



# How Roca Works with Young Men Most at Risk of Violence in Baltimore

PERSPECTIVES FROM ROCA  
BALTIMORE PARTICIPANTS

*Farhana Hossain and Kyla Wasserman* • MARCH 2023

This evaluation is funded by Roca.

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 Joye 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](http://www.mdrc.org).

Copyright © 2023 by MDRC®. All rights reserved.

# Overview

Founded in 1988, Roca is a nonprofit organization that works to change the lives of young people who are involved in the justice system and are at high risk of participating in violence or being affected by it. Such young people include those with a history of arrests, incarceration, violent behavior, or gang involvement, and often a disconnection from education and work. The organization focuses specifically on reaching those who are not likely to connect with mainstream institutions or traditional programs, and engages them in cognitive behavioral therapy and an array of education, employment, and supportive services that seek to address the traumas and challenges that have shaped their lives.

Roca has been working with young people in communities across Massachusetts for more than 30 years. Building on that record, it launched its program in Baltimore in 2018 as a part of an initiative to curb high levels of violence in the city. In Massachusetts, Roca operates programs for young men and women, but the program in Baltimore currently focuses on the city's young men. MDRC is partnering with Roca to study its Baltimore program. An introductory brief in July 2021 describes Roca Baltimore's program model, the characteristics of its participants, and the characteristics of the local communities that shape its work.

This report, second in the series of publications from the evaluation, presents findings from a small-scale, qualitative study designed to use participant cases and voices to create a more detailed picture of the young men Roca Baltimore serves and the ways the program works with them. Between March and May of 2022, the study team interviewed 10 young men at different stages of participation in the program about their experiences, seeking to better understand the program from their perspectives. More specifically, the goals of this qualitative study were to explore the young men's pathways to Roca Baltimore, experiences with Roca's offerings, and perceptions of changes arising from their participation.

- **Pathways to Roca Baltimore:** the life experiences that have shaped young people's trajectory to Roca, including factors related to their families and communities in Baltimore, experiences with traumatic events, and involvement with the criminal legal system
- **Experience with Roca's offerings:** how young people have experienced the relationships and services Roca offers, and what they value about their experience
- **Perception of change:** how participants describe any changes in their behavior, outlook, and relationships that have arisen during their engagement with Roca

The study was not designed to produce broad, generally representative conclusions about Roca's participants or program, but rather to understand the life paths of some participants in a deep and meaningful way, and to generate case studies that provide helpful insights into their program experiences.

# Contents

<b>Overview</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>List of Exhibits</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>Pathways to Roca Baltimore</b> .....	<b>1</b>
Community Context .....	1
<b>Experiences with Roca’s Offerings</b> .....	<b>7</b>
Relentless Outreach and Transformational Relationships .....	9
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy .....	12
Education, Employment Services, and Other Services .....	15
<b>Perceptions of Change</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	
A Methods and Interview Sample .....	24
<b>References</b> .....	<b>27</b>

# List of Exhibits

## FIGURE

1	Trend in Homicide Rates in Baltimore City, Compared with State and National Averages.....	2
2	Roca Baltimore Program Components .....	8
3	The CBT Cycle.....	13

## CASE STUDY

Jomar .....	5
Benny .....	18
Rey .....	22

# Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Alisha Gopaul and the Roca staff members who helped coordinate interviews for this study. We are deeply appreciative of the young people who agreed to participate in interviews and allowed us to learn from their experiences. Without them, this research would not have been possible.

We are grateful to Lili Elkins, Alisha Gopaul, Molly Baldwin, and Sotun Krouch at Roca, as well as Megan Millenky, Carlos Austin, Lily Freedman, Emily Brennan, 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.

The Authors



## Pathways to Roca Baltimore

Roca Baltimore recruits young men who are believed to be at the highest risk of violence in their communities based on their history—“young people who are likely to be shot and killed, or to hurt someone else,” in the words of one staff member. Since 2018, most of the participants in Roca Baltimore have been identified through referrals from the city’s police department and criminal legal agencies, as a measure to reduce both violence and incarceration. Roca also collaborates with local hospitals to recruit victims of nonfatal shootings. Nearly all the participants interviewed for this report came into contact with Roca soon after arrests or after serving time for charges such as drug possession, gun possession, theft, or robbery. This section summarizes the participants’ reflections on how experiences and trauma related to their upbringing in Baltimore City led them to the criminal legal system, and ultimately brought them to Roca Baltimore.

### Community Context

While rich in history, culture, and resilient communities, Baltimore faces urgent challenges with violence that are fueled by widening inequality and racial disparities in poverty, housing, health, education, employment, and policing.<sup>1</sup> As shown in Figure 1, the homicide rate in the city has remained persistently higher than state and national averages, and has also increased substantially in recent years. More than 300 homicides have been recorded each year between 2015 and 2022.<sup>2</sup> These deaths are disproportionately concentrated in Black neighborhoods that have historically received less investments and fare the worst when it comes to poverty and economic conditions,

---

1. Trumbull (2020); Cobb (2015).

2. [The Baltimore Sun \(n.d.\)](#).

access to resources, and neighborhood safety—neighborhoods where most Roca participants live.<sup>3</sup>

Interviews with Roca participants—all of whom identified as Black men and ranged between 19 and 25 years old at the time of the interviews—highlighted how the disparities in opportunity and safety in Baltimore City have shaped their lives.

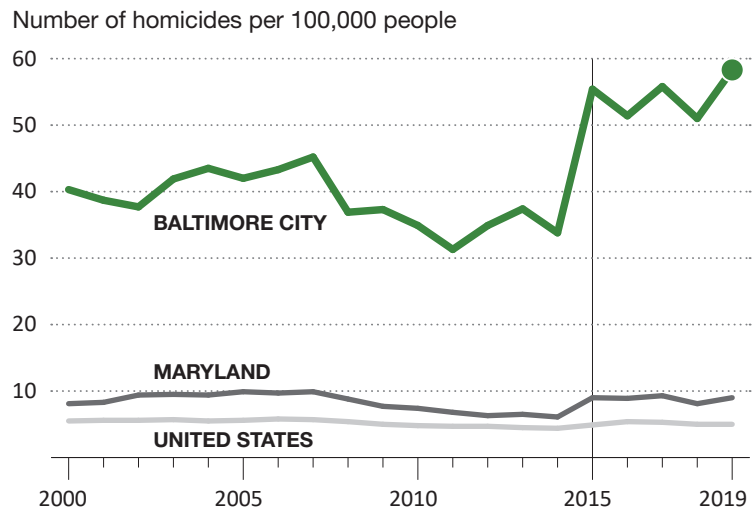
- **Early exposure to drugs, crime, and violence in participants' neighborhoods strongly influenced participants' life trajectories.**

Several interviewees framed their involvement in illicit activities as part of an intergenerational cycle that they could not escape—one that ensnared many of the men in their lives (such as their fathers, uncles, and brothers). Most interviewees reported experiencing multiple arrests as juveniles, adults, or both. Some older participants felt that the violence had worsened in recent years because there were more guns among young people in Baltimore's streets.<sup>4</sup>

"A person is gonna do what they know or what they see around them. They ain't gonna know about hanging on the streets, if they'd never seen that. They're not gonna know about selling drugs if they'd never got their hands on that or they've never been in a situation in their life where they had to make a decision like that. If a person had never seen those things, I feel that they'd have a better chance in life. But if you've been brought up around it, it's gonna be a hard to do things different."

"There's murder everywhere, crime everywhere in Baltimore City. It's hard to stay away from it. That's probably the hardest part of living in Baltimore—staying away from the crime.... Everybody I grew up watching basically led down that road—my brother, my uncle, my cousins, my friends. Mostly everybody that I grew up around took that route, so it was most likely for me to take that route."

**FIGURE 1: Trend in Homicide Rates in Baltimore City, Compared with State and National Averages**



SOURCE: Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) Uniform Crime Reporting.

NOTE: 2019 is the most recent year for which comparable data among these jurisdictions are available, as the FBI has changed the way crime data are collected and reported.

3. Hossain and Wasserman (2021).

4. Between 2010 and 2019, the firearm homicide rate in Maryland increased 31 percent, and Baltimore City had the highest gun death rate among the state's counties. See Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions (2021).



“You just resort to things that you see. You see somebody stealing, you’re gonna grow up learning how to steal. You see somebody sell drugs, you’re gonna grow up and learn how to sell drugs. Whatever you see on the daily, that’s what you gonna want to do as a kid.”

“It’s been the same from generation to generation. The generation that’s on top of us, we learn from them. And the generation that’s under us, they learn from us, and so on and so on. My era growing up—the ’98, ’99 babies—we was more so about making money, selling drugs. But the ones under us, they are making the environment even worse because they all own guns. I didn’t own a gun until I was 17, 18 [years old]; but they’re 13, 14, 15 [years old] with guns. They don’t know how to control their emotions, their feelings, and now they got guns.”

- **The physical and economic conditions of participants’ communities—neighborhoods with vacant and abandoned properties that do not attract sufficient investments in businesses or jobs—played a significant role in driving young men to crime and gangs.**

Interviewees said that the lack of well-paying jobs for young people provides incentives for illicit work, such as selling drugs, that offers a faster route to earning a livable income. (Most participants reported limited experience with jobs in the traditional labor market before coming to Roca.) Young people also appear to join gangs because they perceive that gangs fill important gaps in resources and leadership in their communities. Several interviewees said that gang members and leaders provide for children and families in need, becoming role models for young people in the process.<sup>5</sup>

“[We need] more jobs, more businesses. Young people want something to do and not just stand outside. Almost everything is vacant and closing down [in my community]. [We need to] make more people come to the neighborhood, and not stay away from the neighborhood because its [messed] up.”

“What I know from people that’s my age that’s not working is that it’s about pay. For us to drop [drug sales], it’s gotta be about the pay. A person might not want to make \$10 an hour. Why go make that much if you’re making out right here, even if it’s a negative thing. It’s going to be hard for a person to put down something if it’s not worth it.”

---

5. In a 2021 [interview with a local public radio station](#), Dr. Natasha Pratt-Harris, associate professor and coordinator of the Criminal Justice program at Morgan State University, voiced similar sentiments based on her research and lived experience in Baltimore. She noted that “historically speaking, there’s this acknowledgement that gangs were there to protect the community. Gangs had been established in the beginning to protect the community, to feed the kids, to provide resources.” She also says that gangs in Baltimore City are neighborhood-focused, calling them “central forces” in their communities. “It’s almost a rites [*sic*] of passage [for young people] to become a part of a gang,” she added. See Moore and Gunnery (2021).

“I’ve seen older guys who were out there selling drugs giving back—buying kids Christmas presents who didn’t get their Christmas because their mother was messed up on drugs, or buying shoes, bookbags, binders, uniforms for kids who couldn’t afford those back-to-school things. It helped us as kids.... The guy that I looked up to sold drugs, but he also made sure people [in the community] was good, that he gave back for Thanksgivings, Christmases, Easters. Sometimes he threw big block parties, had bouncers for kids, everybody eats good for free. That was the type of guys I grew up around, and why I started hustling.”

“When people ask me, am I in a gang? I tell them, yeah.... We trying to make things better. We’re trying to show people that it is more than killing people, it’s more than robbing people, it’s more than just sitting up here, waking up and going on a block, selling drugs. It’s more than that.... The leader of my [gang] is trying to start a recreation center for young men that wanna get help, that don’t have any type of help at home—like a big brother program.... He wants to basically invest his money into [the youth], whatever they wanna do in life. So if they wanna go to college and stuff like that, he wants to [help them do] that.”

- **The policing and incarceration of Black men in these communities affected participants in many ways, including their relationships with family and law enforcement.**

Research shows that—(a) the incarceration of a family member, particularly a parent, can have severe consequences on the physical and mental health of children and young adults, along with their educational and financial well-being;<sup>6</sup> and (b) high levels of police presence in areas with lower incomes and higher concentrations of people of color can lead young people to mistrust law enforcement and other authority figures, and to feel unsafe and alienated in their communities.<sup>7</sup>

The stories of Roca Baltimore participants interviewed for this study exemplify those findings. Most interviewees mentioned family members or friends who were incarcerated at the time of the interview or who had been to prison or jail in the past, affecting the participants’ lives in different ways. Young people talked about the financial stress related to a loved one’s incarceration (sending money to a brother in jail or mothers and grandmothers having to take on financial responsibilities of raising families, for example), and their sadness at not having a consistent presence of caring male adults such as fathers or uncles in their lives. Participants also discussed the trauma of mass incarceration that affected the community more broadly (for example, one interviewee said that most men in his community were “either dead or locked up,” which affected his outlook for himself and for his community). Participants revealed a deep distrust and constant fear of the police and the criminal legal system, with some interviewees highlighting what they consider to be racially biased policing and sentencing of young Black men in their communities:<sup>8</sup>

---

6. Martin (2017).

7. [Development Services Group, Inc. \(2018\)](#).

8. Maryland had the highest incarceration rate in the nation of black men between the ages of 18 and 24, according to a 2019 [analysis](#). See Justice Policy Institute (2019). A [disproportionate share](#) of the state’s prison population—about 40 percent—comes from Baltimore City, primarily its poor, Black neighborhoods. See Justice Policy Institute (2022). A 2017 investigation of the city’s police department by the federal Department of Justice found widespread racial disparities in its practices and excessive use of force, leading to a “[consent decree](#)” in which police practices would be overhauled under the oversight of a federal judge. See Rector (2017).

“Right now, police are killing young Black men or locking us up for the rest of our lives. I know some kids out here that are 16 or 17 doing life for crimes that they knew they committed but these are still kids. Some committed murder but, at the end of the day, they are still kids; they are also someone’s child. Some of these police officers don’t think about what it would be like if we were their child[ren]. ... Black people are scared for their kids because they know that the first thing a police officer do when they jump out on you is that they grab for a weapon, and not a handcuff or a taser. And that’s scary.”

- **Growing up in neighborhoods with high poverty, violence, and incarceration meant that participants experienced multiple traumatic events in their personal lives and in the community that have had lasting effects.**

Interviewees spoke of physical and emotional trauma caused by: (a) their experience with law enforcement and the criminal legal system, including time spent in detention facilities, prisons, or jail and violent altercations with the police; (b) the incarceration of parents, relatives, or friends; (c) the unexpected loss of loved ones due to violence, substance abuse, or illnesses; (d) injuries resulting from shootings or assaults; and (e) witnessing violence on their streets. Most participants who spoke with MDRC had experienced multiple types of traumas in their young lives. For example, one participant who survived a near-fatal shooting spoke about the different types of trauma he had experienced:

“[Growing up,] I was hearing gunshots every night. I’ve seen one of my closest homeboys die in front of my face.... I’ve been exposed to violence since I was a baby. I’ve seen my mother in and out of that hospital [for substance use], I’ve seen people get killed. My trauma level is beyond.... It’s something that I don’t want nobody to go through as a kid. For a person to go through stuff like that at an early age, it can change them in so many ways and traumatize them so much that they don’t even know that they’re traumatized until something really bad happens again. So me getting shot [recently], I was already traumatized, and it just traumatized me even more.”

In addition to experiencing traumatic events, the general environment of the participants’ communities—vacant or abandoned houses, persistent poverty, high unemployment rates, lack of opportunities and safe spaces, and the fear of violence from gangs or the police—also appeared to take a significant psychological and emotional toll on participants, leaving them with diminished hope about their future and their communities. Most of the interviewees said that they could not envision a positive future for themselves before getting involved with Roca Baltimore (“I thought I was going to die on the street,” said one), and most remained pessimistic about the potential for change in their communities. Findings from the interviews align with literature that suggests that traumatic experiences in childhood and adolescence influence brain development, and alter emotional regulation and how people see themselves.<sup>9</sup> They affect how people think about their future, lowering their sense of hope and control and often leading to impulsive, high-risk behavior.<sup>10</sup>

---

9. Council of State Governments Justice Center (2015).

10. Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (2014).

## CASE STUDY

# Jomar\*

Jomar found his way to Roca after surviving a near-fatal gunshot wound. The 25-year-old father got caught in crossfire between his coworker and another driver when riding in the coworker's car. After the event, Jomar was unable to continue his work in construction demolition. The loud sounds and physical work were overwhelming. At the time of the interview, he was still uneasy going outside at night and no longer took part in many activities that he used to.

This wasn't the first time Jomar had experienced gun violence or other traumatic events. As a teen, he was accidentally shot in the leg by a friend, and watched as another friend passed away from a gunshot wound. He lost his mom to substance use, and, at the time of the interview, several family members had recently passed or were coping with chronic, life-threatening health diagnoses.

These traumatic experiences with violence and loss shaped him greatly. Jomar has had many incidents of arrests and detention stretching back to his early teen years, for charges related to gang activity and drug sales. When the shooting occurred, Jomar had recently returned home after serving two years in a medium-security prison. He was interested in making changes in his life and had even inquired about Roca, but said it wasn't until his near-death experience that he was really ready for the program. "It took me to get shot for me to really learn," he said.

In his first few days in the program, he sat back a bit and observed. Roca's relatable staff members and services that addressed practical needs in Jomar's life quickly brought him into the program. "I was still like in a little shy stage, so I ain't really wanna participate. I ain't really know nobody. I'm seeing all these new faces that I ain't never talked to before. I felt somewhat confused and nervous. But by the fourth day I really started opening up. They got me a haircut. They got me some clothes. They took me to go get my ID."

Roca continued to help Jomar gain access to benefits and resources. The program has been helping Jomar come off probation and have costly court fees waived.

Jomar knew about CBT before coming to Roca; it was used in the facilities he'd been detained in as a juvenile. A bit older and in a different place in his life, Jomar felt differently about

***"To this day, they still in my life still helping me out. Still trying to meet me a better man, a better father to my kids, a better person. Period. All the way around. Because at one point in time, I wasn't a nice person. I was the type of person, if you had something that looked good or that was worth some money, I was with one of my homeboys robbing you. I'm glad that they stepped in my life, and they really changed the person that I am."***

CBT this time and saw it as offering practical tools to manage stress and persevere through tough situations. Now, Jomar said, he uses the cognitive behavioral skills he's learned daily. If a conflict comes up with a friend or at work, he thinks through the positive or negative consequences he could take and tries to take actions that will help him with his long-term goals. For example, Jomar said he has had some conflict with his current boss, but explained, "I'm not gonna leave this job just because the boss can be obnoxious. I'm gonna stick with this job because at the end of the day, that's what helps me pay my bills. That's what helps me put food on my table. That's what helps me take care of my kids."

Jomar has worked with Roca for a few years and has moved into a less intensive phase of the program. He sees himself as a better man who's risen above the expectations set for him in his early years. He's grown closer with his family members and is trying to be a better dad for his children and to have better relationships with the mothers of his children. And while he's always been invested in his community, he's become more dedicated to creating positive change and is working with his brother to start a youth mentorship program.

\*Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the identity of interviewees.



## Experiences with Roca's Offerings

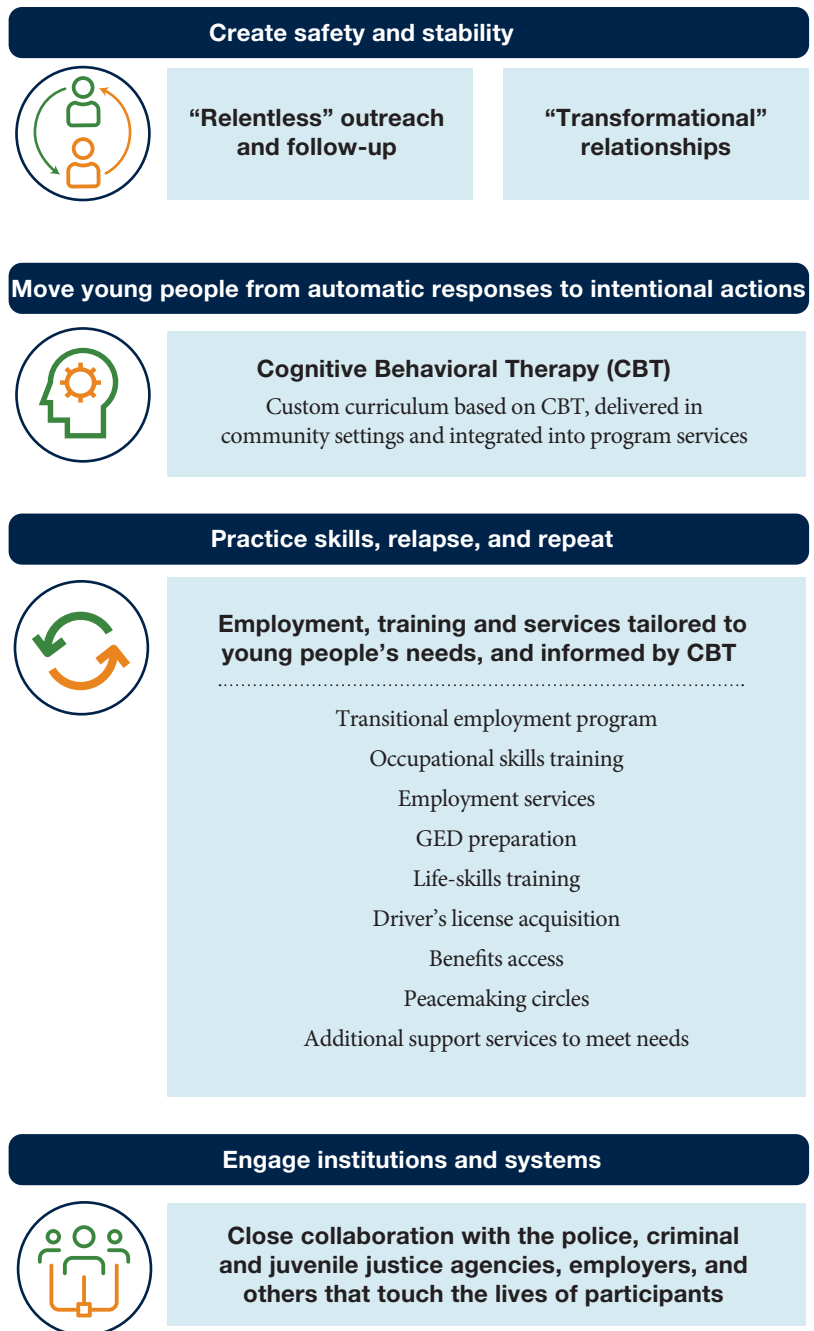
Roca Baltimore's intervention model is grounded in the theory that these young men can have long-term success if they can address the trauma they have faced and learn skills that help them regulate their emotions and behaviors better when faced with adversity. The program is based on the following principles:

- ▶ **Create safety and stability for young people** through “relentless” outreach and “transformational” relationships, in order to build a solid foundation for the longer-term work of addressing trauma and changing behavior.
- ▶ **Teach what Roca calls “lifesaving skills”** to move young people from automatic responses to intentional actions. At the heart of Roca's model is a custom curriculum based on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) that is designed to help young people become more aware of the relationships among their thoughts, feelings, and actions, so that they can make decisions that keep them safer and allow them to advance toward their goals.
- ▶ **Practice skills, relapse, and repeat.** Roca tailors its employment, education, life-skills, and supportive services to a young person's stage of change and readiness to take part in activities, and gives him the opportunity to “fail safely” if he disengages and falls back to an earlier stage of the change process.
- ▶ **Engage institutions and systems.** 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.

Roca begins with outreach and services designed to build relationships and trust, and to address needs such as securing identification, vital records, and public benefits; followed by a more intensive phase of engagement designed to promote behavior change; and then a period of gradually decreasing engagement during which it follows up with participants as needed. Roca staff members provide services to participants in their offices, but they also meet young people where they are. They deliver services from their cars and on the street corners, stoops and corner stores where young people hang out. Young people can engage with the program for up to four years.

This section presents findings on participants' experiences with Roca's core program components and service offerings (Figure 2). At the time of the interviews in mid-2022, 7 of the 10 participants had been involved with Roca Baltimore for more than two years and were in an advanced phase of the program; the remaining 3 interviewees started in 2021. The experiences of the young people described in the interviews overlap with the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID disrupted social and economic life in Baltimore and altered Roca program operations, especially during the pandemic's early months.<sup>11</sup>

**FIGURE 2: Roca Baltimore Program Components**



11. Roca Baltimore adapted its services during different phases of the pandemic to meet emerging needs and to ensure the safety of participants and its staff. This qualitative study did not focus on capturing those changes or on assessing how those changes may have affected participant experiences. The interviews were designed to capture participants' overall experiences with Roca's core program components.



## Relentless Outreach and Transformational Relationships

As previously noted, nearly all the participants interviewed for this report came into contact with Roca soon after an arrest or after serving time in detention, prison, or jail. Roca focuses on young men who are assessed to be at high risk of future violence or incarceration and who are “not ready, willing, or able to participate” in more traditional programs, services, or work.

When recruiting young men for the program, Roca “outreach workers” (those staff members focused on connecting with young people and assessing their eligibility for the program) 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. During outreach and the early stages of the program, they primarily focus on gaining participants’ trust and establishing meaningful

relationships with them, laying the foundation for subsequent stages where the focus shifts to helping young people build education, work, and life skills that can help them create and sustain changes in their behavior. Making an initial connection with a young person and developing a relationship can take several months.

- **Participants were initially very skeptical of Roca’s outreach and hesitant to engage with the program, which aligns with Roca’s focus on reaching young people who are not ready or willing to participate.**

In some cases, the initial reluctance arose from Roca’s proximity to law enforcement and players in the criminal legal system who provided referrals, as interviewees believed Roca to be directly affiliated with the police or courts. But most participants said that they simply were not interested or ready to make a change in their lives and engage in program services when Roca outreach workers came calling. One participant captured the persistent nature of this outreach:

When Roca first started coming out to reach out to me, I really didn’t want to do it. I really didn’t. I did not go at all; I didn’t come to the building at all. I still was stuck into the street level. All I wanted to do was run the streets and make more money.... Everywhere I went, they was there. These people would not give me a break at all. It was almost like a probation officer. They were everywhere I went—they’d knock on my door, they was at my school, they’d catch me outside walking up the street to get me to come with them to the program or to do a CBT lesson. It was crazy. They did not let up at all. Not even a little bit.”

Young people explained that Roca staff members—often a combination of outreach workers and Roca case managers known as “youth workers”—continued to engage them in their communities,

often supporting participants with challenges as they came up (for example, by helping young men navigate the criminal legal system after an arrest or securing access to health care after an accident), until they were ready to give the program a chance.

- **Young people often began to engage meaningfully with Roca’s staff and program offerings after a major life event that motivated them to want a change in their lives.**

Such events included new encounters with the criminal legal system (for example, arrests, detainment, etc.), violent encounters, physical injuries, and family-related issues such as the illness of a parent or the birth of a child. Participants said that these events made them want to change their lifestyles and seek Roca’s support.

“After I seen my daughter born, that played a big step in making a change in my life.... I knew that I don’t want to have a child in the same predicament that I am in now in five years. She’d be 5 and we’re not doing nothing with our lives, we’re in the same position, same neighborhood, same environment. I didn’t want that.”

“What made me want to change was my injury.... I almost lost my life, and I was like—man, I can’t keep doing what I’m doing. I can’t keep living the life that I’m living. So I decided I wanted to change, and Roca was there to help me.”

*Interviewees said that Roca’s persistence in outreach and commitment to helping them navigate major life events or challenges convinced them to participate in the program.*

- **Roca’s approach to building trust and relationships during outreach and early program stages—including by helping participants cope with their needs and challenges—was vital to securing young people’s participation when they felt ready to make a change.**

Staff members often spent months, and in some cases years, building relationships with the interviewees and providing support when challenges arose before the interviewees engaged in more formal program offerings such as CBT groups and employment services. Interviewees said that Roca’s persistence and commitment to them during major life events or challenges helped cut through their initial skepticism and proved to them that the program was serious about helping them. Participants felt that Roca’s staff members genuinely cared about their well-being and their future, which appeared to be a motivating factor for many participants who had previously lacked consistent support from caring adults.

In addition, Roca’s messages and offerings in education, training, and employment services appealed strongly to participants, most of whom had limited work history and education. (Five of the 10 interviewees did not have their high school diplomas or an equivalent credential.) Some participants said that visits to Roca’s offices to observe program activities or conversations with their peers also made the program more tangible, making them more likely to engage.



“I got involved in a robbery and I was locked up for 11.5 months. In those 11.5 months, Roca came to see me constantly—every week or every two weeks. I ain’t have no family coming to see me, so me being able to rap to them, it meant a lot to me. It wasn’t a tit-for-tat thing, but I wanted to give them a chance.... When I came home, I see that I’m not the only person involved with the Roca program, I see that they were actually getting stuff done with people.... I had to see people that was already involved with the program, and see how it was going for them.”

“Some programs, some people they’d try once or twice [to engage me], and they’d give up. [The Roca staff] never gave up on me. They constantly kept coming—knock on the door, come to all the parks I’d be at, come to all my hangout spots looking for me just for me to at least give it a try and see if I like it. If I don’t [like the program], it’d be my decision if I want to stay or leave. Once I actually tried and participated in some little activities, I ended up liking the program.”

- **Even when participants felt ready to make a change and begin engaging in program activities, their journey through the program was not linear.**

One interviewee disengaged from the program multiple times and then reengaged. A few others experienced setbacks in jobs outside of Roca, and returned to the program to build their skills further and get support for future steps.



Experiences participants shared underscore that changing one’s mindset and behavior takes time, especially when one continues to live in the same environment and face the same challenges that landed one in the criminal legal system in the first place. For example, one participant went back to selling drugs after losing his job. Roca plans for these setbacks in young people’s paths toward sustained behavior change as a part of its program model; it refers to these setbacks as “relapses” and considers them critical to young people’s growth and development. Participants said that the access to unwavering support and encouragement from program staff members, even when they disengaged from the program or found themselves in trouble, encouraged them to work through setbacks. For example, when asked why he continued to return to Roca after disengaging multiple times, one participant said:

“[The Roca staff’s] consistency showed me that they cared. They cared more than what I was used to, coming from a program. So I thought, ‘How can I not care about myself as much as these people care about me?’ They never lied to me. Everything they told me they were gonna do, or anything they told me I was capable of doing, it happened.”

- **Participants prized their relationships with Roca staff members as a consistent source of support that brought stability to their lives.**

Interviewees repeatedly said things such as “they never gave up on me” or “they are always there for me” when discussing their experiences. Roca seeks to provide participants with a system of support in which all staff members express care for participants and build relationships with them, and most interviewees greatly valued their relationships with staff members across the program.

Many members of the Roca Baltimore staff are from the same communities as the participants, and also have personal experience with violence or past involvement with the criminal legal system. Young people noted that the staff’s authenticity and nonjudgmental approach to listening to their challenges and to supporting them made them feel like their voices were valued. Several participants discussed their appreciation for Roca staff members for being there for them when they needed to just talk to someone caring. They said Roca staff members would take them out to eat, to play a game of basketball, or to go for a walk when they were having a bad day. While these are not typical program services, young men greatly appreciated these gestures that made them feel valued and suggested to them that caring for them was “more than just a job” for the Roca staff.

“[The Roca staff] are not here for a paycheck. They are here to make sure that everybody gets an equal and fair chance in life. Nobody should be judged off just their past or what they did, it’s more about what you can do right here, right now. Where do you see yourself going, and what can you do in the next four or five years of your life?... Once you come to Roca, they don’t really lean on your past, they lean on more of your future.”

“I feel like [Roca staff members] hear us out. They don’t be quick to judge. They get our opinion, more than they give their opinion. They just wanna hear us. I feel like that’s what we need.”

“I can call [my youth worker] when I’m mad, and angry, and stressed out ... and be like I may need you to get me. And that’s what they’ll do. They’ll come get me, take me for a bite to eat, go look at the water, talk about the problems and how can we prevent this or that from happening. Help get my thoughts together, so that when I get back into the reality, things snap back.”

“Everybody that I involved myself with at the Roca program, never steered me wrong. They always done good. Even if I needed help on the side, it could be a ride home, it could be lunch if I didn’t have any money on me, it could be anything. There was never a question asked. I just have a lot of appreciation.”

## **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**

Participants engaged in Roca’s service offerings learn cognitive-behavioral skills through Rewire, a curriculum developed by Roca and Massachusetts General Hospital that puts the theory behind

CBT into a format that can be implemented by nonclinical staff members such as Roca youth workers.<sup>12</sup> CBT is based on the idea that the way people think and feel about a situation affects how they respond to it, and how they respond to it affects what they think and how they feel. Becoming more aware of this “think-feel-do” cycle can help people slow down long enough to make conscious choices about their behavior rather than relying on automatic or unconscious reactions (see Figure 3).

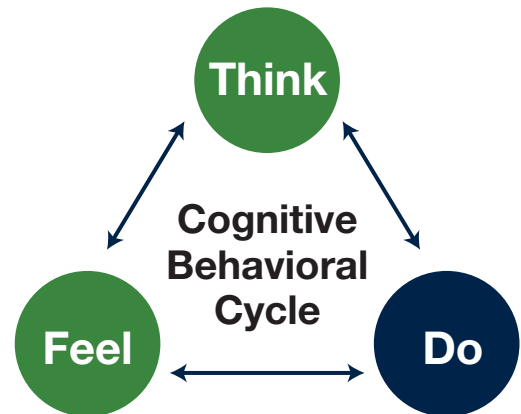
The Rewire curriculum focuses on seven skills (such as “act on your values” and “flex your thinking”) to support better decision-making among young people that can help them consistently make choices that support their safety, well-being, and avoidance of violence.<sup>13</sup> These concepts and skills are (a) taught in group settings such as a classroom or a workshop; (b) practiced in one-on-one interactions wherever staff members meet with young people, whether at Roca’s offices or in the community; and (c) reinforced during participation in other Roca program components. Roca builds opportunities to practice cognitive-behavioral skills into all other aspects of its services, particularly its transitional employment program.

- **While most participants were initially skeptical of the value and relevance of learning cognitive behavioral skills, it is one of the offerings that they ended up valuing the most.**

Nearly all the interviewees reported that: (a) learning about the cognitive behavioral cycle helped change their outlook on life and how they approached interpersonal communications; (b) they found the cognitive-behavioral skills they learned at Roca to be useful in their personal or professional lives to different degrees; and (c) they used the skills to navigate their daily lives, often without explicitly setting out to do so. Several young people spoke about using skills from Rewire to help them navigate relationships and conflicts at work. Below are some examples of how young people talked about their experience with CBT.

“[CBT] basically changed my mindset—it helped me build a new character that somebody would actually want to hire or start a conversation with.”

FIGURE 3: The CBT Cycle



12. Roca refers to Rewire as a cognitive behavioral *theory* curriculum (rather than therapy). Its goal is to create a practice based on CBT that youth workers and other nonclinical staff members can implement. For more information on Rewire, visit <https://rocainc.org/the-roca-impact-institute/rewire-by-roca/>.

13. “Act on your values” encourages young people to take intentional actions based on what’s important instead of reacting impulsively. When participants “flex their thinking,” they identify and examine their thoughts to figure out whether those thoughts are true and helpful so that they can challenge thoughts that lead to behavioral or emotional problems.

“CBT helped me a whole lot, a whole lot. It helped me think through certain situations.... When I failed the test for my [driver’s] permit a couple of times, and I was like—‘I don’t wanna do this. I’m ready to give up.’ I wanted to give up so badly that I kept failing. But [Roca] kept pushing. They brought up the CBT skill ‘Stick-ing with it.’ If you stick with it, you can overcome your fear or your doubt. I used that to keep going.”<sup>14</sup>

“I use [Rewire skills] in my personal life with my child’s mother. If me and her argue over the stupidest things, I don’t always escalate and try to go back and forth [with her]. I’ll leave her home, or get away for some time. I try to bring the focus back on coparenting and our child.”

“As I started getting more mature and settling down with one person, that’s when the CBT started kicking in. I started caring more about how they would feel if I did this or that, and paying more attention to their feelings when I interact with them.”

“My supervisor may talk to me a certain way, or come at me wrong, or say something wrong. The ‘think-feel-do’ cycle helps me think about the situation and not feel a certain way. Think about how you’re feeling, and think about how you can express your feelings in a respectful way. I use that a lot.”

- **Many participants said that they reacted differently to negative or unfair events in their lives after participating in Roca and learning about cognitive behavioral skills.**

They provided examples of thinking about consequences of their actions before they react to situations:

“I used to think straight negatively. Now I know I can weigh my options, have conversations inside of my-self and know that I don’t have to be just negative.”

“If I’m getting into an argument, I basically stop and look at myself and look at what I may be doing wrong. How I can deescalate it ... other than being all aggressive, just think twice about it. Think about how I’m feeling, what I’m getting ready to say.”

“Now I think about my values—What do I have to value? What don’t I wanna lose? It ain’t gotta be a situ-ation for me to think about that stuff, it’s just life. Period. I think about what do I got, and what do I got to lose. I got things now, and I don’t wanna lose those things. All the work I’ve done, it’d be pointless.”

---

14. “Stick with it” encourages young people to persevere in situations that make them feel uncomfortable, so that they can work through the discomfort rather than avoiding it. The goal is for young people to get better at tolerating negative emotions without engaging in impulsive behavior.

“If I’m fussing with one of my homeboys and we end up fighting, I’m gonna think about the consequences. I’m gonna think before anything. I’m gonna flex my thinking.... We not about to sit up here and fight, that’s for people who don’t like each other.... We ain’t about to mess up our bond. So I think before I do anything now, I think before I go out there and I’m about to go commit a crime, I’m thinking before I do, because at the end of the day, I’m gonna be the person behind bars.”

- **The experiences of some participants highlighted that it takes time and continual practice for young people to restructure their thinking and behavioral patterns according to the CBT principles, and that contextual factors can affect the application of these principles in real life.**

While they valued the cognitive-behavioral skills they learned, these participants were not always able to apply what they learned consistently when faced with conflicts at work or difficult situations with friends or partners. For example, one participant discussed his conflict with a coworker that led him to quit a job abruptly, without any notice. He worked with Roca and used cognitive behavioral skills to process the aftermath of his actions, but he was not able to use those skills to manage conflicts with the coworker. In another example, a different participant felt that that cognitive behavioral skills could be useful abstractly, but hadn’t yet found a way to integrate the cognitive behavioral concepts he had learned at Roca into his daily life.

“That moment that I had walked out [from my job], all my values came out my head.... I felt guilty about letting [my feelings for this co-worker] come between me and my money. Something that could’ve been fixed. If it happens next time, I think I’ll know how to control myself better.”

“If I have a situation with myself or with anyone else, basically I’m supposed to use my CBT skills to help me with that conflict. I ain’t gonna say that I haven’t been using it. I try to use it when it’s the right time. I never had a situation for me to use it on my own.”

## Education, Employment Services, and Other Services

Roca participants have limited work histories, and are often disconnected from school and work when they come into the program—factors that put them at high risk of run-ins with law enforcement. To help participants build skills, earn credentials, and gain work experience, Roca offers a large menu of services that include:

- A **transitional employment program** providing paid work opportunities for young people, helping them to develop work-readiness skills and practice using the skills they learn from CBT in a real work context. Young people work in crews of four to five participants who are supervised by Roca



staff members in jobs that typically involve landscaping and maintenance under contracts Roca maintains with the city and local employers.

- **Occupational skills training** to help young people gain skills and certifications in jobs that are locally in demand and accessible to young people with criminal records
- **Employment services** to help participants develop work-readiness skills and to find and retain jobs, and to work with local employers to place young people in jobs
- **GED preparation services** to help young people attain their high school equivalency credentials, including skills assessments, support with an online curriculum young people can follow at their convenience, and financial support to cover the cost of exams
- **Supportive services** to help participants build life skills and cope with new needs and ongoing challenges, including (a) lessons in financial literacy and healthy relationships; (b) individual assistance navigating court cases and applying for benefits, housing, and identification documents (such as driver's licenses); and (c) peacemaking circles aimed at conflict resolution and community building

As noted above, these services are designed to engage young people in real-world settings where they can practice and be coached in the cognitive-behavioral skills taught through Rewire.

- **Participants greatly valued being able to choose from a large menu of service offerings and to customize them to fit their lives as their needs evolved.**

“They’ve got everything,” said one participant, adding, “You can take the path that you want to take.” “They were just helping me with everything I needed to start life basically,” said another. Young people also appreciated that they had the flexibility to receive services in groups and in individual settings, and in their communities or at Roca’s offices.

- **The interviews suggested that the suite of services offered at Roca align with what young people needed and wanted at different times, as they gradually built skills and work experiences to sustain their behavior change.**

For example, one participant started in Roca Baltimore when he was 20 without any work experience and with a history of cycling through the criminal legal system. Between 2018 and 2022, he has worked in the transitional employment program (“the work readiness with Roca was a big



helping step for me because I had no real job until then,” he said), and, with job-placement support from Roca, has secured and held maintenance-related jobs to earn an income and gain experience. When he suffered a job loss two weeks before his rent was due, he was able to rejoin the transitional employment program “to get a little income” while Roca helped him find another job. After becoming a father, he called on Roca’s help to secure supplies such as diapers for his daughter. At the time of the interview, he was also working with Roca on getting his driver’s license and pursuing training for a forklift-operator certification. Other participants shared similar stories about slowly moving along their education and employment pathways with support from Roca. Below are some reflections from participants on offerings they found valuable:

“I’d never been in a work group. Period. This was my first time [when participating in the transitional employment program].... Just to know that we’re all a team and to know that when you work with another, you can basically get things done. Where I come from, I didn’t wanna be with anybody or work with anyone. It made me open up that door and see what’s it really about. I like working with other people. [The work crew] teach me that I’m a people person. I’m good around other people.”

I definitely gained a lot of skills [in the transitional employment program].... [It helped me] get back to the reality that I can actually work a job and maintain a job. [I gained] confidence in the abilities I had but didn’t know I had.”

“A second chance at getting a high school diploma [has been very valuable for me]. Once you drop out, there are no programs to help you or nothing like that unless you’re paying for it. [At Roca], you ain’t gotta pay for it. If you’re really dedicated, you can get that done, and fix that mistake that I’d made when I dropped out at tenth grade. I feel like kids that want that certification to get where they need to go, [Roca] came in with good grace, with open arms. They ain’t forcing it, they’re saying it’s available, it’s here if you want to do it. That’s the best, right there.”

- **Being able to rely on Roca consistently for day-to-day needs or emergencies, no matter how big or small, was of immense value to participants.**

Participants gave many examples of how Roca supported them with their own needs and those of their family members, including by helping participants get clothes, eyeglasses, haircuts, or supplies for their children, and by providing financial help to family members during a crisis. For example, at the time of the interview, Roca was helping a participant’s grandmother find new housing because the family had experienced a fire. Another participant spoke about Roca staff members putting money on his brother’s account in prison when he could not afford to do so.

“[The Roca staff] got me glasses. I was without glasses for three or four years, and I can see again.... That’s a big one. The world looks so much better right now.”

## CASE STUDY

# Benny\*

Benny lives with his mom and little sister in west Baltimore, but he identifies with the east side, where he grew up. He likes that the east side is lively, has lots of young people, and is cleaner and has fewer abandoned houses than his current neighborhood.

Benny's parents had a tumultuous relationship when he was growing up, and he didn't have someone encouraging him to stay focused on his goals. As a kid and young adult on the east side, Benny spent a lot of time with other young people who were not going to school. His family pushed for individual responsibility at young age. Benny explained, "If you're a boy [in my family], you ain't gonna have that much help. My family sees you being a man when you're a teenager... My family started teaching me early—everything is not handed down to you; you gotta work for everything." He knew that if he wanted things, he'd have to figure out how to get them himself. The models he saw for making money made participating in criminal activities seem normal and routine. Financial needs played a role too, and he said that the low-wage jobs available to him in his community couldn't compete with the finances and flexibility of street work.

Benny was arrested for the first time when he was 16. He was on probation for petty theft around the time Roca started reaching out him. Outreach workers would show up at his mom's house, where Benny was living, and left messages at his father's place too. More often, they'd figure out which block he'd be hanging out on and come there. "I ain't never really have to go look for them. They came looking for me," Benny explained.

He was lukewarm on Roca when they started making contact with him. He was pretty sure that his probation officer had given Roca his information, which made him skeptical. But he liked his outreach worker and after talking with him saw that he didn't seem to be involved in law enforcement. It helped that people he trusted in the neighborhood also knew about Roca.

For the next year, he engaged with staff members when they reached out to him, but didn't consider himself to be in the program. Looking back, he admitted that he wasn't really in a mindset to participate at that time. "The Roca program was around, but I wasn't accepting any help and I was just putting them in the back burner.... It wasn't on my mind at the time. My mind didn't really want to access their help," he explained.

Benny was arrested and held in detention for just shy of a year while he was awaiting trial. His family didn't visit him during that time, but Roca staff members did. The program appealed

***"I was nowhere then. I was just a person that was waking up, surviving for that day. Where I'm at now—I'm waking up and I survived. I feel like I already survived to the point that I don't gotta worry about my next meal, where I'm gonna lay my head—I don't gotta worry about none of that stuff now. I didn't have options then, but I got options now."***

to the court and was able to get him released on electronic monitoring, or what Benny calls "the box." Not wanting to return to prison and feeling genuinely grateful for the program staff's support and advocacy motivated Benny to consider the program more seriously. It made him want to give the program a chance.

Benny started working more closely with the Roca, which helped coordinate permission for him to come to Roca's offices while he was on "the box." He began talking with staff members about what he wanted his life to look like, and started working on his GED and obtaining the documents he'd need to start working. He joined Roca's transitional employment program and enjoyed working in a team environment. He learned that he likes working with other people and is good at it, and he started building up some hard skills and gaining certificates for occupational safety training and forklift operations.

The program helped Benny get a temp-to-hire job at a local recycling plant. Benny didn't mind the work, but he had a hard time getting along with a supervisor who was around his age. He quit the job just five days short of being eligible for permanent placement. Afterwards, program staff members helped him use cognitive behavioral skills to figure out how his underlying thoughts and feelings led him to quit. He didn't regret the decision and thought of it as a learning opportunity that would help him handle workplace conflicts differently in the future.

Benny has returned to transitional employment and is working with Roca to figure out how he can put the skills and certifications he's obtained through the program toward a career in the trades rather than just another job. His relationships with his family have improved and so has his sense of purpose and future.

\*Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the identity of interviewees.





## Perceptions of Change

In general, the young men who participated in the interviews reported many achievements since starting at Roca, including staying out of jail, getting jobs, retaining jobs, and acquiring new skills and certifications. The qualitative study was not designed to examine these outcomes, but focused on exploring changes in participants' self-perception, outlook on the future, and approach to relationships, as Roca believes such changes to be important to sustaining behavior change in the long run.

- **Participants reported developing a positive view of their own potential and future.**

Most interviewees described being more confident in their own abilities to pursue a productive and successful life, and said they were more hopeful about their futures since engaging with Roca. Achievements related to the program, such as securing a job or a training credential, contributed to young people's self-worth and their desire to sustain change.

"Before I thought I was going to die on the street. Now I see hope."

"I feel I'm capable of doing a lot of things that I didn't know I could do, as far as positive things.... I'm not in the streets no more."

"Back then, I saw myself as a failure. Now, I'm achieving a lot that I want to. I'm more positive now."

- **Several participants were working on strengthening their relationships with their families, including their children and those children’s other parents.**

In many cases, the participants’ involvement with criminal activities and their connection to the criminal legal system had strained relationships that the young men were trying to repair, and that effort was one of their motivations for staying engaged with Roca and its services. Some interviewees described changes in their own self-worth in the context of their relationships (that is, being a better son, better father, better brother, etc.), and not just their own achievements.

“When I was running the streets, I really wasn’t around my family. Now I got real strong bond with my family.”

“I had family back then but they ain’t want nothing to do with me because I was making wrong decisions. Now I’m making right decisions [and they are there for me.]”

“I accidentally got my mother’s house raided [by the police], and my brother and sisters where there. That had an impact on not just my life, but theirs and my mother’s.... Now, I lean heavy on my little brother to make sure he doesn’t follow my old footsteps.... Now, my mother is proud of me because I changed completely.”

*Interviewees described changes they experienced not just in terms of their achievements, but also in how they conducted their relationships. Some felt they had become better sons, fathers, and brothers.*

- **Participants were less optimistic about the outlook for their Baltimore communities, and the potential for meaningful change.**

As previously discussed, many interviewees believed that the systemic challenges related to racism, poverty, violence, and policing in their communities were too deeply engrained to overcome, and they did not feel empowered to push for change. Some participants highlighted the challenges of sustaining changes in their own behavior while living in the same communities, crediting Roca with helping them do so. Many interviewees set goals to move to different neighborhoods or another city to keep themselves on a positive track and to keep their families safe.

When asked about the changes they would like to see in their communities, participants wished for investments in:

- Living-wage, quality jobs that would create incentives for young people to leave illicit work such as selling drugs, and join the mainstream labor market
- Reliable transportation
- The revitalization of abandoned houses and vacant properties

- Reforms to make policing less biased and more community-friendly
- More programs that help young people gain access to educational and employment services and to caring adults for support and guidance (including an expansion of Roca in Baltimore to other populations, such as young women)

While expressing pessimism about change at the community level, many of the interviewees discussed their desire and efforts to influence other young men like themselves, often directing them to Roca.

“I care more [now], I think that matters.... I care about my freedom, my family, my future, the next person, not just myself. I care about other people—trying to get them back on a track. If a person that don’t know about the Roca program and he in a tight situation in his life, I will point him in the Roca direction.”

## CASE STUDY

# Rey\*

Twenty-two-year-old Rey grew up in a public housing complex on Baltimore's east side, where he developed a nuanced perspective on the role of drug gangs in his community. He explained that while some people who sold drugs were "no good," there were others who were "giving back" by providing kids with gifts or school supplies. That help meant a lot to him as a kid. Rey looked up to guys like these and entered the drug business in their image.

Rey also thinks growing up without a father figure played a role in his trajectory, even with a "good home" and a loving mother and grandmother. He didn't get a chance to build a relationship with his dad, who was incarcerated for most of Rey's life and who was killed when Rey was just a teenager. He had a stepdad who was around but "wasn't really there." He described how not having a positive male role model affected him: "I followed the cycle. I've seen all my uncles hustling and doing bad things, and I thought it was cool. Back then I was just a kid, and I didn't know better. As I was coming up, I thought this was the way for me."

He cycled in and out of jail as a juvenile and an adult. Things "went from playing games to getting serious" when Rey turned 18, had his first child, and felt a responsibility to provide for her financially. He dropped his attempts to catch up on high school credits, and focused on trying to earn money quickly for his daughter and her mom. A conflict between Rey and his daughter's mother and a drug-related arrest landed him in jail two more times.

Roca started reaching out to him after he returned home from jail. He wasn't sure about the first outreach worker who came around but got curious when the worker showed up with a second staff person who used to work at Rey's school. He let the staff members take him out to eat and tell him about the program. He didn't fully trust that Roca was going to follow through on its promises to help him get a GED or a job. But in his first two months with the program he got connected with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (food stamps), began to attend GED classes, and started learning cognitive behavioral skills. Rey started to trust that Roca staff members were serious about their offers to help: "[They] were just being themselves, being the people I thought they wouldn't be. When they said they'd help me with things, I

***"Back then, I ain't gonna say that I saw myself as somebody who wasn't gonna make it. I saw myself as somebody who was gonna make it, but it was gonna take a long time to get it together. I changed by just doing what I had to do for myself and not what people around me think."***

didn't believe them. And they started showing me that they would really help me with things that would benefit me."

Getting a job was important to Rey when he started with Roca. Early in his time with the program, he gained a slot on a work crew with the goal of starting a janitorial job in a few months. Rey liked the work crew and felt that it taught him a lot about responsibility. Roca helped him write a résumé and get ready to meet employment requirements such as mandatory drug screening. He was impressed that just two months after he told Roca he wanted to work at the Department of Public Works, the program got him a temp-to-hire janitorial job there. He liked the work but never put in the paperwork for a permanent position in the department after his temp assignment ended.

Afterward, Roca helped him get another job at a private waste-management company. Rey worked there for a few weeks, but a long and expensive commute made it untenable. He left the job and returned to his prior hustle, leading to another arrest and short stay in jail. Roca worked with his attorney to get him released while awaiting trial by providing documentation of his participation and accomplishments in the program.

While Rey knows that he's had setbacks, he sees a lot of positive changes in his life too. "I know I'm a strong person. I know I can hold anything if I put my mind to it," he says. He's looking for a retail job for now and is starting to think about a long-term career too. He'd like to have his own trucking business, and Roca is helping him get a driver's permit as a first step. He recently had a second daughter and is trying to be an active dad.

\*Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the identity of interviewees.



## Conclusion

The perspectives of young people are critical to understanding and evaluating the programs that aim to serve them. Limited in scope and sample size, this qualitative study of Roca Baltimore participants was not designed to produce broad, generally representative conclusions about Roca's participants, program implementation, or outcomes. Instead, in-depth interviews with a small number of participants generated insights into the community-level factors that shape the lives of the young men Roca seeks to help, and into their experiences with the program.

Participants painted a stark picture of what life is like for young Black men in low-income Baltimore communities marked by violence and mass incarceration, but most saw their lives improve with Roca's support. While participants expressed deep appreciation for the employment and skills-training opportunities that Roca provides, it's the consistent and unwavering support of Roca staff members that they credited with keeping them engaged with the program. When asked about ways Roca Baltimore could improve its program, interviewees did not have many suggestions. Rather, the conversations highlighted the need for deeper investments in community-level changes and systemic reforms such as addressing racial bias in policing or hiring, to help young men gain access to more opportunities and put them on a path to long-term success.

# **APPENDIX A**

## Methods and Interview Sample

For the purposes of this study, MDRC sought to interview young people enrolled in the Roca Baltimore program who were at least 18 years old and not incarcerated or detained by the justice system when outreach for the interviews began in March 2022. Roca staff members were also encouraged to identify young people at different stages of the program for the interviews (that is, some who had enrolled in recent months and some who had been in the program for more than two years).

The program identified 26 such young men, and between March and May of 2022 the study team reached out to them through text messages, phone calls, and emails, ultimately conducting interviews with 10 program participants who responded to the outreach and agreed to participate. MDRC offered a \$25 gift card to the young men who chose to participate in the interviews as a token of appreciation for their time.

The semistructured interviews were conducted in phone or video calls that lasted between 20 and 90 minutes, depending on a young person's availability, speaking style, and program trajectory. For example, participants who had spent years with Roca Baltimore had more to say about the different ways they had engaged with the staff and the program's components than more recent enrollees.

With permission from the participants, the interviews were audiorecorded. The study team used the recordings and the interview notes to summarize elements from the interviews, including participants' demographics and family characteristics, experiences growing up in their neighborhoods in Baltimore, ways of first coming into contact with Roca Baltimore, experiences with Roca and its offerings, and perspectives on the future. At the end of the interview period, the lead interviewer used these summaries to identify themes that ran across the interviews, as well as perspectives that emerged in specific cases. The themes were documented in an analysis memo along with supporting quotations.

Of the 10 young people who participated in the interviews:

- All identified as Black men and ranged in age between 19 and 25 years old.
- Seven had been involved with Roca for more than two years and were in a later phase of the program. The remaining three started in 2021.
- All reported past involvement with the juvenile or criminal legal system or both, and all had been detained in juvenile facilities, jail, or prison. The reasons for their involvement in the justice system included activities related to drugs, gun possession, theft, and robbery. Most reported experiencing multiple arrests as juveniles, adults, or both.
- Nearly all reported experiencing trauma related to violence in their communities, including involvement in shootings or violent altercations and loss of family members or friends. Participants also reported trauma from their brushes with law enforcement and the justice system, including their own arrests, detentions, or incarcerations, and those of parents, friends, or relatives.

- Five did not have a high school diploma or an equivalent credential and were engaged in GED-preparation support offered at Roca.
- Eight reported very limited experience with mainstream jobs before Roca: Three interviewees reported not working at all before enrolling in the program, and five reported having some work experience but not during the six months before their enrollment. Those who reported some employment experience had fragmented work histories interspersed with periods of absence from the labor market due to arrests, detainment, or incarceration. All but one of the interviewees had either participated in Roca's transitional jobs program or were participating in it during the interviews; five of the participants were employed in jobs outside of Roca at the time of their interviews.
- Five were parents to one or more children. Most lived with family members, namely mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and siblings.

The interview sample is broadly representative of Roca's target population with respect to observable characteristics such as demographics, involvement in the criminal legal system, education, and employment. However, it should be noted that the experiences of the young people who voluntarily participated in the interviews may not be broadly representative of Roca's population in other ways, and may be different from those who did not respond to interview requests or declined to be interviewed. The goal of this qualitative study was not to produce broad, generally representative conclusions about Roca's participants or program implementation, but rather to explore the experiences of some participants in a meaningful way and to generate case studies that provide helpful insights into the program and the young men it serves.



# References

- The Baltimore Sun*. n.d. "Baltimore Homicides." Website: <https://homicides.news.baltimoresun.com>. Accessed on February 1, 2023.
- Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. 2014. "Understanding the Impact of Trauma." Chapter 3 in *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services*. Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, No. 57. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Available from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/>.
- Cobb, Jelani. 2015. "What Racism Has Done to Baltimore." *New Yorker* (May 11). [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/05/11/city-life-what-racism-has-done-to-baltimore](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/05/11/city-life-what-racism-has-done-to-baltimore).
- Council of State Governments Justice Center. 2015. "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.
- Development Services Group, Inc. 2018. "Interactions Between Youth and Law Enforcement." Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Hossain, Farhana, and Kyla Wasserman. 2021. "Using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to Address Trauma and Reduce Violence Among Baltimore's Young Men: A Profile of Roca Baltimore." New York: MDRC.
- Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions. 2021. "Maryland Gun Deaths: 2019." Website: <https://efsgv.org/state/maryland/>.
- Justice Policy Institute. 2019. "Rethinking Approaches to Over Incarceration of Black Young Adults in Maryland." Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute.
- Justice Policy Institute, 2022. "Where People in Prison Come From: The Geography of Mass Incarceration in Maryland." Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute.
- Martin, Eric. 2017. "Hidden Consequences: The Impact of Incarceration on Dependent Children." *National Institute of Justice Journal* 278.
- Moore, Wes, and Mark Gunnery. 2021. "Baltimore's Different: Gangs, Youth, And Stopping Violence." WYPR radio interview, February 25. <https://www.wypr.org/show/future-city/2021-02-25/baltimores-different-gangs-youth-and-stopping-violence>.
- Rector, Kevin. 2017. "Federal Judge Approves Baltimore Policing Consent Decree, Denying Justice Department Request for Delay." *The Baltimore Sun* (April 7). [www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-md-ci-consentdecree-approved-20170407-story.html](http://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-md-ci-consentdecree-approved-20170407-story.html).
- Trumbull, Mark. 2020. "Rising Inequality in a Crisis: The View from Baltimore." *Christian Science Monitor* (June 24). [www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2020/0624/Rising-inequality-in-a-crisis-The-view-from-Baltimore](http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2020/0624/Rising-inequality-in-a-crisis-The-view-from-Baltimore).

# About MDRC

MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization, is committed to finding solutions to some of the most difficult problems facing the nation. We aim to reduce poverty and bolster economic mobility; improve early child development, public education, and pathways from high school to college completion and careers; and reduce inequities in the criminal justice system. Our partners include public agencies and school systems, nonprofit and community-based organizations, private philanthropies, and others who are creating opportunity for individuals, families, and communities.

Founded in 1974, MDRC builds and applies evidence about changes in policy and practice that can improve the well-being of people who are economically disadvantaged. In service of this goal, we work alongside our programmatic partners and the people they serve to identify and design more effective and equitable approaches. We work with them to strengthen the impact of those approaches. And we work with them to evaluate policies or practices using the highest research standards. Our staff members have an unusual combination of research and organizational experience, with expertise in the latest qualitative and quantitative research methods, data science, behavioral science, culturally responsive practices, and collaborative design and program improvement processes. To disseminate what we learn, we actively engage with policymakers, practitioners, public and private funders, and others to apply the best evidence available to the decisions they are making.

MDRC works in almost every state and all the nation's largest cities, with offices in New York City; Oakland, California; Washington, DC; and Los Angeles.