



For more information about prison-based gerrymandering, see our website and weekly newsletter at <http://www.prisonersofthecensus.org>

Prison-based Gerrymandering in Iowa

The Supreme Court requires counties and municipalities to update their legislative districts once per decade so that each district contains the same population, giving each resident equal representation in local government. However, the US Census Bureau counts people where they are incarcerated, not where they live, and when the Census figures, which do not reflect the county's population, are used to draw districts, democracy suffers.

The problem

The Census Bureau counts incarcerated people as residents of the prison, but people in prison can't vote and are not residents of the surrounding community. The practice of including prisons in local districting plans leads to serious distortions of political power in local governments. For example:

- The city of **Clarinda** has a district that is 58% incarcerated—giving a district with fewer than half as many actual residents the same vote on the city council as other districts.
- The city of **Mount Pleasant** has a ward that is 46% incarcerated. This means that residents of that ward have nearly twice the political clout of residents of other districts.
- The city of **Anamosa** used to have a particularly absurd situation as a result of counting a prison as part of the city population for redistricting purposes. There a man was elected to the City Council with only two votes, because the district had only 58 actual residents--the rest of the population was made up of inmates in a state prison. Those 58 residents had the same ability to elect a member of the city council as around 1,400 people in any other district. Anamosa fixed this problem when it reformed its government to get rid of the ward system.
- **Jones County** has a district that is 33% incarcerated. That means that every two people in that district have the same ability as three people in another district to elect a representative.
- **Page County** has a district that is 19% incarcerated; **Webster County** has a district that is 15% incarcerated and **Calhoun County** has a district that is 12% incarcerated. The residents of the district with the prison in each of these counties receives more political influence than residents in other districts that do not contain prisons.

The Solution

Ideally, the Census Bureau would not include prison populations in local population counts. But counties can fix the problem themselves by removing the prison populations prior to redistricting.

The City of Anamosa fixed its prison gerrymandering problem by changing from a ward system to an at-large system of government. But such a step is not necessary for cities and counties that want to keep their district systems but avoid the distortions caused by incarcerated people in local government districts.

Over 100 cities and counties across the country remove prison populations prior to redistricting in order to make sure each district has an equal number of actual residents. Cities and counties in Iowa should follow their lead and create districts which allow for equal access to local government. Representation should be based on actual residents, not prison populations.