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Author

Berman, Annie Marie

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Annie Berman
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Title: Who Feels Safe on the Streets of San Francisco?

Abstract:

In the summer of 2019, I was assigned to report on the drive-by shooting of a young black teenager named Day'von Hann, for a small online news site in the Mission District of San Francisco. In response to my article describing his untimely death, a number of readers wrote in, dismayed that we had used the word "child" in our headline to describe a fifteen-year-old boy. In their opinion, Day'von had been a threat, probably in a gang -- not entitled to any presumption of innocence. Their responses got me thinking about who's really safe in San Francisco, and who sees others as unsafe -- in a city that prides itself on being liberal and racially diverse.

What I found very quickly was that gentrification has dealt black San Franciscans a particularly bad hand. It has pushed them out of their old neighborhoods, and into poorer, more dangerous ones, with worse schools and worse prospects for kids. And I found that many of the people new to this gentrifying city don't always see the threat to the long-time residents, who've always been the least safe of all.

ANCHOR LEDE: *Your chances of being killed in many American cities are lower now than they've been in half a century.¹ Violent crime, in general, is way down. And yet, many urban Americans still feel uneasy. Reporter Annie Berman set out to explore who feels safe and why in San Francisco, after reporting on the murder of a black teenage boy.²*

TRAX: I'm standing on 24th street, in the heart of San Francisco's Mission District, with a man named Javier Reyes. Around us, tourists are snapping photos of bold, bright murals. They pause in front of hip new bars -- and taquerias that have been around for ages. This neighborhood has long been a place where now working class communities settle in San Francisco -- the Irish in the mid-19th century, then the Italians, the Poles, Latinos starting some 80 years ago -- and some African-Americans.³ Lately, Silicon Valley money has come in, and now homes are routinely going for more than a million dollars. But Javier remembers the way it was.⁴

AX Javier Reyes: So, all these back streets right here (music playing) over the years. (18:48)
There's just been a lot of... so much history. So much love.

TRAX: Javier has spent most of his life in the Mission. He grew up here at a time when, he says, crime rates in the neighborhood were considerably higher; when there was more gang activity, and death. These days, he directs a faith-based, after school program for local kids. It's a safe space to chat with mentors, get help with homework, and have a free meal.

Javier pauses often as we walk down 24th street... to point out chic new businesses that have popped up of late... near the spots where people he once knew and loved were killed.

AX Javier Reyes: And so right here is where my homeboy Drew got shot and killed. So he was here. And it was eleven o'clock and they ran up right up on him. And he died right here.

TRAX: That was in 2012, when San Francisco had 69 murders⁵. In 2019, there were 41⁶ -- the lowest annual toll in more than half a century. But Javier says black and brown men and boys in San Francisco still have reason to feel unsafe -- in part because of the way neighborhoods like the Mission have changed.

¹ <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/htus8008.pdf> and

https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/homicide_mortality/homicide.htm

² <https://missionlocal.org/2019/07/shooting-at-24th-and-capp-leaves-child-dead-police-come-up-empty-in-vehicular-pursuit/>

³ <https://www.sfchronicle.com/the-mission/a-changing-mission/>

⁴ September 26, 2019. In-person taped interview with Javier Reyes in San Francisco.

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<https://www.sccgov.org/sites/da/prosecution/DistrictAttorneyDepartments/Documents/CSU%20Reports/10-Year%20Combined%20CA%20Crime%20Stat%20Report.pdf>

⁶ <https://sfgov.org/scorecards/public-safety/violent-crime-rate-and-property-crime-rate>

AX Javier Reyes: That's what gentrification does, it brings enemies closer. But not in a good way. It brings them closer via geographic location.

TRAX: Javier is arguing that as San Francisco gentrifies, gang territories shrink and overlap in dangerous ways. He's saying that the common belief that gentrification softens the edges of a neighborhood, making it safer, may be true for some -- but not ALL -- residents.

Gentrification has dealt black San Franciscans a particularly bad hand. It's pushed them out of their old neighborhoods, and into poorer, more dangerous ones... with worse schools, and worse prospects for kids.

If you're black in San Francisco, you're more likely to be seen as a threat -- certainly by police. Black San Franciscans are 7 times more likely to be stopped by police, and arrested. In a city that's 5 percent black, nearly HALF of homeless residents are. They're also more likely to be victims of violent crime. That's something that San Francisco's mayor, London Breed, has observed too. She's the city's first African American woman mayor... and a lifelong San Franciscan.

AX London Breed: (5:18) We have to shed a light on what we know the statistics have said for decades about how in particular in this city you see the percentage of African Americans for example at less than six percent but continue to be sadly the largest number of people who drop out of high school, who end up in the criminal justice system.

One of Javier's students was a 15-year-old black boy named Day'von Hann. Like Mayor Breed, Day'von grew up in a low-income housing complex in San Francisco. Bernal Dwellings is a four block project in the Mission District, with 160+ families and lots of gun violence over time.⁷ Late one summer evening in 2019, when Day'von was hanging out with his friends on a street in that neighborhood, a drive-by shooter killed him.

He was the youngest of three brothers. His friends, like AJ Santiago, called him "Day Day," and loved so many things about him.⁸

AX AJ SANTIAGO: He was many things. He was a comedian. A rapper. When anybody had a bad day, he could even tell, he could sense when someone had a bad day. He would just go over there and give them a big hug. The biggest hug, like.

TRAX: Soon after Day'von was shot, Police arrived to find the boy drawing his last breaths on the sidewalk, while a vehicle sped away. They gave chase but lost the car.⁹

⁷ <https://missionlocal.org/2017/02/rocked-by-gun-violence-some-bernal-dwellings-residents-demand-more-police-intervention/>

⁸ July 10, 2019. In-person taped interview with AJ Santiago, Laylani Morales and Javier Reyes. San Francisco.

⁹ July 8 police report.

Police still haven't arrested any suspects.¹⁰ They said they don't know if Day'von was even the intended target of that drive-by shooting. He wasn't known to be in any gangs; in fact, he belonged to two anti-violence groups in San Francisco.

In covering the story of his death that summer... as a reporter for a local news site called Mission Local... I got to thinking about who's *really* safe in San Francisco... and who sees others as unsafe. It's an interesting question in a city that prides itself on being liberal... and racially diverse.

San Francisco's more than one-third Asian, 15% Hispanic, about 40% white non-Hispanic, and, yeah, just over 5% black.¹¹

I went as a reporter to a celebration of life for Day'von, that Javier put together for him. And I talked to the boy's friends -- AJ Santiago, the one who said Day'von was generous with his hugs -- and Laylani Morales -- who liked something else about him:

AX Laylani Morales: His smile? The brightest thing ever. You could see that smile from hella far, From Africa.

TRAX: Laylani and AJ get out photos and videos of Day'von. In them, he's always smiling or joking. This kid lit up a room.

I went back to the Mission Local newsroom and sat down to write about the memorial service. I was thinking... as I wrote it... about the anger my initial story about Day'von's death... had provoked in some readers. My editor, Joe Eskenazi, gave that story the headline, "Shooting at 24th and Capp leaves child dead; police come up empty in vehicular pursuit." Joe was surprised by what readers were angry about. He recalls that they wrote in complaining:

AX Joe Eskenazi: Why does this headline say 'child' instead of 'teen' or something. No 'child is hanging out at the 24th street BART station after midnight.'¹²

TRAX: We were not the only newspaper to point out that Day'von was young. The San Francisco Chronicle's headline was: "15-year-old boy killed in San Francisco Mission District shooting."¹³ But something about the use of the word 'child' to describe a 15-year-old black boy, set some readers off. And their initial reaction set my editor, Joe, off as well.

¹⁰ April 20, 2020 phone call to Robert Reuca in San Francisco.

¹¹ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/sanfranciscocountycalifornia>

¹² September 12, 2019. In-person taped interview with Joe Eskenazi in San Francisco.

¹³ <https://www.sfchronicle.com/crime/article/Man-shot-to-death-in-SF-s-Mission-District-14078854.php>

AX Joe Eskenazi: He didn't look like a child in the eyes of these people – as in, he didn't look like Jerry Mathers as the Beaver. He looked like a black kid with an unmistakably black name.

TRAX: To some readers, Joe says, someone who looked like Day'von – a black teenage boy -- was the one who was making people unsafe. But Joe thinks these readers were asking all the wrong questions.

AX Joe Eskenazi: In this particular case also, the question was, "What was he out doing this late?" The Mission is not Beirut, you know. The Mission is becoming more and more gentrified, and even in the areas that are not, this is not, again, 1977. There is less and less violent crime.

TRAX: And Joe is right: many San Franciscans ARE far safer than they were in 1977, when the number of homicides per capita was about triple what it is today.¹⁴ But the question isn't why Day'von was out late at night. The question is why was the overall downward trend not reflective of everyone's reality.

In San Francisco, nearly half of all homicide victims are black, just like they were a decade ago.

They're also, on average, the poorest, the most marginalized, the ones pushed out of neighborhoods by rising rents and housing prices, as they gentrify.

That's something that James Taylor has noticed.¹⁵

AX James Taylor: so we're on the corner of Masonic and Turk. I think we're in the panhandle. Just down this at the end of this street is Haight Ashbury, where the Summer of Love was carried out less than a mile away here.

TRAX: This isn't the singer James Taylor. This one is a professor of politics and race at the University of San Francisco, and author of the award-winning book, *Black Nationalism in the United States: From Malcolm X to Barack Obama*.¹⁶ James himself is black. He grew up in New York, went to college in Malibu, and now is raising a family in Oakland. He says being black in San Francisco feels unlike anywhere else he's been. He calls it a kind of "liberal racism."

AX James Taylor: I think if you are a person of color, people go out of their way to not see you. I don't know if it's conscious or subconscious, but I experience it every day on BART where you just hope for a little eye contact, to just acknowledge people's humanity through eye contact... So that invisibility that I'm talking about; it's almost the opposite of racism. It's racism of a different sort.

¹⁴ <https://data-openjustice.doj.ca.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/Homicide%20In%20CA%2020190701.pdf>

¹⁵ September 26, 2019. In-person taped interview with James L. Taylor.

¹⁶ <https://www.usfca.edu/faculty/james-lance-taylor>

TRAX: And here in San Francisco, James Taylor says, all of these tensions about who feels safe, and who's seen by whom as a threat, too often seems to work against you if you're black.

AX James Taylor: If somebody drives by right now and shoots me, somehow I'm implicated in my death. Because of where it happened. And because we've all, for fifty/sixty years, settled on this notion of good neighborhoods and bad neighborhoods. 'Bad neighborhood' is a euphemism for Black and poor in America.

TRAX: In San Francisco, one of those 'good' neighborhoods -- wealthy, Asian and white -- is the Embarcadero, on the waterfront.

AMBI waterfront.

TRAX: Tourists love to come here, to gaze out at the San Francisco Bay, to visit the century-old white Ferry Building, and shop at boutique market stalls; to eat and drink at trendy and pricey restaurants and bars. This area drew Judy Lin here, to buy a condo, in a luxury hi-rise near the Ferry Building.¹⁷ She's the daughter of Chinese immigrants, a successful Silicon Valley software developer, now retired. Judy's fit and athletic; being able to exercise with a view of the Bay is one thing she loves about living here.

AX Judy Lin: I'm a runner, so I run up and down here, you know, uh, most days, you know, I'm down to the ballpark, up to the fair building and back.

TRAX: But there's one thing Judy doesn't love about this neighborhood.

AX Judy Lin: I've had homeless people spit at me. I've had them shout at me for no reason.

TRAX: San Francisco is a city with about 10,000 homeless people, made that much more vulnerable by COVID-19. And here, too, African Americans are overrepresented. Again: nearly *half* of the city's homeless population is black.¹⁸

In Judy's neighborhood, homeless people sleep in parks, and push their belongings around in shopping carts.

One of these people – a young white guy -- attacked one of Judy's fellow residents, when the woman was coming home to her luxury condo building in the wee hours of an August night – just weeks after Day'von was killed. The condo's video surveillance camera recorded the incident.¹⁹ The man blocked the door so the woman couldn't get in. He pushed her hands away from the door. When she kept trying to get past him, he grabbed her by the waist from behind and pulled backward – until they both fell on

¹⁷ October 17, 2019. In-person taped interview with Judy Lin in San Francisco.

¹⁸ <http://hsh.sfgov.org/research-reports/san-francisco-homeless-point-in-time-count-reports/>

¹⁹ <https://abc7news.com/homeless-attack-woman-by-man-caught-on-tape/5481976/>

the ground. The woman got up and ran in the door, and another woman helped close and lock the door. The guy stared through the glass for a while, then left. The woman who'd been attacked, later told journalists²⁰ that the guy had said to her "everyone he's seeing are robots, and he's the only human remaining on earth."

This could have been simply the story of one homeless guy with issues, but Judy took it as something more:

AX Judy Lin: Our safety issues are not stemming from criminals so much. They're stemming from people who are drug addicts or who are mentally ill. So attacks are being perpetrated by people who are not in possession of their faculties. And that makes it extremely difficult to, to protect yourself against that.

TRAX: My editor, Joe, wrote a column about this incident, too.²¹ He was frustrated that people like Judy used a single incident as proof that homeless people were dangerous and that no one was safe.

AX Joe: And watching this horrifying video of this zombie-like man attacking this beautiful young woman, is something that resonates with people beyond the statistical element.

TRAX: Joe's getting at something important -- that sometimes our fear speaks to us in a way that defies logic, or ignores data. That said, San Francisco does rank as having more property crime than all but two US cities with populations above 500,000.²²

Judy was not happy when San Francisco's mayor, London Breed, announced plans to house 200 homeless people in a shelter near her house.²³

AX Judy Lin: "What are these homeless people going to do in the daytime?"

TRAX: In fact, the new shelters are open 24 hours...²⁴ No one's forced out on the streets during the day. No one's allowed to use drugs or drink, while in the shelters. They're called "Navigation Centers, and the eight existing ones in San Francisco have been mostly successful. They've taken in 5,000 homeless people since 2015. And almost half of those people have left to move into permanent homes, or to reunite with friends and family. Some of the homeless are victims of wildfires or have lost a job and just couldn't make rent. Having a safe place to live for a while appears to help them find their footing again.

²⁰ <https://www.sfchronicle.com/crime/article/SF-Embarcadero-attack-Victim-testifies-man-14447376.php>

²¹ <https://missionlocal.org/2019/08/paneez-kosarian-couldve-used-her-platform-for-good-instead-she-cast-every-homeless-person-as-a-mentally-ill-drug-addicted-menace/>

²² <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/crime-trends-1990-2016>

²³ <https://www.sfchronicle.com/politics/article/San-Francisco-to-build-200-bed-Navigation-Center-14049706.php>

²⁴ <http://hsh.sfgov.org/services/emergencysheelter/navigation-centers/>

Still, Judy was not comfortable with the idea of one of these shelters opening in her neighborhood.

AX Judy Lin: There's nothing against using drugs. There's no curfew. There's no, you can come and go as you please.

TRAX: Judy felt so strongly about feeling at risk from all this that she and a neighbor started a group called "Safe Embarcadero for All." Its main purpose was to make sure that the navigation centers aren't built around here. The group sued the city to stop the proposed development.

They lost.

I visited Judy a few months after the shelter had opened. Her neighborhood group "Safe Embarcadero for All" was still in existence.²⁵

She said her feelings are mixed. During the day, she feels about as safe as she felt before the shelter was up and running. But at night, she says she has noticed more drug activity -- and more encampments. She thinks the shelter has drawn more homeless people to the area. But...

AX Judy Lin: I do feel like the operator and the city are trying really hard to make this work. And I am actually hopeful that these issues that we have at night can be solved and they can, you know, either change or extend the patrol hours or implement some kind of different policies to make us feel safer at night.

TRAX: San Francisco police say they don't collect data about crimes committed by or against homeless people.²⁶ But being homeless is certainly more dangerous: the average homeless person has a life expectancy of 47, compared to 77 for the rest of the population.²⁷

But not everyone in San Francisco views homeless people as a threat.

AMB of Amanda interacting with her daughter.

Take Amanda Downing, for instance.²⁸

²⁵ February 20, 2020. In-person taped interview with Judy Lin in San Francisco.

²⁶ Email correspondence, SFPD Media relations, February 2020.

²⁷ Baggett, T. P., Hwang, S. W., O'Connell, J. J., Porneala, B. C., Stringfellow, E. J., Orav, E. J., Singer, D. E., & Rigotti, N. A. (2013). Mortality among homeless adults in Boston: shifts in causes of death over a 15-year period. *JAMA internal medicine*, 173(3), 189–195.
<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2013.1604>

²⁸ October 6, 2020. In-person taped interview with Amanda Downing in San Francisco.

TRAX: She's pushing her toddler Cora back and forth on a swing, in a city park in a gentrified part of the storied Haight-Ashbury neighborhood – ground zero of the sex and drugs and rock and roll of the Summer of Love in the '60s.²⁹ It's a sunny weekend day, and other friendly, seemingly well-off, mainly white people chat with each other and keep an eye on their children, who climb up small wooden castles, or play in the sand. This is yet another gentrified corner of San Francisco, affluent here, but grittier just blocks away. Amanda's somewhat comfortable here.

AX Amanda Downing: I feel generally safe.

TRAX: This is interesting, because:

AX Amanda Downing: We've had some less positive interactions. We've had people yell at us. Um, we've had someone at a sort of like trail behind us. And, um. You know, I just try to stay calm and show her that you don't have to get angry to keep yourself safe.

TRAX: Amanda has been in San Francisco for about a decade. She grew up in a small beach town near San Diego. Grad school drew her here, and she says she loves the city, although she and her husband are planning a move, soon, to a small town or city that's a little more affordable; and a little quieter. Amanda works in community health, and she doesn't appreciate the way her clients -- who are sometimes homeless and often struggling to maintain a normal life -- are often assumed to be dangerous.

AX Amanda Downing: I have a really hard time, anytime that there is a shooting or incident, and the immediate jump... the *immediate* jump to mental health. It's a really well-known statistic that people who have a diagnosis of a mental health challenge are more often the victims of violent crime rather than the perpetrators of violent crime.

TRAX: About half of San Francisco's chronically homeless said themselves in a recent government survey that they have had mental health issues.³⁰ Amanda knows this. But she says it doesn't truly scare her, even when she encounters such people in her own neighborhood. Who feels safe, and why, is complicated. Amanda is a white woman who says she feels mostly safe on the streets of San Francisco, and wants the best for her homeless neighbors. But she says she is also ready to leave this city -- and is ambivalent about the best way to keep her daughter safe.

AMBI of the Mission.

I go back to the Mission, and I pause in an alley a few feet from where Day'von Hann was shot and killed. There's a mural that's almost hidden: of painted candles, with names written inside each one, of young black and Hispanic men who have been killed over the years.

²⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Haight-Ashbury>

³⁰ <http://hsh.sfgov.org/wp-content/uploads/FINAL-PIT-Report-2019-San-Francisco.pdf>

AX Jon Jacobo: When someone is killed in the street, there typically is candles that get put out like this, to kind of honor where this person has been gunned down.³¹

AMB of the scene at the Mission under.

TRAX: This is Jon Jacobo. He grew up in the Mission, too. He's now on the board of a local nonprofit that works to preserve the neighborhood's Latino roots... by resisting gentrification and supporting long standing businesses.³² If he hadn't pointed out the mural of painted candles I would have missed it. It's off the beaten path, out of most tourists' line of vision. The paint is slightly faded, but you can still read the names.

AX Jon Jacobo: When someone dies in our community, it has a ripple effect that impacts all of us. And it's very painful.

TRAX: So is the fact, he says, that so many people new to this gentrifying area don't always see the threat to the long-time residents, who've often been the least safe of all.

Yes, violent crime is down overall, and that's a good thing. But here on a quiet street corner where a child was killed, and newcomers sweep this place of memory... where they step gingerly around homeless people, and pause to take pictures of murals... safety is in the eye of the beholder.

For the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, I'm Annie Berman.

³¹ October 15, 2020. In-person taped interview with Jon Jacobo in San Francisco.

³² <https://www.calle24sf.org/en/>

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