

INCARCERATION WITHOUT EXPLOITATION

San Francisco eliminated steep price markups in the commissary/jail store to lift a financial burden off families and incarcerated people. **California should do the same.**



THE FINANCIAL
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Introduction

Imagine going into a Safeway to shop for weekly groceries and the prices had jumped **65%**. That is the experience of people incarcerated in California prisons when they purchase items from the prison store, also known as commissary. Prisons and jails routinely mark up prices of food and hygiene items in the commissary to generate revenue for their operations. The steep prices fall hard on people's families, who are usually the ones paying.

To lift a formidable financial burden off incarcerated people and their families, San Francisco eliminated profits in its jail store. The results have been profound. Since then:

- **The average 43% profit margin in San Francisco was eliminated on all items**, lowering prices significantly and immediately.
- Paying lower prices **lifted a formidable weekly financial burden off incarcerated people's families.**
- **Incarcerated people can now buy more supplemental food and hygiene items.** Since this

“*Eliminating commissary markups in San Francisco jails lifted a financial burden off of incarcerated people and their families. The San Francisco Sheriff's Office is proud to take this important step in the right direction and reduce the costs of incarceration.*”

SAN FRANCISCO SHERIFF PAUL MIYAMOTO

reform, people are now buying up to 82% more commissary items.

- **The Sheriff's Office, City and County of San Francisco, and San Francisco Jail Justice Coalition agree that eliminating price markups advances racial and economic equity**, helps financially stabilize marginalized families in San Francisco, and boosts reentry and public safety.

This issue brief explains why and how San Francisco eliminated profits on commissary and the positive impacts of this reform. **The State of California has the opportunity to do the same and eliminate the average 65% markup on prison store items.**

1 The Problem with Jail and Prison Commissaries



Commissaries are jail or prison “stores” where people purchase basic food and hygiene necessities. Incarcerated individuals routinely [lack hygiene items](#), such as soap and toilet paper. People must turn to the commissary to purchase items like soap, toothpaste, and shampoo. Additionally, incarcerated individuals receive [inadequate meals](#) and therefore must rely heavily on commissary foods and beverages for sustenance.

Commissary prices are significantly higher than those at grocery stores. Commissary prices can be over 200% higher than those at a grocery or drug store. The table below compares common products from the commissary to products offered in retail markets like Amazon, Safeway, or Walmart.

Product	California State Prison (2023)	Retail Price (2023)	Difference
Deodorant	\$3.60	\$2.79	+29%
Toothpaste	\$3.25	\$2.49	+31%
Ramen	\$0.95	\$0.30	+217%

Corporations and governments profit off goods sold through the commissary. A highly concentrated industry stocks jail and prison commissaries. The [\\$1.6 billion market](#) is dominated by a few corporations, with Keefe as the market’s largest player. This allows suppliers to set prices much higher than in conventional retail markets. On top of the supplier’s markups, counties split the profits from commissary sales with their corporate partners. Prior to San Francisco eliminating these markups, the City and County received a commission of 43% on all goods sold.

Families—most often low-income women of color—pay for food and hygiene items purchased at the commissary. Because incarcerated people cannot afford to buy commissary on their own, it is most often family members, primarily low-income women of color, who pay for commissary to support their loved ones. A [report](#) by the Ella Baker Center found that 87% of family members are responsible for supporting their loved ones inside and more than one-third of people go into debt trying to cover these costs. Furthermore, people incarcerated in county jails make no wages. In prisons, people who can work make very little. In California, the prison pay scale can range from 8 to 37 cents per hour for half time and partial full-time employment. The average hourly wage of a semi-skilled worker in prison is 15 cents. To buy the cheapest bar of soap offered at \$0.54, an individual would have to work four hours.

Research underscores how people’s families help incarcerated people successfully re-enter society when they’re released. Families play a crucial role in providing formerly incarcerated people with a place to live and helping them find jobs. People who maintain strong relationships with their families have lower [rates of recidivism](#). Eliminating commissary markups relieves financial pressures that fray these important family ties. When we ease the burden on people’s families, we strengthen incarcerated people’s chances for successful reentry and boost public safety.

4 HOURS OF WORK FOR A BAR OF SOAP



15 CENTS Average hourly wage of a semi-skilled worker in prison



54 CENTS Cheapest bar of soap offered



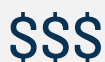
4 HOURS Amount of time an individual would have to work to purchase the cheapest bar of soap

2 How Did San Francisco Eliminate These Price Markups and What Has Been the Impact?

In 2019, prior to these reforms, the San Francisco Sheriff's Office, San Francisco Jail Justice Coalition, and The Financial Justice Project collaborated

to survey incarcerated people to understand how commissary prices affect incarcerated people and their families. The survey found that:

PRE-REFORM: SURVEY OF INCARCERATED PEOPLE



96%
of incarcerated people
said commissary items
were expensive



89%
said there were times when
they didn't buy food and
hygiene necessities because
they couldn't afford them



\$70-100
spent per week on average on
commissary items



People most wanted to buy
supplemental food items,
including soup, rice, and beans,
followed by hygiene items,
including soap and deodorant

In response to the survey results, the San Francisco Jail Justice Coalition and Financial Justice Project worked with the San Francisco Mayor's Office and Sheriff's Office to call for an end to commissary price markups. In 2020, the Sheriff's Office renegotiated its contract with the commissary vendor to remove markups. That same year, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed the [People Over Profits ordinance](#) to establish that San Francisco will not take commissions or profits on products or services provided to incarcerated people.

KEY IMPACTS of San Francisco's Elimination of Price Markups in Commissary

1. Prices dropped dramatically.

Below are examples of the price reduction in a selection of items.

“It helps a lot because our loved ones get a lot more with the money we send and some of us can't always send hundreds of dollars.”


FAMILY MEMBER SUPPORTING INCARCERATED LOVED ONE IN THE SAN FRANCISCO JAIL

Item	Pre-Reform	Post-Reform	Price Reduction
Reading glasses	\$8.00	\$4.55	43%
Shoes	\$30.00	\$19.00	37%
Deodorant	\$3.50	\$2.20	37%
Refried beans	\$3.00	\$1.30	57%
Top Ramen	\$1.08	\$0.50	54%
Sausage	\$1.65	\$0.75	55%

2. People are now buying 82% more items from the commissary.

Below is an example of what \$50 would buy before and after the San Francisco reforms.

PRE-Reform: \$50



- Tennis Shoes
- Reading Glasses
- Deodorant
- Toothpaste
- Dandruff Shampoo
- Tuna
- Ramen

POST-Reform: \$50



- Tennis Shoes
- Reading Glasses
- Deodorant x 2
- Toothpaste
- Dandruff Shampoo
- Tuna
- Ramen x 4
- Toothbrush
- Hair Conditioner
- Comb
- Mouthwash
- Lotion
- Hydrocortisone Cream
- Stationary Pad
- Lasagna
- Ground Coffee
- Hot Cocoa Mix
- Peanut Butter
- Crackers

3. Incarcerated people and their families report **improved health and well-being.**



Born and raised in San Francisco, Kevin has both experienced incarceration in San Francisco and is now supporting loved ones who are incarcerated. He vividly recalls times when he had to go without meals for extended periods during his own incarceration. After commissary markups were eliminated, he could afford more consistent nutrition and meals and said, **“When those prices went into effect, I was eating a lot more. It helped out a lot.”**

And now that he is providing financial assistance to incarcerated loved ones, Kevin notes that the reduction in commissary costs has eased his burden, enabling him to extend help to others as well. **The affordability of commissary items positively affected Kevin’s overall well-being, and he believes it has also contributed to the well-being of his incarcerated loved ones.**

4. **There was minimal budget impact to the Sheriff’s Office.** Forgoing price markups costs the Sheriff’s Office approximately \$500,000 annually, less than one half of one percent of the Sheriff’s Office’s nearly \$300 million budget (0.17%). **The Sheriff’s Office is supportive of the elimination of commissary markups and has a track record of working with the San Francisco Jail Justice Coalition and The Financial Justice Project.**

Conclusion

We are proud of our efforts to reduce the price of commissary in San Francisco jails. **California can limit markups on basic goods sold in prison canteens across California by passing Senate Bill 474, the BASIC(s) Act (D-Becker) into law.** This bill would support the health and well-being of incarcerated people, ease the financial burden for them and their families, and will improve reentry outcomes.

Thank you to the San Francisco Mayor’s Office, Sheriff’s Office, and San Francisco Jail Justice Coalition for their partnership and support on this reform.

About the San Francisco Financial Justice Project. San Francisco is the first city and county in the nation to launch a Financial Justice Project to assess and reform how fees and fines impact our city’s low-income residents and communities of color. We are housed in the San Francisco Office of the Treasurer & Tax Collector. For more information, please visit our website: sfgov.org/financialjustice.