

State of the Community's Health

Watauga County | 2023



Caring for Our Community

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Sharing the State of the Community’s Health

Copies of this report may be found at www.apphealthcare.com. The report will be presented to community leaders and groups during different events. To learn more, follow us on Facebook at [AppHealthCare](https://www.facebook.com/AppHealthCare), log on to our website, and check your local radio and newspapers. To request more information or to schedule a presentation of this information for your group, call our Watauga County Health Center at 828.264.4995 or email info@apphealth.com.

Overview and Demographics

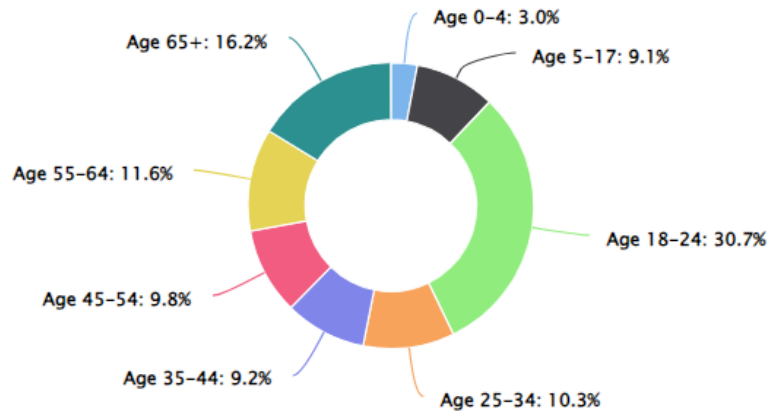
In North Carolina, each local health department conducts a [Community Health Assessment \(CHA\)](#) every four years. AppHealthCare published the CHA in January 2022. During the years between community health assessments, health departments submit a **State of the County's Health (SOTCH) report**. In Watauga County, this report includes a summary of demographics, health indicators, and main causes of death. This report also contains updates on the community's top three health priorities, action plan projects, local initiatives and emerging trends.

Demographic Snapshot

All figures detailed below and on the following page were generated by University of Missouri's Center for Applied Research and Engagement Systems (CARES), and serves as a tool with the most current data sites available. Data reflect 2020 census data, American Community Survey data, and other consistent sources.

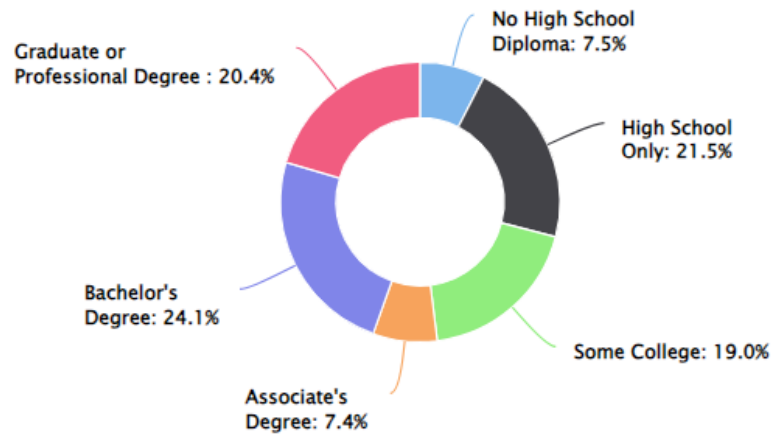
Total Population by Age Groups, Total

Watauga County, NC



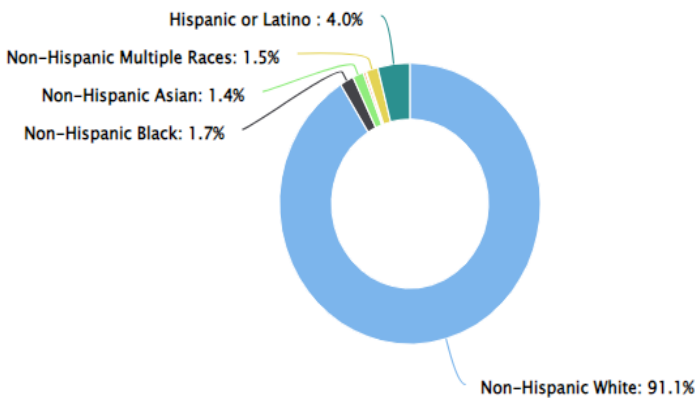
Attainment – Overview

Watauga County, NC



Total Population by Combined Race and Ethnicity

Watauga County, NC

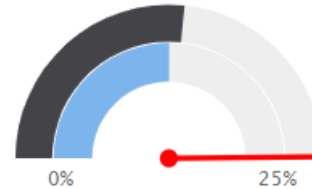
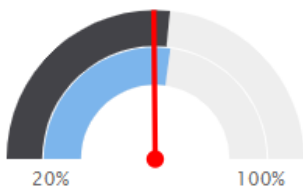


Labor Force Participation Rate

Median Household Income

Population in Poverty, Percent

Population < Age 18 in Poverty, Percent



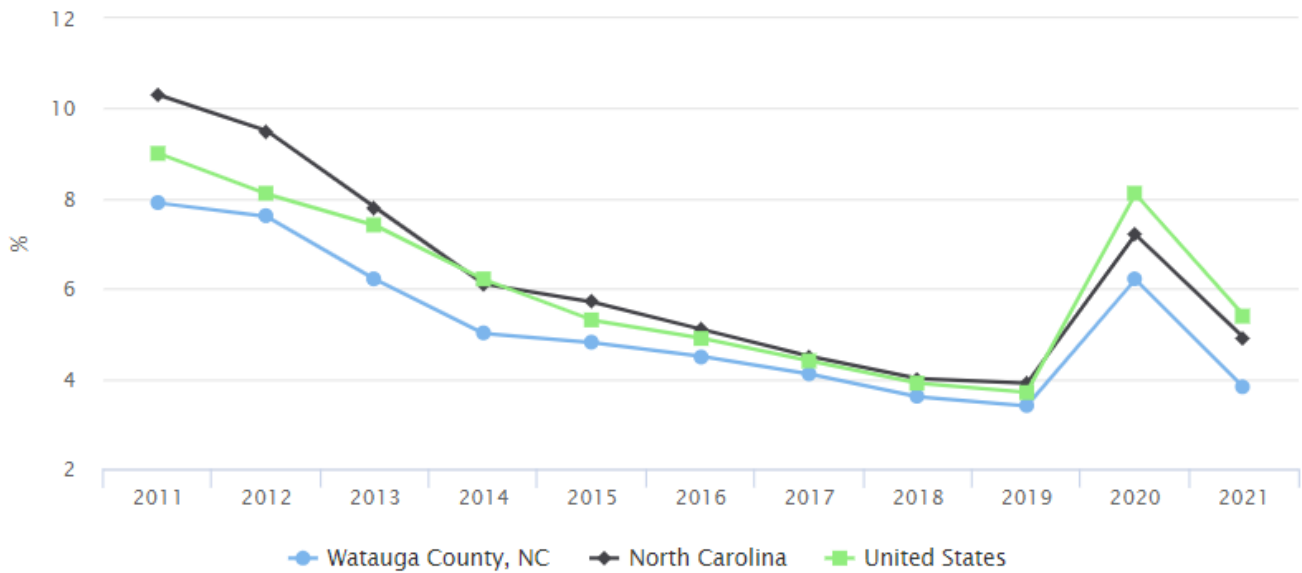
- Watauga County, NC (59.76%)
- North Carolina (62.58%)
- United States (63.47%)

- Watauga County, NC (\$50,034)
- North Carolina (\$66,186)
- United States (\$75,149)

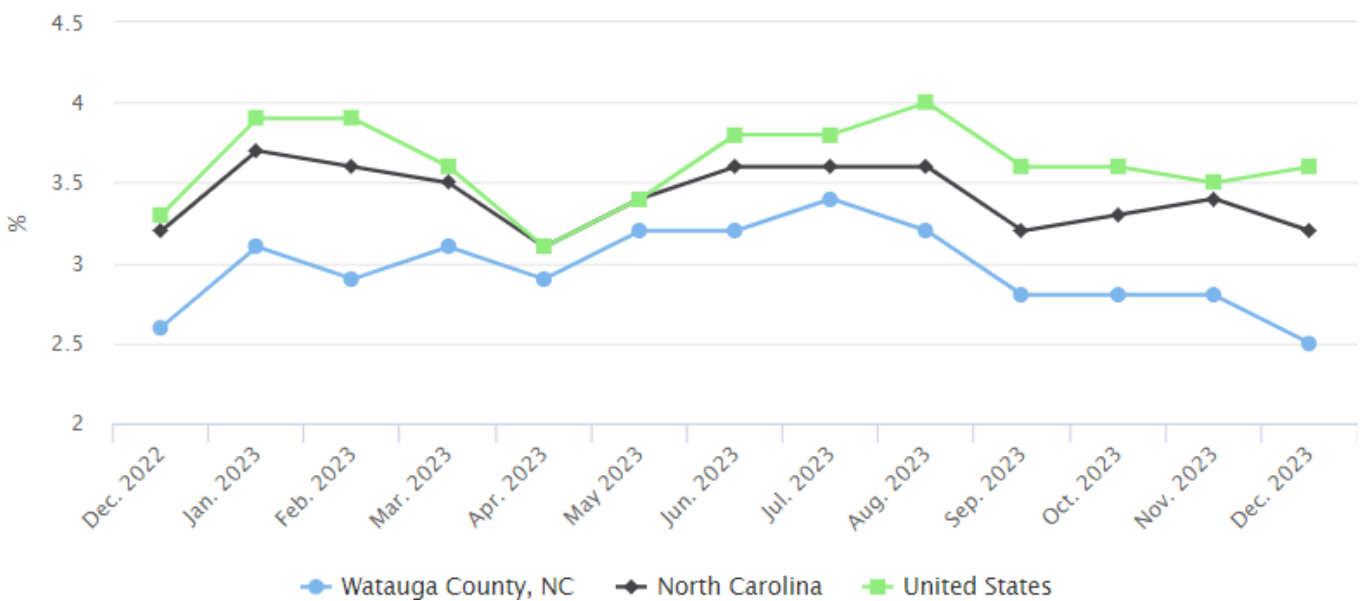
- Watauga County, NC (24.92%)
- North Carolina (13.33%)
- United States (12.53%)

- Watauga County, NC (8.80%)
- North Carolina (18.49%)
- United States (16.66%)

Average Annual Unemployment Rate, 2011–2021



Average Monthly Unemployment Rate, December 2022 – December 2023



Leading Causes of Death

(North Carolina State Center for Health Statistics, 2019)

1. Cancer

2. Diseases of the Heart

3. Alzheimer’s Disease

Leading Risk Factors

Tobacco Use

Lack of Physical Activity

Poor Nutrition

About Public Health: Reaching for Health Equity and Resilience

AppHealthCare is committed to making sure that all people have full and equal access to opportunities that enable them to lead healthy lives.¹ In order to reach this vision of health equity, Watauga County is working to eliminate health disparities—differences in health outcomes among groups of people—that are created by social, economic, and environmental conditions. These conditions lead to behaviors such as smoking, poor nutrition, and lack of exercise, which affect our health.

Public Health Priorities

The Watauga Compassionate Community Initiative selected the health priorities in August 2021. These priorities were chosen based on the 2020 Watauga County Community Health Assessment. The public health priorities identified for Watauga County include mental and behavioral health, family and social support, and housing.

¹Image source: <http://bipartisanpolicy.org/library/what-makes-us-healthy-vs-what-we-spend-on-being-healthy/>
<https://healthequity.sfsu.edu/>

Health Priority: Mental and Behavioral Health

Update to Local Community Objectives



Community Mental Health Project

The [Community Mental Health Project \(CMHP\)](#) is a Watauga-based coalition made up of agency leaders, clinicians, faith leaders, law enforcement and others who want to improve quality of life and prevent loss of life related to mental health issues. With such a diverse group participating in this effort, the target population of this group ranges significantly and many projects are directed towards the general population of Watauga County. In the Spring of 2022, CMHP completed a Results-Based Accountability action planning exercise and in the Fall of that year hosted a roadmapping event to help determine gaps and barriers to accessing mental health services locally. In 2023, workgroups developed around publicity and education of the community, case management and obstacles to care, and resources/education for providers. CMHP also began participating in the Our State, Our Wellbeing Initiative.

Our State, Our Wellbeing Initiative

Carolina Across 100 and UNC Suicide Prevention Institute are partnering with 15 communities from every part of North Carolina to address mental health challenges and prevent suicides through the [Our State, Our Wellbeing Initiative](#). The [selected teams](#) are composed of health providers, government agencies, educational institutions, faith-based groups, and civic and nonprofit organizations from 24 counties across the state. Watauga County secured this opportunity in August of 2023.

Over the next 12 months, Carolina Across 100 and the UNC Suicide Prevention Institute will facilitate a cohort of cross-sector community collaboratives focused on implementing strategies to prevent suicide and suicidal ideation and improve resources available for mental and behavioral health. Participating communities will engage a broad array of organizations, including local government agencies, school systems, institutions of higher education, healthcare providers as well as faith- and community-based organizations. They will work together to identify community needs and target populations, align existing resources and programs, and develop plans to implement evidence-based prevention strategies. The Suicide Prevention Institute will provide participating communities with expertise in selecting the proven interventions that best suit their communities, and then help implement those interventions in an effective and sustainable way.

Gatekeeper Training

AppHealthCare recently realigned grant strategies to further focus resources toward mental health based on conversations with and feedback from community partners. AppHealthCare is partnering with two contractors to work with local organizations to establish policies and/or programs to address suicide prevention. Additionally, these contractors work with organizations and community members to provide gatekeeper training for suicide prevention. The goal of this effort is to equip individuals in a variety of settings to know what to do in situations where someone may be at risk for suicide.

Gatekeeper training offerings in 2023 included Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR), safeTALK and adult Mental Health First Aid.

Health Priority: Family & Social Support

Update to Local Community Objectives

STABLE Workplaces

[STABLE Workplaces](#) is a new initiative in Watauga County with a vision of thriving workplaces sustained by a stable workforce. STABLE Workplaces stands for 'Staff Training and Business Leadership for Evolving Workplaces'. The effort was born out of an event in August 2022 which convened area agencies and partners alongside Watauga County business owners and employers to discuss the possibility of an ongoing collaborative effort toward more resources in the workplace. That event built on years of data collection efforts to better understand challenges around workforce development through the perspectives of local stakeholders, including business leaders and staff. STABLE Workplaces recognizes that the business sector is facing unprecedented recruitment and retention challenges alongside complex challenges among staff (family needs, mental health and substance use concerns, lack of housing, etc.). STABLE is exploring ways to better deliver resources to the business sector and other employers through unified messaging, collaborative training efforts, toolkit development and incentivized participation. The group is currently working on developing a web page, a STABLE 101 presentation to orient workplaces to the offerings of STABLE and its partners, and an incentive program and/or designation that workplaces can gain through participation in trainings & utilization of resources. Program launch is set for early 2024.



Family-Based Intervention: Mother Baby Home Visiting
AppHealthCare offers the [Mother-Baby Home Visiting](#) program (previously Family Connects) to provide support for families of newborns within the comfort of their own homes. The program is coordinated by highly skilled and compassionate nurses and staff who come alongside families and provide support and resources based on the family's unique needs. This support is available to all families of newborns in Ashe, Watauga, and Avery Counties. AppHealthCare hopes to expand to Alleghany County in the near future. For Spanish-speaking families, a Spanish-speaking nurse is available.

AppHealthCare has strong partnerships with hospitals, pediatrician offices, and obstetric and gynecological practices that help make the Mother-Baby Home Visiting program successful and able to serve families in the High Country. Staff have been recruiting at Watauga Medical Center since October of 2021 when staff resumed home visits under Family Connects. As of October 2023, the home visitors were reaching **63%** of all eligible births in its service area and **100%** of all post-visit referrals were being completed.

Families can complete the [online registration form \(forma en Español\)](#) and a member of the Mother-Baby Home Visiting team will reach out to schedule an appointment. All families are welcome to participate. For questions or more information about the Mother-Baby Home Visiting program, visit AppHealthCare's website, email motherbaby@apphealth.com, or call (828) 264-4995 ext. 2229 (BABY).

Family-Based Intervention: Positive Parenting Program

Watauga County practitioners continue to implement positive parenting strategies in hopes of reducing serious negative childhood outcomes. Healthy children equal healthy adults later in life. AppHealthCare collaborates with The Children’s Council as the local Triple P hub agency. In 2023, **71** interventions were delivered to families, and **120** children were served. Based on Client Satisfaction Questionnaires received, improved child behavior and decreased parent stress are being reported. The Triple P Team is working with partners and practitioners to consistently collect this data to ensure an important feedback loop is sustained.



To learn more about The Children’s Council and their services, visit their [website here](#).

Health Priority: Housing

Update to Local Community Objectives

Watauga Housing Council

[Watauga Housing Council \(WHC\)](#) formed in June 2022 as a collective impact initiative resulting from a series of community-wide housing forums. WHC used the Results-Based Accountability (RBA) Framework to identify a population-level desired community result, quantitative indicators, the community’s housing “story,” housing assets/barriers, stakeholders, and a first set of achievable action steps. The WHC is structured into 3 committees to conduct work: Community Engagement (gathers targeted community input about housing needs/assets and supports communities to implement solutions), Housing Solutions (explores, prioritizes, and executes action steps), and Government Relations (focuses on identifying policy changes and funding opportunities that can increase the supply of housing for cost-burdened Watauga residents). The WHC also is supported by a charter Board of Directors, a Communications Workgroup, and a Data Workgroup to facilitate its efforts.



Achievements of the WHC in 2023 include—

- *Community Engagement:* hosted two community dinners/conversations, collected & disseminated data for those communities, developed a Memorandum of Understanding with other community partners, and participated in related community events;
- *Housing Solutions:* reviewed and prioritized action steps, facilitated two employer-led housing conversations, hosted a potential ASU Beaver College of Health Sciences & UNC-Health housing collaboration, supported a resident-owned trailer community initiative; participated in other community-driven housing initiatives;
- *Government Relations:* oversaw development of a backbone structure for the WHC, reviewed population indicators with the Council, developed a purpose statement & focus on local and state policy and funding opportunities;
- *General Achievements:* voted on a mission statement, developed a charter Board of Directors, received approval of Articles of Incorporation, submitted 501c3 paperwork to the IRS, launched a website, and developed a preliminary social media plan.

Emerging Issues Since Last CHA

Opioid Settlement

In July 2021, Attorney General Josh Stein announced a historic \$26 billion agreement that will help bring desperately needed resources to communities harmed by the opioid epidemic. The agreement resolves litigation over the role of four companies in creating and fueling the opioid epidemic. A Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the State and local governments directs how opioid settlement funds are distributed and used in our state. To maximize funds flowing to North Carolina communities on the front lines of the opioid epidemic, the MOA allocates 15 percent of settlement funds to the State and sends the remaining 85 percent to NC's 100 counties and 17 municipalities.

The overdose death rate in Watauga County was 20 out of 100,000 people in 2020. This represents 11 people in Watauga who died from overdose in that year. For every death, there are more non-fatal overdoses. While we are not able to capture all opioid overdoses, emergency department visits for overdoses are one way to measure the number of overdoses happening. The overdose emergency department visit rate in Watauga County was 40.9 out of 100,000 people in 2020, with a population of 54,000. The number increased from 2020 to 2023, where 76.5 out of 100,000 people visited the emergency department for overdoses in Watauga County in 2023.

Another indicator of the impacts of substance use at a community level is the percent of children in foster care due to parental substance use. In 2018, 47.7% of children in foster care in Watauga County were in foster care due to a parent's substance use (n=41). In 2021, the number of children in foster care in Watauga County due to a parent's substance use increased to 54.7% of all children in foster care in Watauga County (n=58). In contrast, in NC as a whole, 42.5% in 2018 and 45.7% in 2021 reflect the percentage of children in foster care across the state due to a parent's substance use. Watauga's rate has remained higher than that of NC.

As a result of the opioid settlement, Watauga County government is set to receive \$3,024,789 over an 18-year period. Before spending settlement funds, every local county or municipality must first select which opioid mitigation strategies they would like to fund.

In November 2022, Watauga County agencies and partners initiated a Results-Based Accountability (RBA) action planning process in which focus areas were determined for the next four years. In March 2023, the Watauga County Commissioners approved the utilization of \$300,000 to fund two-year pilot projects based on Exhibit A strategies in the MOA. In alignment with guidelines set by the North Carolina Attorney General's Office and North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Watauga County considered funding agencies to implement the following Exhibit A strategies:

1. Collaborative strategic planning
2. Evidence-based addiction treatment
3. Recovery support services
4. Recovery housing support
5. Employment-related services
6. Early intervention
7. Naloxone distribution
8. Post-overdose response team
9. Syringe Service Program
10. Criminal justice diversion programs
11. Addiction treatment for incarcerated persons

12. Reentry programs

Priority was given to projects that align with the top 5 focus areas determined through RBA action planning: 1) Harm reduction, 2) Connections to care, 3) Support for people in treatment and recovery, 4) Treatment, and 5) Addressing the needs of criminal-justice involved persons.

For the 2023-2024 fiscal year, Watauga County authorized use of opioid settlement funds for the following projects:

- AppHealthCare for the purchase of a mobile health bus as well as expansion of the Mother-Baby Program (previously Family Connects) to serve families impacted by substance use disorder
- Mediation & Restorative Justice Center/Homestead Recovery Center for Recovery Friendly Housing
- High Country Community Health for peer support services as well as expanded medication-assisted treatment services

Additionally, funds will be used for further collaborative strategic planning to ensure a strong foundation for future investments.

Peer Support Specialists

In 2019, AppHealthCare hired two, part-time, Peer Support Specialists (PSS) then through the Community Linkages to Care grant and the Vital Strategies opioid settlement matching grant, were able to add an additional (full-time) PSS to serve the district. There are one fulltime and one ½ part time PSS that work across the district. The PSSs work as advocates for those struggling with substance use disorder by relating on a personal level through lived experience to promote trust among the people they serve. The PSSs work to serve the community through education, prevention measures, harm reduction, training, connecting individuals to care, working with justice-involved individuals, and helping with environmental and policy change work.

Current PSS initiatives are being captured and evaluated using a combination of pre- and post-test comparisons and follow up with program participants and agencies, as well as maintenance of data logs. The following are measures that are in place and have been tracked since February 2019 (when the NC CPSS program started):

- Total number of individuals served by NC Peer Support Specialists (PSS) across Alleghany, Ashe, and Watauga Counties: **724**
- Total syringes returned: **48,020** (21,390 of those in Watauga)
- Total naloxone kits distributed: **2,772** (905 Watauga)
- Number of unique justice-involved persons served: **158** (76 Watauga)
- Number of justice-involved people and their families or loved ones educated on harm reduction strategies before release, including (but not limited to) training on how to recognize an overdose, how to administer naloxone, and how to prevent an overdose: **150**
- Number of justice-involved individuals reporting overdose reversals: **51**
- Percent of justice-involved individuals who are given access to naloxone upon release: **100% are offered - approximately 40% receive kits**
- Number of Narcan/Naloxone trainings in business and agencies: **13** (including ASU, community organizations, businesses, churches), **440 kits distributed to 150 participants**
- Number of average contacts with each individual served: **9**
- Number of individuals connected to medical, social services, emergency housing, transportation, food, treatment, behavioral health: **478**

- Number of naloxone kits distributed through PORT = **117** (Ashe only)
- Number of overdose reversals reported through PORT = **45** (Ashe Only)