

Contemporary Comment

Gender Difference — Classified Information

... few systems classify women with any thought to the general issues pertinent to objectivity of validity ... were 'risk' rightly assessed and equitably applied to women, between 60 percent and 80 percent of female offenders could be most cost-effectively served via alternatives to incarceration (Fowler 1993).

'Female Inmates Get Policy Break — Mothers and Children's Program and Classification System signed off'. Behind this simple headline in *Insight Out*, the quarterly newsletter of the Women's Services Unit of the New South Wales Department of Corrective Services, lies a complex new concept underpinning the operations of correctional centres for female inmates. Senior management of the Department see it as a major policy shift. It is in line with the strategies outlined in the Women's Action Plan, the blueprint for the Department's work 'designed to ensure improved access to services and programs for women inmates' (Women's Action Plan 1994:Introduction).

At a glimpse, the Mothers and Children's Program and the new classification system for women seem to be quite separate issues. Yet with a contemporary approach to classification in the correctional system (that is, a move away from a sole focus on security considerations) they are intrinsically linked. The classification system is to be used as a means to an end. It is the mechanism by which female inmates are to have a better chance to gain access to the programs most appropriate to their specific and individual needs.

In New South Wales inmates are classified to determine appropriate levels of supervision, housing and legal requirements, program needs and work assignments. Together with *case management* and *program pathways*,¹ it is used to complete a management system which has all the ingredients for meeting the individual needs of inmates.

The introduction of the female-specific classification system in New South Wales is nothing if not innovative. In Australia it is without peer. There are few jurisdictions in the United States and Canada which have developed a classification process specifically for female inmates. It requires political will evidenced through the planned legislative changes and it requires a professional commitment to lateral thinking and intensive case management² by departmental staff.

-
- 1 Program pathways are defined through the case management process specifying an inmate's progression through programs and placements following a 'hierarchy of privileges'.
 - 2 In summary, case management in the New South Wales correctional centres means an organised approach to addressing inmate needs. It involves a multidisciplinary team working with the inmate, often with other specialists and on occasions family members to develop and monitor a program appropriate to individual inmate needs.

Beyond punishment

A literature review suggests that in the 1990s it is commonly accepted that classification is useful and necessary (Fowler 1993:135). Australian jurisdictions assume, like their American counterparts, that 'sound criminal and personal information (beyond age and sex) are essential', that 'least restrictive placement consistent with public, staff, and inmate safety lessens both risks to persons and confinement costs', that 'inmates with similar historical and behavioural characteristics housed together are easier and cheaper to manage' and that 'public safety is always the primary criterion for "sorting" when that is our primary mission' (Fowler 1993:135).

The current classification system has evolved over four decades from one which sought '[to manage] the classification and placement of inmates based on static security, preventing escapes and barrier control systems ... [emphasising and reinforcing] a conservative, subjective, punitive approach'. It is seeking to become an interactive system of '... inmate management and security maintenance, focusing on the skills and knowledge of correctional staff' (Allpass 1995:10).

This approach in New South Wales conforms with that in jurisdictions in other English-speaking countries where the contemporary prison classification system also 'began as a subjective decision-making process' (Solomon and Taylor Camp, 1993:15). In the late 1970s and early 1980s classification systems which originally stressed security and custody issues began to balance these considerations with program needs of offenders. 'It appears that the field of prison classification is now ready to continue this revolution toward classification systems that are validated and evaluated, that express criminal justice philosophies and clearly defined goals and objectives, that are responsive to women and culturally diverse offender differences and needs, and that assist in making more efficient use of a broad range of correctional sanctions and options' (Solomon and Taylor Camp 1993:15).

The leap from a method rooted in punishment to an acknowledgment of inmate needs beyond security and supervision requirements may seem a quantum one to observers, but for social justice groups and practitioners in corrective services this shift is hardly revolutionary. Rather, the reforms for inmates, and for women in prison in particular, have been painfully slow and bureaucratically cumbersome.

No matter how flexible the classification and placement of inmates in New South Wales had become by the mid 1990s, women in correctional centres were still treated as an insignificant sub-set in a larger classification system. Because their numbers were small, they could easily be dismissed. Although women make up more than half (about 51 per cent) of the Australian population, they feature in only a tiny way when it comes to committing offences which attract a prison sentence. Once in jail, their needs are overshadowed by the needs of the vast majority of people in custody — male inmates.

The Women's Action Plan made the point that the 'limited range of correctional centres for female inmates in New South Wales is reflective of many correctional jurisdictions in the developed world ... Women are not provided with anything like the range of facilities available to men' (Women's Action Plan 1994:21). Adult female prisoners all over the world tend to be housed together regardless of their wide variety of needs.

Until 1995, placement options for female inmates in New South Wales were limited to two designated facilities both of which are located in metropolitan Sydney — the Mulawa Correctional Centre in Silverwater and the Norma Parker Correctional Centre in Parramatta. Short-term (and arguably substandard) accommodation for women was available at the Broken Hill and Grafton Correctional Centres, both essentially secure facilities for men.

The New South Wales Department of Corrective Services agreed that its classification of female inmates posed 'more questions than answers' (Women's Action Plan 1994:80) and went so far as to concede that 'for women inmates ... the classification process is something of an anachronism' because 'whilst it has value in assisting with the process of determining an inmate's program regime, the issue most critical to male inmates, namely, security level and therefore institutional placement, is of marginal significance for women given that there are only two placement alternatives available' (Women's Action Plan 1994:81).

Since then, if nothing else, options for the actual physical placement of female inmates have improved — the Emu Plains Prison Farm became a correctional centre for women and the addition of the *Jacaranda Cottages* has widened the placement choices further within this centre itself. The first transitional centre, a community based facility for women, has been opened in Parramatta. And a specific facility for women has commenced operations in Grafton. Women can serve periodic detention in Emu Plains and Tomago.

Competing needs

The wider choice in placement options for female inmates in New South Wales presented the Department with a timely opportunity to introduce a needs-based classification system. It was argued that all centres housing female inmates in New South Wales should be declared as 'variable security institutions' as they can all fulfil the principles of sentencing which include deterrence, rehabilitation and retribution.

Rather than classifying female inmates to a location (for example, the Emu Plains Correctional Centre) the Department explored the viability of classifying all female inmates to a specific program (that is, the Emu Plains Program). While this might appear a mere semantic difference, the change in procedure is quite distinct. In order to classify inmates to a program, each correctional facility for women in New South Wales must have a clearly defined role beyond its capacity to enforce a certain level of security. Programs offered to female inmates include the full range of medical, welfare, psychological, drug dependency and educational services, as well as vocational development provided by Corrective Service Industries, work release, other pre-release leave programs and — of course — the Mothers and Children's Program.

The primary demographic difference between male and female prisoners 'appear with regard to children and employment' (Schafer and Dellinger 1993a:32). As long as 'a substantially greater proportion of jailed women than of jailed men may be under considerable strain because of the disruption in their children's lives, as well as their own' (Schafer and Dellinger 1993b), a female specific classification system must be able to support programs which address this situation.

Women inmates in New South Wales fit the catch phrase of 'High Need — Low Risk'. Female offenders are less violent compared with male offenders, both inside and outside prison.

As the classification process is to find a balance between the safety expectations of the wider community and access for female inmates to programs which are to provide them with the means to avoid re-offending behaviour, it is worth having a closer look at the 'risk' female inmates may present.

As of 30 June 1995, about 32 per cent of all A2³ classified male inmates were in prison for murder. This compares with about 38 per cent of all A2 classified female inmates in jail for murder. At first glance, these statistics are misleading because the percentages compare unfavourably for women. In order to make statistics concerning female inmates in New South Wales come to life, it is useful to look at real numbers. The true picture only

emerges when one knows that the 32 per cent in the statistics for men represent a real number of 168 whereas in the case of the women the real number is only three. Four E1 classified male inmates were in prison for murder; there were no women in this category at all. Nineteen E1 classified men were in custody for Robbery Major Assault, while there were no women in this category. At the time, 28 women in New South Wales correctional centres had a C3 classification, 120 were classified as C2 and 48 as C1. Clearly, the vast majority of women had been allocated a minimum security classification category (Research and Statistics Unit 1995).

In summary, for the purpose of a female-specific classification system which places the major emphasis on inmate needs, the following profile is of significance: the number of female inmates in New South Wales is relatively small; the average length of sentence is three months; at least 80 per cent of female inmates have to deal with drug and alcohol related issues; a high percentage are the primary carers of children and a high percentage have survived domestic violence and abuse. A disproportionate number — about 18 per cent — are Aboriginal women.

Competing interests

The introduction of the Mothers and Children's Program poses an extra challenge to departmental staff grappling with a change in mind-set and indeed attitude essential to the new female-specific classification process. There is an ostensible contradiction. The new classification system has as its centrepiece the individual program needs of an individual female inmate. At the very core of the Mothers and Children's Program is a child's right to continuous care from its primary caregiver. It is not about the need of an inmate mother to live with her child. The new classification system aims to ensure that the mother/child relationship is not unnecessarily damaged or weakened during the mother's incarceration.

It is believed that programs for women in custody which are community based have a greater chance of providing the means to avoid re-offending behaviour. While this may be true for all programs for women in prison, a community link is absolutely vital for the success of the Mothers and Children's Program.

The best classification system is in danger of becoming ineffective if staff misunderstand either its objectives or its implementation logic. The Department needs to learn from the mistakes of the past when 'emphasis has primarily been on research and system design with little attention given to implementation and training issues' (Solomon and Baird 1982:6) and develop intensive and continuous staff training and evaluation.

Lioba Rist

Policy Officer — Women's Services Unit, NSW Corrective Services

3 Inmates are classified according to A, B, C and E categories which define the level of supervision and confinement by a physical barrier. A is the maximum security category — C defines minimum; E is attributed to inmates who have previously escaped from custody.

REFERENCES

- Allpass, I (1995) *Classification and Treatment of Offenders in New South Wales*, New South Wales Department of Corrective Services, Sydney.
- Fowler, L T (1993) 'The Future of Classification' in *Classification, A Tool for Managing Today's Offenders*, American Correctional Association, Laurel, MD.
- Insight Out* (November/December 1996) Newsletter Women's Services Unit, New South Wales Department of Corrective Services, Sydney.
- Research and Statistics Unit (1995) *New South Wales Inmate Census 1995*, New South Wales Department of Corrective Services, Sydney.
- Schafer, N E and Dellinger, A B (September/October 1993) 'Jail Classification — Is it time to include women? Part 1', in *American Jails*, vol 7, no 4.
- Schafer, N E and Dellinger, A B (November/December 1993) 'Jail Classification — Is it time to include women?, Part 2' in *American Jails*, vol 7, no 5.
- Sentencing: Law, Policy and Practice*, vol 1 (1996) University of New South Wales, Sydney.
- Solomon, L and Baird, S C (1982) 'Classification: Past Failures, Future Potential' in *Classification as a Management Tool: Theories and Models for Decision Makers*, American Correctional Association, Laurel, MD.
- Solomon, L and Taylor Camp (1993) 'The Revolution in Correctional Classification' in *Classification, A Tool for Managing Today's Offenders*, American Correctional Association, Laurel, MD.
- Women's Action Plan (1994) *A Three Year Strategy for Female Inmates in New South Wales Correctional Facilities*, New South Wales Department of Corrective Services, Sydney.