Dear Karen Humes,

As a former member of Maine Regional School Unit 13’s Board of Directors I submit this comment in response to the Census Bureau’s federal register notice regarding the Residence Rule and Residence Situations, 80 FR 28950 (May 20, 2015). I urge you to count incarcerated people at their home address, rather than at the particular facility that they happen to be located at on Census day.

As a former elected representative, I am keenly aware that democracy, at its core, rests on equal representation. And equal representation, in turn, rests on an accurate count of our population.

Our Regional School Unit (RSU 13) uses a weighted voting system to apportion votes among the member towns. When we two districts consolidated to make one, we based the weighted vote system on Census Bureau estimates for 2006, we relied on Census data that counted the people incarcerated at the Maine State Prison as if they resided in the town of Thomaston. The prisoners had been moved to a neighboring town of Warren three years prior. This most unfortunate result gave every nine people in Thomaston as much of a say over our children’s education as 10 residents from the other towns. This was a classic case of vote dilution.

To some, this may seem like an academic discussion, but the distorted vote allocation has serious practical legislative consequences. In 2011, for example, a very narrow vote by the RSU 13 Board moved my town of St. George’s 8th graders to an 8th and 9th grade school in Thomaston. (We have since withdrawn from the school district and this was a catalyst) The supporters of the school shift prevailed only because the representatives from Thomaston were able to cast additional votes because of the Census prisoner misallocation. It was tough to explain to my constituents why their vote was equal to that of somebody incarnated in Warren, but perhaps from New York. Simply put, it wasn’t and isn’t fair to the population to dilute the vote this way. I worked tirelessly to correct this matter, but it wasn’t until petitions, and motions were filed trying to fix this, and finally the new number from the Census Bureau arrived. It wasn’t until the new numbers arrived that this problem was finally corrected, but the damage was done.

The RSU 13 eventually redistricted again, and this time, adjusted the Bureau’s data but our reliance on the Bureau’s data in the past left lasting harms. And while we solved the problem ourselves, albeit through a long drawn out exercise, and continue to apply our band-aid solution in the future, I doubt we’re the only ones whose democratic institutions would benefit from more accurate data coming straight from the Census Bureau.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on your residence rules, all the work you do, and I urge you to count incarcerated people as residents of their home address.

Sincerely,

Josiah R. Wilson

Port Clyde, Maine