

Jails to Jobs (J2J): Advancing Public Safety Through Workforce Development

California has long recognized that stable employment is essential to public safety. Through significant public investments in workforce development—including for those impacted by the criminal justice system—the state has demonstrated its commitment to building a resilient labor force while transforming lives and improving public safety.¹ The Jails to Jobs (J2J) program would apply these strategies at the pretrial stage, a period that is critical to breaking the “cycle of crime” and improving safety for everyone.²

California is missing a vital opportunity to stabilize people pretrial

California has not applied its success operating robust workforce development initiatives to its nation-leading pretrial diversion programs. J2J would connect people charged with low-level, nonviolent offenses to sector-specific workforce training and wraparound services as an alternative to incarceration.

Even just 24 hours in jail increases the likelihood of rearrest and carries lasting destabilizing consequences.³ Once incarcerated, people lose income, housing, and support networks, worsening the very conditions that led to their arrest. Meanwhile, a criminal conviction creates long-term barriers to employment and stability that make reoffending more likely.⁴ By intervening at the pretrial stage with cost-effective, evidence-based programs, J2J delivers long-term public safety returns and economic benefits that incarceration cannot.

Employment is critical to public safety

Poverty and unstable employment are strongly associated with arrest and incarceration.⁵ This relationship is cyclical: when people lack access to work, their risk of arrest or incarceration rises. With a conviction history, securing a job becomes even harder—and without economic stability, people are more likely to reoffend.⁶

Employment disrupts this cycle. Research consistently shows that people who secure jobs after returning home from jail or prison are far less likely to be reincarcerated.⁷ Work provides income as well as structure, purpose, and a pathway to long-term stability.⁸ By connecting eligible people to high-quality jobs with living wages and opportunities for advancement before they are destabilized by jail and a criminal conviction, California can meaningfully reduce recidivism and strengthen community safety.

California has proven that workforce development and pretrial diversion work

- Los Angeles County’s SECTOR program, a reentry workforce initiative, found that within one year of enrollment, approximately 87 percent of participants were not arrested, about 96 percent had no new convictions, and employed participants saw a median hourly wage increase of about \$2.20.⁹
- Several California Workforce Development Board programs found that participants saw quarterly employment gains of up to 11.7 percentage points and quarterly earnings gains of up to 32.7 percentage points.¹⁰
- Los Angeles County’s Rapid Diversion Program showed that only 9.3 percent of graduates had a new case filed after completing the program.¹¹
- San Francisco’s Felony Diversion program found that participants had a decreased probability of a new conviction for at least five years following case arraignment—including participants with more extensive conviction histories and serious felony charges.¹²

Jails to Jobs can deliver safety and economic benefits for California

California already has a strong foundation: proven workforce development programs, successful diversion models, and a demonstrated commitment to investing in community safety. At a time when the state is facing a growing labor market shortage, J2J brings these proven strategies together where it matters most, giving California the opportunity to lead the nation in building safer, stronger communities.

Endnotes

- 1 Between 2019 and 2024, the California Workforce Development Board (CWDB) awarded more than \$540 million across 415 grants to support career development for communities facing the greatest barriers to employment. More than 30 percent of participants in these programs were system-involved. See California Workforce Development Board, *California Workforce Development Board Programs Overview Report* (Sacramento, CA: California Workforce Development Board, 2024), <https://perma.cc/6C38-V69W>.
- 2 Nazish Dholakia, "What 'Breaking Cycles of Crime' Actually Means," Vera Institute of Justice, April 17, 2025, <https://www.vera.org/news/what-breaking-cycles-of-crime-actually-means>.
- 3 Christopher T. Lowenkamp, *The Hidden Costs of Pretrial Detention Revisited* (Houston, TX: Arnold Ventures, 2022), 4, <http://perma.cc/99VE-QLG8>.
- 4 Ian A. Silver, Christopher D'Amato, and John Wooldredge, "The Cycle of Reentry and Reincarceration: Examining the Influence on Employment over a Period of 18 Years," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 74 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2021.101812>; and Priscillia Hunt, Rosanna Smart, Lisa Jonsson, and Flavia Tsang, *Incentivizing Employers to Hire Ex-Offenders: What Policies Are Most Effective?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10003.html.
- 5 Institute for Research on Poverty, *Connections Among Poverty, Incarceration, and Inequality* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2020), <https://perma.cc/WC3M-H5PW>; and Silver et al., "The Cycle of Reentry and Reincarceration," 2021.
- 6 Hunt et al., *Incentivizing Employers to Hire Ex-Offenders*, 2018.
- 7 Andrew Berger-Gross, *The Impact of Post-Release Employment on Recidivism in North Carolina* (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Department of Commerce, Labor & Economic Analysis Division, 2022), <https://perma.cc/R28L-E77R>.
- 8 Jose Rodriguez, "The Imperative of Education and Employment for Reintegrating Formerly Incarcerated Individuals," Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, July 16, 2024, <https://perma.cc/DUW3-BFRT>; and Andrew S. Denney, Richard Tewksbury, and Richard S. Jones, "Beyond Basic Needs: Social Support and Structure for Successful Offender Reentry," *Journal of Qualitative Criminal Justice and Criminology* 2, no. 1 (2014), <https://qualitativecriminology.pubpub.org/pub/v211p3/release/1?readingCollection=cf623619>.
- 9 Emily Brennan, Chelsea Jackson, and Anna Kyler, *Not Just a Job: A Career. Implementation of a Sectoral Training Program for People Impacted by the Criminal Legal System* (Los Angeles: MDRC, 2023), <https://perma.cc/X6V8-MVDU>.
- 10 Jesse Rothstein, Robert Santillano, and Till von Wachter, *Identifying the Impacts of Job Training Programs in California* (Sacramento, CA: California Workforce Development Board, 2022), 10, 11, <https://perma.cc/8LRQ-T3HS>.
- 11 Stephanie Brooks Holliday, Elizabeth Marsolais, and Samantha Matthews, *Process Evaluation of the Los Angeles County Rapid Diversion Program: A Pretrial Mental Health Diversion Program* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2024), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3385-1.html.
- 12 Elsa Augustine, Johanna Laco, Steven Raphael, and Alissa Skog, *The Impact of Felony Diversion in San Francisco* (Berkeley, CA: California Policy Lab, 2021), <https://perma.cc/EZ93-6DZQ>.