

Roca:

A Rock for the At-Risk

A program in Massachusetts is successfully transforming the lives of the most troubled young men.

BY SARAH ALICE BROWN
AND ANNE TEIGEN

Imagine a young man who, before age 17, has been arrested three times for shoplifting, expelled from school for bringing a gun to class and kicked out of his home.

Now imagine a program that persuades that teenager to finish high school, teaches him useful work skills and helps him find a job, essentially turning his life around.

A program in the Boston area called Roca is steering young men away from lives of crime so well that the state government is banking on its continued success. Last year, Massachusetts set aside \$27 million for seven years of “social innovation financing” for this program aimed at high-risk young men. It’s the country’s largest investment in this new type of funding.

Both the financing model and the Roca program have gained the attention of other states and communities that seek effective ways to invest in programs that ultimately prevent future crime by reducing delinquency.

The cost savings alone can be significant.

States spend \$5.7 billion annually just to incarcerate youth—arresting, prosecuting and treating them runs several times that amount.

An Ounce of Prevention

Effective juvenile justice policy and programs must balance rehabilitation with accountability and public safety. Roca appears to have found an effective balance.

Founded in 1988, Roca (“rock” in Spanish) takes the most high-risk young men between the ages of 17 and 24 and offers them support in finishing school, training in certain job skills and help in finding a job. The program’s guiding principle is clear: Decent employment that shifts troubled young people toward economic independence keeps them away from a life of crime. Its goal, simple: Move troubled young men out of violence and poverty and into the workforce.

Sarah Alice Brown is NCSL’s criminal justice program director. Anne Teigen is an NCSL program principal.

Juvenile Crime By the Numbers

25%
Portion of U.S.
population under
age 18

1993
Year serious violent
crimes by juveniles
peaked

3 p.m.
When violent juvenile
crime peaks

11%
Portion of arrests
that involve juveniles
under age 18

42%
Portion of arson
arrests that involve
juveniles

*Source: Office of Juvenile Justice
and Delinquency Prevention.*



Stepping Stones for a Better Future

Kens was almost 12 when he moved from Haiti to the United States in 2004. At the time, Franklin Avenue in Brooklyn, N.Y., was littered with a few dollar stores and barber shops, but many storefronts were shuttered, and crime was common. Kens, however, says he was happy to be there. “When I got to America, I felt like I was in a beautiful country, I wanted to go to school to be a pediatrician.”

But after a few years, he and his two brothers moved to Boston and “things happened and I got on a bad track.” He began to smoke marijuana and was arrested for trespassing at a public library and shoplifting at a service station. At age 21 he “was kicked out of my house, lost my job and got arrested.” In 2013, a friend suggested he go to Roca.

Roca—or “rock” in Spanish—is aptly named because the center provides high-risk young men a rock to lean on and a stepping stone to move on with their lives. Now at age 22, Kens feels like Roca helped him onto the right track. He’s going to classes at Roca and working. He’s there five days a week, working in the wood shop to receive a carpentry certification, or in the building’s professional kitchen, where he is also getting his culinary certification. At Roca, the ultimate goal is employment, so Kens is studying a variety of vocations.

Kens says the staff gave him the opportunity to “get out of trouble and to stay off the street. It is good for kids who want to get a GED or take driving classes.” Kens says the staff play a big role. “They push me

to do a lot of things, and they encourage me.” His favorite part has been the trips out of the Chelsea neighborhood. “The staff not only make you work here, but they have taken me places that I have never seen or known before.”

After years of struggle, Kens’ daily life revolves around working hard at Roca, playing basketball at the facility, reading and spending time with his 3-year-old sister.

“We watch *Dora the Explorer*,” he says smiling. He has not yet decided on a profession, but he knows he wants to travel the world. “I want to work and save money so I can go overseas, to visit China and Japan.”

—Anne Teigen



PHOTO: ANNE TEIGEN

The young men in the program have committed crimes and are at-risk of committing more. They have joined gangs, abused illegal drugs, dropped out of school, stolen cars and burglarized homes. They have failed in other rehabilitative programs.

Roca has helped more than young men by offering “a rock to lean on, strength to draw from, and a foundation for the future,” says its website. “We work hard to end the cycle of prison and poverty by targeting the highest risk youth,” says Dana Betts, senior program director at Roca. “We change their behavior and develop their work ethic to ultimately transform their lives.”

Extensive evaluations of the program’s intervention model have produced consistent evidence that lives are changing. In FY 2013, out of 115 young men in the last two years of the four-year program, 89 percent had no new arrests, 95 percent had no new technical violations and 69 percent were still at their jobs. Comparing its participants to similar populations, the program also boasts a 65 percent reduction in incarceration rates over five years and a 100 percent increase in employment rates.

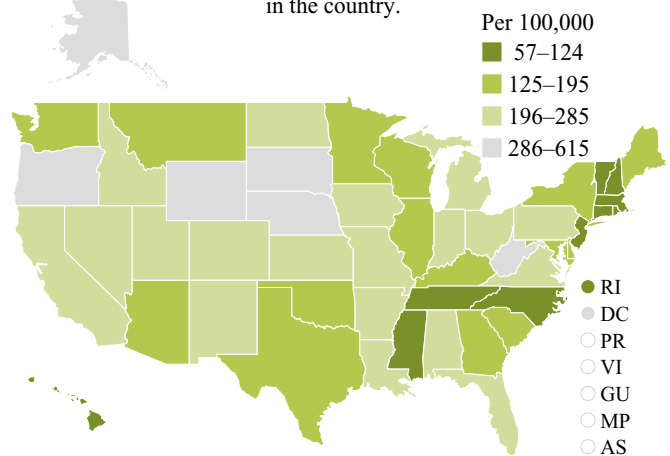
How it Works

Roca starts when a youth worker reaches out to young people on the streets of some of the most dangerous urban communities in Massachusetts. Workers may have to knock on doors or approach kids on the street every day for a year until they get their attention and willingness to try out the program.

Young men go through two years of training and education,

Juvenile Residential Placement Rates, per 100,000

Nationwide in 2011, 196 juvenile offenders were held in juvenile facilities for every 100,000 juveniles in the country.

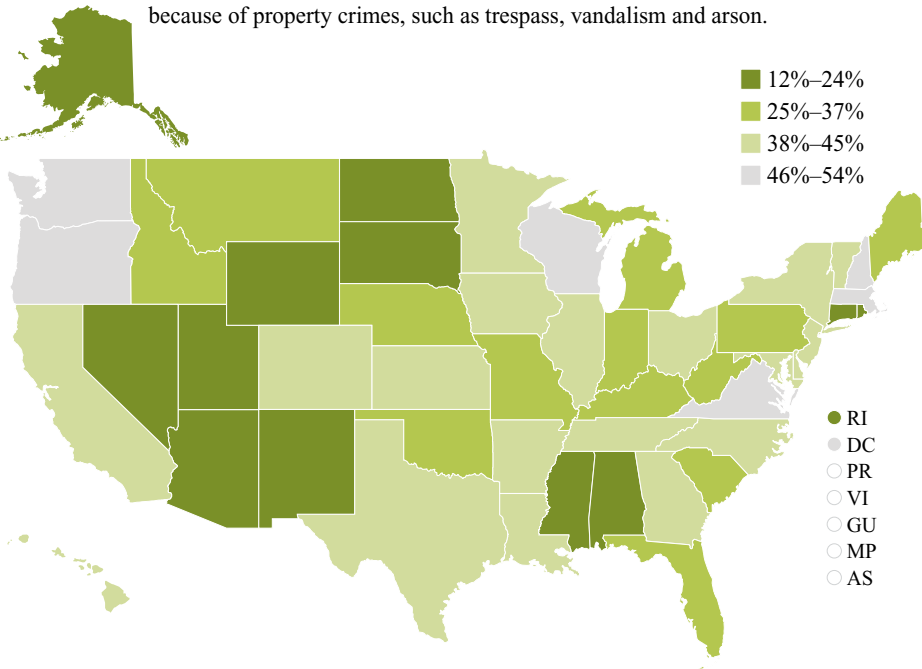


Notes: The placement rate is the number of juvenile offenders in residential placement per 100,000 juveniles ages 10 through the upper age of original juvenile court jurisdiction in each state. U.S. total includes 2,324 juvenile offenders in private facilities whose offense was not reported. U.S. total does not include juvenile offenders in tribal facilities.

Source: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement 2011.

Why Juveniles Are Held

On average, 37 percent of juveniles in residential placement in 2011 were being held for “person offenses,” such as murder, robbery and sexual assault, while 24 percent were held because of property crimes, such as trespass, vandalism and arson.



Source: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. *Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement 2011.*

followed by two years of support services while employed.

“Employment is the real key,” says Betts. “We teach them ‘work habits’—as usually none of the young men have ever had or held any kind of a job. We teach them how to show up, be on time, be in uniform and work a full day. Employment is the last piece—they gain skills to be in cooking, construction, transportation, etc.

“Once they are employed, off the streets and out of crime—you can actually see a sense of self-change in individual young people—they become more confident, proud and happy people,” says Betts.

“They want to work, to earn money, to take care of themselves and their families. And they want to stay out of prison once and for all. It is amazing to witness firsthand the pride they each take in their own transformations.”

The Financing Piece

A key factor in Roca’s success stems from how it is funded. In 2012, the Massachusetts legislature authorized the secretary of administration and finance to enter into Pay for Success contracts, with up to \$50 million in success payments. The legislative act created the Social Innovation Financing Trust Fund.

Massachusetts created social innovation financing as a way to encourage more efficiency and better effectiveness in government programs. Officials begin by identifying an area of government that needs improvement—either in its use of taxpayers’ money or its success in achieving its goals. Officials then con-

tract with a private entity to produce better results for the state. The government then reimburses the service provider only if and when better results are yielded.

Massachusetts decided to focus a social innovation financing project on reducing incarceration rates among high-risk young men who previously have been in the justice system. Roca was chosen because of its rigorous data tracking and proven results.

Critics argue that this type of financing is merely a smoke-screen. Instead of raising more money for programs, it simply shifts funding from one initiative to another. And, they argue, it can be expensive to manage.

Worth a Look

As lawmakers continue to look for ways to reduce crime, all programs that show promising results are on the table. Considering its cost and effectiveness, Roca is worth a closer look.

“The model Roca uses to get youth back on track toward college and career preparedness is nothing short of admirable and extraordinary. Very few organizations will actively seek out young people who have made mistakes in the past,” says Texas Representative Toni Rose (D). “The initiative and investment Roca shows in our youth and community should be an inspiration and example to anyone committed to reducing poverty and violence.”

Lawmakers Visit

NCSL took a group of more than 70 legislators from across the country to visit one of the Roca sites in Chelsea, Mass., last fall through its partnership with the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Staff and participants led tours, told their stories and answered questions from the legislators.

“To see and experience the Roca program was extremely informative,” says North Carolina Representative Nathan Ramsey (R). “I was especially intrigued with how the state of Massachusetts was able to reinvest funds in proven programs to help keep young people out of trouble and equip them with the skills to make them productive citizens.”

The site visit was part of a four-day “Juvenile Justice State Teams’ Meeting” for legislators. It provided an opportunity for teams of legislators from 18 states to learn from each other’s experiences and to hear from national and local juvenile policy experts.



Representative
Nathan
Ramsey (R)
North Carolina



Representative
Toni Rose (D)
Texas