

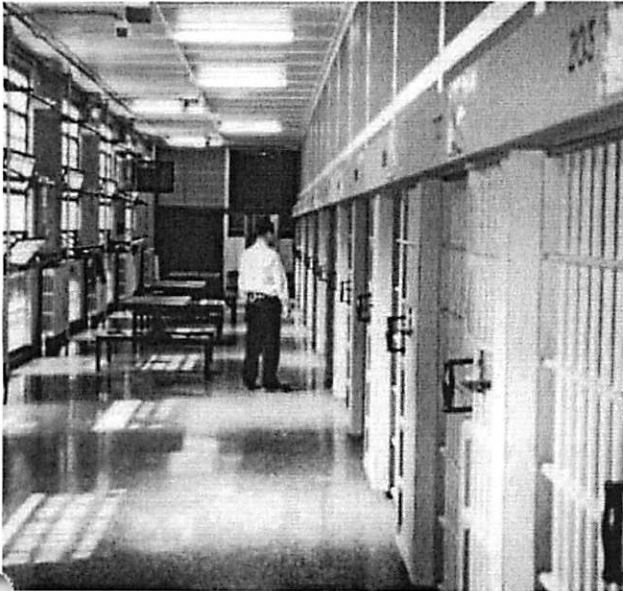
# RaceWire

THE COLORLINES BLOG

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on race and politics.

MICHELLE CHEN

## When Numbers Lie: Prisoners of the Census in New York



Across New York City, tens of thousands of Black and Latino residents have gone missing. You'll find them languishing behind bars in upstate towns, where they're punished by being robbed of their potential as income-earners, parents and community members. And in the 2010 census, they'll likely disappear once again—on paper.

Albany is currently weighing a proposal to change the way the 2010 census counts are weighed for people incarcerated in towns far away from their original communities. Reform advocates point out that, in addition to being torn from their families and neighborhoods, inmates are routinely exploited in a political numbers game known as "prison-based gerrymandering."

Under current state rules, inmates—including those serving relatively short sentences, who will go home eventually—can be counted in the populations of the towns of their facilities. In an eerie reprise of the 3/5 compromise, the state essentially deprives them of the basic entitlements of citizenship by locking them up, and then uses their bodies to artificially inflate population statistics.

This enables huge distortions in the distribution of political power and representation in state legislative districts. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, the quiet theft of these "prisoners of the census" further weakens the political strength of inmates' urban communities, and gives even more undue influence to largely white upstate counties (which, of course, have a stake in keeping their prisons open to drive the local economy).

Some counties in New York and several other states recalculate their population counts to exclude inmates, but others do not. In 2004, the arbitrary discrepancies in the process prompted some residents of Franklin County to formally complain in a letter to the Census Bureau in 2004 that neighboring St. Lawrence County had unfairly skewed its voting clout:

*[St. Lawrence County] legislators admit that the prisoners have no stake in issues of county taxation or policy making. Most critically, there was a large public effort in the county to attempt to repeal the most recent redistricting legislation precisely because large external populations were included making the votes of 8 residents near the prisons worth as much as 10 residents elsewhere in the county.*

The flipside of this scheme is the depopulation and disenfranchisement of the poor Black and Latino communities that have lost young men and women to the criminal justice system--often for nonviolent drug-related offenses thanks to mandatory-sentencing laws. New York recently moved to loosen its sentencing policies to correct some of the gross inequities in the system.

Lawmakers and community groups are trying to bring some sanity to the census. Senator Eric T. Schneiderman and Assemblyman Hakeem Jeffries have introduced a bill to prevent prison population-bidging when drawing legislative districts. The legislation, which would be the first of its kind in the nation if enacted, would mandate that incarcerated people be counted in their home communities, not

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the prison towns that are holding them.

In an announcement of the new legislation, Assemblyman Jeffries said:

*This bill is necessary to break the back of the prison industrial complex where certain communities benefit from the criminalization of young people who disproportionately come from low-income neighborhoods across the state. Prison-based gerrymandering is unfair, unethical and unconstitutional, and we will not rest until the process is changed.*

The prison system dehumanizes people in countless ways, restricting their freedom of movement and cutting off their access to the ballot. Though no single legislative measure could resolve the many injustices wrought by the criminal justice system, this simple tweak in the census can help prevent counties from using incarcerated people to prop up the structure of inequity that keeps them behind bars.

Image: Sing Sing prison (NYS Dept of Correctional Services)

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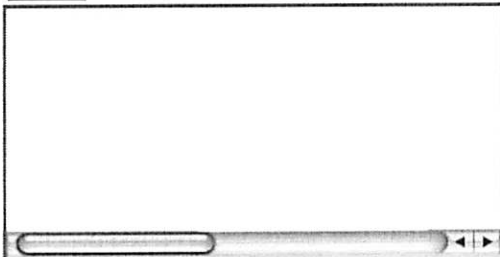
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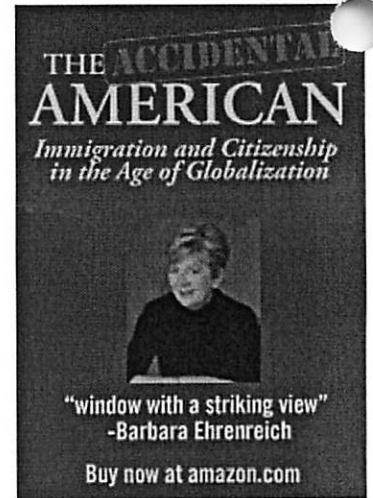
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[http://www.racewire.org/archives/2010/02/when\\_numbers\\_lie\\_prisoners\\_of\\_the\\_census\\_in\\_new\\_york.html](http://www.racewire.org/archives/2010/02/when_numbers_lie_prisoners_of_the_census_in_new_york.html)

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