



#StopShotSpotter

Surveillance is not safety.

An open letter to Mayor Justin Bibb, Cleveland City Council, Chief of police Wayne Drummond, Safety Director Karrie Howard

On behalf of concerned citizens and the undersigned organizations. We call upon Mayor Justin Bibb and all 17 members of Cleveland City Council to stop purchasing surveillance and start listening to communities calling for real solutions to gun violence. We urge you to either vote no on Ordinance No. 909-2022. There is no question that there is a serious gun violence problem in Cleveland. Audio gunfire sensor technology is not the answer to this problem, although we wish that there were a quick fix solution. Deep investment in communities - trauma counseling, job training, programs for kids, access to healthcare and resources, and more - takes a lot more time, but it is ultimately the only solution that will address the root causes of crime and gun violence and make Cleveland communities stronger and safer for everyone.

ShotSpotter technology regularly sends police, falsely expecting to find gunshots, into the Black, brown, and poor communities where microphones are embedded.[1] Instead of preventing gun violence, ShotSpotter tech profits from it. The expansion of ShotSpotter's gunshot detection business depends on continued violence.[2] ShotSpotter is the market standard, and our standing is that most audio gunfire sensor technology operates similarly. The way ShotSpotter works is that a human operator makes the final call about whether recorded audio that has been flagged is a gunshot or not. The self-reported accuracy rate for ShotSpotter is 80% accuracy. Assuming this self reported number is true - and in many cases it seems like it's not' - it still means that 20 times out of 100, police are responding to false positives where there is no shooter, which in turn means an increased number of police responses to false alarms.

This represents both an increased workload, and increased costs for police, as well as an increased risk to the community. If you're a police officer coming into what you assume is an active shooter situation, that is going to affect how you respond; in a city already under a consent decree, police will be coming into more false alarm situations under the assumption that there is an active shooter and thus much more likely to escalate.

ShotSpotter makes everyone in our communities less safe by increasing the number of heightened and harmful interactions with police. Majority Black, brown, and poor communities are already impacted by racist violence by police, and ShotSpotter technology helps further it.

Michael Williams,[3] Silvon Simmons,[4] Danny Ortiz,[5] and countless others have had their lives devastated by ShotSpotter technology in the hands of police. A ShotSpotter alert initiated the deployment of the Chicago Police officer who killed Adam Toledo in 2021.[6]

Independent research has found that police deployments in response to ShotSpotter alerts fail to result in any evidence of a gun crime about 90% of the time.[7] But we know that ShotSpotter has never released any detailed data or peer-reviewed analyses of its technology's benefits.[8]

ShotSpotter alerts have fueled racist and unconstitutional stop and frisk by police in major cities like Chicago, where researchers found police responding to ShotSpotter alerts used stop and frisk[9] thousands of times and that some officers justify stop and frisk in Black and brown neighborhoods by citing a supposed history of ShotSpotter alerts in the area. In Milwaukee, a police unit focused on investigating ShotSpotter alerts, draw guns on Black and brown residents more often than others.[10]

ShotSpotter profits off the fear of gun violence to sell technology that has not been properly validated [11] and secretly records us in our communities. The millions of dollars ShotSpotter extracts should go to communities that have repeatedly asked for help in reducing violence by extending support to the basic needs of community members.

In our work, when we ask our communities what is needed to end gun violence, they say youth programs, jobs, housing the homeless, mental healthcare, and COVID relief from the pandemic. Not ShotSpotter.

People are not asking for more surveillance in the form of hidden ShotSpotter microphones or more racist policing. ShotSpotter does not prevent guns from going off — it is only activated in response to suspected violence, and even then fails to lead to any evidence of a gun incident more than 90% of the time.[12]

None of this has stopped ShotSpotter from extracting hundreds of millions from more than 130 cities across the country and world, despite independent research that its product has made no impact on gun violence.[13] It's the same story across the country, from San Diego, to Durham, to NYC, to Louisville, to Houston, to Chicago, to Cleveland, and beyond.

Surveillance is not safety. We want real solutions to gun violence — not more theft of public money that brings more racist policing to our neighborhoods.

Cleveland’s contract with ShotSpotter expires November 2, 2022. Rather than renew this failed partnership, our elected officials need to invest in initiatives that reduce violent crime. Mental health & substance abuse services, recreational activities for the youth, job training, affordable housing, and access to higher education are all proven to make communities safer. Not ShotSpotter. The community stands to be affected by this proproposed increased surveillance and should have the opportunity to review a use policy and impact assessment, and to have oversight over police use of this technology if it is expanded. Here in Cleveland, we already have the Community Police Commission, which could serve as community oversight in this situation without having to create a new entity.

Cleveland has the opportunity to transform how we view community violence, and the ways in which we address prevention. Without putting a focus on the underlying cause of community violence, we continue to fail those impacted. Surveillance technology is not the solution to preventing gun violence – we must divest from ShotSpotter and invest in community-based solutions.

Invest in people, not private corporations. We call upon the Public Safety Committee and all 17 members of Cleveland City Council to vote on this coming Thursday October 6th, and end the city’s relationship with ShotSpotter.

Concerned citizens should contact their [City Council member](#) and members of the [Public Safety Committee](#). ShotSpotter is expected before the Public Safety Committee on Thursday October 6th, at 10am.

Community Concerns:

1. ShotSpotter does not have a significant impact on gun violence.
2. ShotSpotter rarely finds actionable evidence of a gun crime.
3. ShotSpotter increases high-stress interactions between police and innocent civilians.
4. ShotSpotter wastes millions of taxpayer dollars.

5. ShotSpotter is a loud noise detection program that often mistakes loud noises such as fireworks, jackhammers, and car backfires as gunshots.

6. ShotSpotter's accuracy rate is based on an assumption that 100% of its published alerts are gunfire unless police report otherwise. Of departments that self-report, false positive rates are as high as 48%.

7. ShotSpotter has recorded more than loud sounds — it has captured voice recordings of people on the street that have been admitted as court evidence.

Recommendations:

- An end to the long-standing monitoring and criminalization of poor black and brown communities.
- Diversion of public funds used for surveillance to meeting community needs.
- Elimination of gang databases and related information sharing, and create provisions giving individuals placed on gang databases with notice, and an opportunity to seek removal.
- Moratoriums on the digital devices used to police race and poverty.
- Full disclosure on the use of existing surveillance technology and programs since their inception.
- Mandate a fiscal impact assessment on the cost of purchase, maintenance, and storage of any policing technology and software.

SIGNED:

Black Lives Matter Cleveland

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