



# LOCAL GOVERNMENT SPENDING IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

REPORT 2D: PUBLIC WELFARE AND SOCIAL SERVICES

June 29, 2020

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## About *CivicPulse Insights* and the Publishers

**About *CivicPulse Insights*.** CivicPulse and Power Almanac have teamed up to bring you *CivicPulse Insights*, a research service dedicated to analyzing critical issues of local governance, providing national and regional benchmarks for local governments, and identifying strategic implications for their suppliers. Using Power Almanac's comprehensive contact information for local government officials across the US, CivicPulse conducts random-sample surveys of township, municipal, and county officials, and completes careful analyses to identify key trends and insights that will guide your decision making.

**About CivicPulse.** CivicPulse is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to filling the gap in access to high quality information about local government. Founded in 2018 by a few PhD students at Stanford University's Department of Political Science, and led by Dr. Nathan Lee, professor of public policy at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), CivicPulse combines recurring national surveys of local government leaders with a variety of other data sources to provide trustworthy insights for policymakers, citizens, and the broader stakeholder community.

**About Power Almanac.** Power Almanac's mission is to make it easy for organizations with the ability to help local governments serve their citizens more efficiently and effectively to reach out and connect with key decision makers at the right local governments. We provide the most comprehensive and accurate database of contact information for local government decision makers, with more than 250,000 records from 21,000 cities, counties, and townships. 100% phone-verified every 6 months.

## Local Government Spending Priorities in the Wake of COVID-19: Summary of Reports

The coronavirus has ushered America into its worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. Local governments are on the frontlines of this crisis, as they navigate how to continue providing essential services to meet the growing needs and declining resources of their citizens.

In *CivicPulse Insights'* inaugural report series, “*Local Government Spending Priorities in the Wake of COVID-19*,” we bring fresh data and analysis to bear—based on a nationally representative survey of the top elected leaders of local governments—to unpack the widespread uncertainty about the looming local budget changes in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis.

In our first report of this series, we characterize local policymakers’ expectations about changes in both revenue and spending in the next twelve months, including comparing projected spending across 12 different program and functional areas. The report also examines how expected changes in spending will vary by a range of local factors, including population size, government type, geographic region, the severity of COVID-19’s impact, and the locality’s political leaning.

The second report, which comes in 12 parts, offers a deeper dive into key local government program and functional areas.

In summary, the report series will be composed of:

**Report 1:** *Spending projections by program, function, and local factors*

**Report 2:** *Analyses of projected spending in specific program and functional areas*

### Program Areas

- a. Health services
- b. Housing and community development
- c. Public safety
- d. Public welfare and social services
- e. Public works
- f. Roads and highways
- g. Sanitation, sewage, and water

### Functional Areas

- h. Capital investment
- i. Citizen communication and engagement
- j. Financial administration
- k. Technology
- l. Workforce

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### Key Findings

Below are the key findings in this report, based on our analysis of our nationally representative survey of top elected leaders of local governments:

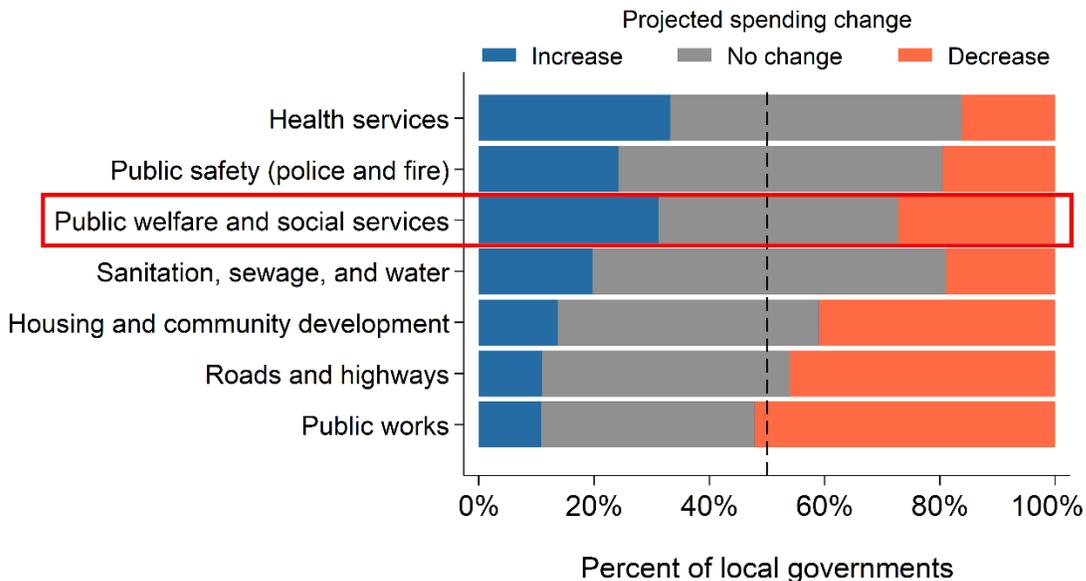
1. **Overall trajectory.** Spending on public welfare and social services is projected to stay about the same, with 42% expecting no change and the remainder almost evenly split between expecting an increase or decrease.
2. **Findings by population size.** There is no clear association between population size and projected changes in spending on public welfare and social services.
3. **Findings by government type.** County governments are somewhat more likely to project an increase in spending on public welfare and social services than municipal and township governments.
4. **Findings by region.** Spending is substantially more likely to decrease among localities in the West than other regions in the United States.
5. **Findings by COVID-19 incidence.** Localities with a lower disease incidence are slightly more likely to increase spending on public welfare and social services than localities with a higher disease incidence.
6. **Findings by political leaning.** Spending on public welfare and social services is more likely to increase in Republican-leaning localities compared to Democrat-leaning localities.

## I. Overall Spending Trajectories on Public Welfare and Social Services

In our first report in this series – based on our national survey of local elected officials – we found important differences in expectations about local government spending trajectories across specific program and functional areas. The remainder of this report series tackles each program and functional area separately.

This report presents a deep dive into local government spending on *public welfare and social services*, one of the seven program areas asked about in our survey.

As Figure 1 shows, a majority of local governments expect no change in spending (gray segment). However, a substantial number of local governments expect spending to either increase (blue segment) or decrease (orange segment).

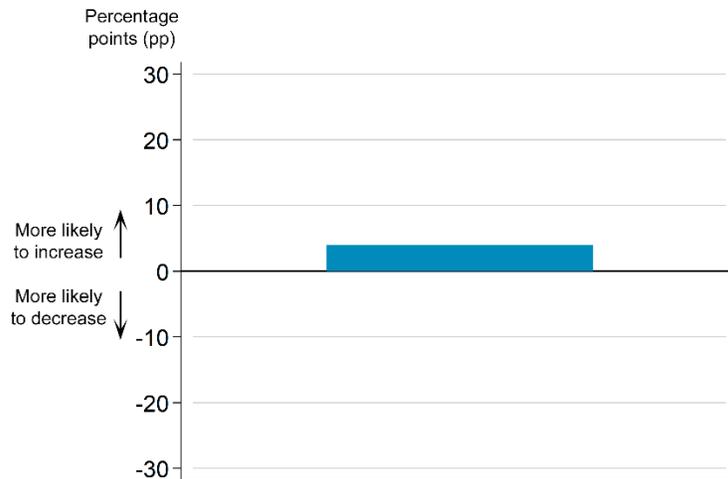


**Figure 1. Spending on public welfare and social services is equally likely to increase as it is to decrease in the next year.** For each program area, the percentage of local governments expecting an increase, no change, or decrease is shown.

In this report, we investigate the factors that determine whether a given local government is more likely to be toward the right or left side of the figure above. To do so, we use the *net likelihood score*.

The net likelihood score represents the difference between the percentage of local governments expecting spending to increase (Fig 1, blue), minus the percentage of local governments expecting a spending decrease (Fig 1, orange).

In this case, the overall net likelihood score for local governments' spending on public welfare and social services is 31% minus 27%, or 4 percentage points (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Spending on public welfare and social services is slightly more likely to increase than decrease next year.** This plot shows the difference in likelihoods (or “net likelihood”) that annual overall spending increases versus decreases (equivalent to the difference between the blue and orange bars in Figure 1).

In other words, it is more likely that the average local government will experience a spending increase on public welfare and social services than a spending decrease.

In the remainder of this report, we use this net likelihood measure to analyze how expected spending changes might vary in terms of five local factors:

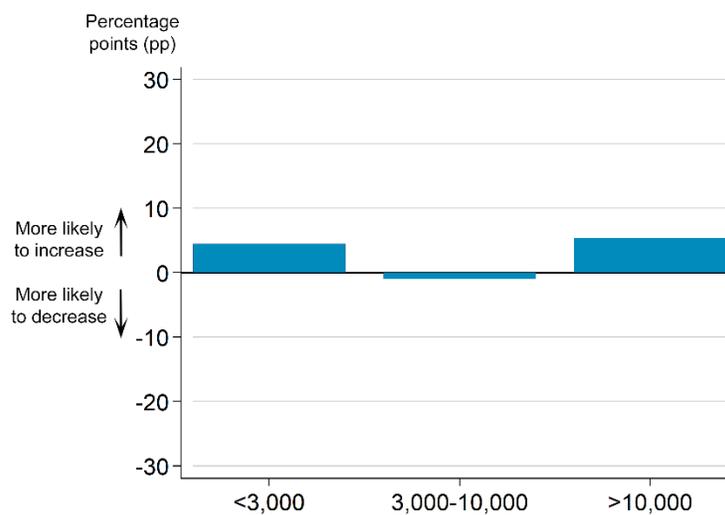
- Population size
- Government type
- Region
- COVID-19 incidence
- Political leaning

## II. Spending Trajectories by Population Size

In this section, we disaggregate our analysis of expected changes in local government spending in terms of the locality’s population size.

In Figure 3 below you can see that there is no clear pattern in the relationship between population size and spending projections. The net likelihood score is lowest for medium-population localities (between 3,000 and 10,000 residents), while it is slightly higher for low and high population communities.

This contrasts with our findings about *overall spending*, where higher-population communities were more likely to decrease spending (see Report 1 in this series).

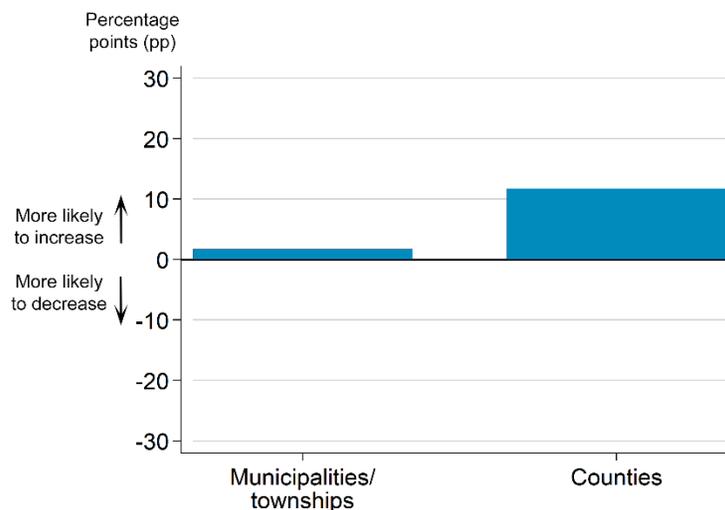


**Figure 3. Expected changes in spending on public welfare and social services do not vary substantially across communities of different population sizes.** Each bar shows, by population size, the difference in likelihoods (or “net likelihood”) that annual spending increases versus decreases.

### III. Spending Trajectories by Government Type

Next, we explore how expected spending on public welfare and social services will vary by the type of government.

Figure 4 shows that county governments are modestly more likely to increase spending than municipal and township governments. The net likelihood score for counties is 12 points, while it is 2 points for municipalities and townships.



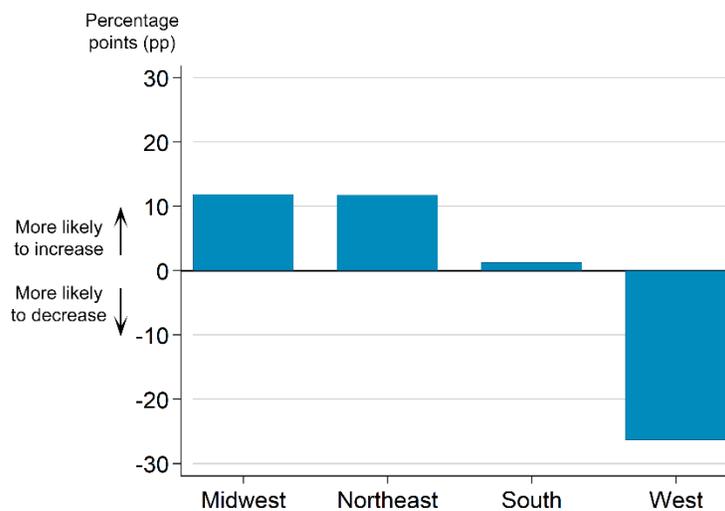
**Figure 4. Municipalities and townships project a spending increase, while counties project a decrease.** Each bar shows, by government type, the difference in likelihoods (or “net likelihood”) that annual spending increases versus decreases.

## IV. Spending Trajectories by Region

How will projected changes in spending on public welfare and social services vary by region? Addressing this question, Figure 5 shows how the net likelihood score varies across different regions of the United States.

The West, with a net likelihood score of -26 percentage points, is the region where local governments are most likely to decrease spending. In contrast, localities in the Midwest and Northeast are more likely to anticipate a spending increase, each with a net likelihood score of about 12 points. In between, localities in the South are about split between expecting an increase versus decrease in spending, with a score of 1 point.

Thus, while spending on public welfare and social services can generally be expected to grow across the nation, we do see substantial regional variation.

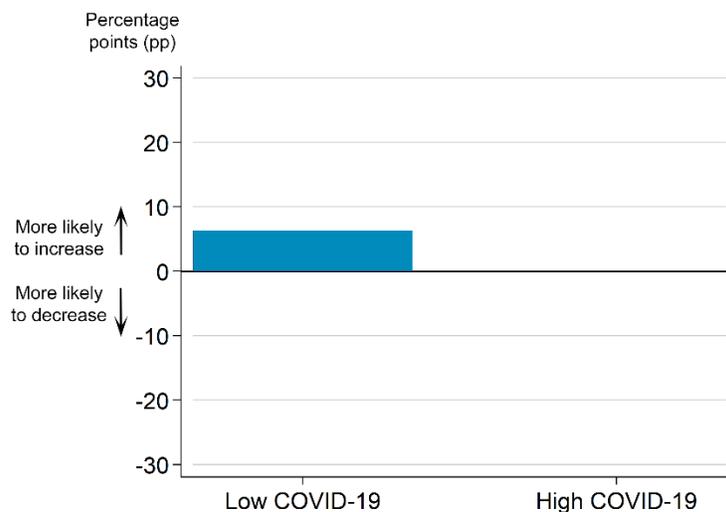


**Figure 5. Spending on public welfare and social services most likely to increase in the Midwest and Northeast, most likely to decrease in the West.** Each bar shows, by region, the difference in likelihoods (or “net likelihood”) that annual spending increases versus decreases.

## V. Spending Trajectories by COVID-19 Incidence

We now investigate whether future local government spending on public welfare and social services depends on the level of COVID-19 disease incidence in their community.

Our projections show that communities with a lower COVID-19 disease incidence are slightly more likely to project a spending increase. Among these communities, the net likelihood score is 6 points, whereas among communities with a higher disease incidence, the net likelihood score is 0.

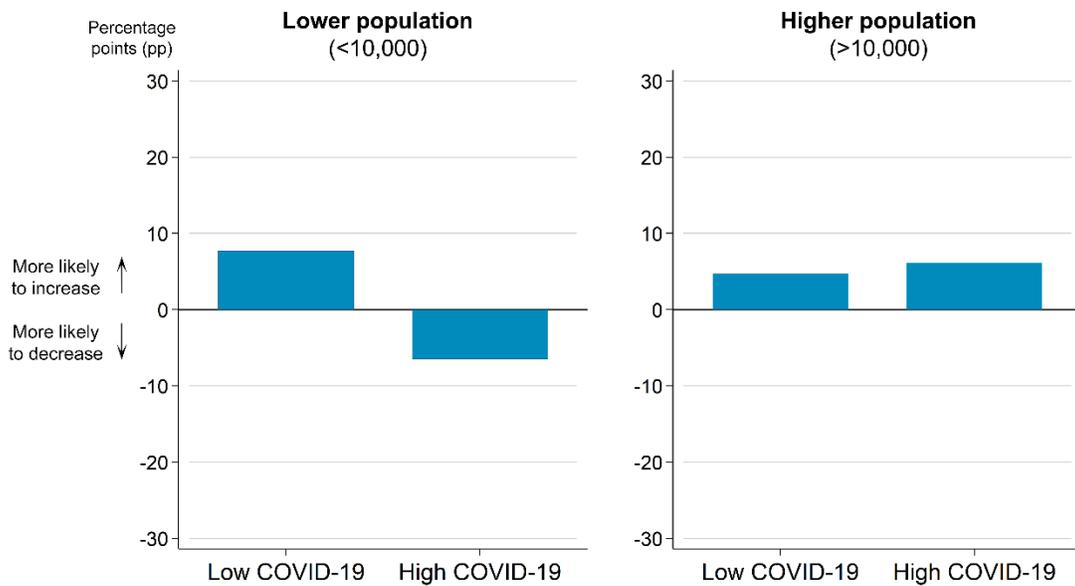


**Figure 6. Localities with lower COVID-19 incidence slightly more likely to increase spending on public welfare and social services.** Each bar shows, by level of disease incidence, the difference in likelihoods (or “net likelihood”) that annual spending increases vs decreases. Level of COVID-19 incidence is based on the number of cases per capita in the county at the time of the survey.

Because the spread of COVID-19 is related to a community’s population size, we further partition the data by both disease incidence and population.

It turns out that the association between disease incidence and spending on public welfare and social services is limited to lower-population communities. Among these localities (those with under 10,000 residents), lower-incidence communities are more likely to *increase* spending, while higher-incidence communities are more likely to *decrease* spending (Figure 7, left side).

In contrast, larger localities (those with more than 10,000 residents) are similarly likely to increase spending on public welfare and social services regardless of disease incidence (Figure 7, right side).



**Figure 7. Lower COVID-19 disease incidence is associated with a greater net likelihood of increasing spending, but only among lower population localities.** Each bar shows, by disease incidence and population size, the difference in likelihoods (or “net likelihood”) that annual spending increases versus decreases.

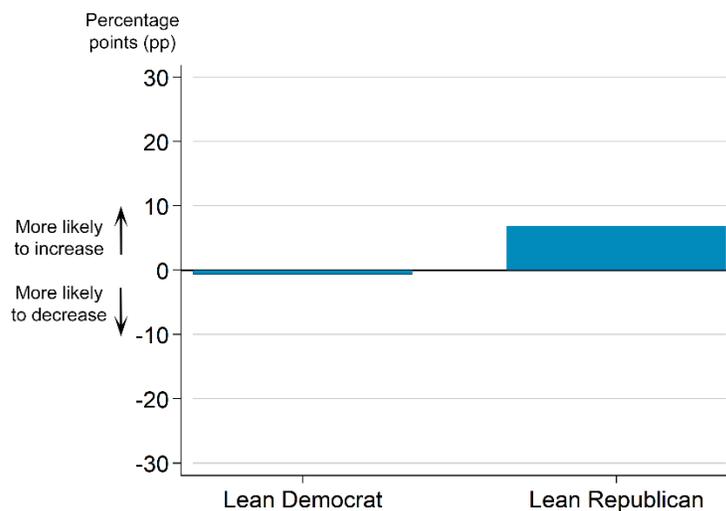
## VI. Spending Trajectories by Political Leaning

Lastly, we investigate whether patterns in projected spending differ by the political leaning of the locality.

To do so, we divide local governments between those that had a higher percentage of residents voting for Donald Trump in 2016 and those that had a lower percentage of votes for Trump (Figure 8).

If 50% or more in the relevant county voted for Donald Trump, the locality was classified as ‘Lean Republican.’ If less than 50% voted for Trump, the locality was classified as ‘Lean Democrat.’

This analysis reveals a modest difference between Republican- and Democrat-leaning localities. Local governments in Republican-leaning communities are more likely to see a spending increase than local governments in Democrat-leaning communities.

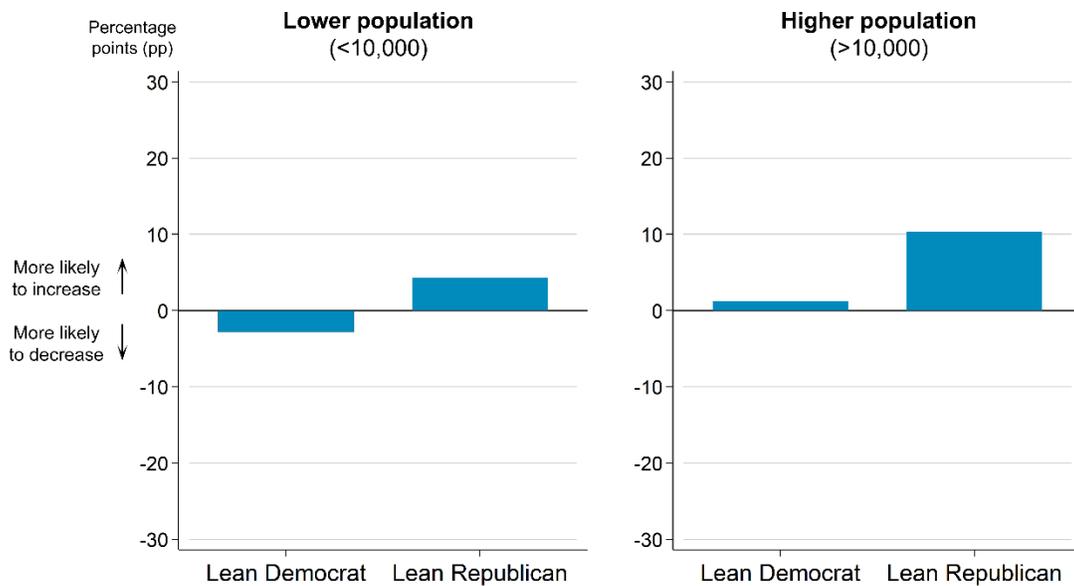


**Figure 8. Republican-leaning localities more likely to see spending increase on public welfare and social services.** Each bar shows, by political leaning, the difference in likelihoods (or “net likelihood”) that annual spending increases versus decreases. Political leaning is based on the locality’s county vote share in the 2016 presidential election.

Because population size and political leaning often go together, we further disaggregate the spending data between these two factors (Figure 9).

Across population sizes, Republican-leaning communities are more likely to increase spending.

Overall, Democrat-leaning, lower-population localities are the most likely to *decrease* spending on public welfare and social services, while Republican-leaning, higher-population localities are the most likely to *increase* spending.



**Figure 9. Republican-leaning communities in higher population areas most likely to increase spending, Democrat-leaning communities in lower population areas most likely to cut spending on public welfare and social services.** Each bar shows, by political leaning and population size, the difference in likelihoods (or “net likelihood”) that annual spending increases versus decreases.

## Appendix

### Methodology and Sample

CivicPulse uses Power Almanac’s continuously updated contact list of the appointed and elected officials associated with all townships, municipalities, and counties in the United States with populations of 1,000 or more (98% coverage).

Each survey includes a random sample of officials from this list. The data used in this report is from a survey of 733 responses collected in April and May of 2020 from 47 states. This report draws from a sub-sample of 356 respondents from this survey that answered questions specifically on public welfare and social services.

Table A1 breaks out survey respondents by the type of local government each represents.

**Table A1. Survey Respondents by Type of Government.**

	Sample Proportion
Townships	0.23
Municipalities	0.63
Counties	0.14
Total	1.00

The geographic distribution of the survey respondents approximates the population distribution of the United States (Figure A1).



**Figure A1. Geographic distribution of respondents.**

To characterize the representativeness of our survey sample, we match these respondents to the U.S. Census using the FIPS system. Tables A2-A3 compare the sample and population medians for four Census-area spatial characteristics: population size, urbanicity, the proportion of residents with a 4-year college education, and the proportion of residents who voted for Trump in 2016.

**Table A2. Sample Representativeness among Sub-County<sup>1</sup> Officials**

	Sample Median	Population Median
Proportion Urban	0.97	0.85
Proportion College-educated	0.27	0.21
Population Size	6,500	3,700
GOP Vote Share <sup>2</sup>	0.52	0.57

<sup>1</sup> This group includes officials from townships and municipalities

<sup>2</sup> Vote share estimated at the county level. Each sub-county government is matched to the relevant county in which it is contained.

**Table A3: Sample Representativeness among County Officials**

	Sample Median	Population Median
Proportion Urban	0.53	0.40
Proportion College-educated	0.21	0.19
Population Size	51,000	26,000
GOP Vote Share	0.62	0.67

Survey weights were also tabulated based on these four spatial characteristics using a post-stratification raking procedure. The findings in this report are consistent with or without the use of survey weights.

## Questionnaire

1. Given COVID-19, how do you expect your government's spending to change over the next twelve months in each of the following areas? *{Respondent views a grid with rows and columns listed below.}*

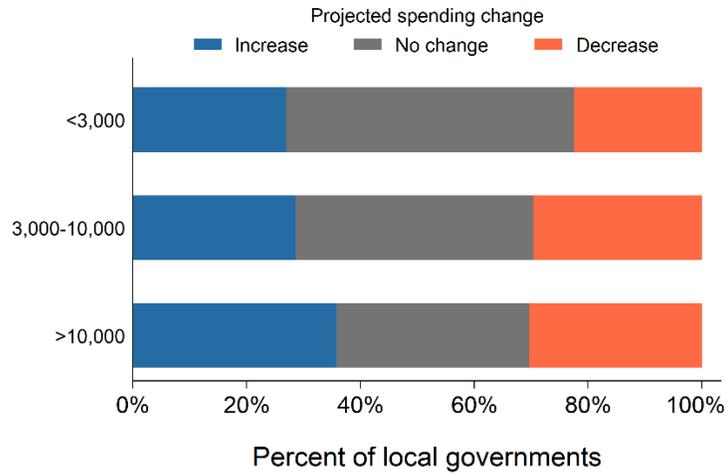
Rows (Program Areas):

- Public safety (police & fire)
- Highways and roads
- Housing and community development
- Sanitation, sewage, and water
- Public works (NOT including highways/roads)
- Health services
- Public welfare and social services

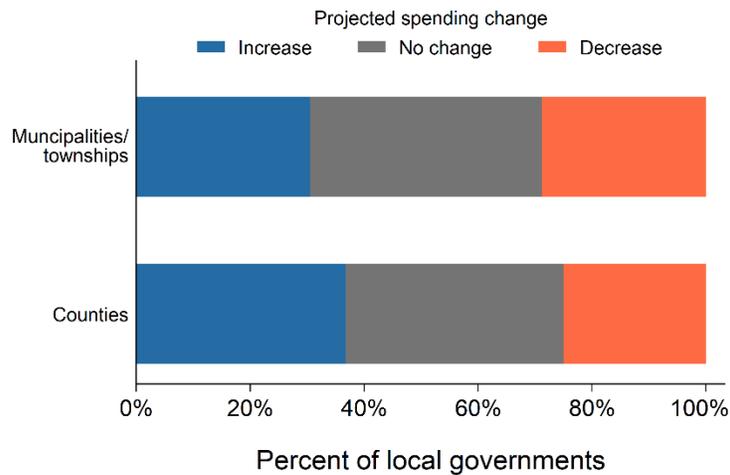
Columns (Answer choices):

- Decrease more than 20%
- Decrease 1-20%
- Stay about the same
- Increase 1-20%
- Increase more than 20%
- No spending in this area

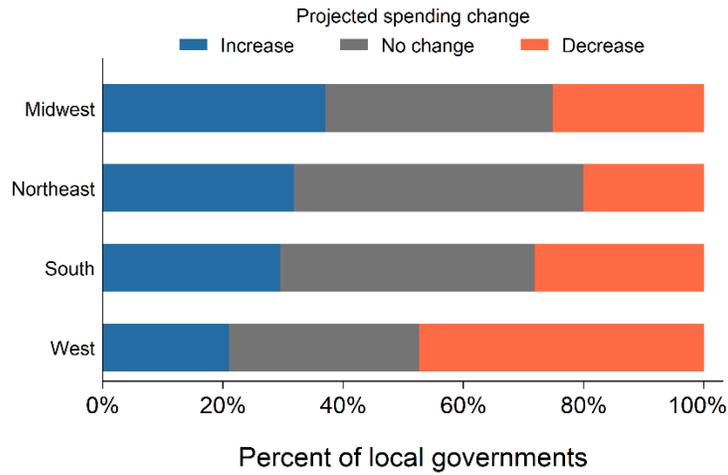
## Alternative Visualization of Projections by Local Factors



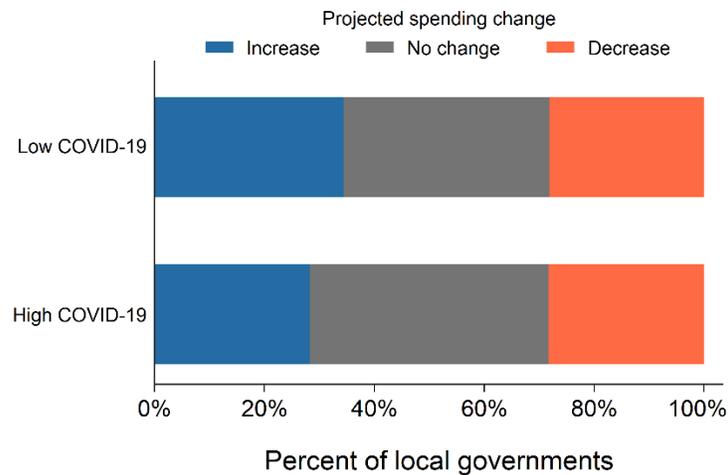
**Figure A2. Distribution of responses by population size.** Percentage of local governments expecting an increase (blue), no change (gray), or decrease (orange) in annual spending, by population size.



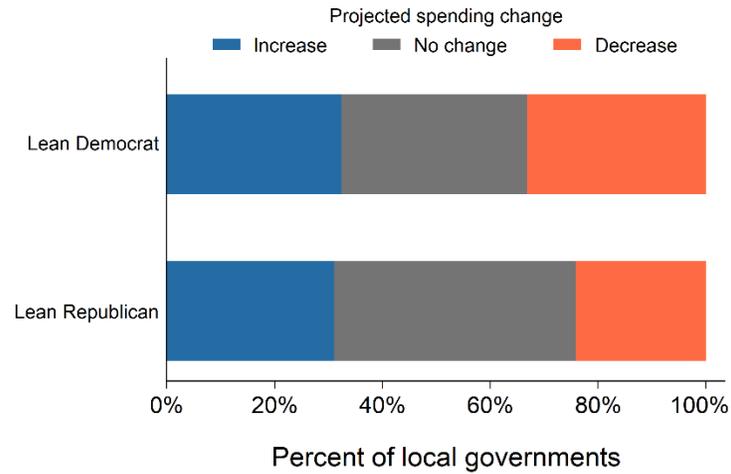
**Figure A3. Distribution of responses by government type.** Percentage of local governments expecting an increase (blue), no change (gray), or decrease (orange) in annual spending, by government type.



**Figure A4. Distribution of responses by region.** Percentage of local governments expecting an increase (blue), no change (gray), or decrease (orange) in annual spending, by Census region.



**Figure A5. Distribution of responses, by COVID-19 disease incidence.** Percentage of local governments expecting an increase (blue), no change (gray), or decrease (orange) in annual spending, by disease incidence. Disease incidence is based on the number cases per capita by county at the time of the survey.



**Figure A6. Distribution of responses by political leaning.** Percentage of local governments expecting an increase (blue), no change (gray), or decrease (orange) in annual spending, by the locality’s political leaning. Political leaning is based on the locality’s county vote share in the 2016 presidential election.





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