

SAN FRANCISCANS SPEND MORE AND GET LESS FROM THEIR POLICE DEPARTMENT THAN MOST MAJOR CALIFORNIA CITIES



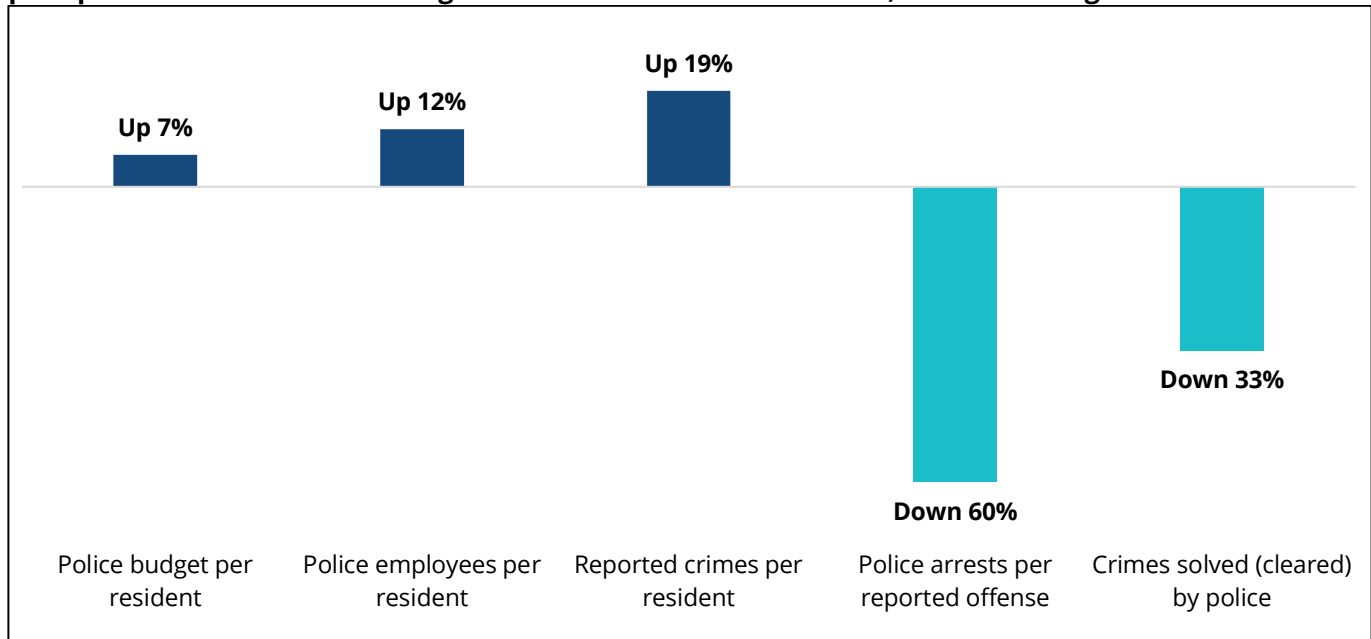
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March 2022

Policy Brief

The San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) remains a liability to the city and a disturbing outlier among California police agencies. The department expends substantial resources while failing to hold itself accountable for vastly disproportionate arrests of Black people,¹ plummeting crime-solving efficiency, and uniquely deficient data reporting. Compared to other big-city police agencies, the SFPD solves fewer crimes despite larger staffing per city resident and costs per area patrolled. The department also greatly over-arrests Black people, refuses to record the ethnicity of Latino arrestees, and flagrantly omits offense descriptions for a substantial share of arrests. The SFPD’s manifest failings harm San Franciscans and distort statewide crime information.

Figure 1. The San Francisco Police Department’s rising budget and personnel accompany increasingly poor performance and worsening crime rates over the last decade, 2010-11 through 2020-2021



Sources: BLS (2022); City of San Francisco, city budget (2010-22); DOJ (2022); DOF (2022); DIR (2022); SFPD (2022). Note: Changes are adjusted for the city’s population growth over the period. The budget compares constant 2021 dollars adjusted for inflation using the Bay Area Consumer Price Index (CPI), and spending per resident is adjusted using the Bay Area CPI to standardize the city’s costs to the statewide average (BLS, 2022; DIR, 2022). Change for all measures are calculated from the first and latest values generated by regression equations incorporating all data points into trendlines, which produces an average change over 10 years. These trends occurred both before the appearance of COVID-19 (2010-2019) and after it had arrived in San Francisco (2020), and they largely preceded the Black Lives Matter protests and swearing in of San Francisco District Attorney Chesa Boudin in 2020.

The SFPD’s budget and staffing have risen both per city resident (Figure 1) and in absolute numbers (Table 1) amid ever-worsening performance. The department has the second-highest spending level per resident, the most

¹ An earlier version of the report referred to arrested Black people as “Black residents.” The report was updated on March 15, 2022 to reflect that arrest statistics do not distinguish between residents and visitors to the city.

employees per resident, and by far the highest costs per square mile patrolled of California’s six major-city police departments (Table 2). Meanwhile, the SFPD has the lowest rate and biggest decline in arrests per reported crime² and crimes solved by police over the 2010-2020 decade, even as reported Part I felony offense rates rose (up 19%).³ This trend occurred both before the appearance of COVID-19 (2010-2019) and after it had arrived in San Francisco (2020). High rates of crime and low rates of crime-solving also preceded the Black Lives Matter protests and swearing in of San Francisco District Attorney Chesa Boudin in 2020.

The SFPD’s low rate of clearing violent crimes compared to other police departments is especially worrisome. San Francisco’s reported rate of Part I “index” offenses (the four violent and three property felonies used as a standard measure of crime) is by far the highest of any major California city, yet SFPD arrests have dropped 41 percent by number and 60 percent per reported offense during this period. That crime rose and arrests fell while the SFPD’s budget and staffing expanded challenges conventional beliefs that more police mitigate crime.

Table 1. San Francisco Police Department budget (in constant 2021 dollars), personnel, reported offenses, crime clearances, and arrests, 2010-23

Year	SFPD budget (constant 2021 dollars)	SFPD employees	SFPD spending per resident	Part I offenses		Percent cleared	Total arrests
				Reported	Cleared		
2010-11	\$618,211,322	2,681	\$668	38,112	5,132	13.5%	20,397
2011-12	\$624,970,227	2,665	\$668	38,260	4,943	12.9%	22,837
2012-13	\$645,731,316	2,655	\$680	44,675	4,457	10.0%	20,408
2013-14	\$679,254,639	2,727	\$707	55,388	6,097	11.0%	21,009
2014-15	\$662,877,220	2,784	\$684	51,854	6,381	12.3%	18,309
2015-16	\$665,386,435	2,891	\$679	59,729	5,610	9.4%	19,923
2016-17	\$670,857,746	3,036	\$680	53,592	5,546	10.3%	17,557
2017-18	\$674,042,854	2,994	\$679	60,657	5,179	8.5%	15,510
2018-19	\$696,670,942	3,053	\$699	55,358	5,318	9.6%	15,436
2019-20	\$741,244,198	3,203	\$744	54,713	5,073	9.3%	15,255
2020-21	\$702,981,180	3,048	\$704	43,533	3,810	8.8%	11,150
Average 10- year change*	+15%	+21%	+7%	+28%	-10%	-33%	-41%
2021-22	\$674,749,658	2,897	\$675	49,269			
2022-23	\$689,077,957	2,953	\$688				

Sources: BLS (2022); City of San Francisco, city budget (2010-22); DIR (2022); DOF (2022); DOJ (2021). *Change for both absolute numbers and for spending per resident are calculated from the first and latest values generated by regression equations incorporating all data points into trendlines, which produces an average change over 10 years. Note: Budget figures are adjusted for the Bay Area CPI to yield constant dollars that factor out year-to-year inflation, and spending per resident is adjusted using the Bay Area CPI to standardize the city’s costs to the statewide average (BLS, 2022; DIR, 2022).

From 2010 through 2020, the SFPD benefited from increased funding (a 10-year average increase of 15%⁴ in constant dollars) and staffing (up 21%) (Table 1).⁵ Civilian employees account for the largest increase in personnel compared to sworn officers. Overall, police spending per city resident rose by a 10-year average of 7 percent after adjusting for inflation and the city’s high cost of living. During that same period, reported Part I violent and property felonies surged by a 10-year average of 28 percent. Notably, arrests and reported incidents both declined in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Total police responses to incidents fell from 152,407 in

² Defined as the following Part I “index” offenses: murder, rape, aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft.

³ Arrest statistics do not distinguish between residents and visitors to the city.

⁴ The SFPD’s budget was analyzed in 2021 dollars adjusted for inflation using the Bay Area Consumer Price Index.

⁵ These figures largely precede the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on crime and policing.

2018 (418 per day) and 148,116 in 2019 (406 per day) to 117,822 in 2020 (322 per day), 126,771 in 2021 (347 per day), and 318 per day in January-February 2022. Total citations and arrests of adults fell from 34,694 in 2018 and 32,136 in 2019 to 22,419 in 2020 and 20,277 in 2021. Initial figures for 2022 project around 21,000 adult arrests and citations for the year. Whether incident numbers will increase to pre-pandemic levels after COVID-19 restrictions are lifted is not known.

The SFPD is more costly, less effective, and less transparent than most other big-city police forces

Table 2 compares the SFPD to police departments in California’s five other major cities with populations of 500,000 or more.⁶ In 2019, the latest year before the coronavirus pandemic (not shown), San Francisco had the highest number of police officers per city resident (3.6), compared to the average in five other major cities (2.2), and the second highest rate of police spending per resident, lagging behind only Los Angeles.⁷ In 2020, the first year of the pandemic and a period of city-wide budget cuts (shown in Table 2), the SFPD still had the second highest rate of police spending per resident, the second highest number of police employees per resident, and the highest cost for the area patrolled. SFPD also continued to have the lowest rate of reported offenses cleared by an arrest (8.8%) compared to the other cities and the highest crime rate of any major city in the state (4,981.1 offenses per 100,000 residents).⁸

Table 2. Comparison of police departments in California cities of 500,000 or more population, 2020

City	Reported crimes	Percent cleared by arrest	Crime rate	Cost per resident*	Staff (FTE) per 1,000 residents
Fresno	20,035	17.7%	3,695.8	\$626	2.1
Los Angeles	114,814	16.3%	2,944.9	\$758	3.6
Sacramento	17,795	13.3%	3,389.9	\$355	2.1
San Diego	29,624	11.6%	2,135.9	\$482	1.9
San Jose	28,222	10.6%	2,785.3	\$407	1.7
San Francisco	43,533	8.8%	4,981.1	\$704	3.5
Statewide	1,015,035	15.4%	2,567.2		

Sources: BLS (2022); California’s city budgets, 2020-2021 (2022); DIR (2022); DOF (2022); DOJ (2021). *In 2021 dollars, adjusted to each city’s Consumer Price Index standardized to the state CPI (BLS, 2022; DIR, 2022). Note: The crime rate is reported Part I violent and property index offenses per 100,000 population. FTE means full-time equivalent staffing. Here 1.0 is the equivalent of a full-time police department employee.

Table 3 shows that the SFPD’s data reporting practices and racial disparities vary radically from those of California’s other major police departments.⁹ First, the SFPD consistently has the worst statistical reporting of any California law enforcement agency, large or small (CJCJ, 2018). The department increasingly fails to specify

⁶ Police budgets and costs per resident are adjusted using the Consumer Price Indexes (CPI) for each city, using the Bay Area, Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim, San Diego-Carlsbad, Western Size Class B, and California CPIs. The effect of these CPI adjustments is substantial, more than doubling the comparative cost figures for Fresno and Sacramento police, for example.

⁷ In comparison with the SFPD, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) has 4.6 times more employees and higher per resident costs. However, the LAPD patrols a city 4.5 times larger in population and 10 times larger in geographic area. We make this comparison in constant CPI-adjusted dollars.

⁸ Although San Francisco’s crime rate is the highest among major cities, current rates stand at historic lows compared to the pre-2000s era and the recent peak in 2017 (DOJ, 2021).

⁹ In addition to the SFPD, San Francisco has five other law enforcement agencies with arrest authority: CA Highway Patrol - San Francisco, CSU San Francisco, UC Hastings College of Law, UC San Francisco, and Union Pacific RR - San Francisco. Together, these agencies received 802 reports of Part I offenses in 2020, including 136 violent felonies and 666 property felonies. These five agencies made arrests that cleared 49 violent and 97 property felonies, 3.7% of the city’s crimes cleared and a clearance rate of 18.2%, which is comparable to other big cities’ clearance rates. These agencies’ crime reports also specify Latino ethnicity of arrestees and conform to other reporting standards. When combined by the state into county-wide figures (DOJ, 2021), the SFPD’s failure to comply with statewide standards produces very misleading racial statistics for San Francisco County.

what offenses lead their officers to arrest individuals. The SFPD does not specify an offense in 17 percent of all adult and 86 percent of juvenile arrests, which is four and 12 times the state average, respectively, and far higher than the other major cities. There is a growing inconsistency between the SFPD’s juvenile arrest data and comparable figures from the San Francisco Juvenile Probation Department. Finally, the SFPD has long refused to specify Latino ethnicity in its arrest data, potentially masking true racial arrest disparities. These statistical anomalies both hamper evaluation of SFPD practices locally and distort statewide and national crime statistics.

Second, the SFPD persists in its 20-year practice of arresting Black people compared to non-Black people at the widest disparities of any jurisdiction we have evaluated, large, small, or statewide. The SFPD’s 2020 arrest rate for Black people was 9.8 times higher than its arrest rate for non-Black people, and 3.6 times the average arrest rate for Black people statewide. San Francisco’s disparity gap is more than double the gap reported in the next most disparate city, San Jose (4.8). In fact, the SFPD arrests Black people at the highest rate of any major California city.

Table 3. Comparison of data reporting practices (2018) and racial disparities among police departments in California cities of 500,000 or more population (2020)

City	Percent of arrests for unspecified offenses*		Specifies Latino ethnicity of arrestees?	Arrests per 100,000 population, 2020		
	Adult	Juvenile		Black	Non-Black	Disparity
Fresno	1.9%	1.6%	YES	6,782.8	2,105.8	3.2
Los Angeles	1.9%	3.3%	YES	3,331.8	816.2	4.1
San Diego	7.1%	15.0%	YES	7,159.5	1,600.6	4.5
Sacramento	2.5%	5.9%	YES	7,227.3	1,518.0	4.8
San Jose	4.5%	7.9%	YES	6,020.3	1,350.7	4.5
San Francisco	17.1%	85.5%	NO	7,449.6	759.4	9.8
Statewide	4.2%	7.3%	YES	5,235.8	1,929.5	2.7

Sources: FBI (2022); DOF (2022); DOJ (2018; 2021). *Percent of arrests reported for unspecified “Other” felonies, misdemeanors, or status offenses. Data are for 2018. The SFPD apparently distributes Latino arrestees haphazardly as “White” or “Other” race, making all non-Black racial categories impossible to quantify.

Recent reform efforts have failed to address the SFPD’s systemic failures

In 2016, the United States Department of Justice released its Collaborative Reform Initiative report in response to several high-profile incidents of SFPD misconduct and abuse. These incidents include the discovery of repeated, racist text messages by certain officers and a number of brutal and unjustified shootings by officers (USDOJ, 2016). The report narrowly focused on “use of force” by officers, particularly racial disparities in traffic stops, and related impacts on police-community relations. However, the report failed to examine larger issues in San Francisco policing. These issues include the vastly disproportionate arrests of Black people compared to those of other races and the department’s failure to produce usable crime statistics sufficient to analyze its practices. The report’s analysis of SFPD traffic stops understates the severe impacts on the city’s Black residents.

The U.S. Department of Justice under President Donald Trump exacerbated these limitations by defaulting on further action. Former California Attorney General Xavier Becerra took over the effort, reaching an agreement with the city in 2018 to implement several reforms. As the present analysis indicates, San Francisco has fallen short of its officially stated “commitment to transform the San Francisco Police Department into a model of transparency and accountability” voiced by former San Francisco Mayor Mark Farrell (OAG, 2018). The report’s extensive recommendations for improving police relations with Black communities remain difficult to envision as long as the SFPD continues to arrest a number of Black people equal to the entire Black population of the city every 87 months (FBI, 2022; DOF, 2022; DOJ, 2021).

Decisive action to reform the SFPD is imperative

It is incumbent upon San Francisco's political authorities to fully investigate and strongly reform the SFPD. This begins with ensuring that police officers are held accountable for deadly violence and other unlawful uses of force—a goal that could become more elusive if SFPD Chief William Scott fails to negotiate a new agreement with the district attorney's office allowing for independent investigation of these incidents (Cassidy, 2022). Additionally, compilation and reporting of crime statistics must be taken out of the SFPD's hands and placed with an independent statistical reporting agency that will conform to the Uniform Crime Reporting standards followed by every other law enforcement agency in California (including San Francisco's other five agencies).

The SFPD has struggled for years with mismanagement, wasteful spending, disproportionate policing of communities of color, and a lack of transparency, among many other issues.¹⁰ The activism of San Francisco's community groups and its Black Lives Matter movement show the city's readiness for substantive reforms and the urgent need for action. Reducing the SFPD's budget and reinvesting funds in community-based services more committed to equitable law enforcement, standardized reporting, and professional practices would advance racial justice while bringing an end to wasteful police spending.

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¹⁰ See, for example, the discovery of racist text messages sent among officers (Fuller, 2016), accusations of deep-seated racism on the police force (Barba, 2020), and the SFPD's recent use of rape victims' DNA (Hernandez, 2022).

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