

In the news

A CRIMINAL DATABASE EXPANSION PUSHES THE BOUNDARIES

“The DNA profiles of nearly four in 10 black men in the UK are on the police’s national database — compared with fewer than one in 10 white men.” (*The Guardian*, 5 January 2006) Several commentaries followed a Home Office report in which it was revealed “that 5.24% of the UK population now has a DNA profile held on the database. This compares with an EU average of 1.3% and 0.5% in the US.” (*BBC News*, 5 January 2006)

When the expansion of the database started in 1999, the samples could only be taken from those charged with a crime. As of April 2004, the rules have been relaxed and the police can retain all samples, even if the donor has been cleared of a crime or the prosecution was dropped. “New Home Office figures estimate that by 2008, the samples of some 4.2 million people — seven per cent of the population — will be contained on a central criminal database.” (*Daily Telegraph*, 5 January 2006).

The trouble with this expansion, especially given the racial bias of the database, is that there has been no national debate about it. The government has been accused of “compiling a national DNA database by stealth” (*Daily Telegraph*). Civil liberties groups have expressed concerns about the lack of safeguards to prevent misuse of this private information. The concern is not just over the risk of the data falling into the hands of insurers and employers but the reliability of the information — each database record is limited to 10 microsatellites. “Prof Sir Alec Jeffreys ... has suggested that this could allow false readings and said the number of DNA markers should be increased to 15.” (*Daily Telegraph*)

Magdalena Skipper