

**SURVEY OF DOC STAFF PERCEPTIONS  
OF THE INMATE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM**

**FINAL REPORT**

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## ABSTRACT

Since 1972, the Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC) has experimented with different inmate classification systems. In 1985, the DOC implemented a new system built around a concept called "Classification and Program Agreements" or CAPA. The CAPA is a voluntary program agreement offered to eligible and suitable inmates during a classification hearing where the DOC and inmate agree to a scheduled reduction in security contingent upon positive institutional adjustment and program participation for the duration of the agreement.

In September 1987, the DOC Research Division began a three phase evaluation study of the classification system. Phase 1, Survey of DOC Staff, consisted of on-site observations of the classification process at MCI-Concord and interviews system-wide with classification staff in order to obtain their perceptions of the system. Phase 2, Validation of the DOC Classification System, will address whether the items used in initial and subsequent classification are predictive of inmate behavior. Phase 3 of the study will consist of an impact evaluation of CAPA specifically.

This report presents the results of Phase 1. Sixty respondents involved with inmate classification were interviewed in order to obtain their perceptions of the system's processes, strengths, weaknesses, and needed changes. A ten item, semi-structured interview schedule was developed and administered to correctional counselors, supervising correctional counselors, program treatment staff, Unit Managers, Directors of Classification, Directors of Treatment and Deputy Superintendents.

Six major problems were identified with the current classification system. These were: too rapid movement of inmates; overcrowding wreaks havoc with classification; inconsistency in the classification process; too much paperwork and too few staff; need for modification of the Standard Movement Chronology; and, a flawed CAPA process at MCI-Concord.

Despite calls for its modification in various directions, a majority of survey respondents believe that the Standard Movement Chronology is an objective and consistent method for placing inmates in the appropriate security level.

The majority of survey respondents felt that CAPA was an effective mechanism for forecasting and managing bed space needs at each security level although a sizable minority said that it did not accomplish this because of overcrowding.

Although a majority felt that CAPA did help to reduce disciplinary reports, many noted it was dependent on several factors. Similarly, although a large majority of survey respondents stated that CAPA has made inmates more responsible in terms of institutional adjustment, program participation and completion, this was also dependent on several factors.

Survey results indicate that the large majority of staff have no knowledge as to whether or not inmates comply with their classification agreements when they leave an institution. Rather classification staff at each institution operate in their

"own worlds" with little or no feedback on the classification agreements they develop and negotiate.

The majority of survey respondents prefer a subjective classification system which is what they perceive the current system to be, although a sizable minority would like to see a combined subjective and objective point-based system. Few prefer an exclusively objective, point based-system.

Major changes or improvements suggested for the classification system included the following: addition of bed space to improve classification flexibility; additional staff, reduced case loads, and a reduction in paperwork; more timely sign-offs on classification boards from Central Office; improved monitoring of CAPA compliance; more training; and, better organization of Central Office records.

The majority of survey respondents believe that inmates do understand CAPA and are committed to the agreement. However, a sizeable number questioned the level of commitment and stated that inmates only see the transfer schedule and sign to get a move.

A number of reasons were cited by respondents as to why inmates choose not to sign a CAPA including: inmate cynicism about CAPA when the DOC does not honor its part of the agreement; inmate laziness, an unwillingness to get programmatically involved, and denial of program needs; distrust of the Department of Correction; and a perception by inmates that they can "cut a better deal" without CAPA and will move quicker especially in light of overcrowding.

The overall picture which emerges from this survey of DOC classification staff is that of a classification system beset by a number of problems but yet at the same time, one with which staff are fairly satisfied and comfortable. Many of the problems with the classification system identified by survey respondents either were or could be attributed to overcrowding leading to the frequently-heard statement that the system "works in theory but not in practice because of overcrowding." Ironically, survey respondents frequently complained about inconsistency in classification decision-making yet argued for the preservation of those principles which classification experts say most contribute to inconsistency, namely, subjectivity and discretion.

## INTRODUCTION

Since 1972, the Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC) has experimented with different inmate classification systems. There have been area board classification systems, reception and diagnostic centers, and contract classifications. In 1985, the DOC implemented a new system built around a concept called "Classification and Program Agreements" or CAPA. The CAPA is a voluntary program agreement offered to some inmates during a classification hearing where the DOC and inmate agree to a scheduled reduction in security levels according to a "standard movement chronology" contingent upon positive institutional adjustment and program participation for the duration of the agreement. All inmates serving sentences whose parole eligibility date is six months away or more are eligible to sign a CAPA. Inmates with outstanding serious warrants, current mental health issues, significant disciplinary history, extreme protection issues, housed in the Department Segregation Unit, or who pose a threat to the community are not eligible for a CAPA.

CAPA was envisioned as an objective and systematic process by which the programmatic needs and security requirements of each inmate could be identified and assessed upon commitment to the Department of Correction. It was also seen as a tool for enhancing inmate management, motivating inmates to participate in programs, forecasting bed space and increasing the likelihood of successful reintegration from higher to lower levels of security and ultimately back to society.

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To what extent does the DOC inmate classification system meet these stated objectives? In order to answer this question, in September 1987 the DOC Research Division began an evaluation of the classification system. The study consists of three phases. Phase 1, Survey of DOC Staff, consisted of on-site observations of the classification process at MCI-Concord and system-wide interviews with classification staff in order to obtain their perceptions of the system.

Phase 2, Validation of the DOC Classification System, will address whether the items used in initial and subsequent classification are predictive of inmate behavior. The validation analysis will consist of two parts. First, a multivariate statistical analysis of the relationship between selected classification factors (predictor variables) and subsequent disciplinary adjustment (criterion variables) will be conducted in order to examine the nature and strength of the association between classification factors and institutional adjustment. Second, in order to examine if the classification system is sending inmates to the correct security level based on the risks they pose, the National Institute of Correction's "Model Systems" classification approach will be "tested against" the Massachusetts system in order to see what changes, if any, result in security level distributions when alternative classification criteria are utilized. The National Institute of Corrections model was selected for cross-validation purposes since it is an objective, point-based model unlike the Massachusetts system which is based on subjective judgement and consensus.

Finally, Phase 3 of the study will consist of an impact evaluation of CAPA specifically. In order to assess the impact of the CAPA system itself, this part of the study will compare the institutional adjustment, movements, and program participation of inmates who have a CAPA, those who are eligible for but have chosen not to participate in CAPA, and those who are either not eligible or not suitable for a CAPA.

This report presents the results from the Phase 1 Survey of DOC Classification Staff. The research methods used in the survey are described in the next section. This is followed by a presentation of the survey results. Finally, the final section of the report presents a summary and discussion based on the survey results. No recommendations are presented in this report. Recommendations will only be presented after Phases 2 and 3 of the overall evaluation are completed.

### RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of the survey of DOC classification staff was to obtain their perceptions of the classification system processes, strengths, weaknesses, and needed changes. Sixty respondents involved with inmate classification were interviewed system-wide. The study sample consisted of correctional counselors, supervising correctional counselors, program treatment staff, Unit Managers, Directors of Classification, Directors of Treatment, and Deputy Superintendents. A list of survey respondents by institution may be found in Appendix A.

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed and consisted of the following ten questions asked of each respondent.

1. What problems, if any, do you see with the current classification system?
2. Do you feel that the Standard Movement Chronology is an objective and consistent method for placing inmates in the appropriate security level?  
(If yes, how? ; If no, why?)
3. Do you feel that CAPA helps to manage bed space at each security level?  
(If yes, how? ; If no, why not?)
4. Do you think that CAPA helps to reduce disciplinary reports?  
(If yes, how? ; If no, why not?)

5. Do you feel that CAPA makes inmates more responsible? In other words, are they more committed toward positive institutional adjustment and program completion?
6. After an inmate leaves this institution, do you have any knowledge as to whether or not s/he complies with their classification agreement?  
(If yes, how do you know?)
7. If you could choose between a classification system based on subjective assessments and expert opinions versus an objective point-based system in which risk scores are assigned to inmates as a way of determining security placement, which would you prefer and why?

OR

Do you think some combination of the two systems would be more effective? Why?

8. What changes or improvements would you like to see made to the current classification system?
9. Do you feel that inmates who sign a CAPA understand and are committed to their agreement?
10. Why do you think some inmates choose not to sign a CAPA?

A copy of the interview schedule may be found in Appendix B. Interviews were conducted by the Deputy Director of Research and a research intern during on-site visits to each institution affected by the research.

The information obtained from the interviews was primarily qualitative in nature and thus not amenable to statistical or quantitative analysis. Therefore, analysis of the responses consisted of identifying, categorizing and describing common and frequently mentioned issues. These were then rank-ordered according to the frequency with which they were mentioned by respondents. Responses given by five or more persons are seen as indicating a common or frequent response for survey purposes.

Before presenting the survey results, one caveat is in order. The reader is asked to bear in mind that the intent of this survey was to obtain the perceptions

of DOC Classification staff, and the results presented herein reflect those perceptions. No attempt was made in this report to reinterpret, verify, or corroborate the accuracy of those perceptions by reference to statistics, data, or other factual information. This is because we believe it to be important to obtain the perceptions of DOC staff irrespective of the validity of those perceptions.

## RESULTS

The presentation of results below is done on question by question basis.

### 1. WHAT PROBLEMS, IF ANY, DO YOU SEE WITH THE CURRENT CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM?

In total, fifty-five problems of various sorts were identified in the classification system. Many of these problems were mentioned by only one or two respondents and are listed separately below. Problems frequently mentioned by survey respondents clustered into six major areas.

#### #1: Too rapid movement of inmates

First, concern was expressed that inmates were being moved through the system too quickly because of bed space needs. In particular, it was felt that inmates were classified for minimum and pre-release too fast without adequate checking of the official version, mittimus, warrants, and parole violation reports. Rapid movement of inmates before they're ready, coupled with flawed information and lack of data was said to lead to classification mistakes and a "fear of the unknown."

## **#2: Overcrowding wreaks havoc with classification**

Second, overcrowding and bed space shortages were identified as major problems for the classification system. Many expressed the thought that CAPA works "in theory" but can't work "in practice" because of overcrowding. As examples, respondents frequently mentioned inmates moved ahead of schedule and before they could complete programs because of bed space needs. Perhaps more serious was the frequently cited "credibility problem" created when the DOC does not hold up its end of CAPA leading one respondent to state, "In a year from now, no inmate will sign a CAPA."

## **#3: Inconsistency in the classification process**

Third, "inconsistency" was a word frequently used in describing the classification system. Primarily attributable to overcrowding, inconsistency was said to take many forms. Thus, there was a perception of inconsistency across institutions in report preparation and holding inmates to program participation and monitoring CAPA compliance. DOC Central Office was criticized for being inconsistent (and slow) in classification sign-offs and overrides to CAPA, crisis movement of inmates who are eligible but not suitable to move, and sending conflicting messages to institutions such as "fill minimum beds, but use stricter criteria given the conservative atmosphere regarding corrections."

## **#4: Too much paperwork and too few staff**

Fourth, there were complaints about the tremendous amount of paperwork and caseloads too large for counselors to adequately handle. There is a cited need for more individual work between counselors and inmates as well as between counselors, correctional officers, and program/treatment staff to discuss an inmate's progress. A need for additional staff, especially, substance abuse

counselors was cited.

#### **#5: Modify the Standard Movement Chronology**

Fifth, although a separate question was asked on the Standard Movement Chronology (SMC) and is presented below, some respondents cited a problem with the SMC. Among the criticisms of the SMC were that in maximum security it is too harsh and inconsistent. The SMC was said to result in taking too long to transfer an inmate out of maximum because SMC guidelines were seen as too severe for certain groups who could be moved but because of their sentences are not. Penalty differences stipulated by the SMC for different types of escape were said to be too great while SMC guidelines for returnees were characterized as vague or absent in the case of parole violators.

#### **#6: Flawed CAPA process at MCI-Concord**

Sixth, concern was expressed by some over CAPAs written at MCI-Concord and apparent confusion on the part of both Concord staff and inmates. Cases of Concord inmates arriving at other institutions with incomplete, unsigned, or misunderstood CAPAs were cited by some survey respondents. A frequently heard anecdote was that of the inmate literally being presented with his CAPA to sign as he walked out the door of Concord for transportation to another institution. This was said to create serious problems for other institutions which were left to fully explain to the inmate the CAPA which was written at Concord.

While certain other problems were mentioned by survey respondents, these were generally only cited by one or two persons and are thus merely listed below.

These include:

- Need for computerization of the classification system.

- Lack of information on whether inmates returned from medium to maximum security really need maximum security.
- Need for additional programming, especially substance abuse and psychological services.
- Confusion as to whether CAPAs are negated on returned inmates whose disciplinary reports may later be dismissed.
- A problem with inmates transferred to pre-release with 1 or 2 weeks left to parole or discharge for whom little can be done programmatically or reintegration-wise (i.e., work release).
- Move date delays to pre-release.
- Female inmates with short sentences who may have outstanding legal issues.
- A lack of facilities to which to transfer women and a lack of programming for women with long-term sentences at Lancaster.
- Confusion as to whether first and second degree lifers will have their CAPAs voided.

**2. DO YOU FEEL THAT THE STANDARD MOVEMENT CHRONOLOGY IS AN OBJECTIVE AND CONSISTENT METHOD FOR PLACING INMATES IN THE APPROPRIATE SECURITY LEVEL?**

The majority of respondents felt that the Standard Movement Chronology is an objective and consistent method for placing inmates in the appropriate security level. The SMC was variously described as an excellent idea as a guide, which provided flexibility, objectivity, uniformity, norms, standards, and consistency. One respondent went so far as to say that "without it, we wouldn't have a classification system."

A large minority of respondents gave a qualified yes in response to this question. Some noted that the SMC was not used consistently or at all because of bed space constraints but was fair when applied. Some felt that the SMC was not functional for lower security, since inmates need to be screened more carefully.

Some even pointed to unfairness, bent guidelines, or exceptions to the rule in its application. For those qualifying their response to this question, a number of suggestions were offered with respect to the SMC. They were:

- Use the SMC less slavishly and don't classify by sentence alone. Also look at the inmate's profile and mitigating factors.
- The SMC should be updated to reflect the increasing conservatism within the correctional system.
- Use discretion in covering unique cases not covered by the SMC.
- A second return from medium security should be changed to one year in maximum in order to deter inmates with prior failures.
- More time should be spent in pre-release.
- More time behind the walls for mandatory offenders especially drug offenders with 3-5 year sentences.
- Reduce large differences in penalties for escape since there are slight differences in returns from escape.
- Less time should be spent in maximum and medium.
- Don't allow inmates to spend ten years or longer in minimum.
- Guidelines on returns from escape and reclassifications are unrealistic in that "wall-jumpers" should be returned to Walpole and walkaways should go back to Norfolk.
- The SMC is only consistent in relation to what sentence the inmate receives from the judge.
- The SMC guidelines are unclear with respect to parole violators and returnees.

One respondent stated that his response to this question really depended on what the purpose of the SMC is seen as being. If it is to fill available beds, adjust it; if it is to classify, it is alright as is.

Critics of the SMC who responded "no" to this question noted that the SMC takes discretionary power away and is relied on too heavily ("it's become gospel

instead of guideline") and is not appropriate for all offenders. The SMC was criticized for only considering time and giving inmates the view that time alone determines when you move. Some said that the SMC was not followed anyway or consistently, especially on returns to higher security. While some felt that "good" inmates could be moved sooner, others felt that more violent offenders are moved too soon, while some in minimum and pre-release could have spent more time in medium security.

### 3. DO YOU FEEL THAT CAPA HELPS TO MANAGE BED SPACE AT EACH SECURITY LEVEL?

CAPA was envisioned as a vehicle for forecasting and managing bed space needs at each security level by placing inmates on a transfer schedule contingent upon satisfactory institutional adjustment and program participation. The majority of survey respondents felt that CAPA met this objective by allowing both the institution and Central Office to screen and project when inmates are going to move according to a transfer list. A tracking system which allowed staff to check projected moves and vacancies was seen as a major advantage of CAPA even though overcrowding or the failure of inmates to follow through on their CAPA could make decisions and plans invalid. CAPA was also said to make bed assignments with less "hopping".

Of the sizable minority who said that CAPA did not help to manage bed space, some said that since inmates are moving ahead of schedule anyway, they know this, and consequently don't have to comply with CAPA or can't finish programs because they are moved early. Some pointed to the 90 day wait for a pre-release bed as an example of the failure of CAPA to work in an atmosphere of overcrowding and lack of pre-release space. In short, because of overcrowding,

inmates go where the beds are and CAPA was thus not being used to control bed space but just the opposite.

A number of other reasons were cited as why CAPA was not helping to manage bed space. Thus, Central Office was characterized as being too disorganized to keep pace with accurate projections and overriding too many institutional classification recommendations which leads to morale problems for both inmates and staff. A depleted pool of candidates suitable for minimum security in a conservative atmosphere coupled with too few inmates on CAPA, and rebellious inmates who use CAPA against the DOC, were also cited as factors mitigating against CAPA's ability to manage bed space.

#### 4. DO YOU THINK THAT CAPA HELPS TO REDUCE DISCIPLINARY REPORTS?

CAPA was seen by its architects as providing an incentive for inmates to maintain positive institutional adjustment by knowing that a move is partly tied to institutional behavior will help reduce the occurrence of disciplinary reports by inmates. Respondents were divided, however, on whether or not CAPA met this objective. Although a majority felt that CAPA did help to reduce disciplinary reports, many qualified their responses to this question.

Of those who felt that CAPA did reduce disciplinary reports, some pointed to the deterrence value of CAPA in light of a pending move. One respondent stated that CAPA reduces disciplinary reports indirectly by getting inmates active in programs so they were less likely to have idle time on their hands in which to get into trouble.

For those who qualified their responses to this question, many pointed out that although CAPA generally had this effect it was dependent on several factors. First, it depends on whether or not the inmate "believes" in CAPA and those who

do may be self-motivated enough to stay out of trouble even without CAPA. Second, inconsistency across the system was noted with inmates incurring disciplinary reports but still keeping their CAPA leading to the perspective that CAPA will only reduce disciplinary reports if properly enforced. Third, CAPA may have more of an impact on D-reports in lower than higher security where "guys have more to lose." Finally, CAPA was not seen as affecting the institutional behavior of the inmate who habitually receives D-reports.

Of the sizable minority who felt that CAPA did not reduce disciplinary reports, it was frequently stated that D-reports have nothing to do with CAPA but are an expression of an individual inmate's personality. In short, if an inmate is going to be disruptive, he or she will no matter what, including CAPA. If anything, individual attention, operations, and sound facility management were seen as reducing disciplinary reports. Overcrowding was also seen as a leading to disciplinary reports. Thus, it is difficult to eliminate the causes of D-reports. The perception that filling beds takes priority and the inmate will move anyway as a result, was seen as negating CAPA's effect on D-reports. In short, these respondents felt that only in exceptional cases does CAPA reduce D-reports and most inmates don't need a CAPA to know to stay out of trouble.

**5. DO YOU FEEL THAT CAPA MAKES INMATES MORE RESPONSIBLE? IN OTHER WORDS, ARE THEY MORE COMMITTED TOWARD POSITIVE INSTITUTIONAL ADJUSTMENT AND PROGRAM COMPLETION?**

In addition to providing an incentive to avoid disciplinary reports, CAPA was also envisioned as providing inmates with an incentive to satisfactorily participate in programs in order to get a scheduled move. The large majority of survey respondents felt that CAPA has made inmates more responsible in terms of institutional adjustment and program participation and completion, although again,

many qualified their responses.

CAPA was said to encourage inmates to participate and stay in programs longer even if only to get a desired move. For those generally seeking help, CAPA was said to make them more conscientious and provide a structured opportunity change even if it was "forced self-help". Others who responded yes to this question, however, said that most CAPA inmates are more motivated and would go to programs anyway. Thus, CAPA was seen as benefiting only those who are already motivated or in the words of one respondent, "those who are already rehabilitated". The effect of CAPA was said to have been particularly noticeable with new commitments and inmates with short-term sentences. Finally, CAPA was said to have improved program quality which has the secondary effect of attracting inmates and making them feel they should go to program for more than just coffee. As with other areas, CAPA's impact was felt to vary not only by inmate but also by institution.

The minority who felt that CAPA did not make inmates more responsible in terms of institutional adjustment or program participation felt that inmates only went to programs to get a move and not because they were internally motivated. CAPA was described as coercive or mandated program participation and not something sought by inmates genuinely seeking help. In the words of one respondent, "inmates will sign anything to get out of Concord."

**6. AFTER AN INMATE LEAVES THIS INSTITUTION, DO YOU HAVE ANY KNOWLEDGE AS TO WHETHER OR NOT S/HE COMPLIES WITH THEIR CLASSIFICATION AGREEMENT?**

This question sought to determine whether or not institutional classification staff received any feedback or had any idea as to the status of classification agreements they negotiated with inmates. Survey results indicate that the large

majority of staff have no knowledge as to whether or not inmates comply with their classification agreements when they leave an institution unless they see an inmate returned for reclassification, or in rare instances they see termination reports or through the informal network of staff at other institutions or inmates. Only two respondents said they regularly see termination reports while another two respondents at one institution said they followed-up on their releasees. In short, classification staff at each institution operate in their own worlds with little feedback or knowledge of the extent to which inmates comply with their classification agreements once they leave an institution.

**7. IF YOU COULD CHOOSE BETWEEN A CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM BASED ON SUBJECTIVE ASSESSMENTS AND EXPERT OPINIONS VERSUS AN OBJECTIVE POINT BASED SYSTEM IN WHICH RISK SCORES ARE ASSIGNED TO INMATES AS A WAY OF DETERMINING SECURITY PLACEMENT, WHICH WOULD YOU PREFER AND WHY?**

OR

**DO YOU THINK SOME COMBINATION OF THE TWO SYSTEMS WOULD BE MORE EFFECTIVE? WHY?**

Classification systems may generally be divided into two types: subjective or traditional systems versus objective or point-based systems. Within these broad types exist a variety of classificatory schemes. Subjective systems have typically relied on the subjective expertise and clinical judgements of individuals or teams in making security, custodial, and programmatic decisions on inmates. By contrast, objective systems usually assign points to inmates based on certain characteristics shown by research to be correlated with institutional adjustment which, when totalled, determine the level of security to which the inmate is assigned.

There is no uniformity in definition or criterion as to what constitutes an objective classification system and thus, a system described as objective by one

person may be seen as subjective by another. However, as described by Buchanan et al., (1986:273), objective classification systems must have at least the following features:

- Uses test and classification instruments that have been validated for prison populations;
- Contains the same components and scorings/classification approach for all offenders;
- Arrives at decisions based only upon application of factors shown to be related to placement decisions;
- Assigns offenders to security classifications consistent with their background;
- Promotes similar decisions among individual classification analysts on comparable offender cases, while minimizing overrides;
- Involves inmates and is readily understandable by both staff and offenders; and,
- Is capable of systematic and efficient monitoring.

The extent to which the DOC classification system possesses these features will not be addressed here. The system does use a Standard Movement Chronology timetable which establishes transfer schedules to medium, minimum, and pre-release security levels by considering an inmate's sentence and earliest presumed parole eligibility date. It does not, however, use a point-based scoring instrument for purposes of classifying inmates and by this fact alone is felt to be more subjective than objective. The purpose of this question therefore was two-fold. First, to examine the extent to which classification staff perceive the system as subjective versus objective. Second, to examine staff preferences for a subjective, objective, or combined system.

The majority of staff interviewed prefer a subjective classification system which is what they perceive the current system to be. A sizable minority would like to see a combined subjective and objective point-based system. Only three of

sixty survey respondents indicated they would like to see an exclusively objective, point-based system.

Advocates of a subjective or the present system levelled a number of criticisms against point-based systems. First, point-based systems were seen as detracting from the personal contact in classification and not allowing staff to know the inmate. Point systems were said to miss the many mitigating factors and the fact that people change. Second, point systems were said to be distorted and only weighted negative factors. Third, point systems would result in too many inmates being classified for maximum security and thus would not work in an environment of overcrowding.<sup>1</sup> Fourth, point systems were said to result in too much paperwork. Finally, there were those who believe that CAPA and the Standard Movement Chronology were already in line with a point-based system.

Those respondents who argued for a combined system also noted that point systems alone can't account for individual personalities, extenuating circumstances, mitigating factors, and the capacity of individuals to change. However, they point out that while subjective individual assessment of the inmate can do the above, it alone can result in mistakes. Point systems were also said to be more fair and would result in fewer inmate complaints about their classification status.

The few advocates for an exclusively point-based system noted that numbers "don't lie" and objective systems would reduce inequities in the classification process and personality conflicts between inmates and staff.

#### **8. WHAT CHANGES OR IMPROVEMENTS WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE MADE TO THE CURRENT CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM?**

A number of changes or improvements were suggested for the classification

system although many were named by only one or two survey respondents. Those mentioned by at least three or more survey respondents, in descending order of frequency with which they were mentioned are:

- Addition of bed space to improve classification flexibility;
- Additional staff or reduced caseloads, and a reduction in the amount of paperwork;
- More timely sign-offs on classification boards from Central Office;
- Improved monitoring of CAPA compliance;
- More training; and,
- Better organization of Central Office records.

Those changes or suggestions for improvement mentioned by only one or two survey respondents are listed below.

- Develop and place more positive community contacts, participation, and resources;
- More accurate classification at Concord;
- More experienced classification staff at Concord in Correctional Counselor 2 positions;
- Greater use of computerization;
- FBI checks should be done by Central Office and not the institution;
- Returns from SECC minimum should be sent to SECC medium rather than Concord in order to save resources;
- Scrutinize the many pre-release returns who could go back to minimum and not medium;
- Improve communication, regularity, and consistency through the whole system;
- Increase the number of creative arts programs;
- Need better and more accurate information;

- Involvement of psychological services and treatment staff in the classification process;
- Add another medium facility or a few minimum facilities;
- Each institution should do a better job in dealing with their problem inmates instead of returning them to higher security;
- Return to area board system of classification;
- Revise the Standard Movement Chronology to reflect the conservative atmosphere;
- Ease the SMC guidelines on those with no criminal histories, non-violent offenders, first incarcerations, youth and those serving 8-10 year sentences;
- Toughen SMC guidelines on escapes, returns, and failures in lower security and stiffen SMC criterion for minimum and pre-release placements;
- Make the SMC more specific, clear, consistent, and "user friendly";
- Obtain input of staff who operate furlough, PRA, and work-release programs;
- Improve screening of pre-release candidates;
- Increase amount of time inmates spend in pre-release;
- Regular assessments of inmates and not just at Concord;
- Hire substance abuse counselors;
- Conduct "progress reviews" instead of classification boards every six months;
- Improve population projections in order to better plan for bed space needs;
- Format of subsequent classification reviews should be simplified and made shorter;
- Establish separate classification system for women;
- Add programs at Lancaster for women with long-term sentences;
- Increase psychological and mental health counseling for women;

- Establish another facility for women between Framingham and pre-release;
- Eliminate need for Commissioner's signature on speedy trials at Framingham since it just delays matters;
- Don't mix female OUI offenders with other female offenders;
- Allow adequate warning and advance notice on females moving to Lancaster;
- Establish better screening process, reception/diagnostic center, and orientation unit for women;
- CAPA training should also focus on factors which positively impact on CAPA and not just those which negatively impact on CAPA;
- Contract out to run programs using 03 funds;
- Establish system-wide strategy for treating sex offenders;
- Ensure consistency and flexibility in treating special cases;
- Establish more minimum security beds and employment for women;
- Make substance abuse assessment and diagnosis a larger part of the classification process;
- Have caseworkers spend more time with inmates;
- Increase psychological and medical testing to treat mental health and drug problems of inmates;
- Put D-reports in writing for those returned to Concord;
- Make security level assignments compulsory;
- Establish better criteria for determining pre-release status;
- Have facilities complete termination reports;
- Obtain feedback from Central Office on reasons for overrides;
- Establish mechanism for determining when programs have a waiting list;

- Improve documentation, accountability, and standardization on lower security returns to Concord; and,
- Have every case worker spend time at Concord.

**9. DO YOU FEEL THAT INMATES WHO SIGN A CAPA UNDERSTAND AND ARE COMMITTED TO THEIR AGREEMENT?**

A fundamental assumption underlying CAPA is that individual inmates will make a rational decision on whether or not to sign the CAPA based on stipulations offered to the inmate in the CAPA. In effect, inmates who abide by the CAPA by participating in designated program areas and maintaining positive institutional adjustment, are to be transferred to reduced security levels contingent upon adherence to the conditions specified in the CAPA and according to the Standard Movement Chronology transfer schedule. The "carrot" or incentive of CAPA to the inmate is knowing where and when they will serve their sentence while the "stick" is knowing they can be held back for failing to comply with their CAPA.

Do inmates fully understand the intent and incentive value provided by CAPA? Are they more committed to program participation and positive institutional adjustment as a result? Or by contrast, do inmates signing CAPAs sign them for other reasons? To address these questions, staff were asked their perceptions of inmate understanding of CAPA and their commitment to the agreements they have signed.

The majority of survey respondents believed that inmates do understand CAPA and are committed to the agreement. Some felt that inmates only understand, however, if it is properly explained to them by the caseworker. Some felt that inmates did not understand why the CAPA gets voided or modified. Others said that inmate understanding of CAPA was a function of the caseworker

while others felt it was a function of the institution with there being less understanding at Concord and larger facilities. A number of respondents said that while inmates may understand CAPA, they are not really committed per se but only sign to get a move. In short, many only see the transfer schedule and not what they have to do in terms of program participation and institutional adjustment in order to get the transfer. Some respondents said that inmates know they'll be moved anyways because of overcrowding even if they are out of compliance with their CAPA.

#### **10. WHY DO YOU THINK SOME INMATES CHOOSE NOT TO SIGN A CAPA?**

Currently, about 25 percent of the inmates who meet the eligibility and suitability criteria for CAPA have chosen to participate by signing an agreement. In order to try to understand why a higher percentage of inmates have chosen not to sign a CAPA, survey respondents were asked for their perceptions. A number of reasons were cited by respondents.

First, inmates were said to be increasingly cynical about CAPA when they live up to their end of the agreement but the DOC does not by moving them late or where the bed space is, not where they were supposed to be transferred. This was said to especially be the case with older "cons", "punks", non-conformists and those with prior incarcerations who believe it to be against the "inmate code" to have a CAPA. In short, CAPA was said to have a credibility problem leading one respondent to state, "In a year from now, no inmate will sign a CAPA."

Second, many inmates were said to be lazy and just want to do their time (especially long-termers), or were unwilling to get programmatically involved and frequently deny program needs. A third reason cited for why inmates won't sign a CAPA is simply a distrust of the Department of Correction. Inmates were said to

not want anything mandated or "held over their heads" by the DOC. Fourth, some respondents indicated that many inmates didn't sign because they believed that they could "cut a better deal" without CAPA and did not expect to gain anything by signing a CAPA. Related to this was said to be a perception by inmates that they could get moved just as fast as if they were on a CAPA due to overcrowding. Other were said to disagree with the transfer schedule, program placement, or would not agree to a setback if returned.

Less frequently cited as reasons why inmates choose not sign a CAPA were the following:

- The addition of new stipulations to CAPA as inmates arrive at different facilities.
- Long termers who have too much time to the P.E. date.
- Inmates who feel that they can get what they want by being returned to higher security and then getting returned to their desired placement.
- Inmates who already possess skills or an education and feel they don't need programs as a result. By contrast, there are other inmates for whom CAPA and program areas are too structured or sophisticated.
- Inmates for whom CAPA was not fully explained, and who consequently don't understand CAPA, especially Hispanic inmates and those from MCI-Concord.
- Inmates who intend to do what is on the CAPA anyways but refuse to sign or will negotiate a CAPA when they are ready.
- Inmates who don't want to leave particular institutions.

This completes the presentation of results from the survey of classification staff regarding their perceptions of the inmate classification system. The final section to this report presents a summary and discussion based on the survey results.

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Six major problems were identified with the current classification system. These were: too rapid movement of inmates; overcrowding wreaks havoc with classification; inconsistency in the classification process; too much paperwork and too few staff; need for modification of the Standard Movement Chronology; and, a flawed CAPA process at MCI-Concord.

Despite calls for its modification in various directions, a majority of survey respondents believe that the Standard Movement Chronology is an objective and consistent method for placing inmates in the appropriate security level.

The majority of survey respondents felt that CAPA was an effective mechanism for forecasting and managing bed space needs at each security level, although a sizable minority said that it did not accomplish this because of overcrowding.

Although a majority felt that CAPA did help to reduce disciplinary reports, many noted it was dependent on several factors. Similarly, although a large majority of survey respondents stated that CAPA has made inmates more responsible in terms of institutional adjustment, program participation and completion, this was also dependent on several factors.

Survey results indicate that the large majority of staff have no knowledge as to whether or not inmates comply with their classification agreements when they leave an institution. Rather, classification staff at each institution operate "in their own worlds" with little or no feedback on the classification agreements they develop and negotiate.

The majority of survey respondents prefer a subjective classification system which is what they perceive the current system to be, although a sizable minority would like to see a combined subjective and objective point-based system. Few

prefer an exclusively objective, point-based system.

Major changes or improvements suggested for the classification system included the following: addition of bed space to improve classification flexibility, additional staff, reduced case loads, and a reduction in paperwork; more timely sign-offs on classification boards from Central Office; improved monitoring of CAPA compliance; more training; and, better organization of Central Office records.

The majority of survey respondents believe that inmates do understand CAPA and are committed to the agreement. However, a sizable number questioned the level of commitment and stated that inmates only see the transfer schedule and sign to get a move.

A number of reasons were cited by respondents as to why inmates choose not to sign an agreement including: inmate cynicism about CAPA when the DOC does not honor its part of the agreement; inmate laziness, an unwillingness to get programmatically involved, and denial of program needs; distrust of the Department of Correction; and a perception by inmates that they can "cut a better deal" without CAPA and will move quicker especially in light of overcrowding.

The overall picture which emerges from this survey of DOC classification staff is that of a classification system beset by a number of problems but yet at the same time, one with which staff are fairly satisfied and comfortable. Many of the problems with the classification system identified by survey respondents either were or could be attributed to overcrowding leading to the frequently heard statement that the system "works in theory but does not work in practice because of overcrowding." This leads to three fundamental questions. First, how can staff be generally satisfied with a system that works in theory but not in practice? Second, if staff perceptions are correct that the system works in theory but not in practice, of what utility is such a system even if staff are comfortable with it?

Third, can any classification system "work in practice" given the severe extent of overcrowding in the Massachusetts prison system?

With respect to the first question concerning staff satisfaction with the system, it would appear that staff are primarily comfortable with the system because it permits them a substantial amount of discretion in making classification decisions. Indeed, those things which reduce staff discretion in making classification decisions, such as objective, point-based systems or Central Office overrides to board decisions, were singled out for criticism by survey respondents. Yet there is fundamental agreement among classification experts that classification systems should seek to reduce subjectivity and discretion in order to ensure more equitable treatment, validity and reliability in classification decision-making<sup>2</sup>. Ironically, survey respondents frequently complained about inconsistency in classification decision-making yet argued for the preservation of those principles which most contribute to inconsistency, namely, subjectivity and discretion. At a time when some 38 states have self-described objective classification systems, and states are increasingly adopting point-based models in response to inmate litigation and court rulings, Massachusetts would appear to be moving in an entirely opposite direction.

The level of satisfaction with CAPA was also surprisingly high at the same time it was characterized as not working in an atmosphere of overcrowding. For example, CAPA was generally felt to meet its stated objectives of managing bed space, increasing program participation, and reducing the incidence of disciplinary reports. Not one respondent suggested "throwing out" the current system or CAPA specifically. At most, there were suggestions for fine-tuning features of the current system such as the Standard Movement Chronology or more effectively monitoring CAPA compliance, or ensuring greater consistency in the classification process and decision-making both across institutions and vis-a-vis Central Office.

Second, perceptions aside, the extent to which the system does or does not work in practice will only be known after Phases 2 and 3 of the current evaluation are completed. Thus, the validation study in Phase 2 will examine the extent to which security level distributions change when alternative classification criteria are employed and if the current criteria correlate with institutional adjustment and program participation. As mentioned previously, despite such problems as move date delays and inmates moved ahead of schedule because of overcrowding, there is a perception that CAPA has helped to better manage bed space, increased rates of program participation, and reduced disciplinary reports. However, perceptions must be balanced against statistical facts and this is what the Phase 3 impact evaluation of CAPA will attempt to accomplish.

In sum, it may be that the classification system works in practice but not as intended or, in spite of itself. Thus, inmates sign CAPAs not out of a sincere desire to get programmatic help but rather because of a perception that they'll be moved quicker if they do. Or, CAPA inmates are moved quicker not because they have higher rates of program participation and completion but rather because the DOC is out of compliance with its end of the agreement by moving inmates ahead of schedule to the next available bed and before they can complete programs. But by the same token, if classification decisions are being made on the basis of bed space availability, how can one explain the fact that medium security facilities are severely over capacity while minimum beds are unfilled? Are we overclassifying or do we have beds in minimum security which we don't need but none in medium which we do?

With respect to the final question, it may be that no classification system can work in an atmosphere of overcrowding even if offenders are classified correctly with the risks they pose because "if the beds aren't there, the beds aren't there." However, Clements (1982) has noted that while overcrowding does distort

classification decisions, certain classification policies may worsen the extent and effects of overcrowding by the use of irrelevant classification criteria. He argues that "offender classification properly conceived and properly used as a correctional management tool, holds substantial promise as a device for reducing the effects of overcrowding (1982:73)." If, as many of our survey respondents believe, inmates are currently being assigned to where the beds are instead of to the least restrictive security level based on the risks they pose, then the system is violating fundamental rules of offender classification. An answer to this, and other issues identified in this survey, will have to await the completion of the validation and impact components of the present study.

## NOTES

1. Ironically, the adoption of point-based systems in other states has resulted in fewer people being classified for maximum security. For example, using three objective, point-based models (i.e., the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the National Institute of Corrections and the California Department of Corrections), Austin (1983) was able to reclassify 53 to 57 percent of Nevada's admission population from maximum and medium to minimum security in contrast to the 16 percent rate historically produced by a subjective committee process.
2. In classification parlance, validity refers to the extent to which classification criteria correlate with or measure what they purport to measure such as institutional adjustment. Reliability refers to consistency in decision making in that given a certain set of classification guidelines or criteria, two different classification committees would arrive at similar conclusions about the same inmate (Clements, 1982).

## REFERENCES

Austin, James. 1983. "Assessing the New Generation of Prison Classification Models." Crime & Delinquency. 29:561-576.

Buchanan, Robert A., Karen L. Whitlow, and James Austin. 1986. "National Evaluation of Objective Prison Classification System: The Current State of the Art." Crime & Delinquency. 32:272-290.

Clements, Carl B. 1982. "The Relationship of Offender Classification to the Problems of Prison Overcrowding." Crime & Delinquency 28:72-81.

**APPENDIX A**

**SURVEY RESPONDENTS**

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**Bay State Correction Center**

Brenda Goudy, Correctional Counselor  
Randy Hoston, Correctional Counselor  
Joan Lyon, Director of Classification

**MCI-Concord**

Paul Barosky, Assistant to Superintendent  
Melinda Cady, Supervising Correctional Counselor  
Janice Clark, Correctional Counselor  
Jaymie Derderias, Correctional Counselor  
Karen DiNardo, Correctional Counselor  
Dan Farnkoff, Principal  
Carol Higgins, Correctional Counselor  
Roy Loveling, Community Service Director  
Terri Mangin, Correctional Counselor  
Greg McCann, Supervising Correctional Counselor  
Lois Melanson Blute, Director of Treatment  
Rollie Rheault, Director of Classification  
Kelly Ryan, Supervising Correctional Counselor

**MCI-Framingham**

Tim Flaherty, Correctional Counselor  
Kathleen McGlone, Industries Instructor  
Joanne Rust, Senior Correctional Counselor/Unit Manager  
Tracy Scanlon, Unit Manager

**Lancaster Pre-Release Center**

Linda Antonucci, Correctional Counselor  
Patty Chase, Correctional Counselor  
Frank Guerra, Correctional Counselor  
Jackie Lovely, Correctional Counselor  
Marty Shaughnessy, Director of Classification

**MCI-Norfolk**

Michael Divine, Correctional Counselor  
Kenneth Nelson, Deputy Superintendent for Programs and Treatment

**North Central Correctional Center**

Peter Chalapatras, Director of Treatment  
Cathy Colo, Correctional Counselor  
Elizabeth Daniel, Senior Correctional Counselor/Unit Manager  
Ed Foley, Director of Classification  
Gregory Nyman, Correctional Counselor  
Robert T. Sadowki II, Senior Correctional Counselor/Unit Manager  
Stanley Suchocki, Senior Correctional Counselor

**Old Colony Correctional Center**

Carol Francouer, Correctional Counselor 3  
Cindy O'Brien, Correctional Counselor I  
Peter Pepe, Deputy Superintendent for Programs and Treatment  
Jackie Turcotte, Unit Manager  
Lynn Woodford, Unit Manager

**MCI-Plymouth**

Angela Young, Correctional Counselor 3

**MCI-Shirley**

Chris Murphy, Unit Manager  
Bill Winn, Supervising Correctional Counselor  
Diane Winston, Director of Classification

**Southeastern Correctional Center**

Ron Bridges, Supervising Correctional Counselor  
Bill Martin, Correctional Counselor  
Clint Martin, Correctional Counselor  
Dorothy Moore, Acting Supervising Correctional Counselor  
Judy Sharpe, Acting Director of Classification

**South Middlesex Pre-Release Center**

Cathy Durward, Correctional Counselor  
Suzanne Hunt, Director of Classification  
John Morin, Correctional Counselor  
John Rull, Deputy Superintendent

**Cedar Junction-MCI at Walpole**

James Aho, Correctional Counselor  
Sherlee Alexander, Correctional Counselor  
Karen Bergeron, Unit Manager  
John Marshall, Unit Manager  
Caroline Sawyer, Supervising Correctional Counselor  
Tony Silva, Unit Manager  
Michael Thompson, Director of Treatment  
Jim Walsh, Unit Manager

**APPENDIX B**

**INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

## INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

To be administered to DOC Directors of Classification and Classification staff.

### Identifier Information

Name of Respondent: \_\_\_\_\_

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Description of Position and Duties: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The Research Division of the Massachusetts Department of Correction is conducting a study of the inmate classification system. As someone involved with classification, you have been selected to participate in this survey. The purpose of this interview is to obtain your perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the present classification system.

Your responses to these questions will remain strictly confidential. We will use the results of the survey to gain a comprehensive look at the classification process and overall system.

DIRECTORS OF CLASSIFICATION & CLASSIFICATION STAFF

1. What problems, if any, do you see with the current classification system?

(TO INTERVIEWER: Below is a list of anticipated problems. Do not read these off in check list form to interviewee - simply use for facilitating questioning and recording).

(INTERVIEWER PROBES)

- Overcrowding - maximizing use of lower security placements and how this affects classification efforts (e.g. inmates assigned to particular security level based on available bed space rather than their characteristics or risks they pose)?
- 85% violent offenders?
- Reviews held when needed and on a regular basis?
- Monitoring - are inmates met on a monthly basis?
- Problems due to classification mistakes?
- Unnecessary reclassifying? (i.e. what Concord does is inadequate?)
- Problems with overrides? (i.e. too many?)
- Do CO's and counselors meet often enough with teachers, supervisors, and program personnel to gain greater insight as to an inmate's performance and motivation?

2. Do you feel that the Standard Movement Chronology is an objective and consistent method for placing inmates in the appropriate security level?

- If yes, how?

- If no, why?

3. Do you feel that CAPA helps to manage bed space at each security level?

- If yes, how?

- If no, why not?

4. Do you think that CAPA helps to reduce disciplinary reports?

- If yes, how?

- If no, why not?

5. Do you feel that CAPA makes inmates more responsible? In other words, are they more committed toward positive institutional adjustment and program completion?

- If yes, how?

- If no, why not?

6. After an inmate leaves this institution, do you have any knowledge as to whether or not s/he complies with their classification agreement?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_

No \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, how do you know?

7. If you could chose between a classification system based on subjective assessments and expert opinions versus an objective point-based system in which risk scores are assigned to inmates as a way of determining security placement, which would you prefer and why?

OR

- Do you think some combination of the two systems would be more effective? Why?

8. What changes or improvements would you like to see made to the current classification system?

9. Do you feel that inmates who sign a CAPA understand and are committed to their agreement.

10. Why do you think some inmates choose not to sign a CAPA?