

Dear Seattle City Councilmembers,

We, as members of the Tech Equity Coalition, community groups, and organizations working to protect people’s civil rights and liberties urge you to reject the \$1 million allocation for a “gunfire detection system” in Mayor Harrell’s proposed budget and replace it with an investment in proven violence reduction strategies.

Gunfire detection technologies do not prevent crime or violence,¹ and disproportionately harm Black and Brown communities by fueling police violence and surveillance. ShotSpotter, the most widely used gunfire detection technology, has been shown by multiple peer-reviewed studies² to be ineffective at preventing or investigating gun violence. A recent study in Chicago showed that over the span of 21 months, ShotSpotter unnecessarily sent police into neighborhoods over 40,000 times.³ ShotSpotter is deployed overwhelmingly in communities of color that already disproportionately experience a heavy police presence, and its many false alarms increase the risk of deadly police violence by sending police on numerous trips into communities for no reason at all.

There are numerous examples of ShotSpotter evidence leading to wrongful convictions or being thrown out of court due to collusions between the company and law enforcement. In 2016, Rochester police colluded with ShotSpotter in the case against Silvon Simmons after he was chased and shot three times by a police officer. An appellate court threw out the ShotSpotter evidence in the case. A ShotSpotter expert admitted that the company reclassified sounds from a helicopter to a bullet at the request of a police department customer, saying such changes occur “all the time” because “we trust our law enforcement customers to be really upfront and honest with us.” This was not an isolated incident: in 2020, then 65-year-old Michael Williams was arrested and spent 11 months in jail, contracting COVID-19 twice, after the Chicago Police Department asked ShotSpotter to change the location of an alert in order to charge him with murder.

There is no question that ShotSpotter is surveillance technology, and it poses significant risk of privacy violations. ShotSpotter’s microphones can record conversations of people on the street without their awareness. In at least two criminal trials, prosecutors sought to introduce as evidence audio of voices recorded on acoustic gunshot detection systems.^{4,5}

Because ShotSpotter is ineffective at preventing or investigating gun violence, increases deadly police violence, and poses surveillance risks, many cities that have spent millions on this technology, including Buffalo, Charlotte, San Antonio, and Dayton have canceled their contracts.

¹ Mares, D. and Blackburn, E. (2020) “Acoustic gunshot detection systems: A quasi-experimental evaluation in St. Louis, MO,” *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 17(2), pp. 193–215. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-019-09405-x>

² Doucette, M.L. et al. (2021) “Impact of shotspotter technology on firearm homicides and arrests among large metropolitan counties: A Longitudinal Analysis, 1999–2016,” *Journal of Urban Health*, 98(5), pp. 609–621. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-021-00515-4>.

³ MacArthur Justice Center (2021) Shotspotter generated over 40,000 dead-end police deployments in Chicago in 21 months, according to New Study. Available at: <https://www.macarthurjustice.org/shotspotter-generated-over-40000-dead-end-police-deployments-in-chicago-in-21-months-according-to-new-study/> (Accessed: October 28, 2022).

⁴ *People v. Johnson*, A131317 (Cal. Ct. App. Feb. 27, 2013)

⁵ *Commonwealth v. Denison*, No. BRCR2012-0029 (Mass. Super. Ct. Oct. 7, 2015) https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2018/01/08/CRIMINAL_ESI_DEC_2017.pdf

Finally, we are concerned that council approval of the mayor’s proposal violates or circumvents Chapter 14.18 of the Seattle Municipal Code, which requires any City of Seattle department that intends to acquire a surveillance technology to submit a surveillance impact report, conduct one or more community meetings and solicit public comments, and obtain City Council ordinance approval *before* proceeding with the acquisition process. Budgeting for ShotSpotter without authorization to purchase this technology prematurely commits and ties up precious resources that could be used for measures that we know keep our communities safe.

An investment in ShotSpotter will not prevent crime and violence but will take away money from programs that do – programs that provide for people’s needs rather than funding law enforcement keep people safe. Investments in housing, healthcare, job programs, education, after school, and violence interruption programs have been empirically shown to prevent and reduce violence in communities.^{6,7} We urge you to reject the proposal to include \$1 million for gun detection technology in the City’s 2023-2024 budget.

Signed,

ACLU-WA
Choose 180
Collective Justice
Community Passageways
Freedom Project
Freedom to Thrive
Indivisible Plus
Japanese American Citizen's League
La Resistencia
MPower Change
PDX Privacy
Rainier Beach Action Coalition
Real Change
Restore The Fourth
Seattle Indivisible
Surveillance Technology Oversight Project
Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle
WA People's Privacy
Wallingford Indivisible
Washington Poor People's Campaign

⁶ Paige Fernandez, T.P. (2021) 10 things to know about combating violence in America: News & commentary, American Civil Liberties Union. Available at: <https://www.aclu.org/news/criminal-law-reform/10-things-to-know-about-combating-violence-in-america> (Accessed: October 28, 2022).

⁷ The Seattle Solidarity Budget includes many proposals to increase investments areas that have been shown to prevent and reduce violence (e.g., housing and education): Solidarity Budget 2022. Seattle Solidarity Budget. Available at: <https://www.seattlesolidaritybudget.com/solidarity-budget-2022> (Accessed: October 28, 2022).