

OVERVIEW

of County Government



History of County Government



Counties trace their roots to the English shire of a thousand years ago. Serving a dual function, the shire acted as the administrative arm of the national government as well as the citizen's local government. The structural form of the shire was adopted along the eastern seaboard of North America by the colonists and adapted to suit the diverse economic and geographic needs of each of the colonies.

When our national government was formed, the framers of the Constitution did not provide for local governments. Rather, they left the matter to the states. Subsequently, early state constitutions generally conceptualized county government as an arm of the state.

After World War I, population growth, and suburban development, the government reform movement strengthened the role of local governments. Those developments set the stage for post World War II urbanization. Changes in structure, greater autonomy from the states, rising revenues, and stronger political accountability ushered in a new era for county government. The counties began providing an ever widening range of services. These trends continue apace today.

County Characteristics



Forty-eight of the fifty states have operational county governments. Alaska and Louisiana call their county type governments boroughs and parishes, respectively. Connecticut and Rhode Island are divided into geographic regions called counties, but they do not have functioning governments, as defined by the Census Bureau.

Hawaii and Delaware each have the fewest counties (3); Texas has the most (254). In addition to the 3,033 counties, there are 33 city-county governments (i.e., cities that have consolidated government functions with their surrounding counties). Jacksonville/Duval, City/County are examples of this type of government structure.

Counties by State

State	Counties	Consol. Govts
Alabama.....	67	0
Alaska.....	13	3
Arizona.....	15	0
Arkansas.....	75	0
California.....	57	1
Colorado.....	62	2
Connecticut.....	0	0
Delaware.....	3	0
Florida.....	66	1
Georgia.....	155	4
Hawaii.....	3	1
Idaho.....	44	0
Illinois.....	102	0
Indiana.....	91	1
Iowa.....	99	0
Kansas.....	104	1
Kentucky.....	118	2
Louisiana.....	60	4
Maine.....	16	0
Maryland.....	23	0
Massachusetts.....	6	1
Michigan.....	83	0
Minnesota.....	87	0
Mississippi.....	82	0
Missouri.....	114	0
Montana.....	54	2
Nebraska.....	93	0
Nevada.....	16	1
New Hampshire.....	10	0
New Jersey.....	21	0
New Mexico.....	33	0
New York.....	57	1
North Carolina.....	100	0
North Dakota.....	53	0
Ohio.....	88	0
Oklahoma.....	77	0
Oregon.....	36	0
Pennsylvania.....	66	1
Rhode Island.....	0	0
South Carolina.....	46	0
South Dakota.....	66	0
Tennessee.....	92	3
Texas.....	254	0
Utah.....	29	0
Vermont.....	14	0
Virginia.....	95	5
Washington.....	39	0
West Virginia.....	55	0
Wisconsin.....	72	0
Wyoming.....	23	0
Total.....	3,034	34

Counties vary greatly in size and population. They range in area from 26 to 87,860 square miles (i.e., Arlington County, Virginia and the North Slope, Alaska). Similarly, the population of counties varies tremendously from Loving County, Texas, with its 67 residents, to Los Angeles County, California, which is home to 9,519,338 people.

Counties with populations under 50,000 accounted for nearly three-fourths of all county governments in 2000.

The Many Hats of County Government



Traditionally, counties performed state mandated duties which included assessment of property, record keeping (e.g., property and vital statistics), maintenance of rural roads, administration of election and judicial functions, and poor relief. Today, counties rapidly are moving into other areas, undertaking programs relating to child welfare, consumer protection, economic development, employment/training, planning and zoning, and water quality, to name just a few.

Service delivery responsibilities, however, vary widely among counties. For most, constructing/maintaining local roads is one of their prime duties. North Carolina Counties, however, have no responsibilities in this area. Wide variations also exist in the social service responsibilities and the types of utility services (e.g., water supply) provided by county governments.

That disparity is clearly demonstrated by a review of per capita spending for various items. Merced County, California, for example, expended \$618.07

Basic Forms of County Government

There are three basic forms of county government. Under all three, many administrative responsibilities are vested by state constitution or statute to independently elected row officers (e.g., clerk, coroner, sheriff, and treasurer).

Commission

The distinguishing feature of this type of structure is the fact that legislative authority (e.g., power to enact ordinances and adopt budgets) and executive powers (e.g., to administer policies and appoint county employees) are exercised jointly by an elected commission or board of supervisors.

Although governing body members are most frequently called commissioners or supervisors, these are not universal titles. Many governing body members in Louisiana, for example, are called parish police jurors. The county governing body in most New Jersey counties is the board of chosen freeholders.

Commission/Administrator

Under this form, the county board of commissioners appoints an administrator who serves at its pleasure. That individual may be vested with a broad range of powers, including the authority to hire/fire department heads and formulate a budget.

Council-Executive

The separation of powers principle undergirds this governance system. A county executive is the chief administrative officer of the jurisdiction. Typically, he/she has the authority to veto ordinances enacted by the county board (subject to their possible override) and hire/fire department heads.

Although a majority of counties still operate under the commission form, more than 40 percent have shifted to either the county administrator or the elected executive type. State policy-makers have contributed to this trend, as Arkansas, Kentucky, and Tennessee now mandate that counties in those states be headed by an elected executive.

per capita on public welfare and \$747.35 on hospitals/health care for its residents in FY 1991- 1992. It registered no spending, however, for sewage treatment. Kent County, Delaware spent \$78.78 per capita on that activity, but nothing on welfare and hospitals/health during the period.

County Finance



Revenues

State constitutions and statutes dictate the revenue sources counties may use. Barely half the states allow counties to impose a sales tax. Only in Indiana and Maryland is a tax on income a significant county revenue source.

According to the 2001 NACo Study *County Revenue Patterns: A Survey of Authority Practices* and as was evident in the 1998 *Preliminary Investigative Report*, property taxes accounted for the single

most important revenue source for counties, reporting 30.6% of general revenue funds. The sales tax is the second most significant revenue source for counties, with counties reporting collecting 14% of the general fund from this tax.

The following states with a state sales tax do not permit local government to levy a local sales tax: Hawaii, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and West Virginia. More than half of the counties who responded to the survey reported sales tax as a percentage of the government's revenue.

Counties reported that other taxes represent 13.6% of their general fund revenues (these taxes include motor vehicle taxes, real estate transfer taxes, cable television franchise taxes and hotel/motel taxes).

Expenditures

The important role that local government plays in delivering basic social ser-

Counties by population

Population Range	No.	%
500,000 +	102	3.3 %
250,000 - 499,999	115	3.8 %
100,000 - 249,999	278	9 %
50,000 - 99,999	383	12.5 %
25,000 - 49,999	641	20.9 %
10,000 - 24,999	871	28.4 %
9,999 - 0	678	22.1 %
Total	3,068	100 %

vices (and providing income maintenance assistance) is demonstrated by the fact that public welfare, hospitals and other general health related issues comprised nearly 64% of total county government expenditures in FY 1998 – 1999. Spending on education services in local communities was second for counties, comprising 13.2% of finances (a decrease of 2.0 from FY 1991 – 92 to FY 1998 – 99).

Nearly all functional areas of government saw slight increases in the expenditure amounts that counties used for fiscal years 1991 – 92 to 1996 – 97 to support education, social services, transportation, environment and housing, and general government administration. The one area that saw a decrease in the cost to provide services was the cash assistance payments under the public welfare function, which accounted for 6.2% of county’s budget in 91 – 92 and only 4.5% in 96-97.

Debt

On average, per capita debt outstanding totals \$334, representing nearly 1.5% of resident per capita income for the counties surveyed in the 1998 NACo study. Per capita debt outstanding is far higher for residents of the most urbanized counties (\$500) than for the least urbanized counties (\$172).

Counties as Employers

To fulfill their service responsibilities, county governments employ more than two million professional, technical, and clerical personnel. Employment by county governments increased by nearly 73% between 1967 and 1997, rising from 1,582,000 full time-equivalent (FTE) personnel to 2,181,000 in 1997. Moreover, the total cost of a typical one month payroll for all county employees climbed from \$1,489,300 to \$5,750,400 over that 20 year period.

According to Census Bureau figures, local governments nationwide employed 389.4 FTE per 10,000 population in FY2000. Top individual county employers were as follows:

County	Non-Education FTE
Los Angeles County, CA	96,161
Dade County, FL	36,734
Cook County, IL	26,703
Harris County, TX	18,546

The information below is compiled from the 2000 Census and 1998-1999 U.S. Census Government Finances

Largest Counties by Population

Los Angeles, CA	9,519,338
Cook, IL	5,376,741
Harris, TX	3,400,578
Maricopa, AZ	3,072,149
Orange, CA	2,846,289
San Diego, CA	2,813,833
Kings, NY	2,465,326
Miami-Dade, FL	2,253,362
Queens, NY	2,229,379
Dallas, TX	2,218,899

Largest Counties in Total Revenue Dollars (1999)

Los Angeles, Calif.	\$15,682,637,000
San Francisco, CA	\$5,287,938,000
Philadelphia, PA	\$5,562,149,000
Miami-Dade, FL	\$4,614,837,000
Fairfax, VA	\$3,179,002,000
Montgomery, MD	\$3,031,123,000
Orange, CA	\$2,876,124,000
San Diego, CA	\$2,565,932,000
Cook, IL	\$2,551,105,000
Santa Clara, CA	\$2,339,541,000

Largest Counties in Total Expenditure Dollars (1999)

Los Angeles, CA	\$13,528,200,000
San Francisco, CA	\$5,629,907,000
Philadelphia, PA	\$5,188,082,000
Miami-Dade, FL	\$4,635,166,000
Fairfax, VA	\$2,931,530,000
Montgomery, MD	\$2,911,956,000
Orange, CA	\$2,443,954,000
San Diego, CA	\$2,364,617,000
Clark, NV	\$2,198,309,000

Leading Sources of Revenue for the Largest Counties

State Aid	\$20,217,806,000
Charges/fees	9,511,532,000
Property Tax	9,338,753,000
Interest	2,073,449,000
Sales Tax	1,753,247,000
Federal Aid	1,273,111,000

Top 25 Counties

Property tax continues to be a basic income generator for the 25 largest county governments, although the most recent data shows a noticeable fluctuation in this reliance. Fairfax County, VA reports that 41 percent of their revenue comes from property taxes, while Orange and San Bernardino Counties report that only 9% of their revenue is from this tax. On average, the top 25 counties report that nearly 22% of their revenue comes from property taxes.

Counties with the Largest percentage of Property Tax Income

County	Actual Dollars	Percent
Fairfax County, VA.....	\$1,316,028,000.....	41%
Tarrant County, TX.....	\$253,989,000.....	40%
Harris County, TX.....	\$721,621,000.....	38%
Broward County, FL.....	\$468,073,000.....	33%
Dallas County, TX.....	\$351,126,000.....	32%

Counties with the Smallest Percentage of Property Tax Income

County	Actual Dollars	Percent
Orange County, CA.....	\$252,907,000.....	9%
San Bernardino County, CA.....	\$195,282,000.....	9%
Kern County, CA.....	\$127,386,000.....	10%
Los Angeles County, CA.....	\$1,863,047,000.....	12%
Clark County, NV.....	\$275,604,000.....	12%

For the largest 25 counties, state aid provides a larger percentage of revenue than property taxes. Riverside County, LA received 60% of this revenue from state aid. The receipts from direct state aid averaged nearly 35% of total county revenues.

Counties with the Largest Percentage of State Aid

County	Actual Dollars	Percent
Riverside County, CA.....	\$975,304,000.....	60%
San Bernadino County, CA.....	\$1,257,327,000.....	56%
Los Angeles County, CA.....	\$1,028,678,000.....	56%
Santa Clara County, CA.....	\$1,257,985,000.....	54%
San Joaquin County, CA.....	\$443,874,000.....	53%

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Revised August 2003