

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-139T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on the Efficiency and Effectiveness of Federal Programs and the Federal Workforce, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

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. A sound requirements process to determine whether a national security position requires access to classified information is needed to safeguard classified data and manage costs. The DNI reported that more than 4.9 million federal government and contractor employees held or were eligible to hold a security clearance in 2012. 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 policies and procedures executive branch agencies use when (1) first determining whether federal civilian positions require a security clearance and (2) periodically reviewing and revising or validating existing federal civilian position security clearance requirements. This testimony is based on a July 2012 GAO report (GAO-12-800), in which GAO (1) reviewed relevant federal guidance and processes, (2) examined agency personnel security clearance policies, (3) obtained and analyzed an OPM tool used for position designation, and (4) met with officials from ODNI and OPM because of their Directors' assigned roles as Security and Suitability Executive Agents. Because DOD and DHS grant the most security clearances, that report focused on the security clearance requirements of federal civilian positions within those agencies.

View [GAO-14-139T](#). 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 Help Ensure Correct Designations of National Security Positions

What GAO Found

In July 2012, GAO reported that the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), as Security Executive Agent, had not provided executive branch agencies clearly defined policy and procedures to consistently determine if a position requires a personnel security clearance. Absent this guidance, agencies are using an Office of Personnel Management (OPM) position designation tool to determine the sensitivity and risk levels of civilian positions which, in turn, inform the type of investigation needed. OPM audits, however, found inconsistency in these position designations, and some agencies described problems implementing OPM's tool. For example, in an April 2012 audit OPM assessed the sensitivity levels of 39 positions, and its designations differed from the agency in 26 positions. Problems exist, in part, because OPM and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) did not collaborate on the development of this tool, and because their respective roles for suitability and security clearance reform are still evolving. As a result, to help determine the proper designation, GAO recommended that the DNI, in coordination with the Director of OPM, issue clearly defined policy and procedures for federal agencies to follow when determining if federal civilian positions require a security clearance. The DNI concurred with this recommendation. In May 2013, the DNI and OPM jointly drafted a proposed revision to the federal regulation on position designation which, if finalized in its current form, would provide additional requirements and examples of position duties at each sensitivity level. GAO also recommended that once those policies and procedures are in place, the DNI and the Director of OPM, in their roles as Executive Agents, collaborate to revise the position designation tool to reflect the new guidance. ODNI and OPM concurred with this recommendation and recently told GAO that they are revising the tool.

GAO also reported in July 2012 that the DNI had not established guidance to require agencies to periodically review and revise or validate existing federal civilian position designations. GAO reported that Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) component officials were aware of the requirement to keep the number of security clearances to a minimum, but were not always required to conduct periodic reviews and validations of the security clearance needs of existing positions. GAO found that without such a requirement, executive branch agencies may be hiring and budgeting for initial and periodic security clearance investigations using position descriptions and security clearance requirements that do not reflect current national security needs. Further, since reviews are not done consistently, executive branch agencies cannot have assurances that they are keeping the number of positions that require security clearances to a minimum. Therefore, GAO recommended in July 2012 that the DNI, in coordination with the Director of OPM, issue guidance to require executive branch agencies to periodically review and revise or validate the designation of all federal civilian positions. As of October 2013, ODNI and OPM are finalizing revisions to the federal regulation on position designation. While the proposed regulation requires agencies to conduct a one-time reassessment of position designation within 24 months of the final rule's effective date, it does not require a periodic reassessment of positions' need for access to classified information. GAO continues to believe that periodic reassessment is important.