

**2002  
CENSUS OF  
GOVERNMENTS**  
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## **GOVERNMENT UNITS IN 2002**

This report presents preliminary information from the 2002 Census of Governments. A Census of Governments is taken at 5-year intervals, as required by law under Title 13, United States Code, Section 161. Publications resulting from the 2002 Census of Governments will cover three subject fields – government organization, public employment, and government finances.

For Census Bureau statistical purposes, a government is defined as an organized entity subject to public accountability, whose officials are popularly elected or are appointed by public officials, and which has sufficient discretion in the management of its affairs to distinguish it as separate from the administrative structure of any other government unit. The Census Bureau recognizes five basic types of local governments – counties, municipalities, townships, school districts, and special districts.

There are 87,900 government units in the United States as of June 30, 2002, according to the preliminary information. In addition to the federal and 50 state governments, there are 87,849 units of local governments. Of these, 38,971 are general purpose local governments– 3,034 county governments and 35,937 subcounty governments, including 19,431 municipal governments and 16,506 township governments. The remainder, which comprise over one-half of the total, are special purpose local governments, including 13,522 school district governments and 35,356 special district governments.

Table A presents national totals by type of government for 2002, with comparisons back to 1952. Over this period the number of general purpose governments has increased 5 percent. The number of county governments has remained relatively constant, decreasing by 18, or less than 1 percent. In 2002, there are 2,624 more municipal governments than in 1952, a 16 percent increase. Township governments have decreased by 696, or 4 percent, in the same period. Counts of special purpose governments have undergone more substantial changes than general purpose governments over the past 50 years. The number of school districts has decreased by 80 percent, from 67,355 in 1952 to 13,522 in 2002, although the rate of decline has slowed in recent years. The number of special district governments has seen a nearly three-fold rise, from 12,340 in 1952 to 35,356 in 2002. Chart A presents the relative proportion of each type of government between 1952 and 2002. Chart B is a graphical presentation highlighting changes in each type of government since 1952.

## **COUNTS BY TYPE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

### **County Governments**

Organized county governments are found throughout the nation except in Connecticut, Rhode Island, the District of Columbia, and limited portions of other states where certain county areas lack a distinct county government. In Louisiana, the county governments are officially designated as “parish” governments, and the “borough” governments in Alaska resemble county governments in other states.

Seven county governments were abolished, and two others were consolidated with city governments, resulting in a decrease of 9 county governments from 1997 to 2002. The number of county governments in 2002 is 3,034, the lowest count since 1921.

### **Municipal and Township Governments**

The 35,937 subcounty general purpose governments enumerated in 2002 (nearly identical to the 1992 number) include 19,431 municipal governments and 16,506 township governments. These two types of governments are distinguished primarily by the historical circumstances surrounding their incorporation. In many states, most notably in the Northeast, municipal and township governments have similar powers and perform similar functions.

As defined for census statistics on governments, the term “municipal government” includes all active government units officially designated as cities, boroughs (except in Alaska), towns (except in the six New England States, and Minnesota, New York, and Wisconsin), and villages. This concept corresponds generally to the “incorporated places” that are recognized in Census Bureau reporting of population and housing statistics subject to an important qualification – the count of municipal governments in this report excludes places that are currently governmentally inactive. Where municipal and county governments have been consolidated, or substantially merged, the composite units are counted as municipal governments in census statistics on governments.

The 19,431 municipal governments reported in 2002 reflect a net increase of 59 since 1997, primarily the result of new incorporations, as opposed to subdivisions, reactivations, and reclassifications.

The term “township government” is applied here to 16,506 organized governments located in 20 states. This category includes government units officially designated as “towns” in the six New England States (including some “plantations” in Maine and “locations” in New Hampshire), New York, and Wisconsin, and “townships” in 12 other states. In Minnesota, the terms “town” and “township” are used interchangeably with reference to township governments. The number of township governments decreased by 123 since 1997, primarily because some units became governmentally inactive.

### **School District Governments**

Of the 15,029 public school systems in the United States in 2002, only the 13,522 that are independent school districts are included in the count as separate units of government. The other 1,507 “dependent” public school systems are classified as agencies of other governments—state, county, municipal, or township—and are not counted as separate governments.

The decrease in the number of school district governments since 1997 reflects a continuation of the trend over the past 60 years that results from school district consolidation and reorganization. As shown in Table B, the current number of school district governments is less than two-thirds of the total 35 years ago, and only one-eighth of the 1942 total.

### **Special District Governments**

Special district governments are independent, special purpose government units (other than school districts). They exist as separate entities, have substantial fiscal independence, and have administrative independence from general purpose governments or function for multiple governments. Special district governments are found in every state and in the District of Columbia. There was a net increase in the number of special district governments from 1997 to 2002, continuing the upward trend of recent decades to create new government units to meet additional needs for government services and resources (see Table C).

Most special district governments are established to perform a single function, but some are authorized by their enabling legislation to provide several types of services. Table D shows a summary of the number of special district governments in 2002 by functional classification.

Of the 35,356 special district governments in 2002, nearly 91 percent perform a single function. As indicated in Chart C, almost one-fifth of all special district governments perform a natural resources function, including such activities as drainage and flood control, irrigation, and soil and water conservation. The next most frequent function performed by such units is fire protection, followed by water supply, and housing and community development.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The 2002 preliminary count of government units is based on a master universe directory file that contains the name, county location, mailing address, and selected characteristics for each government and dependent school system. The directory file is used as the master control and mail file for all phases of the census, and also for selecting samples of governments for non-census years.

The file of general purpose local governments (county, municipal, and township governments) was continuously updated since the 1997 census as these units of government became established, dissolved, or reorganized. In preparation for the 2002 census, special efforts were made to update the lists of public school systems and special district governments. For public school systems, the directory file was updated using individual state department of education directories and a file of local education agencies provided by the National Center for Education Statistics. For special district governments, the process involved several steps as follows:

- (1) Research into state legislation enacted since 1997 creating or authorizing various types of special districts;
- (2) review of Federal and state sources; and
- (3) a mail survey of individual county officials in most states requesting review of the list of special districts for each county.

The 2002 Local Government Directory Survey was conducted to verify addresses, eliminate nonactive units, and obtain information on selected characteristics of local governments on the directory file. Response to this directory survey was 73 percent.

The data in this report are preliminary and subject to change. A more complete discussion of data findings and survey methodology, including the criteria used in classifying governments, will be contained in the forthcoming publication on Government Organization, which will be released as Volume 1 of the 2002 Census of Governments series.

<b>Table A. Government Units: 1952 to 2002</b>						
<b>Type of government</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>1992</b>	<b>1987</b>	<b>1982</b>	<b>1977</b>
<b>Total.....</b>	<b>87,900</b>	<b>87,504</b>	<b>86,743</b>	<b>83,237</b>	<b>81,831</b>	<b>79,913</b>
Federal government.....	1	1	1	1	1	1
State governments.....	50	50	50	50	50	50
Local governments.....	87,849	87,453	86,692	83,186	81,780	79,862
General purpose:						
County.....	3,034	3,043	3,043	3,042	3,041	3,042
Subcounty.....	35,937	36,001	35,962	35,891	35,810	35,684
Municipal.....	19,431	19,372	19,296	19,200	19,076	18,862
Township.....	16,506	16,629	16,666	16,691	16,734	16,822
Special purpose:						
School district.....	13,522	13,726	14,556	14,721	14,851	15,174
Special district.....	35,356	34,683	33,131	29,532	28,078	25,962

<b>Table A. Government Units: 1952 to 2002 (cont.)</b>					
<b>Type of government</b>	<b>1972</b>	<b>1967</b>	<b>1962</b>	<b>1957</b>	<b>1952</b>
<b>Total.....</b>	<b>78,269</b>	<b>81,299</b>	<b>91,236</b>	<b>102,392</b>	<b>116,805</b>
Federal government.....	1	1	1	1	1
State governments.....	50	50	50	48	48
Local governments.....	78,218	81,248	91,185	102,343	116,756
General purpose:					
County.....	3,044	3,049	3,043	3,050	3,052
Subcounty.....	35,508	35,153	35,141	34,415	34,009
Municipal.....	18,517	18,048	17,997	17,217	16,807
Township.....	16,991	17,105	17,144	17,198	17,202
Special purpose:					
School district.....	15,781	21,782	34,678	50,454	67,355
Special district.....	23,885	21,264	18,323	14,424	12,340

<b>Table B. School District Governments: 1942 to 2002</b>	
<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of school district governments</b>
1942.....	108,579
1952.....	67,355
1957.....	50,454
1962.....	34,678
1967.....	21,782
1972.....	15,781
1977.....	15,174
1982.....	14,851
1987.....	14,721
1992.....	14,556
1997.....	13,726
2002.....	13,522

<b>Table C. Special District Governments: 1952 to 2002</b>	
<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of special district governments</b>
1952.....	12,340
1957.....	14,424
1962.....	18,323
1967.....	21,264
1972.....	23,885
1977.....	25,962
1982.....	28,078
1987.....	29,532
1992.....	33,131
1997.....	34,683
2002.....	35,356

**Table D. Special District Governments by Function: 2002**

Function	Number	Percent
<b>Total</b> .....	35,356	100.0
Single function districts:		
Total single function districts.....	32,157	91.0
Natural resources.....	7,026	19.9
Fire protection.....	5,743	16.2
Water supply.....	3,423	9.7
Housing and community development.....	3,413	9.7
Sewerage.....	2,020	5.7
Cemeteries.....	1,670	4.7
Libraries.....	1,582	4.4
Parks and recreation.....	1,314	3.7
Highways.....	767	2.2
Health.....	743	2.1
Hospitals.....	735	2.1
Education <sup>1</sup> .....	530	1.5
Airports.....	512	1.4
Utilities other than water supply <sup>2</sup> .....	485	1.4
Other.....	2,194	6.2
Multiple function districts.....	3,199	9.0

<sup>1</sup> Primarily school building authorities

<sup>2</sup> Includes electric power, gas supply, and public transit.

**Chart A: Numbers of Governments - By Type of Government: 1952 vs. 2002**

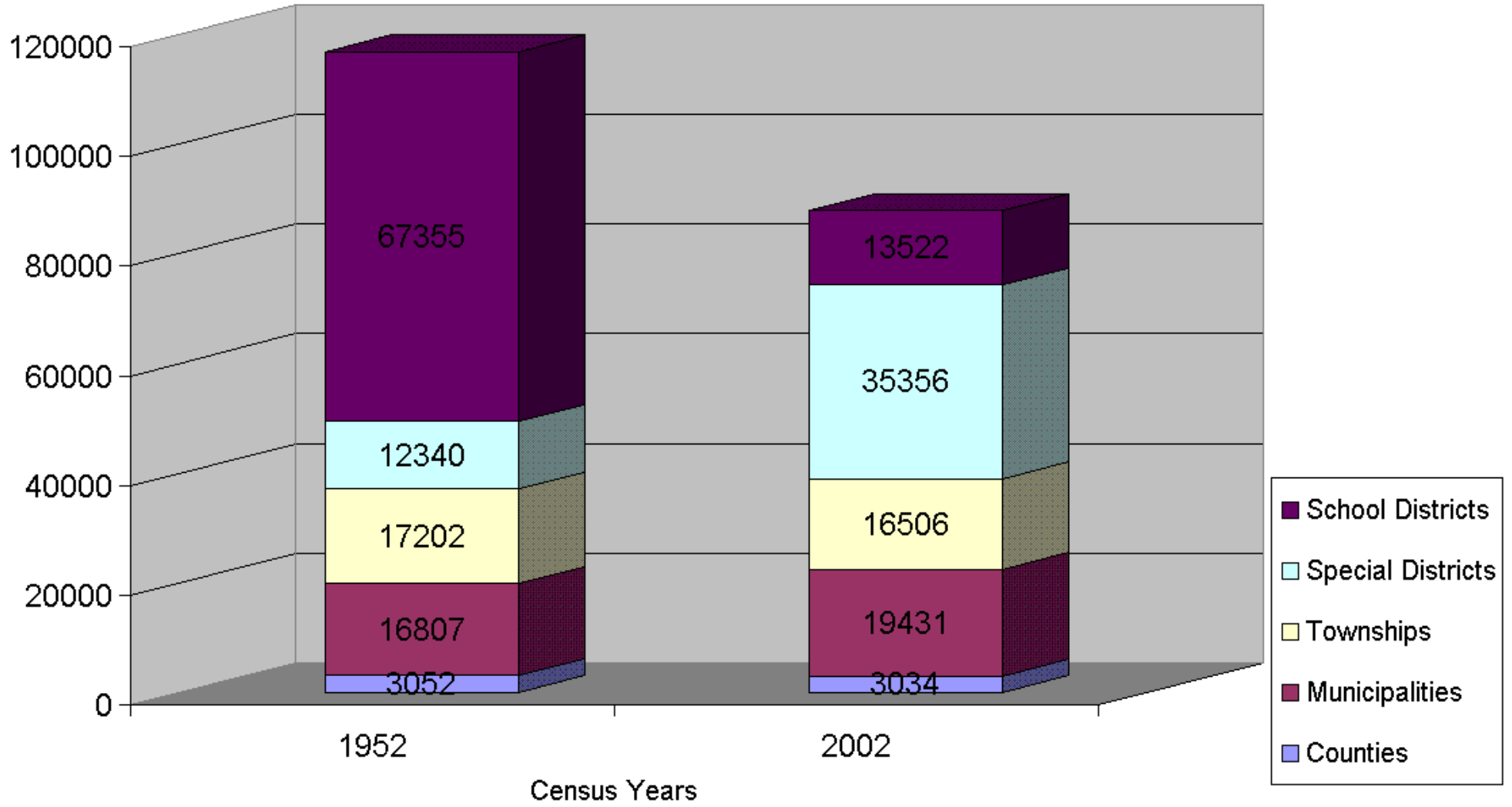
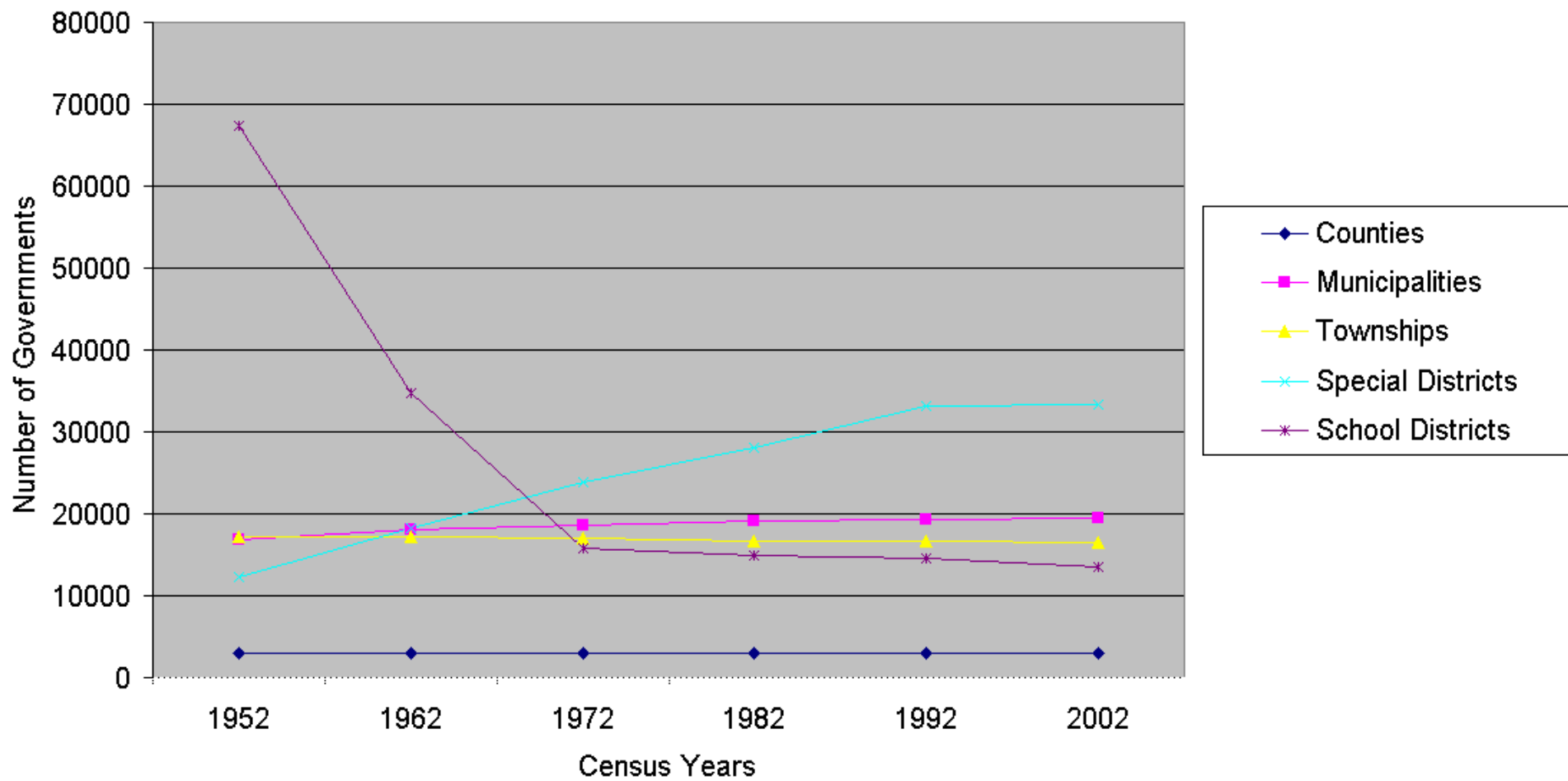




Chart B:

### Number of Governments by Type of Government: 1952 - 2002



### Chart C: Distribution of Special District Governments by Function: 2002

