



Using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to Address Trauma and Reduce Violence Among Baltimore's Young Men

A PROFILE OF ROCA BALTIMORE

Farhana Hossain and Kyla Wasserman • JULY 2021

Roca Baltimore strives to change the lives of young men who have been involved in the justice system and who are identified as being at high risk of participating in violence or being affected by it. MDRC is partnering with Roca to conduct an evaluation of the program's implementation and participant outcomes. This introductory brief takes a closer look at Roca Baltimore's program model, the young men it serves, and the local context that shapes its work.

Roca defines young men as being at “high risk” if they have a history of arrest, incarceration, violent behavior, gang involvement, or disconnection from education and work. They are, in Roca's words, young men who are “not ready, willing, or able to participate” in more traditional programs or services, and who are at a risk of long-term incarceration in the future. Young men served by Roca Baltimore have endured substantial trauma in their lives, including trauma related to poverty, systemic racism, and violence, and they have faced disparities in gaining access to opportunities that can keep them on a positive trajectory.

Trauma can have profound effects on the brain that change how people respond to stressful situations. These changes can lead to heightened stress and “fight-or-flight” responses, as well as decreased ability to regulate fear and other emotions.¹ Research has linked traumatic experiences with risky behavior and violence, especially among adolescents and young adults.² Roca Baltimore takes a trauma-informed approach to change the thought patterns and behaviors that lead young people to violence; it was launched in 2018 as a part of an initiative to curb the rise of violence in Baltimore city.³

Of the 335 homicides in Baltimore in 2020, more than a third were of young adults under the age of 26.⁴ Roca approaches the loss of these lives as a public health

emergency that can be addressed through targeted interventions. It brings its services to areas that are most affected by violence, and to the people who are most likely to be victims or perpetrators of the violence—engaging those who are unlikely to take part in other programs. The program model focuses on helping these young men address their trauma, increase their emotional regulation, and reduce their involvement in criminal behavior over three to four years.

Roca's program in Baltimore builds on the organization's decades of work with young men in communities across Massachusetts. Preliminary results from an ongoing evaluation of the Massachusetts program by Abt Associates found that young men who participated in Roca's program between 2013 and 2019 had a much lower rate of involvement in the justice system than the state's average, with two out of three participants avoiding rearrest, reconviction, or reincarceration within three years. According to Roca's data from fiscal year 2020, 95 percent of young men who completed the first two years of the program in Massachusetts have avoided reincarceration, and nearly three-quarters of them retained jobs for 6 months or longer.⁵

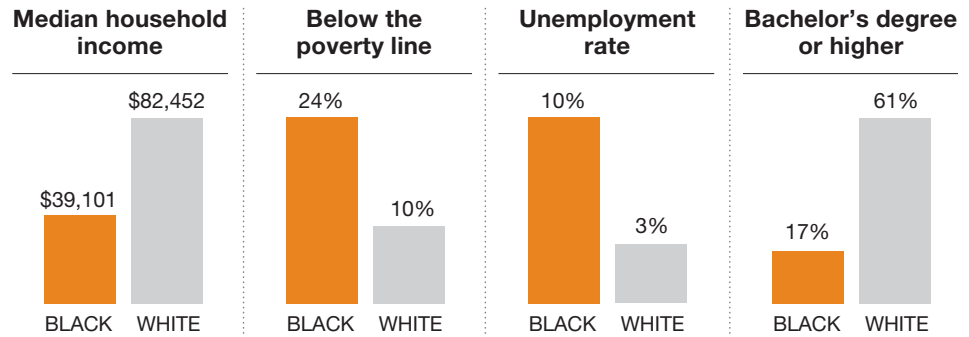
Roca's Context in Baltimore

While rich in history, culture, and resilient communities, Baltimore faces urgent challenges with violent crimes that are fueled by widening inequality and racial disparities in poverty, housing, health, education, and policing.⁶ Roca emphasizes that the operating context of Baltimore—including its community conditions and trends in crime and policing—shapes the lives of young men in its target population and how the program works with them.

PERSISTENT RACIAL INEQUITIES

While Black residents make up about two-thirds of the city's population, they fare worse than White residents by most measures.

All numbers are for 2019.

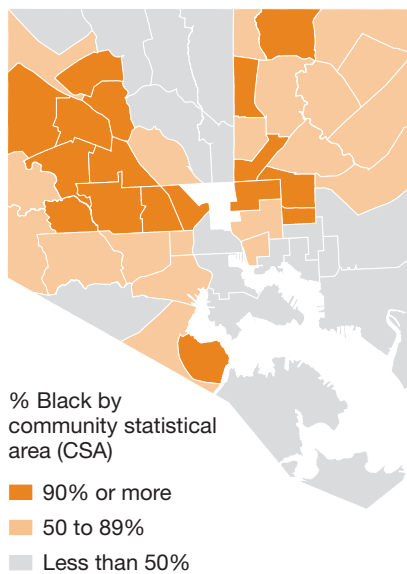


Decades of housing discrimination have left Baltimore highly segregated, and Black neighborhoods have historically received significantly less investment.⁷

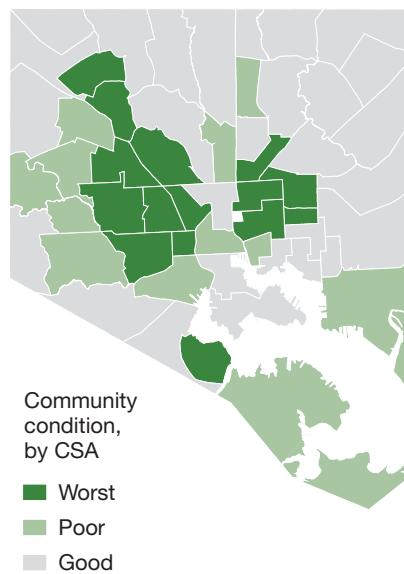
On average, the neighborhoods that are predominantly Black fare the worst when it comes to poverty and economic conditions, access to resources, and neighborhood safety, according to an index developed by Baltimore City Public Schools.

These disparities in opportunity and safety play a big role in shaping the experiences of Roca's young men, most of whom are Black and who live in communities with high poverty and violence.

Share of the population that is Black, 2017

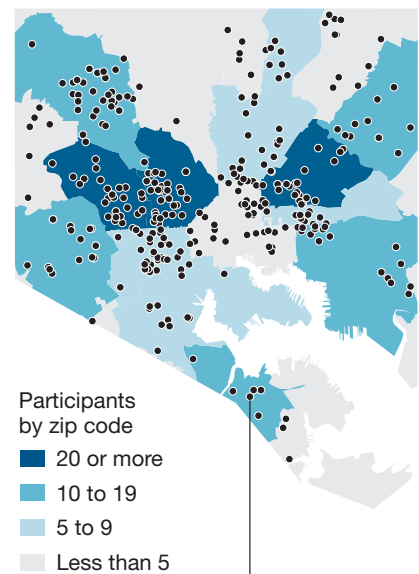


Community Conditions Index, 2017



Location of Roca participants

(Enrolled between July 2018 and July 2020)



Dots show locations of 2019 homicides

SOURCES: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2019 one-year estimates (indicators of inequity); Baltimore City Health Department (% Black map); Baltimore City Public Schools (Community Conditions Index); Baltimore City Police Department (homicides).⁸

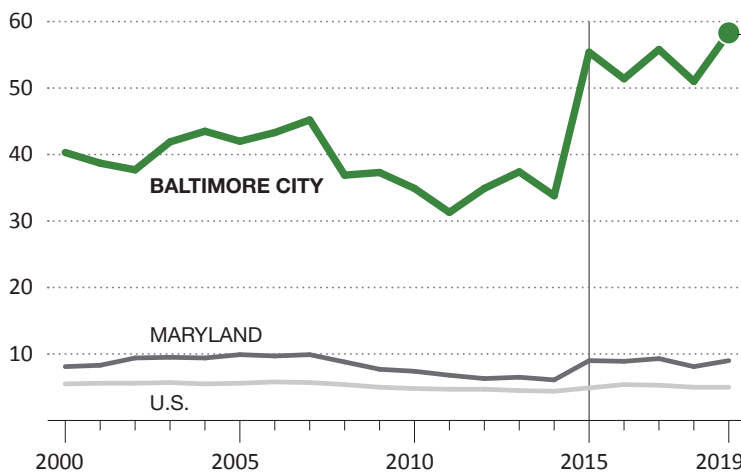
Roca's Context in Baltimore

Research shows that growing up in poor, violence-plagued communities results in significant trauma for children, adolescents, and young adults—trauma that affects their development, health, and well-being and contributes to greater involvement in violence (as both victims and perpetrators) and higher rates of incarceration.⁹

RECENT RISE IN VIOLENCE

Violent crimes, including murders and shootings, have increased sharply in Baltimore over the last five years, with 2019 setting a record for homicides per capita. Only about a third of the cases have been solved by the police, and the low clearance rate is believed to perpetuate the cycle of violence in communities.¹⁰

Homicide rate per 100,000 people



90% of the 2019 homicides were shootings.

Of the 348 homicide victims in 2019:

- 93% of were Black
- 89% were male
- 32% were under the age of 25, and 40% were between 25 and 34
- 29% were members of a street gang or a drug crew
- 82% had a prior criminal record

SOURCES: Federal Bureau of Investigations Uniform Crime Reporting (homicide rate); Baltimore City Police Department (shootings as a share of homicides and victim characteristics).¹¹

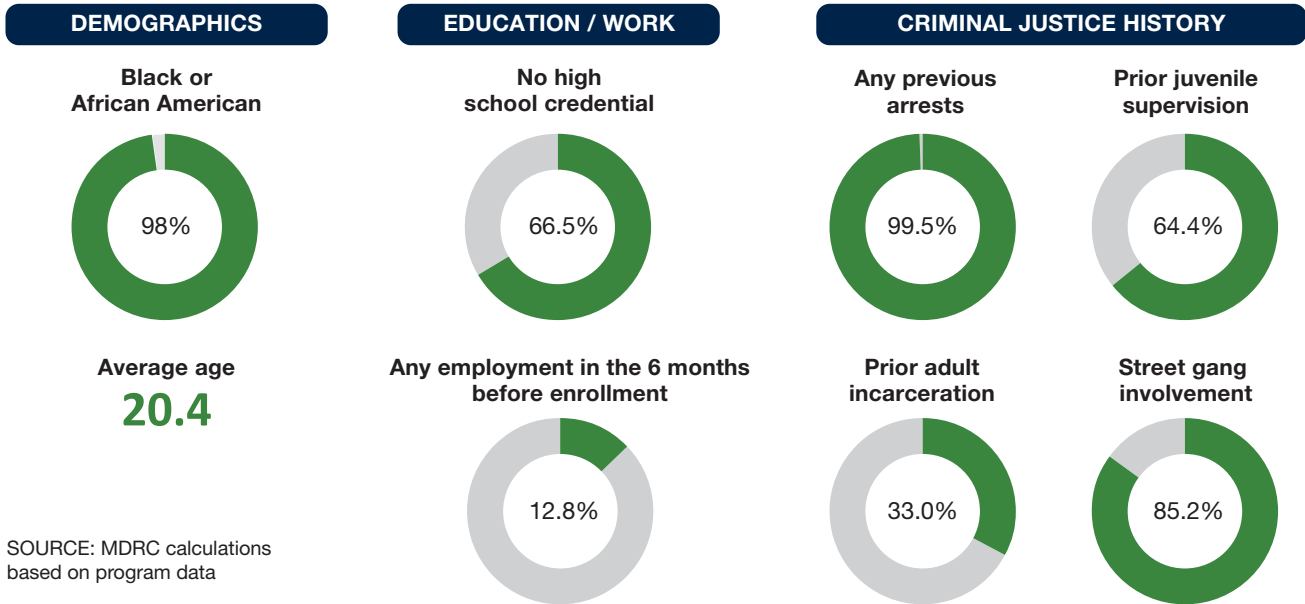
In addition to the widening inequality and racial disparities, the story of violent crime in Baltimore is deeply intertwined with the city's history of police corruption and racial bias in policing, as documented in an investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) and reported by journalists.¹² The 2015 death of Freddie Gray in police custody set off protests that drew national attention, and the rise in violence that followed has been attributed to the decline in policing and increase in mistrust between police and communities.¹³ In 2017, the city's police department entered into a consent decree to resolve the DOJ's finding that the department had patterns of conduct that infringed on constituents' rights, particularly in poor, Black communities.¹⁴

ROCA'S START IN BALTIMORE

In this context, the city launched a violence-reduction initiative, and worked with philanthropic funders and Roca to bring its model for young men to Baltimore. Roca Baltimore focuses on the young people who find themselves in a continual cycle of violence and crime, and encourages law enforcement officials to work collaboratively toward the safety and success of young adults. Since 2018, most of the young participants in Roca Baltimore were identified through referrals from the city's police department and criminal justice agencies as a measure to reduce both violence and incarceration. The program has made a priority of young men who are believed to be at the highest level of risk for violence in their communities—"young people who are likely to be shot and killed, or to hurt someone else," as one staff member noted—referring lower-risk individuals to other programs.

Roca Participants in Baltimore

In Baltimore, Roca has worked with young men between the ages of 16 and 24 who have a history of arrests and street gang involvement. The majority of Roca’s participants do not have a high school credential or a work history. Below is a detailed snapshot of nearly 200 participants who were enrolled between July 2018 and July 2020.

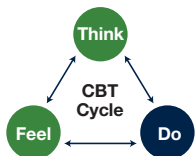


Promoting Positive Change

Roca’s program model is grounded in the theory that these young men can have long-term success if they can address the trauma they have faced and learn skills that help them regulate their emotions and behaviors better when faced with adversity. The model reflects research on youth development, behavior change, and violence reduction, including:¹⁵



Young adults’ brains continue to mature into their mid-20s, making them more prone to risk-taking and impulsive behavior.¹⁶ Traumatic experiences in childhood and adolescence also influence brain development and affect emotional regulation and how people see themselves.



Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) programs are effective in changing thought patterns, leading to better decision-making and reduced involvement in the justice system.¹⁷ CBT asserts that emotions, thoughts, and actions are interrelated, and that helping people change patterns of thoughts and emotions can support desired changes in behavior.



Behavior change occurs in stages through a series of decisions and actions over time. People can—and typically do—relapse to an earlier stage during the process of changing their behavior, and have to start again.¹⁸ People need safe, supportive opportunities to mess up and try again.

Roca builds on these concepts by tailoring program services to a young man’s stage of change and readiness; giving him tools to make better connections among his thoughts, feelings, and actions; and continuing to engage and support him when he relapses to an earlier stage.

Core Program Components

Create safety and stability

“Relentless” outreach and follow-up

Roca’s case managers, known as “youth workers,” meet young men where they are—in the streets, in their homes, at courthouses, at police stations, or in jails and prisons—and make repeated attempts to connect and follow up until they are ready to engage.



“Transformational” relationships

Youth workers are trained to gain participants’ trust, establish meaningful relationships with them, and support them through different stages of the program. They provide intensive case management and are expected to be available 24 hours a day.

In the process of reaching out to young men and building relationships with them, youth workers also help participants meet pressing needs such as food or access to childcare, or getting driver’s licenses.

Move young people from automatic responses to intentional actions through cognitive behavioral therapy



Roca’s CBT curriculum is designed to help young men “think different to act different.” It focuses on emotional regulation, behavior activation, and cognitive flexibility so that young people can choose how they respond to a situation rather than defaulting to their “automatic thoughts,” including those shaped by trauma. CBT exercises are delivered by youth workers in frequent “doses”—taught on the streets, in homes, in cars, and in classrooms. Roca believes that these skills can help young people make decisions that let them refrain from violence, saving lives.

Practice, relapse, repeat



Services are tailored to a young person’s stage of change and readiness to take part in activities. Roca provides young men with opportunities to “fail safely,” and continues to engage them if they fall back to an earlier stage or disengage altogether. Roca’s transitional jobs program provides an opportunity for young people to develop work-readiness skills, to practice using the skills they learn from CBT in a real work context, and to find support and encouragement if they make mistakes. Participants can also gain skills and credentials in different industries, along with knowledge about career pathways.

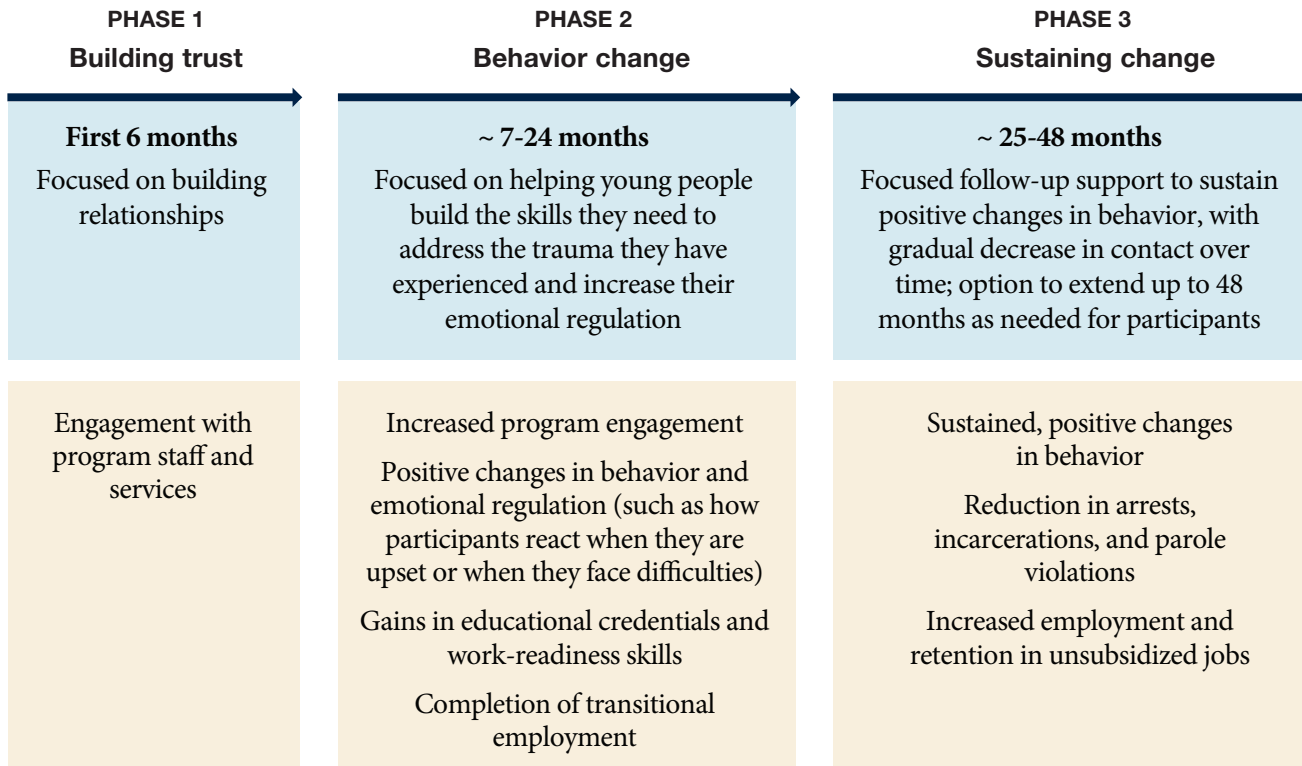
Engage institutions and systems



For recruitment and service coordination, Roca works closely with institutions and systems that affect the lives of its young people, including the police, criminal and juvenile justice agencies, health care organizations, and employers. The program also engages these partners in education and advocacy efforts, attempting to shift policies and practices to benefit young people.

Program Stages and Target Outcomes

While the program is implemented in three stages over a three-year period, the journey of a typical young man in Roca is hardly linear, as he faces many challenges at the individual, community, and systems levels. Roca continues to reach out and engage young people if they relapse or fail to meet their goals during these stages.



Looking Forward

As it has in many other cities in America, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a significant toll on Baltimore, where tens of thousands have contracted the virus and more than a thousand have died (as of June 2021). The pandemic has hit Black families the hardest, and is expected to exacerbate the city's existing inequities.¹⁹ The number of homicides remained well over 300 in 2020, slightly fewer than in 2019 but still far more than the city routinely recorded a decade ago.²⁰

In this context, Roca continues to serve its young people—adapting its outreach and program to comply with local COVID safety guidelines and to meet emerging needs (such as increased housing insecurity or food insecurity among those young people).

MDRC is conducting an evaluation of Roca Baltimore that includes:

- An implementation study of how the Roca model is being tailored for the Baltimore context and communities. This study will describe the characteristics and experiences of young men who enroll in the program and the services they receive.
- An outcomes study that will examine the in-program outcomes of Roca Baltimore participants (such as completion of program components or the program as a whole), as well as their employment and criminal justice-related outcomes.

The findings are expected to be released in late 2022.

Our model is designed for the young people who so many people have given up on, or are just too afraid to deal with. We believe that even the highest-risk young people belong, and that each one of them can succeed.

Molly Baldwin, Roca's Founder and CEO

Notes and References

1. J. Douglas Bremner, "Traumatic Stress: Effects on the Brain," *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 8,4 (2006): 445–461, <https://doi.org/10.31887/dcons.2006.8.4/jbremner>.
2. Cynthia Gillikin, Leah Habib, Mark Evces, Bekh Bradley, Kerry J. Ressler, and Jeff Sanders, "Trauma Exposure and PTSD Symptoms Associate with Violence in Inner City Civilians," *Journal of Psychiatric Research* 83 (2016): 1–7, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1016%2Fj.jpsychires.2016.07.027>; Li-yu Song, Mark I. Singer, and Trina M. Anglin, "Violence Exposure and Emotional Trauma as Contributors to Adolescents' Violent Behaviors," *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 152, 6 (1998): 531–536, <https://doi.org/10.1001/archpedi.152.6.531>; Katherine Quinn, Maria L. Pacella, Julia Dickson-Gomez, and Liesl A. Nydegger, "Childhood Adversity and the Continued Exposure to Trauma and Violence Among Adolescent Gang Members," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 59, 1-2(2017): 36–49, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1002%2Fajcp.12123>.
3. Trauma-informed approaches train staff members to recognize the symptoms of trauma and to understand its effects on behavior.
4. *The Baltimore Sun*, "Baltimore Homicides" (website: <https://homicides.news.baltimoresun.com/?range=2020&cause=all&age=all,2020>).
5. Roca, n.d., "Change is Possible in Massachusetts" (website: <https://rocainc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/R2-At-A-Glance-IN-MASSACHUSETTS.pdf>, accessed on July 2, 2021).
6. Mark Trumbull, "Rising Inequality in a Crisis: The View From Baltimore," *Christian Science Monitor*, www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2020/0624/Rising-inequality-in-a-crisis-The-view-from-Baltimore (June 24, 2020); Jelani Cobb, "What Racism Has Done to Baltimore," *New Yorker*, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/05/11/city-life-what-racism-has-done-to-baltimore (May 3, 2015).
7. The Urban Institute, "The Black Butterfly: Racial Segregation and Investment Patterns in Baltimore" (website: <https://apps.urban.org/features/baltimore-investment-flows,2019>).
8. U.S. Census Bureau, 2019: ACS 1-Year Estimates, Detailed Tables, <https://data.census.gov/cedsci>; Baltimore City Health Department, "Neighborhood Health Profile Reports" (website: <https://health.baltimorecity.gov/neighborhood-health-profile-reports,2017>); Baltimore City Public Schools, *SY1819 Comprehensive Educational Facilities Master Plan* (Baltimore: Baltimore City Public Schools, 2019), <https://www.baltimorecityschools.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/2019-CEFMP-nov11v4.pdf>; Baltimore City Open Baltimore database, Crime Data 2019, <https://data.baltimorecity.gov/datasets/part1-crime-data/explore>.
9. Howard Pinderhughes, Rachel Davis, and Myesha Williams, *Adverse Community Experiences and Resilience: A Framework for Addressing and Preventing Community Trauma* (Oakland, CA: The Prevention Institute, 2016); Quinn, Pacella, Dickson-Gomez, and Nydegger (2017); Justice Policy Institute, "Healing Invisible Wounds: Why Investing in Trauma-Informed Care for Children Makes Sense" (Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute, 2010).
10. Jessica Anderson, "Baltimore Ending the Year with 32% Homicide Clearance Rate, One of the Lowest in Three Decades," *The Baltimore Sun*, www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-md-ci-crime-policy-20191230-zk2v2auuhbgq3f7zsh3t7rt6cm-story.html (December 30, 2019); Wesley Lowery, Steven Rich, and Salwan Georges, "As Police Struggle to Solve Homicides, Baltimore Residents See an 'Open Season for Killing,'" *Washington Post*, www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/as-police-struggle-to-solve-homicides-baltimore-residents-see-an-open-season-for-killing/2018/12/26/77ee561e4-fb24-11e8-8c9a-860ce2a8148f_story.html (December 27, 2018).
11. Federal Bureau of Investigations, Crime in the U.S. database, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s>; Baltimore City Police Department, "2019 Victim and Suspect Analysis Report" (Baltimore: Baltimore City Police Department, 2020).
12. Alec MacGillis, "The Tragedy of Baltimore," *New York Times Magazine*, www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/magazine/baltimore-tragedy-crime.html (March 12, 2019); U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Investigation of the Baltimore City Police Department, www.justice.gov/crt/file/883296/download (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 2016).
13. Brad Heath, "Baltimore Police Stopped Noticing Crime after Freddie Gray's Death. A Wave of Killings Followed," *USA Today*, www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2018/07/12/baltimore-police-not-noticing-crime-after-freddie-gray-wave-killings-followed/744741002 (July 12, 2018); Radley Balko, "Was There a 'Ferguson Effect' in Baltimore?" *Washington Post*, www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-watch/wp/2018/07/19/was-there-a-ferguson-effect-in-baltimore-dont-be-so-sure (July 19, 2018).
14. Kevin Rector, "Federal Judge Approves Baltimore Policing Consent Decree, Denying Justice Department Request for Delay," *The Baltimore Sun*, www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-md-ci-consent-decree-approved-20170407-story.html (April 7, 2017).
15. Molly Baldwin and Yotam Zeira, "From Evidence-Based Practices to a Comprehensive Intervention Model for High-Risk Young Men: The Story of Roca" *New Thinking in Community Corrections Bulletin* 5 (September 2017): 1–28.
16. Council of State Governments Justice Center, "Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Outcomes for Young Adults in the Juvenile and Adult Criminal Justice Systems" (New York: Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2015).
17. Thomas Feucht and Tammy Holt, "Does Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Work in Criminal Justice? A New Analysis from CrimeSolutions.gov," *National Institute of Justice Journal* 277 (2016): 10–17; Nana A. Landenberg-er and Mark W. Lipsey, "The Positive Effects of Cognitive-Behavioral Programs for Offenders: A Meta-Analysis of Factors Associated with Effective Treatment" *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 1 (2005): 451–476.
18. James O. Prochaska, Carlo C. DiClemente, and John C. Norcross, "In Search of How People Change: Applications to Addictive Behaviors," *American Psychologist* 47, 9 (1992): 1,102-1,114.
19. Ella Koeze, "A Year Later, Who Is Back to Work and Who Is Not?" *New York Times*, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/03/09/business/economy/covid-employment-demographics.html (March 9, 2021); Lauren Camera, "Data Reveals Significant Racial Disparities in School Reopening," *U.S. News and World Report*, www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2021-03-24/data-reveal-significant-racial-disparities-in-school-reopening (March 24, 2021).
20. *The Baltimore Sun* (2020).

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank those who have provided essential comments on this short report. We are grateful to Lily Elkins, Alisha Gopaul, and Molly Baldwin at Roca, as well as Megan Millenky, Melanie Skemer, Louisa Treskon, Barbara Condliffe, and Joshua Malbin at MDRC for their thoughtful review of report drafts. Joshua Malbin edited the report and it was prepared for publication by Carolyn Thomas. This evaluation is funded by Roca. We thank the organization for its support.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following organizations and individuals that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Arnold Ventures, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, Daniel and Corinne Goldman, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc., The JPB Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and Sandler Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

For information about MDRC and copies of our publications, see our website: www.mdrc.org.

Copyright © 2021 by MDRC®. All rights reserved.