



## Overview

The chief function of the United States government is to keep the American people safe. To that end, America's vast national security apparatus utilizes a number of tools and strategies for investigations, intelligence collection, communication with allies and counter-terrorism efforts. One critical aspect of American security that has generated much discussion in Washington and around the country lately involves classified information and security clearances. This Basic provides some general information on the subject of security clearances, classified information and their role in keeping America safe.

## What is a Security Clearance?

When an individual or private contractor applies with the federal government to do work that requires access to classified information, the government must make the determination that this person or company is eligible to access the classified material - this is called a security clearance.

## Agencies and Levels of Security Clearance

Security clearances are essentially issued in two different categories. The first is a Personnel Security Clearances (PCL) and the second is a Facility Security Clearance (FCL). From these two types of security clearances, an individual or company can be granted one of three levels of clearance. The three levels of clearance are Confidential, Secret, and Top Secret. Some agencies use their own classification systems, but generally speaking, they correspond with one of these three levels of classification. A security clearance can be issued by a number of U.S. agencies but are most often issued by the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Energy (DoE), the Department of Justice (DOJ), and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Nearly 80% of all clearances are issued by DoD. Outlined below are a few of the terms mentioned above that are helpful to understand when discussing federal security clearances.

**Confidential (C):** Applies to information that could cause damage to the national security if disclosed to unauthorized sources.

**Secret (S):** Applies to information that could cause serious damage to the national security if disclosed to unauthorized sources.

**Top Secret (TS):** Applies to information that could cause exceptionally grave damage to the national security if disclosed to unauthorized sources.

**Sensitive Compartmented Information (SCI):** Is a subset of Classified National Intelligence which relates to intelligence sources, intelligence methods, or intelligence analytical processes. SCI refers to intelligence-related matters such as intelligence sources, methods, or analytical processes. To access SCI, an individual must have a need-to-know basis for requesting the information and possess the

## Security Clearances Approved and Held, FY 2015

### Government Employees

- Approved in FY 2015:
  - Confidential/Secret: **315,859**
  - Top Secret: **118,033**
  - Total: **433,892**
- Total as of End of FY 2015:
  - Confidential/Secret: **2,261,587**
  - Top Secret: **746,836**
  - Total: **3,008,423**

### Contractor/Other Employees

- Approved in FY 2015:
  - Confidential/Secret: **92,403**
  - Top Secret: **112,384**
  - Total: **204,787**
- Total as of End of FY 2015:
  - Confidential/Secret: **623,983**
  - Top Secret: **616,647**
  - Total: **1,240,630**

## Definitions

**Need-To-Know:** "A determination made by a possessor of classified information That a prospective recipient, in the interest of national security, has a requirement for access to, knowledge, or possession of the classified information in order to perform tasks or services essential to the fulfillment of an official United States Government program."

You can find more info on "need-to-know" [HERE](#).

appropriate level security clearance.

**Special Access Program (SAP):** Is a need-to-know basis classification that only a minimum number of cleared individuals receive as it requires additional safeguards. It controls access, distribution, and provides protection for sensitive classified information beyond that normally required.

It is important to note that classified information can only be created, viewed, and processed on appropriately configured and certified IT equipment that is completely disconnected from the internet and unclassified networks. Information can only be moved between networks of different classifications by certified security personnel.

## Responsibilities of Security Clearance-Holders

An individual cannot initiate a security clearance application on his or her own. Rather, the employer, whether it be a private contractor or a government agency must determine whether an individual's job requires access to classified information and therefore whether a security clearance shall be granted. If the position requires access to classified information, an individual must be sponsored by his or her employer or a government agency, and then a background investigation must be conducted to determine that the individual can be trusted to handle the information and protect its secrecy.

Once the background investigation process starts, an individual can be subject to any number of investigations by different agencies varying in their degree of thoroughness and intensity depending on the security clearance level. This process usually begins with a Standard Form 86 (SF86), Questionnaire for National Security Positions, and other required forms. It is critically important the required forms be completed thoroughly and honestly, even if they may expose information about an individual's past that may be troubling. Many individuals will be granted a security clearance though some factors or findings can delay a decision or result in the denial of a security clearance. A complete review of background investigation processes can be found [HERE](#).

Security clearances are subject to periodic reinvestigation that varies depending on the clearance level and sponsoring agency. An individual is notified when it is time for his or her reinvestigation and are then required to submit updated security forms and complete another background investigation. The investigation is similar to the initial investigation and reconfirms an individual's capacity to handle and manage classified information.

Individuals who receive a security clearance are held to certain standards of conduct to maintain that clearance. This requires self-reporting changes in personal life such as getting married, changing your name, foreign travel, foreign contacts, or other changes that are of security interest. It also requires compliance with all federal security regulations and procedures to protect classified information, specifically the [13 adjudication guidelines](#). Those who have been granted a security clearance are only allowed to access the information that they have been approved for on a need-to-know basis and are not authorized to share that information publicly under any circumstances.

## Other Resources

- Congressional Research Service
  - [Security Clearance Process: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- Federation of American Scientists
  - [Selected Office of Management and Budget Documents on Security Clearance Reform](#)
- Office of Personnel Management
  - [Background Investigations](#)
- U.S. Department of Defense
  - [Frequently Asked Questions about the Industrial Personnel Security Clearance Process](#)
- U.S. Department of State
  - [Security Clearances FAQs](#)
  - [All About Security Clearances](#)

## Links to Other Resources

- Center for Development of Security Excellence — Need-To-Know  
[http://www.cdse.edu/multimedia/need-to-know/need\\_to\\_know.pdf](http://www.cdse.edu/multimedia/need-to-know/need_to_know.pdf)
- Congressional Research Service — Security Clearance Process: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions  
<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/secrecy/R43216.pdf>
- Federation of American Scientists — Selected Office of Management and Budget Documents on Security Clearance Reform  
<https://fas.org/sgp/othergov/omb/index.html>
- Office of Personnel Management — Background Investigations  
<https://www.opm.gov/investigations/background-investigations/>
- U.S. Department of Defense — Frequently Asked Questions about the Industrial Personnel Security Clearance Process  
[http://www.dss.mil/psmo-i/ps\\_faqs.html#7](http://www.dss.mil/psmo-i/ps_faqs.html#7)
- U.S. Department of State — Security Clearances FAQs  
<https://www.state.gov/m/ds/clearances/c10977.htm#1>
- U.S. Department of State — All About Security Clearances  
<https://www.state.gov/m/ds/clearances/c10978.htm>