

WHATS  
NEXT?

JANUARY 2020

HEALTHY N

2030

A PATH TOWARD HEALTH

FUNDED BY THE BLUE CROSS AND BLUE SHIELD OF NORTH CAROLINA FOUNDATION,  
THE DUKE ENDOWMENT, AND THE KATE B. REYNOLDS CHARITABLE TRUST

**NCIOM**  
North Carolina Institute of Medicine

In partnership with



NC DEPARTMENT OF  
HEALTH AND  
HUMAN SERVICES  
Division of Public Health

Report to  
North Carolina 2030:  
Toward Health (NCIOM)  
and the 2019 North Carolina  
State Health Assessment

# NEXT STEPS



**Healthy North Carolina 2030: Mid-Cycle Progress**

**239-255**



## Healthy North Carolina 2030: Mid-Cycle Progress

Midway through the Healthy North Carolina 2030 (HNC 2030) decade, the state has made meaningful progress in several indicators, while indicators that are more deeply rooted in structural, economic, and social conditions remain stagnant or are worsening. This landscape of progress and ongoing challenges highlights both the impact of recent investments and the urgency of course correction as the state moves from assessment to action under the 2026 North Carolina State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP).

Several indicators demonstrate sustained or emerging improvement. Insurance coverage among adults under age 65 has increased following Medicaid expansion, contributing to gains in early prenatal care and access to preventive services. Long-term declines in teen births and tobacco use continue (among teens and adults), reflecting the cumulative impact of public health policy, community-based prevention, and health education efforts. Employment levels have largely rebounded from the pandemic, and high school graduation rates show gradual improvement. Together, these trends suggest that coordinated policy action and sustained prevention strategies can produce measurable population-level gains.

At the same time, a substantial set of indicators shows limited or uneven progress. Poverty rates, access to healthy food and opportunities for physical activity have not improved consistently, particularly in rural and historically marginalized communities. While educational indicators such as third-grade reading proficiency and short-term school suspensions show partial recovery from pandemic disruptions, they continue to reflect persistent racial and geographic disparities. Meanwhile, although

life expectancy has risen slightly from its pandemic low point, it has not returned to pre-COVID levels. Although infant and suicide mortality rates show modest gains in some populations these indicators remain unacceptably high in others.

More concerning, several HNC 2030 indicators are moving in the wrong direction. Drug overdose deaths remain elevated, driven largely by synthetic opioids. Excessive drinking has increased and chronic disease indicators — including obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, stroke, chronic kidney disease, and asthma — continue to rise.

Housing affordability has declined, contributing to severe housing problems and compounding health risks. Hospital readmission rates for several Medicare conditions remain stagnant or have worsened, reflecting system strain, care coordination challenges, and unmet social needs. These trends highlight the interconnected nature of behavioral health, chronic disease, housing, and economic stressors, many of which were intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent workforce and cost-of-living pressures.

Taken together, the mid-cycle assessment makes clear that North Carolina cannot achieve HNC 2030 goals solely through clinical care and individual behavior change. Progress is strongest where policy, systems, and funding are aligned, and weakest where upstream determinants — such as housing, income, education, transportation, and environmental conditions — remain unaddressed. The 2026 North Carolina State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP) therefore represents a critical opportunity to move from measurement to coordinated action, focusing on a smaller set of high-leverage priorities that address root causes, reduce disparities, and support sustainable improvement.



## Mapping HNC 2030 Indicators to Priority Opportunities for the 2026 North Carolina State Health Improvement Plan (NC SHIP)

The following mapping translates indicator performance into strategic opportunity areas for the 2026 NC SHIP. These groupings are designed to support cross-sector ownership, measurable strategies, and alignment with local Community Health Assessments (CHAs) and Community Health Improvement Plans (CHIPs).

### / 01 Strengthen Behavioral Health and Substance Use Systems

#### *Indicators driving this priority*

- Drug overdose deaths
- Excessive drinking
- Suicide mortality
- Prevalence of mental health conditions/distress
- Hospital readmissions (behavioral health-related)

#### *Opportunity for the 2026 SHIP*

Focus on prevention, treatment access, workforce capacity, and recovery-oriented systems of care. Emphasize integration of behavioral health into primary care, crisis response infrastructure, and community-based supports, with explicit attention to rural access and high-risk populations.

### / 02 Reverse Chronic Disease Trends Through Upstream Action

#### *Indicators driving this priority*

- Obesity (adult and youth)
- Diabetes (incidence and prevalence)
- Cardiovascular disease and stroke
- Chronic kidney disease
- Asthma

#### *Opportunity for the 2026 SHIP*

Shift from downstream disease management to upstream prevention by aligning food systems, physical activity, housing quality, environmental health, and chronic disease prevention strategies. Prioritize community-level conditions that facilitate affordable healthy choices.

### / 03 Improve Housing Stability and Community Infrastructure

#### *Indicators driving this priority*

- Severe housing problems
- Poverty
- Hospital readmissions
- Life expectancy

#### *Opportunity for the 2026 SHIP*

Elevate housing as a core health strategy. Strengthen partnerships across housing, transportation, economic development, and health sectors. Build on lessons learned from time-limited pilots to develop sustainable approaches that address affordability, quality, and stability of housing.

### / 04 Advance Maternal, Infant, and Family Health

#### *Indicators driving this priority*

- Infant mortality
- Early prenatal care
- Maternal health indicators
- Teen births
- Life expectancy

#### *Opportunity for the 2026 SHIP*

Prioritize maternal and infant health as a foundational investment in long-term population health. Expand culturally responsive care, workforce support, care navigation, and community-based services, particularly in regions with persistent disparities.

## **/ 05 Promote Educational Success and Youth Well-Being**

### *Indicators driving this priority*

- Third-grade reading proficiency
- Short-term suspensions
- Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)
- Youth tobacco use

### *Opportunity for the 2026 SHIP*

North Carolina can strengthen outcomes for infants, children and youth by better aligning early care, education, public health, and family support systems to promote early childhood development and social emotional learning. Emphasizing relational health and resilience across infancy, childhood and adolescence, through trauma-informed, prevention-oriented approaches, shifts the focus from punitive responses to supportive interventions that foster long-term health and well-being.

## **/ 06 Sustain and Leverage Gains in Health Care Access**

### *Indicators driving this priority*

- Uninsured rate
- Population per primary care clinician
- Early prenatal care

### *Opportunity for the 2026 SHIP*

Protect and build upon recent gains by

addressing provider shortages, strengthening care coordination, and reducing access barriers such as transportation and language. Ensure that coverage translates into meaningful, timely, and high-quality care across all communities.

### **Implications for Action**

The 2026 NC SHIP should focus on fewer, higher-impact priorities, each supported by:

- Clear population-level outcomes
- Cross-sector strategies that address root causes
- Shared accountability among state, local, and community partners
- Performance measures that track progress and gaps in health

By aligning SHIP priorities with the indicators most in need of course correction, North Carolina is able to move from mid-cycle assessment to coordinated, measurable improvement, ensuring the remainder of the HNC 2030 decade delivers healthier conditions and better outcomes for all North Carolinians.



## 2026 North Carolina State Health Improvement Plan

### Priority Framework Aligned to Healthy North Carolina 2030 (Mid-Cycle Findings)

SHIP Priority Area	HNC 2030 Indicators Driving Priority	Mid-Cycle Status	Strategic Opportunity for 2026 SHIP
<b>Behavioral Health &amp; Substance Use</b>	Drug Overdose Deaths; Excessive Drinking; Suicide Mortality; Mental Health Prevalence; Behavioral Health-Related Hospital Readmissions	<b>Worsening</b>	Strengthen prevention, treatment, crisis response, and recovery systems; expand workforce capacity; integrate behavioral health into primary care; prioritize rural and high-risk populations
<b>Chronic Disease Prevention &amp; Management</b>	Obesity (Adult & Youth); Diabetes; Cardiovascular Disease; Stroke; Chronic Kidney Disease; Asthma	<b>Worsening</b>	Shift upstream to address food access, physical activity, environmental conditions, and prevention; align public health, health care, and community systems to slow disease progression
<b>Housing Stability &amp; Community Infrastructure</b>	Severe Housing Problems; Poverty; Life Expectancy; Hospital Readmissions	<b>Worsening/ Stagnant</b>	Elevate housing as a health strategy; strengthen cross-sector partnerships (housing, transportation, economic development); pursue sustainable models beyond time-limited pilots
<b>Maternal, Infant &amp; Family Health</b>	Infant Mortality; Early Prenatal Care; Teen Births; Maternal Health Indicators; Life Expectancy	<b>Mixed</b>	Expand culturally responsive care, workforce supports, and navigation models; focus on regions and populations with persistent disparities
<b>Educational Success &amp; Youth Well-Being</b>	Third Grade Reading Proficiency; Short-Term Suspensions; Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs); Youth Tobacco Use	<b>Mixed</b>	Promote early childhood development, trauma-informed approaches, and supportive school environments; align education, public health, and family support systems
<b>Health Care Access &amp; System Capacity</b>	Uninsured (Under 65); Primary Care Clinician Availability; Early Prenatal Care	<b>Improving</b>	Sustain Medicaid expansion gains; address provider shortages, care coordination, transportation, and language access to ensure coverage translates into care

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# Photography Credits

## Inside Front Cover

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