

Prisoners count

By None

COLEMAN

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Nearly one in 10 people counted as Sumter County residents lives behind bars.

Most of those behind bars "live" at the federal correctional complex in Coleman. That's more than 7,300 inmates in a county with about 80,000, according to the 2009 Census.

The rest are housed at a state prison and the county jail, both in Bushnell.

These prisoners don't vote.

But they count in the U.S. Census toward the county's population.

That means they play a part in determining where political district boundaries are drawn.

Currently, the Coleman prison is included in the districts of U.S. Rep. Rich Nugent, R-Brooksville; state Sen. Alan Hays, R-Umatilla, state Rep. Marlene O'Toole, R-The Villages and Sumter County Commissioner Randy Mask.

Hays says as long as the Census count remains consistent, political redistricting will be fair.

"You've gotta count these people," he said of state and federal prisoners. "You count people where they are on that day (that the Census takers come to an area)."

For those who question whether a prisoner should count toward an area's population, Hays says, "Give me an alternative. My thing is, be consistent across the country."

Even though they're in his district, Mask doesn't see himself "representing" the inmates at the federal prison.

"I don't know that I represent them," Mask said last week. "No one's called me about a pothole."

Like Hays, Mask sees no problem with counting prisoners as permanent county residents.

"We've always done it that way," he said.

Legislators will talk in next year's session about whether prisoners will be factored into revised boundaries for legislative and congressional districts. For this year, legislators are tied up with the state's budget to discuss political district boundaries. Sumter, Lake and all other Florida counties will adjust district boundaries for county commissioners after the 2010 Census to comply with federal and state law.

Sumter County Administrator Bradley Arnold said growth in The Villages -- not the inmate population at the federal prison in Coleman -- will change district lines the most.

Stacy Gimbel Vidal, a spokeswoman for the Census, said the Census Bureau counts people according to a

residence rule that states that people should be counted at their "usual residence."

The Census has followed the concept of "usual residence" since the first census in 1790. "Usual residence" is defined as the place where a person lives and sleeps most of the time, Vidal said.

According to this concept, prisoners in correctional facilities -- including prisons, jails, detention centers and college campuses etc. -- are counted for the Census.

"It's important to note that each state has its own rules regarding legislative redistricting," Vidal said.

Some states, for example, decide to move (or remove) the numbers of college students or prisoners from where they currently live or are incarcerated to another location.

The term "usual residence" is used because there is no generally agreed-upon definition of the concept of "permanent home of record," according to a February 2006 report from the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

It concludes that trying to count prisoners at their "permanent home of record" would cost too much. It also would be at least slightly inaccurate because prison records nationwide as to the inmates' "home" are often unreliable.