

**ROCA BALTIMORE
THE SAFETY LANDSCAPE OF HIGH RISK YOUNG MEN**

Lessons from Year One

Given the jarring statistic of almost a murder a day occurring in Baltimore, as well as our knowledge of the severe danger our young men face, it is critical that we fully understand safety and the safety landscape.

Over the course of the first year, we've learned three key lessons around safety:

- We have to understand the brain science that is contributing to the violence.
- We must know the level of safety of young men entering Roca
- We need to monitor this safety

We have to understand the brain science that is contributing to the violence

We know that the brain is not fully developed until an individual turns 25 years old. As such, the 16 to 25-year-old men Roca serves are often not able to regulate their emotions and deal with the trauma they have faced. When services and programs are not set up in a manner that allows for behavior change over time, the young men cannot succeed. This is why Roca uses brain science to inform its programming, meeting participants where they are and expecting relapse instead of penalizing it.

Studying brain science has also taught us that social media has exacerbated this trauma young people are facing, acting as an accelerant to violence and crime. The young men are living in a constant state of fight, flight or freeze that is directly linked to their trauma—*fear that won't turn off*. Their instincts have forced them into “survival mode”, whereas they are continuously feeling stressed, afraid and anxious. This can lead to dramatic and often, tragic outcomes. (Consider the drug crew member who pulls out a gun when a rival looks at him the wrong way, or who resorts to violence over relationship troubles.)

The homicide and non-fatal shooting rates involving this group of young men will continue to increase without intentional programming that incorporates trauma-informed interventions, addresses behavior change over time, and works on changing the neuropathways in the brain—creating new helpful cycles instead of violent ones.

We must know the level of safety of young men entering Roca

Safety is a constant concern for the young men we work with, whether he is in his neighborhood, elsewhere in the city, or at Roca. We know from experience that the young men most at risk of shooting someone or being victims of a shooting, can learn the skills to live and succeed. Approximately one out of every five young men referred to Roca last year were victims of a non-fatal shooting prior to referral. Tragically four young men were killed before we were able to engage them in the program.

The level of violence in Baltimore is egregious. The geographical landscape of street and criminal activity has also changed over time. Historically, an individual was contained to a particular neighborhood or area; today's reality is that many young men travel throughout the city to conduct their various criminal

activities. This makes it more challenging to locate young men at the time of initial referral as well as when they relapse in the program.

We need to monitor this safety

The safety landscape in Baltimore is ever-evolving which requires regular and ongoing assessments in order to keep Roca staff, the young men, and the Transitional Employment Program work crews safe. We also assess the safety levels of each young man as it relates to interactions with one another and engagement in the community or at Roca.

Each young man who is referred to Roca completes a safety profile upon enrollment, which is a living document that can change as their street involvement either increases or decreases. The types of safety concerns and conflicts that the young men bring to our attention vary—issues with other young men at Roca, conflicts their drug crew may be experiencing outside of Roca and even ongoing matters that have not been resolved over the years.

We are intentional in how we build trust and create relationships with young men in order to create a safe space for them to approach Roca staff with any safety concerns or issues they may be experiencing. If there is imminent danger for a young man, we will remove him from Roca, the work crew or his neighborhood to ensure he is safe. If there is a conflict between young men at Roca, we are strategic in our engagement, making sure they are not in the building or programming at the same time. Over time we work to resolve these issues both internally at Roca and in the street where possible.

Some young men find themselves in situations where they may be so “hot” in the streets that they have a bounty on their heads. When we learn about these situations, we work quickly and strategically to get them to safety. In these cases the young men are engaged off-site for programming and are temporarily suspended from the work crews until we can resolve the issues threatening their lives. Roca staff have spoken to opposing factions on the street, attempted and once successfully relocated a young man away from Baltimore and spent countless hours working with young men around safety.

The following examples illustrate experiences we have had in the first year, which are typical of the young men with limited to no emotional regulation skills and/or critical safety issues involved with Roca:

- Earlier this year, two young people were in a situation where they were targeted to be killed. We relocated one to Job Corps, however, he quickly returned. He re-engaged with Roca and then was shot in the County and is currently missing. The other young man simply didn't believe there was a problem. After extensive work with him and opposing street crews, the safety situation has changed. He is actively participating in programming and transitional employment.
- Another young man was shot at on several different occasions this past year. He moved across the city and was shot at again. Finally, he was willing to go to Job Corps many states away. He has been making great strides there and has come to understand that he can't return to the city.

- Another young man who was reluctant to participate in programming, despite the relentless outreach, was a victim of a serious non-fatal shooting in the last quarter. Upon review of the program model and ideal timeline, those young men, who are extremely reluctant to participate and hard to find, are ending up shot and/or arrested more often than those who are engaging more over time.

What's Next?

As we look forward to year two of Roca Baltimore, we have a strategic plan to increase overall safety and healing for our young men and Roca staff:

- Continue to understand the social networks the young men are engaged with Roca to better analyze and predict potential issues with and between one another.
- Facilitate Peacemaking Circles with non-fatal shooting victims—creating a safe space for them to process and heal the trauma they have experienced.
- Work alongside criminal justice and human service providers to develop a highly-coordinated after shooting response protocol.
- Develop a more intentional process for relocating young men with unresolvable safety issues. One Foundation has offered resources to help facilitate this process, one that will be addressed once the after shooting response protocol is finalized. This will require coordination with the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice, Safe Streets, and other criminal justice partners.

We are grateful to the young people, staff and partners with whom we have had the opportunity to work with in this first year. We have learned a lot from each of them and recognize that we have a lot more to learn as we continue our work here in Baltimore. For further detail about this topic, please contact Leyla Layman at Leyla_Layman@rocainc.com to obtain a copy of our quarterly reports.