

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-138T](#), a statement for the record to the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Recently the DNI reported that more than 5.1 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 for federal employment) in fiscal year 2011. A high quality process is essential to minimize the 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.

This statement addresses (1) a general overview of the security clearance process; (2) what is known about the quality of investigations and adjudications, which are the determinations made by executive branch agency officials to grant or reject clearance requests based on investigations; and (3) the extent of reciprocity, which is the decision of agencies to honor clearances previously granted by other agencies. This statement is based on GAO work issued from 2008 to 2013 on DOD's personnel security clearance program and government-wide suitability and security clearance reform efforts. As part of that work, GAO (1) reviewed relevant 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 a sample of case files for DOD personnel.

View [GAO-14-138T](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

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PERSONNEL SECURITY CLEARANCES

Actions Needed to Ensure Quality of Background Investigations and Resulting Decisions

What GAO Found

Several agencies have key roles and responsibilities in the multi-phased personnel security clearance process, including the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) who, as the Security Executive Agent, is responsible for developing policies and procedures related to security clearance investigations and adjudications, among other things. The Deputy Director for Management at the Office of Management and Budget chairs the Performance Accountability Council that oversees reform efforts to enhance the personnel security process. The security process includes: the determination of whether a position requires a clearance, application submission, investigation, and adjudication. Specifically, agency officials must first determine whether a federal civilian position requires access to classified information. After an individual has been selected for a position that requires a personnel security clearance and the individual submits an application for a clearance, investigators—often contractors—from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) conduct background investigations for most executive branch agencies. Adjudicators from requesting agencies use the information from these investigations and federal adjudicative guidelines to determine whether an applicant is eligible for a clearance. Further, individuals are subject to reinvestigations at intervals based on the level of security clearance.

Executive branch agencies do not consistently assess quality throughout the personnel security clearance process, in part because they have not fully developed and implemented metrics to measure quality in key aspects of the process. For more than a decade, GAO has emphasized the need to build and monitor quality throughout the clearance process to promote oversight and positive outcomes such as maximizing the likelihood that individuals who are security risks will be scrutinized more closely. GAO reported in 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, the required number of social references for the applicant, and complete security forms. In May 2009, GAO recommended that OPM measure the frequency with which its investigative reports met federal investigative standards to improve the completeness—that is, quality—of investigation documentation. In January 2014, DNI officials said that metrics to measure quality of investigative reports had not been established.

GAO reported in 2010 that executive branch agencies do not consistently and comprehensively track the extent to which reciprocity is occurring because no government-wide metrics exist to consistently and comprehensively track when reciprocity is granted. The acceptance of a background investigation or personnel security clearance determination completed by another authorized agency is an opportunity to save resources and executive branch agencies are required by law to grant reciprocity, subject to certain exceptions, such as completing additional requirements like polygraph testing. GAO's 2010 recommendation that the leaders of the security clearance reform effort develop metrics to track reciprocity has not been fully implemented.