



# **Pathways to Leadership: Understanding Diversity in the Senior Executive Service**

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### **Abstract**

This study explored the representation of diversity within the Senior Executive Service (SES) and compared with the overall federal workforce. Prompted by a report published by the Partnership for Public Service stating the SES are less diverse than the federal workforce, this research involved a systematic literature review that encompassed the demographic data for the federal workforce and the SES between 1998 and 2002, an examination of advantages and disadvantages of diversity, the statutes and policies guiding diversity and diversity management in the federal government, and a review of initiatives preparing candidates for SES positions. The study was qualitative in nature, utilizing public data and previously published research and reports. The research indicated diversity within the SES has improved over time for women and people of color, although current percentages remained below the diversity of the total federal workforce. Diversity within an organization provides both advantages and disadvantages, and diversity management strategies – with support from leadership – are critical to leveraging the advantages while mitigating the disadvantages. Government statutes aimed at improving the diversity of the SES have not been updated within the last twenty-five years, and executive orders signed during the same period have not demonstrated a causal link to improvements in diversity. The study concludes with recommendations intended to facilitate policymakers and practitioners with initiatives to improve the diversity of the SES while also leveraging the benefits of diversity to achieve agency missions.

## **Introduction**

In writing the Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) of 1978, the 95<sup>th</sup> Congress implemented changes to the management of the federal workforce, stating:

It is the policy of the United States that in order to provide the people of the United States with a competent, honest, and productive Federal workforce reflective of the Nation's diversity, Federal personnel management should be implemented consistent with merit system principles and free from prohibited personnel practices. (Civil Service Reform Act, 1978, p. 1112)

The 95<sup>th</sup> Congress explicitly stated the need for the federal workforce to be “reflective of the Nation's diversity” (Civil Service Reform Act, 1978, p. 1112). In addition, the CRSA established the Senior Executive Service (SES) to “ensure that the executive management of the Government of the United States is responsive to the needs, policies, and goals of the Nation and otherwise is of the highest quality” (Civil Service Reform Act, 1978, p. 1154-1155). As the Congress overhauled the federal workforce management system, the members recognized the need for a level of executive leadership between the General Schedule-15 (GS-15) level and presidential appointees, as well as a workforce at all levels that reflected the diversity of the populace.

## **Background**

To comprehensively address the dynamics of leadership and representation within the federal government, it is essential to first establish a clear understanding of two key components: the SES and diversity. The Senior Executive Service (SES) is comprised of federal civilians holding key positions immediately beneath the most senior Presidential appointees. The SES function as the primary link between appointees and the remainder of the Federal workforce.

These executives manage and direct almost all government operations across approximately seventy-five Federal agencies. (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2017). The SES corps consists of two types of appointments: career and non-career. Career SES are selected through a merit staffing process and approved by a Qualifications Review Board, while non-career SES are approved case-by-case without the same formal review (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-d). This study focused primarily on data pertaining to career SES. Diversity is defined as "the practice of including the many communities, identities, races, ethnicities, backgrounds, abilities, cultures, and beliefs of the American people, including underserved communities" (Exec. Order 13583, 2011; Exec. Order 14035, 2021; U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2023).

In July 2023, the Partnership for Public Service published a report examining data and trends within the SES over the previous twenty-five years. The report compiled data on the SES from 1998 through 2022 and examined the demographic composition of the SES by sex, race, and age during this period, comparing the SES demographic percentages with the makeup of the federal workforce overall. This comparison may allow researchers, academics, policymakers, and others to identify where trends indicate the diversity of the SES is improving or not improving when compared to the total composition of the federal workforce. The report also provides interested parties the opportunity to identify demographic groups that may be underrepresented at the highest levels of leadership (Partnership for Public Service, 2023).

### **Problem Statement**

The Federal News Network published an article on July 25, 2023, titled "The Senior Executive Service remains less diverse than the federal workforce overall." Author Drew Friedman (2023b) references the 2023 report published by the Partnership for Public Service and

states, “As you look higher up in the ranks of the federal workforce, you’ll find less diversity among some of the government’s senior-most leaders” (para. 1). Recent analysis indicates the SES fails to represent the diversity of the federal workforce and thus the diversity of the nation (Partnership for Public Service, 2023; Lardy, 2023).

### **Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore the representation of diversity within the SES and compare it with the federal workforce. Additional emphasis will be placed on the composition of the Department of Defense where primary data is available. This is a qualitative study examining diversity trends and factors potentially influencing diversity within the SES compared to the overall federal workforce.

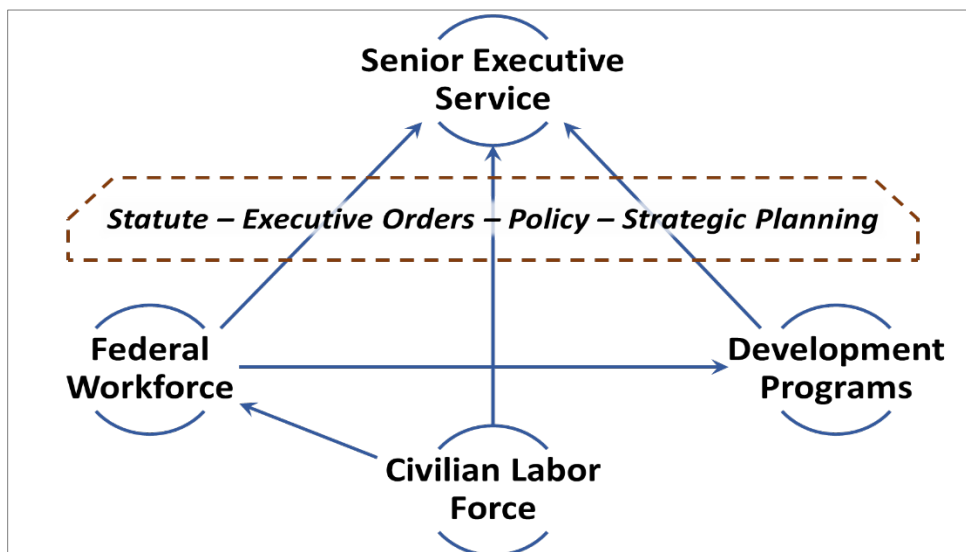
1. How does the demographic composition of the SES compare to that of the federal workforce overall?
  - a. How does the demographic composition of DoD’s SES compare specifically to DoD’s workforce?
  - b. Which demographic groups, if any, are underrepresented in the SES compared to the federal workforce?
2. How does diversity at the executive leadership level affect an organization?
3. How do current policies aimed at improving diversity affect representation at the senior executive level of federal leadership?
4. What existing programs prepare individuals for career SES positions, and how is their success measured?

### Conceptual Framework

This research explored diversity within the SES and compares it to the composition of the federal workforce. First, the research explored the publicly available data on the demographics of the civilian labor force, the federal workforce, and the SES. The research then examined any significant differences between the two bodies of data in specific demographic groups: race, sex, and age. Where data was available, the research also looked specifically at the Department of Defense. The research then reviewed current diversity policies to determine how the policies affect programs to improve diversity at executive levels. The research identified programs in place to help prepare individuals for SES positions and how those programs define success. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of how the civilian labor force feeds into the federal workforce and the SES, and how the federal workforce provides the candidates for SES development programs and the SES corps. Statutes, executive orders, policies, and strategic plans provide the overarching guidance to which applicants and development programs must adhere, thus shaping the final composition of the SES corps.

**Figure 1**

*Concept Model for Diversity in the Senior Executive Service*



### **Significance of This Research**

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) currently allocates 8,328 SES positions across approximately seventy-five agencies, providing vital leadership to agencies throughout the government and bridging the gap between GS-15 leadership and political appointees (U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2020; U.S. Office Personnel Management, 2017). While only 0.4% of the total federal workforce, the SES provides critical skillsets at the executive leadership level (Partnership for Public Service, 2023). As the nation becomes more diverse, reflecting that diversity is important for the public to feel the federal government – including leadership – represents them (Lardy, 2023). Diversity within the SES is critical to understanding issues affecting federal employees across all levels as well as improving problem solving at executive levels and achieving missions across federal agencies (Kriebel, 2020; Borry et al., 2021). As the research explores the demographics and the factors contributing to the composition of the SES, future leaders and policymakers may be able to apply the data, findings, and recommendations herein to influence the development of personnel for future career SES positions.

### **Overview of the Research Methodology**

Qualitative research principles were utilized to explore a central problem, using open-ended questions to guide data collection (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The research involved a systematic literature review on the SES, diversity, the effects of diversity within organizations, guiding statutes and policies, and programs designed to prepare candidates for SES membership. The study used the Defense Acquisition University Library, Lawrence Technical University (LTU) Library, and Google Scholar to find publicly available reports, articles, executive orders, and congressional papers. Multiple scholarly databases were used, including ProQuest,

EBSCOhost, and LTU TechCat+. Public websites were also used, including websites for the U.S. OPM, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), and Congress.

Keywords and key word combinations from the research questions were used to guide the collection and review of literature, using Boolean search principles within the databases listed above. For example, keyword combinations such as “Senior Executive Service” with “Diversity” were used to initiate the field of study and expanded to combinations such as “Senior Executive Service” with “Diversity” with “Benefits” with “Performance” to expand available research material. Advanced search parameters, such as limiting the search to peer-reviewed publications, were refined over time to ensure relevance to the subject matter. In most cases, the searches were limited to publications published between 1998 and 2022, the same twenty-five-year period covered by the report published by the Partnership for Public Service in July 2023.

Data from multiple reports and documents were compared to verify trends over time. For example, the Partnership for Public Service (2023) report examining twenty-five years of demographic data was compared to GAO reports on the diversity of the SES and the federal workforce published during the same period – 1998 through 2022. The analysis included identifying benefits and drawbacks within private corporations that may scale and apply to government teams and organizations. Guidance issued in statutes, executive orders, policies, and strategic plans were compared with demographic data trends before and after implementation.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study is not without limitations. This study is qualitative in nature and does not generate new or primary data. The study focuses on gender, race, and age, with the scope limited to reports and data from 1998-2022. Surveys or interviews with federal agencies, non-partisan

monitoring organizations, or the SES were not conducted. The focus of the analysis is primarily on the demographic categories of gender, race, and age and recognizes inconsistencies in categorizing Hispanic or Latin as either a race or an ethnicity. Comprehensive data were not available for diversity metrics, education, sexual orientation, gender identity, or national origin. Additionally, the study also did not explore any service specific programs for the military services within the DoD.

### **Summary**

Congress passed the Civil Service Reform Act in 1978, asserting the importance of a civilian corps that reflects the nation's diversity and creating the SES. Recent data published by the Partnership for Public Service examining the composition of both the SES and the federal workforce from 1998 to 2022 indicates that diversity in the SES lags behind diversity of the federal workforce. Qualitative research principles were used to study diversity in the SES by comparing demographics of the SES with the demographics of the federal workforce, identifying differences in composition, and exploring factors that may contribute to those differences. The research also examined current diversity policies and research programs that help prepare Federal civilians for SES positions and how those programs measure success.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This chapter reviews literature pertaining to diversity in the federal government and in the SES, applying the research questions to guide inquiry. The review explores data and trends within the demographics of the federal workforce and the SES before investigating the advantages and disadvantages of diversity. The review also studies statutes and policies currently shaping diversity within the federal workforce and the SES. Lastly, the review identifies programs in place to prepare federal employees for the SES. The literature review includes reports, web-based articles, previously completed surveys and survey data, journal articles, policies, executive orders, and strategic plans. Additionally, the review incorporates information published on public websites, including those for the U.S. OPM, the GAO, the EEOC, and Congress.

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1. How does the demographic composition of the SES compare to that of the federal workforce overall?
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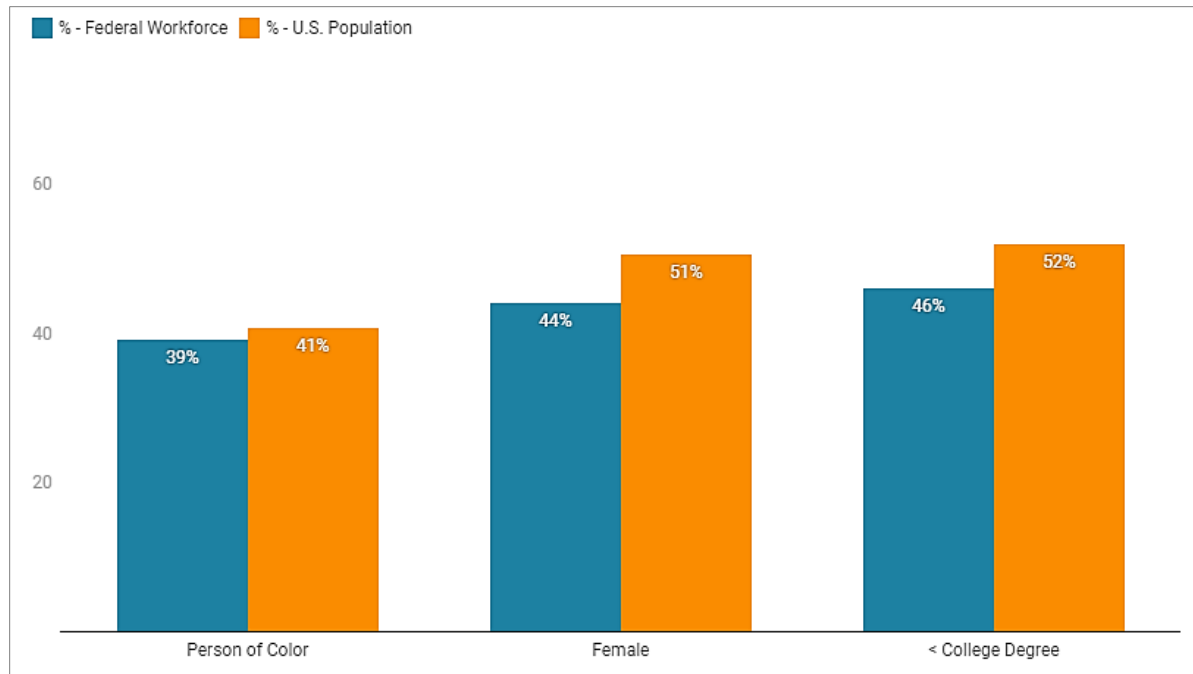
The literature review on diversity in the SES includes four major themes: demographics, advantages and disadvantages of diversity, statutes and policies guiding diversity in the federal government, and programs for preparing candidates for the SES. The available literature for each theme will be reviewed in the following sections. The chapter ends with a summary of the review.

### **Demographics**

Recently published articles claimed that while diversity within the SES has improved over the last few years, the cadre of senior leaders remains less diverse than the federal workforce overall. In an article posted to the Federal News Network, author Drew Friedman states that diversity decreases as one examines the leadership ranks up to the most senior leaders – the SES (2023). Similarly, author Eric Katz posits that recent analysis found the SES remains “disproportionately white and male compared to the larger civil service” despite improvements in overall diversity at the executive level (2023, para. 1). The literature review began with an examination of the data referenced by the authors to state their positions.

*The Federal Workforce and the U.S. Population*

The review of data began by examining the demographic composition of the federal workforce in relation to the population of the civilian labor force of the United States. The Civil Service Reform Act plainly stated that the federal workforce should reflect the diversity of the nation and draw from all segments of the populace (Civil Service Reform Act, 1978). Brandon Lardy, Partnership for Public Service leader of data science practice and internal data strategy, stated 54% of Americans do not believe federal workers are people like them based on a poll conducted by the Partnership (2023, para. 1). Figure 2 provides a side-by-side comparison of the federal workforce with the U.S. population for persons of color, female gender, and education level. As of September 2022, people of color made up 41% of the U.S. population and 39% of the federal workforce. Females make up 51% of the U.S. population and 44% of the federal workforce. Lardy (2023) also examined the education level of the federal workforce compared to the civilian labor force, which is included in Figure 2; however, comprehensive data was not readily available beyond this article for comparison over time. When comparing the diversity of the federal workforce to the nation, the demographics are more representative of the population than respondents to the original poll perceived (Lardy, 2023). It is important to note that Lardy compared the demographic composition of the federal workforce to the composition of the U.S. population and not the working-age portion of the population.

**Figure 2***Diversity of the Federal Workforce and U.S. Population*

Note: This figure is a reproduction of the original figure published by the Partnership for Public Service on May 10, 2023. Source: *The Federal Workforce Looks More Like the Country Than You Might Think*, by Lardy, B., 2023. <https://ourpublicservice.org/blog/how-americans-see-federal-workforce/> Copyright © 2023 Partnership for Public Service.

Not depicted in Figure 2 are data related to age. The greatest disparity between the federal workforce and the population is among workers under 30 years of age. “At the end of fiscal 2022, just 7% of the full-time civil service was under the age of 30 compared with ... 20% of the employed U.S. labor force” (Lardy, 2023, para. 7).

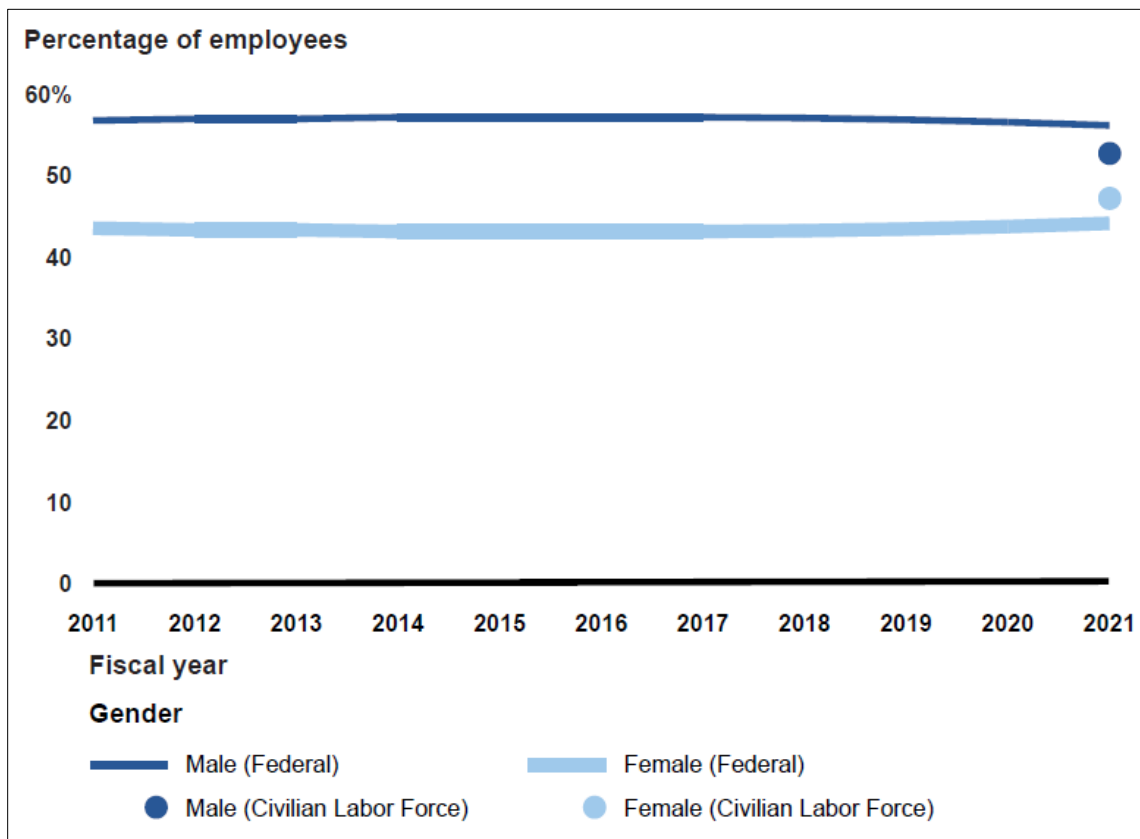
In November 2023, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) published a report, GAO-23-105284, examining demographic changes in the federal workforce. The report examined federal workforce data from 2011 to 2021 and compared it to the civilian labor force. The GAO report explored demographic composition based on gender, race, and ethnicity. The GAO report looked at each primary demographic identifier separately rather than grouping historically disadvantaged groups into one category as persons of color. The disadvantaged racial

groups were identified as Black or African American, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, while Hispanic was studied as a disadvantaged ethnic group.

The 2023 GAO report states that in 2021 the federal workforce employed a higher percentage of disadvantaged racial groups than the civilian labor force with one exception: Hispanic representation. Hispanic representation in 2021 within the federal workforce “was about 50 percent less than their representation in the civilian labor force” (2023, p. 6). When looking at gender in the same report, the GAO also stated that the percentage of women employed by the federal government held steady in 2021 but representation was still lower than the proportion of women in the civilian labor force. The report did not provide exact percentages, but the graphical representation for 2021 had the percentage of women in the civilian labor force just above the 45% demarcation, while the percentage of women in the federal workforce was below the 45% demarcation. See Figure 3 below for the data representation as it was presented in the GAO report.

**Figure 3**

*Federal Workforce and Civilian Labor Force - Gender*



Note: This figure is a reproduction of the original figure published in GAO report GAO-24-105924. The figure is a product of the GAO analysis of Enterprise Human Resources Integration data and American Community Survey data. From *GAO-24-105924 Federal Workforce: Data Reveal Minor Demographic Changes 2011-2021* by Government Accountability Office, November 2023, p. 7.

*The Federal Workforce and the Senior Executive Service*

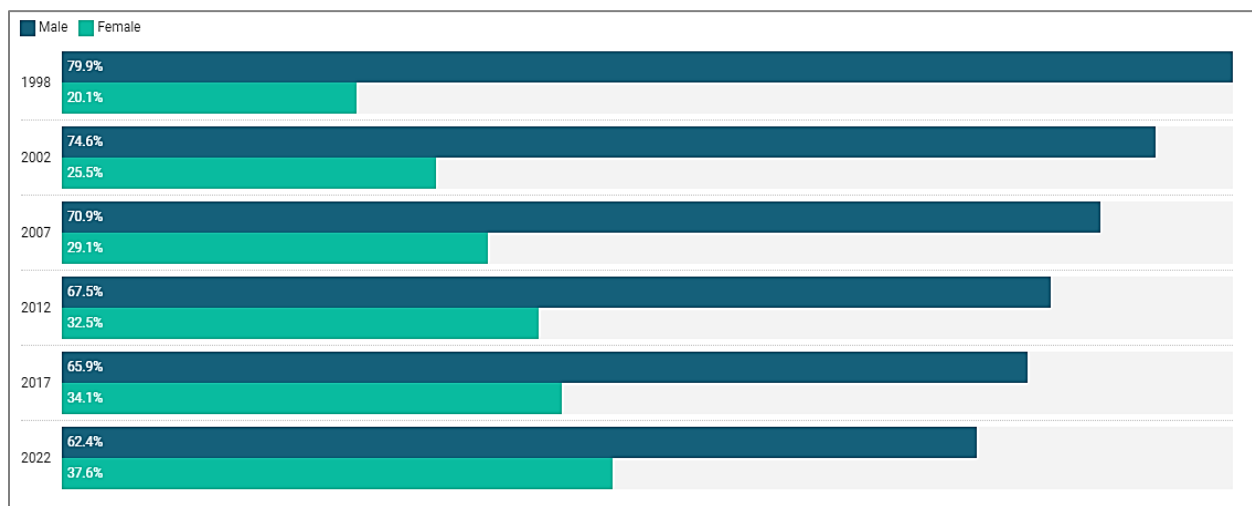
The Partnership for Public Service published a comprehensive report in July 2023, examining diversity within the SES from 1998 to 2022. The study examined demographics and trends related to gender, race, age, education level, length of service, location, agency trends, occupation trends, new hires, separations, and retirement eligibility. The review of demographics focuses on gender, race, age, and education level, where data is available for comparison with the federal workforce. Some categories, specifically race, are limited to more recent data

beginning in 2007. The report indicates diversity is improving over time, yet women, people of color, and younger age groups remain underrepresented when compared to the federal workforce population (Partnership for Public Service, 2023a).

Figure 4 provides a visual overview of gender diversity in the SES from 1998 to 2022 (Partnership for Public Service, 2023a). In 1998, females occupied 20.1% of career SES positions, but the percentage increased to 37.6% in 2022. The percentage of females in the SES has grown steadily since 1998, though it remains below the benchmark of 44% of the federal workforce.

#### Figure 4

##### *Career SES by Sex 1998-2022*



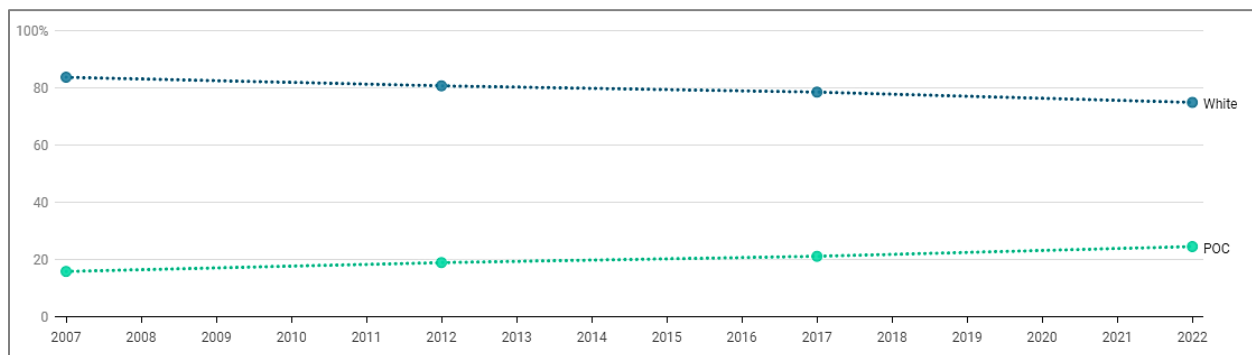
Note: This figure is a reproduction of the original figure published by the Partnership for Public Service on July 25, 2023. The Partnership for Public Service used data from FedScope, managed by OPM. Source: *Senior Executive Service: Trends Over 25 Years*, by the Partnership for Public Service, 2023. <https://ourpublicservice.org/fed-figures/senior-executive-service-trends-over-25-years/> Copyright © 2023 Partnership for Public Service.

Figure 5 provides a visual overview of racial diversity in the SES from 2007 to 2022; racial data on the federal workforce was not available prior to 2007 (Partnership for Public Service, 2023a). The data does not differentiate based on individually identified race or ethnicity

but rather distinguishes between *white* and *people of color*. The term *people of color* is a collective population reference and refers “to African Americans, American Indians/Alaska Natives, Asian Americans, Latinos/Hispanics, and Native Hawaiians/other Pacific islanders” (Braveman et al., 2022, p. 171). People of color made up 16% of the SES in 2007 and increased to 24.7% in 2022, growing by an average of 2.9% every five years. As people of color make up just over 39% of the federal workforce in 2022 (Lardy, 2023), representation in the SES is still fifteen percentage points below reflecting the workforce.

### Figure 5

*Career SES by Race 2007-2022*



Note: This figure is a reproduction of the original figure published by the Partnership for Public Service on July 25, 2023. The Partnership for Public Service used data from FedScope, managed by OPM. Source: *Senior Executive Service: Trends Over 25 Years*, by the Partnership for Public Service, 2023. <https://ourpublicservice.org/fed-figures/senior-executive-service-trends-over-25-years/> Copyright © 2023 Partnership for Public Service.

The GAO (2023) also examined the composition of the SES and progress over the 2011-2021 period. The GAO report again did not consolidate racial and ethnic groups into a single persons of color category; however, the GAO also reported improvements in major demographic categories between fiscal year (FY) 2011 and FY 2021. The GAO found all racial and ethnic categories examined for both men and women demonstrated improvements except for Native Hawaiians or Pacific Islanders. The report also indicates the percentage of white men in the SES decreased during this time yet remains “the most represented group in the SES, occupying more

than half of all SES positions (Government Accountability Office, 2023, p. 10). Figure 6 provides an overview of the percentages of historically disadvantaged groups by race and gender within the SES in 2011 and 2021. Figure 7 provides an overview of the percentage of Hispanic ethnic groups by gender during that same period.

**Figure 6**

*SES Positions – Race and Gender (2011 and 2021)*

Race and Gender	Fiscal Year 2011		Fiscal Year 2021	
	Number of Employees	Percentage of Employees	Number of Employees	Percentage of Employees
American Indian or Alaska Native – Female	34	1	44	1
American Indian or Alaska Native – Male	55	1	57	1
Asian – Female	98	1	170	2
Asian – Male	140	2	208	3
Black or African American – Female	344	5	495	6
Black or African American – Male	429	6	460	6
More Than One Race – Female	12	0	60	1
More Than One Race – Male	28	0	68	1
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander – Female	0	0	0	0
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander – Male	0	0	0	0
White – Female	1,937	26	2,181	28
White – Male	4,431	59	4,053	52

Note: This figure is a reproduction of the original figure published in GAO report GAO-24-105924. This figure is a product of the GAO analysis of Enterprise Human Resources Integration data. From *GAO-24-105924 Federal Workforce: Data Reveal Minor Demographic Changes 2011-2021* by Government Accountability Office, November 2023, p. 10.

**Figure 7***SES Positions – Ethnicity (2011 and 2021)*

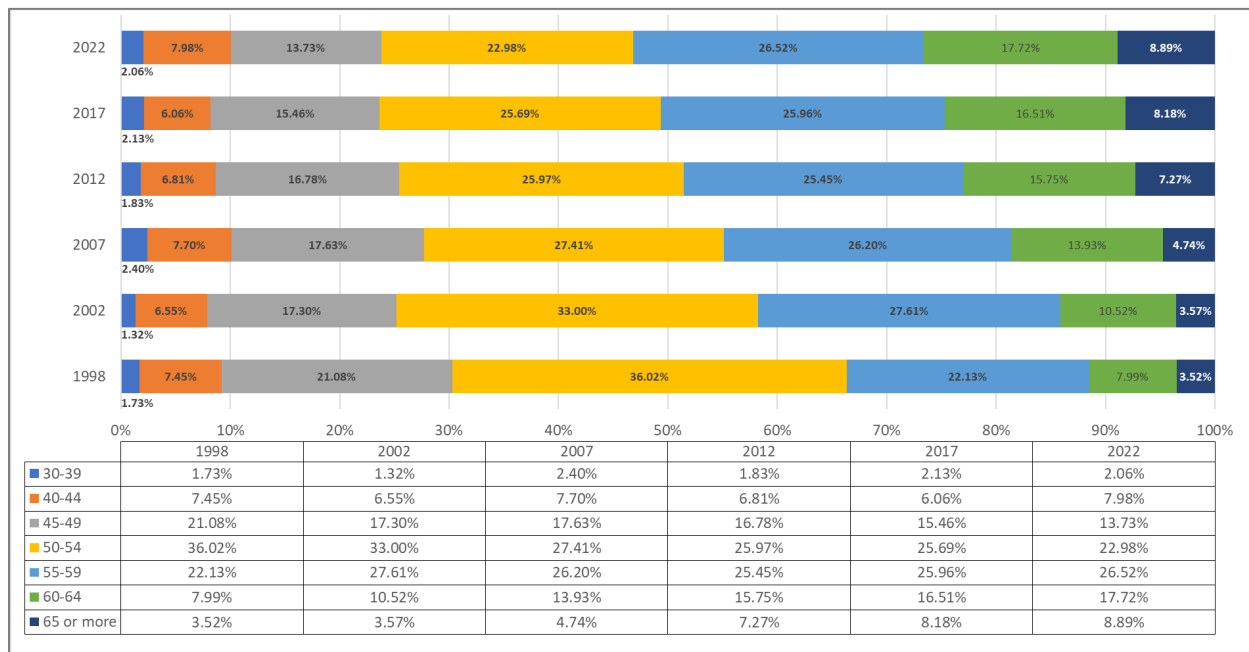
Ethnicity	Fiscal Year 2011		Fiscal Year 2021	
	Number of Employees	Percentage of Employees	Number of Employees	Percentage of Employees
Hispanic	314	4	410	5
Non-Hispanic	7,456	96	7,617	95

Note: This figure is a reproduction of the original figure published in GAO report GAO-24-105924. This figure is a product of the GAO analysis of Enterprise Human Resources Integration data. From *GAO-24-105924 Federal Workforce: Data Reveal Minor Demographic Changes 2011-2021* by Government Accountability Office, November 2023, p. 10.

Figure 8 illustrates trends in career SES age over time. The majority of SES over the past 25 years were between 50-59 years of age, consistently representing 50% or more of the total. The percentage of SES over 60 years of age was steadily increasing since 1998, peaking in 2022 at 26.6% of all SES. The percentage of SES between 40-49 years of age has decreased over time, with the highest total in 1998 at 28.5% but only 21.7% in 2022. The youngest age subset, individuals 30-39 years of age, averaged 1.9% of the SES over the same period, with the lowest percentage in 2002 (1.3%) and the highest in 2007 (2.4%) (Partnership for Public Service, 2023a).

**Figure 8**

*Career SES by Age 1998-2022*



Note: This chart was created using data reported by the Partnership for Public Service and is not the original figure published by the Partnership for Public Service on July 25, 2023. The Partnership for Public Service used data from FedScope, managed by OPM. Source: *Senior Executive Service: Trends Over 25 Years*, by the Partnership for Public Service, 2023. <https://ourpublicservice.org/fed-figures/senior-executive-service-trends-over-25-years/> Copyright © 2023 Partnership for Public Service.

The review of literature also identified government, non-government, and public research and analysis into the composition of the SES going back approximately 20 years. In 2003, the GAO published a report titled "Senior Executive Service: Enhanced Agency Efforts Needed to Improve Diversity as the Senior Corps Turns Over." This report analyzed attrition and ascension rates among the SES and projected what diversity would look like in 2007. The GAO examined twenty-four agencies and coordinated with OPM and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The analysis predicted white women would comprise 23.1% of the SES and minority men and women would comprise 14.6% of the SES (Government Accountability Office, 2003; Zeller, 2003). In a follow-on report published in 2008, the GAO reported that in

September 2007, women comprised 29.1% of the SES, and minorities (terminology for people of color used in 2007-2008) comprised 15.8% of the SES. Actual percentages for 2007 surpassed the projections published in the 2003 report.

While exploring diversity among the SES, researchers also examined diversity across the general schedule (GS) to determine diversity trends and impacts from GS-1 through GS-15 and on to the SES. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) published a report in March 2023 examining the federal workforce in FY 2020. The research aimed to identify diversity trends across all grades of the federal workforce. The EEOC found that as grades or ranks increase, the diversity of the workforce decreases (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2023). Friedman (2023a) reported that diversity between GS-1 through GS-10 looks quite different from the diversity profile of GS-11 through SES, which looks quite different from the diversity profile of just the SES. Figure 9 provides a visual overview of the total composition, with the largest percentages of demographic groups highlighted in green. The only groups with the largest representation in the GS-11 & SES were white men, Hispanic men, and Asian men and women. The only group with the highest representation among the SES only were white men. All other demographic groups were most represented in GS 1-10 positions.

**Figure 9**

*Federal Sector Participation Rates with Grade Bands by Race, Ethnicity, and Gender, FY 2020*

Demographic Group	GS 1-10	GS 11-SES & Senior Pay	SES & Senior Pay Alone
All Men	46.1%	*59.5%	57.5%
All Women	*53.9%	40.5%	42.5%
Hispanic/Latino Men	5.4%	*5.8%	4.2%
Hispanic/Latina Women	*6.1%	3.6%	3.8%
White Men	28.1%	41.4%	*43.2%
White Women	*26.4%	22.7%	24.4%
Black/African American Men	*7.8%	6.6%	6.1%
Black/African American Women	*14.7%	9.8%	10.8%
Asian Men	2.7%	*4.2%	3.2%
Asian Women	2.8%	*3.2%	3.0%
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander Men	*0.4%	0.2%	0.1%
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander Women	*0.3%	0.1%	0.1%
American Indian/Alaska Native Men	*1.2%	0.8%	0.6%
American Indian/Alaska Native Women	*2.9%	0.7%	0.4%
Two or More Races Men	*0.5%	0.4%	0.1%
Two or More Races Women	*0.6%	0.3%	0.2%

Notes: GS = General Schedule. SES = Senior Executive Service. FY = Fiscal Year. Participation rates are calculated by dividing the number of employees within demographic group and grade band by the total number of employees in that grade band. Data include only permanent employees. Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding. The highest value in each row is marked with a star (\*) and shaded green.

Note: Reproduced in whole with notes from the original. Source: *FY 2020 Annual Report on the Federal Workforce Part II: Workforce Statistics & EEO Commitment*, by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2023.

The EEOC and the GAO state that the combined GS-14 and GS-15 bands serve as the primary source of candidates applying for SES positions (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2023; Government Accountability Office, 2023). The data indicates a trend of

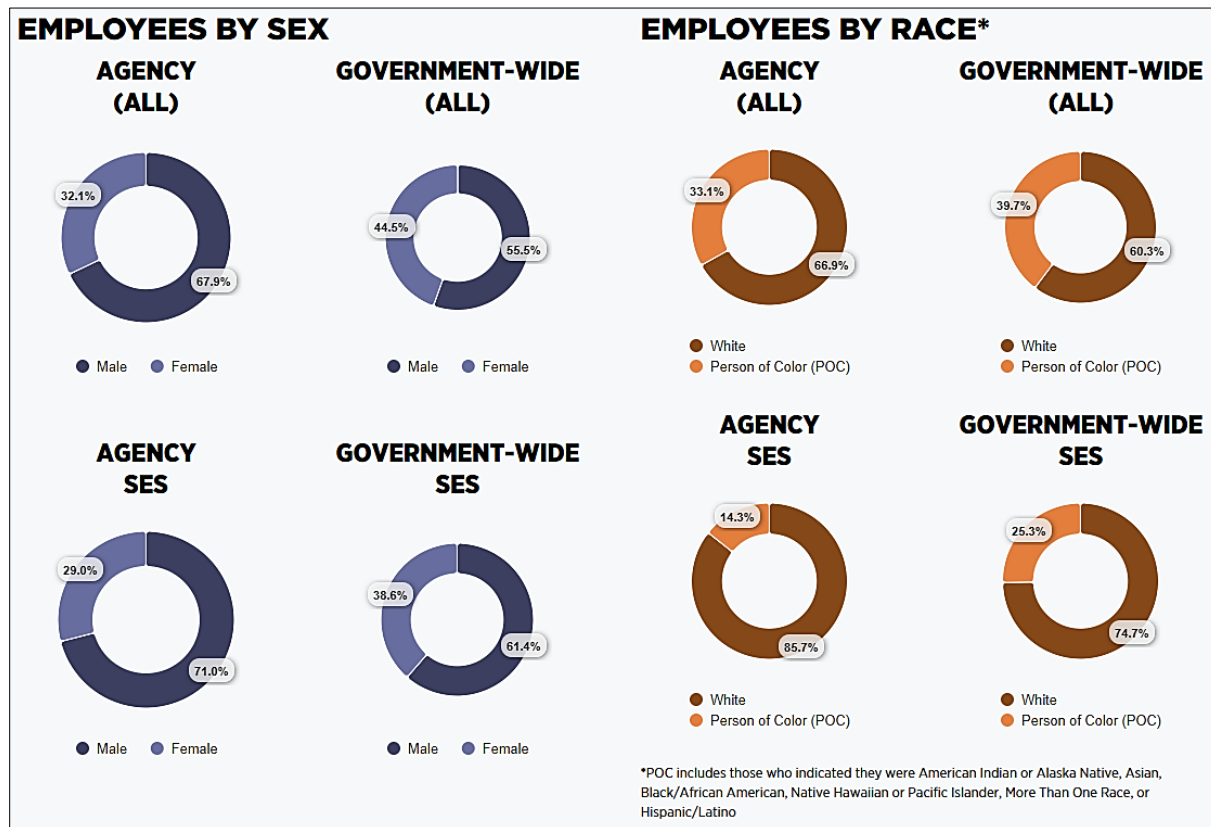
decreasing diversity when moving from lower to higher grades and bands and a less diverse pool of candidates.

*Agency Example: Department of Defense*

The study also reviewed data available pertaining to the Department of Defense (DoD). The Partnership for Public Service (2023b) maintains an agency dashboard that provides overviews of available demographic data. Figure 10 provides a side-by-side visual comparison of employee composition by sex and by race for the DoD compared to the federal government. Figure 10 also provides a side-by-side comparison of SES composition by sex and by race. The DoD is comprised of 32.1% women compared with 44.5% women government-wide and 33.1% people of color versus 39.7% government-wide. Within the SES, 29.0% of SES in the DoD are women compared with 38.6% in government-wide, and 14.3% of DoD SES are people of color versus 25.3% government-wide. When comparing agency SES composition with the agency workforce, women make up 32.1% of the DoD workforce and 29.0% of DoD SES, while people of color comprise 33.1% of the DoD workforce and only 14.3% of DoD SES.

**Figure 10**

*DoD Dashboard – Demographic Composition by Sex and Race*



Note: The Partnership for Public Service manages an agency performance dashboard for demographics. Figures are captured and reproduced here in full without manipulation. Source: *Agency Performance Dashboard – Department of Defense*, by Partnership for Public Service, 2023b, October 17. <https://ourpublicservice.org/performance-measures/agency-performance-dashboard/profile/DOD/> Copyright © 2023 Partnership for Public Service.

**Advantages and Disadvantages of Diversity**

Published literature on the effects of diversity within organizations predominantly concentrates on the private sector, with comparatively limited research available on government agencies. This literature review delves into themes, aspects, and characteristics of diversity as a performance indicator, which are translatable across the public and private sectors. For example, private sector research often examines diversity’s impact on profitability, creativity, and innovation, whereas studies within government agencies tend to focus on the impacts of diversity

on creativity and innovation, excluding profitability. Instead, these government agencies are more likely to investigate how diversity influences elements of human capital management such as recruitment, retention, and turnover (U.S. Office Personnel Management, n.d.-b).

Slater, Wigand, and Zwirlein (2008) highlighted both the benefits and the costs of diversity within an organization and the leadership teams. They offer that diversity promotes creative decision-making by introducing fresh information, voices, and viewpoints into strategic discussions. In addition, greater diversity “links the firm with its customers, enables the firm to attract and retain talented employees, and/or enhances the firm’s reputation” (Slater et al., 2008, p. 207). Slater, Wigand, and Zwirlein also identified the potential costs of diverse teams and organizations. Diverse teams may experience difficulty communicating across teams or groups, reduced internal cohesion, lower cooperation, higher turnover, and resentment. Slater and team state organizations must make a commitment at all levels of leadership to foster diversity as part of the organizational culture, or the costs may outweigh the benefits (Slater et al., 2008).

Phillips (2014), writing for *Scientific American*, posits that diversity among team members is correlative to improved performance, but does not cause improved performance. Like Slater, Phillips identifies positives and negatives of diversity within organizations. Her research indicated that diversity within a team may lead to challenges such as discomfort, interpersonal conflict, poor communication, distrust, decreased cohesiveness, tense interactions, increased concern about disrespect, and more. However, diversity can also lead to improved innovation and enhanced creativity. People who are different from each other bring unique experiences and perspectives, which help drive innovative ideas and better decision-making (Phillips, 2014). She stated that diversity works “by promoting hard work and creativity; by encouraging the consideration of alternatives” (Phillips, 2014, para. 19). She also provided a

high-level overview of diversity among top management teams and performance, finding companies with either gender diverse or racially diverse senior management teams experienced better financial performance than companies with less diverse senior management (Phillips, 2014). However, her research stopped short of examining management teams with both gender and racial diversity present.

Hunt, Layton, and Prince (2015) also examined the relationship between the level of diversity within the leadership teams of large companies and financial performance with comparable results. Companies with greater gender diversity on top management teams were 15% more likely to experience better financial returns than their industry competitors with less diverse leadership teams (Hunt et al., 2015). Companies with more racially diverse top management teams were 35% more likely to achieve better financial returns than competitors with less diversity (Hunt et al., 2015). Like Phillips, Hunt et al., (2015) stated that the data indicates correlation, not causation. Further, Hunt et al. examined the benefits of diversity beyond financial performance. Companies with greater diversity are more likely to attract top talent and have better customer service, employee satisfaction, and decision-making skills, all of which contribute to a positive feedback loop with growing profits. This implies:

That diversity beyond gender and ethnicity/race (such as diversity in age and sexual orientation) as well diversity of experience (such as a global mindset and cultural fluency) are also likely to bring some level of competitive advantage for firms that are able to attract and retain such diverse talent. (Hunt et al., 2015, p. 1)

The argument for a diverse workforce in the public sector is based on the need to represent the society it serves as well as the possibility for increased effectiveness, efficiency, and creativity (Borry et al, 2021). The U.S. OPM, writing for the White House in the

“Government-wide Strategic Plan to Advance Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility in the Federal Workplace,” combines discussion of the benefits of diversity with inclusion.

Inclusion is “the recognition, appreciation, and use of the talents and skills of employees of all backgrounds” (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2023, p.22). On the “Diversity and Inclusion Frequently Asked Questions” sub-site (n.d.-b), the U.S. OPM identifies three main benefits of diversity: 1) serving our communities and being socially responsible; 2) increasing innovation; and 3) getting a return on investment. In support of the first benefit, the U.S. OPM states diversity and inclusion improve an organization's potential to better serve a diverse workforce, adapt to new customs, and provide high-quality, responsive, and equitable services, making it the ideal approach for a democratic government (U.S. Office Personnel Management, n.d.-b).

Under increasing innovation, the second benefit, the U.S. OPM says research shows that effective diversity management enhances organizational performance and innovation by incorporating diverse employees into inclusive work environments, fostering new products, challenges, and innovative teamwork. Lastly, the OPM states diversity and inclusion improve workforce quality and drive a “better return on investment in human capital” (U.S. Office Personnel Management, n.d.-b, Diversity and Inclusion FAQ, para. 4). Diversity initiatives, along with inclusion initiatives, promote the recruitment and retention of a talented workforce, which cannot be attained without reaching out to all communities of talent. Recruiting the best talent improves human capital (U.S. Office Personnel Management, n.d-b). Borry et al. (2021) also highlight better retention and recruitment as a benefit of diversity, stating that a focus on diversity and inclusion improves recruitment and retention as federal agencies compete for more

qualified personnel. Furthermore, encouraging a diverse and inclusive culture within organizations ensures success meeting the agency's mission (Borry et al., 2021).

## **Diversity Policy in the Federal Government**

### *Statutes*

The Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA), passed in 1978, stated the need for the federal workforce to reflect the diversity of the nation and created the SES to function as the federal government's executive management (Civil Service Reform Act, 1978). The SES serves as a bridge between general schedule employees and political appointees (Partnership for Public Service, 2023a). The SES are responsible for directing the work of an organization, supervising employees, managing specific programs or projects, making and determining policies, and other executive functions (Civil Service Reform Act, 1978).

Previously, Congress made efforts to enact legislation aimed at enhancing diversity and introducing reforms within the SES; however, none of these efforts have been successful. The Senior Executive Service Diversity Assurance Act (2008a), or House Resolution (H.R.) 3774, was proposed in October 2007 "to provide for greater diversity within, and to improve policy direction and oversight of" the SES (p. 1). The legislation successfully passed the House of Representatives and was introduced in the Senate as S. 2148. Despite initial progress, the bill ultimately did not pass in the Senate (Senior Executive Service Diversity Assurance Act, 2008b). The Senior Executive Service Reform Act of 2012 was introduced in the House as H.R. 6042 and in the Senate as S. 2249 but did not pass in either chamber. This bill would have required OPM to promote diversity in the SES and strengthen agency candidate development programs in addition to improvements to the hiring process for SES applicants (Senior Executive Service Reform Act of 2012, 2012a; Senior Executive Service Reform Act of 2012, 2012b).

*Executive Orders*

Executive orders signed by sitting presidents serve as a testament to the value placed on diversity at the highest levels of government. These orders are direct actions taken by the president to manage operations within the federal government and often reflect the administration's priorities and policy agenda. Executive Order (E.O.) 13583 established government-wide initiatives to promote diversity across the federal workforce and emphasized the importance of the federal government as an employer to lead by example (2015). The order directed the U.S. OPM to lead the government-wide effort and to publish a Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan intended to guide agencies in the development of agency-specific plans. Additionally, the government-wide plan was also intended to provide guidance to help agencies identify and remove barriers within the federal government associated with hiring, promotions, retention, development, etc. However, Executive Order 13583 did not specifically address the SES. Borry, Getha-Taylor, and Holmes (2021) further explored the impacts of E.O. 13583 on diversity in the federal workforce. Their study revealed that although the diversity of the federal workforce is on the rise, the pace of improvement following E.O. 13583 remains comparable to the period prior to its enactment. Consequently, they argue that a direct link between the advancements in diversity and the implementation of E.O. 13583 cannot be established (Borry et al., 2021).

Executive Order 13714, signed in December 2015 and titled "Strengthening the Senior Executive Service," outlined initiatives specifically intended to improve recruitment, hiring and development of the top leadership of the federal workforce. The E.O. built on previous executive orders and provided additional support for government organizations "to develop and implement a comprehensive, integrated, and strategic focus on diversity as a key component of the

recruitment, hiring, retention, and development of their SES cadre” (Exec. Order 13714, 2015, p. 79225). The E.O. directed reforms to the management and hiring of the SES, including directing a streamlining of the hiring process in addition to tracking data and demographics of the applicant pool for vacant SES positions.

Executive Order 14035 signed June 25, 2021, and titled “Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce” reestablished initiatives established under previous executive orders. The E.O. did not specifically address the SES but did reemphasize the importance of diversity and the commitment of the executive branch to diversity advancement. The E.O. reestablished the government-wide strategic plan, now titled “Government-Wide Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility Initiative and Strategic Plan,” directing the U.S. OPM to retain ownership of development and publication. The E.O. further directed the plan to define standards of success and “identify strategies to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, and eliminate, where applicable, barriers to equity, in Federal workforce functions” (Exec. Order, 14035, 2021, p. 34595). The E.O. also addressed data collection, professional development and advancement, and training and learning for all levels of the federal workforce (Exec. Order 14035, 2021).

### *Strategic Plans and Reports*

In accordance with E.O. 13583, the OPM published the Government-Wide Strategic Plan to Advance Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workplace in November 2021. Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility is shortened to DEIA for this review. The strategic plan identifies initiatives to “cultivate a federal workforce that draws from the full diversity of the Nation” (The White House, 2021, p. 3). The strategic plan defines the mission and vision of the plan, establishes five principles for advancing and supporting DEIA

within the federal government, identifies priorities from the E.O., specifies strategies for improving DEIA, provides a maturity model for supporting growth, assists with developing a framework to address harassment, and explains next steps for further developing DEIA (The White House, 2021). The government-wide strategic plan is intended to guide all agencies in the development of agency-specific DEIA strategic plans.

In compliance with E.O. 14035 and the Government-wide Strategic Plan to Advance Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workplace (The White House, 2021), the DoD published the Department of Defense Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) Strategic Plan for 2022-2023. The strategic plan defines the DoD's mission and vision for DEIA, establishes operating principles, establishes five goals for DEIA initiatives, assesses itself against the maturity model provided in the government-wide strategic plan, lays out a roadmap for completing actions, describes plans for prevention of harassment as well as response plans, and identifies next steps for DEIA within the agency (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). The DoD states that the strategic plan applies to civilian and military workforces. The agency also states the 2022-2023 plan is intended to be foundational and will continue to be assessed and updated based on progress. The DoD identified five DEIA goals and nested objectives within each goal to track progress, each of which is represented visually in Figure 11. The goals reach beyond diversity alone and target equity, inclusion, and accessibility (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). While the DoD set these goals and objectives, the agency does not assign specific offices to oversee individual objectives, nor does it specify metrics for measuring progress.

**Figure 11**

*DoD DEIA Strategy Map*



Source: *Department of Defense Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2022-2023*, by U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, p. 8.

<https://media.defense.gov/2022/Sep/30/2003088685/-1/-1/0/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-DIVERSITY-EQUITY-INCLUSION-AND-ACCESSIBILITY-STRATEGIC-PLAN.PDF>

## **Preparing Candidates for Executive Leadership**

Agencies can employ succession management tools like the Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Program (SESCDP), administered by the U.S. OPM, to identify and train potential senior executive leaders. This program is specifically designed to cultivate the next generation of senior executives by focusing on enhancing their skills in Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs) (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-a). The ECQs are a set of defined and standardized core competencies for all executive leaders and are essential for building a federal corporate culture, serving customers, and forming successful teams. The ECQs are required for entry into the Senior Executive Service and are interdependent, requiring competence in each ECQ for successful performance. The U.S. OPM must certify agency SESCDPs. An agency may run an individual SESCDP or may join with other agencies for joint programs (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-a). Every SESCDP must be recertified every five years or whenever the agencies make major changes to the program design, structure, or content. The SESCDPs are competitive and open to either current federal employees or full and open to the public (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-a). The SESCDPs are announced on the USA Jobs website and must be open for a minimum of two weeks. Selection for SES is not contingent on SESCDP participation or Qualifications Review Board (QRB) certification (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-a).

The OPM oversees the Executive Women in Motion (EWIM) mentoring program as well (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-c). The EWIM is a toolkit for agencies to utilize when hosting events aimed at preparing women and men for leadership roles and encouraging candidates to apply to the SES. The EWIM event is a one-day event hosted by a federal agency and typically consists of a keynote speaker, training on required applicant materials such as

executive core qualifications, and mentoring sessions with members of the SES (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-c).

The review identified one program external to the government that aims to prepare candidates for the SES. The African American Federal Executive Association (AAFEA) hosts the AAFEA Fellows Program, a one-year program designed to prepare high-performing individuals to compete for executive positions in the federal government (African American Federal Executive Association, n.d.). The AAFEA aims to prepare graduates to navigate the SES hiring process. The program includes monthly cohort meetings, one-on-one mentoring sessions with a current or former SES, strengths analysis and coaching sessions, training on the ECQ narratives, mock interviews with feedback, and the completion of a capstone project (African American Federal Executive Association, n.d.).

### **Summary**

The literature review explored four main themes pertaining to diversity in the federal workforce and the SES, structured around the guiding research questions. These themes include the demographics, advantages and disadvantages of diversity, statutes and policies guiding diversity in the federal government, and programs for preparing candidates for the SES. Initially, the review explored data and trends within the demographics of the federal workforce and the SES followed by an exploration on the significance of diversity. The review then analyzed statutes and policies currently governing and impacting diversity within the federal workforce and the SES were then reviewed. The closing section highlighted programs aimed at preparing federal employees for the SES. The sources consulted for the review encompassed reports, web-based articles, previously published surveys and survey data, journal articles, policies, executive

orders, and strategic plans. The review also included information published on public websites, including those of the U.S. OPM, the GAO, the EEOC, and Congress.

### **Research Methodology**

This section provides a thorough explanation of the process used to conduct the research. This section is integral to the study as it delineates the strategies and procedures employed to gather and analyze essential data and information. As a qualitative study, the approach is fundamentally interpretive, placing a strong emphasis on understanding previously published data and studies.

### **Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore the representation of diversity within the Senior Executive Service (SES) and compare it with the federal workforce. Additional emphasis will be placed on the composition of the Department of Defense where primary data is available. This is a qualitative study examining diversity trends and factors potentially influencing diversity within the SES compared to the overall federal workforce.

1. How does the demographic composition of the SES compare to that of the federal workforce overall?
  - a. How does the demographic composition of DoD's SES compare specifically to DoD's workforce?
  - b. Which demographic groups, if any, are underrepresented in the SES compared to the federal workforce?
2. How does diversity at the executive leadership level affect an organization?
3. How do current policies aimed at improving diversity affect representation at the senior executive level of federal leadership?
4. What existing programs prepare individuals for career SES positions, and how is their success measured?

## **Research Methodology**

Qualitative research principles and methods steered the research by exploring a central problem or phenomenon through open-ended questions used to guide data collection (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2019). This process began with a systematic literature review on the SES, diversity of the SES and the federal workforce, statutes and policies on both diversity and the SES, and programs designed to prepare candidates for SES membership. Multiple data sources and literature sources were identified during this literature review. Various search strategies were used to identify public reports, news publications, articles, and opinion pieces, as well as statutes, policies, and formal studies. This qualitative research sought to “interpret the meaning of the information, drawing on personal reflections and past research” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 627).

The study leveraged the Google search engine to find publicly published reports, news articles, and opinion pieces. Scholarly publications and peer-reviewed studies were found using Boolean search principles within academic databases, Google Scholar, and U.S. government websites. The search utilized the Defense Acquisition University Virtual Research Library to access ProQuest and EBSCOHost academic databases. Lawrence Technological University online library was used to access LTU TechCat+. Public websites were also used, including websites for the U.S. OPM, the GAO, the EEOC, and Congress.

The literature search and review used keywords from the research questions to identify applicable research materials. The research questions guided the collection and review of literature, using Boolean search principles within the databases listed above. Keyword combinations and variations of those combinations were used to initiate the field of study. Advanced search parameters were applied to refine discovery over time and included news

articles, reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, U.S. government documents, websites, and dissertations and theses.

Research began with a generic Google search for “Senior Executive Service” and “Diversity,” returning over 268,000 public resources. As a sampling pool, 268,000 was not manageable. To narrow the field, additional searches were conducted in ProQuest and EBSCOHost, utilizing combinations of keywords to refine available materials. All searches were limited to publications in English, excluded wire feeds, and excluded duplicate documents from the results. The search was also constrained to publications published between January 1, 1998, and December 31, 2022, to match the same twenty-five-year period as the study published by the Partnership for Public Service. The tables below provide examples and samples of advanced search parameters used to refine search results.

Table 1 is an example of how advanced search features further refined the results, selecting for full text only, adding the condition for publications to be peer reviewed, and limiting geographic area to the United States. The table includes the total results returned and the breakout across types of publications.

**Table 1**

*Search Refinement Example*

Search Terms & Parameters	Total Results Returned	Scholarly Journals	Trade Journals	Dissertations & Theses	Magazines	Newspapers	Working Papers	Conference Papers and Proceedings	Blogs, Podcasts, & Websites
Senior Executive Service AND Diversity	381	172	30	164	4	2	6	1	2
*Full Text	362	154	29	164	4	2	6	1	2
**Peer Reviewed	136	136	<i>null</i>	<i>null</i>	<i>null</i>	<i>null</i>	<i>null</i>	<i>null</i>	<i>null</i>
***United States	72	72	<i>null</i>	<i>null</i>	<i>null</i>	<i>null</i>	<i>null</i>	<i>null</i>	<i>null</i>

Table 2 provides a sampling of keyword combinations used with the previously detailed advanced search parameters to narrow the field of research within ProQuest. This method was repeated in EBSCOHost and LTU TechCat+ with comparable results.

**Table 2**

*Keyword Combination and Search Results Example*

Search Terms & Parameters	Total Results Returned	Scholarly Journals
Senior Executive Service AND Diversity AND Barrier	12	12
Senior Executive Service AND Diversity AND Benefit	38	38
Senior Executive Service AND Diversity AND Performance	62	62
Senior Executive Service AND Diversity AND Benefit AND Performance	33	33
Senior Executive Service AND Diversity AND Benefit AND Performance AND Barriers	20	20
Senior Executive Service AND Diversity AND Development Program	16	16
Senior Executive Service AND Diversity AND Candidate Development	7	7

Data from multiple reports and documents was analyzed and compared to verify trends over time. For example, the Partnership for Public Service (2023) report examining twenty-five years of demographic data and documenting data trends was compared to GAO reports on diversity of the SES and of the federal workforce published during the same period – 1998 through 2022. Comparison provided the opportunity to corroborate reported data and trends at multiple points in time. The research also examined multiple perspectives on the advantages and disadvantages of diverse organizations and diverse leadership teams within organizations. The analysis included identifying benefits and drawbacks within private corporations that may scale

and apply to government teams and organizations. Analysis also included examining the guidance issued in statutes, executive orders, policies, and strategic plans and comparing demographic data trends before and after implementation.

### **Limitations**

This study is subject to certain limitations. First, this study adopts a qualitative approach and relies exclusively on secondary sources without generating new or primary data. All research data utilized in this study have been sources from publications available in the public domain. Second, the research is limited in scope to reports and data made publicly available between 1998 and 2022. The study did not generate surveys or conduct any interviews with members of federal agencies, non-partisan monitoring organizations, or the SES. Third, the analysis of demographic data focuses primarily on gender, race, and age. Comprehensive data was not available for diversity metrics or for categories such as education, sexual orientation, gender identity, or national origin. Furthermore, the study does not explore any service specific programs for the military services within the DoD. Lastly, data found for analysis often varied between categorizing race into two categories of white and people of color or multiple racial groups, including African American/Black, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, and two or more races. Additionally, the research revealed inconsistencies in how Hispanic/Latino identity was classified, with it being categorized in some instances as a race and in others as an ethnicity.

### **Summary**

This is a qualitative research project, exploring a central problem or phenomenon with open-ended questions to guide data collection (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). As a qualitative study, the approach is fundamentally interpretive, placing a strong emphasis on understanding

previously published data and studies. Guided by the research questions, the research process involved conducting keyword searches across several platforms, including Google Scholar and academic databases like ProQuest, EBSCOHost, and LTU TechCat+. Throughout the study, reliance was placed exclusively on published, secondary data and did not generate primary data.

## Findings

*“We are at our best when we draw on the talents of all parts of our society, and our greatest accomplishments are achieved when diverse perspectives are brought to bear to overcome our greatest challenges”* – Executive Order No. 13583, 2011

### Introduction

This section presents analysis and findings from the literature review and summary data collected during the research. The presentation begins by revisiting the statement of purpose and the research questions, setting the stage for the findings that follow. The findings are then provided in alignment with themes explored in the literature review: demographics, the advantages and disadvantages of diversity, statutes and policies guiding diversity in the federal government, and programs for preparing candidates for the SES. The section concludes with a summary of key insights. The final conclusions drawn from these findings will be detailed in the subsequent section.

### Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the representation of diversity within the Senior Executive Service (SES) and compare it with the federal workforce. Additional emphasis will be placed on the composition of the Department of Defense where primary data is available. This is a qualitative study examining diversity trends and factors potentially influencing diversity within the SES compared to the overall federal workforce.

1. How does the demographic composition of the SES compare to that of the federal workforce overall?
  - a. Which demographic groups, if any, are underrepresented in the SES compared to the federal workforce?

- b. How does the demographic composition of DoD's SES compare specifically to DoD's workforce?
2. How does diversity at the executive leadership level affect an organization?
3. How do current policies aimed at improving diversity affect representation at the highest levels of federal executive leadership?
4. What existing programs prepare individuals for career SES positions, and how is their success measured?

### **Demographics**

The report published by the Partnership for Public Service (2023) highlighted that diversity within the SES is on the rise, especially when examining data concerning women and people of color. However, the composition of the SES still falls short of the composition of the federal workforce. Assessing diversity by age within the Senior Executive Service (SES) proves more challenging, given the increasing number of SES members over the age of 60, contrasted with a slight decrease in those aged between 50 and 59. Furthermore, representation across all age categories under the age of 50 have declined despite minor shifts within 10-year age groupings (i.e. 30-39, 40-49, etc.). When analyzing data from other studies, the observed trends indicating improvements in diversity within the SES appear to hold true over time. Borry, Getha-Taylor, and Holmes (2021) examined demographic trends of women and people of color in 2007, 2011, and 2017, and the data collected aligns with the data published by the Partnership for Public Service as well as in Government Accountability Office reports to Congress (2003, 2008, 2023).

Table 3 provides an overview of changes over time for women and people of color. Each five-year period between 1998 and 2022 indicated positive change or growth in diversity for both

women and people of color, with women averaging 3.5% improvement and people of color averaging 2.9% improvement.

**Table 3**

*Changes Over Time for Women and People of Color 1998-2022*

	<b>Women in SES</b>	<b>Total Percent Change</b>	<b>People of Color in SES</b>	<b>Total Percent Change</b>
<b>1998</b>	20.1%			
<b>2002</b>	25.5%	5.4%		
<b>2007</b>	29.1%	3.6%	16.0%	
<b>2012</b>	32.5%	3.4%	19.1%	3.1%
<b>2017</b>	34.1%	1.6%	21.3%	2.2%
<b>2022</b>	37.6%	3.5%	24.7%	3.4%
<i>AVERAGE</i>		<i>3.5%</i>		<i>2.9%</i>

Note: This table was created using data reported by the Partnership for Public Service and is not the original figure published by the Partnership for Public Service on July 25, 2023. The Partnership for Public Service used data from FedScope, managed by OPM. Source: *Senior Executive Service: Trends Over 25 Years*, by the Partnership for Public Service, 2023. <https://ourpublicservice.org/fed-figures/senior-executive-service-trends-over-25-years/> Copyright © 2023 Partnership for Public Service.

Table 4 provides an overview of changes over time across age groups 30-39, 40-44, 45-49, 50-54, 55-59, 60-64, and 65 or more. Age groups 30-39, 40-44, and 45-49 vary between positive and negative growth over the twenty-five-year period, averaging 0.07%, 0.11%, and 1.47% respectively, for the full period. Age groups 55-59, 60-64, and 65 or more all demonstrated positive growth for the same period, averaging 0.88%, 1.95%, and 1.07%, respectively. The age group 50-54 is the only age group demonstrating negative growth for the full twenty-five-year period, averaging -2.61%.

**Table 4***Changes Over Time by Age group 1998-2022*

	30-39	% CHANGE	40-44	% CHANGE	45-49	% CHANGE	50-54	% CHANGE	55-59	% CHANGE	60-64	% CHANGE	65 or more	% CHANGE
1998	1.73%		7.45%		21.08%		36.02%		22.13%		7.99%		3.52%	
2002	1.32%	-0.41%	6.55%	-0.90%	17.30%	-3.78%	33.00%	-3.02%	27.61%	5.48%	10.52%	2.53%	3.57%	0.05%
2007	2.40%	1.08%	7.70%	1.15%	17.63%	0.33%	27.41%	-5.59%	26.20%	-1.41%	13.93%	3.41%	4.74%	1.17%
2012	1.83%	-0.57%	6.81%	-0.89%	16.78%	-0.85%	25.97%	-1.44%	25.45%	-0.75%	15.75%	1.82%	7.27%	2.53%
2017	2.13%	0.30%	6.06%	-0.75%	15.46%	-1.32%	25.69%	-0.28%	25.96%	0.51%	16.51%	0.76%	8.18%	0.91%
2022	2.06%	-0.07%	7.98%	1.92%	13.73%	-1.73%	22.98%	-2.71%	26.52%	0.56%	17.72%	1.21%	8.89%	0.71%
<i>AVERAGE</i>		<i>0.07%</i>		<i>0.11%</i>		<i>-1.47%</i>		<i>-2.61%</i>		<i>0.88%</i>		<i>1.95%</i>		<i>1.07%</i>

Note: This table was created using data reported by the Partnership for Public Service and is not the original figure published by the Partnership for Public Service on July 25, 2023. The Partnership for Public Service used data from FedScope, managed by OPM. Source: *Senior Executive Service: Trends Over 25 Years*, by the Partnership for Public Service, 2023. <https://ourpublicservice.org/fed-figures/senior-executive-service-trends-over-25-years/> Copyright © 2023 Partnership for Public Service.

Both tables highlight improvement on average over the twenty-five-year period covered by the Partnership for Public Service. While the data indicates improvement over time, the findings draw attention to the position that diversity within the SES does not mirror the diversity of the larger federal workforce.

Data published by both the EEOC and the GAO indicate that while the federal workforce is more diverse than the SES, that diversity is concentrated in grades or bands below GS-11 (refer to Figure 9 on page 20). If diversity is greater in the lower ranks (GS-10 and below) and decreases across the higher ranks, and the typical candidate pool for SES positions consists of GS-14 and GS-15 or equivalent individuals, then the total SES candidate pool is less diverse.

When considering agency-specific trends, Borry et al. (2021) emphasized that improvements in diversity trend across the federal government, but individual agency trends may vary. The DoD data provided an example of one agency with trending improvements, but the

diversity within the DoD workforce and the DoD SES corps is still far below the overall federal workforce (Partnership for Public Service, 2023b).

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Diversity**

The literature indicates diversity improves performance in both the private and public sectors. While most research available specifically examines private sector corporations, certain aspects of the positive influence of diversity may translate to public agencies in the federal government. These benefits include innovative ideas, increased creativity, and better decision-making in addition to the ability to attract top talent (Slater et al., 2008; Hunt et al, 2015). The U.S. OPM (n.d.-b) also stated that agencies benefit from increased diversity in both recruitment and retention of talent. Diversity advocates also believe government organizations will be more accountable and responsive to the public interest (Borry et al., 2021; U.S. Office Personnel Management, n.d-b). Furthermore, both researchers and practitioners also underscored the potential disadvantages of diversity. Diverse teams may experience discomfort, increased conflict, and difficulties communicating (Phillips, 2014). Slater et al. (2008) also documented that increased diversity can lead to higher turnover. Table 5 provides a consolidated view of all the advantages and disadvantages of diversity as documented during the literature review. Ultimately, diversity has the potential to have both positive and negative effects on organizations.

**Table 5**

*Consolidated Advantages and Disadvantages of Diversity*

Potential Advantages of Diversity	Potential Disadvantages of Diversity
Innovative ideas, new voices, and new perspectives	Discomfort
Increased creativity	Interpersonal conflict
Better decision making	Difficulty communicating
Competitive advantage when attracting talent	Higher turnover

Better recruitment and retention	Reduced internal cohesion
Improved innovation	Lower cooperation
Better financial performance	Resentment
Serving communities and being socially responsible	Distrust
Improved return on investment	

To minimize the potential disadvantages of diversity within teams and organizations, other variables should be taken into consideration. Research published by Phillips (2014) and by Hunt, Layton, and Prince (2015) indicates diversity is correlative and not causal to any observed benefits, including improved performance. Choi and Rainey (2010) posit that diversity alone is not an indicator of improved performance but relies on other variables such as human resource practices, team dynamics, and organizational culture. When diversity is considered within the context of external variables, especially human resource policies and leadership attitudes towards diversity, diversity management practices enhance the diversity-performance relationship (Choi & Rainey, 2010).

### **Diversity Policy in the Federal Government**

Both the U.S. OPM and the GAO have submitted reports to Congress in response to requests for information regarding diversity in the SES and improving the SES. However, legislation introduced in both chambers to improve diversity, hiring, and pay for the SES has never been passed. In turn, executive orders have filled the gap, placing the responsibility of improving hiring practices and the diversity of the SES on the OPM and the EEOC.

Diversity has shown improvement since E.O. 13583 was signed in 2011; however, diversity in the SES was already improving for women and minorities before the E.O. was signed, albeit at very slow rates (Borry, Getha-Taylor, & Homes, 2021). When compared with the rate of advancement between 2006 and 2011 before the E.O. was signed, the average growth

rate remained fairly stable between 2011 and 2017, and this cannot directly correlate improvements in representation with the E.O. as the driving factor. Executive Order 14035 (2021) required OPM to publish an updated, government-wide DEIA strategy and guidance for agencies to develop and publish agency specific DEIA strategies. Following this E.O., the OPM developed a government-wide strategy for DEIA, which was published by the White House in November 2021. The government-wide strategy provides guidance for agencies to develop agency-specific strategies as well as a maturity model for agencies to self-assess their progress at managing diversity.

Choi and Rainey presented evidence suggesting diversity alone does not improve organizations or organization performance. Instead, diversity management plans are a valuable variable that may determine whether diversity within a team or an organization has a positive or negative impact on operations, performance, and achieving the mission (Choi & Rainey, 2010). This finding underscores the importance of agency-specific strategic plans for managing diversity, suggesting that such plans are essential to the success of any diversity initiative. For diversity management strategies to be successful, agency plans must be resourced and supported by the culture, management practices, and leadership commitment (Choi & Rainey, 2010). The DoD DEIA Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2022-2023 (2022) identifies securing funding as a critical element of achieving the strategic objectives outlined in the document. Funding is highlighted as one of the essential factors necessary for an agency to assess itself as either advancing outcomes or leading and sustaining DEIA initiatives when assessed using the government-wide maturity model. Within the published plan, however, the DoD only discusses securing funding in the context of improving accessibility for persons with disabilities but does not discuss how that funding will be secured or allocated.

### **Preparing Candidates for the Senior Executive Service**

Individuals interested in applying for SES positions have multiple options available to them to prepare for the application process. The OPM certifies Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Programs for agencies and recertifies those programs every five years (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2020). Agencies may implement their own SESCO or join forces with other agencies to run a combined SESCO, provided the combined effort is also certified by the U.S. OPM (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2020). All SESCOs are announced on the USA Jobs website. The SESCOs are competitive, either open only to current federal employees or full and open to the public. Individuals who graduate from an SESCO are not guaranteed an SES position, but it is possible for a graduate to move into an SES position after certification by the Qualifications Review Board without further competition (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2020).

Other programs provide opportunities for individuals from historically disadvantaged groups, such as women and people of color. The OPM offers toolkits for agencies to conduct other executive development events, such as the Executive Women in Motion program. The event is specifically designed to provide mentoring and connect aspiring executives with current members of the SES for individual development (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.-d). Other organizations, such as the African American Federal Executive Association (AAFEA), also offer programs to aid historically disadvantaged groups compete for SES positions (African American Federal Executive Association, n.d.). Analysis of the literature found application requirements for interested candidates but did not find statistical data on the average number of applicants or class size, nor did the review identify any metrics tied to tracking the success of program graduates in securing SES positions.

## Summary

The research conducted for this study offers insights gleaned from the literature review that encompasses the demographic data for the federal workforce and the SES, an examination of advantages and disadvantages of diversity, the statutes and policies guiding diversity and diversity management in the federal government, and a review of initiatives preparing candidates for SES positions. The findings from this study respond to the research questions posed and highlight potential directions for future research. They reveal that diversity within the SES does not fully match the demographic diversity of the broader federal workforce, although it is gradually improving. The analysis acknowledges both the advantages and disadvantages of diversity, underscoring the notion that diversity by itself does not automatically lead to enhanced organizational performance. Legislation regarding diversity in the SES has not been updated since the original Civil Service Reform Act was signed in 1978, although attempts to introduce new legislation were made in 2007 and 2012. Therefore, most federal governance of diversity policy is the result of executive orders enacted by sitting presidents. The implementation of initiatives directed by executive orders does not show a direct correlation with observed trends in improving diversity in the workforce or in the SES. Furthermore, there is a lack of data to assess the diversity of the applicant pool for SES positions. Additionally, while programs exist within the government and from external organizations to prepare individuals for SES careers, there is insufficient data to determine whether participants are more successful than candidates who did not participate in a development program. The conclusion section will present recommendations based on these findings.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

### Introduction

This section presents conclusions and recommendations derived from the analysis conducted during the literature review. It further outlines potential areas for future research, informed by an exploration of the diversity of the federal government and the SES corps, an examination of the advantages and disadvantages of diversity, an assessment of guiding statutes, policies, and plans, and researching programs designed to prepare candidates for SES positions. Four research questions guided the establishment of conclusions and recommendations:

1. How does the demographic composition of the SES compare to that of the federal workforce overall?
  - a. Which demographic groups, if any, are underrepresented in the SES compared to the federal workforce?
  - b. How does the demographic composition of DoD's SES compare specifically to DoD's workforce?
2. How does diversity at the executive leadership level affect an organization?
3. How do current policies aimed at improving diversity affect representation at the senior executive level of federal leadership?
4. What existing programs prepare individuals for career SES positions, and how is their success measured?

### Conclusions

Based on the literature review and findings, guided by the research questions, there are five conclusions:

Conclusion One. Comparing the SES to the Federal Workforce: While there was observable improvement in diversity among women and people of color in the SES over time, diversity for both groups continue to fall short when compared to the broader federal workforce. Diversity trends vary among age groups, but overall, there is a need for better alignment between SES demographics and those of the total federal workforce. The discrepancies between diversity demographics across ranks and grade bands within the federal workforce when compared to SES demographics highlight the need for initiatives to target improved diversity at the GS-14 and GS-15 levels to ensure the available applicant pool for SES positions is representative of the larger federal workforce.

Conclusion Two. Influence of Diversity: While diversity offers numerous advantages, including fostering creativity and better decision making, it can also introduce challenges such as increased conflict and communication difficulties. However, diversity alone is not responsible for the benefits to the performance of an organization; it depends upon other factors such as organizational culture, leadership support, and diversity management practices.

Conclusion Three. Diversity Management Strategies: To harness the positive impacts of diversity, organizations, particularly federal agencies, should focus on implementing effective diversity management plans. Such strategies should be supported by resources and align with the organizational culture and leadership commitment.

Conclusion Four. Federal Diversity Policies: While Executive Orders were introduced to address diversity in the SES, legislative efforts have faced challenges in passing. Observations indicate that, even after the implementation of specific Executive Orders, the diversity within the SES was already exhibiting gradual progress, albeit at a slow pace before their implementation.

Conclusion Five. SES Candidate Preparation: Various programs, including SESCDPs and initiatives for historically disadvantaged groups, exist to prepare individuals for SES positions. Despite these efforts, the literature review revealed a gap in tracking and reporting metrics that measure the success of these programs and quantify the number of successful graduates securing SES positions.

As the examination of SES demographics and diversity statutes, policies, and plans unfolded, it became evident that while progress was observed, gaps in representation persist, necessitating revisiting diversity strategies to effectively close identified disparities, optimize the advantages of diversity, and fortify pathways for inclusive leadership in the SES.

### **Recommendations**

The research and conclusions resulted in four recommendations for leaders, practitioners, and policymakers:

Recommendation One: Strengthen diversity among the SES by developing and implementing targeted diversity initiatives focused on increasing representation from underrepresented groups within the SES. Establish specific, measurable objectives to bridge the diversity gap between the SES and the broader federal workforce and identify effective metrics for evaluating effectiveness of these diversity initiatives.

Recommendation Two: Implement and resource effective diversity management strategies. Although agencies developed strategies in compliance with E.O. 14035, implementation and execution has been slow and mostly un-resourced due to the importance of prioritizing agency mission accomplishment. Allocate resources and offer training to bolster support for diversity initiatives, emphasizing leadership commitment and organizational practices.

Recommendation Three: Push for legislative support to enhance diversity initiatives within the SES, seeking bipartisan support and the implementation of effective policies. Work collaboratively with policymakers to develop and pass legislation that promotes diversity in federal agencies and stresses the importance of a diverse SES to represent the diversity of the nation.

Recommendation Four: Promote research and data collection. Encourage further research and data collection on the demographics of the SES, trends in diversity, and its impact on public sector organizational performance. Introduce metrics to monitor the progress and success rates of graduates of executive development programs securing SES positions after completion.

### **Areas for Future Research**

Area for Future Research One: Measuring diversity beyond gender, race, and age. The majority of existing research focuses only on gender, race, ethnicity, and age. The study found limited research on persons with disabilities within the federal workforce and the SES, and zero research on gender identity and orientation, neurodivergence, or other non-visible diversity categories. As the definition of diversity continues to evolve beyond demographics and expands to include diversity of thought as well as lived experiences, so too will the research need to expand.

Area for Future Research Two: Identifying barriers to diversity internal to the federal government. The strategic plans published by the U.S. OPM and agencies list identifying barriers to diversity as a primary objective, yet the plans themselves do not provide any details for how barriers will be identified. Further research into the effective use of diversity metrics to identify potential barriers and methods for identifying these obstacles is essential. This work will be

critical to not only future research but also to successful implementation of future diversity initiatives.

Area for Future Research Three: Identifying barriers to diversity external to the federal government. Identifying external barriers to diversity beyond federal government control is essential. Research is needed to understand cultural obstacles that may prevent underrepresented groups from obtaining jobs within the federal government or into the SES. Potential study topics may involve exploring reasons why women may not apply for or be considered for federal government or SES positions (e.g., raising children, limited ability to travel, etc.) or studying the population makeup of a geographic area and compare to available federal or DoD jobs in that area.

Area for Future Research Four: DoD Diversity and Demographics. The findings in this research suggest the diversity of the DoD workforce does not match the broader federal workforce, with greater disparity observed within the SES corps of the DoD. Further investigation into the DoD and underlying factors to its current demographics may be necessary. Such research may help future DoD leadership develop more effective recruitment, hiring, and retention initiatives to enhance diversity.

## **Summary**

This section provided the conclusions from the research, recommendations for practitioners and policymakers, and areas for future research. This research and supporting literature highlight complex variables that influence diversity, its management, and strategies to maximize the advantages of diversity while minimizing the challenges associated with diverse teams. To accurately reflect the federal workforce, the SES continue to advance in diversity, particularly for underrepresented groups. Implementing and resourcing effective diversity

management plans is crucial. Bolstering diversity initiatives for the SES will foster a more representative and effective leadership cadre while also promoting a culture that leverages the advantages of a diverse workforce across federal agencies. As the SES is expected to both represent the diversity of the nation and bridge the gap between political appointees and GS-15 career federal employees, growing the diversity of individuals holding the highest career federal positions of executive leadership is critical for leveraging the benefits of diversity to achieve agency missions.

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**Appendix A – Glossary of Acronyms**

AAFEA .....	African American Federal Executive Association
CSRA .....	Civil Service Reform Act
DEIA.....	Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility
ECQ.....	Executive Core Qualification
EEOC .....	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
EO .....	Executive Order
FY .....	Fiscal Year
GAO.....	Government Accountability Office
GS .....	General Schedule
n.d.....	no date
OPM.....	Office of Personnel Management
PL.....	Public Law
QRB .....	Qualifications Review Board
SES .....	Senior Executive Service
SESCDP .....	Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Program

### **Appendix B – Author Biography**

Mrs. Carson Wakefield assumed her previous role as Product Lead for Soldier Uncrewed Aircraft Systems (SUAS) in the Uncrewed Aircraft Systems Project Office, Program Executive Office (PEO) Aviation in June 2021. During her tenure she led the design, development, and fielding of a portfolio of small uncrewed aircraft systems, ranging from hand-launched, fixed wing systems to small quadcopters, including the first ever fielding of a quadcopter to Maneuver Platoons.

Prior to her last assignment, she served as the Deputy Product Manager for Aerial Communications and Mission Command and as Deputy Product Lead for SUAS. She also served as the Assistant Product Manager for Soldier UAS, first on the Family of Small UAS and then on Short Range Reconnaissance (SRR), a Middle Tier Rapid Prototyping effort for small quadcopters. Other assignments within PEO Aviation include the PEO Strategic Initiatives Group and Logistics Lead for Apache Production and Fielding,

She is a graduate of the Army Materiel Command (AMC) Fellowship, completing her initial study at the AMC Logistics Leadership Center (ALLC) at Red River Army Depot before completing three rotational assignments in both PEO Missiles & Space and PEO Aviation. She earned her Lean Six Sigma Green Belt in March 2009 after completing three Rapid Improvement Events within PEO Missiles and Space. In 2016, she received a Commander's Award for Civilian Service in recognition of contributions made while serving as the ASARC Executive Secretariat Deputy Director and Action Officer.

She holds a Bachelor of Science in Biology from the University of Alabama and a Master of Science in Business Administration from Texas A&M University – Texarkana.