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The Future of Civilians in National Security

Challenges and Opportunities

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Executive Summary

The United States faces threats to national security from a vast set of potential adversaries, including China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and distributed terrorist cells. The war between Ukraine and Russia and heightening tensions between the United States and China over Taiwan focus elements of the U.S. national security community on near-peer competition, while air strikes against Iranian-backed militant groups in Syria and pressing policy decisions regarding the future of Afghanistan simultaneously require attention from the departments and agencies charged with protecting U.S. national security.

The breadth of threats to U.S. national security requires that the federal government attract, recruit, and retain a workforce equipped with the specific knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary to meet the challenge of protecting the country and its interests. The federal government needs experienced, educated individuals who bring specific capabilities to national security, including foreign language proficiency, regional knowledge, legal expertise, or a background in engineering, computer science, or data analytics. The government further needs people who demonstrate strong leadership, management, and communication attributes.

The breadth of threats to U.S. national security requires that the federal government attract, recruit, and retain a workforce equipped with the specific knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary to meet the challenge of protecting the country and its interests.

Fortunately, a highly motivated subset of Americans, ranging from current undergraduate students through senior-level professionals, are pursuing the education, experience, and credentials required in national security departments and agencies. This population has a strong interest in serving the country, even as it is presented with other opportunities. However, challenges such as opaque hiring practices, long clearance processes, and limited access to networks hinder employment in the federal government. As a result, the government is unable to meet national security staffing requirements, while candidates with the necessary skill sets and desire to serve are sidelined from federal careers in national security.

In 2022, CNAS conducted focus groups and implemented a survey to identify the motivations, priorities, and skill sets of those interested in government service. The qualitative research enabled CNAS to further characterize the challenges, barriers, and opportunities facing individuals who wanted to pursue careers in national security. Ultimately, the findings indicate that improvements to the federal hiring process, the clearance timeline, initial pathways into government service, and access to talent beyond Washington, D.C., have the potential to ensure that the federal government has the employees needed to provide for the nation's security. Such improvements require action from the executive branch and Congress.

Within the executive branch, the Office of Personnel Management should evaluate the efficacy and efficiency of the USAJobs platform, identify persistent barriers to employment, and set specific, attainable deadlines for platform improvement. Departments and agencies within the national security sector should monitor the length of time it takes to hire and onboard new employees, with a goal of 14–21 days, in line with industry standards. They should further develop recruiting and retention forecasting models to better align hiring requirements with onboarding processes.

Congress (specifically the Armed Services Committees) can use the National Defense Authorization Act to outline incentives and requirements enabling the Department of Defense and military services to access individuals with high-demand, low-density skill sets. The House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform and the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Accountability can provide oversight of the federal hiring process, specifically regarding the efficacy and efficiency of the USAJobs platform.

Colleges and universities (particularly those not located in Washington, D.C., or in the Northeast) should ensure that career counselors are able to provide comprehensive guidance to students regarding pathways into government service, including internship opportunities. Counselors should have a thorough understanding of the general schedule (GS) system, including the requirements for each GS level.

Problem Statement

The national security enterprise relies on its civilian workforce for critical support, direction, and oversight to protect both the nation and the institutional functioning of the system. While a growing body of research examines the talent management of uniformed service members, the literature examining the recruitment, retention, evaluation, training, and promotion of the government civilian talent pipeline is limited. There is a need for foundational research on the current state of this pipeline—including associated barriers to entry and promotion—to inform efforts by departments and agencies across the government as they actively seek to employ the nation's most competitive talent. A comprehensive review of current demographic information is further needed to inform initiatives aimed at increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the civilian workforce.

For the government to attract, recruit, and retain people with the necessary qualifications and interests, departments and agencies must understand the motivations of the next generation and the challenges they face when seeking government careers in national security. This project seeks to identify factors contributing to the appeal of government service to the next generation of national security civilians. It examines the current state of the civilian national security talent pipeline and explores the challenges, barriers, and opportunities associated with the recruitment and retention of civil servants in national security departments and agencies. Further, the report explores alternative professional paths that individuals interested in civilian national security careers either consider or select.

Scope

This report focuses on the civilian national security talent workforce employed within the executive branch, specifically career civil servants employed in the federal general schedule (GS) system. Although the selection and development of political appointees is relevant to this study, it is not the focus of the report. Additionally, while congressional staff play a crucial role in the legislation, authorization, and funding of national security imperatives, this study focuses primarily on executive branch employment.

The term *national security* is broadly defined throughout this study as comprising all instruments of federal power relevant to keeping the nation secure, including aspects of defense, homeland security, diplomacy, development, sanctions, and intelligence. As it is used here, the term encompasses civilians employed by the Department of Defense (DoD), the individual military services, the State Department, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of Homeland Security, and the intelligence community, including the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Agency, among others. This study also includes analysis of relevant national security functions within the Treasury, Commerce, and Justice Departments.

The post-9/11 era expanded opportunities for civilians to pursue a career in the national security workforce. Thus, CNAS examined data (where available) regarding the national security workforce from 2001 through 2021.

This report does not explicitly focus on federal contractor career paths, but many individuals who contributed their personal experiences to this study indicated that their pathway to national security employment included experience as defense contractors. Therefore, CNAS included relevant aspects of federal contracting in the analysis. Additionally, while there is a growing body of literature regarding military talent management for uniformed service members, this report does not examine military recruitment, retention, or talent management.

Methodology

This report followed a mixed-methods approach to generate original research using three primary lines of effort to collect information: a survey, a series of 18 focus groups, and quantitative data analysis of personnel records at 18 government departments and agencies.

Four major questions guided the background research and data collection:

- What are the demographic trends in current civil service representation?
- What are rising generations' perceptions, priorities, and concerns regarding service in the national security field, whether within or outside of government?
- How can the civilian national security apparatus recruit and retain the best candidates for future government service?
- What are the implications of current civilian hiring, retention, and talent management practices for the civil-military relationship?

CNAS organized 18 focus groups with a total of 59 participants in February and March 2022. Focus groups met virtually on Zoom and included undergraduate students, graduate students, and professionals, allowing CNAS to reach a geographically distributed sample of individuals. To account for the most representative sample of perspectives, CNAS reached out to at least one college or university in each U.S. state or territory. When possible, outreach was conducted to at least one public, one private, and one community college institution in each state or territory. Of the 26 student focus group participants, 15 were graduate students and 11 were undergraduates. Twenty-five professionals participated in the focus groups and divided themselves into self-identified categories of early, mid, and late career. Focus groups were held twice daily on Thursdays and Fridays throughout February 2022, with options on Wednesday evenings for a student session and a professional session. All of the group meetings were voluntary and lasted 60–90 minutes. Notes from each session were coded to provide more specific analysis. The focus group protocol and questions are detailed in Appendix A.

Common themes were identified in background research in the field of civilian national security talent management, and the CNAS team analyzed these to inform the design of a survey through the Qualtrics platform. The survey was provided and advertised to a wide variety of institutions and distributed to colleges and universities in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Outreach was also conducted to professional associations, affinity groups, and government alumni throughout the country, as well as distributed through social media. Between February and March 2022, 261 individuals from 27 states, the District of Columbia, and abroad responded.

The public survey consisted of 30 questions, detailed in Appendix B. Some questions were tailored for specific circumstances, and thus the surveys were not all identical (for example, students and those with military service were asked a series of follow-on questions not made available to other respondents). The survey inquired about individuals' perceptions of and experience with government service, and queried participants regarding relevant challenges, priorities, and professional development considerations affecting their interest in a career in government service. Responses were further used to identify individuals' awareness of the pathways and pipelines into government service.

To conduct quantitative analysis, the CNAS team requested records under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) from 20 federal departments and agencies. The specific data requested included the number of personnel in each agency from 2001 to 2021, by gender and race or ethnicity, and by GS level, Senior Executive Service (SES), or appointee status.

Other sources consulted included research from federally funded research and development centers concerning diversity and talent management in the federal government; national media coverage; documentation regarding current government policies, practices, and initiatives; and coverage of comparative international policies, practices, and initiatives from allied nations.

Background

This report is intended to add to the nascent field of national security civilian talent management. Given the paucity of literature on the topic, the report addresses the first steps in a talent management framework: recruitment, hiring, and onboarding into the field.

Because the current literature regarding civilian national security talent management is limited, this report is informed by frameworks from military talent management policies and practices, along with broader evaluations of overall federal recruitment, retention, and employment.

Defining Talent Management

This study acknowledges that a range of definitions exists for the term *talent management*. At the most basic level, it refers to the "strategic aspects of human resource management,"[1] including the setting of workforce requirements, hiring and onboarding processes, professional development opportunities, effective evaluation systems, retention incentives, and promotion paths. In more intentional frameworks, talent management refers to the matching of specific individuals' knowledge, skills, abilities, and preferences with specific roles within an organization. Lastly, in some contexts, talent management specifically means the career management of top performers. While not all federal departments and agencies pursue a comprehensive talent management strategy for their entire workforce, there is a common belief that careers of high performers within the organization tend to be managed closely.

In both the business literature and federal frameworks, the endeavor is multifaceted and includes building and organizing; training and developing; motivating and managing performance; and promoting and retaining the right talent.[2]

Military Talent Management

Each of the military services has explored the utility of talent management within its specific context. In particular, the Army and the Marine Corps established formal policies, practices, and cultural norms in recent years, with a specific emphasis on managing service members' careers in ways that better meet both their preferences and the service's requirements.

The Army was the first to invest in talent management capabilities, establishing the Army Talent Management Task Force in 2016 and developing officer personnel management efforts intended to better retain, evaluate, promote, and assign officers to positions in which their "knowledge, skills, abilities, and preferences" align.[3] The Army is further supporting this shift from an industrial-era personnel management system to a talent management system through changes in process and practice. For example, the Army developed and fielded the Assignment Interactive Module (AIM2), an open assignment market that provides more visibility to individual soldiers regarding the availability of specific billets for their next assignments, as well as more transparency to receiving units about candidates' experience and skills when considering their placement.[4] While the needs of the service will always take precedence over individual preference, the AIM2 marketplace offers more agency to both the individual and the unit than did the previous assignment system. The Army also developed a more individualized assessment process for assignments to battalion and brigade command—the Battalion Command Assessment Program (BCAP) and the Colonels Command Assessment Program (CCAP). Both the BCAP and CCAP represent a significant change from the traditional model, in which a centralized board selected candidates for command based solely on written board files. The new, more holistic assessment includes peer and subordinate feedback, interviews with operational psychologists, and double-blind panel reviews.[5] Initial analysis of command selection decisions indicates significantly different outcomes between files screened through the traditional board mechanism and those selected through the holistic assessment.[6] Some attribute the difference to the inclusion of peer and subordinate evaluations, which may differ greatly from superiors' perceptions of a candidate.

In November 2021, the United States Marine Corps issued a comprehensive talent management strategy, *Talent Management 2030*, which outlines the ways in which the service will recruit, develop, retain, and assign Marines to billets and duties best matched to their individual strengths, while also meeting service requirements and executing evolving operational concepts successfully.[7] For the Corps, the shift in personnel management is tied to a change in fundamental manpower requirements. Historically, the service has a high rate of turnover, with approximately 75 percent of Marines leaving after their first term of enlistment. To focus on retention, the new strategy favors a depth of experience that necessitates a shift in personnel management. The strategy places renewed emphasis on recruiting talent that meets the Marine Corps' needs for a longer period of service through giving greater consideration to individual preferences for certain occupational specialties. This approach is intended to ensure longer careers that will enable a more mature force.

Federal Employment Research

Existing literature on the federal workforce and civil service career management highlight several challenges faced by those interested in careers in government service, including procedural barriers to entry (such as hiring and onboarding practices), poor succession planning for future vacancies, and a visible lack of diversity.[8] For example, onboarding timelines for new federal hires present an acute challenge, as the government averages 98 days to onboard new workers—more than twice as long as the average process in the private sector.[9] Such delays inhibit the federal government's access to the national security workforce.

Research on federal talent acquisition indicates that there are opportunities for departments and agencies to upskill their existing talent; forecast future hiring and management needs with agency-wide hiring dashboards; better manage career paths to develop future leaders; and increase awareness of opportunities in federal service.[10]

State of the Field: Civil Service across Federal National Security Departments and Agencies

An assessment of talent across the federal workforce requires a baseline understanding of workforce dynamics and programs. This section provides an overview of the civil service workforce across relevant departments and agencies, focusing on changes from 2001 through 2021, the two decades coinciding with the post-9/11 national security establishment.

Civil servants in the GS number approximately two million federal employees across all departments and agencies. GS employees fill "professional, technical, administrative, and clerical positions."[11] This total excludes certain positions in the federal civilian national

security apparatus, such as foreign service officers and certain members of the intelligence community. While political appointees change both between and during administrations, civil servants provide continuity because they are more likely to serve within one department or agency for the entirety of their careers. Even though presidentially appointed, senate-confirmed political appointees lead many departments and agencies, career civil servants can fill leadership roles as senior executives.

CNAS obtained civil service employment data through FOIA requests to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). The data obtained through the requests provide civil service demographic information across pay grades (delineated between junior grades [GS-1 through GS-10] and senior grades [GS-11 through GS-15]), gender, and minority status for several departments and agencies within the national security apparatus. Where OPM data were not provided, the CNAS team augmented the analysis to include other publicly available civil service employment and demographic information. The following section compares demographic data and GS distributions at the beginning of the era (2001) and 20 years later (2021).

The growth of the national security enterprise in the post-9/11 era expanded opportunities for more individuals to participate in national security civil service. However, the expansion of opportunities did not apply equally to men and women, or to minorities and nonminorities. An analysis of trends in the available data follows.

Department of Defense and Military Departments

The DoD and the individual military departments—Army, Air Force (which includes the Air Force and Space Force), and Navy (which includes the Navy and Marine Corps)—employ and manage a large civil service component totaling more than 813,000 individuals.[12]

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

The DoD employs an estimated 214,188 civil servants as of fiscal year (FY) 2022, including the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, and defense-wide agencies.[13] DoD civilian personnel policy falls under the purview of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.

While OPM data were not available for DoD civilian servants, certain trends emerged from the literature. At the aggregate level, women account for 25 percent of the DoD civil service workforce. Minorities (including civil servants who are Black or African American, Hispanic, Asian American or Pacific Islander, and Native American or Alaska Native) represent 18 percent of the workforce.[14]

The DoD administers several programs intended to identify and select competitive talent for full-time employment. The most common is the intern program, which provides 10-week paid internships to currently enrolled undergraduate students. The DoD also runs the Workforce Recruitment Program for college students with disabilities, aiming to increase representation from historically overlooked communities.[15] In addition, the DoD hires individuals with graduate degrees through the Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) Program, though the number of people hired through the PMF program is small (19 in FY 2014, the most recent date for which data are publicly available).[16]

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY

The total number of Department of the Army civil service employees grew from about 164,000 in 2001 to 184,000 in 2021. During that timeframe, nonminority men represented most of those in senior GS ranks (nearly 56 percent in 2001 and 47 percent in 2021). Minority women were consistently the least represented in Army senior civil service positions, though their representation grew from 8.7 percent in 2001 to 13 percent in 2021, as depicted in Figure 1. Growth among all gender and race categories for senior civil servants over the timeline indicates increased retention and promotion pathways within the Department of the Army over the 20-year timeframe.

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In October 2019, the department published the *Army People Strategy*, which emphasized both uniformed and civilian recruitment and retention. As part of the strategy, the Army increased its marketing of job postings; improved screening criteria and onboarding practices; increased training, education, and credentialing opportunities; and updated compensation practices to retain civilians in the Department of the Army.[17] The intended strategic outcome of the *Army People Strategy* is to produce ready, professional, diverse, and integrated civilian and uniformed teams by 2028.

Civil Servants by Military Department in 2001 vs 2021, by GS Level, Gender, and Minority Status

FIGURE 1: ARMY CIVIL SERVANTS

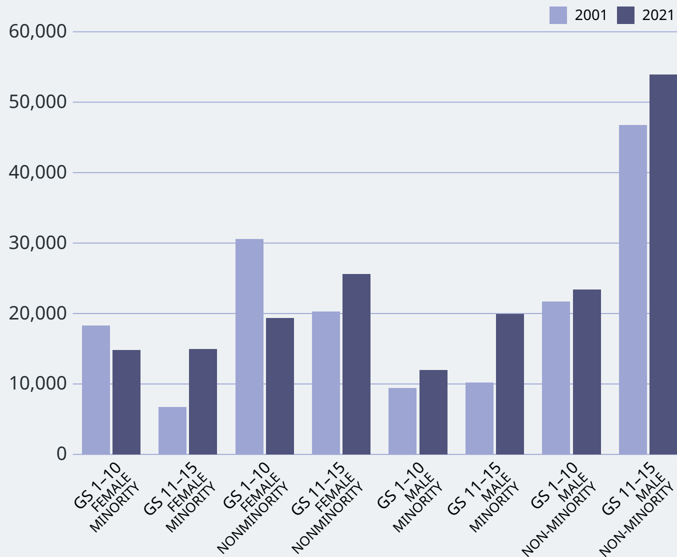


FIGURE 2: AIR FORCE CIVIL SERVANTS

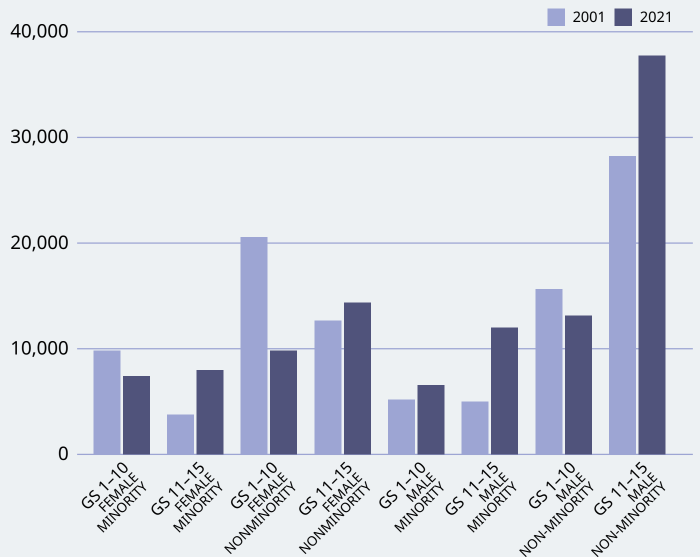


FIGURE 3: NAVY CIVIL SERVANTS

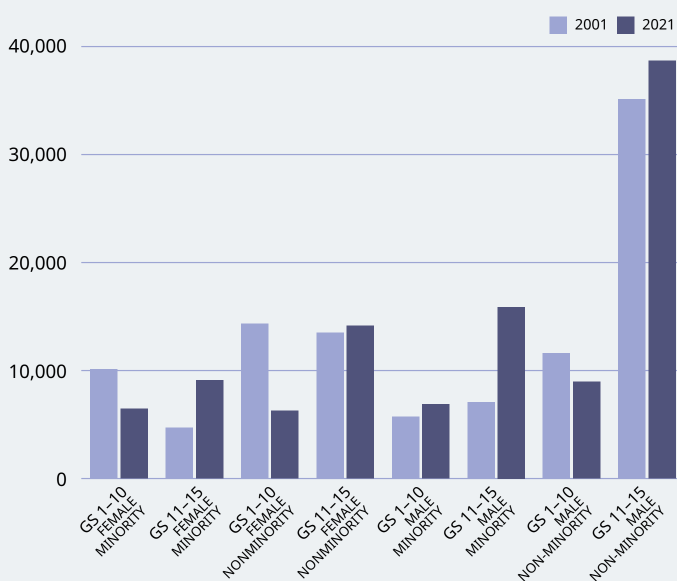
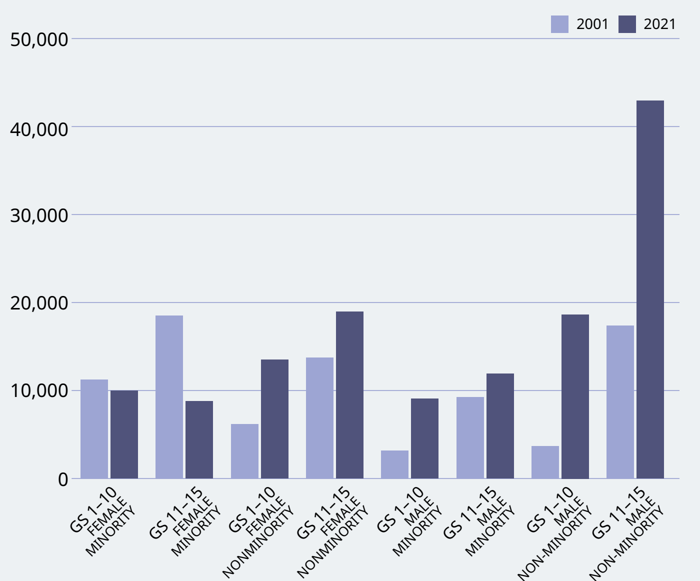


FIGURE 4: MARINE CORPS CIVIL SERVANTS



Source: Office of Personnel Management data obtained through the Freedom of Information Act

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE

The Department of the Air Force increased employment of civil servants from approximately 101,000 to 109,000 between 2001 and 2021. The number of women in senior civil service ranks increased by nearly 6,000 during those years, as depicted in Figure 2. Representation of minority civil servants increased significantly in both junior and senior ranks over the timeframe—from 29 percent of junior civil servants in 2001 to 38 percent in 2021, and from 17 percent of senior civil servants in 2001 to 27 percent in 2021. The increase in minority senior civil servant representation indicates a growth in retention and promotion pathways for minority civil servants.

Growth in the number of women and minorities within the Air Force civil service may further reflect demographic patterns in the active-duty Air Force, because the department has the highest representation (48.4 percent) of civil servants hired with veteran preference within the federal national security apparatus.[18]

DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY

The Department of the Navy includes civil servants who work for both the Navy and the Marine Corps. This department experienced moderate growth in total civil servants between 2001 and 2021, increasing from approximately 102,000 to 106,000 employees. The number and percentage of women employed in junior pay grades decreased significantly over the timeframe, from approximately 24,500 to approximately 12,750, representing a shift from 58 percent of the junior civil service workforce to 44.5 percent over the 20-year period. While women's representation in senior GS positions increased by approximately 5,000 employees between 2001 and 2021, their representation remained nearly unchanged as men were hired at greater rates. Conversely, while representation of junior-level minority civil servants decreased between 2001 and 2021, there was a modest increase in the representation of nonminority civil servants in senior ranks (from 25.1 percent to 28.7 percent) over the same timeframe, as depicted in Figure 3.

In 2019, the Navy issued an updated human capital strategy, *Workforce of the Future*. The strategy focuses on improving civilian recruitment and onboarding practices to access competitive talent; establishing data-based workforce planning tools to predict future needs; updating succession planning processes to forecast future promotions; and embedding professional development in the civilian career path to ensure both employee satisfaction and an increased ability to achieve strategic outcomes.[19]

The total number of civil servants in the Marine Corps grew by approximately 5,000 individuals between 2001 and 2021. The absolute number is similar to the increase of Navy civil servants, but because the Corps is a much smaller service, the growth represents a nearly 60 percent increase. While the absolute number and relative representation of female nonminority, male nonminority, and male minority civil servants grew over the timeframe, the number of female minority civil servants decreased in both absolute and relative terms in junior- and senior-level GS positions, as depicted in Figure 4.

In November 2021, the Marine Corps issued an updated talent management strategy for uniformed service members, *Talent Management 2030*, which includes implications for civilians. As part of a strategic approach to accessing and managing talent, the document addresses the need for updating human resources management systems and reducing administrative processes. Such efforts will improve the quality of life for Marine Corps civil servants and better integrate the relationship between service members and civilians.[20]

State Department

Within the State Department, professionals follow one of two tracks: civil servants or foreign service officers (FSOs). State Department civil servants support the mission and "drive diplomatic principles and initiatives worldwide through conscientious work from their location in the United States."[21] FSOs are employed through a separate competitive track, promoting U.S. interests abroad.

STATE DEPARTMENT CIVIL SERVANTS

The total number of State Department civil service employees grew from 7,913 in 2001 to 11,758 in 2021. In 2001, women accounted for 79 percent of junior civil servants within the department; by 2021, that number had decreased to 67 percent. In 2001, women represented 47 percent of GS levels 11–15; by 2021, women surpassed men at 52 percent of the more senior ranks. The trends displayed in Figure 5 indicate a growth in retention, promotion opportunities, and pathways to entry at higher GS levels for women and minorities over the 20-year timeline.

FOREIGN SERVICE OFFICERS

While OPM data were not available regarding FSOs, a 2020 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report provides recent data on broader diversity within the State Department. According to that report, gender

representation has increased significantly over the past three decades, while racial representation has barely changed. In 1987, 22 percent of FSOs were women; by 2005, the number had increased to 37 percent, a nearly 70 percent jump. Between 2005 and 2020, female representation among FSOs jumped another 14 percent, to 42 percent of the FSO rank. However, in that same 33-year period, representation of African American FSOs remained at 6 percent. Hispanic FSOs increased from 4 to 7 percent over the same 33 years, and Asian FSOs increased from 3 to 7 percent.[22] These discrepancies have sparked outrage and dissent within the State Department.[23]

As of May 2022, the department has instituted several new mechanisms and policies related to personnel and hiring. In the most significant change to the foreign service hiring process since 1930, the role of the Foreign Service Officer Test (FSOT) has been dramatically altered. Instead of the FSOT disqualifying candidates with certain scores, it will now be considered alongside personal narratives and the Qualification Evaluations Panel. The new approach is intended to provide a more holistic understanding of candidates' strengths to identify a "more qualified pool of applicants."[24] The State Department also launched a new paid internship program in addition to its preexisting unpaid programs, with applications opening in 2022.[25] The new effort aims to remove financial barriers for those interested in diplomacy, and it provided up to 200 paid opportunities beginning in the fall 2022 academic semester. The State Department's goal is to ensure that all internships are paid by the end of 2023.

Representation of African American FSOs remained at 6 percent. Hispanic FSOs increased from 4 to 7 percent over the same 33 years, and Asian FSOs increased from 3 to 7 percent. These discrepancies have sparked outrage and dissent within the State Department.

Civil Servants in 2001 vs 2021, by GS Level, Gender, and Minority Status

FIGURE 5: STATE DEPARTMENT CIVIL SERVANTS

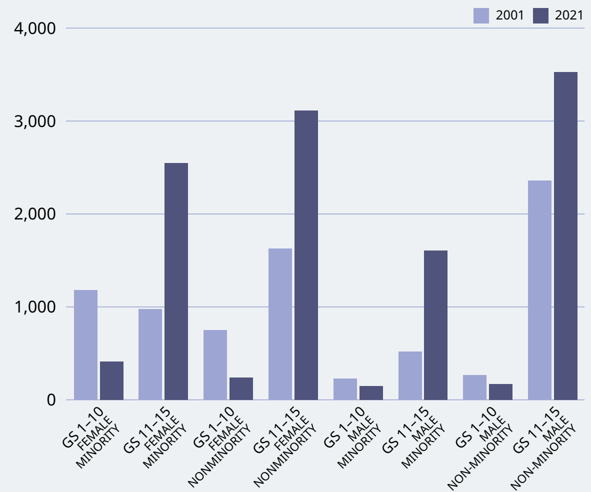
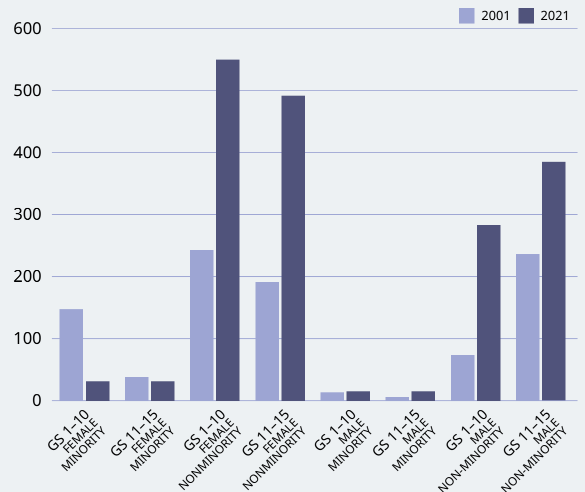


FIGURE 6: USAID CIVIL SERVANTS



Source: Office of Personnel Management data obtained through the Freedom of Information Act

The United States Agency for International Development

USAID is a relatively small organization within the federal government. Employees total approximately 11,000, though congressional appropriations account for about 220 more FSOs and 375 more civil servants to be employed in the agency in the coming years.[26]

Civil servants within USAID totaled 1,800 in 2021, an increase of 853 from 2001. The growth is attributable to a significant increase in the number of senior civil servants across all gender and minority-status metrics, as shown in Figure 6.

In recent years, USAID wrestled with the representation and promotion of racial minorities. In 2020, the GAO found statistically significant differences in promotion rates between races and ethnicities in entry- and mid-level civil service positions.[27] However, the GAO found more positive results when examining FSOs, where there was no statistically significant difference in promotion rates between white and minority employees.

Overall Observations

These trends demonstrate that the number of national security civil service employees grew substantially between 2001 and 2021. Additionally, there are indications that retention and promotion pathways enabled career growth for individuals from GS 1–10 levels to GS 11–15 levels. However, despite growth within the sector over the past 20 years, initial research indicates that the potential next generation of national security civil servants will face difficulty breaking into the field. The remainder of this study provides an analysis of the current challenges facing individuals interested in a career in national security civil service.

The Next Generation: Motivations and Challenges

The research team conducted a survey and hosted focus groups with individuals interested in government service in national security. Participants were solicited through direct outreach to colleges, universities, and professional development organizations, as well as through social media. In all, 261 people participated in the survey, and 59 in focus groups. The groups were divided into undergraduate students, graduate students, and those on the professional track (whether currently serving in government, having previously served in government, or with an interest in serving in government while pursuing a different path). More detailed information regarding the survey instrument and focus group protocol is provided in Appendix A and Appendix B.

Nearly all participants were college educated, and many held, or were currently pursuing, graduate or professional degrees. Several participants had critical skills and backgrounds relevant to the field of national security, including engineering, military experience, language proficiency, experience abroad, technical certifications, federal internships, and/or prior employment in the private sector. In short, those who participated were competitive individuals with employment options outside of government, but who maintained an interest in government service. For the government to attract, recruit, and retain people with such qualifications and interests, it is important for federal departments and agencies to understand the motivations of the next generation and the costs of the challenges they face when seeking government careers in national security.

Many participants indicated a willingness to take a decrease in compensation in exchange for a mission-driven opportunity within the federal government.

There are limitations to the expanded applicability of the sample of individuals who participated in either the survey or the focus groups. However, the voluntary and self-selective nature of participation in each of the research activities indicates a certain level of interest and openness to pursuing a government career in national security. The findings outlined here are not meant to be prescriptive about the experience of all those interested in a national security career; rather, they provide insights into the range of motivations, priorities, and challenges facing the talent with the knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences that are needed in the federal government.

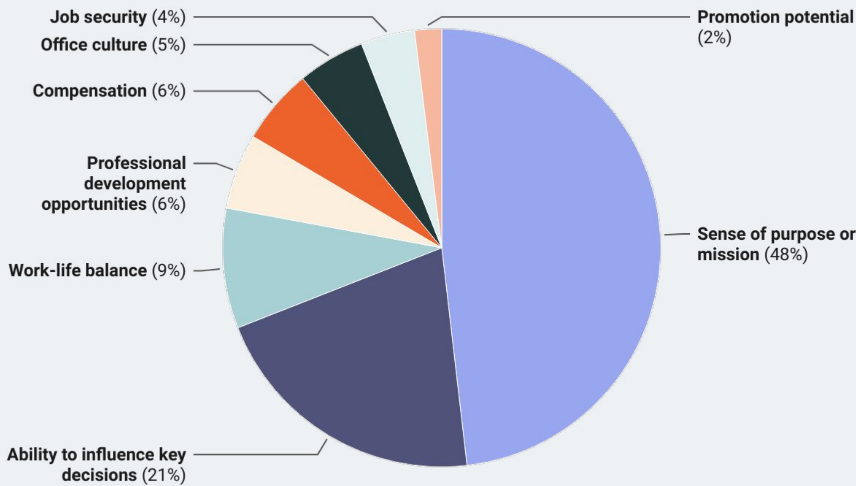
Motivations

To assess individual incentives for a career in national security civil service, the CNAS team explored the most common motivations that survey respondents and focus group participants listed.

SENSE OF SERVICE

Survey respondents and focus group participants alike expressed that their interest in government national security careers was motivated by a sense of mission, purpose, and service to the greater good. The plurality of survey respondents (48.4 percent) indicated that a sense of purpose or mission was the number one factor they considered when offered a job, as reflected in Figure 7.

FIGURE 7: TOP CONSIDERATION WHEN ACCEPTING A JOB OFFER



Results from CNAS survey, question 17. Respondents were asked to rank order the eight options; this chart provides the percentage of individuals who selected the given choice as their first priority. N=124; percentages add to more than 100% due to rounding.

One undergraduate stated that "government work feels very tangible."[28] A graduate student echoed this sentiment, saying that government service offered "tangible connection to the decision-making process."[29] Others indicated that their interest in government service lay in a desire to drive better decisions than their predecessors. Additionally, there was a sense among this next generation that decisions made within government national security positions had longevity, meaning they had an interest in "shaping and carrying out policies that have long-term impacts on the country."[30]

Some were inspired by early exposure to government careers, including parents employed in the field or site visits to the State Department, Pentagon, White House, or Congress during elementary or high school. Others noted that, while no one in their family had served in the federal government, their parents worked in service-oriented fields such as education, nursing, or social work. Still others were motivated by a strong desire to improve human rights on a global scale and were thus drawn to employment at the State Department or USAID. Those with prior military experience frequently noted their interest in continuing to support the warfighting community after they were out of uniform. Many participants indicated a willingness to take a decrease in compensation in exchange for a mission-driven opportunity within the federal government.

ABILITY TO IMPACT DECISION-MAKING

Participants expressed that an interest in government service was further driven by the potential to impact decision-making on the most pressing issues facing U.S. national security. Nearly 21 percent of survey respondents indicated that the ability to influence key decisions was their primary consideration for a job opportunity, the second-largest group after the desire for a sense of mission or purpose. The ability to impact decision-making was also raised among focus group participants at various education and career stages.

JOB SECURITY, FINANCIAL STABILITY, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

While participants consistently indicated that a sense of service to the greater good was their primary motivation for seeking a national security career, many also raised their own professional goals of career advancement and job security as motivations for government careers. Several noted that the ability to build a path within the same agency or department for the entirety of a career was of interest. There was a sense, even among those who had opportunities to work on the same issues as a government contractor, that the work of government—particularly in the field of national security—was unique, with no equivalent outside of federal employment. Individuals also expressed an interest in pursuing multiple career development opportunities within the same department over the course of a career, including interagency experiences and temporary assignments to build out their expertise on specific issues.[31]

Feedback from the survey and focus groups indicated a clear distinction between age groups with respect to the importance of compensation. Older respondents and those who were married or with children were more likely to consider the impacts on partners and families of a career in government service. Even those who reported a strong sense of service indicated a deep consideration of the financial implications associated with opting into a career in government, versus the opportunity costs of not taking their skill sets to the

private sector, where compensation may be greater. Similarly, married or partnered respondents raised the tradeoffs they had to consider between their partners' career opportunities and the geographic constraints of government jobs in national security. Focus group participants indicated that the shift to remote or hybrid work environments—both within and outside of government—raised new considerations about the feasibility of navigating two-career households.[32]

As noted, focus group and survey respondents were competitive individuals who were likely considering opportunities within the federal government alongside others in the private sector, academia, and consulting, among other fields. Because of this situation, the CNAS team posed the following question to survey respondents:

> Consider the following scenario: You are provided a job offer within the federal government on a portfolio that matters to you. You are simultaneously offered a position within the private sector, working on a similar portfolio, for twice the salary. Which option is more appealing to you?

Of those survey respondents who answered this question, exactly 50 percent indicated a preference for government service, while the other half indicated a preference for the private sector opportunity with higher pay.

Further analysis by professional stage indicates diverging preferences among those currently serving in government, government contractors, graduate and undergraduate students, previous government workers, and professionals with no government service. As shown in Figure 9, more individuals currently working in government, or as government contractors, or as undergraduate students demonstrated a preference for private sector opportunities with higher compensation over government opportunities. More people who were currently in graduate school, had prior government service, or were professionals without government experience indicated a preference for government opportunities. The finding that more current government employees were interested in higher-paying private sector positions indicates that additional compensation may serve as a useful retention incentive within the government. The finding that more former government employees would prefer to return to government indicates that, after experiencing both government and nongovernment employment, there is an informed preference for the former.

FIGURE 8: PREFERENCE FOR GOVERNMENT JOB VS. PRIVATE SECTOR JOB WITH DOUBLE THE COMPENSATION

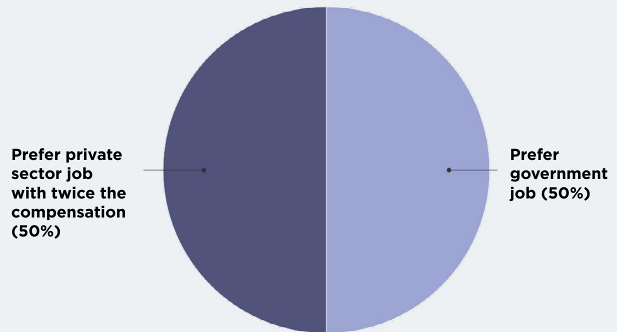
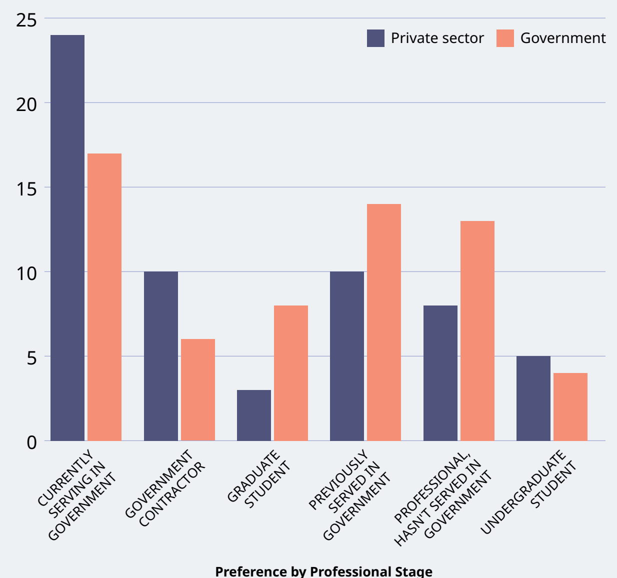


FIGURE 9: PREFERENCE FOR GOVERNMENT JOB VS. PRIVATE SECTOR JOB WITH DOUBLE THE COMPENSATION BY PROFESSIONAL CATEGORY



Source: Results from CNAS survey, question 16. N=122.

Follow-up questions posed in focus groups revealed more nuance to individual responses. Many of those who reported a preference for an opportunity within the government national security community indicated that similar portfolios truly were not available outside of government, whether due to the overall mission or to issues of classification. Discussions with those who stated a preference for a private sector job with higher compensation revealed that it was not the compensation alone that drove their decision. Rather, those who selected the private sector position were preemptively

accounting for a number of challenges, such as the time between an initial job offer and their start date (which could be delayed by a matter of years due to the clearance process). Others noted that their motivation for the private sector opportunity was tied less to compensation considerations than to the pace of decision-making and level of accountability expected within the private sector regarding bottom-line outcomes.[33]

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS TO NATIONAL SECURITY

Lastly, the impact of the events of September 11, 2001, and the post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue to play a pivotal role in motivating the next generation to pursue government service in national security, even if through different vectors for different generations. Most focus group participants belonged to either the Millennial generation (born between 1981 and 2000), which entered college and the workforce shortly after 9/11, or Generation Z (born after 2000), currently in college or the workforce. For Millennials, 9/11 occurred at a pivotal time in which they were deciding on college majors (both undergraduate and graduate) and potential career opportunities. Many noted a change in focus due to 9/11. Members of Gen Z who were born after 9/11 or were infants at the time, today beginning to graduate from college, also express the impact that 9/11 had on their decision-making process. Participants who grew up in the Northeast, especially New York and New Jersey, acknowledged the long shadow of 9/11 as motivation for their interest in national security and government careers.[34]

Challenges

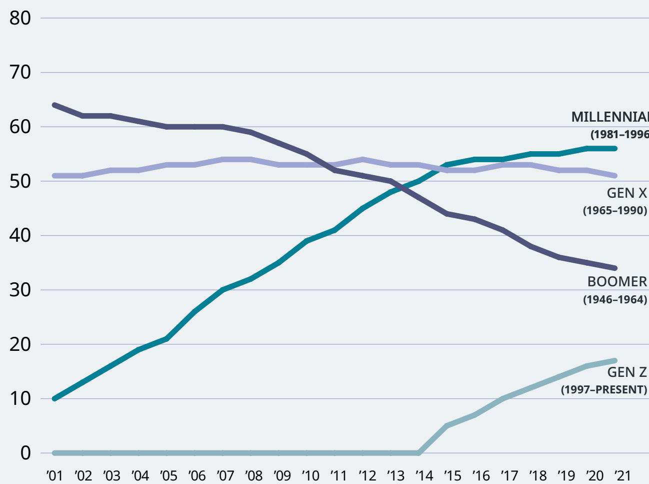
Research from the literature, surveys, and focus groups indicates two major challenges in federal hiring and retention: barriers to access and procedures.

BARRIERS TO ACCESS

Barriers to access are those challenges that hinder individuals from seeking careers in government service, even when they are interested in civil service. While the federal government can impact some barriers to access, many of the barriers inhibit action before a potential candidate interacts with federal hiring systems.

As departments and agencies hire recent college graduates and young professionals, leaders should consider generational differences and similarities in regards to workforce dynamics among Millennials and Gen Z in comparison with previous generations. At 35 percent, Millennials are now the largest generation in the U.S. workforce, as depicted in Figure 10.[35]

FIGURE 10: LABOR FORCE BY GENERATION, IN MILLIONS



Source: Richard Fry, "Millennials Are Largest Generation in the U.S. Labor Force" (Pew Research Center, July 27, 2020), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/11/millennials-largest-generation-us-labor-force/.

For Millennials, life-altering events such as 9/11 and the 2007 economic recession shaped personal and professional aspirations, whereas for Gen Z, "true digital natives" (the first generation with minimal to no memory of a world before smart technology), social awareness and interconnectedness top their distinctive traits.[36] For Millennials, work motivations over time center around flexible work-life balance and meaningful employment. According to a 2015 study, 60 percent of Millennials said a sense of purpose in their work and in their employer was highly desirable.[37] Further, they believe in "working to live" rather than "living to work," and they value job stability that allows for a balanced lifestyle.[38]

As Gen Z begins entering the workforce, they appear to share the Millennial desire for purpose in their employment. In their career pursuits, Gen Z individuals report a strong desire to contribute something to society, to be part of something that is greater than themselves.[39] Personal values and ethics are important drivers of motivation for Gen Z as they enter the labor and consumer markets. When deciding whether to work for an organization, members of Gen Z say their own sense of morality plays an important role.[40] The strong idealistic framework that shapes their attitude toward employment distinguishes Gen Z from previous generations and underpins the need for employer strategies to recruit and retain the upcoming cohort of public servants.

Internship Experience

In general, all federal civilian job postings require an open, competitive process. However, such a process tends to favor applicants with significant work experience, even for entry-level positions. Because of this, the federal government maintains three initiatives, collectively called the Pathways Program, intended to increase opportunities for those interested in entering federal service: the internship program, the recent graduates program, and the PMF program.[41] All three avenues enable employment through Schedule D excepted service, an Office of Management and Budget provision that allows agencies to hire individuals "when it is not feasible or not practical to use traditional competitive hiring procedures."[42] The internship program targets students currently enrolled in an educational program between high school and graduate school, offering an opportunity on a temporary basis of up to one year. The recent graduates program enables individuals within two years of their degree or certificate completion to enter civil service for a period of one year. The PMF program is intended for those who have completed a qualifying advanced degree within the past two years. Departments and agencies can convert employment into either permanent positions or term appointments of one to four years, though such conversion is not guaranteed.

Participants in the CNAS survey and focus groups reported several challenges with respect to federal internships. First, the issues with the federal job application process also apply to internships within the Pathways Program. Second, many federal internships are unpaid, meaning the ability to accept these opportunities is limited to students at universities in Washington, D.C., or who have the financial means to do so in a city with a high cost of living. Third, some respondents reported that the security clearance timeline affected their ability to take advantage of an internship opportunity they were offered and accepted. In at least one case, a student was offered a summer internship nearly a year ahead of time and required a clearance. The student secured Washington, D.C., housing for the internship, but was unable to start it because of delays in the clearance process—even though the rental lease remained in effect.

Lastly, some participants experienced years of "serial internships," instead of their short-term temporary jobs converting into full-time employment. The internships had been presented as opportunities to build both skill sets and networks, but many participants felt they only opened doors to future internships, rather than providing an avenue to an entry-level permanent position.

Geographic Location and the Role of Networking

University career centers and federal employees consistently advise students and professionals who express interest in government service, "It's not what you know, it's who you know."[43] Focus group participants who currently or formerly served in government emphasized the role of in-person meetings, which provide not only a personalized point of reference but also an ability to observe "soft skills" in hiring decisions. Frequent attendance at in-person panel discussions, report releases, and public speeches expose interested individuals to the policy and thought community, and this increases their awareness of nuanced information and further builds their networks. Such relationships and information then inform application materials and interview preparation, increasing the likelihood of employment.

However, effective networking presumes proximity to those in government. Focus group participants from non–Washington, D.C., schools consistently reported difficulties breaking into the "D.C. bubble" or the "Acela Corridor" (referring to the Amtrak train route from Washington, D.C., through New York City to Boston). Those coming from afar felt that not only did they not have the right contacts in Washington, but they also did not have the personal networks to make those connections. Students in non-D.C. undergraduate and graduate programs indicated a strong desire to access resources and networks through their college and university career centers, but many felt underserved by existing resources. (This is addressed separately in the following section.)

Focus group participants from non–Washington, D.C., schools consistently reported difficulties breaking into the "D.C. bubble" or the "Acela Corridor."

One potential advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic was the way in which access to the broader policy and thought community opened through virtual engagements. Moreover, individual connections to those currently serving in the national security community became more accessible through virtual meetings or phone calls, as cultural expectations regarding non-in-person engagements shifted. The result was a certain degree of access democratization between those who lived in D.C. and those who did not.[44]

College and University Resources

Students said they had sought guidance on paths into the national security civil service from two sources: career centers and their professors and departments.

Students and recent graduates (particularly those located outside of the Beltway) reported that their college or university career centers offered limited guidance regarding these career paths. Respondents in both the survey and focus groups listed three main ways in which career services could better serve them.

First, these centers could improve the distribution of information about internships and entry-level government positions, and could provide the information in a timely manner to facilitate application. One participant noted that while the university career center provided information about the PMF application process, this only occurred with one day's notice, meaning the potential candidate was not able to submit as strong an application as might otherwise have been possible.[45]

Second, career centers could further facilitate connections between current students and alumni already employed in federal national security positions, and this could require improvements to databases and record keeping practices. Career centers could also coordinate with alumni in government to schedule campus visits; participants who had been afforded the opportunity to engage in such visits from alumni in government said they had been meaningful experiences.

Third, career centers could better educate students about the differences between and requirements for GS pay grades and related fields, such as foreign service officers.

Some students acknowledged that there were professors in their universities who provided guidance about government careers, but they were in other departments. Their own departments did not offer such resources, and they did not feel comfortable contacting professors in others. For example, students majoring in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, or related fields did not feel as though they had mentors or guidance regarding government careers, even though they recognized that such resources could be available for students in political science or related majors.[46]

Graduate students at D.C.-based institutions, including Georgetown University, George Washington University, and Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, indicated that a combination of geographic location and access to networks had been key motivators in their graduate school selection. The location enabled participation in internships and provided access to professors, mentors, and others within their network who could guide them into government careers in national security. However, many acknowledged that the opportunity came at a high cost of living and tuition, leading to significant student debt upon graduation.

Student Loan Debt

The federal workforce, particularly the senior GS pay grades, requires a highly educated population. GS-5 and GS-7 positions necessitate a bachelor's degree at the time of employment; GS-9 positions and above require graduate degrees or equivalent experience. To finance higher education, the average American with a bachelor's degree from a public university holds more than $30,000 in student loan debt; the average American with a graduate degree owes more than $91,000.[47] Cost of living expenses further add to consumer debt for those who attend high-cost schools in D.C. or the Northeast.

While most participants indicated that their advanced degrees and additional debt had been worth the cost, they highlighted challenges unique to government employment in the national security field—specifically, those associated with the security clearance process. Delayed timelines between a job offer and a clearance could be backlogged for years. For those who pursued a graduate degree to break into national security within the government—thus incurring significant debt—the timeline between a job offer and a completed clearance was untenable. Some of them felt forced to pursue other opportunities within the private sector to pay the student loan debt, walking away from opportunities they actually desired (and were qualified for) out of necessity.

Veterans' Preference

Veterans' preference refers to a federal hiring authority intended to provide opportunities within the federal government to individuals who have served in the military. Initial conceptions of the need for veterans' preference acknowledged a certain degree of economic loss associated with military service and accounted for the professional opportunity costs that resulted from such service, particularly during eras of conscription.[48] However, recent critiques of the policy highlight the challenges it brings for other candidates, including adverse outcomes for highly competitive nonveteran talent and the "homogenization" of the national security civil service.[49]

Veterans' preference in federal hiring operates on a points system. Eligible individuals can claim up to 10 points that count in their favor for competitive service against an agency-wide numerical ranking system for applicants. Preference-eligible circumstances include

service during a specific timeframe, disability ratings, and Purple Heart status. Veterans' preference must be accompanied by documentation from the Department of Veterans Affairs. As of FY 2018, 27 percent of the federal workforce were veterans with preference.[50] Table 1 captures the representation of federal employees hired with veterans' preference in key national security departments and agencies.

While veterans' preference continues to serve an important function, it presents challenges to nonveterans competing for federal employment within the GS system. Veterans have several advantages in the hiring process: in addition to the point system, they often have relevant professional experience from their time in uniform that their civilian counterparts may not have, and may also belong to more established networks within the departments. In addition, veterans may have an active security clearance—an advantage over civilians who may be subject to lengthy clearance process timelines. As a result, hiring outcomes for nonveterans may be disproportionately negatively affected. For example, recent research has identified statistically significant impacts of veterans' preference on women's representation across the DoD civilian workforce, given that women are represented at significantly lower rates than men in the military and thus are underrepresented among those with veterans' preference.[51]

TABLE 1: REPRESENTATION OF FEDERAL EMPLOYEES HIRED WITH VETERANS' PREFERENCE IN KEY NATIONAL SECURITY DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES, 2018

Department or Agency	Percentage of Workforce Hired with Veterans' Preference
Department of Defense	41%
Department of the Air Force	48%
Department of the Army	45%
Department of the Navy	38%
Defense Activities	32%
Department of Homeland Security	23%
State Department	18%
Department of Veterans Affairs	27%

Source: Derived from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Employment of Veterans in the Federal Executive Branch: Fiscal Year 2018 (November 2020), https://www.fedshirevets.gov/veterans-council/veteran-employment-data/employment-of-veterans-in-the-federal-executive-branch-fy2018.pdf.

PROCEDURES

Procedural barriers are challenges within the hiring and onboarding systems that impede an individual's experience. The federal government can improve each of the barriers listed here.

Application Process

Potential candidates find the federal hiring application process particularly opaque, time consuming, and, in many cases, disheartening.

The main job application portal for the federal government is USAJobs, overseen by OPM. The intent of USAJobs is to "recruit and retain a world-class government workforce for the American people."[52] The site manages more than 17,000 postings per day, adding an average of 907 new postings daily, and it provides a database of more than six million active profiles of individuals interested in government service.[53] To maximize efficiency when handling such vast amounts of both job postings and candidate information, systems review for keywords (using either algorithms or HR professionals), and this requires applicants to explicitly address every critical component of a posting in order to proceed to a further round of consideration.[54] Candidates must also thoroughly enter information through the USAJobs online résumé builder and then reformat and resubmit their materials as attachments.

In large part, focus group participants expressed frustration with this system, describing it as a "wormhole" and elaborating that any attempt to use it to secure even an interview was "like mastering a Rubik's Cube" or "learning to play a game."[55] One participant noted, "You throw your entire life's work into USAJobs, and you hope it tells you your life has meant something."[56] Timeliness in rejections was further disheartening to candidates; one focus group participant received an automated rejection for an application dating from more than a year earlier—while awaiting feedback on a current application.

Interviews with current and former government national security professionals highlight that the system is also frustrating for those in hiring positions. From that perspective, those currently in government may know of a qualified, competitive candidate;

encourage that person to apply; and then, due to an automated screening process with "seemingly arbitrary" rules, not be able to see the candidate's information to proceed with the interview process.[57]

While USAJobs is the primary hiring platform within the federal government, the intelligence community uses a separate system called IntelligenceCareers.gov. This system is more specific and tailored to a defined community within national security government service, but CNAS focus group participants noted that it was yet another system they had to learn on top of USAJobs.

Clearance Process

Focus group participants and survey respondents consistently reported challenges with the clearance process. This process has an outsized impact on government career paths for those within the national security community by comparison with other functions of government that have domestic, non–security focused departments and agencies.

Security clearance processing timelines have been a challenge throughout the post-9/11 national security era, but they reached a peak in the second quarter of FY 2019, when periodic reinvestigations were taking more than 450 days; initial top secret clearances were taking more than 400 days; and initial secret clearances were taking nearly 200 days.[58] In an effort to relieve those timelines, the federal government, led by the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency, undertook the Trusted Workforce 2.0 initiative (TW 2.0).[59] This is a "whole-of-government background investigation reform effort," allowing for reciprocity for clearances across departments and agencies. For those who already have clearances, TW 2.0 will move periodic reinvestigations—previously scheduled every five to ten years—to a continuous vetting program, with the intent of both increasing security and decreasing the backlog.[60] The effort has achieved moderate success—in the fourth quarter of FY 2021, periodic reinvestigations were taking approximately 176 days, initial top secret clearances were taking 170 days, and initial secret clearances were taking 79 days.

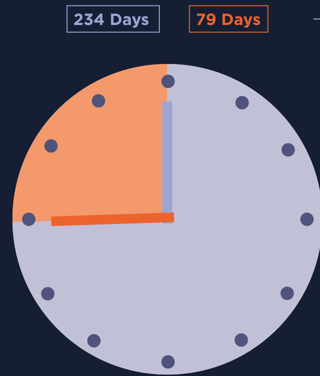
Recent efforts at reforming the clearance process are commendable, producing drastically improved outcomes overall. However, these systematic improvements mask the significant personal costs and daily frustrations associated with even the improved clearance timelines. For instance, the improved initial secret clearance timeline of 79 days (on average) still means that a candidate may have to wait nearly three months between receiving a job offer and being able to meaningfully contribute to the workplace (if the person is even able to start the job before the clearance is in hand). Some students who were accepted into federal national security internships in the fall semester before their summer internships reported such long delays that their offers were rescinded nearly eight months later. Because graduates with student loans cannot afford to wait for onboarding, they may choose other options outside of government.

The costs are not only professional; they are also personal. Given the attention paid to international travel and overseas contacts during the clearance process, applicants are hesitant to travel during the review time. One first-generation American focus group participant recounted that after his grandparents both died in his family's country of origin during the security review process, he did not feel he could travel to their funeral without raising suspicions.[61] Another interviewee reported:

> It takes so much pain and suffering to go through the door. As an American who has foreign family, foreign education, spent a lot of childhood overseas—[things I] thought would all be valuable—I had a number of foreign acquaintances. It is not only an administrative process, it's a type of lifestyle that you are signing up for. Adjudicating your personal relationships; what type of people are you willing to sacrifice in your life to make it feel like it is worth it? Because of the clearance process I almost went into the private sector. People in life matter, and any job that makes you choose between the people you love and the mission is tricky.

Focus group participants and interviewees reported mixed messaging from contacts regarding what should, should not, and must be reported in the security clearance review. One interviewee was advised at a government career event to always err on the side of including a piece of information in the event of uncertainty about whether it was necessary, because "holding back makes you look dishonest." However, the interviewee noted that for information requiring "a lot of context for an external reader or investigator, it is more confusing to include something that doesn't need to be included."[62]

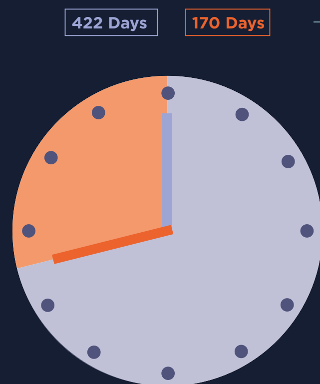
FIGURE 11: AVERAGE SECURITY CLEARANCE TIMELINES



Initial Secret Clearance
2019 vs. 2021

In 2021, the initial secret clearance timeline was shortened to one-third of the 2019 timeline.

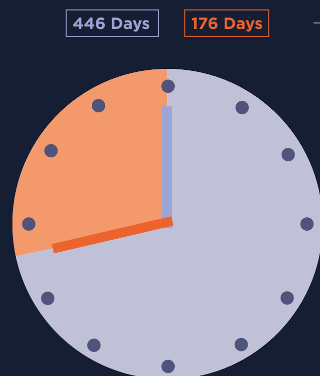
The ideal timeline (one month) is 13% of what it took in 2019.



Initial Top Secret Clearance
2019 vs. 2021

In 2021, the initial top secret clearance time was decreased to 40% of the 2019 timeline.

The ideal timeline is 7% of what it took in 2019.



Secret Clearance Periodic Reinvestigation
2019 vs. 2021

In 2021, the initial top secret clearance time decreased to 39.5% of the 2019 timeline.

The ideal timeline is 6.7% of what it took in 2019.

Sources: Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency, "FY 21 Adjudications Year in Review Annual Report," January 2022, https://www.dcsa.mil/Portals/91/Documents/pv/DODCAF/resources/FY21-Adjudications-Year-in-Review-Annual-Report.pdf; Lindy Kyzer, "How Long Does it Take to Process a Security Clearance? Q2 2019 Update (Clearance Jobs, July 18, 2019), https://news.clearancejobs.com/2019/07/18/how-long-does-it-take-to-process-a-security-clearance-q2-2019-update/.

Overseas Fellowship Challenges in the Clearance Process

The federal government supports several international language fellowships intended to increase knowledge of critical languages and cultural competency in countries that are important to the U.S. national security community. International fellowships include those outlined in Table 2.

Each of these opportunities provides a fully funded study abroad program for approximately one year. Participants in the programs are expected to develop fluency in languages critical to national security. The federal government invests a significant amount of money in these programs—an estimated $25.6 million, as captured in Table 2. In exchange for this investment, the government ensures a ready supply of personnel with critical skill sets in high demand within the national security community.

However, interviews with individuals who participated in these programs reveal that they are penalized in the hiring process for the precise experiences that make them ideal candidates. Significant time overseas—particularly in countries that the U.S. government prioritizes with respect to national security concerns—can become a major hindrance in the security clearance process. Connections with locals in countries such as South Korea, China, Russia, Israel, Egypt, or Jordan—deeply forged through U.S. government-funded learning opportunities—become red flags in applicants' files. Fellows are not always prepared for the kinds of record keeping necessary to navigate the clearance process until well after their experience. All this means that the U.S. government—after identifying competitive talent and investing in language skill development—disqualifies or dissuades that same group of candidates from government employment.[66]

Career Path Dependence

A distinct pattern emerged in conversations with mid-career professionals who, despite their strong desire to serve in government, opted in the end for a different career. Their adverse experience with the federal hiring process led them to a sense of career path dependence, a strong feeling that the decisions they made at a key point would affect the rest of their lives. In some cases, delays in the clearance process and mounting student debt resulted in a career decision that was based primarily on economic factors and took them outside of government. In other cases, federal hiring freezes or furloughs around the time of graduation removed the possibility of pursuing a career in federal service at a key decision-making point.

It is possible for an individual to revisit national security employment in the federal government at multiple points across a career, but participants in this study who had decided to exit the federal hiring process found that their decision became permanent. One D.C.-based law school professor noted that competitive students interested in government service who graduated during periods of federal hiring freezes were more likely to take their skills to private sector law firms—and that once those individuals were on the partner track, they were not going to consider government service at any point in the future. Some participants who had entered high-paying, defense-adjacent career fields such as consulting or government contracting found that their

TABLE 2: FELLOWSHIP OPPORTUNITIES ABROAD

Program Name	Program Focus	Eligible Population	Program Budget (FY 2022)
Fulbright U.S. Student Program	Study, research, or teach English abroad	Conferred bachelor's degree	$8,811,000[63]
Boren Scholarship and Boren Fellowship	Critical language development, cultural immersion, and public service	Currently enrolled undergraduate students (Boren Scholars) and graduate students (Boren Fellows)	$7,800,000 (estimated)[64]
Critical Language Scholarship	Mastery of foreign languages that are critical to national security	Currently enrolled undergraduate students	$9,000,000[65]

choices for federal opportunities were limited later in their careers. By that time, they had already made financial commitments such as mortgages and leases based on the higher compensation models of the private sector. On a government salary, regardless of how appealing or fulfilling the job might be, those financial obligations would be unsustainable.

IMPLICATIONS OF CHALLENGES

The challenges outlined here produce negative outcomes for both individuals interested in government service and the federal government. The government needs people with the necessary skill sets, experience, education, work ethic, and desire to serve in order to carry out the nation's national security mission. Simultaneously, there is a vibrant population of students and professionals who meet these requirements and have a strong motivation to serve, but who are hampered from service due to entry or procedural barriers.

For Individuals

A common theme among survey and focus group participants was the sentiment that each step in their professional journey produced a feeling of "one step forward, two steps back." For example, the attainment of a graduate degree provided a necessary credential but resulted in debt that made government service a challenge; language fellowships in foreign countries provided a critical skill set but became a liability during the clearance process; and a government internship in national security helped candidates build networks and learn internal processes but evolved into a career of serial internships with no permanent employment opportunities. Participants further expressed a sense that the pathway to a career in government service was nonlinear and therefore difficult to plan. Figure 12 provides a notional depiction of the individual experience and the effect of these challenges.

For the Federal Government

At the aggregate level, the challenges that individuals face also produce deleterious outcomes for the federal government. As qualified, interested applicants encounter barriers to government service, they may choose other professional pathways outside of government or national security service. Once these individuals pursue a career outside of government, it becomes increasingly difficult for the federal government to access their talent at later points in their careers. Thus, the barriers to entering government service may permanently inhibit the

FIGURE 12: CHALLENGES FACING INDIVIDUALS PURSUING A CAREER IN GOVERNMENT

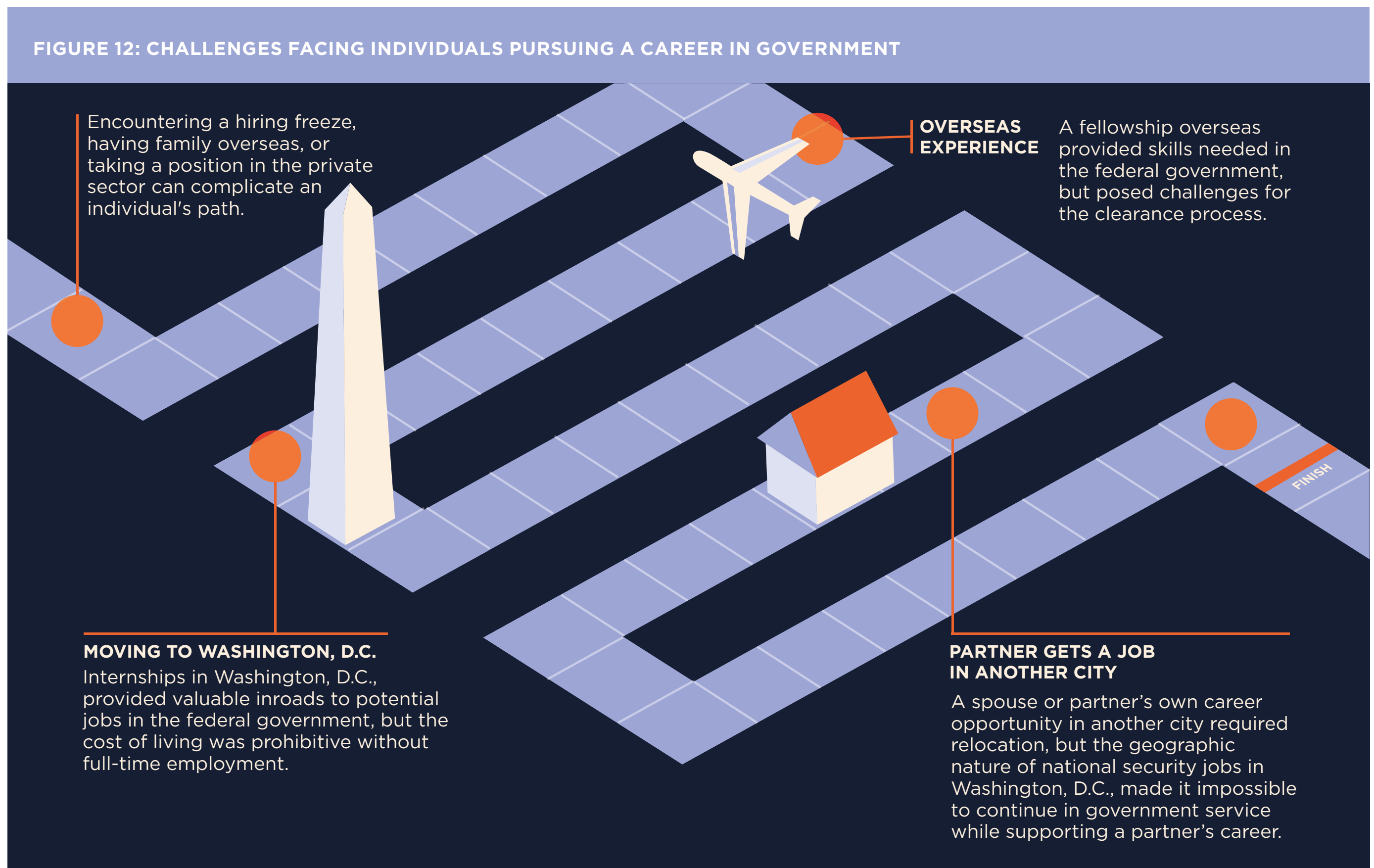
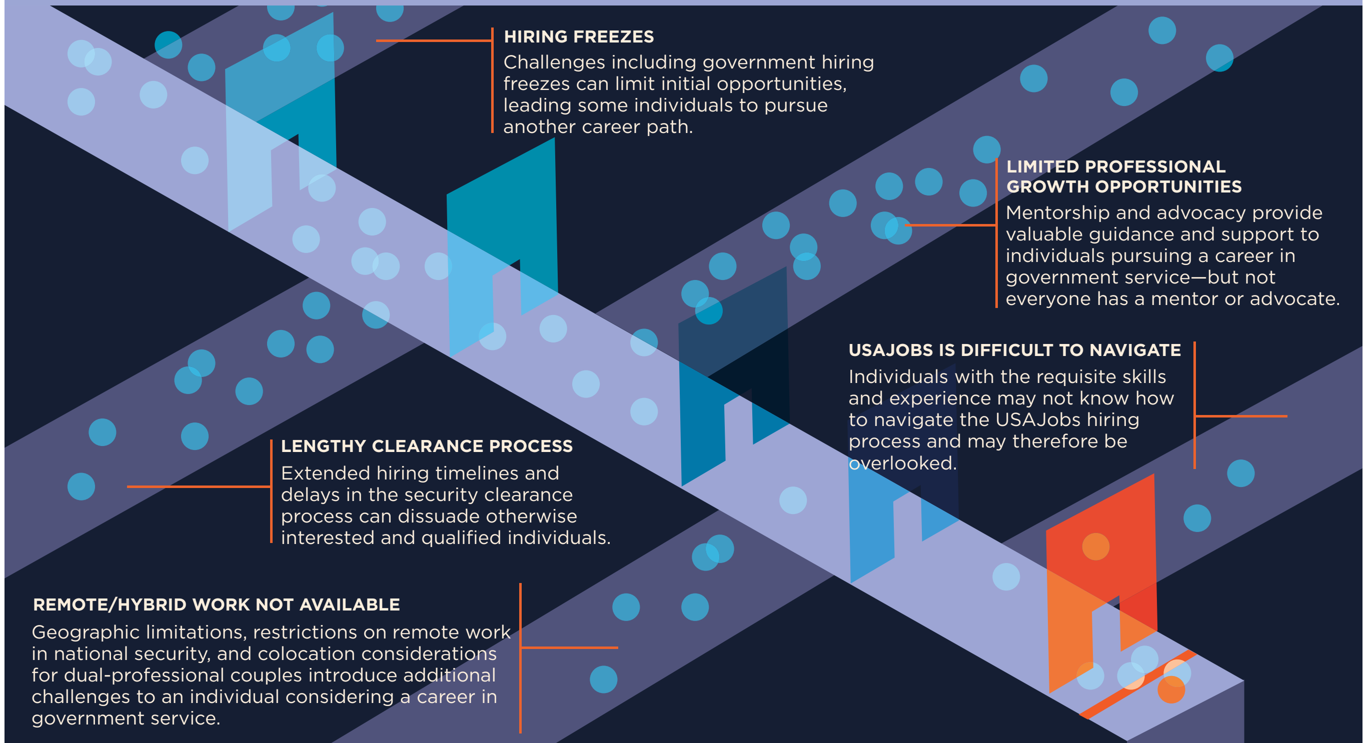


FIGURE 13: SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES



federal government from accessing talent. These consequences can be particularly negative if they deny the federal government access to specific skill sets necessary for national security, such as language skills, engineering expertise, and international or human rights legal expertise. Figure 13 shows the notional consequences of limiting federal access to national security talent.

While this study focuses mainly on individuals seeking a full government career in national security (defined as 20 or more years as a civil servant), the reality is that the national security civilian workforce is somewhat permeable. Many civilians interested in national security careers spend time across the executive and legislative branches, think tanks and federally funded research and development centers, defense contracting firms, consulting firms, tech startups, and within the defense industrial base. While this report's primary concern is the health of the civil service within the executive branch, U.S. national security relies heavily on a healthy relationship between the key actors in the national security sphere. The challenges raised throughout the report—including clearance timelines, access to professional networks, and reliable information from university career centers about potential

CHALLENGES FACING FIRST-GENERATION AMERICANS INTERESTED IN NATIONAL SECURITY CIVIL SERVICE CAREERS

Entry into public service for first-generation Americans presents unique challenges in addition to the barriers that multigeneration Americans experience. While the CNAS team did not ask questions specifically about the first-generation American experience in the pursuit of a national security career in government, focus group participants repeatedly raised the topic unprompted. First-generation potential candidates who aspire to serve their country encounter high barriers to entry due to higher numbers of foreign contacts, foreign travel experiences, and the potential impact of U.S. relations with their parent's home country. Foreign familial relationships are especially challenging for first-generation Americans during the clearance process, which can be long and arduous for those with extensive international connections and experience. Unlike multigeneration Americans, first-generation Americans must consider whether these relationships will complicate their employability in the national security sector. For some, it has meant sacrificing travel plans to see relatives in times of crisis for fear of severely limiting their career prospects.[67] For all these reasons, they may have limited exposure to potential national security career pathways within the government.

opportunities—apply across all sectors of the national security establishment. Thus, any improvements made to national security career pathways within the civil service provide an opportunity to improve access to pipelines of talent across the national security enterprise.

Recommendations

A failure to mitigate the challenges discussed here will not only continue to frustrate individuals interested in and qualified for civil service careers in national security, it will also hinder government access to a competitive talent pool with the precise knowledge, skills, experiences, and interests required to work in national security across all the relevant departments and agencies. Congress, federal departments and agencies, colleges and universities, and potential candidates should consider the following recommendations to improve the government's access to national security talent.

Congress

- The Armed Services Committees should outline incentives, goals, and requirements for civilian hiring within the National Defense Authorization Act to enable the DoD and military services to access individuals with skill sets that are in high demand but also in low density.
- The House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform and the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Accountability should monitor the efficacy and efficiency of the USAJobs platform to reduce the time it takes to fill federal jobs.

Departments and Agencies

- The Office of Personnel Management should evaluate the efficacy and efficiency of the USAJobs platform, identify persistent barriers in the federal hiring process, and set specific, attainable deadlines for platform improvement.
- Departments and agencies within the national security sector should actively monitor the time it takes to hire and onboard new employees, with a goal of 14–21 days, in line with private sector industry standards.
- Departments and agencies should project ahead, six months at a time, their recruiting and retention requirements so that hiring and onboarding are better timed to meet future demands.

Colleges and Universities

- Career centers should work with university alumni associations to maintain opt-in databases for alumni employed in the federal government; this will foster relationships between current students and those who have already navigated the federal hiring process successfully.
- Career centers and academic departments should facilitate campus visits from alumni serving in government to provide informational talks regarding their experiences with the federal hiring process.
- Career centers should ensure that counselors learn about the federal hiring process, including a thorough understanding of the GS system, requirements for each GS level, and internship opportunities. This will enable them to provide comprehensive guidance to students about pathways into government service.

Individuals

- Students should study the reporting required for the clearance process before they pursue international professional or educational opportunities. They should also keep records regarding foreign contacts and living arrangements. If possible, it is wise to connect with other Americans in the assigned region to establish contacts for the clearance process at a later date.
- Individuals interested in government service should be mindful of salary differences between private and federal employment and maintain a standard of living consistent with the lower government salaries to ensure decision flexibility in the event that a civil service opportunity should become available.

Appendix A: Focus Group Protocols

Focus Group Protocol: Undergraduate Students

PART 1: PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- Current major
- Do you have military experience?
- Do you have work experience?
- What departments, agencies, or roles are most appealing to you?

PART 2: GROUP DISCUSSION [OPEN THE QUESTION TO THE GROUP]

1. Why did you choose your major?
   a. *Are you considering graduate school?*
2. What influenced your decision to consider a career in the public sector?
3. Do you feel like you have a sense of potential pathways into government service?
   a. *After receiving your degree, do any of you intend to apply to the PMF program, the Boren Fellowship, government internships, or other opportunities?*
   b. *Why or why not?*
4. Does your school host government career fairs/ events? If yes, do you find them helpful or informative?
5. What excites you about the potential of serving in the government national security sector?
6. What intimidates you about the potential of serving in the government national security sector?
7. What is your experience applying for, or participating in, federal internships?
8. What are your perceptions of the clearance process?
   a. *What information do you feel like you are lacking about the clearance process?*
9. What is the biggest challenge you have had when applying for government jobs?
10. What opportunities are you pursuing or open to pursuing outside of the federal government?
11. What are the most important factors for you in making a career decision? [Probes, if necessary: professional development and advancement; compensation; impact]

Focus Group Protocol: Graduate Students

PART 1: PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- Current school program (MPA, MA, law school, business school, etc.)
- Do you have military experience?
- Do you have work experience?
- What departments, agencies, or roles are most appealing to you?

PART 2: GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Why did you choose your program?
2. What made you want to attend graduate school?
3. What influenced your decision to consider a career in the public sector? (List one to two reasons.)
4. Do you feel like you have a sense of potential pathways into government service?
5. After receiving your degree, do any of you intend to apply to the PMF program, the Boren Fellowship, government internships, or other opportunities?
6. Why or why not?
7. Does your school host government career fairs/ events? If yes, do you find them helpful or informative?
8. What excites you about the potential of serving in the government national security sector?
9. What intimidates you about the potential of serving in the government national security sector?
10. What is your experience applying for, or participating in, federal internships?
11. What are your perceptions of the clearance process?

12. What information do you feel like you are lacking about the clearance process?
13. What is the biggest challenge you have had when applying for government jobs?
14. What opportunities are you pursuing or open to pursuing outside of the federal government?
15. What are the most important factors for you in making a career decision? [Probes, if necessary: professional development and advancement; compensation; impact]

Focus Group Protocol: Professional Track

PART 1: PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- Current department/agency (if in government) or industry (if in private sector)
- What is your job classification? (GS, appointee, SES, other)
- Do you have military experience?
- How many years of professional experience do you have?
- What is your highest level of education?

PART 2: GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What influenced your decision to consider a career in the public sector? (List one to two reasons.)
2. When you were pursuing a government job, what pathway or pathways did you pursue? (USAJobs, internships and fellowships, etc.) What challenges did you face? What worked smoothly?
3. What are your perceptions of the clearance process? How did the clearance process affect your career path, if at all?
4. What professional development opportunities has your career path provided for you?
5. What challenges or obstacles have you faced in your career path?
6. Do you plan on serving in government for the entirety of your career?
7. If you've left government service, or if you've observed colleagues leaving government service, what have been some of the reasons for the career change?
8. What opportunities are you pursuing or open to pursuing outside of the federal government?
9. What are the most important factors for you in making a career decision?

Appendix B: Survey Instrument

In December 2021, the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) Military, Veterans, and Society program launched a new project examining the future of government service in national security. The two-year effort researches how the government can better attract a diverse array of talent to serve in America's critical national security sector.

The project team is conducting original research including interviews, focus groups, and the following survey to generate new data on the current state of the civilian national security talent pipeline and the challenges, barriers, and opportunities associated with the recruitment and retention of civil servants in national security departments and agencies. The team is further investigating data and perspectives associated with individuals' decision points and priorities regarding government service.

The following survey should take approximately 5–10 minutes.

1. Which professional category best describes you?
   a. Undergraduate student
   b. Graduate student
   c. Employed, not currently serving in government, but desire government employment
   d. Employed, currently serving in government
   e. Previously served in government, but no longer serving in government
   f. Employed, government contractor

2. [If "undergraduate student" or "graduate student" selected] What college or university are you currently attending?

3. [If "graduate student" selected] In what program are you currently enrolled? (MA, MS, PhD, MPP, MPA, JD, etc.)

4. [If "undergraduate student" selected] What is your major?

5. [If "employed, currently serving in government" selected] In what department or agency are you currently employed?

6. [If "previously served in government, but no longer serving in government" is selected] In what department(s) or agency(ies) were you previously employed?

7. Have you served in the military?
   a. No
   b. Yes, currently serving
   c. Yes, previously served

8. In which service did you serve?
   a. Army
   b. Navy
   c. Air Force
   d. Marine Corps
   e. Space Force
   f. Coast Guard

9. What national security government departments, agencies, or roles are most interesting to you?

10. What influences your consideration of a national security career in government?

11. What excites you about the potential of a national security career in the federal government?

12. What intimidates you when considering a national security career in the federal government?

13. What is the biggest challenge you've faced when researching or applying for opportunities within the federal government?

14. [If "currently serving in government" or "previously served in government, no longer serving in government" is selected] What professional development tools or opportunities were/are made available to you within the federal government?

15. What opportunities are you pursuing outside of the federal government?

16. Consider the following scenario: you are provided a job offer within the federal government on a portfolio that matters to you. You are simultaneously offered a position within the private sector, working on an adjacent portfolio, for twice the salary. Which option is more appealing to you?
    a. Job opportunity within the federal government
    b. Job opportunity in the private sector

17. When considering a job offer (whether within or outside of the federal government), what are the most important factors you evaluate? Please rank order.

    a. Professional development opportunities
    b. Work-life balance
    c. Ability to influence key decisions

d. Promotion potential
e. Job security
f. Sense of purpose or mission
g. Office culture

18. Which statement best aligns with your perception of the clearance process?

a. The clearance process is straightforward, and I feel equipped to navigate it.
b. I am unsure about the clearance process but feel equipped to navigate it.
c. The clearance process is confusing or intimidating, and I do not feel equipped to navigate it.

19. How would you rate the following statements on a scale of "strongly disagree," "somewhat disagree," "neither agree nor disagree," "somewhat agree," or "strongly agree"?

a. I feel my unique background and identity is/would be valued in the federal government.
b. I feel that my career growth is/would be supported within the federal government.
c. I see examples of individuals whose career paths I would like to emulate.

20. What is your current age?

21. What is your highest level of education?

22. How many years of work experience do you have?

23. With which gender do you identify?

24. With which ethnicity do you identify?

25. In which state do you currently live?

Representation of Survey Respondents

Undergraduate and graduate students responded from the following 26 schools and universities:

American University
Brigham Young University
Clemson University
Columbia University
Dublin City University
Florida International University
Georgetown University
Georgetown University Law School
Harvard Law School
Johns Hopkins SAIS
Kansas State University
Missouri State University
New York University
Purdue University
Tufts University
Tuskegee University
University of Delaware
University of Georgia
University of Guam
University of Iowa
University of Michigan
University of Missouri
University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill
Washington State University
Washington University in St. Louis
Xavier University

Of those currently or formerly in government, the following departments, agencies, and offices were represented among survey respondents:

Central Intelligence Agency
Defense Intelligence Agency
Department of Commerce
Department of Defense
Department of Energy
Department of Homeland Security
Department of Justice
Department of Labor
Department of the Air Force
Department of the Army
Department of the Interior
Department of the Navy
Department of Treasury
Department of Veterans Affairs
Federal Emergency Management Agency
House of Representatives
National Geospatial Agency
National Security Agency
National Security Council
Office of the Director of National Intelligence
Office of Personnel Management
Peace Corps
Securities and Exchange Commission
Senate
State Department
U.S. Agency for International Development
White House staff

With respect to military service, 172 reported no military service (76.4 percent); 16 reported currently serving in the military (7.1 percent); and 37 reported that they had previous military experience (16.4 percent).

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About the Center for a New American Security

The mission of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) is to develop strong, pragmatic and principled national security and defense policies. Building on the expertise and experience of its staff and advisors, CNAS engages policymakers, experts and the public with innovative, fact-based research, ideas and analysis to shape and elevate the national security debate. A key part of our mission is to inform and prepare the national security leaders of today and tomorrow.

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