

A NOTE TO READERS: THIS ANALYSIS WAS GENERATED WITH AI

This article was produced using an AI assistant directed to analyze and synthesize publicly available data from four separate research sources: A synthesis of the BLS American Time Use Survey, US Census commute data, NC childcare desert mapping, and child development research. The AI compressed hours of data synthesis into a coherent cross-source narrative. All data was reviewed and verified by the series editor against original sources.

This is AI as a tool for efficiency — not a substitute for the human relationships and professional wisdom that make this work matter.

Time Poverty

The Hidden Cost of Low Wages Isn't Just Money — It's the Hours North Carolina Families Never Get Back

A synthesis of the BLS American Time Use Survey, US Census commute data, NC childcare desert mapping, and child development research

When we talk about what North Carolina's working families can't afford, we almost always talk about money. Rent. Childcare. Groceries. The ALICE Report's survival budget. The gap between wages and costs. Money is real. Money is measurable. Money is the language of policy.

But there is another resource these families are running short on — one that doesn't appear on a ledger and rarely shows up in a policy brief. Time. Not leisure time or vacation time. The daily minutes and hours that parents are available to their children: to read to them, to answer questions, to sit at the table together, to simply be present. For families in poverty and near-poverty in North Carolina, this resource is being quietly consumed by the same forces that consume their wages: long commutes, multiple jobs, non-standard work schedules, and childcare deserts that require significant travel even before the workday begins.

This is time poverty. And it matters profoundly for child development, family stability, and the work of every professional who serves North Carolina's families.

THE TIME BUDGET OF A LOW-WAGE NC WORKING PARENT

Building a Composite Portrait from National Data

The Bureau of Labor Statistics American Time Use Survey (ATUS) provides the most detailed publicly available picture of how Americans actually spend their days. The 2024 data allows us to construct a realistic portrait of what a typical weekday looks like for a low-wage working parent in North Carolina — drawing on national time-use patterns and NC-specific commute and childcare data.

The composite below represents a parent working a full-time hourly position at approximately \$14 per hour — the approximate median wage for a childcare worker, direct care worker, or entry-level service sector employee — in a rural or small urban NC county, with at least one child in the household.

A COMPOSITE WEEKDAY: LOW-WAGE NC WORKING PARENT

TIME	ACTIVITY	STRUCTURAL CONTEXT
5:30 AM	Wakes before household. Gets children ready for school.	
7:00 AM	Drops children at school or childcare (15–40 min drive in rural county).	Childcare desert: nearest center is 28 min away
8:00–4:30 PM	First job: home health aide, childcare worker, or service sector. 8-hr shift, often on feet, no WFH option.	\$13–\$15/hr, hourly — no paid sick leave
4:30–6:00 PM	Commute, pick up children, begin second job (3 evenings/week) or manage household tasks.	Rural NC avg commute: 27 min each way
6:00–8:30 PM	Dinner, homework help, baths. If second job: partner/neighbor covers.	Primary enrichment time with children
8:30–10:00 PM	Household tasks, bill management, meal prep for next day.	
10:00 PM	Sleep. 6.5–7 hrs if no overnight disruptions.	

Composite constructed from: BLS ATUS 2024 data; US Census ACS NC commute data; NC childcare desert mapping from NC DHHS/NC Rural Center; ALICE Threshold budget data

What this portrait reveals is not a parent making poor choices. It is a parent operating at maximum capacity within a system that has made every non-work hour scarce. The time between school pickup and bedtime — the window in which a parent's presence most directly shapes their child's development — is compressed to a few hours, competed for by dinner, homework, housework, and if applicable, a second job.

The ATUS 2024 data confirms that **employed adults living with children under age 18 engage in leisure and sports activities for three hours less per day than adults without children**. That gap widens further for parents in the lowest income quartile, who are

more likely to work multiple jobs, work non-standard hours, and commute longer distances relative to their wages.

THE COMMUTE MULTIPLIER IN RURAL NC

When Distance Devours the Morning and Evening

North Carolina's average commute time is approximately 26 minutes one way — close to the national average. But that statewide average conceals sharp rural disparities. In rural counties, workers frequently commute to employment centers in adjacent counties, and **44 percent of all NC census tracts are classified as childcare deserts** — areas where childcare slots are insufficient to meet demand. When a parent must drive 25 minutes to a childcare center, then 30 minutes to work, then reverse that trip in the evening, nearly two hours of each day are consumed before any household or family time begins.

For parents who work non-standard shifts — evenings, nights, split shifts, or unpredictable on-call schedules common in retail, food service, and healthcare — the problem compounds. ATUS data shows that parents working non-standard schedules have significantly less overlap with their children's waking hours. A child whose parent works 3 PM to 11 PM has limited access to parental presence during homework hours, dinner, and the pre-sleep routine that research identifies as critical for literacy and attachment.

44%

**NC Census Tracts Classified as
Childcare Deserts**

NC DHHS / NC Rural Center 2024

~2 hrs

**Daily Time Lost to Commute +
Childcare Travel in Rural
Counties**

Census ACS + DHHS desert mapping

3 hrs

**Daily Leisure Gap — Employed
Parents vs. Non-Parents**

BLS ATUS 2024

Sources: BLS American Time Use Survey 2024; US Census Bureau ACS Commute Data; NC DHHS/NC Rural Center Childcare Desert Analysis

On an average day in 2024, adults with children under age 6 spent 3.2 hours in leisure and sports activities — 2.4 hours less than adults in households with no children under 18. Among employed parents, the gap is wider still.

WHAT CHILD DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT PARENTAL TIME

Why This Is a Child Health Issue, Not a Lifestyle Issue

The Harvard Center on the Developing Child identifies serve-and-return interactions — the back-and-forth exchanges between a caregiver and a child in which an adult responds to a child's cues — as one of the most powerful builders of healthy brain architecture. These interactions happen in ordinary moments: reading together, talking about the day, playing. They happen in time. And they happen most effectively when a parent is present, rested, and emotionally available — not exhausted from a double shift or anxious about whether the electric bill will clear.

Research published in *Maternal and Child Health Journal* using ATUS data found that **low-income parents with school-age children showed a measurable decrease in enriching time with children** compared to higher-income parents over the same period — while higher-income parents actually increased enriching time. The income-based gap in parent-child enrichment time — the kind of time that builds vocabulary, emotional regulation, and school readiness — **grew during and after the pandemic and has not fully closed.**

For practitioners in early childhood education, home visiting, pediatrics, and school counseling, this data explains patterns they observe every day. The child who comes to kindergarten without the vocabulary to keep up with classroom instruction is not a child whose parent didn't care. They may be the child of a parent who worked the 4 PM to midnight shift, who couldn't do bedtime reading because they weren't home, who couldn't do weekend enrichment activities because they were working the second job that makes rent possible.

Time poverty is not a parenting failure. It is the downstream consequence of structural economic conditions that consume the hours families need to be together.

"Employed adults living in households with no children under age 18 engaged in leisure and sports activities for 4.5 hours per day — an hour and a half more than employed parents of children under 18." — BLS American Time Use Survey 2024

THE SECOND JOB ECONOMY

When One Job Isn't Enough

The ALICE Report documents that 15 of North Carolina's top 20 occupations by employment volume pay below \$20 per hour. For workers in these jobs — retail, food service, healthcare support, building maintenance, childcare — one full-time position frequently does not generate enough income to cover the ALICE Threshold, which averages \$78,576 for a family in North Carolina. The result is the second job.

Nationally, approximately **5 percent of employed workers hold multiple jobs** — but this rate is higher among low-wage workers and disproportionately concentrated in service and care industries. In North Carolina, BLS data suggests that the rate of multiple job holding is slightly below the national average but concentrated in exactly the sectors — food service, retail, healthcare support — that employ the largest share of ALICE workers. A worker who needs a second job to meet a survival budget is a worker who has traded family time for financial necessity. That is not a free choice. It is a structural outcome.

RURAL VS. URBAN: DIFFERENT TIME POVERTY PROFILES

Geography Shapes the Time Budget Too

Urban and rural NC families face different versions of time poverty. In urban areas — Charlotte, Raleigh, Durham — low-wage workers often live far from employment centers due to housing cost displacement. A worker who can only afford rent in the outer suburbs of Mecklenburg County may commute 45 to 60 minutes each way to a downtown service job. The time cost of that commute is a direct product of the housing affordability crisis.

In rural counties, the problem is different but similarly consuming. Employment is closer but wages are lower, childcare options are fewer and more distant, and the absence of public transportation means every trip — to work, to the doctor, to childcare pickup — is a car trip with its own time and cost. Rural parents in childcare deserts may leave home before 7 AM and return after 6 PM with no alternative structure to absorb the time between school dismissal and their return.

In both contexts, the families who arrive at the offices of school counselors, social workers, pediatricians, and home visitors carrying stress, disconnection, and children with unmet developmental needs are often families that have simply run out of time. Understanding that dynamic changes how practitioners respond.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

1

Reframe parent absence as a structural symptom, not an individual deficit.

When a parent misses appointments, doesn't attend school events, isn't available for phone calls during the day, or seems emotionally depleted at intake — the ATUS and commute data provides a structural frame for that reality. These are frequently not disengaged parents. They are time-poor parents managing an impossibly compressed schedule. Building this understanding into your assessment and engagement approach changes what you offer and how you offer it.

2**Ask about time, not just money, in family assessments.**

Standard intake forms ask about income, housing, food security. Few ask about work schedule, commute time, childcare proximity, or availability of a second adult to cover child pickups. These are time-budget questions — and their answers shape what a family can realistically access, engage with, or benefit from. If a program requires a parent to be present at 4:30 PM on a Tuesday, you need to know whether their work schedule allows that before you offer it.

3**Design services for the time reality of the families you serve.**

Evening and weekend hours, virtual options, home-based services, and co-location in childcare settings all reduce the time cost of accessing support. These are not convenience features. For time-poor families, a service that requires an additional 45-minute trip at the end of an already-compressed day is effectively inaccessible. Service design that ignores time poverty systematically excludes the families who need help most.

4**Connect time poverty to policy advocacy on paid leave, scheduling, and childcare.**

Predictive scheduling laws, paid family and medical leave, and childcare access — all of which North Carolina lacks relative to peer states — are time policy as much as labor or family policy. A parent with predictable scheduling can plan childcare. A parent with paid leave can take a sick child to the doctor without losing wages. A parent with accessible childcare doesn't spend two hours a day on childcare transportation. These are the levers that give families time back.

DATA SOURCES

1. Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time Use Survey 2024 — time use patterns by employment status, income, and household composition. bls.gov/tus
2. US Census Bureau, American Community Survey — NC Commute Time Data — county-level commute times by income and geography. census.gov
3. NC DHHS Division of Child Development & Early Education / NC Rural Center — Childcare Desert Mapping — percentage of NC census tracts with insufficient childcare capacity. ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov / ncruralcenter.org
4. Morrissey & Engel, "Parent-Child Time During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence from the American Time Use Survey," *Maternal and Child Health Journal* (2024) — income-stratified analysis of enrichment time gaps. doi:10.1007/s10995-023-03777-3
5. Harvard Center on the Developing Child — Serve-and-Return Interaction Research — scientific basis for the relationship between parental availability and child brain development. developingchild.harvard.edu
6. United For ALICE / United Way of NC, ALICE in North Carolina (2025) — labor force data on occupational wages and percentage below the ALICE Threshold. unitedforalice.org

AI-Assisted Research: Source, Method & Citation

A transparency document for readers, partners, and policymakers

THE AI SOURCE

Claude by Anthropic

All research synthesis, article drafting, session guide development, and document production in this series was generated with Claude — a large language model developed by Anthropic, PBC — accessed via claude.ai. Claude synthesized publicly available data sources into practitioner-ready documents at the direction of the human researcher.

AI System: Claude (Sonnet series)

Developer: Anthropic, PBC

Access: claude.ai

Period: 2024–2026

Claude did not independently access the internet or retrieve data. All data sources were identified and provided by the human researcher. Claude's role was synthesis and drafting. Verification was the researcher's responsibility at every stage

HOW THE AI WAS DIRECTED — THE PROMPT METHOD

Every article and document began with a structured research directive — a prompt — written by the human researcher. Prompts were not simple questions. They specified which data sources to synthesize, the practitioner audience to write for, the analytical frame to apply, the structural elements required, and the professional voice to use. Representative examples:

PROMPT TYPE	REPRESENTATIVE EXAMPLE
Data synthesis	"Synthesize three major data sources on NC family economic conditions into a single article for cross-sector practitioners. Identify key statistics from each, explain how these data streams reinforce each other structurally, and conclude with five concrete practice implications. Note that the article was AI-generated."
Data update	"New 2024 ACS data has been released. Include these new findings: Gini coefficient rose to 0.478, Black NC household income fell 3%, uninsured rate fell to 8.6%, 515,000 now at risk from federal cuts."

PRIMARY DATA SOURCES

Claude synthesized these sources. The human researcher identified and provided all of them. Cite individual statistics from original sources, not from this series.

2024 ACS (U.S. Census Bureau, Sept. 2025)

Poverty, income, inequality, housing cost burden, health coverage
data.census.gov

United For ALICE / United Way NC (2025)

ALICE Threshold, household survival budgets, rural-urban wage gap
unitedforalice.org

NC Budget & Tax Center

County poverty snapshots, racial income gaps, policy impact
ncbudget.org

Education Law Center — Making the Grade 2025

NC 51st-place school funding ranking, per-pupil gap, teacher pipeline
edlawcenter.org

NC Housing Coalition — 2025 County Profiles

Eviction filings, cost-burden rates, housing wage data

LIMITATIONS

No independent data access Claude did not retrieve data. All statistics were provided by the researcher in prompts.

Synthesis, not verification Claude identified patterns across sources. Verification against original sources was the researcher's responsibility.

Framing reflects prompt framing The structural, equity-centered, practitioner-focused frame is a deliberate human choice embedded in the prompts — not an AI default.

Not peer-reviewed These are practitioner resources, not academic publications. Individual statistics should always be verified against primary sources before use in formal policy contexts.

Hallucination risk AI can generate plausible but inaccurate content. The human oversight and fact-verification process was

nchousing.org

RWJF County Health Rankings 2025

All 100 NC counties — health outcomes and social factors
countyhealthrankings.org

NC Health Professions Data System / Sheps Center

Provider shortages by county, rural workforce data
nchealthworkforce.unc.edu

NC Commerce / LEAD Division (2025)

Hurricane Helene labor market and economic recovery data
commerce.nc.gov

Blue Zones LLC / Buettner (PMC 2018)

Power 9 framework; NC community applications
bluezones.com

Child Care Services Association / Early Years NC

Childcare worker wages, ECE household vulnerability
childcareservices.org

specifically designed to catch and correct errors before publication.

HOW TO CITE

For individual statistics:

Always cite the original data source — not the AI-generated article. The articles in this series are synthesis documents. The authoritative citation for any statistic is the primary source from which it was drawn.