

Cities vs. Counties

Core Facts

INTRODUCTION

Cities and counties are two primary forms of local government in the United States. While they share some responsibilities, they function differently in terms of governance, services, and jurisdiction. This summary provides a thorough breakdown of the distinctions between cities and counties to clarify their respective roles in governance and service provision.

CITY

Definition: A city is a local government governed by a mayor and city council, providing services to residents within defined boundaries.

Oversight: Cities are governed by a mayor and a city council. The structure and authority of these officials depend on the city's charter and form of government:

- Mayor-Council System: The mayor has executive powers, while the city council passes local laws.
- Council-Manager System: A city manager, appointed by the council, oversees administrative operations.

City councils typically have between 5-15 members, depending on the city's size.

Elections: The mayor and city council members are elected by city residents. Terms for both mayors and city council members are usually either 2 or 4 years, depending on the city.

Law Enforcement: Policing is typically handled by a city police department, which enforces laws within the city limits. A city's police department is overseen by the Chief of Police, who is appointed (not voted on) by either the mayor or the city manager.

Services Provided: A city is responsible for services such as:

- Local road maintenance
- Public transportation (buses, subways, trams)
- Water Supply
- Waste management
- Parks and recreation facilities
- Libraries
- Fire and emergency medical services

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Judicial Services: A city may have courts with judges who handle minor legal matters such as traffic violations, misdemeanors, and city law violations. Judges are either appointed or elected, depending on the city's system.

COUNTY

Definition: A county is a larger region that may encompass multiple cities, towns, or rural areas, providing regional governance and services that individual cities may lack the resources to manage effectively.

Oversight: Governed by a board of county commissioners or supervisors, who make decisions collectively on county-wide matters. The size of a board varies from county to county, but typically is between 3-5 members. Some very large counties can have more than 5 members on their board of commissioners.

Elections: County commissioners or supervisors are elected by county residents, often separated by districts. Almost all county commissioner terms are 4 years, but some smaller counties do have 2-year terms.

Law Enforcement: Law enforcement is managed by the county sheriff's office, which has jurisdiction over non-city areas and sometimes supports a city's police department. The sheriff's office is overseen by the County Sheriff, who is elected by the people of a county and who also usually serves a 4-year term.

Services Provided: A county is responsible for services such as:

- County roads
- Public health services (health clinics, disease prevention, compliance with safety standards)
- Regional parks and recreation facilities
- Court systems for civil and felony cases
- Jails and correctional facilities
- Social services (Medicaid, child protection services and unemployment services)
- Emergency management (disaster response, preparedness programs)

Judicial Services: A county operates courts with judges who handle more serious legal matters, including felony cases, civil disputes, and family law matters such as custody or divorce. County judges may be elected or appointed, depending on the state and county regulations.