

District Adding Gunfire Sensors

By Allison Klein
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The D.C. police department is expanding its ShotSpotter network throughout the city in an effort to react faster to gunfire and has plans to link the technology to surveillance cameras in hopes of catching gun-toting criminals in the act.

Police said the ShotSpotter technology, which detects and locates gunfire, has aided homicide investigations and improved emergency response in Southeast Washington, where it has been used since August 2006. Now they want to cover almost a quarter of the city, creating the largest such network in the country.

In recent months, technicians have installed ShotSpotter sensors on rooftops in areas such as the Trinidad section of Northeast Washington, where residents demanded action after a spike in shootings in the spring. The system soon will be up and running in another neighborhood that has long been plagued by gun violence: the Shaw section of Northwest Washington.

By September, police expect to cover 16 of the city's 68 square miles. The noise sensors, about the size of coffee cans, are hidden atop buildings and can identify gunfire within two miles, officials said.

ShotSpotter is now in 30 cities across the country, including New Orleans, Newark and Los Angeles. In the D.C. region, it had been limited to the 7th Police District, which accounts for a large share of the city's homicides. As of July 3, 21 of the city's 87 homicides this year had taken place there.

Officers said they increasingly rely on ShotSpotter to locate gunfire in Southeast Washington because people don't always call 911 when shots ring out, and when they do, they are often unsure where the sound came from. Police used to waste time looking for the scene.

"We want quicker response time to critical incidents," said Mel Blizzard, who is in charge of the police program. "If we have shots fired, I want officers there immediately."

The department is tying the ShotSpotter into other technology to make it more effective, officials said. For example, the city plans to eventually link the police force's 72 surveillance cameras to the gun sensors, Blizzard said. Once they are connected to ShotSpotter, they will turn to the sound of gunfire and record what unfolds, Blizzard said.

By the end of the year, officials plan to send ShotSpotter alerts directly to the laptop computers now kept in many patrol cars. The idea is to instantly provide officers with maps and addresses showing where trouble breaks out. Currently, the city relies on dispatchers to pass along ShotSpotter's alerts to patrols.

When everything is tied together, Blizzard said, investigators anticipate solving more crimes and having more evidence for trials.

Since its inception, ShotSpotter has helped police quickly locate 13 homicide victims and 49 victims of assaults, police officials said. Police credit ShotSpotter with helping them make nine arrests.

Last year, the technology chronicled an alarming amount of gunfire in the 7th District, which includes neighborhoods such as Barry Farm and Congress Heights -- the southern half of the city east of the [Anacostia River](#). It picked up almost 50 gunshots a week. Police used the data to help figure out the best places to strengthen patrols.

"A lot of these folks who have pistols and guns routinely fire them for no reason at all," said Assistant Chief Winston Robinson, who oversees investigations. "You'd be surprised how it becomes a habit. ShotSpotter picks it up and documents where it's coming from."

Since police began using the technology, [Robinson](#) said, officers get to scenes faster. Homicide investigations are more precise, because detectives know with certainty what time the gunfire rang out and how many shots were fired, he said. ShotSpotter locates gunfire within 10 feet.

Several police officials noted that ShotSpotter played a critical role in the investigation of the shooting last September of [DeOnté Rawlings](#), the 14-year-old who was killed after a confrontation with two off-duty officers in Southeast Washington. ShotSpotter determined that the first shot that night did not come from the police officers. Although the technology could not confirm police accounts that DeOnté fired a gun, it contributed to a finding that cleared the officers of any criminal wrongdoing.

ShotSpotter was brought to the District by the [FBI](#) as a pilot project and initially was installed across 2 1/2 square miles of the 7th Police District. The \$2 million cost was picked up by federal authorities. D.C. police took over the initiative in December, allocating \$1.6 million in police funds to upgrade and expand the technology.

The cost of tying ShotSpotter into the cameras has not been determined, officials said.

The expansion covers parts of six of the city's seven police districts. The exception is the 2nd District, which includes areas such as Georgetown, Woodley Park and Palisades that rarely have gunfire.

In determining where to put the technology, police looked at crime statistics and talked with residents and council members. Residents in the Shaw area, for example, have been pushing to get ShotSpotter for more than a year; it now will be in place by July 15, officials said.

"We would have liked to have had it last summer when we had an increase in shootings so we could have nipped it in the bud," said community activist Alex Padro, who has lived there for 11 years.

"This is something that could have been rolled out a long time ago," Padro said. "Police need to be more proactive and less reactive."