Objective Prison Classification, The cornerstone to good prison security

Classification systems help minimize the potential for prison violence, escape, and institutional misconduct. Proper classification is crucial to the efficient and safe operation of any prison facility. Offenders are a diverse lot, possessing a variety of behavioral and treatment needs, as well as varying states of psychological health. Over the last several decades, professionals in prisons and correctional systems have worked diligently to improve their ability to classify offenders according to custody, work, and programming needs. As a result of these efforts, criteria for custody decisions have been validated, custody decisions are more consistent, overclassification has been reduced, prisoner program needs are assessed more systematically, and institutional violence has declined. Since the 1980s, objective prison classification systems have been widely adopted in the United States, Canada, Europe, New Zealand, and Australia.

The process of prison classification encompasses several different stages, including Intake Assessment, Placement, and Reclassification.

What Is Objective Prison Classification?

Understanding objective prison classification requires a grasp of several key terms and concepts and an understanding of the essential components of a classification system.

Key Terms and Concepts

Reliability and validity: Two distinguishing features of an objective classification system are its accuracy, or validity, and its consistency, or reliability. Validity refers to the accuracy of the classification system in predicting a prisoner’s behavior and assigning him or her to an appropriate risk level. Reliability considers whether the same decision will be rendered if the assessment is repeated by the same or a different staff member.

External versus internal prisoner classification systems: External classification determines a prisoner’s custody classification and facility assignment. Internal classification governs facility-level decisions such as where and with whom the prisoner will be housed, the
types of programs and services to which the prisoner should be assigned, and the prison industry or work assignment most appropriate for the prisoner. Most often, the intent of internal classification systems is to ensure that prisoners who are at risk for placement in a special management population are supervised accordingly.

**General population versus special prison populations:** It is important to differentiate between prisoners housed in the general population—that portion of the prison population with no special security-related restriction on access to basic programs and services—and those who require placement in a special prison population such as administrative or disciplinary segregation, protective custody, specialized mental health, or medical units. In general, approximately 80 percent of prisoners are in the general population; these prisoners are classified as minimum, medium, close, or maximum custody.

**Initial Assessment**

Initial Assessment involves the most basic assessments necessary to place offenders into prison, including an orientation process where prisoners are given a brief introduction to the operation and rules of the facility, a health assessment, an overview of all the offender’s relevant documents, and an outline of the offender’s initial plans and sentence plans, including important dates and deadlines.

If an offender requires special medical care, such as the case would be for a heart condition, asthma, sickness, or broken bones, he or she will be referred to the medical unit. If the problems are psychological in nature, such as suicidal tendencies, then he or she will be referred to the psychiatric unit, if one is available. In addition to these concerns, there will be consideration given to educational level of the offender.

**Placement**

Placement occurs after a comprehensive risk assessment process is met. First is an administration interview, then the initial assessment, followed by an assessment of static factors. Risk assessment scales may be used at this point, such as the Custody Rating Scale, to classify the offender on a broad range of static risk factors that determine his or her risk level, such as employment history, prior convictions, prior violence, prior prison misconducts, and substance abuse problems. Dynamic risk factors are then considered, such as hostility or anger management problems, antisocial attitudes, peer associations, family environment, and emotional states. Factors that are especially predictive of prison misconduct include, gang membership, history of violence, young age, program dropout, and disciplinary actions.
Contrary to what many may think, factors that are not predictive of prison misconduct include drug abuse in prison; escape history, severity of offense, and time left to serve.

**Reclassification**

Objective Offender Classification requires regular reclassification to occur at specific intervals. This is to ensure that the process of classification is accurate both from one year to the next, and to ensure that individual-differences among offenders are taken into account.

Reclassification places greater emphasis on dynamic factors than static factors. Because offenders change, learn, and adapt to new life circumstances and conditions, factors that were concerned with prior offenses and behavioral history may have little value assessing the risk of someone who has or is learning to become more pro-social.

**Essential Components of an Objective Prison Classification System**

The following components are essential to the success of an objective classification system:

- **Mission statement**: As the foundation of the classification system, the mission statement should be consistent with the department’s mission, goals, and resources. It should reflect both the formal process for classifying and managing prisoners within the prison system and prisoner risks and service needs.

- **Classification goals and objectives**: These must directly support the core values set forth in the mission statement and be formulated so that their outcomes can be measured and evaluated.

- **Dedicated classification unit and classification staff**: An established classification unit is necessary for a prison classification system to function properly. The unit must have a sufficient number of dedicated, well-trained, and experienced staff to ensure that all prisoners are properly classified in a timely manner.

- **Centralized control over all prison transfers and housing decisions**: Classification staff must have the sole authority to assign prisoners to housing units according to the classification system. This does not mean that other staff members cannot recommend transfers in emergencies. However, even in emergency circumstances, classification staff must review and approve all transfers.
Reliable and valid classification instruments: Objective classification systems use well-structured instruments (i.e., forms) designed to produce reliable and valid assessments of the risks posed by the prisoners. Three basic forms guide the classification process: the initial screening form, used to help identify a prisoner’s emergency needs when he or she is first admitted to the prison system, the initial classification form, used to determine the prisoner’s scored custody level on admission to the prison system, and the reclassification form, used to reevaluate the prisoner’s scored custody level throughout his or her incarceration based on his or her institutional conduct.

Classification instruments that have been tested: Conduct a pilot test of the classification system’s instruments and procedures before implementing the system. The pilot test measures two things: how well the proposed classification instruments will perform on a given prison population and the likely impact of the classification policy and procedures on prison operations.

Appropriate use of overrides: The general standard is that 5–15 percent of a prison population’s custody levels are based on discretionary overrides rather than the original initial classification or reclassification scores. In general, approximately 50 percent of discretionary overrides should assign the prisoner to a custody level lower than that derived from his or her original score and 50 percent should assign the prisoner to a higher custody level.

Timely and accurate classification: All prisoners entering the prison system must be screened immediately to determine if they need to be housed apart from other prisoners, either for their own protection or that of other prisoners and staff. The department should also set time frames for when and under what circumstances prisoners must be reclassified—usually after 6 months of incarceration and at least annually thereafter.

Formal housing plan: To house prisoners according to their classification status, the prison facility must be classified as well. Classifying the prison facility determines the number and types of bed spaces available, which, in turn, establishes the basis for the facility’s housing plan.

Adherence to the housing plan: Ideally, prisoners assigned to different custody levels will not be housed together. For example, minimum-custody level prisoners should never be housed with maximum-custody level prisoners.

Accurate prisoner data: The prison must have a comprehensive and orderly recordkeeping system to ensure prisoner data are available to the classification staff.
**Automated data systems:** Storage in the prison’s management information system (MIS) database of all information obtained from prisoners’ initial screening, initial classification, and all reclassification forms reduces the likelihood of scoring errors and allows for systematic, ongoing monitoring of the classification system. An electronic database increases the accuracy and efficiency of the classification process by reducing the need to reenter the same basic data at each stage of the classification process.

**Continuous monitoring and process evaluation:** A classification system should be monitored continuously to ensure that it was implemented as designed and continues to work as designed in relation to the prison’s current population.

**Impact evaluation:** An impact evaluation assesses the positive and/or negative effects of the classification system on the prison system as a whole and on its various components. Classification systems help to minimize the potential for prison violence, escape, and institutional misconduct. These systems are expected to provide greater accountability and to help forecast future bed space and prisoner program needs. Considered the “brain” of correctional system management, classification systems are essential for projecting the future resource needs of a correctional agency. A properly functioning classification system governs many important decisions, including those that heavily influence fiscal matters such as construction, staffing levels, bed space, and programming expansion.