

COUNTY GOVERNMENT SURVEY 2019

SUMMARY REPORT

Prepared by Paige Kelly and Linda Lobao, The Ohio State University, Columbus OH 43210

County governments provide essential public services and influence local economies in important ways. Counties have more than 314 million residents and serve vast areas of the United States not served by municipalities or other general-purpose local governments (NACo 2019). Because they cover most of the national territory, counties play an important role in American governance as federal programs are devolved to state and local levels. Devolution, however, does not ensure the availability of fiscal resources or local administrative capacity. Thus, county governments face challenges to meet the rising demands for public services and economic development.

Researchers at The Ohio State University and Cornell University conducted a national survey to document the status of county governments in 2018-2019. This report compares county governments in four key areas: (1) public service provision; (2) economic development; (3) land-use planning; and (4) finances. Survey findings are reported for three categories of counties' locations: metropolitan, adjacent, and rural. *Metropolitan Counties* contain or are located within a region that has large urban cores. *Adjacent Counties* are nonmetropolitan (rural) counties located next to metropolitan counties. Small or remote *Rural Counties* are nonmetropolitan counties that are not adjacent to metropolitan counties or that have relatively small or no urban populations.

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY INCLUDE:

- ❖ The services provided most widely by county governments are Law Enforcement (94% of counties), 911 Emergency Services (90%), Jails and Correctional Facilities (89%), Courts (87%), Road Maintenance (86%), Parks and Recreation (61%), and Senior Citizen Programs (57%). Rural governments are less likely than metropolitan governments to provide 15 of the 28 services documented in the survey.
- ❖ Fiscal stress is reported as moderate or significant by more than half of all county governments. Governments in 51% of rural counties, 52% of adjacent counties, and 46% of metropolitan counties report reductions in state revenue as very important problem. Loss of federal revenue is also a very important problem for government finances in 34% of rural counties, 30% of adjacent counties, and 23% of metropolitan counties. A declining local tax base is an important source of fiscal stress in 46% of rural counties, 37% of adjacent counties, but only 25% of metropolitan counties.
- ❖ Economic development activities are engaged in by a majority (77%) of county governments. However, nonmetropolitan county governments are less likely than metropolitan governments to engage in economic development activities. Yet, where economic development activities are pursued, even rural counties report doing more not less over time.

- ❖ Arts-based community development, “creative place-making programs,” are engaged in by a little over a quarter of county governments (27%). However, nonmetropolitan county governments are less likely to engage in “creative place-making” with only 18% of rural counties and 26% of adjacent counties, relative to 34% of metropolitan counties, developing these programs in their communities.
- ❖ Grant-seeking capacity is much lower in nonmetropolitan, both rural and adjacent, relative to metropolitan counties. Only 19% of rural counties and 22% of adjacent counties compared to 36% of metropolitan counties report having a grant writer on their staffs.
- ❖ Land-use planning, such as zoning and farmland preservation, is undertaken by a much higher percent of metropolitan counties than nonmetropolitan counties. Only 23% of rural counties and 28% of adjacent counties compared to 58% of metropolitan counties have a land-use planner on county government staff.
- ❖ A plan to deal with climate-related natural disasters (e.g., floods, drought, storms) were engaged in by 24% of county governments. Rural, adjacent, and metropolitan counties were about equally likely to have such plans in place. Efficient energy plans for the operation of county governments were adopted by metropolitan counties more often, 36% reporting compared to rural counties (19%) and adjacent counties (23%).
- ❖ The services county governments most often reported facing funding shortages for included Substance Abuse Support (36% of counties), Voting Machine Upgrades (36%), Public Defender’s Office (32%), and Services to the Elderly (24%).
- ❖ Use of internet for communicating with the public still lags in nonmetropolitan counties. County governments in 77% of rural counties and 86% of adjacent counties have a website. This is in contrast to 93% of metropolitan counties who maintained a website.

DESCRIPTION OF SURVEY METHODS

COUNTY RURAL-URBAN CATEGORIES

Counties were assigned metropolitan, adjacent, and rural categories based on the rural-urban continuum codes developed by the Economic Research Service. The rural-urban continuum codes are as follows:

Metropolitan Counties:

- 1 Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
- 2 Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population
- 3 Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population

Nonmetropolitan Counties:

- 4 Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metropolitan area
- 5 Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to metropolitan area
- 6 Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to metropolitan area
- 7 Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to metropolitan area
- 8 Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to metropolitan area
- 9 Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area

Metropolitan counties are defined to include rural-urban continuum codes 1-3. Metropolitan counties are determined by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Adjacent counties are defined to include codes 4, 6, and 8. Adjacency is determined by physical boundary adjacency and commuting flows. Rural counties are defined to include codes 5, 7, and 9. Codes are prepared in the Rural Economy Division, Economic Research Service, USDA (<http://www.ers.usda.gov>).

SURVEY PERIOD

Questionnaires were mailed in late spring 2018 through early winter 2019 to 3,052 counties in the 46 contiguous states that have functioning county governments. The two continental states that do not have county governments are Rhode Island and Connecticut.

KEY RESPONDENTS

Questionnaires were sent to a key respondent county official in each county government. The public official selected to receive the questionnaire varied by state, and was chosen by the researchers in consultation with staff at the National Association of Counties (NACo). NACo provided the survey mailing list.

SURVEY RESPONSE RATE

Rural counties: 300 (27% of responding counties). Adjacent counties: 368 (34% of responding counties). Metropolitan counties: 429 (39% of responding counties). Total responding counties: 1097 (a 36% response rate).

STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Differences are reported in the table below for the three county categories (metropolitan, adjacent, and rural). We denote those differences that are statistically significant at the $p \leq 0.1$ level using a chi-square test.

TABLE 1. COUNTY GOVERNMENT SURVEY 2019

(Figure are expressed in percentages. “Yes” in the “Significant” column indicates that differences among the three county categories are statistically significant at the $p \leq 0.1$ level using a chi-square test. “N” refers to the number of observations for which the complete information exists and/or to which the question applies).

	County Categories				Chi-Square
	Metropolitan	Adjacent	Rural	ALL	Significant
How many full time employees does your county employ?					Yes
0-24	0.70	1.63	7.00	2.73	
25-49	3.26	5.98	18.00	8.20	
50-99	6.99	21.74	30.00	18.23	
100-249	20.98	34.24	28.33	27.44	
250-499	16.78	22.83	9.33	16.77	
500-749	12.59	5.16	0.67	6.84	
750-999	6.76	1.63	0.00	3.19	
1,000+	31.93	6.79	6.67	16.59	
N	429	368	300	1097	
Does your county or through intergovernmental collaboration provide the following services?					
Solid waste removal	49.65	46.47	39.00	45.67	Yes
Water and sewer	38.00	27.17	14.33	27.89	Yes
Law enforcement	92.31	94.84	95.33	93.98	No
Fire protection	46.15	42.12	47.67	45.21	No
911 service	89.74	92.39	87.67	90.06	No
Emergency medical services	51.28	50.27	56.00	52.23	No
Mass transit (bus or rail)	29.14	21.74	15.33	22.88	Yes
Child care/Head Start	24.01	17.93	17.33	20.15	Yes
Drug-alcohol rehabilitation	33.80	29.35	21.67	28.99	Yes
Elder care	32.17	28.26	26.00	29.17	No
Food pantry	15.85	19.84	21.33	18.69	No
Health clinic	51.75	41.58	46.33	46.86	Yes
Homeless shelter	11.19	4.08	1.67	6.20	Yes
Hospital	11.42	15.49	20.33	15.22	Yes
Housing assistance	39.63	29.62	22.33	31.54	Yes
Landfill	38.23	38.86	37.67	38.29	No
Mental health services	53.61	48.37	40.00	48.13	Yes
Nutrition programs	43.59	34.78	31.00	37.19	Yes
Public housing	16.08	14.40	11.67	14.31	No
Senior citizen programs	59.21	54.08	57.00	56.88	No
Shelter for battered persons	16.55	13.32	10.33	13.76	Yes
Jails/correctional facilities	92.07	92.12	81.67	89.24	Yes
Courts	86.01	86.68	90.00	87.33	No
Road maintenance	84.38	85.60	90.00	86.33	Yes
Parks and recreation	72.26	60.60	48.00	61.71	Yes
Family planning services	16.78	17.12	19.33	17.59	No
Marriage strengthening services	5.13	4.35	4.67	4.74	No
TANF (welfare) services	39.39	37.50	33.00	37.01	No
N	429	368	300	1097	

	County Categories				Chi-Square
	Metropolitan	Adjacent	Rural	ALL	Significant
In the last five years, has your county done any of the following?					
Had a land use planner on staff	56.64	26.63	23.67	37.56	Yes
Adopted a land use plan	50.82	25.54	21.33	34.28	Yes
Had a grant writer on staff	36.36	22.01	19.33	26.89	Yes
Had economic development professional on staff	50.12	34.78	25.67	38.29	Yes
Maintained a county government website	93.01	85.60	77.33	86.24	Yes
N	429	368	300	1097	
What percent of your county's economic development budget is devoted to each of the following economic development activities?					YES
Small Business Start Ups					
None	39.16	43.50	55.21	44.91	
1-20%	46.21	40.79	27.41	39.36	
21-40%	10.97	10.88	9.65	10.59	
41-60%	3.13	2.72	3.47	3.08	
61-80%	0.26	1.21	2.32	1.13	
81-100%	0.26	0.91	1.93	0.92	
N	383	331	259	973	
Attraction of Outside Businesses					YES
None	25.94	32.63	48.67	34.17	
1-20%	31.42	30.24	32.70	31.36	
21-40%	19.70	23.05	9.51	18.14	
41-60%	15.21	10.48	6.46	11.32	
61-80%	5.74	2.69	1.14	3.51	
81-100%	2.00	0.90	1.52	1.50	
N	401	334	263	998	
Retention/Expansion of Existing Businesses					YES
None	27.96	34.43	47.91	35.41	
1-20%	29.47	27.84	25.10	27.77	
21-40%	23.17	21.56	13.31	20.02	
41-60%	13.60	11.38	8.37	11.47	
61-80%	3.27	3.59	3.42	3.42	
81-100%	2.52	1.20	1.90	1.91	
N	397	334	263	994	

	County Categories				Chi-Square
	Metropolitan	Adjacent	Rural	ALL	Significant
Which of the following engage in economic development planning and implementation in your county?					
City Government	75.99	73.37	71.33	73.33	No
County Government	80.42	77.99	66.00	75.66	Yes
State Government	60.84	52.72	38.33	51.96	Yes
Federal government	14.22	13.59	11.33	13.22	No
Chamber of Commerce	75.52	70.92	64.00	70.83	Yes
Ad hoc citizen group(s)	19.11	17.39	15.33	17.50	No
Utility company(ies)	39.86	29.89	20.67	31.27	Yes
Private business(es)	41.49	34.78	32.33	36.74	Yes
Utility company(ies)	27.97	18.48	17.00	21.97	Yes
Citizen advisory board/commission	27.74	26.63	27.67	27.35	No
Regional development authority	49.65	46.47	41.33	46.31	Yes
Private development foundation(s)	16.32	14.13	9.67	13.76	Yes
Public/private partnership(s)	39.39	25.82	14.33	27.99	Yes
Other	9.09	8.70	6.00	8.11	No
N	429	368	300	1097	
Of the organizations listed in the Question above, please write the note when City or County Governments play the largest role in economic development in your county.					
City Government	18.09	20.18	21.43	19.65	No
County Government	33.17	29.05	29.37	30.81	No
N	398	327	252	977	

	County Categories				Chi-Square
	Metropolitan	Adjacent	Rural	ALL	Significant
How has the focus of your county economic development organization's activities changed over the past 5 years?					YES
Attraction of outside manufacturing business					
Less	6.31	5.41	8.82	6.67	
Same	46.84	47.86	43.38	46.28	
More	37.14	31.91	22.43	31.50	
Doesn't Apply	9.71	14.81	25.37	15.56	
N	413	355	270	1038	
Attraction of outside non-manufacturing business					YES
Less	4.82	5.16	8.12	5.80	
Same	48.67	52.15	42.07	48.12	
More	37.35	28.37	24.35	30.92	
Doesn't Apply	9.16	14.33	25.46	15.17	
N	415	349	271	1035	
Expansion and Retention of existing local businesses					YES
Less	2.66	1.68	4.80	2.88	
Same	42.03	39.94	38.75	40.46	
More	46.38	46.37	35.79	43.62	
Doesn't Apply	8.94	12.01	20.66	13.04	
N	414	358	271	1043	
Small business development aimed at local entrepreneurs					YES
Less	3.63	3.10	5.56	3.95	
Same	45.28	45.92	39.63	44.03	
More	38.98	36.06	32.22	36.22	
Doesn't Apply	12.11	14.93	22.59	15.80	
N	413	355	270	1038	

	County Categories				Chi-Square	
	Metropolitan	Adjacent	Rural	ALL	Significant	
Has your county developed arts-based community and/or economic development ("creative place-making") programs to improve local quantity of life?					YES	
Yes	34.28	26.11	18.31	27.18		
No	56.97	54.44	60.34	57.05		
Don't Know	8.75	19.44	21.36	15.77		
N	423	360	295	1078		
If yes, have you funded these initiatives from your general revenue?					NO	
Yes	33.33	26.12	18.28	27.48		
No	58.19	66.42	70.97	63.86		
Don't Know	8.47	7.46	10.75	8.66		
N	177	134	93	404		
Compared to five years ago, to what extent does your county government undertake the following activities today?					YES	
Workforce development for low income workers						
Not at all	29.98	30.97	51.58	36.21		
Less	0.74	3.69	2.81	2.30		
About the same	40.29	38.35	30.53	36.97		
More	25.55	22.44	12.98	21.07		
Don't Know	3.44	4.55	2.11	3.45		
N	407	352	285	1044		
Tax abatements						YES
Not at all	28.50	27.64	41.94	31.84		
Less	5.50	3.42	5.38	4.76		
About the same	42.75	44.73	37.28	41.94		
More	21.50	18.80	13.62	18.45		
Don't Know	1.75	5.41	1.79	3.01		
N	400	351	279	1030		
National advertising of your county to recruit businesses					YES	
Not at all	50.51	58.17	72.26	58.98		
Less	2.78	3.72	3.65	3.34		
About the same	25.76	18.34	14.23	20.12		
More	17.68	13.47	7.66	13.54		
Don't Know	3.28	6.30	2.19	4.02		
N	396	349	274	1019		
Economic development assistance to small communities					YES	
Not at all	31.67	30.31	42.14	34.04		
Less	3.49	2.55	5.00	3.58		
About the same	41.40	38.24	34.64	38.49		
More	20.20	24.08	15.00	20.12		
Don't Know	3.24	4.82	3.21	3.77		
N	401	353	280	1034		

	County Categories				Chi-Square
	Metropolitan	Adjacent	Rural	ALL	Significant
In the past three years, how important have the following problems been for your county government's finances?					
Loss of federal revenue					
Not important	24.52	19.66	20.00	21.67	YES
Somewhat important	50.72	46.35	42.81	47.11	
Very important	22.60	30.06	34.39	28.29	
Don't know	2.16	3.93	2.81	2.93	
N	416	356	285	1057	
Loss of state revenue					
Not important	12.71	12.29	11.19	12.16	NO
Somewhat important	40.05	33.80	36.71	37.04	
Very important	46.04	51.96	50.70	49.29	
Don't know	1.20	1.96	1.40	1.51	
N	417	358	286	1061	
Declining tax base					
Not important	49.76	33.05	26.69	27.92	YES
Somewhat important	24.40	33.05	26.69	27.92	
Very important	24.88	37.32	45.91	34.70	
Don't know	0.97	2.85	1.07	1.63	
N	414	351	281	1046	
Pressure from local taxpayers to reduce taxes					
Not important	30.34	28.45	28.27	29.14	NO
Somewhat important	44.42	47.89	40.99	44.67	
Very important	23.30	22.25	27.56	24.10	
Don't know	1.94	1.41	3.18	2.10	
N	412	355	283	1050	
Covering costs of natural disasters					
Not important	42.31	41.48	32.98	39.52	YES
Somewhat important	33.89	30.68	45.04	35.81	
Very important	21.63	24.43	19.50	22.00	
Don't know	2.16	3.41	2.48	2.67	
N	416	352	282	1050	
Covering costs of immigrant populations					
Not important	69.73	67.14	73.76	69.95	NO
Somewhat important	19.37	20.86	17.02	19.23	
Very important	5.57	5.43	4.61	5.26	
Don't know	5.33	6.57	4.61	5.55	
N	413	350	282	1045	
Covering cost of substance-abuse services					
Not important	25.54	21.71	27.86	24.88	NO
Somewhat important	36.87	35.14	36.07	36.08	
Very important	35.66	38.29	32.50	35.69	
Don't know	1.93	4.86	3.57	3.35	
N	415	350	280	1045	

	County Categories				Chi-Square
	Metropolitan	Adjacent	Rural	ALL	Significant
Does your county government face funding shortages for any of the following services?					
Child care/foster services	19.81	19.29	19.33	19.51	No
Emergency Room services	6.99	10.05	8.67	8.48	No
Transport for lower income workers	14.69	14.95	9.33	13.31	Yes
Housing assistance	19.11	19.29	17.33	18.69	No
Service to the elderly	24.24	22.01	26.33	24.07	No
Substance abuse	34.97	36.68	36.67	36.01	No
Voting machine upgrades	33.10	37.50	38.33	36.01	No
Public defender's office	31.47	32.88	29.33	31.36	No
N	429	368	300	1097	
Has your county enacted any of the following land use policies?					
Comprehensive land use planning	65.73	44.57	37.33	50.87	Yes
Farmland preservation	38.69	28.80	16.67	29.35	Yes
Impact fees	21.21	7.88	6.33	12.67	Yes
Lot size restrictions	40.09	26.90	20.00	30.17	Yes
Wetland protection	42.42	30.71	21.67	32.82	Yes
Surface or ground water pollution control	40.33	22.01	18.00	28.08	Yes
Transportation planning	47.55	23.91	14.00	30.45	Yes
Urban growth boundaries	21.21	7.61	5.33	12.31	Yes
Watershed planning or management	46.15	29.35	25.00	34.73	Yes
Zoning	63.40	44.29	40.00	50.59	Yes
Nature preserves	22.38	7.88	7.67	13.49	Yes
Subdivision regulations	63.40	44.29	33.67	48.86	Yes
Capital improvement planning and budget	52.91	31.25	20.67	36.83	Yes
Conservation easement	35.20	17.93	13.00	23.34	Yes
N	429	368	300	1097	

	County Categories				Chi-Square
	Metropolitan	Adjacent	Rural	ALL	Significant
Has your county enacted any of the following plans/policies?					
A plan to deal with climate-related natural disasters (floods, drought, storms)	22.61	23.10	25.67	23.61	NO
An energy efficient plan for the operation of the county government	36.13	22.55	19.00	26.89	YES
N	429	368	300	1097	
How much has your state's policy affected your county's ability to undertake the following activities?					
Raise local revenue					NO
Not at all	24.70	26.14	29.82	26.57	
Slightly	17.43	20.17	22.46	19.71	
Moderately	21.07	21.02	17.19	20.00	
Very much	36.80	32.67	30.53	33.71	
N	413	352	285	1050	
Control local expenditures					YES
Not at all	28.71	28.21	38.52	31.20	
Slightly	23.84	25.36	21.55	23.73	
Moderately	23.11	22.51	21.55	22.49	
Very much	24.33	23.93	18.37	22.58	
N	411	351	283	1045	
Make local policy					YES
Not at all	24.63	31.53	39.01	30.84	
Slightly	27.56	28.98	28.72	28.35	
Moderately	28.05	21.31	20.21	23.66	
Very much	19.76	18.18	12.06	17.15	
N	410	352	282	1044	