

The Sun

**21-year-old gets 20 years in theft string
Former Columbia man had led Low Riders, an auto ring
'It's all a big game to him'
He had previously persuaded authorities to release him early**

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For the crimes he committed in the first 20 years of his life, Christopher J. Peca was sent to prison yesterday for the next 20.

Peca, 21, received the sentence in Howard Circuit Court yesterday after admitting he stole two cars, a man's wedding ring and gym bag and misused someone else's credit cards. All of these crimes were committed just months after the man who told police he could steal a car with a screwdriver convinced authorities that he was rehabilitated and was released early from prison.

Peca, convicted for his role as the former head of a Columbia car theft ring called the Low Riders, told Judge Raymond J. Kane Jr. that he wanted to stop hurting people. According to court records, Peca said he suffers from manic depression. He asked that prison authorities place him in the Patuxent Institution, where he could receive therapy and treatment.

He received a 30-year sentence, with 10 years suspended.

"I'm 21 years old. I have been doing this for several years. I don't want to keep victimizing people the rest of my years," said Peca, who also had an extensive juvenile record. "There is nothing left for me if [treatment] doesn't work."

Peca's course through the criminal justice system is about numbers large and small: numerous charges and convictions and little time spent behind bars. To many, his case illustrated the problem the criminal justice system has in handling young offenders charged with serious, but not violent property offenses: Prison space goes to violent offenders.

Assistant State's Attorney Mary Murphy said the lengthy prison term was necessary.

The term "accurately reflects a need to stiffly sentence him for thumbing his nose at the system and reoffending and revictimizing the citizens of Howard County," Murphy said.

At the hearing yesterday, Murphy presented a November letter that Peca, formerly of Columbia, wrote to a Howard County police officer. In it, he tells the officer what the officer needs to do to improve himself.

"The difference between me and you is that I have born leadership skills," Peca wrote. "I am very outgoing and capture people's attention with my attitude, mannerisms and style. Wherever I go, I am liked and have an immediate following, and not just by derelicts and thugs, but also just regular people. People are drawn to me like a magnet and often even idolize me. Have you ever talked to someone and they hung on every word as it came out of your mouth?"

He added: "What I'm saying is that if you worked on becoming more outgoing and open-minded and tried being less robot-like, I think you could be a great cop."

Murphy said the letter showed Peca's intelligence but also how lightly he takes the criminal justice system.

"It's all a big game to him," Murphy said. "He fancies himself a natural-born leader which is a little scary if you consider what he's teaching -- committing crimes."

Yesterday's sentence was praised by another prosecutor who had worked to convict Peca, only to see him out on the street and in trouble again.

"He didn't get the message the first go-round," said Daniel J. Vaccaro, who prosecuted Peca and saw him sentenced to eight years in prison for leading the car theft ring which stole more than 20 cars, often just for joy rides.

Peca spent about 22 months behind bars.

"Hopefully, the 20-year sentence he received this time will give him the message and protect the public from his continuous criminal acts," Vaccaro said.

Peca could face more jail time. He has five pending hearings for violating his probation and parole in previous cases, said Leonard A. Sipes Jr., spokesman for the Department of Parole and Probation.

Peca's case entered the Howard political arena as well.

During a heated judicial election last year, Circuit Judge Diane O. Leasure reduced the eight-year sentence Peca received for leading the car theft ring to five years. Her opponents branded her soft on crime.

"All indications were that he had done extremely well [in prison] and, in the view of prison officials, had been rehabilitated," Leasure said in May after Peca was indicted on several charges. "That was one case where anybody sitting in the courtroom could easily have reached the same conclusion."

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

Murphy said Peca fooled people.

"He is your consummate con man," Murphy said. "He can't seem to stop himself."

After his release last December, Peca racked up about 35 charges of theft and credit card offenses.

His probation officer tried to have his parole revoked. Peca was briefly jailed, then released because the parole board rejected the request. Just weeks later, he stole a car.

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

Before yesterday, the eight-year sentence for car theft was the only major sentence Peca had received since he was 17.

By that age, he had been committed to juvenile detention at least twice, and had 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.

In 1995, while in prison for the Columbia 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 probation.

Graphics:
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Caption:
Sentenced: Christopher J. Peca considers himself a leader.

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