

The Michigan Classification Project by Dave Wells and Tim Brennan

Introduction

Occasionally, a local project extends in scope and influence to assume a national importance and recognition beyond its local boundaries. One example of this, perhaps, is the Objective Jail Classification project as developed in Michigan over the last ten years. The project resulted in the development of the Jail Inmate Classification System (JICS).

This system is noteworthy for several different reasons. It reflects a decade-long transition in American jails to adopt objective inmate classification systems. Under pressure from courts, crowding, litigation, and as a result of the movement to "professionalize" all jail procedures, there has been a steady deliberate movement toward objective classification. The Michigan JICS project is clearly at the forefront of the classification movement.

A second historical trend reflected in this project is the transition from thinking of classification simply as a line level tool for inmate housing and programming decisions. It is now also being seen as a management tool that is central to many of the most critical correctional policies of jails and local criminal justice systems. Objective classification systems such as JICS are being automated and integrated into a Management Information system which can magnify the usefulness of classification data to jail administrators and policymakers. Thus, the management uses of classification (monitoring, planning, trend analysis, policy decision-making, etc.) have been rediscovered.

Finally, historical efforts by jails to implement and introduce innovative information technologies, have often fallen short of their potential. The current project, by contrast, has had substantial success and has achieved an unprecedented level of acceptance in the several dozen jails where it has been implemented.

This article outlines this encouraging innovation in jail classification and data management.

The History of the Jail Inmate Classification System (JICS).

In 1981, a Michigan community corrections program, Community Justice Alternatives, was a local corrections program providing offender support services to jail inmates and other ex-offenders. It operated in a ten county region. The services, offered in the local jails, included various self help programs such as substance abuse education; employability and life skills; re-entry job placement, etc. However, the services were often in conflict with the security concerns of the corrections staff.

Corrections staff often felt that certain inmates should be ineligible for certain programs and privileges or should not mix with certain other inmates or groups due to security issues. There was, however, no security-based method for the sorting out or classifying inmates to facilitate the reconciliation of this conflict between the "do gooders" and the corrections staff.

This conflict obviously hindered efforts of the local corrections program in the delivery of its services to the local inmate populations. It became obvious that some method for determining program participation eligibility was needed that would have the support and meet the needs of both corrections and program staff.

The Director of the community corrections program suggested to research staff the possibility of objective jail inmate classification as a potential solution to the problem. Initial research indicated that objective jail classification systems were virtually non-existent at the time. Perhaps the best known classification system, often used in jails at the time, was the "Vera" model which was actually designed as a pre-trial screening system for assisting in bonding decisions.

Extensive research continued for the next year and a half. All available information on the subject was gathered, including information on any existing jail systems. During this same period, information on prison classification systems were reviewed and experimented with. This included the Iowa model and the Megargee psychological profile system, which were being tested in Florida at that time.

In that study, little was found that seemed appropriate for the uniqueness of the jail populations in Michigan. This fact shifted the emphasis to the development of a pilot objective system designed specifically to address the program eligibility problem as described above. Different methodologies were examined along with an identification of the risk and security factors which were of high concern to a local jail and community. A "decision tree" methodology was selected for its ease of use and high degree of "face validity". The list of risk and security concerns was reduced through a process of elimination to decision splits on nine factors. These factors were then arranged in the tree in order of seriousness or "weighting".

The pilot instrument was reviewed by several jail administrators and corrections personnel for reaction and feedback. Following some minor adjustments to the order of the factors, the system was ready for a pilot test. Two jails in the region, one a 75 bed jail and the other a 38 bed jail, volunteered to pilot the new instrument. The initial piloting of the instrument began late in 1983. By early 1984, three more small jails in the region were added.

During this time, technical assistance was requested and granted from the National Institute of Corrections Jail Division to assist in the evaluation and refinement of the instrument. NIC technical staff made site visits to the pilot jails, interviewed staff, reviewed the instrument and made some helpful suggestions regarding the fine tuning of the JICS system.

Late in 1984, the Michigan Department of Corrections Office of Facility Services expressed interest in the project and wished to expand the project. They wanted to include some larger urban jails to test the relevance of the system in other Michigan jails. At this time, an initial classification instrument was added to include medical and suicide risk screening, officer observations and temporary cell assignment. Subsequently, four jails, ranging in size from 275 beds to 1,100 beds, were added to the project.

The pilot project continued through 1986. A surprising success included strong support from the jail administrators and corrections staff using the system. During this period, there was continued technical assistance from NIC to monitor the project.

An important finding in this phase was that the same classification instruments were relevant, valid and applicable to the larger urban jails with their correspondingly more serious offender population. Further fine tuning of decision factor definitions in the primary instrument were done. These were based on the findings from the volume and varied inmate types in the large urban jails. This resulted in the addition of one additional custody level to the system.

The pilot program produced some other findings. Not only did the system successfully bridge the gap between corrections and treatment staff concerns, but it also had substantial impact on every aspect of inmate management. This impact was apparent from initial intake and housing decisions to program eligibility and behavior modification (through the classification review process). There also seemed to be an easing of staff and inmate stress through the orderly and appropriate identification and grouping of inmates. This heightened the awareness of staff as to which inmates presented increased risk and also provided a sense of fairness and consistency in how various inmate processing decisions were made. This was evident to the staff, the inmate population and their advocates.

By 1989, two fully computerized automated versions of the JICS classification system were developed. One system was integrated into a complete automated jail management package, while a second was developed as a stand-alone system to work with other existing jail management information systems. The automated versions were specifically designed to support inmate and system statistical analysis capabilities and to facilitate management, planning and policy decisions.

Michigan's Community Corrections Act and the Jail Population Information System.

By 1990, a total of sixteen Michigan jails had adopted the JICS classification system including Wayne County which includes the city of Detroit. The project had demonstrated that a "standardized classification system" was applicable, valid and practical. This was true within the same state or region governed by the same criminal and corrections code. It was also valid in both small rural and large urban jails. Several positive side effects and new applications were produced, including the sharing of classification related information on inmates between facilities. Participating jails were able to share the broad standardization of offender data generated as a by-product of the JICS system.

In 1988, due to extreme prison overcrowding, Michigan passed new Community Corrections Legislation. This legislation was designed, in part, to retain short term state prison commitments in the local jails. It also provided a network of "alternative to incarceration" options for various low risk jail inmate target populations. This would make room for those diverted from the state system and assist in easing jail crowding.

As part of Michigan's community corrections initiative through the Office of Community Corrections, the Michigan Jail Population Information System (JPIS) is being developed. JPIS is a statewide reporting system. It will be used to monitor trends and patterns of jail utilization within and among counties. It will also be used to assess the impacts of state and/or local policy changes on local jail utilization.

Through the JPIS project, and the standardization of reporting elements and definitions, there is a requirement that all jails adopt an approved objective jail inmate classification system. The JICS system is being encouraged but not mandated for adoption. It brings a demonstrated track record and applicability across small, medium and large jails. To date, twenty-seven county jails have adopted the system with an additional fifteen to twenty-five jails expected to go on-line in 1992.

Training and Implementation

Up until the latter part of 1991, implementation of the JICS classification system in each jail was done individually. This provided extensive experience to the principal trainers in identifying and developing issues, problems and techniques to address the dynamics of implementing an objective classification system. They developed experience in small, medium and large jails. Over the years, the classification implementation has been greatly refined and documented through this experience. The result is a recently completed comprehensive document: "Guidelines for Implementing an Objective Classification System in Jails". A companion document, "Data Driving Policy and Planning Decisions in Criminal Justice" was also developed with particular emphasis on the analysis of policy relevant data in jails. Based also on this JICS experience, a three day classification training academy has been developed. This format allows for the systematic implementation training of several jail teams at one time. A student workbook has been developed which covers such issues as:

- Why implement classification?;
- Reaching consensus of classification goals;
- The four phases of implementation;
- Managing participation;
- Implementation plan development;
- Developing policies and procedures;
- Evaluation, monitoring, data analysis;
- Enhanced applications of classification including:
 - linkages with the courts,
 - easing overcrowding,
 - identifying target populations for community corrections programs, etc.

Training participants leave the academy with several completed work products as well as the JICS classification system instruments and software ready for immediate use in their installation. Follow-up technical assistance and problem solving is provided.

Summary

The Michigan classification project has resulted in a standardized jail classification system for statewide use. It has proven valid in small, medium and large jails. This standardization for the specific state or region has demonstrated that a single classification system can bring uniformity to the classification process and can also enhance the sharing of inmate profile data as a by-product. This standardized information allows the various jails and local corrections systems to use a common vocabulary when exchanging inmate information between jurisdictions. At the local, regional and state level the standardized "inmate specific" data facilitates the comprehensive analysis, monitoring and comparison of the state's jails for the monitoring of use, planning and policy development.

The Authors

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Mr. Wells and Dr. Brennan are co-authors of two recently completed documents "Guidelines for Implementing an Objective Classification System in Jails" and Data Driving Policy and Planning Decisions "Policy Making in Criminal Justice: The Use of Data at each stage of the Policy/Planning Process". For free copies of the above write or call Northpointe, Inc., 410 S. Union St., Traverse City, MI 231-938-5959.

Since the publication of this article, Northpointe JICS Classification is used in over 75 jails in Michigan and over 300 facilities nationwide.

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