



# TIMES UNION

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## EMPIRE STATE

# 'Phantom constituents' are found

Prisoner advocates say towns got disproportionate political power by claiming inmates as residents

By **MICHAEL HILL**  
Associated Press

ALBANY — Prison towns can wield disproportionate local political clout in the New York counties that count inmates as constituents, according to a report from an advocacy group Wednesday.

The Prison Policy Initiative identified 15 counties — including Saratoga and Columbia — in the

state, plus New York City, that rely on census tallies including prisoners when they draw lines for county legislative districts or weight the votes for county boards of supervisors (county governments usually use one system or the other).

Critics have long contended that the practice of counting state and federal prisoners, who cannot

vote, as local residents creates "phantom constituents" and gives undue political power to places with prisons. The effect can be especially acute in sparsely populated rural counties.

The report found five counties — Chautauqua, Livingston, Oneida, Madison and St. Lawrence — contained districts that consisted of at least 20 percent prisoners.

Report author Peter Wagner said, "It allows certain parts of counties to dominate the future of

their counties."

For example, the report said 62 percent of the residents counted by the census in the Livingston County town of Groveland are incarcerated. That means every four residents there have the same say over county affairs as 10 residents elsewhere in the county, according to the report.

Wagner said five other counties had at least one district with 8 percent to 15 percent prisoners: Chenango, Columbia, Fulton, Jef-

erson and Wayne. New York City also fell within that range.

Researchers measured relatively small effects in five other counties, like Monroe County, where the average district size is more than 25,000 and the lone state prison holds 90 inmates. The other counties in that group were Erie, Saratoga, Ulster and Westchester.

Wagner called for counties to end the practice of counting inmates when drawing district lines.