

San Francisco homeless stats soar: city blames big business, residents blame officials

In the summer of 2019, Fox News embarked on an ambitious project to chronicle the toll progressive policies have had on the homeless crisis in four West Coast cities: Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Portland, Ore. In each city, we saw a lack of safety, sanitation, and civility. Residents, the homeless and advocates say they've lost faith in their elected officials' ability to solve the issue. Most of the cities have thrown hundreds of millions of dollars at the problem only to watch it get worse. This is what we saw in San Francisco.

San Francisco is a city of extremes.

It has more billionaires per capita than anywhere else in the world, but it also has a homeless problem so severe that it rivals some third-world nations. On any given day you can see souped-up Lamborghinis and blinged-out trophy wives in one part of the city, then walk over a few blocks and see piles of human feces, puddles of urine and vomit caked on the sidewalks. The misery of homelessness, mental illness, and drug addiction hits deep in San Francisco and has turned parts of a beautiful city into a public toilet.

SAN FRANCISCO HUMAN FECES MAP SHOWS WASTE BLANKETING THE CALIFORNIA CITY

As the problem grows, residents are finding themselves at a crossroads. The compassion for those struggling is constantly being challenged by a fear for their own safety and quality of life. It never had to get this bad, say, critics, who are appalled that it's getting worse every day.



San Francisco Mayor London Breed says it's inhumane to let addicts languish on the streets, but homeless advocates say the measure to force mentally ill drug addicts into housing and treatment for up to a year is extreme and a violation of civil rights. (AP Photo/Ben Margot)

"I won't visit my son who lives out there again," Amelia Cartwright told Fox News. "It's disgusting. I went there a few months ago for the first time and this guy who looked homeless and really beat up spit on me. Can you imagine? He spit on me!"

While it might be a shock to the system for some, residents say such interactions are common.

One cleaning woman who works downtown told Fox News a homeless woman comes by every day, curses at her and spits on the window.

SAN FRANCISCO PLANS TO RESERVE PARKING LOT FOR HOMELESS LIVING OUT OF VEHICLES: REPORTS

Lately, the cases of citizens being harassed by mentally ill street people has taken a dangerous turn.

Last week, Austin Vincent, a homeless man, was caught on camera attacking a 26-year-old woman outside her condo complex. As he threw Paneez Kosarian on the ground, he allegedly talked about saving her from robots and offered to kill

another woman nearby so he could earn her trust.

Vincent was arrested and pleaded not guilty to a false imprisonment charge and two counts of battery and attempted robbery. Instead of being thrown in jail, Superior Court Judge Christine Van Aken released Vincent over the objections of the district attorney's office. Her decision caused a huge backlash in the community and was slammed by Mayor London Breed and other city officials. The judge eventually ordered Vincent to wear an ankle monitor.

On Monday, Vincent was arrested again for an alleged assault that occurred in February. The police said he was armed with a knife and approached a woman and her friends as they waited for a ride. Vincent allegedly threatened to kill the woman and lunged at the group.

The controversy over Vincent's initial release is just the latest example prompting people in the City by the Bay to say they don't feel safe on the streets. Outraged residents Fox News spoke to in late June said they're tired of waiting for their elected officials to come up with a plan and complain no one ever seems to be on the same page.

What's equally frustrating is that the city still manages to blow through hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars each year to address the crisis and blames everyone but themselves when the homeless count rises.

"It's not as though we don't see the problem," a former Apple employee told Fox News. "There's no way to escape it."

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In May, city officials braced themselves when a preliminary homeless count was released. They expected the numbers to rise and they were right. Initial data showed that it had jumped 17 percent from 2017. The double-digit growth was bad enough but then it got a whole lot worse.

When the final report was released a couple of months later, it showed the street count increase would have been 30 percent if the city had stuck to the same definition of homelessness as they had in the past. This year, San Francisco opted

to use the federal definition instead of the one they wrote themselves.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's definition of homelessness includes people who are living on the streets, in cars or in shelters. San Francisco's own definition widens the category to people without a permanent address who are in prison, rehab or hospitalized. If the city used the same measurement it had in years past, the numbers would show an increase from 7,400 to 9,784 — or 30 percent in 2019.



A person pushes a cart past parked RVs along a street in San Francisco on June 27, 2019. A federally mandated count of homeless in San Francisco increased 17 percent in two years, driven in part by a surge of people living in RVs and other vehicles. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu)

City spokesman Jeff Cretan explained the change by saying San Francisco is “looking at the HUD numbers because it helps us work in collaboration with other places like Los Angeles or our neighboring counties.”

Some homeless advocates weren't on board with that logic and accused the city of manipulating the findings to make it seem as though more progress had been made when, in fact, the numbers showed the opposite.

The city has also blamed the rise in homelessness on big tech companies that have moved to the area, including Twitter, Salesforce, NVIDIA and

Eventbrite. They say the businesses have brought high-paying jobs with them, which has caused housing prices to soar and pushed people who can't afford to keep up financially out of the area or onto the streets.

TOP TECH CEOS BICKER OVER CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS

Jose, a Bay Area Rapid Transit worker who has been living in San Francisco for more than 20 years, told Fox News he fears he too could be homeless one day.

"What's happening is that they are building too many condominiums and kicking the people out," he said. "I'm lucky they haven't kicked me out yet."

According to a 2018 report from HUD, a family of four living in San Francisco making \$117,422 a year qualifies as "low income." For singles, a salary of \$82,000 or less puts them in the bracket. In comparison, "low income" for a family of four in New York is \$83,450 per year.

In his 2019 report on housing affordability in the San Francisco Bay Area, Compass economist Patrick Carlisle said: "affordability percentages remain low by historical standards, and the Bay Area typically has among the lowest in the nation."

According to data from the California Association of Realtors, only 17 percent of households can afford to buy a median-priced home. In San Francisco, that's \$1.7 million.

"It's impossible to buy a home here," resident Doug Stall told Fox News. "You've got these ridiculous housing prices, crime and these people crapping on the streets. Why would anyone want to stay?"

But to say the city hasn't tried to address the problem would be wrong. It has. The problem is that it has backfired spectacularly.

One of the biggest statewide blunders is Proposition 47.

Supported by the California Democratic Party and championed by the American Civil Liberties Union, the referendum was passed by a wide margin in 2014. The idea behind it was to reduce certain non-violent felonies to misdemeanors in order to free up resources for cops and prosecutors to go after serious, violent offenders. This included downgrading fraud, forgery, shoplifting, and grand theft

as long as the total value of the stolen property was less than \$950.

It also included illegal drugs.

“The goal was to be more helpful to society, helpful to the homeless issue, helpful to the police department and the court system. But as we saw, it’s a total failure at this point,” Richie Greenberg, a former mayoral candidate, told Fox News.

He added: “The intention was to help, of course, but what it really wound up doing is that it made San Francisco more attractive to those who are both homeless and those who are drug addicts to move here. We are now finding that homelessness is increasing. Drug addiction is increasing and the number of people here — the numbers are increasing, as well.”



A man stands outside his tent on Division Street in San Francisco. (AP)

The city has also been pro-active in building “navigation centers.” Billed as a new type of homeless shelter, the centers provide homeless San Franciscans room and board while case managers work to find jobs, sign them up for public benefits and make sure they receive health care services. Unlike traditional shelters where people with partners, pets and possessions are not allowed in, they are welcome in the navigation centers. While good in theory, some warn that there are hidden dangers involved in the navigation centers.

Susan Dyer Reynolds, editor-in-chief of the independent community newspaper Marina Times, says the centers “are not sober facilities, and people steal and break into cars to feed their habits.”

In June, San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors voted 10-1 to back a pilot program that would allow the city to force people suffering from serious mental illness and drug addiction into treatment. That didn’t sit well with liberals who argued that it would be a deprivation of civil liberties.

SAN FRANCISCO TO FORCE TREATMENT FOR MENTALLY ILL DRUG ADDICTS AMID CRITICISM PLAN VIOLATES CIVIL RIGHTS

A few frustrated residents say it might be time to cut and run.

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“The city is running out of strategies,” Anna Suarez told Fox. “I’m moving to Austin.”

You can find Barnini Chakraborty on Twitter @Barnini.

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