

Ending the Cycle of Racial Isolation

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD

OCT. 17, 2015

Racial discrimination in housing remains pervasive and well entrenched, and governments at all levels bear a heavy share of the blame. Despite paying lip service to the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which required states and localities that receive federal money to try to overcome historical patterns of racial isolation, elected officials have often reinforced segregation through a range of policies. Among the most pernicious of these is the practice of building [subsidized housing](#) mainly in existing ghettos instead of in areas that offer low- and moderate-income families access to safe neighborhoods, good jobs and schools that allow their children to thrive.

Good things can happen when the cycle of racial isolation is broken. An encouraging example can be found in the southern New Jersey suburb of [Mount Laurel](#), where zoning policies that once excluded black and lower-income families were the target of a major lawsuit nearly a half century ago. In rulings handed down in 1975 and 1983, the New Jersey Supreme Court told Mount Laurel and other suburbs that they could no longer exclude affordable housing and were required to rewrite zoning laws to make such housing possible.

The Mount Laurel remedy had a difficult birth and still draws fire today. Some local officials are working diligently to turn back the clock to a time when poor and minority citizens had no choice but to live walled off in ghettos that stunted their lives and the lives of their children. Gov. Chris Christie and his allies in some of the state's wealthy towns would like nothing more than to kill this remedy.

But much good has flowed from the court's decisions. Once-segregated areas are now more diverse. And more than 60,000 homes have been built for low- and moderate-income families in the New Jersey suburbs, giving such families access to solid jobs and starter homes.

Critics would do well to study Mount Laurel itself, where an affordable housing development that opened in 2000 has yielded benefits that have been chronicled in a study led by the Princeton sociologist Douglas Massey. The study, recounted in the book "Climbing Mount Laurel," shows that an attractive, well-maintained affordable housing development in an affluent neighborhood can improve the lives of struggling families without jeopardizing local property values, precipitating more crime or becoming an economic burden on the community.

Mount Laurel's history is instructive. In the mid-20th century, African-Americans were hemmed in by pervasive bias and federally sponsored mortgage discrimination that kept them from

buying homes and amassing personal wealth. In Mount Laurel, black families who had lived in the area for generations found themselves priced out as the township moved from a sleepy farmland community to a desirable suburb of nearby Philadelphia. With few housing options — and wanting to avoid the ghettos of Camden or Philadelphia — they moved to dilapidated farmhouses, summer cottages or converted chicken coops. As the area went even more upscale, officials began to condemn and raze these structures.

In 1968, a newly formed community group optioned a plot of land and began laying plans to build 36 two- and three-bedroom apartments that would be affordable to low-income renters. The township's mayor subsequently told black residents: "If you people can't afford to live in our town, then you'll just have to leave." The black residents filed suit, alleging that Mount Laurel Township had used exclusionary zoning to systematically shut people out on the basis of race and class. It further asserted that the township had an affirmative responsibility to allow for housing for people of all races and incomes.

The black plaintiffs were not alone. Real estate developers and the United Auto Workers union also brought suit against suburbs that excluded lower-income people through zoning laws while opening their arms to manufacturers and building housing for a growing middle-class.

The court sought to put an end to all this in the Mount Laurel case. It ruled that the township was practicing an illegal form of discrimination that violated the State Constitution, and ordered municipalities throughout the state to end exclusionary zoning and create land-use policies that made a range of housing choices "realistically" possible.

Many Mount Laurel residents who had violently opposed "affordable housing" equated it with the crime-infested, public housing ghettos common in urban centers all over the country. The Mount Laurel development is anything but. Beautifully landscaped, the subdivision — known as the Ethel Lawrence Homes — is in some ways more attractive than nearby developments for middle- and upper-income families. Its management has rigorously screened applicants and has tried to ensure an income mix by setting broader income guidelines. The subdivision managers have also focused on helping children who live in the development.

Meanwhile, according to "Climbing Mount Laurel," crime did not rise, nearby property values did not drop and taxes did not go up. The development has blended in so smoothly and quietly that a decade after it opened, three-quarters of the people in nearby subdivisions could not name it, and nearly one-third were unaware that such a subdivision even existed in the area.

The families that came to Mount Laurel from poorer places clearly benefited. Compared with families who applied for housing at the development but ended up elsewhere, the Ethel Lawrence families have shown higher rates of employment and family income, and lower rates of welfare dependency. The parents are more closely engaged in the school lives of their children, who did well academically even though they found themselves in more challenging schools.

Whatever the precise reason for its success, the authors say, the Ethel Lawrence Homes subdivision validates the idea of developing affordable housing, "both as a social policy for

promoting racial and class integration in metropolitan America” and as a practical strategy for alleviating poverty and achieving economic mobility.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), and sign up for the [Opinion Today newsletter](#).

A version of this editorial appears in print on October 18, 2015, on page SR10 of the New York edition with the headline: Ending the Cycle of Racial Isolation.