

End prison-based gerrymandering in your state: It's not just a problem in Iowa

Gerrymandering travels to Anamosa Iowa where a man won a city council seat with just 2 votes. The problem wasn't voter apathy, it was a lack of voters. Virtually the entire district was locked up at the Anamosa State Penitentiary. The city drew its council districts with Census Bureau data that said people in prison are residents of their prison cells.

Each of the city's other council districts had 25 times as many real residents as this one. So in effect, if you lived next to the prison, you had 25 times as much influence as anyone else in Anamosa.

But Anamosa isn't the only place where drawing districts around a large prison distorts how our democracy works. The prison-based gerrymandering we see in Anamosa exists across the country. For example:

- Dodge County, Wisconsin: Prison district residents get more than twice the influence over county matters as other residents.
- Lake County, Tennessee: Prison district residents get almost 5 times the influence over county matters as other residents.
- Pendleton, Oregon: Unless the city takes corrective action in 2011, every 3 residents of the prison district will be given as much influence over the future of their city as every group of 4 residents in the other wards.

Prison-based gerrymandering also affects state legislative districts:

- One legislative district in New York is 7% prisoners; a legislative district in Texas is 12% prisoners; and 15% of one Montana district is prisoners imported from other parts of the state.

Padding these districts with extra population changes policy priorities statewide and dilutes the votes of all other residents in other districts.

The solution is simple. Correct the Census.

- The U.S. Census Bureau can decide to count incarcerated people at home in the next Census. Problem solved.
- States can follow the lead of Delaware, Maryland, and New York and use state correctional data to adjust the federal Census for redistricting purposes so that districts are based on incarcerated populations counted at their home addresses.
- State and local governments can refuse to pad the populations of legislative districts that contain prisons. More than 100 rural counties and municipalities around the country already make these adjustments on their own.

What you can do.

Find out about prison-based gerrymandering in your area at <http://prisonersofthecensus.org/50states/> and get involved!

