

Research group suggests it might be time to build a universal genetic database

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A team of researchers from Vanderbilt University is suggesting in a Policy Forum piece published in the journal *Science* that it might be time to start building a universal genetic database. They suggest doing so would help law enforcement personnel track down criminals.

A universal genetic [database](#) is one that contains a genetic profile for every person living in (or visiting) a given country, and perhaps at some point, the entire world. The purpose of such a database would be to allow law enforcement personnel to track down people that have committed crimes such as rape and murder. The idea for such a database has arisen as police have started to use [genetic information](#) available in publicly available databases, such as GEDmatch, as a source—an approach used to find the Golden State Killer.

The researchers suggest there are three good reasons for establishing such a database: The first would be the benefit of solving serious crimes. The second would be to stop [law enforcement](#) from obtaining genetic profiles from publicly available databases. The third is because it would remove biases that currently exist in the current system, in which [police officers](#) routinely collect DNA samples from people arrested or convicted of a crime. The researchers point out that most such people are young men of color.

The researchers note that a full genetic profile would not be needed—just enough data to positively identify someone. They suggest restricting data in this way would protect privacy—there would be no medical information, for example. They also suggest that laws regarding how the data is stored and protected could further ensure that it is not misused.

The researchers acknowledge that actually creating such a database would likely be met with many hurdles. It is almost certain the public would object to the plan, for example. It would also cost billions of dollars. And then there is the means of collection—would every person be required to give a [sample](#)? Or would sample be taken from newborns as part of routine postnatal care? The researchers suggest that despite societal concerns, it might be time to start working on a universal genetic database, because the alternatives are worse.

More information: J. W. Hazel et al. Is it time for a universal genetic forensic database?, *Science* (2018). [DOI: 10.1126/science.aav5475](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aav5475)

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