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Murphy directs N.J. agencies to do a better job at preventing and punishing bias crimes

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Gov. Phil Murphy has ordered state agencies to overhaul how they prevent and punish bias and harassment, a week after a state task force said New Jersey wasn't doing enough to stem a rising tide of bias crimes.

Many of the Youth Bias Task Force's recommendations, such as requiring anti-bias education for all public school kids and teachers, would require legislation.

But other suggestions can be adopted now, like offering anti-bias education to juveniles in prison and making it easier to report bias crimes.

Murphy directed the state attorney general, the State Police and other agencies to "take necessary and appropriate steps to implement those recommendations," according to Executive Order 188, which he signed Tuesday.

"Youth bias incidents have been on a steep increase in our state," Murphy said in a statement. "We must act now to reverse this disturbing trend."

"We can't turn away from the role our institutions and systems play in teaching and perpetuating bias," Rachel Apter, director of the state's civil rights office, said in a statement. "With COVID-19 continuing to lay bare unacceptable inequalities, and protests around the country demanding racial justice, the recommendations in this Report are an important first step in responding to this historic moment."

The task force made 27 recommendations overall.

More than a dozen can be implemented without the Legislature, including creating anti-bias curriculum for student athletes, more aggressively investigating social media companies for hate speech and revising how cops are trained to respond to bias crimes.

Officials must report on their progress at the end of next year, Dec. 31, 2021.

New bias statistics were also released last week. The state logged nearly 1,000 incidents of harassment and bias last year, which is both New Jersey's highest total and largest year-to-year increase since law enforcement began tracking incidents in 1994.