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*“Communities confronting high rates of violence must start where they are, with the violence that is right in front of them. The surest path to prosperity begins with peace...in cities suffering from high rates of violence, efforts to address such poverty should begin with controlling violence.”*

– Thomas Abt, *Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets*, Basic Books, 2019, pgs. 25,26.

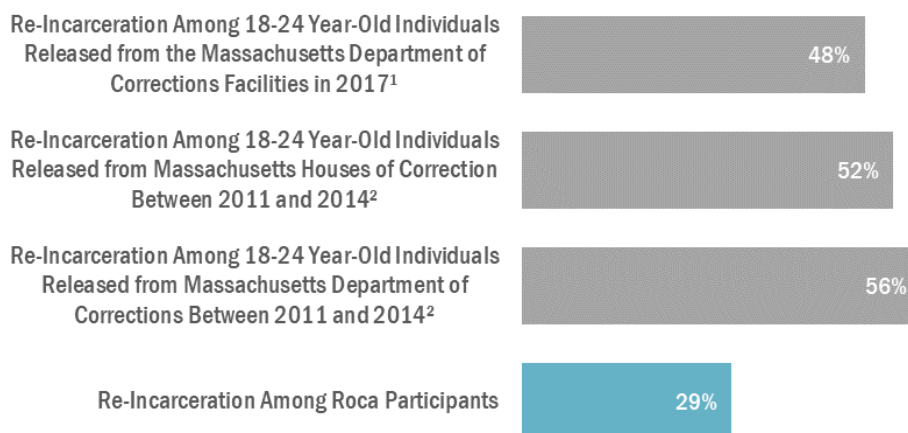
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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Very few programs exist that work with the high-risk population that Roca serves, and even fewer incorporate relapse or failures into their service model. Among high-risk populations, program retention is a common issue. If a program cannot retain its participants, full program services cannot be delivered and participant success is likely to suffer. Retention rates in Roca average 725 days, and one quarter of those who start the program remain for 267 days.

14.63% of Roca participants recidivate within one year, 23.54% within two years, and 29.42% within three years. These rates are **significantly** lower than reported average statewide rates.<sup>1</sup>

### Exhibit 1. Three-Year Recidivism Rates for Roca Participants Compared to Three-Year Recidivism Rates Across the State of Massachusetts



<sup>1</sup>Source: Communication with the Massachusetts Department

<sup>2</sup>Source: The Council of State Governments Justice Center

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<sup>1</sup> Statewide recidivism rates provide context but should not be used to infer program impact.

Most Roca participants recidivate for non-violent offenses: only 5.64% recidivate for a violent offense within one year after eligibility, and less than half of Roca participants who have a violent history and recidivate do so for a violent offense (40.52%).

**Exhibit 2. Criminal History and One, Two, and Three-Year Re-Incarceration Rates for Roca Participants**



**ROCA’S MODEL**

For almost 35 years, an innovative program called Roca has reached out to the highest-risk young people in some of the most violence-torn areas of the country, operating in cities with the highest rates of violence in the states where they sit: Chelsea, Boston, Holyoke, and Springfield, Massachusetts; Baltimore, Maryland; and Hartford, Connecticut. These are young people with little education, gang and/or criminal justice involvement, and no work history. The context for Roca’s programming is critical to understanding its challenges and achievements with these young men and women. These are cities that, as Thomas Abt, notes are “bleeding out” and need to deal with the street violence that is endemic to many of their neighborhoods—not with increased police presence, but by focusing on the young people at the center of it.

In these places, Roca offers a unique model that works relentlessly with young people at the center of urban violence—those with criminal involvement, little or no work history, little educational attainment, and resistance to seeking help. It engages young people one-on-one—with dedicated Youth Workers on the street and in the program facilities—to address the core issue that continues to devastate each city and destroy the lives of its young people: violence.

Roca is data-driven, making it unusual for much of community programming for this population. Working with the Abt Associates research firm,<sup>2</sup> Roca has documented its model and its successes for over a decade. Research has focused on tracking engagement and retention, best practices, and ultimate outcomes for participants across each program area.

## ROCA IS DIFFERENT FROM OTHER COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN THESE AREAS

**Roca participants are at the center of urban violence and hardest to engage.** Roca participants are a population often left behind, excluded, or ineligible for other more traditional community-based programs due to their behavior and lack of motivation to join. Young adults are eligible for Roca if they are 16–24 years old with multiple arrests, including felony charges; often gang involved; have little or no work history; no high school degree or equivalent; and are highly resistant to any intervention. They simply do not fit with nor stay in traditional programming, and they often are not willing to join in the first place.

**Roca never gives up on these young people.**

The model is uniquely based on creating safety and stability by providing a safe place to go, relentless outreach to keep or get young people engaged, and creating transformational relationships with the young people, often where traditional ties and mentors have failed. If Roca participants fail, backslide, or disengage, they are not dropped from the program, but instead sought out and focused on even more intently.

**Roca embeds itself in community institutions.**

A central part of the Roca model is to actively engage local law enforcement, social services, and behavioral health services as partners in programming.

### THE ROCA MODEL

Roca’s Intervention Model seeks to be a relentless force in disrupting incarceration, poverty, and racism. It uses a cognitive behavioral model specially designed for Roca and delivered across all aspects of the program, focusing on life-saving skills by addressing participants’ specific triggers and teaching how thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are connected to help them think before they react. It includes a subsidized transitional employment program (TEP) to promote healthy work habits and facilitate the transition to unsubsidized employment.

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<sup>2</sup> Abt Associates is a public policy research organization with over 50 years of research in criminal justice program evaluation for local, state and federal government entities. For full details on Abt’s recently completed evaluations of Roca, please see the final reports located at this URL: <https://www.abtassociates.com/projects/comprehensive-evaluation-of-roca-inc>

**Roca continuously examines itself and its programming through data and makes changes.** From its beginnings, Roca has engaged outside evaluators like Abt Associates to evaluate progress and make data-driven improvements.

## DOES ROCA'S APPROACH WORK?

Reducing repeated and often violent criminal and legal involvement and incarceration are primary hallmarks of program success.

**Roca participation has reduced recidivism.** Among the hundreds of Roca youth served in Massachusetts between 2013 and 2020:

- 85% did not recidivate within one year of enrollment,
- 76% did not recidivate within two years, and
- 70% did not recidivate within three years.

For context, in the overall three-year recidivism rate for this population in Massachusetts, only 52% did not recidivate.

**Roca participants in the transitional employment program (TEP) show significant gains.**

Participants in TEP were less likely to have any new conviction, including violent convictions, than participants who were not enrolled in TEP.

**Roca participants use the emotional regulation skills taught in Roca Rewire.** Of the 600 young men who received intensive Roca services in 2022, 449 engaged in formal CBT and 475 engaged in CBT practices. Of those enrolled 18 months or longer:

- 61% reported improved emotional regulation,
- 57% improved behavioral health (depression/PDSD),
- 75% reported reduced levels of distress, and
- 77% reported reduced drug/alcohol use.<sup>3</sup>

CBT can be a powerful skill for addressing trauma and altering destructive patterns of thinking and behavior; and, in fact, it appears that this work has led to notable reductions in a variety of emotional and psychological issues. Such improvements in participant quality of life can have long-term benefits for eventual desistance from crime, long term employment, and emotional health.

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<sup>3</sup> These numbers were provided by Roca based on their review of administrative data in 2022.

## HOW DO WE KNOW THIS?

Roca has long been steadfast in their commitment to data- and outcomes-driven programming. Roca has been evaluating the outcomes of its programming for over a decade, using its in-house data management system and administrative records from state corrections agencies and local law enforcement. Random assignment to Roca or a control condition is often deemed the critical step in assessing impact (i.e., what would happen without Roca). There are compelling reasons why that approach is not feasible in these evaluations:

### **The unique risk profile of the individuals that Roca serves makes randomization difficult.**

They are not likely to want to engage in programming of any kind initially, or to voluntarily participate in an evaluation. But by design, randomization must occur before any engagement in programming begins. While risk assessment tools are common in the criminal legal system, these tools often do not capture the issues Roca participants face, especially a resistance to programming. As such, there is no clear way to identify Roca treatment and comparison cases for randomization prior to engagement with a Roca Youth Worker. This aspect of randomized design means that in any random assignment evaluation, many of the participants would not receive Roca's treatment given the very high level of risk Roca requires for inclusion in programming.

**Because Roca targets the young people in both serious and immediate situations, it incorporates failure into its intervention model.** Events that will most often eliminate someone from continued participation in other youth-serving programs do not for Roca. Roca feels that randomizing these youth to either standard programming or no programming when the consequences of failure are critical is an unethical choice for this population.

**Critically, the young people served by Roca are often at immediate crisis points, and it is unethical to deny services to those who would otherwise be eligible.**

Given these practical and ethical issues with randomization, Roca evaluators look to alternative strong evaluation approaches, such as comparing differences in trends in violence and recidivism among Roca participants with other comparable areas and other comparable populations. Such work is currently ongoing using the powerful, widely accepted, quasi-experimental design known as "difference in differences."

The positive outcomes of the thousands of young people reached through Roca's programming speak to the unique model's significant contribution to addressing the violence and loss of life chances in the young populations in the areas it serves. Very few programs exist that work with the high-risk population that Roca serves, and even fewer incorporate relapse or failures into their service model.

**Roca is specifically designed to keep its participants from engaging in violence and criminal activity.** 70% of Roca participants do not recidivate within three years of programming.

**Roca's approach is multi-faceted.** Programming addresses individual safety as well as working to change patterns of decision making. In addition, it provides education, training, and work experience opportunities to young people who would otherwise not have them.



**Roca never gives up on its participants.** Because of the use of relentless outreach to participants and Roca's unique policy of allowing for relapse or failures, Roca holds on to these very high-risk young people through critical times. Retention rates in Roca average 725 days, and one quarter of those who start the program remain for 267 days.