

Are there holes in your criminal background check?

By Laura J. Brown

You've seen ads proclaiming "Criminal background checks, just \$9.95!" or "Instant online results: \$16.95." These ads typically promote criminal records database searches, which are fast, easy and affordable. Unfortunately, there are holes in your criminal background check if you depend on a database search alone to screen church employees and volunteers who work with children.

To make sure your search results are reliable they should be verified by other information, such as Social Security number validation, an address history and criminal records checks in counties where an applicant has lived.

Somerset Alliance Church in Somerset, PA, has opted not to conduct instant criminal background checks on volunteers who work with children. Instead, it asks the Pennsylvania State Police to search criminal records statewide and review state child abuse investigation records. "It's the same process the state's public schools use," says Scott Ream, executive pastor. "It costs about \$20 a volunteer but it's worth it. The biggest and most important benefit is the safety of the children."

What's wrong with database searches?

Databases provide a fast, efficient way to gather criminal history information. However, the quality of a database hinges on who manages it and how often records are updated. The best database searches originate from government sources that update their files frequently and allow ongoing access to the information.

"Most criminal history databases contain incomplete information — even those that proclaim themselves to be national or comprehensive," says Mike McCarty, founder of Safe Hiring Solutions, a background-screening firm based in Danville, IN. "There's no database that's complete enough," he says. "Even the FBI national database isn't." As a result, McCarty says searching a criminal history database alone may provide a false sense of security.

All record searches can produce false "hits" or accidental omissions. Name-based searches can pull up incorrect records for people with common names. They're also easy to defeat by someone who gives false identifying information.

Eliminate false hits

Private vendors, such as Safe Hiring Solutions and ADP Screening & Selection Services, typically use a combination of

name, birth date and Social Security information to eliminate as many false "hits" as possible. While not perfect, they can reduce the chance that you accuse an innocent "Mary Smith" of wrongdoing.

If you include a database search as part of your background screening process, ask your vendor the following questions:

- How many records are in the database?
- How many states does it include?
- Which states does it exclude?
- How frequently is it updated?

There's an array of search options when it comes to checking a person's criminal history, including county, state, federal and sex offender records. Should you check all of them? If not, which ones will be most helpful to you?

Verify arrest information

Background screening firms recommend that you check county court records to verify arrest information found in a database search. County court records contain the most accurate and complete information. They'll also tell you if the person pleaded guilty to a charge, was acquitted at trial, or if the charge was dismissed.

All searches have strengths and weaknesses. While information gleaned from county court records may be the best, a single-county search won't reveal crimes committed in adjoining counties or past places an applicant has lived.

County court records: Counties typically maintain the most accurate, detailed, and up-to-date criminal records. You'll find information on felony and misdemeanor arrests dating back as far as the county maintains records. The records are public and they can be searched quickly at little or no cost to the researcher. In most cases these records are not available online. If the applicant has lived in counties far away, you'll probably need to hire someone to conduct the research in person.

Court employees also can answer questions and clarify details. If your applicant was arrested last week, the information might not appear in a national database but it will be in the county court record. The drawback is that one person can commit crimes in many counties over the course of a lifetime. You may need to search records in several counties to provide an accurate picture of past behavior.

Statewide criminal records: Some states maintain criminal history databases containing felony and misdemeanor information. These databases are repositories for information collected at the county level. Depending on how often the database is updated, a statewide criminal history search may not include an arrest from last week, but it will include information from multiple counties. Therefore, it would be more comprehensive than a single-county search, although not necessarily as current.

Federal court records: Federal crimes, such as bank robbery or embezzlement, won't show up in a county or state records search. Federal court records might help you discover weapons or drug crimes that won't appear in other criminal searches. Records are available online, but you must register to access the database, which charges a few cents each time you view a record. For more information visit pacer.psc.uscourts.gov.

Sex offender registry search: Checking your state's online sex offender registry is a quick way to determine if more extensive background checks are warranted. However, it doesn't provide a complete criminal history since the results are limited to sex-related convictions in a single state. For example, the sex offender registry wouldn't reveal a theft or burglary conviction.

In addition, not all states release sex offender information or require the same types of offenders to register. Therefore, results of this search should complement criminal history checks performed in the applicant's previous counties or states of residence.

Social Security number verification: If you perform a Social

Security number verification on your applicant you may discover that your applicant has tried to "erase" a criminal record by modifying identifying information or using another person's SSN. A search will list additional names, addresses, or birthdates associated with the Social Security number your applicant provided. Expanding a criminal history database search to include those variants might yield additional criminal records.

Address history: Determining where an applicant has lived helps you determine which counties' criminal records you should check. Experts recommend that you search records in all counties where an applicant has lived during the past 10 years.

One of the best ways to prevent holes in your criminal background checks is to choose a reputable screening service provider. The best firms provide accurate and up-to-date information, plus they help you comply with state and federal laws that govern the use of background screening reports during the hiring process.



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