See story here: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/criminal-justice-pardons-impact-1.3416380>

# Pardons system's harsher rules block ex-criminals from jobs, housing

### 'If I had a pardon I could just imagine what else I could do with my life,' woman says

By Nicole Ireland, [CBC News](http://www.cbc.ca/news/cbc-news-online-news-staff-list-1.1294364) Posted: Jan 24, 2016 5:00 AM ET Last Updated: Jan 24, 2016 4:14 PM ET

Liberal Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale says he wants to revisit changes made by the previous government to the criminal pardon system, saying rules that required a longer wait time and a higher fee prior to applying were "punitive" measures.

The Conservative changes on how people can seek suspension of their record [took effect in 2012](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/parole-board-sifts-through-thousands-in-pardon-backlog-1.1414220). In the following year, the number of applications  [dropped by a third.](http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/requests-for-pardons-drop-in-wake-of-changes-1.2434526" \t "_blank)

Here are the stories of three people who say they have struggled with the increased wait times and higher fees for record suspensions.

Alia Pierini was 19 when she was charged with drug trafficking, extortion and aggravated assault. In 2005, she was sentenced to five years in custody.

When she was released, Pierini said, she felt "a lot of hope" of having a "legitimate life." But she quickly found that with a criminal record, "it's constantly a battle … when it comes to gaining employment."

Nevertheless, she obtained a roofing certificate and went to school for mental health and psychosocial rehabilitation.

She also got lucky: In 2012, she participated in *Redemption Inc.*, a CBC television show in which former inmates competed for money to start a business, and won $100,000.

"I'm a very fortunate person coming out of prison," Pierini said, noting she also had a lot of family support. She started an all-women snow removal company in Prince George, B.C., which she later sold.

She's now a manager at Fitness Foods, a Vancouver company run by two single moms determined to hire employees who face barriers, including those with criminal records.

Now 30, Pierini speaks at schools about her past, trying to prevent kids from getting involved in crime — but she still can't get a pardon, at least in part because of the 2012 change that increased the wait period for applications to 10 years from five.

"If I had a pardon I could just imagine what else I could do with my life," Pierini said. She wants to train to be a social worker to help other women coming out of prison, but the school told her she couldn't do a practicum with a criminal record.

In addition to limiting her career prospects, Pierini said not being pardoned means she can't get quality housing. The place she lives in now runs out of water in the summer, she said.

While looking for housing online "almost every place I click on [says] 'must pass criminal record check,'" Pierini said. "Just seeing that is discouraging."

But one of the toughest consequences of a criminal record is the impact on her two sons.

"My [younger] son, who I had after my incarceration and doesn't really know about prison, begs for me to come and volunteer at his school and come build gingerbread houses and come … on field trips and I'm not allowed to," Pierini said. "My kids shouldn't be still paying for my crime that I committed."

Bentley Williams, 48,  lives in eastern Ontario. It's been more than 25 years since he was convicted of theft, possession of stolen property, break and enter and mischief. He was sentenced to probation and paid restitution.

"I learned my lesson," Williams said. "I've been a law-abiding citizen ever since then."

Now married and the father of a teenage son and a 10-year-old daughter, Williams wants to apply for a pardon. "It's just something I want off my back and my life's history," he said. "I want to have it gone before I die. I don't want it hanging over me."

But Williams can't afford to pay the cost of a pardon application, which was raised to $631 from $150 under the former Conservative government. He worked for years as a labourer before hurting his back. He's now on social assistance.

Williams got his licence to drive a truck, but said every job he applies to requires driving experience. He also worries that his criminal record will "come back to haunt" him, even if someone does decide to hire him.

Another reason Williams wants a pardon is the freedom to travel to the United States with his family. They like to camp and "the United States has some beautiful things to offer," he said.

Williams said he paid his dues for his crimes and "it's time to move on." He's reminded of how glad he is that he changed his life when he watches police chase videos on YouTube.

"That could have been me if I hadn't of stopped what I was doing," he said. "You look back and go, 'I'm glad I'm on their side now,' you know? I'm cheering for the cops now."

CBC News has agreed not to publish the name of a man in Calgary who was willing to share his story but feared details about his past would harm his business.

In 2009, he pleaded guilty to a weapons offence in connection with a gun in a car's glove box. He was sentenced to a fine and a 10-year weapons ban.

Now 32, he acknowledges what he did was wrong. "I was in a weird position back then," he said. "I was hanging out with some people I probably shouldn't have been hanging out with."

After his conviction for the weapons offence, he "stopped all that and just focused on … doing something with my life."

He finished his training to be a chef and started his own business — a café — partly because he knew his criminal record would be a hurdle if he applied for jobs.

But his café is in a trendy area of Calgary, and he said it's struggling because his criminal record means he can't get a liquor licence.

"Every café around here has a liquor licence already," he said. "We're missing a big chunk of revenue."

He has applied for a pardon, but under the stricter rules instituted by the Conservative government, he won't be eligible for several more years.

"I might just have to close down the shop," he said, noting he might try to find a smaller space with lower rent elsewhere.

"I do assume that if I didn't own my own business and I were to go try to find a job somewhere and they did a background check … that would ruin a lot of chances for me," he said.

"The thing is I paid the price. I did the fine. I haven't been in trouble for over six years now.

"I was hoping that so much time has passed that I'd be able to, you know, just continue on and grow my business."