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Prisoners of the Census news

for the week of March 9

The 2010 Census will count more than

2 million people in the wrong place.

How will your vote suffer?

Census adjustment bills introduced in Minnesota and Rhode Island

Bills to change where and how incarcerated people are counted in the census for redistricting purposes have been introduced in Minnesota and Rhode Island. Hearings were held last week and this week in Maryland, and a hearing is being held this afternoon in Rhode Island. What is going on in your state?

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Prison-based gerrymandering in Maryland

Olivia Cummings and Peter Wagner have finished a new report: Importing Constituents: Incarcerated People and Political Clout in Maryland, our district-by-district analysis of how crediting Baltimore City’s incarcerated residents to remote districts distorts democracy and dilutes the votes of all voters in all other districts.

We’ve also released two fact sheets:

Ending prison-based gerrymandering would aid the African-American vote in Maryland [PDF] by Prison Policy Initiative

States are Authorized to Adjust Census Data to End Prison-Based Gerrymandering, and Many Already Do [PDF] by Prison Policy Initiative and Demos

and created a new page for the Maryland campaign.

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Census Bureau counts Minnesota's incarcerated population in the wrong place; access to democracy distorted

The federal Census counts incarcerated people as if they resided where the prison is located, and that creates big problems for democracy in Minnesota, charges a new report by the non-profit Prison Policy Initiative.

American democracy relies on Census counts to apportion political power on the basis of equal population. By Minnesota law, prisoners can’t vote and remain residents of their home communities. “By relying on Census Bureau counts of prison populations to pad legislative districts with prisons, Minnesota is inflating the votes of residents who live near prisons at the expense of every other resident,” said report author Aleks Kajstura.

“Every decade we redraw our districts. The state uses Census data to redraw its own districts. Using prisons to pad the populations of a small number of districts dilutes the votes of everyone else,” said State Senator Linda Higgins - DFL-Minneapolis. Senator Higgins and Representative Champion are developing legislation to change the way Minnesota uses census data in redistricting.

Even though Minnesota has one of the lowest incarceration rates in the nation, the way that incarcerated people are counted undermines Minnesota’s efforts to ensure equality and fairness in districting. Sarah Walker, a founder of the Minnesota Second Chance Coalition and chief operating officer of 180 Degrees Inc. in Minneapolis, is concerned that “even in Minnesota there are enough people in prison to skew our democracy. When someone goes to prison, everyone in their community has their vote diluted.”

The report finds 10 House districts where state and federal prison populations were counted as residents, significantly enhancing the weight of a vote cast in those districts. “For people to have confidence in our system of representative democracy, every aspect of it must be founded on basic principles of fairness,” says Mark Haase, Director of Public Policy and Advocacy at Council on Crime and Justice. He continued: “Counting prisoners where they have no ability to participate in the community or vote is not fair to them and all Minnesotans.”

“The Minnesota Constitution provides that incarceration does not change a person’s residence,” says Keesha Gaskins, Executive Director of the League of Women Voters Minnesota. She explains that “it is inconsistent with our Constitution and basic democratic principles of our republic to continue a practice that inflates the political influence of people within a legislative district with a correctional facility and dilutes the influence of the surrounding communities and the home districts of the incarcerated persons. The Census Bureau’s distribution of the important data of where incarcerated persons reside allows us to correct this injustice and to ensure that the redistricting process is fair and equitable to all Minnesotans.”

The report further calls on Minnesota to lobby the Census Bureau to change how prisoners are counted in the future and to develop state solutions to protect the restricting process after the 2010 Census.

The report, “Importing Constituents: Prisoners and Political Clout in Minnesota,” is available at http://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/mn/report.html and other background material including fact sheets, bill links, data tables at http://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/mn/.

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Census empowers, does not dictate data use

new article by Aleks Kajstura

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