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Downtown S.F. foot traffic nearly double last year, but still half of pre-Covid, new data shows

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The streets downtown remain quieter than before the pandemic, but just how much so? New data from two organizations representing downtown San Francisco businesses illustrate how much foot traffic has recovered in Union Square and the Financial District — and the wide gap remaining to reaching pre-pandemic totals.

The good news: From Jan. 1 through March 6, visitors to both Union Square and the downtown Financial District and Jackson Square core this year are roughly double that of last year. But foot traffic is a little under half of what it was for the same period in 2020, which was prior to the citywide shelter-in-place order March 17.

The numbers I examined are from the Union Square Alliance and the Downtown Community Benefit District, which use different



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Union Square is livelier these days than it was a year ago, seen here in May 2021, but foot traffic is still less than half of what it was prior to the pandemic, according to new data from the Union Square Alliance.

pedestrian-monitoring technologies to track foot traffic and gauge economic health to inform the merchants they represent.

Union Square, using a camera-based system at more than half a dozen checkpoints around the neighborhood, recorded just under 1.5 million visitors this year through March 6, an improvement of 92% over the same period in 2021. Meanwhile the Downtown CBD — representing the Financial District and Jackson Square — uses cell phone geolocation data by analytics firm Placer.ai. The Downtown CBD recorded a visitor increase of 98% — 591,000 visitors this year through March 10, compared with just over 298,000 over that period last year.

Both systems put recovery at a little less than the halfway point to pre-pandemic foot traffic. Examining the week of Feb. 28 to March 6, Union Square pegged visitors at about 118,573, or 45% of the total for the same week in 2020. Downtown CBD's recorded visitors year-to-date through March 10 is about 49% of the 1.2 million it tracked in 2020.

The Downtown CBD also records "dwell time," or how long a given pedestrian in the neighborhood stays there. Over the same period (Jan. 1 - March 10) the CBD reports dwell time increased by 32 minutes this year, from 167 minutes in 2021 to 199 minutes — more than halfway back to the 2020 average dwell time for that period of 217 minutes.

Throughout the pandemic San Francisco city leaders have tried to make the downtown area more appealing to locals and Bay Area residents as the area has emptied out of office workers and gained notoriety for high-profile retail thefts, throwing additional police, street teams, cleaning initiatives and art and entertainment incentives at the issue. The city's latest move, Bloom SF, strives to up the ante with music, entertainment, specialty food and beverages, and lots and lots of flowers to encourage foot traffic, while Mayor London Breed has secured pledges from dozens of downtown employers to get serious about requiring office workers to spend at least some part of the week there.

The downtown Westfield San Francisco Centre has seen foot traffic improve since its lowest point but it still remains well under pre-

pandemic totals while the suburban-adjacent Stonestown Galleria is now trending above pre-Covid traffic numbers.

While the vast majority of the city's hotels have reopened, several of the largest ones downtown have remained shuttered, judging there isn't enough demand yet to justify additional labor and upkeep costs (occupancy for the San Francisco area, as tracked by STR, is 48%) and using the time to make improvements or rebrand. A fuller schedule at the Moscone Center than last year's almost non-existent one and an expected uptick in international travel suggest downtown foot traffic is at least trending in a positive direction.

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