

A Snapshot of Washington, DC, Regulation in 2019

132,042 Restrictions, 7.8 Million Words, and 11 Weeks to Read

James Broughel

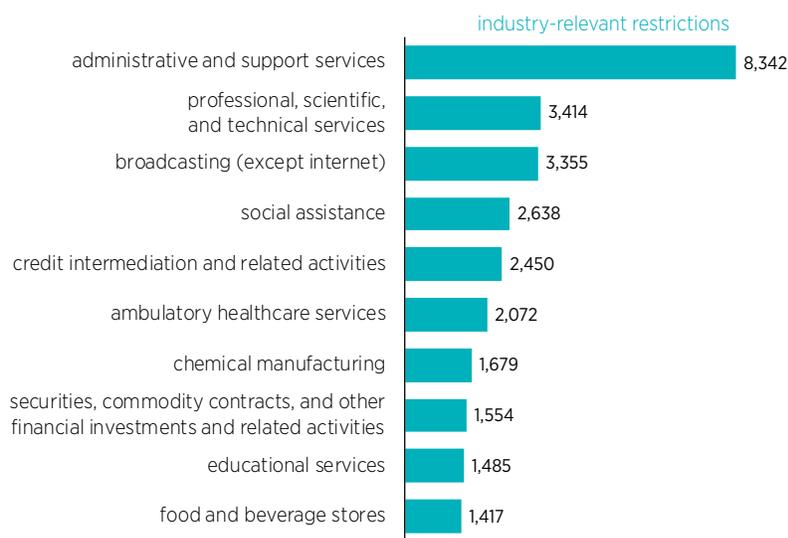
Data Analysis by Jonathan Nelson

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It would take an ordinary person almost three years to read the entire US *Code of Federal Regulations* (CFR), which contained nearly 104 million words in 2017.¹ The sheer size of the CFR poses a problem not just for the individuals and businesses that want to stay in compliance with the law but also for anyone interested in understanding the consequences of this massive system of rules. The District of Columbia and the states of the union also have sizable regulatory codes, which add an additional layer to the large body of federal regulation. A prime example is the online version of the 2019 *District of Columbia Municipal Regulations* (DCMR).²

Researchers at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University developed State RegData, a platform for analyzing and quantifying state regulatory text.³ State RegData captures information in minutes that would take hours, weeks, or even years to obtain by reading and counting. For example, the tool allows researchers to identify the industries that state regulation targets most by connecting text relevant to those industries with restrictive word counts. These regulatory restrictions are instances of the words and phrases *shall*, *must*, *may not*, *prohibited*, and *required*, and they can signify legal constraints and obligations.⁴ As shown in figure 1, the three industries with the highest estimates of industry-relevant restrictions in the 2019 DCMR are administrative and support services; professional, scientific, and technical services (which includes legal services, accounting and tax preparation, and a variety of other professional services); and broadcasting (except internet).

Figure 1. Top 10 Industries Targeted by Washington, DC, Regulation in 2019

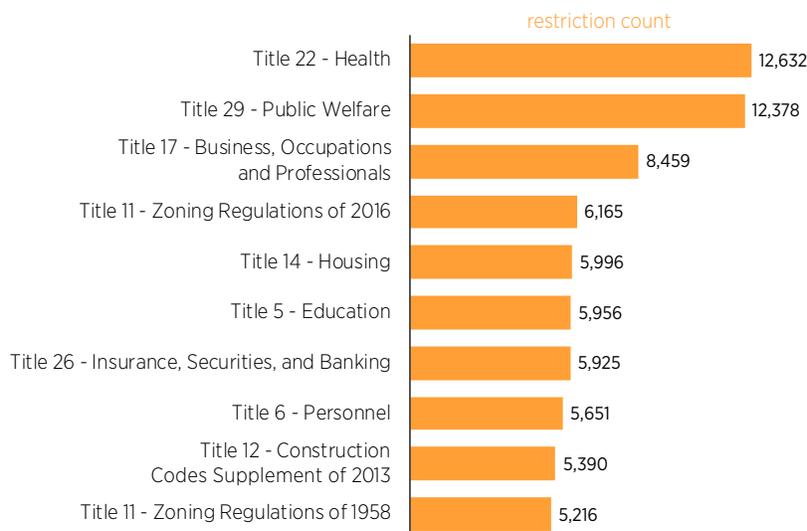


Note: Industries are classified using the RegData 3.0 industry classifier. Some previous state regulatory snapshots used earlier versions of the RegData industry classifier.

Source: State RegData (Washington, DC, data), <https://quantgov.org/state-regdata/>.

State RegData also reveals that the 2019 DCMR contains 132,042 restrictions and 7.8 million words. It would take an individual 435 hours—or almost 11 weeks—to read the entire DCMR. That’s assuming the reader spends 40 hours per week reading and reads at a rate of 300 words per minute. By comparison, there are 1.09 million additional restrictions in the federal code.⁵ Individuals and businesses in Washington, DC, must navigate these different layers of restrictions to remain in compliance.

Figure 2. Top 10 Titles in the *District of Columbia Municipal Regulations* in 2019



Source: State RegData (Washington, DC, data), <https://quantgov.org/state-regdata/>.

The chapters of the DCMR are organized by subject matter area. Figure 2 shows that title 22, associated with health, contains 12,632 restrictions. By this measure, this is the biggest title in the DCMR. Coming in second is the title related to public welfare, with 12,378 restrictions.

Federal regulation tends to attract the most headlines, but it is important to remember that the nearly 104 million words and 1.09 million restrictions in the federal code significantly understate the true scope of regulation in the United States. States write millions of additional words of regulation and hundreds of thousands of additional restrictions. State-level requirements carry the force of law to restrict individuals and businesses just as federal ones do. The District of Columbia, just like the states of the union, adds to the federal regulatory burden a hefty code of regulations of its own.

Researchers are only beginning to understand the consequences of the massive and growing federal regulatory system on economic growth and well-being in the United States.⁶ Meanwhile, the effects of state regulation remain largely unknown. If this snapshot of Washington, DC, regulation in 2019 is a good indicator, then the full impact of regulation on society is far greater than that of federal regulation alone.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Broughel is a senior research fellow at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University. Broughel has a PhD in economics from George Mason University. He is also an adjunct professor at the law school at George Mason University.



QuantGov

This regulatory snapshot was produced in part using **QuantGov**, a policy analytics platform that facilitates analysis of the causes and effects of various government actions. The QuantGov project treats policy text as data, allowing researchers to quickly and effectively examine broad policies (as articulated in bodies of text) by using some of the latest advances from data science, such as machine learning and other artificial intelligence technology. The Mercatus Center's team of data engineers, analysts, and developers created this platform and continually utilize and update it to produce data that support a variety of research products and to provide policymakers with data that inform positive policy change. More information is available at quantgov.org.

Patrick A. McLaughlin
Policy Analytics Director

Stephen Strosko
Data Engineer

Jonathan Nelson
Software Developer

Thurston Powers
Data Analyst

NOTES

1. This assumes the person reads 300 words per minute for 40 hours per week with two weeks of vacation per year. “RegData 3.1,” QuantGov; Patrick A. McLaughlin, Oliver Sherouse, Daniel Francis, Michael Gasvoda, Jonathan Nelson, Stephen Strosko, and Tyler Richards, “RegData 3.0 User’s Guide,” accessed February 15, 2018, <https://quantgov.org/regdata/users-guide/>.
2. Office of the Secretary of the District of Columbia, “District of Columbia Municipal Regulations and District of Columbia Register,” accessed August 18, 2019, <https://www.dcregs.dc.gov/Common/DCMR/TitleListPage.aspx?AgencyID=1>.
3. State RegData is part of a broader project called QuantGov, which seeks to quantify legal text. See Patrick A. McLaughlin and Oliver Sherouse, “QuantGov—A Policy Analytics Platform,” QuantGov, December 20, 2017. Data for Washington, DC, are available at <https://quantgov.org/state-regdata/>.
4. Restrictions can also occur in legal text for other purposes, such as for definitional purposes. At times, restrictions may relate to government employees rather than the private sector.
5. “RegData 3.1”; McLaughlin et al., “RegData 3.0 User’s Guide.”
6. See, for example, Bentley Coffey, Patrick A. McLaughlin, and Pietro Peretto, “The Cumulative Cost of Regulations” (Mercatus Working Paper, Mercatus Center at George Mason University, Arlington, VA, 2016).