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LEADING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN A DYNAMIC WORLD OF COMPLEXITY AND AMBIGUITY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 Identify trends and disruptions that have changed the “rules of the game” and created “certain–uncertainty” for local management.
- 1.2 Define what the term “governance” means and explain why it has grown in usage.
- 1.3 Discuss how relationships between local managers and elected officials have changed in recent years.
- 1.4 List the core competencies that county and municipal managers need to have to effectively deal with contemporary challenges facing local governments.

There are more than 38,000 county, municipal, and township governments in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). While most land area in the country is still designated as rural, more than 86% of Americans live in one of the 387 metropolitan areas in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Metropolitan regions are made up of an urban core area with a population of at least 50,000 and surrounding communities that are socially and economically integrated with that core. The high degree of integration between communities in a metropolis necessitates that leaders at all levels build relationships with one another. The success of an individual community is, to a large degree, dependent on the success of the metropolitan system in which it exists. For this reason, local government leaders must understand the functioning of their governments within the context of this larger system and recognize the importance of skills for forging successful relationships with their neighbors. This chapter reviews the complexity of metropolitan America, the related management challenges, changes in the manager’s roles and responsibilities, and competencies needed to lead and manage successfully in a complex, uncertain, disruptive, and ambiguous contemporary local government world.

TABLE 1.1 ■ U.S. Local Governments in 2022						
Population Group	Municipal		Township		County	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Under 50,000	18,693	96%	16,055	99%	2,097	69%
50,000 or above	798	4%	159	1%	934	31%
Total	19,491		16,214		3,031	

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2022.

MODERN METROPOLITAN COMPLEXITY

Life in metropolitan America can be complicated, but this does not derive solely from the interconnected and codependent nature of the metropolis. Rather, a key contributor to the increased complexity is the growing number of jurisdictions in many areas. While the number of general-purpose local governments (counties and subcounty governments) has remained fairly steady, increasing by only 1.4% between 1942 and 2022, the number of special districts (government units providing only limited sets of services, excluding independent school districts) has gone up by over 300% in this same period (Table 1.1) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Special districts can increase the fragmentation in a region, and they often share the tax base with general-purpose local governments, restricting the fiscal discretion of the county or municipality.

The rising number of special districts, coupled with a lack of authoritative regional governance structures in most metropolitan areas, leads to even greater fragmentation and a tendency to resist efforts to consolidate authority or service provision (Chapter 3 provides greater detail regarding regional government). The fragmented nature of contemporary local governance in the United States, in turn, can lead to economic and racial segregation, overworked and inadequately maintained transportation and public works infrastructures, and competition for scarce natural resources, all of which will further test the capacity of local governments in the future. Even where the state retains a considerable amount of structural, functional, and fiscal authority, local government leaders are finding that their well-being is affected by that of neighboring jurisdictions. In the past, relationships between neighboring localities were more competitive than collaborative. However, modern economic stressors are forcing local governments to work together. Municipal and county managers of the region are often tasked with the responsibility of developing productive relationships with these neighboring entities.

Management Challenges

The issue of how local governments can best adapt to the challenges in a complex regional environment, as well as to the changing political and intergovernmental

landscape, has been a key topic of conversation among government reformers, public officials, civic groups, and students of local government. Increasingly, boundaries between local governments have become blurred, responsibilities for service delivery have become shared, and partnerships and collaborative approaches across jurisdictions and sectors have become commonplace. Local government leaders are expected to be entrepreneurial and equitable and to pursue economic opportunities, implement the latest technologies, and engage their residents—all while remaining efficient and effective. Plus, professional managers are often looked to as community leaders and change agents toward these efforts.

It was not always this way. Historically, municipalities and counties were responsible for the basic services needed to support their communities, such as public safety and public works. Counties acted as the arms of the state government in unincorporated areas, and townships served residents in rural areas in twenty states. Public education was provided by school districts usually separate from general-purpose local governments. In most cases, functions such as the ones listed above were predominantly or exclusively local in the sense that their performance entailed little or no collaboration with other local jurisdictions or units, no receipt of external funds, and no regulation by state and federal authorities.

But during the twentieth century, a new set of services was added to local governments' responsibilities as our nation's population grew and became more urbanized. These included land use planning, zoning and subdivision control, urban renewal, housing, parks and recreation, and public health and welfare. Local service expansion and diversification have only continued. Joining the mix of municipal and county responsibilities are now animal control, job training, juvenile and senior centers, Meals on Wheels programs, community and economic development, emergency preparedness, leisure services, and environmental protection.

This changing world has led some reformers to criticize what they see as an irrational pattern of local governmental units due to an excessive number of small jurisdictions performing a limited range of duties. This has led to costly duplication of functions, parochial orientations on the part of local leaders, and a lack of coordination between units of local government. Reformers also express concerns about the time and expertise limitations of part-time elected officials and governing bodies, and the antiquated budgetary, personnel, and procurement rules under which many local governments operate. These factors give rise to the perspective that many communities are not prepared to tackle complex and costly problems that spill across local boundary lines and are unable to take timely collective or authoritative remedial actions. These constraints make it difficult to provide the quality of life needed to attract and retain businesses and taxpayers in the competitive global economy of the twenty-first century.

On the other hand, supporters of the jurisdictional status quo argue the virtues of having government units that are close to the public they serve, citing accessibility and affordability, the need for local autonomy and control, and the cost-effectiveness of voluntary leadership. This is the case that is often made when communities vote to

incorporate into a municipal government. They contend that democratic values such as responsiveness and fairness (the part and parcel of accessible local governments) are more important than the technocratic values of efficiency and effectiveness that are endemic in different governing systems. Moreover, they point out that while local government structure and operations may not be perfect, in most places they satisfactorily deliver services demanded by the public at prices (i.e., taxes and fees) residents are willing to pay. These advocates argue that part-time elected officials, rather than professional politicians served by professional managers and their staff, are the appropriate leaders to govern communities because they are close to both the problems and the people.

As is often the case in such debates, the ideal arrangement likely lies somewhere between the extremes. But the question remains: How can local governments continue to provide the level of services expected by their residents in a rapidly changing world? Often, the answer is through professional local government management.

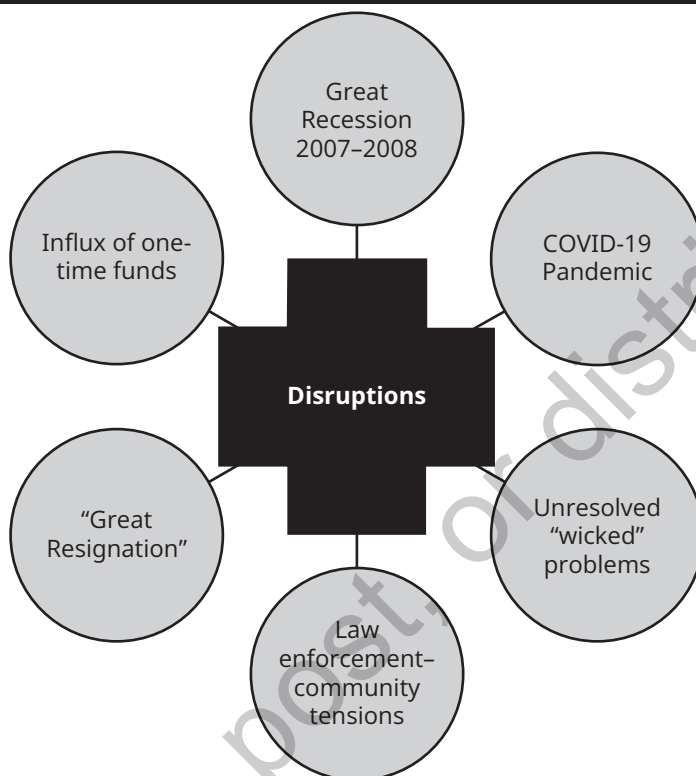
THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Increasing jurisdictional complexity and need for greater coordination between governments has drastically shifted the local government environment while the need for basic service provision remains unchanged. Contemporary local government service delivery and management have been shaped by powerful ideological and political forces and trends that have generated discussion and debate over the role of government in American society, the size and scope of governmental activities, and the cost of government. Local government leaders have also been confronted with and challenged by a number of severe disruptions in recent years.

Environmental Disruptions

These major disruptions, and others, have caused a permanent shift in the way local governments operate. Figure 1.1 provides an illustration of the major disruptions faced by local governments in recent years. They are discussed in greater detail in the paragraphs that follow.

The Great Recession of 2007–2008 revealed inequities between and within communities, especially in terms of wealth (Gooden, 2014). Fewer than 20 years after the recession, the global pandemic highlighted the weaknesses of the American federal system and fragmented local government structure in addressing pandemic-related problems in a coordinated and consistent manner. The pandemic response by public health agencies in many communities underscored the need for local managers to work outside of intergovernmental boundaries to create solutions with intersectoral and interdisciplinary partners. Long-term changes and effects related to the pandemic include an increase in remote work, issues of burnout and retention of frontline workers, and an increase in hostilities between some states and their local governments.

FIGURE 1.1 ■ Local Government Disruptions

Another disruption that has led to significant changes in the way local governments operate is the breakdown of police–community relations in many cities that has contributed to a trend in which residents’ trust and confidence in their local governments declined. The tensions between local law enforcement and minority communities in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, led to calls for remedial actions, from more and better training of police personnel to reconsidering how police departments are funded and organized.

A longer-term trend that requires intergovernmental approaches is the intractability of some of the worst problems faced in communities. The inability of governments to make substantial progress toward solving “wicked problems,” including housing affordability, homelessness, service inequities, and quality of education, have led to additional anger and distrust of the public toward government. The “Great Resignation” of public employees—especially police and public works—and resulting losses of experience, partly stemming from tensions between remote and office-based workplace assignments and inadequate compensation, has undermined the managerial capacity of these organizations to meet resident needs and expectations. Moreover,

high turnover and low recruitment rates have reinforced impressions that local governments are not the first-choice organizations for talented workers.

Finally, on a positive note, contrary to the dire forecasts of severe revenue shortfalls due to the pandemic and limited federal support, the opposite occurred. Substantial federal financial aid has been provided to assist subnational jurisdictions recovering from the pandemic-induced revenue losses and expenditure increases, and to deal with long-neglected problems such as infrastructure renewal. Particularly significant is the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, which provided states, counties, and municipalities with \$350 billion in Fiscal Recovery Funds to compensate for their COVID-19–induced revenue losses, to address the negative public health and economic impacts of the pandemic (especially on disparities and community sectors most impacted), and to undertake “transformative” projects. The amount of funds made available, and the latitude recipients were given in determining their use, were unprecedented since the implementation of the State and Local Fiscal Assistance Act of 1972 (General Revenue Sharing).

While these funds saved local governments from making major spending cuts, local managers were challenged to find better ways to engage community stakeholders and elected officials in determining funding priorities and overcoming implementation obstacles. Eventually, these funds will be expended with no replacement grants likely to follow. An overreliance on one-time funding can be disastrous for local governments. These developments have had profound impacts on the role of the public in formulating government policy, the values and views of elected officials, the manager and staff’s roles and responsibilities, and the ways in which local governments conduct their business (Stenberg, 2007). These areas will receive in-depth attention in the chapters that follow.

The Public as Customers and Production Partners

Another factor contributing to the greater complexity of running a local government are the changes in the way the public is viewed and is treated by the government. Public opinion polls conducted since the early 1970s show a consistent pattern of public preference for local governments over other levels of government. When asked, most respondents indicated they believed that their local governments were more trustworthy and efficient than their state governments or the national government (Kincaid, 2021, pp. 24–26). They also indicated a desire for local governments to be more empowered to identify community needs, set priorities, and find the most suitable ways to address problems.

Members of the public have also been consistent in their desire for the provision of quality services at the local level. At the same time, however, there is often resistance to tax increases to pay for improvements or new services. This “more for less” environment poses significant challenges in resource reallocation and management, and these enduring attitudes have changed the rules of the game for public managers.

Beginning with the New Public Management theorists and Reinventing Government movement of the early 1990s, local government leaders were encouraged to view the public in new ways. Voters have always been seen as the owners of government in that they elect, give legitimacy to, and hold accountable councils and boards—and, through these governing bodies, professional managers and staff (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). Residents have also traditionally been considered clients of local agencies, such as health and human services departments. Reinventing Government instead called upon public managers to treat members of the public as customers (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992, pp. 166–194).

The “public as customer” concept builds on the view that the local government system is a marketplace, offering choices among multiple jurisdictions for people who will “vote with their feet” in search of services they desire at tax and fee rates they are willing to pay (see Tiebout, 1956). The customer service orientation also applies within individual local governments, calling upon managers to abandon one-size-fits-all approaches and to customize or tailor services such as police patrol or solid waste collection to the preferences of various neighborhoods. This pressure is greatest in communities with district/ward elections. Local personnel are expected to have a strong customer service orientation and attitudes comparable to companies recognized nationally for their excellence. Nevertheless, treating citizens—who are the “owners” of government—as customers could make public service more transactional and diminish citizen responsibilities as voters, volunteers, and candidates for elective office.

Another dimension is the public’s engagement in partnership with managers in the provision of a local service. A wide range of possibilities exist for this role—from neighborhood watch police programs to volunteer fire departments, to service on citizen advisory boards, planning departments, or faith-based organizations—but the common factor is professional managers working alongside amateur resident partners. Local governments rely on these volunteers to provide reliable and high-quality services.

As will be discussed in Chapter 8, some use the term “coproducer” in reference to turnovers by public officials of more significant decision-making responsibility and authority to community ownership. Just as the *customer* expectation creates performance pressures on managers to deliver a given service at competitive levels of quality and cost satisfaction, the *coproducer* role requires managers to put aside “we know best” and “we/they” attitudes. Both dimensions of the public’s role potentially expand the manager’s accountability beyond the traditional governing body to include other community members.

Finally, the public cares more about the quality and cost of services than about which unit provides them. In some cases, members of the public are unsure about which government even provides the services they receive. The wide range of special- and general-purpose local governments that exist across the country is neither understood nor appreciated by most people. They tend to look to the professional manager and governing body of the community to ensure that their expectations are met, even

though service provision might be provided jointly with other localities or contracted out to the private sector; in which case, the responsibility for performance might be beyond the control of these officials.

Elected Officials' Values and Views

A second major area where the rules of the game for local government service delivery and management have changed involves the expectations of those who run for and serve on governing bodies. The basic roles of these bodies have not changed dramatically over time: representing residents and businesses, making policy, adopting budgets, overseeing administration, and attending to politics. But the ways these roles are carried out, and the orientations of the officials who serve in them, have changed in certain important respects. See Chapter 6 for a greater discussion of roles and responsibilities.

Representative democracy, not to mention electoral success, requires that elected officials listen to constituents and seek to address their needs and meet their expectations in ways that are consistent with the community's core values. Some local governments have replaced nonpartisan electoral systems with partisan ones, with municipal council and county board members elected from districts rather than from a jurisdiction at-large. These electoral system changes make it increasingly challenging for local governments to find a general will or guiding public interest to serve as the foundation of policy (Wheeland & Paulus, 2022, p. 139). It also becomes more difficult to reconcile conflicting public values, which could lead to political and economic polarization between communities, neighborhoods, and individuals.

Consequently, the policy-making process is changing. The growth of single-issue and antigovernment candidates makes it harder for elected officials to build coalitions on the governing body, find common ground, and reach consensus. These conditions make it less likely that managers will receive clear or consistent direction on implementation priorities. Managers prefer to take a less visible role in the policy process, but when incumbents who seek long-term careers in municipal or county elective office are reluctant to take on leadership roles or make unpopular or controversial decisions that could jeopardize their political futures, managers may be expected to take the lead.

These trends reinforce a short-term orientation on the part of elected officials and encourage incremental approaches to policymaking by governing bodies that do not consider the larger context of a vision for the community, strategic goals and objectives, or action plans and priorities for decisions on programs and budgets. These trends also contribute to growing gaps between professional managers, governing bodies, and members of the public—gaps arising from their differing backgrounds, expectations, and competencies. All of this makes it difficult for governing bodies to set clear and realistic expectations for managers—or to set them for themselves as councils or boards—and to effectively oversee and fairly evaluate administration. John Nalbandian and Robert O'Neill have observed that changes in local government dynamics have been more disruptive than evolutionary and have created an environment of "certain-uncertainty":

Today, standard relationships and ways of doing business are challenged by abrupt and often unpredicted change emanating from uncertain relationships among levels of government; identity politics that have filtered from the national to local levels; unprecedented, continuing technological change which has altered both communication with and among residents as well as expectations regarding service delivery; and from a heightened awareness of and engagement with dynamic social issues (2022, p. 2).

In these respects, the world of local governing bodies has become more political and more partisan in trying to balance complex and competing interests, positions, personalities, and values both within the organization as well as outside of it. And the world of local managers has changed as well.

The Manager's Changing Roles and Responsibilities

Over time, local government managers have become an essential actor in the policy-making process and are now asked to do more than provide accurate information and impartial advice. Today's managers are called upon to identify and assess options and to make recommendations for the governing body to consider. The dichotomy between politics and administration first raised by Woodrow Wilson no longer exists, if it ever did (Nelson, 2022). To varying degrees, managers and governing bodies share responsibility in the spheres of mission, policy, administration, and management.

Contributors to the third edition of the International City/County Management Association's book, *The Effective Local Government Manager* (Newell, 2004), noted other developments and trends that have changed the managers' job and, at times, created tension in their relationships with elected officials and community leaders. These include: (1) the perpetuation of antigovernment feelings among the public, leading to distrust of elected and appointed officials and to support for local candidates running against the government; (2) residents' unrealistic "more for less" expectations relative to services and taxes; (3) a shift from trustee to delegate or activist roles of local elected officials and a corresponding emphasis on constituent service instead of common problem-solving; (4) increasing visibility, powers, and political ambitions of mayors; (5) a growing tendency on the part of local elected officials to become more focused on implementation and to micromanage administration; (6) a demand from governing bodies that managers place more emphasis on privatization as a preferred management tool; and (7) the access that the technology revolution has given citizens and interest groups to information about local operations, enabling them to easily register complaints, monitor performance, and put administration under the spotlight (Svara, 2004).

These trends have continued, and they have changed the manager's formal authority and created voids that must be addressed to effectively provide quality services. As a result, managers must devote more attention to policy, leadership, and constituent

relations in their dealings with governing bodies. This partnership rests on the recognition that while the parties are mutually dependent and share responsibility for most aspects of local government, they still need to divide up some responsibility to efficiently, effectively, and equitably fulfill the expectations of community members.

From Government to Governance

Another dimension of the changing rules of the game for managers involves a shift from government to governance. *Government* refers to the institutions of governing while *governance* focuses on social processes of governing (Bevir, 2012). Structural constraints placed on the capacity of local governments to respond to contemporary challenges and to operate in a businesslike, entrepreneurial, and agile manner are key factors behind this pivot.

In most parts of the United States, the typical local government is by nature fragmented and separated, small in terms of both territory and population, and limited with respect to its powers and range of responsibilities. The number of units within a local government and the relationship between general- and special-purpose units can be especially important if efficiency, effectiveness, equity, and economies of scale are defined as core values in service delivery. On the other hand, these larger-scale values may collide with what are considered other important virtues of the local government system—closeness, responsiveness, smallness, and customization. Reconciling these competing and conflicting values is the job of both elected officials and professional managers. This balancing act sometimes exacerbates the gaps between elected officials' priorities for building the community and representing the public and professional administrators' needs to modernize and sustain the governmental organization and manage local services (Nalbandian, 1999; Nalbandian & O'Neill, 2022, pp. 11–13).

Recognition of the fact that successfully addressing most important public problems requires working across jurisdictional and sector boundaries—with other communities, agencies, nonprofit organizations, businesses, citizen groups, and volunteers—has only added to the complexity of local government operations. Since the 1990s, the term *governance* has been used to describe the reality that the government is only one of multiple players in local service delivery, albeit a critical one.

The need to manage within and to work with a diverse array of horizontal and vertical networks of governmental partners, public–private organizations, and regional and community groups has altered the traditional authority of both managers and governing bodies. Increasingly, managers have taken on the roles of facilitator, broker, and networker while operating less and less in a hierarchical command-and-control model. While their respective responsibilities have grown, their authority has become more shared and more collective.

In summary, the four trends outlined above have had a profound impact on the work of local government managers. Among their other roles, managers are more frequently being called on to serve as a bridge over troubled waters. Gaps continue to

widen in many communities: between the education and experience of professional full-time managers and amateur part-time governing bodies; between the basic roles of elected officials to represent and make policy for the community and those of managers to build organizational capacity to effectively carry out policy; between the public's "more for less," "we want it our way," "just in time," and "quicker, better, cheaper" expectations for service delivery and the need for representation of community interests and deliberative decision-making; between the place-based orientation of elected officials and other local leaders and the boundary-spanning nature of contemporary problem-solving and service delivery; and between the commitment and capacity of local governments to ensure fairness, inclusion, and opportunity so as to serve all residents. These trends and disruptions have negatively affected both local government officials and the people they serve. There has been a mutual breakdown of trust.

While local governments continue to rate higher than federal and state governments in public opinion polls (Jones, 2023), confidence in local government leadership is declining. "Increasingly, elected officials are seen as out of touch and failing to represent the needs of average people. . . . Public officials see a citizenry that is disengaged, often disrespectful in public meetings, unwilling to take responsibility, and demanding more in the way of services but less willing to pay for them" (Lemmie et al., 2022, p. 153).

The relatively positive ratings that local governments have received over the years are attributable to several factors, including the importance of their services such as police, fire protection, and water and sewerage to daily life and their proximity to the public (Wolak & Palus, 2021). Local elected officials and staff are involved in their community—church, grocery stores, sporting events, schools, and more—and residents expect them to listen to problems, needs, and complaints, even on their personal time. Residents can also visit city hall or the county courthouse to express their views, make payments, or receive help. Additionally, governing boards set aside time at each regular meeting for public comment (Kincaid, 2021, p. 26).

Race affects the level of trust in government and that trust affects how people view local government delivery of important programs and services and their satisfaction with the value received for their local taxes (Pew Research, 2024). White survey respondents tend to report greater confidence than Hispanic or Black respondents (Van Ryzin et al., 2004). Although local governments continue to receive the highest ratings, the public's confidence and trust in their local governments may be slipping, in large part due to well-publicized failures to successfully tackle the above disruptions (Kincaid, 2021, p. 25). Moreover, increasingly angry residents are confronting local officials and protesting their perceived failure to address national issues such as reproductive rights, fair elections, climate change, and even global conflicts.

Why is it important for the public to have confidence and trust in their county or municipality? Consider the following: First, election turnout suffers when citizens believe their vote does not make a difference in making improvements or dealing with public problems. Second, voters are less likely to respond positively to referenda asking for support for tax increases or fees necessary for important projects like school modernization,

water and sewer line construction, and parks and recreation facility improvements. Third, people are less inclined to volunteer to serve on committees or to partner in service production with local agencies. Fourth, critical reports on social media that a county or municipality is not a good place to do business in can adversely influence economic development. These challenges to public trust-building are compounded by a crowded, complex, and confusing intergovernmental landscape, discussed in the next section.

THE INTERGOVERNMENTAL LANDSCAPE: WHO'S IN CHARGE?

Over the past half century, the relationships among local, state, and national governments in the United States have undergone dramatic changes. The interactions between these governments and private profit-making and not-for-profit organizations have also experienced marked shifts. Attention has traditionally been focused on the fiscal aspects of these changes, especially on grants-in-aid and tax policy, but equally significant are the regulatory and administrative facets of these developments. Growing intergovernmental and public-private collaboration has raised questions about who, precisely, is in charge: Who is responsible for the delivery of services, the payment for services, and the performance of services? The following section reviews contemporary trends in intergovernmental relations as they relate to local management.

Coordination in a Fragmented System

The number and structure of local government units vary widely across the country (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3). As indicated above, the general pattern of U.S. local governance is a fragmented structure of many small (with populations under 2,500) units having overlapping responsibilities and limited boundaries. These overlapping responsibilities, combined with the cross-boundary nature of many social, political, and economic problems, means that it has become difficult to identify purely local problems—those over which individual counties, municipalities, or other general-purpose units exercise control without significant policy, financial, or regulatory involvement of neighboring jurisdictions or state or federal authorities.

So-called wicked problems involving environmental quality, economic development, health care, and infrastructure ignore these boundaries altogether and defy single jurisdictional remedial action. Even traditional local functions such as police and fire protection, libraries, and streets are intergovernmental. Others, such as schools, while remaining legally separate from municipalities and counties in most places, have received state and federal grants accompanied by standards and requirements as conditions of aid.

Scott Lazenby and Margaret E. Banyan provide a practical example of the coordination challenge confronting the fragmented local government system:

Take the case of a road that is maintained by the state: the areas behind the curbs (sidewalks and storefronts) are maintained and regulated by the city and traffic signal timing is contracted out to the county. Under the road surface, a private utility owns

natural gas pipes; private electric and telecommunications companies own poles in the sidewalks and cables over the road; and the city owns water pipes, fiber optic cable, and conduit. Suppose the city council has a goal of installing banners, attached to existing poles, that promote special events within the city. Doing so might require a permit and possibly payment to the private company that owns the poles, approval from the state for advertising in the right-of-way, and a traffic control permit from the state when the city crew needs to hang the banner. And if the city needs to cut a trench in the road to install a larger water pipe, coordination among the various providers can easily take a year and consume thousands of dollars of engineers' time. (2022, p. 89).

This complex web of service provision and potential duplication by multiple local governments necessitates a more collaborative approach to governance. While horizontal governmental relationships (those between different local governments) can be challenging, the relationships between states and their local governments can also be challenging.

State Constraints

In addition to structural limitations, the powers of local governments are constrained by state constitutions and statutes. Many states operate under a legal interpretation that local governments are creatures of the state (Dillon's Rule, discussed in depth in Chapter 3), and that allows states to have authority over a local unit's form of government, functional responsibilities, personnel, and finances. Studies have found wide variation among states regarding the extent to which constitutions and statutes grant home-rule or discretionary authority to various types of general-purpose local governments. In general, states have been more willing to give local governments greater authority over their form of government, functional responsibilities, and personnel policies than over their finances (Krane et al., 2001).

Legislatures have been less willing to grant home rule to counties than to municipalities, due mainly to the traditional role of county governments as administrative arms of their state. Even in states where local governments have been granted broad home-rule powers, judges, attorneys general, bond counsels, and legislators have imposed sometimes formidable constraints on the exercise of those powers. Studies have also revealed an increase in state preemption of local authority and autonomy over issues such as ride sharing, minimum wage, paid leave, broadband, firearms, and other areas (Swindell et al., 2021).

Regionalization

In response to legal and political constraints and increasing structural complexity, local governments have taken to using a variety of collaborative mechanisms. Foremost among these mechanisms have been formal and informal interlocal contracts and agreements for joint provision of services, as well as mutual assistance pacts between police, fire, and emergency medical services departments. In nearly all cases, these arrangements have involved two units and a single service. A second local government response has

been privatization of services, a phenomenon that grew in popularity during the 1990s through contracting with for-profit and nonprofit organizations for the performance of local functions. Lastly, a variety of fiscal instruments have been adopted by local officials—such as tax increment financing, revenue bonds, and leasing—in the search for ways to circumvent state restrictions on taxing and spending.

In addition to procedural and fiscal responses, since the 1960s there have been three major institutional responses to boundary-crossing problems: the reorganized or urban county, special districts and public authorities, and regional planning and coordinating bodies. These strategies have been implemented with varying degrees of success and have usually occurred in tandem with traditional legal and procedural mechanisms that states have granted to municipalities and counties to enable them to address interlocal matters. Besides contracts and agreements, these include extraterritorial powers, annexation, and interlocal functional transfers. Opposition from citizens and public employees, however, has limited the use of these tools.

Increasing Federal Intervention

Another dimension of the changing intergovernmental landscape involves the federal government's role in local government. Beginning in the 1960s, the federal government's domestic roles and responsibilities steadily expanded. This growth was a reaction to a number of political and ideological factors, including a regulatory green light given to Congress and federal agencies by the U.S. Supreme Court in its broad interpretations of the Commerce Clause, the Necessary and Proper Clause, the Supremacy Clause, and other implied powers provisions of the U.S. Constitution; public opinion support of a strong national role in such areas as civil rights, environmental quality, public health protection, poverty reduction, occupational safety, and community development; and growth in public interest and special interest lobbying groups that advocated for national involvement in local government. This heightened federal role was also a response to concerns about the limited capacity and uneven commitment of localities and states to adequately fund, effectively plan, and equitably administer programs to tackle problems such as poverty, illiteracy, crime, disease, pollution, substandard housing, and infrastructure deterioration (Stenberg, 1981).

These factors continue to be relevant, despite concerns about centralization of authority in Washington, D.C., and about the contemporary federal fiscal picture, as the "4 Ds" (deficits, debt, demographics, and defense) could significantly reduce the discretionary portion of the federal budget, putting localities and states on a possible fiscal collision course. More recently, the demands and pressures of globalization and the new economy, and problems associated with the fragmented intergovernmental response to COVID-19, have called for the United States to speak with one national voice, not 50 state voices or 38,736 municipal, township, and county voices. This has accelerated trends toward centralization. The vehicles for this expansion of the federal government's domestic role have been grants-in-aid, regulations, and preemptions.

There are no indications that the rate of increase in intergovernmental regulations, mandates, and preemption activities will diminish even if the national government's financial role declines. In fact, they are likely to continue to increase, while hopes for turning more authority over to states and localities fade. Also, the trend toward conflict between state governments and local governments when there are ideological differences continues to accelerate.

MANAGING CHALLENGES: CRITICAL COMPETENCIES FOR CLOSING THE GAP

The trends described in this chapter will affect various types and sizes of local governments in diverse ways, but one thing is certain: all local governments will be affected. Local government leaders will need to recognize and relate to a web of other jurisdictions, agencies, and organizations involved in governance. What key knowledge, skills, and abilities are needed for twenty-first century municipal and county managers to succeed in this dynamic world of local government (Stenberg, 2007)?

Skills Needed, Now and in the Future

Since the inception of the council–manager form of government, governing bodies have expected their chief executive officer to ensure that municipal or county operations run smoothly, that services are provided efficiently and effectively, and that prudent fiscal practices are followed. This heritage continues. Within their organizations, managers will need to be managerial capacity builders, applying contemporary business management practices to local government, including workforce and succession planning, job enlargement and work-sharing, team building, mentoring, and coaching. The manager must demonstrate a commitment to diversity in both hiring and service delivery decisions, loyalty to those in the organization, and dedication to the highest ethical standards, as specified in the Code of Ethics of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and in local policies. Managers will need to have a strong moral compass for moving the community forward.

The value proposition for managers has evolved from the traditional economy, efficiency, and effectiveness metrics to embrace two newer values: equity and engagement. Equity has been considered a pillar of public administration since the early 2000s, and in 2023 ICMA amended the language of four tenets and related guidelines in its Code of Ethics to align the language with the executive board's commitment to advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice. Each member now has an ethical obligation to develop strategies and take steps to start and sustain these values. Similarly, the blurring of boundaries for dealing with wicked problems and the need to rebuild trust and confidence in local government will call upon managers to be more citizen-centric and relationally intelligent.

Managers must be process leaders and problem-solvers, applying their expertise, discretionary authority, and creativity to building a high-performing organization to facilitate technical, adaptive, and systemic change (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). They must also be skillful communicators of needs, expectations, and accomplishments both within and outside of the organization. The adept use of management tools such as strategic planning, performance measurement, benchmarking, and program evaluation, and technologies such as e-government and artificial intelligence, will be essential. The adoption of practices used in the private sector to achieve greater efficiency by eliminating unnecessary time and personnel usage in the delivery of services will also prove useful.

Professionalism and lifelong learning are important aspects of these tasks. It is now common for position vacancy announcements for managers, assistant managers, and department heads to require applicants to hold a master's degree. As of 2023, 1,545 managers successfully completed ICMA's Voluntary Credentialing Program or were candidates to be a designated ICMA Credentialed Manager and were committed to an additional 40 hours of professional development each year to retain their credentials (ICMA, 2024).

Closing the Gap between Politics and Administration

The twenty-first century manager will need to be a gap-closer, filling the void between the experience and knowledge found in the offices of the manager and department heads and the offices of elected officials. As an educator, the manager will need to orient newly elected governing body members on local finances and operations so that they can hit the ground running, and the manager must also find ways to present complicated information and updates on matters of interest to busy elected officials in clear and concise ways. The manager will need to find common ground with the council or board on how to develop a vision for the community as well as strategies for achieving that vision over the short and long term.

Consensus building, listening, negotiation and mediation, and conflict management skills will be critical, especially with governing bodies seeking to serve diverse community groups and individual members running on single issues or against incumbents in government. From time to time, the manager will also need to play the role of coach, working with members of the governing body to promote understanding of issues and public values, build trust, improve the governing body's policy-making effectiveness, and strengthen working relationships with the professional staff.

The manager will also need to be a convener, broker, and negotiator of interests from both outside and inside the government. Since most important local services require intergovernmental, private sector, or volunteer engagement to be performed successfully, the manager must be both an entrepreneur and a middle person in government-by-contract arrangements. This role involves finding opportunities for engagement, bringing diverse groups together, building coalitions, arranging contracts

and agreements, monitoring performance, and ensuring that corrective actions are taken. He or she will need to educate the governing board and professional staff on a wide range of matters, including community expectations and issues; regional relationships; state and federal grants, mandates, and regulations; statutory, regulatory, ethical, and legal requirements; and the limits as well as advantages of privatization.

In view of public confusion over who does what in delivering local services and sometimes unrealistic expectations about the costs and quality of municipal or county services, another dimension of the manager's role as educator is informing the community. This is done through websites, public meetings, and citizen academies about the roles and responsibilities of their local government and the division of labor between the governing body and the professional staff. Outreach to prospective volunteers will also be important. In communities where local government has had a tarnished image, marketing and public relations skills will be especially useful to overcome public skepticism and show how local government works to serve all citizens.

The manager as community leader must be a relationship builder. According to Lemmie and colleagues,

Effective community leadership relies on managers who individually are and who lead organizations that are networked within the local government, across local governments and levels of government, across sectors, and with citizens and other non-organizational stakeholders. The manager's office is a hub around which multiple spokes revolve and is a spoke that cuts across multiple other hubs. The leadership challenge and opportunity are to build and sustain cooperative, coordinated, and collaborative relationships as appropriate to the diverse set of routine and wicked problems local leaders must address regularly. We suggest a label and competency for this type of manager as one who is *relationally intelligent*. (2022, p. 154)

While local managers should not be expected to play the role of lobbyist, in the complex and rapidly changing world of intergovernmental relations, the voice of local government will need to be heard, and thus, managers will increasingly be called on to serve as intergovernmental liaisons. Getting involved in the work of the state leagues of municipalities, the county commissioner associations, and the local government managers' associations, as well as with these groups' national counterparts representing local government interests in Washington, D.C.—the National League of Cities, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National Association of Counties, and the ICMA—will be an important way for managers to bolster their local officials' efforts to register the needs of their community and increase opportunities for financial assistance. Managers will need to be politically astute (but not politically involved) professionals.

In the contemporary local government environment, sound management knowledge, skills, and abilities are important, but they will not be sufficient to deal with the political, ideological, intergovernmental, and community-building needs associated with globalization, the new economy, and the information age, much less the challenges associated with the “certain–uncertainty” trend. In this respect, the manager

of the present and future will be looked to as a local leader, an organizational capacity builder, and a community change agent.

The chapters that follow explore more fully the challenges affecting local governments and those who lead and run those governments. Our hope is that their contents will prove helpful in preparing students who aspire to careers in local government and in motivating current local government professionals who seek to become county or municipal managers.

RESOURCE LIST/TO EXPLORE FURTHER

Books/Articles

Hitchings, B., & Rouse, D. (2024). Managing disruption in a rapidly changing world: A briefing book for decision-makers in North Carolina. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, School of Government.

2

U.S. LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 Discuss the historical development of U.S. cities.
- 2.2 Describe the causes that led to urbanization in the United States.
- 2.3 Explain the major trends during the Progressive Era that inspired significant social and government reforms.
- 2.4 Identify the drivers of postwar suburbanization.
- 2.5 Discuss both the positive and negative impacts of post-Progressive Era metropolitan development.

The United States did not begin as a country of urban dwellers, yet today more than 80% of Americans live in an urban area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Between 2010 and 2020, the country's urban population grew by 6.4% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Many local governments in the United States exist as a subcomponent of a large, interconnected metropolitan system. This chapter examines how the United States transitioned from rural to urban/suburban and how those transformations laid the groundwork for modern local government systems. This transition was not easy or fast, and the people who inhabited early American cities experienced a vastly different way of life than that of today. Early cities suffered from endless maladies—limited infrastructure, lack of sanitation, substandard housing, political corruption—but these problems were growing pains that paved the way toward major change and reform in the early 1900s.

EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN CITIES: 1700–1900

The early American economy was dependent on agriculture. Early towns were developed to foster mutual protection and came to serve as business centers, collecting and exporting agricultural products from the region (Schlesinger, 1940). Given the vast expanse of land in North America, the population spread out, leading to low densities and a mostly rural population (Lemon, 2001). In 1900, nearly 94% of the population lived in rural areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998).

Early local government was borrowed and adapted from the European countries that originally colonized North America. Prior to the American Revolution, a royally appointed governor led many colonial governments. Initially, political subdivisions were called *townships*, *towns*, or *parishes*. Counties were created as combinations of these subunits (Lemon, 2001). After the American Revolution, most former colonies relocated their state capitals to more central locations (Martis, 2001).

Cities, as early centers of concentrated population, were only found near transportation hubs. The largest early cities were located near ocean ports (Schlesinger, 1940) or large rivers to facilitate trade in natural resources and agricultural production between rural and urban areas and between the United States and other nations. As the Industrial Revolution took hold, population in these early cities exploded. Between 1700 and 1800, Boston's population increased from 7,000 to 25,000; New York's from 5,000 to 118,000; and Charleston's from 2,000 to 13,000 (Nash, 1987).

Railroad hubs became influential in the location of new cities after the 1830s (Monkkonen, 1988). Cities in the Midwest and West were founded and grew rapidly as the railroads reached them. Chicago's population, a mere 4,470 in 1840, grew to over a half million by 1880 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Likewise, in St. Louis, the population increased by more than 300,000 during that time. In New York, the Erie Canal was completed in 1825, providing a link from the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean and increasing the populations of Albany and Buffalo. Towns along the Mississippi River also experienced population growth.

Overall, however, cities remained at low population levels relative to modern cities until a boom in the late nineteenth century. The nation's population increased from about 17 million in 1840 to 76 million by the end of the nineteenth century, and much of this growth was in large cities. The U.S. population exceeded that of Britain by 1820 (Lemon, 2001). New York reached over 1 million residents by 1880. By 1900, Chicago and Philadelphia joined New York at the over 1 million population mark (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998).

Technological improvements in intracity transportation during the nineteenth century led to geographic and physical expansion in cities, as wealthier residents sought to distance themselves from some of the unpleasant conditions that existed in early American cities. Cities were crowded, dirty, and often lacked paved streets or sidewalks, green space, and other amenities that the public takes for granted today. Initially, moving away from the center city by only a mile or two was sufficient to escape urban ills; however, development pushed people further and further out (Hayden, 2003).

Beginning in the 1870s, the installation of new streetcar lines coupled with land speculation led to development beyond cities' peripheries (Hayden, 2003). These developments were often hastily and haphazardly planned, with modest single-family homes being the primary residence type (Hayden, 2003). Today, these precursors to the modern suburb are often incorporated into the central city.

URBAN POPULATION GROWTH

As the nineteenth century ended, population growth in the cities intensified. These population increases had two primary drivers. The first were the massive waves of immigrants coming to the United States from other countries. The second and later driver were improvements in public health that led to lower mortality rates, allowing for the natural population growth that was impossible amid the problems of early urban life.

Before the twentieth century, disease rates were exceedingly high in cities. Close living quarters, polluted water sources, tainted food, and dangerous working conditions frequently led to death rates exceeding birth rates. Epidemics of cholera and yellow fever were common, and urban mortality in the United States exceeded rural mortality until about 1920 (Haines, 2001). These factors meant that population could not grow from within and instead the need for labor for the burgeoning industries of the early twentieth century had to come from abroad.

The 1840s marked the beginning of a period of mass immigration in the United States (see Table 2.1). Industry offered employment for these new immigrants, and cities became the primary destinations for most of them (Ward, 2001). As a result, by 1920 the U.S. population exceeded 100 million.

TABLE 2.1 ■ Total U.S. Population and Percentage Foreign Born, 1850–2010		
Year	Total Population	Percentage Foreign Born
1850	23,191,876	9.7
1870	38,558,371	14.4
1890	62,622,250	14.8
1910	91,972,266	14.7
1930	122,775,046	11.6
1950	150,216,110	6.9
1970	203,210,158	4.7
1990	248,709,873	7.9
2010	308,745,538	12.7
2022	461,800,000	13.9

Sources: Gibson & Jung, 2006, and Azari et al., 2024.

The United States has become increasingly urbanized over time. According to the Census Bureau, in 1820, there were only 12 places with more than 10,000 residents. By 1880, the number had increased to 212, and by 1970 there were more than 3,000 incorporated places with populations of 10,000 or above.

The transition from rural to urban was a rapid one in the United States (see Table 2.2). Until 1930, residents were more likely to live in rural areas than urban areas. At the first U.S. census, in 1790, only about 5% of the population lived in urban areas. However, the 50% mark was reached before 1930. By 2010, more than 80% of the population lived in urban areas.

Urban areas have grown geographically as well. In many parts of the country, multiple municipal borders converge, creating massive, multijurisdictional metropolitan regions. However, to reach this level of complexity, cities first had to grow—and to grow, they had to cope with problems that had become commonplace for urban dwellers.

TABLE 2.2 ■ U.S. Urban Population Percentage: 1790–2020	
Year	Percentage Urban
1790	5.1
1830	8.8
1870	25.7
1910	45.6
1950	64.0
1990	78.0
2000	79.0
2010	80.7
2020	80

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, 2020.

Note: The 1950, 1990, and 2020 censuses each introduced a new definition of what qualifies as an urban area. The change in urban population percentage for these years from the previous decade cannot be attributed entirely to migration.

THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

Perhaps no other period in United States history witnessed a more profound and significant set of reforms than those that occurred during the Progressive Era (1897–1920). Reformers were stirred into action by the appalling living and working conditions

in cities, the absence of workers' protections, and the rampant corruption of the government. The reforms set in motion during this time served as a foundation for broad-reaching government policies that created a merit system, improved living and working conditions, and improved government.

Living Conditions in the Cities

Rapid urbanization and government corruption in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to critical dysfunctions in American cities. These problems included poor-quality housing, dangerous working conditions, rudimentary infrastructure, and local government systems that barely functioned due to bribes and patronage. As Progressive reformers drew attention to these issues, the need for better-run cities became apparent. Problems of early urban living were numerous. While living conditions were miserable for the lowest-income residents, even the wealthy endured a lower quality of life than is common in modern cities.

Poor sanitation, overcrowded housing, low-quality food, and pollution had severe public health outcomes for urban residents during the Industrial Revolution. Most cities drew their drinking water from the same water source used for sewage disposal and industrial runoff, leading to high waterborne disease rates. Overcrowding in the tenements meant that communicable diseases spread rapidly. The idea that "bad air" (miasma theory) caused illness, rather than germs, led to a failure to prioritize clean water and other sanitary measures (Melosi, 2000). Cholera, typhoid, and yellow fever were particularly pernicious infections; nearly 10% of Memphis's population was lost to yellow fever in 1873 (Melosi, 2005) and New York City lost over 3,500 residents to cholera in 1832, when its population numbered about 250,000 (Wilford, 2008).

Infrastructure

One sign of the limited development of infrastructure in the early twentieth century was the condition of the streets in many cities. Often, the streets were unpaved or poorly paved, making traversing a city challenging. Early pavement included cobblestones, granite blocks (Belgian block), and wood—but significant swaths of the average city had no pavement at all through the 1800s. The largest cities fared the best with pavement (see Table 2.3) but even by 1890, out of the ten largest cities at the time, only Boston boasted fully paved streets.

Early city streets were muddy, filled with holes, and littered with animal waste, even those with some form of pavement. Asphalt did not come into use until the late 1800s (Hart, 1950). However, cities in the United States were quicker to install asphalt pavement than in other countries, and by the early 1900s places like Buffalo, New York, and Washington, D.C., were using asphalt on most of their streets (Teaford, 2019).

TABLE 2.3 ■ Ten Largest Cities' Percentage of Paved Streets, 1890		
City	Population	Percentage of Paved Streets
New York	1,515,301	62.3
Chicago	1,099,850	30.7
Philadelphia	1,046,964	65.2
Brooklyn	806,343	57.4
St. Louis	451,770	39.8
Boston	448,477	100.0
Baltimore	434,439	58.8
San Francisco	298,997	56.1
Cincinnati	296,908	56.5
Cleveland	261,353	14.9

Source: Billings, 1890.



Street sanitation was nonexistent in nineteenth-century New York, as this picture from 1895 shows.

Granger, NYC. All rights reserved.

The inferior quality of the roads led to problems with commerce and sanitation. Ideally, pedestrians could walk on sidewalks to avoid the conditions of the streets, but sidewalks were not typically built by local governments. Instead, property owners paid for the installation of sidewalks, so they were only found in the wealthy areas

in most cities. This disparity in road quality based on the relative income of the residents in a neighborhood was one of the many inequalities between rich and poor in the cities.

Pollution and Public Health

Horses remained the primary form of transportation for people and goods throughout the nineteenth century, but horses created problems too. Each horse deposited 30–50 pounds of manure per day, and large cities had many thousands of horses (Rosner, 2010). Although most cities had street cleaning or sanitation departments in the early 1800s, local government corruption meant that little was done. Human waste, dead animals, manure, and other trash were simply thrown on the streets. When trash was collected, it was either disposed of in a waterway or an open dump (Louis, 2004).

Pollution from industrialization also contributed to low quality of life in early American cities. Coal was the most common fuel used for heating and factory energy production (Gonzalez, 2005). The resulting smoke and soot led to low air quality and dirty cities. Dangerous chemical by-products from coal production, such as sulfuric acid, caused or exacerbated lung ailments, including tuberculosis and asthma (Stradling & Thorsheim, 1999). Some cities were dark, even during the day. When burned, the coal produced coal ash, another form of solid waste that early sanitation departments were incapable of disposing of properly. Industries that produced pollution of all kinds typically dumped their refuse into the nearest waterway. Industrial sites were located immediately next to low-income residential buildings, meaning residents could not escape the noxious fumes or waste.

Housing

Another aspect of urban quality of life in which there were vast discrepancies between wealthier residents and lower-income residents was housing. The most common early urban dwelling buildings for low-income residents were called *tenements*. Tenements often served as the homes for new immigrants arriving from other countries. Many tenements had once been single-family homes that were later subdivided into small apartments. Due to overcrowding, poor ventilation, and lack of indoor plumbing, tenements were substandard housing. Tenements that were built as new dwellings typically suffered from shoddy construction techniques and poor building materials due to the developers' interest in keeping costs low.

The Tenement House Act, passed in 1867 by the New York State Legislature, required fire escapes, a window in every room, and a minimum of one toilet per 20 residents. However, enforcement of the law was lax, and loopholes were exploited. In 1890, Jacob Riis, photographer and author, published *How the Other Half Lives*, a book that exposed the horrible conditions of tenement life. Public outcry caused by the book's revelations led to a series of amendments to New York state law and calls for nationwide housing reform.

Corruption

Exacerbating the issues in housing, public health, and waste management was the fact that many early urban governments were plagued by corruption and patronage. Leaders of political machines, with power based in segments of immigrant groups, sought private gain for their leaders through graft and bribes. There was little oversight of early municipal contracts, so contracts with private companies for services such as street cleaning were padded with bribes for office holders. Within local government organizations, hiring was based on loyalty to the machine rather than qualifications for a job. A survey in 1890 found that 70% of the 30 largest cities in the United States conducted hiring based on patronage (Reid & Kurth, 1992). Men who delivered votes did so in expectation of getting jobs in the government. A survey in the mid-1920s found that of Chicago's 600 precinct captains (the lowest official rank in the political machine) 70% held jobs in city government. These men reported to "bosses" who frequently accumulated vast amounts of personal wealth.

One of the most notorious bosses was William M. Tweed of New York City's infamous Tammany Hall. Over the span of his "career," Boss Tweed became the third largest landowner in New York City and a director of the Erie Railway Company, Tenth National Bank, and New York Printing Company, as well as a member of the United States House of Representatives and New York State Senate (Ackerman, 2005). Due to machine influence and a lack of professionally trained staff, city services were inadequately and inequitably provided. Cities with a political machine could still expect basic municipal services, but due to the corruption and the hiring of less-than-qualified individuals for many jobs, the quality and efficiency of the services suffered.



Early New York Department of Sanitation workers wore white to give an image of cleanliness and professionalism.

Granger, NYC. All rights reserved.

Political machines manipulated the political process through corrupt acts and by exploiting weaknesses in the existing electoral system. While political machines did serve the new immigrant populations by assisting them with housing and work, they did so at a significant cost of waste and inefficiency in local governance (Reid & Kurth, 1992).

Progressive Era Social Reforms

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, muckrakers (journalists who exposed many of the ills of urban society), social reformers (including the Catholic Church), and government reformers (made up primarily of business elites) began to draw the public's attention to these problems. Each of these groups sought reform for distinct reasons, but the unlikely coalition around reform led to significant changes during the Progressive Era.

Socially, reforms were directed at the daily quality of life of the urban population. Labor reforms were intended to make working conditions safer and to place limits on child labor. Food and drug reform laws were passed to make the food supply safer and remove harmful patent medicines from the market. Housing reforms were passed at the state level, and engineers applied their skills to sanitizing water and removing waste from the cities.

Progressive Era Political Reforms

Although social reforms helped ameliorate some of the worst issues related to public health and living conditions, these reforms would do little to improve the day-to-day lives of urban residents if the local government system could not improve. Political reforms during the Progressive Era set the stage for greater professionalism in local government and a weakening of political machines and the patronage system. The Australian ballot, which allowed citizens to vote in secret, was adopted throughout the United States by 1892. However, nationally, it was not illegal to pay another person to vote for a candidate until 1925 (18 U.S. Code § 597).

At the national level, the merit system was introduced to reduce patronage under the Pendleton Act of 1883. States and local governments gradually shifted away from the patronage system as the power of political machines ebbed.

Much of the initiative behind transforming local government to more professional, businesslike organizations was taken by good government organizations funded by ultra-wealthy benefactors. Advocates working in these organizations sought to create more efficient and effective local government systems through training, research, and advocacy (Hopkins, 1912; McDonald, 2010). The first and most well-known of these organizations was the New York Bureau of Municipal Research. After its founding in 1906, financed by Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, similar organizations were created in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Dayton (Hays, 1964).

One area of research these organizations undertook was an exploration of how structural changes to municipal governments might affect performance. Two new forms of government became the focus of advocates for structural reform: the commission and council–manager forms. These reform models were instituted to improve local government efficiency by borrowing techniques from the private business sector (Bernard & Rice, 1975).

The *commission form of government*, first instituted in Galveston, Texas, to deal with the massive rebuilding effort from the 1900 hurricane that devastated the island city, quickly grew to become the most popular form of government in the country (Rice, 1975). Under the commission form, elected members of the legislative body—the commission—would also each be tasked with overseeing an administrative department of the local government. Despite its rapid rise in popularity, the plan’s weaknesses became quickly apparent. Elected officials, when charged with responsibilities over a single department, quickly identified with that department, looking out for the interests of the department and its personnel. This almost inevitable result meant it was difficult to reach consensus on decisions, since commissioners would put their departments above the city. Because of these problems with the commission form, adoptions of the plan dropped precipitously after 1920 (Rice, 1975) and the other reform model, the council–manager plan, quickly eclipsed it.

In 1906, the city of Staunton, Virginia, adopted a form of government unlike that found in any other city. The city council created the position of general manager, a title that was quickly transformed by the press to the title *city manager* (Grubert, 1954). Staunton had suffered from mismanagement for years, resulting in a significant public outcry over lack of street pavement. Due to both tradition and state legal requirements, Staunton operated under an inefficient bicameral legislative system of 22 elected officials and 30 committees (Grubert, 1954). The manager position was created to handle the administrative duties that were previously conducted by committee. Under the new plan, Staunton was to be viewed as a business corporation and was to be administered as such. The manager would be directly responsible to the council. The first general manager, Charles Ashburner, an engineer by training, was appointed in 1908 (Grubert, 1954).

The city manager may have remained an oddity had it not been for the work of Richard Childs. Childs’s conception of the council–manager plan was a marriage of Staunton’s general manager with the commission form of government—unifying executive and legislative authority in a single elected body (Hirschhorn, 1997). At a meeting of the National Municipal League in 1915, when the council–manager form was used as the basis for the model city charter, Childs proclaimed he was “the minister who performed the marriage ceremony between the city manager . . . in Staunton, and the commission plan in Des Moines” (Childs, 1916, p. 210). He believed that the council–manager form would be the most closely related to a private corporate management structure with a board (council or commission) appointing and directing a chief administrative officer—the city manager. The manager would then direct the day-to-day operations of the government.

The first charter adoption of the council–manager plan occurred in Sumter, South Carolina, in 1912. One year later, Dayton, Ohio, became the first large city to adopt the plan. Publicity from these adoptions and reports of early successes with the plan led to widespread adoption throughout the United States. Today, the council–manager form is found in more municipalities than any other form (see Chapter 3).

URBAN SERVICE DELIVERY IMPROVEMENTS

In addition to social and political reforms, the Progressive Era saw rapid changes in urban infrastructure and service delivery. As an era of professionalism began for local government, these new municipal officials were tasked with projects on an enormous scale that would vastly improve the quality of life of urban residents over time.

Sanitation and Clean Water

The first public health department was established in New York in 1866 (Melosi, 2000). A bill passed by the New York State Legislature created the Metropolitan Board of Health and granted the board broad powers over public health issues in New York City and Brooklyn. It soon became a model for health departments in other U.S. cities. By 1880, at least 94% of cities surveyed by the census had some type of health board or health officer (Melosi, 2000). The mid-nineteenth century has been dubbed the period of the Great Sanitary Awakening, marked by substantial advances in public health and sanitation.

As described earlier in the chapter, people living in cities during the era of the Industrial Revolution suffered tremendous health issues, primarily from lack of clean water and sanitary sewage disposal and hazardous living and working conditions. Efforts to improve the water supply were critical to reducing deaths from disease. With the work of John Snow in mid-1800s London, who linked a cholera epidemic to a tainted well, germ theory began to take hold (S. Johnson, 2006).

Efforts to bring clean water to many cities presented a number of geographical, technological, and engineering challenges; for example, to draw clean water from Lake Michigan, Chicago had to raise the level of the city and reverse the flow of the Chicago River, enabling waste to be dumped into the river without polluting Lake Michigan (Encyclopedia of Chicago History, n.d.). In addition to municipalities finding ways to draw water from less polluted sources, scientists and engineers developed effective filtration systems by the early 1900s. These efforts not only stopped the spread of many communicable diseases but were also responsible for improving overall life expectancy (Sedlak, 2014).

Between 1900 and 1940, urban mortality rates declined by 30% due to the introduction of water filtration and chlorination (Cutler & Miller, 2005). While most of that decline was due to fewer deaths from waterborne illnesses, the authors argue that these illnesses also weaken immune systems, making people more susceptible to

other diseases (Cutler & Miller, 2005). Federal regulations for drinking water quality were implemented in 1914, with standards set by the U.S. Public Health Service (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 1999).

While improvements in water quality and sewage disposal were responsible for enormous gains in life expectancy for urban residents, advances in solid waste disposal led to safer living conditions and an overall better quality of life for those living in cities during the early part of the twentieth century. As U.S. cities grew, so did their production of waste. Another factor contributing to the enormous growth of trash was the rising middle class and increasing consumerism.

Initially, most city governments did not initially take responsibility for solid waste removal (Melosi, 2000). In 1895, New York's Mayor William Lafayette Strong appointed George E. Waring, Jr. as Street Commissioner (Seavitt Nordenson, 2016). Although Waring did not believe in germ theory, he did believe that sanitation was critical for good public health outcomes. He set to work cleaning the streets of New York City with an army of sanitation workers who dressed in white, connecting their presence with hygiene (Seavitt Nordenson, 2016). In only a few years, he had cleared the streets of trash, instituted a rudimentary form of recycling, and created a landfill on Rikers Island (Seavitt Nordenson, 2016).

With Waring leading the way, solid waste collection soon became the purview of engineers (Louis, 2004). Collection was only part of the riddle early sanitation engineers had to solve. The second was waste disposal. Systems for waste disposal were initially rudimentary or nonexistent. While most cities used basic dumps or buried refuse, cities that were located near large bodies of water often used boats to dump the refuse offshore (U.S. Department of the Interior, 1880, as reported in Melosi, 2000). It was also fairly common for cities to sell some waste to use for animal feed or fertilizer (Melosi, 2000). These unsophisticated (and often disorganized) methods for disposing of waste led to public health and public safety issues in cities.

As the field of sanitary engineering developed, there was a call for municipalities to assume the responsibility for waste collection and disposal. Sanitary engineers began analyzing situations in individual communities to determine the best methods for waste collection and disposal (Melosi, 2000). The two methods that became popular were incineration and reduction. Reduction involved extracting oils from garbage that could be sold for purposes like fertilizer production. Neither method was without critics, and dumping on land continued to be the most popular method for dealing with solid waste, though the technology for constructing landfills improved over time. It was not until 1959 that guidelines for how to construct sanitary landfills were published by the American Society for Civil Engineers (National Solid Wastes Management Association, 2006).

Public Safety

Today, the average local government in the United States spends more on public safety than any other service, other than education (Urban Institute, 2021). However, modern police and fire services developed many years after the founding of early U.S. cities.

The professionalization of police and fire services contributed to significant improvements in the life of city residents by the early 1900s.

Organized, uniformed policing did not take hold in the United States until the adoption of the model by the New York City police in 1853 (Monkkonen, 1981). With this change came a shift in focus from apprehending criminals to crime prevention. Prior to the development of uniformed police, citizens served as constables who could make arrests of people caught in the commission of crime. Uniformed police were empowered to arrest those suspected of crimes (Monkkonen, 1981). By the early 1900s, the uniformed police model was found throughout the United States.

Like policing, firefighting began as a volunteer service. Volunteers continue to play a valuable role in firefighting today (Fahy et al., 2022). Early cities were always at considerable risk of destructive and rapidly spreading fires. Most buildings were constructed of flammable materials, people lived in crowded conditions, and fuels and open flames were used to provide light and heat. There are some fires that will always stand out in history due to the massive loss of life and near destruction of their cities. Perhaps the most famous of these tragedies is the Great Chicago Fire that started October 8, 1871, and burned for three days until a rain shower put down the flames (Schons, 2011). Approximately 300 people died, and a sizable proportion of the city was destroyed. Tragedies like these led to cities seeking ways to reduce fire risk and improve firefighting techniques.

The first fire department in the United States was manned by volunteers in Boston in 1718 (Greenberg, 1998). Although the professionalism of fire departments and equipment improvements helped reduce the destruction from fires, changes in building codes that led to lower flammability were even more consequential (Wermiel, 2000). Volunteer fire companies were often resistant to adopting new equipment (Greenberg, 1998). With improvements in water supply that led to greater water pressure, steam-powered engines began replacing hand-pumping. These steamers required specialized expertise to maintain and operate, leading to a greater need for a professional fire service (Holzman, 1955). Although data are limited, the improvements in building codes and design, coupled with advancements in firefighting technology and professionalism, led to a decline in the number of mass deaths in cities due to fires (Shields, 2008). Improvements in public health and service delivery led to urban areas becoming healthier places to live and offered residents a better quality of life.

POST-PROGRESSIVE ERA METROPOLITAN DEVELOPMENT

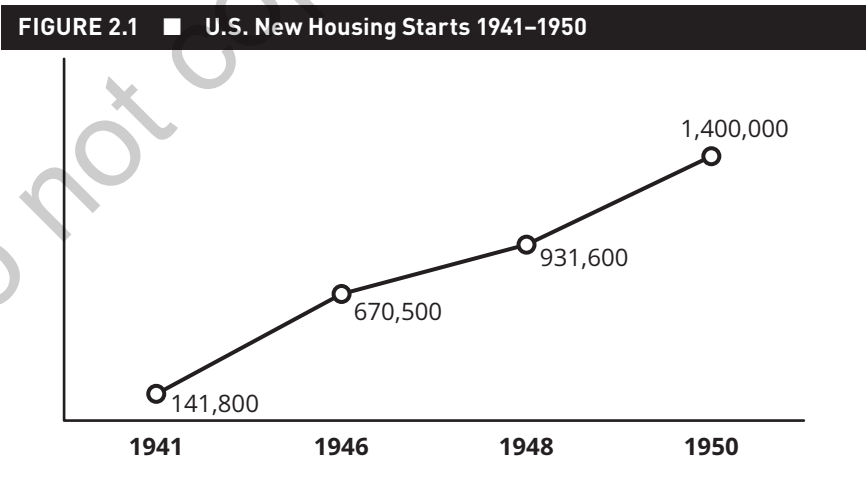
The Progressive Era began a wave of initiatives to professionalize local governments. This professionalization led to increases in efficiency and the implementation of technological innovations in urban services that allowed cities to continue to grow rapidly throughout the twentieth century. However, negative aspects of urban living remained and led to the borders of the cities being constantly pushed outward, eventually leading to rapid suburban development.

Forces That Shaped Suburban Development

Pre–World War II, suburban development was modest. The early streetcar suburbs had, in most cases, been subsumed by the central cities by mid-century. Suburban enclaves, planned communities designed to resemble European estates, were out of reach for most Americans’ budgets (Hayden, 2003). However, after the war, a number of forces and federal programs led to the development of suburbs for the growing middle class. These forces both drove demand for new housing and facilitated the development of large-scale housing developments further outside cities than was possible before.

A key piece of federal policy that allowed for the construction of massive middle-class suburban developments was the GI Bill. Passed in 1944, financing from the Department of Veterans Affairs allowed military members and retirees to borrow 100% of the value of a home (up to \$2,000) with no down payment (Hanchett, 1994). This created a demand for housing that was not satisfied by existing urban housing development. Demographic changes also fed increasing housing demand. Beginning in 1946, birth rates in the United States grew substantially and remained at elevated levels until the beginning of the 1960s. The total size of the baby boom cohort (those born between 1946 and 1964) was 72.5 million (Colby & Ortman, 2014).

Growth in the American population exacerbated the existing housing shortage. Due to economic decline in the Depression and the subsequent need to devote industry to the war effort, virtually no homes were built during the 1930s and 1940s in the United States. New housing starts numbered fewer than 200,000 in 1941 but quickly increased after the war (see Figure 2.1). Initially, homebuilding technology was not advanced enough to build the necessary housing needed due to the baby boom. To replace deteriorating housing and provide homes for the growing population at the time, between 1 million and 1.5 million new homes were needed per year (Checkoway, 1980). The United States did not meet that production level until 1950.



Source: Carney, 1959.

The largest and perhaps best-known postwar mass-produced suburban development was Levittown, New York. Located 25 miles from New York City, Levittown would grow to have more than 17,000 homes (Ross, 2014). Levitt built the homes using an assembly line style, allowing the houses to be priced below traditional builder prices. Soon, other builders across the country were replicating Levitt's methods.

To build these houses at affordable prices, land needed to be acquired at low cost. However, low-cost undeveloped land lay far outside the city limits. Were it not for federal highway policy and the rise of the automobile for transportation, the modern suburb would not have been created.

As with other industries, the production of cars rapidly increased after the war. Mass production dropped prices to make them more affordable for average families, and changes in financing allowed for payments over time. Construction of the interstate highway system provided high-quality roads to feed suburban residents into the cities for work. The combination of affordable cars and high-quality highways further pushed development outward.

Unintended Consequences of Suburbanization

Affordable homes with green space and a system of roads to make commuting to the city quicker and easier led to rapid suburbanization in the United States but also to decline of the central city. The same highways that made transportation to the cities fairly easy for suburban residents often split cities in half, harming healthy neighborhoods. Urban housing, primarily that of minority residents, was destroyed to accommodate the new roads. However, dislocation was seen as an acceptable cost to revitalize blighted areas.

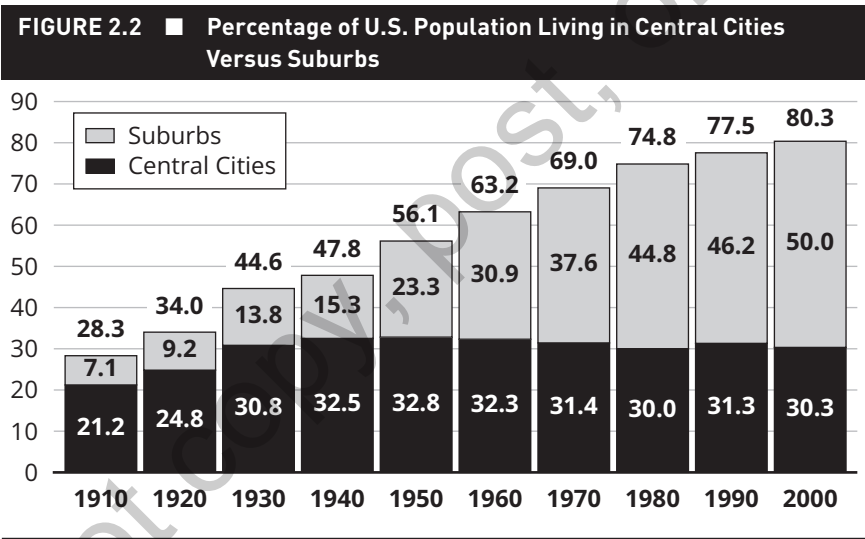
Racial discrimination occurred in several forms. Suburban developers put restrictive covenants in place that prohibited minorities from buying homes, and real estate appraisers devalued homes in predominantly Black neighborhoods (a practice called *redlining*). Redlining was used to justify mortgage discrimination, making it more difficult for African American families to purchase homes. These forces led to urban populations that were predominately people of color and suburban populations that were predominately White. By 1980, only 33% of metropolitan whites lived in the central city compared to 72% of metropolitan Blacks (Boustian, 2010). So, the population shift to the suburbs was primarily White. This "White flight" has had lasting implications for inner cities.

Central cities suffered substantial economic losses due to these population shifts. Suburban malls replaced downtown retail areas. Both property and sales tax revenue collections for cities declined due to population shrinkage. As cities experienced revenue decline, they delayed improvements to infrastructure. This led to a general worsening appearance of central cities and a long-term period of urban decline (Banfield, 1968).

Federal housing policy that called for revitalization of blighted urban areas often destroyed healthy but low-income neighborhoods (Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954). More low-rent homes were destroyed than were built (Checkoway, 1980). Urban

revitalization projects replaced low-rent homes with luxury housing or commercial space. Revitalization efforts also tended to displace healthy owner-run small businesses with corporate-owned ones (Giloth & Betancur, 2007).

Another federal policy choice served as a further push of population away from central cities: funding for Federal Housing Administration (FHA) mortgage insurance favored suburban housing over urban housing, and Congress began reducing funding for public housing in 1951 (Checkoway, 1980). By 1980, the percentage of the U.S. urban population that lived in suburbs exceeded the percentage living in central cities (see Figure 2.2). This trend has continued into the twenty-first century. According to the 2017 American Housing Survey (AHS), conducted by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Census Bureau, 52% of households describe their neighborhood as suburban, compared to only 27% that describe their neighborhood as urban; the remaining 21% describe their neighborhood as rural (Bucholtz, 2020). Additionally, 63% of households in Census Urbanized Areas describe their neighborhood as suburban.



Source: Hobbs & Stoops, 2000.

Central cities were not the only localities to suffer from unchecked suburban development. As people moved further and further from the central cities, seeking fresh air, large yards, good schools, and more affordable housing, metropolitan areas increasingly became victims of sprawl. Factors that set sprawl apart from simple urban population growth include low-density development, automobile dependency for transportation, leapfrog subdivision development, and segregated land uses (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1999).

Sprawl causes a host of problems for some regions (Bhatta, 2010; M. P. Johnson, 2001). Higher dependency on cars for transportation leads to water, air, and noise pollution. Automobile dependency also leads to heavy traffic in these areas. The increase in paved surfaces surrounding suburban space, both for roads and parking lots, means that much of the rainwater falling in the suburbs becomes runoff. Other environmental impacts of sprawl include the significant use of green space, loss of farmland, and loss of environmentally fragile land, such as wetlands.

The Beginnings of the Metropolis

When the central city and its surrounding suburbs are viewed as a region, it is called the *metropolitan area*. A metropolitan area is defined as “an economically and socially linked collection of large and small communities” (Frey et al., 2004). As of 2023, more than 90% of the U.S. population lived in either a metropolitan statistical area (86.2%) or micropolitan statistical area (8.4%) (U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 2023). The U.S. Office of Management and Budget delineates metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas based on U.S. Census data. A metropolitan or micropolitan statistical area has a core concentration of population in which adjacent communities have an economic and social relationship with each other and with the core (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). The differences in metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas is based on population of the urban core (see Table 2.4).

TABLE 2.4 ■ U.S. Office of Management and Budget Delineations of Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas		
Area Type	Definition	Number (2023)
Metropolitan Statistical Area	At least one urban area of 50,000 residents	387
Micropolitan Statistical Area	At least one urban area of 10,000 residents (<50,000)	538
Combined Statistical Area	Combination of adjacent metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas	184

Source: U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 2021.

As suburbs evolved from places to live into places to work as well, they expanded geographically, sometimes becoming large cities in their own right. Inner-ring suburbs, the oldest of the suburbs, were often incorporated into the central city while aging middle-ring suburbs developed the problems of the central cities (Orfield, 2002). Sprawl resulted in population outgrowth away from central cities, eventually causing

central city borders to touch or come close to touching what were once distant suburban municipalities, creating a *metropolis*. In some cases, multiple metropolitan areas abutted, creating a mega-metropolitan area, the *megalopolis*.

From Metropolis to Megacity

The historical legacy of metropolitan America has been an evolution from tiny port towns to megacities. What were once highly disorganized and inefficient local governments are today professionally and efficiently run organizations. While there are a number of problems in the metropolis that will be discussed in other parts of this book, the system of local governments in the United States is able to provide high levels of services to the public, most of whom do not have to think about whether their trash will be picked up or whether the tap will have clean water.

The profession of local government management has evolved to encompass changes throughout the development of the United States. As the next chapter will describe, the historical legacy of urban and suburban development has led to a level of structural complexity not seen in other nations around the world. This structural complexity presents an ever-changing environment for local governments and one in which other governments—state, federal, and other local governments—have influence over the future of that local government. The local government manager plays a key role in a community's success in this complex environment.

RESOURCE LIST/TO EXPLORE FURTHER

Books/Articles

Childs, R. (1965). *The first 50 years of the council-manager plan of municipal government*. National Municipal League.

Hofstadter, R. (1955). *The age of reform*. Knopf.

Jackson, K. (1985). *Crabgrass frontier: The suburbanization of the United States*. Oxford University Press.

Johnson, S. (2006). *The ghost map: The story of London's most terrifying epidemic—and how it changed science, cities, and the modern world*. Riverhead Books.

Web Resources

Harvard University's Open Collection Program, "Immigration to the United States: 1789–1930," provides a freely accessible list of resources on muckrakers, tenement housing reform, immigration, and urban poverty. Available at <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/riis.html>

Video

"Industrial New York." *Filthy Cities*. (2016). BBC/PBS. This episode of a documentary provides a vivid picture of life in early twentieth-century New York.