

More Companies Running Background Checks

A growing number of companies are running background checks on job applicants to see if they have a criminal history. The practice is making it difficult for drug offenders to find jobs upon their release from prison, the Wall Street Journal reported Aug. 26.

For instance, Peter Demain, who served a six-year prison sentence for possession of 21 pounds of marijuana, was turned down by 25 businesses, among them bagel shops, grocery stores, and coffee houses.

According to a January survey of personnel executives, 80 percent of big companies run background checks, up from 56 percent in 1996. Among the companies that conduct background checks are Wal-Mart, General Motors, Ford Motor, General Electric, Citigroup, IBM, and American International Group.

Reasons for the trend range from protecting companies from negligent-hiring lawsuits, preventing theft, and ensuring the applicants aren't linked to terrorism.

But human-rights groups argue that the background checks are an unfair barrier for rehabilitated criminals and could drive them back to crime. Most at risk are blacks and Hispanics, who have a higher incarceration rate.

"Forty-six million people in this country have been convicted of something sometime in their lives and our economy would collapse if none of them could get jobs," says Lewis Maltby, president of the National Work Rights Institute, a nonprofit human-rights organization.

Experts also say that more companies are conducting background checks because technological advances have made them faster and inexpensive. Search costs range from \$25 to \$100 each.