

**Classification of Women Offenders:  
A National Assessment of Current Practices  
and the Experiences of Three States**

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This report was funded by the National Institute of Corrections under cooperative agreement #99P10IGL2 with the University of Cincinnati Division of Criminal Justice. Points of view or opinions stated in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

## I. Introduction

Over the past decade, women's prison populations have grown considerably faster than men's (Austin, Bruce, Carroll, McCall, & Richards, 2000; Beck & Harrison, 2001; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Gillard & Beck, 1998). Since 1990, the number of incarcerated women offenders increased 108 percent while men accounted for a 77 percent increase (Beck & Harrison, 2001).<sup>1</sup> Growth rates of this magnitude underscore the need for sound strategies of classification and assessment (Beck & Mumola, 1999). In this context, however, a recent nationwide survey of correctional administrators and practitioners observes that existing classification models for women – many of them originally designed for male incarcerates – are not relevant to the characteristics of women offenders (Morash, Bynum, & Koons, 1998). Classification systems for women have also been faulted for their incompatibility with emerging research on gender-specific programming or with managerial considerations unique to women offenders (Burke & Adams, 1991; LIS, Inc, 1998; Morash et. al, 1998; Ryan, 1994).

The call for improving classification and programming for women predates the recent surge in the size of these prison populations. Women and girls, especially those who are incarcerated, have long been overlooked in practice and research due to reduced economies of scale (there were fewer of them) and gendered assumptions about the causes of their criminal behavior (Belknap, 1996; Dobash, Dobash & Gutteridge, 1986; Owen, B.; Pollock-Byrne, 1990; Rafter, 1990; Weisheit & Mahan, 1988).

In 1999, the Prisons Division of the National Institute of Corrections sought to address these issues through two initiatives (a) Classification of Women Offenders, two cooperative agreements<sup>2</sup> designed to develop improved strategies for classifying women offenders, and (b) Gender Responsive Principles (Bloom & Owen, forthcoming), a series of cooperative agreements endeavoring to assemble information and to improve programming for women. Both of these projects were completed in 2002.

This report summarizes the findings of one of the cooperative agreements dealing with classification of women offenders. The tasks of this project included:

- A national assessment of current practices for classifying women offenders.

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<sup>1</sup> The proportion of incarcerated women (59 per 100,000 U.S. women) remains much smaller than proportion of incarcerated males (915 per 100,000 U.S. males) (Beck & Harrison, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> These cooperative agreements were administered by Dr. Patricia Van Voorhis, at the Center for Criminal Justice Research at the University of Cincinnati, and Dr. Patricia Hardyman at the Institute on Crime, Justice and Corrections at George Washington University.

- Technical assistance to refine the classification models used in three states -- Hawaii, Colorado, and Nebraska.

The following sections (a) review the classification research, (b) discuss classification practices and concerns raised by prison officials across 49 states, and (c) describe system modifications initiated by three states.

## **II. Issues in Classifying Women Offenders: The Literature**

This project took place in the context of uncertainty regarding the role and status of objective classification systems for incarcerated women. Two issues seemed fundamental to this observation. First, the literature was not clear about what the purpose of classifying women offenders *should* be---treatment-oriented or custody-oriented, or both. And on an applied level, agencies' answers to the question ---What do you want your classification system to do? --- were crucial to their approach to classification.

Second, there were so few validation studies involving women offenders that we could not determine whether the current generation of classification systems was serving *any* of the purposes of classification---custody, housing, or programming.

### **Classifying Women for Purposes of Security/Custody**

Early (Burke & Adams, 1991) and more recent (Morash et al., 1998) cross-state surveys of correctional agencies report that approximately 40 states use the same objective classification system for women and men. In most instances these involve variations of an NIC Model Prisons approach, a system for predicting disciplinary problems. The earlier NIC classification models contain mostly static variables (e.g., history of institutional violence, severity of current and prior convictions, escape history, current or pending detainers, prior felonies, substance abuse, assaultive behavior, age). Later NIC versions add some dynamic variables, such as education, employment, and performance in treatment programs.

A focus on prison security seems appropriate given increases in the size of women's populations and changes in their composition (e.g., increases in the number of gang members and younger offenders). However, not all correctional officials agree that women offenders are as dangerous as men (Burke & Adams, 1991; Morash et al., 1998). Empirical support for this perception is seen in (a) some (though not all) state validation studies of security-based classification systems for women (e.g., Alexander & Humphrey, 1988; Hardyman, 1999), and (b) several studies conducted prior to the 1980s and reviewed by Bowker (1981). In contrast, other

researchers assert that women offenders are becoming more aggressive and problematic over time (Kruttschnitt & Krmpotich, 1990; Tischler & Marquart, 1989; Williams, 1981).

Apart from the issue of dangerousness, some question the relevance of commonly used classification variables, such as static criminal history variables and stability factors (e.g., age, education, and employment)(Burke & Adams, 1991). Extant research identifies a number of more relevant risk factors for women, including (a) marital status and suicide attempts (Forcier, 1995); (b) family structure of the childhood home (Balthazar & Cook, 1984; Kruttschnitt & Krmpotich, 1990); (c) childhood abuse, depression and substance abuse (McClellan, Farabee, & Crouch, 1997); (d) single parenting and reliance upon public assistance (Bonta, Pang, Wallace-Capretta, 1995); and (e) dysfunctional relationships (Covington, 1998). More controversial additions cite prison homosexual relationships as generating many acts of aggression in women's prisons (e.g., see Tischler & Marquart, 1989).

Even more questionable is the issue of whether or not existing classification models are valid for women offenders. Although it has long been considered unethical to apply *any* assessment to a population other than the one used for its construction and validation (AACP, 2000; APA, 1992), failure to validate correctional assessments to specific populations is a common observation (Van Voorhis & Brown, 1996). Of course, invalid classifications then result in inappropriate placements. Rather than being unique to corrections, this situation has unfortunate parallels to the fields of education, mental health, and medicine. In many cases, the consequences adversely affect women, resulting in less accurate (a) college admissions (Sternberg & Williams, 1997); (b) mental health assessments (Gilligan, 1993); (c) information regarding women's heart attacks and strokes (Arnstein, Buselli, & Rankin, 1996); and (d) understandings of drug dosages and side effects for women (Martin, Biswas, Freemantle, Pearce, & Mann, 1998). All of these adversities started with the error of conducting most studies on men and prematurely generalizing the findings to women.

A related issue concerns whether security/custody classification systems are over-classifying female offenders, directing that they be assigned to higher security levels than warranted. Over-classification occurs in three ways. First, prediction instruments for populations with low base rates on the criterion variable produce more false positive classifications than instruments for populations where variation on the criterion variable is evenly distributed (see Brennan, 1998; Clear, 1988). Second, even in cases where "maximum custody" is indicative of a greater likelihood of problematic behavior than "minimum custody", the meaning of *seriousness* is relative to the population at hand (Van Voorhis & Brown, 1996). "Maximum custody" in a group with a low base rate, for example, could translate into 30% of the group committing a

prison misconduct, whereas the same label for a group with higher base rates (e.g., male prison inmates) could translate into a 60% rate of misconducts. Simply put, maximum custody females may be quite different from maximum custody males. If so, the difference has clear implications for policy and practice. Third, if the dependent/criterion variable (misconducts) captures different behaviors for men and women, one group or the other can have inflated reclassification levels. To illustrate, staff who are ill-prepared to supervise women offenders may cope with these difficulties by citing women more readily than men for minor infractions (see Dobash, Dobash, & Gutteridge, 1986). The result inflates reclassification scores, because most place heavy reliance upon prison behavior.

### **Classification for Case Management and Treatment Purposes**

Custody classification systems cannot assist efforts to make treatment-related decisions (Andrews & Bonta, 1998; Van Voorhis, 2000). Agencies invested in offender programming require needs-based classification tools. Typically these consist of checklists indicating whether inmates show problems related to: (a) substance abuse, (b) physical health, (c) mental health (d) education, (e) employment, or (f) family issues. Emerging community correctional classification systems simultaneously assess risk and needs by tapping “criminogenic needs”, dynamic risk factors for criminal behavior (Andrews, Bonta, & Hoge, 1990; Andrews & Bonta, 1998). Even though criminogenic needs also predict prison misconducts (see Andrews & Bonta, 1995), some argue that it is important to keep the custody classification and the needs classification separate in prison classification models (Adams & Henning, 1982). This admonition reflects ethical concerns for elevating custody according to problems or status rather than behavior.

The return of correctional treatment as a core feature of correctional policy and philosophy (Cullen Gendreau, 2001) highlights the importance of accurate needs assessments. At the same time, recent interest in gender-specific programming suggests that needs assessments for women attend to (a) victimization; (b) childcare; (c) self-esteem; and (d) women’s unique health, substance abuse and mental health issues (Brennan, 1998; LIS, Inc., 1998; Morash et al., 1998). Although some studies find that criminogenic needs are the same for men and women, the body of research on this issue is equivocal. A meta-analysis of delinquency causation studies conducted by Simourd and Andrews (1994), for example, reports that the most important criminogenic needs are the same for males and females. However, it may be that only *some* criminogenic needs are the same for men and women. Advocates of gender-responsive programming suggest additional gender-responsive needs, which do not appear on the current generation of offender needs assessments. For example, several authors recommended

interventions targeted to physical and sexual abuse, self-esteem, and mental health (see Belknap, Dunn, & Holsinger, 1997; Bloom & Owen, forthcoming; Dembo et. al, 1992; Holsinger, 1999; Miller et al., 1995; Morash et al., 1998; Owen, 1993). Women appear to have different paths to substance abuse than men (Wanberg & Milkman, 1998). Their offending may be more likely than men's to involve relationship issues (Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995; Covington, 1998; Owen, 1993) and less likely to involve antisocial rationalizations (Erez, 1988). Women offenders are far more likely than men to be diagnosed with mental illness (Austin et al., 2000; Bloom & Owen, forthcoming; Covington, 1998; Morash et al, 1998).

The possibility that some of the gender-responsive needs may also predict prison misconducts or new offenses complicates matters. Although problematic for both males and females, abuse and neglect seem to be more predictive of the future offending of females than males (McClellan, Farabee, & Crouch, 1997; Rivera & Widom, 1990). In correctional settings for both girls and women, the proportion of inmates reporting past physical and sexual abuse is much higher than it is for males (Belknap et al., 1997; Browne, Miller, & Maguin, 1999; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Dembo, Williams, Wothke, Schmeidler, & Brown, 1992; Holsinger, 1999; McClellan, Farabee, & Crouch, 1997; Morash et al., 1998; Snell, 1994). Finally, the causal paths between abuse and offending, for females, may be intertwined with anxiety, depression, emotional problems, self-esteem, and substance abuse (Miller et. al., 1995; McClellan et. al., 1997; Obeidallah & Earls, 1999). Of course, incorporating needs such as abuse, depression, and self-esteem into risk assessments or custody determinations presents a new set of problems. Even though such factors may be highly predictive, the prospect of holding offenders in more austere environments on the bases of their problems rather than their behavior raises a number of concerns.

### **Legal Impediments**

Although the preceding sections highlight a number of reasons for constructing separate classification systems for men and women, some see legal impediments to such a course. Following much litigation and legislation, women prison inmates are now mandated to be afforded equality in housing, access to legal services, programming, employee wages, medical facilities and other matters pertaining to their rights and wellbeing. Many have interpreted classification to fall within this rubric (Brennan, 1998). As with other equity issues, some corrections officials vehemently defend parity as requiring identical classification systems for men and women.

The security afforded such a stance is illusive. Equity is *not* present when identical systems prove valid for men but not for women. A system that recognizes men's needs better than it does women's, for example, is inherently unequal. Moreover, if proportionately more maximum custody men commit predatory acts than similarly classified women, the system already lacks parity. In these instances, even though the classification instruments and procedures look identical, they produce disparate outcome. With this in mind, some voice concern that *not* having separate systems may lead to litigation (Austin et. al, 1993; Brennan, 1998). This was recently illustrated when the State of Michigan (Cain vs. Michigan DOC) lost a class action suit brought by women offenders who were classified by the *same* system that was used for men.

In sum, the existing literature frames a number of issues for the current cooperative agreement. National surveys suggested that women and men are classified by the same systems, but these studies are either becoming outdated (Burke & Adams, 1991) or they do not focus exclusively on classification issues (e.g., Morash et al., 1998). Even so, they raise concerns for whether current systems are valid for women offenders. We observe no examples of classification factors that were optimally relevant to women's offending patterns or their programming needs. Utilization of gender-responsive factors has been discouraged for (a) legal reasons [e.g., equal protection concerns (see Brennan, 1998; Burke & Adams, 1991)];<sup>3</sup> (b) lack of research on women-specific predictors of institutional infractions; (c) ongoing disagreements concerning whether or not there are enough dangerous behaviors to predict; and (d) arguments concerning whether or not women *should be* classified according to risk (Stanko, 1997). With the literature identifying three crucial issues: validity, over-classification, and lack of gender-responsivity, our next step involved a national assessment of 50 states and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The assessment sought to understand the extent to which these issues typified current correctional practices and whether agencies had formulated approaches for resolving them.

### **III. National Assessment of Current Practices for Classifying Women Offenders**

The national assessment sought detailed descriptions of practices currently in use for women offenders, including both problematic areas and emerging strategies (see Van Voorhis & Presser, 2001). We were interested in officials' perceptions of whether their systems "worked" for women and served as a tool for making custody, programming, and housing decisions. We explored the extent to which agencies found the classification needs of women offenders to be

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<sup>3</sup> Burke and Adams (1991), attach a legal analysis conducted by Nicholas and Loeb (1991) which effectively dispel these concerns.

different from men and were particularly attentive to states that had made changes to their systems. Finally, we inquired about the psychometric quality of systems currently in place: What were the origins of the system? Was it developed with women offenders in mind, or was it designed for men and applied to women? Had the systems been validated for women offenders?

These issues were addressed through telephone contacts with representatives from 50 state correctional agencies and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. These took place between February 29 and May 23, 2000. Most of the respondents (33) were state directors of classification; five (5) were administrators of women's facilities; four (4) were research analysts; one (1) was a clinical director; and eight (8) were serving in some other administrative capacity (e.g., regional administrators). Occasionally, we contacted a consultant or researcher known to have worked with the agency.

## Findings

### Are Women and Men Classified Differently?

Although many respondents discussed clear differences between men and women offenders in terms of needs and risks to institutional and public safety, very few states had incorporated these differences into their objective prison classification instruments.

All respondents considered the custody assessment to be the foundation of their classification approach:

- Many states (21) employed a system which was based on the NIC Model Prisons instrument. These contained mostly static (unchangeable) factors. Most states reclassified offenders using an objective reclassification tool (usually the NIC model), administered at intervals ranging from three to six months. Fourteen (14) states only reclassified women on an annual basis. Of course, for numerous women serving short sentences annual reclassification meant *no* reclassification.
- Typically, states used systems that were either developed for men and then applied to women (four states) or systems that were developed for both men and women (39 states). To say that a system was developed for men and women, however, is not the same as saying that it incorporated factors that were relevant to women, or that it had been validated for women.
- Thirty-four (34) states reported using an objective tool to summarize offender needs. Often more specific assessments were used to measure single needs (e.g., education, substance abuse, and mental health). Only eight (8) states reported use of a system that identified needs in a gender-responsive manner.
- Although seventeen (17) agencies reported using internal classification systems to guide housing assignments, the internal classification models were the same for men and women.
- Twelve (12) states reported different classification procedures for men and women.



The distinctions were as follows:

- Four states have separate custody classification system for women (Idaho, New York, Massachusetts, and Ohio).
- Four states have different cut-off scores for men and women, representing an attempt to tie each custody level to a group of offenders with similar behavioral outcomes.
- Two states have changed specific variables to better reflect the nature of women's offending and their disciplinary behaviors in prison. For example, New York State reduces points on a common variable, seriousness of the current offense, for women who murdered an abuser.
- Four states have expanded options on existing variables to accommodate the nature of women's offending and infractions. Employment variables, for example, were changed to avoid classifying full-time parents/caregivers as unemployed. Escape variables were modified to provide lower scores for offenders who walked away from community or other non-secure settings.

### **What should be the purpose of classifying women offenders?**

The overwhelming majority of respondents noted security and public safety as the central purpose to be served by incarcerating and classifying women offenders. Even so, respondents in 15 states indicated that some classification considerations were more relevant to women offenders than to men. These respondents voiced a desire for classification models that would (a) better support gender-responsive programming, and (b) move less serious women offenders through the system more quickly.

### **What considerations should govern the classification of women offenders?**

Most Women Offenders are Less Dangerous than Male Offenders: A concern for expedient movement of women to lower custody and community levels accorded with an underlying sense that women offenders do not pose the same security risks as men: 51 percent of the respondents reported that women either pose less risk than men, or a much smaller portion of women than men pose serious threats to institutional and public safety.

Women Have Different Needs than Men: Responses to questions about women's programming and treatment needs strongly echoed the emerging writings on gender-responsive programming (e.g., see Bloom & Owen, forthcoming). Forty-nine respondents (92 percent) asserted that women have unique needs that should be addressed in correctional settings. These needs included (a) trauma and abuse (23); (b) self-esteem/assertiveness (10); (c) vocational

needs (10); (d) medical (21); (e) mental health (14); (f) parenting and childcare (33); and (g) relationship issues (8).

### **What problems are encountered in classifying women offenders?**

#### Many States Reported that Their Systems were Over-classifying Women Offenders.

That is, the classification system assigned too many women to unnecessarily high custody levels which then required officials to override the classifications to lower custody levels.

Representatives of ten (10) states indicated that they overrode more than fifteen percent of their classification scores (rates ranged from 18 to 70 percent of their cases). In effect, these agencies (20 percent of the total) indicated that their systems were not working for women offenders.

Many States Did not Use the Custody Classification Systems to Make Institutional or Housing Decisions for Women Offenders. Given the observation that public safety and security was their primary concern, it was surprising to learn that in 35 states women with different custody scores were housed together in at least one if not all of the state's facilities for women. That is regardless of the assigned custody level, women, unlike men, were often assigned to an institution where custody did not impact housing, privileges, programming, or movement throughout the facility. Furthermore, this practice occurred without increased risk of prison misconducts or breaches of security. Custody scores could, however, affect whether a woman worked outside of the facility's perimeter, the types of restraints required when transporting her outside of the institution, and, more importantly, whether or not she moved to a community placement.

Only Fourteen (14) States Reported Validating their Custody Classification Systems on a Sample of Women Offenders. Eleven (11) states (not included in the 14 with women-specific studies) combined women and men in the same validation sample. Unfortunately, combined samples cannot be considered adequate validation studies for women offenders, because they often contain far fewer women than men. The resulting statistics are then driven by the majority of the sample--men. *If* the states participating in the current cooperative agreements actually implement the changes recommended by their validation studies, the number of states with valid classification systems for women could increase to 19 states.

Needs Assessment: In spite of the fact that 49 respondents identified needs/problems that were unique to women offenders, only eight (8) states had some provisions to assess men and women differently. This is unfortunate because needs assessments impact programming; when needs are not identified, they are more likely to be overlooked.

#### **IV. Focus Groups with Corrections Professionals and Women Offenders**

Many of these same issues were addressed in focus groups with staff and inmates. These accompanied the initial site visits to three states selected to participate in this cooperative agreement. Focus groups were held with (a) women offenders, (b) wardens, (c) line staff, and (d) case management staff. In addition, each state formed a steering committee comprised of the director of classification for the state, research personnel, deputy directors, wardens of women's facilities, and case managers. In Hawaii, steering committee meetings were sometimes attended by representatives of a women's advocacy commission working to improve correctional options for women offenders.

**Staff and Administrators** identified a number of issues with existing custody classification systems. For two of the states, their dissatisfaction was with NIC models which had been altered since their implementation. The third state used a system developed in-house, which nevertheless contained some of the same variables as the NIC versions. Their concerns were as follows:

- The systems did not appear to make clear distinctions between women offenders. Most notably, some staff claimed that high custody women offenders often did not pose more adjustment difficulties than minimum custody offenders.
- Women with many problems (e.g., mental illness, substance abuse, etc.) appeared more likely to make poor prison adjustments than those with high custody scores.
- The reclassification instruments lacked sufficient incentives (e.g, credit for participation in work and programs).
- The systems did not assist with programming and case management.
- Women offenders were over-classified. Overriding the scores reached by the classification instruments occurred frequently in order to move women to appropriate assignments.
- Reclassification scores were overly inflated by difficulties in managing women offenders. Unskilled staff, in particular, often resorted to excessive citations in lieu of more effective management practices.
- Classification models did not move women into least restrictive options fast enough. They did not accommodate women's shorter sentences, nor did they adequately inform transitions into community settings.

**Women Offenders** spoke to the problems with current system and suggested new classification factors. For example, when we asked "what problem(s) could get you back into the system?" we

were looking to identify criminogenic needs that may or may not be contained on current needs assessments. Their responses were as follows:

- Drugs and alcohol.
- Loosing our own voice in intimate relationships, and then reverting back to criminal behavior.
- Abuse and trauma
- Low self-esteem
- Mental illness.
- Unemployment
- Rage.

Initial meetings also called attention to specific classification variables that, because they captured women's behavior somewhat differently from men's, elevated women's classification scores in inaccurate ways. These variables included:

- Seriousness of the current offense for women who committed a one-time act against an abuser.
- Escape history variables that allotted excessive points to walk-aways from a non-secure facility or counted walk-aways on several variables simultaneously.
- Employment variables that did not credit as employed women who were caregivers to children and other family members.
- Time frames for counting/removing points attributable to disciplinary infractions that were too long for women's sentences. As a result, disciplinary infractions were dynamic factors for men, because with time and no further incidents, they were removed from later reclassification scores. For women serving shorter sentences, disciplinary infractions served as static variables; many would not be incarcerated long enough for the points to be reduced. At the same the impact of disciplinary scores could serve as an incentive for men, thereby assisting the tasks of prison management, but not for many women.

## **V. Directions for Technical Assistance**

The initial stages of this project were devoted to information gathering, through literature reviews, a national assessment, and focus groups with correctional staff, administrators, and inmates. Together these sources of information identified some key directions for the subsequent cooperative agreements. To summarize:

- There were urgent and ethical demands to validate custody classification systems to women offenders. We note above that at the beginning of the cooperative agreements only 14 states had validated their systems on women offenders.

- There was wide consensus that women offenders were over-classified to higher custody levels than their institutional adjustment problems warranted. In many cases, over-classification occurred because the custody classification models were invalid.
- It was not clear that the current generation of custody instruments contained optimal predictors of institutional adjustment problems. In this regard, we were struck by those focus groups which reported that (a) women offenders appeared to be a more troubled group than male offenders, and (b) troubled women (e.g., mentally ill, substance abusing, and victims of abuse) appeared to incur more disciplinary problems than women with high custody scores.
- The field was moving in the direction of gender-responsive programming, but needs assessments, if available, did not focus on gender-responsive issues such as (a) abuse, (b) parenting, (c) relationships, (d) self-esteem/self-efficacy, and (e) mental health.

We did not pursue all of these tasks with every state receiving technical assistance. A priority, however, was to assure that custody systems were valid for women offenders and were not erroneously over-classifying women offenders. We focused on custody systems, because custody classification (in various states of predictive accuracy) was a standard in all states. In addition, inherent in the problems of over-classification was the urgent need to move women to the settings required by legal mandates--the least restrictive options.

We also worked with needs assessments, but recognized that not all states were as prepared to address the assessment and treatment for clinical needs as they were to address security considerations. Doing so required additional resources devoted to (a) the completion of the needs assessments, (b) staff-training, and (c) program resources to respond to the needs assessments. With respect to gender-responsive needs, this would involve new programs. As a result, we addressed custody concerns in all three of the technical assistance sites, and needs assessments in two of the three sites. As will be seen, in one site, we also successfully tested the idea of combining needs and custody classification into a single assessment approach.

We turn now to accounts of the three states.

## **VI. Technical Assistance: Hawaii Department of Public Safety**

### **Background**

The Hawaii Department of Public Safety was selected in March, 2000 to be one of the cooperative agreement sites. Following an initial site visit (April 3-7, 2000) and meetings with HDPS officials and the Classification Steering Committee, the goal of reducing over-classification through a valid classification system was determined to be a priority (see Van

Voorhis & Peiler, 2001). At the beginning of the project, 236 women were housed at the Women's Community Correctional Center on Oahu, and an additional 79 women had been sent to Oklahoma to relieve prison overcrowding. These numbers represented a substantial increase in inmates over a relatively short time period. In 1992, for example, the State housed only 164 women offenders.

The initial application requested assistance with jail classification and with needs assessments. We decided to focus on the custody system rather than all three classification issues for three reasons. First, it was hoped the planned modifications would move more women to minimum and community custody, thereby affording an opportunity to transfer the Oklahoma offenders back to Oahu. Returning the Oklahoma inmates to settings closer to their families was an important consideration for Hawaii officials. Second, substantial differences in policies, procedures, and conditions at each of the four jails, located on separate islands, recommended against developing a single classification model for jailed women offenders. Sheriffs enjoyed considerable autonomy, and it was unlikely that a single model would be appropriate or even used at each of the sites. Third, the decision to postpone development of an objective needs assessment reflected concern for staff shortages and limited organizational resources. Shortages in case management staff, in particular, placed serious constraints on the Agency's efforts to complete initial and reclassification assessments in a timely manner.<sup>4</sup> With such limited resources for the custody classification, full-scale development and implementation of a new needs assessment did not seem feasible. The agency's strategic plan called for increasing programming options for women offenders (in both institutional and community settings). Attainment of such programming would call for future technical assistance to develop a gender-responsive needs assessment, but the resources for implementing such a system were not present at the time of this cooperative agreement.

### **Existing Custody Classification System**

Hawaii's current classification instruments was developed by NIC and NCCD in the 1980s and implemented in Hawaii in 1991. Intake classification factors included: severity of prior institutional violence, current and prior offenses, escape history, history of assaultive behaviors, involvement in substance abuse, prior felony convictions, and stability factors (e.g., age, education and employment). The reclassification instrument added: time to serve, frequency and severity of prison misconducts, involvement in drugs or alcohol while incarcerated. As with

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<sup>4</sup> The agency was experiencing staff shortages, space shortages at community correctional sites, limited resources for staff training, and a difficult transition to a new information system.

many states, the agency appeared to make several changes over the intervening years. Most importantly, non-discretionary overrides to medium custody were issued to inmates who were (a) less than one year from their last violent episode; (b) on detainers; (c) within 7 years of an escape or attempted escape; or (d) sentenced to maximum terms of greater than 60 months (initial) or 48 months (reclassification). The escape variable seemed especially problematic to women offenders, because it included women who walked away from community correctional facilities in with more serious escapes (e.g., escape over a secure perimeter).

This system was validated in 1996 in a study which did not disaggregate the female population for a separate validation analysis (Bench, 1996). Nevertheless, the study found that classification scores suffered from “extensive missing values, coding omissions, and coding irregularities” (p. 38); these, in turn, compromised the validity and reliability of the classification results.

#### **Modifications and Validation Procedures.**

The initial and reclassification instruments were reviewed qualitatively during the first site visit. Separate focus groups (e.g., women offenders, the classification steering committee, and key staff at the WCCC) identified a number of items that were believed to be contributing to an over-classification. The Steering Committee suggested changes to several factors. Most of these involved reductions in weights and time frames for “counting” prior acts of violence, misconducts, and certain types of escapes. The Committee also identified ways to prevent counting minor escapes on multiple classification items. In recommendations that seemed especially relevant to women offenders (a) two points were deducted from the severity of the current offense score for women who had committed a one-time act of violence against an abuser in self-defense, and (b) women who were engaged in parenting or care-giving were scored as employed. These changes reflected the consensus of the members of the Steering Committee as well as the understanding that the final recommendation would also reflect the results of empirical tests of whether or not the changes contributed to validity. Final changes are listed on page 21.

Validation of the existing and the modified systems involved selection of representative intake and reclassification samples, data collection, and analyses. Sample selection and data collection relied upon non-automated inmate files. The samples were selected through a systematic random sampling strategy resulting in 112 offenders in the intake sample and 99 in the reclassification sample. Sampling difficulties and case attrition attributable to parole hearings, discharge, and missing data, reduced the sample size over the intended number of 150 offenders

each. Our analyses suggested, however, that the smaller samples were still representative of Hawaii's incarcerated women offenders (see Van Voorhis & Peiler, 2001).

Prison admission dates for the intake sample ranged from January, 1991 until November of 2000. The majority of the sample (93 percent), however, were admitted between 1995 and November of 2000. Among those included in the reclassification sample, reclassification dates spanned seven years, from September 1993 until June 2000.

Demographic, prior record, custody classifications, and rates of institutional misconducts for each sample are shown in Table 1. Not surprisingly, the sample reflected a unique ethnic distribution, with few African American, female offenders (6 percent in the initial classification group and 5 percent in the reclassification group) and high proportions of Hawaiian (36 and 33 percent of the initial and reclassification groups, respectively) and Asian (16 percent of each group) inmates. The conviction offenses were mostly property and drug-related crimes. However, twenty percent of the women in the intake sample (19 percent of the reclassification sample) committed crimes against a person. In eleven percent of the cases (both samples) these offenses involved the use of a weapon and in 18 percent of the intake cases (14 percent of the reclassification cases) these offenses were committed with a male perpetrator. For three women, a homicide was perpetrated against an abuser. Approximately one third of each sample was comprised of women serving their sentences in Oklahoma.

The distribution of inmates across classification types supported the committee's concerns regarding over-classification. The proportion of inmates classified as medium or above on the initial classification system was 56 percent for the intake sample and 30 percent for the reclassification sample. A comparison to other validation studies among women offenders finds medium custody inmates comprising proportions ranging from 16 percent to 18 percent of incarcerated women offenders (see Hardyman & Tullock, 2000; Hardyman & Pearson, 2001).

Finally, the sample typifies other samples of women offenders in that misconducts are not overly serious. Twenty eight offenders (27 percent) of the initial classification sample and 19 offenders (24 percent) in the reclassification sample committed infractions during the 6-9 months following their classification/ reclassification. Only 9 women in the initial sample (9 percent) and 7 women in the reclassification sample (9 percent) committed acts of aggression against inmates or staff. Aggression rates were slightly higher than those observed in other studies involving women offenders (e.g., Hardyman, 1999, Harer & Langan, 2000, Austin, Chan, & Elms, 1993) but still lower than rates for male offenders.



**Table 1. Demographic, Conviction Offense, Classifications, and Misconducts for Intake and Reclassification Samples, Hawaii DPS.**

Variable	Initial		Reclassification	
	N	%	N	%
<u>Age at admission</u>				
Under 20	3	2.9	3	3.1
20 – 29	34	32.7	32	32.7
30 – 39	40	38.4	37	37.8
40 – 45	20	19.3	18	18.4
Above 45	7	6.7	8	8.2
Mean Age		33.2		33.5
<u>Race</u>				
White	29	29.6	31	33.7
Black	6	6.1	5	5.4
Hawaiian	35	35.7	30	32.6
Asian	16	16.3	15	16.3
Other	12	12.2	11	12.0
<u>Nature of the offense</u>				
Person	21	20.4	18	18.8
Property	50	48.5	46	47.9
Drugs	30	29.1	30	31.3
Escape	2	1.9	2	2.1
<u>Weapon used in conviction offense</u>				
Yes	11	11.7	10	11.2
No	82	88.3	77	88.8
<u>Offense committed against an abuser</u>				
Yes	3	3.0	3	3.2
No	96	97.0	90	96.8
<u>Legal status (at intake)</u>				
New commitment	71	68.3	62	63.9
Parole violation	8	7.7	12	12.4
Probation violation	25	24.0	23	23.7
<u>Is inmate being held in Oklahoma</u>				
Yes	34	32.7	34	35.1
No	70	67.3	63	64.9
<u>Maximum Sentence Length</u>				
5 years	59	54.1		
10 years	36	33.0		
15 years	1	.9		
20 years	9	8.3		
50 years	1	.9		
Life w/o parole	3	2.8		

**Table 1: Demographic, Conviction Offense, Classifications, and Misconducts for Intake and Reclassification Samples, Continued.**

Variable	Initial		Reclassification	
	N	%	N	%
<u>Custody level (Original form)</u>				
Community	1	1.0	52	52.5
Minimum	45	43.3	17	17.2
Medium	51	49.0	27	27.3
Close	7	6.7	3	3.0
<u>Number of misconducts</u>				
None	74	72.5	60	75.9
One	16	15.7	12	15.2
Two – Five	9	8.9	6	7.6
Six – Ten	3	2.9	1	1.3
<u>Number of high/greatest misconducts</u>				
None	93	91.2	73	91.3
One	7	6.9	6	7.5
Two	2	2.0	1	1.3

### Results of the Validation Study

Prior to any modifications, the existing classification system was correlated with overall institutional misconducts and serious misconducts occurring six to nine months following intake/reclassification. These findings are shown in Table 2. For the intake sample, statistically significant relationships were observed between custody levels and all misconducts ( $r = .22$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ) and serious misconducts ( $r = .27$ ,  $p \leq .01$ ). The reclassifications showed a significant relationship to serious misconducts ( $r = .29$ ,  $p \leq .10$ ) but not to overall misconducts. Even so, only three of nine intake variables and five of 9 reclassification variables contributed to the validity of the system.

The initial classification of Hawaii’s women offender population was strongly influenced by discretionary overrides. According to the intake classifications 76 percent of the women classified as medium security, received the classification through a non-discretionary override rather as a result of total points accumulated across classification variables. Most of these overrides (N=30) were the result of case managers being required to override to medium any offender with a maximum sentence greater than 60 months. Without this override, only 22 percent of the intake sample would be classified at medium or above.

A similar occurrence was seen on the reclassification instrument where 24 (89 percent) of 27 medium security inmates received their reclassification by virtue of a non-discretionary

override. Again, the typical reason for the override was time-related (having 48 months or more remaining until parole eligibility date). Seventeen inmates were so effected. Time also drove the community security classification, because minimum security inmates were not moved to community classifications until they were within 24 months of their parole eligibility or discharge date.

**Table 2. Percent and Mean Number of Disciplinary Infractions Across Classification Designations, Original Classification System.**

System/Type	N	%	All Misconducts		Most Serious Misconducts <sup>a</sup>	
			%	X	%	X
<u>Initial Classification</u>						
Community	1	.9	0.0	0.00	0.0	0.00
Minimum	44	43.1	18.2	0.50	4.5	0.04
Medium	50	49.1	34.0	0.75	12.0	0.14
Close	7	6.9	42.9	1.57	14.3	0.29
			r = .22**	eta=ns	r=.27***	eta=ns
<u>Reclassification</u>						
Community	40	51.6	25.0	0.41	12.5	0.15
Minimum	13	16.4	15.4	0.31	0.0	0.00
Medium	24	30.4	20.8	0.54	4.2	0.04
Close	2	2.5	50.0	0.50	50.0	0.50
			r = ns	eta = ns	r=ns	eta=ns
<u>Reclassification, less community custody inmates</u>						
Minimum	13	33.3	15.4	0.31	0.0	0.00
Medium	24	61.2	20.8	0.54	4.2	0.04
Close	2	5.1	50.0	0.50	50.0	0.50
			r = ns	eta = ns	r=.29*	eta=.48***

<sup>a</sup> Includes high and greatest misconduct categories.

\*\*\* p ≤ .01

\*\* p ≤ .05

\* p ≤ .10

As shown in Table 3, modifications proposed by the Steering Committee and suggested by statistical analysis further improved the predictive validity of the classification system while also reducing problems with over-classification. Intake classifications were more strongly related to overall misconducts ( $r = .33, p \leq .01$ ) and to serious misconducts ( $r = .27, p \leq .01$ ). For the modified reclassification instrument, findings were not as strong, but still better than those for the existing system. At the same time the proportion of women offenders classified at intake as

medium custody or above decreases from 55 percent on the existing system to 47 percent on the modified system. At reclassification, these proportions decrease from 30 percent on the existing system to 20 percent on the modified system. These reductions fall somewhat short of the figure needed to transfer all Oklahoma inmates back to Oahu, however. The study achieved approximately a 10 percent shift downward in classification scores. The Oklahoma inmates comprise 25-33 percent of Hawaii's women offender population, depending on the time period.

**Table 3. Percent and Mean Number of Disciplinary Infractions Across Classification Designations, Modified Classification System.**

System/Type	N	%	All Misconducts		Most Serious Misconducts <sup>a</sup>	
			%	X	%	X
<u>Initial Classification</u>						
Minimum	53	52.5	13.2	0.21	1.9	0.02
Medium	44	43.6	43.2	1.11	15.9	0.18
Close	4	3.9	50.0	2.50	25.0	0.50
			$r = .33^{***}$	$\eta = .35^{***}$	$r = .27^{***}$	$\eta = .30^{***}$
<u>Reclassification</u>						
Community	35	44.3	31.4	0.54	11.4	0.14
Minimum	27	34.2	11.1	0.11	0.0	0.00
Medium	11	13.9	18.2	0.27	9.1	0.09
Close	6	7.6	50.0	1.67	33.3	0.33
			$r = ns$	$\eta = .36^{**}$	$r = ns$	$\eta = .27^*$
<u>Reclassification, less community custody inmates</u>						
Community	4	10.3	50.0	1.00	0.0	0.00
Minimum	20	51.3	15.4	0.15	0.0	0.00
Medium	9	23.7	11.1	0.11	0.0	0.00
Close	6	15.4	50.0	1.67	33.3	0.33
			$r = ns$	$\eta = .43^{**}$	$r = .39^*$	$\eta = .55^{***}$

<sup>a</sup> Includes high and greatest misconduct categories.

\*\*\*  $p \leq .01$

\*\*  $p \leq .05$

\*  $p \leq .10$

The project involved analyses of all of the existing and modified classification variables, but in the end, most of the improvements were attributable to removing time to serve from the list of non-discretionary overrides. In a state where sentence length were atypically long (see Bench, 1996), this policy affected many prison inmates. Even so, our item analyses found that time to serve *was* significantly related to prison misconducts (see Van Voorhis & Peiler, 2001). As a result, we recommended that it be included as one of the classification variables contributing

to the overall classification score. In this way, it no longer automatically increases classification scores unless other risk factors are present.

On the existing classification system, time to serve is also considered when inmates are classified to community custody. If they are classified at minimum custody, have no overrides, and have less than 24 months remaining on their sentence, they are assigned to community custody. Our reclassification sample showed us that community custody offenders incurred substantial misconducts, further establishing the fact that time and custody variables are not optimal predictors of community infractions. We recommended consideration of a community risk assessment instrument to guide the supervision of community-based offenders. This was especially relevant to Hawaii, where community agencies are moving to adopt the Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R)(Andrews & Bonta, 1995).

Except for detainers, the modified system moved all other non-discretionary overrides to discretionary overrides, because (a) they too contributed to over-classification, but to a lesser degree than time to serve, and (b) they were already considered as separate classification variables incorporated into the custody score.

Finally, the modifications recommended by the classification steering committee to specific variables, in addition to those recommended by the empirical item analyses contributed to improved predictive validity. Five of eight intake classification variables contributed to overall predictive validity and six of 11 variables contributed to the validity of the reclassification system. Final changes to the classification items were as follow:

- Reductions in time frames for counting less serious forms of institutional violence (18 months to 12 months). Weights were reduced slightly.
- A reduction (two points) from severity of the current offense scores for women who had committed a one-time act of violence against an abuser in self-defense.<sup>5</sup> Weights for one option, life with parole were reduced to be lower than the weight for life without parole.
- A reduction in weights (10 points) for time left on minimum sentence (reclassification instrument) for women serving 21 years or more on a minimum sentence. Addition of time to serve to the intake classification form as a scored variable contributing to the overall classification score. Moving sentence length from a non-discretionary override to a discretionary override.
- Improved differentiation of walk-aways from a community facility and escapes from a secure facility on the escape variable. Windows for counting the item were reduced.
- Deletion of Involvement in Substance Abuse from the intake form.

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<sup>5</sup> Our samples identified only 3 women offenders who met this criteria, however, none of these women were engaged in any prison misconducts. Even so, our sample did not provide adequate opportunity to test this change.

- Exclusion of prior escapes from the options listed under Prior Felony Convictions (intake form).
- A directive to score as employed, unemployed women engaged in full-time child rearing.
- Omission of escapes from frequency and severity of misconducts (reclassification) because they had already been counted on the escape variables. In addition time frames for counting misconducts were reduced from 18 to 12 months.
- Addition of a new item to the reclassification instrument --- performance in work and programs. The change was intended to add incentives to the reclassification process.
- Lowering the cut of score (from 30 to 27) for considering age as a stability factor on the intake form.

A final contribution to the validity of the modified system was attributable to the correction of errors. As with an earlier validation study (Bench, 1996), we observed an extremely high rate of scoring errors; discrepancies on at least one of the classification variables, were noted for 31 percent of the coded cases. These were corrected over the course of the file review and coding process. Even so, this observation underscores the fact that not all classification problems are attributable to the classification system; in the presence of extensive systemic problems, even a valid system may become invalid very quickly. Quality control is an important aspect to any classification system.

Given the findings reported above the modified intake and reclassification instruments were recommended for adoption. In addition, the final report recommended attention to staff training, quality control procedures, community risk assessment, and needs assessments.

## **VII. Technical Assistance: Nebraska Department of Correctional Services**

### **Background**

The Nebraska Department of Correctional Services (NDCS) began technical assistance activities on April 12, 2000. The NDCS application indicated concerns for over-classification and suggested that the current system did not adequately reflect important differences between male and female offenders. The initial site visit revealed a number of important additional features of the NDCS system:

- During previous year, over 90% of the 180-250<sup>6</sup> women offenders housed at the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women were released within 6 months of intake. This reflected the State’s indeterminate sentencing model and the minor nature of women’s offenses relative to men.
- Women were housed on one campus. Except for the movement of women to community custody, the current custody system was not used to make housing assignments or to inform movements to different institutional placements.
- Officials indicated that the main contribution of the current system was to inform community placements and prisoner movements outside of the perimeter. Typically both considerations are much better informed by a community risk assessment than a custody classification model.
- Women were over-classified into high custody levels. With short sentences, this was not necessarily delaying their release. However, excessive overrides of classification scores were required in order to move women into community custody prior to their release. Even with these overrides, 57 percent of the prison releases were from minimum, medium, or maximum custody rather than community custody.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, community correctional resources were underutilized.

The difficulty in moving women to community custody was not solely attributable to the classification system. Most notably, women could not be moved to community custody unless they had completed a mandatory eight weeks of Generic Out-Patient Levels Format (GOLF)(a cognitive program) and any programs that were listed on their Personalized Plan. The current custody classification system did nothing to reduce these requirements by “triaging” women into programs or further assessments. At intake, officials completed a Personalized Plan for all inmates. This entailed assessments related to: a) education (TABE and GATB), b) works assignments, c) mental health (MMPI), d) substance abuse (SASSI), e) self-help, and f) court-ordered requirements. With no structure for limiting assessments and program requirements to inmates most in need of them, and with waiting lists for most programs, many inmates were unable to complete their requirements in time to move to community custody prior to release. Moreover, the existing intake process, which funneled *all* women into programs and assessments, appeared to be an inefficient use of programming and assessment resources.

An additional source of over-classification affected parole violators (approximately 30 percent of the population) who were automatically overridden to medium custody and were not reclassified for another six months. For many of them, the time remaining on their sentence was too short to permit them to be reclassified to a lower custody level.

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<sup>6</sup> This rate has fluctuated over the course of this cooperative agreement.

<sup>7</sup> These included 4 percent who were released from maximum custody, 17 percent from medium custody, and 35 percent from minimum custody.

### **Existing Custody Classification System:**

NDCS uses a point system (Factor Rating Score) for initial classification and reclassification of both men and women offenders. Factors on the initial classification instrument include (a) severity of the current offense, (b) prior commitments, (c) escape or attempted escape (over the entire criminal career), (d) past violence (over the entire career), (e) projected length of incarceration, and (f) detainers. Reclassification Factor Rating Scores consider (a) current detainers, (b) escapes (over the entire career), (c) past violence (entire career), (d) involvement in drugs or alcohol while incarcerated (entire career), (e) frequency of disciplinary infractions (up to the past 12 months), and (f) severity of disciplinary infractions (up to the past 12 months). In contrast to models used in many other states, variables pertaining to the current offense, prior commitments and length of sentence are not carried over to the reclassification instrument. In addition, misconducts are counted for only one classification (six month) period. Inmates with no misconducts received reductions in classification levels relatively quickly. Of course, inmates with short terms were often not incarcerated for long enough to be reclassified.

Both the initial and the reclassification instruments were developed in-house by the NDCS Division of Classification and Programming. Neither instrument had been formally validated. However, a preliminary test, conducted during the early months of the present cooperative agreement, found it to be invalid for women offenders and only modestly related to the serious misconducts committed by males.

### **Goals of the Cooperative Agreement:**

Fairly early into the cooperative agreement, consultants advised consideration of a community risk assessment instrument. This was recommended for three reasons:

- Most of Nebraska's classification issues *were* pertinent to community rather than to institutional risk. The majority of women offenders served short-terms and inmates were housed in a single rather than multiple institutions. The main classification consideration involved movement to community custody rather than transfer to other institutions.
- The State's use of a custody instrument to inform community-related decisions was providing a false sense of security. Custody instruments generally are not predictive of new offenses in the community.



- On the other hand, some community risk assessment instruments are known to be predictive of prison misconducts. A community risk assessment system, in other words, could inform institutional as well as community safety.

The Steering Committee examined two types of community risk assessment instruments. The first, a model derived from the earlier NIC, NCCD, and Wisconsin risk assessment systems, considered mostly static and criminal history variables. The second was the Level of Service Inventory-Revised (Andrews & Bonta, 1995), which determined risk scores through more intensive attention to criminogenic needs. The LSI-R was chosen because its greater focus on needs could help relieve assessment and programming resources by identifying women most in need of those services. In doing so, the LSI-R could also help reduce the bottleneck of inmates awaiting programs.

The LSI-R is administered through an interview and a review of institutional files, particularly a pre-sentence investigation. The interview typically requires 45 minutes to complete. In the case of Nebraska, the time required to administer the LSI-R could be regained through the opportunity the LSI-R affords to conduct fewer educational, and substance abuse assessments.

The LSI-R is a published assessment (Andrews & Bonta, 1995) available through Multi-Health Systems. It yields community and institutional risk scores as well as scores pertaining to the following needs (a) education, (b) employment, (c) financial, (d) family/marital, (e) prosocial/antisocial living conditions, (f) use of leisure time, (g) prosocial/antisocial companions, (h) alcohol/drugs, (i) emotional health, and (j) prosocial/antisocial attitudes. Results for the Colorado study, described below, suggest that the LSI-R might be more predictive for women with the inclusion of gender-responsive variables, e.g., relationships, parenting, child abuse, and self-efficacy. Even so, the LSI-R has been extensively validated among criminal offenders. An increasing number of these studies involve women offenders, e.g., see Coulson, Ilacqua, Nutbrown, Giulekas, & Cudjoe, 1996; Lowenkamp, Holsinger, and Latessa, 2001; Rettinger, 1998). In jurisdictions that do not place heavy emphasis on gender-responsive programming, a needs assessment with some programming implications is better than no needs assessment.

For a time, the Steering Committee considered using two classification instruments (a) the LSI-R for informing program placements and community risk, and (b) a custody classification instrument to move inmates to higher and lower custody assignments on the bases of institutional adjustment and current/prior offense characteristics. In this way high custody assignments would not be overly influenced by an inmate's needs or problems, but rather by prior offenses and poor prison adjustment. Such a system would be similar to model three in the Colorado section (see

pages 42-43 and Figure 1). However, there were ways in which the current custody system was problematic for men *and* women. Moreover, changing the custody system for women and not men, would in all likelihood, further exacerbate problems with over-classification of women offenders relative to men. As a result the Steering Committee planned to approach NIC for separate technical assistance to examine the custody classification system for all inmates and determined that adoption and validation of the LSI-R was a sufficient expectation for the current cooperative agreement. Even without changes to the custody model, the LSI could reduce the number of inmates being held pending programming requirements and better inform community work and placement decisions.

NDCS classification, administrative, and case management staff were trained in July, 2001, to administer and score the LSI-R. The plan was to then complete a validation study on a sample of 150 women offenders by February 2002. Meeting this deadline would have required case managers to begin administering LSIs very shortly after their training. The summer training session was favorably evaluated. However, by November 2001, staff had not begun to administer the interviews. This required revisions to the project timeline as well as several discussions between NIC, UC, and NDCS personnel. These resulted in 100 LSI being completed by the end of January 2002.<sup>8</sup>

Descriptive information for these cases is presented in Table 4, below. Follow-up data will not be available until the summer of 2002. Although this is outside of the time frame of the current cooperative agreement, scheduled to conclude at the end of January, 2002, we are able at this time to present descriptive information on a sample of 100 women offenders and to discuss it's implications for assessments and programming.

### **Research Procedures**

There were costs to completing these assessments over such a short time period. Most importantly, we were not able to obtain a representative sample of the NCCW inmates. Our sample was limited to 100 inmates who would remain in the system (in prison or in a community placement) for at least 6 months following their interview. This resulted in a sample that may be skewed toward serious offenders with longer sentences. As such, the sample permits an assessment of predictive validity but may inflate the size of medium and high risk categories and perhaps the proportion of offenders with specific needs.

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<sup>8</sup> The project also experienced a lengthy delay during the fall of 2001 when agency officials wished to reconsider the legal ramifications of having separate classification systems for men and women.

The sample ranged in age from 18 to 58 (mean = 33, sd = 9.5). The distribution of offenses was as follows (a) crimes against persons (26 percent), (b) property offenses (mostly forgery, bad checks, and shoplifting)(36 percent), and (c) drug offenses (31 percent).

### **LSI Results and Implications for Institutional Assessments and Programming**

Results of the LSI-R assessments are shown in Table 4, below. Scores ranged from 6 to 47, (mean=23, sd = 7.7). When the LSI total scale is collapsed into custody categories according to institutional norms for women (published in the LSI User’s Manual) (Andrews & Bonta, 1995), 52 percent of the sample were classified as minimum risk or medium risk. Contrary to our concern for sample irregularities, the LSI scores were not higher than those observed in other studies of women offenders (e.g., see Lowenkamp, Holsinger, & Latessa, 2000; Rettinger, 1998).

**Table 4: LSI Descriptive Information**

<b>LSI Category</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>sd.</b>
<b>Risk Levels</b>				
Minimum (0-12)	7	7.1	22.8	7.7
Medium (13-23)	44	44.9		
High Medium (24-36)	42	42.9		
Maximum (37-47)	5	5.1		
<b>Criminal History Score</b>				
1-3 pts.	23	23.5	4.9	2.0
4-6pts	53	54.1		
7+ pts.	22	22.4		
<b>Education/Employment Total</b>				
0 pts	6	6.1	5.4	2.9
1-3 pts.	22	22.4		
4-6 pts	32	32.7		
9-10 pts.	38	38.8		
Education, Less than 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade <sup>a</sup>	20	32.3		
Education, Less than H.S. <sup>a</sup>	36	58.1		
Frequently Unemployed <sup>a</sup>	30	48.4		
<b>Financial</b>				
0 pts.	25	25.5	1.2	0.8
1-2 pts	73	74.5		
<b>Family/Marital</b>				
0 pts.	21	21.4	1.4	1.1
1-2 pts.	63	64.3		
3-4 pts.	14	14.3		

<b>Accommodation</b>				
0 pts.	61	62.2	0.7	0.9
1-2 pts.	29	29.6		
3 pts.	8	8.2		

<sup>a</sup> Percentage is of 62 rather than 98 inmates. Answers to specific items, as opposed to category totals, were available for only 62 inmates.

**Table 4: LSI Descriptive Information, Continued.**

<b>LSI Category</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>sd</b>
<b>Use of Leisure Time</b>				
0 pts.	13	13.3	1.4	0.7
1 pts.	32	32.7		
2 pts.	53	54.1		
<b>Companions</b>				
0 pts.	8	8.2	2.2	1.3
1-3 pts.	77	78.6		
4-5 pts.	13	13.2		
<b>Alcohol/Drugs</b>				
0 pts.	25	25.5	3.3	2.5
1-3 pts.	21	21.4		
4-6 pts.	46	46.9		
7-9 pts.	6	6.1		
<b>Emotional</b>				
0 pts.	47	48.0	1.2	1.5
1-2 pts.	29	29.6		
3-5 pts.	22	22.5		
<b>Antisocial Attitudes</b>				
0 pts.	30	30.6	1.2	1.1
1-2 pts.	56	57.1		
3-4 pts.	12	12.2		

Recognizing that these scores also target needs which could be addressed through institutional and community programming, 48 percent of the sample, classified at high medium and maximum risk categories showed greatest need for programming and/or further assessments. Taking a conservative approach to determining who should receive more detailed assessment batteries for specific needs (any need score of 1 or above) (a) 58 percent of the sample could be referred for further educational testing, (b) 75 percent for substance abuse assessments, and (c) 52 percent mental health, although we continue to recommend mental health screens for the entire population at intake. Put in terms of the agencies goals for reducing assessments and programming options, the following should be taken under consideration.

- a. Educational test batteries could be reduced by 42 percent.
- b. Substance abuse assessments could be reduced by 26 percent.
- c. Mental health assessments could be reduced by 48 percent although we don't recommend it.

We noted above that a number of inmates were held up at higher custody levels in order to complete mandatory program assignment. These scores recommend against such a "one size fits all" stance. The findings recommend:

- a. Programming targeted to criminal thinking for 69 percent (as opposed to 100 percent).
- b. Educational programming- 58 percent.
- c. Job development programming -75 percent.
- d. Life skills -as high as 87 percent (cited to use of leisure time, financial concerns, and anti-social companions).
- e. Substance abuse and mental health programming would be determined by their respective assessment batteries.

Because the sample is skewed toward more serious offenders, these estimates of both assessment needs and programming needs are likely to be inflated, or higher than they actually are for the population as a whole. Of course more exact figures would be available to Nebraska officials within a short time of implementing the assessment for all newly admitted inmates. We also note that we have set the cut points for determining programming and assessment needs quite low. Resource problems and severe budget cuts could require raising them, and affording services to those with higher need scores.

In addition to using the LSI-R as a tool for prioritizing assessment and programming services, there are clear implications for community placement and programming decisions. Seven inmates (7.1 percent) are classified at minimum risk. Although this figure could increase for the full population these inmates, upon meeting statutorily prescribed criteria for release, are better candidates for work release, furloughs, and early releases than those classified at medium high or above. More detailed predictions, await the collection of institutional and community follow-up data. Even so, other researchers (e.g., Rettinger, 1998) found the recidivism rates for the low risk group group was 6 percent. Rates for the other groups in her study, medium and high risk, were 30 percent and 71 percent, respectively.

## **VII. Technical Assistance: Colorado Department of Corrections**

### **Background**

NIC and the University of Cincinnati began work with the Colorado Department of Corrections in February 2000. At that time, the State requested assistance with (a) developing a

separate classification system for women offenders, (b) identifying classification variables that have been shown to be predictive for women offenders, and (c) assessing needs as a component of the classification model. The Classification Steering Committee for this project preferred development of a new classification model for women offenders rather than alteration the current system. At the outset, the Committee proposed to measure and test offender needs for their contribution to predictive validity. It was hoped that the new system would inform both custody and programming decisions. In doing so, the Committee hoped to incorporate gender-responsive needs (e.g., relationships, parenting skills, child abuse, adult victimization, self-efficacy and self-esteem) as well as needs more common to prison classification systems, such as education, employment, mental health and substance abuse. With the added task of designing an assessment system for gender-responsive needs, the project proposed changes to both intake and reclassification instruments, but time permitted only a validation of the intake measures.

A number of concerns with the existing system prompted these directions. First, Colorado was experiencing many of the same problems with over-classification of women offenders as experienced by other states. These resulted in overriding a substantial proportion of women offenders to lower custody levels. Second, in a number of ways, the population of women offenders seemed more troubled than men. Most notably, officials observed that women were more likely (26%) than men (11%) to be diagnosed mentally ill. The current the system did not assist case management and programming decisions for these offenders. Third, the current custody system did not appear relevant to women offenders. Such variables as escapes and assaults appeared to mean different things for men and women. Moreover, high weights<sup>9</sup> on a time-to-serve classification variable kept women with long sentences at medium custody (or higher) for atypically long periods of time. Finally, staff voiced concerns for both the validity and the reliability of needs and custody classification factors.

### **The Existing Classification Model**

The State's existing classification system was based on the NIC Model Prison Classification System. The system was validated in 1995 by Dr. James Austin (see Austin, Alexander, Anuskiewics and Chin, 1995). The report for that study called for the development of a separate system for women offenders. The reasons for doing so, however, were unclear.

### **Modifications and Validation Procedures**

The project proceeded through three phases:

- A qualitative review of the current system and recommendations for revision. This phase involved focus groups with inmates, custody staff, case management staff, and administrators from all three women's facilities.
- Construction of gender-responsive scales pertaining to relationships, self-esteem, self-efficacy, adult victimizations, and child abuse.
- Working sessions of the Steering Committee where members recommended changes to the current custody items, examined needs assessments that were currently in the system, reviewed new items recommended by University of Cincinnati staff, and made final recommendations regarding both the intake and the reclassification instruments.
- Validation of the existing intake custody system in comparison to three possible modifications: (a) improvements to the current custody system, (b) the modified custody system augmented by gender-responsive needs, and (c) a custody system which embedded needs assessments within the custody levels.

**Qualitative Review.** Meetings with inmate and staff focus groups and working sessions of the Steering Committee proposed a number of revisions to current classification procedures. Changes proposed by the Steering Committee included (a) changed or reduced weights to history of institutional violence, escapes, and prior felony convictions, (b) improvements to needs variables (e.g., substance abuse, education, and mental health), (c) addition of new gender-responsive variables such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, relationships, parenting, and victimization,<sup>10</sup> (d) changes to the calibration of infractions on the reclassification instrument, (e) the addition of work and program incentives to the reclassification instrument, and (f) changes emerging from an empirical analysis of current and recommended classification variables.

**Construction of Needs Scales:** Colorado's comprehensive MIS system greatly facilitated this project. Most importantly, the system included LSI total scores and scores for each criminogenic need identified by the LSI. In addition DOC maintained 5 point scales for several important need categories, including substance abuse, mental health, violence potential, and sex offending behaviors. We were primarily interested in the substance abuse and mental health variables.

Gender-responsive needs scales were constructed at the University of Cincinnati. A literature review produced two scales which could be used in their current forms, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979) and the Sherer and Maddox Self-efficacy Scale (Sherer & Maddox, 1982). A literature review suggested a number of scales pertaining to relationships and

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<sup>9</sup> Inmates received one point for every year for every year remaining on their term.

parenting, however, many of these contained items more appropriate to middle-class life styles than those lived by most women offenders. The relationship scale was influenced by the Spann-Fischer Codependency Scale (Fischer, Spann & Crawford (1991), the Codependent Questionnaire (Roehling & Gaumond, 1996), and the Silencing the Self Scale (Crowley & Dill, 1992). The parenting scale involved slight modifications to a 20 item scale developed by Avison, Turner, and Noh (1986). Child abuse and adult victimization scales consisted of a check-list of abusive behaviors. Self-report behavioral checklists are viewed to be far more valid than official records or direct questions, such as “Were you abused as a child?” (see Browne, Miller, & Maguin, 1999). The latter tend to underestimate the prevalence of abuse experiences. Final scales reflected results of several construct validity and reliability tests, and factor analysis for data reduction (see Van Voorhis, Peiler, Spiropoulis, & Sutherland, 2001).

**Methodology.** Because the project included measures that were not currently on the Colorado DOC information system, validation of the proposed systems required a prospective study. Data were obtained for a cohort of 156 women offenders admitted to the Colorado DOC between October 10 2000 to January 8 2001. The data were collected by Colorado DOC research and classification staff. Their efforts involved administering a needs assessment survey (containing the gender-responsive items) to the 156 research participants within 30 days of their admission and completing the revised intake custody instrument that reflected changes recommended by the steering committee. In addition, DOC research staff downloaded data pertaining to existing intake classifications, LSI scores, Colorado substance abuse and mental health scores, and social, demographic, and criminal history data. At a later point, they also downloaded data pertaining to disciplinary infractions incurred during the first 6 months of incarceration.

Data routinely collected by the Colorado DOC were available for all 156 inmates. We noted some data attrition on the gender-responsive needs assessments, especially toward the end of the rather lengthy interview, but the final samples did not differ from the intake cohort on key demographic and criminal history factors.

**Sample Characteristics.** As shown on Table 5, age distributions typified most women offender populations; the proportion of Hispanic offenders was slightly higher than average. Conviction offenses for these women were predominantly property- (36 percent) and drug-related (44 percent). Twenty-nine (19 percent) of the women were convicted of attempted possession of a drug, seemingly a relatively minor drug offense. Only 10 percent of the sample committed

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<sup>10</sup> Some of these measures were developed at the University of Cincinnati; others were more well-



crimes against a person, a figure which is considerably lower than the national rate for incarcerated women (28 percent)(BJS, 1999).

Prison terms would be short for most of these women. Ninety three, or 61 percent of the sample, had less than one year remaining until their parole eligibility date, and an additional 32 inmates (21 percent) would serve at least a year until their parole eligibility date. Nearly half of the sample had prior felonies on record (49 percent), and 18 percent had served a prior prison term.

**Table 5. Frequency and Percent Distribution of Demographic, Conviction, Prior Record, Classification, and Prison Adjustment Measures.**

Variable	N	%
<u>Age at admission</u>		
Under 20	1	.6
20 – 29	46	29.5
30 – 39	64	41.0
40 – 45	32	20.5
Over 45	13	8.3
Mean Age		34.60
<u>Race</u>		
White	83	53.2
Black	45	28.8
Hispanic	25	16.0
American Indian	3	1.9
Other		
<u>Most Serious Conviction Charge</u>		
Burglary		
Assault	13	8.4
Robbery	2	1.3
Theft	28	18.1
Escape/ Attempt Escape	13	8.4
Forgery/Fraud	12	7.7
Attempt/Possession of Drugs	40	25.8
Distribute/Sell Drugs	28	18.1
Other	15	9.7
<u>Maximum Sentence Length</u>		
Less than 24 months	48	30.8
25 to 48 months	62	39.7
49 to 120 months	42	26.9
Above 120 months	4	2.6
<u>Years to Parole Eligibility Date</u>		
Zero	93	61.6

established scales.

One	32	21.2
Two	14	9.3
Three – Five	10	6.6
Six to Fifteen	2	1.3

**Table 5. Frequency and Percent Distribution of Demographic, Conviction, Prior Record, Classification and Prison Adjustment Measures.**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<u>Prior Felonies</u>		
None	80	51.3
One	30	19.2
Two	23	14.7
Three or more	23	14.7
<u>Prior Incarcerations</u>		
No	128	82.1
Yes	28	17.9
<u>Current Custody Level at Intake</u>		
Minimum	28	18.5
Minimum-restrictive	77	51.0
Medium	45	29.8
Close	1	.7
<u>Number of Disciplinary (6 months)</u>		
None	106	67.9
One	27	17.3
Two or more	23	14.7
Mean number of disciplinary	.60	
<u>Number of Aggressive Disciplinary (6 months)</u>		
None	153	98.1
One	2	1.3
Two or more	1	.6
Mean number of disciplinary	.03	
<u>Number of Serious Disciplinary (6 months)</u>		
None	129	82.7
One	17	10.9
Two or more	10	6.4
Mean number of disciplinary	.26	
<u>Days in Disciplinary Segregation</u>		
None	146	93.6
1 to 20	5	3.2
Over 20	5	3.2

Custody assignments, based upon the existing intake classification system, placed 28 offenders or 19 percent of the intake cohort in minimum custody. The proportion of women offenders classified as medium custody was higher than intake samples for other recently completed classification studies (e.g., Hardyman & Tulluck, 2000; Hardyman & Pearson, 2001). Fifty inmates (32 percent) were cited for prison misconducts during the follow-up period. Very few of these (N=3) involved aggression. Twenty-seven offenders (17 percent), however, were engaged in serious infractions, or incidents that did not involve behaviors related to insubordination.

### Results of the Validation Study

**The existing intake classification system.** Analyses of the existing intake classification system found it to be invalid for women offenders. Table 6 reports that misconducts rates were similar for minimum, minimum-restrictive, and medium custody inmates. The statistically significant results for difference of means tests were misleading, because they were attributable to the behavior of only one inmate.

**Table 6: Validity of the Current Colorado Intake Classification System.**

Custody Level	N	%	All Misconducts		Aggressive Misconducts		Serious Misconducts	
			%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean
Minimum	28	18.5	28.6 <sup>a</sup>	.57 <sup>b</sup>	0.0	.00	14.3	.21
Minimum-Restrictive	77	51.0	33.8	.66	2.6	.04	22.1	.29
Medium	45	29.0	31.1	.49	0.0	.00	11.1	.20
Close	<u>1</u>	<u>0.7</u>	100.0	4.00	1.00	1.00	100.0	3.00
	151	100.0	ns	eta=.24**	ns	eta=.41***	ns	eta=.36***

<sup>a</sup>This figure is interpreted as the percent of all minimum custody inmates who commit a misconduct.

<sup>b</sup>This figure is interpreted as the average number of infractions committed by minimum custody inmates.

\*\*\*  $p \leq .01$

\*\*  $p \leq .05$

\*  $p \leq .10$

**Custody versus needs variables.** From the outset, we sought to determine whether the addition of needs would improve the predictive validity of an intake classification model for women offenders. We also recognized that needs were important in their own right, as having programming implications even if they did not correlate with institutional adjustment. This

would be especially true if the need was found to be a criminogenic need, i.e., related to offender recidivism.

An item-by-item analysis of the existing custody variables (see Table 7) found that only three of eight variables (history of institutional violence, severity of prior convictions, and escape history) were predictive of misconducts. Even more problematic, an additional four variables (severity of the current offense, pending detainers, prior felonies, and PED) were *negatively* correlated with misconducts, thereby detracting from the predictive validity of the current system. That is, inmates with *less serious* offenses, those *without* detainers, those with *no* prior felonies and *shorter* sentences were *more likely* to commit prison disciplinary infractions than their counterparts with more serious criminal histories. Modifications proposed by the steering committee offered only modest improvements to the predictive validity of the custody instrument. We were able to improve the predictive accuracy of age to a modest degree and to reduce the impact (weights) of those factors showing negative relationships with prison misconducts. The revised variables continue to show two negative correlations involving severity of the current conviction and prior felonies. Considering these factors fundamental to extant philosophies of punishment, the Committee found these variables difficult to remove. Just the same, our analysis recommended that we reduce their weights. Otherwise, their inclusion would severely compromise the predictive validity of the instrument. Finally, two variables, age and escape history, were only modestly related to prison misconducts. Simply put, the custody variables were not impressive predictors of prison misconducts. Even with our modifications, only two variables showed strong correlations with misconducts.

**Table 7: Comparison of Current and Modified Custody Risk Factors.**

Custody Risk Factor	Current Intake Custody Item	Modified Intake Custody Item	Recommended Change
History of Institutional Violence <sup>a</sup>	.32**	.32**	Change in offense rating.
Severity of Current Conviction <sup>a</sup>	-.10*	-.11*	Change in offense rating.
Severity of Prior Convictions <sup>a</sup>	.26***	.26***	No change.
Escape History <sup>b</sup>	.10*	.10*	Change in weights. Omission of walkaways with 24 hour return.
Pending Detainer	-.14*	Na	Omission.
Prior Felonies <sup>b</sup>	-.16**	-.17**	Lower weights.

Parole Eligibility Date <sup>c</sup>	-.17**	Ns	Lower weight, collapse time range.
Age <sup>a</sup>	Ns	.16*	Higher cut point.

<sup>a</sup>Correlation is with serious misconducts.

<sup>b</sup>Correlation is with aggressive misconducts.

<sup>c</sup>Correlation is with all misconducts.

\*\*\*  $p \leq .01$

\*\*  $p \leq .05$

\*  $p \leq .10$

Moreover, high scores on these variables, history of institutional violence and severity of prior convictions, do not characterize many women offenders.

Offender needs offered a somewhat more impressive contribution to the prediction of institutional misconducts. As shown in Table 8, many of these were related to offenders' risk of re-offending (as demonstrated by correlations with total LSI scores).<sup>11</sup> The following needs are important for their effect on prison adjustment: relationships, child abuse, mental health, substance abuse, and employment. Adult victimization scores were only modestly related to misconducts. A different set of needs are found to be important for their relationship to offender risk of future offending: self efficacy, self esteem (to a very modest degree), relationships, troubled parenting, child abuse, mental health, substance abuse, education, and employment.

Interestingly, some gender-responsive needs make opposite predictions of misconducts and offender risk. For example, the findings for self-efficacy find women with *favorable* self-efficacy scores more likely than women with low self-efficacy to incur prison misconducts. At the same time, inmates with high self-efficacy scores were significantly more likely to have low risk classifications on the LSI. Similarly, good parents made poor prison adjustments but were more likely to be classified as low risk on the LSI.

It is also noteworthy that LSI scales for substance abuse, education/employment were more predictive of misconducts than the currently used Colorado measures. Moreover, the LSI emotional variable was as effective as the Colorado measure. Even so, the total LSI score was not as strongly related to misconducts as three of the gender-responsive needs, relationships and child abuse.

Regardless of whether these needs factor into offender custody scores, they are important in their own right. Findings reported above strongly support the inclusion of these needs in needs assessments and offender treatment plans. In doing so, we attempt to target program resources to those needs most likely to be associated with future offending.

**Table 8: Summary of Predictive Validity of Offender Needs.**

Need Scale	Disciplinary	Aggressive Disciplinary	Serious Disciplinary	LSI Total Score
<b>Gender-Responsive Needs</b>				
<u>Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale<sup>a</sup></u>	--	--	--	.12*
<u>Sherer Self Efficacy Scale<sup>a</sup></u>	-.16**	-.11*	-.15**	.14**
<u>Relationship Scale<sup>a</sup></u>	.16**	.12*	.26***	--
LSI Family Marital <sup>a</sup>	--	--	--	X
LSI Companions <sup>a</sup>	.10*	--	--	X
<u>Parenting Scales</u>				
Total Scale Score <sup>a</sup>	-.25*	--	-.20**	.26***
Ineffective Parenting Scale <sup>a</sup>	--	.15*	--	.21***
Emot. Healthy Parent Scale <sup>a</sup>	--	--	--	.30***
Punitive Parent Scale <sup>a</sup>	-.18**	-.14*	--	.21***
<u>Adult Victimization</u>				
Total Victimization Scale <sup>a</sup>	--	--	--	--
Emotional Abuse Scale <sup>a</sup>	.12*	.12*	.12*	--
Physical Victimization Scale <sup>a</sup>	--	--	--	--
<u>Child Abuse Scales</u>				
Total Scale <sup>a</sup>	.22***	.17**	.21***	.12*
Child Physical Abuse Scale <sup>a</sup>	.22**	.17**	.21***	.21***
<b>Other Needs</b>				
<u>Mental Health</u>				
Colorado Mental Health <sup>a</sup>	--	.20***	--	.14**
LSI Emotional <sup>a</sup>	--	.20***	--	X
<u>Substance Abuse</u>				
Original Custody SA Scale <sup>a</sup>	--	--	--	.53**
Colorado Substance Abuse <sup>a</sup>	--	--	--	.53**

<sup>11</sup> The LSI-R risk score was chosen in lieu of a recidivism measure, because these women were still incarcerated at the time of these analyses.

LSI Substance Abuse <sup>a</sup>	.16**	.04	.16**	X
<u>Education</u>				
Colorado Revised Custody <sup>a</sup>	--	--	--	.22**
LSI Education/employ <sup>a</sup>	.17**	.13**	.12*	X
<u>Employment</u>				
Colorado Revised Custody <sup>a</sup>	.12*	.14**	--	.32***
LSI Education/employ <sup>a</sup>	.17**	.13**	.12*	X
<u>LSI Total Risk/Needs</u>	.18**	.13**	.16**	X
Collapsed 3 pt item.				

<sup>a</sup> High scores indicate high need (e.g., problematic parenting, low self-esteem, etc.).

### **Constructing a Classification System for Women Offenders**

Previous analyses found that needs, particularly gender-responsive needs, were as important if not more important than traditional custody variables in predicting the misconducts of women offenders. There were several options for using this information, however, and each one posed different benefits and concerns. We propose and discuss three options in this section. All three were valid or predictive of misconducts. The first two are shown in Table 9.

Option 1: Modifying the Current Intake Custody Classification System. Table 9 shows that the modifications proposed by the steering committee and through the course of data analysis resulted in a valid system. The classification factors consisted of history of institutional violence, severity of the current conviction, severity of prior convictions, escape history, prior felonies, parole eligibility date, and age. The changes involved: (a) changed or reduced weights for history of institutional violence, escape history, and prior felony convictions; (b) removal of education and current or pending detainer from the instrument;<sup>12</sup> (c) increased cutoff points for the age variable; (d) substantially reduced points allotted to the parole eligibility factor, and (e) substitution of the LSI drug and alcohol variable for the current substance abuse variable. No gender-responsive variables were added to this model. The most dramatic change was to the time to serve variable. Rather than allotting one point to every year remaining on the sentence, the modified variable contributes 3 points to the classification score for inmates with sentences of 5 years or longer. See the final report (Van Voorhis et al., 2001) for actual classification instruments. We also changed cut-off points for assigning inmates to the four custody level.

As can be seen from Table 7, the revised system was significantly related to all of the misconduct variables. Moreover, the proportion and mean number of prison misconducts increased with custody levels and the relationship between custody types and misconducts was

<sup>12</sup> Detainers were moved to the category of a non-discretionary override.

stable rather than dependent upon one outlier (see Table 6).<sup>13</sup> It is instructive to note that when we utilized only the custody variables and omitted the predictive needs (e.g., substance abuse and employment) the system was not valid with women offenders. Thus, even the commonly used offender needs contributed a good deal to the predictive validity of this model.

We also found that the modified system lowered the custody assignments for a substantial portion of the inmates. The modified system moved 41 women (27 percent) to lower custody levels, and 20 (13 percent) to higher custody levels. In effect, it helped to reduce over classification while at the same time improving the validity of the system.

Option one, compared to the following options, would be easier to implement, because it is very similar to the model currently used in Colorado. Option 1 does not however, take advantage of the improved predictive validity afforded by the gender-responsive variables.

#### Model 2: Adding Gender-Responsive Variables to the Intake Custody Classification System.

To take advantage of the fact that additional needs were related to prison misconducts, a second model was created which added two of the three needs found to be related to prison misconducts among women offenders -- mental health and relationships. Women scoring high on the relationship scale received an additional two points toward their custody score. A Colorado Mental Health score of three or above also added two points to the custody score. We did not use the child abuse variable in this model even though it was significantly related to prison misconducts. All other factors in option two are identical to those for option one.

Table 9 shows that the addition of these two needs enhanced the predictive validity of the custody instrument over the format considered in option one. The number and proportion of inmates assigned to each custody group was almost identical to option one. However, this model more sharply differentiates each group in terms of their prison adjustment difficulties. Correlations between custody levels and misconducts are considerably higher than those shown for option one.

Just the same, option two posed a unique set of concerns. In prison systems designed primarily to punish and incapacitate offenders, a State could be faulted for increasing custody according to problems which inmates may have no control over. In contrast, the current practice of increasing custody according to one's behavior seems far more defensible. A similar line of reasoning argued against incorporating child abuse into the option two score, even though child abuse measure further increased the predictive validity of the classification system. A second

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<sup>13</sup> The measures of association hold even if the two close custody inmate were classified as medium custody.



concern would be for whether inmates would honestly address offender needs if they knew that they would impact custody assignments.

**Table 7. Validity of the Revised Colorado Intake Classification System (Similar to Current Colorado Model) and the Revised Intake Classification System Augmented by Gender-responsive Needs.**

Custody Level	N	%	All Misconducts % Mean	Aggressive Misconducts % Mean	Serious Misconducts % Mean
<b>Option 1: Revised Colorado Intake Classification Instrument</b>					
Minimum	36	24.0	19.4 .31	0.0 .00	5.6 .08
Minimum-Restrictive	86	57.3	33.7 .57	1.2 .01	20.9 .26
Medium	26	17.3	50.0 1.27	7.7 .12	26.9 .58
Close	2	1.3	0.0 .00 <i>r=.17** eta=.27***</i>	0.0 .00 <i>r=.15** eta=.21**</i>	0.0 .00 <i>r=.16** eta=.25***</i>
<b>Option 2: Revised Colorado Intake Instrument Plus Mental Health and Relationship Measures</b>					
Minimum	31	22.5	22.6 .32	0.0 .00	3.2 .03
Minimum-Restrictive	80	57.9	28.8 .50	0.0 .00	17.5 .24
Medium	24	17.4	62.5 1.50	8.3 .13	37.5 .63
Close	3	2.2	33.3 1.33 <i>r=.23*** eta=.33***</i>	33.3 .33 <i>r=.29*** eta=.32***</i>	33.3 1.00 <i>r=.28*** eta=.33***</i>
<b>Option 2a: Collapsing Medium and Close Custody</b>					
Minimum	31	22.5	22.6 .32	0.0 .00	3.2 .03
Minimum-Restrictive	80	58.0	28.8 .50	0.0 .00	17.5 .24
Medium	27	19.6	59.3 1.48	11.1 .15	37.0 .67

Close	0	0.0	00.0	.00	0.0	.00	00.0	.00
			r=.25***	eta=.33***	r=.24***	eta=.29***	r=.28***	eta=.32***

\*\*\* p ≤ .01

\*\* p ≤ .05

\* p ≤ .10

One answer to the ethical considerations raised by the prospect of adding too many needs to the custody instrument would be to limit custody levels to medium custody, with movement to close custody being made on a case-by-case basis. In this way, high need inmates could not be placed in a custody situation that was more stringent than medium custody, unless subsequent prison adjustment warranted movement to close custody. In doing so (see Table 7), the model remained highly predictive.

Option 3: A Needs Assessment for Women Offenders: Regardless of whether or not needs and gender-responsive needs are incorporated into custody classifications, they are important in their own right. With the exception of relationships and adult victimization, all other gender responsive needs were found to be significantly related to LSI scores pertaining to offenders' risk of future offending. This underscores the urgency of addressing these needs programmatically. The third options constructed a needs assessment (see Van Voorhis et al., 2002) for guiding case management and program assignments. This model adds gender-responsive needs (except parenting and adult victimization) to total LSI scores. The LSI contains additional needs pertaining to criminal associates, employment, education, substance abuse and others.

It is important to note that even though option three did not add gender-responsive needs to the intake custody instrument, the needs summary score was nevertheless significantly related to prison misconducts. Correlations between the summary needs score and prison misconducts were as follows: a) number of misconducts (r=.20, p≤.01), b) number of aggressive misconducts (r=.19, p≤.01), and c) serious misconducts (r=.21, p≤.01). Moreover, addition of the gender responsive needs to the LSI scores enhanced the predictive validity of the LSI. The correlations between the LSI and prison misconducts were lower: a) number of misconducts (r=.18, p≤.01), b) number of aggressive misconducts (r=.13, p≤.05), and c) serious misconducts (r=.16, p≤.01).

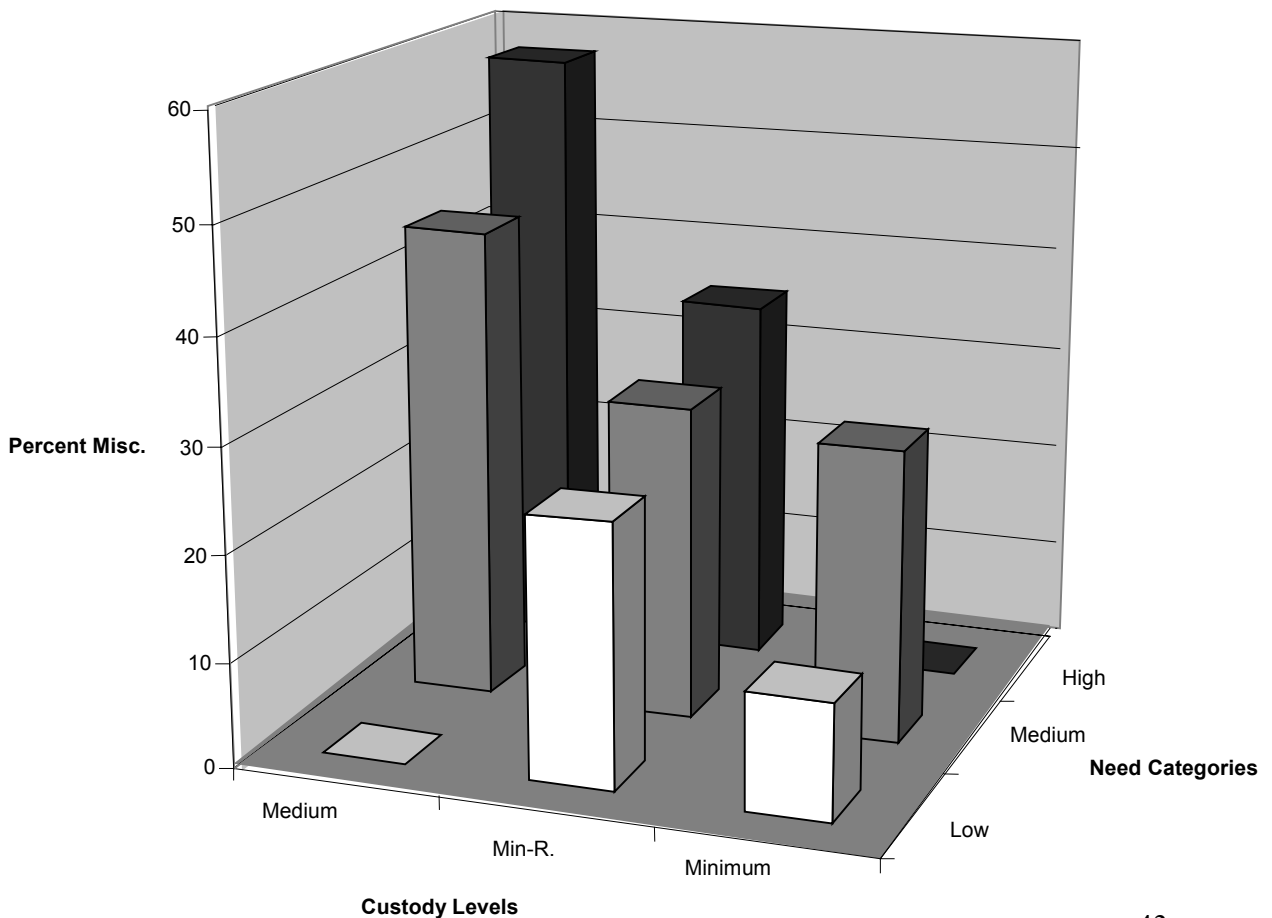
If we collapse total needs scores into three categories (low, medium, and high needs) and then consider these scores at the same time we consider the custody scores (see Figure 1), these needs assessments can facilitate a wider array of correctional decision-making. Doing so enables us to use the implications of the needs scores to address public safety *and* treatment

considerations *without affecting inmates' custody scores*. Figure 1 shows that this involves imbedding needs classification within custody classification.

There are both security and treatment issues pertinent to these categories. A system such as this could use custody scores to move inmates through the system, and need scores to make program assignments. Since needs scores are hypothesized to predict recidivism, further research is likely to suggest that the needs assessments inform any decisions regarding movements outside of the institution, including work assignments, furloughs, and community placement recommendations for inmates approaching release. In addition, officials would be wise to recognize that even within a given custody assignment, high need inmates incur more disciplinary infractions than medium or lower need inmates.

Figure 1

Prison Misconducts by Custody Levels and Needs Levels



The Colorado technical assistance project afforded an opportunity to experiment with a greater variety of variables than typically assigned to classification instruments. In the end, the State chose to adopt option two. Options two and three also were valid, but officials voiced concern for the fact that the research using gender-responsive correlates was not well established. Colorado's final report makes a similar point. This was only one study, and it takes many studies with consistent findings to appropriately build an assessment instrument (see Van Voorhis et al., 2001). Additional research is needed to test the stability of the scales across different groups of incarcerated women. Moreover, the usefulness of a gender-responsive needs assessment would be more impressive if these factors were found to correlate with offender recidivism.

Final instruments for assessing needs pertaining to relationships, child abuse, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and parenting scales are contained in the final report. These are shorter assessments than those administered in the present study, because data reduction strategies identified a number of redundant measures.

### **VIII. What We Have Learned**

At the outset of this cooperative agreement we sought to: a) assure the validity of classification systems for women offenders, b) reduce over-classification resulting from invalid classification systems, c) improve the relevance of classification factors to women offenders, and d) assess the contributions of more gender-responsive variables. The fact that each state approached their technical assistance with different issues provided a rich opportunity to learn from all three. Hawaii approached this project with concerns for the validity of their system and for whether or not it was over-classifying women offenders. Proposed solutions needed to utilize one rather than several classification instruments. In particular, staff shortages precluded the addition of a new needs assessment at this time. Nebraska sought to determine whether a community risk/needs instrument could address most of its classification needs for women offenders. Finally, Colorado afforded an opportunity to test gender-responsive needs and to

examine the interplay between needs and custody variables. These varied and rich experiences increased our understanding of women's classification issues. We set these lessons forward in the points listed below.

Before discussing these, however, we should first address the question most frequently directed to this project. That is "What about men?"; "Don't some of the same variables apply to them?" They might, and these models definitely should be tested for their applicability to men. Comparative studies would further improve our understanding of the various approaches. However, we were not asked to conduct comparative research in the present cooperative agreement, and the three states approached us for assistance specific to women offenders. We agreed with this decision. Our decision to start with women was a deliberate one. History has taught us that work devoted to male *and* female offenders quickly becomes focused upon those in the overwhelming majority—men. It is impossible to deny that the corrections knowledge base is dominated by research and models pertinent to male offenders. We did not wish to see this project join a long list of omissions regarding women offenders which have come to affect program curriculums (Bloom & Owen, forthcoming) as well as basic validation research (Van Voorhis & Presser, 2001).

We move now to some generalizations that emerge from this research:

**A. It is possible to classify women offenders with custody classification instruments that are similar to those currently used in many states.** Validation studies show us that some adjustments to these instruments are required to assure their validity among women offenders. Across our two studies of custody classification systems, history of institutional violence, employment, and age, are often related to prison misconducts. Institutional misconduct was predictive of future misconducts for the Hawaii reclassification sample, and this is a common finding. Factors pertaining to prior offense severity, number of prior felonies, and current offense severity appeared to be more vulnerable to sample fluctuations. In part this may be attributable to the fact that serious scores on these variables pertain to very few inmates. Variables with limited variability combined with modest predictive power often appear to be unstable across studies.

Careful attention to weights and cutoff scores on a variable-by-variable basis helps to assure the validity of commonly used custody systems. This often, but not always, involves increasing the cut off scores for age (see Hardyman, 2001, Van Voorhis et al, 2001) and decreasing weights or excluding variables that are not highly predictive. In Colorado this occurred with measures of prior felonies and time to serve (Van Voorhis et al., 2001)(see

Hardyman 2001 for a more detailed discussion of key custody variables). Cutoff scores for the entire custody classification scale almost always have to be different for women and men (see Hardyman, 2001; Harer & Langan, 2001). This was the case for both the Hawaii and the Colorado studies. All of this underscores the importance of validating each state's custody instrument for males and females separately.

Custody classification systems are improved when variables are expanded to provide more relevant options for women. Unemployed homemakers should be considered to be employed. Walkaways from nonsecure facilities should not be weighted as heavily as escapes from a secure facility. Even more important, the practice of counting escapes, especially walk-aways, on several variables rather than just the escape variable (e.g., escapes, disciplinary infractions, and new offenses) contributes to making custody systems invalid for women offenders. A final recommendation, reduction of weights for women who murder an abuser in self-defense could not be studied in this project due to the small number of offenders who fit this categorization. The small number of women in Hawaii and Colorado who could be scored into this category, however, did not commit any infractions during the follow-up periods. Moreover, during our focus groups, inmates and officials, alike, observed that the overwhelming majority of women who commit a *one-time* offense in response to a sustained period of abuse, were *not* violent or disruptive during their prison terms.

Officials need to be wary of tampering with systems found to be valid. Such alterations often seriously detract from the validity of the classification system. This was true in Hawaii with respect to non-discretionary overrides and in Colorado with respect to the excessive weights on a time to serve variable.

The observation that a number of classification variables worked in opposite from predicted directions was unsettling. In Hawaii, for example, women with high school educations (as opposed to those without them) and those with less serious prior records were more likely to commit misconducts than women who did not complete high school or those with more serious prior records. In Colorado, women with more prison misconducts tended to be those with less serious current offenses and prior felonies, and those with shorter sentences. While the few existing studies find validity in custody classification systems modified to women offenders, the instability of many variables across studies remains troubling (see Harer & Langan, 2001).

**B. Measures of Offender Needs Offer Substantial Contributions to the Validity of a Custody Classification System** In the Hawaii and Colorado studies we observed a number

of instances where stability and needs variables performed more consistently and were stronger predictors of misconducts than the traditional custody factors. In fact, in the Colorado study, the intake instrument as a whole, was not significantly related to misconducts until variables pertaining to employment and substance abuse were added to the scores. Then when additional needs, such as mental health and relationships were added to the model, predictive validity improved again. These findings come as no surprise given recent shifts in the composition of prison populations. Although prisons do not currently house more violent offenders than in years past, the proportion of troubled inmates has grown considerably. Diagnoses of mental illness and substance abuse characterize dramatically higher proportions of offenders, women especially, than in years past (Austin et al., 2000). Inclusion of needs into correctional assessment tools seems highly relevant to these trends.

The realization that criminogenic needs predict adverse outcomes recently began to govern programming and supervision in community corrections. In these settings, use of criminogenic needs to produce risk assessment scores serves three very important purposes. First the assessments alert practitioners to offenders who are most in need of programming and intensive supervision. Second, the criminogenic needs help agencies match offenders to those programs most likely to reduce recidivism. Third, reducing the magnitude of criminogenic need reduces offender risk (see Andrews, Bonta, & Hoge, 1990).

The Colorado study suggests that these principles may work for institutional corrections as well. In that study we found that criminogenic needs predicted institutional misconduct. The suggestion here is that attention to criminogenic needs may also improve prison adjustment. Moreover, there may be *added* benefits for institutional corrections over those realized by community corrections. Beyond the issue of institutional adjustment, agencies planning for prisoner reentry would do well to utilize dynamic risk assessment instruments as tools for treatment planning. This model recommends that agencies have a sound picture of criminogenic needs at intake, during the sentence, and prior to release. That assessment-based picture should then become an important tool for guiding program referrals and post-release supervision and programming. Some may object to incorporating needs or problems into custody considerations, however, embedding needs within custody categories (see Figure 1) may obviate the need to base institutional assignments on problems rather than behaviors. Finally, as the Hawaii data show, most custody classification systems are not designed to and do not predict community adjustment problems. This misperception appears to be widespread. In contrast, dynamic community risk assessments, or for that matter any valid

community risk assessment instrument, are designed to predict new offenses and parole violations.

Adding gender-responsive needs to the array of needs typically cited in risk/needs assessments appears to hold promise. As noted in earlier sections of this report, however, researchers may debate this issue, because the body of research on this topic is in a rather ridiculous state. Some assert that offender needs are the same for men as for women without bothering to even add gender-responsive needs into their empirical assessments. Others, maintaining that women have unique needs, empirically substantiate differences between men and women and then neglect to assess the impact of gender-responsive needs on future offending. Clearly, the present study is not the last word on this topic. However, child abuse, mental health, and loss of personal power in the context of intimate relationships are strongly associated with prison misconducts. A different combination of variables including mental health, dysfunctional parenting, self-efficacy, and child abuse are hypothesized to be related to recidivism as well, because they are significantly related to risk scores. A final group of needs scores, substance abuse, employment and education, show predictions that are seen for men and women.

We must caution that incorporating gender-responsive needs into classification instruments has not been adequately studied, and that our study is just one of many more that should occur. However, we are far from being the only authors to recommend classification variables that are more responsive to women's needs (e.g., Bloom & Owen, forthcoming; Brennan, 1998; Harer & Langan, 2002).

**C. Precise Definitions and Accurate Measure are Important Considerations.** In our literature search, we were struck by the number of times that measurement errors appeared to mar research findings. We caught some in our own studies as well. Resulting null findings then fail to support important suggestions offered by officials, inmates, and scholars. In cases such as these, the fault may not be with the theories and the ideas but with the manner in which factors are defined and then measured.

The role of abuse in the prediction of future criminal behavior is perhaps the most poignant example of this. Two types of measurement errors occur repeatedly in studies of abuse and crime. First, direct questions, (e.g., "Have you been abused?") tend to underestimate the prevalence of child or adult abuse (Browne et al., 1999). Use of official records of abuse also distorts this picture, because most abuse is unreported. Of course measures that underestimate the prevalence of a problem later attenuate the relationship



between that problem and key outcomes. Simply put, the debate concerning whether abuse is a risk factor, and the contradictory research on the topic, may really be a measurement issue.

Measurement errors appear elsewhere in classification validation studies. In our study, for example, commonly used measures of substance abuse were marred by problems differentiating between abuse “causing occasional legal and adjustment problems” and abuse “causing serious legal problems or serious disruption of function”. One reason why the LSI alcohol/drugs variable worked in the Colorado study, when two other measures did not, may be attributable to the fact that the measure taps specific dimensions of the problem (e.g., legal, medical, family, employment) rather than the scorer’s and respondent’s impressions.

Addition problems occurred when pre-sentence investigations and record data did not furnish the information needed to score an item. This is especially relevant to changes recommended to the classification of women offenders. Consider our intent to finely tune certain items which tapped whether (a) the offense was a single act of violence committed in self defense against an abuser, (b) the woman was engaged in full-time parenting or caregiving or, (c) the escape occurred from a non-secure setting with the offender returning within 24 hours. Agencies wishing to add these options will have to plan for inclusion of relevant information within intake interviews and records. We were especially struck with the absence of records pertaining to parenting.

Finally, we remind readers that some of the definitions of our key factors are very narrowly defined. Adjustment of the seriousness of the current offense variable to deduct points for “a one time only act of violence” is not the same as “committing an offense against an acquaintance” or “committing a violent act against an abuser which was part of a general pattern of violent behavior.” Similarly our relationship variable describes women who lose a sense of their own voice, or personal power, in the context of intimate relationships. It does not tap happiness or fidelity. Finally, it is essential to assure that family scales are appropriate to women offenders rather than to middleclass respondents. Many existing family scales show class biases.

Simply put, it is not enough to design an instrument. Much attention must be given to furnishing the information needed to complete the instrument accurately. Care must also be given to understanding the nature of the factor being measured.

**D. The Cooperative Agreement Reduced Over-classification but did Not Cure It.** The national assessment and our experience with all three states found over-classification to be a

common concern. The current generation of classification systems appears to be overclassifying women offenders. Our research with two of the three states found that modifications and validation of their systems does in fact reduce over-classification. However, reductions may not be as great as those desired by these agency officials. In Hawaii, for example, we lowered classifications to minimum custody or lower for 10 percent of both the intake and the reclassification samples. In Colorado, 11 percent of the intake sample moved from medium custody to a lower designation. These reductions are similar to those reported in other validation studies in [e.g., Wyoming (8 percent)(Hardyman, 1999) and Idaho (9 percent at intake and 14 percent at reclassification)(Hardyman & Pearson, 2001)]. In most cases, the option of increasing cutoff scores to create larger minimum security groups would render these instrument invalid.

**E. The Classification System is Not the Only Source of Over-classification** If officials consider these corrections to over-classification to be too modest, they may wish to attend to some of the systemic problems that also contribute to over-classification. If these problems occur to any significant degree, the classification model, itself, will not solve them. Excessive reliance on citations in the place of skilled interaction and management practices is one such problem. The added citations then drive up the reclassification scores of even valid instruments. In these situations over-classification could be addressed by staff training for improved knowledge of women offenders and the fostering of skills needed to supervise them. Other systemic problems concern:

- Agency policies that have the unintended consequence of keeping inmates at overly high custody levels. These would include (a) automatic assignment of parole violators to medium custody for overly long periods of time as opposed to conducting an intake or reclassification assessment upon their return to prison; (b) mandatory program assignments which cannot be met because of insufficient program availability; (c) invalid and mandatory time to serve requirements which pertain to all offenders rather than to those with other risk factors present.
- Errors to the instruments themselves that could be corrected by a systematic audits of classification scores.
- Sloppy case management procedures that loose track of when an inmate should be reclassified.
- Institutional conditions which increase the probability of infractions, such as overcrowding, uncontrolled antagonism, limited programming and other outlets for constructive use of prison time

Indirectly related to over-classification is the failure to realize that similar labels mean different things for men and women. Misconduct rates for similarly classified inmates are often lower for women than for men, even when the classification system is valid for both. For example, misconduct rates among close custody inmates in Wyoming were 10 percent lower for women than for men (Hardyman, 1999). Similar differences were noted in a recently published study of Federal inmates (Harer & Langan, 2001).<sup>14</sup> In community settings re-incarceration rates for high risk women, as measured by the LSI-R are 5 to 18 percent different than for men (depending upon the sample)(Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2000). These differences should be reflected in agency policies and procedures.

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<sup>14</sup> Exact differences are difficult to determine given incomparable data presentations across studies.

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