

Burned out

A deadly fire in March 2017 tears through San Pablo Avenue apartments in Oakland.

COURTESY OF ABC7 NEWS/KGO-TV

How overwhelmed fire inspectors fail to protect us

By Thomas Peele

tpeele@bayareanewsgroup.com

Photos and video by Karl Mondon

kmondon@bayareanewsgroup.com

Data analysis by Harriet Blair Rowan

hatterrowan@gmail.com

PUBLISHED: JUNE 1, 2018

OVERWHELMED and often disorganized, fire departments across the Bay Area routinely fail to perform state-required safety inspections of buildings where hundreds of thousands of Californians live and go to school. And despite the potential for tragedy, there are no consequences — and nobody paying attention — to make sure fire inspectors are getting the job done.

An investigation by the Bay Area News Group found many of the region's major fire departments are months — and often years — late on performing annual inspections at schools and apartment buildings. In many cases their record-keeping is so flawed, scores of residential buildings go unchecked altogether because fire marshals don't know they exist.

Such oversights can have horrifying results, such as what has happened over the last two years in Oakland, a city with a troubling inspection record where 40 people died in fires in a pair of buildings plagued with faulty wiring and other hazards. But this news organization's investigation found serious problems far beyond Oakland.

An analysis of inspection records over eight years from 11 of the Bay Area's largest fire agencies found nearly one-quarter of the 17,000 apartment buildings in the review

96%

of schools went more than a year without an inspection at least once from 2010 to 2017

93%

of apartments and hotels also lapsed more than a year between inspections during the same period

weren't inspected in 2017, and, astonishingly, more than 400 hadn't been inspected since 2013.

Visits to a sampling of those apartment complexes revealed dangers that inspections could have corrected: gasoline and paint cans, piles of wood, discarded furniture and other flammable and bulky items collecting under stairwells and clogging escape paths.

"The longer the frequency between inspections the more likely something is going to go wrong," said Ronny Coleman, a retired state fire marshal who calls annual inspections "absolutely critical."

Are Bay Area apartments safe or a death trap?



WATCH: Kacey Smith's mother, Cassandra Robertson, perished in a blaze in an Oakland halfway house that had been plagued by missed inspections and unrepaired hazards. A Bay Area News Group investigation found similarly shoddy fire inspection practices across the region.

State law requires that fire departments inspect apartment buildings, hotels and motels and K-12 schools once every 12 months. But it establishes no method to ensure those inspections are done — agencies do not have to report their progress to Sacramento, and no outside authority audits compliance with the law. This news organization's review is the most comprehensive look at fire inspections in California ever undertaken.

The problems were not limited to apartments: Fire inspectors failed to set foot in 271 schools — or more than 30 percent of the total in the review — in 2017. Oakland inspected 11 of its schools only once over eight years. And Redwood City inspected four of its schools only once and 13 others only twice between 2012 and 2017, records show, when they should have been inspected at least six times each.

FIRE INSPECTIONS AT BAY AREA SCHOOLS

The Bay Area News Group analyzed how well 11 of the largest fire agencies in the region follow the state mandate to perform yearly fire inspections at K-12 public and private schools.

Search for a school or click on a dot to see when fire inspectors showed up at the school, how many days it was overdue for an inspection at the time and the percentage of time a school was overdue for an inspection over the entire period.

Percent of time school had overdue inspections

From 2010 to 2017 unless otherwise noted.

- 0% to 25%
- 25% to 50%
- 50% to 75%
- 75% to 100%

Search the database

By fire department jurisdiction

All

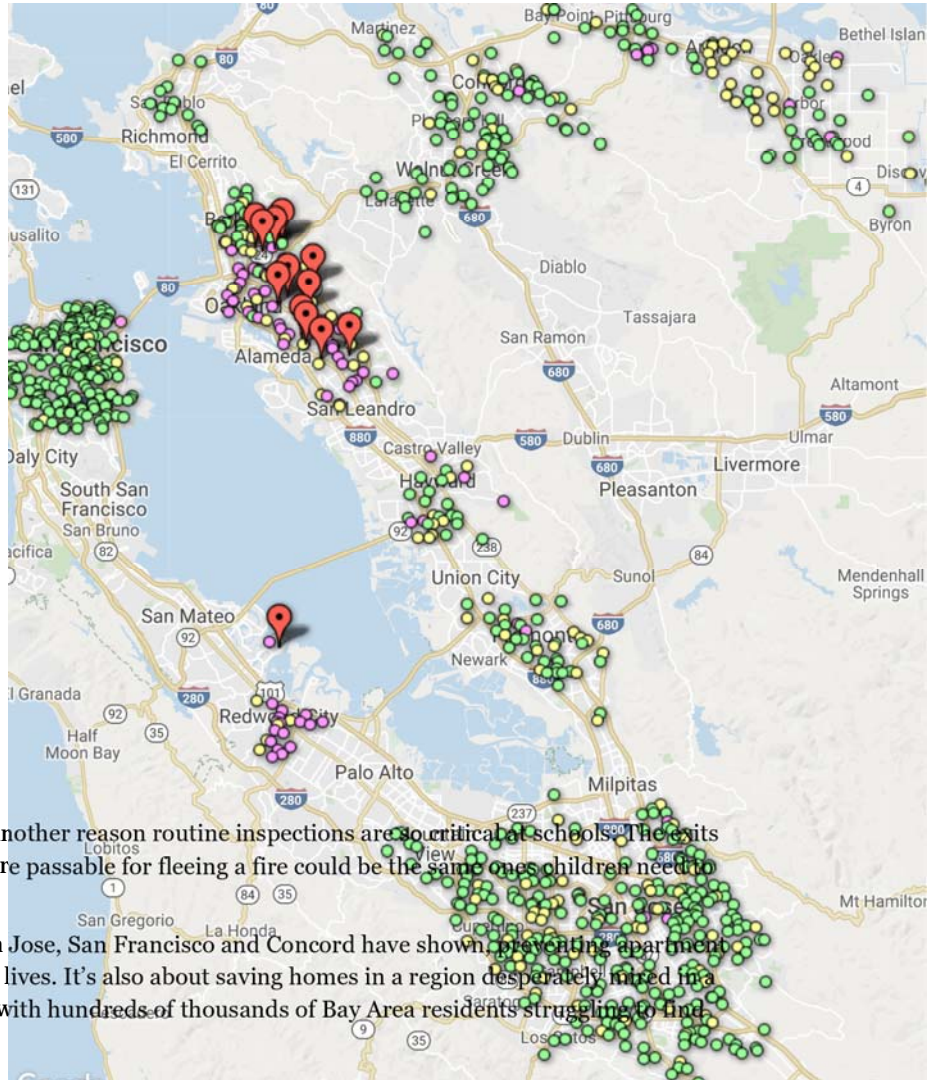
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By school name

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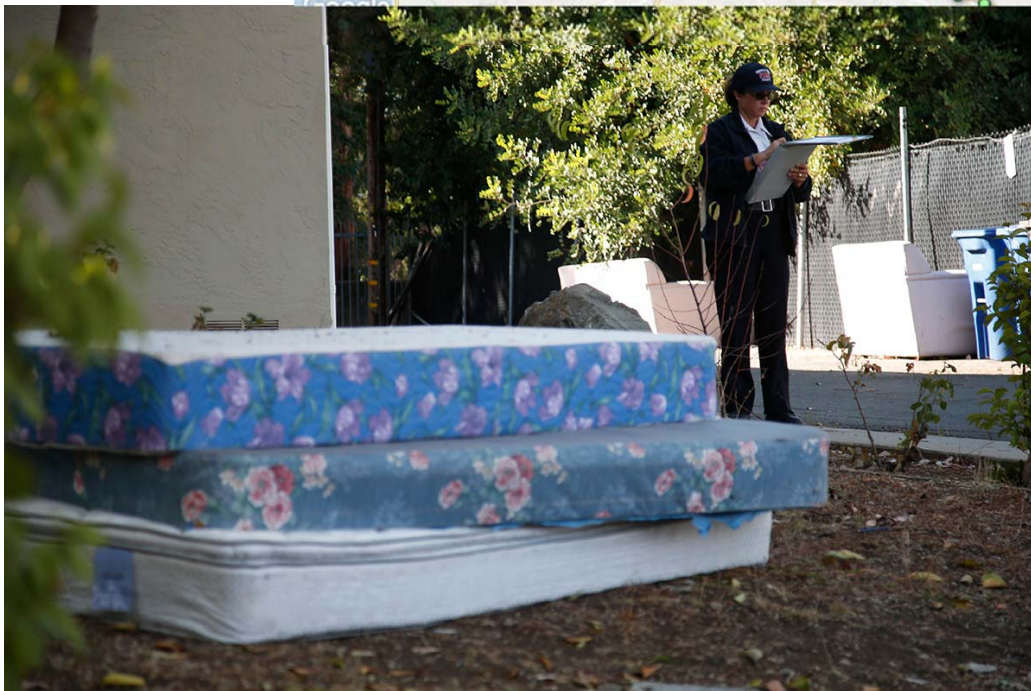
874 schools shown

Reset map



In 2018 America, there is another reason routine inspections are so critical at schools. The exits fire inspectors make sure are passable for fleeing a fire could be the same ones children need to run from a shooter.

And as recent blazes in San Jose, San Francisco and Concord have shown, preventing apartment fires isn't just about saving lives. It's also about saving homes in a region desperately mired in a historic housing shortage, with hundreds of thousands of Bay Area residents struggling to find affordable places to live.



Contra Costa Fire Inspector Lisa Martinez conducts a fire-safety inspection at an apartment complex in Concord. The mattresses stacked near the structure are an obvious hazard.



One fire chief asks: ‘What mandate?’

Our analysis exposes what Contra Costa County Fire Marshal Robert Marshall called “a systematic failure” of inspection programs in his and other departments.

“I don’t think we are alone in that,” said Marshall, whose department failed to inspect 43 percent of the schools it is responsible for in 2017. Contra Costa’s records on apartment buildings are so unreliable that we had to drop them from our analysis when it became unclear whether buildings in the data actually exist.

“Do they exist? Do they not exist? We just have to figure that out,” said Marshall, whose department covers most of the county, acknowledging that he didn’t know the problems were “this bad” until the Bay Area News Group raised repeated questions about his inspection data.

Marshall has resorted to combing through county tax assessor records for information on Contra Costa apartments. Inspectors in Redwood City walked the streets last year looking for buildings that the state requires be inspected.

And Hayward’s fire chief seemed altogether unaware of the state law on inspections.

“What mandate?” Fire Chief Garrett Contreras said during an interview with the Bay Area News Group, even asking a reporter to point out specifics in the state code.

The specifics can be found in [the state Health and Safety Code](#), which requires that local fire departments annually conduct fire safety inspections of all residential buildings with three or more apartments, hotels, motels, and all K-12 public and private schools in their jurisdiction.

Hayward Fire inspects only apartment buildings with at least 16 units and an on-site building manager, Contreras said. Still, last year Hayward failed to inspect

INSPECTING APARTMENTS

Fire agencies in the Bay Area News Group analysis of apartment, hotel and motel inspections from 2010 to 2017 struggled to meet the state mandate for annual inspections.

Percent with no inspection in 2017

Oakland	72%
Fremont	48
Berkeley	28
Hayward	28
Sunnyvale	28
Average	24
Redwood City	18
San Jose	16
San Francisco	17
Santa Clara (city)	14

Percent of inspections that were overdue by 6 months or more (2010 to 2017)

Oakland	32%
Fremont	27
Redwood City	16
Hayward	14
San Jose	11
Average	10
Berkeley	8
Santa Clara (city)	8
San Francisco	7
Sunnyvale	5

Source: Bay Area News Group analysis
BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

nearly 28 percent of those larger apartment complexes, according to our analysis. The city's code enforcement officers go to smaller buildings, Contreras said, "but don't look at (them) from a fire-prevention standpoint. ... That's not the world we operate in."

A veteran fire investigator found the Hayward chief's response troubling: "What's he thinking? If it's (an apartment building with) 10 people, I'm not worried?" asked John DeHaan, a Bay Area fire expert currently consulting with investigators in last year's deadly Grenfell Tower fire in London. "This is a lot worse than anything I would expect."

On May 18, about two weeks after the Bay Area News Group interviewed the Hayward chief, the city announced it was beginning a review of its fire inspection practices.



BEN MARGOT/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Firefighters battle a four-alarm apartment fire on San Pablo Avenue in Oakland, where four people died on March 27, 2017. An Oakland fire captain had recommended two months earlier that the building should be shuttered immediately due to life-threatening hazards.

‘Doesn’t make any sense’

Most fire agencies in the Bay Area take a similar approach to inspections: They employ small fire-prevention units of specially trained inspectors who work separately from firefighters, following the detailed requirements of city and state fire codes. The reasons the agencies offered for their failures were also similar: They blamed antiquated data management systems, small staffs and difficulty keeping up with problem properties that require repeat visits.

No fire agency confronted a tougher set of circumstances than Oakland, where poverty, urban crowding and an aging housing stock deepen the challenges of preventing fires. And none logged a deadlier record of futility.

The city found its practices in the spotlight when a four-alarm blaze in a three-story apartment building on San Pablo Avenue killed four residents on March 27, 2017, the culmination of years of missed inspections and failures to follow up on safety concerns. [Inspectors and firefighters had flagged the building](#) as a hazard three months before the deadly inferno, but no improvements had been made.

Months earlier, 36 people died in Oakland's deadliest fire ever during an electronic music party at a warehouse illegally converted into a living space for artists known as the Ghost Ship. The warehouse wasn't in the fire department's inspection logs — and had not been inspected — despite multiple complaints over the years and visits from Oakland firefighters and police who [expressed alarm](#) about the fire danger.

City leaders in Oakland promised to step up fire inspections after the two tragedies. Instead, our

analysis found the number of fire inspections in the year after the Ghost Ship actually dropped by 15 percent. Fire Chief Darin White was able to look at more data and said in a statement the drop off was even higher — 25 percent.

“It doesn’t make any sense, that’s very clear,” said Kacey Smith, whose mother, Cassandra Robertson, 50, was killed when fire spread through the San Pablo Avenue halfway house where about 100 people lived.

“If your job is to check buildings and do inspections, why are buildings going uninspected and not being checked?” said Smith, 24, who is a plaintiff in a wrongful death suit against the city. “If you don’t do your job, there is always going to be a price to pay for something you do wrong. But it seems like they do something wrong and it’s ‘Whoops. Oopsies’.”



Kacey Smith holds a snapshot of herself (right) with her mother, Cassandra Robertson (center) and sister McKenzie Smith. Robertson was one of four casualties when fire consumed the Oakland halfway house where she lived. Now Kacey Smith is suing the city for its failure to enforce fire safety standards.

The findings

We spent months gathering thousands of records and building a database to look at the frequency of fire inspections. The analysis of inspection records is a large sampling from 2010-17 covering more than 800 schools and 17,000 residential buildings, including apartments, motels and hotels.

Properties for which not enough information was listed — in some cases, for example, it was impossible from the records to confirm a structure is an apartment building — were excluded from the analysis. But fire marshals interviewed for this project acknowledged the flaws suggest a large number of buildings are being overlooked by inspectors.

On apartment inspections, Oakland’s fire department had the worst record, missing 72 percent of apartment buildings last year. And over the eight years analyzed, 32 percent of Oakland’s inspections were more than six months delinquent — or more than 18 months since the previous inspection — what we categorized as “exceedingly late.” Fremont had the second-worst record for apartments, missing 48 percent of apartment buildings last year and falling “exceedingly” behind on 27 percent of its inspections.

On schools, the data shows, Redwood City missed 78 percent of its schools last year and has been exceedingly late on 40 percent of its inspections overall; Oakland failed to inspect 77 percent of its

72%

of apartments in Oakland were not inspected last year

78%

of schools in Redwood City were not inspected last year

schools last year, and has been exceedingly late 26 percent of the time. By comparison, Sunnyvale last year inspected all 26 of its schools in the analysis — the only department to manage that.

The investigation also found:

- **Fire inspectors blowing the state's inspection mandate isn't the exception — it's the rule:** Nearly all of the schools — 96 percent — went more than a year without an inspection at least once during the eight-year period analyzed. Ninety-three percent of the apartment buildings and hotels also lapsed more than a year between inspections at least once.
- **Gaps between inspections are sometimes alarming:** More than 2,000 apartment buildings went at least three years between inspections and sometimes longer. Half of all apartment buildings and 72 percent of schools had at least one gap of 18 months or more. And one in 10 schools in the survey were overdue for an inspection for more than half of the eight-year period covered by the analysis.
- **Violations can mount when inspections are missed:** In Oakland, inspectors visited only 23 percent of the city's schools last year, according to the data. And 72 percent of the schools they did inspect failed for reasons like broken or uncertified fire alarms, blocked exits and missing evacuation maps.
- **Using firefighters to help perform inspections improves performance:** Most departments saw little to no growth in their ranks of fire inspectors in the past eight years, but the ones that tasked firefighters to perform inspections in between other duties maintained higher completion rates for apartment inspections last year, among them San Francisco (93 percent) and San Jose (84 percent). In contrast, Hayward and Fremont each relied solely on three full-time inspectors; Hayward inspected only 73 percent of its apartment buildings last year and Fremont only 47 percent.

The risks: What are fire inspectors missing?



CHICAGO TRIBUNE HISTORICAL PHOTO

The 1958 fire that consumed Our Lady of the Angels grade school on Chicago's West Side took the lives of 95 people, almost all of them schoolchildren. In the aftermath, states across the country adopted stricter fire codes.

A horrific Chicago school fire in 1958 that killed 92 children and three nuns led to rapid changes in fire codes and inspections in schools across the country, including California. The state added mandatory inspections every 12 months for apartments and other residential buildings with more than three units in the mid 1980s as fire codes were improved again.

Many of the hazards that fire inspectors look for may not be apparent to the untrained eye: Are exits clear, stairwells safe, alarms and extinguishers serviced and functioning? Do doors designed to close automatically shut properly? Can people get out and, equally important, can firefighters get in?

Fire inspectors enter classrooms at schools but not individual units at apartments and hotels, where they are only required to inspect hallways, common areas, stairwells and the exterior of buildings.

But at some of the apartment buildings overdue for inspections, the fire dangers seemed obvious.

On a recent afternoon, an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts sat next to a propane tank on the front steps at a six-unit converted house on 24th Street in East Oakland — last inspected in 2012, according to the city's data. A tenant who asked not to be identified said the building has no fire extinguishers.



The simple wood construction and open holes in this carport ceiling, shown during an April inspection of an Oakland apartment building, would not prevent a vehicle fire from threatening residents above.



If the illegal piles of trash under this stairway caught fire, Oakland apartment dweller Clarence Sparks says, the only way he could escape would be "to jump out."

Clarence Sparks worries that he'd "have to jump out" of his third-floor apartment on the 9900 block of MacArthur Boulevard if flames consumed it. He's probably right: Sheets of plywood, trash and paint cans were piled beneath the stairway he'd need to escape.

Records show the building was last inspected in May 2016 — almost half a year before the Ghost Ship tragedy.

Resident Erik Lyngen said he's "disgusted" by the Oakland Fire Department's performance.

The Jean Street apartment building where he lives with



Oakland resident Erik Lyngen said he had to pressure a fire inspector to order changes to numerous hazards in his apartment, including a faulty lock and non-functioning break-away bars in his children's bedroom. The building hadn't

his family hadn't been checked for at least six years, records show, when an inspector arrived in late 2016.

received a fire inspection for six years.

Even then, Lyngen contends, the inspector overlooked a jammed escape mechanism that is supposed to unlatch metal bars covering his daughters' ground-floor bedroom window. "A deathtrap," he called it.

Also, the lock on one of the doors leading from the apartment was installed backwards, so he needed a key to get out rather than in — an obvious concern during a fire.

Lyngen said he insisted the inspector come back. "It was like pulling teeth." Eventually, the landlord was ordered to change the lock and the window bars were repaired.

But the experience left him beyond frustrated. "No one wants to take the lead and take responsibility," he said.

"I've got two daughters, my wife, myself. It isn't the Ghost Ship, but it is four more people."

Oakland chief not 'surprised'

When confronted late last year with questions about some of the city's most delinquent inspections, Oakland's fire chief White offered a blunt response: "I won't say I'm surprised."

In a follow-up email in March, the chief blamed "chronic staffing shortages" and inspection data that is "in poor condition and contains inconsistent, deficient and inaccurate information."

White didn't respond to an invitation to send an inspector along with a reporter to what appeared to be some of the city's most alarming conditions at apartments long overdue for inspections.

He acknowledged the city's plan to hire more inspectors and clear up a backlog of inspections has taken longer than anticipated. The year after the Ghost Ship fire, the city's records showed it performed 446 fewer apartment building inspections than the year before.

The chief said the department has hired six inspectors since the Ghost Ship disaster and is moving to hire six more to bring the total to 20 inspectors by the end of 2018. It also is searching for a new leader for its Fire Prevention Bureau after embattled Fire Marshal Miguel Trujillo resigned at the end of March to take the same post in Gilroy. City officials promised more than a year ago to unveil a new database program to track inspections, but it will not be ready until sometime after June, White said.

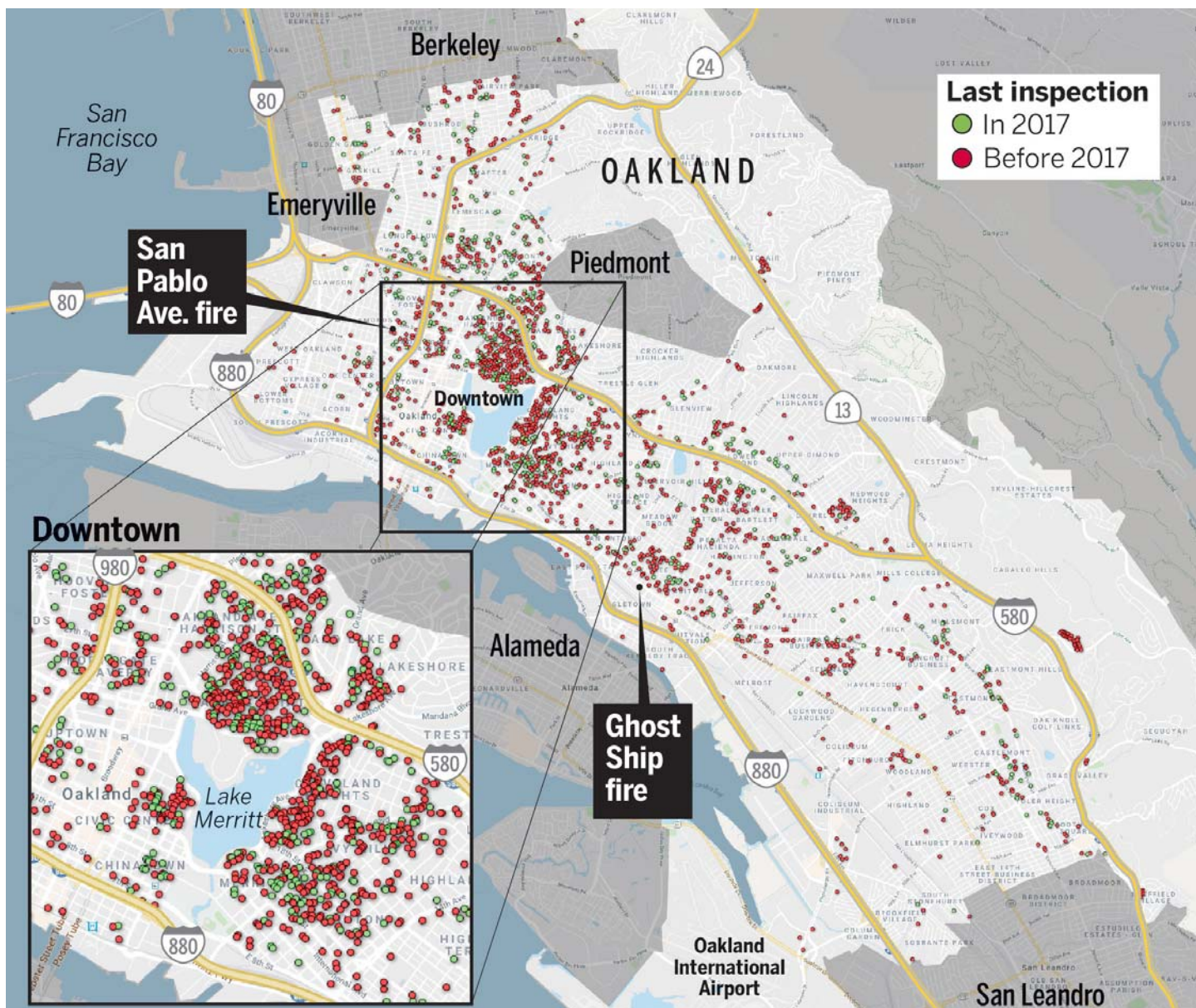
"I'm here to look forward," the chief said, "look ahead on how we can make things better moving forward, recognizing full well what we haven't been able to do in the past."



Oakland Fire Chief Darin White

OAKLAND'S TROUBLED FIRE INSPECTION RECORD

Oakland had by far the worst record for performing state-mandated annual fire inspections of apartment buildings in the Bay Area News Group's survey of 11 local fire agencies. The fire department failed to inspect an astonishing 72 percent of the apartment buildings in its data last year — despite promises to step up its performance after the deadly Ghost Ship warehouse fire. Red dots indicate buildings that were not inspected in 2017 — the most recent data available.



In the Bay Area's scalding housing market, there's another reason why fire inspections are critical: to make sure fires that do start can be contained and stopped from spreading to save as many dwelling units as possible.

“In my mind that’s gained more and more priority,” said Berkeley Fire Chief Dave Brannigan, whose inspectors missed two-thirds of the city’s K-12 schools and three out of 10 apartment complexes last year. As home to UC Berkeley, the city is responsible for inspecting fraternities, sororities and off-campus housing.

Instead of offering excuses, Brannigan asked the city’s auditor to review his department’s inspection process. That review began in early May.

When an apartment building fire displaces “families,” Brannigan said, “most of those people have no idea where they are going to go and how they are going to get there.”

Recent Bay Area fires have displaced more than 400 people, including 250 in Concord when a massive conflagration consumed an apartment building under construction and damaged nearby apartments.



LAURA A. ODA/BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

San Jose firefighters tend to the aftermath of a five-alarm fire that destroyed part of an apartment complex off McLaughlin Avenue in San Jose, Calif. In 2011, a city inspector flagged a non-working fire alarm in the building, but officials never followed up and it was not repaired.

In San Jose, an early morning five-alarm fire in April tore through a building at the Summerwind apartments, a large complex, displacing about 120 people from 36 units. Nobody was killed, but firefighters were forced to rescue 20 people who were trapped on balconies, as flames blocked other ways out.

The complex had passed inspections the past five years, including one in November, records show. But San Jose Fire Marshal Ivan Lee revealed in late May that his department had failed to follow up on a 2011 inspection that flagged a broken fire alarm at the complex that still hadn’t been fixed and wasn’t working the morning of the fire. San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo [called the lapse an “unacceptable failure”](#) and he and two council members promised to push for reforms.

“We were very lucky,” said Jade Oguero, who was cooking breakfast for her family in an apartment down a hallway from where the fire started. “We barely got out.”



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The Mercury News EAST BAY TIMES

Failing schools in Redwood City

While the analysis showed Oakland with the worst overall record of inspecting apartment buildings, Redwood City was the poorest performer in regularly inspecting schools.

Parent Kelaela Bass said she was shocked to learn of the lapses. Redwood City firefighters had inspected her children's school, Henry Ford Elementary, only twice between 2012 and the end of 2017, according to the fire department's inspection records. The school received six safety violations when last inspected in 2015, records show.

Three Redwood City schools received more than 20 fire code violations each when inspected in 2015. One, Roy Cloud Elementary, received 27 violations after not being inspected in two and a half years. They included blocked air vents, non-working exit lights, supplies piled too close to the ceiling, missing evacuation maps and other safety violations, records show.

A spokesman for the city school district insisted the schools are safe, noting that Redwood City (like most school districts) uses contractors to maintain fire alarms, extinguishers and other equipment. But while the spokesman first said that the contracted work is a substitute for the state-mandated inspection, by law it isn't. In fact, fire inspectors are supposed to verify that work is done properly and check for other potential problems, like whether exits are blocked or classroom walls are covered by too many posters or student projects.

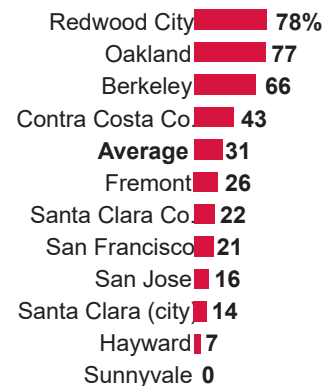
It's "very, very scary," Bass said outside the school as she waited to pick up her son and daughter. "With everything that happened in Oakland, they should be on top of things."

Redwood City Fire Chief Stan Maupin acknowledged in an email his department is struggling to do that. The department's record keeping was such a problem that last year Maupin sent

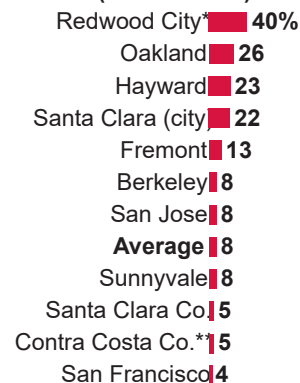
INSPECTING SCHOOLS

State law mandates annual inspections of K-12 public and private schools. But the Bay Area News Group analysis turned up some serious lapses in how 11 of the region's biggest fire agencies inspected schools from 2010 to 2017.

Percent of schools with no inspection in 2017



Percent of inspections that were overdue by 6 months or more (2010 to 2017)



inspectors “walking our districts to ensure that the physical addresses (of buildings) matched our records,” the chief wrote.

Maupin blamed the gaps on low staffing levels and a database that “did not perform to our expectations.” He wouldn’t elaborate.

After persistent questions from this news organization, Redwood City City Manager Melissa Stevenson Diaz said the fire department is now working to complete a round of school inspections by the end of June.

* Redwood City school inspection data begins 2012
** Contra Costa County begins 2011
Source: Bay Area News Group analysis
BAY AREA NEWS GROUP



KARL MONDON/BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

Paper art projects, considered a potential fire danger by inspectors, cover windows near a classroom exit at Hawes School in Redwood City. The city has the poorest record of school inspections in our survey.

Perfect score on schools in Sunnyvale

With no outside monitoring, residents have no way of knowing whether their fire departments are falling miserably behind on the state’s yearly inspection mandate. Until we notified them, some Bay Area fire chiefs and fire marshals were even unaware of their own performance.

But Sunnyvale Fire Marshal Lynne Kilpatrick was keenly aware. Her department got to 100 percent of the city’s schools in the analysis last year. It also had the lowest percentage — 4.65 percent — of apartments considered “exceedingly late” for inspections in the survey.



KARL MONDON/BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

Sunnyvale Fire Marshal Lynne Kilpatrick looks over plans at the city's fire prevention bureau in May. Her department was the only one surveyed to meet the state requirement to inspect every school in the city in 2017.

Kilpatrick, who ran Seattle's hazardous materials inspection program for 21 years and has a degree in chemical engineering, said she has made the mandatory inspections a priority and closely tracks her department's progress. Despite the clunky software hers and many other fire inspection programs are saddled with, the mandate can be met through strong management, she said.

Firefighters working out of six stations do the majority of Sunnyvale's inspections in addition to other duties. Kilpatrick creates monthly reports for her inspectors to make sure they are on track and sets clear expectations.

"We hold them accountable," she said. "State-mandated inspections are a priority for us."

Kilpatrick said the results would improve across California if fire marshals were required to send annual reports to the state showing how they are meeting the state mandate for annual inspections.

Currently, the state fire marshal, California's top fire safety and prevention official, makes no checks to ensure inspections are done on time and offers no guidance for departments to format inspection records. And the office isn't prepared to start, said California Fire Marshal Dennis Mathisen.

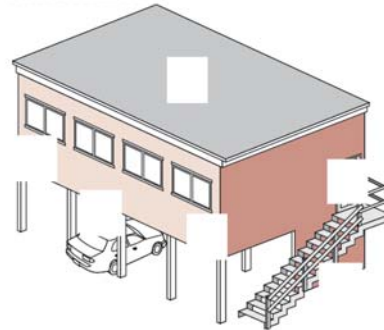
Monitoring or auditing inspections would "be a large amount of work," that the state can't take on, Mathisen said during an interview in Sacramento.

"The law is the law," Mathisen said, but he

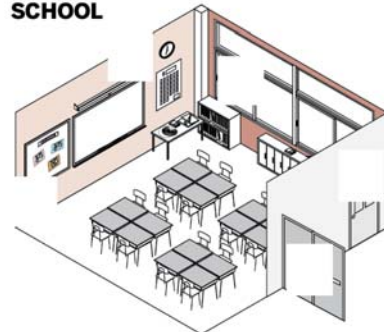
HOW ARE FIRE INSPECTIONS DONE?

Fire marshals say they focus on three basic elements in inspections: preventing fires, escaping fires and containing fires. Tap on the red circles for examples of what inspectors look for:

APARTMENT



SCHOOL



What happens when there are violations?

PAI/BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

How to check on your apartment building or kids' school

refused to criticize departments that miss deadlines. "It's not my place to say what's OK and what's not OK."

But state Sen. Jerry Hill, D-San Mateo, said this news organization's findings show lawmakers need to make changes.

"The legislature has already made (inspections) a priority," said Hill, who has taken the lead in the Legislature on other public safety issues such as demanding reforms after PG&E's San Bruno pipeline explosion. Gaps between inspections show "a violation of a law the legislature has already established," Hill said. "The law itself is not adequate. There is no carrot or stick."

Hill said he wants the Legislature to consider reforms, such as requiring local fire departments to send the state annual reports on their fire inspections to improve accountability.

"Something else needs to be done," he said.

Advocates for both tenants and apartment building owners agree. Tom Bannon, CEO of the California Apartment Association, said he was "surprised and baffled" by the Bay Area News Group's findings, and promised his organization would not oppose such accountability efforts because inspections are "already the law." Toughening requirements to ensure that fire departments perform them and the state reviews the results wouldn't burden apartment owners, he said.

California law requires annual fire safety inspections of K-12 public and private schools and apartment buildings. Local fire departments are required to inspect them no later than 365 days since the previous inspection, but this often doesn't happen until months, or years, after an inspection is due.

Unlike a common trend in food safety inspections at grocery stores and restaurants, there are no public postings required in schools or apartment buildings showing the details of the last fire safety inspection. But the information is public record and available from fire departments. The public also can call their local fire marshal's office or fire prevention bureau to ask about previous inspections as well as to report unsafe conditions that should be checked.

A searing image

The importance of inspections isn't lost on Marshall, the Contra Costa County fire marshal.

He has trouble reconciling the shortcomings in his own inspection program with a photo he shows his inspectors to drive home the profound impact of their job.

In the photograph, the stairwell of an apartment building is black with soot, except for the place where a 3-year-old boy was found overcome by searing heat and smoke, the outline of his tiny body clearly visible on the carpet. The boy's mother had led him and his 9-year-old brother down the stairwell in a futile effort to escape a blaze, but a disabled fire safety door was ajar, allowing flames to sweep in. All three died.

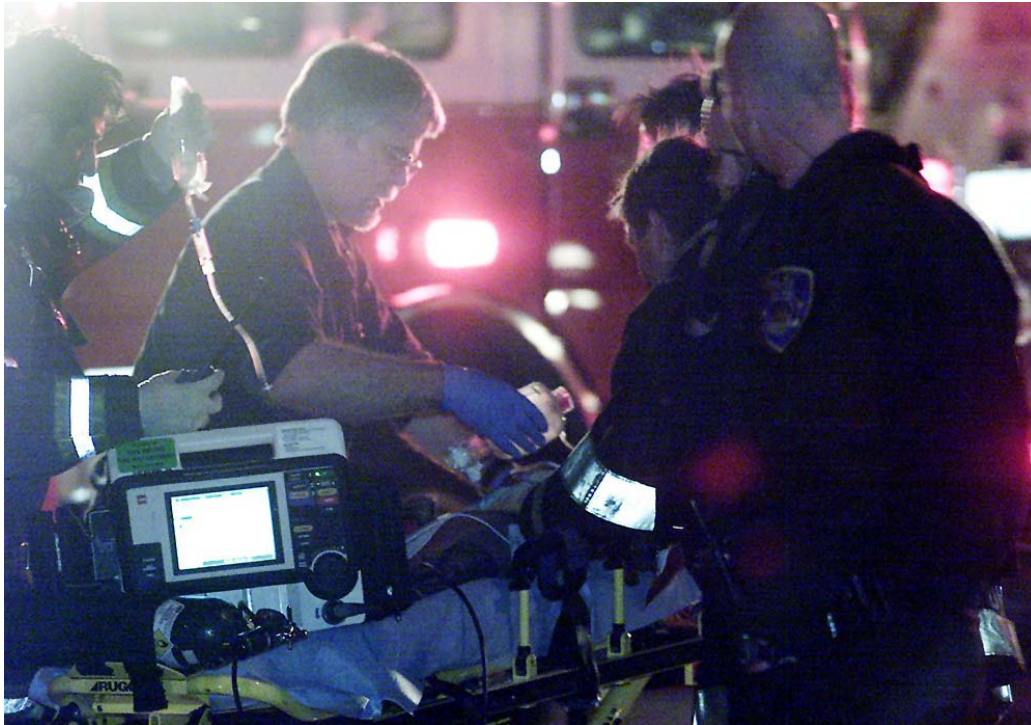
"They perished because of a fire code violation that we knew about and had written up," said Marshall, who snapped the photo at an apartment fire in 2002 in San Mateo County when he worked there. "We were going back to reinspect it literally the next day."

As he pulled up to the fire, Marshall remembers the 3-year-old boy was being wheeled to an ambulance as a medic tried to keep him alive with CPR.

"I will never forget that," he said.



Robert Marshall, Contra Costa County fire marshal



KRISZTIAN K. ORBAN/SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES

Medics treat a child at a 2002 fire in San Mateo County that claimed three lives. The victims all perished in a stairway with an uncorrected fire code violation. Contra Costa Fire Marshal Robert Marshall, who worked there at the time, said a follow-up inspection was scheduled for the next day.

Students from the University of California Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism contributed to this report.

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HOW WE DID THE STORY

Following the tragic Ghost Ship and San Pablo Avenue fires in Oakland that killed 40 people, the Bay Area News Group began an investigation into the enforcement of state fire safety laws. This news organization acquired fire inspection data from 11 Bay Area fire departments and analyzed it to check compliance with state law requiring annual safety inspections of schools and apartment buildings.

This news organization limited the analysis to major fire departments that were able to provide electronic data for review.

The data covered 2010-2017 with a few exceptions. Apartment inspection data from two departments, the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District and the Santa Clara County Fire Department, could not be used because it lacked key information needed to identify apartment buildings, such as a building name or accurate address.

Also, Contra Costa's school data was analyzed starting with 2011 inspections and Redwood City's school and apartment data was analyzed starting with 2012 inspections, the year the city began keeping electronic records.

Since the state does not specify how inspections should be recorded, the investigation had to refine and standardize each department's data set, often cleaning up variations of names and addresses for a single school or apartment building to check the frequency of inspections.

We gave the benefit of the doubt to inspectors, counting any recorded visit to an apartment building, including follow-ups, as an inspection on the advice of experts who said any time an inspector goes to a property is an opportunity to enhance safety. We applied the same principle to schools.

Overall, we looked at records of 874 schools covering 14,606 individual inspections. For apartments and hotels/motels, we looked at 119,658 inspection records covering 17,008 buildings.

Not all schools and apartment buildings in a given city are in the data. Some could not be fully identified in the records fire departments provided. When there was any doubt that an address, name or building type was correct, we omitted it from the analysis. We also removed buildings that appeared to be condominiums, which are private homes and not subject to inspections.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Thomas Peele is a Pulitzer Prize winning investigative reporter on the Bay Area News Group's regional team. He has worked at newspapers, including Newsday, for 34 years in California and elsewhere. Peele focuses on government accountability, public records and data, often speaking about transparency laws publicly. In addition to a 2017 Pulitzer, his more than 60 journalism awards include Investigative Reporters and Editors' Tom Renner Award for organized-crime reporting and the McGill Medal for Journalistic Courage. Peele's also the author of the book "Killing the Messenger," on the murder of Oakland journalist Chauncey Bailey. He also lectures at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. Follow him on Twitter at [@thomas_peele](https://twitter.com/thomas_peele).



Karl Mondon is a staff photographer at the Mercury News. He previously worked at the Contra Costa Times and the Santa Barbara News-Press. Mondon is a graduate of U.C. Santa Barbara.



Harriet Rowan is an investigative and data reporter. Rowan received her master's degree from the University of California, Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. She previously did research and reporting for Reveal, from the Center for Investigative Reporting, Richmond Confidential, and the Center for Media and Democracy.

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F.G • 2 days ago

They try to draw the connection to the housing crunch. Give me a break. If cities inspected all the illegal structures like this article suggests, a lot more people will lose their homes. That's the real problem. Renters don't want to tell on their bad landlords because they can't afford rent increases or they are worried about evictions because they are living in illegal units. That's the real story of ghost ship. Poor housing conditions are a real problem, and inspections may help, but let's not pretend that more inspections will lead to more housing. Try again Mercury News. This is more of a gotcha article than thoughtful investigating.

^ | v • Reply • Share >

Tom • 3 days ago

This article relies too heavily on fear mongering. I appreciate the reporters pointing to ways that Fire Departments could be more effective, but before we freak out and increase government regulation and fees, I'd like to see some analysis that actually connects the "lack" of inspections to an increase in fires. Yes, there have been horrible tragedies in the past few years, but overall non-wildfire structure fires have dropped dramatically over the past decades. And according to the State's website, there have been a total of 15 injuries and 0 deaths due to fire in California schools since 2007. It seems like these reporters are milking the tragedies that have happened so they can create a "sensational" story, which is irresponsible journalism in my book.

With housing prices already so high in the bay area, I want to see more evidence before we increase government regulations and slap additional fees on our small apartment buildings that will get passed on to renters (that's why Mr. Bannon says that toughening requirements "won't burden apartment owners" – they will just pass the costs on to their renters). Also, no mention of negligent property owners? Why?

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >

Sky ↗ Tom • 2 days ago

I agree. I was taken aback reading this by your use of people's tragedies to make you headline seem flashier. The horrific anecdotes about fire deaths are just thrown in for shock value without any real analysis. In fact, the examples you give are of buildings that had been inspected, but not upgraded by the owners (especially that last one about the three year old boy). If you are going to point fingers, at least respect these victims' deaths by telling their full, honest stories.

^ | v • Reply • Share >

PmPiel • 3 days ago

Government failing in its mandate, let's task them with healthcare delivery and a state sponsored retirement system as well...

^ | v • Reply • Share >

MzUnGu • 3 days ago

So the lesson here from that map is... Don't live in Oakland. I already know that. LOL

^ | v • Reply • Share >

