COMMUNITY PATROL SERVICE

Serving Since 1998

From Incident To Justice



FROM INCIDENT TO JUSTICE: HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding the criminal justice process helps people make informed decisions, cooperate effectively with law enforcement, protect their rights, and understand why reporting an incident is so vitally important, even when an arrest does not immediately follow.

The criminal justice system is not a single organization. It is a sequence of responsibilities shared by several independent agencies:

1. **San Francisco Police Department**: Receives reports, responds to incidents, investigates suspected crimes, collects evidence, identifies suspects, and makes arrests when legally justified.
2. **San Francisco District Attorney's Office**: Reviews evidence, determines whether criminal charges should be filed, prosecutes criminal cases, and provides victim and witness assistance.
3. **San Francisco Superior Court**: Administers criminal proceedings, protects the legal rights of the parties, hears evidence, determines guilt or innocence through the appropriate legal process, and imposes sentences when a defendant is convicted.
4. **Victim support organizations**: Provide assistance, advocacy, counseling referrals, financial compensation information, and practical support throughout and beyond the criminal justice process.

It is important to understand that these organizations have different responsibilities. Police do not determine guilt, prosecutors do not act as judges, and courts do not conduct the original police investigation.

The following guide explains how these processes work in San Francisco and what members of the public can do to help.

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1. Reporting incidents to the San Francisco Police Department



One of the most important responsibilities members of the public have in helping maintain community safety is reporting crimes and suspicious or potentially criminal incidents to the police.

A common misconception is that reporting a crime is only the responsibility of the person who was directly victimized. This is not the case. Witnesses are an equally important source of information, and their willingness to report what they have seen can make the difference between an incident remaining unresolved and an investigation progressing.

A. Reporting as a victim

A victim is someone who has suffered physical injury, financial loss, property damage, threats, intimidation, or other harm as a result of an incident.

If you are the victim of a crime in San Francisco, you should report it to SFPD as soon as reasonably possible.

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There are three principal reporting options:

1. Emergency: Call 911

Call 911 when:

- A crime is currently taking place.
- Someone is in immediate danger.
- There is an immediate threat of violence.
- A weapon is involved.
- The suspect is still present, or their location is known and police intervention is urgently needed.
- Someone requires immediate medical assistance.

Give the dispatcher your location, explain what is happening, describe any immediate danger, and provide information about the suspect if available.

Do not put yourself in danger to obtain information or photographs.

2. Non-emergency: Call 415-553-0123

For incidents that have already occurred, where there is no immediate threat and the suspect is no longer present, contact the SFPD non-emergency line.

An officer can be dispatched to take a report when appropriate. You can also visit your nearest SFPD district station.

3. Online reporting

SFPD provides an online reporting system for many qualifying incidents, including certain thefts, vandalism, vehicle burglaries, identity theft, fraud, and other property-related offenses.

Not every crime can be reported online. For example, residential burglaries, robberies, stolen vehicles, and certain other incidents require a different reporting process.

The current list and online reporting portal are available here:

SFPD – How to File a Police Report

(https://www.sanfranciscopolice.org/get-service/police-reports)

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B. Reporting as a witness



A witness is someone who personally observes an incident, has relevant information about a crime, or possesses evidence that may assist an investigation.

You do not have to be the victim to report a crime.

For example:

- You see someone being assaulted or threatened.
- You witness a robbery, theft, or vandalism.
- You observe a person deliberately damaging another person's property.
- You witness an incident involving hate speech, intimidation, or a possible hate crime.
- You see someone behaving suspiciously in circumstances that suggest a crime may be taking place.
- You possess video footage, photographs, or other information relating to an incident.

If you witness a crime, report it even if the victim appears unwilling to do so.

There may be many reasons why a victim does not immediately report an incident, including fear of retaliation, embarrassment, concerns about immigration status, distrust of authorities, intoxication, trauma, or simply not knowing what to do.

A witness can provide the police with information that the victim may be unable or unwilling to provide.

Importantly, witnesses should distinguish between what they personally observed and what they believe may have happened.

For example:

- Good: "I saw the individual strike the victim three times."
- Less useful: "I think the individual was trying to kill the victim."

The first statement describes an observation. The second expresses an interpretation about intent that may not be established by the available evidence.

C. What information should you provide?

Whether reporting as a victim or witness, try to provide as much accurate information as possible.

Information	What to provide
Location	Exact street address, intersection, business, or landmark
Date and time	When the incident occurred, or the best estimate
People involved	Descriptions, clothing, approximate age and other identifying features
Suspect information	Direction of travel, vehicle, license plate, distinguishing characteristics
Incident details	What happened, in chronological order
Injuries	Nature of injuries and whether medical assistance was required
Witnesses	Names and contact information, if available
Evidence	Photographs, video, messages, documents, or physical evidence
Other information	Possible motive, threats, prior incidents, or additional context

If you have video footage from a mobile phone, business security camera, vehicle camera, or residential surveillance system, tell the officer.

Do not edit, delete, or publicly circulate original footage before speaking with investigators. Preserve the original recording and make a separate copy if necessary.

If you have physical evidence, avoid handling it unnecessarily.

D. Ask for an incident or police report number

One of the most important things to obtain when making a report is the SFPD incident number, or the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) number. If the incident results in an investigation by Police or a criminal case by the District Attorney, then a Case Number will also be generated and will be important to know when seeking information about the status of the case.

The Case Number and CAD numbers provide a reference for future communications with the police, investigators, prosecutors, and victim advocates.

If you remember additional details after making your initial report, contact SFPD and ask how to provide supplemental information.

If you discover additional witnesses or locate video footage later, make sure the investigating officer receives it.

A police report is not simply a record of something that happened. It can become the foundation for a subsequent investigation, prosecution, restitution claim, insurance claim, and victim-support application.

SFPD also provides an online process for requesting copies of incident reports, subject to applicable disclosure restrictions.

2. How SFPD prioritizes incident responses and why filing a report matters

San Francisco, like every major American city, has finite police resources. There are times when the number of calls for service exceeds the number of officers immediately available to respond.

Consequently, not every call receives the same response priority.

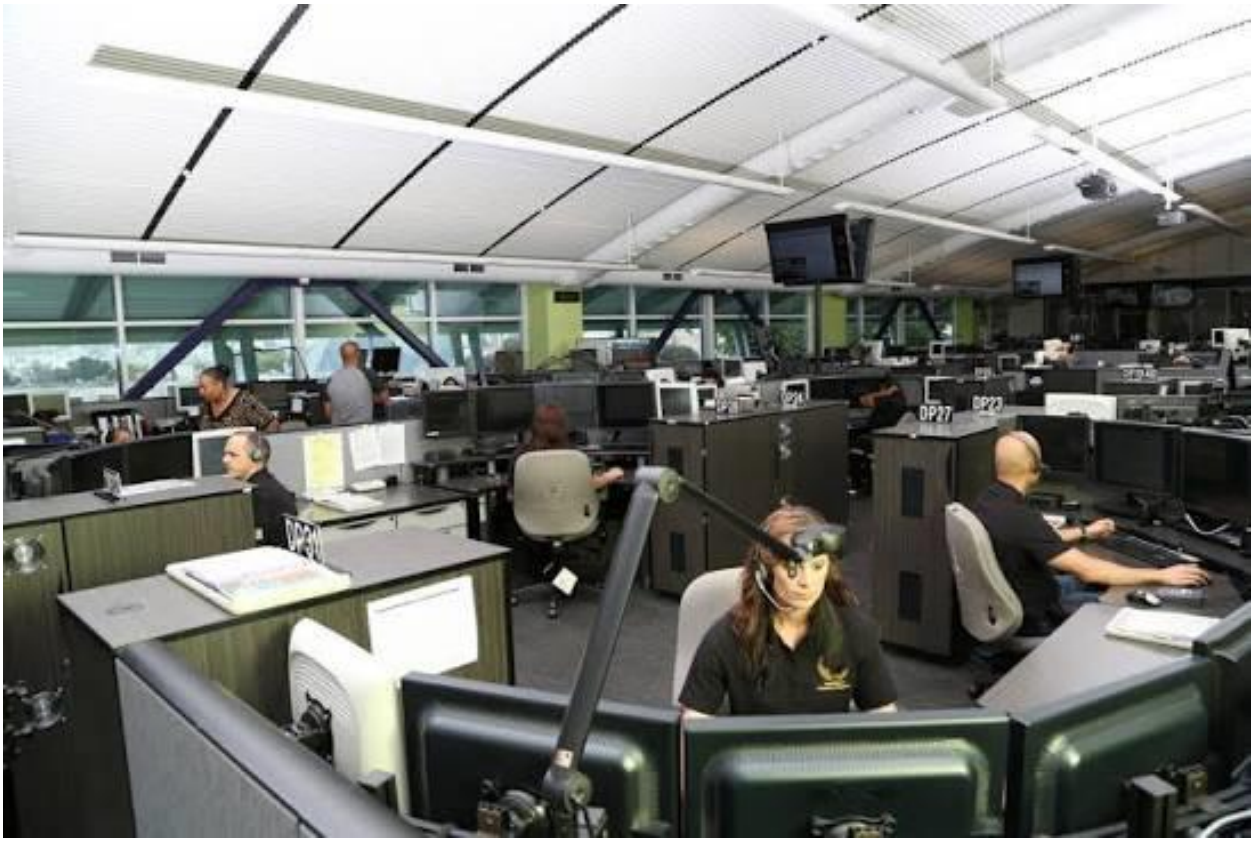
Understanding this distinction is important because the absence of an immediate police response does not necessarily mean that an incident is unimportant, that police are ignoring it, or that the incident will never be investigated.

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A. How emergency calls are prioritized



Emergency calls received through 911 are assessed by the Department of Emergency Management (DEM), which operates San Francisco's emergency communications and dispatch functions.

Dispatchers evaluate the information provided by the caller and determine the appropriate response and priority.

Generally, the greatest urgency is given to situations involving:

- Immediate threats to life.
- Serious injuries or medical emergencies.
- Crimes involving firearms or other weapons.
- Active assaults and violent confrontations.
- Robberies or other serious crimes in progress.
- Situations where an offender is still present and there is an immediate threat to public safety.

Other incidents may receive a lower dispatch priority, particularly when the immediate danger has passed.

For example, a report of a completed vehicle burglary, vandalism, property theft, or a disturbance where the parties have dispersed may not require the same immediate response as an ongoing violent assault.

The actual priority depends on the circumstances, information available to the dispatcher, and other calls awaiting assistance.

B. Why police cannot always attend immediately

Members of the public sometimes become frustrated when they call the police and are told that an officer may not be immediately available.

It is important to appreciate that officers may already be dealing with:

- Violent crimes and active emergencies.
- Arrests and prisoner transportation.
- Medical emergencies.
- Domestic violence incidents.
- Serious traffic collisions.
- Evidence collection and crime-scene preservation.
- Other calls that have been assessed as more urgent.

A police officer who is occupied dealing with an immediate threat to life cannot simultaneously attend a lower-priority incident elsewhere in the city.

This is one reason why the distinction between emergency and non-emergency reporting is so important.

It allows emergency communications personnel to allocate available resources according to urgency.

C. Why you should still file a police report

Perhaps the most important message in this article is:

If you are a victim or witness to a crime, do not assume that because an officer cannot immediately attend, there is no value in reporting the incident.

A formal report creates an official record that can be used to:

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1. Establish that an incident occurred.
2. Identify victims, witnesses, and potential suspects.
3. Document injuries, losses, damage, and other consequences.
4. Identify patterns involving repeat offenders or locations.
5. Connect seemingly unrelated incidents.
6. Identify additional investigative opportunities.
7. Support subsequent arrests and prosecutorial decisions.
8. Provide documentation for victim compensation and restitution.

Consider an example.

A business owner reports a robbery but is told that an officer cannot immediately attend because higher-priority incidents are being handled.

The owner might reasonably conclude that there is little point in pursuing the matter further.

However, the report could become important if:

- Another business reports a similar robbery.
- A witness subsequently identifies the suspect.
- Security footage from another location captures the suspect.
- The suspect is arrested for another incident.
- Investigators identify a pattern of offending.

The original report may then become an important part of a larger investigation.

D. Reporting also helps identify crime patterns

Police departments use incident reports and other information to understand where crimes are occurring, what types of offenses are being committed, and whether particular locations or individuals are associated with recurring problems.

A single report may not result in an arrest. However, multiple reports can establish a pattern that might otherwise remain invisible.

This is especially important in neighborhoods with active commercial districts, entertainment venues, public events, and large pedestrian populations.

In San Francisco's LGBTQ+ neighborhoods, for example, reporting incidents of harassment, assault, threats, and hate-motivated conduct can help investigators identify recurring problems and potential patterns of targeting.

The reporting of incidents also helps inform decisions about patrol deployment, community engagement, and preventative policing.

E. What if you do not want to make a formal report?

Some people are reluctant to provide their identity or contact details.

SFPD operates an anonymous tip line at:

415-575-4444

This can be used to provide information about ongoing criminal behavior.

However, an anonymous tip is not necessarily equivalent to a formal victim or witness statement. It may not provide investigators with sufficient evidence to establish what happened or allow them to contact the person providing the information.

Where possible, providing your contact information and making yourself available for follow-up questions can be extremely valuable.

3. How SFPD investigates incidents and refers cases to the District Attorney

Once a crime has been reported, SFPD determines what investigative steps are appropriate.

The nature and complexity of the investigation will depend on the offense, available evidence, whether a suspect has been identified, and the circumstances surrounding the incident.

Not every reported incident results in an arrest, and not every arrest results in criminal charges.

These are separate stages of the process.

A. The initial police investigation

When officers attend an incident, their first responsibilities generally include:

- Ensuring the immediate safety of those involved.
- Obtaining medical assistance where necessary.
- Determining what appears to have happened.
- Identifying the victim and any available witnesses.
- Identifying and locating potential suspects.

- Preserving evidence.
- Determining whether an arrest is legally justified.
- Preparing an incident report.

Depending on the circumstances, officers may take photographs, examine physical evidence, obtain witness statements, review surveillance footage, and identify other investigative leads.

For more serious incidents, specialist investigators may become involved.

These may include detectives assigned to units dealing with robbery, homicide, sexual assault, domestic violence, financial crimes, or other specialized offenses.

B. The importance of witness statements

Witnesses can provide some of the most important evidence in a criminal investigation.

A witness statement helps establish:

- What happened.
- When and where it happened.
- Who was involved.
- What actions were taken by the people involved.
- Whether weapons were present.
- Whether threats were made.
- What happened immediately before and after the incident.

Investigators may interview witnesses separately to obtain independent accounts.

They may also ask witnesses to identify suspects, describe events in greater detail, or clarify inconsistencies.

It is important that witnesses tell the truth, avoid speculation, and do not coordinate their recollections with other witnesses.

If you are uncertain about something, say so. An honest statement of uncertainty is far more valuable than an inaccurate statement presented as fact.

C. Evidence gathering

A criminal investigation may involve several different types of evidence.

Evidence type	Examples
Physical	Weapons, damaged property, clothing, fingerprints
Documentary	Receipts, records, written communications
Digital	Text messages, emails, social media, electronic records
Video	CCTV, mobile phone footage, vehicle cameras
Forensic	DNA, fingerprints, blood samples, trace evidence
Testimonial	Victim accounts, eyewitness statements, expert testimony
Medical	Injury photographs, hospital records, forensic examinations

Investigators must also consider whether evidence was obtained lawfully and whether it can be introduced in court.

For example, video footage may be useful in identifying a suspect, but its authenticity, completeness, and relevance may need to be established before it can be used as evidence.

D. What happens when police identify a suspect?

Depending on the circumstances and applicable law, SFPD may:

- Arrest the suspect.
- Issue a citation or make another lawful disposition.
- Seek an arrest warrant.
- Continue investigating before seeking an arrest.
- Submit an investigative package to the District Attorney for review.

An arrest does not mean that someone has been found guilty.

It means that law enforcement believes there are sufficient legal grounds for taking that person into custody.

The defendant remains presumed innocent unless and until guilt is established through the legal process.

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E. How cases are referred to the District Attorney

The San Francisco District Attorney's Office is responsible for prosecuting criminal offenses under California law in San Francisco.

When police complete an investigation, they may submit their reports and supporting evidence to the District Attorney's Office.

This can happen following an arrest or through a request for an arrest warrant.

The information submitted may include:

- The original police report.
- Supplemental reports.
- Witness statements.
- Victim statements.
- Photographs and video.
- Physical and forensic evidence.

- Suspect interviews.
- Other investigative findings.

The District Attorney's Office reviews the material and determines whether there is sufficient admissible evidence to support criminal charges.

The office explains that prosecutors must have sufficient admissible evidence to prove the proposed charges beyond a reasonable doubt at trial before filing a case.

San Francisco District Attorney+2

This is a particularly important distinction.

Police investigate suspected criminal conduct. Prosecutors decide whether the available evidence and applicable law justify bringing criminal charges.

F. Why some cases are not referred or prosecuted

There can be several reasons why an investigation does not result in prosecution.

For example:

- The available evidence does not establish that a crime occurred.
- The suspect cannot be identified.
- Witness accounts are incomplete or contradictory.
- There is insufficient admissible evidence.
- The evidence does not establish the required criminal intent.
- A necessary legal element of the offense cannot be established.
- The applicable statute of limitations has expired.
- Other legal or evidentiary issues prevent prosecution.

This does not necessarily mean the original victim or witness was not believed.

It may simply mean that the available evidence does not meet the legal standard required to prosecute the case.

Similarly, a case that cannot be prosecuted today may produce new investigative opportunities if additional evidence becomes available.

Victims and witnesses should therefore provide additional information whenever it becomes available and keep their contact information current.

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4. How the San Francisco District Attorney determines charges and brings cases to court

The San Francisco District Attorney (SFDA) is an elected public official responsible for prosecuting criminal offenses on behalf of the People of the State of California in San Francisco.

The District Attorney does not represent the victim as a private attorney. Rather, the District Attorney represents the public interest in enforcing criminal law.

A. Reviewing the evidence

When a case is presented to the District Attorney's Office, an Assistant District Attorney (ADA) evaluates the investigation.

The prosecutor considers several questions:

1. Does the evidence establish that a criminal offense occurred?
2. Can the suspect be legally connected to the offense?
3. Can each required element of the proposed criminal charge be established?
4. Is the evidence admissible in court?
5. Are witnesses available and able to provide testimony?
6. Are there legal defenses or other issues that could affect the case?
7. Is there sufficient evidence to prove the charge beyond a reasonable doubt?

The prosecutor must consider both the strengths and weaknesses of the case.

The decision is not simply whether someone appears to have behaved badly or whether the victim has suffered genuine harm.

The question is whether a legally sustainable criminal case can be brought.

B. Deciding which charges to file

California law divides criminal offenses into three broad categories:

Category	General description
Infraction	Generally a minor violation punishable by a fine rather than imprisonment
Misdemeanor	A criminal offense generally punishable by up to one year in county jail, a fine, or both

Felony	A more serious criminal offense potentially punishable by state prison or county jail, depending on the offense and applicable law

Some offenses can be charged as either misdemeanors or felonies, depending on the circumstances and applicable statutory provisions. These are commonly called wobblers.

The prosecutor determines the appropriate charges based on the evidence, relevant statutes, the circumstances of the offense, and applicable prosecutorial standards.

The victim does not decide what charges should be filed.

However, the victim's account, the extent of injuries, financial losses, and other relevant information may be important to the prosecutor's decision.

C. Filing the criminal complaint

If the prosecutor determines that sufficient evidence exists, the District Attorney's Office files a criminal complaint.

The complaint identifies:

- The defendant.
- The criminal charges.
- The alleged offenses.
- The relevant dates and circumstances.

This formally begins the prosecution in court.

A defendant is entitled to legal representation. If the defendant cannot afford an attorney, the court may appoint one.

D. Arraignment

The arraignment is generally the defendant's first court appearance.

At this hearing:

- The charges are formally presented.
- The defendant is advised of their constitutional rights.
- The court addresses legal representation.
- The defendant enters a plea.

- Bail or release conditions may be considered.

The usual pleas are:

- Not guilty: The defendant denies the charges.
- Guilty: The defendant admits the charges.
- No contest: The defendant does not contest the charges; this plea is available in misdemeanor cases under the applicable rules.

The court may also impose conditions of release or determine whether the defendant should remain in custody.

E. The role of the victim and witnesses

Victims and witnesses are important participants in the process, but they are not responsible for deciding whether the defendant should be prosecuted.

The prosecutor may consult with victims about the impact of the crime, their safety concerns, and their views regarding possible case resolutions.

Victims may also have rights to:

- Receive information about court proceedings.
- Be present at appropriate court hearings.
- Express their views at certain proceedings.
- Request confidentiality protections where available.
- Seek restitution.
- Receive notification of certain developments and release decisions.
- Have a support person present when permitted during testimony.

California's constitutional and statutory victim protections are commonly associated with Marsy's Law.

The SFDA Victim Services Division can explain how these rights apply in individual cases.

San Francisco District Attorney+1

F. Plea negotiations and case resolution

Not every criminal case proceeds to trial.

In many cases, the prosecution and defense discuss whether the case can be resolved through a negotiated plea agreement.

For example, a defendant may agree to plead guilty to particular charges in exchange for an agreed recommendation or other legally permissible resolution.

The prosecutor must consider the interests of justice, the strength of the evidence, the circumstances of the offense, and the relevant legal requirements.

Victims may be consulted and have rights to express their views, but the ultimate decision regarding acceptance of a plea and the resulting judgment belongs to the court.

If no acceptable resolution is reached, the case may proceed toward trial.

5. How San Francisco courts schedule and hear cases and arrive at judicial decisions



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The San Francisco Superior Court is part of the California state judicial system.

Its Criminal Division handles criminal matters arising within San Francisco, including misdemeanors and felonies.

The court's responsibility is to ensure that criminal cases are handled according to the law, that constitutional rights are protected, and that decisions are made through a fair judicial process.

A. Where criminal cases are heard

The principal criminal courthouse is:

San Francisco Hall of Justice

850 Bryant Street
San Francisco, CA 94103

Some criminal proceedings are also heard at other court locations, including the Civic Center Courthouse and the Community Justice Center.

The specific location depends on the case and its assignment.

The court provides online services for checking case information and hearing calendars.

San Francisco Superior Court – Criminal Division
(https://sf.courts.ca.gov/divisions/criminal)

San Francisco Superior Court – Online Services
(https://sf.courts.ca.gov/online-services)

B. How court hearings are scheduled

After a criminal complaint is filed, the case is assigned to the appropriate court department.

The court schedules hearings according to the type of case, applicable procedural requirements, judicial availability, and other considerations.

The criminal court calendar may include:

- Arraignments.
- Bail and detention hearings.
- Preliminary hearings.
- Pretrial conferences.
- Motions.
- Plea hearings.
- Trial dates.
- Sentencing hearings.
- Probation-related proceedings.

Court schedules can change. Hearings may be continued, rescheduled, or consolidated.

For this reason, victims and witnesses should not assume that a previously communicated hearing date remains unchanged.

The court's online calendar provides information about scheduled proceedings, while the case query system provides information about individual cases.

The court currently makes calendar information available for up to 120 days in advance.

C. Preliminary hearings in felony cases

In many felony cases, a preliminary hearing takes place before the case proceeds to trial.

The purpose of this hearing is for a judge to determine whether there is sufficient evidence to hold the defendant to answer for the felony charges.

This is not the same as a trial.

The prosecutor presents evidence to establish probable cause, and the defense has an opportunity to challenge the evidence.

If the judge finds sufficient probable cause, the case can proceed to the next stage.

The prosecutor then files an information document setting out the charges on which the defendant will be prosecuted.

If the judge does not find sufficient evidence for a particular charge, that charge may be dismissed at this stage, although the prosecution may have other legal options.

D. Pretrial hearings

Before a trial, the prosecution and defense may raise a variety of legal issues.

These can include:

- Whether evidence was legally obtained.
- Whether certain statements can be used.
- Whether witnesses can testify about particular matters.
- Whether the prosecution has met its disclosure obligations.
- Whether the charges are legally sustainable.
- Whether the case should be resolved through a plea agreement.

Judges make decisions on these issues based on applicable law and the arguments and evidence presented.

These hearings can be important because they determine what evidence may be presented at trial.

E. The criminal trial

If a case proceeds to trial, the prosecution must prove the defendant's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

This is the highest standard of proof used in the ordinary criminal justice process.

The trial generally includes:

1. Selection of a jury, where applicable.
2. Opening statements.
3. Presentation of the prosecution's evidence.
4. Cross-examination of prosecution witnesses.
5. Presentation of the defense case, if the defense elects to present one.
6. Closing arguments.
7. Jury instructions from the judge.
8. Deliberations and a verdict.

The defendant has the constitutional right to confront witnesses and challenge the prosecution's evidence.

The defense is not required to prove that the defendant is innocent.

The burden of proving guilt rests with the prosecution throughout the trial.

F. How the court arrives at a decision

In a jury trial, the jury evaluates the evidence and determines whether the prosecution has proved the defendant guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

In California criminal cases, a guilty verdict generally must be unanimous.

If the jury cannot reach a unanimous decision, the result may be a hung jury and the court may declare a mistrial. The prosecution may then decide whether to retry the case.

In a bench trial, the judge performs the fact-finding role ordinarily performed by the jury and determines whether the prosecution has met the required standard.

A judge also decides questions of law, rules on evidence, and ensures that the proceedings follow the applicable legal requirements.

G. Sentencing

If a defendant is convicted, either through a guilty plea or following trial, the court determines the appropriate sentence.

Depending on the offense and circumstances, sentencing may involve:

- Imprisonment.
- County jail.
- Probation.
- Fines and statutory assessments.
- Restitution to victims.
- Protective or stay-away orders.
- Treatment or rehabilitation requirements.
- Other legally authorized conditions.

In reaching a sentencing decision, the judge considers applicable sentencing laws, the circumstances of the offense, the defendant's history, relevant reports, and other legally permissible information.

Victims may have an opportunity to provide a victim impact statement describing how the crime has affected them.

H. What happens if the defendant is acquitted?

If the defendant is found not guilty, the criminal case ends with an acquittal on those charges.

An acquittal does not necessarily mean that the incident never happened or that the victim was dishonest.

It means that the prosecution did not establish guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

This distinction is fundamental to the American justice system.

The system seeks to hold offenders accountable while protecting everyone from wrongful conviction.

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Addendum: Victim support, assistance, and resources



Being the victim of a crime can have consequences that extend far beyond the original incident.

Victims may experience physical injuries, financial hardship, emotional trauma, loss of confidence, anxiety, disruption to employment, and concerns about their personal safety.

Witnesses may also experience trauma, particularly when they have witnessed serious violence, death, or an incident involving someone they know.

Fortunately, there are numerous support programs at the federal, California state, and San Francisco city and county levels.

Importantly, you do not necessarily need to have an arrest, criminal prosecution, or conviction before seeking assistance.

The following resources provide starting points for obtaining help.

6. Federal victim support and resources

Federal victim assistance is generally available when a crime falls under federal jurisdiction or when a federal agency is investigating or prosecuting the offense.

Examples include certain interstate crimes, federal hate crimes, human trafficking, terrorism, federal firearms offenses, and crimes occurring on federal property.

A. U.S. Attorney's Office – Northern District of California

https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndca

U.S. Department of Justice – Northern District of California

The office prosecutes federal criminal offenses and provides victim and witness assistance in federal cases.

San Francisco area Victim-Witness Specialist

415-436-6993

https://www.justice.gov/usao-cdca/programs/victimwitness-assistance-program

Services may include:

- Explaining the federal criminal justice process.
- Notifying victims of relevant court proceedings.
- Providing information about case developments.
- Helping victims understand their rights.
- Providing courtroom orientation and support.
- Referrals to appropriate community services.

The office's victim-witness assistance responsibilities generally begin once federal charges have been filed and made public, although federal investigative agencies may provide assistance earlier.

B. U.S. Department of Justice – Office for Victims of Crime

The Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) supports victim assistance programs throughout the United States.

It provides information about available services, funding programs, and resources for individuals affected by crime.

Office for Victims of Crime – Official Website https://ovc.ojp.gov/

C. Federal Crime Victims' Rights Act

The federal Crime Victims' Rights Act, 18 U.S.C. §3771, establishes rights for victims of federal crimes.

These include:

- The right to reasonable protection.
- The right to timely notification of relevant court proceedings.
- The right to be heard at specified proceedings.
- The right to confer with the prosecutor.
- The right to full and timely restitution as provided by law.
- The right to proceedings free from unreasonable delay.
- The right to fair treatment and respect for dignity and privacy.

These protections apply to federal criminal proceedings and are separate from California's state victim protections.

7. California State victim support and resources

A. California Victim Compensation Board (CalVCB)

"CalVCB Can Help You Rebuild" Media Toolkit - CA Victim Compensation Board
(https://victims.ca.gov/)

California Victim Compensation Board

Statewide program

Official CalVCB WebsiteOnline Compensation Application
(https://online.victims.ca.gov/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

CalVCB provides financial assistance to eligible victims of qualifying crimes and, in certain circumstances, their family members and witnesses.

Depending on eligibility and applicable program limits, assistance may cover:

- Medical and dental treatment.
- Mental health counseling.
- Funeral and burial expenses.
- Income loss.
- Loss of support for eligible dependents.
- Relocation expenses.
- Residential security measures.
- Other qualifying crime-related expenses.

Eligibility is subject to statutory requirements, qualifying crime definitions, cooperation requirements, and applicable limits.

Importantly, some witnesses may also qualify for assistance, and certain Good Samaritans who take direct action to prevent crime or rescue someone in immediate danger may qualify for compensation.

California generally requires applications within seven years, subject to specific exceptions and alternative time calculations for certain circumstances. It is best to apply promptly or ask an advocate about eligibility.

B. California Department of Justice

The California Attorney General's Office provides information concerning victims' rights, criminal justice processes, and resources available throughout California.

California Department of Justice (https://oag.ca.gov/)

For general questions about which agency investigates a crime, the Attorney General explains that local law enforcement investigates violations within its jurisdiction and may forward appropriate cases to the local District Attorney for prosecution.

Office of the Attorney General

C. California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation – Victim Services

For victims whose offenders have been sentenced to state prison, CDCR provides information about:

- Inmate status.
- Release and parole processes.
- Victim notification.
- Opportunities to provide information during parole proceedings.
- Victim participation in relevant correctional processes.

CDCR Office of Victim and Survivor Rights and Services

8. City and County of San Francisco victim support and resources

San Francisco has several services specifically intended to assist crime victims and witnesses.

A. San Francisco District Attorney – Victim Services Division

Victim Services Division (VSD)

Primary local referral

350 Rhode Island Street, North Building, Suite 400N

San Francisco, CA 94103

Telephone: 628-652-4100

Email: victimservices@sfgov.org

Victim Services Division (https://sfdistrictattorney.org/victim-services/)

This is one of the most important local resources for victims of crime.

The division provides assistance to victims and their families following an incident, during prosecution, and after a case has concluded.

Its services include:

- Crisis intervention and support.
- Explanation of the criminal justice process.
- Information about victims' rights.
- Referrals to counseling and community services.
- Assistance with California victim compensation applications.
- Court orientation and accompaniment.
- Assistance with restitution claims.
- Information about court proceedings.
- Assistance with safety and other practical concerns.

A particularly important point is that the Victim Services Division can assist victims of violent crimes and eligible property crimes even when an arrest has not been made.

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The division receives police incident reports and assigns victim advocates to eligible victims. Its published process describes an attempt to contact victims within approximately 24 hours of receiving a report, although individuals should not wait for contact if they need assistance.

B. San Francisco Police Department – Victim Services

SFPD provides information and referrals to victim-support services.

For general police reporting:

- Emergency: 911
- Non-emergency: 415-553-0123
- Anonymous criminal activity tips: 415-575-4444

For victim-support referrals, the SFPD website directs victims to the District Attorney's Victim Services Division.

SFPD Victim Services Information (https://www.sanfranciscopolice.org/get-service/victim-services)

C. UCSF Trauma Recovery Center

UCSF Trauma Recovery Center

2727 Mariposa Street

San Francisco, CA 94110

Telephone: 415-437-3000

Trauma Recovery Center (https://divisionoftraumarecoveryservices.org/trauma-recovery-center/)

The center provides trauma-informed assistance, including clinical case management and therapy.

It is particularly relevant for individuals who have experienced serious violence or other traumatic events and may need more comprehensive support.

The center is listed as a local resource by the California Victim Compensation Board.

CA Victim Compensation Board

D. San Francisco-specific community organizations

The following organizations provide specialized services that may be appropriate depending on the nature of the incident.

Organization	Services	Contact
Community United Against Violence (CUAV)	LGBTQ+ survivors of violence, safety planning, advocacy and support	415-333-4357
SF Women Against Rape	Sexual assault crisis support and survivor services	415-647-7273
WOMAN Inc.	Domestic violence support and advocacy	415-864-4722
La Casa de las Madres	Domestic violence support, crisis intervention and shelter referrals	415-503-0500; hotline 877-503-1850
Asian Women's Shelter	Domestic violence support and shelter	415-751-7110; hotline 877-751-0880
Cooperative Restraining Order Clinic	Assistance with restraining orders	415-864-1790
Child and Adolescent Sexual Abuse Resource Center (CASARC)	Support for children and adolescents affected by sexual abuse	415-206-8386
Elder Friendship Line	Emotional support and connection for older adults	415-752-3778

These contacts are drawn from San Francisco District Attorney and California Victim Compensation Board resource listings. Availability and eligibility vary.

San Francisco District Attorney+1

For additional local referrals, the District Attorney maintains a broader directory:

San Francisco District Attorney – Resources for Victims
(https://sfdistrictattorney.org/victim-services/resources-for-victims/)

E. Mental health and immediate crisis support

People experiencing serious emotional distress following a crime can contact:

- 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: Call or text 988.
- San Francisco crisis support: 415-781-0500.
- 911: If there is an immediate threat to life or safety.

These services are not substitutes for reporting a crime, but they can provide important assistance when someone is struggling emotionally following an incident.

9. Victim rights, confidentiality, restitution, and ongoing support

It is worth emphasizing that victims have rights that extend beyond simply making a police report.

A. Confidentiality

Victims may have legitimate concerns about their identities, addresses, and personal information being disclosed.

Depending on the type of offense and applicable law, certain confidentiality protections may be available.

Victims should specifically discuss these concerns with the investigating officer or a victim advocate.

The District Attorney's Office identifies confidentiality protections for certain victims, including victims of child abuse, domestic violence, and sex crimes.

San Francisco District Attorney

B. Protection from intimidation and retaliation

Witness intimidation is a serious matter.

If someone threatens, harasses, or attempts to prevent you from cooperating with police or prosecutors, report the conduct immediately.

Contact SFPD if there is an immediate threat, and notify the assigned prosecutor or victim advocate if the matter relates to an existing criminal case.

Victims and witnesses should not feel that they must tolerate intimidation simply because they have agreed to provide information.

C. Restitution

Restitution is a court order requiring a convicted offender to compensate a victim for qualifying financial losses resulting from the crime.

Examples may include:

- Stolen or damaged property.
- Medical expenses.
- Funeral expenses.
- Counseling and therapy.
- Relocation expenses.
- Certain lost wages.

Victims should retain receipts, invoices, medical bills, estimates, and other supporting documentation.

The District Attorney's Victim Services Division can help victims submit the necessary information.

It is important to understand that restitution is not the same as compensation from the state. Restitution depends on a court order and collection from the responsible offender, whereas CalVCB is a separate compensation program subject to its own eligibility rules.

D. The right to be informed

Victims should tell the Victim Services Division how they wish to receive updates and provide current telephone numbers and email addresses.

They should also ask about:

- Upcoming hearings.
- Changes to scheduled proceedings.
- Plea agreements.

- Sentencing.
- Defendant release notifications.
- Restitution opportunities.

Do not assume that every court development will automatically be communicated directly by the court.

10. A practical guide: What should you do if you witness or experience a crime?

The following checklist summarizes the most important actions.

Crime reporting checklist

- Make sure you and others are safe.
- Do not confront a dangerous suspect.
- Call 911 if there is an immediate threat, serious injury, weapon, or crime in progress.
- For non-emergency incidents, call SFPD at 415-553-0123.
- Provide accurate details about the incident, location, people involved, and any suspect.
- Identify yourself as a victim or witness and provide contact information where possible.
- Preserve photographs, video, messages, and other evidence.
- Ask for the police incident report number.
- Provide additional information or evidence to investigators as it becomes available.
- Contact the District Attorney's Victim Services Division if you need assistance.
- Keep records of financial losses and expenses relating to the incident.

Conclusion: Community participation is essential to public safety

An effective criminal justice system depends on more than police officers, detectives, prosecutors, and judges.

It also depends on the willingness of ordinary people to participate.

A person who witnesses an assault, robbery, threat, hate crime, or other criminal incident has potentially valuable information. A victim who takes the time to make a formal report helps establish an official record and creates an opportunity for investigators to identify suspects and connect incidents.

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Not every report will result in an arrest. Not every arrest will result in prosecution. Not every prosecution will result in a conviction.

These outcomes reflect the different responsibilities and legal standards that govern each stage of the criminal justice system.

However, failing to report an incident can mean that valuable information is never collected, patterns of criminal behavior go unidentified, and opportunities to protect other members of the community are lost.

San Francisco's public safety system works best when residents, businesses, community organizations, police officers, prosecutors, victim advocates, and the courts understand their respective responsibilities and work constructively together.

This is particularly important in neighborhoods where residents may be reluctant to report incidents because of fear, past experiences, language barriers, or concerns about personal safety.

Reporting is not about guaranteeing an arrest or conviction. It is about ensuring that information reaches the people responsible for investigating crime, protecting the public, and administering justice.

Every accurate report matters. Every credible witness matters. And every victim deserves to be treated with dignity, compassion, and respect.

Quick-reference directory

For convenient public distribution, these are the principal contacts and resources discussed in this article.

Service	Contact
Emergency police, fire or medical	911
SFPD non-emergency	415-553-0123
SFPD anonymous tip line	415-575-4444
San Francisco 311	311
SFDA Victim Services	628-652-4100
UCSF Trauma Recovery Center	415-437-3000
Federal Victim-Witness Assistance	415-436-6993
California Victim Compensation	Online application
Suicide and Crisis Lifeline	988

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Editorial note: This article is intended as general public education, not legal advice. Reporting procedures, contact details, eligibility requirements, and court schedules can change. Readers should verify current information with the relevant agency. The precise legal requirements of individual cases should be confirmed with a qualified attorney.