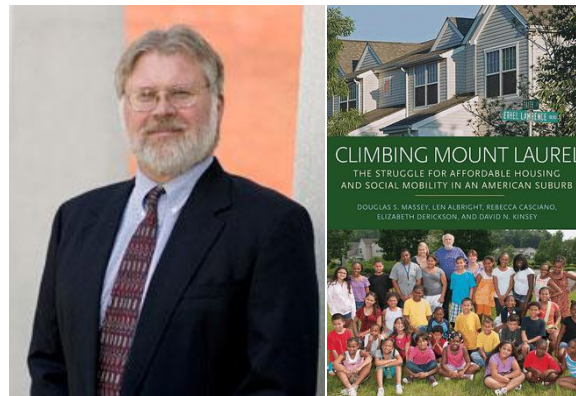


Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs
Princeton University

Climbing Mount Laurel

October 31, 2013
By B. Rose Huber

["Climbing Mount Laurel: The Struggle for Affordable Housing and Social Mobility in an American Suburb"](#) by Douglas Massey (*Princeton University Press, July 2013*)



What happens when you provide affordable housing in safer areas to struggling Americans in disadvantaged neighborhoods? Lives are shaped for the better, according to "Climbing Mount Laurel: The Struggle for Affordable Housing and Social Mobility in an American Suburb."

Written by Woodrow Wilson School Professor Douglas Massey and a team of colleagues, "Climbing Mount Laurel" explores life in the Ethel Lawrence Homes, a fair housing development that opened in 2001 in Mount Laurel, New Jersey, an affluent suburb nestled 30 minutes outside of Philadelphia. The project stemmed from the New Jersey State Constitution's requirement that municipalities create realistic opportunities for low- and moderate-income households.

In this book, Massey and his colleagues assess the consequences for the surrounding neighborhoods and their inhabitants, the township of Mount Laurel and the residents of the Ethel Lawrence Homes. They confirm the power of what social scientists call "neighborhood effects," the notion that neighborhoods shape the life trajectories of their inhabitants. The book proves that building affordable housing projects is a cost-effective approach to improving the lives of the poor with no drawbacks to the greater community at large.

Q: Why did you write this book?

Massey: The real question is what motivated me to do the study in the first place, and that goes back to my time as a graduate student at Princeton (1975-1978), when the Mount Laurel

controversy was in the news and working its way through the courts. I was doing my dissertation research on patterns of residential segregation, so, naturally, I was following the case. I left New Jersey in 1979 and, although I followed the case sporadically when key junctures were reported in the national media, I didn't pay too much attention until I returned to New Jersey to join the Princeton faculty in 2003. That's when I learned that the affordable housing project authorized by the New Jersey Supreme Court had finally been built and opened its doors.

The project's opening in 2001 rekindled my interest, and I came to see it as a fortuitous opportunity to address critical issues before both policy makers and academics. With the cooperation of Fair Share Housing, Inc., the developer of the Ethel Lawrence Homes, my colleagues and I were able to develop a research design capable of revealing the effect that the opening had on surrounding neighborhoods and the township of Mount Laurel. We could also analyze what difference moving into the development had on the lives of Ethel Lawrence residents. And so, this book tells the story of how the Ethel Lawrence Homes came into being and what effect the opening of the development had on its 140 tenant families and people in the surrounding community.

Q: What are the main takeaways you want your readers to know?

Massey: The book conclusively shows that, despite the initial fears of Mount Laurel residents, the opening of the Ethel Lawrence Homes had no effect on tax rates, crime rates or property values in adjacent neighborhoods or the township itself. Indeed, nearly a third of the residents in adjacent neighborhoods did not even know that they were next door to an affordable housing development. However, for those families who were fortunate enough to move into the Ethel Lawrence Homes, access to an advantaged suburban neighborhood changed their lives. Adults enjoyed dramatically lower levels of exposure to neighborhood disorder and violence, fewer negative life events, improved mental health, high rates of employment, higher earnings and low rates of welfare usage. Children experienced much safer and more secure school environments, greater parental involvement in education, huge increases in study hours and were able to attend much higher quality schools and, despite moving into a much more competitive educational setting, earned excellent grades.

Q: What are the policy implications going forward?

Massey: The book offers a "proof of concept" for affordable housing development. It shows that it's possible to build an affordable housing complex for 140 low-income, mostly minority families and position it in an affluent, predominantly white suburban area without any negative effects on the surrounding community. This type of housing offers a ladder of social mobility to aspiring poor adults so they can achieve economic independence, and it also provides deserving, low-income children access to high quality schooling and greater educational attainment. This is all achieved at a marginal cost to the taxpayers of New Jersey. It is a win-win situation for all interested parties.

To read this article on Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson website, click here:

<http://wwilsondev.devcloud.acquia-sites.com/news-and-events/news/item/climbing-mount-laurel-1>