

Use of genealogy site to trace Golden State Killer raises concerns

May 3 2018, by Veronique Dupont



Joseph James DeAngelo, the suspected "Golden State Killer", appears in court

The arrest of a suspected serial killer and notorious rapist in California using DNA and a public genealogy website has been hailed as a triumph of ingenuity by law enforcement.

But the method used to hunt down the "Golden State Killer" has also raised privacy issues and some ethical concerns.

"What if you become uninsurable because of a genetic test?" said Joseph Turow, a professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

And, he asked, what about your relatives? Could they also be denied health insurance because of a genetic predisposition to some malady?

"DNA is part of a larger issue of 'How do we profile people in the 21st century?'" Turow said. "Face and voice and genes—they are all part of this idea about parts of the human body as identifiers."

Joseph James DeAngelo, 72, a former policeman, was arrested outside his California home last week after investigators tracked him down by plugging crime scene DNA into an open-source genealogy database.

They found a DNA match with distant ancestors, traced the family tree to DeAngelo and arrested him after collecting his DNA from a "discarded item."

It was the culmination of a 40-year manhunt for the man blamed for 12 murders and more than 50 rapes between 1976 and 1986 in central, northern and southern California.



FBI investigators and sheriff's deputies are seen at DeAngelo's Citrus Heights, California, home

The FBI maintains a database containing the DNA of millions of convicted criminals, but DeAngelo did not have a felony conviction and his DNA was not on file—forcing the police to turn to public genealogy sites to find a match.

Finding a balance

The collection of intimate personal data is by no means restricted to genealogy services such as Ancestry.com, 23andMe or GEDmatch, the one used to track down DeAngelo.

Amazon, Facebook, Google and other companies also collect vast amounts of private information about their millions of users.

Michael Copps, who served as a commissioner on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) from 2001-2011, said a "privacy framework that gives consumers control over their own data" is needed.

"For years, companies have failed to adequately protect our personal data, and our weak privacy laws have paved the way for this to happen," Copps said in an article in USA Today.

"It's high time to put consumer privacy ahead of corporate greed," Copps said. "Companies across the board must be required to get express consent from their users prior to sharing their data."

Many companies require a court order before handing over information about their users to the authorities.

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