PRE-ANALYSIS PLAN

**Field Experiment on Housing Discrimination: Landlord Response to Inquiries**

Olgahan Çat[1], Danny Cowser[2]

# 1 Introduction

This study investigates housing discrimination through a field experiment that tests how landlords respond to rental inquiries varying by the applicant's perceived racial or ethnic identity and the reasons stated for potential rejection. Unlike traditional survey-based research, which often relies on self-reported attitudes or hypothetical scenarios, this approach captures actual behavioral responses in a real-world housing market context. Specifically, we send emails, SMS messages, and other forms of communication to landlords who are actively advertising rental properties. By observing landlords' actual responses, including whether they reply, how quickly they do so, and the helpfulness or tone of their messages, we gain a more accurate and nuanced understanding of discrimination as it operates in practice. This project is conducted in close collaboration with Casa Marianella, a community organization that provides shelter and support services to refugees. Casa Marianella has connected us with refugees currently living in their care, and we submit rental inquiries on their behalf. This partnership allows us to design inquiries that authentically represent the experiences and identities of vulnerable populations seeking housing. Through this collaboration, we not only aim to document patterns of discrimination but also to inform interventions that can improve housing access for refugees and other marginalized groups.

# 2 Hypotheses and Theoretical Motivation

Housing discrimination often reveals itself through landlords' differential responsiveness to rental inquiries. While overt discrimination based on race or ethnicity is illegal, landlords may nonetheless respond less frequently or less helpfully to applicants signaling minority status, often masking bias with subtle cues. Gender and third-party endorsements also shape landlord behavior in meaningful ways.

---
[1]Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Brown University
[2]Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Government, the University of Texas at Austin

**H1:** *Landlords will respond less frequently, with shorter and less helpful replies, to inquiries from applicants signaling minority racial or ethnic identities compared to those signaling White identities.*

This hypothesis reflects extensive evidence that racial and ethnic discrimination persists in housing markets, reducing access to timely and useful information for minority applicants.

**H2:** *Inquiries signaling female applicants will receive more frequent, longer, and more helpful responses compared to those signaling male applicants.*

Gender bias in housing markets often favors women, who may be perceived as lower-risk tenants, resulting in differential treatment by landlords.

**H3:** *Inquiries endorsed by a trusted NGO, such as Casa Marianella, will elicit more frequent, faster, and higher-quality responses than those without such endorsements.*

Endorsements signal tenant reliability and reduce landlord uncertainty, potentially mitigating discrimination and improving responsiveness.

Across these hypotheses, we assess multiple dimensions of landlord behavior: whether landlords reply at all, the length of their replies, and the helpfulness or informativeness of their responses. This multi-faceted approach captures how discrimination operates not only through outright refusal but also through subtle variations in communication quality.

## 3 Design and Data Collection

We randomly assign rental inquiries to landlords advertising units in the Austin metropolitan area. With the help of our undergraduate research assistant team, we compile housing listings daily from multiple online sources such as Facebook Marketplace, Apartment.com, Zillow, and Craigslist to capture a wide range of available units. Working closely with Casa Marianella, which connected us with refugees currently living there, we submit rental applications on their behalf. We have carefully prepared inquiry message templates that are comparable across treatment conditions but differ enough to avoid raising suspicion from landlords. This ensures that the experiment maintains realism while systematically varying the applicant's perceived racial or ethnic identity and stated

reasons for potential rejection. With all materials and logistics in place, we are now actively in the data collection phase for pretesting, sending inquiries and recording landlord responses to measure the likelihood, speed, and quality of replies. The messages vary systematically by:

- Applicant's perceived identity including nation/race/ethnicity, gender (signaled via names, language cues, or cultural references) and age,

- Whether the applicant is endorsed by the NGO

Data collected includes:

- Whether the landlord/agent responds,

- Time elapsed until the first response,

- Coding of response helpfulness and tone by trained coders,

- Follow-up interactions if any.

Sample size targets at least 1,200 landlords, powered to detect differences in response rates and timing.

## 4  Outcome Measures and Analysis

Primary outcomes:

- **Response rate**: binary indicator if landlord replies,

- **Response time**: elapsed time (hours/days) until first reply,

- **Response quality**: coded on a standardized scale of helpfulness,

Secondary outcomes include length of response and whether a follow-up was offered.

We will estimate treatment effects using logistic regression for binary outcomes and linear or survival models for timing and quality outcomes. Models will include controls for neighborhood, landlord characteristics, and communication mode.

# 5    Ethical Considerations

We have obtained IRB approval with protocols to minimize harm to refugees, avoid burdening landlords, and ensure data confidentiality.