

## **Inmate Classification and Direct Supervision Jails**

**By Gary Knapp & Dave Wells**

With the fairly recent trend toward direct supervision jails, the question of the potential role of inmate classification within such a model is frequently being asked. In traditional jails (first generation linear design, and second generation in direct surveillance jails) the role of objective inmate classification systems has been pretty well defined. An inmate classification system can help identify those inmates who present a grave threat to themselves, staff, other inmates, or the community. Subsequently, such inmates can be assigned appropriate housing and supervision relative to the degree of assessed risk.

Frequently, in traditional jails, this results in maximum, medium, and minimum-security inmates being housed separately from each other, if the facility design and cell space permit. This has been demonstrated to work well for the management of the general inmate population for these two traditional jail designs. But can, or should, inmate classification play the same, or similar, role in a direct supervision jail? For instance, what is the potential impact of classification on overcrowding? What role can classification play in decisions to board inmates in other correctional facilities? Can classification help in identifying direct supervision inmates who are eligible for work release, non-secure trusty positions or minimum-security housing? To address these questions let's look at them in relation to four primary functions of classification, include determining factors of inmate and staff safety, equity, fairness, consistency, public safety and community based programs, and correctional facility management and planning.

### **Inmate and Staff Safety**

One of the primary functions of jail/ inmate classification systems is as a tool assisting jail administrators and staff in assessing and identifying the dangerous or potentially problem inmate in order to make appropriate housing, supervision, medical care, and treatment decisions. In most jails this assessment should (or could) occur at two distinct stages of incarceration: 1) at booking or intake for temporary management decisions, and 2) before the inmate is moved to general population for longer-term housing assignment, needs assessment, and program referral. In respect to the initial classification stage at intake (assessment of various factors including medical treatment needs, suicide risk, appropriate temporary housing, etc.), the function of inmate classification remains essentially the same for all supervision models. At the second stage of classifying the longer-term inmate to general housing, the function of inmate classification may be different for direct supervision jails. While the issue of identifying the high risk or problem inmates (i.e., assaultive, suicidal, mental illness, etc.) and separating them from the general population is the same for both models, the difference may be found in the housing policy of the facility. Frequently, direct supervision jails adopt a housing policy of mixing maximum, medium and minimum-security inmates together in the same housing unit. In such instances, the application of classification is not critical to housing assignments. Some direct supervision jails, on the other hand, may choose the housing policy of separating minimum custody level inmates to take advantage of less expensive housing options and reduced staff supervision levels while still operating under the direct supervision model. Obviously, classification has a useful role to play in this circumstance.

The point here is that the use of classification for security decisions, knowing what kind of inmate is where, is the same for traditional and direct supervision models; the difference lies chiefly in the relationship between the assessed security levels of inmates and the housing policies a specific facility chooses to meet its objectives.

### **Equity/Fairness/Consistency**

An objective inmate classification system, regardless of the type of supervision/facility model, provides for equity, fairness, and consistency in managing the general inmate population. In principle, all inmates should be classified by the same objective criteria supported by specific policies and procedures, including designated housing areas, decision guidelines, and program eligibility criteria. This provides reasoning to support the decision making process and eliminates arbitrary decisions. For example, the various security level classifications should define and determine an appropriate range of eligibility for certain programs, privileges (e.g., day release or trusty positions for minimum-security inmates, etc). This also supports a system of behavior modification providing incentives for the inmate to address these needs and to promote positive behavior, consistent with the direct supervision philosophy.

A necessary component for this application of classification is a regular periodic review of an inmate's current security level classification. This provides structure for monitoring and tracking inmate behavior, and allows for the inmate to work his way to a lower security level (i.e., increased eligibility for programs, housing, special privileges), or, conversely, to higher security levels (i.e., restricted housing, etc.) as a result of behavioral problems. Obviously, factors such as the offenses for which they are incarcerated may limit the security level an inmate may achieve.

Regardless of the supervision model used, the principle of security, fairness and consistency is very important, and provides a base from which management decisions are made.

### **Public Safety and Community Based Alternative Programs**

Regardless of whether a jail is operating under the more traditional models or the direct supervision model, and regardless of the degree to which classification determines housing decisions, classification is perhaps most instrumental in its potential application to community-based correction programs and public safety. With the ever-increasing problem of jail overcrowding, jail administrators and local criminal justice policymakers are increasingly faced with the question of which offenders are going to take up the jail's limited space and resources. This problem can be addressed either at the front end, in determining punishment options at sentencing, or at the back end, in determining which sentenced inmates may qualify to serve a portion of their jail term and then be recommended for early release into community-based programs such as community service work, residential treatment, or intensive probation. To facilitate this process a good classification system should help to identify those inmates who have the best chance of successfully completing the community-based sanction while minimizing the risk to public safety.

### **Efficient Facility Planning and Management**

Classification, and the inmate data it provides in conjunction with other important booking and release information, can play a significant role in facility planning and management. Knowing who is in the jail, offense type, crime classification, length of stay, security profile, etc. (in short, an objective inmate

population profile), comprise critical factors in this jail management process. An obvious application includes assistance in identifying the type of facility construction (minimum to maximum) needed to handle the local offender population. Typically, new jail construction "over-builds" in terms of costly maximum security cell space, especially in rural areas, relative to the actual security profile of the inmate population in that area. Inmate data derived from classification may, if available during the planning process for new jail construction, or renovation, significantly reduce expenses by providing a wider range of options for housing. The inmate information provided by a good classification and data system can also identify target sub-populations within the overall inmate population for which specific options may be discussed. For example, in a medium sized rural jail in northern Michigan, 59% of the general jail population in 1986 were classified as minimum security. The majority was defined as misdemeanants with an alcohol-related conviction. This group served over 8,000 jail days. By isolating this population, policymakers faced with an over crowded jail could potentially evaluate the impact of diverting some portion of this minimum security sub-population into an acceptable alternative and assess the impact of that policy on the overall size of the jail population prior to implementing the policy.

In some states, such as Michigan, state and local officials are interested in developing a standardized inmate classification system that would facilitate boarding of inmates in another jurisdiction or facility to relieve overcrowding for those jails which are overcrowded. By standardizing the classification system, jails, when communicating with each other, and regardless of the supervision model, would have the same objective criteria for determining security levels of inmates. A jail can then specifically identify which security beds are available for "out-county housing" and make arrangements accordingly.

For policymakers at the regional or state level, this standardized system could facilitate consistent data collection and analysis of jail population profiles, and hence policy decisions can be more consistent throughout the state or region. In this context, the same objective classification system should be applicable for most, if not all, full service jails in a state or region regardless of the supervision model.

In conclusion, our experience with the applications of a good inmate classification system in traditional jails suggests that these functions are similar for both traditional jail supervision models and the direct supervision model, with one important distinction. The same decision making criteria provided by a good classification system, supporting the primary functions of classification, should be applicable and relevant regardless of the type of supervision model used. The primary difference in the application of a good objective classification system, in the context of these differing supervision models, is in the role classification plays in determining housing decisions, which remain the individual choice of the jail administration. The primary factor for determining whether an inmate in a direct supervision jail is housed in a group pod or in a segregated area is in assessing his institutional behavior, special needs, and ability to get along with other inmates. All other basic applications of inmate classification hold similar potential in facilitating efficient and cost-effective jail management and planning.