

COVERING THE POLICE

Dog bites in S.F. are rising. In the Tenderloin, they're skyrocketing.

San Francisco's dog court has been on hiatus for seven months, and consequences for bite incidents are slim



by **ELENI BALAKRISHNAN**
March 19, 2026, 4:00 am



Illustration by Neil G. Ballard.

At a Tenderloin community meeting this past November, Captain Matt Sullivan said that, in the previous four months, more than 27 percent of the department's dog-bite reports took place in the Tenderloin police district.

He wasn't surprised. Just walking down the sidewalk, Sullivan told the 20 or so attendees, he often thought, "I got to be prepared to jump out of the way for some of these dogs."

Eric Rozell, a deputy director at the Tenderloin Community Benefit District, shared a similar story at another recent community meeting. In the past year and a half, he said, four of his colleagues at the nonprofit have been bitten by neighborhood dogs.

Rozell witnessed one of those bites in person.

One day, as he walked down the street with a colleague, "a dog just jumped up and grabbed him by the arm," Rozell said.

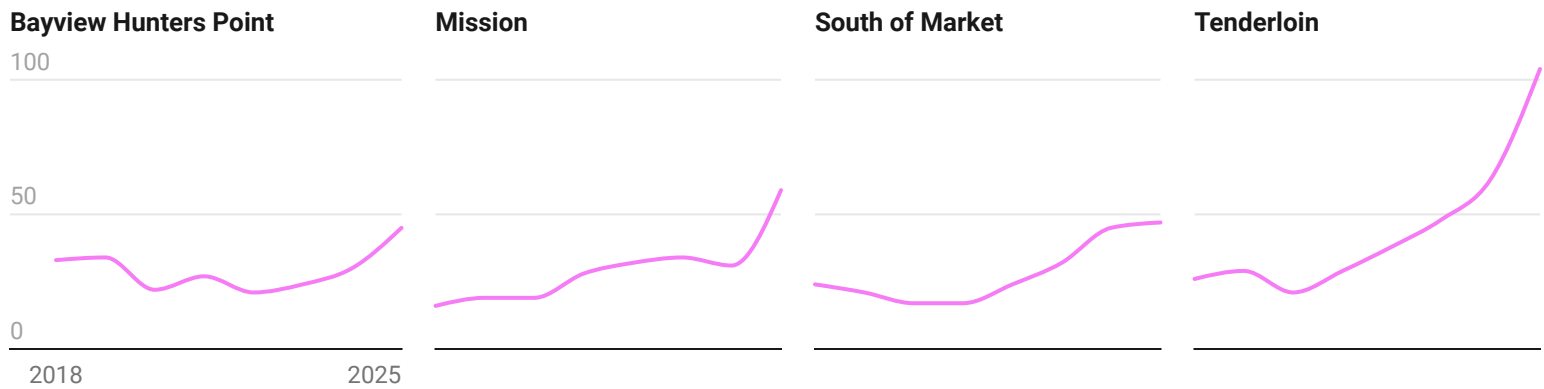
While Rozell waited for medics and police to arrive, he said, the pitbull, despite being on a leash, "lashed" and "snapped" at multiple passersby, including a senior.

"If you have more people on the street with dogs, they're not getting fed as often, not getting the naps that they normally take," Rozell added, "I just imagine the dogs are probably more irritable than normal, too."

In response to frequent bites, the Tenderloin district police station in November launched dog-enforcement operations with the tongue-in-cheek working name, "Paw Patrol." One officer, who Sullivan said took an interest in the issue, is now the station's resident "dog lieutenant."

Dog bite reports in the Tenderloin are skyrocketing

The number of police incident reports filed for dog bites or attacks, by year and neighborhood.



Counts exclude bites reported with Animal Care & Control.

Chart: Kelly Waldron • Source: [San Francisco Police Department via S.F. Open Data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Lt. William Elieff and Tenderloin officers have gone out on patrol to educate residents about regulations like leash laws, and occasionally run enforcement operations. On one Sunday in February, they issued 11 citations for dogs being off leash or unregistered.

“Some of these dogs are very aggressive and it’s problematic, and we have all these dogs that bite people,” said Elieff, who recently arrived at Tenderloin station. “We don’t want to penalize people who are responsible. At the end of the day, we want to just educate the community.”

Dog-bite incidents rising across San Francisco

It’s a concern citywide. The police department told *Mission Local* that SFPD only began keeping records of dog bites in mid-2024. That half-year, it documented 446 bites reported to police or Animal Care and Control. In 2025, there were 926 reported dog bites in San Francisco.

Census [data](#) and pet ownership [data](#) from the American Veterinary Medical Association shows that over 155,000 [households](#) in San Francisco have at least one dog, which would suggest that the vast majority of dogs in the city are not biting anyone. San Francisco famously is home to more dogs than children. But it’s likely that the true total number of bites is significant, since many people who get bitten are unlikely to report it.

Reddit and Nextdoor threads show residents trying to track down bad-acting dog owners. Sometimes they seek advice after being bitten.

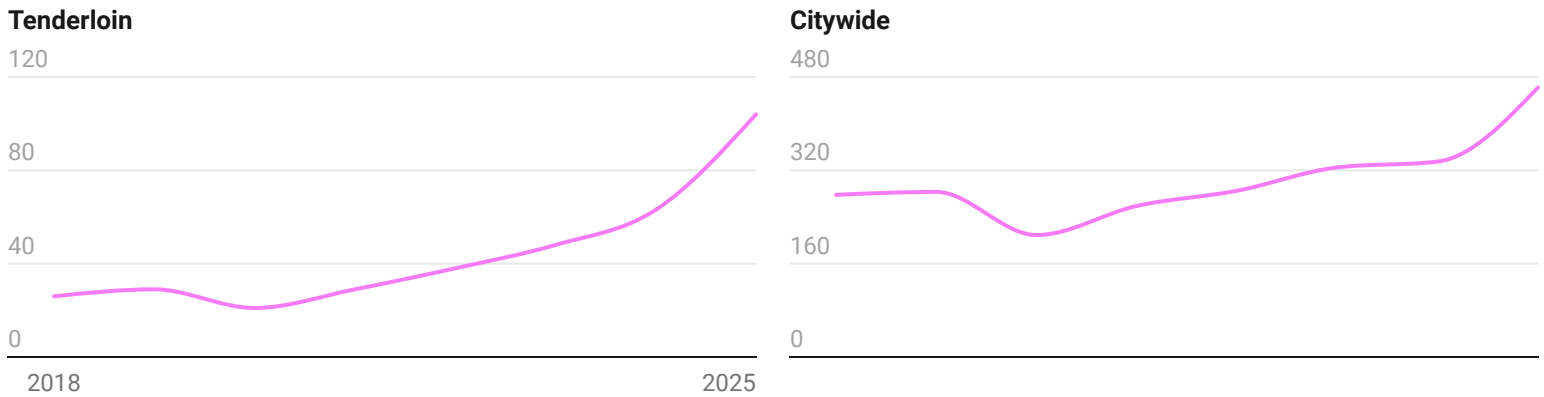
“Dog bit my dog at Fort Funston and owner fled,” reads one [post](#).

“Pitbull lunged at a baby” at Beach Chalet athletic fields, reads another.

The police department can respond to animal attacks, as does Animal Care and Control, the city-run shelter, which sends out officers to reports of bites.

Dog bites reported to police are increasing citywide

The number of police incident reports filed for dog bites or attacks, by year and area.



Counts exclude bites reported with Animal Care & Control.

Chart: Kelly Waldron • Source: [San Francisco Police Department via S.F. Open Data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

After a dog bite is reported, Animal Care and Control attempts to reach the owner and tells them to keep the dog at home for 10 days. If the dog’s owner is homeless or unable to, the agency will quarantine the dog.

Animal Control spokesperson Deb Campbell said the agency may then follow up with the owner, warn them to keep the dog on-leash (and possibly muzzled) in public, and “advise them that a Vicious and Dangerous Dog hearing may be requested.”

Those Vicious and Dangerous Dog hearings, held by the Department of Police Accountability, have been suspended since 2024.

The suspension, announced by department head Paul Henderson in a May 2024 letter to the city administrator, Animal Control, and police department, declared that his department no longer had the resources to staff the program.

“Over the past five years, the burden of managing the VDD hearing program has steadily increased,” Henderson wrote, emphasizing that without additional funding his agency would stop taking cases. “Given that there are more dogs than children in San Francisco, it is important for the City to prioritize maintaining a strong VDD program.”

Dog court on hiatus

The Department of Police Accountability briefly resumed hearing cases in early 2025. Its last hearing, records show, was on July 22, 2025. According to the SFPD, 61 cases are pending a hearing.

The SFPD still has a dedicated Vicious and Dangerous Dog Unit, which investigates reports of aggressive dogs. As of press time, the unit's website still said that Vicious and Dangerous Dog hearings occur within 15 days of a bite or, if the dog and owner are unknown, within 90 days of a biter's identification.

It is unclear how police and Animal Control policies concerning dangerous dogs are enforced, especially with the court on hiatus. So, many bite victims are left to their own devices.

In places like the Tenderloin, where homeless people often keep dogs for protection as well as companionship and many spend much of the day on the sidewalks, bites are often never even reported.



Toni Machada poses for a picture with her dog Jelly in 2023, at an encampment behind Best Buy. Photo by David Mamaril Horowitz.

“The homeless credo is if you get bitten, you don’t say anything, or you’re a rat,” said Aaron Wilson, who was bitten twice while he was living at the now-closed Candlestick Point RV park. Instead of reporting a dog or its owner, he said, “you’re supposed to take it.”

Wilson was bitten in December 2024 by Sophia, his neighbor’s dog, as he was cruising around on his bicycle at the RV park. In February 2025, he was bitten by Scruffy, a stray dog who lived at the lot.

Afterward, Wilson had to get rabies shots injected into his wounds. Now, he is afraid of dogs — and he sees them everywhere.

“I never had a problem with dogs, but now I do,” said Wilson. “I’m scarred for life every day I get to look at this dog bite ... the mental anguish goes on.”

Searching for Scruffy, or Scrappy

Wilson is one of those people awaiting justice in dog court. He has spent much of the past year and a half tracking down documents about his bites. Wilson estimates he has spent some 200 hours over the last 15 months trying to find out what will happen with his case and the dogs that bit him and his neighbors.

Animal Control was never able to catch Scruffy (also known as Scrappy), though Campbell said her colleagues visited the RV park 11 times between 2022 and 2025 looking for him.

The agency only has a record of him biting once — the time involving Wilson — but Scruffy/Scrappy appears frequently in department records, at times reported to have a “bleeding injury” or a limp, or suffering himself from bites from other dogs.

An Animal Control report from March 2025, a month after Wilson was bitten, discusses the closure of the RV park, and states that “we will catch ‘Scrappy’ eventually, but most likely would need to dart him.”

In February this year, after a security guard reported that the dog was hit by a car and injured, Campbell said, Animal Control officers went out twice to look for him again. He was not found.

“As of [Feb. 6], Scruffy was in the vicinity of the old Vehicle Triage Center,” Campbell said in a statement.

Sophia, the other dog that bit Wilson, is known by Animal Control to have bitten at least one other person, and is suspected in two other bites. Sophia’s current whereabouts are unknown.

“The owner vacated with the dog,” Campbell said. “Our understanding is that there may be a Vicious & Dangerous Dog Hearing through the SF Police Department.”

Mauricio Castro, another former RV park resident, was also bitten by Sophia, he says, though he never filed a report that time, or the three other times he was bitten while living at the RV lot.

Castro, who has kidney cancer, was recently moving out of his car and into supportive housing. In the years he was homeless, he said, he and his dog suffered multiple dog attacks and bites.

One Animal Control report shows that Castro was also bitten by a pit bull in 2014, near Silver Terrace.



Bites to Mauricio Castro's arm in November 2024. Photo from an Animal Care and Control report.

“Homeless vic was walking past a hill when 2 dogs charged out,” the report reads. “He fell and was bitten on the arm, knee and shoulder.”

Records show that the case was closed a few months later. Animal Control did not provide further information about what became of the dog.

The bite from Sophia is the worst, says Castro. When he was sleeping in his car, he said, the cold would seep in and he could feel the ache in his bones.

Now that he's housed, Castro hopes a friend will help him track down the documentation he needs to file all the proper reports for his four dog bites. Keeping his affairs in order while living in his car was difficult.

“Me hicieron pedazos,” Castro said in Spanish: *They busted me up*. He is thinking of the statute of limitations, which for filing lawsuits about dog bites in California is two years. “I need to do it before time runs out.”

The estimated number of dogs in San Francisco was updated after publication of this article. The number of bites in 2025, originally reported in this story based on SFPD data, was also adjusted with data from Animal Care and Control.



tired of the squalor

March 19, 2026, 10:58 am at 10:58 am

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