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## The Census Bureau's prison miscount: It's about political power, not funding

It is important that everyone be counted in the Census. The Census population determines the drawing of legislative districts and the distribution, among states, of federal funds. Because incarcerated people rarely cross state lines, the exact location within each state **where people in prison are counted has little to no impact on funding.**

Most federal funding based on Census data is block grants to states, meaning that the federal government gives each state money based on their total population. Once the states receive the federal money, the states are free to distribute it as they see fit within their own borders. For block grant purposes it does not matter, therefore, where in any given state an incarcerated person is counted.

Most other funding programs are quite sophisticated and are calculated in ways that directly or indirectly ignore prison populations. For example, federal funds intended for low-income schools are based on the number of low-income children in the Census or the number of students in the school's discounted lunch program. Here again, whether the school district has more total people in it does not matter. Even if there were a prison next to the school, the extra population would not benefit the school. The school's funding is based only on the number of children, and so is unaffected by any miscount of the incarcerated population in the state.

Even if every funding formula were changed tomorrow to distribute money based on prison populations, the proposed Schneiderman/Jefferies Census Adjustment Act would still have no effect on funding because this bill applies only to redistricting. Census data for all other federal, state and local purposes will not be changed.

We understand that there are numerous news articles which claim a direct connection between the prison miscount and the formula grants received in urban communities, but these claims have not withstood scrutiny. Changes in the way incarcerated people are counted have no impact on funding for urban communities. Unfortunately, these stories — about an impact which does not exist — threaten to split the rural-urban coalition for Census reform.

There are funds affected by the prison miscount, but they tend to be both small and intended for rural communities; so a community with a prison gets a larger share of money that other rural communities without prisons should receive. When the funds are restricted so that only rural communities are eligible to receive them, and one of those communities contains a prison, even if that community gets more than its fair share of the funding, it is not at the expense of any urban community. Urban communities suffer no loss, for example, when one rural Appalachian community unintentionally receives funding that should have gone to other rural Appalachian communities.

The prison miscount has a severe impact on elections, but the impact on funding in rural prison-hosting areas tends to be minor, and it is non-existent in urban high-incarceration communities.

For more information and references, contact Peter Wagner at <http://www.prisonpolicy.org/contact.html>