

Detroit City Council Expands “ShotSpotter” After Two More Are Gunned Down by Police

Law-enforcement claims that discredited surveillance technology will improve safety while the use of lethal force continues unabated

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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In a 5-4 decision on October 11, the Detroit City Council provided yet another example as to why there must be a major defunding of the police in urban areas.

The political marketing of the ShotSpotter technology by the corporate-imposed Mayor Mike Duggan and his appointed police Chief James White utilized deceptive tactics which falsely claimed that the tool will benefit the people of this majority African American municipality.

The decision came on the heels of the October 2 police killing of Porter Burkes, 20, an African American youth suffering from a mental health crisis. Reports indicate that Burkes’ brother called the police after the victim slashed his vehicle tires with a knife.

Burkes was carrying the knife when police arrived on the scene. In an edited police bodycam video issued by law-enforcement to the media, the voice of what is said to have been a crisis intervention specialist can be heard in an attempt to de-escalate the situation.

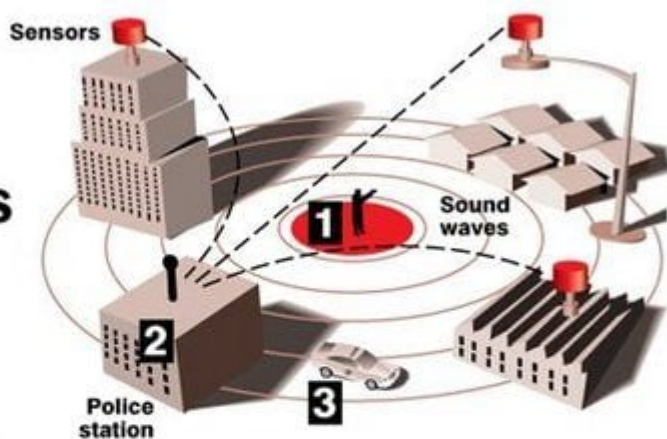
Nonetheless, Chief White told a press conference the day after the shooting that Burkes refused to put down the weapon and move closer to the crowd of police officers on the scene, making them feel threatened. At least five officers fired 38 rounds at Burkes within three seconds hitting him at least 15 times. There was no explanation by White as to what happened to the other 23 bullets fired from the weapons of the officers.

How it works

1 When a shot is fired, the sound is picked up by sensors that triangulate the origin of the noise.

2 Police dispatchers and patrol officers in squad cars receive GPS data pinpointing the location and a recording of the sounds.

3 Police respond to the scene.



SOURCE: ShotSpotter Inc.

MCT and DAN JACALONE/THE SAGINAW NEWS

Source: ShotSpotter Inc./MCT and Dan Jacalone/The Saginaw News

Immediately members of Burkes' family decried the shooting. They exclaimed to the television networks that they only called the police because their brother was having a psychological breakdown. Porter Burkes had been diagnosed with schizophrenia and was prone to violent outbreaks.

Burkes was failed by both the inadequate mental health system in existence today in the United States, particularly in relations to the African American community, as well as law-enforcement, which has repeatedly been quick to utilize lethal force. Many in Detroit voiced the opinion that if Burkes had been a Caucasian, he would not have been subjected to such a deliberately brutal and deadly attack.

The Burkes family has retained well-known civil and defense Atty. Jeffrey Fieger to represent them in a wrongful death lawsuit against the City of Detroit and its police department. At a press conference on October 6 at Fieger's Southfield office he accused the Detroit police of killing Burkes unjustifiably. Fieger described the shooting death of Burkes as totally avoidable, noting that Chief White is consciously misleading the public with comments which do not coincide with the facts.

Image: Detroit youth Porter Burkes killed by police (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)



[According to Fieger:](#)

“We have what I consider to be an intolerable situation that occurred in the city of Detroit, in which a clearly mentally ill young man was executed by a Detroit Police Department firing squad of five officers. I hope that Chief White is listening — I have more questions today than answers. Why can’t you figure out a better way to deal with him than executing him by firing squad? You have all sorts of equipment, all that body armor that police have. They have helmets, they have arm and chest armor. They have bulletproof vests everywhere. Are you telling me that today, you don’t have sufficient equipment to send an officer toward somebody with a 3-inch knife and instead you have to execute him? If that’s crisis intervention, God help us all.”

After Burkes was shot down by the police with multiple wounds, he was handcuffed while lying on the ground. White during his hastily convened press conference claimed that Burkes was carrying an 8-inch knife. Fieger pointed out during his media briefing with the Burkes family, that the knife was only 3.5 inches, illustrating the disinformation being circulated by the police and the Duggan administration.

Another press conference and picket line were held by the Detroit chapter of the National Action Network (NAN) on October 10 outside police headquarters downtown. The community-based organization denounced the police killing of Burkes and demanded that the names of the officers involved be released to the public.

On October 12, the By Any Means Necessary (BAMN) organization also held a demonstration to demand justice for Porter Burkes and his family. The grouping said that there was no excuse for the law-enforcement execution of a mentally ill person carrying a knife.

Meanwhile, there was another police-involved shooting on the southwest side of the city where law enforcement officials claimed that a man suspected in an armed robbery was surveilled and later pursued. Of course, Chief White once again, criminalized the victim in the shooting. He asserted that the wounded person, said to be in critical condition, was armed with a 9mm handgun. The police did not release the name or nationality of the victim.

In the typical attempt to justify the shooting by officers, White alleged that the person shot by police was a “known gang member” who had participated in numerous violent crimes.

[White said to the media that:](#)

“On Friday (Oct. 7), he did an armed robbery and home invasion, breaking into a house and robbing the occupants at gunpoint. Also Friday, he is suspected of firing shots into a house; the vehicle he was driving (Monday) was identified as the suspect vehicle; (and) at 9:50 p.m. (Friday) in the 10000 block of Flora, he fired shots into an occupied vehicle where no one was injured. The officers knew he was violent, so as a result, they put the Headquarters Surveillance Unit on him to track his whereabouts.”

ShotSpotter is Opposed by Many Organizations

On the morning prior to the Detroit City Council vote to expand ShotSpotter which has already been operational in some sections of the municipality, a group of community organizers held a press conference outside City Hall. Members of Michigan Liberation, the Michigan ACLU, Disability Power, Detroit Justice Center, We the People of Michigan,

Pettyproplis and Moratorium NOW! Coalition stood in solidarity against this expansion of police surveillance and its potential to lead to even more violent encounters with law-enforcement.

ShotSpotter has a growing list of critics who insist that the technology is unreliable. Several cities including Chicago, have been pressured to discontinue its usage as an investigative tool citing several problems.

The ACLU in an August 24, 2021 report listed a series of issues with the surveillance mechanism, [noting](#):

“A critical report on the ShotSpotter gunshot detection system issued today by the City of Chicago’s Inspector General (IG) is the latest indication of deep problems with the gunshot detection company and its technology, including its methodology, effectiveness, impact on communities of color, and relationship with law enforcement. The report questioned the ‘operational value’ of the technology and found that it increases the incidence of stop and frisk tactics by police officers in some neighborhoods. The IG’s report follows a similarly critical report and legal filing by the Northwestern School of Law’s MacArthur Justice Center and devastating investigative reporting by Vice News and the Associated Press. Last week, the AP profiled Michael Williams, a man who spent a year in jail on murder charges based on evidence from ShotSpotter before having his charges dismissed when prosecutors admitted they had insufficient evidence against him.”

In a study conducted by the MacArthur Justice Center revealed that the ShotSpotter technology has resulted in 40,000 unwarranted police interventions in mainly Black and Brown communities in Chicago where the rates of shooting by law-enforcement are exceptionally high. The sound signals sent to police dispatchers have an abnormally high rate of false alarms.

The MacArthur Justice Center in a May 3, 2021 press release [noted](#):

“The City of Chicago has deployed ShotSpotter only in the police districts with the highest proportion of Black and Latinx residents. On an average day, there are more than 61 ShotSpotter-initiated police deployments that turn up no evidence of any crime, let alone gun crime. Neighborhoods that are surveilled by ShotSpotter are subject to thousands of additional, unfounded police deployments just because the ShotSpotter system is present. Every unfounded ShotSpotter deployment creates an extremely dangerous situation for residents in the area. ShotSpotter primes police to believe that they are heading to a dangerous location where a person has just fired a gun. Any resident who happens to be in the vicinity of a ShotSpotter alert will be a target of police suspicion or worse. These volatile deployments can go wrong in an instant. ‘Only residents in predominantly Black and Latinx neighborhoods have to contend with the burden of thousands of unnecessary and potentially dangerous police deployments,’ said (Jonathan Manes, staff atty. For MacArthur Justice Center). ‘Only their neighborhoods get saddled with inflated statistics about supposed gunfire. At the same time, there is no evidence that the ShotSpotter system makes communities safer or reduces crime.’”

A Continuing Legacy of Police Violence Against Civilians

Detroit has a long and sordid history of police misconduct and brutality directed towards the African American community. This history, dating back to at least 1957, is being documented by the University of Michigan's Policing Lab. See [this](#).

In the most recent annual City of Detroit budget, the police department is given the largest proportion of municipal resources. Over \$400 million is spent on policing while the overall social situation in most Detroit neighborhoods continues to deteriorate.

The corporate-oriented Duggan administration along with City Council has allocated COVID relief funding to the police. Funds for ShotSpotter were taken from federal allocations ostensibly designed to assist people imperiled by the current economic and social crisis impacting municipalities across the country.

In addition, the Detroit Police Officers Association (DPOA) has recently reached an agreement with the City administration to raise the salaries of law-enforcement personnel. Earlier a \$2,000 bonus was awarded to police officers as "incentives" to remain on the force in light of its high rates of attrition.

The vote by City Council on October 11 indicated that the funding for ShotSpotter would not be taken from the American Recovery Act passed by the U.S. Congress during 2021. Instead, the funding would come from money already in the police budget. However, all of these monies belong to the people of Detroit and their resources are used against them through false notions which suggest that there is a positive correlation between the number of police in a given community and the levels of security.

People in Detroit are in need of security from impoverishment, high rents, the lack of a viable public transportation system, environmental degradation, inadequate education, the misappropriation of funds taken from the impoverished and allocated to billionaires and the police, along with rising energy costs. These are the issues which matter to the majority impoverished, oppressed and exploited residents of the city. Police departments in Michigan and around the U.S. should be defunded in the quest to create a safe, just and equitable society.

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Abayomi Azikiwe is the editor of the Pan-African News Wire. He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

Featured image: Detroit Justice Center spokeswoman at press conference opposing ShotSpotter, Oct. 11, 2022 (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

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