

# Accessible Voting in North Carolina

**DISABILITY RIGHTS**  
NORTH CAROLINA

Champions for Equality and Justice



Voting is a fundamental right, and the primary means by which citizens decide on how society is governed at the local, state, and national levels. Having a vote is having a voice.

Voting is also a part of the full integration of people with disabilities in the community. Yet, that full integration is possible only when all barriers to participation are removed and people with disabilities vote at the same rate as individuals without disabilities. Congress recognized the importance of voting accessibility for people with disabilities and authorized the Protection and Advocacy Voting Access (PAVA) program as part of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA).

A critical component of participation is physical access. Disability Rights NC, with funding from the PAVA program, assessed physical accessibility of polling sites across the State. After exploring the voting gap between those with and without disabilities, this report details the state of physical accessibility of polling sites in North Carolina and includes recommendations for ways the voting gap can be bridged.

## The Voting Gap

An analysis conducted by Rutgers University showed that the 2008 national voter turnout rate for people with disabilities was 7% lower than the turnout rate for people without disabilities. In North Carolina, the gap was twice as wide – 14.4%, according to the same study. North Carolina's disability voting gap was the fourth largest in the nation, behind only Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

The bottom line: **North Carolinians with disabilities are not accessing the electoral process to the same extent as peers without disabilities.**

The gap in voting is reflected in the rate of voter registration. In North Carolina, approximately 90% of adults are registered to vote. By contrast, the registration rate among North Carolinians with disabilities is approximately 76%, based on Disability Rights NC's internal statistics. According to the Disability Compendium, there are approximately 897,600 people with disabilities in North Carolina. Thus, about 233,000 eligible North Carolina voters with disabilities are not registered. Far fewer votes have decided the outcomes in recent North

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Carolina races for President (14,000), Labor Commissioner (50,000), and Supreme Court (62,000).

**North Carolinians with disabilities have the power to shape the political landscape of our State.**

Rutgers University surveyed registered voters who did not vote in 2008, and identified their reasons for not voting. Those without disabilities were more likely to say that they did not vote because they weren't interested or felt their votes wouldn't matter. People with disabilities gave that reason only 9.5% of the time, while individuals without disabilities gave that reason 15.5% of the time.

**The voting gap does not reflect a lack of interest in the electoral process on the part of people with disabilities.**

In the Rutgers study, illness/disability (44%) and transportation (7%) were the two areas that people with disabilities cited in significantly greater numbers than people without disabilities as the reason they did not vote. Polling accessibility should not be an additional barrier. In other words, full participation is possible in an electoral system that is truly accessible to all citizens.

**The voting gap is not inevitable.**

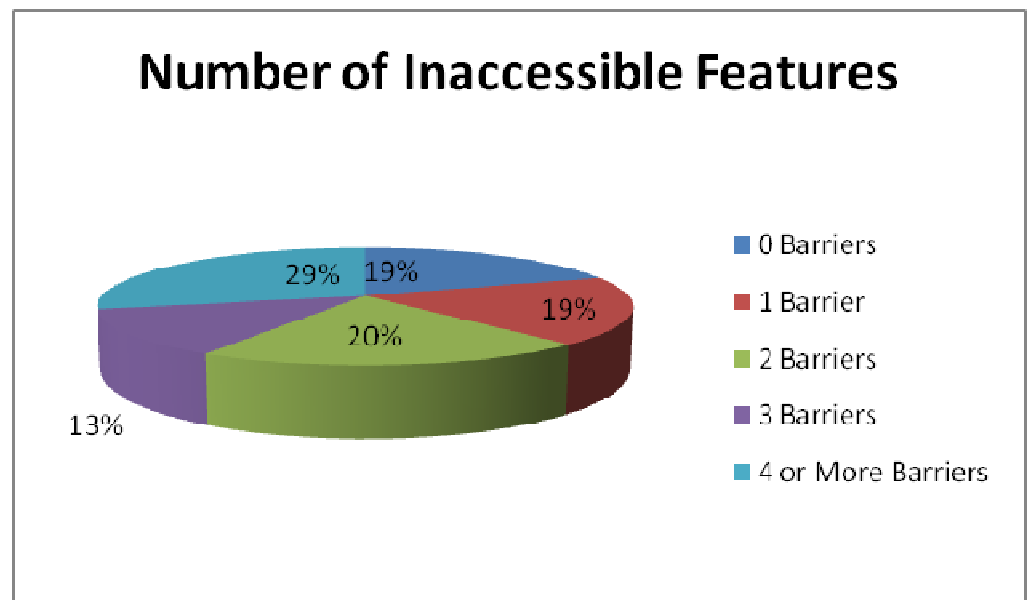
## The Polling Site Accessibility Project

Through the PAVA program, Disability Rights NC conducted extensive on-site surveys of early voting and Election Day polling sites throughout North Carolina in 2008 and 2010. The purposes were to assess physical barriers to on-site voting and identify inaccessible features to the local boards of elections.

After analyzing the survey results, Disability Rights NC sent letters to County Boards of Elections and County Managers regarding the findings for precincts in their counties. Where appropriate, we recommended corrections and suggested that counties apply for HAVA funding to remedy access issues.

Disability Rights NC surveyed 161 voting sites in 59 of North Carolina's 100 counties during the early voting periods of the 2008 and 2010 General Elections, and 352 voting sites on either Election Day 2008 or 2010.

Using a detailed process modeled on the Department of Justice polling site accessibility survey, Disability Rights NC assessed parking, curbside voting, sidewalks and walkways, ramps, entrances, interior corridors, and voting areas.



**Figure 1: Polling Sites with Inaccessible Features**

## The Findings

Polling locations varied greatly in accessibility, although the State Board of Elections as a whole has a positive record of pursuing complete accessibility. While some of the barriers described below may seem insignificant, any given barrier may prevent a person from accessing a polling place and exercising a private and independent vote, as required by law.

Accessibility does not exist in shades of gray; there are standards that a building is expected to meet to comply with the law and provide for accessibility.

### Election Days 2008 and 2010

Of the 352 polling locations surveyed on either Election Day 2008 or 2010, 79.55% had at least one inaccessible feature and 29% had four or more barriers (Figure 1.)

Disability Rights NC surveyed Election Day polling locations in twelve counties. The number of locations in each county varied from nine to 69, with an average of approximately 29 locations visited per county. Pamlico County (nine sites surveyed) had the lowest percentage of sites with inaccessible features at 44.44%. Three counties (Avery, Craven, and Robeson) had inaccessible features at 100% of the polling locations surveyed.

Results are presented here as percentages. Raw data for individual counties and polling locations

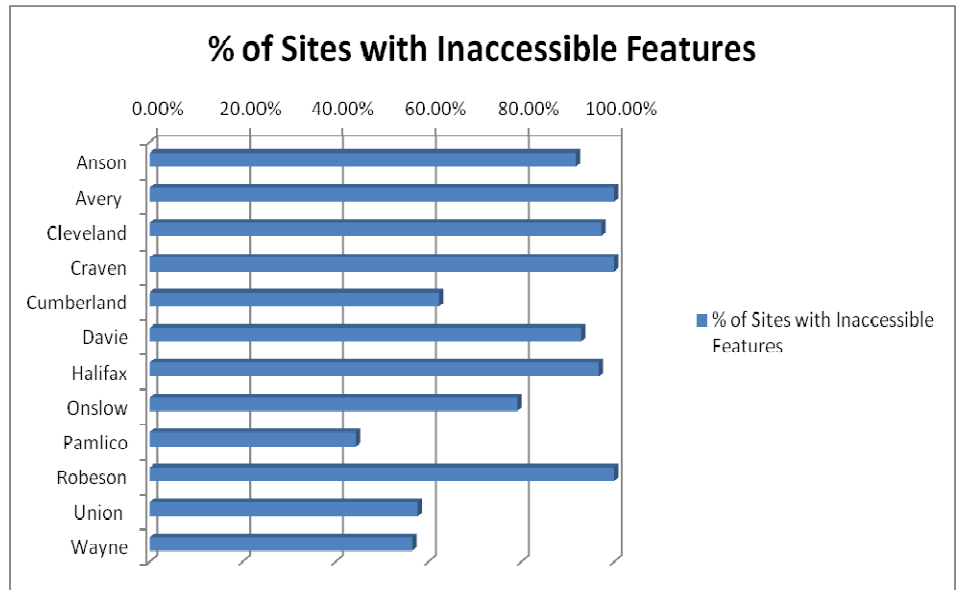


Figure 2: Inaccessible Features by County

is available on request.

As noted above, the number of inaccessible features differed significantly. While even one barrier may be enough to render the site inaccessible to a voter with a disability, some polling sites presented multiple barriers. Figure 2 indicates the average number of inaccessible features identified at sites in the counties where surveys were conducted. These figures include sites where no barriers were

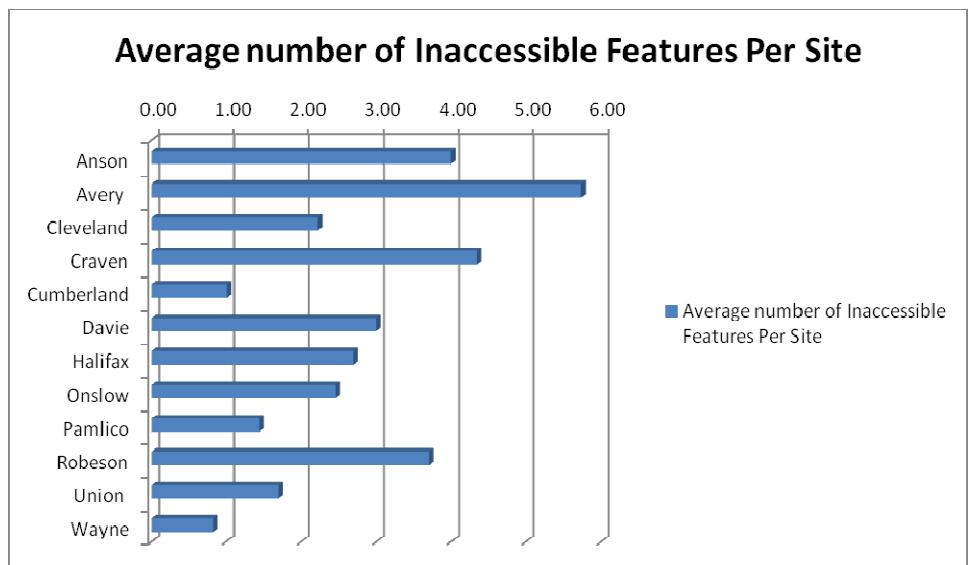


Figure 3: Inaccessible Features Per Polling Site

identified (i.e. a zero was averaged in for such sites).

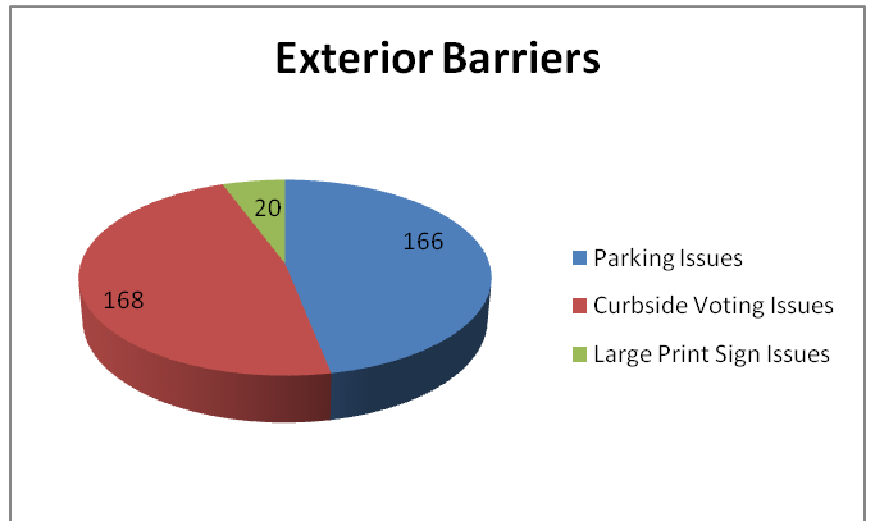
**Exterior, Entrance, and Interior Features**

To better capture the nature of the barriers encountered at polling sites, the results of the Disability Rights NC surveys are separated into exterior, entrance and interior features. Within each category, there is a breakdown of the types of issues encountered and the relative prevalence of those barriers.

**Exterior**

The investigation of exterior features included assessment of parking, curbside voting, and large print signage. The most significant problems were found in the areas of parking and curbside voting.

Parking concerns included lack of accessible parking, parking not placed to create the shortest accessible route and parking labeled as accessible without the requisite features of accessibility, including the required access aisle to allow a person with a disability to exit his or her vehicle.



**Figure 4: Types of Exterior Barriers**

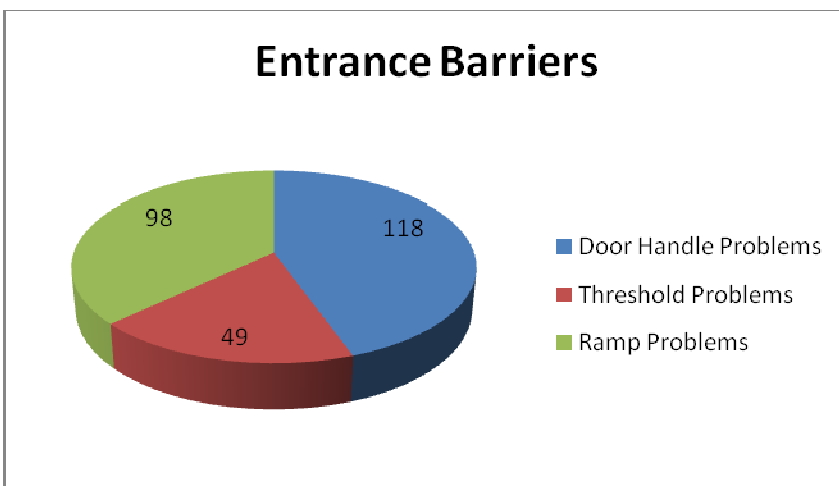
Curbside voting may allow a person with a disability to vote more easily. This service is functionally unavailable if there is no indication of how to access the service (signs) or a means to trigger the service without exiting the vehicle (alarms or bells). Curbside voting problems identified included inaccessible placement, lack of signs and absence of a system to alert poll workers of the presence of a curbside voter.

Figure 4 indicates the number of each type of exterior barrier.

**Entrance**

Polling place entrances were evaluated for accessible ramps, thresholds, and door handles. Thresholds were evaluated for appropriate height (one-half inch or less) for wheelchair/walker access. Door handles were assessed to determine whether they could be used without great manual dexterity.

Ramps were evaluated for correct slope, hand rails, level landing, edge protection and door clearance. Many buildings had entranceways that might appear to be accessible because there are either perma-



**Figure 5: Types of Entrance Barriers**

ment or temporary ramps in place for Election Day. However, the presence of a ramp does not guarantee accessibility if the ramp does not create true access absent the appropriate features identified above, including a level landing beside a doorway to allow a person to open a door without rolling backward.

Figure 5 indicates the number of each type of barrier identified among the sampled polling sites.

Interior

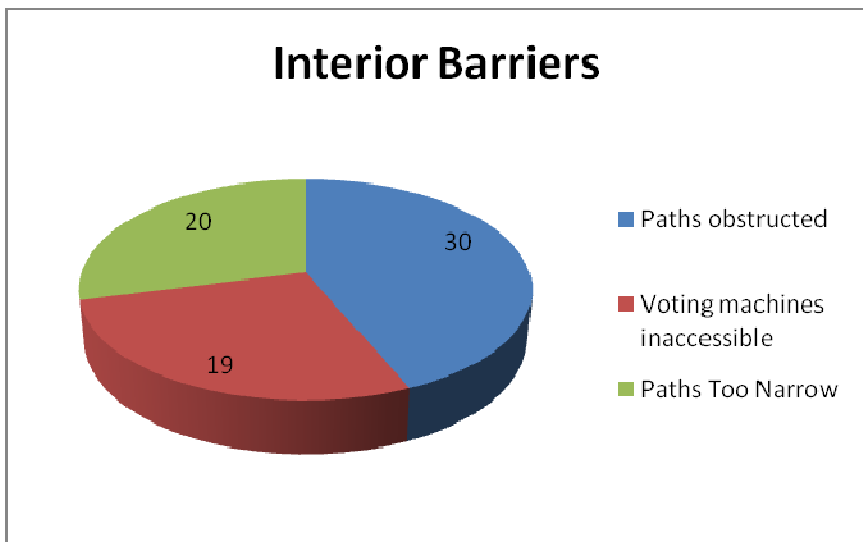
The evaluation of interior features included the access path to the voting booth and the accessible placement of the voting equipment. A common error was to place the voting machine too close to the wall, preventing access by an individual using a wheelchair. Similarly, objects in the path create a barrier for voters with limited mobility – but one that is usually very easy to prevent or correct.

Figure 7 indicates the number of the types of barriers identified among the sampled polling sites.

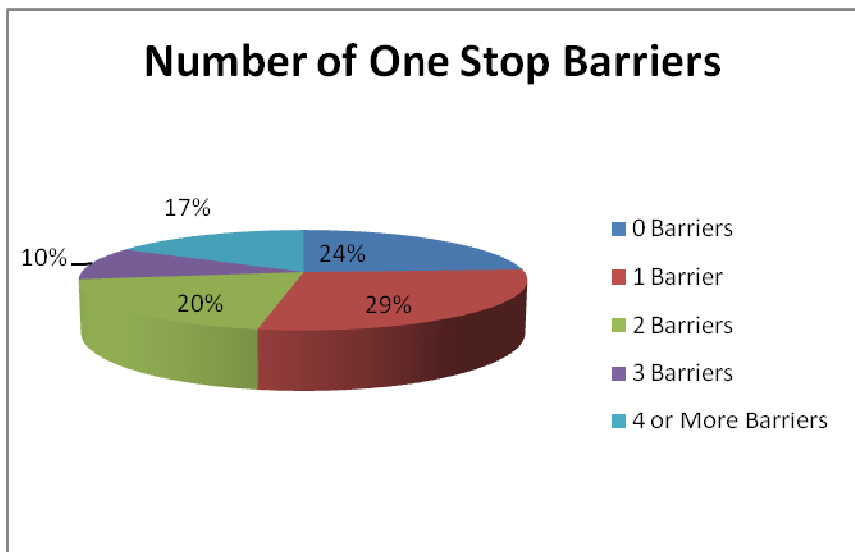
**One Stop Early Voting 2008 and 2010**

During 2008 and 2010 General Elections, Disability Rights NC surveyed 161 One Stop early voting sites in 59 counties. The county-by-county findings are attached as Figure 8 on pages 7-8.

Approximately 76% of One Stop locations had one or more barriers. Including those sites with zero barriers, the sites surveyed had an average of 1.92 barriers per site.



**Figure 6: Types of Interior Barriers**



**Figure 7: One Stop Polling Sites with Inaccessible Features**

# The Future: Removing Physical and Non-Physical Barriers

## Promoting Access to Polling Places

Access to polling sites is fundamental to full participation in the electoral process by North Carolinians with disabilities. Disability Rights NC will continue to work with the State Board of Elections, as well as County Boards, to ensure accessibility.

Physical upgrades are required to remove some of the barriers identified in this report, and we encourage local boards and county governing bodies to make necessary changes, funding for which may be available through the Help America Vote Act.

At the same time, many of the barriers encountered by our surveyors were simple ones to fix, requiring cost-free changes to the physical lay-out of polling sites. The guide *Do's and Don'ts of Polling Place Set-Up* provides some guidance to polling place set-up and can be found at [www.disabilityrightsnc.org](http://www.disabilityrightsnc.org).

## Encouraging Full Participation

Although access is a starting place, having fully accessible polling sites will not, by itself, bridge the voting gap.

Disability Rights NC engages in regular outreach regarding voting rights, encouraging North Carolinians with disabilities to register, vote, and participate actively in the civic life of our community.

A 14% gap in voter registration and voting by North Carolinians with disabilities means that important voices in our community are not being heard. Engagement in the electoral process is an important step in creating a truly equal and integrated society.

Voter registration forms are available through the State Board of Elections, County Boards or by contacting Disability Rights NC.

A comprehensive voting guide for people with disabilities can be found at [www.disabilityrightsnc.org](http://www.disabilityrightsnc.org). This guide provides all the basic information a citizen needs to vote, as well as tips and ideas for how voters with disabilities can become more engaged in the electoral process.

North Carolina has been a leading state in promoting early voting opportunities. Disability Right NC supports the continued availability of One Stop early voting as an important alternative for voters with disabilities and will continue to promote the removal of physical and non-physical barriers to full participation by people with disabilities in the electoral process.

*Disability Rights North Carolina is the federally-mandated protection and advocacy agency for people with disabilities in North Carolina. It is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. The accessibility work described in this report was funded through a Protection and Advocacy Voting Access (PAVA) grant made pursuant to the Help America Vote Act (HAVA).*

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**Figure 8: One Stop Location Survey Results**

County	Year	Sites Surveyed	Total # of Barriers	Sites w/ Barriers	Exterior Barriers	Entrance Barriers	Interior Barriers	% of Sites w/ Barriers	Barriers Per Site
Alexander	2008	1	2	1	1	0	1	100.00%	2
Alleghany	2010	1	0	0	0	0	0	0.00%	0
Anson	2010	1	0	0	0	0	0	0.00%	0
Ashe	2008	1	3	1	2	1	0	100.00%	3
Bertie	2008	4	5	4	5	0	0	100.00%	1.25
Buncombe	2010	13	11	7	5	2	4	53.85%	0.85
Caldwell	2008	2	2	1	0	2	0	50.00%	1.00
Catawba	2008	4	5	2	5	0	0	50.00%	1.25
Chatham	2010	3	4	2	4	0	0	66.67%	1.33
Cherokee	2010	1	5	1	4	1	0	100.00%	5.00
Chowan	2010	1	2	1	2	0	0	100.00%	2.00
Clay	2008	1	2	1	1	1	0	100.00%	2.00
Cleveland	2008	4	11	3	6	3	2	75.00%	2.75
Columbus	2008	7	17	7	11	6	0	100.00%	2.43
Currituck	2008	1	0	0	0	0	0	0.00%	0.00
Dare	2010	2	2	1	0	2	0	50.00%	1.00
Davidson	2010	3	9	2	6	2	1	66.67%	3.00
Duplin	2008	2	2	2	0	2	0	100.00%	1.00
Forsyth	2010	7	24	7	23	0	1	100.00%	3.43
Franklin	2010	3	12	3	12	0	0	100.00%	4.00
Gaston	2010	3	2	2	1	1	0	66.67%	0.67
Graham	2010	1	3	1	1	1	1	100.00%	3.00
Haywood	2010	2	1	1	0	1	0	50.00%	0.50
Henderson	2008	4	5	4	3	2	0	100.00%	1.25
Hyde	2008	1	2	1	2	0	0	100.00%	2.00
Iredell	2008	4	2	2	2	0	0	50.00%	0.50
Jackson	2010	3	12	3	6	6	0	100.00%	4.00
Johnston	2010	3	2	1	0	2	0	33.33%	0.67
Jones	2008	1	2	1	2	0	0	100.00%	2.00
Lincoln	2008	3	1	1	0	1	0	33.33%	0.33
Madison	2010	3	3	2	3	0	0	66.67%	1.00
Martin	2008	2	10	2	7	2	1	100.00%	5.00
Mitchell	2010	2	3	1	2	1	0	50.00%	1.50
New Hanover	2010	3	1	1	0	0	1	33.33%	0.33
Onslow	2010	4	2	2	1	0	1	50.00%	0.50
Orange	2010	3	7	3	3	0	4	100.00%	2.33
Pamlico	2008	2	4	2	3	0	1	100.00%	2.00
Pasquatank	2010	1	0	0	0	0	0	0.00%	0.00
Perquimans	2008	2	3	1	1	2	0	50.00%	1.50
Pitt	2010	4	9	3	4	4	1	75.00%	2.25

**Figure 8 (continued)**

Polk	2008	3	15	3	10	5	0	100.00%	5.00
Randolph	2010	3	15	3	11	1	3	100.00%	5.00
Robeson	2010	1	2	1	0	2	0	100.00%	2.00
Rockingham	2008	1	4	1	4	0	0	100.00%	4.00
Rutherford	2008	4	5	4	5	0	0	100.00%	1.25
Scotland	2008	1	2	1	2	0	0	100.00%	2.00
Stanly	2008	4	11	4	6	5	0	100.00%	2.75
Stokes	2008	3	13	3	5	5	3	100.00%	4.33
Surry	2008	3	8	3	4	3	1	100.00%	2.67
Swain	2010	2	3	2	3	0	0	100.00%	1.50
Transylvania	2008	1	0	0	0	0	0	0.00%	0.00
Tyrell	2008	1	2	1	0	1	1	100.00%	2.00
Union	2008	4	4	4	2	1	1	100.00%	1.00
Wake	2010	8	13	8	9	3	1	100.00%	1.63
Warren	2008	2	3	1	3	0	0	50.00%	1.50
Washington	2008	1	0	0	0	0	0	0.00%	0.00
Watauga	2010	3	8	2	8	0	0	66.67%	2.67
Wilkes	2010	2	3	1	3	0	0	50.00%	1.50
Yadkin	2008	1	6	1	3	2	1	100.00%	6.00
<b>Total</b>		161	309	123	206	73	30	76.40%	1.92