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THE KILLERS OF L.A.

DNA nabs three serial killers in four years, most recently through a familial search

From all the hoopla surrounding the arrest of the “Grim Sleeper” (so dubbed because after an unexplained hiatus he supposedly rose to kill again) one would think it marks the end of a decades-long quest to capture the city’s most murderous evildoer. Well, think again. Thanks to DNA, LAPD detectives have arrested three – that’s right, *three* – serial killers in the last four years, and Lonnie Franklin isn’t necessarily the most prolific.

April 30, 2007 was the day that society finally washed its hands of [Chester Turner](#). Convicted of raping and strangling ten women and causing the death of a viable fetus, the middle-aged crack dealer had passed the final two decades of the twentieth century preying on prostitutes in the poverty-stricken neighborhoods that image-conscious politicians recently christened South Los Angeles but locals still call south-central.

In 2002 Turner’s imprisonment on a rape conviction led authorities to place his DNA profile in the state databank. One year later an LAPD cold-case detective matched DNA from a 1998 south-central murder to Turner. Assembling profiles from dozens of similar killings, the detective matched Turner to nine more. But there was a glitch. You see, three had already been “solved” with the 1995 conviction of another Los Angeles man, [David Allen Jones](#).

A mentally retarded janitor in jail for raping a prostitute, Jones initially denied killing anyone. Detectives finally badgered him into making incriminating statements in three cases. Only problem was, as [the D.A. later conceded](#), his blood type didn’t match biological evidence recovered from his alleged victims. But prostitutes have complicated sex lives, so prosecutors convinced the jury that this apparent inconsistency wasn’t definitive.

Jones was exonerated and freed in March 2004. He was compensated \$800,000 for his eleven years in prison.

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Well, Turner's DNA *was* present. At trial his attorney argued that it only proved that his client had sex with the women, not that he killed them. Jurors were unswayed. Turner is presently on death row awaiting execution.

During the mid-1970's someone was [raping and killing elderly white women](#) in southwest Los Angeles county. After subsiding for a few years the murders resumed nearly forty miles to the east, in the Claremont area. By 2009 there were two dozen, all unsolved.

Meanwhile, back in south-central, detectives were still on the trail of one or more killers, as many more prostitutes were slain than could be attributed to Turner. Finally in 2002 Chief Bratton ordered his troops to form a cold-case squad. Detectives began comparing biological evidence from unsolved cases in south-central to the DNA profiles of sex-crime registrants. One of these was John Thomas, 72, a parolee who had been imprisoned for rape in 1978. Although his DNA didn't match any of the south-central killings, it matched at least two of the southwest homicides. His time in prison also coincided with the interval between the waves of murder, and he was paroled to Chino, not far from Claremont.

Thomas was arrested in April 2009. After more DNA testing [he faces trial in seven killings](#). Detectives think that he is responsible for others as well.

By 2008 the south-central investigation was stalled. All remaining crime-scene DNA had been compared to the DNA profiles of convicted felons in state and federal DNA databanks, without further success. Then, only two weeks ago, detectives received startling news: [California's DNA database had a partial match](#).

DNA identification focuses on thirteen known locations, or "loci," in the human genome. Each contains chemical sequences that are inherited from one's parents. The FBI considers it a match if crime scene DNA and suspect DNA have identical sequences at no less than ten loci, and there are no dissimilarities. Some analysts and state labs accept fewer. Now, unrelated persons will frequently match at one, two or even three loci, but the odds that they will share chemical sequences at, say, five or more loci are very low. (For more about DNA identification click [here](#).)

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A year ago California DOJ launched a [familial DNA](#) program, the first in the U.S. California's DNA repository has DNA profiles for most convicted felons. Until recently the practice has been to report no match with DNA profiles submitted for comparison unless a sufficient number of loci (say, ten) are identical, and there are no dissimilarities. Now, in serious cases, the state will provide the name of any felon in its databank whose DNA profile, although not identical to the submitted DNA (dissimilarities exist at one or more loci) is sufficiently similar to suggest a familial relation. (Pioneered in Great Britain, this procedure has also been adopted by Colorado. It's under consideration in other states and by the FBI.)

Detectives finally had their break. State analysts reported that a DNA profile from the south-central killings likely belonged to a brother or the father of a felon in the state databank. And it got better: that profile wasn't from just one killing: it was from *ten*, seven in the late 1980's and three between 2002-2007.

Detectives took on the father, who had lived in south-central Los Angeles for decades, as the likely candidate. Learning that he would be attending a birthday party at a restaurant, an undercover officer bussed his plates, utensils and leftovers. One assumes that yielded a complete, thirteen-loci DNA profile. Analysts compared it to the DNA found on the ten murder victims. There was no question: [it was a perfect match](#).

Four days ago LAPD detectives arrested Lonnie Franklin Jr., 57. Although he has an extensive criminal record, including theft, assault, weapons offenses and, as recently as 2003, for car theft, his DNA [had never made it into the state database](#). Without familial DNA, Franklin would have probably never been caught.

Dozens of south-central killings lack DNA and remain uncleared. However, detectives [found guns](#) in Franklin's home, and since some victims were shot they're hoping that ballistics can help. In any event, police are confident that, like Thomas, Franklin committed many more murders than what they can presently prove.

At last report, they think as many as thirty more.

Not everyone thinks highly of familial DNA. While [California Attorney General Jerry Brown](#) and police officials enthusiastically call it a "breakthrough," the ACLU's Michael Richter thinks that it could lead innocent persons to be harassed. Winding one's way through family trees, he worries, "has the potential to invade the privacy of a lot of people."

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Richter's fears seem overblown. Policing is more likely to threaten privacy interests when physical evidence is lacking. Struggling with its own prostitute serial-killer situation, [Daytona Beach](#) recently asked gun stores to identify everyone who bought a certain model of weapon during a two-year period (natch, the NRA is crying foul.) *That's* intrusive, perhaps unavoidably so. DNA, including familial DNA, can prevent years of fruitless interviews and unproductive searches, to say nothing of more killings and a wrongful conviction. When properly used it's everyone's best friend.

Of course, good detective work is crucial. Every time that a new maniac comes to light there's a tendency to go "aha!" and attribute all unsolved homicides to them, risking that some culpable parties will go scot-free. Pressures to clear cases have led to [wrongful convictions](#) (remember David Allan Jones?) And [as we've pointed out before](#), multiple DNA contributors and [mixed DNA samples](#) can yield ambiguous, even incorrect results. In the end, CSI can't do it alone. Proving that Franklin did more than have sex with his victims will require corroboration, either through statements, other physical evidence (like ballistics) or circumstantially, say, through his whereabouts and activities. It will certainly make for a fascinating trial.

We could also do with a bit of introspection. What in the end detectives skillfully resolved was, for victims and their loved ones, solved far too late. Why did it take until 2002 to mount a cold-case campaign? Would we have responded differently had the victims been different or had the killings occurred in a more affluent area?

And one must wonder. Three killers (one convicted, two alleged) are locked up. Is there a number four?