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LEARNING FROM MOUNT LAUREL

In the suburb whose exclusive zoning led to New Jersey's fair share affordable housing law, new research explores what the affordable housing finally built there has meant to the town—and to the people who have gotten to move there.

By [Douglas S. Massey](#)



Young residents of Ethel Lawrence Homes

When they first heard about the proposed Ethel Lawrence Homes affordable housing development in Mt. Laurel, N.J., most neighbors were none too enthusiastic. In a series of rancorous public planning board hearings, community members predicted an exodus from the town, deteriorating property values, rising taxes, and a possible increase in crime. Some labeled the development a “ghetto in the field,” and twice vandals destroyed signs indicating the site of the proposed project.

The Long Road to Ethel Lawrence

Mt. Laurel is not just any suburb struggling with these sorts of attitudes. It gives its name to two famous court cases that formed the basis for a statewide “fair share” affordable housing law. In

the second case, commonly known as Mt. Laurel II, the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that all municipalities in New Jersey had an “affirmative obligation” under the state constitution to permit the construction of their “fair share” of housing affordable to low- and moderate-income people living in the region. ([See page 31 for more detail.](#))

In late 2000, 15 years after Mt. Laurel officials and litigants entered into a consent decree, Ethel Lawrence Homes (ELH)—the landmark affordable development resulting from that decree—opened with 100 units. Development and managed by [Fair Share Housing Development, Inc.](#) (FSHD), ELH is open to low- and moderate-income families (10 to 80 percent area median income) on a first-come, first-serve basis. Another 40 units were completed in 2004.

In 2009, I joined with a team of colleagues to undertake a systematic evaluation of the effect that ELH had on the township and surrounding neighborhoods, as well as on the lives of the people who moved in. From public sources we compiled basic statistics on social and economic conditions in Mt. Laurel and similar nearby municipalities before and after the opening of the development. We also surveyed ELH residents, a comparable sample of non-residents from the waiting list of people who had applied for entry but had not yet been admitted, and neighbors living in areas immediately adjacent to the housing development to learn about their perceptions and experiences in the wake of the project’s opening.

Effect on the Town

We compared trends in home values, crime rates, and tax assessments in Mount Laurel before and after 2001 with a matched set of nearby townships and found no statistical differences. Even neighborhoods immediately adjacent to the development experienced no apparent effects on property values.

In the end, the project opened not with a bang but a whimper, largely because FSHD chose architectural styles and landscaping practices that were compatible with those prevailing in surrounding subdivisions. A third of nearby residents did not even know that an affordable housing development existed in the immediate area. As one person told us, “I know that it’s Ethel Lawrence only because I lived here when there was the fight over it. If I wasn’t here then, I’d have no clue.”

Effect on the Residents

The effect on ELH residents was a different story. Compared to conditions in neighborhoods that they inhabited before moving in, residents reported an 80 percent reduction in their exposure to crime and social disorder. They describe life in development as “quiet and peaceful,” “like a dream,” and “less stressed.”

ELH residents reported significantly lower levels of injury, illness, robbery, burglary, and other maladies than the comparison group. On an index of exposure to negative life events, ELH residents averaged 23 percent lower than members of the control group, while their reported frequency of mental distress symptoms was 25 percent lower.

Fortunately, this improvement in personal well-being did not come at the cost of social support. Some opponents of the development had argued that because of the lack of public transportation near the site, the residents would be “all dressed up with no place to go.”

At the time of our survey, however, 87 percent of ELH residents reported access to a car and no greater difficulty accessing goods, services, or work sites than members of the comparison group. ELH residents also reported the same frequency of interaction with friends and family members after the move as before, and slightly higher levels of interaction with neighbors.

On the other hand, ELH residents experienced much improved economic prospects compared to control subjects. According to our data, welfare use was reduced by 67 percent, employment rose by 22 percent, and income increased by 25 percent. An index of economic independence that we constructed was about 2.5 times greater for residents than the control group. One resident reported: “I moved here and in one week I found two jobs.”

Compared to children in the comparison group, children of ELH residents were 33 percent more likely to report having a quiet place to study and they spent twice as many hours studying or doing homework. Parents said the relative tranquility of their surroundings allowed them to devote time to the supervision and education of their children. ELH parents were 40 percent more likely to report checking their children’s homework and eight times more likely to take their child to a library.

When we constructed an index of school quality from published statistics on SAT scores, attendance rates, dropout rates, graduation rates, and advanced placement scores, we found that school quality was 2.3 times greater for ELH children than those in the comparison group. Exposure to disorder and violence within schools was 23 percent lower. One mother praised school personnel, saying they were “just hands on with the kids. Any little thing they had a discrepancy with, a problem with as far as reading, math, academics, they were right there.” Most ELH parents agreed with the mother who told us that “moving here was an awesome blessing for my kids because they got the right education.”

Despite the fact that they were attending much more competitive, and thus more difficult schools, the grades of ELH students were no lower than those reported by children in the comparison group; adjusted for school quality and other characteristics their grades were slightly higher. Speaking of her children, one mother proudly proclaimed, “They’re straight A and B students. They love to read, and [when] I compare them with my family members who still are in Camden, there’s no comparison.”

Implications

These findings indicate that the Mt. Laurel Doctrine is an unequivocal success and that the construction of homes affordable to low- and moderate-income families in affluent areas offers an attractive, cost-effective way of combating class and racial segregation, while promoting socioeconomic mobility among the poor.

Our findings resoundingly underscore the importance of neighborhoods in determining individual and family outcomes. This is in contrast to results from the Moving to Opportunity experiment, in which researchers found no significant effects on economic or educational outcomes, causing some observers to conclude that “MTO showed that neighborhoods don’t matter.”

Certain features of MTO’s design and implementation mitigated against finding strong effects, however, and our use of a different—and we feel better—research design affirms that neighborhoods do, in fact, matter. The contrast in neighborhood socioeconomic circumstances was much greater in the ELH analysis than in the MTO study, and more effectively insulated subjects from violent, high-poverty neighborhoods, while offering their children access to much higher quality schools. ELH residents also enjoyed longer exposure to improved neighborhood conditions than MTO participants, and the design was not affected by selective acceptance of random assignments or selective mobility back into segregated, high-poverty areas.

Our research suggests strongly that neighborhood circumstances are a critical determinant of well-being in post-industrial America and programs that promote access for poor families to advantaged residential environments constitute a tractable and cost-effective way of reducing poverty and enhancing socioeconomic mobility.

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