



Canada should make it easier to get criminal convictions pardoned, new coalition argues



Canadians found guilty of a crime currently have to wait at least 10 years after serving their sentence if they want to obtain a pardon. And the pardon doesn't remove a criminal conviction, it just makes it no longer publicly accessible information.

“People don't realize how compromised a person with a criminal record is, how marginalized they are,” says veteran defence lawyer Ralph Mastro Monaco, who says 70 per cent of people with criminal records are first-time, non-violent offenders.

“People think it's a limit to employment, but there's a lot more to it. That person is stigmatized with being a criminal.”

A new coalition lobbying for change said most large corporations and governments won't hire a potential candidate based solely on the existence of a criminal record. That makes it hard for a former convict, even someone convicted for a minor offence, to find the type of job that prevents people from reoffending. People with criminal records are usually prevented from doing volunteer work, and can face discrimination in housing, too.

“Social science evidence shows that having a job and employment is a strong protective factor against reoffending,” said Laura Berger, a lawyer with the Canadian Civil Liberties Association.



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“We know the income and pro-social behaviours and networks that are fostered by employment have a significant impact so having a job is one of the key factors that prevents reoffending.” The Fresh Start Coalition brings together more than 85 associations lobbying for civil liberties in Canada. It’s currently lobbying a reform bill currently initiated by the Senate, which would still require approval from the House of Commons.

It calls for the removal of a criminal record two years after the end of a sentence for minor offences, and five years for more serious crimes resulting in longer sentences, known as indictable offences.

Visible minorities are especially affected by the pardon process. High legal fees to obtain a pardon and the complexity of the process keeps it out of reach for many reformed offenders.

“It’s already difficult to find gainful employment,” said Joan Lee of the West-Island Black Community Association.

“When you have this strike against you, well, it becomes another strike against you. So reform is definitely needed with this.”