

Golden State Killer suspect was tracked down through genealogy websites

Comparing decades-old crime scene DNA to profiles on genealogy websites led investigators to a relative of the suspected Golden State Killer – and from them, to the suspect himself, the *Sacramento Bee* reported today.

Also known as the Original Night Stalker and the East Area Rapist, the Golden State Killer is suspected of committing 51 rapes and 12 murders in California between 1974 and 1986. On Tuesday, officers arrested 72-year old Joseph James DeAngelo in Citrus Heights, California in connection with the crimes. The team found him by scouring profiles on genealogy websites, Chief Deputy District Attorney told *The Sacramento Bee*.

While the investigators didn't find a perfect hit, they did find a close one – the partial DNA match of a relative, which eventually led the investigators to DeAngelo. DeAngelo had lived in areas that matched the locations of the crimes, and when the investigators compared DNA collected from an item DeAngelo threw away to the crime scene DNA, they found a match.

Critics say the practice may violate civil rights

Tracking down suspects via a family member's DNA is controversial enough when law enforcement does it through its own databases. The FBI's national genetic database, for example, includes DNA from federal convicts and arrestees who haven't been convicted, law experts Natalie Ram and Michael Seringhaus explain in *Slate*. But critics say the practice can expose citizens to additional scrutiny simply because a

relative is in a DNA database, potentially posing a violation of their civil rights.

Familial searches have helped law enforcement track down notorious suspects before – like the so-called “Grim Sleeper” and the “Roaming Rapist” in California, according to the *LA Times*. But the technique has also led law enforcement to innocent people, too – like Michael Usry, who police tracked down through a genealogy study that had been made publicly available. The police later decided he was innocent, and apologized for the inconvenience, the *LA Times* says.

If you are wondering how this #goldenstatekiller investigation all went down google Michael Usry Jr, and realize the cop wouldn't need a warrant if either the company complied, or if the data was publicly available (eg WikiTree etc).

– Erin Murphy (@ErinMurphysLaw) April 27, 2018

Other databases like WikiTree and YHRD make genetic data freely available, where it would be readily accessible to police. And police wouldn't need a warrant if a company cooperated by providing user data, law professor and criminal justice expert Erin Murphy points out.

Direct-to-consumer genetic testing company 23andMe told *The Verge* that it didn't help law enforcement with the case. “Broadly speaking, it's our policy to resist law enforcement inquiries to protect customer privacy,” a spokesperson for 23andMe said in an emailed statement. “23andMe has never given customer information to law enforcement officials.”

Ancestry.com also denied being in contact with law enforcement about the case. “Ancestry advocates for its members' privacy and will not share any information with law enforcement unless compelled to by valid legal process,” a company spokesperson said in a statement emailed to *The Verge*. The company

publishes such requests in . Helix and National Geographic did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Asked whether law enforcement could have used 23andMe data that had been sold to another company, a 23andMe spokesperson answered, simply, “No.”

Additional reporting provided by Russell Brandom.

<https://www.theverge.com/2018/4/26/17288532/golden-state-killer-east-area-rapist-genealogy-websites-dna-genetic-investigation>