

Hill Bombed: embracing skateboarding and ending policing.  
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On a sunny July day, hundreds of San Francisco and Bay Area skaters gathered on Dolores and 20th Street to bomb the hill, a dangerous and exhilarating act of riding a skateboard down a hill. With no breaks to stop them, the riders are often met with a face full of concrete, the legs of other skaters, curbs, bushes, and sometimes the crowd gathered around the street cheering them on as they zoom down the hill. The impromptu event that is held at the hill on the intersection of Dolores and 20<sup>th</sup> is a family-oriented annual tradition for young and old skaters alike.

“For the most part this is a traditional event where children, youth, and their families went and hung out. I took pictures of women with their babies smiling,” said youth advisor and part-time photographer Amir Abdul-Shakur who attended the event with his wife and son. “Once they started antagonizing, then you start to see the behavior that happened afterwards.”

On July 8, 2023, skateboarders at the renowned San Francisco skateboarding event, known as the Dolores Hill Bomb, were confronted by police squads equipped with riot gear, rubber bullet guns, and tear gas to stop the event.

“The Dolores Hill Bomb is a worst-case scenario,” said Aaron Breetwor, brand manager for Comet Skateboards in San Francisco and advocate for skateboarding as mode of transportation. “You’ve got a spectacle focused culture. You have young kids; you have no organizers, and they’re just sort of out there performing tricks.”

More than [100 arrests](#) and citations were made on allegations of vandalism, police assault, and fireworks. Thirty-two adults were arrested and booked into the San Francisco County Jail on allegations of inciting a riot, while 81 juveniles were cited and released under suspicion of inciting a riot.

“I’m watching to see where their trigger finger is [...] so there was a chance in my mind as a photographer that I might be targeted with a bean bag and rubber bullets,” said Abdul Shakur. “It was completely unnecessary.”

This has been one of the most aggressive attempts to halt a community event that attracts families and passionate youth interested in skateboarding. Still, this recent incident in the Mission Dolores neighborhood is the culmination of a decade’s old criminalization campaign against skateboarders, labeling participants as social outcasts, rebels, and criminals. But why has this been the status quo since the invention of skateboarding?

### **Shredding the Status Quo**

In a study published in [The British Journal of Criminology](#), researchers argue that skateboarding is “deemed to be problematic as it challenges the aesthetic ordering of public spaces, that it is

often perceived to interfere with the look and feel of cities that are designed to cater for the 'consuming majority of late-modern capitalism.'

Researchers have proposed that skateboarding disrupts the ways cities work, including streamlined production, consumerism, trade, and the aesthetics of urban spaces, which are often portrayed as gilded, exclusive, and clean.

"The ways [skateboarding] is enmeshed in the consumer culture ultimately prioritizes spectacle part and parcel of sort of normal capitalist markets," says Breetwor. "It does not exist outside of that system. At the same time, it is not included in city planning, cultural planning, education transit and many of these other things in ways that it could be."

A video of a man donning baggy pants, loose t-shirt, and shredded shoes in his early twenties landing a kickflip out of a tail grind off a ledge near the Sales Force towers depicts rebellious and defiant scene of the white-collar industry.

"I think of individuality. I think of freedom. I think of rebellion," said Abdul-Shakur reflecting on characteristics he associated with skateboarders. "I think of going outside the norm and I think that's the individuality."

With little regard for the wax stains left on the ledge, landing a trick that took years to master, speaks to the freedom and creativity quintessential of skateboarding.

"The way it exists in the status quo today is in a limited version of its potential self. It could be better utilized as a tool for education, as a tool for transportation, and as a tool for community building," said Breetwor.

## **Policing the boards**

Skateboarding was invented in the 1950s and 60s. As street skating evolved, city governments had pulled on a full-blown operation to make it hard to skate from setting curfews on skateboarders, putting up no skateboarding signs, installing "skate stoppers" or metal knobs on ledges to stop grinding, making laws that prohibited skateboarding on streets and sidewalks, and banning skateboarders overall from certain places. Skateboarding was seen as socially deviant and anti-social.

In a [Community Oriented Policing Services](#) guide, or COPS for short, the Department of Justice said, "disorderly youth in public places constitute one of the most common problems most police agencies must handle" and outlines how to address "the relatively minor, but often highly annoying, misconduct associated with youth congregating in public," listing skateboarding among other activities such as open-air drug dealing and shoplifting.

Written by Michael S. Scott, the handbooks cover shows a photo of three teenage boys, one holding a skateboard and all three smoking cigarettes. As of 2011, when the handbook was updated, skateboarding is listed as a national cause for concern and necessary of policing.

In San Francisco, skateboarding is [prohibited](#) on the street or sidewalk in any business district at any time. In a non-business district, skateboarding is prohibited at night (30 minutes after sunset to 30 minutes before sunrise). There are other areas in the city, especially tourist attractions, that prohibit skateboarding.

“A skateboarder represents a way of moving through space that is very fluid and free and flexible,” said Breetwor. There’s a freedom to it that can be challenging for a lot of people to accept. We often resent things that we can’t be.

Given the official language for addressing skateboarding in San Francisco and federally at large, it is not surprising that the event was met with militarized police action, despite having mostly underage event goers.

It can be hard to tell when policing is necessary when skateboarding is illegal in most settings outside of the skatepark, and even then, skateboarding is prohibited from sundown to sunrise.

### **Transition into the mainstream**

Even though the language for policing skaters is very clear on protocol, skateboarding’s perception as a legitimate sport is starting to change on an international level. In 2021, the International Olympic Committee [supported](#) the inclusion of skateboarding in the Summer Olympics program. The sport is also set to be included in the [2024 Paris](#) games.

While some [pro skaters are skeptical](#) that this move was a cash grab and way to increase programming viewership rather than promote visibility for skateboarding, it is naïve to believe that featuring skateboarding on one of the most mainstream sports competitions in the world will not help change the narrative around skateboarding.

If skaters can compete in a world class event, why can’t San Francisco governments promote a more local and accessible community event? The annual event is often organized by a handful of veteran riders like Kevin Reiner.

Many city officials and Mission Dolores residents believed that the arrests were an overreaction from the police, noting the events cultural relevance to the city and highlighting that many eventgoers were minors. Some say [legally organizing](#) the event and obtaining necessary permits could keep the event alive.

Others are [skeptical](#) that anyone would be willing to take on the responsibility of organizing the event. There are legal hurdles like the after dark skating prohibition and demand that

skateboarders under 18 wear helmets. Others worry about the costs of organizing such an event would take away from its essence.

“If you were to change the paradigm of skateboarding in the city, you would have not only no interactions between kids and cops, you also wouldn’t have events like the Dolores hill bomb,” said Breetwor on legitimizing the Dolores Hill Bomb event. “You would have a different format of event that would be much safer and welcoming.”

On top of legitimizing events like the Dolores Hill bomb, other concerns point out that police attention would be more useful elsewhere.

“I really disagree with the waste of resources. You’re standing around being tough cop and there’s bippers, [or] the car break-ins and other places so it’s a complete waste of resources,” said Abdul-Shakur.

To some, skateboarding represents young city vagabonds with nothing better to than destroy private property. To others it is an optimal form of transportation that responds closely to the rider’s desire. Skateboarders are not helpless and can strive to change these negatives perceptions.

“Skateboarders have been marginalized in the law for a really long time and they have not been prioritized for a very long time and its often-young people and very creative people just trying to find an outlet in a very depressing world and if public officials were able to see us as inspiration as opposed to an infestation we might get somewhere,” said Breetwor.