

Understanding the value of in-prison training programs

Overview

RIPL partnered with the RI Department of Corrections (RIDOC) to identify *effective, low-cost solutions to reduce recidivism*. We created a value-added measure to help policymakers *understand how well in-prison training programs prepare inmates for life after incarceration*.

How do we measure value-added?

Governor Raimondo set a goal of reducing the RI recidivism rate to 44% by 2020. Of individuals released from prison in 2014, [50% had returned to prison with a new sentence by 2017](#). Upon release from prison, formerly incarcerated individuals face many barriers to reintegration. In-prison training programs provide prisoners with skills that foster successful reintegration, reducing recidivism down the line.

In partnership with the Office of the Governor and Rhode Island, we built a new data lake of integrated and anonymized administrative records to unlock the power of data and science to improve policy and lives. We used this data lake to measure the impact of each in-prison training program on recidivism.

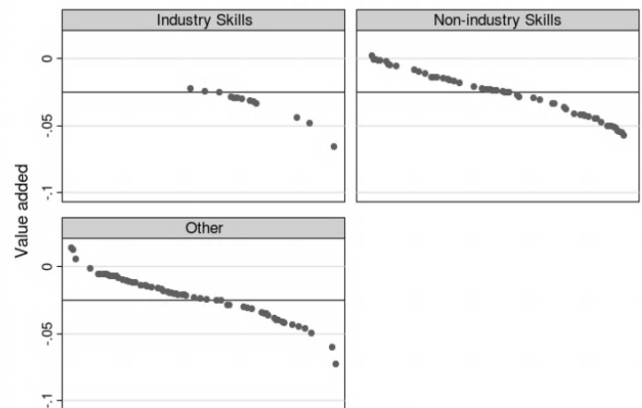
To truly measure what works, we can't simply compare the mean recidivism of each program's enrollees. Inmates with different backgrounds choose different programs and have different probabilities of recidivating, regardless of training. We don't want to label a program "effective" at lowering recidivism if it simply attracts individuals who are less likely to recidivate in the first place.

Instead, we 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.

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.

Figure 2: Value-added to 36-month recidivism (negative is better) for in-prison training programs



Notes: The line denotes mean value-added of programs, equal to -0.025. Value-added estimates constructed using anonymized administrative data from RI 360. "Industry Skills" include construction or food services; "Non-Industry Skills" include languages, math and basic software; and "Other" such as yoga or history). Each dot on the graph represents the mean value-added estimate for a training program in each category, ordered from least to best (a more negative value-added estimate indicates a larger reduction in recidivism relative to enrollee's baseline).

Currently, a corrections 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 percent immediately.

Governor Raimondo used our results to propose an allocation of resources that could more effectively reduce recidivism in the state.