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**Prosecutors drop assault case against car thief  
Man was charged 1 month after leaving prison**

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Howard County prosecutors dropped an assault charge against a convicted Columbia car thief yesterday -- a charge that was filed just a month after the man was released from prison.

Assistant State's Attorney Thomas W. Rafter said he decided to drop the charge against Christopher James Peca, 21, because the alleged victim in the case moved to Florida and was unavailable to testify.

"It was unclear whether Mr. Peca's conduct rose to the level of an assault in this case," Rafter said.

Two years ago, Peca was sent to prison for leading a band of car thieves -- known as "the Low Riders" -- that stole about 20 cars. Many of the vehicles were taken for joy rides; once, members launched two from a boat ramp into Lake Elkhorn.

The reduction of Peca's eight-year sentence last fall by Circuit Judge Diane O. Leasure became a political football in a contentious county judicial election.

Leasure's opponents branded her soft on crime, but she said prison officials recommended the sentence reduction so that Peca could graduate from a military-style boot camp. Peca was rehabilitated, they told her.

The assault charge was filed against Peca in January, a month after he was released from prison. It stemmed from a dispute between Peca and another driver.

Peca faces 23 other charges in Howard Circuit Court from a May 1 indictment on allegations concerning incidents in February and March.

In February, Peca allegedly stole two men's credit cards, along with a wedding ring, a pager and clothes. Peca is accused of using the cards to buy liquor, gas and sporting goods.

He is also charged with stealing a Chevrolet Blazer in March and setting it afire.

Peca's attorney, J. Bernard McClellan of Baltimore, has said Peca is not guilty of the new charges.

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