

# REDEMPTION LAW GROUP



## Whitepaper 2025

### Redeeming Futures: Post-Conviction Relief in California and How a Tech-Forward Legal Service Is Leading the Way

#### Executive Summary

California is leading a paradigm shift in criminal justice reform by expanding **post-conviction relief** measures that help people move beyond their past records. With approximately **8 million Californians** – about **1 in 5 adults** – living with an arrest or conviction record, the social stakes are high. These individuals face thousands of legal and societal barriers (over **4,800 collateral consequences** in California law) that hinder employment, housing, education, and more. Research shows that nearly **76% of people with a conviction history** encounter significant hurdles to success in daily life. Clearing or sealing criminal records through avenues like expungement, record sealing, certificates of rehabilitation, or early probation termination can remove these barriers – improving job prospects, increasing lifetime earnings, reducing recidivism, and ultimately enhancing public safety and the economy. In fact, one analysis estimated that California loses about **\$20 billion in GDP each year** due to the underemployment of people with old convictions, a loss that record-clearance reforms can help reverse.

This whitepaper explores the **legal and social impact** of post-conviction relief in California and illustrates the benefits of a clean slate for individuals and communities. It also highlights how **Redemption Law Group (RLG)** – a California-based legal tech firm – is disrupting the traditional legal model with an accessible, affordable, and convenient **digital-first platform** for record clearance services. Compared to outdated, expensive legal processes, RLG's innovative approach leverages technology to serve clients **statewide in all 58 counties**, offering **flat-fee pricing** (typically \$990–\$1,695 per case) that brings second chances within reach of more people. We outline RLG's mission and values rooted in second chances and fairness, and how its flat-fee, full-service model (covering expungements, arrest record sealing, certificates of rehabilitation, early probation termination, and more) provides a client-friendly alternative to the status quo.

**In summary**, post-conviction relief is transforming lives and strengthening communities across California by removing the stigma and restrictions of a criminal past. Redemption Law Group is at the forefront of this movement, combining expert legal representation with cutting-edge technology to empower clients to **clear their record** and **reclaim their future**. The following sections provide an in-depth look at the impact of record clearance, the advantages of RLG's tech-forward service model, and why now is the time for Californians with old records to pursue relief. *(Data visualization tip: Consider using an infographic to show the scale of the issue – e.g., a pie chart illustrating that 1 in 5 Californians has a criminal record, and a graphic highlighting the \$20B annual economic loss from unrealized potential.)*

#### The Legal and Social Impact of Clearing Criminal Records in California

## Californians Living with Criminal Records: The Scope of the Issue

Having a criminal record – even for a single past mistake – is remarkably common in California and carries lifelong consequences. More than **8 million adults** in California have a criminal record on file. That equates to roughly **one in four** adults in the state who must check “yes” on a background check and potentially face skepticism or discrimination.

Even focusing on convictions alone, about **1 in 5 Californians** are living with an **old** conviction record that continues to follow them. Many of these convictions are years or decades old, yet they impose ongoing burdens. California law imposes over **4,800 collateral consequence provisions** – legal restrictions that limit people with convictions from accessing jobs, licenses, housing, and other opportunities – and **73%** of these restrictions are **permanent** bans. In short, millions of Californians are marked by their past in ways that make it harder to rebuild their lives, long after any sentence or probation is complete.

The human impact of these records is profound. According to a **Californians for Safety and Justice** survey, **76%** of people with a prior conviction report experiencing serious barriers to re-entry into society. They describe struggling to find steady employment or even being outright barred from certain careers; difficulty securing housing or being disqualified from leases; trouble obtaining occupational licenses required for many trades; and other social disadvantages. These individual struggles add up to broader societal costs: families remain economically insecure, communities lose out on productive workers, and the state economy suffers from unrealized potential. A 2018 analysis found **2.5 million working-age Californians** had a felony record, and the state’s economy lost about **\$20 billion annually** (in 2021 dollars) due to the reduced employment and earnings of people with old felony records. The Los Angeles region alone was missing out on an estimated **\$9 billion** in annual GDP, and the Bay Area over **\$4 billion**, because of the chilling effect of past convictions on workforce participation. Clearly, the stakes are high – both for individuals and for California as a whole – when so many people remain “marked” by their past convictions.

*(Visualization suggestion: A statewide map or chart could illustrate the prevalence of criminal records and economic impact by region – for example, highlighting Los Angeles’ \$9B and Bay Area’s \$4B estimated GDP losses due to conviction-related underemployment. This would visually convey that the impact is widespread across all California counties.)*

## Collateral Consequences: Barriers Faced by People with Records

The label of a criminal record creates an array of **collateral consequences** – essentially, civil penalties and social biases that kick in after the criminal case is over. These consequences touch nearly every facet of life. For instance, people with records often encounter:

- **Employment Barriers:** Job applications frequently ask about criminal history, and background checks can disqualify candidates. Over **46%** of Californians with convictions report difficulty finding a job due to their record. Many employers, by policy or bias, are hesitant to hire someone with a past offense, even for otherwise qualified candidates. Certain industries bar people with certain convictions altogether. This leads to higher unemployment and lower income for people with records, creating a vicious cycle where a past mistake limits one’s ability to make a living.
- **Housing Obstacles:** Safe, stable housing can also be out of reach. About **1 in 4** (24%) of people with a conviction history in California say they’ve had difficulty renting or finding housing because of background checks. Landlords may reject applicants with any criminal record, or housing laws may exclude them from certain programs. As a result, individuals and families can remain in insecure or substandard housing, or even face homelessness, due to an old conviction or arrest record.

- **Financial Burdens and Fees:** Nearly **45%** of people with past convictions struggle with outstanding fines, fees, or court-ordered debts. The financial aftermath of a conviction – such as court fines, restitution, or administrative fees – can total thousands of dollars, creating long-term debt that damages credit and financial stability. (One study found the average debt incurred from a criminal conviction was over **\$13,600**.) These financial obligations can accumulate interest or lead to wage garnishment, further hampering re-entry.
- **Occupational Licensing and Education:** Over **35%** report trouble obtaining professional or occupational licenses due to their record. California, like many states, has licensing restrictions that can disqualify individuals with certain convictions from working as barbers, nurses, contractors, real estate agents, and in many other professions. Even when not legally barred, the licensing process may require disclosure of convictions and subjective “good moral character” evaluations. This makes it harder for people with records to advance into higher-paying careers or start businesses. Likewise, some individuals are denied educational opportunities or student financial aid because of past offenses, though policies have been improving in this area.
- **Social Stigma and Other Barriers:** Intangible but very real, the stigma of a criminal record can affect one’s mental health and relationships. Surveyed individuals noted **health issues** (40%, including stress or trouble sleeping) linked to the stigma and stress of carrying a record. People with records may also be barred from volunteering in their child’s school or youth sports, from adopting or fostering children, or even from certain civic roles – all of which isolates them further from community life.

Each of these barriers reinforces the others – for example, difficulty finding a job leads to financial instability, which makes securing housing even harder. The **cumulative impact** is that many people with past records feel they are still “serving a sentence” long after they’ve paid their dues to society. As one lawmaker put it, *“Preventing people with a past conviction from positively contributing to their communities is a leading driver of recidivism, destabilizes families, undermines our economy, and makes our communities less safe.”* In other words, when people are perpetually punished and excluded, everyone loses. That is why California has increasingly pursued **post-conviction relief** strategies – to lift these barriers, unlock individuals’ potential, and improve public safety and economic health in the process.

### **Post-Conviction Relief Options: Expungement, Sealing, and More**

Fortunately, California law provides several **post-conviction relief** mechanisms that can mitigate or remove the lasting effects of a criminal record. These legal remedies allow eligible individuals to clear their record or obtain court recognition of their rehabilitation. The main forms of relief include:

- **Record Expungement (Dismissal of Conviction):** *Expungement* in California is a process under Penal Code §1203.4 that effectively **dismisses a conviction** after successful completion of the sentence (including probation). When a conviction is expunged, it is updated to show as *dismissed* on one’s record – in essence, the case is closed as if a not-guilty verdict had been entered. An expunged conviction will **no longer appear** on most private background checks, and California law then allows the person to **legally state** to private employers or landlords that they have **not been convicted** of that offense. This is a game-changer for job and housing applications. Expungement *removes the conviction* from public view and eliminates many barriers, though the record is still accessible to courts and law enforcement. Most misdemeanors and many felonies are expungeable (with some exceptions like serious sex or violent offenses). By clearing convictions, individuals can honestly say they’ve put the conviction behind them, opening doors to employment, professional licenses, better housing, and educational opportunities.
- **Arrest Record Sealing:** California’s laws also allow people to seal records of **arrests** that did not result in a conviction. Under Penal Code §851.87 (the “Clean Slate” law effective since 2018), one can petition the court to seal an arrest record if charges were never filed or were dismissed, or if the person was acquitted at trial. **Sealing an arrest record** means that the

record is *hidden from public view* – it will not show up in standard background checks by employers or landlords. This is crucial because roughly one-third of felony arrests in California do not result in conviction, yet without relief, those arrest records can still appear and cause prejudice. A sealed record still exists in law enforcement databases and can be seen with a court order or for certain sensitive jobs, but for most everyday purposes, it is as though the arrest never happened. Sealing offers relief for innocent people or those who were never charged, ensuring a *dismissed case or mere arrest* does not unjustly shadow someone's life.

- **Certificate of Rehabilitation (COR):** A Certificate of Rehabilitation is a court order that formally declares a person rehabilitated after a serious conviction. It's often used by individuals who **served time in state prison** or others whose convictions *cannot* be expunged under California law. While a COR **does not erase the conviction**, it is a powerful **symbol of reform**: it signifies to employers, licensing boards, and society that the individual has turned their life around and remained crime-free for a substantial period. Importantly, obtaining a Certificate of Rehabilitation **automatically triggers an application for a gubernatorial pardon** in California. It can be a first step toward a pardon, which *would* fully restore rights and forgive the conviction. The COR itself also can provide some direct benefits: for example, under a 2019 law, **California employers are prohibited from considering convictions that have been relieved by a Certificate of Rehabilitation**. Many professional licensing boards look favorably on (or even require) a COR before granting licenses to someone with a past felony. In sum, a Certificate of Rehabilitation helps to **clear one's name in the eyes of the law** and is tangible proof of one's rehabilitation that can reduce the stigma of a conviction.
- **Early Probation Termination:** In California, those on felony or misdemeanor probation can petition the court under Penal Code §1203.3 for an **early termination of probation**. Successfully ending probation ahead of schedule not only lifts any remaining probation conditions, but also **opens the door** to immediate expungement (since California generally requires probation to be completed before a case can be expunged). Ending probation early is often possible for people who have completed all requirements (such as fines, classes, community service) and demonstrated good behavior. The court considers factors like compliance with terms, time already served on probation, and the person's need (for employment, etc.) to end probation sooner. If granted, the person is discharged from probation and, in many cases, their attorney will **file for expungement immediately after**. This two-step combo – early termination *plus* expungement – is extremely beneficial: it can shorten the typical waiting time by months or years, allowing individuals to clear their record and regain rights (such as the ability to travel freely, or avoid restrictions like probation check-ins and travel limits) much faster than normal. Many of Redemption Law Group's clients pursue this dual relief, achieving freedom from supervision and a clean record in one continuous process.

## How Many People Benefit?

California has been expanding access to these remedies through legislation and even **automatic record relief**. In 2022, the state implemented an *automatic clearing* system (pursuant to AB 1076 and SB 731) that will eventually **seal old conviction and arrest records electronically** for those who remain crime-free for a set period. This "Clean Slate" automatic relief is estimated to cover **approximately 90% of people with convictions between 2010 and 2021** – meaning the vast majority of those recent cases will be cleared without the person having to file a petition. Analysts project that nearly **1 million+ Californians** became newly eligible to have old convictions sealed when SB 731 took effect, marking "*the most expansive post-conviction relief law in the nation's history.*" Still, not everyone is covered by the automatic process (for example, those with certain violent or serious convictions, or convictions from before 1973, must still petition manually). And for many, waiting for automatic relief is not ideal – a petition for expungement or sealing can achieve results **faster** and allow one to certify their record clear when needed for a job or license application on a quicker timeline. Thus, services that help people navigate **petitions for expungement, sealing, and other relief** remain critically important. California's clean slate efforts are a huge leap forward, but the need for **personalized, case-by-case post-conviction relief**

**assistance** is still great – especially for those outside the automatic criteria or seeking to maximize relief (such as obtaining a certificate of rehabilitation or terminating probation early).

### **Benefits of Clearing Records: Better Jobs, Safer Communities**

The upside of clearing a criminal record is massive – both for individuals and for society at large. On the individual level, research across states has found that expungement and similar relief lead to **significantly improved life outcomes**. A landmark empirical study in Michigan, for example, found that within just **one year after an expungement**, individuals' **quarterly wages rose by about 23% on average**. This boost was largely because people were able to secure better jobs (or any job at all) once their record was cleared. In California, a cost-benefit analysis of a Santa Clara County record clearance clinic similarly found an average **increase of about \$6,000 in annual earnings** for individuals after expungement, due to improved employment opportunities. When people can work to their skill level, earn higher wages, and access careers that were previously closed to them, it not only transforms their lives – it also means more tax revenue and less reliance on public assistance, yielding an economic gain for communities.

Another crucial benefit is **reduced recidivism**. Clearing a record can break the cycle of re-offense by removing the barriers that often lead people back into desperation or illegal activity. The Michigan study found that expungement recipients have extremely low subsequent crime rates – only about **4% were convicted of any crime within 5 years post-expungement** (mostly minor misdemeanors), a rate far below that of the general criminal population. In California, automatic record relief is projected to be durable: an estimated **72% of individuals who receive an automatic clean slate will not have any new contact with the justice system within at least five years** of clearing their record, and fewer than 2% are expected to commit any new offense serious enough to disqualify them from future relief. These figures debunk the myth that offering second chances jeopardizes public safety – on the contrary, people given a clean slate are overwhelmingly law-abiding and productive, and our communities are *safer* when more people can gain legitimate employment and stability.

There are also intangible benefits that come from lifting the burden of a criminal record. People report improved mental health, better family relationships, and a greater sense of dignity and belonging once their record is cleared – essentially, it is the restoration of full **citizenship and human potential**. As one California report framed it, giving people a second chance “*uplifts millions of people and their communities*” and unlocks a wave of economic and social contributions. By one estimate, fully utilizing record clearance in California could add **\$20 billion annually to the state GDP** – the exact amount currently lost – by enabling people to work to their capabilities. In short, post-conviction relief doesn't just help one person at a time; it is a smart social investment. It strengthens the workforce, boosts public safety, and affirms our values of redemption and rehabilitation.