

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-431T](#), a testimony before the Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The government-wide personnel security clearance process was designated as a high-risk area in January 2018 because it represents one of the highest management risks in government.

This testimony focuses on, among other things, the extent to which executive branch agencies (1) made progress reforming the security clearance process, and (2) are meeting timeliness objectives and reducing NBIB's investigative backlog.

GAO's statement is based on information from public versions of its reports issued in November 2017 on continuous evaluation of clearance holders and in December 2017 on clearance reform efforts. Information that ODNI and OPM deemed sensitive was omitted. For those reports, GAO reviewed Executive Orders and PAC strategic documents; obtained data from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) on the timeliness of initial clearances and periodic reinvestigations; and interviewed officials from ODNI, NBIB, and other agencies.

What GAO Recommends

In November 2017 and December 2017, GAO made 12 recommendations to the DNI and the Director of NBIB, including setting a milestone for establishing measures for investigation quality, developing a plan to meet background investigation timeliness objectives, and developing a plan for reducing the backlog. NBIB concurred with the recommendations. The DNI concurred with some, but not all, of GAO's recommendations. GAO continues to believe they are valid.

View [GAO-18-431T](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

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PERSONNEL SECURITY CLEARANCES

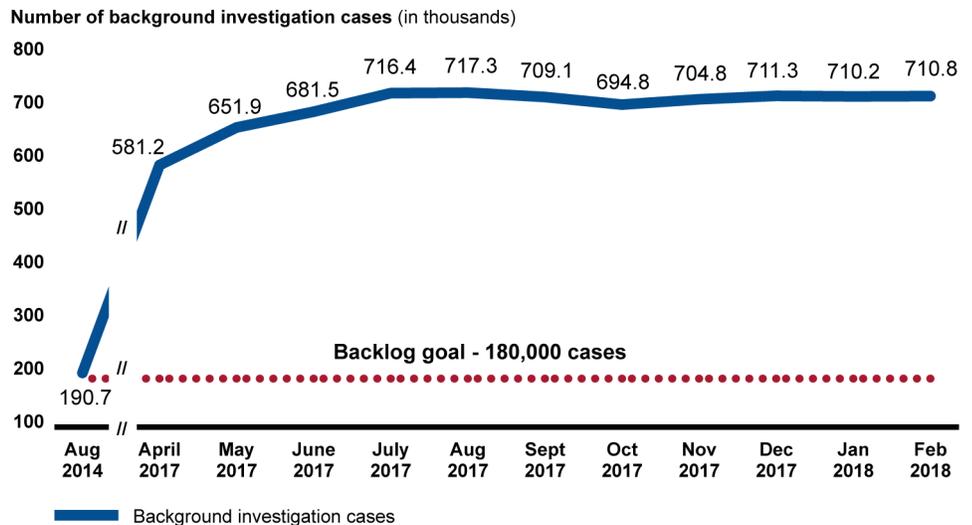
Additional Actions Needed to Implement Key Reforms and Improve Timely Processing of Investigations

What GAO Found

Executive branch agencies have made progress reforming the security clearance process, but long-standing key initiatives remain incomplete. Progress includes the issuance of federal adjudicative guidelines and updated strategic documents to help sustain the reform effort. However, agencies still face challenges in implementing aspects of the 2012 Federal Investigative Standards—criteria for conducting background investigations—and in implementing a continuous evaluation program. In addition, while agencies have taken steps to establish government-wide performance measures for the quality of investigations, neither the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) nor the interagency Security, Suitability, and Credentialing Performance Accountability Council (PAC) have set a milestone for completing their establishment.

GAO's analysis of timeliness data for specific executive branch agencies showed that the number of agencies meeting investigation and adjudication timeliness objectives for initial secret and top secret security clearances and periodic reinvestigations decreased from fiscal years 2012 through 2016. For example, while 73 percent of agencies did not meet timeliness objectives for initial clearances for three of four quarters in fiscal year 2012, 98 percent of agencies did not meet these objectives in fiscal year 2016. The DNI has not developed a government-wide plan, including goals and milestones, to help agencies improve timeliness. Agencies' challenges in meeting timeliness objectives have contributed to a significant backlog of background investigations at the agency that is responsible for conducting the majority of investigations, the National Background Investigations Bureau (NBIB). NBIB documentation shows that the backlog of pending investigations increased from about 190,000 in August 2014 to more than 710,000 as of February 2018, as shown below. NBIB leadership has not developed a plan to reduce the backlog to a manageable level.

National Background Investigations Bureau's Backlog of Background Investigations, August 2014 to February 2018



Source: GAO analysis of National Background Investigations Bureau information. | GAO-18-431T