



## **New Report: In Northern Virginia, Neighborhoods of Color Largely Left Out of Region's Social and Economic Progress**

*Many Struggling Communities Suffer Further Setbacks; Gentrification and Displacement May Be Driving Economic Growth in Some Areas*

ARLINGTON, VA (November 16, 2023) – Between 2009 and 2021, Northern Virginia experienced considerable social and economic progress, including increases in median household income and rates of educational attainment, accompanied by decreases in poverty and uninsurance rates. But not all communities shared in these gains. Many communities that were already struggling suffered further setbacks, according to a new report by the Center on Society and Health at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) commissioned by the Northern Virginia Health Foundation (NVHF).

The report, *Lost Opportunities: The Persistence of Disadvantaged Neighborhoods in Northern Virginia*, offers a unique view of social and economic changes at the census tract level by comparing two five-year periods, 2009-2013 and 2017-2021. It pays particular attention to “islands of disadvantage,” neighborhoods where residents—who are predominantly non-White—face multiple, serious challenges and that are interspersed among communities of great affluence.

These “islands of disadvantage” were first identified in a 2017 report commissioned by NVHF. In many of these communities, living conditions have worsened or stayed the same, even as wealthier communities nearby enjoyed significant progress. For example, in one economically marginalized section of Bailey’s Crossroads in Fairfax County, the poverty rate climbed from 17% in 2009-2013 to 30% in 2017-2021. Child poverty nearly doubled, from 32% to 63%. The neighborhood also experienced setbacks in educational attainment and English literacy, employment and overcrowded housing. These conditions disproportionately affected people of color.

The report also noted some geographic shifting in the “islands of disadvantage,” often reflecting changes in demographic composition and socioeconomic conditions. For example, in one census tract in the Bull Run area of Prince William County, the Hispanic population increased by 53% while the White population fell by 38%. The proportion of the population with limited English tripled, median household income increased by only \$2,140, the poverty rate increased by 60%, and overcrowded housing increased by 187%.

### **Widespread but Uneven Progress**

Poverty rates fell in 52% of the region’s census tracts. Median household income increased in 92% of census tracts, the proportion of adults with a high school diploma increased in 59%, and the share with a bachelor’s degree increased in 73%. The uninsured rate decreased in 78% of tracts.

The region’s progress reached some “islands of disadvantage.” One predominantly non-White neighborhood along Columbia Pike in Arlington County experienced a 34% reduction in poverty. Median household income increased from \$42,571 to \$64,872, and the proportion of the population that was uninsured or relied on public assistance decreased by 43% and 33%, respectively.

In some areas, economic progress was accompanied by increases in the size of the White population, suggesting gentrification and displacement of people of color. For example, in the Courthouse area of Arlington County, median household income increased from \$87,233 to \$132,603 and the poverty rate plummeted from 19% to 5%. However, the share of the population that was White grew from 48% to 68%, while that of the Black and Asian populations declined by 42% and 72%, respectively. Similar displacement appears to have occurred in Old Town Alexandria, areas of Annandale, and in the historically Black neighborhood of Green Valley/Nauck.

“The data indicate that progress in some areas may have come at the price of displacement,” said Dr. Steven Woolf, the report’s lead author and director emeritus of VCU’s Center on Society and Health. “Some neighborhoods that historically were home to people of color became upscale, gentrified, expensive—and increasingly White.”

The report also notes that the COVID-19 pandemic brought a raft of federal, state and local relief programs that offered economic assistance, eviction moratoriums and other support to many families in need. Low-income households received increased benefits through SNAP, Medicaid, the Child Tax Credit and other federal supports, but most of those benefit increases were discontinued in 2023. It is unclear whether COVID relief accounts for some of the progress observed during 2017-2021—and whether that progress was only temporary.

### **Pursuing Policy Solutions**

NVHF President Patricia N. Mathews said that the persistence of concentrated areas of disadvantage across a region known for its affluence and resources underscores the need for targeted investment in marginalized neighborhoods.

“That’s where the data in our report could be most helpful to policymakers, advocates, and funders,” Ms. Mathews said. “These data show, at the census tract level, which neighborhoods are being left behind and what kinds of investments they need—whether in health care, education, job opportunities, or affordable housing or transportation.”

She added that although several local governments and organizations have launched initiatives for improving health and financial wellbeing in their communities, much more needs to be done. “Everyone deserves to share in our region’s social and economic progress—not just those who are already doing well,” she said. “For that to happen, we must dismantle the structural barriers that stand in the way.”

To read the full report, visit: <https://novahealthfdn.org/resources/lost-opportunities-persistence-of-disadvantaged-neighborhoods-in-northern-virginia>

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**About the Northern Virginia Health Foundation:** The Northern Virginia Health Foundation is dedicated to improving the health and health care of residents of Northern Virginia, with a particular emphasis on low-income, uninsured, and underinsured persons.

**About the Virginia Community University (VCU) Center on Society and Health:** The VCU Center on Society and Health is an academic research center that studies the health implications of social factors such as education, income, neighborhood and community environmental conditions, and public policy.

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