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Housing Bias Seen as Persistent

By [MARCELLE S. FISCHLER](#)

IN a new report seeking to measure housing discrimination on [Long Island](#), an advocacy group that has been instrumental in easing the way for minorities to report instances of bias finds scant progress on the issue since its last in-depth look four years ago.

Its dismal findings back then helped the Syosset-based group, Erase Racism, spur changes at the county level, so that by 2007 residents could take their bias complaints directly to the Nassau or Suffolk County Human Rights Commissions, rather than have to scale the state or federal bureaucracy.



Phil Marino for The New York Times

“REPORT CARD” V. Elaine Gross, left, the head of Erase Racism, with Rosemarie Walker, a colleague, called bias “a stain on our region.”

Two fair-housing laws that went into effect at the same time gave these human rights commissions powers of enforcement. For instance, in Nassau, the new laws impose fines of up to \$50,000 on real estate agents, mortgage companies or management companies if the commission finds they have discriminated against prospective home buyers or renters on the basis of race, religion, sex, sexual orientation or disability.

Yet Erase Racism’s “Racial Equity Report Card,” taking the temperature two years later, indicates that the new accessibility and prosecution powers of the rights panels have done little to change perceptions that Long Island deserves its census ranking as the third most racially segregated suburban region in the country. (The first two are the suburbs of Newark and Cleveland.)

The report is based on a study that Erase Racism commissioned from the [State University of New York at Stony Brook](#), which rated the experiences and perceptions of 256 African-Americans and 238 Latinos, finding that 40 percent of the former and 21 percent of the latter said they had experienced housing discrimination by real estate agents, white landlords or homeowners.

The total number responding to the survey was 813, according to its administrator, Leonie Huddy, director of Stony Brook’s Center for Survey Research. It functions mainly as a perceptual barometer, since the researchers did not provide their respondents with a time frame — asking them, for instance, “whether you or a member of your immediate family ever missed out on housing in Long Island because a real estate agent would not show, sell or rent you a home in a good area that you could afford.”

Yet Ms. Huddy saw value in the attitudes revealed by the results — among them that 53 percent of whites, 84 percent blacks and 73 percent of Latinos believed it somewhat or very likely that real estate agents practiced housing discrimination.

And real estate professionals like Gail Bishop, an associate broker with Prudential Douglas Elliman in East Islip, corroborate such perceptions. Ms. Bishop, who serves on equal opportunity and cultural sensitivity committees for the Long Island Board of Realtors and the [New York State](#) Association of Realtors, said that fair-housing laws were part of continuing education requirements for agents, but acknowledged that neighborhoods are segregated.

She said: “Part of it is a choice that people make for a comfort level. The makeup of a neighborhood appeals to people.” She added that Latinos, for instance, “want to live in a Latino community.”

A participant in the survey, Theodore Williams, said that when he and his wife, Kippy, came from [Brooklyn](#) to Long Island to shop for a home in 1996, real estate agents “took advantage” and initially steered the couple toward “the slums of Long Island,” a “very dilapidated area” of Roosevelt.

“It was a real ghetto,” Mr. Williams said. “I was looking for a mixed area.”

Instead, they bought a \$155,000 four-bedroom two-bath colonial in Freeport, which the agent assured them was “good for new homeowners.” Their block had “a couple of white families.”

During the entire course of the house hunt, Mr. Williams recalled, “we never went to Baldwin, we never went to Merrick, we never went to Bellmore, where there is more of a mix.”

V. Elaine Gross, the president of Erase Racism, described housing discrimination as an Island-wide concern, saying that in 2000 to 2007, 47 communities in Nassau and 49 in Suffolk had reported at least one fair-housing complaint. Calling the data in her group’s report conservative, she said, “this is really a stain on our region.” She added, “We are selling ourselves short by making it hard for the people who do live here and not making it welcoming for the people who might want to live here.”

But officials at both counties’ human rights commissions rebutted her assertions.

Martha Krisel, Nassau’s chief deputy attorney, said that its rights panel had fielded complaints and done “a ton of outreach,” but that many grievances are “not really discrimination.”

Even when a case has merit, she said, “historically people don’t go forward with them the way people with employment discrimination complaints do.”

She cited a complaint from a woman trying to sublet a co-op who was convinced the board was “dragging their heels because the tenant was Iranian.” When the tenant found another place to live, Ms. Krisel said, the woman dropped the complaint, so as not to “rock the boat.”

Since the law took effect, two cases have been referred to an administrative law judge, said Daniel Russell, acting executive director of Nassau's rights commission. Seven cases are being actively pursued.

"There are some against Realtors; there are some against homeowners for refusing to sell or lease to a certain race." Mr. Russell said.

Similarly, Paulette Bartunek, executive director of Suffolk's rights panel, said calls were "usually landlord-tenant issues unrelated to discrimination."

Of two housing discrimination cases in Suffolk last year, Ms. Bartunek said, a disability complaint was "mediated right away" and a sexual orientation case is headed to court. Ms. Bartunek described the county as ready to act, and said there was a plan to put ads on the sides of buses, "letting people know there is a fair housing law."

According to the Erase Racism report, the Island's history of government-sanctioned housing segregation and steering gained force after World War II. When [Federal Housing Administration](#) loans were used to create Levittown, the first suburb for returning veterans, deed restrictions limited the 17,400 houses to non-Latino white families.

These days Levittown is 94.1 percent non-Latino white and 0.5 percent African-American, the report said; much of the Island is as segregated, and "in many places home ownership for blacks and Latinos is still not an option."