

The Best Firefighting Jobs Require the EMT License

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Introduction

Over the past few years, public pressure has mounted in opposition to a California state [regulation](#) that severely restricts people who have criminal records from obtaining licensure as Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT's). This regulation stipulates a lifetime ban against people with two or more felony convictions, a 10-year ban against applicants with one felony conviction, and a 5-year ban against applicants with any theft-related misdemeanor conviction. In June 2020, a [lawsuit](#) was filed challenging the constitutionality of the regulation's 10-year and lifetime bans.

These restrictions have been widely criticized in the news media, particularly given the state's reliance on incarcerated people to serve as front line firefighting "hand crews," which save the state up

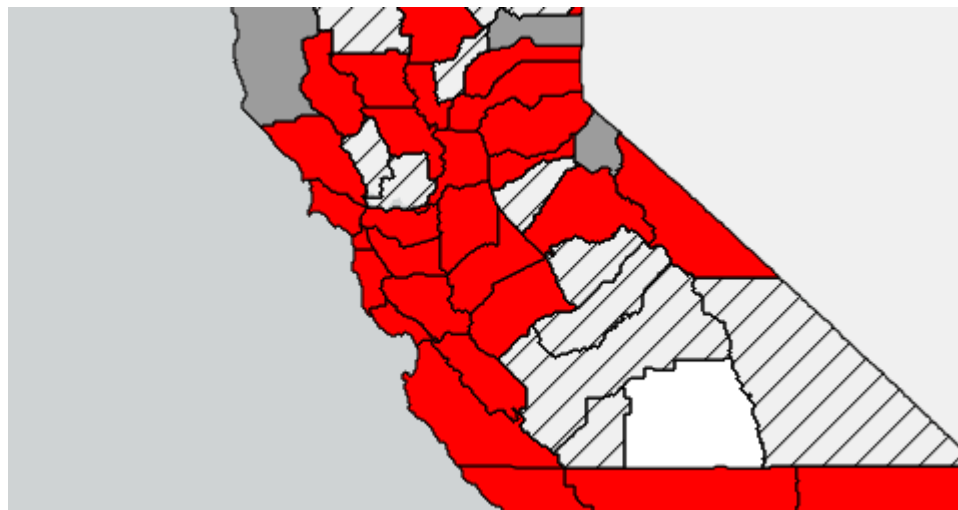
to \$100 million dollars per year. While people who have criminal records *can and do* get hired as firefighters, as the findings presented here demonstrate, **the best firefighting jobs require the EMT license.**

Over the past few years, advocates have been steadily working toward legislative reform. In September 2020, Governor Newsom signed a Bill ([AB 2147](#)) establishing a "discretionary dismissal" process for those who participated in conservation fire camps while in prison. However, the reform excludes people with certain violent and sex-related felony convictions; requires applicants to petition a superior court for the dismissal, which then may or may not be granted at the discretion of a judge; and does not guarantee that dismissed conviction(s) will be overlooked by the regulatory agencies with the power to grant or deny EMT certification and licensure [1]. Thus, many people with criminal records remain unable to get licensed as EMTs, including the many who do not get the opportunity to work in conservation camps while incarcerated.

We sought to test a widely held anecdotal assertion: the best paid, most sought after firefighting positions, in the most desirable locations in California, are out of reach for many people with criminal records. **By compiling and comparing EMT requirement and salary data for CAL FIRE, Federal firefighting agencies and every county fire department in California [2] , we concluded the following:**

Findings

1) In most counties, an EMT license is required or strongly preferred. Click on any county in the below map for details on EMT status, population, and entry-level pay range.

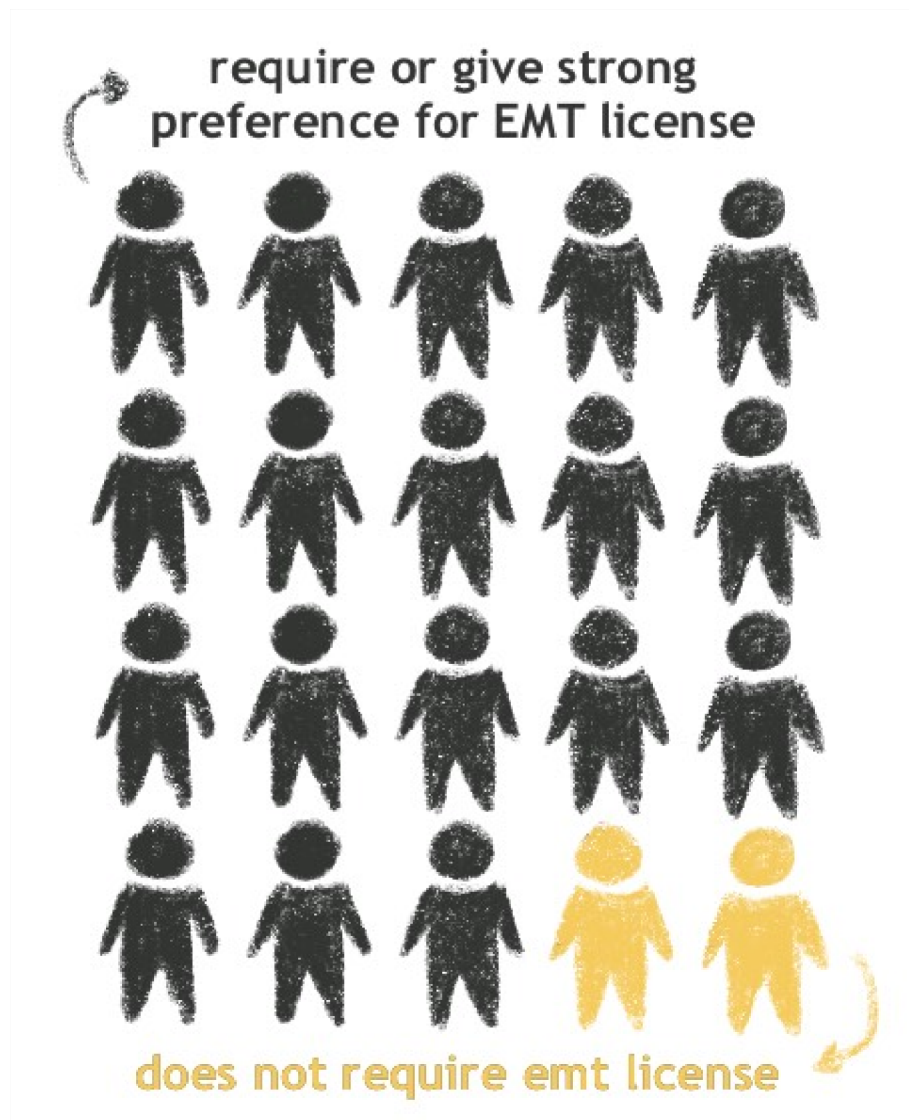


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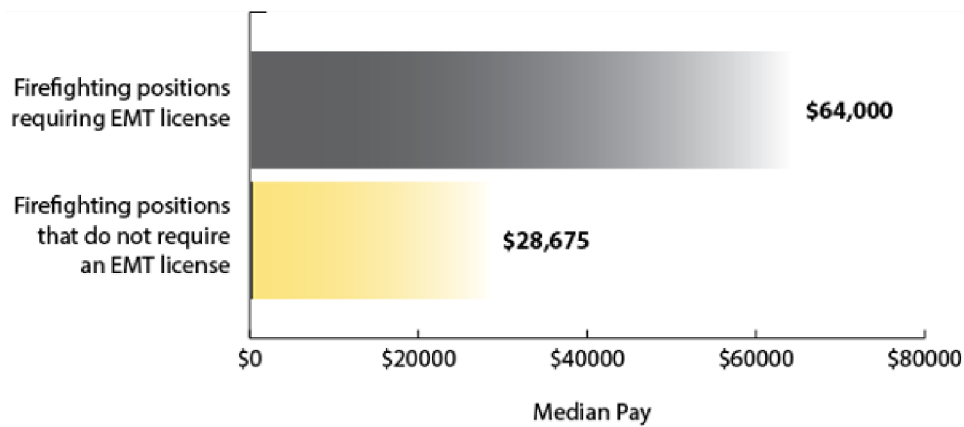
Click the circle on the bottom left to see the legend.

2) The places where most Californians live require the EMT license. Of the 20 most populous counties in California, 18 either require, or give strong preference to firefighter applicants with EMT licenses.



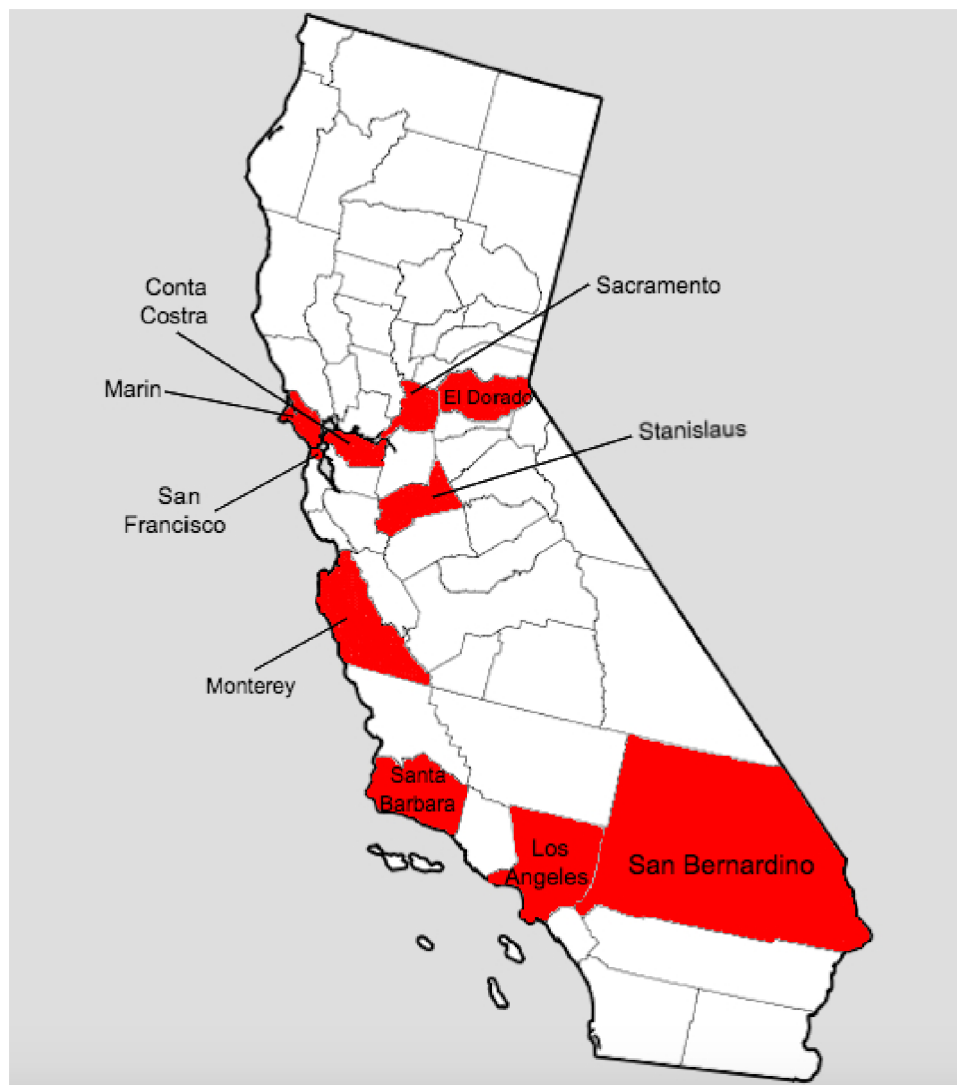
Graphic by Dalia Harris.

3) The pay is significantly higher for jobs requiring the EMT license. Positions requiring EMT licensure pay approximately twice as much as those that don't require the license.



Graphic by Dalia Harris.

4) The top 10 highest paying counties require EMT licenses for introductory-level firefighting.



The Top 10 Highest Paying Counties in California

Context & Background

Since the 1950s in the United States, there has been a dramatic increase in the number and range of professions requiring licenses, clearances, and credentials. Couched in concerns about risk and harm prevention, but often lacking rational basis, many occupational licenses, clearances and credentials carry significant restrictions related to criminal records. As a result, people who have criminal records – people who are disproportionately Black, Latinx and of modest economic and educational backgrounds - are increasingly unable to access stable, well-paid and career-advancing jobs.

The California regulation restricting people with criminal records from EMT licensure derives its legal authority from Assembly Bill 2917, passed in 2008. This Bill called for the creation of a centralized database for EMT licensing, into which local EMS authorities were required to enter certain "data elements" about EMT candidates and holders, including fingerprints, criminal records, and disciplinary actions. The new law also required local authorities to establish standardized procedures for conducting background checks. The purpose of the Bill was to ensure that an EMT who had been disciplined or whose license was suspended in one county could not simply move to another.

The Bill's motivation is illuminated by Committee Analysis documents, which reference an investigation conducted by The LA Times and Sacramento Bee in 2007-2008, detailing incidents of misbehavior on the part of California EMTs. The newspapers exposed a few dramatic cases in which EMTs who had been dismissed were subsequently able to secure employment as EMTs in other areas of California. However, AB2917 did not disqualify people with criminal records from EMT licensure. Rather, the EMSA made a leap from an effort to centralize data and track professional misconduct, to the categorical, lifetime exclusion from licensure of people with two felony convictions, regardless how old or irrelevant. Section 22 CC 100214.3 of the California Code of

Regulations ([see page 11](#)) now lists an extensive series of circumstances relating to prior criminal convictions that will result in the denial or revocation of an EMT license.

Sources & End Notes

[1] The National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians (NREMT) is a nonprofit organization established in 1970 that "certifies" potential EMT's through a competency test. The National Registry is recognized in every state in the United States, and 46 states use the National Registry certification as a basis for licensure. NREMT has its own criminal convictions policy, distinct from that of the EMSA. While the agency's policy does not name any blanket restrictions relating to criminal history, there is a general tendency to deny consideration for certification until five years after completion of sentencing. For example, a person convicted in 2012, released from prison in 2015, and then serves 5 years of parole, would not be given consideration until 2020.

Once a person is certified, EMT licenses are granted by the Emergency Medical Services Authority, which develops and coordinates statewide emergency medical preparation and response, and sets and maintains standards for emergency medical personnel.

[2] More detail on methods: Fire protection in California involves resources at state, federal and local levels. These include: 1) the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), whose primary function is to prevent and fight wildland fires across the state and coordinate this effort across counties; 2) federal resources (including the United States Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Bureau of Indian Affairs) that manage wildland fires throughout California and across the US; and at the local level, county and city fire departments. Some counties in California do not have their own firefighting units and instead rely on city fire departments, while others have volunteer-only departments, or are subcontracted with and/or supplemented by

CAL FIRE. There is no one rule that governs the response to fires throughout the state, and collaboration is frequent.

For the purposes of this study, we analyzed the firefighting resources used by each county, comparing salary and EMT requirements across **county fire departments, CalFire** and **federal agencies**. Salary information is publicly available on many county's websites. For those with insufficient information on their web pages, we sent emails to their listed contacts or through the contact sections of their websites, asking for supplemental information. We also cross-referenced information found on the California Professional Firefighters Union webpage regarding which firefighting units are part of the union. We opted to not include city fire departments in our analysis because of a lack of readily available information, and because their generally more stringent requirements and higher salaries would only have made our conclusions more stark. The data are compiled in an excel document, where they are sortable by categories such as county population, and salary. To access background data, email: mlburch@umich.edu



This research brief was produced as part of the University of Michigan Carceral State Project's "Documenting Criminalization & Confinement" initiative. Charlotte

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