THE INSTITUTE FOR SOUTHERN STUDIES

WORKING IN **DURHAM**

How Growth and Inequality Are Reshaping the County's Workforce

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How Growth and Inequality Are Reshaping the County's Workforce

Durham has experienced a decade of strong economic growth. New development can be seen across the county. Median household income has climbed from roughly $52,000 in 2014 to $79,500 in 2023. At first glance, these trends look like progress.

But Durham's gains have not been shared evenly. In 2010, taxpayers earning $200,000 or more made up 2.7% of Durham County filers and received about one-fifth of all reported income. By 2022, they made up 8.5% of filers and received 40% of reported income.

Durham's economy is growing, but more of its income is flowing to the top, widening the divide between wealthy residents and workers who sustain the local economy.

A DECADE OF WORK, LITTLE TO SHOW

As Durham's income disparities grow, the wage gap between white and Black workers is widening. U.S. Census Bureau wage data for Durham County workers in 2014, 2019, and 2023 reveals a troubling pattern. The wage gap between Black and white workers did not simply persist from 2014 to 2023; it grew wider.

In 2014, Black workers in Durham earned 72.5 cents for every dollar earned by white workers. By 2023, that figure had fallen to 62.2 cents. These figures compare different groups in each year rather than tracking the same people over time; that means the change reflects both trends in pay, and shifts in who is working in Durham. After adjusting for inflation, the median hourly wage for Black workers was essentially unchanged, falling slightly from $20.97 in 2014 to $20.59 in 2023.

A decade of economic growth produced no real gain for the typical Black worker, even as Durham's median household income rose 22% after inflation. By comparison, white workers' wages grew 14.4% and Latino workers' wages grew 22.8%.

The kinds of jobs workers hold also shape what they earn. White workers are concentrated in higher-paying management positions, while Black workers are overrepresented in lower-paid support jobs.

This pattern is visible at major institutions such as Duke University, the county's largest employer, where highly paid professional positions exist alongside low-wage service jobs. That divide is one of the main reasons the wage gap persists.

DURHAM COUNTY'S GROWING WAGE GAP

Change in Real Median Hourly Wages, 2014-2023

	2014	2019	2023
Black Median Hourly Wage	$20.97	$20.20	$20.59
Latino Median Hourly Wage	$14.87	$16.42	$18.26
White Median Hourly Wage	$28.92	$29.93	$33.10

Source: ACS PUMS microdata, Durham County, 2014/2019/2023 (5-year estimates). Median hourly wages calculated from reported annual wage/salary income and usual hours worked; all figures adjusted to 2023 dollars using BLS CPI-U

WHO'S WORKING WHERE, AND FOR WHOM

The kinds of jobs people hold in Durham reflect the influence of the county's anchor institutions. White workers are concentrated in management, healthcare, and education, including many of the higher-paying positions in sectors led locally by Duke University and Duke University Health System.

Black and Latino workers are more likely to work in other parts of the economy. Black workers are spread across a wider range of occupations, with office and administrative support representing the largest single category in each year. Latino workers are heavily concentrated in construction, which employed more than one-quarter of Latino workers during each period studied.

The jobs held by Black workers are more likely to be low-wage work. Economists define a low-wage job as one paying less than two-thirds of the local median wage. By that measure, the economic security of Black workers declined over the decade. The share of Black workers in low-wage jobs rose from 31.7% in 2014 to 39.3% in 2023.

Healthcare and social assistance jobs have been a major driver of this trend. About one in five low-wage Black workers were employed in these sectors in both 2014 and 2023. The share of low-wage Black workers employed by hospitals rose from 5.3% to 8.6%. Among low-wage white workers, the share appears to have fallen from 7.1% to 4.6%, although that estimate is based on a smaller sample and is less certain.

Durham's most influential institutions therefore play two roles at once: They are major engines of economic growth, but they are also major employers of Black workers in low-wage jobs.

JOBS WITHOUT A SAFETY NET

Access to benefits is another key issue for Durham workers. Only about half of employed Latino workers in Durham have health insurance. Although that share rose from 41% in 2014 to 50% in 2023, it remains strikingly low. The share of Black workers with coverage increased from 83% to 87.6%, but Black workers still trail white workers by nearly eight percentage points.

> " I'm a CNA and work in an assisted living facility. Working and living in Durham is a paycheck-to-paycheck struggle. I love my city but working here and living here is not adding up. There's constant building up in this city, but there's nothing being built that I can afford. I can tell the people investing in Durham are not invested in our community. The people that work the hardest are treated like the bottom of the totem pole, but without us, none of this is possible.

IEISHA FRANCIS

Participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, offers another sign that Durham's economic growth has not reached many Black workers. The share of Black workers living in households that received SNAP benefits remained between 15% and 17% throughout the period studied. Among white workers, the share remained between 2% and 3%.

In other words, even as Durham's economy grew, the share of Black working households relying on food assistance remained essentially unchanged. Federal policy could now weaken that safety net further. A federal law signed in July 2025 cuts more than $180 billion from SNAP and nearly $1 trillion from Medicaid nationally over 10 years. It also creates stricter work requirements and more frequent eligibility checks, which research shows often cause eligible people to lose benefits without increasing employment.

A COUNTY GETTING MORE EXPENSIVE

Durham is also getting harder to afford. Between 2014 and 2023, the median gross rent in Durham County climbed from $877 to $1,415. When adjusted for inflation, this represents a real-dollar increase of 25%.

Wage growth across the county did not keep pace with rising rents. Even for white workers, whose inflation-adjusted wages grew 14%, rents rose faster than earnings. Latino workers' wages came closer to keeping pace, but only barely.

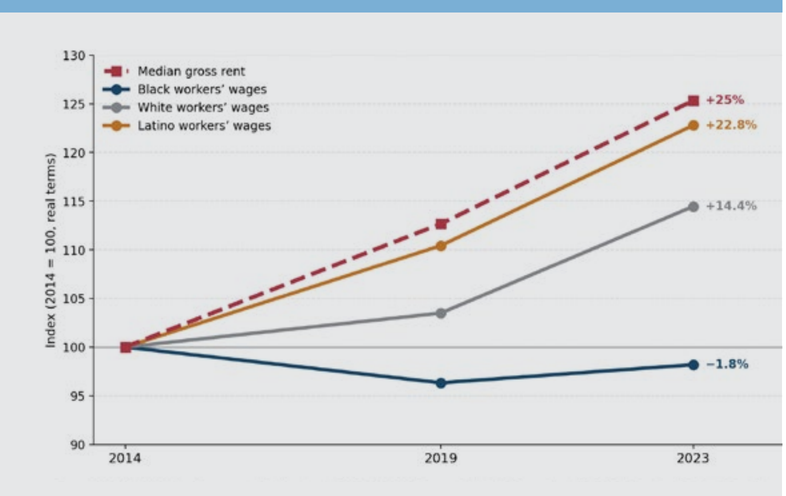
For Black workers, the contrast has been stark: Inflation-adjusted wages were essentially unchanged while inflation-adjusted rents rose 25%. Black workers are living in a county that is becoming wealthier and more expensive while their own financial security is at a standstill.

CONCLUSION

This divide will not close on its own. Durham's economic boom has been fueled by regional growth in technology and biotechnology, as well as the enormous influence of anchor institutions such as Duke University and Duke University Health System. Yet many jobs at these institutions still lack the good wages, health benefits, and security workers need.

WAGE TRENDS VS. GROWING RENTAL COSTS

Real Rent Has Outpaced Real Wages for Every Group – Most of All for Black Workers



Source: ACS PUMS wage data and ACS Table B25064 (median gross rent), Durham County, 2014/2019/2023 (5-year estimates). All figures adjusted to 2023 dollars using BLS CPI-U; indexed to each series' own 2014 value.

> As a housekeeper at Duke, I think we deserve more than we're getting. Even with a $20 minimum wage now, it's still not enough. We need so much more to be able to keep living in Durham.

NAH'SHON BLOUNT

Closing the gap will require Durham's largest employers to change how they value workers. Duke University and the private companies driving Durham's growth must treat job quality for Black and Latino workers as a central responsibility.

METHODOLOGY

Median household income figures cited in the introduction are drawn from ACS Table S1903 (median income by race and Hispanic origin of householder, Durham County) for the 2010-2014 and 2019-2023 five-year reference periods, reported in nominal dollars. Wage data comes from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample (ACS PUMS), analyzed across three five-year reference periods ending in 2014, 2019, and 2023. All wage figures are adjusted to 2023 dollars using the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index. Income concentration figures are drawn from the IRS Statistics of Income county-level data for Durham County, comparing 2010 and 2022 tax year filings. Rent figures come from ACS Table B25064 (median gross rent, Durham County) for the same reference years used in the wage analysis. Data processing scripts were developed with AI assistance and verified against raw source files.