

## **Abstract**

California's inmate fire camp program is often presented as a rehabilitative initiative that offers incarcerated individuals vocational training, discipline, and chances for reintegration into society. However, a closer examination, based on data from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and critical perspectives on carceral labor, reveals a more complex reality. While participants in the program exhibit slightly lower short-term recidivism rates than nonparticipants, the program's potential benefits are frequently undermined by significant barriers after release. Restrictive occupational licensing laws, a lack of recognized firefighting credentials, employment discrimination, and racial inequalities hinder many former participants from securing stable employment in the firefighting profession. As a result, the program's rehabilitative claims are weakened, leading to outcomes that often resemble labor exploitation rather than meaningful justice reform. Without systemic policy changes, including certification pathways, licensing reform, and structured reentry support, the program risks perpetuating structural inequality while continuing to provide the state with inexpensive, high-risk labor. Addressing these contradictions is essential for transforming wildfire suppression practices to promote equity, genuine rehabilitation, and long-term public safety.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, California has increasingly depended on incarcerated individuals to assist with wildfire suppression through the CAL FIRE Inmate Fire Camp Program. While the program is often promoted as a rehabilitative opportunity that provides vocational training, discipline, and structure, its long-term effectiveness remains a subject of debate. Many individuals who have participated in the program face significant barriers after their release, including employment discrimination, a lack of recognized certifications, and restrictive occupational licensing laws that limit access to firefighting careers (Goodman, 2012; Tolin, 2025). Data from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2023) indicate that participants in the program have a lower three-year recidivism rate (45.3%) than nonparticipants (51.1%). However, these short-term gains do not necessarily lead to long-term success in reintegration. This study explores the long-term effects of participating in the CAL FIRE Inmate Fire Camp Program on recidivism rates, employment opportunities, and rehabilitation outcomes for formerly incarcerated individuals in California. Using a qualitative policy and literature review approach, this paper draws on state data and peer-reviewed research to assess the gap between the program's rehabilitative claims and its actual outcomes. **Although California's inmate fire camp program is presented as a rehabilitative opportunity, its long-term benefits are undermined by systemic barriers such as licensing restrictions, employment discrimination, and the state's reliance on low-cost prison labor, demonstrating the need for meaningful structural reform rather than symbolic rehabilitation.**

## **Carceral Labor and the Political Economy of Fire Suppression**

California has relied on incarcerated individuals for wildfire suppression since the 1940s, when the state initiated the Conservation Camp Program in response to an escalating wildfire crisis (Goodman, 2010). This program aimed to achieve two primary objectives: alleviating prison overcrowding and enhancing the state's firefighting workforce. It was presented as a rehabilitative opportunity for inmates. Over time, the program has become an essential element of California's wildfire management strategy, with incarcerated firefighters comprising up to 30% of wildfire suppression crews during peak fire seasons (CDCR, 2023). In addition, the CAL FIRE program cultivates a positive rehabilitation image, yet its primary focus is on the state's economic benefit. According to Goodman (2010), California saves around \$100 million each year by employing incarcerated individuals who earn as little as \$2 per day, compared to professional firefighters who earn \$40 or more per hour and receive benefits. These cost savings come at the expense of the incarcerated workers, who face hazardous working conditions with minimal financial compensation and no guarantees of employment opportunities upon their release. While the program instills discipline and provides valuable firefighting experience, Goodman (2012) argues that it often lacks the systemic support necessary to help participants transition successfully into society after their release.

## ***Short-Term Recidivism Reduction and Long-Term Structural Barriers***

The CAL FIRE program provides valuable training for incarcerated individuals; however, systemic barriers limit its long-term effectiveness. Many participants struggle to find employment due to restrictive licensing laws and the stigma associated with criminal records (Tolin, 2025). Those who fight wildfires are often excluded from professional firefighting careers, undermining their rehabilitation and future stability. California saves approximately \$100 million annually by employing incarcerated firefighters for as little as \$2 per day (Goodman, 2010), yet they receive minimal compensation and few benefits. Additionally, racial disparities within the program reflect broader systemic inequalities (Goodman, 2014). Despite these challenges, some perspectives question the need for broader reform. One common counterargument is that incarcerated individuals should be grateful for the opportunity to participate in the fire camp program and that the state is not obligated to provide additional employment options after their release. Some may argue that since these participants have criminal records, expanding access to professional firefighting careers is unnecessary or undeserved. However, this perspective overlooks the fact that most participants will eventually return to their communities. If the state relies on incarcerated individuals to perform dangerous, frontline work, denying them meaningful employment opportunities after their release undermines both rehabilitation and public safety. Supporting reentry not only benefits individuals but is also crucial for reducing recidivism and enhancing community safety.

### ***Structural Barriers to Reentry: Licensing Laws and Racial Inequality***

The CAL FIRE program offers vocational training for incarcerated individuals; however, systemic barriers significantly hinder its long-term effectiveness. Tolin (2025) argues that many participants face substantial obstacles in securing employment as firefighters due to restrictive occupational licensing laws and the persistent stigma associated with a criminal record. Even those who bravely risk their lives during California's most devastating wildfires often find themselves excluded from professional firefighting careers. This legal exclusion perpetuates cycles of poverty and incarceration, undermining the very rehabilitative goals the program claims to promote. Financial exploitation adds to these challenges. California saves approximately \$100 million annually by employing incarcerated firefighters at wages as low as \$2 per day, which is a fraction of what professional firefighters earn (Goodman, 2010). Despite performing life-threatening work, these individuals receive no hazard pay, healthcare benefits, or workplace protections. The lack of formal job certifications and post-release employment support leaves many former participants without viable pathways to economic stability, trapping them in the same disadvantaged conditions that contributed to their initial incarceration (Tolin, 2025). Moreover, racial inequalities within the program reinforce broader systemic injustices. Goodman (2014) observes that while inmates work together across racial lines during wildfire suppression, segregation remains entrenched in their living quarters, perpetuating social divisions that hinder meaningful rehabilitation. These disparities create additional barriers for marginalized groups, particularly people of color, making it even more difficult for them to break free from cycles of incarceration and poverty after their release. Without comprehensive policy reforms that address licensing barriers, fair compensation, and post-release support, the CAL FIRE inmate fire camp program will continue to prioritize the state's financial interests at the expense of the vulnerable individuals it claims to rehabilitate.

### **From Exploitation to Reintegration**

#### ***Building Equitable Futures Through Policy Reform***

Policy changes are essential to breaking the cycle of incarceration and helping individuals in the CAL FIRE inmate fire camp program rehabilitate successfully. Without these changes, barriers will prevent formerly incarcerated individuals from using their skills and achieving economic stability. One important change is removing licensing laws that block qualified former inmates from pursuing firefighting jobs. These laws mainly affect those with non-violent convictions, despite their willingness to contribute positively (Tolin, 2025). Allowing record clearing and offering licensing waivers would help them find jobs that match their training. The state should also establish certification programs in the CAL FIRE training curriculum. By providing recognized credentials, California can help inmates become more competitive in the job market (Goodman, 2012) and support employers in recognizing them as qualified candidates. Lastly, developing reentry programs focused on transitional jobs, mentorship, and job

placement can support individuals after their release. Partnerships between state agencies, employers, and community organizations can ensure that formerly incarcerated individuals have the resources they need to reintegrate successfully (Apel, 2011). These reforms can turn the CAL FIRE program into a real opportunity for rehabilitation and reintegration.

### ***Reframing Economic Efficiency and Community Impact***

Addressing the systemic failures of the CAL FIRE inmate fire camp program can provide significant benefits for both individuals and society as a whole. Reducing recidivism rates would not only decrease the financial burden of incarceration on taxpayers but also enhance community safety (CDCR, 2023). By providing meaningful employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals, we can reduce reliance on public assistance programs and strengthen local economies. While the state currently benefits from substantial financial savings from inmate labor, Apel (2011) argues that the long-term societal costs, such as higher unemployment, increased poverty, and higher recidivism rates, outweigh these short-term fiscal advantages. Redirecting state resources toward reentry programs and eliminating systemic barriers would lead to healthier communities and a more equitable criminal justice system. As Goodman (2012) highlights, adopting a restorative justice model focused on rehabilitation rather than exploitation would position California as a leader in progressive criminal justice reform.

### **Conclusion**

The CAL FIRE inmate fire camp program reflects a deeper contradiction in California's criminal justice system. While it provides valuable skills to incarcerated individuals, systemic barriers continue to impact their long-term success after release. Without proper certifications, job opportunities, and reentry support, the program risks becoming a source of low-cost labor rather than a true path to rehabilitation. The debate over Proposition 6, which aimed to eliminate the constitutional provision for involuntary servitude in prisons, reflects ongoing controversies surrounding prison labor in California (California Legislative Analyst's Office, 2024). Although the measure was rejected, it highlights the political divide on these issues. Recent efforts to expand opportunities for formerly incarcerated firefighters indicate a recognition of these barriers, but reforms remain limited and do not fully address underlying inequalities. Effective reform must create certification pathways, remove licensing barriers, and invest in reentry support. Addressing these challenges would improve outcomes for formerly incarcerated individuals while enhancing public safety and community stability. Ultimately, transforming the CAL FIRE inmate fire camp program requires confronting the broader inequities within the criminal justice system and prioritizing long-term reintegration over short-term economic gains. Without these reforms, the program will continue to embody a system that values economic efficiency over genuine rehabilitation.

## References

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