



CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE RISK IN MINISTRY CONTEXTS

Criminal Background Checks – Not a *Silver Bullet!*

By Gregory Love & Kimberlee Norris

Where criminal background checks are concerned, many ministry leaders are not good consumers, looking for ‘cheap and fast’ rather than intrinsically effective. Ministry leaders have much to learn related to criminal background checks. As a starting point, ministry leaders must learn what this element in the ministry screening process accomplishes, and what it lacks.

Given #MeToo, #ChurchToo and ongoing media headlines, many church and ministry leaders have awakened to the risk of child sexual abuse and are seeking guidance about *what to do*. Other church and ministry leaders are not ‘awakened’, but are taking this opportunity to evaluate existing safety efforts to measure preparedness. The criminal background check is quickly identified as the first line of defense. For many churches, the background check is the *only* line of defense.

The value of the criminal background check, however, must be measured in light of actual reality. Take, for example, this fact: less than 10% of sexual abusers will encounter the criminal justice system *ever*. As a result, more than 90% of child sexual abusers have no criminal record to find ... *and they know it*.

Criminal background checks have become a standard of care and must be performed, but cannot be relied upon as a *silver bullet*: a ministry’s sole preventative protocol meant to prevent child sexual abuse. If a ministry allows an applicant with a past known (or knowable) criminal history of harming children into a ministry program, that ministry is placing children in harm’s way, as well as exposing the ministry to civil liability and public censure. Why? The best predictor of future behavior is *past behavior*; if an applicant acts upon his *known* (or knowable) past behavior, the children in the program are at risk.

The purpose of this article is to provide ministry leaders with a better understanding of the value and limitations of this fundamental element of an effective screening process: the criminal background check.

LEGISLATIVE LIMITS

Due to legislative limits, an applicant applying for a ministry position may have a criminal record that *does not appear* on a criminal background report, due to laws placing guidelines and limitations on the type and age of information reported. As a result, it behooves ministry leaders to develop some familiarity with state-specific guidelines and restrictions. When a background

check report comes back stating ‘no records found’, it cannot necessarily be concluded that *no records exist*.

FCRA (Federal Law)

The criminal background check industry is governed by federal legislation: the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA). Any third-party vendor providing criminal background checks to a church or ministry is a Credit Reporting Agency (CRA). One purpose of the FCRA is to provide *consumer protection*, promulgating guidelines that seek to ensure that consumers are not unfairly deprived of employment and other opportunities. The FCRA places limitations on information reported by a background check vendor (CRA) to a ministry. In addition, in some jurisdictions state law further restricts criminal history reporting, placing limits on the *type* of information reported and *when* a background check can be requested by a potential employer.

Under the FCRA, criminal *convictions* can be reported regardless of when the conviction occurred, while *non-convictions* may only be reported if the matter is less than seven years from the criminal filing. (A non-conviction could involve an alternative or deferred adjudication, a dismissal or a finding of ‘not guilty’).

State Law

Though the FCRA places no limits on reporting criminal convictions, various states have passed legislation that have limited the scope of conviction reporting to seven years (California, Kansas, Massachusetts, Montana, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York and Washington).

Though the FCRA limits the reporting of *non-convictions* past the seven-year mark, some states (California, Kentucky, New Mexico and New York) prevent CRAs from reporting non-convictions altogether.

In Massachusetts, Hawaii and Washington, employers may perform a criminal background check only *after* an offer of employment has been extended. In Hawaii and Washington, an employer may rescind the offer of employment only if a conviction has occurred within the past ten years *and* is directly related to employment responsibilities.

These examples, not exhaustive, illustrate how state legislation can impact the *type and age* of information reported, and *when* it can be requested. Year by year, these legislative limitations continue to mount.

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)

In addition to federal and state law, the EEOC has proposed guidelines further restricting *how* and *when* criminal histories can be requested and used for employment purposes.

PLEA DOWN OFFENSES

Criminal background checks are performed in various industries, and the ‘hit rate’ varies depending upon the type of industry. An industry ‘hit rate’ defines the likelihood that a population of applicants will have a criminal history. In the construction industry, for instance, the hit rate is much higher than the hit rate in higher education. The hit rate for industries hiring younger applicants (i.e., summer camps, youth ministry) is low in part because criminal activity *prior to age 18* is generally unavailable.

The hit rate for ministry applicants is comparatively low. As a result, most ministry leaders get a report stating ‘no records found’. As a starting premise, do NOT read this statement as an assurance that no records *exist*. An applicant *may* have encountered the criminal justice system, but that encounter is not or cannot be reported by a background check vendor (see above).

On occasion, however, ministry leaders request a criminal history related to an applicant and get a ‘hit’. Remember, the criminal background check is *one* screening element, part of an effective *screening process* ([see prior article](#)). A fundamental principle in effective screening is this: *the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior*. A ‘hit’ from an applicant’s criminal background check provides information related to an applicant’s past behavior that is criminal in nature. The next question is this: *exactly what behavior did the applicant exhibit that gave rise to the criminal charge?*

If the charge is ‘theft by check’, the applicant’s behavior is fairly clear. The appropriate analysis is this: the applicant has engaged in past criminal behavior involving money, suggesting the applicant may not be the best candidate for a position involving ministry funds. Screening analysis – predicting possible *future behavior* – is feasible with most criminal charges: DUIs, drug charges, fraud charges.

Some criminal offenses are more difficult to evaluate – especially when the charges are related to ‘plea-down offenses’. Imagine this occurrence: a sexual offender is arrested and charged with Aggravated Sexual Assault of a Child – clearly a disqualifying offense. In the course of the criminal justice process, however, the offender is allowed to ‘plea down’ to a lesser (possibly a *non-registration*) offense. Examples of common ‘plea down offenses’ correlated to child sexual abuse include: Indecency, Contributing to the Delinquency of a Minor, Criminal Mischief, Assault, and a variety of other labels, depending on the criminal codes of a particular state. For screening purposes, these are ‘red flag offenses’. The person reviewing the criminal search results must understand this concept and be sensitive to ‘red flag offenses’.

Practice Point 1: Develop a familiarity with ‘plea down’ or ‘red flag offenses’.

Practice Point 2: NEVER accept a *self-reported explanation* for a ‘red flag offense’.

In many cases, the criminal behavior underlying a charge for Indecency is simple and explicable. In some cases, however, the criminal behavior underlying a charge for Indecency is child sexual abuse. If the offender was allowed to plea down to a lesser offense, he or she will have an explanation for the charge that does not involve sexual abuse of a child, and this explanation will be well-rehearsed and persuasive. *Do NOT accept self-reported explanations for red flag offenses*. Instead, politely explain to the applicant that you must pause the process. Shift the burden to the applicant. Politely request that the applicant bring you the arrest record for the Indecency charge. The arrest record is more difficult for you to access but is available to the applicant. The arrest record will describe the behavior that gave rise to the underlying arrest. If the applicant was arrested and charged with sexual abuse of a child, the arrest record will say so. If the applicant was in fact arrested and charged with sexual abuse of a child, the applicant will simply disappear. He or she will *self-select out* of the screening process.

**This concept is covered at length in MinistrySafe’s [Skillful Screening Training](#): including grooming offenses, stair-step offenses and use of releases.*

MINISTRY BEST PRACTICES

Notwithstanding background check limitations, criminal searches must be completed. In so doing, ministries must wisely allocate limited resources. As financial resources are expended, the following principles should be considered.

Deeper Searches

Given the growing crisis of child sexual abuse, background check vendors are quick to capitalize, encouraging ministries to run deeper searches and refresh searches more frequently. These are excellent suggestions, but deeper and more frequent background checks alone do not solve the problem, because less than 10% of abusers will encounter the criminal justice system. As an example, USA Gymnastics could have undertaken an exhaustive criminal background check on Larry Nassar *weekly*, without a single ‘hit’.

Create Tiers of Staff/Volunteers

Most ministries choose a background check vendor based upon how quickly and cheaply a search can be completed. As a general rule, the ‘cheapest’ background check has the narrowest search scope. Often, it will not search aliases, it provides the shortest ‘look back’ period, and it does not confirm Social Security Number (SSN) identity. In other words, it’s relatively easy to foil.

For some roles, a cheaper and narrower search may be acceptable: roles that are highly supervised with limited (or no) time alone with a child (e.g. a face-painter at your VBS). For other roles, a deeper search is necessary, particularly high-trust positions where *trusted time alone* with a child or student may be contemplated (e.g. student minister, children’s minister, senior pastor, church counselor). For these roles, a ministry cannot afford to be wrong; consider a deeper search.

Given differing roles and a limited budget, it is recommended that a ministry create two or more tiers of those who wear the ministry’s nametag. The depth of search should correspond to the trust level and access to children. Be prepared to spend more for personnel about whom you cannot be wrong. These tiers should be based on *trust level* and *access*, not whether a person is a staff member or a volunteer.

In general, there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ criminal background check.

Disclosure Requirements

Every ministry should have a disclosure requirement requiring all staff members and volunteers to disclose whether he/she has been arrested, charged or accused of criminal behavior during the time of service as a staff member or volunteer. This is not to be confused with requesting information prior to engagement, which may be impacted by state law.

Periodically Refresh

Every two or three years, each ministry should refresh or re-run criminal history searches to determine whether a staff member or volunteer has been arrested or charged with criminal conduct. Coupled with a disclosure requirement (see above), discovery of an undisclosed new criminal record provides an independent justification for dismissal; requiring disclosure is an important first step.

Skillful Screening Training

Managerial and screening personnel must receive training to recognize high-risk indicators revealed by and through an effective screening process, including those revealed by criminal records. Risk indicators stemming directly from skillful evaluation of background check records include common *plea-down*, *stair-step*, *grooming* and *red-flag* offenses, as well as disqualifying offenses (mandated by state law or internal policy).

CONCLUSION

Ministry leaders have much to learn about the criminal justice system, how criminal records are generated, how records are reported and the various obstacles to obtaining a complete criminal history. When ministry professionals become educated consumers, they are best prepared to fully utilize the criminal background check, understanding what this screening element can – and cannot – provide.

Kimberlee Norris and Gregory Love are partners in the Fort Worth, Texas law firm of Love & Norris [<https://www.lovenorris.com>] and founders of MinistrySafe [<https://www.ministrysafe.com>], providing child sexual abuse expertise to ministries worldwide. After representing victims of child sexual abuse for more than two decades, Love and Norris saw recurring, predictable patterns in predatory behavior. MinistrySafe grew out of their desire to place proactive tools into the hands of ministry professionals. Love and Norris teach the only graduate-level course on Preventing Sexual Abuse in Ministry as Visiting Faculty at Dallas Theological Seminary.

SIDEBAR

Screening for Child Sexual Abuse Risk: Principles Every Executive Pastor Should Know

Effective screening is rooted in an understanding of the offender's *grooming process*.

Sexual offenders come from all segments of society. Sadly, some gain access to children through ministry programming. Abusers groom both children *and* gatekeepers – trusted adults in a child's life – to convince them that they are helpful, trustworthy, responsible people. Validated by decades of academic studies, the grooming process of the abuser is *known* and *recognizable*. Ministries should screen child-serving personnel with a thorough understanding of the abuser's *grooming process*, common grooming behaviors and known offender characteristics.

Effective screening creates OPT OUT opportunities.

Skillful screening incorporates *opt out opportunities* for applicants with the wrong motive, *before* he or she has access to children. When a ministry communicates current child protection practices and protocols, from the beginning, it communicates that '*it might be easier somewhere else*'. Written policy should clearly state that all suspicions and allegations of child abuse are immediately reported to authorities. Applicants should review and sign child protection policies describing inappropriate forms of communication and physical touch. Training should occur *before* an applicant is interacting with children. These clear policy expressions provide offenders with an opportunity to self-select out of the ministry's screening process.

Effective screening gathers information about the applicant from third party sources.

Many employers ask for references, but *don't check them*. Others check references but fail to include *questions meant to elicit a high-risk response*. The failure to speak with references about a prospective staff member or volunteer is one of the most common mistakes made by ministries. Beyond the initial consequence of missing helpful information about an applicant, untapped references can ultimately prove to be harmful to the organization, as employers are commonly responsible for information that *would have been* communicated by a reference, if the reference *had* been contacted.

Effective screening requires *training*.

To screen effectively, intake coordinators and interviewers must be trained to recognize high-risk responses on applications, reference forms and during the interview process. An applicant with inappropriate sexual motives carries with him various indicators and life patterns that help identify him as one who may be a danger to children or youth.

For screening training, information and additional resources, see MinistrySafe.com.