

Rhode Island's annual prison recidivism rate is 52%. Can we do better without spending more by improving in-prison programs?

Strategic Goal

Governor Gina Raimondo wants to reduce the recidivism rate to 44% by 2020. RIPL took a data-driven approach to identify low-cost solutions to lower recidivism rates. We started by measuring the effectiveness of in-prison training programs.

Assessment

We set out to determine which prison training programs lower recidivism the most. To measure what works, we couldn't simply measure the mean recidivism of each program's enrollees. Prisoners with different backgrounds choose different programs and have different probabilities of returning to prison regardless of training. We don't want to label a program "effective" at lowering recidivism if it simply attracts those individuals who are less likely to recidivate in the first place.

We must measure value-added—how much a program reduces the probability of recidivism given an inmate's background and baseline probability of recidivating. To do this, we estimate an optimally predicted probability of recidivism for each inmate, given his or her background before being incarcerated. Then, we measure how much each program lowers recidivism rates relative to this baseline. The RIPL Panorama database provides the data needed to accomplish both better than previously possible.

Results

Our analysis suggests that the most effective programs are those that provide job-specific skills in industries that are likelier to hire former inmates such as construction training, and which provide generally important basic skills and education. In contrast, programs with low mean recidivism rates do not appear to reduce recidivism, but instead likely enroll inmates with low recidivism probability to begin with.

Programs with High Value-added to Recidivism Reduction
Alpha for Prisons (religious)
Building Construction
College Academic Courses: Fundamentals of Math
College Academic Courses: Beginning Spanish
Computer Literacy Advance: Word
Health Education
Lead Abatement Training
Programs with Low Mean Recidivism Rates
College Academic Courses: Anthropology
College Academic Courses: Compensatory Writing
College Academic Courses: Principles of Management
College Academic Courses: U.S. History since 1877
College Academic Courses: Ethics
College Academic Courses: Microeconomics
Introduction to Creative Writing

Figure 1: High value added vs. low recidivism rates

Programs that provide industry-specific skills are consistently more effective; programs that provide non-industry skills (e.g., college courses) and recreation (e.g., yoga) are much more variable in their effectiveness

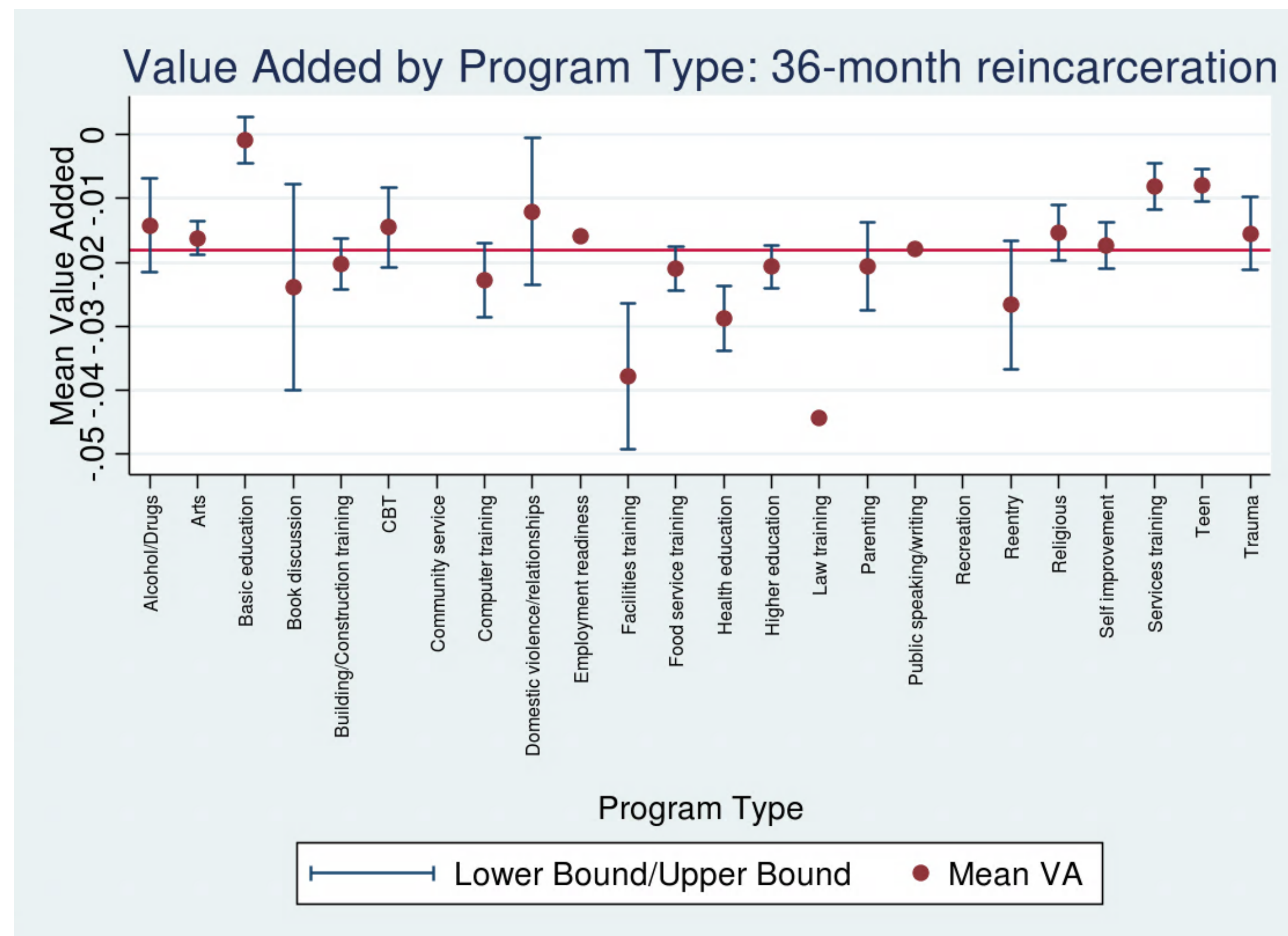


Figure 2: Mean value added by program type

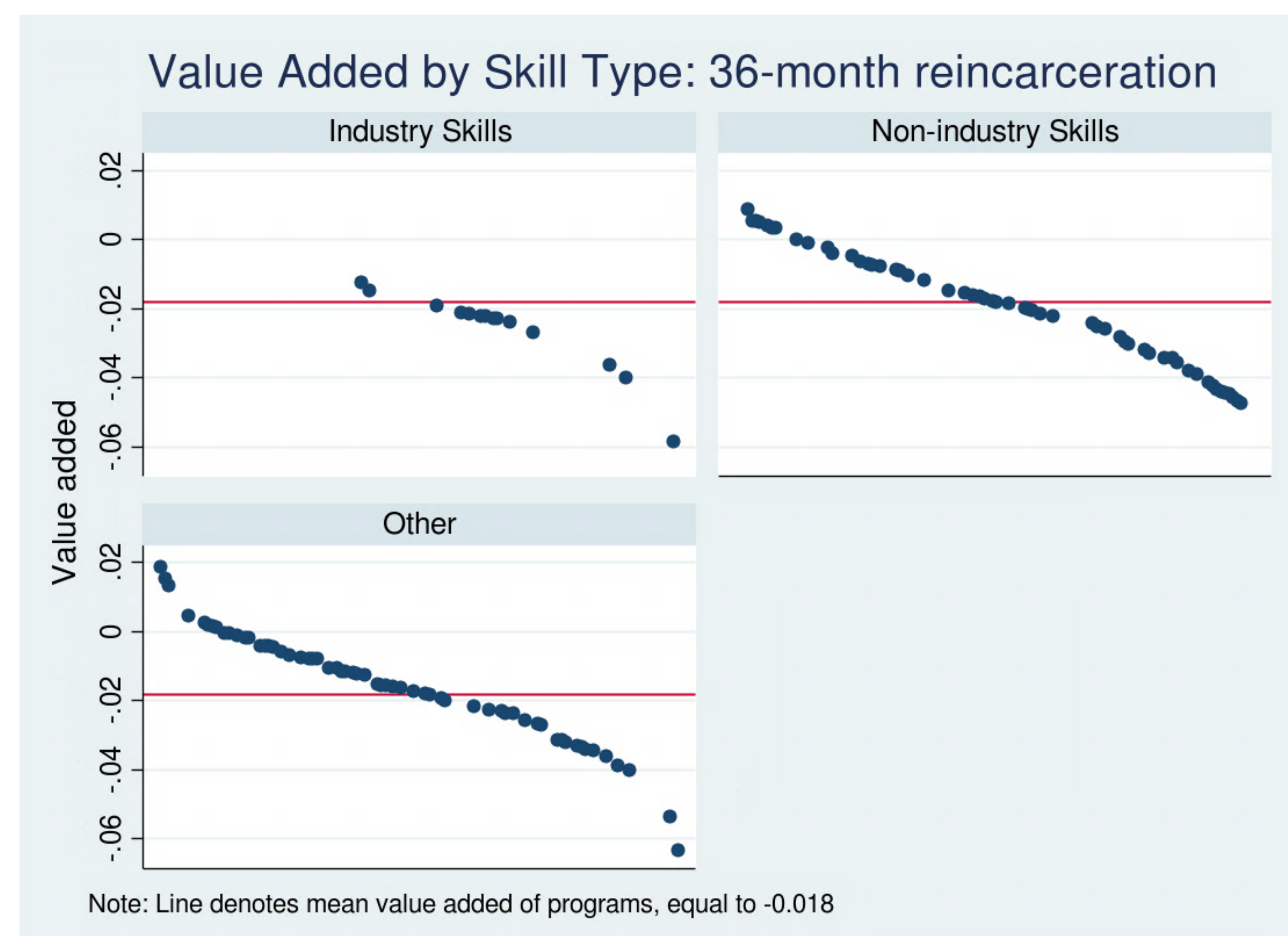


Figure 3: Value added estimates by type of training

Design and Test Improvements

Currently, a Rhode Island Department of Corrections (DOC) counselor refers an inmate to a program from among hundreds of self-described programs. This process does not enable the counselor to identify which programs are most effective at reducing recidivism when making the enrollment recommendation.

Our value-added estimates suggest that transferring inmates from low value-added to high value-added programs could reduce recidivism by roughly 3% immediately.

RIPL is currently designing a program proposal to trial assigning inmates to programs based on value-added along with current needs assessment measures. By trialing and testing this improved assignment, we measure impact and provide a blueprint for other states to adopt similar approaches to successful recidivism reduction.