

## THE CENSUS BUREAU'S PRISON MISCOUNT: IT'S ABOUT REPRESENTATION, NOT FUNDING

### Most funding formulas are too sophisticated to be fooled by the prison miscount

It is important that the Census counts everyone. Census populations determine how legislative districts are drawn and play a major role in how federal funds are distributed. **But where incarcerated people are counted<sup>1</sup> has less impact on funding flows than people assume.**

Every decade, the Census Bureau encourages participation in the Census by pointing out that the population counts will be used to distribute funding. It advertises that Census data “help determine how billions of dollars in federal funding flow into states and communities each year.”<sup>2</sup> While it's true that a lot of funding depends in some way on Census data, this funding isn't a lump sum that can be converted to a dollar amount per head.

#### **Surprised? It's understandable.**

So how did we come to think that funding is distributed as a set amount of money per person? It's mostly the result of well-intentioned over-generalizations and simplification in an effort to have everyone counted. Desperate not to lose any population in the decennial count, governments often resort to putting a price tag on each person's failure to respond. For example, as officials in one Georgia community tried to ensure their residents were counted, the local paper made claims such as: “If only one person is counted in a house with four people, it will mean \$69,000 less in local coffers over a decade.”<sup>3</sup> It's a statement that may motivate action, but comes at the expense of the truth.

#### **“Per-head” is an oversimplification.**

A brief by Andrew Reamer, Research Professor at the George Washington Institute of Public Policy, gives a detailed walkthrough of the types of population data used to distribute funding. Reamer's brief makes it clear that accurate Census counts are important to proper funding distribution, but per-head calculations are misleading; declaring that one “cannot draw a straight line between the number of people counted in the census and the dollars a state receives for all census-guided program.”<sup>4</sup>

That conclusion is supported by the Federal Funds Information for States analysis of funding distributions among states, which shows that some states receive about 4 times as much funding per resident as others<sup>5</sup> — providing further proof that funding is not based on a simple headcount. Individual state-level analyses reach the same conclusion.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Funding factors.**

Although the specifics of funding distribution change over the years, they are generally distributed based on complex formulas that strive to match funds to the needs. To the extent that these rely on population totals, it is just one of many components taken into consideration. As you might expect, poverty measures play an important role in funding allocation, but federal poverty data does not include incarcerated people.<sup>7</sup> For example, Title I funds are distributed to local schools under 4 different grants, each based on a different formula that aims to measure student need.<sup>8</sup> Only one of those grants even looks at adult populations to compare community wealth, but even there, incarcerated people are excluded from that income data, showing once again, prison locations do not impact funding distributions.

#### **State reforms don't impact funding.**

Further, **state legislation ending prison gerrymandering could never affect funding distributions** because no federal or state funding formula is distributed on the basis of state or local redistricting data. This analysis has been confirmed by decades of experience of hundreds of local governments that have excluded prison populations when drawing local districts without any effect on the funding they receive.

*Flip over for endnotes. For more information contact Aleks Kajstura, Legal Director of the Prison Policy Initiative at <http://www.prisonpolicy.org/contact.html>*

## Endnotes & References

<sup>1</sup> The Census Bureau counts incarcerated people as if they were residents of prison cells rather than their home communities. This causes prison gerrymandering when states use those Census counts to draw legislative districts. Prison gerrymandering unfairly gives people who live closest to prisons a louder voice in government, to the detriment of everyone else.

<sup>2</sup> Census Bureau talking points about the importance of counting everyone are available at <https://www.census.gov/library/video/2019/getting-an-accurate-count.html>

<sup>3</sup> This is an example of media over-generalizing the relationship between funding and population counts, available at [https://thebrunswicknews.com/news/local\\_news/low-census-response-could-cost-region-millions/article\\_6957825f-bfb5-5ca4-8f1c-3f4f5d438981.html](https://thebrunswicknews.com/news/local_news/low-census-response-could-cost-region-millions/article_6957825f-bfb5-5ca4-8f1c-3f4f5d438981.html)

<sup>4</sup> Summary available on page 1 at <https://gwipp.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2181/f/downloads/GWIPP%20Reamer%20Fiscal%20Impacts%20of%20Census%20Undercount%20on%20FMAP-based%20Programs%2003-19-18.pdf>  
This report is part of a larger series that explores the impact of Census counts on the distribution of federal funds. Although this series of reports does not address incarcerated populations directly, it serves as a great introduction to the ways that federal funding is tied to Census data. The entire series is available at <https://gwipp.gwu.edu/counting-dollars-2020-role-decennial-census-geographic-distribution-federal-funds>

<sup>5</sup> The FFIS analysis provides a national overview of funding allocation among states, and is available at <https://ffis.org/sites/default/files/public/publications/2020/percapita2019/sa20-01.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> For one example of a state perspective, see the Massachusetts Secretary of State's Census 2020, Explained: How It Works and What's at Stake for Massachusetts has a section on the Census's funding impact, which notes that some programs "may hardly be affected at all by Census counts." The explainer focuses on a potential undercount (that is, the Census failing to count some people), and uses several examples to show how Census data could impact the state's funding allocations is available at <https://www.sec.state.ma.us/census2020/img/pdf/Census-2020-Explained-Full-Version.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Surveys usually used for poverty data, the ACS, CPS, SIPP, and SAIPE, all exclude incarcerated people from their poverty measures. The differences between the four surveys are summarized in a chart at <https://www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/poverty/guidance/survey-data-collection.html>.

- American Community Survey (ACS): "Institutional group quarter respondents as well as those living in college dormitories or military barracks are not included in the poverty universe"
- Annual Social and Economic Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS ASEC), conducted in partnership between the Census and Labor Statistics Bureaus, includes "Civilian non-institutionalized population of the United States, includes all housing units and non-institutionalized group quarters", and "People in institutions, such as prisons, long-term care facilities, and nursing homes, are ineligible for the CPS." (page 3) <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/methodology/CPS-Tech-Paper-77.pdf>
- Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) is also limited to "Civilian non-institutionalized population of the United States, includes all housing units and non-institutionalized group quarters"
- Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) uses the same population definitions as the ACS, above.

<sup>8</sup> A summary of the factors taken into consideration in the Title I funding formulas is available at <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html>