

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-640](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Personnel security clearances allow people access to classified information that, through unauthorized disclosure, can cause exceptionally grave damage to U.S. national security. In light of recent events, having a high-quality process to determine whether an individual's eligibility to access classified information should be revoked has become increasingly important. DOD and DHS grant the most clearances in the executive branch, and the Director of National Intelligence is responsible for, among other things, oversight of clearance eligibility determinations.

GAO was asked to evaluate revocation processes at DHS and DOD. GAO evaluated the extent to which the agencies (1) track data on these processes; (2) consistently implement government-wide requirements and exercise oversight over these processes; and (3) determine outcomes for employees whose clearances were revoked. During this review, GAO identified possible inaccuracies in DOD's data on eligible personnel with access to classified information and is also reporting on that issue. GAO analyzed agency revocation data, reviewed executive orders, agency guidance, and documents, and interviewed officials from ODNI, DHS, DOD, and their components.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS, DOD, and the DNI take several actions to improve data quality and oversight related to the personnel security revocation process. DHS, DOD, and ODNI generally agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-14-640](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at 202-512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

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PERSONNEL SECURITY CLEARANCES

Additional Guidance and Oversight Needed at DHS and DOD to Ensure Consistent Application of Revocation Process

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Defense (DOD) both have systems that track varying levels of detail related to revocations of employees' security clearances. DHS's and DOD's data systems could provide data on the number of and reasons for revocations, but they could not provide some data, such as the number of individuals who received a proposal to revoke their eligibility for access to classified information, which means that the total number of employees affected by the revocation process is unknown.

Inconsistent implementation of the requirements in the governing executive orders by DHS, DOD, and some of their components, and limited oversight over the revocation process, have resulted in some employees experiencing different protections and processes than other employees. Specifically, DHS and DOD have implemented the requirements for the revocation process contained in Executive Orders 12968 and 10865 in different ways for different groups of personnel. Although certain differences are permitted or required by the executive orders, GAO found that implementation by some components could potentially be inconsistent with the executive orders in two areas. As a result, some employees may not be provided with certain information upon which a revocation appeal determination is based, and may not be told that they have a right to counsel. These inconsistencies in implementation may be in part because neither DHS nor DOD have evaluated the quality of their processes or developed performance measures to measure quality department-wide. Similarly, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) has only exercised limited oversight by reviewing policies and procedures within some agencies. ODNI has not established any metrics to measure the quality of the process government-wide and has not reviewed revocation processes across the federal government to determine the extent to which policies and procedures should be uniform.

DHS and DOD employees whose clearances were revoked may not have consistent employment outcomes, such as reassignment or termination, because these outcomes are determined by several factors, such as the agency's mission and needs and the manager's discretion. Further, most components could not readily ascertain employment outcomes of individuals with revoked clearances, because these data are not readily available, and communication between personnel security and human capital offices at the departments varies.

GAO's comparison of the total number of DOD employees eligible to access classified information to the total number of DOD employees in fiscal year 2013 suggests that DOD's clearance eligibility totals may be inaccurate. Specifically, GAO found that the number of eligible employees exceeded the total number of employees in five DOD components. DOD officials said this discrepancy could be because DOD's eligibility database is not consistently updated when an employee separates. As a result, the total number of government employees eligible to access classified information that ODNI reports to Congress likely overstates the number of eligible DOD employees. Inaccurate eligibility data hampers DOD's ability to reduce its number of clearance holders to minimize risk and reduce costs to the government.