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Flint, Michigan

Our Views

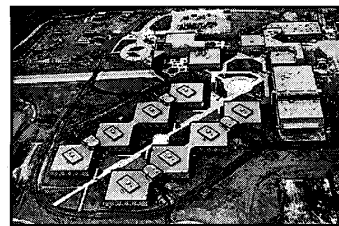
Inmate census

Hometowns, not prison locales, should get to count felons

Communities with prisons gain enough benefits from the presence of these large employers, without the added advantage of using the inmate population to qualify for more state and federal aid, as well as additional representation in the legislatures and Congress.

The U.S. Census Bureau, which has been studying whether this residency rule is fair, should recommend Congress change the policy when it reports on the issue this month, so the inmates are counted into the populations of their hometowns.

While communities like Lapeer argue persuasively that being able to claim its approxi-



Flint Journal files • Rodney Curtis

▲ The Thumb Correctional Facility, shown here under construction, began accepting prisoners in 1987.

mately 1,000 inmates was part of the deal for accepting the Thumb Correctional Facility 20 years ago, on balance the cities and towns that produce the criminals have at least as solid a claim to them. These places, which often are

urban and troubled, also could use the extra financial aid the inmate numbers would supply to combat social ills that contribute to crime.

Flint, for example, probably could qualify for more road money and revenue sharing from the state, as well as boost its totals from various federal programs if it could count its incarcerated as part of the 2010 census.

Nationally, there also would be a slight shift in political clout if 1.5-million prisoners were considered part of the districts where they were last free.

This would not be unfair to communities hosting prisons, as the inmates are not "residents" in any real sense. They place so little demand on local services they obviously contribute more than they cost, with the jobs created and the income taxes often paid to cities such as Lapeer. In fact, locales long associated with prisons generally howl in protest when anyone suggests closing one of these cash cows.

Certainly, many of those economic rewards are due, but not when government grants and political representation come at the expense of the inmates' hometowns, where they are most likely to return when released. These benefits belong to the communities that bore the cost of their crimes and apprehension, and could shoulder other burdens these same individuals might create.