

Prison gerrymandering disproportionately harms North Carolina's Black residents

Prison gerrymandering reduces the political power of nearly all North Carolina residents by allowing a few districts with large correctional facilities to claim residents from all over the state. And while it does that, it also enshrines the racial inequities of mass incarceration into the state's democratic institutions.

What is prison gerrymandering?

Everyone in North Carolina is supposed to have an equal voice in their government's decisions, but an outdated and misguided Census Bureau policy that counts incarcerated people in the wrong place gives a few residents of the state a megaphone.

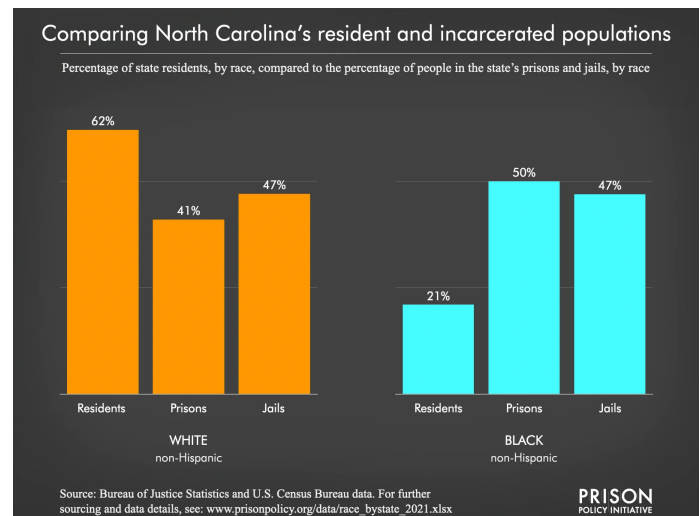
Every ten years, when the Census Bureau conducts its official tally of the nation's population, it incorrectly counts incarcerated people as residents of prison cells rather than in their home communities. When state officials then use that Census data in the legislative redistricting process, they inadvertently inflate the populations of those areas — in violation of constitutional principles of equal representation. This gives residents of state legislative districts that contain correctional facilities a particularly loud voice in government, at the expense of nearly every other person in the state.

In three of North Carolina's State House districts — districts 12, 32, and 38 — correctional facilities account for roughly 4% of the population. That means that just 96 residents of those districts have as much political clout as 100 residents in any other district.

Disproportionate impact for Black residents

In North Carolina, like across the country, mass incarceration has a disproportionate impact along racial lines. Black residents are incarcerated at disproportionate rates and therefore counted in the wrong place more often than North Carolina's white residents:

- Black residents make up 21% of the state population, but a whopping 50% of people in prisons and 47% of people in jails.
- Counting incarcerated people in the wrong place adds up. In just the three most prison gerrymandered districts alone, nearly 4,500 Black people were counted in the wrong place.



North Carolina needs to end prison gerrymandering now

Nearly half of the US population now lives in a place that corrects redistricting data they receive from the Census to avoid prison gerrymandering. States that have ended prison gerrymandering include deep “blue” states like California, “purple” states like Maine and Pennsylvania, and deep “red” states like Montana — where prison gerrymandering-reform legislation received wide bipartisan support.

It's now time for North Carolina to pass legislation ending prison gerrymandering and count incarcerated people at home when drawing districts.

Our full report on prison gerrymandering in North Carolina is available at <https://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/news/2025/05/13/north-carolina-prison-gerrymandering/>