

Collecting DNA for human rights: How to help while safeguarding privacy

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DNA databases might help identify victims of crime and human trafficking, but how do we safeguard the personal privacy of innocent victims and family members? A new report online May 15 in the Cell Press journal *Trends in Genetics* identifies a number of key challenges to consider as experts develop such programs.

Identifying victims of human trafficking remains a challenge around the world; between 12 million and 27 million individuals are currently enslaved. "If ever there is a justifiable use of DNA, it is the protection of victims of human rights violations and human trafficking," says coauthor Sara Katsanis, of Duke University. "DNA will not be useful for many types of human trafficking, but if it can be used to identify just a small percentage of victims, then we have made progress in the fight against modern slavery."

Katsanis and her coauthor Joyce Kim, also of Duke University, note that although DNA is a powerful forensic tool that has great potential to identify and protect victims of human trafficking and other human-rights violations, many people fear the use of DNA against them and worry that authorities could use victims' DNA to control private information concerning citizens.

Also, collecting DNA for human-trafficking purposes might be outside of the law-enforcement purview when it involves persons who are neither criminals nor deceased. Some governments already test DNA of [immigrants](#), refugees, adoptive children, and their biological mothers, but the authors note that in some cases collecting DNA to identify the victims of [human-rights violations](#) might be better handled by nongovernmental authorities. On the other hand, DNA collected today could serve as court evidence in the future, so authorities must have proper legal control over the handling of samples.

"Combatting human trafficking is going to require

creativity and collaboration amongst government authorities, law enforcement, social services, academics, and victim advocates," says Kim. "We envision multiple approaches and solutions and would like to see the perspectives of the participants and victims be considered as approaches develop," she adds.

Related Duke University initiatives include a series of workshops to bring together experts to discuss relevant scientific, policy, and human-rights issues pertaining to the collection of DNA to identify [victims of human trafficking](#).

More information: *Trends in Genetics*, Kim et al.: "Brave New World of Human Rights DNA Collection."

Provided by Cell Press

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