

Incarcerated People and the Census

Painting a Distorted Picture of Virginia



Photograph by Tuck Engineering
<http://www.bigstonegap.org/pictures/page1.htm>

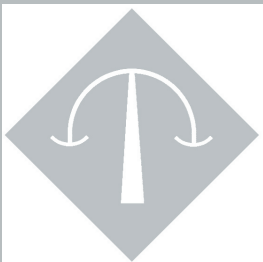
Wallens Ridge State Prison (pop. 1,050) in Big Stone Gap, VA (pop. 5,906)

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by Patricia Allard & Chris Muller

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This report is the first in a series outlining the state-level effects of the United States Census Bureau's policy for counting prison populations. Currently the Bureau enumerates incarcerated people as residents of the towns where they are imprisoned rather than as residents of their home communities.¹ When coupled with the nation's rising incarceration rate and pattern of building prisons in rural areas, this facially benign policy produces harmful results. In Census 2000, the Bureau's counting method inflated the size of rural populations across the nation and skewed their demographic characteristics. The approach also decreased the size of urban communities. As a result, federal and state funds keyed to population left areas where most people are arrested and sentenced and entered places where they are incarcerated. Such funds are generally not used for prison programs or upkeep, but instead flow into coffers serving the community outside the prison. Greater population counts also boosted the political clout of rural prison towns at the expense of urban communities and neighboring rural areas without prisons.² For these reasons, the Census Bureau's current counting policy violates its twin principles of *fairness* and *accuracy*.³ This piece discusses how the Bureau's prison count method affects Virginia communities.

Mirroring national trends, Virginia's incarcerated population grew exponentially between the 1990 and 2000 Census. The majority of prisons built in Virginia during this period were sited in rural areas.

- Between the 1990 and 2000 Census counts, the number of incarcerated people under the jurisdiction of State or Federal correctional authorities in Virginia rose from 17,418 to 29,643, a 70 percent increase.⁴
- By 2002 the Virginia Department of Corrections (DOC) incarcerated 31,243 people in state facilities or local jails.⁵



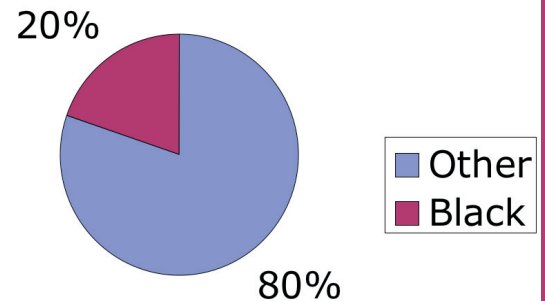
- Between 1995 and 2000, Virginia built seven new prisons - all in rural areas - adding a total of more than 8,000 cells.⁶
- Drug offenses comprised 26 percent of new court admissions in Virginia in fiscal year 2000, while non-violent offenses comprised 45 percent.⁷

Virginia disproportionately incarcerates its black population.

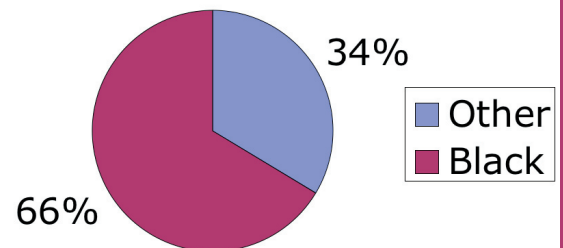
- In 2000 blacks represented 20 percent of Virginia's total population, but 66 percent of those incarcerated in Virginia DOC facilities or local jails. Black men alone accounted for 62 percent of Virginia's incarcerated population.⁸

Virginia Black Population

Virginia Population Census 2000



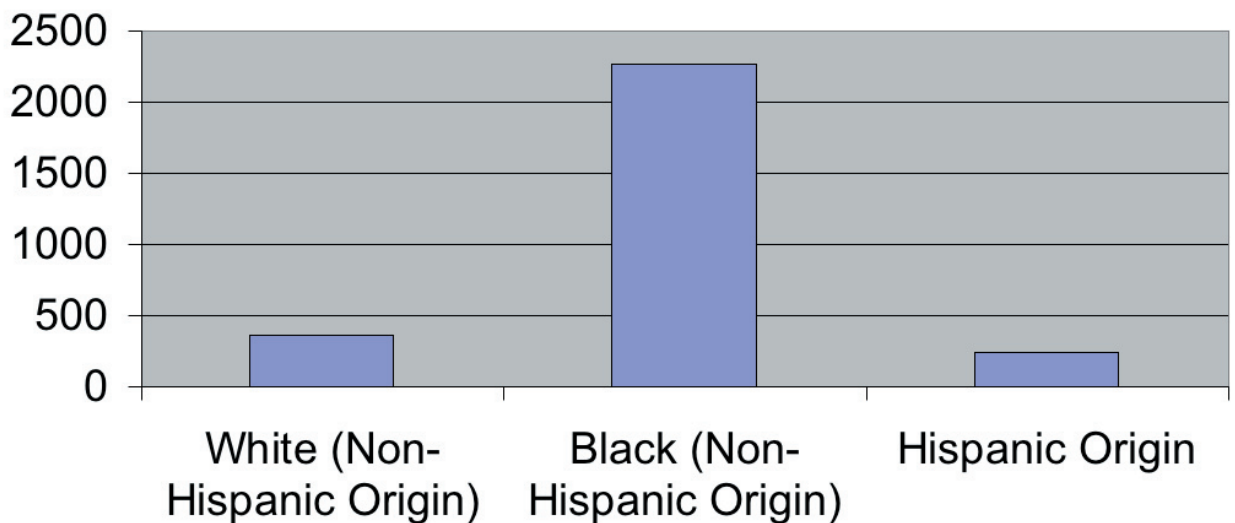
Virginia Prison Population FY 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Virginia Department of Corrections

- Virginia incarcerates its black residents at a rate 6 times higher than its white residents.⁹

Racial Disparity in Virginia Incarceration Rates per 100,000 Population



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics (2001), Prison Policy Initiative (2004)

The Census Bureau's prison count policy distorts population growth in every Virginia county with a major correctional institution.

Census 2000 population distortions translate into financial losses.

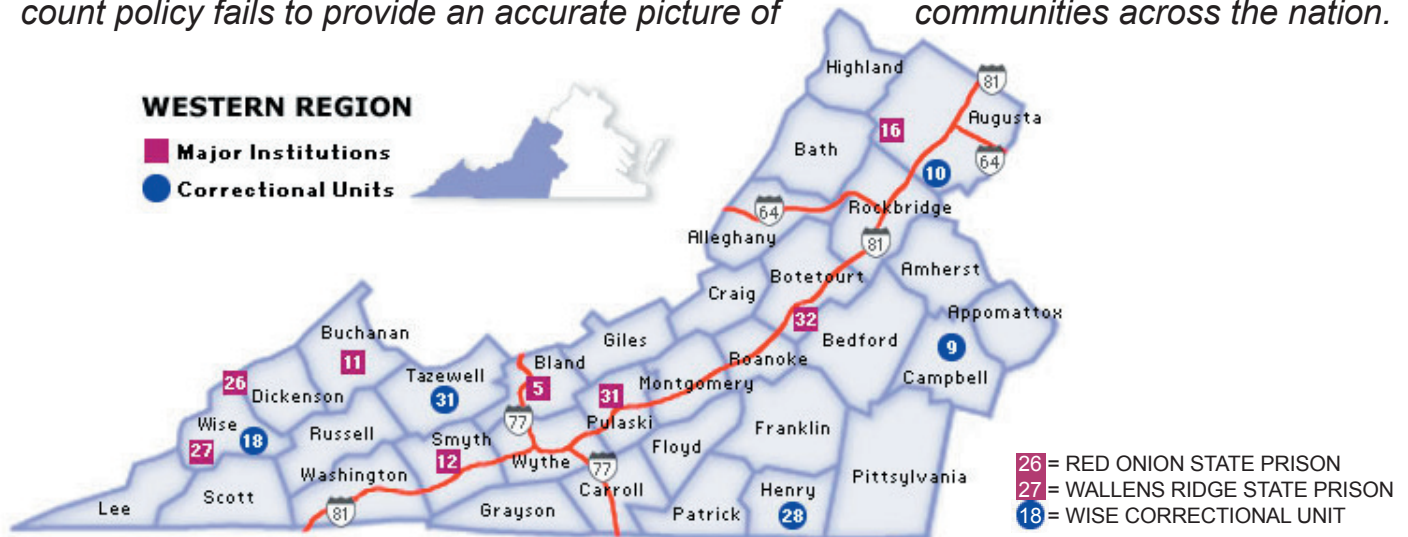
According to Census 2000 figures, in ten Virginia counties eight percent or more of the population was in a correctional institution: Greensville (26.2%), Sussex (19.2%), Richmond (16.6%), Brunswick (13.3%), Buckingham (12.8%), Powhatan (9.6%), Bland (8.5%), Lunenburg (8.5%), Southampton (8.5%) and Nottoway (8.2%).¹⁰

Due to prison expansion, two small Virginia counties with *declining* populations appeared to be *growing* according to Census 2000 data. The Bureau reported growth of 2,256 residents in Sussex County, making it the fastest growing county in the United States. In fact, its non-prison population had actually declined. The Bureau reported a population increase of 2,707 in Greensville County, which also lost non-prison residents between 1990 and 2000.¹¹

Between 1998 and 1999 Virginia opened two maximum-security prisons, Sussex I and Sussex II, in Sussex County.¹² In fiscal year 2003, the population gain due to the arrival of these facilities drew approximately \$120,700 in additional funds to Sussex County for primary and secondary education. Urban Henrico County, which hosts no prisons and is home to many people sent to prisons in other counties, lost \$292,900 in similar education funds.¹³

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When the Census Bureau last enumerated the nation's population in Census 2000 it initially failed to count thousands of people incarcerated in Wise County as residents of that county, instead counting them as residents of neighboring counties with no prisons. Focusing on a county like Wise, where prison populations were initially miscounted, allows us to zero in on how the current approach to counting incarcerated people affects a community's size and demographics. The situation in Wise County clarifies the ways in which the Bureau's prison count policy fails to provide an accurate picture of communities across the nation.



<http://www.vadoc.state.va.us/facilities/institutions/insti-west.htm>

In Census 2000 the Census Bureau first counted people incarcerated in Wise County as residents of nearby Grayson and Russell counties. The town of Troutdale in Grayson County was reported to have a population “increase of 540 percent from 1990,” according to Ray Reed of the *Roanoke Times*.¹⁴ Census findings showed that 68 percent of Troutdale’s population was black.¹⁵ This came as a surprise to at least two Grayson officials:

“How many blacks did you say that was?” asks [Troutdale] Mayor Danny Richardson. “I haven’t seen any of them.”

“There must be an enclave of people living over there that I’ve never campaigned to,” jokes Del. John Tate, D – Marion... “I’m not going to tell anybody,” says Tate. “If they ask me in Richmond, I’m just going to say, golly day, it’s a growing community.”

“Troutdale Perplexed by Phenomenal Growth Numbers,” *Roanoke Times*, March 28, 2001

The *Roanoke Times* found that the Bureau made a mistake by failing to count Wise County’s incarcerated population in that county. After the Bureau discovered and corrected its error, the data showed that Troutdale’s population increased by two people - not by 540 percent.¹⁶

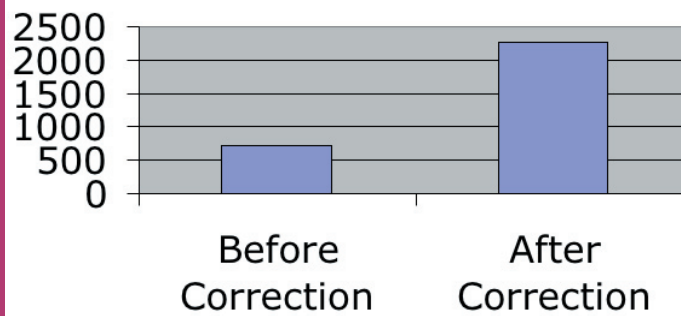
But did the “correction” produce numbers that accurately reflect Wise County’s population and demographics? Available information indicates that the vast majority of those incarcerated in Wise County come from elsewhere.¹⁷ Therefore, the *fixed* population figure also *distorts* Wise County’s true picture.

Following the correction, Wise County’s population rose by 6.7 percent, making it the second fastest-growing county in southwest Virginia. Wise had been one of the 10 lowest-growth counties in the state during the 1990s.¹⁸ “The town of Big Stone Gap [in Wise County], with a population of about 4,800,” reports Lawrence Hammack of the *Roanoke Times*, “would receive additional federal and state dollars based on the extra 1,200 ‘residents’ from its prison.”¹⁹

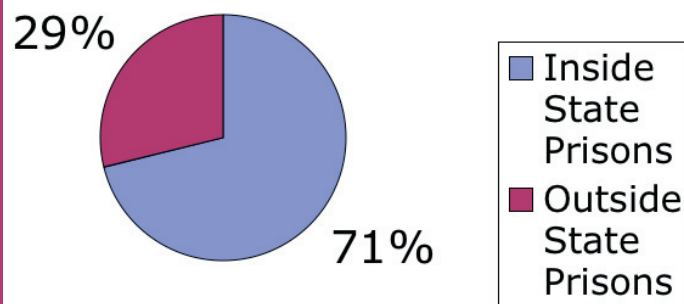
The Census Bureau's correction of Wise County's population figures *more than tripled* (x 3.18) the county's black population.²⁰ While such figures suggest a rapidly growing black community in Wise County, no such enclave exists. Seventy-one percent of the county's black population is behind bars.

Wise County Black Population

Before and After Census Bureau Correction



Percentage Inside State Prison



Source: United States Census Bureau

Recommendations

The Census Bureau is currently reevaluating its residency rules in preparation for the 2010 Decennial Census. As the agency reviews and reforms its procedures, it should consider these new approaches to counting incarcerated people:

1. Enumerate Incarcerated People as Residents of their Home Communities

Enumerating people in prison as residents of their home communities by adopting the “home of record” approach used to count overseas military personnel would solve the distortion problem. According to Virginia Department of Corrections officials, if provided, the DOC maintains a home address for every person incarcerated in the state. The Bureau should test the feasibility of counting incarcerated people as residents of their home communities in the 2010 Census.

2. Adopt a Uniform Prison Enumeration Method

Census enumeration methods for prisons differ from state to state, and within a state from facility to facility. In Virginia, some corrections officials use information from an administrative data base to complete Census forms on behalf of incarcerated people. In other states officials permit people to complete their own forms. To add some measure of quality control to the counting process the Bureau should study the accuracy of the approaches currently utilized and select one method to apply uniformly at facilities nationwide.

3. Identify Informational Needs of Data Users

The Bureau should conduct a survey to determine what information is needed by the data users who provide services to people released from prison and to their home communities. Each year 650,000 people leave prison, most returning to the communities where they lived before incarceration. The Bureau is in a unique position to document the size and needs of this temporarily absent population in ways that assist community planning and policy making. Norfolk State University Census Information Center, for example, currently uses Census figures to develop “community mapping and data solutions” for education, environment, housing and poverty-related issues.

Notes

¹ United States Census Bureau, *Plans and Rules for Taking the Census*, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/resid_rules.html>.

² For a discussion of the political impact of the prison count policy, please visit <<http://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/>>.

³ For further discussion, see Patricia Allard and Kirsten D. Levingston, *Accuracy Counts: Incarcerated People & the Census* (New York: Brennan Center, 2004).

⁴ Virginia Department of Corrections <<http://www.vadoc.state.va.us/resources/statistics/research/new-statsum/FY02StatSummary.pdf>>, figures reflect incarcerated population on June 30, 2002. Virginia's total population is 7,078,515.

⁵ Allen J. Beck and Paige M. Harrison, *Prisoners in 2000*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, August 2001), 4, Table 4.

⁶ These facilities are Red Onion and Wallens Ridge state prisons in Wise County, Sussex I and Sussex II in Sussex County, Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women in Fluvanna County, Lunenburg Correctional Center in Lunenburg County and the Correction Corporation of America's Lawrenceville Correctional Center in Brunswick County. See Virginia Department of Corrections <<http://www.vadoc.state.va.us/facilities/institutions/insti-alpha.htm>>. Three of the seven newly constructed prisons were built in a "Metropolitan Statistical Area," which the Census Bureau defines as: "an area containing a recognized population nucleus and adjacent communities that have a high degree of integration with that nucleus." See U.S. Office of Management and Budget, "Standards for Defining Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas," *Federal Register*, 65 (249), 82228. However, these prisons were built in counties that lie in the outskirts of these Statistical Areas. Sussex I and Sussex II – in the Richmond, VA Metropolitan Statistical Area – do not belong to any town in Sussex County, but are instead counted as part of the county as a whole. Waverly, the closest neighboring town to the facilities, had a population of 2,309 in Census 2000. Other nearby towns had populations of less than 300. The Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women – in the Charlottesville, VA Metropolitan Statistical Area – is located in Troy, VA, which is not a town, and is not counted as such by the Census Bureau. Fluvanna Correctional Center held 870 women on April 1, 2000. In a telephone conversation, the Postmaster of the Troy Post Office reported that the area is "very rural." See United States Census Bureau, *Group Quarters Population by Sex, Age, and Type of Group Quarters: 2000*, for Fluvanna County, VA.

⁷ Virginia Department of Corrections, *Population by Most Serious Offense, Annual Statistical Summaries*, <http://www.vadoc.state.va.us/resources/statistics/research/statsum_00/00offense.htm>.

⁸ Virginia Department of Corrections, *FY 2000 Population by Gender and Race*, <http://www.vadoc.state.va.us/resources/statistics/research/statsum_00/00gender.htm>, figures reflect incarcerated population on June 30, 2000, U.S. Census Bureau, *Virginia Quickfacts*, <<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/51000.html>>.

⁹ Allen J. Beck, Jennifer C. Karberg, and Paige M. Harrison, *Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2001*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, May, 2001), 13, Table 16 and Peter Wagner, "Virginia Incarceration Rates by Race, 2001," *Prison Policy Initiative*, <http://www.prisonpolicy.org/graphs/VA_incrates2001.shtml>, 2004.

¹⁰ United States Census Bureau, *Group Quarters Population by Sex, Age, and Type of Group Quarters: 2000*, for Southampton, Buckingham, Bland, Powhatan, Brunswick, Nottoway, Greensville, Richmond, Lunenburg, and Sussex Counties, <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DatasetTableListServlet?_ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U&_type=table&_program=DEC&_lang=en&_ts=115204677799>, United States Census Bureau, *Virginia Quickfacts*, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/maps/virginia_map.html>.

¹¹ Peter Wagner and Rose Heyer, "Prison expansion made 56 counties with declining populations appear to be growing in Census 2000," *Prisoners of the Census*, <<http://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/news/fact-26-4-2004.shtml>>, Tracy Huling, "Prisoners of the Census," *Mother Jones*, May 10, 2000, <http://www.motherjones.com/cgi-bin/print_article.pl?url=http://www.motherjones.com/commentary/columns/2000/05/census.html>, "New Loudoun motto: 'We're number two!'" *Loudoun Easterner*, March 15, 2000, <<http://www.easterner.com/articles/031500/news.cfm>>.

¹² Judith A. Greene, "Entrepreneurial Corrections: Incarceration As a Business Opportunity," in *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment*, ed. Marc Mauer and Meda Chesney-Lind (New York: The New Press, 2002), 108.

¹³ "FY 2003 & 2004 State Entitlements and Required Local Match: Standards of Quality (SOQ), Incentive-Based, and Categorical Programs for Direct Aid to Public Education" for Henrico and Sussex Counties provided by Eric Lotke, Director of Policy and Research at the Justice Policy Institute in Washington, DC on July 2, 2004. Email correspondence.

¹⁴ Ray Reed, "Census Bureau Finds Misplaced Prison in Wise County; Agency Recently Corrected Population Counts for 9 Places in VA," *Roanoke Times*, June 15, 2002.

¹⁵ A.W. Hauslohner, "Troutdale perplexed by phenomenal growth numbers," *Roanoke Times*, March 28, 2001.

¹⁶ United States Census Bureau, *Corrected Census 2000 Total Population, Group Quarters Population, Total Housing Unit, and Vacant Housing Unit Counts for Governmental Units*, <<http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/notes/cqr-va.pdf>>.

¹⁷ This assumption is based on available information. Initially, Wallens Ridge and Red Onion State Prisons primarily housed people from out of state. See especially Alan Elsner, "Terror Cells: Abuse of Iraqi Detainees Is an Echo of The Cruelties Inflicted on U.S. Inmates," *Washington Post*, May 9, 2004. We are unable to obtain current or reliable information about the home of record of those incarcerated at Wallens Ridge or Red Onion. This is one of the reasons we urge the Bureau to adopt a new counting method. See Recommendations on the opposite page.

¹⁸ Ray Reed, "Inmate Miscount Flubs Census; Zero Prisoners Were Counted in Wise County, Home of Wallens Ridge and Red Onion," *Roanoke Times*, December 8, 2001.

¹⁹ Laurence Hammack, "Prison Profits Replace a Waning Coal-Mining Industry; Residents Hope the Prison Will Boost Employment in the Coalfields of Virginia," *Roanoke Times*, December 9, 2001.

²⁰ United States Census Bureau, *PCT17B. Group Quarters Population By Sex By Age By Group Quarters Type (Black or African American Alone)* for Wise County, Russell County and Grayson County, <<http://factfinder.census.gov>>, and *GCT-PL. Race and Hispanic or Latino* for Virginia, <<http://factfinder.census.gov>>. Because the Bureau corrected only the county's general population statistics, this startling demographic shift will not officially appear until the 2010 decennial census. Thus, Bureau figures for the tiny town of Troutdale still report that the town's current population is made up by "380 white residents and 834 black residents – up from 192 whites and no blacks in 1990."

