

PHILANTHROPY & NONPROFITS

'A KEY PIECE'

Roca program aims to break Baltimore's never-ending cycle of violence

Roca Baltimore's management team includes Tyrone Kent, director, Kurtis Palermo, executive vice president, and DeAndra Gordon, employment manager.

ERIC STOCKLIN FOR BBJ



By [Joanna Sullivan](#) – Editor-in-Chief, Baltimore Business Journal
Sep 20, 2024 **Updated** Sep 20, 2024 2:15pm EDT

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Roca Baltimore aims to end violence by helping endangered young men.
- The nonprofit teaches life skills and job training to at-risk youth.
- Roca's program has contributed to reducing Baltimore's homicide rate.

Editor's Note: The Baltimore Business Journal is embarking on a new series of stories focused on efforts to address social and economic ills in Greater Baltimore. "Elevate Greater Baltimore" will explore the nonprofits, people and businesses that are being creative in improving the quality of life in the region. Stay tuned for monthly installments of "Elevate Greater Baltimore" in the print and online Baltimore Business Journal starting in January.

Chris Spruill knows both the danger and pull of a nearby street corner in his East Baltimore neighborhood. The 21-year-old was shot there. Yet on a recent summer day, he still debated whether to hang out with his twin brother and friends at the same spot.

"A lot happens where I'm living," he said about the shooting. "It was bound to happen."

The folks at Roca, a Baltimore nonprofit focused on ending Baltimore's never-ending cycle of violence, want to make sure it doesn't happen again. Roca's James Taylor and Roderick Milligan paid a visit to Spruill's house to ask why he didn't show up to Roca's headquarters that day. The affable young father came outside to greet them and assure his skeptical visitors he was staying away from the corner.

"They have my back," Spruill said of the Roca men.

Roca Baltimore, an offshoot of Roca's Boston anti-violence program, aims to "have the back" of Baltimore's endangered young men, mostly Black teens and young adults who have survived a shooting or have been incarcerated. The nonprofit works with police and local hospitals to identify potential participants. The Baltimore program teaches life skills, self care, GED preparation and testing, and job training so the 18- to 24-year-olds can embark on productive lives.

Roca is nearing its seventh year in Baltimore with some high points, including numbers that show a majority of participants avoiding arrest and incarceration. The nonprofit also recently paid \$750,000 for a headquarters in Baltimore and has continued to train the city police department amid a federally mandated reform plan. Roca is looking beyond the city too, with an expansion into Baltimore County and a virtual training model that is trying to replicate the effort nationally.

Probably most encouraging is that the three-year program, backed by funding from public funds, grants and donations [from some of Baltimore's largest businesses and](#)

foundations, also has been credited with helping reduce Baltimore City's homicide rate. As of Sept. 10, annual homicides numbered 135, compared to 195 at this time last year. Non-fatal shootings dropped from 458 at this time in 2023 to 286 this year.

ROCA BY THE NUMBERS

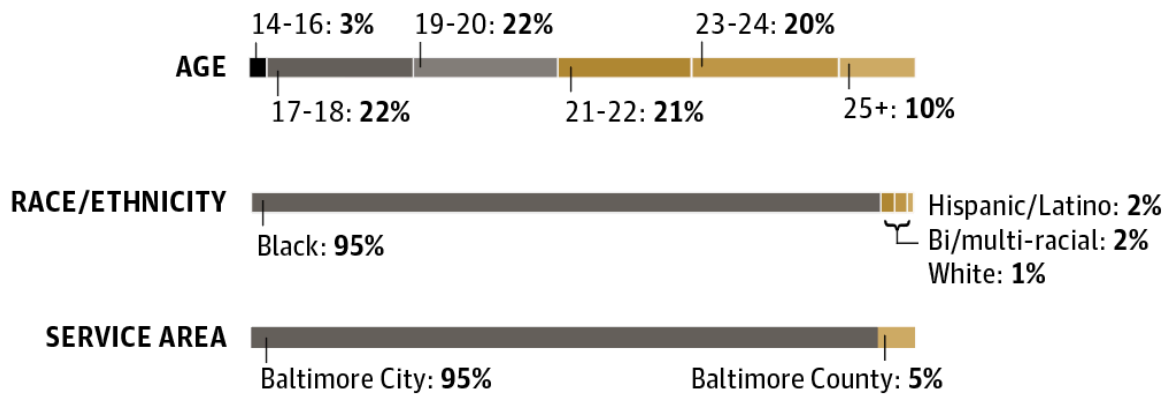
Roca Baltimore breaks down its impact on participants in fiscal 2024.

67%
Percentage of the 451 high-risk youth Roca served in fiscal 2024 who stayed with the program.

80%
Percentage of 152 participants enrolled for two years or longer who had no new arrests.

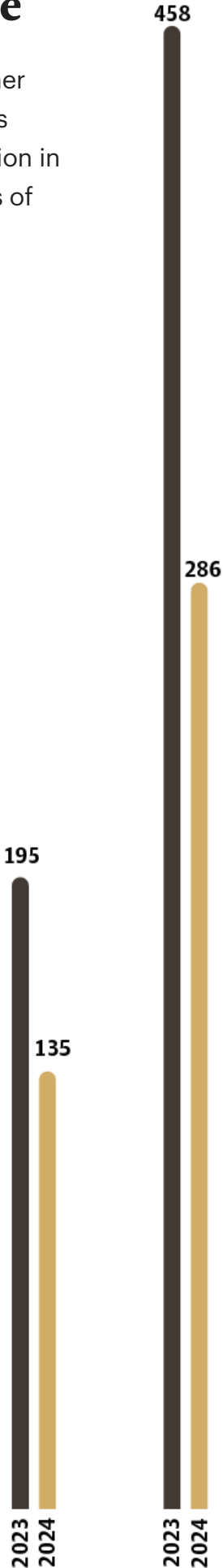
92%
Percentage of 152 participants enrolled for two years or longer who had no new incarcerations.

POPULATION SERVED



Combatting Crime

Baltimore Police Commissioner Richard Worley says Roca has played a role in crime reduction in the city. Here are statistics as of Sept. 10.



"We'd like to believe we're a key piece of it," said Molly Baldwin, Roca's founder and CEO, in a recent interview.

Baldwin, a Baltimore native, founded Roca in 1988 in Massachusetts with a focus on helping a small group of high-risk young people. The program served 451 boys and men in Baltimore in fiscal 2024 and boasts a 67% retention rate. She said cooperation with the police department, part of a federal consent decree after the death of Freddie Gray, has contributed to Roca's accomplishments so far.

"Success is not 100%, and it never is," Baldwin said. "Every young man we help to convince that there's a better way, that's a big success."

Baltimore Police Commissioner Richard Worley said he's been encouraged by that success. He admits he wasn't sure about the program when it first entered the market.

"I was skeptical because we've seen so many things tried here that didn't work," Worley said in an interview.

What sets Roca apart from those that failed?

"Persistence," Worley said. "They stay on top of the young person. They don't take no for an answer."

Worley said the young people in the Roca program often don't have anyone who really cares about them or wants to help them. Roca shows again and again that they do, he said.

"They come back a second and third time," he said. "They will continue to go back until all the avenues are exhausted."



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Inside Roca Baltimore's HQ

That persistence is on display as Milligan and Taylor work to make sure Spruill comes back to the program.

It's also apparent on a visit to Roca's headquarters. On the whiteboard is the "Skill of the Week," which tells the dozen or so participants gathering for a morning meeting to "Stick With It." It's at this meeting where the men and boys are asked how they're doing and make plans for their day, which involves going to job sites as part of a transitional jobs program.

Kurtis Palermo, executive vice president of Roca in Maryland, stands nearby and explains that the all-day program offers these young men a safe space to learn and grow in – a "house of healing" as he put it. Roca believes its participants can change.

"The brain is able to change," he said. "This is an opportunity for them to practice? something new in a safe place. We hold them accountable and keep them from harm's way."

At the core of Roca's efforts is the use of cognitive behavioral theory, an approach that teaches skills that help Roca participants make better choices such as avoiding confrontation or walking away from a fight. For example, they're taught to take an eight- to 10-second pause before acting. It often diffuses potentially deadly situations.

CBT is also used to help Roca workers get through some tough situations. Working with high-risk boys and men on a daily basis can be both rewarding and stressful, said Palermo, a 12-year veteran of Roca who moved to Baltimore to expand the program.

Palermo talked of losing some of the Roca participants to violence. In 2023, he said 15 Roca men and boys were killed. Over the past six years, they've lost more than 50.

"It's heartbreaking. It's painful," Palermo said. "You have to take your time to grieve but we have to serve other people."

James Taylor, who has 20 people in his caseload, said it always hits him hard when someone is arrested again.

"I feel like I failed them," Taylor said. "I can't be with them 24/7. A lot of these guys aren't bad people. They make bad decisions."

On the flip side, seeing someone turn their life around makes the job worth it, said Tyrone Kent, director of Roca Baltimore, who focuses on employment development.

"Just seeing the smile on their face when they've accomplished some things, it's priceless," he said.

Taylor agrees.

"Small wins are still wins," he said.

Isaiah Scarborough, 20, hopes to be one of those wins. He was trimming weeds from a fence in Patterson Park on a luckily not-too-hot July day. He talked about how he's halfway through his GED classes through Roca and learning job skills that can help him eventually join the "real world."

"It's definitely changed my life and the way I think," he said. "It's still a little rough, but Roca has taught me there's always light at the end of the tunnel. Better days are coming."



Roca youth worker Jeffrey Jones hugs participant Erin Walker.

ROCA

Roca's future in Baltimore

Some, like Worley, were hesitant to embrace Roca when it made its first move to expand here. Former Mayor Catherine Pugh was its biggest proponent.

"You're new. Where are you from?" Baldwin said many people asked. "You're never going to last."

Instead, Roca has attracted substantial support from some of Greater Baltimore's biggest players – Whiting-Turner Contracting Co., T. Rowe Price Foundation, Abell Foundation, M&T Bank and Exelon Corp. among them. Roca lists the revenue for its overall operations, including Baltimore, as \$27.9 million in its 2023 annual report. About 55% of its revenue comes from government sources and another 26% from private grants and contributions.

The nonprofit wants to grow its impact through its virtual Roca Impact Institute, an intensive coaching arm that provides community-based violence intervention programs, juvenile and young adult justice agencies and law enforcement with the same tools used

in Baltimore's comprehensive in-person program without the high cost. Roca Baltimore reported expenditures of more than \$7 million in fiscal year 2024.

Augie Chiasera, M&T Bank's Greater Baltimore president, sits on Roca's national board [and has spearheaded funding for the nonprofit](#). He encourages other organizations to help fund Roca, as well.

"I hear stories all the time about the lives that we impact," Chiasera said.

"It's remarkable."

Tim Regan, CEO of Whiting-Turner Contracting Co., said the company donated \$1 million soon after learning about Roca's plans to combat violence. He liked the focus on ending the cycle of violence that is often caused by retaliation and revenge against other crimes.

"I watch the numbers," Regan said. "To do with the numbers what Baltimore has been able to do the past two and a half years is downright thrilling."

Asked whether it was money well spent, Regan didn't hesitate.

"If our support of Roca has had even a modest effect on that, he said. "The answer to that is it's absolutely worth it."

The nonprofit continues to try to attract funding by offering statistics that highlight what's working.

"We are lowering the negatives and raising the positives," said Judge Andre M. Davis, chair of Roca Baltimore's advisory board. "It's a lot easier to show you're producing positive impacts. I see it upfront. It's having quite a significant impact in Baltimore."

The retired judge said he got involved because he wanted to stop young men from ending up in courtrooms, jails or worse. He likes Roca because it holds people accountable and gives them structure and deadlines.

"We're not giving up on these young men," Davis said. "We believe that change is possible. We're heading in the right direction."

As for Spruill, the 21-year-old who is trying to resist the corner where he was shot, he recently secured his driver's permit. He hopes to someday get his CDL license so he can