

## Background checks increasing

A recent forum discussed how such checks keep many out of work, including some never convicted of a crime.

**Margaret Zack, Star Tribune**

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Background checks on job seekers are more thoroughly and ambitiously pursued by businesses in this technologically enhanced age, and a former prosecutor says that is making it more difficult for people with criminal records to get hired.

"We recognize what an important role business plays, how we fight crime, what we do with those who have criminal records," said former Hennepin County Attorney Tom Johnson, who now heads the Council on Crime and Justice.

The 50-year-old nonprofit council held a one-day seminar Wednesday at Minneapolis Community and Technical College: "Call to Justice: Reducing Racial Disparity and Enhancing Public Safety." The council's Racial Disparity Initiative has for the past five years examined through 17 studies the "alarming racial disparities in Minnesota's criminal justice system."

Among the disparities the council noted: Blacks are imprisoned at a rate 20 times higher than whites and people of color are disproportionately arrested in such cases as lurking and disorderly conduct.

The Rev. Albert Gallmon, pastor of Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church in Minneapolis and chairman of the board of directors of the Council on Crime and Justice, said employers "are between a rock and a hard place" when contemplating hiring someone with a criminal background.

"Employers want to hire, but there can be consequences," Gallmon said. "We're talking about restoring individuals to the community. Employment allows an individual to get housing and education."

He said particularly troublesome are cases in which someone has been arrested but not convicted. That information is available to prospective employers and is easier to access than it was 20 years ago, he said.

Prof. Kenneth Goodpaster, of the University of St. Thomas was among the forum's speakers Wednesday. "The private sector might revisit some of its hiring policies in such a way that they can be part of the solution, not a problem," he said.

He called criminal background checks a form of identity theft. "Employers need to become more savvy, to have more enlightened hiring practices," he said.

The increasingly savvy technology in background checks can reach far back. "It's easy to find a red flag and not know what it means," Goodpaster said.

He said he isn't arguing that the checks shouldn't be done, but he said that employers should look deeper into any concern that might pop up.

There may always be some disparity in communities of color, but "how can we reduce it?" he asked.

Shelley Benedict of Verified Credentials Inc., a Lakeville firm that employers hire to investigate job applicants, said her company has seen a 40 percent increase in background checks in recent years.

Company President Kevin Spang said, "The demand has increased for more secure work environments, requiring honest and ethical employees as businesses become aware of the benefits of hiring the best possible employee. Background screening helps businesses achieve this goal by taking the necessary extra step to verify applicant's credentials."

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