

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EVALUATION OF AREA BOARD CLASSIFICATION IN THE MASSACHUSETTS  
DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION

Interim Report I: Process Description and Statistical Summary

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## INTRODUCTION

Classification is an integral component of any correctional system, yet the process must deal with two, potentially conflicting operational mandates to classify both for treatment purposes, and for those of management and security. Area Boards constitute one component of a comprehensive system of the Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC) and are charged with periodically reviewing inmate status to determine eligibility and suitability for inter-institutional transfers. Although unified in overall approach, each of the three DOC regions administers its own Boards for inmates housed within the Area's facilities.

This report is the first in a series of studies of the Area Board classification process, and stems from DOC management request. The overall research goals have been identified as: 1) to describe the operation of the three Area Boards; 2) to describe the types of recommendations and types of inmates recommended by the Boards; 3) to determine the decision-making rationales of classification and the correlates of these rationales; and 4) to assess the validity of the classification decision-making process.

The present study addresses the first major objective by: developing some historical perspective on the Area Board process within the general context of classification at the DOC by: a) describing its precursor; b) operationally describing the components of the process within the organization; c) providing a statistical summary of the numbers seen, the types of recommendations made, and Central Office actions vis-a-vis these recommendations; and d) conducting a preliminary follow-up analysis to determine the outcome of these recommendations and decisions.

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ACQUISITIONS

## Technique

The population of all cases heard by a Board during a representative time frame (July, 1977 through January, 1978) formed the basis for the study. Variables collected for each case included the dates of the hearing, Central Office decision, and transfer; the Area Board recommendations; Central Office decision (approved placement); actual placement immediately following classification; and placement six months after concluding classification. Frequency distributions and crosstabulations were utilized to portray this quantitative data.

A sizable portion of the report is a narrative description of classification, and the drawbacks and advantages of this particular strategy. Information necessary to prepare this section was derived primarily from in-depth interviews with both Central Office administrative classification staff; and institution-based Area Board members and chairpersons. The Departmental Directives on classification were also reviewed.

## Findings

Inasmuch as two sections on findings are included - a qualitative description and statistical summary - the following will be organized in the same manner.

### I. Narrative Description of the Area Board Process:

1. The centralized classification process prior to Area Boards is characterized as utilizing separate types of Boards - Inter-Institutional Transfer Boards for transfer between major facilities, and Community-Based Boards, for considerations for community placements. Approvals flowed from the Board recommendation to the Central Office Supervisor of Classification Systems (acting on behalf of the Commissioner).

2. Area Boards hear all potential transfer cases. The recommendation is sent to a Central Office Area Director of Classification, who approves recommendations to a placement within his or her own Area. If inter-area, both Area Directors must agree, and final sign-off is obtained from the Supervisor of Classification Systems.

3. There are five avenues by which an inmate may appear before an Area Board: recommendation by the institution's internal classification committee; receipt of a periodic review date by a prior classification board; necessity for reclassification following a lower security placement; receipt of an open reserve parole date; and referral by a Superintendent.

4. A variety of factors are weighed during Board deliberations. These may be external, such as statutory eligibility, bed-space and program availability; and/or internal, as inmate's program involvement and motivation.

5. The process was perceived by classification staff as having the advantages of bettering the review process, leading to increasingly informed decision-making, and improving management. These can be generally categorized in terms of effectiveness. Disadvantages cited bore upon efficiency; i.e., bureaucratic complexity and Area-intensiveness (or, that familiarity with corrections is limited to the particular Area). Suggestions for improvement included upgrading training and communication, expediting the decision-making time, systematizing information, and increasing staff size.

## II. Quantitative Analysis of the Area Board Process:

Twelve major findings were asserted, based on an analysis of 1200 cases appearing before Area Boards during the specified time frame.

1. A large proportion of all Area Board recommendations (60.7 percent), were for transfers to lower custody (Table 1).
2. Central Office tended to approve Area Board recommendations (66.7 percent approval rate); the largest percentage of overturns were for approvals to higher custody (Table 2).
3. In terms of specific institution, the Area Board recommendations were nearly equally split between maximum and medium security (43 percent) and minimum and community-based (41.5 percent).
4. Central Office decisions were apt to be more conservative: 50.5 percent for maximum or medium security versus 36.8 percent for minimum or community-based. As Table 3 demonstrates, the Area Boards recommended 255 cases for maximum security and the Central Office ultimately approved 326 cases for maximum, which was an increase of 28 percent. Conversely, the Boards recommended 370 cases for community-based facilities and Central Office approved only 286 - a decrease of 23 percent.
5. At the end of the six-month follow-up, a large proportion of the population (36.5 percent) was in community-based programs or released on a GCD or parole.
6. The length of classification is greater than expected; the median length of time for Central Office decisions was two to three weeks; the median number of weeks from a hearing to a transfer was four to five weeks; and the median length of time between the Central Office decision to transfer was two weeks.
7. There was a fairly high degree of consistency between Area Board recommendations and Central Office decisions; however, the latter again tended to act more conservatively (i.e., overturn for higher custody). Whereas 85.9 percent of the recommendations for higher custody were approved by Central Office, only 59.7 percent of the recommendations for lower security were approved.
8. The highest Central Office approval rates were in the security level originally recommended by the Area Board.

9. The security level of actual placements was fairly consistent with Area Board recommendations; the highest placement rates were in the same categories of these original recommendations. Recommendations for maximum drew the highest specific approval rates: 85.9 percent of all Board recommendations for maximum were approved for maximum. In contrast, 70.8 percent of the community-based recommendations were approved for such a placement by Central Office.

10. Six-month placements (for those who could be followed) also drew the highest proportions from the original recommendations. However, there was evidence of substantial movement through the system; for example, releases on parole constituted 17.7 percent of the maximum, 15.9 percent of the medium, 11.2 percent of the minimum, 13.2 percent of the medium/minimum, and 31.9 percent of the community-based recommendations.

11. Central Office decisions almost always resulted in an immediate placement in that security level facility.

12. Six-month placements had a slightly higher degree of consistency with the Central Office decision, compared to the Area Board recommendation. The proportion on parole from each Central Office decision category was: maximum, 18.5 percent; medium 21.2 percent; minimum, 9.2 percent; medium/minimum, 14.0 percent; and community-based, 32.4 percent.

TABLE 1  
RECOMMENDATIONS OF AREA BOARDS

<u>Recommendation</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Remain at current status	332	(27.8)
Transfer to lower custody	725	(60.7)
Transfer to higher custody	71	( 5.9)
Transfer to lateral custody	65	( 5.4)
Out-of-state transfer	1	( 0.1)
TOTAL	1194	(100.0)

TABLE 2  
CENTRAL OFFICE DECISIONS<sup>1</sup>

<u>Type of Decision</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Approve Area Board recommendation	800	(66.7)
Deny AB recommendation; approve for lower than Board recommendation	70	( 5.8)
Deny AB recommendation; approve for higher than Board recommendation	208	(17.3)
Deny AB recommendation; approve for lateral to Board recommendation	118	( 9.8)
Defer	3	( 0.3)
TOTAL	1199	(100.0)

<sup>1</sup> Missing is the option to "approve to remain at current status". This will appear in the next report. In this table, the type of decision would have been weighed and coded into an appropriate category vis-a-vis the Area Board recommendation.

TABLE 3

DIVERGENCE BETWEEN CUSTODY LEVELS OF PLACEMENTS APPROVED BY CENTRAL OFFICE AND PLACEMENTS RECOMMENDED BY AREA BOARD

<u>Custody Level</u>	<u>Area Board Recommended</u>	<u>Central Office Approved</u>		<u>Difference</u>
Maximum	255	326	(+71)	+27.8%
Medium	255	271	(+16)	+ 6.3%
Minimum	122	151	(+29)	+23.8%
Community-Based	370	286	(-84)	-22.7%

Conclusions

No definitive conclusions will be offered until an exhaustive analysis of additional data is complete. This will include a characterization of inmates in the recommendation/decision typology; the rationales for these recommendations; and a continuous movement tracking. The final report will endeavor to determine the probability of success at lower custody; describe these successful inmates; and assess whether these decisions were accurate. At this time, statements about the Area Board classification process will be made with greater confidence.

One generalization that has emerged from this analysis is that Central Office tends to act more conservatively than the Area Boards in classification deliberations. In the subsequent research an attempt will be made to ascertain whether or not a relationship exists between this conservative orientation in the Central Office and the persistent problem of vacancies in pre-release beds.