Institutional classification involves a process by which offenders are designated as either "minimum" or "maximum" security and housed accordingly. The major aim of this procedure is to provide the safest and least restrictive environment possible. Federally sentenced female offenders are to be classified and housed in an environment commensurate with their assigned security designation. Some argue that the maximum security designation for women is inequitable in that it overestimates the risk and imposes unnecessary restrictions.

The study examined this issue through a comparison of maximum security female offenders with their maximum security male counterparts. More specifically, groups were compared across a number (over 200) of variables associated with risk (criminal history background), criminogenic need and suicide potential.

Results demonstrated that current classification strategies appropriately target offenders who are high-risk/high-need for the maximum security designation. Analysis revealed few statistically significant between-gender differences on risk and need variables. Global need level ratings for six target areas (employment, associates, substance abuse, community functioning, personal/emotional orientation, attitude) were found to be non-discriminating. For the marital/family domain, maximum security female offenders were rated as being more needy than their male counterparts.

Examination of individual need domain indicators revealed that female offenders were especially needy in the areas of substance abuse and community functioning. Indeed, all discriminating substance abuse indicators showed more problems among the maximum security female offenders. In the area of personal/emotional orientation, maximum security male offenders had more needs in terms of cognitive skills, and women had more difficulties with mental health.

The most significant and robust differences were found in the areas of suicide potential: federally sentenced women are clearly at higher risk for self-injury and suicide. Results showing that the majority of maximum security female offenders have previous suicide attempts suggest maladaptive coping strategies by this particular group. This raises awareness about the case characteristics of female offenders placed in maximum security and suggests tailoring intervention strategies to meet their unique needs.