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Drug-free school zones assailed as ineffective

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By **TOM BALDWIN**
GANNETT STATE BUREAU
tbaldwi@gannett.com

TRENTON — Almost all people convicted of violating drug laws in New Jersey school zones are minorities, evidence that the law hardening enforcement in the shadow of a school house does not work, an Assembly committee was told yesterday.

"What drug-free zone laws do not do is protect school children," said Barnett Hoffman, retired as the presiding judge of the criminal division in Middlesex County. The law is "just plain ineffective," he said.

"They cannot deter a drug dealer, particularly in New Jersey's densely populated cities, from selling in a school zone, because the cities have become the school zones themselves," said Hoffman, who when he stepped down from the bench had been the state's longest-sitting criminal division judge.

Hoffman testified before the Assembly Law and Public Safety Committee. He spoke on behalf of a bill that would shrink the size of drug-free school zones from 1,000 feet in every direction to 200 feet. In some cities, nearly all blocks are in school zones.

The measure was one recommendation of the Commission to Review Criminal Sentencing, of which Hoffman is chairman. The commission's full report is due to be released later this week.

About 97 percent of people convicted under the drug-free school zone law are minorities, according to the commission.

The bill is sponsored by Assemblyman Peter Barnes, D-Middlesex, chairman of the Assembly Law and Public Safety Committee, and Assemblywoman Mary Previte, D-Camden.

"The legislation is not being soft on crime. It's being smart on crime," Previte said.

"The national trend is to do exactly what we are doing here today," said Barnes.

The committee voted 4-1, with one lawmaker voting to abstain, to send the measure to the full Assembly.

Gregory J. Volpe:

gvolpe@gannett.com

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