

Guide to National Security Clearances vs. Public Trust Positions

This guide provides a clear breakdown of the distinctions between **National Security Clearances** and **Public Trust Positions**, along with practical tips and essential details for individuals navigating federal roles.

Overview

Aspect	National Security Clearances	Public Trust Positions
Purpose	Access to classified information vital to national security	Suitability for sensitive but unclassified roles
Access	Confidential, Secret, or Top-Secret information	Sensitive government systems and data
Investigation Focus	National security risk assessment	Job suitability and trustworthiness
Levels	Confidential, Secret, Top Secret	Low, Moderate, High Risk
Reinvestigation	Periodic reinvestigation required	Periodic updates at agency discretion

1. National Security Clearances

Purpose: Enables access to classified information based on national security needs.

Levels and Impacts

- **Confidential:** Unauthorized disclosure could cause damage to national security.
- **Secret:** Unauthorized disclosure could cause serious damage to national security.
- **Top Secret (TS):** Unauthorized disclosure could cause exceptionally grave damage to national security.

Investigation Types

- **Confidential & Secret:**
 - ✓ **Tier 3 Investigation:** Includes National Agency Checks, local agency checks, and credit checks.
- **Top Secret:**
 - ✓ **Tier 5 Investigation:** Formerly known as Single Scope Background Investigation (SSBI), involving a detailed review of personal, professional, and financial history, plus interviews with associates.

Reinvestigation Requirements

- **Confidential:** Every 15 years
- **Secret:** Every 10 years
- **Top Secret:** Every 5 years

Continuous Evaluation

Many agencies now implement **Continuous Evaluation (CE)** programs for ongoing automated monitoring of clearance holders, including credit checks and criminal activity monitoring.

2. Public Trust Positions

Purpose: Evaluates suitability for roles involving sensitive but unclassified data and critical systems.

Risk Levels

- **Low Risk:** Minimal sensitivity; involves basic background checks.
- **Moderate Risk (MBI):** Positions with access to sensitive systems or data; moderate background investigations required.
- **High Risk (BI):** Positions with significant responsibilities or access to critical systems; requires more comprehensive background checks.

Investigation Types

- **Moderate Risk (Tier 2):**
 - ✓ Includes employment history, credit checks, education verification, and references.
- **High Risk (Tier 4):**
 - ✓ Involves a full Background Investigation (BI), like a clearance investigation but less rigorous than Tier 5.

Reinvestigation Requirements

- Generally conducted only when issues arise or at the agency's discretion.

3. Key Differences

Aspect	National Security Clearance	Public Trust Position
Governing Body	DoD or federal security agencies	Office of Personnel Management (OPM)
Investigation Depth	Rigorous, national security focus	Moderate to high, suitability focus
Eligibility	U.S. citizenship required	Often requires U.S. citizenship or permanent residency
Focus	National security risks	Job-related trustworthiness

4. Eligibility Criteria

National Security Clearances

- **U.S. Citizenship:** Required.
- **Vetting Areas:**
 - Criminal background
 - Financial stability
 - Foreign contacts/influence
 - Substance use history

Public Trust Positions

- **U.S. Citizenship or Residency:** Often required.
- **Suitability Focus:**

- Financial stability
- Employment history
- Character and trustworthiness

5. Reciprocity

- **Clearance Portability:** National Security Clearances can often transfer between agencies, but the process may involve verification delays.
- **Public Trust Portability:** Typically, not portable; suitability is reassessed by each agency.

6. Time to Obtain

Designation	Typical Processing Time
Confidential/Secret Clearance	1–6 months (may vary)
Top Secret Clearance	6 months to over a year (expedited for critical roles)
Low Risk Public Trust	Few weeks
Moderate Risk Public Trust	1–3 months
High Risk Public Trust	3–6 months

7. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

1. **Can I hold both a clearance and a Public Trust designation?**
Yes, many individuals hold both simultaneously.
2. **What happens if my clearance or designation is denied?**
You'll receive a formal denial notice and often have the option to appeal through a designated process.
3. **Does my clearance or designation expire?**
Clearances require periodic reinvestigations. Public Trust designations generally remain valid unless reviewed by the agency.

8. Common Myth

“Public Trust is a clearance.”

False. Public Trust is a designation assessing job suitability, not national security access.

9. Final Tips

- **Higher Clearance Levels:** A Top Secret (TS) clearance often exceeds Public Trust requirements but confirm with the agency.
- **Maintain Documentation:** Keep forms like SF-86 updated to streamline future reviews.
- **Be Proactive:** Communicate with security officers and hiring managers to ensure smooth transitions.

Tier One Talent & Intel Recruiting

Tier1-talent.com

sgagliardi@tier1-talent.com

910.850.3055

Cleared & Confused LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/13118066/>