

HOW ROCA SUPPORTS YOUNG WOMEN EXPERIENCING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

**THE ROCA YOUNG MOTHERS PROGRAM
SERVES A POPULATION OF YOUNG
WOMEN WHO HAVE FACED COMPLEX
TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, AND MULTISYSTEM
INVOLVEMENT — AND INCREASINGLY,
SEX AND LABOR TRAFFICKING.**

Tufts Interdisciplinary Evaluation Research (TIER)
explores the factors that shape these women's lives,
and Roca's unique approach to supporting them.

AUTHORS

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INTRODUCTION

The Roca Young Mothers Program (YMP) exclusively serves a population of young women in Massachusetts and Connecticut who have faced complex trauma, violence, and multisystem involvement. Roca YMP increasingly serves young women experiencing human trafficking—primarily sex trafficking. “Human trafficking involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act.”³ As of April 2024, Roca identified about 125 trafficking cases across Roca YMP’s programs in Eastern and Western Massachusetts and Hartford, Connecticut—more than a third of its participants. Most are gang-involved and victims of sex trafficking, and increasingly, labor trafficking. Many do not identify themselves as victims of human trafficking.

Key risk factors for females experiencing human trafficking include exposure to complex trauma,⁵⁻⁸ violence,^{7,15} and multisystem involvement;^{5,7,8} mental health and substance use challenges;^{5,7,8} living in poverty^{7,15} and experiencing homelessness;^{7,8,18} lack of social support,⁶ running away or forced to leave home,^{5-7,15,19} and gang involvement;¹⁹ and challenges at school.^{7,15}

Trafficking Reports & Cases in the United States

In 2021, there were 10,360 reports of trafficking—76% sex trafficking—comprising 16,710 victims—79% female.¹ Of total reports, 93 were in Massachusetts (143 victims)⁴ and 54 in Connecticut (66 victims).¹¹

In 2022, there were 183 new human trafficking cases charged in Federal Courts,¹² comprising 363 victims—35% adult females, 26% minor females; 96% of cases were sex trafficking.¹⁶ Of these sex trafficking cases, 10 were in Massachusetts and one in Connecticut.¹⁷ These data likely underestimate the prevalence of sex trafficking.¹⁸



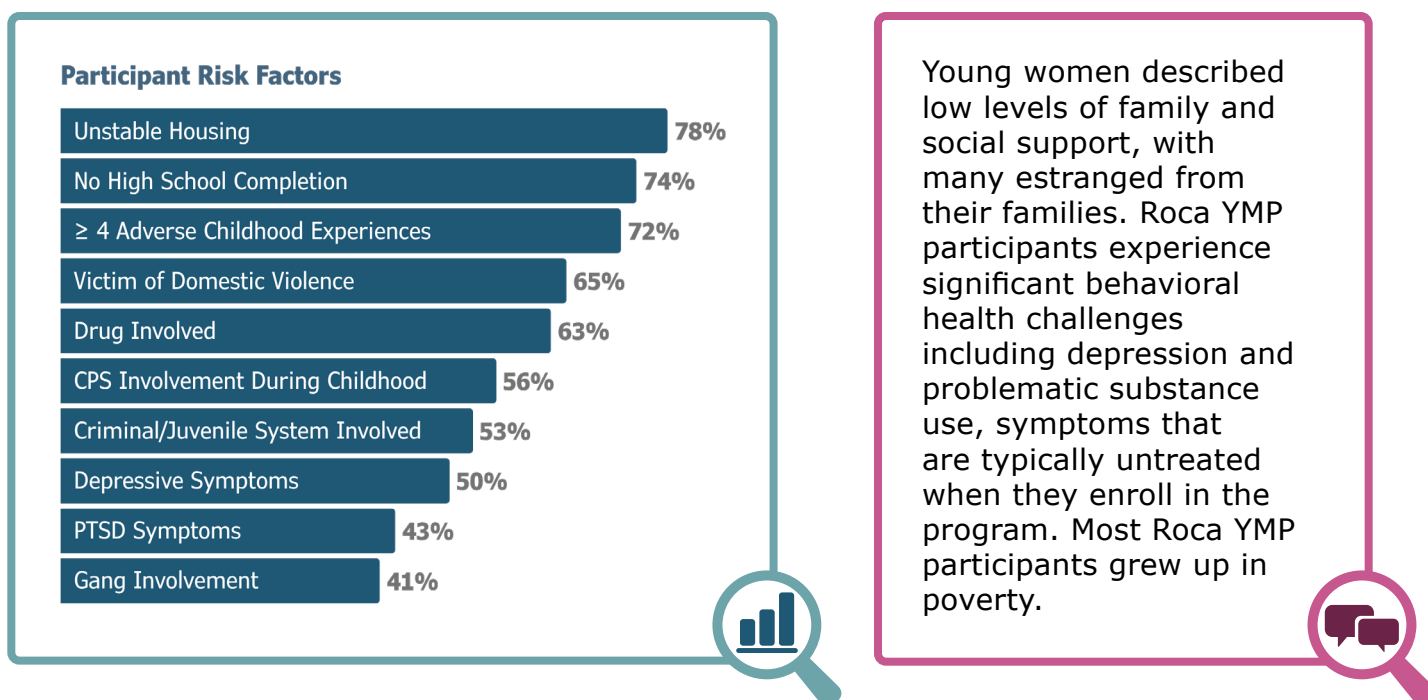
Participant Case Study

S, aged 17, was referred to Roca by DCF as a suspected victim of trafficking. She was getting into fights on the streets and had been kicked out of school for attempted kidnapping of a younger girl. Roca was able to confirm that S was connected to a group of known traffickers, and the man she considered her boyfriend is a known and dangerous gang member. S also disclosed that she and her sister were being sexually abused by her stepfather and that she was pregnant. S disappeared for some time and when she reappeared a few weeks later, she shared that, in trying to extricate herself from her trafficker, she was being sexually abused and prostituted on a daily basis.



Participant Experiences at Time of Enrollment

The figure below highlights the characteristics and experiences of Roca YMP participants, which overlap considerably with known risk factors faced by people experiencing human trafficking.



Roca YMP has recently begun tracking human trafficking among its young women and current records revealed participants who experience trafficking (vs. those who do not) were more likely to enter the program with histories of child welfare and criminal system involvement, domestic violence, trauma, and substance use. This previously hidden population within Roca YMP has become a focal point for programming.

ROCA'S UNIQUE APPROACH TO SUPPORTING YOUNG WOMEN

Roca YMP utilizes a unique approach that incorporates promising practices for victims of human trafficking. Roca YMP is led and supported by women, for women, implementing programming through a trauma-centered lens,^{2,20} and a harm reduction approach^{21,22} including a specific focus on **physical and psychological safety, relationships and positive connections, and opportunities for agency and empowerment.** In the sections below, we highlight the core components of Roca YMP. For each, we indicate how Roca YMP aligns with guiding principles and practices for victims of human trafficking (see boxes).

Safety and Stabilization

Roca YMP creates a space for young women that is safe and free from harm—both physically and psychologically—while ensuring women’s basic needs are met. Roca YMP recognizes that it may take a long time and lots of effort to break through the protective layers and behaviors developed in response to exposure to human trafficking. Thus, the program is both flexible and responsive to young women’s readiness.^{23,24}

MAKE participants feel safe both physically and emotionally.²

HELP address participants’ basic, immediate human needs including safety, shelter, food, and medical care.⁹



Relentless Outreach and Connection

Effective outreach for young women experiencing human trafficking—particularly those who may not realize they are victims—requires patience and persistence.²⁵ Roca YMP builds into its model a lengthy outreach period where young women experience firsthand that staff will not give up on them, they are seen, and Roca will be there. People who experience human trafficking often are not ready, willing, or able to connect with staff and make behavioral changes. Some young women may show low motivation to get out of exploitative relationships because they do not see themselves as victims and may view their relationships as a way to get their needs met.²⁴ Roca YMP tolerates—and expects—this period of disconnection, believing that by maintaining consistency, patience, and acceptance, young women will see that positive change is possible.²⁶ Roca YMP uses a youth worker model, often hiring women with lived experience similar to participants who will serve as their key worker. Peer mentoring has been shown to be effective among youth who have experienced sexual exploitation.²⁷ For example, a qualitative study of girls participating in a child sexual exploitation prevention program found that participants appreciated that their co-facilitator—a survivor of trafficking—could relate to them with respect to the challenges they experienced and the decisions they made, something that people without lived experience may struggle to do.²⁷

WORK towards building collaborative relationships with participants by being transparent and trustworthy, and showing respect for participants.^{2,10}

UNDERSTAND that challenging behaviors are adaptations (often self-protective) to trauma resulting from chronic activation of the stress response system that dysregulates cognition, behavior, and affect leading to impulsivity and challenges with interpersonal relationships.¹⁴



Emotional and Behavioral Regulation

Roca YMP uses a simple, relatable, and non-clinical cognitive behavioral theory curriculum as a guiding principle to teach critical self-regulation skills. This approach aims to help young women slow down, especially when triggered by trauma, identify thoughts and feelings, and disrupt negative cycles to assert control over their actions. Several evidence-based programs developed for youth exposed to extreme trauma—including human trafficking—use cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) as a primary component.^{24,28–31} In Roca YMP, these life-saving skills are taught, practiced, and honed over several years, allowing young women to learn to exert control over their own bodies, minds, emotions, and behavior to move towards change.

SUPPORT participants' mental health by supporting them to develop key competencies including how to cope with their emotions, build healthy relationships, and develop a positive sense of self and future orientation.²



Navigation

Roca YMP helps young women untangle themselves from the web of involuntary multisystem involvement by supporting them to resolve their child welfare, court, and immigration cases, and increasing their willingness and ability to navigate voluntary community systems of care. It directly provides or offers referrals for many of the services and supports young women's needs, including housing, substance use services, counseling, driver's education, financial literacy, vocational and educational services, and job training and placement. It provides advocacy for young women on their cases and as they move through systems. It supports alignment on case planning and goal setting across systems and services. It gets young women to the starting line so they can participate in services that can help them. Their work includes interfacing with public systems and advocating for the young women moving through them. They help connect siloed systems and help coordinate case management among all service providers. Increasingly, Roca YMP works with systems to ensure they are trauma-informed⁸ and educates professionals across disciplines on understanding and recognizing trafficking.^{5,6,18} Roca YMP is part of the movement ensuring that people recognize that human trafficking is a human rights issue, not a criminal justice issue.

USE multifaceted programming that aims to heal trauma, but also provides guidance for their future across multiple levels.² Some topics to focus on include safety, mental health (including effects of violence and feelings of shame), agency and empowerment, physical health (including sexually transmitted infections), substance use, family relationships (including parenting), and economic self-sufficiency.

TRAIN frontline workers in related systems including law enforcement, hospitality, transportation, and juvenile justice to recognize and identify potential victims and to offer safety and support is essential.^{5,13}



Transformation

Roca YMP recognizes the unique potential of each young woman it serves. They work on building young women's self-esteem and self-worth^{6,8} and their ability to make decisions and engage in the world in a manner that is empowered and future-oriented.³²

Building these skills can help to weaken connections to traffickers, who often work hard to isolate and create a sense of dependency among their victims.²² They aim to increase young women's knowledge and understanding about exploitation to help break the cycle.⁸ Roca YMP values incremental positive changes, recognizing that seemingly small improvements may be large victories for the young women.

PROMOTE participants' empowerment such as supporting their autonomy² and decision-making.¹⁰



HOW ROCA HELPS YOUNG WOMEN TRANSFORM

Roca YMP helps young women build protective factors, engage positively in supportive systems of care, and provide a new start for themselves.

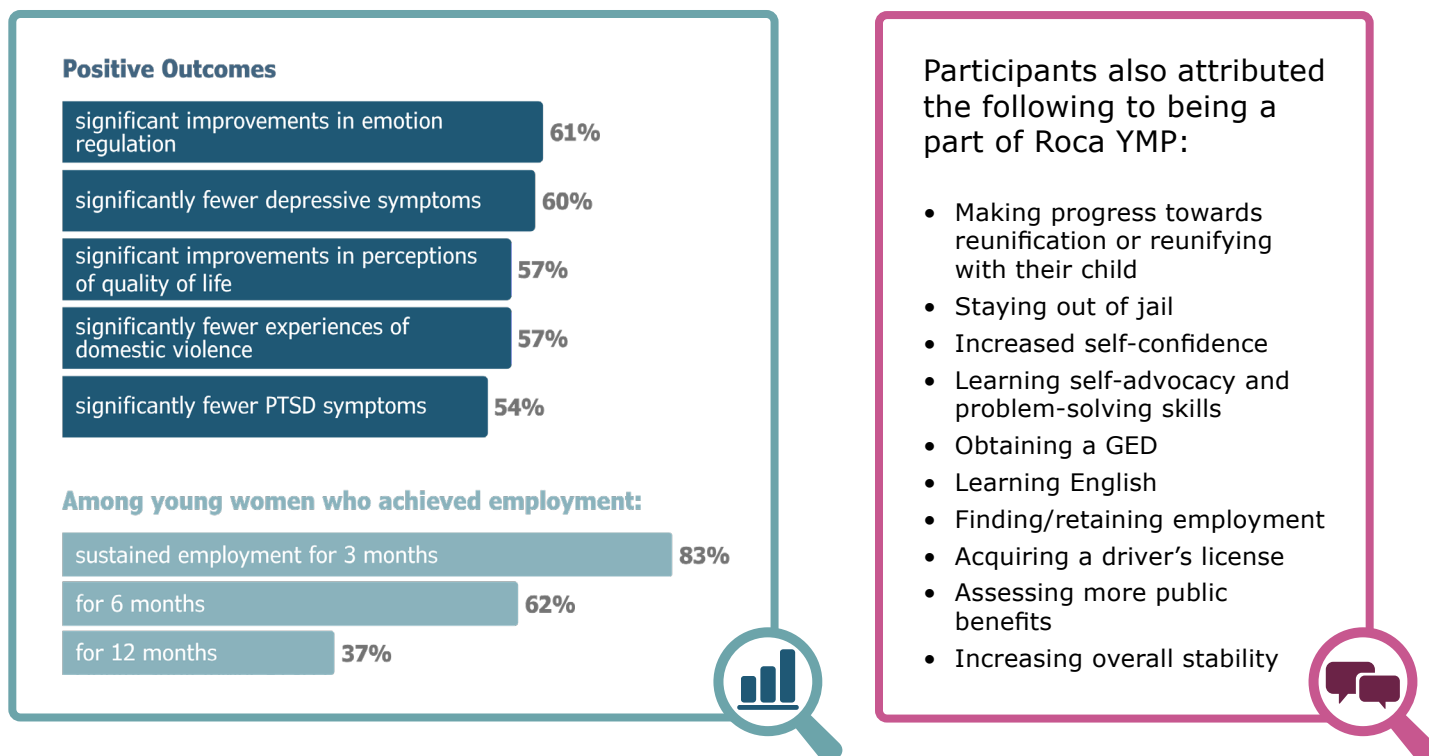
Participant Case Study

R was referred to Roca by DCF at age 16. She was involved with DCF as a child and had been on Juvenile Probation and in detention due to street involvement. She was extremely challenging to engage, and Roca staff realized that she was actively involved in sex trafficking, potentially even recruiting other young women to go across state lines. Roca exercised caution in engaging her with other participants and in community settings. After a year of relentless outreach and sporadic engagement, R began to seek out Roca's help. One day, she came to Roca unannounced and said she needed a shelter because she didn't want to have to go out of state again. Roca helped find her temporary shelter, because it was not safe to place her in a hotel. She agreed to stay for three nights, at which time she was supposed to receive a call from 211 but never did. She went back to the streets but agreed to share her location with Roca.



Participation in Roca and Positive Outcomes

The figure below highlights how participation in Roca YMP changes the trajectories of the young women it serves.



BOLSTERING SUPPORT FOR YOUNG WOMEN EXPERIENCING TRAFFICKING

Screening and Assessment Recommendations for Roca

Healthcare providers are often the first people to have contact with victims of active trafficking,¹⁸ but others who work with vulnerable populations, such as Roca YMP staff, may also be in a position to identify potential victims. It is important to note that organizations should adhere to a few guidelines when engaging in trafficking screening and assessment. See the text box below.

A few guiding principles for organizations³³

SAFETY: Ensure that staff and participants feel safe.

PEER SUPPORT: Peer support helps to build safety and hope. Sharing lived experience can promote recovery and healing.

EMPOWERMENT: Ensure that participants are empowered to make decisions about their lives and supported to build self-advocacy skills.

To prepare staff for screening^{34,35}

- Provide human trafficking training
- Establish an internal response protocol
- Implement an information and referral network

Before and during screening

- Create a safe space including holding the interview in a non-threatening and comfortable location where the participant is not in sight of the trafficker.
- Meet participants' physical needs by providing food and drinks, bathrooms and showers, and regular comfort breaks.
- Discuss how and when confidentiality will be maintained and any limitations.
- Ask participants if they would like to be interviewed by someone of the same gender identity and/or culture.
- Be respectful of their cultural and/or religious background and how it affects attitudes towards sex. If translators are required, use trustworthy interpreters who understand the sensitive nature of the interview and can maintain confidentiality.
- Do not probe for unnecessary details and do not imply that participants are responsible for their abuse and exploitation and inability to leave the trafficking situation.
- Be prepared for participants' trauma reaction and fear of retribution.
- Assess current risk and offer strategies to reduce threat of harm. Offer choices when possible.



There are several types of tools available, including

- a “red flag” checklist or risk assessment, which is used to **identify risk factors** for potential human trafficking;
- screening tools, which are typically brief questionnaires designed to **identify potential human trafficking**. These usually include closed-ended questions that require “yes” or “no” responses;
- more lengthy assessment tools to **confirm human trafficking**, often administered by an expert. [See the Polaris Project’s assessment here.](#) Roca would benefit from focusing on a “red flag” or screening tool. See the text box below for some examples.

Tools for Roca to Consider

[Adult Human Trafficking Screening Tool](#)³⁴

[Human Trafficking Interview and Assessment Measure \(HTIAM-14\)](#)³⁶

[The Quick Youth Indicators for Trafficking \(QYIT\)](#)³⁷

[Human Trafficking Screening Tool \(HTST\)](#)³⁸

[The Trafficking Victim Identification Tool \(TVIT\)](#)³⁷

[Six-Item Screening Questionnaire](#)³⁹



CONCLUSIONS

Many of Roca YMP’s young women do not explicitly identify as victims of human trafficking even though they meet criteria and exhibit most of the key risk factors. Roca YMP’s participant-centric approach emphasizes participants’ ability to make decisions based on their perceived needs, while understanding that experiences of human trafficking are often due to structural inequities and require a broader community-wide response. Roca YMP does not try to “rescue” these young women, but rather aims to be a beacon of safety, stability, and trust when the young women come to them and are ready to engage, celebrating even the smallest successes.

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