

INTRODUCTION

Baltimore, like almost every urban center in America, faces a wide range of challenges which have led to the current crisis in urban violence. In 2018, Roca Baltimore began working with the young men who are at the center of the city's violence: those who are most likely to shoot or be shot. Since that time, Roca has worked with 445 of those young men. Those efforts are beginning to show results. Of the men enrolled with Roca for 24 months or longer, 79% were not re-arrested and 98% were not re-incarcerated for new charges. And while the overall murder rate in the city rose 9%, homicides by those under 25 dropped by 8%, and non-fatal shooting victims under 25 dropped by 3%.

How does Roca Baltimore succeed where other programs do not? The four-year program combines many elements. None of them succeed in isolation. Roca success lies in how those elements are combined.

Thomas Abt is a leading expert on reducing urban violence. His 2019 book *Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence—and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets* outlines a set of core principles and strategies to reduce urban violence. His proposed approach is evidenced-based, community-informed, and supported by a systematic review of countless studies conducted to illuminate what actually works to reduce urban violence. Abt's work validates much of what Roca has put into practice.

Abt likens the issue of urban violence to a patient brought into an ER who is suffering from life-threatening issues—the very real state of our community in Baltimore City. For this patient, the most important and appropriate first step in triage is to stop the bleeding: address the issue of urban violence as something that is an existential crisis. If the bleeding cannot be staunched, all other issues surrounding urban decay, such as poverty, inequality, and racial equity, have no hope of being addressed:

““ Communities confronting high rates of violence must start where they are, with the violence that is right in front of them...efforts to address such poverty should begin with controlling violence.”¹

Abt uses data and scientific studies to lay out an overarching theory of what works to reduce violence. Roca's work over several decades in other cities and now in Baltimore has embodied what Abt proposes, most notably in three core areas:

- 1.** Relentless street outreach work that focuses on the right target population—young men most likely to kill or be killed—and meets them “where they are,” on the streets;
- 2.** Consistent application of cognitive behavioral therapy [CBT], a specific evidence-based and science-backed tool, to engage this population and change their behavior; and
- 3.** Working directly with law enforcement and other institutions which make up most of the resources our community dedicates to violence reduction.

RELENTLESS OUTREACH TO A FOCUSED TARGET

Roca Baltimore works tirelessly with its partners to identify, reach out to, and eventually engage with young men between the ages of 16–24 who are most prone to perpetrate or to be victims of violence. There are two components of this work:

- 1.** Keeping focused on small subset of individuals—the would-be shooters—and
- 2.** Reaching out to meet these youth where they are, both mentally and physically, rather than expect them to recognize a need for service or to routinely show up for programming.

Reaching and engaging this population is critical, as Abt explains:

“ [One] anti-violence strategy revolves around street outreach organizations that directly engage with would-be shooters who cannot be reached by traditional law enforcement or social services... Street outreach can provide much-needed balance to anti-violence efforts that focus exclusively on policing and prosecution. Outreach also connects tough-to-reach individuals with timely, urgently needed services.”²

Roca’s focus distinguishes it from other social service programs attempting to bring programming and/or services to this population. It is also different from “violence interrupter” programs that seek, for example, to mediate disputes. Abt agrees that focus is essential, based on the strong body of evidence about what works:

“ In public health, a systematic review of youth violence interventions found that effectiveness improved as interventions became more specific, with prevention programs targeting medium- and high-risk populations outperforming those focusing on low-risk or general populations. According to our most rigorous evidence, focus works.”³

Referrals to Roca come from the Baltimore City Police Department, the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services, and from hospitals and other social services entities. Referrals are screened by senior staff with an eye towards safety. Attempts to reach these youth can be dangerous.

Roca staff work relentlessly—guided by safety protocols—to find and engage referred young people. “It can sometimes take 10-15 visits for a young person to soften their resistance to even meeting with us,” notes Roca’s Kurtis Palermo, who leads Roca Baltimore. “But we do not give up. There is simply too much at stake. We know these youth are often traumatized, and what is called for is steady pressure to assure them that we do not represent another

threat or potential trauma.” In 2022, Roca staff recorded over 27,000 efforts that resulted in 14,448 successful contacts with roughly 325 young men.

Informed by over 34 years of work in Massachusetts, Roca Baltimore tracks all efforts in outreach. The organization’s “contact standards”—an explicit set of indicators tracked every day for each interaction by youth outreach workers—are an example of the oversight necessary when conducting this important work. All participants are screened at intake for safety and risk factors along with elements that provide staff with a better picture of trauma they have experienced. Over the first 60 days, five different assessments and intake forms, spanning hundreds of questions, are completed and reviewed.

Palermo says this attention to data is a critical piece of the Roca model: “We are unapologetic about the data we need to properly serve our young people. And we use the data every day to ensure we target the right youth and serve them in the most appropriate manner.” Roca meets them where they are: more than 40% of the interactions with program participants happen on the street.

COMPENSATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This work is hard. From the outset, Roca Baltimore implemented a higher pay scale and full benefits for its youth workers. Palermo notes:

“ It is critical for us to compensate those individuals who are putting everything on the line to make connections with our young men. All staff go through an extensive orientation and training module for weeks and do not go out to do the work until they have demonstrated a thorough level of understanding of our logic model and overall strategy for engagement. In order to have competent staff who understand our expectations—but even more importantly are willing to set and enforce expectations of their young people—we need to pay enough to attract the necessary talent.”

But higher pay is only the first step in professionalizing the role of street-based outreach workers. Roca Baltimore has an intense service delivery model that is well understood throughout the organization. Roca reviews data at regular intervals with every staff member, in both team meetings (to discuss the best approach for particular youth), and frequent one-on-one meetings conducted with an eye towards ensuring program contact standards are met. “People are sometimes amazed at how much data we are capturing,” says Palermo, “but I am not sure how we could understand how effective our street outreach is without it.”

PROVIDING ALTERNATIVES AND ENSURING “BALANCE” IN THE APPROACH

Abt frequently references the need for “balance” to be applied alongside a hyper-focus on urban violence. Balance is an essential element to curbing violence. Pure deterrence efforts (more arrests, longer sentences) have proven to be ineffective:

“ [B]alancing prevention and punishment works far better than either approach in isolation...we need a wide range of incentives that promote positive associations and activities while deterring violence—there must be both carrot and stick.” ⁴

Roca embodies this balance with its approach to participants receiving its services. Truthful conversations focused on accountability and “peacemaking circles” where deep personal insights are shared, are just two examples of the many ways staff work to instill the trust necessary for young men to contemplate different choices and behaviors. Through the development of positive relationships with youth workers and by offering transitional employment opportunities, Roca offers alternatives to participants caught up in a cycle of violence.

CHANGING THINKING PATTERNS: CBT

Every element of Roca Baltimore’s work with young men is informed by cognitive behavioral therapy [CBT]. Abt identifies CBT, developed to support intentional behavior changes, as essential to the success in working with would-be shooters.

In a joint development project with Massachusetts General Hospital, Roca adapted well-respected CBT approaches that are typically deployed in clinical environments. Roca’s CBT tools are designed to be used by non-clinicians outside of the clinic and in the settings where engagement with its young people takes place. Roca trains and supervises all staff that serve its target population in CBT. Through ongoing training sessions, staff recount the specific ways in which CBT was introduced in an interaction with youth. According to Palermo, “By staying focused on what we know works—changing thinking patterns through CBT—we know we have the best chance of enacting the behavioral change essential to reducing violence.”

Roca’s experience with CBT makes it clear: teaching young men how to better process information and to pause between “feeling” and “doing” saves lives. Palermo recounts:

“ We had a young man who was enjoying a Sunday afternoon in a park with his girlfriend when he spotted a known rival across the way. He felt immediately threatened and disrespected by what he perceived to be a potential advance on his girlfriend. He initially called a friend asking for a weapon to respond. As his friend was on the way, he thought through the decision and also reached out to his Roca youth worker. The youth worker was able to pick him and his girlfriend up and remove them from a developing situation. Confiding later with Roca staff, the youth credited the intentional pause between feeling and action as a tool he was able to use effectively to defuse a volatile circumstance.”

Whether through building new neural pathways to assist youth in moving out of their trauma-induced instinctive “flight, fight or freeze” response, or simply practicing an 8-12 second pause between what they think, feel, and do, CBT is the core mechanism that assists youth in a transformation. “We stay at it, because the science tells us it works,” notes Palermo, “but it is the appreciable difference we note in how our 3rd and 4th year participants carry themselves that best demonstrates the impact of CBT.” Abt is also clear about how essential CBT is:

“ Not one but several systematic reviews prove that CBT positively impacts criminal justice outcomes. Simply put, CBT works... In fact, almost every effective anti-violence treatment seems to contain, either formally or informally, some elements of CBT... Efforts to reduce criminality and delinquency that lack a CBT component usually fail to achieve the desired results.”⁵

Roca understands that implementation of CBT is the core mechanism for providing its young people alternative choices of action, something essential in treating would-be shooters. Palermo recounts another example:

“ We had a young man who had developed a deep relationship with staff, but who did not participate in various elements of our program, like educational enrichment or transitional employment. We received a call from him when he was in crisis: he had learned that his grandmother had stolen money from him. His request to us was direct: please come out to me right now as I want to work through CBT to try to deal with this situation. A staff member and I responded immediately, met him, and talked through the array of emotions he was experiencing. He was able to address the situation quite differently from his initial response. That he intuitively understood he needed another way to think about his situation demonstrates the power of CBT practiced relentlessly.”

Roca combines proven street outreach methods, a tight focus on its target population, and CBT to drive behavior change. This balanced approach challenges young people's risky/violent decision making while offering practical alternatives to violence. Abt perfectly summarizes Roca's theory of change and overarching strategy:

“ To turn would-be shooters around, evidence-informed approaches tend to follow the same basic steps: First, they identify and engage those most at risk. Second, they stabilize those individuals and provide some measure of safety and stability. Third, once stabilized, they treat their misguided thinking, their unsafe and unhealthy behavior, and their trauma. Fourth, they offer opportunities for a better life...”⁶

WORKING WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

Since its inception in Chelsea, Massachusetts over 35 years ago, Roca has understood the importance of building relationships with the law enforcement agencies and other institutions that routinely intersect with the lives of this target population. Internally, Roca calls this the work of “engaged institutions”, and senior staff work continuously to build and maintain these partnerships. Abt concurs with this approach, frequently referencing law enforcement as a key component:

“ The evidence clearly shows that law enforcement is an essential element of any realistic anti-violence strategy.”⁷

When Roca Baltimore launched in 2018, its initial work centered around the youth in just a few Baltimore City Police Districts, and bridge building with the BCPD there. Now, formal relationships have been established with every major district in the city, and in some cases Roca staff attend nearly weekly meetings with BCPD staff to sort through potential referrals and gather information about hot spots and those in danger. Palermo puts it succinctly: “We rely heavily on strong lines of communication with the police. The relationship is critical for staff to work with real-time data and use the intel to get to young people in danger. Without them, we would have no chance doing this work.”

By working directly with the police, Roca Baltimore also helps to establish and reinforce the legitimacy of law and order and its role in keeping the peace. This is not something most organizations attempt to do. An often-overlooked issue in our country's highly polarized discussions on reducing violence is what the data tell us about why some poor communities are violent while others are not. A central element is how law enforcement is perceived: Does the system have legitimacy in the eyes of the community? Research in other cities suggests that restoring legitimacy and trust in the legal system is key to violence reduction:

“ [The researchers] believed that legal cynicism could help explain why homicide rates varied among poor Chicago neighborhoods, where some viewed the police as more of a burden than a benefit... [N]eighborhoods reporting high levels of legal cynicism had significantly higher homicide rates than those that viewed authority more favorably. In fact, legal cynicism was more closely correlated with violence than poverty, inequality, or unemployment.”⁸

Roca Baltimore’s work with the BCPD has yielded great results, helping to reinforce the “legitimacy” of police in the eyes of young men, hastening the flow of information and referrals, and even implementing some new practices for both Roca and the BCPD.

An example is the development of the After-Shooting Protocol for non-fatal gunshot victims. Working closely with BCPD in the Western District, Roca Baltimore began to track outreach efforts to those victims of gun violence, offering to bring services to their doorsteps with the ultimate end of engaging these youth. Palermo notes, “All of our interactions with youth during the After Shooting Protocol are framed by the fact that we are engaging the victims at the request of the police who are concerned about their well-being. This often comes as a shock to these young men.”

Abt uncovers some evidence of ancillary benefits of this work for police officers themselves:

“ Just like residents of poor communities afflicted by violence, police officers are deeply discouraged by the ineffectiveness they witness inside the criminal justice system...Officers receive the same message from society that residents do: that people in poor communities are not valued, and, by association, neither is their work with such people.”⁹

Roca has long known that it takes strong partnerships with a vast range of organizations, in addition to the police, that interact with these young men. Roca works closely with organizations like the Maryland Department of Parole and Probation and the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services. Since Roca’s arrival in Baltimore in 2018, Roca staff have attended hundreds of meetings with these partners, assisting larger efforts when possible but always with the goal of better serving young people.

These relationships have expanded beyond communication and coordination. Over the past two years Roca has used a “train the trainer” model, training more than 275 staff at MDJS; more than 1,227 Baltimore City police (in conjunction with Baltimore police department trainers); 52 Baltimore County Police; and 8 Baltimore City Police; to train their own colleagues in Roca’s CBT method.

ROCA BALTIMORE'S EARLY INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

After its first four years of operation—two of which were during the pandemic—Roca Baltimore sees early indicators of success from both internal data and external evaluations. Arrest rates among Roca participants are significantly down compared to young people who don't participate. Homicide rates among Roca's target population are down both in absolute terms and as a share of all homicides in Baltimore. Roca is the only new intervention strategy introduced in that timeframe that specifically targets this population in Baltimore.

Roca cannot draw a direct connection between their work and the reduction in homicides among 16–24-year-olds. However, between the significant number of young people engaged and the unprecedented coordination with the Baltimore Police Department, the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services, and the Maryland Department of Parole and Probation, it is apparent that Roca has had a positive impact.

As Abt notes:

“ Because small numbers of people are responsible for large amounts of crime and violence, successfully turning around a few can yield significant results.” ¹⁰

It may seem like a stretch to draw correlations between the work of a small organization like Roca Baltimore, which is engaged with only a few hundred youth, and the “needle moving” on an issue as large as Baltimore's urban violence. But seen through the lens of both evidence and practical experience, Roca is confident that Abt is right when he says:

“ Common sense suggests that big problems require big solutions. Urban violence imposes tremendous costs on poor communities and the public at large, but because it is highly concentrated among a few people, places, and behaviors...that we can do a lot with a little on this issue can be hard to believe.” ¹¹

Roca Baltimore—a small group of people absolutely focused on the core issue of urban violence that claims so many young men—is an essential element in Baltimore's overarching strategy to reduce violence. They are doing great work with scant resources. We are lucky to have this organization working in our community.

ROCA'S DATA-DRIVEN APPROACH AND RESULTS

Roca has been evaluating the outcomes of its programming for over a decade, but one evaluation technique—random assignment of young adults to participate in Roca or to a control group that does not receive Roca—is not feasible in these evaluations for many reasons. Instead, Roca has turned to independent evaluators to assess results.

In Baltimore, MDRC used the city's, the state's, and Roca's own data to set benchmarks for programmatic and criminal justice outcomes. Their outcomes report benchmarks Roca's outcomes to city- and statewide data to better understand Roca's impact.

Additionally, Abt Associates has conducted a rigorous, quasi-experimental evaluation of Roca's Intervention Model and CBT work in Baltimore, allowing us to better understand the program's impact on violence and individual behavior change in young people.

Evaluations conducted in other regions confirm Roca's strong effect on the young people they serve. Abt Associates found in an evaluation of young people served by Roca in Massachusetts between 2018 and 2021 that:

- **85% did not recidivate** for any reason within one year of enrollment, 76% did not recidivate within two years, and 70% did not recidivate within three years. This is a 43%–48% reduction in recidivism when compared to a similar group analyzed by the Council on State Governments. CSG recently reported three-year re-incarceration rates of 52% and 56% for youth ages 18–24 who were released from Massachusetts county jails and state prisons, respectively.
- Equally important, Abt Associates found that Roca impacts the trajectory of a young person's criminal activity. While 62% of Massachusetts participants came to Roca with histories of arraignments or sentences for violent crimes, only 14% recidivated for a violent offense within three years (86% did not recidivate for a violent offense).

ROCA “WALKS THE WALK” FOR VIOLENCE REDUCTION IN OUR CITY

Roca works through relentless focus on a specific group of people, using a balanced approach that offers both alternatives to violence and a scientifically proven method of helping young people change their way of thinking, feeling and acting. In this way Roca embodies Abt's eloquent articulation of a process most likely to succeed at reducing urban violence:

“ What works to stop would-be shooters before they pull the trigger? What can turn them around? The principles of focus, balance, and fairness provide some guidance... Three specific anti-violence strategies, rooted in these principles, stand out from the rest: focused deterrence, street outreach and mediation, and cognitive behavioral therapy.”¹²

By intentionally working in concert with other organizations—especially law enforcement—that are necessary to keep peace and provide services to those who need a way out of violence, Roca models the organizational stance necessary to foster change in the community. Working in partnership requires time, trust, and a willingness to be humble. Roca understands this. Abt reflects on what kinds of overall efforts lead to positive results in a community:

“ After the meetings end, the partnership must follow up relentlessly, following through on the promises that were made. The partnership must establish working relationships with group members, first to keep them safe and out of jail or prison, then to get them on a path to opportunity. To win their trust, the partnership reaches out tirelessly—calling, texting, and visiting—trying to connect with each member as frequently and for as long as possible.”¹³

We are optimistic that Baltimore can reduce the urban violence in our city. To do so, we must first stop the bleeding in Baltimore City. It takes a coordinated, focused, balanced effort that leaves politics and even the public's need for simplistic solutions aside. Based on the results of its first four years, Roca Baltimore is playing a significant role in moving us forward.

This article is authored by Stephen Butz and Andre M. Davis, both prominent Baltimore residents who deeply care about the city and its community. Editing assistance was provided by Stewart Chapin.

Stephen Butz has worked with hundreds of non-profit organizations in his capacity as the Founder/CEO of Social Solutions. As a Leap Ambassador, Steve is a part of a large, national effort to promote high performance in nonprofit organizations across the country.

Andre M. Davis retired in 2017 as a federal appellate judge after 30 years of judicial service on both the state and federal judiciaries. Thereafter, he served for more than two years as the City Solicitor and Head of the Law Department for Baltimore City, during which he was instrumental in persuading the Mayor and City Council to support the efforts by many stakeholders to bring Roca to Baltimore.

Stewart Chapin is trustee of the Bennett Family Foundation, with a focus on organizations that help teens and young adults get reconnected to a supportive community. He spent his professional career in senior marketing, business development and product management roles for technology companies.

Both Butz and Davis are members of Roca Baltimore's Board of Managers, and Stewart Chapin is a member of Roca's Board of Directors.

ENDNOTES

All page references are to Abt, Thomas, *Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence--and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets*, Basic Books, 2019.

- 1 (Abt, "Bleeding Out", pp 25-6)
- 2 (Abt, pp 93, 95)
- 3 (Abt, p 41)
- 4 (Abt, p 45)
- 5 (Abt, p 100)
- 6 (Abt, p 104)
- 7 (Abt, p 167)
- 8 (Abt, p 66)
- 9 (Abt, p 69)
- 10 (Abt, p 107)
- 11 (Abt, p 171)
- 12 (Abt, p 87)
- 13 (Abt, p 91)