

Prison gerrymandering disproportionately harms Oregon's Native American residents

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Everyone in Oregon is supposed to have an equal voice in their government's decisions, but an outdated and misguided Census Bureau policy that counts incarcerated people in the wrong place gives a few residents of the state a megaphone.

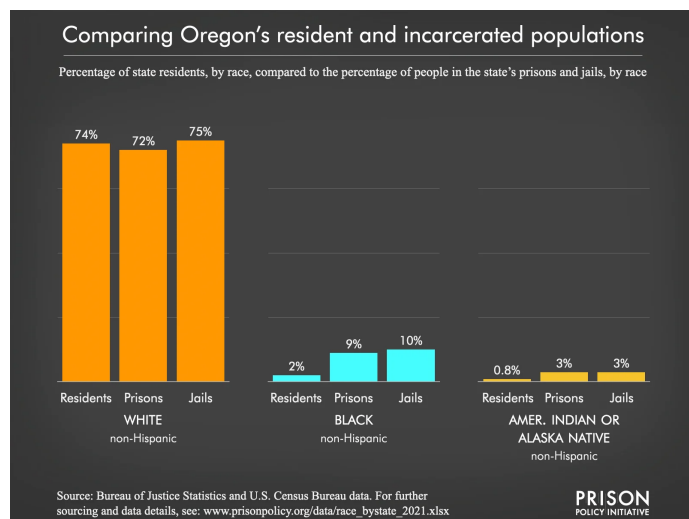
Every ten years, when the Census Bureau conducts its official tally of the nation's population, it incorrectly counts incarcerated people as residents of prison cells rather than in their home communities. When state officials then use that Census data in the legislative redistricting process, they inadvertently 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.

Although each district should have the same number of people living in it, the state counted people at the Snake River, Warner Creek, and Powder River Correctional Facilities as if they were residents of State House District 60. Those 3,672 people make up over 5% of the district's population.

Disproportionate impact for Native residents

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

- Native residents make up less than 1% of the State's population, but 3% of people in prisons and jails.



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

Our full report on prison gerrymandering in Oregon is available at https://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/news/2025/07/23/oregon_prison_gerrymandering/