

Counting Incarcerated People At Home in the Census

A Prison Policy Initiative fact sheet

PRISON
POLICY INITIATIVE
<http://www.prisonpolicy.org/>
(413) 527-0845

Misconceptions about the realities of modern mass incarceration permeate discussions about the usual residence of incarcerated people. While the Census Bureau proposes to continue to count incarcerated people at their correctional facility for purposes of the census, an analysis of the interplay of time served, prison locations, community ties, and the usual residence rule shows that incarcerated people should in fact be counted at their home addresses.

People who are incarcerated on Census day are at home most of the time:

- Many people in jails are away from home for a few days or less.
- People sentenced in Rhode Island to the state's correctional facilities generally serve only 99 days.
- Nationally, people incarcerated in state prisons have been away from home for two years.

Regardless of sentence length, **people in prisons don't reside (eat and sleep most of the time) at the particular correctional facility that they happen to be at on Census day:**

- 75% of people serve time in more than one prison facility.
- 12% of people serve time in at least 5 facilities before returning home.
- Most people incarcerated in New York State have only been at their current prison for 7 months. (Other states report similar figures.)

While they are being shuffled between facilities, incarcerated people maintain a usual residence elsewhere; **their home remains the only actual stable address.**

- Nearly all incarcerated people return home after release from correctional facilities.

For other groups who are away from home, the Bureau counts them at home because for those groups, the Bureau looks not just at time away from home, but at a person's ties to home when **determining their usual residence.**

- The Census Bureau relies on family and community ties to count other people at home (e.g., truck drivers, boarding school students, Congress, military personnel), even when they are away for long periods of time, but fails to apply the same rules to incarcerated people.

The Census Bureau must modernize its residence criteria and count incarcerated people at home in the 2020 Census.