



New Data Cards show more NC children struggling with food access

County level data cards present crucial benchmarks on child health and wellbeing in all 100 counties

RALEIGH— New data from NC Child shows that the number of children who are food insecure is at the highest level recorded in almost a decade. The data comes from NC Child’s 2026 County Data Cards, an annual snapshot that outlines 15 key metrics assessing child health and well-being in all of North Carolina’s 100 counties.

“Every child deserves to go to sleep at night without wondering where their next meal is coming from—but right now, more than 1 in 5 North Carolina children are going to bed hungry. We have to change this,” said NC Child Executive Director Erica Palmer Smith.

How child hunger is changing

The 2026 North Carolina Data Card indicates that 504,790 (21.5%) of North Carolina children live in households that don’t have steady access to food. The Data Card reflects numbers from 2024, which is the most recently available data year from Feeding America. In 2023, more than 438,200 (18.9%) of North Carolina children lived in food insecure homes, meaning that in one year, almost 66,600 North Carolina children lost regular access to adequate nutrition.

“While there was a modest increase median family income over the last data year, the sharp rise in the number of children living in food insecure homes reflects other challenges families are facing,” said NC Child Senior Director of Policy and Research Neil Harrington. “The cost of goods has increased, and it costs more money to raise a family—but there are steps we can take to ensure that every child can access the food they need to have a healthy childhood.”

Though the data included in the 2026 County Data Cards reflects numbers for 2024, advocates are concerned that the rate of children living in food insecure homes will continue to rise in the wake of federal food assistance changes enacted by H.R.1.

“The shift of administrative costs and new guidelines around certain procedural details like SNAP payment error rates and work requirements makes it more burdensome for counties across North Carolina to administer SNAP and makes it harder for families in need to

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access the program,” said Harrington. “This would pose a challenge for every county, but families in rural counties would be disproportionately affected.”

Smith says that it’s critical that advocates and leaders pay attention to how child hunger rates change year-over-year. “Beyond the benefits to their physical health, access to adequate nutrition has a huge impact on a child’s ability to learn and thrive in school,” she said. “Access to nutrition is essential for every child to have a strong start in life.”

New Data Included on County Data Cards

Advocates and community leaders can now see the rate of pediatric behavioral health visits to the emergency department in their county.

“We know that more children are being diagnosed with anxiety or depression, and that nearly 1 in 10 North Carolina high school students reported making a suicide attempt,” said Harrington. “Ensuring that our children have access to the mental health supports they need starts with us fully understanding this crisis and being clear-eyed about the solutions.”

Smith says that school-based solutions to address the youth mental health crisis can be effective for many students. “We need to meet children where they’re at, and the reality is that they spend most of their time in school,” said Smith. “School-based peer support programs and suicide prevention training for teachers and other personnel can go a long way in ensuring that a child gets the help they need.”

In addition to the new data point assessing youth mental health, the 2026 County Data Cards also include the percentage of children under age 6 enrolled in licensed child care programs with working parents.

“The lack of affordable and accessible child care has huge economic ramifications for families and for our state as a whole,” said Harrington. A study conducted by NC Child and the U.S. and NC Chamber Foundations found that about 35% of parents that experienced disruptions to their employment in the past year reported leaving the workforce as a direct result of child care challenges. “Tracking this metric over time will help advocates across the state understand how investments in early childhood education are expanding access to care for children while strengthening family financial security and workforce participation.”

What comes next

NC Child publishes the 15-metric County Data Cards annually and the nonprofit provides advocates with additional resources that outline how North Carolina children are faring.

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“The old adage is true—you can’t change what you don’t measure,” said Smith. “We all have big dreams for our state's children, and equipping advocates, leaders, and decisionmakers with the latest data on child well-being ensures that those dreams can become a reality.”

To download the Data Card for your county, visit ncchild.org/datacards. For more information about child health and well-being, visit the NC Child Data Center at ncchild.org/data-center.

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About NC Child

NC Child is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that advocates for public policies that improve the lives of all North Carolina children. As the state’s only multi-issue child advocacy organization, NC Child’s work addresses policies that affect the whole child, including health and well-being, early childhood education, and family economic security. NC Child is also a leading source of state-level research and data on the issues affecting children and families, and the organization serves as a trusted and reliable source for policymakers and other child advocates across the state. For more information, visit ncchild.org.