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BAY AREA // CRIME

Troubling trend in S.F.: 32% jump in gunfire recorded by ShotSpotter sensors

By **Megan Cassidy**, Crime Reporter
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Gift Article



Jason Young, 41, poses for a portrait in a t-shirt with images of his late 6-year-old son, Jace Young, at India Basin Park on Wednesday, July 29, 2020, in San Francisco, Calif. Jace was fatally shot while watching fireworks on 4th of July. India Basin Park was one of Jace's favorite places to play.
Yalonda M. James / The Chronicle

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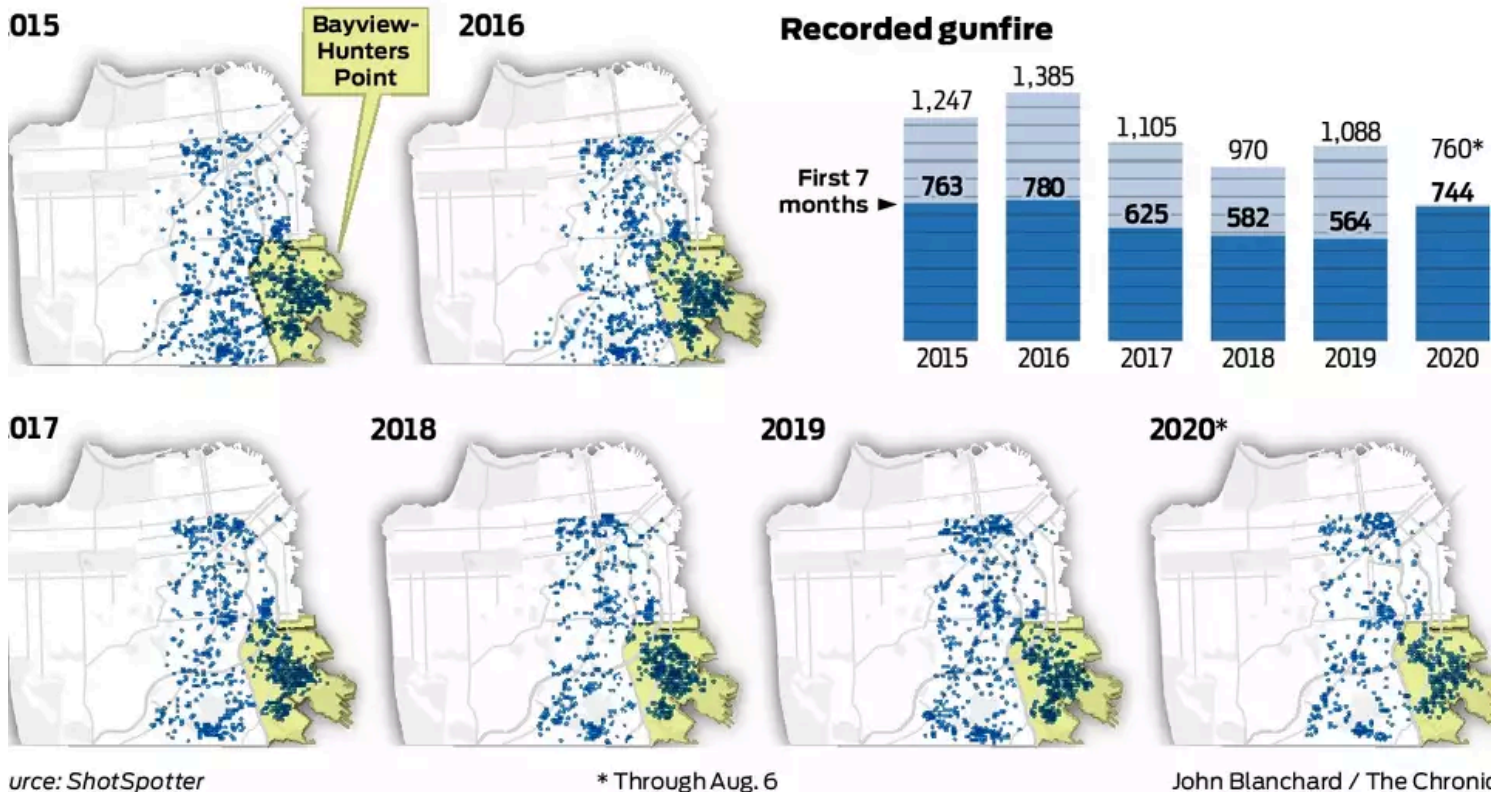
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After years of falling gun violence and despite pandemic shelter-in-place orders, shootings appear to be on the rise in some San Francisco neighborhoods in 2020, a trend that became more stark as the weather began to warm.

ShotSpotter, a gunfire-detection system the city uses to pinpoint shootings in areas including the Bayview, Mission, South of Market and Visitacion Valley, recorded 744 incidents of shots fired in the first seven months of the year, a 32% jump from the 564 logged during the same period last year.

San Francisco gunshot spotter

Data provided by ShotSpotter show the neighborhoods where shootings cluster. Year over year, areas in Bayview-Hunters Point see more gunfire than anywhere else in San Francisco.



May, June and July saw a 43% increase, from 251 gunfire incidents during those months in 2019 to 360 in 2020.

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The bullets — at least those that could be located — penetrated homes and pierced street signs and cars. Others struck gang rivals or innocent bystanders, such as 22-year-old public transit advocate [Courtney Brousseau](#) and [Jace Young](#), a 6-year-old boy who was fatally shot while watching Fourth of July fireworks.

Overall, violent crime decreased in San Francisco while the city sheltered in place due to the coronavirus.

San Francisco

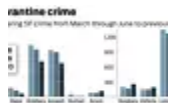
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But the uptick in shooting incidents has corresponded with a rise in homicides. The city to date has tallied 35 homicides, a 30% rise from the 27 recorded by this time last year. Firearms were used in 22 of this year's killings. There were [41 killings in all of 2019](#) — a 56-year low for the city.

"It's happening all the time," said Rudy Corpuz Jr., the founder and executive director of United Playaz, a San Francisco violence prevention organization, in a Friday interview. Corpuz, who tracks reports of local crime on a neighborhood watch app, said he's noticed a spike in the number of shots fired. "Just as we're speaking, I got another notification."

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Criminologists caution against putting too much weight on short-term crime trends and assigning them to a single cause, and peaks and valleys are normal to see year-over-year. However, police officials and others said a rise in gang-related violence, as well as national events like the coronavirus pandemic and civil unrest, could be contributing to the uptick.



Jason Young, 41, poses for a portrait at India Basin Park on Wednesday, July 29, 2020, in San Francisco, Calif. Young is the father of Jace Young, a 6-year-old boy who was fatally shot while watching fireworks on 4th of July. India Basin Park was one of Jace's favorite places to play.

Yalonda M. James / The Chronicle

San Francisco Supervisor Catherine Stefani said the trend is alarming to residents and gun safety groups. She recalled a conversation she had with a woman who recounted having to duck for cover, while six months pregnant, under a car during a shooting in Glen Park.

“People are feeling very unsafe in San Francisco,” said Stefani, a gun control advocate and vice chair of the Public Safety and Neighborhood Services Committee. “I’ve been hearing from people who are afraid to take their kids to the park — shootings are taking place in places where people are just walking to work.”

Stefani plans to call for a hearing on the recent increase in gunfire.

National data show that the city isn't alone. ShotSpotter, a for-profit company that tracks gunfire with acoustic sensors in San Francisco and more than 100 other cities, found that every week in 2020 to date saw more gunfire than its counterpart in 2019.

Stanford Criminal Justice Center Director Robert Weisberg noted that crime rates in San Francisco and other cities have been historically low in recent years, so percentages can be skewed by the small number of incidents.

However, he said, the jump in San Francisco's shootings isn't trivial.

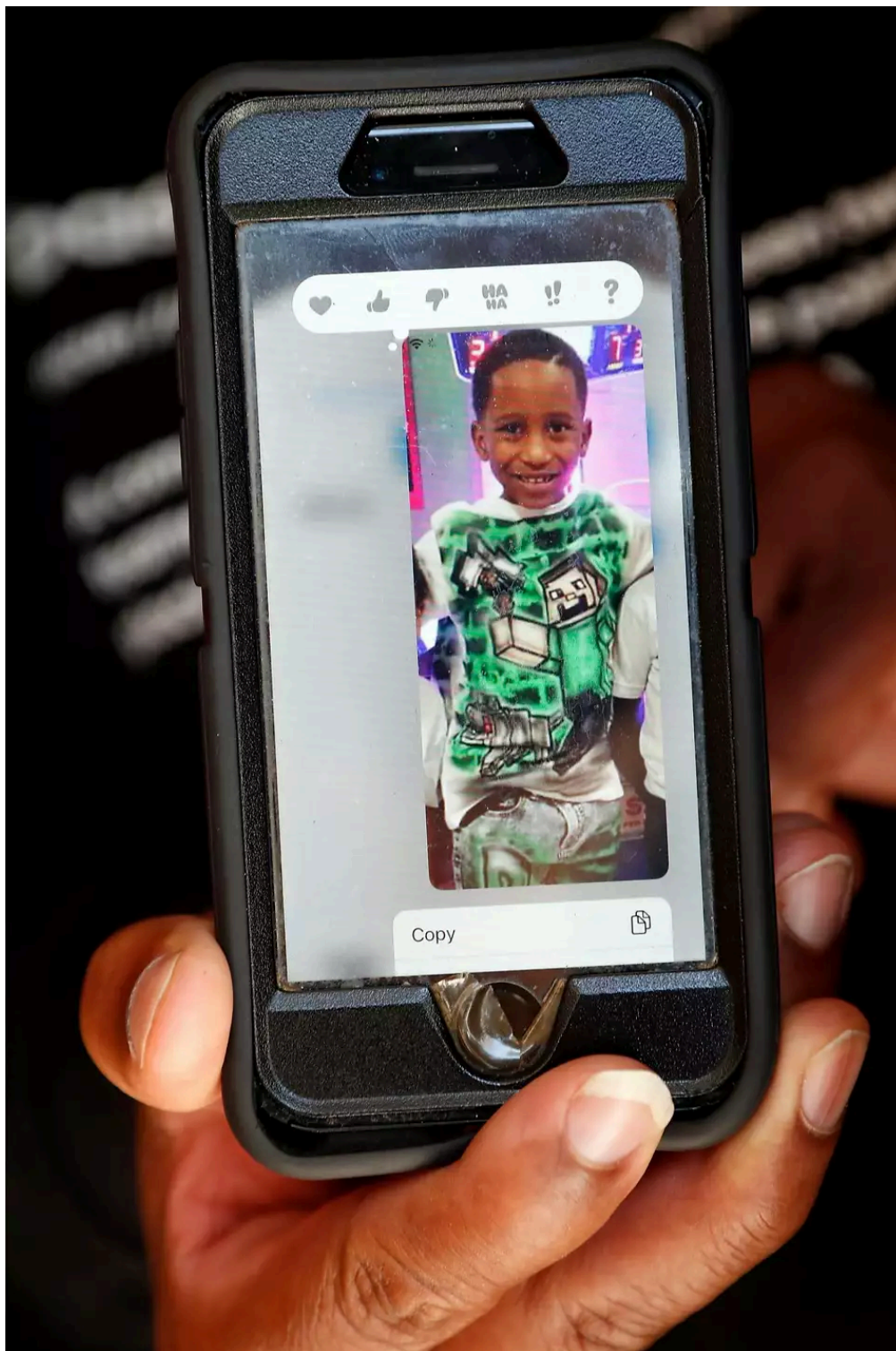
"Killings arise from interpersonal stress or conflict, and for all we know, COVID has increased those stressors," Weisberg said, noting that more research is needed. "Since many people shoot without aiming to kill, the stress explanation would work even better for shootings than for killings."

"I think a lot of people are desperate," Corpuz said. "There's no jobs, less opportunities — people are just getting out there and robbing, taking what they can, because they're in desperate situations."

ShotSpotter sensors record all gunfire in their tracking areas, and seek to filter out similar noises like fireworks and car backfires. San Francisco, like many cities that use the technology, chose coverage areas that receive the most reports of violence

Raw data reviewed by The Chronicle show that gunfire incidents were clustered in Bayview-Hunters Point over the past year. San Francisco police Deputy Chief David Lazar said many of this year's shootings were attributed to escalating gang wars.

Such was the case on Aug. 17, he said, when a rolling gunbattle that began between two gang members in the Sunnydale neighborhood spilled into the Excelsior district. A bystander who was sitting at a bus stop downrange of the shooting was struck in the face.



A photo Jace Young, 6, in San Francisco, Calif., on Monday, July 6, 2020. The boy was fatally shot on Whitfield Court Saturday night.

Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

“We’re noticing that so many innocent people are being affected by these shootouts that are taking place, whether it’s people or property,” Lazar said.

Another alarming trend is the types of weapons being used, Lazar said. In 2019, police recorded three incidents involving rounds from high-powered guns, such as AR-15s. There have been at least 20 such shootings so far in 2020, Lazar said.

He said the department is deploying a range of strategies, understanding that it can't arrest its way out of the problem. Officials have begun working with the California Partnerships for Safe Communities, a data-driven coalition of organizations that target people at the highest risk of violence.

San Francisco police are also leaning on their own relationship-building units like the gang task force, which Lazar credits for helping to drive the city's violent crimes to historically low levels.

"It might seem adversarial between the police and the gangs, but in many cases the investigators have a good rapport with those that are engaged in this activity."



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Jason Young, the father of Jace Young, said there's been little headway on his son's case since the July 4 shooting in the Bayview, despite police officials' recent announcement of a \$100,000 reward for information leading to an arrest.

"For all intents and purposes, it was a gang shooting," he said.

Jace Young, 6, was at a July party at a friend's house when he was struck and killed. The tragedy sparked an outpouring of support from city officials including Mayor London Breed and Supervisor Shamann Walton, but police have not announced any arrests.

Young said he's trying to move his family out of the Bayview. He has at least 10 other family members who have been victims of gun violence, many of whom live in the neighborhood, and three shooting attempts on his own life in the last few years.

"It's too easy to obtain a firearm," he said. "You use one, you get rid of it, there ain't no rules, no morals."



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San Francisco District Attorney Chesa Boudin said that while the city has seen an increase in shootings this year, other gun-related crimes that don't involve bullets being fired have fallen. Assaults with guns that don't involve a shooting are down 58%, and there have been no rapes involving a firearm reported. Last year, there were seven such incidents.

"Shootings, gun violence, is tragically a part of the urban landscape in every American city," Boudin said.

He said most of the illegal weapons fired in San Francisco come from other states like Arizona and Nevada, and called for more robust gun-control laws to curb the trafficking.

Stefani has requested a report from the Budget & Legislative Analyst's Office to dive into the causes of the trend.

"What I'm hearing anecdotally is we have an increase in gang gun violence and we need to find out exactly whether or not that's true," she said. "Is it an increase, is it the type of weapons being used, is it random? These are important questions that I think we need to get to the bottom of."

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Megan Cassidy

CRIME REPORTER



Megan Cassidy is a crime reporter with The Chronicle, also covering cops, criminal justice issues and mayhem. Previously, Cassidy worked for the Arizona Republic covering Phoenix police, Sheriff Joe Arpaio and desert-area crime and mayhem. She is a two-time graduate of the University of Missouri, and has additionally worked at the Casper Star-Tribune, National Geographic and an online publication in Buenos Aires. Cassidy can be reached on twitter at @meganrcassidy, and will talk about true crime as long as you'll let her.

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