

Will New Focus on Rape Kit Tests Put Thousands Behind Bars?

Sharon Cohen,
AP National Writer

The evidence piled up for years, abandoned in police property rooms, warehouses and crime labs. Now, tens of thousands of sexual assault kits are giving up their secrets — and rapists who’ve long remained free may finally face justice.

A dramatic shift is taking hold across the country as police and prosecutors scramble to process these kits and use DNA matches to track down sexual predators, many of whom attacked more women while evidence of their crimes languished in storage. Lawmakers, meanwhile, are proposing reforms to ensure this doesn’t happen again.

“There’s definitely momentum,” says Sarah Haacke Byrd, managing director of the Joyful Heart Foundation, an advocacy group working on the issue. “In the last year, we really are seeing the tide turn where federal and state governments are offering critically needed leadership and critically needed resources to fix the problem.”

In Cleveland, the county prosecutor’s office has indicted more than 300 rape suspects since 2013, based on newly tested DNA evidence from old kits. The plan is to eventually charge 1,000.

In Houston, authorities recently cleared a backlog of nearly 6,700 kits that included cases dating back to the 1980s. The project,



Forensic analyst India Henry examines cotton swabs from a sexual assault evidence kit in the biology lab at the Houston Forensic Science Center in Houston on Thursday, April 2, 2015. A dramatic shift is taking hold across the country as police and prosecutors scramble to process these kits and use DNA matches to track down sexual predators, many of whom attacked more women while evidence of their crimes languished in storage. Lawmakers, meanwhile, are proposing reforms to ensure this doesn't happen again.

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which cost about \$6 million, turned up 850 matches in a national DNA database.

In Detroit, the Wayne County prosecutor’s office is seeking donations to help analyze, investigate and prosecute cases from the results of more than 11,000 kits that had been untested. Hamstrung by city and county money troubles, the prosecutor has formed an unusual partnership with two nonprofits to raise \$10 million. So far, contributions have poured in from corporations and residents from all 50 states and eight foreign countries.

There’s a new urgency, too, in statehouses from Alaska to Maryland, where legislators in more than 20 states are considering — and in some cases, passing — laws that include auditing all kits and deadlines for submitting and processing DNA evidence. Recent counts in Louisiana found nearly 1,100 unprocessed kits. Disturbingly, nearly 100 additional kits from two New Orleans children’s hospitals also have been discovered.

The high-profile campaign also is getting a big financial boost: At least \$76 million— more than half from the feds — will be available for testing, prosecution and reforms.

No one knows how much it will all cost in the end. And it won’t be easy to make up for lost time.

In some cases, it’s simply too late for justice because statutes of limitations have expired. In others, investigators may have to wade through old, often incomplete, police files, search for witnesses and suspects, confront fading memories and persuade survivors to reopen painful chapters of their lives. It will be a lot slower-going than it is on those prime-time police procedurals.

“It’s great entertainment on television that in one hour’s time, we have a crime, we take the sample, we get a ‘hit,’ we arrest the suspect and then he’s prosecuted and off to jail,” says Doug McGowen, coordinator of Memphis’ Sexual Assault Kit Task Force. “That’s just not the case, clearly.”

In Memphis, about half of more than 12,300 kits have been tested or are waiting to be analyzed. It will take at least 40 hours to follow up on each case and all will be investigated even if there is no DNA match, McGowen says. He estimates the police work and trials could continue until 2019.

But once all the kits are processed, the potential is enormous — both for communities and rape survivors.

As Vice President Joe Biden recently declared: “If we are able to test these rape kits, more crimes will be solved, more crimes will be prevented, and more women will be given back their lives.”

In resurrecting old crimes, investigators have detected an alarming pattern: Many rapists are repeat offenders.

In Cuyahoga County, home to Cleveland, about 30 percent of cases that have developed from testing so far are serial rape suspects. One of them, Robert Green, assaulted seven women over nearly a decade as evidence went unprocessed. He pleaded guilty last fall and was sentenced to up to 135 years in prison.

In Wayne County, home to Detroit, authorities say 288 potential serial rapists have been found among the kits tested. Among the cases to surface is Reginald Holland, who raped a woman in 2005. His identity wasn’t known then. Three years later, Holland’s DNA was entered in

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