

Overview

The data in this report is intended to facilitate a comparative analysis of spending by Minnesota counties. This report does not analyze whether a county is spending an appropriate amount for county services. Such evaluations can only be made after a thorough assessment of the overall spending of a particular county, the relative level of need for services within that county, and the extent to which the residents of that county demand, and are willing to finance services. Many services provided by counties are required by the state and federal government. These programs often have rules and regulations that put costs beyond the control of the county.

Minnesota's truth-in-taxation requirements for local governments provide citizens with information on the proposed distribution of their property tax dollars. This information does not, however, compare different jurisdictions to one another. This report, and the presentation of the data in per capita form, allows county residents to compare their county's expenditures to other similarly sized counties. The comparisons may be used by citizens as a means to better understand the uses of their tax dollars and to hold county government accountable for management of county resources.

Comparisons of county per capita expenditures can also be useful for the counties themselves. County officials should use the comparisons as a starting point for improving efficiency, by looking at comparable counties that have lower per capita expenditures, and investigating potential techniques or ideas that could be replicated to reduce county expenditures.

When examining the following tables, it is evident that there are wide variations in the per capita amounts spent on county services. Several possible reasons exist for the wide variation in county expenditures.¹ Counties with relatively high per capita expenditures may be responding to particular circumstances, such as a higher crime rate, or a geographically-large county with a small population over which to spread the costs of the services. Alternatively, comparatively high per capita expenditures may be indicative of poor financial management practices by county officials.

Conversely, counties with comparatively low per capita expenditures may have opted not to provide certain services that are available in other counties, or may not be faced with the same demands for services. Alternatively, comparatively low per capita expenditures may be indicative of superior financial management practices of county officials.

Residents of individual counties need to evaluate their county's circumstances to better understand the reasons for its per capita expenditure patterns. To fully understand county finances, residents and county officials need to evaluate the relative contributions of both management decisions and circumstances for their county.

The State Auditor's Office has made this data available in an interactive database on its website. The OSA website address is www.osa.state.mn.us.

¹ Appendix A provides a more detailed analysis of factors that contribute to differences in county spending.