

# Evaluation of mixed-source, low-template DNA profiles in forensic science

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Enhancements in sensitivity now allow DNA profiles to be obtained from only tens of picograms of DNA, corresponding to a few cells, even for samples subject to degradation from environmental exposure. However, low-template DNA (LTDNA) profiles are subject to stochastic effects, such as “dropout” and “dropin” of alleles, and highly variable stutter peak heights. Although the sensitivity of the newly developed methods is highly appealing to crime investigators, courts are concerned about the reliability of the underlying science. High-profile cases relying on LTDNA evidence have collapsed amid controversy, including the case of Hoey in the United Kingdom and the case of Knox and Sollecito in Italy. I argue that rather than the reliability of the science, courts and commentators should focus on the validity of the statistical methods of evaluation of the evidence. Even noisy DNA evidence can be more powerful than many traditional types of evidence, and it can be helpful to a court as long as its strength is not overstated. There have been serious shortcomings in statistical methods for the evaluation of LTDNA profile evidence, however. Here, I propose a method that allows for multiple replicates with different rates of dropout, sporadic dropins, different amounts of DNA from different contributors, relatedness of suspected and alternate contributors, “uncertain” allele designations, and degradation. R code implementing the method is open source, facilitating wide scrutiny. I illustrate its good performance using real cases and simulated crime scene profiles.

forensic genetics | forensic identification | statistical genetics | weight of evidence

## Reliability of Low-Template DNA Profiling

Problems with the courtroom use of low-template DNA (LTDNA) profiles were brought into sharp focus in the United Kingdom in 2007, with the collapse of a trial arising from the Omagh bombing in Northern Ireland in 1998. This crime killed 29 people and injured many more; consequently, early termination of the trial and acquittal of the defendant attracted widespread adverse publicity. The judge gave several reasons, but it was his critical appraisal of the LTDNA evidence that captured headlines. In response to the controversy, a report reviewing LTDNA evidence (1) was commissioned by the UK Forensic Science Regulator. The report found the underlying science to be “sound” and LTDNA profiling to be “fit for purpose,” although admitting that there was lack of agreement “on how LTDNA profiles are to be interpreted.”

I suggest that these comments are somewhat contradictory: Without valid methods of assessing evidential strength, a technique cannot be fit for purpose in the criminal justice system. Fig. 1 shows part of the electropherogram (epg) giving the results from replicate LTDNA profiling runs in a crime investigation. The two eggs show substantial similarity yet also important differences: For example, the 17 allele at locus D19 is detected in Fig. 1 (*Left*) but not in Fig. 1 (*Right*), yet the reverse is true for the 11 allele. Is a technology that produces such variable results reliable? This is often asked by legal commentators, but the term “reliable” is too vague for the question to be useful. What is evident is that there is substantial, but imperfect, information in

these results about the genotypes of individuals contributing DNA to the sample. The important question is whether or not we can extract that information with enough statistical efficiency for it to be useful while avoiding overstatement of evidential strength. Fortunately, progress has been made on this front since publication of the report by Caddy et al. (1), and I propose here a methodology for robust and efficient analyses of LTDNA evidence that is incorporated in a freely available suite of R functions.

## Case of Knox and Sollecito

Table 1 shows three interpretations of the DNA evidence at five loci from exhibit 165B of the trial in Perugia, Italy, in 2009. The exhibit includes the clasp of a bra, attached to some apparently blood-stained fabric, that was found near the murdered woman, Meredith Kercher. The report (2), written by two academic experts from the Sapienza Università di Roma, was highly critical of the prosecution’s DNA evidence at trial and led to the convictions of Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito being overturned on appeal. Here, I will use “interpretation” for the process of deciding which epg peaks are allelic and “evaluation” for the calculation of numerical measures of evidential weight for an interpretation.

The interpretation by the Italian Scientific Police presented at trial identified exactly the alleles of the victim and one of the coaccused, Sollecito, in the DNA profiling results. Using methods described below, I computed a weight of evidence (WoE) in favor of the contributors of DNA being Kercher and Sollecito, rather than Kercher and an unknown man, of >15 bans. The ban is the unit of WoE introduced by Alan Turing (3):  $x$  bans means  $\log_{10}(\text{LR}) = x$ , where LR is the likelihood ratio, such that 6 bans means an LR of 1 million. In reviewing the evidence, Vecchiotti and Conti (2) agreed with the alleles originally identified but also reported many additional epg peaks. They cited recommendation 6 of Gill et al. (4) in concluding that all peaks in stutter positions should be regarded as allelic. Of the 24 additional peaks identified by Vecchiotti and Conti (2), of which 6 had heights below the threshold of 50 relative fluorescence units, 9 are included in the profile of the other codefendant, Knox, providing apparent support for the presence of DNA from her. However, four of her alleles were not observed, including two homozygotes, which are less prone to dropout.

These interpretations pose problems for standard methods of evidence evaluation because of the alleles not attributable to any of the profiled individuals, uncertainty over whether or not Knox is a contributor, and the need to allow for the possibility that subthreshold peaks may be allelic. The number of above-threshold alleles recorded at any locus is six or less, which implies three

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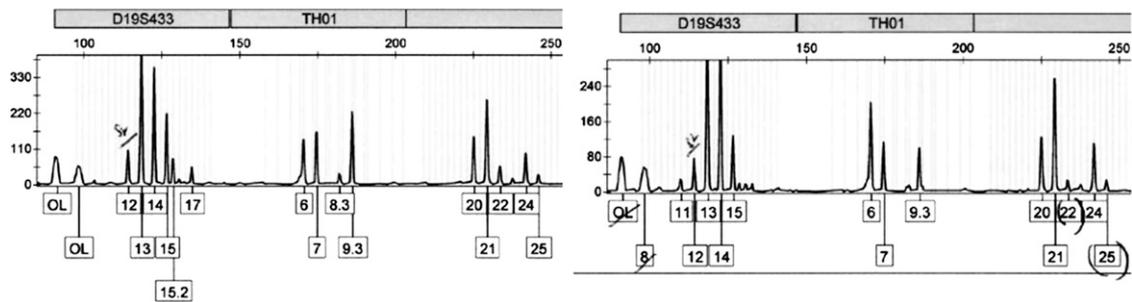
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**Fig. 1.** Illustrative epgs from a swab of a handgun magazine. Two replicates are shown at three loci: D19, TH01, and FGA. Note the different y-axis scales, chosen automatically, in units of relative fluorescence units; the x axis shows fragment length in base pairs. Allele labels in boxes are assigned automatically but can be overridden by a forensic expert taking into account factors like peak morphology and potential stutter. Some manual annotations are shown, indicating subthreshold peaks in ( ) as well as possible artifacts, such as stutter.

or more contributors of DNA. However, if Knox is assumed to be a contributor, the alleles not attributable to her still imply three or more other contributors. I first compare these prosecution ( $H_p$ ) and defence ( $H_d$ ) hypotheses for the contributors of DNA:

$H_p$ : Kercher, Knox, Sollecito, and one unknown individual

$H_d$ : Kercher, Knox, and two unknown individuals

I introduce an innovation to likelihood-based analyses to allow for an “uncertain” allele designation. In previous formulations (5–10), the likelihood at a locus in a profiling run is the product over all allelic positions in the epg of one of four possible terms, according to whether or not the corresponding allele is represented in the crime scene profile (CSP) and whether or not it is included in the profiles of any of the hypothesized contributors (*Materials and Methods*). I introduce here a fifth possibility corresponding to an absence of information about whether the allele is present, irrespective of whether or not it is included in the profile of a hypothesized contributor. An assumption of no information is appropriate if there is substantial uncertainty, for example, due to borderline peak height or the possibility that a peak is due to stutter or other artifact.

Using this uncertain designation for the six subthreshold alleles, the estimated dropout rate for Knox is close to 100%. A separate analysis with her as the queried contributor returned an  $LR < 1$ , also favoring a conclusion of no DNA from her. I reran the analysis excluding Knox from both  $H_p$  and  $H_d$ , and obtained an LR in favor of  $H_p$  of 42 million (WoE = 7.6 bans). Thus, although the additional alleles have, by providing evidence for an additional contributor, weakened the evidence implicating Sollecito by a massive 8 bans, this evidence nevertheless remains strong. Moreover, Gill et al. (4) did not consider uncertain

designations for peaks that are potentially due to stutter. After reclassifying as uncertain all peaks below 15% of the height at one extra repeat unit, a common stutter guideline (4), there remain four alleles not attributable to either Sollecito or Kercher and the WoE is increased to 10.7 bans.

Note that I cannot address here issues of how the DNA came to be in the exhibit: Possible contamination was an issue in the trial and appeal. I only consider whether there is DNA from Sollecito for which the evidence remains very strong after allowing for the additional alleles identified by Vecchiotti and Conti (2) and the possibility that apparent stutters are allelic.

### LikeLTD Software

The probability model used to calculate these LR is implemented in the likeLTD (likelihoods for LTDNA profiles) software, which computes likelihoods for hypotheses, such as  $H_p$  and  $H_d$ , that specify the contributors to a sample of DNA, some or all of whom may have contributed low levels of possibly degraded DNA. For mixed-source profiles, epg peak heights are potentially informative beyond simply indicating whether or not an allele is present because they can reflect the amount of DNA, which may differ among contributors. However, this information can be difficult to exploit because peak heights for LTDNA are highly variable and this variability can be sensitive to the details of the profiling protocol used. The data input into likeLTD are the reference profiles, together with the CSP, coded as present/uncertain/absent at each allelic position in each replicate. Peak height information is used by the forensic scientist when deciding these classifications, for example, when assessing whether a peak in a stutter position should be regarded as allelic or uncertain. The full set of present/uncertain/absent indicators, combined over alleles, loci, and replicates, is highly informative about the amount of DNA from different contributors, and hence about dropout probabilities, permitting powerful and robust evaluations of evidential weight without the need to use sensitive peak height information.

In this article, I describe the probability model underlying likeLTD and assess its performance on real and artificial CSPs. I show that likeLTD provides a good solution to the problem of evaluating LTDNA profiles with up to two unprofiled contributors in addition to the queried contributor. The DNA evidence for Knox and Sollecito was criticized by Vecchiotti and Conti (2) because only a single DNA profiling run was performed. For any “noisy” scientific process, replicate analyses are desirable. This is broadly true for LTDNA evidence, but replication does have the potential disadvantage of dividing an already minuscule sample, which may adversely affect the results (11). As long as the noise is adequately modeled, which is possible by combining information over alleles and loci, replication is not a prerequisite for valid evaluation of the evidence. In Table 1, the extra uncertainty due to lack of replication has led to a much lower WoE than might have been realized had replicate PCR assays been successfully analyzed. In other words, a penalty for lack of replication

**Table 1.** Allele calls at 5 of 15 loci in the DNA profile obtained from exhibit 165B (case of Knox and Sollecito)

Locus	Trial*	Appeal <sup>†</sup>	New <sup>‡</sup>
D8	13, 15, 16	<u>11</u> , 12, 13, 14, 15, 16	<u>11</u> , <u>12</u> , 13, 14, 15, 16
D21	30, 32.2, 33.2	29, 30, 32.2, 33.2	29, 30, 32.2, 33.2
D7	8, 11	8, 10, 11	8, <u>10</u> , 11
CSF	10, 12	10, 11, 12	10, <u>11</u> , 12
D3	14, 16, 17, 18	14, <u>15</u> , 16, 17, 18	14, <u>15</u> , 16, 17, 18
LR <sup>§</sup>	$7 \times 10^{15}$ (15.8 bans)	$4 \times 10^7$ (7.6 bans)	$5 \times 10^{10}$ (10.7 bans)

\*Alleles reported at the original trial.

<sup>†</sup>Alleles identified by Vecchiotti and Conti (2); underlined alleles have peak heights <50 relative fluorescent units.

<sup>‡</sup>Apparent stutters are also underlined (peaks with a height <15% of the peak height at one extra repeat unit).

<sup>§</sup>LR for Sollecito to be a contributor of DNA, given that Kercher is a contributor, based on all 15 loci [ $x$  bans means  $\log_{10}(\text{LR}) = x$ ].

arises automatically in likelihoods that model stochastic phenomena, such as dropout or dropout.

## Results

**Hammer Case.** The profile data in Table 2, consisting of two CSP replicates and reference profiles from a queried contributor, Q, and two victims, K1 and K2, are taken from Table 2 of a study by Gill et al. (7), which did not consider the possibility of uncertain allele calls. There is some variability across the two replicates, a symptom of low-template and/or degraded DNA, such that 12 alleles are observed in only one of the two replicates. There are a total of 6 alleles,  $\leq 2$  per locus and all of them unreplicated, that are not from Q, K1, or K2. This suggests a comparison of the following two hypotheses for the contributors of DNA to the sample:

$$H_p: Q + K1 + K2 + U1,$$

$$H_d: X + K1 + K2 + U1,$$

where X and U1 are both unprofiled individuals. The distinction between them is that X is the alternative to Q; thus, the ethnic backgrounds of X and Q, and the degree of relatedness between them, can have important impacts on the WoE, whereas U1 plays the same role under both  $H_p$  and  $H_d$ .

Every CSP allele attributable to K2 could also come from K1 or Q (Table 2); thus, under  $H_p$ , there is no evidence for DNA from K2. However, under  $H_d$ , the DNA of Q is not present, leaving three CSP alleles that can be attributed to K2 but not to K1. Nevertheless, likeLTD estimates 100% dropout of the alleles of K2 in both replicates under both hypotheses. This is because the three alleles attributable to K2 under  $H_d$  are all replicated, whereas seven other alleles of K2 do not appear at all, indicating very high dropout; thus, likeLTD finds that attribution of the three alleles to K2 is unlikely. Although K2 cannot be excluded from contributing any DNA to the sample, these results indicate that including K2 in the analysis brings no explanatory power and so has a negligible impact on the WoE implicating Q as a contributor.

After removing K2 from  $H_p$  and  $H_d$ , the WoE is 10.6 (SD = 0.10).  $H_p$  is favored over  $H_d$  at every locus except D18 (-0.6 bans); the

most incriminating locus (2.5 bans) was D19, where Q has two rare alleles that appeared in both CSP replicates.

The WoE of 10.6 bans computed here is stronger than that obtained by Gill et al. (the maximum of the blue solid curve in figure 1 of ref. 7 is just over 9 bans). The extra discrimination power of likeLTD results from its extra flexibility, for example, allowing different dropout rates per replicate and per contributor.

I recoded eight CSP alleles as uncertain and observed differing effects at individual loci, depending, for example, on whether the uncertain allele is in the reference profile of Q. The resulting changes in the computed WoE match intuition; for example:

Locus D16, CSPa, allele 11: This is an allele of Q not shared with K1; thus, changing its status from present to uncertain reduces the WoE, but only slightly, because the allele is called in CSPb. The single-locus WoE decreases from 1.17 to 1.14 bans (Table 2, column 4).

Locus D21, CSPb, alleles 29 and 30: These are both alleles of K1 not shared with Q, and they are not called as alleles in CSPa. Thus, changing the allele call to uncertain has a bigger impact, although still modest. The WoE is increased by just over a deciban because of the reduction in possible genotypes for X.

There are also indirect effects on all loci, because the changes in allele calls have an impact on the support for dropout parameter values. Overall, the evidence is weakened but remains very strong at 9.3 bans (Table 2, bottom row).

**Simulated Profiles.** Detailed results for a range of tests of likeLTD on DNA profiles subject to a number of modifications, such as artificial dropout and dropout, as well as modifications to the modeling assumptions underlying likeLTD, are provided in *SI Text*. I summarize here the main conclusions.

For a one-contributor, two-replicate CSP with no dropout or dropout (*SI Text, section S2*), likeLTD returns almost exactly the same WoE as the standard match probability formula whether or not dropout is explicitly modeled (because the dropout rate is estimated at zero) and whether X is unrelated to Q or is a brother of Q. If I wrongly hypothesize two contributors rather than one, the dropout rate for the additional contributor is estimated at 100% and the WoE is unaffected. If the CSP is modified, the WoE at individual loci changes in line with expectations and the overall WoE is reduced. For a CSP affected by four dropouts and two dropouts over the two replicates, repeat likeLTD runs with a search length ( $n$ ) of 1,000 simulated annealing iterations (*Materials and Methods, Parameter Estimation*) give WoE values with a SD less than half of a deciban (about 11% on the LR scale). For  $n = 5,000$  and  $n = 10,000$ , the WoE is precise to <1% on the LR scale. When the alleged contributor Q was chosen at random, such that the prosecution hypothesis was false, the dropout rate for the noncontributor Q was estimated to be very high and, consequently, the WoE was usually negative and always low.

Proceeding to a two-contributor CSP (*SI Text, section S3*), with neither contributor known, a series of experiments introducing 50% dropout to one or both contributors, as well as uncertain allele calls due to stutter, gave satisfactory results in that parameter estimates and the WoE varied in accord with intuition. With three unknown contributors (*SI Text, section S4*), the larger number of parameters implies less precision in evaluating the WoE. With  $n = 1,000$  simulated annealing iterations, the overall WoE has an SD of 0.4 bans (a factor of 2.5 on the LR scale), which is reduced to 0.24 bans (a factor of 1.7 on the LR scale) and 0.03 bans (about 6%) for  $n = 5,000$  and  $n = 10,000$ , respectively. Taking a different three-contributor CSP, this time with one contributor a known and profiled individual, I investigated (*SI Text, section S5*) high and low extremes for the degradation parameters, the variance of the locus-specific parameters, and the dropout model power parameter. The WoE was relatively stable under these extreme perturbations, varying

**Table 2. Hammer case DNA profiles and results from two analyses**

Locus	D3	D16	D2	D8	D21
CSPa*	14	11 <sup>u</sup> , 13	20, 23	11 <sup>u</sup> , 12	28
	16	14	24, 25	13, 15	31
CSPb	14	11, 13	20, 24	11, 12	28, 29 <sup>u</sup> , 30 <sup>u</sup>
	16	14	25	13, 15 <sup>u</sup>	31, 31.2
Q <sup>†</sup>	<b>14, 16</b>	<b>11, 14</b>	<b>24, 25</b>	<b>12, 13</b>	<b>28, 31</b>
K1	<b>16, 16</b>	<b>13, 13</b>	<b>20, 20</b>	<b>11, 15</b>	<b>29, 30</b>
K2	<u>15, 17</u>	<u>12, 13</u>	<u>18, 25</u>	<b>11, 13</b>	<b>29, 30</b>
Other <sup>‡</sup>			23		31.2
WoE <sup>§</sup> , bans					
Mean (SD)	1.23 (0.057)	1.17 (0.033)	0.91 (0.084)	0.88 (0.029)	1.48 (0.14)
unc <sup>¶</sup>	1.10	1.14	0.95	0.94	1.59

\*The crime scene DNA sample was profiled in duplicate (CSPa and CSPb). Results from 5 of 10 loci are shown.

<sup>†</sup>The profiles of the two uncontested possible contributors of DNA, K1 and K2, and the queried contributor, Q, are shown using the notations: **replicated alleles**, unreplicated alleles, and **unobserved alleles**.

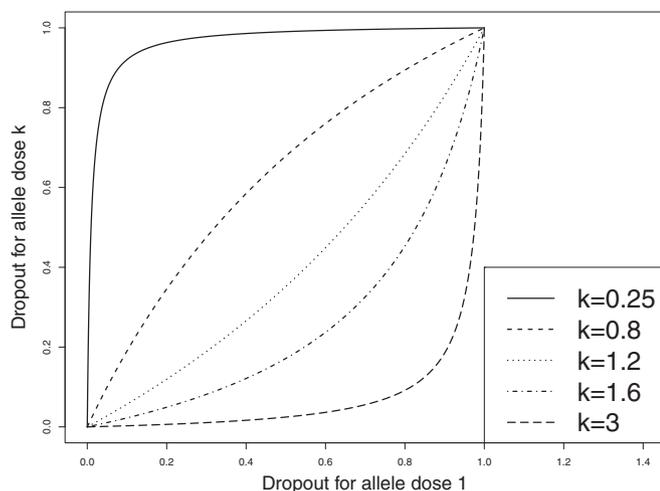
<sup>‡</sup>CSP alleles not attributable to any of Q, K1, or K2.

<sup>§</sup>WoE for Q to be a contributor, given that K1 and one unprofiled individual are also contributors. The mean 10-locus WoE from 25 likeLTD runs is 10.6 bans (SD = 0.10).

<sup>¶</sup>Mean WoE based on 10 likeLTD runs when eight alleles were reclassified as "uncertain," of which five were at the displayed loci and are indicated with <sup>u</sup>. The mean 10-locus WoE is 9.3 bans (SD = 0.15).







**Fig. 3.** Dropout probabilities for dose  $k$  of DNA ( $y$  axis) against those for a unit dose ( $x$  axis). The values of  $k$  are shown in the legend box.

or at the scene of recovery of the item. They can be generated from tiny fragments of the DNA molecule that persist for some time after the death and decay of a cell. Forensic scientists often restrict “dropin” to laboratory-based alleles, the rate of which can be measured by control runs and is usually found to be low. However, I cannot usually distinguish laboratory-based dropin from alleles arising at the crime scene (12).

Each dropin allele does come from an individual, but it may arise from very few and possibly degraded cells. It is computationally inefficient to sum over all possible genotypes, as in Eq. 4, for such low-level contributors; thus, I allow the possibility of modeling dropin more simply as independent Bernoulli trials (6). Dropin is nondropout of an allele of a low-level contributor; thus, I model the dropin probability as a constant ( $c$ ) times the nondropout rate for each replicate. As for the  $\gamma_i$ , I impose a weak penalty on  $c$  (exponential, mean = 0.5) to discourage solutions with a large  $c$ , reflecting background information that dropin is usually rare.

**Parameter Estimation.** To compute the LR, it is necessary to deal with the “nuisance” parameters under each hypothesis. These are the  $D(1)$  (one per replicate), the  $\alpha_s$  (one per locus), possibly a dropin parameter  $c$  (see above),

the contributions of DNA relative to the reference individual, and the  $\gamma_i$  (one for each contributor subject to dropout). The likeLTD program seeks to maximize a penalized likelihood over these parameters, with penalties on  $\alpha_s$ ,  $\gamma_i$ , and  $c$  as described above. The penalties can be thought of as prior distributions, but I do not use a Bayesian approach because I maximize over unknown parameters rather than integrate. The primary purpose of the penalty is to discourage the maximization algorithm from exploring unrealistic regions of the parameter space.

I use a simulated annealing algorithm (21) to maximize in an approximate manner the penalized likelihood  $L$ . Starting with  $L$  computed at any set of parameter values, the algorithm repeatedly takes a random step in parameter space; compute the penalized likelihood  $L'$ ; and accept the new state with probability  $\exp(-(L' - L)/t)$ , where  $t$  is the temperature, computed here as  $t = (1 - i/n)^3$ , with  $i$  and  $n$  being the current and total numbers of iterations. Our goal is to obtain the maximized  $L$  under each hypothesis:  $\widehat{L}_p$  and  $\widehat{L}_q$ . Estimates of the nuisance parameters are available as a byproduct. They may not be precise, because there are some regions of the space of nuisance parameters over which  $L$  varies little, particularly when both U1 and U2 are included in the hypotheses being compared, because their genotypes cannot easily be distinguished. However, the assessment of evidential weight uses only  $\widehat{L}_p/\widehat{L}_q$  and does not require precise estimates of the nuisance parameters.

Simulated annealing is a well-established algorithm with good properties, but there is no guarantee that it will find the exact maximum value of  $L$ . A larger  $n$  generally produces better approximations to the maximum; however, beyond a certain value, the improvement may be negligible. In *SI Text, section S2 and S3*, I show that  $n = 5,000$  provides good precision for hypotheses involving both U1 and U2, as well as excellent precision when U2 is not required.

**Computing Times.** Using  $n = 5,000$ , likeLTD requires a few minutes if neither U1 nor U2 is included in the hypotheses being compared, a few hours for U1 only, and several days for both U1 and U2. Other parameters affecting computing times include the number of replicates and whether dropin is modeled. The runs of likeLTD for the Hammer case and the Knox and Sollecito case reported here required just over 10 min per locus on a standard desktop machine. A much faster implementation of the algorithm is under development.

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