



SPUR

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Balancing Trade-Offs

How police and fire labor negotiations will impact San Francisco's budget — and its future



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Executive Summary

San Francisco faces a \$937 million budget deficit over the next two years. Closing it will require a foundational shift in how the city manages its finances. The city will need to end its reliance on one-time revenues, redefine core services, implement permanent cost controls, and pursue reforms to the city charter, voter-approved measures, and labor agreements that currently limit flexibility.

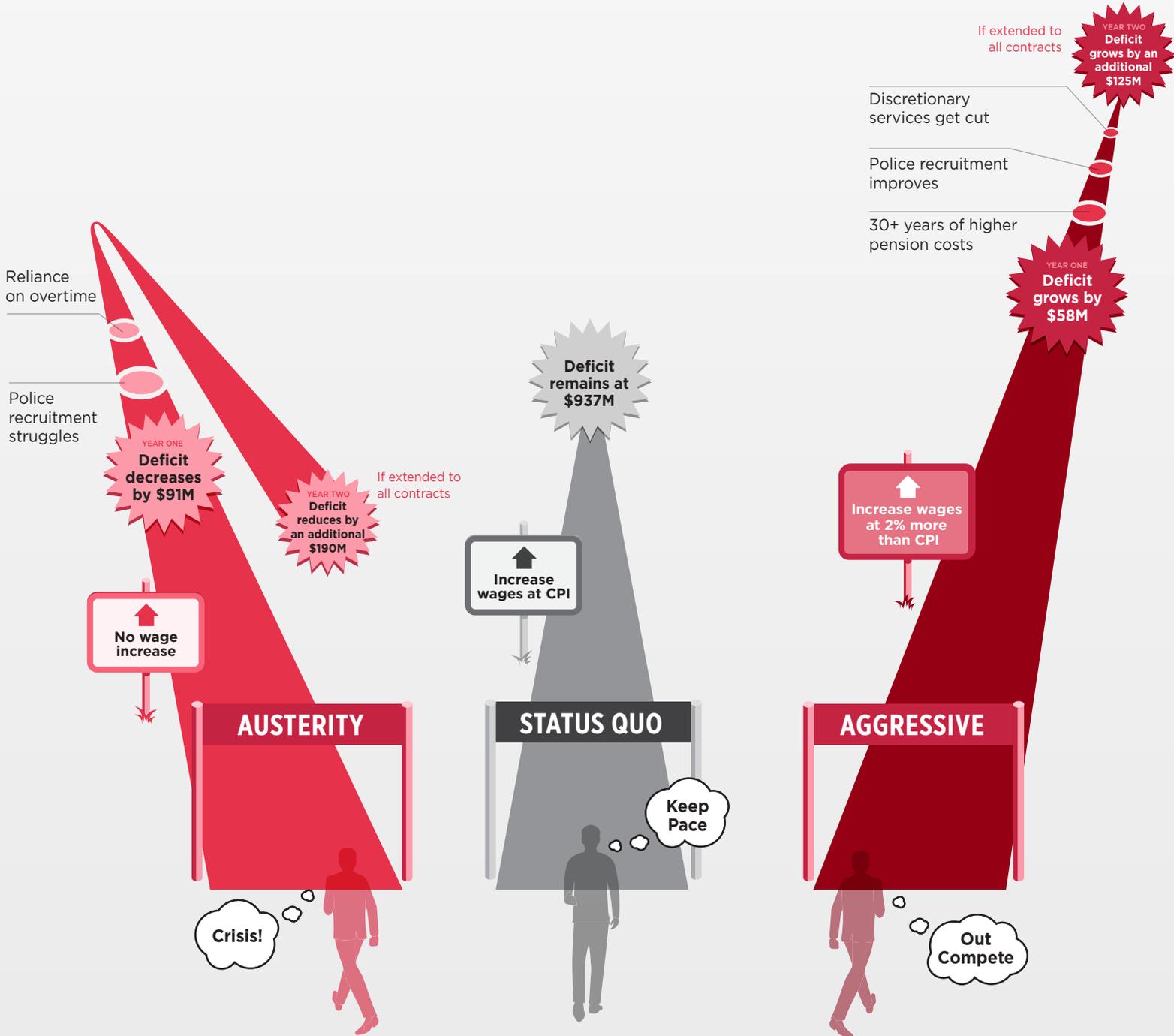
Salaries and benefits account for nearly half of all city expenditures, making the workforce the single largest driver of San Francisco's costs. Most of these costs are set through negotiations between the city and its labor unions, resulting in memorandums of understanding — a process that typically happens out of public view yet has a profound impact on the budget.

This year, police and fire contract negotiations will be among the most significant fiscal decisions the city makes. These contracts affect nearly \$1 billion in annual spending — about 39% of the city's discretionary budget. The current deficit projections assume that wages for police officers and firefighters grow roughly in line with projected inflation, currently 3% to 3.3% annually. Every negotiating choice changes the deficit. Offering no increases at all could save \$91 million in base wages but risks making police recruitment even harder than it already is — potentially forcing greater reliance on expensive overtime that could cost more than a raise would have. A wage increase just 2% above inflation could add \$58 million to the deficit for police and fire alone, cutting into the city's discretionary funds that would otherwise be spent on other services. This amount is more than the city spends each year on arts grants, adult protective services, and animal care and control combined and is equivalent to approximately 251 full-time jobs.

The stakes grow larger when negotiations with other city employees are considered. In 2027, the city will negotiate with its remaining 31,000 employees, meaning precedents set now could affect the entire workforce. Agreements with all city employees will determine not just what the city pays staff, but also what services it can afford to provide, how it can respond to changing community needs, and how much fiscal burden it passes on to future generations of residents.

The city must balance competitive compensation with fiscal sustainability and determine how much operational flexibility departments need to serve San Franciscans well. Reconsidering longstanding practices such as wage parity between the police and fire departments, workweek hours, staffing minimums, and budget set-asides that constrain the city's ability to make strategic decisions should be on the table.

There are no easy choices. Every course of action involves difficult trade-offs. The goal should be agreements that enable the city to recruit and retain qualified public safety personnel, provide excellent service to residents, maintain fiscal health, and set a sustainable path forward for all city employees and residents alike.



Navigating the Budget Crisis
 The High Stakes of Wage
 Increases for San Francisco's
 Police and Fire Departments

Source: SPUR

The city's current cost and deficit projec-
 tions assume wages will grow at the region-
 al Consumer Price Index (CPI), currently 3%
 to 3.3% annually. Offering a higher wage
 increase could worsen the city's deficit, but
 offering no wage increase could cause the
 city to rely on costly overtime hours.

Introduction

In spring 2025, SPUR published a three-part series examining San Francisco’s budget crisis. The analysis revealed a growing gap between the cost of service delivery and available revenues. This report builds directly on that work, focusing on labor costs and their implications for the city’s fiscal trajectory.

Labor is the single largest expense for San Francisco, with salaries and benefits accounting for nearly half of annual expenditures. Most of these costs are set through negotiations between labor unions and the city, resulting in memorandums of understanding (MOUs). The current MOUs with police officers and firefighters expire at the end of fiscal year (FY) 2025–26, with negotiations expected to conclude by May 2026.

This year’s labor negotiations with the Police Officers’ Association and the Firefighters Union Local 798 cover \$1 billion in spending and represent about 39% of the city’s discretionary budget. Whatever is decided now will set precedents for contracts with the remaining 31,000 city employees that will be negotiated in 2027.

This report illuminates a process that is both technically complex and deeply consequential. The goal is to help policymakers and residents understand labor negotiations and the trade-offs involved as the city balances competitive pay, fiscal sustainability, and service delivery.

The Fiscal Context

San Francisco faces a \$937 million deficit over the next two years — the largest in its history.¹ Revenue growth has lagged behind expenditures, which have skyrocketed due to inflation, fixed costs, and service expansions made in rosier economic times.

Each year, the city is required to close its deficit through a combination of increasing revenues and reducing expenditures. To **increase revenues**, voters can approve new taxes or the city can create new revenue streams, such as department-identified fees. To **reduce expenses**, policymakers must cut discretionary expenditures, that is, expenditures with no restrictions on how they can be spent.

Over time, voter-approved tax measures have dedicated local revenues to specific uses and added spending mandates to San Francisco’s charter, limiting the city’s options for addressing the structural deficit. Consequently, only 17% of the city’s General Fund budget in FY 2025–26 is truly

¹ San Francisco Controller’s Office, Mayor’s Office, and Budget and Legislative Analyst’s Office, Five Year Financial Plan Update: FY 2026–27 Through FY 2029–30, December 19, 2025; City and County of San Francisco, *Budget Process Documents for Fiscal Years 2026 & 2027*.

discretionary, leaving city leaders with little flexibility to respond to fiscal pressures and changing needs.²

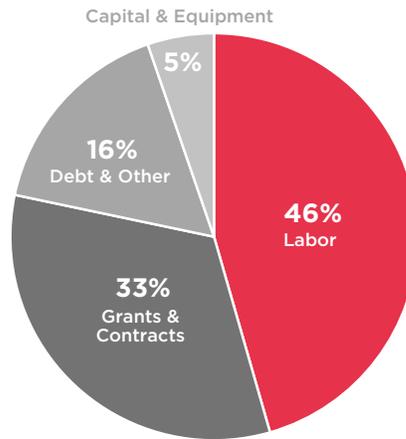
Labor Costs

San Francisco spends most of its budget in two main categories: contracts (which include grants) and staff. Grants and contracts account for approximately one-third of the overall budget, and staff salaries and benefits account for almost half (Exhibit 1).

EXHIBIT 1
San Francisco's Labor Expenditures (Salaries, Wages, and Benefits) Dwarf Other Expenditures

In FY 2025-26, labor accounted for \$7.3 billion, or nearly half, of the city's total expenditures.

Source: Budget and Appropriation Ordinance for FY 2025-26 and FY 2026-27 https://media.api.sf.gov/documents/FY2026_FY2027_-_FINAL_AAO.pdf.

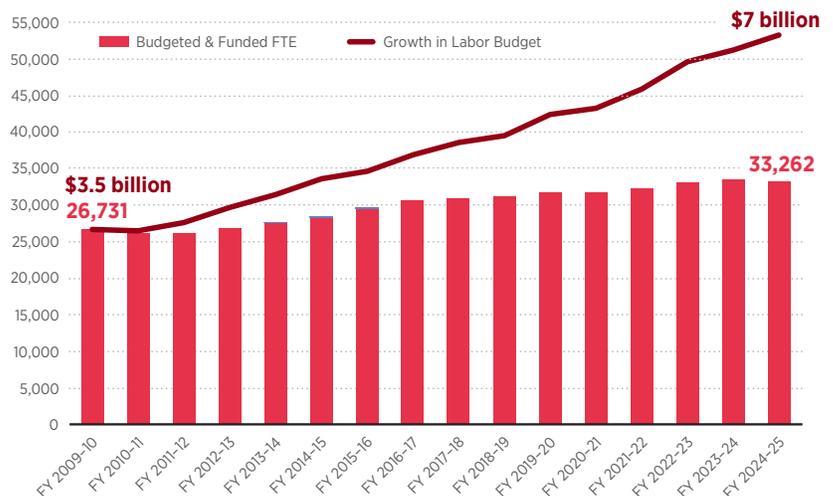


The cost of staffing is directly related to the number of employees, their salaries, and the cost of fringe benefits, particularly health and pension benefits. Over the past 15 years, budgeted personnel spending has increased by 100%, while staff numbers have increased by only 25% (Exhibit 2).

EXHIBIT 2
Staff Costs Have Doubled, But the Number of Staff Has Increased by Only 25%

Staff cost increases are driven by contractual wage increases and rising costs such as health benefits.

Sources: Analysis of DataSF "Budget - FTE" dataset for FY 2009-10 through FY 2017-18, accessed April 28, 2025. FY 2018-19 through FY 2023-24 figures are from the mayor's Budget Book.



² SPUR analysis of DataSF, "City Management and Ethics," https://data.sfgov.org/City-Management-and-Ethics/Budget/xdqd-c79v/about_data.

Wage increases and most terms of employment are negotiated by the city and employee unions through a labor negotiation process defined in the city charter and by state law. The Mayor’s Office represents the city in these negotiations and presents proposed contracts to the Board of Supervisors for approval. The city’s contracts with the police and firefighter unions expire on June 30, 2026; the city’s contracts with all other employee unions expire on June 30, 2027.

MOUs and the Negotiation Process

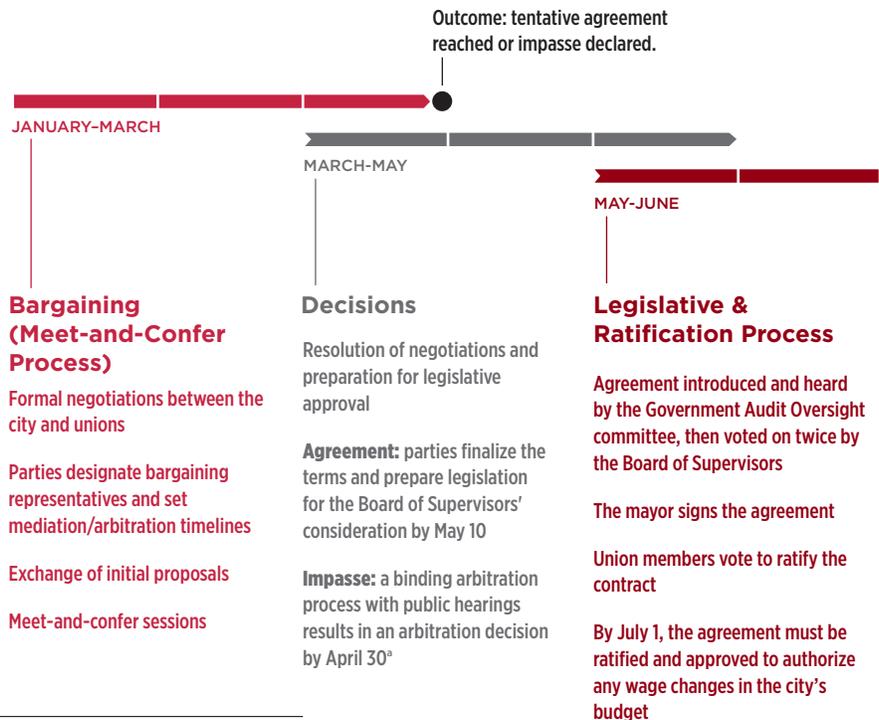
A memorandum of understanding (MOU), also known as a labor contract, is a legal agreement between the city and a union representing employees. MOUs govern virtually every aspect of employment, including

- Wage increases and salary ranges
- Health benefit contribution rates
- Incentives and premium pay
- Hiring and discipline procedures
- Work schedules and conditions
- Staffing requirements

The city currently has 33 labor contracts covering different employee groups. These contracts typically last two to five years before expiring and requiring renegotiation, a six-month process (Exhibit 3).

EXHIBIT 3 The City Charter Prescribes the City’s Negotiations Timeline and Process

San Francisco’s labor bargaining process generally runs from January to June of the year in which a new agreement is created. The process is governed by provisions set in the city charter.



^a San Francisco Charter Section A8.590-5(b) Impasse Resolution Procedures, https://codeiilibrary.amlegal.com/codes/san_francisco/latest/sf_charter/0-0-0-3308.

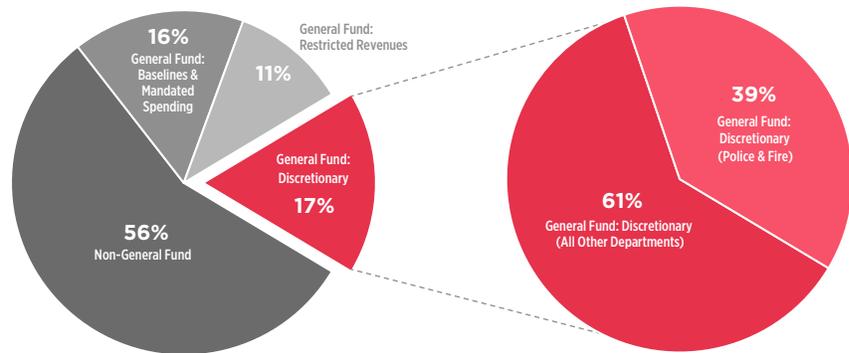
If the city and public safety labor unions are unable to reach a negotiated agreement, San Francisco’s city charter provides a process for resolving disputes known as “binding interest arbitration.” The arbitration board — composed of a representative of the labor union, a representative of the city, and the independent neutral arbitrator agreed to by both parties — solicits final contract proposals from each party and selects one in its entirety. This “final offer” structure is designed to motivate both sides to present reasonable proposals. The board’s decision is binding on both parties, effectively removing the final decision from elected officials and the democratic process.

A dozen groups and stakeholders are involved in the labor negotiation process. Appendix A presents their roles and responsibilities.

Police and Fire Costs

San Francisco’s Police and Fire departments are supported by about \$1.2 billion in General Fund revenue annually — roughly 20% of the total General Fund (Exhibit 4). However, voter-approved measures increasingly restrict how most of this revenue can be spent, shrinking the proportion of the city’s budget that is truly discretionary. By FY 2025–26, police and fire spending represent about 39% of all discretionary General Fund revenue, which means that changes here can impact other city services that rely on discretionary General Fund support (Exhibit 5).

EXHIBIT 4
Budgeted Revenues by Type and Allocation
 In the FY 2025–26 budget, 56% of the revenues are non-General Fund, meaning they are reserved for department revenues and recoveries, and 44% are General Fund. The General Fund sources are divided among revenues dedicated to baselines and mandated spending, restricted-use revenues, and purely discretionary revenues. Of discretionary General Fund revenues, 39% was allocated to the Police and Fire departments.



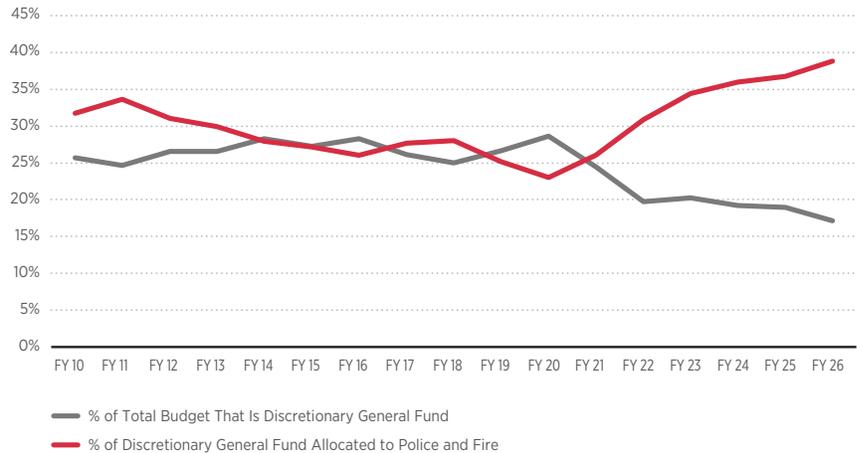
Source: SPUR analysis of Data SF Budget dataset, https://data.sfgov.org/City-Management-and-Ethics/Budget/xdqd-c79v/about_data.

EXHIBIT 5

Discretionary Revenue Has Decreased While Police and Fire Costs Have Increased

Discretionary General Fund revenues increased in absolute values between FY 2009-10 and FY 2025-26. The percent of General Fund revenue that is discretionary has decreased over time, while police and fire costs have grown. As a result, a smaller share of the total budget is discretionary, and a larger share of discretionary funds is allocated to the Police and Fire departments.

Source: SPUR analysis of Data SF Budget dataset, https://data.sfgov.org/City-Management-and-Ethics/Budget/xdgd-c79v/about_data.



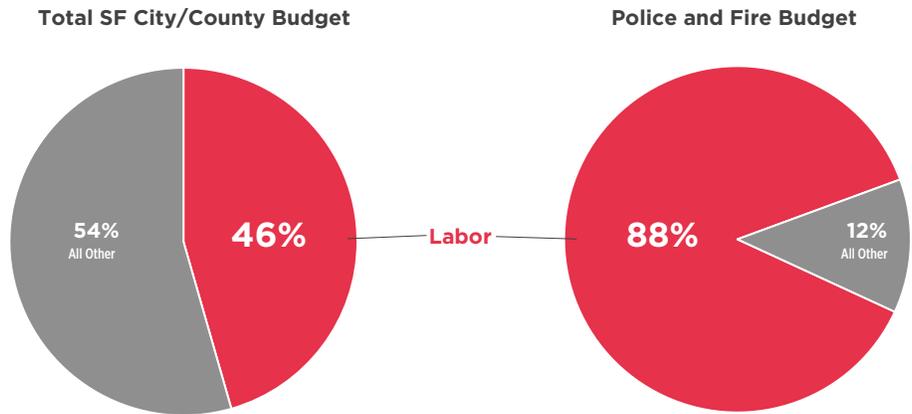
The concentration of labor costs in public safety (Exhibit 6), combined with the city’s limited discretionary budget, means upcoming negotiations will significantly impact San Francisco’s fiscal future.

EXHIBIT 6

Labor Costs as a Percentage of Police and Fire Costs

Within the Police and Fire departments, labor accounts for roughly 90% of total spending.

Source: SPUR analysis of Data SF Budget dataset, https://data.sfgov.org/City-Management-and-Ethics/Budget/xdgd-c79v/about_data.



Components of Total Compensation

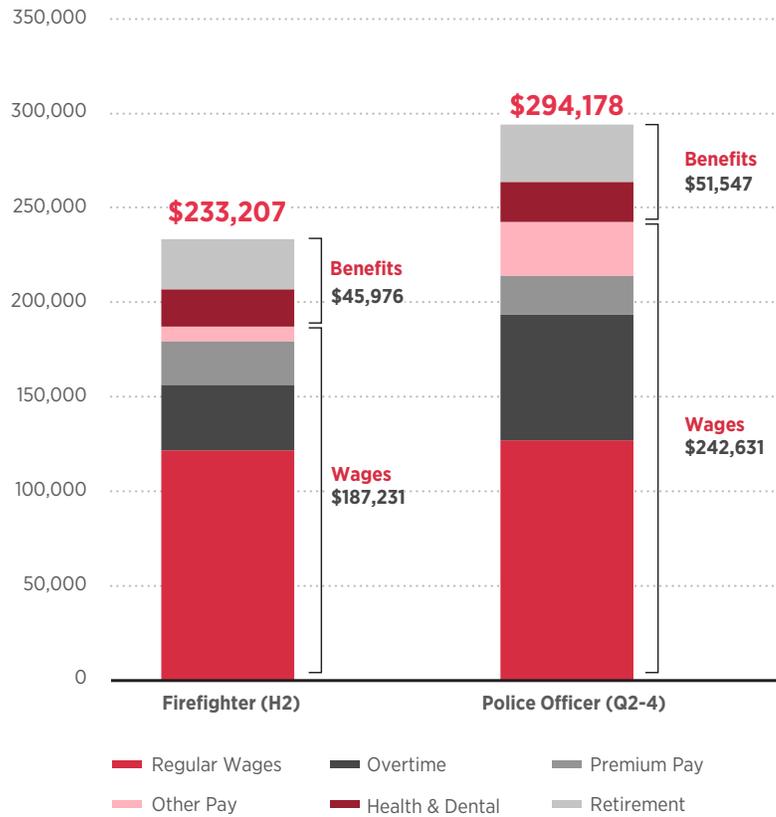
Discussions of police and fire compensation often focus narrowly on salaries, the component of compensation primarily negotiated in the MOU process. However, police and fire compensation differs from compensation for most other city positions in that it consists of several components that together determine an employee’s total pay and the city’s overall labor cost (Exhibit 7). In addition to base wages and health and pension benefits, employees may receive compensation for working overtime, performing specialized duties, and holding particular skills or certificates. While many of these components are defined and negotiated in MOUs, others are set in the city charter and require voter approval to change.

EXHIBIT 7

Average Actual Compensation Earned, FY 2024–25

Although top base wages in FY 2024–25 were around \$145,000, on average a firefighter made \$121,000 in regular wages plus \$65,000 in other pay types; a police officer made \$127,000 in regular wages plus \$115,000 in other pay types.

Source: SPUR analysis of FY 2024-25 payroll actuals provided by the Controller’s Office and active position counts provided by the Department of Human Resources.



Base Wages

Base wages establish the annual salary range for each job classification and serve as the foundation for calculating overtime, premium pay, and retirement benefits. Recent contracts have included annual increases ranging from 3% to 6%. Negotiated increases to base wages are intended to keep pace with inflation or improve competitiveness in recruitment and retention. Currently, police officer salaries range from \$119,262 to \$151,892, and firefighter salaries range from \$98,488 to \$151,918.

Premium and Special Pay

Beyond base wages, contracts include distinct types of premium pay for specialized duties, specific training, or less desirable shifts. These provisions add significant complexity and cost (Appendix B). There are 13 unique types of premium/special pay in the Firefighters Union contract and 15 in the Police Officers’ Association agreement. Once added, pay types are very difficult to remove – 26 of the 28 pay types have been in place for at least 20 years.³

³ City and County of San Francisco Department of Human Resources, “Negotiated Compensation Provisions by Bargaining Year, 2006–2025,” *Past Classification and Compensation Documents*, <https://sfdhr.org/past-classification-and-compensation-documents>.

Overtime

Overtime pay is set at 1.5 times regular wages. Labor agreements can further add to or clarify rules for overtime. For example, under current labor agreements, vacation time and legal holidays are counted as hours worked when calculating overtime.⁴

Overtime costs are driven largely by staffing minimums — requirements that ensure adequate emergency response but limit operational flexibility. When departments face vacancies or unexpected demand, they rely on overtime to meet these minimums. Overtime is also driven by increased staffing needs for special events or operations and by the need to work overtime hours during an ongoing emergency.

Costs in Context: Regional Labor Market Competitiveness

Ensuring competitive compensation is central to labor negotiations. Police and firefighters operate within a regional labor market, and compensation influences the city's ability to attract and retain qualified personnel.

Critically, true comparisons must include total compensation — base wages, work schedules, premium pay, overtime patterns, and healthcare. A jurisdiction with lower base wages but more generous overtime or different standard work hours offers more competitive total compensation, as a comparison of San Francisco and peer cities shows (Exhibit 8 and Exhibit 9). Retiree benefits add another layer of complexity in comparisons not reflected below: pension and retiree healthcare benefits vary across jurisdictions and have real financial impacts to the employee post-retirement.

⁴ San Francisco Charter Section A8.451(d) Police Department, https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/san_francisco/latest/sf_charter/0-0-0-2214; San Francisco Charter Section A8.452 Fire Department, https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/san_francisco/latest/sf_charter/0-0-0-2214; Firefighters Union Local 798, *Unit 1 Contract, 2023-2026*, Section 14, "Overtime Compensation," page 13, City and County of San Francisco, <https://www.sf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-01/fire-fighters-union-local-798-unit-1-2023-2026.pdf>; *Memorandum of Understanding Between the City and County of San Francisco and the San Francisco Police Officers' Association, Units P-1 and P-2A, 2023-2026*, Section 2, "Overtime and Compensatory Time Off," page 26, City and County of San Francisco, <https://www.sf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-08/Police-Officers-Association-2023-2026.pdf>.

EXHIBIT 8
Firefighter Adjusted Hourly Pay in San Francisco and Peer Jurisdictions: SF Compensation Is Higher
 Annual wages for Hayward’s firefighters exceed those for San Francisco’s firefighters by \$20,000, but when those wages are adjusted for scheduled hours, San Francisco’s compensation is higher.

Source: SPUR analysis of data provided by the Department of Human Resources as of August 2025.

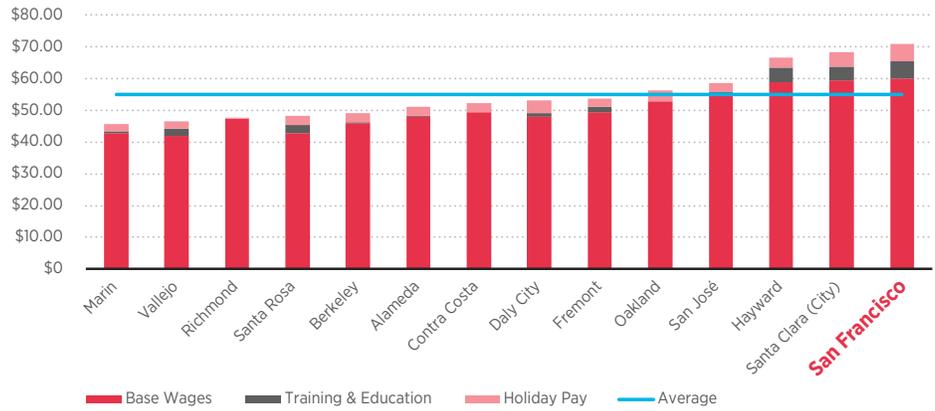
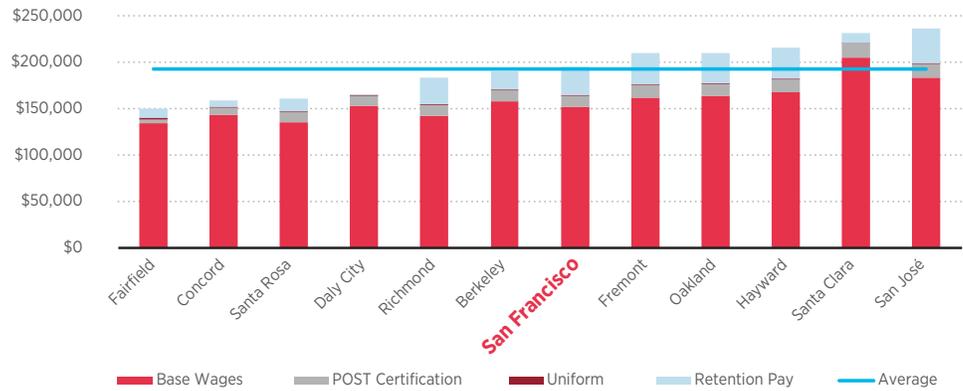


EXHIBIT 9
Police Officer Pay in San Francisco and Peer Jurisdictions: SF Compensation Is Average
 When comparing cities and accounting for common additional expenses and retention pay, San Francisco pays its officers an average salary.

Source: SPUR analysis of data provided by the Department of Human Resources as of August 2025.



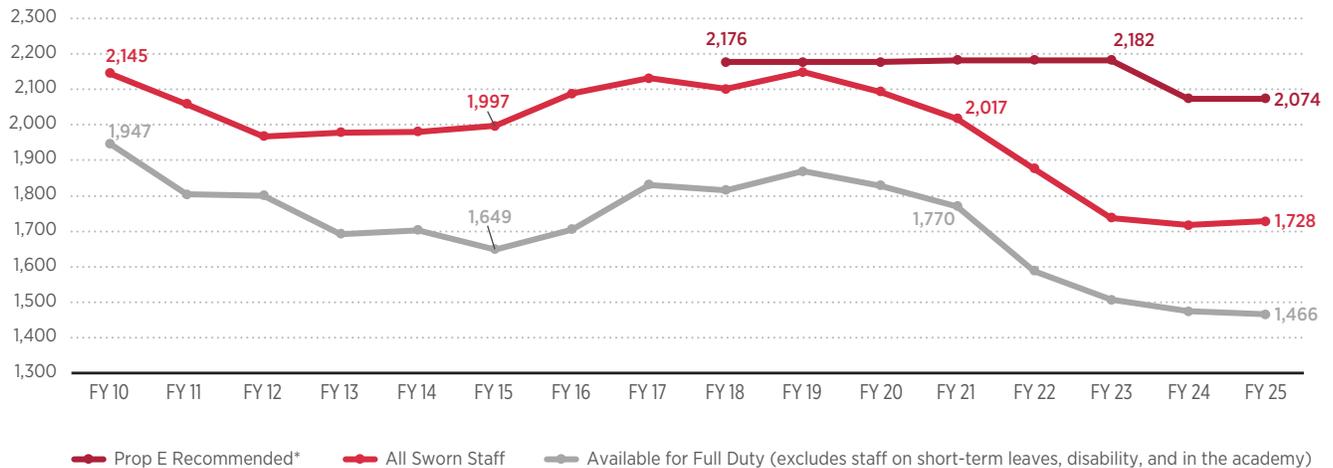
Key Constraints Impacting Upcoming Negotiations

As the city and unions enter bargaining, negotiators must weigh interrelated considerations that define the trade-offs inherent in this process.

Police Department Recruitment and Retention

The Police Department struggles with officer recruitment and retention (Exhibit 10), reflecting broader national trends in law enforcement.⁵ Recent academy classes exemplify the challenge: one 2025 class saw only 12 of 41 recruits graduate, an attrition rate of more than 70%.⁶

EXHIBIT 10
City Sworn Staffing Levels Have Dropped, FY 2010–25
 The gap between desired staffing levels and actual sworn officer counts grew steadily between FY 2018–19 and FY 2024–25.



Source: Adapted from San Francisco Police Department, "Overtime De-Appropriation," presentation to the Board of Supervisors, April 30, 2025, <https://sfgov.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=14117778&GUID=D063A4F4-35B2-44C6-87CB-4C5A28F25931>.

* In November 2020, voters passed Proposition E, which amended the city charter to no longer require the Police Department to maintain a minimum of 1,971 full-duty sworn

officers and to maintain the number of officers dedicated to neighborhood policing and patrol at least at the level in FY 1993–94. The charter now requires the chief of police to submit a staffing report and recommendation to the Police Commission every two years. See SPUR, "SF Prop E Police Staffing," <https://www.spur.org/voter-guide/2020-11/sf-prop-e-police-staffing>.

⁵ International Association of Chiefs of Police, *The State of Recruitment & Retention: A Continuing Crisis for Policing – 2024 Survey Results*, <https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/2024Recruitment%26RetentionSurveyResults.pdf>.

⁶ Jonah Own Lamb, "SFPD Preps Recruits to Be 'Indoctrinated Into a Paramilitary Organization,'" *San Francisco Standard*, January 31, 2025, <https://sfstandard.com/2025/01/31/sfpd-doc-preps-recruits-to-be-indoctrinated/>.

As a result of understaffing, the department has operated below desired levels for years, increasing reliance on overtime and affecting service delivery. However, in late 2025, the Police Department reported a net increase in officers for the first time since the pandemic, attributing the improvement in part to recruitment strategies and competitive pay and benefits.⁷ This uptick suggests that compensation does matter for recruitment, though it is not the only factor.

In addition to challenges in hiring and retaining new staff, the Police Department has experienced high rates of retirement in recent years as the cohort of officers hired in the 1990s, when federal funding for law enforcement increased, reaches retirement age. Between FY 2017-18 and FY 2021-22, the Police Department saw an 80% increase in “non-training attrition” due to this wave of retirements.⁸ Retirements peaked in FY 2021-22 but remain a significant factor. As of November 2025, the department reported that 443 sworn members, 24% of the total sworn staff, were currently eligible for retirement.⁹

Recent changes to the Police Department’s pay structure also appear to have shifted labor market competitiveness. By allowing officers to receive longevity pay benefits at the fifth step of the salary schedule rather than the seventh, the department accelerated access to higher pay earlier in an officer’s career. This change was designed to address recruitment and retention challenges and to demonstrate how changes to negotiated labor agreements can improve recruitment.

The Police Department has greater operational flexibility than the Fire Department. Staffing minimums are set administratively rather than by union contract, allowing the department to adjust based on call volume and community needs.¹⁰ However, union provisions still affect costs: seniority rules push junior officers onto less desirable night shifts, requiring premium pay (a 6.25% night differential, plus 2% for experienced officers) to incentivize coverage.¹¹

In FY 2024-25, the Police Department requested \$102 million in overtime — 149% above the approved \$41 million budget — primarily to meet minimum staffing requirements during shortages.

⁷ San Francisco Police Department, “SFPD Making Significant Progress Hiring Sworn Officers,” <https://www.sanfranciscopolice.org/news/sfpd-making-significant-progress-hiring-sworn-officers-25>.

⁸ San Francisco Police Department, *Staffing Analysis*, presentation, April 14, 2022, slide 12, <https://sfgov.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=10763487&GUID=4FCF0DAB-0BE3-497F-B518-90975E0EE37B>.

⁹ San Francisco Police Department, *Staffing Analysis*, presentation to the Police Commission, November 19, 2025, slide 10, <https://media.api.sf.gov/documents/PoliceCommission111925 - Staffing Analysis Presentation PowerPoint.pdf>.

¹⁰ San Francisco Police Department, *Staffing Analysis*, presentation to the Police Commission, November 19, 2025, <https://media.api.sf.gov/documents/PoliceCommission111925 - Staffing Analysis Presentation PowerPoint.pdf>.

¹¹ *Memorandum of Understanding Between the City and County of San Francisco and the San Francisco Police Officers’ Association, Units P-1 and P-2A, 2023-2026*, Article III, “Pay, Hours and Benefits,” Section 256.1, “Night Shift Differential,” page 36, City and County of San Francisco, <https://www.sf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-08/Police-Officers-Association-2023-2026.pdf>.

Overtime Logged Due to Improper Use of 10B Program

San Francisco’s 10B program allows private entities to hire police officers for specific assignments at overtime rates, with costs reimbursed by the private entity.^a While designed to be cost-neutral to the city, improper use creates both financial and staffing problems.

The MOU prohibits officers from taking 10B assignments while on leave or while regularly scheduled to work, or if they’ve used more than 20 hours of sick leave in the prior three months. However, a 2024 audit found the department failed to enforce these restrictions.^b The audit identified patterns suggesting officers called in sick from regular shifts to work higher-paying 10B assignments instead. Between 2020 and 2023, approximately 51,000 hours were worked by officers who should have been ineligible due to excessive sick leave use. This practice increases the city’s overtime costs because officers who call out of regularly scheduled shifts are often replaced by other officers working overtime to meet staffing minimums.

^a San Francisco Administrative Code, Chapter 10B, “Special Law Enforcement and Public Works Services,” City and County of San Francisco, https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/san_francisco/latest/sf_admin/0-0-0-5783.

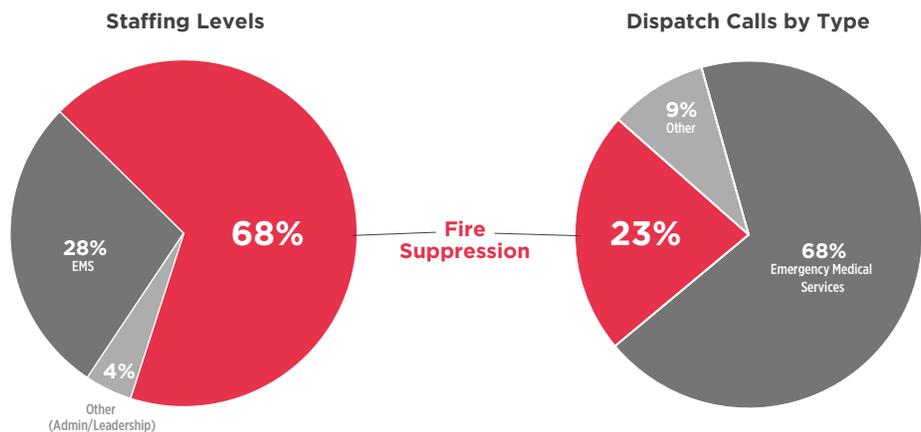
^b San Francisco Budget and Legislative Analyst, *Performance Audit of San Francisco Police Department Overtime*, December 12, 2024, page 40, https://sfbos.org/sites/default/files/121224_Performance_Audit_of_Police_Dept_Overtime.pdf.

Fire Department Staffing Misalignment

The Fire Department faces a different challenge: a misalignment between staffing and operational needs (Exhibit 11).

EXHIBIT 11
FY 2024-25 Fire Department Staffing Allocation and 2020-2025 Service Dispatch Calls Indicate a Staffing-Operational Needs Mismatch

While more than 70% of calls for service are for emergency medical responses, more than 70% of staff are assigned to primarily fire suppression roles.



Source: SPUR analysis of DataSF Spending – FTE dataset, https://data.sfgov.org/city-Management-and-Ethics/Spending-FTE/43jt-u7yn/about_data and SPUR analysis of DataSF Fire Department and Emergency Medical Services Dispatched Calls for Service dataset, https://data.sfgov.org/Public-Safety/Fire-Department-and-Emergency-Medical-Services-Dis/nuek-vuh3/about_data.

Voter-approved rules and union contracts prevent the city from shifting Fire Department resources to match actual needs.¹² Reports show gaps in emergency medical services, but given mandates on fire suppression staffing and levels, there has been no recent evaluation of whether fire suppression resources are appropriately matched to need.¹³

As a result, the Fire Department has far more fire engines than ambulances even though they cost more and most calls are medical emergencies. When a medical call comes in that might be best served by an ambulance, a full fire engine crew (one trained paramedic and three emergency medical technician-trained firefighters) often responds alongside or instead of an ambulance — simply because the engine is closer or no ambulance is available.

Fire Department staffing is shaped by multiple overlapping constraints. A 2005 voter-approved measure requires all fire stations to remain open 24/7 at 2004 service levels.¹⁴ This measure locks service levels into the charter, removing them from the broader conversation about competing citywide needs and preventing adjustment as circumstances change. As SPUR recommended in its *Charter for Change report*, operational requirements shouldn't require a ballot measure to be revisited.¹⁵ Union agreements add a further complication by separately mandating specific staffing levels and crew composition for each vehicle.¹⁶

Firefighter Work Hours

Firefighters' work schedules differ significantly from those of other public employees, including police officers. Firefighters remain at the fire station during their work period rather than returning home at the end of a defined shift. The length of the workweek influences the number of employees needed to fully staff the department and drives overtime costs when firefighters work beyond their defined workweek. San Francisco firefighters currently have a defined workweek of 48.7 hours, structured into 24-hour shifts over a 31-day period.¹⁷ This schedule results in each firefighter working 9 regular 24-hour shifts over the 31-day period.

San Francisco's 48.7-hour firefighter workweek is an outlier among peers. Most jurisdictions in the region set workweeks at 52–56 hours and can change them through labor negotiations (Exhibit 12). The length of the workweek influences the number of employees needed to fully staff the department and drives overtime costs when firefighters work beyond their defined hours. Increasing the 48.7-hour workweek to a 52-hour workweek is estimated to reduce annual labor costs by \$19.8 million, and switching to a 56-hour workweek would yield annual savings of \$40.8

¹² City and County of San Francisco, *Proposition F — Neighborhood Firehouses*, November 2005, <https://files.amlegal.com/pdf/sanfran/2005-11-08-PropF.pdf>.

¹³ San Francisco Budget and Legislative Analyst, *Performance Audit of Emergency Medical Services Resources at the San Francisco Fire Department*, June 10, 2014, https://sfbos.org/sites/default/files/FileCenter/Documents/49337-EMS%20Audit_Final%20Report_061014.pdf.

¹⁴ SPUR, *Voter Guide: Proposition F — Neighborhood Firehouses*, November 2005, <https://www.spur.org/publications/voter-guide/2005-11-01/proposition-f-neighborhood-firehouses>.

¹⁵ Ben Rosenfield, Maeve Skelly, and Nicole Neditch, *Charter for Change: Empowering San Francisco's Government Through Charter Reform*, SPUR, 2025, <https://www.spur.org/publications/policy-brief/2025-11-10/charter-change>.

¹⁶ Each engine and each rescue squad must be regularly staffed with 1 officer and 3 firefighters. Trucks must be staffed with 1 officer and 4 firefighters. See *Memorandum of Understanding Between the City and County of San Francisco and San Francisco Firefighters Union Local 798, IAFF, AFL-CIO, Unit 1, July 1, 2023–June 30, 2026*, Section 22, "Staffing," pages 33–34, <https://www.sf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-01/fire-fighters-union-local-798-unit-1-2023-2026.pdf>.

¹⁷ *Memorandum of Understanding Between the City and County of San Francisco and San Francisco Firefighters Union Local 798, IAFF, AFL-CIO, Unit 1, July 1, 2023–June 30, 2026*, Section 13, "Hours," page 18, <https://www.sf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-01/fire-fighters-union-local-798-unit-1-2023-2026.pdf>.

million.¹⁸ On the other hand, a change in the workweek level could affect work conditions and employee performance. Such considerations and trade-offs are commonly addressed through labor negotiations. However, in San Francisco, changes to the number of hours in a standard workweek are not solely subject to bargaining.

Because the city charter defines the workweek, a ballot measure would be needed, which is a more significant undertaking than the bargaining process. In 2009 and again in 2010, members of the Board of Supervisors initiated efforts to place charter amendments on the ballot to increase the workweek to 52 hours, but both efforts failed to garner sufficient support to reach voters. In *Charter for Change*, SPUR cited the 48.7-hour workweek for firefighters as an example of an overly restrictive requirement in the charter that should instead be subject solely to the labor bargaining process.¹⁹

**EXHIBIT 12:
San Francisco’s Fire Workweek Is Shorter
Than That of Other Bay Area Cities**

LOCALITY	HOURS/WEEK	% VS. SAN FRANCISCO	WHERE SET
San Francisco	48.7	—	Charter + Memorandum of Understanding
Oakland	52	6% higher	MOU
San José, Fremont, Hayward, Richmond	56	13% higher	MOU

Source: SPUR.

Regional peer jurisdictions serve an important role, particularly in evaluating competitiveness for recruitment purposes. Factors like workload and density could also be considered in determining the appropriate workweek duration. Cities such as Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City have firefighter workweeks of 40–42 hours. Their base salaries, which are influenced by regional factors, are about 60% of those of their San Francisco counterparts.²⁰

¹⁸ SPUR analysis of FY 2024–25 compensation data for H2 and H3 classifications in the DataSF Employee Compensation dataset and the Spending – FTE dataset, https://data.sfgov.org/city-Management-and-Ethics/Employee-Compensation/88g8-5mnd/about_data and https://data.sfgov.org/city-Management-and-Ethics/Spending-FTE/43jt-u7yn/about_data.

¹⁹ Ben Rosenfield, Maeve Skelly, and Nicole Neditch, *Charter for Change: Empowering San Francisco’s Government Through Charter Reform*, SPUR, 2025, <https://www.spur.org/publications/policy-brief/2025-11-10/charter-change>.

²⁰ Philadelphia has a 42-hour workweek for firefighters and a current top base salary of \$90,253. Boston has a 42-hour workweek and a current top base salary of \$89,815. New York City has a 40.3-hour workweek and a current top base salary of \$105,146.

Baselines and Set Asides

San Francisco's charter currently has 19 voter-approved set-asides or baselines, binding requirements that dedicate a portion of the city's budget to a specific use. The high number of such requirements is unique to San Francisco and heavily restricts the discretionary General Fund that the Police and Fire departments rely on. SPUR's *Charter for Change* report found that while each of these requirements was adopted to protect a necessary public service, they reduce resources available to meet other needs and create a downward spiral in finances.²¹

When voter-approved requirements continue taking up more of the General Fund while police and fire costs keep growing, the pool of flexible money shrinks each year. Any wage increases negotiated in upcoming contracts will come from this already-constrained discretionary budget, intensifying trade-offs among funding other city priorities, compensating public safety personnel, and closing a significant deficit.

Retiree Benefits: Healthcare and Pension Formulas

Retiree healthcare and pension benefits have major long-term consequences for both retirees and city finances. Several factors determine the final pension amount, including employee contribution rates and which types of pay (such as base salary and premium pay) are counted in the calculation. These factors are generally negotiable, whereas pension formulas, retiree healthcare benefits, and employer contribution rates are set by the city charter.²²

Retired San Francisco police officers and firefighters receive monthly pension benefits calculated from their final pensionable compensation, years of service, and age at retirement.²³ A police officer or firefighter who retires at age 58 or 55, respectively, with 30 years of service receives a pension equal to 90% of final compensation.²⁴ In FY 2024–25, the city spent approximately \$80 million on health benefits and \$90 million on pensions for police and fire union members.²⁵

Pension formulas cannot be changed through labor negotiations. They are enshrined in the city charter and can be modified only with voter approval. When base wages increase through negotiations, pension obligations increase proportionally because pensions are calculated on final compensation. Consequently, today's wage increases translate into higher pension costs over the next 30-plus years.

²¹ Ben Rosenfield, Maeve Skelly, and Nicole Neditch, *Charter for Change: Empowering San Francisco's Government Through Charter Reform*, SPUR, 2025, <https://www.spur.org/publications/policy-brief/2025-11-10/charter-change>.

²² San Francisco Charter, pension provisions for Police (sections A8.595, A8.602, A8.605) and Fire (sections A8.598, A8.601, A8.603); health benefits for all city employees and retirees (sections A8.42X and A8.43X), https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/san_francisco/latest/sf_charter/0-0-0-52610.

²³ The pension calculation is Credited Service x Age Factor x Average Monthly Pensionable Compensation = Monthly Benefit. The compensation value used is the "highest average monthly pay in any three consecutive fiscal years or average monthly pay in the 36 consecutive months immediately prior to retirement." Pensionable wage types include regular salary and certain premium and special pays. Overtime and other premium and special pays are not eligible. The minimum age of retirement for the 3% age factor is currently set at 55 years for firefighters and 58 years for police officers. An age factor of 2.7% is used for those who retire after the minimum retirement age of 50 but before 55 or 58 for fire and police, respectively. The maximum benefit is equal to 90% of the average final pensionable compensation. San Francisco Employees' Retirement System, "Retirement Benefits for Safety Members," <https://mysfers.org/active-members/safety-members/safety-retirement-benefits/>.

²⁴ In November 2024, voters approved Proposition H, lowering the minimum retirement age for full firefighter pension benefits from 58 back to 55 — reversing a 2011 reform — at an actuarially estimated cost of \$3.9 million in FY 2025–26 alone, with costs expected to grow each year thereafter.

²⁵ SPUR analysis of FY 2024–25 payroll actuals shared by the Controller's Office.

San Francisco runs its own pension system, giving it more flexibility than other regional jurisdictions that fall under the California Public Employees' Pension Reform Act (PEPRA) framework. The two key differences are the compensation cap and the age factor used in the benefit formula: Eligible Compensation × Years of Service × Age Factor % = Monthly Retirement Benefit. San Francisco's compensation limit is \$270,000, compared with \$191,679 under PEPRA, and San Francisco's maximum age factor (a calculation based on hiring date and age at retirement) is 3.0% versus 2.7% under PEPRA.²⁶

Regarding retiree health benefits, San Francisco employees hired before 2009 with at least five years of service receive full coverage for themselves and half the cost for one dependent. For those hired on or after January 10, 2009, employer contributions to retiree healthcare are tied to years of credited service: employees with fewer than five years receive no coverage; those with at least five but fewer than 10 years have access to coverage but receive no employer contribution; those with at least 10 but fewer than 15 years receive a 50% employer contribution; those with at least 15 but fewer than 20 years receive 75%; and those with 20 or more years — as well as employees who retired due to disability and surviving spouses or domestic partners of active employees who died in the line of duty — receive a 100% employer contribution.²⁷

Wage Parity

An important structural consideration is the continued use of wage parity between police officers and firefighters. This practice originated from the belief that the two professions faced similar recruitment requirements and risks, but it has largely disappeared from peer jurisdictions as labor markets and job requirements have diverged.²⁸

A 2023 San Francisco Department of Human Resources survey of 15 comparable jurisdictions found that none maintain wage parity between police and fire.²⁹ Yet in San Francisco, parity remains embedded in Fire Department MOUs, requiring that any general base wage increase negotiated for police officers that would “create a disparity in pay between the base wage of Police Officer and Fire Fighter” be automatically extended to the Local 798 bargaining unit.³⁰

This practice limits the city's ability to target compensation increases to address department-specific recruitment, retention, and operational challenges. Given that the Police Department faces severe recruitment challenges while the Fire Department does not, the continued use of parity warrants serious reconsideration. Eliminating parity would not necessarily mean firefighters receive lower compensation — it would simply allow each department's pay to reflect its own labor market conditions and operational needs.

²⁶ PEPRA compensation limit in 2026 for non-Social Security participant, <https://www.calpers.ca.gov/employers/policies-and-procedures/circular-letters/200-001-26#:~:text=Compensation%20limit%20for%20PEPRA%20members,Non%2DSocial%20Security%20Participant%3A%20%24191%2C679>; San Francisco's compensation limit is set at 75% of the IRC § 401(a)(17) limit, which is \$360,000 in 2026. See <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-drop/n-25-67.pdf>.

²⁷ City and County of San Francisco Department of Human Resources, “Retiree Health Care,” https://media.api.sf.gov/documents/Retiree-Health-Care_2ZNcCZN.pdf.

²⁸ Larry T. Hoover, Sam Houston, and Eugene E. Bouley Jr., “The Erosion of Police and Firefighter Wage Parity,” *Monthly Labor Review*, April 1996, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/1996/04/art2full.pdf>.

²⁹ Data shared by the San Francisco Department of Human Resources.

³⁰ *Memorandum of Understanding Between the City and County of San Francisco and San Francisco Firefighters Union Local 798, IAFF, AFL-CIO, Unit 1, July 1, 2023–June 30, 2026*, Section 11, “Parity,” page 17, City and County of San Francisco.

The Balancing Act: Navigating Fiscal Reality and Service Needs

In the face of a nearly \$1 billion budget deficit and limited discretionary budget flexibility, policymakers must navigate a difficult balancing act to simultaneously maintain effective service delivery, manage operational and labor costs, and sustain the city's long-term fiscal health.

Impact of Negotiated Base Wage Increases on San Francisco's Deficit

The city calculates multi-year budget projections using assumptions about how costs will grow. For labor costs, the standard assumption is that wages will increase in line with inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI).³¹ This assumption is already built into the deficit projections.

When labor agreements are negotiated

- **At CPI**, the deficit remains as projected.
- **Above CPI**, the deficit grows larger than projected.
- **Below CPI**, the deficit shrinks compared to projections.

Because police and fire labor costs represent a large share of the General Fund, and because agreements with police and fire unions often set precedents for other employee groups, even small deviations from CPI can have substantial fiscal consequences for the city, which faces a \$937 million deficit over the next two-year budget cycle.

Risk of Below-Market Wages

When wage increases are negotiated too low, compensation does not keep pace with market conditions and cost-of-living increases. When compensation is perceived as inadequate relative to the demands and challenges of the job, it compounds the difficulties of recruiting qualified candidates and retaining experienced personnel. Staffing shortages follow, leading departments to rely more heavily on overtime to meet minimum staffing requirements. This pattern creates a

³¹ "All open contracts assume the average inflation projection of the California Department of Finance SF Metropolitan Statistical Area CPI and Moody's SF Metropolitan Area CPI, equal to 3.30% for FY 2026-27, 3.04% for FY 2027-28, 2.34% for FY 2028-29, and 2.26% for FY 2029-30." City and County of San Francisco, *Five Year Financial Plan Update: FY 2026-27 through FY 2029-30*, https://media.api.sf.gov/documents/Joint_Report_FY_26-27_through_FY_29-30.pdf.

perverse fiscal dynamic: attempting to save money by lowering wage increases can lead to higher overall costs through overtime expenditures. Service quality, response times, and overall public safety outcomes may also suffer when departments operate persistently below desired staffing levels.

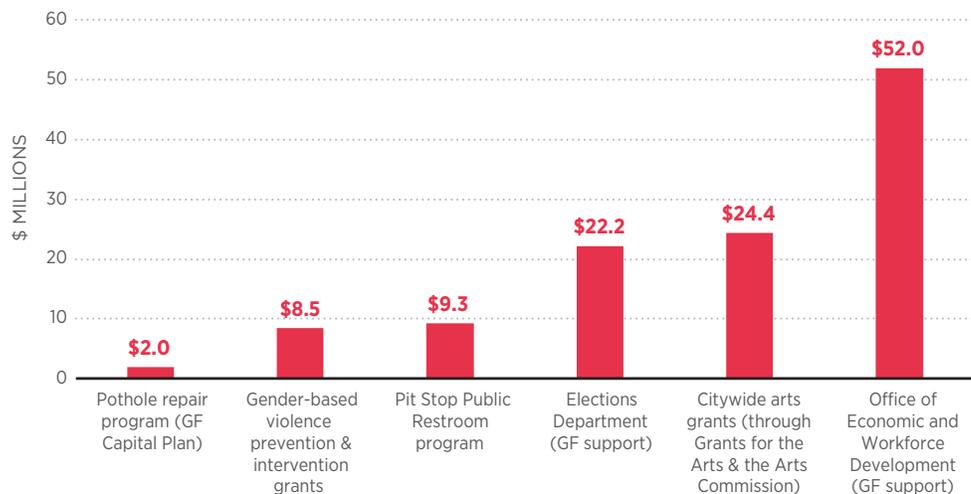
Risk of Unsustainable Wage Increases

At the other end of the spectrum, wage increases that are significantly above CPI place substantial strain on the city's budget. Higher labor costs deepen the deficit and force difficult choices about other city services. Given that 83% of the city's budget is already restricted or committed, increased labor costs for public safety services must be absorbed by reducing the remaining discretionary services (Exhibit 13). Moreover, less funding is available to augment the Police and Fire departments' resources, such as by increasing the number of beat patrol officers or paramedics. A small percentage change in base wages can be equal to or greater than an entire program or department's annual budget.

EXHIBIT 13

General Fund-Supported Services Face Cuts When Public Safety Costs Rise

Services such as domestic violence shelters, street maintenance, and local workforce and economic development programs rely heavily on the General Fund to operate. When costs in one area of discretionary funding rise, these services may experience budget cuts.



Sources: Departmental presentations for the FY 2025-26 and FY 2026-27 budget cycles; Arts Commission and Grants for the Arts FY 2026 awards announcements; Capital Plan; Annual Appropriation Ordinance for FY 2025-26 and 2026-27, <https://sfgov.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=14276851&GUID=F09C6477-E6CC-4439-A9E6-A74F93973666>, <https://www.sf.gov/grants>, https://media.api.sf.gov/documents/FINAL_GFTA_FY26_Awards_List_09-15-25.pdf, https://sfpublicworks.org/sites/default/files/Commissions/Jan%2022%202026/Item%204_Public%20Works%20FY27%20FY28%20BudgetOverview%202026-1-22.pdf, <https://onesanfrancisco.org/capital-budget>, https://media.api.sf.gov/documents/FY2026_FY2027_-_FINAL_AAO.pdf.

Particularly within the Police and Fire departments, which rely heavily on the General Fund, wage increases that substantially exceed CPI growth reduce fiscal flexibility to address future budget challenges. They also set precedents for negotiations with other employee groups. If Police and Fire receive 5% annual increases while the city projects 3% CPI, it becomes politically difficult to offer other employees less, multiplying the fiscal impact across the entire workforce. That impact is much larger because the labor costs of non-public safety unions are approximately \$6 billion a

year, six times the \$1 billion in annual labor costs represented by the police and fire unions. SPUR estimates that the value of a 1% increase in labor costs for non-public safety unions in FY 2027–28 dollars is around \$63 million.³²

Moreover, because pension benefits are calculated based on final compensation, higher wage increases compound long-term costs that extend for decades. The true fiscal impact of the above CPI increases is therefore much larger than the immediate impact in the budget year.

Principles for Finding the Right Balance

The ongoing police and fire negotiations will determine where the balance between service and cost is struck for the next several years. Several principles should guide decision-making:

Base decisions on total compensation, not base wages alone. Comparisons with peer jurisdictions must account for all elements of compensation, including premium pay, overtime patterns, pension formulas, and healthcare benefits. Without this complete picture, negotiators may make decisions based on incomplete information.

Account for fiscal reality. With a \$937 million deficit and a small discretionary budget, the city will face challenges balancing wage increases, even at the current CPI. Exceeding CPI will worsen the projected deficit and could require increased cuts to other essential services.

Consider department-specific needs. The Police and Fire departments face different recruitment and operational challenges. Agreements should reflect these differences rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all approach through wage parity.

Address structural inefficiencies. Beyond wage negotiations, the city should examine operational structures and city charter mandates that codify staffing minimums and work rules. Does requiring voter approval to make changes serve current needs or simply preserve past practices at an increased cost?

Maintain transparency. Residents and policymakers deserve clear information about what is being negotiated, what it will cost, and what trade-offs are involved.

³² SPUR analysis of DataSF Budget dataset, https://data.sfgov.org/city-Management-and-Ethics/Budget/xdq-d-c79v/about_data.

Conclusion

San Francisco's labor negotiations with police officers and firefighters represent some of the city's biggest fiscal and operational decisions in the coming years. With labor costs accounting for nearly half of the city's budget, and public safety departments accounting for 39% of the city's discretionary General Fund, the outcomes of these negotiations will shape not only near-term deficits but also the city's long-term ability to deliver services and respond to future challenges.

As negotiations proceed, policymakers and labor representatives will need to weigh a complex set of trade-offs. They must balance competitive compensation with fiscal sustainability; align staffing resources with operational demands; ensure that existing work rules, staffing minimums, and practices such as wage parity support effective service delivery; and successfully address recruitment and retention challenges.

Agreements reached within police and fire unions will set precedents for future negotiations with other employee groups and will influence the city's fiscal trajectory for many years. Striking the right service-cost balance will require greater transparency about trade-offs, consideration of long-term fiscal impacts, and an understanding of how labor provisions affect both the city's budget and service delivery.

Ultimately, the goal should be to reach labor agreements that enable the city to recruit and retain qualified public safety personnel, deliver high-quality services to residents, maintain fiscal health, and set a sustainable path forward for San Francisco's entire workforce and residents alike.

Appendix A

Labor Negotiation Participants and Their Roles

The City and County of San Francisco's labor negotiations typically involve a dozen groups.

Mayor's Office: As the publicly elected spokesperson for the city's position in labor negotiations, the Mayor's Office sets the tone by establishing the city's priorities and provides final approval for city proposals.

Board of Supervisors: The Board of Supervisors receives completed successor memoranda of understanding (MOUs), sometimes through a tentative agreement between the parties and sometimes through arbitration awards at the conclusion of negotiations, through an ordinance. The board can vote to approve or reject the proposed MOU; it cannot amend its provisions. MOUs cannot become effective without board approval.

Department of Human Resources: This department serves as the city's primary negotiator, leading labor negotiations on the city's behalf. It serves as the main point of contact for union representatives, conducts meet-and-confer sessions, and translates the city's priorities into negotiated agreements.

City Department Leadership: Department directors identify key operational issues and provide context regarding the potential impact of labor agreements on city services and operations.

Controller's Office: As the city's financial unit, the Controller's Office reports on the city's financial condition and provides analytical support regarding the fiscal impact of proposed agreements.

Labor Unions: As the exclusive representatives of one or more bargaining units, unions negotiate and enforce wages, benefits, and other terms and conditions of employment through collective bargaining agreements or MOUs with the city. Unions collaborate with their members to identify key priorities and issues, develop proposals accordingly, and submit them during negotiations. Tentative agreements must be ratified by the membership before the union concludes negotiations.

Bargaining Unit: A bargaining unit consists of a group of job classifications and the employees within these classifications, who share a clear and identifiable community of interest as established by the city's Employee Relations Ordinance.

Shop Stewards: Shop stewards are rank-and-file union members selected to represent the union at the worksite level. Their roles and responsibilities may vary across organizations. They are authorized to speak on behalf of the union in formal settings such as grievance meetings and often serve on negotiating committees.

Legal Teams: Legal teams for both the city and the unions ensure compliance with labor laws and statutes, present their respective arguments, and draft and review contract language.

Arbitration Panelists: At the beginning of the labor negotiation process, an arbitration panel is formed. It comprises three representatives: one selected by labor, one by the city, and a third jointly selected. The third individual, often referred to as the independent neutral arbitrator, is the de facto final decision-maker and can influence how each party approaches negotiations.

Chief Negotiator: Each party has a chief negotiator who serves as the union's or the city's lead spokesperson at the bargaining table. This individual is typically the only person authorized to speak, call for a caucus, or respond to union proposals. The chief negotiator directs the negotiation team, sets the tone for discussions, and is responsible for building a working relationship with their counterpart.

Public: Negotiations and mediations are closed to the public. If negotiations proceed to binding arbitration, sessions in which evidence is presented to the arbitration panel are open to the public in accordance with the requirements of the Brown Act. Current opportunities for public engagement are limited to brief periods of public comment at Board of Supervisors and commission meetings. Unlike in K-12, higher education, or state employee collective bargaining, the City and County of San Francisco has no established process to inform the public about issues to be discussed or to solicit input until a successor agreement is submitted to the Board of Supervisors.

Appendix B

Select Premium and Special Pay Types, Police Officers' Association and Local 798

There are 13 unique types of premium/special pay in the Firefighters Union Local 798 contracts and 15 in the Police Officers' Association agreement. The following examples are representative.

UNION	TITLE OF PAY	DESCRIPTION*	INCLUDED IN CALCULATION OF RETIREMENT BENEFITS?
Local 798	Training and Education Achievement Pay	<p>For employees hired before October 1, 2013, members with a bachelor's degree, an associate's degree and four years of service, or ten years of service and completion of annual training requirements receive an additional 6% of base wages, increasing to 9% by the end of the term of the current contract.</p> <p>For employees hired after October 1, 2013, members with a bachelor's degree and two years of service, an associate's degree and four years of service, or a Fire Officer Certification and six years of service receive an additional 4% of base pay, increasing to 7% by the end of the term of the current contract. Members with a bachelor's degree and five years of service, an associate's degree and seven years of service, or a Fire Officer Certification and 10 years of service receive an additional 6% of base wages, increasing to 9% by the end of the term of the current contract.</p>	Yes
Local 798	Retention Pay	Employees who have completed 21 years' service receive an additional 2% of base wages. Employees who have completed 23 years' service receive an additional 4% of base wages. Employees who have completed 26 years of service receive an additional 6% of base wages.	Yes
Local 798	Uniforms	All uniforms, protective clothing, and safety equipment are furnished by the department at no cost to the employee.	No
POA	Bomb Squad/SWAT Team Pay	Employees assigned to the Bomb Squad, the SWAT team, or both receive an additional 5% of base wages.	No
POA	Peace Officer Standards Training (POST) Certificate Pay	Certain ranks require an officer to hold an intermediate or advanced level of POST certification. Ranks requiring the intermediate level pay a 6% increase over base wages; ranks requiring the advanced level pay an 8% increase over base wage.	Yes

POA	Retention Premium	An additional 5% of base wage pay for employees with a minimum of 5 years of service; an additional 8% (cumulative) of base wage pay for employees with a minimum of 7 years of service; an additional 9% (cumulative) of base wage pay for employees with a minimum of 10 years of service; an additional 13% (cumulative) of base wage pay for employees with a minimum of 15 years of service; an additional 15% (cumulative) of base wage pay for employees with a minimum of 20 years of service; an additional 17% (cumulative) of base wage pay for employees with a minimum of 25 years of service.	Yes
POA	Experienced Officer Incentive	Additional 2% of base wage pay for the most senior officer and sergeant (with a minimum of 23 years of service) for hours worked between 9 p.m. and 7a.m.	Yes
POA	Night Shift Differential	An 6.25% additional pay on base wages for hours worked between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m.	No
POA	Uniform and Clothing Stipend	All members receive \$1,100 per year to maintain and replace their standard uniform or, in the case of non-uniformed sworn officers, business attire. The initial uniform, as well as any specialized safety equipment and uniform items, are provided by the department.	No

Sources: *Memorandum of Understanding Between the City and County of San Francisco and the San Francisco Police Officers' Association Units P-1 and P-2A*, <https://www.sf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-08/Police-Officers-Association-2023-2026.pdf>; *Memorandum of Understanding Between the City and County of San Francisco and San Francisco Firefighters Union Local 798, IAFF, AFL-CIO, July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2026 (Unit 1 and Unit 2)*, <https://www.sf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-01/fire-fighters-union-local-798-unit-1-2023-2026.pdf> and <https://www.sf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-01/fire-fighters-union-local-798-unit-2-2023-2026.pdf>.



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