



OUR PEOPLE

Introduction

Buncombe County combines lush foliage, vibrant urban and rural communities, residential neighborhoods, and attractions like the Biltmore Estate, along with rugged natural terrain and beloved forests on the eastern ridge of the Blue Ridge Mountains. This combination of natural beauty and urban amenities has attracted thousands of new residents each year for decades, making Buncombe County one of the fastest growing counties in a fast-growing state. Population growth has occurred both in the City of Asheville and the county's other municipalities, as well as the unincorporated areas of the county. Substantial growth is anticipated to continue through 2045 and beyond, although at a slightly slower pace than over the last few decades.

Across many measures, Buncombe County performs higher on economic and social metrics than the state average. However, there are parts of the county that face greater challenges, such as lack of access to internet, higher rates of uninsured residents, and higher vulnerability to human-made and natural disasters and other unexpected events. These are challenges the County can begin to address through development of its Comprehensive Plan.



The county's population is projected to continue to grow for the next several decades. Projecting future population is an inexact science, but the consensus from experts is that the county's population will continue to increase at a rapid pace for the next 25 years.

According to projections from Woods & Poole Economics, Inc. and the French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization

Photo courtesy Buncombe County

OVERVIEW OF TRENDS & PLANNING INFLUENCES

Population Trends

- Buncombe County has grown substantially in recent decades. The population as of the 2020 Census is 269,452, an increase of more than 67 percent from 1980.
- While the county's population has grown more slowly than the rest of the state over this 40-year period, Buncombe County has grown much faster than the United States.
- The county's population is slowly becoming more diverse. However, the overall Black/African American population has roughly stayed the same over the last 20 years, and more specifically, the Black/African American population in the City of Asheville has declined significantly.
- Population growth has occurred both in the cities and towns (Asheville and the towns, also known as incorporated areas) as well as the unincorporated parts of the County, outside of Asheville and town borders.
- The county's population is slowly becoming more diverse. The overall Black/African American population has roughly stayed the same over the last 20 years, although the Black/African American population in the City of Asheville has declined significantly.

Projected Population Growth

- The county is projected to continue growing over the next several decades.
- Projections by Woods and Poole Economics Inc., a consulting firm that specializes in developing these types of projections, estimate that Buncombe County will add an additional 54,961 residents by 2045, a 20.4 percent increase to 342,431.

- Projections by the French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization, the regional planning organization that develops the long-range transportation plan for Buncombe County and the surrounding region, estimate that the County will grow even faster with an additional 83,435 residents by 2045, an increase of 31 percent over today's population.

Vulnerable Populations

- Certain populations are at greater risk of dislocation or other challenges due to a natural disaster, job loss, or other emergency.
- A higher percentage of Buncombe County residents have health insurance than in previous years. However, significantly more members of the community who are Hispanic or Latino, or who live at or near the poverty line, are uninsured. In addition, the percentage of residents with health insurance is lower in Buncombe County than the state level.
- A high percentage of households in Buncombe County have high- or medium-speed internet access. Access to internet service is less prevalent with residents who live in more rural parts of the county, as well as among residents with lower incomes.
- The Social Vulnerability Index measures prepared by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) show that Buncombe County generally has high resilience and low vulnerability to disasters or other emergencies. However, certain parts of the county are more vulnerable, both within the City of Asheville and some of the county's unincorporated areas.



Photo courtesy Buncombe County

FINDINGS FROM ANALYSIS

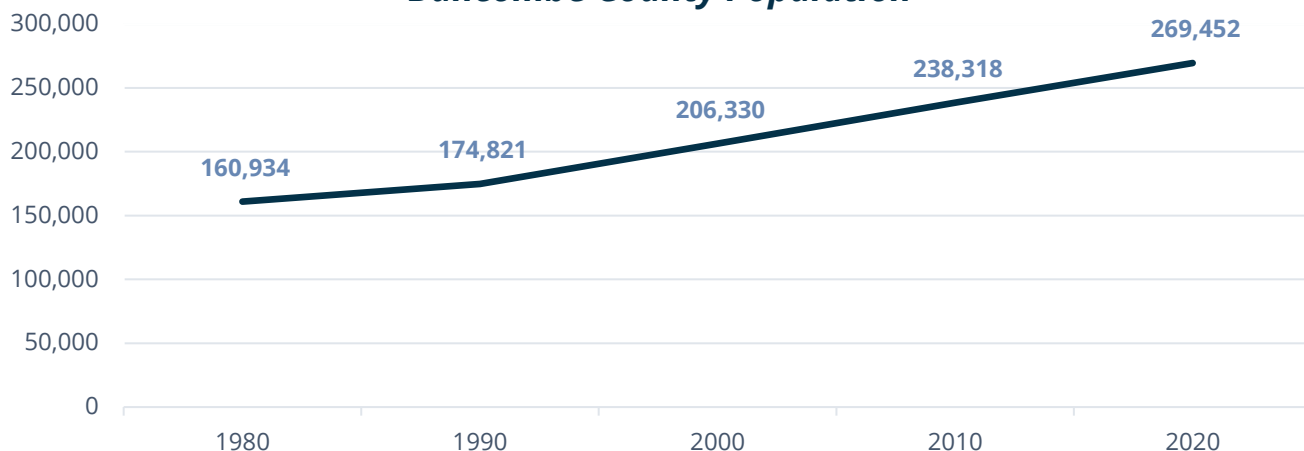
Population Trends

With Consistent Growth the County is Now Growing Faster than the State

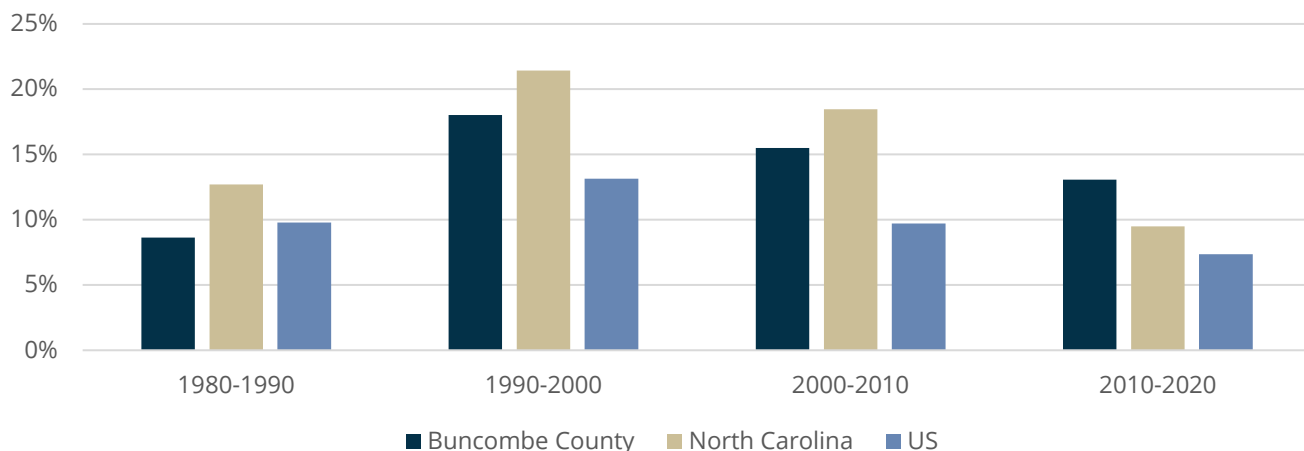
Buncombe County has seen consistent population growth over the last several decades. Since 1980, the County's population grew from 160,934 to 269,452, an increase of 67.4 percent. Over the same time period, the North Carolina population grew by 77.5 percent, while the population of the United States grew by 46.3 percent.

Since 2010, the county's population has grown by 31,134 residents, up from 238,318 residents. Of North Carolina's 100 counties, Buncombe County was the 16th fastest growing between 2010 and 2020, and the fastest growing outside of several coastal counties, the Raleigh-Durham metro area, and the Charlotte metro area. Buncombe's rate of growth, which had trailed the state's in recent decades, surpassed it during this time period. The county grew 13.1 percent, while overall the state only grew by 9.5 percent and the nation by 7.4 percent. Thus, while the county's rate of growth slowed in the last decade, it has slowed less than the rate of state or national population growth.¹

Buncombe County Population



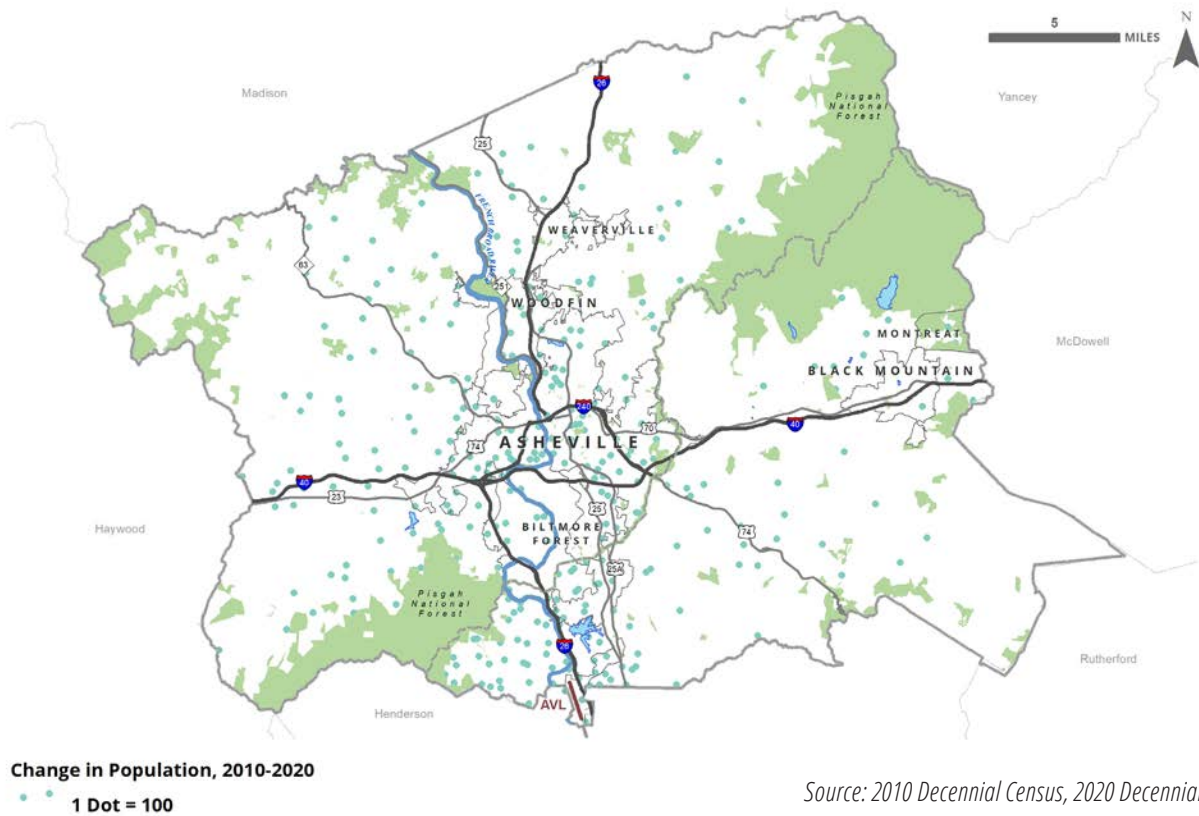
Population Growth by Decade



Population Density, 2020



Change in Population, 2010-2020



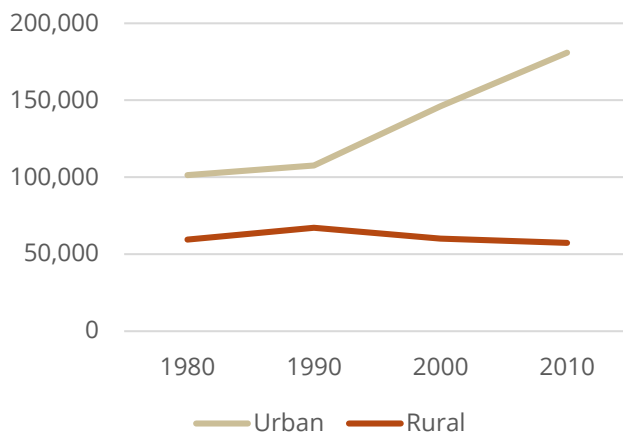
Source: 2010 Decennial Census, 2020 Decennial Census

Much of the growth has occurred in the more urban parts of the county. Using the U.S. Census Bureau’s definition of rural and urban areas, the urban population of the County grew from 101,392 in 1980 to 180,932 in 2010. For this same time period, the rural population shrank from 59,542 to 57,386.² However, the population in the incorporated areas of the county—the City of Asheville and the towns of Biltmore Forest, Black Mountain, Montreat, Weaverville, and Woodfin—has grown only slightly faster than the rest of the county. In 2000, 41 percent of the population was located in the incorporated areas, and 59 percent in the unincorporated areas. By 2020, 44 percent of the county’s population was located in the incorporated areas and 56 percent in the unincorporated areas. In fact, between 2010 and 2020, the population grew slightly faster in the unincorporated parts of the county (15,856 growth in population) versus the incorporated parts of the county (15,278).³

It is important to note that the amount of land within each municipality has grown over time, as the municipalities annexed land into their corporate limits. However, changes in state law in 2012 limited the ability of municipalities to involuntary annex land, requiring a majority vote of residents of the area proposed to be annexed before the annexation takes effect. For instance, the City of Asheville was 28.7 square miles in area for its 55,889 residents in 1990, for a population density of 1,943 persons per square mile. By 2010, Asheville had enlarged to 44.9 square miles. Despite the rapid population growth, the growth in the city’s area means that density in 2010 dropped to 1,856 persons per square mile.

Overall, the municipalities have grown steadily since 1980, with slightly accelerated growth since 2000. The municipalities grew by 30.5 percent from 1980 to 2000, and 40.2 percent from 2000 to 2020. Asheville continues to be by far the largest municipality. The city is roughly four times as large as the towns combined. Among the towns, Woodfin has experienced the fastest growth since 2000, more than doubling from 3,162 residents to 7,936 residents. Weaverville and Black Mountain have shown significant growth as well. Biltmore Forest has roughly the same population today as it had in 1990, while Montreat continues to have fewer than 1,000 residents.

Urban vs. Rural Population



Growth is Projected to Continue

The county’s population is projected to continue to grow for the next several decades. Projecting future population is an inexact science, but the expert consensus is that the county’s population will continue to increase at a rapid pace through the 2045 horizon year of this plan.

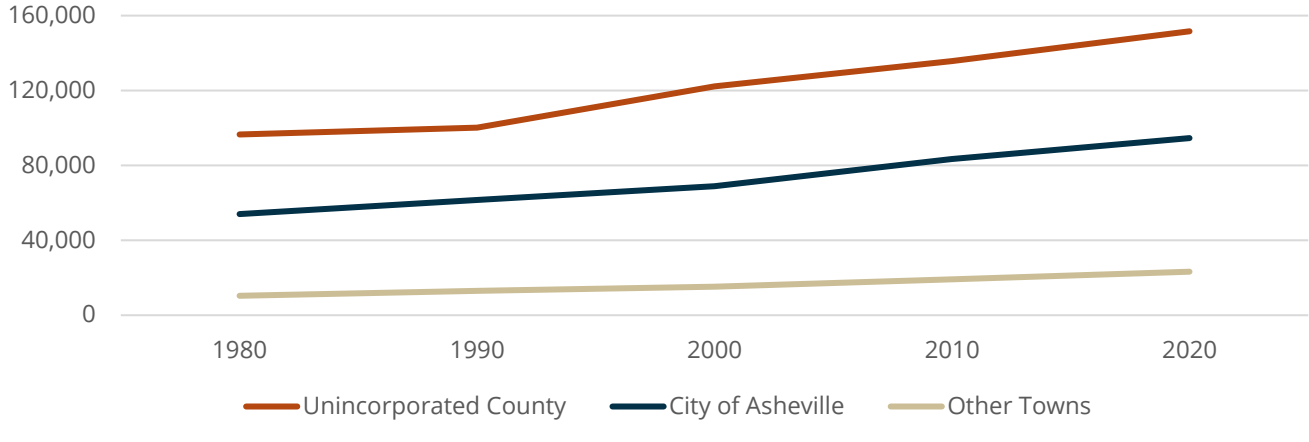
Projections prepared by Woods & Poole Economics, Inc.—a consulting firm that develops long-term county population and economic projections—anticipate that the population will reach 342,413 in 2045, an increase in population of 54,961 or 20.4 percent over the 2020 population.

Even faster growth is projected by the French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization (FBRMPO), the regional planning organization that is responsible for preparing long-range transportation plans for Buncombe County and the surrounding region. County elected officials and most of the county’s municipalities are members of the MPO’s governing board. Its most recent projections were prepared for the 2045 Metropolitan Transportation Plan, which was adopted in 2020 and guides regional transportation investments. In the MPO’s projections, the county’s population is anticipated to increase by 83,435 by 2045 to 352,887, or a 31.0% increase, greater growth compared to the Woods & Poole projection.

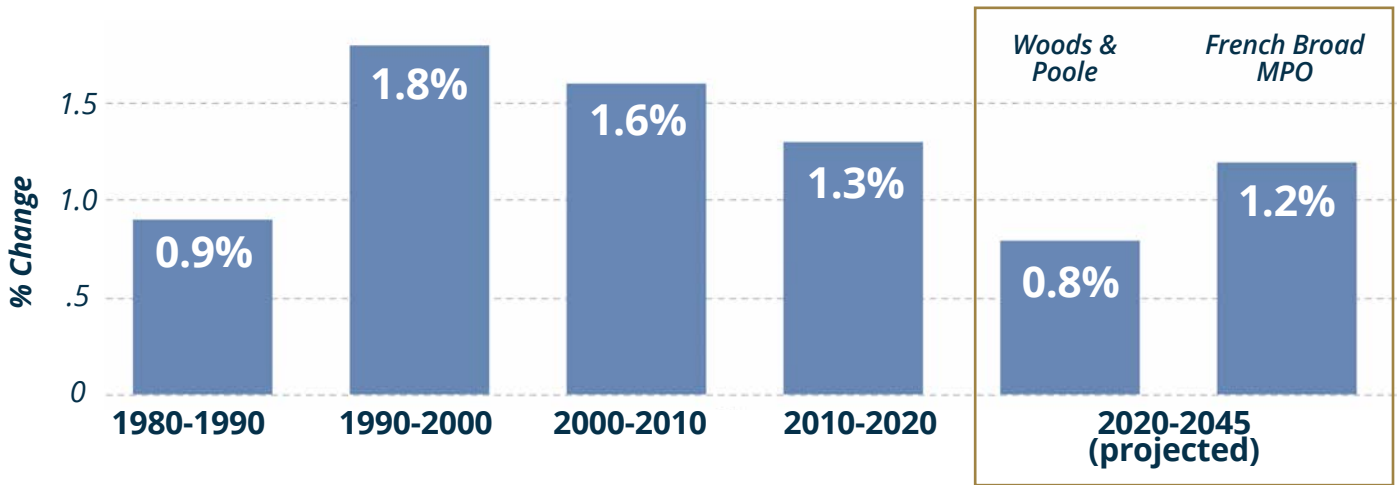
In addition, the state issues its own population projections. The state demographer projects that by 2045 the county’s population will be 313,408, with 43,956 additional residents and an increase of 16.3 percent.

Both the Woods and Poole and the French Broad MPO projections anticipate a continued slowing in the population growth rate. The Woods and Poole estimate projects an annual population increase of 0.8 percent, while the French Broad MPO figures estimate an annual population increase of 1.2 percent, both of which are below the county's average annual growth rates over the last four decades.

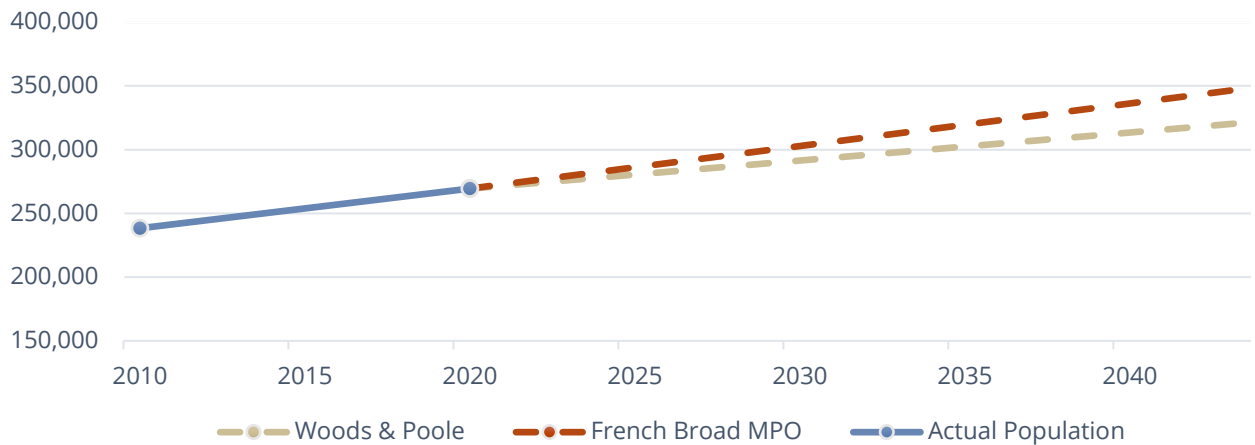
Population, Municipalities, and Unincorporated Areas



Average Population Growth Per Year



Buncombe County Population Projections



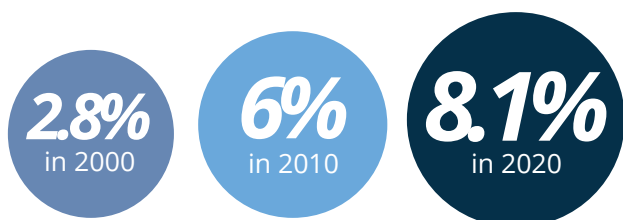
However, because the county's population today is larger than in the past, the smaller growth percentages still result in large numbers of new residents.

Becoming More Diverse Over Time

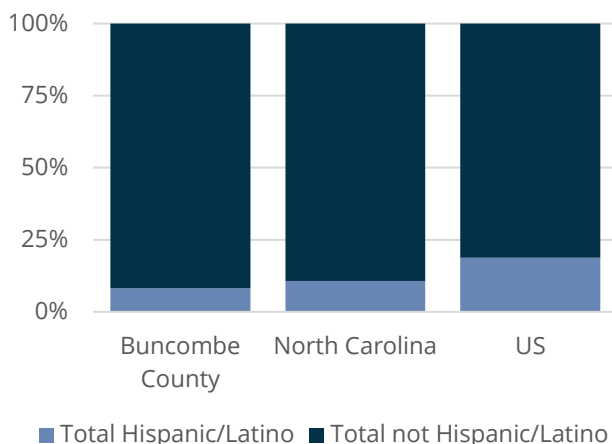
Buncombe County has a less racially and ethnically diverse population than the state or the nation. In 2020, the population of Buncombe County was 81.2 percent white, 5.7 percent Black or African American, and 1.2 percent Asian. Statewide, 62.2 percent of the population is white, 20.5 percent Black or African American, and 3.3 percent Asian. Across the United States, 61.6 percent of the population is white, 12.4 percent Black or African American, and 6.0 percent Asian.

However, the county has become modestly more diverse over the last several decades. The nonwhite population grew faster than the white population, and as a percentage of the total population has grown from 13 to 19 percent. The county has also seen growth in the Hispanic or Latino population. In 2000, 2.8 percent of the population identified as Hispanic or Latino; that grew to 6.0 percent in 2010 and 8.1 percent

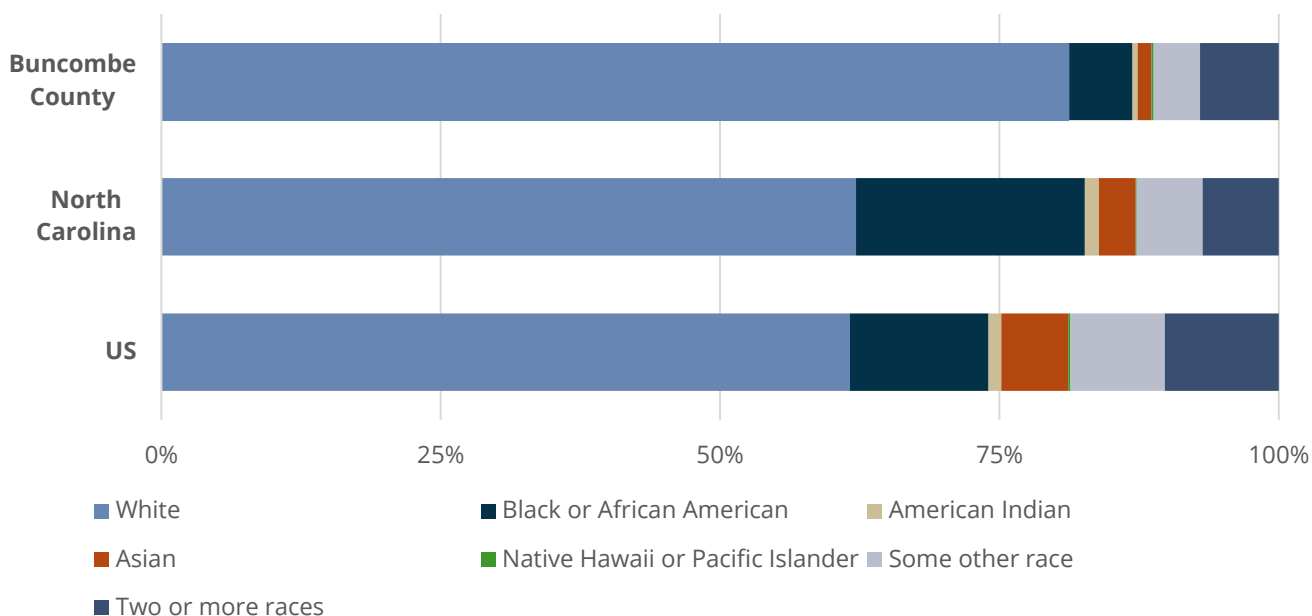
% County Population, Hispanic



Comparison of Hispanic Status



County Population by Race



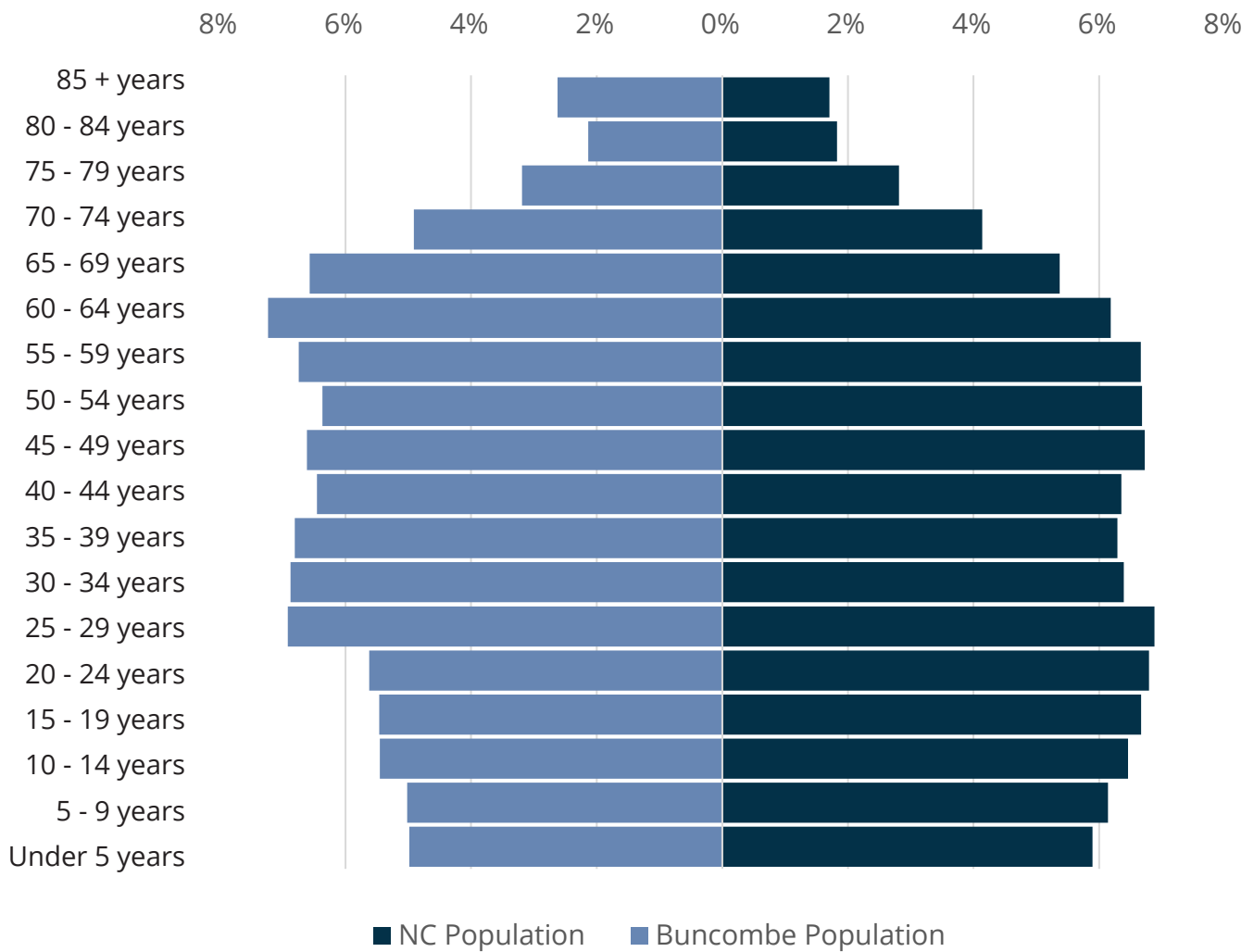
in 2020. Both figures trail the percentage of the population that is Hispanic or Latino in North Carolina (10.7 percent) and the United States (18.7 percent).⁴

Over the last 20 years, the size of the county’s Black or African American population has stayed almost the same, from 15,425 in 2000 to 15,311 in 2020, while the population of other categories have grown. However, these totals obscure the changes that have occurred in the City of Asheville, which has seen the Black or African American population decline from 12,129 in 2000 to 11,134 in 2010 and 9,938 in 2020.

Population Slightly Older than the State

The median age of Buncombe County residents is slightly higher than the rest of the state—42.2 in Buncombe County versus 38.7 in North Carolina. Both have similarly flat age distributions, with Buncombe County having a slightly lower percentage of its population 24 years and under, and a higher proportion of its population 60 years old and up compared to the state. You can see this pattern visualized in the population pyramid below. Demographers use population pyramids to evaluate the extent of development for a given population and to make predictions about the types of services that population will need e.g. schools, hospitals, homes, etc.

County Population by Age



Vulnerable Populations

Vulnerable populations are comprised of those who are at greater risk of dislocation due to a job-related or health shock or an external event such as a natural disaster. For example, a person without health insurance runs a higher risk of serious economic impacts from an unexpected illness, while households with a disabled person will have a more difficult time adapting to a natural disaster or other unexpected significant event.

This report provides data regarding the percentage of Buncombe County residents with or without health insurance or internet access, and the portion of the populations that requires food stamp assistance. In addition, it includes data from the Centers for Disease Control's Social Vulnerability Index which analyzes the vulnerability of different areas based on various measures.

Health Insurance

A higher percentage of Buncombe County residents today are insured than they were in the past, although the percentage of residents insured slightly trails comparable figures for the United States and the state. More than 91 percent of U.S. residents have health insurance, compared to 89.3 percent both statewide and in Buncombe County. This percentage of the population with health insurance is significantly higher than comparable data from 2010-2014, which reported that only 81.9 percent of the county's residents had health insurance (84.5 percent in the state, 85.8 percent in the nation). From 2010-14, only 78.6 percent of Black or African American residents within the county had health insurance; currently, 90.4 percent do. Likewise, while 84.4 percent of white county residents were insured from 2010-14, 89.6 percent are insured today.

The percentage of Hispanic or Latino residents in the county who have health insurance is lower than the rest of the population. From 2010-2014, only 62.4 percent of Hispanic or Latino residents had health insurance, a figure higher than the 59.9 percent insured statewide but significantly lower than the 71.9 percent or Hispanic or Latino residents with insurance nationwide. Currently, only 68.1 percent of Hispanic or Latino residents have insurance, lower than the 69.8 percent across the state and 81.8 percent nationwide. By contrast, 90.8 percent of non-Hispanic white residents in the county have insurance today.

There continues to be a significant difference in insurance status based on income. For county residents with incomes below 138 percent of the federal poverty line,⁵ only 79.5 percent had health insurance, compared to 80.2 percent statewide and 84.2 percent in the United States. Back in 2010-2014, only 70.7 percent of county residents below 138 percent of the poverty line had health insurance, compared to 72.5 percent of such residents statewide and 74.4 percent in the nation.



Photo courtesy Buncombe County

Internet Access

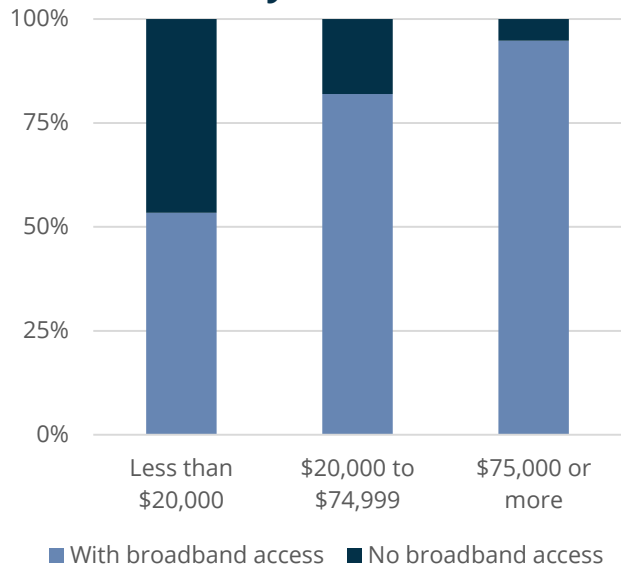
Availability and speed of internet access is similar in Buncombe County compared to the rest of the state and the nation. Within the county, 81.6 percent of residents have access to broadband. More than 2/3 (67.9 percent) have access to higher-speed broadband such as cable, fiber, or DSL, while 4.2 percent have satellite internet and 10.7 percent have access to a cellular plan and no other internet access. More than 18 percent of residents do not have an internet subscription (18.1 percent); that is a lower percentage than the statewide total (18.9 percent), but higher than the percentage of people in the United States without internet access (17.0 percent).

Internet access within the county varies based on geography. In census tracts within the municipalities and other urbanized areas, a higher percentage of residents have internet subscriptions. For example, most Census tracts in Woodfin, Weaverville, Black Mountain, and much of Asheville have about 80 percent or more of their residents with internet access. The exceptions are Census Tracts 1 and 9 in Asheville, where about 60 percent of residents have internet access. These figures are similar to the large, rural census tracts in the northwest and southwest

parts of the county, where about 60 percent of residents have internet subscriptions.

There is a significant gap in internet broadband subscriptions based on income. For residents whose household income was less than \$20,000, nearly half—46.4 percent—do not have broadband.

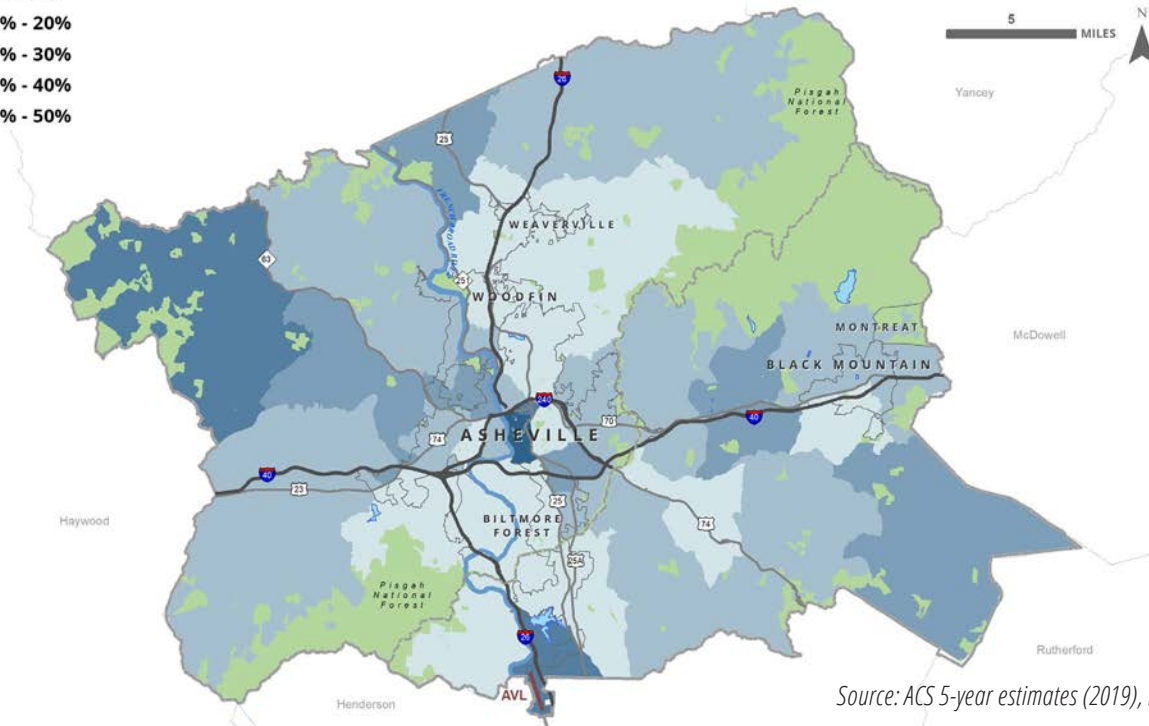
Household Internet Subscriptions by Income



Households without Internet Access

Percentage of Households Without Internet Access

- 2.9% - 10%
- 10.1% - 20%
- 20.1% - 30%
- 30.1% - 40%
- 40.1% - 50%



Source: ACS 5-year estimates (2019), B28002

A similar percentage of North Carolina (44.8 percent) and US (41.8 percent) residents with household incomes less than \$20,000 lack broadband access. For Buncombe County residents with household income between \$20,000 and \$74,999, 17.6 percent do not have a broadband subscription, and for residents with household incomes of \$75,000 or more, 5.1 percent do not have a broadband subscription.

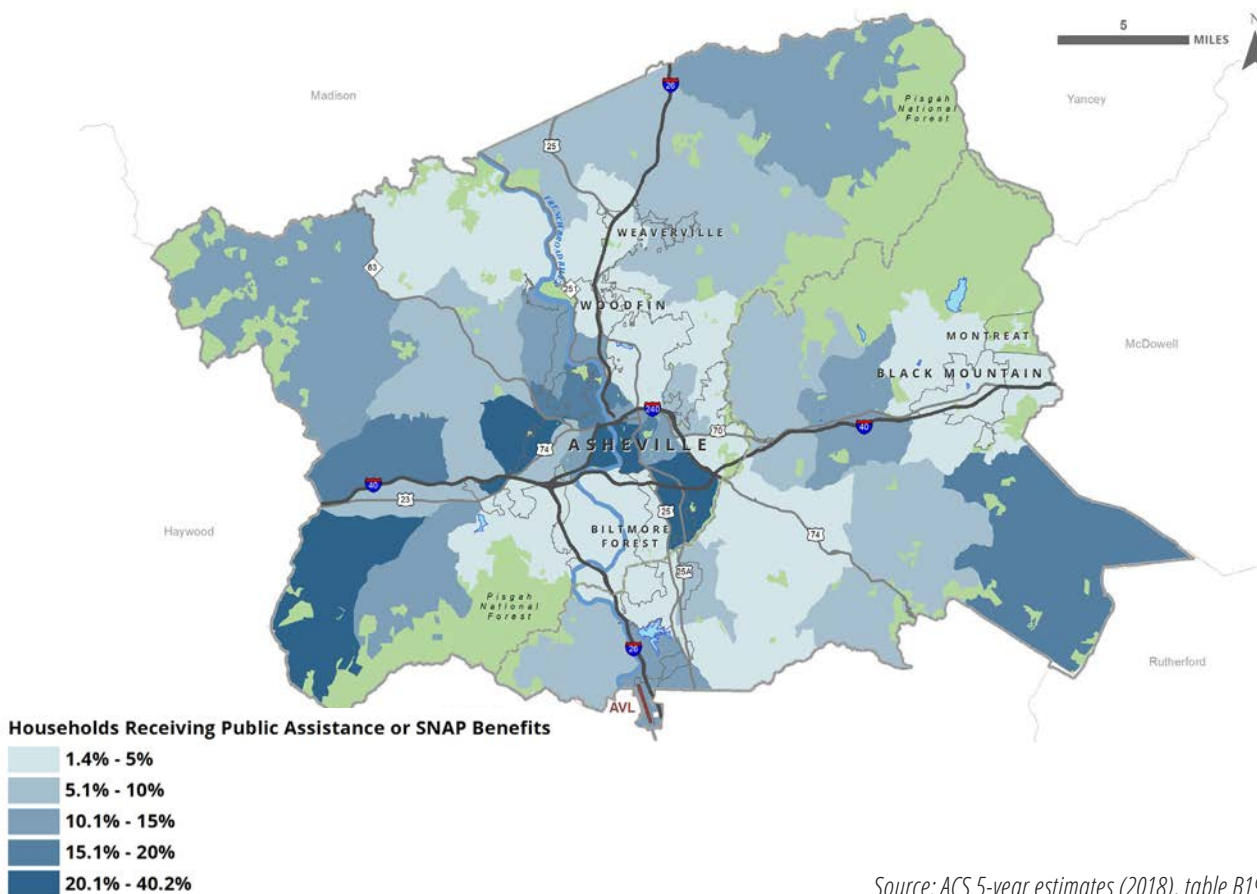
Within the county, 88.1 percent of residents have a computing device such as a desktop or laptop computer, tablet, or smartphone, compared to 89.1 percent of state residents and 90.3 percent of U.S. residents. A total of 6.3 percent of county residents have a smartphone and no other computing device.

Food Assistance

Among the concerns facing low-income families is food insecurity, and worry about empty refrigerators and where they will find their next meal. The federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), often known as the food stamps program, provides payments to allow low-income people to purchase food.

About 8.6 percent of households within the county received SNAP benefits; that percentage is lower than the 12.6 percent of households within North Carolina, and 11.7 percent of households in the United States who received SNAP benefits. Households with children under 18 years were more likely to receive SNAP benefits—14.5 percent of such households in the county received SNAP benefits, compared to 20.7 percent across North Carolina and 8.5 percent nationwide. Overall, 40 percent of the households in the county that received SNAP benefits included children under 18 years of age; nationally, just about half of households receiving SNAP benefits include children under 18 years.

Households receiving Public Assistance or SNAP Benefits



Source: ACS 5-year estimates (2018), table B19123

Social Vulnerability

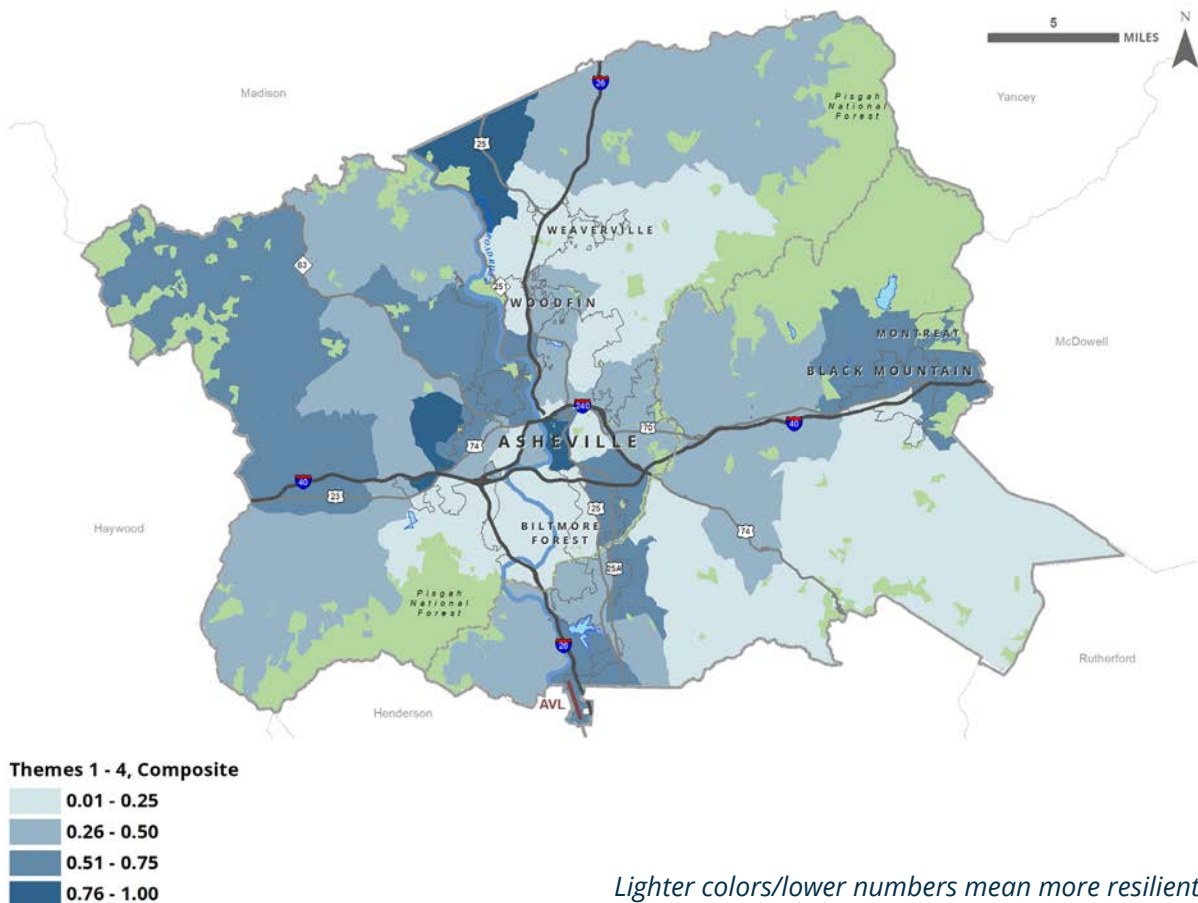
The data in this section is based upon the Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) produced and updated by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The SVI was developed to identify communities that would be most vulnerable to disruption by a hazardous event, such as a severe weather event like a tornado or a human-made event such as a chemical spill. The SVI measures communities on certain metrics which are associated with a lack of resiliency to such disasters, such as high poverty, high unemployment, the presence of individuals with disabilities, lack of a vehicle, and residence in a mobile home.⁶ The SVI metrics used in this report are calculated as an index compared to the measures for the other 99 counties or 2,192 census tracts statewide. Each county or tract is assigned a score between 1.0 and 0.0, with 1.0 representing the most vulnerable areas, and 0.0 representing the most resilient areas. Five separate measures have been developed—four representing different themes, as discussed below, and one overall vulnerability score.⁷

Five separate maps are also included showing data on the census tract level—one map for each of the four themes, and one map showing overall vulnerability across the County.

Overall, Buncombe County has low vulnerability and demonstrates high levels of resilience. Compared to the 99 other counties in North Carolina, Buncombe County is the 17th most resilient county on the consolidated measure that includes all the metrics. However, a closer look at the different SVI themes reveal a more nuanced story of the county's resiliency:

- Theme 1 addresses overall **socioeconomic status**. This theme incorporates data including the percentage of the population living below the poverty line, unemployment rate, household income, and percentage of the population without a high school diploma. On Theme 1, Buncombe County ranks as the 4th least vulnerable among the state's 100 counties.

Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) Composite Map



Data Source: ACS 5-year estimates (2018)

*Lighter colors/lower numbers mean more resilient
Darker colors/higher number mean more vulnerable*

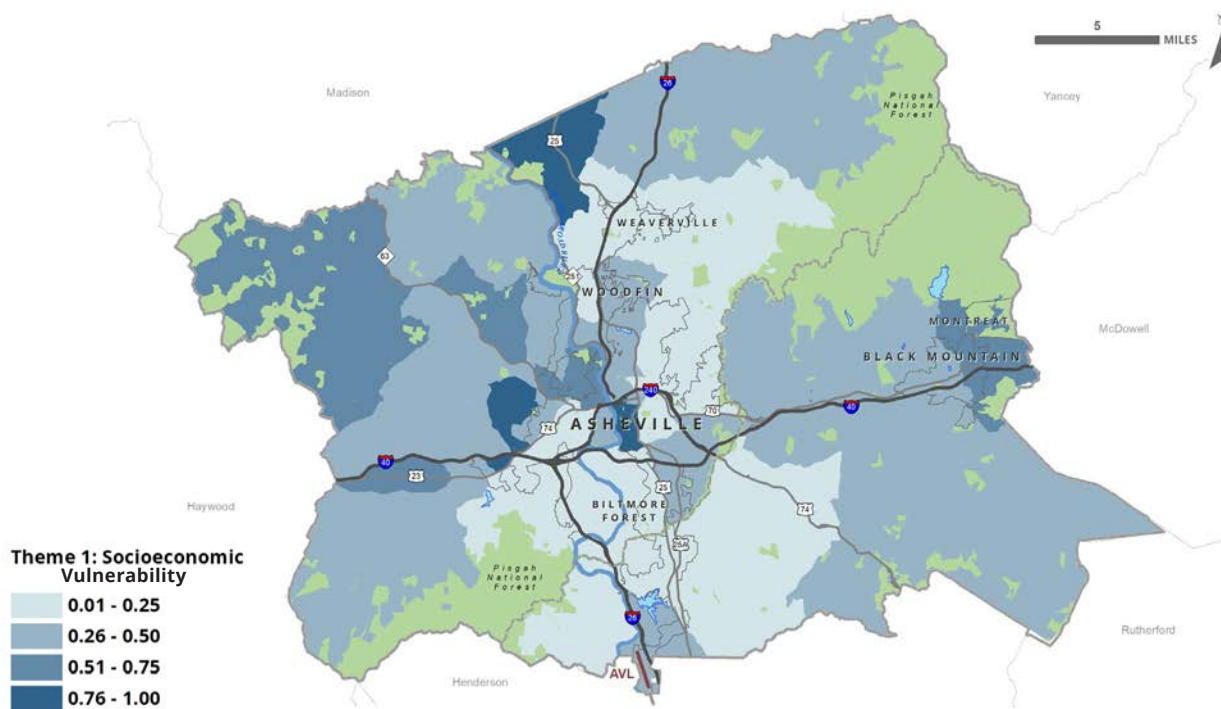
- Theme 2 addresses **household composition and diversity**. Data in this theme includes the percentage of the population that is older than 65 years of age or younger than 17 years of age, the percentage of the population older than age 5 that has a disability, and the percentage of households headed by single parents. As with Theme 1, Buncombe County ranks as the 4th least vulnerable in the state.
- Theme 3 addresses **minority status and language**, and includes the percentage of the population that is a member of a minority, and the percentage of individuals who reported that they speak English “less than well.” On this metric, Buncombe County ranks in the middle of the pack, 45th among the state’s counties.
- Finally, Theme 4 addresses challenges regarding **housing and transportation**. The measures for this theme include the percentage of the population living in larger multifamily structures, or mobile homes, in households that live in residences with more people than rooms, in households without an available vehicle, and persons who live in group quarters (which includes institutions such as jails and nursing homes, and non-institutional residences such as college dorms, missions, or shelters). On this measure, Buncombe County trails much of the other counties in the state, ranking 73.

The SVI data is also reported on the census tract level, and the degree of vulnerability is determined by comparing each census tract in the county (there are 56 in total) with each of the 2,192 census tracts in the state. The map on the previous page shows the composite SVI measure, and the maps on each of the following pages demonstrate the areas of high and low vulnerability in the county for each theme.

Theme 1: Socioeconomic Vulnerability

On Theme 1, much of the county shows low vulnerability. However, there are pockets of high vulnerability in the center of Asheville, in Census Tract 9 between I-40 and I-240, and in Census Tract 28.03 along the edge of the county northwest of Weaverville.

SVI Map: Socioeconomic Vulnerability



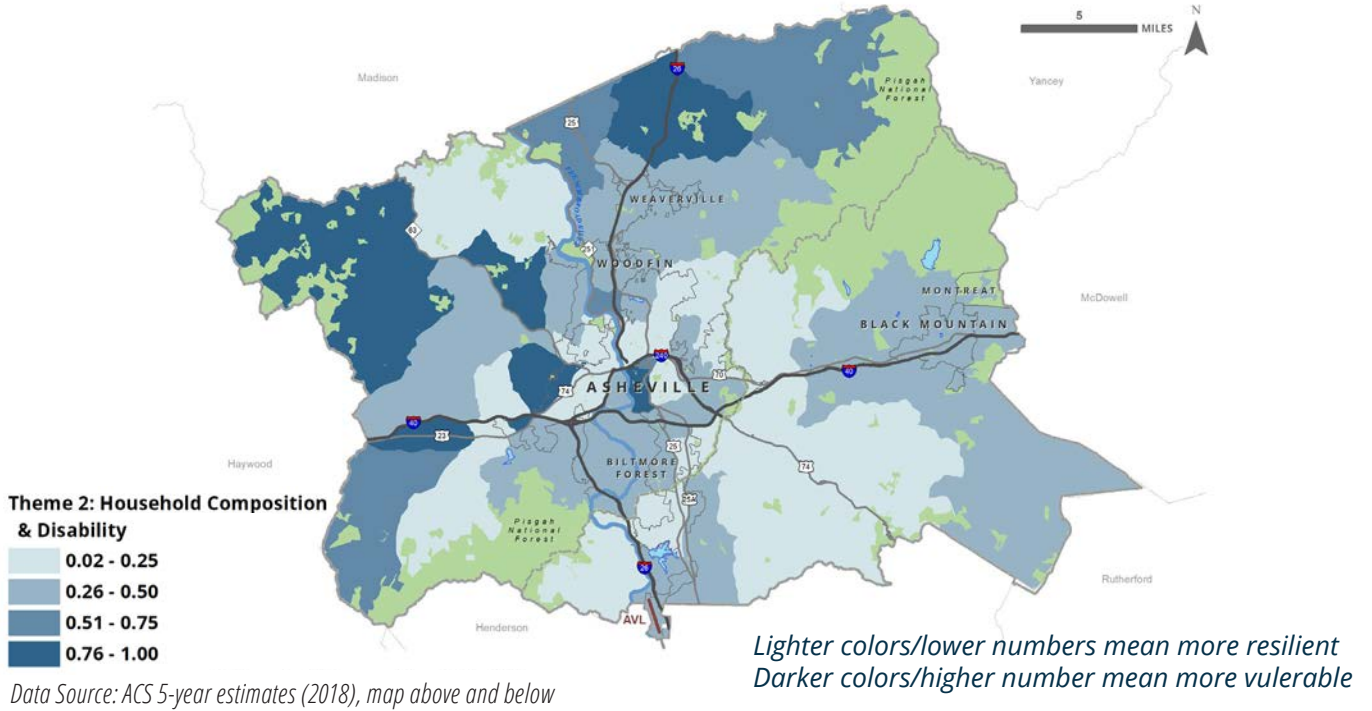
Data Source: ACS 5-year estimates (2018)

Lighter colors/lower numbers mean more resilient
Darker colors/higher number mean more vulnerable

Theme 2: Household Composition and Disability

On Theme 2, as with Theme 1, Census Tract 9 again shows high vulnerability, as do Census Tracts 13 and 25.06, located west of Mimosa Dr. and largely north of I-40 west of Asheville, and the western-most part of the county just east of Canton, Census Tract 25.03.

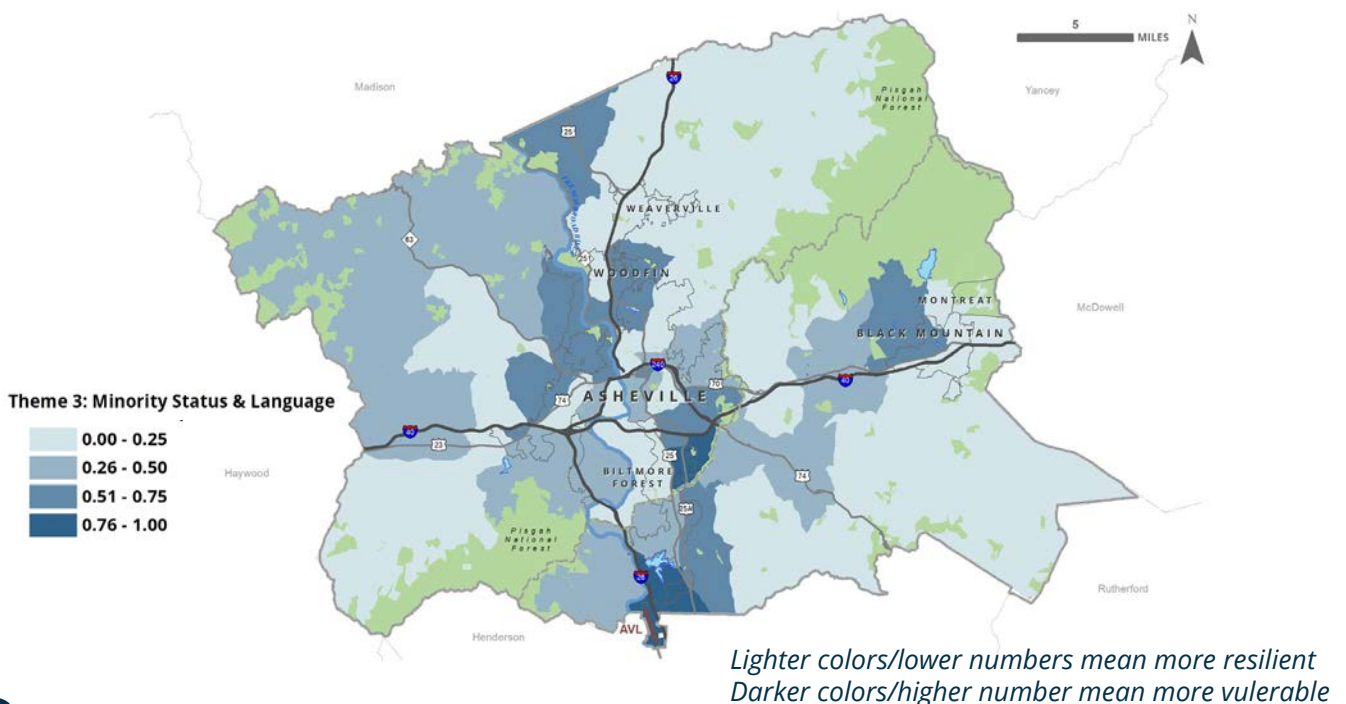
SVI Map: Household Composition and Disability



Theme 3: Minority Status and Language

On Theme 3, most vulnerable areas are in the Emma neighborhood within and just outside of northwest Asheville (Census Tract 14), as well as the census tract north of Emma and the French Broad River (Census Tract 15).

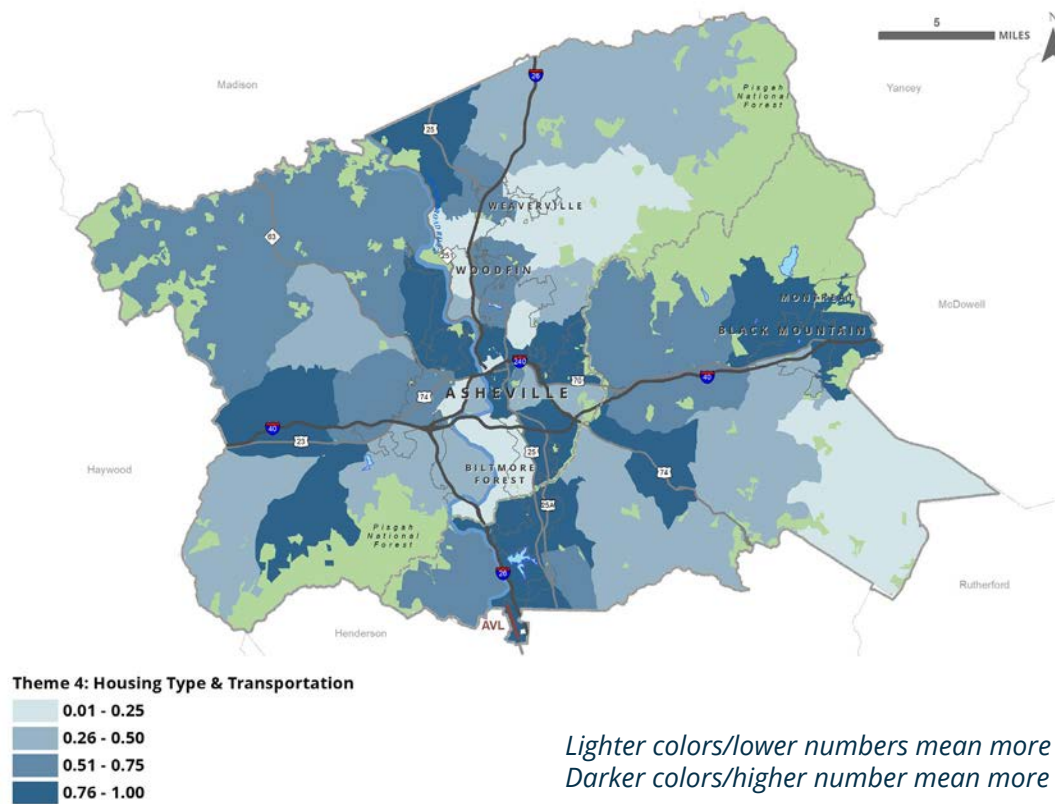
SVI Map: Minority Status and Language



Theme 4: Housing Type and Transportation

In Theme 4, large swaths of the county show high vulnerability, including census tracts west, south, and northeast of Swananoa, north of Black Mountain, the Emma community; Census Tract 9 between I-40 and I-240; and Census Tract 28.03 on the edge of the county northwest of Weaverville.

SVI Map: Housing Type and Transportation



Data Source: ACS 5-year estimates (2018)

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Overview

While the pace of growth in Buncombe County is projected to continue to slow, the County's population is expected to grow. The new comprehensive plan can provide guidance for how existing and future residents are supported by changing conditions brought by growth and protected from its impacts. The following are general policy and regulatory ideas that can be considered for inclusion in the plan. Other chapters include related and more specific guidance.

Foster equity as the County's population grows:

- Identify the sources of disparities among vulnerable populations (such as limited access to affordable housing), track those trends, and implement strategies to alleviate disparities.
- Deploy programs and resources to address identified inequities, including support and assistance for adequate and affordable housing, job training and educational opportunities, childcare services, and other needs. To maximize limited resources, identify ways to prioritize programs and resources to be deployed that align with multiple goals of the comprehensive plan and the county's Strategic Plan.
- Evaluate ways to extend broadband service to lower-income communities (where income may be a barrier) and rural communities (where infrastructure may be a barrier).
- Address transportation challenges, such as lower income households lacking access to reliable transportation (cars or bus service)

Review zoning and subdivision regulations to:

- Protect existing long-term residents, particularly lower-income households and

other vulnerable residents from development that may displace them from their homes and work.

- Ensure adequate opportunities to build housing that can accommodate projected population growth and affordability needs.
- Permit a wide range of housing types to accommodate the wide range of housing needs and related household incomes in the county, specifically allowing more opportunities for affordable housing.
- Encourage new development, through zoning and development regulations, to take place in areas that are near existing infrastructure such as water and sewer, roads, transit, and commercial development.
- Protect natural resources, including valuable agricultural lands and rural viewsheds.

Endnotes

1 Unless otherwise specified, all population data listed as 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, or 2020 is taken from the decennial census conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. All other data is from the American Community Survey (ACS), an annual survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. Unless otherwise specified, data is from the 2015-19 five-year estimates (because the ACS surveys only a small percentage of Americans, multiple years of data is typically required to provide accurate data). More recent ACS data was not available at the time this report was prepared.

2 Rural and urban population data is not yet available for the 2020 U.S. Census. The criteria used to designate urban areas versus rural areas has changed over time. In general, urban areas are more densely developed areas, including residential, commercial and other land uses. The criteria used in the 2010 Census describe urban areas as comprising “a densely settled core of census tracts and/or census blocks that meet minimum population density requirements, along with contiguous territory containing nonresidential urban land uses as well as territory with low population density included to link outlying densely settled territory with the densely settled core. To qualify as an urban area on its own, the territory identified according to the criteria must encompass at least 2,500 people, at least 1,500 of which reside outside institutional group quarters.” 76 Fed. Reg. 53030, 53039 (2011). All areas that do not qualify as urban are rural areas.

3 The discrepancy between the growth of the urban population versus the growth in the incorporated versus unincorporated parts of the county reflects the differences between the two categories of measurement. The U.S. Census Bureau designates areas as “urban” if they comply with several technical metrics, including a certain level of population density; therefore, parts of the unincorporated land in the County are designated as urban due to its relationship to other urban development and the density of the development itself.

4 In the U.S. Census, race and ethnicity are distinct pieces of data. In the Census questionnaire, individuals are asked to self-identify their race, either listing one race or multiple races. In a separate question, individuals are asked to self-identify whether they are or are not Hispanic/Latino.

5 The federal poverty line is calculated each year by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For 2019, the federal poverty line was set at \$12,490 for a household with one person, \$16,910 for a household with two people, and an increase in \$4,420 for each individual person in a household.

6 The CDC SVI data is based off the same ACS data used for most of the other reporting in this section, except instead of the 2015-19 five-year estimates used for most of the other data included in this report, the CDC SVI data was calculated using 2014-18 five-year estimates.

7 The NC SVI Tool is an interactive web map prepared by the NC Institute for Public Health at the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health. This tool presents detailed data for each county and census tract within the state. The website is available at <https://unc.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=5ed91aabf26e44698c9efeeb6c708991>.

8 Transportation for America (2020, March). The Congestion Con: How More Lanes and More Money Equals More Traffic. <https://t4america.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Congestion-Report-2020-FINAL.pdf>