
Jail Classification: Improving Link to Intermediate Sanctions

By Dave Wells & Tim Brennan, Ph. D.

Jails are just one component in most communities' criminal justice system. Although each component in the system affects the others, these components often function separately, with little, if any, coordination. However, some communities are beginning to use jails as the most punitive component in a continuum of coordinated intermediate sanctions. As part of this process, jail administrators will need to rely on more complex classification and data collection systems to monitor jail populations and target in-mates for appropriate sanctions.

Jail Populations: Driven by Policy

Many experts now recognize that policy factors, rather than crime rates and local socioeconomic conditions, dictate the size and makeup of a jail's population. These factors include arrest policies, pretrial and sentencing policies, jail inmate processing policies, early release/good time policies and probation/parole violation policies.

Two measurable factors drive a jail's size and makeup: number of admissions and length of stay. Reducing either or both of these through coordinated policy changes can profoundly alter the number and type of inmates in a jail. Given that short-term incarceration has been shown to have a negligible effect on recidivism, it makes sense to incorporate jails into a coordinated community corrections policy.

Jail Classification

Classification's traditional role in jails has been to assess inmate risk and make housing decisions. In many facilities, the offender's classification determines his or her access to various programs and privileges.

Jail administrators use classification systems to make objective and consistent decisions about separating inmates into different groups. Newly developed objective classification systems-for both large and small jails- provide rational procedures that have been accepted by the courts, offenders and their advocates, and the public.

Classification can play a central role in getting stakeholders to "buy into" the development of coordinated correctional policies. A sound jail classification system can enhance several related policy objectives: the safety of staff, inmates and the public; orderly processing and discipline; protection against liability; and equity, consistency and fairness. An effective classification system also facilitates eligibility screening for programming - such as pre-trial release, day release or early release - and can provide a linkage with courts for monitoring, coordinating work release and fast tracking. All of these policy options can help ease jail crowding. Because housing, privileges, programs and early release eligibility all can be directly tied to

classification levels, jail classification can be used successfully to link jails to intermediate sanctions and community corrections through a system of behavior incentives.

Using Data to Understand Jail Population Characteristics

In order to establish new policies linking jails and community corrections, policy-makers must have solid data. First, the characteristics of the jails population must be clarified. Data elements most useful for this include admission date, pre/post-sentence, primary offense severity, classification level and date classified, release reason and release date. Using these data, administrators can break down the jail's population to determine what populations are in the jail and to identify which populations should be targeted for innovative policy and program options.

Such simple statistical breakdowns also can give policy makers insight into the two main factors driving jail populations: admissions and length of stay. Inmates' legal and classification status often change during incarceration. As inmates progress to different status levels, jail staff can intervene in different ways. For example, offender management options differ for pre-trial inmates vs. sentenced inmates, felons vs. misdemeanants and minimum security inmates vs. maximum security inmates.

To "unpack the data" by inmate status, jail administrators need to collect event dates for each inmate: admission, conviction, sentence, classification and release dates. Using these dates, administrators can then determine the number of inmates and length of stay for each incarceration status. The administrator also can use such time-based data to isolate those inmates who are classified as pre-trial, sentenced or minimum security and can determine the average number of inmates incarcerated in each status. With these data, jail administrators can target those inmates who would be appropriate candidates for intermediate sanctions and community corrections programs.

Identifying Inmate Target Populations

A data-driven policy approach to selecting target populations for intermediate sanctions and community corrections must begin with an understanding of who is passing through the jail. Two of the most frequently selected inmate populations targeted for diversion from jail are pre-trial status and minimum security inmates. Some jail classification systems also may screen unsentenced inmates for pre-trial release. Such distinctions, if designed appropriately, can help jail administrators identify eligible unsentenced detainees for further pre-trial release screening. For example, a widely used inmate classification system identifies pre-sentence detainees who are non-violent and have no prior assault record, no escape history, less than three prior felony convictions, no detainees or warrants, and no record of institutional problems. Such offenders may be eligible for further pre trial release consideration. Local "program-specific" pre-trial screening criteria then may be applied, such as length of time incarcerated, prior failure-to-appear histories, local residence, stability, willingness to participate and substance abuse issues. Appropriate, low-risk inmates thus can be targeted and screened for pre-trial release as an extension of the jail classification system.

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This same classification system also identifies minimum security inmates with the same nonviolent characteristics as those described above but who are sentenced to jail. The classification system then identifies three minimum custody levels: 1) misdemeanants with community ties; 2) felons with community ties; and 3) felons and misdemeanants with no community ties. Once low-risk, nonviolent inmates are identified and classified in one of the above groups, jail administrators would clearly see that program alternatives should be explored for such groups. Thus, a sound classification system can identify minimum security groups eligible for specific programs with graduated levels of supervision and accountability.

Although principally designed to address internal facility management, jail classification systems (as described above) also can be designed to identify those sub populations that should be considered for alternatives to incarceration. Ideally, a sound risk/needs assessment could be used in conjunction with the jail classification system to further screen such low-risk sub-populations for community placement. Other factors the risk/needs assessment would need to consider are offender stability, recidivism risk, propensity for violence and treatment needs. The range and type of community programs and sanctions available and their supervision and accountability capacities also would need to be considered when deciding whether an offender is eligible for community placement.

Linkage with Courts

A well-designed and logical classification system also gives jail administrators an opportunity to coordinate activities with the courts. Classification data, for instance, can be used to produce routine reports to the courts or individual judges that identify the unsentenced/pre-trial population in the jail by the number of days incarcerated. Such reports can expedite the arraignment, pre-trial and adjudication process. As a second example, the prosecutor and the courts can use these reports to fast-track felons who, because of their current offense or criminal histories, are most likely to receive prison sentences. This, again, minimizes the time an offender is incarcerated at the local level.

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Another example of how classification systems are used in coordinating with the courts occurs when judges are forced to issue early release orders to meet court-imposed caps. Jail administrators can supply the courts with a list of inmates most appropriate for early release ranked in order of security, length of time incarcerated and crime class. Courts find this useful in making decisions. It also supports the jail's classification-driven, behavior modification approach because eligibility for early release may be based on graduated security assignment from the lowest classification level to higher classification levels.

Monitoring to Measure Progress

Once policy changes have been implemented, another prudent step is to establish a system to monitor the jail's population. Such a monitoring system can help jail administrators track the impact of new policies on

jail populations. Monitoring should focus on: 1) changes in admissions; 2) changes in average length of stay of the target populations; and 3) changes in overall population characteristics. Monitoring should assess any changes in the target population compared to a pre-implementation base year. This allows a partial assessment of the impact of the new policy.

A second reason to monitor jail population is to identify changes in non-targeted populations. For example, to ease crowding, a community may institute a new program targeting a specific population but find that several months later the jail's overall daily population rate has not changed. It might then be assumed that the new program is failing and should be discontinued. In reality, a sound monitoring system might indicate that the target population has been significantly reduced, but the "void" created by saving jail beds from the targeted group has been filled by a different inmate population because of an unexpected system adjustment, such as an increase in inmates incarcerated for probation violations, an increase in the number of targeted offenders entering the jail, etc. Therefore, it can be justifiably argued that the program should not be discontinued. At the same time, the monitoring system alerts the jurisdiction to any system adjustments or net-widening that might emerge unexpectedly.

Monitoring a jail's population is a dynamic process that evolves over time. The information produced may trigger modifications of existing policies because the criminal justice process and offender characteristics also change over time. For example, in Michigan, counties are funded through the state's Community Corrections Act to target minimum security and other appropriate jail - and prison - bound populations for diversion to community corrections programs. The intent is to free up scarce jail beds for prison-bound felons. Thus, for many counties, although there hasn't been a change in their jails' average daily population, there has been a substantial change in their jails' population characteristics. Management information systems to collect the appropriate data elements, coupled with user defined statistical outputs, are essential components of this ongoing monitoring system.

Coordination Critical

To implement such data-driven decision processes in a jail, criminal justice practitioners, treatment providers, county commissioners, planners and other key players must work together. This coordination has several potential benefits, including synthesizing policy across agencies, "back flushing" targeted offenders from jail into community corrections, reinforcing a coordinated system of behavior incentives for offenders, and diverting prison-bound offenders when appropriate.

Each of the above applications of sound jail classification, coupled with the use of an appropriately designed jail data base, can serve to alleviate jail crowding and to make use of a jail's limited resources more effectively. For jail classification to work in this context, community corrections, courts, and jail officials must coordinate their activities. Such coordination supports the development of an integrated system of intermediate sanctions and community corrections to match the various sub populations of offenders that enter the local criminal justice system. This benefits not only those who work in the criminal justice system but also the offender and the community.

REFERENCES

Tim Brennan and David Wells. Guidelines for Implementing Objective Classification In Jails, published In February 1995, Corrections Today. David Wells and Tim Brennan, Ph.D., are the principals of Northpointe Institute for Public Management, Inc. located in Traverse City, Michigan.