



Highlights of GAO-09-400, a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Defense (DOD) personnel security clearance program has been on GAO's high-risk list since 2005, due to delays in the process and incomplete documentation. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) conducts most of DOD's clearance investigations, which DOD adjudicators use to make clearance decisions. The Deputy Director for Management at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) chairs a Performance Accountability Council that is responsible for reforming the clearance process. Conducted under the authority of the Comptroller General, GAO's report addresses the (1) reporting on timeliness for DOD clearances, (2) documentation completeness for making initial top-secret clearance decisions for DOD personnel, and (3) reporting on the quality of the clearance process. To assess these issues, GAO analyzed data on most DOD clearances granted in fiscal year 2008, randomly sampled and analyzed 100 OPM investigative reports and DOD adjudicative files for clearances granted in July 2008, and analyzed 2006-09 executive branch annual clearance reports.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that, in annual reports to Congress, OMB provide Congress with more information on timeliness and quality and that OPM and DOD address documentation completeness issues. OMB and DOD concurred, while OPM did not state whether it concurred with GAO's recommendations.

[View GAO-09-400 or key components.](#)
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DOD PERSONNEL CLEARANCES

Comprehensive Timeliness Reporting, Complete Clearance Documentation, and Quality Measures Are Needed to Further Improve the Clearance Process

What GAO Found

DOD and OPM met statutory timeliness requirements for personnel security clearances in fiscal year 2008, but the executive branch's 2009 required report to Congress did not reflect the full range of time to make all initial clearance decisions. Currently, 80 percent of initial clearance decisions are to be made within 120 days, on average, and by December 2009, a plan is to be implemented in which, to the extent practical, 90 percent of initial clearance decisions are made within 60 days, on average. Under both requirements, the executive branch can exclude the slowest percent, and then report on an average of the remaining clearances. The most recent report stated that the average time to complete the fastest 90 percent of initial clearances for military and DOD civilians in fiscal year 2008 was 124 days, on average. However, without taking averages or excluding the slowest clearances, GAO analyzed 100 percent of initial clearances granted in 2008 and found that 39 percent still took more than 120 days. The absence of comprehensive reporting limits full visibility over the timeliness of initial clearance decisions.

With respect to initial top secret clearances adjudicated in July 2008, documentation was incomplete for most OPM investigative reports and some DOD adjudicative files. GAO independently estimated that 87 percent of about 3,500 investigative reports that adjudicators used to make clearance decisions were missing required documentation, and the documentation most often missing was employment verification. Although DOD leadership asserted that adjudicators follow a risk-managed approach, DOD has not issued formal guidance clarifying if and under what circumstances adjudicators can adjudicate incomplete investigative reports. For DOD adjudicative files, GAO estimated that 22 percent were missing required documentation of the rationale for granting clearances to applicants with security concerns, and the documentation most often missing was related to foreign influence. Neither OPM nor DOD measures the completeness of its investigative reports or adjudicative files. As a result, both are limited in their ability to explain the extent or the reasons why some documents are incomplete. Incomplete documentation may lead to increases in both the time needed to complete the clearance process and in overall process costs and may reduce the assurance that appropriate safeguards are in place to prevent DOD from granting clearances to untrustworthy individuals.

The executive branch's annual reports to Congress on the personnel security clearance process have provided decision makers with limited data on quality. The 2009 report did not provide any data on quality but, unlike previous reports, identified quality metrics that the executive branch proposes to collect. GAO has stated that timeliness alone does not provide a complete picture of the clearance process and emphasized that attention to quality could increase reciprocity—accepting another federal entity's clearances. The executive branch, though not required to include information on quality in its annual reports, has latitude to report appropriate information and has missed opportunities to make the clearance process transparent to Congress.