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## Local Governments in South Dakota

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# Local Governments

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## in South Dakota

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Department of Rural Sociology  
Agricultural Experiment Station  
South Dakota State University  
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# Local Governments

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## in South Dakota

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On average, there are 402 persons per government in South Dakota; the U.S. average is 10 times greater, with 4,468 persons per government.

Is 402 persons per government cost effective?

Some people would say "no." The ability of rural governments to provide public services continues to be stretched to the limit. Because many of these governments serve small populations, per-capita costs of providing services are often disproportionately high. The argument is that taxes to support these various governments could be lowered through consolidation or some other administrative change.

Others respond that "bigger may be more economical," but at the cost of local control.

Where does the South Dakota Legislature fit in?

Within limits, the Legislature can, by act of law, change how local governments govern. What they cannot do is change county boundaries or dissolve townships.

Though the Legislature cannot force counties to consolidate, the

Local Government Committee of the Legislature in late February 1989 resolved that South Dakota counties could attain economies of size by consolidating, using computers, and sharing resources. The committee recommended that counties study these alternatives.

This resolution sounds like the calls for school consolidation of decades gone by. And, also like these calls, the intent of the resolution is to ask local governments to adapt to changes in local economies.

Adjustments to economic and demographic changes do not occur overnight. They require concerted, rational action by community leaders acting upon the most up-to-date information on local governments available.

This Update contains the latest census data on South Dakota governments. Community leaders will find this information beneficial when they debate consolidation issues.

### Types and numbers of local governments

There are 1,762 local governments in South Dakota serving approximately 708,000 citizens (Table 1).

Though we have 66 counties, only 64 have distinct forms of government. The two that do not are Shannon and Todd; they have "home rule" governments and contract their responsibilities to adjacent counties. Shannon contracts with Fall River County, while Todd contracts with Tripp County.

A board of commissioners is the county governing body; in addition to the board are other administrators and elected officials (register of deeds, auditor, treasurer, sheriff, and the like).

These bodies have authority over some or all of the following activities: (1) assessment of property, (2) management of deeds, property tax information, and other public documents, (3) maintenance of some local roads and other infrastructure, (4) assistance to abject poor, and (5) law enforcement.

Within South Dakota counties are 309 municipalities, 984 townships, 193 independent school districts, and 211 special district governments.

### Governments per county

Shannon County has the fewest number of local governments with three; Brown County has the most

**Table 1. Governments in South Dakota counties, 1987.**

	Total	Mun	Town	Sch	Spec	Pop86	Perpop
Aurora	28	3	20	3	1	3,300	117.86
Beadle	50	8	35	4	2	18,300	366.00
Bennett	6	1	0	1	3	3,400	566.67
Bon Homme	14	5	0	3	5	6,800	485.71
Brookings	43	8	23	5	6	24,600	572.09
Brown	69	10	44	5	9	36,700	531.88
Brule	31	3	22	2	3	5,500	177.42
Buffalo	4	0	1	0	2	1,600	400.00
Butte	13	4	3	2	3	8,200	630.77
Campbell	9	4	0	2	2	2,200	244.44
Charles Mix	42	6	24	4	7	9,400	223.81
Clark	39	7	27	2	2	4,800	123.08
Clay	19	2	12	2	2	12,800	673.68
Codington	32	6	17	5	3	22,500	703.13
Corson	29	3	20	3	2	5,000	172.41
Custer	12	5	0	2	4	6,900	575.00
Davison	21	3	12	3	2	17,400	828.57
Day	44	9	28	4	2	7,900	179.55
Deuel	28	7	16	3	1	5,000	178.57
Dewey	9	3	0	3	2	5,500	611.11
Douglas	23	3	14	3	2	4,000	173.91
Edmunds	45	4	31	4	5	5,000	111.11
Fall River	17	3	7	4	3	7,800	458.82
Faulk	35	7	22	2	3	3,100	88.57
Grant	34	9	17	4	3	8,900	261.76
Gregory	30	6	18	3	2	5,700	190.00
Haakon	8	2	0	2	3	2,800	350.00
Hamlin	26	6	13	3	3	5,200	200.00
Hand	43	3	34	2	3	4,700	109.30
Hanson	20	4	12	2	1	3,300	165.00
Harding	5	2	0	1	1	1,800	360.00
Hughes	14	3	6	2	2	14,900	1,064.29
Hutchinson	40	6	23	4	6	8,700	217.50
Hyde	7	1	3	1	1	1,900	271.43
Jackson	14	4	6	1	3	3,400	242.86
Jerauld	23	3	15	2	2	2,800	121.74
Jones	26	2	18	1	4	1,500	57.69
Kingsbury	30	9	13	5	2	6,300	210.00
Lake	35	5	16	4	9	10,800	308.57
Lawrence	14	5	1	2	5	19,400	1,385.71
Lincoln	33	7	16	4	5	14,400	436.36
Lyman	39	4	29	1	4	3,700	94.87
McCook	30	5	16	5	3	6,100	203.33
McPherson	16	5	5	3	2	3,600	225.00
Marshall	40	5	25	3	6	5,000	125.00
Meade	15	2	6	2	4	23,500	1,566.67
Mellette	24	2	18	2	1	2,300	95.83
Miner	27	5	16	3	2	3,500	129.63
Minnehaha	50	11	23	7	8	122,700	2,454.00
Moody	28	5	16	4	2	6,700	239.29
Pennington	49	8	20	5	15	76,900	1,569.39
Perkins	62	2	53	3	3	4,600	74.19
Potter	8	4	0	2	1	3,700	462.50
Roberts	49	10	30	6	2	11,000	224.49
Sanborn	25	3	16	3	2	3,000	120.00
Shannon	3	1	0	1	1	12,800	4,266.67
Spink	56	10	37	5	3	8,900	158.93
Stanley	5	1	0	1	2	2,700	540.00
Sully	7	2	0	2	2	1,900	271.43
Todd	5	2	0	1	2	6,800	1,360.00
Tripp	55	3	46	2	3	7,200	130.91
Turner	36	10	18	5	2	8,700	241.67
Union	32	5	12	6	8	10,500	328.13
Walworth	12	6	0	4	1	6,700	558.33
Yankton	21	6	9	3	2	18,800	895.24
Ziebach	4	1	0	1	1	2,500	625.00

Total = total number of governments in county.  
Mun = number of municipalities in county.  
Town = number of townships in county.  
Sch = number of school districts in county (school districts often overlap county boundaries).  
Spec = number of special districts in county.  
Pop86 = population in 1986.  
Perpop = average number of persons per government.

with 69 (Table 1). Counties with the fewest number of local governments are Shannon (3); Buffalo and Ziebach (4); Harding, Stanley, Todd (5); Bennett (6); Hyde and Sully (7); Haakon and Potter (8).

### Persons per government

The average number of persons per government within counties ranges from a low of 57.7 in Jones County to a high of 4,266.7 in Shannon County (Table 1).

### Municipalities

There are two kinds of municipalities in South Dakota: cities and towns. Cities are of two classes. First-class cities have populations of 5,000 or more, while second-class cities have populations of 500 to 4,999. Towns, also referred to as third-class municipalities, have populations under 500 people.

Municipalities, under a 1972 law, may adopt home rule charters and contract their legal responsibilities to other governments. In all cases, municipalities and counties exist as separate entities.

Minnehaha County has the greatest number of municipalities. With no towns or cities, Buffalo obviously has the fewest. It is no coincidence that Buffalo and other counties with Native American reservations have the fewest municipalities; reservation communities in South Dakota are typically not incorporated.

Besides Buffalo, counties with the fewest municipalities are Shannon, Ziebach, Stanley, Bennett, and Hyde with one; Harding, Todd, Sully, Haakon, Meade, Clay, Mellette, Jones, and Perkins with two (Table 1).



**Table 2. County rankings, selected statistics.**

Greatest number of local governments:

Rank	County	Number
1.	Brown	69
2.	Perkins	62
3.	Spink	56
4.	Tripp	55
5.	Minnehaha	50
	Beadle	50
7.	Pennington	49
	Roberts	49
9.	Edmunds	45
10.	Day	44

Fewest persons per government:

Rank	County	Persons / gov't
1.	Jones	57.7
2.	Perkins	74.2
3.	Faulk	88.6
4.	Lyman	94.9
5.	Nellette	95.8
6.	Hand	109.3
7.	Edmunds	111.1
8.	Aurora	117.9
9.	Sanborn	120.0
10.	Jerauld	121.7

Most persons per government:

Rank	County	Persons / gov't
1.	Shannon	4,266.7
2.	Minnehaha	2,454.0
3.	Pennington	1,569.4
4.	Meade	1,566.7
5.	Lawrence	1,385.7
6.	Todd	1,360.0
7.	Hughes	1,064.3
8.	Yankton	895.2
9.	Davison	828.6
10	Codington	703.1

Greatest number of townships:

Rank	County	Number
1.	Perkins	53
2.	Tripp	46
3.	Brown	44
4.	Spink	37
5.	Beadle	35
6.	Hand	34
7.	Edmunds	31
8.	Roberts	30
9.	Lyman	29
10.	Day	28

Counties with the greatest number of municipalities are Minnehaha (11); Brown, Spink, Roberts, and Turner (10); Day, Grant, and Kingsbury (9); and Beadle, Pennington, and Brookings (8).

### Township governments

Unlike cities and towns which serve "populations," townships serve "geographical areas."

Most South Dakota township governments are responsible for building and maintaining local roads. Activities in each township are overseen by a board of supervisors. However, some contract out their responsibilities to other governments; and recently, some townships have been dissolved all together.

Township governments cannot be abolished without residents' approval. If local approval is not forthcoming, then a Legislative order to disband would first require a change in the state constitution. In all cases, township governments exist separately from towns and cities.

Where populations are less dense, rural areas are usually not organized into townships. In fact, 14 counties--Shannon, Ziebach, Stanley, Bennett, Harding, Todd, Sully, Haakon, Dewey, Potter, Campbell, Custer, Bon Homme, and Walworth--do not have any townships at all (see Table 1 for all counties).

### School districts

A long time has passed since there was a one-room schoolhouse in every township. Consolidation, especially during the 1960s, closed many of these schools. Since 1957, there has been a 94.7% decline in the number of school districts, from 3,288 in 1957 to

193 in the 1987-88 school year.

During the 1987-88 school year there were 174 **operating** public school districts in South Dakota that offered grades K-12. There are 711 schools within these districts; 323 are elementary schools with more than one teacher.

Of the remaining 387, 91 were one-teacher schools, 51 were two-teacher schools, 26 were middle schools (grades 5-8), 45 were junior highs (grades 7-9), 14 were senior highs (grades 10-12), and 161 were 4-year high schools (grades 9-12).

Though school districts usually follow township boundaries and not county lines, we can still get a pretty good picture of the distribution of school districts per county (for a detailed map of school district boundaries, refer to *Education Statistics Digest* ).

Counties with the fewest number of school districts are Buffalo with none, and Bennett, Harding, Hyde, Jackson, Jones, Lyman, Shannon, Stanley, Todd, and Ziebach with one (Table 1). Counties with the most school districts are Minnehaha with seven, Roberts and Union with six each, and Brown, Brookings, Codington, Kingsbury, McCook, Pennington, Spink, and Turner with five. Incidentally, most of these counties are also in the top 10 in number of municipalities.

During the 1987-88 school year, 18 school districts (grades K-12) had less than 100 students. On the other end of the scale, two districts had over 5,000 students. Generally, per-student costs are higher in the smaller districts.

School districts are governed by local school boards which have the power to levy taxes and issue bonds. School districts may also

**Table 3. School districts (total K-12 enrollment) by size, 1987-88 school year.**

Number of students	Number of schools
under 100	18
100 - 199	44
200 - 399	62
400 - 699	30
700 - 1,499	23
1,500 - 4,999	12
5,000 +	2

Source: *Education Statistics Digest*

operate vocational schools, special education cooperatives, and multi-district vocational centers.

These cooperatives and multidistrict centers are not counted as special or separate governments, because they exist through contracts between two or more school districts, and are financed by these districts.

### Special districts

State statutes allow for a number of different kinds of special-purpose, single-, or multi-function governments. These governments may provide educational, social, or transportation services or regulate housing, industrial development, water supplies, sewerage, and solid waste disposal activities. There are 212 of these special districts in South Dakota.

The most common special governments in South Dakota are soil and water conservation districts (71), housing and community development districts (38), fire protection districts (31), sewerage districts (19), and sewerage and water supply (multipurpose) districts (18).

Counties with the fewest special district governments (Shannon,

Ziebach, Harding, Hyde, Potter, Hanson, Mellette, Deuel, Aurora, and Walworth) have just one (Table 1).

With 15, Pennington County has the greatest number of special districts. Brown and Lake have nine; Minnehaha and Union have eight; Charles Mix has seven; Brookings, Hutchinson, and Marshall have six each.

### Comparative viability

Governments that serve few citizens experience higher costs per person when delivering public services than do larger governments.

In 1982, county governments serving less than 5,000 people paid out \$334.54 per person, while those that served over 20,000 citizens paid out \$108.95. This is the basis of the argument that consolidation of counties and other local governments would cut costs.

A comparison of per-student costs also demonstrates that per-capita costs are higher for the smallest populations.

Average costs per student in school districts with less than 170 students is \$4,123.90; the per-student costs decline to \$3,576.90 for school districts with 170 to 269 students, a savings of \$547.00 per student or \$2,575,002.50 statewide.

Though we do not yet have 1987 data on county government costs for the delivery of public services, we can predict where the highest costs existed: in those counties with the fewest persons. In South Dakota, these are: Jones (1,500 persons), Buffalo (1,600), Harding (1,800), Hyde (1,900), Sully (1,900), Campbell (2,200), Mellette (2,300), Ziebach (2,500), Stanley

(2,700), Haakon (2,800), and Jerauld (2,800).

### Other factors affecting per-capita costs

Economies of size can exist when local bodies share resources, although per-capita costs may be slightly higher for governments that serve greater geographic areas, especially if those areas have lower population densities.

Other factors that affect economies of size are those related to the actual delivery of services. If records are computerized, for example, time spent handling licenses and other records will decline and the government will save money on employee wages and other overhead costs.

### Alternatives

R.L. Smith, in *Adapting Local Government to a Changing Rural South Dakota*, states that local governments have at least two sets of alternatives. The best alternative will depend on local economic, political, and cultural conditions.

First, local governments can cut per capita costs by resolving the "numbers burden." That is, they can increase the number of persons supporting the government. This is accomplished via consolidation, deferring obligations to a higher level of government, or creating regional governments (Smith, 1985).

All things being equal, bigger is almost always cheaper; however, bigger may **not always** be better. Consolidation may mean "loss of community," an alternative citizens may be unwilling to live with.



Instead of resolving "the numbers burden," locals can choose to resolve the "financial burden" in the following ways:

(1) Contract for services with another government; many townships take this approach. (2) Share responsibilities with another government; some school districts take this approach with their special education cooperatives and multipurpose school centers. (3) Deregulate, thus cutting high expenditure services (Smith, 1985).

Local governments and their constituents have the power to choose; there is no requirement that any action be taken at all. There are benefits and costs both ways--changing and doing nothing.

Any governmental body needing more specific data may write the Census Data Center, SDSU, Box 510, Brookings, SD 57007.

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