

Smaller drug-free zones may level the preying field

With entire city in zone, urban dealers face stiffer penalties

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TRENTON — A bill that would cut the size of drug-free zones around schools and other public places corrects an unfair system that penalizes minority city dwellers more harshly than suburban residents, advocates of the change said Thursday.

The zones, established in response to the growth of crack cocaine use, have been criticized because they effectively blanket entire urban areas, leaving their mostly low-income and minority residents facing harsher sentences for drug crimes.

"What we have are two different penalties for the same offense — two different penalties which are based on geography and ultimately on race," said Roseanne Scotti, director of the Drug Policy Alliance of New Jersey, speaking in favor of the bill at a Statehouse news conference Thursday.

Shrinking the zones and doing away with mandatory minimum sentences would eliminate disparities and even make the zones more effective, because drug dealers who now cannot avoid the zones would have incentives to stay away from schools, Scotti said.

The bill — sponsored by Assemblyman Peter J. Barnes, D-Middlesex, and Assemblywoman Mary T. Previte, D-Camden — cleared the Law and Public Safety Committee on Monday. It now heads to the full Assembly.

It would reduce the zones to 200 feet from their present size of 1,000 feet around schools and 500 feet around public parks, public housing and other public buildings.

Offenders would face five- to 10-year terms, compared with the current three to five years. But judges would have more discretion in sentencing.

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