

8.11: Prison Levels

Each of these jurisdictions of prisons also has varying degrees of intensity or seriousness. These are often considered prison levels or classifications. Depending on the State, the BOP, or even in the private sector, it is usually associated with the seriousness of the offenders that are housed within these institutions. For example, many States have three classification levels: minimum, medium, and maximum. Some States have a fourth level called super-maximum. Others call this close, or administrative level. The BOP has five levels, minimum, low, medium, high, and unclassified. Although not a true designation, and would be considered an unclassified, administrative control, ADX Florence is a United States Penitentiary (USP) that would be counted as a super-max. It houses the most dangerous individuals at the Federal level. Although not in operation today, Alcatraz was probably the most famous Federal USP (also considered a super-max at one point). It too housed the most dangerous federal inmates. Below are two images of this iconic prison, known as the “rock.”



Alcatraz



Alcatraz in the Bay against the Backdrop of San Francisco

Other States use a simple number designator to assign prison intensity, such as Level I, Level II, Level III, Level IV, and sometimes Level V. While still, other States incorporate a Camp to their list of designations, indicating a specific purpose within the low level, such as a Fire Camp. These types of camps are dedicated to fighting fires. In all there are some basic concepts to point out for each type:

Minimum – These prisons usually have dorm style housing, typically for only non-violent offenders, with shorter sentences (or sentence lengths left after downgrading). The fencing or perimeters of these types of facilities are usually low levels. The BOP generally refers to these as camps.

Low – These types of prisons are similar to minimums, to include some kind of dormitory style housing. However, there are normally more serious or disruptive offenders in these types of prisons. The fencing around the perimeter of these is generally higher, and maybe even a double fence. Offenders are typically in these institutions for longer periods.

Medium – Here, there is a transition from dorm-style housing to cells. Normally, there are two persons to a cell, but not always. The perimeter is usually a high fence, and may even have barbed wire, or there are large walls surrounding the institution. Freedom of movement within the institution is reduced, seen as privilege. Inmates here typically longer sentences, and include violence convictions.

High or Maximum – Similar to medium, but most of these offenders have violence convictions, and longer sentences, including life. Many of these individuals will spend most of their day in a cell, and more often than not, these are single occupancy.

Super-Max or Administrative Control – Depending on what the mission is for that particular prison, the prisoners in these institutions could be vastly different. For instance, if it is a facility that is designated for mental health, it would not operate the same as one that is a super-max. The super-max facilities would have individuals in their cells for almost all of every day. Many services would come to them at their cell, instead of them going somewhere (i.e., sick call), the cells would almost all be single occupancy. Visitation of these inmates would be much more regimented and monitored. Most of these individuals are also classified as extreme threats to the successful operations of the prison and are long-term inmates (LWOP – life without the possibility of Parole).

Intake Centers – An intake center can be part of an institution, running alongside the normal operations of an institution. The purpose of an intake center is to classify the offenders coming from the various courts in the jurisdiction, post felony conviction. The offender has an initial classification, where they are getting assigned to one of the jurisdiction's prisons, based on a point system for that agency. This assessment is looking at priors, prior and current violence, escape risk, and potential self-harm. For example, Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Oregon is their intake of prison. It also is the women's prison for Oregon. Inmates come to CCCF and are assessed, then shipped off to one of the other institutions in Oregon (or placed in a level there if female). Inmates will gain later classifications at their destination prison, in terms of work assignments, mental health status, cell assignments, and other items.

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