

MEETING COMMUNITY NEEDS:
Municipal Services and
the Public Workforce
Over the Past Century

This brief, part of a series to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the National League of Cities, focuses on the evolution of service provision and the development of the local government workforce over the past century.

Introduction

Cities are innovators by design. As the form of government closest to the people, municipal governments must be responsive to residents' needs, sometimes even before there is a systemic way to address these issues. While the municipal departments providing services have generally remained fairly constant, the nature of the services they provide has evolved over time. In tandem with these developments, the local government workforce also has experienced much change, across a range of dimensions, over the past 100 years.

This brief provides an overview of the services provided by cities between 1903 and 2010, based on budgeted expenses, (see Appendix for methodology) and examines the changes to the municipal workforce related to these changes.

Types of Municipal Service Departments

The list below is representative of the way that municipalities organize departments to deliver services, although the methods through which they deliver services have evolved over the last 100 years.

- Infrastructure (roads, bridges and waterways)
- Public spaces (parks, recreation)
- Public safety (police, fire, courts, corrections facilities)
- Public health (hospitals, related public health institutions, aid to individuals-in-need)
- Education (schools, libraries)¹
- Governance (administrative functions essential for government operations; occasionally voting and elections)

Early Catalysts for Expanding Municipal Services

In the 20th century, population growth, demographic shifts, health emergencies and natural disasters led to an expansion of local-level services. At times, federal priorities and legislation were the catalysts for services delivered at the local level, with federal funding for these services often passing through to states and local government budgets.

1918 Flu Pandemic

The flu pandemic of 1918 and high rates of tuberculosis led cities to invest in public health tracking systems, management of physical plants to address quarantine needs and improved approaches to the management of sewage and waste.² A spurt of fires in the early 20th century led cities to add fire management to the services they offered, and also spurred an increase in cities' spending on water, sewer and road management in order to enhance the efficiency of fire departments.³ Likewise, public education expanded in the early 20th century with high school attendance becoming more commonplace.⁴ During this period, municipal infrastructure spending covered highways and bridges⁵ and education made up the highest share of municipal spending in the early 20th century coinciding with increases in the availability of public education beyond the elementary grades⁶.

Great Depression

Municipal spending on service provision increased during the Great Depression when there was an increase in public assistance, and during World War II.⁷ During this time, health and human services spending accounted for an average of 20 percent of the examined budgets, although there has been variation as the types of services shifted over time expanding to include regulatory functions around food, distribution of federal and state-funded public benefits and the like.

World War II

According to U.S. Census Bureau datasets, prior to World War II, there was an average of approximately 1.4 million local government employees. This increased to 1.8 million in 1949, reflecting an expansion in local government services, budgetary capacity and availability of labor, along with an expansion of suburban jurisdictions.⁸

Post World War II Expansion

The post-World War II period was a time of growth in local government employment associated with expanded service provision. Following the war, with veterans returning to the workforce, suburban development opening up, and cars becoming a primary means of transportation, municipal spending on infrastructure in the form of roads and housing increased.⁹ While the management of public spaces has continuously included public parks, other public cultural institutions such as theaters, museums, sports venues and the like were added to spending on public recreation in the second half of the 20th century.¹⁰ In addition, housing, community development and natural resource management funds were included in the budgets of public space management departments around this time with many communities making investments in soil management, drainage, flood control and other actions to enhance their climate resilience.

The number of local government civil engineers was at its highest point right before and after World War II (1930 and 1950), and generally decreased from 1980 to 2020, reflecting spikes in local public works projects in the first half of the 20th century and the contracting out of these positions in the later stages of the 1900s and early 2000s.¹¹



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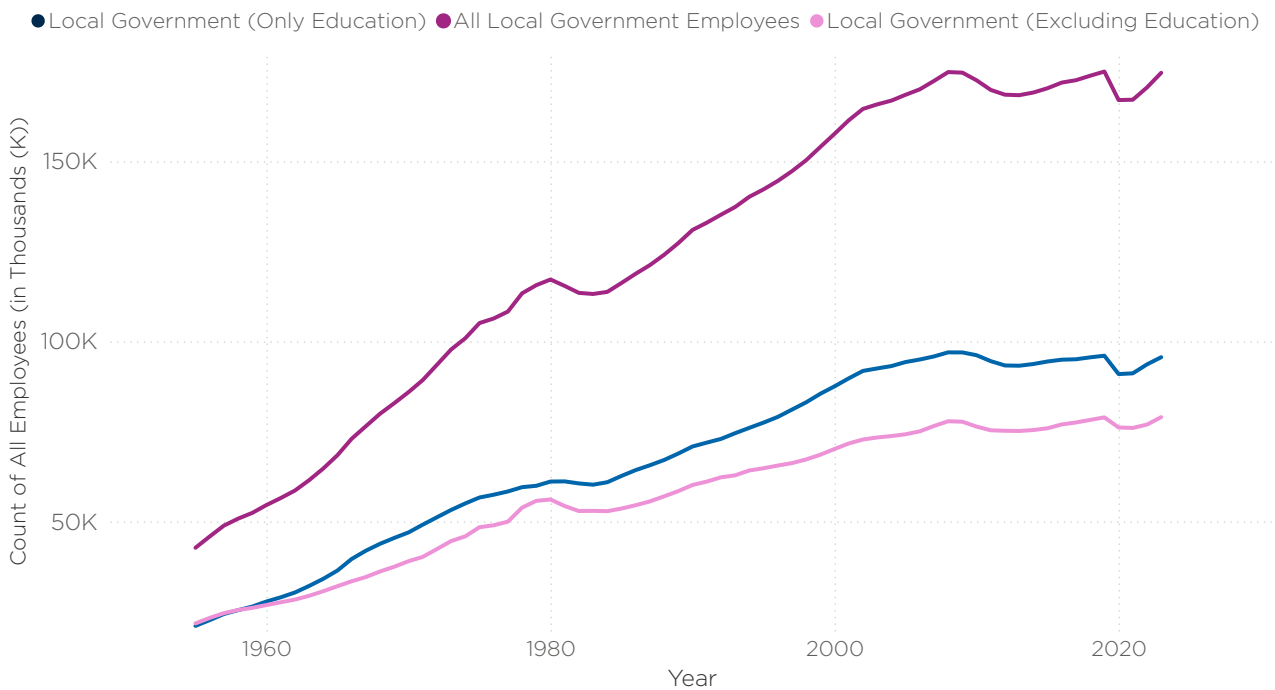
In 1955 there were 3.5 million local government employees overall, with 49 percent in education and 51 percent in non-education local government industries (see Figure 1 for details).¹² The 1957-1958 timeframe was when educational positions began to eclipse the number of non-education local government positions, in line with when sizable portions of the baby boom generation (born 1946-1964)¹³ were entering their school-age years.

In the 1960s, the federal government’s War on Poverty led to increased municipal spending on services to those in need. The passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, and more recently the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), are examples of how federal legislation also led to changes in local education budgets.¹⁴ And, beginning in 1974, municipalities gained access to federally funded Community Block Development Grants (CBDG) to meet a range of community development needs, such as changes in community organization, desegregation and other factors.¹⁵


The workforce has undergone change in both numbers and allocation across sectors, as illustrated in the figure below.

FIGURE 1
Employment in the Local Government Has Increased Over the Past Century

LOCAL GOVERNMENT EMPLOYMENT COUNT BY YEAR (EDUCATION, NON-EDUCATION, AND TOTAL)



Source: FRED Economic Data, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. 2024.
Figure Note: Local governments include county, municipal, or other local government.



The share of spending on public safety has ranged from less than 10 percent in 1970 to 30 percent in 1980

While fire and police protection services have stood the test of time in municipal service provision, public safety expenditures increased notably in the 1960s, with this trend continuing after 1980. The share of spending on public safety has ranged from less than 10 percent in 1970 to 30 percent in 1980. This pattern appears to be primarily driven by growth in policing costs as well as the addition of corrections and court expenses from 1990 onward in the data examined. All public safety costs increased at this time across police, fire, corrections and court services. Related, the number of employees in police and detective roles was relatively flat prior to 1950, but then increased steadily through 2010, leveling off in 2020.¹⁶ Those in management positions gradually increased from 1980 through 2000 and have remained at similar levels through 2020. Those in legal positions (lawyers and judges) have continued to increase from 1980 onward.

Over the last 50 years, from early 1974 to 2024, local government employment overall has increased by 79 percent, with the non-education local government workforce similarly increasing by 78 percent in that same time period; this increase aligns with increases in municipal spending for service provision.¹⁷ While this growth has generally been consistent, there have been times of fluctuation, evident during recent recessions,¹⁸ such as the 1981-1982 recession,¹⁹ the Great Recession of 2007-2009, and the COVID-19 pandemic recession of 2020 (see Figure 2). These recessions had impacts on tax and fee revenues, reserves, increased costs due to inflation (in certain instances), and governments being more conservative about adding workers in a period of economic uncertainty, among other factors – all of which, in turn, had an effect on local workforce levels.

By the end of the 20th century, municipal infrastructure services had expanded to include funding for parking, public transportation and air traffic (although it no longer included bridges). Despite this expansion, budgeted expenses for infrastructure services represented only 7 percent of municipal expenditures after 2000 while in 1903 they represented one-fifth of budgeted service expenditures..²⁰

Corresponding with these developments, the local government workforce has experienced much change over the past 100 years and has expanded significantly. In 2024, there were approximately 14.7 million local government employees in the US overall, with 55 percent of these local employees in education, 29 percent in general administration, 5 percent in hospitals, 2 percent in utilities, 2 percent in transportation and 7 percent in other local government industries..²¹



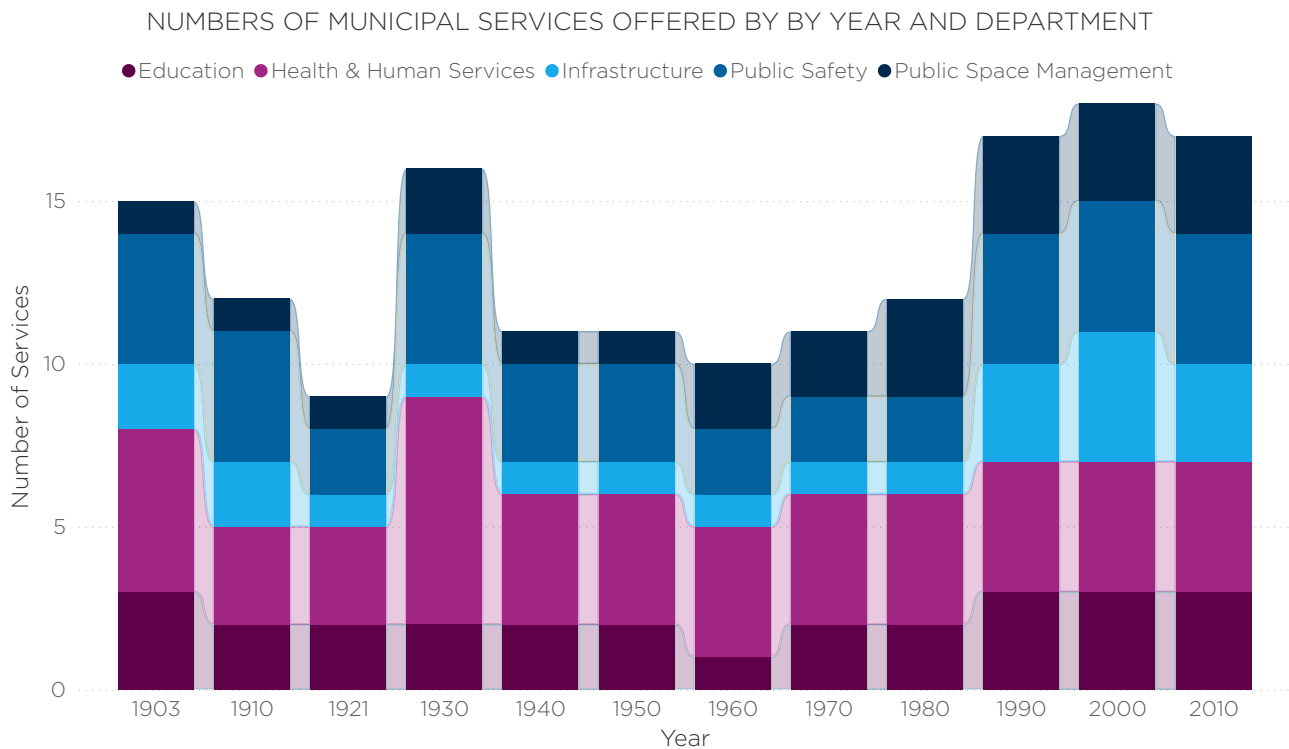
In 2024, there were approximately 14.72 million local government employees in the US overall, with 55 percent of these local employees in education, 29 percent in general administration, 5 percent in hospitals, 2 percent in utilities, 2 percent in transportation and 7 percent in other local government industries

Municipal Service Provision: A Closer Look

The specific services municipal departments provide have changed over time, even though the number of services they provide remains relatively stable. On average, municipalities provided 13 services across five departments (infrastructure, public space management, public safety, health and human services, and education) between 1903 and 2010. However (see Figure 2), over the last 30 years, 15 to 18 services have been provided across these departments, with health and human services and public safety offering more services than other departments.



FIGURE 2
 Number of Services Offered by Municipalities Have Stayed Fairly Consistent for More Than a Century



Source: Census of Governments, data manually drawn down by hand by author for years before 1990.

In terms of budgets, infrastructure, public space management and health and human services departments have had the greatest increases in share of budget. However, health and human services, public safety and education make up larger shares of municipal spending on services in the later periods. These changes also influenced the types and number of municipal employees across time.

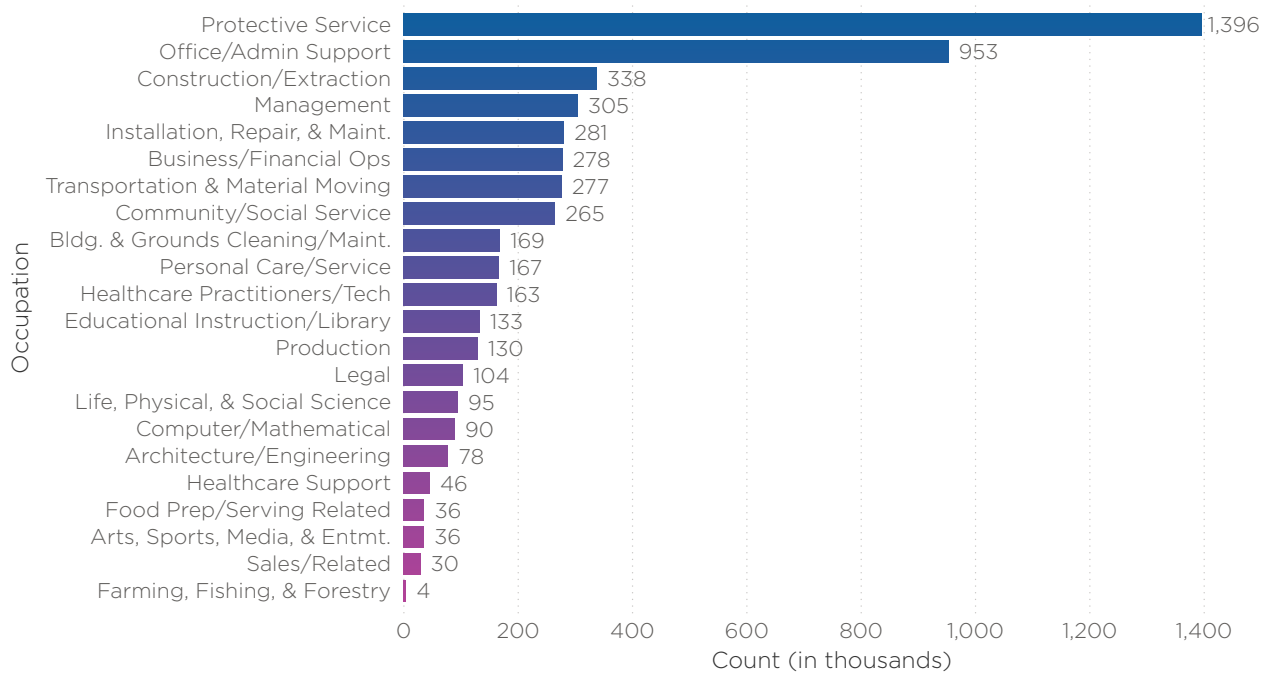
Local Government Occupations: A Century of Change

The most recently available local employment data (as of 2022) quantifies the top major categories of (non-education) occupations within local governments, shown below in terms of number of positions and percentage of total employment:²² Some interesting trends emerge when looking at the main occupations within these major categories over the past 100 years.²³ Most positions within local government have increased over the past century, in line with population and service provision changes.

FIGURE 3

Protective Service and Office/Administrative Support Occupations Dominate Local Government Positions

NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS IN OCCUPATION WITHIN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS, MOST COMMON CATEGORIES



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Local Government, excluding Schools and Hospitals (OEWS Designation) - May 2022 OEWS Industry-Specific Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates.*



Generally, as the administration of local government has taken on more complex roles, positions that require advanced training and/or education have experienced notable increases to meet these responsibilities. These categories include social workers, public health and medical, finance and accounting, scientists and geologists, among others. Conversely, positions that have been affected by mechanization, automation and/or contracting with other sectors have experienced notable decreases, including laborers, office machine operators, gardeners, foreman, truck drivers and road machinery operators, among others. For example, the number of employees in the stenographer, typist and secretary category peaked in 1970 and 1980, and then decreased, likely linked to the use of word processing via computers. Positions such as janitors peaked between 1970 and 1990 and have been decreasing in number since, likely due to local governments increasingly contracting out these services.

Partnering with the Private Sector on Service Provision

While cities take the lead in providing services for their residents, they do not directly implement all services. Instead, they may choose to enter a contract arrangement with a private company, nonprofit or not-for-profit organization to deliver services to constituents. In some cases, governments oversee relationships with these private service providers through governing boards or authorities. Some of these services include public transportation, health care, communication services like broadband, telecommunications and even education.

For example, in the early 20th century, cities owned and managed public health institutions such as sanitoriums and hospitals; today, two-thirds of these services are owned and managed by non- and for-profit organizations.²⁴ Municipal spending on hospitals spiked in the 1950s but has slowly declined since then as hospitals became privatized. And in many cases today, public health services are provided by county agencies, rather than municipalities, if they are not privatized.

Similarly, while cities are still the major provider of educational services for their residents, the market has expanded to include a greater variety of non- and for-profit options, such as charter schools, religious schools and other private options.²⁵

In terms of infrastructure, cities are now often contracting with private service providers for management of services such as garbage, road maintenance and the like (see Appendix for other details). Likewise, municipalities generally contract out to public transit providers (often called “transit authorities”) to provide services; cities often support and oversee the provider but are not primarily responsible for daily management, revenue or expenses.

The Past Points to the Future

While localities have long provided services to their communities, the variety of services that they provide has evolved significantly over the last century, accompanied by a substantial increase in associated costs. This has been accompanied by changes in the local government workforce. The capacity of local governments to adapt their service structures, budgets and workforce to changing conditions, as demonstrated over the past 100 years, makes it clear that municipalities will continue to play an important role in delivering critical services to residents.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

Data for the examination of provision of municipal services were collected from the Census of Governments expenses “by function” data.

Between 1903 and 1990, they are based on PDFs of the annual reports for the start of each decade where available. Given the amount of work required to manually collect these data, the author started with the earliest year (1903) and then provided data for approximately each decade’s census of governments moving forward. While expenses are reported in various formats (thousands, millions, etc.) all values in this report have been converted to be represented in full thousands of dollars.

There are several data limitations to this analysis. First, each year’s report is based on a different sample of cities. The sample size may, particularly in the later years of the analysis, result in an inflation of costs due to the inclusion of only large cities. Additionally, in some years certain budget lines are not available for all of the years (for example, “voting”). Utility services such as communications utilities and electrical utilities are not included in this analysis as in early years they are listed only as an expense related to municipal buildings and not clearly defined in later years. Analyses are driven by what is available in the raw data such that if a service area is not listed, its value is equal to 0 in that year.

Overall employment level (and industry) data are drawn from two sources: (1) The U.S. *Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States* series and (2) FRED Economic Data, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, based on the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’ (BLS) Current Employment Statistics survey data sets. For these federal data sources, including source BLS data sets, unless otherwise noted, local government represents those working for county, municipal, or other local government entity. For pre-1955 data, there may be some limitations due to how the data are categorized, along with related methodological changes implemented, over time. Trends and changes in occupations are based on author analyses of IPUMS USA (1920 – 2020), constructed from decennial censuses and American Community Surveys conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Note: For most part, local government educational services are administered by local School districts, separate from general local government entities, see: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cog.html>
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- 3 Trounstine, J. (2018). *Segregation by Design: Local Politics and Inequality in American Cities*. Cambridge University Press.
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- 5 Highways are often managed by the Federal Highway Administration. However, the service is specifically titled “highways” in all documents analyzed and thus is reported as such here, though it is possible that the classification of “highway” differs in these budget documents.
- 6 Labaree, D. (1992). *The Making of an American High School: The Credentials Market and the Central High School of Philadelphia, 1838-1939*. Yale University Press.
- 7 Trout, C.H. (1973). Welfare in the New Deal Era. *Current History*, 48(29), 621-629. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45312886>
- 8 Gigantino, A. (2019). Suburban Sprawl: The Greatest Social Change of Post-World War II America. *The Histories*, 5(1), 35-42. https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1099&context=the_histories
- 9 Fillon, P. (2018). Enduring Features of the North American Suburb: Built Form, Automobile Orientation, Suburban Culture and Political Mobilization. *Urban Planning*, 3(4), 4-14. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v3i4.1684>
- 10 This is likely partially due to Mission 66 funding which impacted public spending on public recreation with billions of dollars across 10 years to conclude in 1966. See “Mission 66 Background and History,” National Park Service, <https://home.nps.gov/articles/000/mission-66.htm>
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- 13 The Pew Charitable Trusts. (2019, February 8). *Defining Our Six Generations*. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/data-visualizations/2019/defining-our-six-generations>
- 14 For more details on Title I funding of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, see National Center for Education Statistics, “[Title I.](#)”
- 15 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2024, August). [*About the CBGB Program Fact Sheet*](#). HUD Exchange. <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/3878/cdbg-fact-sheet/>

- 16 Author analysis of IPUMS USA, 1920 – 2020, Occupation and Industry analysis. <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/>
- 17 Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. *FRED Economic Data*. <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/categories/32325>
- 18 National Bureau of Economic Research. (2023, March 14). *US Business Cycle Contractions and Expansions*. <https://www.nber.org/research/data/us-business-cycle-expansions-and-contractions>
- 19 Sablik, T. (2013, November 22). *Recession of 1981-82. Federal Reserve History*. <https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/recession-of-1981-82#:~:text=July%201981%E2%80%93November%201982,effort%20to%20fight%20mounting%20inflation.&text=Prior%20to%20the%202007%20D09,States%20since%20the%20Great%20Depression>
- 20 Contact author for details. This table describes the percentage of spending each department accounts for based on total spending across these departments.
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- 26 Garrett, T.A. (2007, November). *Economic Effects of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic: Implications for a Modern-day Pandemic*. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. https://www.stlouisfed.org/-/media/project/frbstl/stlouisfed/files/pdfs/community-development/research-reports/pandemic_flu_report.pdf
- 27 According to the CDC there were 350,831 COVID-related deaths in 2020 and 416,893 in 2021 for a total of 767,724 over the two years, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db456.pdf>