

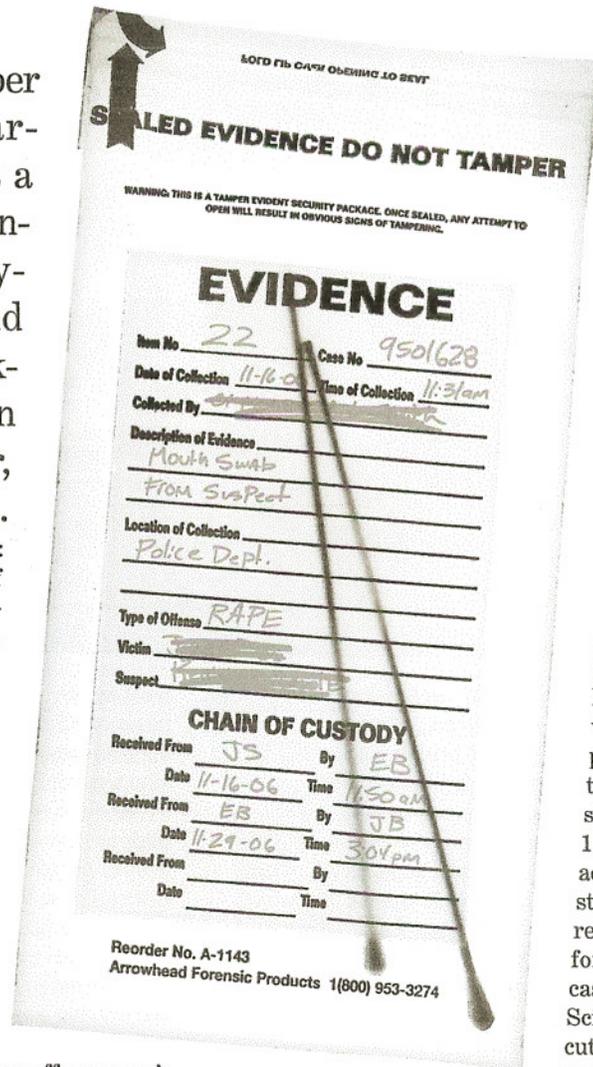
Let's catch more rapists before they strike again

One night in October 2005, a 28-year-old woman left a friend's party at an ocean-side restaurant in Daytona Beach, Florida, and walked to her car in a parking garage. There, a man forced her into the car, raped her, then escaped.

But police got a huge break in the case: Because the man had been convicted of sexual battery years earlier as a juvenile, his DNA profile was stored in a government database. When officers entered DNA info taken from semen collected at the crime scene into the computer, they found a perfect match. Seven months later, a jury sentenced Kenneth William Stuckey, 22, to life in prison because of his prior record.

DNA identification is the single most powerful crime-fighting tool out there. As *CSI* as it sounds, the genetic data contained in just one strand of hair, drop of saliva or sweat stain can clinch the conviction of a violent criminal. It's especially helpful in cases of rape, because while fingerprints can't be taken off a woman's body, fluids and other biological remnants can. But experts say we're underutilizing this breakthrough technology, leaving rapists on the street, free to attack again.

Currently most states get DNA samples only from convicted felons; victims' advocates and law enforcement officials also want to collect them from people guilty of misdemeanors, like minor assaults or burglary, and those arrested for crimes, even without a conviction. "We fingerprint people when we take them into custody—why not get DNA then too, like so many other countries do?" notes attorney Christopher Asplen, former executive director of the National Commission on the Future of DNA Evidence. It's absolutely necessary, experts say, given that criminals often progress from less serious crimes to more violent ones. "The point of a DNA database is to get them in



the system earlier in their careers," Asplen says.

Collecting a DNA sample is simple—you just run a swab inside someone's cheek. European countries that mandate this three-second process have achieved astounding results. In England, DNA evidence has helped officials to successfully identify perpetrators 660,000 times; here in the United States, that number is 39,000. Feeling safe? Didn't think so.

Thankfully, our government is waking up to the potential of DNA collection. In the past year, 12 states and the federal government have passed laws that will increase the number of DNA profiles in their databases, with six more bills pending at press time. Authorities expect this should help chip away at our shameful backlog of rape cases; 169,000 remain unsolved today, according to federal government statistics. Notes Henry Lee, a forensic scientist who trains law enforcement officials to solve cold cases at his Institute for Forensic Science in New Haven, Connecticut, "The additional DNA profiles mean tens of thousands of old rape cases could be solved." More jailed rapists would mean closure and justice for victims and their families—and peace of mind for the rest of us.

Additional federal funding will be needed to process an influx of DNA samples. But preventing rapes and saving lives should be a national priority—and a beefed-up DNA database is our best hope. Jayann Sepich has fought hard for it; after her 22-year-old daughter, Katie, a New Mexico State University student, was raped and murdered in 2003, she lobbied to expand DNA collection in the state. Katie's Law takes effect this month. "If my daughter's attacker had a DNA record on file, he might have been caught after he got to her,"

Sepich says. "He's still out there. There's nothing I can do for Katie now, but we have the power to bring about changes that could save other women's lives." ©

What you can do

Check dnaresource.com to see what your state's DNA collection laws are, then urge your legislators (for contact info, go to firstgov.gov) to broaden those laws and push for more funding.