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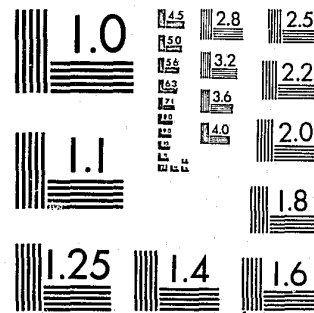
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CLASSIFICATION: AN OVERVIEW

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States are beset by problems in Corrections that are reaching crisis proportions. Too many people in too little space are generating conditions of confinement that encourage litigation and court intervention to protect the rights of inmates. The demands for increased capacity are made untenable because of the enormous cost of prison construction in an era of limited resources.

The importance of classification in correctional management is being re-emphasized as policymakers and administrators seek solutions to these troublesome problems. Classification is the information system of corrections. The technology of classification can be used to inform administrators of security and custody needs as well as program requirments for inmates.

The National Institute of Corrections is active in promoting the understanding and use of classification systems at all levels of correctional decisionmaking. Programs to develop bail and sentencing guidelines, prison classification systems, parole guidelines and probation and parole classification systems have all been completed in the last two years. Model systems have been developed for prison, probation and parole classification and these are currently being implemented in various agencies throughout the country.

Offenders must be placed at custody and security levels, appropriate to the risk they represent and in work and study programs that will benefit them when they return to the community. The correctional term for this matching of offenders, facilities, and program is "classification." The manner in which this matching is accomplished varies dramatically from among agencies depending on agency philosophy and the resources available.

Purpose of Classification

The purpose of classification is to utilize rational, consistent and equitable methods of assessing the relative risk and needs of each individual and then to assign agency resources accordingly. At its most basic level, a classification system must separate violent or potentially violent offenders from non-violent individuls especially those who are young, weak, passive, mentally ill, or mentally retarded. To maximize efficiency and program opportunities, offenders should be placed in the least restrictive custody required to protect society, staff and other inmates.

Classification is operationally defined as the process by which inmates are subdivided into groups based on a variety of factors. This process includes:

1. determination of and assignment to appropriate custody and security levels;

2. program placement based on inmate needs and available services, e.g., medical, mental health, vocational, academics, educational and work programs;

3. designation of the proper housing placement within the institution; and

4. routinely scheduled reassessment of custody and program placements, progress and adjustment.

Classification then is the sorting out procedure that matches a prisoner to the appropriate custody level, institution, job and programs and services to meet his/her needs, and regularly reviews these placements to achieve the most appropriate assignments possible.

Essential Elements of Classification Systems

The criteria on which classification decisions are based must be <u>explicitly delineated and defined</u>. The National Institute of Corrections has determined that the following eight elements should be included in a comprehensive classification system:

1. Classification depends on quality information being available. It is essential that a standard, high quality pre-sentence or admission investigation be completed by field staff on all incoming inmates. In addition, the intake process must include a standardized interview administered by a trained intake worker. The purpose of these two processes is to provide complete and reliable data on which custody and program placements can be based.

2. Custody decision should be based, on past behavior that is relevant. The frequency, recency, and severity of past behavior is the best indicator of future similar behavior. At intake, however, it is also necessary to consider other variables correlated with institutional adjustment (such as age, employment history, etc.) These historical acts should be replaced by measures of actual institutional behavior (e.g., disciplinary reports) at <u>reclassification</u>.

3. Classification for custody should seek the least restrictive custody required to protect society, staff and other inmates. Maximum custody placements should be reserved for inmates who have demonstrated through past violent behavior that they are a serious threat to other inmates or staff.

4. Inmates needs should be systematically assessed at intake and again at reclassification. Continuing program recommendations should be made on the basis of these needs assessments. Subsequent actions should be closely monitored to ensure that program recommendations are carried out.

5. Tests for psychological disturbance (e.g., MMPI, CPI) need <u>not</u> be administered to all inmates. To do so probably constitutes a misuse of resources. Testing should be selective and based on the type of offense committed (unusual offense, degree of violence, sexual offense, etc.), history of emotional instability, or problems uncovered during th intake interview. Testing should always be done in conjunction with a complete psycho-logical/psychiatric evaluation. <u>However, achievement and intelligence tests are appropriate for all inmates at intake in order to facilitate effective programming decisions based, in part, on these test results.</u>

6. No classification device will correctly classify all individuals -- there will always be cases exhibiting exceptional circumstances not addressed by "normal" classification criteria. An override capability must be built into the system for monitoring and to prevent abuses in classification.

7. Classification forms should be designed so as to be compatible with other data needs. These forms should be capable of use as input documents to an agency's information system. Computerized files allow for routine monitoring to enhance accountability and systematic program planning, research, and evaluation.

8. A standard reclassification process addressing both custody and program needs is an essential part of any classification system. Reclassification schedules can be developed to meet the various needs of the inmates and the institution, but under no circumstances should more than six months elapse between evaluations.

The Relationship of Classification to Correctional Management

Data required to make rational program and security decisions for inmates are, when aggregated, the same data required by administrators to manage an institution, a region, or an entire agency. From a managerial standpoint, the provision of reliable aggregate data is perhaps the more important function of classification. This information can serve, not only as a basis for allocating an agency's resources, but is also a program and facility planning, monitoring, evaluation, budgeting and accountability device.

The potential role of classification is recognized by the courts and has been emphasized in recent years:

In <u>Palmigiano</u> v. <u>Garrahy</u>, 443 F. SUPP. 956, 965 (D.R.I. 1977), for example, the court presented this view of the importance of classification:

> *Classification is essential to the operation of an orderly and safe prison. It is a prerequisite for the rational allocation of whatever program opportunities exist within the institution. It enables the institution to gauge the proper custody level of an inmate, to identify the inmate's educational, vocational, and psychological needs, and to separate non-violent inmates from the more predatory . . . Classification is also indispensible for any coherent future planning."*

The value of aggregate data generated by an objective and empirically based classification system has recently been demonstrated in California. Like most other states, California's prison population is increasing rapidly, forcing policymakers to consider a large scale building program. The Department of Correction's first effort

to plan for new facilities was severely criticized by the legislature. Their questions regarding the nature of the inmate population, current custodial needs, and the use of existing facilities relative to these needs could not be answered due to inadequacies in the agency's classification system. This situation, however, provided the impetus for the development and implementation of an empirically based classification process. The new system indicated need to place more emphasis on community centers, camps and open facilities.[1] Since maximum security institutions cost approximately three time more per bed than do minimum security facilities, the potential savings to California taxpayers are substantial.

As the California example illustrates, without a thorough understanding of inmates' custody and program needs, rational facility planning is impossible. Furthermore, without systematic assessment of inmate needs, progress and outcomes, an agency cannot properly evaluate programs, policies, or procedures.

California's experience is not unique. Several other jurisdictions have recently evaluated and revised their classification procedures. Almost without exception, these agencies have found that their populations were overclassified and that planned construction costs could be considerably reduced by placing more inmates in less secure (and less costly) environments. Many prison systems incarcerate 40-50% of inmates in maximum security institutions. When classification criteria are used to determine appropriate placements, the number of inmates that actually present a danger to staff or other inmates generally amounts to 10-20% of the population. The problem of misclassification is especially acute. If new state facilities are designed and built based on invalid classification information, an already expensive corrections system is made unnecessarily more costly.

Current Status of Classification

Despite the increased interest in classification most agencies have little to improve their classification efforts. Even the better systems are not utilized in a manner that gains maximum benefit. Factors associated with these failures include:

1. General misunderstanding of both the intent and capabilities of classification systems.

2. Little attention has been given to implementation and training issues even though research has led to improvements in system design.

3. Failure to utilize classification as an integral component of overall operations.

4. Failure to recognize and address constraints imposed by agency policy and/or the political environment.

In many agencies classification has generally been considered the domain of research and/or clinical staff, who, in their zeal to improve predictive accuracy, sometimes lose sight of program and implementation issues. As a result, the field is

shrouded in jargon, suffers from unrealistic expectations, and is inundated with overly complex systems. The usefulness of classification to both line staff and administrators must be readily apparent if the system to be properly utilized.

While classification systems must discriminate to a significant degree between several categories of offenders, the importance of predictive accuracy is overstated. Society has not been very successful in predicting criminal behavior. To expect much success is unrealistic, given that there are dozens, if not hundreds, of intervening factors specific to each case. The better classification instruments provide reasonably accurate estimates for aggregate populations. This information must be applied, not to make predictions about individuals, but to more rationally allocate cell space, programs, staff and other resources. Everyday, decisions are made regarding potential for violence, protective custody requirements, program needs, and, in probation, parole and community programs, the relative risk of recidivism posed by each client. If classification is to become an integral part of everyday correctional operations, more emphasis must be placed on implementation and training issues. Such action will require a commitment of money and staff that few jurisdictions have, as yet, been willing to make.

If classification is to attain its proper role, line staff must understand and value the process. Staff need to fully understand the basis for and appropriate use of classification systems. Criteria and procedures for reclassification must be clearly defined. Staff must be adequately trained and the system must be monitored continuously.

The influence of traditional agency practices and the political environment facing criminal justice agencies impedes the proper utilization of classification.

Day to day realities can diminish the impact of classification when program decisions are based on needs of the institution rather than the offenders. In this instance, inmates can be assigned to custody levels that are not consistent with the risk they represent. Many administrators have neither the confidence in classification data nor the resolve required to initiate necessary changes in agency policy and practices. The status quo is a more comfortable alternative.

Political pressure can also impact correctional classification decisions. With the nation obviously concerned about violent crime and the perceived failure of the criminal justice system, efforts to reduce the use of maximum security and place more offenders in minimum security programs may encounter resistance. There is, however, a countervailing reality -- the high cost of prison construction. In states where new facilities are needed, sound classification procedures and the data they generate, can be used to determine the type of facilities required. However, increased utilization of lower security settings will require a strong commitment by corrections officials and other decisionmakers to keep the legislature and the community informed about the rationale for what they are doing -- increased public safety, cost effective programing and rational planning for the use of an expensive resource, prisons.

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