

# Government Organization Summary Report: 2012

## *Governments Division Briefs*

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### INTRODUCTION

This report is part of a series designed to provide information on the structure, function, employment, and finances of the United States' 90,106 state and local governments. The U.S. Census Bureau produces data every 5 years as a part of the Census of Governments in years ending in "2" and "7." Between censuses, comparable employment and financial activity data are produced from intercensal quarterly and annual sample surveys.

The estimates in this report present the data collected as part of the 2012 Census of Governments summarizing the structure and organization of state and local governments. The Employment and Finance components of the Census of Governments are released as separate products. Specifically, the data in this report are a complete enumeration of all state and local governments that were in existence on June 30, 2012. For Census Bureau purposes, a government is defined as an organized entity, which in addition to having governmental character, has sufficient discretion in the management of its own affairs to distinguish it as separate from the administrative structure of any other governmental unit.

### DID YOU KNOW?

The official count of independent school districts in the United States is 12,880.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 Census of Governments: Organization Component.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Illinois has 6,963 local governments, the highest number of governmental units in the nation, followed by Texas with 5,147 governmental units.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 Census of Governments: Organization Component.

### LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

The official count of local governments in the United States for 2012 was 90,056, comprising 38,910 general-purpose governments and 51,146 special-purpose governments. General purpose governments include those classified as counties, municipalities, and townships. These governments perform a number of functions, which include financial administration, police protection, highway administration, hospitals, utilities, etc. In 2012, general-purpose governments included 3,031 counties, 19,519 municipalities, and 16,360 townships.

Special-purpose governments perform only one function or a very limited number of functions. For example, independent school districts perform education-related functions. All other single- or limited-purpose governments are called special districts. Examples of special districts include mosquito abatement districts, utility districts, water and sewer districts, transit authorities, etc. Special districts may serve a single function in a large municipality or may serve as a regional entity in more rural settings. In 2012, special-purpose governments included 12,880 independent school districts and 38,266 special districts.



## REGIONAL AND STATE-AREA CHARACTERISTICS OF GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

In examining the details of local governments, one finds that the region with the highest average number of local governments per state is the Midwest with an average of 3,332 local governments per state area. This is followed by the Northeast with 1,494; the West with 1,274; and the South with 1,181. As shown in Figure 1, the Midwest with 39,979 local governments services a 2010 Census population of about 66.9 million residents. The South with the lowest average number of local governments per state area has 20,073 local governments.

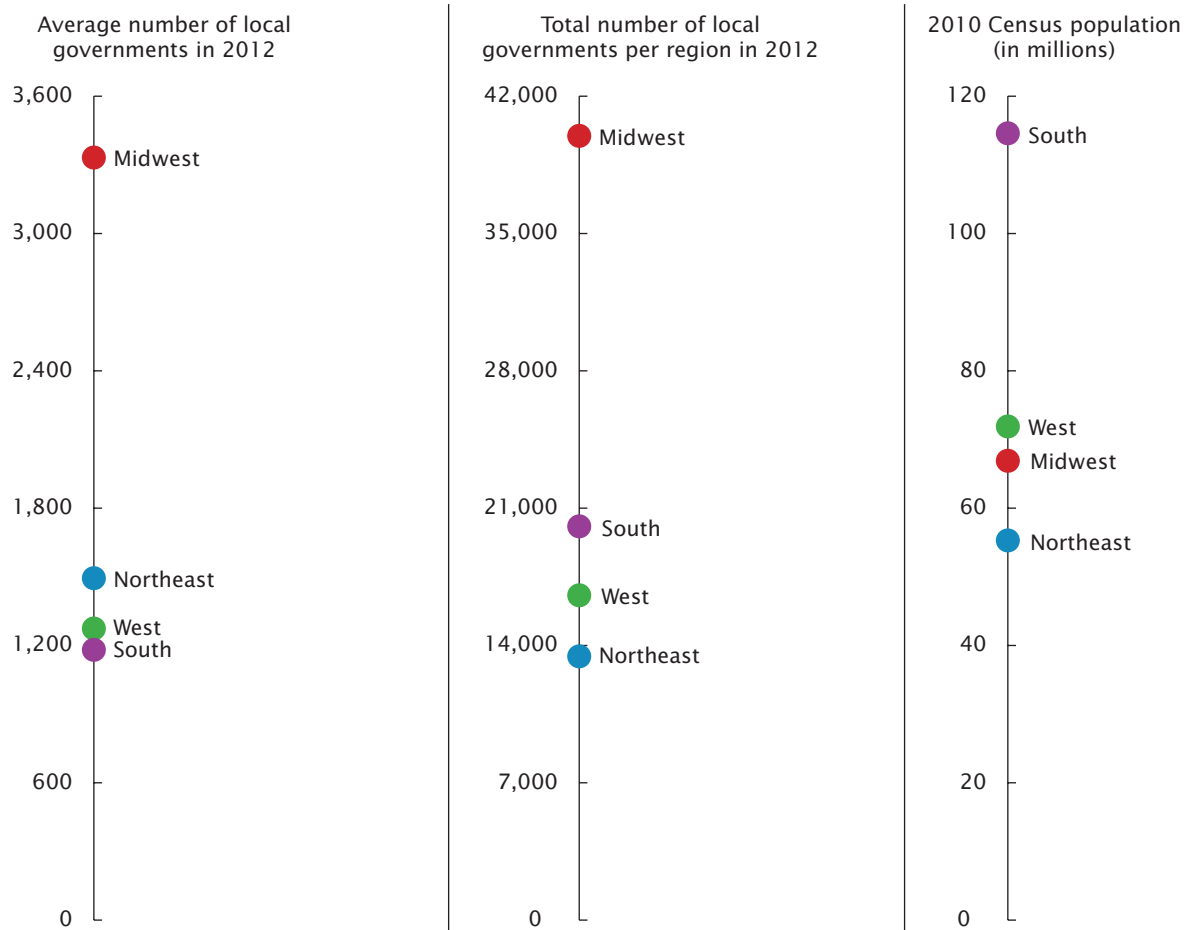
Some general points to understand when comparing state and regional numbers include:

- There are no township governments in the South and West.
- There are no county governments in Connecticut, Rhode Island, and the District of Columbia.

- A number of states have only public school systems that are dependent on the state government or on municipalities or county governments. The District of Columbia, Maryland, North Carolina, Alaska, and Hawaii have no independent school districts. Hawaii is unique as having only one public school system, a system that is dependent upon the state government.
- Sixteen states have a mix of dependent and independent school systems within their state areas. For example, Virginia has only 1 independent school district and 135 dependent school systems. Louisiana has 69 independent school districts and one dependent school system.

The largest number of dependent school systems is in the Northeast with 687 dependent systems. The South has the next largest number of dependent school systems with 477. As shown in Figure 2, the largest number of public school systems is in the Midwest with 5,039 school systems, only 8 of which are dependent school systems. The

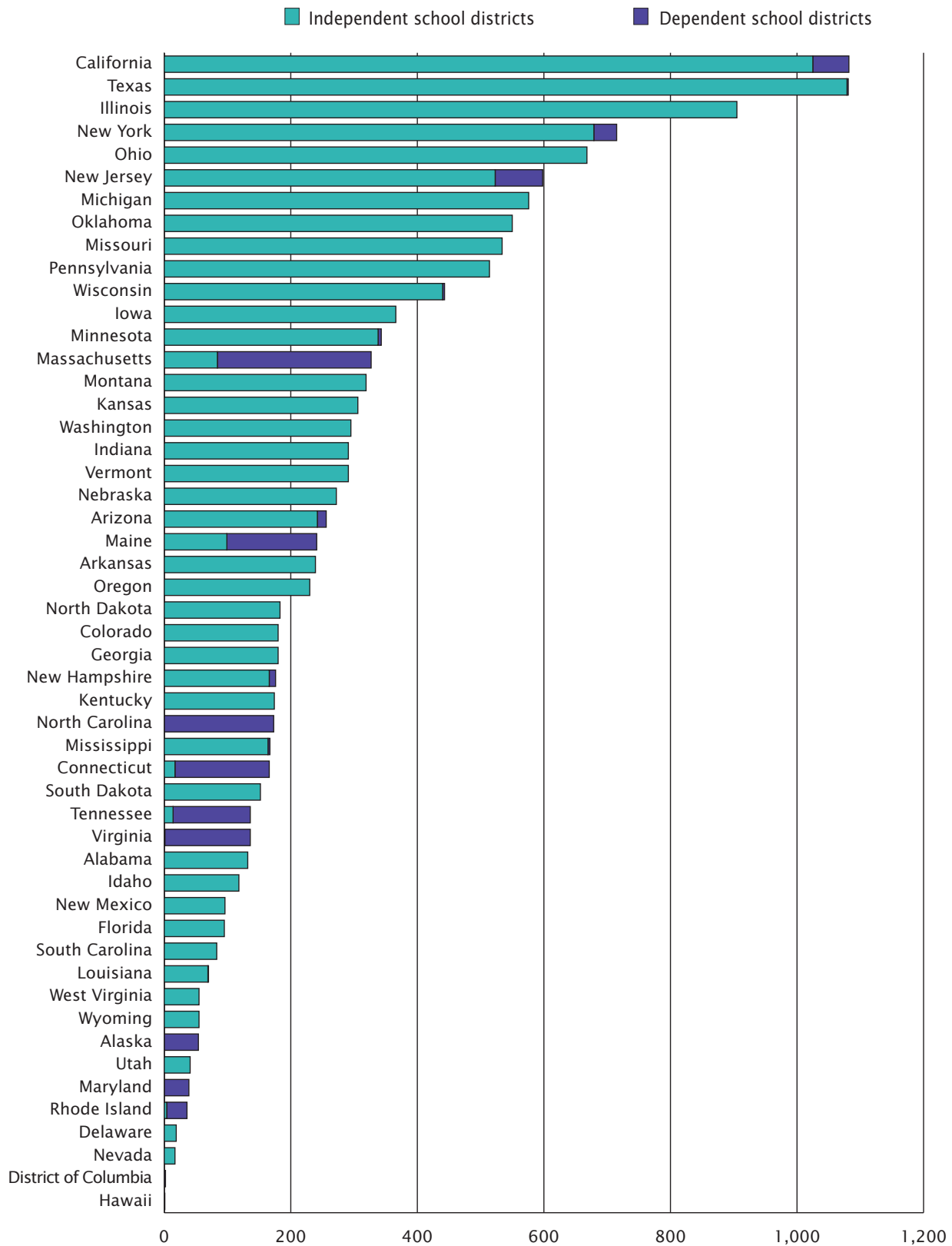
Figure 1. **Regional Characteristics of Local Governments**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 Census of Governments: Organization Component and 2010 Census.

Figure 2.

**Total Number of Public School Systems by State**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 Census of Governments: Organization Component.

smallest number of public school systems is in the West with 2,744, of which 126 are dependent systems, found mostly in Alaska and California.

The largest component of government structure is the special district type of government with 38,266 units. The largest number of special districts is found in the Midwest with 13,145 special districts; followed by the West with 11,205; the South with 9,277; and the Northeast with 4,639 special districts. Both the Midwest and West have 4 states with over 1,000 special districts (Illinois, California, Colorado, Missouri, Kansas, Washington, Nebraska, and Oregon). Special districts vary greatly by state and are comprised largely of Fire Protection Districts (5,865 districts), Water Supply Districts (3,522 districts), Housing and Community Development Districts (3,438 districts), and Drainage and Flood Control Districts (3,248 districts).

## TRENDS IN GOVERNMENTAL STRUCTURE

The 2012 Census of Governments: Organization Component found that state and local governments increased by 0.6 percent over the 2007 Census. From the 1952 Census of Governments to present, the number of governments has decreased 22.9 percent from 116,807 in 1952. From the previous census, governmental units in the Midwest region has decreased by 1.1 percent. The Northeast, West, and South have increased in the number of governments, increasing 0.1, 4.2, and 1.7 percent, respectively. The state showing the largest percentage increase in the number of governments over the last 5 years was Maryland, which added 91 governments, increasing 35.4 percent to 348 state and local governments. The next largest percentage increase was Colorado, which increased by 489 governments, an increase of 20.2 percent to 2,906 governments. The largest percentage decrease in number of governments was Indiana, which decreased by 16.2 percent to 2,710 state and local government units in 2012.

From 1952 to 2012, the percentage increase in the number of state and local governments was more than double in 6 states: Alaska (up 263.3 percent), Delaware (up 214.8 percent), New Mexico (up 199.0 percent), Florida (up 167.6 percent), Alabama (up 120.6 percent), and Tennessee (up 110.8 percent). Note that in 1952, Alaska was a territory and was officially proclaimed a state on January 3, 1959.

Particularly noteworthy, as depicted in the interactive visualizations on <[www.census.gov/govs/cog2012](http://www.census.gov/govs/cog2012)>, special districts over the 60-year time period have increased from 12,340 districts in 1952 to 38,266 districts in 2012.

In that same time period, as the visualization shows, the number of independent school districts decreased from 67,355 to 12,880 units.

## SOURCE AND ACCURACY OF THE DATA

The data in this report are not subject to sampling error or any sampling variability as the data resulted from a complete enumeration of all governmental units. Most of the data were gathered by a mail canvass (the 2011 Government Units Survey [GUS]) of appropriate government offices. GUS provided the preliminary estimates which were released in August 2012. Between August 2012 and April 15, 2013, state governments were canvassed for listings of local governments and the Governments Master Address File was augmented as appropriate. Legislation was researched to see if state legislation had approved the creation of additional governments. In the GUS, respondents were given an opportunity to respond either via mail or via a Web application. Of the respondents to the mailed survey, 38.0 percent completed their surveys via the Web collection instrument.

Data from school districts are collected in a joint Census Bureau and National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) effort through NCES State Data Coordinators.

The Census Bureau collects these data by law under Title 13, U.S. Code, Section 161. The survey is voluntary and as public record, the data are not confidential.

## NONSAMPLING ERROR

Although every effort is made in all phases of collection, processing, and tabulation to minimize errors, the survey is subject to nonsampling error, such as inaccuracies in classification, keying, coding, and coverage errors.

While the data records are ultimately from state and local government sources, the classification of organizations is entirely the responsibility of the Census Bureau.

## OVERALL UNIT RESPONSE RATE

The overall Unit Response Rate to the 2012 Government Units Survey was 75.0 percent.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

For additional information on the Census of Governments, please visit our Web site at <[www.census.gov/govs/cog2012](http://www.census.gov/govs/cog2012)>. Please contact the Outreach and Education Branch at 1-800-242-2184 (toll free) or e-mail <[govs.cms.inquiry@census.gov](mailto:govs.cms.inquiry@census.gov)>.