**N A A T A P**

Native American and Alaskan Technical Assistance Project

# PROJECT GUIDE:

## Objective Classification Analysis

*Part of  A Series of  Guides for Planning, Designing and Constructing Adult and Juvenile Correctional and Detention Facilities on Tribal Lands*

## Purpose

The purpose of each NAATAP Guide is to communicate substantive information concerning a range of subjects that are relevant to the development of adult and juvenile detention and correctional facilities in Indian Country. This series of guides grew out of a recognition that there were common concerns and questions being raised by Tribes and consultants developing new correctional facilities on Native lands throughout the country. The guides seek to provide research and information on issues of common concern to the Tribes. These guides also seek to document the knowledge and experience gained by Justice Planners International LLC (JPI) while providing technical assistance to tribes engaged in the facility development process.

## Acknowledgements

# **P R O J E C T  G U I D E :**

# Objective Classification Analysis

**Author**

Ira Rubin and Justice Planners International LLC (JPI)

JPI Project Staff: Shelley Zavlek and Mark Goldman, Principals;
Anthony H. Jones and Joshua LeFrancois, Associates

# Overview of Classification Analysis

Correctional facilities often adopt an objective classification system (OCS) to assist staff in making decisions regarding custody, housing, and program needs by categorizing individuals into groups according to a standardized set of criteria. Inmates/residents categorized in the same group receive similar recommendations regarding level of custody and special services. When feasible, individual treatment plans are developed, implemented, monitored, and adjusted as needed for each person within every group.

Typically, an OCS bases its recommendations on information on the inmate's/resident's:

- Likelihood of abiding by conditions of release
- Risk of attempted escape
- Risk of violent behavior
- Vulnerability to being victimized by others
- Need for specialized housing or intensive supervision
- Need for specialized mental health or medical services, and
- Need for specialized programs or services

The information is derived from data on any previous incarcerations and from other official records, assessment instruments, and interviews with the inmate/resident. It usually includes data on some combination of the following areas:

- Personal characteristics (i.e., age, gender, school or employment status)
- Present case (i.e., charge type/level, status of criminal proceedings)
- Criminal history
- Past detentions/incarcerations (number of escape attempts, violent incidents, excellent behavior, success/failure as a trustee etc.)
- Medical or psychological conditions that need immediate treatment or special provisions (i.e., isolation, detoxification, increased observation, handicapped accessible housing)
- Skills, academic levels, interests, and other factors relevant to rehabilitation

# Designing a Classification System

No single classification system is ideal for every Tribe or correctional facility. However, Holt, Ducat, and Eakles (1981) have listed a set of conceptual goals for designing a successful classification system (at least at the time of intake into the facility):

- All inmates/residents should be placed in the lowest custody level consistent with public safety.
- Inmates/residents should be classified on the basis of objective information and objective criteria.
- The process must be applied uniformly, so that similarly situated inmates/residents receive similar custody assignments.
- The system must provide for centralized control over the process.

The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) suggests that the following guidelines be adhered to when designing and implementing a classification system:

1. **Establish a clear definition of goals and objectives of the total correctional system.** Since these goals may change over time, the classification system should be reviewed periodically to make sure that it is consistent with current institutional priorities.

2. **Create a manual of operations that will detail written policies and procedures governing the classification process.** A clearly written manual will increase understanding and reduce the chances of incorrect implementation.

3. **Ensure that the classification process provides for the collection of complete, high quality, verified, standardized data.** These data can be used to monitor the classification process and make certain that the standards and procedures are followed.

4. **Measure and test instruments used in the classification decision-making process to ensure that they are valid, reliable, and objective.** The classification process is only valid if it accurately assigns individuals to the appropriate level of care and placement within the facility. 'Under-assignment' of custody level may lead to violence, disruption, or an escape, while 'over-assignment' may be programmatically unsound and is needlessly expensive, since higher

security usually costs more to operate and always costs more to build.

Reliable classification systems will consistently assign individuals with similar characteristics to the same type of custody and/or treatment programs.

Classifications that are objective are based on clearly defined and measured criteria. The most objective criteria are often observable behaviors.

5. **Issue explicit policy statements structuring and checking the discretionary decision-making powers of classification team staff.** The staff assigned to do classification must receive the authority and support to perform this function. Also, since no classification system captures all relevant information on every inmate/resident, there must be a delegated person(s) with the authority to override the OCS recommendation. [Overrides should stay between five percent and 15 percent of the final classification decisions, which preserves the legitimacy of the OCS without rendering it inflexible.]

6. **Establish a provision for screening and further evaluation of inmates/residents who are management problems or who have special needs.** The initial assessment should be followed up with observations of behavior within the facility and by more comprehensive diagnostic tests. In most instances, this second assessment can be delayed or prolonged for a few days to allow short-stay inmates/residents to be released from custody. This action will save considerable expense when there is high turn-around soon after intake. An important exception is the identification of intakes requiring immediate special care (e.g. those with injuries, incapacitated by drugs or alcohol, or with suicidal intentions).

7. **Make provisions to create programs based on needs and then to match inmates/residents with programs that are consistent with custody classification.** It makes little sense to use classification categories that have no real consequences or programmatic distinctions, either because they require more resources than are available or are inconsistent with the current mission and goals of the institution.

8. **Create provisions to classify inmates/residents at the least-restrictive custody.** Since higher levels of custody are more expensive and

can be counter-productive to the improvement of self-esteem, a cost effective OCS should assign most inmates/residents to lower to medium security settings.

9. **Involve inmates/residents in the classification process.** Involving inmates/residents in developing and implementing the OCS will increase their acceptance of and commitment to it. Inmates/residents can become involved through interviews that ask for anecdotal information that might be relevant to custody level (i.e., job status, living status), or information on personal goals and interests. This will enable program providers to explore various options that will suit inmates'/ residents' needs.

10. **Provide for systematic, periodic reclassification hearings.** Redassification hearings should be conducted at least once every 90 days to review new information regarding changes in the inmate's/resident's case, behavior, health, etc. Such hearings are important not only for reasons already mentioned, but to increase the motivation of inmate/residents to act in ways that will lead to lower levels of custody and increased privileges and freedoms. For most Tribal facilities, the relatively low number of people in custody enables more frequent reclassifications. Quick recognition of improving behaviors can reinforce those behaviors, especially for youth.

11. **Assure that the classification process is efficient and economically sound.** An OCS should match housing and programs to available resources (staff, space, etc.). In addition, the OCS design should be simple enough so that it does not interfere with other operational functions (i.e., overburdening staff).

12. **Continuously evaluate and improve the classification process.** There must be a process that monitors both the implementation and results of the OCS to determine if:

   ■ the Tribe's goals and objectives related to classification are being achieved
   ■ the Tribe's policies and procedures for classification are being carried out as written

13. **Ensure that classification procedures are consistent with constitutional and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) requisites.** No classifica-

tion rule should counter the inmate/resident's constitutional rights to avoid self-incrimination, receive legal advice, etc. In addition, the classification system must abide by BIA, Department of Justice (DOJ) and other Federal mandates, such as the separation of juveniles and adults.

14. **Get input from administrative and line staff, and others involved in treatment programs, when undertaking development of a classification system.** Since administrators, line staff, and treatment providers possess different types of information, it is important that none of these groups is excluded from the process. Doing so may jeopardize the system's feasibility, efficiency, validity, and reliability, as well as staff's and program providers' commitment to the success of the process and facility.

# Benefits of Implementing a Classification System

When properly designed and implemented, objective classification systems can provide a number of benefits, including:

■ Improved institutional security
■ Increased public security
■ Higher morale/lower stress among staff
■ More encouragement of inmate/residents to behave in order to achieve greater privileges, lower levels of supervision, and perhaps early release
■ Greater equity and fairness in custody/housing decisions
■ Efficient decision-making
■ Better matching of inmate/residents and programs
■ Increased likelihood of identifying inmate/residents who need special services
■ Better information for program and facility planning
■ Lower percentage of high security cells/rooms
■ Reduced construction cost
■ Possibly reduced operational cost -- as high security housing units often have higher staff to inmate/resident ratios

### Improved institutional security
The facility can lower the risk of violence and escape attempts by assigning inmates/residents classified as high risk for these behaviors to high levels of supervision and security.

### Increased public security
The same factors that predict violence within the facility often forecast which inmates/residents have the highest likelihood of committing another crime (especially a violent one) if released. Proper classification can impact time and conditions of release for pre-adjudicated youth/ pre-trial adults.

### Higher morale/lower stress among staff
Better identification and subsequent separation of high-risk inmates/residents will increase the confidence of staff that they know what to expect from the inmate/residents under their supervision, and that they have sufficient resources to deal with most potential problems. The resulting improvement in staff attitudes should lead to lower absenteeism and turnover and higher levels of job performance.

### More encouragement of inmates/residents to behave in order to achieve greater privileges and lower levels of supervision/early release
The criteria used by the classification instrument to make custody/housing decisions clearly define which behaviors will be rewarded by lower security assignments and punished by higher security assignments.

### Greater equity and fairness in custody/housing decisions
An objective classification system defines standards of behavior in observable terms and applies these standards equally to all inmates/residents. Inmates/residents are more likely to respect and abide by a system that is fair and reasonable. This sense of confidence and respect for the OCS may carry over to other aspects of facility operations.

### Efficient decision-making
Decisions made with a standardized classification system can be processed quickly and with confidence.

### Better matching of inmate/residents and programs
When needs assessments are included in the classification instruments, the screening process can help match inmates/residents to programs, and can help ensure that programs evolve from inmates/residents' needs.

### Increased likelihood of identifying inmates/residents who need special services

Good classification instruments include items that attempt to identify inmates/residents who require special care (e.g. suicidal tendencies, drug or alcohol addiction).

### Better information for program and facility planning

The aggregated data from a classification system are invaluable in monitoring and forecasting facility and programmatic needs, such as the need for new, separate, population-specific housing units, or changing the use of a housing unit (e.g., from general population to a therapeutic community for substance abusers), supplemental staff training, or new programs.

## Potential Drawbacks of Objective Classification

The main drawback of instituting an objective classification system is the time and expense, especially at start-up. These may include:

- ■ Time to interview the stakeholders in the system about the criteria to use to define risk and treatment groups.
- ■ Money to hire a consultant, if the Tribe has limited or no experience with the design and implementation of classification systems, and if other resources (e.g. from BIA or JPI) are limited.
- ■ Training staff to gather the data for and make decisions from the classification instrument
- ■ Development and operation of a management information system that records all data about classification, including the initial decision, changes in the decision (overrides), and the behavior of the inmate during custody for use in possible re-classification.

A way to significantly reduce time and cost is to use available resources from BIA, NIC, BJA and JPI. It is always easier to modify something that exists than to "reinvent the wheel." BIA, JPI, NIC, or BJA may be able to provide staff or a Technical Assistance Provider or other consultant who can help. A second way to reduce time and expenditures is to make maximum use of relevant existing information from official records that must be kept for other purposes, such as court documents and intake assessments.

A third way to lower expenses is to reduce the scope and complexity of the classification system. The classification system should only make distinctions that are useful for current or planned custody assignment and program development decisions. Generally, smaller facilities have fewer housing units, and this has a direct impact on the ability to house adults and juveniles by classification categories. While extensive information is still useful for treatment planning, it may be less relevant to classification and housing unit placement when there are fewer housing units. For example, if there are only five housing units, then for housing placement, there should be no more than five classification categories. If the number of classification categories is greater than the number of housing units, then decisions must be made about which categories of inmates/juveniles may be housed in the same housing units.

Also, consult the web sites of the National Institute of Corrections and of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, both of which contain numerous articles with examples of and research on objective classification instruments.

Other than its initial expense, the most serious potential drawbacks of an OCS stems from the failure to implement the classification process correctly, either through faulty procedures or by regularly ignoring its recommendations. Too often, the result is litigation for unfair decisions about custody or housing. Even when there is no litigation, the result of misuse is to invalidate the classification process and, as a result, reduce or eliminate its potential benefits.

## Some Additional Considerations

In addition to the principles identified earlier, there are some other common themes in research about OCS:

- **The best approach is to involve all major stakeholders in the design and any subsequent re-design of an OCS.** These stakeholders might include: management and staff of the adult and/or juvenile corrections system, inmates/residents and their advocates, judges, lawyers, prosecutors, BIA, Indian Health Services, Education, and representatives of important groups in the community (e.g. Boys and Girls Club, alcohol and drug programs, family counseling). Many of these individuals will have important contributions to make to any discussion of the criteria to use, sources of data, and ways to ensure and monitor proper implementation of the process. All of them are necessary to legitimize the OCS, and reduce the likelihood of costly mistakes in housing assignments and/or litigation in the future.

- **Integrate the OCS with other record-keeping systems inside and outside the facility.** As mentioned, the cost of data collection for the OCS can be reduced by relying whenever possible on existing sources of data. The complement to this suggestion is to collect data for the OCS that is useful for other functions. For example, if a new process is implemented to gather information about behavior during detention/incarceration for making decisions about custody level, then perhaps the same data will be useful to case managers and social work staff within the Tribe's correctional agency, IHS, and other program providers

  An ideal strategy is to integrate the data about inmates/residents in correctional facilities with information from other OCS agencies. An information base of this sort can be extremely helpful for making decisions about custody and service needs, especially at the time of intake. On the other hand, these systems may be costly and time-consuming to develop when created "from scratch."

- **Keep OCS data about released inmates/residents available for subsequent classifications of individuals returned to custody in the future.** Data about behavior and specialized services can be particularly useful for future intake and classification decisions, and some of the data may not be available from any other source.

- **Distinguish between factors that will individually lead to a specific recommendation and those that in combination will lead to the**

**same recommendation.** For example, detention for a very serious felony may rule out a decision to release the individual from custody and/or place him in maximum security. In contrast, the same recommendation may be produced by a less serious felony in combination with two or more serious incidents (assaults, escape attempts, etc.) while in custody.

- **Simpler is often better.** A recurrent theme in this primer is the need to balance the goals and costs of instituting an OCS. Similarly, it is self-defeating to design an OCS that tries to do too much- especially in the early stages of implementation or in small to medium size corrections systems. The research on OCS is filled with examples of partial or complete failure to achieve intended goals because the process was too ambitious, which resulted in its incomplete implementation.

"Simpler is better" is especially important for small facilities; and most Tribal correctional facilities are relatively small. An 800-bed county jail may have, for example, separate housing units for 16 classification categories, but a 50-bed facility with 16 units for 50 beds (average of 3 beds/ housing unit) would be impractical, staff inefficient, and costly (more walls, doors, dayrooms, showers, and, most significantly, staff).

## Identifying Individuals with Substance Abuse/ Dependence Issues

This section presents an example of the use of objective classification for the identification and development of treatment plans for inmates/residents with substance abuse problems. Such individuals pose serious health and safety risks in correctional settings, and may require specialized housing and medical attention. Therefore, it is imperative that they be properly identified so that appropriate treatment can be coordinated.

A complete classification system for identifying inmates/residents with substance abuse/dependence issues should include the components identified below.

- **Screening Process** The goal of the screening process is to initially identify which inmates/residents have alcohol- and/or drug-

related problems or are at risk for developing them. In a juvenile or adult correctional setting, screening usually consists of brief written, oral, and/or computerized questionnaires. The primary objective of the screening process is to select in a cost efficient manner which inmates need more extensive evaluation. The best screening instruments to select are ones that have already been tested and proven to be reliable and valid for identifying substance abuse issues in corrections populations, such as the Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory (SASSI) or Drug Use Screening Inventory-Revised (DUSI-R). A positive score on the screening instrument may be validated by a substance test. However, managers should consider the potential benefits, obstacles, legal issues and costs of establishing and maintaining a standardized drug-testing program before implementing this option.

■ **Assessment Processes** An assessment is a more comprehensive, detailed approach than the initial screening that results in a diagnostic impression and the beginning of the treatment process. Assessment information is typically gathered from existing records, intensive interviews, and standardized instruments. The level of detail of the assessment instrument should be sufficient to guide the development and evaluation of treatment programs.

■ **Treatment Alternatives** The best classification systems match treatment recommendations to the severity of the substance abuse problem as identified by the assessment. For example, the Bureau of Substance Abuse Treatment provides services via a "Tier" system ranging from substance abuse education for inmates who have little or no history of substance abuse to highly structured treatment and relapse prevention programs for those with severe substance abuse issues.

This guide suggests that "simpler is better" in designing an OCS system. A related suggestion is to consider practical realities in making OCS-related decisions. For example, the decision to place a youth in maximum security may be based on a total point score on the OCS. Although the cutoff point should reflect the need to separate a certain class of inmate/resident, it might also recognize the finite number of beds, staff and resources that are allocated to appropriately deal with that population. Accordingly, the cutoff should be set high enough to assure sufficient beds and resources for all the inmates/residents who exceed that score. This is fair and legal as long as the rules for determining the score are applied consistently to every inmate/resident. In other words, in order for the classification system to be meaningful, the tribal system must have the capacity to tie appropriate responses (housing and/or programmatic) to all inmates/residents that fall within established point score ranges on the OCS.

# A Closing Thought: Balancing Objectivity and Practicality