

THE EFFECT OF SECURITY LEVEL ON PRISONER COSTS

By Karen Firestone, Fiscal Analyst

In fiscal year (FY) 2000-01, the Department of Corrections asked the Legislature to continue and expand two pilot programs addressing the increasing number of prisoners being assigned to administrative segregation and maximum security. The programs, which were funded for FY 2000-01 but will be eliminated due to budget reductions, were named Project RESTART and Project CHANGE. These two programs used two different methods to curtail prisoner behavioral problems that lead to incarceration in more costly, high security level prison beds: Project RESTART was a boot camp-style program and Project CHANGE used an emotional-behavioral model called cognitive restructuring. Each program required the addition of staff to grow from a pilot program to a fully operational program serving more prisoners, but promised savings with additional safety for staff, reduced need for administrative segregation beds, and the ability to move prisoners into cost-saving double-bunking due to the lower security rating.

These programs, initiated by the Department, demonstrate that costs for the Department grow not only due to prison population growth, but also as a result of the need to accommodate different security levels. In fact, two of the main factors in the average cost of incarceration include the security level of prisoners and the design of the facilities. This article looks at the security classification of prisoners, the relationship between security classification and prisoner costs, and where growth is occurring in the security levels of the prison population.

Prisoner Security Classification

The security classification scale goes from level I to level VI: security level I relates to minimum security while security level VI relates to very high security. According to departmental policy, a prisoner is screened to determine his or her *confinement level*, the amount of custody necessary to reduce the risk of escape, and his or her *management level*, the degree of custody necessary to maintain institutional order and security. The prisoner is then assigned a *true security level* which is the higher of the confinement level or the management level. The *actual placement level* may be higher or lower than the true security level in certain situations, including medical needs or lack of bed space. Parole eligibility and status and the crime of conviction also may affect the actual placement level of a prisoner. Prisoners may be further divided into categories including administrative segregation, mental health, or "other", such as new entries to prison, detention, or special protection. Separate categories are used for these prisoners, because they do not have a security classification or their status outweighs their security classification.

Correctional facilities can house prisoners of one security level or of many security levels, although the number of single security level facilities is waning. In facilities with multiple security levels, prisoners of different security levels are segregated from one another according to departmental policy. The policy, however, allows for certain exceptions to strict segregation including participation in academic or career and technical education programs, receiving health care services, attending certain meetings, or obtaining assistance in a legal writer program.

A secure level I facility is defined in the policy as having a secure perimeter including double fences, concertina wire, a perimeter detection system, armed alert response vehicles on perimeter patrol, and controlled entry to the facility. Higher security level facilities are differentiated from lower security level facilities by the confinement conditions, such as the number of prisoners per cell, the number of hours a prisoner is allowed out of a cell or housing unit, and the number of corrections officers per prisoner, as well as the programming options available to the prisoner. In addition to secure correctional facilities, there are other facilities including prison camps with lower security requirements than those for a secure level I facility, a mental health prison operated by the Department of Community Health for prisoners with mental health disorders, and the youth correctional facility for

youthful offenders convicted as adults.

Security Classification and Prisoner Costs

The average prisoner cost by security classification based on gross appropriation is shown in [Table 1](#). This information reflects the gross appropriation per prisoner for facilities with single security level housing, or that primarily serve one security level. As stated above, most prisons in the State of Michigan are multilevel prisons and therefore are excluded from the straight security classification. Assuming that the multilevel prisons operate more efficiently than single security facilities do, then the security classification costs in the table are overstated. Also, a number of facilities primarily house one security level, but have one or two housing units for prisoners of different security levels. For example, the Ionia Maximum Correctional Facility (IMAX) is a security level VI prison, yet contains a housing unit with lower security level prisoners in the facility to provide for facility maintenance. When IMAX, which has primarily security level VI prisoners, is included in the calculation for average cost of security level V and VI prisons, the costs are diluted because of two factors: 1) the lower costs of a housing unit of medium security prisoners and 2) the decreased cost of facility maintenance that is achieved. The average costs provided in the table, however, are the best estimate of costs at the level of detail available. Better data would be produced only if the Department developed a cost accounting system that would capture costs by security level.

Table 1

Average Costs of Incarcerating a Prisoner for Each Security Classification Level Based on Gross Appropriation FY 1999-2000		
Security Level	Annual Cost/Prisoner	Daily Cost/Prisoner
Level I	\$16,584	\$45
Level II	20,131	55
Level III	22,114	60
Level IV	34,732	95
Level V & VI	33,946	93
Multi-level	20,952	57

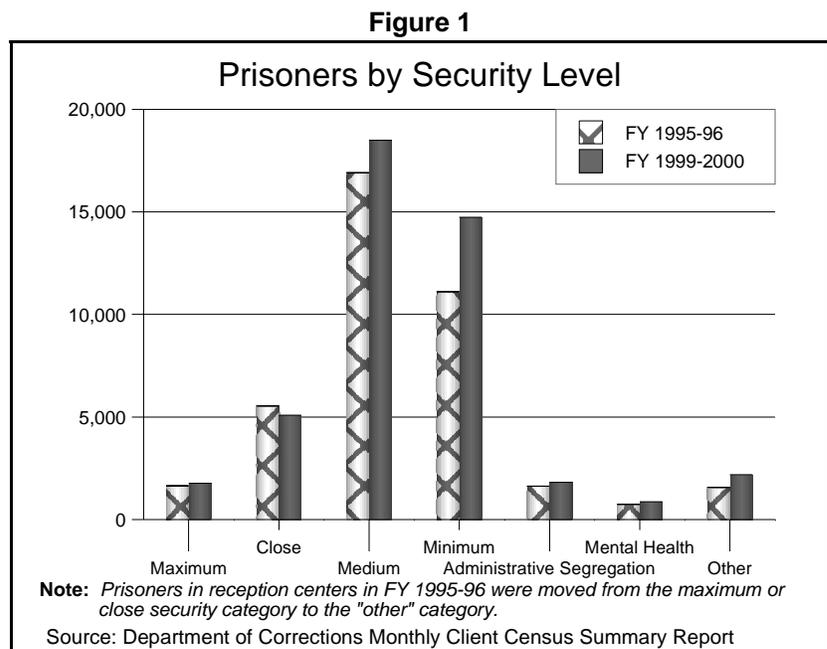
Source: Department of Corrections, "Average Costs by Type of Supervision, Gross Appropriation, FY 2000".

The reasons for cost differences based on security level include the number of corrections officers assigned per prisoner, the release time from the cell, and the number of prisoners housed together. While the ratio of corrections officers per prisoner is straightforward in regard to the cost of prison operations, the release time from the cell and the number of prisoners housed together may need some explanation. If a prisoner is in a higher level security classification or administrative segregation, for example, he or she is not allowed to go to a dining hall and meals are delivered to the prisoner. Putting a meal on a tray, transporting the tray to the cell, and throwing out any uneaten portion of the meal add to the cost of operations for the facility. Programs for prisoners on reduced out-of-cell time must go to the prisoner. Further, higher security prisoners are housed in individual cells resulting in fewer prisoners per housing unit and leading to a higher utility cost per prisoner. In addition, at IMAX, high security level prisoners have caused major damage to the cells including destruction of fixtures and plumbing. The appropriations for IMAX have increased to address repair of the damage, suggesting that higher security level

prisoners require higher appropriation levels.¹

Prison Population Growth and Security Levels

On a monthly basis, the Department of Corrections reports the number of prisoners aggregated by security level. In this report, prisoners are designated not by a single security class, but rather by security categories. The categories in the report are maximum, close, medium, minimum, administrative segregation, mental health, and "other". Figure 1 shows the average annual number of prisoners included in each of these groups for FY 1995-96 and FY 1999-2000 and indicates that the majority of prisoners are rated either minimum or medium security. Over the five-year period shown in Figure 1, the number of



prisoners in the minimum and medium security categories has increased, administrative segregation and mental health have stayed fairly constant, and maximum has increased slightly. It is difficult to evaluate close and other security levels, because some offenders who are now in the "other" category, such as detention or special protection prisoners, may have been housed in close security beds previously. Also, it is difficult to assess the impact of the overall prison population growth on the changes in security shown in Figure 1.

For FY 1995-96 and FY 1999-2000, Table 2 shows the growth of each security category and compares the categories with the growth of the prison population as a whole. The minimum security category and the "other" category have had the highest growth rate in the five-year period.² Given the average costs above, for each 1% increase in the minimum security category, costs will increase \$2,450,000, and for each 1% increase in the maximum security category, costs will increase \$600,000. To put this in perspective, 1% growth in the maximum security population is one-eighth the size of growth in the minimum security population, yet the cost for a 1% increase in the maximum security population is one-quarter, or double the population growth rate, of the cost of a 1% increase in the minimum security population.

¹ Cost differences that are generated by design rather than by security level include the efficiency of the utility system and the sight lines of the prison. In general, older prisons cost more to operate, because they are fuel inefficient or were built with blind corners, resulting in a higher complement of corrections officers needed to ensure the safety of the facility. In newer facility designs, corrections officers can supervise prisoners from a control room-

like booth separated from the prisoners. Additionally, the location of the prison will cause differences in cost. For example, prisons in the Upper Peninsula have colder and longer winters than do those in the Lower Peninsula.

² Table 2 does not indicate whether the true security level has grown at the same pace as actual placement level has grown. The change in true security level is important to determine whether changes have taken place in the characteristics of the prison population in relation to the risk of escape and manageability. Changes in actual placement may reflect only the planned security level for newly constructed facilities and the availability of beds, because prisoners can be waived from their true security level based on bed space availability.

Table 2

Prisoner Security Levels as a Percentage of Total Population FY 1995-96 and FY 1999-2000			
Classification	FY 1995-96	FY 1999-2000	Population Growth (% Change)
Minimum	11,112	14,732	32.6%
Medium	16,904	18,483	9.3
Close	5,542	5,093	(8.1)
Maximum	1,651	1,772	7.3
Administrative Segregation . . .	1,632	1,819	11.5
Mental Health	744	862	15.9
Other	1,565	2,188	39.8
Total Prison Population	39,150	44,949	14.8
Source: Department of Corrections Monthly Client Census Summary Report.			

Note: Prisoners in reception centers in FY 1995-96 were moved from the maximum or close security categories to the other category.

Conclusion

Both the absolute number of prisoners in minimum security and the growth of the minimum security category surpass other security categories. The Department adopted programs to improve prisoner behavior and reduce prisoner security levels because, from average appropriations information disaggregated by security level, the more restricted a prisoner is, the higher the average costs of incarceration will be. By developing more rigorous cost accounting procedures that would allow the measurement of cost by security level at all correctional facilities, the Department would be able to evaluate the investment in programs such as Project RESTART and Project CHANGE.