

## Drug-free zones: Smaller is smarter

Our Opinion: A Press Editorial  
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A new report from the state Commission to Review Criminal Sentencing has revealed that large drug-free zones around schools, parks and public buildings have done little to protect children from drugs or to reduce drug dealing.

What they have done is send lots of minorities to jail. The commission found that statewide, blacks and Hispanics made up an astonishing 96 percent of state prison inmates whose most serious crime was a drug offense within a drug-free zone.

The zones, the commission said, unfairly target densely populated cities, which are more likely to be made up of minority groups. In Atlantic City, for example, nearly the entire city is a drug-free zone.

When the law was passed in 1987, some thought that was a perfectly good side effect. If your entire city was a drug-free zone, the police and prosecutors would have an easy way to get drug dealers off the street and in jail. If nothing else, dealers might move their business somewhere else.

But drug dealing has not been eradicated, and the mandatory jail sentences that came with the zones have been controversial on both sides of the law.

The commission, chaired by retired Superior Court Judge Barnett Hoffman, supports a bill that calls for a reduction in the size of the zones, currently 1,000 feet for schools and 500 feet for parks, museums and public buildings. The bill would create one 200-foot zone, coupled with longer jail sentences of five to 10 years.

But even more important, the commission supports eliminating mandatory minimum sentences and instead leaving the decision to judges.

We've never liked legislatively mandated sentences. One sentence does not fit all crimes or the people who commit them, and the law ought to give judges more credit for being able to do their jobs both humanely and effectively.

Bigger is not always better when it comes to these drug-free zones. It's time to give smaller and smarter a chance.

