

Background and Design Logic for the Nationally Recognized Northpointe Decision Tree Instruments

The Northpointe Classification instruments, commonly known as the “Decision Tree”, was originally developed and tested in 6 small, medium and large jails in Michigan in 1987. It was first described in the U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections publication “Objective Jail Classification Systems: A Guide for Jail Administrators” published in 1989. In collaboration with the Michigan Department of Correction’s Jail Division, the instruments were implemented statewide from 1989 through 2001.

The original primary and reclassification instruments produced 8 “custody levels” within the traditional 3 “security level” assignments (maximum, medium and minimum). The trees were updated by Northpointe in the late 1990’s and one additional custody level was added. *The 9-level custody tree is the one currently recommended and taught by Northpointe (see attached).*

Why Custody Levels?

Having come from a strong community corrections and jail background, the designers understood that developing an objective classification instrument that produced only traditional security level assignments served the basic historical purpose but limited the use of classification and left information gaps for corrections staff and other stakeholders. The logic of the Northpointe Tree assigns an inmate to maximum security, for example, but allows for the distinction between a “high custody level 1” single cell lockdown maximum security threat from general population maximum security “close custody level 2” inmates which can share cell space and a day room with other close custody maximum security inmates. This approach allows for this distinction that provides corrections staff with more information about the characteristics of these two maximum security populations and further protects the jail from liability of a serious violent inmate injuring other less violent maximum security inmates.

Excluding an override the characteristics of the maximum security - high custody level 1 population has all three of the following risk factors:

- Current offense assaultive felony, and
- Prior assaultive felony convictions, and
- History of serious institutional behavior problems.

The close custody level 2 maximum security population needs two of the following risk factors present:

- Current offense assaultive felony, and/or
- Prior assaultive felony convictions, and/or
- Escape history from secure facility, and/or
- Institutional behavior problem

Note: because it takes at least two risk factors in the tree to be classified maximum security jails typically find a smaller percent of inmates classified maximum security than when using the point scale as the seriousness of the current offense is often all that is needed to warrant a max assignment with that instrument.

The Medium security population of a jail represents the largest percent of the inmate population. The designers of the tree felt it would be very helpful to further breakdown this large population into three custody levels (Level 3, 4 and 5) for descriptive purposes to better assist and inform staff as to the characteristics of the population they are managing. While all medium security inmates are generally housed together there are distinctions that may be useful with cell assignments, work and program assignments, jail population management, etc. The primary Decision Tree logic is very useful in describing these medium security populations:

- Medium security - custody level 3 inmates have current or past assaultive felony offense histories, or escape history but only one of these risk factors is present. These are considered high medium inmates and may or may not qualify for certain inmate worker assignments per Department policy.
- Medium security - custody level 4 inmates are those with no assaultive felony offense histories and no escape history but who have 3 or more prior felony non-violent offenses, or have active detainers/holds, or have a history of disciplinary problems. This level 4 population may be best suited for medium security inmate worker assignments. In addition, jails running reentry or alternative to jail programs to reduce crowding may also target level 4's not having active holds/detainers for early release consideration (pretrial or post sentenced) in conjunction with a validated community risk assessment tool (e.g. COMPAS).
- Medium security custody level 5 inmates are those that have none of the level 3 or 4 risk factors but who are unsentenced and will likely receive a prison term at sentencing. The "Likely Prison Bound" risk split language in the tree is customized by Northpointe for each state to provide more objective definition and guidance e.g. Michigan uses A, B or C Felony yes/no. Please contact Northpointe for your state's custom language.

As mentioned, medium security - custody levels 3, 4 and 5 may be housed together. However, by using the decision tree logic and custody level designations, some larger jails have found it useful to further separate the custody level 3 high medium security inmates from the level 4 and 5 inmates within the medium security housing areas of their jail.

The Minimum security population is also all housed together. The purpose of the minimum security custody levels is to simply identify/describe inmate sub-populations for work assignments and early release eligibility.

- Minimum security custody level 6 inmates are unsentenced. This custody level provides a target population for further pretrial release risk (FTA) screening and may be appropriate for certain inmate worker assignments.
- Minimum security custody level 7 inmates are sentenced felons but who do not have local ties to the community. Therefore they may not be suitable for outside less-supervised work assignments or local community corrections.
- Minimum security custody level 8 inmates are sentenced felons which may be appropriate for early release consideration, through further community risk assessment, in support of community corrections and jail population management, inside/outside inmate work assignments and work release.
- Minimum security custody level 9 inmates are sentenced misdemeanants which might be most appropriate for early release consideration, through further community risk assessment, in support of community corrections and jail population management, inside/outside inmate work assignments and work release.

We emphasize again that the Tree's custody levels do not complicate housing plans but serve to better inform corrections staff and other decision makers and planners. We recommend the following housing guideline (considering gender) which is consistent with accepted and court supported practice:

In-Direct Supervision: Inmates should be Housed within 4 Distinct and Separate Groups

- High Max (level 1)
- General Max (level 2)
- Medium (level 3,4,5)
- Minimum (level 6,7,8,9)

Direct Supervision: Inmates should be housed within a Minimum of Three Distinct and Separate Groups

- High Max (level 1)
- General Max (level 2)
- Medium and Minimum (levels 3 thru 9)

Note: We encourage direct supervision jails to consider separating medium and minimum security inmates within their direct supervision framework when the physical plant allows. This encourages and incentivizes medium security inmates to continue to work towards a reclassification to minimum security (through good behavior, work, program participation, etc.) which may allow access to additional privileges and programs. If there is a portion of the medium and minimum security population left over after separation then they would be housed together until space becomes available in a minimum security pod.

The custody levels within the tree also serve another useful purpose. When a jail is crowded and forced to mix security levels the custody levels inform the classification and housing officers as to which inmates may best be mixed. For example if you are forced to mix some medium and minimum inmates then mixing Medium level 4 and 5 inmates with Minimum level 7 or 8 felons would be better than mixing Medium level 3 inmates with minimum security inmates. If maximum and medium must be mixed then selecting level 2 maximum inmates to be housed with medium level 3 inmates would be preferred.

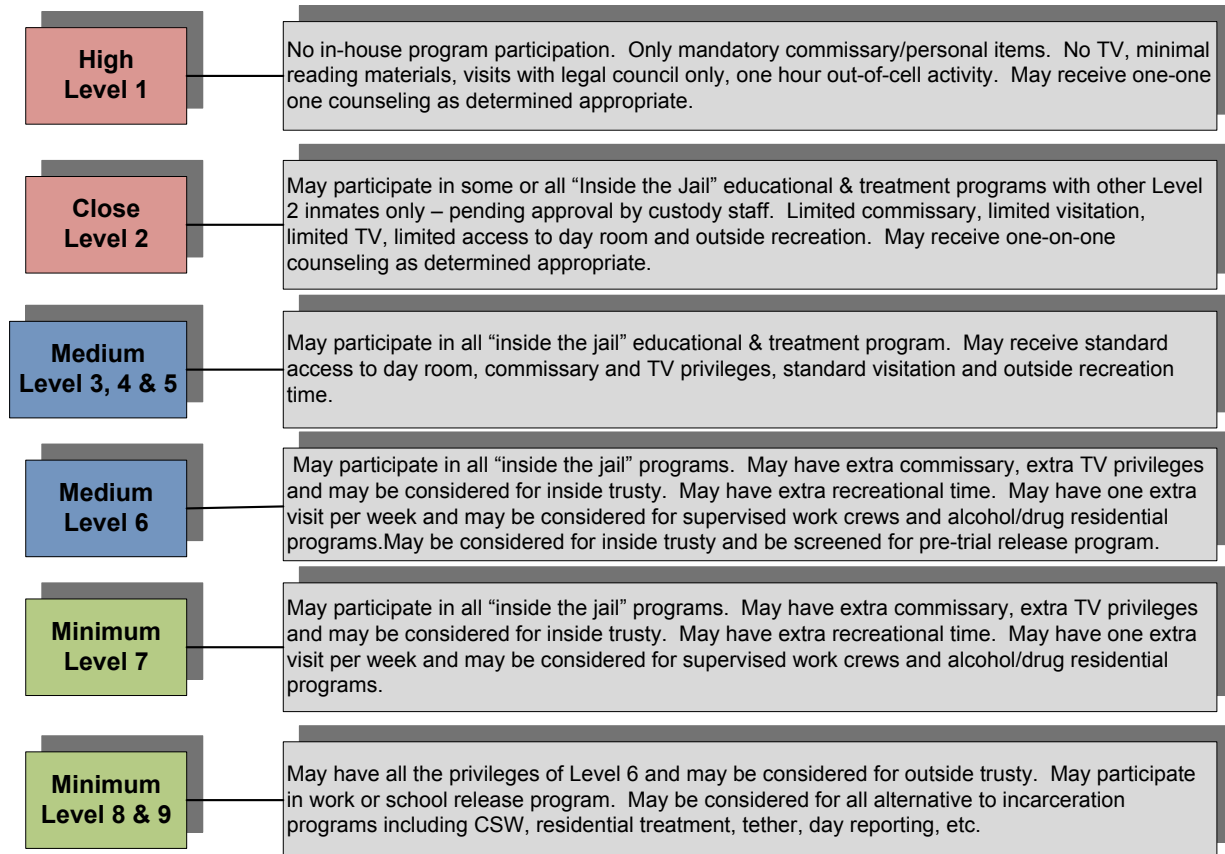
In summary, the tree's custody levels do not complicate the traditional maximum, medium, minimum security assignment but serve to further describe and identify inmate sub-populations to better inform corrections staff and to target populations in support of more informed inmate management decisions and more efficient screening for programs and early release eligibility in conjunction with additional community risk and criminogenic needs assessment tools.

The Reclassification Trees (both mitigating and aggravating) are almost exclusively behavior driven with allowance for legal status changes as well. The information generated from the classification trees produce rich inmate characteristics data for the jail in support of planning, management and policy development that go beyond the traditional security classification designations.

Jails who have properly implemented and supervised the use of the decision tree classification tools typically have override rates of 2% to 6%. The tree methodology – with its high degree of “face validity” - routinely produces lower override rates than point scale systems.

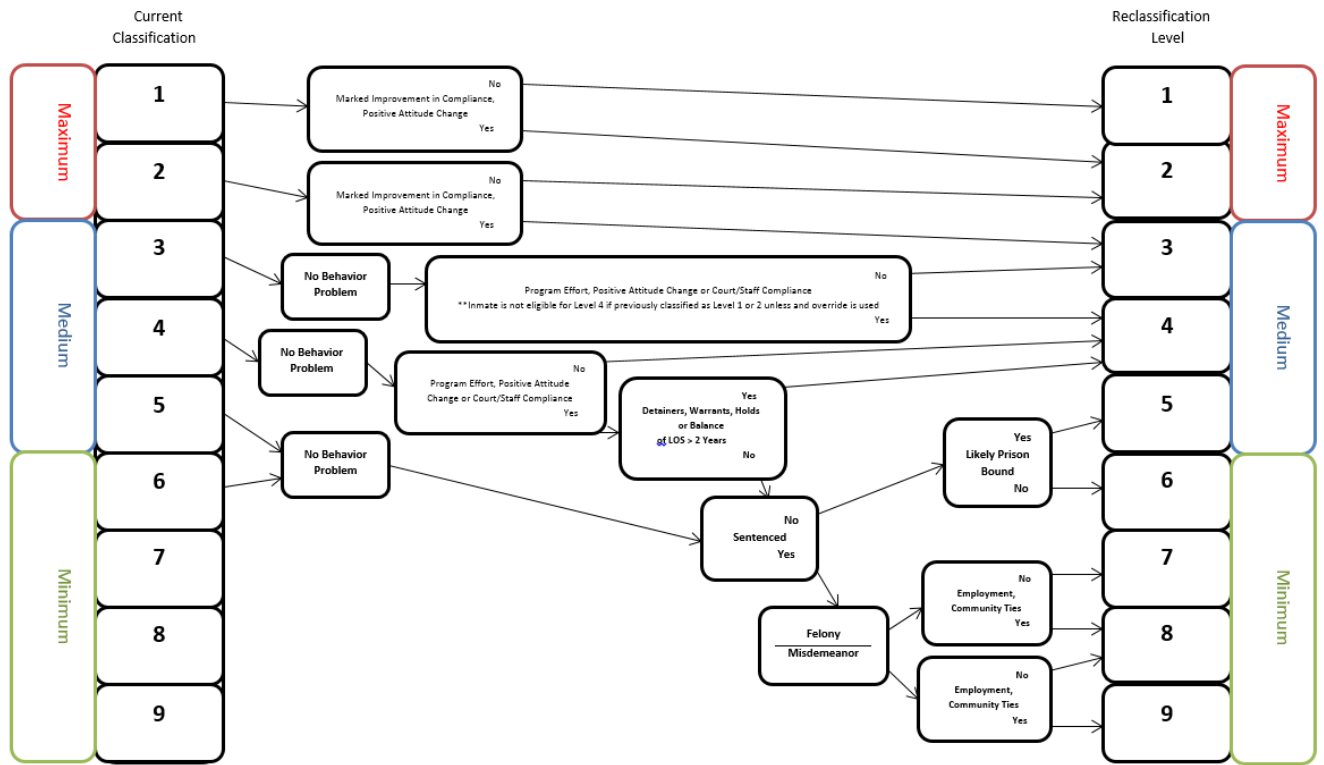
Lastly, the trees design is also intended to better support the implementation of an “Incentive Based Behavior Management Strategy” designed to encourage inmates, through good behavior, program and work participation, to earn their way – through reclassification - to lower custody and security levels to access increased privileges. The chart below provides an example of how a jail may use Northpointe’s Decision Tree classification in support of this strategy.

Linking Programs & Privileges to Security / Custody Assignment (Alternate)



9 Custody Reclassification Trees

Reclassification Tree Mitigating



Reclassification Tree Aggravating

