

The Census Project Blog

The blog of the Census Project, a Washington, D.C.-based stakeholder coalition

Prison Populations a Big Issue for Census

Posted on [March 9, 2010](#) | [1 Comment](#)

by *Peter Wagner*

On Census Day, there will be more than 2.3 million people behind bars in this country. That is a population larger than 15 individual states, and larger than the combined populations of our 3 smallest states. Because this population disproportionately consists of African-American and Latino men, critical civil rights issues are at stake in achieving an accurate count in 2010.

The Census Bureau counts people in prison as residents of the correctional facility. It strives to use individual enumeration via census forms wherever possible and, as a last resort, uses administrative records to collect information on inmates.

The controversy comes not from the counting procedures – which the Census does well – but from the rules that govern where prisoners are counted. Many state constitutions declare that incarcerated people remain residents of their pre-incarceration addresses. (In fact, these same prisoners are either denied the right to vote or are required to vote absentee in their home districts.) Because census numbers are used to allocate political representation within counties and states, drawing districts as if these individuals lived in the prison town skews democracy.

[Seven states are considering legislation](#) that would adjust census population figures for the state's internal redistricting. For example, some states plan to collect the home addresses of incarcerated people, while others are considering a requirement that districts not include prisons in their population base. More than 100 counties adopted this latter approach after the 2000 Census. In decades past, counties that wanted to make such an adjustment were on their own. The Census Bureau published prison count data far too late to be of help to those drawing districts. But the Census Bureau recently announced that it will publish Group Quarters data (which includes prison counts) early, in May 2011. This information will make it easier for states and counties to redistrict according to their own standards.

Despite press reports to the contrary, the Census Bureau won't be counting prisoners at their pre-incarceration addresses, and earlier-than-usual release of Group Quarters population data will not affect federal or state funding formulas. All the Census Bureau is doing is making it easier for data users to identify group facilities – like prisons – within the redistricting data.

And by publishing numbers for prisons in Spring 2011, instead of in late summer, the Census Bureau simply has given states the tools to decide for themselves how best to ensure equal representation for their citizens.

###

Peter Wagner is executive director of the [Prison Policy Initiative](#), a non-partisan organization that documents the impact of mass incarceration on individuals, communities and the national welfare. Mr. Wagner can be reached at [pwagner \[AT\] prisonpolicy.org](mailto:pwagner@prisonpolicy.org). For more information how prison counts influence the democratic process, please visit the organization's website: <http://www.prisonersofthecensus.org>.