

# Prison Gerrymandering

*Sergio Hyland*

**BEFORE YOU READ:** See p. 19 for a definition of and background to *gerrymandering*.

## Prisoners Add to Rural Count

One of the reasons for a census is to determine how many political representatives a certain district needs. A densely populated district should have more political representation in government and more federal funding than a sparsely populated district. It seems fair enough, right? But what happens when certain districts manipulate their residency count?

Take Pennsylvania, for example. According to <[justicemercy.org](http://justicemercy.org)>, we have roughly 50,000 state prisoners, housed in 27 state prisons, as well as 14,000 prisoners in federal prisons. Many prisoners are from larger cities, but the prisons are usually in rural areas with small populations. When a small rural county is home to a large state prison, that county increases its population count significantly. A larger population means more funding and more political representation. This is a legal process known as “prison gerrymandering.”

In the past, communities fought to stop prisons from being built nearby. Now, they lobby for the opposite. They see the advantage in having a large prison population: it adds to the amount of federal money they receive and increases their representation in government. Just think about it: a small town of 3,000 residents could double its population by allowing a prison to be built in their community. And all of this would happen WITHOUT prisoners being allowed to vote, which is supposed to be the cornerstone of our democracy.

## Urban Communities Lose

Prison gerrymandering doesn’t only benefit small counties, it also harms the counties where prisoners call home. Every time an urban prisoner is counted in a rural county, it takes away from the

number of city residents included in the census report. Urban communities are often majority people of color, so this process contributes to disempowering black and brown people.

Gerrymandering extends to immigrant detention centers. Immigrants are coming to America in large numbers. They are economic and political refugees seeking nothing more than the possibility of a better life. Thousands of these immigrants are arrested and housed in detention centers, and the Census Bureau counts them as residents of those districts. Ironically, some politicians generate anti-immigrant hysteria to justify long detentions; meanwhile their districts benefit from having all those detainees counted as residents.

Those of us in prison and detention centers are being used against our own interests! We should support laws that prevent prison gerrymandering and give prisoners the right to vote. Voting is the most important part of democracy! We should all play a part in deciding our future.

**AFTER YOU READ:** Explain in your own words how prison gerrymandering works. Research how prisoners are counted in your state. Visit <[prisoners-ofthecensus.org](http://prisoners-ofthecensus.org)> to learn more.

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