



Parole in Canada: An Incredibly Restrictive System

There are significant barriers to work, family and safe housing that people on parole in Canada face every day

What is parole?

Parole is legislated to support transition back into community in the later stages of a prison sentence, and provide release from prison on the requirement that paroled individuals follow conditions set out by the Parole Board of Canada. People become eligible for parole at specific times in their sentence, but must apply to the Parole Board of Canada and undergo a review process to determine whether or not they will actually be released into the community. Parole aims to increase public safety by providing structure and support as people transition from prison back into the community.

Understanding the reality

Parole is often talked about as leniency. In reality, parole in Canada is being operationalized as an intensely restrictive legal status that governs where a person lives, who they are allowed to have in their lives, even to the point of interfering with whether they keep a job. People on parole are often returned to prison without committing a new offence, for technical administrative breaches. Living under these conditions, people on parole often express that being on parole is even harder than being in prison. There are many hard-working people trying their best to reintegrate on parole in Canada. Few people know how difficult their lives are, and how hard a task being on parole is. Even less people know that already, Canada is becoming more and more restrictive in the administration of parole, to the point where Canada maintains one of the most restrictive systems of parole in the world.

People who gain parole were not handed it. This population represents those who work the hardest to meet the mandate of Canada's prison system: to become contributing members of society. Yet it is a population we are increasingly inflicting intense punishment upon, following years in prison, and following the Parole Board of Canada carefully deciding to support their release back into the community.

Did you know?

- ☐ Full parole is difficult to attain. It is only granted in **32.4%** of reviews. Roughly two in three applications are refused.
- ☐ Day parole supervision periods are completed successfully **91.6%** of the time; full parole, **88.5%**. Most failures are breaches of conditions, not new offences.

Public Safety Canada, 2024 Corrections and Conditional Release Statistical Overview, Figures D3, D8, D9, D11, D12.

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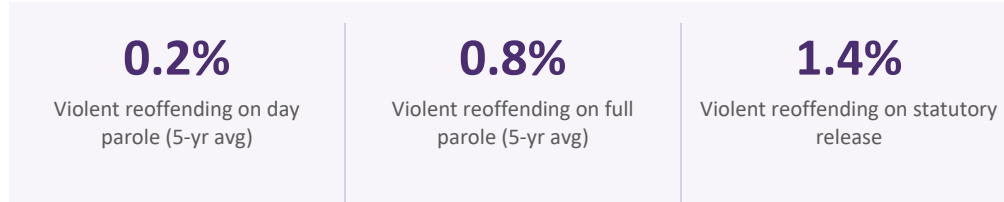


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Risk of violence committed by people on parole is very low



Public Safety Canada, 2024 Corrections and Conditional Release Statistical Overview, Figures D8, D9, D11, D12.

Parole is never guaranteed, and it is easily lost

- **Being eligible does not guarantee release.** Reaching a parole eligibility date means one thing: the right to apply for parole. The Parole Board decides if release is granted, and it is deciding “yes” less often than it once did. Among people serving life sentences, releases within a year of first eligibility fell from 41.7% of those eligible between 1986 and 2000 to 14.8% of those eligible between 2009 and 2015.
- **Being sent back to prison does not mean a crime has been committed.** Parole is most often suspended and revoked for breaches of administrative conditions: an address that was not approved, a relationship that was not assessed, or movement outside the small geographic boundary that people are forced to stay within.
- **Someone else’s word is enough to suspend parole.** Because parole officers try to keep an open line to partners, employers and family, people know an allegation from someone close to them is enough to trigger a suspension. This gives people in the person on parole’s life incredible power over their liberty, and survivors of intimate partner violence have named this as a specific danger.
- **People on parole live in fear, isolation, and under unclear expectations.** People on parole report often living in fear of being sent back to prison. They report being afraid to be around others because of these conditions. They report complying with instructions from parole officers they believe are unlawful because questioning a parole officer feels more dangerous than obeying one.

“I am scared to push it at all, she could revoke my parole.”

— Woman on parole, Canada

Barriers to getting and keeping a job

- **Maintaining a job is a parole condition, but getting a job is difficult.** Everyone on parole must report any change in their “normal occupation, including employment, vocational or educational training and volunteer work,” and any change in their “domestic or financial situation.” (Corrections and Conditional Release Regulations, s. 161)
- **Parole officers are contacting employers and turning up at work.** People describe officers arriving at their workplace and in some instances are being told their employer “has to be notified”. People report being fired after being ‘outed’ as a person on parole by their parole officers.
- **Leaving a job is read as a risk.** Stability is treated as proof of success, so people stay in jobs they want to leave. Losing a job begins a chain that can end in re-incarceration. This can result in people on parole remaining in unsafe workplaces and gives significant power to employers.



- **The ceiling is real.** Canadian research on people on parole records “exclusion from their dream careers, pay and position ceilings that they would otherwise not have, and being stuck in jobs that they are unhappy in for fear of change or conditions which don’t allow for many employment positions.”

“Because he said, ‘Your work has to be notified.’ I said, ...what kind of work do you think I’m doing. I’m in a warehouse, packaging boxes. Like just packaging boxes.”

— Person on parole, Canada

Isolation from family, partners, and community

- **Loving someone triggers a file disclosure.** Before a partner, friend or relative is allowed properly into a person on parole’s life, they are required to sit for a “community assessment”: an interview, a background check, a parole officer in their home, and the disclosure of the person’s correctional file, held without the person on parole present.
- **Assessments happen even when no condition requires it.** In a study of 19 people on parole in Canada, only two had any Parole Board condition about relationships. All 19 however, were told an assessment is required before any intimate relationship, and had their parole officers mediate every familial and intimate relationship they were in.
- **The result is people living alone.** Of those 19: fourteen live alone, one is married, two live with children.
- **People lose their families.** Relatives who love someone decline to be interviewed or to have their home inspected. Research found this occurs most often among racialized families, further isolating racialized people on parole.

“I get so lonely...but...being free is more important than being lonely. But I am alone. I never imagined it would be this way... I am running out of my reproductive years... I would love a family. What can I do?”

— Woman on parole, no relationship condition on her file

Intense restriction on where you are allowed to live, and go

- **People on parole are kept inside very small boundaries.** Participants describe being limited to a radius of roughly 30 km, usually the limits of their own city, that they can freely move within. In Ottawa, for example, this means not being able to cross the bridge to Gatineau. In Vancouver, this means not being able to cross to North Vancouver without express approval of a parole officer. This is sometimes described as house arrest in the city you live in.
- **Leaving a prescribed area takes a permit.** In order to leave the determined radius, people on parole are required to provide one to two week’s notice, the dates of travel, the address and phone number of whoever is being visited, and the method of travel. The paper permit is collected in person and carried, in case police stop them. If the permit is lost, the person on parole is at risk of re-incarceration.

“I just want to go to this wedding...It’s my cousin... My PO wants them to do a [community assessment] for me to go, so now he’s got all this stress and I’ve got to ruin her experience? For one day? I want to go so badly... so I don’t go of course.”

— Person on parole, Canada



Canada has a high number of people on parole forever. Almost everywhere else in the world, supervision ends.

Over 28% of federally sentenced people in Canada have life sentences. If they gain parole, conditions remain intensely restrictive and will never end until a person dies, or is returned to prison. In a fact sheet about the practice of parole for life, CAEFS surveyed 32 jurisdictions and found Canada to be one of the only jurisdictions to not have in-built mechanisms that relieve people of parole supervision following good behavior.

Of the 31 other jurisdictions surveyed, 28 either legislated a route out of supervision or barred penalties of indefinite duration outright — five of them in their constitutions. Canada is one of only two countries with no exit at all. The other is England and Wales.

“I am 42 years old... I am not who I was when I was 18... I am an adult and can make decisions about who my friends are. If the system can’t trust me that much, then what are we all doing here, really?”

- Person on parole, Canada

