

Critics Challenge Familial DNA Testing

By Amy E. Wong



What's your take on familial DNA testing?

Here's the skinny on the controversial subject. DNA results from crime scenes often do not lead to direct matches. Some investigators analyze the DNA of near-matches to narrow down their lists of suspects, often using the DNA of perpetrators' family members as evidence in criminal trials. This practice is called familial DNA testing, and it's been drawing the ire of many critics who fear that it will lead to "Big Brother" and increased racial discrimination.

Despite the backlash, prosecutors across the nation are now relying more heavily on this new technology, which is far more powerful than police sketches and anonymous tips. Mitch Morrissey, a D.A. in Denver, supports partial or familial DNA testing; during an NPR *Day to Day* panel [discussion](#), he said, "It's more than just your normal lead. It's a scientifically based lead that could solve a lot of cases."

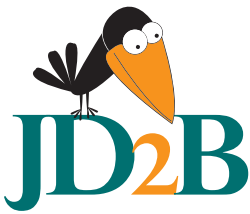
Although the practice isn't condoned by Massachusetts police as an official technique for investigating crimes, Morrissey noted, "We're running the risk of another victim, and if we had the opportunity to use this technology to try to capture that person and we didn't do it, then I'd say, 'Shame on you for not helping us here.'"

Although familial DNA testing has proven itself as a successful and powerful tool for prosecutors, there are many critics out there who are a little more hesitant about the social ramifications.

Hank Greely, professor of law and genetics at Stanford University, noted to NPR, "It's one thing to say that it's okay to have felons have their DNA in the database—even those are disproportionately African-Americans—because they brought it on themselves by committing the crime, but now you're making suspects out of all of their relatives, and I think you could argue that that's unfair."

Greely went on, "What's most troubling are the larger racial implications." The majority of perpetrators are black, and their entire families will also be subject to DNA testing.

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Currently, DNA databases are limited to convicted criminals and those who have been arrested. However, if familial or partial DNA use becomes widespread, the DNA database will also contain the DNA of millions of innocent people whose only link to crime will be their family blood.

Although defenders of familial DNA testing claim that the investigations are quiet and private, that doesn't stop people from calling out "Big Brother" or, for all you movie junkies, *Gattaca*. If there is a partial DNA match at a crime scene, innocent people will be scrutinized until they are cleared by DNA tests. It's a systematic process of elimination.

Still, proponents of familial DNA testing maintain that this is nothing new. It's common for police to question or suspect people who are innocent. Police are supposed to find leads and chase them.

Familial testing has proven helpful in several cases already. However, I don't think we should meddle or rely too heavily on this technology in criminal cases. We must continue to build on other investigative methods such as depositions, testimonies, logic, and other evidence.

I cannot imagine what it would be like if I were a permanent fixture in the government's DNA database because my sister, let's say, was a convicted felon. Furthermore, I think it would be far too easy for someone to plant my DNA (a hair, some blood, a nail, etc.) at the crime scene. How could I possibly escape from such incriminating evidence?

And what if, one day, it's not just the families of criminals who are in databases but all people? What would it be like to go through life coded, detected, and discriminated against?