

CASE STUDY 2

DATA BANK HITS FIRE UP COLD CASES IN TORONTO

Police describe him as “evil and dangerous.” He’s the suspect in a sexual assault case that has frightened and angered a close-knit Toronto neighbourhood.

On March 5th, 2002, a seven-year-old girl and a friend were walking down a hallway at Holy Name Catholic School. Without warning, the girl was grabbed by the arm and pulled into a school washroom where she was sexually assaulted. The assailant escaped.

The disturbing attack was front page news and sent ripples of fear throughout the community. Toronto police conducted an exhaustive investigation, following up on hundreds of leads.

With little more than the eye witness testimony of two 7-year-olds, investigators theorized that the attacker was likely a transient who had chosen the school at random.

Having pursued every viable lead, police could do little more to advance their investigation and could only hope for a break in the case.

“As often happens, DNA produced a critical link that has completely changed our theory about the school assault and injected new life into a cold file,” says Detective Brian Borg, who heads up the Toronto Police Sexual Assault Unit’s Cold Case Squad, a three-member unit with a caseload of 300 unsolved crimes.

A semen sample collected at the crime scene was sent to Toronto’s Centre of Forensic Sciences where forensic scientists produced a DNA profile that was then submitted to the National DNA Data Bank in Ottawa. The profile generated a “hit” on the Crime Scene Index. It matched with genetic material collected from a sexual assault in

1990 when a 20-year-old woman was raped at gunpoint in her office.

For police, the most compelling aspect of the match was the fact that this afternoon attack had taken place in the same neighbourhood as the school assault.

“The two cases are at opposite ends of the spectrum,” according to lead investigator, Detective Sandy O’Grady. “They couldn’t be more different. The only thing linking them is the DNA the attacker left behind. Without it, these cases would never have been put together.”

A New Theory

The Data Bank hit inspired police to combine the evidence from both cases, including the composite drawings based on descriptions from the two victims.

“What we thought were random attacks have now been linked,” notes Detective Borg. “The fact that the two assaults are twelve years apart suggests we’re likely dealing with someone who knows the neighbourhood well and who may be known to residents. This is a huge break for us.”



The case remains unsolved and police continue to make repeated calls for the public's help because the likelihood of further attacks is high.

"How the offender has progressed to now sexually assaulting a seven-year-old in a school washroom is unknown to us," says Detective O'Grady. "But the science tells us this is the same person."

DNA evidence has also helped to clear more than 200 suspects who volunteered biological samples, but whose DNA profiles didn't match that of the perpetrator.

"That part has been what's surprised us the most – the terrific co-operation of people we've taken DNA from," remarks Detective Constable Doug Ward. "If you didn't do the crime and believe in the science – which is bulletproof – why not?"

DNA Shines Light on Baffling Murder

This case is just one of dozens of examples that the Toronto Cold Case Squad points to as evidence of the power of DNA evidence.

"You won't find stronger supporters of the National DNA Data Bank anywhere," adds Detective Borg. "While we haven't yet solved all of our cold cases, DNA evidence has linked assaults that we would have never even

considered. The Data Bank hits are a real shot in the arm for frustrated investigators and, more importantly, for the victims and their families."

Citing another example, Detective Borg explains that a Data Bank match, linking genetic material at two different crime scenes, has produced a vital piece of evidence in an unsolved Toronto murder.

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turned up almost nothing about the killer," notes the Toronto detective.

A DNA profile was generated from samples taken from the crime scene and submitted to the National DNA Data Bank's Crime Scene Index. A hit on the system linked this case to a 1997 sexual assault on another prostitute.

"With this new lead, we went back to the '97 case and found a physical description of the attacker," explains Detective Borg. "This is a critical piece of evidence we didn't have before. We've re-opened the investigation and are much more hopeful that we'll find the perpetrator."

Solving Armed Robberies through DNA

Detective Borg is quick to point out that DNA evidence can be vital in cracking cases other than murders and assaults. He notes that a Data Bank hit has also uncovered a key piece of evidence in a string of armed robberies dating back to December 2002.

"A group of suspects would enter a restaurant just before closing and order a meal," explains Detective Borg. "Once the place had closed down and the other patrons had left, they'd rob the place."

And the critical piece of DNA evidence?

"One of the suspects had a beer," adds Detective Borg. "The Toronto

lab was able to generate a DNA profile from saliva on the glass which produced a Data Bank link to an old sexual assault case. This is an important piece of the puzzle and it's moving the investigation in a very positive direction."

Vital Tool that Works

As the head of a small unit with 300 difficult cases, Detective Borg emphasizes the value of DNA in helping to make the most of limited resources – pursuing the best leads and eliminating the innocent. He's convinced the Data Bank has caused a dramatic evolution in the way police investigate serious crime.

"For us, it boils down to enhancing public safety," he says. "As far as the Data Bank is concerned, from a very practical perspective – it works."

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