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BTC Brief

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RISING CASELOADS: Severe Recession Fuels Dramatic Growth in the Food Stamp Program

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The severity of the current recession has fueled a dramatic expansion in North Carolina's Food Stamp Program. In April 2009, 1.2 million Tar Heels lived in families receiving food assistance. If those individuals gathered in one place, they would comprise a metro area more populous than Raleigh-Cary. Moreover, the number of individuals living in assisted families has increased by 231,000 since December 2007. Put differently, over the last 16 months the state's food assistance program has added slightly more people than currently reside in the City of Winston-Salem.

A Surging Food Stamp Caseload: 1.2 Million Persons and Rising

The Food Stamp Program – called Food and Nutrition Services in North Carolina – is a federal entitlement that helps low-income families purchase basic groceries. To qualify, a household must have a monthly income at or below 130 percent of the poverty level (approx. \$2,445 for a four-person family in 2008) and meet other criteria. Benefits are paid for with federal dollars, are set on a sliding scale and are modest in size; in April, half of enrolled households received less than \$200.

Since the start of the recession, the number of persons living in assisted families has grown by 231,000, rising from 985,000 to 1.2 million. Some 57 percent of the change has occurred since September 2008, which is when unemployment began to rise. And just two months – February and April 2009 – account a quarter of the change.

The Local Impact: Caseloads Rising in All 100 Counties

Since the recession's start, the number of persons living in families receiving food stamps has risen in every county (**over**). Urban places have recorded the greatest numerical changes. Mecklenburg County, for instance, has gained 116,374 individuals. In relative terms, changes have been greatest in rural areas. Dare, Clay and Macon counties all have posted increases of more than 50 percent. Overall, caseloads in 21 counties – 20 of them rural – have grown by at least a third.

Food assistance has become vital to the well-being of households across the state. In April, 13 percent of all North Carolinians lived in families receiving food stamps. At the county level, the share of such individuals ranged from 30 percent in Burke County to 6 percent in Watauga County. Moreover, there now are 88 counties in which at least 10 percent of the population resides in families receiving food stamps.

P.O. Box 28068
Raleigh, NC
27611-8068
Editor: Elaine Mejia
919/856-2176
elaine@ncjustice.org
www.ncjustice.org

Table: Individuals in Food Stamp Families, by North Carolina County, April 2009

County	# Individuals in FS Families	Individuals in Families as % of Total Pop.	% Change Individuals Dec. 07 - Apr. 09	County	# Individuals in FS Families	Individuals in Families as % of Total Pop.	% Change Individuals Dec. 07 - Apr. 09
Alamance	17,901	12.3%	38.8%	Johnston	21,748	13.4%	30.3%
Alexander	4,647	12.6%	27.9%	Jones	1,570	15.3%	8.2%
Alleghany	1,517	13.7%	21.4%	Lee	8,630	15.0%	43.0%
Anson	5,363	21.1%	8.7%	Lenoir	11,929	20.7%	16.6%
Ashe	3,551	13.5%	33.5%	Lincoln	9,378	12.6%	36.6%
Avery	2,081	11.3%	43.0%	Macon	4,589	13.4%	52.3%
Beaufort	7,350	15.8%	12.0%	Madison	3,011	14.5%	36.2%
Bertie	4,595	22.9%	11.6%	Martin	4,527	19.0%	14.1%
Bladen	6,409	19.9%	5.2%	McDowell	6,351	14.2%	40.8%
Brunswick	11,620	11.3%	37.8%	Mecklenburg	116,374	13.3%	28.1%
Buncombe	26,796	11.8%	27.2%	Mitchell	1,993	12.4%	12.5%
Burke	26,796	30.0%	26.7%	Montgomery	5,001	18.1%	28.4%
Cabarrus	19,882	11.7%	25.6%	Moore	8,641	10.1%	25.5%
Caldwell	13,366	16.7%	26.5%	Nash	13,614	14.5%	21.3%
Camden	671	6.9%	12.2%	New Hanover	19,214	10.0%	19.6%
Carteret	6,902	10.9%	35.2%	Northampton	5,098	24.1%	10.1%
Caswell	4,118	17.6%	15.6%	Onslow	13,779	7.8%	6.9%
Catawba	22,368	14.4%	32.2%	Orange	8,431	6.5%	20.7%
Chatham	4,881	8.0%	31.4%	Pamlico	1,609	12.5%	22.7%
Cherokee	3,658	13.6%	43.3%	Pasquotank	5,824	14.1%	15.3%
Chowan	2,737	18.6%	22.2%	Pender	6,561	12.7%	28.8%
Clay	1,805	17.5%	52.6%	Perquimans	2,241	17.3%	21.5%
Cleveland	19,018	19.4%	23.5%	Person	5,768	15.4%	21.2%
Columbus	11,309	20.7%	12.0%	Pitt	23,757	15.3%	18.3%
Craven	11,755	12.0%	21.3%	Polk	2,111	11.1%	41.7%
Cumberland	48,307	15.2%	16.1%	Randolph	20,734	14.7%	30.0%
Currituck	1,965	8.4%	34.7%	Richmond	10,086	21.5%	20.6%
Dare	2,313	6.8%	59.1%	Robeson	33,047	25.4%	17.0%
Davidson	23,647	14.9%	27.9%	Rockingham	13,094	14.3%	22.8%
Davie	4,213	10.3%	36.9%	Rowan	18,740	13.5%	31.8%
Duplin	7,630	14.3%	24.0%	Rutherford	10,849	17.1%	23.9%
Durham	30,890	11.9%	19.8%	Sampson	11,569	17.7%	23.7%
Edgecombe	13,726	26.5%	12.1%	Scotland	9,299	25.1%	6.2%
Forsyth	40,670	11.8%	19.1%	Stanly	7,603	12.7%	23.6%
Franklin	8,203	14.2%	22.5%	Stokes	4,553	9.8%	10.5%
Gaston	32,610	15.9%	28.3%	Surry	11,910	16.2%	26.9%
Gates	1,450	12.5%	20.3%	Swain	2,320	16.6%	26.8%
Graham	1,265	15.6%	24.6%	Transylvania	3,979	12.8%	41.0%
Granville	5,832	10.4%	18.3%	Tyrrell	870	20.3%	19.7%
Greene	4,059	19.1%	13.3%	Union	16,697	8.7%	38.4%
Guilford	64,052	13.7%	21.6%	Vance	12,165	28.0%	14.1%
Halifax	14,234	25.8%	7.8%	Wake	61,315	7.1%	24.6%
Harnett	15,664	14.3%	28.1%	Warren	3,988	20.0%	8.7%
Haywood	7,959	13.9%	27.9%	Washington	2,834	21.5%	8.9%
Henderson	9,175	8.8%	41.5%	Watauga	2,701	6.0%	30.9%
Hertford	5,160	21.8%	9.9%	Wayne	17,354	15.0%	11.5%
Hoke	7,470	16.8%	20.9%	Wilkes	10,909	16.2%	29.2%
Hyde	923	16.7%	12.0%	Wilson	13,133	16.6%	17.3%
Iredell	14,113	9.2%	29.0%	Yadkin	4,581	12.0%	36.7%
Jackson	4,024	10.9%	35.4%	Yancey	3,283	17.7%	15.8%

Notes: "# Individuals in FS Families" is the number of persons in families receiving food stamp benefits. Because not every individual in a family may be eligible for assistance, the actual number of people in the food stamp household may be smaller. "Individuals in Families as a % of Total Pop." is the number of individuals in food stamp families in a county divided by the county's estimated population in July 2008. "% Change" measures the change in the number of individuals in FS families from Dec. 2007 to Apr. 2009. Sources: UNC-CH Jordan Institute for Families; Office of State Budget and Management