



BACKGROUND CHECKS AND SECURITY CLEARANCES

Everyone hired for a federal job undergoes a basic background check of his or her criminal and credit histories to ensure that all federal employees are “reliable, trustworthy, of good conduct and character, and loyal to the United States.”

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), a government agency that works in several broad categories to recruit, retain and honor a world-class workforce for the American people, serves as the corporate human resources organization for the federal government, performs the majority of background checks. In addition, some federal positions, like those that include access to sensitive information, generally require a security clearance, which ensures an applicant’s trustworthiness and reliability.

FEDERAL POSITION CLASSIFICATIONS

Positions in the federal government are classified in three ways: Non-Sensitive Positions, Public Trust Positions and National Security Positions. Each position requires some level of background investigation.

Non-Sensitive Positions

According to the Office Personnel Management, low-risk or non-sensitive position must undergo the National Agency Check and Inquires (NACI), the minimum level of investigation required for federal employees.

Form: Standard Form (SF) 85

Public Trust Positions

Public trust positions are positions that have the potential to adversely affect the integrity or efficiency of an organization’s mission. According to OPM, these positions do not require a security clearance but do require a background check. Public trust positions are classified as either low-risk, moderate-risk, or high trust positions. The type of background investigation an applicant must undergo will depend on the classification of the public trust position.

Form: Standard Form (SF) 85P

National Security Positions

National security positions require thorough background investigations in order to obtain a security clearance.

Form: Standard Form (SF) 86

TYPES OF SECURITY CLEARANCES

Security clearances are only required for national security positions.

Confidential

This type of security clearance provides access to information or material that may cause damage to national security if disclosed without authorization. It must be reinvestigated every 15 years.

Secret

This type of security clearance provides access to information or material that may cause serious damage to national security if disclosed without authorization and may take up to a year obtain, it must be reinvestigated every 10 years.

Top Secret

This type of security clearance provides access to information or material that may cause exceptionally grave damage to national security if disclosed without authorization. In order to obtain a “Top Secret” clearance candidates must go through a rigorous process. It must be reinvestigated every five years.

Sensitive Compartmented Information (SCI)

This type of security clearance provides access to all intelligence information and material that require special controls for restricted handling within compartmented channels.

OBTAINING A SECURITY CLEARANCE

Only federal agencies can grant security clearances. Many federal agencies require security clearances depending on their mission and role in national security. Examples of agencies that may require higher levels of clearance include:

- Intelligence community (e.g., CIA, NSA)
- Federal law enforcement agencies (e.g., FBI, DEA, NCIS)
- Diplomatic agencies (e.g., State Department, USAID)
- Civilian military agencies (e.g., DIA, DSS)

There are also many companies that have contracts or grants with the federal government that require them to access sensitive information. These companies or organizations are required to have their employees cleared by the federal government. A company without a contract with the federal government cannot independently give or seek a security clearance, and an individual who is not hired by the federal government or a contract organization cannot get a security clearance.

Once the agency has selected a candidate to hire, the applicant will typically receive a job offer contingent upon successfully obtaining a background investigation. The extensive background investigation takes place after the initial offer has been accepted.

The length and depth of the background investigation will depend on the position's requirements, as well as the type of security clearance needed for a particular job or internship. This process may take several months or up to a year depending on backlog, need for more information, depth of the investigation process and other factors.

In order to help speed the process along, students should begin to gather relevant information early on in the application process. Once a student is offered a position they will be asked to submit a series of forms and information about themselves. Students should gather this information now so they can save time on their end. Forms for background checks (SF-85: Questionnaire for Non-Sensitive Positions) and security clearances (SF-86: Questionnaire for National Security Positions) can be viewed on the Office of Personnel Management's website.

Once a student has submitted the documentation, the designated agency will proceed with the investigation, depending on backlog and priority.

How long does a background investigation take?

According to the Office of Personnel Management, the length of a background investigation depends on the type of investigation conducted. The need for a security clearance may affect the time period in which an investigation is completed. Each background investigation requires that certain areas are covered before an investigation is completed.

Learn more at [OPM.gov](https://www.opm.gov)

Basic Guide Based on Position Designation

For this Position Designation:	You will use this request format:	To request this investigation:
Risk/Sensitivity Level	Standard Form	FY 2012 OPM Investigative Product Codes
Low Risk/HSPD-12 Credential Non-Sensitive Position	SF 85 (Questionnaire for Non Sensitive Positions)	National Agency Check and Inquiries (NACI) (02B)
Moderate Risk Public Trust Position No national security sensitivity	SF 85P (Questionnaire for Public Trust Positions)	Moderate Risk Background Investigation (MBI) (15)
High Risk Public Trust Position No national security sensitivity	SF 85P (Questionnaire for Public Trust Positions)	Background Investigation (BI) (25)
Secret/Confidential (Undesignated –e.g. Military/Contractor)	SF 86 (Questionnaire for National Security Positions)	National Agency Check with Law and Credit (NACLIC) (08B)
Low Risk Noncritical Sensitive Position and/or Secret/Confidential Security Clearance	SF 86 (Questionnaire for National Security Positions)	Access National Agency Check and Inquiries (ANACI) (09B)
Moderate Risk Noncritical Sensitive Position and/or Secret/Confidential Security Clearance	SF 86 (Questionnaire for National Security Positions)	Moderate Risk Background Investigation (MBI) (15)
Any level of risk Critical Sensitive Position and/or Top Secret (TS) Security Clearance	SF 86 (Questionnaire for National Security Positions)	Single Scope Background Investigation (SSBI) (30)
Any level of risk Special Sensitive Position and/or TS Security Clearance with Sensitive Compartmented Information (SCI)	SF 86 (Questionnaire for National Security Positions)	Single Scope Background Investigation (SSBI) (30)
High Risk Public Trust Position Any level Sensitivity	SF 86 (Questionnaire for National Security Positions)	Single Scope Background Investigation (SSBI) (30)

Source: Office of Personnel Management. To learn more visit <http://www.opm.gov/investigations/background-investigations/federal-investigations-notices/2011/fin11-04.pdf>