



National Criminal Databases

There are many companies now offering a “National Criminal Database” accessible online to anyone willing to pay for it. But what exactly are you paying for? Is there really such a thing as a National Criminal Database? It is very important when you search these databases, or sell them to your clients, that you fully understand what you are – and more importantly what you are NOT getting in these searches.

The closest thing to a National Criminal Database is the one maintained by the FBI called the National Crime Information Center (NCIC). Although very comprehensive, this database is not close to being what most people would consider a “National” database.

National Database Limitations

The NCIC database is composed of records from states that choose to send their records to the FBI – and not all do. Individual counties are expected to upload their records to the state repository and then the state proceeds to upload the records to the FBI. States must then keep the records current by sending them again to the dispositions after arrests and trials. In many cases this never happens. The database is also not updated on a regular basis and does not include all courts in each state. Further, the NCIC database is off limits to anyone except for law enforcement and a few select industries, like banks.

So, if there really isn't a National Database, what are these companies selling? The answer is really very simple. They are gathering information from a variety of sources like counties and states who will sell them their criminal records, state corrections listings of people who have been incarcerated, state sex offender listings and a variety of other databases that they can purchase. These databases have the same inherent problems that the NCIC database has. They are relying on the “owners” of the data to keep them updated, and keep them accurate. Another very big issue is for them to include enough identifiers to be able to accurately allow you to match the records you find to the person you are screening.

Is it possible to have a national database? There are literally thousands of separate databases maintained at the city, county and state levels not to mention the federal courts. It would be virtually impossible for any company to get the records from all these sources to have a true National database. Although it would be possible to search all these sources, it would be very time consuming not to mention cost prohibitive.

So how can these databases be used to help when doing a criminal record search? It is very important to know as much as possible about the applicants when you are doing a search on their background. It is very possible that if you only do a criminal records search in the state or county the applicant lived or worked you will miss a record. The applicant could have been on vacation or on a business trip and committed a crime. This could have put him/her anyplace in the country.

When doing a background check on an applicant, it is important to do all you can to make sure they have a clean record. Using these databases in conjunction with the statewide or county search gives you the best possible chance of finding a criminal record. Although they do not cover all counties and jurisdictions, it is much better than just looking at a small geographic area. These searches all work together to ensure you are doing proper due diligence.

Conclusion

These databases give you the ability to cast a wide net over a large portion of the country to see if any records surface that you may not find when doing a county criminal search. These databases should only be used in conjunction with county searches in the areas where the applicant has lived and worked. No reputable screening agency should sell these database searches as a stand alone, letting their clients think they are getting a true National search. It is important that everyone understand their limitations as well as the extreme usefulness that they offer.