



New Portable DNA Scanner Gives Results In 90 Minutes

Two years ago, TN predicted that portable DNA scanners would hit the market and be instantly snapped up by police departments. The barrier to privacy has been completely demolished and laws will soon require routine testing for any citation. Initially, law enforcement is using the tech for crime scene analysis of DNA material. □ TN Editor

For the last 10 months, Houston police have been testing cutting-edge technology that could potentially get criminals off the streets faster.

It's called rapid DNA.

HPD launched a pilot program with the company ANDE to test a machine that runs DNA tests in under two hours.

"This rapid DNA is the future. It comes down to when mathematicians stopped using abacuses and started using calculators. It's that important to criminal justice," said Lt. Warren Meeler, Houston Police Department, Homicide Division.

The machine has a variety of applications, including testing evidence at crime scenes.

For example, detectives could run a rapid DNA test if they find a weapon at a murder scene. They would swap the weapon and swab anyone who might be involved. Then machine would compare the samples to potentially reveal whose DNA is on the weapon.

As part of the pilot program, the protocol has been to swab each piece of evidence twice. First, the Houston Forensic Science Center takes an official sample for the lab, then Houston police take a second sample for the trial.

“These are the types of cases we want to solve quickly. If we don’t get those answers quickly, we may wait weeks or even months for those results to come back from the crime lab,” Meeler said.

Houston police have used rapid DNA analysis in approximately 60 cases, ranging from aggravated assaults to murders.

Meeler says the technology has helped detectives solve cases.

“We have. I can’t discuss specific cases. But yes, we have been able to develop leads as well as eliminate potential suspects from cases, which is equally important,” he said.

Rapid DNA results can’t be used in court. It is only used for investigations.

However, some forensic scientists also have serious concerns about whether it should be used at crime scenes at all.

“I think everybody is comfortable that if there is a high concentration of DNA from a single source, so an oral swab from an individual, we’re confident the instruments produce good data. The questions start to come in circumstances where we’ve got touch DNA — smaller quantities of DNA, more mixtures, there’s more people on that doorknob that I’m swabbing - there I’m not sure anybody knows yet,” said Dr. Peter Stout, President and CEO of the Houston Forensic Science Center.

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The National District Attorneys Association has also spoken out against using the technology at crime scenes.

“NDAA does not support the use of Rapid DNA technology for crime scene DNA samples unless the samples are analyzed by experienced DNA analysts using that technology working in an accredited forensic DNA laboratory,” the association said in a statement.

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