



CLEAN WATER FOR  
NORTH CAROLINA

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# A Pandemic's Impact: Utility Disconnections, Evictions & Houselessness

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Utility Disconnections Amid a Pandemic</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Evictions Target Black, Latinx &amp; Low-Income Communities</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Unhoused Populations Face Increased Health Exposure</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Resource List</b>	<b>29</b>

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# **Overview**

The COVID-19 Pandemic had significant financial impacts for many families across the US and in North Carolina. Clean Water for NC Staff, along with volunteer Lee Barnes, explored the nuances and impacts of the pandemic on utility insecurity, eviction insecurity, and houselessness in the U.S., and specifically North Carolina, during COVID-19. We also consider the disproportionate impacts on low-income households as well as Black, Indigenous and other communities of color. We hope to highlight resources for those facing these difficulties and groups who are providing assistance and demonstrate our commitment to holistically considering issues facing environmental justice communities.

# **Introduction**

Over the last two years, COVID-19 has ravaged the world, spreading quickly and thoroughly through countries all around the world. Since March of 2020, when the pandemic began seriously affecting the United States, people across America have experienced the direct effects of the pandemic: fears of illness, managing cases within communities, and untimely deaths. However, the indirect effects, while perhaps more covert, are insidious and damaging.

Due to a number of new factors, financial constraints made it much more difficult for many Americans, especially renters, to pay their rent and utility bills, among other necessities. These factors vary depending on the person, but many Americans shared similar struggles. In-person jobs shut down, leaving many workers without a job and subsequent paycheck. Schools closed, meaning working parents often had to stay home with little ones instead of working full days. In the months following the start of the pandemic, global supply for products decreased, meaning companies were forced to let many workers go. For those who did fall ill with COVID-19, attending work was often impossible whether it was due to one falling ill or taking care of a loved one with COVID-19.

Legislators and politicians attempted to aid the situation by mandating a halt on residential evictions and utility shut-offs during the first months of the pandemic, with extensions through the summer of 2021. State leaders took it upon themselves to impose different types of moratoria for different amounts of time. A federal eviction moratorium by the CARES Act was in place from March 27 to July 24, 2020.<sup>1</sup> Another federal moratorium on evictions, by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), lasted from September 4 to June 30, 2021.<sup>2</sup> North Carolina's role in moratoria was far from perfect. Apart from federal protections, North Carolinians did not receive much additional support from the state government.

This report details the nuances and impacts of the pandemic on utility insecurity, eviction insecurity, and houselessness in the U.S., and specifically North Carolina, during COVID-19. Utility and eviction moratoria are discussed in the context of race and class, especially considering access to utilities and reasonably priced rent *before* the pandemic as compared to *during*. The nature of utility shut-offs and why utility access is so important during a pandemic is covered in some detail, and there is discussion of private vs. public water utilities. We examine types of evictions and the legal nature of these evictions, along with the geographic patterns of evictions in the United States. The emotional, financial, and medical impacts of houselessness on Americans, especially during the pandemic, and especially during the climate crisis, are explored, as well as their racial context.

This report was prepared by staff and volunteers of Clean Water for North Carolina (CWFNC), a community-based environmental justice nonprofit with a vision of clean, safe, accessible water for all North Carolinians, protected by empowered, educated communities. CWFNC has been involved in advocating for low-income North Carolinians against utility rate increases for years, and we saw new concerns emerge with COVID's financial impacts.

Beginning in July 2020, as CWFNC saw the looming disaster for families who were struggling during the pandemic to afford water, power, broadband and rent during discussions about the COVID relief bill, the organization urged our senators to safeguard households by passing a national moratorium. We phone banked, wrote letters to the editor at various publications, gathered resources and distributed lists, and encouraged folks to donate to service organizations working directly with impacted households. As the pandemic's impacts persist, we continue to advocate for protections by calling on state and national politicians to stand up for North Carolinians, and in particular the Black, Brown, Indigenous and other people of color (BIPOC) who have been disproportionately impacted.

# **Utility Disconnections Amid a Pandemic**

Insecure utility access has been a reality for many Americans long before COVID-19 spread across the country. When utility payments are not completed in a timely fashion, companies have the option to disconnect service to households, leaving families without heat, water, internet, gas, and electricity. As of 2017, water bills were unaffordable for 12% of Americans. If the trend continued, 36% of Americans would be unable to pay their water bill in 2022.<sup>1</sup> In 2018 alone, 16 million low-income households were struggling with energy insecurity, most often because electricity prices were too expensive.<sup>2</sup>

While utility cutoffs, or disconnections, of any kind negatively affect Americans, water cutoffs are especially damaging to households across the country. These cutoffs are not just inconvenient, they're dangerous. Water cutoffs don't just mean lack of fresh drinking water, but inability to shower, flush toilets, or wash your hands. Lack of access to water can affect families in a variety of ways, and the most prominent is adverse health effects. As the World Health Organization (WHO) states in their "Drinking Water" fact sheet, "Contaminated water can transmit diseases such [as] diarrhoea, cholera, dysentery, typhoid, and polio. Contaminated drinking water is estimated to cause 485,000 diarrhoeal deaths each year."<sup>3</sup>

Chronically ill Americans, communities of color, the elderly and children suffer the greatest. Children are less able to regulate their body temperature, and are more susceptible to certain illnesses. Communities of color face redlining and systemically racist policies, often leaving them with a lack of resources.<sup>4</sup> Americans with chronic illnesses who need to refrigerate medicines or operate machinery like nebulizers often rely on utilities for their recovery and health. As an example of this severity from losing power, in Florida, after multiple heat-related deaths caused by Hurricane Irma in 2017, the state changed its regulations to require nursing homes and assisted living facilities to have backup generators in case of power loss, helping prevent issues such as the loss of refrigerated medicines.<sup>5</sup>

These shutoffs can also lead to “psychological distress.”<sup>6</sup> As Jeremy Orr, former senior attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council (NDRC)’s Safe Water Initiative expresses, “water has been unaffordable for a long time now.”<sup>7</sup> Fresh water is a vital ingredient in staying safe and healthy, especially during a pandemic. To put such a necessity behind a paywall fosters stress and suffering for low-income Americans.

Beyond shutoffs, utilities also have the option to implement other measures to promote payment of bills. During the pandemic in Cape Fear, North Carolina, the water utility considered putting restrictor devices in residents’ pipes. These devices would restrict water flow, so that “it would take 30 seconds to fill a glass.”<sup>8</sup>

Private utilities, that aren’t regulated by the state like public ones, can also enact policies that further hurt North Carolinians. Aqua, a private water utility that has a North Carolina subsidiary, exists to make a profit rather than provide affordable water.<sup>9</sup> North Carolinians who were disconnected during the pandemic could pay as much as \$1,000 to get their service restored. During nonpayment, Aqua can also install elder valves, which send sewage up the toilet instead of down when it is flushed. They charge the resident more than \$600 to remove the elder valve when payment is completed.

As COVID-19 began to ravage the United States, water shutoffs rose alongside the increased need for freshwater. Sanitation became increasingly important, as the CDC urged Americans to increase hand-washing and other such practices.<sup>10</sup> In the first four months of 2021, utilities that serve around 11% of North Carolina reported 1,845 water disconnections.<sup>11</sup> Water shutoffs during COVID-19 might have contributed to 9,000 extra deaths during the pandemic, or around thirteen deaths per day since the start of COVID-19.<sup>12</sup>

Utility moratoriums were put into place in select states, though never applied nationwide. In states that regulated utility companies to halt water shutoffs, a reduced daily infection rate was 0.235 percent, and a reduced death rate by 0.135 percent.<sup>13</sup> As

of March 2021, nationwide water shutoff moratoria could have prevented 3.97% of COVID-19 cases and 5.51% of COVID-19 related deaths.<sup>[14](#)</sup>

**As of March 2021, nationwide water shutoff moratoria could have prevented 3.97% of Covid-19 cases and 5.51% of Covid-19 related deaths.**

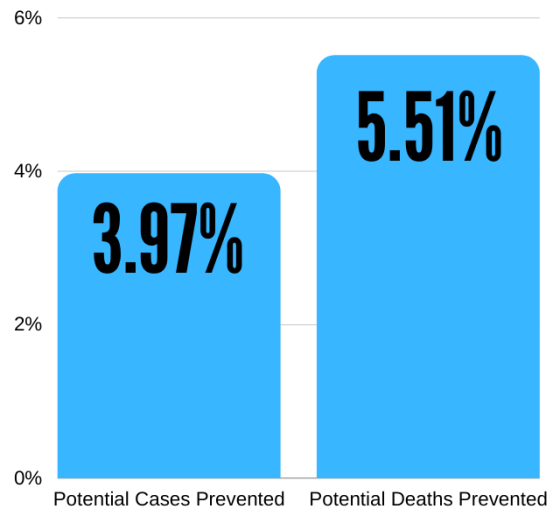


Figure 1: Xue Zhang, [The Relationship Between Water Shutoffs and COVID Infections and Deaths](#), (2021).

In North Carolina, Gov. Cooper issued a halt on disconnections, but it expired in July of 2020.<sup>[15](#)</sup> The N.C. Utilities Commission’s moratorium that prevented state-regulated utilities from shutting off service was enacted and expired in September of 2020.<sup>[16](#)</sup> In August of 2020, North Carolinians owed \$208.4 million to electric utility companies, and 15.4% of active accounts were behind on these utility payments.<sup>[17](#)</sup>

In December of 2020, racial and economic justice groups, alongside clean energy and conservation groups, signed and released a letter to Governor Roy Cooper calling on him to enact an emergency moratorium on all evictions and utility shut offs.<sup>[18](#)</sup>

“As new daily infections are now in the thousands, reaching as high as 7,540 on December 11th, maintaining access to housing and utilities for households in North Carolina is literally a matter of life and death. This is especially true given that Black, Asian, Hispanic and Native American residents are being infected

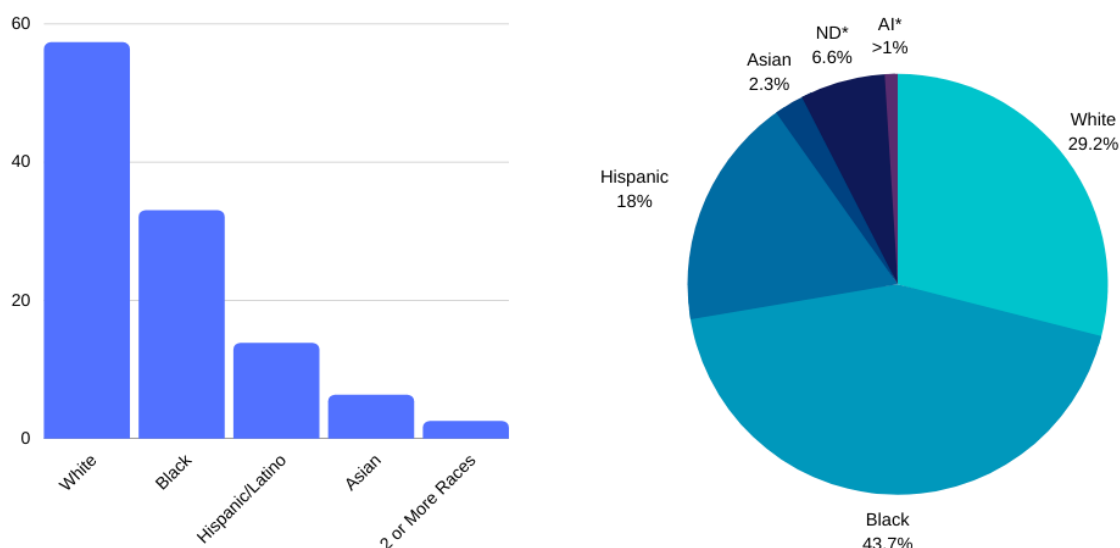
and/or dying at a higher rate, while at the same time being more at risk of eviction and/or loss of utility services than are White residents.”<sup>19</sup>

As stated by Diane Yentel, President of the National Low-Income Housing Coalition, in the letter, “Structural racism leaves people of color disproportionately low-income, rent-burdened, or homeless. These inequities compound the harm done by COVID-19.”

The racial breakdown of COVID-19 cases and deaths can also be tied back to water access. In Mecklenburg County, NC, 32.9% of the population is Black, but as of April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020, 43.7% of the COVID-19 cases in the county were Black individuals.<sup>20</sup>

Numerous studies show that communities of color are more prevalently hit with water shutoffs and water insecurity, which exacerbate rates of COVID-19 infection.

**In Mecklenburg County, NC, 32.9% of the population is Black, but as of April 4th, 2020, 43.7% of the Covid-19 cases in the county were Black individuals.**



\*ND - Not Disclosed

\*AI - American Indian or Alaskan Native

Figure 2: Joseph Williams, [Black People Are Disproportionately Getting and Dying From COVID-19](#), (2020).

Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association, comments, “We have always known that we’ve had these enormous social determinants that impact health and create an unequal society...I’m not surprised that we have had these enormous disparities in illness and deaths from COVID-19. They exist for everything else.”<sup>21</sup>

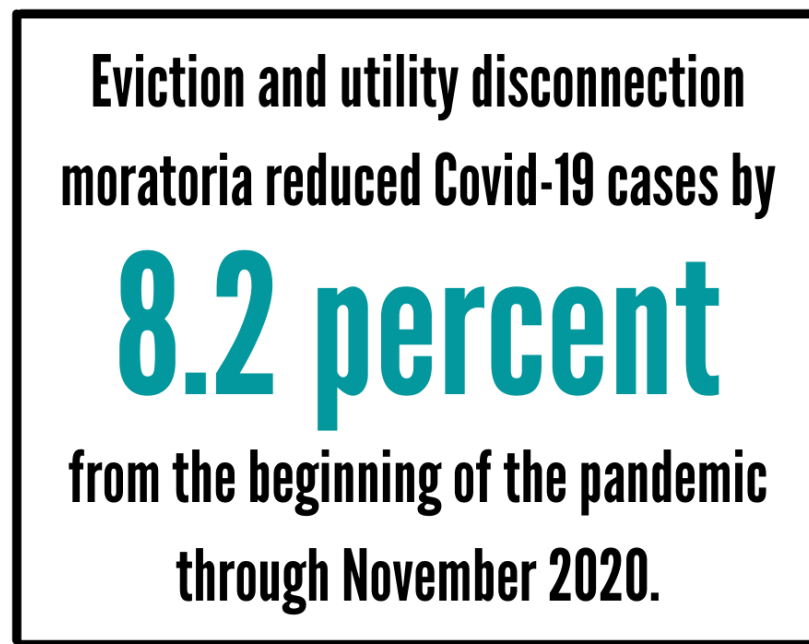


Figure 3: Kay Jowers, [\*Moratoria on Utility Shutoffs and Evictions Reduced COVID-19 Infection Rates, Duke Analysis Finds\*](#), (2021).

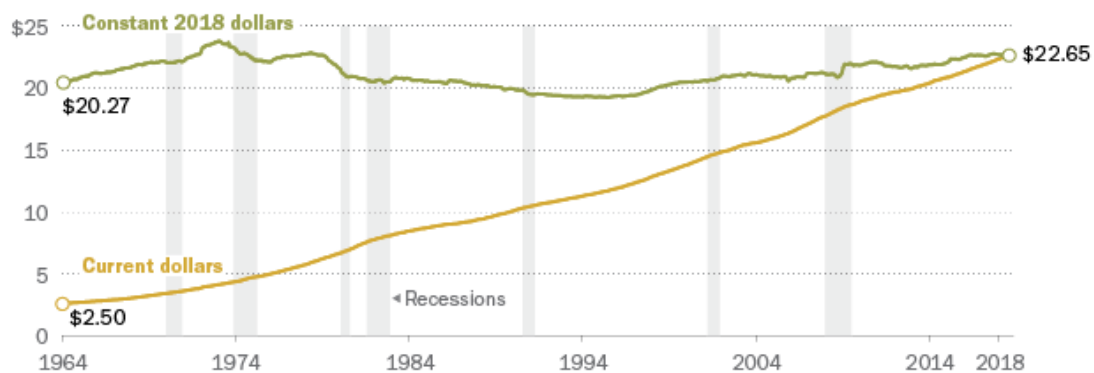
North Carolinians are urging for improved infrastructure so if there is another disaster like COVID-19, they won’t be hit as hard. “We can’t have another COVID-19 pandemic, because we weren’t prepared for this one. We won’t be prepared for the next one if it stays the same,” says Jovita Lee, senior environmental justice campaigner for the Center for Biological Diversity.<sup>22</sup> Moratoria are important in emergency situations, as well. Eviction and utility disconnection moratoria reduced COVID-19 cases by 8.2 percent from the beginning of the pandemic through November 2020.<sup>23</sup>

# Evictions Target Black, Latinx and Low-Income Communities

Even before the pandemic, the US was experiencing an eviction crisis. From 2000 - 2016, the US nationally saw 1 million evictions per year, equivalent to 1 in 40 households evicted per year. In 2016, that number increased to 3.7 million eviction filings.<sup>1</sup> Further, a 2018 study found that 40.6% of renters were rent burdened, meaning they spent 35% or more of their income on rent, and 25% of households spent half their income on rent.<sup>2</sup> The reason we've seen these numbers increase lies in the changes in costs of rent and relatively stagnant wages. While in 1960, median household rent in the US was \$350 per month, this number has steadily risen, and in 2018 was \$1,086 with an increase of \$736. At the same time, median hourly wages in the US in 1964 was \$20.27 and while rising and falling through the years, has only risen \$2.38, so that in 2018 was \$22.65.<sup>3</sup> That means we have experienced a whopping 210.29% increase in median rents and only a 11.74% increase in median wages where wages simply are not keeping up with housing costs.

## Americans' paychecks are bigger than 40 years ago, but their purchasing power has hardly budged

*Average hourly wages in the U.S., seasonally adjusted*

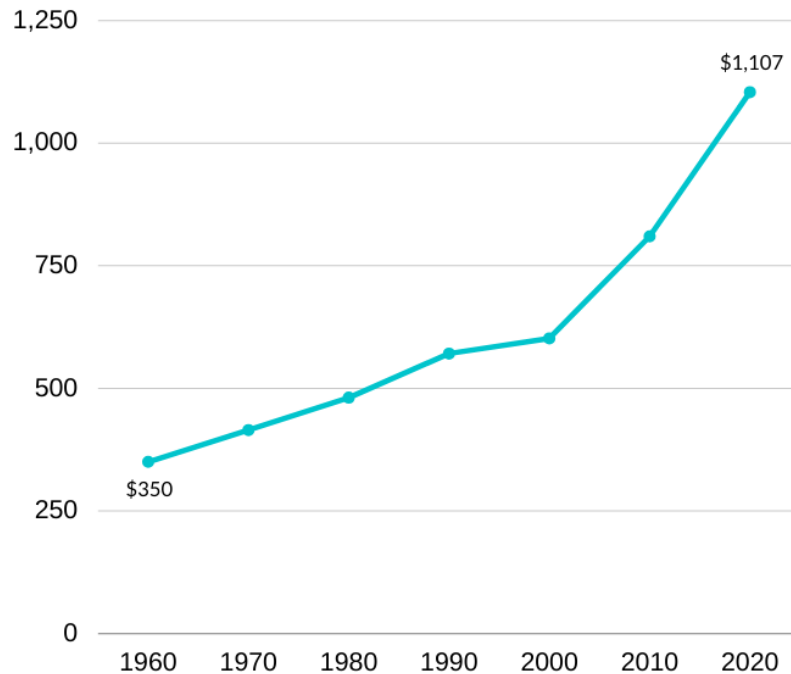


Note: Data for wages of production and non-supervisory employees on private non-farm payrolls. "Constant 2018 dollars" describes wages adjusted for inflation. "Current dollars" describes wages reported in the value of the currency when received. "Purchasing power" refers to the amount of goods or services that can be bought per unit of currency. Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 4: Pew Research Center, [For most U.S. workers, real wages have barely budged in decades](#), (2018).

# Median Household Rents



Note: Adjusted to 2000 dollars for prior years

Figure 5: U.S. Census Bureau, [Historical Census of Housing Tables: Gross Rents](#), (2000).

Evictions are emotionally traumatizing. While the process varies state-by-state, generally, notices are posted on the door, beginning the process. This first step is known as the “notice to the tenant.” Next, is filing a lawsuit, then a court hearing. Should the eviction be granted, there is a court order for the tenant to leave the property by a set date. After this, the sheriff may “execute” the eviction. If the tenant does not leave voluntarily, the sheriff removes the renters and their belongings from the home. Navigating the justice system can be extremely difficult for many, and this process of removal from one’s home can be incredibly distressing.

Because eviction and housing cases are considered civil cases and not criminal cases, the right to an attorney is not granted. Low-income renters with limited resources and a lack of understanding of the legal system face many challenges when going through this

process and often cannot afford legal representation. This is why many organizations offering free legal assistance exist, however the demand for services is far greater than the supply. In 2017 alone, an estimated 62% to 72% of people who requested legal aid were unable to get it due to limitations of assistance available, staffing shortages, and other factors.<sup>4</sup> This is all the more concerning, considering that these estimates suggest close to half of evictions would be preventable if tenants had representation.<sup>5</sup>

Another type of eviction is a self-help eviction, which is illegal in most states and does not involve a court case. Tenants in these cases are often just locked out, their water or electricity is turned off, or their belongings are removed. Landlords are subject to damages and fines, and tenant fees for the court and attorney in some states. In North Carolina, landlords are subject to actual damages, but the statute does not provide for tenant's court costs and attorney fees.<sup>6</sup> This means that low-income tenants who are evicted illegally by their landlord, would still have to pay their attorney and court fees in NC, which may prohibit them from challenging the eviction in court.

After being evicted, it can be difficult for renters to find new housing. Although the major credit bureaus have stopped reporting if someone has been previously evicted, many companies have popped-up solely to enable landlords to know about previous evictions by searching through public court records. Renters who are evicted also may have to leave work or have children who are unable to go to school, further disrupting the lives of families who may already be struggling financially.

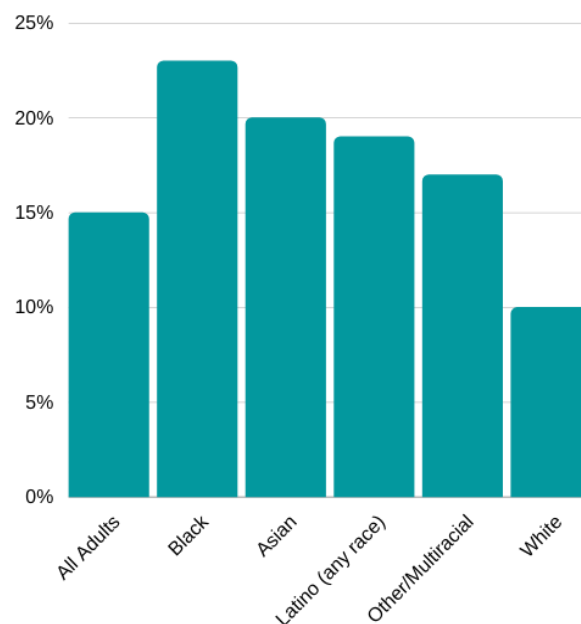
The South in particular has seen a concerning number of evictions. In 2019, the Eviction Lab at Princeton University found that "nine of the 10 highest-evicting large U.S. cities were not only located in the South, but also had populations that were at least 20% Black."<sup>7</sup> Those cities in descending order are North Charleston, South Carolina; Richmond, Hampton, and Newport News in Virginia; Jackson, Mississippi; Norfolk, Virginia; Greensboro, North Carolina; Columbia, South Carolina; and Chesapeake, Virginia. This disproportionate impact on Southern cities is often attributed to the deeply rooted history of U.S. racism in those places. On the Media noted that "You can

superimpose a map of the Great Migration"— when Black people fled the Jim Crow South — "over the map of the highest eviction areas today and the contours would almost exactly match."<sup>8</sup>

In North Carolina, where the population is over 22% Black, 15.8% of renters face eviction, equivalent to almost 273,000 people. These at-risk renters are disproportionately people of color.<sup>9</sup> The pandemic brought on hardship for many, but many challenges were disproportionately felt by Black, Indigenous, Latinx and low-income families, often as a result of job loss, disproportionate risk of severe illness and other effects. These disparities are, again due to the historical social and economic inequities between white and BIPOC communities.<sup>10</sup>

### **Nearly 1 in 6 Renters Not Caught Up on Rent During Pandemic, With Black, Asian, and Latino Renters Facing Greatest Hardship**

Share of adult renters saying their household is not caught up on rent, as of September 16 - 28, 2020



Note: Other/Multiracial, not Latino = people identifying as American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or more than one race. Chart excludes renters who did not respond to the question.

Figure 6: CBPP, [Nearly 1 in 6 Renters Not Caught Up on Rent During Pandemic](#), (2020).

In response to the pandemic toll, on September 4, 2020, the CDC issued an order declaring a national eviction moratorium, which was extended several times.<sup>11</sup> The final reissuance of the moratorium was in early August, 2021. The CDC moratorium blocked landlords from evicting tenants making less than \$99,000 annually for nonpayment of rent if they lived in an area with high or substantial levels of COVID-19 transmission,<sup>12</sup> which at the time was a designation that covered the majority of the country.<sup>13</sup> Researchers have estimated the CDC moratorium helped to prevent 1.55 million eviction filings nationwide. In many areas, eviction filings were less than half of historical averages.<sup>14</sup>

The national eviction ban is no longer in effect, being that the Supreme Court struck it down in late August 2021, leaving the more than 11 million Americans still behind on their rent at risk of being forced out of their homes.<sup>15</sup> However, at least four states and Washington, D.C. continued to ban evictions: Illinois did so until September 19; California's ban lasted through September 30; and New Jersey and D.C. will still curb the proceedings until January 2022. Furthermore, places like Connecticut, Virginia, Oregon, Massachusetts, Michigan and Minnesota as well as Washington, D.C., have limited evictions, tying them to the rental assistance process that will last until 2022. In those cases, a landlord must file for federal rental assistance before filing an eviction, or else they cannot evict a tenant until after their application for aid is complete.

While the federal eviction moratorium was shut down by the Supreme Court, many have remarked on the positive effects of the ban, and the large federal spending on citizens. In March, researchers at Columbia University estimated that as a result of the American Rescue Plan, the US poverty rate would fall to 8.5 percent,<sup>16</sup> the lowest figure on record and well below 2018's figure of 12.8 percent.<sup>17</sup> Because of the robust response by the federal government during the pandemic and resulting impacts, we can assume that the continuation of poverty is a policy choice.<sup>18</sup>

Several studies, including the one at Columbia, have shown that investment toward poverty works to lessen it.<sup>19</sup> At the beginning of the pandemic in April 2020, there were

approximately 20 million people unemployed, the highest rate of unemployment since the Great Depression. Resulting effects included higher rates of anxiety and depression, as well as the inability for many to afford rent, utilities or basic expenses for their families. However, a University of Michigan Poverty Solutions report using U.S. Census household survey data found that federal support, like the CARES Act of March 2020 and the American Rescue Plan Act of March 2021, severely dampened the worst effects of the pandemic.<sup>[20](#)</sup>

Experts at the University of Michigan report that direct stimulus payments and expanded unemployment benefits, in particular helped people pay their bills, pay down debt, and get necessary medical and mental health care.<sup>[21](#)</sup> “There’s a question of what we do during severe recessions: What we did [during the pandemic] worked, and it worked better than anything we’ve ever done before,” said Director of Poverty Solutions Luke Shaefer. However, while there was federal support for communities struggling with COVID-19’s impacts on income and expenses, state- based housing policies varied, often resulting in large differences in the amount of protection of renters dealing with financial hardship.

The Eviction Lab considered COVID-19 state housing policies and produced scorecards evaluating how each state, including North Carolina, protected renters dealing with financial challenges during the pandemic.<sup>[22](#)</sup> North Carolina’s ranking was 2 stars, and had a state score of 1.84/5.00. The chart below shows common policies across the US, noting whether North Carolina had or had not implemented each policy.

## Eviction Lab Chart of North Carolina Eviction Protections



Note: Last Updated 6/30/2021

Figure 7: Eviction Lab, [COVID-19 Housing Policy Scorecard](#), (2021).

With the Supreme Court shutting down the moratorium in August 2021, there have been significant impacts on folks. A survey of renters by the U.S. Census Bureau found an estimated 11.4 million people were behind on rent as of early July (a month before it was struck down), with renters of color the most likely to report missing payments: 24% of Black renters, 18% of Latinx renters, 18% of Asian renters and 11% of white renters said they were behind.<sup>23</sup> “The tragic, consequential and entirely avoidable outcome of this ruling will be millions of people losing their homes this fall and winter, just as the delta variant ravages communities and lives,” Diane Yentel, the president and CEO of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, said in a statement, describing the moratorium as a “lifeline for millions of families.”

Certain populations have greater risk of eviction and being unhoused, including BIPOC and elderly populations. “In fact, the number of homeless people who are 55 and older is rising at an alarming rate. I have seen this first hand... Roughly 30% of our clients are over 55. Many more are in their 60s, 70s and 80s. We have even served people in their 90s. But because we are a mass shelter, we can’t offer these clients accommodations to make their stay more comfortable and safe,” said Lisa Glow, the CEO of Central Arizona Shelter Services (CASS), a 470-bed homeless emergency shelter in downtown Phoenix.<sup>[24](#)</sup>

Lisa Glow spoke to Judy, a 75-year-old who was supported by CASS whose case is relatively common. Judy’s roommate, who also happened to be her landlord, obtained an eviction notice against her, even though Judy paid her rent on time. This was before the COVID-19 vaccine was available and her roommate did not feel safe sharing her home with Judy anymore. Judy had never been homeless before. She didn’t understand how the judge could sign the order with the eviction moratorium in place. Still, Judy told the staff that she felt lucky that “she only had to sleep in her car for a week” before CASS staff found her and offered her a hotel room where she could isolate until she could get back into housing.<sup>[25](#)</sup>

Racial disparities in evictions, which existed prior to the pandemic, have continued to persist. Black and Latinx renters in general and women in particular are disproportionately evicted from their homes. A Rutgers and Princeton Study found that while Black individuals made up 19.9% of all adult renters, they also made up 32.7% of all eviction filing defendants, and that women—especially Black and Latinx women—faced higher eviction rates than men.<sup>[26](#)</sup> Even while the moratorium was in place, members of the same demographic groups were targeted with eviction filings. While Black renters accounted for 22% of all renters in the study, they were over represented in eviction filings at 35% prior to the pandemic and continued to be during the moratorium at 33% of filings.<sup>[27](#)</sup>

## Renter and Defendant Data Pre-Pandemic and During CDC Moratorium

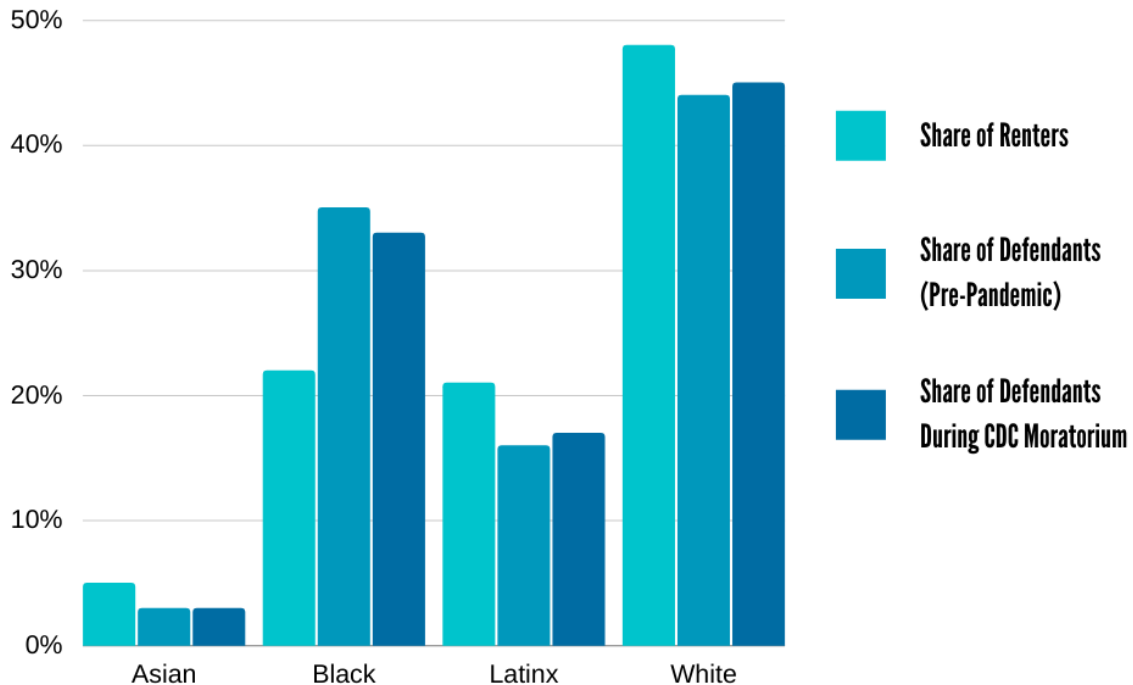


Figure 8: Rangel et al., [\*Preliminary Analysis: 11 months of the CDC Moratorium\*](#), (2021).

Communities and organizations have banded together to take action and support those vulnerable to evictions.

"Once the pandemic hit, it was very clear that nothing was going to be done to support the unhoused people in the area who were not able to use the bathrooms, not able to get food anywhere—not even the leftovers they used to pick up off the street. They didn't have access to information, so I started gathering donations and asking for support, and within a few weeks we had a team of about 20 people going out every single day," said Jasmine Araujo, founder of Southern Solidarity, a mutual aid organization supporting unhoused people.<sup>[28](#)</sup>

The year 2020 also saw the largest coordinated rent strike in US history. These protests demanding cancellation of rent spanned from coast to coast, gaining traction throughout the US by renters who were frustrated with the lack of protections during the pandemic, despite the heightened risk of COVID exposure and other public health considerations.

Despite community members and organizations stepping up, many North Carolinians are particularly vulnerable to evictions since experiencing the financial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Households face wide-ranging impacts from evictions. As explained above, when a family receives an eviction filing, it appears on record and can be used by landlords to deny approval to a housing unit. Additionally, having an eviction filing can make individuals and families ineligible for certain housing assistance programs.<sup>29</sup> North Carolina families deserve affordable and safe housing, and as housing costs continue to climb and we continue to see the effects of the pandemic, investment in affordable housing needs to match the demands of the housing market.

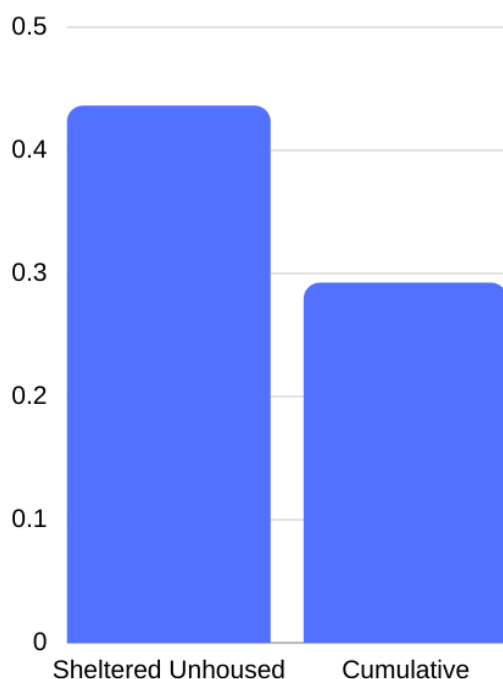
# Unhoused Populations Face Increased Health Exposure

*Note: We have chosen to use the words “unhoused” and “houseless” instead of “homeless” in this section. Read more about this topic here: [Time to Retire the Word ‘Homeless’ and Opt for ‘Houseless’ or ‘Unhoused’ Instead? | Architectural Digest](#)*

After being evicted, what happens? For some, they are able to find temporary housing with family or friends, but for others, the situation is far from a simple fix. Many difficulties face those who have been evicted, like the ones experienced by Gregory Curry, from Dothan, AL, whose eviction story is shared in an NPR article:

“So for more than seven months now, Curry hasn’t had a home. Even though he started working again and has a job. He’s stayed at long-term stay hotels, that is, when he’s had enough money to do that. ‘I literally had to sleep in my car,’ Curry says. He says the extended stay hotels cost more than what he was paying for rent and utilities. So his housing costs got higher, and his wages were being seized by his old landlord.”<sup>1</sup>

Curry went on to state that “the emotional toll has been more than the actual financial toll,” reflecting the deep insecurity felt by those who lose their housing, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Situations like this one are hard enough, but during a global health crisis, the risks are even higher. According to a study by Coalition for the Homeless, “Through the end of February 2021, the cumulative New York City mortality rate due to COVID-19 was 292 deaths per 100,000 people. For sheltered homeless New Yorkers, it was 436 deaths per 100,000 people – 49 percent higher than the New York City rate.”<sup>2</sup> In North Carolina, as of January 2020, there were 9,280 unhoused people in the state;<sup>3</sup> Mecklenburg County, which includes the city of Charlotte, experienced a 55% increase of unhoused residents—from 2,025 to 3,137—between June 2020 and June 2021.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, 77% of those individuals in Mecklenburg County were African American.<sup>5</sup>



**By the end of February 2021, New Yorkers who were sheltered and unhoused had a 49% higher rate of mortality than the cumulative rate for the city.**

Figure 9: Coalition for the Homeless, [Age-Adjusted Mortality Rate for Sheltered Homeless New Yorkers](#), (2021).

In addition to COVID-19 mortality rates and increases in unhoused populations, there are several other health risks attributed to being unhoused. Exposure to impacts from living outdoors such as extreme heat, poor air quality, floods and storms, as well as diseases like the West Nile Virus, pose serious concerns to the safety and wellbeing of unhoused populations.<sup>6</sup> Health issues from air pollution in particular are concerning during the pandemic, as COVID-19 affects the respiratory system. Research from Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health suggests that higher historical particulate matter positively link to higher COVID-19 mortality rates on the county level.<sup>7</sup> And for individuals experiencing homelessness (IEHs), air quality may be a significant concern, as a 2020 study from the University of Utah found:

“More than 61% of IEHs reported physical reactions to air pollution, 37% reported air pollution-related emotional stress, and more than 89% had sought medical attention for a condition related to air pollution.”<sup>8</sup>

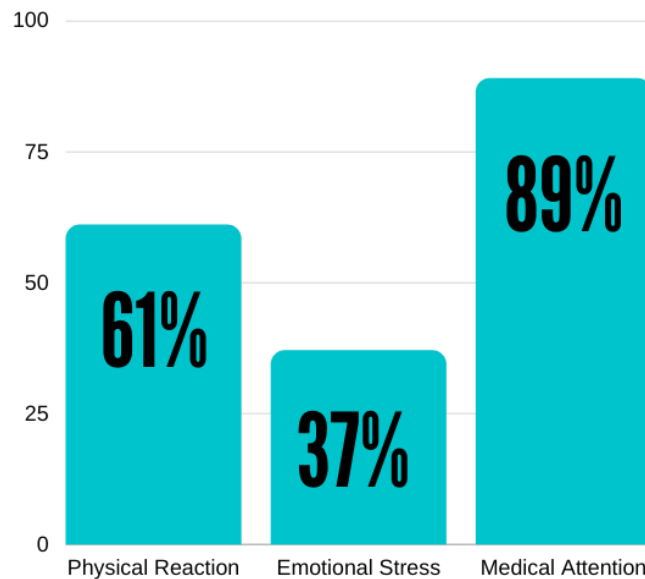


Figure 10: DeMarco et al., [\*Air Pollution-Related Health Impacts on Individuals Experiencing Homelessness: Environmental Justice and Health Vulnerability in Salt Lake County, Utah\*](#), (2020).

To make matters worse, unhoused people also lack access to necessary infrastructure such as electricity, stormwater management systems, water and sanitation, and other essential services.<sup>9</sup> Unhoused populations may reside and set up camp in toxic places, such as hazardous waste sites, further exacerbating health risks from living outdoors and lacking access to basic shelter and services.<sup>10</sup> For US cities, an estimated 930,000 people lack access to basic sanitation and 610,000 to basic water access.<sup>11</sup> In San Francisco, a survey of unhoused residents reported that 68% faced barriers in getting their daily water needs, and 61% said they don’t have even 15 liters of water available per day, below the international minimum standard.<sup>12</sup>

As a response to such sanitation issues during the pandemic, a mutual aid organizer in Chapel Hill, NC—Devin Ceartas—helped establish projects to build and spread out hand washing stations for the area’s unhoused population. He explained:

“If washing your hands is the most important thing to do right now and you don’t have a place with running water, that’s going to be an issue’ Ceartas said. ‘Any time we see people on the streets, they are very thankful for [the hand-washing stations]. They all agree it’s a good idea.’”<sup>13</sup>

In addition to these pre-existing struggles around sanitation and water access, climate change then exacerbates and creates added challenges for unhoused people to live through. Heat, for example, is difficult to face during the summer months in general, but it’s made even harder with higher temperatures from climate change. Risk factors for death from heat may correlate with characteristics of being unhoused, such as psychiatric illnesses and social isolation.<sup>14</sup> During heat events, public health messages might not reach vulnerable populations, such as those who are unhoused.<sup>15</sup> When parts of the West Coast were hit with a heat wave in June and July of 2021, some of the highest unhoused rates in the country were impacted as well.<sup>16</sup> And as temperatures across the globe continue to rise, many people may be displaced and become climate refugees, with an estimated 1 billion people living in countries that will be unable to handle the ecological changes from now to 2050.<sup>17</sup>

Alongside increased temperatures are increases in extreme weather events that also pose a threat to unhoused populations. During Hurricane Ida, the stories of several unhoused community members were featured in the news. In Louisiana, one couple who rode out the storm were interviewed:

“‘It was really scary,’ Angelique Herbert notes. ‘I was crying and upset and holding onto him, and we held on to each other, and I kept telling him, “We’re going to die, you know, in this hurricane.” He said, “No, we’re not. Just hang on, baby. It’s going to be over with.” You know, I just hung on and prayed.’”<sup>18</sup>

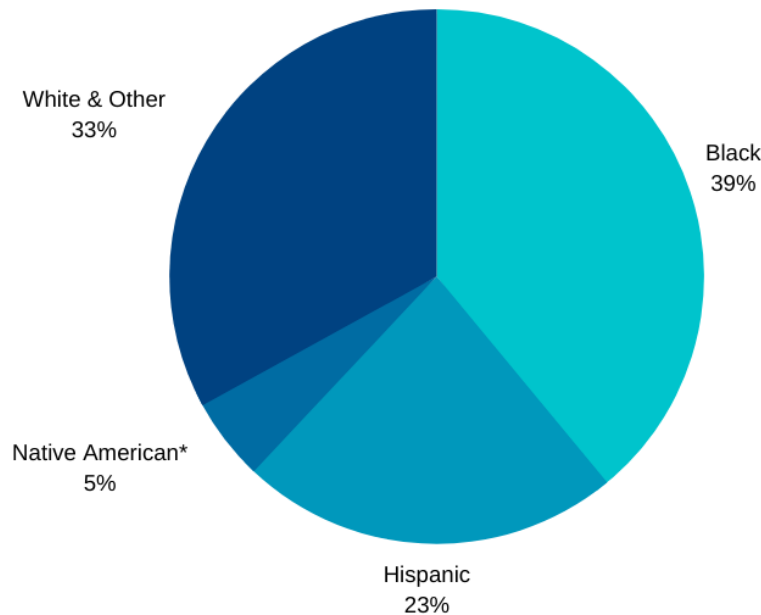
Across the country in New York City, as the subways flooded, unhoused people endeavored to stay dry. One man’s story was recounted:

“On Wednesday night, he made it to a scaffold in Midtown Manhattan and stayed underneath while the storm raged around him. He was up all night to keep his body off the wet pavement, dodging areas where the rain was pouring through the scaffolding above. He says he still got drenched. As he sat on a Midtown sidewalk on Friday afternoon, his bag was still damp, and his clothes had only dried out the day before.”<sup>19</sup>

Accounts like these highlight the harm climate change is already havocking on the unhoused, and its potential to do worse in the future. While clearly an issue of climate justice, could the environmental threats to unhoused populations also be considered an environmental justice (EJ) concern? Demographically, according to the 2020 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) Annual Homeless Assessment Report, people of color are “considerably overrepresented” in the U.S. homeless population. From the report’s press release:

**“Almost 4 of every 10 people** experiencing homelessness in January 2020 **were Black or African American** (39% or 228,796 people). [...] Almost a quarter of all people experiencing homelessness, **23 percent, were Hispanic or Latino** (counting people of all races who identify as Hispanic or Latino). Together, American Indian, Alaska Native, Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian populations account for one percent of the U.S. population, but **five percent** of the homeless population and **seven percent** of the unsheltered population” (emphasis added).<sup>20</sup>

# Demographics of the Unhoused



\*American Indian, Alaska Native, Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian

Figure 11: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, [HUD Releases 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report Part 1: Homelessness Increasing Even Prior to COVID-19 Pandemic](#), (2021).

When you consider the environmental and climate impacts on the unhoused population, alongside the high percentage of people of color living unhoused and in poverty, this is clearly an issue that concerns the environmental justice movement. The interacting factors of environmental impacts and social pressures present a unique challenge to the unhoused. And becoming housed isn't often an easy process. Although someone might have a stable job, eviction records make it extremely hard to find a new landlord willing to rent housing, creating yet another hardship for those trying to move beyond an unhoused living situation.

For those unable to find housing, the environments in which they live should *still* be safe. According to Robert Bullard, the father of environmental justice, the environment

should be redefined to include where people “live, work, play, worship, and go to school.”<sup>21</sup> For the unhoused, living outside or in shelters might be the only feasible options, and the environmental justice movement should help ensure safe living conditions, regardless of one’s housing circumstances.

**By ensuring protections for North Carolinians in the form of utility shutoff and eviction moratoria, we’re better able to mitigate the amount of people who become unhoused in the first place and provide consistent water and sanitation during the unprecedented events of a global pandemic.**

# **Conclusion**

While the pandemic saw a robust federal response with the utilities and eviction moratoria, low-income communities have been and continue to be vulnerable to shut-offs and evictions. When the US Supreme Court shut down the moratorium, many experts feared the avalanche of shut-offs and evictions would follow. Electric utilities in particular have been criticized for rolling out shut-offs while receiving tax bailouts.<sup>1</sup> In the case of evictions, because organizations and groups are more efficiently getting rental assistance from Congress to renters in recent months, there hasn't been the wave as expected.<sup>2</sup>

Some states have stepped in to protect communities and people who have been financially impacted by COVID with state moratoriums. The North Carolina Utilities Commission in July reported that more than 1.3 million residential customers in the state have avoided shut-offs because of the moratorium. As of June 30, state utilities said they were owed \$257 million in past-due bills, and in response, the Utilities Commission directed companies to allow customers at least 12 months to repay overdue bills.<sup>3</sup>

To combat evictions without a statewide eviction moratorium in NC, local and community organizations have stepped up to support their neighbors. In Fayetteville, North Carolina, a grassroots group called Fayetteville PACT has launched a campaign to stop local evictions. The campaign includes door-to-door canvassing several days a week, specifically directed at the Lake of the Pines Apartments, where evictions have been underway. The group aims to educate tenants on their rights and available resources while also gathering data on implementation of emergency rental assistance funding. Other organizations and mutual aid groups like the [Community Empowerment Fund](#) in the Triangle area, and [Davidson Community Fund](#) aim to show meaningful solidarity.

Clean Water for North Carolina has a mission to promote clean, safe water and environments for all communities in North Carolina. By empowering communities through outreach, advocacy, education, and technical assistance, we're better able to promote environmental justice and create positive changes for all. This mission dictates that we consider a wide set of impacts and advocate for the communities who bear a disproportionate burden. These social and environmental hardships include the lack of access to safe and affordable drinking water, utilities and housing. The goal of this report is to demonstrate our commitment to holistically considering the issues facing underserved communities. We hope state policies better protect BIPOC communities facing water disconnections, higher rates of eviction, and unhoused status.

If you or someone you know is in need of assistance, consider the below resources to help in cases of rental and utility payment assistance. If you are able to give, please also consider donating to one of the organizations below, or directly to unhoused community members.

#### Rental & Utilities Assistance

- [HOPE Program | ReBuild NC](#)
- <https://legalaidnc.org/get-help/apply-online>
- [Treasury Emergency Rental Assistance \(ERA\) Dashboard | National Low Income Housing Coalition \(nlihc.org\)](#)
- [Welcome to LawHelpNC.org | A guide to free and low cost legal aid, assistance and services in North Carolina](#)
- Guide: [Utilities | Tenants' Rights \(equalhousing.org\)](#)
- [North Carolina Low-Income Energy Assistance Program \(LIEAP\) | Benefits.gov](#)

#### Community Organizations

- [Charlotte Mutual Aid \(GCAMA\)](#)
- [Davidson Community Fund](#)
- [Community Empowerment Fund](#)
- [Duke Mutual Aid](#)
- [Mutual Aid Resources | Asheville Racial Justice Coalition \(rjcavl.org\)](#)
- [BeLoved Asheville](#)
- [Food Not Bombs Raleigh](#)

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