



Creating Career Opportunities for Formerly Incarcerated Firefighters

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A Note to Readers: As formerly incarcerated researchers, we do not advocate for imprisonment to solve systemic social problems. We are also cognizant that prisons can and do exist in California. Please do not misunderstand our policy recommendations as an endorsement of incarceration, forced idleness, coerced labor, or the more extensive criminal legal system.

Abstract

Much has been written about the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) conservation camp program, also known as the “fire camps,” in which incarcerated men, women, and juveniles work as firefighters battling wildfires throughout California. However, few incarcerated firefighters have had the opportunity to turn that experience into a career upon release because of restrictions on people with felony convictions. This research project uses semi-structured in-depth interviews with 19 people who worked as firefighters while incarcerated in California to shed light on their experiences seeking work after being released and their views on how to support formerly incarcerated firefighters. We find that incarcerated firefighters performed meaningful and heroic work, and that the fire camps offered benefits such as shortened sentences, safer and more comfortable living conditions, and improved relationships with other incarcerated people and with loved ones on the outside. However, fire camp workers also undertook difficult and dangerous tasks, receiving low pay and little recognition. Though many wished to pursue careers in firefighting, they were usually discouraged or blocked from doing so. Based on our research participants’ experiences, we recommend expanding eligibility for the fire camp program to more incarcerated people, expanding the felony expungement process to benefit formerly incarcerated firefighters, creating direct pathways from the fire camps to firefighting careers, and piloting the fire camp model in another trade.

Key Findings

- » All interview participants valued the opportunity to work in the fire camp program.
- » Incarcerated firefighters performed important work protecting communities across California.
- » Fire camps were safer, more comfortable, and more humane than conventional prisons.
- » Firefighting helped fire camp workers improve themselves and their relationships with others.
- » In-person visits with loved ones allowed fire camp workers to form powerful, lasting memories.
- » Fire camp workers performed tasks that nonincarcerated workers did not want to do.
- » Incarcerated firefighters did not receive full recognition for their strenuous efforts.
- » Formerly incarcerated firefighters faced discrimination and legal barriers to firefighting careers.
- » AB 2147, intended to reduce legal barriers to formerly incarcerated firefighters, has had limited effect.
- » A program led by formerly incarcerated firefighters created a career pathway for fire camp workers.

Introduction

This research project uses semi-structured in-depth interviews with people who worked as firefighters while incarcerated in California to examine their experiences seeking employment as firefighters or otherwise after being released. Much has been written about the exploitative nature of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) conservation camp fire crew program, also known as the “fire camps” (Janssen 2009; Goodman 2010; Polick-Kirkpatrick 2019; VanderPyl 2021). Inmate firefighters undertake dangerous and demanding labor fighting wildfires throughout California in exchange for \$1 to \$5 per day (Lowe 2021) and \$1 per hour while actively fighting fires (Stygar, 2020). In addition to risking their lives in California’s increasingly long and virulent fire “season,” historically, few prisoners who fight fires while incarcerated are allowed to turn that experience into a career after being released. Recent legislative reforms, such as AB 2147, were intended to help formerly incarcerated firefighters obtain jobs, but the effects, thus far, are unclear (Smith 2021). Programs such as the [Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program \(FFRP\)](#), which creates a direct pathway to firefighting training and employment post-release, seem to be improving outcomes more than the legislative changes (Smith 2021). Fire camps, caught between penal reform and climate catastrophe, must become a major concern for our legislature.

The United States has the world’s largest incarcerated population, and incarceration rates have risen dramatically over the past fifty years (Western and Pettit 2010). No country in the world even comes close, and California jails its citizens “at more than double the rates of our closest international allies” (Widra and Herring 2021). The fire camp program has existed in California, in some form, for more than a century. During World War II, the California Department of Corrections developed forty-one “interim camps”; Camp Rainbow was the first permanent camp opened in 1946 (CDCR 2022a). The camps have historically been marketed as a valuable tool for rehabilitation and an asset to the state by supplying economic benefits through inmate labor, which is obviously exploited labor (Goodman 2010).

As global warming continues to turn California’s wildfire season into an all-year phenomenon, we can anticipate the need for fire management to increase. The history of California’s fire management has changed since the colonization of California and the genocide of indigenous peoples (Gutierrez et al. 2021). The urbanization of California continues with population density shifts to rural areas, creating more structures built in the wildland-urban interface. In California, up to 75% of the buildings destroyed by wildfire have been located in this region (Kramer et al. 2019). As the temperatures in California have increased so, have the number of fires and the amount of area burned (Gutierrez et al. 2021).

Barriers to employment faced by formerly incarcerated firefighters

Formerly incarcerated people face multiple barriers to finding employment. Job applicants who report criminal records are one-half to one-third as likely to receive callbacks from employers, suggesting discrimination against formerly incarcerated people (Pager 2003). Formerly incarcerated individuals typically return to communities awash in the

typical structural violence that leads to recidivism (Wacquant 2001; Morenoff and Harding 2014). Formerly incarcerated people may avoid employers and other formal organizations for fear of heightened surveillance (Brayne 2014). Scarce opportunities for industrial and private-sector work in prison mean formerly incarcerated people lack opportunities to avoid gaps in employment and develop skills that could be helpful after release (Hatton 2021). Finally, gaps in employment history leave formerly incarcerated people with a work history that is difficult to explain.

In addition to navigating these barriers, former fire camp workers who wish to pursue a career in firefighting are often prevented from doing so by their felony convictions. A single felony conviction makes one ineligible for certification as an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) for at least a decade, and people convicted of multiple felonies are never eligible to become EMTs (California Code of Regulations, Title 22, Section 100214.3). The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire) prefers its firefighters to qualify for EMT certification, and employment with any municipal fire department will require it.

In 2020, California lawmakers passed AB 2147 to allow eligible “successful participants” of the CDCR conservation camps to petition for expungement of the term(s) of incarceration during which they worked as firefighters. AB 2147 is only available for those who served as fire crew members, not those who participated as support staff within the camp. Prisoners who worked at firehouses on the grounds of a prison rather than the conservation camps are also not eligible for expungement through AB 2147. For relief, the participant must petition the court in the county of commitment (CDCR 2022a). Despite the law taking effect in January 2021, journalistic reports suggest its effects have been limited (Smith 2021).

Fire camps caught between penal reform and climate catastrophe

Presently, thirty-five conservation camps are found throughout California (CDCR 2022a). These camps house about 100 to 125 incarcerated people each, with work crews consisting of 14 to 18 people. Eligible inmates are classified as Level I, or minimum custody, with no restrictions (a conviction for arson being only one such restriction). Eight fire camps were “deactivated” at the end of 2020, and today the number of fire camp participants is much lower than a decade ago. According to CDCR (2022a), there were approximately 1,600 fire camp workers as of May 2021, of whom 900 are qualified to work on fire lines, down from roughly 4,500 total fire camp workers in 2012 (Taylor 2012). As of June 2022, California had more than 97,000 individuals incarcerated in state prisons (CDCR 2022b). This means that only 1% of the people incarcerated in state prisons are inmate firefighters.

Under the current classification system, people must have under 19 total points to be eligible for lower-security Level I facilities, a threshold that is too low for many people to meet. People who enter prison at a younger age, who may be more successful in fire camps because of the physical fitness requirements, find the classification system stacked against them. A juvenile arrest adds ten points to a person’s score, and being under twenty at the time of assessment adds eight points (Petek 2019: Figure 2). Being younger is also more strongly correlated with recidivism, except for younger incarcerated people participating in the fire camp program who exhibit lower recidivism rates (CDCR 2020). Furthermore,

CDCR can override an inmate’s housing score and house the inmate at a security level that is different than otherwise called for... five of the six mandatory overrides result in inmates being housed at Level II rather than Level I.... as of June 30, 2018, there were nearly 40,000 inmates in state prison whose housing score was overridden by CDCR staff as a result of either a mandatory or discretionary override (Petek 2019: 6–7).

We believe this rubric overstates the security risk posed by many incarcerated people. The vast majority of people we interviewed were housed in higher security yards, often for several years while waiting for their points to drop low enough to qualify for fire camp. Yet they were successful in fire camps when finally allowed to participate, suggesting that they would have been successful had they been able to go to the camps earlier.

Other experts agree with our assessment. In 2011, a team of University of California researchers concluded after extensive statistical analysis of the relationship between classification scores and misconduct that people classified “at each of the cutoff thresholds... can be moved down to a lower housing level without the expectation that misconduct will increase”

(Farabee et al. 2011: 115). A 2012 report from the California Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) foresaw the decline in fire camp participation. It recommended that CDCR “relax” eligibility criteria for the fire camps and increase incentives to participate (Taylor 2012: 19). In a 2019 report on the classification system, LAO emphasized that “CDCR’s overly expansive exclusions on [fire] camp eligibility... have contributed to the roughly 1,000 vacant camp beds” (Petek 2019: 16) and that “these exclusions reduce the number of inmates who would otherwise be available to support state wildfire fighting and prevention efforts” (ibid: 17).

At the same time that fire camp participation has declined, CDCR is slated to close the California Conservation Center in Susanville at the end of June 2022 (CDCR 2021). CCC Susanville is one of only two men’s prisons in California where incarcerated men can complete the physical fitness training necessary to become a firefighter.

Data and Methods

We recruited interview participants for this study by asking organizations that serve formerly incarcerated people, including organizations specifically focused on formerly incarcerated firefighters, to share our recruitment materials with their staff and clients. A total of 19 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted over Zoom with formerly incarcerated people who have worked at fire camps throughout California. Interview questions revolved around general formative background information, pre-and post-incarceration work experiences, incarceration, and fire camp experiences, and opinions and recommendations that participants feel would benefit them. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to more than 150 minutes, most lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were automatically transcribed using Otter.ai and coded and analyzed using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software. We used both deductive and inductive coding strategies throughout the transcript analysis. We have lightly edited some quotations for readability.

Because we recruited through organizations serving formerly incarcerated firefighters, 9 of our 19 participants had worked with FFRP. FFRP was founded in 2015 and incorporated in 2018 by two formerly incarcerated firefighters and is the only organization of its kind in California. In an interview, FFRP’s founders estimated they had served approximately 200 formerly incarcerated firefighters, compared to the estimated 50,000 to 100,000 people who have worked in the conservation camps over their history. Despite their relatively small numbers, the insights of those currently a part of FFRP have much to show for the capacity to provide opportunities for individuals coming out of fire camps. Our policy recommendations suggest ways to build on their progress and goals.

Findings

We first discuss our interview participants’ experiences in the fire camp program and their experiences after being released. Consistent with previous research, our participants described both beneficial and harmful experiences in the fire camps, so we first discuss positive aspects and then harmful elements. Many told us they wished to continue firefighting after being released but could not due to felony convictions. In our participants’ experience, AB 2147 had done little to reduce these barriers. We close by discussing the experiences of those who worked with FFRP and found more success.

Incarcerated firefighters perform meaningful and heroic work

The variegated experience of those working in fire camps has been described as simultaneously rehabilitative and exploitative (Goodman 2010). Despite this, everyone we spoke with expressed gratitude that they were able to participate in the program, whether they loved or hated their time at the fire camp. One person pointed out a contradiction between criticisms of the fire camps from nonincarcerated people compared to how they are viewed by incarcerated people:

I am not on board with the extreme antagonism we see in activist circles towards the fire camp program. We both know that labor is an issue in prisons and that fire camps are not the principal type of labor we should be worried about. There are people who labor all day in prison just so they can get an extra phone call. There are people that make one cent an hour, seven cents an hour, or nine cents an hour, much of which goes to restitution... if we’re concerned with it from the labor/slavery perspective, let’s not focus on the single most

humane place in the entire prison system.

Like, that's how I looked at it; these are well-intentioned people. But the only reason they are talking about [incarcerated firefighters] is that they're the only ones leaving the walls and are in your community. That's why you're talking about them. That's why you see them, and to them, it's just egregious that there's something similar to the chain gang or something. But slavery, as you know, was never banned for people in prison. And the fact is, like, people in fire camp want to be there... I've never met a person who talks all this trash about fire camp who's actually been there, or had a family member be there.

The majority of incarcerated people in California are required to work. Those who aren't required to work often wish they were, as the forced idleness of solitary cell living is torture. If an incarcerated person refuses to work, that person will be subject to a loss of all privileges. Because of how the fire camps compared to other prison work, many of the people we interviewed were concerned about the impending closure of CCC Susanville and the future of the fire camp program in California.

Many people spoke of firefighting as a sort of redemption. After being cast out by society, they are given an opportunity to complete a task that requires intensive, challenging work, courage, and teamwork.

I think the biggest thing is that it gave me a sense of purpose. What I mean by that is, you know, when you're locked up there's like this aura, whether you feel some kind of way... that you are a detriment to society, you're a failure. Aggressiveness, racism, sexism, you know, all these kinds of things out there. And you know, you kind of take that on. And so fire camp actually gave me a space where like, I can be, for lack of a better term, a little, a little less removed from that. Because I was putting myself in a space of like being like a public advocate or something like that, or like a public servant. Like I was doing something good.

Based on our interviewees' experiences, the fire camps afforded many incarcerated people their first opportunity for deeply meaningful work. One person shared a story of defending a town from a wildfire that demonstrated their work's powerful and personal impact.

[W]e cut [fire] line all night... [and] we literally saved that town. Two firefighters came up and one guy looks at us and goes, "You know, my house is a mile down that road. And if you didn't work all night last night it would have burned down. Thank you." And just him thanking me, my crew, and everybody else that was there working and stuff, it's just—the feeling that I got was so amazing. I was just like, I know where I want to be, you know, like, I know my purpose.

I had a house fire and I lost everything with my daughter's mom; my girls were like one and two, and losing that house, it just hurt because you lose everything, like family heirlooms, pictures, things like that, and watching these towns burn and everything, it just, hit my heart... But this dude was in tears thanking us, like, "That's where my wife and kids live. And if it wasn't for you guys working all night, they wouldn't have a home."

Fire camp contributed to the development of healthy pride among firefighters and the satisfaction of knowing that they mattered and were positively impacting the world around them.

I actually enjoyed the hard work, you know? I enjoyed the camaraderie with the guys. I enjoyed the feeling of knowing that you're being productive. You're actually out there helping folks. Yeah, I enjoyed pretty much everything about it. Like, you know, I'm a macho type of guy, so that ego-stroking definitely put me in a mindset of like, you know, I do have a purpose. I can do good things. I can be a hero in a sense, right? You know, fighting fire... It was definitely just the mindset of knowing I had a purpose and a destiny. That's what made me really enjoy the experience.

Many people also spoke of their experiences with something akin to nostalgia. This was more pronounced in the interviews of people released before FFRP established a pathway for formerly incarcerated people to work in fire prevention.

I don't know how old I was back then. Forty? Now after having cancer I'm all worn out, you know? But [being able to continue firefighting after release] would have been a game-changer for me. I think that's the most effort I've ever put into a job and not get paid for it, you know? I mean, I think my pay number was like 90 cents an hour. You know, I was willing to go out and die for that. Like, you know, I just enjoyed it so much. That's definitely the one thing my grandfather told me is when you find something that you'd like, you'll do it for free. You know, even though you're going to get paid for it. You would do it for free. And that was probably the one thing that, you know, that I would definitely do for free.

Several people also showed how their time in camp broadened their horizons, leading to fundamental changes in their habits, attitudes, and orientation toward the world. Many people discovered they had a passion for fitness, exercise, and the natural world.

It's like telling your family calling back, like, yes, I'm in prison. But I'm a firefighter. Like, I'm helping lives. I'm doing this. I'm doing this for such a low pay. And it's basically, to come home to you guys. So I'm doing all these dangerous things and doing all this to get home. Like I said, I'm in prison, but I messed up. And I understand that, and this is helping me realize there are better things out there. There's more to the world. I liked the forests. I never liked the woods at first, but going, I liked the forest. I like being outside, learning [about] nature, and you learn all types of other things—like, it's just amazing.

A considerable portion of our sample said that they wanted to keep fighting fires after they were released. None, with the exception of the men and women affiliated with FFRP were successful.

Fire camps can benefit incarcerated firefighters

Although not every participant enjoyed working as a firefighter, all preferred fire camp to life “behind the wall.” Some people were pulled to the fire camps by the improvements they offered over conventional prisons, like one man who recalled how others described the camps’ benefits.

Bro, like, you can like, go be with your people, and then oh my gosh, like, you're gonna make, like, a whole lot of money out there, bro... you're gonna be close to your fam[ily], like, there are just so many opportunities. [There] aren't any more gun towers, all that stuff... you actually eat what the firefighters eat, go out on fires, and you're in the community.

Others, like this woman, were pushed toward the fire camps by their traumatic experiences in other prisons.

I didn't know how it was gonna be when I heard about fire camp, but prison was really traumatic for me... I still have, like, a bald spot on the back of my head from losing hair and I didn't have my period for a year and a half, I was so stressed out. That shit was really traumatic for me... [In fire camp], people were not getting stabbed or raped... It was just more peaceful, and I felt it was beautiful there. And there's something about not having, like, big gates, and the COs [correctional officers] were so much nicer, and having that freedom to get up and go for a run outside in this beautiful place pretty much anytime I wanted to.

This quote highlights that many people who end up in prison have been traumatized, and many incarcerated people need respite and healing (Western 2015; Western 2018). Another person used a powerful metaphor to contrast the feeling of safety they felt in the fire camps compared to prison.

But for me, it's just about the humanity. And the fact of the matter is, people in fire camps suffer less. They just do. And so, like, please don't make that go away. Like, please don't take away the opportunity for people in prison to not have to be in prison in the same way that they were. Like, prison sucks—like, it sucks. Living in fear of riots, getting stabbed... of like, somebody taking something you do the wrong way and getting hurt. Like, that shit's scary, and it's nice to get out of that.

It's nice to go to an environment where the worst thing imaginable that could happen to you when it comes to your fellow prisoners is a fistfight. Like that's the worst. And that's a significant, like, unloading of boulders

from your backpack, if you know what I mean... Like, I remember the palpable, complete letting go of that particular type of fear. Like the moment I stepped into a fire camp, I remember what that felt like. And I felt like crying because it's like, it's something you carry around with you. At least in a men's institution, you know, is that fear of what's going to happen, when it's going to happen, because for so many years, like, I was just trying to avoid that thing.

In describing the appeal of the fire camps, many people highlighted the racism and interracial conflicts that overwhelmed regular prisons. “It’s bad in there. Like, it’s racist in there. I can’t deal with that. I’m not good with that, you know? My mom and dad raised me a whole different way and not to be like that.” They experienced the relaxed environments of the fire camps as a reprieve from these racial tensions.

[I]n actual prison... you will never help another race out or do anything like that... [In the fire camp] it was more like, I understand like you, my brother. Even when we go back to the yard... we still have more of a connection than we will ever have just in regular prison.

Someone else we interviewed put it even more pointedly, that in the fire camps, “I started to feel like a human again.”

Fire camp workers can earn credits to reduce their sentences at higher rates than other incarcerated people (Petek 2019). For many people we interviewed, the top reason they wanted to participate in the fire camps was to shorten their sentences. As one person succinctly put it, “the only reason I did fire camp is because that was like, the quickest way home. So I’m just like, my goal is to get home as soon as possible. So I got to do what I got to do.” For some, the promise of being released sooner outweighed the low pay they received for their hard work. As another person told us, “I went home earlier, and for that you don’t have to pay me anything.” Getting out of prison sooner mattered more than pay to some people because of the life-or-death stakes of incarceration. One person put this point especially poignantly.

[I]f I hadn’t gone to camp, I wouldn’t be here talking to you today. My original date to go home was 2025. I’m not supposed to be here. If I went that route, I’d still be locked up and taking chances with my life... I’m really grateful and blessed that I made it out alive. I know people [who] are doing life, who are not getting out. People are going through riots and getting stabbed. And death is in there—you know that. Death is in there, you know, and it’s not cool. Misery lives in there... So they gave me a chance, and I took it and I ran with it and I fell in love with it. And now—now I’m here to do good.

The fire camps offered better quality of life compared to conventional prison in several respects. Fire camp workers were given more personal freedom and autonomy. As the person quoted above noted, they received better food. Another person emphasized that though food quality might sound like a “stupid and basic and mundane” benefit, it was “actually pretty important for folks who have been eating some trashy food on the chow hall for a number of years.” Fire camp workers were not confined in cells but worked outside in beautiful natural surroundings. “It was way different, way better,” one person explained. “I mean, we got to touch grass... when you’re in the cell or whatever, all you see is cement.” In the course of fighting wildfires, they often traveled to parts of the state they had never been. Since people in prison often come from dense, urban environments, some people we spoke with relished the novel opportunities fire camp provided to spend time in nature. Being outdoors also contributed to their feelings of freedom. As one person described it, “You almost feel free for a little bit. Sometimes you’re walking around the track, we’re in the woods, beautiful track, and you’re in the middle of nowhere with a bunch of dry grass, but you’re free.” In some cases, the change of physical environment helped foster positive personal changes, as another person explained. “I started running [at the fire camp]... I was running miles and miles every day... And when I got out, I kept running. I mean, I ran today. So for that I am grateful, yeah, I really fell in love with running.”

Fire camp workers were also permitted in-person visits, not behind glass, which helped them stay more connected to family.

Your family could come visit, like in a picnic type setting... [My fiancé] would drive like three hours... get up to see me [where I was incarcerated] for like, an hour behind glass. And [the fire camp] was closer to home, and so for me, that was kind of just my goal and my path to somehow get closer to home so I could see him

| and my kids[.]

These visits gave fire camp workers opportunities to make loving and meaningful memories with their families.

| *[B]eing able to push [my daughter] on the swings, that was one of the things that I really appreciated. We got to have like, weekly physical connections with our family... [T]hey can bring like, sandwiches and stuff and we would go out there and chill. I can take my daughter on the slides and all that kind of stuff... [T]hat was a moment that was really, really great for me.*

Ostensibly mundane and “normal” experiences like this show how the fire camps stood out against the overwhelming inhumanity of conventional incarceration. In contrast to the “social death” imposed on people behind the wall (Patterson 1982; Price 2015), the fire camps permitted people to maintain some dignity and more meaningful connections to society.

On the job, incarcerated firefighters gained important knowledge and skills and learned a valuable trade. For some, these were opportunities that they had not expected to receive.

| *It was a good experience... learning and stuff and, you know, just realizing that you're capable of doing stuff that you would never think that was possible, or that you can do... [I]t gave me a different type of confidence that I never had before.*

One person told us how the working conditions of firefighting encouraged valuable traits of determination, discipline, and resilience. “It made me a hard worker, like how much you have to work and how long the shifts are, and everything in doing that... [I]t definitely conditioned my mind to work longer hours[.]” Another told us how their role as a “swamper” gave them opportunities to demonstrate leadership. “[W]hen I got to that position, I was like okay, this is what I need to do, this is who I am... [T]he responsibility, you know, taking that, it was just, it was cool.”

Another person told us how the fire camps’ more productive and humane setting in turn helped them pursue their goals for self-improvement.

| *[W]hen you're treated like a criminal, you're gonna keep acting like a criminal. And in fire camp we were treated like human beings who had worth and something valuable to offer. And so then we can, like, transform into those kind of people[.]*

The opportunity to perform meaningful, productive jobs helped fire camp workers build caring bonds with their coworkers and develop new ways of relating to others, including being more sensitive to the effects of their actions on others. Another person echoed this sentiment by sharing a powerful story of how they realized the potential harm of even a seemingly innocent or inconsequential act, and how that realization helped them avoid repeating the patterns that led them to prison.

| *Doing something] just to see if you can get away with it, that's what you end up doing time [for]. And fortunately, for me, you know, [the lesson] stuck. [T]hat was the moment that I learned integrity, and that's something that I didn't have before. I didn't. I mean, I didn't understand it. So I learned integrity at fire camp for sure.*

The skills and purpose people found in the camps helped them update their own self-images. One woman explained that after working in the fire camps she gained higher personal ambitions. “I need to reach higher, like, I have a different skill set [now]. I am a different woman... it just didn't go away.” These transformative experiences also changed how they saw others, as another person told us.

| *[I]t just made me realize that there's a lot of good in everyone, you know, and you can't always see that... that made me have a lot of empathy and compassion... I don't judge people anymore after that. And I would say that fire camp did that, probably, because I wasn't feeling that way in prison.*

Their new identities as firefighters also helped people convey a different image to their loved ones. One woman told us

about how the fire camps helped her children make sense of her absence in a positive way. “I didn’t want my kids to be like, oh, my mom’s, you know, upstate. I wanted my kids to think, like, oh my god, my mom’s a firefighter, and that’s why she’s not home.”

Incarcerated firefighters are put at risk and undervalued

Despite the benefits offered by the fire camps, incarcerated firefighters also endured a range of negative, harmful, and even traumatic experiences. For their hard work and personal sacrifices, they receive very little pay compared to nonincarcerated firefighters. Despite learning important skills, none of the certificates they earned or labor they completed counted as experience as a firefighter outside of prison. And they received little recognition for their lifesaving and heroic efforts.

In the course of their work, incarcerated firefighters were exposed to significant danger, risking injury or even death on the frontlines of wildfires. One person recounted how they were nearly crushed under a falling tree.

You just see the top of the tree coming straight for us, and before you could turn around and run my captain grabbed me out of the way or I would have been underneath it. My coworker was underneath it... [L]uckily he didn’t get paralyzed. [...] He was on his last year, so that’s why he was eligible to get to camp... and then that happened.

Fire camp workers also handled a variety of arduous tasks beyond firefighting. In some cases they worked for other government agencies or on public land, for instance helping to clean up a wildlife refuge. We also heard about incarcerated people being contracted out to work for municipalities as in the case of one person who told us about working on a golf course while incarcerated. They also assisted with rescue operations and law enforcement investigations; one person recalled assisting in a search for a person believed to have been murdered.

[F]or like, five days, we went down... to this landfill with this crazy hazmat gear to scour this landfill section by section looking for a body. We did not find the body... [but] for a whole week we would be down there from early morning in a landfill. And it was not like, a fresh landfill... [T]hey were pulling layers off... [it was] so disgusting and gnarly. But I remember just being so excited because they fed us like you were at a fire... Like, you’re in a landfill, so it stinks, but there was such good food and snacks[.]

This example illustrates how intertwined the benefits and drawbacks of the fire camp program could be.

Many times, fire camp workers were tasked with risky or unpleasant tasks that nonincarcerated workers did not want to handle, as in this harrowing story one person told us.

I remember one season we were cutting [fire] line, and we were working for like, literally 24 hours. We were cutting line, we were up, we were tired... We’re going back to the bus that we were in, we’re going back there, and they turned around and told us, well, we still need you all up there. So we turned around and had to go back up there and we were doing the 48 [hour shift].

After the 48 we were actually leaving, and a dozer had burned over and [the driver had] gotten burned and had died. He [was] all burnt up and stuck to the wheel and nobody wanted to go get him, not Cal Fire, not Forestry, not a private crew—nobody wanted to go get him, not even the police. They couldn’t hike to where the body was. It was like four or five miles—and like I said we were just off of 48-hour shift, that’s a lot to be doing that—and they turned around and asked [our captain], can we go get the body? He says [to us], if some of us are uncomfortable, if it’s a no, then he’ll tell them that. Like I said, once you’re in there, you understand, like, you understand what’s going on, we understand all that. So [we said] yeah, let’s go do it. We went over there, we hiked all the way in, dropped off our tools, hiked all the way in, and actually got the body off of the dozer, put them in the bag, zip[ped] them up, and carr[ied] them all the way from where we’re at—like I said, it was four or five or six miles, and I don’t know how long it was, but it was far. we actually carried him all the way back. The police didn’t do a thing.

The pay they received for their hazardous and lifesaving work was much lower than minimum wage, let alone what the nonincarcerated firefighters they worked with received. As we described above, for many people getting out of prison sooner mattered more than being paid fairly. But reflecting on their time in the fire camps, some believed they should have been paid more, especially considering the financial burdens that accompanied incarceration that their wages could have ameliorated.

[W]orking at like, the state and federal parks, we were getting paid \$1 a day... [I]n the moment I was grateful for every dollar and I was not complaining about it then, but now, all these years later, I mean, we did really hard work, and they paid us \$1 a day. And I owed all that restitution... had they paid me something fair I could have had my restitution finally paid off.

Another person echoed their frustration with the low pay they received, despite their overall appreciation for the fire camp program.

[T]o go fight fires and risk our lives and be, I mean, as filthy and what—all that stuff to get paid \$1 an hour? I don't know. So I think the program should continue, I think it definitely gives people a better opportunity to change than you have in prison. But I think that that pay thing... I think that's exploitation.

Our participants recognized, and in many cases valued, the inherently demanding aspects of wildland firefighting. But the pay disparity between incarcerated and nonincarcerated workers performing the same tasks was still frustrating.

[I]t's not all peaches and cream and fire. Again, these folks are extremely, extremely exploited. Like, you're talking Monday through Friday full work schedules, while being asked to go out here and work as firefighters on 24-hour shifts. That's not a problem for me. But when you talk about the pay, these folks are exploited.

Increasing the wage for incarcerated firefighters could prove to be a mutually beneficial situation for fire camp workers and the state. Despite spending more money on labor costs, the state would be helping incarcerated firefighters pay the court-ordered restitution that often becomes a barrier to receiving an expungement and therefore to becoming a firefighter.

Though fire camp workers received training to do their jobs, that training was limited and inconsistent and depended on where workers were located and to what work they were assigned. Many participants mentioned receiving certificates for their training, but no one we spoke with was able to use those certificates to advance a career in firefighting or any other field. All of the former fire camp participants we interviewed who pursued firefighting were required to start at the beginning of training, as if they had never fought a fire before.

They give you like, the fire training that they give you in the classroom and they give you that certificate. I think that's about it... I just put them away because... they meant nothing to anybody out here [in the free world], you know? [Nobody] was gonna [be] like, oh, look what I did. They didn't care.

The fire camp workers we interviewed often had extensive experience, yet once they were free that experience seemed to count for very little. As one woman explained, the fact that they had happened to be incarcerated while fighting fires could turn their experience into a source of shame and stigma rather than pride and skill.

[W]hen I went to school for it, I was the only woman in this class and I was the only Black person in this particular class. So I faced a lot of discrimination there. And they knew about my experience from being inside a fire camp, because I did have hella certificates for shit that I wanted to show and post... I wanted to tell people about what I know and what I learned. These folks made very clear that they did not like me, they did not like where I got my skills from, and that it was a problem. I had a very hard time with that class... I did graduate, but it definitely left a bad taste in my mouth... and it also let me know that moving forward in this field, that there is racism and sexism that goes on.

Another person conveyed the bitter irony that certifications issued by the state were not credited by other public agencies.

These certificates have state seals on them. So how are they not recognized by the state? We got recognized by an assembly member! I got assembly proclamations! So it's like, how is the state not recognizing something you put your seal on?

The undervaluing of their hard-earned credentials reinforced the second-class treatment that formerly incarcerated people faced and fit into a broader pattern of “coming home and not having that stuff recognized.”

While non-incarcerated firefighters are viewed by the public as heroes, fire camp workers rarely received the same recognition. Although we heard of more positive interactions than negative, in some cases incarcerated firefighters were viewed as threats, even by the people whose property they were defending. Asked about how public perception could or should influence formerly incarcerated firefighters’ ability to seek meaningful careers after being released, one person hoped that the threat of climate catastrophe would quell potential fears.

I wasn't a danger when I was trying to protect your home... I feel like we should put the decision to the voters. In a burning state, at a time like this, with all this talk about climate change getting out of control, we should put it on the ballot, and let the people decide if they want people with criminal records to be eligible for a firefighting career.

In a broader sense, our participants were negatively affected by CDCR’s overly restrictive housing classification system—the source of the “points” mentioned above—which kept them confined at higher levels of security for years before they became eligible for the fire camps. One person explained how these restrictions affected their trajectory in prison.

They sent me to a [level] three yard [high security] at first... and then from there I dropped points. After like a year [I] had level two points, and then they sent me to [a] level two yard... But it actually took me like, a while to qualify for fire camp... [If] you have something they want to look [into], like any charges that they need to look [into], or if there's violence on your record... [then] you just sit there and wait there until the counselors can go over the charges and look through the reports and everything to make sure that you're not an escape risk.

Experiences like these suggest support our and other experts’ assessments that the primary challenge facing the conservation camp program is not that there are not enough people who could work in the fire camps, but rather that CDCR is preventing them from doing so because of their outdated classification system (Taylor 2012; Petek 2019).

Formerly incarcerated firefighters face significant career obstacles

Many of our interview participants wished to pursue firefighting after being released. For those who were able to do so, the experience of coming back to the job as a free person was immensely vindicating.

When I got my first job professionally and the camp staff saw me, it was so interesting... [There] were two COs at the camp and they gave me a hug. Like, what? Y'all gave me a hug? Like, okay, you know, congratulations, [name]. The lieutenant was there—he gave me a handshake [and said], “Good job, [name], good job, like, I see you out here.” [...] That's a cool moment... when you run into folks and they see you in one light and now they see you in a different light. Like, I am not your kid or your student or your incarcerated person—I'm sure not your felon. I'm your coworker, homie. What up?

But for many, the legal obstacles to returning to firefighting could appear insurmountable. In California it is very difficult for people with felony convictions to obtain an EMT certification. No person convicted of multiple felonies or certain violent felonies may obtain a certification at all; those with one felony conviction must wait ten or fifteen years after their release from prison, depending on the offense, to obtain a certification (California Code of Regulations, Title 22, Section 100214.3). As a result, none of the formerly incarcerated firefighters we interviewed had ever been hired by a municipal fire department because virtually all municipal departments require EMT certification. Some of the people we interviewed tried to pursue other careers, but still encountered obstacles related to their criminal records. As one person told us, “I have a bistro with family members... And I tried to get an alcohol license and I was not able to get one because of my background.” Even though this participant successfully completed parole years ago and had gone so far as to actualize

the “American dream” in owning a small business, she was still encountering barriers to success.

Prior to FFRP’s founding and incorporation, perhaps a handful of people out of tens of thousands of formerly incarcerated firefighters successfully made the transition from incarceration to professional work in the fire industry. For example, one person we spoke with was released in 2018 to no parole, and immediately looked for employment with Cal Fire. But he was released before FFRP had fully developed recruitment relationships in the fire camps. He told us that his experiences getting rejected in his job search despite being highly qualified really deflated him. Tragically, for many people we interviewed, especially for people who were in fire camp before FFRP existed, experiencing systemic barriers overwhelmed their desire to work in fire prevention, and even led them back into unhealthy, self-defeating behaviors.

[I]f I could have paroled from fire camp, straight into, like, a full-time position at Cal Fire, I would have 100% done that. And to be honest, I probably wouldn’t have relapsed and gone back to jail... I think that would have been so valuable.

FFRP provided important support for some of our participants. As mentioned above, FFRP has worked with an estimated 200 formerly incarcerated firefighters to pursue their goals of careers in firefighting. One person summarized the partial success they had seen with expungement requests for formerly incarcerated firefighters. “[FFRP] put in, I think 30 applications for expungements. Out of the 30, 13 got approved, five got denied, and the rest are still pending. So... it works - sometimes.”

Several aspects of FFRP’s approach seemed to be responsible for their participants’ career success. Rather than focus on jobs with municipal fire departments that require EMT certification, FFRP focused on firefighting jobs with the federal Forest Service, which does not have that requirement. Another important feature of FFRP’s approach is that they emphasize formerly incarcerated firefighters’ integration with their communities.

[W]e encourage all of our folks [FFRP participants] to build support from their families and from home, or whoever they consider to be their peoples, and I know everybody doesn’t have peoples... But that’s one of the things that helped me out, was I had a group of people that could hold me up while I was trying to navigate this whole pathway... But that’s why FFRP is here as well. And so we believe in people being home closer to their loved ones and reunited with their kids.

This stands in contrast with another effort to create career opportunities for formerly incarcerated firefighters, CDCR’s Ventura Training Center, which provides an 18-month training program to former fire camp workers. One of the most significant differences between the Ventura program and FFRP is that Ventura program participants must continue living in an institutional, group setting, rather than allowing people to nurture family and community connections, which are often a primary source of a support for formerly incarcerated people and a buffer against recidivism (Western 2018: Ch. 7).

When you get paroled to Ventura, you live in this firefighter training program. You have to live there for 18 months... they don’t have a lot of success in that program. Because when people come home, they want to come home... and they’re asking for 18 months on the ticket... So a lot of folks [get] violated [on parole] right off the top... That model isn’t for everybody.

AB 2147 has had limited effects

While AB 2147 was touted by Governor Newsom as “legislation (that) rights a historic wrong and recognizes the sacrifice of thousands of incarcerated people who have helped battle wildfires in our state” (Riggins 2020), based on the experiences of the people we interviewed its effects have been limited. We identified several factors that limit the effectiveness of AB 2147.

The most significant barrier relates to prior convictions. More than half of the individuals we interviewed had prior convictions when they received the sentence that sent them to a fire camp. Yet AB 2147 does not afford relief for those convictions. Only the convictions for which one was in a fire camp are eligible for expungement, which affords limited relief to the person with multiple convictions. This limitation stopped some, like the following person, from pursuing expungement altogether. “I considered it, but no. I mean, I thought about it. But if I got those six felonies removed, I still have 12 from my other prison term.”

Another trouble spot are the ambiguous legal standards and judicial discretion involved in the expungement process. The petitioner must return to the sentencing court for relief. Relief is not guaranteed but can be offered “in the interest of justice,” which is an ambiguous phrase that leaves the decision to the judge’s discretion. As one person explained, that creates severe inequalities across judges and jurisdictions. and implies that it is up to the judge to decide.

That whole law is a mess. Basically, the law says that the judge wakes up in the morning, and depending on how they feel, they can say yes or no. Period. That’s all the law says. There’s no formal process to it. There are no evaluation standards. You know, we’ve had some folks that come home to Los Angeles [and submit a petition and they] get it in like, three months. And then we have some folks that are like in, say, San Diego, or Riverside, that after three years, they still can’t get [an expungement]. It’s like, what’s going on here? That limits folks’ opportunities, especially when you talk about the EMT license.

More broadly, expungement is a limited solution to the obstacles faced by formerly incarcerated firefighters. While expungement will permit a person with expunged convictions to tell a private employer that they have never been convicted of a crime, the same cannot be said for public employers. Despite receiving an expungement, a person who has been convicted of a crime still must disclose that conviction to any public employer and in any application for a professional license.

Convictions are no longer supposed to exclude formerly incarcerated people from many professional licenses unless they are found to be “substantially related” to the license. However, “substantially related” is a vague and undetermined term. For example, if a Live Scan, a fingerprint-based background check that shows criminal records, is required for a job opportunity, all prior convictions will still be listed, with only a petite one-line addendum at the end of the multi-lined conviction information, stating that the conviction was dismissed pursuant to the related Penal Code section. One person we interviewed poignantly described the false promise of expungement.

To be perfectly honest, it’s like, you still show up [on a background check]. Ultimately, in the modern world, even if I went and got pardoned, everything’s still there anyhow. And the judgment would be the same anyhow. And you know as well as I do, like, they’re not going to go, like, “Oh, he had X felony convictions, but then got him expunged. He’s not a [criminal].” The people that are judging me are going to judge me, regardless of whether they’re expunged or not.

As implemented in AB 2147, the expungement process was both too limited and too uncertain for the people we interviewed. Some saw too little potential benefit from expungement to pursue it. Others found the process inconsistent and unjust, like another obstacle to overcome rather than a source of support. While some of the people we interviewed planned to pursue an expungement, fewer were currently in the process of doing so, and no one we spoke with had successfully completed the expungement process.

While all the individuals associated with FFRP we spoke with were aware of the possibility of receiving an expungement, only one person who was not affiliated with the organization was aware of the opportunity created through the change in legislation. In light of these findings, we determined that AB 2147 has not had the intended effect.

Policy Recommendations

Based on our findings, we have four broad sets of recommendations. First, expand the fire camp program rather than shrink it, not by increasing the number of people who are incarcerated, but by making more people who are currently incarcerated eligible for the fire camps. Second, expand the expungement process in several ways to make more people eligible for expungement and to make expungement more meaningful. Third, create direct pathways from the fire camps to firefighting careers upon release. Finally, pilot the fire camp model in another, similar essential trade, such as maintenance work on roads or the power grid, in order to help more people avoid incarceration while contributing to important societal needs.

1. Expand the fire camp program rather than reducing or eliminating it

The most important policy recommendation we have is that the fire camp program be expanded rather than shrunk.

Under no circumstances are we suggesting that CDCR incarcerate more individuals. CDCR currently has more than 97,000 persons in its custody. Many individuals interviewed told us how they were “stuck” on yards with higher custody levels for months and often years, waiting for their points to drop low enough for them to be reclassified and become eligible to participate in the fire camp program. It should be clear that such individuals could have been transferred to a conservation camp far earlier in their stay without compromising public safety. Other experts have made similar calls to expand eligibility for the fire camps for a decade (Taylor 2012; Petek 2019). On the shoulders of this our participants’ experiences we recommend that CDCR review and revise their current classification system and make adjustments so that the bulk of the incarcerated people housed there are not overwhelmingly housed on yards that are overly restrictive and ironically, much more expensive.

The recent closures of several of the California conservation camps exemplify the need to reevaluate the current classification system. We support Governor Newsom’s commitment to close two California prisons, yet we have serious concerns about which prisons he decided to close. At the end of June 2022, California Correctional Center (CCC) in Susanville, California is slated to be the second prison closed. CDCR claims to be closing prisons to reduce our society’s overreliance on incarceration in response to social problems, yet closing CCC in many ways cements the opposite. Susanville is a rural town with two state prisons—not just one—as well as a federal prison nearby. Closing the town’s other state facility, High Desert State Prison, would contribute to decarceration, remove an inhumane high-security facility, and preserve a pathway to the fire camps. Presently the two routes available for incarcerated men who want to participate in the fire camp program are through the California Correctional Center in Susanville and the Sierra Conservation Center in Jamestown. If CCC is closed, the only route to fire camp for incarcerated people in California will be through Jamestown. But it doesn’t have to be this way. CDCR can reevaluate its classification methodology, or expand its eligibility criteria. The problem is not that there are not enough incarcerated people willing and able to do the work. The problem is that CDCR won’t let them out of their cells to participate. There are many factors that can assist with actualizing this expansion.

Update the housing classification system

CDCR should revise its classification system to either make more people eligible for Level I facilities (lowest security level) and the fire camps. This includes the two out of every five incarcerated people who are subject to the mandatory or discretionary classification overrides undertaken by CDCR staff (Petek 2019: 7). The majority of these overrides change the classification score from eligibility for a Level I yard to necessitating a housing placement on a Level II yard.

Expand eligibility for the fire camps

Eligibility for the fire camps should be expanded to include people with longer sentences, rather than only those with under five years remaining as is currently required, as well as people currently incarcerated above minimum security who demonstrate an interest in and capacity for firefighting work.

Increase fire camp workers’ pay

I’m not saying that there can’t be something different done, like, there’s not a way like to at least pay the minimum wage and then parlay that into, like, some sort of bank account that they have access to when they get out.

Raising the pay for incarcerated firefighters could be mutually beneficial in a few different ways. First, firefighters’ pay could be used to cover costs incurred as a consequence of incarceration, such as living expenses while in camp, restitution, fines, child support, and so on. Second, raising pay at least to the legal minimum wage would significantly impact camp workers’ quality of life and ability to provide for themselves and reintegrate into their communities upon release. One of the primary drivers for reoffending is poverty and insolvency, which can lead to homelessness, desperation, and a return to criminal activity to survive. Raising the pay to the minimum wage would still allow the state to save a considerable amount of money because it certainly appears that fire seasons are accelerating with every passing year. Increases in wages would almost certainly be offset by the fire damage prevented by additional firefighters. In addition, a proper wage would provide formal recognition while performing life-threatening work.

Improve training in fire camps

Fire camp workers should receive improved training and credentials that are standardized across the conservation camp program and acceptable to other fire departments. This training curriculum could be based on Cal Fire's Fire Academy curriculum, for example.

2. Expand the expungement process

So without the camp, I wouldn't be here. But at the same time, I think the government or the state can devise a better way to compensate folks. I don't necessarily think money is everything because I look at it like this. I think being an apprentice on something is a great thing. I think volunteering is a great thing. But if you are volunteering or you're an apprentice, and after that volunteer or apprenticeship you're not gaining anything from it, then that is a problem.

I think it should be a win-win situation. I look at, like for example, a win-win situation with us [the interview participant and the researcher] right now... we both gain out of it. But when one person is like, winning because they save millions of dollars throughout California a year, but then the other person is not even really getting crumbs of the deal—like, [that's] not even okay. You get better food, a better situation, and maybe you can get better visitations or whatever in prison, but it still doesn't add up.

So say I die in a fire. They're not going to give me shit—nothing. Nothing at all. A pat on the back, like, "Yeah, he died," or whatever. And that's it. I'm not going to get compensated. I'm not going to get none of that. But you're saving money for the state, right? So it's got to be something lucrative for both parties. Right? And I think it should be. But you can win and be successful and have a career that you might want to pursue when you come home. But for the people that don't, being able to say if you go to fire camp, you can get your record expunged.

A life for a life, right? You know, putting we're putting our lives on the line, so give me my life back. Then I can pursue whatever I want. Because I'm taking the risk, because I'm, you know, being a public servant for that short time, no matter if I'm in prison or not. I'm still protecting, you know, communities and areas in California.

Based on our participants' frustrating experiences with the expungement process, we recommend several changes to improve and expand it.

Lower the legal standard for expungement

We believe the standard for expungement should be changed from "in the interest of justice" to read, "absent clear and compelling evidence to the contrary." We were repeatedly informed by our interviewees that individuals' county of commitment had more impact on their ability to obtain an expungement than any other factor and that counties like Riverside which are renowned for their punitive criminal legal systems are much more resistant to granting relief. Revising the standard for expungement would help address these inequalities. If an expungement request is denied, applicants should have access to an appeal process to a higher authority.

Immediate or automatic eligibility for expungement

At the very least, formerly incarcerated firefighters should be permitted to submit a request for expungement immediately upon release, rather than waiting until they have been discharged from parole. Waiting to provide an expungement provides no public safety benefit. Expungement affords a benefit solely to the formerly incarcerated person who seeks to work for a private employer in a field that does not require a professional license. Automatic expungement upon release would reduce administrative expenses and maximize eligibility among former fire camp workers for future firefighting careers. Therefore, an automatic expungement would improve the employment prospects for the formerly incarcerated person and likely result in increased stability and improved opportunities.

Extend expungement to the entire criminal record

Expungement should cover the individual's entire record, rather than only the conviction the person received when they went to fire camp. Expunging only the convictions associated with terms in which people were in fire camps makes the process useless for people with other terms of incarceration.

Expungement for all fire camp workers

Expungement is currently limited to people who worked on an active fire line. It should instead be available to all individuals who worked at a fire camp, including people who were not active on the fire line and instead worked in the camps as clerks, kitchen workers, and so on. Similarly, expungement should be available to people who served in a firehouse located on a prison's grounds.

Eliminate restitution requirements

Expungements should be granted regardless of restitution status. Requiring full payment of restitution creates additional barriers for formerly incarcerated firefighters who are already disproportionately impacted by poverty.

Examine disparities in applications and expungements across jurisdictions

Since our participants highlighted unjust disparities in expungement outcomes based on the varying punitiveness of county criminal legal systems, further research should be conducted to identify the numbers of people who have sought relief from specific counties and what the outcomes were.

3. Institutionalize pathways from the fire camps to firefighting careers

[W]hen Governor Newsom, and when the fire chiefs and all these folks go out here and say, well, we have a shortage of firefighters out here, actually, [what] if we created a policy that these folks who already have the experience doing this work, put them in the spot, right? All you got to do [is] pay them right, [and] make sure their family is good.

There should be a streamlined program from fire camps to a firefighting career, potentially with Cal Fire or the Department of Forestry, that is institutionalized and supported financially by the state of California. We are not suggesting a highly restrictive program such as the flawed Ventura program that we discussed above, but rather a program that adds capacity to the model developed by FFRP. The most important features of this program would be that participants would be allowed to live at home rather than in a group institutional environment and that formerly incarcerated firefighters could transition to sustainable employment right away, rather than wading through the red tape and barriers that currently exist.

We want to break down these barriers and eliminate the procedural lag between release and employment. We believe that streamlining the process for people interested in a career in firefighting would reduce recidivism, increase public safety—not only from crime but from devastating wildfires—and create a pathway for a meaningful career for people who have demonstrated a desire to serve the community through this critically important yet potentially life-threatening labor. Current proposed legislation SB 936 proposes a similar pathway through a partnership between CDCR and Cal Fire to create a training center for entry-level forestry and vegetation management jobs that prioritizes formerly incarcerated people.

4. Pilot a similar program in another trade

I'd rather see it expanded to include other trades somehow... like, could we figure out a way to get a few more thousand people out from behind the walls, get them out in nature somewhere? Why don't we figure out how to do more of that? Why don't we figure out how to have them do [work for] Caltrans, like build highways... I'm talking about something that actually translates into a skill that's going to be used when they come home... There [are] just so many reasons why [this program is] something that just should be modified and replicated rather than gone away. Because you and I both know that if the fire camp thing goes

| *away, they're just not going to release those people. They're just going to put them back behind the wall.*

Given the benefits of the fire camp program to its participants despite its limitations, we recommend that CDCR pilot a similar program in another trade where incarcerated people would learn skills and get real-world experience that could immediately transfer to a career upon release. Ideally, participants in this program would work alongside nonincarcerated workers on projects that serve the public interest, as fire camp workers do. The person we quote above suggests providing opportunities to perform road maintenance with the California Department of Transportation. Another option could be partnering with PG&E to assist with repairs and upgrades to the power grid, especially in areas at risk of wildfire. Each of these pilot projects would benefit the public. Like firefighting, both projects involve outdoor work and limited direct interaction with members of the public, which some of our participants identified as a potential source of stigma or suspicions. Further, CDCR already provides vocational training in some prisons in electrical work and some trades relevant to road maintenance, so there would undoubtedly be people qualified to participate.

About the Authors

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About the Underground Scholars

Berkeley Underground Scholars (BUS) creates a pathway for incarcerated, formerly incarcerated and system impacted individuals into higher education. We are building a prison-to-school pipeline through recruitment, retention, and advocacy. BUS is an academic support program housed within the Division of Equity and Inclusion at UC Berkeley.

Underground Scholars Initiative (USI) is the student org that works in partnership with BUS. USI is completely student-run. The two organizations, BUS & USI, are separate and aligned. This research cohort, composed of USI members, exists to show that those of us who have been impacted by the circuitous violence and structural inequality of hyperincarceration are now at the helm of engaging in the knowledge production of our communities. We are here to educate and take control of our narrative within the halls of academia—and society writ large—by forging our own conceptual and analytical tools through collective consciousness raising.

About IRLE

The Institute for Research on Labor and Employment is an interdisciplinary institute at the University of California, Berkeley that connects world-class research with policy to improve workers' lives, communities, and society. IRLE promotes better understanding of the conditions, policies, and institutions that affect the well-being of workers and their families and communities by informing public debate with hard evidence about inequality, the economy, and the nature of work.

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