

AN INTRODUCTION TO NORTH CAROLINA PRISONS

The North Carolina Prison System is a section under the Division of Adult Correction and the Department of Public Safety. As an agency of the state, it is responsible for the housing, treatment and well being of those convicted by the courts of North Carolina and sentenced to serve active time in prison. The prison system initially classifies and houses inmates by gender, type of conviction (felony or misdemeanor) and type of custody (close, medium or minimum).

Assigning Inmates to Prison

Prison classification is a method of assessing inmate risks that balances security requirements with program needs. Newly admitted inmates are transported from county jails to one of eight prison receiving centers where the risk assessment process begins. There are two reception centers for females, two for male youth and six for adult males. Upon admission, processing and evaluation of inmates begins. They are put through a series of evaluations, including medical and mental health screenings. Prison classification specialists develop an individual profile of each inmate that includes the offender's crime, social background, education, job skills and work history, health, and criminal record, including prior prison sentences.

Based on this information, the inmate is assigned to the most appropriate custody classification and prison. From this initial classification, inmate behavior and continuing risk assessments by prison staff will determine the inmate's progression through the various custody levels to minimum custody and eventual release. Prison managers assign inmates to work, rehabilitative self improvement programs, and treatment. As inmates serve their sentences, the inmates who comply with prison rules, do assigned work and participate in corrective programs, may progress toward minimum custody.

Inmates who violate prison rules are punished and may be reclassified to a more restrictive custody classification and a more secure prison. Inmates are then required to demonstrate responsible and improved behavior over time to progress from that status to less restrictive custody classifications and prisons.

Inmate Custody Levels

Inmates may be classified and assigned to the following custodial levels: close, medium, minimum I, minimum II, and minimum III. The classification levels are in descending order of perceived public safety risk presented by the inmate. Inmates in close custody present the highest risk while inmates in minimum III generally present the least risk. Within this mix of custodial assignments, inmates also may be subject to various control statuses. The control statuses include maximum, death row, intensive, safekeeper (inmates who have not yet been sentenced but need to be housed outside of their county jail generally due to safety or security concerns), disciplinary, administrative and protective custody. Each of these control statuses further restricts inmate freedoms and privileges. Assignment and removal of inmates from these

statuses is generally at the discretion of higher level classification authorities in the prison system. The imposition of these additional custody control measures are generally for the purpose of maintaining order in the prison, protecting staff safety or providing for inmate safety.

Prison Security Levels

Prisons are classified and designated by security level. The security levels are close, medium, and minimum. In certain circumstances, however, the head of the prison system may designate specific cell areas within close security institutions as maximum security. The design and unique features of the prison, the level of staffing, and the operating procedures determine security levels. Maximum security, located inside close security prison units, is the most restrictive level of confinement and minimum security is the least restrictive. The prison security level is an indicator of the extent to which an offender who is assigned to that facility is separated from the civilian community.

Close security

Close security prisons typically are comprised of single cells and divided into cellblocks, which may be in one building or multiple buildings. Cell doors generally are remotely controlled from a secure control station. Each cell is equipped with its own combination plumbing fixture, which includes a sink and toilet.

The perimeter barrier is designed with a double fence with armed watch towers or armed roving patrols. Inmate movement is restricted and supervised by correctional staff. Inmates are allowed out of their cells to work or attend corrective programs inside the facility.

There is a special type of security, known as maximum security, available within certain close security units. Maximum security units, designated by the head of the prison system, are comprised of cells with sliding cell doors that are remotely operated from a secure control station. These units are used to confine the most dangerous inmates who are a severe threat to public safety, correctional staff, and other inmates.

Inmates confined in a maximum security unit typically are in their cells 23 hours a day. During the other hour they may be allowed to shower and exercise in the cellblock or an exterior cage. All inmate movement is strictly controlled with the use of physical restraints and correctional officer escort.

Medium security

Medium security prisons typically are comprised of secure dormitories that provide housing for up to fifty inmates each. Each dormitory contains a group toilet and shower area as well as sinks. Inmates sleep in a military style double bunk and have an adjacent metal locker for storage of uniforms, undergarments, shoes, etc.

Each dormitory is locked at night with a correctional officer providing direct supervision of the inmates and sleeping area. The prison usually has a double fence perimeter with armed watch towers or armed roving patrols. There is less supervision and control over the internal movement of inmates than in a close security prison.

Some medium security prisons may be designed with dry cells as the method of inmate housing. Dry cells contain no toilet fixture. Most inmate work and self improvement programs are within the prison, although selected medium custody inmates are worked outside of the prison under armed supervision of trained correctional officers. These inmate work assignments typically support prison farm operations or highway maintenance for the Department of Transportation. Typically, each medium security prison has a single cell unit for the punishment of inmates who violate prison rules.

Minimum security

Minimum security prisons are comprised of non-secure dormitories that are routinely patrolled by correctional officers. Like the medium security dormitory, a minimum security dormitory has its own group toilet and shower area adjacent to the sleeping quarters that contain double bunks and lockers. The prison generally has a single perimeter fence that is inspected on a regular basis, but has no armed watch towers or roving patrols. There is less supervision and control over inmates in the dormitories and less supervision of inmate movement within the prison than at a medium security facility. Inmates assigned to minimum security prisons generally pose the least risk to public safety.

Minimum III custody inmates at minimum security prisons usually participate in community based work assignments such as the Governor's Community Work Program, road maintenance with Department of Transportation employee supervision or work release with civilian employers. Also, inmates may participate in pre-release transition programs with community volunteers and family sponsors. The proper security designation of facilities combined with appropriate offender classification and assignment provide the foundation for safe and secure prison management and operational efficiency.

Victim Services Within the Prison System

Each prison unit has at least one individual who has been identified as a Victim Information coordinator. It is the VIC's responsibility to provide public information about offenders as well as general information about the facility to victims and interested citizens. The VIC acts as a liaison between the prison system, the Adult Correction Victim Unit and other governmental agencies. Each Victim Information coordinator has received specialized training to perform this important function for his/her prison unit. All victims' information is strictly confidential.

Notifications for Victims/Survivors Whose Offenders are in Prison Custody

Effective July 1, 1999, North Carolina's Crime Victims' Rights Act (N.C.G.S. §15A-836) requires the prison system to provide written notification about certain events during the offender's incarceration to victims and survivors who have requested notification. Individuals with safety concerns or a vested interest in the case (ex. Division of Social Services) may also register.

The prison system is required to provide registered victims with the following notification:

(1) The projected date by which the defendant can be released from custody. The calculation of the release date shall be as exact as possible, including earned time and disciplinary credits if the sentence of imprisonment exceeds 90 days.

(2) An inmate's (initial) assignment to a minimum custody unit and the address of the unit. This notification shall include notice that the inmate's minimum custody status may lead to the inmate's participation in one or more community-based programs such as work release or supervised leaves in the community.

(3) The victim's right to submit any concerns to the agency with custody and the procedure for submitting such concerns.

(4) The defendant's escape from custody, within 72 hours, except that if a victim has notified the agency in writing that the defendant has issued a specific threat against the victim, the agency shall notify the victim as soon as possible and within 24 hours at the latest.

(5) The defendant's capture, within 24 hours.

(6) The date the defendant is scheduled to be released from the facility. Whenever practical, notice shall be given 60 days before release. In no event shall notice be given less than seven days before release.

(7) The defendant's death.

All notifications are generated by updates made to offenders' records in the OPUS (Offender Population Unified System) computer system. Letters are printed by the Management Information System office and mailed by N.C. Adult Correction Combined Records. The Office of Victim Services facilitates the notification program, and N.C. Adult Correction Combined Records enters the notification information on behalf of the prison system.

Although the 1999 N.C. Crime Victims' Rights Act defines who is to receive notification (N.C.G.S. §15A-830), the Division of Adult Correction voluntarily exceeded the legislature's mandate by providing the notification described above for all victims regardless of the crime or when the crime occurred. It is important to note that it is the responsibility of those who have requested notification to notify the Adult Correction

Victim Unit of any changes in address or telephone number. Without this information, the Division of Adult Correction is unable to provide notification to those who have requested it.

Please send correspondence to:

N.C. Adult Correction
Victim Unit
2020 Yonkers Road, 4223 MSC
Raleigh, N.C. 27699-4223
1-866-719-0108 (toll-free)

Input from Victims

An amendment to the Crime Victims' Rights Act was made on October 1, 2001. Among the improvements made to the original law were two important changes for victims/survivors whose offenders are serving an active prison sentence in the prison system. The amendment now requires the Division of Adult Correction to prohibit those inmates incarcerated for a crime covered under the Crime Victims' Rights Act from contacting the victim or a family member of the victim upon their request (N.C.G.S. §148-10.2). This includes direct as well as indirect contact.

The amendment specifically prohibits death row inmates from contacting the surviving family members of the victims without the written consent of the family members being contacted. Contact includes arranging for a third party to forward communications from the inmate to the surviving family members of the victim. Furthermore, the amendment requires the division to develop an appropriate punishment for any inmate who chooses to violate a "no contact" order issued by prison staff.

Another revision to the 1999 N.C. Crime Victims' Rights Act concerns Adult Correction's responsibility to consider the safety concerns of a victim or a member of the victim's immediate family when placing an inmate in the same county where the victim/family member(s) lives or works (N.C.G.S. § 148-5.1). If an alternative assignment is not a viable option and the offender is placed in the county in which the victim has requested a "county block", the Division of Adult Correction shall inform the victim/family member in writing. It is important to note that this part of the law only applies to victims/survivors who have expressed a written concern for their safety and have experienced a crime covered by the 1999 N.C. Crime Victims' Rights Act.

These changes strengthen a victim's/survivor's ability to make his/her feelings known while it provides the prison system with important information from the victim's/survivor's perspective.