



Highlights of [GAO-04-344](#), a report to the Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Terrorist attacks and espionage cases have heightened national security concerns and highlighted the need for a timely, high-quality personnel security clearance process. However, GAO's past work found that the Department of Defense (DOD) had a clearance backlog and other problems with its process. GAO was asked to address: (1) What is the size of DOD's security clearance backlog, and how accurately is DOD able to estimate its size? (2) What factors impede DOD's ability to eliminate the backlog and accurately determine its size? (3) What are the potential adverse effects of those impediments to eliminating DOD's backlog and accurately estimating the backlog's size? GAO was also asked to determine the status of the congressionally authorized transfer of Defense Security Service (DSS) investigative functions and personnel to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD improve its personnel security clearance program's management and oversight by matching workforce sizes to workloads; developing a strategic plan to overcome access to information problems; developing DOD-wide backlog definitions, measures, and reports; and completing work on the Joint Personnel Adjudication System. DOD concurred with three recommendations and partially concurred with one.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-344.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Derek Stewart, (202) 512-5559, stewardtd@gao.gov.

DOD PERSONNEL CLEARANCES

DOD Needs to Overcome Impediments to Eliminating Backlog and Determining Its Size

What GAO Found

DOD did not know the size of its security clearance backlog at the end of September 2003 and has not estimated the size of the backlog since January 2000. DOD cannot estimate the size of its backlog of overdue reinvestigations that have not been submitted for renewal, but prior estimates of this portion of the backlog suggest it was sizeable. Using September 2003 data from DSS, OPM, and nine adjudication facilities, GAO calculated the size of investigative and adjudicative portions of the backlog at roughly 270,000 and 90,000 cases, respectively. Because these estimates were made using time-based goals that varied from agency to agency, the actual backlog size is uncertain.

Several impediments hinder DOD's ability to eliminate—and accurately estimate the size of—its clearance backlog. Four major impediments slowing the elimination of the backlog are (1) the large numbers of new clearance requests; (2) the insufficient investigator and adjudicator workforces; (3) the size of the existing backlog; and (4) the lack of a strategic plan for overcoming problems in gaining access to state, local, and overseas information needed to complete investigations. Two other factors have hampered DOD's ability to develop accurate estimates of the backlog size. DOD has failed to provide adequate oversight of its clearance program, including developing DOD-wide backlog definitions and measures and using the measures to assess the backlog regularly. In addition, delays in implementing its Joint Personnel Adjudication System have limited DOD's ability to monitor backlog size and track when periodic reinvestigations are due.

DOD's failure to eliminate and accurately assess the size of the backlog may have adverse effects. Delays in updating overdue clearances for command, agency, and industry personnel who are doing classified work may increase risks to national security. Slowness in issuing new clearances can increase the costs of doing classified government work. Finally, DOD's inability to accurately define and measure the backlog and project future clearance requests that it expects to receive can adversely affect its ability to develop accurate budgetary and staffing plans.

In December 2003, advisors to OPM's Director recommended that the authorized transfer of DOD's investigative functions and personnel to OPM should not occur for at least the rest of fiscal year 2004. That recommendation was based on uncertainties over financial risks that OPM might incur. An alternative plan being discussed by DOD and OPM calls for leaving investigative staff in DSS and giving them training for, and access to, OPM's case management system. A DOD official estimated that using the OPM system, instead of DOD's current system, would avoid about \$100 million in update and maintenance costs during the next 5 years. Also, as of December 16, 2003, the Secretary of Defense had not provided Congress with certifications required prior to any transfer.