

INVESTIGATING AND CONCEPTUALIZING LARCENY
THEFT IN SAN FRANCISCO

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors in the
Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

May 6, 2024

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ABSTRACT

Larceny theft is the “unlawful taking, carrying, leading, or riding away of property from the possession or constructive possession of another” (FBI, 2018). Crime in San Francisco, specifically larceny theft, has made headlines in both California and the nation. In the past decade, the city has seen more and more businesses leaving the area, the greatest outflow of residents in decades, and a completely changed culture. Despite this, city officials claim that the media has exaggerated this issue of theft in San Francisco. The author gathers and conceptualizes violent and property crime data in recent decades, in both San Francisco and other comparable California cities, to understand the severity of theft in the city, as well as potential factors that may explain these trends (such as changed legislation and changed policing priorities). By examining existing reports and new crime data from the FBI Crime Data Explorer, the author found unique trends in the data. San Francisco is rather nonviolent compared to other cities, but larceny theft provides a completely different pattern in the data. San Francisco larceny rates began its exponential increase in 2011, as clearance rates for these crimes began to decrease. The data provides support for the deterrence theory, used in the authors discussion, calling direct attention to changed policing priorities. Amidst the San Francisco Police Department staffing crisis, statewide legislation changes, and the changing social realities of San Franciscans, the author attempts to put the pieces together, identifying what is truly going on in the city of San Francisco, and what has caused this larceny phenomenon.

Introduction

Crime in San Francisco has put the city under the spotlight in recent years, with theft being one of the most discussed crimes in the Bay Area. Businesses have fled the city by the dozens, the city has experienced the greatest outflow of residents in decades, and the quality of life for those who still reside in the city seems to be compromised. Viral videos, news stories, and social media posts of break-ins and smash and grabs have brought attention to this issue, but what does the data show? Has theft truly plagued the city of San Francisco the past few decades, or has the city been used as a “punching bag” for crime headlines, as claimed by Mayor London Breed (Bhole, 2023)? The goal of this research is to examine trends in rates of theft in San Francisco over the last two decades (2003-2023), examining this data against comparable cities in California. Some citizens have argued that recent legislation changes, like Proposition 47, are responsible for this increase in theft in the city, while others blame the relaxed approach from law enforcement. **This research is aimed at investigating and conceptualizing the unique larceny problem in San Francisco, identifying patterns in the most current data, and examining how this supports or conflicts with common narratives.** My research is needed, as there is clear uncertainty when it comes to the severity of theft in San Francisco and its causes, making addressing the issue a serious challenge. Before introducing these trends, it is important to have a general understanding of larceny theft in the Bay Area, and in California as a whole. To provide contextual information, and gain a better understanding of the cultural climate during this time, I have pulled essential themes from prior literature on larceny theft in the Bay Area, including the outflow of residents and businesses, public fear of crime, legislation changes, and the roles of law enforcement. **Due to unique city characteristics and developments over the last 15 years, we expect to find a larceny rate that is higher than comparable**

cities. We also expect to find a correlation between larceny reports and these legislative developments.

Literature Review

Fear of Crime

In recent years, we see that “Californians' perception of crime spiked during the pandemic- as did certain types of crime” (Walters, 2023). The use of technology to capture crime as it’s taking place, and release it on social media, provides a “never-ending supply of crime video snippets” (Walters, 2023). According to a poll released by CBS News (2022), “perceptions of the Bay Area as a safe place to live have plummeted from 63% in 2019 to 47%”. The poll found several changed behaviors as well. “65% of those asked said they were avoiding going to big city downtowns because of crime” (CBS News, 2022). In addition, concerns about crime and safety were reasons people mentioned for leaving the Bay Area. When the respondents were asked about crime in general, they indicated strong fears of “becoming victims of car and home break ins” (CBS News, 2022). And this is not necessarily unwarranted. The Bay Area Council’s President and CEO Jim Wunderman said, "I think you ask a lot of folks in our cities, they either have personally had their car broken into and the glass smashed”, or their best friend, neighbor or family member has (CBS News, 2022). In other words, these types of crimes have become personal to a lot of people.

Though these crimes are not usually violent in nature, they can have a direct impact on one’s quality of life. Of those who still remain in the city, it seems as if there may be some questioning of the media’s role in instilling fear in San Franciscans. One source says that residents seem divided in the city: “the ones who fear that danger is lurking right around the corner, the ones who accept a certain degree of tumult as part of the urban landscape, and the

ones who are less disturbed by crime itself than by what they see as the exploitation of fear by local politicians and online influencers” (Swan, 2023). Nonetheless, according to a survey conducted by the city, “residents graded the city with the lowest safety rating since 1996 at 3.3 out of 5” (Moench & Sumida, 2023). The information gathered from this survey also showed that only 36% of residents feel safe walking in the city at night, which dropped from 53% in 2019 (Moench & Sumida, 2023). When it comes to the government, they gave the local government a rating of 3 out of 5, the lowest government rating since 2002 (Moench & Sumida, 2023). In my research, I will be investigating the numbers. I will investigate whether solely the perception of crime has increased, due to the technology that has exposed it at greater rates, or if crime is truly on the rise.

Moving Out

Theft has been a surging topic of conversation in San Francisco and California in recent years. The impact of theft can be felt by store closures and domestic migration out of the San Francisco Bay Area. Target moved three of their stores out of San Francisco in 2023, “blaming organized retail crime and unsuccessful anti-theft measures”, after just opening in 2019 (McLean, 2023). They put out a statement, claiming that they “cannot continue operating these stores because theft and organized retail crime are threatening the safety of our team and guests, and contributing to unsustainable business performance” (Clark, 2023). Almost 40 stores have closed in San Francisco’s Union Square since 2020, one of the biggest tourist attractions in the city (Delouya, 2023). This includes Macy’s, which has “anchored the San Francisco shopping district for nearly a century” since the location was opened in 1929 (Pehling, 2024). As far as residents, San Francisco topped the “list for largest net outflow of homebuyers” with 41,500 homebuyers leaving in January 2022 (Salzano, 2023). Lisa Mirza Grotts, a previous San Francisco resident who worked for former mayor Willie Brown,

claims that the “city feels broken, because it seems like there are no consequences for anything” (Sweeney, 2023). After having to use brown paper bags to cover retailer bags to prevent being robbed, having to stop wearing her engagement ring, and witnessing the lawlessness in the city, Lisa finally decided to move out of San Francisco after living there for nearly four decades (Sweeney, 2023). A 2022 CBS Poll showed that “concerns about crime and safety were also mentioned as a reason for leaving the Bay Area”, a dramatic shift since 2018 where “crime barely registered as a reason to relocate”. Seeing that crime has forced both big businesses and residents out of the city, this is something worth investigating.

Legislation Changes

It’s important to consider the ways legislation has changed in the timeframe we are examining, as California’s non-prosecution approaches have been under scrutiny by the rest of the United States. In November 2014, California’s Proposition 47 reclassified several offenses as misdemeanors, larceny included. This made it a misdemeanor to steal under \$950 worth of items, compared to the previous misdemeanor threshold of \$450. The proposition redefined several property and drug offenses that could be charged as either a felony or misdemeanor to straight misdemeanors. The purpose of Prop. 47 was to “focus spending on serious offenses in a state with overcrowded prisons, invest the savings to support mental health and substance use disorder treatment and kindergarten through 12th grade education, and increase alternatives to incarceration for low-level crimes” (Mooney et al., 2018). Several Californians have argued that current legislation in the state has “emboldened people to steal without fear of consequences”, while others, including the Governor Gavin Newsom, have stated that “reducing jail time for lower-level offenses would be good for communities and save the state money that could be used for education and other government programs aimed at keeping people from committing crimes in the first place” (Bollag, 2024). Using a

multi-strategic approach, researchers found little evidence of an “impact on violent crime rates in the state”, but more “consistent evidence of an impact on property crime, operating primarily through an effect on larceny theft” (Patricio Dominguez-Rivera,). The Public Policy Institute of California found a “potential relationship between the Proposition and statewide increases in larceny”, as statewide larceny theft increased 9% after Prop. 47. The proposition also led to a sizable decline in county jail and state prison populations along with “a decrease in arrests for property and drug offenses” (Patricio Dominguez-Rivera). This research highlights a “pattern of results that is indicative of the deterrence mechanism; showing that crimes whose sanctions were most weakened had the greatest increases” (Renner & Bartos, 2021). This data supports the criminological deterrence theory, essentially highlighting that criminals are rational human beings, and will “do what is pleasurable or beneficial, and avoid acts that are painful and/or costly” (Ladegaard, 2018). Lawmakers argue that the proposition has created such a “knowing lack of consequence for theft that it has created a culture of lawlessness regarding retail theft” (Lagos, 2024).

Role of Law Enforcement

While examining the literature, an interesting theme is the response of law enforcement to crime over the years, as we’ve seen new policies, a staffing crisis, and a shift in priorities. In 2009, SFPD decentralized its investigative units and moved toward “community policing,” a model where officers patrol specific neighborhoods to build familiarity and trust (Neilson, 2023). It was believed that this model “made the department ‘ineffective’ at curbing organized rings committing car break-ins across the city, groups they estimated were behind 70%-80% of incidents” (Neilson, 2023). In recent years, San Francisco Police has still been under scrutiny for their lack of response to property crimes and larceny theft. University of San Francisco professor Lara Bazelon, adds that “at one

point, [the clearance rate] was hovering around 9%,” for car break-ins (Whitney, 2023). They “won’t even assign an officer to take a report” as they are “short staffed-and have to focus on violent crime” (Noyes, 2022). As of 2022, the department was down “at least 500 officers and recruitment is struggling”, therefore they “don’t have many eyes out on the street” (Sierra, 2022). In addition, before Proposition 47 took effect, officers were able to arrest for shoplifting. The proposition “removed that authority, making it much easier to shoplift without any consequences” (Grow SF, 2023). “SFPD said that when it comes to property crime, there’s a policy that prohibits them from pursuing suspects”, unless there is violence involved (Pena, 2023).

Though violence is typically not associated with theft, it might be more common than we think. Target said that they saw a “120 percent increase in thefts that involved violence or threats of violence over the first five months of the fiscal year” (Clark, 2023). Along with violence, another negative byproduct of this theft is its impact on the economy. We see two types of theft in the city, theft for personal use and theft to sell goods back into the marketplace. Organized retail theft, which we’ve seen a lot of in the city, may not be categorized as a “high profile crime”, but it is a costly one. It “undermines the integrity of our interstate commerce”, which can have extremely negative effects on businesses, forcing them to shut down or compensate for these losses in their pricing models (HOR, 2007).

My studies are needed in order to provide an updated crime analysis on larceny theft, specifically in San Francisco. San Francisco is crucial to investigate, given its current outflow of businesses and residents. Previous studies have examined rates of larceny theft up until 2017, as well as the impacts of Prop. 47 in California as a whole. I’ve found little combined research examining the discrepancy between San Francisco and other California city theft rates over time, as well as clearance rates. My goal is to dive deeper into the numbers,

identifying larceny reports over time in the city, how this compares with other cities in California, drawing connections (if any) between clearance rates and reported larceny, how this has changed over the years. I will use this data to analyze common narratives, such as relaxed law enforcement approaches and legislation changes, determining which explanations are most supported by the data.

Methods

We began our research by first looking at existing reports of all crime in San Francisco and comparable cities. We found Santa Clara County's 10-Year Crime Report, which compared all crime rates in both San Francisco and other comparable California cities. Many of these reports only went up to 2017. We then gathered larceny theft reports and clearance rates in San Francisco from the FBI Crime Data Explorer, up until 2022. We used the FBI Crime Data Explorer to gather larceny data for other comparable cities in California, as well as their clearance rates.

We then examined the data, finding any distinctive trends or patterns we wanted to utilize in our research. We found some San Francisco data that was atypical compared to other California cities. This was illustrated through Santa Clara County's 10 Year Crime Analysis Report, in their larceny rates. This was also displayed through the city's clearance rates of larceny theft. We gathered data that showed San Francisco as similar to other California cities in areas of violent crime and total property crime. When observed in conjunction, we found that clearance rates and reports of larceny displayed a notable curve in San Francisco. To illustrate this finding, we plotted the clearance rates and reports of larceny theft over time. We exported all larceny theft data reported by the San Francisco Police Department from the FBI Crime Data Explorer, and put this into an excel sheet. This included the clearance rates for larceny as well. We then created a chart with the data, with reported

larceny on the left vertical axis, clearance rates of larceny on the right vertical axis, and years on the x-axis. We used blue bars to represent the reported larceny over time, and an orange line to represent clearance rates over time, from 2010 to 2022. We calculated the correlation and significance of this data set.

To further investigate clearance rates (and how these compare with clearance rates in other cities), we downloaded larceny data from 2012 to 2022 from the Crime Data Explorer for San Francisco, Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Diego, and San Jose police departments. We used the clearance rates in these datasets to track police clearance for larceny over time. We imported the data into excel, and made a line graph. The graph included clearance rates on the y-axis, and the years on the x-axis. We used different colored lines to represent different cities in California.

EXISTING DATA

Figure 1

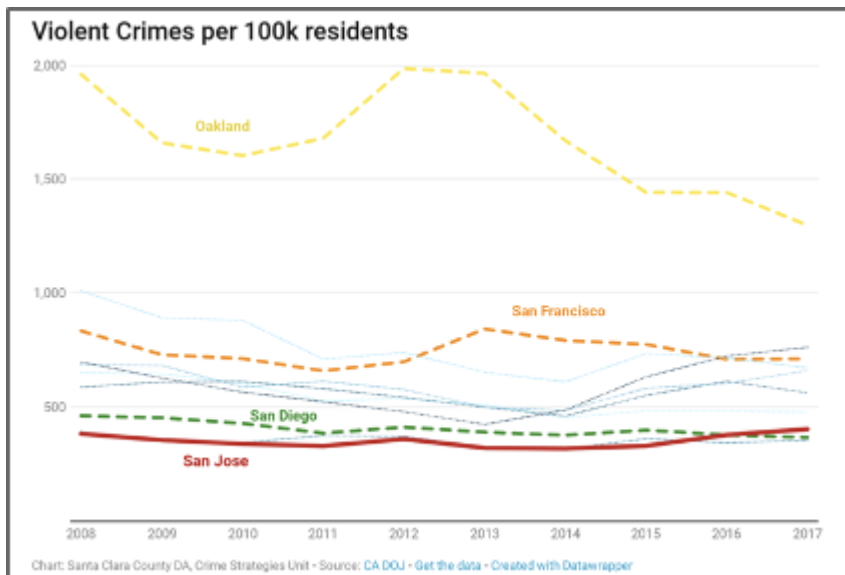


Figure 2

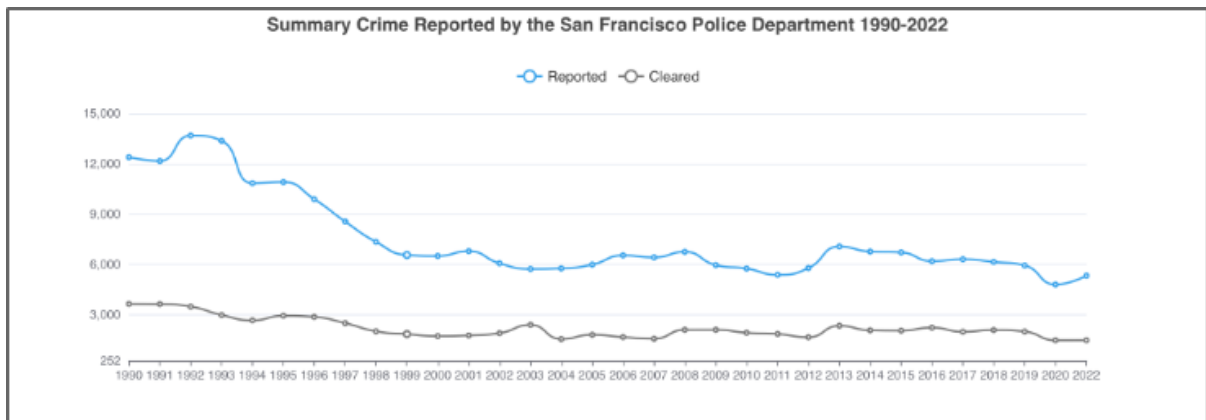


Figure 1 was retrieved from Santa Clara County’s 10-Year Crime Analysis Report and demonstrates rates of violent crimes in San Francisco and other comparable cities from 2008-2017. Figure 2 was retrieved from the FBI Crime Data Explorer and shows reports of violent crime in San Francisco, along with its clearance, from 1990-2022.

Figure 3



Figure 3 from Santa Clara County’s 10-Year Crime Analysis Report shows rates of total property crimes in San Francisco and comparable cities from 2008-2017.

Figure 4

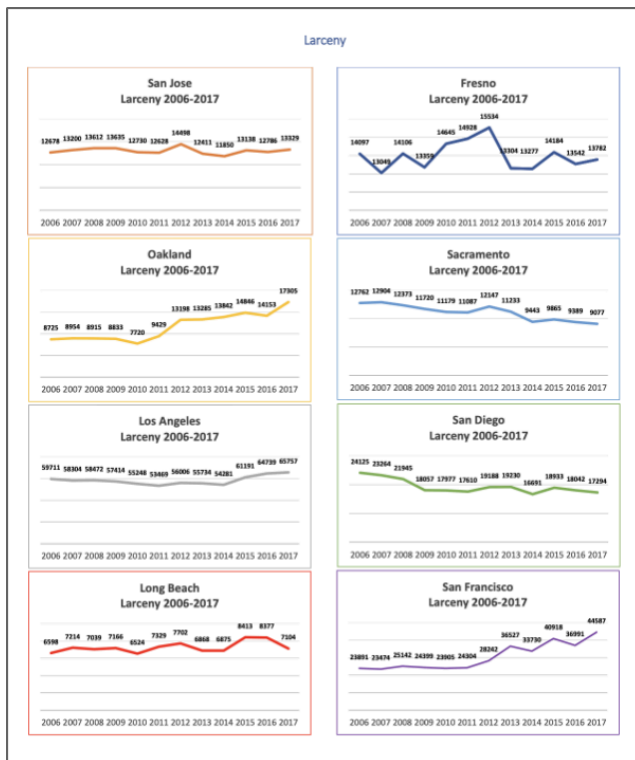


Figure 5

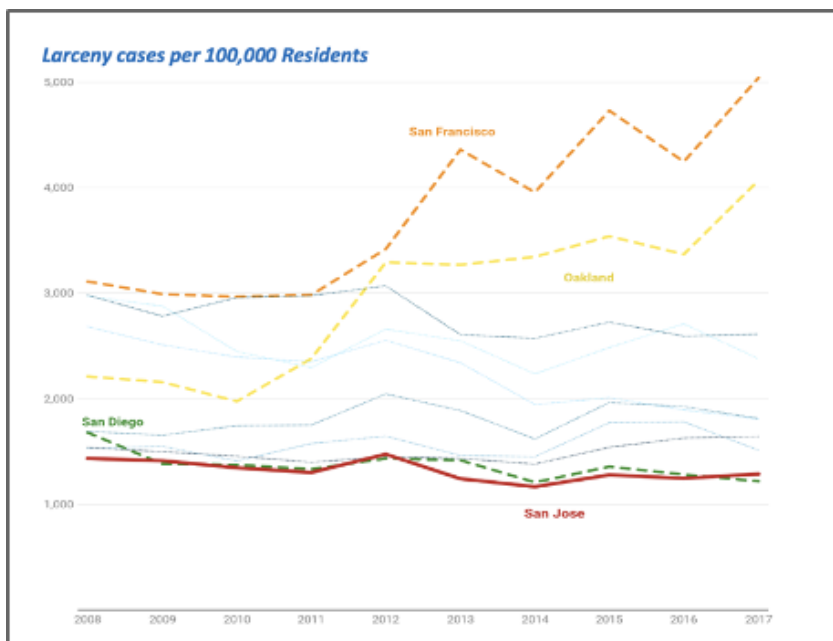
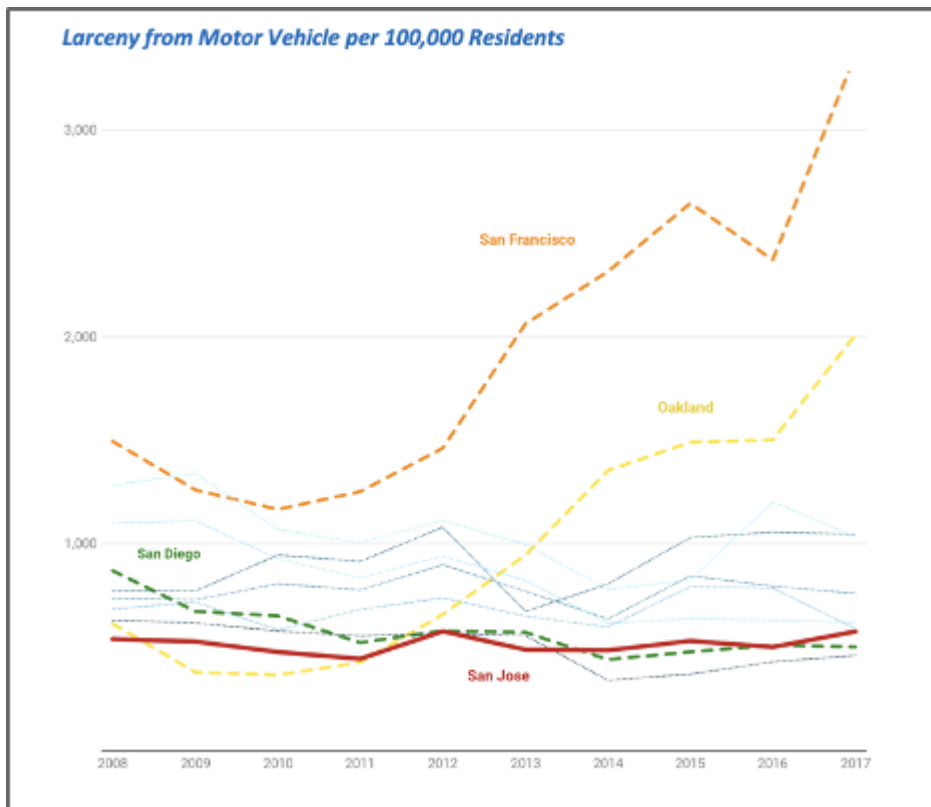


Figure 6



In Santa Clara County’s 10 Year Crime Analysis Report, we see reports of theft from 2006-2017 in San Francisco and comparable cities, charted independently (Figure 4). Similarly, we are given graphs portraying both rates of larceny (Figure 5) and larceny from motor vehicles (Figure 6) in San Francisco and other comparable cities from 2008-2017.

Figure 7



This graph (Figure 7) represents all reports of larceny in San Francisco by the San Francisco Police Department, gathered from the FBI Crime Data Explorer from 2000-2022. The blue line represents reported cases of larceny and the gray line shows which of these were cleared.

OUR DATA

We gathered the following data from the FBI Crime Data Explorer, showing reported larceny and its clearance rates for five major California cities, including San Francisco. This helped us create Figure 8 & 9.

Summary Crime Reported by the Los Angeles Police Department 2012-2022_04-08-

series	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2022
Reported	56006	55734	54281	61191	64739	65757	67963	66253	50990	62665
Cleared	5538	5213	5391	4959	4867	4510	4448	4163	3083	2533

Summary Crime Reported by the Sacramento Police Department 2012-2022_04-

series	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2022
Reported	12147	11233	9443	9865	9389	9077	9783	10644	8903	10328
Cleared	1119	1040	989	833	764	660	488	481	324	387

Summary Crime Reported by the San Diego Police Department 2012-2022_04-08-202

series	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Reported	19188	19230	16691	18933	18042	17294	18482	18426	16044	17620	15106
Cleared	3191	3101	2920	2959	2230	1789	1422	1252	616	283	529

Summary Crime Reported by the San Francisco Police Department 2012-2022_04-08

series	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2022
Reported	28242	36527	33730	40918	36991	44587	39675	39887	25319	35530
Cleared	1871	2474	3295	2418	2108	2134	2011	1886	966	1046

Summary Crime Reported by the San Jose Police Department 2012-2022_04-08-2

series	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2022
Reported	14498	12411	11850	13138	12786	13329	13510	14924	12737	15010
Cleared	2004	1988	1681	1635	1467	1092	1007	1123	801	870

Figure 8

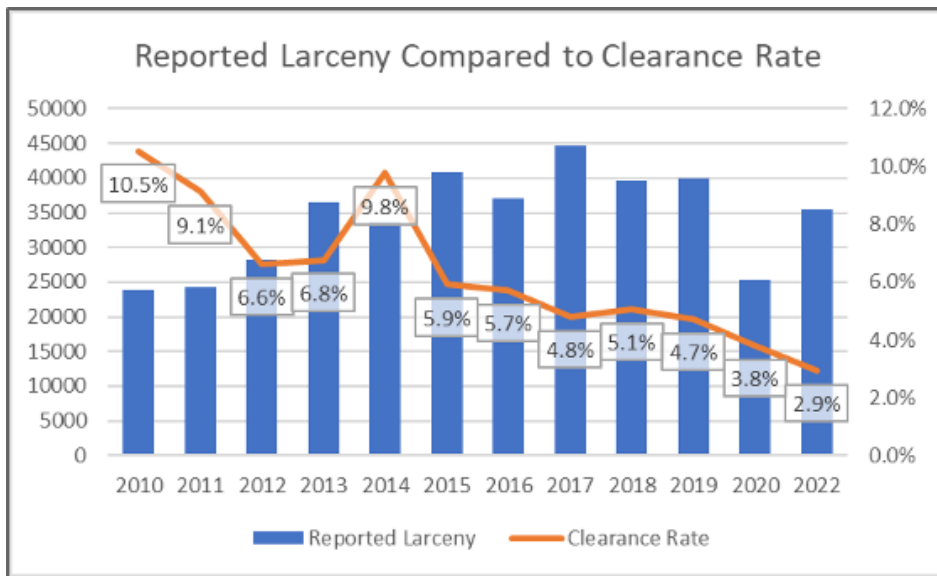


Figure 9

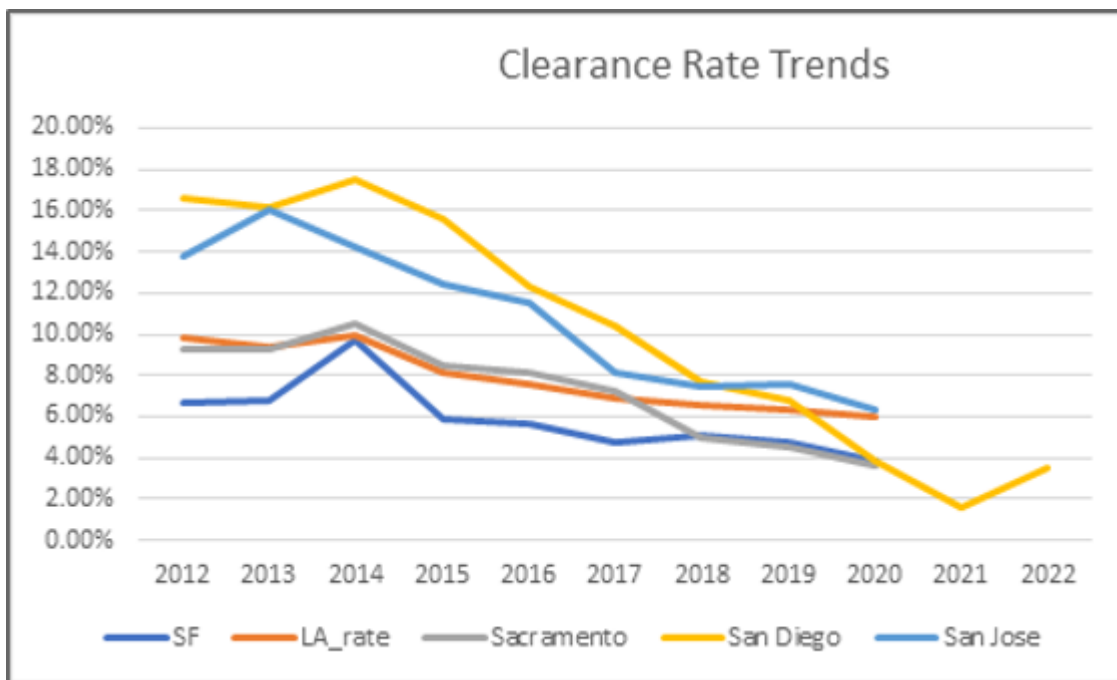


Figure 8 shows reported larceny in San Francisco from 2010-2022, as well as the clearance rate for these reports. Figure 9 shows clearance rates from 2012-2020 in San Francisco and other comparable cities.

Findings

1. **SF is rather average for a city of similar size for all violent and most property crime rates.**

From the data collected through the FBI's Crime Data Explorer, and the visuals provided by the city of Santa Clara, we found San Francisco's total violent crime and total property crime to be rather average for a city of its caliber. In Figure 1, we can see the total violent crime rates for San Francisco and other comparable cities. Though higher than average, San Francisco appears to be near the middle of the pack, presenting violent crime rates that are not unusual or alarming (see Figure 1). In Figure 2, we can see how violent crime reports in San Francisco dropped dramatically over the decades (see Figure 2).

2. **Rates of larceny theft in San Francisco followed a unique trend, significantly higher than other comparable cities in California.**

San Francisco is rather nonviolent, but with larceny theft there is a completely different pattern in the data. San Francisco larceny rates began its exponential increase in 2011, as shown in both Figures 5 and 6. In addition, in Figure 4, we see how San Francisco larceny reports increase exponentially in the last decade, while larceny trends in other cities show different patterns. No other city shows such a sharp, dramatic increase, with such severity. Oakland comes second in terms of larceny rates, lying only 12 miles from San Francisco. In Figure 7, we see reports of larceny over time in San Francisco. This graph from the FBI Crime Data Explorer confirms data we found from Santa Clara, demonstrating an increase in larceny that begins around 2011. This data extends beyond data retrieved from Santa Clara, showing data up until 2022. In 2020, we see a dip in larceny due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The only city whose rate of theft beats San Francisco is Los Angeles.

But As shown in Figure 4, we see that Los Angeles rates of larceny have remained consistent over the past few decades, while San Francisco's rates have been making its way up.

- 3. Clearance rates specifically for larceny for San Francisco were significantly lower than other major cities in California, and declining, providing us with a unique city characteristic that might be contributing to this issue.**

As shown in Figure 9, we see that larceny clearance rates were significantly lower in San Francisco than other comparable California cities, and continues to decline over time. This remained consistent from 2012-2020. We see a slight increase in clearance rates in 2014, but a sharp decline among all cities after that. Nonetheless, San Francisco remained the city with the lowest clearance rate, which continued to decrease through 2022. In Los Angeles, where we see the highest rates of larceny, the clearance rates have consistently remained above clearance rates for San Francisco in recent decades (see Figure 9).

- 4. A potential correlation between clearance rates and larceny reports in San Francisco.**

An examination of correlation revealed a moderately strong negative correlation, $r=-0.492$, that nevertheless failed significance $t(10)=-1.79$ due to the limited amount of available sample data. The negative correlation pattern (see Figure 8), was particularly pronounced in pre-pandemic years, and the significance failed as the strong consistent negative correlation pattern in pre pandemic years got reversed in post-pandemic years. As larceny reports trended upwards from 2010-2022 (except for during the height of the pandemic), clearance rates took a massive toll. Decreasing 7.6%, from 10.5% to 2.9% cleared. This data shows a unique relation between larceny reports and clearance rates, posing support for the narrative that relaxed approaches by law enforcement, specifically

with larceny, correlate with increases in theft. More data is needed to examine whether there is a correlation.

5. Prop. 47 did not have a uniform impact on theft, of similar severity, to all cities in California

The number of thefts as reported by the San Francisco Police Department, through the FBI Crime Data Explorer, demonstrate an overall increase in San Francisco since 2000, with peaks and valleys in the past decade. In Santa Clara County's 10 Year Crime Analysis Report, we see how San Francisco has worked its way up in larceny reports, second to Los Angeles, despite its dwindling population. Proposition 47 was enacted in 2014, but Figure 4 illuminates that cities showed different larceny trends post 2014. While larceny reports increased in some cities, with the most prominent being San Francisco and Oakland, San Diego and Sacramento show a decrease in larceny reports after 2014. This tells us that statewide legislation changes like Proposition 47 did not have a uniform impact on theft in all major cities in California, making it difficult to solely blame for larceny increases in San Francisco.

Discussion

1. Is crime a legitimate concern in San Francisco?

The short answer is: it depends. According to the data, violent crime is still on a decline in the city and is currently at its lowest in decades (see Figure 2). Nonetheless, the data supports concerns about larceny theft. According to the data shown in Figure 5 and 6, larceny theft is on a steep incline, greater than all other comparable cities in California. A lack of police intervention, as well, is a cause for concern. As demonstrated by Figure 8 and 9, clearance rates for these larceny cases have dwindled down over the last ten years. The

numbers show that the media is not overexaggerating the issue, as claimed by Mayor London Breed. With a sharp increase in theft (that does not seem to be declining), and with a dramatic decrease in police involvement, I'd say that the concerns of San Francisco residents and businesses are valid. If crime is on the rise, and if you can't rely on law enforcement to intervene, fears and concerns are only natural.

2. Can't blame Proposition 47 entirely

As mentioned in our findings, statewide legislation changes like Proposition 47 did not have a uniform impact on all major cities in California, making it difficult to blame for larceny increases in San Francisco. We cannot attribute larceny increases in San Francisco to Prop. 47 entirely, as larceny did not follow the same pattern in the entire state. If statewide legislation like Prop. 47 was solely to blame for larceny increases, we'd see similar patterns among all comparable cities in California, as the legislation took into effect in the entire state. In addition, larceny in San Francisco began its upward trend in 2011, before the Proposition was enacted in 2014. "Car break-in rates began increasing in 2011, three years before Prop. 47 passed. Plus, the reform was statewide, and other cities didn't see their break-in rates rise to anywhere near this degree" (Neilson 2023). While Prop. 47 may have contributed to the theft issue in San Francisco, something else is clearly happening in San Francisco that makes it stand out, something not pertaining to statewide legislation changes.

3. Policing Priority and Governing

Despite San Francisco's lower rate of all other types of crime, including violent crime, clearance rates confirm that addressing larceny cases is not a priority for San Francisco Police. As demonstrated in our findings, having the lowest clearance rates among all comparable California cities might be a more likely reason for larceny increases. If criminals know that they have a high chance of getting away with a crime, they are unlikely to be

deterred by the police. The police have recentered priorities to violent crime in recent years, as the department has experienced a staffing crisis. With the passing of Proposition 47, it created even more of an incentive to focus on violent crime, rather than larceny, as officers were not allowed to arrest for shoplifting. Though Proposition 47 alone cannot be fully responsible for San Francisco's increase in theft, it's likely that its impacts on policing priorities made this a greater issue.

It is interesting to note that after 2014, when the Proposition was enacted, clearance rates plummeted statewide (with San Francisco being the lowest) (Figure 9). This leads us to believe that Proposition 47 may have had an indirect impact on policing priorities and clearance rates in all major cities; but why did some experience an increase in larceny while others did not? We assume that this Proposition has manifested in different ways, in different cities, depending on the current governing and policing strategies in place, by disproportionately deprioritizing larceny theft enforcement beyond the decline that is observed in similar cities. Proposition 47 is not *completely* to blame for larceny increases, and neither are clearance rates. Though they are surely to have had an impact on theft in San Francisco, these factors simply exposed loopholes that may have already existed in city governing in the city. It was the perfect recipe for lawlessness in San Francisco.

4. Lawlessness and Deterrence

Though the deterrence does not explain all crime (as it's fundamentally based on the assumption that all people are rational people, able to weigh pros and cons), crime in San Francisco provides a good example of this theory in action. It's clear that if there are no laws or sanctions to provide consequences, people will see the pros of committing the crime as greater than the cons, given the low chance of getting caught (See Figure 8). This has created a culture of lawlessness in the city. Our data highlights a "pattern of results that is indicative

of the deterrence mechanism; showing that crimes whose sanctions were most weakened had the greatest increases” (Renner & Bartos, 2021).

Over the years, the city has realized that “if you have a 91% chance of getting away with a crime, you’re not going to be deterred by the police” (Whitney, 2023). In September 2023, San Francisco received a \$17 million state grant to combat organized retail theft (sf.gov, 2024). New tactics have been employed by SFPD to deter larceny theft that includes increasing patrol in crime hotspots, utilizing secret shoppers in retail stores, and implementing “bait cars” in areas with high rates of auto break-ins (Bindman, 2023). In 2022, police officers were stationed at theft hot spots throughout the city, leading to 60 arrests as of December 2022 (Echeverria, 2022). The San Francisco Police Department is still trying to hire more patrol officers, and lifted the starting pay up to \$112, 398 to provide incentives for officers (with or without experience) (Bloomberg, 2024). But “adding personnel doesn’t always translate to better policing” as the “effectiveness of police officers depends on how they are trained, as well as on leadership decisions about priorities and resource allocation” (Bloomberg, 2024). In January 2024, Mayor London Breed announced that property crime had been lower in 2023 than any period in the last 10 years (except 2020) (sf.gov, 2024). It’ll be interesting to see if this trend continues, despite SFPD’s remaining staffing crisis.

In February 2024, San Francisco Mayor London Breed joined a Republican-led campaign that aimed to increase jail time for repeat thefts and organized retail theft. Breed mentioned that she “initially supported Prop. 47”, but didn’t see some of the “unintended consequences of the measure as she tries to crack down on illegal drugs and thefts in San Francisco” (Bollag, 2024). “Our goal is not to keep people locked up”, “but when there are no real consequences for crimes that are committed in this city, that’s a real problem”, said Breed (Bollag, 2024). Governor Gavin Newsom, on the other hand, reaffirmed his support for Prop. 47. Instead, Newsom suggested that the state “crack down on organized retail theft”,

utilizing a “tough-on-crime approach” (Bollag, 2024). He has recently sent more state police officers to fight theft and violence in Oakland and drug dealing in San Francisco. In addition, he called for lawmakers to send legislation to increase punishments for larceny theft, to make it easier for police to arrest suspects, and to impose harsher penalties for individuals who are reselling stolen items (Bollag, 2024).

As businesses downtown are trying to revive post-pandemic, fears of going downtown due to crime are preventing the economy from bouncing back. "Bringing the hammer down on crime and ensuring public safety isn't a debatable question, it's a fundamental responsibility of local government and law enforcement. The deep concern reflected in these poll results should be a clarion call to our local leaders to do what's necessary to make our cities, neighborhoods and transit systems safe for everyone." (CBS News, 2022). Not only is this approach necessary to lower theft and crime in the city, which have had clear negative impacts on citizen safety and trust in the government, but it's necessary for resident quality of life, the health of the economy, and overall flourishing of the city.

Implications

My work provides and synthesizes the most recent data regarding larceny theft in San Francisco, including statistical support for certain unique city characteristics that might be responsible. My data reveals San Francisco's average position when it comes to violent crime and all property crime against other major California cities, but above average rates of larceny theft over the years. My work also dismantles arguments about “perceived increases” in crime, exacerbated by the media. My data provides original charts, demonstrating the correlation between clearance rates and larceny reports, providing a direct example of the deterrence theory in action.

This area has the potential for many more future studies. Though we primarily discussed deterrence in this research, it would be interesting to look at theft in San Francisco while testing the theory of social control, the idea that one's connections to society determine deviant behavior. As mentioned before, a culture of lawlessness seems to have been created in the city, creating new values and norms. It's essential that we look at community ties and how these have changed over the years. Whether it be in schools, in the family unit, changes in community involvement.

More recently, the city has begun to recognize problems associated with theft in the city. San Francisco has received more funding from the state and has started conducting "undercover 'blitz' operations", while also increasing the number of officers in theft hot spots. In order to reduce motor vehicle break ins, the city "deployed more police officers to tourist hot spots and started using bait car operations". But the effectiveness of these efforts is still being measured. It's important that future researchers follow up with these measures, in the coming years, examining how new operations have impacted crime rates in the city, and whether these operations are working as intended.

Limitations

There are several limitations I have identified in my study.

1. Relying on reported crime

While we will be assessing crime reports over the last few decades, it is important to consider that this will only cover reported crime. This poses a limitation for the study, as the number of reported crimes may not accurately represent the number of crimes taking place. Nonetheless, we can assume that rates of underreporting were consistent over the years. In addition, the FBI Crime Data Explorer only provides us with data up until 2022.

2. Time discrepancies in data

The FBI Crime Data Explorer only gives us data through 2022. There may be additional changes in crime trends in recent years, 2023-2024, that are not included in our analysis. In addition, in 2021 the FBI changed their method of data collection. Many agencies could not switch over in time, causing a lag in data reports for that year.

Conclusion

This research provides the most current examination of larceny trends in San Francisco over the last two decades (2003-2023). This analysis was inspired by a variety of common narratives published regarding theft in San Francisco, as well as uncertainty when it comes to the severity of theft in the city. Our research provides contextual information about theft in California, such as approaches by law enforcement, legislation changes, as well as the cultural climate in the city. Our data displays increasing larceny rates in San Francisco since the 2010's, rates that are well above average larceny rates for a city of its caliber. Simultaneously, we see declining clearance rates, at rates lower than the averages for comparable cities. While Proposition 47 may have exacerbated the larceny issue in San Francisco, we cannot fully attribute these trends to statewide legislation changes. Rather a more practical correlation would be with clearance rates and approaches from SFPD and city officials, factors that may have been indirectly impacted by Proposition 47. Due to unique city characteristics and developments over the last 15 years, we expected to find a larceny rate that is higher than comparable cities. We also expected to find a correlation between larceny reports and these legislative developments. Our research confirmed our initial hypothesis and allowed us to find exactly which narratives were supported by the data. Not only did our research confirm our hypothesis, but it provided an example of the deterrence

theory in action. It demonstrated that, when a crime's sanctions are weakened, it's natural for that crime to increase. When there are no regulations or laws that hold individuals accountable in a certain area, people will not be deterred from committing that crime. It's the fundamental responsibility of city officials and of law enforcement to confront the data, using this information to make law enforcement decisions that are best for the wellbeing of all citizens, businesses, and the culture of San Francisco.

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