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## Study Shows the Benefits of Affordable Housing: Guest Opinion

By Howard Gillette Jr.

Affordable housing, and particularly the Mount Laurel doctrine that mandates that every municipality in New Jersey has an obligation to provide its "fair share" of affordable housing, is under attack.

While Gov. Chris Christie has been rebuffed by the courts in his effort to eliminate by executive order the Council on Affordable Housing established by the Legislature to implement the Mount Laurel decisions, he has often stated his intent to change the makeup of the high court in order to get his way.

As the issue of affordable housing has become increasingly contentious, Princeton University has published an especially timely book refuting the widespread belief that the expansion of affordable housing adversely affects communities where it happens, by increasing crime and other social costs while dragging down nearby property rates.



A young resident plays at Ethel R. Lawrence Homes, an affordable housing complex in Mount Laurel that has been praised as "a model for promoting greater integration and a pathway out of poverty for disadvantaged minority families throughout the United States." (2012)

Authored by the distinguished Princeton University sociologist Douglas Massey and a team of associates, [Climbing Mount Laurel](#) lays to rest the myths that the governor has built upon to stir support for his effort to roll back the affordable housing mandate from the courts.

The case study is the Ethel R. Lawrence Homes, named for the original lead plaintiff in the Mount Laurel decisions. The community is located, after years of obstruction, at the heart of Mount Laurel itself. As a Fair Share Housing Development, the nonprofit sponsor-developer sought the necessary permits to build what eventually became 140 units for people with incomes ranging from 10 to 60 percent of the state median. Opponents raised every possible ill effect that could follow from that investment. As [Climbing Mount Laurel](#) documents, in stunning detail, none of those fears materialized.

Using sophisticated statistical analysis, as well as in-depth interviews with successful and unsuccessful applicants to occupy the new units, Massey and his colleagues demonstrate that Mount Laurel taxes subsequently showed no significant deviation from trends in other nearby communities. Not only did crime continue to fall in Mount Laurel, most area residents were not even aware

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[www.fairsharedevelopment.org](http://www.fairsharedevelopment.org)

that the Lawrence Homes existed.

As part of the ongoing academic discussion about whether poor people benefit from being relocated from centers of urban poverty to opportunity-rich suburbs, Climbing Mount Laurel is equally confident of its findings. Lawrence Homes' residents reported a significant drop in traumatic experiences in their lives, and their physical and mental health improved significantly in the new environment.

While it might be expected that the move from troubled to superior schools might have cost students in the form of lower grades, the Princeton researchers did not find that to be the case. Whatever academic challenges students faced in transition, they report, were offset by the new home and school environments.

While some residents bridled at the level of staff intrusion in their lives, generally they acknowledged the importance of allied services that came with their new location. Any complaints they expressed paled compared with those associated with the places they left, most notably Camden, where crime, pollution and failing schools remain terrible constraints on even the most ambitious of families.

The residents at the Lawrence Homes are not the typical poor, having been culled from a large pool of applicants. They receive social services, including after-school assistance for their children, that are not readily available elsewhere. And the housing not only looks like other developments in the area, thus removing any immediate association that this is low-income housing; it also has been sited to facilitate community, through the provision of play space for children and other group amenities.

That being said, Massey and his colleagues conclude that the positive effects of moving from poverty to sites of greater opportunity make the Ethel R. Lawrence Homes "a model for promoting greater integration and a pathway out of poverty for disadvantaged minority families throughout the United States." That's an endorsement that should appeal to everyone, regardless of politics or party.

*Howard Gillette Jr. is a professor emeritus of history at Rutgers University-Camden and author of "Camden After the Fall: Decline and Renewal in a Post-Industrial City" (2005).*