



Ending Modern-Day Slavery in California

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California's prison labor system has long been a subject of controversy, particularly when it comes to the state's reliance on incarcerated individuals and labor practices.

California currently pays incarcerated people between \$0.08 and \$0.37 per hour to work prison jobs. Most of the prison labor is dedicated to maintaining the facilities themselves, with 94% of prison labor in California consisting of prison maintenance jobs such as janitorial duties, laundry, and kitchen prep. The highly select few who work as "inmate firefighters" are paid up to \$10 per day to risk their lives fighting California's annual wildfire problem. The remaining percent is managed by the California Prison Industry (CALPIA), which oversees specialized work programs. These rates, while varying by job type, remain notably low across the board.

Prison Labor in California

In 1983 the state legislature established the California Prison Industry (CALPIA), to organize and manage prison labor according to best practices in private industry.

CALPIA oversees work assignments for approximately 5,700 incarcerated people in the state and operates as a business to produce over 100 service, manufacturing, and consumable goods in all California prisons. These products are sold to the State of California and other government agencies.

CALPIA publicly markets itself as a [beacon of rehabilitation](#), by providing incarcerated people with education, job training, and resume experience they allege will prevent further recidivism and lower crime rates. CALPIA also touts itself as providing a major economic service to the state by providing affordable products and services to state agencies and government entities. CALPIA, private industries, and the state of California [generates billions of dollars](#) annually by having goods and services produced through forced prison labor.

Unbeknownst to the public, CALPIA has been marred by scandal, financial fraud, and legal investigations into its innerworkings. For example, a 2021 California [state audit](#) revealed CALPIA's substantial improper spending and illegal use of state funds, followed by nepotism in hiring decisions, such as the appointment of relatives and friends to high-paying executive positions.

In addition, CALPIA, which also serves as a model for managing prison maintenance jobs, has been [audited and cited](#) numerous times for hazardous work conditions, misreporting data about the relationship between recidivism and participation in prison labor.

Forced Prison Labor as a Legacy of Chattel Slavery

The ability to enact modern-day slavery and compel the labor of incarcerated people dates to the 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution which abolished slavery and involuntary servitude in 1865, except for those held captive as punishment for a crime. For example, the 13th Amendment laid the legal groundwork for the expansion of [convict leasing](#) after the Civil War. This manifested as local law enforcement collaborating with land-owning elites to arrest predominantly Black people for petty offenses such as loitering and vagrancy, and then incarcerate them in industrial camps, mines, and plantations where their life expectancy could be as little as 9 months-3 years. Incarcerated Black people, though newly freed from chattel slavery, were now forced them to labor once again for the same white families that owned them before the war.

Though a union state during the Civil War, [California engaged in convict leasing](#) beginning in 1851. The rapid expansion of prisons over the last 4 decades, known as "[mass incarceration](#)," has also further solidified California's perpetuation of slavery by another name and its enduring adoption of the 13th Amendment in the state constitution.

Incarcerated people in California face severe consequences for refusing to work, including potential reassignment to [solitary confinement](#). This practice is particularly concerning given the United Nations recognizes [solitary confinement](#) as a form of torture. In addition, the disparity in compensation between prison labor and comparable work outside is stark. This wage inequality is evident across various job categories, highlighting the systemic undervaluation of incarcerated workers' labor. For instance, an incarcerated person working as a technician in a California prison can hope to make between \$0.15 and \$.24 per hour, while a technician on the outside can aspire to average \$25 per hour. This vast wage gap raises significant questions about the ethics of prison labor practices, especially when participation is effectively mandatory under threat of punishment.

Proposition 6

California Proposition 6, Remove Involuntary Servitude as Punishment for Crime Amendment, explicitly prohibits slavery and involuntary servitude as punishment for a crime, and forced prison labor.

Voting yes on this proposition would amend the California state constitution, removing the language copied from the now infamous, federal 13th Amendment. This amendment would make the state constitution more in line with current standards of liberty and justice and end modern-day slavery once and for all.

Voting no on this proposition would allow modern-day slavery to continue in California, impacting the approximately [91,500 people](#) in held in the state's 32 prisons and fire camps, and the thousands of people connected to them through kinship, friendship, and community.

Proposition 6 is an issue of contemporary standards versus outdated, historical attitudes that are no longer in line with our notion of democracy.

Bi-partisan Support

Across the country, other states spanning the political spectrum have already banned forced prison labor by amending their constitutions to prevent involuntary servitude as punishment for a crime. Colorado became the first state in modern history to amend its constitution banning the use of slavery and involuntary servitude

as punishment for a crime in order to make forced prison labor illegal. [Alabama, Oregon, Tennessee, and Vermont](#) recently passed amendments similar California's proposed Proposition 6.

As bi-partisan political support rises across the country to end modern-day slavery in the form of prison labor, California remains behind on the issue of prison labor when compared to other states. [In 2022](#), California lawmakers rejected a ballot measure that would have abolished forced prison labor and slavery, and raised incarcerated workers' pay to minimum wage.

Come November 6th, California voters now have the chance to rectify a grave miscalculation of justice and restore the state's commitment to equity and fairness for all.