

York City looks to ShotSpotter to reduce gun crime

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More than a decade ago in Redwood City, Calif., midnight on New Year's Day would bring a 20-minute hail of gunfire.

"If you were brave enough to step out and listen, it sounded like a war zone," said police Sgt. James Stoney.

It was a way to celebrate, but it was a dangerous one, as stray bullets occasionally crashed through the ceiling of a house or into a car. So the city invested in a gunshot detection system -- and the gunfire dropped to a shot or two a month, Stoney said.

Dramatic changes like the one in Redwood City have

encouraged Mayor John Brenner to try to get a similar system for York City. His proposed 2008 budget includes the first \$60,000 payment toward the \$500,000 network of sensors and cameras.

But while officials say the sensors can cut gunfire and help police solve crimes, statistics collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation show that the system does not always lead to drops in the levels of violent crime.

No magic pill: The ShotSpotter system includes a network of sensors that alert authorities as soon as a shot is fired and reports the location to dispatch centers or police cars. York's model would also turn cameras toward the sound.

Twenty-six cities across the country have installed similar systems through ShotSpotter Inc., said senior vice president Gregg Rowland. Some have seen an 80 percent drop in celebratory gunfire and a 25 to 50 percent drop in gun-related violent crime, he said.

But the ShotSpotter is not a guaranteed fix for crime rates, which are affected by many variables. Gary, Ind., installed the system in 2005, the year its leading murder rate got it dubbed the

Gunshot-detection and murder rates

Twenty-six U.S. cities have installed gunshot-detection systems. The manufacturer ShotSpotter Inc. claims the technology cuts crime rates, and city officials say it reduces reckless gunfire and helps solve crimes. But even if murder rates drop after the technology is installed, they don't necessarily stay down.

Murder and non-negligent manslaughter incidents reported per 100,000 residents

City/Year	Population	Incidents reported	City murder rate	National murder rate
Redwood City, Calif.				
2006	73,772	6	8.1	6.1
System installed - 1996	68,749	3	4.4	7.4
1995	68,126	6	8.8	8.2
North Charleston, N.C.				
2006	87,655	28	31.9	6.1
System installed - 2004	82,579	6	7.3	5.7
2003	81,476	12	14.7	5.7
Gary, Ind.				
2006	99,369	48	48.3	6.1
System installed - 2005	100,065	58	58.0	5.9
2004	100,637	54	53.7	5.7
York, Pa.				
2006	40,454	4	9.9	6.1

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS DATA, YORK CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT DATA AND FBI UNIFORM CRIME REPORT DATA

"murder capital" of the United States. Though the number of murders went down the year after and the city lost its title, it still had the second-highest murder rate for cities with a population over 10,000.

Redwood City saw the rate of murder and other violent crimes fall after it installed the ShotSpotter, but the country as a whole saw a decrease as well. And though the system has been in place for a number of years, the city's crime rates have been rising, mimicking what has been happening in other ShotSpotter cities and across the country.

Despite Redwood City's dramatic decrease in celebratory gunfire, its police department has not seen or expected much of an effect on violent crimes, Stoney said. The city's murder rate is generally below the national average.

Rowland said the effectiveness of the gunshot-detection system depends on how cities want to use it. The company will teach York how to imitate cities that have used the system well and how to avoid mistakes made elsewhere.

Brenner said the gunshot-detection system would be part of York City's broader effort to make policing more proactive. In the last year, the city has added police officers and increased foot, bicycle and Segway scooter patrols in the city's downtown and southeast.

Lots of info: The system could cover two square-mile areas or four smaller areas, Brenner said. The city is still choosing appropriate locations, though he said the decision would be based on current patterns of gunfire.

Rowland said the ShotSpotter has the potential to shift crime from one neighborhood to another. Though the sensors can be moved from one neighborhood to the next, Rowland said the change is expensive, so most cities just buy additional sensors instead.

Besides discouraging gunfire, the system also helps a municipality investigate and prosecute a case, Rowland said. Sensors give police an idea about the kind of weapon used and whether the shooter was driving.

That, plus information provided by cameras, gives police officers some idea of what they are heading into before they respond to a shot, Rowland said.

"If it's some kid in a back yard shooting off a .22, you might want to respond in one way," Rowland said. "If it's someone with a rifle shooting off high-powered rounds, you might respond in a different way."

The details can also help police departments in court, demonstrating whether a police officer or a suspect fired first in a shootout, Rowland said.

And with police responding quickly every time a shot is fired, Rowland said the public's confidence in the police department can increase -- so that they begin reporting even more crimes.

Brenner said that even after the sensors and cameras are in place, the city still needs people who are willing to do their part to fight crime.

"It's not going to fix everything," Brenner said about the proposed system. "We still need to have a very active group of people in our community, supporting police and helping make their neighbors safe."

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