PRISON POLICY INITIATIVE

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

Prison gerrymandering disproportionately harms Oklahoma's Black residents

Prison gerrymandering reduces the political power of nearly all Oklahoma 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Everyone in Oklahoma is supposed to have an equal voice in their government's decisions, but an outdated and misguided Census Bureau policy that counts incarcerated people in the wrong place gives a few residents of the state a megaphone.

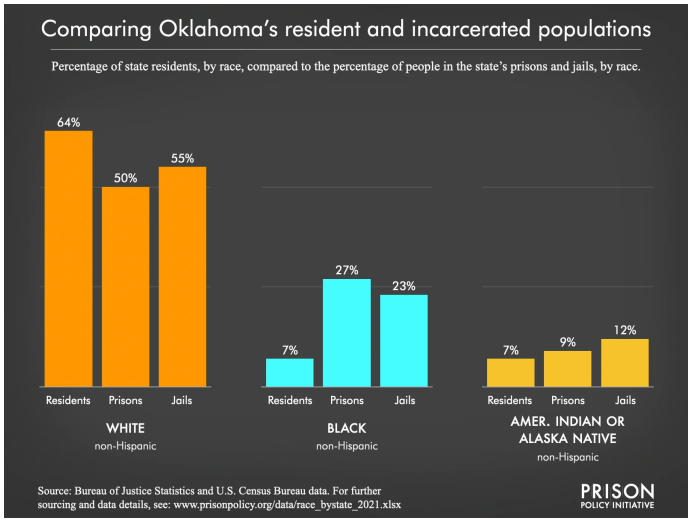
Every ten years, when the Census Bureau conducts its official tally of the nation's population, it incorrectly counts incarcerated people as residents of prison cells rather than in their home communities. When state officials then use that Census data in the legislative redistricting process, they inadvertently 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 Oklahoma's State House District 56, for example, correctional facilities make up 14% of the population. That means that just 86 residents of that district have as much political clout as 100 residents in any other district.

Disproportionate impact for Black residents

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

- Black residents make up only 7% of the state population but 27% of people in prisons and 23% of people in jails.
- The racial impact of prison gerrymandering is so strong that, for example, nearly half of the Black people counted in State House District 18 were actually behind bars, rather than living in the community.



Oklahoma 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 Oklahoma to pass legislation ending prison gerrymandering and count incarcerated people at home when drawing districts.

Our full report on prison gerrymandering in Oklahoma is available at https://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/news/2025/04/29/okla_prison_gerrymandering/

11/18/25