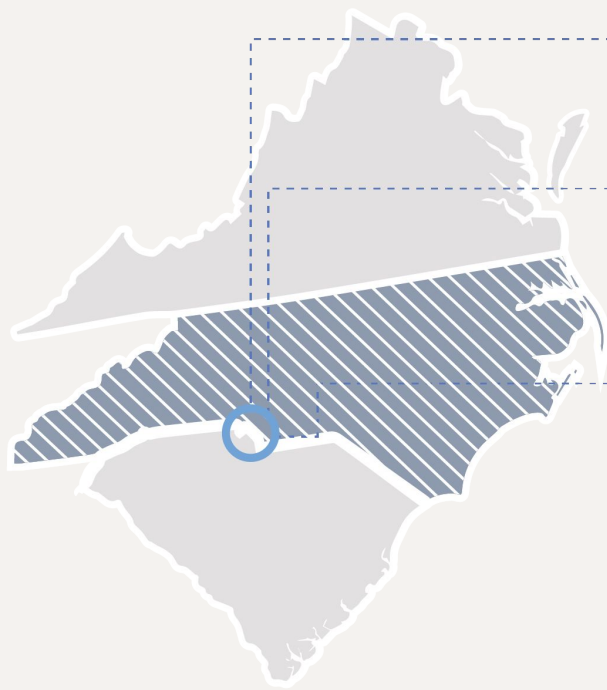


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# Charlotte, North Carolina

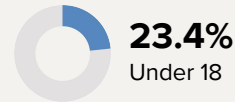
# Charlotte, NC



## Charlotte, NC

**879,709** (2021 ACS)

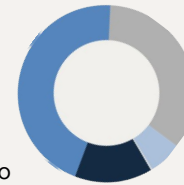
### Age



### Race

**46.7%**  
White  
(Non-Hispanic)

**14.6%**  
Hispanic / Latino



**35.5%**  
Black / African American  
(Non-Hispanic)

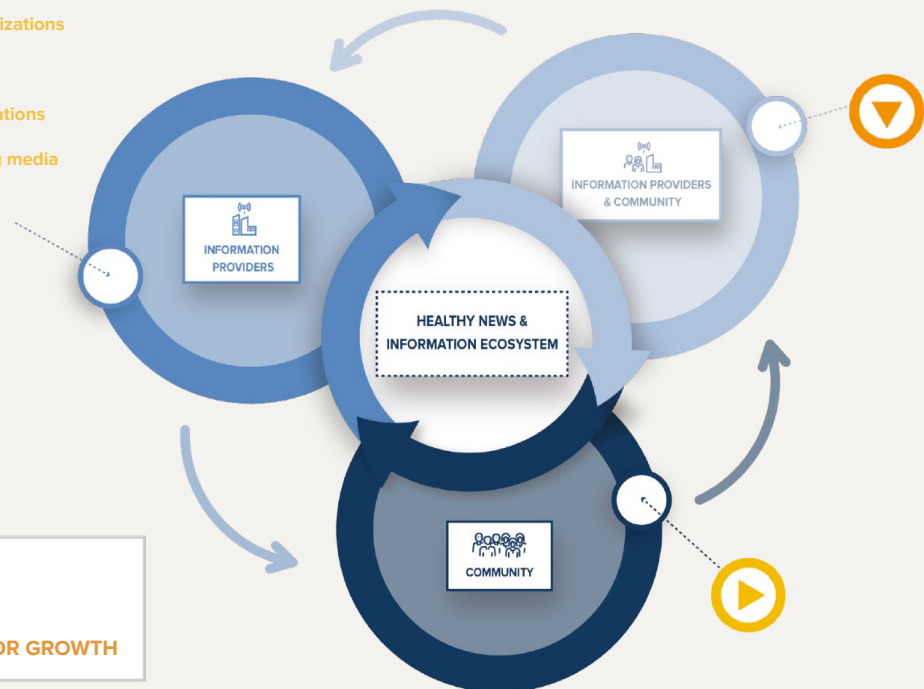
**6.6%**  
Asian / Asian American  
Pacific Islander

**0.4%**  
Native American /  
American Indian

## News & Information Ecosystem 2022

- Number of journalism organizations
- Types of media
- Business models of organizations
- Diversity and BIPOC-serving media
- Collaboration
- Journalism funding

- STRONG**
- AVERAGE**
- OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH**



# Key Elements



While Charlotte has a diverse range of news options, the landscape is dominated by text content in print and digital media.



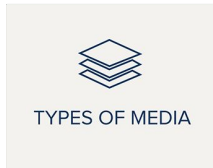
Collaboration has continued to strengthen and crystallize in Charlotte, much of which is institutionalized through the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative, which has continued to serve the region well.



A statewide diversity audit for North Carolina newsrooms found that, on average, 71% of staff and 75% of leadership identify as white, which is significantly higher than the state's 47% white population.



Based on the size of Charlotte's Black and Hispanic/Latino populations, there is a high number of news organizations serving Hispanic/Latino communities, but a small number serving Black communities.



Almost half of the outlets in the Charlotte ecosystem are primarily print media. Among those, all but two are independent for-profit outlets, with the exceptions being Charlotte's McClatchy-owned daily newspaper and a religiously affiliated nonprofit.



While public media has a strong presence in Charlotte, as do nonprofit organizations (8.3% of all outlets), over half of all outlets are independent for-profits, all of them either primarily print or digital only.



There has been little philanthropic investment in the Charlotte ecosystem on a per capita basis in the past three years, although organizations serving statewide in North Carolina have received philanthropic funding.



Based on 2019, 2020 and 2022 surveys, Charlotte residents have a relatively negative perception of their local media.

# Summary

Charlotte is located in Mecklenburg County and is the largest city in North Carolina and the fifteenth-largest in the United States. While the city proper has experienced a very slight population decrease of -0.68% from 2019 to 2022 (879,709), the Charlotte metro area is [one of the ten fastest-growing metro areas in the country](#). Charlotte is part of the Charlotte-Concord-Gastonia, NC-SC Metropolitan Statistical Area, a region with a total population of over 2.7 million residents.<sup>1</sup> Charlotte’s growth has contributed to gaps in news coverage as newsrooms struggle to keep up, especially in places like the West End, a historically African American neighborhood.

Charlotte is a relatively young city, with just 10.4% of its population over the age of 65 compared to 16.8% nationally. It is also more racially diverse than the United States as a whole, in particular when it comes to the Black and African American population, which comprises 35.5% of Charlotte’s population compared to 13.6% nationally. Less than half of Charlotte’s population, at least within the city proper, is white.

Community indicators show that Charlotte is an educated city with significant resources invested in libraries and higher education—there are twenty library branches and seventeen universities in Charlotte. But while Charlotte’s median household income has increased since 2020, it has not increased at the same pace as the United States as a whole and is now about 5.4% lower than the national median household income.

The Charlotte media ecosystem is relatively robust, with many news outlets serving diverse communities. The institutionalization of collaboration through the Solutions Journalism

Community Indicators	National Average, 2021	Charlotte Baseline, 2020	Charlotte, 2021	Trending
<b>Economics</b>				
Median Household Income	\$69,021	\$60,886	\$65,359	Improving
Per Capita Income	\$37,638	\$36,436	\$39,834	Improving
Poverty Rate	11.6%	14.0%	11.9%	Steady
<b>Education</b>				
High School Degree	88.9%	89.0%	89.4%	Steady
Bachelor’s Degree	33.7%	44.0%	44.8%	Steady
<b>Resources &amp; Infrastructure</b>				
Households with Computer	93.1%	92.9%	91.9%	Steady
Broadband Access	87.0%	85.4%	85.2%	Steady
Universities	20	20	20	Steady
Population per University	32,690	44,285	43,985	Steady
Libraries	27	20	20	Steady
Population per Library	23,693	44,285	43,985	Steady
Community Satisfaction <sup>2</sup>	60.9	62.2	66	Improving
Voter Turnout of most recent election	66%	47%	72.0%	Improving
Prior Information Needs Study	Yes/No	Yes	Yes	
Prior Ecosystem Study	Yes/No	Yes	Yes	

1. <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/31000US16740-charlotte-concord-gastonia-nc-sc-metro-area/>

2. Community satisfaction is measured by Share Care in partnership with Boston University, <https://wellbeingindex.sharecare.com/interactive-map/?defaultState=NC>.



Network-led Charlotte Journalism Collaborative has proven to provide valuable reporting and community engagement efforts across the ecosystem, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Information Needs

There's been significant change in Charlotte's news ecosystem during the last five years, with contraction in the commercial media space and simultaneous vibrancy in local news initiatives serving diverse sectors of the community. The Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media's 2023 NC News and Information Census found that Mecklenburg County residents have the most access to news in the state (42 outlets).<sup>3</sup> This analysis also found there to be a very small reporting gap, relative to other counties, meaning that the majority of outlets that are accessible in Mecklenburg County also cover the county directly. The majority of publications in the state, as well as in Charlotte are print. The household penetration rate of newspaper circulation in Charlotte is 16.1%, about average compared to other Knight communities.<sup>4</sup>

However, there is still often a gap between what the community needs and what news organizations are able to provide given limited resources. In the words of Ju-Don Marshall, WFAE's former chief content officer and executive vice president and current president and chief executive officer, "We run to the fire when there is one, but we fail to look at what's simmering and get ahead of these things so our community is well informed."

For example, while voting guides were a standard offering from legacy news organizations in the past, that has dropped off in recent years due to shrinking newsrooms and a lack of resources. Local public media and nonprofits are working to fill these gaps. For example, WFAE began producing bilingual voter guides and collaborating for distribution with La Noticia, for which they received overwhelming feedback from the community about their utility.

In the past year, the *Charlotte Observer* has increased efforts to be more responsive to audiences and launched a service journalism desk of three reporters and one editor who respond to reader questions, providing a direct line from the community to the newsroom. And the *Observer's* [Mobile Newsroom](#), launched in January 2023 in partnership with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library, expands how the

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3. Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, "NC News & Information Census," 2022, <https://www.cislm.org/research/nc-news-information-census/5/>.

4. Daily average circulation is a composite average based on data from Alliance for Audited Media, which includes the daily average of print, print replica and print nonreplica editions of newspapers, four reporting dates for 2019 and two for 2021. Household penetration rate is the average daily circulation divided by the number of households in Charlotte, according to the Census Bureau's 2021 American Community Survey (ACS).

organization is engaging with and meeting community information and expanding the local news ecosystem beyond traditional media entities.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored huge disparities in the community at every level in Charlotte, in particular health equity; early on, the impact was disproportionate on communities of color in the city, stakeholders noted. If there's any silver lining to the media's response to the pandemic, it's that most news organizations shifted to community-first mindsets, breaking the mode of how they would normally approach journalism, centering community questions and following a service journalism model. The pandemic showed that journalism can "sometimes make the difference between life and death," La Noticia's publisher and CEO Hilda Gurdian said, citing La Noticia's Spanish-language coverage to the Latino and Spanish-speaking community within Charlotte that was disproportionately affected by the pandemic and lacked access to information.

According to the Gallup/Knight American Views survey, a majority of respondents in Charlotte get their daily news from a television station, although this decreased slightly from 2020 to 2022 (69% to 55%).<sup>5</sup> In both years, just over one third of respondents said they get most of their news from television. In 2022, only 27% of respondents agreed that local news organizations can be relied on to deliver the information they need.

## Information Providers

The news and information ecosystem in Charlotte is complex, with significant local news coverage and innovation in the works, especially among startups and nonprofits, while at the same time the city is experiencing decreasing resources for legacy commercial media. In total, we found 36 information providers in Charlotte, an increase of two since 2020 (*Queen City Nerve* and the *Charlotte Voice*), suggesting there was growth in some areas of Charlotte's news and information ecosystem with new organizations cropping up and some even expanding.<sup>6</sup> In the state of North Carolina, the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at UNC Hussman School of Journalism found in their 2022 census of news providers in the state that Mecklenburg County, where Charlotte is located, had the most news providers of any county in the state.

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5. Responses to the Gallup/Knight American Views Survey are not statistically significant for Charlotte and instead can be considered information to be analyzed together with other data sources. In 2020, there were 171 respondents in Charlotte; in 2022, there were only 35 respondents from Charlotte.

6. In the 2023 "NC News & Information Census," the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media found 29 news providers in Mecklenburg County, <https://www.cislm.org/research/nc-news-information-census/2/>.

However, at the same time, some outlets are shrinking in headcount; in legacy newsrooms like the *Charlotte Observer*, staffing has gone down over the years. According to the Alliance for Audited Media, the *Charlotte Observer's* daily average circulation of print, digital replica and digital nonreplica copies declined 27% from 2019 to 2021 (77,050 to 55,857).

In late 2018, the publisher of Creative Loafing, Charlotte's alt weekly, announced that it would reduce staff and transition to a digital-only format. The transition meant that Charlotte lost a print media publication, but it didn't necessarily lose a news outlet. Not long after Creative Loafing's transition, former staffers of the outlet launched *Queen City Nerve* to serve as a free print alt weekly for Charlotte. *Queen City Nerve* operates as an independent, for-profit publication. Charlotte Voice is another new publication on the horizon that is in development.

Information Providers	Knight Communities Average, 2022	Charlotte Baseline, 2020	Charlotte, 2022	Trending
Number of Organizations (newspapers, television stations, radio stations, and digital)	34	34	36	Improving
Population per Organization	27,162	26,050	24,436	Improving
Daily Average Circulation (Major Daily)	N/A	77,050	55,857	Declining
Household Penetration Rate	15.2%	-	16.1%	Average
<b>Platform Breakdown<sup>7</sup></b>				
Newspapers	36.8%	50.0%	47.2%	Steady
Television Stations	31.3%	26.5%	25.0%	Steady
Radio Stations	10.9%	8.8%	8.3%	Steady
Digital only	18.5%	17.6%	22.2%	Improving
<b>Business Models Breakdown<sup>8</sup></b>				
Nonprofit	11.2%	8.8%	8.3%	Steady
Public Media	11.5%	5.9%	5.6%	Steady
National Broadcast Chain	24.4%	26.5%	25.0%	Steady
National Newspaper Chain	6.0%	2.9%	2.8%	Steady
Independent For-Profit	46.4%	55.9%	58.3%	Steady
<b>BIPOC-Serving Media</b>				
African American / Black		3	4	Improving
Hispanic / Latino		8	8	Steady
Asian / Asian American		0	0	Steady
<b>Diversity</b>				
Staff Diversity Transparency		1 (ASNE)	Audit Underway	
Source Diversity Audits		0	0	
Collaboration		Developed and Institutionalized	Developed and Institutionalized	
<b>Journalism Funding</b>				
Philanthropic Dollars over the 3 previous years <sup>9</sup>	\$3,837,794	\$107,015	\$94,464	
Funders	13	6	2	
Recipients	8	5	3	
Invested Per Capita	\$5.94	\$0.12	\$0.11	Steady

7. The percentage of news outlets that publish on specific platforms in Charlotte.

8. The percentage of news outlets that have specific business models in Charlotte.

9. Philanthropic investment is based on the Media Impact Funders and Candid database, which pulls data from organizational 990s. These data include only institutional funders, not individual donors. There is also a lag in the data as a result of both the timing of organizations' tax filings and the process of tagging grants. While this data is far from perfect, it is the only current data source with respect to philanthropic funding for media.

It was founded by the editor of *Pride Magazine*, Alicia Benjamin, and is intended to be an independent for-profit outlet providing digital news aimed at Charlotte's Black and African American communities.

Finally, in late 2020, Axios purchased the digital startup Charlotte Agenda and rebranded it as Axios Charlotte.

## BIPOC-Serving Media

Charlotte has a robust ecosystem for news in Spanish. It has four Spanish-language print publications aimed at serving Hispanic and Latino communities, in addition to two television stations and two digital news organizations, Enlace Latino and La Noticia. The number of Spanish-language news options is particularly striking given the percentage of the population that is Hispanic/Latino. At 14.6% of the population, it is substantial but still lower than the national percentage, 18.9%.

The Black population of Charlotte is much larger (35.5%) than the Hispanic/Latino population, but there are fewer news options expressly serving this community. Of the four publications aimed at serving Black and African American communities, two are print (the newspaper the *Charlotte Post* and *Pride Magazine*) and two are digital, though one has not launched yet.<sup>10</sup>

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10. The presence of Telemundo and Azteca América, both well-established Spanish-language broadcast chains, partly accounts for the discrepancy between the number of news options for Hispanic and Latino communities compared to Black and African American communities. Azteca América closed at the end of 2022.



## News Outlets Based in Charlotte

	Independent	National Chain	Nonprofit/University	Public Media
Digital only	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Axios Charlotte</li> <li>Charlotte Ledger</li> <li>Charlotte Voice</li> <li>Creative Loafing</li> <li>Charlotte</li> <li>Q City Metro</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>EdNC</li> <li>Enlace Latino</li> </ul>	
Print and digital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Charlotte Business Journal</li> <li>Charlotte Magazine</li> <li>Charlotte Post</li> <li>Denver Citizen</li> <li>El Progreso Hispano</li> <li>Hola News Charlotte</li> <li>Lake Norman Citizen</li> <li>La Noticia</li> <li>Matthews Mint Hill</li> <li>Mecklenburg Times</li> <li>Mundo Latino</li> <li>Newspaper</li> <li>Pride Magazine</li> <li>Q Notes</li> <li>Que Pasa Mi Gente</li> <li>Charlotte</li> <li>Queen City Nerve</li> <li>South Charlotte Weekly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Charlotte Observer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Catholic News and Herald</li> </ul>	
Radio		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>WBT</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>WFAE</li> </ul>
Television		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spectrum News 1</li> <li>Telemundo</li> <li>WBTV</li> <li>WCCB</li> <li>WCNC</li> <li>WJZY</li> <li>WSOC-TV</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PBS Charlotte</li> </ul>

## Diversity

Among Charlotte's newsrooms, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives have been much more intentional in both internal processes, from attracting and retaining talent, to how newsrooms participate among and engage with communities. And who is in newsrooms also matters to residents: according to the 2022 Gallup/Knight American Views survey, 60% of respondents in Charlotte think that the diversity among a news organization's journalists is either very or somewhat important when deciding which news sources or outlets to turn to.

In 2021, the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media conducted a statewide diversity survey of newsrooms.<sup>11</sup> While these data are reported in aggregate and at the state level, they are interesting nonetheless. The 2022 report found that 71% of staff and 75% of leadership of newsrooms identify as white, a much higher percentage than the 47% white population in the state overall. Black staff (23%) and leadership (18%) are represented in newsrooms at rates far below the 36% of overall population. And the biggest opportunity area for North Carolina overall is with respect to Hispanic/Latino inclusion in newsrooms, which was reported at 6% for both staff and leadership, while statewide the population is 15%.

Public radio entity WFAE is often cited by stakeholders as engaging in substantive DEI work. For example, in June 2021, WFAE launched a [Race and Equity Team](#) in partnership with Report For America to help WFAE fulfill its public service mission "by meeting this moment in history to help lead communities across greater Charlotte in addressing racial injustice." The initiative raised \$1.2 million for its first three years of funding.

## Collaborations

Charlotte is a go-to example of how a collaboration could become institutionalized and grow in a city. The [Charlotte Journalism Collaborative](#) (CJC), launched in 2019 through the Solutions Journalism Network, is made up of seven newsrooms and additional non-newsroom partners like the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library and is focused on a single issue: affordable housing in Charlotte. Stakeholders emphasized that

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11. Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, "2022 Diversity Audit Report," <https://www.cislm.org/research/ncdiversityaudit/2022-diversity-audit-report/4/>. According to the report, "of the 36 newsrooms that completed the organizational survey, 16 were a nonprofit organization, and nine have independent local owners. Newspapers owned by McClatchy participated in the organizational survey but not newsrooms owned by chains such as Lee and Adams. There was limited participation among Gannett newsrooms."

collaboration requires significant commitment from participating organizations in order to be successful. Together, CJC members are trying to address community challenges around affordable housing collectively because some of these issues are nearly impossible to approach individually—stories are approached differently, with each newsroom bringing its own identity and skill sets to the work, said Rana Cash of the *Charlotte Observer*.

In many ways, the CJC is an answer to what can happen when newsrooms get smaller—various organizations can collaborate and coordinate to ensure that stories of community importance get expansive coverage. “In the old days of journalism, we would have each of us run to the fire, and cover that story. But wouldn’t it be a better use of resources to aim different people at similar issues and serve the community?” said Ju-Don Marshall, WFAE’s president and chief executive officer.

Over the past three years, the collaborative has started to be seen more broadly as a convener in Charlotte, with far-reaching impact in the city, as outlined in its [Impact Report released in January 2023](#). The CJC is often in the same room with non-media entities working on affordable housing. The CJC is able both to hold power to account but also seen as part of the room and not just covering the room, said Chris Rudisill, director of the CJC.

## Case Study: Charlotte Journalism Collaborative’s New Storytelling Approach

In 2021, the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative launched a graphic novel in both English and Spanish, [PANDEMIC](#), detailing stories from the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the community in Charlotte, using innovative storytelling approaches to engage new audiences. Each chapter is based on a real news story published by CJC members, from how contact tracing works to prevent community spread to an undocumented family’s navigation of the health care system. The CJC obtained a local grant from the Arts and Science Council, partnered with local artists through BOOM Charlotte and distributed 2,500 copies of the graphic novel to local libraries, as well as additional copies to local schools and museums, highlighting the work as a historical record of the first year of COVID-19 in the community. The graphic novel also was shared via social media.

## Local Journalism Support Organizations

Charlotte has a network of journalism support organizations, including News Voices: North Carolina at the state level, which was particularly active prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. There are also institutions engaged in the news and information ecosystem. For example, the Charlotte Mecklenburg Public Library participates in the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative and engages with news organizations independently through programs like [the Charlotte Observer's Mobile Newsroom](#).

However, most institutional funding for journalism in Charlotte is sponsorship- or issue-based (for example, the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative's focus on affordable housing).<sup>12</sup> While institutional support exists, there is room for improvement in this area, and perhaps new avenues to pursue. For example, Charlotte has a large financial industry, but those institutions have not yet become supporters for journalism in the community.

This could largely be due to the fact that for many non-media institutions, journalism funding is unfamiliar territory. "It's our job to talk to them and explain the importance of a healthy local news ecosystem," Hilda Gurdian, publisher and CEO of La Noticia said. The pandemic did offer an opportunity to do just that, demonstrating the value of local news in everything from health information to where to find access to resources like food banks.

## Information Providers & Community

The Pew Research Center's 2019 Local News Survey data reflect the weak connection between local journalists and residents in Charlotte, with more than half of residents saying that news does not mostly cover the area where they live or include people like them in their stories. And only slightly more than half of respondents felt that news sources cover stories thoroughly, are transparent or deal fairly with all sides.

In 2022, the Gallup/Knight American Views survey included 35 respondents in Charlotte, and while the results of the survey are not statistically significant, they are worth considering to understand the perception of local news among Charlotte residents. While a mere 6% of respondents disagreed that local

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12. The Charlotte Journalism Collaborative is funded by the Solutions Journalism Network, which is in turn funded by Knight Foundation.

news organizations have the resources and opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly, only 21% agreed that local news organizations care about the best interest of their readers, viewers and listeners and only 18% agreed that they do not intend to mislead, misinform or persuade the public.

In interviews in 2023, stakeholders reflected that many Charlotte residents have a distrust of legacy media, and are particularly critical of

the newspaper the *Charlotte Observer* and of TV news. Ju-Don Marshall of WFAE said residents feel that they “are booster-ish around local government and talk around growth of the city, masking issues of what it means for residents.” And Rana Cash, executive editor of the *Observer*, said that trust depends on the outlet—for television, for example, “there might not be more trust but there’s more familiarity.”

Despite reductions in staff size, the *Charlotte Observer*, a legacy publication, is consciously working on building trust with sectors of the Charlotte community with which it does not have a strong relationship. To that end, the *Observer* recently launched a mobile newsroom initiative with the public library to give people access to newsmakers and build relationships, especially in Black and brown communities, as well as hosting a “Meet the Observer” open house. As evidenced in the Pew Research Center data and low percentage of residents who say that they have spoken directly with a journalist, Rana Cash said that the *Observer* has historically often “writ[ten] about them not for them,” reflecting that many people in Charlotte have only talked to a journalist if something bad happens.

Together with the NC News Voices, local public radio station WFAE did a number of listening sessions pre-pandemic, talking to local residents about news and trust. Ju-Don Marshall said these sessions specifically sought to break down barriers between the station and community members.

Information Providers & Community*	National Average	Charlotte	
% Who say local journalists are in touch with the community	63%	66%	Average
% Who have spoken with a journalist	21%	18%	Average
% Who say their local news source mostly covers the area where they live	51%	45%	Low
% Who pay for local news in the past year	14%	12%	Average
<b>% Who say their local news:</b>			
Reports news accurately	71%	71%	Average
Keeps an eye on local political leaders	66%	70%	High
Provides news that they use daily	67%	64%	Low
Covers news stories thoroughly	65%	60%	Low
Are transparent about their reporting	62%	57%	Low
Deals fairly with all sides	62%	53%	Low
Includes people like you in their stories	58%	48%	Low

\*Data from 2019 Pew Research Center Local News Survey



## Opportunities

- **Institutional support:** While there is investment in local public media and initiatives like the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative, philanthropic investment per capita is low and there is still ample opportunity for increased support for nonprofit organizations to strengthen their institutions and scale their work.
- **Scale up collaboration:** Given the success of the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative, additional resources for new or existing collaborative efforts could expand coverage beyond a single issue facing Charlotte residents.