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# Prison-Based Gerrymandering

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD

The Census Bureau has steadfastly resisted calls to end the practice of counting inmates as “residents” of their prisons instead of the cities and towns where they lived and to which they typically return. The bureau’s new director, John Thompson, [seems at least open to ending](#) this wrongful practice.

Counting inmates at their correctional institutions encourages prison-based gerrymandering, by which state lawmakers draw legislative districts that consist partly or even mainly of prison populations, even though inmates are denied the right to vote in all but two states. This enhances the political power of the mainly rural districts where prisons are built and undercuts the influence of the urban districts where many inmates came from.

Four states and about 200 municipalities have acted against prison gerrymandering in recent years because the prison count had warped the political landscape. Maryland, for example, required inmates to be counted in their home communities after learning that inmates were nearly a fifth of the “residents” in one legislative district and 64 percent of the population of one county commission district. But state and local laws that require inmates to be counted in their hometowns often require piecemeal adjustments to the census data. That’s why members of Congress are pushing the Census Bureau to solve this problem.

Earlier this spring, for example, 18 House Democrats signed a letter asking the bureau develop “a standardized national solution to the problem of redistricting distortion” that would make it easier to draw honest legislative districts. At a Congressional hearing earlier this month, Mr. Thompson said that the Census Bureau had not yet decided on the rules for the 2020 census and would do so after consultations with interested parties.

They should reform the current system. It distorts the political process and raises concerns about the fairness of the census process itself. That’s reason enough for the bureau to solve this problem now.

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