

# IDENTITY DOCUMENTS & FORMERLY INCARCERATED PEOPLE

Identity documents (IDs) are vital keys necessary to open the doors to so many parts of everyday life. However, there are key system-level failures that create significant obstacles to IDs for many people, causing severe, yet avoidable harm. This infographic highlights some of the unique impacts on formerly incarcerated people. See MAP's [new report](#) to learn more about the obstacles to ID, the harms caused from a lack of ID, and recommendations for improving ID access for everyone.

## SYSTEM FAILURES CREATE OBSTACLES TO ID



**Burdensome documentation requirements** often mean a person needs one form of ID (such as a birth certificate) to get another ID (such as a driver's license). When someone is jailed or incarcerated, many of their belongings, including IDs, are taken from them, and these may not be returned upon release. In some cases, jails or prisons will intentionally destroy inmates' personal property, including IDs. Depending on how long a person is incarcerated, even if their IDs are returned to them, the IDs may have long since expired and no longer be valid. One advocate in Michigan estimated that 80% of the returning citizens he works with leave prison without a state ID, social security card, or a birth certificate—leaving people exiting incarceration with little to no way to get a new ID and setting them up for an even more difficult reentry.



**IDs are needlessly expensive**, with a new driver's license costing an average 4.1 hours of work at minimum wage—not including the costs of time waiting at or traveling to an ID office. Costs of a birth certificate can range even higher. People being released from prison or jail are unlikely to have any income to use to pay for the fees associated with obtaining a driver's license or other state-issued ID, and especially so if they must also pay any fines or fees associated with their incarceration or court processes.



The **limited availability of ID services** especially impacts people exiting incarceration, who have had little to no access to ID services while incarcerated. Relatively few states have laws providing for ID services for people exiting incarceration, as discussed on the next page, and this undermines the ability of people to successfully reenter their communities.

## LACK OF ID CAUSES CONCRETE, YET AVOIDABLE HARM

*Re-entering society after incarceration can be incredibly challenging even in the best of circumstances. Some of the most important factors for a person's successful reentry—stable housing, steady employment, and family or community connection—can be nearly impossible to access without a valid ID. The U.S. Justice Department itself says "issuing state identification while people are still incarcerated is the most effective model to support successful reentry."*



A lack of ID **blocks access to basic needs**, such as housing or employment. People exiting incarceration already face obstacles to meeting these needs, such as landlords or employers who might refuse to rent to or hire formerly incarcerated people. Without an ID required to apply for housing or jobs, or to legally drive to a job, these basic needs are even further out of reach. Research shows human connection is a vital part of successful reentry, but a lack of ID restricts a person's ability to travel freely to be with friends and family.



Both currently and formerly incarcerated people face **significant obstacles to voting**, and these are worsened by obstacles to ID. Laws in 48 states deny voting rights to people with felony convictions, including 26 states that continue to deny these rights after people have left prison on parole, probation, or even after they fully completed their sentence. A lack of ID can make it even harder for people to meet the terms of their parole or probation and to restore their voting rights—if their state even allows such restoration.

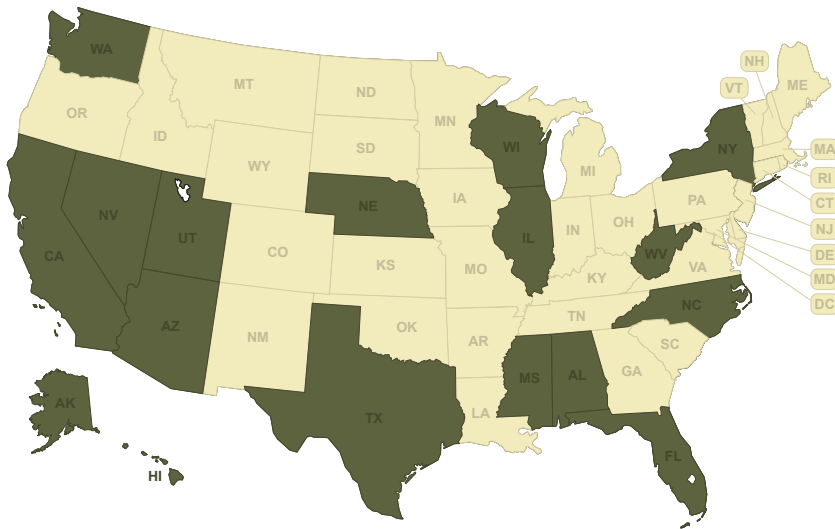


A lack of ID **limits access to essential services**, such as social safety net programs that can support successful reentry, such as food assistance (e.g., SNAP) or cash assistance (e.g., TANF). Some states and public programs already ban formerly incarcerated people from accessing these key services, limiting their chances at successful reentry—in states or for programs where this is not the case, a lack of valid ID poses another obstacle to accessing these essential supports.

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## ONLY 17 STATES HAVE LAWS ASSISTING PEOPLE EXITING INCARCERATION TO GET IDs



Every year, more than 600,000 people are released from incarceration. At least 17 states have enacted legislation that help people exiting incarceration get some form of state ID, and there are still more states or municipalities that have made similar efforts through non-legislative routes, like Washington D.C. and Michigan (profiled below).

Source: [National Conference of State Legislatures, 2022](#).

## NEW JOINT INITIATIVE IN MICHIGAN HELPS RETURNING CITIZENS GET IDs

A collaboration between the Michigan Department of State and the Michigan Department of Corrections assists people who are preparing for parole with collecting the documents, paperwork, and photos needed for a state-issued ID. The Department of Corrections pays for every individual to order a birth certificate. The materials are forwarded directly to the Department of State. Upon parole, individuals receive a license or ID, are registered to vote, and are connected to workplace supports.

The program was developed to help address the real challenges that formerly incarcerated people faced without an ID. For example, in 2020, Andre Felton left prison after nearly 40 years. He didn't have an ID, birth certificate, or social security card; he only had his Department of Corrections ID card. "If they don't send us out here prepared with that basic necessity, then you set us up for failure," said Felton, who now lives in Detroit. "I belonged to you for 40 years. Why can't I identify myself? And you're leaving the struggle to me in a pandemic?," he told *The Detroit Free Press*. He lost out on three jobs, struggled to find housing, and couldn't open a bank account. Eventually, and with the help of a local foundation, he was able to get his ID, which in turn allowed him to enroll in job training.

As a result of the collaboration, by October 2021, 95% of people being paroled received a state-issued ID upon release.

Adapted from: Angie Jackson's "[People leaving prison in Michigan still face hurdles to getting an ID](#)" (*Detroit Free Press*, May 11, 2021) and Scott McClallen's "[Thousands formerly incarcerated get IDs, driver's licenses](#)" (*The Center Square*, Nov 24, 2021).

Learn more about identity documents in MAP's new report:

### THE ID DIVIDE: HOW BARRIERS TO ID IMPACT DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES AND AFFECT US ALL

<http://www.mapresearch.org/id-documents-report>

