Growth, Opportunity, and the Capacity to Act

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Harnett County's location between the Research Triangle and Fort Bragg-Fayetteville region provides access to two major employment markets. Its growing population, relative affordability, and economic development assets also create opportunities for additional business investment.

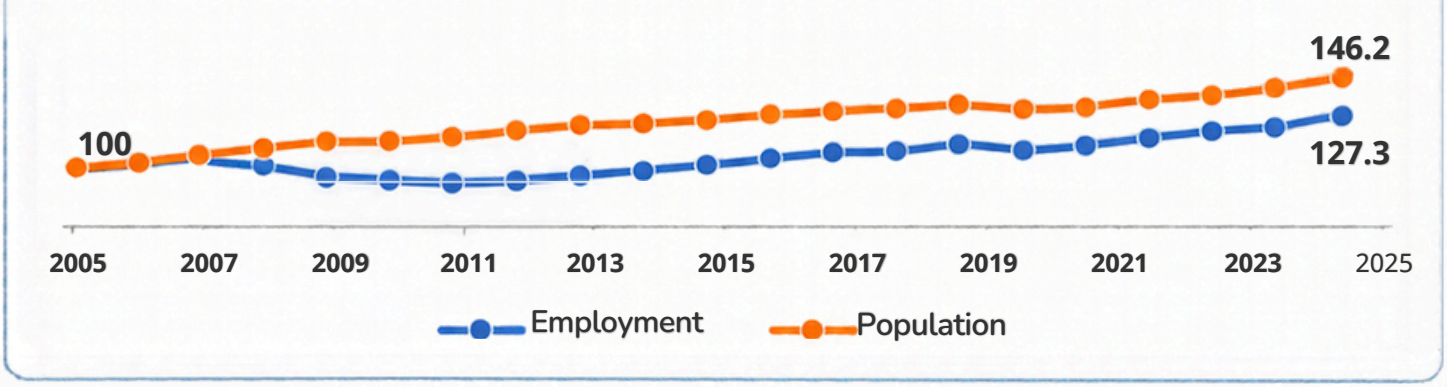
North Carolina continues to rank among the nation's leading states for business, but local competitiveness increasingly depends on workforce skills, reliable infrastructure, available sites, and responsive government. For Harnett County, the challenge is to keep pace with population growth while creating more local jobs, improving earnings, and maintaining the qualities that make the county an attractive place to live.

Economic Growth and Performance

Harnett County has experienced substantial growth over the past two decades, with population growth outpacing job creation. Between 2005 and 2025, population increased 46%, compared with 27% employment growth. However, employment growth has accelerated more recently, increasing 17% over the past five years. The longer-term gap reflects Harnett's role as a residential community for the surrounding region while highlighting opportunities to expand local employment.

Harnett County Employment and Population Growth 2005-2025

100=2005 Levels



Source: Lightcast 2026.4

Harnett's economy has also grown, with real GDP increasing 31% between 2014 and 2024, slightly above the statewide rate. While Harnett trails the faster-growing Johnston and Wake counties, its growth has been comparable to Moore and Chatham counties and stronger than several other surrounding counties. As investment continues across the region, Harnett has an opportunity to attract more business activity and employment within the county.

Real average earnings per job increased 7.4% in Harnett between 2015 and 2025, compared with 10.5% statewide. In 2025, approximately 66% of county jobs paid between $25 and $50 per hour, while 26% paid between $15 and $25. Increasing higher-paying local employment opportunities and improving earnings for existing workers will be important as the county continues to grow.

Housing Growth, Affordability, and Commuting

Residential development has increased significantly in Harnett County, with 2,205 new private housing structures authorized in 2025, compared with 639 in 2019. Housing affordability remains an advantage, with a typical home value of $292,371 in September 2026, nearly $40,000 below the statewide average. This relative affordability helps attract residents who work throughout the surrounding region.

However, rapid residential growth also puts additional pressure on roads, schools, water and sewer systems, and other public services. Keeping infrastructure ahead of development while maintaining housing affordability will be important as the county continues to grow.

Harnett's commuting patterns reflect its strong ties to surrounding employment centers. In 2025, the county had substantial net outbound commuting to Wake and Cumberland counties, along with smaller net outflows to Johnston, Mecklenburg, and Durham. Access to these regional job markets is an advantage for residents, but the commuting patterns also show how much of Harnett's workforce is employed outside the county. Expanding local employment opportunities would allow Harnett to benefit more directly from its growing labor force.

Harnett County Commuting Patterns, 2025

County	Inbound Commuters	Outbound Commuters	Net Commuters
Wake	4,461	13,218	-8,757
Cumberland	3,610	7,108	-3,498
Johnston	2,107	3,632	-1,524
Mecklenburg	304	1,693	-1,390
Durham	414	1,682	-1,268

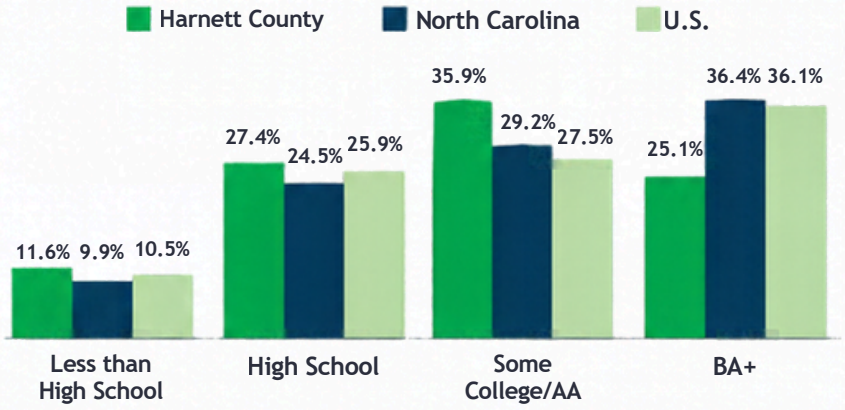
Source: Lightcast 2026.4

Workforce Growth and the Changing Demand for Skills

As population growth slows nationally and labor shortages become more common, Harnett County's growing working-age population could provide an advantage. The county's population ages 25–64 is projected to increase from approximately 77,400 in 2025 to 88,900 by 2036, an increase of nearly 15%. Harnett's prime-age labor force population (ages 25–54) also grew 14.2% between 2015 and 2025, twice the statewide rate of 7.1%.

A growing labor pool does not necessarily mean having the skills employers need. In 2025, approximately 36% of Harnett's labor force had some college education or an associate degree, compared with 29% statewide. At the same time, only 25% held a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 36% statewide. These differences point to the need for continued investment in education and training, particularly programs that prepare workers for higher-skilled occupations.

Labor Force By Education, 2025



Source: Lightcast 2026.4

Automation, artificial intelligence, and other technologies are changing skill requirements across manufacturing, construction, healthcare, logistics, and agriculture. Harnett's occupational projections show particularly strong growth in computer, engineering, and mathematical science occupations through 2035. Aligning education and workforce training with these changing needs will be important, with Campbell University, Central Carolina Community College, and local employers playing key roles.

A Changing Business Environment

Businesses and governments are placing greater emphasis on domestic production, supply chain security, and reliability. These shifts could create opportunities for Harnett County in advanced manufacturing, biotechnology, and defense-related industries. Its proximity to Fort Bragg, access to I-95 and rail, and available industrial sites are advantages in attracting investment.

Businesses are also placing greater demands on local infrastructure. In the 2026 Area Development consultant survey, 83% of respondents rated electric power availability at scale as very important, followed by transmission and substation capacity (74%), skilled labor (65%), and grid reliability (63%). Site readiness, zoning compatibility, and responsive government were also among the leading considerations.

Key Considerations for Business Investment

% of respondents rating as very important

Electric power availability at scale	83%
Transmission and substation capacity	74%
Skilled labor availability	65%
Grid reliability	63%
Site readiness, zoning compatibility, and responsive government	

Building on Harnett County's Advantages

For Harnett County, having available land is only part of the equation. Attracting investment will also depend on having prepared sites, adequate infrastructure, timely permitting, and the ability of local governments, utilities, economic development organizations, and workforce partners to coordinate and carry out projects.

Harnett County's Key Opportunities and Challenges

Opportunities

What can drive the next phase of growth

Continued population and labor force growth
A larger, younger workforce that supports business investment

Affordability and quality of life
A competitive location for households and employers relative to Wake County

Advanced manufacturing, biotech, and defense
Growing opportunities tied to industrial sites, workforce training, and proximity to Fort Bragg

Two major regional labor markets
Access to the Research Triangle and the Fort Bragg-Fayetteville economy

Strong institutional and economic development assets
Campbell University, Central Carolina Community College, I-95, rail, and a growing portfolio of industrial sites (e.g., Harnett 95)

Challenges

What could constrain future prosperity

Infrastructure and public service capacity
Keeping pace with growth in roads, schools, water, and utilities

Maintaining affordability
Managing rising housing and development costs as growth accelerates

Converting population growth to local jobs
Reducing the sizable net out-commuting and growing higher-wage employment in the county

Workforce skills and talent pipeline
Expanding training and credential pathways in high-demand industries

Coordination and execution
Aligning county and municipal planning, site readiness, and investment to capture regional opportunities

Looking Ahead

Harnett County's next challenge is to turn its continued growth into more local economic opportunities. Coordinating infrastructure investments, workforce development, and business recruitment will be important to attracting new employers, increasing local earnings, and managing growth without losing the affordability and quality of life that have helped attract residents.

Harnett County: Key Indicators of Growth

+7.4%
Real Average Earnings Per Job
2015 – 2025

3.5×
Residential Building Permits
2025 vs. 2019

+8.7%
County-Based Employment Growth
2019 – 2024

+14.2%
Prime-Age (25–54) Labor Force Population Growth
2015 – 2025

Sources: Lightcast 2026.4; U.S. Census Bureau; Harnett County FY2025 Financial Report.