

Are legislative maps hurting prison reforms?

In April, Maryland lawmakers voted to count prison inmates at their home addresses, instead of where they're incarcerated, for state and local legislative redistricting purposes.

New York lawmakers followed suit in August.

And what does this have to do with anything down here in the middle of Illinois?

Exactly nothing. Yet.

Prison-based gerrymandering is a touchy topic down here. I know, I know, it's tough to wrap the brain around the phrase. How do you gerrymander with a prison?

Easy. State and local lawmakers do it all the time all around the country. But it really breaks down how democracy works, probably as much, if not more, than who turns out to vote and the obscene amounts of money candidates raise and spend to influence how voters vote. That's why Maryland and New York gave prison-based gerrymandering the political death sentence.

Illinois?

Let's just say Democrats get to decide, as they did in Maryland and New York. But here, Democrats benefit as much from the current arrangement as Republicans.

For all the bluster about how Chicago's political clout governs much of what happens in the state, downstaters — both Democrats and Republicans — are reluctant to talk about the political advantages of counting prisoners where they're confined (mostly downstate) instead of their last address (mostly Chicago).

Take the 91st legislative district. Long-time Democratic incumbent Mike Smith and Republican challenger Mike Unes fought it out in one of the most costly and closely watched races in the state. Unes ultimately won by almost 2,800 votes.

The district's boundary lines, which run through parts of Fulton, Tazewell and Peoria counties, include Illinois River Correctional Center in Canton and the federal prison in Pekin. Conservatively, the combined population at the two prisons is about 3,000 inmates. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, they're more than just inmates. They're residents of the 91st District. And when it comes to using Census figures to draw legisla-

tive boundaries, state lawmakers agree.

They are residents who don't have the right to vote for the candidate of their choice in their residential district. They are residents with issues a candidate can conveniently ignore when it comes to constituent services. But without them, the 91st District, as we know it, wouldn't meet the population requirements to be a state legislative district.

In a report released earlier this year, the Massachusetts-based think tank and advocacy group Prison Policy Initiative found 11 state legislative districts that relied on the prison population to pad overall population figures to make their numbers equal to every other legislative district in the state. Equal population size happens to be a legal requirement for

legislative districts. The 91st District happens to have the most prison inmates counted in its total population figures.

At the time of the analysis, the other 10 districts happened to have equal numbers of Democratic and Republican representatives.

The state has about 50,000 men and women in prison.

Though most of the state's prisons are downstate, most of the state's prison inmates are from the Chicago area. Most of them will return to the Chicago area in less than two years. Counting prison inmates where they're confined rather than where they live means Chicago basically exports political power to prison-padded districts downstate.

We ought to be a bit more grateful to Chicago down here. Especially with a round of legislative redistricting on the horizon and downstate potentially in line to lose yet another Illinois House seat because population hasn't kept up with the competition.

Except it's not fair. Not to the prison inmates who can't vote. Not to voters in districts that don't have prisons. Not to basic democratic principles.

And it definitely doesn't provide much political incentive to pass reforms that would reduce the more than \$1 billion annually the state spends on prisons.



PAM
 ADAMS

PAM ADAMS is a columnist with the Journal Star. Her e-mail address is padams@pjstar.com.