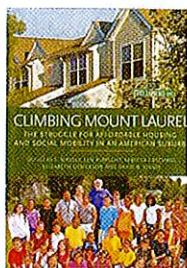


# PLANNING

## Just the facts

In *Climbing Mount Laurel*, Princeton University sociologist Douglas Massey and colleagues Len Albright, Rebecca Casciano, Elizabeth Derickson, and David N. Kinsey, FAICP, document the effects of adding a low-income housing development to a suburban New Jersey township. But despite the book's subtitle, *The Struggle for Affordable Housing and Social Mobility in an American Suburb*, history takes up only a small portion.

As Mount Laurel changed from a rural community to a Philadelphia suburb in the 1960s, African American residents of long standing were being gentrified out. In 1966 they organized to build a small enclave of respectable but affordable housing.



*Climbing Mount Laurel*  
2013; Princeton University Press; 269 pp.; \$35.

documented sociological study of the effects of adding a 140-apartment, subsidized-housing complex to a suburban township of about 45,000 people. The authors are sociologists, not advocates, and they begin by recognizing that, although

Township authorities fought them in court and lost in a landmark 1975 decision that mandated every New Jersey jurisdiction to face up to its responsibility to help (a decision still being fiercely fought by local politicians).

Mainly this book is a scrupulously

racism and class prejudice are involved, "suburbanites have legitimate practical reasons to be skeptical about the influence of 'public housing' on their communities, given the lamentable record of the projects built throughout the country during the 1950s and 1960s."

By matching Mount Laurel to comparable townships and the residents of the Ethel Lawrence Homes to comparable nonresidents, they systematically evaluate these reasons. It should be noted that these homes were designed and built in a similar style to existing township residences, that they are proactively managed, that they provide various levels of subsidy (not concentrating the neediest in one spot), and that the residents are not randomly assigned; they went through the time and effort to land a place there.

Given these nontrivial preconditions, the authors found no negative effects on the township and many positive effects on the residents. Most neighbors do not know of the development's existence. Property values, crime rates, and tax burdens in the surrounding community have not been affected. The adult residents of Ethel Lawrence Homes overall have had better economic outcomes, and their children better educational outcomes.

The authors specify the need for such projects to be done right and emphasize that they are not an all-purpose solution. But they leave no doubt that "affordable housing for low- and moderate-income minority families can be built within an affluent white suburban environment without imposing significant costs on the host community or its residents."