

## Documenting Poverty in North Carolina

Maureen Berner, Ph.D., Professor  
Alexander Vazquez, MPA Candidate  
School of Government University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
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This paper provides 1) the most common definitions for poverty; 2) new perspectives on how it should be measured; and 3) accompanying current data for North Carolina. In sum, by any measure, on average, North Carolina fares worse than most of the rest of the U.S. in terms of poverty, and is currently experiencing the highest levels since the recession of the early 1980s. Several measures show economic hardship has been increasing since before the recession. It impacts children more than adults, and families more than single individuals. The poorest areas of the state are wide swaths of rural eastern and mountainous western counties. In addition, all urban areas in the state have at least one pocket of severe economic hardship.

### 1. Definitions of Poverty

#### *The poverty line*

Government generally measures poverty for individuals and families via income, using a 50-year old measure established called the poverty line<sup>1</sup>. It represented three times what a family would pay for the least expensive (“economy”) food plan, as defined by the USDA in 1963. The thresholds have been indexed for inflation annually.<sup>2</sup> Depending on household composition and number, a family’s

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<sup>1</sup> *The Development and History of the U.S. Poverty Thresholds — A Brief Overview* by Gordon Fisher, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, found at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/papers/hptgssiv.htm>. Accessed December 31, 2014. Fisher also produced an unpublished 88 page paper on the development of the measure available at the Census Bureau’s web site on poverty measurement found at <https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/about/overview/measure.html>.

<sup>2</sup> The federal Office of Management and Budget designated the Census Bureau as the official determiner of the poverty thresholds – the official measure of poverty. Annual guidelines used for administrative purposes are then established by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in line with those thresholds under the authority of 42 U.S.C. 9902(2). Accessed December 30, 2014.

income must fall beneath this threshold to be considered in poverty.<sup>3</sup> The measure has been criticized for decades, but remains in use because there is no politically or methodologically acceptable alternative.<sup>4</sup> The official poverty line is the most conservative measure in common use. Interestingly, according to its developer, Molly Orshansky, it was not meant as a measure of adequate income, but a measure of inadequacy of income – rather than a measure of what is enough, she sought to measure what was clearly not enough to maintain a household.

The federal poverty line is often the default used by lower levels of government for their own purposes, although there can be exceptions.<sup>5</sup> For example, when implementing federal programs, state or local agencies in North Carolina often refer to federal thresholds. The 2014 poverty line thresholds developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services are:

Persons in family/ Household	Poverty threshold
1	\$11,670
2	15,730
3	19,790
4	23,850
5	27,910

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<sup>3</sup> Pre-tax income, not including capital gains or the cash value of government benefits such as food stamps. Non-relatives, such as roommates, are not considered in a household for these purposes.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, “Lies, Damn Lies, & Poverty Statistics: The Census Bureau Is Right to Reconsider the Official Poverty Line” an on-line commentary posted July 2010 from the by Jeannette Wicks-Lim at the Political Economy Research Institute at University of Massachusetts Amherst. A 1995 National Academy of Sciences report recommended the development of new poverty measures. Based in part on this report, a supplemental poverty measure has been developed that takes into account the value of many government benefit programs and their impact on moving people out of poverty. Data on this supplemental measure are discussed in an October 2014 Census Bureau document found here:

<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2014/demo/p60-251.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Additional efforts have been made to develop state or local specific measures such as the Wisconsin Poverty Measure developed by Chung, Isaacs, and Smeeding (2013). However, as Chung et al. state, despite the need for an improved measure for poverty, “[T]he technical difficulties involved, such as the lack of data and techniques needed to identify accurate information about comprehensive needs and resources, make the analysis expensive and impede research on this topic” (526).

### *Census definition versus definitions used for Federal program eligibility*

Census uses the poverty line definition when reporting on the levels of poverty in any geographic area, such as city, counties, and states. However, poverty is also defined by participation in programs targeting the needy. These programs often use an eligibility criterion higher than the official poverty line, but generally a multiplier of it. A common example is eligibility for the National School Lunch (free and reduced price lunch) and related federal programs. Children can participate if they come from a household with income up to 185% of the federal poverty line, as listed below. The percent of children in schools who qualify for free and reduced price lunch is probably the most common measure of childhood poverty used in program administration decisions.

Persons in family/ Household	185% of poverty threshold
1	\$21,590
2	29,101
3	36,612
4	44,123
5	51,634

Being deemed 'poor' or 'needy' by the free and reduced lunch or similar program standard often serves as the criteria for other programs – in other words, if a child is eligible for free and reduced price lunch, he or she may be automatically eligible for other assistance. The same logic applies at other vertical levels of program administration. Programs targeting poor communities, such as the Community Development Block Grant program may base area eligibility on the percent of children in the school system who qualify for free and reduced price lunch program.

In this way, the poverty line definition is the fundamental building block upon which most other definitions are based. And in turn, the entire conversation around poverty in the US - trends, programs, and who is affected, is based fundamentally on how much income is coming into a household.

### **New Perspectives on Understanding Poverty**

#### *Using income inequality*

The national conversation and academic research has shifted in recent years to changes in household status across the whole economy, going beyond the

traditional question of how many people were 'poor'. This research tends to be on economic inequality, or the distribution of income and/or relative income growth or decline. It asks where income is concentrated across the economic spectrum, and whether or not people are worse off or better than they were over time, relative to everyone else. In terms of poverty, the focus tends to be on whether or not people are climbing out of poverty, and thus whether the share of the population who are poor is decreasing, or whether more are falling into it, and thus the share of the population who are poor is growing.

### *Using material deprivation*

The traditional concept of poverty based on income is being challenged in academic research. Income measures only account for resources available, not whether those resources are sufficient. The poverty line does not account for costs of housing, food, transportation, etc. There is a movement in the international community, primarily in western, developed countries such as Canada and in northern Europe, and western-based international organizations to define poverty as material deprivation.<sup>6</sup> These measures revolve around whether a household can meet its basic needs such as housing, food, water and energy. Material deprivation measures by definition account for differences in cost of living across geography. Some researchers argue material deprivation measures are more accurate, comparable and methodologically sound.

Perhaps the most common measure of poverty from this perspective is food insecurity, which measures if a household can provide sufficient, predictable food to maintain an active, healthy life.<sup>7</sup> It is likely that a struggling family will skip meals before allowing power to be cut off or eviction from a home. Research around food insecurity and hunger has seen a dramatic increase in the past decade.<sup>8</sup> Federal programs addressing food insecurity and related public health issues such as obesity and diabetes have also seen a surge.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The most important contribution is probably the discussions included in the 2012 Oxford University Press volume *Counting the Poor: New Thinking About European Poverty Measures and Lessons for the United States* (Besharov and Couch, eds), especially the material addressing the idea poverty through a lens of resources (income, U.S. based conceptualization) versus social exclusion (European based conceptualization).

<sup>7</sup> Also developed, defined and measured by the USDA. A description of this measure can be found at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx>

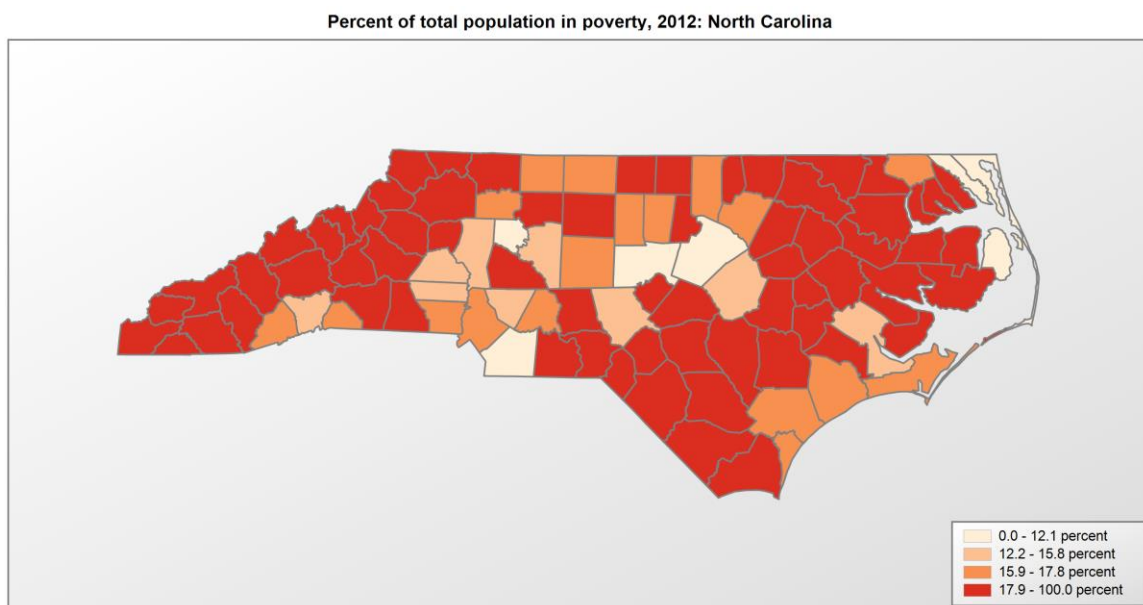
<sup>8</sup> See list of references attached for several examples.

<sup>9</sup> See description of the USDA Strikeforce initiative at [http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=STRIKE\\_FORCE](http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=STRIKE_FORCE).

## Where is N.C. in terms of poverty according to these measures?

Using the official poverty line, at around 18 percent, North Carolina overall has a higher portion of its population living in poverty than the U.S. average, approximately 16 percent. Figure 1 below shows the percent of the population living in different poverty ranges in each NC county according to 2012 Census data. Poverty rates range from around 10 percent in Camden and Dare counties to Scotland, Northampton and Robeson Counties having 30 or more percent of the population living at or below the poverty line. There is a clear pattern of high poverty in the eastern rural and western mountain areas of the state. Data for all counties are included in Appendix I.

Figure 1: Percent of Total Population in Poverty in North Carolina by County, 2012



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/county-level-data-sets/poverty.aspx#.VKLuv7j7DaA> accessed on December 28, 2014. Original data source: Bureau of the Census, [Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates](#).

In addition, within some of the relatively better off counties, an analysis using more precise data by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Center for Urban and Regional Studies on distressed communities showed county averages

often mask pockets of deep poverty.<sup>10</sup> To be considered severely distressed, census tracts, usually representing an area of approximately 4000 people, must meet three criteria: unemployment equal to 14.5 percent, less than or equal to \$16,921, and a poverty rate of greater than or equal to 24 percent. The most important take-away from the report is that some pockets of urban poverty are deeper than those found in broader rural poor areas. The most distressed neighborhoods in the state are majority urban, and include, in rank order:

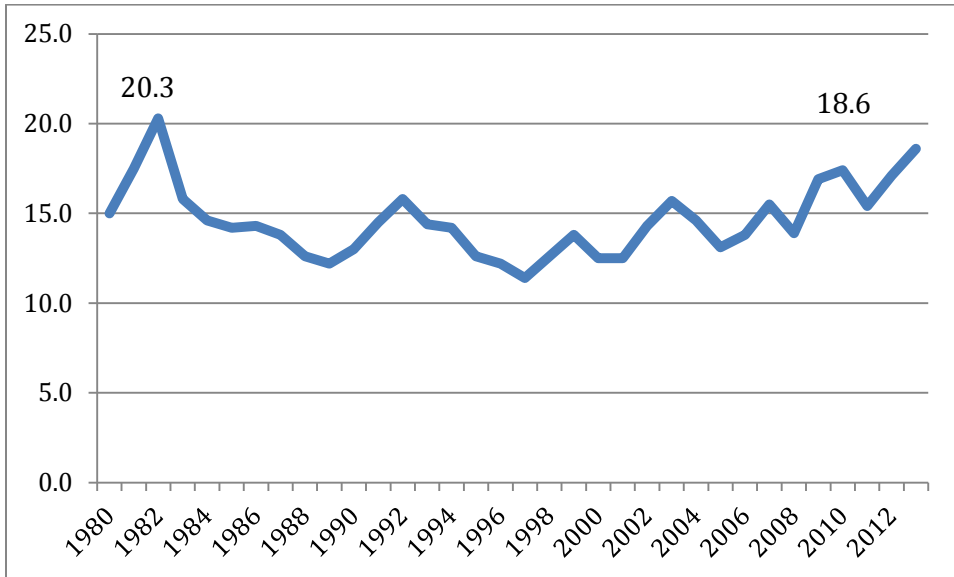
1. East Kinston area of Kinston
2. Lockwood area of Charlotte
3. University City South and College Downs areas of Charlotte
4. Leonard Ave area of High Point
5. Waughtown and Columbia Heights areas of Winston-Salem
6. Grier area of Charlotte
7. Downtown, Roundtree and Richardson Square areas of Wilson
8. Capitol Drive, Jackson Homes, and Boulevard areas of Charlotte
9. Central Raleigh and South Park areas of Raleigh
10. Northeast Winston area of Winston-Salem

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<sup>10</sup> The CURS report is titled *North Carolina's Distressed Urban Tracts: A View of the State's Economically Disadvantaged Communities*; a summary and link to the report can be found at <http://curs.unc.edu/2014/06/08/curs-releases-north-carolinas-distressed-urban-tracts-view-states-economically-disadvantaged-communities/>

Over the past 15 years, the percent of individuals in poverty in NC has been rising in fits and starts, as seen below. However, the general trend is a rising level of poverty, and it is the highest point since 1982.

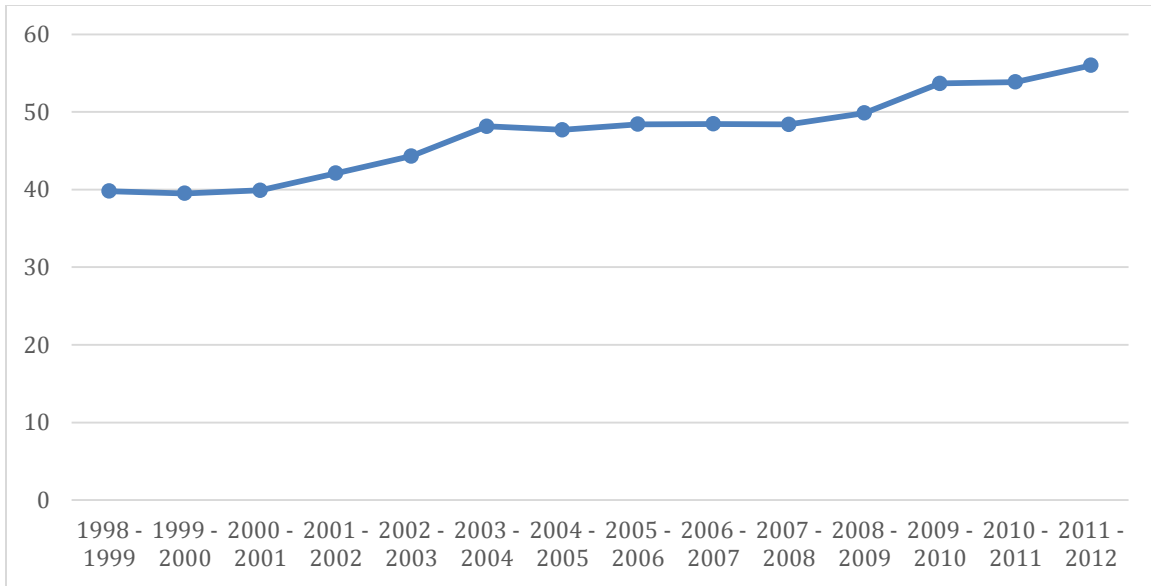
Figure 2: Percent of NC Population in Poverty 1980-2013



Source: Author, based on data from Historical Poverty Tables of the U.S. Census found at <https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/historical/people.html> accessed January 4, 2015.

Using the percent of children who qualify for free and reduced price lunch (185% of the poverty line) as a measure of poverty, we see the same pattern, but much higher numbers. Appendix II includes data for all NC Counties using 2014 data. Figure 3 shows the trend for the state as a whole over time. With approximately 56% of all public school children enrolled in the program, a record high, a majority of NC children live in poor households

Figure 3 Percent of Public School Students Enrolled in National School Meals Program (Free and Reduced Price Lunch) in NC 1998-2012

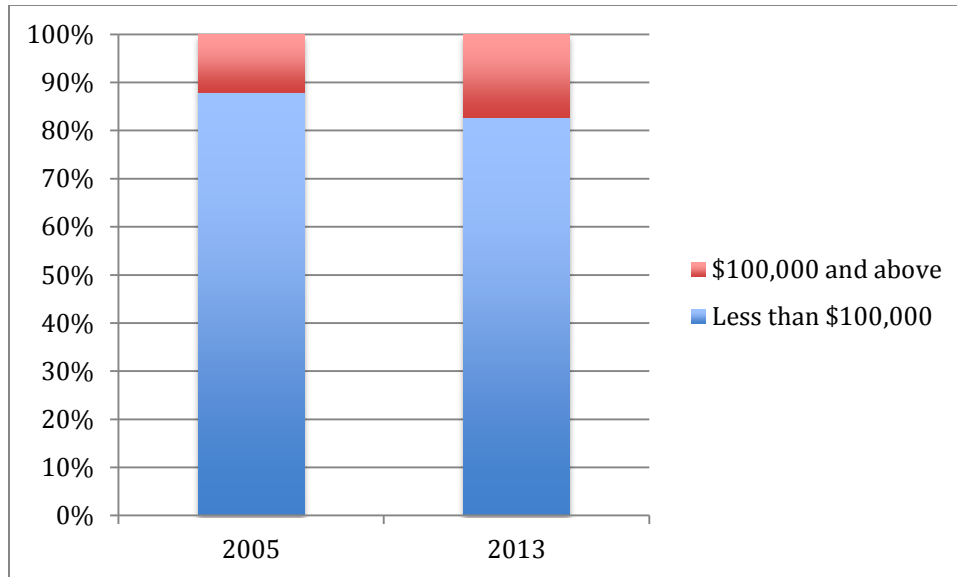


Source: Author using data from the Casey Foundation - <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/2239-percent-of-students-enrolled-in-free-and-reduced-lunch?loc=35#detailed/2/any/false/1021,909,857,105,118/any/4682> accessed Jan 5, 2015.



Economic inequality figures provide a broader perspective because it includes how people are faring across all income groups. A full distribution chart is located in Appendix IV, but as found in other states, there is downward pressure in income distribution in North Carolina. In 2005, those making \$100,000 or more comprised 12.1 percent of the population, but that amount increased to 17.2 percent by 2013.

Figure 4: Comparing Share of Total Income Shared by Higher Earning Households



Source: US Census Bureau – American Fact Finder <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/searchresults.xhtml>? accessed January 5, 2015.

Using food insecurity as a measure, North Carolina is again worse than the U.S. States as a whole, and children are more affected than the general population. Data from the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina, however, suggests that households have been facing a steadily increasing level of hardship, with more food than ever being received by needy families through its member non-profit community food pantries.

Figure 5: Percent of Population Living in Food Insecurity Household In N.C. 2012

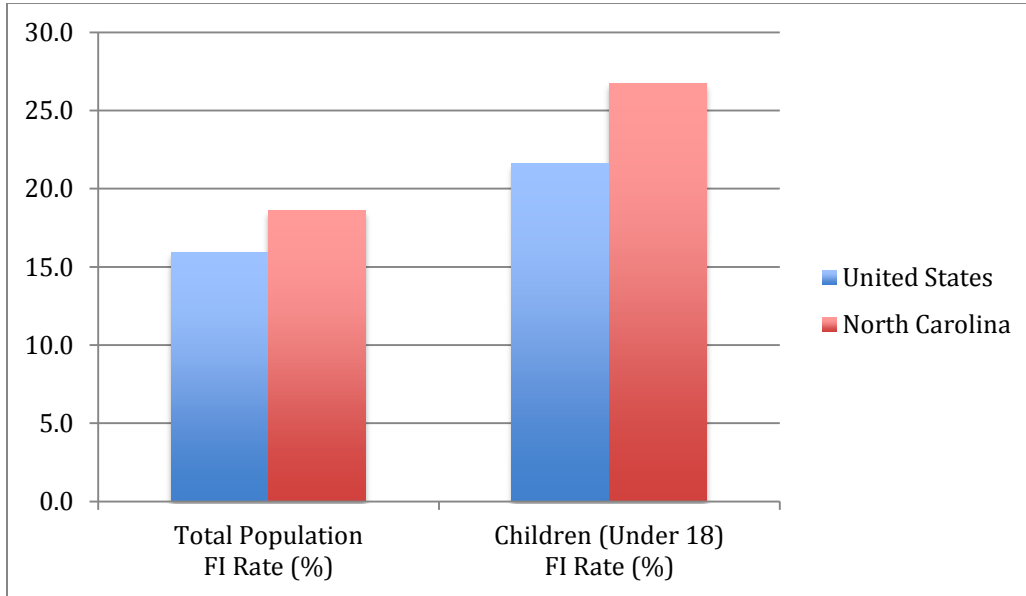
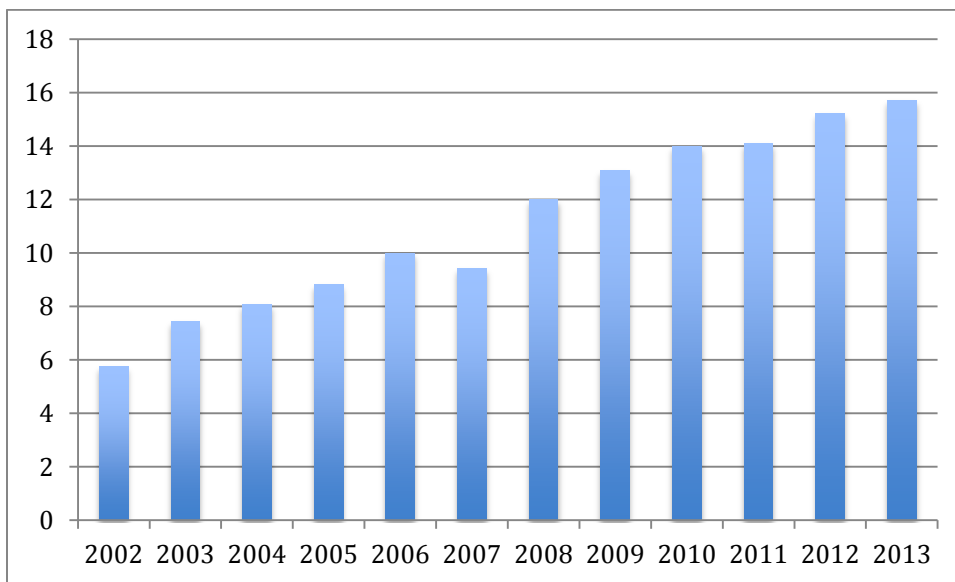


Figure 6: Median Pounds of Food Per Person Being Distributed by Food Pantry members of Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina 2002-2013.



Sources: Figure 5, Author, based on data from Feeding America  
[http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/map-the-meal-gap/2012/nc\\_allcountiescfi\\_2012.pdf](http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/map-the-meal-gap/2012/nc_allcountiescfi_2012.pdf) on January 1, 2015. Figure 6,  
Author calculations based on data supplied in August 2014 by Food Bank of  
Central and Eastern North Carolina.

## Appendix I: Poverty Data Using Traditional Measures for N.C. Counties

Area_Name	Percent of Total Population living in Poverty	Percent of Children (ages 0-17) living in Poverty	Median Household Income (in \$)
<b>United States</b>	15.9	22.6	51,371
<b>North Carolina</b>	18.0	25.8	45,195
Alamance County	19.5	29.2	41,394
Alexander County	17.1	25.0	39,655
Alleghany County	21.0	34.7	34,046
Anson County	26.8	36.6	32,339
Ashe County	20.2	31.0	34,080
Avery County	22.7	32.4	34,727
Beaufort County	19.0	30.3	38,256
Bertie County	27.0	37.8	30,414
Bladen County	25.5	35.0	32,766
Brunswick County	15.8	30.1	48,624
Buncombe County	17.7	26.0	43,146
Burke County	19.1	27.2	38,581
Cabarrus County	13.2	18.9	55,531
Caldwell County	20.4	28.6	35,127
Camden County	9.7	14.5	53,563
Carteret County	15.4	26.4	48,930
Caswell County	20.8	30.6	39,615
Catawba County	18.5	28.9	42,080
Chatham County	12.7	20.3	55,371
Cherokee County	25.1	37.6	31,370
Chowan County	20.8	31.8	37,458
Clay County	18.5	33.1	36,871
Cleveland County	22.9	35.6	38,265
Columbus County	25.3	35.0	33,765
Craven County	16.4	25.9	47,087
Cumberland County	17.0	25.4	45,110
Currituck County	12.5	20.2	54,822
Dare County	10.7	20.1	51,900
Davidson County	16.5	25.0	43,824
Davie County	12.8	19.1	49,984
Duplin County	23.6	32.6	36,075
Durham County	19.3	27.6	50,889
Edgecombe County	28.1	45.7	32,002
Forsyth County	21.2	32.4	43,049
Franklin County	16.7	24.2	42,346
Gaston County	17.8	27.3	41,614
Gates County	17.4	26.3	44,273
Graham County	22.5	33.8	32,883
Granville County	19.9	25.0	46,303
Greene County	27.1	35.9	35,050
Guilford County	18.1	25.3	43,299

Halifax County	29.2	43.1	31,253
Harnett County	18.9	26.3	44,998
Haywood County	16.1	27.7	40,022
Henderson County	14.2	23.0	45,168
Hertford County	30.5	38.9	31,861
Hoke County	20.7	28.0	44,717
Hyde County	24.3	31.8	35,301
Iredell County	14.4	20.0	49,666
Jackson County	22.4	29.7	37,049
Johnston County	16.8	24.9	48,773
Jones County	20.1	33.2	35,159
Lee County	17.8	27.8	43,424
Lenoir County	23.6	36.6	35,634
Lincoln County	14.6	21.7	47,799
McDowell County	20.2	30.4	36,584
Macon County	20.4	34.6	36,438
Madison County	19.9	29.7	37,644
Martin County	24.7	40.1	33,159
Mecklenburg County	16.1	22.3	55,392
Mitchell County	20.0	29.3	36,210
Montgomery County	23.6	34.9	35,272
Moore County	16.0	26.5	49,670
Nash County	20.8	29.4	40,937
New Hanover County	15.9	22.3	50,890
Northampton County	31.8	48.0	31,217
Onslow County	14.9	20.4	44,263
Orange County	16.4	15.3	53,026
Pamlico County	17.3	31.8	41,004
Pasquotank County	17.8	28.4	43,935
Pender County	19.3	27.0	43,318
Perquimans County	17.8	31.2	42,494
Person County	16.2	23.8	42,546
Pitt County	24.0	29.9	39,343
Polk County	18.3	29.5	41,719
Randolph County	17.9	27.8	41,815
Richmond County	24.6	36.3	30,726
Robeson County	34.7	47.8	29,965
Rockingham County	19.1	27.6	37,577
Rowan County	19.2	27.2	40,400
Rutherford County	18.2	28.8	34,193
Sampson County	21.9	31.2	37,420
Scotland County	30.7	46.8	31,704
Stanly County	17.2	25.4	42,816
Stokes County	17.8	25.1	42,272
Surry County	18.6	26.6	36,934
Swain County	20.9	32.3	36,280
Transylvania County	15.8	29.7	40,642
Tyrrell County	28.9	39.7	30,728
Union County	11.6	15.6	61,260

Vance County	25.8	39.7	34,371
Wake County	11.6	15.4	64,107
Warren County	25.4	35.5	33,068
Washington County	27.4	43.0	32,545
Watauga County	29.5	22.2	38,563
Wayne County	23.4	35.1	38,776
Wilkes County	19.9	28.3	35,362
Wilson County	23.8	36.7	37,440
Yadkin County	19.3	31.2	40,012
Yancey County	20.3	31.0	36,019

Source: found at Dept. of Agriculture, Economic Research Service  
<http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/county-level-data-sets/poverty.aspx#.VKLuv7j7DaA> on December 28, 2014. Original data source: Bureau of the Census, [Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates](#)

**Appendix II: Poverty Data Using Percent of Students Enrolled in Free and Reduced Price Lunch for N.C. Counties**

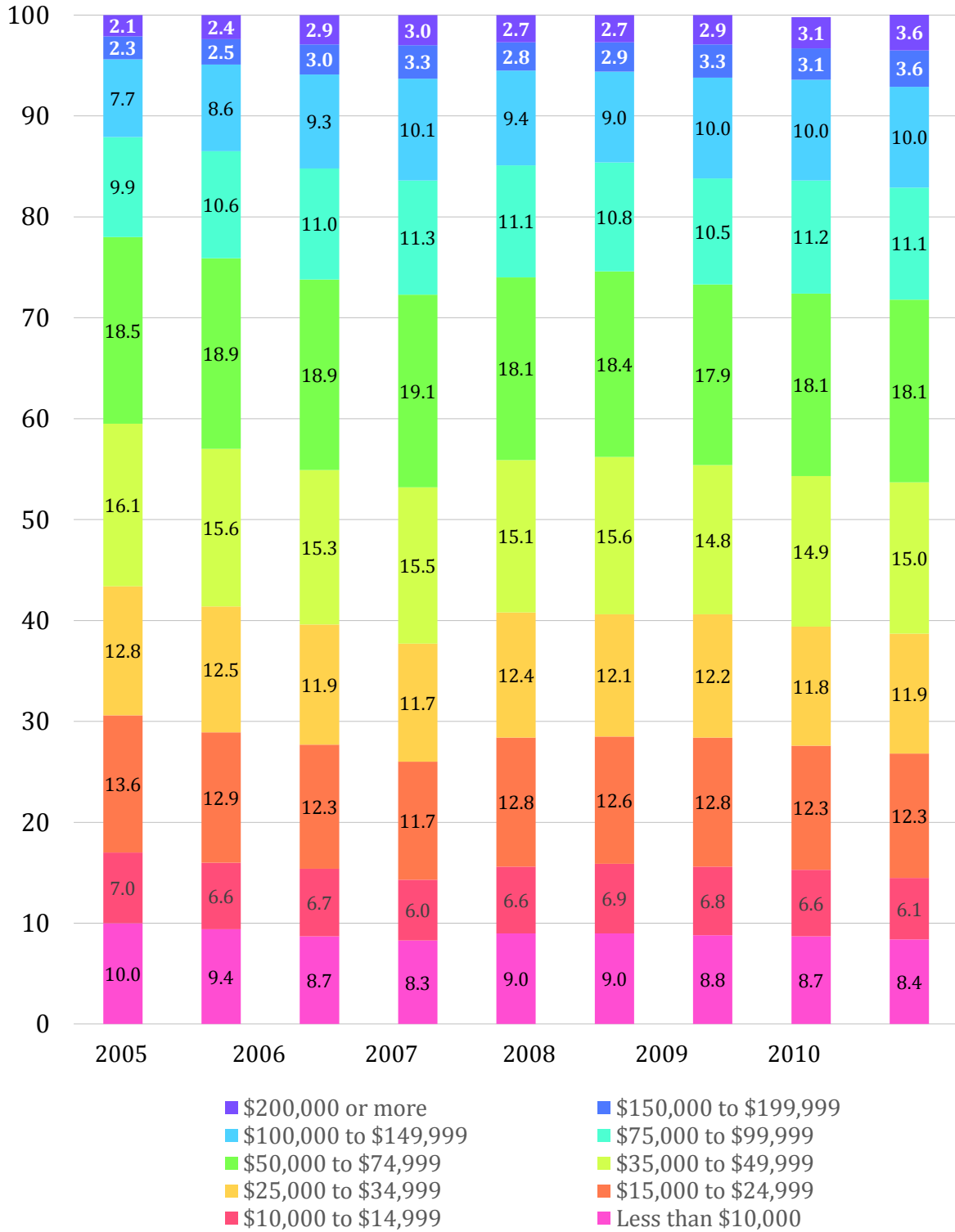
<b>Students Enrolled in F &amp; R Lunch (%)</b>	
North Carolina	56.0
Alamance County	55.6
Alexander County	54.2
Alleghany County	63.3
Anson County	79.5
Ashe County	75.6
Avery County	60.0
Beaufort County	72.0
Bertie County	83.7
Bladen County	79.1
Brunswick County	63.7
Buncombe County	55.5
Burke County	63.0
Cabarrus County	48.3
Caldwell County	59.7
Camden County	76.3
Carteret County	45.1
Caswell County	69.4
Catawba County	54.9
Chatham County	52.0
Cherokee County	69.6
Chowan County	68.3
Clay County	60.8
Cleveland County	64.9
Columbus County	75.1
Craven County	58.6
Cumberland County	51.1
Currituck County	36.9
Dare County	47.3
Davidson County	54.5
Davie County	45.1
Duplin County	76.3
Durham County	63.6
Edgecombe County	85.0
Forsyth County	55.1
Franklin County	61.3
Gaston County	59.9
Gates County	58.8
Graham County	63.6
Granville County	51.0
Greene County	84.3
Guilford County	58.7
Halifax County	82.3
Harnett County	57.9

Haywood County	54.9
Henderson County	54.9
Hertford County	85.0
Hoke County	69.4
Hyde County	68.6
Iredell County	43.0
Jackson County	58.2
Johnston County	45.9
Jones County	91.2
Lee County	64.4
Lenoir County	76.9
Lincoln County	49.5
Macon County	65.2
Madison County	63.0
Martin County	73.2
McDowell County	69.9
Mecklenburg County	54.0
Mitchell County	58.9
Montgomery County	76.5
Moore County	45.9
Nash County	69.6
New Hanover County	51.9
Northampton County	98.2
Onslow County	47.7
Orange County	32.2
Pamlico County	64.2
Pasquotank County	61.7
Pender County	63.7
Perquimans County	69.2
Person County	63.9
Pitt County	61.4
Polk County	64.3
Randolph County	58.6
Richmond County	75.8
Robeson County	83.8
Rockingham County	60.0
Rowan County	61.9
Rutherford County	70.6
Sampson County	73.4
Scotland County	79.8
Stanly County	56.0
Stokes County	52.0
Surry County	62.5
Swain County	66.8
Transylvania County	58.8
Tyrrell County	81.2
Union County	36.1
Vance County	95.2
Wake County	38.6



Warren County	86.5
Washington County	93.3
Watauga County	41.3
Wayne County	66.3
Wilkes County	65.9
Wilson County	64.4
Yadkin County	55.8
Yancey County	59.6

**Appendix III: Household Income Distribution (Adjusted for Inflation in NC)  
2005-2013**



Source: authors based on data from US Census Bureau – American Fact Finder  
<http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/searchresults.xhtml?> accessed  
January 5, 2015.

**Appendix IV: Poverty Data Using Food Insecurity Measures for N.C. Counties**

	<b>Total Population FI Rate (%)</b>	<b>Children (Under 18) FI Rate (%)</b>
United States	15.9	21.6
North Carolina	18.6	26.7
Alamance County	17.1	27.0
Alexander County	15.9	29.1
Alleghany County	16.4	31.8
Anson County	22.7	28.0
Ashe County	16.3	29.9
Avery County	16.8	28.7
Beaufort County	19.2	27.5
Bertie County	24.1	26.9
Bladen County	22.0	29.2
Brunswick County	15.9	27.6
Buncombe County	15.5	25.9
Burke County	16.9	28.6
Cabarrus County	14.7	22.5
Caldwell County	17.2	29.4
Camden County	12.2	20.2
Carteret County	15.0	25.9
Caswell County	19.3	27.7
Catawba County	16.3	27.3
Chatham County	12.6	22.4
Cherokee County	16.0	28.1
Chowan County	21.2	27.7
Clay County	15.7	31.8
Cleveland County	19.0	27.8
Columbus County	21.4	29.9
Craven County	18.1	26.6
Cumberland County	20.5	24.5
Currituck County	12.2	21.5
Dare County	14.9	26.4
Davidson County	15.9	26.8
Davie County	13.4	24.8
Duplin County	18.6	29.1
Durham County	19.1	22.3
Edgecombe County	25.7	28.8
Forsyth County	17.8	25.0
Franklin County	16.5	23.1
Gaston County	17.6	26.8
Gates County	16.8	23.8
Graham County	18.3	29.9
Granville County	17.2	22.5
Greene County	19.4	27.4
Guilford County	19.3	23.4

Halifax County	25.1	28.1
Harnett County	17.8	25.4
Haywood County	14.3	27.9
Henderson County	13.0	24.7
Hertford County	24.0	24.4
Hoke County	19.1	25.3
Hyde County	20.1	28.1
Iredell County	15.4	24.4
Jackson County	16.3	26.6
Johnston County	15.3	25.0
Jones County	19.3	25.1
Lee County	17.7	27.9
Lenoir County	22.1	27.4
Lincoln County	15.0	27.0
McDowell County	16.9	30.9
Macon County	16.2	30.6
Madison County	15.2	26.9
Martin County	22.3	28.5
Mecklenburg County	18.1	22.3
Mitchell County	16.5	30.1
Montgomery County	19.1	31.4
Moore County	15.3	25.4
Nash County	21.0	25.1
New Hanover County	17.4	24.7
Northampton County	23.7	28.6
Onslow County	17.1	24.4
Orange County	15.6	22.2
Pamlico County	15.7	25.9
Pasquotank County	20.4	24.2
Pender County	17.0	27.1
Perquimans County	17.8	25.3
Person County	17.8	22.7
Pitt County	21.5	24.1
Polk County	14.2	27.3
Randolph County	15.4	28.0
Richmond County	21.9	29.0
Robeson County	22.8	34.4
Rockingham County	18.1	27.3
Rowan County	17.4	27.3
Rutherford County	19.0	30.6
Sampson County	17.9	26.2
Scotland County	26.4	34.3
Stanly County	15.8	25.3
Stokes County	14.9	27.3
Surry County	15.9	27.9
Swain County	18.1	33.1
Transylvania County	14.8	28.8
Tyrrell County	19.2	30.3
Union County	12.4	21.0

Vance County	24.9	31.2
Wake County	14.9	20.2
Warren County	23.5	24.9
Washington County	23.2	28.7
Watauga County	19.0	26.1
Wayne County	19.6	26.4
Wilkes County	17.3	31.0
Wilson County	22.6	28.4
Yadkin County	14.5	27.9
Yancey County	16.0	31.7

Source: Feeding America [http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/map-the-meal-gap/2012/nc\\_allcountiescfi\\_2012.pdf](http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/map-the-meal-gap/2012/nc_allcountiescfi_2012.pdf) on January 1, 2015.

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