

2020 Baseline Assessment of Gaston County's Community Food System

August 10, 2020

Background

In 2018, the Gaston County Cooperative Extension and Gaston County Department of Health and Human Services – Public Health initiated work with diverse organizations and community members to better understand and strengthen Gaston County’s food system. Their primary goal was to initiate a food council to work with representatives from all parts of the local food supply chain to make improvements in the community food system. After several community workshops, participants agreed to conduct an assessment to better understand our community food system.

This assessment was funded as a Community Food Strategies pilot project and provides baseline measures of the food system in Gaston County. It is designed to provide insights into current food system challenges and opportunities to help Gaston County organizations and residents to understand local food, agriculture, and community health from a systems perspective. The organizations engaged in this work include the Gaston County Cooperative Extension, the Gaston Department of Health and Human Services, and the Gaston Together Health in All Policies Workgroup.

This assessment was completed in August 2020 by:

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David Fogarty (Gaston County Cooperative Extension) and Ashlyn Wadsworth (Gaston County Department of Health and Human Services) provided guidance throughout the process, and Alyssa Mouton initiated the Gaston Food Policy effort.

Project funding was provided through a grant to Gaston County Cooperative Extension by Community Food Strategies, a program of NC State University’s Center for Environmental Farming Systems.

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What is a Baseline Food System Assessment?

A baseline food system assessment is a collaborative process that examines a broad range of food system-related data to inform actions for improving a community's food system. The assessment presents quantitative data in a format that facilitates planning and decision-making.

This assessment examines five of the six categories of the Whole Measures for Community Food Systems framework developed by the Community Food Security Coalition: (1) Justice and Fairness, (2) Strong Communities, (3) Vibrant Farms, (4) Healthy People, and (5) Sustainable Ecosystems. A sixth category, Thriving Local Economies, was omitted because all of the challenges and opportunities identified in that category were also noted in one of the other five categories.

While this assessment began with input from several community meetings, it is presented as a starting point for future community conversations. It offers challenges and opportunities facing Gaston County's community food system, and is intended to encourage Gaston County residents to think about the county's food system from a systems perspective.



While this assessment is not intended to be exhaustive, it provides a way to start telling the story of Gaston County's community food system. This assessment has the potential to generate positive changes in our community by:

- Building a common, strategic vision of a more sustainable, resilient, and equitable food system;
- Fostering an awareness and understanding of our community food system;
- Identifying possible gaps in data;
- Identifying challenges and opportunities facing our community food system;
- Creating alignment, building connections, and encouraging collaboration across multiple sectors that influence our community food system;
- Guiding priority-setting, strategic planning, and decision-making;
- Measuring progress, tracking change; and,
- Evaluating impact over time.

<https://nesfp.org/sites/default/files/resources/wholemeasurescfs.pdf>

Assets

Improving Gaston County's food system begins by recognizing the many assets that exist in our community. These assets can be organized as four different "capitals" as described by the Wallace Center at Winrock International: social, financial, physical, and natural.

Social Capital: Capacity, skill, and network of community residents and organizations.

- Gaston County Cooperative Extension is an outreach of NC State University based in Dallas, NC. It provides education programs and research-based information to enhance all aspects of our local food system. Its programs include: NC Farm School, Extension Master Gardeners, the Beekeepers' and Cattlemen's Associations, 4H Youth, and nutrition education programs.
- Gaston County Department of Health and Human Services provides clinical and community services to protect, promote, and assure the health of Gaston County residents; this support includes:
 - Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)
 - Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits
 - Meals on Wheels program, which delivers meals to home-bound elderly who are unable to prepare or secure home-prepared meals and provides balanced meals at sites in Belmont, Bessemer City, Cherryville, Dallas, Gastonia, and Mt. Holly.
- The Backpack Weekend Food Program provides healthy and nonperishable foods to 800-1,000 students on weekends during the school year, so they return to school on Mondays nourished and ready to learn.
- The Faith Community includes houses of worship that provide direct food assistance and support food assistance agencies.
- The Farmers Market Vendors Association is a group of local farmers who coordinate the sale of produce at the Gastonia Farmers Market.
- The Gaston County Schools provide nutritional services to over 30,000 students, including the Free and Reduced Lunch Programs. In addition, the Summer Feeding Program serves 67 sites across the county (2019).
- The Highland Neighborhood Association is a collaboration formed to improve community health, including improved nutrition in the Highland neighborhood.
- The Resource Connection Gateway secures referrals for individual and family needs, including food assistance.
- Kintegra Health provides primary medical and dental care to Gaston County's publicly insured, underinsured, and uninsured residents, and addresses socio-economic and upstream factors, including food systems.
- CaroMont Health is a comprehensive healthcare system with more than 50 medical practices, a 435-bed hospital, nursing home, hospice, and has a strong orientation to community health.
- Gaston Together Healthcare Commission is a collaborative network of organizations working toward a healthy community. Current programs include a Health in All Policies work team.
- Gaston College, a community college in Dallas, NC, offers a degree in Dietetics and operates a Small Business Center.

Financial Capital: Monetary resources such as equity, grants, or credit.

- Funding partners provide grant support to enhance local food systems, including:
 - Community Food Strategies provides microgrants for developing community food systems in North Carolina.
 - Gaston Farm Bureau offers small grants for farms and agricultural-related projects in Gaston County.
 - The CaroMont Health Foundation has supported local food and nutrition programs.
 - The Carrie E. and Lena V. Glenn Foundation focuses on education projects, including nutrition education.
 - The Community Foundation of Gaston County funds food and nutrition-related programs and projects.
 - The Duke Endowment has funded programs to enhance child and family wellbeing.
 - The Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation and The Blue Cross/Blue Shield Foundation of North Carolina have supported food system work in Gaston County.
- The Farm Service Agency is a USDA agency based in Dallas, NC that administers farm commodity programs, crop insurance, credit, environmental, conservation, and emergency assistance programs for farmers.
- The United Way of Gaston County funds local nonprofit agencies, including several that provide food assistance.
- Municipal governments can set food system policies and often provide land and in-kind services for community gardens.

Physical Capital: Manufactured items or built infrastructure. This may include tools, facilities, and community gardens.

- Community gardens help area residents raise healthy and fresh foods for themselves and their neighbors. There are currently six community gardens operating in Gaston County.
 - *Belmont Community Garden* is a non-profit that leases 47 organic garden plots, including plots for children and people with disabilities. Its mission is to educate, engage the community, and enhance the image of downtown Belmont. <https://www.facebook.com/growingbelmont>.
 - *Bessemer City Community Garden* is a partnership of St. Andrews Episcopal Church and the City of Bessemer City with a goal of feeding the needy and educating the community. It has over 40 garden plots with 8 reserved for community partners. The garden is not operating in the summer of 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/BessemerCityCommunityGarden>.
 - *Gastonia Rotary Garden* is a project of The Gastonia Rotary Club. Their 43 garden plots are managed by community groups and two beds are reserved for persons with disabilities. Their mission is to feed the hungry, teach a new generation about gardening, and to beautify Franklin Boulevard. <https://www.facebook.com/rotarycommunitygardenofgastonia?fref=ts>.
 - *Healthy Harvest* is a school gardening program coordinated by the Gaston County Cooperative Extension at 8 elementary schools. The program offers hands-on classes and helps schools develop gardening and nutrition initiatives. Learn more at: <https://gaston.ces.ncsu.edu/healthy-harvest-program/>.

- *Highland Community Garden* has 18 large beds on Gastonia City property and is coordinated by Keep Gastonia Beautiful. The garden is open to residents of the Highland Community and surrounding areas. Its goals include building community, beautification, and providing education. A second community garden was established for teens and is managed by the Highland Neighborhood Association. Learn more at: <https://www.facebook.com/keepgastoniabeautiful>.
- *Mount Holly Community Garden* has 52 garden beds, including 6 that are handicap-accessible, at First United Methodist Church. The garden engages families to increase healthy eating, supplies fresh fruits and vegetables to food banks, and provides summer youth programs and educational workshops. Learn more at: <https://www.facebook.com/mthollycommunitygarden?fref=ts>.
- Farmers markets in Cherryville, Gastonia, and Mt. Holly sell locally grown produce and proteins. The markets in Gastonia and Mt. Holly accept payments from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Cherryville Farmers Market
 220 East Main St., Cherryville, NC
 May – October: Thursdays, 8:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.
 Contact: Richard Randall, 704.435.3451
 Email: rRANDALL@CITYOFCHERRYVILLE.COM

Mt Holly Farmers Market
 226 S. Main St, Mt Holly, NC
 May – August: Saturdays, 8:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.
 Contact: Leigh Brinkley, 704.951.4066
 Email: leigh@brinkleydesign.com

Gastonia Farmers Market
 410 E. Long Ave, Gastonia, NC
 April: Saturdays, 8:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.
 May: Tuesdays, Thursdays, & Saturdays 8:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.
 June-Oct: Tuesday, Thursday, & Saturday 7:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.
 November: Saturdays 8:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.
 Contact: April Smith, Market Manager, 704.853.0049
 Email: abarefootwalk@gmail.com

- At least a dozen food pantries serve Gaston County. Their operating hours and food offerings vary widely. In response to needs occurring during COVID-19, the community is developing new partnerships around food assistance. In addition to the food pantries listed below, contact Resource Connection Gateway for more information.
 - Belmont Community Organization
 - Bessemer City Crisis Center
 - BREAD, Gastonia
 - Center of Hope of Gaston County/Salvation Army, Gastonia

- Cherryville Area Ministries
 - Cramerton Ministerial Relief Fund
 - Crisis Assistance Ministries of Christians and Jews, Gastonia
 - Dallas High Shoals Christian Ministry
 - First United Methodist Church, Stanley
 - Gaston Baptist Social Ministries, Gastonia
 - Higher Ground Ministry, Ranlo
 - Mount Holly Community Relief Organization
 - Mt. Zion Restoration Church, Gastonia
 - Second Harvest Food Bank of Metrolina, Dallas
 - Serving our Community with Kindness in Springwood, Belmont NC
- Gaston County has approximately 32 full-service grocery stores and many corner and convenience stores.

Natural Capital: Ecological resources that occur naturally in the environment such as land and soil and include water, unimproved green space, habitat, and biodiversity.

- Gaston County has abundant water supply from rivers, streams, lakes, and groundwater for agricultural production.
- Climatic conditions are generally favorable for raising crops.
- More than 37,695 acres in Gaston County are used for crops and pasture. Refer to the Vibrant Farms data table for more information.
- Local soils, such as Appling, Cecil, and Gaston, have good drainage and are well suited for food crops.
- Gaston County has an active Voluntary Agriculture District
- The Gaston County Farmland Protection Plan and the County Natural Heritage Inventory can be found on the Gaston County Cooperative Extension website.

Whole Measures for Community Food Systems Baseline

While there are many food system assets in Gaston County, this Assessment focuses on the county’s challenges. For each challenge we have developed possible opportunities. The whole measures categories for this assessment are: Justice and Fairness, Strong Communities, Healthy People, Sustainable Ecosystems and Vibrant Farms; these categories are interconnected and overlap.

Justice and Fairness

A just food system is deliberately organized to promote social equity, justice, worker rights, and health, by:

1. Providing food for all;
2. Creating just food system structures and caring for food system workers; and,
3. Ensuring public institutions and local businesses support a just community food system.

Challenges	Opportunities
County residents outside the City of Gastonia do not have access to public transit. Across the county individuals without automobiles must rely on convenience stores, and rides to grocery stores and Farmers Markets with friends, family, and taxi services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Work with Gastonia Transit to establish bus stops at grocery stores and the Gastonia Farmers Market. · Work with Gaston ACCESS to provide Medicare and Medicaid recipients with free rides to full-service grocery stores and Farmers Markets. · Expand the Corner Market Program, to help convenience stores carry fresh produce. · Prepare healthy meals at church and community kitchens and sell them in low-income communities at reduced prices. · Encourage and teach county residents to raise their own produce. · Work with municipalities and community organizations to establish and expand community gardens.
While more than 17.7% of County residents receive SNAP benefits, and two of three County Farmers’ Markets accept SNAP benefits, few SNAP recipients purchase produce at the farmers markets.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Improve marketing to convey SNAP is accepted at farmers markets. · Expand SNAP benefits to the Cherryville farmers market. · Conduct the <i>Double UP Food Bucks Program</i>, which gives SNAP beneficiaries matching funds when shopping at farmers markets.
Lack of a publicly available inventory of food banks and food pantries.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Conduct a survey of food banks and pantries to gather information on their operations, eligibility requirements, and available resources.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Engage food banks and food pantries and community organizations to publicize survey results, · Engage food banks and food pantries to provide fresh local produce and deliver nutrition education. · Create a printed and online food assistance guide for food insecure county residents.
Increase the number of food insecure Gaston County residents who obtain government assistance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Identify individuals and families who are eligible for governmental food assistance but do not receive it. · Define options for assisting these food insecure individuals. .
Help community gardens to establish and thrive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Activate the Gaston Community Garden Network to provide sessions on available garden resources and best practices.
Local produce is not used in meals from the Gaston County Schools' Summer Feeding Program for food insecure youth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Meet with School Nutrition Program staff to develop strategies for enhancing the Summer Feeding Program. · Establish a GAP-Certified garden adjacent to the Gaston County School Nutrition facility to supply the school lunch program.
There is limited access to affordable and healthy prepared meals in Gaston County food deserts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Support the Highland Neighborhood Association as it develops and conducts a program to sell healthy and low-cost prepared meals. · Enhance educational on preparing healthy meals at home by developing the Extension's Master Food Volunteer Program.

Strong Communities

Food can be a common and unifying social, cultural, and spiritual force. A strong food system builds strong communities for persons of all economic, racial, age, and education groups.

A food system that builds strong and resilient communities:

1. Responds to community food needs;
2. Contributes to healthy neighborhoods;
3. Improves equity for all residents;
4. Builds collaborative relationships, trust, and reciprocity among diverse groups; and,
5. Supports civic participation, political empowerment, and local leadership.

Challenges	Opportunities
Lack of community engagement for enhancing the county's food system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Engage local Faith Organizations to conduct food projects and initiatives · Activate a network to support new and existing community gardens. · Leverage local school gardens to engage parents and community members in raising and eating healthy foods. · Connect graduates from leadership programs to food system initiatives, such as, Civic Engagement Leadership, Leadership Gaston, and Teens Changing Gaston County. · Secure increased input on food related issues from underserved community members through advisory councils, listening session, and meetings.
Lack measures to describe the needs of unhealthy populations and neighborhoods.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Apply the methodology from the Highland Community Project and the Community Health Assessment to neighborhoods across Gaston County. · Use the data to set community goals and acquire needed resources.
With anticipated population growth, new Gaston County residents need to learn about local food and nutrition-related resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Work with the Go Gaston campaign to market food resources. · Work with realtors to develop a Quality of Life brochure that emphasizes food, nutrition, dining, and fitness resources.
Need a culture of healthy eating.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Use the Highland Neighborhood Association's <i>Healthy Communities Initiative</i> as a model for other communities. · Work with faith and community organizations to teach healthy cooking. · Expand the use of mass media and social media to increase public knowledge about using nutrition to prevent illnesses.

Healthy People

Community and individual health include our physical, social, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. These dimensions are intrinsically connected to food and our food systems. For example, growing food helps develop our physical and spiritual awareness as we connect to larger natural systems; engaging with community members at farmers’ markets promotes our social connectedness; and, learning to prepare our food contributes to our mental development and enhances our resiliency. Whole communities need food systems that increase access to healthy food while cultivating broader dimensions of health.

A food system that promotes healthy people:

1. Provides healthy food for all;
2. Ensures the health and wellbeing of all people residing in Gaston County;
3. Connects people and the food system, from farm to fork; and,
4. Connects people to local farms and promotes health and wellness.

Challenges	Opportunities
The need for stronger nutrition policy and education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Identify healthcare providers and health champions to advocate for nutrition policy and education. · Encourage clinical providers to advise their patients to eat healthier foods, consistent with their health needs.
Higher rates of nutrition-related illnesses among low-income county residents. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Many county residents lack knowledge on selecting and preparing healthy foods. · County residents see healthy food options as inconvenient and expensive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Offer cooking classes. · Offer nutrition education classes in communities with limited nutrition resources. · Promote health department and extension nutrition programs. · Promote church programs that focus on healthy eating. · Encourage corner stores to redeem SNAP and WIC benefits.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Presence of food deserts · Presence of food swamps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Develop community policies to restrict the density of fast food restaurants. · Promote healthy food choices at corner stores. · Encourage churches to transport community members to farmers markets.

Sustainable Ecosystems

Sustainable ecosystems depend upon clean air, water, and healthy soil. They enable a sustainable food system that produces, processes, and distributes food in a way that supports and enhances, rather than destroys, ecological systems.

A food system that supports sustainable ecosystems:

1. Sustains and grows a healthy environment;
2. Promotes an ecological ethic;
3. Enhances biodiversity;
4. Promotes agricultural and food distribution practices that mitigate natural resources depletion;
5. Enhances greater production with smaller environmental footprint; and,
6. Promotes profitability

Challenges	Opportunities
Few farms practice sustainable farming by using organic methods and alternatives to pesticides.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Encourage all farmers to practice sustainable farming methods. · Provide producers with technical and financial support for receiving organic certifications. · Create market-based opportunities for sustainably produced foods. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Encourage the restaurant/grocery sector to purchase locally and sustainably raised farm products. · Ask local restaurants about barriers to buying from local farmers.
Increased urban development makes it difficult to justify farming and strains local environmental resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Update and implement the Gaston County Farmland Protection Plan. · Use the Gaston County Natural Heritage Inventory to protect biodiversity.
Compostable items are regularly put in landfills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Develop community-based compost programs.

Vibrant Farms

Vibrant farms are central to the health and vitality of community-based food systems. They often shorten the gap between farmer and consumer and actively contribute to sustaining and revitalizing regional food systems and economies. Both traditional farms and practices, and young farmers and immigrant farmers, are essential to the future of farming.

A food system that promotes healthy, vibrant farms:

1. Enables local, sustainable family farms to thrive and maintain their economic strength;
2. Protects and cares for farmers and farm workers; and,
3. Honors stories of food and farm legacy through community voices.

Challenges	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Many local crops are sold for livestock feed. · Gaston County farms only had \$243,000 in direct sales of fruits and vegetables. 	Educate farmers on production techniques and market opportunities for healthy produce.
Urban expansion diminishes quality farm area.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Promote voluntary agricultural districts. · Maintain tax incentives for agricultural land.
It is difficult to create economies of scale for local, small farmers, which often makes local produce more expensive.	Consider opportunities for establishing farmer cooperatives and a food hub/aggregation center.
Local farmers do not have access to institutional buyers, such as schools, restaurants, and grocery stores.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Promote “Farm to School” programs. · Encourage the Gaston County Schools to implement the 10% Campaign. · Train farmers to provide GAP-certified produce. · Increase communication and networking among local farmers and local food providers.

Data

Food Access and Security

Food insecurity describes a lack of access to enough nutritional food for all household members to have an active, healthy life. These households are not necessarily food insecure all the time, but experience periods where their members have reduced food intake and their normal eating patterns are disrupted because they lack money and other resources for food. As a result, these households often have to make difficult decisions on whether to eat or pay rent and medical bills. This problem often occurs with other overlapping issues, such as the lack of affordable housing, social isolation, chronic and acute health problems, high medical costs, and low wages.

Measure	North Carolina			Gaston County		
Food Environment Index rating ¹ which ranges from 0 (worst) to 10 (best) and equally weights estimates of <i>limited access to healthy food and food insecurity</i> .	6.7 (2010 & 2013)	6.6 (2015 & 2016)	6.7 (2015 & 2017)	6.2 (2010 & 2013)	7.0 (2015 & 2016)	6.9 (2015 & 2017)
Limited Access to Healthy Foods ¹	7.0% (2010)	7.0% (2015)	---	11.0% (2010)	11.0% (2015)	---
Food insecurity rate ^{2, 3, 4, 5}	15.4% (2016)	14.6% (2017)	14.0% (2018)	15.1% (2016)	14.7% (2017)	14.4% (2018)
Number of food insecure people ^{2, 3, 4, 5}	1,565,910 (2016)	1,503, 050 (2017)	1,456,200 (2018)	31,980 (2016)	31,370 (2017)	31,210 (2018)
Estimated food assistance eligibility among food insecure people ^{2, 3, 4, 5}	72% (2016)	70% (2017)	72% (2018)	80% (2016)	77% (2017)	79% (2018)
Child food insecurity rate ^{6, 7, 8, 9}	20.9% (2016)	20.1% (2017)	19.3% (2018)	21.9% (2016)	21.0% (2017)	20.1% (2018)
Number of food-insecure children ^{6, 7, 8, 9}	479,220 (2016)	461,630 (2017)	443,040 (2018)	10,760 (2016)	10,360 (2017)	9,940 (2018)

Measure	North Carolina			Gaston County		
Average cost per meal ^{2,3,4,5}	\$2.74 (2016)	\$2.87 (2017)	\$2.923 (2018)	\$2.88 (2016)	\$2.76 (2017)	\$2.8 (2017)
Additional money required to meet food needs ^{2,3,4,5}	\$770,900,000 (2016)	\$735,321,000 (2017)	\$719,879,000 (2018)	\$14,999,000 (2016)	\$14,756,000 (2017)	\$15,045,000 (2018)
Gaston County census tracts that are food deserts, 2015 data ¹⁰ <i>See image below</i>				306.02; 313.01; 313.02; 314.01; 315.00; 317.01; 317.04; 319.00; 320.00; 321.00; 323.02; 332.02; 334.00; 335.00		
Gaston County residents living in food deserts, 2015 data ¹⁰				44,991 / 21.8%		

Note: The listed years describe the year this data was collected.

¹ <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/north-carolina/2020/measure/factors/133/data>

² <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2015/overall/north-carolina>

³ <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2018/overall/north-carolina>

⁴ <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2015/overall/north-carolina/county/gaston>

⁵ <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2018/overall/north-carolina/county/gaston>

⁶ <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2015/child/north-carolina>

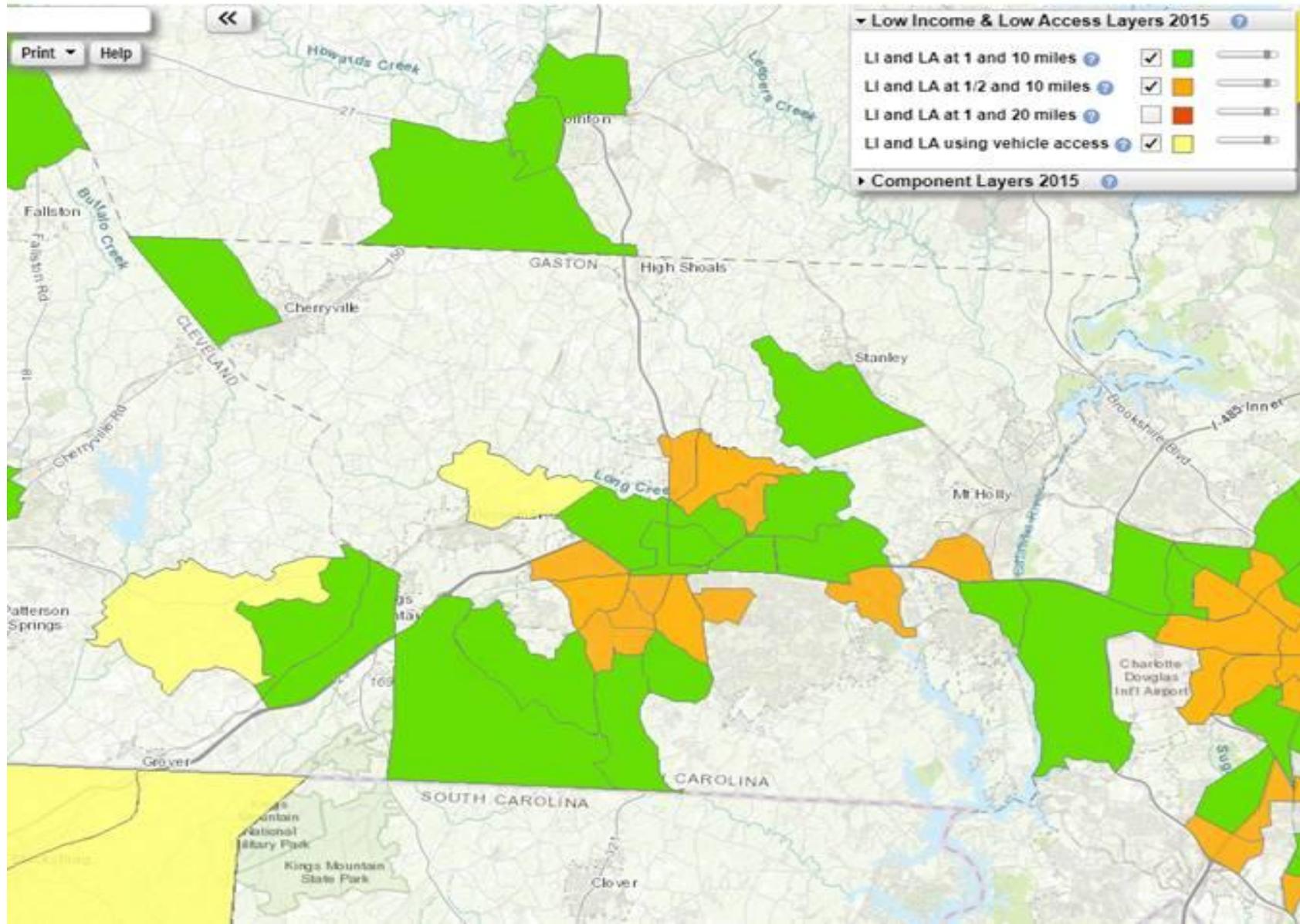
⁷ <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2018/child/north-carolina>

⁸ <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2015/child/north-carolina/county/gaston>

⁹ <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2018/child/north-carolina/county/gaston>

¹⁰ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/download-the-data/>

Gaston County Food Desert Map



Food Assistance

The SNAP, WIC, and National Lunch Program food assistance programs are available to low income individuals and families in Gaston County. The following data shows a decrease in the number of households receiving SNAP benefits over the most recent four-year time span and a decrease in the median monthly income for individuals receiving SNAP benefits. While the number of students receiving reduced price school meals has decreased, from 2014 to 2016, the number of students receiving free school meals has increased. These findings are similar to patterns in North Carolina.

Measure	North Carolina		Gaston County	
Households receiving SNAP/Food Stamps in the past 12 months ¹	1,607,677 (2014)	1,339,924 (2018)	43,021 (2014)	34,016 (2018)
WIC participation by State Fiscal Year ²	243,640 (2015-16)	233,237 (2017-18)	4,377 (2015- (2016)	4,040 (2017- (2018)
Percent eligible participating ^{3,4}	51.1% (2014)	53.8% (2016)	53% (2016)	48% (2018)
Median income for people on Food Stamps ⁵	\$2,769/mo. (2014)	\$2,041/mo. (2018)	\$1,086/mo. (2014)	\$831/mo. (2018)
Children receiving free school meals ⁶	679,858 (2014)	789,643 (2016)	16,057 (2014)	19,391 (2016)
Children receiving reduced price school meals ⁷	73,959 (2014) Total 52.83%	61,006 (2016) Total 59.82%	1,460 (2014) Total 56.18%	1,369 (2016) Total 66.4%
Percentage of pregnant women enrolled in Medicaid who received prenatal WIC Program services ⁸	69.2% (2014)	69.2% (2017)	67.5% (2014)	66% (2017)

¹ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>

² Crossroads Management Information System (CMIS-WIC), Nutrition Services Branch, NC Department of Health Human Services, Division of Public Health.

³ <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/WICEligibles2016-Volume1.pdf>

⁴ <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/WICEligibles2014.pdf>

⁵ Social Services Division, Gaston County Department of Health and Human Services

⁶ Department of Public Instruction: 919/807-3450

⁷ Department of Public Instruction: 919/807-3450

⁸ 2014 data: NC Automated WIC System matched with Medicaid Processed Claims Report; North Carolina Department of Health Human Services, NC Analytics Data Warehouse

2017 data: NC WIC Crossroads Prenatal Records Matched with Medicaid Processed Claims Records. Analyzed by NC DHHS State Center for Health Statistics

Healthy People

This data measures health outcomes such as obesity, diabetes, and lifestyle changes; the three columns on the right are looking at rates in either Gaston County or the larger region of Anson, Cabarrus, Cleveland, Gaston, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Stanly, and Union Counties. While the rates of childhood overweight/obesity and adult overweight have remained fairly constant in North Carolina, the Gaston County rates have increased slightly. With higher weight comes increased risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, and cancer. A healthy diet and consistent exercise are recommended to maintain a normal weight and reduce the risk of disease. In both North Carolina and Region 4, the percent of adults who consumed fruits or vegetables or beans 5 or more times a day has increased significantly from 2015 to 2017.

Measure	North Carolina			Gaston County or Region 4		
Child overweight / obesity rate, ages 2-4 ¹	30.7% (2016)	30.7% (2017)	30.3% (2018)	28.1% (Gaston, 2016)	26.9% (Gaston, 2017)	29% (Gaston, 2018)
Adult overweight rate ^{2,3}	35.0% (2016)	34.9% (2017)	35.1% (2018)	33.6% (Region 4, 2016)	35.5% (Region 4, 2017)	37.3 % (Region 4, 2018 d)
Adult obesity rate ^{2,3}	31.8% (2016)	32.1% (2017)	33% (2018)	30.7% (Region 4, 2016)	33.1% (Region 4, 2017)	30.9% (Region 4, 2018 da)
Rate of diabetes ⁴	11% (2014)	11% (2015)	11% (2016)	13% (Gaston, 2014)	12% (Gaston 2015)	11% (Gaston, 2016 d)

Percent of adults who consumed fruits or vegetables or beans 5 or more times a day ^{5,6}	13.0% (2015)	17.9% (2017)	---	14.5% (Region 4, 2015)	17.2% (Region 4, 2017)	---
Percent of adults that participate in 150+ minutes (or vigorous equivalent minutes) of physical activity per week ^{7,8}	48.1% (2015)	48.3% (2017)	---	46.1% (Region 4, 2015)	47.4% (Region 4, 2017)	---

Note: Region 4 is composed of Anson, Cabarrus, Cleveland, Gaston, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Stanly, and Union Counties.

¹<https://www.eatsmartmovemorenc.com/facts/#facts-dataChildren>

²<https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/data/brfss/2015/region4/rf1.html>

³<https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/data/brfss/2018/region4/rf1.html>

⁴<http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/north-carolina/2019/measure/outcomes/60/data>

⁵https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/data/brfss/2015/region4/DAILY_5.html

⁶https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/data/brfss/2017/region4/DAILY_5.html

⁷<https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/data/brfss/2015/region4/PA150R2.html>

⁸<https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/data/brfss/2017/region4/PA150R2.html>

Thriving Local Economies

This economic data focuses on general economic measures for Gaston County and more specific food system economic data. The columns “Measure 1” and Measure 2” present data from different years; the dates of that data is provided. Despite being the 8th most populous county in North Carolina, Gaston County has lower per capita incomes and median household incomes than the State average. Food measures show a slight increase in the number of fast-food restaurants in recent years and a slight increase in grocery stores per 1000 residents; this data does not describe grocery store locations. The lack of grocery stores in specific areas continues to result in significant food deserts and swamps in the county.

Economic Measures	North Carolina		Gaston County	
	Measure 1	Measure 2	Measure 1	Measure 2
Poverty Rate ¹	14.7% (2018)	14.0% (2019)	15.1% (2018)	14.2% (2019)
Child Poverty Rate – persons 17 years of age and younger ²	21% (2017)	20.2% (2018)	21.7% (2017)	19.2% (2018)
Income Inequality ³ The ratio of household income at the 80 th percentile to income at the 20 th percentile	4.8 (2010-14)	4.8 (2014-8)	4.7 (2010-14)	4.7 (2014-18)
In Labor Force, 16 years+, 2014-18 ⁴	61.3%	---	61.3%	---
Unemployed ⁵	4.5% 220,846 (2017)	3.9% 196,569 (2019)	4.6% 5,021 (2017)	3.9% 4,333 (2019)
Per Capita Income in past 12 months ⁶	\$28,123 (2013-17)	\$29,456 (2014-18)	\$24,937 (2013-17)	\$26,069 (2014-18)
Median Household Income ^{7,8}	\$50,320 (2013-17)	\$52,413 (2014-18)	\$46,626 (2013-17)	\$49,384 (2014-18)

Food-related Measures, Gaston County⁹	Measure 1	Measure 2
Grocery Stores	30 (2009)	32 (2014)
Grocery Stores, Percent Change 2009-2014	6.66%	
Grocery Stores/1,000 people	0.146 (2009)	0.152 (2014)
Grocery Stores/1,000 people, Percent Change 2009-2014	4.02%	
Convenience Stores	117 (2009)	104 (2014)
Convenience Stores, Percent Change 2009-2014	-11.11%	
SNAP-Authorized Stores	211.92 (2012)	218.58 (2016)
SNAP-Authorized Stores, Percent Change 2012-2016	3.15%	
SNAP-Authorized stores/1,000 people	1.02 (2012)	1.01 (2016)
SNAP-Authorized stores/1,000 people, Percent Change 2012-2016	-1.09%	
WIC-Authorized Stores	29 (2008)	31 (2012)
WIC-Authorized Stores, Percent Change 2008-2012	6.9%	
Fast Food Restaurants	144 (2009)	164 (2014)
Fast Food Restaurants, Percent Change 2009-2014	13.89%	
Percent of Restaurants that Are Fast Food	54.55% (2009)	57.54% (2014)
Full-Service Restaurants	120 (2009)	121 (2014)

¹<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/gastoncountynorthcarolina.nc/POP010210>

²<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/saipe/data/datasets.2018.html>

³<http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/north-carolina/2019/measure/factors/44/map>

⁴<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/gastoncountynorthcarolina.nc/IPE120217>

⁵<https://data.bls.gov>

⁶<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/gastoncountynorthcarolina.nc/IPE120217>

⁷<https://www.census.gov/search-results.html?q=median+household+income%3A+NC+and+Gaston+County&page=1&stateGeo=none&searchtype=web&cssp=SERP& charset =UTF-8>

⁸<https://www.census.gov/search-results.html?q=median+household+income%3A+NC&page=1&stateGeo=none&searchtype=web&cssp=SERP& charset =UTF-8>

⁹<https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-environment-atlas/data-access-and-documentation-downloads/>

Food Related Measures ^{1,2}		North Carolina		Region 4	
		2015	2017	2015	2017
To what degree would you agree with the statement, "It is easy to purchase healthy foods in my neighborhood such as whole grain foods, low fat options, and fruits and vegetables?"	Strongly Agree	33.6%	41.2%	36.6%	42.9%
	Agree	49.1%	43.7%	46.4%	42.2%
	Neutral	6.2%	6.2%	6.5%	4.5%
	Disagree	8.2%	6.8%	7.8%	9.2%
	Strongly Disagree	3.0	2.1%	2.7%	---

Note: Region 4 is composed of Anson, Cabarrus, Cleveland, Gaston, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Stanly, and Union Counties.

¹<https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/data/brfss/2015/region4/nc06q01.html>

²<https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/data/brfss/2017/region4/nutenv.html>

Vibrant Farms

Data on farms in Gaston County is from the USDA Agriculture Census, which was most recently completed in 2012 and 2017. During this five-year period Gaston saw a 10% decline in farm acres but a 36% increase in total agricultural products sold. Those increased sales resulted primarily from the sale of animal products and nursery/ greenhouse products as the direct sales of edible vegetable and fruit produce declined. According to the census data, the number of new and beginning farmers increased dramatically during this period. While very encouraging for Gaston County's local food system, this change may be due in part from changes in USDA census definitions.

Data from 2012 & 2017 Census of Agriculture. Census taken every 5 years ¹				
Measure	North Carolina (2012)	North Carolina (2017)	Gaston County (2012)	Gaston County (2017)
Total number of farms	50,218	46,418	520	522
1-9 acres	4,155 (8.3%)	5,112 (11%)	78(15%)	96(18.4%)
10-49 acres	20,014(39.9%)	17,132(36.9%)	207(39.8%)	210(40.23%)
50-179 acres	17,260(34.4%)	15,321(33%)	173(33.3%)	169(32.4%)
180-499 acres	5,387(10.7%)	5,341(11.5%)	57(10.96%)	39(7.47%)
500-999 acres	1,706 (3.4%)	1,762 (3.8%)	2(0.38%)	6(1.15%)
1000+ acres	1,696 (3.4%)	1,750 (3.8%)	3(0.577%)	2(0.383%)
Total cropland	4,745,014	5,000,685 acres	15,142 acres	15,354 acres
Total harvested cropland	4,378,097	4,407,160 acres	12,302 acres	13,301 acres
Median size of farm	51acres	52 acres	40 acres	37 acres
Family or individual owned	43,563 farms (86.7%)	39,452 farms (85%)	485 farms (93.3%)	298 farms (76.2%)
Total market value of agricultural products sold	\$12,588,142,000	\$12,900,674	\$17,052	\$23,164
Total market value of crops sold	\$4,302,877,000	\$3,734,980	\$5,120	\$5,660
Farms with net cash gains	21,700(43%)	19,558(42%)	157 (30.2%)	138 (26.4%)
Farms with net cash losses	28,518(57%)	26,860(58%)	363 (69.8%)	384 (73.6%)
Total number of farm operators	73,846 ⁶	74,958	812	799
Average age of principal operator	58.6 ⁶	59.2	60.3	57.7

Average years on present farm	23.1	21.4	23	20
Farmers on present farm for 2 years or less	1,659	4,377	296	376
Average years on any farm	25	23.3	24.9	21.6
Farmers on any farm for 2 years or less	1,298	10,879	216	1446
Farming is the operator's primary occupation	24,574(33.3%)	31,998 (42.7%)	207 (25.5%)	259(32.4%)
Principal operator lives on farm operated	39,098	55,537	400	594
Total number of female operators	6,453(8.74%)	24,107(32.2%)	208 (25.6%)	292(36.5%)
Principal operator is non-white minority	4.7%	4.5%	1.9%	0.6%
Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino	667farms	666 farms	4 farms	3 farms
American Indian or Alaska Native	693	571 farms	3 farms	7 farms
Asian	220	288 farms	2 farm	2 farm
African American	1,689	1,482 farms	7 farms	3 farms
Hired farm labor:	78,012 workers (14,469 farms)	67,496 workers (12,492 farms)	242 workers (82 farms)	268 workers (96 farms)
Payroll	\$765,886,000	\$810,029,000	(D) ⁴	\$2,329,000
Migrant workers	27,104 (1,804 farms)	28,063 (1,684 farms)	(D) (2 farms)	(D) (1 farm)
Unpaid workers	48,608(21,730farms)	46,783(21,698 farms)	654 (242 farms) ⁴	677 (295 farms)
Crop land treated with:				
Fungicide	670,001acres	767,734 acres	326 acres	1,709 acres
Herbicide	3,776,603 acres	3,944,774 acres	6,926 acres	8,193 acres
Insecticides	2,350,771acres	2,712,981 acres	1,602 acres	2,795 acres
Fertilizer	3,488,942acres	3,506,280 acres	9,060 acres	12,247 acres

¹ [https://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics by State/North Carolina/index.php](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/North_Carolina/index.php)

(D) means: "withheld to avoid disclosing data for individual operations"