

Gunshot alerts from ShotSpotter have improved response times in Miami-Dade County

By WAYNE E. RAWLINS

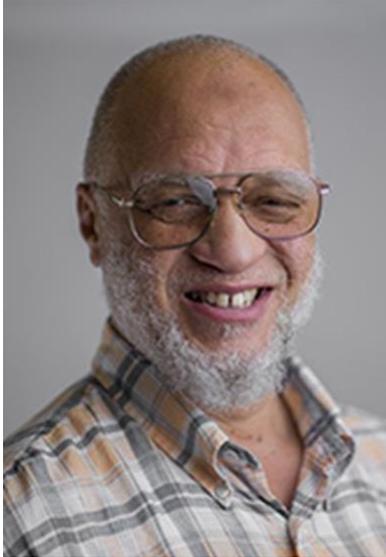
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ShotSpotter CEO Ralph Clark stands for a photo at his office in Newark, Calif., on Tuesday, Aug. 10, 2021. ShotSpotter uses microphones and algorithms to try to detect when and where gunshots ring out in cities where it's deployed. (Josh Edelson/AP)

Gun violence is not some abstract public ill to those of us living with it in Miami-Dade County. It's a daily plague that steals souls from our families, perpetuates vicious cycles for those who engage in it, and sets back our communities from growing and realizing potential.

When it came time for those of us combatting gun violence to put plans into action, we were intent on doing everything we could. And we are. That is why one tool we use is ShotSpotter – a technology that uses sound sensors to get police quickly to gunshot locations. Critics are attacking the company while turning a blind eye to the social good ShotSpotter contributes. I see the successes it delivers just about every day.



Wayne E. Rawlins is a community activist in Miami-Dade County who provides social services to communities impacted by gun violence.

As project manager for [Miami-Dade County's Anti-Violence Initiative](#), my job is to marshal the resources needed to confront rampant gun violence in South Florida. This organization was created after the 2008 South Florida Anti-Gang Summit, where 175 national and local experts came together to provide recommendations that directly address violent gang activity. While critical strides have been taken in the years since, South Florida has experienced a distressing [45 percent increase in gun related crime since 2016](#). It has never been more important that we directly address this epidemic, and the programs I help manage aim to serve that mission by changing the mindset of those associated with gun violence through social and economic support for our communities.

One component of this approach is the [Group Violence Initiative](#), which works to reduce retaliation and re-victimization after gun violence. We have a team of trained "violence interrupters" who we dispatch to the scene of group violence to defuse situations.

In doing so, we work closely with the Miami-Dade Police Department, which notifies us of group violence activity, so we can get on the scene fast. Additionally, immediately after the incident, my team

(including case managers and licensed social workers) goes to the neighborhood to engage with bystanders and provide support.

You can now see why we find ShotSpotter so valuable. It rapidly tells the police and us specific locations of gunfire so we can immediately direct the social services we provide to help address trauma, prevent future violence, and assist those in need. These services are exactly what critics of ShotSpotter want to see taking root in the community, and this technology enables it.

ShotSpotter's detractors say the company's technology leads to over policing in neighborhoods of color, but we're seeing it send police to places where communities are underserved. In the neighborhoods in which we work, hardly anyone calls in to report a gunshot. Without ShotSpotter alerting the Miami-Dade Police Department of gunfire, we may not know about these instances of violence and would be unable to deploy to the scene to intervene and break the cycle of gun violence in our communities.

Beyond assisting us with immediate on-scene response, ShotSpotter's data also allow us to know where our [Walking One Stop](#) program is needed. This program brings federal, state, and local resources to the doorsteps of traumatized gun and gang violence survivors in Miami, connecting vulnerable populations with services to improve quality of life by providing desperately needed social and mental health services. The program increases access to a range of services from healthcare to therapy to food stamps. This support helps address sources of trauma and minimizes the likelihood that people later turn to violence.

ShotSpotter has received criticism over accuracy, yet ShotSpotter is so accurate that we can see the precise areas – down to block sections – that experience high rates of gun violence, so we know exactly who is in dire need of the community intervention we provide. This targeted approach is incredibly powerful because people get the help they need, right at their front door.

Our next mission is to collaborate with schools using ShotSpotter data. If ShotSpotter can help us determine high gunfire activity around a school's location, we can work with school and local leaders to provide violence prevention and trauma assistance programming at the school.

Beyond my own program, I have also seen how ShotSpotter increases the likelihood of lives being saved. Between March 2020 and March 2021, the Miami-Dade Police Department's Northside District saw a 12.5 percent reduction in group member-involved homicides at the same time gun violence was drastically increasing nationwide. This success has, of course, many parents, and my organization is one of them, thanks in part to ShotSpotter data that allow us to effectively deliver services and respond to violence in Miami-Dade County.

I know from many years of hands-on experience that we need innovative approaches and greater resources. ShotSpotter is an important example of our public leaders coming together and putting resources into technology that is helping our communities beyond pure law enforcement activity. I, for one, am grateful.

Wayne E. Rawlins is a community activist in Miami-Dade County who provides social services to communities impacted by gun violence. Neither his organization nor he receives any funding or compensation from ShotSpotter. The opinions expressed in this piece are solely Wayne E. Rawlins' and do not express the views or opinions of the Miami-Dade County government or its affiliates.