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**A case of chronic trouble with law  
Howard Co. man, 21, has record illustrating justice system woes**

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In the four years since his crimes became serious enough to emerge from the anonymity of the juvenile system, Christopher J. Peca has racked up a criminal history that runs more than 80 computerized pages.

But the 21-year-old former leader of a Columbia car theft ring called the Low Riders has spent only about two years in prison while receiving probation and suspended sentences in other cases. His record illustrates the problems the criminal justice system has handling young offenders charged with serious but nonviolent property crimes.

Today, Peca goes on trial again in Howard County Circuit Court, this time on 30 counts of theft and credit card offenses, a number dwarfed by the roughly 130 criminal charges he has faced since he was 17.

"He's going in and out of the system like a revolving door," said Stephanie Parker, a field supervisor for the state Division of Parole and Probation. "He goes in [to jail], he gets released, then something else happens, then he goes in again."

State authorities predict about 40 percent of criminals released from state prisons will be formally charged again within three years.

And those who stole, burglarized or pilfered are more likely than those who committed violent crimes to become repeat offenders, parole officials say.

Former Baltimore City Circuit Judge Elsbeth L. Bothe said many prisoners accustomed to nice cars and other luxuries obtained through crime have difficulty adjusting to a life of hard work.

Such criminals aren't "going back into the community to wash dishes at \$5.60 an hour," Bothe said. "Some of these kids can't keep their hands to themselves when they see a car."

But if the criminal justice system does not see them as posing the type of immediate danger to the community that murderers and rapists do, they may not face serious jail time.

"In a society of limited resources, you have to have priorities," said Judge Joseph H. H. Kaplan, administrative judge for Baltimore City Circuit Court. "If you want to keep every thief off the streets for the rest of their lives," the state would have to build two or three more prisons.

When Howard County prosecuted Peca nearly three years ago in the car theft case, he had a juvenile record and was on probation, said Daniel J. Vaccaro, who prosecuted him.

Peca's car theft ring stole more than 20 cars from Columbia, mainly for joy riding. Two vehicles were launched from a boat ramp into Lake Elkhorn in east Columbia's Owen Brown village.

Peca was sentenced in January 1995 to eight years in prison for the car thefts -- a stiff sentence for his age, Vaccaro said. Because of state parole guidelines, Peca was eligible for release after serving about two years.

He got out after serving about 22 months because he apparently persuaded authorities that he had seen the error of his ways.

He wrote in an April 1995 letter to now-retired Judge Cornelius F. Sybert Jr. that he had found God in jail: "I have tried the ways of man for 19 years and look where it has gotten me. I am ready to try the ways of God. I know I was sent here to save my life, to get

myself together."

For a hearing to reduce his sentence, Peca submitted a package of letters from prison officials and relatives attesting to his changed outlook.

Peca pleaded with Judge Diane O. Leasure to let him be a "productive citizen."

Even prison officials who oversaw Peca's participation in a military-style boot camp urged Leasure to lower his sentence.

Cpl. M. Cohn, a senior drill instructor, wrote: "Mr. Peca has always kept his military bearing here at Boot Camp and completed all tasks required of him quickly, willingly and without question. He is one of the few inmates that have come through this program that I would consider writing a letter of recommendation on their behalf."

The judge was persuaded. Peca was released Dec. 17.

A little more than a month later, he was charged with assault. Those charges later were dropped.

In May and July, he was indicted on thefts alleged to have occurred this year. Today, he goes on trial on those charges, which include allegations he stole credit cards from three men and stole a Chevy Blazer that he then set on fire.

The most serious charges carry maximum penalties of 15 years in prison. Peca's attorney, J. Bernard McClellan, said Peca is innocent but has declined further comment.

Despite those charges, Peca remained free. His grandparents and mother -- who declined comment for this article -- posted bail twice.

In June, Peca's parole officer in the car theft case tried to have him returned to prison for violating his parole through his latest tangles with the law. Parker, the field supervisor for the probation division, said parole commissioners reviewing the case jailed him in June for about a month.

In her June report, parole officer Yvonne Cousin wrote: "To say the least, this is a troubled young man. Every month since his release, Mr. Peca has either been cited [for traffic offenses] or arrested."

The parole commissioners released Peca, Parker said. Just weeks later, he was accused of stealing a car. That trial is pending and no date has been set yet.

Bobbie Fine, who prosecuted Peca as a juvenile, said he is an intelligent man who is at his best behind bars.

"He does well in prison. Out of prison, he doesn't do well," Fine said. In prison, "he just follows the rules, probably to get out. When he has no structure [of jail], he's off."

Leonard A. Sipes Jr., spokesman for the state parole division, said it is far more common for property crime offenders to become involved in criminal activity again.

Violent offenders often commit their crimes in the heat of the moment, while those who steal are doing it to maintain a certain lifestyle. Auto theft can become almost an addiction, he said.

Still, experts say, authorities are more likely to impose heavy sentences on violent offenders.

"We don't look at property crimes as threatening," said Rex Smith, Maryland's former director of juvenile services. With young offenders, "people want to believe the very best. When you see the potential you want to capitalize on that. [You think] if he just put those energies toward something positive, he could be a CEO."

The criminal justice system's response to Peca's case has been consistent: no additional time in prison, despite two additional convictions and more criminal charges.

The eight-year sentence for car theft is the only major sentence Peca has received since he was 17.

Before then, he was committed to juvenile detention at least twice, and pleaded guilty to reckless endangerment -- reduced from an attempted-murder charge -- in a 1993 Baltimore case. He received a two-year suspended sentence and two years' probation, according to court records.

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In 1995, while in prison for the car thefts, he pleaded guilty to two earlier crimes -- one committed while he was awaiting trial for the car thefts, court records show.

They included stealing a delivery truck from the company that employed him and stealing a man's wallet.

For those crimes, he received two suspended sentences and orders for probation.

"You're not going to give him a life sentence for stealing cars," Bothe, the former judge, said of people like Peca who keep showing up in court. "Instead, he'll serve it on an installment plan."

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