



Affordable Housing in New Jersey: A Q&A

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By **Star-Ledger Staff**

Douglas Massey of Princeton University spent more than a year studying the effects of the Ethel Lawrence Homes on the fearful community that fought it, and on the hopeful people — many from Camden — who ultimately moved in.

Massey will present his findings Thursday in a campus forum, "Forty Years after Mount Laurel; New Findings About the Effects of Affordable Housing."

Massey gave Star-Ledger editorial writer Linda Ocasio a preview of his findings.

Q. What did your study reveal?

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A. When we looked at property taxes, crime and home values, the trends were no different between Mount Laurel and similar townships nearby. And as a result of moving into Ethel Lawrence, residents experienced much better neighborhoods, lower rates of violence and social disorder, better mental health, fewer negative life events, higher rates of employment and higher wages.

Their children experienced much better schools and improved educational outcomes. The move advanced their lives economically. There was a significant drop in welfare usage. It was a win-win for everyone.

Nothing happened to the neighborhood and taxpayers don't have a burden. The project pays for itself. We've basically confirmed the wisdom of the Mount Laurel decision, demonstrating convincing benefits to residents and that fears were misplaced about the possible harm to the community.

Q. What is it about placing affordable housing in a middle-class enclave that improves outcomes for low-income residents?

A. Everybody knows opportunities and resources vary geographically. Some neighborhoods are more advantaged than others. Allowing low-income families to benefit from those advantages — access to jobs, better schools, less exposure to crime and violence — rids them of stress.

As a result, people were able to improve their lives. They became much more employable and better employees. They were able to work themselves out of poverty.

Q. Were there any surprises, data you hadn't expected?

A. A large number of people living in surrounding neighborhoods didn't even know there was a housing project nearby. Ethel Lawrence is explicitly designed to blend into the suburban environment, so as not to stigmatize residents or the neighborhood. Its town houses were developed and designed to match other developments in the area.

That's an important element in planning these things — building them so they don't become stigmatizing. The project managers even have a landscaping budget, to match surrounding suburban areas. That's a very important consideration.

Q. How do you hope the study will be used?

A. I hope it will prevent opposition to affordable housing projects around the nation and in New Jersey by showing residents they have nothing to fear.

I hope it gives Gov. (Chris) Christie pause about the line his administration has been taking and, instead of fighting Mount Laurel, embracing it as a blueprint and model to build affordable housing developments that benefit everyone. You've got a population at Ethel Lawrence that now earns higher incomes and pays more taxes. I don't see what the downside is.

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