This study compares female offenders placed in medium security to their maximum security counterparts on a variety of criteria: risk (security and escape), criminogenic need and suicide potential. For the purpose of this study, the Correctional Service of Canada’s automated Offender Management System was used, and all available data for federally sentenced female offenders were extracted. As of January 14, 1997, data for institutional security level were available for 212 female offenders and revealed that 34% (72) were designated minimum security, 49% (103) were medium security and the remaining 17% (37) were maximum security.

The first set of comparisons focused on demographic information (age, race), which was available for the entire sample. Statistical analysis revealed that the maximum security female offenders were significantly younger (with a mean age of 28.7 years) than their medium security counterparts (a mean age of 34.2 years).

Comparisons on overall risk ratings also yielded statistically reliable results, with the majority (56%) of those in medium security assessed as medium risk, and most (77%) of those in maximum security as high risk. Regarding their admitting offences, the majority (62%) of female offenders designated for maximum security were serving sentences for violent assaults or robberies. This was true for less than half (46%) those designated for medium security.

The results of this study demonstrate clear and reliable differences between medium and maximum security female offenders. Multiple risk and need variables discriminate between groups, in each case demonstrating more needs and higher risk among those in maximum security. These data suggest a heterogeneity of female offender populations by security designation and imply that the assignment of security/custody levels is proceeding in an equitable manner, while appropriately managing risk.