

The Star

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A boost to crime-fighting

By early next year South Africa is likely to get its first national DNA database in a move that will see improvements in crime investigation and bring the country in line with other advanced nations.

This is good news for crime-rattled citizens, frustrated when detectives at the scenes of house robberies, hijackings and the like seem unable to do much if they fail to catch the suspects red-handed. In future any DNA evidence will be run through a database and throw out matches or links with any other crime on record.

This boost is part of the overhaul of the criminal justice system and will provide an essential mechanism to boost the investigation of crime. At present it is not compulsory for convicts to be fingerprinted, and only a medical doctor is permitted to take DNA samples. Many are understandably reluctant to approach violent offenders in the cells to do this job.

The proposed new legislation makes provision for the DNA profiling of all prison inmates, convicts and suspects arrested for serious offences. No longer is it only a medical doctor who can take the samples, but police officers will be authorised to take saliva swabs or draw blood from a finger prick.

DNA is seen as the most accurate way of matching a suspect to evidence found on a scene, with new research showing that it is five times more accurate than fingerprints. This will be worrisome for criminal offenders as once their DNA profile is on record, their presence on any crime scene in future will be easily detected and can be proven in a court of law. This is a significant factor in a country that has a recidivism rate of well over 90%.

The Criminal Law (Forensic Procedures) Amendment Bill 2008 addresses current technology limitations by linking the police electronically with Home Affairs and eNaTIS.

It is envisaged that the Bill will be processed by Parliament early in the new year and come into effect immediately after that.

This can only mean positive things for our country, so hard hit by crime.