

## Essential Elements of a Background Screen

Have you ever wondered what happens when you request a pre-employment background screen? What is checked? What isn't? In reality, each background investigation is different, but they all have (or should have) common building blocks that aid in making good hiring decisions.

The first step is to obtain from the candidate a completed application form. Completed forms should be reviewed by qualified personnel to assure any periods of unemployment or non-residency are adequately explained. Sometimes there are plausible explanations for gaps in employment. Just be sure to establish an unbroken timeline.

Don't forget to obtain a signed release from each job candidate who will undergo a background check. Place the original in the applicant's file, keep a copy for your records and forward a copy to your screening agency. This gives your company representative permission to request searches without violating a job candidate's legal rights.

Now, the search begins. Probably the most effective tool used to determine and verify identity is a **Social Security Number Trace**. This trace validates a person's Social Security number, birth date and address listings. Should any discrepancies appear between the searched results and the applicant-provided information such as an invalid Social Security number or multiple birth dates, this could indicate an attempt to mask a criminal history. The list of addresses obtained from the Social Security Number Trace should match the application information precisely. If there are any discrepancies, the applicant should be able to provide rational explanations. This list of addresses helps the screening agency determine precisely where to search for criminal records.

At the heart of any background screen is a check for criminal court records. Criminal cases are tried in either local county courthouses or federal courthouses. A comprehensive employment screen will involve searches at both levels. A **County Criminal Records Search** reveals whether an applicant has been convicted of, or charged with, a felony, and in some counties, misdemeanor offense within the past 7 years. Predictably, there is no standardization among county court systems nationwide. There are nearly 8000 county courthouses across the U.S. Each is responsible for maintaining a record of all criminal charges within its jurisdiction. Knowing where to search in each county is the responsibility of your professional search agency.

More severe crimes such as violations of the Constitution or federal law (i.e., bank robberies, kidnappings, mail fraud, drug violations, illegal firearms sales and embezzlement) are tried in the 100 or so federal district courthouses across the country. A search of these **Federal Criminal Records** unveils any convictions or pending cases filed anywhere in the United States within the past 10 years.

If driving will be part of a potential employee's job duties a **Driving Record Report** should also be requested. This important screen provides valuable information that could prevent you from hiring a negligent driver, potentially sparing your company costly litigation. You'll also want to consider a **Credit Check**, especially for applicants seeking positions in accounting or finance, or whose responsibilities might include the handling of cash or valuable merchandise. Credit reports can shed light on an individual's financial stability, and may be an indicator of a person's integrity or ability to manage money. You should also verify educational credentials, employment history, personal and job-related references, military records, and professional licenses and certifications to complement your basic search.

Pre-employment background checks are instrumental in making better hiring decisions to help your company grow and prosper. We hope understanding the procedure makes your job a little easier.

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