

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-13-728T](#), a testimony before congressional Subcommittees, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

Personnel security clearances allow government and industry personnel to gain access to classified information that, through unauthorized disclosure, can in some cases cause exceptionally grave damage to U.S. national security. In 2012, the Director of National Intelligence reported that more than 4.9 million federal government and contractor employees held a security clearance.

Multiple executive-branch agencies are responsible for different phases in the government-wide personnel security clearance process. The Director of National Intelligence, as Security Executive Agent, is to develop uniform and consistent policies and procedures. Executive branch agencies are to determine which positions require access to classified information. OPM's investigators from the Federal Investigative Service conduct the majority of security investigations on personnel holding those positions, and adjudicators from requesting agencies, such as DOD, make the final clearance eligibility determination. Reform efforts and reporting requirements since 2005 have focused on expediting the processing of clearances.

This testimony is based on GAO reports and testimonies issued between 2008 and 2013 on DOD's personnel security clearance programs and security clearance reform efforts. This testimony addresses three areas for improvement to the government-wide personnel security clearance process: (1) a sound requirements determination process, (2) performance metrics to measure quality, and (3) guidance to enhance efficiencies.

View [GAO-13-728T](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell, (202) 512-3604, [farrellb@gao.gov](mailto:farrellb@gao.gov).

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## PERSONNEL SECURITY CLEARANCES

### Further Actions Needed to Improve the Process and Realize Efficiencies

## What GAO Found

In July 2012, GAO reported that the Director of National Intelligence, as Security Executive Agent, had not provided agencies clearly defined policy and procedures to consistently determine whether a civilian position required a security clearance. Underdesignating positions can lead to security risks; overdesignating positions can result in significant cost implications. Also, GAO reported that the Department of Homeland Security and Department of Defense (DOD) components' officials were aware of the need 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 recommended that, among other things, the Director of National Intelligence, in coordination with the Director of Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and other executive branch agencies as appropriate, issue clearly defined policies and procedures to follow when determining if federal civilian positions require a security clearance, and also guidance to require executive branch agencies to periodically review and revise or validate the designation of all federal civilian positions. The Director of National Intelligence concurred with GAO's recommendations and identified actions to implement them.

Executive branch agency efforts to improve the personnel security process have emphasized timeliness but not quality. In May 2009, GAO reported that with respect to initial top secret clearances adjudicated in July 2008, documentation was incomplete for most of OPM investigative reports. GAO independently estimated that 87 percent of about 3,500 investigative reports that DOD adjudicators used to make clearance decisions were missing required documentation. In May 2009, GAO recommended that the Director of OPM direct the Associate Director of OPM's Federal Investigative Services to measure the frequency with which its investigative reports met federal investigative standards in order to improve the completeness—that is, quality—of future investigation documentation. As of March 2013, however, OPM had not implemented this recommendation.

Government-wide personnel security reform efforts have not yet focused on potential cost savings, even though the stated mission of these efforts includes improving cost savings. For example, OPM's investigation process—which represents a portion of the security clearance process and has significant costs—has not been studied for process efficiencies or cost savings. In February 2012, GAO reported that OPM received over \$1 billion to conduct more than 2 million background investigations in fiscal year 2011. GAO raised concerns that OPM may be simultaneously investing in process streamlining technology while maintaining a less efficient and duplicative paper-based process. In 2012, GAO recommended that, to improve the efficiency of suitability and personnel security clearance background investigation processes that could lead to cost savings, the Director of OPM direct the Associate Director of Federal Investigative Services to take actions to identify process efficiencies that could lead to cost savings within its background investigation process. OPM agreed with this recommendation and GAO is working with OPM to assess any progress it has made in this area.