



UK Police Collecting DNA ... Just in Case

With the recent proposal by the government of the UK that agents of the Department of Health be permitted to enter the homes of children suspected of having parents not sufficiently concerned with “safety,” it would seem that there would be few privations of liberty that Her Majesty’s subjects have not endured.

That is until the report published in the *Times* of London revealing that law enforcement officers throughout the UK routinely arrest people not suspected of criminal activity based solely on their perceived propensity for committing crimes. The goal of this roundup is so that the government might have samples of the arrestees’ DNA on file and recorded in a national database.



The database was established in 1995 and is the world’s largest. It contains the DNA material of over five million Britons, a figure that represents 8 percent of the population of England and Wales. The recording system was initially developed, ostensibly, to aid the police in the investigation of crime scenes and function as a “vital crime-fighting tool” in tracking down elusive offenders. The program has come off the rails in recent years, however.

According to the multifarious mishmash of groups and lawmakers that oppose the practice of collecting and collating such private information, the report published in the *Times* only adds to the mountain of convincing evidence that the UK has become the world’s foremost “surveillance society” where “everyone is treated as a potential suspect ... regardless of guilt or innocence.”

One of the chief spokesmen for the ad hoc adversaries of the database and the method being used to augment it is Jonathan Montgomery, director of the Human Genetics Commission, a public policy board that advises the UK government on issues of genetics. Montgomery worries that the behavior of police in selecting those from whom they will take DNA samples has transformed a database of offenders into a database of suspects. Based on figures printed in the *Times* article, there are nearly one million innocent people whose DNA has been permanently archived in the database.

The most chilling allegation regarding the systematic collection of DNA is that certain people or groups of people are being arrested not because they are accused or suspected of a crime, but instead for the singular purpose of recording their DNA and adding them to the national database. Shockingly, 75 percent of all black men between the ages of 18-35 have their genetic data stored in the database, suggesting an official, though understandably unspoken, prevailing policy in English law enforcement of racial profiling. A retired police officer testified to a commission investigating the lawfulness of the claim that “it is now the norm to arrest offenders for everything if there is power to do so. It is apparently understood by serving police officers that one of the reasons ... is so that DNA can be



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obtained.”

Despite the *Times* illumination of this frightening and unlawful exercise of police power, Parliament seems to not be bothered. As proof of Parliamentary indifference to the scandal, one need only examine the Labour government’s announced agenda for the coming year. Although the [legislative slate announced last week](#) by the Queen on behalf of Prime Minister Gordon Brown did include a bill that would after six years expunge from the database the records of those accused or suspected but never convicted of a crime, the measure lamentably contained no provision for curtailing the police’s seemingly unfettered authority to take DNA samples incident merely to an arrest.

The burgeoning clamor against the current method of collection warns that there might be a more nefarious purpose behind the building of the database. “Not only are we stockpiling the most sensitive information of innocents who have never been charged,” said Isabella Sankley of the civil rights watchdog group Liberty, “we are also creating a perverse incentive to arrest people solely to get their details on the database.”



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