

Harassment and Displacement in the Mission:

Community Experiences Survey

Contact: researchforchange2014@gmail.com



Background:

In partnership with Mission district service providers, the Coalition on Homelessness conducted a survey about experiences of harassment and criminalization in the Mission. We initiated this project after hearing reports from poor and homeless Mission residents that they were experiencing heightened harassment and displacement from their neighborhood. We wanted to know whether these were isolated incidents, or whether these problems were widespread. We also wanted to know what would make Mission residents feel safer in their neighborhood.

How the survey was conducted:

Surveys were administered by volunteers and service providers at the Coalition on Homelessness, Community United Against Violence, El/La Para Trans Latinas, Mission Neighborhood Resource Center, Mission SRO Collaborative, and Saint James Infirmary. Surveys were collected at service organizations in the Mission, as well as outdoors near the 16th Street Mission BART Plaza between December 2013 and March 2014.

Demographics:

- 117 people participated in our survey.
- 41 % of participants are Latino/a, 21% are African American and 23% are White.
- 59% of participants identify as male, 21% female, and 11% transgender female.
- 56% of participants have a disability.
- 55% report that their housing is unstable¹. The majority stay in shelters (29%), on the street (23%) or camp in parks (11%). 20% stay in SROs, and a smaller number couch surf or rent their own apartments.
- 66% report that their income does not meet their current needs for food, housing and medical care.
- 24% of participants have been ticketed for “quality of life” offenses near 16th and Mission, and 6% elsewhere in the Mission.

Summary

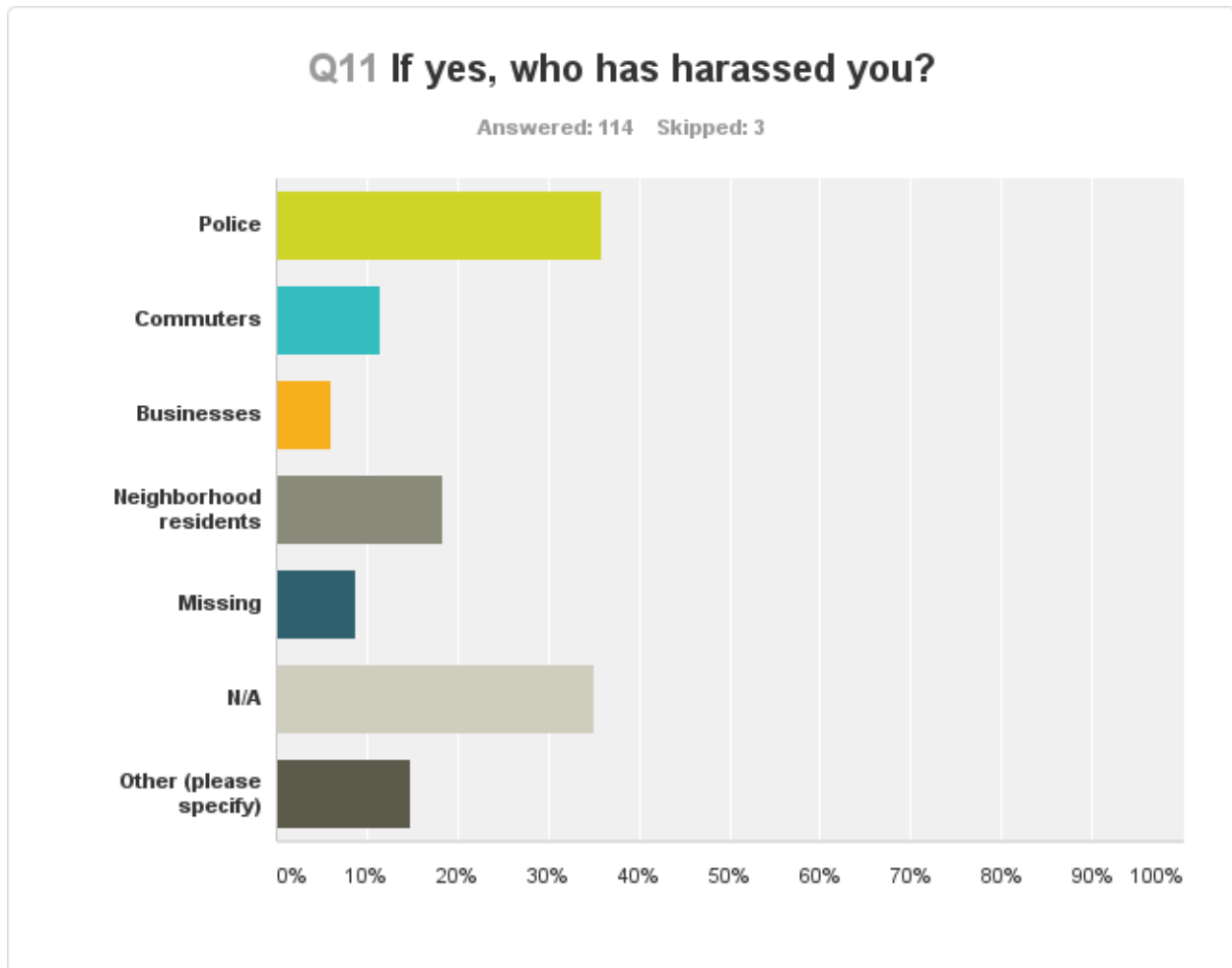
Many poor people in the Mission feel vulnerable to police harassment and displacement. Some members of our community, including youth, elderly and disabled people, homeless and marginally housed people, people of color and transgender residents, have been subjected to more intense policing as the neighborhood gentrifies. The results of this survey illustrate the close relationship between gentrification and the displacement and criminalization of poor people of color who are long-term Mission residents. Complaint-driven policing means that poor people of color may be particularly vulnerable to violence if their presence is perceived as a threat to the financial interests of business owners or corporations, or if wealthier residents complain.

All of the solutions and needs described by survey respondents center basic needs, health, and dignity. As many are long-term residents of the Mission neighborhood, there was a call for public space and access to housing in the neighborhood regardless of one's housing or socio-economic status. Respondents also point to racial and class-based profiling at the hands of law enforcement as a part of the on-going displacement and changing landscape of the 16th & Mission area specifically. Respondents also shared that neighbors and business owners in the neighborhood contribute to the harassment, violence, and displacement.



Harassment:

An alarmingly high number of participants—58%-- report that they have experienced harassment in the Mission. 35% of all participants report being harassed by police, 18% by neighborhood residents. Others reported harassment by commuters or business owners.

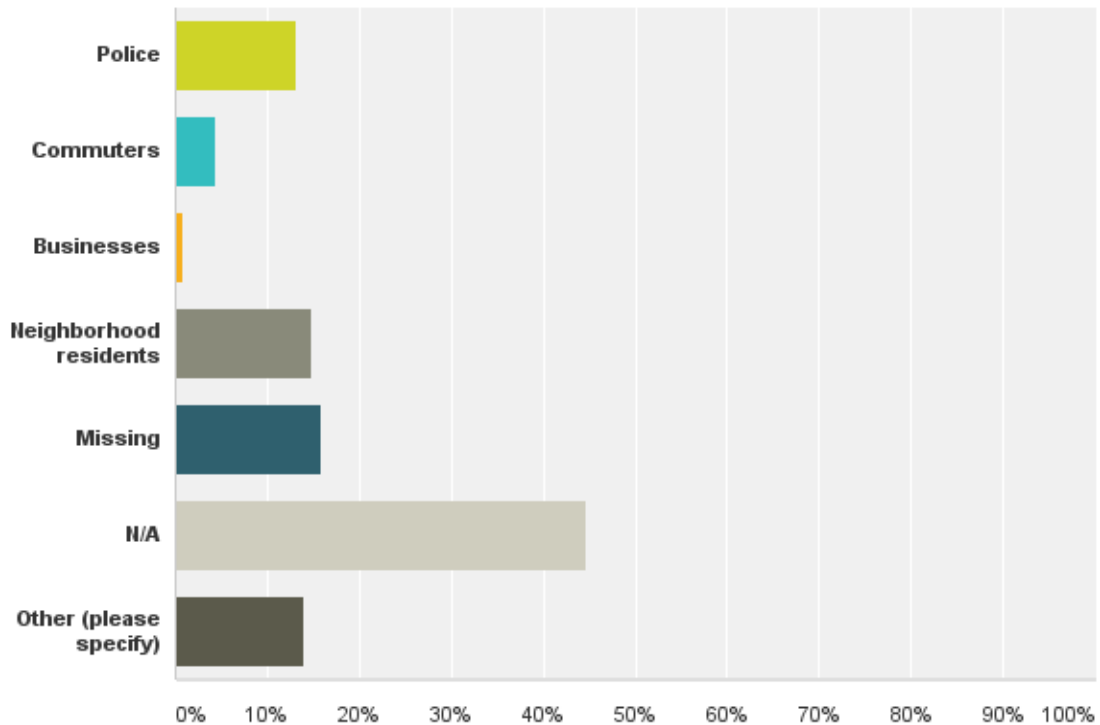


Physical violence:

41% of all participants report that they have experienced physical violence near the 16th & Mission BART Plaza. 13% said they have been physically harmed by police. 15% reported that physical violence was perpetrated by neighborhood residents. Fewer participants reported that commuters or business owners perpetrated physical violence. When there is an increased police presence, homeless people are displaced from the plaza, which may increase neighborhood tensions and instability.

Q14 If yes, who attacked you?

Answered: 114 Skipped: 3



SRO RESIDENTS

About 30% of the 117 survey respondents (34 people) live in Single Resident Occupancy hotels. SRO residents report physical and verbal threats to their safety in the plaza, including high rates of harassment by police.

Police are the most frequent source of harassment, followed by neighborhood residents, commuters and merchants. 14 of the 34 SRO residents report police harassment. SRO residents also suffer the most physical violence by police: 7 out of 15 experienced violence at 16th and Mission.

Because SROs are often cramped, infested with pests, or unsafe due to poor management, many neighborhood SRO residents use the plaza as an open-air living room. Unfortunately, these long-term Mission residents are often prevented from safe enjoyment of public space by police practices that target poor people for “quality of life” violations. 13 SRO residents report being ticketed by police in the Mission. 9 were cited at 16th & Mission. Resting in public, carrying an open container and smoking were the most frequently ticketed offenses.

12 SRO residents report getting arrested in the neighborhood; 9 said their arrests happened near 16th and Mission, and the majority of them said they were nabbed for open-container possession.

When unpaid tickets add up, they can result in arrest and even jail time, which puts people at risk of losing their housing. Policing of SRO residents is a tenants' rights issue, even when it happens outdoors.

"Many SRO residents don't feel comfortable calling the police around tenants' rights issues because they have repeatedly had the experience that the police side with the landlord and often harass them in the process."

--Kendra Froshman, Mission SRO Collaborative

SRO residents who participated in the survey said that housing, bathrooms and food would make them feel safer in the Mission. In a discussion group at the Mission SRO Collaborative, residents recommended that the city prioritize funding for housing and drug treatment, and stop subsidizing the criminalization of poor people in the Mission.

PEOPLE WHO LIVE OUTDOORS

Unsheltered survey participants include people who stay on the streets or sidewalks, and people who camp outside. A total of 37 respondents, roughly 1/3 of respondents, live outdoors. 25 participants live on the street; 12 camp in parks.

As a whole, this group reports enduring harassment, police scrutiny and sometimes physical violence in the Mission. 23 people who live outdoors (15 who stay on the street and 8 who camp) reported that they had been verbally harassed near the 16th street plaza. More often than not, the harassment and violence came from police: 16 unsheltered people reported that they had been targets of police harassment near the plaza. 9 people who live outside report being physically attacked and harmed by police. A few others reported violence by other people on the street or neighborhood residents.

Encounters with the police in the Mission often result in citations and arrests. 24 unsheltered survey participants said they have been ticketed for a variety of offenses. Many report that they were ticketed for so-called "quality of life" activities, such as sleeping outside or public urination.

PEOPLE OF COLOR

92 survey participants identify as people of color. People of color in the Mission are being displaced by gentrification, and disproportionately policed.

A majority of respondents of color reported that their housing was unstable. Of these respondents, 29 stayed at a shelter or other institution. 20 participants of color live on the streets or camp outside. Another 20 live in rental apartments.

The majority of people of color surveyed reported that they had been targets of verbal harassment in the neighborhood: 52 survey participants of color reported experiences of verbal harassment in the Mission, while only 40 said that they had not been harassed. Of people who experienced harassment, the majority—31—reported that they were harassed by police officers. Others reported being harassed by neighborhood residents, business owners or commuters.

The same groups who harass respondents are also responsible for physical violence toward them. Neighborhood residents lead in attacks, followed by police and other unspecified people.

13 participants of color reported that they are verbally harassed by police near 16th and Mission “always” or “most times,” 29 reported that they are “sometimes” harassed, and 40 said that they were never harassed by police.

People of color are also disproportionately likely to be singled out for police searches. 26 participants of color said they were “sometimes” searched near the plaza. 23 were cited near 16th and Mission. When tickets were given, most of these cases were for quality-of-life offenses. Offenses included trespassing and sleeping outside. 10 people of color said they were ticketed for open containers, 8 were ticketed for sitting or lying down in a public place, and 8 were ticketed for smoking.

25 people of color reported being arrested in the Mission. The charges? They ranged from parole violations to loitering. 8 people of color reported being arrested for open-container violations.

When asked what would make these residents safer in the Mission, the respondents replied housing, bathrooms and food as their top choices.

GENDER NON-CONFORMING PEOPLE

Gender non-conforming participants, especially transgender women, reported experiences of harassment and physical violence with alarming frequency.

There were 21 gender non-conforming participants in our survey, including 13 transgender women, 4 intersexed people, 3 transgender men, and 1 genderqueer person.

Of this group, 14 participants (2/3 of gender non-conforming people surveyed) reported that they experienced verbal harassment near the 16th Street BART plaza. 6 people reported that they were verbally harassed by police, and five reported that they were harassed by neighborhood residents. Others were harassed by commuters or employees of nearby businesses.

12 participants (over ½ of gender non-conforming people surveyed) reported experiencing physical violence near the 16th Street BART plaza. The most common perpetrators of physical violence against gender non-conforming people were neighborhood residents and police. 5 people reported being attacked by neighborhood residents. 4 reported that they were attacked by police. 5 reported that they were “physically harmed” by police.

7 participants reported that police had searched them near the plaza, and 5 were ticketed for open containers or smoking. 6 people reported that they had been arrested in the Mission, and 3 elsewhere in San Francisco.

Some participants expressed desire for more police protection, while others said that having fewer police in the neighborhood would make them feel safer. According to providers at organizations serving transgender women, relying on police protection is a double edged sword.

“The more we hear of people reporting violence they’re experiencing to the police, the more we hear stories of survivors experiencing violence at the hands of police. According to a 2012 study on anti-LGBTQ hate violence by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP), transgender and gender non-conforming women were 3.32 times more likely to experience police violence. Unfortunately, the energy we then spend fighting for police accountability takes away from our ability to organize for the things that decrease violence in the first place -- stable housing, healthy food, and affirming health care.”

-- Norio Umezu, Community United Against Violence

One transgender survey participant told us: “I was arrested by SFPD after I experienced domestic violence. They told me that if I wanted to press charges against my partner, they would need to arrest me.”

These results are consistent with the findings of a survey conducted by the Transgender Law Center in 2003, finding that ¼ respondents experienced discrimination when interacting with law enforcement in San Francisco. Nationwide 46% of transgender people “reported being uncomfortable seeking police assistance.”

At the same time, a number of survey participants had also experienced violence from others in the neighborhood. 4 gender non-conforming survey participants said that “more police” would help them feel safer, while 4 others said that “fewer police” would increase safety. Participants who wanted “more police” include transgender women who reported being harassed or physically assaulted by police in the past. These participants explained that they wanted police to protect them from violence in the neighborhood instead of creating more violence. The desire for more or fewer police varied by race and gender—people who identified as female were more likely to say that “fewer police” would increase their safety, as were African Americans. Talking with survey participants who wanted “fewer” or “more” police in the neighborhood helped us understand that their main concern was not about the number of police officers patrolling the plaza, but about the ways police respond to neighborhood residents. Regardless of their opinions about how to achieve the goal of making the Mission safer, participants agreed that police need to protect poor people, not criminalize them.

Personal Stories of Survey Participants

- *People are still getting shot in the street and the police don't see it. Why are they focusing on an open container?"*
- *"I have 28 resisting arrests and no convictions. They [police] go out of their way to target black people."*
- *Police sometimes look at someone's presentation and question their gender identity, and question the reason why they are out so late in the Mission neighborhood, giving the impression that trans women are to blame."*
- *I am a combat vet Afghanistan/Iraq. The human conditions in the Mission/16th area are deplorable. People are treated like animals. Something needs to change."*
- *It's very expensive here and poor people can't live here. They displace all the poor people. They have no place to stay. They're gonna bring in all the new buildings here. Then they rent is gonna be so high. They displace everybody. Where are you gonna put the poor people? There's nothing available for the poor. They cut all the services."*
- *My [transgender] friend was just walking along, and then Mission police stopped and asked her, 'What are you doing, where are you going?' They searched her bag and gave her a dirty look and then we left. It was really scary. There was no reason why they should be asking her what she had in her backpack."*
- *The gentrification ran me out of the Mission. Can't afford it here and the places they do let you stay, they don't upgrade enough. They all have bedbugs."*

Solutions

What do you need to feel safer in the Mission?

Survey participants identified a number of changes that would make them feel safer in the Mission.

1. 63% of participants said housing would make them safer,
2. 51% said public restroom access would make the Mission safer,
3. 37% said access to food would make them safer in the Mission,
4. 19% said access to clean needles would increase safety,
5. 18% said access to condoms would increase safety.

How can Mission police work with the Mission community?

- Document all future “quality of life citations,” given in the Mission, including housing status, race and gender of people cited, and provide this data to the Coalition on Homelessness.
- Provide the Coalition on Homelessness with all available data related to citations and arrests for “quality of life” offenses as well as drug use and prostitution in the Mission district.
- Stop profiling Mission residents based on perceived race, gender, disability, mental illness, substance use or housing status. Prioritize the protection of vulnerable people, not property.
- Collaborate with providers to implement solutions to poverty in the Mission, rather than trying to push poor people out of the neighborhood. Solutions include: Improving conditions of SROs, increasing affordable housing, meeting basic needs, and expanding public space for all.
- Support harm reduction services for people who use drugs, and understand substance use as a health issue—not a crime.
- Respect the rights of all people to rest, socialize, and spend time in public space, including the 16th Street BART plaza.
- Support reducing poverty through housing, rather than policing, citation and incarceration. Eliminate “quality of life” citations and related patrolling in the Mission.

Our vision for a safe and welcoming plaza and neighborhood:

Poverty and punitive quality-of-life policing threaten the safety of homeless and marginally housed people in the Mission. Rapid gentrification is pushing long-term residents out of the neighborhood, and poor and homeless people who use the plaza as an open-air living room are increasingly criminalized. We support the demands of the Plaza 16 Coalition, and advocate for community-led solutions that prioritize access to safe and welcoming public space for all.

- We advocate for safe outdoor public space for all San Franciscans regardless of housing status or socio-economic status.
- We support the construction and rehabilitation of affordable housing with indoor public space.
- We support community-led solutions to prevent violence, such as the Mission Neighborhood Resource Center’s Ambassador Program.

- We support the Plaza 16 Coalition's platform and demands, including that the city of San Francisco reject all market rate housing developments in the Mission until the needs of poor and working class residents are fully met.

Footnotes:

1. **Persons who are unstably housed** and at risk of losing their housing include people who at program entry or program exit: Are currently housed and not literally homeless or imminently losing their housing, per above definitions; Are experiencing housing instability, but may have one or more other temporary housing options; and Lack the resources or support networks to retain or obtain permanent housing.

Recommended resources:

- *Plaza 16 Coalition website:* <http://plaza16.org/visiondemands/>
- *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey* at http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/reports/reports/ntds_full.pdf
- *Trans Realities: A Legal Needs Assessment of San Francisco's Transgender Communities* at http://www.hawaii.edu/hivandaids/Trans_Realities_A_Legal_Needs_Assessment_of_SF_s_TG_Communities.pdf
- *National Lawyers' Guild of San Francisco's website:* <http://www.nlgsf.org/interactions/police-officers-1>
- *Criminalizing Crisis: The Criminalization of Homelessness in U.S. Cities* at http://www.nlchp.org/documents/Criminalizing_Crisis
- "Syringe Access and Law Enforcement" at <http://harmreduction.org/syringe-access/syringe-access-tools/sas-le/>