

What is Expungement?

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Expungement is the common phrase used to describe changing your criminal history for the better by having eligible convictions dismissed and eligible counts reduced to lesser ones (e.g., felony reduced to misdemeanor). We will describe exactly how it does that, what it does not do, and how it may benefit you.

Definition of “Expungement”

Bouvier Law Dictionary defines Expungement as, “Erasure or removal, particularly from a record. Expungement means to wipe something out or to take it off a page, whether it is a person from a list, an entry from a record, or a memory from the mind. In law, it is often used to describe the official deletion of a record, such as the removal of an entry of arrest from a record of the arrests in a jurisdiction,”(Bouvier Law Dictionary (Desk Ed. 2012.).

California’s Judicial Branch does not use the word “Expungement,” because by and large, California does not allow for the *erasure* of criminal convictions. The Judicial Branch uses the phrase “cleaning” to describe the options available to those convicted of criminal offenses in California. When we use the phrase “expungement” on our web page, we are describing the ways that you can, “...reduce the impact of your California criminal record,” (“Clean Your Record.”

<https://selfhelp.courts.ca.gov/clean-your-record>. Accessed October 2, 2025.).

What does that mean?

If you are convicted of a criminal offense in California, then you ask the court to “expunge” your conviction by asking the court to let you withdraw your plea of guilty or no contest, or set aside your guilty verdict, and allow you to re-enter a not guilty plea, and then dismiss the convicted count(s).

If you were to look up your criminal case history for a charge that resulted in a conviction, the “Disposition” of the case would show your conviction status, like in the example below. This may not be your Disposition - this is just one example for the point of illustration.

Charges/Dispositions						
Count	Type	Code	Section	Charge Description	Charge Disposition	Disposition Date
001	M	PC	148	** NOT AVAILABLE **	PLED GUILTY	02/23/04



Effect of Expungement

The effect of a successful expungement is to change the Charge Disposition from a conviction to a dismissal, so that you can honestly say that you are not convicted of the crime. The goal is to turn a conviction into a dismissal, like in the images below.

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001	M	PC	148	** NOT AVAILABLE **	DISM - PC 1203.4	02/23/04



What Expungement is NOT

- Expungement is not a way to modify or terminate probation.
- Expungement is not a way to remove convictions from your record for a variety of sex offenses.
- Expungement is not a way to seal a record of an arrest that did not result in a conviction - there is a separate process for that (see: [CH-409-Info](#)).
- Expungement is not a way to modify a jail or prison sentence.
- Expungement is not an unlimited license to state you have never been convicted of any crimes.
- Expungement is not a shield from future prosecution for new offenses.

Why bother with Expungement?

The primary benefit of expungement is that you may now *generally* tell employers that you are not convicted of the crime, once your charge is dismissed.

There are some exceptions where expungement does not excuse you from disclosing your conviction. They are:

- 1) If you are applying to work with the California State Lottery Commission,
- 2) If you register to run for public office, and
- 3) If you are applying for licensing through a California state license (e.g., the State Bar of California).

Otherwise, you *generally* do not have to disclose your old conviction to new employers in California, but whether you should or should not disclose a conviction you have expunged is a question best directed to a licensed attorney who works in criminal defense.

Summary - Expungement

Expungement effectively undoes or “cleans” a conviction and replaces it with a dismissal. It does not excuse you in all circumstances from disclosing your conviction.

For many of the jobs for which you will apply, you do not have to report a conviction if you have had it expunged. Once you petition for dismissal, and a judge orders your conviction dismissed, you open up a wide variety of job opportunities you might not otherwise have had.