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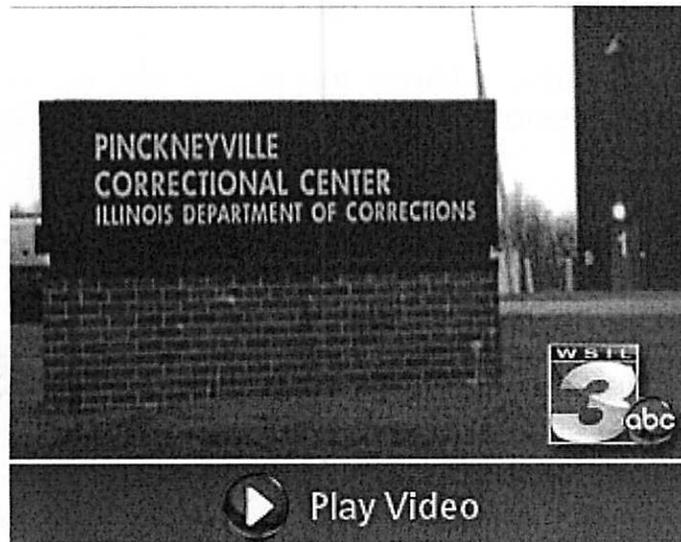
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Local Communities Oppose Inmate Census Bill

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PINCKNEYVILLE -- A proposal in the Illinois House would change the way the government counts prisoners in the census--something that could cost local communities thousands of dollars in tax revenue.

Under the bill proposed by Chicago-area lawmaker Rep. LaShawn Ford, inmates in state prisons would be counted as residents of their hometown. Right now, they are included in the census in the community where they're behind bars.

Prisoners account for a big chunk of the population in many towns in Southern Illinois. Big Muddy Correctional Center has an average of 1847 inmates. That comes out to 79 percent of the population in Ina, where the prison is located.

Two prisons near Vienna hold 3,500 inmates, or more than a quarter of Johnson County's population.

Perry County is also home to a state prison. Pinckneyville Mayor Joe Holder is having a hard time understanding the proposal to change the way inmates are counted in the census. He believes the prisoners behind these gates are residents of his city.

"These people are citizens of Pinckneyville," he said, "Even though they're incarcerated they still have to have services." 

Services like the courts or emergency care in a disaster, and even basic utilities like water, sewer, and electricity.

"We have to have tax revenue to provide those services, to support those services," Holder told News Three.

Pinckneyville would lose out on population-based tax revenue like income and motor fuel tax reimbursements. The Pinckneyville Correctional Center houses 2,400 inmates. If the law changes, and the city is no longer allowed to count those inmates in its census, it stands to lose more than 40 percent of its population.

County officials don't want to see that happen either. Those inmates make up 10 percent of the residents in Perry County. Commissioner Sam Robb explains it's hard enough to make ends meet now.

"To have to provide these services with that loss of income would be disastrous to the county," Robb remarked.

Supporters argue it's not fair to count prisoners where they're incarcerated, because some are only in those facilities for a short time. Then they return to other parts of the state. The census is only done every ten years, so the tax revenue isn't changed to reflect that until the next census. 

But local leaders insist the prisons are constantly full. Prisoners who leave are replaced with others, and there's never a lapse in the need for services.

Senator John O. Jones of Mt. Vernon is already fighting the measure; his district includes two prisons.

"The Chicago legislators didn't want these facilities built in Chicago. They didn't want them there," Jones said.

Everyone acknowledges the prisons are a good industry for Southern Illinois but insist that comes with a price.

"The Village of Ina, and I know Pinckneyville is the same way, roads have to be maintained in that area," Jones said, "There's a lot of bus traffic."

"We can't do it for free," said Holder.

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