



MOUNTAIN POVERTY AND RESILIENCE

Wilkes County, North Carolina

NC Poverty Research Fund • Summer 2017

Gene Nichol and Heather Hunt

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Mountain poverty is rural and isolated. It's invisible to a lot of the community. We all have our routines. I used to volunteer for Samaritan's Kitchen. I'd be shocked when we take meals to people's houses. I was shocked at the neighborhoods we would see. It was like a tour of distress. People would have blankets over the windows, things like I'd never seen, though I've lived here almost my whole life. I was surprised there was such intense poverty three or four miles from my house. But I never went up those roads otherwise.

—Tim Murphy, SAFE Spot Child Advocacy Center, Wilkesboro

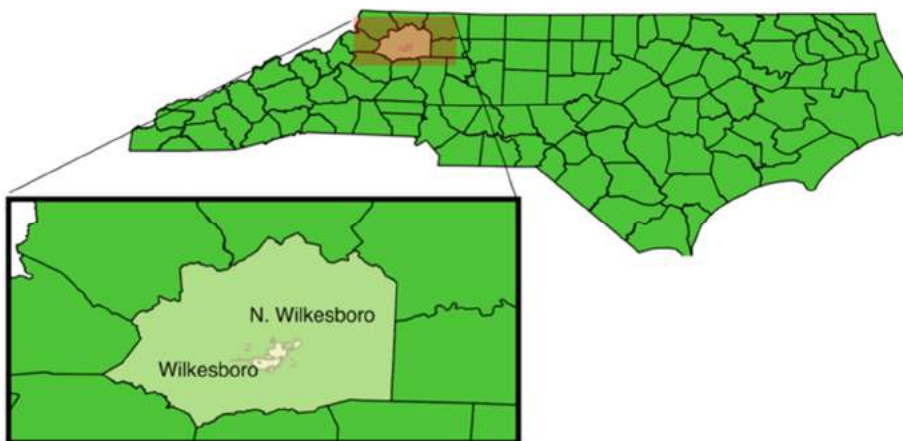
Wilkes County is a great place that has experienced a sort of slow motion disaster the last couple decades.

—Bob Taylor, Hospitality House, Boone

Introduction

Nestled into the eastern slope of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Wilkes County spreads across more than 750 square miles. With elevation ranging from about 900 feet in the east to over 4,000 in the west, it's a place of gauzy panoramas and steep ravines. The Brushy Mountains track the county's southern border and the Yadkin River cuts through its central core. It is a half hour drive from Boone, which shares some of Wilkes' natural beauty and has experienced notably greater growth—in part because of its university (Appalachian State) and draw as a tourist destination.

Map 1: Wilkes County, North Carolina



Note: All maps made with QGIS
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2016 TIGER/Line Shapefiles

The county is home to about 69,000 residents.¹ Wilkesboro is the county seat and North Wilkesboro is the county's largest town, though the population of each is less than 5,000. A sprawling rural county, Wilkes is a singular North Carolina community: Appalachian in culture, geography, history and ethic. Its temperament adds to its economic challenges, and likely lift its prospects as well.

From the 1930s until the 1990s, Wilkes could boast an impressive array of successful industries. Textile, furniture and mirror factories provided jobs that supported middle-class lifestyles for workers without a college, or sometimes, a high school education. Lowe's Home Improvement was founded in Wilkes in 1946, making the county home to corporate and management level employment. Lowes Foods, started by the same family, also called Wilkes home. The Northwestern Bank, one of the state's biggest until it was acquired by First Union in 1986, was launched and headquartered in the county. The Carolina Mirror

Company, founded in the 1930s was, for many years, the premiere mirror factory in America. Drawing on the county's moonshine traditions, the first NASCAR race took place in Wilkes County. Racing superstar Junior Johnson hailed from the county, and the famed North Wilkesboro Speedway became a potent source of economic thunder by the 1950s. Holly Farms, located in Wilkesboro, was, for decades, one of the major poultry producers in the southeastern United States. In 1989, it was purchased by Tyson Foods, now the county's largest employer.

North Carolina experienced more manufacturing job losses after the adoption of the North American Free Trade Agreement than almost any state.² The burden was felt most brutally in industry-dependent communities like Wilkes County. By the mid-1990s, the Carolina Mirror Company had faltered. In 1996, the North Wilkesboro Speedway closed and the county ceased hosting NASCAR races. Then, in 2003, Lowe's Home Improvement moved its corporate headquarters to Mooresville, North Carolina, a Charlotte suburb, though some significant operational functions remain in Wilkes. In quick succession, a seismic shift occurred in the county, shrinking its economic base to a fraction of what it had long been. Then the great recession hit. Heather Murphy, head of The Health Foundation and a local leader, likened the rapid commercial losses to a natural disaster, without FEMA to assist in picking up the pieces.

The results have been challenging. Michael Cooper, a young lawyer and civic leader, who grew up in North Wilkesboro, put it like this: "A lot of folks' prospects got shattered when the old-line industries pulled out of here, they've been on the losing end for a long time and feel like they've had the shit kicked out of them." Many residents feel that they live on the ruins of an earlier, brighter era. They "still grieve over the community they used to be," Cooper says. So there can be "a sort of crisis of spirit." The county, he continues, "is the kind of place where people exist in small, tight-knit communities." There is "a church on every corner and folks stick to their own." The mountain heritage has instilled, deeply, a do-it-yourself-attitude that can serve as both blessing and challenge, providing a potent source of strength and resilience against tough fortune but also frequently presenting barriers to public or community-based efforts to address economic struggle.

This report, the third in our series on economic distress in North Carolina, is our effort—drawn from observations and research—to document poverty in Wilkes County. The report's first section highlights demographic, socioeconomic and employment data. This section is intended to supplement and contextualize the personal narratives that follow in the second section. The voices of these Wilkes residents, who generously gave us their time and stories (often revisiting painful memories in the process), are the heart of our report. They convey, more accurately than any statistic could, the experiences of hardship in their home county. These narratives were collected from interviews organized by our tireless local partners and conducted over many months. The third section contains our recommendations, which come out of both data and conversations.

We would like to thank an array of Wilkes County leaders and engaged citizens who have been marvelous partners in this project. Heather Murphy and her colleagues at The Health Foundation have been indispensable and beyond generous. Shellie Bowlin and Tim Murphy at SAFE Spot Child Advocacy Center, Fred Brason at Project Lazarus, Tina Krause and Bob Taylor at Hospitality House in Boone, John Triplett at Wilkes Ministry of Hope, Denise Monaghan at the Wilkes County Health Department, Maggie McCann at Crisis Ministries, and Gary Newman of Circles and Habitat for Humanity have aided our work immeasurably. And Michael Cooper of the Wilkes Community Foundation and the McElwee Law Firm opened doors and provided crucial insights into county challenges.

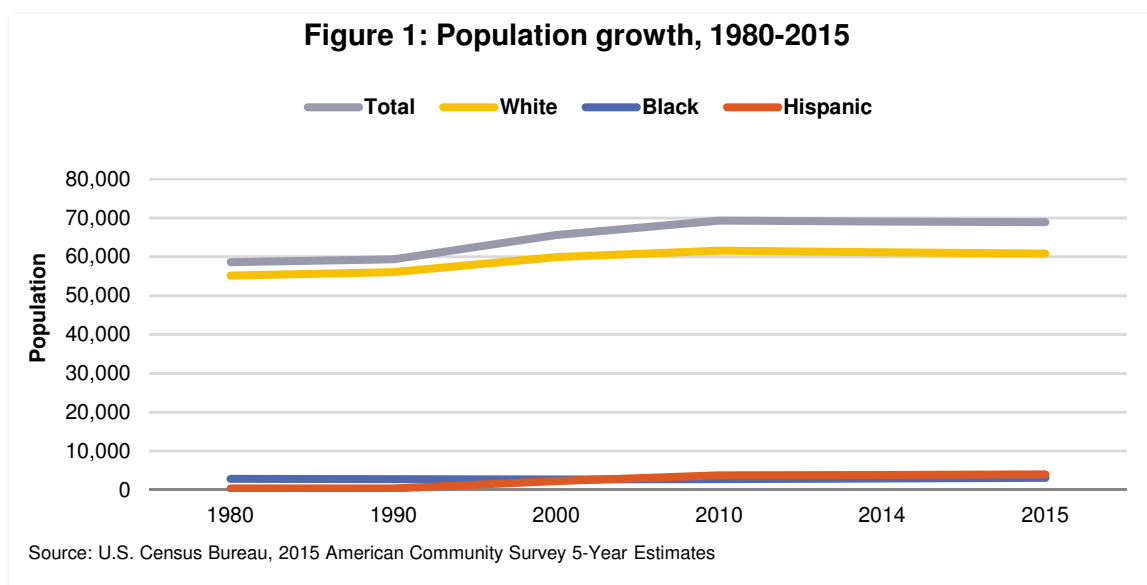
The Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation has generously funded this effort. Will Graebe and Matt Norchi, Carolina Law students, helped with important research and interviews. This report reflects contributions from many others as well, especially those who have been kind enough to respond to our questions. The contents, suggestions, and any mistakes, though, are ours alone.

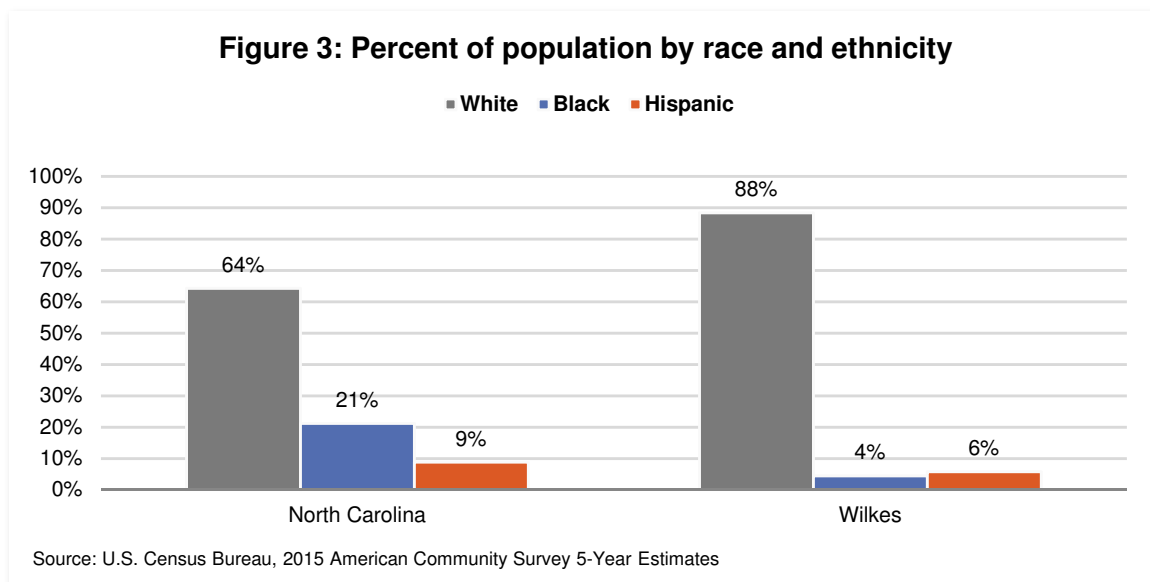
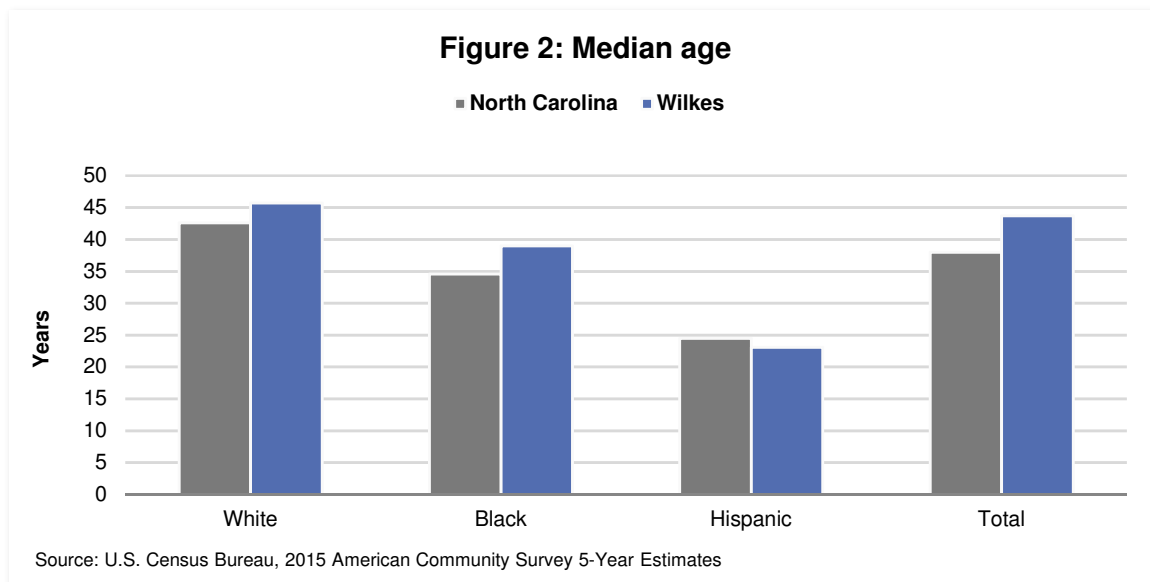
Statistical Portrait

Wilkes' Distinctive Demographics

Demographically, Wilkes County departs from much of North Carolina. Unlike the state's urban centers, which are experiencing rapid population growth, Wilkes' population has not changed dramatically since 2000 (Fig. 1) and is predicted to remain at its current level for the next two decades.³ Wilkes' population is older than the state's; the median age is 43.7 years compared to 38 for the state. The county median age would be higher if not for the presence of a much younger Hispanic population (Fig. 2).

The county's racial makeup is more homogenous than most of North Carolina. About 88% of the county is white, while 4% is African-American, and a little over 5% is Hispanic. In comparison, North Carolina is 22% African-American, 9% Hispanic and about 6% other races (Fig. 3). Although small in number, the Hispanic community in Wilkes grew almost tenfold in the 1990s and 2000s, from a few hundred to almost 4,000. That growth is predicted to continue, though at a much slower pace, partially offsetting a slow decrease in the white population.⁴



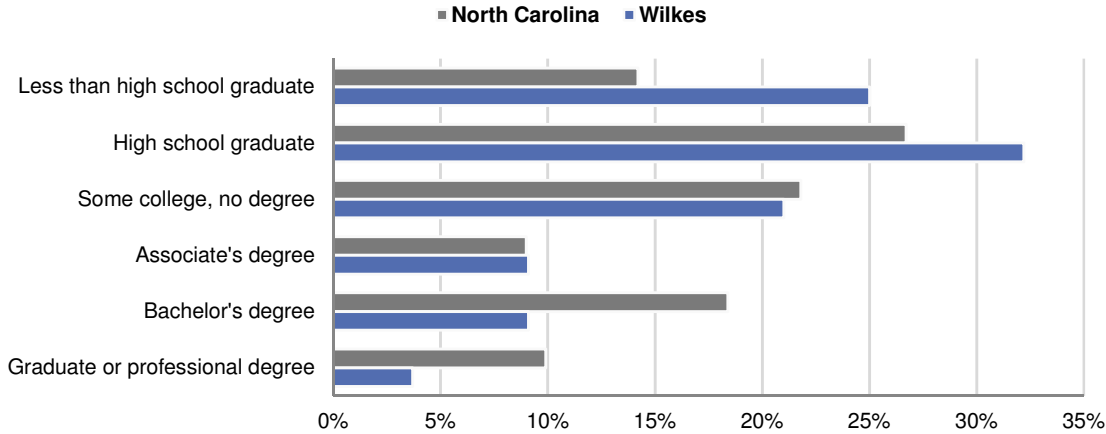


Wilkes County has a far higher percentage than the state of adults over 25 years old with no formal education after high school. Over 57% of county adults have a high school diploma at most, compared to 41% for Tar Heels generally. Starkly, only 13% of Wilkes adults have a bachelor’s degree or higher—less than half the state rate (Fig. 4). Women are more likely than men to graduate from high school and a substantially larger percentage acquire some college education or more (47% to 39%) (Fig. 5).⁵

The education picture seems to be changing for the better in Wilkes. More young people are graduating from high school and going on to college. The high school graduation rate has improved from 72% for the class of 2006 to 86% in 2016.⁶ The graduation rate in Wilkes for all student subgroups is right on par with, or slightly better than, the state average (Fig. 6). Over half of 18-to 24-year-olds in Wilkes have at least some college experience or an associate’s, compared to 43% for people 25 years and older (Fig. 7). Because many 18-to 24-year-olds are still in school or contemplating going back, these rates are almost certain to go up, indicating a promising shift toward greater educational attainment.

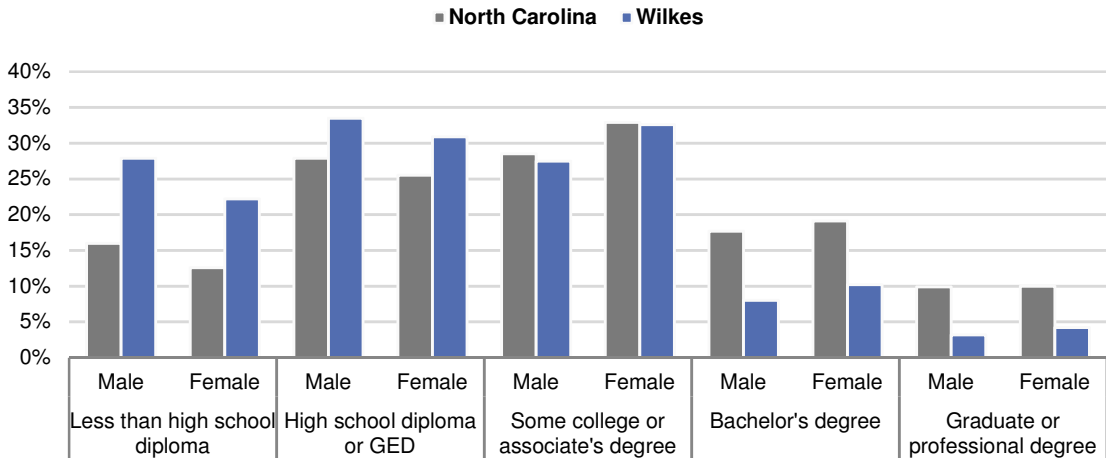
Despite this progress, however, large numbers of Wilkes residents have limited educational attainment, especially African Americans and Hispanics 25 years and older (Fig. 8). While high school graduation rates overall have improved drastically, students with limited English proficiency (LEP) still graduate at a much lower rate than other groups (Fig. 6). The actual number of LEP students that fail to graduate with their class is small, however. Most dropouts are white students; and more boys drop out than girls.⁷

Figure 4: Educational attainment (highest level completed)



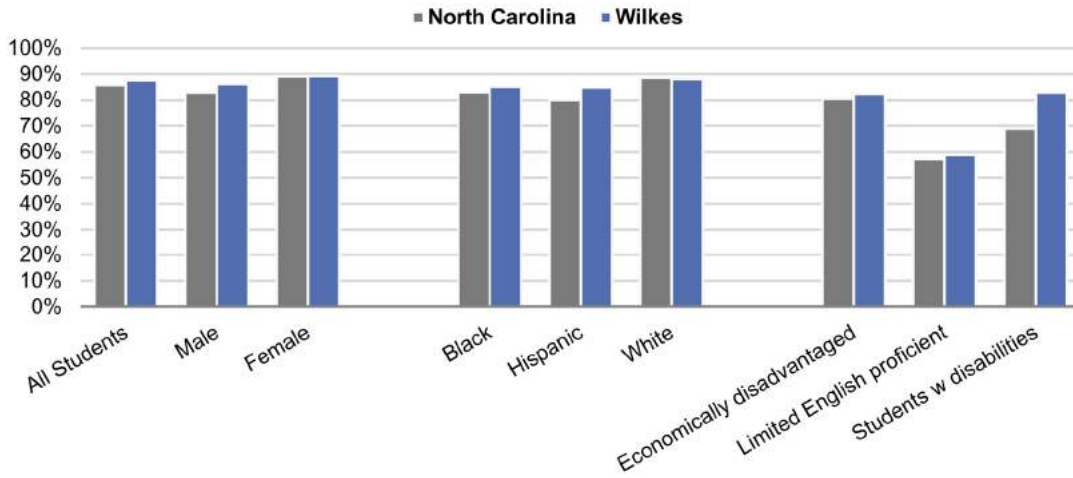
Note: Population 25 years and over
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figure 5: Educational attainment by sex



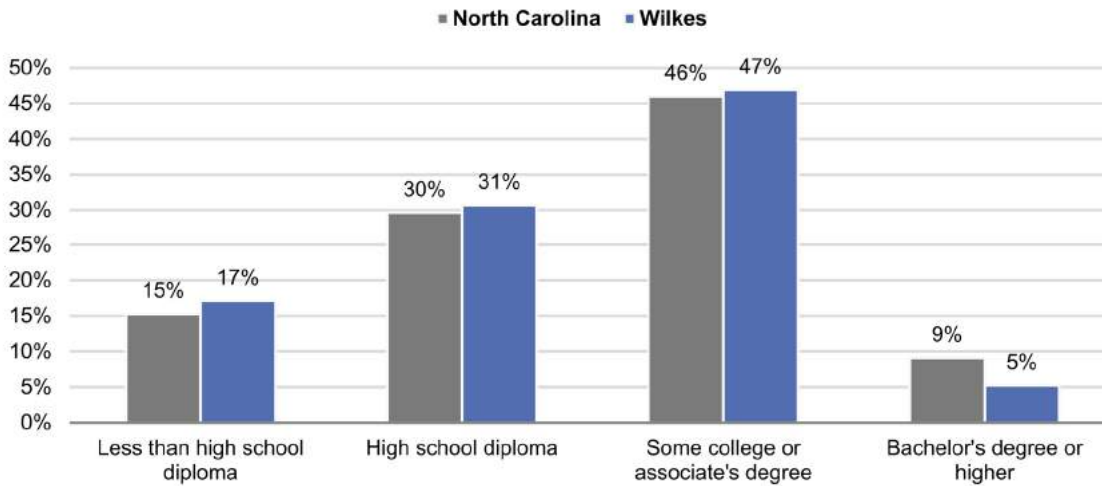
Note: Population 25 years and over
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figure 6: Four-year cohort high school graduation rate, 2015-16



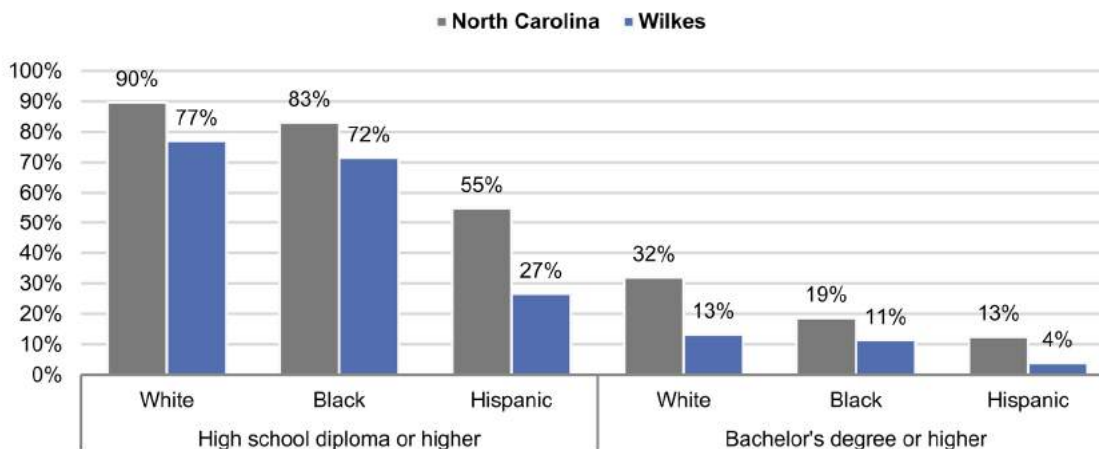
Source: N.C. State Board of Education, Department of Public Instruction, 4-Year Cohort Graduation Rates

Figure 7: Educational attainment, 18-24 year-olds



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figure 8: Degree attainment by race and ethnicity

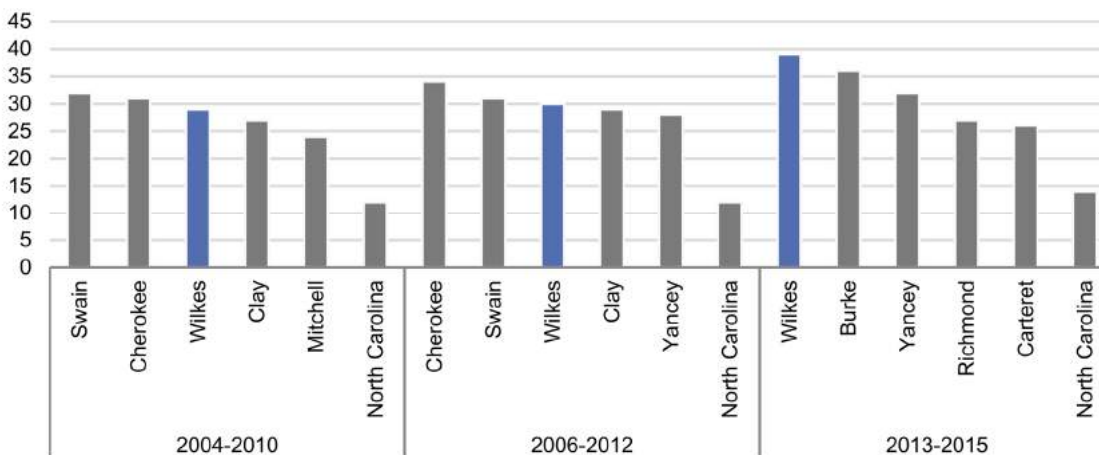


Note: Population 25 years and over
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

About 28% of the population receives Social Security benefits compared to about 20% for the state, reflecting a population that, on average, is older and more disabled.⁸ Self-reported disability rates in Wilkes are high, 18.5% compared to 13.5% for the state, which is typical of rural places where the population is aging and work often exacts a heavy physical toll.⁹ Former workers who receive SSDI (Social Security Disability Insurance) make up about 5% of the total population—a higher rate than many other counties in North Carolina but one in line with Wilkes’ peers.¹⁰

Fortunately, crime rates are lower in Wilkes than in the state at large and have declined in the last four years. In 2011, Wilkes had an index crime rate of 3,480 per 100,000 people. It declined to 2,011 in 2015.¹¹ Drug overdose mortality rates though have been among the highest in the state for years. For the 2013-2015 period, Wilkes suffered the highest county rate in North Carolina (Fig. 9). The reasons for the recent nationwide spike in drug deaths has been the subject of numerous studies, which connect substance abuse to places with a history of manual labor, economic decline and loss of social supports—all of which may play a role in Wilkes.¹²

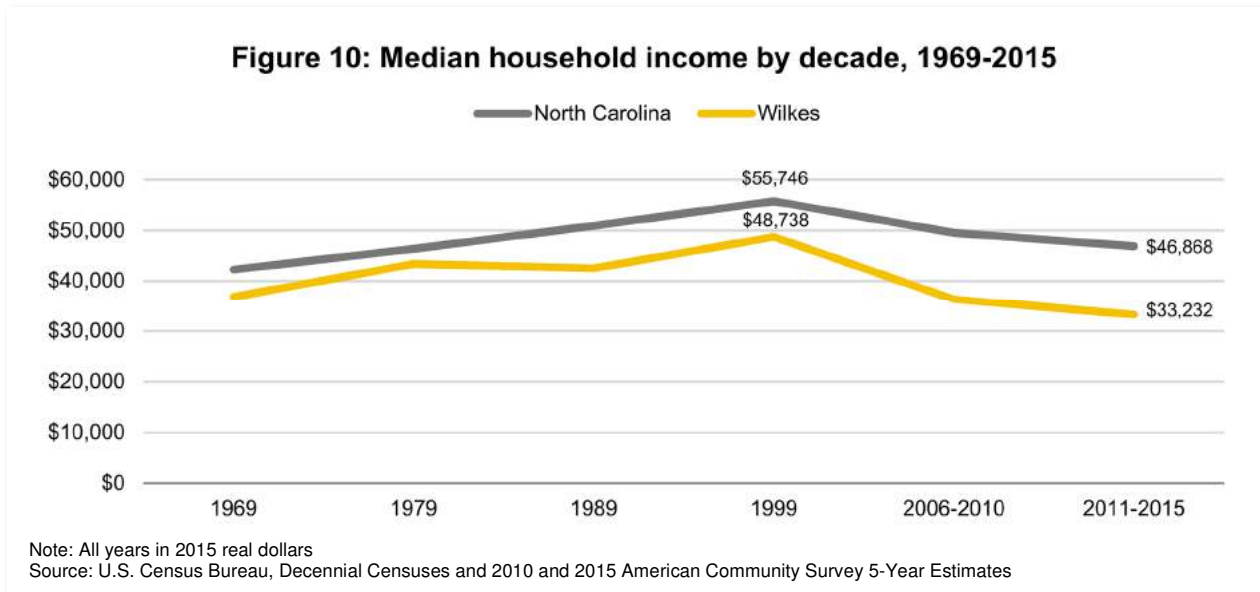
Figure 9: Drug overdose deaths per 100,000 population



Source: County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Income and Poverty

Income and earnings in Wilkes are low, often dramatically so, when compared to statewide measures. Historically, median household income in Wilkes has been lower than in North Carolina. In the last fifteen years, household income fell at a steeper rate in the county, significantly widening the gap (Fig. 10). The Pew Charitable Trust’s Stateline initiative reported in 2016 that only one other county in the nation suffered a larger drop in median household income.¹³



While minority residents of Wilkes have lower median household incomes than their white neighbors, the difference is less pronounced than it is in the state generally. Comparatively depressed incomes, particularly for white residents, result in greater income equality—though at a cost for all (Fig. 11). A similar story appears when viewing median household income by household type. Married couple families are greatly advantaged, income-wise, in both North Carolina and Wilkes, but the gap between this and other household types is narrower in Wilkes (Fig. 12).

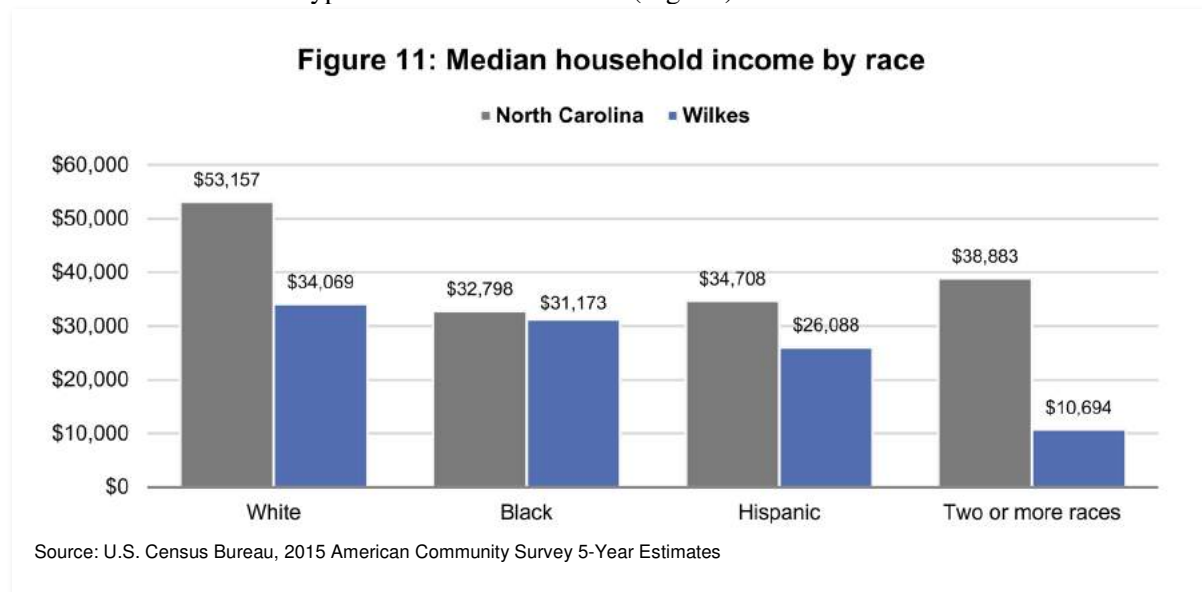
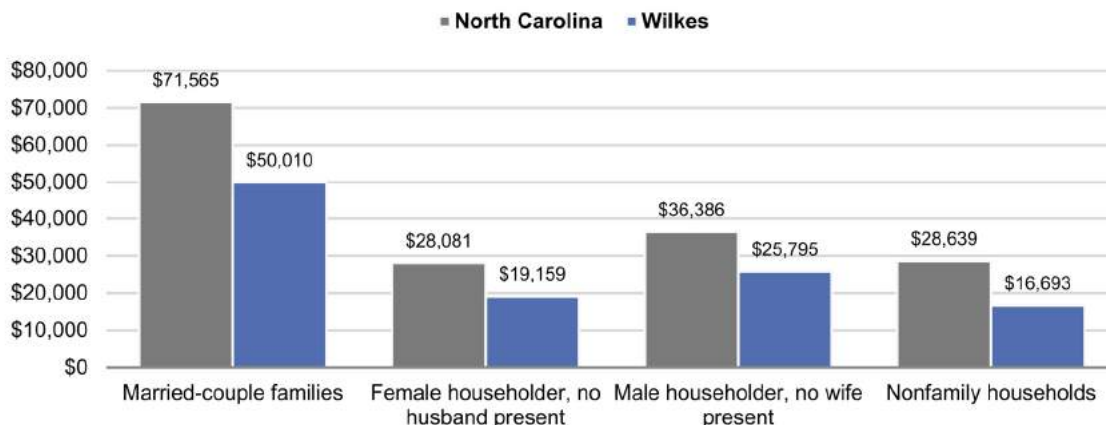


Figure 12: Median household income by household type

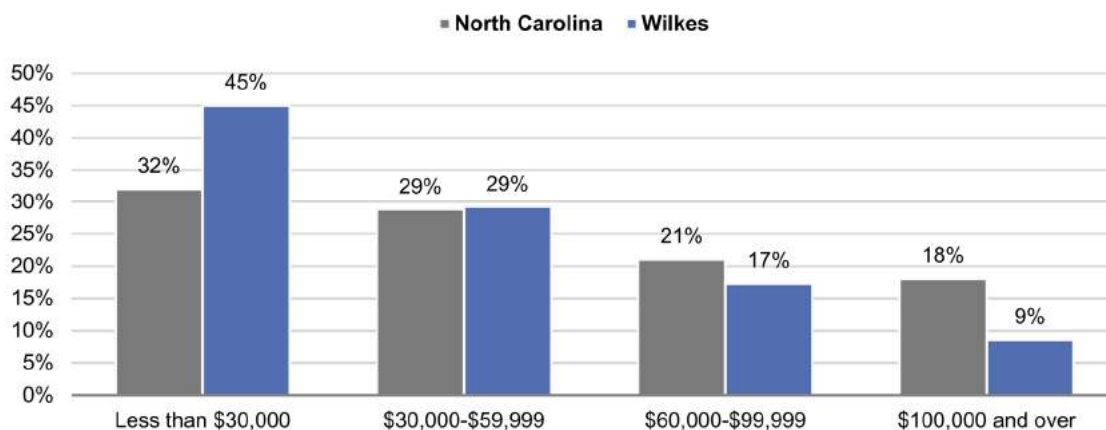


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

The most recent Census Bureau estimates suggest that Wilkes’ income is on the rise. The U.S. Census Bureau survey that measures poverty and income in small places found a heartening leap in median household income to \$40,647 in 2015 from \$33,438 the previous year (Appendix, Fig. A-1). This may foreshadow a welcome upswing, signifying recovery from the recession and unemployment-driven damages. But smaller communities are subject to up and down swings and statistical uncertainty, so it will take several years to see if the optimistic trend holds.

Still, at present, almost half of all households in the county have an income of less than \$30,000 and only 9% of households have incomes of \$100,000 or more, compared to 18% statewide (Fig. 13). Even as Wilkes slowly recovers from the last recession, average income for every income group falls short of 2010 levels. Table 1 shows the change in average income for each income quintile for North Carolina and Wilkes County between 2010 and 2015. (If all households are ranked by income from low to high and grouped into five “slices” with an equal number of households, each slice is a quintile.) Across the board, the rate of decline between the two years is steeper in Wilkes, even as average income in every quintile is lower than the state to begin with.

Figure 13: Share of households by income category



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Table 1: Average income by quintile, 2010-2015

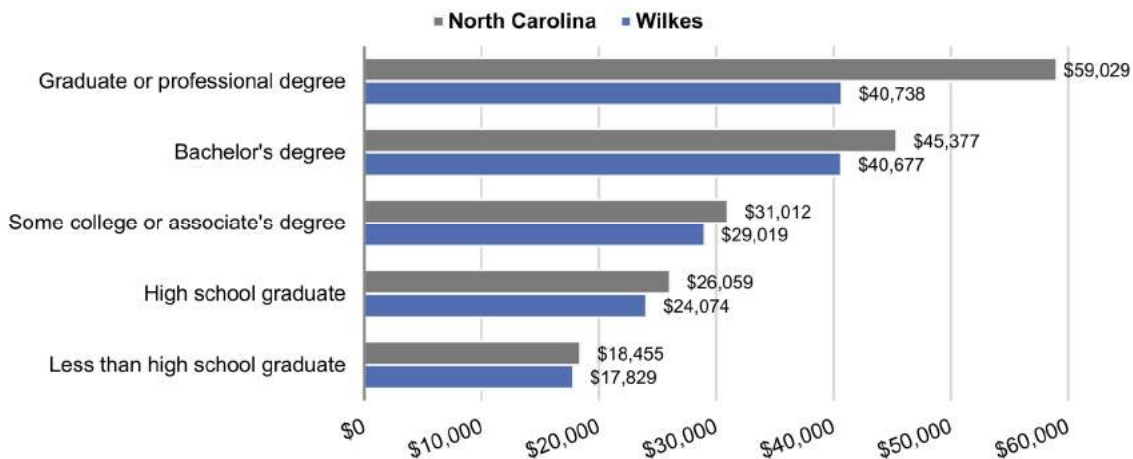
	North Carolina			Wilkes County		
	2010	2015	Percent change	2010	2015	Percent change
Lowest quintile	\$11,491	\$10,809	-5.9%	\$9,338	\$8,535	-8.6%
Second quintile	\$29,850	\$28,095	-5.9%	\$21,985	\$19,663	-10.6%
Third quintile	\$49,769	\$47,071	-5.4%	\$36,541	\$33,683	-7.8%
Fourth quintile	\$77,387	\$74,630	-3.6%	\$60,202	\$54,805	-9.0%
Fifth quintile	\$167,267	\$166,086	-0.7%	\$127,419	\$118,353	-7.1%
Top 5%	\$293,223	\$293,961	0.3%	\$226,151	\$203,523	-10.0%

Note: All in 2015 real dollars

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 and 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

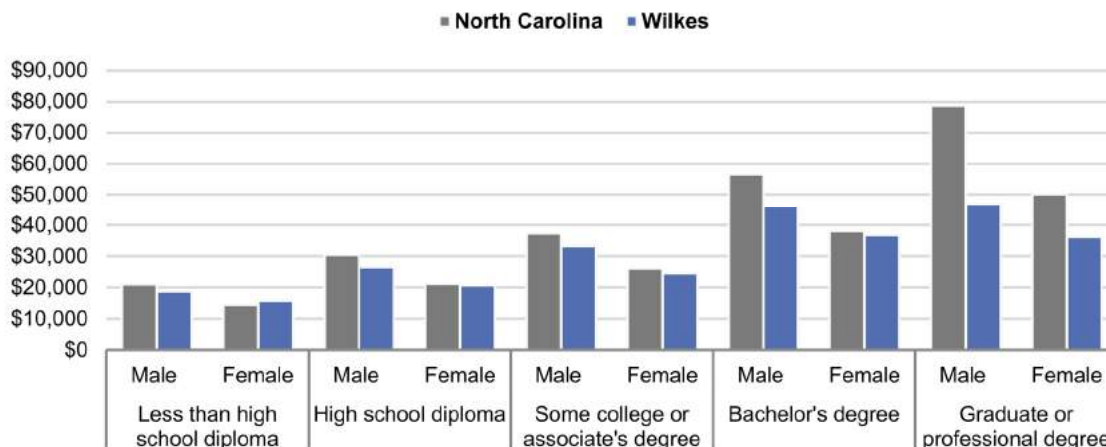
At every educational level, and especially at the top, state median earnings outpace the county (Fig. 14). Men with graduate or professional degrees in Wilkes earn \$31,000 less at the median than their state counterparts—representing a 40% pay cut. Earnings for women with a higher degree are doubly penalized, since they make \$10,000 less than their male colleagues in the county and about \$14,000 less than highly educated women in the state. Squeezed by gender and place, they earn less than half of the median earnings for male Tar Heels with an equivalent education (Fig. 15). Earnings in Wilkes are notably unable to reward investment in higher education to the same extent as the state. While median earnings are near parity with the state for those with less than a bachelor’s degree, this is not an accomplishment, as state earnings levels are themselves nothing to boast about.

Figure 14: Median earnings by educational attainment



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

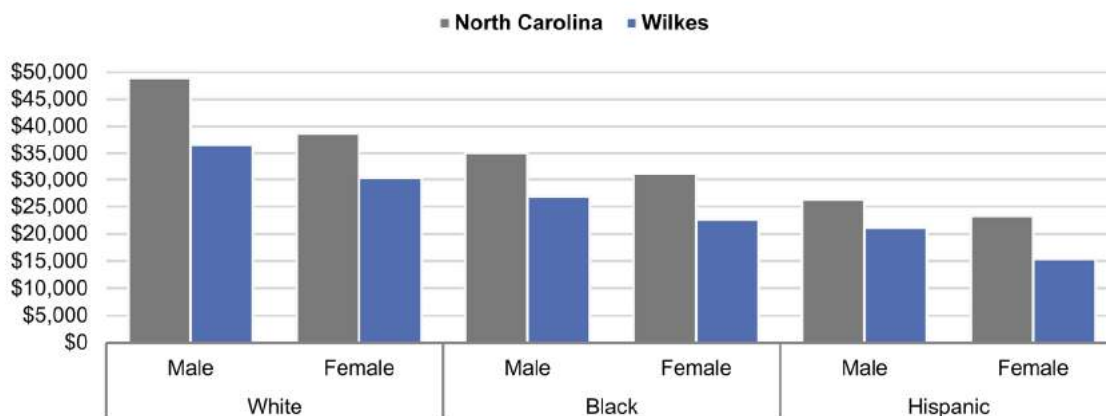
Figure 15: Median earning by sex and educational attainment



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Differences in earnings also persist along racial and ethnic lines. While white men who work full-time, year-round in Wilkes make \$12,000 less at the median than their state counterparts, they still earn \$10,000 more than similarly situated African American men in the county and \$15,000 more than Hispanic men. The same pattern, though at a fraction of men’s earnings, repeats for women (Fig. 16).

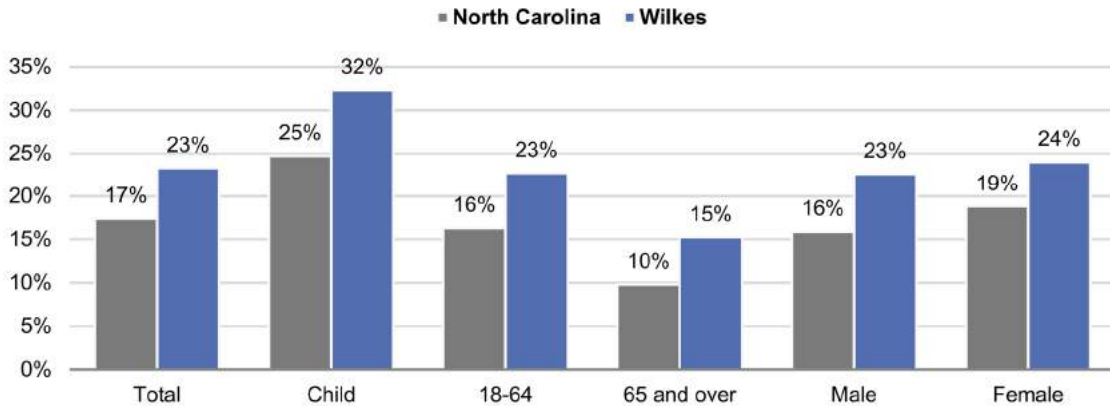
Figure 16: Median earnings in previous 12 months for full-time, year-round workers by race and ethnicity



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

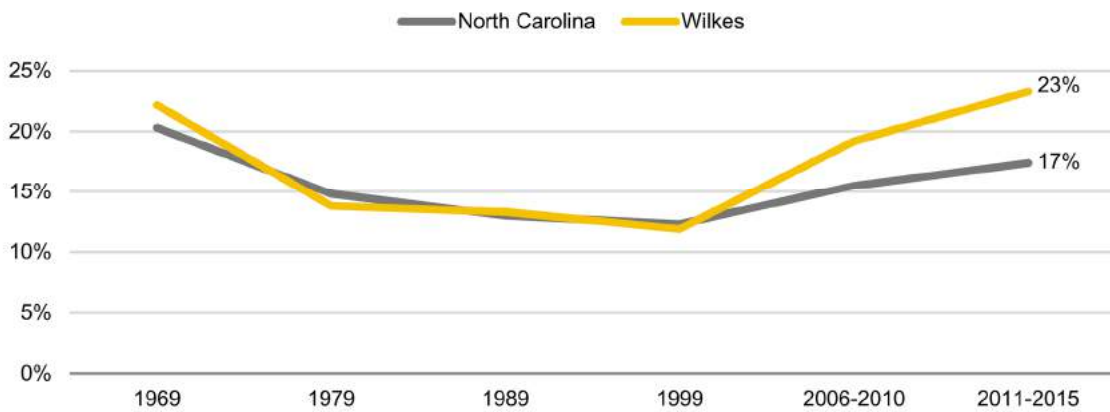
Poverty echoes income. Nearly a quarter of Wilkes residents live below the meager federal poverty threshold.¹⁴ A third of all children, and over half of Hispanic children, are poor.¹⁵ The county’s poverty rate is higher than North Carolina’s for young and old, male and female (Fig. 17). It wasn’t always so. During the 1980s and 1990s, state and county poverty rates converged. In the mid-2000s, Wilkes’ poverty rate began to climb rapidly. By 2015, the county rate exceeded the state by six percentage points (Fig. 18). The 2015 U.S. Census Bureau small area estimates suggest recent improvements (Appendix, Fig. A-2). Time will tell whether or not the numbers keep moving in this favorable direction. Currently, however, about half of the county earns less than 200% of the federal poverty standard, a rough measure of financial stability (Fig. 19).

Figure 17: Poverty rate



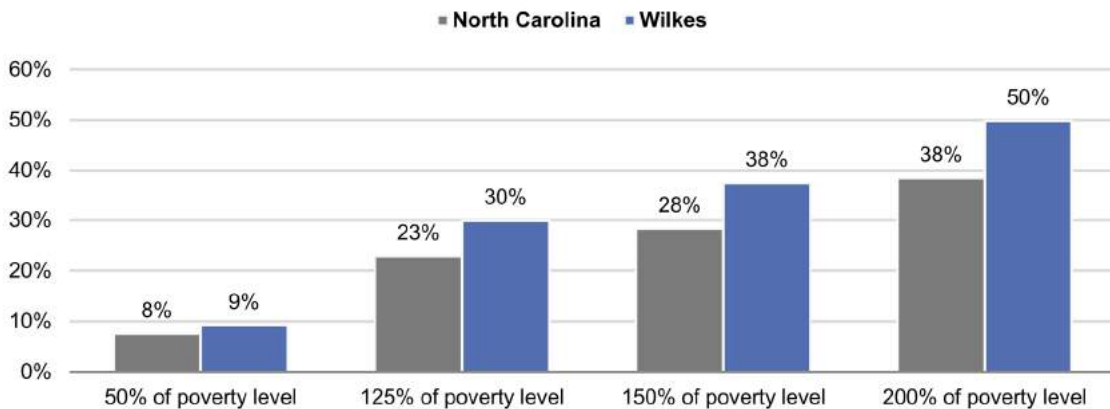
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figure 18: Poverty rate by decade, 1970-2015



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census and 2010 and 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

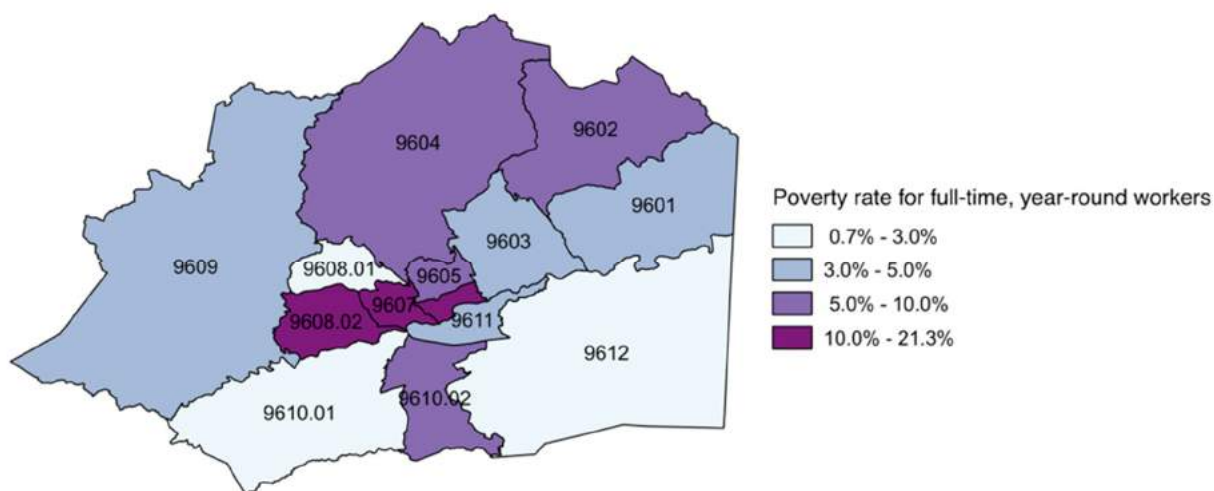
Figure 19: Share of population in relation to federal poverty level



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

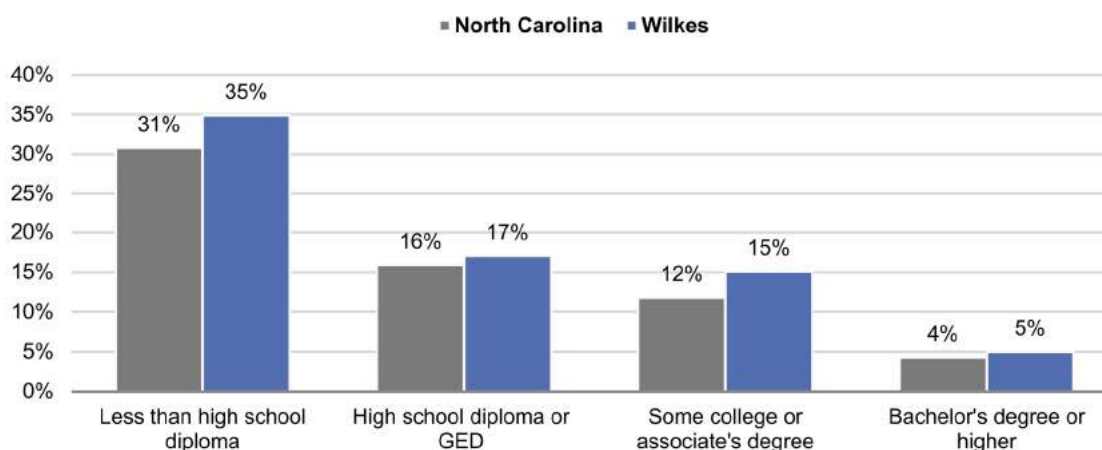
Work is no guarantee of escape from poverty. Five percent of people in Wilkes who worked full-time, year-round in the previous year live in poverty, with a much higher share located in some census tracts.¹⁶ More than 20% of full-time workers around North Wilkesboro, and 10% of workers in two other census tracts, make too little to climb out of poverty (Map 2). Marriage and education—two common hedges against poverty—are not reliable safeguards in Wilkes. Married residents in Wilkes are poor at twice the state rate¹⁷ and while postsecondary education reduces the likelihood of experiencing poverty, its protection is not as reliable as it is for the state. And those without a high school diploma face disturbing odds—35% (or over 4,200 adults) are poor (Fig. 20).

Map 2: Poverty rate for full-time, year-round workers by census tract



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figure 20: Poverty rate by educational attainment

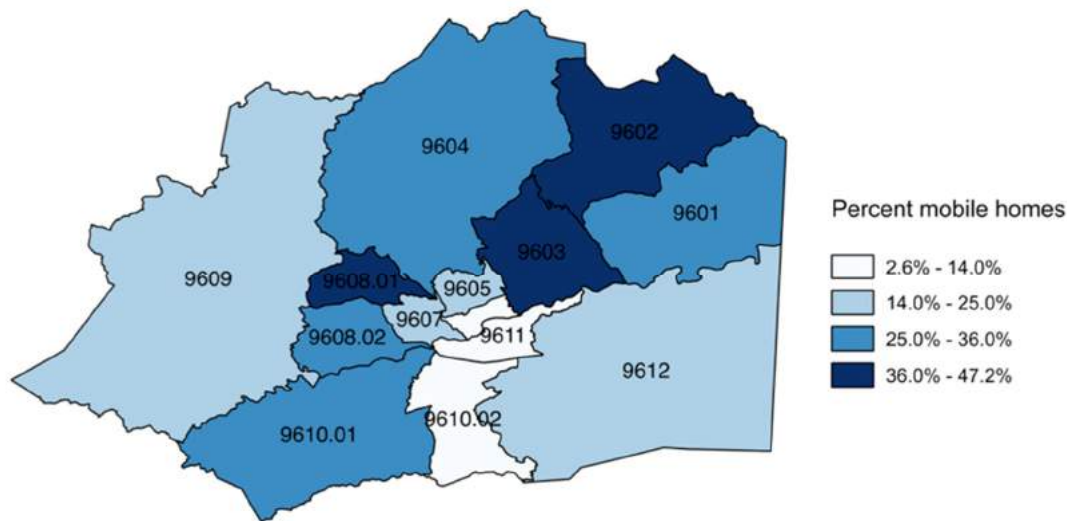


Note: Population 25 years and older
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Housing and Transportation

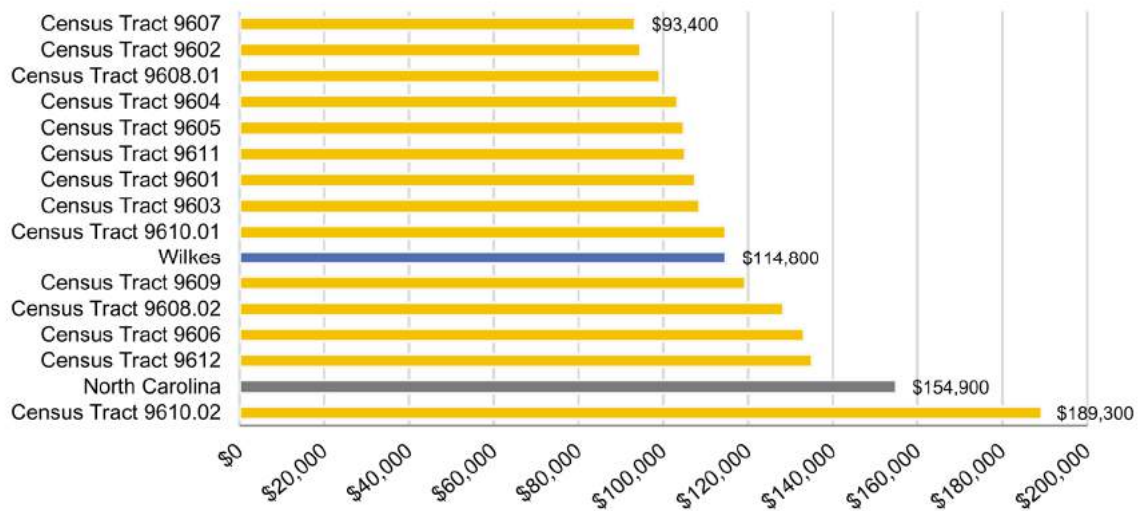
Housing conditions reflect and compound the economic challenges facing Wilkes. The housing stock is typically older and less valuable than in the state. About 43% of housing in North Carolina, but only 30% in Wilkes, was built since 1990. Over half of housing units in Wilkes were built in 1979 or earlier, and about a third were built before 1969.¹⁸ Wilkes also has twice the share of mobile homes as the state (27% of housing units to 13%).¹⁹ In some census tracts, mobile homes make up more than a third of all housing (Map 3 and Appendix, Fig. A-3). The median home value in Wilkes is \$40,000 less than that for the state (Fig. 21 and Appendix, Map 1). Housing values in Wilkes slid in the last recession and they remain about \$8,000 shy of their 2000 level.²⁰

Map 3: Percent of housing units that are mobile homes by census tract



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figure 21: Median home value by census tract



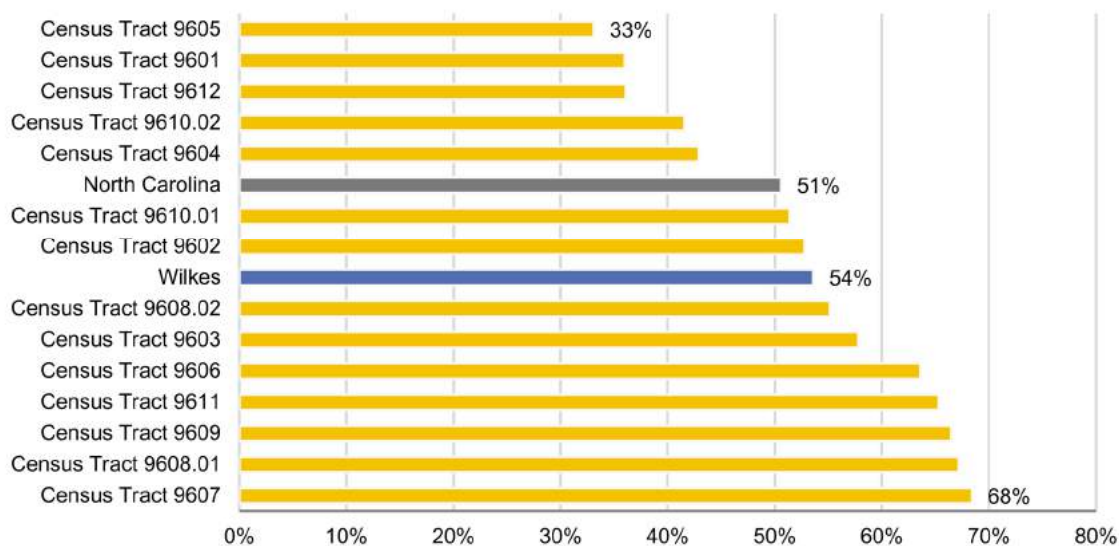
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Housing in Wilkes is less expensive on average than elsewhere in the state. Median rent for the county, for example, is only 74% of the statewide figure.²¹ However, housing costs often outpace household income. The result is that many county residents are forced to allocate too much of their limited budget to housing. Although fair market rent (FMR) in urban areas like Charlotte and Winston-Salem is higher, so too is the typical household income. FMR for a two-bedroom apartment in Charlotte is 17.5% of median household income for that area, but in Wilkes it's about 23%.²² Rental housing is generally a larger share of income in Wilkes than in neighboring counties as well.²³

Over half of renters in Wilkes pay 30% or more of their income for housing (housing is widely considered unaffordable when it claims 30% or more of a family's income) (Fig. 22). High housing costs are not limited to renters, however. Many homeowners, particularly those with a mortgage, are cost-burdened. In Wilkes, one in three homeowners with a mortgage spends 30% or more of their income on housing (Fig. 23). Even homeowners without a mortgage can incur housing costs beyond their budget. Countywide, one in seven households that own their home outright shoulder excessive housing costs.²⁴

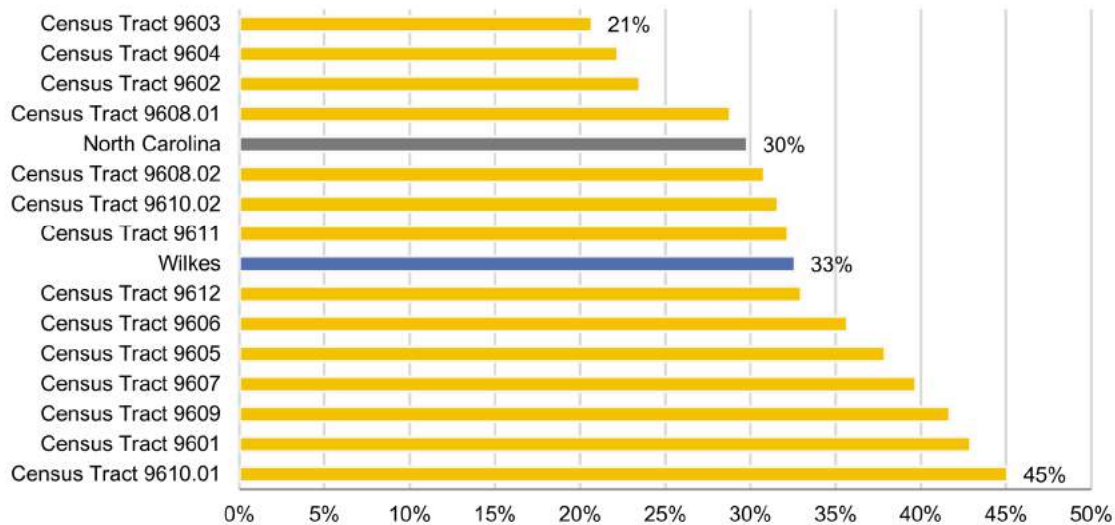
When housing takes up too large a share of income, less money is available for food, transportation, health care, household needs and other expenses. Additionally, tight budgets can lead to neglected or deferred maintenance and repairs, as well as substandard or nonexistent utilities, creating unsafe living conditions and the devaluation of an important family asset. Ultimately, eviction, foreclosure and homelessness—and the host of negative outcomes that accompany them—can result.

Figure 22: Percent of renter-occupied housing units that are unaffordable



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figure 23: Percent of housing units with a mortgage that are unaffordable



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

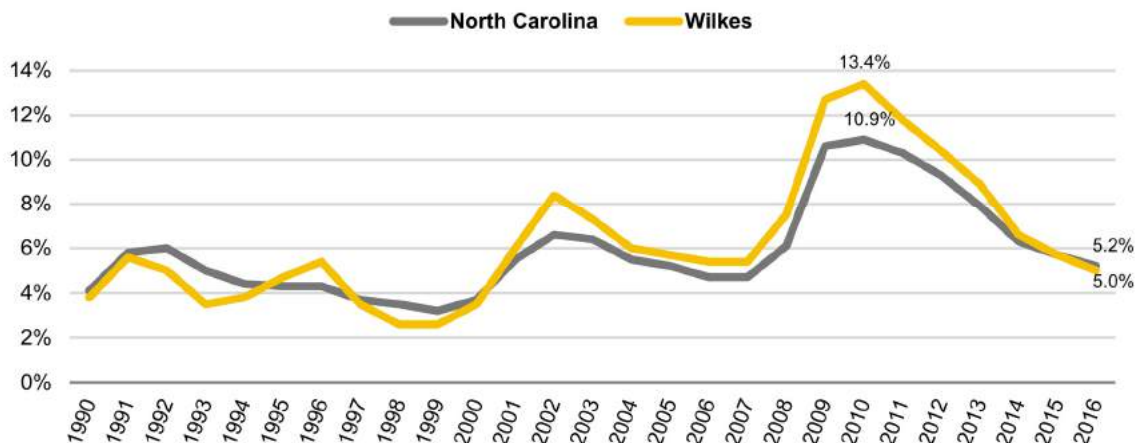
Wilkes is one of the state's largest counties by size. It contains no large towns. People, services and jobs are widely dispersed. Roughly 29% of Wilkes County residents travel more than 30 minutes to get to work, and compared to the state, a larger share of workers who live in Wilkes commute an hour or more.²⁵ One in every four low-income workers commutes more than fifty miles to work.²⁶ Over half its residents work outside the county.²⁷ Public transportation is limited and fares can be prohibitive. Access to an automobile is imperative to get to work and to conduct routine business. But in this sprawling county, many lack an available vehicle.

In some census tracts, 10% or more of households lack a vehicle; in census tract 9606, around North Wilkesboro, the rate is 20%. Transportation issues are especially acute for households with only one person. For Wilkes overall, 20% of single-person households have no vehicle. In five census tracts, that rate is over 25%. For all households, but particularly for people living alone, lack of access to a vehicle compounds economic and social isolation.²⁸ For those fortunate enough to have transportation, it can come dear. When transportation and housing costs are added up, they consume 68% of the household budget for a median income, four-person family in the county.²⁹

Wilkes Labor Force and the Local Economy

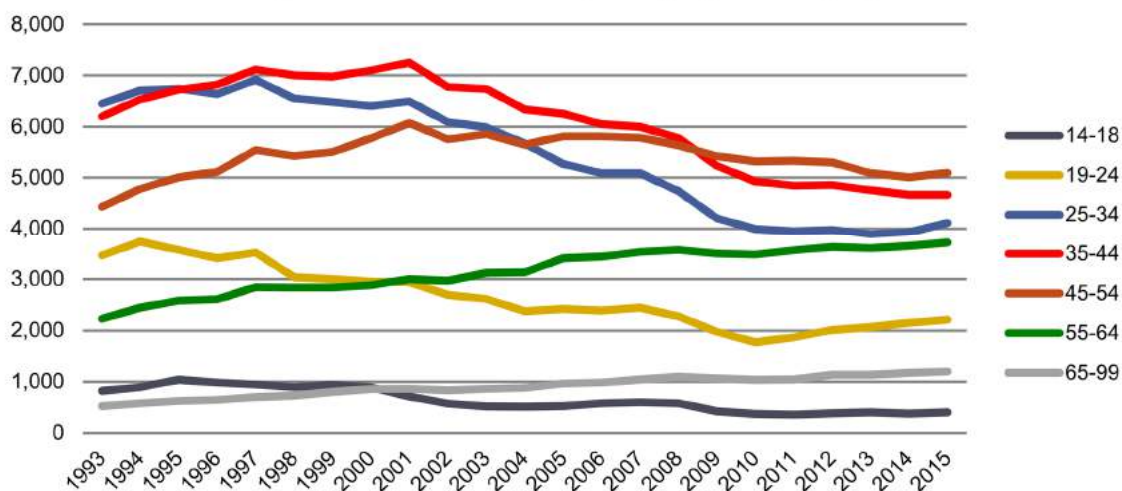
Falling income and rising poverty stem in large part from an economy bruised by globalization and successive recessions in 2001 and 2007. The sectors that were the pride and bedrock of the Wilkes' economy shrank dramatically. The unemployment rate, a paltry 2.6% in the late 1990s, skyrocketed up to double digits in 2009 and stayed there for four long years (Fig. 24). Large numbers of residents dropped out of the labor force and many have not returned. Wilkes' labor force participation rate, a measure of the share of adults who are working or looking for work, is almost 9 percentage points lower than the state's and over 12 points lower than its 1980 peak.³⁰ Employment numbers for younger and prime age workers have fallen far off their peak. Only older workers have experienced increased employment (perhaps due to delayed retirement) (Fig. 25). The county now has over 5,000 fewer private jobs than it did in 1995.³¹

Figure 24: Unemployment rate, 1990-2016



Source: N.C. Department of Commerce, Labor and Economic Analysis Division, Local Area Unemployment Statistics

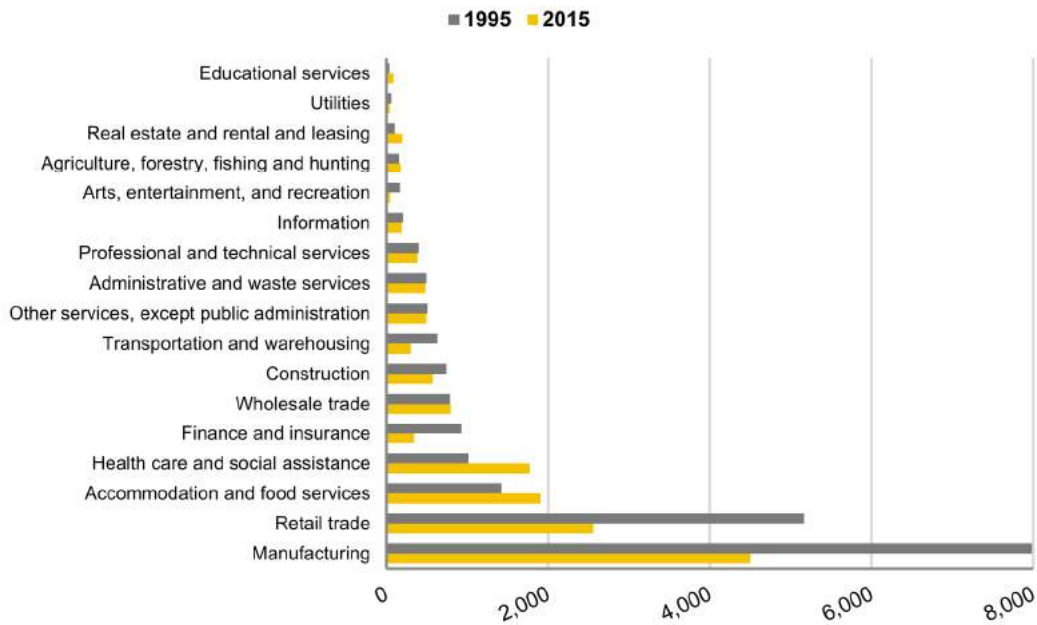
Figure 25: Annual average employment by age



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, QWI Explorer

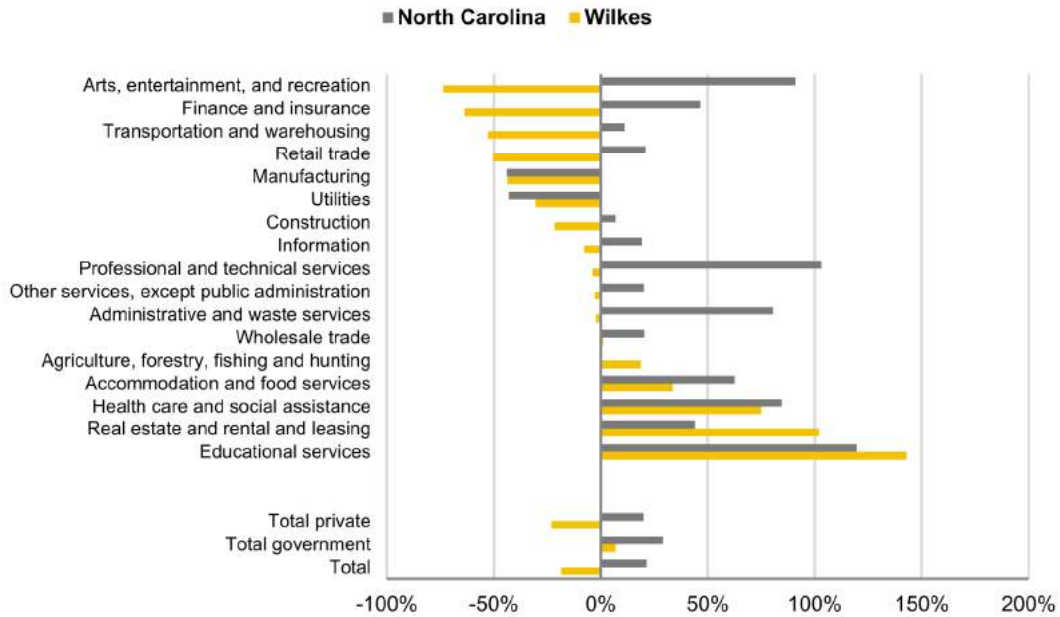
Wilkes is not as economically diversified as larger metropolitan areas, making it vulnerable to the changing fortunes of individual industries and businesses. Heavily invested in manufacturing, retail trade and finance, Wilkes saw employment in these three sectors fall by over 6,600 between 1995 and 2015—a vertiginous drop in a place with about 22,000 private sector jobs in 1995.³² Despite this gutting, manufacturing and retail trade remain the two largest sectors by employment in the county (Fig. 26). Only five sectors in Wilkes experienced appreciable employment growth between 1995 and 2015, compared to fifteen for the state (Fig. 27). While jobs in two of the growing sectors (health care and social assistance; accommodation and food service) increased substantially (1,240 combined), they could not fill the hole created by the departure of over 7,000 jobs in total during this period.

Figure 26: Private employment in Wilkes by sector, 1995 and 2015



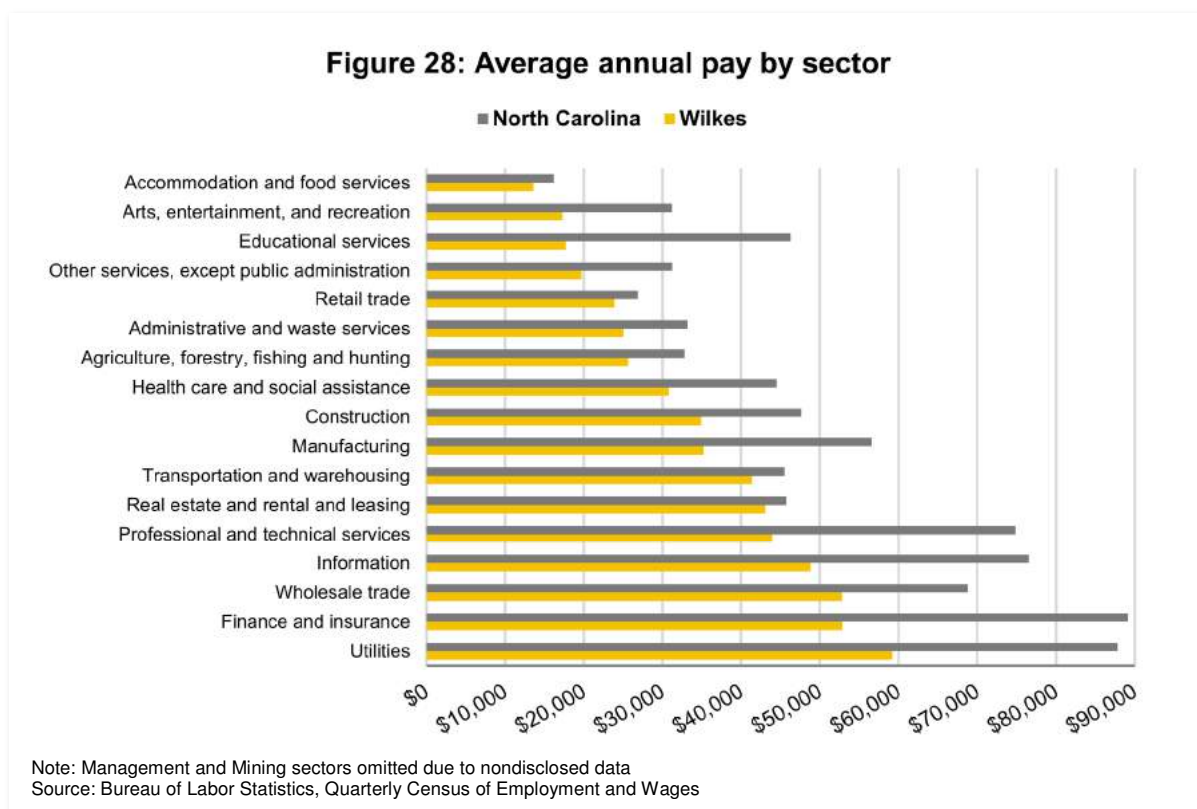
Note: Mining and Management sectors omitted due to small employment numbers or nondisclosed data.
 Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages

Figure 27: Percent change in private employment by sector, 1995-2015



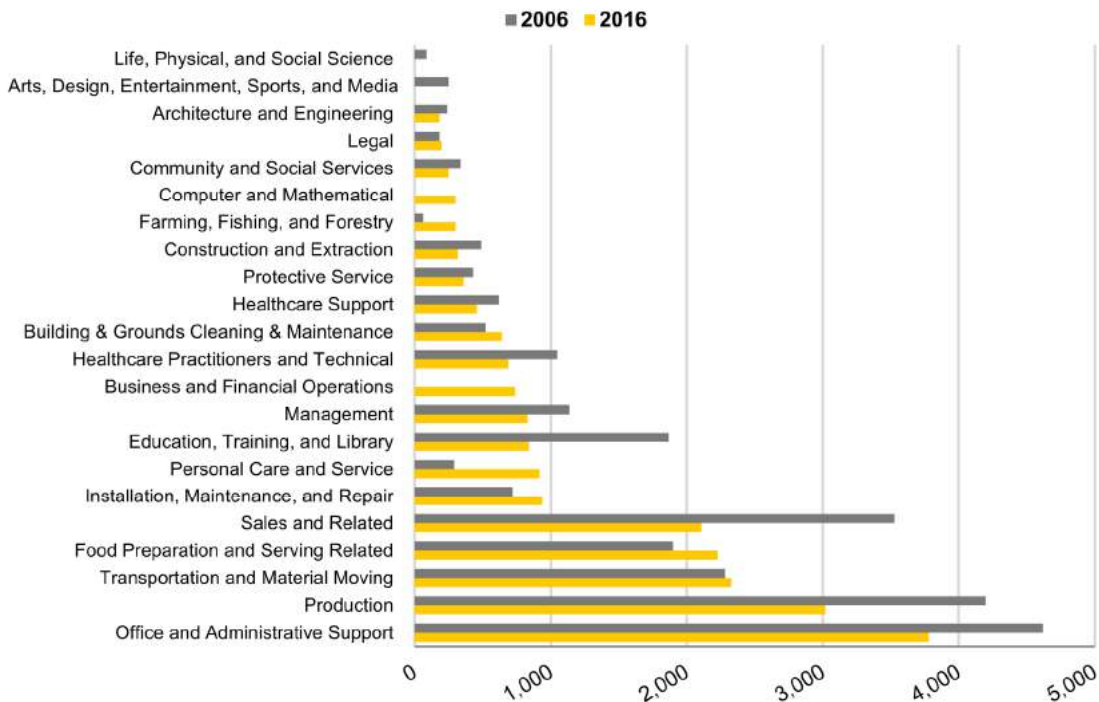
Note: Mining and Management sectors omitted due to small employment numbers or nondisclosed data.
 Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages

Wages across virtually all industrial sectors were historically lower in Wilkes than statewide and that remains the case today (Fig. 28). Moreover, while average annual pay (adjusted for inflation) has grown in every private sector in North Carolina since 1995, it has dropped in six of the seventeen in Wilkes (Appendix, Table A-1).



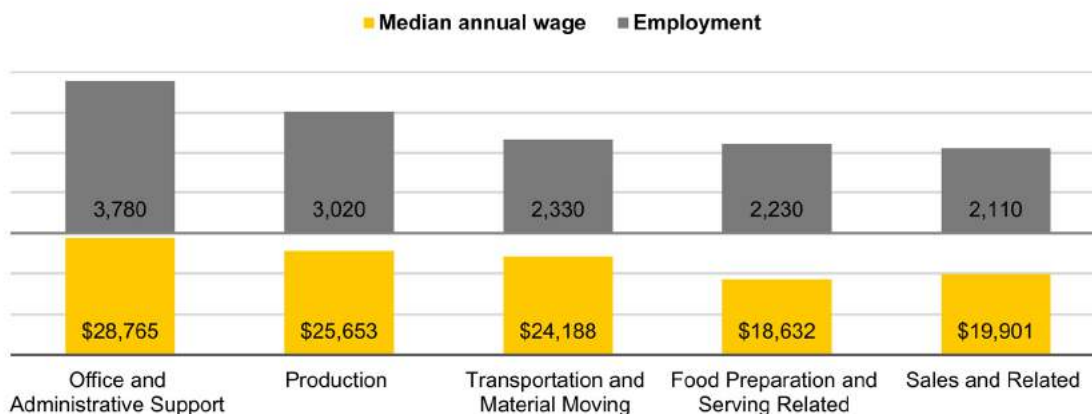
The slack in employment and wages in Wilkes is also evident when examined by occupation. (“Occupation” categorizes workers based on the type of tasks and activities they perform. “Industry” categorizes businesses by the type of product or service they provide.) Since 2006, 11 of the 18 occupational groups in Wilkes have lost jobs, and employment overall has dropped 18.5% (Fig. 29 and Appendix, Fig. A-4).³³ The median annual wage is lower in Wilkes than in the state for all but one occupational group (Appendix, Fig. A-5). None of the five largest occupational groups by employment has a median annual wage above \$29,000 (Fig. 30). And the wage range for those occupational groups with the largest job gains in the last ten years is even lower (median annual wage of about \$18,000 to \$25,000).³⁴

Figure 29: Employment in Wilkes by occupational group, 2006 and 2016



Note: No employment data available for the Business and Financial Operations or Computer and Mathematical groups in 2006 and Life, Physical and Social Science or Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media groups in 2016
 Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics

Figure 30: Employment and median annual wage for largest occupational groups



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics

Many of the largest occupations in Wilkes require little formal education (Table 2). In the past, a high school diploma or less was sufficient to acquire a secure job that offered lifelong stability. While educational requirements remain low for the largest occupations in the county, these jobs no longer ensure

access to the middle class. They are also among the occupations estimated to gain the most jobs in the region in next five years (Table 3).

Table 1: Largest occupations by employment

Occupation	Employment	Median annual wage	Typical education needed	Typical on-the-job training needed to attain competency
Combined Food Preparation and Serving Workers	1,150	\$18,013.00	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Retail Salespersons	900	\$19,175.00	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Cashiers	560	\$17,897.00	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers, Hand	510	\$21,304.00	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Office Clerks	470	\$24,588.00	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term on-the-job training
Stock Clerks and Order Fillers	410	\$23,105.00	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	410	\$31,322.00	Postsecondary nondegree award	Short-term on-the-job training
Maintenance and Repair Workers	400	\$33,430.00	High school diploma or equivalent	Long-term on-the-job training
Packers and Packagers, Hand	400	\$22,088.00	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Janitors and Cleaners, Except Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	380	\$21,914.00	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Total	5,590 (26% of total 2016 employment)			

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics

Table 2: Occupations with largest projected employment gains, Boone-Wilkesboro region

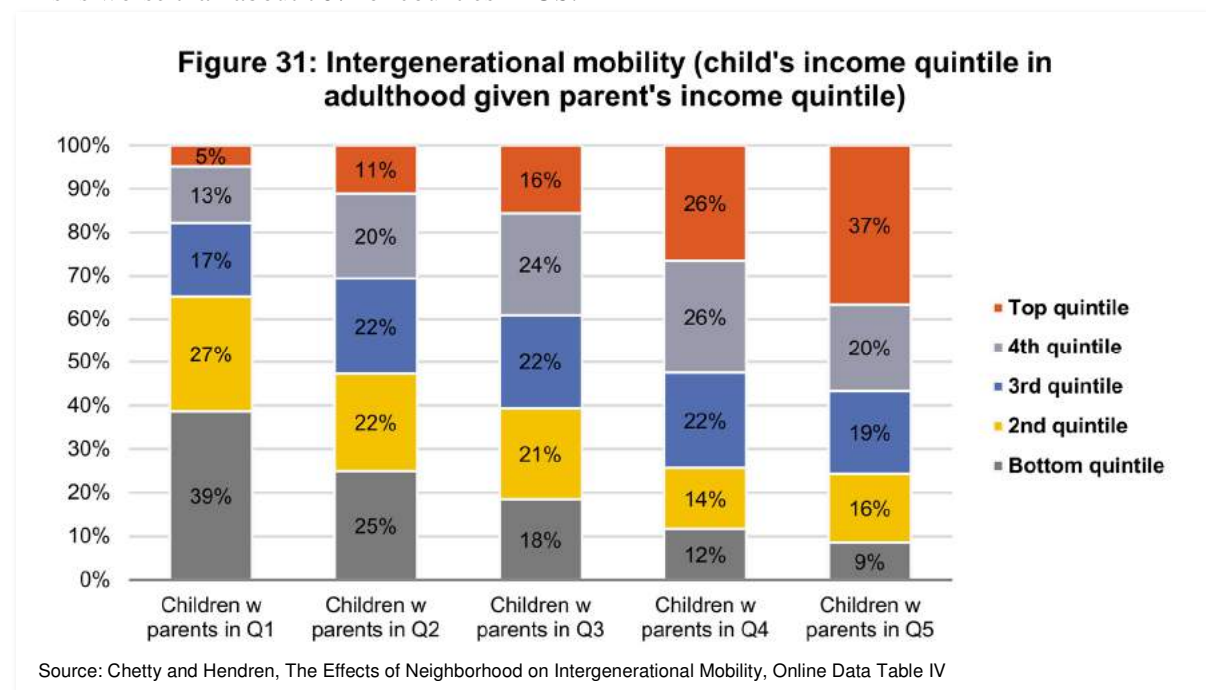
Occupation	Projected 2024 employment	Change from 2014	Median annual wage	Typical education needed	Job Training
Combined Food Preparation and Serving Workers	3578	720	\$18,178	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Retail Salespersons	3134	333	\$20,772	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Waiters and Waitresses	1884	272	\$17,818	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Cooks, Restaurant	968	227	\$19,675	No formal educational credential	None
Home Health Aides	1144	209	\$18,964	No formal educational credential	Apprenticeship
First-Line Supervisors of Food Preparation and Serving Workers	833	150	\$25,856	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term on-the-job training
Customer Service Representatives	1352	120	\$27,842	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term on-the-job training
Cashiers	2458	112	\$18,076	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Registered Nurses	1367	99	\$54,074	Bachelor's degree	None
Childcare Workers	1066	92	\$19,618	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term on-the-job training

Source: N.C. Department of Commerce, Labor and Economic Analysis Division

Given low wages in the past that have, in many cases, contracted in recent years, it is not surprising that many workers in Wilkes can't make ends meet. When viewed by occupation, about 70% of employment in the county provides a median annual wage below \$32,592—the minimum amount needed to afford basic sustenance in Wilkes County for a one-parent, one-child family.³⁵

An economy predicated on low-wage work shapes the trajectory of entire families. Figure 31 shows that two-thirds of children in Wilkes born to parents at the bottom of the income ladder are stuck in the bottom two quintiles when they grow up. Only 5% of kids from the bottom will climb to the top 20%. Conversely, well over half of kids with parents at the top will remain in the top two quintiles as adults. Intergenerational mobility in Wilkes is severely constrained.

Additionally, on average, a poor child who spends all of his or her childhood in Wilkes suffers an income penalty of \$920 (\$1,540 for boys, \$130 for girls). This means that at age 26, a boy raised poor in Wilkes will have an annual income \$1,540 less per year than if he had grown up in the average American county. This is worse than about 76% of counties in US.³⁶



Voices of Wilkes County

Wilkes County's demographic, educational and economic patterns often play out roughly in the lived experiences of local residents, young and old. Structures and barriers of hardship, hunger, illness, narrowed opportunity, unemployment, abuse, addiction, diminished hope and deprivation can harrow at close hand. Determined acts of resilience, courage, obligation, commitment, generosity and idealism instruct powerfully as well. As ever, they paint in brighter and more vivid shades than statistics can typically muster. Anecdotes are only that of course. But they illustrate, in ways that numbers often fail to reveal, the nature of economic challenge in Wilkes County. Unless noted otherwise, all quotations are from interviews with the authors or research assistants with the North Carolina Poverty Research Fund. Names have been changed or abbreviated in many cases to protect confidentiality.

Losing (and Finding) Home

Tina Krause is the executive director of Hospitality House in Boone, North Carolina. Her agency serves seven counties, including Wilkes, providing food, shelter, counsel and therapy to clients facing poverty, personal crisis and homelessness. Krause also lives in Wilkesboro, where she previously helped lead the local United Way. To Krause, Wayne Harris represents both the character and the hardship repeatedly found in Wilkes County.

“Wayne is a quiet and humble man,” she says, “not that different than most folks here.” Over the course of several years, he slowly moved closer and closer to homelessness “due to life circumstances that any of us or our neighbors might face; he is a good man who has had a great struggle.” After years of labor, growing up and working on a farm in Wilkes County, doing a long stint at Tyson Foods, severe and continuous lower back pain and worrisome clotting of blood in his legs made it tough for Harris to walk, much less work full time. Homelessness, Krause notes, can look markedly different when you stare it in the face. Wayne Harris explained to a local publication:

I love working. I’ve worked all my life, since I was a little boy. But after a while I was in so much pain, I couldn’t handle it anymore. I didn’t have the strength to keep going or to do the job like I wanted to do. I just prayed that the Good Lord would keep me going. That He would show me a way.

I didn’t have no insurance to take care of myself, so I just kept on going. Then I couldn’t work no more. It broke my heart. To be honest, it was embarrassing. As a man, I’m supposed to take care of my family. I’m supposed to be the provider, go to work and take care of my own. I always done that. And I was trying to be strong because I believe in the Bible. But after a while, the worry really works on you. I kept praying and asking the Lord to let me get better so I could take care of my son and my three grandchildren.

[After eventually losing his housing], it was deep down in the fall and I slept outside under a bridge for a while. I was very disappointed in myself and it was hard to understand how it got that bad. But I guess it’s a part of life we have to go through sometimes. There were times I was really scared. I just kept praying and holding on to my faith. It was all I had.

I wasn’t looking for no charity. I just wanted to get my health better and find a home. Then I could start to help others again.³⁷

Harris’ path wasn’t unfamiliar to Tina Krause. Many of the wounded folks they serve at Hospitality House struggle greatly with problems of addiction or mental illness. On the first visit I made to her facility an immensely distressed client was threatening suicide in the parking lot. On the day of my second interview, another long-term, struggling, vulnerable friend/client had ended his life. Krause wears her heart, her courage and her unending patience, on her sleeve. But she explains that many of their clients, particularly from Wilkes, don’t have addiction issues, they have just seen the bottom fall out.

When Wayne Harris walked through the door, she said, you could tell he was in crisis. “Our first job was to get him the health care he needed,” she says, and then they could deal with his other challenges. Eventually, Harris got an operation and the necessary treatment for his blood clots. Hospitality House staff also helped him apply for disability payments. Unsurprisingly, he feels like they saved his life. “Hospitality House gave me a miracle,” he told the local newspaper. “They’re like my family, I finally made it home.”³⁸ For Krause, though, too many others slip between the cracks. “This is a low income county,” she explains, with all that entails. The chronic stress and erupting crises bring, in too many instances, domestic violence, substance abuse, family dysfunction, closed doors to opportunity, closed doors to hope. As she puts it, “A lot of folks, in the community I love, have a lot of things to unpack.”

Still, Krause, like Harris, can't bear the thought of leaving. "I have a heart for Wilkes County and for where they are," she says. They are, "by God, Wilkes County." They "take care of their own."

BD, who was living in transitional housing in Boone when we interviewed her, cleaned houses and worked as a waitress and a cook until poor health forced her to quit. She has lupus, rheumatoid arthritis and Crohn's disease.

She has been on and off Medicaid. Kicked off because she got married, she and her husband divorced so she could get back on. "Life," she observes, "is really lousy when I'm off Medicaid. When your health deteriorates, you tend to get depressed. I'm naturally outgoing."

BD lived in a trailer before coming to the shelter. She paid \$500 in rent and \$300 in utilities—far more than she could afford on her disability check. Then, as now, she had no car and relied on friends and family to drive her to doctor's appointments. She had to leave the trailer because freezing temperatures one winter drove her to Hospitality House. BD says, "I don't know where I'd be without these people. I thank God for them every day."

Poverty and Health

Claire Johnson has not had to endure the terrors of homelessness. But, like thousands in Wilkes County, she has repeatedly struggled to support and care for her kids and extended family, while facing an array of health and economic difficulties that would swamp most of us. Fear and poverty haunt her daily life.

Johnson, 53, grew up in Hickory and moved to Wilkes County in 1990. Her first husband passed away at a young age and she felt obliged to help care for his parents, who lived in Wilkes. Johnson's daughter was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes when she was eleven. A couple of years later, when Johnson applied for work at Tyson Foods, she learned that she was diabetic as well. Nonetheless, she worked for years on the main line at the chicken processing plant, though, she explained, the work was "nasty."



Part of Tyson chicken processing plant in Wilkesboro

Last October, Claire Johnson had a heart attack. Though she hadn't experienced any chest pain, she had a hard time getting her breath and lost all her energy. By the time she got to the hospital, her hand had gone numb. But she got there in time to be treated and she managed a slow recovery.

Since then, Johnson has worked in home health care. She is paid \$8.35 an hour and her hours are capped at thirty, so she doesn't receive health benefits. Her second husband now works out of Elkin as a truck driver. He pulls a 12-hour shift, seven days on and seven days off. He is paid a little more, per hour, than she is. They own a singlewide trailer that they can park on her husband's parents' lot. Their children are grown and live in Wilkes as well (her daughter also works in home health care). On

bad days at work, Johnson has a hard time breathing. She gets limited health care through a local community health center. She can't pay for the course of rehabilitation they have prescribed.

Food stamps help but are not enough to cover their grocery bills. "I need to eat right to manage my diabetes," she says. "I start to feel sick if I don't get enough to eat." She and her husband "buy a lot of Banquet TV dinners, we eat what we can afford to buy." Junk food costs less, she says. "We eat potatoes and pasta and Hamburger Helper, I don't get a lot of vegetables, but they take what we get on the EBT card."

“If our car gets tore up, like it does sometimes, I just cry,” she admits. “My husband lost his job for a few months a couple of years ago and we really, really struggled.” Sometimes there was nowhere to turn when the food stamps ran out. Back then, she says, “We were so broke, we couldn’t even afford to pay attention.”

Claire Johnson’s biggest worry, now, is her heart. She is able to see a general practitioner twice a year and the health center helps with her insulin. She buys strips to monitor her diabetes at Wal-Mart, where she can afford them. “I live in fear because of my heart, both my mom and dad died of heart attacks.” Her home health care work can be stressful physically, but she can’t afford not to work. She can’t really pay for her medications as it is. Last year, combined, Johnson and her husband made less than \$20,000, though they hope to fare better this year, because of his job. Housing and transportation “eat people alive here.” My kids “have to drive all over the county.” Both Johnson and her daughter “have to pay our own gas” for the home health care work. And the hours logged driving across the county to get to the patient’s house “don’t count toward your hours.”

“We were so broke, we couldn’t even afford to pay attention.”

“I do my best not to feel stressed,” she says. “I trust in the Lord.” Johnson has been a committed member of Harvest Time Christian Ministry for over twenty years. Her kids went to school there and her husband has, on occasion, worked for the ministry, part time. When we’ve had a “real hard time of it, the Church has helped us out.” But “I feel like I should retire to avoid getting a heart attack,” she admits. “I feel that way, but I just can’t afford to do it.”

ER has struggled with diabetes since 2000 and had a stroke in 2010. She cashed out her 401(k) to pay her medical bills. Her insulin costs \$1,200 every three months. Her husband, a Vietnam vet and former business owner, has a degenerative disc condition. She’d like to replace the floor of their house so they could move around safely but they can’t afford it. Despite her challenges, she tries to stay positive. She and her husband volunteer at their church—he works with youth, she with seniors. Still, living on a fixed income is frustrating. “I didn’t choose to have a stroke at 58,” she says. She and her husband worked hard. But when disaster struck, there was “no help for us.” ****

TB raised his son as a single father. He dropped out of school at 16. He tried to do well but had a learning disability that made reading and focusing difficult. Family discord encouraged him to strike out on his own. TB has wrestled with bipolar disorder since he was 19 and is still paying off debt from his treatment. He eats once a day to save money. He prepares a lot of pinto beans and bologna and cheese sandwiches. He has calculated his bills down to the dollar. TB describes himself as “a poor and lost mountain man,” but he has hopes for his son, who is training to get his commercial driver’s license. ****

SJ is a single parent of an 11 year-old daughter and a 14 year-old son. She is unable to work due to complications from diabetes, bad kidneys, IBS and migraines. She has also had two heart attacks. She has been receiving insulin shots for her diabetes since she was 8. She often blacks out, sometimes in front of her children. Her son has nightmares about finding her unresponsive. One time, she passed out while driving. He took the wheel, got them home and called 911. SJ is sure that the stress of her illness and poverty is affecting her son, who has trouble focusing in class.

SJ has been out of work 16 or 17 years. She doesn’t have the energy to participate in activities with her family. “I want to be able to do things with my kids, but every time I try, I get sick and they have to help me.” Every month, she itemizes her family expenses. She skips bills some months, medications other months. Her situation makes her “feel worthless sometimes,” but she tries to “not go there” so she doesn’t worry her kids. ****

NC, who is 44, lives in a small house near his parents. His parents pay for it, a fact that clearly chafes at him. NC worked all his life until chronic back pain forced him to stop. He also suffers from anxiety, high blood pressure and dystonia in his hands, which causes them to contract involuntarily. “I can’t grip, I lose my change if I get it out of my pocket. If I put any pills in my hand, I drop them. I can’t hold anything. I used to be extremely strong in my hands,” he states with a mixture of pride and wistfulness. He would like to get an MRI for his back but can’t afford it. He has applied for disability twice and has been denied twice. He feels like he has no choice but to try again. “I’m not somebody who’s trying to sit on my butt out here and not work. I mean I’m struggling bad and I’ve not got any income coming in and it’s been this way for awhile. It’s finally gotten to me pretty bad.”

While he appreciates having a place to live, the solitude weighs on him. “I don’t really go anywhere. I go to Wal-Mart like once a month. There’s one prescription I get up there and I go to the grocery store. Basically I haven’t got a life.” He continues, “I tell people if they can find any place that’s better not to come to Wilkes County, because they’re not missing anything really. Because there’s nothing to do around here unless you want to go to Tyson.” As for the future, all he asks for is the security of a monthly check. “I’m a simple man. It doesn’t take a lot to please me but that’s what I want. It’s been hard.” ****

Trauma

Tina Krause indicates that Hospitality House’s internal research reveals that over 80% of the men served by the shelter and over 90% of the women, no matter what the immediate cause of their homelessness might be, struggle principally to cope with a major trauma or set of traumatic events. For the men, it is often child abuse. For the women, it is frequently partner or sexual abuse. Our interviews were similarly shot through with reports of domestic violence. Terry Drew is not a resident at Hospitality House, in major part because she inherited an old mobile home. But her experiences demonstrate the pattern.

Drew is 50. At present, she says, “I’m just pulling at strings.” The only assistance she receives is food stamps. She was much distressed to report that, last month, she had to ask her daughter for \$25 to help with her medicine. She tries hard not to burden her daughter. “I can’t see well enough to read a lot of things now, like the numbers on the telephone, reading glasses aren’t strong enough,” she says. “I owe the hospital over \$50,000 that I just don’t have the money to pay, but I keep getting small strokes and seizures.” She has no health insurance, no Medicaid, no job, no disability. “I’m stuck, really stuck,” she sighs.

Terry Drew worked as a cashier at Bojangles in Wilkes for over a decade. “Ms. Bojangles” is what everybody called her. Then she had a stroke at home one night, and several follow-on seizures came quickly thereafter. As a result, she had to quit working. “I’d been employed full time since I was 16,” she says. She owns a 1987 trailer and a 1978 pick-up truck. She tries to keep them both up, but it is a challenge. She pays \$150 a month for lot rental, \$120 for power, \$42 for the telephone and \$40 for car insurance. “That’s hard to manage with no job.” She keeps getting turned down for disability benefits. She gets some health care through the Foothills Free Clinic. The folks there are wonderful, she reports, like family. She cleans the facility and takes height and weight measurements at the clinic on a regular basis as a volunteer, because she’s grateful for their care.

Drew is a victim of intense domestic abuse. Her husband assaulted her for decades. He returned to find her after he was released from prison seven years ago. He held her captive in her house for over four hours, inflicting vicious beatings. She reports that he “thrashed her very nearly” to death. “I had a restraining order but it didn’t matter, the deputies were no help,” she says. “I was married to him for more than twenty years and he abused both me and my daughters the whole time.” She doesn’t have a restraining order any more, thinking they are useless. “I won’t go back to the magistrate,” she emphasizes, “I had enough of that business.” But she says she does now have a gun. “I won’t be beat no more. I live in fear every single day of my life. I can’t come out on my front porch. But I won’t be beat no more. Not ever.”

“I won’t be beat no more. I live in fear every single day of my life. I can’t come out on my front porch. But I won’t be beat no more. Not ever.”

The stress has had its impact. “I can’t deal with the public anymore, though I did it every day for many years.” Counseling helps a little, she says. But she also forgets people and says sometimes that “makes her feel like a fool.” Still, she believes you just keep on trying, you keep going. “But now I’m so low down I can’t really do for myself.” Drew has been living in her trailer for almost twenty years. She got married and had her first child at sixteen. She earned her GRE in 2007.

I’d like to have enough money to pay my bills, and what I owe. I don’t want a fine house or nice clothes. But a lot of times I can’t come up with the \$30 I need for my medicine. Then I just have to endure the pain until I throw up. I’m fifty years old now. Only eight years of my life have been free of abuse. One of my friends told me, “You were born into your stress.” I guess that’s right. I still get the night terrors anytime I hear the gravel flying from a car coming up the road. I don’t know how to handle it.

RS is a soft-spoken, withdrawn woman in her 50s. She, like many of the women we talked to, has a personal history rife with abuse, starting with her childhood. Pregnant at 16 (“My mom kind of kept me locked up in the house so I really didn’t know the outside world,” she says), her mother forced her to marry the father of her child. She stayed with him until her three kids were old enough to leave home, despite an unhappy and violent marriage.

RS got a job at a college in South Carolina. She thrived, enjoying the challenges of the position as well as her independence and self-sufficiency. When a “friend” from church tried to set RS up with her son, she hesitated. But with her children gone, she was looking for companionship. The son was “very charming” and they eventually married. Then, she says, “The real person came out.” She was treated “like a prisoner in my own home.” He beat her regularly. “He was threatening to kill me, saying if I left, he was going to kill me and bury me somewhere nobody could find me.” “Every day,” she recollects, “I feared it when he came home from work.”

After a stint in the hospital from a beating, RS packed her car to leave. As she was pulling out of her driveway, her husband shot first through a neighbor’s window, then through her car window, missing her head “by an inch.” He shot out the passenger side window but she got away, covered in glass, and called the police.

Although she escaped physically, the psychological scars persist. “My mind wasn’t right. I was afraid to come out of my house for a long time. I was terrified.” RS moved to Wilkes for a job, but was told she was “too nervous” and let go. “I always feel like somebody’s trying to do something to me all the time. I try to avoid crowds.” “Life derails you. I made poor choices,” she admits (as if the abuse is her fault). She wishes there were more chances for people like her that “have been through traumatized situations.” “It’s a little hard right now.” But she’s determined. “I’m getting better,” she asserts through quiet tears.

No Ladder Up

Kendra Lee is a thirty-three-year-old single mother who lives in North Wilkesboro. She has two children, a twelve-year-old son and a daughter who is two. “Double trouble,” as she puts it. Lee graduated from high school in Wilkes County—her father lived there and her mother resided in Virginia Beach. So Kendra grew up in both places.

Lee explains that her parents lived in poverty so she hasn’t received any economic support from them. When she was in her early twenties, she worked as a temporary employee at a country ham processing plant, Suncrest Farms, in Wilkesboro. Before that, she put in long hours at fast food restaurants to make sure her son never went hungry. She might go hungry, she offers, but not her son. Never. At Suncrest, Lee quickly became fulltime and now, for almost eight years, she has been a line supervisor in the boning room. It’s a decent job, she says. She is well treated and valued as an employee. She explains that “it pays the bills,” even if there is no room to spare. Her son attends an after-school program and “skills camp” run by her church. He likes it. Her baby daughter attends a good day care program at Lincoln Heights School. A public voucher program helps pay the fare. Lee has health care through her employer, as do her kids, though her job includes no retirement benefits. She has a doctor her children can see regularly at Wilkes Pediatric. She has, for several years, been part of the Wilkes Circle of Care program,³⁹ receiving advice, support and mentorship from committed volunteer Circles members. Circles is a big help in navigating life in Wilkes County, she says. “You can get help here, there is quite a bit of assistance here in the county and there are a lot of good-hearted folks, but you’ve got to know where to dig.”

She is, basically, in “a good spot” she says. She and her kids live in a subsidized apartment in Wilkesboro. Her rent is affordable, but when she works overtime or gets a raise, it goes up, so it doesn’t seem to lift her prospects. “I frequently work six days a week,” she reports, but “don’t really get any more money by doing it because I lose it in rent.” Her electricity is “ridiculous,” often more than \$350 a month, “though I keep it cold.” They have three bedrooms, fortunately, but the building is very old, the “heating hasn’t been replaced in forever and it feels like the wind is blowing inside.” Still, it’s a decent place to live. And it is also diverse, so she and her kids feel safe and included there. Both of her kids “grow like weeds,” she says. A twelve-year-old boy always needs something. In middle school, “every day it’s something new.” Kids are expensive.

“It is hard being a single parent,” she says. There isn’t enough for her son to do and he is getting to an age where that is more worrisome. But Lee’s biggest concern is that there seems to be no road up. Her job is okay, but it offers no career path. No matter how hard she works or how well she does, there is no promotion possible. And there is no retirement program she can rely on. She has a car from 2008. It has 60,000 miles and when something goes wrong it throws everything off. She doesn’t have enough money for a new one.

What she really wishes is that she could go to college. Then she would have a future, rather than just eking by. She has an array of course credits in the medical field, but her current job is hands-on supervisory and does not include the possibility of part-time work. “So, I am afraid that, if I tried to go to school, I wouldn’t be able to take care of my kids,” she notes. “I barely make ends meet now,” she says. There are some chances you just can’t afford to take.

She concedes that life can sometimes be challenging for a black family in Wilkes County. Her son has had some problems at school, things that perhaps wouldn’t happen in other parts of the state, and shouldn’t happen in Wilkesboro either. At work, people are constantly telling her, given her supervisory role, that they are “shocked she has made it this far.” She thinks the “Hispanics probably get it worse.” Still, there are generous folks in Wilkes too. And the churches try to help. But even if you have a stable job, a job that basically pays the bills, it is possible to feel trapped, unable to work your way out of the bottom wrung. Diminished opportunity can crush even if you are not facing homelessness and starvation. “People need to be able to work toward a better circumstance,” she explains.

Low-wage jobs are often classified as “low skill” but that doesn’t make them easy. We spoke to one resident who worked at a convenience store. She described how, as the only person on her shift, she is responsible for doing everything herself. She works the registers, stocks the shelves and coolers, keeps the front orderly, sweeps and mops, cleans the bathrooms, shakes the rugs, accepts deliveries, and takes care of anything else that might arise. For all this she makes minimum wage. That’s when she can get to work. The day we talked, her car was broken and she hadn’t been able to go in for over a week.

SC’s life was difficult from the start. Born weighing one pound, four ounces, her life has been a constant uphill climb. While many of the tribulations she has faced could happen to anyone (debilitating disease, abusive relationships), lack of resources and a sense of powerlessness—of being marginalized in tightknit community—have dogged her attempts to get ahead.

Nonetheless, she holds fast to a dream of finishing one of her two courses of study. SC is only four classes away from completing her medical assistant degree, an interest inspired by her sister’s twenty-year struggle with ovarian and breast cancer. She is also close to finishing a degree in early childhood education. She longs to have a job where she can help people. “I worked in nursing homes and when I worked for [home health care] I loved it. It’s nothing, but it’s all about letting someone know they matter. If my life means anything, I want people to know their life matters because my life has never mattered. My goal every day is to make somebody know they matter.”

Although SC knows a degree and a good job are the ticket to financial security, they remain elusive. The demands of the present are far too pressing. In and out of jail for nonpayment of child support, requiring constant medical care, trying to reunite what’s left of her family, SC has too much on her plate to even begin to think about school. “What do you do? What do you do?” she asks. “I’m doing everything, I’m going to all groups, I’m seeking therapy. I’m doing everything I know to do. But it’s like every time I get started, they throw me in jail for child support. How do y’all expect me to get anywhere?”

The Impact and Challenge of Poverty

Those who work in Wilkes County’s substantial charitable and social services community echo themes raised by the stories above. Poor health and care that is long delayed or never sought; jobs that don’t offer health insurance, a career path or financial security; the long-lasting damage wreaked by trauma, mental health issues and substance abuse, compounded by the toxic stress of the daily grind of poverty—these interrelated barriers demonstrate how multidimensional poverty is, and how necessary a multipronged and coordinated response becomes.

Heather Murphy and her colleagues at The Health Foundation play a potent role in broad-based community efforts to improve the health and well-being of the residents of Wilkes County. The Foundation itself has become a rare and effective vehicle for organization, coordination and engagement—defining health care more meaningfully and pervasively than mere visits to the doctor’s office. Murphy seems obsessed with the reality that “a child born today in Wilkes County is likely to live four and a half years less than a child born in North Carolina’s healthiest county.” Fortunately, she makes sure that others become obsessed with that stark reality as well.

Murphy emphasizes, of course, poverty’s central link to the social determinants of health. She begins, as do many, with its frequent invisibility. “My family and I live in a middle-class neighborhood,” she says. One year, when the family dog got loose, she and her son walked further down the road than they usually go. Her son spied a classmate and asked, “Why is he standing on the porch of that old shack?”—not comprehending that the “old shack” was his classmate’s home. In Wilkes, with homes tucked out of public view at the end of curving, deeply wooded drives, poverty is easy to overlook. And it is easier to acknowledge the plight of those far away. Murphy notes that, “my church, like lots of others, takes their youth group to foreign countries. It’s a lot easier to explain to your kids why such wrenching hardship happens in Haiti than why it happens here.” Gary Newman, who took us through abandoned buildings where squatters live and up steep, almost impassable, roads, echoed Murphy’s point. “I know the folks in my church would have no idea that this is here, you go to the lake or the club or the football game in Charlotte, there’s no reason to drive up into these hills.”

Heather Murphy has taken health outreach explorations beyond the usual parameters. “We’ve gone out to find those with the lived experience of poverty.” Murphy spoke movingly of her conversations with Robert, a man in his late thirties. He explained his most important goal was to make sure his son didn’t have the same life he had. “I don’t want my child to grow up to be like me,” he said. “I’ve had a tough time.” He said he couldn’t even work at McDonald’s any more. He gets too nervous being around people. He’s ashamed that he can’t support his family. Murphy soon learned Robert had suffered two heart attacks and had trouble getting his breath. His medical traumas were related to earlier dental problems. He had no teeth and had developed infections in his gums. Stomach illness then followed.

“I noticed he was always tapping his two fingers,” Murphy said. Three fingers were missing. Robert had worked for years at a sawmill, always in pain because of his teeth. One day the pain was so bad he took extra pills to make it stop. He then had an accident and three fingers were cut off. “His life had been crushed,” Murphy said, “because he couldn’t get dental care.” Like Robert, Murphy is adamant that his son doesn’t face a similar fate.

Shellie Bowlin is the former program director of SAFE Spot, a child protection and advocacy center in Wilkes County. Poverty and economic hardship press hard on SAFE’s clients. The link between abuse and unemployment and wages is direct. “A family is doing okay, but then he loses his job,” she says. Stress rises. The couple “get pissed at each other.” He hits her. Then he goes to jail. She is left in an even tougher spot. In the meantime, she observes, the agency budget gets cut and private donations taper off because there are fewer resources. “So the economy can be the biggest cause of the ills we exist for and have to combat, but then the economy also makes it harder for us to provide the services we need.” Wilkes has a lot of community pride, Bowlin reminds. And people don’t like to acknowledge problems of poverty and abuse. But, the truth is, she explains, “We have to focus harder on our poverty problems in Wilkes County or we won’t be able to deal with child abuse.”

“We have to focus harder on our poverty problems in Wilkes County or we won’t be able to deal with child abuse.”

“There’s no use pointing fingers. We have a real problem and we can either make it better or we can make it worse.”

Fred Brason is the executive director of Project Lazarus, an organization at the focal point of the county’s much-noted addiction challenges. “This is a remarkable community,” he says. “We all know

hardship, we all know each other, we're entrepreneurial, we always have been." "Look at all the businesses that started here," he observes. "It's no accident they were all here." For some, the present illicit commodities are not that different than moonshine work. "Moonshine, marijuana, medicine—they're just different commodities." You can't separate the county's designation, nationally, for income loss from its parallel rankings for addiction. "There's no use pointing fingers," Brason says. "We have a real problem and we can either make it better or we can make it worse."

Brason is tenacious about making it better. "I spend a lot of time back in the hollers, and we've always been pretty insular." But being insular didn't matter as much when "daddy could go to work in textiles without finishing high school," he says. "We're independent, we like to do it our way, but now there's a bigger cost for that." A lot of folks Brason knows used to log. "What do you do when that gets displaced?" he asks. The county is also "so spread out, there's no core here, no transportation, no great business to bring in." Even the kids often "think there's no future for them here, so the only coping method is escape. If I get \$20 for food it's gone in a day, better to spend it on meth." That's why meaningful treatment work has to be about relationship, he says. No outside warriors here, "you have to meet people where they are."

John Triplett has run Wilkes Ministry of Hope, sponsored by the Brushy Mountain Baptist Association, for nine years. The almost entirely volunteer-based faith ministry has served over 7,000 Wilkes County families—mostly with food, but also with vouchers for rent and power and gasoline. Triplett also makes sure they can help with emergency transportation. The ministry typically sees about 40 families a day at a generously donated facility in North Wilkesboro. Local churches of an array of denominations are heavily involved. The ministry relies on at least 25 volunteers a week with responsibilities rotating among church memberships. Much of the food distributed comes from Second Harvest Food Bank in Winston-Salem, but nearly half is produced in local food drives. Hope Ministry also runs a toy store that is famous across the county. It allows impoverished parents to buy Christmas presents for their kids, paying about ten cents on the dollar. Last Christmas, it served over 5,000 children. The morning of our visit, before the Ministry opened, a desperate family was waiting in the parking lot when Triplett arrived. They explained their two daughters had not eaten in a day. Triplett opened early and brought them a box of food in the parking lot, giving them instructions to come back in the late afternoon after the kids had been to school. "We mean to be a place of warmth and safety and friendship," he said. Then people will come back.

Triplett has seen much. "Wilkes County was hit real hard seven or eight years ago, we're still reeling from it," he says. But he thinks people have had to "get used to it, to not having as much as they used to." Everybody is included in that, he says, "my family too." The county just needs higher paying jobs for people who haven't gone to college. "Wilkes has Tysons, but that's almost it, we still have some Lowe's jobs, but most of them require a bachelor's degree or at least community college," he says. There's no magic to it, he argues, we need more jobs that meet people where they actually are. We need to concentrate more on the people who come in here, the working poor. "My grandmother worked in a furniture factory from the time she was fourteen until she was seventy," he laments. It was a good job. Decent wages. It wasn't going to make you rich, but it paid decent wages. Now that "factory is gone and so are all the rest."

Bob Taylor, from Hospitality House, says "Wilkes County is a great place that has experienced sort of a slow motion disaster the last couple decades." It has been rocked by a lack of decent paying jobs, a lack of affordable housing, 40- and 50-year-old trailers, and thousands of folks "hanging on by a thread." Maggie McCann from Crisis Ministries at St. Paul's in Wilkesboro reports that transportation and day care that working people can afford are great challenges. All the churches could tell you, she says, of so many people who can't afford their utilities and rent. A lot of times they are hardworking folks who have just gotten "thrown off" by a doctor bill or a car falling apart. Most of the residents she sees, "just don't have enough to get by." They are usually "still positive about improving their lives, but some are beaten down, depressed about their lives." Even with a supposed economic recovery, it "seems like things have

gotten worse, we're a lot busier at Crisis Ministry." St. Paul's "tries hard, but it can't do enough."

Denise Monaghan, a beloved "miracle worker" at the Wilkes County Health Department, worries that even their best efforts can't always meet people's most basic needs. "We make them jump through so many hoops to rise up—do this here, and then go across the county to get that, come back in three days for this. Sometimes they even have to go to Boone to get help, and we also make them work," she notes. "It's a full-time-plus job." Sometimes it isn't really possible. "We're splintered and spread out," she says. Every food pantry has different hours, is open on different days, has different eligibility requirements. No one knows them all. And "truth is, even a lot of our county workers are on food stamps themselves, just a few days away from poverty in their own lives." This is the "most beautiful place in the world," she says. "But we don't have the infrastructure to deal with people's challenges." Tim Murphy of SAFE adds, "this is a great community, lots and lots of people want to help, but they're all moving in different directions, we're like 300 mules in a field with none hitched up."

"We make them jump through so many hoops to rise up—do this here, and then go across the county to get that, come back in three days for this. Sometimes they even have to go to Boone to get help, and we also make them work," she notes. "It's a full-time-plus job."

Tina Krause, Hospitality House's director, relates the challenges of the county not only to her clients, but to her family as well. "My middle son was accepted to four universities, but, like almost all his friends, he chose to stay in Wilkes County at first," she explains. "Putting it as elegantly as possible, it is important for our kids here to see themselves as capable of doing something beyond Wilkes County." A lot of them may have to leave, but, "if enough leave, maybe a lot more will come back, and build a future here." If families and teachers don't see them as capable of it, "they won't stretch them."

Realizing her son's future for work was diminished in Wilkes, Krause accepted that he'd have to go elsewhere. "It was heartbreaking to pack him up," she says. She still wishes "he was here to cut my wood and walk the dogs and lift my heart, but he needed to go. I think he'll come back," she says, "but he needed to challenge himself."

But, as Krause describes it, even her son's day of departure showed Wilkes' neighborly side.

I left for the shelter before he'd finished packing up. On the way to work it occurred to me he'd likely need some money for gas and I hadn't left him any. I didn't have time to drive back home, so I turned into the gas station I knew he'd pull into before he left. The owner knew me, but I didn't know who might be at the station later that day, so I said, "my son will be coming by and he'll have a mattress on top of his car. When he gets here, will you go out and give him twenty bucks worth of gas and I will swing by and pay you tonight?" "Sure," he said. I never wondered or hesitated for a moment. This is Wilkes County.

Recommendations

Housing and transportation are critical needs in the county. Over half of renters and a sizable portion of homeowners cannot afford safe, adequate housing. Aggravating the problem, many homes in Wilkes are older and increasingly dilapidated, requiring repairs, weatherization and accommodations for the elderly or mobility impaired. Three times more households in Wilkes than North Carolina use fuel oil, such as kerosene, or wood to heat their homes. Alarming, about 250 households report that they use no heating fuel at all.⁴⁰

A University of North Carolina report on extreme housing conditions in North Carolina identified six

especially troubled census tracts in Wilkes. These tracts are marked by a concentration of housing that is unaffordable, overcrowded, lacking critical facilities, or some combination of the three.⁴¹ Driving around the county, we saw numerous homes and trailers exhibiting the telltale signs of neglect: plastic sheets taped over broken windows, holes in foundations, rusted out siding, porches and roofs collapsing. Additionally, we heard anecdotal reports of homelessness and people squatting in abandoned homes. A national point in time count in January 2016 found 520 people without permanent housing in the Northwest region (the region that includes Wilkes). This was the highest rate of homelessness in the state and probably an undercount of the true number of homeless individuals.⁴² Contrary to common stereotypes, over a quarter of those counted were children aged 17 years or younger; about half were women.⁴³

Safe, reliable housing conveys a wide range of benefits. Significantly, almost three quarters of housing units in Wilkes County are owner-occupied and about half of those are owned outright, providing a ready asset.⁴⁴ Typically, people are “planted” in Wilkes more deeply than in the state (almost half of all residents moved into their current home in 1999 or earlier compared to a third of Tar Heels overall).⁴⁵ However, the homeownership rate has dropped by five percentage points since 2000, suggesting some housing volatility and involuntary displacement.⁴⁶



Mobile home in Wilkes County

Given these conditions, measures should be taken to assist homeowners to secure and preserve family homes. Programs that assist with repairs, improvements, property taxes and weatherization can be implemented locally and have the potential to forestall larger costs and yield future benefits for both homeowner and county. Given residents’ high rates of homeownership and commitment to place, the county is rich ground for small yet smart investments in housing such as weatherization, lien forgiveness and inexpensive loans.

Transportation is expensive, and in a large county such as Wilkes with no real center of population or employment, it is vital. The Wilkes Transportation Authority is an ambitious attempt to provide this critical service. Many of our interviewees described relying on it, and while they are grateful for its presence, they often cited cost and schedule as real barriers.

We spoke to one woman, SC, whose complicated life demonstrates how difficult, yet essential, public transportation is for those without a car. Currently living in a safe house, SC is trying to find housing and a job while regaining custody of her sons and battling debilitating health condition. Using public transportation to take care of all this business requires a strategy, she explains.

“I make my list the day before of what I want to do because once you get on the shuttle, depending on where you’re getting off at, that’s about an hour trip. Then when you get done with where you’re going, you have another hour trip to get back home. You can spend all day trying to get to one or two places.” A task that runs unexpectedly long, such as a medical appointment, can cause her to miss her shuttle and throw off her entire plan.

“There’s only so much you can get done. They say there’s 24 hours in a day but you really have 12 because the shuttle runs from 6 something to 6. So in those 12 hours, you gotta get up, do your chores, you gotta have everything done before you leave the house. So then, by the time I can get to the shuttle, like this morning it was 8-something. I had to catch it by 8-something to be at the hospital by 10 and not be late.”

SC has to get a copy of her birth certificate. She dreads the prospect. She was born in a neighboring county but it might as well be another country. “I’ve been on the phone with the health department and social service trying to see if they got a copy because if not, then I have to get to Iredell. And how am I supposed to get to Iredell?”

Vouchers or discounted tickets would help those who are homeless or on a shoestring budget. The fare to Winston-Salem, the location of the nearest large hospital, is \$68—an impossible sum for many; and even \$1 for the Wilkes Express Shuttle can be too much, especially for those who need to ride multiple times a

week. Coordination between the transportation authority and local service providers can help with distribution of tickets and bring rider concerns to the fore. Programs that draw on Wilkes' generous volunteer culture, such as FaithHealthNC, can be promoted and expanded to fill gaps in need. The wear and tear inflicted by long miles of driving on mountain roads is a regular preoccupation among low-income residents. Organizations such as Wheels4Hope and "car ministries" run by churches and nonprofits can step in to fill this need through free or discounted cars and car repair. A few hundred dollars upfront and a safe, functioning vehicle can keep hardship at bay.

The intersection of health, substance abuse, domestic violence and poverty was a powerful theme that ran through most of our interviews. While the links between poverty, dependency and abuse are present everywhere, the physical and social isolation many experience in Wilkes deepen the damage to self and family and make help harder to reach. As one person we interviewed noted, the sense that dysfunctions such as alcoholism and abuse are "family business" (and ought to remain so) is deeply rooted. Isolation also creates a paucity of imagined alternatives. How do you strive for normalcy, one respondent observed, if you've rarely witnessed it?

Effective programs that tackle these urgent problems—and the toxic stress they engender—exist, but the need outstrips the capacity of any one organization. Healing people and families requires time and relationships. The availability of long-term, wraparound support is especially critical from an intergenerational perspective. As local news articles have pointed out, the number of foster children in Wilkes has reached record numbers and is one of the highest rates in the state.⁴⁷ Additionally, Wilkes has a high percentage of grandparents caring for grandchildren without a parent's presence—a situation that often arises as a consequence of poverty, incarceration or drug use.⁴⁸ As a result, the needs of children, parents and caretakers must all be addressed. Given the complexity of these entangled issues, collaborative, multi-pronged, long-term assistance is vital.

Resources should be allocated for developing a coordinated infrastructure of care and services to connect providers and clients. Related programs must be identified and linked in order to treat the whole person. Individuals with a drug dependency, for example, not only have to grapple with the addiction, odds are that they and their families face a host of other health, behavioral, housing, employment and legal obstacles. Wilkes has the leadership and capacity to craft a strategic response to address each of these interrelated hurdles.

A more coordinated response network also makes it easier for people in the fog of crisis to get crucial services. Alleviating the burden of seeking help removes some of the stigma, as does emphasizing that services are for the whole community or that they are important for family integrity and child wellbeing. A community is better off when its individual members thrive. This is especially true of small places.

"We mean well and lots of people want to do good, but ultimately we're disorganized, We place the jail and the courthouse next to each other and that makes sense. But what about the services that prevent people from landing there? The county has lots of well-meaning professionals who prescribe solutions but there's no support for families after they get this bundle of recommendations. There is not a good recollection that clients don't always know what to do or how to do it. We're used to knowing these things and think that other people do too."

While Wilkes County public schools have made notable achievements, Wilkes as a whole lags behind the state in terms of higher education. A vicious cycle is in play: those with a college education have few employment opportunities. The jobs that are available typically pay less than in other parts of the state. From an employment perspective, there is little to attract and keep college-educated workers in the county. Yet absent more residents with college degrees, Wilkes risks ever-greater brain drain and reliance on employment that is dominated by backbreaking, low-wage and often dead-end work.

Additionally, a large portion of the population is under-employed, unemployed or has dropped out of the labor force entirely. According to one study, approximately a quarter of Wilkes' youth (ages 16-24) are disconnected—that is they are neither working nor in school.⁴⁹ These youth are at risk from being cut off from the experiences, education and growth opportunities that lead to a fulfilling and productive life. Many older workers have also fallen out of the workforce. Job training, apprenticeships, certifications and skills upfitting can redirect these lost workers back into the labor force. But, as one person cautioned, “Job training is good but we need to ensure that the jobs are there.” We often heard that local employers faced a shortage of skilled laborers such as welders. This is somewhat supported by jobs data which report that there were 1,452 unemployed people and 5,001 job openings in the county in 2016.⁵⁰

Wilkes Community College is a vital player in this transitional moment in the regional economy. Already commendably focused on economic mobility and workforce concerns, WCC is rethinking ways to increase its impact. It is striving to better align education and training with the skills sought by employers and to improve support for its students. Removing some of the barriers to college enrollment and program completion (such as financial burdens, lack of transportation and child care, scheduling issues, homelessness or hunger) will help reverse the low-wage cycle.

In many ways, Wilkes enjoys considerable advantages: a robust entrepreneurial tradition, a beautiful setting, natural amenities, Merlefest, a fascinating history, rich cultural practices, proximity to Boone and entryway to the Blue Ridge Mountains. A strong, locally based and oriented small business ecosystem is a natural fit in this environment. It's already happening: 78% of firms in Wilkes employ fewer than 20 people.⁵¹ In addition, over 4,400 non-employer firms operate in the county (most non-employer firms are self-employed individuals operating unincorporated businesses).⁵² Clearly, much small-scale business activity already exists, but more can be done to encourage its growth. The Small Business Center at Wilkes Community College is a crucial component, but economic development and business leaders can also take steps to foster local businesses that have an allegiance to place and people. These are investments in Wilkes' future.

A Concluding Note – Gene Nichol

Michael Cooper is a young lawyer and author immensely tied to his native Wilkes County. At perhaps some financial sacrifice, he was determined to move back home. The hardship he sees pervading much of the county makes him lose sleep. His determination to help his hometown address and overcome it, though, is more than a match for his apprehension. In one of our long conversations, Cooper stepped back a shade, looking broadly. “What is happening here was always going to happen,” he says. “In Appalachian areas, people have traditionally been less well educated, or at least less well formally educated.” That didn't always hurt as much as it does now. Then NAFTA came along, globalization, other trade deals. And the jobs that could be had that pay a good wage and don't require higher education flew away. “It's true here in Wilkes, it's true in a lot of places—Hickory, Sparta, it's what's happening all

“I think, if we're serious, we also know there is no savior who is going to come in and rescue us, there's not going to be another Lowe's or a Google or a bunch more Tysons,”

over southern Appalachia.” The departure of Lowe's and the speedway may have made it worse, but “it was coming, regardless.” That means, “This is our opportunity to help lead the way,” he says. “I think, if we're serious, we also know there is no savior who is going to come in and rescue us, there's not going to be another Lowe's or a Google or a bunch more Tysons,” Cooper adds. “The next economy is

going to come from the locals.” Some young folks are making progress in interesting ways. They don't get headlines like a plant closure. “Inviting folks in won't do it,” he says, “we've got to do it for ourselves ... we need to increase local democracy and engagement and community commitment.” And “I don't

mean getting involved with the city council, I mean believing in, investing in, creating, and paying back this great community.” Cooper can make you a believer.



My students, colleagues and I have made many trips to Wilkes County in the last few months. It challenges and inspires, offering affection and anxiety. On one of our visits before the 2016 election I spent a good deal of time with a family in a small mobile home lot. The trailers were ancient and pressed in close proximity. Confederate flags and Trump signs were on prominent display. The home, where we sat at the kitchen table, was at least four decades old and too small for the six people who lived there. On a mid-summer day, it was exceeding hot. The windows were closed tight and covered with sheets or blankets, so that no one could see in and, perhaps, to avoid seeing out. Fans were running full speed inside, but the air they pushed stayed hot and stifling. The smell of mold, or at least what I thought was mold, was intense. The main room was remarkably cluttered. Two small children played on the

floor and watched TV. Their older sister, who was eight and already involved with the social services and justice systems, was in foster care. An aunt and uncle watched over the kids, as they had for several months. The children’s mother was in prison and wouldn’t be released for four or five months.

The aunt and uncle were committed to the kids, including the absent eight-year-old—certain they could protect and feed and teach and shield them until their mother got back. I believed they were right. I was far more certain that my heart went out to them and that the kids on the rotting floor deserved to be safe and healthy and to thrive. I thought much of my own children and of our broad aspirations to equal opportunity and dignity and meaningful life chance. I had come to the trailer with few answers. I left with even fewer. But their easy smiles provided potent reminder of what is at stake.

Appendix: Additional Figures and Tables

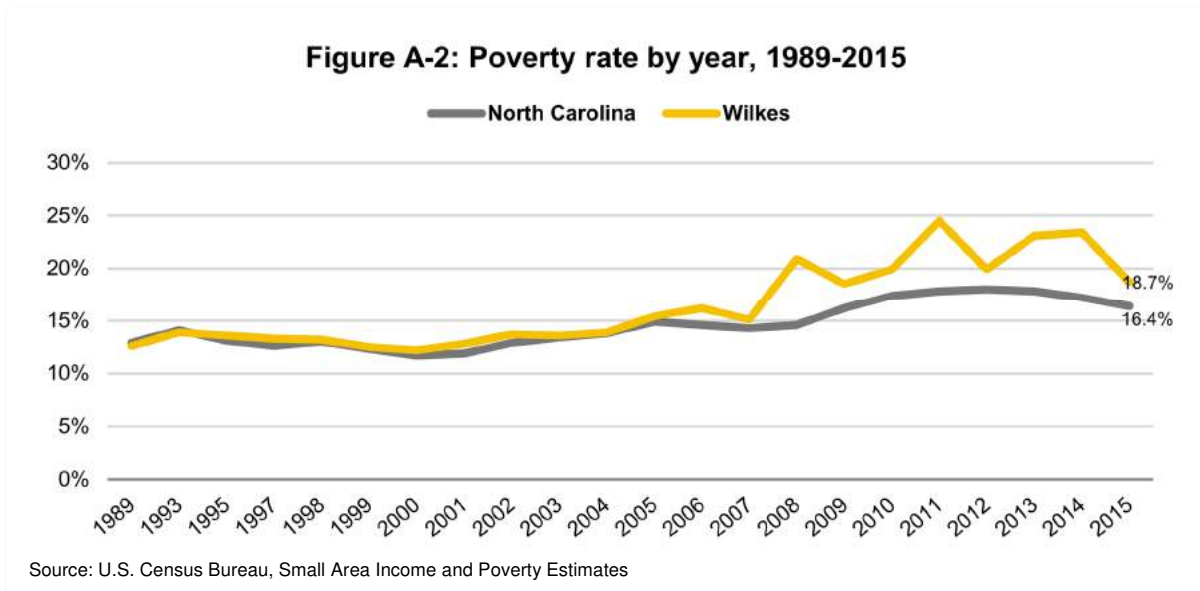
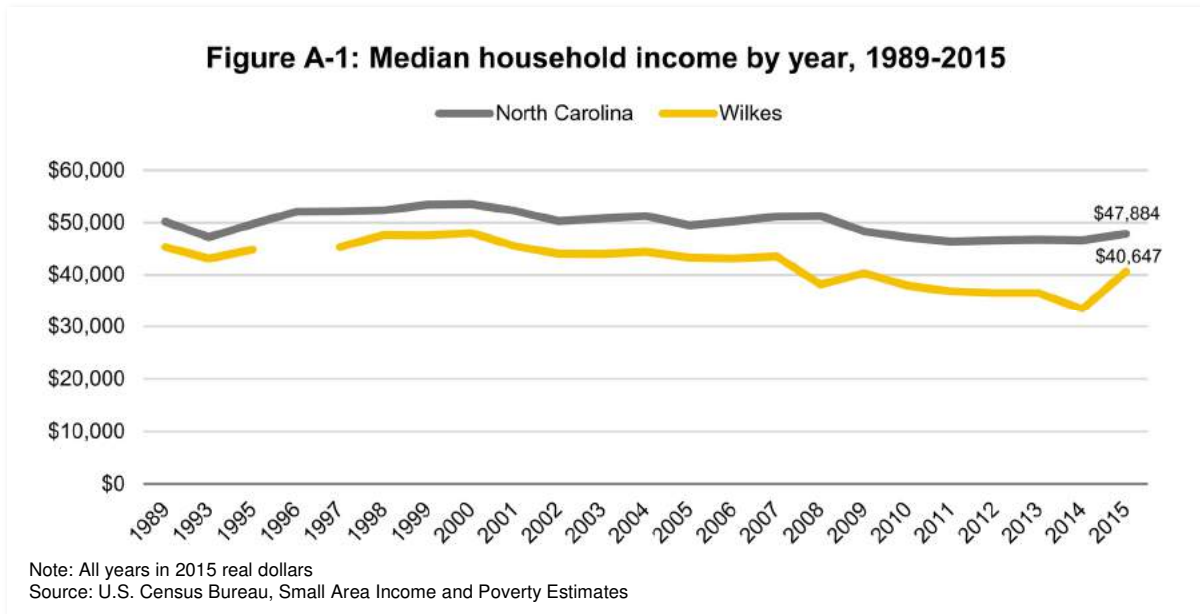
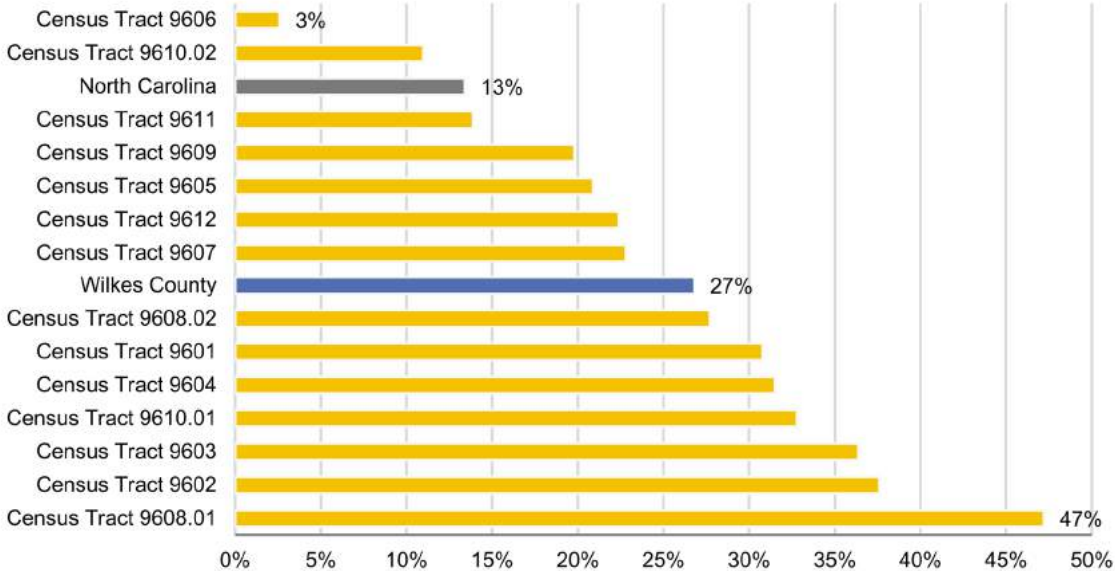
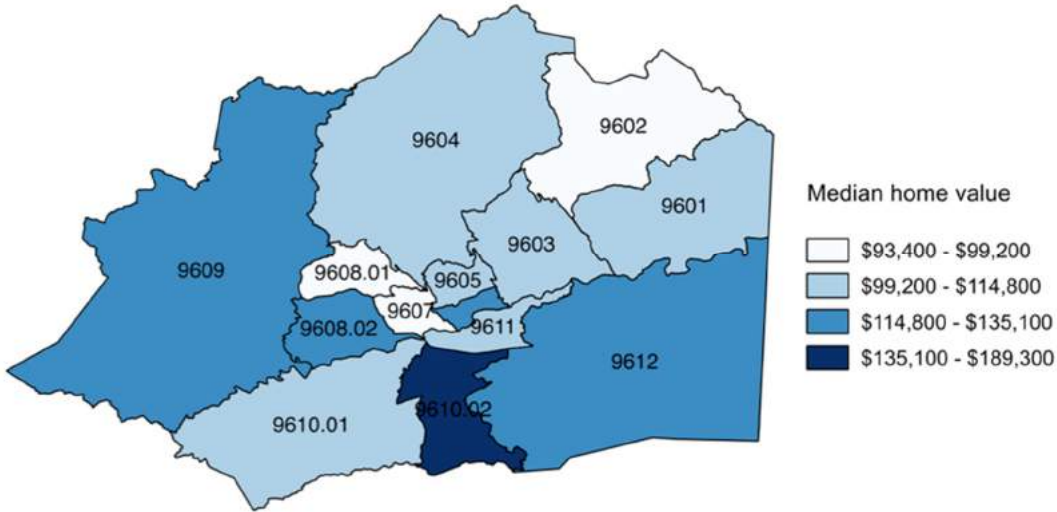


Figure A-3: Percent of housing units that are mobile homes



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate

Map A-1: Median home value



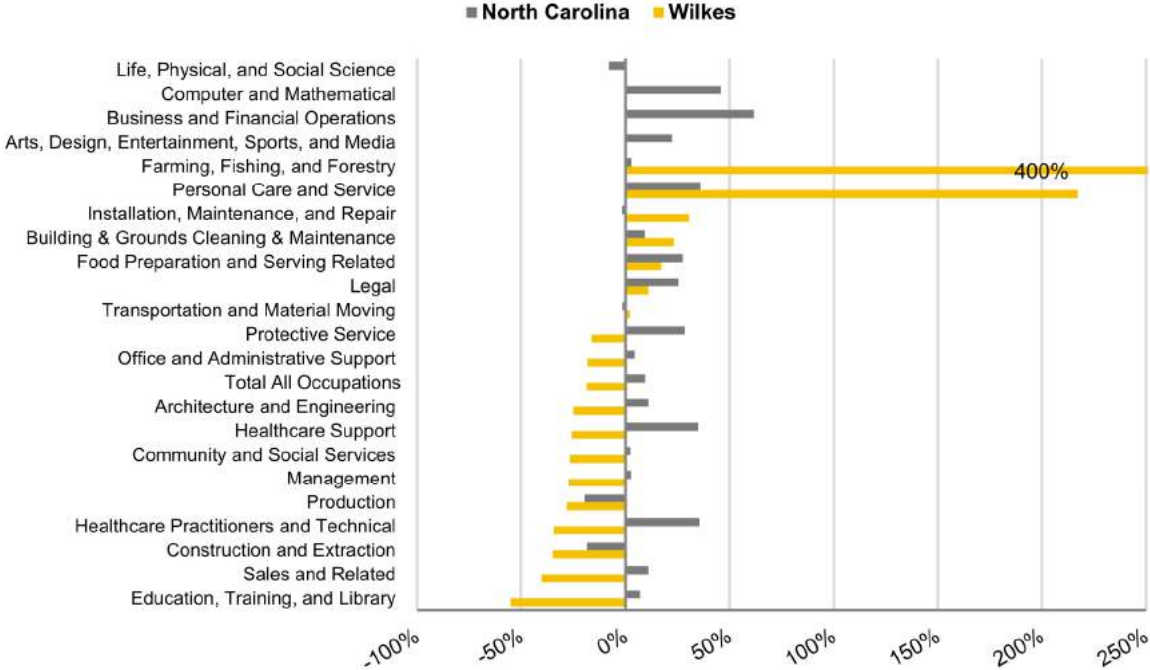
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate

Table A-1: Average annual pay by sector, 1995 and 2015

Sector	Average annual pay in 1995 (2015 \$)		Average annual pay in 2015		Percent change, 1995-2015	
	North Carolina	Wilkes	North Carolina	Wilkes	North Carolina	Wilkes
Federal government	\$54,092	\$48,103	\$67,110	\$55,471	24.1%	15.3%
State government	\$43,428	\$35,371	\$47,905	\$35,946	10.3%	1.6%
Local government	\$36,862	\$32,414	\$42,775	\$35,967	16.0%	11.0%
Total private	\$37,573	\$31,035	\$46,519	\$33,334	23.8%	7.4%
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting	\$26,338	\$26,843	\$32,765	\$25,667	24.4%	-4.4%
Mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction	\$54,040	n/a	\$55,183	n/a	2.1%	n/a
Utilities	\$69,488	\$49,873	\$87,804	\$59,183	26.4%	18.7%
Construction	\$37,623	\$31,189	\$47,690	\$34,906	26.8%	11.9%
Manufacturing	\$42,542	\$31,237	\$56,578	\$35,194	33.0%	12.7%
Wholesale trade	\$53,386	\$35,811	\$68,814	\$52,808	28.9%	47.5%
Retail trade	\$25,739	\$33,282	\$26,822	\$23,910	4.2%	-28.2%
Transportation	\$44,165	\$39,503	\$45,504	\$41,367	3.0%	4.7%
Information	\$51,386	\$44,239	\$76,576	\$48,838	49.0%	10.4%
Finance and insurance	\$53,887	\$38,080	\$89,156	\$52,837	65.4%	38.8%
Real estate and rental and leasing	\$32,453	\$27,940	\$45,779	\$43,023	41.1%	54.0%
Professional and technical services	\$54,921	\$41,130	\$74,879	\$43,966	36.3%	6.9%
Management	\$65,038	n/a	\$105,518	n/a	62.2%	n/a
Administrative and waste services	\$22,974	\$17,103	\$33,148	\$25,003	44.3%	46.2%
Educational services	\$40,467	\$18,809	\$46,280	\$17,705	14.4%	-5.9%
Health care and social assistance	\$40,847	\$31,680	\$44,520	\$30,767	9.0%	-2.9%
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	\$22,468	\$26,784	\$31,207	\$17,310	38.9%	-35.4%
Accommodation and food services	\$14,566	\$12,324	\$16,170	\$13,605	11.0%	10.4%
Other services	\$26,201	\$23,479	\$31,233	\$19,719	19.2%	-16.0%

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages

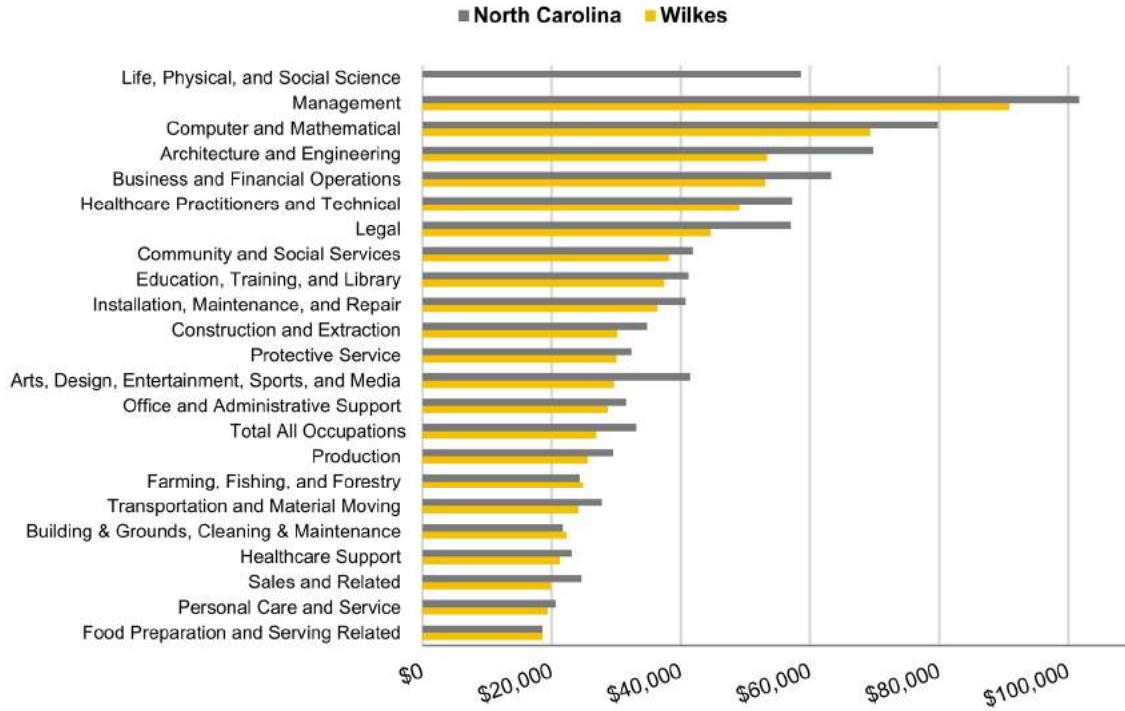
Figure A-4: Percent change in employment by occupational group, 2006-2016



Note: No Wilkes employment data available for Business and Financial Operations and Computer and Mathematical occupational groups in 2006 or Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media and Life, Physical, and Social Science groups in 2016. The increase in the Farming, Fishing, and Forestry group may be an anomaly as it reflects a recent jump (to 130 in 2015 and 300 in 2016).

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics

Figure A-5: Median annual wage by occupational group, 2016



Note: No wage data available for Life, Physical, and Social Science occupational group in Wilkes
 Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics

Endnotes

¹ Wilkes County's population as of July 1, 2016 was 68,740. U.S. Census Bureau, Annual Estimates of the Resident Population: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2016, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

² See, Public Citizen, "North Carolina Job Loss During the NAFTA-WTO Period," <https://www.citizen.org/our-work/globalization-and-trade/north-carolina-job-loss-during-nafta-wto-period>; Robert E. Scott, "The High Price of Free Trade: NAFTA's Failure Has Cost the United States Jobs Across the Nation," Economic Policy Institute, Nov. 17, 2003, http://www.epi.org/publication/briefingpapers_bp147/.

³ North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management, "County/State Population Projections," Annual County Populations, <https://www.osbm.nc.gov/demog/county-projections>.

⁴ North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management, "Projected County Population – Hispanic," https://www.osbm.nc.gov/demog/countytotals_hispanic.

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S1501, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

⁶ North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "4-Year Cohort Graduation Rate Report," <http://accrpt.ncpublicschools.org/app/2016/cgr/>. The 2015-16 graduation rate is for students who were 9th graders in 2012-13 and who graduated by 2015-16 or earlier.

⁷ Of students who dropped out of Wilkes Public Schools in 2014-15 and 2015-16, 80% and 81%, respectively, were white. In 2014-15, 56% of dropouts were male; in 2015-16 that figure was 61%. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "Annual Reports," Annual Dropout Reports, Dropout Table D-6 2014-15 and 2015-16, <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/research/dropout/reports/>.

⁸ Social Security Administration, "Research, Statistics, & Policy Analysis," OASDI Beneficiaries by State and County, 2015, Tables 1, 4 and 5, https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/statcomps/oasdi_sc/.

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S1810, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

¹⁰ Ibid and U.S. Census Bureau, Annual Estimates of the Resident Population: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2016, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

¹¹ North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation, "Crime in North Carolina – 2015," [http://crimereporting.ncsbi.gov/public/2015/ASR/2015 Annual Summary.pdf](http://crimereporting.ncsbi.gov/public/2015/ASR/2015%20Annual%20Summary.pdf).

¹² See for example, Anne Case and Angus Deaton, *Mortality and Morbidity in the 21st Century*, (presentation, Brookings Panel on Economic Activity, March 23-24, 2017), Brookings Institute, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/case-deaton-postconference-april-10-2017-with-appendix-figs.pdf>; Sam Quinones, *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Press, 2015); J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2016).

¹³ Jule Hubbard, "Wilkes 2nd in U.S. in Income Loss," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, http://www.journalpatriot.com/news/wilkes-nd-in-u-s-in-income-loss/article_c83dbd82-d732-11e5-9eca-773f01f3e4f8.html; Stateline, "Fewer Manufacturing Jobs, Housing Bust Haunt Many U.S. Counties," Pew Charitable Trust, <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2016/01/22/fewer-manufacturing-jobs-housing-bust-haunt-many-us-counties>.

¹⁴ The federal poverty threshold, which is used by the federal government to count the number of poor people, is set by the U.S. Census Bureau. It calculates the threshold using a formula based on certain types of pre-tax income, adjusted for family size and the age of the head of household. If total individual or family income falls below the threshold number then that individual or family is considered poor. The poverty threshold for an individual under 65 in 2016 was \$12,486; for a family with two adults and two children, the threshold was \$24,339.

¹⁵ Because the number of children in Wilkes is small—and the number of minority children even smaller—these child poverty statistics have a large margin of error. U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S1701, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

¹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S1701, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

¹⁷ The poverty rate for a married-couple family in North Carolina is 6%: for Wilkes it is 11%. U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table DP03, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

¹⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table DP04, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

- ²⁰ Median home value in Wilkes in 2000 was \$122,775 (in 2015 real dollars) compared to \$114,800 in 2015. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census, Summary File 3, Table H076, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.
- ²¹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table B25064, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.
- ²² Fair market rent (FMR) as a percentage of median household income is calculated by multiplying the monthly FMR for Wilkes by 12 to obtain annual housing costs, and then dividing that sum by median household income as estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Fair Market Rents,” 2015, <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/fmr.html>; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table B19013, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.
- ²³ With one exception (fair market rent for a three bedroom in Caldwell County), FMR consumes a larger share of income in Wilkes than for units of any size in Ashe, Caldwell and Alleghany Counties.
- ²⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table DP04, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.
- ²⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S0801, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, “On the Map,” <https://onthemap.ces.census.gov/>.
- ²⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table B08201, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.
- ²⁹ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Location Affordability Portal,” <http://www.locationaffordability.info/lai.aspx>. Another calculator estimates that the typical household in Wilkes spends 72% of its budget on housing and transportation combined. Center for Neighborhood Technology, “H+T Affordability Index,” <http://htaindex.cnt.org/map/>.
- ³⁰ Wilkes’ labor force participation rate in 1980 was 66%. In 2011-2015, it was 53.9%. Minnesota Population Center, National Historic Geographic Information System, <http://www.nhgis.org> and U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S2301, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.
- ³¹ In 1995, total private employment by industry was 22,119; in 2015 it was 17,028. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, “QCEW Data Files,” <https://www.bls.gov/cew/datatoc.htm>.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ North Carolina Labor and Economic Analysis Division, “Occupational Employment and Wages in North Carolina,” D4: Demand Driven Data Delivery System, <http://d4.ncommerce.com/OESSelection.aspx>.
- ³⁴ The Personal Care and Service occupational group (median annual wage of \$19,429) grew the most, with 630 new jobs. Food Preparation (median annual wage of \$18,632) grew by 330 and Farming, Fishing, and Forestry (median annual wage of \$24,902) grew by 240. These three occupational groups account for 74% of job growth between 2006 and 2016. Job growth in the Farming, Fishing, and Forestry occupational group may be an anomaly since employment had hovered around 100-130 in the years prior to 2016.
- ³⁵ Brian Kennedy II and Alexandra Sirota, *A Standard Worthy of North Carolina Workers: The 2016 Living Income Standard for 100 Counties*, Budget and Tax Center, http://www.ncjustice.org/sites/default/files/LIS_report_2016_updated.PDF.
- ³⁶ Gregor Aisch et al., “The Best and Worst Places to Grow Up: How Your Area Compares,” *The Upshot*, *New York Times*, May 4, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/05/03/upshot/the-best-and-worst-places-to-grow-up-how-your-area-compares.html>.
- ³⁷ Laura Mitchell, “Providing Shelter, Hope,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, August 17, 2016, http://www.journalpatriot.com/news/providing-shelter-hope/article_7b498834-64a5-11e6-8adf-1b291c41166c.html.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ For more information on the Wilkes Circles of Care, visit <http://www.wilkescirclesofcare.org/index.html>.
- ⁴⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table 25040, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.
- ⁴¹ The census tracts identified in the report are 9608.01, 9607, 9610, 9611, 9606 and 9602. William Rohe, Todd Owen and Sarah Kerns, *Extreme Housing Conditions in North Carolina*, Center for Urban and Regional Studies, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <https://curs.unc.edu/files/2017/02/Extreme-Housing-Conditions-in-North-Carolina.pdf>.
- ⁴² North Carolina Coalition to End Homelessness, “Who is experiencing homelessness in North Carolina,” http://www.ncceh.org/media/files/page/3d5f5fbd/NC_2016_PIT_Infographic.pdf.
- ⁴³ North Carolina Coalition to End Homelessness, “Continuum of Care: Homeless Count,” http://www.ncceh.org/media/files/page/93b67254/2016_PIT-Northwest.pdf.

⁴⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table DP04, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ See Kaitlin Dunn, “Most Ever in Foster Care; Homes Needed,” Wilkes Journal-Patriot, February 3, 2017, http://www.journalpatriot.com/news/most-ever-in-foster-care-homes-needed/article_c1d030fe-ea16-11e6-8cae-132f8ea1daf1.html; Jule Hubbard, “County Board Focuses on Foster Care,” Wilkes Journal-Patriot, February 14, 2017, http://www.journalpatriot.com/news/county-board-focuses-on-foster-care/article_ff21a7a8-f2bd-11e6-a973-13d6ba934b35.html.

⁴⁸ In Wilkes County, over 40% of households headed by a grandparent are responsible, without the presence of a parent, for the care of one or more grandchildren under the age of 18. U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table B10002, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

⁴⁹ Measure of America, “Disconnected Youth,” Data Tables, <http://www.measureofamerica.org/disconnected-youth/>.

⁵⁰ NCWorks Online, “Find LMI Data,” Data Trends, Labor Market Supply, Advertised Jobs and Unemployment, <https://www.ncworks.gov/vosnet/Default.aspx>.

⁵¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “2014 SUSB Annual Data Tables by Establishment Industry,” Counties, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2014/econ/susb/2014-susb-annual.html>.

⁵² U.S. Census Bureau, Nonemployer Statistics for the US, States, Metropolitan Areas, and Counties: 2014, Table NS1400A2, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

MORE INFORMATION

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