

The Importance of Inmate Classification in Small Jails

By Tim Brennan and Dave Wells

In the last decade, inmate classification has re-emerged as one of the most critical issues governing the management, efficiency, and safety of Jails. A major upgrading of classification methods and management training has been undertaken during this decade. This renewed emphasis on the importance of classification has occurred primarily in large and medium sized jails. Small jails have lagged behind in the move to improve classification.

In this article we propose that classification is equally important for the small jail the tendency to casually neglect inmate classification in small jails is hazardous, and is based on a profound misunderstanding of the roles that inmate classification plays in all jails. These roles are equally pertinent to the small jail - and that the neglect of classification, or the continued use of inadequate classification - will dramatically undermine the degree to which such facilities can meet their stated missions. Furthermore, any excuse for not conducting rigorous classification in small jails (due to staff shortages, etc.) are rapidly disappearing due to developments in objective classification systems and computerized methods.

There are many sources of weak commitment shared among managers of small jails: no trust in new objective systems, a preference for subjectivity, fear of resistance from important colleagues, poor understanding of classification, distraction by other tasks, etc. These are common in both small and large jails and are reinforced by the resistance of other staff who are comfortable with traditional classification.

Many small jails have adopted several inappropriate approaches to inmate classification:

- They rely mainly on subjective "informal" staff judgment. They may restrict classification to the most basic demographic and legal separations (e.g. felons from misdemeanants, adults from juveniles, sentenced from unsentenced, etc.),
- They ignore classification entirely as a basis for the housing, supervision, disposition and treatment of offenders.
- Much classification simply occurs on a "space available" basis (i.e. inmates are housed where there is an empty bunk).

These adaptations have many negative consequences: inconsistency, bias, prejudice, personal favoritism, inadequate documentation, over-classification, higher risk of inmate litigation, etc.

Our experience, through the implementation of classification in over thirty jails ranging in size from 12 beds to over 2500 beds, is that classification fulfills the same correctional roles in both small and large jails, and thus cannot be ignored in small jails. Virtually all major correctional goals are equally pertinent to small jails, as to larger jails, and must be vigilantly addressed in both kinds of facilities.

There is a common and persistent misunderstanding among staff in small jails. It is that because of housing/cell limitations classification becomes irrelevant and can be bypassed. There is an assumption that because the few available cells are equivalent (having the same security levels) and do not allow for adequate separation between classifications into different "housing levels", classification is irrelevant. We repeatedly hear claims from small jail staff that "classification makes no sense in our facility, because we are too small". In these cases, classification is simplified, curtailed, or ignored. The staff rely on intuitive judgement or guesswork in managing inmates. Interestingly, the same dynamic occurs (limited cell space for housing separation) when a medium or large jail becomes overcrowded.

This approach makes sense only if the role of classification is limited to housing decisions. It misses the critical point that classification fulfills multiple roles beyond driving housing decision. Many jails, large and small, have little or no distinction between security types of cells. This, however, is not critical to classification driving housing decisions in that classifications' housing role is to group minimums with minimums, mediums with mediums, etc. The problem with classification performing this role in the small or overcrowded jail is that there may not be an appropriate number of available beds to facilitate this grouping. The integrity of the classification system should be maintained, however, while acknowledging that inmates of different security levels may have to be housed together due to lack of appropriate resources. The classification-related data can provide documentation of the shortfall in appropriate resources, while the other roles of classification can still be maintained and applied without loss of integrity.

Why Implement Objective Classification in Small Jails?

A 1970 Rhode Island court case clearly indicates the multiple roles of classification in both jails and prisons:

"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 education, vocational, and psychological needs, and to separate non-violent inmates from the more predatory. Classification is also indispensable for any coherent future planning."

Managers of small jails must realize that classification enhances and supports several correctional policies and management goals.

Staff and Inmate Safety: A first and central role of classification that cannot be ignored by small jails is to provide valid identification of "dangerous" offenders. This identification relies on carefully collected background and risk factor data (criminal history, past convictions, arrests, etc.) coupled with appropriate classification procedures. Both inmate and staff safety rely on valid identification, classification and supervision of dangerous inmates. This goal is a major priority in most institutions. If small jails neglect to obtain the appropriate background data or conduct ineffective classification, there will be an increased risk of "false negative" classification. Failure to identify predators and likely victims will produce an unsafe, more anxiety-provoking environment.

The courts have also ruled that classification is a primary guarantor of the inmates' right to be reasonably protected from violent assault, or the fear of violence. This allaying of fear and anxiety relies on the ability of classification to achieve valid assignments. Neither inmates nor staff want any surprises. Good classification has a critical role in reducing anxiety by creating an orderly, predictable and controlled environment - despite the presence of dangerous persons.

Public Safety: Public safety is another primary goal of classification for both large and small jails. This goal depends on valid classification of risks of dangerousness and recidivism. Such classifications can then be used to develop security and release recommendations to minimize escape, erroneous community placements, and serious recidivism. Small jails will come under intense public criticism if they fail to properly identify high-risk inmates, and then allow participation in day release programs or release dangerous inmates back into the community.

Protection Against Liability and Protection of Inmate's Rights: Although the focus of much litigation on classification has been on larger jails, it is naive to think that small jails can ignore the legal rulings that have been so instrumental in motivating larger jails to improve their classification procedures and policies. A current trend is that jails are being forced to abandon traditional "subjective informal" classifications and adopt objective methods. A few high profile classification errors (e.g. giving work release, or minimum custody status to a high risk inmate) can devastate the public image of any jail - - especially a small one. Good classification minimizes such errors. In addition, classification also provides documentation and rational justification for decisions. Such documentation and justification are basic prerequisites for protection in legal disputes and these are both strengthened by the newer objective classifications.

Classification also aims to protect the prisoner's rights to avoid deterioration; to have access to rehabilitation programs, to be placed in a least restrictive environment; and to minimize the isolation of inmates from the community while simultaneously achieving the often opposing goal of public protection. A valid classification provides jail staff with a rational basis for such decisions. The principle of least restrictive custody, jointly with the goal of reintegration, aims at

classifying inmates to minimize their isolation from the community. Small jails, even with very limited cell space, cannot avoid the difficult decisions involved in these often contradictory correctional policies.

Orderly Processing, Discipline and Equity, Consistency, Fairness:

Classification - even in small jails - can enhance the control and management of inmates' behavior. It partially governs access to various rewards and punishments. Different custody levels typically have access to different rewards, punishments and privileges. Such arrangements often form the basis of behavior-based discipline systems. For example, misbehavior may be "punished" by reclassifying the person to a less privileged level, while good behavior is rewarded by reclassification into more privileged levels. The line classification/corrections officer thus plays a critical role in regulating inmate behavior. A well-implemented classification system can be instrumental in conveying institutional rules and in generating consistent expectations and behavior. Additionally, this provides an inmate processing system with clear communication; logically based decisions; consistency in procedures; and orderly/predictable housing and program assignments.

Data for Planning, Resource Allocation, Efficiency:

The primary excuse in small jails for not using classification is that there is insufficient space (i.e. a resource shortage). Yet paradoxically, experience has shown that valid classification is one of the most effective techniques for avoiding waste and allocating scarce resources. Correct "matching" of inmates with needed resources is the foundation of efficient resource allocation. Every instance of a classification error - either over-classification or under-classification - will result in a mismatch between inmates and services provided. It will also create waste, extra costs, and reduced efficiency.

Increasingly, classification is seen as a tool for coherent planning regarding budgets, staffing, programs and physical space requirements. Small jail management, like their cohorts in larger facilities, must prepare and defend their budget requests. This process is increasingly conducted "by the numbers": Budgets and various resource requests require "data based" justification. Planning is greatly enhanced by the presence of an accurate enumeration of inmate population structures, sizes, needs and trends. Accurate and valid classification data has become indispensable for many jail managers in preparing and defending their budgets. This increased importance of classification in regard to budgeting and planning is a direct result of the gradual shift to "objective classification" by many jails. Large volumes of empirical data about inmate population breakdowns and trends emerge from the use of objective (data based) classification. Knowledgeable jail managers are aware of the value of this data, and make good political use of it. Regardless of the size of the jail, classification is becoming as important at the management and policy level as for the line level (inmate processing).

Finally, increasing public and political demands for efficiency, accountability, management control, and tighter budgets are forcing all jails to adopt more formalized bureaucratic classification approaches in jails nationwide. This trend will also increasingly impinge on the small jail.

In this environment classification cannot continue to be ignored in small jails. Nor can it remain dormant in addressing inmate management, planning and budgeting issues. Currently, classification data in most small jails is generally not used to help with planning, management, or policy decisions. This situation demands rapid change, the introduction of efficient objective systems, and the use of inexpensive PC based Management Information and Classification systems. These would give the small jail manager the same sophistication, application and "number crunching" power found in many larger jails.

In conclusion, the pressures of litigation, overcrowding, tighter budgets and political demands for efficiency that are forcing many larger jails to upgrade their classification systems, seem inevitably to infringe equally on small jails. The transition to more valid objective classification in small jails will also depend on the managers of these institutions broadening their understanding of the many roles that classification fulfills beyond the simple act of housing inmates. New classification methods, such as the JICS system in Michigan, based on inexpensive PC micro-computer technology, can also help many small jails adopt sophisticated classification approaches.

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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".