

Strengthening Equity & Community Growth

Through Engagement & Assessment

Stakeholder Interview Report



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PIEDMONT TRIAD
REGIONAL COUNCIL



RESEARCH,
POLICY &
IMPACT
Center

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Introduction

Strengthening Equity & Community Growth

In 2010, the Piedmont Triad Regional Council (PTRC) and Piedmont Authority for Regional Transportation (PART) received a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to undertake a three-year effort to develop a regional plan for greater prosperity in communities across the region. As a result, in 2014 Piedmont Together was published and included an equity growth profile for the region – setting the sights on a more equitable and prosperous region.

More recently, the PTRC received a Phase I Build Back Better Regional Challenge award of \$500,000 from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) for the development and maturity of the SITE Next-Gen Cluster. Strengthening Innovation, Talent, & Equity (SITE); is a project that will spark equitable innovation to invigorate Next-Generation Manufacturing in the Piedmont Triad Region, with a goal to increase the number of high-paying manufacturing jobs across all demographics and geographies. The SITE Next-Gen Cluster is supported by a Coalition of 12 members: PTRC, Piedmont Triad Partnership, Piedmont Triad Regional Development Corporation, NC A&T, Wake Forest University Health Sciences, Winston- Salem State University, Alamance Community College, City of High Point, Forge Greensboro, Nussbaum Center for Entrepreneurship, Business High Point Chamber & Foundation, and Greensboro Chamber & Foundation.

The SITE Next-Gen Cluster Coalition has developed a preliminary engagement plan that may inform this qualifications request. The SITE Next-Gen engagement plan includes outreach and partnership from the following: 1) Private sector cluster partners and supporters, including business and industry leaders, economic developers, recruiters, and local chambers of commerce; 2) Community engagement and non-profit partners, including entrepreneurial interests, rural interests, environmental interests, DEI interests, public bodies and ad-hoc groups of changing composition and interests; 3) Educators, including universities, community colleges and K-12 systems; and 4) Workforce partners, including both public entities and private training programs. In order to be successful in reaching key outcomes of diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout the Cluster's nine projects, an assessment on Strengthening Equity & Community Growth is needed to engage, educate and identify leaders who can be directly involved in, advise, and inform the cluster's work during the project period of performance through the fall of 2026 and beyond.

Engagement & Assessment

Dr. Stephen Sills, Vice President of the *Research, Policy, and Impact Center* (RPIC) and John Ham, Vice President of the *Center for Professional Services* (both Centers of the *National Institute of Minority Economic Development*) have been conducting an in-depth assessment of workforce equity by engaging community and stakeholders in an analysis of barriers to economic and social mobility faced by low- and moderate-income workers.

The research findings presented in this report will be used to develop a better understanding of workforce needs and issues that present challenges for the most vulnerable workers. Through these interviews we have explored the social, structural, and environmental conditions in the communities where people live and work; whether those conditions hinder economic mobility and make it harder for people to achieve their goals; and whether the obstacles affect some racial, age, or gender groups more than others. If low- and moderate-income people don't have the resources they need to find work and to connect with the services they need, we want to know why, and who gets left out.

We have sought information, perspectives, best practices, and recommendations from community leaders, business executives, economic development agents, public administrators, educators, and workforce development experts throughout the study area. Our findings will be used to assess the needs of workers, to raise awareness about conditions in the labor economy, and to develop recommendations and best practices to improve economic mobility and workforce equity in the Piedmont Triad.

Goals of the Study

This project workforce equity assessment is intended to be used in updating the existing 2014 Piedmont Together's Equity Growth Profile, and in order to support focus areas of the Piedmont Triad's SITE Next-Gen Cluster Coalition, as well as to inform the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) - Triad Tomorrow. The goals of the study are to:

1. *Conduct* an environmental scan of equity efforts in the region focused on systems change to better understand the landscape, including analyzing existing partners and frameworks to address equity.
2. *Facilitate* community & stakeholder engagement meetings within our 12-county region to inform data collection and identify leaders in the advanced manufacturing cluster space, resiliency, and equity.
3. *Collect* baseline data related to advanced manufacturing, leadership, and four industry sectors of Biomedical, Automotive, Aviation, and Furniture/Textiles.

4. *Identify* existing census tract data and economic modeling data that will best support and inform the equity metrics and outcomes of the SITE Next-Gen cluster.
5. *Reveal* and *propose* strategies that will strengthen equity and community growth within the Piedmont Triad.
6. *Develop* an implementation plan & dashboard outline based on assessment results and revise goals to best align with community priorities and are they informing our metrics of success.

This interview sub-report will try to fulfill these goals, but it will be only a step toward fulfilling the overall objectives of the workforce equity assessment as a whole. This report includes some baseline data compiled from secondary sources, as well as interviews with key stakeholders conducted between 9/5/2022 and 11/18/2022. This is but the first phase in the process of acquiring the data we need to carry out those objectives. In later sub-reports we will present what we learn from focus groups and roundtable discussions with workers, social services clients and other local residents; and from surveys of public opinion. The questions we are asking and the information we are collecting are intended to help the PTRC to achieve its goals.

We won't present definitive recommendations for solutions in this sub-report. But, this sub-report will point toward solutions in several important ways. First, we hope that the detailed information presented here about a very wide range of topics will deepen the reader's insight into the nature of these problems. The fuller picture that emerges from the data will help to equip the PTRC with the understanding they will need in order to address the problems. Second, inevitably remedial ideas emerged naturally from our conversations about the problems. In these ways, the data presented here can eventually be applied to further the PTRC's goals.

Background: Economic Mobility

Wage, Salary, & Wealth Disparities

According to the Federal Reserve, in 2020 white families in the US had a median wealth of \$188,200, compared to \$24,100 for Black families.¹ Family wealth is an important tool for providing an economic safety net and for assisting the next generation in

getting started.² Wealth accumulation was systematically denied, and, in many cases, capital was even taken from Black communities and commuted to white institutions, resulting in the huge disparity seen today³. The legacy of exclusionary practices in the twentieth century is the 800% difference in the median wealth of white versus Black families. Shapiro (2006) exclaims that “closing the racial wealth gap must be at the forefront of the civil rights agenda in the twenty-first century.”⁴

The wage gap between White and Black workers is an important contributor to disparities in access to homeownership as well as just good quality housing, medical care, food access, and educational opportunities.⁵ This wage differential narrowed between 1880, when “Blacks in the United States earned only about 34 percent of the income of Whites,”⁶ to 51% by the 1950s.⁷ The gap narrowed further with improving labor rights for workers in the 1960s: “The black-white wage gap shrunk substantially

THERE REMAINS A 38.8% GAP IN EARNINGS TODAY. ACCORDING TO THE U.S. CENSUS, THE MEDIAN INCOME IN 2020 WAS \$45,870 FOR BLACK HOUSEHOLDS AND \$74,912 U.S. DOLLARS FOR WHITE, NON-HISPANIC FAMILIES.

1 Bhutta, Neil, Andrew C. Chang, Lisa J. Dettling, and Joanne W. Hsu (2020). "Disparities in Wealth by Race and Ethnicity in the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances," FEDS Notes. Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, DOI: 10.17016/2380-7172.2797 .

2 McIntosh et al., 2020.

3 Baradaran, Mehrsa. (2017). *The Color of Money: Black Banks and the Racial Wealth Gap*. Cambridge, Mass. Belknap Press, Harvard University Press.

4 Shapiro, Thomas. (2006). "Race, Homeownership and Wealth." *Journal of Law and Policy* 20:53-74.

https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_journal_law_policy/vol20/iss1/4.

5 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine; Health and Medicine Division; Board on Population Health and Public Health Practice; Committee on Community-Based Solutions to Promote Health Equity in the United States; Baciu A, Negussie Y, Geller A, et al. , editors. (2017). *Communities in Action: Pathways to Health Equity*. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 11. 3, "The Root Causes of Health Inequity." National Center for Biotechnology Information, U.S. National Library of Medicine <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK425845/>

6 Ng, K., & Virts, N. (1993). "The Black-White Income Gap in 1880." *Agricultural History*, 67(1), 1–15.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3744636>

7 Leonhardt, David. (2020). "The Black-White Wage Gap Is as Big as It Was in 1950: Recent research indicates little progress since the Truman administration." *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/25/opinion/sunday/race-wage-gap.html>

MOST SOCIAL MOBILITY IN AMERICA HAS BEEN ATTRIBUTED TO STRUCTURAL ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHANGES RATHER THAN TO PERSONAL EFFORT.

collar workers, like strong unions and a rising minimum wage. Because black workers were disproportionately in blue-collar jobs, the general rise of incomes for the poor and middle class shrank the racial wage gap.”⁸

Little has changed in the last 40 years. There remains a 38.8% gap in earnings today. According to the U.S. Census, the median income in 2020 was \$45,870 for black households and \$74,912 U.S. dollars for white, non-Hispanic families.^{9,10} Across the South, these wage differentials are even more pronounced. In some Southern cities the differential is even greater. For instance, in Atlanta, Georgia the Black median household income is \$31,900 compared to the non-Hispanic white income of \$96,065.¹¹ As noted in national and state-level analysis by PayScale, Inc, “equal pay for equal work is not a reality for many people of color. When controlling for education, years of experience, occupation and other compensable factors, most men and women of color still earn less than white men.... these differences in annual earnings can amount to hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars less for people of color over the course of their careers.”¹²

Socio-Economic Mobility

In a stratified society, social mobility refers to the increase or decrease of the class or status of individuals or groups. This movement requires an open class system or social structure that provides opportunities for changing one’s relative position in the society. In America, the system of advancement is perceived to be that of a meritocracy, in which abilities or achievements determine mobility.

⁸ Leonhardt, 2020.

⁹ Statista Research Department. (2021). “Median income of white, non-Hispanic private households in the United States from 1990 to 2020.” Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/203277/median-income-of-white-households-in-the-us/>

¹⁰ Statista Research Department. (2021). “Median income of black private households in the United States from 1990 to 2020.” Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/203295/median-income-of-black-households-in-the-us/>

¹¹ SimplyAnalytics (2021). “U.S. Census American Community Survey 2020 Current Estimates Data from SimplyAnalytics database.”

¹² PayScale. (2021). “The Racial Wage Gap Persists in 2020.” <https://www.payscale.com/data/racial-wage-gap>

Social mobility may be measured in changes in income or occupational prestige. Movement between classes may be measured within one person's life course (intragenerational mobility) or may be measured across generations (intergenerational mobility). Thus, a parent working hard in a "blue-collar" factory job may save enough money to send their son or daughter to law school; or an individual may begin as the child of working-class parents and through their own excellence in academics may be accepted to the same school. In both cases, the meritocratic system would allow for upward intergenerational and intragenerational mobility. However, the reality is that there are a number of factors that are associated with one's chances of social mobility. Birth status (ascribed status) plays a significant role. Limitations such as parental socioeconomics, opportunities for educational attainment within the society, race/ethnicity, sex, and urban/rural residence have great influence on the individual's prospects for mobility. Moreover, most social mobility in America has been attributed to structural economic and social changes rather than to personal effort.

Absolute vs. Relative Mobility

Social mobility is often measured by tracking the income or occupation of individual families over time. The degree of mobility may be evaluated in absolute or relative terms. Absolute mobility refers to the inflation adjusted change in a family's income over time, often measured as it crosses over a fixed standard such as the poverty line. Relative income mobility is typically measured in movement between quintiles (a distribution that has been divided into fifths). Most families experience some relative mobility, moving up or down one or more quintiles in mean income. Yet, the proportion of families to remain in the same quintile has increased from about 35% in the 1970s, to about 40% in 1990s. This indicates an increasingly less mobile class structure. In fact, a recent Brookings study of intergenerational wealth noted, "Mobility out of the top and bottom quintiles is low. Half (49 percent) of those with bottom-quintile wealth will remain in the bottom quintile in their late fifties. Similarly, half (53 percent) of individuals who start in the top wealth quintile will remain there in their late fifties."¹³

Opportunity and Structural Mobility

The degree of mobility is related to the rate of growth in an economy and the amount of opportunity that economy holds for individuals to move from one type of employment to another. Changing economic structures in the twentieth century account for most of the documented social mobility in America. With increasing productivity, resulting from technological improvements, living standards may improve

¹³ Shiro, Ariel Gelrud, Pulliam, Christopher, Sabelhaus, John, Smith, Ember. 2022. "Stuck On The Ladder Intragenerational Wealth Mobility In The United States" Brookings Institute. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022_FMCI_IntragenerationalWealthMobility_FINAL.pdf

from one generation to the next though the class structure itself changes little. However, the growth of the economy resulted from the structural transition from agrarian to industrial, then to technology-based economies. This allowed for a great deal of upward intergenerational mobility, especially during the post-war period (1950s-1970s), as the occupational structure of the country changed. Yet, the changes in the relative class status from one generation to the next were modest. Very few moved more than a few positions (up or down) within the class structure.

America has also become more “open” and “fair,” affording opportunities to broader segments of the society and establishing legal rights and policies that are aimed at promoting a more meritocratic system. When compared to the earlier time periods, ethnic minorities, immigrants, women, and the disabled have more opportunities for class mobility today. Nevertheless, these groups still face structural impediments and discrimination that limit significant upward mobility.

Post-Secondary Education

Access to college education has also been a significant factor in promoting social mobility in the twentieth century. Median incomes of those with a four-year degree are more than twice that of individuals with only a high school diploma. Attempts have been made to increase access to post-secondary education to lower income families and thereby encourage intergenerational mobility. However, opportunities for college education are still greater for those from families with higher socio-economic status, especially in the elite colleges and universities.

Immigration and Social Mobility

In the last forty years, the proportion of immigrants in America has increased to about 14% of the total population. The majority of migrants enter the US today with lower levels of “human capital” than US citizens, placing them at a disadvantage in competing for fewer and fewer higher prestige, higher income jobs. For intergenerational mobility to occur, the children of migrants must overcome barriers to assimilation, their low ascribed status, as well as fewer opportunities in the economy. In particular, mass migration has created ethnic enclaves with their own independent economies that act to limit opportunities for upward mobility.

Stalled Growth

The rate of upward social mobility in the United States was steady until the late 1970s. It has been declining in the past few decades as economic growth has slowed or even stalled (principally in the late 1990s). This stalled growth has led to a decline in the proportion of middle-income and high skill workers in favor of a growth in the service sector resulting in a decrease in the opportunities for upward mobility. In inflation-adjusted terms, men born after 1960 are earning less than their fathers' generation did

at the same age. An increase in economic inequality during this period can be linked to a widening gap between wages of skilled and unskilled labor.

Impact of Education on Income Inequality

While educational attainment has risen significantly in the last two decades, we continue to see a huge disparity in post-secondary education by race and ethnicity. White 25- to 29-year-olds are 55% more likely than Black counterparts to have completed a bachelor's degrees or higher.¹⁴ And Black high school students are 13 percent less likely to graduate than their white peers.¹⁵ One of the most robust predictors of a child's academic success and earning power is whether they can read by third grade.¹⁶ In North Carolina two out of five children do not read at grade level at the end of third grade. There are clear racial disparities with 41% of Black third graders reading at grade level compared to 70% of white children.¹⁷

According to education researchers, Barbara Bowman, James Comer, and David Johns (2018), "The interface between racism/classism and attendant economic and social disadvantages is the key to understanding the underachievement of African American children. African Americans have been exposed to generations of legal and illegal measures to deny them basic rights."¹⁸ Resource equity is an underlying issue: "school districts attended predominantly by students of color receive \$23 billion less in funding than primarily white districts, despite serving the same number of students. And school districts that are poor and white receive about \$150 less per student than the national average. In contrast, school districts that are poor and attended primarily by students of color receive \$1,600 less."¹⁹ In a recent study, *Is School Funding Fair*, researchers at the Education Law Center compared state funding of schools across all 50 states finding that most states provide disproportionately *more* economic resources to affluent schools than to those in high poverty areas.

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¹⁴ Hanson, Melanie. (2021). "Education Attainment Statistics" EducationData.org.

<https://educationdata.org/education-attainment-statistics>

¹⁵ Stemm-Calderon, Zoë. (2019) Why Education Reform Must Prioritize Resource Equity Raikes Foundation.

<https://raikesfoundation.org/blog/posts/why-education-reform-must-prioritize-resource-equity>

¹⁶ Fiester, Leila. (2010). Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters. Annie E. Casey Foundation.

<https://www.aecf.org/resources/early-warning-why-reading-by-the-end-of-third-grade-matters>

¹⁷ NC Child 2021 County Data Cards. <https://ncchild.org/what-we-do/insights/data/2021county-data-cards/>

¹⁸ Bowman, B. T., Comer, J. P., & Johns, D. J. (2018). "Addressing the African American Achievement Gap: Three Leading Educators Issue a Call to Action." *Young Children*. 73(2), 14–23. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26558913>

¹⁹ Stemm-Calderon, Zoë. (2019)

²⁰ Baker, B., Farrie, D., Sciarra, D. (2018). *Is School Funding Fair? A National Report Card* Education Law Center https://edlawcenter.org/assets/files/pdfs/publications/Is_School_Funding_Fair_7th_Edit.pdf

Several other factors are related to the lack of progress in achieving parity in educational attainment and standardized scores. For poor urban youth, there is evidence that disengagement in school is a major cause of absenteeism and low graduation rates.²¹ Also, there is data to support the claim that “a growing disparity in teacher quality across the social divide may have offset the impacts of policies designed to work in the opposite direction.”²² Finally, confounding the issue is the fact that parental education strongest predictor of student achievement.²³

RPIC Workers Poll: Wage & Salary Disparities in NC

In July of 2022, the Research, Policy, & Impact Center polled constituents to better understand wage and salary disparities in North Carolina and explore the barriers experienced by minority workers. Minority respondents were nearly three times as likely (31.4% minority respondents vs 13.3% white respondents) to be earning less this year than last year. White respondents meanwhile were twice as likely as minority respondents to be earning more this year (46.7% of white respondents as compared to 22.9% of minority respondents).

Notably, while 33% of white respondents took a medical or FMLA leave, none of the minority respondents did, underscoring the differences in benefits and employment categories that minority workers fill. Minority workers were also more likely to experience barriers limiting their ability to work such as caring for aging relatives, lacking healthcare, having a disability, not having transportation, not having credentials needed for the job, and experiencing employer bias or racism.

We asked respondents to rank possible ways that the local, state, or federal government could help to improve workforce conditions. A majority of respondents recommended that government should: offer free community college options, raise the minimum wage, provide universal preschool, and close racial and gender pay gaps. One participant explained: *“[It is a] myth that people are lazy and do not want to work not true. People want to work when/where they are taken care of. People do not want to work when the take home (after taxes) offers no benefits to their lives and they cannot afford to live (pay for housing, transportation, food, etc.)”*

²¹ Mac Iver, D. (2019). Five Successful Reforms to Combat Students’ Absenteeism and Disengagement. John Hopkins School of Education. <https://education.jhu.edu/2019/06/five-successful-reforms-to-combat-students-absenteeism-and-disengagement/>

²² Hanushek, E.A., Peterson, P.E., Talpey, L.M., and Woessmann, L. (2019). “The Achievement Gap Fails to Close: Half century of testing shows persistent divide between haves and have-nots.” *Education Next*. 19(3), 8-17.

²³ Hanushek, E.A., Peterson, P.E., Talpey, L.M., and Woessmann, L. (2019).

Disproportionate Impact of Inflation

While unemployment has remained low as the US recovers from the global COVID19 Pandemic, inflation has been very high causing serious harm to many workers’ abilities to afford basic goods and services. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “The annual inflation rate in the US accelerated to 9.1% in June of 2022, the highest since November of 1981.” The Research, Policy, & Impact Center polled constituents to better understand how inflation is impacting them. Disparities are clear as 72% of minority respondents indicated that their families are experiencing moderate to severe economic hardship as compared with only 52% of white respondents.

Coping strategies have included taking on additional work, overtime, or even second jobs (29% of respondents); starting or expanding a side business (28%); selling family assets or real properties to cover costs (16%) and seeking public assistance (15%). Workers are also cutting back on things like driving (56%) and food purchases at the grocery store (51%) in order to off-set higher costs. Poll respondents are looking to the federal government to forgive student loan debt, raise minimum wage, institute price controls on fuel and other goods, and expand economic assistance programs.

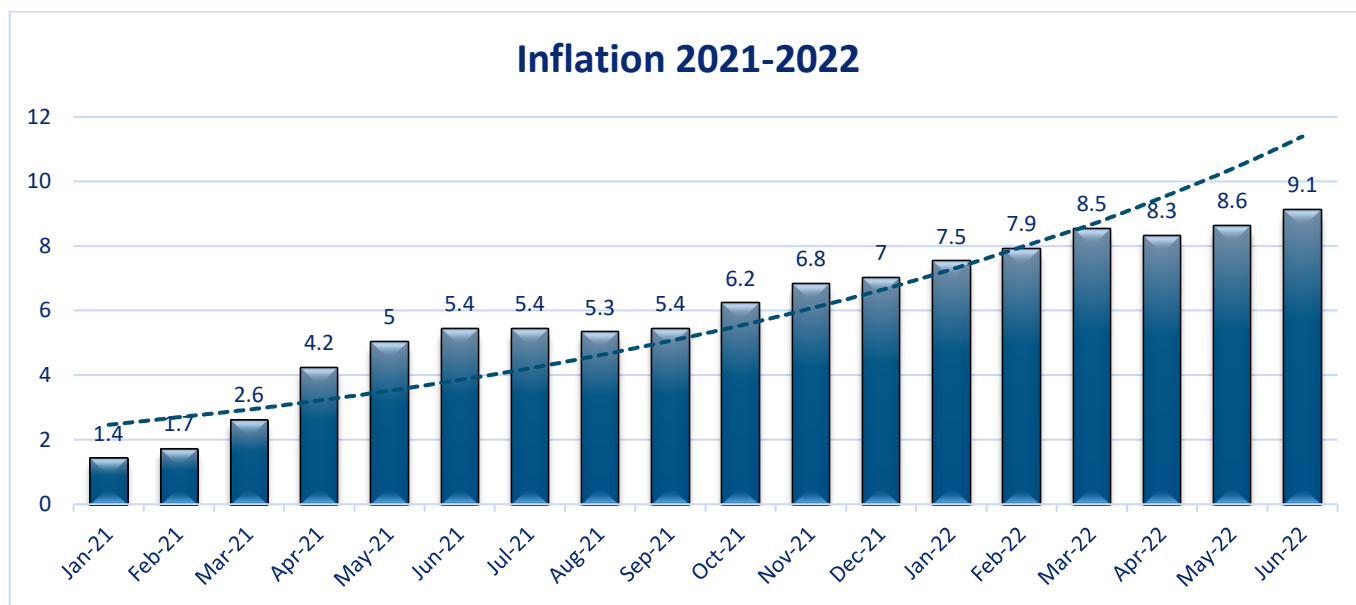


Figure 1 – Inflation Rate, U.S. Labor Department July 2022

Piedmont Triad Population Dynamics

The Piedmont Triad is a sprawling urban, peri-urban, and rural area comprised of 12 counties including: Alamance, Caswell, Davidson, Davie, Forsyth, Guilford, Montgomery, Randolph, Rockingham, Stokes, Surry, Yadkin. There are over 70 municipalities in the area. In the heart of the Piedmont Triad are the Greensboro-High Point MSA, Winston-Salem MSA, and the Burlington, MSA. There are 427 census tracts and 137 zip codes within this area.

Demographics

Population: The estimated population is 1,733,811 (ACS 2021) with nearly half the population (921,111) residing in Guilford and Forsyth Counties. The population growth in the area is around 1-2% annually.

Race/Ethnicity: The population is diverse with 21.7% African American, 10.4% Hispanic, 2.9% Asian. About 7.8% of the population living in this area were "foreign born." Between 2010 and 2020, the White population changed by -5%, the African American population grew by 9.1%, the Asian population grew by 45.8%, and Hispanics increased by 35.3%.

Age Structure: The median age was 38.1 years old with 17.0% of the population 65 years or older and 22.1% being children under 18, leaving 60.9% in the working ages of 18-64.

Veteran Status: About 7.0% of the population are veterans of armed services (ACS 2021).

Disability Status: 13.8% of the population 18 years old and older are disabled (ACS 2019).

Educational Attainment: Educational attainment was high with 86.3% of adults completing high school/GED or more, and 27.1% of adults have a higher education degree (bachelor's, master's, or doctorate; ACS 2021).

Quality of Life

The region is very accessible as it is intersected by four interstate highway systems, eight US highways and numerous secondary N.C. highways. There is one major airport (Piedmont Triad International Airport). A majority of households (80.8%) have internet access, but access is not distributed equally throughout the region. The urban areas in the region have closer to 90% or higher while very rural areas fall below 75% of households with internet access. There are 131 Census Tracts in Piedmont Triad that are considered by the USDA as having low income and low food access (aka Food Deserts).

Table 1 – Demographic Data Piedmont Triad, NC

	PTRC Footprint		North Carolina	
POPULATION & SEX				
Total Population	1,733,811		10,474,324	
Average Population Density (per sq. mile)	295.0		215.4	
Urban Population	1,101,917	67.2%	6,301,756	66.1%
Rural Population	538,800	32.8%	3,233,727	33.9%
RACE & ETHNICITY				
White	1,184,484	68.32%	7,051,555	67.32%
Black or African American	376,112	21.69%	2,238,521	21.37%
American Indian and Alaska Native	9,456	0.55%	138,665	1.32%
Asian	50,927	2.94%	335,521	3.20%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone	1,372	0.08%	9,917	0.09%
Some other race alone	61,773	3.56%	372,201	3.55%
Two or more races	47,814	2.76%	317,306	3.03%
Hispanic or Latino	180,230	10.40%	1,052,522	10.05%
INCOME				
Median Household Income	\$53,503.50		\$55,073.81	
Per Capita Income	\$31,047.59		\$31,107.91	
EDUCATION				
Less than high school diploma	175,839	14.74%	944,790	13.15%
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	314,071	26.32%	1,721,424	23.96%
Some college	254,239	21.31%	1,474,759	20.53%
Associate's degree	115,009	9.64%	697,915	9.72%
Bachelor's degree or Higher	323,512	27.11%	2,285,942	31.82%
LANGUAGE				
English	1,427,900	87.22%	8,616,954	87.27%
Spanish	137,469	8.40%	766,248	7.76%
French, German, Russian, or other Indo-European Languages	28,508	1.70%	211,125	2.10%
Asian or Pacific Island Language	30,722	1.90%	201,206	2.00%
Arabic	5,027	0.31%	29,165	0.30%
CITIZENSHIP				
Born in the United States	1,576,769	90.96%	9,463,475	90.36%
Born in Puerto Rico or U.S. Island Areas	5,527	0.32%	43,232	0.41%
Born abroad of American parent(s)	13,152	0.76%	100,807	0.96%
U.S. citizen by naturalization	56,410	3.25%	358,424	3.42%
Not a U.S. citizen	80,927	4.67%	503,510	4.81%

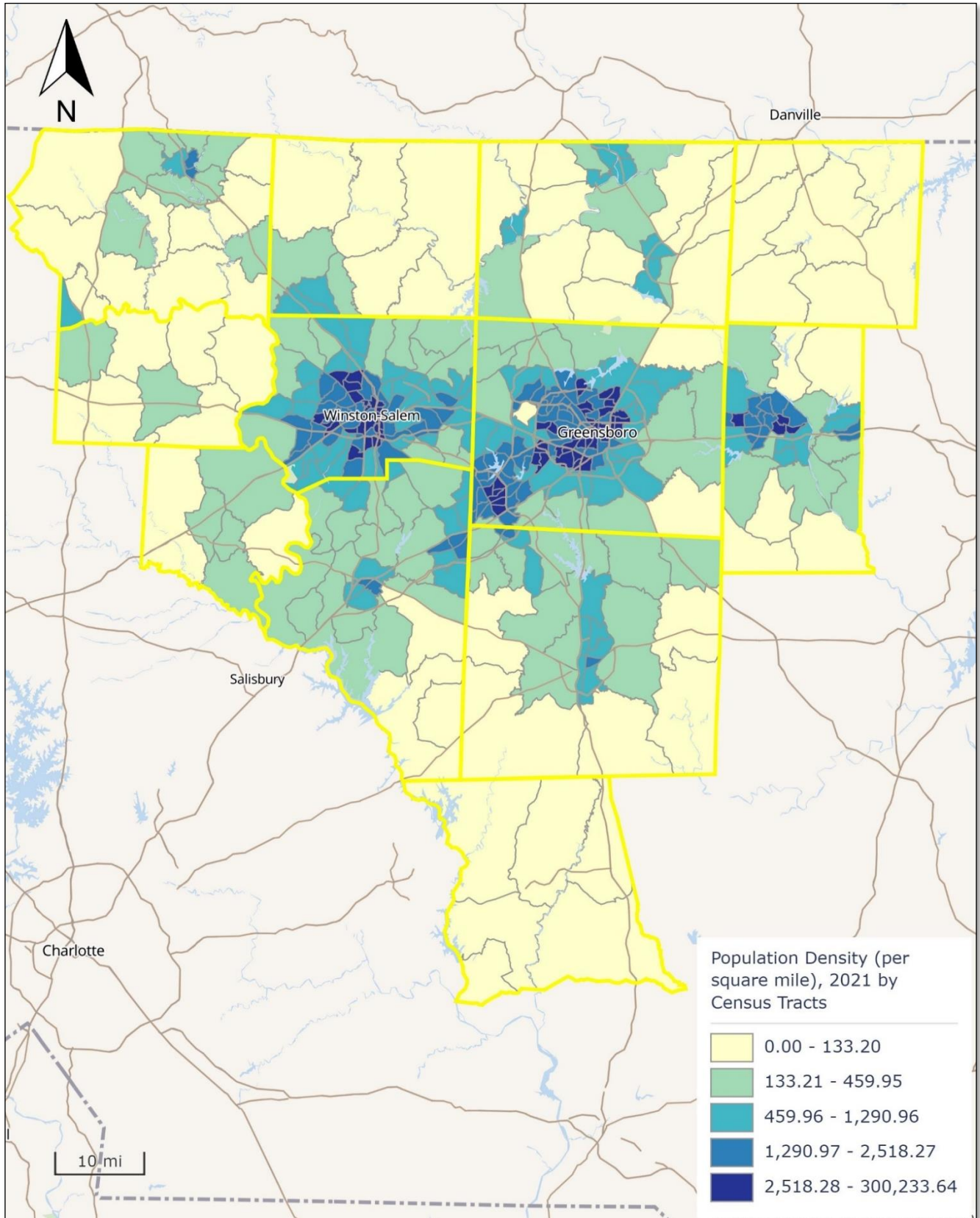


Figure 2 - Population Density Piedmont Triad, NC

Local Employment Context

There was a total of 805,323 (57.5%) workers employed in the region and 55,236 (39.6%) adults who are not in the labor force (BLS 2021). The overall unemployment rate was 2.68% in 2021.

The leading employment sectors based on number of people employed (ACS 2016-2020) included: Manufacturing, Health Care, and Retail Trade (see below). Nearly 70% of those employed in the area are classified as wage or salary earners in private companies while about 8% were employed in not-for-profit organizations, and 13% in government local, state, and federal). Around 9% are self-employed (see next page).

According to the 2021 Nearly one-in-six (15.4% or 260,015 individuals) were considered in poverty in the Piedmont Triad (ACS 2021). One-in-ten (10.5% or 180,214 individuals) are without health insurance coverage (ACS 2021).

Industries	N	%
Accommodation and Food Services	54,767	6.8%
Administrative and Support and Waste Management Services	36,847	4.6%
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	5,967	0.7%
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	12,673	1.6%
Educational Service	71,956	9.0%
Finance, Insurance, Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	48,883	6.1%
Health Care and Social Assistance	118,197	14.8%
Information	9,985	1.3%
Manufacturing	125,092	15.6%
Management of Companies and Enterprises	1,177	0.2%
Other Services	39,856	5.0%
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	36,831	4.6%
Public Administration	25,469	3.2%
Retail Trade Industry	94,989	11.9%
Construction Industry	51,972	6.5%
Transportation and Warehousing, and Utilities	43,259	5.4%
Wholesale Trade	22,898	2.9%
All Other Industries Employment	514	0.1%

Figure 3 - Workforce by Industry Piedmont Triad, NC 2016-2020

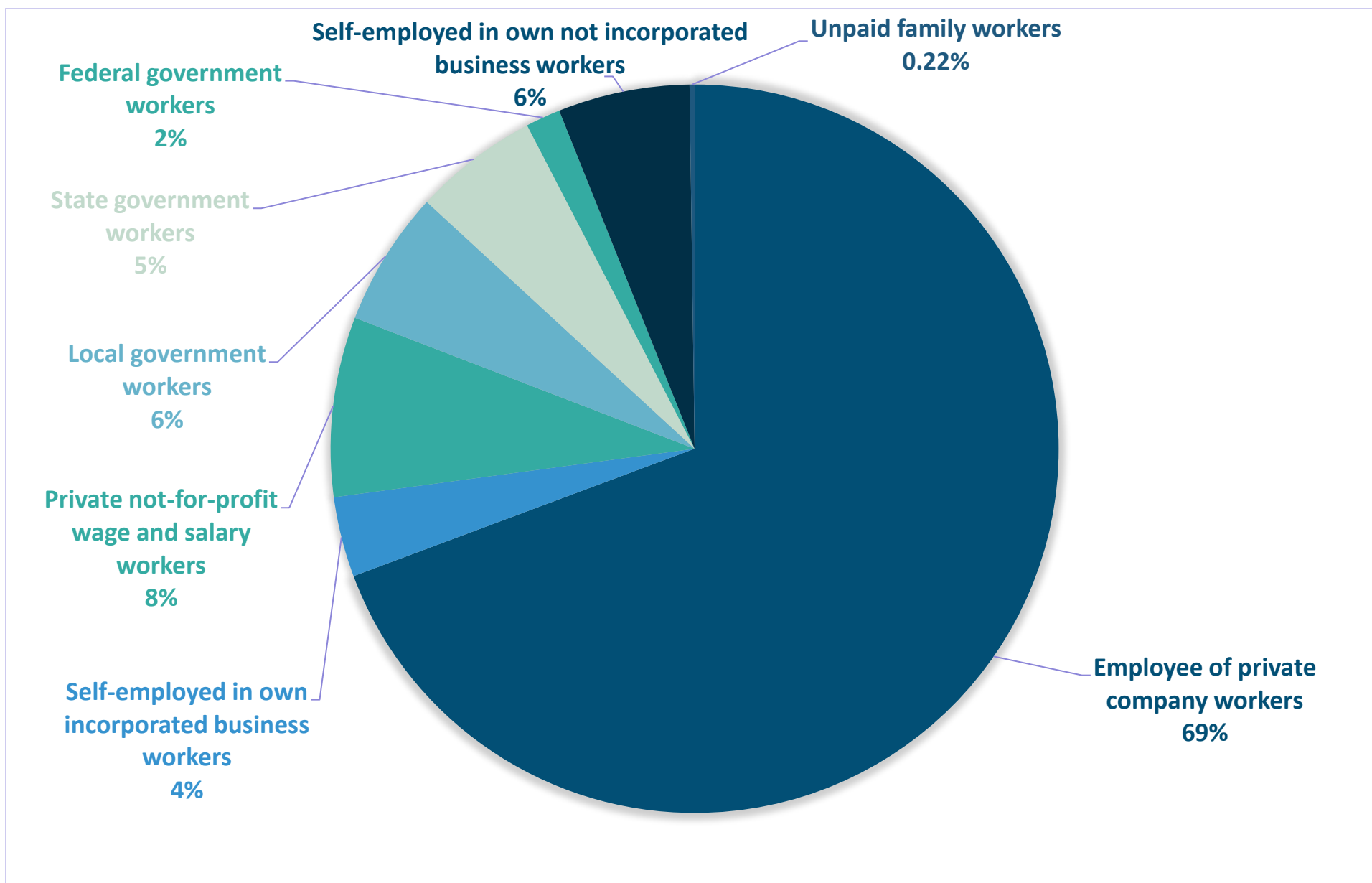


Figure 4 - Proportion of Class of Workers in Piedmont Triad, NC

Stakeholder Interviews

Research Process

For the first phase of our data gathering, we conducted semi-structured, in-depth one-on-one interviews with community stakeholders. Interviews were conducted remotely via zoom and recorded. The interview subjects were assured that their comments would not be reported in a manner that would identify the person speaking by name or by affiliation. The comments directly quoted in this report are lightly edited for clarity or to ensure confidentiality. Interviews were between half an hour and an hour in length. Transcripts were made of each interview, reviewed by a project intern for accuracy, then reviewed for themes and quotes using a grounded approach. We interviewed twenty-four people representing the following organizations and professions:

- Center for Educational and Agricultural Development
- Various Community Colleges
- County Economic Development Offices, Councils, and Partnership
- Municipal and County Managers
- Goodwill
- Major Construction Corporations
- Major Light Industries
- NCWorks Career Centers
- Regional Partnership Workforce Development Boards
- School Districts

In these interviews, we discussed a range of topics, from the state of the job market today, to the shortage of workers across all industry sectors, to the attitudes of the workers and their employers, and the opportunities presented to workers by the changes happening now. We talked about inequities in the job market and in the workplace, and the social conditions that limit economic mobility for vulnerable groups. We talked in depth about the many socio-economic and structural barriers that keep people from finding employment or remaining successfully employed including transportation and childcare at the top of the list, but and also including the conditions of rurality, housing affordability, technological skills and educational deficits.

Vulnerable Classes of Workers

We will see in this report that some interviewees (employers as well as those working in workforce development and government) felt that there were no Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) issues in their areas. None-the-less most individuals interviewed recognized that some social statuses faced stigma, prejudice, or discrimination in recruitment, hiring, and retention. Minorities, women, justice involved individuals, individuals with a disability, LGBTQ+, limited English proficient, older workers, and veterans were all discussed in some ways as having a disadvantage in the job market. In some locations, the lack of visibility of certain statuses made those in positions of authority feel that they didn't have any equity issues to address. As one senior executive pointed out, in a survey of employees very few equity issues were uncovered: "But, then you look at 80% or more of respondents were white men. So, from their perspective, of course, there are no issues because they don't have any issues."

Ethnic and Racial Minorities

When asked to identify vulnerable populations, many interviews spoke about ethnic or racial minorities. One interviewee said, "so I feel like some of the minority populations, they don't have the same opportunities." Another respondent affirmed, "There are huge equity gaps, just between black and whites in our community." The lack of ethnic/racial diversity between salaried and hourly employees, between entry level and management level of organizations was also pointed out, "I would have senior leadership look like the world that we live in and the communities we serve." This racial and ethnic divide is something that has gained attention with a few of the employers and workforce development directors we spoke to who said they were promoting programs to address equity by targeting historically low-income communities in order to recruit, train, and place more workers of color in higher skilled and higher paying positions:

"...EQUITY HAS BEEN A HUGE CONVERSATION OVER THE PAST TWO, THREE YEARS, RIGHT. I WOULD SAY THAT WE HAVE INTENTIONALLY LEVERAGED DATA TO SUPPORT TARGETING OUR COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMMING TO WHAT JUST SO HAPPENS TO BE HIGH MINORITY COMMUNITIES.

"...equity has been a huge conversation over the past two, three years, right. I would say that we have intentionally leveraged data to support targeting our community-based programming to what just so happens to be high minority communities. So, our eastern part of the county ...and our southern part of the county...has received a lot of targeted services

from the workforce system. And I would, you know, back into say that 85 plus percent of those communities are black and brown. And so, we find that important, because the data shows that median household or median household earnings are significantly, are extremely low. Unemployment rates are very high, crime rates are very high. And all of that is intertwined.... So, I would say, our, our targeted, you know, outreach and community-based programs in those minority communities has been very successful for us. I don't know if it's the best model. But you know, we do see increased participation rates in those communities."

For minority interviewees in rural areas, the salience of race in the workplace was especially acute. One Hispanic participant who had moved to rural North Carolina from California said, "one thing that I have encountered here in [small town], again, not, not in other cities, is the visible division between the white community and the community of color. I mean, I really haven't seen it so much in other in other cities. I was raised in California, so when I came here to North Carolina, it was a shock to me in, in many levels, and I actually experienced racism for the first time when I got here. So, after being in more open cities, like, Kernersville and Greensboro, Winston Salem, Chapel Hill, coming here to [small town] that was a big shock." An African American community college continuing education director elaborated on the racialized experience in rural areas and the ways in which he copes with it, "you know, you know, me as a black man, if I, if I said, and went on perception of what others thought, or they lived in the past, and living in the past and dealing with them now. I'd be in trouble. I tell you, I just returned last night from the chamber [of commerce] retreat. And as far as minorities, there was probably eight of us there out of maybe 120."

Another community college executive elaborated on the job market segmentation that occurs along lines of color and a program she is instituting to address racial disparities in educational attainment:

"... our early childhood program was overwhelmingly being subscribed to by women of color. ... what was concerning us is we looked at the wages that they would earn, even with an associate's degree, and they were below the average income in our community, and so while we, you know, as a mother of three, I want the best people in our childcare centers, and yet I also don't want to sentence our students to a lifetime of poverty. And so, the, the call we made was to change the advising model for everyone who tells us they want to go into early childhood, right. And so now there's a checklist of things that we share with them. And as a result,

we've been able to steer almost half of those students who initially said they wanted to be an early childhood teacher into teacher education instead. And so now they're going to be qualified to do K-5, they will earn benefits, they will have retirement, they will have educational reimbursement so they can continue their education and continue to be compensated. And yet they're still working in that space. Right. So that's the pivot."

Women

Our stakeholders clearly recognized the unequal impact on employed or job-seeking women, especially as a result of the pandemic. One explained, "I think that COVID forced a lot of people to stay home, and to find other avenues of revenue that would take care of their families. A lot of women have decided to go back and become homemakers because it's cheaper than trying to pay daycare. I think that a lot of individuals were at that point of retirement, and just went ahead and took that early retirement. I think that there are still those out there that were not on the radar. When the unemployment benefits end, they are dropped from that radar, because there's no way to track them."

During the pandemic eight times as many women dropped out of the workforce compared to men,²⁴ they have now begun to return. "As of August, more than 49 million women aged 25 to 54 were working or looking for work. That's slightly more women than were in the workforce in February 2020. The return has been especially pronounced among Black and Latina women."²⁵ Yet, in many fields, women are still absent. One corporate executive said, "we were at about, we were at about 20% women. However, I think that has changed because I was recently told Friday that we have 91 women out of almost 600 employees. And that is in the field working on job sites as well as in the offices like marketing and accounting and HR kinds of positions."

Gender tracking was recognized as an issue by multiple interviewees. As one said, "I think is a due to lack of exposures, a lot of times in certain industries, women, of course,

"SO, WE ARE BEING INTENTIONAL ABOUT TRYING NEW THINGS TO RECRUIT MORE WOMEN AND UNDERREPRESENTED POPULATIONS. BUT RIGHT NOW, IT'S STILL A LARGELY WHITE MALE DOMINATED COMPANY AND INDUSTRY."

²⁴ See <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/22/coronavirus-pandemic-women-workforce-500329>

²⁵ See <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/28/1125149612/women-are-returning-to-paid-work-after-the-pandemic-forced-many-to-leave-their-j>

are left out, for instance, in construction or welding, you don't see a lot of women in those areas.” Another industry leader said they needed to be more intentional about addressing gender disparities, “So, we are being intentional about trying new things to recruit more women and underrepresented populations. But right now, it's still a largely white male dominated company and industry.” With this particular employer, they have instituted new measures to try and attract more women into the male dominated field. She explained, “one example where we have started this work intentionally is with women in the company. So, we started a series of roundtable meetings with women in each of our offices in March. And from that, identified what needs to change in our benefits, in our culture, and safety on a job site. All those things. And we'll be revisiting that again in February with the whole group of women again.”

Table 2 - Unemployment rates of people age 35-44 among the U.S. general public and formerly incarcerated population, by race and gender (2018)²⁶

	Unemployment rate general population	Unemployment rate formerly incarcerated
Black women	6.4%	43.6%
Black men	7.7%	35.2%
White women	4.3%	23.2%
White men	4.3%	18.4%

Justice Involvement

Among the most vulnerable of populations are those who have had justice involvement. Many interviewees recognized that, ““Individuals that are justice involved have significant barriers.” While highly correlated with race, we see that justice involvement itself creates vulnerability. As we can see from the pre-pandemic, Bureau of Justice Statistics’ National Former Prisoner Survey (NFPS) data above, there are disproportionately higher unemployment rates for Black men and women, yet incarceration experiences result in much higher rates of unemployment overall. Couloute and Kopf (2018) explain, “High unemployment among formerly incarcerated people is not simply explained by the overrepresentation of people of color in the criminal justice system; it’s the status of being formerly incarcerated that sets them

²⁶ Couloute, Lucius and Kopf, Daniel. (2018) “Out of Prison & Out of Work: Unemployment among formerly incarcerated people.” Prison Policy Initiative. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html>

apart.”²⁷ For this reason, we treat race/ethnicity and justice involvement as separate vulnerable classes.

Across the region, stakeholders echoed the difficulties faced by justice involved individuals, “I think of individuals, justice involved individuals, a lot of times we, we don't get to that second chance. So, we'll be working more closely with our justice involved individuals to provide opportunities to have employer think differently about those second chances for those individuals.” Stigma wasn't the only problem, however. One workforce development official explained, for job placement employer liability insurance can be an issue, “the justice served are always gonna be a difficult population.... Obviously, with their record, that's going to be a little bit more difficult depending upon the employer, if the employer can't hire him for insurance reasons, or whatever reasons that they have. So, we tried to, I know the staff that worked with those populations, tried to know employers in the area who were more accepting, accepting of persons with criminal records.” These programs linking justice involved individuals directly with employers were vital. They not only provided connections and introductions, but also provided security to the employers: “...we work with employers to make sure that they have their, that anybody who's been incarcerated that we do have them federally bonded, and that we help them fill out the WIAO paperwork for their business.”²⁸

Changes were noted, some resulting from the current economic conditions. There was some evidence of more employers providing opportunities as a result of the low unemployment rate. A participant explained, “you know, some, some employers, you know, you know, a lot of them have rules against hiring felons, and that kind of thing. They're waiving that, especially, you know, if it's been so, so long are they their record is clean now and that kind of thing.” Another noted greater employer leniency, “And then we're also seeing a trend for our employers to, as long as it was not a violent offense, then a lot of folks are working through that. And just, they just want to be aware. And I know people are scared to check that box, to say if they've got a felony, but the business is just want to be aware and make sure it's not a violent offense.”

Things are also changing on the policy level, especially as a result of the “Ban the Box” Law (Executive Order 158: FURTHERING FAIR CHANCE POLICIES IN STATE GOVERNMENT EMPLOYMENT) which was signed in 2020.²⁹ One community college representative noted, “I've been to some of the, the lobbying and everything that they did the

²⁷ Couloute and Kopf (2018)

²⁸ See <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/workforce-investment/adult>

²⁹ See <https://www.backgroundsonline.com/blog/north-carolina-passed-a-ban-the-box-law>

legislation to, you know, take, you know, some of the things off applications and all that so you know, my, my, my feelings on that personally is you know, you know, I believe we serve a God of a second chance. And if someone has done their time and, and have been rehabilitated, we owe it to them to give them a chance at a job or manufacturer....”

“AND IF SOMEONE HAS DONE THEIR TIME AND, AND HAVE BEEN REHABILITATED, WE OWE IT TO THEM TO GIVE THEM A CHANCE AT A JOB OR MANUFACTURER....”

Another area of correlation was between justice involvement and substance misuse. “In North Carolina, drug possession is the number one crime that lands a person in prison. In 2017, about 19 percent of folks that entered prison were locked up due to drug possession or intent to sell.”³⁰ One program was discussed which links the need for need long-term substance use disorder treatment and workforce development:

“...[this] County has a substance abuse department, actually an opioid and substance abuse director. And we have worked with that department and the sheriff's office and local companies to help people that are incarcerated, and 80% of the folks incarcerated in [this] County are incarcerated on a drug related offense of some sort. So, what we're trying to do is get them out. Uh, help when they get out of that situation, get them to where they can get treatment, and then also get them to where they can get a job. So, we've worked with a couple of companies that are willing to hire people from that situation, and put them to work. Because we know that, you know, once you get into recovery, and trying to work through that, you know, if you don't have hope of bettering your situation, then you're gonna be more likely to, you know, fall back into that. And part of that hope is having a job and being able to support yourself and support your family. So yeah, we're working on a program to help identify those that are coming through not only our local prison system, but if they're coming back from like state incarceration or something like that. We're trying to identify those folks, getting them to treatment, and then also connect them to, you know, a job that will do that.”

³⁰ See <https://www.northcarolinahealthnews.org/2018/03/06/incarcerating-mental-illness-and-addiction/>

Individuals with Disabilities

Another category or class of vulnerability in the workforce was those with a disability. According to the American Community Survey, in the Piedmont Triad the civilian noninstitutionalized population between 18 and 64 years old with a disability was 112,716 individuals or about 10.9% of the total population

of 18- to 64-year-olds. This sizeable segment of the population faces many challenges to employment and is sometimes overlooked. One interviewee affirmed, “Definitely individuals with disabilities and limited abilities, I feel they're left out. Certainly, bypassing individuals and a lot of the quote unquote, higher skilled industries that require more training.”

“DEFINITELY INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES AND LIMITED ABILITIES, I FEEL THEY'RE LEFT OUT. CERTAINLY, BYPASSING INDIVIDUALS AND A LOT OF THE QUOTE UNQUOTE, HIGHER SKILLED INDUSTRIES THAT REQUIRE MORE TRAINING.”

Another stakeholder echoed, “In terms of individuals, we're kind of leaving out, I think a lot of times individuals who have disabilities, either physical or mental. I think we need to work better with those individuals, particularly OCS, students, occupational core studies students in high school. They can provide, we can help work with them to build out our workforce and support some of these pipeline of workforce issues in terms of talent.” Several programs were mentioned that are working to connect individuals with disabilities to work, “we've also connected employers with vocational rehab, as they have a pool of applicants that we don't always get access to through the Career Center. So sometimes we'll make referrals to employers to try and make that connection between job seeker and employer as well.”

Disability visibility was also raised as an important issue that employers should be aware of, “They may think, the, the person with a disability has to be a person with a seen disability. And sometimes they're very disabled people with unseen disabilities.” In other cases individuals may not receive a fair chance based on the perception of their disability: “I feel like disability, disabled individuals or people with limited abilities are oftentimes excluded from opportunities. Just because visually, someone thinks that they can't do something when, in actuality they could if they were given the opportunity or the training to do it.”

Most employers noted that they will make accommodations for any employees with disabilities. One employer explained, “If we are known, presenting the fact that they have a disability, we'll do our best to accommodate it.” Similarly, another employer described their approach, “...when it comes to disabilities, you know, we do have individuals on staff that had some form of disabilities. And so, we make sure they have

the tools and technology to effectively complete the essential duties of their job. And so, if we don't have that, we make sure we get it so they can be successful in their job when it comes to a form of disability.”

LGBTQ+

Discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity are not prohibited statewide in private employment though some municipalities and county governments have adopted expanded anti-bias ordinances including Winston-Salem,

Greensboro, and High Point.³¹ Moreover, a “June 2020 Supreme Court ruling affirmed that LGBTQ people across the country are protected by federal law against discrimination in the workplace.”³² Yet, in N.C. the lack of affirmative employment protections, and growing legislation against LGBTQ+ identified communities,^{33,34} presents an issue for worker rights and the experiences of LGBTQ+ discrimination in the workplace.

“THE LGBTQ THAT, THAT COMMUNITY IS DEFINITELY, I DON'T FEEL LIKE THEY FEEL WELCOMED HERE. UNFORTUNATELY. JUST BECAUSE I FEEL LIKE IT'S THAT OLD CULTURE, OLD SOUTH WAY OF THINKING”

While most respondents avoided the topic of sexual orientation and the workplace, a few brought up the discriminatory environment: “Yes, yes. So definitely, the LGBTQ that, that community is definitely, I don't feel like they feel welcomed here. Unfortunately. Just because I feel like it's that old culture, Old South way of thinking on a lot of different, different, different issues, different events, or any whatever that you know, whatever. I don't feel like they feels included. It's not as welcomed, as it should be. And we're working with our, with our industries to help get rid of that that stigma there. And to not think of that as a as a quality of work kind of issue, if that makes sense.”

A community college executive added that in the rural community where they are, there is tension over LGBTQ+ rights:

“...so probably a few years ago, when the bathroom bill was being discussed, a blight on North Carolina's reputation, But, but it was a wonderful opportunity for us to have a great dialogue with our students.”

³¹ See https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality_maps/profile_state/NC

³² See https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/employment_non_discrimination_laws/state

³³ See <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/north-carolina-senate-revives-attacks-on-lgbtq-north-carolinians-this-time-by-passing-dont-say-gay-or-trans-bill-even-more-egregious-than-floridas>

³⁴ See <https://ncpolicywatch.com/2022/03/16/will-nc-get-swept-up-in-the-national-rising-tide-of-anti-lgbtq-legislation/>

It led to us making some changes in how we deliver student development. And so, we've added an LGBTQ club. And so, we've created some really great spaces, I think, for that community to come together and to recognize and be aware of that even though we're in a rural community that that population exists, and we want them to feel welcomed, and to feel as though this is a good place for them to grow and develop. So, parents have not been very pleased and I've been accused of with the advent of the club, have, I've been accused of trying to recruit.

Industry specific resistance has been seen as well. One construction employer explained, "...this year, it was in a national endeavor for people in the construction industry to rally around this issue. And we did not participate in it last year. And this year, we did participate, but it was, was a baby step. Because again, not everyone's ready to go full on

into this journey. And I'm happy we participated. We did share something on social media for Pride month. But, depends on whom you ask. People came to me saying, I feel seen and appreciated in my workplace. Thank you for posting this. And other people apparently went to a leadership saying, why did they mean to post this? Why was this allowed? I'm like, Why? Why would this not be allowed?"

Foreign Born

Another, sometimes overlooked, vulnerable population was immigrants and refugees who make up 11% of the labor force.³⁵ Foreign born individuals comprise about 8% or about 136,000 residents in the Piedmont Triad. In the urban areas the proportion of foreign born is larger and more diverse. Immigrants and refugees are employed at high rates in Manufacturing, Construction, Accommodation and Food Services, Health Care and Social Assistance, and Retail Trade. None-the-less, one workforce development director noted, "I can't think of anything that's been specifically targeted towards refugees and immigrants."

"NOT EVERYONE'S READY TO GO FULL ON INTO THIS JOURNEY. AND I'M HAPPY WE PARTICIPATED. WE DID SHARE SOMETHING ON SOCIAL MEDIA FOR PRIDE MONTH. BUT, DEPENDS ON WHOM YOU ASK. PEOPLE CAME TO ME SAYING, I FEEL SEEN AND APPRECIATED IN MY WORKPLACE."

³⁵ See <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigrants-north-carolina>

Another administrator explained, that while they work with refugee resettlement agencies on job placement, they do not have many services specifically tailored to the needs of foreign-born residents:

“Yeah, I think that that is, you know, full transparency, a space that we really can enhance our, you know, collaborations, and certainly service and impact. Those agencies do come to our partners network meetings, as we are resettling individuals, think back to the most recent Afghan resettlement initiative that came to [this] County, they did reach out, and we were at the table with them to say, we can provide support by, you know, connecting you with employers that could potentially look at, you know, employing those individuals with skills. But generally speaking, they're leading those efforts, and we're really just being supportive, you know, as an extension of the work that they're already doing. But, I think that most public systems could do, or public workforce systems for that matter, could do a better job at creating better services to serve, you know, immigrant and refugee communities.”

Language barriers and limited English proficiency were brought up as obstacles to service delivery, especially in the more rural communities. Bilingual pamphlets and access to telephonic interpretation were the full extent of efforts to accommodate immigrants in some areas, “Well, we do not. I mean, we have, we have pamphlet on whatever we offer in English, we offer in Spanish, we also have MasterWord³⁶ who we can call. And they, they can get us in touch with 28 languages of whatever somebody speaks. As long as it's in those 28. I don't know what would happen if it was somewhat another one. But we'll, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.” Another respondent confirmed this weakness, “When it comes to limited English, I think that's probably an Achilles heel that we have. We don't other than an 800 number or things of that nature. Unfortunately, going to somebody that may speak that language,

“WHEN IT COMES TO LIMITED ENGLISH, I THINK THAT'S PROBABLY AN ACHILLES HEEL THAT WE HAVE. WE DON'T OTHER THAN AN 800 NUMBER OR THINGS OF THAT NATURE. UNFORTUNATELY, GOING TO SOMEBODY THAT MAY SPEAK THAT LANGUAGE, LEAN ON THEM TO PERFORM THOSE OTHER DUTIES AS ASSIGNED TO ASSIST US WITH THE COMMUNICATION BARRIER.”

³⁶ See <https://www.masterword.com/>

lean on them to perform those other duties as assigned to assist us with the communication barrier. We don't have a lot of systems in place, and that's something that we think we can improve upon.”

A county manager did point out that they employee many Spanish speaking individuals and, as a result, have hired human resources staff who are bilingual, “

we have three full time interpreters to work for us there, and our Human Services Department. And that's because we see that's one of the most need is for the interpretation services. And then we also contract with the language line. So that if we need another language, because all three of those we have our Hispanic, but if there's another language that we need, we can utilize the language line.”

Only one workforce development program talked about providing resources for outreach to immigrant communities, specifically to address workplace language barriers: “There is we do encourage companies to use our WIAO dollars As far as, if they've been working with that company for six months or longer, to put them in Spanish classes, both Spanish or English classes, you have them take the English as a second language, and you have the others take introduction to Spanish.”

Another obstacle to workforce development services with immigrants was documentation status.

“Um, so I'll tell you who's left out Well, right now, what we're going to, again, Hispanic individuals who are they don't have to be citizens, but they're going to have to have that work authorization part. So, and that costs money. And I don't know how they don't exactly know all of this. We have, I've worked with Hispanic students earlier. And I don't know if how much of this has changed. But you have to fill out a form, there's an application fee. And I think it needs to be filled out by an attorney, if so then there's a fee for that. So that's going to be a challenge.”

Senior Citizens

According to the 2021 American Community Survey, there are 294,815 individuals in the Piedmont Triad who are 65 years or older. About 17% of this population is in the labor force. While it was recognized that “older workers in specific industries are definitely left out,” little was said about this population and the barriers they experience. It was recognized however, that senior citizens presented a viable pool of workers. One interviewee explained, “I think that more so there's a lot of untapped market that employers could look at. If they were willing to look at them. You have the, the older employee.”

There are several limitations though that were noted: educational attainment, retraining, and energy. As one person explained, employers may, “For some reason, they may not think the older ones have enough energy.” Another workforce development professional noted issues with educational attainment among older workers, “...once we did a study, what we found out was in [this city], and these are mostly older adults now, you know, in their, their 50s. And over, and it has changed some, but with [this city] being a manufacturing city, you know, people were not encouraged to get a high school diploma, because families work for companies. And you knew that dad worked for the company, and mom worked with the company, I'm gonna work with the company, my uncle works for the company, and we're gonna stay there 30 years. So, all of a sudden, you know, ... the economy went to the point where companies started leaving [this city]. And they started laying folks off. And they, they found it difficult to find another job, because I only a high school diploma. And I'm too old to go back to school. So, you know, a lot of a lot of people face that. And as far as moving up in companies, those that did, did it from experience, more so than education, but now, descriptions are written so you just weed people out.”

Another point made by some participants was the fact that while there were some limited resources available for older jobseekers, more funding is geared towards educating and training younger people, “now we find older adults having to learn new skill sets. And then once they learn those skill sets, they don't have the experience to step into positions. So, you know, an apprenticeship opportunity would work great for them. But money is being, they are funding, it's provided for the 18-to-24 year old. But there's no money provided for the older adult.”

Veterans

Another population that received attention for needed additional support were veterans of armed services who represent about 7% of the entire population. Employers, economic development officials, and workforce

“I WORRY THAT A LOT OF THESE VETERANS WHO COME OUT, YOU KNOW, THEY END UP WITH PTSD OR SOME TYPE OF MENTAL ILLNESS. AND NO, EMPLOYERS DON'T WANT TO HAVE TO DEAL WITH THAT.”

development professionals all noted the need for helping veterans who were having trouble with finding employment. One explained, “Yeah, so we have a Veteran Services Unit. So, they're working with individuals that have served, you know, in the military and have come back, and they have some sort of barrier to, you know, successfully

reentering the workforce. And so, the state provides us three full time personnel to work out at the Career Centers to work with them.”

Some of the barriers that veteran’s face were brought up as well. For example, one participant said, “So I worry that a lot of these veterans who come out, you know, they end up with PTSD or some type of mental illness. And no, employers don't want to have to deal with that.” While some employers may be hesitant to employ veterans due to PTSD, others wanted to specifically recruit veterans, “I know right now two employers that I've been dealing with in the last week or two or a landscape labor and a pest control. The pest control services they're looking at trying to have some type of training they're targeting veterans are hoping to get veterans and then offer them training if they have no experience whatsoever so that they can get qualified pest control people.”

Adjacent to the issue of workforce equity for veterans was the issue of homelessness which is high in this population. An interviewee explained, “our veterans program specifically works with homeless veterans and a homeless veteran population. And then they'll try to get them into certain shelters and veteran programs to get them back to where they have suitable housing.”

Employer Issues

Worker Shortage

According to the U.S. Chamber of commerce there is a national deficit of workers. As Stephanie Ferguson, Director, Global Employment Policy & Special Initiatives, explains “Right now, the latest data shows that we have over 10 million job openings in the U.S.— but only around 6 million unemployed workers. We have a lot of jobs, but not enough workers to fill them. If every unemployed person in the country found a job, we would still have 4 million open jobs.” The shortage, she explains, is due to both the growth in the job market which add 3.8 million jobs in 2021 as well as the 2.9 million who dropped out of the workforce due to early retirement, enhanced benefits during the pandemic, issues with childcare, and the opening of a record number of new small businesses.³⁷

This issue was top of mind for our interviewees. One interviewee explained, “what's not going well, is trying to find job seekers to fill all those opportunities.” Participants all declared that there just aren’t enough applicants for the number of jobs available, “there's just a labor shortage across the board in every sector.” As one workforce development director explained, “One of the biggest trends we're finding, and I think this

³⁷ Ayala, Megan. 2022 “The Pandemic Unemployed Survey: Why Americans are Staying Out of the Workforce” U.S. Chamber of Commerce <https://www.uschamber.com/workforce/the-pandemic-unemployed-survey-why-americans-are-staying-out-of-the-workforce>

is kind of statewide, is that we've got a lot of openings. And we don't have enough people.”

The issue was being felt across all sectors as one economic development officer explained, “manufacturing is struggling to get people to actually come to work.” Another added, “Yeah, we get a lot of telephone calls, especially any jobs that requires manual labor. Those employers have a harder time. I know right now of two employers that I've been dealing with in the last week or two, a landscaper and pest control. The pest control services, they're looking at trying to have some type of training. They're targeting veterans and hoping to get veterans to offer them training even if they have no experience whatsoever just so that they can get qualified pest control people. And I've got the landscape labor company that she says, If I hire somebody, she doesn't usually quit before I get the paperwork done to get them into payroll system. “

Industries were having an especially hard time finding and keeping anyone over entry level positions and these positions were a revolving door with many leaving within months of employment. This churn puts additional strain on those who

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remain with an employer as they have to absorb the additional workload for the same pay, “it is hard for those that work in these places and they, they don't have enough help. So, it's putting a burden on those that are still working.” The issue of a worker shortage was both seen in the urban as well as in the rural areas of the Piedmont Triad, though some rural participants noted the additional strain caused by the long-term trend of declining population and ‘brain drain.’ For these reasons, skilled worker shortages were more acute in these areas.

Mismatch of Skills

Another issue with recruitment is the mismatch between worker’s skills and employers’ needs. One workforce development director explained, “there's plenty of jobs, and there's plenty of job seekers, the problem is the mismatch of skills, so that people that are looking for a job don't have the skills that the employers have vacancies or so that is, is, you know, a little bit of a mismatch we would have if we put all these bodies into jobs. Yeah, we could fill a lot of them, or maybe all of them, but, but if you're not skilled for that particular type of work, that's a problem.”

Technological changes in the workplace were brought up as well as skilled trades and training and even just the physicality of some jobs, “a lot of our barriers too are ability to do the work, physically.” On the job training, apprenticeships, community college programs, and other efforts have had results. One administrator explained, “We've had

some better success lately, but we do still, you know, continue to struggle with finding good talent.” Another elaborated on the programs they are offering:

“So one of the things that we're doing is we do because of the WIOA Title One program,³⁸ we do screen and work with people to help them go back to school in their in their chosen field, if you know it's one of our approved training programs. But another thing that [we] are doing right now we are planning, we're trying to do some brainstorming on plans on getting nontraditional students back in school for and whether it's short term or long term training....And so that's one of the things we're done. One of the other thing we're doing is we have partnered with the Department of Transportation, where they come in and they have this program. What we're doing is a pop-up academy... the HCTA or Highway Construction Trades Academy. And what it is, is they come in, it's usually a six-week to six-month class. But ours is just 10 days. So what it is, is they come in and they get certified, , as a flagger, OSHA 10, and CPR. Plus, they spend three full days getting acclimated to heavy equipment operation. The goal is to work with returning citizens who had been incarcerated, women, and your, your whole DEI. So it it's really awesome, the program that they're doing so and they get hands on experience. And then they at the end of that they hold a job fair with state contractors.”

Technological deficits were especially acute with older jobseekers. It was said that, “they are left out because they didn't grow up in the era of computers.” This deficit was exacerbated by a fear of technology: “I never really hear people talk about the broadband being an issue, but we just hear people who are just afraid they've not ever had to do it, and they just are scared to learn. Or that, you know, maybe they just have kids that help them when they have to, but that's not I have not heard anyone talk about access and being an issue.”

Others observed technological skills deficits among younger people as well. One human resources person indicated, “I still find it surprising the number of people that come in that. I mean, I'm, I'm not young, I'm not really that old, either. But the number of people that are my age and younger that come in, who do not have an email address.” Another workforce development official attributed this in part to school districts doing a poor job in promoting computing skills:

³⁸ See <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/completedstudies/WIOA-implementation-study>

“And, you know, we also continue to teach Microsoft Word and PowerPoint, as well as Excel, we teach Adobe courses, as well as Autodesk and, Autodesk type courses for drafting and that kind of thing. So I think, teaching students, a lot of districts have stopped teaching the Microsoft Word and PowerPoint because they feel like oh, well, that course that you know, it doesn't go anywhere, it doesn't fit in a pathway. However, it teaches those kids some skills that they need with almost any job that they're going to have. And even if you wind up using Google platforms, in your in your job, then the skills that you have learned in Word, and PowerPoint can still help you in those because much of it's very similar.”

Technological training programs were also mentioned, though specifically targeted to younger students and more likely to be in urban than rural settings. One such program was described to us. “And, so we work with the Chamber of Commerce, and [County] Tech is which is really in my backyard as it has a really good LEAP program, a Learn and Earn Apprenticeship Program which is working with a lot of advanced manufacturing, and they're doing some cybersecurity now, and some information technology...”

DEI in the Workplace

While some participants recognized the need for additional DEI trainings, policies, and resources, others said diversity was just not an issue in their areas or their businesses. One interviewee explained that they had made efforts to train staff using an online program they purchased, “we did purchase a platform and for DEI training, and we offered it to not only in-house

staff, but all staff.” Another employer said, “these are brand new discussions to the company. We have worked with an organization in Raleigh called the Diversity Movement. They did listening sessions with employees, they did an employee survey. And we then shared that with our senior leadership, and part of the context of that is the majority of people thought there are no issues that everything's fine. But then you look at 80% or more of respondents were white men. So, from their perspective, of course, there are no issues because they don't have any issues.”

“AND WE THEN SHARED THAT WITH OUR SENIOR LEADERSHIP, AND PART OF THE CONTEXT OF THAT IS THE MAJORITY OF PEOPLE THOUGHT THERE ARE NO ISSUES THAT EVERYTHING'S FINE. BUT THEN YOU LOOK AT 80% OR MORE OF RESPONDENTS WERE WHITE MEN. SO, FROM THEIR PERSPECTIVE, OF COURSE, THERE ARE NO ISSUES BECAUSE THEY DON'T HAVE ANY ISSUES.”

Another employer explained the need for proactive programs and DEI training, “we as managers, we as supervisors, we have a responsibility to identify potential conflicts in the workplace and to anticipate and to proactively address those kinds of issues.” Another employer in the construction industry explained, “I think in this industry, we are, we are caring, and we are accommodating when we know about something, but it is not necessarily an industry where people feel comfortable admitting when they might need help or support.”

However, the disconnect between salaried and hourly employees or between upper management and workers in the field was clear. An employer explained, “we also had training with our CEO and all VPS. And I'm gonna be honest, that didn't go all that great. Part of it is, it was on Zoom. So, it's not as effective. And part of it is, I think, a lot of discomfort comes with these kinds of trainings and people didn't like that. And they were, they were, pretty adverse to that. And so, our, our very intentional DEI strategies and tactics have come to a halt.”

Another interviewee elaborated on the fact that they had received training and he felt his staff had no biases, “I mean, just from my perspective, I see enough of training from the staff in diversity, equity, and inclusion, DEI, so I, I feel comfortable in saying that the staff that we have here aren't going to be discriminatory towards customers coming in, we don't look and go, Oh, well, you're beneath me, or you're this or that, because you are, we're not going to provide you a service.”

“I THINK, A LOT OF DISCOMFORT COMES WITH THESE KINDS OF TRAININGS AND PEOPLE DIDN'T LIKE THAT. AND THEY WERE, THEY WERE, PRETTY AVERSE TO THAT. AND SO, OUR, OUR VERY INTENTIONAL DEI STRATEGIES AND TACTICS HAVE COME TO A HALT.”

Another rural manufacturing company executive explained that while they don't have a DEI department, they do utilize their human resources to encourage diversification:

“I would say to start with, we've got a talent acquisition team that looks at you know, diversity as far as recruiting sources and different schools and areas to try to attract people from all areas. We do not have anyone in that role that you mentioned as like a diversity and inclusion director. But you know, we make, you know, local efforts to we talk about diversity, not just with, you know, race and gender, but also many other areas, as far as, you know, the different generations, you know, age backgrounds. We have people that work at our facility, they're from other countries. So it's really broader in the way that we look at diversity.”

Yet, in some areas, particularly those that are less ethnically diverse, people simply said they didn't have any equity issues and stated "we don't have a lot of diversity." In those rural areas, we were less likely to hear about proactive DEI work. One county economic development official explained that the County Government did not have a formal policy or DEI program in place. They explained:

"But we are, you know, obviously, an equal opportunity employer. Part of that is also you know, where we're located, there's not a lot of D and I, in [this] County in general. It's just our population is pretty, when you look at our population is 90/10, from a demographic standpoint, or maybe 85/15, but so, yeah, we, I would really like to have some diversity, especially on my board. That is a challenge, because it's just a numbers game for us. There's just not there's just few people, to from all of that, you know, whether it's race, religions, sexual preference, whatever, it's, you know, we don't have as many up here, as many people to kind of choose from, to make that happen. And that's something we're definitely open to, especially on our board, you know, we really want our board to look like our county. And, you know, from a geo geographical sense, as well, from diversity. We won't all parts of the county, we won't try to get all types of people on the board that they're from a representative standpoint, and we have a high Latino, we actually have a higher Latino concentration people than we do have African Americans. And so, they're both still, I think, between the both of those groups as 15% of our population. The relatively small when you look at all of it, but, but that's something we need to work on, but we do not have a policy in place."

Similarly, a rural employer noted, "we do not have a DEI officer at this time. We think that our person who is our life benefits coordinator, the EEO officer, or whatever, she will kind of take on that role. And I think they're in the process of discussing and creating a policy or guidance on that. And then I feel like they will probably have a, a one or two people from each of our departments. And we're not very big like, in in this building, how many we have, like, less than 30 people here, or whatever, they will try to, you know, have a DEI team, or

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whatever. But, um, I guess because we're in [this] County, and we're kind of, kind of rural. We don't have a lot of diversity, I will tell you why, especially when you start getting into gender and all that we just, we don't have, we don't have a very diverse pool of people applying.”

Other rural leaders did recognize a racial divide in small communities that had pockets of racial diversity with histories of disenfranchisement. One explained:

“Um, I think that we have a we have an issue with that. I mean, there's a, there's a divide in our towns where you know, I think it's everywhere. There is a diversity is there's a battle there's a battle with inclusion, white versus black, on a lot of different in a lot of different avenues, and it's just, it's a battle, I think it's that small town battle thing. It's like they're just they, I think both sides feel like they're, they're not getting the same opportunities. So, I think it's something that we could work on as a County to, to ensure that all parties feel included, and we do have a high Hispanic population. And I think that's been a battle as well. I mean, it's been good, but there's been a there's been a battle and, you know, racial battle for many, many years, when it comes to that, and it's just, it's hard to discuss because there's you can't really, can't really blame it on one. One town, one, one happened, you know, one event or anything like that, it's just, there's a, there's a divide. And I'd love to see that change.”

In another rural community, they had DEI policies in place, but no one designated to lead efforts. The manager explained, “I do have policies, but we don't have we don't have anybody that's leading that effort up. Not at the county level or at the community college level or, or County Schools. That's something I think we're, we're a little bit behind on so we have, we have not but I'd love to see more of that...”

Drug Testing & Background Checks

A final area of exploration with employers was around drug testing and background checks. Drug testing has been found to disproportionately impact workers of color. One recent survey found “African-American respondents experienced the highest rate of firing or being reprimanded”³⁹ Another study of nearly 70,000 respondents found, “younger age, male sex, black race, income greater than \$20,000, completion of high school and non-urban residence were associated with report of drug testing at one's workplace among the full sample as were non-white collar occupation, work in medium

³⁹ See <https://detox.net/uncover/drugs-at-work/>

or large workplace, and absence of other substance abuse/dependence. In stratified analyses, black race was associated with report of workplace level drug testing among executive/administrative/managerial/financial workers and technicians/related support occupations; Hispanic ethnicity was associated with the outcome among technicians/related support occupations.⁴⁰

Many employers had universal testing of employees. One company executive explained, “everyone takes the drug test. Yep. And I have heard from people, you know, this is, this is not equitable. This is a bad practice. Companies shouldn't be doing this anymore. I mean, even I have, I have a desk job, I had to take a drug test to get hired. And you know, some people push back around, well, alcoholism doesn't get tested and screened, on the

“EVERYONE TAKES THE DRUG TEST. YEP. AND I HAVE HEARD FROM PEOPLE, YOU KNOW, THIS IS, THIS IS NOT EQUITABLE. THIS IS A BAD PRACTICE. COMPANIES SHOULDN'T BE DOING THIS ANYMORE. I MEAN, EVEN I HAVE, I HAVE A DESK JOB, I HAD TO TAKE A DRUG TEST TO GET HIRED. AND YOU KNOW, SOME PEOPLE PUSH BACK AROUND, WELL, ALCOHOLISM DOESN'T GET TESTED AND SCREENED.”

drug tests and what if somebody comes to work drunk or hungover? So, there are all these layers that are not, not to be discounted there, right? But the bottom line is, is we do drug test.” This universal testing was usually at point-of-hiring: “We only test when we bring people in. We do the drug testing when we bring people in. We do drug and background check. But after that, not a yearly or quarterly or whatever we don't do that.”

Other employers had foregone the drug testing altogether, “a lot of our manufacturers and business and industry partners have forgone the drug test.” However, most still required a background screening. One employer explained, “we do not require drug testing. But we do a criminal background. And each scenario is weighed as far as you know, severity of the crime time since, since that occurred, and just how it pertains to their specific position.” This represents a shift for some employers who said they used to test for drugs but they had too many issues then with filling positions: “I think we have good workers. But I think honestly, just passing the drug test is a big, big deal. We have a lot of opioid problems in our county. We're one of the highest in the state, unfortunately.” Another said, “the drug testing, because it was a real big problem,

⁴⁰ Becker, W.C., Meghani, S., Tetrault, J.M. and Fiellin, D.A. (2014), Racial/ethnic differences in report of drug testing practices at the workplace level in the U.S.. *Am J Addict*, 23: 357-362. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1521-0391.2013.12109.x>

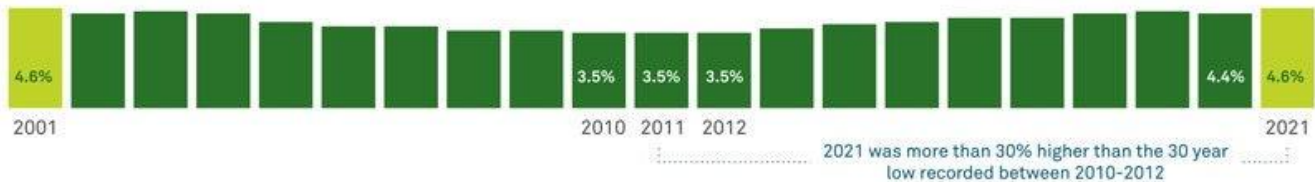
because people couldn't pass drug tests here. So, a lot of employers have taken the marijuana off the drug test, so that they can get more people hired. Because that's more, more recreational everywhere.” This change has been recent and attributed in part to the exodus of so many from the labor market: “especially in the last two years where employers can't hire ... they're more willing to hire people that have some type of criminal background record. Depending on what it is, though, everybody looks at it a different way.”

2022 Quest Diagnostics Drug Testing Index

Based on more than seven million urine drug tests collected between January and December 2021

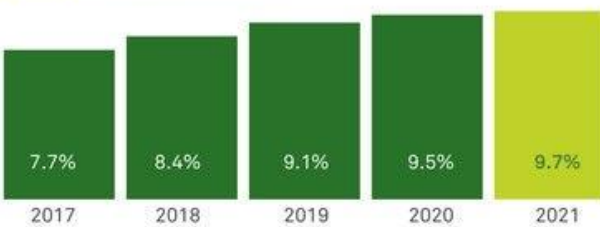


Drug positivity rates in the combined U.S. workforce climbed to highest level in 20 years



Post accident positives climbed over five years

For General U.S. Workforce



Post-accident vs. pre-employment positivity rates for cocaine – urine drug tests

For General U.S. Workforce, as a percentage of all tests for Cocaine



(More than 6 million tests from January to December 2021)

Figure 5 – Drug Positivity Rate – Quest Diagnostics ⁴¹

⁴¹ See <https://www.forconstructionpros.com/business/construction-safety/news/22158873/construction-gets-a-big-bump-as-workforce-drugtest-positivity-reaches-20year-high>

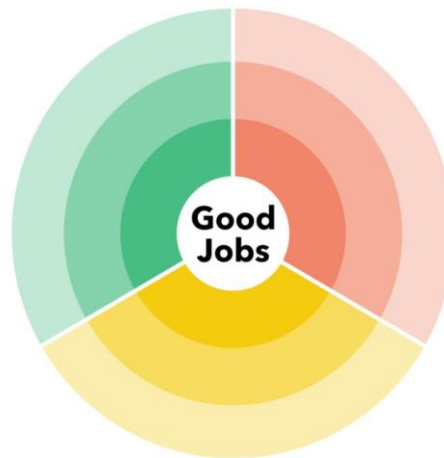
Good Jobs: A Working Definition

Economic Stability

- Stable, family-sustaining pay
- Sufficient, accessible, and broadly available benefits
- Fair, reliable scheduling practices
- Safe, healthy, and accessible working conditions

Economic Mobility

- Clear and equitable hiring and advancement pathways
- Accessible, paid training and development opportunities
- Wealth-building opportunities



Equity, Respect & Voice

- Organizational and management culture, policies, and practices that:
 - are transparent and enable accountability
 - support a sense of belonging and purpose
 - advance DEIA*
 - and address discrimination.
- Ability to improve the workplace, such as through collective action or participatory management practices

*DEIA: diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility

Figure 6 - Aspen Institute Working Definition of Good Jobs⁴²

Key Worker Issues

Worker issues will be more fully explored in our next sub-report which will be based on public listening sessions with jobseekers. None-the-less, we did explore perspectives on the issues workers have with the various stakeholders interviewed. Those on the frontlines of human resources and workforce development had relevant perspectives on what they felt were problems facing jobseekers in the Piedmont Triad. The issues fell into the categories of low pay, lack of flexibility or work-life balance, and few advancement opportunities. It is noted that these issues align well with the working definition of a good job proposed by the Aspen Institute which includes the domains of economic stability, economic mobility or advancement, and principals of equity, respect, and voice for workers.

Low Pay and Limited Benefits

One theory explaining the worker shortage in North Carolina is that it is being caused by low wages, poor working conditions, and the unwillingness of workers displaced during the pandemic to return to underpaid positions. According to an August 2022 study by the North Carolina Department of Commerce,

⁴² See <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/good-jobs-champions-group/>

“The number of job openings in North Carolina skyrocketed in 2021, while the supply of jobseekers fell below pre-recession levels, leading to a record-low number of jobseekers per job opening. These trends were particularly pronounced for low-wage jobs, such as Food Preparation and Serving-Related Occupations. By the end of 2021, the number of job openings in Food Preparation and Serving-Related Occupations had more than doubled, while the number of jobseekers in this category was 18% lower than its pre-recession level.”⁴³

A recent article in the UNC School of Government N.C. Impact Initiative also notes that workers in education and healthcare have also dropped out of the market in part due to wages:

“The medical field has been greatly impacted by these shortages. North Carolina was already projected to face a shortage of around 12,500 nurses by 2033 before the pandemic and is now set to face projected shortages of up to 21,000 nurses in the coming decade due to burnout.....

Another heavily affected sector is education, with a November 2021 survey indicating that half of all teachers were considering switching positions. In addition to low levels of pay and benefits, teachers say they feel stretched thin, with new expectations and little support. For many since the pandemic began, teaching has been exhausting, and some say it’s not sustainable.”⁴⁴

Our interviewees clearly recognized the “K-shaped recovery” that is being discussed in the media. The economic rebound from the pandemic is benefiting higher wage workers who are earning more and seeing more job openings, but simultaneously this is furthering inequalities with low wage workers. While one workforce development official noted, “I’m seeing anywhere from \$11.50 for a [bank] teller position, and the manufacturing industry is doing lots better with \$15 and higher.” Another economic development official also noted that wages were rising across the job market in their area, “what’s going on is employers in [this] County, have really over the past couple of years, raised salaries for not just entry wages for you know, entry level positions, but really all positions. So that’s helping bridge a gap.”

⁴³ See <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/blog/2022/08/30/low-wage-workers-and-k-shaped-recovery-north-carolina>

⁴⁴ See <https://ncimpact.sog.unc.edu/2022/09/the-ongoing-workforce-shortage/>

None-the-less it was pointed out that inflation has made these wage gains less meaningful, “we know the price everything go everything's going up price wise, but salaries ain't going up [as fast].” Starting wages were not sufficient for living costs as one interviewee noted, “...one thing is the companies are not paying enough at all like to live on, and I see some of these, you know, but I see sometimes, like, an ad say, you know, it'll pay \$12 an hour and ... I'm like, what? Like, if they offered that to me, I'd be like, what no, like, nobody can live on that.”

Another interviewee pointed out the bifurcation in the market between high- and low-skilled workers, “It's a challenge right now, because of the dollar the hourly wage that's being offered for relatively low skilled work. It's kind of an undercut. And so I think that's, I think that's part of the challenge.” Finally, and further underscoring the divide between higher wage workers and others, an employer explained the recent loss of some employees, “I think he’s, he was looking for more salary [from us]. But he said, you know what, let me go ahead and leave. Since then, the other two that left, one was salary, he saw an opportunity where I think he's gonna get maybe like \$20,000, a year more. And I'm like, I don't blame you. Not at all.” It wasn’t just direct pay, but the lack of benefits which also made higher skilled workers think about leaving, “Since we are a small nonprofit, our benefits and what we can offer are limited, especially when it comes to health care. My current issue right now and the person I'm trying to hire is they are the head of their family... And because we are so small as an organization, we cannot pay for their health insurance.... So that really decreases our ability to hire people because of that.”

Other participants explained that new industries had come to the area and attracted the higher-skilled workers away, “you know, several new industries are coming in, and they have gotten the higher

pay. So, you know...they probably are most likely pulling from other industries where the pay has not been so good. We've seen a lot of that. But it's again, I think it comes back to those wages where, you know, we've had the lower wages.”

There is competition as well between counties for the same workers. For example, one person explained, “it's just easier for them to go to work in Forsyth County, and pay those lower taxes to live in Davidson County, because Davidson County's got the lowest residential tax rate around.” Labor market competition was especially felt in rural, less densely populated areas:

“THEY PROBABLY ARE MOST LIKELY PULLING FROM OTHER INDUSTRIES WHERE THE PAY HAS NOT BEEN SO GOOD. WE'VE SEEN A LOT OF THAT. BUT IT'S AGAIN, I THINK IT COMES BACK TO THOSE WAGES WHERE, YOU KNOW, WE'VE HAD THE LOWER WAGES.”

“I think we struggle because we just have a really small population of 20,000 people and have 11,000 folks in the workforce. We do experience a lot of leakage to other counties, particularly Randolph, Stanley, and Moore County. Just because of, you know, higher pay positions. We used to back in the day, we were a booming textile community. And once the 90s hit, we kind of went through a really rough time in Montgomery county, and we lost a lot of employers, a lot of industry, obviously, a lot of those textile mills, so folks looked outside of the county for work. So we do struggle. I mean, I think everybody's experiencing that right now.”

Likewise, ‘leakage’ was also noted in border counties between North Carolina and Virginia, “North Carolina is number seven, for workforce development in the United States. But Virginia is number two.” The worker ‘leakage’ from smaller places was also a phenomenon affecting the age structure of the workforce, “the young people want to stay here, but there's no jobs. And the jobs that are for the young people are very low pay. So, they leave. They leave [this town], because, you know, the wage paid is less than what they need. So, we end up with a not so young city, if you will.”

Flexibility (Work/Life Balance)

A December 2022 article in Financial Management Magazine had the title, “Benefits and flexibility remain important to attract talent, report finds” The article, which used data from Indeed and Glassdoor found that, “employers trying to fill in-person jobs may find themselves at a disadvantage as workers gravitate to work that lets them stay home.... Organisations that adopt flexible work can cater more to employees with disabilities and parents with childcare responsibilities. They also open their doors to expanded talent pools....”⁴⁵

Flexible schedules, work from home opportunities, and work/life balance were a common topic in our interviews. One participant noted, “I want to work for a company that has paid parental leave and excellent family benefits because it speaks to the culture of the company. And I think we don't talk about that enough.” Another employer also spoke about the need for work-place flexibility:

“So I think employers who would be more flexible, when it comes to that, I think, in the past, and what we're dealing with, right now, we have employers who they don't care, they don't care that you can't, you don't

⁴⁵ See <https://www.fm-magazine.com/news/2022/dec/benefits-flexibility-attract-talent-report-finds.html>

have, you know, your child sick, or maybe, you know, Mom has to go get a job and you don't have childcare. They don't, they don't, they don't look at the individual situations, and they're not flexible when it comes to that if you don't show up, you don't show up. And you get, you know, you get fired. So, yeah, we've, we've struggled with that over the years. I think that PTO, health benefits, and being flexibility when it comes to childcare.

And to an individual situation, you know, I mean, that's, that's something I've been, I've been blessed in both my organizations, they've been very flexible when it comes to the deaths in the family or, and I know it's not, you know, it's not always like that all these industries can't always be as flexible, but I think that needs to be considered. And then, you know, we're, we're talking with our HR folks in the industries and trying to get them to think more, more like that, and to encourage policies that will allow for flexibility and to manage on different situations because everybody's got a different background, everybody's dealing with different stuff. And I just feel like they're not they've not been as forgiving. Over the years.”

In a similar vein, an interviewee discussed the flexibility needed for working parents in particular industries like construction. She explained, “related to that are childcare issues, because you gotta get back to pick up your kids at a certain time, whether it's afterschool care, or daycare, or whatever it might be. So, these are all are interrelated. We are seeing some companies offer more flexible work arrangements, so people can mitigate that at least a couple days a week. We are not that company. We are asking people to be in the office. And part of that is construction was deemed essential and never shut down. And that means for everyone in the office to so those are some of the issues.”

Smaller organizations, as well as those that were linked to government agencies or higher education, seemed to have more flexibility already built into the positions, though at a cost to salaries, “So we provide a nice work life balance, cohesive environment, but our pay is not equitable with some other institutions. So, so, we don't always get the best talent in essence.” Another interviewee further explained, “And of course, we're flexible we're a small organization so you know time off to get things done during the day you know, we try to be very flexible with that as long as we get the job done.” Others in workforce development explained that more employers are trying to be flexible when they can:

“We've recently been hiring people, and then kind of give you some anecdotal information on others. Here, yes, we've had to work with we've turned one position into parttime, and we've been flexible with those parttime hours, plus we increase the hourly pay for that, in addition to our fulltime position, we are being a little bit more flexible with remote work. And we've had to definitely increase the wages and benefits for that position for our organization. Now, anecdotally, what I can tell you about, we're talking to our employers here, you know, it's the same thing, everybody has raised wages, everybody has been flexible with work schedules when they can, I mean, there's certain occupations, like production workers and things that they've got deadlines they meet there, they can't like can only be so flexible, but everybody is adjusting and adding to and increasing their benefits, wages, all that what we've seen.”

Lack of Advancement

Another job quality issue for workers is the opportunity for mobility or advancement. One employer said, “I think there could be more opportunities where I would like to see there being more opportunities for advancement for other individuals here.” Most entry level and production-based jobs lacked clear pathways as one interviewee suggested, “the people that are engaged in employment there are often in you know, what we tend to call the dead end jobs....”

Lack of advancement opportunities was also noted in white collar professions and governmental positions in rural areas. One county manager explained:

“As far as opportunities for advancement and growth, there's not necessarily opportunities within a department. I will use well and also say that, again, a sheriff's deputy does not make a good detective. A really good social worker does not make a really good social work supervisor. And, you know, we have like a CPS we have six social workers. We have one supervisor who says that only real option for the social workers to move up is if that supervisor retires or... So there's not always within those, those departments opportunities for advancement.”

Smaller employers also had limited opportunities. While they might have good pay and benefits and even economic mobility, one had to wait for attrition among senior levels before positions would open for promotions, “Oh, yeah, economic mobility, stability, for sure. Um, opportunities for advancement not so much just because this is a place that

people like to work at for a long time. So people, once they get a higher level role, they typically stay in that role for a significant amount of time. So those opportunities to advance don't necessarily come up." Similarly, "I think we offer good jobs. Now as far as advancement, you know, obviously, we're, we're, a small organization and unless I'm gonna leave and the person has been here for a while, and they're qualified, you know, there's just our size, there's we're kind of limited on advancement in a clear advancement opportunity."

Some employers did talk about upward movement within a company and support for additional skills building, "So, I think the job offers good opportunities to advance within I'm a product of that myself, I started off as a director and paid my dues did some good work, and I was able to get a promotion. So that there is a lot opportunities for advancement within the organization....we do, do, you know, fairly regular professional development training on various matters as an organization. But as far as when it comes to advancement, things of that nature, a lot of that takes place off site with different organizations." Others talked about having to create their own advancement opportunities:

"I sort of, like, created my own way of doing things when I was at [company name]. I went in on ground-level, and going in on the ground-level... I learned everything on my desk and learned how to satisfy the other ask that they had for me coming in, sometime it was all out and sometime it was scattered. But the girl that sitting here, she's kind of I want to say lazy, for lack of another word. So at times, I would train on her desk, you know, just real casually. You want some help? And she'll say yes. Okay. I was saying one day, I'm gonna have your job. Okay, I learned that job. Well, okay. And sure enough, I got that job. But then I wasn't satisfied. You gotta be hungry, in order to move from where you are. And the, the employer is not responsible for what you're carrying on the inside... I moved from that job, learned the next person job. I learned the highest job in that office When I got to the top it was about the same amount of work... And I felt good about myself getting there."



Figure 7 – Structural Barriers to Social and Economic Mobility

Structural Barriers

The distribution of occupations by race or gender tends to perpetuate workplace inequities and relegates women and people of color to lower-paying jobs. While social mobility usually involves climbing up the economic ladder and achieving a higher standard of living, making more money, and getting a better-paying job with better benefits, there are many barriers to mobility that have been observed in the literature and in these interviews with stakeholders. More economic mobility happens when the social and material conditions exist which help and support that person, or people as a whole, in their efforts to gain access to employment opportunities.

In the State of Working NC 2021: Protecting & Connecting Workers report from the NC Justice Center,⁴⁶ the authors note, “Rebuilding from COVID-19 presents an opportunity to shore up our economic defenses and lift up communities that previously were left in harm’s way. Helping people overcome the barriers to rejoining the labor force is the quickest way to speed our collective economic recovery, and doing it right will put us on a path to a more resilient post-COVID economy.”

Some of the barriers that were underscored in our interviews (as well as in the literature) include: access to transportation, affordable and safe housing close to employment

⁴⁶ See <https://www.ncjustice.org/publications/state-of-working-nc-2021-protecting-connecting-workers/>

opportunities, affordable quality childcare, and broadband internet access. One interviewee explained,

“So from our perspective, and the work I’ve done, since about 2006, working at youth programming, and all the way up through adult dislocated worker and just the policy side of the house, a lot of the barriers kind of stemmed from issues around transportation, access to technology or broadband, childcare opportunities that are from different organizations, we’re, you know, we’re in this new space around diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. So, I think a lot of organizations who support work around workforce development have changed their thought processes, and in organizations who hire people have changed their thought processes. So, I think just a big barrier is our big reason why a lot of people don’t aren’t able to follow the economic mobility ladder, or just basic simple barriers around access to technology, transportation, and childcare.”

Access to Transportation

Nearly every interviewee in a rural area pointedly discussed the barriers presented by lack of access to public forms of transportation. These areas lacked universal access to public transportation, “you know, there’s no public transportation to speak of in [this] County, especially to the more rural parts.” Ridesharing was sometimes an option, but app-based ride shares were nonexistent, “We don’t have Uber. We don’t have with, if you do not have a car, you are simply not able to access the work force.” The rurality of much of the Piedmont Triad was a key issue:

“...honestly, where I think we’ve got a barrier and every, every bit that that’s an infrastructure we don’t have, when there’s not it’s, it’s not easy for someone to, to drive, you know, to ride their bike to work. We don’t even have bike lanes in our county. We’re very rural, very old school when it comes to that, unfortunately.... You know, it’s just in transportations, we have one system I think, that folks can use, but usually, most folks usually have like a disability when they use that transportation system. Yes, we’re very we’re very large county, I think we’re 502 square miles, if I’m not mistaken. So, it’s very large county. We’re very rural.”

The transportation system was also seen as declining with fewer mass transit resources in rural areas. One interviewee recounts, “Well, we used to, they used to have PART that would come up here and take people out of the county. But, they have stopped that,

they no longer do that. And there is YVEDDI here, but they have been focusing on since before COVID, on more medical issues with people, it's harder to get them to bring people to employment or to interviews, or just appear to even to look for work because of their funding, they had difficulty getting funding even before COVID for that. So, because the state budget not passing for a very long time. So they stopped using it and mostly all they use it for was for Medicare and Medicaid patients to get them to different doctor's appointments and things. So, it's not like it used to be.”

Creative solutions have been tested in some areas. For example, in one area “ [the] county transit authority is just building a small bus line, [which] has given a lot of people that are in our city, an opportunity to move around easily. But, we do not have anything that goes even 15 miles out into the county to be able to transport. We've had some companies come together to try to do vans. And they'd have a meeting point and they travel to the next destination. That works in some cases. But a lot of times, if there's a mom that's being transported out, or a dad caregiver, and need to get back home, it's difficult for them to get back if they're doing that mode of transportation.” Another county has also tried, and failed with many transportation efforts:

“...it's, it's a huge barrier. And I don't know that we've you know, we have tried several things and they've not been successful. One of the things we tried was having a special bus line that went between our campuses, we thought that that was an issue. I've had conversations with many ministers about those vans, those beautiful vans that are parked six days a week, and why not have those vans rolling for their members to get them back and forth to work. That wasn't greeted with the, how do I say this, it wasn't greeted with the, the, joy of the Lord that I would have expected. It became bogged down in issues of insurance and liability. There's, there's not a good solution for it right now in such a rural community.”

A few employers didn't see transportation as being as much of a barrier, “Yeah, so transportation. I feel like everything's reasonable there. We have a lot of personal vehicles, there's no mass transportation, but for those that need it, they are able to access it. For example, we have an individual that has a disability. And so, they rely on the public transportation system, and they have them on their regular ongoing schedule. And so that's, that's good.” This was also reflected in some urban areas, “In Forsyth County, no it's not the issue, there's public transportation and pretty much anybody that needs transportation can get it, and then if they struggle with transportation in their, in our programs, we can provide bus passes and gas cards, so that's not the problem.”

Affordable Housing

A report just released by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington DC, noted that “Since 2010, the price of a house has increased by 31.5 percent, while rents have risen by 14.6 percent. The average fair market rent, which represents the 40th percentile of gross rent, for a two-bedroom apartment in North Carolina now exceeds \$960 per month, or more than \$11,500 per year. State officials estimate that North Carolina needs 900,000 additional homes over the next decade to meet the demands of a growing population.”⁴⁷ In part, this report blamed the shortage of housing supply on zoning which restricts density and multi-family housing in preference for detached single-family homes. The National Low Income Housing Coalition points out that housing affordability is a workforce issue as “without affordable housing, families have constrained opportunities to increase earnings.”⁴⁸

Many of those we interviewed listed lack of housing and housing affordability as issues impacting workers in their areas. Workforce housing supply issues were underscored and the bifurcation between high value homes for vacationers and retirees and those that are affordable for local workers was noted:

“...as far as housing, there's, there's not a lot of affordable housing around or just housing in general. There's some new developments coming out, but it's primarily for an affluent community near, near the lake for like retirement. But as far as like, affordable housing, and with work nearby, we lacked that. We're working on that ,we're growing, we're actually seeing that that growth there when it comes to some residential development, but we do have a ton of that higher income residential development out on our lakes, that's, that's, the bulk of our property tax in the county. So, I feel like some of the minority populations, they don't have the same opportunities just because we just, we, we haven't had any residential growth and we, we, don't have available housing. We don't have workforce housing.”

This lack of housing was seen for single family homes, as well as multi-family housing types. An employer explained, “We don't have a lot of affordable single-family homes;” and another noted “we're very rural, very old school when it comes to that, unfortunately, in housing, we don't have enough housing rent, we don't have a lot of rentals.” In rural and urban markets alike, recent increase in cost of housing was also

47 See <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/keeping-north-carolinas-housing-affordable>

48 See <https://nlihc.org/explore-issues/why-we-care>

discussed, “I have noticed that the housing market and rental market has increased.” One participant reflected on just how much the prices have increased:

“I will tell you, in the six years that I've been here, I have noticed that the housing market and rental market has increased, because when I first moved here, you know, you could rent a nice house, three bedroom house for like, \$700. And now, it's more like \$1000. So that, you know, things have changed over the six years in that area. So, I would think that it would be getting a little bit harder with that \$30,000 to \$32,000 a year [salary]. If that's the only income Yeah.”

Childcare

Childcare in North Carolina is also prohibitively expensive. According to the Care Index⁴⁹ at-home care averages \$27,251/yr and in-center care averages \$8,643/yr. This represents about 34% of the median household income. As a result of COVID19 closures of childcare facilities and schools, availability of childcare has become more restrictive. Childcare supports parents’ employment, but also affects their ability to work sufficient hours, seek promotions, and build skills.⁵⁰ A December 2022 headline underscores the issue, “The NC economy is said to be ‘inextricably linked to childcare’.”⁵¹

It has been argued that high quality universal pre-K could “significantly reduce the financial burden facing families with young children and help ensure that children are prepared for kindergarten.”⁵² It also helps with reducing poverty in households with children by reducing the cost-burden of families due to childcare expenses.

An October 2022 headline by WRAL noted, “workforce crisis: Shortage of childcare employees keeps parents from getting back to work.” The childcare workforce itself is being impacted. As a workforce development director pointed out, “an issue now though, is with the workforce shortage is really impacting childcare and childcare centers, because there's not available staff or the spots are taken. Or you may not be able to acquire a voucher from whatever organization that provides those Department of Social Services, and things of that nature.” In many rural areas, participants noted only having one or two options for care, “...as far as the childcare is concerned, that's a huge

⁴⁹ See <https://www.care.com/care-index>

⁵⁰ See <https://buildthefoundation.org/2020/12/new-report-child-care-crisis-cost-north-carolina-2-4-billion-yearly-before-the-pandemic/>

⁵¹ See <https://localtoday.news/sc/the-nc-economy-is-said-to-be-inextricably-linked-to-childcare-93251.html>

⁵² Lieberman, A. (2022). “Policy Recommendations: Universal Pre-K.” New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/care-report/policy-recommendations-universal-pre-k/>

a huge deal in our area. In fact, where I live, there's only one child development center, that, that's public.”

For many interviewees, childcare was both a barrier to employment and an equity issue for employed and job seeking women. One explained, “I would also say childcare [is a barrier] because they can't, if they don't have childcare, they can't go to work. If you know, and then they don't have a plan B when childcare is not a, you know, my kids sick, I don't have a backup plan. I can't go to work today. And employers are getting tighter and tighter on you know, that's one of the things we found here is that, you know, you might get one chance, but you can't use that every time because employers are tightened are really tightening the absentee policies is what we've also found here.” A corporate executive suggested one possible way employers could help, “I did mention in a meeting last week that if we're really having trouble recruiting, the number one thing I think will help us is if we had a child childcare stipend. And that's where men and women are like, if we provide a childcare stipend, that's a huge benefit for people.” Another employment specialist linked childcare and the worker desire for more flexibility and talked about the need for onsite childcare at employment locations:

“I think American workers want and need more flexible work hours, that may or may not be working remotely. But, but definitely some flexibility somewhere in there. And it probably does tie back into childcare. For most things, I think in our area, also, we have several industrial parks, that are already in existence or are being built. And I think that, that our community leaders, and even state leaders, when these companies are choosing to relocate, or build here, and they're looking at one of these industrial parks, I think there should be some kind of incentive either through accompanies and, you know, maybe state incentives to consider having a childcare facility within that park. And then it would not matter if you work with Toyota or Lidl or whatever other company is there, it would be primarily for those employees and their children. And I think that those childcare centers should also be opened. And it's hard, you know, and staffed to accommodate the work hours of those facilities. So just not an eight, hour seven to six, or whatever the normal childcare hours are, I think they need to, you know, expand beyond that. I think there are a few childcare facilities that do that, but not enough.”

Broadband Services

Our interview participants noted that the Piedmont Triad has “really strong infrastructure around broadband in metropolitan areas.” But they all pointed out that as you move further out into the rural areas, this infrastructure (which includes digital subscriber line, cable internet, fiber optic technology, wireless broadband, satellite broadband, and broadband over powerlines) is lacking. As one interviewee said, “... in your rural areas, then you have the issue with just access to high quality broadband infrastructure.” Another noted that the 5G wireless infrastructure is also lacking in these areas, “I find that to be a very big issue, because in my travels just here around the county, there's no, there's certain places you don't have any signal.” These claims are born out in the data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau and presented in the map below. We clearly see that many rural areas have less than 75% access to high speed internet.

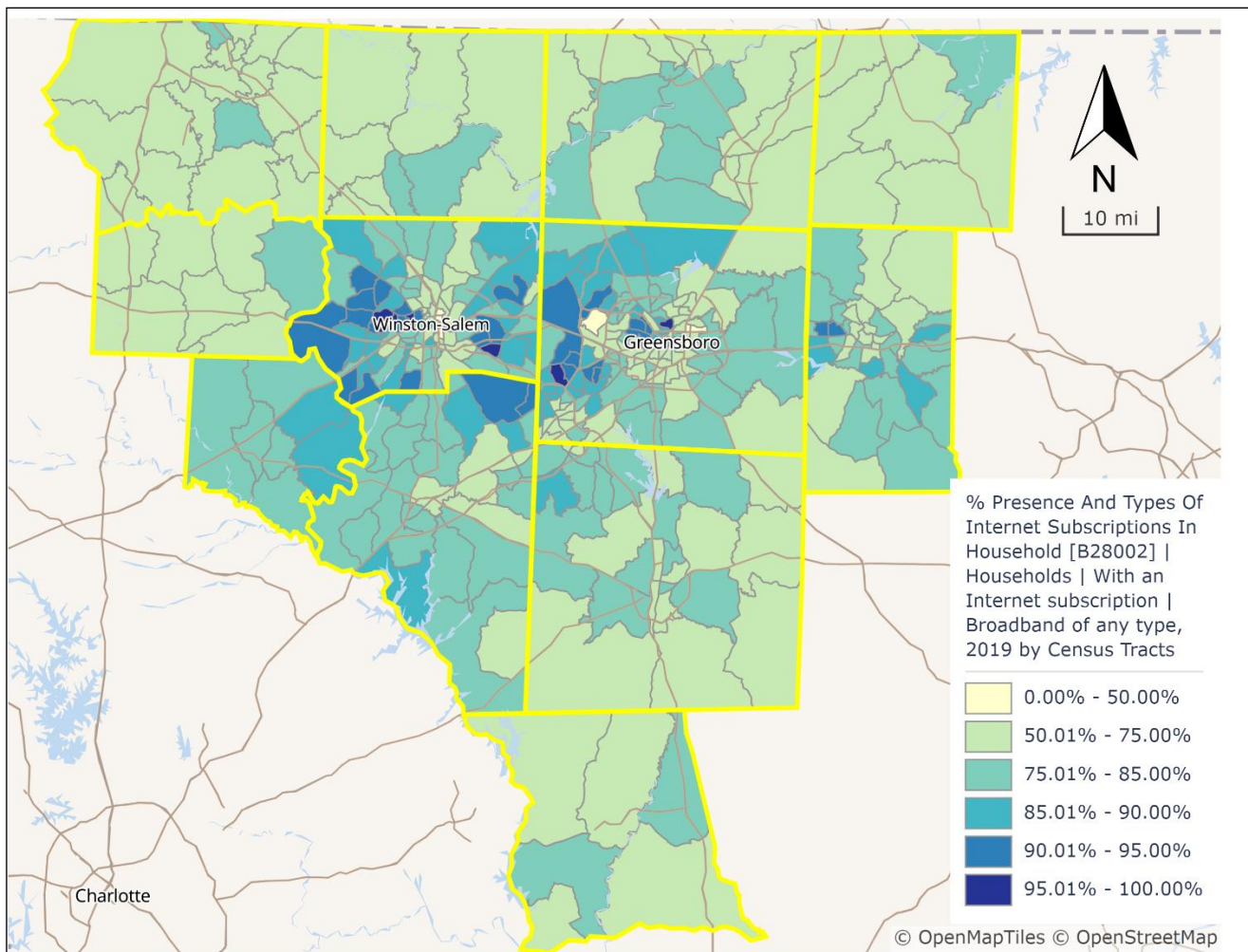


Figure 8 - Broadband Access Across Piedmont Triad by Census Tract (2021)

Jeffery Coghill, an Associate Professor at East Carolina University, notes, “The slower pace of growth for Broadband internet access has had a cascading effect on more rural areas causing slower growth and creating barriers to access the world wide web of information.... we could possibly grow people where they live and grant internet access to rural citizens. One way to do this is with creative internet access in areas that are underserved to grow rural workforces in place.”⁵³

Efforts are underway to increase access with \$25.6 million to N.C. in federal funding from the USDA,⁵⁴ and \$206 million in Growing Rural Economies with Access to Technology (GREAT) grants coming from the N.C. Department of Information Technology’s (NCDIT) Broadband Infrastructure Office.⁵⁵ Our interviews also uncovered some of the successful ways that American Rescue Act funding has led to increased highspeed access for rural populations:

“And [this] County, we've lobbied for money, this grant money, there was a coalition of us that went and so they've been able to use some of those dollars, they use some of their ARA dollars to do last stop. And so, the ability to access high speed, affordable broadband will open some doors for employment in a way that had not previously been available. The other thing we've done is, there's a site in downtown... It was a former drugstore that had been sitting vacant, and we were able to get funding to turn that into something called CoSquare. And so, for very reasonable prices, people can get three gig access. It's the best internet in [this] County, and there's a coffee bar and you can use offices, and it's it's a reasonable price. The idea is that we'll, just it's a cost recovery model. “

⁵³ Jeffrey G. Coghill (2021) Rural Broadband Internet Access: The Key to Rural Workforce Development, *Journal of Electronic Resources in Medical Libraries*, 18:4, 204-212, DOI: 10.1080/15424065.2021.2003279

⁵⁴ See <https://www.rd.usda.gov/newsroom/news-release/biden-harris-administration-announces-246-million-high-speed-internet-north-carolina-rural>

⁵⁵ See <https://governor.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2022/08/31/governor-cooper-announces-206m-great-grants-expand-internet-access-69-counties-across-state>

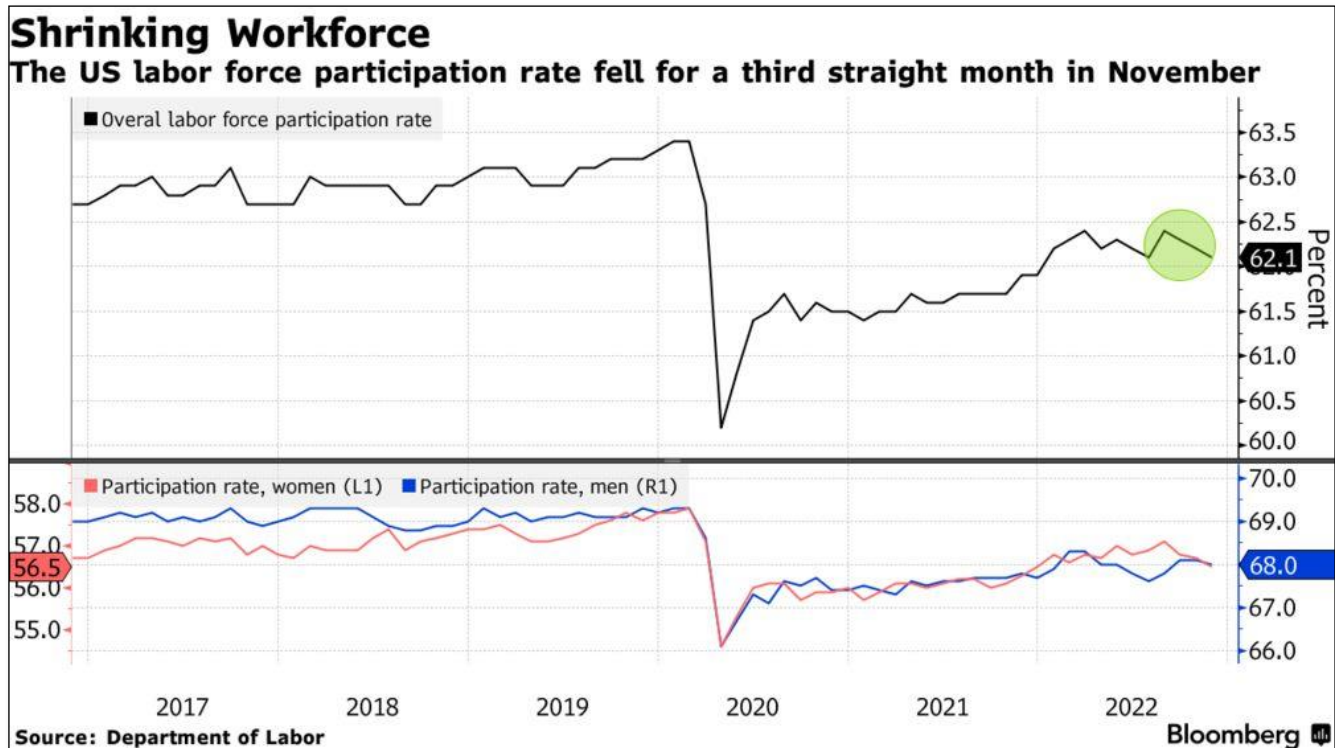


Figure 9 – US Labor Market Participation December 2022 - Bloomberg⁵⁶

Workforce Development

With the continuing decline in labor force participation rates (see figure above), several workforce development themes were explored with stakeholders. In particular, the lack of labor engagement resulting from the COVID19 Pandemic and the need for greater marketing and community engagement by those working within workforce development agencies.

Workforce Engagement

With labor force participation below pre-pandemic levels, many of our interviewees discussed engagement as an issue. One said, “it’s just so critical right now, for our employers to get talent, and they need it now. And we have a lot of people who are not engaged in the workforce for various reasons.” Another elaborated:

“So, yeah, so engagement. So COVID has really changed how we work with people. I mean, you know, there’s a big push for virtual services and making sure we individually can meet them where they are, and engage with them without them coming to bricks and mortar centers. So, we’re

⁵⁶ See <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-12-02/us-jobs-report-shows-more-americans-are-leaving-the-workforce>

really focusing on our virtual services, some combination of hybrid services, but COVID really changed. Individuals walking in doors, seeking out help. So just trying to re-engage individuals. I don't think it's a thing of people are lazy, they don't want to work or they got too much money from the government. I just think circumstances are where they're trying to figure out childcare needs, transportation needs, how to address some of the barriers, and just engage and get them back into the workforce. So I think engagement is the biggest thing we've kind of seen lacking, or we have to, we have to work on getting individuals back when the doors are back into services.”

While “COVID has changed everything for community serving organizations,” some agencies had restarted in-person workshops in an attempt to re-engage jobseekers, “we're looking at ways to start some of those workshops back now that we're starting to see more customers in person can have more in person classes.” Another noted people coming in to seek services, “primarily, people who are seeking employment services will come in to us and we'll engage them into our resource room where we have staff that meet them.” Another workforce development official noted that they had resources and funding to support more engagement, “we're able to provide training dollars and supportive services to job seekers that are looking to get training in specific career pathways.”

Marketing and Community Engagement

Along the same lines, stakeholders discussed the need to do further outreach in order to attract jobseekers, principally in rural areas, with students and youth, and with other vulnerable communities. As one said, “It's all about outreach.” Another explained, “maybe marketing of our programs, getting the word out there. I know, we do not market NCWorks at all, there is no budget for marketing and advertising.” Another workforce development director explained,

“One of the things that happened during COVID is the employees went into a dark, dark away place who can't find them. So that's an effort for us to go out and be, try to be, visible in places that we think individuals may be that may be looking for jobs. So, we sort of visit the community a lot. “

In addition to greater community engagement, other workforce development directors explained that organizations like theirs need to be more nimble and change with the needs of the community. He said, “we have found that individuals expect and are less reliant on brick-and-mortar locations, right, this need and ability for organizations to transition the way that they have traditionally deployed or delivered services”

Collaboration among economic development and workforce development organizations was also needed, “a lot of the organizations that do the work around economic and workforce development, I think they need to come to the table and better pool resources and resource allocation.”

Some participants were looking at furthering engagement with youth through apprenticeships and through high school Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. An interviewee noted, “On our youth council, we have CTE directors from all three of the school systems who are youth council members. So, what those meetings do is it allows us to keep abreast of what's going on in the school systems and at the community college.”

A limitation that was raised was the fact that many offices are short staffed, “as far as hiring for our center, as for workers for our centers, we have not really done a lot of that. The state has not had the resources to hire people, we were back, we're probably at our lowest staffing level.” According to ZipRecruiter, there are 5,918+ Workforce Development job vacancies in the North Carolina area as of December 2022. Another limitation is funding, “So I think just providing more organizations with more funding to leverage across that pool of pool of individuals to support and I say participants who are engaged in workforce training, who are engaged trying to get back into the workforce, helping businesses and industry offset some of their costs around uncovered worker training, you know, JTS on the job training.”



Figure 10 - NCWorks Mobile Career Center

Summary & Conclusions

This first report in our project has laid out the nature of social and economic mobility in the United States and explained the interrelationships between factors which contribute to inequality in wages, salaries, and wealth. We spoke briefly about recent studies conducted by the Research, Policy, and Impact Center which underscore racial disparities in wages as well as the recent impact of inflations on low- and middle-income North Carolinians. We then provided socio-demographic data for the Piedmont Triad, describing the population characteristics, quality of life, and employment context including data on unemployment, leading employment sectors, and populations impacted by poverty.

The remainder of this report focused on learnings that emerged from the qualitative process of interviewing 24 stakeholders from across the region and in positions related to workforce development, human resources, and economic development. These stakeholders identified seven classes of vulnerable workers in the Piedmont Triad including: Ethnic and Racial Minorities, Women, Justice Involvement, Individuals with Disabilities, LGBTQ+, Foreign Born, Senior Citizens, and Veterans. These categories were neither exhaustive nor exclusive: clearly intersectionality exists between many adding layers of vulnerability to some jobseekers and resulting in disproportionate inequality. For each class of vulnerability we deconstructed the workforce-related issues impacting them. We also drew parallels between national and state-wide trends and patterns and what our interview participants found in their experiences.

Next, we explored the various employer and worker issues that limit labor force participation and filling vacant positions. Employers, we heard, are being harmed by the depth of the worker shortage and are desperate for talent. As a result, they are opening up in some ways to workers they may not have hired in the past. They are relaxing drug testing and background checks in some areas, and where permissible, and they are promoting *some* principals of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the workplace including recruiting women into non-traditional fields. Yet, as one corporate executive pointed out, “we know that our industry has a huge problem. We know that our industry has the highest suicide rate of any industry in America. We know that there are high rates of divorce and alcoholism and domestic violence and all of these horrible things. So, we are starting the conversations around these topics. These are all still taboo issues that no one wants to talk about. And then you add to that these are mostly men and they certainly don't want to talk about their feelings and their experiences. So, we're, we're, trying right now.

Workers on the other hand are still reeling from the Pandemic which changed the lives of so many, or at minimum caused them to reconsider priorities. Workers are less willing

to work for low pay. Rising wages in the region were reflected in starting wages in the \$12-\$15 an hour range. But this is not enough for many worker as they still face poor working conditions, inflexible schedules, and limited benefits. Lack of opportunities for advancement and upward mobility were also discussed. Without clear pathways to better compensation, autonomy, and job quality, workers are less motivated to stay with any given employer.

We also spend considerable time in our interviews discussing the structural barriers of transportation, housing, childcare, and technological infrastructure. These issues, while having local ramifications, are clearly societal in nature. Our legal and economic structures do not incentivize investment in public goods. A recent OP-ed in the *Minnesota Reformer* explains well the tension between collective good and private market: “The undeniable reality is that all of these problems stem from insufficient public funding of our basic needs. The provision of affordable housing, accessible child care, quality education and other public goods are not profitable to provide, and thus will not spring from the private sector. We lack them because our state government has chosen not to buy them, and the whole of our society is suffering as a result. It is that simple.”⁵⁷

There is nothing new about this perspective on public investment for economic development. We see many references to the need for investment in public resources for working families. For example, Dr. Mildred Warner noted in a 2006 journal article for the *American Planning Association*, “Child care in the US is now being recognized as part of the social infrastructure for economic development. Planners are now recognizing the complexity of child care as a market sector and is now engaging experts in early care and education policy to craft solutions to previous problems associated with families.”⁵⁸

This report ends with workforce development experts themselves emphasizing the need to be creative in community engagement with those who haven’t re-engaged since the Pandemic. The static, brick-and-mortar, employment center that may have worked well in previous decades needs to become a more flexible, nimble, and responsive institution that meets workers where they are and through multi-modal or hybrid forms of outreach.

⁵⁷ See <https://minnesotareformer.com/2022/03/04/surplus-provides-once-in-a-lifetime-opportunity-dont-blow-it/>

⁵⁸ See Warner, Mildred. 2006. "Child Care and Economic Development: The Role for Planners" PAS Memo. American Planning Association.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255454076_Child_Care_and_Economic_Development_The_Role_for_Planners

Appendix A – Interview Protocol

Version 10.11.2022



Workforce Equity Assessment 2022 Employer Interview Script

Date: _____

Person Interviewed: _____

Organization: _____

Good Afternoon. My name is _____. I'm a _____ with the Research, Policy, & Impact Center at the National Institute of Minority Economic Development. This interview is part of a Workforce Equity Assessment sponsored by the Piedmont Triad Regional Council. We are speaking with community leaders, industry executives, public administrators, employers, and others with knowledge of the workforce in the Piedmont Triad Area of North Carolina. In particular, we are interested in better understanding the obstacles faced by residents seeking access to employment as well as some of the problems employers have in attracting good talent.

Thank you for taking the time to answer our questions. Just a few preliminary comments. We are recording this interview, but only for internal transcription purposes. What we say will be kept confidential. We will report on what we learned today, and we will use quoted excerpts in our reporting, but we will not attribute any statement to you by name or affiliation. We'll ask about a variety of topics; if in any instance you aren't familiar with the topic and don't have an answer, feel free to say so, and we'll move on to the next question.

Is it okay for us to record this interview?

START RECORDING

1. To begin, may I ask you to describe your company/organization and your role in it?
 - a. In your work, do you deal with any aspect of hiring, supervising, or training workers?
 - b. In what ways do you intersect with employers, jobseekers, workforce development programs, etc.
2. What are the challenges your company (or companies in your area) face in finding, hiring, and retaining employees?
3. We understand that low unemployment has put pressure on employers to raise wages, augment benefits, alter work schedules, etc. How has your company responded? Are there any things you have changed in order to attract talent?
4. Would you say that the jobs your firm offers are “good jobs”?
 - a. Do they provide economic stability?
 - b. Do you provide benefits?
 - c. Are there clear pathways for advancement?
 - d. Are there wealth building, savings, or profit sharing opportunities?
 - e. Do workers have any say so in improving the workplace?
5. Does your workplace have a designated DEI officer/manager/director?
 - a. Does your company have written policies promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion?
 - b. Do you address gender, sexuality, and LGBTQ+ communities?
6. Do jobseekers in your area have issues with resources such as housing affordability, transportation, childcare, healthcare, or other supports?
 - a. Is your company doing anything to address these issues?
 - b. Do you provide vans, carpool, or other transportation services?
 - c. Do you provide childcare or childcare assistance?
7. Does your company provide any education or training opportunities on site?

- a. Does it provide any education or training benefits like tuition assistance?
 - b. Do you offer apprenticeships or internships? Do you coordinate with high schools, community college or other programs?
8. What does your company do when applicants have a criminal background?
 9. What are your drug testing requirements?
 10. What are some of the ways you accommodate individuals with disabilities?
 11. How do you accommodate non-English or limited-English speakers?
 12. Is your company involved in projects to improve workforce equity and address structural obstacles to employment?
 13. Is there anything else you would like to add that we have not already covered in this interview?

STOP RECORDING

Appendix B – Steering Committee

Steering Committee Members – Equity Assessment

Dr. Laura Colson (Guilford)	VP of Academic Affairs – Bennett College	icolson@bennett.edu
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