

Black and Deaf in North Carolina Appalachia: Description of Culture, Communication, and Audiological Needs

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ABSTRACT

Appalachia is a region in North Carolina consisting of rich and diverse cultures, including individuals from both rural and urban Appalachia who are Black. This poster discusses Black residents who occupy Appalachian North Carolina, with focus on the residents who are both Black and Deaf. A description of the unique culture, language and history of this population will be considered, as well as the unique challenges they face with access to healthcare, habilitation, rehabilitation, and resources to promote full life participation.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

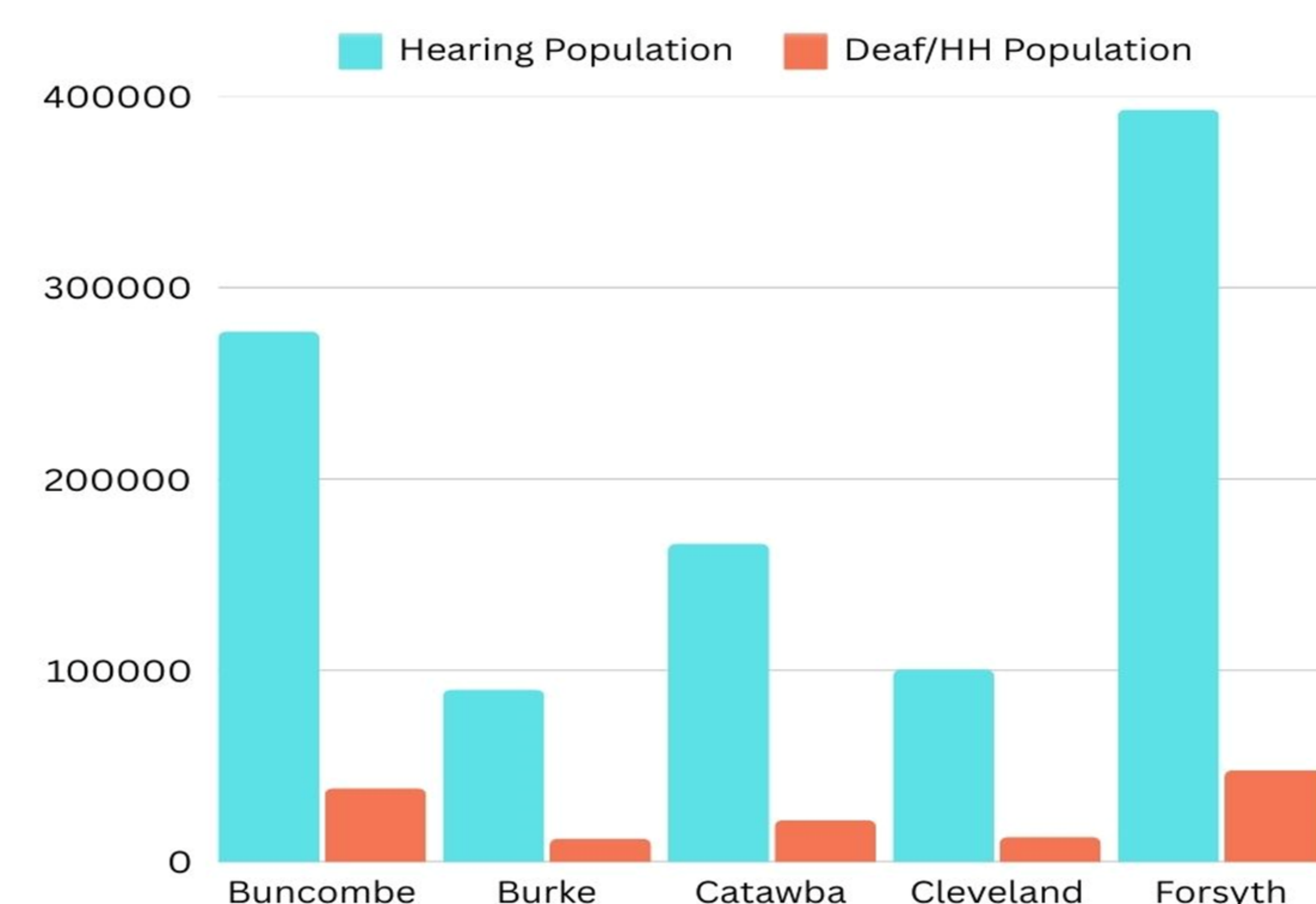
By the fulfillment of this poster, participants should:

- Discuss 2 factors that affect health and rehabilitation care for Black people in the Deaf community who reside in Appalachia
- Identify 2 features unique to Black American Sign Language
- Discuss research needs to help with the identification and understanding of audiological services among Black Deaf people

HEARING IMPAIRMENTS IN APPALACHIA

31 counties make up Appalachian North Carolina; rural, non-metro, and small metro regions are the most prominent. 25.8% of Appalachian North Carolina is rural and 15.7% have some form of a disability, including hearing loss (ARC, 2023).

Roughly 5,000 people take part in the annual health surveys sponsored by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS). In the 2021 survey, participants were asked "Are you deaf or do you have serious difficulty hearing?" In which 8.1% of participants who identified as non-Hispanic Black answered "yes." Relating to the NCDHHS (2023), rural counties Forsyth, Buncombe, Cleveland, and Catawba have significant populations with hearing loss and a high Black Appalachian population.



BLACK AND DEAF – DOUBLE MINORITY

Deaf Appalachians are a minority group of people that celebrate their identity with sign language. Black Deaf Appalachians do the same, however, they are a double minority group. Black Deaf Appalachians may have to deal with greater forms of bias, socio-language barriers, and lack of access to the resources they need compared to Black hearing people and White Deaf people.

- 18 audiology clinics (according to Google Maps) are within western NC; rural citizens closer to the western border must drive hours to the nearest clinic
- Black American Sign Language (BASL) - dialect of general ASL. Both hands are commonly used to sign, and stronger emotion is conveyed behind signs compared to ASL (McCaskill, 2011)
- Rural areas have less funding and lower economic status compared to small metros and above (ARC, 2022)



EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE & BLACK ASL

Language competence and representation is important for Black Deaf people because meaning and emotion may not be accurately conveyed by those who do not know BASL. A report was written on a Black Deaf woman in Rochester who went to the doctor because of severe abdominal pain. She was assigned an ASL interpreter, but the woman felt as if her sign was "lost in translation." The interpreter's sign was described as "monotone" compared to what the woman is used to. Fortunately, the woman was able to get a BASL interpreter who matched her emotion and was able to get an MRI (Franklin, 2021). Cultural interprofessionalism and access like this is vital, but Black and deaf rural areas are struggling to obtain these specific needs. Cultural competence is something to practice in the meantime, as it will be mentioned later.

SUPPORT FOR BLACK DEAF CULTURE

Despite being a small population in North Carolina, Black Deaf culture is preserved and celebrated:

- National Black Deaf Advocates stationed in Raleigh - focuses on promoting social equality, welfare, leadership development, and educational opportunity for Black Deaf citizens.
- Black Deaf Center - organization centered around uniting Black Deaf youth

These organizations are a great help for Black Deaf people to find resources and learn about community. An urban college study revealed that there is a serious lack of health literacy among Deaf people of color. One reason is because some Deaf patients are uncomfortable with the information they must provide (Franklin, 2021). Another reason is that there is medical information that does not have specific signs, causing a possible lack of understanding between patient and clinician. Terms such as "stroke" and "heartburn" are not commonly used in Black Deaf conversations, which is striking because these two conditions are prevalent in the Black hearing community, signifying a great need in health education among the Deaf community, including Deaf rural areas who have yet to be studied.



AUDIOLOGICAL HEALTHCARE

Audiologists with Deaf and HH patients may:

- Assess any residual hearing
- Maintain hearing aids and cochlear implants

Many rural Deaf people may not have the choice to visit an audiologist. As mentioned before, there are not many audiology clinics distributed around Western NC. There may be rural Deaf people who desire hearing aids or need an appointment, but they do not have the resources to go nor the coverage. The average audiologist is not fluent in Sign, and it is more difficult to find an interpreter who knows ASL and rare for an interpreter to know BASL in these areas. Fortunately, Black Deaf associations are growing and obtaining more funding to support the wellness of Black Deaf individuals in Appalachia.

FUTURE INVESTIGATION

C. Williams (personal communication, March 6, 2025), a speech therapist from the NC School for the Deaf in Burke County recently spoke about how the school and neighboring organizations are doing their best to let people from rural areas know that they exist and are here for those who need speech and audiological services. Black Deaf cultural awareness is also being brought into the school, supporting those underrepresented in the community.

It is important to educate students and professionals within these medical fields on the possible patients of diverse backgrounds that they may have and how to best assess them. Others may even make a significant change and outreach to rural areas, starting a chain reaction of community service. Going to these areas and asking what the locals desire within the area and meeting their needs makes all the difference, it builds a personal and direct relationship among communities. Knowledge leads to recognition, and recognition brings support to people who need it most. With enough attention, exploratory research and investigating the statistics of Black, Deaf rural areas may be properly funded by federal organizations. With increasing action and aid, these small societies will flourish further.



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