimination (SAVD) and which, since 2018, have published the Barcelona Discrimination Observatory report² which has drawn attention to the numerous situations of discrimination detected in the city of Barcelona.

1. Catalan Association for Integrating Homosexual, Bisexual and Transsexual Immigrants (Acathi), the Catalan Association for the Defence of Human Rights (ACDDH), Bayt al-Thaqafa, Cepaim, Dincat, the ECOM Federation, the Catalonia Mental Health Federation (FSMC), Federació Veus, Fil a l'Agulla, Fundació Secretariat Gitano (FSG), Gais Positius, Irídia, the Observatory against Homophobia (OCH), Plataforma per la Llengua, the Tenants' Union, SOS Racisme Catalunya, Unión Romani and Care for the Homeless Network. (XAPSLI).

2. Accessible at: <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/oficina-no-discriminacio/ca/observatori-discriminacions>

This annual report is a first step towards understanding the problem, but it should be remembered that much of the discrimination that takes place in the city goes unreported. The same thing happens with the statistics based on complaints about cases of discrimination. This data brings us closer to the reality, but reveals only the tip of the iceberg. It is often disregarded because it is considered to refer to isolated cases, cases that have little statistical significance or are not backed by empirical evidence.

There are also opinion studies, such as the Survey of Neighbourhood Relations and Coexistence, carried out by the IMERB (2021) which provides a great deal of information, including a discrimination index. This type of study measures the social perceptions and general attitudes of majority groups towards minorities or situations experienced by minorities. However, perceptions of discrimination may over- or under-estimate the actual incidence of discrimination. Precisely because they are perceptions, they occur within relationships and in situations that can be interpreted in different ways. Existing research on racialized attitudes and stereotyping among the general population (Farley, 1977) indicates that much discrimination tends to go undetected, because of the degree to which it is perceived as 'normal' in the daily lives both of those who have to live with discrimination due to their personal characteristics, and those who engage in certain discriminatory practices.

To resolve these difficulties in detecting discrimination, and the often invisible, and even normalised, nature of that discrimination, the social sciences provide techniques that can help with measurement that are based on evidence and the empirical contrast of real or simulated cases from situations that are recreated, whether fictitiously or with real people who are susceptible to being discriminated against due to their personal characteristics.

Given the need for increased knowledge about discrimination in the city, Barcelona City Council's Directorate of Citizenship Rights and Diversity Services promoted an experiment to detect racial discrimination in access to rented housing.

This research, entitled "The Key Can Be in a Name" and carried out by the Broll cooperative, aimed to conduct an experiment in order to detect and quantify the existence of differential treatment based on ethnic origin in terms of access to the private rental market in Barcelona, based on the submission of applications for housing on internet real estate portals.

2. The Key May Be in A Name: A Social Experiment to Detect Evidence of Ethnic Discrimination in Access to Rental Housing.

The experiment allowed us to measure discrimination directly. The idea was to select and match population profiles (majority group with minority group) and to display the chosen profiles in the situation to be analysed, so that differential treatment might subsequently be analysed. Experiments carried out in other locations in recent decades provide evidence confirming that ethnic groups face discriminatory behaviour in all kinds of market transactions, such as access to employment (Pager and Shepherd, 2008), in the rental or home ownership market (Ying, 1995; Chambers, 1992; Wachter and Megbolugbe, 1992), mortgage lending (Turner and Kidmore, 1999), insurance applications (Wissoker et al. 1998), access to health care (Schulman et al. 1999), and even when purchasing a car (Ayres and Siegelman, 1995) and access to taxis (Ridley et al. 1989).

Experiments aimed at detecting discrimination on the basis of ethnicity show that, compared to the ethnic majority, minority applicants generally receive fewer responses to housing applications and are invited to fewer housing viewings, i.e., they have fewer opportunities to access housing. The experiment, carried out in Barcelona in early 2020, consisted of creating fictitious profiles for housing applicants to whom names were assigned that unequivocally pointed to different ethnic origins. Catalan/ Spanish names and names of Arabic origin were randomly matched in the application for the same flat offered on an internet rental portal. In this pairing, the identities differed only in one characteristic: the name.

Our names are our calling cards. Names confer identity as well as conveying that identity to others, and are therefore directly related to social experiences and opportunities. Names can be a key factor. The key to gaining access to certain social or cultural relations, goods, or services. Names can open or close doors, including the doors of a home. Behind names lie life stories that are subject to interpretation by others, and often include prejudices and stereotypes that act as constructs of otherness and factors that feed discrimination. A mere name can have a bearing on the allocation of opportunities to access resources.

Using names, we conducted an experiment that consisted of sending 1,000 applications in response to 500 housing advertisements published on real estate portals. Half of the applications were sent with a name of Arabic origin, and the other half with a Catalan/ Spanish name based on the names registered as most common by Idescat.

3. Results of the experiment: does differential treatment exist in that opportunities for access to housing depend on the origin of the name of applicant?

3.1. Responses to applications

In order to detect differences, comparison was made between the response rates to applications submitted by couples with Catalan/ Spanish names, and those presented by couples with names of Arabic origin. The sample was evenly distributed in terms of gender, each female Catalan/ Spanish name being paired with a female Arabic name. The same procedure was followed for the males.

In this experiment, no differences were established between positive and negative responses, since the *modus operandi* of estate agents, as confirmed in this study, is that when faced with giving a negative response, the preferred choice is not to respond - a practice that explains why there was no response at all to over half of the sample. 52.8% of the requests received no response at all, a non-response rate similar to that in other field studies in the rental housing market that also include names of Arabic origin (Ahmed et al., 2008; Bosch et al., 2010). 'Response' in the data presented indicates only the fact that the estate agent responded in some way; there is no analysis of the content of the response message, only whether or not there was in fact a response. The overall response rate to applications was 47.2%. In the case of men, 37.2% of enquiries received a response regardless of origin; for women this figure was 57.2%. The response rate for housing applications made by women was 20% higher than for men, without taking origin into account. These results are not an isolated case: there is evidence of gender-differentiated treatment to the detriment of men in the internet property rental market, regardless of their origin (Ahmed and Hammarstedt, 2008; Andersson et al. 2012). Ahmed and Hammarstedt (2008) reveal that in Sweden men are 13% less likely to receive a response than women, regardless of origin. Bengtsson et al. (2012). However, while it was found that women are 8.7% more likely to receive a response than men, this advantage only occurs for women with a Catalan/ Spanish name, not for those with an Arabic name.

In our study, women got more responses than men regardless of ethnic origin, but when compared with a Catalan/ Spanish person of the same gender, men with Arabic names got 19.2% fewer responses than those with Catalan/ Spanish names, and women 18.4% fewer. A woman with a Catalan/ Spanish name would receive about 40% more responses than a man with an Arabic name.

The rate of discrimination on the basis of origin without taking gender into account is 18.8%³

3. Very similar results were obtained in a baseline study using aggregated data from Madrid and Barcelona, with a difference in response rate of 22% (Bosch et al, 2010).

Table 1. Response rates by applicant profile and net discrimination

Gender	Sample size (Advertisements)	Catalan/ Spanish name	Arabic name	Net discrimination	
M	%	50	46.8	27.6	19.2*** t=6.472
	N	(250)	(117)	(69)	(48)
W	%	50	66.4	48.0	18.4*** t=6.803
	N	(250)	(166)	(120)	(46)
T	%	(100)	56.6	37.8	18.8*** t=9.375
	N	500	(283)	(189)	(94)

*** p<0,001

M: Men, W: Women, T: Total

Source: Original.

The breakdown of responses to the advertisements is as follows: 41% did not respond to either of the couples; 35.4% responded to both, 21.2% responded only to the Catalan/ Spanish couple, and 2.4% responded exclusively to the couple with an Arabic name.

The correlation of responses between the two different ethnic origins is high, indicating that estate agents tended to respond to requests submitted for the same advertisements (58%) to couples with Catalan/ Spanish names and couples with names of Arabic origin, and even more so when the request is made by a woman, rising to 61%. Discrimination is concentrated in the number of responses that each profile receives depending on ethnic origin; the existence of two parallel housing markets according to Catalan/ Spanish origin and Arabic origin was not detected. The type of discrimination that was detected consists of a reduced supply of housing available to couples with Arabic names.

Segmentation along the lines of ethnicity in the rental housing market as expressed in differentiated markets was not detected, but a restriction of access to couples with Arabic names was, with fewer access opportunities reflected in the lower number of responses to the same advertisements.

Table 2. Correlation of responses according to applicant profile

		Catalan/ Spanish name		
		Men	Women	Total
Nombre árabe	Men	0.515**	---	---
	Women	---	0.616**	---
	Total	---	---	0.585**

**p< 0.01

M: Men, W: Women, T: Total

Source: Original.

3.2. Responses to applications that include viewings

Responses to applications contained other information that is of interest when analysing the existence of differential treatment of applications on the basis of ethnic origin. One of the most common practices detected was the attitude of the agent in terms of willingness to follow up on applications received. As we have been able to verify, one of the most common ways of following up on the initial contact is to suggest a telephone conversation to provide more information about the property. Either the estate agent requests the applicants telephone number and calls them, or alternatively suggests that the applicant her/himself should call the agency on a number indicated.

First of all, it should be noted that 68% of the responses received included messages indicating that, in order to obtain more information about the property requested, the applicant would need to call the telephone number included in the email, or requesting a contact number for the applicant to enable the agency to initiate the conversation. This was the response to 34% of the total number of applications sent.

Table 3. Rate of appointments by applicant profile

Gender		Sample size	Catalan/ Spanish name	Arabic name	Net discrimination (T-Student)
M	%	50	14.8	6.8	8.0*** t=5.745
	N	(250)	(37)	(17)	(20)
W	%	50	20	12.8	7.2*** t=3.614
	N	(250)	(50)	(32)	(22)
T	%	(100)	17.4	9.8	7.6*** t=5.209
	N	500	(87)	(49)	(38)

*** p<0.001

M: Men, W: Women, T: Total

Source: Original.

In this type of message, differences in treatment are also observed, although to a lesser extent than in the response rate. Thus, 29.2% of couples with Catalan/ Spanish names would receive messages inviting a conversation via telephone, compared to 22.8% of couples with Arabic names, a difference of 6.4%.

However, this indicator provides little information and is ambiguous, since it is not possible to effectively monitor the reasons why the estate agent may choose to establish a new contact by telephone. Although in the body of the message they usually state that the reason for the call is to provide more information, the possibility that the motive is that this offers a way to carry out a further screening process with the latent, and sometimes overt, desire to obtain more information about the applicant cannot be underestimated.

In any case, the indicator that best fits the analysis of the content of the message is the number of viewings obtained by each of the profiles analysed by the experiment to study discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin.

With regard to the applications that receive responses offering the possibility of a viewing, the differences would be aligned in terms of differential treatment depending both on gender and ethnic origin. However, discrimination persists. The couple with Arabic names were able to access 7.6% fewer viewings than the couple with Catalan/ Spanish names.

17.4% of Catalan/ Spanish couples received an immediate invitation to view a property. In couples with Arabic names, 9.8% of applications resulted in an invitation to view the property. The difference was therefore 7.6%.

Out of every ten enquiries sent, those with Catalan/ Spanish names received two responses with the possibility of a viewing, and those with Arabic names only one.

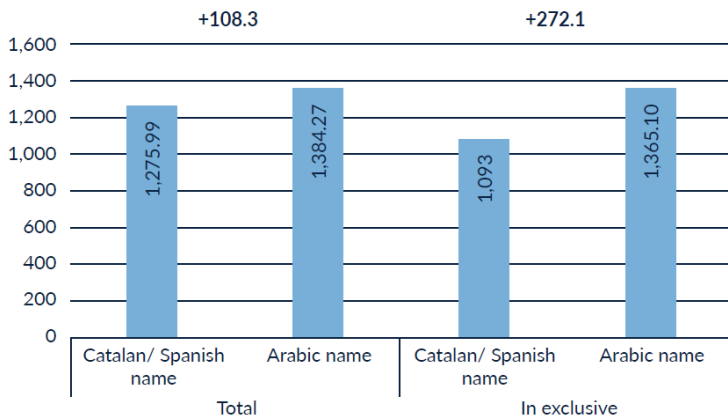
Although in the response rates the gender differences were very marked, in the rate of responses to viewings the results were aligned, both if we compare the results by ethnic origin or by gender; there was a downward adjustment, with an 8% discrimination rate in the case of men with an Arabic name, and one of 7.2% for women with an Arabic name when compared with an application made by a person of the same gender but with a Catalan/ Spanish partner.

Again, women got more responses (+11.2%) offering viewings than men, regardless of their ethnic origin. However, when compared by ethnic origin, women and men with Arabic names were offered almost the same number of viewings, with a difference of 7.2% and 8%, respectively.

Consistent with the results obtained so far is that discrimination on the part of estate agencies means that the rental prices for properties to which migrants have access are higher than the rental prices for properties that Catalan/ Spanish couples have access to.

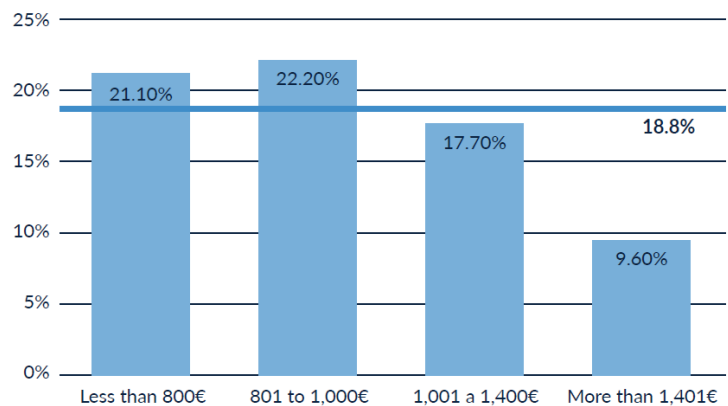
The average monthly rental price of the responses obtained by the Catalan/ Spanish couple was 1,276 euros. For the couple with names of Arabic origin, it was 1,384 euros, a difference of 108.30 euros more per month. If only those applications that received a response in each group are selected, the difference is even more pronounced, with monthly rents 272.10 euros higher for those with Arabic names.

Graph 1. Average access price by response to Catalan/ Spanish name and Arabic name (€)



Source: Original.

Graph 2. Discrimination distribution according to the property asking price (in % and in €)



Source: Original.

Discrimination against those with an Arabic name was concentrated in the 800 to 1,100 euro price range, corresponding to the most sought-after properties in the city when the characteristics of the property and the price were taken into consideration. The correlations between the responses obtained according to the prices of the properties was positive; i.e. the higher the monthly rental price, the more responses there were for those with an Arabic name (0.262 ^{**4}), a higher value than among those with a Catalan/ Spanish name (0.176 ^{**5}).

4. P < 0.01.

5. P < 0.01.

The non-linear regression model presented below incorporates the available variables that can explain applicant responses. We will look at the value of the estimate for each parameter. The most significant parameter is being part of a couple with Catalan/ Spanish names (0.523), followed by a couple with Arabic names (0.339). In this model, it can be seen that the fact that the woman is the applicant for the property affects the response, but less strongly than the ethnic origin. Therefore, ethnic discrimination would outweigh the gender discrimination that benefits the female applicant. There are three parameters that explain the model with a negative sign: the districts according to disposable household income, whether a flat has a terrace and whether it has a lift. This model shows a scenario in which the following hypothesis may be put forward: in the case of the most desirable properties, both in terms of location and because they have a terrace or lift and can therefore be rented more quickly, real estate agents make less effort to respond to applications.

If the advertisement publication dates on real estate portals were a reliable source of information, it is very likely that in this explanatory model the parameter "time in days of publication" would have been significant for this hypothesis: the longer a flat has been on the market for, the greater the chance of response across all applications, but especially to applications from couples with Arabic names. It may be that in the face of difficulty in renting a property, discrimination would diminish and the need to secure a tenant for that property would prevail over the profile of the applicant. However, this indicator is manipulated on a daily basis on real estate portals, and advertisements that have been on the portal for months are published as recent additions; for this reason, this factor could not be included in the explanatory model.

4. Conclusions

A field experiment was carried out based on access to rental housing in Barcelona. The experiment aimed to log differences in actions taken by estate agents with regard to response/non-response to applications; and in the case of the existence of a response, in the content, taking into account whether or not it included an invitation to view.

Existence of discrimination on grounds of origin: access to the rental market is restricted for couples with an Arabic name

Differential treatment of applications was detected, both in the number of responses, and in the content of those responses in terms of the opportunity to view the property. There was a response difference of 18.8% excluding applicants with an Arabic name, a slightly higher difference in the case where the applicant was a man with an Arabic name (19.2%).

In rental units, this implies that, for every ten applications sent, a couple with an Arabic name would get two fewer responses than the local couple. In terms of viewings carried out, the differences would be aligned both in terms of gender-differentiated treatment and in terms of ethnic origin. However, discrimination persists. The couple with Arabic names were able to access 7.6% fewer viewings than the couple with Catalan/ Spanish names.

The correlation of responses between couples by ethnic origin is high, and this indicates that in principle there would be no discrimination along ethnic lines in the rental housing market expressed in differentiated markets. It is rather that in the case of couples with Arabic names access to the market is restricted, as shown by the fact that they received fewer responses to the same adverts.

The ethnic origin of the applicant has more explanatory weight in the response rate than gender.

The female response rate (57.2%) is significantly higher than the male response rate (37.2%), regardless of ethnic origin. However, when Arabic names were introduced, the discrimination rates by gender when compared with the Catalan/ Spanish equivalent were virtually the same, for both males (19.2%) and females (18.4%), with a difference of 0.8 percentage points.

The non-linear regression model including the variables that are significant in explaining the response to the applications reveals that the most relevant parameter is being part of an local couple (0.523) rather than being a woman (0.303). Therefore, ethnic discrimination would outweigh the gender discrimination that benefits the female applicant.

Greater discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin in the most affordable rental price brackets

People with names of Arabic origin would have access to fewer and more expensive flats. The differences in the average rental prices for the couple with Catalan/ Spanish names and the couple with Arabic names were 108.30 euros per month and 272 euros per month, if we compare the averages of the responses to only one of the two profiles. The properties applied for with rents below 1,100 euros show a higher discrimination rate than is the case for the average property. These properties are the most sought-after properties in the city when the characteristics of the property and the price are taken into consideration.

The correlation between the volume of responses according to the prices of the properties is positive; that is, there is a link between the highest monthly rental price and the response to the population with names of Arabic origin (0.262 **) with a higher value than in the population with Catalan/ Spanish names (0.176 **).

Other considerations related to the limitations of the study and challenges posed by the results obtained

The study refers only to the initial phase of the rental process, to the request for information; therefore, the results presented as opportunities or restrictions in terms of access for a certain population profile are explanatory only in the period of initial contact. According to the social entities consulted, the barriers in terms of access to housing for the racialized population persists throughout the entire search process, which leads us to believe that if the experiment had continued up to the signing of the contract, the differentiated treatment would in all probability be even greater.

In the course of the experiment we did not identify any explicitly discriminatory advertisements referring to the exclusion of certain sections of the population on racial grounds, as was previously the case. Thus, we can see a tendency to leave open and overt discrimination behind, being replaced with a more subtle form of discrimination, one that operates in the shadows, that restricts access to housing for certain minorities using methods that make it even more difficult to detect the discrimination suffered. By way of example, among the advertisements tested, there was evidence of the existence of differential rental conditions depending on applicant profile, but the profiles to which they refer are not specified on the websites.

The study did not investigate the causes of the discrimination detected, nor did it allow for an analysis of where the discrimination might stem from: the property owners themselves, or the estate agents? Regardless of the answer to this question - which is certainly an important one - the discrimination we have detected indicates that this differential treatment, of at least 18.8%, is possible because certain real estate agents accept and carry out discriminatory practices that have direct consequences leading to unequal access to the right to housing.

This issue generates the need to initiate a work process that is shared between local government and the property marketing companies in the city, with the aim of eradicating the phenomenon of discrimination in access to housing, and which could be oriented towards the creation of spaces for shared reflection and training processes for estate agents. At the same time, it is essential to continue developing programmes and services that are effective in the fight against the racial stereotyping and prejudice that is still present in society today.

Some studies (McLaren, 2003; Schneider, 2008) provide evidence based on the fact that increasing interaction between people of different nationalities, cultures or religions is a valuable

tool to mitigate discourses that legitimise certain forms of racism and the practices that perpetuate them.

Bibliography

ANDERSSON, L.; JAKOBSSON, N.; KOTSADAM, A. "A field Experiment of Discrimination in the Norwegian Housing Market: Gender, Class and Ethnicity". *Land Economics*, vol. 88 (2), (2012), p. 233-240.

AHMED, A. M.; HAMMARTSTEDT, M. "Discrimination in the rental Housing market: A field experiment on the Internet". *Journal of Urban Economics*, vol. 64 (2), (2008), p. 362-372.

AYRES, I.; SIEGELMAN, P. "Race and Gender Discrimination in Bargaining for a New Car". *American Economic Review*, vol. 85 (3), (1995), p. 304-321.

BENGTSSON, R.; IVERMAN, R.; HINNERICH, B. T. "Gender and ethnical discrimination in the rental housing market of Stockholm: a field experiment". *Applied Economics Letters*, vol. 19 (1), (2012), p. 1-5.

BOSCH, M.; CARNERO, M. A.; FARRÉ, L. "Information and Discrimination in the Rental Housing Market: Evidence from a Field Experiment", *Regional Science and Urban Economics*, vol. 40, (2010), p. 11-19.

CHAMBERS, D. N. "The racial housing price differential and racially transitional neighborhoods". *Journal of Urban Economics*, vol. 32, (1992), p. 214-232.

FARLEY, R. "Residential Segregation in Urbanized Areas of the United States in 1970: An Analysis of Social Class and Race Differences". *Demography*, vol. 14 (4), (1977), p.497-518.

INSTITUT D'ESTUDIS REGIONALS I METROPOLITANS DE BARCELONA (IERMB). *Enquesta de Relacions Veïnals i Convivència (ECAMB), 2020. Primers resultats*. Bellaterra: IERMB, 2021. https://iermb.uab.cat/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECAMB-2020_Primeres-dades-AMB.pdf.

MCLAREN, L. M. "Anti-immigrant prejudice in Europe: Contact, threat perception, and preferences for the exclusion of migrants". *Social Forces*, vol. 81 (3), (2003), p. 909-936.

PAGER, D.; SHEPHERD, H. "The Sociology of Discrimination: Racial Discrimination in Employment, Housing, Credit, and Consumer Markets". *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 34 (1), (2008), p. 181-209.

RIDLEY, S.; BAYTON, J. A.; OUTTZ, J. H. *Taxi Service in the District of Columbia: Is It Influenced by Patrons' Race and Destination?* Washington, DC, Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights under the Law, 1989.

SCHNEIDER, S. L. "Anti-immigrant attitudes in Europe: Outgroup size and perceived ethnic threat". *European Sociological Review*, vol. 24 (1), (2008), p. 53-67.

SCHULMAN, K. A.; BERLIN, J. A.; HARLESS, W.; KERNER, J. F.; SISTRUNK, S.; GERSH, B. J.; DUBÉ, R.; TALEGHANI, C. K.; BURKE, J. E.; WILLIAMS, S.; EISENBERG, J. M.; ESCARCE, J. J. "The effect of race and sex on physicians' recommendations for cardiac catheterization". *The New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 340 (8), (1999), p. 618-626.

TURNER, M. A.; SKIDMORE, F. (eds). *Mortgage Lending Discrimination: A Review of Existing Evidence*, Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.

WACHTER, S.; MEGBOLUGBE, I. "Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Homeownership". *Housing Policy Debate*, vol. 3, (1992), p. 333-370.

WISSOKER, D.; ZIMMERMAN, W.; GALSTER, G. *Testing for Discrimination in Home Insurance*. Washington D. C.: Urban Institute Press, 1998.

YINGER J. *Closed Doors, Opportunities Lost: The Continuing Costs of Housing Discrimination*. New York: Russell Sage Found, 1995.