Peter Wagner knows firsthand just how hard it is to get people excited about a topic as seemingly dry and technical as the U.S. Census. As the executive director of the Prison Policy Initiative, a non-partisan research organization in Easthampton, Wagner has spent years trying to get lawmakers and others in positions of influence to pay attention to—and then push to change—one aspect of the complex process by which the Census Bureau counts U.S. residents.

Wagner’s focus: how the Census counts prisoners, a topic he’s been studying since his days as a law student at Western New England College. The Census counts prisoners at the place where they’re incarcerated, not in the community where they lived before they were locked up. That policy results in the skewing of population data that’s used to draw up legislative districts—a “prison-based gerrymandering,” as PPI puts it—that has a direct, and detrimental, effect on the fair, democratic distribution of political power.

Wagner has been studying the issue for almost a decade, and along the way, he and his colleagues have seen just how hard it is to change a bureaucracy as large and slow-moving as the Census Bureau. That makes their recent victory on the prisoner issue, while only a partial solution, a satisfying—and effective, step in the right direction.

The 2010 Census currently underway will count prisoners as it has for years: at the institutions where they are incarcerated, not at their most recent home addresses.

The difference is what the Bureau will do with that information. Under a new agreement, data on prison populations will be published several months earlier than planned, which will allow individual states to use it as they begin their legislative redistricting processes.

That might not sound like much—a government agency releasing a relatively small amount of its collected data a little earlier than usual. But the consequences will be significant, making it easier for states to ensure that their legislative districts are fair representations of actual populations.

Decisions about where prisoners are counted are significant, given the large number of people behind bars in the U.S. According to the federal Department of Justice, there were 1.5 million people in state and federal prisons in 2008 (an increase of more than 200,000 from just a decade earlier). Another 800,000 people were locked up in local jails, up 300,000 from 1998. In Massachusetts, there were just over 10,000 people in state prisons in 2009, according to a report by the Mass. Department of Corrections. The state’s one federal prison, Fort Devens, has about 1,300 prisoners, according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Those people are all counted by the Census as living at their jails and prisons; that data, in turn, is given to states to use as they draw legislative districts. In its research, PPI points to perhaps the most dramatic example of how this process can go awry: it comes from Anamosa, Iowa, a small town whose total population of 5,700 includes the 1,300 men locked up at the state penitentiary located there. The prison dominates the Anamosa City Council’s Ward 2, accounting for all but 100 residents in the district. But because in Iowa (as in 47 other states) convicted felons cannot vote, only the 100 non-prisoner residents of the ward were eligible to select their city councilor—meaning those 100 people had as much representational clout in city government as the 1,400 residents who made up each of the city’s three other wards.

And it wasn’t just those residents who were poorly served by the formula. Because the prisoners were not counted at the homes where they lived before their arrest—and where, it can be assumed, many would return upon their release—those communities also suffered, as their population count, for the purpose of distributing political representation, shrank.

After a 2006 election in which Ward 2’s councilor was elected by just two voters, Anamosa voters opted to right the imbalance by changing their governmental structure: starting last year, all city councilors there were elected at-large, rather than by ward.