MYTH VS. FACT · ASHEVILLE, NC

Five *Myths* About Housing and Hunger

The things we hear most about homelessness and hunger in Buncombe County, each one set against the local numbers.

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Sources & notes (11 linked documents) PDF version

People argue about who ends up on the street, or who runs out of food before the end of the month. Most of those arguments run on assumptions about character. The numbers tell a different story, and it's mostly about arithmetic: what people earn, compared with what they are charged for a roof and a meal.

MYTH 01

"People are homeless here because of addiction and mental illness."

THE FACT

Not mainly. Addiction and mental illness are real, and they make it harder to stay housed. But they are not what determines the size of the problem. The 2026 Point-in-Time count found 824 people homeless in Buncombe County on a single night. Of them, 91 adults said they had a mental-health condition and 62 said they had a substance use disorder. The much bigger reason is a housing market with far too few homes the lowest-income renters can afford.

824
People homeless on one night, 2026 count

91
Adults with a mental-health condition (self-reported)

62
Adults with a substance use disorder (self-reported)

MYTH 02

"If you hold down a job, you can afford a place."

THE FACT

Not at the wages most jobs pay here. It takes $35.29 an hour to afford a modest two-bedroom in the Asheville metro area, and $32.19 for a one-bedroom. The median home price was about $500,000 in May 2026. A single adult's living wage in Buncombe is $24.10 an hour.

The $35.29 is the National Low Income Housing Coalition's 2026 figure. It assumes one full-time worker paying the federal fair-market rent, with rent and utilities taking no more than 30 percent of income before taxes. The coalition estimates that renters in the metro earn an average of $18.25 an hour. At that pay, it takes 77 hours of work a week to afford the two-bedroom. At North Carolina's $7.25 minimum wage, it takes 195 hours a week, nearly five full-time jobs.

The coalition's 2026 report says there's nowhere in the U.S. where someone working full time at the local minimum wage can afford a modest two-bedroom rental. Brian Goldstone makes the same point in *There Is No Place for Us: Working and Homeless in America*, the book that won the 2026 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction. It follows five families in Atlanta, all part of the low-wage workforce, as they become what he calls the working homeless.

$35.29
Hourly wage to afford a 2-bedroom (metro)

$24.10
Single-adult living wage, Buncombe

~$500K
Median home price, May 2026

MYTH 03

"They come here from somewhere else for the services."

THE FACT

Most of the people living outside here didn't. Of the 824 people the 2026 Point-in-Time count found, 334 were unsheltered. They were asked where they last had housing. About 60 percent said Buncombe County. Another 31 percent said somewhere else, and the rest didn't answer. Some do arrive from elsewhere, but no one was asked why. The shortage of affordable homes is the cause of homelessness, and that shortage was made here. Nationally, there are just 35 affordable, available homes for every 100 of the lowest-income renter households. No state has enough of those homes, so there's no easy place to land.

35
Affordable, available homes per 100 lowest-income renter households (national)

MYTH 04

"Food banks have hunger covered."

THE FACT

Not on their own, though they are essential. As of October 2026, about 25,000 Buncombe residents rely on SNAP, the federal grocery benefit. That number is down from about 29,000 in April 2025. When that benefit was delayed in November 2025, during the federal shutdown, local charity could soften the blow but came nowhere close to replacing it. And SNAP itself doesn't reach everyone who struggles to afford food. Nearly half of food-insecure Americans may have had incomes too high to qualify in 2024. That was an estimated 25 million people.

~25,000
Buncombe residents on SNAP (October 2026)

25M
Food-insecure Americans whose income may be too high for SNAP (2024)

MYTH 05

"Hunger is a downtown problem."

THE FACT

Feeding America's county estimates say otherwise. About 86 percent of the U.S. counties with the highest food-insecurity rates are rural, though most food-insecure people live in metro areas. In Buncombe, 16.8 percent of residents, roughly 46,200 people, were food insecure in 2024. That was the highest reading on record here. The federal survey these county estimates are built on was canceled in September 2025. Feeding America plans to keep producing them by adding other data sources, so later estimates would be built a different way. In most of the counties that border Buncombe, a larger share of residents get SNAP than in Buncombe itself. For more on that pattern, see Rural Hunger Is the Real Story.

86%
Rural share of the U.S. counties with the highest food-insecurity rates

46,200
Food-insecure Buncombe residents (16.8%, 2024)

THE TAKEAWAY

Five claims, one test, and not one of them *holds up*.

When you read the local numbers instead of the stereotypes, the same cause keeps showing up in two places: a housing market and a grocery bill that outrun local wages. That gap is a policy choice. Charity takes the edge off. It does not change the count. What changes the count is the homes we build and the benefits we fund.

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- Why Food Banks Can't Fix Hunger
- The Shortage Was Made Here

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