

Count Inmates At Home

Though it fell in a rather busy week and didn't grab much attention, another U.S. Supreme Court decision last week should have ramifications for Connecticut. The ruling affirmed the constitutionality of a Maryland law that counts incarcerated persons as residents of their last legal home addresses, not the prisons, for redistricting purposes.

This is the fairer way to do it. The decision should be an impetus for Connecticut to follow suit.

Prisoners are counted in the locality of the prison here and in most states, which is an accident of history. When the census began more than two centuries ago, it didn't much matter where inmates were counted because relatively few people were in prison and the prisons and jails were often in the same town where the prisoner lived. But the burst of prison building and mass incarceration in the latter part of the 20th century changed the landscape. Now there are many more people in prisons that are most often in other municipalities.

The U.S. Census Bureau recognized this in 2010 when it allowed states to choose where to count inmates for redistricting purposes. And handful of states including New York and Maryland passed laws requiring that inmates be counted in their home communities. Bills that would have changed the law in Connecticut failed in the last two sessions of the General Assembly.

Next year it should pass. The current system tends to dilute the political power of urban areas, where the majority of inmates come from, in favor of suburban towns that happen to have prisons. Remember that most prisoners cannot vote. So if, say, 15 percent of a district is made up of inmates, then the remaining 85 percent of the district's population has the same political muscle as 100 percent of the people in a district with no prison. That would appear to violate the "one person, one vote" rule.

Also, as State Sen. Eric Coleman said at a hearing last year, some state funding formulas are based on population, so the urban areas are being cheated out of funds they desperately need — for dealing with returning inmates, among many other things.

Data compiled by the Prison Policy Initiative using the 2000 census found that less than 20 percent of the state's population lives in Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, New Britain, Stamford or Waterbury, but more than half of the state's prisoners come from those cities. By the same token, less than 1 percent of state prisoner hail from the five towns — Cheshire, East Lyme, Enfield, Somers and Suffield — that contain 60 percent of the state's prisons.

The vast majority of inmates leave prison, and most go home. That's where they should be counted.

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