



Best Practices for Criminal Background Screening

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In the multifamily industry, criminal screening has rapidly evolved and grown over the past 5 years. In 2005, 42% of RentGrow's customers performed criminal screening on their applicants – in 2010, it's 94%! It's clear that the industry has embraced criminal screening as a standard practice. In this article, we'll discuss best practices for criminal screening in an ever-changing public records landscape.

Today's Criminal Data Landscape

There have been numerous advances in public records data over the years. More data is available instantly online, and it is generally more affordable than it was in the past. This is a great thing for screening companies and multifamily operators. However, criminal records data is still an evolving area.

Regional Data Differences: There are regional differences in the availability and quality of criminal data. Different reporting practices and state laws impact the format and details available in online criminal data sources. State mandated privacy acts have redacted certain portions of data from online public records databases. Most states exclude social security numbers from online criminal records, and some states exclude date of birth, address, and/or offense details.

Economic Impact: With state and local governments struggling with budget cuts, courthouse furloughs have had an impact on criminal databases in some areas. Some courts are mandated to close specific days each month, slowing down how quickly records are processed and updated.

Criminal Screening Best Practices

It's apparent that online public records databases have some inherent limitations and differ from region to region. So, **what is the best approach?**

Collaborate with Screening Experts: Ideally, you want to work with your screening provider to strike the optimal balance

between data quality, turn-around time, and cost. In some areas of the country the online criminal databases are strong and the records are detailed, thus an instant online national criminal search is highly effective. In other states this is not the case, so a supplemental local courthouse search is recommended. Ask your screening provider to advise you on the regional differences. In appropriate areas, a supplemental local search should be automatically included and triggered through your screening program.

Apply Consistent Criteria: Be sure to apply consistent criteria to criminal searches. Since most are not experts in deciphering and de-coding public records, it may be ineffective to leave criminal records review solely in the hands of the leasing staff. It may also be ineffective and irresponsible to totally automate the "scoring" of criminal records. There is a possibility of false positives, and the variability of the record format and detail does not lend itself to a 100% automated evaluation.

Try the "Hybrid Approach": Combine the sophistication, speed and efficiency of an automated criminal screening process with human expertise. Your screening system should be programmed with the intelligence to search the appropriate databases depending on locale for each applicant. If no criminal records are found, the screening process is complete. If complex criminal records are found, trained resident screening experts should assist with filtering and evaluating the records against your company's criteria.

Conclusion

It is important to be aware of the criminal data landscape in the multifamily industry. You must strike the optimal balance between data quality, turn-around time, and cost. You should also have a system in place that helps you evaluate criminal records accurately and consistently.

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