



Center for Effective Public Policy

Report to the Reentry Coalition of New Jersey (RCNJ) on Prison Classification Systems (January, 2023)

Introduction

The Reentry Coalition of New Jersey asked the Center for Effective Public Policy to review and summarize best practices around prison classification systems, including their impact on release decisions. This paper provides an overview of prison classification and describes what an effective prison classification system generally includes.¹ The paper also reviews recent evaluations of some prison classification systems and the evaluations' findings.

Overview of Prison Classification

A prison classification system categorizes people who are incarcerated into groups by security needs in order to assign them to custody settings like close, high, medium, and low. Its primary purposes are to ensure the safety of people who are incarcerated, staff, and the community; to discern a person's risk of escape; to identify a person's risk of violence to other people who are incarcerated and to staff; and to identify a person's risk of danger to the community. It also helps assess the programming and treatment needs of the population and, thereby, the housing and staffing required. A well-functioning classification system is the key to a well-functioning corrections system.

¹ This paper draws heavily on the following resources: [Objective Prison Classification: A Guide for Correctional Agencies, Second Edition](#) (National Institute of Corrections) and [Handbook on the Classification of Prisoners](#) (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime).

Although a *subjective* system of classification was predominantly used in the past, over the last 30 years, corrections administrators and researchers have improved their approaches to classifying and housing people who are incarcerated. Now, nearly all state prison systems use *objective* classification tools and processes. Administrators and researchers have refined and validated the criteria for, and increased the reliability of, custody decisions; reduced over-classification; enhanced assessment of institutional program needs; and reduced institutional violence.

Best Practices in Classification²

The process of creating and then implementing an effective and accurate prison classification system takes time, resources, staff commitment, and patience. Here are some of the most important actions that corrections departments should take:

1. **Identify goals and develop measurable objectives for the classification system.** These goals and objectives should be used to identify the data needed to create the classification tools, assess the classification process, and evaluate the tools' functioning and the classification process over time. Administrators should revisit these goals and objectives annually and create new ones if needed.

Other Types of Classification

The security levels close, minimum, medium, and maximum are for what is called the “general population.” There are populations, however, that qualify for special housing. These populations will vary by department. In general, most systems will have housing units designed for those with serious mental or physical illness, for those whose crime or profession makes them vulnerable (e.g., people convicted of a sex offense against a child, former law enforcement officers and prosecutors, etc.), or people whose notoriety makes them targets (e.g., Jeffrey Dahmer). These special units may be hospital or protective custody units or, in a worst case scenario, segregation units. But within those, it is critical that prison officials make reasonable efforts to grant people some of the privileges, programming, or activities they would get if they were in the general population.

² In addition to the resources referenced in footnote 1, this section relies on the following additional resources: [Internal Prison Classification Systems: Case Studies in Their Development and Implementation](#) (National Institute of Corrections) and [Revalidating External Prison Classification Systems: The Experience of Ten States and Model for Classification Reform](#) (National Institute of Corrections).

Which Factors?

After a review of several states' use of structured internal assessment tools, an NIC technical assistance project concluded that: "No distinct set of ideal, generalizable factors was identified to be included in an internal classification system. Instead, the critical risk factors, operational definitions, processes, and timing appeared to be unique to each state and dependent upon its specific goals, resources, and system composition. In other words, there is no 'best model,' nor should there be; instruments and processes must be tailored to and validated on the population for which they will be used."

[Reference:
[Internal Prison Classification Systems: Case Studies in Their Development and Implementation](#) (National Institute of Corrections)
at page xiv.]

assignment within a facility—to a specific unit that offers housing, programming, and work assignments appropriate for the person's specific risk and needs. The internal screen might review the person's behavior during a previous period of incarceration, as well as their suitability for congregate housing and ability to work or participate in group settings; the extent of their needs for education and training or for mental health treatment; their physical health and abilities; and other indications of competence and need.

2. **Develop a robust classification system.** A robust classification system includes multiple assessment tools whose development and testing include criteria suggested by a multidisciplinary team of experienced staff from, for example, the security, medical, mental health, education, and prison fields. Creating the tools requires the availability of automated data on past populations of the department, for example, their criminal history and demographics; their behavior, disciplinary history, programming, work performance, and so on while incarcerated; their length of stay (actual vs. anticipated); and other information. These data points are tested for their role in predicting behavior. Many factors will be eliminated as weak or inconsequential to predicting the behaviors of interest. Others will be pertinent, especially when found together. In still other cases, based on their experience, the team may decide to include factors that they deem important even if they are not strongly predictive.

In general, a robust classification system includes the following assessment tools:

- The **initial or external screen** determines a person's risk of escape, violence, and danger to the community, and it assigns them to a custody level (e.g., close, minimum, medium, and maximum) and a facility. Relevant factors of this assessment generally include but are not limited to the person's current offense, prior record, age, and history of violence.

- After that, the **internal screen** determines a person's

While not optimal, other considerations can affect the facility and housing assignment decision beyond what an assessment indicates, for instance, a lack of bed space in the most appropriate facility, insufficient staffing to accommodate movement to programming or to supervise work assignments, or lack of space to safely house a person with physical or intellectual disabilities. These considerations may force a housing assignment that does not comport with the person's classification.

- 3. Make classification systems more responsive to the risk and needs of women in prison.**³ The recent substantial growth in the number of women sentenced to prison presents problems for adequate classification. Most states have neither enough total number of beds nor enough beds of varying security levels. The prisons built to house women were constructed when state systems had far fewer women in prison and when there were too few women to build separate facilities for those at higher risk. This has limited the availability of appropriate programming, treatment, and work opportunities for women at any security level. Appropriate programming and treatment are especially important given that women's risks and needs are often different than those of men. For example, few women are at risk for violence or escape. The prevalence of trauma in their histories, however, results in significant mental health and substance use problems that make their behavior less predictable and more difficult to assess.

Until recently, most states were using the same tools to assess both men and women. However, as research on women in the criminal justice system has expanded, it has revealed the need to use different criteria for women when judging the likelihood of difficult or destructive

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³ This recommendation relies in part on the following resource: [Using Trauma-Informed Practices to Enhance Safety and Security in Women's Correctional Facilities](#) (National Resource Center on Justice-Involved Women).

behavior. Many states have updated their classification designs to include gender-specific custody risk criteria, but research on the impact of trauma on behavior during incarceration is continuing. In the meantime, the lack of appropriate and adequate facilities for women limits the usefulness of these updated classification tools in terms of security and needed programming.

4. **Test tools for validity.** Once created, a draft tool needs to be tested, tweaked, and retested for its validity—that is, the actual strength of its predictive ability. At every step, department officials and senior staff will also have to review it for its practicality and for any issues, legal or otherwise, with the criteria chosen.
5. **Develop procedures for the use of assessment tools.** Procedures should cover topics including but not limited to who will administer the tools, what kind of training they will receive, what type of oversight there will be, how assessment information will be protected, what policies will exist regarding overrides (see below for more information on overrides), who will make the final assignment decisions, and who will be responsible for data analysis. These decisions should be made by a team of senior staff from a variety of departments, including legal and other outward-facing officials.

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In general, it is recommended that classification be handled by a dedicated unit, with a team of experienced staff who have the authority to make all decisions about housing and housing transfers. This ensures that a central, single unit has an accurate picture of all the department’s housing units, their capacity, and the services and programming available. There should be formal training for new staff, refresher training for all staff, and consistent training on updated policies. As for data analysis, it should be conducted by experienced researchers (on staff or from a research or academic institution) with computing capability.

6. **Be careful to not over- or under-classify.** The problems from wrongly classifying someone can be serious. A person who is over-classified may be denied programming, work, visitation, and other privileges to which they might otherwise have access. They are then exposed to people with a higher assessment of risk, which research indicates may make misconduct and disciplinary concerns more likely. All of this may, in turn, affect their eligibility for release. A

Likelihood of Over- or Under-Classification

The likelihood of a person being over- or under-classified is amplified if a system has persistent space constraints, whether too little or the wrong kind. It is even more likely if classification tools have not been validated and evaluated in many years, or if their use is not consistent and reliable.

person who is under-classified may pose a risk to others in a facility not equipped for their security needs. That can result in the overuse of punitive segregation and, similarly, jeopardize release eligibility.

7. **Ensure that overrides are used appropriately.** An objective classification system uses criteria developed for people who typically make up the incarcerated population in that jurisdiction. Every corrections department, however, will have policies and procedures by which some people will receive a classification and housing assignment not indicated by the screenings. These may be related to categories of crime, the circumstances of the current offense, the characteristics or circumstances of individuals, or even staff's previous experience with a person. Some overrides are standard policy while others are determined at the discretion of the classification team—with policy-directed oversight. While overrides are an appropriate and important part of the classification process, officials should routinely review the numbers and examine samples of cases to be certain that they are being used as intended and that procedures are being followed.

8. **Regularly review the reliability of the classification process.** This includes reviewing the accuracy of the data used to complete the classification tools and of the data entry process, and reviewing the consistency in the use of the classification process itself across staff. This ensures that decisions are the same among different staff for similar cases.

9. **Revalidate the classification tools regularly to ensure that their predictive accuracy is unchanged and, if necessary, to identify any changes that must be made.** The criminal justice system and the prison population are not static. Sentencing laws change, demographics change, the prevalence and types of illegal drugs come and go, economic cycles cycle, crime trends change, and so on. Therefore, the classification and assessment instruments must be revalidated and evaluated frequently. Revalidation also examines if the corrections department is over- or under-classifying people. As noted above,

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10. **Conduct reclassification screens regularly.** Every six to twelve months is suggested unless a person’s behavior becomes increasingly difficult, in which case a reclassification should be done as soon as possible. Reclassification screens provide an opportunity to adjust a person’s status based on their behavior while incarcerated (e.g., the type and number of misconduct

reports against the person, the person’s participation in programming, their work performance) and any progress made on goals identified during the previous classification and needs assessment. Reclassification screens may result in a different custody, facility, and unit placement, depending on the person’s progress. As the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has noted, the aim should be to reduce the level of restrictions on each person as quickly as safety will allow. This permits more programming, education, and treatment options and promotes people’s readiness to be safely released to the community.

Regardless of the outcome of the reclassification screens (e.g., higher or lower security level, different housing assignment), the reclassification process should involve a discussion with each person to increase their understanding and compliance with any change.

11. **Continuously monitor the classification system to ensure that it is being implemented as designed and continues to work as intended for the prison's current population.** Formal evaluations may include a process evaluation and an impact evaluation.

Separating People By Custody Level

When conducting process evaluations, it is important to confirm whether the classification system and housing assignment plan are housing people according to their custody level and any special population status. A primary concern is the assurance that people classified as low versus high custody are separated. While some interaction between people who are low and medium custody is expected, the housing plan should prevent the intermingling of people who are low and high custody.

A **process evaluation** should answer two questions:

- Was everyone classified according to existing agency policies and procedures?
- Are all individuals housed according to the classification system?

The answers to these questions require both quantitative data (i.e., statistics) and qualitative data (i.e., data gathered through observations of processes such as intake or admission processes or classification interviews conducted by staff).

An impact evaluation can examine how well the classification system is meeting the objectives determined when it was created. For example, if a primary objective was to reduce assaults by people in prison against other people in prison, it is important to examine how much those numbers have declined since the implementation of the classification system.

Taken together, process and impact evaluations can highlight for the department where the classification system is either not being carried out as intended or is not performing as expected and must be changed.

Evaluations of Two Classification Systems

In just the past three years, legislative bureaus in both New Mexico and California have conducted examinations of the classification systems in their departments of corrections.⁴ In both cases, the evaluations found that people in prison were being over-classified and consequently denied access to

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⁴ See the following for the complete evaluations: [Inmate Classification](#) and [Inmate Classification at NMCD](#) (Program Evaluation Unit, New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee) and [Improving California's Prison Inmate Classification System](#) (California Legislative Analyst's Office).

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Further, neither system had revalidated its assessment tools in decades. The California analysis questioned the accuracy of the data being used for classification. In New Mexico, the analysis found that the reliability of the classification system was weak, with a lack of consistency of scoring among staff. The reports also questioned the departments' use of overrides, asking if the override criteria were still valid and if the overrides to higher security were overused.

Using Classification for Planning Purposes

Beyond its day-to-day use, the classification system can be used by administrators to help with future planning and budgeting. Aggregating classification data about current and incoming populations provides the department with the critical information it needs to advocate for system improvements that would allow it to more safely house and effectively respond to those in their care. For example, changes in a prison's population may force officials to advocate for adjusted policies and increased spending. Changing security level numbers may indicate the need for more and/or different kinds of space, more staff to permit additional programming or enhanced security, or more training for staff who may need to be reassigned to a different type of facility. More people in prison are older and sick, so this might call for a compassionate release program. More people are entering prison with serious mental health and substance use problems, so administrators may need to contract more quickly with local, community-based providers to provide additional services. If women are unable to access the same work assignments as men outside the walls, perhaps their facilities need more staff to help them build employment skills and access work opportunities.

Using Classification for Reentry Planning

There is some tension between using a classification system for security purposes on the one hand, and reentry planning on the other. However, adequate screening of each person's abilities and needs is a first step in making prisons more focused on preparing people for eventual release. From mental health and substance use issues to a lack of basic education, life skills, and employment skills, people in prison and the people who care for them face severe challenges. Offering a range of treatment services, education opportunities, programming to build skills and introduce positive social activities, and work opportunities that are engaging and offer some remuneration are crucial to people's success.

Yet, since the mid-1980s, “tough on crime” policies and legislation at the federal, state, and local levels have increased both prison populations and sentence lengths. Parole boards have tightened release standards and lowered the grounds for revocation. Additional legislation enacted in some places limits the kinds of programming that can be offered in prisons. Overall budgets have been cut, in some cases significantly given the increases in numbers of people and prisons. And, corrections departments—constrained by their lack of control over numbers and their budgets—are unable to offer people the programming and treatment they need. Even the best classification systems cannot adequately function in facilities too crowded to allow movement and appropriate programming.

Given that the vast majority of people—upward of 97 percent—will leave prison and return to their communities, policymakers—whether mayors or governors, councils or legislatures—must choose to invest in services as well as security to ensure that people leaving prison are able to lead more productive lives than before they were incarcerated. This investment impacts everyone: the person, their family, their community, and potential victims.

Final Thoughts

Well-functioning classification systems are key to the safe management and operation of prisons. In addition, they can have an impact on parole and release eligibility. To function effectively, classification systems need investments in skilled staff, research and data capacity, and accurate ratings of a facility’s security, design, and services. Frequent rescreenings are needed to address changes in people’s behavior and the possibility of changing their security classification. For women in particular, proper classification requires gender-specific and trauma-informed criteria. And, classification systems must be continually monitored and evaluated, and their tools revalidated and adjusted as needed on a regular basis, to ensure that what is a fully functioning system today remains fully functioning in a few years.