

Bellatora Tirado | Understanding your status/Custody level

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1. Introduction & Scope

This guide is intended as a general reference for understanding how correctional systems (jails, prisons, state/federal systems) manage inmate status and classification. It covers conceptual frameworks, common procedures, and policy considerations. Because each jurisdiction (federal, state, county) may have specific statutes, regulations, and institutional policies, this document should be adapted accordingly.

The “inmate status” concept is broad — it encompasses custody levels, administrative statuses, disciplinary or restricted statuses, classification, movement, and release pathways.

2. Key Terminology & Definitions

Before diving into statuses and procedures, here are essential concepts and terms:

- **Custody / Custodial Status:** The level of supervision and control required for an inmate, often influencing where and how they are housed, and their permissible activities.
- **Classification / Designation:** The process of assigning an inmate to a particular custody level, security designation, or facility, based on assessed risk and needs.
- **General Population (GP):** Inmates housed in the normal housing units without special restrictions (unless imposed otherwise).
- **Administrative Custody / Segregation:** A status for inmates whose presence in general population is problematic (e.g. threat to safety, pending investigation, etc.).
- **Disciplinary Segregation / Disciplinary Status:** Placement in a more restrictive setting due to rule violation.
- **Restrictive Housing / Solitary Confinement:** Housing with severe limitations on out-of-cell time, contacts, programming, etc.
- **Work Release / Community Custody / Transitional Custody:** Statuses that allow movement outside or near-community supervision in preparation for reentry.
- **Detainer / Hold:** A request from another jurisdiction or authority to maintain custody or delay release for transfer or legal proceedings.
- **Writ:** A court order (e.g. writ of habeas corpus, writ of habeas corpus ad prosequendum) requiring production or movement of an inmate.

- **Escape / Abscond / Absconder:** Unauthorized absence from custody.
- **Registration / Identification Number:** Each inmate is given an internal ID (e.g. BOP number, DOC number) to track records, housing, etc.

3. Inmate Statuses / Categories

In most systems, inmates fall into various statuses. Below is a typical schema (may vary by jurisdiction).

Status / Category	Description	Common Use / Conditions
Pretrial / Pre-sentenced / Detainee	Those awaiting trial, sentencing, or disposition of charges	Often held in jails or detention facilities; subject to “presumption of innocence” procedural protections
Sentenced / Committed	Those who have been convicted and sentenced	Housed in prisons (state or federal) or long-term facilities
Appeal / Post-conviction status	Those challenging sentence or awaiting outcome of appeals	May remain in same facility or transferred
General Population (GP)	Standard housing with access to programs, work, recreation	Default status when no special restrictions
Administrative Custody / Segregation	Inmates who, due to safety, threat, investigation, or classification reasons, must be isolated from GP	E.g. crisis intervention, protective custody, investigations
Disciplinary Status	Inmates sanctioned for rules violations and placed in restricted housing for a period	Subject to defined disciplinary procedures
Restrictive Housing / Solitary	A particularly restrictive form of housing, often long durations or near-isolation	Usually regulated strictly (time limits, reviews)

Status / Category	Description	Common Use / Conditions
Work Release / Transitional / Community Custody	Inmates allowed to work outside, live in halfway houses, etc., as they approach release	Must meet criteria of lower risk and good conduct
On Parole / Supervised Release	Post-release status, under supervision in the community	Not technically in “custody” but under correctional oversight
Released / Discharged	No longer under institutional custody	The inmate’s status is closed, though sometimes subject to supervision or parole
Escaped / Absconder	When an inmate leaves custody without authorization	The system may mark status as “escaped” and trigger capture procedures

Some systems also use intermediate statuses (e.g. “holdover,” “transit,” “pre-designation”) for inmates in between phases (e.g. awaiting assignment to a permanent facility).

Example: Custody levels in certain states

- Alabama’s DOC uses **Close, Medium, Minimum** custody levels, with *Minimum* subdivided into Minimum-In, Minimum-Out, Minimum-Community. [Alabama Dept of Corrections](#)
- Washington State DOC has custody levels from **Security Level 1 (Community / Partial Confinement)** up to Level 5 (Maximum) [Washington DOC](#)
- In New York, the inmate lookup system includes a field called “Custody Status” to distinguish those still in incarceration vs. released. publicapps.doccs.ny.gov

4. Classification / Custody Designation

Purpose & Objectives

Classification aims to:

- Ensure safety of staff, inmates, and public
- House inmates in appropriate security levels
- Allocate resources effectively

- Promote programming, rehabilitation, and reentry planning
- Avoid aggregation of high-risk inmates or gang members

Process & Criteria

Typical factors used in classification:

- Criminal history and severity of offense
- Escape history / institutional behavior
- Violence history
- Institutional adjustment / disciplinary record
- Medical / mental health needs
- Security risk (gang affiliation, escapes, behavior)
- Program/parole needs and proximity to release
- Institutional bed availability and capacity constraints

In the federal system, the Bureau of Prisons uses Program Statement P5100.08 for inmate security designation and classification. [Bureau of Prisons](#) It includes objective score metrics (e.g. criminal history, education, age) and management variables. [Bureau of Prisons](#)

Classification is not static; inmates are periodically reviewed and reclassified (e.g. annually or upon significant behavior changes).

Designation & Redesignation

- **Initial designation:** Upon commitment, inmates are assessed and assigned a security level / facility
- **Redesignation:** Based on behavior, program participation, or changed circumstances (e.g. nearing release)
- **Management variable:** In some classification systems, non-scoring factors (age, health, institutional safety, bed availability) may override base scores to shift placement. [Bureau of Prisons](#)

5. Administrative / Special Statuses

These statuses overlay or interrupt the “normal” classification when needed.

Administrative Custody / Protective Custody

- Inmates whose presence in GP is problematic (threat to safety, investigations, litigation, witness protection).
- The inmate is placed in more controlled setting, but not necessarily for punishment.
- Policy should require periodic review and justification.
- Example: In Pennsylvania, DC-ADM 802 allows placement into administrative custody when presence in GP would threaten safety or orderly running of the facility.

[Pennsylvania Government](#)

Disciplinary Status / Disciplinary Segregation

- Sanction-imposed for rule violations after due process (hearing, notice, ability to present defense).
- Inmates may lose privileges (visits, programs, etc.) for defined periods.
- In many jurisdictions, maximum durations are limited (e.g. 30 days) and subject to review.

Restrictive Housing / Solitary / “Restrictive Status”

- Highly controlled environment, minimal contact, extended isolation.
- Because of mental health and human rights concerns, many jurisdictions limit durations, mandate periodic reviews, and require special oversight.
- Some correctional standards (e.g. for PREA, mental health) place safeguards or limits on use.

Temporary / Transit Status

- While in transit (between facilities) or awaiting permanent assignment, inmates may live in holding units or transit housing.
- Their status is often more restrictive due to security and logistical constraints.

Medical / Mental Health Units

- Inmates requiring medical or psychiatric care may be housed in specialized units (infirmary, psychiatric wings).

- Their status may be “medical custody” — movement and privileges are controlled by medical staff.

Segregation for Investigation

- When an inmate is under investigation (e.g. assault, contraband, internal investigation), they might be placed in segregation until findings are resolved.
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6. Movement, Transfers & Security Levels

Security Levels & Facility Designations

Facilities often carry security designations (e.g. minimum, medium, close, maximum). Inmate placement must match both their custody level and facility security features. Washington State DOC, for example, uses Security Levels 1–5. [Washington DOC](#)

The federal BOP also classifies institutions and assigns inmates accordingly, guided by Program Statement P5100.08. [Bureau of Prisons](#)

Inter-Facility Transfers

- Transfers may be for operational reasons (bed space, overcrowding), security, classification changes, or closer to home (release transfer).
- The BOP uses “Nearer Release Transfers” code (313) for moving inmates closer to their release area when conditions allow. [Bureau of Prisons](#)
- Transfer requests, reviews, and approvals follow articulated procedures.

Within-Facility Movement

- Housing unit changes, cell moves, segregation transfers must respect safety, security, and classification rules.
- Moves may be triggered by disciplinary action, protective custody, programming needs, or bilateral agreements.

Interstate / Interstate Agreement Transfer

- Some states participate in interstate compacts (e.g. Interstate Corrections Compact), allowing transfer across state lines under agreed terms.
- Foreign transfers (for foreigners to serve sentences in home country) are also possible under treaties, following established procedures.

7. Rights, Privileges & Restrictions

General Rights of Inmates

Inmates retain certain constitutional and statutory rights, often limited by security concerns. These typically include:

- Access to legal counsel and the courts (e.g. law library, assistance)
- Due process for disciplinary charges
- Freedom from cruel and unusual punishment
- Medical care and mental health services
- Reasonable access to visitation, mail, communication (subject to restrictions)
- Grievance mechanisms
- Access to programs, religious services, education (when permissible)

Privileges & Incentive Systems

Correctional institutions often provide a graded privileges system:

- Increased visitation, commissary, phone access, recreation, programming
- Ability to participate in work, education, vocational training
- Incentive or “good time” credits for good behavior (subject to law)
- Eligibility for lower custody or community status

These privileges may be rescinded as sanctions for misconduct.

Restrictions & Limitations

- Inmates under restrictive or disciplinary status may have severely limited out-of-cell time, limited or no visitation, restricted commissary, and limited ability to participate in programs
- Searches (cell, body, property) may be more frequent
- Movement (e.g. library, yard) may be suspended
- Mail or phone may be monitored, restricted, or suspended
- In some jurisdictions, inmates may lose “good time” or credit accrual

8. Discipline, Grievances, and Appeals

Disciplinary Process

Any system that imposes discipline must establish fair procedures:

1. **Notice of charge:** The inmate is informed of the violation, charges, date/time, and rights.
2. **Preliminary hearing / screening:** Some charges may be dismissed or informally resolved.
3. **Formal hearing:** A hearing officer or disciplinary board hears evidence, allows inmate defense, offers witnesses or documentation.
4. **Decision & sanctions:** Based on standard of proof (often “more likely than not”), sanctions are imposed if found guilty.
5. **Appeal:** Inmate may appeal to higher authority (warden, regional, central), often with review timelines.

Policies must define maximum sanctions, allowable punishments (e.g. cell restriction, loss of privileges), and time limits. Many DOC policies require segregation periods to be limited and reviewed regularly.

Grievance Systems

- Every inmate should have access to a grievance procedure to raise issues (conditions, staff misconduct, health care, etc.).
- Typically structured with multiple levels of review (e.g. ward-level, facility-level, central office).
- Procedures should include time deadlines, confidentiality protections, and prohibition on retaliation.

Oversight & External Review

- External oversight bodies (ombudsman, inspector general, courts) often review grievance outcomes or complaints.
 - Some systems allow judicial review (e.g. habeas corpus) for constitutional violations.
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9. Release, Parole, Work Release & Transitional Statuses

Release / Discharge

- Upon completion of sentence (including credit, good time, etc.), an inmate is released or discharged.
- The release date, release type (mandatory, expiration, parole, supervised release) is recorded.
- The institutional records office ensures all legal, administrative steps are completed.

Parole / Supervised Release

- Some systems allow early release under supervision. The parole board or supervising authority sets conditions.
- Failure to comply can lead to revocation and re-incarceration.
- In federal systems, supervised release typically follows the confinement term (for certain crimes).

Work Release / Community Custody / Transitional Programs

- Inmates may be allowed to leave the facility daily to work (work release) or reside in transitional housing near community (halfway houses).
- Eligibility is restricted (low risk, nearing release, good conduct).
- These statuses aim to ease reentry, maintain family ties, and reduce recidivism.

Furloughs / Temporary Leave / Home Confinement

- Some jurisdictions permit short-term releases (medical, family, educational) under strict supervision.
- Home confinement or electronic monitoring may be used for select inmates.

10. Detainers, Holds & Writs

Detainers / Holds

- A detainer is a request from another jurisdiction holding pending charges or warrant, to keep the inmate in custody or delay release.

- When an inmate is released from one jurisdiction, the detaining jurisdiction may assume custody.
- Institutions must notify affected authorities of impending release (e.g. 60-day notice in BOP system) and coordinate transfer. [Bureau of Prisons](#)
- If the detaining authority declines custody, the detainer is removed, and release can proceed. [Bureau of Prisons](#)

Writs

- **Writ of habeas corpus:** Inmate requests release or procedural review by court
 - **Writ of habeas corpus ad prosequendum:** Transfer inmate from prison to court appearance
 - **Other writs** may order production of records or movement
 - Legal and procedural safeguards govern their execution; institution must verify authenticity and comply with judicial orders. [Bureau of Prisons](#)
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11. Policy and Procedure Frameworks

To operationalize the above in a correctional setting, a robust policy / procedure framework is key. Components include:

1. Authority & Legal Basis

- Statutes, regulations, enabling legislation
- Constitutional constraints (8th, 14th Amendments in U.S.)

2. Definitions / Terminology

- Clear definitions of statuses, levels, rights, roles

3. Classification Policy

- Criteria, scoring, overrides, periodic review, appeals

4. Status Assignment / Change Procedures

- Administrative custody, disciplinary placement, removal

5. Movement / Transfer Procedures

- Transfer requests, approvals, interstate compacts

6. Disciplinary Process

- Notice, hearing, appeals, record keeping

7. Grievance Policy

- Timelines, confidentiality, multiple levels

8. Release Procedures

- Computation of sentence, credit, release notifications

9. Detainer / Hold / Writ Procedures

- Lodging, removal, notification, verification

10. Oversight, Audits & Review

- Internal audits, external oversight, compliance monitoring

11. Safeguards & Human Rights

- Time limits on restrictive housing, mental health review, due process

12. Training & Staff Responsibilities

- Role definitions, training requirements, reporting

13. Record Keeping & Documentation

- Inmate central file, logs, transfer paperwork

14. Quality Assurance & Continuous Improvement

12. Implementation Considerations & Best Practices

- **Transparency & Consistency:** Classification and status decisions should be standardized and documented.
- **Periodic Review:** No status (especially restrictive) should remain indefinitely without review.
- **Appeals & Oversight:** Provide meaningful appeals and external review.
- **Safeguards for Vulnerable Populations:** Inmates with mental illness, disabilities, juveniles, pregnant women require special consideration.

- **Minimization of Restrictive Housing:** Limit use and duration of solitary; ensure mental health monitoring.
 - **Data & Analytics:** Track trends, recidivism, classification outcomes to detect bias.
 - **Training of Staff:** Emphasize procedural fairness, constitutional rights, and safety.
 - **Integration with Reentry Programming:** Status decisions should support inmate access to rehabilitative programs, especially as release nears.
 - **Coordination with Other Agencies:** For detainers, interstate transfers, court orders.
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13. Sample Outline for Institutional Policy Document

Policy Title: Inmate Classification, Status & Movement Policy

Purpose / Objective

Scope / Applicability

Definitions

Authority / Legal Basis

Classification / Designation Procedures

- Initial classification
- Redesignation / periodic review

Status Categories & Criteria

- General population
- Administrative custody
- Disciplinary status
- Restrictive housing
- Work release / transitional

Assignment / Change Protocols

Movement & Transfer Procedures

Disciplinary Procedures

Grievance Procedures

Release, Parole, Transition Procedures

Detainer / Hold / Writ Procedures

Safeguards & Review Requirements

Roles & Responsibilities
Documentation & Records
Auditing & Review
Training & Implementation
Appendices / Forms

14. Limitations, Challenges & Risks

- **Subjectivity & Bias:** Even in “objective” scoring systems, discretionary overrides may introduce bias. (E.g., algorithmic assessment tools have been critiqued for racial bias)
 - **Resource Constraints:** Limited bed space or staffing can force misclassification or overuse of restrictive housing
 - **Legal Challenges:** Restrictions or disciplinary processes may be challenged in court (due process, cruel & unusual)
 - **Mental Health Risks:** Prolonged isolation can exacerbate psychological harm
 - **Overuse of Restrictive Housing:** Without proper oversight, it can be abused
 - **Inter-jurisdictional Coordination:** Conflicts or delays in transfers, detainer processes, or extraditions
 - **Inmate Rights vs. Security Tension:** Balancing institutional safety with constitutional rights
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15. Conclusion

Inmate statuses and classification systems are foundational to safe, fair, and effective correctional management. Properly designed policies, rigorous review, transparency, and built-in safeguards are critical in ensuring that inmates are housed appropriately, their rights are respected, and institutions remain secure. This guide is a starting blueprint; jurisdictions should tailor it to local laws, institutional needs, and oversight frameworks.