

Overview

Cities in Minnesota are classified by population for legislative purposes. This publication explains the classifications and provides a breakdown of the number of cities and people within each class. Classification is based on the federal decennial census. This publication also explains the legal rationale for and the purpose and history of classifying cities. The publication reflects population data from the 2020 census and the 2023 population estimates from the State Demographers website. Any incorporations, dissolutions, or consolidations that occurred in a later year are not included.

Statutory Basis for Classification of Cities by Population

Cities are classified by population under Minnesota Statutes, section 410.01. Cities are divided, for legislative purposes, into four classes.

- **First class:** Cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. Once a city is in the first class, it is not reclassified unless its population decreases by 25 percent from the census figures that last qualified the city as first class.
- **Second class:** Cities with a population between 20,001 and 100,000
- **Third class:** Cities with a population between 10,001 and 20,000
- **Fourth class:** Cities with not more than 10,000 inhabitants

Changes in classification take effect every ten years upon the filing of certified copies of the federal decennial census in the Office of the Secretary of State.

Cities in Each Classification

Based on the 2020 federal decennial census, there are four first-class cities (Minneapolis, St. Paul, Rochester, and Duluth), 55 second-class cities, 41 third-class cities, and 753 fourth-class cities, for a total of 853 cities.¹

Despite having a population of less than 100,000, Duluth remains a first-class city because of the language in the statute, added in 1978, that provides that “once a city is defined to be of the first class, it shall not be reclassified unless its population decreases by 25 percent from the

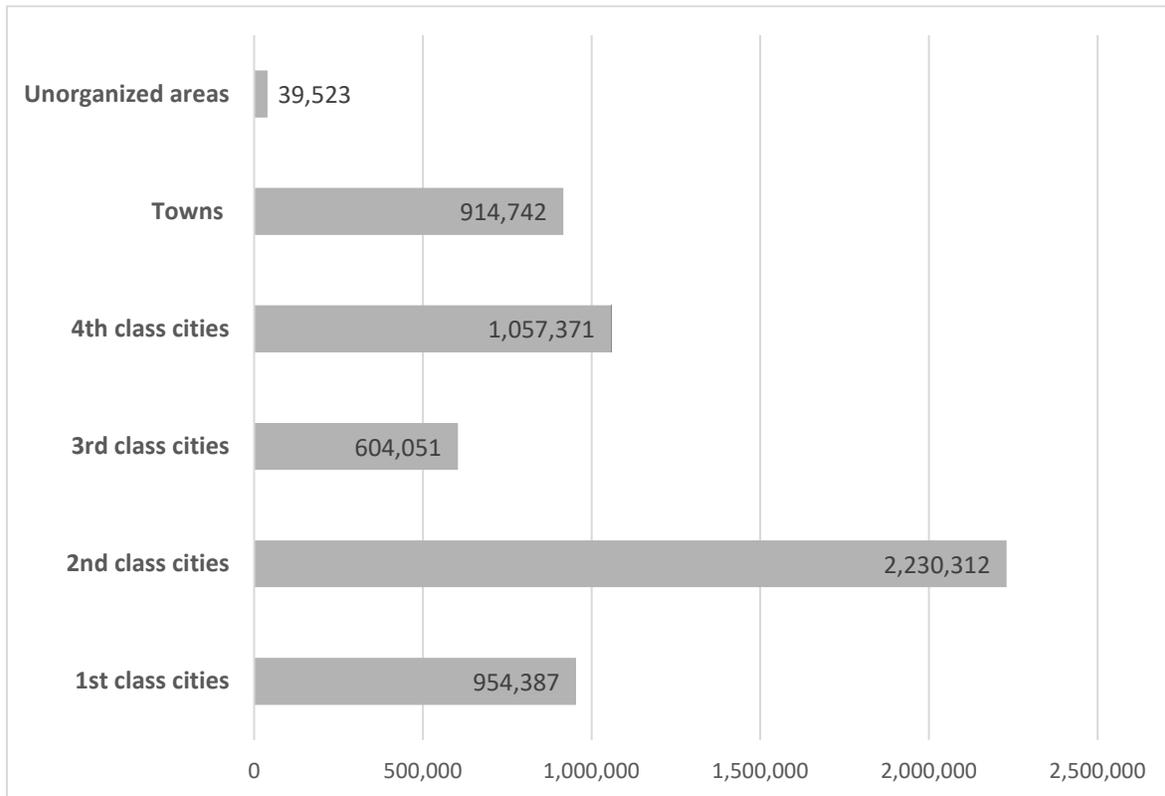
¹ Since the 2020 federal decennial census, two townships have incorporated as cities, bringing the total number of cities in 2023 to 855. Credit River Township incorporated as the city of Credit River on May 11, 2021. The township of Empire also incorporated as the city of Empire on February 28, 2023.

census figures which last qualified the city for inclusion in the class.” Duluth was last over 100,000 in the 1970s; the 1970 census for Duluth was 100,578. The 2020 census for Duluth is 86,697.

The population ranges for classes of cities in the statute have been the same since 1959, when the voters repealed the constitutional provision for city classification by population and the legislature enacted classification as a statute instead. Prior to that, between 1896 and 1959, first-class cities were those with a population of 50,000 or more.

2023 Population by Type of Local Government and Class

As of the state demographer’s 2023 population estimates, the state’s total population is 5,800,386 and is distributed among these classifications of cities, and in towns or unorganized areas² as follows:³



² Unorganized areas are those areas of a county that lack organized city or town government. Government services in unorganized areas are managed by the county.

³ The graphs and tables in this publication reflect the newly incorporated cities of Credit River and Empire as fourth-class cities. 2020 census and 2023 estimates data from the state demographer’s website were used to create the graphs and tables (<http://mn.gov/admin/demography>).

	1 st Class Cities	2 nd Class Cities	3 rd Class Cities	4 th Class Cities	Towns	Unorganized areas
Number of local government units	4	55	41	755	1,779	15
Total population	954,387	2,230,312	604,051	1,057,371	914,742	39,523
Percentage of state population	16.45%	38.45%	10.41%	18.23%	15.77%	0.68%

There are 499 cities with populations of less than 1,000, and 702 cities with populations of less than 5,000. There are 215 towns with a population over 1,000.

Classification and Statutory or Home Rule Charter Cities

Within each class, a city may be a statutory city, organized and operating under state statutes, or a home rule charter city, organized and operating as provided in the charter approved by the voters of the city. Some powers given to statutory cities may be available to home rule charter cities whatever their classification.⁴ The following table shows the number and population of statutory cities and home rule charter cities within each class.⁵

Number and Population of Cities by Type

	Statutory Cities		Home Rule Charter Cities	
	Number of Cities	2023 Estimated Population	Number of Cities	2023 Estimated Population
1 st Class	—	—	4	954,387
2 nd Class	28	1,136,751	27	1,093,561
3 rd Class	24	342,350	17	261,701
4 th Class	696	824,154	59	233,217
Total	748	2,303,255	107	2,542,866

⁴ [Minn. Stat. § 410.33](#): “If a city charter is silent on a matter that is addressed for statutory cities by [chapter 412](#) or other general law and general law does not prohibit a city charter from addressing the matter or expressly provide that a city charter prevails over general law on the matter, then the city may apply the general law on the matter.”

⁵ The city forms of government data in this table was received from the League of Minnesota Cities (October 31, 2024).

Changes Since 2010 through 2023

Classification changes

Nine cities changed classification from the 2010 census to the 2020 census. For these cities, there may be laws that no longer apply to them and other laws that now do apply to them.⁶

Four cities changed from third-class cities to second-class cities. The cities are Forest Lake in Washington County, Columbia Heights in Anoka County, West St. Paul in Dakota County, and Willmar in Kandiyohi County.

Five cities changed from fourth-class cities to third-class cities. The cities are Victoria in Carver County, Lake Elmo in Washington County, Rogers in Hennepin County, Hermantown in St. Louis County, and Little Canada in Ramsey County.

No cities changed classification due to a loss of population.

Incorporation Changes

Between the 2010 census and the 2020 census, the city of Tenney in Wilkin County dissolved, Rice Lake in St. Louis County incorporated, and Thomson and Carlton in Carlton County consolidated (now named “Carlton”).

Since the 2020 census, Credit River in Scott County incorporated⁷ and the city of Empire in Dakota County incorporated.⁸

Reasons for Classifications

Classification of cities by population was originally a way to avoid running afoul of the state constitutional prohibition against special legislation by enacting a general law that applied to specific cities.⁹ From 1892 to 1958, the state constitution prohibited special legislation, including special legislation for local governments. Laws relating to local governments had to be general laws. However, as the courts explained, a law was not special just because it applied to a specific class of cities. Looking at challenged laws on a case-by-case basis, the courts said that a law that may look special could be general and vice versa. The courts also said that there may be a class of one.¹⁰

⁶ See the last section of this publication for a few examples of the many laws that apply only to certain classes of cities.

⁷ Effective May 11, 2021.

⁸ Effective February 28, 2023.

⁹ Classification did not apply to villages or boroughs, which were made into statutory cities in the 1970s.

¹⁰ For more information on special legislation, see House Research publication, [Special Legislation](#).

In order to determine if a classification is justified and constitutional, the Minnesota Supreme Court has applied a three-part rational-basis test.¹¹ A classification is proper if:

- “the classification applies to and embraces all who are similarly situated with respect to conditions or wants justifying appropriate legislation;
- the distinctions are not manifestly arbitrary or fanciful but are genuine and substantial so as to provide a natural and reasonable basis justifying the distinction; and
- there is an evident connection between the distinctive needs peculiar to the class and the remedy or regulations therefore which the law purports to provide.”

Even though use of classification schemes helped, soon after adoption of the 1892 prohibition against local law, it was evident that it was too harsh of a restriction for local governments who desired specific authority that could not be met through enactment of general law. The state constitution was amended again in 1896 to classify cities by population. The legislature also enacted the classification scheme in statute in 1905. As the state supreme court described it, the constitutional classification by population gave the legislature the power to enact legislation relating to cities of a class, alleviating the harshness of the local law prohibition. However, the legislature was always free to use additional classification to further limit the application of a law as long as the additional classification was germane and reasonable.¹²

In 1958, the voters approved an amendment to the Minnesota Constitution to allow special legislation relating to local government (and the constitutional classification of cities by population was repealed, leaving the statutory classification). Under the state constitution, however, “a special law, unless otherwise provided by general law, shall become effective only after its approval by the affected unit expressed through the voters or the governing body and by such majority as the legislature may direct.” [Minn. Const. art. XII](#), § 2.

How Classification by Population is Used

There are several ways that classification by population is used. Here are a few examples.

To bring cities under a law as they reach the threshold population.

This would appear to be the most basic application of the classification scheme. Statutes written to apply to cities of a particular class authorize or require those cities to do something that is related to their ability or needs as they reach a certain population.

¹¹ *In re Tveten*, 402 N.W.2d 551, 558-559 (Minn. 1987) (citations omitted)

¹² *Leighton v. City of Minneapolis*, 222 Minn. 516, 519 to 521, 25 N.W.2d 263 (1946) (accepting as general law legislation that related to a city of the first class with a population over 450,000, effectively limiting the application of the law to Minneapolis at that time).

However, sometimes a law is written to apply only to cities of one class but then there will be another law allowing the same, or substantially the same, thing for cities of another class. For example, under [Minnesota Statutes, section 374.01](#), in a county with a city of the first class, the county and city can together build and use a courthouse/city hall. [Section 374.25](#) allows any other city and county to do the same thing.

To limit the application of a law.

There are many laws (coded and uncoded) that were enacted referring to, for example, a city of the first class with a population over a certain number. As discussed above, this is the type of law that could be viewed as general but relates to just one or a very few cities.

To describe the area in which something must or may be done.

Unlike classifications that relate to a city's powers or duties, this could affect a nongovernmental entity. For example, [section 65A.28](#) requires insurers writing homeowner's policies for property in the metropolitan area or in a city of the first class to compile and file an annual report with the Commissioner of Commerce about the number of policies written, canceled, nonrenewed, and the number of applications declined. (The law goes on to allow the commissioner to make similar requirements for other parts of the state.) This has no direct bearing on the powers and duties of the city.

For descriptive or administrative uses.

Classifications are also used descriptively or administratively to provide information on different types of cities. An example of this is the state auditor's annual reports.



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