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Make the panel permanent

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Ordinarily we'd be extraordinarily reluctant to suggest that the state create yet another bureaucracy, particularly at a time when Trenton, seemingly, is focused on fiscal restraint. But the Commission to Review Criminal Sentencing, established as a temporary panel in 2004, should become permanent.

Often changes in criminal law come in response to some horrific crime, without a thorough assessment of the costs and the benefits. A cogent argument can be made that legislators ought to have the benefit of such analysis, which the 15-member commission has demonstrated that it can perform.

Already it has issued major reports such as the one proposing a contraction of the drug-free zone from 1,000 feet from a school to 200 feet. The law, enacted to discourage drug peddling near children, has meant that in many urban areas, where virtually every area is near a school, African-Americans and Hispanics were more likely to be sentenced to long prison terms even when there was no evidence they were trying to sell to schoolchildren.

The commission also helped to modify the law governing the suspension of driver's licenses following conviction for a drug offense. In January, the law was relaxed to allow a judge to waive license suspension in compelling circumstances.

Earlier this month, the Assembly voted unanimously to make the commission permanent. The Senate should do the same.

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