PRISON POLICY INITIATIVE

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

Prison gerrymandering disproportionately harms Vermont's Native American residents

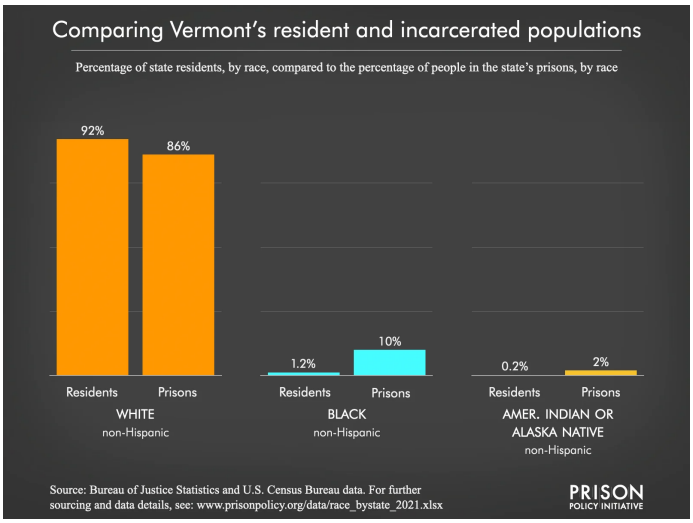
Prison gerrymandering reduces the political power of nearly all Vermont residents by allowing a few districts with large correctional facilities to claim residents from all over the state. And while it does that, it also enshrines the racial inequities of mass incarceration into the state's democratic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

What is prison gerrymandering?

Everyone in Vermont is supposed to have an equal voice in their government's decisions, but an outdated and misguided Census Bureau policy that counts incarcerated people in the wrong place gives a few residents of the state a megaphone.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 Northern State Correctional Facility as if they were residents of State House District Orleans-2. Those 360 people make up over 8% of the district's population. That means that just 92 residents of the Orleans-2 District have as much political clout as 100 residents in a typical district.



Disproportionate impact for Native residents

In Vermont, 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 Vermont's white residents:

- Native residents make up less than a quarter of one percent of the State's population, but 2% of people in prisons.
- The racial impact of prison gerrymandering is so strong that, for example, 28% of Native Americans counted in State House Orleans-2 were actually behind bars in the Northern State Correctional Facility, rather than living in the community.
- And this district isn't alone. For example, in Franklin-3, 29% of Native Americans were counted at the Northwest State Correctional Facility and in the Caledonia Essex District, 26% of Native Americans were counted at the Northeast Correctional Complex.

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

Our full report on prison gerrymandering in Vermont is available at https://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/news/2025/09/24/vermont_prison_gerrymandering/

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