

BULLETIN

VOLUME 6, ISSUE 2

OCTOBER 2025

Prison Labor Part II: Economic & Social Impacts



In the 2024 general election, California rejected Proposition 6 (Prop 6), a ballot measure that would have amended the state constitution to ban forced labor as a form of punishment in prisons.ⁱ It was strongly supported by civil rights groups, labor unions, Democratic leaders, and incarcerated individuals who viewed Prop 6 as an important step toward improving opportunities for rehabilitation and reintegration.^{i, ii}

Despite this broad support, California voters ultimately voted against the measure, prompting widespread public surprise at this unanticipated outcome. Experts point to the ballot's confusing language—specifically, using the term “involuntary servitude” instead of “slavery”—as a potential reason for the upset as voters may have misunderstood the issue.ⁱ Further, voters are noted to have been hesitant to support the proposition because they were uncertain about the potential economic and re-

habilitation consequences of eliminating forced labor. In either case, this generalized confusion reflects a broader lack of public understanding of how California's prison system currently operates and what, specifically, Prop 6's impact would have been.

This bulletin is the second in a two-part series examining the issue of prison labor. The first bulletin explored the historical background of forced prison labor, its perpetuation through policies and court rulings, and recent reform efforts in six other states - including a case study of California's Prop 6. This second bulletin focuses on the broad economic and social impacts of forced prison labor at both the macro- and micro- levels, from the costs and benefits to the state, to the rehabilitation of incarcerated workers, and ripple effects on non-incarcerated workers, communities, and families.

Prison Labor Categories: Tasks, Wages & Levels of Choice in CA

Category of Work	Common Jobs/Tasks	Hourly Wage	Type of Participation
Prison Maintenance	Food service, janitorial duties, laundry, and agricultural tasks ^{iii, iv, v}	\$0.08 - \$0.37 ^{vi, vii}	Forced
Manufacturing for State-Owned & Private Companies	License plates, furniture, DMV call centers, etc. ^{i, iv, v}	State: \$0.30 - \$0.95 Private: prevailing wage ^{vii, viii}	Voluntary
Public Work Programs	Firefighting, forestry, road work, etc. ^{iii, v}	Varies, with firefighters making \$7.50 + emergency pay ^{i, ix}	Voluntary

PRISON LABOR IN CA

Forced Labor

Legal scholar Adam A. Davidson indicates that “most people don’t realize that incarcerated individuals do want to work... They just want to work in ways that are dignified and in conditions that are at least tolerable”.^x However, the 13th Amendment remains a major barrier to the latter, as prisons are legally permitted to require incarcerated individuals to work undesirable jobs for extremely low pay as a form of punishment. Thus, inmates “have no right to choose what type of work they do and are subject to arbitrary, discriminatory, and punitive decisions by the prison administrators who select their work assignments”ⁱⁱⁱ, also known as “forced labor.”

The different types of prison labor can be generally distinguished into three categories: prison maintenance, manufacturing, and public service programs^{iii, v, xi, xii} (see: Table 1 for a summary of the types of prison labor, forced and voluntary, in California). For the purpose of this bulletin, “forced labor” refers to situations in which individuals are required to work for little to no compensation and face threats or punishment if they refuse to comply.

As of December 2023, approximately 40% of the state’s 94,200 incarcerated individuals are assigned to jobs such as cooking, cleaning, laundry services, and general maintenance.^{iii, xiii} Participation is typically mandatory, with California law requiring all able-bodied incarcerated individuals to work (see: CA Penal Code § 2700, 2024). These sorts of prison maintenance jobs pay between \$0.08 and \$0.37 per hour and such assignments are prioritized over other activities—such as educational courses—that may better support rehabilitation.^{vi, vii} Declining or failing to complete the work leads to negative consequences, including additional punishments like solitary confinement, denial of opportunity to reduce their sentence, and loss of family visitation.^{i, iii} They may also receive a write-up on their prison record that could result in parole delays, longer sentences, and determine which programs—including those for work and education—they may be eligible for in the future.^{vi, xix} Because prison maintenance work cannot be declined without penalty, it is considered forced labor and was Prop 6’s target.

Voluntary Labor

Through good behavior and reliable performance, inmates can voluntarily enroll in work programs that connect them to state- or privately-owned companies.^{xi} These positions typically include manufacturing goods such as license plates, textiles, furniture, and medical equipment, or working for DMV call centers. Such roles provide slightly higher wages and, as a matter of policy, do not carry penalties for refusal in California. However, in practice, there are documented instances of those who refuse to participate being punished, which has prompted some organizations to lobby on behalf of independent oversight of these work assignments to ensure the environment is not coercive and that protections are not ignored.^{xx}

Eligible inmates may also voluntarily participate in public work programs, including firefighting, forestry, and roadwork. These roles are considered more dangerous and arduous, but are often attractive options because of their higher wages, opportunities to work outside of prison, and the chance to gain marketable skills that will, theoretically, serve them after release.^{ix}

In California, prison firefighting programs are particularly visible to the public given recent wildfires, providing insight into the experiences and contributions of incarcerated individuals who work on public projects. Their labor fills critical gaps during severe fire seasons, often supplementing professional crews. Incarcerated firefighters earn higher—though still less than the California minimum—wages and report better living conditions, including higher quality food and the opportunity to work outdoors.^{xxi} Many inmates in these roles report great satisfaction and pride in their work, with former incarcerated firefighter, Paula Drake, noting “it’s just feeling like you’re a part of something bigger and being able to give back to a community that has deemed us unredeemable, and being like a productive member of society... it was amazing enough to where I decided... that this is something that I would like to do with my life”.^{xxii}

Although public work programs can foster a

sense of belonging and purpose, they still lack essential labor protections and pay wages that do not meet basic needs. Additionally, formerly incarcerated individuals often report it is difficult for them to find work in these roles upon release - either due to limited availability of such careers or barriers to their being hired because of their criminal record. These ongoing inequities make it difficult for incarcerated people to successfully reintegrate into society after release. The following sections explore in greater depth the economic and emotional impacts of both forced and unforced labor on justice-impacted individuals.

While California offers a range of work opportunities for incarcerated individuals—from prison maintenance to manufacturing and public service programs—Prop 6 was narrowly focused on eliminating *forced* labor, which means its implementation would have primarily affected mandatory prison maintenance work, leaving voluntary programs with higher pay and protections largely unchanged. In the following sections, we examine the economic and social impacts of prison labor to help illuminate the arguments made by opponents of Prop 6, who raised concerns that eliminating low-cost forced labor could increase expenses for jails and prisons and potentially reduce access to rehabilitation opportunities for incarcerated individuals.

CONSIDERING THE IMPACT OF PRISON LABOR

Economic Impacts: the Impact to the State

California's correctional system relies on incarcerated workers to complete a wide range of tasks, from prison facility maintenance and industrial production to essential state safety and infrastructure support.^{iii, xxiii} Despite these responsibilities, incarcerated workers in California earn well below the \$16.50 per hour minimum wage, often receiving less than \$1 per hour.^{xxiv} As the LA Times reports, wages historically range from \$0.08 to \$0.37 per hour depending on skill level.^{xxv} Conditions in county jails are even more severe as jails are not required to compensate workers, and if they do, wages are legally capped at \$2 per eight-hour workday (see: CA Penal Code § 4019.3, 2024). Califor-

nia State Assembly Member Isaac Bryan highlighted this at a 2024 assembly meeting: "At that rate...it would take you a full business week to be able to afford a two-ounce tube of toothpaste and a bag of hot Cheetos".^{xxvi} In short, incarcerated people are paid only token sums that represent a tiny fraction of what free-world workers earn for the same labor.

Because wages for prisoners are so low, the state avoids labor expenditures that would otherwise fall on taxpayers. In fact, by utilizing prison labor, California achieves a substantial economic benefit of at least \$1 billion annually for state agencies and private entities.^{xxvii} This benefit is derived both from being able to pay below market rates for services and being able to purchase products—like office furniture and license plates—at lower cost than if purchased from wholesale retailers paying prevailing wages.^{xxviii} In fact, the California Department of Finance estimated in 2022 that it would cost \$1.5 billion to pay all incarcerated, working Californians the then-minimum wage of \$15 per hour.

Economic Impacts: the Impact to Workers, Incarcerated and Non-Incarcerated

Beyond direct budgetary savings, California's prison labor system creates broader economic ripple effects, raising questions about who benefits from this labor. On one hand, the state and its contractors gain access to cheap labor and services. On the other, incarcerated individuals and their communities see very little of the wealth generated.^{xxix} The Economic Policy Institute argues that prison labor today functions as a transfer of wealth from marginalized populations, particularly low-income Black and Brown communities, to private companies, the wealthy, and government entities.^v Nationwide, the incarcerated workforce generates over \$2 billion annually in goods and more than \$9 billion in services,ⁱⁱⁱ yet inmates—approximately 800,000 nationwide—receive virtually none of the corresponding income.

The current compensation structure also has long-term consequences for inmates' economic prospects and for their families. Most incarcerated workers earn only a few cents or dollars per day, leaving prison with little to no savings

even after years of labor.^{xxx} Under California regulations (see: CA Code Regs. Tit. 15, § 3097), deductions for restitution, room and board, and mandatory fees are commonplace. These deductions, combined with meager wages, mean prison labor provides little financial benefit to inmates, shifting costs onto families and communities. Nationally, families spend approximately \$2.9 billion annually on commissary and phone call costs alone and roughly \$4,200 per year on basic needs, incurring debt or financial strain in the process.^{xxx, xxxi} Prison commissaries also sell items at inflated prices, typically taking a 25–50% commission on sales.^{xxxii} These hidden costs compound the economic harms of incarceration to the individual and their families, even if the individual is working to generate income while incarcerated.^{xxxix}

Prison labor also exerts broader labor market pressures, raising concerns among unions and worker advocates that extremely low-cost labor can undercut wages and displace jobs held by non-incarcerated individuals.^{xxxix} California has attempted to limit competition with the private sector by structuring CALPIA to sell primarily to government buyers and allowing private companies to access incarcerated labor only through controlled joint ventures.^{xxxiii} These safeguards aim to prevent unfair competition with firms paying prevailing wages.^{viii} However, spillover effects remain; as prison labor expands or is used to backfill public sector work—as is the case with incarcerated firefighting—it can depress wage standards or replace jobs that would otherwise go to free workers. As Cole Dorsy of the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee notes, “jobs in the public sector have been removed from communities and put into prisons where workers are paid less than minimum wage”.^{xxxiv}

Recidivism & Rehabilitation: the Impact of Work Programs & Training

California’s prison labor programs are often justified by their rehabilitative potential, and recent evaluations provide evidence that structured work programs can, in fact, improve post-release outcomes. A University of California, Irvine study commissioned by the CDCR examined thousands of individuals after release

and found that those who participated in CALPIA programs had significantly lower recidivism rates than similar individuals who did not.^{xxxv} According to the study, “By three years after release, only 15.4 percent of CALPIA participants had been returned to custody. In addition, only 20.8 percent of CALPIA participants had been reconvicted of a crime after three years of release”.^{xxxv} In other words, over 80% of CALPIA workers remained free three years after release - a substantial improvement given historically high recidivism in California. These findings were consistent in a follow-up study conducted by UC Irvine and were observed across most types of prison industry jobs. Notably, participation in CALPIA programs, which also provide formal trade training and certifications alongside work experience, is voluntary and thus would not have been directly impacted if Prop 6 passed.

Broader research also supports a link between credentialed prison education or work programs and improved post-release outcomes. A meta-analysis by the RAND Corporation (2013) found that incarcerated individuals who receive correctional education or vocational training “have 43 percent lower odds of returning to prison than those who do not”.^{xxxvi} Such programs also boost post-release employment, with a 13% higher employment rate for those with any education and a 28% higher employment rate for those who completed vocational training, compared with peers who did not.^{xxxvi} Similarly, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy quantified the economic benefits of rehabilitative labor programs in the state: vocational training programs cost roughly \$1,960 per participant but produce over \$12,000 in net savings per individual by reducing recidivism and related costs to victims and taxpayers.^{xxxvii} These findings suggest that when prison labor is combined with education and skills training, it can generate substantial long-term economic gains, reduce re-incarceration costs, increase post-release employment, and contribute to the broader economy.

However, the quality and structure of prison labor programs are critical to realizing these benefits. Evidence from evaluations of the federal Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Pro-

gram (PIECP) illustrates this point: while private-sector work programs can raise earnings and expand access to formal employment—especially for women—they may not improve long-term job stability or reduce job loss after release.^{xxxviii} Similarly, an National Institute of Justice (2006) study found that participants in PIECP were “significantly more successful in obtaining and remaining in post-release employment” than those in traditional prison jobs or no work at all, underscoring that higher-quality, skill-building work experience is more rehabilitative than menial or maintenance labor.^{xxxix} In turn, this suggests that the type of labor eliminated by Prop 6 (i.e. forced, low-skill maintenance work without supplemental training or education) may not have meaningfully contributed to rehabilitation outcomes.

Social Impacts: Social Isolation & More Limited Opportunities for Connection

The prison system often fails to foster social connections, which contributes to challenges for formerly incarcerated individuals reintegrating into society and can be exacerbated by being expected to maintain a job. Prison environments are designed to be socially isolating, with strict visiting hours,^{xxxx} and inmates report being pushed to prioritize work over attending educational or career events. While some prison labor provides rehabilitation, skill development, or socialization, these benefits are often limited or difficult to leverage post-release. Many inmates report that prison provides little to no job training, and the current labor framework lacks structures to help develop transferable vocational skills.^{ii, iii} Even programs that offer transferable skills, such as firefighting, can be undermined by state occupational licensing restrictions or the need for court approval, preventing inmates from pursuing careers they trained for while incarcerated.^{iii, xi, xxxxi}

These constraints on labor not only affect the individual’s ability to reintegrate but also have significant intergenerational consequences as incarcerated parents are less able to maintain meaningful connections with their children. Research shows that disrupted parent-child relationships during incarceration are associated with poorer social, emotional, and educational outcomes for children.^{xxxx, xxxxi} By limiting oppor-

tunities for meaningful work and social engagement, prison labor may reinforce isolation, strengthen stigma against formerly incarcerated individuals, and contribute to ongoing social and familial disadvantages that extend beyond the prison walls.

Social Impacts: Compounded Post-Release Challenges & Stigma

The rejection of Prop 6 is consistent with existing stigmas around incarcerated individuals, which hinders employment opportunities. Formerly incarcerated people often must accept positions that offer low pay, instability, and limited career advancement—so called “dirty work”^{xxxixiii}—that is compounded by weak social connections.^{ii, iii}

The rejection of Prop 6 and the persistence of prison labor, particularly when it lacks fair compensation and workplace protections, perpetuates the notion that formerly incarcerated individuals are inherently unworthy of equitable employment treatment. This devaluation of their labor contributes to the stigma that they are less capable or deserving workers, during and after incarceration. Moreover, even when incarcerated individuals gain work experience, legal barriers such as occupational licensing restrictions and employer discrimination often prevent these skills from translating into post-release employment opportunities or impact wages.^{xxxiv, xxxv} Studies have shown that individuals with criminal records face significant challenges in securing employment, with many employers unwilling to hire them due to perceived risks and being reluctant to “count” their work experience while in prison as work experience on their resume.^{xxxvi} This cycle makes it harder for formerly incarcerated individuals to rebuild their lives and also reinforces negative stereotypes about people with criminal records. Allowing prison work to be voluntary and fairly paid, like jobs outside of prison, may help break this cycle and make it easier for people to successfully reintegrate into society.

REFLECTIONS ON PROP 6 & CALIFORNIA'S SYSTEM OF PRISON LABOR

California voters' rejection of Proposition 6 reflects, in part, the confusion around what the measure actually sought to do and the impacts it might have had. As this bulletin underscores, the state's prison labor system is complex. Mandatory maintenance work provides huge cost savings for the state, but very little financial benefit to incarcerated individuals, while voluntary programs—like manufacturing or fire-fighting—offer slightly higher wages and skills development, though barriers often prevent those skills from translating into meaningful post-release jobs. By breaking down the different types of labor and their social and economic effects, this analysis attempts to provide insight into what Proposition 6 aimed to change and why the issue may have been difficult for voters to fully grasp.

If Prop 6 had passed, the primary change would have been eliminating forced, low-paid prison maintenance work. This could have freed more incarcerated people to focus on education or vocational training, potentially improving post-release outcomes, while also posing operational and budgetary questions for the state. Even without a vote in its favor, the discussion around Prop 6 shines a light on ongoing questions regarding fairness, rehabilitation, and the balance between economic efficiency and labor protections in California's prisons - issues that remain very much unresolved.



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