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Murphy commits to studying racial bias in N.J. policing, jury selection

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Gov. Phil Murphy has committed to rooting out racism within New Jersey's criminal justice system by expanding a key commission that has already helped pass statewide reforms.

Under Murphy's proposal, unveiled Monday night, the Criminal Sentencing and Disposition Commission would also look for ways to improve policing, jury selection and access to defense lawyers.

"In order to more effectively address the undeniable presence of racial bias in our current criminal justice system, we must more fully understand the nature and extent of this problem," Murphy said in a joint statement with two lawmakers and the leader of the commission.

The proposed legislation would also expand the commission's membership to include representatives from the state Legislature's Black and Latino caucuses. It will need to pass both the state Assembly and Senate before it can head to Murphy's desk.

The announcement comes about a year after the commission made sweeping recommendations for how to fix racial disparities in the state's prisons, which lock up a dramatically higher share of Black residents.

Some of those recommendations have become law, including one that allows courts to consider a young person's age when sentencing them for a crime.

But a bill to eliminate mandatory minimum sentences for non-violent drug offenses and property crimes, the cornerstone of the recommendations, has stalled.

The proposal to expand the commission's size and mandate came after the Legislature overwhelmingly approved creating a new task force to study racial bias within the justice system.

Murphy vetoed that bill (AJR172) on the grounds that it would be more efficient to give that job to the current sentencing commission.

The governor's statement was sent with state Sen. Ronald Rice Sr. and Assemblywoman Shanique Speight, both Essex Democrats who sponsored the task force bill.

Lawmakers have advanced several policing reforms since George Floyd protests swept the state. Murphy recently signed a bill generally requiring departments to use body cameras, but other major reforms have yet to pass.

NJ Advance Media staff writer Joe Atmonavage contributed to this report.