

The Poor in North Carolina¹

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Background and Experience

I am a sociologist who studies poverty and social change. I received my B.A. in English at Stanford University in 1971, and completed my M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Kentucky in 1985.

In the 1980s I was research director at an economic development organization in Kentucky, where I led studies examining the impact of the coal industry on community development and others exploring the education challenges in Kentucky's fifth congressional district, where dropout rates were among the highest in the nation.

In 1989 I joined the faculty of the University of New Hampshire's (UNH) Sociology Department in a tenure track position, teaching courses on poverty, social policy, social change, and qualitative methods to undergraduate and graduate students. I contributed to and edited Rural Poverty in America, published in 1992, in which top poverty scholars examined rural poverty. In 1990 I began a multi-year comparative study of poverty in the Mississippi Delta, Appalachia and northern New England, using decades of Census data and hundreds of interviews with people from all walks of life. This research culminated in my award-winning book Worlds Apart: Why Poverty Persists in Rural America, published in 1999 by Yale University Press with a foreword by Robert Coles. I continued to advise various regional and national foundations on poverty while teaching and conducting research at the University from 1989 to 2000.

After four years as a director at the Ford Foundation, in May 2004 I became founding director of the Carsey Institute at UNH, a research institute endowed by UNH alumna Marcy Carsey to conduct rigorous policy-relevant research on vulnerable families and communities. Under my leadership the Institute became a highly regarded source of policy research on vulnerable families and communities, collaborating with think tanks like the Brookings Institution and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. The Institute is supported by national foundations interested in poverty alleviation and sustainable development, and its work continues to this day. During this period I gave numerous keynote addresses on poverty and opportunity to diverse audiences. In 2011 I left the University to become research director of a new eight-year food and

¹ This report was written with the assistance of Andrew Schaefer, a doctoral candidate in Sociology at the University of New Hampshire and a research assistant at the Carsey Institute.

agriculture policy initiative supported by nine national foundations, a position I now hold.

In 2012 Yale University Press asked me to develop a second edition of Worlds Apart. With the support of several foundations and working with two graduate students and a colleague from Rust College in Mississippi, I revisited my original study communities twenty years later to conduct interviews and assess the changes that had occurred and the implications for our understanding of poverty and development. The new edition will be available later this year. I am frequently giving presentations on the findings to academic and policy audiences.

In late December 2013 the Southern Coalition for Social Justice asked me to research and write a report on poverty in North Carolina. Working with two graduate students in sociology at UNH, the current director of the vulnerable children and families program at the Carsey Institute at UNH, and the George Autry Fellow at MDC in Durham, North Carolina, I analyzed data from the U.S. Census and conducted 47 interviews with poor men and women in North Carolina. The qualitative work was conducted using the same protocol approved by the University's Institutional Review Board for my book update in 2013. Because of the compressed time frame in which this report was produced I reserve the right to expand the scope if requested by counsel.

I. Summary of Opinions

Poverty is high in North Carolina, where 18 percent live in poverty and 26 percent live in near poverty (150 percent of poverty). But in North Carolina blacks, Native Americans and Hispanics are significantly more likely to be poor (and near poor) than whites.² Poverty rates for African Americans, American Indians and Hispanics are two to three times as high as those for whites. Those who dropped out of school or only have a high school degree or GED are more likely to be poor, but again, low educational attainment is an even greater liability for those who are not white; that is to say, blacks, Native Americans and Hispanics who have low educational attainment have higher poverty rates than do their white counterparts. The less working age adults work the more likely they are to be poor, but again the rates of poverty are higher for those who are not white. The poor in North Carolina have relatively high disability rates, and the poor who are non-whites are more likely to be disabled. Fifteen percent of the poor do not have access to a vehicle, but this is especially true for poor African Americans, 27 percent of whom do not have a vehicle available to them. The poor are almost twice as likely as the non-poor to have moved in the last year, as their lives are unstable when

² In this summary I round numbers to make it easier to follow the trends I am describing. In the summary I also refer to non-Hispanic whites, non-Hispanic African Americans and non-Hispanic Native Americans as whites, African Americans (or blacks) and Native Americans.

resources are scarce. Again, poor blacks and Hispanics are even more likely to have moved than their poor white counterparts, 19 percent compared to 14 percent.

North Carolina's poor are more likely to live in central cities and rural areas than in the suburbs, and in each type of place non-whites have higher poverty rates than whites. More than a third of black and Hispanic rural residents are poor. Poverty rates are higher in the Mountains and Coastal regions than in the Piedmont, but in each region poverty for blacks and Hispanics is significantly higher than for whites.

Poverty scholars generally agree that those living in poverty are excluded from mainstream opportunities because they lack the resources to participate. In recent years new scholarship has documented the persistent poverty and lack of mobility experienced by African Americans in disadvantaged neighborhoods, showing how concentrated multigenerational poverty in these poor places deprives black children of opportunities to escape poverty through educational attainment or good jobs. Scholars now recognize that larger structural factors such as discrimination, lack of jobs and racial and class segregation are intertwined with cultural factors such as failure to stay in school, having children young and out of wedlock, or getting involved with drugs and criminal activity. The legacy of poor schools in bad neighborhoods and low wages in bad jobs weighs on poor families and impacts their children, and in North Carolina the legacy especially impacts non-whites. In sum, those who live in poverty struggle to make ends meet and their daily lives are difficult, and people of color are more likely to be poor and often face greater disadvantages and hurdles than their poor white counterparts.

II. What is Poverty and How Do We Measure It?

This report describes the 1.5 million people who are poor in North Carolina, focusing on the slightly over one million poor adults. We rely primarily on Census data, the 2012 American Community Survey (ACS) micro-data and the most recent five-year ACS estimates (2008-2012).³ We include some quotations and vignettes of people in poverty selected from the 47 men and women whom we interviewed for this report in February 2014. Their backgrounds and daily lives illustrate the experiences and perspectives of some of North Carolina's citizens living below the poverty line.⁴

Median household income in North Carolina was \$46,450 in 2012. Poverty is calculated at the family level, considering all of the income brought in by family members. The

³ Appendix tables display demographic and economic characteristics of the population in North Carolina; demographic and economic characteristics of the poor in North Carolina; and the percent in poverty for North Carolina by various characteristics, and by race and Hispanic origin.

⁴ The vignettes are illustrative only and do not form the basis for any of the statistical data in this report.

2012 poverty threshold for a family with two adults and two children was about half the median, at \$23,283. To calculate the poverty line, the Census Bureau compares all pre-tax family income to a threshold developed by Molly Orshansky who worked at the Social Security Administration in the 1960s. She basically took the USDA's "thrifty food plan" and multiplied it by three, as food was then roughly a third of a family's expenses. It is adjusted annually for inflation (see <http://www.ocpp.org/poverty/how/> for a good description). Families with pre-tax income below this threshold are considered "poor." Those with income at or above the threshold are not considered "poor," though there is much research to suggest they may still be struggling to make ends meet and many will move in and out of "official poverty."⁵

In 2012 the poverty threshold for a single person under age 65 was \$11,945. The threshold was \$15,825 for one (non-senior) adult⁶ with one child, and \$18,498 for a guardian or parent with two children. The threshold for two adults and two children is \$23,283. For a single parent with three children the threshold was \$23,364. Therefore, a single parent earning the minimum wage of \$7.25/hour working full-time, year round would not have sufficient income to rise above the poverty threshold even with only one child in the family.

According to the 2012 thresholds, almost 18 percent of the population in North Carolina was poor in 2012, the most recent year for which poverty data are available, compared to 15.9 percent in the nation overall.⁷ The poverty rate for the state's 5,944,953 working age adults was 16.8 percent (compared to 14.7 percent in the US overall), while the rate for the state's 1,300,814 seniors was 9.8 percent (compared to 9.4 percent nationally). Nearly 26 percent of North Carolina's 2,269,509 children are growing up in poverty, over one in four, compared to 22.7 percent in the nation as a whole.

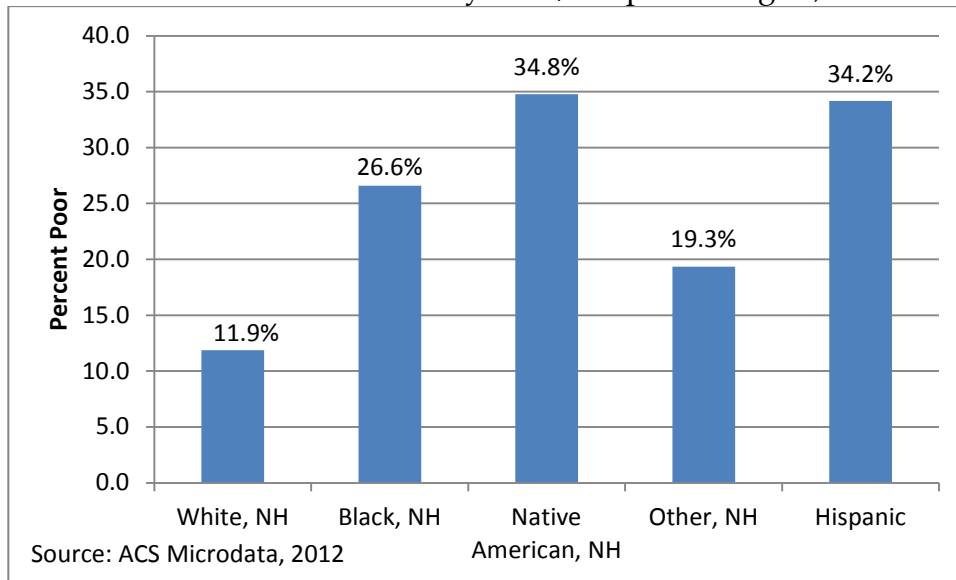
Poverty is relatively high in North Carolina, then, and African Americans, Native Americans, and those who are Hispanic are at greater risk of poverty than non-Hispanic whites. Figure 1 shows poverty rates (with actual numbers in footnotes) by race and ethnicity.

⁵ Mark R. Rank and Thomas A. Hirschl, "The Occurrence of Poverty Across the Life Cycle: Evidence from the PSID," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* (2001); Mary Jo Bane and David Ellwood. "Slipping into and Out of Poverty: The Dynamics of Spells," *Journal of Human Resources*, 1986, 21 (1), 1-23.

⁶ Thresholds are slightly lower for persons 65 years and over.

⁷ Throughout this report we refer to poverty among the non-institutionalized population in North Carolina and the U.S.

Figure 1. Percent Poor in North Carolina by Race/ Hispanic Origin^{8, 9}



But what does being in poverty mean for how people get by, how they live their lives? I find British sociologist Peter Townsend’s definition useful. He said: “Poverty is the lack of resources necessary to permit participation in the activities, customs, and diets commonly approved by society...as resources diminish, there occurs a sudden withdrawal from participation.”¹⁰ Nobel economist Amartya Sen describes poverty as “capability failure, the inability to participate fully in society...insufficient means to lead satisfying lives.”¹¹ Or, to paraphrase Harvard poverty scholar William Julius Wilson, living in poverty means not having the resources, material and cultural, to engage in the mainstream.¹²

Poverty is about isolation and exclusion, about people and families that are cut off from the kind of everyday living that those in the middle class take for granted. Poor people have described their lives to me as “scrabbling” and “scratching,” doing everything they can to make ends meet, to find food and shelter first, then work and transportation, means for stability, to be independent and take care of their needs and

⁸ Throughout the document non-Hispanic is abbreviated as NH in tables and figures.

⁹ Numbers of poor by race and ethnicity are: White non-Hispanic - 747,196; black non-Hispanic - 552,620; Native American non-Hispanic - 35,345; other non-Hispanic - 84,094; and Hispanic - 28,881.

¹⁰ Peter Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1979.)

¹¹ Amartya Sen, “Conceptualizing and Measuring Poverty,” in *Poverty and Inequality* ed. David B. Grusky and Ravi Kanbur (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006.)

¹² William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.)

those of their family on their own. Many of those with whom we talked for this report said their dream was to have a regular job and be able to take care of their children.

Work is unstable, family obligations weigh heavily on single parents and noncustodial fathers, and living in communities plagued by drugs and gangs, even in rural North Carolina, is a constant challenge and source of stress. The poor have often grown up in fragile families and chaotic neighborhoods, and some make mistakes, “mess up,” as they put it. They find it hard to get “back on track,” or to be granted a second chance, especially if they have broken the law. Most of our interviewees regret not finishing high school on time, though many went back for their GED and even have some college or trade training. Men and women alike would advise young people in their community to stay in school, *get all the education they can*,¹³ and then get a stable job and start a family.

III. Who Are North Carolina's Poor? Estimates from 2012 Data

North Carolina Adults

Overall 1,125,378 adults are poor in North Carolina. African Americans (non-Hispanic) and Hispanics are far more likely to be poor in North Carolina, even though poor whites (non-Hispanic) outnumber poor blacks and Hispanics. There are 559,397 poor white (non-Hispanic) adults, 351,262 poor African American (non-Hispanic) adults, and 144,942 poor Hispanic adults (of any race). Figures 2 and 3 show poverty for adults in North Carolina by race/Hispanic origin compared to the composition of each group in the state overall.

¹³ Quotations from the interviews are presented in italics throughout the report.

Figure 2. North Carolina Adult Population by Race/Hispanic Origin

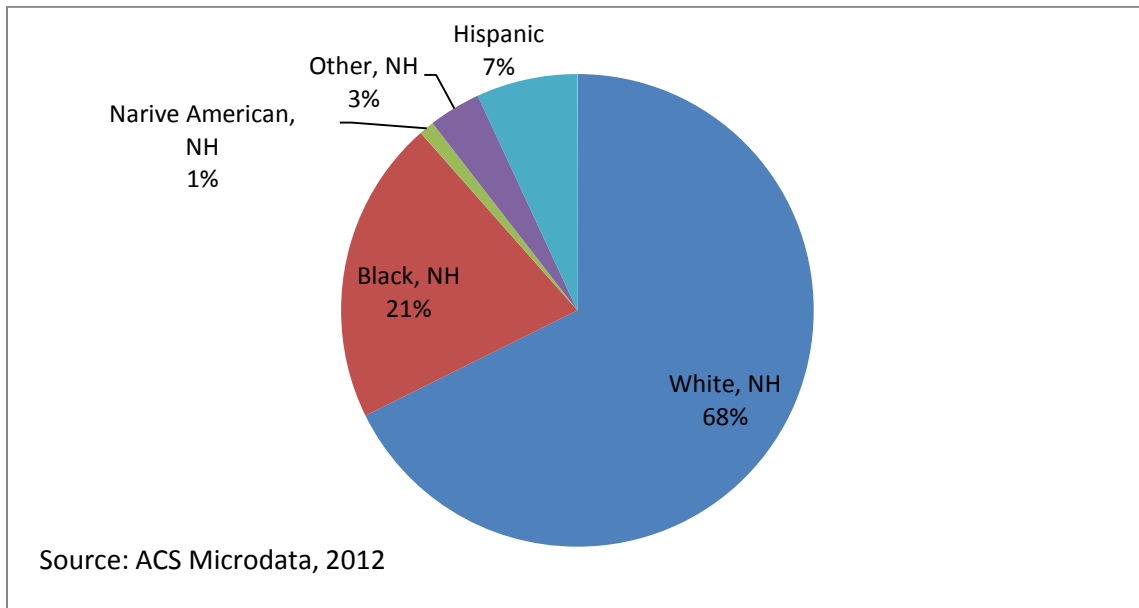
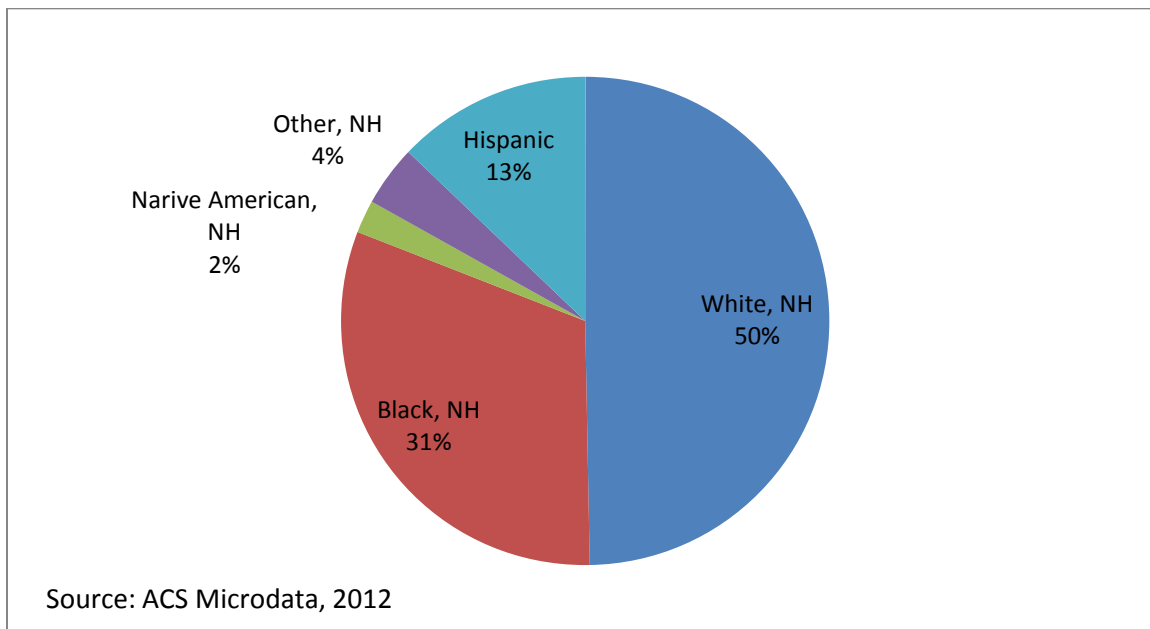


Figure 3. North Carolina Poor Adult Population by Race/Hispanic Origin

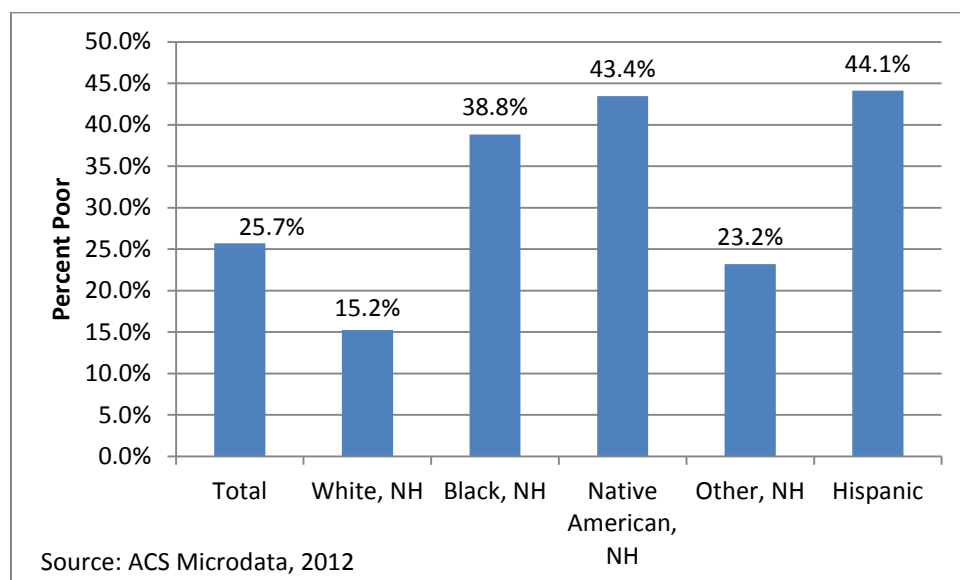


Approximately 11.4 percent of North Carolina’s white (non-Hispanic) adults live below the poverty line, while the rate of poverty for black (non-Hispanic) adults is more than twice as high at 23.7 percent. The Native American (non-Hispanic) adult population in North Carolina is almost three times more likely to be poor than non-Hispanic whites (33.2 percent). Hispanic adults (of any race) in North Carolina are also substantially more likely than non-Hispanic whites to be poor (28.8 percent).

Children and Families in North Carolina

Children in North Carolina are more likely than their adult counterparts to be poor. As with adult poverty, child poverty varies substantially by race and Hispanic origin of the child. Non-Hispanic white children are least likely to be poor (15.2 percent). Non-Hispanic black, Native American, and Hispanic children are all more than twice as likely as their non-Hispanic white counterparts to be poor, at 38.8, 43.4, and 44.1 percent (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Percent Poor Children in North Carolina by Race/Hispanic Origin¹⁴



Children living in households headed by married couple families are substantially less likely to be poor than those living in households headed by single males or females (Table 1). For instance, 13.8 percent of children living in households headed by a married couple are poor, compared to 51.3 percent of children living in households headed by single females and 39.1 percent of families headed by single males.¹⁵

Racial differences in child poverty are evident across all family types. Poverty rates for children in households headed by married couples vary by race of the householder.

¹⁴ Numbers of poor children by race and ethnicity are white non-Hispanic - 187,799; black non-Hispanic - 201,358; Native American non-Hispanic - 10,653; other non-Hispanic - 39,027; and Hispanic - 143,939.

¹⁵ See Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) for an excellent study of female-headed families in poverty.

Children in homes headed by non-Hispanic white¹⁶ married couples are least likely to be poor at 9.5 percent, followed by children in homes headed by non-Hispanic black married couples (16.0 percent). Although Hispanic children residing in homes headed by a married couple face a dramatically higher poverty rate than other racial/ethnic groups in such families, their poverty rate is much lower than that of Hispanic children being raised by a single parent. But over 35 percent of children living in homes headed by Hispanic married couples are poor.

Table 1. Child Poverty in North Carolina by Household Type

	Married Couple	Single Female- Headed	Single Male- Headed
Total	13.8	51.3	39.1
Race/Hispanic Origin			
White, Non-Hispanic (NH)	9.5	40.0	27.7
Black, NH	16.0	55.4	41.8
Native American, NH	20.5	66.4	31.8
Other, NH	11.2	61.1	51.1
Hispanic	35.5	68.1	61.5

Note: **Bold** values are different from White, NH in the same column (p<.05)

Source: ACS Microdata, 2012

Children in households headed by single females experience very high rates of poverty. Approximately 40 percent of kids living in homes headed by non-Hispanic white single females are poor, followed by more than half of all kids in homes headed by non-Hispanic black single females (55.4 percent), and more than two-thirds of kids in homes headed by Hispanic single females (68.1 percent¹⁷). New research in both the neurosciences and behavioral sciences indicates that growing up poor can have profound negative effects on cognitive as well as social development,¹⁸ so these high rates of poverty will affect future generations of North Carolina adults.

IV. Characteristics of the Poor in North Carolina

Educational Attainment

¹⁶Each spouse in a married couple family has their own race. For ease of discussion, the race of the householder, or person in whose name the housing unit is rented or owned, is used when talking about married couples.

¹⁷ The Standard Error is large for Hispanics and actually is not statistically different from blacks.

¹⁸ For a summary see interview with Greg Duncan (no relation) in Spotlight on Poverty March 19, 2014. Also see <http://developingchild.harvard.edu>.

Living in poverty, by definition, means living with limited resources. One of the primary ways that people get resources is through income from work, and getting decent paying work in the 21st century almost always requires educational attainment of high school or beyond.¹⁹ Many of our interviewees regretted not finishing high school because of the way it limited their job options: *A lot of jobs even at McDonalds now, you don't know how to use a computer, you can't get by. The way things are now, I don't see no job opportunities...* And they recognized that young people needed a good education to get good work: *With their education, they need to be able to work with their heads now. Manual labor is disappearing.* It is not surprising that those who dropped out of school or only complete high school or even some college are far more likely to be poor than those who received a college degree (Figure 5).

In North Carolina, 13.6 percent of adults age 25 and over have less than a high school degree, 34.8 percent have a high school degree, 24.3 percent have some college experience, and 27.3 percent have a college degree or more education. These rates vary substantially by race. While only 10.1 percent of non-Hispanic whites 25 years and older have less than a high school degree, the same is true of 15.7 percent of non-Hispanic blacks, 23.5 percent of non-Hispanic Native Americans, and 44.0 percent of Hispanics. Similarly, non-Hispanic whites are most likely to have some college experience or a college degree or more at 55.7 percent, compared to 44.2 percent of non-Hispanic blacks, 34.4 percent of non-Hispanic Native Americans, and only 26.1 percent of Hispanics.

Looking at this a different way, with less than high school as an example, we see that while non-Hispanic whites make up 69.0 percent of the population 25 years and over in North Carolina, they only make up 51.0 percent with less than a high school degree. Members of minority groups, on the other hand, are disproportionately likely to be represented among the less educated. For instance, non-Hispanic blacks make up 20.2 percent of those over 25 years in North Carolina and 23.3 percent of those with less than a high school degree. Similarly, Hispanics make up 6.5 percent of those over 25 years and 20.9 percent of those with less than a high school degree, a substantial difference.

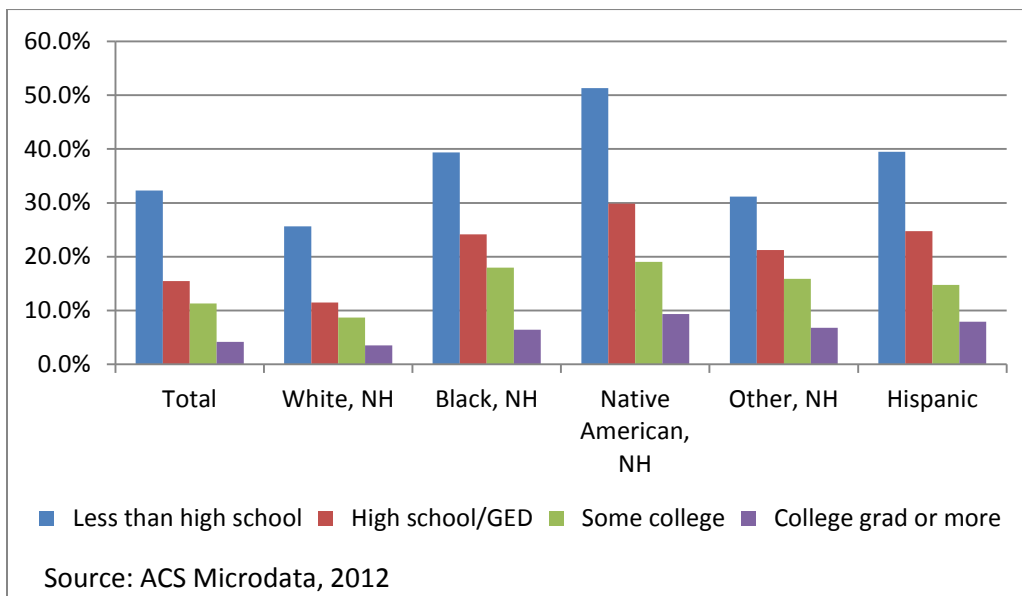
Poverty rates at different levels of educational attainment. Nearly one third of adults over 25 without a high school diploma are poor, while 15.5 percent of those who have completed high school or have a GED are poor. Just over 11 percent of those with some college are poor, but only 4.2 percent of those with a bachelor's degree or higher are

¹⁹ See Greg J. Duncan and Richard Murnane, eds. *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011.) and Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz, eds. *The Race between Education and Technology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.)

poor. Often those we interviewed said their greatest regret was dropping out of school. *I wish I had gotten more education so I could have gotten a better job.*

Figure 5 shows that for all racial/ethnic groups, poverty is lower among those with higher levels of education. Members of minority racial/ethnic groups are more likely to be poor than non-Hispanic whites at each level of educational attainment. For instance, almost 40 percent of non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics without a high school degree are poor, compared to 25.7 percent of non-Hispanic whites with the same educational attainment. Similarly, non-Hispanic blacks (24.1 percent), non-Hispanic Native Americans (29.9 percent), and Hispanics (24.7) with a high school degree are all more than twice as likely as their non-Hispanic white counterparts to be poor. We see similar patterns for those with some college and with a college degree or more.

Figure 5. Percent Poor, by Educational Attainment and Race/Hispanic Origin



Among poor adults in North Carolina, 31.5 percent dropped out of high school and never received a GED; 39.7 percent graduated high school or received a GED; 20.3 percent have attended some post-secondary school; and 8.5 percent have received a college degree or more. Statistically speaking, poor non-Hispanic blacks are no less likely than poor non-Hispanic whites to have less than a high school degree, a high school degree or GED, or have some college experience.

Table 2. Education of Poor Adults 25 & over, Race & Ethnicity

	Less Than High School	High School/ GED	Some College	College Grad or More
All Adults	31.5	39.7	20.3	8.5
Poor white, NH	25.9	40.6	22.1	11.4
Poor black, NH	27.4	44.6	22.7	5.2
Poor Native American, NH	39.9	42.2	13.5	4.4
Poor other, NH	25.9	30.6	22.7	20.7
Poor Hispanic	62.4	26.3	8.0	3.1

Note: **Bold** values are different from White, NH in the same column (p<.05)

Source: ACS Microdata, 2012

Poor non-Hispanic whites are, however, more likely than their non-Hispanic black counterparts to have a college degree or more (11.4 and 5.2 percent, respectively). Poor Hispanics, on the other hand, are most likely to have less than a high school degree (62.5 percent) and least likely to have some college (8.0 percent) or a college degree or more (3.1 percent).

Work Status

As a general rule, the more a person works the less likely he or she is to be poor. We interviewed several people who work two jobs to make ends meet or to build up a savings account – either a day job and an evening job or a workweek job and a weekend job. *It was real real tight so I took a second job.* About 39 percent of the unemployed, seeking work, are poor, while 8.9 percent of those who are working are poor, and 31.0 percent of those not in the labor force are poor (being in the labor force means one is looking for work). Stated differently, 366,514 employed persons between ages 16 and 64 are poor and 190,834 unemployed are poor in North Carolina. While 23.6 percent of those who worked part-time or part-year are poor, 34.0 percent of those who did not work (unemployed or not in the labor force) are poor. Nonetheless, nearly four percent of those who worked full-time year-round are still poor.

In North Carolina, 10.7 percent of working age adults in the labor force are unemployed – 8.6 percent of working age non-Hispanic whites, 16.9 percent of working age non-Hispanic blacks, 13.9 percent of working age non-Hispanic Native Americans, and 10.8 percent of Hispanics²⁰

²⁰ Not statistically different from non-Hispanic whites.

Poverty rates by work status in North Carolina vary by race/ Hispanic origin. For instance, 34.0 percent of unemployed whites (non-Hispanic) are poor, compared to 45.0 percent of blacks (non-Hispanic) and 53.2 percent of Native Americans (non-Hispanic). Similarly, only 6.2 percent of employed non-Hispanic whites are poor. Employed non-Hispanic blacks, non-Hispanic Native Americans, and Hispanics are each more than twice as likely to be to be poor at 12.7, 14.2 and 20.8 percent, respectively. Along these lines, non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics who worked full-time all year are far more likely to be poor at 5.4 and 11.8 percent, respectively, than their non-Hispanic white counterparts (2.3 percent).

Those we interviewed who were working had low wage jobs, and struggled to make ends meet, living paycheck to paycheck. Those who were out of work said they wanted to work, and in response to the question “where would you like to be in five years?” almost all those of working age said they wanted to be in a steady job. *I'd like to have a steady job. I'd like to have enough money in the bank that I can go see my grandbabies, and buy them something at Christmas.*

Factors Limiting Work for Working Age Adults

Adults' ability to find work that pays a non-poverty wage is not only affected by their educational attainment. Among other factors, it is also affected by their physical and mental health, their children's health, their ability to get to work, and the stability in their family.

Disabilities. Just over 11 percent of working age adults in North Carolina report a physical or cognitive disability. Non-Hispanic blacks and non-Hispanic Native Americans are most likely to report a physical or cognitive disability at 14.2 and 17.0 percent, respectively. Non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics are less likely to report disabilities at 11.1 and 5.3 percent, respectively. Nearly 30 percent of these individuals are poor. Thought of another way, the poor have relatively high disability rates, with 19.5 percent reporting a disability. Poverty rates among disabled working-age North Carolinians also differs substantially by race/ Hispanic origin. At 26.0 percent, for instance, a substantial number of disabled non-Hispanic whites of working-age are poor. More than one third (36.2 percent) of disabled non-Hispanic blacks are poor and over half (51.9 percent) of disabled non-Hispanic Native Americans are poor.

Vehicle Access. Access to a vehicle is important for many North Carolinians' journey to work, especially in rural areas where public transportation is more limited. Only about five percent of non-poor people in North Carolina live in households without a vehicle kept at home for use by household members. Vehicle access differs by race and ethnicity. For instance, while only 2.4 percent of non-Hispanic whites live in homes

without access to a vehicle, the same is true for 10.7 percent of non-Hispanic blacks, 7.3 percent of non-Hispanic Native Americans, and 6.4 percent of Hispanics.

Approximately 15 percent of the poor live in homes without access to a vehicle. These numbers for poor North Carolinians differ by race. Approximately 8.8 percent of poor (non-Hispanic) whites live in households without a car available to household members, compared to 27 percent of poor (non-Hispanic) blacks. (No other racial groups are statistically different from non-Hispanic whites.)

More than 50 percent of those living in households with no vehicles available are poor. Again, however, there is a large racial disparity. Approximately 40 percent of non-Hispanic whites who live in households with no vehicles available are poor, compared to about 63 percent of both non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics.

The vast majority of North Carolinians who commute to work in a car, truck or van do so alone (88.6 percent). Just over 11 percent carpool, and 1.2 percent use public transportation. Poor workers, on the other hand are less likely to commute alone by car (80.5 percent) and more likely to carpool (19.5 percent). Poor workers are also more likely to rely on public transportation (3.7 percent)²¹. Many of those we interviewed in cities relied on the bus. *I do the bus thing. You have to take a bus everywhere.*

Other Non-Work Sources of Income and Other Support

North Carolinians obtain income from multiple sources. The poor are less likely to receive income from wages and salaries, social security, and retirement than are non-poor adults. The poor are more likely to get income from public assistance programs like supplemental security and welfare, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF, called Work First in North Carolina). In all, about 40 percent of poor adults in North Carolina have wage and salary income, compared to approximately 66 percent of the non-poor adults. Poor non-Hispanic Native Americans are least likely to receive wage and salary income (28.9 percent) and poor Hispanics are most likely (52.2 percent).

Table 3. Percent of poor adults in North Carolina receiving income from:

	Wage and Salary	Social Security	Supplemental Security	Welfare	Retirement
Non-poor	65.8	22.6	2.2	0.7	12.1
Poor	39.8	15.7	7.6	3.4	3.4
White, NH	38.3	18.1	7.2	3.7	3.8
Black, NH	37.8	18.1	11.1	4.2	4.2

²¹ Sample size is too small to break down by race and ethnicity.

Native American, NH	28.9	17.6	10.5	2.1	3.6
Other, NH	39.5	9.8	6.9	3	1.4
Hispanic	52.2	2.5	1.4	2.2	1.6

Note: Universe includes adults age 18 and over; **bold** are different from White, NH (p<.05)

Source: American Community Survey Microdata, 2012

Non-wage income. Other than wage and salary income, North Carolina’s poor adults are most likely to report social security income (15.7 percent), followed by supplemental social security income (7.6 percent). Just over three percent of poor adults receive welfare payments, in part because the program emphasizes work and has two-year time limits.²² Just over three percent receive retirement income. There are substantial racial disparities in receipt of these other sources of income, however. Poor white (non-Hispanic) and black (non-Hispanic) adults, for instance, are equally likely to receive social security (18.1 percent). Poor members of other non-Hispanic races and Hispanics are least likely to report social security income at (9.8 and 2.5 percent, respectively). Similarly, poor non-Hispanic whites and non-Hispanic blacks report higher rates of retirement income receipt (3.8 and 4.2, respectively) than those of other, non-Hispanic races and Hispanics (1.4 and 1.6 percent, respectively). Poor non-Hispanic whites, at 7.2 percent are less likely than their black, non-Hispanic counterparts (11.1 percent) to report receipt of supplemental security. Hispanics are least likely to report receipt of supplemental security income at 1.4 percent. There are few racial differences in welfare receipt.

Non-cash benefits. The poor are also often eligible for non-cash benefits. In North Carolina, 18.8 percent of people live in households with at least one member receiving benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the food stamps program. The average monthly benefit per person in North Carolina in 2012 was \$121.37, about \$1.35 per meal. Those living in households with a SNAP recipient are, not surprisingly, predominantly poor. Approximately 54 percent of those living in “SNAP households” are poor, compared to 15.9 percent of people living in households without a SNAP recipient.²³ This proportion shifts when looking at members of different racial/ethnic groups. For instance, while non-Hispanic whites and non-Hispanic blacks living in “SNAP households” are statistically equally likely to be poor at 49.2 and 53.0 percent, respectively, non-Hispanic Native Americans and Hispanics in “SNAP households,” are disproportionately likely to be poor (66.8 percent and 65.3 percent).

²² See <http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/workfirst/> for details about program elements and eligibility.

²³ SNAP recipients who are not poor are, by definition, “near poor” given eligibility thresholds. See <http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/foodstamp/index.htm>.

Health Insurance

In total, 83.5 percent of North Carolinians have health insurance coverage and 16.5 percent do not. Of those who have insurance, 75.2 percent have private health insurance coverage and 38.3 percent have public coverage (an individual can have both).

Poverty and health insurance disparities. Nearly 30 percent of poor North Carolinians do not have any health insurance coverage, compared to 13.6 percent of the non-poor.²⁴ Furthermore, just 21 percent of the poor have private health insurance while approximately 54.4 percent have public health insurance coverage from programs like Medicaid, Medicare, and veteran's benefits. The poverty rates also differ for those with different types of health insurance coverage. For instance, 6.2 percent of those with private health insurance coverage are poor, but those without health insurance are about as likely to be poor as those with public health insurance at 32.0 and 30.6 percent, respectively.

Race and health insurance disparities. Health insurance coverage also differs by race/Hispanic origin. For instance, 12.2 percent of non-Hispanic whites do not have access to health insurance coverage of any kind, compared to 18.8 percent of non-Hispanic blacks, 22.1 percent of non-Hispanic Native Americans, and 41.8 percent of Hispanics. Similarly, poverty rates among those with access to different insurance types vary by race/Hispanic origin. Of those with no health insurance coverage, non-Hispanic whites are least likely to be poor at 26.8 percent. Just over two-thirds of non-Hispanic blacks (36.6 percent) and Hispanics (38.6 percent) without health insurance are poor. These patterns persist across each type of health insurance coverage. For instance, while only 5.2 percent of non-Hispanic whites with private health insurance coverage are poor, 9.1 percent of non-Hispanic blacks, 9.8 percent of non-Hispanic Native Americans, and 9.6 percent of Hispanics with private coverage are poor. Similarly, 20 percent of non-Hispanic whites with public health insurance coverage are poor. The same is true for 44.9 percent of non-Hispanic blacks, 55.7 percent of non-Hispanic Native Americans, and 51.9 percent of Hispanics.²⁵

Residence Patterns Among the Poor in North Carolina

Homeownership. While 66 percent of North Carolinians live in an owned (or mortgaged) home, this is true of only 35 percent of North Carolina's poor. Similarly, the poverty rate for those living in owned homes is lower than those renting. Just over 9 percent of

²⁴ These figures are for 2012, before the Affordable Care Act was implemented.

²⁵ Children in low-income families have more health insurance options than their parents. See <http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dma/healthchoice/who.htm>.

those residing in owned homes are poor, compared to 34.5 percent of those in rented homes. Furthermore, home ownership rates vary by race/ Hispanic origin. For instance, 75.1 percent of non-Hispanic whites live in owned (or mortgaged) homes. This compares to 49.8 percent of non-Hispanic blacks, 63.2 percent of non-Hispanic Native Americans, and 46.4 percent of Hispanics owning homes.

Again, poverty rates among those in different living arrangements vary by race/ Hispanic origin. Just 27.4 percent of non-Hispanic whites in rented homes are poor compared to 41.4 percent of non-Hispanic blacks, 57.0 percent of non-Hispanic Native Americans, and 41.8 percent of Hispanics. Similarly, just 6.9 percent of non-Hispanic whites in owned homes are poor compared to 13 percent of non-Hispanic blacks, 23.3 percent of non-Hispanic Native Americans, and 26.7 percent of Hispanics.

Residential Instability. Just over 15 percent of North Carolina’s population in 2012 lived in a different house than in 2011. The poor are almost twice as likely to have moved than the non-poor: 23.7 percent of the poor moved, compared to 12.4 percent of the non-poor population. Similarly, 29.2 percent of those living in a different house in 2011 are poor, compared to only 15.9 percent of those in the same residence. Residential stability varies slightly, though significantly, by race/ Hispanic origin. For instance, 13.6 percent of non-Hispanic whites reside in a different house than they did last year, compared to 18.5 percent for both non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics. Poverty rates among those who live in a different home this year vary by race/ Hispanic origin as well. For instance, only 23.2 percent of non-Hispanic whites residing in a different home are poor while members of minority groups in the same situation are significantly more likely to be poor. Just below 40 percent of non-Hispanic blacks in a different home are poor, 55.2 percent of non-Hispanic Native Americans, and 35.9 percent of Hispanics.

People Living at 150 percent of the Poverty Level or Less

This report focuses on those who are below the official poverty thresholds, as noted in the introduction, but those who are just above the poverty threshold also struggle to make ends meet. When we look at the percent of North Carolinians who are “near poor” as well as those who are poor (or those with 150 percent or less of the poverty threshold incomes), we again see significant variation by race and ethnicity.

	Less than 150% of poverty
Total	26.0
White, NH	20.1
Black, NH	36.9
Native American, NH	46.3
Other, NH	26.4
Hispanic	48.5

Note: **Bold** values are different from White, NH in the same column (p<.05)

Source: ACS Microdata, 2012

V. Where Do North Carolina's Poor Live?

To examine how poverty differs by geography and type of place we shift from using one-year American Community Survey (ACS) estimates for North Carolina in 2012 and instead use data from the ACS 2008-2012 five-year estimates because they are more accurate at levels of geography below the state level. In other words, at the specific levels of geography used in the following analyses, we are able to get a more accurate portrait with the average over the past five years than if we were to only look at the past year. This shift in focus, however, comes with one major drawback. The ACS five-year estimates do not break down each race (except for whites) by whether or not they are of Hispanic origin. As a result there is some overlap in the black and Hispanic categories presented below. However, as Table 4 shows, this will not likely skew the results in a meaningful way because only 1.6 percent of blacks in North Carolina are also Hispanic (1.4 and 2.1 percent among the non-poor and poor, respectively).

Table 4. Race by Hispanic Origin

	Percent Hispanic		
	Total	Non-poor	Poor
White	7.8%	6.0%	18.9%
Black	1.6%	1.4%	2.1%
Native American	8.6%	9.1%	6.9%
Other	38.5%	32.7%	54.6%

Source: American Community Survey Microdata, 2012

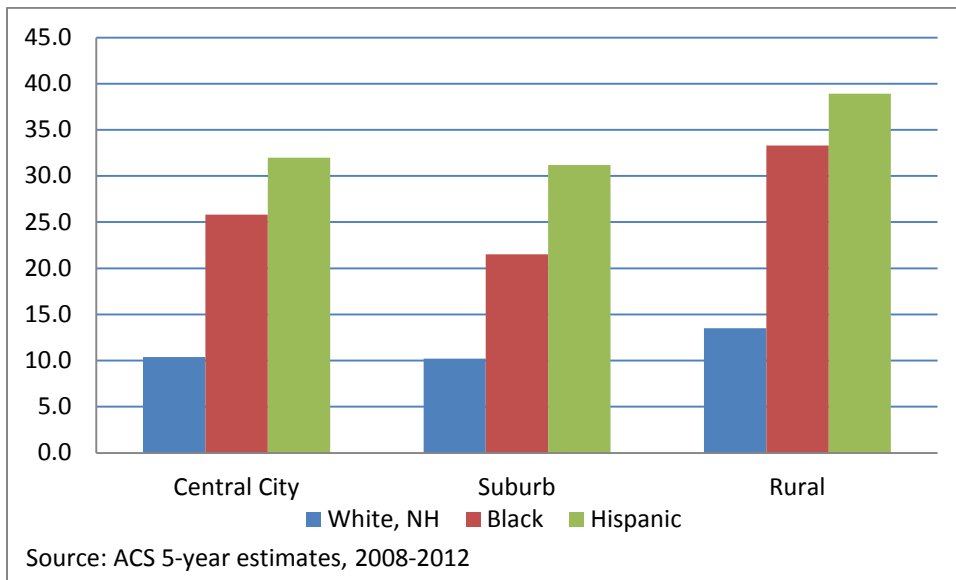
Metropolitan Status

To some degree the challenges associated with living in poverty differ according to whether one is living in a central city area, a rural community, or a suburb. Poor parents may find greater dangers in inner city neighborhoods, for example, and more support from extended family may be available in rural enclaves. Transportation can be a greater challenge for those without a vehicle in the countryside, and there are often fewer job opportunities.²⁶

²⁶ The cost of gas and long commutes are especially hard on the working poor in rural areas. See discussion box in David L. Brown and Kai A. Schafft, *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century: Resilience and Transformation* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011), p. 199.

We look at poverty in North Carolina based on metropolitan status: the central cities, where 31.9 percent of North Carolina’s population resides, the suburbs of those cities with 38.6 percent of the population, and rural areas where 29.6 percent live. North Carolina’s poor population disproportionately resides in central cities (34.2 percent, or 535,012 people) and rural areas (34.8 percent, 543,542 people). Suburban areas have the smallest amount of North Carolina’s poor (31.0 percent, or 485,000 poor). Central cities and rural areas have similar (though statistically different) poverty rates at 18.1 and 19.8 percent, respectively, while only 13.5 percent of those in suburban areas are poor.

Figure 6. Percent Poor by Race and Metropolitan Status



As Figure 6 shows, there are also racial differences between poverty rates in each of these areas. In central cities, approximately 10.4 percent of non-Hispanic whites are poor. Blacks (of any origin), on the other hand are more than twice as likely to be poor in the central cities (25.8 percent) and Hispanics (of any race) are more than three times as likely to be poor (32.0 percent). We see a similar pattern in rural areas except with slightly higher poverty rates for each racial group. About 13.5 percent of non-Hispanic whites in rural North Carolina are poor.

Remarkably, more than a third of blacks and Hispanics in rural North Carolina are poor at 33.3 and 38.9 percent, respectively. Poverty is lowest in the suburbs with only 10.2 percent of non-Hispanic whites below the poverty line. About 21.5 percent of suburban blacks (of any origin) are poor, while more than 31 percent of Hispanics (of any race) are.

Regional Differences

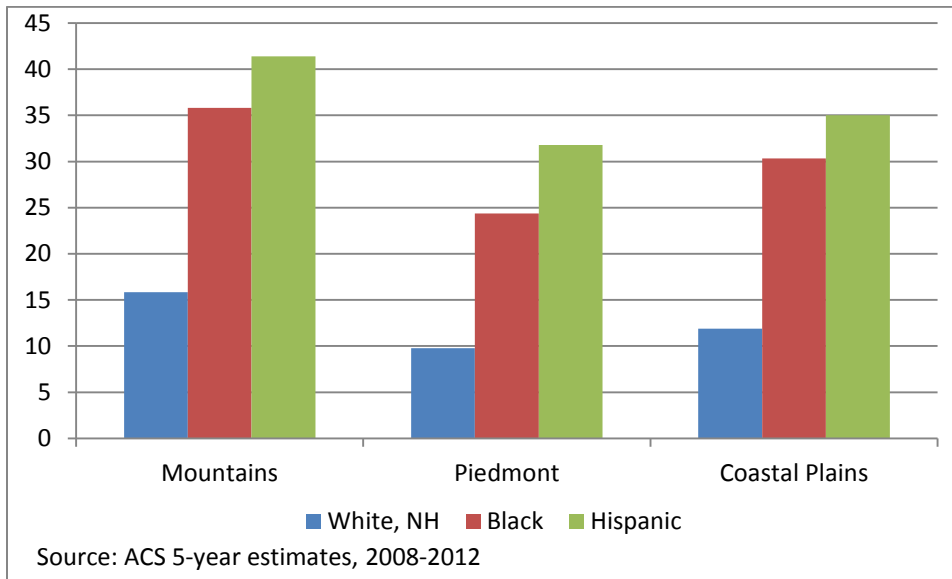
We also look at poverty in North Carolina across its three distinct regions, the Mountains,²⁷ the Piedmont,²⁸ and the Coastal Plains.²⁹ The Mountains region contains 11.6 percent of North Carolina's population, compared to the Piedmont region at 59.9 percent, and the Coastal Plains region at 28.5 percent. North Carolina's minority population is disproportionately concentrated in the Piedmont and Coastal Plains regions. The Piedmont is 21.4 percent black (can be Hispanic) and 9.3 percent Hispanic (of any race), and the Coastal Plains is 27.6 percent black (can be Hispanic) and 7.7 percent Hispanic (of any race). In contrast, the Mountains region is only 3.9 percent black (can be Hispanic) and 5.3 percent Hispanic (of any race). North Carolina's poor population is spread out proportionately across these three regions. Just over 12 percent of the poor live in the Mountains region, 54.3 percent in the Piedmont region, and 33.2 percent in the Coastal Plains region. While the poor are spread out across these three regions, the poverty rates in the Mountains and Coastal Plains regions are higher than in the Piedmont region. Just over 18 percent of those living in the Mountains are poor and 19.6 percent of those in the Coastal Plains, compared to 15.2 percent in the Piedmont region.

²⁷ The Mountains region includes these counties: Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Burke, Caldwell, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, McDowell, Macon, Madison, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Swain, Transylvania, Watauga, Wilkes and Yancey.

²⁸ The Piedmont region includes these counties: Alamance, Alexander, Anson, Cabarrus, Caswell, Catawba, Chatham, Cleveland, Davidson, Davie, Durham, Forsyth, Franklin, Gaston, Granville, Guilford, Iredell, Lee, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Montgomery, Moore, Orange, Person, Randolph, Richmond, Rockingham, Rowan, Stanly, Stokes, Surry, Union, Vance, Wake, Warren, and Yadkin.

²⁹ The Coastal Plains region includes these counties: Beaufort, Bertie, Bladen, Brunswick, Camden, Carteret, Chowan, Columbus, Craven, Cumberland, Currituck, Dare, Duplin, Edgecombe, Gates, Greene, Halifax, Harnett, Hertford, Hoke, Hyde, Johnston, Jones, Lenoir, Martin, Nash, New Hanover, Northampton, Onslow, Pamlico, Pasquotank, Pender, Perquimans, Pitt, Robeson, Sampson, Scotland, Tyrell, Washington, Wayne, and Wilson.

Figure 7. Percent Poor by Race and Region



We also find racial differences in the poverty rates in each of these areas (Figure 7). For instance, 15.8 percent of non-Hispanic whites in the Mountains Region are poor, compared to 35.8 percent of blacks (of any origin) and 41.4 percent of Hispanics (of any race). The same general patterns emerge in the Piedmont and the Coastal Plains regions where non-Hispanic whites have substantially lower poverty rates than their black (of any origin) and Hispanic (of any race) counterparts.

VI. Conclusion

Poverty is high in North Carolina, and African Americans, Native Americans and Hispanics are especially hard hit. Why? What does the research tell us about why people are poor, and why some groups are more vulnerable and can be stuck in poverty generation after generation?

Until the 1980s poverty analysts, policymakers, and politicians largely cast the debate about why poverty persists in terms of culture versus structure, or human agency versus larger economic and social forces beyond the control of individuals.

Conservatives emphasized personal responsibility and attributed poverty to bad decisions and bad behavior – dropping out of school, having children out of wedlock or too young, getting involved in drugs or other criminal activity. Progressives would stress the barriers poor people face, from racism and sexism to the distribution of opportunity for education and work and the growing prevalence of low-wage jobs.

The debate became especially politicized in the 1960s when sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then working for the Johnson administration, became alarmed by persistent

black poverty and argued that black families were caught in a “tangle of pathology,” with a growing proportion of female-headed households. He said that black men needed job training and access to jobs to address the challenges contributing to high poverty rates among African Americans. While Moynihan’s report was intended to make an internal case for a jobs program to the Johnson administration, the report was leaked to the press and journalists highlighted his “vivid prose,” as sociologists Massey and Sampson put it, rather than his strong structural argument.³⁰ Liberals, feminists and black leaders maligned the report as victim blaming, racist and sexist. The result was a hardening of the two perspectives on poverty, one blaming racism and structural conditions for poverty and the other blaming culture and behavior.

Finally in the 1980s sociologist William Julius Wilson challenged this dichotomy, arguing that culture and structure were both important. Wilson’s research showed how bad decisions, failing community institutions and larger structural economic and social factors, including historic and ongoing racial discrimination, are intertwined, especially in poor black neighborhoods. In his study of poverty in Chicago, Wilson had found that structural factors like job availability or the presence of a middle class affected culture, or how the poor behaved. When the black middle class moved out of Chicago’s inner cities in the 1980s to less depressed suburbs, the very poor remained. Simultaneously, joblessness rose as blue-collar work mechanized or moved overseas and a two-tiered service economy replaced the more egalitarian manufacturing economy that prevailed in the post World War II era. Without jobs, without the examples and the institutional investments of a middle class, the poor experienced increased social isolation and turned to gangs or drugs, had children young and out of wedlock, and dropped out of school, making bad choices that further cut them off from participation in the mainstream. Poverty deepened in these disadvantaged neighborhoods.

In an afterword to a new edition of The Truly Disadvantaged, Wilson summarizes his original argument in the context of these debates, stressing the link between persistent poverty and growing inequality in a changing American economy:

In earlier decades, most of the adults in ghetto neighborhoods were employed. And black working and middle classes provided stability in these neighborhoods... In the process they reinforced societal values and norms... the inner-city ghetto today includes a high proportion of residents whose major predicament is rising joblessness, a trend that is strengthened by growing social isolation. The contact between groups of different class and racial backgrounds has decreased ... Accordingly, the arguments presented in The

³⁰ Douglas S. Massey and Robert J. Sampson, “Moynihan Redux: Legacies and Lessons,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (2009.) <http://ann.sagepub.com/content/621/1/6.refs.html>

Truly Disadvantaged to account for the recent increases in social dislocations in the inner-city ghetto are complex. They cannot be reduced to the easy explanations of racism advanced by those on the left or of “culture of poverty” posited by those on the right. Although historic racism created the ghetto and although contemporary discrimination has undoubtedly aggravated the economic and social woes of its residents, an adequate understanding of the sharp increase in these problems requires the specification of a complex web of additional factors, including the impact of shifts in the modern American economy.³¹

Wilson’s original work catalyzed important new scholarship examining poverty, race and culture in neighborhoods over the last two decades.³² My own work exploring persistent poverty in rural America in the 1990s was inspired by Wilson’s urban analysis. I found similar patterns in chronically poor rural communities — a small middle class, communities made up of haves and have-nots where poor children attended separate dysfunctional schools, isolated from those who were doing well and often maligned by them for making bad decisions about school, childbearing and work.

But in rural areas there was a local political dimension based on the historical political economy. In Appalachia and the Yazoo Delta in Mississippi, economic and political power was tightly held by a few families whom everyone could name. There had been a time when coal operators and plantation bossmen deliberately kept miners and field workers uneducated and vulnerable. They wanted cheap and compliant labor, fearing unions in coal country and civil rights organizing in the Delta. This history of exploitation and vulnerability created the two-class society I found in the 1990s, and again in 2013, in which the have-nots were excluded from the mainstream.

³¹ Wilson, William Julius (2012-06-29). *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, Second Edition (Kindle Locations 5718-5729). (University of Chicago Press. Kindle Edition, 2012).

³² See, for example, John D. Kasarda, “Structural Factors Affecting the Location and Timing of Urban Underclass Growth,” *Urban Geography* 11 (1990): 235– 64; John Iceland, “Urban Labor Markets and Individual Transitions Out of Poverty,” *Demography* 34, no. 3 (1997): 429– 41; Tama Leventhal and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, “The Neighborhoods They Live In: The Effects of Neighborhood Residence on Child and Adolescent Outcomes,” *Psychological Bulletin* 126 (2000): 309– 37; and Mario L. Small and Kathryn K. Newman, “Urban Poverty after *The Truly Disadvantaged*: The Rediscovery of the Family, the Neighborhood, and Culture,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 27, no. 1 (2001): 23– 45. 25; Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Lincoln Quillian, “Segregation and Poverty Concentration: The Role of Three Segregations.” *American Sociological Review* 77(3):354-379. Xavier de Souza Briggs, Susan J. Popkin and John Goering. *Moving to Opportunity: the Story of an American Experiment to Fight Ghetto Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and David J. Harding, Michele Lamont, and Mario Luis Small (eds.) *Reconsidering Culture and Poverty*. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Volume 629, May 2010.

Historically North Carolina's economy relied on agricultural enterprises and textile operations that paid low wages to workers with little education. Those we interviewed in their sixties and seventies in rural eastern North Carolina recounted leaving school as youngsters to work in the fields alongside their parents. They had limited education and were consigned to low wage work. In their study of the North Carolina Fund,³³ Robert Korstad and James Leloudis describe the state's economy in the 1960s:

When Terry Sanford became governor in 1960, he inherited the bitter legacy of an economy built on cheap labor and white supremacy. The state's factory workers earned some of the lowest industrial wages in the nation, more than a third of families lived below the poverty line, half of all students never finished high school, and a fourth of all adults were functionally illiterate.

While educational opportunities have improved in North Carolina, we still see the legacy of low education, as well as low wages. That legacy perpetuates poverty, and as this report has shown, African Americans and Hispanics are especially vulnerable. But the new research linking poverty and place is also important for understanding the persistence of high poverty among people of color in North Carolina.

Recent books by sociologists Robert Sampson and Patrick Sharkey, building on work by Wilson and others, offer useful insights and understanding about ongoing, chronic poverty in the nation's cities, especially for black Americans. In sophisticated empirical studies Sampson and Sharkey have documented the cumulative effect of growing up in a disadvantaged community context across generations. As Sharkey puts it: "If a child is raised by a parent who grew up in a similarly disadvantaged neighborhood — a parent who was taught in similarly deficient learning environments, who witnessed the same violence, who also had few employment opportunities — it is reasonable to think that the effects of the environment would be amplified, reinforced by the consistency of disadvantage as experienced over generations of a family."³⁴ Sampson found that the same neighborhoods that were poor in the 1990s were poor in the previous three decades, and that poverty meant the "tangle" of problems we associate with chronic poverty. He observes, "The legacies of neighborhood inequality are pervasive."³⁵ Douglas Massey's recent review of their books concludes that both Sampson and

³³ Robert R. Korstad and James L. Leloudis. *To Right these Wrongs: The North Carolina Fund and the Battle to End Poverty and Inequality in 1960s America*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

³⁴ Patrick Sharkey (2013-05-15). *Stuck in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of Progress toward Racial Equality* (Kindle Locations 231-238) (University of Chicago Press. Kindle Edition, 2013.)

³⁵ Sampson, Robert J. *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 363.

Sharkey link inheritance of poverty to inheritance of place in ways that help us understand why poverty stays so high for African Americans.

In my view, Great American City and Stuck in Place are critical to understanding the persistence of poverty and deprivation among African Americans today and are also fundamental to explaining the relative lack of progress in closing salient racial gaps in achievement. Sampson in his book expertly describes the social and spatial structure by which segregation and concentrated poverty are generated and reproduced. Sharkey ably documents the multigenerational exposure of African Americans to concentrated poverty that inevitably follows from these structural conditions and how it systematically undercuts black prospects for education, employment, occupational status, earnings and wealth while simultaneously making it difficult for affluent African American parents to pass on class advantages to their children.³⁶

Poverty scholars Wilson, Massey, Sampson and Sharkey are among those whose research has shown the powerful intersection of poor job prospects, poor educational institutions in bad neighborhoods, and the bad decisions that poor children and youth often make. They show how these forces disproportionately affect poor African Americans and Hispanics, who are far more likely to live in poor places among poor households in families that have been poor for generations.

VII. Vignettes

There are common challenges in the lives of the 47 poor adults my team interviewed in February 2014. Most had dropped out of school before completing high school, often caught up with a “bad crowd.” But many went back to earn a GED, and to a person they recognize education is necessary to improve their lives and those of their children.

Many came from large families, and a good number had three or four or more children of their own. Resources were tight and still are, and stress can be high in their fragile families, stress that can lead to domestic violence and substance abuse (which themselves lead to increased stress). Those we talked to usually grew up in disadvantaged neighborhoods among other families who were struggling, and most still live in these tough places, though several had plans to save and move to neighborhoods that would be safer for their children.

Some were working part time or part year, others were working two jobs, and a good number were unemployed but looking for work. Those who had disabilities might be looking for work, but were also hoping to get approved for SSI and disability payments.

³⁶ Douglas S. Massey, “Inheritance of Poverty or Inheritance of Place? The Emerging Consensus on Neighborhoods and Stratification,” *Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews* 2013 42:690-695.

Finding enough income to make ends meet is a constant struggle, and many rely on family. They almost all say that their lives have been hard, but are determined to make things better for their children.

As noted in a footnote, these poor adults do not represent a random sample of the poor in North Carolina. But they do illustrate the kind of lives the poor lead, and their stories are consistent with the hundreds of poor adults I have interviewed over my career in urban and rural America.³⁷

Off the Farm and Into the Factories in Rural Eastern North Carolina

Like so many of her contemporaries, seventy-two year old Mary grew up on a farm, the daughter of black sharecroppers. Her parents had nine children, and by the time they were eight they were helping out with farm work, chopping cotton, picking cotton, working on chores in the peanut or tobacco fields. Mary went as far as the ninth grade when she became pregnant. She broke up with the Daddy of her first child right after her son was born when she saw him *walking around with somebody else. I got so disappointed in him.*

She married a couple years later, and she and her husband of fifty-two years raised seven children. They lived on the farm his parents worked at first, with his parents. But after a year they got their own house on the farm, *we farmed for the same man as my father-in-law. Gave up some crop, peanuts and cotton, sharecropping, we done that for a couple years.* But as a young couple they decided to leave the farm, and he got a job working on roads. She was a cleaner at a hospital, making five dollars a day in the mid 1960s. They built a cinder block house with help from neighbors, the house they live in to this day. *I wanted a house where I could plant flowers.* They had paid their debts on it by the time they reached their thirties, but later he put on vinyl siding, and the loans for that improvement still plague them. They owed \$3,000, and when the company demanded payment right away they had to borrow from the bank. *We still in debt. Isn't that something?*

Mary and her husband were hard workers right up until retirement. In addition to their early work on farms and on the roads or at the hospital, they both worked in factories – sewing, poultry, and plastics. Her mother looked after the children. She bought the groceries and paid for the phone; he paid the house, heating and *insurances*. But it was paycheck to paycheck, and now they survive on their social security with some extra help from their children. *I had a hard life.*

³⁷ Names have been changed to ensure anonymity and to stay consistent with the protocol approved by my university's Institutional Review Board for my book update in 2013.

We came up hard. Recalling her childhood, she shakes her head, the end of the year would come and we looked for Christmas money, but they said we came out even.

Reflecting on her life of hard work, Mary says *I wish I had gotten more education so I could have gotten a better job.* She is deeply religious. When asked when she feels good she says it is that she knows Jesus, and she *thinks on his goodness and mercy, other things don't matter, the things you can't do nothing about.*

Hunting for Work After Prison To Be a Model for His Boys

Henry is a tall, lanky 43 year-old African American with deep ties to his family here in rural eastern North Carolina. He grew up in a church-going family and describes his childhood as *beautiful.* He was bright, involved in school activities, and on the road to further education when he fell in with a bad group – *I was young, ignorant and focused on other things. I hung around the wrong people.* Selling drugs gave him money of his own, and much more of it than the minimum wage jobs he also worked as a young man. He got caught and was incarcerated, three times. Now at 43, he is recently divorced. He has three sons, and they are the focus of our interview and of his life. They drive his determination to make it. He describes family members and community leaders supporting him, trying to help him find work. *This is my time to be strong, be stable.*

But it is very hard to find work, even as a licensed electrician, because at the end of every interview there is the inevitable question about whether he has a criminal record. He doesn't have a vehicle, but he says through his family he has *reliable transportation. My family is strong, they see me trying, they will help me.* Henry always looked down on those who relied on food stamps, but now he depends on them to get by. *I never thought I would have to fall back on them.* He does odd jobs while he looks for steady employment, and now is holding out hope that one of the two prospects for minimum wage jobs will work out. He says *opportunities in this community are slack – everything has its kinks... sometimes I feel there is no help and other times I am overwhelmed by the help I get. Persistence is what matters.* When we ask where Henry would like to see himself in five years, he grins – seems like a long way away. *Stable employment. A nice place that my boys can come visit. I don't want to be rich, I just want to be able to maintain, do what I am supposed to do, have a little money in the bank, all that from hard work.*

He wants his boys to finish college, do well in school. He wants them to see things more clearly than he did. He is trying to talk with them and be a down to earth Dad – listen to them. His grandparents never asked what he thought about things; they believed what was good enough for them was good enough for him.

And he rebelled. He wants his boys to *be just the opposite of me*. He is trying hard to rebuild, he says, to get back into the workforce. *I want to be stable, strong.*

Hispanic Married Couple Family

Jorge and Marta are in their early 40s and have been living in the United States without documents for the last eight years. Marta is from Guatemala and her husband, Jorge is from Mexico. Neither one completed elementary school, and they began working to support themselves and their families as soon as they left school. Jorge doesn't get through talking about his childhood without sobbing for his younger self. Marta left Guatemala when she was 8-years old to find work in Mexico, where she met Jorge, at 25 already exhausted from years of physical labor in the fields. They've been together for 19 years but little has come easily to them. With one child, the family saved up for years to pay a coyote the couple thousand dollars it costs to safely cross the heavily patrolled border. Despite the added security that comes with paying a professional to get you across, they were aware of the significant risks. They hoped that they would be able to offer their young child a better life, with economic security and physical well-being.

When you're struggling in Mexico, Marta explains, all you hear about is the promise of America. What gets left out is how the struggle continues in a new environment, isolated from family and friends, along with the constant fear that at any moment you could be sent back, separated from your family. Jorge, Marta, and their two children rarely leave their two-bedroom apartment; they leave only to go to work and church and out to dinner when there's a birthday, because every car ride carries the risk of deportation. The uncertainty and isolation drove Jorge to take up drinking. It got so bad at one point that he was hiding money from the family to buy his next drink. He was barely holding on to his job and the entire burden of keeping the family afloat fell on Marta.

Jorge's ability to hold down a job became irrelevant five years back when the poultry plant closed, leaving Jorge and Marta and hundreds more like them without work. Marta eventually got a job at a restaurant making biscuits during the early shift (she starts at 4 in the morning). After seven months of unemployment, Jorge got a job at a packaging plant about 20 minutes away. He works the afternoon shift, starting at 3:30 in the afternoon, so they don't have to pay for childcare.

Jorge has stopped drinking. Going to church with the family at his daughter's

request has helped. He sobs once more when I ask who is the most important person in his life. *Mi esposa (my wife)*, he says. *I would have died without her.* Marta continues to participate in a women's support group that meets weekly. She joined when her husband was drinking heavily but has continued to participate despite things having improved at home. It's her only social network. When I ask her what's been the toughest for her, she says that it was the long bouts of unemployment but quickly jumps to tell me her philosophy of raising children poor. *You can't spoil them, even when the situation is not so bad.* She explains that the moments when they have a little left over are rare and short. If you let down your guard and spoil them, they'll get used to it, and it'll hurt even more when it inevitably gets taken away.

Hispanic Single Mom

Twenty-nine year-old Camila lives with her two teenage daughters, Sofia and Juliana. Camila dropped out of high school but pursued a two-year certificate in computer systems. She met her husband, whom she never names, in Mexico. They had their two daughters and came to the U.S. legally when the girls were six and four years old. That was nearly 13 years ago. A lot has happened since then. Camila says that the father of her children couldn't handle the stress of making it in America and took it out on her. *Gracias a Dios (thank god)*, she found a women's group of domestic abuse survivors who helped her get out of the house with her daughters safe and sound. She's currently living with a Latina friend who's allowing her to live in one of the rooms in the three-bedroom trailer she owns. It's tight and it's not their own but it's better than being back with her husband.

Back in Mexico, Camila provided child care to families to make a living. She continued to do that work in the U.S. for many years, unable to find other work. But she found herself losing patience with the children so she stopped providing childcare and gets by with the small child support payment her husband contributes and the little bit she makes from selling homemade tamales. She'll make it work this way until she finds another job and saves up the money to get her GED. That's the very next thing on her to-do list.

She lights up when I ask her to tell me about her daughters and her relationship to them. *I'm a very modern kind of mom*, she says. *We're close, there's lots of trust, not like the mothers of the past that you couldn't discuss certain things with. With my daughters, all topics are open for discussion.*

Camila is very aware of the isolation that the average Latino immigrant experiences in this part of North Carolina, and she works hard to find a community to combat it. Her daughters and she regularly volunteer with an organization that helps young women with anger management issues. She's involved with a Latino community organization and is a part of the choir at a local church. Her experience with domestic violence threw Camila into a downward spiral of depression. For her, the community she's been so deliberate about building up around her has been her salvation.

Getting Straight for the Children and Grandchildren

Helen, now 48, is a medium build white woman with long dirty-blond hair caught up in a barrette, warm eyes and a straight talking manner. Her life turned hard when she was only three, when she and her sister were taken from her parents and placed in a foster home. Her mother, who had dropped out in the 9th grade, had epilepsy and was prone to seizures. Her Dad, also a dropout, earned his living as a roofer. He was an alcoholic and beat her mother. After several foster homes their uncle and his wife adopted her and her sister when she was six. But Helen was molested in both the foster and adopted homes, and she started drinking as a young teenager. She wishes she had been stronger back then, like her sister, whom she thinks was spared by more forcefully resisting the abuse. *If I could do it over I would be a stronger kid. I wished I would have been strong like her.*

Both girls graduated from high school and went right to work, Helen as a cashier in a grocery store. Over the past 25 years she has moved back and forth between North Carolina and Ohio and her two children and two grandchildren are in Ohio now. When she was young she visited her stepbrother in Ohio on a visit with her foster Dad. There she met the man who would become her husband and the father of her two children, and returned a year later to be with him. They were together eight years in Ohio, both working, his family helping with the children. But she was coming home from her factory job and getting drunk every night, and eventually they split up. For a while she moved back to North Carolina to take care of her mother and they each took a child, but the children missed each other. She realized he had a solid family support system and she did not, so she had him take both children. A few years later she moved back to Ohio herself and kept the children every other weekend. Now her children are in their twenties and having their own babies. After years of drinking and living rough in an abandoned house in a small town in North Carolina, surviving on

food stamps, she moved to the city where she is trying to remake her life. *I got sick and tired of being tired.*

She is starting from scratch. *I do the bus thing. You have to take a bus everywhere.* Now that she is clean, she is putting in applications at fast food restaurants. She feels blessed that she has never been arrested, or hurt anyone when she was *driving under the influence.* But money is a challenge, with medicine to pay for, food, rent, and transportation. Like others we spoke with, she thinks five years in the future is a long way off. *Wow. I'd like to have a steady job. I'd like to have enough money in the bank that I can go see my grandbabies, and buy them something at Christmas. I don't need anything big for myself. A simple, clean life.* She wants to work with animals – maybe get a job grooming animals at PetCo. She wants her children and her grandchildren to be proud of her.

Working Two Jobs to Support Her Son and Mom and Save for a Down Payment

Karen is a 38 year-old single African American mother who grew up in Philadelphia, where she played basketball in high school and planned to be a lab technician. She attended community college for one semester, but she was *paying out of pocket*, and decided she really needed to work. She moved soon after to this North Carolina city, following her mother, who had moved down because she liked the area when she attended a family member's graduation several years earlier. When her mother became ill, Karen came to take care of her. Over the last twenty years she has worked hard – as a cashier at a big drug store, in the purchasing office of an office building, at grocery stores, as a house cleaner, as a receptionist.

Her mother lives with her, and she takes care of her, joking that she has two children. But the arrangement also makes it possible for her to work her two jobs – one as a receptionist for a service agency and another cleaning an elementary school. Her workday goes from 9 AM to 9 PM every day, and she snatches time with her son in the morning when she drives him to school and when she gets home before he goes to bed. They talk several times on the phone while she is cleaning after he gets home from school. *It is kinda hectic Monday through Friday!*

When Karen and her son's father were together they lived in a two-bedroom apartment in a good neighborhood, and Karen is determined to save enough to buy a house in that same area before her 11 year old is in high school. She originally took her second job several years ago to just make ends meet, to make the car payments and pay the "insurances" she has on herself and her son. *It was*

real real tight. But now she is putting a little money away each month with her eye on that house.

Last year she attended a class on drawing blood, got her certificate, and has been helping out at a clinic at her agency. She tried applying for regular jobs drawing blood at a hospital, but soon realized they all want at least one year of experience, so she is building that year of experience even as she holds the two jobs. Maybe in another year she can have one better job as a phlebotomist.

Her son's father also holds two jobs, one at Wal-Mart and as a hotel desk manager, and a year ago he told her that is why he was not coming around anymore. She decided she could not rely on him, and though he talks with his son, they are officially "broken up" and he does not provide financial help. She has her plans, and is steadily working to get the house and the new job and make sure she can *do what's best for my child.*

Raising Children Right as a Single Mom in a North Carolina City

Sharon is a quiet but tense 21 year-old black woman who lives in her mother's place with her two small children, ages three and four. For much of her childhood she and her brothers lived with both parents, and they had clothes, shoes, took trips and went to church. But the urban neighborhood they lived in was rough -- she had friends who died as twelve year olds. *You think you can walk to the store for potato chips, but it is dangerous, real easy to get caught up in it... you could be 11 or 12 and somebody gets you drugs, older kids ask you to hold their guns and drugs, it's cool, you think 'they my friends.'* *If you are young it is easy to get caught up in those streets and never come out.*

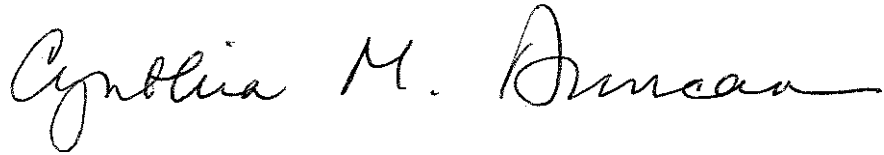
She had her oldest child at 17 while she was in high school, several years after her parents divorced and her dad left, struggling to manage his alcoholism. She was depressed, she says, and stressed, with a colicky baby. She dropped out of school, started hanging out with friends and getting high, and six months later found she had a heroin addiction – *hanging around the wrong people doing the wrong things.* A couple years ago she got her GED at the community college, and started on a path to completing a trade certification, but didn't finish. She has worked at fast food restaurants, and liked being able to provide for her kids, *on payday buy them a toy or a happy meal.* Family members often help with the children, some times her brother, other times her mother or her great aunt.

She is out of work now, gets some child support from the children's father, who is unemployed and rarely sees the children. She relies on food stamps and welfare. The children get fed breakfast and lunch at the preschool program she

feels lucky to have gotten them into, so she can make the food stamps work to cover dinner.

She says it is very hard to get employment. It's very hard to get a job, you get on a bus, and you go fill out an application, trying to get a job. Her dream is to get her cosmetology license and have her own hair salon. She wants her children to finish high school, get a trade, in building, electrician, something they like and can keep to it. Sharon says she has known struggle since I had my kids. My children need a chance, I want to raise them appropriately – my children is my hope.

I declare under penalty of perjury under the laws of the United States that the foregoing is true and correct to the best of my knowledge. Executed on April 10, 2014 in New Castle, NH.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Cynthia M. Duncan". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Cynthia M. Duncan