ROCA YOUNG WOMEN
2026 BRIEF REPORT

ROCA WORKS WITH YOUNG WOMEN NAVIGATING COMPLEX LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES, INCLUDING EXPERIENCES OF TRAUMA, POVERTY, HOUSING INSTABILITY, EXPLOITATION, TRAFFICKING, AND INVOLVEMENT IN THE CHILD WELFARE AND CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEMS.

ROCA HELPS INTERRUPT HARMFUL PATHWAYS, STRENGTHEN CONNECTIONS, AND SUPPORT POSITIVE CHANGE.

In fiscal year (FY) 2026, TIER led two complementary studies focused on Roca Young Women (Roca). This brief report presents updates and high-level findings from both.

JULY 2026

TIER
Tufts Interdisciplinary Evaluation Research

Executive Summary

This brief presents findings from two complementary studies of Roca's work with young women navigating complex life circumstances, including experiences of trauma, poverty, housing instability, exploitation, trafficking, and involvement in the child welfare and criminal legal systems. Together, these studies provide a deeper understanding of the challenges young women face when they enter Roca and the ways in which Roca's model supports their movement toward safety, stability, healing, and long-term positive change.

STUDY 1

Supporting Young Women with Systems Involvement

This study examined the experiences of young women deeply involved in the child welfare and/or criminal legal systems and explored how Roca helps interrupt harmful pathways, strengthen connections, and support positive change. Findings draw on interviews with young women, Roca staff, and partners, as well as program and state administrative data.

STUDY 2

Trafficking Prevalence and Engagement

This study explored the prevalence of trafficking among young women enrolled in Roca and how Roca engages those with trafficking histories. Preliminary findings focus on suspected and confirmed trafficking histories, pre-enrollment outreach, and staff engagement during the first six months of participation.

Conclusion

Together, these studies highlight the importance of Roca's work with young women navigating trauma, instability, exploitation, and system involvement. The findings suggest that sustained relationships, consistent engagement, and practical support can help young women move toward greater safety, stability, and well-being. While the results are descriptive rather than causal, they provide encouraging evidence and lay the groundwork for future research on how specific elements of Roca's model contribute to young women's outcomes.

TIER Tufts Interdisciplinary Evaluation Research

Roca

KEY FINDINGS

Young women face complex, interconnected challenges.
Trauma, poverty, housing instability, violence, exploitation, and system involvement are often linked to broader barriers and limited access to resources and support.

Systems often fall short.
Young women frequently describe child welfare and criminal legal systems as difficult to navigate and insufficiently responsive to their needs.

Roca provides relationship-based support.
Through sustained outreach, Rewire cognitive behavioral theory (CBT), skill-building, advocacy, and systems navigation, Roca helps young women build trust, stability, and coping skills.

Engagement is strong.
Most participants remained closely connected to their youth worker; 88% met weekly during their first two years, and 72% practiced Rewire CBT skills.

Outcomes are promising.
Following enrollment, young women showed improvements in areas such as criminal legal and child welfare involvement, employment, benefits access, and emotional well-being.

Trafficking is common among participants.
Nearly two-thirds of young women enrolled in FY26 were identified as having a suspected trafficking history, underscoring the prevalence of exploitation among the young women Roca serves.

Persistent outreach matters.
Young women with trafficking histories often require substantial time and trust-building before engagement, highlighting the importance of Roca's long-term, relationship-based approach.

STUDY 1

How Roca Supports Young Women Experiencing Complex Systems Involvement

This study provides an in-depth examination of young women participating in Roca who experience complex involvement in the child welfare and/or criminal legal systems. Drawing on interviews with young women, staff, and state and community partners, this study explores the conditions, experiences, and behaviors that shape young women's lives and influence their pathways into and through multiple systems. It also examines how Roca's model helps disrupt harmful system pathways, strengthen community connections, and support movement towards safety, stability, healing, and positive long-term change.

Methods Snapshot

In FY25, we conducted preliminary interviews with six Roca staff and two state and community partners to scope Study 1 and refine its aims. We also reviewed summaries from three focus groups with Roca young women conducted in FY25. In FY26, with funding from the William T. Grant Foundation (Grant ID #OR-205558), we conducted paired interviews with six Roca young women and their youth workers (interviewed separately), as well as interviews with an additional Roca staff member and 11 state and community partners. To analyze the qualitative data, we first developed a list of codes aligned with the study aims and then iteratively refined them as new themes and patterns emerged.

We supplemented the qualitative data with secondary analysis of Roca's internal Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) and state administrative data to examine uptake of Roca programming and changes in key data points over time. The analytic sample included young women who enrolled in Roca between FY19–FY24 and who remained enrolled for at least 12 months (n=322).[i] We conducted descriptive analyses (e.g., chi-square tests and t-tests) comparing outcomes before and after Roca enrollment. State administrative data included arraignment records from the Connecticut Judicial Branch Court Support Services Division and the Massachusetts Department of Criminal Justice Information Services Criminal Offender Record Information system, public benefits data from the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, and childcare financial assistance records from the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care. All reported differences are statistically significant at $p<.05$.

i Sample sizes for specific variables will vary depending on missing data and availability of state administrative data.

Findings

Structural and social conditions limit young women's opportunities and affect all aspects of their lives, greatly enhancing the likelihood they will become systems-involved.

Young women's lives—and the lives of their families before them—are shaped by several structural and social conditions:

- ***Racism and gender inequality*** including unfair policies, unequal treatment by systems, social and economic exclusion, and greater exposure to gender-based violence and exploitation.
- ***Socioeconomic conditions*** including persistent and severe poverty, unstable labor markets, and limited access to safe and affordable housing.
- ***Community disinvestment*** including under-resourced schools and institutions, scarce community programs for children and youth, and exposure to neighborhood violence and disorder.
- ***Gaps in health and social infrastructure*** including inadequate access to health care including reproductive care, substance use treatment, and other essential social services.

These structural and social factors limit young women's opportunities and affect young women's everyday experiences and behaviors across multiple areas of their lives. These impacts are seen:

- ***Personally,*** young women may become more isolated, struggle to trust others, and experience emotional distress. They may also face unstable housing and adopt coping strategies such as substance use or self-harm.
- ***Within their families,*** young women may lack consistent emotional or material support and experience caregiving instability or rejection of sexual or gender identity. Family conflict, violence, substance use, gang involvement, or incarceration are common, with many young women assuming adult responsibilities prematurely.
- ***In peer and romantic relationships,*** young women may experience bullying, isolation, or victimization. Some face intimate partner violence and some parent without support from a partner.

Figure 1.
Structural Pathways to Systems Involvement

- ***In schools,*** young women may struggle to stay engaged due to chronic absenteeism, disciplinary actions, or exclusionary practices. Some experience direct mistreatment by school staff, leading to disengagement from learning and, in some cases, leaving school altogether.
- ***In their communities,*** young women may witness or experience violent crime, become involved in gangs, face trafficking or exploitation, or engage in informal or illicit economies to meet basic needs.
- ***In their interactions with services and systems,*** young women often experience mistrust, fragmented support, and limited control over decisions impacting their lives.

Together these conditions, which constrain opportunities and shape young women's experiences and behaviors drive complex systems involvement (see Figure 1).

Experiences and behaviors—including ongoing crises, unmet basic needs, and trauma-related coping behaviors—contribute to system involvement by triggering new cases and intensifying existing ones. As system involvement increases, existing challenges may become more difficult to resolve, creating conditions that can lead to further involvement.

Systems responses to young women are often inadequate and, in some instance, detrimental.

Systems often respond in ways that do not fit the complex challenges young women experience. It can feel like punishment instead of support to young women, with more focus on following rules than meeting real needs. As a result, young women must navigate overwhelming and sometimes conflicting requirements across multiple systems, while also managing fear of consequences if they seek help. Young women report perceived bias and harsher treatment compared to male counterparts, as well as interactions with staff who take a deficit-focused or unsupportive approach. These dynamics can make it difficult to advocate for themselves.

Systems frequently fail to account for how unmet basic needs and trauma shape young women's behavior—contributing to initial involvement and increasing the likelihood of violations or setbacks, making it harder for young women to disengage.

"It feels like sometimes they don't listen to you. Like, if I am going through a lot, and I have to pay rent, and I have to pay all these things, and on top of that, I am a troubled kid who's trying to survive, not trying to go more, you know, get more cases, and they're just on top of you, like … I get it, to a certain extent, but when you want me to do random testings, aside from that, you know, a program that you have to go in person, and aside from that, another type of testing, and on top of that, you have to work, and on top of that, you have to deal with all your stuff towards, surviving. I didn't feel heard. I felt like this is what the protocol says, and this is what we're gonna do. It didn't matter how much I was expressing myself and telling, 'hey, I can't. I literally, physically cannot.'"

—Roca young woman

Through trauma-informed, gender-responsive care, Roca helps young women navigate systems, address unmet needs, and heal from trauma.

Roca is a leading example of a program supporting young women who are deeply systems-involved. Roca focuses on promoting safety, stability, and connection; emotional and behavioral regulation; practicing skills through programming; and systems navigation. Its approach expands young women's opportunities—opening doors that have long been closed, which can re-shape young women's experiences and behaviors in all aspects of their lives.

Safety, Stability, and Connection

Roca creates a physically and emotionally safe and predictable environment for young women based on transparency, consistency, and acceptance. Roca staff aim to build a culture of respect, trust, and dignity across all interactions with young women. Every young woman is paired with a primary female supportive Roca staff member—their youth worker—who provides one-to-one support across the duration of the three-year program period. Youth workers and other Roca staff focus on:

- Engaging in relentless outreach—Roca's intensive outreach practice
- Fulfilling immediate basic needs
- Providing a safe space
- Building transformational relationships defined by acceptance and trust.

88%

of young women met with their youth worker on a weekly basis in first two years of program

Emotional and Behavioral Regulation

A cornerstone of Roca's approach is teaching young women how to react to their trauma differently, so they move beyond survival behaviors—behaviors that often predicated their systems involvement. Through Roca's flagship CBT program—Rewire—Roca staff teach young women how trauma impacts the brain, help them to recognize and manage the emotions they feel, support them to challenge unhelpful thoughts, and identify solutions to problems in real time within their everyday interactions. Roca also offers timely, flexible, and responsive in-house therapy through contracts with community clinicians.

72%

of young women practice CBT skills with their youth worker

Roca youth workers use Rewire to support young women to approach how they react to "disrespect" in their interactions with others. State systems partners highlighted instances when they saw young women using or sharing CBT skills in group situations.

Practicing Skills Through Programming

Roca staff model, coach, and provide on-site programming to foster and build young women's skills. Roca's program offerings include GED support, financial literacy, driver's education, parenting support for young mothers, healthy relationship-building, and workforce training. Roca's transitional employment program (TEP) is critical for young women who are systems-involved. TEP serves as a helpful on-ramp to employment by providing opportunities to learn employability skills in a safe and non-judgmental environment.

79%
of young women attended Roca programming every other week

90%
of young women engaged in life skills programming

85%
of young women engaged in workforce readiness or educational programming

Systems Navigation

Roca's youth workers help young women navigate systems. They do this directly through their one-to-one work with young women including case management and referrals, and indirectly through advocacy on behalf of young women and coordination with community services and systems partners.

Almost all young women enrolled in Roca *(90.0%) have third party contacts made on their behalf by Roca staff, averaging about 11 contacts per young woman.*

Table 1 summarizes how young women and Roca staff described systems barriers and Roca's alternative approach to prevailing systems practices.

Table 1. **How Roca Responds to Systems Barriers**

SYSTEMS BARRIERS	ROCA'S RESPONSE
Overwhelming, rigid requirements that emphasize compliance	Break requirements into manageable, step-by-step goals
Environments that discourage help-seeking due to fear of punishment or negative consequences	Build trust and create safe, supportive spaces where young women feel comfortable asking for help
Misunderstanding the root causes of behavior	Help explain how trauma, coercion, unmet needs, and other lived experiences shape behavior
Interpreting behavior as "noncompliance" rather than as adaptive or survival responses	Reframe behaviors as coping strategies and respond with support and skill-building rather than punishment
Expectations that do not account for instability or barriers (e.g., housing, childcare, transportation)	Advocate for flexibility when requirements are unrealistic or unfair
Fragmented systems with limited coordination across providers	Coordination across providers and systems to ensure continuity of care
Requirements that can deepen system involvement when unmet	Help young women navigate systems and reduce barriers to disengagement

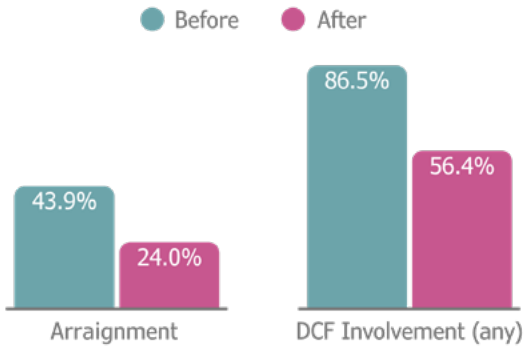
With Roca by their sides, young women make significant progress in many aspects of their lives.

With Roca's support, young women with complex systems involvement described significant progress in several domains of their lives—within systems; across education, employment, and life skills; in building healthy relationships; and personally, in terms of their socio-emotional and behavioral development. The following section outlines how young women and Roca staff conceptualized progress, supplemented by available data from Roca's ETO and linked state administrative records.

Within Systems

Interview participants described system-related progress in terms of reunification with children, closure of Department of Children and Families (DCF)[ii] cases, completion of probation requirements, and reduced recidivism risk reflected in sustained positive and emotionally regulated behavior. Quantitative data were available on arraignments and general DCF involvement and are presented here. Future analyses will explore child welfare involvement in greater depth using state administrative data.

Figure 2.
Rates of new arraignments and child welfare involvement declined following Roca enrollment, compared to the period prior to enrollment.



Note: *Arraignment data from the Connecticut Judicial Branch Court Support Services Division and the Massachusetts Department of Criminal Justice Information Services Criminal Offender Record Information; n=171. DCF involvement as a minor or as a parent from Roca's ETO and tracking data; n=289.*

Across Education, Employment, and Life Skills

Interview participants described progress in education, employment, and life skills in terms of graduating from high school or earning a GED, improving workforce readiness and financial stability, and building the skills necessary for independent living. Quantitative data were available on young women's employment status and receipt of public benefits.[iii] Additional data are needed on educational attainment and life skills including financial management and housing stability.

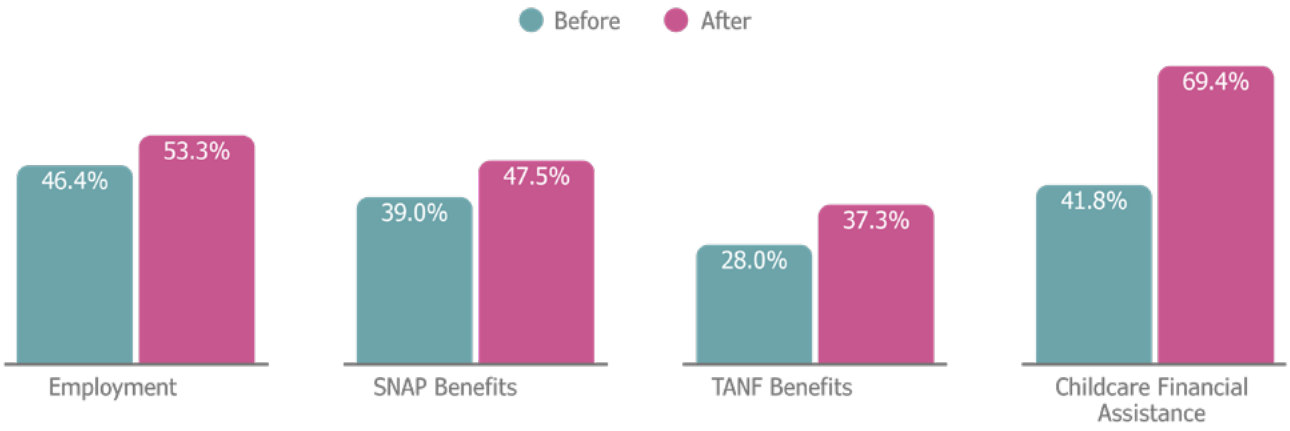
"I don't know how to phrase this, but a statistic. But that's what I feel like Roca don't want me to become. You know what I mean?"

—Roca young woman

ii DCF is the state child welfare agency in both Connecticut and Massachusetts, respectively.

iii Benefits data were available in Massachusetts only for this analysis. Connecticut data will be available for future analyses.

Figure 3.
Employment and benefits receipt increased following Roca enrollment, compared to the period prior to enrollment.



Note: *Employment data from Roca's ETO; n=302. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) data from the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance; n=118. Child care financial assistance data from the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care; n=98.*

Building Healthy Relationships

Progress in building healthy relationships centered on young women developing a stronger understanding of what constitutes a healthy relationship and gaining skills to set and maintain personal boundaries. Interview participants described increased capacity to recognize behaviors and relationship patterns that were unhealthy or misaligned with their needs. Quantitative data in this area were limited to domestic violence screening.

*According to standardized assessment, young women reported **significantly lower levels of domestic violence** at follow-up (about 1–3 years after enrollment) compared to enrollment.*[1]

Socio-Emotional and Behavioral Development

Interview participants described progress in socio-emotional and behavioral development when young women showed increases in confidence and self-awareness, along with strengthened capacity for emotional and behavioral regulation. Young women built more adaptive coping strategies, remained engaged in therapy, and responded to stress with fewer trauma-driven behaviors. Over time, these changes supported the development of a more stable and renewed sense of self. Quantitative data were available for several related outcomes including emotional regulation, depression, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

According to standardized assessment measures, ***levels of emotional dysregulation,[2] depression,[3] and PTSD symptoms[4] were significantly lower*** *at follow-up (about 1–3 years after enrollment) compared to enrollment.*

Conclusion

Young women's complex systems involvement in the child welfare and/or criminal legal system is driven by several structural and social conditions that limit opportunities across multiple domains of life and deeply affect their lived experiences and behaviors. Systems often fall short in addressing the underlying factors that contribute to system involvement and may not create the conditions for sustained positive change.

Roca is a leading example of an approach that aims to shift policies and practices, build systems of support rather than surveillance, and provide these supports consistently and relentlessly. Through one-to-one partnerships between youth workers and young women, and Roca staff collaborations with community and state partners, Roca promotes safety, stability, emotional and behavioral regulation, skill development, and system navigation, broadening opportunities for young women to change their lives. Findings indicate promising progress, including reductions in systems involvement, increased benefits receipt, and improvements in psychosocial outcomes following enrollment.

STUDY 2

Prevalence and Engagement of Young Women Who Have Experienced Trafficking

The second study, currently in its early stages, will assess outcomes for young women in Roca using ETO data and state administrative data from Connecticut and Massachusetts.[iv] It includes: (1) an assessment of risk prevalence including trafficking among young women; (2) a descriptive analysis of program dosage after updates to Roca's Rewire CBT model; and (3) an outcome analysis examining how differences in staff engagement, Rewire participation, and skills-based programming relate to young women's outcomes. We present preliminary data on the first objective in this report, offering an initial look at integrated data collection on human trafficking—through sex and labor—among young women participating in Roca.

Methods Snapshot

Using ETO data, the analytic sample includes 91 Roca young women who enrolled in the first three quarters of FY26. We examined several data points including: (1) youth worker reports of suspected and confirmed trafficking histories, and (2) the number of direct and attempted contacts made by youth workers with young women prior to program enrollment (relentless outreach) and during the first six months of participation (staff engagement).

iv State administrative data include arraignment records from the Connecticut Judicial Branch Court Support Services Division and the Massachusetts Department of Criminal Justice Information Services Criminal Offender Record Information system, child welfare reports and case openings from the Connecticut and Massachusetts Departments of Children and Families, public benefits data from the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, and childcare financial assistance records from the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood and the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care.

Findings

Most of the young women enrolled in Roca have a history of trafficking.

Among young women who enrolled in FY26 (n=91), staff identified that nearly two thirds (n=59, 64.8%) had suspected trafficking in their lifetimes. All but two of these young women experienced sex trafficking and 12 experienced labor trafficking. Staff confirmed trafficking for 40 of the 59 young women (67.8%). Initial staff feedback suggests that young women may take time to disclose experiences related to trafficking—as their relationship with their youth worker develops. Thus, these statistics may underestimate trafficking prevalence among Roca young women.

Roca engaged in substantial relentless outreach to engage young women who have experienced trafficking.

On average, Roca youth workers engage young women with a trafficking history for almost three months, on average, prior to enrollment, with substantial variability ranging from 0 to 39 weeks. Prior to enrollment, most outreach efforts result in actual contact—18, on average. A quarter of these women received upwards of 27 actual contacts. Young women received another 4 attempted contacts, on average, with a quarter of these women receiving upwards of 7 attempted contacts These patterns are consistent with the broader population of young women Roca serves.

Roca continues to engage these women once they are fully enrolled in the program.

In the initial six month of Roca enrollment, we found that youth workers maintained consistent contact with young women with histories of trafficking. On average, young women received 8 to 12 direct contacts with staff per month. In addition, staff made 2 to 5 attempted contacts each month. These patterns are consistent with those observed across the broader sample of young women enrolled in Roca in FY26.

Next Steps

As data become available, we will continue to assess program dosage, with a focus on Rewire, ultimately examining how Roca programming is associated with young women's psychosocial, systems-related, and economic outcomes using both internal ETO data and state administrative data.

Acknowledgements and Disclaimers

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