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Local police get promising results from trial project involving property crimes and DNA

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A novel project designed to test the effectiveness of DNA testing in solving property crimes has come to an end in Charleston with promising results for local police agencies.

The background

Investigators from Charleston, North Charleston, Charleston County and Mount Pleasant participated in the three-year project, which used genetic evidence to solve burglaries, car break-ins and other crimes. Samples were tested at Marshall University's Forensic Science Center.

What happened?

The center tested evidence from 413 cases. Of those, 162 resulted in matches with known criminals -- a nearly 40 percent success rate, said Judy Gordon, director of the Charleston police forensic services division. More than 20 suspects were arrested, some for multiple crimes.

What types of cases were solved?

Charleston police tied one suspect to a 2010 truck break-in on Bogard Street by testing blood he left behind on a smashed window. County deputies solved a September 2008 break-in at a Johns Island campground after blood evidence provided a DNA match to a Pennsylvania man who had passed through the area.

What worked best?

Blood samples yielded the highest matches, with 131 hits from the 159 cases submitted, Gordon said. Evidence with saliva, mostly found on discarded cigarettes, generated 22 hits from 82 cases submitted, she said.

What didn't work?

Investigators devoted a fair amount of time to testing surfaces for DNA left by human touch. None of the evidence collected led to suspects being identified in those crimes, Gordon said

What are officials saying about the testing?

"I think the numbers show it's really beneficial," Gordon said. "In cases with bodily fluids, it was enormously effective."

Charleston County sheriff's Maj. John Clark: "Not only did it eliminate the need for us to burden the State Law Enforcement Division with 413 cases, it showed in a real practical way that DNA testing does work for property crimes and something like this needed."

What's next?

Marshall has been working with police in Miami-Dade, Fla., and Huntington, W.Va., as well on the project, which is funded by the National Institute of Justice. Results from the three areas are still being tabulated. Huntington also still has a way to go in submitting a comparable number of cases for testing, Dr. Terry Fenger, director of the Marshall Forensic Science Center, said.

So far, all indications point to the testing being beneficial, which should encourage agencies at the national level to devote future grant funding to this area, Fenger said. "We are a real believer in this type of testing."

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