

Inmate security reclassification: Increasing reintegration potential

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Classification of inmate populations is one of the most important functions of any correctional agency; it serves numerous purposes. As a management tool, appropriate classification minimizes the potential for institutional misbehaviour and violence, mitigates the probability of escape, and directs resources to where they are most needed. The Corrections and Conditional Release Act (CCRA)² mandates that the Correctional Service of Canada assign a security classification of minimum, medium, or maximum to all inmates. As a guiding principle for practice, section 4(d) of the CCRA directs that “the Service use the least restrictive measures consistent with the protection of the public, staff members and offenders.” The Service is therefore tasked with the responsibility of assigning each inmate the lowest level of security possible, while concurrently managing risk, both within and outside of the institution. Following initial security classification, this is achieved through regular security review and reclassification procedures.

Upon admission to federal custody, all inmates are assigned a security classification as a part of the comprehensive and integrated Offender Intake Assessment (OIA) process.³ Initial security classification is informed by the Custody Rating Scale (CRS),⁴ an objective risk-based measure consisting of two independently-scored dimensions: Institutional Adjustment (5 items) and Security Risk (7 items). The reliability, validity, and practical utility of the CRS have been assessed favourably within male, Aboriginal, and women offender samples.⁵

Following initial security classification, the CCRA decrees that each offender’s security level be reviewed annually. The Correctional Service of Canada policy⁶ dictates that the security classification of each offender is reviewed prior to making a recommendation for any decision (e.g., transfer, temporary absence, work release or parole). Policy also directs that receipt of any new information affecting an offender’s risk should result in an immediate review of his or her security classification. In each case, the review could result in either confirmation of the offender’s security classification, or a recommendation to change the offender’s security classification.

Clearly, an inmate’s security designation is not immovable. Rather, the security review process is designed, in accordance with the Service’s Mission, to ensure the safe and timely re-integration of offenders. For those offenders who are initially classified at higher levels of security, the process

of reintegration should be reflected in successive reductions in security until release into the community. Moreover, reclassification and expeditious transfer of an offender to the “least restrictive” level of confinement improves the likelihood of that offender being considered favourably for discretionary release.

There is research evidence demonstrating a strong association between security level placement and discretionary release, even when controlling for risk.⁷ Specifically, lower-risk offenders placed in higher security have lower discretionary release rates and longer incarceration periods than higher-risk offenders placed in lower security. Thus, it is the actual placement, rather than assessed risk, of the offender that facilitates discretionary release. While reclassifying offenders to lower levels of security is commensurate with community reintegration efforts, it is also important to remember that there are potential costs in terms of increased incident and escape rates.

Ideally, reclassification criteria recommend the least restrictive security levels, without compromising accuracy in prediction. Policy directives guide the review process, proscribing three dimensions on which to rate the offender: probability of escape, risk to public safety in the event of escape, and level of control and supervision required for appropriate management of the offender within the institution. Although these criteria provide a structure for the security review and reclassification process, there is also some reliance on professional discretion.

There are two principal ways of aggregating information to make a classification decision. The clinical method relies mostly on human judgement that is based on informal, subjective techniques, sometimes including case conferencing strategies. The actuarial/ mechanical method involves formal, objective procedures such as statistical equations to render a score and recommendation for decision. There is over 70 years of research suggesting that actuarial methods of prediction generally outperform clinical methods with respect to accuracy.⁸

Importantly, objective instruments are also often more lenient than professional judgement. With respect to security classification, actuarial tools tend to significantly lower the average classification. It has been suggested that staff, left to their own professional discretion, will act more conservatively because there are serious consequences for under-

classification such as institutional violence, and inmate escape. While over-classification also evokes consequences, especially for the inmates, they are less apparent than those caused by under-classification.⁹

Thus, there are obvious benefits to using actuarial methods for offender classification: evidence suggests that they are both more accurate and more liberal than clinical classification. Mechanical approaches have other advantages as well. At the federal level of corrections in Canada, implementation of an actuarial tool for classification (such as the CRS) provides an objective, cost-effective, equitable, and nationally standardized approach. The use of actuarial measures assists staff by providing an accountability framework for their decisions. Objective instruments provide inmates with explicit behavioural criteria regarding their security level, and how they could achieve a reduced security classification. Finally, actuarial/mechanical methods can help management modify policy to either reduce or increase security classification distributions; with mechanical methods the effects of proposed policy changes can be simulated in advance.

Until recently, CSC used a structured professional judgement method to render security reclassification decisions. In December 1998, the Service introduced the Security Reclassification Scale (SRS)¹⁰ for male offenders. The mechanically derived scale has been validated and field-tested, with results suggesting a high degree of concurrent validity. Unlike the Custody Rating Scale, the SRS emphasizes dynamic criteria and proximal in-custody behaviour. The SRS has an approximate 30-point scoring range, with higher scores representing higher risk and resulting in higher security ratings.

The SRS ensures that the security review and reclassification process is based on consistent and clearly articulated criteria. Importantly, it also includes provisions for professional discretion to override the SRS score recommendation. Despite this allowance, overrides to the SRS do not occur often (about 15% of the time); when they do, staff

must clearly articulate their reasons for contravening the scale recommendation.

Following an operational review of the SRS, minor revisions have been suggested and are pending national implementation. The revised scale is projected to be more liberal than current practice, in support of the “least restrictive measure of confinement.” In turn, these results will expedite the community reintegration process without compromising institutional security or public safety.

While the SRS was developed, validated, and field-tested with male offenders, a parallel process was undertaken to develop a security reclassification protocol for female offenders. The Security Reclassification Scale for Women (SRSW)¹¹ is currently in the field-testing phase. Similar to the SRS, the SRSW has an approximate 30-point scoring range, with higher scores representing higher risk and resulting in higher security ratings.

The structured clinical method (professional assessment of three risk domains), currently in use for women, has demonstrated predictive validity.¹² The research evidence suggests that the SRSW will match the clinical method with respect to predictive accuracy. Moreover, results of preliminary data analyses suggest that the SRSW will recommend placement of more women in minimum-security, and fewer in maximum-security.

Fundamentally, an objective security reclassification instrument reflects the agency’s risk-taking policy. The use of objective actuarial measures in security reclassification facilitates management in taking responsibility for the Service’s risk-taking policy. This, in turn, enables staff accountability in applying the policy to individual inmates. The use of actuarial tools such as the SRS and the SRSW for reclassification supports the process, by placing offenders in the least restrictive environment while maintaining predictive accuracy and managing risk. As such, the Service is maximizing reintegration potential through the security reclassification process. ■

¹ 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9

² *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* (c.20), (1992).

³ Motiuk, L. L. (1997). Classification for correctional programming: the Offender Intake Assessment Process, *Forum on Corrections Research*, 9(1), 18-22.

⁴ Solicitor General of Canada (1987). *Development of a Security Classification Model for Canadian Federal Offenders*, Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

⁵ Luciani, F. P., Motiuk, L. L., & Nafekh, M. (1996). *An Operational Review of the Custody Rating Scale: Reliability, Validity, and Practical Utility*, Research Report R-47, Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada.

⁶ See *Standard Operating Practice* #700-14.

⁷ *Op. Cit.* Luciani, Motiuk, & Nafekh, (1996).

⁸ Grove, W. M., & Meehl, P. E. (1996). Comparative efficiency of informal (subjective, impressionistic) and formal (mechanical, algorithmic) prediction procedures: The clinical-statistical controversy, *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 2(2), 293-323.

⁹ Alexander, J. (1986). Classification objectives and practices, *Crime and Delinquency*, 32(3), 323-338.

¹⁰ Luciani, F. P. An Operational Review of the Security Reclassification Scale: Findings and Recommendations for Improving the Protocol, Draft Research Report (in press), Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

¹¹ Unpublished Raw Data (Blanchette & Wichmann), Ottawa, ON: Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada.

¹² Verbrugge, P. & Wichmann, C. *A Comparison of Security Classification Decisions between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Women Offenders*, Ottawa, ON: Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, (unpublished draft: under review)