

LOST OPPORTUNITIES

PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY

THE PERSISTENCE OF DISADVANTAGED NEIGHBORHOODS IN PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY

Prince William County is known for its good health, but health statistics at the county level can hide stark disparities. Life expectancy varies by 11 years across the county and premature death rates vary nearly 5-fold. These disparities exist largely because of differences in social and environmental conditions that affect health, from education and income to housing and transportation.

A 2017 report commissioned by the Northern Virginia Health Foundation identified “islands of disadvantage” across Northern Virginia. That report was based on census data collected over five years in 2009–2013. The foundation’s new report examines data from 2017–2021 to identify areas that have experienced progress and setbacks over the decade. The report divides the region’s tracts into deciles. Deciles were used to group data into ten equally sized groups of census tracts. For each indicator, the bottom decile represented the 10% of tracts in Northern Virginia with the worst outcomes.

The new report found that areas of concentrated disadvantage persist in Prince William County. **Figure 1** highlights tracts in Prince William County that ranked among the bottom 10% on multiple indicators in 2017–2021. Tracts with the darkest shading were in the bottom decile on seven or more indicators. For example, census tract 9005.04 in

the Marumsco area of Woodbridge ranked among the bottom 10% on eight indicators. Only 10% of adults had a Bachelor’s degree, 15% of households spoke limited English, 18% of the population relied on public assistance, and 28% were uninsured. In that Marumsco tract, 79% of the population was Hispanic and 9% was Black.*

During this period, Prince William County became more racially and ethnically diverse. The maps in Figure 2 show which areas of the county experienced growth in each racial and ethnic group. Socioeconomic progress occurred in areas of Prince William County that were identified as “islands of disadvantage” in the Northern Virginia Health Foundation’s 2017 report. For example, census tract 9004.10 near Potomac Hills in Dale City, where 58% of the population was Black and 13% was Hispanic, saw its poverty rate fall from 17% to 5%. Median household income increased from \$60,118 to \$85,357. Some of this progress may reflect efforts in Prince William County to increase investments in marginalized communities and adopt equity-oriented policies.

However, many tracts that were already struggling in 2009–2013 experienced further economic setbacks. For example, in census tract 9019 in the Yorkshire area of Manassas, the poverty rate rose from 8%

to 14% and the share of adults with a high school diploma decreased from 85% to 77% (Table 1). These conditions disproportionately affected people of color. While the share of the population that was White decreased from 46% to 29%, the share that was Hispanic increased from 27% to 45%.

Setbacks of this sort occurred throughout Prince William County. Low-income tracts in Manassas, Dale City/Woodbridge, Dumfries, and Dawson’s Landing experienced increases in poverty between 2009–2013 and 2017–2021.

The period examined in the new report included the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the region experienced devastating health and socioeconomic setbacks. The pandemic also brought federal, state, and local “COVID relief” programs. Low-income households experienced an increase in benefits through SNAP, Medicaid, and other federal supports that were discontinued in 2023. It is unclear whether the footprint of disadvantage in Prince William County will shift as these benefits expire.

Gentrification

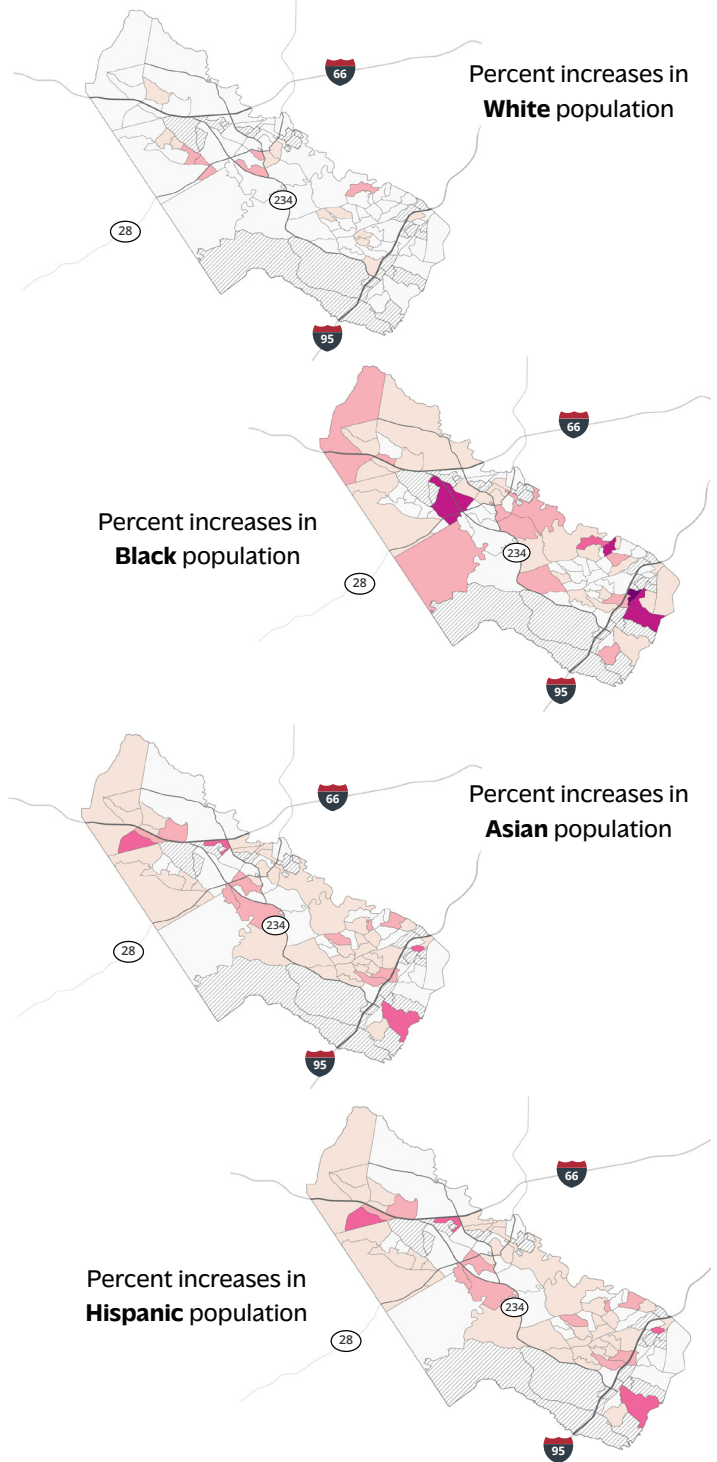
Progress in some areas likely reflected gentrification. For example, in tract 2012.04 in the Potomac Yard/Del Ray area, median household income climbed from \$82,431 to \$116,172. However, the share of the population that was White grew from 38% to 56%, while the Hispanic and Black populations declined.

The persistence of concentrated areas of disadvantage in Prince William County underscores the need for targeted investment in marginalized neighborhoods. Key priorities to expand opportunity and health across Northern Virginia include investments in education, food security, employment opportunity and benefits, affordable housing, access to health care, environmental justice, and attention to systemic racism and inclusive policies. Prince William County government and local organizations have launched a variety of initiatives in pursuit of these goals, but more must be done. All residents of Prince William County deserve the opportunity to pursue a better life and good health.

Table 1. Socioeconomic conditions in census tract 9019 (Yorkshire)		
	2009-2013	2017-2021
High school diploma	85%	77% ↓
Bachelor’s degree	25%	24% ↓
Median household income	\$73,346	\$76,890 ↑
Poverty (all ages)	8%	14% ↑
Child poverty	11%	24% ↑
Overcrowded housing	3%	6% ↑

Figure 2. Census tracts that experienced an increase in racial-ethnic composition between 2009–2013 and 2017–2021

Percent increase in share of population



* All references to Asian, Black, and White populations refer to those who do not identify as Hispanic.