



Serving Young Men in Baltimore at the Center of Violence

FINDINGS FROM A DESCRIPTIVE EVALUATION OF ROCA BALTIMORE

Lily Freedman, Megan Millenky, and Farhana Hossain • AUGUST 2023

Roca is a nonprofit organization that works with young people at the center of violence. For 35 years, it has operated in communities across Massachusetts. In 2018, it brought its well-regarded program model to Baltimore in 2018 as a part of the city's efforts to reduce violent crimes. Roca identifies and engages young men who are involved in the criminal legal system and those who are at high risk of participating in gun violence or being affected by it. Roca's program model, grounded in promoting cognitive behavioral change among its participants, seeks to address the traumatic experiences and barriers to opportunities that these young men have faced. The program's ultimate goals are to reduce participants' involvement with the criminal legal system and increase their ability to retain employment.

This brief, the third and last in a series of publications from MDRC's evaluation of the program, assesses the extent to which Roca identified and engaged its target population, through an analysis of data on participants' demographics; their histories of trauma, employment, education, and involvement in the criminal legal system; and their current involvement in the criminal legal system. The current brief supplements these analyses with some of the evaluation's previously published qualitative findings. Earlier publications from the evaluation focused on the [program model and its operational context](#) in Baltimore, and the [journey of Roca's participants](#) and their experiences with what the program offers.

Roca's Context in Baltimore

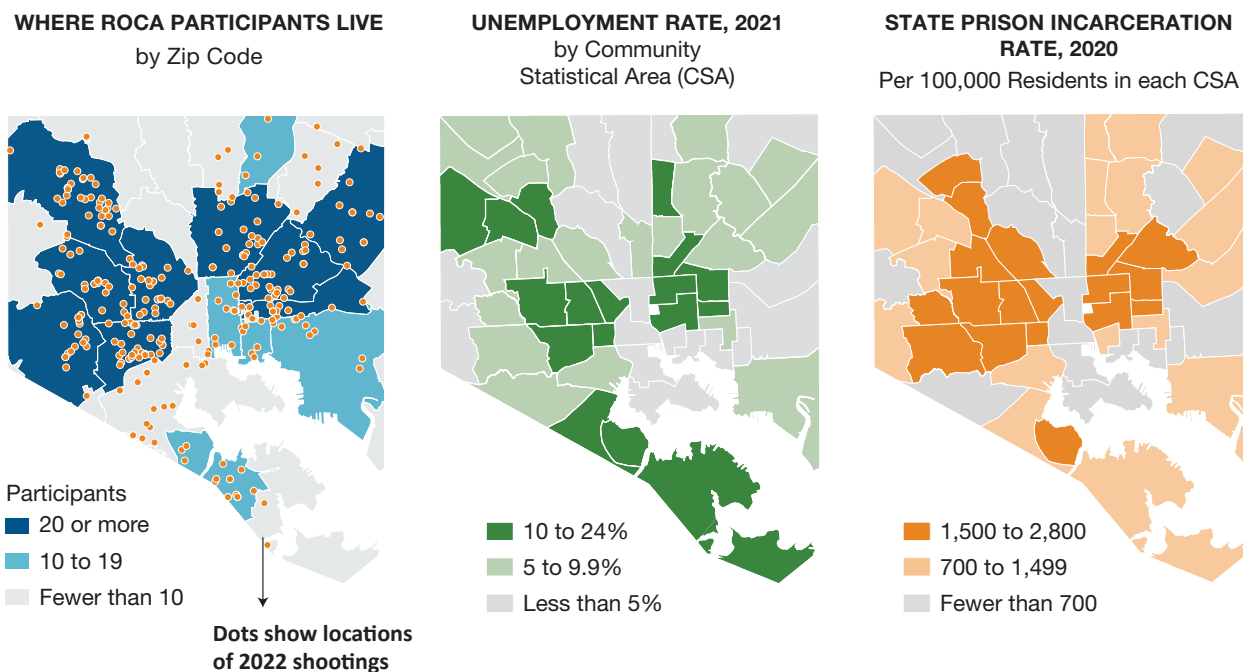
Baltimore is a city with rich history, vibrant culture, storied institutions, and resilient communities. However, the city is geographically divided by race and income, and Black neighborhoods have long faced wide disparities in investments, access to opportunities, policing practices, and neighborhood safety.¹

Black residents far outnumber White residents in the city, but they have significantly lower median household incomes (\$42,825 compared with \$84,106 for White residents in 2021),² and much higher rates of incarceration (one study estimates that Black residents are incarcerated three times as often as White residents).³ Black neighborhoods have also faced a pattern of unconstitutional and discriminatory policing practices, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.⁴ Following the 2015 death of Freddie Gray in police custody that set off citywide protests, the Department of Justice finding only cemented distrust for the police in these communities.⁵ Furthermore, Black communities endure high levels of violence; in 2022, 210 of 335 homicide victims in Baltimore were Black.⁶ Additionally, in a lawsuit spanning over 25 years, families of Baltimore City Public Schools and civil rights groups allege the state has violated its constitutional obligation to provide adequate funding to city schools and provide students access to quality education.⁷ Notably, 73 percent of students are Black.⁸

As shown in Figure 1, the young men Roca serves—most of whom are Black and between the ages of 16 and 24—live in these communities with high levels of poverty, unemployment, violence, and incarceration.

FIGURE 1
Community Context of Roca Baltimore Participants

Roca Baltimore participants come from neighborhoods that are predominantly Black, and that have long experienced disparities in poverty, employment, violent crimes, and policing.



SOURCES: MDRC calculations based on data from Roca Baltimore's management information system (participant zip codes); Baltimore City Police Department (shootings); Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance-Jacob France Institute (unemployment rate, based on American Community Survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau); and the Prison Policy Institute (state prison incarceration rate).

NOTES: Participant locations are based on the zip codes of those who enrolled in Roca Baltimore between July 2018 and March 2022. Zip code information was not available for 5 of the 399 participants enrolled during this time.

Identifying Roca Participants

Roca focuses specifically on reaching young men who are assessed to be at high risk of future involvement in gun violence or incarceration and who are unlikely to pursue services or work on their own. Roca partners with the city's police department and criminal legal agencies to identify potential program participants.

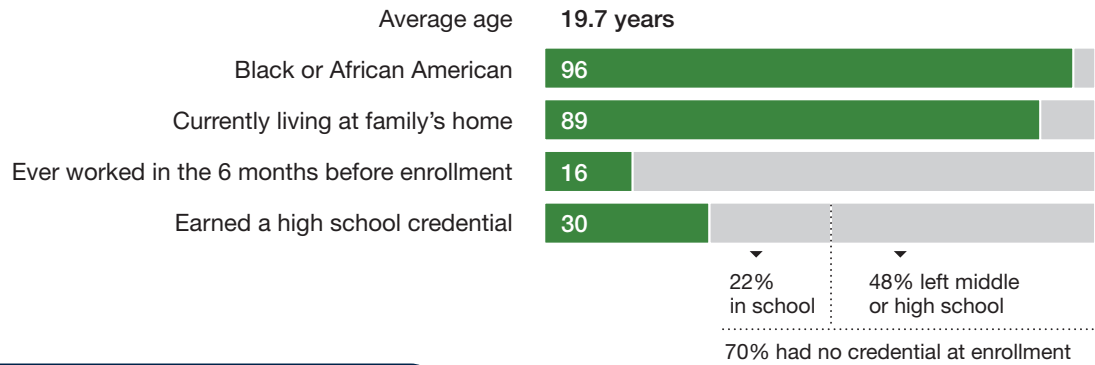
Based on MDRC's analysis of data from Roca Baltimore's management information system, Roca was successful in reaching its target population.⁹ Figure 2 presents characteristics of young people who enrolled in Roca between July 2018 and March 2022. At the time the young men began working with Roca, the vast majority had been arrested in the past and reported personally experiencing a traumatic event. Relatively few had recent work experience or a high school credential, and 70 percent reported either being on parole or probation or under juvenile supervision at the time of enrollment (not shown).

In interviews with the research team, participants described how these experiences had affected them.¹⁰ Specifically, they said the lack of well-paying jobs in their neighborhoods drives young people to illicit work such as selling drugs to support themselves and their families, taking them away from the mainstream labor market. Participants had experienced multiple traumatic events with long-lasting consequences, including negative encounters with law enforcement and the criminal legal system; incarceration of family members and friends; the unexpected loss of loved ones due to violence, substance use, or illnesses; and physical injuries resulting from violent crimes such as shootings. In addition to their own experiences with the police, participants said that the mass incarceration of Black men in their communities also led to significant trauma for young people like them.

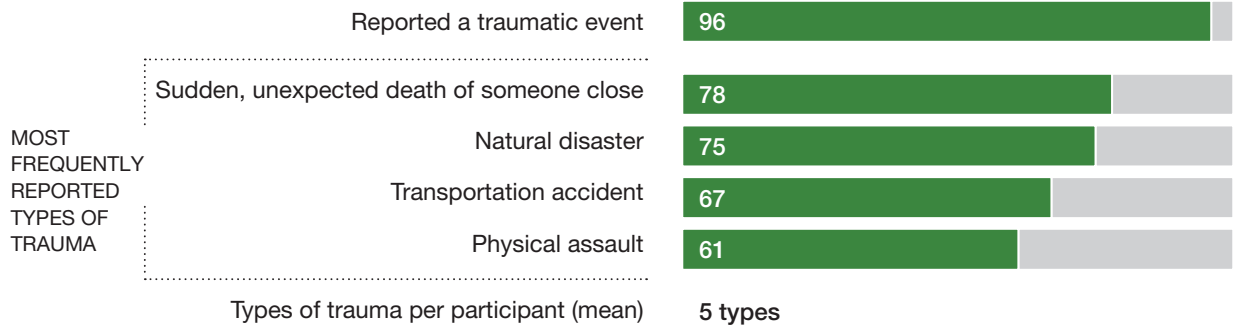


FIGURE 2
Baseline Characteristics of Roca Baltimore Participants

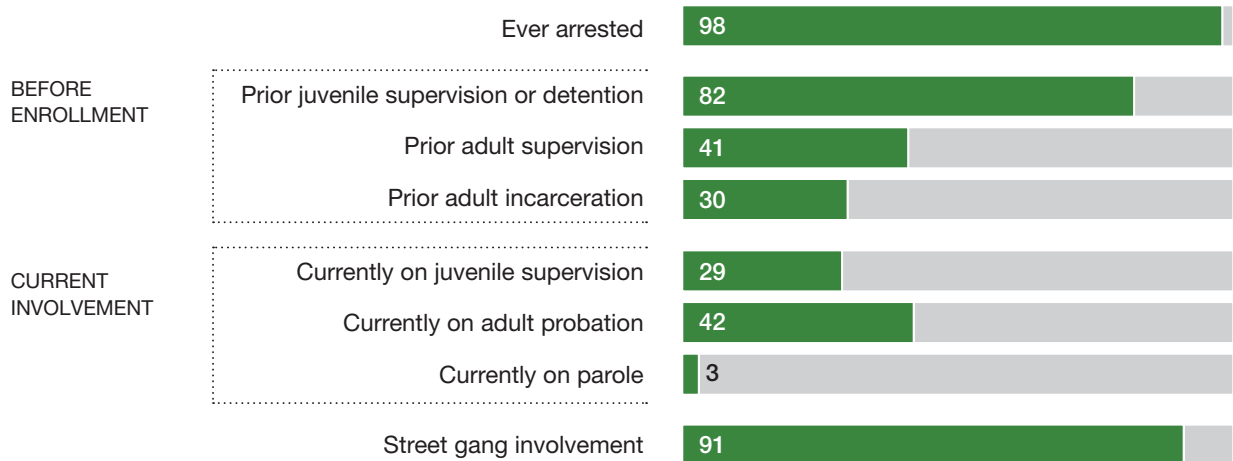
Demographics, employment and education (%)



History of trauma (%)



Involvement in the criminal legal system (%)



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from Roca Baltimore’s management information system.
 NOTES: Measures include 399 participants enrolled in Roca Baltimore between July 2018 and March 2022. If a participant reentered the program during this time frame, the information in this figure reflects only the participant’s most recent entry. The trauma measures are based on responses to the Life Events Checklist, a self-reported measure of 17 items “designed to screen for potentially traumatic events in a respondent’s lifetime” (United States Department of Veterans Affairs).

Program Principles, Services, and Engagement

Roca's intervention model is grounded in the theory that young men can create change in their lives if they can address the trauma they have faced and learn skills that help them regulate their emotions and behaviors when faced with adversity. Trauma can negatively affect the brain in a way that decreases one's ability to regulate one's emotions.¹¹ Research also shows a connection between traumatic experiences and future risky behavior and violence, especially among adolescents and young adults.¹²

Roca tailors its services to a young person's needs. Its three- to four-year program starts with two years of intensive interaction with a young man to gradually promote behavior changes and engagement in the program, followed by one to two years focused on sustaining the positive changes in behavior achieved in the first two.

Figure 3 provides a snapshot of Roca's program principles and service offerings discussed in this section and shows the average engagement and participation levels in different services for young people enrolled in Roca Baltimore between July 2018 and March 2021.

Most services saw engagement from a majority of Roca participants; participants interacted with staff members frequently over the course of their enrollment. The program is based on the following four principles and services:

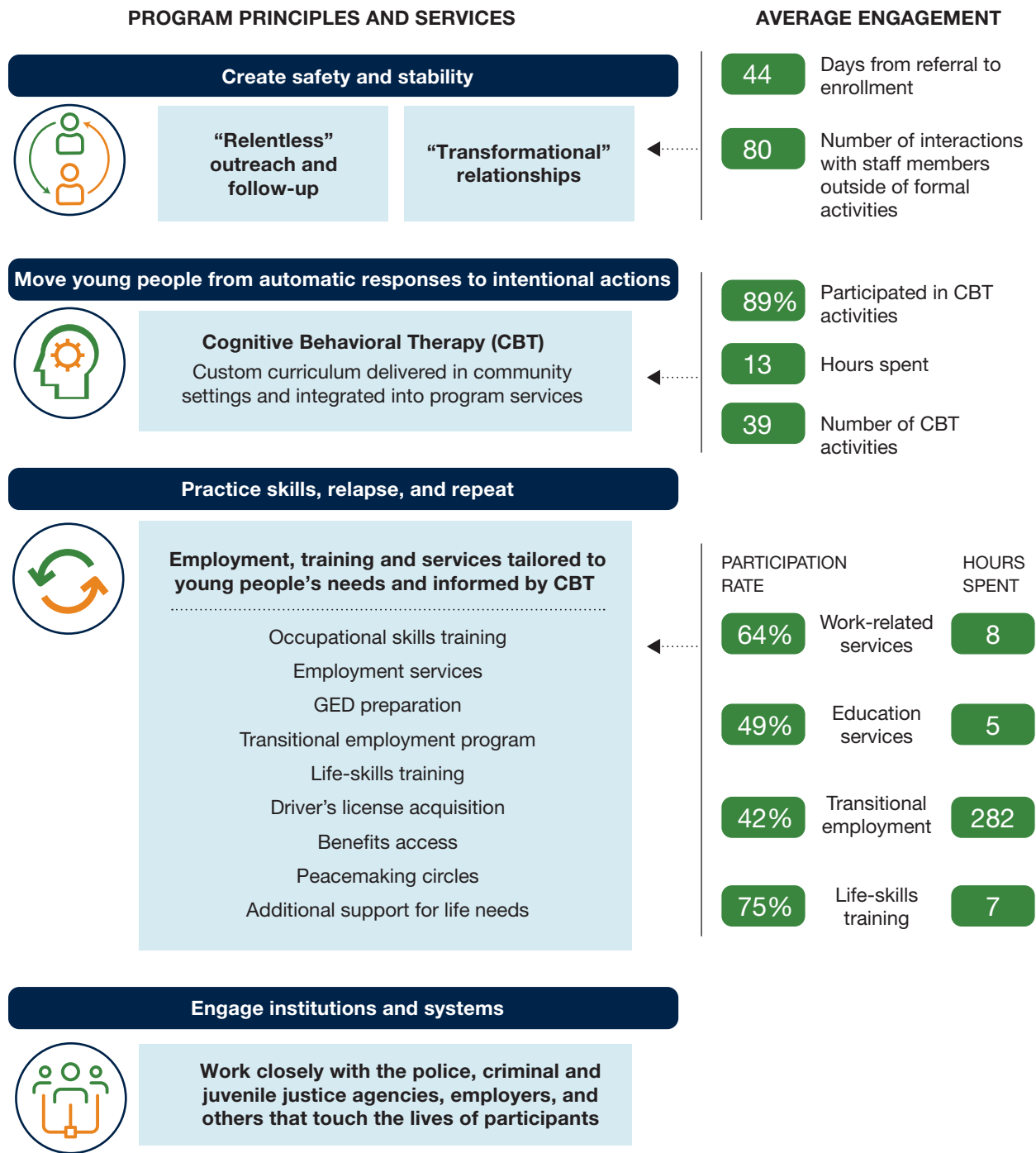
- **Create safety and stability for young people through “relentless” outreach and “transformational” relationships.**

Roca believes this effort is crucial to building a solid foundation for the longer-term work of addressing trauma and changing behavior. During outreach, the program's staff works diligently to address young people's reluctance to engage with the program. This reluctance can stem from a number of sources: A young person might be skeptical about a program that he was identified for by the police; he might not be contemplating a change in



FIGURE 3

Roca Baltimore Program Elements and Participant Engagement



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from Roca Baltimore’s management information system (engagement measures).

NOTES: Participant engagement measures include 247 participants who enrolled in Roca between July 2018 and March 2021. If any such participants ever reentered the program, the numbers reflect only their most recent entries. Measures encompass activities during a participant’s most recent active enrollment period, from eligibility to dismissal. If a participant was still enrolled at the time of the data pull, the measures include all activities that occurred between eligibility and the data-pull date.

The number of interactions with staff members measure reflects a larger sample of 399 Roca participants who enrolled through March 2022.

Hours spent and number of activities are only calculated among those who participated in the activity in question at least once.

his life; or he might be distrustful of any program, given his past experiences. Program data show that, on average, it took 44 days after a referral until an eligible young person agreed to participate in the program. According to Roca, this period includes 10 to 12 “door knocks” by Roca staff members.¹³ Participants said that Roca’s approach to building trust and relationships during outreach and early program stages was vital to securing their engagement when they felt ready to make a change.¹⁴ Participants also said that they prized their relationships with Roca staff members as a consistent source of support that brought stability to their lives. On average, participants interacted with staff members outside of formal program activities 80 times while they were enrolled.

- **Teach what Roca calls “life-saving skills” to move young people from automatic responses to intentional actions.**

At the heart of Roca’s model is a custom curriculum based on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) that is designed to help young people become more aware of the relationships among their thoughts, feelings, and actions, so that they can make decisions that keep them safer and allow them to advance toward their goals. Participants learn cognitive-behavioral skills through Rewire, a curriculum developed by Roca and Massachusetts General Hospital that puts the theory behind CBT into a format that can be implemented by nonclinical staff members such as Roca youth workers.¹⁵

Roca builds opportunities to practice cognitive-behavioral skills into all other aspects of its services, with the goal of surrounding participants with CBT-trained staff members at all points of engagement. Close to 90 percent of the participants in MDRC’s analysis engaged in CBT services, and on average, participants received nearly 40 different instances of CBT services for a total of 13 hours.

- **Practice skills, relapse, and repeat.**

Roca’s participants face multiple challenges at the individual, community, and systems levels, and the program expects that the process of addressing their traumas and changing their behaviors will take years. During that time, there may be points where participants will struggle. The program tailors its employment, education,



life-skills, and supportive services to a young person's stage of change and readiness to take part in activities and gives him the opportunity to "fail safely" if he disengages and falls back to an earlier stage of the change process.

Young people are not *required* to engage in all the services that are offered. Instead, Roca participants can choose from a menu of service offerings and customize them to fit their lives as their needs evolve. This flexibility was greatly valued by participants who spoke with MDRC about their experience. The services include:

- **Occupational skills training** to help young people gain skills and certifications in jobs that are locally in demand and accessible to young people with criminal records
- **Employment services** to help participants develop work-readiness skills, find jobs, and retain them, and to work with local employers to place young people in jobs
- **Educational services** to help young people attain their high school equivalency credentials
- A **transitional employment program** (typically offered later in the model) that provides paid work opportunities for young people, helps them develop work-readiness skills, and provides an opportunity to practice the skills they learn from CBT in a real work context
- **Supportive services** to help participants build life skills (such as financial literacy and healthy relationships) and cope with new needs and ongoing challenges, including navigating court cases and applying for benefits and identification documents (such as driver's licenses). Roca also assists participants in meeting basic and emerging life needs such as getting eyeglasses or diapers for children.

Approximately 64 percent of participants in MDRC's analysis received employment services, including work-readiness training. Due to the timing of services during a participant's time with Roca, a smaller share (42 percent) worked in the transitional employment program at some point during their enrollment, for a total of 282 hours, on average.¹⁶ About half of the sample engaged in educational services, and more than two-thirds participated in life-skills training.

- **Engage institutions and systems.**

Roca works closely with institutions and systems that affect the lives of its young people, including the police, criminal and juvenile justice agencies, health care organizations, and employers.¹⁷

The program-participation levels reported in this section reflect adaptations and adjustments made to service offerings and delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily those made in the year 2020. The transitional employment program was temporarily suspended when the pandemic began, and it resumed with fewer slots available for young people, gradually building back to prepandemic levels. Roca's offices were temporarily closed, and some program services temporarily shifted to virtual service delivery to align with social-distancing rules. Like many other nonprofit organizations, Roca also had to reduce staffing levels through furloughs and layoffs during the pandemic, which may have affected service delivery. Interviews with participants suggest that Roca's approach to providing services to young people in their homes and communities, particularly services related to teaching cognitive behavioral skills and providing supportive services, helped young people maintain a connection to the program during the pandemic.

Life Outside of Roca

As discussed, young people come to Roca with histories of trauma and involvement with the criminal legal system. Given these backgrounds, Roca anticipates many young men will continue to interact with the police and legal system while enrolled in the program, and that they will experience setbacks during that time. Roca considers these “relapses” to be critical to young people’s growth and development. To illustrate the paths participants may follow following their initial engagement with Roca, MDRC conducted a descriptive analysis based on public administrative records and data from Roca’s management information system.

Interactions with the Criminal Legal System

To trace Roca participants’ contact with the criminal legal system, MDRC constructed an analysis sample of participants for whom at least 36 months of data (following program enrollment) were available. This sample consists of 134 young people who enrolled in the program between August 2018 and November 2019, and who participated in the program for any length of time. Using individual-level data from the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, the team calculated the arrest rate among participants in each month of the three years after enrollment.¹⁸ This time period is relative to when an individual enrolled and varies for each young person, but for everyone in the sample the period overlaps with some part of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the months between August 2018 and October 2022 are represented in this analysis.

The majority of Roca Baltimore participants in the analysis sample—63 percent—were arrested in the state of Maryland at least once in the three years following enrollment. Most participants’ first arrests after enrollment with Roca occurred within one year, and the number of participants who were arrested in each month after their enrollment declined slightly over time.

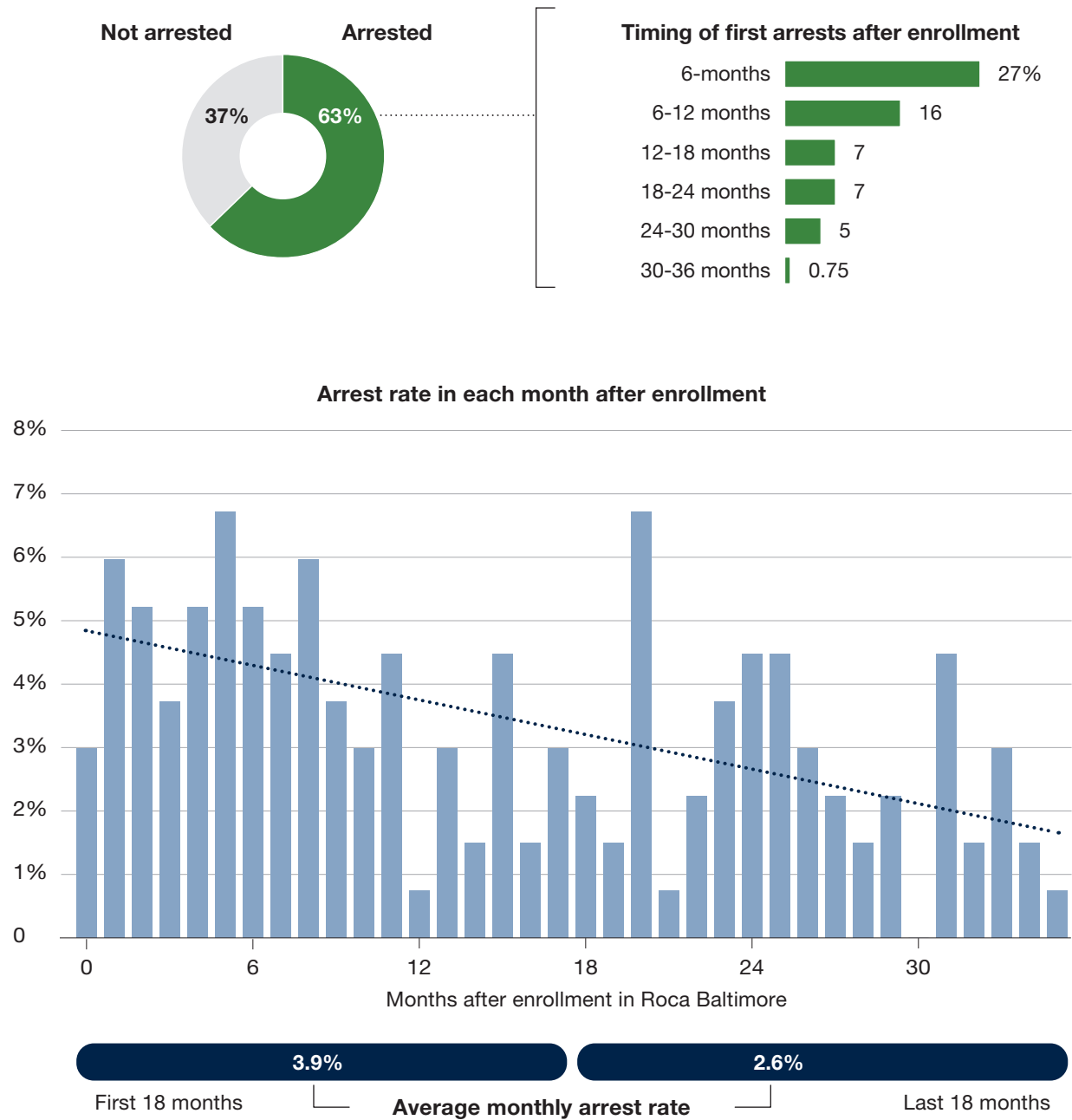
Figure 4 shows the trend in arrests in two ways:

- The first chart shows the **timing of participants’ first arrests following program enrollment**. In the first six months after program enrollment, 27 percent were arrested for the first time; between 6 and 12 months after study enrollment, an additional 16 percent were arrested for the first time. This rate declines in subsequent periods.
- The second chart shows the **monthly arrest rate**, which is the percentage of the sample that had at least one arrest in each month following program enrollment. A trend line fitted to these data points suggests that the arrest rate declined over the 36-month period. Over the first 18 months, the average monthly arrest rate is 3.9 percent; over the remaining 18 months, the arrest rate is 2.6 percent.

The prevalence of involvement with the criminal legal system after enrollment is aligned with the program’s theory of change, the characteristics and risk factors of its target population, and the context of the communities in which participants live. In interviews with MDRC, participants said it was challenging to sustain the changes they were working toward while living in the same communities where they continued to face structural barriers such as a lack of good jobs and reliable transportation and discriminatory law enforcement practices. Roca staff members and participants also emphasized that addressing trauma and restructuring behavioral patterns can take time, especially when contextual factors pose continual challenges. Importantly, staff members are committed to working with participants through their setbacks, for example, by reaching out to young people to offer them help navigating their court cases or finding new jobs.

The current analysis of administrative records cannot explain the trends observed in the data in a conclusive manner. It is possible that participants had fewer arrests over time due to changes in their behavior, but in the absence of an experimental study design, it is not possible to attribute any such changes to Roca Baltimore. Changes in arrest rates over time also could have been the result of a combination of factors such as changes in policing, court operations, or crime rates—all of which have been affected nationally by the pandemic.¹⁹ The decline in arrest rates could also reflect changes in detention and incarceration patterns. For example, those arrested soon after enrollment could have been detained for some or all of the remainder of the analysis period,

FIGURE 4
Roca Baltimore Participants' Arrest Trends After Enrollment



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services. The findings of the researchers do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department.

NOTES: Sample includes those Roca participants for whom at least 36 months of data were available, beginning with the month of enrollment: 134 young people who enrolled in the program between August 2018 and November 2019.

and therefore not subject to new arrests. The research team did not have access to complete data on incarceration episodes.

Experiences in the Labor Market

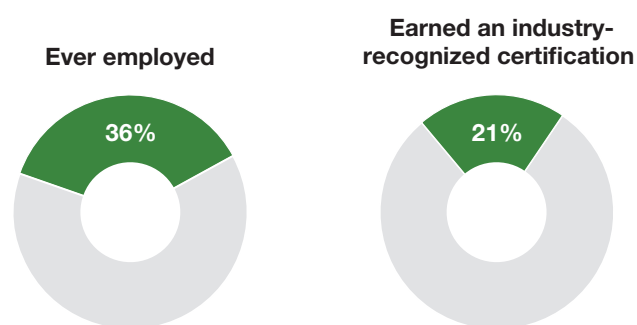
Roca aims to place young people in unsubsidized jobs as they transition out of the initial, intensive two-year engagement period and into a period of more sustained behavior change. Therefore, the analysis shown in Figure 5 was conducted with a subset of Roca participants who had been engaged with Roca for at least 21 months in March 2022, when MDRC retrieved data from Roca's management information system.²⁰

Thirty-six percent of participants who had been in the program for at least 21 months reported being employed at some point during those months. Twenty-one percent earned an industry-recognized occupational certification over this follow-up period.

For context, across Maryland, the 2021 employment rate among 16- to 24-year-old men was 49 percent; among all Black 16- to 24-year-olds in the state, the rate was 48 percent.²¹ These findings underscore the community and individual factors, discussed earlier, that hinder Roca participants' access to employment. As shown in Figure 1, Roca's participants live in neighborhoods with the highest unemployment rates in the city, and research shows that neighborhood conditions matter for the employment of young people who have been involved in the criminal legal system.²² Participants who spoke with MDRC reported falling back on illicit activities such as selling drugs to make a livable income when faced with the prospects of low-paying jobs. (These activities are not captured in this analysis.) Among those who reported employment to Roca, common jobs included maintenance or cleaning and warehouse work. About 21 percent of MDRC's analysis sample also reported earning a certification over the follow-up period, such as a certificate for CPR or First Aid, a driver's license or permit, or an OSHA certification.

Last, pandemic-related trends in the labor market may have also affected Roca participants' employment prospects, as the economy lost low-income jobs at a fast pace during the early days of the pandemic.²³ Black workers were severely affected by these job losses, and racial disparities in unemployment persisted during the economic recovery that followed.²⁴ The young people in this analysis probably started their job searches after the pandemic's onset in the spring of 2020.²⁵

FIGURE 5
Roca Baltimore Participants' Labor Market Outcomes After Enrollment



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from Roca Baltimore's management information system.

NOTES: Outcomes are presented for 107 participants who were actively enrolled for at least 21 months as of March 2022. Measures reflect only job placements and certifications attained while enrolled at Roca.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research

The analyses discussed in this brief provide a high-level look at young people's engagement in Roca services and their interactions with the criminal legal system and job market after Roca enrollment. Specifically, the evaluation confirmed that Roca is successfully reaching a high-risk population—young people with histories of trauma, limited educational and employment opportunities, and both former and current involvement with the criminal legal system. Once enrolled in Roca, young people have frequent contact with staff members and services, particularly CBT services. Their high arrest rates and low employment rates underscore the significant challenges that Roca's young people face in Baltimore.

These findings, coupled with existing literature on effective interventions for juveniles and young adults, suggest that Roca Baltimore is a strong candidate for further research. Meta-analyses of programs serving populations similar to Roca's note that interventions are most effective when targeting those at a high risk of involvement in the criminal legal system, like those enrolled in Roca.²⁶ Additional research on Roca would add to the body of evidence on programs for this population.

MDRC's evaluation did not attempt to assess the efficacy of Roca Baltimore's services, in terms of criminal legal system outcomes or outcomes in other areas, and therefore the analyses in this brief should not be used to draw conclusions to that effect. Future research might consider constructing a comparison group to answer the question of Roca's effectiveness. To assess the extent incarceration contributed to the declining arrest rate among Roca participants, as opposed to other community and participant factors, future research should also analyze the types and severity of criminal charges Roca participants received, and the length and timing of their stays in prison and jail. Finally, it would be informative to replicate these analyses with participants who enrolled in Roca more recently, when the pandemic was no longer interfering with program operations and local labor market conditions.

While the evaluation cannot speak to the effectiveness of Roca's model, the small group of participants who spoke with MDRC's research team expressed deep appreciation for the consistent and unwavering support of Roca staff members, the large menu of services the program offers, and its ability to customize participants' experiences in the program based on their needs and circumstances. The participants also painted a stark picture of what life is like for young Black men in low-income Baltimore communities marked by violence and mass incarceration. These conversations highlighted the need for deeper investments in community-level changes and systemic reforms such as addressing racial bias in policing or hiring, to help young men gain access to more opportunities and put them on a path to long-term success.

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