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# OPINION

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## Prison Census Counts Enhance White Power

The fight against unjust prison gerrymandering

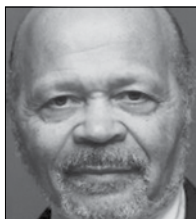
BY OSCAR H. BLAYTON

Almost every high school student in America knows about the compromise reached during the drafting of the U.S. Constitution resulting in enslaved people being counted as three-fifths of a person during the national census held every 10 years.

Even while white Southerners denied enslaved people in those states the rights guaranteed to citizens, they still demanded that the enslaved people's bodies be counted in the census. The Southerners made this demand because the size of a state's population determined how many representatives those states would be granted in Congress. The more representatives a state had, the greater the state's power in the federal government.

The Northern states, seeing this ploy for what it was, resisted Southerners' demand but, eventually, a compromise was reached where each enslaved body would be counted only as three-fifths of a person.

This is just another example of how white supremacists benefited from the use of black bodies while



not providing one drop of benefit to the souls inhabiting those bodies. It also helps us to understand how black bodies currently are being used to enhance white supremacy in America.

Today, significant numbers of prisons — where brown and black inmates from urban areas are incarcerated — are located in rural, predominantly white census tracts. And for years, these brown and black bodies have been used to inflate the census figures in order to enhance the political power of those rural white areas.

The practice of counting prisoners in the census tracts where they are incarcerated decreases the political power of the home communities of those prisoners and transfers that power to an alien community with diametrically opposed interests. This is what happens when an individual is removed from his urban home in a liberal Democratic district and incarcerated in a district that voted for a white supremacist like Donald Trump. The body of that inmate, who by incarceration is ineligible to vote, has now increased the population count in the conservative district while the count of his liberal home district has been reduced.

The body of the inmate of color, like the body of his or her en-

slaved ancestor, has been stolen in order to enhance the political power of his or her oppressor.

There are approximately 2.3 million Americans in prisons and jails today. It also has been reported that between 1970 and 2000, more than 1,100 prisons were built in the United States, with roughly 70 percent of those prisons being located in rural communities, mostly in conservative Southern states such as Florida, Georgia, Oklahoma and Texas.

Data collected by the Vera Institute of Justice shows that largely rural counties that voted for Donald Trump had a 53 percent higher jail admissions rate than those that voted for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election.

The national NAACP has reported that while African Americans and Hispanics make up approximately 32 percent of the U.S. population, they made up 56 percent of all incarcerated people in 2015.

A slide rule is not necessary to figure out that when you have large numbers of people victimized by the mass incarceration policies of this country, and a significant number of those inmates are used to further empower white supremacists in rural areas, there is little incentive for conservative politicians to correct this injustice that has been dubbed "prison gerrymandering."

In addition to stealing bodies

to gain political power, these rural areas receive increased federal funding based on their inflated population figures. This takes money from inner cities where many of the inmates had lived and redeposits those funds into the rural, predominantly white areas where the prisons are located. This is a win-win for white supremacy and a significant handicap for urban areas victimized by a lack of services, over-policing and courts that hand down harsh sentences.

The practice of prison gerrymandering is slowly attracting attention. Six states — Delaware, Maryland, Nevada, California, New York and Washington — have outlawed prison gerrymandering and others have started taking steps to reduce or eliminate it.

The year 2020 is coming. It is not only an election year, but a year when the next census will be taken. Battles will be fought over racial gerrymandering and voter suppression. Ending prison gerrymandering is a battle that also must be fought. If prison gerrymandering is taking place in your state, organize and act.

The year 2020 is coming and we must fight against all attempts to foster white supremacy, including prison gerrymandering.

Oscar H. Blayton is a former Marine Corps combat pilot and human rights activist who practices law in Virginia.