

S.F. mayor looks to gadget to halt soaring homicides

[Cecilia M. Vega, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

Thursday, September 13, 2007

With the city's soaring homicide rate on pace to break records this year, San Francisco officials are hoping a high-tech tracking system that alerts police to gunfire within seconds of a shot going off will help their crime-fighting efforts.

Twenty cities around the country, including a handful in the Bay Area, are using the technology known as "ShotSpotter" in their most violence-prone neighborhoods. On Wednesday, Mayor Gavin Newsom said San Francisco also could benefit from installing the program, which uses sensors to detect gunfire and alerts police about it.

"Literally lives can be saved," Newsom said at a demonstration of the device his office arranged for reporters. "There's an imperative not to wait."

There have been 81 homicides in the city this year, putting San Francisco well on the way to surpassing the 85 slayings that occurred on city streets in 2006. In 2005, there were 96 homicides - a decade high.

The electronic sensors read sound waves and use Global Positioning System satellites to alert authorities to the gunfire within 15 seconds of the incident.

The program tells police when the shot was fired, the number of shots fired, the location and even how many guns were used or the type of gun. The spotters detect sound within a mile radius and are able to differentiate between gunfire, fireworks, cars backfiring and other noises.

Armed with that information, police say, they are able to respond to crime scenes faster, and in some cases, even as the crime is still ongoing.

"It's a big difference to respond to a corner or geographical area than it is to know that the shot came from a side of the building or behind the building or in front of a building," said Deputy Chief Morris Tabak, the department's head of investigations. "Tactically, that is significant."

It's not the first time Newsom, who is running for re-election in November but lacks a serious political threat in the race, has invested his political capital in crime-fighting technologies. Since 2005, his office has spent about \$500,000 on public surveillance cameras that have been installed in high-crime areas and their effectiveness remains in question.

But the ShotSpotter program, made by a company in Mountain View, for the most part comes with positive reviews.

Redwood City has used the detection system for a decade, and Oakland began installing the censors last year.

Oakland police Officer Roland Holmgren said the program gives officers "another set of ears." In February, an Oakland officer responding to a ShotSpotter report approached an allegedly armed suspect. As the suspect attempted to flee, the officer shot and killed him.

"If you go into this thinking this is going to be the end-all be-all in solving your crime problems, that's not it," Holmgren said. "It's a definite step in the right direction."

San Francisco officials, who have been talking about installing the gunshot sensors for two years now, want to kick off the program in the crime-plagued Western Addition and Bayview neighborhoods.

It would cost \$400,000 to get the devices installed and running, money Newsom set aside in his proposed 2007-08 fiscal year budget, but which he said the Board of Supervisors has refused to release.

Supervisors held off on releasing money for the program during budget deliberations earlier this year because they said they needed more details about the technology Newsom wanted to buy with city money. On Tuesday afternoon, after his press conference, Newsom's office requested a new set of budget hearings to discuss the ShotSpotters and provide the board with the details they had requested.

Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi, whose district includes the Western Addition, said the gunfire detectors are worth the money.

"It finally forces the city to deal with what has been disconcerting and alarming to neighbors that live with gunfire," he said.

A 1998 U.S. Department of Justice study found that gunfire detection devices, including the ShotSpotter program, had an 80 percent success rate in detecting shots fired, but that automatic weapons were more difficult to detect than pistols or shotguns. The study also said police did not respond to the technology any more quickly than they responded to gunfire reports phoned in by residents.

But the makers said the ShotSpotter technology has come a long way. The FBI, for example, used the technology in 2004 to build a case against an Ohio sniper.

"This is the kind of thing we want to try," Newsom said. "We're just increasing the number of tries and see what works. You don't want to overpromise and underdeliver. But there've been some huge success stories."

E-mail Cecilia M. Vega at cvega@sfgate.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/09/13/BAPKS4RPA.DTL>

This article appeared on page **B - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle