
Leaked Home Office e-mails reveal controversial plans to hold onto innocent DNA for up to six years

By Ruth
Dayspring
2/11/09

News of Home Office plans to keep the DNA of hundreds of thousands of innocent people in defiance of a European court ruling has been met with outrage by civil liberties and human rights groups.

Attempt to recruit relatives of murder victims in a bid to keep innocent DNA

Leaked e-mails from the Home Secretary, Alan Johnson's office have revealed government plans to thwart the ruling made by the European Court of Human Rights last year, and continue to store the DNA of innocent people for up to six years news reports have revealed .

The e-mails detail information on Alan Johnson attempting to recruit relatives of high profile murder victims to manage the 'media handling of this contentious plan'.

This latest development flies in the face of the Home Office announcement made last month that it was withdrawing a proposal for the retention of DNA profiles from people arrested but not convicted from the policing and crime bill when it faced the threat of defeat in the House of Lords.

The government's misinterpretation of the European Court ruling and their manoeuvres over the last nine months to retain the DNA of hundreds of thousands of innocent citizens has been met with unease in many quarters.

'It is very disappointing that the government is still disregarding the spirit as well as the letter of the European court ruling by insisting

on retention of data of innocent people for any length of time,'Olu Alake - President, 100 Black Men of London told Black Mental Health UK.

The damaging impact of the criminal database of ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups led to closer scrutiny of the management of the database by race equality groups who have condemned for criminalising the whole of Britain's black communities .

The community has lost of faith in this government's ability to manage the database

Although people from African Caribbean communities have lower offending rates than their white counterparts, the over policing of people from this group has led to a alarming high numbers of innocent black people being profiled on the criminal database. Currently over 77% of young black men between the ages of 18 to 35 are on the DNA database

Adults from the community have not fared any better under this system. Evidence presented to a Home Affairs Select Committee on the DNA database shows that 42% of black men on are on the DNA database compared with just 9% of all Asians and 6% of white people. In London alone 57% of innocent DNA samples have been taken from the black population.

The disturbingly high numbers of innocent people from African Caribbean communities who have their DNA stored on the database, and the high numbers of innocent mental health patients, who have had their DNA taken when they have been sectioned under the Mental Health Act, has also led to widespread condemnation of how this new technology has been used, with observers calling it the digital equivalent of the 1980's sus laws.

'The Home Office response to European Ruling has not been at all reassuring, and there is great unease within the community over the way the Government has handled this. The community has lost all faith in this Government's ability to manage the database, we can't understand why there is this big drive to keep innocent DNA on the system for criminals,' Matilda MacAttram, director of Black Mental Health UK said.

Public mistrust in government ability to manage data at an all time high

Since the landmark ruling in December last year, over 90,000 or close to 1,480 a day innocent people have been added to the datase.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission wrote to the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) last month, giving them 28 days to confirm that the advice they had given their officers to continue to take innocent DNA samples has been withdrawn and replaced with advice which complies with the law. The EHRC warned that if ACPO fails to do this legal action may be taken against them.

'The police are at the forefront of the fight against crime. The importance of this fight cannot be underestimated but it should comply with the government's legal obligation to protect the privacy of innocent people, as outlined by the European court,' John Wadham, the commission's legal director, said.

The European Court on Human Rights ruled that storing the DNA of innocent people who have been arrested but never convicted is illegal.

These latest leaks, published in the Daily Mail last week, have shed light on Home Office proposals which would allow the police to continue to keep the DNA, swabs and fingerprints of those who have been arrested by the police but never convicted.

'There are grave concerns over the lack of attention being paid to the discriminatory nature of this data, with 75% of Black men on the register and the black populace as a whole disproportionately represented. We urge the government to reconsider this option seriously for the sake of good relations and community faith in the authorities,' Alake added.

With mistrust for in the Government's ability to safeguard personal data at an all time high. Findings from research by the campaigns group Big Brother Watch, show that 86% of those polled fear for the safety of private data in Government hands is a view which resonates with many innocents on the dataset.