UMASS CHAN MEDICAL SCHOOL
Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences
Law & Psychiatry Program

Issue 2 | July 2025

Building Equity in the MA Department of Correction Female Objective Point Base Classification System

In response to recommendations from the *2022 Special Legislative Commission on Structural Racism in Correctional Facilities of the Commonwealth*, the MA Department of Correction (DOC) and the Law & Psychiatry Program at UMass Chan Medical School partnered to examine the potential for racial and ethnic biases in the MA DOC classification system. This project is funded by the National Institute of Justice's W.E.B. Du Bois Program of Research on Reducing Racial and Ethnic Disparities in the Justice System.

We assessed how MA DOC's classification system works for incarcerated females by focusing on three core questions:

1. Is the classification tool accurately identifying institutional misconduct?

   What this means:
   Are the custody levels (Minimum and Medium) set by objective points correctly predicting who is most likely to engage in institutional misconduct? **(predictive accuracy)**

2. Is the tool biased against certain racial and ethnic groups?

   What this means:
   Are the custody levels set by objective points assessing risk of misconduct differently depending on a person's race and ethnicity? **(predictive bias)**

3. What happens when MA DOC adjusts the classification decision through overrides?

   What this means:
   Is the classification decision still accurate and absent of racial and ethnic bias after MA DOC applies override(s) to the custody level set by objective points?

What is the MA DOC Female Objective Point Base Classification System?

MA DOC uses female-specific classification tools and policies to evaluate incarcerated females' custody requirements and programmatic needs and assign them to appropriate security levels—such as Minimum or Medium security facilities—with the goal of reducing institutional misconduct. Upon admission to MA DOC, females undergo an initial classification process to determine their custody level. Reclassification tools are used throughout incarceration to periodically reassess and adjust custody levels when appropriate. The key outputs of these classification tools and processes are:

Scored Custody Level: A preliminary custody level set by objective points (i.e., Medium, Minimum or below), before any overrides are applied.

Override-Informed Custody Level: The final custody level assigned after applying any applicable discretionary or non-discretionary override(s) to the preliminary scored custody level.

- **Discretionary Override:** A departure (higher or lower) from a scored custody level based on professional judgment of classification staff.
- **Non-Discretionary Override:** A departure (higher or lower) from a scored custody level based on MA DOC policy that restricts or limits the custody level of incarcerated females. These cannot be disregarded.

Overview of Findings

We explored the three core questions with classification data from Hispanic, Black, and White females in MA DOC custody between Dec. 2019 and Dec. 2022. This brief primarily focuses on findings from the female reclassification tool and process, as reclassifications account for most of the MA DOC's custody decisions for females. Our analyses were based on over 200 females. This is a relatively small sample for the analyses required, and therefore the results may not be as dependable as those based on larger samples.

Is the reclassification tool accurately identifying institutional misconduct?

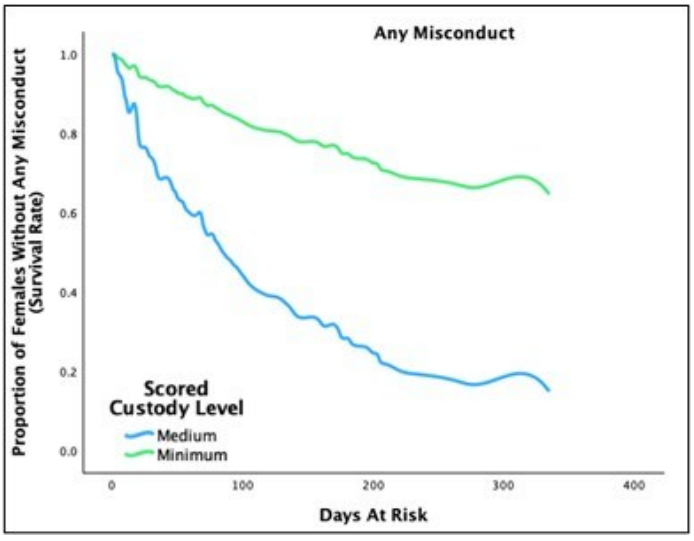
YES

The scored custody level derived from the objective points accurately differentiated between females with the highest and lowest likelihood of engaging in institutional misconduct. As shown in **Figure 1**, we see a good separation in the survival curve lines for Medium and Minimum custody, which suggests that each scored custody level is associated with a different probability of engaging in misconduct.

The tool demonstrated higher predictive accuracy—based on gold standard statistics—than most risk assessment instruments in use.

FIGURE 1.

Predictive Accuracy of Scored Custody Level on Misconduct for Females



Similar finding in the initial classification process (i.e., strong predictive accuracy of the initial tool).

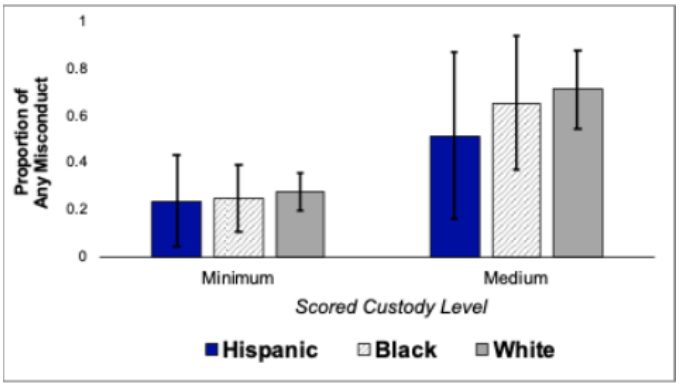
Is the reclassification tool biased against certain racial and ethnic groups?

NO

The scored custody level derived from the objective points functioned similarly for Hispanic, Black, and White incarcerated females. In other words, the custody level similarly differentiated those most versus least likely to engage in institutional misconduct, regardless of race or ethnicity. As shown in **Figure 2**, misconduct rates increased from Minimum to Medium custody levels across all racial and ethnic groups. Although there appear to be differences in misconduct rates by race and ethnicity at the Medium custody level, the range of uncertainty around these rates is too wide to confirm that the differences are real.

FIGURE 2.

Predicted Probabilities of Misconduct by Scored Custody Level and Race/Ethnicity for Females



Similar finding in the initial classification process (i.e., no predictive bias).

Is reclassification still accurate and absent of racial and ethnic bias after MA DOC applies its non-discretionary overrides?

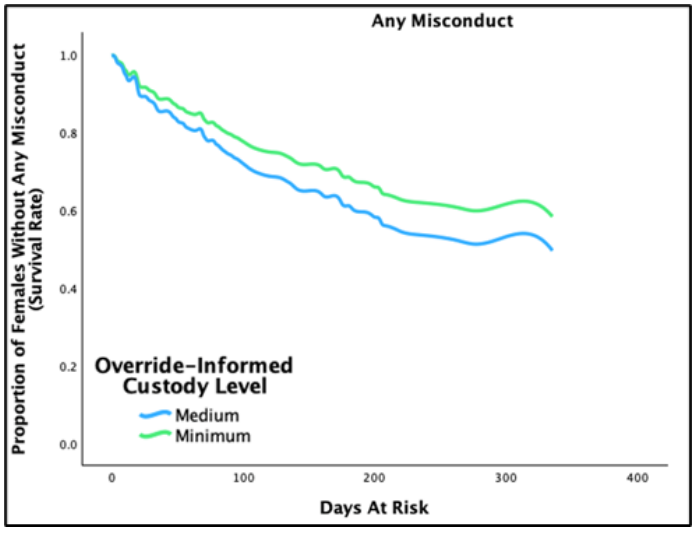
NO & YES

About two in five females (42%) were moved to a higher custody level than set by the objective points at reclassification, 57% experienced no change in custody level, and less than 1% were assigned a lower custody level. Of the 76% of females who had the points to be classified into Minimum custody at reclassification, less than half (45%) were actually assigned to a Minimum custody level.

♦ Reduced predictive accuracy

Almost one in two (46%) females ultimately assigned to Medium custody at reclassification experienced any misconduct, relative to about one in four (23%) Minimum custody females. As shown in **Figure 3**, the survival curves for these two custody levels are closely aligned, indicating no appreciable difference in the probability of engaging in misconduct. Put simply, the Medium override-informed custody level group was not different from the Minimum custody group in a meaningful way.

FIGURE 3.
Predictive Accuracy of Override-Informed Custody Level on Misconduct for Females



♦ No evidence of predictive bias

Although custody levels decided by MA DOC through discretionary and non-discretionary overrides had reduced accuracy in predicting misconduct, it performed similarly across racial and ethnic groups.

☑ *Final custody level decisions during initial classification remained accurate but findings on racial and ethnic bias were inconclusive due to small sample sizes.*

Highlights

While the analyses produced several key findings, our confidence in them is limited by the small number of females in the sample:

Classification decisions derived from MA DOC Objective Point Base Classification tools (scored custody level) successfully differentiate between females at minimum and medium risk of misconduct and do so without evidence of racial or ethnic bias.

While the final custody levels during reclassification showed reduced predictive accuracy in the prediction of misconduct for females overall, there was no evidence that the custody levels decided by MA DOC through discretionary and non-discretionary overrides were biased across race or ethnicity.

Visit the Law & Psychiatry Program online at umassmed.edu/lawandpsychiatry

PREPARED BY
Spencer G. Lawson, Ph.D., **Gina M. Vincent**, Ph.D., & **Namita Railkar**, MS. MPH

This project was supported by Award No. 15PNIJ-23-GG-01363-NIJB, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in the publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice, MA Department of Correction, or Commonwealth of Massachusetts.