



JON GUZE

MORE COPS, LESS CRIME

USING COMMUNITY POLICING TO
ADDRESS NORTH CAROLINA'S
CRIME PROBLEM

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Executive Summary

Crime continues to be a problem in North Carolina, and the burden of crime isn't evenly distributed. Instead, it falls most heavily on poor and black communities. The best way to reduce that burden would be to implement an approach to crime control that the John Locke Foundation has advocated for many years. We call it *intensive community policing*,¹ and it consists of four elements:

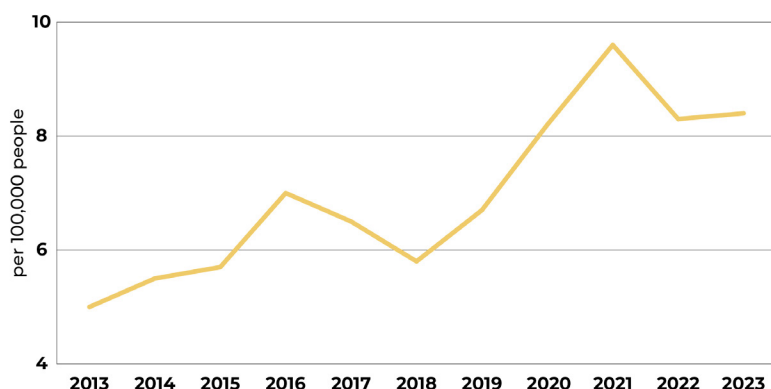
- Hiring more police officers
- Paying them higher salaries
- Providing them with state-of-the-art training and support
- Deploying them to act as peacekeepers in high-crime, high-disorder neighborhoods

Unfortunately, the communities that need intensive community policing the most are generally the ones that can least afford it. For that reason, solving North Carolina's crime problem will probably require supplemental police funding from the state.

NORTH CAROLINA'S CRIME PROBLEM

A recent Civitas poll found that almost two-thirds of North Carolinians are either very concerned or somewhat concerned about crime and safety in their communities.² They are right to be concerned. As Figure 1 shows, crime rates began to climb in 2014 and reached a peak in 2020, with homicide leading the way.³

FIGURE 1: MURDER VICTIMIZATION RATES IN N.C., 2013–23



Source: North Carolina Bureau of Investigation

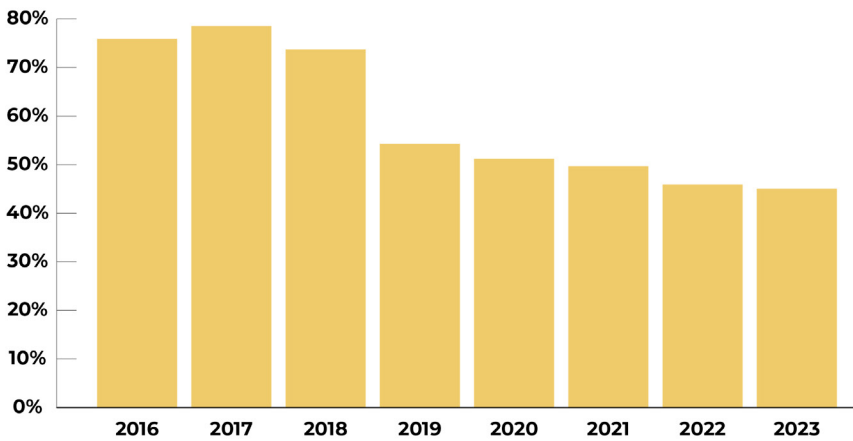
The rates for other kinds of crimes, including other kinds of violent crimes, also rose. The rate of aggravated assault, for example, jumped by 45 percent across the same 10-year period.⁴

In 2022, crime rates abated in most parts of the country, including in North Carolina. Unlike the rest of the country, however, in North Carolina the decline appeared to stall in 2023, and for some categories of crime rates actually rose.⁵ The murder rate increased slightly, and the rate for motor vehicle thefts increased by almost 40 percent. While North Carolinians hope and pray that the decline resumes and continues, a sustained decline seems unlikely without systemic changes in the operation of the criminal justice system.

Research has repeatedly shown that the best way to deter crime is to increase the likelihood of arrest and punishment.⁶ Unfortunately, arrest and punishment have become markedly less likely in recent years.

Consider, for example, the murder clearance rate (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. N.C. MURDER CLEARANCE RATE, 2016–23



Source: North Carolina Bureau of Investigation

A crime is said to be “cleared” when the suspected perpetrator or perpetrators are charged. In 2017, when the murder rate was 6.5 per 100,000 people, the clearance rate for murders was almost 80 percent.⁷ Sadly, the clearance rate for murder has declined every year since then. In 2021, when the murder rate peaked at 9.6 per 100,000, fewer than 50 percent of all murder cases were cleared, and the clearance rate declined still further in 2022 and 2023.⁸

The clearance rates for other crimes have also declined. For example, whereas about 50 percent of all aggravated assaults were cleared in 2017, by 2023 the clearance rate for aggravated assault had declined to just over 25 percent.⁹

What all this means is that more than half of all murderers and almost three-quarters of those who have committed aggravated assault are getting away with their crimes nowadays. Those who have committed less heinous crimes are even more likely to go unpunished.¹⁰ That is not the way to deter crime.



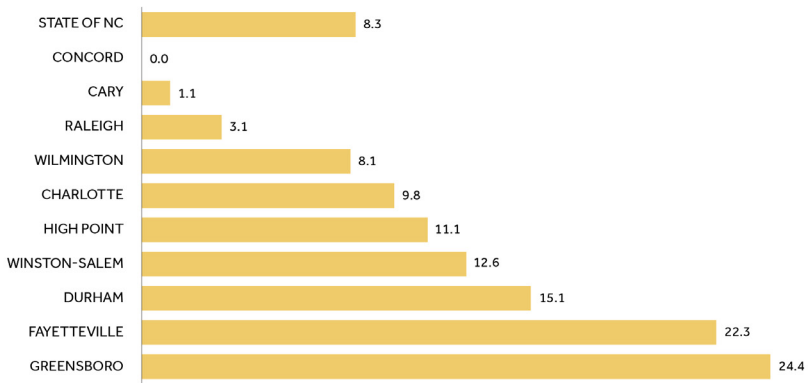
WHO BEARS THE BURDEN OF CRIME?

It would be great if North Carolina could get its crime levels down to pre-2020 levels, and it would be even better if we could get them down below the national average. Even if we succeeded in doing those things, however, many North Carolinians would still have good reason to be concerned about crime. Crime rates vary from year to year and from state to state, but they vary much more from neighborhood to neighborhood.

As seen previously in Figure 1, between 2013 and 2023 the murder rate for the state as a whole varied between 5.0 to 9.6 per 100,000 people. As shown in Figure 3, however, in 2023 the murder rate varied more than three and a half times that much among North Carolina's largest cities. Regardless of what happens in the state as a whole, the residents of high-crime communities will always need to worry about crime.

"Regardless of what happens in the state as a whole, the residents of high-crime communities will always need to worry about crime."

FIGURE 3. MURDER RATES FOR N.C. AND FOR THE STATE'S 10 LARGEST CITIES PER 100,000 PEOPLE



Source: North Carolina Bureau of Investigation/US Census Bureau

Figure 3 also shows that residents of large cities generally have more reason to worry about crime than residents of less densely developed parts of the state, but that is far from the whole story.

Consider the differences between Cary and Fayetteville. Even though they are comparably sized cities, Cary had one murder in 2023, while Fayetteville had 34.¹¹ That is a huge disparity, and it is not an anomaly. In 2022, there were 47 murders in Fayetteville, and no murders in Cary at all.¹²

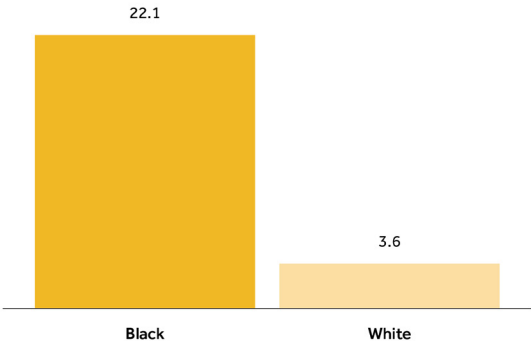
Comparing Cary and Fayetteville reveals another important consideration: blacks and the poor are far more likely to live in high-crime neighborhoods than are other demographic groups.

Cary's residents tend to be affluent professionals. In 2023 the median household income in Cary was \$129,000 per year.¹³ Only 5 percent of Cary residents were living below the poverty line,¹⁴ and only 8 percent of Cary residents were black.¹⁵

Fayetteville's residents, on the other hand, were much more likely to be working class or poor. The median household income in Fayetteville was \$56,000 per year.¹⁶ Eighteen percent of Fayetteville residents lived below the poverty line,¹⁷ and 42 percent of Fayetteville residents were black.¹⁸

Similar demographic differences can be found between low-crime and high-crime communities across the state. The cumulative effect is that blacks in North Carolina are more than six times as likely to be murdered as whites (see Figure 4).¹⁹

FIGURE 4. 2023 HOMICIDE VICTIMIZATION RATES FOR NORTH CAROLINA PER 100,000 PEOPLE



Source: FBI/US Census Bureau

These disparities in victimization rates ought to be concerning in themselves, but it's also important to remember that crime victims and their families are not the only ones harmed by high levels of crime and disorder. *Everyone who lives in a high-crime, high-disorder neighborhood suffers, too.*

Quality of life declines when drug dealers, pimps, and gang members take over the streets and other public spaces and residents are afraid to leave their homes. Furthermore, the rise in crime and the breakdown of public order in these neighborhoods tend to drive away businesses and discourage investment. The result is a cycle of poverty that began in many cities in the late 20th century and continues to this day (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5. THE ROLE OF CRIME IN THE POVERTY CYCLE

We need to reduce crime levels in those communities and bring safety and order to their streets and public places. Fortunately, we already know how to do that.

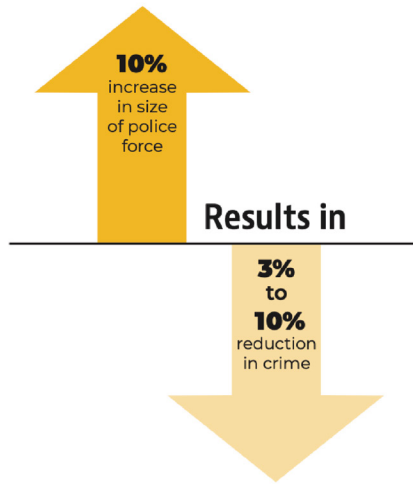


MORE COPS, LESS CRIME

For many years, the John Locke Foundation has advocated an approach to crime control that we call *intensive community policing*. It consists of:

- Hiring more police officers
- Paying them higher salaries
- Providing them with state-of-the-art training and support
- Deploying them to act as peacekeepers in high-crime, high-disorder neighborhoods

Research has consistently found that police presence deters criminal conduct.²⁰ A 2016 report from the Council of Economic Advisers under the Obama administration summarizes a variety of studies published over the preceding decade and a half. This analysis concluded not only that police presence deters crime, but also that “a 10 percent increase in police hiring leads to a crime decrease of approximately 3 to 10 percent” (see Figure 6).²¹

FIGURE 6. EFFECT OF INTENSIVE COMMUNITY POLICING

Source: Council of economic advisors (Washington, D.C.: the White House, April 23, 2016), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/23/cea-report-economic-perspectivesincarceration-and-criminal-justice>

It also found that “larger police forces do not reduce crime through simply arresting more people and increasing incapacitation, instead, investments in police are likely to make communities safer through deterring crime.”²²

Additional studies published since 2016 have corroborated that finding, including one published by Aaron Chafin *et al.* in *American Economic Review: Insights* in 2022.²³ Unlike the previous studies, this one disaggregated its results by race. Summarizing their results, the authors said:

We find that expanding police personnel leads to reductions in serious crime. With respect to homicide, we find that every 10-17 officers hired abate one new homicide per year. In per capita terms the effects are approximately twice as large for Black victims. In short, larger police forces save lives and the lives saved are disproportionately Black lives. (Emphasis added).²⁴

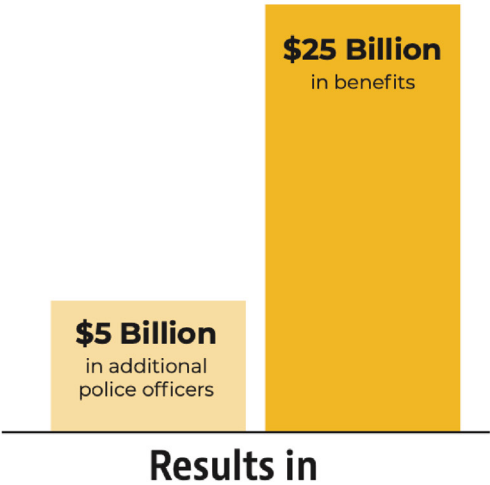
Intensive community policing offers many benefits beyond protecting the lives and property of potential crime victims. It also improves the quality of life and the economic prospects of everyone who lives in what would otherwise be high-crime communities. It improves the life

prospects of young men who would otherwise commit crimes, and it reduces the cost of dealing with criminal offenders through the criminal justice and social welfare systems.

In the long run, by attracting better qualified applicants and reducing the need to retain or rehire bad actors, intensive community policing also improves the level of professionalism among police officers and reduces the frequency of police misconduct. Benefits like these explain why intensive community policing has been found to be extremely cost-effective. One comprehensive analysis found that a \$5 billion investment in additional police presence yielded \$25 billion dollars worth of long-term benefits.²⁵

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FIGURE 7. BENEFITS OF INTENSIVE COMMUNITY POLICING



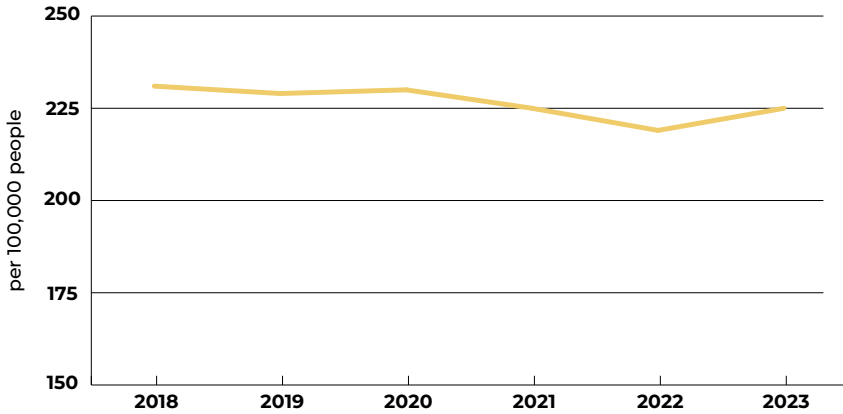
Source: Mark A.R. Kleiman, "When brute force fails: Strategic thinking for crime control," legislation/policy analysis (National Institute of Justice, March 31, 2005)



THE NEED FOR SUPPLEMENTAL POLICE FUNDING

Despite the empirical benefits of intensive community policing, North Carolina has been moving in the wrong direction. Police staffing levels in North Carolina fell between 2018 and 2022 as the rates of murder and other crimes were spiking. Furthermore, even though the number of police officers per 100,000 North Carolinians increased slightly in 2023, it has remained significantly lower than it was in 2018 (see Figure 8).²⁶

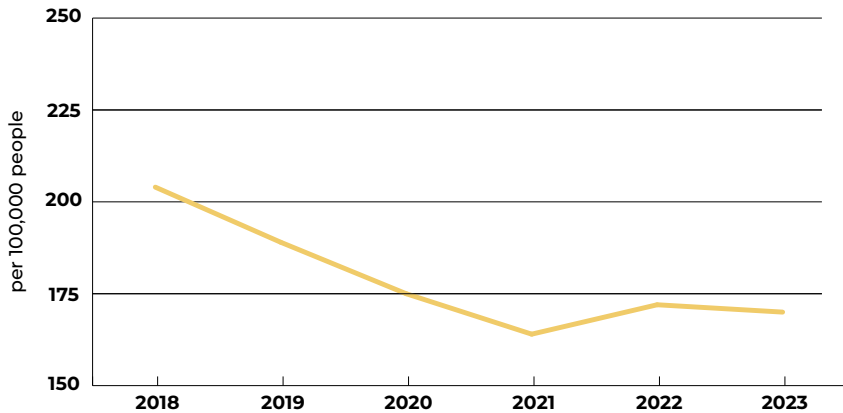
FIGURE 8. RATIO OF POLICE OFFICERS TO POPULATION IN NORTH CAROLINA, 2018-23



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation

Unfortunately, just as the murder rate has varied drastically among comparable cities (such as Cary and Fayetteville), so has the decline in police staffing levels. This decline has hit Fayetteville particularly hard, even as the city has needed all the police officers it could get during the recent crime spike (see Figure 9).²⁷

FIGURE 9. RATIO OF POLICE OFFICERS TO POPULATION IN FAYETTEVILLE, 2018-23



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation

The fact that the decline in police staffing levels in Fayetteville and across the state was occurring when crime rates were rising is probably not

coincidental. Despite its high rates of crime, Fayetteville had fewer police officers per capita than the state average in 2018. By 2023, Fayetteville's ratio of police officers to population had fallen by 16 percent, more than three times the decline in the state as a whole.²⁸

Given what we know about police presence and crime, the solution to North Carolina's crime problem might appear to be straightforward: cities like Fayetteville should simply hire more police officers and deploy them in high-crime neighborhoods.

Unfortunately, that solution isn't feasible. A city like Cary, with a median household income of \$125,000²⁹ and an average house value of \$623,359,³⁰ could easily afford to hire more police officers, but Cary doesn't need them.

Fayetteville, on the other hand, is badly in need of more police officers, but with a median household income of only \$57,000³¹ and average house value of only \$213,594,³² it can barely afford to maintain its current, inadequate level of staffing.

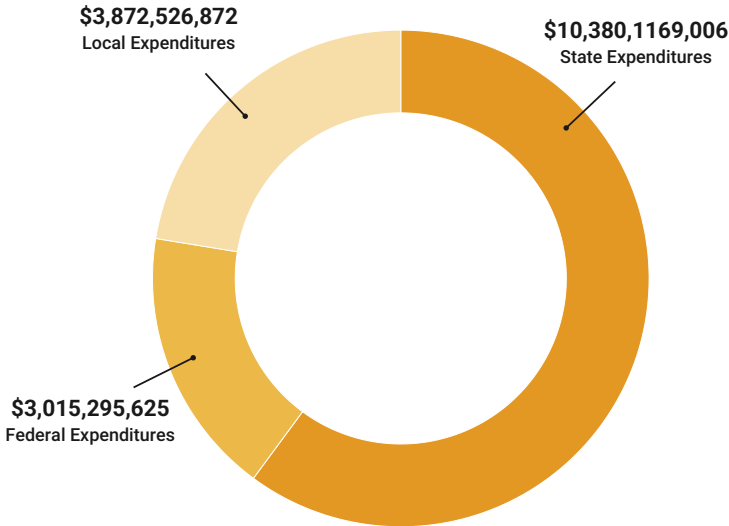
"By 2023, Fayetteville's ratio of police officers to population had fallen by 16 percent, more than three times the decline in the state as a whole."

Fayetteville, moreover, is not alone. Throughout the state, crime tends to be highest precisely where income levels and property values are lowest. If high-crime, low-income communities cannot afford intensive community policing on their own, they need supplemental funding, and the obvious source of that funding is the State of North Carolina. Providing state funding for local public services can be a thorny matter, but there is a blueprint for it in how North Carolina has been funding public schools for years.

Before the onset of the Great Depression, public school funding in North Carolina was primarily the province of local governments. Poorer counties with low tax bases, however, could not afford to provide an adequate level of educational services on their own, so beginning in the 1930s, the state began to take on a significant share of school funding. Today, 60 percent of public-school funding is provided by the state, and

public-school funding is the largest item in the state budget (see Figure 10).

FIGURE 10. K-12 EXPENDITURES IN NORTH CAROLINA, BY SOURCE



Source: North Carolina Public Schools Statistical Profile

Even though public-school funding shows that state funding for local public services is feasible, it also provides a warning about it. Public schools have witnessed enormous growth in spending levels, with much of that growth going not to teacher pay, but to administrative bloat. State policymakers seeking to provide supplemental police funding must take steps to ensure that the money is used not to fund more administrators, but to put more police officers on the streets.

Approximately 17 percent of public-school funding in North Carolina comes from federal grants. Despite the appeal of shifting costs to

out-of-state taxpayers, this is not a precedent to follow. Federal funding invariably comes with regulatory strings attached. They include administrative requirements that divert money and attention from where they are needed and often

"Approximately 17 percent of public-school funding in North Carolina comes from federal grants."

do more harm than good. Indeed, overreliance on federal funding probably accounts for much of the administrative bloat in public schools. Moreover, a recent John Locke Foundation report highlights additional problems with the current school funding system, including that it has become too complex and that it lacks transparency, accountability, and flexibility.³³

When legislators address the question of how to provide supplemental funding for high-crime, high-disorder communities, they must take what we have learned from decades of supplemental school funding to heart. Any system they come up with must ensure: that supplemental funding is used to put officers on the street and not diverted to administrative bloat; that the funding formula is simple, transparent, and flexible; and that recipients are held accountable for how they use the funds.

In addition, when they think about how best to provide supplemental police funding, legislators must find a way to solve a problem that doesn't arise in the school funding context, namely, how to avoid creating perverse incentives. In order to accomplish its goal, supplemental funding must be directed to communities with high levels of crime. If it is successful, those levels of crime will fall. But if falling crime means supplemental funding will be withdrawn, law enforcement agencies will have an incentive to keep levels high. There is no easy or obvious solution to this problem, but it is one that legislators will nevertheless have to address.

Compared to the problems listed above, finding the money to pay for supplemental police funding might appear to be an even bigger problem, but that may not be the case. In 2023, the North Carolina General Assembly committed \$500 million to NCInnovation, a nonprofit organization established to “grow the university-to-industry pipeline ... in North Carolina.”³⁴ If the State of North Carolina can afford to devote half a billion dollars of its taxpayers' money to a wildly speculative attempt at state-funded venture capitalism,³⁵ it can surely afford to spend a fraction of that amount on a proven method for deterring crime and promoting economic growth.

"[State of North Carolina] can surely afford to spend a fraction of that amount on a proven method for deterring crime and promoting economic growth."

The tax windfall created by the recent authorization of online gambling in North Carolina could also provide an easy source of supplemental funding. During its first full year, the gaming tax raised about \$116 million. A little over half of that was earmarked for specific uses, but the rest — about \$50 million — was not.³⁶ Allocating even a fraction of that stream of discretionary revenue to supplemental police funding could make a big difference.

In 2025, the starting salary for new police officers in Fayetteville was just over \$50,000 per year.³⁷ Taking training, benefits, equipment, and administrative overhead into consideration, the total annual cost of deploying an additional officer in Fayetteville would have been around \$100,000. At that rate, just 10 percent of the discretionary online gambling revenue received by the state could have paid for 50 new police officers in Fayetteville, which would have increased the total number of sworn officers by almost 30 percent.

The research findings by Chalfin et al. cited earlier suggest that a 30 percent increase in Fayetteville's police force would have resulted in a comparable reduction in both the general level of crime and the murder rate in particular — and produced something along the lines of \$25 million in total economic benefits for the city.

Conclusion

Under the North Carolina State Constitution,³⁸ the General Assembly has a duty to ensure that North Carolinians have access to free public schools. Arguably, however, it has an even more fundamental duty to ensure that North Carolinians have adequate police protection. Supplemental police funding for high-crime, low-income communities would be a good way for the General Assembly to fulfill that duty.

By making it possible for high-crime, low-income communities to deploy more police officers, supplemental police funding would:

- Reduce the level of crime and disorder in those communities.
- Improve the quality of life and the economic prospects of everyone who lives in those communities.
- Reduce the costs of dealing with criminal offenders through the criminal justice and social welfare systems.
- Improve the level of professionalism among police officers and reduce the frequency of police misconduct.

In short, supplemental police funding for high-crime, low-income communities would do more than simply fulfill the General Assembly's duty to provide adequate police protection. It would also be a great investment.

Endnotes

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Before joining the John Locke Foundation, Jon practiced law in Durham, North Carolina for over 20 years. He received a J.D., with honors, from Duke Law School in 1994 and an A.B. in history from Harvard College in 1972. In between, he studied architecture and, as a Vice President at HOK, Inc., he managed numerous

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Jon lives in Durham, North Carolina with his wife of 50 years. He has four children and seven grandchildren.

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Our History

The John Locke Foundation was created in 1990 as an independent, nonprofit think tank that would work “for truth, for freedom, for the future of North Carolina.” The Foundation is named for John Locke (1632–1704), an English philosopher whose writings inspired Thomas Jefferson and the other Founders. The John Locke Foundation is a 501(c)(3) research institute and is funded by thousands of individuals, foundations, and corporations. The Foundation does not accept government funds or contributions to influence its work or the outcomes of its research.

Our Vision

Locke envisions a North Carolina in which liberty and limited, constitutional government are the cornerstones of society so that individuals, families, and institutions can freely shape their own destinies.

Our Mission

Locke’s mission is to be North Carolina’s most influential force driving public policy so North Carolinians flourish in a free and prosperous society.



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