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Toward Successful Reintegration: Addressing Barriers to Housing and Employment for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals in California

Criminal Justice Policy Memo

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Executive Summary

The criminal justice system in the United States fails to provide a successful process for reintegration for formerly incarcerated individuals. Limited investment in effective reentry programs, housing resources, and vocational training programs has created significant structural barriers to successful reentry into society for formerly incarcerated individuals. These barriers contribute to high rates of poverty, homelessness, and recidivism, especially within marginalized communities. Housing and employment access for individuals recently released from prison must be improved and expanded through effective, equitable, and supportive measures to promote successful reintegration and community wellbeing. This memo outlines policy alternatives aimed at dismantling the housing and employment-related obstacles faced by formerly incarcerated individuals.

This memo considers four potential policy alternatives, which are:

1. Letting present trends continue—no action required to improve access to housing and employment for formerly incarcerated individuals.
2. Education on the record expungement process during incarceration—require prisons to provide formerly incarcerated individuals with forms and documentation detailing the record expungement process upon release.
3. Expanding professional and academic pathways post-incarceration—expand the availability and improve the quality and accessibility of career and educational development programs for formerly incarcerated individuals.
4. Increasing frequency of halfway house audits—require entities that regulate halfway houses to conduct more frequent and intensive audits.

Each of these alternatives presents a potential solution for reducing poverty, homelessness, and recidivism by addressing housing and employment barriers faced by formerly incarcerated individuals and marginalized communities. The proposed alternatives were evaluated based on equity, political feasibility in California, cost effectiveness, and effectiveness. After thorough analysis, providing incarcerated individuals with education on the record expungement process during incarceration was found to significantly increase their ability to secure stable housing and employment post-release, thereby reducing risks of recidivism, poverty, and homelessness.

Therefore, this memo recommends the implementation of education on the record expungement process during incarceration as the most practical and impactful policy solution towards addressing barriers to housing and employment for formerly incarcerated individuals in California.

Define the Problem

The United States prison system lacks adequate support structures and resources for formerly incarcerated individuals transitioning back into society. Upon release, individuals face systemic barriers to securing stable housing, gaining employment, and accessing public benefits.

These obstacles significantly hinder successful reintegration and contribute to high rates of recidivism, poverty, and homelessness. A criminal record decreases an individual's chances of securing safe and affordable housing and thus increases their likelihood of experiencing homelessness. The lack of essential resources and support systems for formerly incarcerated individuals decreases their chances of successful reintegration post-incarceration and highlights the urgent need for systemic criminal justice reform. These individuals must be educated and equipped with the skills and resources necessary to secure housing and employment and thrive upon release.

The United States accounts for approximately 5% of the global population but makes up nearly 25% of the global prison population.¹ Despite a decline in crime rates since the 1990s, the current incarceration rate is more than four times what it was 50 years ago.² It is critical to acknowledge that incarceration disproportionately impacts marginalized populations, including Black, Latinx, impoverished, and unhoused individuals. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) found that at the end of 2019, the imprisonment rate among Black men was nearly six times higher than that of white men, and the rate for Black women was double that of white women.³ Additionally, unhoused individuals are eleven times more likely to face incarceration, and those living in poverty are three times more likely to be incarcerated. Formerly incarcerated individuals are also ten times more likely to be unhoused than the general population.⁴ Every year, over 600,000 individuals are released from prisons, and an additional 9 million people are released from jails. Of this population, two-thirds face rearrest, and over 50% are reincarcerated within three years of their initial release.⁵

Upon release, many individuals lack access to reentry pathways, such as qualifications for obtaining employment and adequate housing. As previously mentioned, formerly incarcerated individuals are significantly more likely to face homelessness, largely because having a criminal record significantly limits and restricts access to both employment and housing. This is due to the widespread use of criminal background checks by employers and landlords in the applicant screening process. A report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that among more than 50,000 individuals released from prisons in 2010, 33% found no employment at all over the following four years, largely due to a combination of a lack of sufficient resources and bias in hiring against individuals with criminal records. Moreover, formerly incarcerated individuals face an average wage reduction of 51.7%, amounting to an estimated \$55.2 billion in lost income annually for the demographic.⁶ Collectively, these findings reveal how systemic racism and structural poverty are not just correlated with, but also actively perpetuate and contribute to, the mechanisms and cycles of mass incarceration.

¹ "Criminal Justice Fact Sheet." *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*, Accessed 24 February 2025, naacp.org/resources/criminal-justice-fact-sheet.

² Barnhorst, Margaret, and Tara O'Neill Hayes. "Incarceration and Poverty in the United States." *American Action Forum*, Accessed 24 February 2025, www.americanactionforum.org/research/incarceration-and-poverty-in-the-united-states/.

³ "Smart Justice." *American Civil Liberties Union*, Accessed 24 February 2025, www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice.

⁴ Barnhorst and O'Neill Hayes. "Incarceration and Poverty in the United States."

⁵ Benecchi, Liz. "Recidivism Imprisons American Progress." *Harvard Political Review*, Accessed 24 February 2025, harvardpolitics.com/recidivism-american-progress/.

⁶ Carson, E. Ann, et al. "Employment of Persons Released from Federal Prison in 2010." *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, December 2021, bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/eprfp10.pdf.

When considering the systemic barriers that formerly incarcerated individuals face during their reentry into society, it is clear that the carceral system—and by extension, the broader justice system—needs significant reform. These barriers can be attributed to three primary causes: the cyclical relationship between poverty and incarceration, which disproportionately affects communities of color; ineffective parole policies and insufficient post-release support systems; and the long-term consequences of having a criminal record. Addressing the deeply rooted nature of the systemic cycles of poverty and incarceration is a complex and difficult task fully beyond the scope of this memo. Therefore, the policy alternatives within this memo will focus on addressing the other primary causes mentioned.

Reentry barriers for formerly incarcerated individuals represent a pressing public issue with permeating and far-reaching social, economic, and ethical implications—barriers that perpetuate cycles of poverty and incarceration while disproportionately impacting historically disenfranchised neighborhoods. Current policies and legislation fail to provide adequate assistance and resources to individuals post-release. For example, recently released individuals with criminal records are ineligible for many public benefits, public housing opportunities, and student loans⁷—resources that would otherwise support their successful reintegration into society if not for these systematic barriers. Moreover, the widespread use of criminal record background checks, combined with ambiguity and difficulties surrounding the record expungement process, prevents many of these individuals from being able to secure stable housing and employment.

These barriers most acutely impact predominantly Black and Latinx communities, alongside those who are impoverished and unhoused. Without targeted policy interventions, the United States will continue to experience unsuccessful reintegration and subsequent high rates of recidivism. To address these challenges, the primary objective of this memo is to reduce recidivism through expanding access to housing, employment, and reentry support for formerly incarcerated individuals to obtain greater opportunities towards societal reintegration and upward mobility. The following three policy alternatives will be examined as potential solutions:

1. Education on the Record Expungement Process During Incarceration
2. Expanding Professional and Academic Pathways Post-Incarceration
3. Increasing Frequency of Halfway House Audits

Construct the Alternative

1. Letting Present Trends Continue

If current trends continue in California, formerly incarcerated individuals will continue to encounter systemic barriers to successful reentry and reintegration into society, including limited access to housing, employment, and public benefits. The criminal justice system will remain focused on individual responsibility, burdening formerly incarcerated individuals, rather than addressing the structural barriers that prevent equitable reintegration. The widespread reliance on

⁷ “Barriers to Successful Re-Entry of Formerly Incarcerated People.” *The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights*, 27 March 2017, civilrights.org/resource/barriers-to-successful-re-entry-of-formerly-incarcerated-people/.

criminal background checks will continue, leaving many formerly incarcerated individuals unable to secure stable housing or achieve financial stability upon release. Formerly incarcerated individuals currently face up to a 51.7% wage reduction, and, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, over 33% remain unemployed for eight years post-release.⁸ If present trends continue and the patterns within the criminal justice system persist, cycles of poverty and recidivism will not only continue but also intensify, particularly within Black and Latinx communities. These historically marginalized communities will continue to experience disproportionate rates of homelessness and economic instability, furthering existing racial and socioeconomic disparities that pose obstacles to social mobility and stability. The continuation of the status quo would thereby sustain, rather than alleviate, the injustices perpetrated by the current criminal justice system.

2. Education on Record Expungement Process During Incarceration

A criminal record makes it significantly harder to obtain housing and employment, as many landlords and employers frequently rely on criminal background checks during the application process.⁹ In California, individuals with felony and/or misdemeanor convictions may be eligible for record expungement; however, many formerly incarcerated individuals are unaware of this option, as it is neither widely publicized nor advertised within the carceral system. As a result, individuals must independently seek out this information, often without the tools or resources to do so effectively and successfully. Currently, over 100,000 individuals are incarcerated in California,¹⁰ many of whom have limited understanding of their legal options post-release. Providing state-sponsored informational materials detailing the expungement process and listing relevant organizations and legal resources approximately three months before, as well as upon release, could significantly increase the number of individuals who pursue and obtain record expungement. These educational materials should be translated and available in the most commonly spoken languages in California to maximize accessibility for a wider variety of formerly incarcerated individuals. Increasing education on the record expungement process and legal options and resources would improve employment and housing prospects, as expunged records would allow more individuals to pass background checks at a higher rate, thus avoiding discrimination during the reintegration process.

3. Expanding Professional and Academic Pathways Post-Incarceration

Currently, California offers several existing programs and initiatives designed to support career and educational development among formerly incarcerated individuals, including the California Department of Corrections (CDCR) Conservation (Fire) Camps Program,¹¹ the UC Underground Scholars Initiative (available through all UC campuses),¹² and the California

⁸ Carson et al. "Employment of Persons Released from Federal Prison in 2010."

⁹ "California Ex-State Prisoners Can Expunge Their Criminal Record." *Law Offices of John D. Rogers*, 15 January 2023, johndrogerslaw.com/california-ex-state-prisoners-can-expunge-their-criminal-record/.

¹⁰ Harris, Heather, and Sean Cremin. "California's Prison Population." *Public Policy Institute of California*, September 2024, www.ppic.org/publication/californias-prison-population/.

¹¹ "Conservation (Fire) Camps Program." *California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation*, 8 October 2024, www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/.

¹² "The Underground Scholars Initiative: Building a 'Prison-to-School Pipeline.'" *California 100*, 1 November 2023, californial00.org/the-underground-scholars-initiative-building-a-prison-to-school-pipeline/.

Workforce Development Board Corrections-Workforce Partnership.¹³ While these programs and initiatives play a valuable role in expanding professional and academic pathways post-incarceration, it is crucial to acknowledge the exploitative conditions associated with some of these pathways. For instance, the CDCR Conservation Camps Program compensates incarcerated fire crew members between “\$5.80 and \$10.24 per day,” depending on their evaluated “skill level”¹⁴—a rate that falls well below the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour.¹⁵ This alternative would work to expand the availability of such programs and initiatives and improve the conditions under which they operate by increasing pay, enforcing labor protections, and ensuring equitable access to education and training. Expanding these professional and academic pathways would promote self-sufficiency and reduce recidivism among formerly incarcerated individuals. Additionally, increasing the pay rate of incarcerated individuals within these programs would help the individuals build a financial safety net to fall back on after they are released. Numerous sources—including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce¹⁶, the National Institutes of Health¹⁷, and the Brookings Institution¹⁸—have published journals and research affirming that improved access to employment and educational opportunities directly correlates with lower recidivism rates among formerly incarcerated populations.

4. Increasing Frequency of Halfway House Audits

Halfway houses serve as transitional residential facilities where formerly incarcerated individuals are required to live before full release. Often privately operated, halfway houses are not held to the same transparency or data reporting standards as public facilities. This makes it difficult to monitor conditions in these facilities effectively and thus harder to ensure safe and supportive living conditions. The majority of the data and information known about these halfway houses is from investigative journalists or first-hand accounts. Reports of violence, drug use, overcrowding, poor sanitation, excessive costs, and long waitlists demonstrate how halfway houses are not contributing to safe and effective reentry for formerly incarcerated individuals. Instead, these facilities replicate carceral conditions rather than facilitating successful reintegration. Although federal oversight agencies and state corrections departments conduct audits of halfway houses, these audits are extremely infrequent and limited in scope. Between 2013 and 2010, the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) released only eight audit reports on

¹³ “Corrections – Workforce Partnership & Prison to Employment Initiative.” *California Workforce Development Board*, Accessed 4 March 2025, cwdb.ca.gov/partnerships/workforce-corrections-partnership/.

¹⁴ “Frequently Asked Questions: Conservation (Fire) Camp Program.” *California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation*, 15 January 2025, www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/faq-conservation-fire-camp-program/.

¹⁵ Palazzolo, Mike, and Adithya Pattabhiramaiah. “Raising the Minimum Wage Improves Nutrition Among Food-Insecure Households.” *Center for Poverty and Inequality Research*, Accessed 4 March 2025, poverty.ucdavis.edu/post/raising-minimum-wage-improves-nutrition-among-food-insecure-households.

¹⁶ Ferguson Melhorn, Stephanie et al. “The Workforce Impact of Second Chance Hiring.” *U.S. Chamber of Commerce*, 18 September 2024, www.uschamber.com/workforce/data-deep-dive-the-workforce-impact-of-second-chance-hiring-3.

¹⁷ Ramakers, Anke et al. “Not Just Any Job Will Do: A Study on Employment Characteristics and Recidivism Risks After Release.” *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 28 July 2016, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5669259/>.

¹⁸ Duwe, Grant et al. “A better path forward for criminal justice: Training and employment for correctional populations.” April 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-better-path-forward-for-criminal-justice-training-and-employment-for-correctional-populations/>

federal halfway houses. A similar infrequency of audits can also be found on a state level.¹⁹ A 2018 report on a Residential Reentry Center (RRC) in Washington, D.C. identified recurring issues such as disorganized resident files, inadequate subsistence collection, and insufficient incident report documentation. The OIG admitted that it did not track these deficiencies over time or take corrective action effectively.²⁰ To address these deficiencies, this policy alternative proposes increasing the number and frequency of audits conducted on halfway houses by oversight committees. More rigorous, standardized, and regular inspections would help ensure compliance with standards, improve data reporting and accountability, and create safer and more rehabilitative environments for formerly incarcerated residents. In addition to more effectively monitoring halfway houses that fail to comply with regulations, increased oversight through audits could also help assess and ultimately increase the effectiveness of halfway houses as transitional support systems post-release.

Select the Criteria

1. Equity

Equity—the just and fair treatment of all individuals and communities to ensure that they receive the necessary support and resources to overcome systemic barriers toward achieving equal opportunities—is a critical criterion for evaluating any policy proposal. When aiming to expand housing and employment opportunities for reentry populations, equity guarantees that all individuals, especially members of marginalized groups, can receive the appropriate and adequate resources and opportunities for fair access. This criterion will be measured by examining:

- 1) The degree to which reentry individuals and advocacy groups have a voice and influence in shaping policies, as reflected in decision-making processes, and
- 2) Whether post-incarceration housing and education resources are distributed fairly, regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status, or ability; and
- 3) The inclusivity of funding allocation mechanisms and eligibility requirements, especially in whether they reduce discrimination and promote access; and
- 4) Demographic outcomes measuring equitable access and long-term success, especially for Black, Latinx, impoverished, and unhoused individuals.

2. Political Feasibility within California

Political feasibility, defined as the likelihood that a policy alternative can be realistically implemented given the current political climate, is an important criterion for any policy proposal. This criterion is especially important within criminal justice reform, where proposals—particularly those supporting formerly incarcerated individuals—often face political scrutiny and resistance. Assessing political feasibility helps ensure that time and resources are

¹⁹ Daniel, Roxanne, and Wendy Sawyer. “What You Should Know about Halfway Houses.” *Prison Policy Initiative*, 3 September 2020, www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2020/09/03/halfway/.

²⁰ “Audit of the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ Residential Reentry Center Contracts Awarded to Reynolds & Associates, Inc., Washington, D.C.” *Office of the Inspector General*, September 2018, oig.justice.gov/reports/2018/a1830.pdf

directed toward alternatives with a reasonable chance of enactment. This criterion will be evaluated based on:

- 1) The number of organizations or government agencies that must approve the alternative, and
- 2) The level of influence those respective government agencies hold in altering, approving, or rejecting a policy; and
- 3) The historical record of similar proposals being accepted or blocked by these stakeholders is based solely on political considerations.

3. Cost-Efficiency

Cost-efficiency measures the extent to which a policy alternative achieves its intended outcomes at the lowest possible cost while maximizing public benefit. In the context of criminal justice reform, this includes reducing recidivism, enhancing public safety, and promoting successful reintegration, all while minimizing financial strain on the state. Cost-efficiency will be evaluated based on:

- 1) The direct costs of implementation, including but not limited to staffing, infrastructure, and materials;
- 2) The potential for long-term savings through reduced incarceration costs and increased employment and housing stability; and
- 3) The extent to which the policy reallocates existing resources toward evidence-based, preventative interventions.

4. Effectiveness

Effectiveness refers to the degree to which a policy alternative achieves its intended goal—in this case, the successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals and the reduction of recidivism. A policy is considered effective if it results in measurable improvements in housing stability, employment rates, and community reintegration outcomes. This criterion is central to evaluating the real-world impact of a policy and ensures that proposals not only sound promising in theory but also produce meaningful results for affected populations. Effectiveness will be evaluated by:

- 1) Quantitative metrics such as the percentage of formerly incarcerated individuals being able to secure stable housing or employment, and changes in recidivism rates compared to the status quo; and
- 2) Qualitative data, including participant testimonials, feedback from community organizations, and assessments of reentry programs and materials; and
- 3) The degree to which the policy addresses underlying structural barriers to reentry, particularly for marginalized communities.

Project the Outcomes

1. Letting Present Trends Continue

Equity: The status quo is inherently inequitable as it fails to acknowledge the racial disparities and systemic barriers that formerly incarcerated individuals from marginalized communities face. Black, Latinx, impoverished, and unhoused populations, in particular,

experience the inherent oppression of the criminal justice system in a compounded and intensified way. The widespread use of background checks in housing and employment deepens these inequities, further hindering successful reintegration. The lack of resources and systemic support within the status quo perpetuates cycles of recidivism and poverty within the criminal justice system, which in turn, further marginalizes historically disenfranchised populations.

Political Feasibility in California: Letting present trends continue is politically feasible in the short term because it requires no immediate action by policymakers, meaning that they do not have to face political tension and pushback with any new legislative changes or reallocation of resources. However, this inaction is not sustainable. California’s social and political climate has showcased increased support for criminal justice reform, with recent legislation, such as SB 731, the Clean Slate Law,²¹ and AB 2147 advocating for the expungement of incarcerated firefighters²²—reflecting support for initiatives and programs that would support reentry for formerly incarcerated individuals. As advocacy organizations, academic institutions, and the general public increasingly mobilize around reentry support and systemic racial justice, policymakers continuing to ignore reentry barriers risk alienating an ever-growing group of voters. Furthermore, public trust in the criminal justice system—and in the respective institutions that oversee it—could further erode, creating political liabilities for elected officials. Failure to act would conflict with California’s broader policy objectives around racial justice, poverty reduction, and homelessness, making long-term political feasibility increasingly untenable.

Cost-Efficiency: Maintaining the status quo imposes a significant financial burden on the state. High rates of recidivism, alongside homelessness and crime, result in significant costs to California. For instance, in 2021 alone, recidivism was estimated to cost California \$1.9 billion.²³ This stems from the widespread reliance on public services for individuals, such as emergency shelters and social services, as well as incarceration costs for formerly incarcerated individuals who end up back in prison. Without proper reform and restructuring of the criminal justice system, formerly incarcerated individuals will continue to rely on the state’s services, intensifying economic pressure on the state over time.

Effectiveness: Allowing present trends to continue is ineffective in successfully reintegrating formerly incarcerated individuals. Existing patterns within the status quo—such as a 51.7% wage reduction and a 33% eight-year period of unemployment post-release among formerly incarcerated individuals—are likely to persist or even intensify and worsen.²⁴ The status quo fails to address the structural barriers to reentry for formerly incarcerated individuals and will continue to marginalize already vulnerable communities unless proactive intervention is taken to challenge this current ineffectiveness.

2. Education on Record Expungement Process During Incarceration

²¹ “Bill Text - SB-731 Criminal Records: Relief,” *California Legislative Information*, Accessed 27 April 2025, https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=20210220SB731.

²² “AB 2147: Expedited Expungement for Former Fire Crew Members,” *California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation*, April 23, 2024, www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/fire_camp_expungement/.

²³ “The Cost of Recidivism,” *The Council of State Governments Justice Center*, April 2023, csgjusticecenter.org/publications/the-cost-of-recidivism/.

²⁴ Carson et al. “Employment of Persons Released from Federal Prison in 2010.”

Equity: Education on the record expungement process in the form of a handout, approximately three months before and then again upon release, is inherently equitable, as everyone being released from prison will receive the handout. Therefore, everyone will have an equal opportunity to read the handout and act accordingly to begin the expungement process should they choose to do so. However, there are aspects of this policy alternative that are inequitable. For example, the handout would be printed in a couple of languages ideally, but there is still the variable of a language barrier, as it will only be printed in the most common languages spoken in California, namely English, Spanish, and Mandarin. Additionally, according to the National Adult Literacy Survey, over 70% of incarcerated Americans cannot read past a fourth-grade level.²⁵ The handout will then be straightforward and easily digestible, to combat the equity problem of illiteracy as much as possible.

Political Feasibility in California: Education on the record expungement process is politically feasible, as the California political climate supports record expungement as well as opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals. For example, California has the nation's broadest laws when it comes to record expungement.²⁶ Just recently, in 2023, California passed a law legalizing record expungement for formerly incarcerated individuals with a felony conviction.²⁷ Considering the current political climate of the state of California, as well as projections as to the future of California politics, this alternative would have high feasibility.

Cost-Efficiency: This alternative is cost-efficient as the price of paper and ink can be minimized to one page, and NGOs or nonprofit organizations can contribute to the creation of the record expungement infographics. The highest areas of cost would be the paper, the ink, and the cost of maintaining federal and non-profit employees to create and distribute the infographic. The possibility of government funding, as well as contributions from California record expungement nonprofits, would significantly lower the cost of this initiative. Record expungement also decreases the rate of recidivism, which is a significant burden on the state's finances. Record expungement education could save the state the financial burden of maintaining an overflowing prison system.

Effectiveness: The effectiveness of this alternative relies on the outcome of the record expungement, whether people use the options available on the form, and the helpfulness of a sealed record for formerly incarcerated individuals applying for housing. The success of this alternative could therefore be measured in the potential shifts to the number of formerly incarcerated individuals receiving housing or employment opportunities. This alternative would be incredibly helpful for increased record expungement, which can, in turn, lead to better housing and employment outcomes for formerly incarcerated people. With that being said, education on this subject is not a guarantee that people will use this information to get their records expunged. The effectiveness of this option fully relies on the individual and whether or not they are able and willing to utilize these resources.

²⁵ "Early Literacy Connection to Incarceration." *Governor's Early Literacy Foundation*, 18 September 2020, governorsfoundation.org/gelf-articles/early-literacy-connection-to-incarceration/.

²⁶ Kuang, Jeanne. "California Is Clearing Criminal Records — Including Violent Crimes — to Offer Second Chances." *CalMatters*, 22 March 2024, calmatters.org/justice/2024/03/california-criminal-records-expungement-law/.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

3. Expanding Professional and Academic Pathways Post-Incarceration

Equity: Expanding California’s existing professional and academic pathways programs for incarcerated individuals is a highly equitable approach. It would provide individuals, especially those from marginalized communities, an opportunity to build skills and pursue education that could help them secure employment post-incarceration. By increasing access to professional training and education, the alternative helps address systemic barriers that have historically excluded Black, Latinx, impoverished, and unhoused individuals from economic opportunities. Additionally, this alternative advocates for fairer wages for prison labor, promoting equity by recognizing the value of incarcerated individuals’ labor and helping them build financial stability prior to release.

Political Feasibility in California: This alternative is politically feasible given California’s progressive stance on criminal justice reform. Existing legislation, such as AB 2147²⁸, the Incarcerated Individual Hand Crew Conviction Relief Act, and SB 731²⁹, the California Clean Slate Act, reflects strong state support for second-chance initiatives that would seal or expunge records of formerly incarcerated individuals, making it easier for them to secure housing and employment. Additionally, California public universities—particularly the UC and CSU systems—all across the state support programs like Underground Scholars, which help individuals with criminal backgrounds pursue higher education. Therefore, an alternative focusing on expanding professional and academic pathways post-incarceration would be reasonably politically feasible in California, considering such programs and initiatives already exist with functioning funding and support systems.

Cost-Efficiency: Compared to the high costs of incarceration—approximately \$133,110 per individual annually in California³⁰—investments in expanding professional and academic pathways post-incarceration are significantly more cost-effective. Education and job training programs cost significantly less and have been shown to reduce recidivism rates. Investments in reentry education—including vocational training and college accessibility programs—can improve employment outcomes for inmates and lower the chances of inmates becoming re-offenders. This ultimately saves the state money in the long term, bolsters the economy’s productivity levels, and reduces some of the widespread reliance placed on public assistance programs.

Effectiveness: Expanding professional and academic pathways for individuals is a highly effective alternative. A study conducted by Hope College found a 43% reduction in recidivism among parolees who participated in prison education programs and a 13% increase in post-release employment for parolees who participated in the same programs.³¹ Another study conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California, however, found that in educational and vocational programs conducted between 2015 and 2019, reduced recidivism rates, but only slightly. The study found that over half of those with prior convictions and 43% of first-time

²⁸ “Assembly Bill No. 2147.” *AB-2147 Convictions: Expungement: Incarcerated Individual Hand Crews*, 14 September 2020, leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB2147.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ “Senate Bill No. 731.” *Bill Text - SB-731 Criminal Records: Relief*, 3 Oct. 2022, leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220SB731.

³¹ “Benefits of Prison Education.” *Hope College*, 2019, hope.edu/offices/hope-western-prison-education-program/benefits-prison-education.html.

arrestees were arrested for felonies.³² While both studies suggest that these programs reduce recidivism rates, they also reflect a broader trend in the literature: ongoing disagreements about the extent of their success. With that, it is difficult to predict with certainty exactly how effective this alternative would be.

4. Increasing Frequency of Halfway House Audits

Equity: Increasing the frequency of halfway house audits can potentially advance equity for formerly incarcerated individuals. By increasing the frequency of audits, mandating transparency and accountability in data reporting, and tying government funding to reentry success metrics like housing retention and employment rates instead of profit, this policy alternative can address systemic inequities in accessing safe and supportive housing post-incarceration. Oversight processes designed to be culturally competent and trauma-informed can ensure that evaluations recognize and respond to the lived experiences of marginalized individuals, thereby further enhancing equity. Since poor halfway house conditions and limited support services post-incarceration disproportionately affect BIPOC, disabled, and low-income individuals,³³ addressing these issues with halfway houses will improve equity by directly supporting these marginalized communities in their transition process. In reforming policies and structures of halfway houses, the voices of formerly incarcerated individuals, especially those a part of marginalized communities, and advocacy groups can be prioritized and taken into consideration, which will further increase equity for formerly incarcerated individuals.

Political Feasibility in California: Increasing the frequency of halfway house audits is the least politically feasible alternative proposed. On a federal level, the Trump administration would likely oppose this alternative because the administration's criminal justice approach emphasizes punitive measures over rehabilitation and has also shown support for increased policing and incarceration rather than investing in support services for formerly incarcerated individuals.³⁴ This would impact California's ability to implement this alternative on a statewide level because federal agencies, such as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), provide grants to fund programs such as halfway houses. On a state level, Governor Gavin Newsom has shown a willingness to support various reentry programs. When it comes to the regulation of these reentry programs, however, Newsom has been criticized for insufficient data collection on the implementation or success of said programs. With the amount of criticism that he has already received, it is unlikely that he will support or acknowledge this alternative. Additionally, California's upcoming 2026 gubernatorial race will produce a new governor for the state, and it is nearly impossible to predict how the new governor will respond to this alternative. With all of that in mind, this alternative is not necessarily politically feasible considering the current political climate.

³² Harris, Heather, Brandon Martin, and Sean Cremin. "California's Prison Programs and Reentry Pathways." *Public Policy Institute of California*, June 2024, www.ppic.org/publication/california-prison-programs-and-reentry-pathways/.

³³ Danya E. Keene, Amy B. Smoyer, and Kim M. Blankenship, "Stigma, Housing and Identity after Prison," *The Sociological Review*, 12 June 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026118777447>.

³⁴ "Trump Promises to Militarize Police, Reincarcerate Thousands, and Expand Death Penalty." *American Civil Liberties Union*, 19 July 2024, www.aclu.org/news/criminal-law-reform/trump-promises-to-militarize-police-reincarcerate-thousands-and-expand-death-penalty.

Cost-Efficiency: Increasing the frequency of halfway house audits can improve cost-efficiency by reallocating resources toward evidence-based reentry practices that reduce recidivism and long-term incarceration costs while supporting formerly incarcerated individuals in finding and maintaining safe and supportive housing. Although increasing audits and mandating outcome-based funding may require initial high costs, these costs are offset by the long-term savings associated with reducing re-incarceration rates and improving rehabilitation outcomes, especially when housing support can help individuals in finding jobs and contributing to the economy.³⁵ By incentivizing halfway houses to focus on housing retention and employment outcomes rather than bed occupancy, the policy redirects funding toward services that contribute to reducing recidivism and improving the lives of formerly incarcerated individuals. Furthermore, improved living conditions and oversight reduce the burden on law enforcement and emergency services frequently called to intervene in mismanaged facilities, which can often be costly.

Effectiveness: Current data on the effectiveness of halfway houses is limited due to the infrequency of audits. It is difficult for researchers and policy analysts to say definitively whether halfway houses help reduce recidivism, with some studies even suggesting that they increase recidivism.³⁶ The inability of researchers and policymakers to successfully analyze the effects of halfway houses is part of the problem that this alternative is attempting to remedy. Increased audits will allow for more data collection and subsequent analysis of the effectiveness of halfway house programs. Unfortunately, with the current lack of data, it is difficult to give percentage estimates of how improved halfway houses will allow formerly incarcerated individuals to secure stable housing and reduce recidivism rates. The quantitative assessment of this alternative would have to be conducted during a pilot program that garnered concrete data. The qualitative assessment that this criterion requires would have to be conducted in pilot programs or test trials, as there is no existing data to be analyzed.

Important Tradeoffs

1. Letting Present Trends Continue

Allowing present trends to continue may initially seem like the best approach as it requires no additional public funding, new infrastructure, or resource allocation. Politically, letting present trends continue through inaction is low-risk in the short term; however, delaying urgent reform and ignoring systemic barriers within the criminal justice system will only exacerbate the structural barriers it seeks to avoid addressing. Maintaining the status quo will undoubtedly perpetuate racial disparities and economic inequities faced by formerly incarcerated individuals, particularly among Black and Latinx communities, making it inherently inequitable. Instead, housing discrimination, employment barriers, and cycles of incarceration, recidivism,

³⁵ Couloute, Lucius. “Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among Formerly Incarcerated People,” *Prison Policy Initiative*, August 2018, www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html.

³⁶ Dolnick, Sam. “Pennsylvania Study Finds Halfway Houses Don’t Reduce Recidivism.” *The New York Times*, 24 March 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/nyregion/pennsylvania-study-finds-halfway-houses-dont-reduce-recidivism.

and poverty will persist, which is neither cost-efficient nor politically feasible in the long term. Therefore, the status quo clearly fails the criteria for effectiveness, since it does not reduce recidivism or improve housing and employment stability among formerly incarcerated individuals. While continuing current trends may seem superficially cost-effective, it neglects the needs of marginalized communities and increases long-term social and economic costs. Inaction strips individuals of the necessary reintegration resources and worsens existing systems of oppression and structural barriers, rather than expanding and creating conditions for successful societal reintegration.

2. Education on Record Expungement Process During Incarceration

Providing education on the record expungement process during incarceration would significantly increase equitable access to critical reintegration resources, as all individuals would be able to receive informational materials. However, language barriers and low literacy rates among incarcerated individuals may limit the full reach of this alternative. Furthermore, while education on the record expungement process—and record expungement itself—would potentially improve housing and employment opportunities, it does not fully eliminate societal discrimination against formerly incarcerated individuals. Despite these limitations, this alternative still ranks high in cost-efficiency, as the primary costs of this policy involve distributing simple printed materials, with high potential for sponsorship from nonprofit organizations or federal funding. It is also highly efficient, as this alternative can be integrated into existing inmate release procedures with little operational disruption. This model is also highly politically feasible, as California is the leading state in record expungement initiatives. Within the current political climate, record expungement education during incarceration is a highly politically feasible alternative.

3. Expanding Professional And Academic Pathways Post-Incarceration

Expanding professional and academic pathways post-incarceration directly addresses disproportionate rates of unemployment and the limited upward career mobility among formerly incarcerated individuals. This policy alternative would improve reintegration outcomes and promote greater socioeconomic equity by enhancing access to education, job training, and fair employment opportunities, thereby scoring high on the effectiveness criteria. Two main restrictions limiting this alternative are: 1) creating and expanding professional and academic pathways post-incarceration are costly, making this alternative less cost-effective than other lower-cost alternatives, and 2) while California's broader political climate considering criminal justice is increasingly progressive, attitudes regarding prison labor and post-release housing and workforce integration remain highly mixed (as seen in the failure to pass CA Proposition 6 in the most previous election cycle),³⁷ making this alternative moderately politically feasible.

4. Increase the Frequency of Halfway House Audits

Increasing the frequency of halfway house audits most directly addresses the problem of limited housing opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals by providing access to safe, stable, and affordable housing, which is why it scored highly in effectiveness. Since the infrastructure of halfway houses is already in place, increasing regulation and audit frequency

³⁷ "California Proposition 6, Remove Involuntary Servitude as Punishment for Crime Amendment." *Ballotpedia*, Accessed 15 April 2025, [ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_6_Remove_Involuntary_Servitude_as_Punishment_for_Crime_Amendment_\(2024\)](https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_6_Remove_Involuntary_Servitude_as_Punishment_for_Crime_Amendment_(2024)).

would enhance the quality of living for formerly incarcerated individuals, effectively addressing one of the key problems we identified. Additionally, this alternative would be relatively cost-efficient, as major infrastructure investments would not be required. The primary costs would likely stem from hiring additional auditors to conduct more frequent inspections. This alternative, however, is limited in its equity as it would only benefit formerly incarcerated individuals residing in halfway houses, rather than addressing the broader housing needs of all formerly incarcerated individuals. Most importantly, this proposal is not politically feasible. Given the current political climate, it is highly unlikely to gain enough implementation support. As a result, despite its projected effectiveness and moderate cost, this alternative cannot be recommended at this point.

Matrix Scoring Explanation

Score	Meaning	Cumulative Score	Meaning
1	Low	1 - 6	Inadequate
2	Low-Moderate		
3	Moderate	7 - 13	Favorable
4	Moderate-High	14 - 20	Advisable
5	High		

Matrix for Proposed Outcomes

Criteria	Status Quo	Alternative 1: Education on Record Expungement Process	Alternative 2: Expanding Professional and Academic Pathways Post-Incarceration	Alternative 3: Increasing Frequency of Halfway House Audits
Equity	1	4	3	3
Political Feasibility in California	4	5	3	2
Cost-Efficiency	2	5	3	3
Effectiveness	2	3	4	4
Cumulative Score	9	17	13	12

Recommendation

After a thorough evaluation of all alternatives, we recommend the implementation of Education on Record Expungement Process During Incarceration as the most feasible and effective alternative. This alternative will be implemented by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) beginning January 1, 2026. Compared to the other alternatives evaluated, it is the most cost-efficient, requiring minimal resources—primarily paper, ink, printing services, and existing staff—and is likely to receive financial support from nonprofit organizations and state funding. Additionally, this policy aligns with California’s history of support for record expungement pathways, making it a realistic and actionable next step. In recent years, many strides have been taken to adopt more record expungement pathways for incarcerated individuals. Examples of this include the journey towards legalizing cannabis in California and sealing previous cannabis-related offenses. In 2023, more than 11 million criminal records were wiped clean within the first 6 months of the adoption of AB 1706 and SB 731, both bills being largely popular and well supported by California legislators and community members alike. While expanding professional and academic pathways and increasing halfway house regulations are both promising in terms of long-term outcomes, they are significantly less politically feasible and more costly in the initial implementation at scale. The status quo, while easy to maintain, fails to address the urgent needs of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individuals. Record expungement education, on the other hand, provides a direct and accessible way to empower individuals during incarceration and improve their chances of reintegration, especially within California’s policy landscape.

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