

## Security Level Classification

By Michael G. Santos  
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*This article provides an overview of what inmates can expect in prisons of various security levels.*

The United States operates 52 separate criminal justice systems. Each state system has its own criminal court and prison system, as does the District of Columbia. Each of these systems, however, is modeled on the federal criminal justice system. Rather than examining the criminal justice systems of each of the 50 individual state systems, or the DC system, one can obtain a bird's eye view by reviewing the federal criminal justice system. I provide that view in my book [\*Inside: Life Behind Bars in America.\*](#)

People who are confronted with the criminal justice system, generally, want to understand the worst-case scenario - meaning, they want to know how their lives will change if they are sentenced to prison.

Prisons are like miniature, self-contained communities. Some of these prison communities are more stressful than others. Like all communities, the people who compose the community dictate the quality of life inside. Prison administrators set the rules that govern the prison society according to a general view of the types of offenders who will be held in those communities. Each prison system makes use of a rather elaborate custody and classification system that helps administrators determine the most suitable prison level for individual offenders.

Some citizens in the broader community feel that all prisons should be punitive and provide minimum amounts of freedom to each individual. In truth, a direct relationship exists between a prison system's security classification and taxpayer costs. Super-maximum security prisons, for example, have as many as one staff member for each prisoner they hold. They spare no expense on the most elaborate security measures, including walls, triple fences, electronic

surveillance mechanisms, and other features that require extraordinary amounts of initial capital to build the facility, and huge yearly budgets to operate such prisons.

Such prisons are extremely punitive, but they also are extremely expensive to operate, costing the taxpayers who fund them more than \$50,000 per year to hold each prisoner. These types of prisons, like Pelican Bay in the California State Prison System, or the Administrative-Maximum facility at Florence, Colorado, in the federal system, represent a limited resource within their respective prison system. Only so much space exists in each of these types of super expensive facilities; administrators reserve that space for those prisoners whom administrators deem as the worst of the worst.

At the other extreme are prisons known as minimum-security, or prison camps. Camps operate with the minimal quantity of staff members and have hardly any security measures at all. They rarely have a fence around the prison's perimeter, and there are few gates or electronic surveillance mechanisms inside. Prisoners designated to serve their sentences in minimum-security facilities generally have records that demonstrate a level of responsibility and good citizenship that may be absent from the offenders held in higher-security institutions. Whereas administrators may allocate more than \$50,000 per year to fund each prisoner in a super-maximum security prison, those administrators who establish budgets for prison camps may allocate less than \$10,000 per year for each minimum-security prisoner under control.

Security-level classifications, then, become an economic necessity. Our country now incarcerates more than 2.3 million people, the vast majority of whom have neither histories nor proclivities for violence. Indeed, a substantial percentage of our nation's prisoners are incarcerated for drug offenses - activities that were not illegal 100 years ago, and activities which likely will not be illegal 100 years from today. If administrators were to hold each of these offenders in super-maximum security prisons - at \$50,000 per inmate - the costs to operate such a system would be extraordinary, even more so than they are now. That is why administrators

establish guidelines to help them determine a particular offender's suitability for a particular institution. Generally, administrators want to make efficient use of their limited resources.

Several factors figure into the equation of determining each offender's security level. Those factors come from an objective scale, which I describe below. It's important for each offender to know that although it is difficult to work one's security and classification scoring down (meaning one would be eligible to be held in lower security), it is easy to add points to one's security and classification scoring (meaning one would have to move up to a higher-security institution). In a nutshell, the best decision a prisoner can make to is stay out of problems and participate in self-improvement programs during one's confinement.

In my book [\*Inside: Life Behind Bars, in America\*](#), I provide graphical descriptions of the prison system. That book was for a general, nonfiction audience. In [\*About Prison\*](#), I describe my observations and experiences during my first decade of confinement. I wrote [\*About Prison\*](#) for an academic audience. Both books would provide interested readers with a more detailed description of the myriad issues related to prison security level classifications.

### ▪ **Minimum-Security (Prison Camp) Institutions**

On 4 December 2003 I was admitted to the population of prisoners at the Federal Prison Camp, Florence (FPC Florence). With my transfer to FPC Florence, I now have served time in maximum, medium, low, and minimum-security prisons. My first job assignment at FPC Florence was at the nearby supermax prison known as ADX Florence, so now I have served time in federal prisons of every security level.

I had been confined at Fort Dix low for nearly eight years prior to my transfer to FPC Florence, and although I knew that I had become eligible for camp placement, my transfer came unexpectedly. It was a good move for me. Although the more than 17 years that I already have served in prison have helped my adjustment to most any prison setting, I consider camp

placement a privilege and hope to finish my remaining years of confinement in minimum security.

FPC Florence may be the first minimum-security camp in which I have served time, but I have interviewed hundreds of other prisoners over the course of my confinement. In my [books](#), I provide backgrounds and adjustment patterns of individuals who have served time in other prison camps. Through MichaelSantos.net, I provide profiles articles describing what others told me about their experiences in prison camp.

### **Minimum-Security Population Composition:**

People confined in prison camps had fewer than ten years remaining to serve before their scheduled release. Those who were in the camp, especially those prisoners who had worked their way down after having served time in higher-security prisons perceived the camp experience as a significant step closer to home. They were not inclined to engage in any type of disturbance that could threaten their release or the privileges that come with camp living. Prisoners in the camp with fewer than two-years remaining to serve were eligible for furloughs, meaning they were allowed to spend time away from the prison with their families for extended periods of time. Because the vast majority of prisoners in camps had an interest in the outside community, hope remained alive and volatility was almost completely absent.

### **Minimum-Security Quarters:**

The quarters in camps, generally, were dormitory-style. The dormitories were divided into smaller cubicles; in others, the beds were aligned in long rows. Each prisoner was assigned a locker to hold all of his personal belongings, and space was extremely limited. Prisoners shared community bathrooms, as in a large locker room. Privacy was completely absent. Noise could be disturbing, as hundreds of people were grouped together. I used earplugs and recommend them to those who value silence.

## **Minimum-Security Structure of the Day:**

Federal prison camps generally were open facilities. The inmate population confined in prison camps provided labor for the higher-security prisons which they surrounded, or if the camps were independent of higher-security prisons, the camp inmates might provide labor to nearby military bases or towns. Camp prisoners could expect that a job assignment would consume a significant portion of their time.

Whereas featherbed-type jobs were abundant in higher-security prisons, minimum-security prisons offered few. Indeed, upon my transfer to Florence camp, I went through a series of jobs before I found one that allowed me to spend time writing. I worked performing laundry services at ADX Florence. I worked as a unit orderly. I worked as an orderly in the administration building at FCI Florence. I worked as a tutor for the education department. And I was assigned to work in a busboy-type position in FPC Florence's food service department. Most people won't transfer through so many prison jobs, but my writing activities and profile put me in a more closely monitored position.

Staff members in minimum-security camps were much more anal over the minutia of prison rules. Rule infractions that would go unnoticed in higher-security prisons were strictly enforced in minimum-security. For example, prisoners who had more than one bowl (for eating) in their possession could expect a sanction if the extra bowl was discovered. More than the allotment of five books could result in a reprimand and sanction. A wrinkle in a bed, a dirty trash bucket, or a picture attached to the inside of a locker could result in disciplinary action if discovered. Such innocuous infractions would mean nothing in higher-security prisons.

The petty enforcement of rules did not bother me, but I was used to prison living. I much preferred the camp environment to higher security because prisoners in the camp were given significantly higher amounts of freedom. We had access to the recreation yard more easily, and better access to the library. I spent my leisure time running long distances or working on my

writing projects in the library. It was much more convenient to live without the hassle of the structured and controlled movements that exist in higher security. Further, I preferred minimum security because there was minimal tension among the inmate population.

The jobs themselves would include such details as food service, landscaping, building maintenance, or orderly jobs. Many camps offered work inside the prison factory, too. Most prisoners should expect to work seven-hour shifts, and while in the camps, the prisoners should be vigilant about observing the rules. Camp prisoners should expect a certain level of humiliation, as many staff members spoke to prisoners in pejorative tones.

### **Minimum-Security Leisure Time:**

Prisoners who were not assigned to be working at a given time could access the recreational facilities, library, watch television, or spend time in their assigned quarters. They were not allowed to visit in housing units to which they were not assigned. Many prisoners played table games or visited with others in common areas during their leisure time. Each prison operated a chapel, where individuals could practice and observe their religious beliefs - as long as those beliefs didn't interfere with the security of the institution.

### **Minimum-Security Violence:**

People confined in prison camps were exposed to no more violence than one would expect who is working in a normal office environment. It just didn't exist. People were more respectful and tolerant of each other, and the littlest things did not threaten to ignite lethal violence. The environment differed significantly from the settings in higher-security institutions.

### **▪ Low-Security Institutions**

Time remaining to serve is one of the guides administrators used when determining the appropriate security and custody classification scoring for individual prisoners. Those who had fewer than 20 years to pass in confinement before release might be eligible to serve their time in a low-security prison. I was confined at FCI Fort Dix, the East Side, between 1996 and 2003. It

was a low-security prison holding more than 4,000 people in total. I provide a lengthy description of the daily life at Fort Dix in the article "Fort Dix: A Long-Term Prisoner's Description". I provide even deeper coverage in my books, especially [\*Inside: Life Behind Bars in America\*](#).

### **Low-Security Population Composition:**

Low-security prisons had considerably lower levels of volatility than higher-security prisons. One of the reasons was that as prisoners moved closer to their release dates, they were less inclined to participate in group disturbances. It didn't mean that disruptions in lower-security prisons were totally absent. A large percentage of the population in low-security had hopes of not only release, but an eventual transfer to a minimum-security camp, where their access to privileges would increase significantly. I was in my eighth year of imprisonment when administrators transferred me to low-security, and I noticed a difference in the type of offenders held behind low-security fences.

Higher-security prisons, by their nature, held a high percentage of people committed to the criminal way of life. Although many of those people eventually moved to lower security, when they did, they were less likely to engage in the same type of behavior that dominated the culture in high security. There were fewer weapons in the low, less group violence or disturbances. Also, when the government began to focus on pursuing white-collar offenders, the number of well-educated prisoners in the population at Fort Dix increased. One of my closest friends there had founded a major Wall Street brokerage company and was the chairman of several publicly traded companies prior to his imprisonment, another was a former mayor, and I had several friends at Fort Dix who had advanced degrees from Ivy League universities. As a long-term prisoner, I welcomed opportunities to learn from others.

### **Low-Security Quarters:**

The quarters in low-security were less private than in the higher security facilities. Most low-security facilities held the prisoners in dormitory-style rooms. They divided the large rooms into two- or four-man cubicles with the partitions commonly used in office buildings. Some, on the other hand, had rows upon rows of beds without any dividers. At Fort Dix, where I was held, prisoners were assigned to rooms holding 12 people. A smaller number of two-man rooms were available to those prisoners with clean disciplinary records and seniority in the institution. Each prisoner was assigned a locker to hold all of his personal belongings.

The low-security prisons did not have locks on the doors, and the prisoners shared community bathrooms. Privacy was completely absent, and the noise levels could be unbearable.

### **Low-Security Structure of the Day:**

Although prisoners were not locked inside of individual cells, as in the higher-security prisons, they were not free to walk around when the compound was closed. Usually, at 6:00 a.m. each morning one of the guards announced that the compound was open. Upon the announcement, prisoners could move to the chow hall or the recreation yard. At 7:30 there was a work call, and those who were assigned had to report to their job details.

All prisoners who were medically able were required to work. They could work in any number of positions depending on their level of skills and the institutional need. Some jobs required a full day of labor, others were featherbed-type jobs requiring little more than a few minutes each day. The pay for those jobs could vary, too, from a minimum of \$5.25 per month to over \$200 per month for inmates who worked overtime in factory positions in UNICOR.

### **Low-Security Leisure Time:**

Prisoners who were not assigned to be working at a given time could access the recreational facilities, library, watch television, or spend time in their assigned quarters. They were not allowed to enter housing units to which they were not assigned. Many prisoners played

table games or visited with others during their leisure time. Each prison operated a chapel, where individuals could practice and observe their religious beliefs - as long as those beliefs didn't interfere with the security of the institution. Some prisoners, of course, chose to spend their leisure time in ways that were less acceptable to prison administrators. They initiated hustles to generate an income, or participated in disruptive activities like extortion, gambling, or the alcohol and drug rackets. But in low-security prisons, such disruptive activity was less prevalent.

### **Low-Security Violence:**

The level of volatility and violence was significantly less in low-security prisons than in the higher-security institutions. This did not mean it was totally absent, but it was much rarer. During the eight years that I was confined at Fort Dix, we never had a lockdown that lasted more than one day. But there were individual spurts of violence. One individual in my housing unit was slashed repeatedly with a razor blade across his face after he objected to another man's fart; another individual was mugged and savagely beaten with pipes by two other prisoners as a consequence of his not paying a gambling debt. Violence could happen anywhere, and it was more likely in the prison environment than in communities outside. Still, relative to the prison system, lower-security prisons had lower rates of violence than in higher security.

The best way to avoid violence was to associate with few people and to avoid interference in the activities of others. Prisoners would find that spreading gossip, or poking into the business of others could have perilous, and sometimes fatal, consequences. Those confined to prison ought to respect the choices that others make and remain nonjudgmental. Failing to abide by such tacit rules of prison life could bring immediate and violent results.

### ▪ **Medium-Security Prison**

Prison systems have grown at an unprecedented rate. And people serving significant lengths of time for nonviolent offenses did not have a means to advance their release date through merit. It was not uncommon to meet people in prison who were serving life terms even

though they had no history of violence and were serving time for their first offense. As a consequence, the penitentiaries - which were extremely expensive to operate – were overcrowded. Administrators responded by pushing people who otherwise would be held in the penitentiary to lower-security prisons. Accordingly, many of the medium-security prisons held individuals with no release dates, and administrators governed those prisons much like high-security penitentiaries.

I served a few years at the medium-security prison in Bradford, Pennsylvania known as FCI McKean, and another segment at FCI Fairton, in New Jersey. I described those experiences in [\*Inside: Life Behind Bars in America\*](#). For those who expect that they might be held in a medium-security prison, and want to learn more about it, I recommend they read [\*Inside\*](#).

### **Medium-Security Population Composition:**

Medium-security prisons usually held between 800 and 1,500 prisoners. The men generally were serving sentences of between 10 and 30 years, but there were some serving less time and others serving life terms. As in the penitentiary, the majority of prisoners in medium-security prisons came from criminogenic backgrounds. The men were serving lengthy sentences, and since opportunities to advance their release dates were conspicuously absent, many of the men carried a significant amount of tension. Short tempers, scowling looks, and a characteristic hardness were the norm.

### **Medium-Security Quarters:**

Prisoners in medium-security prisons generally were assigned to rooms much like those in the penitentiary. Indeed, prisons were stamped out in a cookie-cutter design, with one institution very much resembling the next. The rooms were small and generally held two people. Sometimes administrators stacked three bunk beds on top of each other in order to cram more people into cells that originally were designed to hold one man. Again, the rooms generally had a toilet, a sink, and a locker for each prisoner assigned to the room; all personal belongings had to

be stored inside the small locker. A steel door with a heavy dead-bolt lock kept inhabitants confined during lockdown periods, which occurred regularly between 11:30 p.m. and 6:00 a.m., and irregularly whenever violence or disruptions exploded inside the prison.

### **Medium-Security Structure of the Day:**

Generally, prison compounds opened at 6:00 a.m., when the cell doors were unlocked and prisoners were allowed to go to the chow hall for breakfast. Some prisons allowed the prisoners to access the recreational areas of the prison when the compound opened. Others did not open the compound until "Workcall" at 7:30.

All prisoners who were medically able were required to work. They could work in any number of positions depending on their level of skills and the institutional need. Some jobs required a full day of labor, others were featherbed-type jobs requiring little more than a few minutes each day. The pay for those jobs varied, too, from a minimum of \$5.25 per month to over \$200 per month for inmates who worked overtime in factory positions in UNICOR.

### **Medium-Security Leisure Time:**

Prisoners who were not assigned to work at a given time could access the recreational facilities, library, watch television, or spend time in their assigned quarters. They were not allowed to enter housing units to which they were not assigned. Many prisoners played table games or visited with others during their leisure time. Each prison operated a chapel, where individuals could practice and observe their religious beliefs - as long as those beliefs didn't interfere with the security of the institution. Some prisoners, of course, chose to spend their leisure time in ways that were less acceptable to prison administrators. Because of the underground economy, and general bitterness and negativity, prisons could be volatile.

### **Medium-Security Violence:**

Prisoners in medium-security would not be surprised to see high levels of violence. A prisoner could expect to hear of blood shed as a result of a stab wound or a pipe beating at least

once each month, and murders were not unheard of in prisons concentrating hundreds of long-term prisoners together. During my term at FCI McKean, hundreds of prisoners participated in a riot that caused over a million dollars of damage to the institution. They lit fires, broke windows, and destroyed property as a response to their anger over what they perceived to be unjust sentencing laws; other times the violence erupted over a pool game, and the combatants used pool balls, prison made knives (shanks) and steel folding chairs as weapons. Prisons were high-strung environments. Many of the people inside had lost everything, all hope, and they never expected release to come. They did not hesitate to use violence when they felt as though someone was invading their space. The best way to avoid violence was to associate with few people and to avoid interference in the activities of others. Prisoners would find that the spreading of gossip, or poking into the business of others, could have perilous, and sometimes fatal, consequences.

### ▪ **High-Security Institutions**

Prisoners who were confined to high security prisons lived in restrictive environments. I served the first several years of my sentence at the United States Penitentiary in Atlanta, and I describe those experiences in [\*Inside: Life Behind Bars in America\*](#). Although I had no history of violence, and had never been imprisoned before, I was designated to begin serving my term in a maximum-security penitentiary because I had been sentenced to the terrifically long term of 45 years. At 23, I was one of the youngest prisoners behind the forty foot walls that surrounded USP Atlanta.

### **Population Composition:**

Generally, life in maximum-security was extremely regulated. Prisoners who had long histories of violence, were charged with particularly violent crimes, or had sentences that required them to remain in prison for more than 30 years could expect to serve their time in

maximum-security penitentiaries. Super-maximum security prisons (which held a rather small percentage of any system's overall population) were the most restrictive of course, often depriving the prisoners of any human contact. Prisoners in those facilities were completely contained within a cell and constantly monitored by surveillance cameras. They did not interact with others and had extremely limited access to any type of privilege. Prisoners designated to serve their sentences in super-max facilities usually met at least one of two criteria: They either had an extremely high, like the Unabomber, or Timothy McVeigh, or they were suspected of causing such disruption in other facilities that administrators refused to hold them in anything lower than a super-max prison.

Penitentiaries, or high-security prisons, on the other hand, like USP Lewisburg, USP Atlanta, USP Allenwood, or USP Florence, allowed the prisoners to mix with more freedom. Prisoners confined in those institutions generally had long sentences and long criminal histories. Many of the men were militant and stubbornly resistant to authority. Prisoners who constituted the society inside the penitentiary walls tended to live by a different code of values than that which existed in the broader society. According to the code of the penitentiary, it was forbidden to rely upon law enforcement to handle problems. Rather problems were to be handled "like men," by demanding respect through the willingness to use lethal force at the slightest provocation.

Prisoners in the penitentiary spent a considerable amount of their time in "lockdown" status. That meant they were locked in their cells for 23-hour days. Lockdowns could occur at any time, but those in maximum security could expect to be locked down at least a few times each year, and sometimes they could be locked down for weeks at a time. Frequently, when violence erupted inside the penitentiary walls, administrators called a lockdown to quell the volatility. Lockdowns also were an administrative response to food strikes, work strikes, or any type of prison disturbance. Those disturbances were more likely to occur in maximum-security

prisons than in super-max prisons because the prisoners had more freedom to congregate. Since the prisoners had significant amounts of time to serve, many welcomed the excitement of conflict or some type of break to the monotony they live day after day, year after year, decade after decade.

### **High-Security Quarters:**

Prisoners in high-security penitentiaries usually shared a closet-sized room with at least one other prisoner. The rooms were generally small enough that a man with outstretched arms could touch both walls. The room contained a bunk bed, a toilet, and a sink. The door was usually made of steel and had a heavy dead-bolt lock. If the room had a window, it was generally covered with bars and an opaque glass that prevented the prisoner from looking outside. The window likely would not open.

The rooms also had a small locker in which the prisoner was required to keep all of his possessions. He could purchase a small combination lock to secure his lockers, but prison bandits had no problem breaking those bicycle-type locks. It was best for prisoners to learn the art of austerity.

### **High-Security Structure of the Day:**

Generally, the penitentiary compound opened at 6:00 a.m., when the cell doors were unlocked and prisoners were allowed to go to the chow hall for breakfast. Some penitentiaries allowed the prisoners to access the recreational areas of the prison when the compound opened. Others did not open the compound until "Workcall" at 7:30.

All prisoners who were medically able were required to work. They could work in any number of positions depending on their level of skills and the institutional need. Some jobs required a full day of labor, others were featherbed-type jobs requiring little more than a few minutes each day. The pay for those jobs varied, too, from a minimum of \$5.25 per month to over \$200 per month for inmates who worked overtime in factory positions.

### **High-Security Leisure Time:**

Prisoners in the penitentiary who were not assigned to be working at a given time could access the recreational facilities, library, watch television, or spend time in their assigned quarters. They were not allowed to enter housing units to which they were not assigned. Many prisoners played table games or visited with others during their leisure time. Think of a small, self-contained community of 2,000 men. Everyone did his own thing. Each prison operated a chapel, where individuals could practice and observe their religious beliefs - as long as those beliefs didn't interfere with the security of the institution. Some prisoners, of course, chose to spend their leisure time in ways that were less acceptable to prison administrators. They initiated hustles to generate an income, or participated in disruptive activities like extortion, gambling, or the alcohol and drug rackets.

### **High-Security Violence:**

Prisoners in the penitentiary should not be surprised to see high levels of violence. A prisoner could expect to hear of blood shed as a result of a stab wound or a pipe beating at least once each month, and murders were not unheard of in the penitentiary. During my term in USP Atlanta, one prisoner beat a guard to death with a hammer; a prisoner was once stabbed to death over a two-dollar bet on a chess game. The penitentiary was a high-strung environment.

Many of the people inside had lost everything, all hope, and they never expected release to come. They did not hesitate to use violence when they felt as though someone was invading their space. The best way to avoid violence was to associate with few people and to avoid interference in the activities of others. Prisoners would find that the spreading of gossip, or poking into the business of others, could have perilous, and sometimes fatal, consequences.

Those confined to penitentiaries should respect the choices that others made and remain nonjudgmental. Failing to abide by such tacit rules of penitentiary living could bring immediate and violent results.