

THE PERSISTENT AND PERVASIVE CHALLENGE OF CHILD POVERTY AND HUNGER IN NORTH CAROLINA



Gene Nichol and Heather Hunt

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Acknowledgments

We are indebted to the individuals we interviewed for this report. Their work on behalf of North Carolina's children and families makes their communities and the state better places. We are also grateful for the generous and steadfast support of the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation. The contents and opinions of this report, and any mistakes it may contain, come from the authors alone.

Cover photo: Kids in Trailer Bed. Photograph by Steve Liss.

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Introduction

These are the conversations that aren't had often enough. We need to ensure meals are there for everyone. And we can do it. These conversations need to reach our lawmakers, who seem not to know or care about the issues. It seems like our lawmakers haven't experienced poverty or hunger. Or if they did, it was too long ago, they've forgotten it or ignored it. It's really important to press the conversation forward. All our children deserve to eat.

—Anti-hunger advocate

We need, most of all, compassionate policy making. Policies making a livable wage and affordable housing a reality. If you did those two things, it would put Loaves & Fishes out of business. And we'd be happy to be put out of business. I would love to be forced to go into another line of work. I dare you to put us out of business. Many of our policymakers' lives don't include the experience of low-wage people or, if they did, they're too far away from it now. So they don't deliver compassionate policy-making. Something has to give.

—Tina Postel, Loaves & Fishes/Friendship Trays

What we should do is shift the focus to what kids need to thrive. It's expensive to ignore the needs of kids. Let's also stop all this focus on deserving versus undeserving kids. There's also the presence, or rather, the dominance of race in that division. We have to get past the inability to think of black kids as our own kids. There is no future without supporting our kids—all our kids—and what they need for success. It's what matters the most. Let's make the investments our kids need. Public schools, libraries, families, and the rest. Make that be the only test. Not, as it is now, just serving the interests of the top one percent.

—Alexandra Sirota, Budget & Tax Center, North Carolina Justice Center

Sometimes we get used to things we should never get used to.

North Carolina countenances extraordinary levels of child hunger and poverty. For perspective, the United States, tragically, lets more of its citizens, especially its kids, live in wrenching poverty than almost any advanced, democratic nation. The United Nations rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights has decried the “shockingly high number of children living in poverty in the United States.” The U.S. has, by far, the highest child poverty rate among peer nations. It is, by almost all measures, the world's richest country. It has also become, the rapporteur wrote, “the most unequal society in the developed world.”¹

¹ Alston and United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights on His Mission to the United States of America*.

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North Carolina is, on average, notably worse than the rest of the country. About one in five Tar Heel kids (19.5%) live below the federal poverty threshold (about \$25,000 a year for a family of four). That is the tenth highest state rate in the nation. Almost ten percent of North Carolina kids live in extreme poverty. The youngest segment of the state's population is the poorest. Twenty-two percent of children five years old and under are impoverished. Child poverty is also very highly racialized. Children of color are three times as likely as white kids to be poor. And child poverty in North Carolina, in recent decades, has become decidedly more concentrated—with poor kids living in neighborhoods containing higher and higher percentages of other poor kids. Children are thus required to deal not only with the challenges flowing from their own family's economic hardship, but, often, also those of their close communities. North Carolina children's economic mobility, as a result, has become increasingly impaired, making it more likely that if you are born poor you will stay that way. Our youngest, most vulnerable members face the most daunting economic challenges.

North Carolina child hunger is similarly crushing. The state's food insecurity rate is the ninth highest in the nation. In the majority of North Carolina counties, at least one in five children are food insecure. In over twenty counties, the rate is more than one in four. Reflecting the prevalence of poverty, hunger is racially skewed too. While 62% of White households are food secure, that's the case for only 43% of African-American and Hispanic households. In 2019, over 250,000 households with children in North Carolina (almost 21% of all households with children) participated in SNAP (formerly known as food stamps). And for the 2019-2020 school year, nearly six of ten Tar Heel public school students were enrolled in free or reduced cost school meal programs. Hundreds of thousands of North Carolina children—living in one of the most economically vibrant states of the wealthiest nation on earth—year in and year out, don't get enough to eat.

This report seeks to document and explore North Carolina's twin challenges of child hunger and poverty. They constitute, jointly, one of the state's most wrenching and most embarrassing problems. They are, as well, massively inadequately attended to, constituting little of our public policy discourse, deliberation and legislative focus. Ignoring the pervasive dignity- and opportunity-denying difficulties of so many of our youngest and most vulnerable members is increasingly impossible to square with our foundational commitments and declarations, our constitutions and our creeds.

The sections that follow examine North Carolina child poverty and hunger through an array of lenses. We look at levels of poverty, inequality, mobility and hardship over time. We focus on the close kinship between poverty and race. We compare North Carolina levels of child hardship and challenge to those of other states and nations. Geographic distinctions are outlined as well, as is the dominance of low-wage work. Childhood food insecurity and other hunger markers are explored. And we briefly examine the Covid-19 crisis as a case study in the polarization and separation that mark us as a state, often leaving our most vulnerable families, including their children, in crushing circumstance. Across a very broad landscape of challenges and opportunities, North Carolina fails to offer adequate assurances for its children to thrive.

We make an effort to move beyond the data as well. Frequently, we turn to the words and narratives of those who work with impoverished children and their families across various communities. Statistics alone fail to convey the depth and realities of burdens pervasively imposed on North Carolina kids. We conclude by suggesting an altered public policy approach for North Carolina's children. As Alexandra Sirota, director of the Budget & Tax Center at the North Carolina Justice Center, pressed,

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In more recent years, we haven't looked at the long-term effect of our policy choices on our kids. ... We haven't made the turn to realizing and acting on the fact that only if kids do well, do we have economic well-being. We only look at dollars and cents being spent and even then it's mainly only the dollars and cents interests of wealthy people. What if the main idea was, "we have to do everything it takes to give all kids a real chance to thrive"?²

As Sirota summarized, we "didn't sign up for a society that lets kids starve."

Poor Children in North Carolina

As a state, we tolerate shockingly high levels of child poverty. Children as a group are among our poorest residents. In 2019, North Carolina's child poverty rate was 19.5%, or about one in five children.³ Nationally, 16.8% of children are poor and 44% experience episodic poverty (periods of poverty lasting two or more months).⁴ It's likely that children in the Tar Heel state encounter occasional spells of poverty at an equal—and dismayingly, possibly higher—rate.

According to the most recent estimates, North Carolina's child poverty rate is the 10th highest in the nation, returning it to shameful and historically familiar territory (it was 11th in 1969). The state's neglect of poor children is more disturbing when viewed in an international context. The United States ranks lower than all European nations but one in child poverty (Appendix 1). This puts North Carolina at the back of the pack in a country that has fallen badly behind its peers.

The international comparison shows that there's nothing inexorable or natural about high child poverty rates. The same lesson can be gleaned from North Carolina's own past. The state's changing child poverty rate tells a story of remarkable success—and remarkable dereliction. In 1969, almost one out of four "related" children were poor.⁵ Ten years later, in 1979, the poverty rate had dropped five percentage points and by 1989 it had fallen below the national rate. It fell even farther in 1999, to a low of 15.7%, again besting the national rate. This was no accident. Alexandra Sirota, policy expert at the N.C. Justice Center, told us how the state

made a more significant investment in kids, and not just in food stamps and the like, but in an infrastructure that supported kids and families. Community Action Agencies, Head Start, a supportive community around the family. The numbers you cite show it worked.

Circumstances changed quickly, however, and the following decades brought a demoralizing rollback. The child poverty rate for the period from 2008 to 2012 was roughly the same as it had been forty years earlier, and it continues to remain well above the national average (Fig. 1). North Carolina is home to almost half a million children who live below the paltry federal poverty line.

² Unless noted otherwise, all quotes are from interviews conducted by the North Carolina Poverty Research Fund.

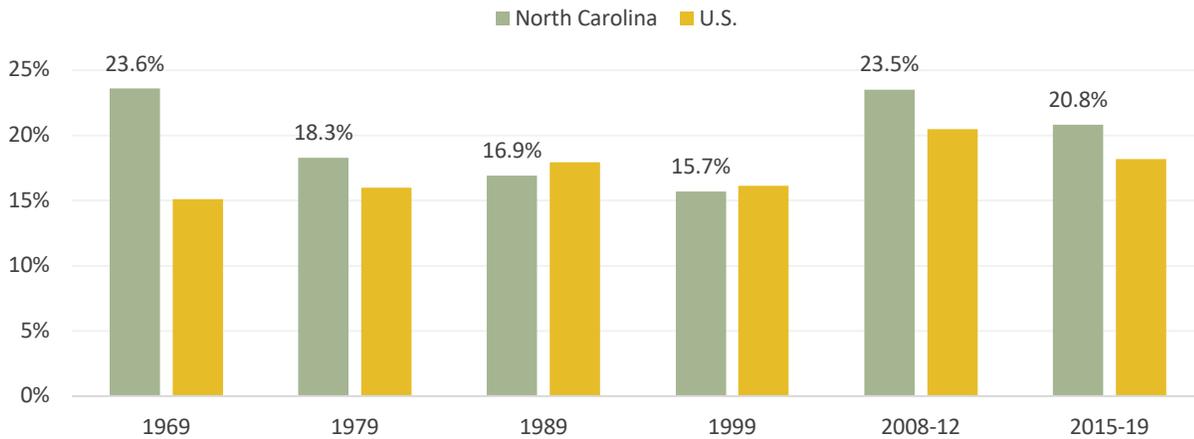
³ U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 American Community 1-Year Estimates.

⁴ Mohanty, *Dynamics of Economic Well-Being: Poverty, 2013-2016*.

⁵ The Census Bureau uses the term "related children" to refer to children under the age of 18 who are related to the householder. The related child poverty rate closely approximates the poverty rate for all children.

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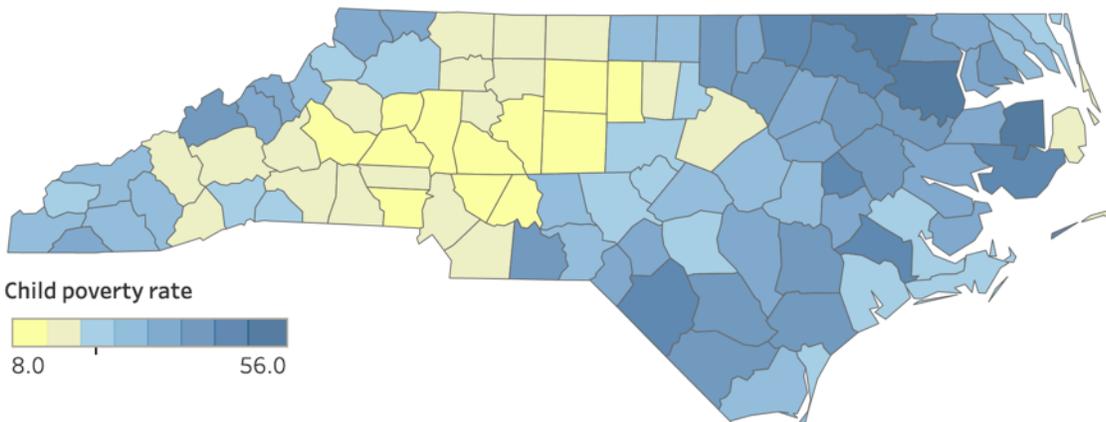
Figure 1. Poverty rates for related children under 18



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census and American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Child poverty rates are unevenly distributed on the map. Historically, counties in North Carolina's portion of the Black Belt to the east, and in Appalachia to the west, were substantially poorer than the rest of the state. In 1969, 48 counties, most of which were in eastern North Carolina, had child poverty rates over 30%. In three eastern counties—Northampton, Bertie and Tyrrell—the child poverty rate topped 50% (Fig. 2, counties shaded in yellow have poverty rates below 20%).

Figure 2. Child poverty rates by county, 1969

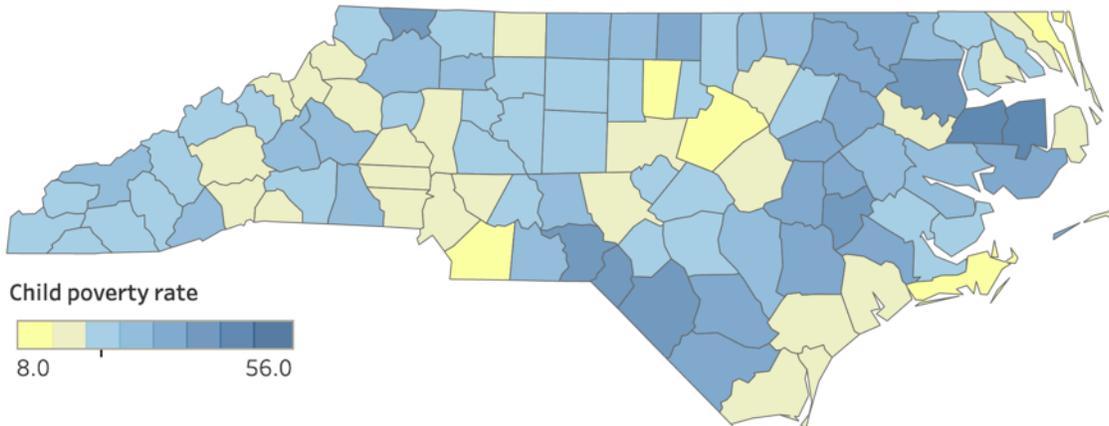


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census

As child poverty receded in the 1980s and 1990s, it lingered longest in eastern North Carolina. In 1999, when the child poverty rate reached its statewide nadir, the six counties with child poverty rates of 30% or more were in the east. As poverty swelled again in the 2000s, it returned to many of its old haunts. The most recent U.S. Census Bureau data shows that high poverty rates have reestablished themselves across the eastern portion of the state, where many counties once again have child poverty rates of 30% or more (Fig. 3).

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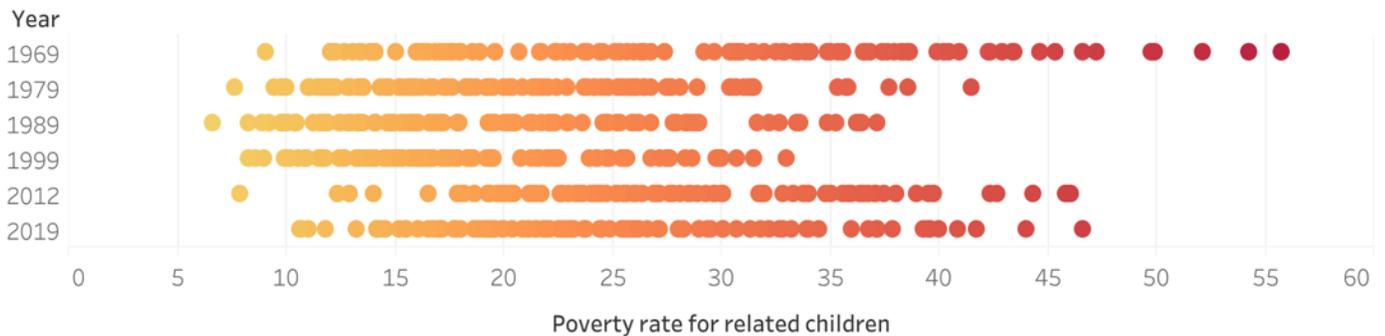
Figure 3. Child poverty rates by county, 2015-2019



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Inequality between counties has fluctuated with the child poverty rate. North Carolina in 1969 was a state of stark contrasts: 47 percentage points separated the county with the lowest child poverty rate (Catawba County’s 9%) from the county with the highest (Northampton’s 55.7%) (Fig. 4). As the poverty rate declined in the following years, it fell farthest in the counties that historically had been the poorest. By 1999, only 25 percentage points separated the counties with lowest and highest child poverty rates, and many counties were clustered densely at the lower end of the spectrum. As the child poverty rate surged in 2012 and 2019, counties began to pull apart once more.

Figure 4. Distribution of child poverty rate by county (each dot represents a North Carolina county)



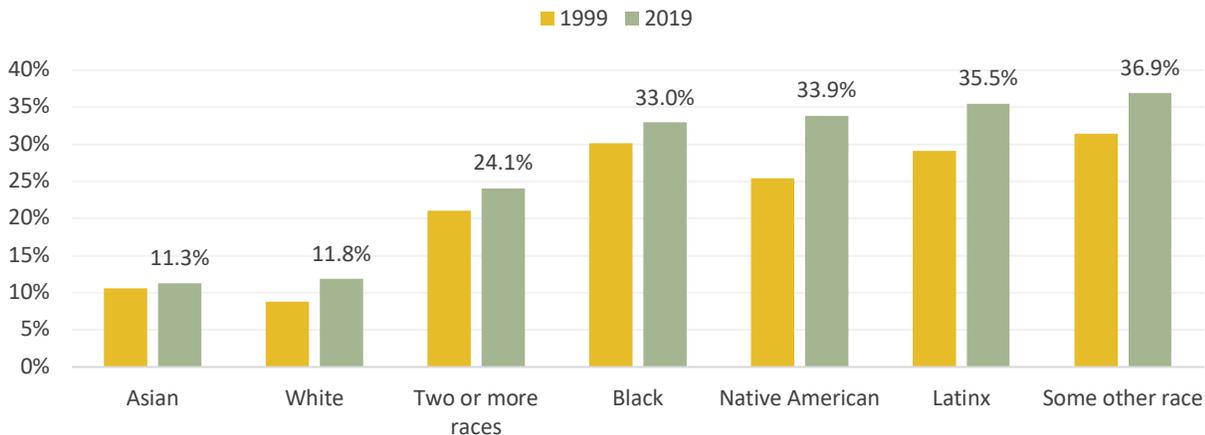
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census and American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Inequality between different parts of the state is a question of fairness and economic growth. Children in much of the state lack the opportunities and resources available in more affluent places. In leaving these children behind, the state is stunting human potential and undermining future economic prosperity. Earline Middleton, Vice-President of Partner Services and Public Policy at the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina, described the vicious cycle created by this underinvestment in people and places. “If there are no decent paying jobs and no opportunity, isn’t that a reason for why poverty is more stubborn? Why do companies move to certain areas? Education, quality of life.” Shortchanging the state’s children shortchanges everyone.

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Race and ethnicity, like geography, strongly influence a child’s chance of experiencing poverty. The share of Black, Hispanic and Native American children in North Carolina who live below the poverty line is almost three times the share of White children—a difference that has persisted across decades (Fig. 5).

Figure 5. Child poverty rates by race/ethnicity, North Carolina



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Decennial Census and 2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Tiffany Gladney is policy director at N.C. Child, an advocacy group working on behalf of the state’s children. She pointed out that “Poverty is the biggest risk factor in terms of a child’s healthy development and growth—mental health, physical health.” Decades of studies bear her out. Poor children experience a higher incidence of adverse physical, cognitive, behavioral and academic outcomes than children who are economically better off. Poverty has been linked to toxic stress, low birth weight, stunted growth, learning disabilities, developmental delays, and emotional and behavioral issues. Many health conditions are chronic and persist into adolescence and adulthood, ultimately limiting physical wellbeing and opportunities to thrive.

The Growth of Child Poverty in North Carolina

As child poverty has gained ground in North Carolina, so too has concentrated poverty. More children than ever are living below the poverty line. At the same time, more children are living in neighborhoods marked by high rates of poverty. The neighborhood where a child grows up influences her life trajectory. Schools, crime and safety, health and wellness, opportunities, jobs, social networks, and interactions with law enforcement, to name a few factors, are shaped by the neighborhood where you reside. Economically marginalized and under-resourced communities add to and magnify personal challenges and contribute to worse outcomes in adulthood, including a greater likelihood that the child will experience poverty later in life.

Discussion 1. Intergenerational Mobility

“The biggest determinant of hunger and poverty and opportunity is your zip code here.”

—Tina Postel, Loaves & Fishes/Friendship Trays

Concentrated poverty stifles children’s prospects. Recent scholarship has shown that where a child grows up has a dramatic influence on his or her chance of success later in life. Children of low-income parents who grow up in “low opportunity” neighborhoods have worse outcomes in adulthood than their low-income peers who grow up in “high opportunity” neighborhoods. The more time a child spends in a low opportunity place, the greater the effect. Among the characteristics that distinguish low opportunity neighborhoods are concentrated poverty, racial and economic segregation, struggling schools, weaker measures of social capital, and greater income inequality.⁶

In North Carolina, the lowest opportunity neighborhoods for children with low-income parents are predominantly in its cities: Charlotte, Winston-Salem, Durham, Raleigh. (Charlotte was singled out as having the worst intergenerational mobility of the nation’s large metro areas.)⁷ However, the state’s smaller cities and towns are represented too: by the

time they reach their 30s, low-income children who grow up in certain neighborhoods in Wilson, Red Springs, Kinston, Salisbury, Pembroke, Statesville, and Henderson, for example, have average earnings of about \$14,000-\$18,000 a year.

The race of the child can push earnings up or down. In only one of twelve census tracts in Halifax County, for example, do children with low-income parents go on to earn over \$30,000 a year on average. This makes it a high opportunity tract for the region. The average White child with low-income parents will earn about \$37,000 a year—\$14,000 more than the average Black child with low-income parents, who will earn \$23,000 a year.⁸

The state does little to narrow these disparities in opportunity. Said Sirota of the N.C. Justice Center, “We need money to build a state that is a beacon.” Our political inability to do so, “harms mobility and grows the divide. The kids of the wealthy don’t only start on third, they aren’t even in the same game.”

In the last twenty years, the number of poor children in North Carolina has grown three times faster than the total number of children. At the same time, more children—poor and not poor—are living in high poverty communities (Table 1). In 2019, over one million children (45% of all children) lived in a high poverty neighborhood—450,000 more than in 1999. (A high poverty neighborhood is one where 20% or more of children are poor.) Over twice as many **poor** children lived in high poverty neighborhoods in 2019 compared to twenty years earlier. And almost four times as many poor children lived in **very** high poverty neighborhoods (those with child poverty rates of 40% or more). In North Carolina, more than three out of four poor children are growing up in a high poverty neighborhood.

⁶ Chetty and Hendren, *The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility I: Childhood Exposure Effects*; Chetty and Hendren, *The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility II: County-Level Estimates*.

⁷ Boraks, “Report Confirms Charlotte’s Lack of Upward Mobility, Offers Priorities.”

⁸ Opportunity Atlas, <https://opportunityatlas.org/>.

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Table 1. Concentrated child poverty in North Carolina over time

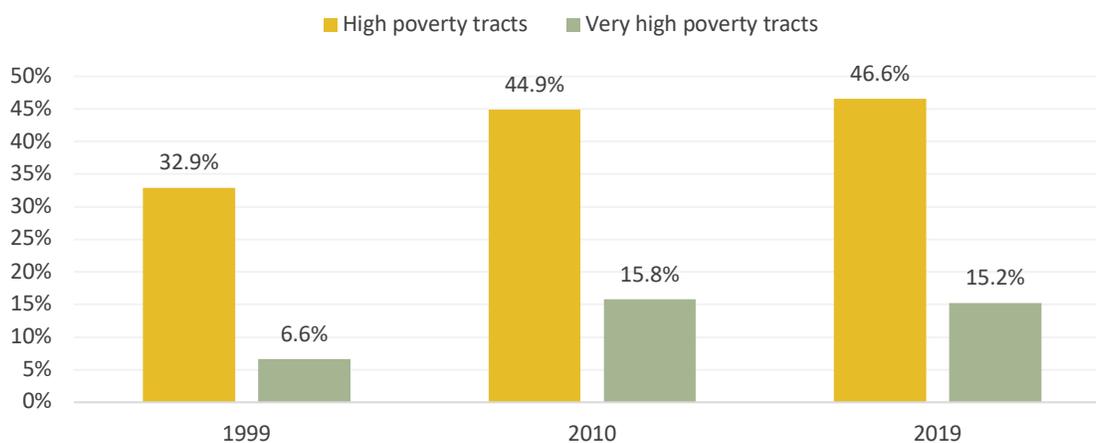
	1999	2010	2019	Percent change, 1999-2019
Total number of children	1,932,359	2,205,704	2,261,398	17.0%
Total number of poor children	311,053	476,790	478,877	54.0%
N.C. child poverty rate	16.1%	21.6%	21.2%	31.7%
Total number of children in high poverty tracts	571,996	1,009,993	1,019,915	78.3%
Total number of poor children in high poverty tracts	175,912	366,768	369,040	109.8%
Total number of children in very high poverty tracts	91,063	323,004	321,932	253.5%
Total number of poor children in very high poverty tracts	44,645	170,548	166,990	274.0%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Decennial Census and 2010 and 2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

The recovery following the 2007 recession did little to move the needle on concentrated child poverty. About 10,000 more children lived in high poverty neighborhoods in 2019 than in 2010 and about 1,000 fewer children lived in **very** high poverty neighborhoods—marginal changes given the state’s improved economic circumstances and the large number of children living in impoverished conditions.

North Carolina also has more neighborhoods with high child poverty rates now than twenty years ago. In 1999, a third of all census tracts in the state were high poverty tracts. Fewer than 7% of census tracts were **very** high poverty tracts (Fig. 6). In 2010, almost half of all tracts (45%) were high poverty tracts, a share that increased slightly by 2019. The percentage of **very** high poverty tracts more than doubled between 1999 and 2010. While it decreased slightly in 2019, it was still more than twice the 1999 rate. Over one in seven census tracts in the state has a child poverty rate of 40% or more.

Figure 6. Share of high and very high child poverty tracts by year, North Carolina

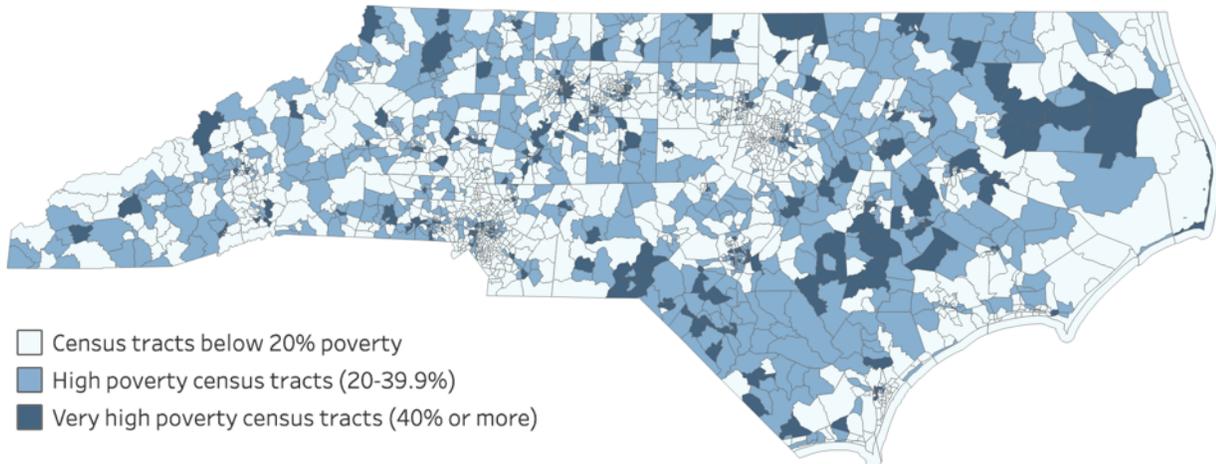


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census and American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

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Intense child poverty exists in urban and rural places. Neighborhoods with high child poverty rates now cover a sizable portion of eastern North Carolina. Many very high poverty census tracts lie in the state's rural towns and small cities. In several rural counties, census tracts with high child poverty rates dominate the local landscape. Of Richmond County's eleven census tracts, for example, seven have child poverty rates of 40% or more. Less visible on the map (because small in geographic size) are the many very high poverty census tracts in North Carolina's metropolitan areas. About 30% of North Carolina's **very** high child poverty tracts are in its five most populated counties.⁹

Figure 7. Child poverty by census tract, 2019



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Children of color are far more likely than White children to live in a high poverty neighborhood. Of North Carolina's 334 **very** high poverty tracts, 237 (71.0%) are majority non-White (primarily Black and Hispanic residents). Of the 68 tracts with the very highest levels of child poverty—*60% or higher*—the residents of **all but eight** are majority non-White. Almost 9% of all poor children, predominantly children of color, live in one of these extremely high child poverty tracts.

⁹ Mecklenburg, Wake, Forsyth, Guilford, Cumberland

Discussion 2. *Leandro* and the State's Neglect of High Poverty Schools

As poverty grows and becomes more concentrated, schools are increasingly segregated by class and race.¹⁰ When students are clustered in high poverty and racially disproportionate schools, they often need an extra boost to succeed.¹¹ North Carolina has largely declined to provide that support, a telling reflection of its indifference to poor children.

North Carolina is constitutionally required to provide a “sound basic education” for all children, a tenet affirmed by the N.C. Supreme Court in the well-known *Leandro* case.¹² In past decades, the state was a national leader in developing a strong public education system.¹³ Yet by any number of metrics, North Carolina has turned its back on this progress, depriving hundreds of thousands of students—especially poor, Black and Hispanic students—of this basic right.¹⁴ Said Judge David Lee, the presiding judge in *Leandro*,

“This case is about children who are from high poverty, low-performing districts and areas of our state that aren’t given fair opportunity to get a sound, basic education. Unfortunately, from the numbers I have seen, the sheer number of those [at-risk] students has increased dramatically and continues to do so. In that sense, it’s a runaway train.”¹⁵

The state’s most egregious shortcoming is its refusal to fund schools at a level necessary to provide all students with an adequate education. In 2017, North Carolina’s per-pupil spending was the sixth lowest in the nation. High poverty schools—which make up a third of public schools in the state—require more

resources to serve their students, but they remain woefully underfunded, even as the number of poor students grows.

The state has fallen short in other ways too. Statewide initiatives designed to help poor students and high poverty schools overcome their challenges have languished. High quality early childhood programs that prepare young children to learn reach far too few. The number of teachers, especially licensed teachers, has declined. High poverty schools employ far more new and lateral entry teachers than low poverty schools and have much higher turnover rates, creating instability in the schools that need experienced, committed teachers the most.¹⁶

Academic outcomes speak to these deficiencies. End-of-grade tests in English and math show that about two-thirds of students in grades 3-8 are not proficient in one or both subjects. The achievement gap for Black and Hispanic students, which shrank in the mid-2000s, has widened again. Only 80% of economically disadvantaged ninth graders graduate within four years, and most who do graduate don’t pursue additional education. Only 18% of economically disadvantaged students complete postsecondary programs, compared to 43% of better-off students.¹⁷

The state’s disinterest in poor and disadvantaged children results in a diminished vision of the future for all of us. “North Carolina’s current education system,” noted an independent consultant, “fails to meet the educational needs of many of its children and thereby fails to provide for the future success of these individuals, their communities, and the state.”¹⁸

¹⁰ Nordstrom, *Stymied by Segregation: How Integration Can Transform North Carolina Schools and the Lives of Its Students*; Owens, Reardon, and Jencks, “Income Segregation Between Schools and School Districts”; WestEd, Learning Policy Institute, and William and Ida Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University.

¹¹ Garcia, “Schools Are Still Segregated, and Black Children Are Paying a Price”; WestEd, Learning Policy Institute, and William and Ida Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University, 97.

¹² *Leandro v. State*, 488 S.E.2d 249 (N.C. 1997).

¹³ WestEd, Learning Policy Institute, and William and Ida Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University, *Sound Basic Education for All: An Action Plan for North Carolina*.

¹⁴ WestEd, Learning Policy Institute, and William and Ida Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University, “Sound Basic Education for All: An Action Plan for North Carolina: Executive Summary,” 1.

¹⁵ Walkenhorst, “Judge Orders NC to Move \$1.7B to Education Agencies.”

¹⁶ WestEd.

¹⁷ WestEd, *Sound Basic Education for All: An Action Plan for North Carolina*.

¹⁸ WestEd, 1.

We haven't made the turn to realizing and acting on the fact that only if kids do well, do we have economic well-being. ... *Leandro* is the clearest possible example. Thirty years of purposeful inaction on the most important matter. Generations and generations of kids excluded from meaningful opportunity.

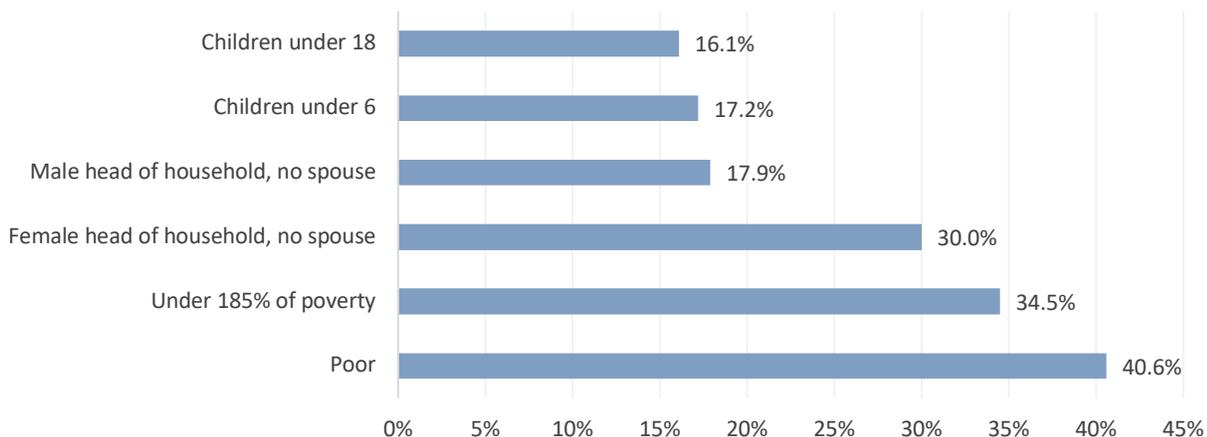
—Alexandra Sirota

Family Food Insecurity in the U.S. and North Carolina

Unlike hunger, which is a physiological sensation, food insecurity categorizes people and households by whether they can access enough food. Individuals in a food insecure household may or may not be hungry, but a chronically hungry person is almost certainly a member of a food insecure household. In other words, food insecurity is a measure of economic vulnerability based on a person's ability to satisfy a basic need.¹⁹

According to a government estimate, over 16% of children in the U.S. lived in food insecure households in 2020, with higher rates for younger children and children in households headed by a single parent (Fig. 8). Over 40% of poor children lived in food insecure households. Almost three times more Black children and two times more Hispanic children lived in food insecure households than White children (Fig. 9).²⁰ Had federal safety net programs not stepped in with increased assistance, food insecurity rates for these and other groups—already unacceptably elevated—would have been much higher.²¹

Figure 8. Food insecurity rate for U.S. households with children by household characteristic



Source: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture

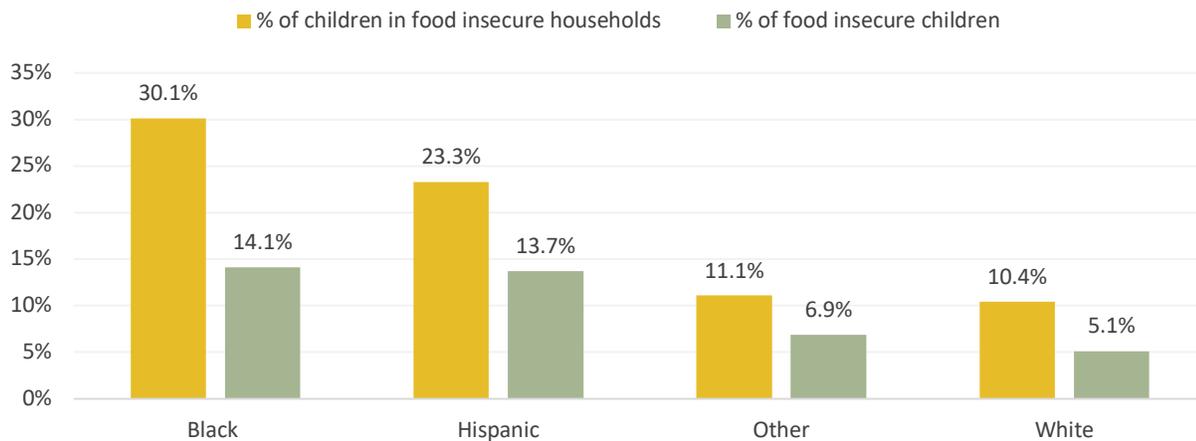
¹⁹ Definitions of food insecurity vary but the one used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture is typical: food insecurity is a household's inability "to acquire adequate food for one or more household members because they had insufficient money and other resources for food." Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Food Security in the U.S.: Measurement."

²⁰ Coleman-Jensen et al., *Statistical Supplement to Household Food Security in the United States in 2020*.

²¹ Cooney and Shaefer, *Material Hardship and Mental Health Following the Covid-19 Relief Bill and American Rescue Plan Act*; Coleman-Jensen et al., *Statistical Supplement to Household Food Security in the United States in 2020*. The federal stimulus payment and other aid lifted more than 11 million Americans out of poverty in 2020. U.S. Census Bureau, "The Supplemental Poverty Measure."

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Figure 9. Child food insecurity in the U.S. by race and ethnicity



Source: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Parents or other family members will skip meals or reduce portion size to ensure that children have enough to eat. As CEO of a food distribution nonprofit in Charlotte, Tina Postel is familiar with this attempt to shield younger children. She has encountered,

the mom who skips a meal for her kids to be able to eat. Or—who I saw the other day—the older brother who came in with his mom and who told me he’d been skipping breakfast because he wanted his younger brother to be able to eat what they had. He was so excited when he saw we had boxes of cereal. He was thrilled. And I thought, “it shouldn’t be that way.”

Despite the protective efforts of family members, more than 6.1 million children in 2020 were either food insecure themselves or shared a household with another child who was.²²

The physical harm caused by food insecurity starts before birth. Maternal food insecurity during pregnancy is associated with birth defects and low birth weight.²³ Very young children, whose brains and bodies are developing rapidly, need proper nutrients to fuel growth and activity. A subpar diet at this formative time puts children at higher risk for developmental and cognitive delays. For example, one study found that children who had iron-deficiency anemia as infants had lower scores when tested on motor and mental functioning at five years of age, even though they were successfully treated in the interim.²⁴ Food insecure children of all ages are more likely to suffer from more frequent headaches and stomachaches, higher rates of chronic illness, and poorer health overall.²⁵ Hunger in childhood may even contribute to increased risk of obesity.²⁶

²² Coleman-Jensen et al., *Statistical Supplement to Household Food Security in the United States in 2020*.

²³ Carmichael et al., “Maternal Food Insecurity Is Associated with Increased Risk of Certain Birth Defects.”

²⁴ Lozoff, Jimenez, and Wolf, “Long-Term Developmental Outcome of Infants with Iron Deficiency.”

²⁵ Alaimo et al., “Food Insufficiency, Family Income, and Health in US Preschool and School-Aged Children”; Cook et al., “Child Food Insecurity Increases Risks Posed by Household Food Insecurity to Young Children’s Health”; Gundersen and Kreider, “Bounding the Effects of Food Insecurity on Children’s Health Outcomes”; Weinreb et al., “Hunger”; Gundersen and Ziliak, “Food Insecurity and Health Outcomes.”

²⁶ Au et al., “Household Food Insecurity Is Associated with Higher Adiposity Among U.S. Schoolchildren Ages 10–15 Years.”

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Child food insecurity has also been associated with psychosocial dysfunction, psychiatric distress and poor academic performance. Hungry children are more likely to struggle in school, repeat a grade, receive special education services or require mental health counseling. Childhood depression, anxiety, irritability, aggression, and suicidal ideation have all been linked to food insecurity. Not having enough to eat is a source of shame. Worry or uncertainty about food consumes mental energy and contributes to the toxic brew of stress fomented by poverty.²⁷ Tiffany Gladney, of N.C. Child, emphasized the connection between children having reliable access to food and their overall prospects in life.

Looking at food insecurity, it impacts every aspect of a child's life. Prevention is always better than treatment. If we can make sure our children are healthy, they'll grow into healthy adults. This is a no-brainer. We all win if our babies are healthy. We need to ensure that parents are healthy to set up children for success as well. Economically *and* physically.

The impact of food insecurity on education and behavior was a throughline in our interviews. "How do you learn in school if you haven't had enough to eat?" asked Tina Postel. "It's like the Snickers ad on TV. If you can't get enough to eat, you turn into someone else."

"Think about when you're hungry," offered Laura Dille, director of operations at TABLE, which distributes food to children and their families. "You get grumpy, hangry. You can't concentrate. All you can think about is your empty stomach. When you're chronically hungry, *of course* you're going to act out, *of course* you're going to have trouble concentrating." She relayed how on Mondays, the line to see the school nurse would be out the door. "Kids had headaches, stomachaches because they had gone all weekend without enough food. They were not feeling good. Think about what it means just in terms of missing class that day, the interruption to learning."

Our number one source for distributing those [less healthy snack] foods is teachers who drive in to our pantries and pick them up to take to the kids in their classes. The food isn't ideal, but it's better than nothing and the teachers coming in to get it shows how desperately strong the need is.

– Tina Postel

If a weekend is bad, imagine what happens over the summer. As another advocate pointed out,

In summer months, not getting meals means not getting prepared for education. You go back and you're not prepared physically, emotionally, mentally. What does that mean behavior-wise, for your ability to sit still and learn? It's upsetting. It's unfair and it's unjust.

Marne Meredith, a social worker at an elementary school, described how scarcity fosters anxiety about the next meal. Food insecure children, she said, "are hungry all the time. They ask the teacher, 'Can I have a snack? Can I have a snack?' Even though they just had lunch." Jakki Davis, who runs D-UP, an afterschool fitness and health program in High Point, talked about how misinterpreting hunger as a behavioral issue takes children in a troubling direction.

²⁷ Anderson, Gallagher, and Ritchie, "How the Quality of School Lunch Affects Students' Academic Performance"; Chatterjee, "Kids Who Suffer Hunger in First Years Lag Behind Their Peers in School"; Kleinman et al., "Hunger in Children in the United States"; Murphy et al., "Relationship Between Hunger and Psychosocial Functioning in Low-Income American Children"; NEA, "Nutrition Programs"; American Psychological Association, "What Are the Psychological Effects of Hunger on Children?"

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Having food—secure and healthy food—dramatically affects their lives. When they don't have food, it affects how they feel, how they learn. If they don't have breakfast, it affects their whole day. They get marked as a bad child. Then another step is taken, they get headed down a wrong road. It's like I read Oprah saying, 'I used to ask, "what's wrong with that child?" Now I ask, "what happened to that child?"'

Hunger, noted Laura Bobis Olley, a school social worker, "shows up very starkly. ... Kids who are hungry show signs of distress." Meredith described a boy with special needs who exhibited signs of repetitive head banging. Once the family was set up with food assistance, the head banging stopped.

The failure to alleviate food insecurity in childhood leads to greater harm in the long run. Carl Vierling, executive director of the Greater High Point Food Alliance, discussed the costs of giving short shrift to childhood hunger.

Food insecurity leads to health problems. They only grow with time, they don't disappear. Then society has to pay for bigger health care problems down the road. Pay me now or pay me later. ... We need to make sure all our kids get food and health care. It's shortsighted not to. If you're going to have equal opportunity, you have to end childhood hunger."

He continued, "Hungry kids can't learn. If they can't learn, they can't succeed. If you can't succeed, you can't be a contributing member of society. You have to fix hunger to fix generational poverty." Earline Middleton, of the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina, presented a similar argument. "What happens to a kid when his stomach is growling? Then we see it's difficult to learn. We see it affects emotional health. And it can be passed to the next generation. That's the injustice."

Food insecurity also deprives children of the basic emotional, sensory and culinary associations and knowledge that build a foundation for a lifetime of healthy eating. Foods that are commonplace in more affluent households are sources of discovery for food insecure children. "Healthy food," remarked Marne Meredith, "is super expensive. People can buy unhealthy food from the Dollar Store. It will fill you up but not sustain you. Kids get so excited about strawberries and blueberries." Debbie Horwitz, founder and director of PORCH Chapel Hill-Carrboro, a hunger relief organization, talked about the pleasure children show when they're "cracking into a clementine." Or the wonder in parents' comments when they say, "'we learned that this thing is called a peach.' Or 'my child learned that she loves asparagus.'" She pointed out that many children don't get to experience "the basic joy of good food, which many of us take for granted." The specter of scarcity in a land of plenty galled her. "We should be ashamed of ourselves as a country. It's a travesty that we let this happen."

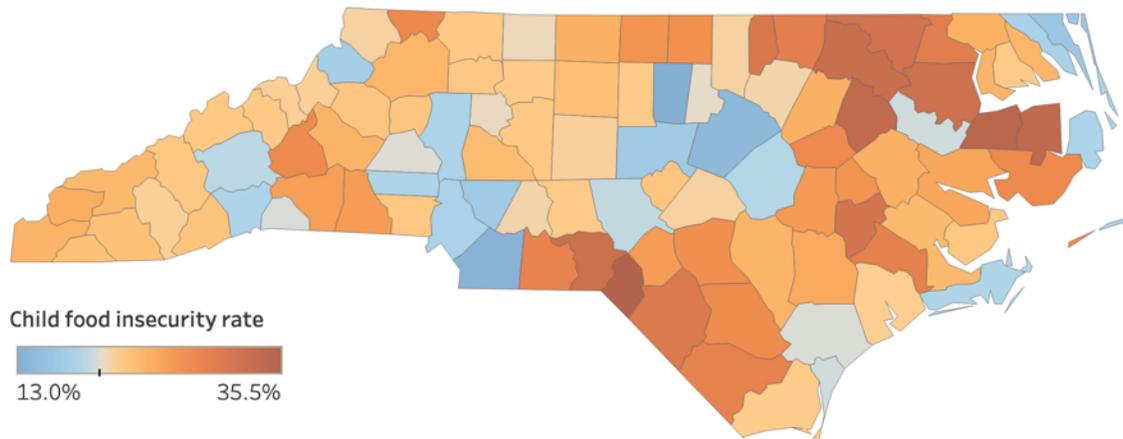
According to two recent rankings, North Carolina has one of the highest food insecurity rates in the nation. The U.S. Department of Agriculture ranks our overall food insecurity rate as the eleventh highest in the country.²⁸ Feeding America, the national anti-hunger organization, agrees. In its projections for 2021, North Carolina ranks eleventh for both food insecurity and child food insecurity.²⁹ In 78 of North Carolina's 100 counties, 20% or more of children are food insecure (Appendix 2).

²⁸ Coleman-Jensen et al., *Household Food Security in the United States in 2020*.

²⁹ Gunderson et al., *The Impact of the Coronavirus on Food Insecurity in 2020 & 2021, Update March 2021*. State and county level data provided by Feeding America.

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Figure 10. Projected child food insecurity rate by county, 2021 (counties in orange are 20% or more)



Source: Feeding America

In 2019, over one in five North Carolina households with children participated in SNAP, the federal food assistance program.³⁰ SNAP participation is an imprecise measure of need however, since North Carolina fails to reach many eligible families. Between 2016 and 2018, North Carolina’s SNAP participation rate fell

People are eating cheap food and their bellies are full, but it’s not food that’s sufficient for a healthy lifestyle. Fresh food is something people don’t have access to.

– Debbie Horwitz

dramatically. It was by far the most precipitous decline in the nation. The share of eligible North Carolinians who participate in the program is now one of the lowest in the U.S. (Appendix 2).³¹ Additionally, most SNAP participants remain food insecure. Not having enough money to buy food is a big problem, but other issues such as time, distance to grocery stores, transportation, physical disability—even access to functioning kitchen facilities and equipment—are also common barriers.³²

Poverty and food insecurity are easy to ignore, sidestep and dismiss. Poverty, noted Debbie Horwitz of PORCH, is physically hidden. “We drive around in North Carolina where everything grows so lush. The low-income housing and the trailer parks are behind the trees. We sometimes get a glimpse, but we’re not exposed to it.” “You can’t literally see it,” said TABLE’s Laura Dille, about food insecurity. “It’s easy to blame other factors, blame low test scores or bad behavior on other things.” But food insecurity is extensive in the best of times. Horwitz remarked that “year after year” her annual client surveys “come up with the same response.”

Many families have been receiving assistance for years. Sixty-one percent report that “the food that we bought just didn’t last, and we didn’t have money to get more.” Sixty-nine percent report that they sometimes, often or always worry about getting enough food for their families. These are all families in Chapel Hill-Carrboro, the premier school system in the state.

Poverty and food insecurity are endemic, even in North Carolina’s wealthiest communities. But you have to be willing to look—and many people aren’t. The individuals we interviewed remarked on this willful ignorance. Stated Dille,

³⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

³¹ Cunnigham, *Reaching Those in Need: Estimates of State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates in 2018*.

³² Gearing, Dixit-Joshi, and May, *Barriers That Constrain the Adequacy of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Allotments: Survey Findings*.

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For me it's old news, but people are always surprised that there's hunger in Chapel Hill. "I understand Durham," they say, "but not Chapel Hill." But nearly 30% of Chapel Hill students are free and reduced lunch. That means when a kid sits in the classroom, if they look to the left or right, one of those three could use food assistance. We have professors, doctors, the university, the hospital, but we also have lower income workers such as janitors and housekeepers, who are equally needed to keep a university and hospital running.

Tina Postel, in Charlotte, spoke about this stubborn blindness with the insight of someone long accustomed to running into it.

We think it's their fault they can't get enough to eat. We like to think that. We're a lot more comfortable with that. It means we don't have any responsibility to help. But it's not true. I explain to a lot of folks that they ought to come see. Very few ever do. ... Folks like to live in their own bubble. That way they don't have to think about those who don't have the resources and assets they do.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and North Carolina's Children

Children's fortunes rise and fall with the economic status of their parents. In February 2020, North Carolina's families should have been riding a wave of prosperity. Finally emerging from the long shadow of the 2007 recession, the state's economy appeared robust. The unemployment rate was 3.6%, the statewide median household income had risen to pre-recession levels, poverty was inching down. Yet this apparently healthy moment masked structural weakness, growing polarization and deep inequalities.

The number of middle-income jobs in the state had been shrinking for years, replaced by jobs on the high and low end.³³ Low-wage work, here defined as earning less than \$15 an hour, makes up a large and growing portion of jobs. We estimate that about 44% of people, 25-64 years old, who work for wages (not self-employed) earn less than \$31,200 annually (the amount someone paid \$15 an hour would make if they worked 40 hours per week, 52 weeks per year).³⁴ An Oxfam study found that well over half of North Carolina's children (57.8%) are supported by a low-wage worker.³⁵ Using a different methodology, another study concluded that in every metro area in North Carolina but one, at least four out of ten workers were low-wage. With 62% of its workers in low-wage jobs, Jacksonville, North Carolina, was tied for worst in the nation.³⁶

In the words of one news headline, a rock-bottom minimum wage and a dearth of protections for working families has rendered North Carolina "the Worst Place to Work in America."³⁷ None of this came as any surprise to the individuals we interviewed. "The number one reason for food insecurity in this state is the North Carolina minimum wage," asserted Debbie Horwitz of PORCH.

³³ "What Happened to Middle-Wage Jobs in North Carolina?"

³⁴ *IPUMS USA*.

³⁵ Oxfam and Economic Policy Institute, "Scorecard: North Carolina."

³⁶ Ross and Bateman, *Meet the Low-Wage Workforce*; Ross and Bateman, "Low-Wage Work Is More Pervasive than You Think, and There Aren't Enough 'Good Jobs' to Go Around."

³⁷ Tauss, "North Carolina Is the Worst Place to Work in America." See also, Sanchez-Guerra, "N.C. Rated Worst State for Wages, Worker Protection"; Kofman, "How North Carolina Transformed Itself into the Worst State to Be Unemployed."

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If you're working for \$7.25 an hour, you're not making a living wage. We started as an emergency program for when families were dealing with the impact of the [2007] recession, but the reality is that families can't keep their heads above water and the need for our services is higher than ever.

This observation was echoed by Laura Bobis Olley. Drawing on the ways her students' parents have struggled, she asserted,

The biggest problem I can see is the stagnant minimum wage, lack of a living wage for hourly work where people don't get sick leave or health benefits. They have to make terrible decisions about where to spend money. Low wages coupled with increasing rent, which is outrageous around here, puts families at great risk for homelessness. Rising costs but wages are stagnating.

In some parts of the state, it is unrealistic to aspire to wages that barely loosen poverty's grip. Danielle Baptiste is a graduate of Goldsboro High School who returned home after college to become operations director at Dillard Academy, a nonprofit charter school focused on disadvantaged youth. "They talk around North Carolina and the country about a \$15 an hour minimum wage, but nobody is getting that here," she said.

Paychecks can't cover essential expenses for many families. It takes over \$38,000 a year to afford the basic budget for an average one adult, one child family in North Carolina. Yet approximately half of jobs in the state pay less than that.³⁸ Almost 600,000 renter households in North Carolina—43.3% of all renter households—are cost burdened.³⁹ One in five are severely cost burdened, spending more than half their household income on housing. Across the state, the typical family spends more than half of their income on housing and transportation alone.⁴⁰

A school social worker told us about a family where, "Dad works two jobs, cleaning at UNC, and at a gas station. ... He's working 60-70 hours a week." But that's not enough. "They live in one of the more affordable but not so nice apartments and it's still \$1,100 a month. A tiny two bedroom."

Our interviewees attested to the financial challenges facing low-income families. "A lot of the folks we serve are working more than one job. They just don't make enough to make ends meet in Charlotte," said Tina Postel. Laura Dille echoed this message, noting that poor and food insecure workers have

jobs that don't pay well enough to pay for living in an expensive city, especially when you have children. You have people who have moved here from other countries, who have fled persecution and abuse. Moved here from other parts of the country. ... These are families that are facing difficult life circumstances.

Baptiste, in Goldsboro, distinguished conditions there from wealthier parts of the state. "It's a different world here," she said. She elaborated,

³⁸ The Living Income Standard calculates the cost of housing, food, child care, health care, transportation, taxes, and other necessities such as clothing. See Kennedy, *The 2019 Living Income Standard for 100 Counties*. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median wage for all occupations in North Carolina is \$18.63, which equals an annual salary of \$38,750 for a fulltime, year-round worker.

³⁹ 2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Cost burdened renters spend more than 30% of their household income on housing.

⁴⁰ Location Affordability Index, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Office of Policy Development and Research.

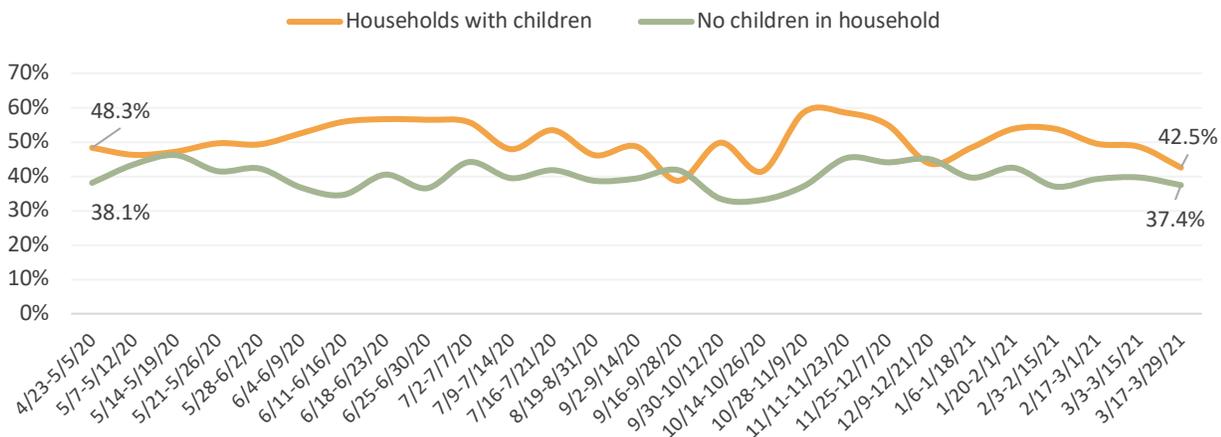
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I'd say too, it's not only working hard, doing all that can be done, but also not making any progress, not moving forward. ... We have parents who are working hard, working long hours, trying to save, hoping they can move out of the projects and buy a mobile home. Those are often the only two options here in Goldsboro, and too many aren't able to make progress even on that limited set of possibilities, no matter how hard they work and how frugal they are.

Covid-19 isolated and exposed these and other longstanding systemic disparities. Remarked Alexandra Sirota, from the Budget & Tax Center, "We've started to see some of the deprivations more clearly with Covid. But they were already there. We chose not to pay attention to them." Low-wage occupations were decimated by lockdown-related layoffs.⁴¹ Low-wage workers were also likely to be categorized as "essential workers," and exposed to the coronavirus.⁴² "Covid really showed the unfairness," stated High Point's Carl Vierling. "A lot of folks thought, 'what's the big deal?' because they could work from home. Lots couldn't. They were trapped. Essential workers weren't treated as essential, just as people with no choices."

Although broadly devastating, the Covid-19 shutdown was especially hard on children. In 2021, more than four in ten children in North Carolina lived in a family that was financially on the edge, even taking federal assistance like the stimulus checks into account.⁴³ In the first year of the pandemic, adults in households with children reported that they or someone else in their household had lost employment-related income at higher rates than adults in households without children (Fig. 11). Between April 2020 and March 2021, an average of about half of adults in households with children reported that they or another person in their household lost employment income, versus 40% for adults in childless households. As recently as October 2021, one in five adults in households with children had lost employment income in the previous four weeks.

Figure 11. Share of adults reporting employment-related income loss since March 2020, North Carolina



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey, April 2020-March 2021 (Week 1-Week 27)

Note: Date ranges are data collection periods.

⁴¹ Gould and Kassa, *Low-Wage, Low-Hours Workers Were Hit Hardest in the COVID-19 Recession*.

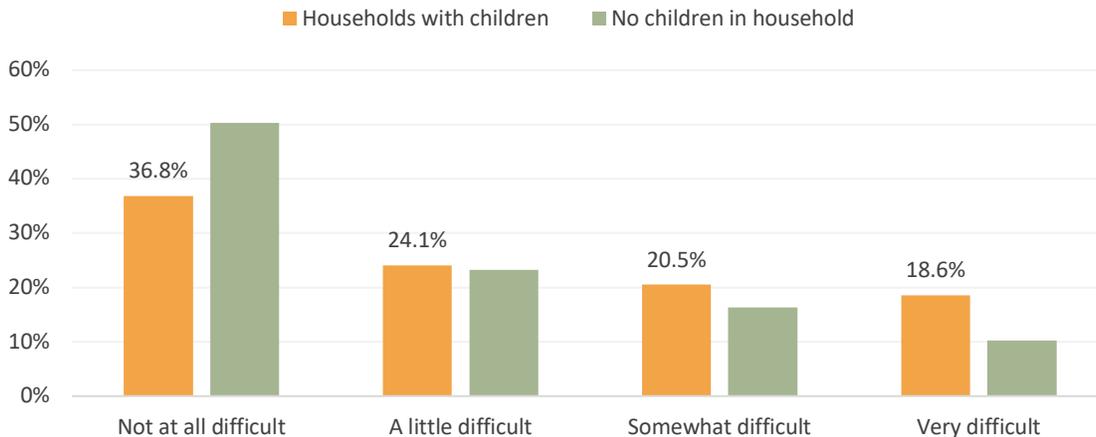
⁴² Tomer and Kane, *To Protect Frontline Workers During and After COVID-19, We Must Define Who They Are*.

⁴³ Wheaton, Giannarelli, and Dehry, *2021 Poverty Projections: Assessing the Impact of Benefits and Stimulus Measures*.

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Between August 2020 and July 2021, six in ten adults in households with children reported difficulty paying for their usual household expenses (such as food, medical expenses or housing) in the past seven days (Fig. 12). On average, almost twice as many adults in households with children had a very difficult time paying for the usual household expenses compared to adults in households with no children.

Figure 12. Difficulty paying for usual household expenses, North Carolina



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey, August 2020-July 2021 (Week 13-Week 33 averaged)

Other signs of financial fragility were more prevalent in households with children. In October 2021, almost 42% of adults who live with children (versus 24.3% of those without children) reported that they had cut back on or went without basic household necessities such as food or medicine so that they could pay an energy bill. Adults in households with children were twice as likely as those without children to say that they could not pay their energy bill in full for all or some months in the past year.⁴⁴ That same month, one in four renters who lived with children—approximately 230,000 adults in households with children—reported that they were not current on rent.⁴⁵

Black and Hispanic children, the majority of whom are poor or near-poor, were more likely to live in a family hit by the Covid-19 recession.⁴⁶ Nationally, disproportionate shares of Black and Hispanic workers were laid off *and* required to work in essential but low-wage jobs.⁴⁷ (They were also, not coincidentally, more likely to be infected by and die from the coronavirus.)⁴⁸ The typical Black and Hispanic family own much less wealth than the typical White family—about 13 and 19 cents, respectively, to every dollar.⁴⁹ With less of a financial cushion to fall back on in emergencies, nearly a third of Black households, and 27% of Hispanic households, lost their savings during the pandemic. Over half of Black and Hispanic households faced serious financial problems in 2021, compared to 29% of White households.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey (Week 39).

⁴⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey (Week 39).

⁴⁶ In 2019, 60% of Black children and 64% of Hispanic children lived in households earning less than 200% of the poverty level, Kids Count Data Center, Annie E. Casey Foundation.

⁴⁷ Gould and Wilson, *Black Workers Face Two of the Most Lethal Preexisting Conditions for Coronavirus—Racism and Economic Inequality*.

⁴⁸ Kinder and Ford, *Black Essential Workers' Lives Matter. They Deserve Real Change, Not Just Lip Service*.

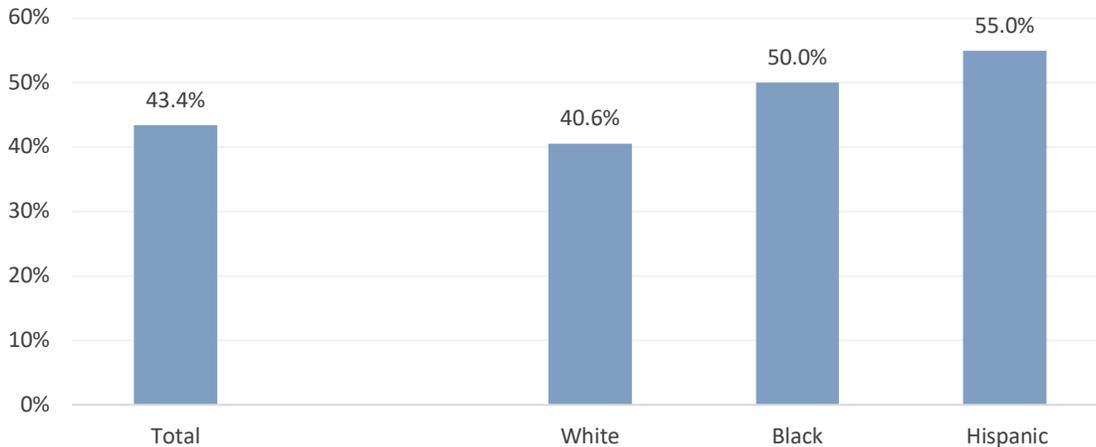
⁴⁹ Bhutta et al., "Disparities in Wealth by Race and Ethnicity in the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances."

⁵⁰ NPR, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, *Household Experiences in America During the Delta Variant Outbreak, By Race/Ethnicity*.

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In North Carolina, Black and Hispanic households showed high levels of financial distress. Between April 2020 and March 2021, an average of 50% of Black adults and 55% of Hispanic adults reported that they or another household member had lost employment income (Fig. 13).

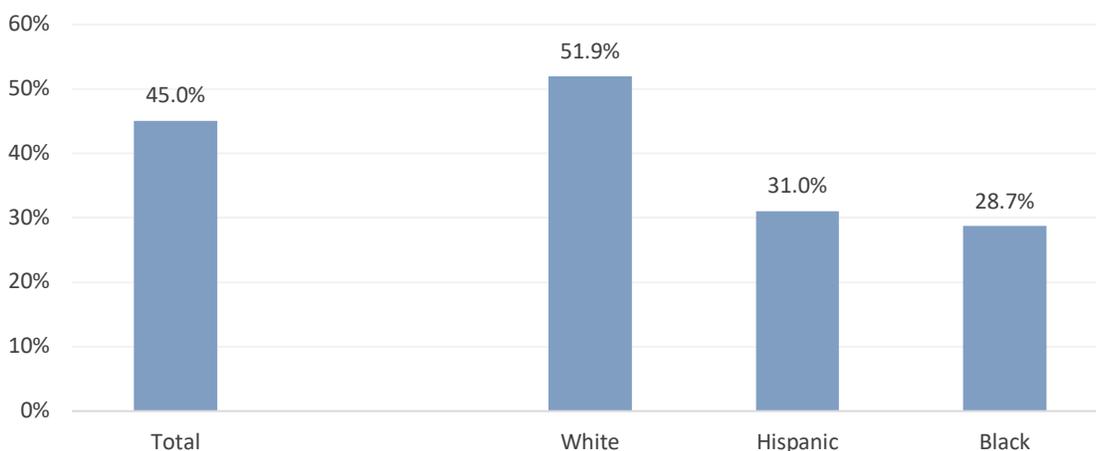
Figure 13. Employment-related income loss by race and ethnicity, North Carolina



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey, April 2020-March 2021 (Week 1-Week 27 averaged)

Compared to White households, a much smaller share of Black and Hispanic households could afford their usual expenses. Between August 2020 and July 2021, over half of White adults on average reported that their household had no difficulty paying for what it needed, but this was the case for fewer than one in three Black and Hispanic adults (Fig. 14). In October 2021, about 57% of White adults reported that their household could pay for the usual expenses without difficulty—a substantial improvement from the low of 42.2% in February 2021. In contrast, the rates for Black and Hispanic adults, abysmally low in February, remained essentially unchanged in October.⁵¹

Figure 14. No difficulty paying for the usual household expenses by race and ethnicity, North Carolina



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey, August 2020-July 2021 (Week 13-Week 33 averaged)

Note: The sample size for Hispanic is small and less reliable than for Black or White.

⁵¹ In October 2021 (Week 39 of the Household Pulse Survey), 29.6% of Black households and 28.7% of Hispanic households experienced no difficulty paying for the usual household expenses. The rates for each group in February 2021 (Week 25) were 25.3% (Black) and 26.5% (Hispanic).

Discussion 3. Child Care and the Pandemic

Early childhood care is essential for working parents.⁵² It is, said a national expert, “a linchpin of our economy.”⁵³ Yet it’s also notoriously expensive. Average costs in many states exceed that of college tuition.⁵⁴ In North Carolina, the average annual cost approaches \$9,000, or about a sixth of the typical household income.⁵⁵ Since only 17% of children who are eligible for child care assistance receive it, most parents are on their own.⁵⁶ Unaffordable (or nonexistent) child care causes at least one in four parents with young children to quit a job, go part-time, reduce work hours, or turn down a training or job offer; about one in five drop out of college or decline a promotion.⁵⁷ These disruptions to work and career depress current and future wages and thwart advancement.⁵⁸

When schools and child care facilities closed during Covid-19 lockdown, parents—especially mothers—left the workforce in droves to care for children. Women of prime working age were more than three times more likely than men to be out of work for this reason.⁵⁹ Single, low-income, and Black and Hispanic mothers were especially affected by work disruptions

due to caregiving responsibilities.⁶⁰ The blow to women’s employment has been catastrophic: 1.4 million fewer prime age women were in the labor force in October 2021 than there were in February 2020, before the start of the pandemic.⁶¹

The economic impact of the pandemic on child care lingers. In September 2021, over a third of adults in North Carolina who lived with children under five reported that daycare or child care was unavailable. Over 10% of adults without child care reported that in the last four weeks they had cut work hours to care for children; over 7% reported that they had lost or left a job for the same reason.⁶²

“Covid has shown how many women are being kept out of the workplace, particularly women of color,” said Alexandra Sirota. “The state is failing on childhood and family development, education, pre-K. It shows [policymakers] don’t actually value work. If you can’t get high quality, affordable child care, the infrastructure for economic development, family development is not there. ... Child care is the foundation for working families.”

⁵² About 66% of mothers and 95% of fathers with a child under six were employed or searching for work in 2019. Davis and Sojourner, *Increasing Federal Investment in Children’s Early Care and Education to Raise Quality, Access, and Affordability*.

⁵³ Miller, “How Other Nations Pay for Child Care. The U.S. Is an Outlier.”

⁵⁴ DeParle, “When Child Care Costs Twice as Much as the Mortgage”; Davis and Sojourner, *Increasing Federal Investment in Children’s Early Care and Education to Raise Quality, Access, and Affordability*.

⁵⁵ Schulte, “Explore the Care Index,” <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/care-report/explore-care-index/>.

⁵⁶ McHugh et al., *State of Working NC: Protecting & Connecting Workers*.

⁵⁷ Belfield, *Early Education in the Time of COVID-19: An Economic Analysis for North Carolina*.

⁵⁸ Belfield; Schochet and Malik, “2 Million Parents Forced to Make Career Sacrifices Due to Problems with Child Care”; U.S. Department of the Treasury, *The Economics of Child Care Supply in the United States*. The child care system doesn’t work for employees either. Caregivers, who are almost entirely women and who are disproportionately people of color, are among the lowest paid workers in any occupation. Nearly half of child care workers receive some kind of public assistance and many fall below the poverty line. See U.S. Department of the Treasury; Davis and Sojourner, *Increasing Federal Investment in Children’s Early Care and Education to Raise Quality, Access, and Affordability*. In North Carolina, the annual average wage for child care workers is \$24,600.

⁵⁹ Kent and Ricketts, “Child Care, School Disruptions Burden Working Parents.”

⁶⁰ Kent and Ricketts; Ranji et al., *Women, Work, and Family During COVID-19*; Smith and Reeves, “Black Moms Facing the Toughest Childcare Crunch: How Policy Can Help.”

⁶¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, <https://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/LNU01300062>.

⁶² Household Pulse Survey, Week 37.

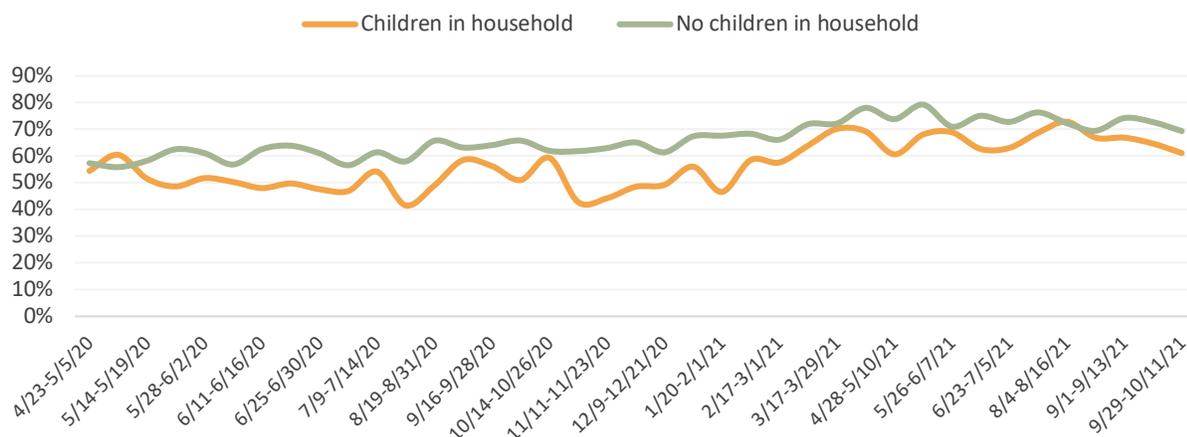
The Pandemic and Food Insecurity

An unprecedented number of people sought help from food charities in 2020.⁶³ About 60 million people (or one in five U.S. residents) received charitable food assistance, an increase of 50% from the year before.⁶⁴ A Brookings study found that the food insecurity rate for all households in the U.S. reached 25% in the summer of 2020, with higher rates for households with children.⁶⁵ Other surveys have found similar rates of food insecurity.⁶⁶

In North Carolina, the need has yet to subside. In June 2021, the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina was serving “39% more people than last May,” according to Earline Middleton. “Our goal was 100 million meals last year,” she noted in our interview. It served 115 million.

Throughout the pandemic, adults in households with children were consistently less likely to report that their household was food secure than households with no children (Fig. 15).⁶⁷ In October 2021, 39% of adults in households with children reported that their household could not afford adequate types or quantities of food, about eight percentage points more than households without children.⁶⁸

Figure 15. Share of adults reporting household is food secure, North Carolina



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey, April 2020-October 2021 (Week 1-Week 39)

Note: Date ranges are data collection periods.

Hardship during the pandemic meant that children in North Carolina felt hunger’s pinch all too often. On average, between June 2020 and June 2021, over a third of adults who lived with children in food insecure households reported that in the past seven days, children in the household did not have enough to eat. This represents hundreds of thousands of households where children weren’t eating enough. Even into the fall of

⁶³ Smith, “Pandemic, Growing Need Strain U.S. Food Bank Operations”; Tulley, “Food Lines a Mile Long in America’s Second-Wealthiest State”; White, “Millions of Americans Are Going Hungry as the Pandemic Erodes Incomes and Destroys Communities.”

⁶⁴ Luhby, “More Children Faced Food Insecurity Last Year During Pandemic.”

⁶⁵ Bauer, “Hungry at Thanksgiving.”

⁶⁶ See Schanzenbach and Pitts, *Estimates of Food Insecurity During the COVID Crisis: Results from the COVID Impact Survey, Week 1 (April 20–26, 2020)*; Waxman and Gupta, *Working Less to Provide More Care: How the Pandemic Has Affected Families with Young Children*.

⁶⁷ The Household Pulse Survey defines food security as having enough food of the desired type.

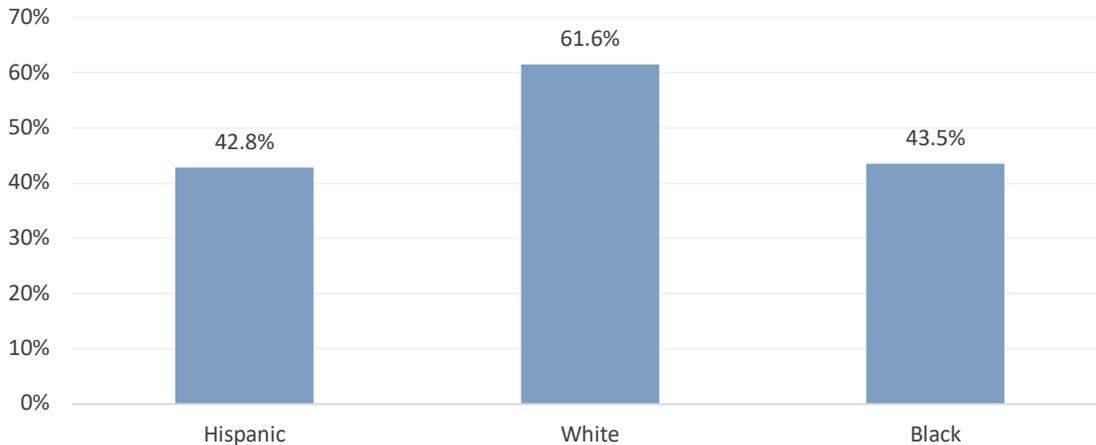
⁶⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey (Week 39).

The Persistent and Pervasive Challenge of Child Poverty and Hunger in North Carolina

2021, food insecurity among children continued unabated. In October, 32% of adults in food insecure households said that children in the household had not eaten enough food in the past seven days.⁶⁹

Food security is especially elusive for Black and Hispanic families with children (Fig. 16). Between April 2020 and July 2021, an average of 43.5% of Black adults in households with children were food secure compared to 61.6% of White adults. Hispanic adults reported food security rates comparable to those for Black adults, but the sample size is small and not as reliable.

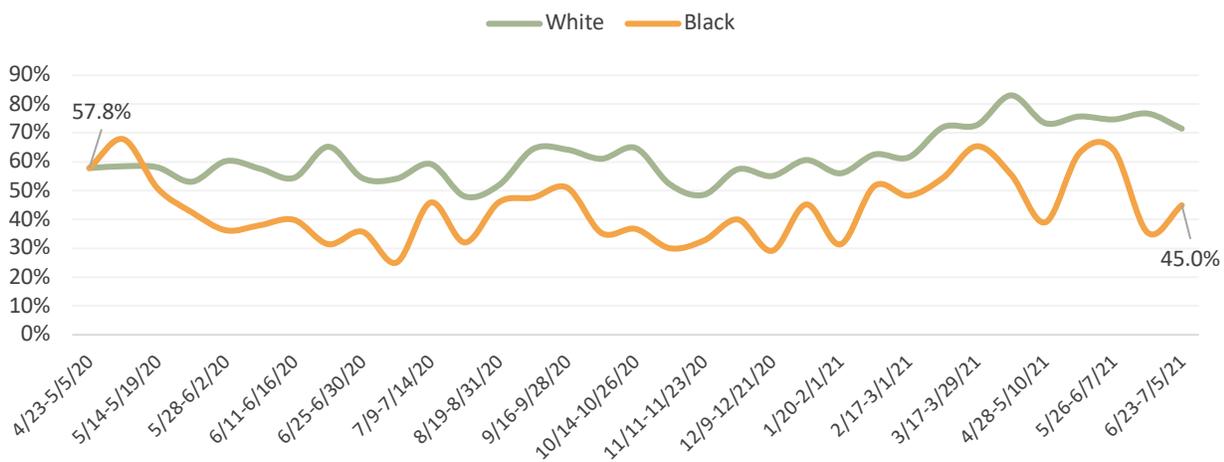
Figure 16. Share of adults with children who say household is food secure by race and ethnicity, North Carolina



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey, April 2020-July 2021 (Week 1-Week 33 averaged)

Food security for White households with children generally improved through the spring of 2021 (Fig. 17). In contrast, the share of food secure Black households with children remained well below rates seen at the beginning of the pandemic. In July 2021, only 45% of Black adults said that their household was food secure, about 13 percentage points lower than at the start of the pandemic.

Figure 17. Share of adults with children reporting that household is food secure, North Carolina



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey, April 2020-July 2021 (Week 1- Week 33)

Note: Date ranges are data collection periods.

⁶⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey (Week 39).

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Immigrant families faced a similar confluence of health and economic challenges, including occupational segregation in low-quality, low-wage jobs.⁷⁰ Laura Bobis Olley, one of the school social workers we interviewed, described how Covid-19 affected her students' foreign-born parents. "During the pandemic their hours were drastically cut. They had to make decisions about rent or food, gas to get to their job or food." Noted Carl Vierling, "A lot of immigrants were essential workers, and they went to work even when they were sick, because they had no options." Many immigrants were barred from receiving a range of government benefits, including the federal stimulus checks and SNAP. In North Carolina, over 400,000 foreign-born individuals were ineligible to receive stimulus payments. Many immigrants also hesitated to seek assistance due to fear, language barriers or cultural differences. According to Vierling,

"Steven Miller's Public Charge" doctrine scared a lot of immigrants away, especially if pantries required IDs. There's no trust, and not just with Latinos. Refugees are apprehensive too. We need culturally appropriate food, and we need to increase trust and access.

As we go to press in November 2021, tremendous difficulties continue to bear down on North Carolina's families and children. "Covid may be over for some of us who are vaccinated and have steady work," stated Debbie Horwitz of PORCH.

But for those who lost work or had to draw down savings, it's ongoing. While the pandemic relief programs were helpful, they were not accessible to everyone. We continue to get questions about how to access food assistance.

Worry about what the future held shaded our interviews (many of which took place in spring and summer 2021). Laura Bobis Olley's fears were typical.

We provide free school lunch, free school breakfast, we sent buses to communities to distribute food but it's not enough. Maybe it's two meals, but it's not enough. I'm really dreading what's going to happen in the fall, post-eviction moratorium. Families are going to be getting suddenly evicted or use whatever tiny amount they have to pay rent or utility bills.

Covid illuminated the daily struggles that often remain hidden. Earline Middleton remarked, "We know of these gaping inequalities after Covid-19. It has shone a bright light on the challenge. We need to face it." But the moment to act on this realization may be fading. "We've seen some of what we need," stated Alexandra Sirota,

and now the window is closing. It's really our obligation to realize the window is closing and to press hard to push it open. To make sure the time doesn't pass and seal it so we just stay in the status quo. ... Maybe creating a new, just landscape would scare all of us a little. We're used to things as they are. And now the window is closing and I find that devastating.

"The big thing to walk away with here," Tiffany Gladney, at N.C. Child, stressed,

North Carolina's children are suffering. Our poverty rate is staggering, with one in five children growing up in households below the poverty line. It is incumbent on us to ensure that we're investing in our children, and in our families. It is incumbent on us to ensure that every baby has an opportunity to thrive.

⁷⁰ Clark et al., "Disproportionate Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Immigrant Communities in the United States"; Joint Economic Committee, *Immigrants, the Economy and the COVID-19 Outbreak*; Kim, Lee, and Zhang, "Labor & the Economy."

Conclusion

North Carolina is tough on its children. Though the state enjoys significant economic prowess, income and wealth, stunningly high percentages of its children live in wrenching poverty. The hardship is borne, very disproportionately, by kids of color. As Meredith Marne, one of the school social workers we spoke to, commented, “Families of color struggle most and they struggle in a lot of ways simultaneously.” Child poverty is increasingly concentrated in distressed neighborhoods. Prospects for economic mobility are thereby diminished and the perils of high poverty neighborhoods are visited upon large numbers of Tar Heel children.

Child poverty in North Carolina is joined by soaring rates of food hardship. State poverty and hunger rates are among the very highest in the nation. Brutal impacts of deprivation through both poverty and hunger result. They leave hundreds of thousands of our kids without meaningful opportunities and diminish, potently, their natural rights to thrive, to compete, to develop and succeed. Child care, housing, and educational opportunities are systematically diminished. Effects are notable in both the short and long terms. The economic and social burdens pressed upon poor children in North Carolina are unacceptable to any state that so readily proclaims its commitment to equality and that so regularly declares how earnestly it values its families. The fact that political authorities in the state seem untroubled by the tragedy of child poverty only makes the transgression more indefensible and more pointedly hypocritical. An admirable society lifts and values its children, beyond any other interest or challenge.

As this study reveals, other states and other nations far outperform North Carolina in their support of children. Even North Carolina’s past efforts and attentions to the welfare of children have been both more intense, and more effective. For decades now, North Carolina policymakers have explored insufficiently the long-term impact of economic, social, educational, housing, child care, food security and welfare policies. If policymakers think at all of poor children and their parents, it is principally to characterize them as unworthy and deserving of their diminished plight. Too often, we fail to make the necessary connection between childhood success and dignity and a strong economy and society. North Carolina is, on the surface, seemingly much focused on broad horizons of economic development and prosperity. But public policies tend to concentrate only on the wealthiest citizens and businesses in a stubborn faith that if the richest become even more prosperous, the fortunes of the state’s poorest kids will rise. But the facts reveal otherwise. We rarely ask the foundational question: how can we assure that all North Carolina children have a chance to thrive? Both Democratic and Republican leaders have failed to assure that the plight of our children is the state’s highest priority.

No demonstration of our unacceptable treatment of poor children could be more pointed, chronic and pervasive than that exposed by the state’s famous *Leandro* school case. Clear court rulings demonstrate that poor children have been thwarted by over thirty years of intentional state deprivation. On perhaps the most important front faced by a society—the education of its children—North Carolina has failed to meet its moral and constitutional mandates. Generations of Tar Heel children have, as a result, been marginalized and denied meaningful and equal opportunities and life chances.

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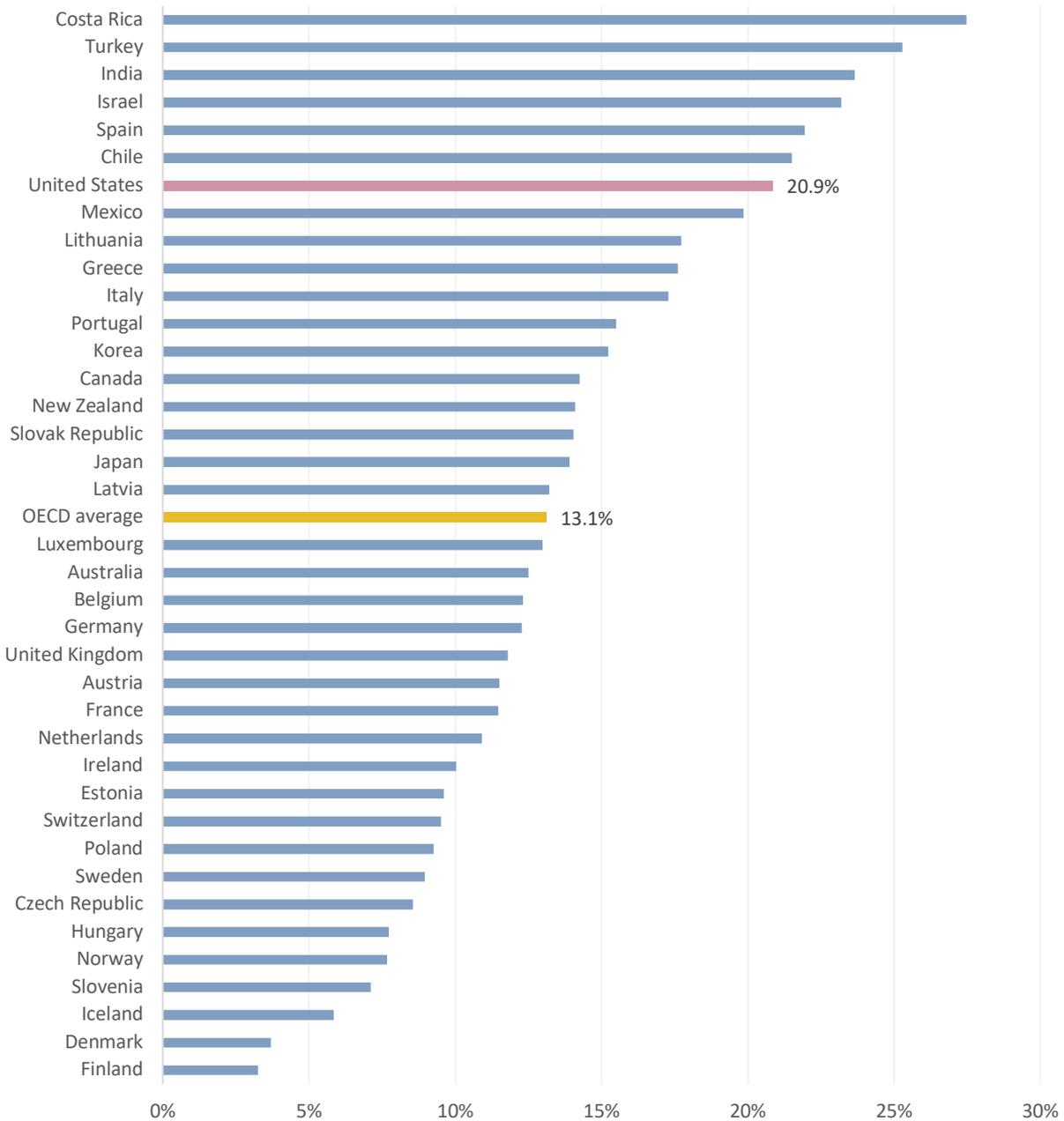
Chasms between pronounced commitment and reality are longstanding. But, as with the *Leandro* rulings, the Covid-19 pandemic has rendered our breaches more readily apparent and more incapable of being ignored. As our colleague Alexandra Sirota of the North Carolina Budget & Tax Center explained,

We've started to see some of the deprivations more clearly with Covid. But they were already there. We chose not to pay attention to them. What would we have done if sustaining our children had actually been our main goal? We've seen some of what we need in terms of cash support, child tax credits and the like. ... But we don't press the big question—how will we make sure our children thrive? Think how astonishing it is that during Covid, when schools closed, we learned that we had no structure to actually feed our kids. People sprang into action in amazing ways. But think of a society not being prepared to feed its kids. We're used to things as they are.

In times of disease and unemployment, the toughest burdens have fallen disproportionately on our most vulnerable and, too frequently, on our youngest members. We have been insufficiently well prepared to feed, nurture, protect, care for and educate our kids. Volunteer organizations have hustled mightily to stave off disaster. But as a society we've been stunned to learn that though we are one of the most economically vibrant states of the richest nation on earth, it has not always been clear that we can keep our kids from going hungry. Few things could speak more poorly of our stewardship.

Appendix 1

Figure 1. Child poverty rate by country



Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Poverty Rate Indicator, doi: 10.1787/0fe1315d-en

Appendix 2

Table 1. North Carolina food insecurity rate by county, 2019 and projected 2021

County	2019 Food insecurity rate	2019 Child food insecurity rate	2021 Food insecurity rate	2021 Child food insecurity rate
Alamance County	13.7%	19.2%	15.3%	21.7%
Alexander County	14.3%	19.5%	16.0%	22.2%
Alleghany County	18.5%	26.8%	19.3%	28.0%
Anson County	14.5%	25.5%	16.4%	28.8%
Ashe County	15.4%	19.4%	16.5%	21.0%
Avery County	16.0%	19.5%	17.1%	21.2%
Beaufort County	15.6%	23.5%	16.7%	25.1%
Bertie County	15.7%	30.8%	16.7%	32.3%
Bladen County	17.1%	25.8%	18.3%	27.7%
Brunswick County	13.5%	19.3%	14.9%	21.5%
Buncombe County	13.5%	15.7%	15.5%	18.9%
Burke County	16.4%	21.7%	17.9%	24.0%
Cabarrus County	10.8%	14.2%	12.3%	16.7%
Caldwell County	15.6%	19.4%	17.4%	22.2%
Camden County	11.5%	16.4%	12.4%	17.7%
Carteret County	14.2%	17.5%	15.0%	18.5%
Caswell County	15.0%	24.3%	16.5%	26.8%
Catawba County	13.5%	17.0%	15.3%	19.9%
Chatham County	11.7%	15.2%	12.8%	16.7%
Cherokee County	16.6%	22.1%	17.8%	23.9%
Chowan County	14.5%	22.8%	15.3%	23.9%
Clay County	15.4%	20.6%	16.7%	22.6%
Cleveland County	16.4%	23.2%	18.1%	26.0%
Columbus County	17.0%	26.4%	18.7%	29.1%
Craven County	14.9%	21.2%	16.2%	23.3%
Cumberland County	16.0%	23.6%	18.2%	27.3%
Currituck County	11.9%	14.6%	13.0%	16.1%
Dare County	12.3%	16.1%	13.6%	18.1%
Davidson County	14.7%	19.4%	16.4%	21.9%
Davie County	13.6%	18.1%	15.1%	20.4%
Duplin County	15.6%	23.5%	16.5%	24.8%
Durham County	12.1%	17.6%	13.8%	20.2%
Edgecombe County	16.7%	29.5%	19.2%	33.7%
Forsyth County	13.2%	18.7%	15.0%	21.7%
Franklin County	12.6%	18.5%	14.1%	20.8%

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Gaston County	14.3%	18.8%	16.2%	22.0%
Gates County	14.0%	22.6%	15.0%	24.1%
Graham County	17.6%	22.2%	19.0%	24.4%
Granville County	12.4%	19.0%	13.7%	21.0%
Greene County	16.1%	25.1%	17.2%	26.8%
Guilford County	13.1%	19.4%	15.1%	22.7%
Halifax County	17.6%	29.5%	19.6%	32.7%
Harnett County	14.0%	18.9%	15.4%	21.0%
Haywood County	14.9%	19.4%	16.5%	22.0%
Henderson County	12.9%	16.1%	14.4%	18.4%
Hertford County	15.7%	28.3%	16.7%	29.7%
Hoke County	15.6%	22.6%	17.6%	26.0%
Hyde County	19.2%	29.1%	18.8%	27.8%
Iredell County	12.1%	15.6%	13.7%	18.1%
Jackson County	15.8%	19.7%	16.9%	21.2%
Johnston County	12.1%	16.5%	13.5%	18.7%
Jones County	18.1%	27.6%	19.2%	29.2%
Lee County	14.3%	19.8%	15.8%	22.2%
Lenoir County	17.7%	29.1%	19.3%	31.5%
Lincoln County	13.0%	16.2%	14.4%	18.4%
McDowell County	16.5%	20.4%	17.9%	22.6%
Macon County	15.7%	20.2%	16.8%	21.9%
Madison County	15.5%	17.3%	16.9%	19.5%
Martin County	15.6%	25.9%	16.9%	27.8%
Mecklenburg County	10.8%	14.7%	12.7%	17.9%
Mitchell County	15.6%	19.2%	16.9%	21.2%
Montgomery County	13.8%	19.7%	15.2%	21.7%
Moore County	12.6%	17.1%	13.9%	19.1%
Nash County	13.7%	21.3%	15.6%	24.2%
New Hanover County	14.3%	17.2%	15.8%	19.5%
Northampton County	15.5%	29.8%	16.8%	31.9%
Onslow County	15.4%	19.5%	16.6%	21.3%
Orange County	11.6%	11.4%	12.6%	13.0%
Pamlico County	13.8%	20.0%	15.0%	22.0%
Pasquotank County	14.1%	21.7%	15.4%	23.7%
Pender County	13.2%	18.0%	14.4%	19.8%
Perquimans County	14.5%	20.8%	15.2%	21.7%
Person County	14.3%	25.0%	15.7%	27.2%
Pitt County	15.4%	21.9%	16.9%	24.2%
Polk County	14.0%	17.8%	15.2%	19.7%

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Randolph County	14.6%	18.7%	16.1%	21.1%
Richmond County	18.1%	29.3%	20.1%	32.5%
Robeson County	19.1%	27.3%	21.1%	30.6%
Rockingham County	15.3%	21.3%	17.1%	24.2%
Rowan County	14.4%	20.6%	16.0%	23.1%
Rutherford County	17.0%	22.9%	18.8%	25.8%
Sampson County	15.1%	22.3%	16.2%	23.9%
Scotland County	19.7%	31.4%	22.1%	35.5%
Stanly County	13.5%	19.0%	14.7%	20.8%
Stokes County	14.2%	18.2%	15.7%	20.5%
Surry County	15.9%	20.1%	17.1%	21.9%
Swain County	16.9%	22.0%	17.9%	23.4%
Transylvania County	14.4%	20.8%	15.4%	22.3%
Tyrrell County	18.1%	31.5%	19.6%	33.9%
Union County	9.4%	11.7%	10.7%	13.6%
Vance County	16.6%	27.3%	18.8%	30.9%
Wake County	10.1%	12.1%	11.5%	14.3%
Warren County	14.9%	26.2%	16.9%	29.5%
Washington County	17.1%	32.2%	18.6%	34.6%
Watauga County	15.2%	16.1%	16.0%	17.2%
Wayne County	15.4%	23.7%	16.9%	26.1%
Wilkes County	16.3%	22.1%	17.4%	23.7%
Wilson County	15.9%	25.5%	17.4%	27.8%
Yadkin County	14.5%	19.7%	15.9%	21.9%
Yancey County	16.4%	20.0%	17.6%	21.8%

Source: Feeding America

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Table 2. SNAP participation rates for all eligible people

	2016	2017	2018	Change 2016-2018
North Carolina	84	74	69	-15
District of Columbia	92	90	82	-10
Arkansas	72	68	66	-6
Mississippi	76	74	70	-6
Rhode Island	100	100	95	-5
Florida	90	86	86	-4
Maine	85	84	81	-4
Alabama	82	80	79	-3
Idaho	77	75	74	-3
Kansas	71	66	68	-3
North Dakota	66	63	63	-3
South Carolina	80	79	77	-3
California	72	71	70	-2
Indiana	76	73	74	-2
Michigan	91	89	89	-2
New Hampshire	82	74	80	-2
Georgia	84	84	83	-1
Minnesota	77	75	76	-1
New Jersey	82	79	81	-1
Tennessee	91	91	90	-1
Virginia	73	73	72	-1
Delaware	100	98	100	0
Illinois	100	100	100	0
Iowa	88	90	88	0
Missouri	87	85	87	0
New York	89	88	89	0
Ohio	84	83	84	0
Oregon	100	100	100	0
Washington	98	93	98	0
Wisconsin	92	90	92	0
Colorado	78	75	79	1
Connecticut	92	90	93	1
Kentucky	74	75	75	1
Louisiana	82	86	83	1
Nebraska	78	78	79	1
West Virginia	87	85	88	1
Wyoming	53	49	54	1
Maryland	89	87	91	2

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Massachusetts	92	88	94	2
Montana	76	81	78	2
Vermont	90	94	92	2
Nevada	89	91	92	3
Texas	72	75	75	3
Utah	74	72	77	3
Arizona	73	77	77	4
Pennsylvania	95	94	99	4
New Mexico	93	97	98	5
Oklahoma	80	83	85	5
South Dakota	72	76	78	6
Hawaii	80	79	88	8
Alaska	70	77	89	19

Source: Cunningham, U.S. Department of Agriculture

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