

Arkansas Department of Corrections:

Prison Classification System Assessment

CGL Company's Research and Forecasting (RAF) Division is proposing an assessment of the current prison classification system for the State of Arkansas which compares and aligns current best practices for prison classification with current systems in the state. The assessment will comprehensively review existing policies, procedures, and protocols, benchmarking them against the American Correctional Association (ACA) standards and best practices observed in other systems, as outlined in the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) guide to objective classification systems. This Assessment will also include on-site assessment of the classification process and interviews with correctional staff, administrators, and key stakeholders to gather insights on how these policies are implemented in daily operations. This approach allows RAF staff to identify areas where improvements are needed, ensuring that any recommended strategies are grounded in both compliance and operational realities.

A detailed analysis of facility data, including disciplinary and incident reports, inmate classification systems and forms, and operational outcomes, will be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the current classification system. The goal is to determine whether inmates are classified correctly and housed appropriately. Overclassification can be costly, negatively impact inmate well-being, and restrict access to essential programming. Conversely, under classification may create unnecessary risks for both inmates and staff, compromising overall prison operations.

This review process presented below is based on elements of Phases 1 and 2 from the "Objective Prison Classification: A Guide for Correction Agencies, Second Edition" produced by the NIC. The guide is co-authored by Dr. James Austin, who will lead the project, and is an update to the previous version published in 1998. The complete guide is included as an attachment to this document and provides more details on the steps summarized here. It also includes details on the next phases following an assessment, including full statistical validation (reliability and validity), planning, pilot testing, applying to future bed space forecasts, implementation, and details on special populations.

The proposed assessment is the first step in evaluating and planning a comprehensive, objective classification system for Arkansas and will result in practical, evidence-based recommendations that enhance safety, improve staff training, strengthen overall operations, and provide a cost-effective system of classification based on the population.

Phase I: Mobilization - Determining the Need for Change

Step 1. Identify the Classification Issues. It is recommended that an agency revalidates its classification system every three to five years. Revalidation ensures that the classification system is operating as intended and that the risk factors and custody scales are appropriate for the current prison population. A revalidation entails detailed statistical analysis of the classification policies, procedures, risk factors, relative weight of the risk factors, custody scale, and mandatory and discretionary override factors.

Past issues that have strongly influenced agencies to reassess and modify their classification systems include:

- Changes in the characteristics and behavior of the incarcerated population.
- “Get-tough-on-crime” legislation.
- Budget cuts, overcrowding, and reductions in programming and services.
- Questions about the validity of the classification system for women in prison.
- Identification and management of individuals who pose high risks to institutional safety or security.
- Planning for construction of a new facility or remodeling current housing unit(s).
- High rates of overrides.

Before undertaking any initiative to change its classification system, an assessment of the agency’s commitment and readiness to change is essential. All levels and divisions within the agency—the commissioner, the wardens and superintendents, the supervisors, correctional officers, case managers, and, in particular, the research and information system staff—should be committed to the classification initiative.

Step 2. Designate a Review/Advisory Committee. A crucial step is to identify a project leader responsible for overseeing the completion of all tasks associated with the initiative. The project leader’s first task is to organize a steering committee to direct the change process. The steering committee should include representatives from all the agency’s operational areas, such as security, medical and mental health services, programming, classification, research and planning, and information systems, budget, training, and legal counsel.

Step 3. Review the current written classification policies and procedures. On the establishment of the steering committee, it should undertake a comprehensive review of the agency's current classification procedures and practices to identify problems and issues in the classification process and examine the links between the external, internal, and needs assessment processes. This review should consider the following questions:

- What current policies, practices, and issues are potentially affecting the classification system?
- What trends are associated with these policies and practices?
- What outcomes would the steering committee like to achieve with the revised classification system?

Phase II: Comprehensive Assessment of the Current Classification System

Step 1. Conduct an onsite assessment of the classification system. The assessment should include site visits to correctional facilities and the research and information system units.

- **Interview the central office and facility-level classification staff.** The site visit team should conduct face-to-face interviews with critical supervisory and line classification staff regarding their specific classification tasks and identify any concerns about the current classification process.
- **Observe the classification process.** The site visit team should have access to case files, observe the classification process, and identify the criteria for making custody decisions. These data, combined with the staff interviews, should provide insight into both the availability and quality of the data required to score the current initial and reclassification instruments, the degree of discretion associated with the classification process, and the reliability of the classification scores and custody designations.
- **Review the results of the site assessment.** The site visit team should present its findings to the steering committee. During this meeting, it is essential to address any unresolved issues, achieve consensus reached on the project tasks, identify the specific responsibilities of the steering committee members, and review the feasibility of the project and timeline.

Step 2. Compile baseline data. Baseline data should be collected for each of the outcomes identified by the steering committee and stakeholders. These may include case level data on a snapshot of the population, number of discretionary overrides at initial classification and reclassification, rate of

institutional misconduct by custody level, and the custody distribution at initial classification and reclassification. Each statistic should be compiled separately by gender, facility, and custody level.

Step 3. Prepare the classification assessment report.

The RAF team will prepare a draft report documenting its activities and findings, and the baseline data. The report should describe the agency's current practices, identify the classification issues to be addressed by the initiative, and document the agreed-upon project time-task line. The draft report should be provided and presented to the agency commissioner, steering committee, director of classification, and any staff who participated in the assessment.

Key deliverables of this project will include:

- **Comprehensive Classification System Assessment Report** – A detailed evaluation of the current classification system, including findings from site visits, stakeholder interviews, and data analysis.
- **Benchmarking Analysis** – A comparison of Arkansas's classification policies and procedures against national best practices and ACA/NIC guidelines.
- **Baseline Data Report** – A compilation of key metrics, including classification trends, override rates, and institutional misconduct by custody level, broken down by facility and population characteristics.
- **Implementation Roadmap** – A phased plan outlining actionable recommendations, timeline, and resource needs for improving the classification system.
- **Stakeholder Presentation** – A briefing for leadership and key stakeholders summarizing findings, recommendations, and next steps for implementation.

A project of this magnitude requires a thoughtful and strategic approach to ensure the safety and efficiency of the correctional system. Making informed, data-driven decisions will be critical in implementing an effective and sustainable classification system that aligns with best practices. The assessment and subsequent recommendations are projected to take 6 months to complete, allowing for thorough analysis, stakeholder engagement, and careful planning for implementation.

Proposed Budget: \$60,000 all inclusive of labor and travel.