New Jersey’s Counties

**Creator:** New Jersey Center for Civic Education, Rutgers University, Piscataway, NJ

**Grade Level:** 3-5

**Objectives:** Students will be able to:
- locate the 21 counties in New Jersey
- identify which county they live in
- the structure of their county government

**New Jersey Student Learning Standards for Social Studies (2020):**

6.1.5.CivicsPI.3: Explain how the United States functions as a representative democracy and describe the roles of elected representatives and how they interact with citizens at local, state, and national levels
6.1.5.CivicsPI.4: Describe the services our government provides the people in the community, state and across the United States.
6.1.5.CivicsPI.5: Explain how government functions at the local, county, and state level

1. **Can you identify New Jersey’s counties?**

**Historical Background**
- From 1674 to 1702, the Province of New Jersey was divided into East Jersey and West Jersey, each with its own governor.
- The State of New Jersey entered the union as the 3rd state on December 18, 1787 with a total of 13 counties.
- Eight more counties were added in New Jersey between 1824 to 1857 bringing the total to 21 counties, where it has remained to this day.

**Activity:**
• Divide students into groups and give them Handout One: Map of New Jersey with county lines (but no names) and Handout Two: slips of paper with the names of each county
• Ask groups of students to paste, tape or otherwise match the names of the counties to their locations on the map
• Share a completed state map with counties with the class
• Ask students to identify which county they live in.

2. Why do we have counties? What services do county governments in New Jersey provide?

Activity:
Have students work in groups to research what their county does by going online, looking at local news sources or contacting the clerk of the county office directly, and prepare a short written or oral presentation.
The presentations should include the following:
• NJ counties maintain significant powers since they have existed in some form since colonial times.
• Counties were created as administrative district courts within each province. Now there are 15 vicinages for Superior (trial) courts in the state, organized primarily by county (Bergen, Essex, Passaic, Hudson, Union, Middlesex, Monmouth, Mercer, Camden, Burlington and Ocean Counties; with Atlantic and Cape May Counties together; Morris and Sussex Counties together; Somerset, Hunterdon and Warren Counties together; and Gloucester, Cumberland and Salem Counties together as one court vicinage.
• Counties also provide services for older citizens, parks, public safety, road construction and repair, corrections (jails), help with elections, and maintain important property, health and other records.

3. How do county governments in New Jersey make decisions?

Background
• New Jersey counties are run by an elected board of commissioners.
• The county board of commissioners serves as both the legislative and executive body (for counties with supervisors or administrators, that person serves as the executive).
• Depending on the county, the executive and legislative functions may be performed by the Board of County Commissioners or split into separate branches of government.
• In counties without an Executive, a County Administrator (or County Manager) may be hired to perform day-to-day administration of county functions.

Activity: Have students research and determine the type of county government they have in their county.
• In 16 counties, the County Commissioners perform both legislative and executive functions on a commission basis, with each commissioner assigned responsibility for a department or group of departments.
• In the other five counties (Atlantic, Bergen, Essex, Hudson and Mercer), there is a directly elected County Executive who performs the executive functions while the commissioners retain a legislative and oversight role.
Handout One: Map of New Jersey with county lines
Handout Two: Names of New Jersey’s Counties

1. Sussex
2. Passaic
3. Bergen
4. Hudson
5. Essex
6. Morris
7. Warren
8. Hunterdon
9. Somerset
10. Union
11. Middlesex
12. Monmouth
13. Mercer
14. Burlington
15. Ocean
16. Atlantic
17. Camden
18. Gloucester
19. Salem
20. Cumberland
21. Cape May
Handout Three: New Jersey’s Counties