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EDITORIAL

Public safety loses in Cambridge

ShotSpotter gone — a victim of confusion and myths.

By [The Editorial Board](#) Updated July 13, 2026, 4:00 a.m.



A ShotSpotter device was attached high on a light pole in Somerville in 2024. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Xavier Bautista, a 32-year-old Cambridge public works employee, was shot and killed in the early morning hours of [July 4](#).

Yes, another victim of senseless gun violence. But the real issue Cambridge city officials need to face is whether he was also the victim of their own opposition to a technology intended to save lives.

Bautista's body was discovered around 5:30 a.m. by a [passerby who called 911](#). But the Middlesex District Attorney's office [believe he was shot about an hour earlier](#), his body concealed by the darkness. There were no earlier 911 calls reporting shots fired from the area.

In mid-May the Cambridge City Council [voted 5-2](#) (with two more voting present) to remove the ShotSpotter system from the city's neighborhoods, which had been employed [since 2014](#) — including at the intersection near Broadway and Norfolk Street, where Baptista lay dying for at least an hour.

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“It is plausible that an active ShotSpotter system could have resulted in first responders arriving on-scene to render aid to the victim more quickly, particularly in this case when the shooting was not reported via 911,” Cambridge Police Department spokesperson Sergeant Robert Reardon told [Cambridge Day](#).

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The acoustic system, which uses a network of microphones to detect sounds that might be gunfire and then notifies police, is in use in [more than a dozen](#) Massachusetts communities, including Boston and Somerville.

The technology and the parent company that produces and promotes it, California-based SoundThinking, have become the stuff of confusion and myths — and that all played out at the public hearing at which the Council voted to remove the system.

Many systems, including Cambridge’s, are funded all or in part through a [Homeland Security](#) grant program. That alone has sent some opponents into a tizzy.

Others feared the system was being used to record conversations. A recent [study](#) by the Policing Project at NYU Law School found “the risk of voice surveillance was extremely low in practice,” and offered suggestions for eliminating even those slight risks, which the company adopted.

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And because the technology is used primarily in neighborhoods particularly plagued by gunshots, some worry they are a form of racial profiling. But microphones don't discriminate.

And at a [packed community meeting](#) on Wednesday, attended by a number of Bautista family members, it was largely minority residents who demanded restoration of the system.

Mayor Sumbul Siddiqui, who voted with the majority of the City Council to remove the ShotSpotter system, said, "We're not going to leave this behind. Xavier will not be forgotten. We'll have some next steps."

You'd think council members might have given more weight to the advice and the data presented to them before they took their precipitous vote at a meeting in May.

At that meeting, Cambridge City Manager Yi-An Huang and Pauline Wells, acting police commissioner, [both supported](#) keeping the system, noting that there had been 11 incidents of gun violence in the city over the past 10 years which were flagged by ShotSpotter but had never been the subject of a 911 call.

"That means 11 moments when no one reached for the phone, 11 moments when officers would have no direction, 11 moments when seconds were slipping away, and ShotSpotter was the only reason help was there at all," [Wells said](#).

The Boston Police Department, which has used ShotSpotter since 2007, reports [on its website](#) that on average its notifications arrive one to two minutes before 911 calls, adding, "Sometimes, notifications arrive without a 911 call."

Those are the ones that often save lives — and help deliver justice by allowing police to recover evidence quickly.

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Ralph Clark, SoundThinking president and CEO, was interviewed recently by [WBZ Radio's Dan Rea](#) and said that 80 percent to 90 percent of criminal gunfire generates no 911 call.

"It's not about getting calls late, or getting calls from a half a mile away [where we] don't know the exact location. It's about not getting calls at all," he said.

In a [Globe op-ed](#), two city councilors who voted against removing ShotSpotter, Tim Flaherty and E. Denise Simmons, wrote, “Too many shootings remain unresolved. That is not progressive. It is neglect dressed up as privacy.”

The two councilors also called for “an evidence-based evaluation of the service.”

Imagine that, expecting a community that is home to a couple of the world’s most prestigious universities, actually looking at the data before abandoning a system that has served the city for the past 12 years. Among the only “evidence” the [Council apparently considered](#) was that offered by [Digital Fourth](#), a group of volunteer activists devoted to ending “unconstitutional government surveillance.” Hey, no bias there.

No, we can’t be certain Bautista’s life would have been saved had his shooting been reported earlier.

But as his sister, Victoria Angeles, [told NBCBoston](#), “My brother was laying on the ground for an hour... anything [that] could have helped him should have been used.”

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