

# “Surviving Through Together”: Hunger, Poverty and Persistence in High Point, North Carolina



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## Introduction

High Point is not what comes to mind when thinking about the hungriest metropolitan area in the United States. A small city of about 114,000 people,<sup>1</sup> located in North Carolina’s Triad region (with Greensboro and Winston-Salem) (Map 1), High Point has long been at the forefront of the state’s prominent, and almost defining, furniture industry. As the “Home Furnishings Capital of the World,” the city hosts the semi-annual, internationally recognized High Point Furniture Market, attracting over 75,000 exhibitors and buyers from around the globe.<sup>2</sup> Furniture Land South, a five-minute drive from the downtown market showrooms, advertises itself as the largest furniture store in the world. High Point University, a private, Methodist-affiliated institution founded in 1924, is attended by almost 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students from almost every state and many nations. Unlike any North Carolina city of its size, High Point has a thriving Bentley dealership on North Main Street. An array of the city’s census tracts report elevated median incomes.<sup>3</sup> An impressive new city-driven stadium project is designed to revitalize the downtown—bringing in, it is hoped, new restaurants, entertainment facilities and commercial endeavors.

On the face of it, High Point is not the poorest place in North Carolina, let alone the nation. Still, in 2015, a survey conducted by Gallup and released by a national anti-hunger advocacy organization found that the Greensboro-High Point metropolitan area had the highest levels of food hardship in the country.<sup>4</sup> A year later, a High Point University survey of local High Point households confirmed the demoralizing results.<sup>5</sup>

We saw these figures and related articles and wondered what was happening in High Point. How could hunger hit this region so hard? It had suffered grave losses as manufacturers closed shop, but its worst in the nation ranking seemed extreme. As we explored and studied the city, interviewed an array of community and civic leaders, and spoke to High Point residents facing the challenges of hunger and poverty, the story deepened. Embedded in a narrative about surpassing need appeared a galvanizing example of a community coming together to tackle its toughest problems. Faced with alarming stresses of hunger, which are often, as here, reflections of even more debilitating economic and structural hardships, High Point civic and community forces did not sit on their hands. Both private and public sector members locked arms to elevate food and poverty difficulties more effectively to their shared agendas. Notable progress has been made. We will attempt to highlight their bold and often uplifting steps here.

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<sup>1</sup> 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

<sup>2</sup> High Point Market Authority, “High Point Market.”

<sup>3</sup> Census tracts 164.07, 162.04 and 163.04 boast median household incomes of about \$100,000. 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

<sup>4</sup> Food Research and Action Center, *How Hungry Is America? FRAC’s National, State and Local Index of Food Hardship*.

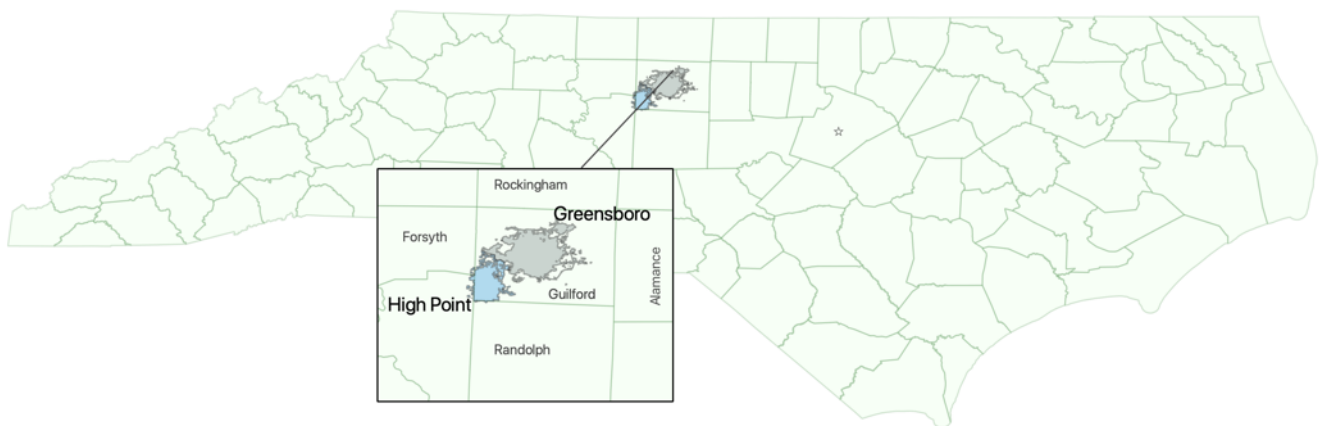
<sup>5</sup> High Point University, “New Survey Looks at Food Security and Food Hardship in High Point Area.”

Our studies of food insecurity in High Point, however, have also revealed broader, sometimes even more intractable, concerns. Census data and other demographic measures reveal a worrisome level of food hardship for seniors. Though not always technically living in poverty, such older community members often provide food and other essential support to grandchildren and extended families. Our interviews repeatedly echoed this theme—seniors attempting to assist their extended families—suggesting difficulties not fully resolved by greater access to food resources alone.

We noted at the outset that High Point is not the poorest city in North Carolina. But like some other Tar Heel cities, High Point’s levels of poverty are elevated and intense in specific neighborhoods. And as is common in other parts of North Carolina, High Point’s poverty is also disproportionately racialized and increasingly concentrated. Concentrated poverty, unsurprisingly, multiplies the stresses of individual hardship and it can erode possibilities of economic mobility and opportunity. These deep concerns are experienced potently in High Point and they can leave the inspiring efforts of non-profit, charitable and religious organizations, even when sometimes aided by supportive local governments, frustratingly incomplete. Despite insistent private anti-hunger efforts, food insecurity remains a stubborn concern. Child poverty, senior hardship, racialized poverty and concentrated poverty can work to entrench hunger and opportunity challenges. Broader state and federal public policy changes such as cuts to food stamps (SNAP) from Washington and Raleigh may serve to hinder some of High Point’s hard-fought progress.

High Point thus becomes an example of impressive community response to hardship and marginalization. The High Point narrative also reveals the limits of that response. Sustained and broad-ranging efforts are, of course, essential to successfully pushing back against debilitating challenges. Arising as they do from potent poverty and economic hardship realities, it is also likely that local charitable efforts, no matter how striking, will fail to overcome the daunting barriers to opportunity and prosperity that appear in High Point, or, for that matter, in North Carolina as a whole. As Augustine put it, “charity is no substitute for justice withheld.”

Map 1. Greensboro and High Point, North Carolina



Source: U.S. Census, TIGER/Line Shapefiles. Map made with QGIS.

## The Greater High Point Food Alliance and Hunger in High Point

In November 2014, *The High Point Enterprise* published a remarkable, in-depth series on local hunger.<sup>6</sup> This was followed in quick succession by two years of the city sitting at the top of a national rating of hunger in metropolitan areas and a High Point University survey that found that about a quarter of households in High Point were food insecure.<sup>7</sup> At the time, Reverend Carl Vierling was the coordinator of a local umbrella group, the Community Resources Network. Catalyzed by High Point’s status as the nation’s hungriest metro area, Vierling and others came together to develop a strategy to fight hunger locally. Community forums resulted, in early 2015, in the formation of the Greater High Point Food Alliance (the Food Alliance).<sup>8</sup> Led by Vierling, the Food Alliance jumped headlong into the crisis, organizing a food security summit attended by 500 people and forming teams tasked with generating and accomplishing a list of concrete goals—some quick wins, some ambitious, longer-range projects.

The Food Alliance’s extensive network, which includes foundations, local government, nonprofits, business leaders, the faith community, High Point Medical Center and High Point University among others, supports existing organizations and develops, launches and guides new solutions to food insecurity in High Point. The Alliance spearheads food collection and distribution efforts, hosts annual community summits, measures and responds to food-related needs, promotes urban agriculture, partners with a range of groups on food, nutrition and health related programs, oversees a food security fund, educates the broader High Point community about hunger, distributes information on available resources, celebrates local champions, and serves as a coordinating entity for the many food pantries, emergency kitchens, shelters and other groups working on this front. Tapping into the city’s prominent neighborhood associations, the Food Alliance focuses intensely on four neighborhoods in the center of the city—Burns Hill, West End, Washington Street and Highland Mills—as well as citywide efforts.

Whenever the statistics came out that the High Point area with Guilford County was at that time number one [in hunger] in the country, that we had the most affluent zip code at 27265 and the most impoverished one 27260 in the same city, that shed a light, a negative light. But it made some people come to the table because they didn’t necessarily want that image. Sometimes out of adversities come the greatest opportunities to do some great things. That’s when I saw a lot of things begin to turn. ... When people came to the table, whatever the motives were, if at the end of the day, you’re solving the problem that causes you to come together and work out the difference, it’s a win-win for everybody.

– Pastor Michael Ellerbe,  
New Beginnings Full Gospel Ministry

### Food Pantries

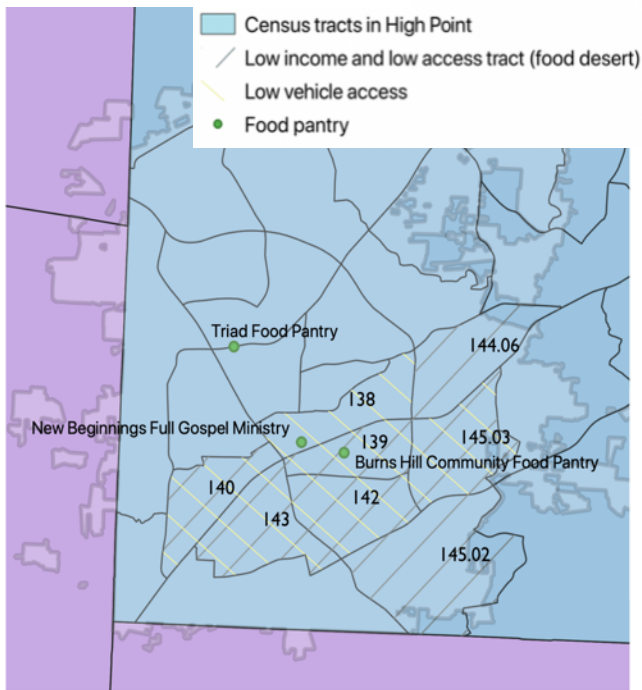
Speaking to the inspiring and hard-working individuals who lead some of High Point’s food pantries, we not only learned about their organizations, we heard firsthand about hunger and poverty in High Point. All three pantries described here are located in the middle of High Point, in or near the food desert that extends through its southern half (Map 2). Each pantry has a different reach, approach and focus, but all provide a critical service to their neighborhoods and the surrounding area.

<sup>6</sup> See Tomlin, “Hunger in High Point Ranked Second in the Nation.”

<sup>7</sup> See McLaughlin, “Greensboro, High Point Top Nationwide Hunger List”; High Point University, “New Survey Looks at Food Security and Food Hardship in High Point Area.”

<sup>8</sup> Greater High Point Food Alliance, <https://www.ghpfa.org/>.

Map 2. Food deserts in High Point



Source: U.S. Census, TIGER/Line Shapefiles and U.S.D.A. Food Access Research Atlas. Map made with QGIS.

## Burns Hill Community Food Pantry

Jerry Mingo became involved in the Food Alliance as president of the Burns Hill Neighborhood Association (Burns Hill is one of the Food Alliance’s targeted neighborhoods), but he has been an energetic proponent of his community for many years. The creation of a food pantry in Burns Hill (part of the food desert that exists throughout the central city) was one of the stated kick-off goals of the Food Alliance. The pantry opened in September 2015.

The pantry is a small one, open one day a month, and according to Mingo, it doesn’t distribute food to lots of people. He believes however that its services are crucial for those who come. He notes that pride sometimes keeps people away. “There’s need,” he says, “but to encourage people to come is a different story.”<sup>9</sup> While he was aware that many were barely eking by, he was surprised at who showed up at the pantry. “We thought the folks who would come would be young single mothers but a lot of them are seniors, grandparents.” The pantry is considering opening

twice a month, close to the end of the month when SNAP benefits run out. In a refrain we heard from others, Mingo says, “Our food pantry is area specific, but we won’t turn people away. We’re not part of Second Harvest. They require too much information. All our folks live in poverty.”

Mingo also manages the Burns Hill Community Garden, which donates produce to the food pantry. Despite his commitment to these endeavors, Mingo doesn’t sugarcoat their limitations.

Food pantries and community gardens are not the end-all to poverty. They won’t solve our poverty and hunger issues. It’s green-washing; putting a band-aid on. It’s High Point’s way of dealing with a hard set of problems. There are lots of blighted homes. Gardens won’t fix that.

Mingo’s answer to hunger is straightforward, if not simple. “We need to focus more on decent-paying jobs. If people had decent jobs, they wouldn’t be coming to us. There will be new jobs. But will they come to us and will they lift us out of poverty?” He wonders if High Point will become another community polarized along income lines like Durham, Charlotte or Greensboro. “We’re leaving people to their own plight, but we need to step up and do this for ourselves, for our communities.”

<sup>9</sup> N.C. Poverty Research Fund, Interview with Jerry Mingo.

## New Beginnings Full Gospel Ministry<sup>10</sup>

Michael A. Ellerbe is the founder and head pastor of New Beginnings Full Gospel Ministries, Inc., which has been running a food pantry out of the church for 15 years. The pantry got its start when Pastor Ellerbe had his eyes opened to hunger among the senior members of his congregation.

I started thinking about the fact that seniors were a population that were very proud because they had worked. In their mind, they didn't have to beg anyone for anything, or even ask. So we started at first with the people in our congregation, the ones we'd come in contact with, and we put them at ease. It couldn't be like a charity to them. You had to ask them, 'so we're doing this for the seniors' and then let them open up to you.<sup>11</sup>

At that time, food donations fit into a solitary plastic tub. He recalls how when he enclosed a little space in the back as a pantry, congregation members asked him why he built it so big. His reply, he relates, was “well, it's the area that's back here, but we'll never use all this room.” Looking back, he marvels at his naivete. “We really didn't know.”

Ellerbe notes that the largest uptick in people coming to the food pantry has been over the past five years, mostly in working age adults, though seniors still make up about 40% of the pantry's clients. The pantry serves about 165-170 families (about 400 individuals) and provides over 50 pounds of food per client household per month.

Being associated with the Food Alliance has been a boon for New Beginnings, enabling Ellerbe to expand the pantry dramatically even though it's not a formal member. Through the Food Alliance and Second Harvest, Ellerbe's pantry started participating in a direct pick-up program with the Food Lion chain of grocery stores. This helped double the amount of food the pantry could offer. But Ellerbe likes to maintain some independence from the Food Alliance too.

I was approached by Carl [Vierling] ... and I told him mine is a mandate from my Christian faith and that I believed in what they were doing, but not some of the limitations, which were you could only serve people in your zip code. I said hunger comes from every zip code and if it shows up at my door, I don't want to turn someone away because they're not in my district. So I would stay on the outside. It cost me not being able to access some things because I wasn't part of it. But because of the building of the relationships with the Food Alliance, and Carl being persistent that I need to be at the table, we were able to access a few opportunities.

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<sup>10</sup> New Beginnings Full Gospel Ministry, <http://nbfgm.sundaystreamwebsites.com/>.

<sup>11</sup> N.C. Poverty Research Fund, Interview with Pastor Michael A. Ellerbe.

## Triad Food Pantry of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church<sup>12</sup>



Jo Williams, the head of the Triad Food Pantry of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, benevolently rules the pantry from her motorized wheelchair. No detail escapes her attention, no guest escapes without a personal greeting. Food is distributed by setting boxes out on long tables; clients go down the row and select what they want. The pantry offers food with its clientele in mind, featuring kid-friendly items like small yogurts. Clients can pick up food for neighbors or grandkid's friends, people who don't have cars or who just can't make it that day.

Most of the pantry's clients are older adults. In addition to open pantry hours, volunteers deliver food weekly to a senior residence home. The pantry also hosts senior wellness clinics and medicine giveaways. When we visited, clients sat and chatted in small groups, waiting for the food to be laid out. The communal scene, more like a friendly gathering than a pantry, is intentionally cultivated. As Williams says:

The main thing a senior citizen needs is friends and somebody to listen to them, where they can talk and work. I see the volunteers in here. They're having a good time working. I say "you all sure have a good time." They say, "Miss Williams, we're family, we're talking, we're doing stuff."<sup>13</sup>

Williams is justly proud of the variety and quality of the food available. When we visited, she made sure to point out the fresh produce and meat. To Williams, the pantry is more than an emergency provider and food is more than mere sustenance. She hands out birthday cake on kids' birthdays, organizes canning workshops ("Seniors got a sweet tooth," she observes) and runs a backpack program. She spoke of wanting to offer courses on car repair and job hunting. Always dreaming up new ways to help her clients, she understands that food may satisfy basic needs but that's not always enough.

Williams's pantry vividly illustrates the way that pantries serve as emergency stopgaps during severe economic disruptions. Talking about the federal government shutdown that occurred in February 2019, she notes, "That was a reality for people. People who never had to do that before. The day that we give out [food] ... we saw 168 families. We usually see 89-90. A lot of first-time people coming. That's almost double the people I usually get."

Williams is quick to acknowledge the Food Alliance's support. Its ability to spread the word about available resources was driven home for her, she says, during the government shutdown. Asking new clients how they found out about her pantry, she learned it was through a Food Alliance brochure. "The thing that I realized, and this struck me as phenomenal that the book they gave out with the days when we give out food, that was the reason they came." The Food Alliance also helps Williams reach out in new ways. The last time we saw her, she enthused about a grant that would allow her to open a food pantry in a local public high school—the second of its kind in High Point.



<sup>12</sup> Triad Food Pantry of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, <https://www.triadfoodpantry.com/>.

<sup>13</sup> N.C. Poverty Research Fund, Interview with Jo Williams.

It was at Williams’ pantry that we first heard about and met grandparents who were caring for their young grandchildren. The stories were of parents who were not in the home due to long work hours, troubles with mental health or substance abuse, incarceration, or other travails. As the next section discusses, when parents are absent, grandparents are stepping in with greater frequency.

## Grandparents

We asked kids at the Youth Food Summit what they’d do if there was not enough food at home. The number one response was ‘go to grandma and grandpa.’ This affects senior hunger, since now you have to feed more people, seniors with kids in the home are more likely to be hungry. This also brings in health care costs. It’s interconnected; food versus medicine.

– Carl Vierling, Greater High Point Food Alliance

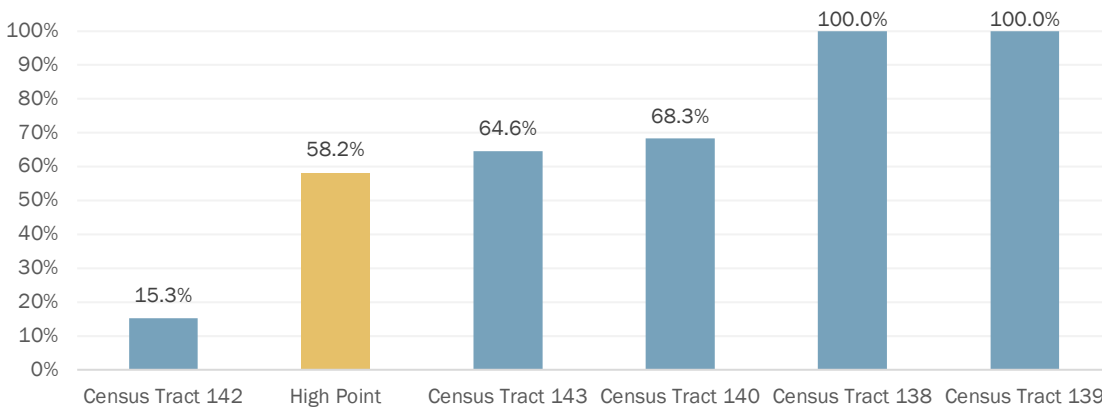
The reason I think you have more of the seniors or the grandparents [at food pantries] is that they become the security, because you go eat at grandma’s house.

– Pastor Michael Ellerbe, New Beginnings Full Gospel Ministry

Hearing so much about senior hunger and grandparents, we turned to the data. It confirmed that a large share of grandparents who live with their grandchildren are also responsible for them (that is, they perform most of the basic care).<sup>14</sup> In two-thirds of High Point families where grandparents and grandchildren live together, a grandparent is a primary caregiver.<sup>15</sup> About a third of grandparents responsible for their grandchildren live in the city’s five poorest tracts (we examine these tracts in more detail below).<sup>16</sup>

In most cases, caring for a grandchild is not a short-term proposition. Over a third of grandparents in a caretaking role look after their grandchildren for five years or more; none care for grandchildren for less than a year.<sup>17</sup> In the poorest tracts, caring for grandchildren is an ongoing responsibility for most grandparents (Fig. 1). In census tract 138 and 139, every grandparent caring for grandkids has taken on parental responsibilities for three years or more.

Figure 1. Percent of grandparents who are responsible for grandchildren for 3 or more years



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

<sup>14</sup> We rely on U.S. Census Bureau data here. However, the Census Bureau probably undercounts the number of grandparents who are responsible for children under 18 years old. For example, it doesn’t count grandparents who care for grandchildren but not live with them full-time. Nor does it count older adults who might be caring for children—related or not—who are not grandchildren.

<sup>15</sup> 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

<sup>16</sup> Throughout this section, the term “grandchildren” refers to children under the age of 18.

<sup>17</sup> 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

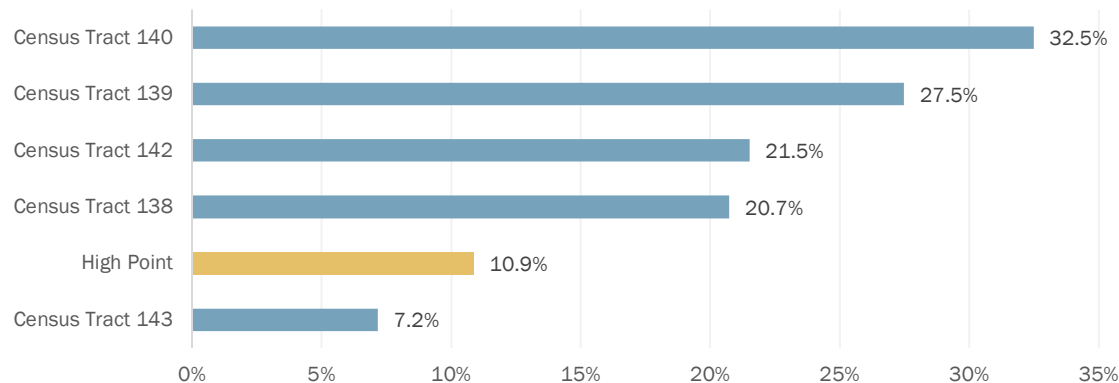
In High Point, about 40% of grandparents who are responsible for grandchildren are unmarried (including those who are divorced or widowed).<sup>18</sup> Being the sole caretaker puts additional stress on the grandparent in charge. One in four grandparents responsible for a grandchild has a disability, which may come with its own burdens such as substantial medical costs, difficulty working or additional caregiving challenges.<sup>19</sup>

Over 2,500 grandchildren in High Point live in a grandparent’s home.<sup>20</sup> For 63%, or over 1,500 grandkids, the grandparent is the primary caregiver. For about half, the parent is not present in the home at all. Households with no parent present are particularly vulnerable. Not only do all the burdens of parenting then fall on the grandparents, but they lack the additional income another adult could bring in. In High Point, grandparent households with no parents in the home make substantially less than those with parents: \$31,506 to \$47,750.<sup>21</sup>

Grandparents taking care of their young grandkids face special challenges. Children are costly and may be an unexpected expense. While the poverty rate among older adults is generally low compared to other groups—in High Point, it’s 10.9%—this doesn’t mean they’re well off. Older adults are often limited in their ability to work and must get by on fixed incomes. Medicine, housing and other expenses, including caring for other family members, can fray household finances. Additionally, grandparents may not be able to access assistance in caring for their grandchildren, either because they’re unaware of programs, don’t qualify or are excluded because they lack formal guardianship.

Additionally, senior poverty can and does occur in deeper pockets, the result of disability, employment experience, inadequate or nonexistent retirement funds, debt, barriers to wealth accumulation or any number of other reasons.<sup>22</sup> In four of the five poorest tracts, poverty rates for older adults are much higher than found in the city at large (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Poverty rate, adults 60 years and older



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

<sup>18</sup> 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

<sup>19</sup> 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

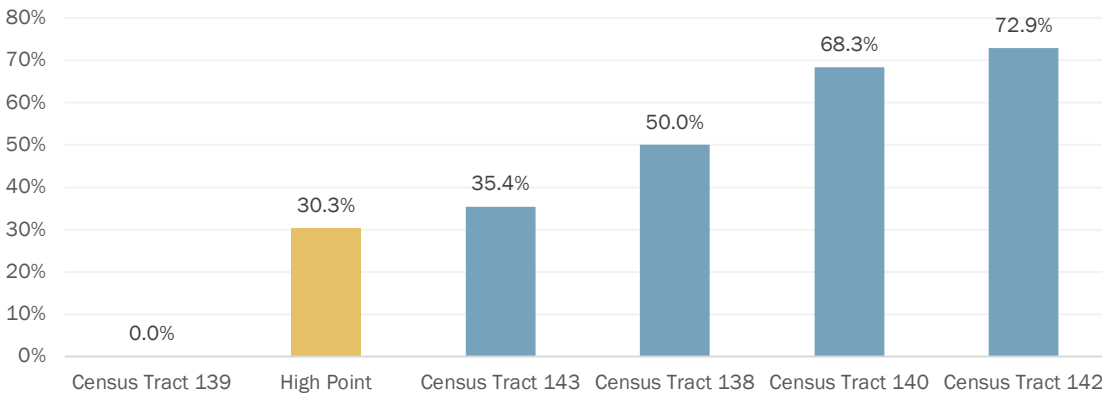
<sup>20</sup> 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

<sup>21</sup> 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

<sup>22</sup> A growing number of older Americans rely on Social Security as their only source of income. About half of households surveyed by the U.S. Federal Reserve did not have a retirement account. See Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, *Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2018*.

Distressingly, grandparents who are responsible for their grandkids are often poor. While the poverty rate in High Point for all grandparents living with grandchildren is high (24.2%), it’s higher still for grandparents who live with and are responsible for their grandchildren (30.3%). Among all *poor* grandparents living with their grandchildren, a large portion of this group (43.2%) are responsible for their grandkids. It’s clear that hundreds of grandparents in High Point take their grandchildren under wing at substantial personal cost.<sup>23</sup> This is especially true in High Point’s five poorest tracts. In three of these tracts, the poverty rate for grandparents who are responsible for their grandchildren is 50% or more (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. Poverty rate for grandparents living with and responsible for grandchildren



Note: The Census Bureau estimates that only 8 grandparents in tract 139 live with and are responsible for their grandchildren. This extremely small number means the margin of error is very high.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

During one of our visits to the Triad Food Pantry, we spoke with a group of older women who were waiting to pick up their food selections. We approached them initially because of their light and upbeat mood. As it turned out, they were all widowed women in their 70s who found themselves unexpectedly taking care of young children—grandkids or great-grandkids. Two were black, one white. Our conversations turned on some of the hardships they faced.<sup>24</sup>

Grandparents are the emergency food bank for their families. Not only emergency food bank, but they’re also the emergency electrical help, the heat help for the whole family.

– Pastor Michael Ellerbe,  
New Beginnings Full Gospel Ministry

The first woman we spoke with was gregarious and talkative. Being able to get food from the pantry, she said, “really helps to supplement my income,” especially since her grandchildren live with her. But she also mentioned how she appreciated the fact that the pantry doors open early, allowing her and her friends to come in and visit with each other. She described the difficult logistics of figuring out where to go for food, which pantries were open and when, and how to get there. Coordinating rides with friends and family takes up her time. Despite her sunny disposition, her last words to us were melancholy, though devoid of self-pity. “We’re healthy and we still have life,” she said, “but no one wants us.”

The second woman in the group was taking full-time care of her two great-granddaughters, 11 and 13 years old. Although soft-spoken, she talked at length about the cost of Medicare. Her monthly bill had inexplicably gone up and the extra expense was hard. She found out about the pantry from the “library book” (a brochure that lists all the pantries in High Point). She prided herself on being a good cook—the other women there quickly confirmed this—and she appreciated the variety of food available at this pantry for that reason.

<sup>23</sup> 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

<sup>24</sup> N.C. Poverty Research Fund Interviews.

The third woman found out about the pantry through her church. Her social security check just doesn’t last, she said. In addition to her own expenses, she takes care of her grandchildren on the weekends, when their parents work. She thought High Point provided more assistance now (in the form of food pantries and similar organizations) but offered fewer jobs. She pointed to the experience of her own children, who had to take jobs farther away. (This is not unusual. Only a quarter of High Point residents work in High Point and approximately a fifth travel more than 50 miles to get to work.)<sup>25</sup>



All three women commented that they were brought together by shared experience. Everyone, they agreed, chipped in as they can. Race doesn’t keep them apart, but they noted that at a different time, they would not have been friends. Jo Williams could have had them in mind when she remarked on the high number of seniors she serves. “It’s because they did not earn a high wage,” she ventured, “so their SSI, social security checks are below \$600, most at \$500 and something a month. What can you do with \$500?”<sup>26</sup>

## SNAP and Hunger in High Point

Another way of examining hunger in High Point is to look at who receives SNAP benefits. Formerly the federal food stamp program, SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) is a vital and far-reaching anti-hunger effort. It assists thousands of families in High Point. One in five households in the city participates in SNAP, considerably higher than the rate for North Carolina.<sup>27</sup> SNAP participation in High Point peaked in 2016 and started to fall slightly in 2017. This is the first statistically significant drop in the SNAP participation rate since 2008, though the rate remains about twice that year’s level.<sup>28</sup>

SNAP is the primary hunger prevention program in the United States. It alleviates severe hardship for millions of families and is one of the country’s most effective poverty reduction efforts. Between 2016 and 2018, it lifted 3.5 million people out of poverty nationally. SNAP supports families in lean times, enhances food choice and fosters better diets, improves health, provides income stability and frees up funds for other necessities. It eases household crises caused by spells of unemployment, low wages or variable schedules. It is also a powerful economic stimulant, especially during downturns.

All qualifying households that meet income and asset limits are eligible to receive benefits. Benefits, which are calibrated to family size and income, averaged \$127 per person per month in 2018. Although eligibility is broad, undocumented immigrants and most college students do not qualify. In addition, able-bodied adults between 18 and 50 years old who do not have dependents must comply with work requirements.

Each state creates its own application process. In North Carolina, applicants can apply online, at a local Department of Social Services office or via mail. The North Carolina application form is ten pages long and requires extensive documentation, including information on household income, employment and expenses. Applicants must submit to an interview with a state employee who verifies application accuracy. SNAP recipients must reapply to continue receiving benefits at least once every 12 months.

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics, Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics Program, <https://onthemap.ces.census.gov>.

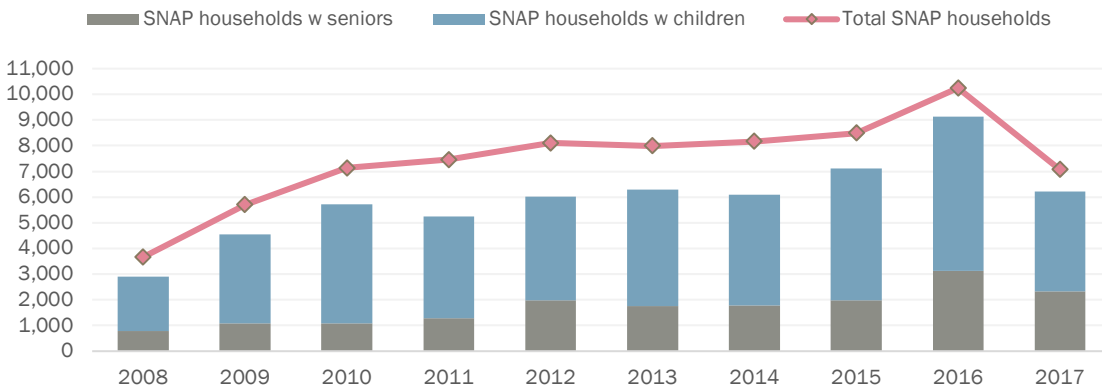
<sup>26</sup> N.C. Poverty Research Fund, Interview with Jo Williams.

<sup>27</sup> High Point’s SNAP participation rate is 48% higher than North Carolina’s. 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

<sup>28</sup> In 2008, the SNAP participation rate was 9.5%. 2008 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

Most SNAP households in High Point contain seniors or children (or both) (Fig. 4).<sup>29</sup> A large share (41%) contain at least one person with one or more disabilities. In almost 80% of households, at least one person works. For these working households, employment does not guarantee adequate wages. The median income for SNAP households in High Point is \$19,551, below the poverty threshold for a household with two adults and one child.<sup>30</sup>

Figure 4. Number of households receiving SNAP benefits by presence of children or seniors in household

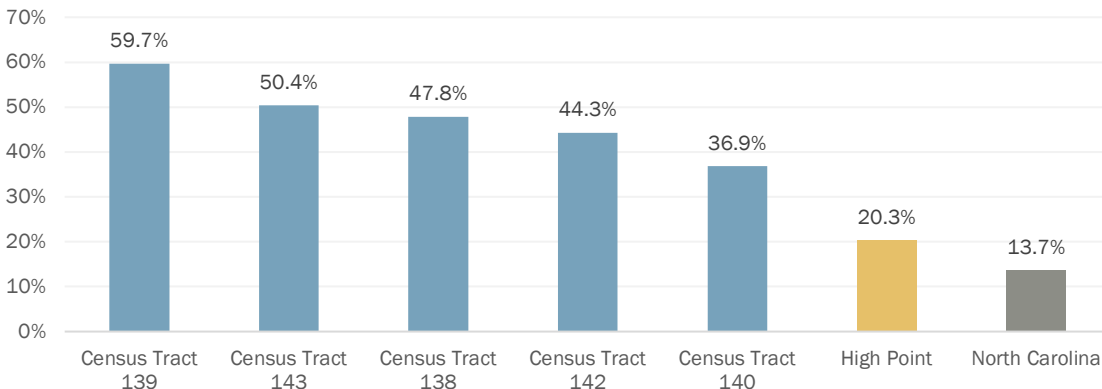


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

About 43% of High Point’s SNAP households are headed by single women (six percentage points higher than in the state). Almost all (81%) of these households also include children under the age of 18. High Point has a larger percentage of African American, Hispanic and Asian SNAP households than the state.<sup>31</sup>

Although the five poorest census tracts in High Point are home to only 17% of its households, over 40% of SNAP households reside there. In four of the five tracts, the rate of SNAP participation is more than two times the rate for the city generally (Fig. 5).

Figure 5. Rate of household participation in SNAP



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

<sup>29</sup> “Senior” is defined as individuals 60 years or over. We use “older” and “senior” interchangeably.

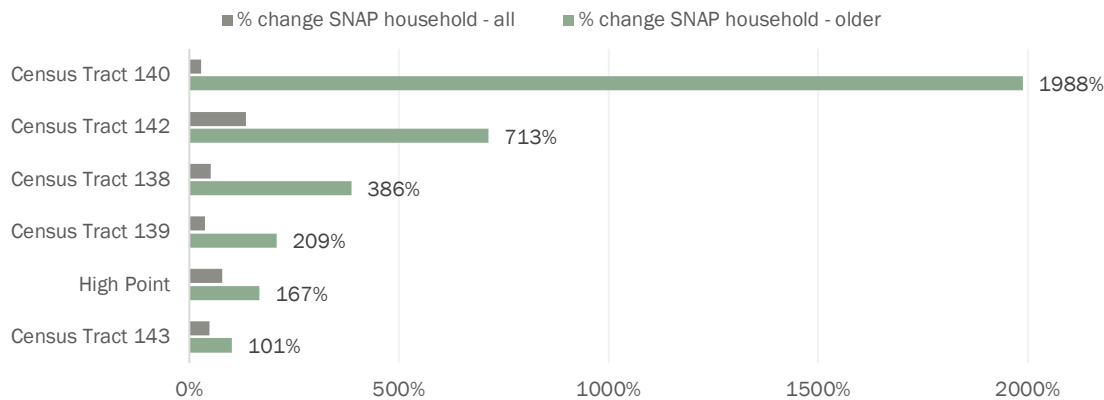
<sup>30</sup> The 2018 poverty threshold for 2 adult, 1 child household was \$20,212. See U.S. Census Bureau, Poverty Thresholds, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-thresholds.html>.

<sup>31</sup> 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

Thirty-seven percent of SNAP households in High Point contain at least one person 60 years old or over.<sup>32</sup> The number of SNAP households with an older adult is growing faster than either SNAP households or older households separately. Between 2009 and 2017, the number of older households in High Point increased 28.3% and the number of SNAP households increased 79%, but the number of SNAP households with an older person increased 167%.<sup>33</sup>

In most of the five poorest tracts in High Point, senior SNAP households are growing at an even faster rate (Fig. 6). In tracts 140, 142 and 138 especially, the number of older SNAP households has skyrocketed. In all tracts, however, the number of SNAP households with older adults has grown at a steeper rate than for SNAP households generally, a sign of escalating need among seniors.

Figure 6. Percent change in all SNAP households and older SNAP households, 2009 and 2017

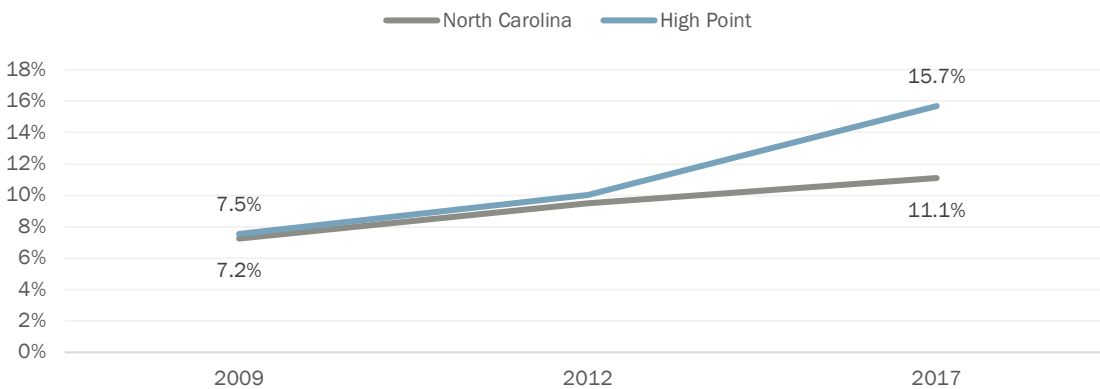


Note: The older population at the census tract level is small and not as accurate as citywide numbers.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2009 and 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

About one in six older households in High Point participates in SNAP (15.7% of older households). This is twice the rate it was in 2009 (Fig. 7). In all five of the poorest tracts, older households participate in SNAP at a much higher rate (Fig. 8). Four of the five tracts have rates surpassing 30%. At about three times the state rate, this figure reflects the deeper privation among seniors in these neighborhoods.

Figure 7. Percent of older households that participate in SNAP

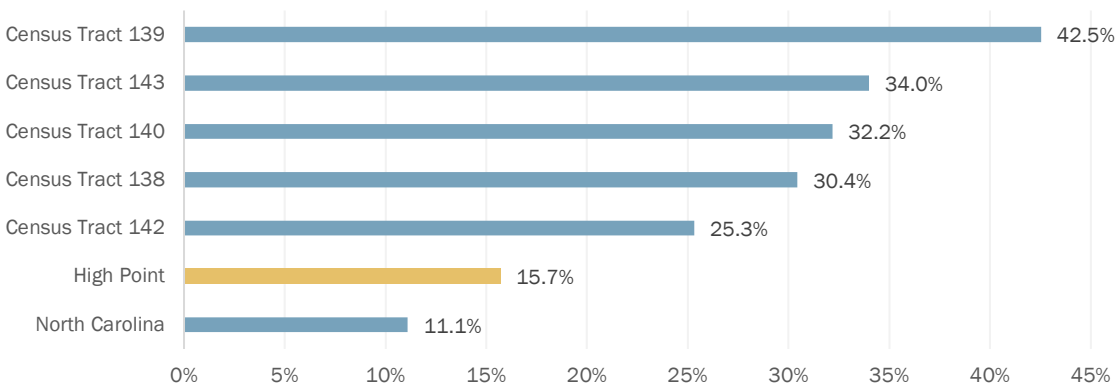


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2009, 2012 and 2017 5-Year Estimates

<sup>32</sup> 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

<sup>33</sup> 2009 and 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. The number of older households participating in SNAP was 840 in 2009 and 2,243 in 2017.

Figure 8. Percent of older households that participate in SNAP



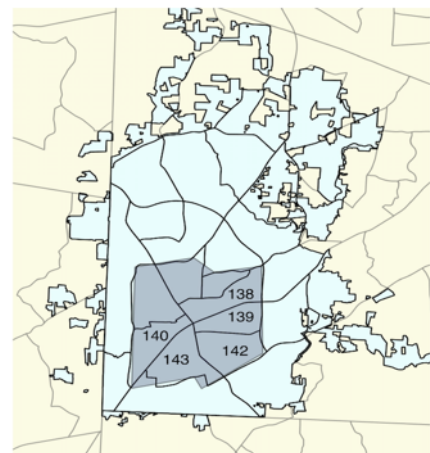
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Food insecurity among seniors is a growing problem nationally.<sup>34</sup> The majority of older households surveyed by Feeding America reported some kind of tradeoff between food and another expense.<sup>35</sup> Despite the need, only 35% of eligible seniors in North Carolina participate in SNAP.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, 83% of all eligible individuals in the state receive SNAP. Reasons for low enrollment include feelings of shame or that others are more deserving, lack of awareness regarding eligibility, and hurdles to access.<sup>37</sup> This suggests that in High Point and elsewhere, many food insecure older adults are not participating in SNAP. In many cases, as we heard, they turn to food pantries for help.

## Disadvantage in High Point’s Core City

Hunger goes hand in hand with poverty, itself often a symptom of other social and economic ills. In this section, we explore poverty, income and employment data in order to better understand hunger in High Point. We also look more intently at five tracts in High Point’s core city (the core city is the area in gray in Map 3, the five tracts we study are labeled). These five tracts, which we’ve discussed above, are the poorest in the city—we will refer to them collectively as the “distressed tracts.”

Map 3. High Point Core City



Core city  
Census tracts in High Point

Source: U.S. Census, TIGER/Line Shapefiles.  
Map made with QGIS.

<sup>34</sup> Ziliak and Gunderson, *The State of Senior Hunger in America in 2017*.

<sup>35</sup> More than 60% had to choose between food and medical care or prescriptions; 60% chose between food and utilities; 58% between food and transportation; and 49% between food and housing. Feeding America, “Older Adult Food-Insecurity Levels at Highest in American History”; Knutson, “Senior Hunger Surges as Boomers Swell the Ranks of The Nation’s Elderly.”

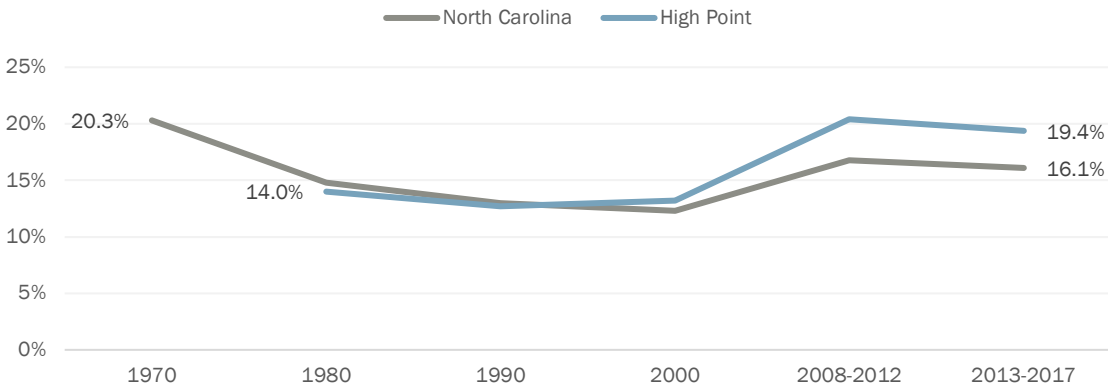
<sup>36</sup> Food Research and Action Center, AARP Foundation and the Retirement Research Foundation, *North Carolina: SNAP Matters for Seniors*.

<sup>37</sup> Warren, “Why Aren’t More Older Adults Using SNAP?”

## Poverty

Overall, High Point’s poverty rate is only slightly worse than the North Carolina’s. Between 1980 and 2000, the poverty rate for both city and state held steady at around 13% (Fig. 9). The poverty rate for both increased sharply after 2000, however it rose higher in High Point, and it has been slower to decline.

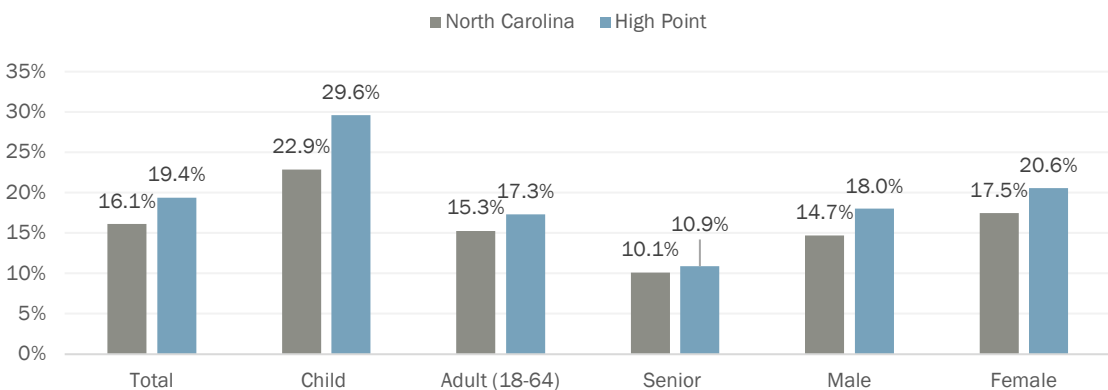
Figure 9. Poverty rate, 1970-2017



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census and 2012 and 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Almost 30% of children in High Point are poor, considerably higher than the state’s 22.9%. However other markers, such as the adult and senior poverty rates, are not much higher than in North Carolina as a whole (Fig. 10).

Figure 10. Poverty rate by age and sex

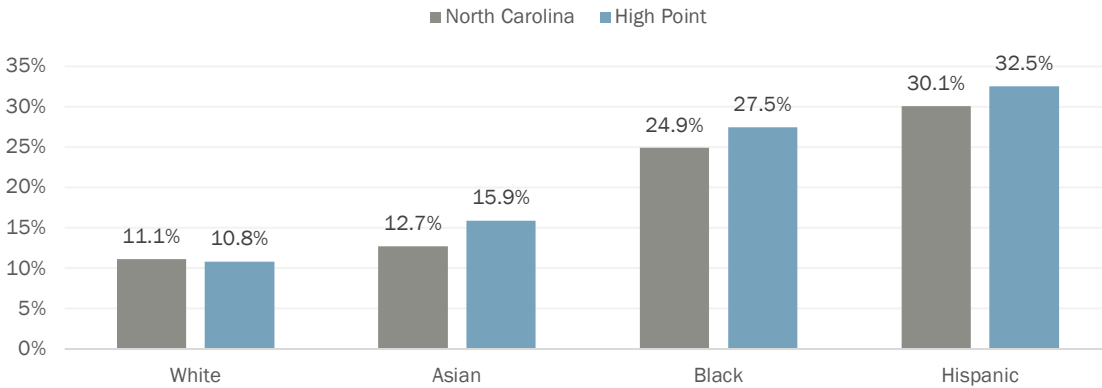


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Poverty rates vary markedly by race, sex and education. Black and Hispanic residents are poor at more than double the rate for white residents (Fig. 11).<sup>38</sup> Four in ten black and Hispanic children are poor, again double the rate for white children. Although the estimate for the number of poor Asian children in High Point is unreliable (because their overall numbers are low), their relatively high poverty rate compared to the state is notable (Fig. 12). For individuals with less than a high school diploma, one in three are poor and even among those with some secondary schooling, one in seven is poor (Fig. 13).

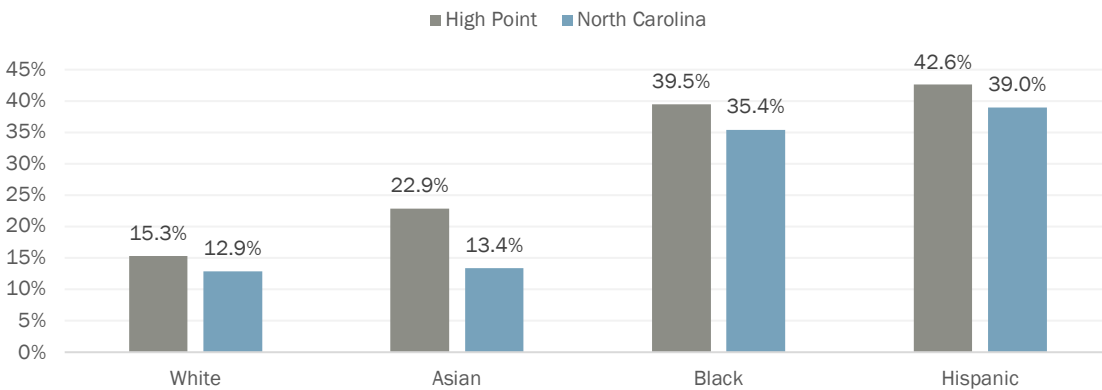
<sup>38</sup> “White” in this report refers to individuals who identify as white but not Hispanic. We use the term “Hispanic,” and not Latino/Latinx, in order to remain consistent with Census Bureau designations.

Figure 11. Poverty rate by race/ethnicity



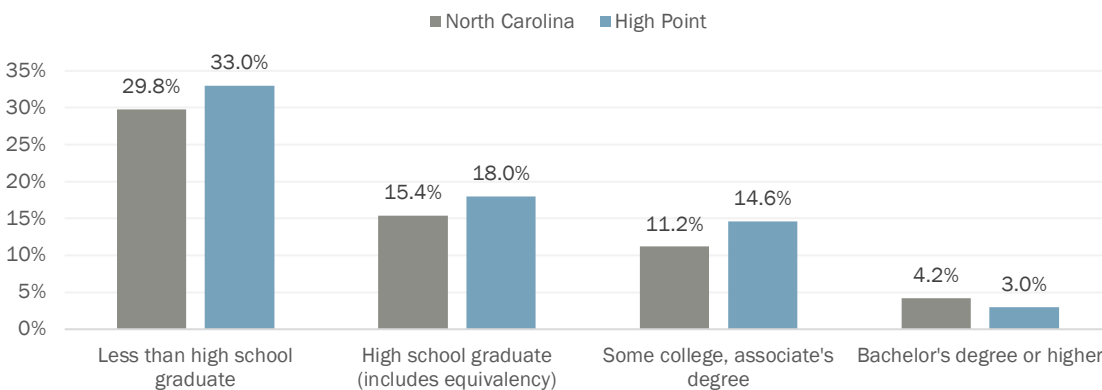
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figure 12. Child poverty rate by race/ethnicity



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figure 13. Poverty rate by educational level

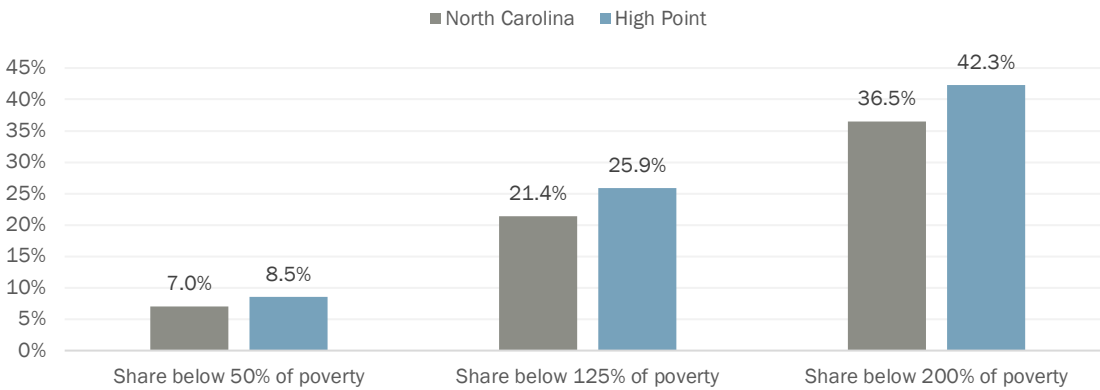


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

High Point’s share of residents living in deep poverty, the equivalent of getting by on an income less than half the federal poverty threshold (about \$10,000 for a family of three), is only slightly higher than North Carolina’s (Fig. 14). However, a notably larger share of residents in the city are among the near poor. This means they may not be poor according to federal poverty measures, but they don’t make enough to maintain a solid grip on financial security. Individuals living in households below 200% of the federal poverty level (about \$40,000 for

a family of three) are generally considered near poor.<sup>39</sup> In High Point, 42.3% of residents are near poor compared to 36.5% for the state.

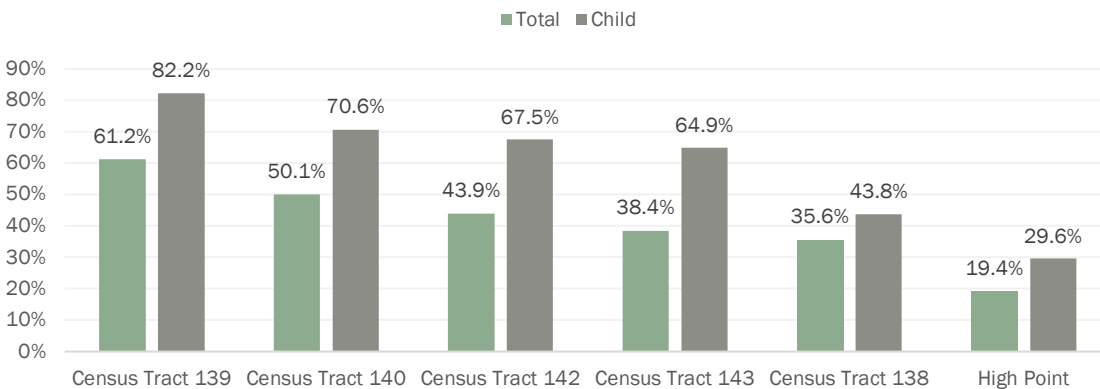
Figure 14. Share of population in relation to federal poverty level



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

The city’s wealth masks deeply entrenched poverty in the core city, as revealed by the bleak statistics for the city’s five poorest census tracts (the “distressed tracts”). Hardship here is far more widespread, reaching into large segments of the population. Poverty rates are double or sometimes triple the city-wide rate. Child poverty rates are even more staggering. Two in three children, or almost 4,000 kids, in these five tracts are poor. In tract 139, almost every child is poor (Fig. 15).

Figure 15. Total poverty rates and child poverty rates by distressed tract



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

In the distressed tracts, poverty is elevated regardless of race and ethnicity (Table 1). In two tracts (139 and 140), the black and Hispanic poverty rate is well above 50%; the same is true for the white poverty rate in tracts 138 and 142. Considering all five tracts together, almost half of residents (46%) are poor. Over 9,000 poor people live in these five tracts alone, representing 44.3% of all poor people in High Point.

<sup>39</sup> Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “Income Data for Policy Analysis: A Comparative Assessment of Eight Surveys. The Poor and Near Poor.”

## “SURVIVING THROUGH TOGETHER”

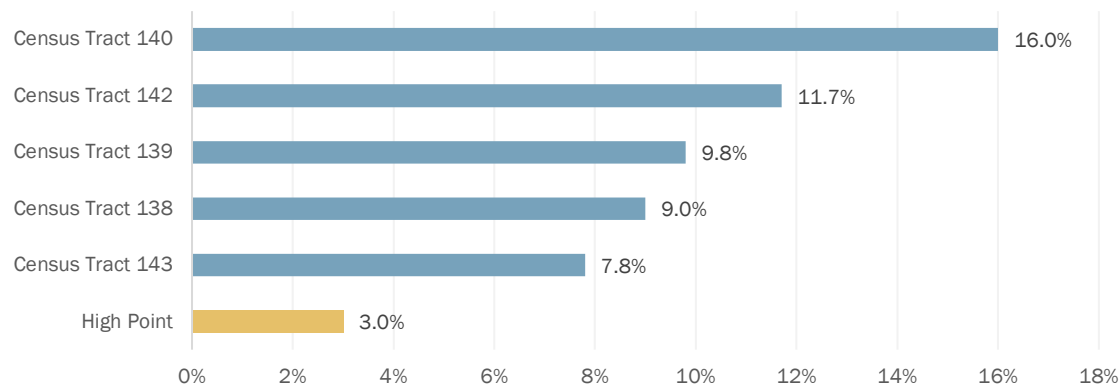
Table 1. Poverty rate by race/ethnicity

	White	Black	Hispanic
High Point	10.8%	27.5%	32.5%
Census Tract 139	23.6%	58.5%	63.2%
Census Tract 143	28.8%	45.9%	32.7%
Census Tract 140	33.5%	62.4%	62.5%
Census Tract 138	55.4%	36.8%	29.5%
Census Tract 142	65.7%	39.9%	43.9%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

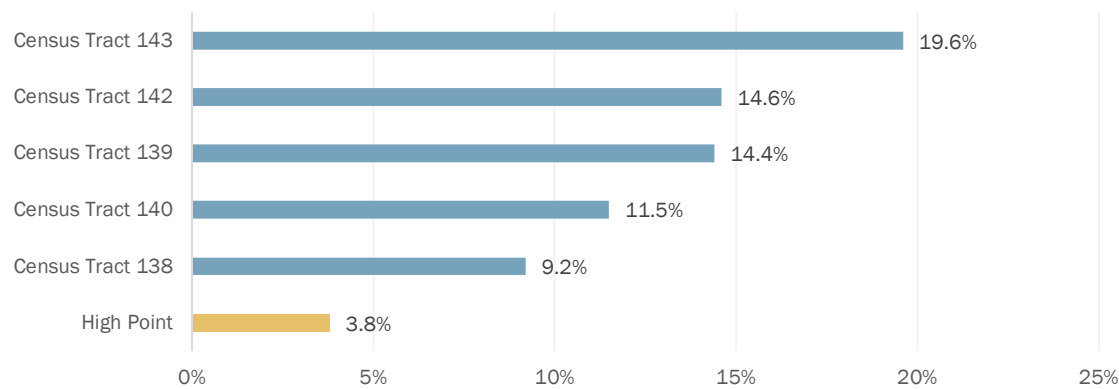
Even the usual markers of financial stability and middle-class status—a college degree or full-time job—are not bulwarks against poverty in the distressed tracts. While the poverty rate for college graduates in High Point is an enviable 3%, residents with college degrees in the distressed tracts struggle with poverty rates two to five times that (Fig. 16). Similarly, full-time employment fails to lift about one in seven residents of the distressed tracts out of poverty; in tract 143, this is true for one in five full-time workers (Fig. 17).

Figure 16. Poverty rate for individuals with college degree or higher



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

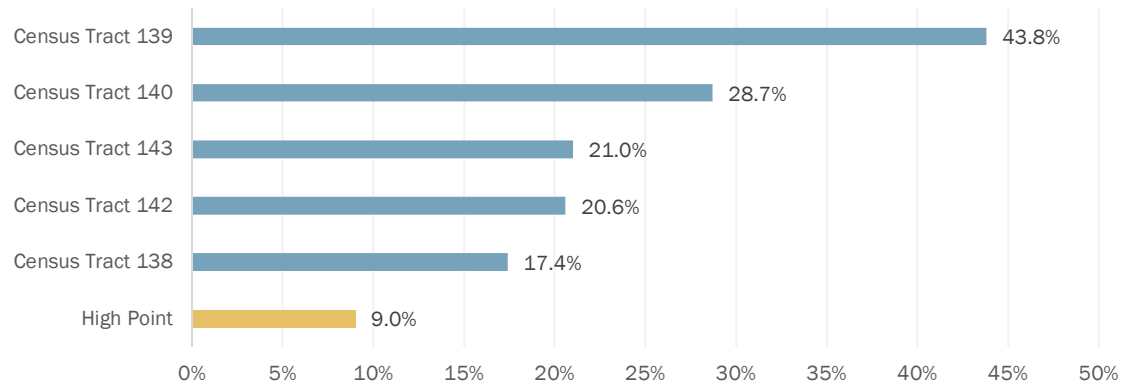
Figure 17. Poverty rate for workers (16 and over) employed full-time, year-round in the previous year



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

The poverty rate for all people in the labor force who worked in the previous week (whether full- or part-time) is another indication of the economic fragility of many in the distressed tracts. While 9% of individuals in High Point who worked in the previous week are poor, the share in the distressed tracts is two to five times as much (Fig. 18).

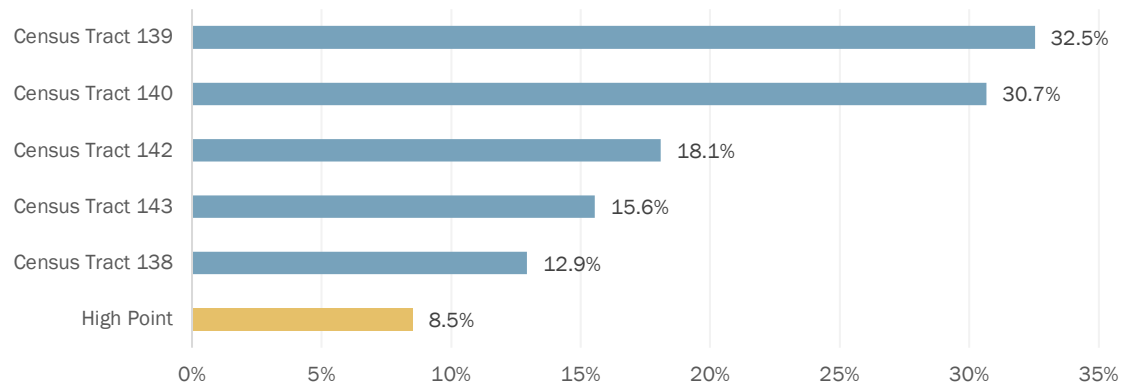
Figure 18. Poverty rate for people (16 and over) in the civilian labor force employed in the past week



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

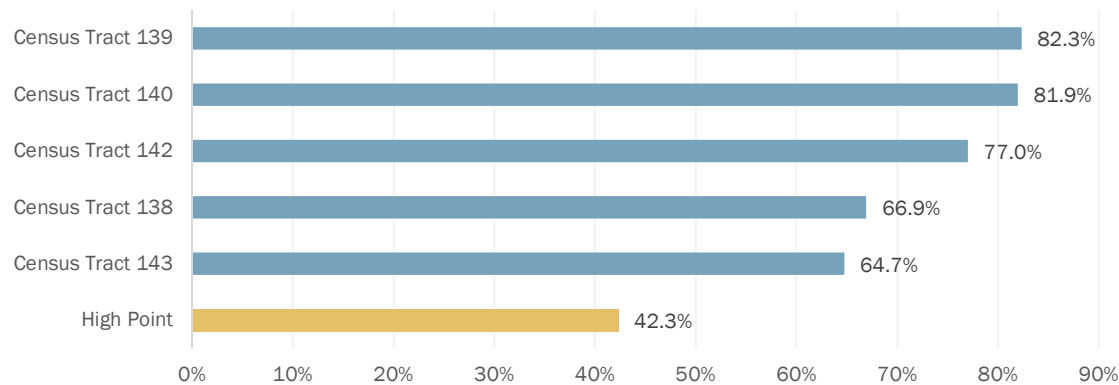
Deep poverty exerts a strong hold on the distressed tracts. About half of High Point residents who experience deep poverty reside in one of these tracts. In two tracts, about a third of residents are deeply poor, more than three times the city rate (Fig. 19). In all five tracts, more than two in three are near poor (Fig. 20). Few households in these tracts have the resources to mitigate or overcome the difficult conditions that surround them.

Figure 19. Percent of people in distressed tracts below 50% of poverty level



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figure 20. Percent of people in distressed tracts below 200% of poverty level



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

I think I have a different perspective of High Point coming here as a student of High Point University. Patrick Harman took some of the AmeriCorps VISTAs on a drive one day to show us the community that we're now working in. It was honestly heartbreaking and so eye-opening because obviously I was aware that High Point was a more impoverished community but being inside the gates of the university for four years, I really hadn't experienced what was going on around us. It was hard to see that there was so much wealth in the small area in those gates and there's so much poverty surrounding it. The university obviously does amazing things for the community but that was such a disconnect to see.

– Amy Grener,  
AmeriCorps VISTA

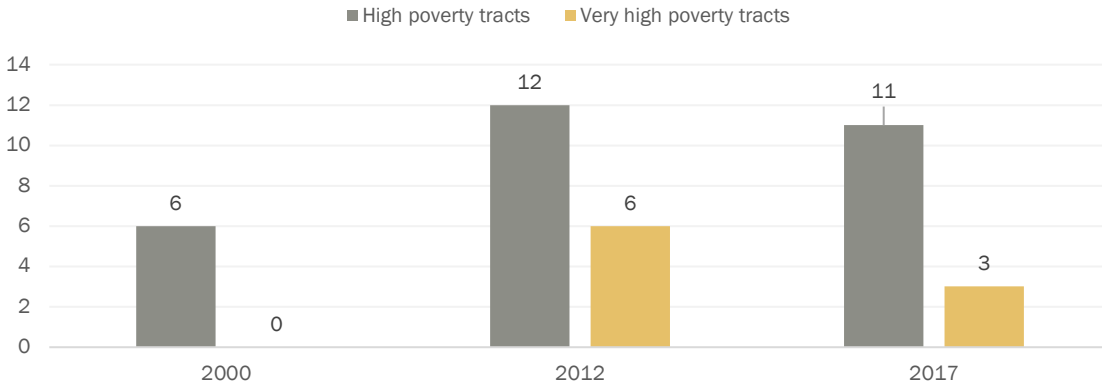
## Concentrated poverty

In High Point, and in many towns and cities across North Carolina, poverty is increasingly concentrated by geography. Poor people are not evenly dispersed. Instead, they live with other poor people around them. This creates neighborhoods of disadvantage, in which personal and individual challenges are compounded by larger environmental ills such as poor schools, food deserts, neglected or nonexistent infrastructure, crime, dilapidated housing, constricted social capital and connections, limited public transportation and other undesirable attributes. This neighborhood-level disadvantage is itself a well-documented barrier to social, physical and economic wellbeing.<sup>40</sup>

In 2000, there were 6 high poverty census tracts (tracts with poverty rates over 20%) and zero very high poverty tracts (tracts with poverty rates over 40%). About ten years later, there were 12 high poverty tracts and 6 very high poverty tracts. By 2017, the number of high poverty tracts decreased to 11, 3 of which are very high poverty tracts (Fig. 21). The drop in poor tracts is good news. The worrisome news is that this level of concentrated poverty doesn't show much indication of budging.

<sup>40</sup> See Cortright and Mahmoudi, *Lost in Place: Why the Persistence and Spread of Concentrated Poverty-Not Gentrification-Is Our Biggest Urban Challenge*; Kneebone and Holmes, *U.S. Concentrated Poverty in the Wake of the Great Recession*; Jargowsky, “Concentration of Poverty”; Office of Policy Development and Research, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Evidence Matters: Understanding Neighborhood Effects of Concentrated Poverty.”

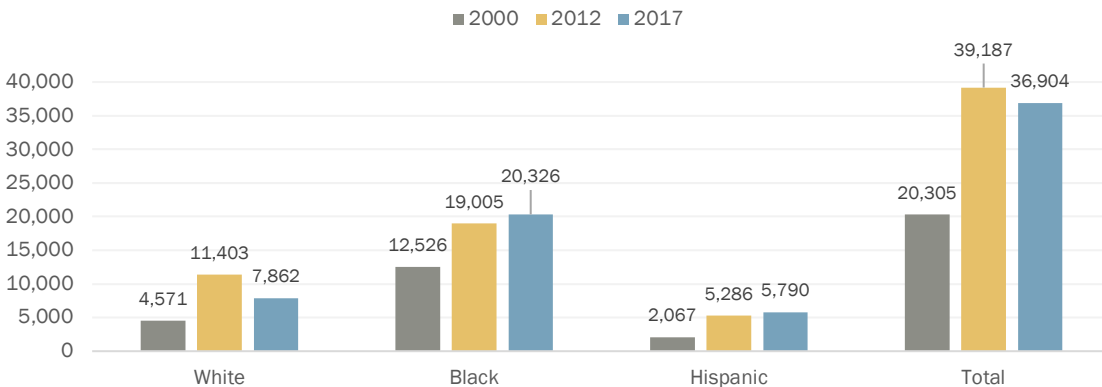
Figure 21. Number of high poverty (>20%) and very high poverty (>40%) tracts



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Decennial Census and the 2012 and 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

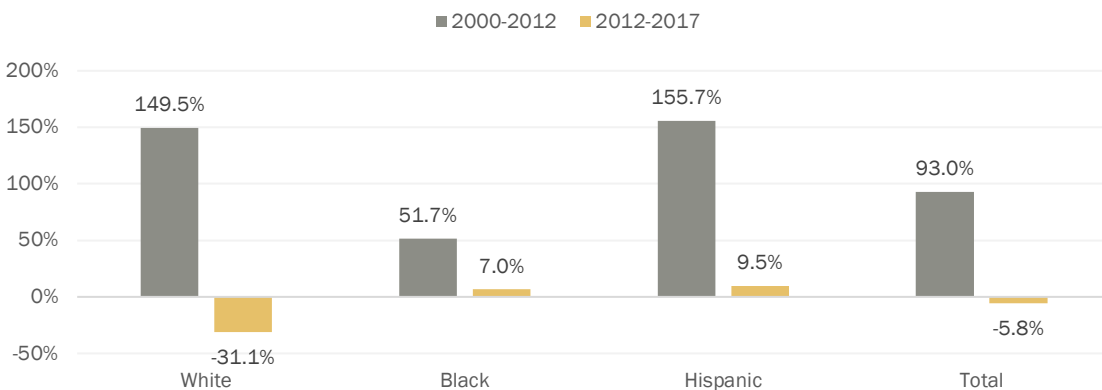
The number of **all** people (of any income) living in a high poverty tract peaked in 2012 at 39,187 (Fig. 12). This represents 37.5% of High Point's population for that year and approximately twice the number of people living in a high poverty tract in 2000. In 2017, the number of **all** people living in a high poverty tract was a jot under 37,000, a decline primarily attributable to a drop in the number of white people (of any income) living in a high poverty tract (Fig. 23).

Figure 22. Number of **all** people in high poverty tracts



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Decennial Census and the 2012 and 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

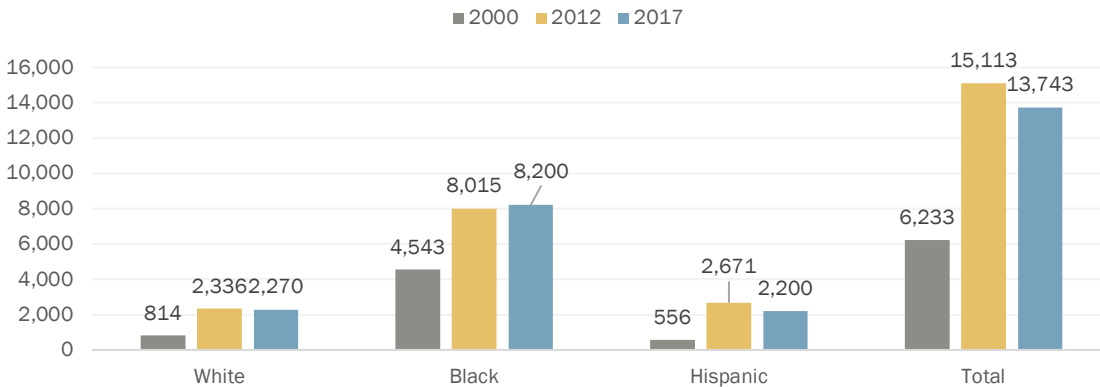
Figure 23. Percent change in number of **all** people in high poverty tracts, 2000-2012 and 2012-2017



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Decennial Census and the 2012 and 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

The number of **poor** people in high poverty tracts more than doubled between 2000 and 2017—from 6,233 to 13,743. The number of poor white and poor Hispanic residents grew most rapidly (179% and 296%, respectively), though for the years we examine here the majority of poor people in high poverty tracts were African American. The most recent estimates indicate that fewer poor people live in high poverty tracts in 2017 compared to 2012 but the difference is not statistically significant (Fig. 24).<sup>41</sup>

Figure 24. Number of **poor** people in high poverty tracts

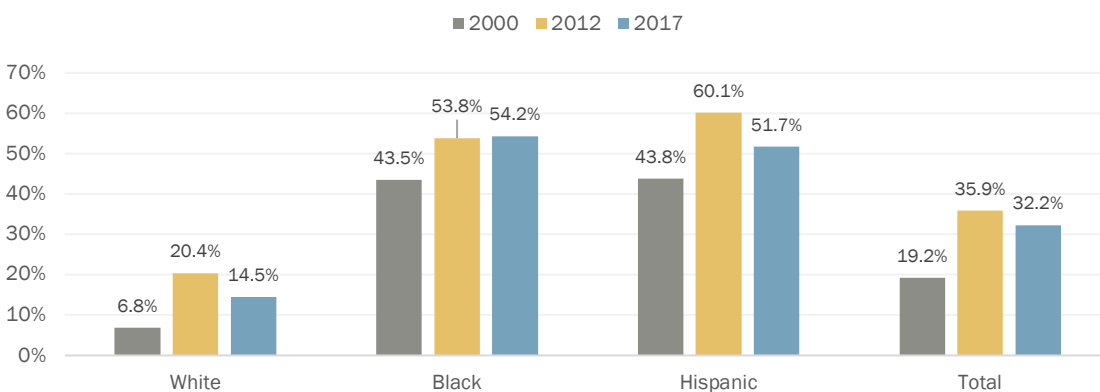


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Decennial Census and the 2012 and 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

People of color, and especially poor people of color, are far more likely to live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. (Here we look only at black and Hispanic residents as the estimates for other minority populations are not reliable at the tract level.) In 2000, 5 of 6 high poverty tracts were majority minority (the 6th was 50% white, 50% nonwhite). In 2017, 10 of the 11 high poverty tracts were majority minority (the 11th was again split, 55% white, 45% nonwhite).

In 2017, only 14.5% of **all** white residents of High Point lived in a high poverty tract, compared to over half of black and Hispanic residents (Fig. 25). Forty-one percent of **poor** whites lived in high poverty tracts, compared to 77% of poor African Americans and 63.2% of poor Hispanics (Fig. 26). In other words, white households, even poor ones, are less likely to live in disadvantaged neighborhoods than their black and Hispanic neighbors. This is especially true for very high poverty tracts: in 2017, black and Hispanic residents were three to four times more likely to live in such a tract compared to their white counterparts (Fig. 27).

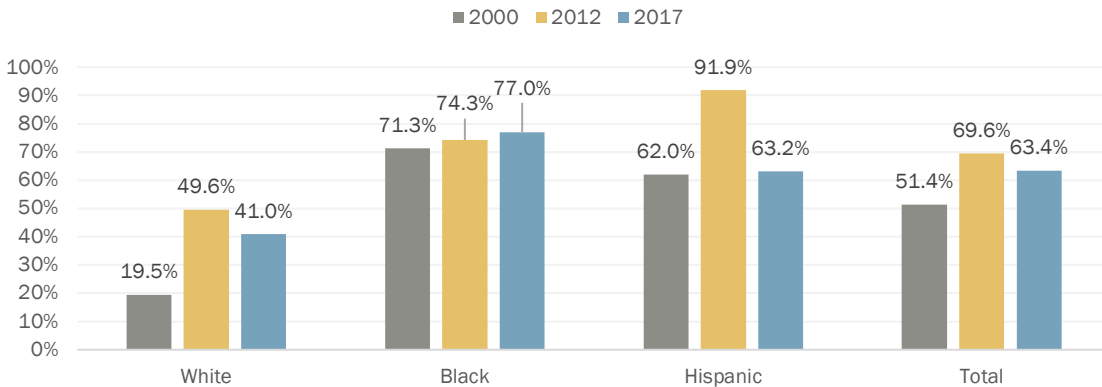
Figure 25. Percent of **all** people living in a high poverty tract by race/ethnicity



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Decennial Census and the 2012 and 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

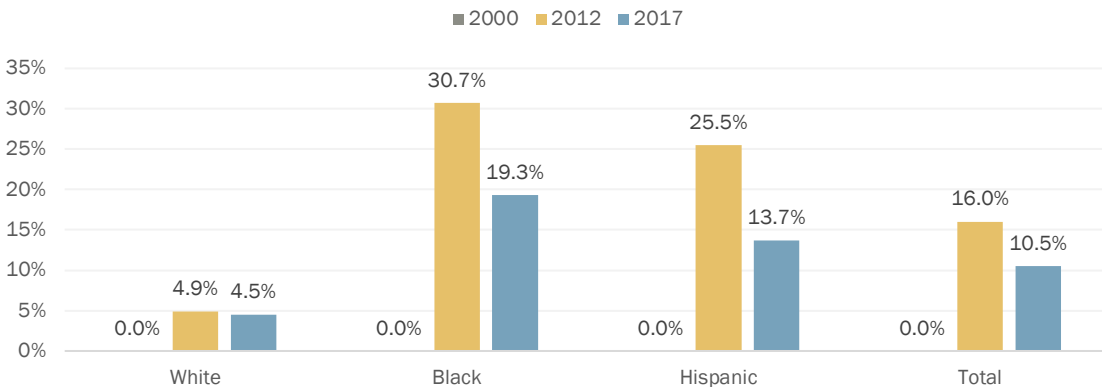
<sup>41</sup> 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

Figure 26. Percent of **poor** people living in a high poverty tract by race/ethnicity



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Decennial Census and the 2012 and 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figure 27. Percent of **all** people living in VERY high poverty tract (40% or over) by race/ethnicity



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Decennial Census and the 2012 and 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

One of the bright spots in this data is that it shows how poverty can fluctuate over time. The charts depict a very clear spike in poverty during the last recession that has since eased slightly. One lesson from this is that poverty is not set in stone; individuals fall in and out of hard times. Poverty can be prevented or allayed; it's not a permanent condition.

However, one of the disturbing aspects of concentrated poverty is that it initiates a cycle that is difficult to reverse or uproot. This seems to be true in High Point. The poorest tracts in 2000 are, with one exception, the poorest in 2017 (#5 in 2000—tract 144.08—fell to #9 in 2017) (Tables 2 and 3). The overall population in three of the five distressed tracts has grown, but in all tracts, the share of poor people has grown more (Fig. 28). This means more people, and more poor people, are living in difficult neighborhoods.

Table 2. Poorest census tracts in High Point by rank

	2000	2012	2017
Census tract 139	1	1	1
Census tract 142	2	7	3
Census tract 144.08	3	10	9
Census tract 138	4	4	5
Census tract 143	5	2	4
Census tract 140	6	9	2

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Decennial Census and the 2012 and 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

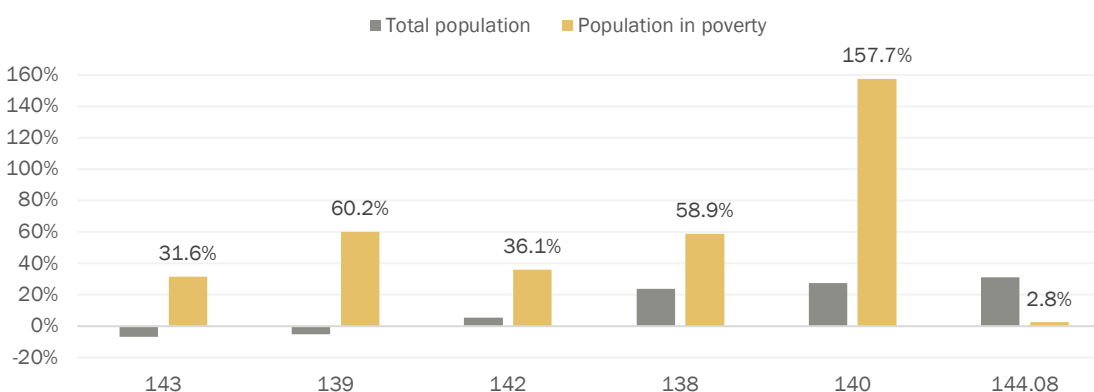
Table 3. Poverty rates in poorest census tracts

	2000	2012	2017
<i>Census tract 139</i>	36.2%	59.8%	61.2%
<i>Census tract 140</i>	24.8%	33.2%	50.1%
<i>Census tract 142</i>	34.1%	38.4%	43.9%
Census tract 143	27.1%	54.0%	38.4%
Census tract 138	27.8%	43.6%	35.6%
Census tract 144.08	31.9%	30.0%	25.0%

Note: Italics indicate tracts where the poverty rate increased each year.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Decennial Census and the 2012 and 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figure 28. Percent change in total population and poor population, 2000-2017



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Decennial Census and the 2012 and 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

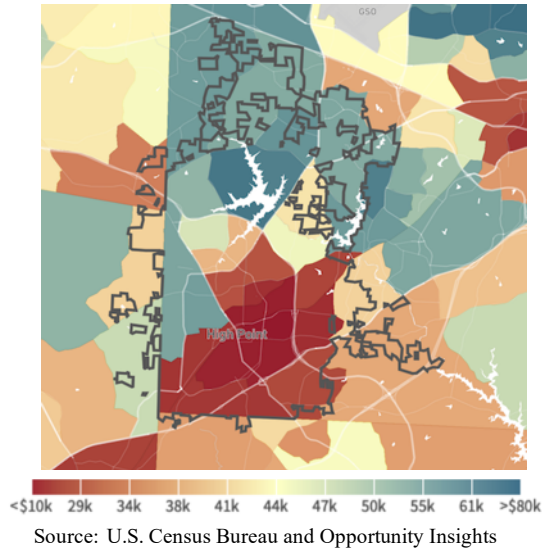
The disproportionate racial impact of concentrated poverty is not a new phenomenon. In High Point in 2000, 72% of **all** people living in a high poverty tract were black and Hispanic; that number in 2017 was virtually unchanged at 71%. Similarly, in 2000, 82% of **poor** people living in a high poverty tract were black and Hispanic; in 2017, the share was 76%.

The harms of concentrated poverty are not limited to the present; they also reach across years. Social scientists have identified the neighborhood where children grow up as one of the most influential factors shaping their prospects as adults.<sup>42</sup> One groundbreaking study examined millions of tax records in order to track outcomes in

<sup>42</sup> See the research of Raj Chetty and his colleagues at Opportunity Insights, “Neighborhoods Matter,” <https://opportunityinsights.org/neighborhoods/>.

adulthood for children born in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It found that on average, children who grew up at the same income level but in different neighborhoods—even neighborhoods not very far from each other—charted very different courses in life. Place, the study concluded, is one of the biggest determinants of a child’s future income, as well as other measures such as teen births and marriage.<sup>43</sup>

Map 4. Opportunity Atlas, High Point



As Map 4 shows, individuals, now around 40 years old, who grew up in southern High Point (the tracts shaded red) have substantially lower average annual incomes than their peers who grew up in nearby neighborhoods to the north (the tracts shaded blue). The typical child of low-income parents raised in northern High Point has an annual income around \$42,000 (the exact amount depends on the tract). In contrast, annual income for the typical child of low-income parents from one of the distressed tracts is about half that (between \$17,000-\$23,000). These results hold regardless of where the child lives in adulthood.

While race influences income, neighborhood still matters. For example, the average black child who grew up in tract 144.09 (in northern High Point) earns \$26,000 a year (Table 4). This is low compared to the annual income for a comparable white child who grew up next door (\$51,000). But it’s much higher than the income

of the average black child raised down the road in tract 142 (\$16,000). Even children of high-income (75<sup>th</sup> percentile) parents are not immune to neighborhood effect. Children of high-income parents from the distressed tracts earn approximately half as much as children of high-income parents from nearby tracts. A neighborhood can change the trajectory of a child’s life.

Table 4. Average annual income in adulthood, distressed tracts and higher opportunity tracts

	Average Annual Income in Adulthood			
	All children, low-income parents	All children, high-income parents	Black children, all parents	White children, all parents
Distressed tracts:				
138	\$18,000	\$31,000	\$19,000	\$28,000
139	\$17,000	\$25,000	\$18,000	\$15,000
140	\$23,000	\$47,000	\$23,000	\$32,000
142	\$18,000	\$36,000	\$16,000	\$28,000
143	\$19,000	\$38,000	\$16,000	\$26,000
Nearby “opportunity” tracts:				
144.09	\$33,000	\$55,000	\$26,000	\$51,000
137	\$32,000	\$55,000	\$29,000	\$59,000

Source: U.S. Census Bureau and Opportunity Insights

<sup>43</sup> Chetty and Hendren, *The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility*; Chetty and Hendren, *The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility: Childhood Exposure Effects and County-Level Estimates*.

For all this discussion of what poor neighborhoods lack, it’s worth remembering that they are places that people value and fight for. Our visit with the Burns Hill Neighborhood Association illustrates the ways residents push back against poverty’s challenges. Through the association, neighbors strive to improve conditions, share information, communicate with city officials, exert political pressure and foster a sense of pride and neighborhood identity.

An all-white neighborhood until the 1960s, Burns Hill became home to black working-class families who were employed in nearby factories. As the jobs left and the population aged, homes were abandoned or allowed to run down, leading to a spiral of neglect and property devaluation.<sup>44</sup> Burns Hill by any account is troubled. Its census tract, 139, has the highest poverty rate in High Point. Seventy-six percent of families with children are poor. About a third of residents over 18 years old have not graduated from high school.

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I was born here, I was raised here, I’ve seen the good, the bad and the ugly. In the 1980s, hosiery and furniture factories lined Green Street. Burns Hill was middle class. There were lots of jobs and you could go from one factory to another and get a job. We had community togetherness; we’d share food, we kept our yards up.

- Jerry Mingo,  
Burns Hill Neighborhood Association

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Despite these troubling conditions, the neighborhood association is vibrant. Not only does it run a food pantry and community garden, its monthly meetings allow residents to voice a range of concerns. At the meeting we attended, all attention was on a spate of shootings that had, that week, claimed the lives of a 61-year-old woman and a pregnant 18-year-old.<sup>45</sup> People at the meeting feared both the violence and the stigma that it brought. A representative from the police department explained that one house was the center of a longstanding feud between rival gangs. “That house has been shot at so many times we don’t know which shots are old,” he said. The house in question was a rental; the landlord had a reputation for “only being interested in money.”<sup>46</sup>

This scenario represents many of the negative features experts cite when discussing the harms of concentrated poverty: stress, crime, violence, gangs, police involvement, blight, rundown rental properties, social marginalization, underinvestment. Yet the Burns Hill residents in attendance were vocal advocates on behalf of their neighborhood. They emphasized that this criminal element was unwelcome and unacceptable. They pressed for solutions, inquired about nuisance abatement and fining the landlord. They asked if they could meet with police dispatchers to discuss how callers might remain anonymous. They wondered whether the gang task force was involved. The challenges facing this neighborhood are many and deep. But residents aren’t accepting their fate passively. “People ask me if I’m scared,” said one attendee, “and I’m not. Only God knows the day and hour.”

## Income and earnings

The year 2000 was a golden age for income, in High Point and in North Carolina generally. That year, the city reached its peak median household income, exceeding the state’s, \$59,054 to \$57,652 (in 2017 dollars). By 2005, the figure for both High Point and North Carolina had dropped to about \$51,000. The 2007 recession knocked incomes back even farther, and both city and state have since struggled to make up lost ground (Fig. 29).

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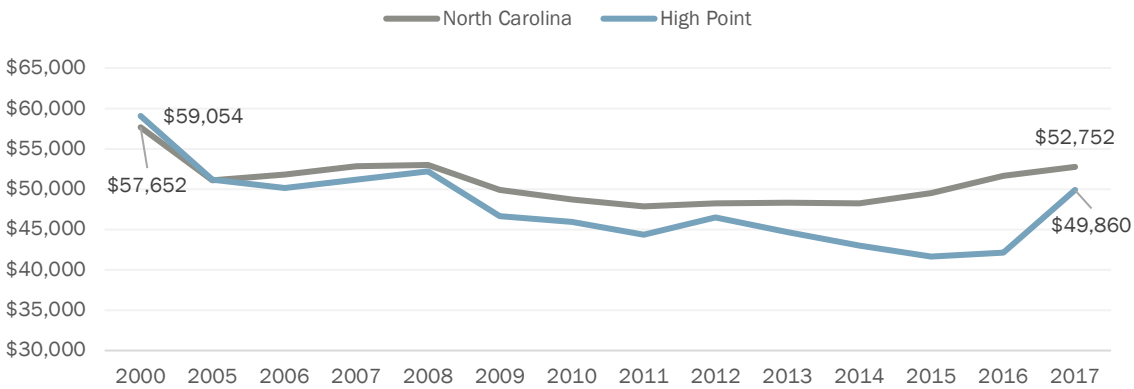
<sup>44</sup> Green, “Who Owns the Ghetto in High Point?”

<sup>45</sup> “Fourth Early Morning Shooting Reported in High Point.”

<sup>46</sup> N.C. Poverty Research Fund, Burns Hill Neighborhood Association Meeting.

Although median household income in North Carolina has not yet regained its 2000 high water mark, it has in recent years gotten back to its pre-recession range. High Point however is still recovering. In fact, the recession maintained a long-lasting grip on High Point, which didn’t see any significant improvement in median household income until 2017. Even with this recent upward turn, median household income is still about \$10,000 off its peak.

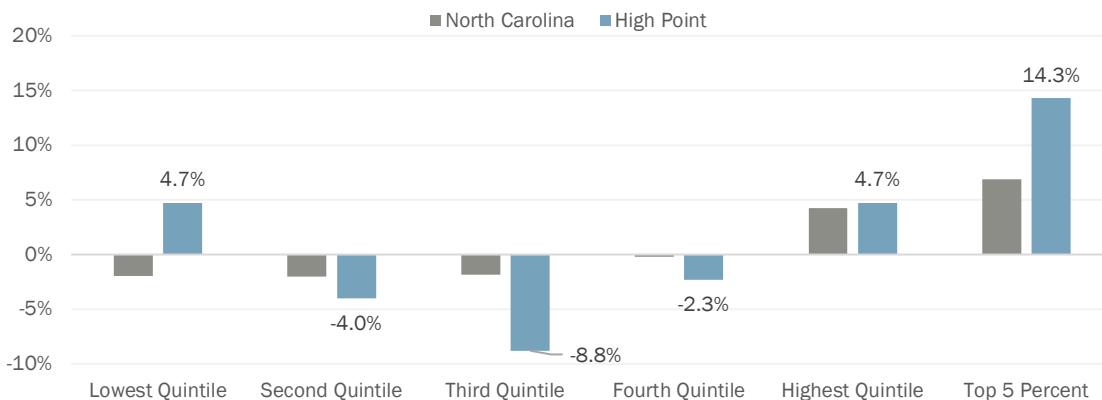
Figure 29. Median household income, 2000-2017 (2017 dollars)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census and American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

Over the past decade, those at the bottom and the very top of the income range in High Point have seen modest income gains (with the top 5% doing very well). However, households in the middle—the second, third and fourth quintiles<sup>47</sup>, or roughly, the near poor and middle class—have lost income. The average household income for these groups has fallen far more in High Point than in the state (Fig. 30).

Figure 30. Change in mean household income by quintile, 2006-2010 and 2013-2017

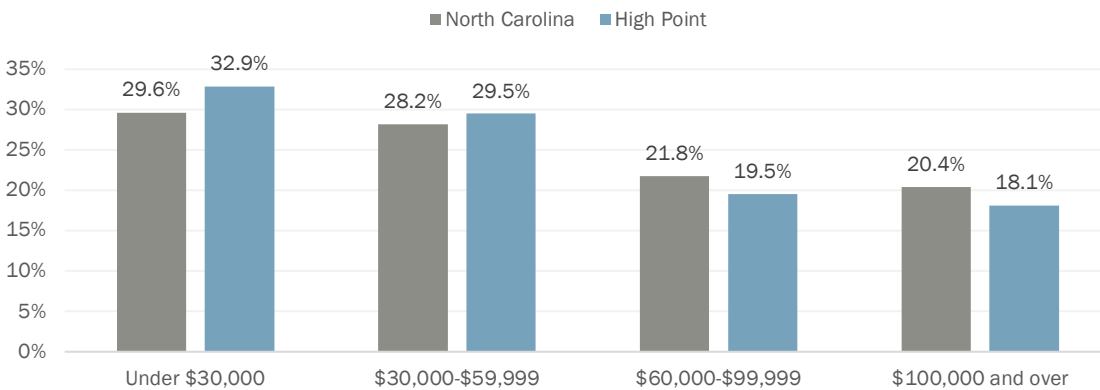


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 and 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

<sup>47</sup> A quintile is a one-fifth of the population, in ranked order. Dividing households into quintiles by income is equal to lining up all households, from lowest to highest income, then splitting them into five groups with an equal number of households in each.

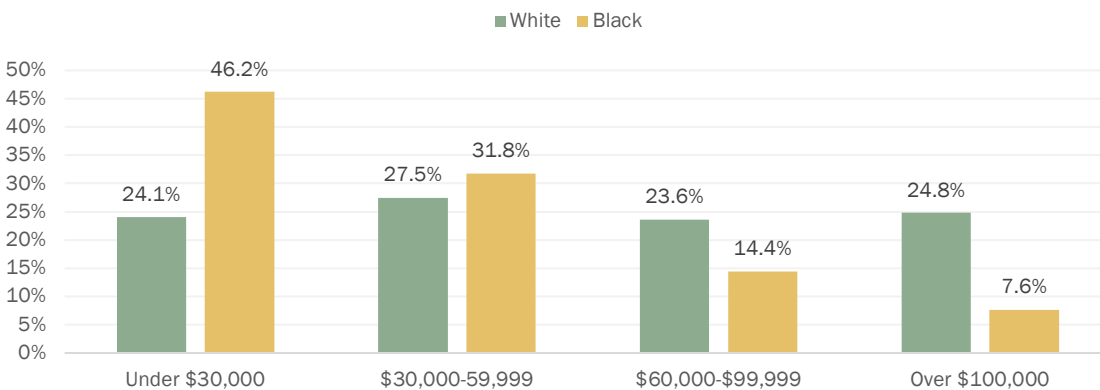
More households in High Point than in the state fall into lower income categories, with a third of households earning less than \$30,000 (Fig. 31). The income distribution varies with race, however. White households are spread fairly evenly across lower- and upper-income categories. In contrast, three in four black households are in the two lower income categories. The percentage of white households in the top income category (\$100,000 and above) is three times larger than it is for black households (Fig. 32).

Figure 31. Percentage of households by income category



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figure 32. Percentage of households by income category, by race

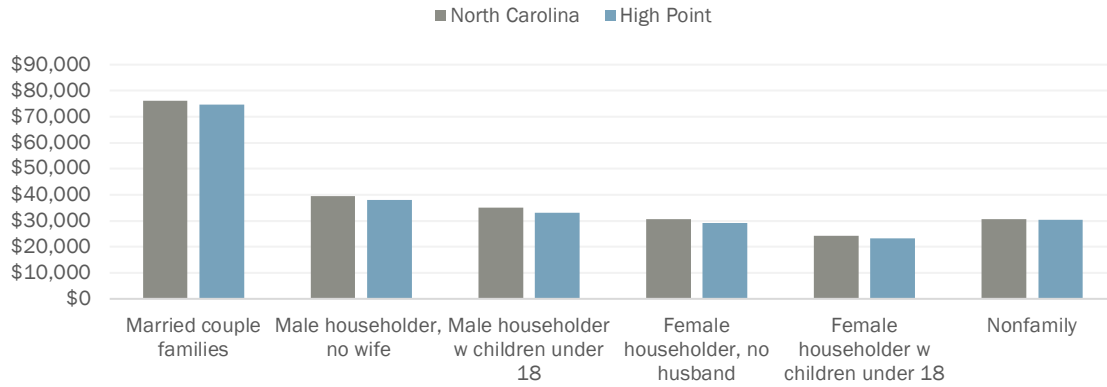


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

As with poverty, many measures of income in High Point are similar to statewide numbers. Median household income by household type in High Point marches in step with the state. Married-couple families in High Point (and the state) make more than twice the amount earned by any other household type. Families led by single women with children under 18 have the lowest median household incomes (\$23,123 in High Point, \$24,130 in North Carolina) (Fig. 33).

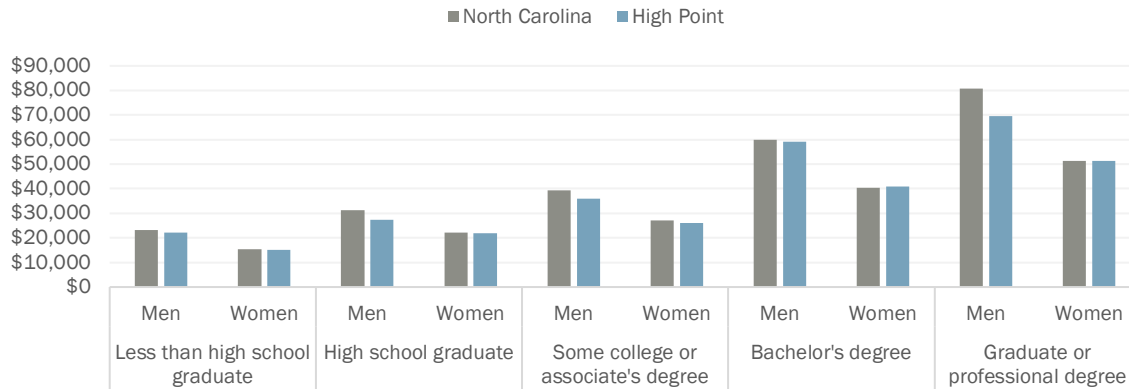
Median earnings in the city and state are also similar. In both cases, individual earnings increase with education but diverge based on gender. The earnings gap between men and women actually increases with every educational step up. However, it's clear that both men and women enjoy an earnings boost by acquiring a college degree or more (Fig. 34).

Figure 33. Median household income by family type



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figure 34. Median earnings by educational attainment and sex

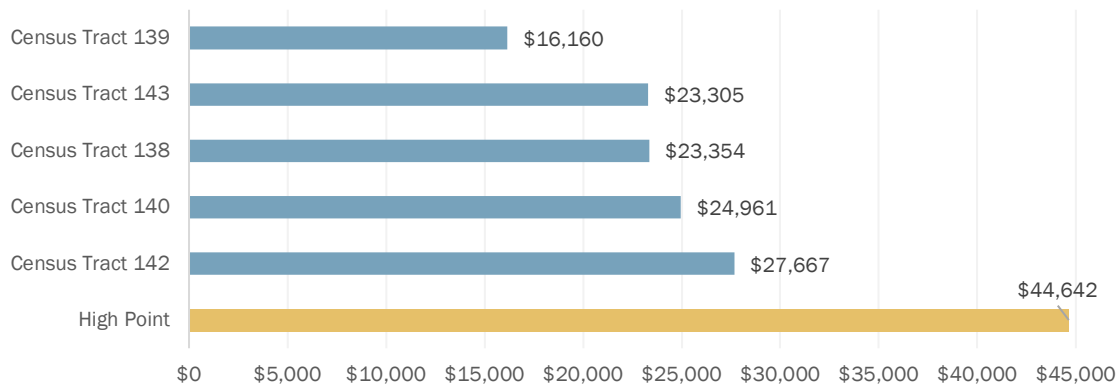


Note: Population 25 years and over

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Here again though, citywide averages mask profound differences between neighborhoods. Median household income in the distressed tracts is about half of what it is for the city at large (Fig. 35).

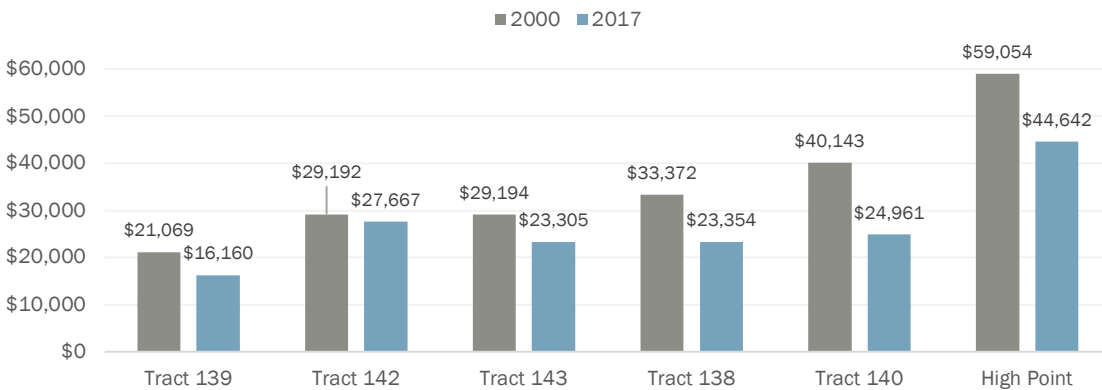
Figure 35. Median household income by census tract



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Between 2000 and 2017, median household income declined for all the distressed tracts. For three of the tracts, the drop was not as steep as the city’s; because the median income was lower to start with, it didn’t have as far to fall. Median household income in the two remaining tracts dropped precipitously, however. Tract 138 and 140 lost 30% and 37.8% of median household income, compared to 24.4% for the city (Fig. 36).

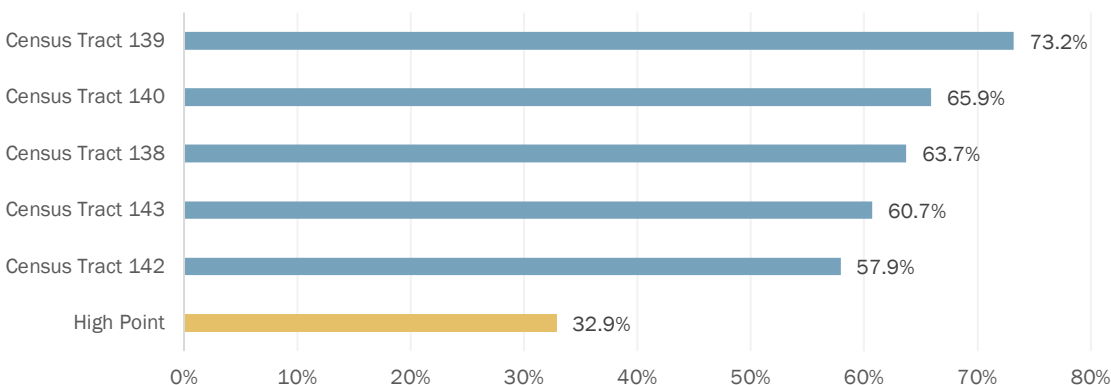
Figure 36. Median household income, 2000 and 2017 (2017 dollars)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Decennial Census and 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

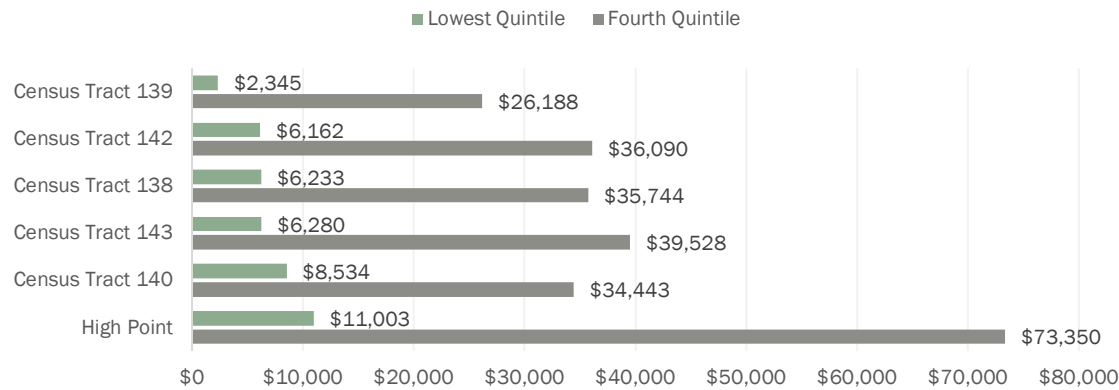
A sizable majority of residents in all of the distressed tracts make less than \$30,000 annually (Fig. 37). Even those households that are relatively well-off compared to their neighbors suffer in comparison to the rest of the city. At the fourth quintile—which should be upper middle class—average household income in all the distressed tracts fails to crack \$40,000 (Fig. 38). Among these five tracts, the tract with the highest average income at the fourth quintile (143) lags **\$34,000** behind the average income for the fourth quintile city-wide. While the absolute difference between the distressed tracts and the city is less pronounced at the bottom quintile, the typical household at the bottom of the ladder in High Point makes about \$2,500 to \$8,500 more than their counterparts in the distressed tracts (Fig. 38).

Figure 37. Percentage of households making less than \$30,000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

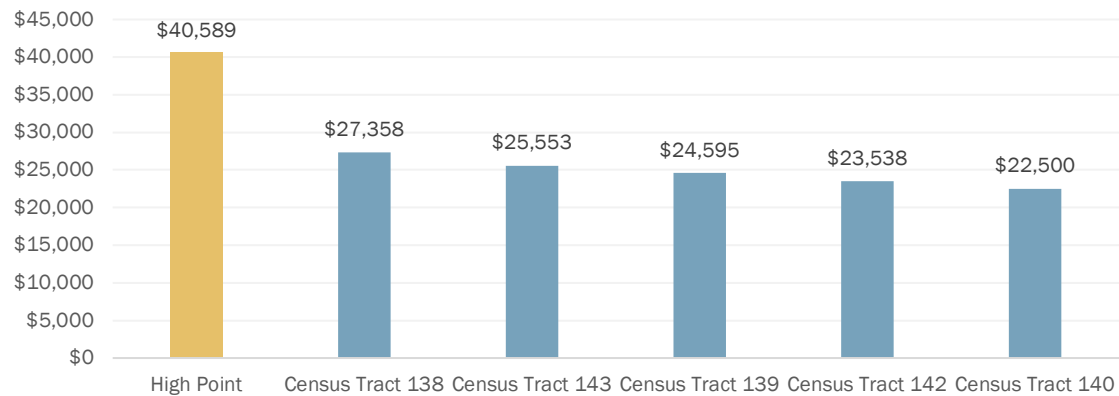
Figure 38. Average household income, first and fourth quintile, by distressed census tract



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Working full-time, year-round does little to lift these numbers. At the median, full-time, year-round workers in the distressed tracts earn \$13,000 to \$18,000 less than the equivalent worker in High Point overall (Fig. 39).

Figure 39. Median earnings, full-time, year-round employment



Note: Civilian population 16 years and older

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

## Employment

Years ago, when furniture and textiles were good, a man could pick up a part-time job or lose a job and get another before getting home. When those jobs left, people got insecure. ... To see the magnitude of furniture in High Point, you never would think it would leave. But it did, to a very large part.

- Pastor John Langdon,  
Helping Hands Ministry

For most people, the bulk of their income comes from wages. In this regard, broad macroeconomic changes in the state and local economy have brought additional challenges. Not too long ago, workers in High Point with a high school degree (or less) could reasonably expect to get a job that paid a no-frills but steady and adequate wage. These jobs have become rare. Instead, “good” jobs—those that pay well, offer flexibility and decent benefits—increasingly require a college education or specialized training, at minimum. The jobs that are available to workers with less education typically pay less, offer few if any benefits, and entail part-time hours and unpredictable scheduling. These jobs often don’t pay enough to lift families into the middle class—or keep them there.

The good news for High Point is that the number of jobs is growing and becoming increasingly diversified. Manufacturing remains a cornerstone of the local economy, but the single largest employer is now the hospital. High Point University, Ralph Lauren, Bank of America and Aetna employ thousands.<sup>48</sup> A number of industrial sectors have seen employment growth, especially health care, education, and food services. These jobs have more than offset losses in manufacturing and a few smaller sectors.

You have more people who are working poor, who work 2 jobs or 3 sometimes, because they're underemployed and underpaid.... This trickle-down stuff ain't trickling down. Someone cut the water spigot off. It's a drop and then next week another drop.

- Pastor Michael Ellerbe,  
New Beginnings Full Gospel Ministry

The bad news is that the sectors showing the most job growth are also relatively low paying. Median earnings for the sectors with the largest gains in employment (accommodation and food services; educational services; and health care and social assistance) range from a meager \$13,133 to the low \$30,000s (Table 5). Of the five sectors with the highest employment numbers in High Point, only manufacturing has median earnings over \$35,000. Additionally, since 2010, median earnings have fallen for all of these sectors. A few sectors—finance and insurance, public administration, management, professional services—pay well and offer rising wages. However, jobs in these sectors often require high levels of expertise, education or training.

Table 5. Employment and median earnings by sector, High Point

Sector	Employment	Change in employment 2000-2017	Median earnings	Change in median earnings, 2010-2017
Total employment	49,145	6895	\$31,133	-6.80%
Manufacturing	8,275	-2322	\$35,800	-4.40%
Health care and social assistance	6,643	2515	\$30,832	-6.00%
Retail trade	5,876	893	\$23,140	-11.60%
Educational services	4,442	1527	\$32,639	-23.60%
Accommodation and food services	3,649	1216	\$13,133	-8.70%
Professional, scientific, and technical services	2,793	915	\$52,116	18.00%
Transportation and warehousing	2,749	607	\$40,490	-6.30%
Finance and insurance	2,641	-28	\$46,069	5.30%
Other services, except public administration	2,323	720	\$15,115	-37.30%
Administrative and support and waste management services	2,289	967	\$19,536	0.80%
Construction	1,863	-148	\$30,859	-1.10%
Wholesale trade	1,795	-264	\$43,948	-2.80%
Public administration	1,323	171	\$42,523	4.60%
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	817	415	\$25,402	10.00%
Information	781	-151	\$41,929	16.90%
Real estate and rental and leasing	695	-19	\$31,888	-15.40%
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining	109	-44	\$18,750	-45.50%
Utilities	60	-67	\$40,147	-11.90%
Management of companies and enterprises	22	-8	\$41,500	51.40%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

<sup>48</sup> High Point Economic Development Corporation, “High-Point’s Largest Employers in 2018.”

High Point don't pay a good salary. Give them a chance. You can't hardly make it if you have a job. Never mind if you don't.

– Burns Hill resident

An analysis of employment by occupation<sup>49</sup> underscores the income divide in High Point. In three out of four jobs are in occupational groups where the median earnings are below the Living Income Standard (LIS) for a family of one adult and one child in Guilford County (\$40,738).<sup>50</sup> While a handful of central occupations in High Point pay well (namely in management, health care practitioners, business and financial operations, and computer and mathematical occupations), 69% of jobs in occupations with growing employment have median earnings below the LIS. Again, the occupations that pay well present major barriers to entry, requiring significant investment in experience, skills, training or education (Table 6).

Table 6. Employment and median earnings by occupational group, High Point

Occupational group	Employment	Change in employment 2000-2017	Median earnings
Total	49,145	6,895	\$31,133
Office and Administrative Support	7,011	270	\$29,260
Sales and Related	5,656	425	\$30,098
Management	4,765	533	\$64,886
Production	4,718	-1,381	\$25,286
Education, Training, and Library	3,091	876	\$35,445
Food Preparation and Serving	2,887	1,056	\$13,505
Healthcare Practitioners and Technical	2,650	1,025	\$56,763
Business and Financial Operations	2,370	603	\$52,662
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance	1,688	500	\$15,669
Personal Care and Service	1,674	620	\$12,317
Material Moving	1,661	186	\$18,128
Construction and Extraction	1,583	-33	\$27,272
Transportation	1,569	67	\$35,313
Computer and Mathematical	1,448	904	\$56,125
Healthcare Support	1,439	635	\$21,771
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	992	-310	\$38,750
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media	965	166	\$30,965
Protective Service	883	361	\$35,903
Community and Social Service	815	316	\$42,928
Architecture and Engineering	696	92	\$79,569
Life, Physical, and Social Science	289	86	\$65,938
Legal	279	-36	\$38,711
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry	16	-98	\$9,063

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

<sup>49</sup> Occupational groups classify workers according to what they do; sectors and industries classify establishments by the type of business they conduct.

<sup>50</sup> The Living Income Standard estimates the income a family needs to cover basic household expenses (housing, food, childcare, health care, transportation, taxes and other necessities such as clothing and school supplies). Expenses are estimated for basic needs only and are calculated using local market prices. Kennedy II, *A Standard Worthy of North Carolina Workers: The 2019 Living Income Standard for 100 Counties*.

Employment projections for the Greensboro-High Point metropolitan area foresee continuing growth in low-wage, low-skill occupations. With the exception of registered nurses, the occupations with the largest employment gains in the near future require little formal education and minimal on-the-job training. They pay accordingly, with the top three occupations offering a median annual income around \$20,000 (Appendix One).<sup>51</sup> There's little happening on the economic horizon regionally or nationally to alter current employment trends. If low-wage jobs are a growing part of the local economy, then work alone is no longer a reliable path to financial stability.

A lot of jobs come into High Point, unfortunately, many people lack transportation and technical skills. There's a gap there. All applications are online, you need computer skills. High Point has been predominantly blue collar with a lot of old wealth. We have generous donors and there's some new money, but we need more jobs, more middle-income jobs.

- Pastor John Langdon,  
Helping Hands Ministry

## Combatting Poverty in High Point

Anti-poverty organizations in High Point are a diverse group. Speaking with leaders in this community, we were struck by the many facets of poverty they described. We heard about homelessness, mental illness, substance abuse and involvement in the criminal justice system. Some ascribed poverty to a sudden event: a health crisis, a divorce or unemployment. Others thought of it as a long slide downward. Still others focused on families and children whose opportunities are pinched by poverty. These varied perspectives show the multiplicity of the faces of poverty and the complex and interlocking ways it is experienced. Yet the scope and thorniness of the challenge does little to deter these soldiers on the poverty frontlines.

### Acts Ministries<sup>52</sup>

Pastor Dan Hodgson has created a home for those who have none. A policeman for thirty years, he was led by his faith to found Acts Ministries; in his words, an “organic, first century church” reaching out to those “shunned by society”—folks struggling with homelessness, mental illness, addiction.<sup>53</sup> He's not affiliated with any mainstream denomination and prefers to remain free of the rules imposed by more institutional arrangements. “The church is based on service, it doesn't try to be preachy, there's no religion in feeding people. We don't put up signs, people find us as they find us,” he states.

We met Hodgson at a somewhat unusual place: the public library's weekly Community Café, a gathering place for people of all walks—housed or not—to get together and have a warm meal. The Café reflects the library's broad-minded approach to its role in the community, its constituency and its partnerships. Hodgson relates how the head librarian responded to complaints of homeless people sitting on picnic tables downtown. “I know they're hungry,” he remembers her saying. “Why don't we feed them?” And with that simple proposition, the Community Café was born. “Hundreds come to get a cup of coffee, egg casserole. It's not just homeless people eating here, it's open to anyone, any library employee, anyone coming to library.”

<sup>51</sup> N.C. Department of Commerce, Labor and Economic Analysis, “Employment Projections by Occupation.”

<sup>52</sup> Acts Ministries, <https://actsministrieshighpoint.weebly.com>.

<sup>53</sup> N.C. Poverty Research Fund, Interview with Pastor Dan Hodgson.

Although he notes there aren't enough middle-income jobs in High Point, from Hodgson's point of view, the problems he sees aren't economic in origin. “I serve the unsheltered.... I don't know anyone who is unsheltered who isn't a drug addict or have mental issues. There are more people living in streets now.” He tells them about job training programs, but he believes many are unemployable when they're on the streets. Drugs are especially bad now, “there's more heroin, more opioids.” He notes there are few long-term treatment facilities in High Point. “Most of the success I've seen are mostly women and they've really done it on their own. At my church, we just love on them, we don't criticize them. It wouldn't do any good anyway. It's a caring service.”

“We're all sinners,” he proclaims. “I don't preach to them. I ask them what they need. I'll go and get them shoes. Most of them wouldn't know I'm a minister.” His folks are the hard cases, the ones that he says would rather be homeless than go to the shelter (which he describes as “stab central”). He has a working relationship with the police. When the homeless camps are scheduled to get cleared, he goes in first and warns them.

Hodgson is pragmatic. He's not in the business of forcing change, either personal or systemic. His focus is on immediate need. “I'm not interested in stats. We work just for the moment, doing as much as we can do.” As Hodgson sees it, it all comes back to Jesus. “If he's hungry,” he says quoting scripture, “feed him.” Change occurs as a personal decision, “when you're sick and tired of where you are.” His work, as is his commitment, is deeply personal: a testament to his faith, experiences and philosophy.

Why hunger? Go back a century, the haves and have nots. The tracks split the workers from the rich. Why is there a Rolls Royce and Bentley dealership here? High Point had more millionaires per capita than any other city in North Carolina. But people are in denial about poverty and hunger. They say it's not here, there are no gangs. And I say, come with me, I'll show you.

- Pastor Dan Hodgson,  
Acts Ministries

## Open Door Ministries<sup>54</sup>

Steve Key runs Open Door Ministries, which operates a shelter for homeless men and veterans, serves and distributes food, helps clients obtain housing and jobs, and provides emergency financial assistance to cover utilities and rent. The shelter accommodates about 70 men, though it takes in more when the weather turns cold. It's full most of the time, especially in winter. On bad nights, folks are squeezed in on the floor and in the living room. The volunteer-staffed kitchen serves three hot meals a day, six days a week.

The biggest poverty challenges Key identifies are mental health and medical issues. As Key describes it, when people come out of hospitals, mental health centers, rehab or prison, they have no information on how to proceed and no resources to assist them. The sheriff drops them off and they're on their own. In response, the shelter keeps a mental health clinician and security guard on staff. In his opinion, the economy is not a major cause of homelessness. “If we went back to full employment,” he asserts, “we'd still have full shelters.”<sup>55</sup> The failure of mental health reform and the lack of adequate care mean folks end up on his doorstep. Classes and job training are successful for those who are really trying to find work, he says, but many suffer from disability or need counseling.

<sup>54</sup> Open Door Ministries, <https://opendoorministrieshp.org/>.

<sup>55</sup> N.C. Poverty Research Fund, Interview with Steve Key.

“Shelters aren’t the answer to the problem,” Key asserts. “Even housing isn’t the answer if you can’t keep people in it.” Key described a client, a single mom with five kids. The oldest, who is 15, has “all kinds of mental health problems.” He has threatened his mom and gotten kicked out of school. He needs help, but the mom has “mountains of problems every day.” “How do you help her?” he asks. “How do you help the other twenty people in a similar boat?” “The majority of clients have problems,” Key says, “they’re not perfect people. They have criminal records, bad credit. If you create barriers, they have to survive somehow.” By denying the complexity of their lives and imposing unrealistic standards, we’re “creating avenues for them to get in trouble again.”

If homelessness is not an economic issue, Key believes that food insecurity is. Low wage workers don’t earn enough to buy food, he says. “Gardens won’t do it either. We can feed people all day long, I understand hunger. We don’t have a hunger issue, we feed people. We don’t have an economic system for people to work.” In the past, he recollects, “We had all these factories, you had to run to avoid work. There were people ready to employ you and drive you home.” When those jobs left, the core city crumbled. He notes that good things are going on—jobs are coming in—but they are not blue-collar jobs accessible to the folks that need them. But, Key emphasizes, the High Point community is caring and creative, and more people than ever are responding to the need.

#### D-UP Inc.<sup>56</sup>

Jakki Davis is focused intently on children, mostly children of color, and their parents. D-UP, the organization she runs, and its many affiliated programs promote physical fitness and health. It sponsors after school programs, summer camps, scout troops, neighborhood festivals, community gardens, cooking classes and more. But Davis has her eye on a bigger prize: to change her kids’ futures. She strives to provide the building blocks that will help them rise out of poverty. This is no small challenge. She estimates that 80-85% of the children in D-Up’s programs are from single-parent homes, mostly single moms. Many them work, but often in low paying hotel or fast food jobs.

In the face of this reality, Davis is relentless. She’s determined to not let the kids’ circumstances limit their opportunities and, for her, education is a major part of her vision for them. “We’re going to give them what they need or set them up for the best opportunity for them to go to the next level of education, whether it is a four-year school, whether it is a two-year vocational school or if they have some type of trade, that at least it gives them an opportunity where they can make more money and they will not repeat” the poverty cycle.<sup>57</sup>

Davis’ relationship with parents is a distinctive part of D-UP’s success. In order to support and nurture the kids, she must work closely with the parents—and that means earning their trust. “We’re not a day care center. Our parents don’t just drop them off. We have communication with our parents and that’s where we’re fortunate.” D-UP can provide kids with “the structure, the respect, the love,” she says. “But I can’t do that if I don’t have my parents on board.”

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You can tell there are definitely days when some of the kids are really upset and you ask, ‘do you want to talk about it?’ A lot of times they don’t, at least that’s what I’ve experienced, because they want to be tough and they want to put on that front that’s like ‘everything’s fine, I’m good,’ but you know, you can just tell.

- Amy Grener,  
AmeriCorps VISTA

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<sup>56</sup> D-UP Inc., <https://www.facebook.com/ItsTime2DUP/>.

<sup>57</sup> N.C. Poverty Research Fund, Interview with Jakki Davis.

Davis knows that this connection is special. She can build those relationships with parents in part because she understands them and where they’re coming from.

We’re in a unique situation where we have created rapport to where it helps us. And understanding my parents to the point where they send their kids to us, and maybe they have not eaten and then we provide food—because we’re kind of that bridge I’d say for both of them. “I have to worry about paying my light bill. I can’t do that if I have three or four kids that desperately need my attention.” It gives parents their necessary space and then the kids have that space where they can come and it’s not “you have to go sit down because mommy has to think right now. We don’t have time to do homework at this moment, I have to figure out where we’re going to live.” I truly understand. I respect them for desiring more for their children.

Davis worries about the effect of their environment on the kids. They can bounce back, she says, but she dislikes touting their resilience, since they shouldn’t have to face the things they do.

We have kids that see violence and crime. We have some that sleep at night with gunshots. That aspect of being resilient, is that “yeah, I slept half the night not sure if that shot is aimed at my house or is close or if I can close my eyes and go to sleep. Then I have to go to school. I may eat or I may not. Then I have my teachers telling me that I need to perform, and the teachers don’t understand why I cannot.” As a community we must learn to recognize the trauma and adverse childhood experiences facing our children in order for us to assist and make an impact in their lives.

Drugs and gangs are inescapable. “High Point isn’t big,” she says. “You have families that are moving from one community to the next desiring a safer place to rear their children, but they’re still in the areas that are poverty stricken; therefore, there is crime.” She realizes that she can’t always protect her kids and the prospect bothers her. What starts as innocuous goofing off in middle school can lead to a dangerous crossroad. “It’s scary,” she acknowledges.

We do have some students who have been targeted to be in gangs, some of our older kids. It is hard when they get to that age. You’re happy that they’re coming to you and talking to you, but then you don’t know what they’re doing when they’re not at the Enrichment Center and when you’re not with them at home or school. You talk to the parents when there is misbehavior or change in habits. At that point greater communication is necessary and ensuring there is not a lot of idle time. You have to watch their circles.

D-UP recognizes that when kids walk out the door, friends and family take over, so many activities involve parents and the wider community. This programming flows naturally outward and has been central to the revitalization of the Washington Street Historic District. Davis spreads her message through an irresistible combination of fun, food, fitness, camaraderie and dancing. For example, as part of the monthly “Let’s Move in the Park” program, Davis celebrates physical activity with a different theme each month (the Winter Olympics, Valentine’s Day, Color Run, Back-Yard Cookout and Water Day, for example).

Community members are riding by in their cars and they’re stopping, and they’re asking, “what’s going on over there?” We’ve been doing it every single Saturday once a month since 2012. We’ve had 35, sometimes 50 children that are out there for two hours on a Saturday—and in the winter months, it’s cold! ... I make activities engaging and fun, so I’ll take images, like a bunny with a scarf, and I post them on trees. And on them, it indicates to do 15 jumping jacks, and then you go to the next one, and it gets them moving.

Davis tries to open her kids to a world of possibility—and hope. Without hope, she says, nothing changes. “If you don’t have any hope, then you’re not going to want more. Because you’re not going to believe that you can have more.”

We have to find a way to where there are opportunities. I think it’s getting better—like the stadium. I’m hoping that it’s going to bring more opportunities, but it has to be at an income where it’s going to make a difference.

Davis tries to meet her families where they are, knowing they face an array of obstacles. She also takes to task anyone who wants to help but applies excessive demands and expectations. “Transportation is a barrier. Childcare is a barrier. You have to look at everything that hinders resiliency. You can’t sit back and say ‘well, if they really want it, they’ll do this and that.’ No. ‘If you’re doing it that way, you’re crippling them.’ No. Stop thinking that way for once.”

We just try to expose them to so much because that end result is for them to take everything that they’ve learned and apply it when they leave us, when they go to college, whatever it is they do, to have a better, thriving life.

- Jakki Davis,  
D-UP Inc.

## High Point Community Against Violence (HPCAV) and English Road Baptist Church<sup>58</sup>

Jim Summey is a busy man. As pastor and executive director of High Point Community Against Violence (HPCAV), he has a special vantage point on poverty in High Point.

Summey grew up on a farm in next door Davidson County. Called to religious ministry, he left the area for study and training, returning in 1992 to the pulpit at English Road Baptist Church. At the time, the West End neighborhood where his church is located was wracked by drugs and prostitution. He felt it was the church’s duty to reach out to people on the street. That was the start of a “real tug of war,” as he puts it, within the church over whether to include ““those people.””<sup>59</sup> But under his leadership and example, the congregation eventually came around.

Like others we talked to, he remembers a time when High Point didn’t have as many poverty problems because almost anyone who wanted a job could find one. “It was a blue-collar town. The furniture industry, the cotton/hosiery industry, were king, especially furniture. Back in the late 80s, it started shipping out and we started getting in trouble.” As he remembers, just as the jobs started to slip away, crack cocaine appeared and didn’t let up until the mid-2000s. When economic stability is taken away, he says, poor people fall into the trap of drugs and alcohol. “We ended up in that spiral.” As pastor, he’s seen the toll personally, burying over 100 people in past 26 years.

“We have a lot of hungry people in High Point,” he says. “One thing we found on West End was that the food we handed out was the only hot meal they got.” Summey notes that hunger leads to chronic health problems as well. Obesity is a problem. As Summey describes it, people eat junk because it’s a cheap source of calories, “They’re not starving but their cells are.” Malnutrition is a problem. “Diabetes is rampant, they can’t get proper

<sup>58</sup> High Point Community Against Violence, <https://www.hpcav.com/>. English Road Baptist Church, <https://www.facebook.com/English-Road-Baptist-Church-382527105188365/>.

<sup>59</sup> N.C. Poverty Research Fund, Interview with Pastor Jim Summey.

medications.” Summey takes prescriptions to the pharmacy and bargains them down. He “buys so much medication” he says. The health costs are staggering.<sup>60</sup>

HPCAV started in 1997 in West End. Summey likened it to “throwing a grenade” at the presence of “gunfire, prostitution and crime.” “People were desperate for \$5 to buy crack rock and young people were dying.” The final straw came when a high school football player was shot to death. A group went to the police, leading to a partnership that would become HPCAV. Adopting a model of restorative justice that had been successful in Boston, HPCAV has since altered its approach a number of times to address issues specific to High Point. It works with offenders, offenders’ families, victims, communities and law enforcement to understand and target criminal activity and assist offenders in turning their lives around.

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For a town of this size we have pretty good wealth, smaller middle class and a large group of people struggling. With that comes all these issues, a lot of mental illness, that lead to dysfunction.

- Pastor Jim Summey,  
HPCAV

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Hunger is a “fundamental” problem among people with a criminal record, Summey says.

I ask when was the last time you ate—“3 days ago.” Criminals have burned so many bridges. They’ve done so much to damage the support system around every human being. They don’t have a place to put food if they have it. They have a hard time finding stability because they don’t have a home.

Despite the challenges, Summey remains upbeat. Eighty-six percent of individuals who go through HPCAV’s programs don’t commit violent offenses again. HPCAV provides clothes, tools and job training; participants gain experience (and income) refurbishing houses. “Lots end up with work,” states Summey. “Not necessarily fulltime, but work.” He feels supported by the city and its generous citizens. “High Point comes together. Most of the time, if we tell the benevolent community they go, ‘ok let’s do this.’ They don’t mind giving out of their abundance.” “The community foundation is fantastic,” he notes, “and individual families do their own thing.”

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## The Greater High Point Food Alliance, High Point and the Limits of Private Charity

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We gotta have a common core, a common desire, that everybody can help each other. Together. That’s the secret. It’s togetherness, unified through a common purpose. And that’s to survive. The purpose is survive until we die. We have to survive hunger, we have to survive heat, we have to survive cold. The only way we can do that is through together.

- Jo Williams,  
Triad Food Pantry

It’s a cliché to observe that food pantries and similar nonprofits are often under-resourced and perpetually stretched. It may be an accurate enough assessment on its face, but it diminishes the mighty and absolutely vital contributions they make in the fight against hunger in their communities. If they were to vanish, the results would be catastrophic. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 69% of food insecure households received emergency food from a food pantry in the previous 12 months; 78% ate at an emergency kitchen.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> According to Summey, the emergency clinic gave away \$11 million in free care last year.

<sup>61</sup> Coleman-Jensen et al., *Statistical Supplement to Household Food Security in the United States in 2014*.

In High Point, food pantries, kitchens and other like-minded non-profits are literally life-sustaining. By linking arms with the Food Alliance, they have expanded their reach and effectiveness. Make no mistake: they still face serious constraints. We heard about the difficulties of working with an all-volunteer staff, issues with continuity and planning for succession, the cost of constantly working in triage mode, and, as always, challenges with finding accessible and ongoing sources of funding. We witnessed organizations grappling with mission creep and the scope and severity of the problems they encountered.

But the one constant theme shining through our interviews was how the Food Alliance augments and amplifies the capacity of partner organizations. We heard over and over how the Food Alliance paved the way for access to exposure, education, funding, more food, better food, new strategies and new ways of thinking. How it expanded outreach and promoted information about available services. How the presence of the Food Alliance means that groups aren't working in isolation. How it provides stability, support and structure to sustain a lasting effort. But this organizational work is just one facet of the Food Alliance's fight against hunger in High Point.

Through its many partners, the Food Alliance has its ear to the ground all over the city, granting it greater insight into the challenges facing High Point's low-income residents and the groups that serve them. It is able to harness wide-ranging expertise in order to devise smart solutions. It straddles differences between groups, detects gaps and fills them. Its position “allows it to step back and take a look at the issue from a 30,000-foot view and see how the pieces fit together,” says Carl Vierling. Its elevated vantage point and manifold connections allow it to recognize larger problems and advocate for reform. The Food Alliance, for example, successfully persuaded city government to change an ordinance to allow urban farming, fought to retain free and reduced lunch in public schools, and is a steadfast advocate for siting a grocery store in the core city food desert.

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Advice to those starting the journey? Don't assume you know the answers. Spend time talking to people. Spend time listening. Ask their ideas. Too many have a savior complex. Create the largest most diverse board possible. If the usual suspects couldn't fix it then, then why should they now?

- Carl Vierling,  
Greater High Point Food Alliance

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The Food Alliance also serves a broader civic purpose in that it brings people together around a common issue. It connects people from diverse walks, bridging social, economic and racial divisions. This is especially pertinent with regards to race, and the overlap between race and class. As one Burns Hill resident said, “One of the biggest problems in High Point is north and south... I don't see it all coming together.”<sup>62</sup> Another interviewee noted, “High Point likes to assume it is racially color

blind. It doesn't like talk otherwise. It misses a large part of the problem then.” Through shared and heightened purpose, the Food Alliance raises these difficult topics while knitting High Point together.

Other conditions in High Point have contributed to the Food Alliance's success. It has joined forces with civic partners who reinforce and broaden its efforts. The city in general is an energetic and vital collaborator. A member of the city council serves as liaison between the two entities, and city officials sit on the Food Alliance's executive committee. As an extension of the city, the High Point Public Library deserves special mention as a compelling example of city resources aligning with the Food Alliance's vision. Under the leadership of Mary Sizemore, the head librarian, the library purposefully strives to include *all* of High Point's residents in its programming. For example, the library's parking lot is the site of the city's main farmers market. This could be a quaint event that appeals to locavores and foodies. Instead, the library sees this as a way to supply fresh

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I'm proud of High Point, none of this was here three years ago. Folks are joining hands and trying to do it for ourselves.

- Christopher Williams,  
High Point City Council

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<sup>62</sup> N.C. Poverty Research Fund, Burns Hill Neighborhood Association Meeting.

produce to residents who don't have access to a grocery store, promote nutrition and health, assist small businesses and nonprofits, and teach urban farming. “Everything that happens out in the parking lot,” says Sizemore, “is a continuation of what happens inside.”<sup>63</sup>

The library also sponsors a multitude of food- and health-related activities. It sponsors cooking classes for kids and health fairs for seniors. It provides help for people looking for food assistance. The website has resources for seniors, nonprofits and small businesses. Mark Taylor, a librarian and urban agriculture guru who leads the Food Alliance's Urban Agriculture Working Group, writes extensively about gardening tips on the library's website. He also operates a teaching garden at the library that donates produce to local food pantries.<sup>64</sup> The library hosts the weekly Community Café that serves breakfast to anyone who shows up. According to Mary Sizemore, these activities reflect the library's role as an engaged institution.

Everything we do is part of making a good contribution to our community. When the library became aware of the hunger issue, it was a natural next step to address that. Like the homeless population, we don't think of it as a problem, but just another population we serve. Everything we do ties to the mission statement.

As vigorous as these efforts are, Sizemore recognizes that the library is more powerful in partnership with others. “There are lots of things we can do,” Sizemore comments, “but until folks come with us, our impact is limited. If we can bring pantries, shelters and churches together, our voice might be loud enough.”

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The nonprofits work really well together .... We're trying to find better practices. We meet regularly, collectively try to get grants. The city loves collaboration as does the community foundation and the United Way.

- Pastor John Langdon,  
Helping Hands Ministry

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The generosity of local benefactors was another theme that arose out of our interviews. Almost everyone we spoke with mentioned the donation of a building or free rent, the success of annual fundraisers, the outpouring of support for the local United Way. The city is home to significant wealth, which is apparently distributed with great open-heartedness. As Jim Summey succinctly puts it, “the benevolence community is awesome.”

Any discussion of selfless civic engagement in High Point would be incomplete without mention of one of the community's central lynchpins, Dr. Patrick Harman, the executive director of the Hayden-Harman Foundation. Harman's name came up, perhaps more than any other, in discussions with nonprofit leaders working to address the multiple challenges of the distressed communities of High Point. Jakki Davis' description is illustrative:

I don't think there is any way we could do the work we're doing without Patrick—from our dreams at the beginning when we moved to High Point at the end of 2011 to helping us get to where we are now and making a real impact having our own facility donated by his family foundation...he's incredible. His vision of bringing hope and belief to our community is a shared vision along with bringing back pride. I know we wouldn't be here without Patrick believing in us, and we're forever grateful.

Harman plays committed leadership roles in numerous philanthropic, academic and civic organizations.<sup>65</sup> The Hayden-Harman Foundation's High Point Community Needs Assessment—launched in partnership with an

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<sup>63</sup> N.C. Poverty Research Fund, Interview with Mary Sizemore.

<sup>64</sup> Taylor, “High Point Library's Teaching Garden a Success Story”; Taylor, “High Point Public Library Urban Gardening Growing Tips: Home.”

<sup>65</sup> Harman is active with the Hayden-Harman Foundation, the Greater High Point Food Alliance, High Point University (Board of Visitors), the Washington Street Business Association and the Washington Street Neighborhood Association, the County

array of local non-profits in October 2019—exemplifies Harman’s thoughtful approach.<sup>66</sup> Part of a larger project designed to help children and families weather adverse experiences, this collaborative undertaking will use a combination of methods, including interviewing and surveying residents, in order to better allocate resources. As Harman explains, “It’s not just about needs and issues and gaps in service, but it’s a lot about, how do folks get their information? ... You’re building stronger communities, getting them resources.”<sup>67</sup>

The central focus of Harman’s attentions is the historic and challenging Washington Street area, where he and the Foundation have renovated commercial buildings, repaired homes, supported youth programs, donated a building for D-UP, worked with community groups to improve the landscape, helped create the Washington Street Park, developed community gardens, and helped link the community to library programs.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, Harman has located his office on Washington Street. It is rare, more than rare actually, to see an executive director of a generously endowed charitable foundation working so extensively on the ground—providing leadership, commitment, energy, selflessness and mentorship—to the community the foundation supports (with expenditures of millions of dollars). Harman grew up in High Point and has clearly given the city his heart.

Thanks to committed, bold leadership, a resourceful and collaborative approach to problem-solving, the support of the city and the presence of a generous philanthropic community, the Food Alliance’s accomplishments are many. Among other things, it can boast of new food pantries, enhanced access to food and other resources, coordinated outreach (including a free cell phone app), heightened awareness of hunger and poverty in High Point, widespread promotion and use of community gardens and urban agriculture, the establishment of the Food Security Fund and many spin-off projects initiated by Food Alliance partners. Remarkably, the food insecurity rate in the Greensboro-High Point metro area has dropped 31% from its 2014 peak.<sup>68</sup>

As praiseworthy as this effort is, the achievements of the Food Alliance are under threat. Proposed cuts to SNAP would inflict deep harm and push more people to seek help from pantries and kitchens. While SNAP doesn’t erase hunger—its inadequacies have been rigorously documented<sup>69</sup>—it is a gigantically important program that fills larders, feeds hungry schoolchildren and lifts millions of people above the poverty line.<sup>70</sup> Food pantries in High Point and throughout the state are under considerable duress already, battered by 2019’s federal shutdown, the recession and a series of natural disasters. The North Carolina legislature piled on by permanently prohibiting the state from waiving the SNAP work requirement during periods of high unemployment (as the federal government allows), a decision that restricted access to SNAP for up to 105,000 North Carolinians when it went into effect in 2016.<sup>71</sup> Slashing SNAP means food pantries will become the only assistance many hungry families can turn to.

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Transportation board, the Core City CDC, the Public Transit Task Force, the Community Shops Market, the High Point Convention and Visitors Bureau, and more.

<sup>66</sup> Bargebuhr, “Survey Addresses City Needs in High Point.”

<sup>67</sup> Zeugner, “Resiliency Study Will Address High Point Needs.”

<sup>68</sup> Food Research and Action Center, *How Hungry Is America? FRAC’s National, State and Local Index of Food Hardship*; Food Research and Action Center, *How Hungry Is America? Food Hardship in America: A Look at National, Regional, State, and Metropolitan Statistical Area Data on Household Struggles with Hunger*.

<sup>69</sup> One study found that an average of 59% of SNAP benefits are spent within the first week and about a quarter of all families with children spend their entire allotment in that time period. Castner and Henke, *Benefit Redemption Patterns in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program*. See also Food Research and Action Center, *Initiatives to Make SNAP Benefits More Adequate Significantly Improve Food Security, Nutrition, and Health*; Hamrick and Andrews, “SNAP Participants’ Eating Patterns over the Benefit Month.”

<sup>70</sup> Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “Policy Basics.”

<sup>71</sup> Mitchell, “North Carolina’s Hunger Problem”; Campbell, “Food Stamps Will Soon Require 20 Hours of Work or Classes in N.C.”

Nonetheless, as of the publication of this report, the Trump administration is on the verge of implementing changes to SNAP that would enact severe restrictions. One proposed change would eliminate a provision known as “Broad Based Categorical Eligibility.”<sup>72</sup> If adopted, the rule would purge 3.6 million people from the food stamps program nationally, including 150,000 in North Carolina. Nearly one million K-12 students would lose automatic access to free school meals, with the total number of students affected climbing still higher due to some schools losing eligibility to provide free meals to all students.<sup>73</sup> About a third of SNAP households that would be cut contain an older adult over 60.<sup>74</sup>

The “public charge” rule is another attack on SNAP. Directed at immigrants seeking legal permanent residence, the rule penalizes applicants who have received SNAP benefits. (Undocumented immigrants are already not eligible to participate in SNAP.) Although the rule has been temporarily blocked by federal judges,<sup>75</sup> it has already sown widespread fear and misunderstanding in many immigrant communities. As a result, families are choosing to forego benefits rather than imperil their green card applications.<sup>76</sup> In yet another move, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is proposing a new method for how household utilities are counted when calculating SNAP benefits. According to its own estimates, the change would result in 19% of SNAP households receiving lower benefits and would disproportionately impact households containing elderly or disabled members.<sup>77</sup>

Compounding these impending injuries, the state has not yet passed its annual budget, which runs from July 1 to June 30. As Pastor Ellerbe pointed out, pantries rely on the state for supplemental food donations, especially during the second half of summer and early fall when school is out of session. Budget delays imperil this “lifeline” (as he described it) and stretch pantries thin. Then there’s the possibility of another federal government shutdown. The last time this happened, we were told there was an uptick in the number of people seeking help from pantries. If a shutdown happens around the holidays, already a period of financial stress for families and high demand for pantries, the deprivation will be more hard-pressed than usual.

These blows are short-sighted and counterproductive. The consequences of hunger and malnutrition reach across all life stages, affecting children, prime age adults and seniors.<sup>78</sup> Observes Vierling,

There’s a health care cost. The silver tsunami is hitting us and at the end of the day, someone has to pay the bill. We’ll end up spending many times this in health care if we don’t step up... I worry about the impact on grandkids, I worry about the elderly. It’s frustrating because we’re not having those discussions. There are solutions but it’s how you prioritize those dollars.... We’re not willing to have an honest, nonpartisan conversation.

<sup>72</sup> Under BBCE, which has been adopted by 40 states including North Carolina, states can set income and asset limits for SNAP that are less restrictive than federal rules and phase out benefits more gradually. This provision gives states flexibility, eases the administrative burden on individuals, states and schools, and allows families to start a small rainy-day fund or work more hours without fear of losing benefits immediately.

<sup>73</sup> About half of students would be eligible for reduced priced lunches only; about half would have to apply to receive free meals; and about 40,000 would lose eligibility altogether. See Blagg, Rainer, and Waxman, *How Restricting Categorical Eligibility for SNAP Affects Access to Free School Meals*.

<sup>74</sup> Dean, Flowers, and Harvey, “600,000 Households with Seniors Could Lose Food Assistance Under Proposed Rule.”

<sup>75</sup> Hajela, “Lawsuits Around U.S. Seek to Block Trump’s Public Charge Rule”; Herrera and Habig, “Local Governments Need to Join the Fight Against Trump’s Cruel ‘Public Charge’ Rule”; Rosenberg-Douglas, “Federal Judge in Chicago Stops Trump Administration Rule Aimed at Denying Green Cards to Immigrants on Public Benefits.”

<sup>76</sup> Hellerstein, “Immigrants Afraid of Trump’s ‘Public Charge’ Rule Are Dropping Food Stamps, MediCal”; Bowen, Elliott, and Hardison-Moody, “A Heartbreaking Choice for Moms: Food or a Family’s Future.”

<sup>77</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Standardization of State Heating and Cooling Standard Utility Allowances*, 28–29.

<sup>78</sup> See Food Research and Action Center, *The Impact of Poverty, Food Insecurity, and Poor Nutrition on Health and Well-Being*; Heflin, Ingram, and Ziliak, “The Effect of The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program on Mortality”; Pereira et al., “Malnutrition Among Cognitively Intact, Noncritically Ill Older Adults in the Emergency Department.”

Even without these looming threats, the enormity of the need and the intensity of the challenge is daunting. People are hungry for reasons that are deep, interconnected, structural. “It’s a holistic problem, the social problems that are killing people,” Jim Summey notes. “You don’t hear of people starving to death in High Point, but they are dying of many things that society is glossing over.” Private charity can ameliorate conditions for some, and those efforts deserve support and recognition. But the magnitude of the problem is unimaginable and unquantifiable. A line we hear often from food banks and pantries is some variation of this: “you can double, triple, quadruple our budget and we could reach more people and distribute more nutritious food, and we’d do it well and efficiently. But we’re still only ever scratching the surface of hunger.”

As a result, food pantries and the organizations that support them, like the Food Alliance, are squeezed in multiple ways. They’re there to pick up the pieces when the federal government abdicates its responsibility. They’re there when the state shrugs and turns away. They’re there because they have to be. The alternative is unimaginable. But if they’re increasingly neglected by the state and federal government, they’re also pinched by the demands of private funders, who may have unrealistic goals or no taste for a long-haul investment. As Pastor Ellerbe says, “[T]hrowing one fastball doesn’t strike a person out. One fastball, one pot of money, one time is not going... it has to be sustained to help. The greatest challenge to the people trying to deal with this is sustainability.” Even during the best of times, pantries worry about donor fatigue. As Vierling astutely recognizes, in the face of unrelenting hardship, interest can flag in the larger community as well.

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I think we do a great job with the organizations in High Point as far as getting food to families. We understand food insecurity and access is a big need. I applaud the city for seeing it for what it is. But I feel we need to go deeper and understand the root cause. In my heart I still think it goes back to equipping and empowering our communities to desire more and the City and organizations providing resources and education to ensure we have opportunities.... It’s great we’re doing what’s needed to help. Please don’t get me wrong. We have to have this food and make it accessible but while we’re doing that, what can we do more to make our families self-sufficient?”

- Jakki Davis,  
D-UP Inc.

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The challenge is how do you keep people motivated when your numbers don’t change? ... How do we keep people going and continuing to make a difference? The charitable dollars are drying up and not enough. Entitlement programs are drying up. There’s an increased burden on local communities, from Washington, from Raleigh.

Despite these challenges, the Food Alliance perseveres. Carl Vierling knows that hunger is never going away. “I went into this with the goal to *alleviate* hunger. This was intentional and realistic. When my time is done, there will still be hungry people, but fewer than when we started.” By that measure, the Food Alliance stands as a symbol for what can be accomplished at the local level, given the right conditions.

But the success of the Food Alliance is not exclusively about eliminating hunger. It’s about helping to shape a vision for a transformed High Point. As the city attempts to remake itself for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Food Alliance is empowering voices and pressing issues that haven’t always been welcomed in city halls and chambers of commerce. This is a profoundly optimistic and aspirational act, one that believes in a better city for everybody. “You have to have a champion of what the city should be,” says Vierling. Lucky for High Point, then, that it has the Food Alliance and its partners.

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Honey, you gotta be able to accept everybody. ... If you open up your heart, would you find love? *That’s* our theme song, open up your heart, would you find love?

- Jo Williams  
Triad Food Pantry

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## Appendix One

Employment projections by occupation, Greensboro-High Point Metropolitan Area, 2018-2026

Occupation Title	Net Growth	2018 Median Wage	Education	Job Training
Combined Food Preparation and Serving Workers, Including Fast Food	2,055	\$18,613	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Home Health Aides	1,148	\$19,444	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term on-the-job training
Janitors and Cleaners, Except Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	918	\$21,592	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Registered Nurses	844	\$64,124	Bachelor's degree	None
Landscaping and Groundskeeping Workers	744	\$27,648	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers, Hand	739	\$26,225	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Personal Care Aides	614	\$20,052	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term on-the-job training
Nursing Assistants	523	\$24,113	Postsecondary nondegree award	None
Customer Service Representatives	444	\$34,405	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term on-the-job training
Waiters and Waitresses	418	\$18,513	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Cooks, Restaurant	405	\$22,062	No formal educational credential	Moderate-term on-the-job training
Helpers--Production Workers	393	\$23,012	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term on-the-job training
Retail Salespersons	326	\$22,095	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Packers and Packagers, Hand	313	\$20,956	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Medical Assistants	284	\$34,073	Postsecondary nondegree award	None
Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	266	\$18,980	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Stock Clerks and Order Fillers	247	\$24,709	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term on-the-job training
General and Operations Managers	228	\$106,215	Bachelor's degree	None
First-Line Supervisors of Food Preparation and Serving Workers	222	\$30,503	High school diploma or equivalent	None
Maintenance and Repair Workers, General	201	\$38,001	High school diploma or equivalent	Moderate-term on-the-job training

Source: N.C. Department of Commerce

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## **MORE INFORMATION**

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