

Why Is There So Much Human Shit on the Streets In Socialist San Francisco

By Noah Sanders



A friend of mine once told me that he had to take an extended break from the Mission because every time he'd visit, often in the middle of the day, he'd see someone publicly pooping

He couldn't force himself to come back because the fear of stumbling upon an act of urban defecation was just too great. I understand the feeling. As a Mission kid, I have experienced days, even weeks, in a row when I've had to pull my eager dog away from steaming pancakes of human shit, or I've had to step over a sad, sick turd-smearred man passed out among sculpture-like piles of his own doo-doo mere feet from my doorway. However San Francisco's poop problem isn't confined to the streets of the Mission. Other neighborhoods – particularly SOMA, Mid-Market, and the Tenderloin – have a similar human-excrement predicament. Let's face it: if you live in the city, regardless of location or class affiliation, you've probably had your own encounter with the aftermath of a public number-two.

We live in a beautiful city that's praised for its progressive values and the deeply set urban intellect of its residents. Why, then, do I find myself, on a daily basis, stepping around errant piles of fecal matter? In simpler terms, *what's with all the shit?*



A pile of poop congealing on the sidewalk isn't an immaculate conception, willed into existence by some mischievous divinity.

It's there for one reason, and one reason only: people needed to use the loo, and none was there for the using. And for the most part, these people are San Francisco's massive homeless population.

There are more than 10,000 people living on the streets at any given time in our fair City by the Bay. San Francisco must be scrambling hand over foot to provide at least some semblance of a plan for their very apparent human needs. Right? Wrong. I reached out to Jennifer Friedenbach, the executive director of San Francisco's Coalition on Homelessness over the phone, and she laid out the overarching cause of our defecation dilemma. "We have thousands and thousands of [homeless people] living in our city that have no access to public bathrooms," she told me. When you take this number and compare it with the scant amount of public-restroom facilities provided for the homeless, you end up with thousands of people with nowhere to respond to the call of nature, aside from the tempting concrete of our city sidewalks.

Worse off, the facilities that *are* open to the public are limited, even shackled by budgetary concerns. As Friedenbach told me, "When they started doing the mass layoffs of Parks and Recreation staff in 2009, the city couldn't keep a lot of their public bathrooms open." Suddenly, there were just a small number of overworked facilities located in the hardest-hit areas to pick up the slack and offer public restrooms and other amenities to our homeless population. "Anywhere you go in the world, westernized or not," Friedenbach said, "you have enough public restrooms for the homeless, for tourists, for the general public. Not here, though. It's pretty brutal."



I won't be the first to say that BART has a human-waste issue.

Sure, I can talk about my daily commute and the warm, hazy fog of pee and poo smells that greet me every time I saunter down the Montgomery BART escalator, but I don't need to. The facts speak for themselves. In July of 2012, an escalator at the Civic Center BART Station grinded to a halt. When work crews disassembled the ailing device, they discovered that an excess of human urine and fecal matter had gummed up the gears. So much so that the city was forced to call in a hazardous-materials team to remove the problem. When I spoke to BART spokesperson Jim Allison about the situation, he referred to BART as “a microcosm of a larger society.” As Allison said, “These are humans with human body functions like anyone else, and when they need to take care of these bodily functions, sometimes it takes place on BART escalators.” To add to the issue, 56 of the BART entryway escalators go to street level, and with BART being closed each night from midnight to 4 a.m. (longer on weekends), an open escalator presents a tantalizing option for bathroom needs. “Anyone can go down [into the BART station],” Allison told me. “And if a person were homeless and needed to use the restroom, it would just seem like a natural thing.”

To prevent a human-waste invasion, BART has proposed the production and installation of canopy-like structures that would extend over the exposed part of BART station—the idea being that the transparent canopy would deter bathroom-needing folks from using the BART station and the adjoining escalators as their own private restrooms. The canopy, still in prototype form, would be designed and built over the next two years at a cost of almost four million dollars, with the first installation scheduled for 2015 at the 19th Street station in Oakland.

Friedenbach balked at the canopy proposal. “I find it interesting that they’re spending this much money on canopies when they could be using it to keep their bathrooms open.” More so, the money could be used for keeping the high-traffic drop-in centers operational. A few years back, San Francisco, under former-mayor Gavin Newsom’s authority, sought to cut over a million dollars in funding for many of the city’s highest-traffic drop-in centers. The Coalition for Homelessness wouldn’t stand for it. “We’d already seen almost half of the centers close,” Friedenbach recalled, “so we figured out how many pounds of feces the public facilities kept off the street.” Friedenbach and company estimated that the cost of cutting back or getting rid of drop-in centers altogether would be over 58,000 **pounds** of human feces on the streets of San Francisco. Unsurprisingly, the city backed down.

In a perfect world Friedenbach would see funds go toward a system of multiple-stall, well-lit, staffed restroom facilities scattered throughout the Mission, SOMA, the Tenderloin, and downtown. “We have the technology now to build these facilities inexpensively and to make them clean and attractive for *everybody*.” Regarding the four million dollars spent on the canopy proposal, Friedenbach said, “You could capture a large amount of feces [with bathrooms], instead of the one shit a night you might be staving off with this.”

Canopies and supervised toilets aren’t the only public-waste solutions. In May, in conjunction with Hyphae Design Laboratory, the North of Market/Tenderloin Community Benefit District installed what is being lovingly called the PPlanter, an ecologically beneficial public restroom. The idea: pee goes into the urinal and is filtered of its smell, then water-processed into a solution that might actually help surrounding plants while offering anyone who needs a bathroom break a clean, relatively private place to go. Unfortunately, a PPlanter is only for urine.

When it comes down to it, we have a shit problem in San Francisco, one caused by a large group of people without proper access to the basic amenities of life.

At the end of the day, though, the poop problem is only a mirror to the way City Hall perceives the homeless in our fair city. Everyone I spoke to in the course of writing this article echoed, from one side or the other, the same sentiment: San Francisco believes that our homeless population actively chooses to be homeless. There is a stance in our city government that rests on the notion that if you are homeless, you're there because you want to be. And if our homeless population has made a *choice* to be on the street, then by supporting them, with the basic amenities of human living, we are only encouraging them to continue to stay here. In the words of BART spokesperson Jim Allison, "You could have housing for every person on the street and there'd still be people who'd choose not to live there." And to that, I say bullshit.

If we want a solution to poop sculptures and clogged escalators and the odor of piss and shit that permeates so many of our neighborhoods, we need to start by changing our perception. As Jennifer Friedenbach told me, "People are outside because of systemic disparity, and lack of affordable housing not because we offer such great services." If we, and our government continue to perceive the homeless as a problem, an issue perpetuated purposefully by a group of people, we're going to be facing this problem for a long, long time. We need to start by seeing our homeless population as actual human beings who need to eat and drink and wash their hands and who, yes, need a place to take a nice private dump once in a while.