

# The Forgotten Governments: Exploring Midwestern Township Capacities and Functional Service Responsibilities\*

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This field note provides both a foundation for discussion about the role of townships in local governance and empirical evidence of their unique and embedded role. Drawing on a survey administered to Illinois township supervisors, administrators, and assessors, it presents baseline indicators about the range of township services, managerial practices, assessment, and collaboration for services to better illuminate current services, capacities, and challenges. A greater understanding of the complexity of delivering township services can guide policymakers in their deliberations about the future of township governments and provide research propositions for investigating township governments in the United States.

*Keywords:* Township governments, Capacity-building, Collaboration, Consolidation

## INTRODUCTION

They are both embedded and often invisible. In places like Illinois, Minnesota and Pennsylvania, township governments are the most common general-purpose units of local government. Yet, they are among the least studied and understood. They provide services to more than 50 million citizens in the United States, although their span of functional service-responsibility varies. Townships have a varied history, largely depending on what geographic region they are located in. Today, township governments exist in 20 states as multifaceted public service providers. The authority and responsibility assigned to townships can vary significantly both within and across states, even more so than for single-purpose governments (e.g., school districts) and traditional general-purpose ones (e.g., municipalities). In New England states, town and township governments operate in lieu of counties to provide extensive municipal-style services.<sup>1</sup> Midwest townships, in contrast, operate in tandem with counties to provide road and bridge repairs and varied social services in mostly rural areas. In recent years, townships have become increasingly targeted as prime candidates for local government consolidation, despite the often-unclear delineation of their role in communities (Slowik 2019). This field note aims to demystify some of the facets of township governments in Illinois via a descriptive analysis of recent survey data. The results reflect a first step in an attempt to more broadly examine township governments in Illinois; future research can build this understanding across states. Our results suggest a need for greater scholarly and practitioner attention to the potential for township collaborations and capacity-building.

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1. A third form of town or township, the Mid-Atlantic town or township, is found in New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. They have powers more like New England towns but vary widely (Stephens 1989).

## TOWNSHIP HISTORY & SERVICES

The two different kinds of townships, New England (or Mid-Atlantic) and Midwestern, come from different origins, even though the U.S. Census Bureau considers both general-purpose local governments. In New England, and to an extent the Mid-Atlantic, towns and townships follow a more European tradition as the most basic form of local government, and they provide an extensive array of public services. Midwestern townships are largely organized around the “congressional township” (36 square mile blocks), a vestige of the Confederation Congress’ Ordinance of 1787 (Sokolow 1997) and are generally a more limited form of local government. Midwestern townships are typically an areal unit of government, like a county, governing a fixed land area with little consideration of population or service demands. As townships took on different characteristics across the country, new laws were passed to accommodate the changing local government landscape. In most township states, the rural aspect of meeting annually to take care of government needs in a vast agricultural area made efficient use of time. The 20 states with townships delegate different powers and statutory responsibilities to them. Abress (2000) provides a detailed history of township governments in the U.S. As seen in Table 1, the degree of fiscal responsibility and public service options vary considerably.

Table 1: Key Township Characteristics by State

State	Number of Towns or Townships	Population Range	Authority to Levy Tax	Road Responsibility
Connecticut	94 <sup>a</sup>	610-139,160	Yes	All roads
Illinois	1,426	31-178,507	Yes	Roads and bridges
Indiana	1,008	55-178,000	State Board of Tax Commissioners	None
Iowa	1,588	57-N/A	Yes <sup>c</sup>	None
Kansas	1,541	N/A	Set by county commissioners	Roads
Maine	440	28-20,808	Yes	Roads
Massachusetts	303	97-65,000	Yes	Roads
Michigan	1,242	16-91,735	Yes	County has road authority
Minnesota	1,793	11-10,852	Yes	Roads and bridges
Missouri	23 <sup>b</sup>	N/A	No, funds come from county	Roads
Nebraska	452	N/A	County Board of Commissioners	Roads
New Hampshire	219	28-27,378	Yes	Roads and bridges
New Jersey	247	62-81,550	Yes	Roads
North Dakota	1,348	3-12,000	Yes	Roads and bridges
Ohio	1,309	150-70,000	Yes	Roads and bridges
Pennsylvania	1,549	15-59,179	Yes	Roads and bridges
Rhode Island	31	489-30,400	Yes	Roads and bridges
South Dakota	969	6-2,137	Yes	Roads and bridges <sup>d</sup>
Vermont	237	17-39,000	Yes	Roads and bridges
Wisconsin	1,265	30-22,654	Yes	Roads and bridges

<sup>a</sup> Municipalities with a town form of government.

<sup>b</sup> Township government in 23 of 91 counties.

<sup>c</sup> Some amounts set by state.

<sup>d</sup> Although the counties take care of some.

Source: (Abress 2000).

There were 1,426 townships in 85 of the 102 counties in Illinois in 2021. The distribution of townships varies across regions; townships are more common in the central and northern counties of the state. The 17 counties without townships are located in the southern part of the state. By state law, Illinois townships are only mandated to provide general assistance (e.g., public aid to indigent people), property assessment, and road and bridge maintenance. However, many provide additional services such as after-school programs, senior services, food banks, and other community benefits. Yet, there are no available studies to explain how these expansive services are feasible, given the same statutory resources and mandates.

In Illinois, a township elects eight offices: supervisor, clerk, assessor, and highway commissioner plus four trustees. Township road districts manage over 72,000 miles of roads in Illinois.<sup>2</sup> Some townships contract with the county to manage and perform road maintenance, which contributes to government efficiency. Thus, the potential exists for both varied specialization of services within townships and intergovernmental relationships between townships and other governments, but it has surprisingly drawn little attention by scholars and policymakers despite prolonged interest in local government consolidation, shared services, and collaboration.

Calls for abolishing or consolidating townships in Illinois are based more on ideology than data. The main data point repeatedly cited by proponents is that Illinois has 7,000 local governments and California gets by with only 4,400. Townships in Illinois have statutory requirements to deliver three services within their jurisdictions: maintain township roads and bridges, assess property values, and provide general assistance to needy individuals. About 67% of our survey respondents only provide these statutory services. The other 33% provide a wide range of additional services, from libraries to elderly assistance to mental health resources and more, making them more like New England towns than the typical Midwestern township. Critics of townships regularly assert that townships duplicate services already provided at the municipal or county levels, and that services are provided at an uneconomical level (lacking scale economies at the county level, for example). This analysis provides some baseline information from which to make such evaluations, even though the majority of Illinois townships in the survey provided only mandatory services seldom provided by other units of local governments.

The remainder of this field note examines Illinois township services, managerial practices, and collaboration for services using new survey data to better illuminate current services, capacities, and challenges. It is widely acknowledged that local government service delivery occurs via complex and overlapping combinations of local governments, including cities, counties, special districts, and townships (Goodman 2019). Of these, cities, counties, and special districts typically draw the most scholarly attention (Hendrick, Jimenez, and Lal 2011). This survey was designed to address two interrelated research questions specifically about township organizational capacities and practices and the interconnected role they play in local governance. First, what are the current levels of internal resource capacities and services within the purview of these governments? Second, to what degree do townships collaborate with each other and other local governments for service delivery, and does this differ by the variety of services townships offer? The descriptive foray provides valuable guidance to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers interested in local governance and the opportunities for improving efficiency, effectiveness, or equity of public goods and services.

## DATA & METHODS

We collaborated with the Township Officials of Illinois (TOI) to send a self-administered web-based survey to township officials who serve in the role of supervisor, administrator,<sup>3</sup> or assessor. An email letter including a link for the survey was sent to the township officials and the survey assured participants that participation was voluntary. In total, the survey was sent to 1,509 officials (1,180 supervisors, 296 assessors, and 33 administrators) in January 2021, and

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2. Importantly, township road districts are distinct forms of local government. Some townships have elected to abolish their township road districts in favor of directly providing those services under the township supervisor. Townships may also elect to collaborate with other townships for road services. Known as consolidated township road districts, they serve multiple neighboring townships and are similarly legally distinct from townships. See 605 ILCS 5/6 for more information.

3. A township administrator is not an elected position.

respondents were asked to reply by the end of March 2021. We received responses from 472 officials (330 supervisors, 118 assessors, and 24 administrators) – a 31.3% response rate. Supervisors and administrators were asked to respond to questions regarding their townships’ services, workforce, and collaborations as well as demographic questions, while assessors were asked to respond only to the questions related to property tax practices and demographic questions. Of responding assessors, 25 serve in a special-purpose government called a multi-township assessment district<sup>4</sup> and not a township, and are therefore removed, resulting in a sample of 447 township officials across 394 townships.<sup>5</sup> Table 2 shows that our sample tends to be evenly distributed by township size (i.e., small, medium, and large townships). However, given that over 80% of Illinois townships have a population smaller than 5,000, we acknowledge that our sample over represents large townships. This is partly because many small townships in rural areas did not have an email address to which we could send our survey link. According to the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes,<sup>6</sup> about 60% of our survey townships are categorized as being in metropolitan counties compared to about 40% categorized as being in nonmetropolitan counties. Among the nonmetropolitan townships, 120 are adjacent to a metropolitan county while 64 are in completely rural counties. Acknowledging the small, rural township bias, the survey sample is sufficiently representative to allow generalizability to Illinois townships large and small.

Table 2: Comparison of Sample and Illinois Townships

	Sample	Illinois Townships
Small (population <1,000)	134 (30.0%)	695 (48.7%)
Medium (population 1,000-5,000)	135 (30.2%)	471 (33.0%)
Large (population >5,000)	178 (39.8%)	260 (18.2%)
N	447 (100%)	1,426 (100%)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2010) Note: The multi-district assessors are excluded from this analysis.

## TOWNSHIP SERVICE& MANAGERIAL PRACTICES

Our analysis begins with changes in services and workforce characteristics, then focuses on managerial practices, especially how they manage to deliver which services. We especially analyze the levels and types of collaboration found in Illinois townships large and small.

4. A multi-township assessment district (MTAD) is a formal collaboration between townships for assessment purposes. In circumstances where a township has less than 1,000 individuals in population, an MTAD is required by state law to be formed with at least one neighboring township so that the newly formed MTAD’s population is larger than 1,000. MTADs can also be voluntarily formed by neighboring townships. See 35 ILCS 200/2-5 for more information.

5. It is important to note that 53 respondents (the difference between 447 and 394) represent townships that have one more respondent. Of these, 44 are from townships with two nonredundant respondents, i.e., supervisor (or administrator) and assessor. Importantly, as mentioned above, supervisors/administrators and assessors have responded to different survey questions (except for demographic questions). Thus, it can be assumed that in our analysis, the 44 townships with multiple respondents actually have only one respondent (either supervisor/administrator or assessor, depending on questions) answering each question, with each respondent serving as a representative of the township on particular issues. On the other hand, 9 townships have what might be considered a redundant respondent (e.g., supervisor and administrator). It is important to note, however, that the proportion of townships with one more respondent in our sample is minimal (2.0%).

6. The Rural-Urban Continuum Codes use a scheme that “distinguishes metropolitan counties by the population size of their metro area and nonmetropolitan counties by degree of urbanization and adjacency to a metro area.” See <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-code> and <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes/documentation/>

## Changes in Services

Township officials were asked about changes they experienced in the past 10 years. The majority of townships that only provide mandatory services reported no change in the three required programs in the last 10 years (Table 3). For those that did experience change, a greater percentage reported reduction rather than expansion of general assistance services; alternatively, a greater percentage reported expansion rather than reduction of property tax assessment and maintenance of roads.

Table 3: Changes in Services Over the Past 10 Years for Townships That Only Provide Mandatory Services

	Reduction	No Change	Expansion	N
General assistance	26 (13%)	160 (78%)	19 (9%)	205
Property tax assessment	10 (5%)	169 (87%)	16 (8%)	195
Roads	9 (5%)	156 (78%)	36 (18%)	201

Most of the townships that provide services beyond the three mandated services reported no change in property tax assessment or road maintenance in the last 10 years – although one-quarter of the townships indicated expansion in these two areas over this time period; approximately 40% had expansion in general assistance (see Table 4). A substantial number of these townships indicated they were more likely to expand services in some of the nonmandated areas than to have no change; in particular, service expansion was reported at a higher rate than no change in senior therapy, food pantries, lending closets, senior services, youth services, and mental health services. In addition, a few townships reported that they plan to initiate some services, including youth services and cemeteries, in the next three to five years.

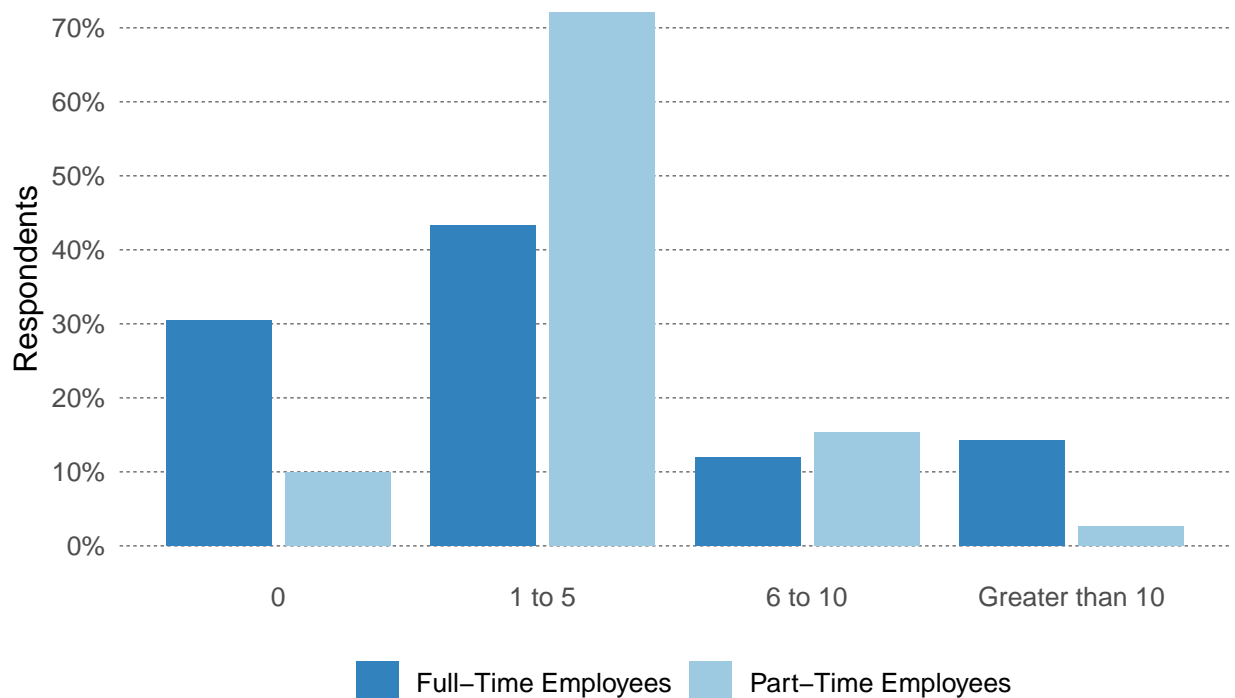
Table 4: Changes in Services Over the Past 10 Years for Townships That Provide Additional Services

	Reduction	No Change	Expansion	Plan to Initiate in Next 3-5 Years	N
General assistance	15 (15%)	43 (44%)	<b>40 (41%)</b>	–	98
Property tax assessment	2 (2%)	66 (74%)	24 (26%)	–	92
Roads	1 (1%)	63 (70%)	26 (29%)	–	90
Family therapy	1 (4%)	12 (52%)	9 (39%)	1 (4%)	23
Senior therapy	1 (4%)	11 (41%)	<b>13 (48%)</b>	2 (7%)	27
Community building services	3 (6%)	29 (55%)	19 (36%)	2 (4%)	53
Food pantry	1 (2%)	12 (23%)	<b>40 (76%)</b>	–	53
Lending closet	1 (3%)	15 (47%)	<b>16 (50%)</b>	–	32
Passports	–	10 (48%)	10 (48%)	1 (5%)	21
Transportation	3 (6%)	28 (54%)	21 (40%)	–	52
Mental health services	1 (3%)	14 (47%)	<b>15 (50%)</b>	–	30
Disabled services	–	13 (59%)	8 (36%)	1 (5%)	22
Senior services	2 (4%)	19 (37%)	<b>29 (56%)</b>	2 (4%)	52
Youth services	1 (3%)	15 (43%)	<b>16 (46%)</b>	<b>3 (9%)</b>	35
Notary public service	2 (4%)	44 (82%)	7 (13%)	1 (2%)	54
Cemeteries	–	26 (63%)	12 (29%)	<b>3 (7%)</b>	41
Parks and recreation activities	–	15 (58%)	10 (39%)	1 (4%)	26

## Township Workforce

As seen in Figure 1, the majority of respondents indicated that the number of full-time and part-time employees is five or fewer. About 43% of the townships with full-time employees indicated one to five employees and about a third indicated they have no full-time employees at all. Interestingly, as seen in Figure 2, the majority of respondents indicated that they used seasonal or contract workers (about 41% of respondents had no seasonal employees, but only 17% had no contract employees), although most of the townships with seasonal or contract employees indicated one to five employees. Of those who had contract employees, none had more than five employees. Overall, most of the townships are run by a limited number of staff, although there are some variations among townships.

Figure 1: Percent of Townships Employing Full- or Part-Time Employees by Size Category (Excluding Elected Officials)



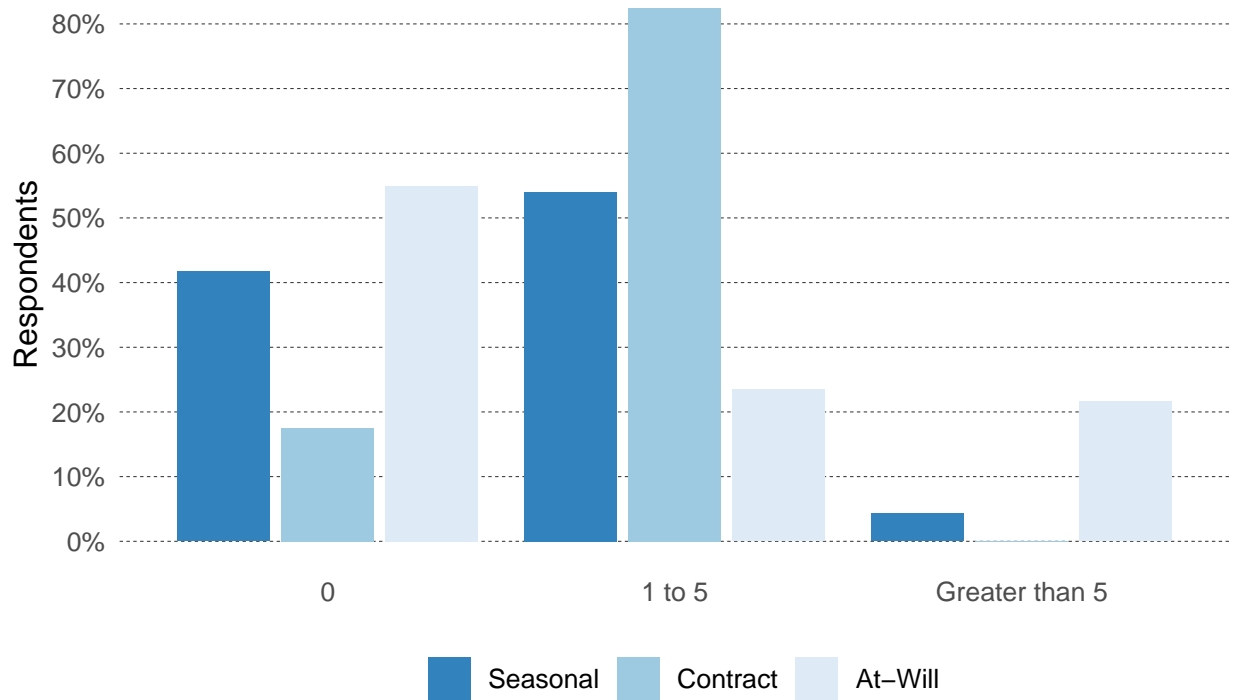
*Note.* Among the townships who responded to the questions asking about the number of full-time employees and part-time employees (N=210, 301, respectively), on average, townships in our sample have about 5 full-time employees and 3 to 4 part-time employees.

## Managerial Practices

Table 5 presents township officials' responses regarding questions about opportunities for training/education programs for employees. Over half responded that there is an annual budget for employee training, although about half of the respondents reported that there is not a requirement for a minimum number of hours of training per year. In response to questions about sending employees to education programs, over one-third responded that they regularly send employees to TOI programs while only a few responded that they regularly send employees to the Northern Illinois University Township Academy.

Table 6 presents responses to questions about the use of social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) in the last two years. While the majority of township officials indicated that their townships do not use social media, some reported using

Figure 2: Percent of Townships Employing Seasonal/Contract/At-Will Workers by Size Category



*Note.* Among the townships who responded to the questions asking about the number of seasonal, contract, and at-will employees (N = 278, 57, and 51, respectively), on average, townships in our sample have about 2 seasonal, 1 to 2 contract, and 6 at-will employees.

social media to a moderate/great extent for purposes such as important township announcements, events, general community engagement, and customer services.

## TOWNSHIP COLLABORATION FOR SERVICES

We analyzed the extent to which townships collaborate to provide services, thereby creating scale economies that (presumably) save taxpayers money. Of the 208 townships in our sample that provide only statutory services, 68% collaborate across different organizations for a total of 227 collaborations. These collaborations are for assessments, general assistance, and highways; notably, only 18 are codified in an interlocal agreement (ILA). Within this group of collaborations, they are most likely to partner with neighboring townships (60%) and counties (27%), primarily for assessment services (47% of all collaborations); they are least likely to partner with nonprofits and private-sector organizations. For example, 31% collaborate with a neighboring township and almost 15% with a county government for property tax administration (Figure 3).

These patterns contrast with the 105 townships that provide services beyond the statutory requirements. About 67% of these townships collaborate on one or more services, including those statutorily required. As seen in Table 7, these townships use 141 collaborations to provide statutory services, of which 42% support roads and 35% support general assistance. The modal category for partners is collaboration with neighboring townships (45%) followed by county governments (26%).

Table 8 presents the matrix of 245 collaborations used by these 105 townships to provide services beyond statutory requirements. Surprisingly, the modal partnerships for these services are with nonprofits (50%) driven by food pantry,

Table 5: Employee Training/Education Programs

My township...	Yes	No	Don't know
Has an annual budget for employee training	128 (54%)	38 (16%)	71 (30%)
Requires a minimum number of hours per year for employee training	35 (15%)	94 (40%)	105 (45%)
Regularly sends employees to the TOI Education Program	84 (36%)	63 (27%)	88 (37%)
Regularly sends employees to the annual NIU Township Academy	12 (5%)	128 (55%)	95 (40%)

N = 234-237

Table 6: Township Use of Social Media in the Last Two Years

	Not at All	To a Small Extent	To a Moderate Extent	To a Great Extent	N
Newsletter	191 (80%)	14 (6%)	13 (6%)	20 (8%)	238
Important township announcements	154 (64%)	27 (11%)	31 (13%)	28 (12%)	240
Customer services	177 (74%)	18 (8%)	25 (11%)	19 (8%)	239
Events	166 (70%)	23 (10%)	23 (10%)	25 (11%)	237
General community engagement	163 (69%)	28 (12%)	28 (12%)	18 (8%)	237
Recruitment	197 (83%)	24 (10%)	9 (4%)	8 (3%)	238

mental health, and senior services. Neighboring municipalities (20%) and other townships (14%) are also active partners, with collaborations for transportation the modal category in these columns. The townships that provide services beyond statutory requirements use a combined 386 collaborations (141 core collaborations noted in Table 7 and 245 other collaborations noted in Table 8) to provide their services, of which only 24 (7%) are identified by respondents as a formal ILA.

Table 7: Core Collaborations by Townships That Provide Extra-Statutory Services (Percent of 141 Collaborations by 105 Townships)

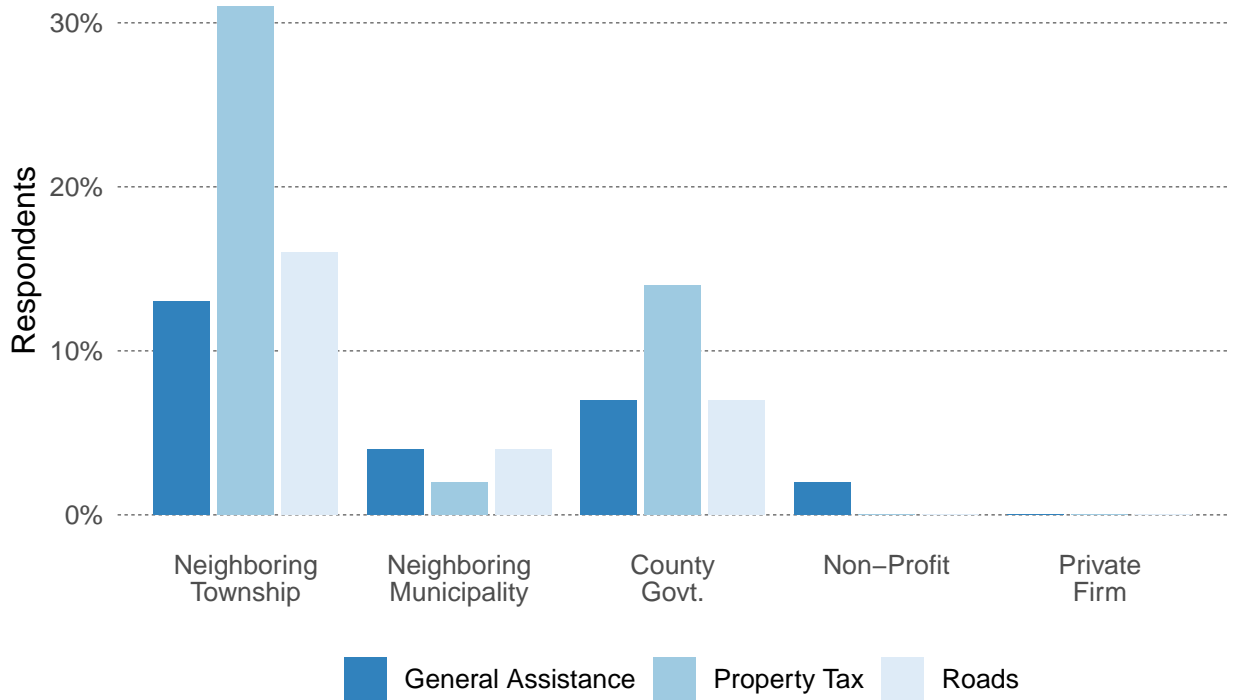
Service/Partner	Neighboring Township	Neighboring Municipality	County Govt.	Non-profit	Private Firm	Total	Of Which Formal ILA*
General Assistance	18%	4%	6%	6%	1%	35%	1%
Property Tax	9%	1%	12%	–	–	23%	–
Roads	18%	16%	8%	–	–	42%	3%
Totals	45%	21%	26%	6%	1%	100%	4%

*Note:* Totals include values less than 1% in specific table cells.

Equally important are the results concerning employee-sharing practices. We asked respondents: “Does your township share employees with other township governments in any of these service areas?” Among the 208 townships in our sample that provide only statutory services, 81 townships (39%) reported having employee-sharing practices. Of the 109 employee-sharing practices for the required services, 79 are with other townships and 30 are with governments other than townships. Figure 4 shows that employee-sharing practices with other townships are predominantly for assessment services (44%).



Figure 3: Collaborations by Townships That Only Provide Statutory Services (227 Collaborations by 208 Townships)



Note: Totals include values less than 1% in specific table cells.

Similarly, among the 105 townships in our sample that provide more services than required by statute, 33 of those townships (31%) report 41 employee-sharing practices. In this case, employee-sharing agreements are more likely with other townships (73%). Figure 5 shows that they are driven almost equally by general assistance (24%) and assessment services (29%). Employee-sharing practices with other governments are predominantly for roads (22%). Table 9 presents the matrix of employee-sharing practices for the extra-statutory services. About half of the practices (47%) are with other townships, and the other half (53%) are with other governments. Transportation services account for 29% of employee-sharing practices while senior services and parks and recreation each account for 18% of the total.

To the extent that employee-sharing practices are also a form of collaboration between townships, the results reveal that townships that provide only the required services collaborate even more with other townships via employee-sharing practices. These results raise important questions about the ways in which we measure the concept of collaboration. Collaborations require and potentially increase interpersonal and interorganizational trust. These results suggest that townships are finding ways to increase organizational efficiencies within the current statutory structure. Consolidating services with other levels of government, as suggested by some policymakers, may not yield substantially more savings in these cases.

Property assessment is one of the three services that Illinois townships must provide. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the constant and administrative nature of property assessment, statutory townships report relative stability among assessor's offices with just 8% reporting growth in service levels in the last 10 years (see Table 3). Among those townships providing more than the three required services, the expansion of the assessor's office is higher (26% of respondents, see Table 4). Taken together, those townships that provide the minimum required services tend to be stable in their property assessment outlook, and those townships that provide more than the required services tend to see some limited expansion in the role of the assessor and their office.

Table 8: Core Collaborations by Townships That Provide Extra-Statutory Services (Percent of 141 Collaborations by 105 Townships)

Service/Partner	Neighboring Township	Neighboring Municipality	County Govt.	Non-profit	Private Firm	Total
Family therapy	–	–	–	4%	1%	6%
Senior therapy	–	–	–	4%	–	4%
After-school tutoring	–	–	–	2%	–	2%
Community building	1%	1%	–	3%	–	5%
Food pantry	2%	2%	1%	8%	–	13%
Lending closet	–	–	–	3%	–	4%
Passports	–	–	–	–	–	1%
Transportation	2%	3%	3%	3%	2%	13%
Mental health	1% –	1%	6%	1%	9%	
Disabled services	–	1%	1%	4%	–	6%
Senior services	2%	2%	2%	7%	1%	13%
Youth services	2%	2%	1%	5%	–	9%
Notary public	2%	2%	1%	1%	–	5%
Cemeteries	1%	–	–	–	–	1%
Parks and recreation	–	2%	–	–	–	2%
Libraries	–	2%	–	–	1%	3%
Other	–	1%	–	–	–	2%
Totals	14%	20%	10%	50%	6%	100%

*Note:* Totals include values less than 1% in specific table cells.

The relative stability of the township assessor’s office does not necessarily indicate that the office is stagnant. As mentioned in the previous section, the assessor’s office is highly collaborative with other forms of local government. Among statutory townships, 44% of sharing agreements for required services are for property assessment. These agreements are largely with other townships; however, counties provide support as well. The percentage of sharing agreements among required services drops considerably when we examine townships that provide services beyond the required minimum although sharing agreements for property assessment still compose the plurality of agreements.

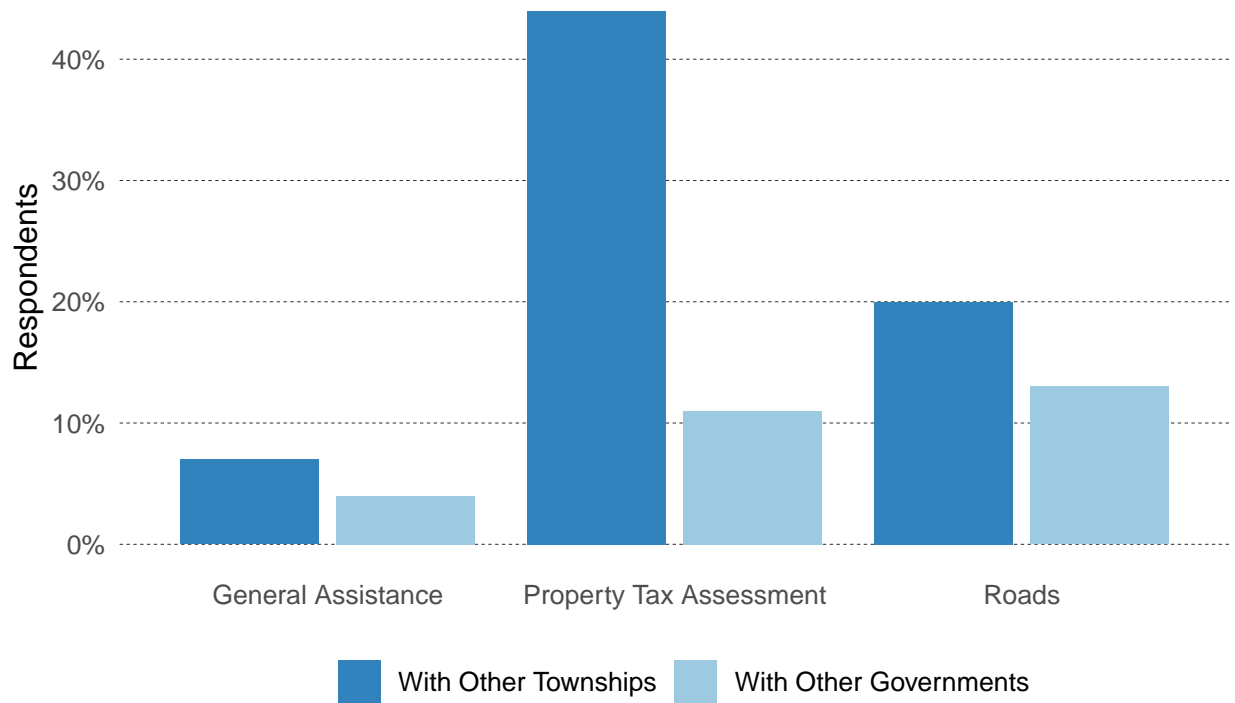
Interestingly, while townships are quite externally collaborative with property assessment duties, they are not internally collaborative. Among the 54 responding elected assessors, only six report sharing staff with other areas of township government. When asked the nature of the staff sharing, most report sharing clerical or support staff. Our more limited data from representatives of multi-township assessment districts<sup>7</sup> suggests a similar trend: Employee sharing is rare and typically clerical in nature when it does occur. This seems to indicate that the assessor’s staff is highly specialized<sup>8</sup> and not particularly suited to sharing roles in other parts of the township operations. The specialized nature of property assessment may also explain why townships are so externally collaborative in this area. Specialized labor tends to be more expensive or rare outside of large urban centers (Rosenthal and Strange 2006). Sharing resources is one mechanism to overcome these issues while still providing the required service.

One area of interest our survey did not explore is the extent to which these employee-sharing arrangements with other local governments are the result of voluntary policy changes, the result of historical decisions, or necessity. State law requires collaboration on property assessment for particularly small townships via the formation of multi-

7. As a reminder, a multi-township assessment district is a formal collaboration between townships for assessment purposes.

8. One potential indication of specialization is professional certification. Nearly all (51 out of 54) assessors in our survey indicated they provide reimbursement for Certified Illinois Assessing Officer training through the Illinois Property Assessment Institute.

Figure 4: Employee Sharing by Townships With Only Statutory Services (81 Townships, 109 Sharing Practices)



*Note:* Totals include values less than 1% in specific table cells.

township assessment districts. Additionally, if an elected assessor cannot be secured (i.e., no one runs for office), the assessing role may fall to another local government, typically the county. These “forced” collaborations are likely somewhat different than voluntary ones, and more research is required to determine the different facets of these relationships.

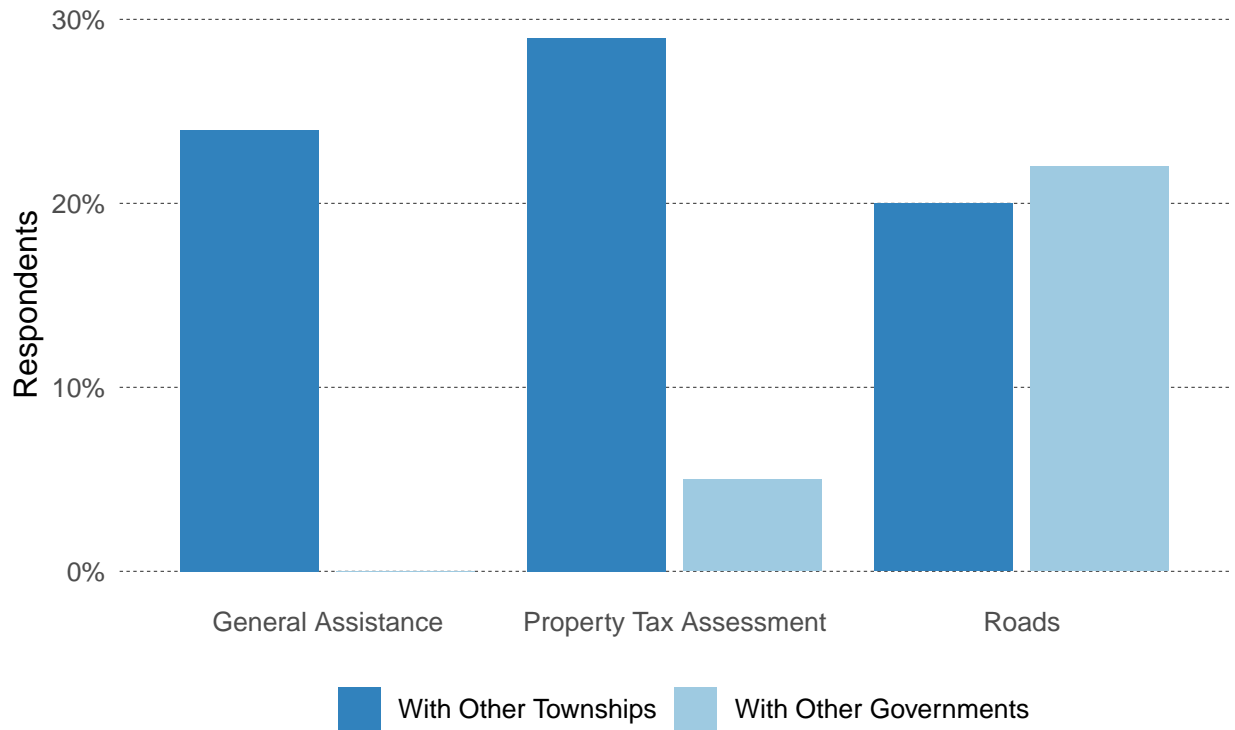
## BROADER IMPLICATIONS

Townships remain prevalent forms of local government, yet little systematic evidence of their activities is available. This survey provides insights that can inform subsequent inquiry in several directions. Many Illinois townships appear poised to expand various forms of social services in future years, yet most are likely to face continued periods of fiscal austerity and uncertainty as threats posed by climate change and rural population decline continue to become clearer (Bausch and Koziol 2020; Mukherjee et al. 2021). While township service responsibilities may vary across states, the future challenges and the potential for economies of scale and scope via service expansion are not unique to Illinois. With this larger landscape in mind, we focus on three interrelated topics: the extent of engagement and information provision between townships and citizens, township government capacities, and the potential for collaborative service delivery.

### Citizen Engagement

Citizen engagement is a longstanding topic of interest and concern for public administration scholars (Glaser, Yeager, and Parker 2006). Reducing the information costs for citizens to be informed of government actions and engaged

Figure 5: Employee Sharing by Townships With Extra-Statutory Services (33 Townships, 41 Sharing Practices)



Note: Totals include values less than 1% in specific table cells.

with public officials is critical for the civic health of society. Accountability and equity are both normative areas of concern when it comes to reducing information barriers between citizens and government decision-making. The survey indicates that township governments largely ignore or disregard social media as one combination of platforms that could help to alleviate the general lack of attention paid to township issues, services, and governance. Online citizen engagement has been an evolving and growing facet of local government strategic communications for more than two decades, but our survey indicated less than half of Illinois townships used social media for making major public announcements. Fewer than one in five used social media for recruitment despite the dominance of social media platforms in public service human resources recruitment. With the continuing emphasis of state and federal government policies and funding for broadband and wireless technology expansion into rural areas, Illinois township governments should redouble efforts to develop strategies and capabilities for using social media platforms to build community connections with citizens.

### Organizational Capacity

Local governments exist today in a challenging environment of resource constraints but also have the potential for sizable investments in infrastructure in the coming years (Deslatte and Stokan 2019). Organizational capacities are often described in terms of the technical, fiscal, and managerial capabilities they possess to deliver public services. Despite the general depiction of governments as bloated bureaucracies, Illinois township governments report operating with extremely low administrative overhead in terms of personnel. Recall that a majority of respondents indicated they had fewer than five full- and part-time employees. Only about half (54%) indicated they budgeted annually for employee training. The vast majority of townships rely on seasonal or contract workers to function. Most also share

Table 9: Employee Sharing by Townships With Extra-Statutory Services (33 Townships, 107 Sharing Practices)

Service/Partner	With Other Townships	With Other Governments	Totals
Family therapy	–	–	–
Senior therapy	–	–	–
Community building	–	–	–
Lending closet	6%	–	6%
Transportation	18%	12%	29%
Mental health	–	–	–
Disabled services	–	–	–
Senior services	6%	12%	18%
Youth services	6%	6%	12%
Cemeteries	6%	–	6%
Parks and recreation	–	18%	18%
Libraries	–	6%	6%
Other	6%	–	6%
Totals	47%	53%	100%

*Note:* Totals include values less than 1% in specific table cells.

employees with other townships. While heavy reliance on contracting and employee-sharing can provide fiscal savings, trade-offs can emerge when pursuing financial savings leads to increase number of contracts to negotiate and manage. At some point, the use of these tactics may negatively impact organizational performance. This is especially true given the rapidly changing environment in which local governments find themselves today. Townships will likely need more flexibility and increased capacity – not less – to respond to future challenges such as climate change, public health, and the continued demographic and economic challenges of rural places. Township governments will need to place a greater emphasis on developing newer technical and managerial capacities as service needs change, public infrastructure continues to degrade, the population ages, and service needs generally become more complex in future years.

## Collaboration

To that end, township governments appear focused on building capabilities through their collaborative relationships with other townships, other local governments, and nonprofits. It is unclear how much of the collaborative effort is mandated by resource scarcity, innovation, or legislative mandate. Nonetheless, the extent to which townships are turning to collaboration to meet service needs is encouraging. We expect that there are many examples of collaboration among townships in Illinois, as illustrated by the case of 29 townships in Sangamon County regarding the administration and distribution of General Assistance. Each township in the county utilizes a single township to process all of the county-wide townships applicants for general assistance. This eliminates confusion and provides consistent standards in the review, approval, and delivery of general assistance funding. The administering township charges a minimal fee to each participating township on a per application processed basis. As townships seek to expand services in the future, policymakers should consider methods for incentivizing service expansion via collaborative arrangements as a means to avoid duplication and otherwise inefficient uses of limited resources (Thurmaier and Wood 2004).

## CONCLUSION

This initial review of Illinois townships suggests a wide range of services variation beyond the statutory requirements for roads, property assessments, and general assistance. The widespread practice of sharing personnel and otherwise collaborating for service delivery indicates that townships are perhaps more efficient and cost-effective than conventional parodies may suggest. Most of the townships are run by a limited number of staff, suggesting that reassigning mandated services to other local governments is unlikely to result in personnel cost savings. While the analysis presented here does not directly assess the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of townships or their collaborations, we look forward to more research to assess these important issues. More specifically, while our current research focused on township governments in Illinois, it is necessary to collect data from other states in the Midwest (e.g., Wisconsin), which may allow for more illuminating comparisons of resources and service-load across townships in different state contexts. Further analyses by scholars in the 20 states with townships should explore differences across townships in terms of population size, rural versus urban geography, size of budgets, and other factors. A greater understanding of the complexity of delivering township services can guide scholars and practitioners in their deliberations about the future of township governments.

Created to serve small, rural populations, many Illinois townships has evolved over time to expand services for their constituents, especially in metropolitan areas. The debate about the role and viability of these public institutions in the 21st century is important. Policymakers and others who are critical of the number of township governments may note that our initial findings indicate that a legislative approach that encourages and facilitates township collaborations with each other and with other local governments may be an expeditious way to increase their effectiveness and efficiency. More than two-thirds of Illinois townships provide only the three statutory services, and this is especially true of smaller townships. Rather than trying to force counties and municipalities to take over township responsibilities, legislators may find it easier to facilitate townships increasing their collaboration with each other and other local governments. In the future, scholars and practitioners would be well-served to expand township survey efforts to additional states to collect comparable baseline information.

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