A Better Interpretation of "Special Needs" Doctrine After Edmond and Ferguson

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Case Comment

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United States v. Miles, 228 F. Supp. 2d 1130 (E.D. Cal. 2002).

In 2000, Congress enacted the DNA Analysis Backlog Elimination Act, which requires convicted sex offenders and other felons to submit DNA samples to the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS), a national database used to identify DNA evidence found at crime scenes. Two federal district courts have applied the Supreme Court’s special needs doctrine to determine whether the collection of samples from felons under the DNA Act violates the Fourth Amendment, with different results. This Comment argues that the debate over the constitutionality of the DNA Act demonstrates that the Supreme Court’s most recent interpretation of the special needs doctrine is misguided.

Two recent cases, United States v. Miles and United States v. Reynard, have reached different conclusions about whether the collection of samples under the DNA Act violates the Fourth Amendment. The Miles

2. The DNA Act also applies to individuals convicted of murder, voluntary manslaughter, kidnapping, robbery, and burglary, among other offenses. See id. § 14,135a(d).
4. 228 F. Supp. 2d 1130 (E.D. Cal. 2002).
6. Other courts have addressed this question. See, e.g., Roe v. Marcotte, 193 F.3d 72 (2d Cir. 1999); Boiling v. Romer, 101 F.3d 1336 (10th Cir. 1996); Rise v. Oregon, 59 F.3d 1556 (9th Cir. 1995); Jones v. Murray, 962 F.2d 302 (4th Cir. 1992); Kruger v. Erickson, 875 F. Supp. 583 (D. Minn. 1995). However, those cases were all decided prior to the Supreme Court’s decisions in City of Indianapolis v. Edmond, 531 U.S. 32 (2000), and Ferguson v. City of Charleston, 532 U.S. 67 (2001), and therefore are not relevant to my analysis of the current state of the special needs
and Reynard courts agreed that the blood-sample extractions mandated by the Act are warrantless searches lacking probable cause, and therefore would be constitutional only if they fell under the "special needs" exception to the warrant requirement. This exception holds that the government may conduct a search without a warrant or probable cause "when special needs, beyond the normal need for law enforcement, make the warrant and probable-cause requirement impracticable." Both courts further agreed that the Court's recent decisions in City of Indianapolis v. Edmond and Ferguson v. City of Charleston should be the guideposts for special needs inquiry. The courts disagreed only on the outcome of that inquiry: Miles struck down the DNA Act searches, while Reynard upheld them.

Part I of this Comment summarizes the special needs doctrine as interpreted in Edmond and Ferguson; Part II offers an alternative approach to the doctrine; and Part III applies that alternative approach to the CODIS, concluding that the constitutionality of the CODIS should be evaluated under the alternative doctrine.

I

In discussing the DNA Act searches, both the Miles and Reynard courts relied on City of Indianapolis v. Edmond and Ferguson v. City of Charleston. In Edmond, the Court struck down Indianapolis's highway checkpoint program, under which randomly stopped cars were visually inspected by officers and sniffed by narcotics-detecting dogs. Unlike highway checkpoints with virtually identical effects upheld in earlier cases, Indianapolis's program was created for the "primary purpose [of detecting] evidence of ordinary criminal wrongdoing." Thus, the Border
Patrol could stop cars near the border,\textsuperscript{17} and the police could stop motorists for sobriety checks,\textsuperscript{18} because in both cases the searches were justified by a primary purpose distinct from "general crime control ends," namely, safeguarding the border and removing drunk drivers from the roads. But because Indianapolis had conceded that its program "unquestionably [had] the primary purpose of interdicting illegal narcotics,"\textsuperscript{19} the program could not be similarly justified.

In \textit{Ferguson}, Charleston proved that it had learned from Indianapolis's unwise concession in \textit{Edmond}. Charleston argued that a public hospital's policy of testing pregnant women for cocaine use had the primary non-law-enforcement purpose of protecting the health of mother and child, and therefore fell within the special needs exception.\textsuperscript{20} The Court nevertheless struck down the program, concluding that while the "ultimate goal of the program" may have been to get the women into treatment, the "immediate object of the searches was to generate evidence for law enforcement purposes in order to reach that goal."\textsuperscript{21}

How did the Court distinguish the "immediate object of the searches" at issue in \textit{Ferguson} from the warrantless drug-testing programs upheld in earlier cases? Here again, the Court defined the special needs category by considering the primary purpose to which the government intended to put the results of the search. Each of the earlier programs upheld by the Court was justified by a purpose that did not involve arrest and prosecution: protecting the integrity of the front lines in the war on drugs,\textsuperscript{22} gathering reliable data on train accidents caused by substance abuse,\textsuperscript{23} or ensuring the safety of high school students.\textsuperscript{24} The Charleston policy, by contrast, focused on "the arrest and prosecution" of the drug-abusing mothers.\textsuperscript{25}

Taken together, \textit{Edmond} and \textit{Ferguson} articulate a kind of evidentiary approach to special needs analysis. In determining whether a warrantless search falls under the special needs exception, the court asks, "What is the primary purpose to which the government intends to put the results of the search?" If the answer is simply, "to generate evidence for law enforcement purposes,"\textsuperscript{26} then the exception does not apply. If, however, the government

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Martinez-Fuerte, 428 U.S. 543.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Sitz, 496 U.S. 444.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Edmond, 531 U.S. at 40. Because of this concession, the Court "express[ed] no view" on whether an \textit{idemical} checkpoint program justified by "the primary purpose of checking licenses" would be constitutional. \textit{Id.} at 47 n.2.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Ferguson v. City of Charleston, 532 U.S. 67, 73 (2001).
  \item \textsuperscript{21} \textit{Id.} at 83.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Nat'l Treasury Employees Union v. Von Raab, 489 U.S. 656, 670 (1989).
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Bd. of Educ. v. Earls, 536 U.S. 822 (2002).
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Ferguson, 532 U.S. at 82 (citation omitted).
  \item \textsuperscript{26} \textit{Id.} at 83.
\end{itemize}
can plausibly argue that it needs the search results primarily for something other than criminal prosecution, then the special needs exception applies.

The Miles and Reynard courts faithfully applied this test in their analyses of the constitutionality of the DNA Act searches. In both cases, the government argued that the primary purpose of the searches was to create a more accurate DNA database, which would assist law enforcement in solving past and future crimes and thereby ensure a more accurate criminal justice system.27 The Miles court concluded that this purpose was "indistinguishable from the government's basic interest in enforcing the law," since the evidence was being used to solve and prosecute crimes.28 The Reynard court, on the other hand, found that "the creation of a more accurate criminal justice system" was a purpose that went beyond "the normal need for law enforcement."29

Thus, the debate between the Miles and Reynard courts over the constitutionality of the DNA Act searches amounted to a semantic disagreement over the meaning of "law enforcement purposes."30 By focusing their attention on whether the creation of a more accurate criminal justice system is a "law enforcement purpose," both courts ignored many of the central issues pertaining to the reasonableness of the DNA Act searches.

This definitional quandary, moreover, is inevitable under the special needs test as articulated in Edmond and Ferguson. Those cases frame the special needs inquiry in terms of whether the government’s primary purpose in obtaining the results of the search is law-enforcement-related. In applying this test, lower courts faced with special needs arguments will have to determine (1) whether a given purpose is non-law-enforcement-related, and (2) if so, whether that is the primary purpose of the search.

But there are several reasons why these questions are not helpful in determining whether warrantless searches are reasonable, which is, after all, the point of the special needs exception. First, there is no reason to believe that searches conducted primarily for non-law-enforcement purposes are categorically more likely to be reasonable than law enforcement searches. The Court has noted, "It is surely anomalous to say that the individual and his private property are fully protected by the Fourth Amendment only when the individual is suspected of criminal behavior."31

28. 228 F. Supp. 2d at 1139.
29. 220 F. Supp. 2d at 1168.
30. At the end of its opinion, the Miles court noted, "The only difference between Reynard and the court's decision here is that in Reynard the court concluded that the Act's goals of ensuring accurate prosecution and creating a more complete DNA database were distinct from general law enforcement objectives." 228 F. Supp. 2d at 1141.
31. Camara v. Mun. Court, 387 U.S. 523, 530 (1967) (applying the warrant requirement to municipal housing inspections); see also Michigan v. Tyler, 436 U.S. 499, 504 (1978) ("The decisions of this Court firmly establish that the Fourth Amendment extends beyond the
Second, the distinction between law enforcement and non-law-enforcement purposes is not entirely clear. Most of the warrantless searches upheld under special needs analysis had a law enforcement purpose in the sense that they ultimately led to an arrest and/or criminal prosecution.\textsuperscript{32} Conversely, nearly any law enforcement search could also be said to have a non-law-enforcement purpose, since “law enforcement involvement always serves some broader social purpose or objective.”\textsuperscript{33} Thus, most warrantless searches will have both law enforcement and non-law-enforcement purposes. \textit{Edmond} and \textit{Ferguson} suggest that a special needs search is one in which the non-law-enforcement purpose is “primary,” but offer little guidance about how to distinguish primary from secondary purposes.\textsuperscript{34}

Third, the special needs test suggests that subjective intent is relevant to the reasonableness of the search: “[O]ur special needs... cases demonstrate that purpose is often relevant when suspicionless intrusions pursuant to a general scheme are at issue.”\textsuperscript{35} But this approach is inconsistent with the Court's holding in \textit{Whren v. United States} that an actor's motive does not “invalidate[] objectively justifiable behavior under the Fourth Amendment.”\textsuperscript{36}

II

The special needs doctrine as articulated in \textit{Edmond} and \textit{Ferguson} and applied in \textit{Miles} and \textit{Reynard} asks an evidentiary question: Does the government have a special (i.e., non-law-enforcement-related) need for the fruits of the search? I propose that the special needs doctrine should instead ask an administrative question: Does the context of the search at issue


\textsuperscript{34} D.H. Kaye, \textit{The Constitutionality of DNA Sampling on Arrest}, 10 CORNELL J. L. & PUB. POL'Y 455, 496 (2001) (“[N]either \textit{Edmond} nor \textit{Ferguson} reaches the more vexing question of what evidence can be used to infer purpose when the government contends that its immediate purpose in instituting an investigative practice is something other than (or in addition to) pure crime control.”).


\textsuperscript{36} 517 U.S. 806, 812 (1996); see also \textit{Edmond}, 531 U.S. at 52 (Rehnquist, C.J., dissenting) (“Once the constitutional requirements for a particular seizure are satisfied, the subjective expectations of those responsible for it, be it police officers or members of a city council, are irrelevant.”); George M. Dery III, \textit{A Deadly Cure: The Supreme Court's Dangerous Medicine in Ferguson v. City of Charleston}, 55 OKLA. L. REV. 373, 410 (2002).
create a special need for warrantless searches? When the government
conducts business-as-usual crime fighting, the Fourth Amendment requires
that searches and seizures be based on individualized suspicion.37 But when
the context of the search differs from everyday police work, the government
may be able to articulate a special need for warrantless searches, even if its
primary purpose in obtaining that evidence is prosecutorial.

Thus, school searches fall within the special needs exception because
the warrant requirement is unsuited to the school environment. Requiring
teachers, who are not familiar with Fourth Amendment jurisprudence, to
obtain a warrant before searching a student "would unduly interfere with
the maintenance of the swift and informal disciplinary procedures needed in
the schools."38 Similarly, warrantless stops near the border are permissible
on the ground that a warrant requirement "would be impractical because the
flow of traffic tends to be too heavy to allow the particularized study of a
given car."39 Likewise, suspicionless drug testing of railroad employees
immediately after an accident is necessary because the delay required to
obtain a warrant would destroy much of the toxicological evidence the
government needs to determine whether the accident was drug- or alcohol-
related—again, an administrative consideration.40 And so on.

The administrative interpretation of the special needs doctrine suggests
that the Edmond highway checkpoint program was unconstitutional
because, with the narrow exception of border searches,41 highway
checkpoints cannot be justified by an administrative special need. Drug
couriers are the targets of everyday law enforcement. Their illegal activities
are supposed to make them susceptible to apprehension through ordinary
law enforcement methods. The suspicionless searches at the highway
checkpoints were simply a shortcut around these methods.

The key fact in Ferguson was that law enforcement and city
prosecutors were involved in the hospital's drug-testing program from its
inception—deciding who would be tested, how and when the tests would be
conducted, and even establishing a chain of custody for the evidence.42
Unlike the drug tests of railroad employees (upheld in Skinner) or high

37. See Mincey v. Arizona, 437 U.S. 385, 393 (1978) ("[T]he mere fact that law enforcement
may be made more efficient can never by itself justify disregard of the Fourth Amendment.").
41. Border searches are necessary "because of national self protection reasonably requiring
one entering the country to identify himself as entitled to come in, and his belongings as effects
which may be lawfully brought in." Carroll v. United States, 267 U.S. 132, 154 (1925). The heavy
flow of traffic at the border makes a random search regime the only way to administer such
searches. But this administrative need does not extend to highway checkpoints outside the border
search context. See Edmond, 531 U.S. at 56 (Thomas, J., dissenting) ("I rather doubt that the
Framers of the Fourth Amendment would have considered 'reasonable' a program of
indiscriminate stops of individuals not suspected of wrongdoing.").
school students (upheld in Earls), the drug tests in Ferguson were not administered by officials unfamiliar with Fourth Amendment jurisprudence. Nor was there any danger, as in Skinner, that evidence would be lost because of the delay necessary to obtain a warrant, since the women were in the hospital for an extended period to give birth. The involvement of police and prosecutors in the administration of the program has constitutional significance, not because it reveals a primary law enforcement purpose, but rather because it suggests that, as in Edmond, the warrantless search program was nothing more than a police shortcut.

This brief account of the Court’s recent cases suggests that, under the administrative interpretation, the special needs doctrine would likely apply when (1) the search is administered by non-law-enforcement officials; (2) the delay necessary to obtain a warrant would result in the loss of evidence or otherwise frustrate the purpose of the search; or (3) the context in which the search is conducted necessarily requires randomness, for example because of the sheer number of searches involved.43

III

Does the context of the searches conducted pursuant to the DNA Act create a need for a warrantless regime of searches? The benefit to innocent persons of an accurate DNA database suggests that the answer is yes.

One reason suspicionless searches are disfavored under the Fourth Amendment is the burden such searches place on innocent persons.44 Under a suspicionless search regime, innocent persons are inconvenienced and intruded upon in a way they would not be if the government were required to obtain a warrant based on individualized suspicion of wrongdoing. Consequently, if a suspicionless search regime has important collateral benefits to innocent persons (beyond the generalized benefit of better law enforcement, which would exist in any search regime), those consequences are a good argument in favor of the constitutionality of the searches.

The Miles court quickly dismissed the benefit to innocent persons of an accurate DNA database, noting that “[i]f a convicted felon wants to be exonerated of a crime for which he is wrongly accused, he will presumably submit voluntarily to a DNA test.”45 But the court ignored the important benefit to a wrongly accused person of a database that would eliminate him as a suspect, not by ruling him out, but by incriminating someone else. For example, if two or more individuals commit a crime, but only one leaves

43. This list is meant to be illustrative (rather than exhaustive) of the kinds of administrative reasons that would justify a special needs exception.
44. See Arnold H. Loewy, The Fourth Amendment as a Device for Protecting the Innocent, 81 MICH. L. REV. 1229 (1983).
45. Miles, 228 F. Supp. 2d at 1139.
DNA evidence at the crime scene, the fact that my DNA does not match the
evidence does not eliminate me as a suspect. But if that evidence, through
the CODIS, incriminates another person whom I have never met and to
whom I have no connection, I have received an important collateral benefit
from the suspicionless search regime necessary to implement the CODIS.\textsuperscript{46}

The point here is that whether or not the maintenance of a DNA
database for the purpose of exonerating innocent persons is properly
characterized as law-enforcement-related, that benefit simply cannot be
achieved without a regime of warrantless searches. If the government had to
obtain a warrant before conducting DNA Act searches, the CODIS database
would likely fail. The government would not be able to establish probable
cause for the vast majority of the searches, and would not go to the trouble
of getting so many warrants even if it could. The warrantless searches
mandated by the DNA Act are not merely law enforcement shortcuts.
Rather, they are a necessary precondition to the maintenance of a DNA
database, which has an important value to innocent persons. Therefore, the
administrative interpretation suggests that the DNA Act searches should be
evaluated under the special needs exception to the warrant requirement.

There are, to be sure, important arguments against the constitutionality
of the CODIS. First, given the massive amounts of information about an
individual that can be revealed through DNA analysis, the extraction of a
DNA sample can be an extraordinarily intrusive search. If a searchee could
show that the Act's disclosure limitation requirements were insufficient or
ineffectively implemented, a court might conclude that the burden of the
search outweighed the benefits. Second, the burdens and benefits of the
suspicionless searches at issue here are disproportionately distributed. The
burdens of the DNA Act searches are most likely to fall on convicted
criminals, a politically powerless group, while the beneficiaries are the
members of society at large. These considerations, though, seem most
relevant at the second stage of the special needs inquiry—the balancing of
the privacy interests at stake against the nature of the government's
concern. My point here is not to establish the constitutionality of the DNA
Act, but rather to argue that my proposed interpretation of the special needs
doctrine suggests that the Act should be evaluated under that doctrine. The
DNA Act does fall within the special needs exception, not because its
primary purpose, immediate need, or ultimate objective is non-law-
enforcement-related, but because in the context of the searches at issue, the
government has important administrative reasons for needing a warrantless
regime of searches.

—Jonathan Kravis

\textsuperscript{46} See Akhil Reed Amar, A Search for Justice in Our Genes, N.Y. TIMES, May 7, 2002, at
A31.