

# Pew Report Compares Councils in 15 Cities

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Members of Los Angeles' city council draw the biggest salaries, those in San Antonio the smallest. Philadelphia's city council members have been in office the longest and San Diego's and Houston's the shortest.

The council in Detroit spends the highest percentage of the overall city budget on its own operations, the one in New York the lowest. Washington's council spends the most on a per resident basis, Phoenix the least.

These are just some of the findings of a new study from The Pew Charitable Trusts' Philadelphia Research Initiative, titled *City Councils in Philadelphia and Other Major Cities: Who Holds Office, How Long They Serve, and How Much It All Costs*.

The report compares councils in 15 cities, including the 10 largest, in a number of ways that can be quantified. Among them are council budgets, staffing, salaries, certain electoral conditions, tenure and the representation of historically underrepresented groups. The cities are Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, San Antonio, San Diego, San Jose and Washington. Three other cities—Denver, Nashville and San Francisco—were included in some of the cost comparisons because they, like Philadelphia, have consolidated city/county governments. A PDF of the report and an interactive Web graphic that allows users to compare councils is available.

“On the heels of a recession, many cities have cut their municipal budgets with city councils heavily involved in those decisions,” said Thomas Ginsberg, project manager of the Philadelphia Research Initiative. “In some cities, councils' own spending levels have come under increased scrutiny. Our research sheds light on a number of measureable characteristics of the councils as cities are about to engage in the once-a-decade council redistricting process.”

All of the cities studied, except Detroit, Houston, New York and San Diego, have elections this year at which all or some council seats are on the ballot.

Among the key findings are these:

- Philadelphia city council had the longest average tenure for its members, 15.5 years, followed by Chicago and Baltimore at 13 years apiece. San Diego and Houston had the shortest at 2.7 years. One reason for the big differences between cities is that eight of the 15 cities have term limits for council members. Among the eight with term limits are San Diego and Houston but not Philadelphia, Chicago and Baltimore.
- The Los Angeles City Council spends the most per seat on itself, about \$1.7 million, and Pittsburgh the least, about \$226,000. The 15 councils cost local tax-payers a median of about \$607,000 per member this past year, the biggest part of which was salaries and benefits for staff and members. On a per resident basis, Washington, which functions as a city, county and state, spends the most on council, \$32.41, and Phoenix the least, \$2.10.
- Detroit's council consumes 1.01 percent of city general-fund spending, the largest share among the cities studied. New York's 0.10 percent is the lowest. Across all 15 cities, the median is 0.46 percent. That share changed little through the recession (fiscal 2008 to 2011) for many of the cities. After inflation, seven of the councils reduced their own budgets during the period, led by Phoenix's 33 percent cut, while seven recorded increases.
- Los Angeles has the highest average salaries, \$178,789, and San Antonio has the lowest, a maximum of only \$1,400 per member. In addition to Los Angeles, council members are paid more than \$100,000 a year on average in Washington, New York, Philadelphia and Chicago.
- As for representing historically under-represented groups, the 15 cities as a group have about the same percentage of blacks in council as in their general populations. In fact, blacks account for a higher percentage of council seats than population in Chicago, Detroit, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix, San Antonio and San Diego. Women are less well-represented. Dallas has the largest representation of women on council, 47 percent, while Los Angeles has the lowest at 13 percent. In most of the cities, Hispanics and Asians have smaller shares of council seats compared to populations.
- Philadelphia City Council has the most weeks during which no hearings or sessions

appear on its official calendar—12 weeks during a typical summer—although many members continue to work during that period. In contrast, Houston, officially a part-time panel, schedules some type of council business every week of the year, although often only partial days.

- Most council members are elected from districts rather than citywide. The only city where all council members are elected at large is Detroit, which is in the process of switching to a district-based council.

## About the Report

City Councils in Philadelphia and Other Major Cities was written by Thomas Ginsberg, project manager of Pew's Philadelphia Research Initiative, with the assistance of senior associate Claire Shubik-Richards and staff at the Pew Center on the States. The report is limited to the parameters described above, as well as other measurable factors. It does not, for instance, look at such items as voting records of council members, nor does it attempt to measure the political effectiveness of individual members or the councils as a whole.

## MEDIA CONTACT

**Elizabeth Lowe**

Officer, Communications

215.575.4812



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