

THE CENSUS BUREAU'S PRISON MISCOUNT: IT'S ABOUT POLITICAL POWER, NOT FUNDING

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

It is important that the Census counts everyone. Census population determines how legislative districts are drawn and places a major role in how federal funds are distributed. But where incarcerated people are counted has very little effect on those funding distributions for two reasons:

First, the majority of federal funding is in the form of block grants to states, so it does not matter where in any given state an incarcerated person is counted.

Second, most other funding programs are quite sophisticated and the funding distributions are calculated in ways that directly or indirectly ignore prison populations. For example, federal funds intended for low-income schools are based not on the total population counted for the area but rather on the number of low-income children counted in the Census or the number of students in a school's discounted lunch program. Therefore, a large prison near a school would not increase funding to the school district.

The rare funding programs that are skewed by prison populations tend to be very small, and focused solely on distributions within particular regions. For example, total population plays a minor part in the grants distributed by the Appalachian Regional Commission in a way that gives communities with a prison a slightly larger share of the available funds, and similarly situated rural communities without prisons receive less. Communities that are outside the eligible Appalachian counties are entirely unaffected.

Further, **state legislation ending prison gerrymandering could never affect funding** distributions because no federal or state funding formula is distributed on the basis of 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. Moreover, our model bill, and some recent proposed legislation in Illinois (HB62 2013) and Rhode Island (SB516 2013) explicitly say "The data ... shall not be used in the distribution of any state or federal aid."

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

Surprised? It's understandable.

News articles often spread the common misconception that there is a direct connection between the prison miscount and the formula grants received, but none of these claims have ever withstood scrutiny.

These stories about an impact which does not exist threaten the longstanding rural-urban coalition for Census reform.

For more information and references, contact Peter Wagner, Executive Director of the Prison Policy Initiative at <http://www.prisonpolicy.org/contact.html>