

Houston Sexual Assault Kit Research

Frequently Asked Questions

August 2014

Q: Who are we?

A: The project group is a multi-disciplinary team committed to addressing the problem of sexual violence in the Houston area. Representatives from law enforcement, prosecutors, advocates, crime lab personnel, academic researchers, and medical personnel make up the team. The group came together to work on a federally funded research grant to study sexual assault kits (SAKs). We are taking a broad-based approach to studying the local criminal justice system response to sexual assaults. The group has spent the last three years wrestling with persistent questions about how to best respond to sexual assaults.

Q: What is a SAK?

A: SAK stands for sexual assault kit. It is collected during a forensic medical exam and includes any combination of vaginal, anal, or oral swabs, pubic hair combing, blood and urine specimens, and fingernail scrapings. SAKs are collected by trained sexual assault nurse examiners. Completed SAKs are placed in the custody of law enforcement and held in controlled storage until it can be submitted to a crime laboratory for analysis. These are collected at no cost to victims in the state of Texas.

Q: What is the problem?

A: Many cities across the United States, including Houston, have discovered that SAKs have been collected but the evidence was never submitted to a crime lab for analysis. People are starting to learn about why this situation existed and jurisdictions are working to test evidence in these SAKs that were never submitted. Testing evidence from these unsubmitted SAKs may produce new investigative leads that can contribute to justice for victims and help hold offenders accountable. We do not currently have good information about what will happen in these cases when the evidence is tested.

Q: What are our objectives?

A: We set out to understand the factors that led to the large number of previously untested SAKs, and, in a broader sense, understand how to improve responses to sexual assault crimes. The group felt it was important to emphasize a victim-centered approach. We also started with the idea that it is necessary to fully study a situation before making changes. By including stakeholders from many areas, the project group hopes to improve the criminal justice system response to sexual assault from the initial point of contact with an agency through prosecution.

Q: What have we been doing?

A: The group has been working collaboratively since early 2011 to collect information that provides an understanding of the responses to sexual assaults. The group is using this information to make several changes to address any identified problems and to build on successful policies already in effect. The working group has been sharing information about this project through reports and presentations.

Q: What is happening with unsubmitted SAKs in Houston?

A: HPD has been testing evidence from all SAKs in their custody that had not previously been tested. Cases are being given investigative review and HPD investigators are pursuing new leads. All cases that had a SAK collected, regardless of whether new leads are identified, are being reviewed. HPD now automatically submits all SAKs for laboratory analysis, ensuring that a situation like this will not occur in the future. Victims can contact the HPD hotline to learn about the status of their kit and case at [713-308-1400](tel:713-308-1400) and at SAinfo@houstonpolice.org.

Q: What are some of our successes?

A: One of our successes has been the multi-disciplinary group's ability to work together, make positive change, and continually evolve to examine new issues. In addition, new training opportunities have been created for criminal investigators, specialized units formed to investigate and prosecute crimes with new leads, and greater levels of victim advocacy have been injected into criminal investigations and prosecutions. Our other successes include the development of a formal victim notification protocol, the establishment of a hotline for victims to contact and obtain updated information about the status of their cases, and building communication channels for agencies to proactively discuss situations before they turn into problems.

Q: What is a CODIS hit?

A: CODIS is the acronym for the “Combined DNA Index System.” CODIS is a generic term used to describe the national criminal justice DNA databases, as well as the software used to run these databases. DNA profiles from forensic evidence, as well as from convicted offenders, get uploaded into the database. A “CODIS hit” can occur in two ways. The first is when DNA obtained from a SAK is entered into CODIS and it matches to an offender already registered in the system. The second way is a case-to-case hit in which an unidentified DNA profile matches an unidentified profile that was uploaded from a past case. To learn more about CODIS, please visit <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/lab/biometric-analysis/codis>.

Q: What is next?

A: The group is currently preparing materials that will describe many aspects of the project in order to share information with other jurisdictions. We plan to continue our work in Houston after the federally funded grant ends in October 2014.

Q: How can I learn more about this project?

A: The working group will continue to make information, including project reports and findings, available at <http://www.houstonsakresearch.org>.