

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-29](#), a report to congressional addressees

Why GAO Did This Study

A high-quality personnel security clearance process is necessary to minimize the risks of unauthorized disclosures of classified information and to help ensure that security-relevant information is identified and assessed. The passage of IRTPA initiated an effort to reform the security clearance process government-wide.

This report assesses the extent to which (1) executive branch agencies made progress reforming the security clearance process; (2) executive branch agencies completed timely initial clearances from fiscal years 2012-2016, and reported on timeliness; and (3) NBIB has taken steps to improve the background investigation process and address the backlog. GAO reviewed documentation; analyzed timeliness data; and interviewed officials from the four PAC Principals and NBIB. This is a public version of a sensitive report that GAO issued in December 2017. Information that the DNI and OPM deemed sensitive has been omitted.

What GAO Recommends

Congress should consider reinstating the IRTPA requirement for clearance timeliness reporting. GAO is also making six recommendations, including that the DNI and other PAC Principals set a milestone for establishing measures for investigation quality, and that NBIB develop a plan to reduce the backlog and establish goals for increasing total investigator capacity. NBIB concurred with the recommendations made to it. The DNI did not concur with GAO's conclusions and recommendations. GAO continues to believe they are valid, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-18-29](#). 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 Ensure Quality, Address Timeliness, and Reduce Investigation Backlog

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 common federal adjudicative guidelines and updated strategic documents to help sustain the reform effort. However, agencies face challenges in implementing certain aspects of the 2012 Federal Investigative Standards—criteria for conducting background investigations—including establishing a continuous evaluation program, and the issuance of a reciprocity policy to guide agencies in honoring previously granted clearances by other agencies remains incomplete. Executive branch agencies have taken recent steps to prioritize over 50 reform initiatives to help focus agency efforts and facilitate their completion. 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 Security, Suitability, and Credentialing Performance Accountability Council (PAC) have set a milestone for their completion. Without establishing such a milestone, completion may be further delayed and agencies will not have a schedule against which they can track progress or to which they are accountable.

The number of executive branch agencies meeting established timeliness objectives for initial security clearances decreased from fiscal years 2012 through 2016, and reporting has been limited. For example, 59 percent of the executive branch agencies reviewed by GAO reported meeting investigation and adjudication timeliness objectives for initial top secret clearances in fiscal year 2012, compared with 10 percent in fiscal year 2016. The Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (IRTPA) required the executive branch to submit an annual report, through 2011, to appropriate congressional committees on, among other things, the time required to conduct investigations, adjudicate cases, and grant clearances. Since the requirement ended, reporting has been limited to a portion of the intelligence community. Without comprehensive reporting, Congress will not be able to monitor agencies' progress in meeting timeliness objectives, identify corrections, or effectively execute its oversight role.

The National Background Investigations Bureau (NBIB), within the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), has taken steps to improve the background investigation process, but it faces operational challenges in addressing the investigation backlog and increasing investigator capacity. While NBIB has taken positive steps to improve its oversight of background investigation contracts, it faces operational challenges in reducing the investigation backlog—which grew from 190,000 cases in August 2014 to more than 709,000 in September 2017. To increase capacity NBIB has hired additional federal investigators and increased the number of its investigative fieldwork contracts, but it has not developed a plan for reducing the backlog or established goals for increasing total investigator capacity. Without such a plan and goals, the backlog may persist and executive branch agencies will continue to lack the cleared personnel needed to help execute their respective missions. The bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018, passed by Congress in November 2017, would authorize DOD to conduct its own background investigations.