

# Women and Security Classification in Massachusetts: An Overview

Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC) security classification practices routinely lead to incarcerating women in settings that are more restrictive than necessary. However, the risk of violence posed by incarcerated women is very low, as is the risk of escape. Despite most women receiving minimum-security scores by the Massachusetts Department of Correction, nearly all are reclassified to medium-security status and held in unnecessarily restrictive settings.

Most incarcerated women have endured abuse and victimization, often beginning in childhood, leaving them with chronic physical and mental health challenges and making them [vulnerable to re-traumatization in punitive environments](#) where privacy and autonomy are severely restricted. The conditions of higher security custody—characterized by loud noises, lack of privacy in bathrooms and showers, and threats of punishment—often bear great similarity to the behavior of abusers, exacerbating trauma and potentially leading to disciplinary issues and ever harsher custodial conditions. Unnecessarily harsh security classification also makes it nearly impossible for women, the majority of whom are mothers, to access programs such as work release, community release supervision, and electronic monitoring (GPS) outside the prison that would allow them to care for their children, maintain family connections, and work towards financial independence.

It is within the authority of the DOC to modify or abolish policies, listed below, that result in the overly restrictive classification of women ([Massachusetts General Law Title XVIII Ch 124, Section 1, Para Q](#)).

- The DOC uses essentially the same “objective point base system” to score women’s and men’s security statuses. This system does not adequately consider women’s experiences and strengths, nor does it consider the impact of race, class, sexual orientation, and other intersecting factors that may impact a woman’s security score. Promoting the participation of women in the whole range of prerelease, work release, community release, and ELMO programs allowed under Massachusetts law.
- Although the DOC’s “objective point base system” scores most women as “minimum security,” nearly all women are reclassified as “medium security” through “overrides” and “minimum security requirements,” at least in part because the DOC has chosen to designate the Massachusetts women’s prison (MCI-Framingham) as “medium security.” Some of the “override” criteria and “minimum security requirements” may be particularly harmful to women.
- The DOC chooses not to classify any women as “pre-release,” a status that would make them eligible for work release or electronic monitoring.

In recognition of the low security risk posed by women, this report recommends:

- Ensuring that women in DOC custody are held in the least restrictive setting allowable by law.
- Promoting the participation of women in the whole range of pre-release, work release, community release, and electronic monitoring programs allowed under Massachusetts law.
- Changing the security designation of MCI-Framingham from medium security to minimum security. (Note: this report does not propose opening new prisons for women or transferring women from prison to jails or other carceral facilities.)
- Requiring that the DOC and sheriffs’ departments gather and release data and procedural information regarding the full range of issues that may interfere with women being held in the least restrictive settings possible.

