

A POOR PEOPLE'S PANDEMIC REPORT:

MAPPING THE INTERSECTIONS OF POVERTY, RACE AND COVID-19

County Snapshot



Wayne County, North Carolina



Volunteers at Rebuilding Broken Places food distribution
PHOTO: ARCHIE BLACK

Before the pandemic, there were approximately 4.6 million poor and low-income people in North Carolina, including 53% (1.2 million) of children, 58% (1.2 million) of Black people, 67% (699,000) of Latino people and 36% (2.2 million)

of white people in the state (SPM). The state has been at the center of contemporary voter suppression laws for years, as well as organized resistance and victories against those laws. A 2017 monster voter suppression bill was found to have targeted Black voters “with [surgical precision](#)” and was sent back to the state government to correct. This batter continues today around [voter identification](#). In 2021, North Carolina also witnessed the [largest expansion of voting rights](#) since the 1965 Voting Rights Act, with the restoration of the right to vote for people with felony convictions.

Wayne County is a rural county in Eastern North Carolina, one of the poorest regions of North Carolina. It is a “Tier 1” county, indicating that its 125,000 residents have some of the highest levels of poverty and economic distress in the state: approximately 42% of its residents live under 200% of the poverty line (OPM), nearly half of the county is rent-burdened, and its uninsured rate (12.6%) is more

than two and a half times the uninsured rate in the wealthiest counties of the country. Its residents are 53% white, 30% Black and 11.8% Hispanic or Latino. During the pandemic, it had a death rate of 302 out of 100,000.

The county seat in Goldsboro is an entitlement city that receives resources for housing and community development projects to improve the quality of life for its low-income residents.

One of the biggest employers in Goldsboro is the Cherry Hospital state psychiatric facility. Rev. Shyrl Uzzell, Assistant Pastor at Greenleaf Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and trained nurse, worked there part-time during the pandemic. She saw the hospital and community do their best to respond to the health crisis and ensuing economic difficulties. Cherry Hospital implemented protocol for staff and visits and restructured its units to be able to test, quarantine and treat patients. Greenleaf Christian Church collaborated with other churches and community organizations to set up testing stations, financial assistance programs, and food and meal distributions.

One of the most pressing challenges the community faced was around housing and evictions. North Carolina has established the [Housing Opportunities and Prevention of Eviction \(HOPE\) Program](#) to provide rent and utility assistance to low-income renters that were having a hard time meeting their payments because of the pandemic. However, not all landlords were willing to accept these payments. A young woman in Goldsboro was evicted because her landlord was no longer interested in renting to the tenant. The community rallied around the young woman's case to buy her some time so she could find another place to live. In fact, the sheriff's department was overwhelmed with eviction notices and her notice was not served in a timely manner. She ended up living with family and friends until her situation stabilized, and remarkably, ministered to other homeless people during this crisis, by purchasing personal hygiene items, blankets and preparing meals. The toll of that time, however, remains.

As Rev. Uzzell noted, this crisis is far from over: "Who wants to rent someone a place who doesn't have a job? And how long will the pandemic assistance last? These are ongoing questions we're confronting here in Goldsboro."