

The Persistence of Neighborhood Disadvantage

High-Poverty Neighborhoods in North Carolina



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Cover Photo: 1603 Angier Avenue, East Durham, North Carolina. Open Durham/Preservation Durham, <https://www.opendurham.org/buildings/1603-angier-avenue>

Introduction

North Carolina's statewide poverty rate—12.5% in 2024—is just shy of its historic low in 1999. Yet today far more Tar Heel residents live in economically segregated, high-poverty neighborhoods than 25 years ago. **More than two million North Carolinians, or one in five, live in a neighborhood where at least 20% of their neighbors are poor.** Four in ten *poor* North Carolinians live in one of these communities, where neighborhood disadvantage compounds personal struggles.

High-poverty neighborhoods—quick to expand and slow to shrink—have taken root across the state, in urban and rural areas, in prosperous counties and struggling ones. The formation and persistence of these neighborhoods is not accidental. They are the product of decades of policy choices around issues such as lending, homeownership, land use, transportation and employment. They do more than contain poverty; they intensify and reproduce it, with consequences for residents and the state alike.

Not all North Carolinians are equally exposed to high-poverty neighborhoods. As a result of systemic exclusion and disinvestment, Black and Hispanic residents are twice as likely as their non-Hispanic White neighbors to live in a high-poverty community. At the same time, the composition of these neighborhoods has shifted substantially, reflecting North Carolina's changing demographics and suggesting that concentrated poverty is reaching farther than it once did.

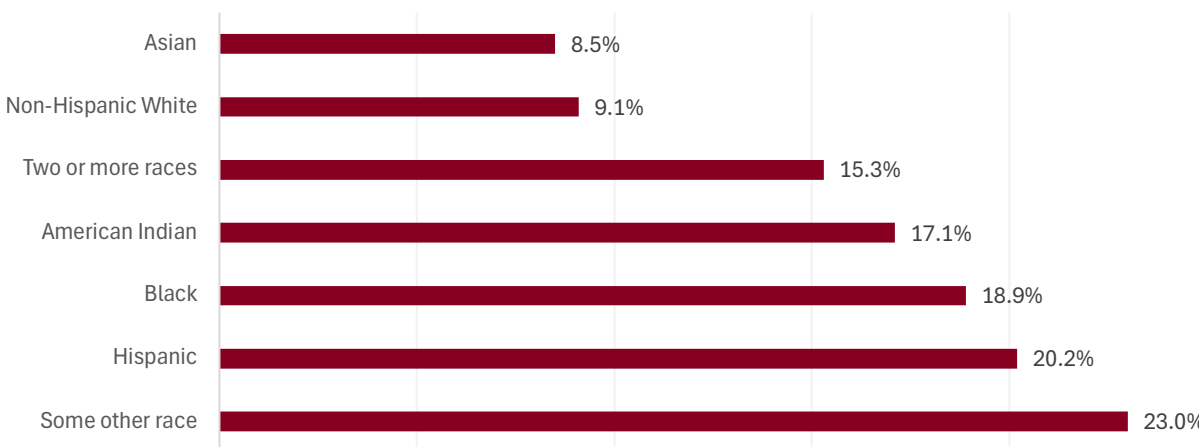
High-poverty neighborhoods are already a defining feature of North Carolina's landscape. Unless the challenge is met by sustained and determined commitment, they will almost certainly grow larger when the next economic downturn comes.

The Changing Landscape of Poverty in North Carolina

North Carolina at the turn of the 21st century had made impressive progress in reducing poverty. In 1960, more than 40% of North Carolinians were poor. By 1999, that figure had tumbled to 12.3%—a historic low that, for the first time, beat the national poverty rate of 12.4%.¹ Poverty shot up again during the Great Recession, reaching 18% in 2012 and declining slowly after that. By 2024, it had subsided to 12.5%, essentially matching the earlier low.²

Poverty varies substantially by race and ethnicity. Asian and non-Hispanic White North Carolinians have the lowest poverty rates—about half of other groups. Yet because non-Hispanic White residents are such a large share of the population, they account for the largest number of people in poverty, over 575,000.³

Figure 1. Poverty Rate By Race and Ethnicity



Source: 2024 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

North Carolina’s demographic transformation over the past 25 years has changed who lives in poverty. Driven in part by rapid population growth (250% since 2000), the number of Hispanic residents who are poor increased by 186%, and their share of the state’s poor population doubled—from 9.5% in 1999 to 19% in 2024. At the same time, the share of poor North Carolinians who are Black fell by ten percentage points, from 40% to 30%.⁴ As this report details later, these statewide shifts have affected the size and composition of high-poverty neighborhoods.

Why High-Poverty Neighborhoods Matter

High-poverty neighborhoods—defined here as census tracts where at least 20% of residents live below the federal poverty line—exist in almost every corner of North Carolina. They are found in rural and urban counties, in fast-growing metro regions and small towns, in more and less affluent regions.* Nearly 600 census tracts meet this threshold, and 75 qualify as extreme-poverty neighborhoods, where 40% or more of residents are poor.

The prevalence of high-poverty neighborhoods matters because place shapes opportunity. Poor neighborhoods compound individual hardship, adding external pressures to already-burdened households. Jobs are harder to access. Housing is often older or substandard, yet costly relative to income. Amenities like grocery stores, sidewalks and parks are few or absent. Instead, these neighborhoods are more likely to host land uses that wealthier communities have the political clout to reject: landfills, industrial sites, highways, predatory businesses and other unpleasant or dangerous features.⁵

Living in a high-poverty neighborhood is bad for your health. Residents face higher exposure to crime and violence, producing long-term chronic stress.⁶ High-poverty neighborhoods are often hotter than surrounding areas, subjecting residents to unhealthy temperatures.⁷ Environmental contaminants in the home, soil or air contribute to higher rates of serious illness, including stroke, cancer and dementia. The cumulative toll on residents' health cuts lives short. Life expectancy in high-poverty neighborhoods is markedly shorter than in more affluent communities.⁸

Children are especially affected by neighborhood poverty. In addition to the environmental stressors experienced by all residents, they contend with educational and social barriers that play a powerful role in determining their futures: under-resourced schools, fewer mentors and role models, and limited connections across socioeconomic lines. Research shows that children who move to higher opportunity neighborhoods fare better as adults along a range of measures, and the earlier they move, the larger the benefit. Where a child grows up can meaningfully affect economic mobility and life course.⁹

* Only seven counties are without a high-poverty census tract: Currituck, Davie, Gates, Jones, Madison, Perquimans and Yancey.

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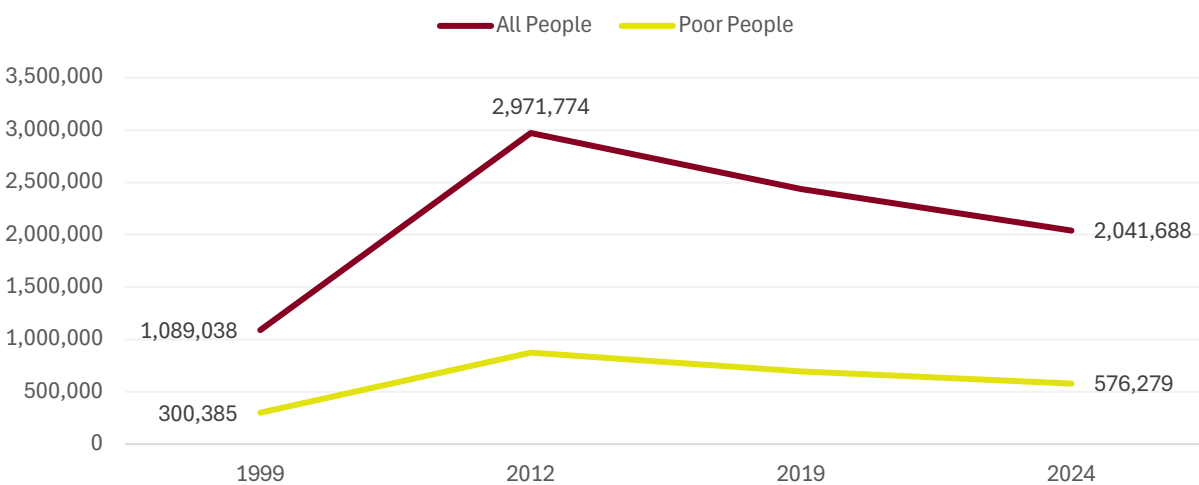
Neighborhoods marked by poverty don't occur naturally. They are the product of decades of deliberate policy choices, racial segregation, economic marginalization and disinvestment. They are also not defined solely by what they lack. Many are home to supportive neighbors, committed nonprofits, clear-sighted leaders. But these strengths often exist alongside or because of difficult conditions, not instead of them.

High-Poverty Neighborhoods in North Carolina

Today, far more North Carolinians live in high-poverty neighborhoods than 25 years ago. **More than two million residents—including nearly 600,000 people in poverty—live in a census tract where at least 20% of their neighbors are poor (Fig. 2).** High-poverty neighborhoods now account for over one in five census tracts statewide.

Between 2000 and 2012, the number of residents in these neighborhoods surged to nearly 3 million, driven in large part by the recession that began in 2007 (Fig. 2). The decline since then has been slow and incomplete. By 2024, nearly one million more people lived in high-poverty neighborhoods than in 1999. This pattern of “stickiness”—where these neighborhoods are quick to expand during downturns but slow to contract afterward—is a well-documented feature of concentrated poverty.¹⁰

Figure 2. Number of People in High-Poverty Neighborhoods



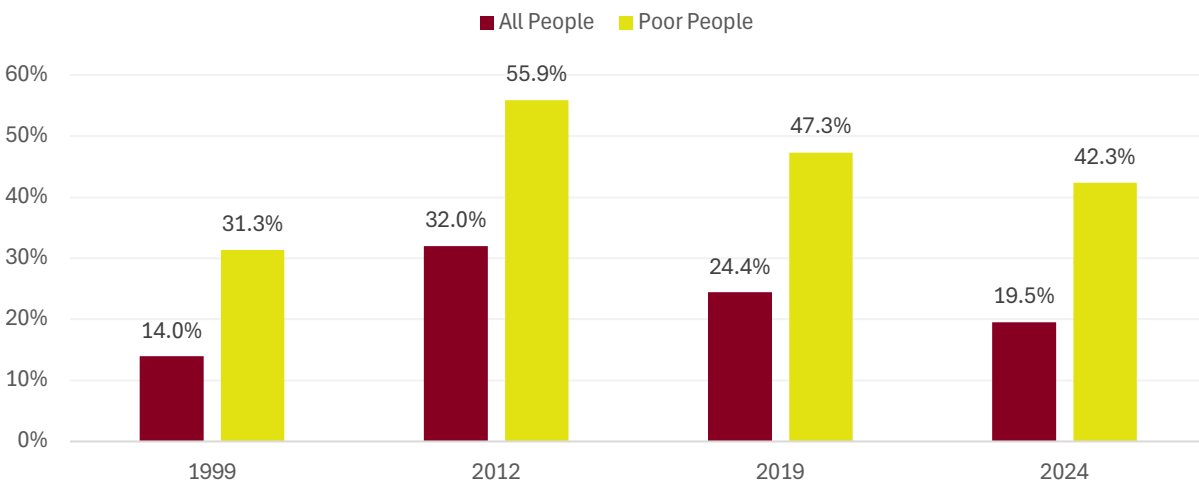
Source: IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota; U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census 2000 and American Community Survey 2012, 2019, 2024 5-Year Estimates.

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Additionally, a larger *share* of North Carolinians calls one of these high-poverty communities home. One in five people in the state now lives in such a neighborhood, up from 14% in 1999. Among people in poverty, the share rose from 31% to 42% over the same period (Fig.3).

The growth of high-poverty neighborhoods has outpaced population growth and the increase in poverty overall, reflecting the deepening geographic concentration of poverty. Between 1999 and 2024, North Carolina’s population grew by 34% and the number of poor people by 42%. In contrast, the number of residents of high-poverty neighborhoods rose by 87.5%, and the number of *poor* residents in those neighborhoods by 92%.

Figure 3. Percent of All People and Poor People Living in High-Poverty Tracts



Source: IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota; U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census 2000 and American Community Survey 2012, 2019, 2024 5-Year Estimates.

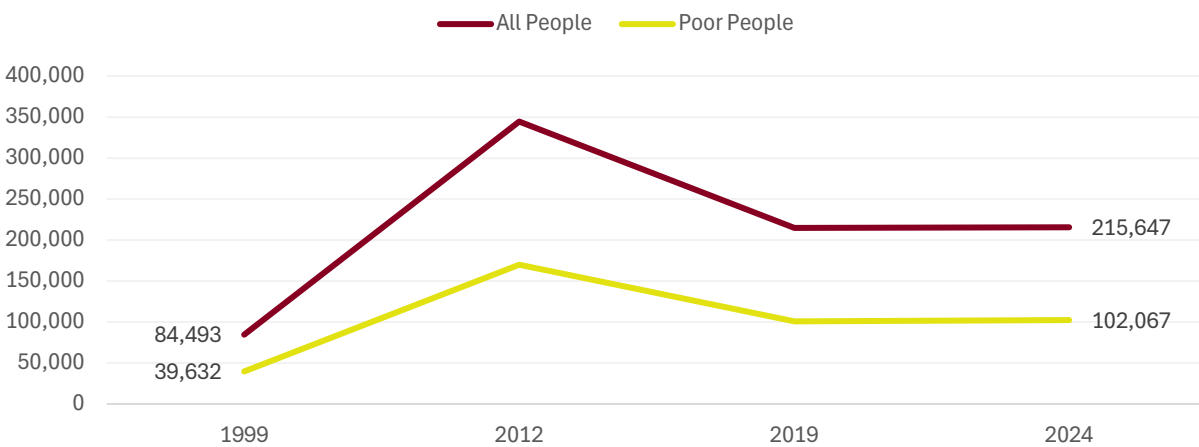
Extreme-Poverty Neighborhoods

Neighborhoods of extreme poverty—where 40% or more of residents are poor—concentrate disadvantage even further, with even more pungent harms. North Carolina now has 75 such neighborhoods in 31 counties, both urban (15) and rural (16). While the total number of census tracts in the state has grown by 70% since 2000, the number of extreme-poverty tracts has grown by 103%.

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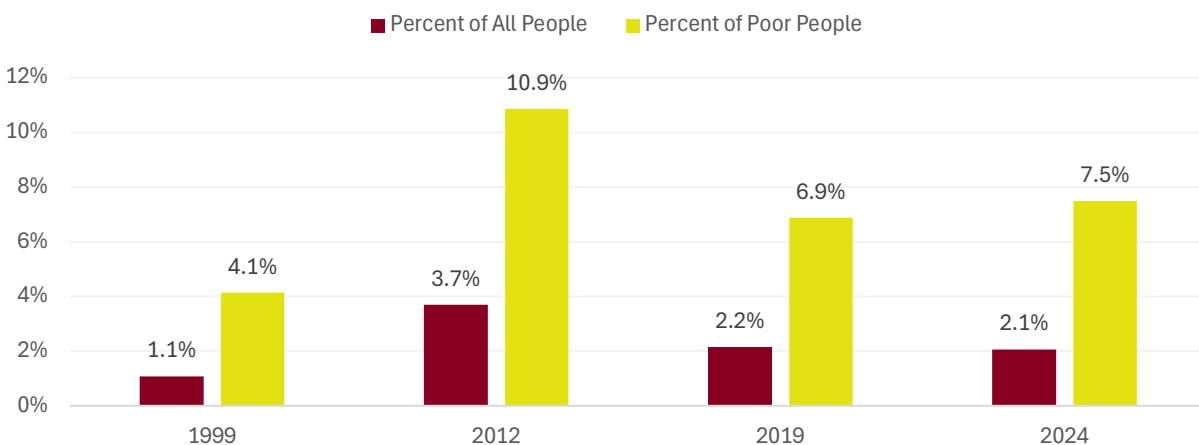
Extreme-poverty neighborhoods appear even more resistant to change than high-poverty neighborhoods. While the population of these areas declined in the aftermath of the Great Recession, it is now more than double what it was in 1999, and several indicators suggest that progress has stalled (Fig. 4). Population levels have changed little since 2019, and the share of poor residents living in an extreme-poverty tract edged up from 6.9% in 2019 to 7.5% in 2024 (Fig. 5). Over the same period, the number of extreme-poverty census tracts increased slightly, from 70 to 75. Taken together, these trends suggest that the post-recession recovery has plateaued and may be beginning to reverse.

Figure 4. Number of People in Extreme-Poverty Neighborhoods



Source: IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota; U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census 2000 and American Community Survey 2012, 2019, 2024 5-Year Estimates.

Figure 5. Share of People Living in Extreme-Poverty Neighborhoods



Source: IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota; U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census 2000 and American Community Survey 2012, 2019, 2024 5-Year Estimates.

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With more residents living in high- and extreme-poverty neighborhoods today than before the recession, these communities are already a prominent feature of North Carolina's landscape. Unless underlying conditions improve dramatically in the interim, the next economic downturn will push that footprint wider still.

Racial and Ethnic Differences in Exposure to High-Poverty Neighborhoods

A long history of exclusion and systemic inequality has shaped not only who experiences poverty, but where poor people live. Race-based segregation, limited access to homeownership and wealth-building, and discriminatory land use policies, among other factors, have influenced the location and composition of high-poverty neighborhoods. The result of this history is that Black North Carolinians—of all income levels—are significantly more likely than non-Hispanic White residents to live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty.

The full history of these discriminatory practices is far too complex to detail here, but a quick survey of housing policies provides a summary illustration of how these practices operated and still reverberate. For most of the last century, Black Americans in many communities were systematically denied access to credit and homeownership. The housing that was available was generally located in disadvantaged neighborhoods, entrenching residential segregation. Discriminatory lending, racially restrictive covenants, exclusionary zoning, and threats (and acts) of violence policed this color line and limited access to higher-opportunity neighborhoods elsewhere.

Even after *de jure* housing discrimination was banned, segregation was maintained in other ways. Unequal lending practices, subprime mortgage targeting, racial steering, inequitable property tax assessments, and cycles of disinvestment and gentrification have continued to limit Black homeownership and wealth-building. These factors have devalued Black communities and restricted where Black families can live, directly contributing to the formation of high-poverty neighborhoods with disproportionately Black populations.

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The data reflect this history. Black North Carolinians across all incomes are more than twice as likely as non-Hispanic Whites to live in a high-poverty tract (Table 1).⁺ One in three Black North Carolinians, and about half of **poor** Black and Hispanic residents, live in such a neighborhood. Although the share for poor non-Hispanic White residents is relatively smaller, it is not trivial. Nearly 30% live in high-poverty communities.

Table 1. Share of Each Racial/Ethnic Group that Lives in High-Poverty or Extreme-Poverty Neighborhood

	High-Poverty Tracts		Extreme-Poverty Tracts	
	All incomes	Incomes below poverty	All incomes	Incomes below poverty
Black	33.5%	56.5%	4.5%	11.2%
Hispanic	27.6%	47.4%	2.6%	5.9%
Non-Hispanic White	13.4%	29.8%	1.1%	5.4%

Source: IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2024 5-Year Estimates.

The disparities are also pronounced in neighborhoods of extreme poverty. Black residents—poor or not—are more likely than other groups to live in a tract where at least 40% of residents are poor. One in ten poor Black North Carolinians lives in one of these neighborhoods, a striking figure given that fewer than 3% of the state’s census tracts reach this threshold. Black and Hispanic North Carolinians are two to four times more likely than non-Hispanic White residents to live in an extreme-poverty tract.

The Changing Racial Composition of High-Poverty Neighborhoods

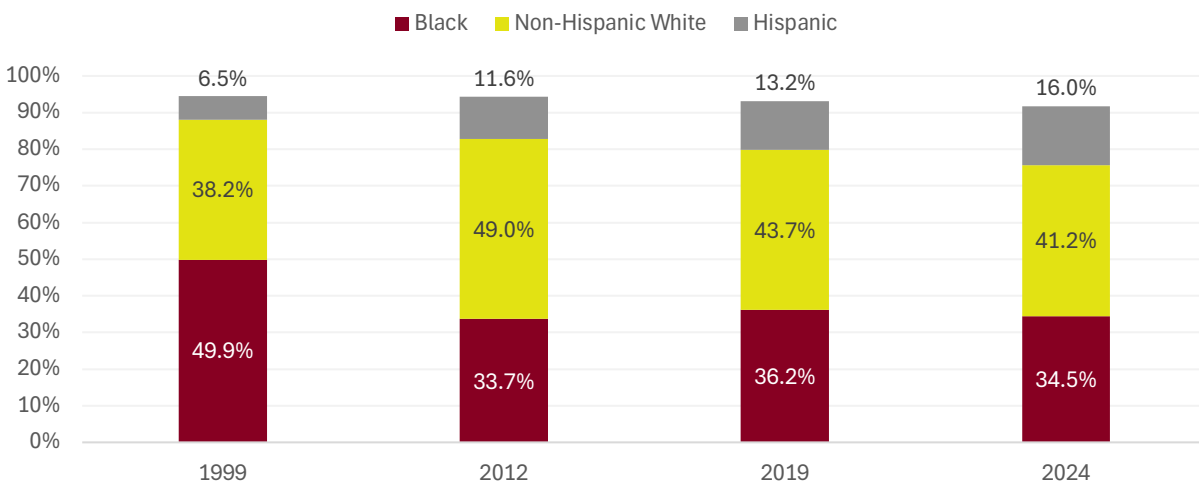
Although Black and Hispanic North Carolinians are disproportionately exposed to high-poverty neighborhoods, the racial composition of these neighborhoods looks strikingly different now than it did 25 years ago. These are not contradictory findings—they reflect two distinct ways of looking at the problem of high-poverty neighborhoods. One perspective focuses on the share of people within a group that lives in a high-poverty neighborhood; the other looks at neighborhoods and those who live in them.

⁺ This report focuses on the state’s three largest racial and ethnic groups: people who identify as Black, Non-Hispanic White and Hispanic.

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In 1999, Black residents made up roughly half of all people living in high-poverty neighborhoods, the largest group by a significant margin (Fig. 6). This changed considerably over the following decade. Between 1999 and 2012, the Hispanic and non-Hispanic White population of these neighborhoods grew at far higher rates—by 387% and 250% respectively, compared to 85% among Black residents. The non-Hispanic White population alone increased by more than one million people during this time. By 2012, non-Hispanic White residents had become the largest racial group in high-poverty neighborhoods, outnumbering Black residents by roughly 450,000.

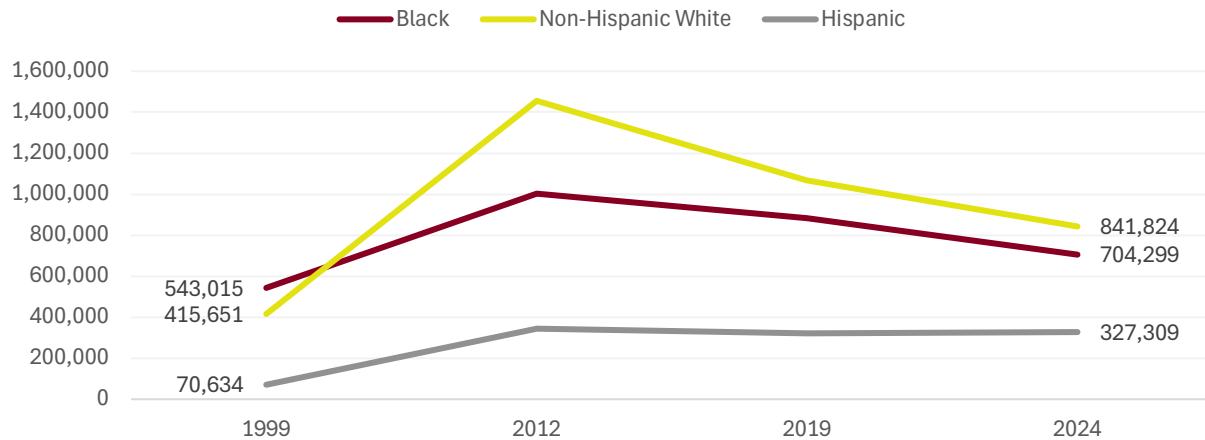
Figure 6. Share of High-Poverty Neighborhood, All Residents By Race/Ethnicity



Source: IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota; U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census 2000 and American Community Survey 2012, 2019, 2024 5-Year Estimates.

After 2012, the number of residents in high-poverty neighborhoods declined across all three groups, though at different rates. The non-Hispanic White population fell by 42%, the largest decline of the three, but not enough to return to earlier levels (Fig. 7). By 2024, twice as many non-Hispanic White residents lived in high-poverty neighborhood as in 1999, and they remained the largest racial or ethnic group in these tracts. The Hispanic population changed little over this period, falling by only 5% between 2012 and 2024. As a result, both Hispanic and non-Hispanic White residents accounted for a larger share of high-poverty neighborhood residents in 2024 than they had in previous years, while the share of Black residents shrank to about one third of the high-poverty tract population.

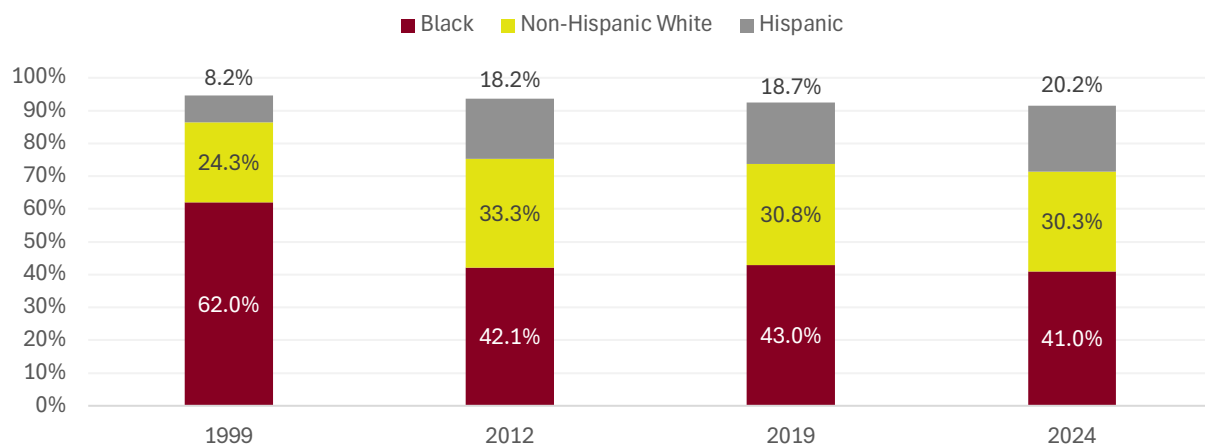
Figure 7. Number of Residents in High-Poverty Neighborhoods by Race and Ethnicity



Source: IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota; U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census 2000 and American Community Survey 2012, 2019, 2024 5-Year Estimates.

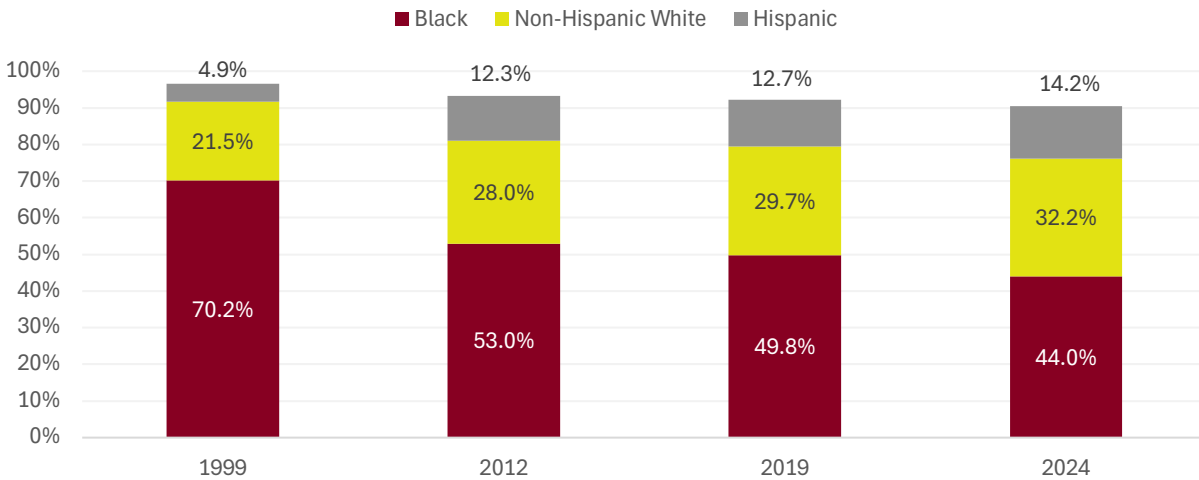
Similar patterns appear among *poor* residents of high-poverty neighborhoods and among residents of extreme-poverty neighborhoods. In both cases, the share of Black residents fell substantially, although it remained the largest throughout the entire period. Poor Black residents accounted for 62% of poor people living in high-poverty neighborhoods in 1999, but by 2024, that figure had fallen to 41% (Fig. 8). This decline was offset by larger shares of non-Hispanic White, Hispanic and other residents. The shift was even more pronounced in extreme-poverty neighborhoods. Black residents, 70% of the population in 1999, declined to 44% in 2024, while the share of other racial and ethnic groups grew (Fig. 9).

Figure 8. Share of High-Poverty Neighborhood, Poor Residents By Race and Ethnicity



Source: IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota; U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census 2000 and American Community Survey 2012, 2019, 2024 5-Year Estimates.

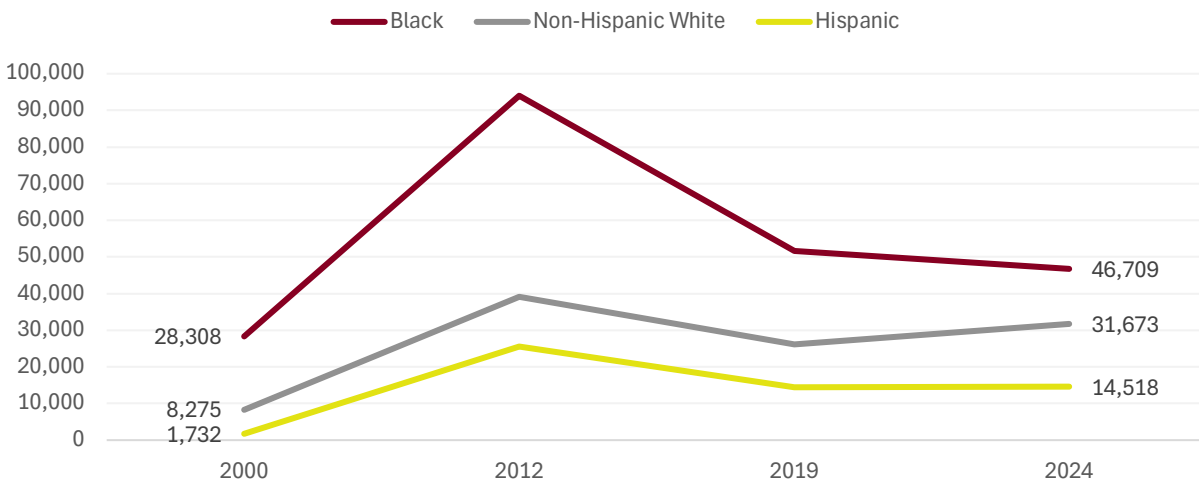
Figure 9. Share of Extreme-Poverty Neighborhood Residents by Race and Ethnicity



Source: IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota; U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census 2000 and American Community Survey 2012, 2019, 2024 5-Year Estimates.

Although Black residents now make up a smaller share of those living in high- and extreme-poverty neighborhoods, it remains disproportionate to their presence in the overall population (19.8%). The sharp increase in 2012 of Black residents of extreme-poverty neighborhoods also illustrates how some groups feel economic shocks more extensively than others (Fig. 10).

Figure 10. Number of Residents in Extreme-Poverty Neighborhoods by Race and Ethnicity



Source: IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota; U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census 2000 and American Community Survey 2012, 2019, 2024 5-Year Estimates.

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These changing patterns in the composition of high-poverty neighborhoods reflect North Carolina's broader demographic transformation, especially the rapid growth of the statewide Hispanic population during this period. It may also suggest a more troubling possibility: increasing economic segregation is drawing in non-Hispanic White and Hispanic North Carolinians, who historically accounted for smaller shares of high- and extreme-poverty neighborhoods. This is not primarily a story of Black residents moving out but of other people moving in.

Together these two co-existing realities—unequal racial and ethnic exposure and diversifying neighborhoods—paint a complex picture. Black and Hispanic North Carolinians are still far more likely than non-Hispanic White residents to live in high- and extreme-poverty neighborhoods. Demographic shifts in the makeup of disadvantaged neighborhoods should not obscure the fact that some groups bear the burden of high-poverty neighborhoods more than others. The fact that these neighborhoods are more racially diverse now than they were 25 years ago is also not reason to celebrate. It means the presence of concentrated poverty has widened, not improved.

Study of a High-Poverty Neighborhood: East Durham, North Carolina

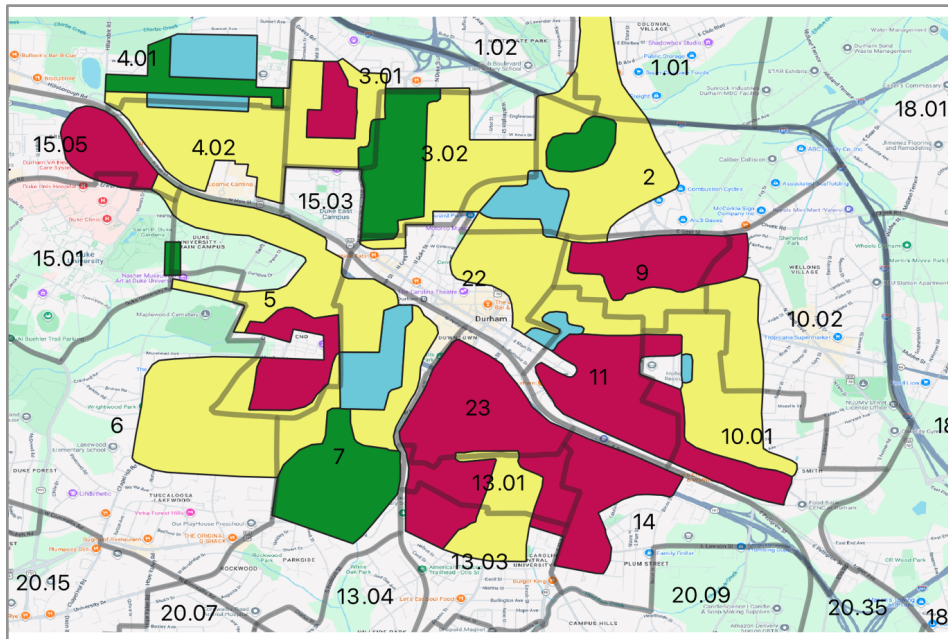
Numbers are good at identifying broad patterns, but they can't capture lived experience. To better illustrate how high-poverty neighborhoods shape residents' lives, we examined one census tract in central Durham, North Carolina—the state's fourth largest city. Census tract 10.01 lies to the east of the city's revitalized downtown and is part of the larger East Durham neighborhood.

Current conditions in this tract didn't arise recently or accidentally. Much of the tract (in the bottom right quadrant of Map 1) was included in the infamous Home Owners' Loan Corporation "redline" map of Durham made in the 1930s. The areas shaded in red were neighborhoods considered a "hazardous" risk for home loans; yellow areas were "definitely declining." These designations effectively cut off residents from the credit needed to purchase a home.¹¹

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One resident we interviewed made explicit the connection between the historic limits on credit to low homeownership rates today. “I have met long-term residents . . . that I thought owned their house,” she reflected. Turns out “they were 20-year renters in the same house,” who had been locked out of homeownership.

Map 1. Durham City Center With Overlay of Home Owners' Loan Corporation Risk Map



Source: Nelson, Winling, et al., “Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America,” University of Richmond Digital Scholarship Lab; Google Maps; U.S. Census Bureau, TIGER/Line shapefiles. Map created using QGIS.

The tract still bears the scars of redlining and other forms of marginalization. One resident described the “two different worlds of Main Street”: a vibrant city center less than a mile away from a neighborhood marked by persistent hardship. The tract’s poverty rate is 32.5% and median household income (\$32,257) is less than half the county median (\$82,316). Three out of four residents are Black (43%) or Hispanic (32%); 21.5% are non-Hispanic White.¹²

The neighborhood concentrates a variety of land uses that are often unwelcome in more affluent neighborhoods. It is bordered to the south by railroad tracks, which are lined by industrial uses like scrap dealers, auto body shops and warehouses. The Durham Freeway, which bisected the historically Black Hayti neighborhood, is just to the south. The tract contains two subsidized housing developments, six brownfield sites and a homeless shelter in the midst of significant expansion. The tract notably lacks basic amenities like a bank or full-service supermarket.

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One resident pointed out that for some, “getting on the buses, way across town” for groceries and other necessities is a real challenge, especially those who are older or mobility impaired. “I’m looking at people disabled, trying to get a bunch of bags on the bus because I done been there and done that,” she shared. According to some residents, access to public transportation has been limited by changing routes and bus stop locations, as well as inadequate shelter and lighting at stops.

Despite high poverty and a vacancy rate of 18.4%, housing costs are steep. Median rent in the tract is \$1,481/month and two-thirds of renters are housing cost burdened, paying more than 30% of their income for rent. Homes are typically older—more than four in ten were built in 1939 or earlier—and of modest size. Yet the median home value is high (\$331,200), placing homeownership out of reach for most residents.¹³ For those who do own, the property tax is an onerous expense. At the 2025-26 property tax rate, a homeowner with a home assessed at the median value would pay \$3,283 or roughly 10% of the typical household income.¹⁴ One homeowner mentioned his property tax bill was \$3,400, a considerable financial burden.

Homeownership is not only expensive, it can also keep residents stuck in place. One person we interviewed expressed how thrilled he was at the opportunity to buy a house, only to find that ultimately, it was a “hard lesson.” Neighborhood crime and instability have made him feel unsafe, but he can’t sell at the price he would need to buy elsewhere. “I don’t want to make that my forever home,” he stated with conviction. “That will not be my forever home. If I could sell it today, I would. . . . There’s really no peace there.” Like many residents, he’s caught by rising housing costs, concern for his own and his family’s wellbeing, and limited alternatives.

References to and stories about safety were a throughline in resident interviews. Some stories involved generalized ambient disorder. An older resident of subsidized housing described how unlocked apartments in her complex had attracted squatters. Another resident described “a gang, a crew of individuals who hang on the corner . . . drinking and selling drugs and partying.” Residents we interviewed described public encounters with people in crisis—individuals on the street struggling with addiction or mental illness.

While everyday disorder is unsettling, other stories described more serious incidents. One person we interviewed shared how his year started with gunfire.

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Eighteen minutes after midnight, I had a bullet come through my window, New Year's morning . . . The little metal around the screen or the window, that's what stopped the bullet. That has been a jarring experience for me. I don't feel safe anymore.

Not all incidents end without physical harm. Another resident recalled a shooting with a deadlier outcome.

My air conditioning system got hit with bullets. . . . Police were standing in the parking lot that was adjacent to the side of my house and goes to the back of my house, talking to neighbors about the shootings that just happened, that nobody was hit in. And then while we were all standing there, we're looking at bullet shells on the ground and I'm putting the markers out, we hear boom, boom, boom. And it was the killing of the young man on Driver Street in front of his grandmother's house.

These shootings are not only terrifying, the victims are often known to community members. As a result, these untimely gun deaths are personally and collectively painful. After the shooting death of a family friend, one interviewee peeled back the accumulated layers of pain: "Not only was it my daughter's childhood friend, my son the one that called 911, but . . . when he died was on the same day that my daughter's dad died. And so it was a real grief moment, and it was just all kinds of processing."

Over time, these and similar experiences—any one of which is scarring—become a profound psychological trauma. Two residents described the weight of neighborhood violence and premature death—not as concerns for themselves, but for their children. One woman, discussing end-of-life matters with family, relayed how she had to counsel her younger children to not hold it against their older brother if he doesn't come to her funeral.

I said, "Look, don't despise your brother, don't. . . . Leave him room not to come." [Because] it's based off of the . . . the constant going to funerals and the constant dealing with his friends that got shot. At one point in time, I knew one of the whole pods at the Durham County jail system from growing up with my sons.

Another resident worried about her grown son, who has outlived many of his childhood acquaintances. "Mama," he confided to her, "everybody who hangs around me dies." As a musician who plays at funerals, he feels like it's his duty to "keep everybody together" at the service. But the pain persists. "I understand why he gets out of town every week," she reflected. "I know why he goes fishing or whatever. He's trying to find an outlet so he doesn't have to think about the traumas that he's dealing with that he might not talk to me about."

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As these stories show, neighborhood residents have reason to be on constant alert. One person shared how this perpetual state of hypervigilance—and the threats that provoke it—is reflected in everyday conversation. “It’s become a norm now,” she said. “‘Stay safe.’ You know, we didn’t used to say that back in the day. Now it’s ‘God bless you, stay safe.’”

More than one in five residents is under the age of 18 and young people are especially affected by neighborhood conditions.¹⁵ “The children can’t be children,” observed one resident. Everyday activities are constrained by safety concerns. Drug activity was so common in one of the parks that a resident called the city recreation department to trim trees and remove amenities that were used for illicit activity. “From now on,” she said, “the park would be ‘bring your own table, bring your own grills, and bring your own chairs.’”

Other dangers lurk in the parks. East Durham Park, the site of a former trash incinerator, is one of five city parks closed due to elevated lead levels, with no reopening date in sight.¹⁶ Most facilities at another park, Long Meadow, are closed through 2030. One interviewee explained that when residents in her apartment complex bought basketball goals for local kids, property management took them away.

The absence of safe spaces for young people to come together inflicts real community harm. Youth participation in sports, especially team sports like basketball, has been shown to reduce gun violence and improve long-term outcomes. Yet the loss of places designed for young people removes opportunities for kids to exercise, play, learn teamwork and practice peaceful conflict resolution.¹⁷

At the same time, many parents work multiple jobs. Almost 11% of jobs held by tract residents are non-primary, meaning they’re a second job, not the jobholder’s main source of income.¹⁸ This is one of the highest rates in the region. Parental obligations outside the home, combined with street-level pressures and lack of recreational outlets, leaves some young people disconnected and without clear purpose. As one resident observed, their anger and frustration searches for targets to lash out at. Young people, she said, “don’t know what to do with themselves. They don’t know conflict resolution. . . . It’s not the mayor standing before you. It’s not all these decision-makers. So you fight who’s closest to you.”

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These cumulative stressors have lasting consequences for children. Tract 10.01 ranks near the bottom nationally for economic mobility. On average, children of low-income households who grow up in this tract earn very low incomes as adults—an annual average income of about \$25,000 (in 2026 dollars) per household by age 35. One reason might be related to the high incarceration rate. Eleven percent of Black men who lived in this tract as low-income children were in prison or jail on one single-day count.¹⁹

Some residents feel that they can't turn to elected officials for support. Those we spoke with described frustration in their dealings with the city. "People say they hear us," one resident noted, "and yeah, they might be listening. But they don't *hear* us, you know?" Relationships with law enforcement are similarly complicated. Police presence is viewed as necessary, but the residents we spoke with described some interactions as fraught and tense. As one person said, some officers "don't know how to engage with Black poor people."

In the absence of reliable institutional support, residents have turned to each other for protection, support and neighborhood uplift. They look after each other and fill gaps in need. As one said, "we are like police officers in a sense. We're like EMS in a sense, social work, lawyers. We're everybody." They share information and help secure resources, track gun violence, host community events and create positive moments of celebration and connection in difficult circumstances.

Residents we interviewed were clear that the neighborhood should not be defined solely by deprivation. Challenges are met by a deep sense of mutual aid and, as one resident said, "relationships, fellowships, friendships." One community leader, tired of negative attention, stopped talking to reporters. She told them,

Don't call me when you get something across your police scanner, if you can't come out here and support when we got National Night Out, if you can't come out here and say that we got the Zetas to come out here and do bike giveaways. If you can't highlight both sides of it, don't call my number no more.

Another resident alluded to a tradition of collective responsibility. "We came up with the village, where the village took care of the village. It's going to go back to that."

The Persistence of Neighborhood Disadvantage

Census tract 10.01 has been shaped by its specific history and local conditions, but it shares features with other high-poverty tracts. Like others, it reflects a legacy of exclusion and disinvestment. Residents face external burdens imposed by place: limited access to groceries and other necessities, high housing costs, few amenities, and exposure to environmental hazards, violence and chronic stress. Young people have few constructive outlets and constricted opportunities, leading to more violence and long-term harms.

These environmental factors illustrate the ways that neighborhood influences a person's options and trajectories. Neighborhoods such as this one are not simply a reflection of individual poverty, they represent structural forces that shape where people live, how they live and the opportunities available to them. They exacerbate and replicate poverty.

Conclusion

High-poverty neighborhoods in North Carolina have expanded quickly and shrunk slowly. Although the statewide poverty rate is near historic lows, the number of high-poverty census tracts is higher than ever. More than two million North Carolinians—and over four in ten poor people—contend with neighborhood level disadvantage.

As the period after the Great Recession shows, high-poverty tracts can contract, but larger macroeconomic trends alone won't do the job. Addressing concentrated poverty requires sustained commitment and a willingness to invest in communities that have often been overlooked.

As policies and decisions helped to produce high-poverty neighborhoods, they can help reverse them. No one solution is a silver bullet or a quick fix. Different places might benefit from different approaches. But inaction will entrench poverty further, constricting individual prospects and dimming the state's future.

Methodology

This analysis uses data from the 2000 Decennial Census and the American Community Survey (ACS) 1- and 5-year estimates. The decennial census and the 2012, 2019 and 2024 ACS 5-year estimates were obtained from IPUMS National Historical Geographic Information System (NHGIS).²⁰ If an estimate covers five years, the year referenced in the text refers to the last year of the 5-year period (2024 for the 2020–2024 estimate).

The ACS is based on a sample of the population. It includes a margin of sampling error—a range into which the actual number might fall—for each estimate. When comparing changes over time, we assess whether differences are larger than the combined sampling error of the two estimates.

Census tracts are classified as “high poverty” (20% or more residents below poverty) or “extreme poverty” (40% or more) based on estimated poverty rates. Because these are estimates, some tracts identified as high-poverty tracts might not actually reach the 20% threshold. Others might not be included when in fact they should be. To improve stability, we aggregate data across tracts and evaluate reliability using the coefficient of variation (CV), treating estimates with a CV above 10% as unreliable.

We use the terms “neighborhood,” “census tract” and “tract” interchangeably.

Endnotes

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¹¹ The maps produced by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, a federal agency, were color-coded by neighborhood to indicate the riskiness of home loans. Areas shaded green were considered the best neighborhoods, blue areas were "still desirable." The HOLC considered the presence of poor, foreign-born or Black residents to be an "inharmonious" element that would lower property values and neighborhood desirability, leading to a yellow ("declining") or red (hazardous) designation. See Robert K. Nelson et al., "Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America," in *American Panorama: An Atlas of United States History*, ed. Robert K. Nelson (2023), <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining>.

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About the Poverty Research Project

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.

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