Arrest Trends in San Francisco, 2018-2024

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Abstract

In this memo I analyze trends in arrest activity in San Francisco between 2018 and 2024. Arrest activity decreased during this period, with a steady decrease before the pandemic, a sharp drop at the outset of the pandemic, and generally low arrest activity in the post-pandemic. In the post-pandemic, arrest levels for almost every class of crime were less than or equal to arrest levels in the pre-pandemic, except for drug sale arrests, which substantially increased. The vast majority of those increased drug sale arrests took place in the Tenderloin. Indeed, the Tenderloin was an exception to the trend of decreasing arrests in San Francisco – arrest activity in the district increased in the post-pandemic, with the increase driven by drug sale arrests.

An important caveat of this analysis is that it examines arrests, not *crime.* Of all crime events, arrests only include those that are reported to law enforcement and go on to produce an arrest. Trends in arrest do not necessarily point to equal trends in crime, rather, they point to trends in how the City and Police Department are prioritizing law enforcement resources. Thus I conclude that in the post-pandemic, the City shifted policing resources towards the Tenderloin and towards making arrests for drug sale crime.

## Geographic concentration in the Tenderloin

Geographic trends in arrest over the six-year analysis period are shown in [Figure 1](#fig-tenderloin). The left-hand panel depicts the general concentration of arrests in downtown police districts – Northern, Central, Southern, the Tenderloin, and the Mission. However, viewing the geographic trends by district obscures more specific patterns illustrated at a block-level in the right panel. High arrest numbers in the Northern, Central, and Southern districts were driven by arrests taking place along those regions’ borders with the Tenderloin.

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| Figure 1: Geographic Trends in Arrests (2018-2024), by Police District (Left) and by Block Segment (Right) |

At the block level, we can specifically classify **“the greater Tenderloin,”** the area inside of the Tenderloin plus the corners along its border streets,[[1]](#footnote-24) as having particularly high arrest activity. Arrests in the greater Tenderloin made up 27% of the total arrests in San Francisco in the analysis period. Of the top ten street corners in San Francisco ranked by total arrest activity 2018-2024, shown in [Figure 2](#fig-2), almost all of them were in the greater Tenderloin.

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| Figure 2: Ten Corners with the Highest Arrest Activity (2018-2024) |

## Changes in post-pandemic arrest patterns

The onset of the pandemic and the accompanying city-wide shelter-in-place order were associated with a large drop in arrests at the city level. Between February and April 2020 – the immediate outset of the pandemic – monthly arrests decreased by 43% (-441 arrests) in San Francisco. This trend aligns with prior study of the pandemic’s effects on crime and policing. In a national analysis that included San Francisco and 11 other major cities, Abrams (2021) found that shelter-in-place orders and the pandemic itself caused substantial and immediate reductions in many types of criminal behavior and their accompanying arrest activity.

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| Figure 3: Monthly Arrest Totals, City-wide, 2018-2024 |

While the short-term drop in arrests is intuitive to some degree, it is less intuitive that arrest activity remained depressed for years after the onset of the pandemic. [Table 1](#tbl-post) defines two, two-year periods:

* the “pre-pandemic,” 1/1/2018-1/1/2020, and
* the “post-pandemic,” 1/1/2022-1/1/2024

The table shows that average weekly arrests in the post-pandemic period were still down -36% from the pre period.

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| Table 1: Weekly Arrest Totals in the pre/post pandemic   | Time Period | Average Weekly Arrest Total | Difference | Percent | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Pre Pandemic (2018-20) | 269 | - | - | | Post Pandemic (2022-24) | 171 | -98 | -36% | |

The general decrease in arrest activity in the post-pandemic was driven by a large decrease in traffic violation arrests, down -19.82 arrests a week on average. Arrests for some violent crimes – robbery and assault – also decreased, as did larceny theft arrests.

In the post-pandemic, homicide, burglary, weapons, and drug-use[[2]](#footnote-36) arrests all returned to or else never deviated from pre-pandemic levels, with average weekly arrest levels in the post-pandemic indistinguishable from the pre-pandemic. All trends are shown in [Figure 4](#fig-city-changes), using a statistical approach detailed in the Appendix [Section 4.2](#sec-stats).

The only incident category examined where arrest activity significantly increased in the post-pandemic was arrest tied to the sale of drugs,[[3]](#footnote-37) up by 7.43 arrests a week on average. It is notable that drug sale arrests increased while drug-use arrests did not.

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| Figure 4: Change in Average Weekly Arrests, 2018-2020 to 2022-2024 |

The vast majority, 73%, of those elevated drug sale arrests in the post-pandemic took place in the greater Tenderloin. The greater Tenderloin is also the only region in the city where arrest activity returned to and in some months exceeded pre-pandemic levels. Other districts generally saw arrest levels drop slightly, or, in the Mission’s case, drop significantly.

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| Figure 5: Monthly Arrest Totals by District, 2018-2024 |

The greater Tenderloin also saw a meaningful change in the composition of arrests in the post-pandemic, with a growing emphasis on drug sale arrests. [Figure 6](#fig-5) shows that for most arrest types in the greater Tenderloin, average weekly arrest levels were essentially equal in the pre and post pandemic. While drug use arrests rose on their face, the increase was not statistically significant, due to the weekly arrest totals being highly variable and not consistently elevated.

Drug sale arrests saw a significant and large increase, with 6.7 more arrests a week on average in the post-pandemic than the pre period. This increase is consistent with media coverage of the City’s approach to drug crime in the Tenderloin – Neilson (2023) suggests that policing in the Tenderloin was more aggressive in the post-pandemic, with a particular focus on making arrests for drug sale and facing political pressure to avoid making arrests for drug use.

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| Figure 6: Change in Average Weekly Arrests in the Tenderloin, 2018-2020 to 2022-2024 |

## Discussion

I conclude that in the post-pandemic, the City shifted policing resources towards the Tenderloin and towards making arrests for drug sale, the vast majority of which took place in the Tenderloin. To be clear, political and administrative focus on the Tenderloin, and particularly on drug crime in the Tenderloin, is not novel (Hartlaub 2022). However, I find that the degree to which the City, in the post-pandemic, has emphasized arrest activity in the Tenderloin, is novel. The arrest gap between the greater Tenderloin and all other regions in the City has grown considerably. This shift in policing resources may be in response to rising drug sale crime in the Tenderloin, but further research using criminal incident data is necessary to confirm any trends in crime.

## Appendix

### Data

All analysis is based on publicly available police incident data from the City of San Francisco (DataSF 2024). Of the 824,565 records in the incident data extract, many are duplicates or else incidents that did not lead to arrest. Filtering is applied to isolate the 119,119 records that represent all arrests from 01-01-2018 to 16-02-2024. Geographic point data is available for 118,506 of those records – the vast majority of arrests with missing point data were arrests that took place outside of San Francisco, with the negligible missing-ness for arrests in San Francisco distributed across districts proportional to their arrest totals. All analysis is based on the arrests with geographic point data.

#### Defining the greater Tenderloin

The “greater Tenderloin” is defined by placing a small buffer around the Tenderloin shape to encompass the corners along its immediate edges. See [Figure 7](#fig-gt) below:

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| Figure 7: The Greater Tenderloin |

#### Defining “Drug use” arrests

In the arrest data, there is an arrest type, “Drug,” which is defined broadly and contains all drug related offenses. I split this category into two sub-groups – drug sale arrests, and drug use/non sale arrests. All arrests in the broad “Drug” category are also members of one of these two subgroups.  
Drug use, or, non-drug sale arrests, are defined as those drug crimes that do not contain the phrase “sale” in their description.

| Drug Use Arrest Description | Frequency |
| --- | --- |
| Narcotics Paraphernalia, Possession of | 4,349 |
| Methamphetamine Offense | 1,446 |
| Controlled Substance Offense | 318 |
| Heroin Offense | 298 |
| Opiates Offense | 284 |
| Loitering Where Narcotics are Sold/Used | 249 |
| Cocaine, Base/rock Offense | 231 |
| Marijuana Offense | 227 |
| Firearm, Armed While Possessing Controlled Substance | 207 |
| Cocaine Offense | 161 |
| Controlled Substance, Under the Influence of | 122 |
| Methamphetamine, Transportation | 39 |
| Controlled Substance Violation, Loitering for | 24 |
| Cocaine, Transportation | 21 |
| Hallucinogenics Offense | 20 |
| Marijuana, Transporting | 20 |
| Controlled Substance, Transportation | 12 |
| Methadone Offense | 11 |
| Amphetamines Offense | 11 |
| Opiates, Transportation | 10 |
| Maintain Premise Where Narcotics Are Sold/used | 10 |
| Heroin, Transportation | 9 |
| Opium Offense | 8 |
| Opium Derivative Offense | 6 |
| Marijuana, Cultivating/Planting | 4 |
| Marijuana, Furnishing | 4 |
| Drug Lab Apparatus, Possession | 3 |
| Hypodermic Needle or Syringe, Possession | 2 |
| Narcotics Addict, Failure To Register | 2 |
| Barbiturates, Possession | 2 |
| Prescription, Forge Or Alter (11368 H&S) | 2 |
| Barbiturates Offense | 1 |
| Controlled Substance, Presence Where Used | 1 |
| Barbiturates, Transportation | 1 |

#### Defining “Drug sale” arrests

Drug sale arrests are those arrests in the “Drugs” category that contain the word “sale” in their description.

| Drug Sale Arrest Description | Frequency |
| --- | --- |
| Methamphetamine, Possession For Sale | 2,063 |
| Cocaine, Base/rock, Possession For Sale | 1,862 |
| Heroin, Possession For Sale | 1,429 |
| Opiates, Possession For Sale | 898 |
| Controlled Substance, Possession For Sale | 880 |
| Cocaine, Base/rock, Sale | 523 |
| Cocaine, Possession For Sale | 430 |
| Methamphetamine, Sale | 252 |
| Controlled Substance, Sale | 232 |
| Marijuana, Possession For Sale | 182 |
| Heroin, Sales | 133 |
| Opiates, Sale | 108 |
| Hallucinogenic, Possession For Sale | 62 |
| Hallucinogenic, Sale | 45 |
| Methadone, Possession For Sale | 41 |
| Marijuana, Sales | 29 |
| Cocaine, Sale | 18 |
| Sales of Cocaine Base/Schoolyard Trafficking Act Violation | 11 |
| Opium, Possession For Sale | 7 |
| Amphetamine, Possession For Sale | 5 |
| Opium Derivative, Possession For Sale | 3 |

### Statistical Approach

The core statistical test used in this memo is defined as follows:

The estimate of interest is , which represents the average increase in weekly arrests in the post-pandemic, 2022-2024, relative to the pre-pandemic, 2018-2020. is the average weekly arrest level in the pre-pandemic and is the average arrest level in the post-pandemic. I test the hypothesis that the average weekly arrest level in the post-pandemic was different from the average weekly arrest level in the pre-pandemic:

I repeat the estimation of [Equation 1](#eq-ols) and test [Equation 2](#eq-h) for each arrest type, a total of 9 times.

To adjust for multiple testing, I apply a bonferroni correction to the hypothesis tests. Specifically, for a 95% confidence interval, where one would typically test with a threshold for the probability of a false positive, ,[[4]](#footnote-64) the bonferroni correction implies instead testing with , where is the number of hypotheses being tested. In this case, 9, implying a threshold 9 0.0056 and confidence intervals that cover 99.44%.

The bonferroni correction has been criticized as being overly conservative when the amount of hypotheses being tested is very large or sample sizes are very small, but in this setting, where only 9 related hypotheses are being tested and the week-level time series is fairly large at 313, the bonferroni correction should be an appropriate adjustment (VanderWeele and Mathur 2019). Regardless, to test if the conservatism of the correction meaningfully changes the results of the policy analysis, I fit models with and without it. The correction has no effect on estimates that are ascribed policy-relevance in the memo, but does makes a difference for Robbery and Traffic arrests in the Tenderloin, which, without the correction, have statistically significant, small, decreases, and with the correction have no statistically significant change. These findings are not relevant for the core findings of the memo.

Note that [Equation 1](#eq-ols) is estimated under the assumption that the error term is normally distributed with constant variance and mean zero: . In the context of weekly arrest totals, which are a time-series that exhibit autocorrelation, the assumption of constant variance may be problematic. Estimation is repeated using autocorrelation-robust Newey-West estimation and using the block bootstrap, with weeks clustered into one month groups, for nonparametric estimation. [Equation 1](#eq-ols) is also estimated under the assumption that arrests of each type are continuous and distributed normally, which are both not true for arrest count data, but the block bootstrap specification makes no assumptions about the distribution of the outcome and consistently reaches the same policy conclusions as [Equation 1](#eq-ols). Specification does not change the core findings.

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| Table 2: Full City – robustness checks for changes in arrest activity   |  |  | Coefficient | Lower bound | Upper bound | Significant | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Outcome | Model |  |  |  |  | | Assault | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | -7.876190 | -10.355048 | -5.605288 | True | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | -7.876200 | -11.169000 | -4.584000 | True | | Newey West without Bonferroni | -7.876200 | -10.193000 | -5.560000 | True | | OLS | -7.876200 | -10.985000 | -4.768000 | True | | Burglary | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | -0.523810 | -1.482933 | 0.571635 | False | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | -0.523800 | -1.652000 | 0.604000 | False | | Newey West without Bonferroni | -0.523800 | -1.317000 | 0.270000 | False | | OLS | -0.523800 | -1.708000 | 0.661000 | False | | Drug Non Sale | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | -3.066667 | -10.985337 | 4.263942 | False | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | -3.066700 | -10.623000 | 4.490000 | False | | Newey West without Bonferroni | -3.066700 | -8.383000 | 2.250000 | False | | OLS | -3.066700 | -7.997000 | 1.863000 | False | | Drug Sale | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | 7.428571 | 1.731731 | 13.421875 | True | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | 7.428600 | 2.006000 | 12.851000 | True | | Newey West without Bonferroni | 7.428600 | 3.614000 | 11.243000 | True | | OLS | 7.428600 | 2.813000 | 12.044000 | True | | Homicide | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | 0.047619 | -0.067308 | 0.144231 | False | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | 0.047600 | -0.058000 | 0.154000 | False | | Newey West without Bonferroni | 0.047600 | -0.027000 | 0.122000 | False | | OLS | 0.047600 | -0.053000 | 0.148000 | False | | Larceny Theft | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | -9.571429 | -12.342067 | -6.376923 | True | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | -9.571400 | -12.820000 | -6.323000 | True | | Newey West without Bonferroni | -9.571400 | -11.857000 | -7.286000 | True | | OLS | -9.571400 | -12.127000 | -7.016000 | True | | Robbery | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | -3.066667 | -4.227644 | -1.796635 | True | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | -3.066700 | -4.298000 | -1.835000 | True | | Newey West without Bonferroni | -3.066700 | -3.933000 | -2.200000 | True | | OLS | -3.066700 | -4.181000 | -1.953000 | True | | Traffic | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | -19.819048 | -24.349519 | -15.896154 | True | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | -19.819000 | -23.714000 | -15.924000 | True | | Newey West without Bonferroni | -19.819000 | -22.559000 | -17.079000 | True | | OLS | -19.819000 | -22.734000 | -16.905000 | True | | Weapons | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | -1.171429 | -3.127404 | 0.914663 | False | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | -1.171400 | -3.618000 | 1.276000 | False | | Newey West without Bonferroni | -1.171400 | -2.893000 | 0.550000 | False | | OLS | -1.171400 | -3.401000 | 1.058000 | False | |

[Table 3](#tbl-robust-tl) shows that testing specification makes a small difference for conclusions around changes in Robbery and Traffic arrests in the greater Tenderloin. The conservatism of the bonferroni correction prevents one from concluding that these arrest types decreases slightly in the post-pandemic greater Tenderloin. This is ultimately not relevant to the policy conclusions of this memo.

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| Table 3: Greater Tenderloin – robustness checks for changes in arrest activity   |  |  | Coefficient | Lower bound | Upper bound | Significant | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Outcome | Model |  |  |  |  | | Assault | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | -0.533333 | -1.464904 | 0.309856 | False | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | -0.533300 | -1.650000 | 0.583000 | False | | Newey West without Bonferroni | -0.533300 | -1.319000 | 0.252000 | False | | OLS | -0.533300 | -1.626000 | 0.560000 | False | | Burglary | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | -0.076190 | -0.386779 | 0.163462 | False | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | -0.076200 | -0.397000 | 0.245000 | False | | Newey West without Bonferroni | -0.076200 | -0.302000 | 0.149000 | False | | OLS | -0.076200 | -0.377000 | 0.225000 | False | | Drug Non Sale | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | 3.561905 | -1.426923 | 10.720433 | False | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | 3.561900 | -2.601000 | 9.725000 | False | | Newey West without Bonferroni | 3.561900 | -0.774000 | 7.898000 | False | | OLS | 3.561900 | -0.054000 | 7.178000 | False | | Drug Sale | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | 6.704762 | 1.733654 | 11.625721 | True | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | 6.704800 | 1.774000 | 11.636000 | True | | Newey West without Bonferroni | 6.704800 | 3.236000 | 10.174000 | True | | OLS | 6.704800 | 2.671000 | 10.738000 | True | | Homicide | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | 0.009524 | 0.000000 | 0.038462 | False | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | 0.009500 | -0.017000 | 0.036000 | False | | Newey West without Bonferroni | 0.009500 | -0.009000 | 0.028000 | False | | OLS | 0.009500 | -0.017000 | 0.036000 | False | | Larceny Theft | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | -0.885714 | -2.018269 | 0.882933 | False | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | -0.885700 | -2.504000 | 0.732000 | False | | Newey West without Bonferroni | -0.885700 | -2.024000 | 0.253000 | False | | OLS | -0.885700 | -1.993000 | 0.222000 | False | | Robbery | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | -0.361905 | -0.729808 | -0.017067 | False | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | -0.361900 | -0.750000 | 0.027000 | False | | Newey West without Bonferroni | -0.361900 | -0.635000 | -0.089000 | True | | OLS | -0.361900 | -0.748000 | 0.024000 | False | | Traffic | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | -0.895238 | -2.067308 | 0.273558 | False | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | -0.895200 | -1.959000 | 0.169000 | False | | Newey West without Bonferroni | -0.895200 | -1.644000 | -0.147000 | True | | OLS | -0.895200 | -1.716000 | -0.074000 | True | | Weapons | Block Bootstrap (block=4) | 0.342857 | -0.694471 | 1.548077 | False | | Newey West Errors (lags=3) | 0.342900 | -0.622000 | 1.308000 | False | | Newey West without Bonferroni | 0.342900 | -0.336000 | 1.022000 | False | | OLS | 0.342900 | -0.548000 | 1.233000 | False | |

#### References

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1. A map defining the “greater Tenderloin” is available in Appendix [Section 4.1.1](#sec-gt) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
2. “Drug-use arrests” are defined in Appendix [Section 4.1.2](#sec-drug-use) [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
3. “Drug-sale arrests” are defined in Appendix [Section 4.1.3](#sec-drug-sale) [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)