



Insight

How Many Federal Forms are There?

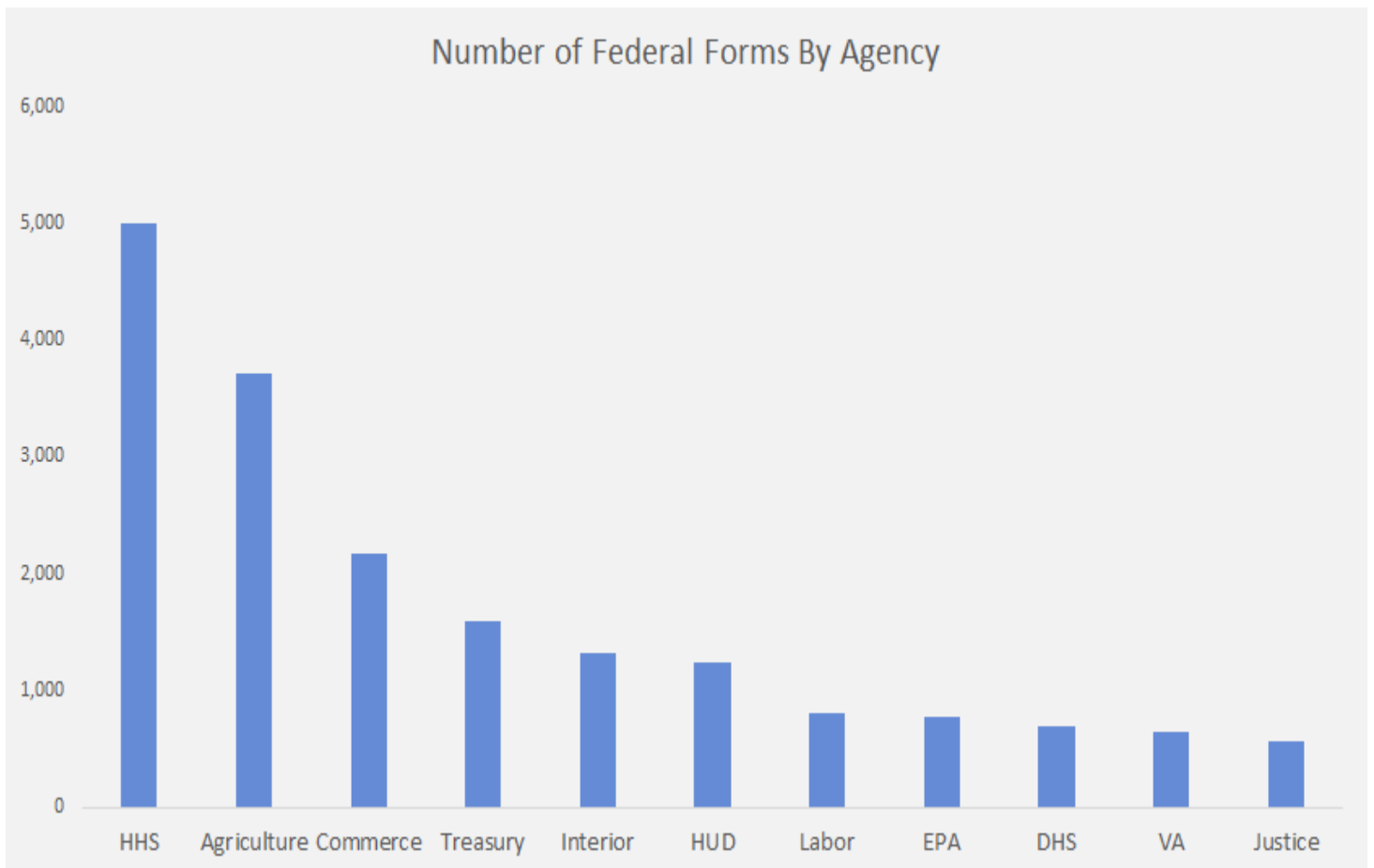
SAM BATKINS | APRIL 21, 2016

Any patient waiting for a doctor's appointment or taxpayer laboring over tax forms understands that federal and state governments impose an almost incomprehensible amount of paperwork. The federal government provides data on the total number of hours ([11.4 billion](#)) and the number of control numbers (roughly 9,300); the latter represents macro collections of information associated with hundreds of forms or sometimes just recordkeeping requirements. However, there was never a firm number on the quantity of federal forms that doctors, homeowners, employers, and employees must manage to comply with federal laws.

According to American Action Forum (AAF) research, 68 federal agencies impose roughly 23,000 forms. To arrive at this figure, AAF searched "active" collections of information for every federal agency the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) lists. Some agencies, like the National Labor Relations Board and the Federal Election Commission, impose no official paperwork requirements or federal forms. Others, like the Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Treasury impose more than 6,600 combined forms.

The Dead Tree Leaders

Surprisingly, Treasury, with an almost countless number of tax forms (there are roughly 1,500) is not the runaway leader in federal paperwork. Although it imposes the greatest number of paperwork hours, it is actually just fourth in the federal forms race, behind HHS and the Department of Agriculture. Anyone who has ever spent an hour filling out forms before a doctor's appointment can attest to the weight of HHS paperwork. Now, there is a number behind these anecdotes: 5,005 forms or 34 percent more than the next closest agency. The graph below depicts the 12 most active agencies, by number of forms.



The Department of Agriculture, somehow, imposes approximately 3,700 forms, but it's not immediately clear why. A review of the data reveals a collection for "Vegetable and Specialty Crops" contains 334 associated forms, far more than even the Individual Income Tax (200). It appears this collection, at just 24,000 aggregate hours, contains a federal form for every item of produce imaginable: nominations to the "Vidalia Onion Committee," nominations to the "Hazelnut Marketing Board," a report of inventory for "High Moisture Content Prunes," and an application to ship Florida tomatoes for relief or charity. Each of these forms supposedly takes just a few minutes to complete, which partly explains why Agriculture's overall paperwork burden (131 million hours) ranks just ninth in the federal government.

The agency's collection for "Fruits, Nuts, and Specialty" crops contains almost as much inanity as well. In its 76 forms (spanning just 18,000 hours), Agriculture collects data on everything from pistachio production and prices, to Hawaiian fresh fruit, to Maple Syrup production, and the infamous "Mid-Season Macadamia Nut Processor Report."

What makes Agriculture stand out from other cabinet agencies is not just its desire to collect data on every form of fruit, nut, or vegetable in the U.S. The agency also has a responsibility to implement important housing and welfare laws. It collects 97 forms under the "Rural Rental Housing Program" and 38 forms for the "Rural Energy" program. Although Agriculture's overall paperwork burden is not record-breaking, its reach throughout the economy is quite broad.

HHS's lead in forms has nothing to do with Medicare, Medicaid, or the Affordable Care Act. The "Hispanic Community Health Study," imposes 107 forms and collects data on food propensity, blood pressure, and alcohol use, among a myriad of other data points. Another HHS leader, "Evaluation of Dating Matters," collects 60 forms on everything from discussing "the possibility of misinterpreting feelings through text messages and/or emails" among sixth graders to a 26-page capacity and readiness survey for local health departments implementing the "Dating Matters" program.

In terms of the ACA's imposition of new or revised paperwork, OIRA lists 943 forms related to the ACA. One of the largest (33 forms) is simply listed as "Health Care Reform Insurance Web Portal." The "Consumer Operated and Oriented Plan [CO-OP]" also imposes substantial burdens, with 21 forms.

Finally, no discussion of paperwork would be complete without mentioning Treasury. The agency imposes the vast majority of hourly burdens (77 percent), thanks in large part to the incomprehensible individual and corporate tax system in the U.S. As mentioned, the Individual Income Tax produces 200 different forms, but it is trumped by the business tax system, which adds 235 forms, including "Mine Rescue Team Training Credit," American Samoa Economic Development Credit," and the "Renewable Electricity, Refined Coal, and Indian Coal Production Credit." Not surprisingly, the IRS's treatment of tax-exempt organizations, which caused considerable controversy recently, also generates substantial paperwork: 27 forms and 24 million hours.

21st Century Reporting?

Some of these forms undoubtedly have legitimate health, safety, or data collection rationales. However, a large percentage somehow cannot be submitted electronically. For example, according to OIRA, 447 of HHS's forms cannot be submitted electronically. The reason isn't immediately known. Likewise, there are more than 1,000 Treasury forms that cannot be submitted online, as well as more than 1,400 Agriculture forms. In the year 2016, it's discouraging that such a large percentage (28 percent) of supposedly vital private information must be mailed back to the federal government. If this percentage is constant across the federal government, it means there are more than 6,500 forms that Americans cannot easily send to regulatory agencies.

Paperwork Budget

AAF has addressed regulatory reform in the past and the confirmation of more than 23,000 forms only reinforces the idea behind a paperwork budget. There are limited resources in the economy and to account for this on a fiscal scale, Congress and the President agree (at least in principle) to a budget. However, no such restraint exists for regulators and the almost countless hours of requirements they impose on Americans.

A paperwork budget could function by agency and cumulatively. That is, Treasury would be limited to eight billion hours, a reduction from its current total, but still far higher than its historical average. Each agency would be limited to a total, providing a cumulative check as well. This budget could be extended to the number of control numbers or paperwork requirements as well. A budget for paperwork is hardly a silver bullet for regulatory reform, but it could provide some relief for how most Americans interact with regulation daily.

Conclusion

The number of federal forms, 23,000, should give pause to regulators seeking to add more to the pile or to Members of Congress wanting to cede additional power to the executive branch. These forms help to generate

more than 11.4 billion hours of paperwork annually. That's the equivalent of 35 hours for every person in the nation. At those extremes, the administration ought to pay more than [lip service](#) to reform.

You can watch our video on [federal forms here](#).