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### Harris County morgue takes on property crimes

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Associated Press

HOUSTON -- The number of property crimes being handled by the morgue in Harris County has skyrocketed, as authorities increasingly use DNA technology best known for aiding homicide and sexual assault investigations to solve burglaries and thefts.

The Harris County Medical Examiner's Office got twice as many property crimes submitted for investigation in 2008 as it did in the previous year.

The lab can test blood or skin cells left invisibly at a burglary or theft scene, or can pull DNA from cigarette butts, partially eaten food or drink containers.

DNA labs elsewhere don't typically have the resources to test evidence for burglaries or thefts, said forensic biology lab director Dr. Roger Kahn, but Harris County has one of the few labs in the nation trained in five disciplines: forensic biology, trace evidence, fire debris analysis, drug analysis and toxicology.

The lab operates independently of law enforcement agencies, aiding more than 65 agencies within the county, and is not affiliated with the Houston Police Department lab, which has had hundreds of its cases reviewed because of inaccuracies.

Kahn told the Houston Chronicle for its Sunday online editions that the Harris County lab receives more evidence connected to attacks on people and prioritizes those cases over property crimes, but analysts actually have better odds at solving property crimes.

"These are crimes that don't often get solved" without such testing, Khan said.

Nearly two-thirds of the property crime cases sent to the lab match other crimes or a suspect already in the national database system.

The lab, which tests everything from sweat left on a window to vomit at a crime scene, has linked evidence from 392 cases to other crimes or suspects in a national database, including 240 property crimes and 152 attacks on people.