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OUR VIEW

Our view: Even if ShotSpotter goes quiet, tech keeps expanding in local policing

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A device that “hears” and reports gunshots to the authorities has saved lives in Winston-Salem, police say, by providing quick, precise audio data that allows faster response times.

But the city has discontinued the service at the behest of the police department, which says it has only so much money to spend and wants to invest in other technology.

It’s not you, the city says of the breakup, which became effective in September. It’s us.

To be clear, ShotSpotter did do a good job, police say, but ...

“As a law enforcement agency, our priority is to ensure public safety for the entire community, not just a limited area,” the department explained in a news release.

Greensboro police, who don’t use ShotSpotter, praise the system’s reliability but cite a similar concern about its surgical approach.

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“It’s a great technology,” Greensboro Police Capt. Holly Pate said. “But it’s a very expensive system. You kind of lock yourself into a high investment in one spot.”

ShotSpotter doesn’t intend to go quietly.

Though the contract with Winston-Salem expired in September, the company is pressing hard for the city to keep the service, even saying it’s willing to help the city find grant money to pay for it.

The most compelling argument is at least three lives saved with ShotSpotter's help:

A shooting victim who received medical assistance that he would not have received in time without data from ShotSpotter, a Winston-Salem police officer said in a YouTube video.

A May 31, 2023, incident in which police were able to locate a 7-year-old critically injured from a shooting that enabled the child to be rushed to a hospital for surgery.

And a June 23, 2023, case in which a man who had been shot in both legs was taken to a hospital for treatment.

City and police officials dispute none of that. But they say ShotSpotter only covers a 3-square-mile radius.

Another complaint about ShotSpotter that has been repeated often is that it is used too heavily in Black communities.

Seriously?

The company's CEO, Ralph A. Clark, calls the complaint "rubbish."

"ShotSpotter is deployed where there is a concentration of gun violence," he said. "That's what police are supposed to do.

"If you have an itch, you scratch where the itch is."

Clark added: "In case you didn't know, I'm Black."

Still, Winston-Salem police say they prefer "a range of technologies" that will affect more people and more territory.

Another factor is how the city paid for ShotSpotter. A \$625,000 grant that paid for the service for three years has run out.

The company that manufactures ShotSpotter, SoundThinking Inc., mounted a vigorous argument to renew the contract with a strongly worded cover letter from Clark, and a 20-plus-page report with footnotes and testimonials.

Among other cities in North Carolina that use ShotSpotter, the company says, are Fayetteville, Goldsboro, Greenville, Rocky Mount, New Bern and Wilmington.

The company argues that the technology is more reliable than 911 calls, solves gun crimes and saves money.

So far to no avail.

Meanwhile, technology in law enforcement continues to advance.

Among Greensboro's tools are license plate cameras and recruiting residents to volunteer doorbell camera footage. GPD also uses mobile video trailers to provide surveillance at targeted locations. Both Winston-Salem and Greensboro have "real-time" centers that monitor networks of privately owned video feeds. The Forsyth County Sheriff's Office plans to install devices on patrol cars that fire GPS trackers that attach themselves to fleeing vehicles. Finally, Winston-Salem and Greensboro police and the Forsyth Sheriff's Office use drones.

Bottom line: Technology will continue to play a part of policing, generally for the good. It's rarely as wonderful as we hoped. Remember the euphoria about body cameras? But it should help, as long as concerns about privacy and abuse are kept in mind.

As for ShotSpotter, range is an issue, but it seems especially effective for areas with high violent crime rates. And it demonstrably has saved lives in Winston-Salem and elsewhere. (A University of Chicago study cites 85 lives a year saved in that city.)

We know. There's only so much money to go around .

But how much is a life worth?