



National Institute of Corrections

Prisons Division—Issues in Brief

September 25, 2001

Critical Issues and Developments in Prison Classification

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Since the development and implementation of objective prison classification systems by the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the California Department of Corrections during the late 1970s, the nation's prison systems have changed fundamentally how inmates are classified and managed. As a result, today virtually all state prison systems and many jail systems use objective classification to help manage and operate their offender populations. These classification systems utilize objective criteria known to be associated with inmate misconduct, as well as sound correctional policies to determine the appropriate custody level that is consistent with the inmate's threat to the safety and security of the public, the institution, other inmates, staff, and self. Additionally, objective classification systems are important for planning the construction of new prisons and the development of inmate programs. The most dramatic impact of objective classification systems has been the economic benefits reaped from our ability to place larger proportions of the inmate population to lower custody levels without jeopardizing inmate, staff, or public safety.

Despite these important developments, much work remains in the area of inmate classification. This bulletin summarizes the current critical classification issues to enable correctional administrators to anticipate further improvements.

Re-Evaluation of Existing Prison Classification Systems

Many of the classification systems used by prison systems today were developed more than a decade ago on an inmate population that may be significantly different from today's larger and more diverse population. In general, prison classification systems should be re-evaluated and tested at least every five years to ensure that they are valid and operating properly. A large number of states and the Federal Bureau of Prisons are undergoing or have completed re-evaluations which have had a major impact on their prison operations (Alabama, California, New Mexico, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Wyoming).

External and Internal Classification

Traditional inmate classification systems have been narrowly focused on determining the custody level of the inmate (e.g., minimum, medium, etc.) and to which facility the inmate should be transferred once classified. Very little attention has been drawn to how an inmate should be housed and programmed once the prisoner arrives at the facility. These decisions are critical to a well managed and safe prison system. There are several approaches to internal classification systems that vary as to their purpose, process, staff, and level of automation. States that have implemented internal classification systems include Oregon, Connecticut, Illinois, Missouri, Colorado, and Florida.

Classification Systems for Women Inmates

Most prison classification systems were developed and “normed” on predominantly male inmate populations and tended to over classify females. An increasing number of states have developed separate classification systems for their female inmates or are making appropriate modifications to ensure the classification systems are based on risk factors appropriate for women. When this is done, the number of women classified to medium and close custody drops dramatically. This is consistent with the findings that most female inmates pose little danger to staff and other inmates, especially with respect to violent behavior. States that have adopted female-based classification systems include Michigan, New York, Idaho, Indiana, Massachusetts and Oklahoma. Several states are now in the process of developing such systems, including Colorado and Ohio.

Identification of High Risk and Special Management Inmates

Identification and housing of high risk or disruptive inmates who require assignment to a special management categories such as “Super Max,” administrative segregation, protective custody, mental health and medical are critical internal classification questions facing many states. Questions arise on how to systematically identify high risk inmates in the general population that are potential management problems due to their high risk, aggressive, disruptive, and predatory behavior. In response, NIC has recently launched a major effort to assess how states are identifying such inmates and applying innovative approaches for managing of such inmates.

The Use of Classification for Reentry and Inmate Transition Programs

A special issue related to special management inmates is the growing interest in re-entry or transition. The recent diminution in correctional

programming designed to prepare inmates for a successful reentry coupled with the acceleration in the number of releases may pose a growing public safety threat. This may impact some of the gains made in reducing the incidence of crime over the last seven years. Further exacerbating this problem is the growing percentage of released inmates nationally who have completed full terms and are not subject to any post release supervision. A portion of the released population have been management problems resulting in long periods of confinement in maximum security/ administrative segregation units. For these reasons, prison classification systems will be increasingly relied upon to assess how inmates should be prepared for their eventual release so they transition successfully from prisons to the community. There are a number of states, such as Washington and Ohio, that are now experimenting with a more comprehensive approach to risk assessment.

The Impact of Longer Prison Terms

Truth in Sentencing (TIS), mandatory sentencing, and more restrictive parole decision making have collectively increased the length of incarceration for many prisoners. Despite recent trends that the number of people entering prison has either stabilized or declined, longer prison terms will increase the prison population in some states albeit at a slower pace. The nature of the prison population will also change and the aging prison population will require increased medical services. There may also be an associated impact on inmate misconduct rates. Additionally, inmates facing extremely long sentences may be less willing to conform to institutional rules during the initial portion of their sentence. Conversely, an older inmate population may also reduce the overall rate of misconduct. Since many classification systems are sensitive to sentence length and/or length of imprisonment factors, classification criteria may need to be adjusted to better manage the changing prison population.

Using Classification for Planning Purposes

Classification systems are essential for projecting the future resource needs for the correctional agency. New methods in prison population projections allow agencies to disaggregate the projected inmate population by gender and custody level. This data, coupled with an accurate accounting of the systems bed capacity by security, allows an agency to determine not only how many beds to add to its current system, but more importantly, the types of beds and programs the prison population of the future will require. Without classification based projections, correctional systems have a high likelihood of building the wrong type of prison beds, hiring the wrong number and type of staff, and developing treatment and work programs ill-suited for its inmate population.

The Need for On-Going Research and Evaluation of Classification Practices

Despite the recent innovations in classification systems as described above, it is clear that much work remains. There is a parallel need to test new methods using rigorous evaluation designs. For example, studies are needed to assess how best to classify and manage the growing number of inmates serving longer prison terms, security threat groups, and parole violators. Further, we need to evaluate the impact of new prison architecture, staffing patterns, and disciplinary procedures on prison operations.

Additional Resources

For additional information on current issues and how the National Institute of Corrections can assist your state in improving your classification system, please contact: Madeline Ortiz, NIC Prisons Division, 320 First Street, NW, Washington, DC 20534, (202) 353-0481 or mmortiz@bop.gov.

The NIC website, <http://www.nicic.org/services> features a special focus topic on offender classification to provide information on training programs, publications, and other announcements.

Suggested Readings and References

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