

WHO'S LENDING A HAND?

A NATIONAL SURVEY OF NONPROFIT
VOLUNTEER SCREENING PRACTICES



THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR
Victims of Crime

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR Victims of Crime

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- Advocates for federal, state, and local laws and public policies that create resources, secure rights, and provide protections for crime victims;
- Delivers training and technical assistance to victim service organizations, counselors, attorneys, criminal justice agencies, and allied professionals serving victims of crime; and
- Fosters cutting-edge thinking about the impact of crime and the ways each of us can help victims of crime rebuild their lives.

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THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS	1
INTRODUCTION	3
Nature of Volunteer Service in America	3
Management and Screening of Volunteers	3
Importance of Background Checks: The Stakes Are High	5
Risk Management: Protection against Liability	6
About This Study	6
SURVEY FINDINGS	9
Which Organizations Screen Volunteers?	9
How Thoroughly Are Volunteers Screened?	10
How Do Organizations Use Screening Information?	13
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	17
Conclusion	18
APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY	19
Sample Selection	19
Response Rate	19
Telephone Interviews to Gather Anecdotes	20

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	Types of Organizations Surveyed	8
Table 2	Screening Process by Number of Volunteers	10
Table 3	Screening Process for Volunteers Who Provide Direct Service vs. Administrative Assistance	11
Table 4	How Organizations Respond to Volunteers Arrested or Convicted of Crimes	14
Table 5	How Organizations Respond to Child Abuse Reports	14
Table 6	How Organizations Respond to Elder Abuse Reports	15
Table 7	How Organizations Respond to Poor Credit History Reports	15

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Prevalence of Background Check Screening Methods	12
Figure 2	Prevalence of Single State vs. Multi-State Background Checks	12
Figure 3	Obstacles to Completing Background Checks	13
Figure 4	Telephone Survey Response Rates	20

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The National Center for Victims of Crime conducted a telephone survey of 517 nonprofit human service organizations to identify: characteristics of organizations that regularly screen volunteers, the screening methods used, and how information revealed by screening is used in decision making. Most organizations say they conduct some screening, but few conduct thorough screening using all available methods of gathering information, including reference and background checks. In fact, one in four organizations does not call references for potential volunteers, and 27 percent do not conduct any type of background check. Less than one-third use fingerprints, the most reliable form of criminal background check. Most organizations say they would not accept a volunteer with a criminal history or a report of child or elder abuse, but some that said they would disqualify on that basis are not checking the sources of that information. For most organizations and volunteers, credit history is not an issue.

WHICH ORGANIZATIONS SCREEN VOLUNTEERS?

The vast majority of organizations that participated in the survey indicated that they conduct some form of screening on incoming volunteers, but not all organizations that screen do so thoroughly.

- 12 percent of organizations reported not screening volunteers at all.
- Organizations that do not screen volunteers reported a variety of reasons for not doing so, including not thinking screening is useful, thinking it costs too much, and not wishing to offend potential volunteers.
- The majority of organizations in our survey at minimum conduct an interview of volunteers while fewer organizations check references and fewer still engage in full background checks.

HOW THOROUGHLY ARE VOLUNTEERS SCREENED?

While most nonprofits in our survey report conducting some type of volunteer screening, far fewer organizations engage in more in-depth screening practices.

- Organizations with a larger volunteer base were more likely to conduct interviews, reference checks, and background checks.
- Among organizations that report screening volunteers, some of their volunteers are not screened at all or are screened less thoroughly than other volunteers. About one-third of organizations screen volunteers less thoroughly than employees.
- Most organizations that conduct background checks submit volunteers to a name-based criminal-records check but use other databases, such as sex offender registries and child and adult protective services, fingerprint, and credit history databases, far less frequently.
- Only about half of organizations that conduct background checks on volunteers do so in more than one state or using national databases.
- The majority of organizations never re-screen volunteers after the initial screening.
- The most commonly reported obstacle in completing background checks is cost, followed by the inconvenience of waiting for the results.

HOW DO ORGANIZATIONS USE SCREENING INFORMATION?

Screening practices can potentially reveal a variety of information about an individual. Organizations need to decide how they will use that information in making decisions about placing a volunteer.

- Nearly half of organizations indicated that screening has identified a volunteer who would be an “inappropriate” match for the organization.
- The majority of organizations would disqualify a volunteer for an arrest or conviction for a crime. (About one in five organizations would disqualify a volunteer arrested or convicted for *any* crime, and about half of organizations would disqualify a volunteer only for specific crimes.)
- The majority of organizations report that they would disqualify a volunteer for a child abuse report.
- The majority of organizations say they will not accept a volunteer who has been reported for elder abuse.
- Most organizations will not turn away a volunteer for having a poor credit history.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted troubling gaps in the volunteer screening practices of nonprofit organizations. When volunteers are not thoroughly screened, an organization exposes its clients to potential victimization and itself to liability. Thorough screening is one part of an overall volunteer management program, which should also include training, oversight, and well-publicized policies on interactions between volunteers and clients.

INTRODUCTION

NATURE OF VOLUNTEER SERVICE IN AMERICA

In 2006, more than 61 million people volunteered through or for an organization, accounting for over 8 billion hours of volunteer service.¹ Volunteers most frequently devoted their time to religious organizations (35 percent of all volunteers), followed by educational or youth service organizations (27 percent) and social and community service organizations (13 percent). Not only is the sheer number of volunteers important, due to its size, but so are the roles these volunteers are being asked to fill within their organizations.

As nonprofit organizations feel the pinch of tighter budgets and growing client populations, volunteers in many organizations are taking on more responsibility, effectively functioning as if they were paid staff. They often have access to clients and client information and increasingly shape the public face of the organization. No doubt this trend of using volunteers to supplement service efforts has at minimum helped social and human service organizations maintain a base level of service in some communities and, in many cases, has certainly helped to expand services. Using volunteers in this manner, however, imposes additional responsibilities on organizations, which must pay more attention to volunteer management than ever before.

MANAGEMENT AND SCREENING OF VOLUNTEERS

Several national policy groups focused on improving the functioning of the nonprofit sector have highlighted the importance of best practices in volunteer management and screening, which include conducting background and reference checks and providing ongoing training and oversight of volunteers.² Investment in these activities benefits the organization in many ways. From a safety perspective, properly screening and managing volunteers is a critical step in protecting an organization's clients against possible exploitation and victimization by those volunteers. Screening is also essential to help ensure

¹ Corporation for National and Community Service, "Volunteering in America," (Washington, DC: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007).

² Mark A. Hager and Jeffrey L. Brudney, *Volunteer Management Practices and Retention of Volunteers*, (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2004).

Types of Background Checks

Criminal History: To determine whether a prospective volunteer or employee has a criminal record, the candidate's name and/or fingerprints are submitted to local, state, or national law enforcement, or to a state or national repository of criminal history record information (either government entities at the state level or private companies that collect and store information nationally). Criminal records may include data on arrests or convictions. In general, name-based checks are faster and more convenient, but fingerprint-based checks are the most reliable, as they eliminate name mix-ups and the possibility of candidates using aliases to avoid detection of their criminal past.

Sex Offender Registry: All states currently have lists of registered sex offenders, many of which are available online. Organizations can search online sex offender registries or contact state or local law enforcement agencies to learn whether a candidate is a registered sex offender in a given state.

Child Protective Services, Adult Protective Services: All states have designated entities responsible for the protection of children and vulnerable adults, and these entities (whose official names vary by state) keep records of reports of abuse, investigations, and the outcomes of investigations (i.e., whether the allegation was substantiated by evidence). Candidates' names can be submitted to these state authorities to search for founded allegations of abuse. (Allegations that were not substantiated by evidence might not be revealed.) No national repository of this information currently exists; it must be checked state by state.

Credit History: With verification of a legitimate purpose, organizations can set up an account either directly with a credit bureau or with an intermediary entity (such as ChoicePoint) to submit candidates' names and Social Security numbers for a report of their credit history. This type of check requires the candidate's consent and is typically conducted only when a volunteer will be handling significant sums of money.

the long-term viability of an organization, because nonprofit organizations can be found liable for harm caused by their volunteers and could be subject to damages and rising insurance costs.

Volunteer screening, the subject of this study, is one of the volunteer management best practices identified in the literature on nonprofit management. Volunteer screening may involve a range of practices, including, at the most basic level, interviewing potential volunteers and checking their references. More thorough screening includes conducting background checks using state-wide or national databases. Volunteer screening allows organizations to identify volunteer candidates who may pose a safety risk to clients. It also allows organizations to assess whether volunteers are a "good fit" for the organization, whether they possess suitable skills, and if they are committed to the organization's mission.

A study by the Urban Institute found that less than half (45 percent) of the charities surveyed had adopted volunteer screening procedures "to a large degree," and 42 percent said they had done so "to some degree." Among religious congregations that use volunteers for social service outreach projects, only 29 percent indicated that they have adopted screening practices to a large degree, and 54 percent said they had done so to some degree. The study also found that organizations with larger budgets were slightly more likely to indicate that they conduct volunteer screening compared to organizations with smaller budgets.³

What we do not know from the current literature, however, is the degree to which social and human service organizations conduct a *thorough* screening process that includes an in-person interview, reference checks, and all types of applicable background checks. (See box for a summary of the types of background checks that may be conducted.)

According to the Nonprofit Risk Management Center, the general guideline for screening volunteers is that the more vulnerable the service recipient and the greater the opportu-

³ The Urban Institute, *Volunteer Management Capacity in America's Charities and Congregations*, (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2004).

nity for violations of trust, the more intensive the screening process should be.⁴ The Corporation for National and Community Service, which oversees the AmeriCorps program, agrees. All AmeriCorps programs that provide services to vulnerable populations are required to conduct national criminal history background checks.⁵

Recognizing the importance of volunteer screening, Congress has taken steps to make criminal record information more accessible to the nonprofit community. The Federal Child Protection Act of 1993 gives access to national criminal data, including fingerprint-based information, to “qualified entities,” including nonprofit groups that provide “care, treatment, education, training, instruction, supervision or recreation to children, the elderly, or individuals with disabilities.”⁶ Organizations that receive federal funds to support their programs may be required to submit volunteers to background checks, as is required of organizations that receive AmeriCorps volunteers. Most organizations, however, are governed by local and state laws and policies, which vary significantly across the country.

IMPORTANCE OF BACKGROUND CHECKS: THE STAKES ARE HIGH

It may be every nonprofit organization’s worst nightmare: a trusted volunteer is charged with a crime involving a client or some other vulnerable person in the community. The residents of Tacoma, Washington, recently faced this situation when a prominent anti-gang activist known in the community as Brother Rico was charged with second-degree child molestation in a case involving a female relative.⁷ Brother Rico had earned the trust and respect of the Tacoma Police and school officials for his work with school children. A thorough background check would have revealed that he was a registered sex offender in California. However, while the Tacoma school district requires background checks for volunteers, the requirement does not apply to school partnerships with outside agencies. Brother Rico fell through the cracks.

Every year, millions of children, seniors, individuals with disabilities, and other vulnerable people are assisted by the nonprofit community. Many of these people come into direct contact with volunteers. When organizations do not conduct background checks of volunteers or conduct insufficient background checks, they leave their clients vulnerable to victimization. While the vast majority of volunteers will not have backgrounds that raise concerns, it is critical to screen out those who, based on the available information, would pose a risk to clients. A recent audit conducted by ChoicePoint showed that five percent of applicants screened by nonprofit organizations had undisclosed criminal backgrounds, and for one youth-serving organization, the rate was 12 percent.⁸

Although most information relevant to background checks is collected at the state level, our mobile society dictates that, whenever possible, organizations should use national databases for background checking. For example, a youth-serving nonprofit that conducts only single-state criminal history checks is exposing

⁴ Nonprofit Risk Management Center, “Checking Criminal Histories: Some Considerations before You Begin,” <http://nonprofitrisk.org/library/articles/employment05001998.shtml>, (accessed September 27, 2007).

⁵ For more information, see www.cnscsig.gov/criminal_background_checks.htm, (accessed September 27, 2007).

⁶ Although the 1993 legislation allowed for organizations to request FBI checks through their states, in practice this process remained cumbersome and difficult, and in states that did not pass authorizing legislation, impossible. New federal legislation in 1998 attempted to make the process easier, and the PROTECT Act of 2003 created a pilot program (extended in 2005) that allowed direct access to FBI checks for a few national organizations.

⁷ Sean Robinson, “Anti-gang Activist Faces Abuse Trial,” *The News Tribune*, June 13, 2007.

⁸ ChoicePoint, *A Brief on the Importance of Background Screening for Nonprofits*, (February 27, 2006), www.choicepoint.com/about/ChoicePoint_Cares_Background_Screening_Audit.pdf, (accessed January 14, 2008).

the children it serves to great risk, because child molesters typically seek out opportunities to have contact with children and may move from state to state to do so. A U.S. Department of Justice study showed that 16 percent of sex offenders rearrested within three years of their release from prison were rearrested in a new state—higher than the percentage of non-sex offenders rearrested in a new state.⁹ Sex offenders have even created Web sites to give each other tips on locating victims and avoiding detection.

Even credit checks can reveal critical information about a volunteer's suitability for a position in some cases. A 2005 newspaper report told of a California Department of Veterans' Affairs court-appointed guardian who left her disabled veteran wards without critical funds and was unable to account for more than \$1 million of their money. A simple credit check would have revealed her history of irresponsible financial behavior and bankruptcy.¹⁰

RISK MANAGEMENT: PROTECTION AGAINST LIABILITY

Nonprofit organizations need to manage the risks associated with using volunteers primarily to protect their clients but also to protect their financial standing and reputation in the community. One potential outcome of a client being victimized by a volunteer of a nonprofit organization is a civil lawsuit against the individual volunteer or the organization. In a civil case, either an individual or an organization (or both) can be found liable for harms experienced by the victim and may be ordered to pay damages to compensate the injured party. Either the volunteer or the organization could be named in a lawsuit, but a plaintiff is more likely to name the party that could afford to pay a damage award, which in most cases would be the nonprofit organization.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

Given the importance of volunteer screening as part of an overall program of volunteer management, this study set out to discover the state of background checking among nonprofit human service organizations that use volunteers. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

- What is the current state of background screening of volunteers by human service nonprofits in the United States (i.e., are they conducting background checks and, if so, what kinds of checks)?
- Are there differences in volunteer screening practices among human service organizations based on variables like the size of the organization, whether they have a paid volunteer coordinator, and what population they serve?
- What experiences have organizations had with victimization of clients by unscreened or inadequately screened volunteers that could be instructive for the nonprofit community?

To answer the first two questions, the National Center for Victims of Crime conducted a telephone survey with 517 nonprofit organizations representing the categories of tax-exempt entities deemed most likely to engage volunteers and work with vulnerable clients. (See Table 1 for a complete list of the types of organiza-

⁹ Patrick A. Langan, Erica L. Schmitt, and Matthew R. Durose, *Recidivism of Sex Offenders Released from Prison in 1994*, (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003).

¹⁰ Evelyn Larrubia, Jack Leonard, and Robin Fields, "Missing Money, Unpaid Bills and Forgotten Clients," *Los Angeles Times*, November 15, 2005.

tions surveyed.) To answer the third question, the National Center gathered anecdotes about victimization by unscreened staff or volunteers by interviewing a convenience sample of seven victim service providers and attorneys with clients who had been victimized by someone representing a nonprofit organization. The results of the survey are presented in the next section of this report, and selected anecdotes can be found in the boxes. The survey took place between February and April 2007, and the anecdotes were gathered in June and July 2007. (See Appendix for more details on the study methodology.)

Table 1: Types of Organizations Surveyed*

- Adoption
- Agricultural, Youth Development
- Alcohol, Drug Abuse (Treatment Only)
- Alcohol, Drug and Abuse (Prevention and Treatment)
- Baseball, Softball (includes Little Leagues)
- Big Brothers, Big Sisters
- Boy Scouts
- Boys and Girls Clubs (Combined)
- Business, Youth Development
- Child Abuse, Prevention of
- Child Day Care
- Children's and Youth Services
- Citizenship Programs, Youth Development
- Community Mental Health Center
- Counseling Support Groups
- Deaf/Hearing Impaired Centers, Services
- Delinquency Prevention
- Developmentally Disabled Services/Centers
- Ethnic/Immigrant Services
- Family Counseling, Marriage Counseling
- Family Services
- Family Services (Adolescent Parents)
- Family Violence Shelters and Services
- Financial Counseling, Money Management
- Foster Care
- Girl Scouts
- Girls Clubs
- Goodwill Industries
- Group Home (Long Term)
- Group Home, Residential Treatment Facility - Mental Health Related
- Homeless Services/Centers
- Hospice
- Hot Line, Crisis Intervention
- Human Service Organizations
- Meals on Wheels
- Mental Health Treatment
- Neighborhood Center, Settlement House
- Personal Social Services
- Prison Alternatives
- Protection Against and Prevention of Neglect, Abuse, Exploitation
- Psychiatric, Mental Health Hospital
- Public Housing
- Rape Victim Services
- Recreational and Sporting Camps (Day, Overnight, etc.)
- Rehabilitation Services for Offenders
- Religious Leadership, Youth Development
- Residential, Custodial Care (Group Home)
- Scouting
- Senior Centers/Services
- Senior Citizens' Housing/Retirement Communities
- Senior Continuing Care Communities
- Services to Prisoners/Families
- Services to Promote the Independence of Specific Populations
- Sheltered Remunerative Employment, Work Activity Center N.E.C.
- Single Parent Agencies/Services
- Spouse Abuse, Prevention of
- Temporary Shelter for the Homeless
- Thrift Shops
- Transportation (Free or Subsidized)
- Urban League
- Victims' Services
- Vocational Rehabilitation (includes Job Training and Employment for Disabled and Elderly)
- YMCA, YWCA, YWHA, YMHA
- Youth Centers, Clubs, (includes Boys and Girls Clubs) Multipurpose
- Youth Development Programs

* These categories correspond to the organizations' National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) codes. For more information, see <http://ncs2.urban.org/ntee-cc>.

SURVEY FINDINGS

The National Center for Victims of Crime conducted a telephone survey of 517 nonprofit human service organizations to identify: characteristics of organizations that regularly screen volunteers, the screening methods used, and how information revealed by screening is used in decision making. The survey findings are presented in the following sections:

- Which organizations screen volunteers?
- How thoroughly are volunteers screened?
- How do organizations use screening information?

WHICH ORGANIZATIONS SCREEN VOLUNTEERS?

Nearly 90 percent of the 517 organizations that participated in the survey indicated that they conduct at least minimal screening on incoming volunteers, and there was little variation between types of organizations that report conducting some screening and those that say they do not screen their volunteers. However, as outlined in the next section, while most nonprofits conduct interviews with incoming volunteers, far fewer also call references and conduct background checks.

- **Twelve percent of the organizations surveyed said they do not screen volunteers at all.** Of the 60 organizations (12 percent) in our survey that said they do not screen volunteers, nearly one in four said the primary reason for not screening is that they do not think it is useful. Another 17 percent cited insufficient funds as the primary reason, and 13 percent said they were concerned with offending potential volunteers.
- **Organizations that have paid staff working on volunteer coordination are more likely to screen volunteers.** Overall, nearly 80 percent of the organizations surveyed indicated that a paid staff person has responsibility for volunteer coordination. Organizations with a paid staff person overseeing volunteers were significantly more likely to conduct some form of volunteer screening: 92 percent of organizations with a paid volunteer coordinator conducted screening compared to 75 percent of organizations that did not have a paid staff person coordinating the organization's volunteers.

- Most organizations do some screening of volunteers regardless of the size of their volunteer base, client population, and level of client contact with volunteers.** The number of volunteers, types of clients, and the duties assigned to volunteers (i.e., direct contact versus administrative help) had no significant effect on whether organizations say they conduct some form of volunteer screening. Over 80 percent of organizations across all these variables report screening their volunteers.

Victimization by an Unscreened Volunteer

A crime victim advocate described one of her recent cases in which a young man was sexually assaulted by a volunteer for a rural social services organization. The victim was a client of a nonprofit organization providing case management services to people with mental illness. The volunteer was a convicted sex offender who, under state law, was required to register as a sex offender. The volunteer was providing transportation services for agency clients and had not been subjected to a background check of any type. In addition to failing to implement proper volunteer screening practices, the agency did not have procedures for securely storing client information. As a result, the volunteer was able to access the victim's case file and learn that he was staying temporarily at a local motel until permanent housing could be found. The volunteer confronted the victim at the motel and sexually assaulted him.

HOW THOROUGHLY ARE VOLUNTEERS SCREENED?

Of the various screening methods, the background check is the most thorough in terms of gaining and verifying information about a potential volunteer's criminal history, financial history, and possible involvement in the child and adult protective services systems. While the vast majority of nonprofits in this survey said they conduct some type of volunteer screening, far fewer engage in more in-depth screening practices. This section examines the differences among organizations with respect to their specific screening practices.

- Most organizations conduct interviews; fewer check references; and fewer still conduct background checks of volunteers.** The majority of organizations in our survey at minimum conduct an interview of volunteers while fewer organizations check references and fewer still engage in full background checks. Of the organizations that indicated that they screen volunteers, over 95 percent conduct interviews, 76 percent call references, and 72 percent submit their volunteers to at least one type of background check.

Table 2: Screening Process by Number of Volunteers

No. of Volunteers	An Interview	Reference Check	Background Check
Less than 10	82%	63%	57%
11 to 25	85%	69%	64%
26 to 50	83%	65%	64%
51 to 100	82%	67%	70%
101+	91%	74%	72%

- Organizations with a larger volunteer base were more likely to conduct interviews, reference checks, and background checks.** While across the board, organizations with more volunteers were more likely to engage in all three screening practices, the largest differences were seen in the area of background checks. (See Table 2.) Just over half of organizations with 10 or fewer volunteers indicated that they conduct background checks compared to over 70 percent of organizations with more than 50 volunteers.

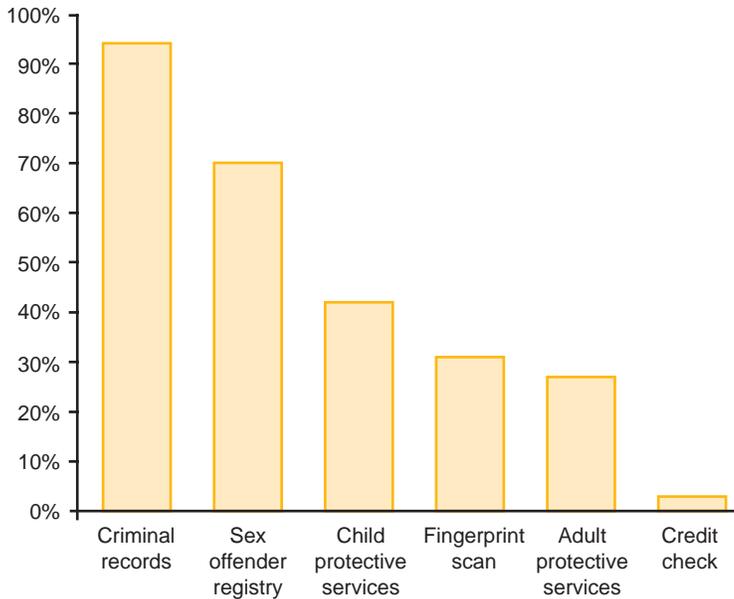
- Among organizations that report screening volunteers, some volunteers are not screened at all or are screened less thoroughly than other volunteers and employees.** While 62 percent of organizations indicated that all volunteers receive the same level of screening, more than one in three organizations said that some volunteers receive a lower level of screening or no screening at all. Volunteers that fall into this group do not have direct contact with clients or are one-time or short-term volunteers. In comparing screening of volunteers versus employees, half of organizations use the same screening process for both volunteers and employees, while just over one-third said that both volunteers and employees are screened but employees are screened more thoroughly.
- Volunteers who provide direct service are screened more thoroughly than those who provide administrative assistance.** “Direct service” included both volunteers who provide services to clients in person or by telephone as well as volunteers who have access to client records. These volunteers are more likely to be interviewed and subject to reference and background checks as compared to volunteers who provide primarily administrative, fundraising, or maintenance assistance to the organization. (See Table 3.) Yet it should be noted that one in four organizations that give volunteers direct access to clients and client information is not routinely checking references and submitting those volunteers to a background check. Likewise, while many purely administrative tasks may not warrant a full background check, some administrative responsibilities involve access to sensitive information. For example, a volunteer charged with soliciting and tracking donations will have access to the organization’s fundraising records and donor lists, which may be cause to check that person’s criminal and credit histories.

Table 3: Screening Process for Volunteers Who Provide Direct Service to Clients vs. Administrative Assistance

Client Contact	An Interview	Reference Check	Background Check
Direct service to clients	90%	75%	72%
Administrative, fundraising, or maintenance service	86%	70%	65%

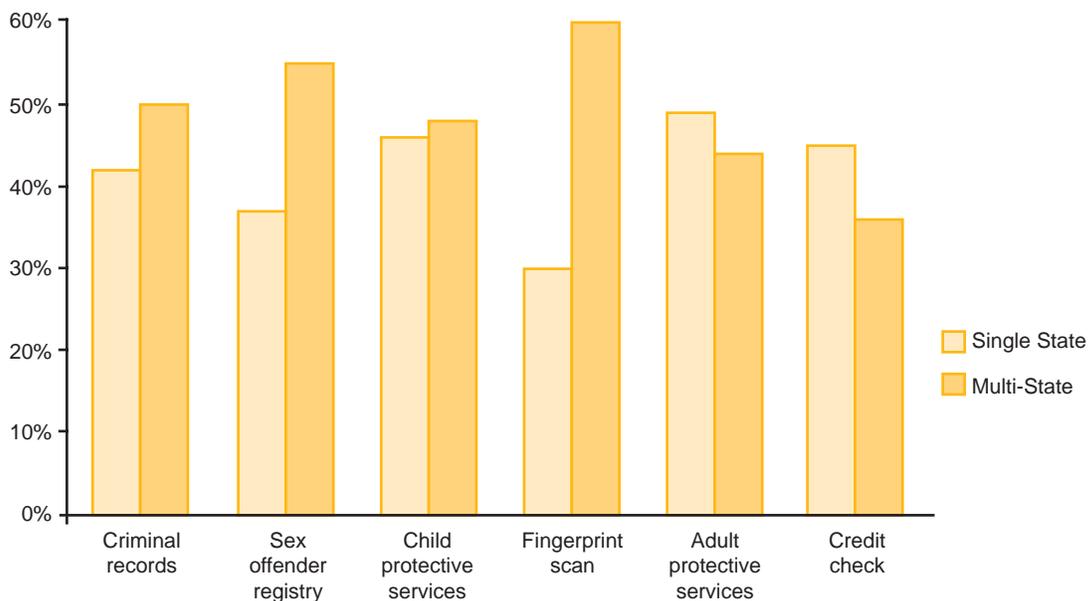
- The great majority of organizations that conduct background checks submit volunteers to criminal records checks; other databases are used less frequently.** Nonprofit organizations have access to a range of databases through which they can run the names of their volunteers. These databases include criminal records, sex offender registries, child and adult protective services, fingerprints, and credit history. Among organizations that indicated they conduct background checks on volunteers, over 90 percent said this screening includes a criminal records check. (See Figure 1.) The other available databases are used less often: 70 percent of organizations conducting any background checks use sex offender registries; 42 percent submit names to child protective services; 31 percent conduct fingerprint-based criminal checks; 26 percent submit names to adult protective services; and only 3 percent submit volunteers to a credit check.

Figure 1: Prevalence of Background Check Screening Methods



- Only about half of organizations that conduct background checks on volunteers do so in more than one state or using national databases.** When submitting volunteers' names for a background check, organizations have the option of checking only the databases in their state or checking several states' or national databases (depending on the type of information sought—see the box on page 4 for an explanation of the types of information available at the state and national levels). Single-state checks may be inadequate in today's mobile society, particularly where child molesters are concerned, as they tend to move frequently. According

Figure 2: Prevalence of Single State vs. Multi-State Background Checks



to our survey, only about half of organizations that conduct background checks on volunteers conduct multi-state or national checks. (See Figure 2.)

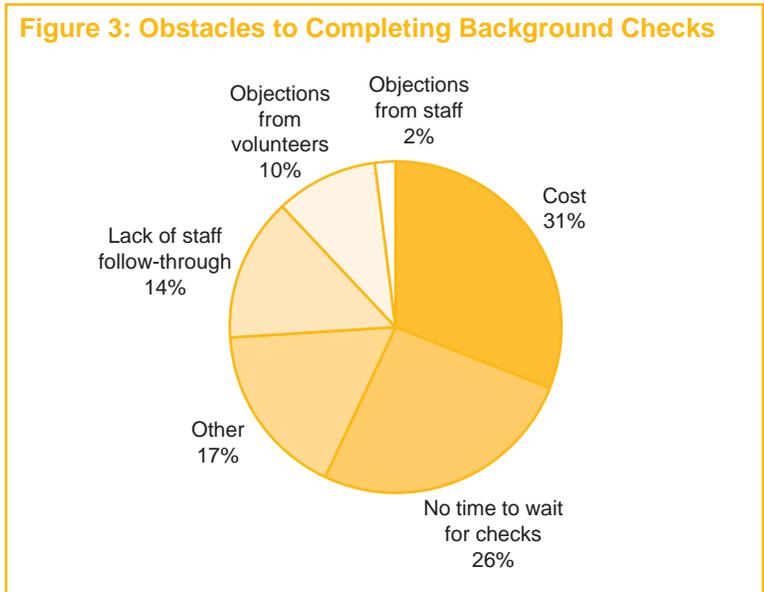
- Majority of organizations never re-screen volunteers.** Government employees in sensitive positions are typically subject to re-screening after a certain number of years of service, and this practice is increasing in the corporate world as well. However, re-screening is not done in most of the human service organizations that participated in our survey. Of the organizations that conduct an initial screening of volunteers, only one in three submit volunteers to an additional check, typically after they have completed one year of service to the organization.
- Most commonly reported obstacle in completing background checks is cost.** Of the organizations that reported routinely screening volunteers, 12 percent indicated that they encounter obstacles in completing the background check process. (See Figure 3.) Nearly one in three organizations that reported experiencing obstacles cited the cost of background checks as the primary challenge. One in four reported that the process takes too long and the organization cannot wait for the results before putting volunteers to work. A handful of organizations cited objections from either the volunteers or the staff. The most common responses captured in the “other” category cited delays in receiving information either from the volunteer or from the agency conducting the check.

Victimization by an Insufficiently Screened Volunteer

An attorney representing two girls, ages 10 and 12, described a case where the girls were victimized by a coach in their softball league. The volunteer gave two other coaches as personal references, his date of birth, and Social Security number. The local softball league used the volunteer’s identifying information to conduct a background check with local law enforcement only. Despite the fact that the two coaches given as references stated that they only knew the volunteer slightly and only in the context of coaching softball, the references were accepted as sufficient. A national background check for criminal history, however, would have revealed that this volunteer had committed crimes against children in other jurisdictions. The league has since updated its screening policies to require national criminal history record checks and references from community members who have known the volunteer for at least two years.

HOW DO ORGANIZATIONS USE SCREENING INFORMATION?

Screening practices can potentially reveal a variety of information about an individual, such as arrests, convictions, abuse allegations, and bankruptcies. Organizations, particularly those with high numbers of volunteers, must develop policies for how they will use that information in making decisions



about placing a volunteer. This section explores how organizations report using the information they receive from their volunteer screening process.

- Nearly half of organizations indicated that screening has identified inappropriate volunteers.** Of the organizations that conduct regular volunteer screening, 46 percent said that their screening process has identified volunteers who were “inappropriate” for their organization. In the context of this survey question, “inappropriate” could have a broad range of meanings, from someone who was found to have a criminal record to someone who did not appear to support the mission of the organization or did not have the appropriate skill set for the position.
- The majority of organizations disqualify a volunteer for an arrest or conviction for a crime.** About one in five organizations would not accept a volunteer who had been convicted of—or even arrested for—any crime. (See Table 4.) A larger proportion, about half of the organizations surveyed, said they would only disqualify a volunteer for an arrest or conviction for certain specific crimes, typically violent felonies or sex crimes. One in five organizations would not disqualify a volunteer for an arrest.
- The majority of organizations disqualify a volunteer for a child abuse report.** An accusation of child abuse as documented by child protective services (CPS) would disqualify a volunteer in 65 percent of the organizations surveyed. (See Table 5.) This number jumps to 84 percent for a substantiated report of child abuse. However, only 42 percent of organizations report conducting CPS

checks, so many organizations reporting that they would disqualify on the basis of a child abuse report do so hypothetically. One in five organizations would not disqualify a volunteer for an accusation of child abuse.

Table 4: How Organizations Respond to Volunteers Arrested or Convicted of Crimes

Response to Volunteer	Arrest	Conviction
Disqualify for any crime	18%	21%
Disqualify for specific crimes	45%	54%
Does not disqualify	20%	8%
Don't know	18%	16%

Table 5: How Organizations Respond to Child Abuse Reports

Response to Volunteer	Accused	Substantiated
Disqualify	65%	84%
Does not disqualify	22%	5%
Don't know	13%	11%

- The majority of organizations say they will not accept a volunteer who has been reported for elder abuse.** Similar to responses to child abuse reports, 67 percent of surveyed organizations say they will disqualify a volunteer for an accusation of elder abuse and 85 percent will not take on a volunteer with a substantiated report of elder abuse. (See Table 6.) Again, some respondents were clearly speaking hypothetically, as only 26 percent of organizations report submitting prospective volunteers' names to adult protective services for a check. Nearly one in five organizations would not disqualify a volunteer for an accusation of elder abuse as reported by APS.
- Most organizations will not turn away a volunteer for having a poor credit history.** Only two percent of organizations who conduct regular screenings of potential volunteers indicated that they would disqualify a volunteer for a poor credit history. (See Table 7.)

Table 6: How Organizations Respond to Elder Abuse Reports

Response to Volunteer	Accused	Substantiated
Disqualify	67%	85%
Does not disqualify	19%	4%
Don't know	14%	11%

Table 7: How Organizations Respond to Poor Credit History Reports

Response to Volunteer	
Disqualify	2%
Does not disqualify	89%
Don't know	9%

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The National Center for Victims of Crime conducted a telephone survey of 517 nonprofit human service organizations to identify: characteristics of organizations that regularly screen volunteers, the screening methods used, and how information revealed by screening is used in decision making. Most organizations say they conduct some screening, but fewer conduct thorough screening using all available methods of gathering information, including all types of background checks. Most organizations say they would not accept a volunteer with a criminal history or a report of child or elder abuse, but some who said they would disqualify on that basis are not checking the sources of that information. For most organizations and volunteers, credit history is not an issue.

The findings of this study point to several essential steps that organizations should take as they strive for high-quality services in an environment that protects the safety and well-being of their clients and ensures the nonprofit organizations' continued viability.

- All volunteers should be consistently and comprehensively screened, particularly if they will be working directly with clients or have access to sensitive client information. A comprehensive screening program should include conducting an in-person interview, calling personal and professional references, and submitting names—and, where possible, fingerprints—for a national background check of criminal history records. Depending upon the client population to be served and the volunteer's duties, additional checks, such as child protective services, adult protective services, and credit checks, may be in order.
- A statewide background check may not be sufficient, particularly in cases where the potential volunteer will be working with children. The best option would be to submit all volunteer names (and, again, fingerprints where possible) to a national database to avoid missing information on a conviction or sex offender status from another state. Child protective services and adult protective services records are kept only at the state level and should be checked for each state in which a volunteer has lived if that person will be working with children or vulnerable adults.

- Organizations need to determine what type of history should disqualify volunteers or put conditions on their assignments, and then screen for those types of histories. Many surveyed organizations said that they would disqualify a volunteer for events for which they were not screening, indicating a lack of well-considered volunteer screening and assignment policies. Organizations must also develop policies on obtaining volunteers' consent to perform background checks.
- A clean background check does not necessarily mean that a potential volunteer poses no risk. Organizations should use all available sources of information—including in-person interviews and reference checks—to make preliminary determinations about a volunteer's fitness for a particular position. Volunteers should then be re-screened at regular intervals.
- Volunteer screening should only be one part of an overall volunteer management policy within the organization. In addition to thoroughly screening potential volunteers, the organization also has an ongoing obligation to adequately supervise and train all staff and volunteers to ensure the quality of services and the well-being of clients receiving services. Organizations should also have clear policies regarding the types of contact that are allowed between clients and volunteers or staff, and should make all clients (and clients' parents or guardians), as well as staff and volunteers, aware of these policies.

CONCLUSION

Although the majority of organizations say they engage in some form of volunteer screening, one in four organizations working with vulnerable clients does not conduct reference or criminal background checks, exposing clients to potential victimization and the organization to liability should an unscreened volunteer harm a client. Many organizations also claim to disqualify volunteers based on events they are not screening for, indicating a lack of cohesive policy on volunteer screening and assignment. Organizational leaders may think they do not have time or money to invest in volunteer screening and management; however, not investing in this process could be far more costly in the long term—both to vulnerable clients and to the organization itself.

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

SAMPLE SELECTION

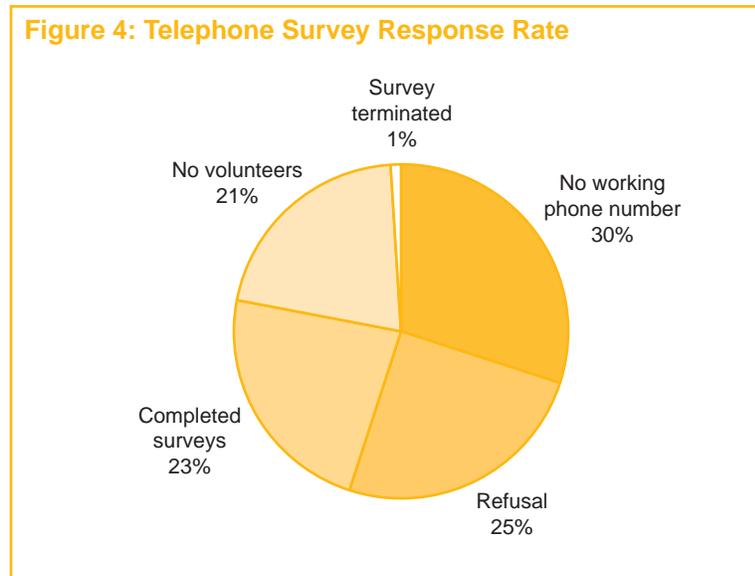
Survey respondents were drawn from a random sample of 2,251 nonprofit organizations within certain categories of work that had filed Form 990 with the Internal Revenue Service between 1998 and 2006. The sample consisted of social and human service organizations that provide direct services to clients in the fields of education, mental health and crisis intervention, nursing services, crime and victimization, food distribution, housing, youth development, and emergency and financial assistance. (Table 1 on page 8 provides a complete list of the types of organizations interviewed.)

The sample was purchased from GuideStar, an organization that gathers and publishes data about nonprofits. GuideStar's database includes all organizations filing the IRS Form 990. The National Center for Victims of Crime selected the most relevant NTEE (National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities) codes, which classify organizations according to the type of work they do, and GuideStar drew a random sample of U.S. nonprofit organizations within these codes.¹¹ Organizations with less than \$25,000 in annual gross receipts are not required to submit Form 990 and, therefore, were not included in the sample.

RESPONSE RATE

Executive staff or volunteer coordinators of 517 nonprofit organizations nationwide completed the telephone survey. Completed surveys represent a 23 percent response rate. As illustrated in Figure 4, respondent organizations dropped out of the sample for four primary reasons: the telephone number listed in the tax records used to develop the call list was not working for nearly one-third of the sample; one-quarter of the people contacted declined to participate in the survey; one-fifth of the organizations contacted reported not

¹¹ For more information on the NTEE, see the Urban Institute's National Center for Charitable Statistics, <http://nccs2.urban.org/ntee-cc>.



using volunteers, making them ineligible for participation; and a small number of respondents ended the call before the survey could be completed.

TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS TO GATHER ANECDOTES

In addition to the survey, the National Center for Victims of Crime sought to gather anecdotal reports of the impact of victimization by unscreened volunteers. To develop a list of potential respondents, the National Center sent an online survey to 6,045 victim service providers across the country and to the approximately 500 members of the National Crime Victim Bar Association to ask if they were aware of cases of client victimization by a nonprofit volunteer or employee (not necessarily within their own organization).¹² The National Center received 145 responses, of which 71 reported knowing of a case of victimization by a volunteer or staff member of a nonprofit organization. Of these, 17 respondents agreed to a confidential telephone interview. The National Center completed follow-up phone interviews with seven respondents. Respondents included current and former employees and volunteers of nonprofit organizations and attorneys representing clients who had been victimized by volunteers of organizations where they once received services. Two of the resulting accounts are included as sidebars in this survey report.

¹² The National Crime Victim Bar Association, an affiliate of the National Center for Victims of Crime, is the nation's only organization of attorneys dedicated to helping crime victims seek justice through the civil justice system. For more information, see www.victimbar.org.

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