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Congress Directs Census Bureau To Study New Approach to Counting People in Prison

NEW YORK - November 29 - An appropriations bill signed into law by President Bush last week directs the U.S. Census Bureau to study a new way to count people in prison: using their pre-incarceration addresses rather than their prison addresses. The study of this new approach could lead to a change in the way the Bureau conducts its actual census counts, to a method widely believed to be fairer and more accurate.

"By counting incarcerated people as residents of their true home communities, the Census Bureau will provide more accurate information for individuals, families, communities, and policymakers," explained Kirsten Levingston, Director of the Criminal Justice Program at the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law. "And it just makes sense, because people overwhelmingly return home after a prison sentence. Critical funds keyed to the population count should go to the areas where services – like job training and drug treatment – will be used by the people returning home, increasing the chances they will thrive there."

Congressman José E. Serrano from the Bronx, New York was instrumental in including the instructions to the Census Bureau. "It is an issue of accuracy and fairness," said Congressman Serrano. "I have been a longtime supporter of counting incarcerated persons where they really live. I believe that the Census Bureau will conclude that this is the right way to do it, and I look forward to the results of the study."

The distorted picture that results from the Bureau's current approach of counting people as residents of their place of incarceration does more than just drive the federal and state funds linked to population data away from the places most incarcerated people call home. In some cases, inflated population counts also boost the political clout of rural prison towns at the expense of urban communities and rural regions without prisons.

"The distortional effects of this policy have bothered me for years," said Bill Cooper, a demographer with FairData2000, a national database that provides community-based mapping and data solutions for education, environment, housing, and poverty-related issues. "Congress's decision to thoroughly examine the issue is long overdue."

The congressional action reflects the growing attention the issue has received in recent months, with endorsements for change from the New York Times, the National Conference of Mayors, numerous re-entry service providers, and Former Director of the Census Bureau Kenneth Prewitt. "Congress has correctly recognized the seriousness of this issue," remarked Prewitt, now a professor at Columbia's School for International Public Affairs. "Counting people in prison as residents of their home communities offers a more accurate picture of the size, demographics and needs of our nation's communities, and will lead to more informed policies and a wiser and more just distribution of public funds."

The study is included in the conference committee report language for the 2005 Commerce-Justice-State Appropriations Bill, HR 2862.

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