**The Case of ShotSpotter: “Precision Policing”**

March 25, 2022

“Does anyone think that on this council, that we’re going to preside over a police department that just harasses black and brown people in our city?” He shook his head. “Not on our watch.”

At the semimonthly Durham City Council Meeting on Monday, Mayor Pro Tempore Mark-Anthony Middleton spoke for the adoption of ShotSpotter - a gunshot identification and location service for law enforcement.

His comments were prompted by critics like Danette Wilkins - a community activist and public health professional working with violence prevention and response - who spoke against ShotSpotter during the public hearing.

Her comments quoted an investigation by the City of Chicago’s Inspector General on ShotSpotter:

“ShotSpotter alert notifications can seldom be shown to lead to investigatory stops which might have investigative value and rarely produce evidence of a gun related crime,” quotes Wilkins. “The introduction of this technology in Chicago changed the way that some Chicago Police Department members perceived and interacted with individuals present in areas where ShotSpotter alerts are frequent.”

Council Member Leonardo Williams spoke on ShotSpotter when the floor opened to the Council.

“Please consider assessing the results and not just the idea,” said Williams. “Give us a chance to try this.”

“If it doesn’t work, hold me accountable,” said Williams, putting up his right hand. “Hold me accountable for trying.”

Middleton followed up on Williams’s comments.

“One of the things I think this debate has suffered from, on both sides, is confirmation bias by cherry picking examples and studies and data,” said Middleton. “There are currently over 100 American cities that deploy this technology.”

According to the ShotSpotter website, the technology is used in 120 cities. The website claims 97% aggregate accuracy and less than 0.5% false positives. Increased gunfire reporting from 12% to 90%. Decreased dispatch time from 4.5 minutes to 60 seconds. Increased location accuracy from 780 feet to 82 feet. Decreased victim transport time from 10.3 minutes to 6.8 minutes.

“When ShotSpotter was first proposed, it had nothing to do with lowering the amount of gun violence, it had nothing to do with retrieving shell casings, it had nothing to do with catching bad guys - it had to do with saving lives. It had to do with sending help when people need help,” Middleton said.

“Sending police when gunfire goes off is not overpolicing. Stop and frisk is overpolicing,” said Middleton.

The ShotSpotter website advertises claims of helping find 83 gunshot victims in Pittsburg, PA. Decreasing shootings by 66% in Oakland, CA. Increasing the casings found in homicide cases from 50% to 89%. A 296% increase in arrests in Denver, CO since 2015. According to its homepage, it’s “The First End-to-End Precision Policing Platform.”

Later, Williams said that the opponents of ShotSpotter are often not ones who are suffering, and that the argument has been overly politicized.

“In communities where gunfire is rampant, people want to try this,” said Williams. “They’re saying, ‘We’re tired of ducking.’”

Council Members Javiera Caballero and Jillian Johnson have been and continue to be against trialing and adopting ShotSpotter in Durham. As Johnson recalls, Middleton has been advocating for ShotSpotter since 2018.

Johnson says that ShotSpotter does not have the effects it claims to have. She also says that it is difficult to verify their claims because they do not allow independent evaluation of their technology.

According to the ACLU, ShotSpotter denied a request by IPVM (an independent security technology research publication) to conduct independent tests on their two AI algorithms.

Johnson says that the danger is in sending armed police officers over and over again to marginalized communities. She cites a statistic found by the MacArthur Justice Center: in Chicago, 89% of the initial police responses to ShotSpotter alerts found no incidents involving a gun.

“I think that ShotSpotter does a great job at manufacturing consent for increased policing,” said Johnson.

According to Caballero, ShotSpotter is a waste of money. The money would be better spent funding the Community Safety Department, which is beginning its pilot. It would be better spent on staffing the Violence Interrupter Program.

“I expect it to pass,” said Caballero. “We aren’t prepared to vote down the budget.”

She says Durham has a six month trial period to collect the data it wants. After that, it has to pay for ShotSpotter.

Both Caballero and Johnson agree that there has not been substantial community outreach.

“We don’t know what people in Durham think about ShotSpotter because we haven’t asked them!” said Johnson. “The overall feeling in the community is that they don’t know it’s coming.”

(757)

**Fact Check**

“Does anyone think that on this council, that we’re going to preside over a police department that just harasses black and brown people in our city?” [✓] He shook his head. [✓] “Not on our watch.” [✓] [✓]

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His comments were prompted by critics like Danette Wilkins - a community activist and public health professional working with violence prevention and response [✓] - who spoke against ShotSpotter during the public hearing. [✓] [✓]

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**Sources**

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Jillian Johnson:

Email: Jillian.Johnson@durhamnc.gov

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ACLU Article:

Url: <https://www.aclu.org/news/privacy-technology/four-problems-with-the-shotspotter-gunshot-detection-system/>

City of Chicago Office of Inspector General Report:

Url: <https://igchicago.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Chicago-Police-Departments-Use-of-ShotSpotter-Technology.pdf>

ShotSpotter:

Url: <https://www.shotspotter.com/>

Url: <https://www.shotspotter.com/results/>

Url: <https://www.shotspotter.com/law-enforcement/gunshot-detection/>

Recording of City Council Meeting:

Url: <http://durham.granicus.com/ViewPublisher.php?view_id=2>