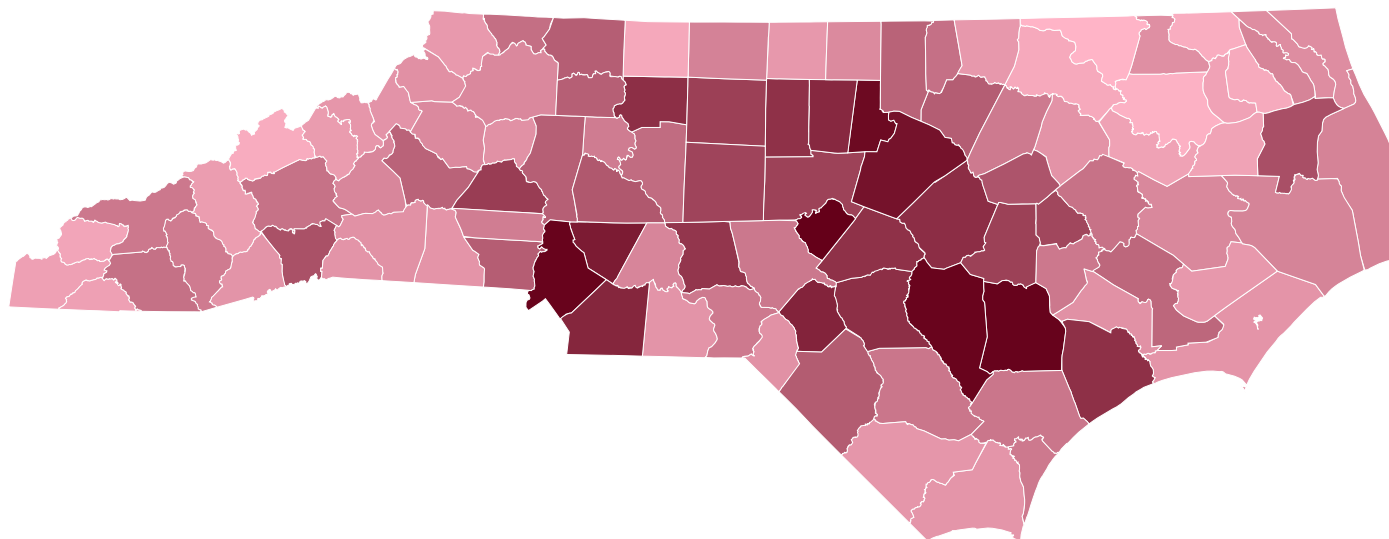


Hispanic, Asian and Two or More Races as Percent of the Population

4.9%

26.7%



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# POPULATION CHANGE, IMMIGRATION AND THE FUTURE OF RURAL NORTH CAROLINA

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## **Introduction**

North Carolina has experienced remarkable population growth in recent decades, transforming it from a largely rural to mostly urban state and dramatically altering its communities, economy and identity. Roughly half of the growth since 2000 has come from racial and ethnic groups whose widespread presence in the state is a relatively new demographic development. The number of North Carolinians who identify as Hispanic, Asian or Two or More Races has increased by more than 250% statewide, far outpacing the growth rate of North Carolinians who identify as White, Black or Native American.

Despite the state's overall surge in population, roughly half of North Carolina's 100 counties—all of them rural, many of them far from the state's urban centers—have seen little or no growth since 2000. This picture would be much more pessimistic, however, if not for gains in the number of people who are Hispanic, Asian or Two or More Races. Together, these three groups accounted for two-thirds of the increase in the total rural population—fueling growth in the rural counties where it occurred and stabilizing and buffering the losses in counties that have struggled with population stagnation or decline.

Although this wave of new residents is a promising start, its continuation is far from certain. Will people keep moving to rural counties in the coming years? Will current residents stay and put down roots? Will aggressive deportation measures or other measures targeting minority groups curtail future growth? The answers to these questions might determine the path forward for many rural communities. The vitality of these places—and the wellbeing of their residents—hangs in the balance.

## Population Change in North Carolina's Counties

Between 2000 and 2024, North Carolina's population leapt from about 8 million to 11 million people—a 37% increase. Most of this growth has been concentrated in the state's metropolitan areas. Fifteen counties, primarily those that encompass or border the state's major cities, captured 78% of the total increase. These counties include the larger Raleigh and Charlotte metropolitan areas, as well as counties containing the cities of Durham, Greensboro, Wilmington, Winston-Salem and Asheville (Table 1).

**Table 1. Counties with the Largest Increase in Population, 2000-2024**

County	Metro Region	Population Change, 2000-2024	Percent Population Change, 2000-2024
Alamance County	Burlington	52,290	40.0%
Harnett County	Raleigh	55,118	60.6%
Onslow County	Jacksonville	62,536	41.6%
Buncombe County	Asheville	72,845	35.3%
New Hanover County	Wilmington	83,018	51.8%
Iredell County	Charlotte	83,730	68.3%
Forsyth County	Winston-Salem	91,869	30.0%
Brunswick County	Wilmington	93,991	128.5%
Cabarrus County	Charlotte	113,882	86.9%
Durham County	Durham	120,358	53.9%
Johnston County	Raleigh	127,796	104.8%
Guilford County	Greensboro	137,968	32.8%
Union County	Charlotte	139,552	112.7%
Mecklenburg County	Charlotte	510,937	73.5%
Wake County	Raleigh	604,538	96.3%
Total		2,350,428	

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for Counties"

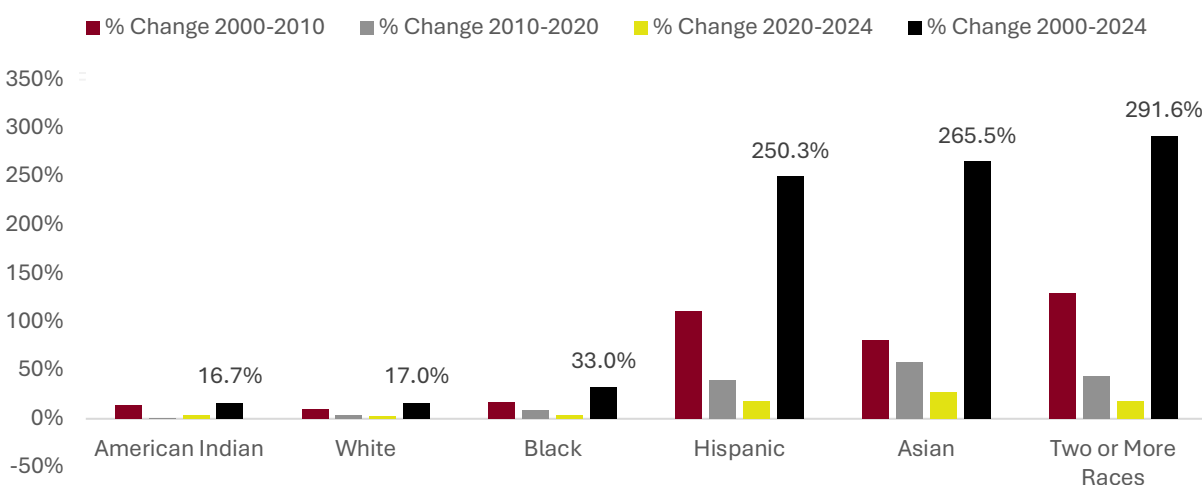
A substantial share of this population growth was due to the rapid increase in the number of North Carolinians who identify as Hispanic, Asian or Two or More Races (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> As the

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, "Asian" includes people who identify as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. White, Black, American Indian, Asian and Two or More Races are all racial identities that refer here to people who are not Hispanic. "American Indian" is the term the U.S. Census Bureau uses for Native American.

## Population Change, Immigration and the Future of Rural North Carolina

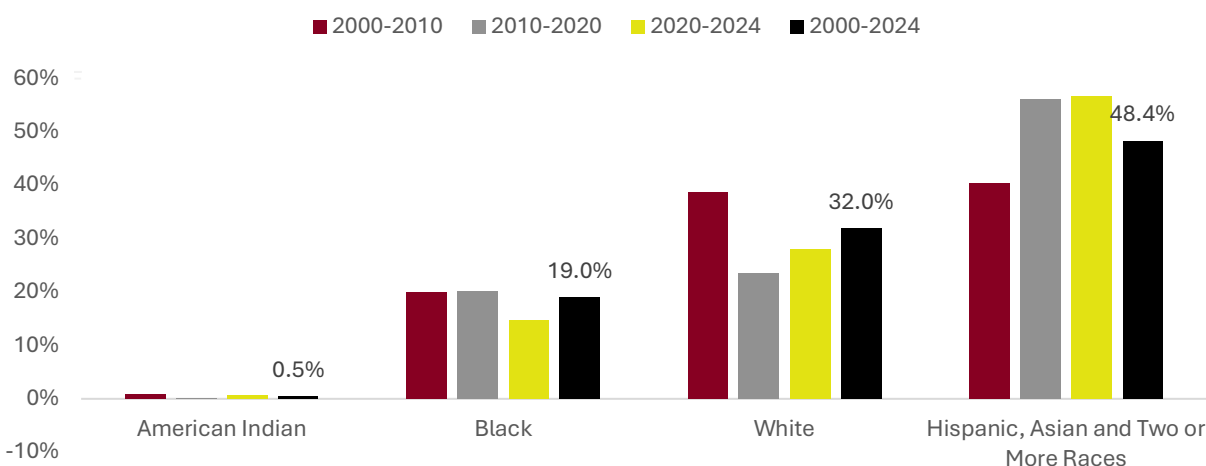
state's three fastest growing racial-ethnic groups, they accounted for about half of North Carolina's population increase during this time (Figure 2).

**Figure 1. Percent Change in Population, 2000-2024**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin"

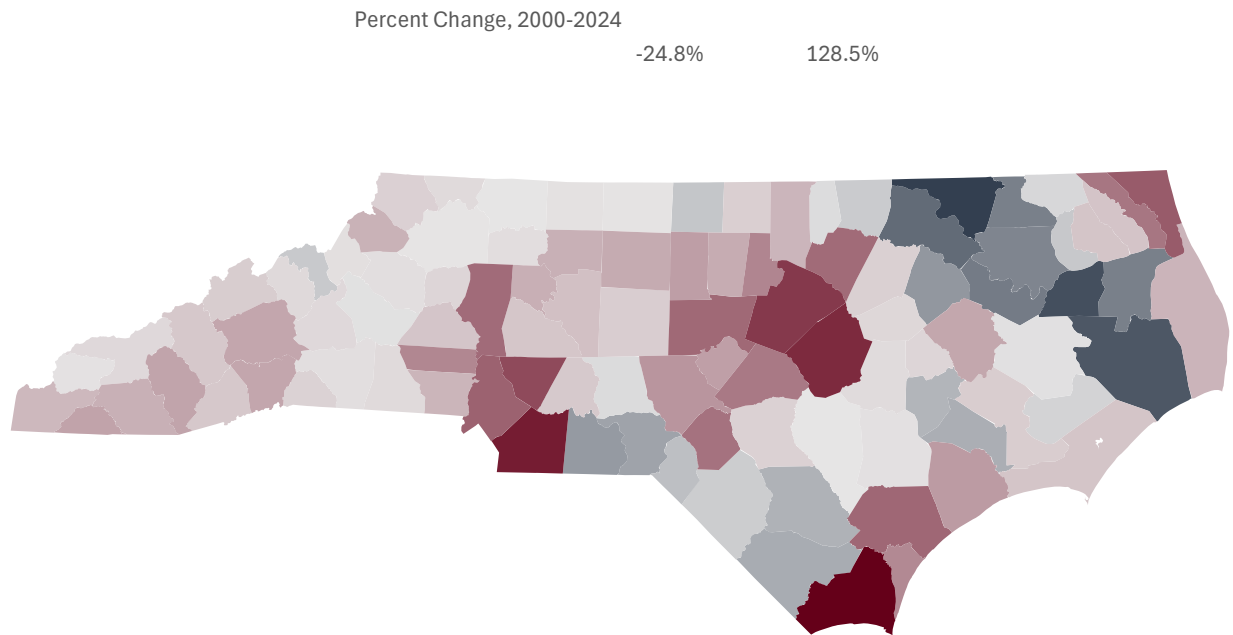
**Figure 2. Share of Population Growth by Racial and Ethnic Group, 2000-2024**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin"

Despite the statewide surge in population, many counties located outside urban centers have experienced little to no growth. Twenty-seven counties—all rural, most of them far from the state's metro areas—lost population between 2000 and 2024. Another 20 counties grew, but at a sluggish rate. In total, about half of North Carolina's 100 counties are characterized by flat or declining populations (Map 1).

Map 1. Percent Change in Population, 2000-2024



## The Problems of Declining Population

Communities experiencing population loss face an array of challenges.<sup>2</sup> Local governments still have a responsibility to maintain infrastructure, deliver services and continue core operations, but must do so with reduced tax revenue. In North Carolina, the counties losing population are poorer and older on average than the state, placing even greater strain on already limited local resources.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The North Carolina Rural Health Association, *2024 North Carolina Rural Health Snapshot* and Masten, “In Fast-Growing NC, ‘Neglected’ Counties Are Shrinking and Struggling” describe some of these challenges.

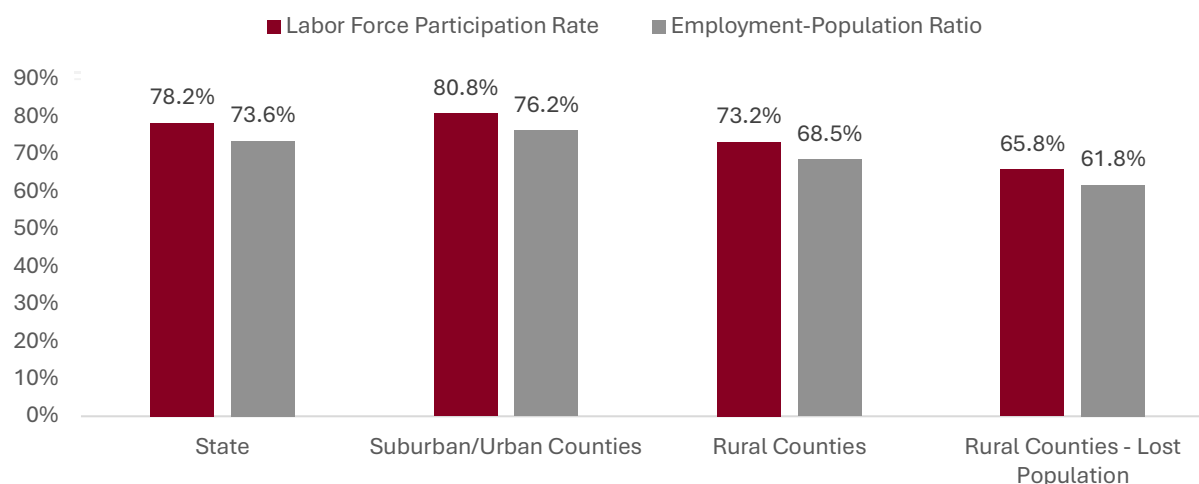
<sup>3</sup> In counties that lost population, 21.5% of residents were poor compared to 13.2% of North Carolinians statewide. People over 60 were almost 30% of residents compared to the state average of 23.3%. U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate, S1701 and B01001.

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A declining population also hinders economic activity and business development. Employers struggle to fill positions, stifling homegrown entrepreneurship and business expansion. Younger or more highly skilled residents looking for better opportunities move away, taking their energy and talents with them. The workers that remain have fewer employment options and are often limited to lower wage jobs. Communities that can't offer the infrastructure, skilled workers and quality of life that employers look for will find it difficult to attract new businesses and jobs.<sup>4</sup>

One indicator of rural distress is the relatively large share of working-age adults who are disengaged from the labor force. Among North Carolinians aged 22 to 64, the labor force participation rate in rural counties is nearly eight percentage points lower than in urban counties. The difference is even steeper—15 percentage points—in rural counties that lost population between 2000 and 2024 (Figure 3). The employment to population ratio, which is simply the percentage of residents aged 22 to 64 who are employed, shows a similar pattern of disengagement. Both measures suggest that in many rural counties, working age adults have fallen out of the workforce at a disturbing rate. This in turn effects household income and financial security, weakens the tax base, reduces consumer spending, and discourages investment.

**Figure 3. Labor Force Participation Rate and Employment-Population Ratio for the Population 22-64 Years by County Type**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate, B23001.

<sup>4</sup> See Marre, “Rural Population Loss and Strategies for Recovery”; Wagner, “The NC Counties With the Biggest Population Losses Are All in the Northeast. Why?”

Declining employment and other undesirable outcomes related to population loss are connected and reinforcing, creating a negative feedback loop that is difficult to reverse. State and federal policy decisions can make this task even more daunting. Cuts to Medicaid and SNAP will disproportionately harm rural residents and rural economies.<sup>5</sup> However, as we discuss in the next section, a chance to slow or reverse this cycle still exists.

### In Many Rural Counties, Gains in Fast-Growing Racial-Ethnic Groups Drives Population Growth and Softens Losses

The gains in the number of people who identify as Hispanic, Asian or Two or More Races is especially meaningful for rural counties. Between 2000 and 2024, the number of people in these fast-growing groups **increased in every single county in North Carolina**. In contrast, the White population declined in 47 counties and the Black population declined in 43. The number of North Carolinians who identify as American Indian decreased in five counties but grew, albeit modestly, in the other ninety-five.<sup>6</sup>

If the population of these three fast-growing groups had stayed at their 2000 levels, 45 counties—not 27, as was the case—would have lost population.

In 21 counties, growth in the three fast-growing groups fully offset losses in the White population. **In ten counties, growth in the fast-growing groups made up for losses in the White and Black population, resulting in positive overall growth.** For example, Rockingham County lost over 5,000 residents who identified as either White or Black. It gained over 6,500 residents who were Hispanic, Asian or Two or More Races, along with 117 residents who identified as American Indian, for an increase of 1.6%. Without these gains, the county's population would have fallen by 5.5%.

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<sup>5</sup> Medicaid cuts will disproportionately harm rural residents and jeopardize the survival of rural hospitals. In addition to providing essential health care, hospitals are large employers and economic anchors in their communities. Similarly, SNAP participation rates are higher in rural counties, and every dollar of SNAP spending generates about \$1.50 to \$1.80 in economic activity. See, Canning and Stacy, *The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Economy: New Estimates of the SNAP Multiplier*; Center for Healthcare Quality and Payment Reform, *Rural Hospitals at Risk of Closing*.

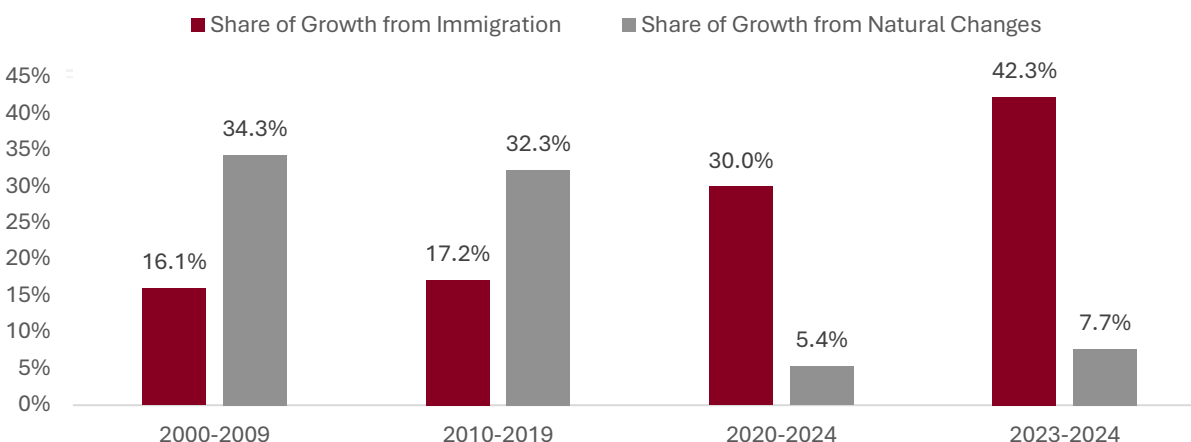
<sup>6</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “Annual County Resident Population Estimates by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin.”

In counties that still experienced net population loss, the three fast-growing racial-ethnic groups served to cushion the drop. Robeson County, for example, lost over 15,000 residents who identified as White, Black or American Indian. **It added almost 11,000 residents who identified as Hispanic, Asian or Two or More Races.** Without these gains, the county's total population would have dropped by 12.5%. Instead, it fell by only 3.7%. Similarly, Burke County lost 618 people between 2000 and 2024, but without population gains in the three fast-growing groups, its total population loss would have exceeded 6,500.

## Demographic Change and Immigration

These demographic shifts are closely tied to immigration, another important driver of population growth in North Carolina. This matters because in the near future any increases in the state population will depend entirely on domestic and international migration.<sup>7</sup> **Already between 2020 and 2024, domestic and international migration accounted for almost all North Carolina's population growth (94.8%).** International migration alone contributed 30% of the total growth. That share appears to be getting larger—at least for now. From 2023 to 2024, international migration represented 42.3% of the state's population growth (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Immigration and Natural Change as Share of Population Growth, North Carolina**



Note: Natural change is the number of births minus the number of deaths.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, “Annual and Cumulative Estimates of the Components of Resident Population Change for the United States, Regions, States, District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico”

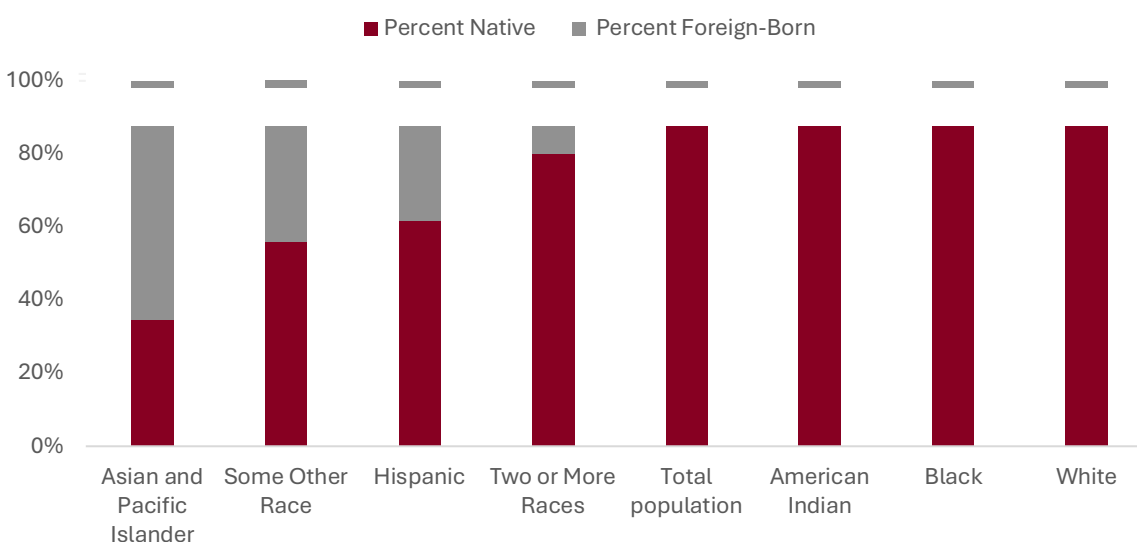
<sup>7</sup> See North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management, “Population Growth 2030-2040”; Venkataganesan et al., “North Carolina’s Older Adult Population to Almost Double in the Next 20 Years.”



## Population Change, Immigration and the Future of Rural North Carolina

Of the approximately 2.5 million North Carolinians who belong to one of three fast-growing groups, nearly 900,000 (or 35.6%) were born outside the United States. Conversely, most of the roughly one million North Carolina residents who were born in another country (89.7%) identify as Hispanic, Asian or Two or More Races.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 5. Percent Native and Foreign-Born by Race and Ethnicity, North Carolina**



Note: The “Some Other Race” category is a response option in the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey but not in its annual population estimates.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate, B05003

Immigrants participate in the labor force at higher rates than native-born workers—70.7% versus 61.0%—in part because a larger share are in their prime working years.<sup>9</sup> They play a critical role in supporting industries, especially manufacturing, construction and agriculture, that are central to rural economies but struggle to find workers.<sup>10</sup> They also bring economic, social, and community vitality to local Main Streets. Nearly 14% of entrepreneurs in North Carolina, or 69,000 individuals, are foreign-born. Altogether, the combined household income of

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimate, B05003.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimate, S0501; Guarine, “The Impact of Immigration on North Carolina’s Workforce.”

<sup>10</sup> Our analysis of 2023 American Community Survey data shows that immigrants are about 12.1% of the employed civilian workforce in North Carolina, but account for about 27% of jobs in construction, 18% in agriculture, and 14% in manufacturing. Immigrants are also a much larger share of specific occupations. For example, immigrant workers are 55% of painters and 37% of carpenters in the state. Economic Policy Institute, “What You Need to Know About Immigrant Workers.” For worker shortages, see Gordon, “Contractors Say NC Labor Shortages Causing Construction Delays. They Want Federal Action.”; Zehnder, “Report: NC Ag Industry Faces Labor Shortage.”

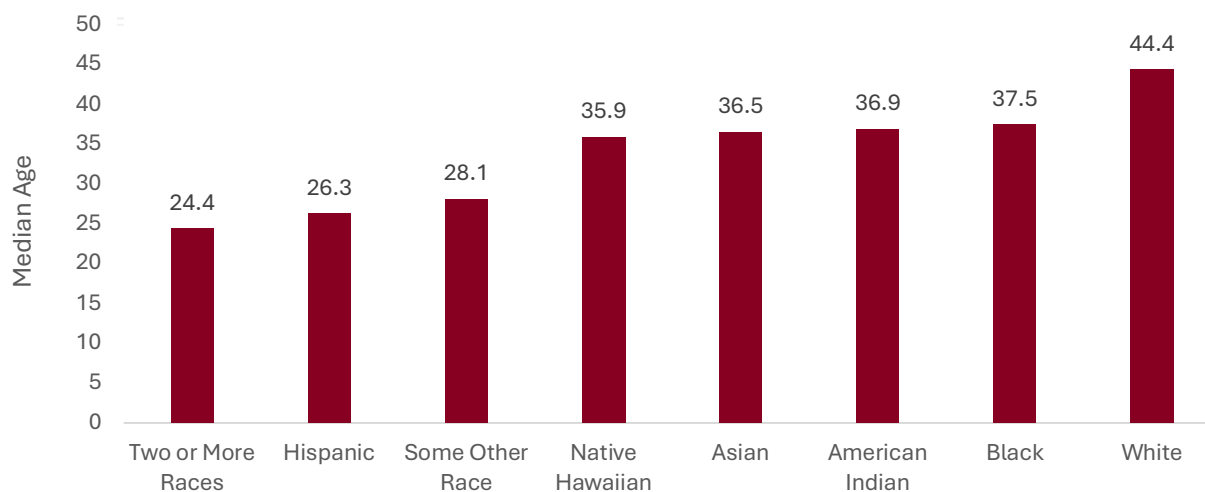
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immigrants in the state tops **\$38 billion annually**—income spent in part on local businesses and taxes.<sup>11</sup>

For the rural counties grappling with population loss, these new residents, whether immigrant or native-born, represent an opportunity to stabilize communities and rebuild the local economy. New residents expand the workforce, create demand for local goods and services, start and support small businesses, and strengthen the tax base.

Additionally, these fast-growing groups tend to be younger. White and Black North Carolinians are the two oldest racial-ethnic groups in the state, while those who identify as Hispanic or Two or More Races are the two youngest (Figure 6). Critically for counties with small or declining populations, the presence of younger residents adds significant vitality.<sup>12</sup> They are more likely to be in their prime working years and starting families, bolstering local school enrollment, engaging in civic life, and laying the foundation for long-term growth.

**Figure 6. Median Age by Race and Ethnicity, North Carolina**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimate, B01002

<sup>11</sup> Economic Policy Institute, “What You Need to Know About Immigrant Workers.”

<sup>12</sup> Winkler, “As Rural Populations Grow Older, Communities Increasingly Rely on Smaller Labor Force.”

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Whether this positive trend will take root or fizzle is unclear. The more that rural communities welcome and support new residents, the greater their chances of turning the demographic tide and fostering lasting change. Yet this moment might already be slipping by. Attacks on diversity and immigration at the state and federal level are rampant.<sup>13</sup> Sudden shifts in federal policy, such as fluctuating tariffs and the rollback of support for small and minority businesses, have hurt immigrant entrepreneurs especially hard.<sup>14</sup> Increasingly aggressive and militarized immigration enforcement has created a pervasive climate of hostility.

The consequences are already apparent. About one million immigrants left the country between January and June 2025.<sup>15</sup> Applications for work permits have dropped sharply compared to 2024.<sup>16</sup> ICE raids have driven foreign-born workers into hiding.<sup>17</sup> The effects have already sent shudders through states—like North Carolina—that have a large share of foreign-born workers. By one estimate, North Carolina stands to lose nearly 200,000 jobs due to deportation if the goals set by the Trump administration are met.<sup>18</sup>

In November 2025, federal immigration agents began large-scale sweeps in several North Carolina cities, detaining and arresting people in Charlotte and the Raleigh-Durham area. Early reporting highlighted the economic fallout: closed businesses, deserted parking lots, commercial corridors emptied of customers, even in places not yet targeted by federal agents.<sup>19</sup> “For many Hispanic people in the region,” a grocery store owner in Durham explained, “going outdoors feels like a leap of faith right now.”<sup>20</sup> But even before these stepped-up operations, ICE arrests in North Carolina between January and July of 2025 had

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<sup>13</sup> See for example, federal measures such as the Trump administration attempting to eliminate Temporary Protected Status for certain countries and imposing visa restrictions; Congress substantially increasing the Department of Homeland Security’s budget; the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services giving ICE access to Medicaid records; and the US Department of Labor reducing farmworker minimum wage. At the state level, numerous bills, including HB 10 (requiring sheriffs to cooperate with ICE), HB 171, SB227 and SB 558 (banning “DEI” in state and local government, K-12 public schools, and public colleges and universities respectively), were passed in the General Assembly in 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Carmona, *Stabilizing Latino Entrepreneurs Amid Federal Policy Volatility*.

<sup>15</sup> Kramer and Passel, “What the Data Says About Immigrants in the U.S.”

<sup>16</sup> Brookings Institution, *Tracking Work Permit Applications Among Eligible Immigrants*.

<sup>17</sup> De Loera, “ICE Raids May Stunt Economies of States with Large Latino Populations.”

<sup>18</sup> Zipperer, “Trump’s Deportation Agenda Will Destroy Millions of Jobs.”

<sup>19</sup> Berger, “Charlotte Immigrant Corridor Empties Amid Border Patrol Surge; Some Shops Close Indefinitely”; Medina and Mokam, “U.S. Border Patrol Launches Operation in Charlotte”; Robertson, “Arrests Now Top 250 in Immigration Crackdown Across North Carolina”; Serrano, “Restaurantes Latinos de Asheville Sufren Caída en Clientes por el Miedo en la Comunidad.”

<sup>20</sup> Medina et al., “Border Patrol Expands North Carolina Operations to More Liberal Cities.”

## Population Change, Immigration and the Future of Rural North Carolina

already more than doubled compared to the same period in 2024. Nearly all those detained were from Latin America.<sup>21</sup>

In a powerful op-ed, Yesenia Cuello, the executive director of NC Field, a farmworker advocacy and community-building organization, emphasized an often overlooked but essential truth: we need immigrants.

If deportation forces continue to tear us from our communities, the impact will be catastrophic: crippling farms, driving up food prices, and destabilizing the food system that families across the nation depend on every single day. The consequences will ripple far beyond the fields, leaving damage that will be felt for generations.

Who will keep farms thriving and stores supplied when thousands of us are gone? We remain essential regardless of the immigration system that facilitated our dehumanization. To deport farmworkers on a mass scale is to gamble with everyone's food security.<sup>22</sup>

North Carolina's rural communities, like its farms, rely on new and diverse neighbors for growth and renewal. Yet the politics of intimidation and exclusion will deter people from coming, accelerate out-migration and shrink economic activity across the state, with the biggest impact occurring in the rural counties least able to absorb it. This isn't solely an economic argument, or even a humanitarian one. The viability of many rural communities—and their ability to nurture and sustain their residents—is at stake.

## Resources

Links are active as of November 2025.

- Immigration Legal Assistance:
  - If you are an attorney or advocate who works with immigrants and you suspect a client's or community's civil rights have been violated, fill out this [form](#) created by the ACLU of NC and the NC Justice Center.

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<sup>21</sup> Baintrub, "Exponential Surge: A Snapshot of ICE Arrests."

<sup>22</sup> Cuello, "A Life in the Shadows."

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- If you would like the ACLU of NC to provide your community group with an immigration Know Your Rights presentation, contact them through this [form](#).
- The [Carolina Migrant Network](#) provides legal services statewide and runs a hotline at 704-740-7737 (Charlotte).
- Legal Aid of North Carolina offers [pamphlets and guides](#) on a range of immigration topics
- Immigrant Defense Project: [Know Your Rights with ICE](#) guides in Spanish and English
- Carolina Migrant Network: [Know Your Rights](#) webpage in Spanish and English
- Hotlines
  - Carolina Migrant Network: 704-740-7737 (Charlotte).
  - RadarSafe: 1-800-559-8714 (Raleigh/Durham)
  - Watauga County Immigrant Justice Coalition: 828-537-2688
  - Siembra NC: 336-543-0353 (statewide)
- Online Guides and Resources:
  - [Siembra NC](#): [map](#) of ICE activity in NC
  - [El Centro Hispano](#) (Durham and the Triangle)
  - El Pueblo: [“Safe Families”](#) guide (in English and Spanish); [Resource Directory](#) listing many services and agencies.
  - NC Justice Center: [Resources for Immigrants](#) including [Know Your Rights](#) fact sheets and the [Immigrant Family Preparedness Toolkit](#) (English)
  - The National Immigration Law Center: [“How to Find a Loved One After a U.S. Immigration Arrest”](#)
  - [Apply Heat!](#): Convenient site that lists resources named here and more
- [Enlace Latino NC](#) provides news and information affecting the Spanish-speaking community in North Carolina (such as this [guide](#) to free legal assistance).

## Population Change, Immigration and the Future of Rural North Carolina

- Has your local law enforcement agency signed a 287(g) agreement with ICE?<sup>23</sup> You can track agreements on the [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement website](#). If sheriff is on the primary ballot in 2026, you can ask your candidates where they stand.
- Take Action!
  - Volunteer! [Siembra NC](#) or [NC Asian Americans Together](#) are good places to start.
  - Contribute to the [Immigrant Solidarity Fund](#) or [Wake Resiste Mutual Aid Fund](#) to support families with loved ones in detention.
  - Shop at businesses owned and operated by immigrants.
  - Own, run or have contacts with a business? Become a [Fourth Amendment Workplace](#).

## For More Information

The Poverty Research Project is part of The Justice Institute at North Carolina Central University School of Law. Its mission is to examine and document poverty and poverty-related issues in North Carolina, raise awareness of barriers to economic security, serve as a resource for individuals and groups interested in these topics, and provide training and mentorship for students at NCCU and elsewhere.

Website: <https://www.nccu.edu/law/academics/poverty-research-project>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/nccu-poverty-research-project/about/>

Bluesky: <https://bsky.app/profile/nccupovresproject.bsky.social>

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<sup>23</sup> The 287(g) program, sponsored by U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE), deputizes local law enforcement to perform specified immigration enforcement functions even though immigration enforcement is a federal civil matter, not a local criminal one.

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