



Out of prison, then back in? Unique plan aims to break cycle

By [DAVID CRARY](#), Associated Press

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BOSTON (AP) — Tykeam Jackson's mellow voice and warm smile give little hint of how the 21-year-old spent his youth: in and out of juvenile detention and jails, leading a life in Boston's mean streets centered on gangs and guns.

"I just kept getting caught," he said. "I was hanging around the wrong crowd."

Yet even as a pending criminal case looms over him, he's gaining hope that he can break the cycle that has entangled him — with the help of a unique organization called Roca.

"Since I've been with Roca, my whole life has done a 360," he said.

VIDEO: LEARN MORE ABOUT ROCA AND ITS EFFORTS [HERE](#)

Roca is a nonprofit seeking to steer hundreds of Massachusetts' highest-risk young men away from a return behind bars. Even the most troublesome participants are exhorted to persist with its multi-year education and job programs; Roca is loath to give up on any of them.

If its unorthodox approach works — and private investors are betting millions it will — it might show a path forward for other states and cities yearning to lower stubbornly high rates of re-incarceration.

With more than 2.1 million people held in America's prisons and jails and the annual bill around \$80 billion, according to a Brookings Institution study, there has been bipartisan action on many criminal justice reforms — but no breakthrough on recidivism. Within five years, 77 percent of ex-prisoners in a 2014 federal study were arrested again; more than half returned to prison.

Recidivism rates were highest for inmates 24 or younger at release — the age range of Roca's target group. Nearly all have arrest records; the vast majority are school dropouts involved in

street gangs. They are, in Roca's words, young men "not ready, willing or able to participate in any other program."

"My guys are not going to be Boy Scouts," said Jason Owens, a Roca assistant director. "It's Last Chance University for them. It's either Roca, or jail, or death."



Roca's program, with its pledge that investors will be repaid for its success, is unusual in many ways, yet it reflects changing attitudes nationwide. Politicians and corrections officials are increasingly vocal about stopping the revolving door back to prison. Efforts are intensifying to better prepare inmates for release with job-training and education programs.

Yet obstacles abound, from the reluctance of many legislators to pay for re-entry programs to the barriers ex-inmates face in obtaining jobs, driver's licenses and public housing. There's also the problem of "technical violations" of parole and probation terms; many former inmates return to prison not because of a new crime but because they broke a rule.

How does Roca, which operates only in Massachusetts, help ex-offenders build a new life?

It begins with dogged recruiting by outreach workers. A recruit is then assigned to a work crew and paid minimum wage for tasks such as landscaping and snow removal.

"We have to show them how to work," said Aaron Bray, who coordinates the crews. "We expect them to fail sometimes."

This outlook contrasts with many other programs that are selective about whom they recruit.

"The cops hated us when we first started — they saw us as a 'hug a thug' program," said Jason Owens, who served prison time himself before joining Roca's staff 10 years ago. He's on a first-name basis with police and troublemakers alike in Chelsea, home to Roca's headquarters.

Chelsea Police Capt. David Batchelor now views Roca as valuable ally.

"Most programs, if you violate the rules, you're out," Batchelor said. "Roca's the only one I know of — if you break the rules, they'll take you back."



Behavioral therapy sessions help Roca participants with anger management. Many take courses leading to a General Education Development diploma.

The GED classes are taught one-on-one by volunteers, sometimes in a university library or hospital cafeteria. With gang rivalries, it's deemed too dangerous for many participants to attend classes at Roca's building.

"Any rival might kill them on sight," said Roca's Boston director, Shannon McAuliffe. In fact, in February 2015, 21-year-old Kenny Lamour was shot dead by an adversary while working with a Roca snow-clearing crew.

Tykeam Jackson also was targeted recently by a rival's gunfire, suffering a leg wound, McAuliffe said. Since he enrolled in Roca in January 2015, he's had two stints in jail and faces charges in a pending carjacking case.

"Yet he's still showing up," McAuliffe said. "I'll say, 'You don't have to be here,' and he'll say, 'If I'm not here, Shannon, I'm going to die.'"

With its motto "Less jail, more future," Roca aims not just to save young men from wasting their lives but to save taxpayers from wasting money. Roca says the annual cost of incarceration in Massachusetts is about \$53,500 per person, while its program costs about \$26,000 per person for four years.

"No business would be allowed to run as poorly as our prison systems are run," said Molly Baldwin, Roca's CEO and founder.

Does Roca's approach really work? Signs are positive. Of young men with the program at least two years, 91 percent have not been re-arrested and 85 percent have held a job at least six months.

A more definitive judgment will come in about two years, when outside evaluators assess whether Roca has saved taxpayers' money by curtailing the time its participants are incarcerated. The outcomes of 1,000 Roca participants will be compared with a control group of other high-risk young men.

If Roca can reduce prison bed days by 40 percent compared to the control group, the state will repay investors who gave Roca more than \$18 million in grants and loans. If Roca reduces prison time by 60 percent, the state's savings will be huge, and the investors will get bonus payments.

Meanwhile, participants like Tykeam Jackson look toward their personal future; he'd like go to community college to study business.

"When I got to Roca, I felt, 'Take the chance,' because I messed up so much," he said. "I felt it was my last chance."



Associated Press writer Rodrique Ngowi in Boston contributed to this report.

NOTE: This story originally appeared at <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/19c38842a4dc4c92a08286baeddbc4a6/out-prison-then-back-unique-plan-aims-break-cycle>