

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-157T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

A high-quality personnel security clearance process is necessary to minimize the associated risks of unauthorized disclosures of classified information and to help ensure that information about individuals with criminal activity or other questionable behavior is identified and assessed as part of the process for granting or retaining clearances. Personnel security clearances allow individuals access to classified information that, through unauthorized disclosure, can in some cases cause exceptionally grave damage to U.S. national security. In 2012, the DNI reported that more than 4.9 million federal government and contractor employees held or were eligible to hold a security clearance. GAO has reported that the federal government spent over \$1 billion to conduct background investigations (in support of security clearances and suitability determinations—the consideration of character and conduct for federal employment) in fiscal year 2011.

This testimony addresses the (1) overall security clearance process, including roles and responsibilities; and (2) extent that executive branch agencies have metrics to help determine the quality of the security clearance process. This testimony is based on GAO work issued between 2008 and 2013 on DOD's personnel security clearance program and governmentwide suitability and security clearance reform efforts. As part of that work, GAO (1) reviewed statutes, federal guidance, and processes, (2) examined agency data on the timeliness and quality of investigations and adjudications, (3) assessed reform efforts, and (4) reviewed samples of case files for DOD personnel.

View [GAO-14-157T](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or FarrellB@gao.gov.

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PERSONNEL SECURITY CLEARANCES

Full Development and Implementation of Metrics Needed to Measure Quality of Process

What GAO Found

Multiple executive branch agencies are responsible for different steps of the multi-phased personnel security clearance process that includes: determination of whether a position requires a clearance, application submission, investigation, and adjudication. Agency officials must first determine whether a federal civilian position requires access to classified information. The Director of National Intelligence (DNI) and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) are in the process of issuing a joint revision to the regulations guiding this step in response to GAO's 2012 recommendation that the DNI issue policy and guidance for the determination, review, and validation of requirements. After an individual has been selected for a federal civilian position that requires a personnel security clearance and the individual submits an application for a clearance, investigators—often contractors—from OPM conduct background investigations for most executive branch agencies. Adjudicators from requesting agencies use the information from these investigations and consider federal adjudicative guidelines to determine whether an applicant is eligible for a clearance. Further, individuals are subject to reinvestigations at intervals that are dependent on the level of security clearance. For example, top secret and secret clearance holders are to be reinvestigated every 5 years and 10 years, respectively.

Executive branch agencies have not fully developed and implemented metrics to measure quality throughout the personnel security clearance process. For more than a decade, GAO has emphasized the need to build and monitor quality throughout the personnel security clearance process to promote oversight and positive outcomes such as maximizing the likelihood that individuals who are security risks will be scrutinized more closely. For example, GAO reported in May 2009 that, with respect to initial top secret clearances adjudicated in July 2008 for the Department of Defense (DOD), documentation was incomplete for most of OPM's investigative reports. GAO independently estimated that 87 percent of about 3,500 investigative reports that DOD adjudicators used to make clearance eligibility decisions were missing some required documentation, such as the verification of all of the applicant's employment. GAO also estimated that 12 percent of the 3,500 reports did not contain the required personal subject interview. In 2009, GAO recommended that OPM measure the frequency with which its investigative reports met federal investigative standards in order to improve the quality of investigation documentation. As of August 2013, however, OPM had not implemented this recommendation. GAO's 2009 report also identified issues with the quality of DOD adjudications. Specifically, GAO estimated that 22 percent of about 3,500 initial top secret clearances that were adjudicated favorably did not contain all the required documentation. As a result, in 2009 GAO recommended that DOD measure the frequency with which adjudicative files meet requirements. In November 2009, DOD issued a memorandum that established a tool called the Review of Adjudication Documentation Accuracy and Rationales (RADAR) to measure the frequency with which adjudicative files meet the requirements of DOD regulation. According to a DOD official, RADAR had been used in fiscal year 2010 to evaluate some adjudications, but was not used in fiscal year 2011 due to funding shortfalls. DOD restarted the use of RADAR in fiscal year 2012.