

# The Star-Ledger

## **Racial disparity in N.J. prisons ‘galling,’ Murphy says. He backs easing sentences.**

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Gov. Phil Murphy and leaders of the state Legislature said they’re planning to act swiftly on new recommendations to overhaul how people are sentenced in New Jersey, where prisons have had the worst racial disparity in the nation.

Murphy said during a news conference in Trenton on Thursday that he supports calls to eliminate mandatory minimum sentences for non-violent drug and property crime and to speed up when people convicted of second-degree robbery or burglary are eligible for parole in the Garden State.

The recommendations were detailed in a new report by the New Jersey Criminal Sentencing and Disposition Commission.

Some of the changes, if adopted, could apply retroactively, although the Democratic governor emphasized that nobody was guaranteed release.

Murphy called the fact that black residents are incarcerated at far higher rates than whites “galling,” and he said the reforms would ensure that the criminal justice system works “for all communities.”

Both houses of the Democratic-controlled Legislature — the Senate and Assembly — would need to pass bills to approve the changes and Murphy would then need to sign them into law.

Murphy said he’d like to see that happen by the end of the current legislative session, which is finishes its business Jan. 14.

But it’s unclear how quickly this could happen. State Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin spoke in favor of reform in general Thursday but he said he had only received the report a day earlier and had not read it all.

“The devil is in the details,” Coughlin, D-Middlesex, said.

The commission also recommended faster release for people diagnosed with terminal illnesses, and said judges should have more leeway when sentencing juveniles. Fewer people in prison, Murphy said, could also mean more money for rehabilitation programs.

State Senate President Stephen Sweeney said the changes were “long past due.”

“We’re destroying people,” Sweeney, D-Gloucester, said. “People that made mistakes. They’re not criminals. But we turn them into criminals if we keep them in jail for a long period of time.”

Deborah Poritz, a former chief justice of the state Supreme Court and the leader of the commission, said there was “overwhelming consensus” behind the proposals.

Acting Departments of Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks spoke in support, as did state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal, who advocated for similar changes in July. Grewal said those suggestions were supported by all 21 of the state’s county prosecutors.

*NJ Advance Media staff writer Brent Johnson contributed to this report.*