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## **PART IV**

### **Issues**



# ShotSpotter and Militarism

Alyx Goodwin

Military and militarism are not confined to being a global force deployed by national governments during war. Black activists have come to understand that the role of the military, and the reasons governments prioritize the funding and development of the military, is to generate capital and maintain power through violence; this includes at the local level in our own neighborhoods. These priorities aren't just confined to soldiers abroad. The federal 1033 program gives local police departments militarized equipment<sup>1</sup>; federal agencies such as the U.S. Department of Justice reward grant dollars to local law enforcement<sup>2</sup>; training programs exist between local law enforcement and the Israeli military<sup>3</sup>. At the local level, law enforcement agencies are the muscle that protects capital and maintains social control and they do so because militarism's scope and purpose have been legitimized. Because of the function and culture of capitalism, the role of technology in this legitimization was inevitable. Technology has been wielded as a tool of neoliberalism: it expands police and military functions and powers while framing itself as a non-biased, technical solution through innovation to stymie any concern about its expansion. This is especially evident in the creation and use of gunshot detection technology, namely ShotSpotter by SoundThinking, the largest gunshot detection supplier in the industry.

When I first learned about ShotSpotter technology, I was researching the technology that law enforcement uses. That research evolved into the report *21st Century Policing: The Rise and Reach of Surveillance Technology*. SoundThinking—formerly known as ShotSpotter—was founded in 1996 by a physicist named Robert Showen, who created ShotSpotter after hearing what he believed to be gunshots and wanted to figure out how to pinpoint them<sup>4</sup>. The company is now led by Ralph Clark—a Black millionaire from the wealthy and exploitative industries of tech and finance<sup>5</sup>. ShotSpotter microphones are a “gunshot detection technology” which, in reality, is simply audio surveillance that is deployed primarily in Black, brown, and poor neighborhoods in

over 100 cities in the contiguous U.S.<sup>6</sup>, as well as Puerto Rico<sup>7</sup>, South Africa<sup>8</sup>, and Virgin Islands<sup>9</sup>. The company has framed the ShotSpotter equipment and software as a tool to help police solve crimes more effectively. In our current time, when gun violence is a high-ranking concern for many, a tool like ShotSpotter seems useful at face value.

### **The Real-World Impact of ShotSpotter**

March 29, 2023, marked the second anniversary since SoundThinking's ShotSpotter microphones led to the death of 13-year-old Adam Toledo in Little Village<sup>10</sup>, one of Chicago's predominately Latinx neighborhoods. Chicago Police received a ShotSpotter alert that led them to the young person's location, and upon arrival, they shot and killed him while his hands were raised. After news of this young person's death at the hands of state violence, Chicago organizers came together to demand that the City of Chicago cancel its contract for ShotSpotter<sup>11</sup>.

The way ShotSpotter microphones are deployed is that decision-makers at the municipal level—including but not limited to elected officials or public safety departments—in a given city sign a contract with SoundThinking. SoundThinking then provides microphones and software as a service. When the microphones hear a loud noise, they send a notification of the sound with geo-location to a SoundThinking office, where sound analysts classify the sound as a gunshot or something else and send gunshot alerts back to the local police department. SoundThinking claims a 97% accuracy rate for the microphones. However, that number has been challenged and disproven as 1 out of 10 alerts show evidence of a gun being present, and the accuracy rate is based on how often police officers report when an alert is wrong. But SoundThinking is a multimillion-dollar company with a budget for marketing that has been used to help the company maintain its legitimacy through propaganda.

As our communities face deep and valid fears of violence and crime, SoundThinking describes its technology as one to “combat gun violence,” further reinforcing the idea that the solution to what our neighborhoods experience is war-like responses that require force and state-sanctioned violence. At the same time, combat—and in this case ShotSpotter—does not reduce violence

or crime. There is no research or data to show that it does. But combat—and ShotSpotter—require the presence of violence to position itself as necessary and relevant. There is no incentive for SoundThinking, and surveillance companies like it, to reduce or eradicate violence in our communities.

ShotSpotter microphones are deployed in primarily Black, brown, and poor neighborhoods. In Chicago, ShotSpotter microphones cover over 80% of the Black community and over 70% of the Latinx community<sup>12</sup>. Although the physical piece of equipment can't be racist, the choice of deployment is based on the historical divestment of these communities. This takes us to the second thing wrong with ShotSpotters: these communities want and deserve public safety; however, throwing dollars at policing and technology for law enforcement has been proven ineffective. Communities want and demand investments into long-term solutions to prevent and end gun violence, such as structural investments into our schools, infrastructure, access to jobs, and healthcare. Not another white-supremacist prescribed answer framed as color blind and neutral that shows up after the harm and violence have been committed. Programs like Cease Fire, a non-police street outreach model designed to reduce community violence<sup>13</sup>, and similar street outreach models, or the Support Team Assistance Response program in Denver that operates as a mobile mental health clinic,<sup>14</sup> have proven to immediately reduce crime and provide non-lethal support to those in need.

For decades, local governments have chosen to invest in police and technology to control the masses rather than investing in the masses and trusting us with the tools to manage our modes of public safety. On a global scale, this is the model for controlling African and Latin American countries and populations, and it requires surveillance—it requires imaginary borders, selective divestment and disinvestment, and the stripping of people's privacy. An expansive definition of surveillance offers that the existence of surveillance creates unspoken or intangible control over an individual or a community. But with technological advancements, money, and racism, that physical someone has made way for equipment, such as cameras and drones, to become something that is watching. The use of gunshot detection technology in places like Chicago, Puerto Rico, or South Africa does not occur in a vacuum. The use and proliferation of ShotSpotters in

these cities with contracts has been made possible by centuries of surveillance and continuously failed efforts at police reform in the U.S. but also because of the U.S.'s global military influence for controlling capital and land.

### **The Global Impact of ShotSpotter**

In 2016, SoundThinking announced it was expanding into Cape Town, South Africa, "to deploy the technology over seven square kilometers (more than 4 square miles) in the high-crime areas of Manenberg and Hanover Park"<sup>15</sup>; predominantly indigenous neighborhoods in the Cape Flats that have been characterized by poverty and violence post-apartheid. This contract was worth R32,000,000 or almost \$1.9 million for three years. In those three years, ShotSpotter microphones led to 67 arrests<sup>16</sup>. City officials have faced some public scrutiny over the cost of the contract and its quiet expiration<sup>17</sup>; critics believe that the allotment of funds should have had more community input around it or lawmakers should have considered other violence prevention methods. And like everywhere else, ShotSpotters are just one piece of South Africa's growing surveillance puzzle. Less than 1,000 miles away, Johannesburg is the site of 5,000 CCTV cameras that feed into other technologies such as license plate readers and facial recognition<sup>18</sup>. The private company that contracts the cameras is Vumacam<sup>19</sup>.

On the other side of the world, SoundThinking has laid its claim in the most colonized parts of the U.S. For centuries, the people of Puerto Rico have fought for independence against colonialism, first from the Spanish and then from the United States. Puerto Ricans cannot vote in presidential elections and do not have representation in Congress. Since the 1800s, Puerto Rico has been a commonwealth of the U.S., meaning that economic and political decisions are left to the U.S. Still, the citizens of Puerto Rico do not experience full U.S. constitutional rights. They are a colony.

From the 1930s through 1987, the Puerto Rico Police Department and the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) conducted a surveillance program to monitor and suppress Puerto Ricans who were fighting for the independence of their land<sup>20</sup>. The program tracked around 150,000 Puerto Ricans who were

then placed on a blacklist, making access to basic necessities like employment difficult. In 1957, Puerto Rico passed a law criminalizing “any mention of Puerto Rican independence, the singing of patriotic songs, or even owning a Puerto Rican flag,” the U.S. government spent millions to continue their methods of suppression. In June 2012, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) published<sup>21</sup> *Island of Impunity: Puerto Rico’s Outlaw Police Force*, highlighting the Puerto Rico Police Department’s history of abuse and use of lethal force.

The economic history is parallel to Puerto Rico’s history of law enforcement abuses. The economic conditions of Puerto Rico are dire, with a median income of just over \$20,000 and a poverty rate of over 40%<sup>22</sup>. The United State’s economic decisions over Puerto Rico have led to the island taking on billions of dollars of tax-exempt debt (the financiers invested in this debt do not pay taxes on it to Puerto Rico) and massive job loss. Coupling these things with natural disasters and lacking infrastructure, Puerto Rico has the prime material conditions for exacerbated crime and violence, which the State then uses to justify its surveillance.

Similar conditions exist in Chicago as well. Chicago’s history as a hub for Black people and its history with segregation has also made it a site with a history of racist police violence against Black people and workers. The police department was formed in 1853<sup>23</sup>, when there was an influx of immigrants and a growing labor movement. As more Black people began moving to the city during the Great Migration<sup>24</sup>, they were increasingly segregated to specific areas in Chicago, most notably on the South Side<sup>25</sup>. Decades later, in 1919, the race riots in Chicago were triggered when 17-year-old Eugene Williams was stoned to death in Lake Michigan when he accidentally floated to the “Whites Only” side of the beach<sup>26</sup>. This event triggered white violence against Black Chicagoans while the Chicago Police Department remained complicit and did nothing to intervene. In the 1960s, the FBI’s Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) was active in the City, surveilling, harassing, and eventually dismantling the Black Panther Party chapter in Chicago and ultimately assassinated Illinois Chairman Fred Hampton and Mark Clark on December 4th, 1969. Between 1970 and 1990, Chicago Police Commander Jon Burge and members of the Chicago Police Department tortured at least 100 Black men, now known as the Jon Burge Torture Victims, into confessions<sup>27</sup>



using methods such as electric shock, suffocation, and burning<sup>28</sup>, as a means of reinforcing the needs and outcomes of police work through convictions.

In recent years, Chicago police officers have killed and harassed young and old Black men, women, and trans folks, with impunity. The department has been rewarded with a consistently increasing budget, leaving city services at risk of cuts and opening the door for privatization and gentrification. Despite the increases in the police department budget for personnel and tools like ShotSpotter, the department is not preventing, curbing, or solving more crimes. The City's independent auditor found that ShotSpotter microphones have contributed to a change in police behavior, encouraging more harassing methods and practices from police officers<sup>29</sup>. ShotSpotter technology in Chicago is part of a long history of state violence being used to control Chicago's Black, brown, and poor residents. Chicago's South Side neighborhoods, which are home to the University of Chicago and the soon-to-be Obama Presidential Center, are policed by both the Chicago Police Department and the University of Chicago police force.

## **Conclusion**

We live in a global society that believes the poor are meant to be controlled to keep capital and the status quo safe. As a result, the State would rather manufacture crises such as corruption, economic disaster, and police violence than take the necessary steps to solve the high rates of poverty and instances of violence. This is as true in Puerto Rico as in Chicago or Palestine. So when a tool like ShotSpotter is introduced, we're not truly seeing something to solve for public safety. Still, we are seeing more of our public dollars spent on a tool that sustains the existence of policing as a means of protecting capital and maintaining social control. As native Puerto Ricans are being pushed out and oppressed, the island is becoming a paradise for the super rich<sup>30</sup> with its beautiful weather and zero taxes. In the last decade, Chicago's neighborhoods have seen anywhere from a 32%-50% decrease in their Black population<sup>31</sup>. Surveillance and policing are contributing factors.

In December 2021, SoundThinking announced a partnership with Israeli drone manufacturer Airobotics "To Help Save Lives

and Deter Crime in Israel”<sup>32</sup>. Gun violence at the hands of Israeli colonizers has been a serious issue for Palestinians, and the Israeli police and forms of law enforcement do not keep statistics on the matter, nor do they prioritize responding to it. Palestinians have pressed for the local government to do something about it, resulting in a task force whose recommendations included “ increasing surveillance, and recruiting more Muslim Palestinian men into the police force and national service, an alternative to military service.” These recommendations are similar to recommendations we have seen in the U.S., and like many of us abolitionists, human rights lawyer Shahrazad Odeh writes of these recommendations:

“Rather than investing in social services and offering original solutions that center rehabilitation in Palestinian society, it lists outdated recommendations that are merely tools by which the state can tighten its grip on Palestinian citizens under its colonial rule. The document denies the state’s role in the escalation of violence and crime in Palestinian communities, ignoring its discriminatory economic and social policies and mechanisms of enforcement. Instead, it places most of the blame on the victims themselves, treating the problem as intrinsic to Arab society.”

This excerpt of Odeh’s analysis of policing in Palestine could be relevant in any major U.S. city. The U.S. Empire relies on the military and militarization of police at home and abroad. However, the tides are shifting, and calls for the abolition of police and capitalism by Black organizers are becoming louder and more prevalent. Rather than listen to these calls, the neoliberal approach to use reform and technology has allowed the State to become more repressive without the physical presence of law enforcement officers while masking it all as improving policing. But there is no alternative or compromise for abolition.

*Alyx Goodwin is an organizer in Chicago working at the intersections of policing, surveillance, and finance.*

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