



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**CHICAGO**

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SERVICE ADMINISTRATION

# Trends In Child Welfare: The Emerging Focus on Child Well-Being

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# My purpose today

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- Describe some of the consequences for children and families of the emphasis on child safety and permanency over well-being
- Examine the reasons for the lack of attention to well-being
- Provide evidence of a growing interest in child well-being by policymakers:
  - Present case studies of research and policy/practice development targeting elements of well-being

# Consequences of inattention to child wellbeing

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## Short term:

- Children are often in care for long periods before their needs are assessed
- Child welfare agencies and courts—the corporate parents—often know little about the well-being of children in their care (education, health, mental health, social relations)

## Long term:

- Well-being outcomes for the children of the state are unacceptable

# Why doesn't child welfare *policy* focus more on child well-being?

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- Historical evolution of the child welfare system
  - Focused on child protection, not child welfare
  - Interest in permanency developed in recognition of the limits of a child protection focus
  - Interest in well-being evolving in response to the limits of a permanency focus

# Why doesn't child welfare *practice* focus more on child well-being?

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- Ambivalence by administrators and policymakers
  - Challenges posed by short-term nature of care
  - Questions regarding which institutions should be held accountable for children's wellbeing
  - Reluctance to take on more responsibility/liability

## A cynical student of the system might observe...

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- Safety = “stay off of the television and out of the papers”
- Permanency = “get rid of the children as quickly as possible”
- Well-being = “not my job”

# Winner of the “it’s not my job award”

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Child safety, permanency, and well-being are  
inextricably linked

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Examples from Chapin Hall research:

- Education of foster children
- Youth who run away from care
- Foster youth transitions to adulthood



## Foster children in the Chicago Public Schools

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- Almost no attention by researchers and little policy/practice focus until late 1990s
- Work in Chicago begun in 2002 as part of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) strategic planning
- Continued as part of broader research program for the Illinois child welfare agency
- Included both quantitative (approx. 5500 foster children in CPS) and qualitative research

# Chicago: Falling Behind Early, Never Catching Up

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- Twice as likely as other CPS students to be at least a year old for their grade
- Trauma prior to placement >>> to educational delays
- More likely to be retained in school in the year immediately following placement in care

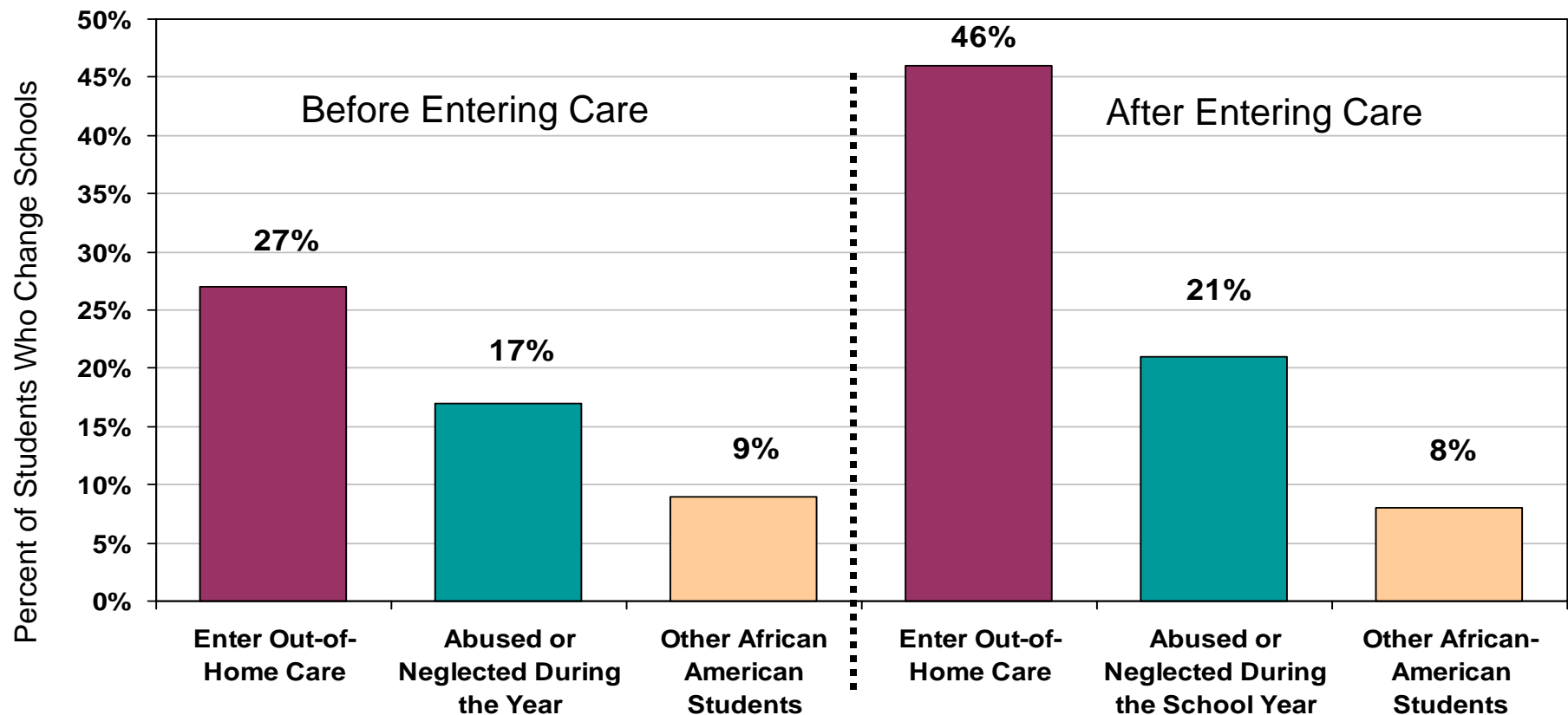
## Changes in Placement, Changes in Schools

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- School mobility rates highest for those entering care for the first time
- 40% of foster children who moved once and 66% of those who moved twice also switched schools during academic year
- Over 80 percent of children changing schools attended a school within 5 miles of the school they left

# Foster children are more mobile both before and after removal

School Mobility for Elementary Students in Chicago:  
Grades 2 through 8: Five Year Average, 1998-2002 School Years



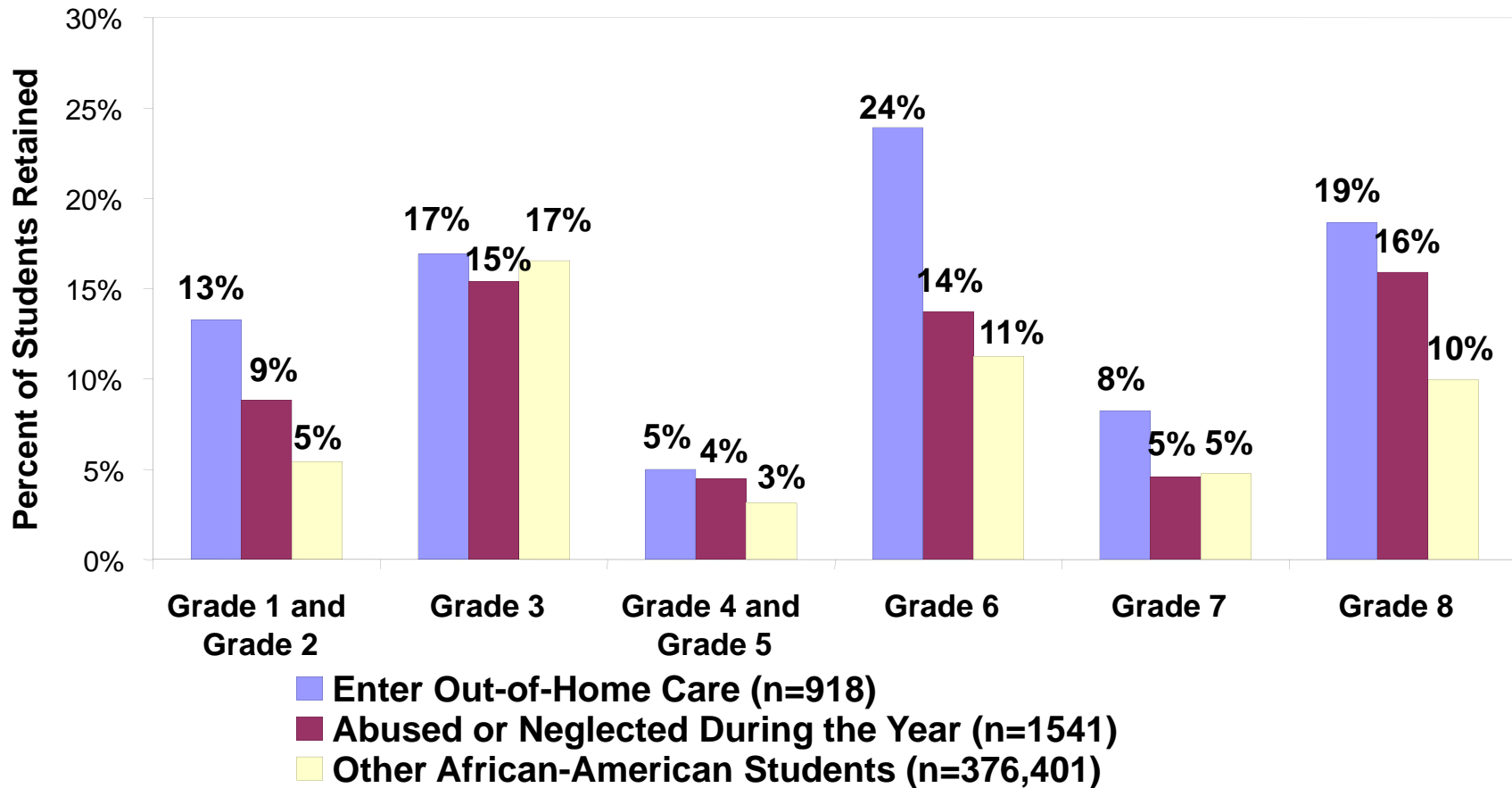
# Educational Consequences of School Mobility for Children

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- Disrupted educational instruction and social relationships
- Delays in transfers of important school records
- Delays in access to important special or supplemental educational services

# Mobility contributes to higher grade retention

**Percent of Students Retained the Year After They Enter Care in Chicago  
(Grades 1 through 8): September, 1999, 2000, and 2001**



# Special Education: The Most Appropriate Response?

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- More likely than other Chicago Public School students to be classified as learning disabled
- More likely to have been placed in special education at least once
- Behavioral problems >>> erroneous labeling of children as emotionally or behaviorally disordered?
- Might remediation of educational deficits be more appropriate, in some cases, than special education?
- Don't confuse behavior associated with the transition to care with emotional disability

# The Challenge for Caseworkers: Identifying Needs

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- Finding an appropriate school
- Securing special services
- Motivating youth to stay in school
- Helping prepare for and choose among post-secondary education options



# The Challenge for Caseworkers: Knowing the Schools

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- Forming sustained, professional relationships between caseworkers and educators
- Building familiarity with school processes and procedures

# The Challenge for Caseworkers: Identifying Needs and Knowing the Schools

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- 45% of Illinois foster children had 2+ caseworkers (2003)
- Caseloads distributed among many different schools and districts
- High caseworker turnover

## Takeaways

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- Instability (i.e., lack of permanency) directly influences well-being
- Multiple public institutions play a role in the problem and its solution(s)
- Paying attention to well-being can lead to small steps that can have an immediate impact
  - Identify misconceptions systems have of each other (e.g., special education)
  - Identify where and when movement takes place to identify cross-system strategies for minimizing movement
  - Assess children's strengths as well as challenges

# Youth who run away from care

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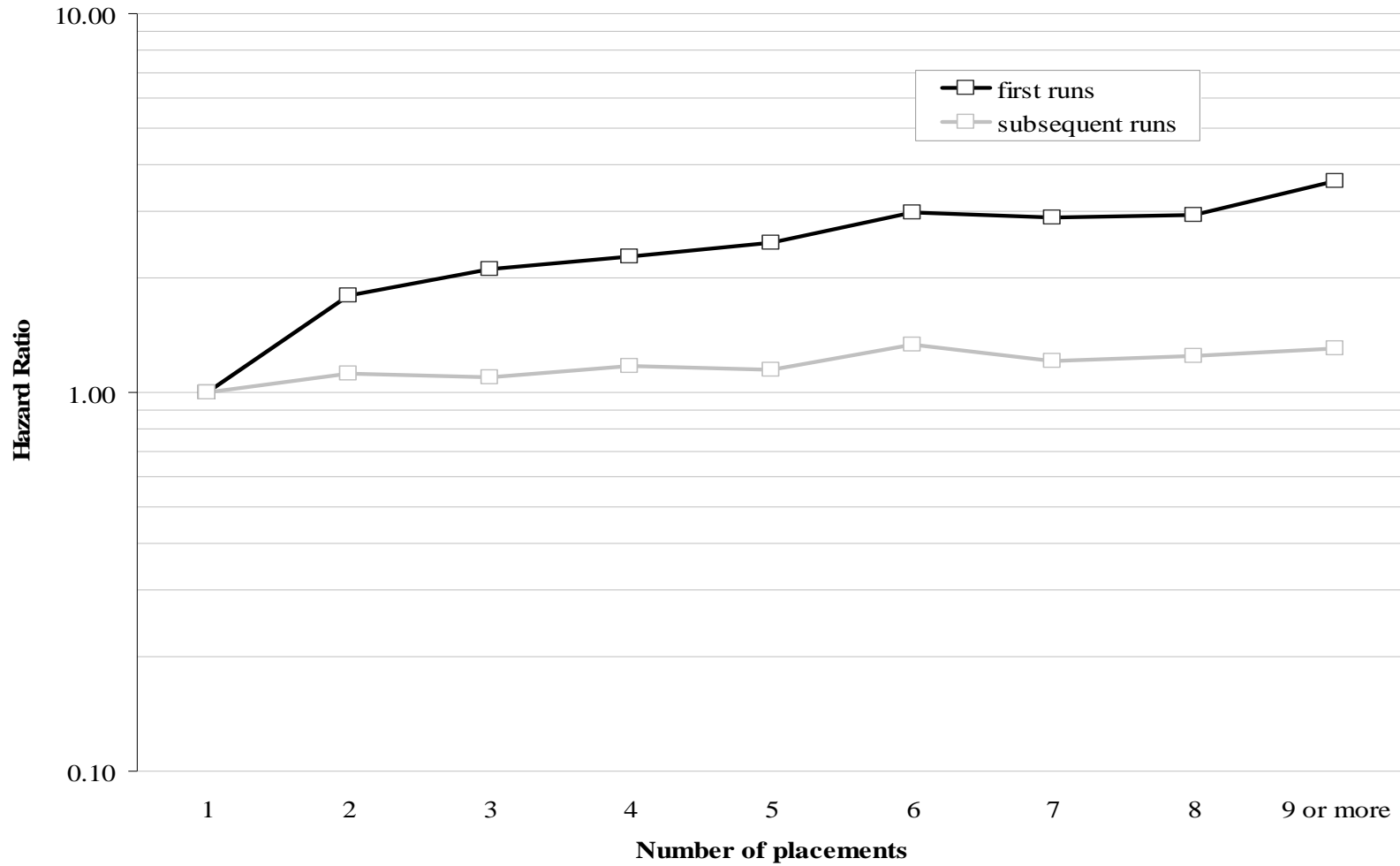
- Concern growing over past decade about “missing” foster children
- Second most common exit for adolescents in the U.S.!
- Research shows running to be very risky
- Illinois Study of Runaways from Out-of-Home Care:
  - All youth in DCFS care at some point between 7/1/1992 and 12/1/2004
  - Over 14,000 youth ran from care in Illinois during this period

## Selected Findings of Multivariate Analyses: Youth Context

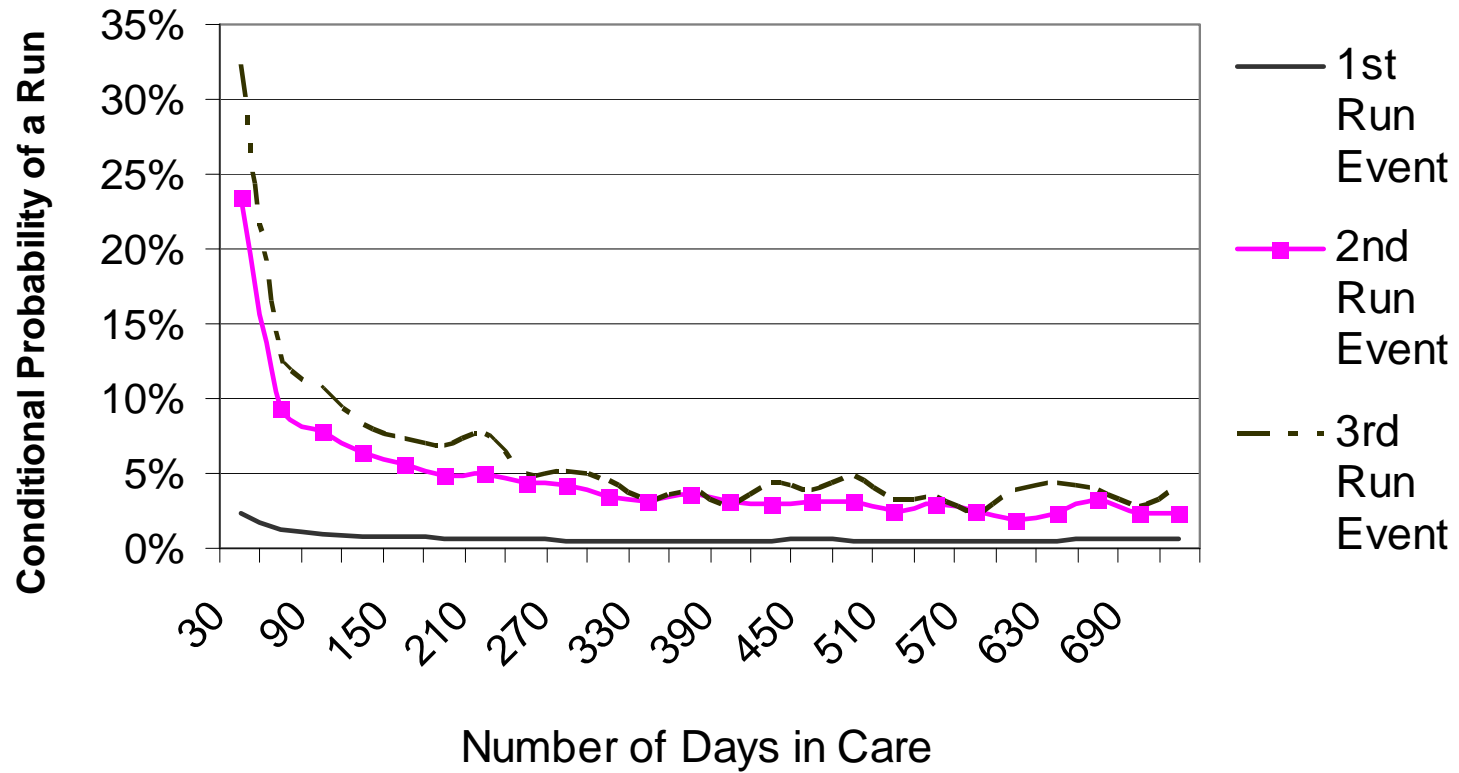
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- Placement type matters: group care > foster home > kinship foster home
- Placement with siblings decreases risk
- Returns home decrease risk
- Placement instability increases risk
- Each run increases the risk of a subsequent run
- DCFS region matters, though effects are not large
- Risk of first runs increased somewhat after 1995, but risk of subsequent runs increased by over 50% between the 1995 and 2000 cohorts

# Risk of Runaway and Number of Placements



# Change in Likelihood of Running While in Care



## Qualitative Study

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- Sought the perspectives of those serving youth and the youth themselves about the reasons why youth run away
- Interviewed 16 key informants including staff from DCFS, law enforcement agencies, and private service-providing organizations working with runaway foster youth
- Interviewed a random sample of 46 youth who had run away from care and returned in the prior six months



## Selected Findings

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- Many youth do experience harm during runaway episodes
- Youth often reject the label “runaway”
- Recurring themes: the centrality of family; the importance of other adults (caseworkers, caregivers, attorneys, and other professionals); and the struggle for autonomy (i.e., the ability to make choices) and the drive to access “normative” experiences

## Implications for Policy and Practice

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- Treat first runs as red flags; assess and intervene
- Policies and practices should take very seriously youths' relationships with their kin
- Continuity of care settings and relationships with non-familial caring adults is central to preventing runaway and reducing its harm
- End social exclusion of foster youth
- Better initial and ongoing assessment and treatment of some mental and behavioral health problems could help

## Takeaways

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- Failure to attend to well-being can threaten permanency and safety
- Child welfare professionals can have a great impact on well-being
- Data can help target prevention and intervention efforts

# Foster youth transitions to adulthood

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- Growing recognition of the lengthening of the transition to adulthood for young people generally
- Extensive family support during the transition
- Child welfare policy focus on the transition emphasizes “independent living,” but is shifting to “fostering connections”
- Concern about foster youth in transition raises two important questions:
  - When should the state cease parenting?
  - What is the relationship between safety, permanency and well-being for these adult children of the state?

# The Midwest Study

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- Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth
- Largest prospective study of foster youth making the transition to adulthood since the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999
- Collaboration between state child welfare agencies and the research team
- Foster youth in Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois who:
  - Were still in care at age 17
  - Had entered care before their 16th birthday
  - Had been placed in care because they were abused, neglected or dependent
  - Not originally placed because of delinquency
- Data from in-person interviews (structured and in-depth qualitative) and government program administrative data

## Study Design and Sample (continued)

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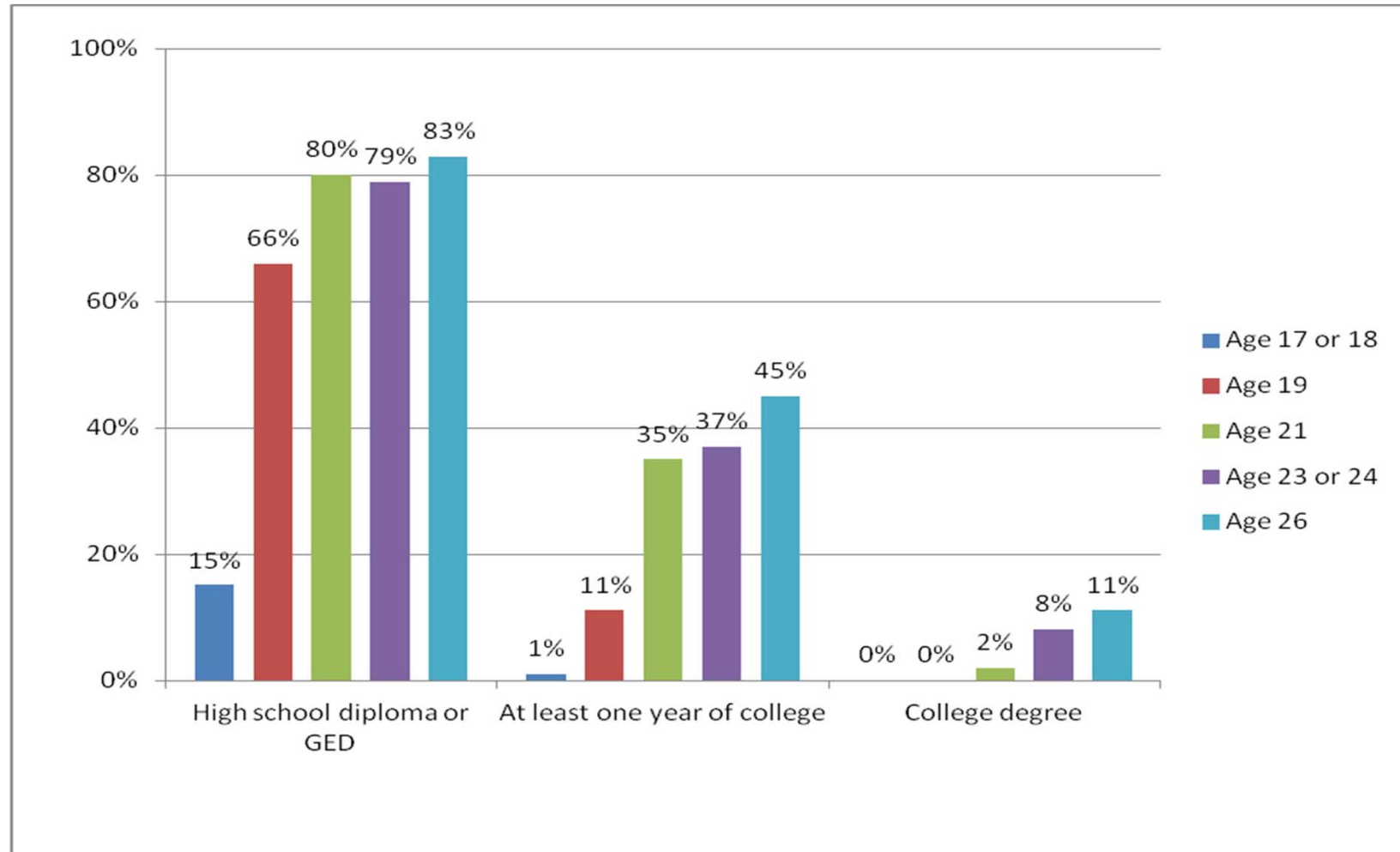
Wave	Year	Number Interviewed	Response Rate	Age at interview
1	'02 – '03	732	96%	17 – 18
2	'04	603	82%	19
3	'06	591	81%	21
4	'08	602	82%	23-24
5	'10 – '11	596	83%	26

## Selected Baseline (17-18) Characteristics

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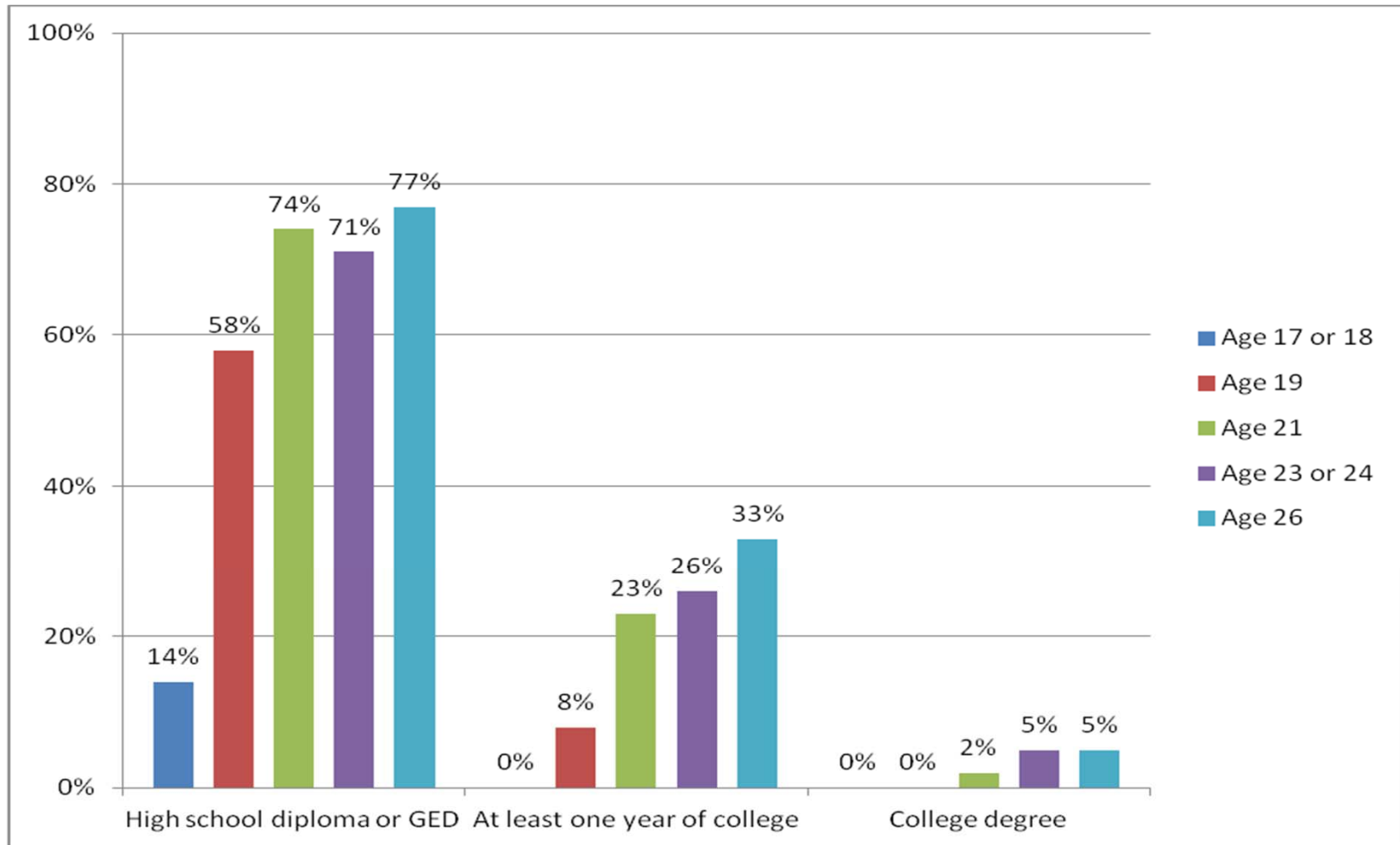
- Most entered care as adolescents
- Vast majority experienced abuse/neglect prior to care
- About 2/3 in kin or nonkin foster homes with remainder in group care or supervised independent living placements
- Poor educational attainment; high special needs
- High rates of affective and substance use disorders
- High rates of delinquency and justice system involvement
- Poor employment history compared to peers
  
- Most had favorable views of care, high educational aspirations, and were optimistic about the future
- Strong connections to family of origin

# Young Women's Educational Attainment

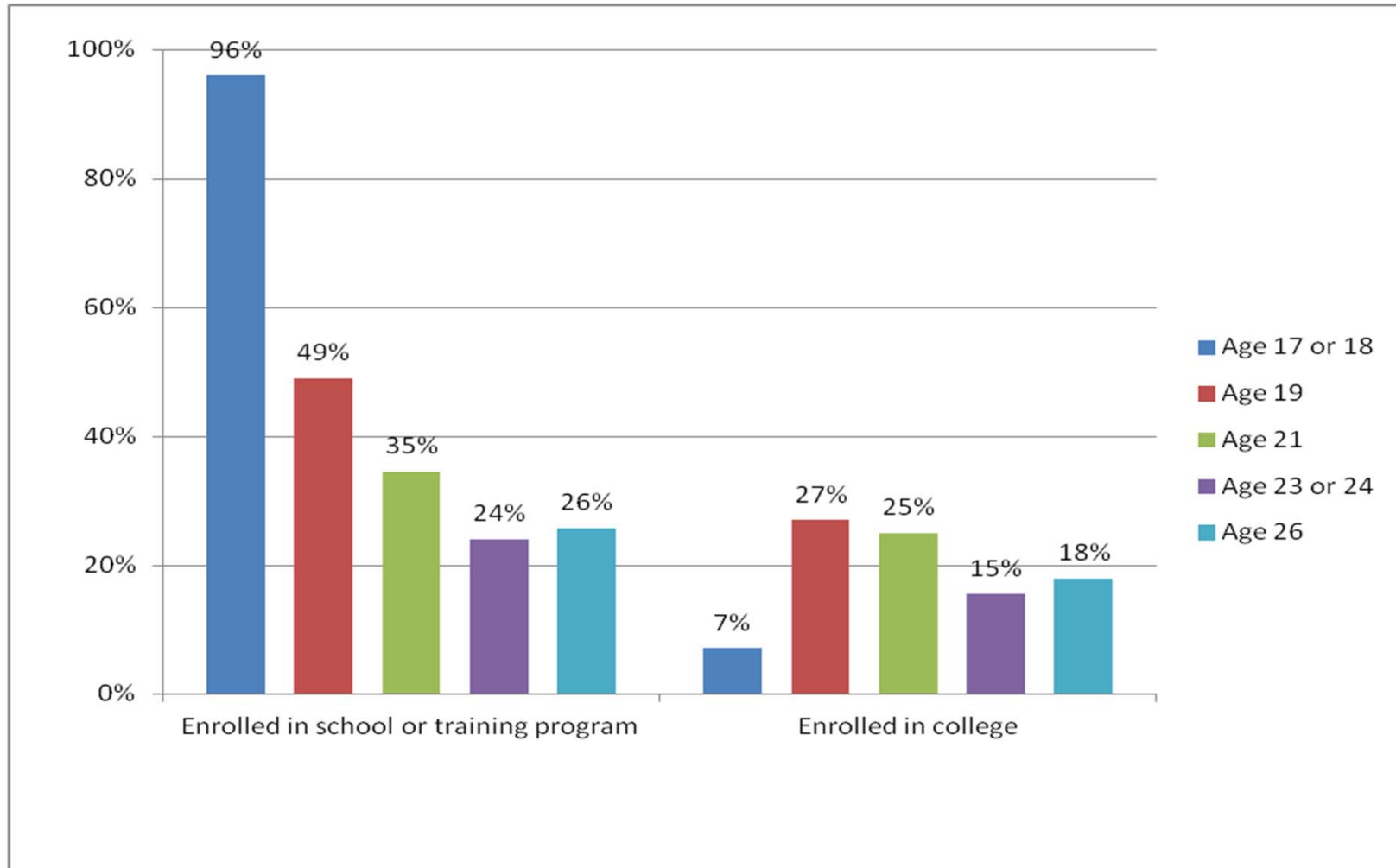




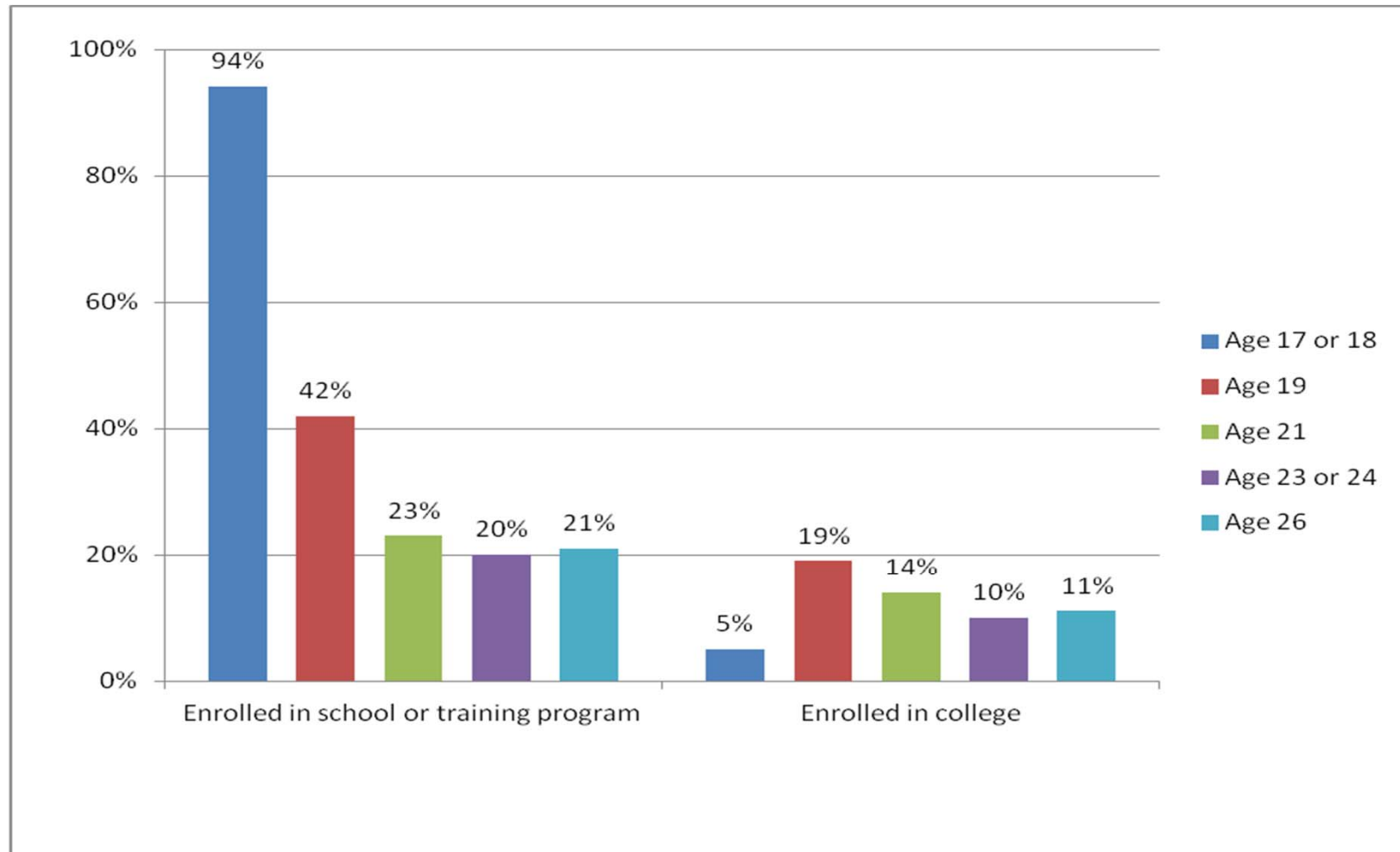
# Young Men's Educational Attainment



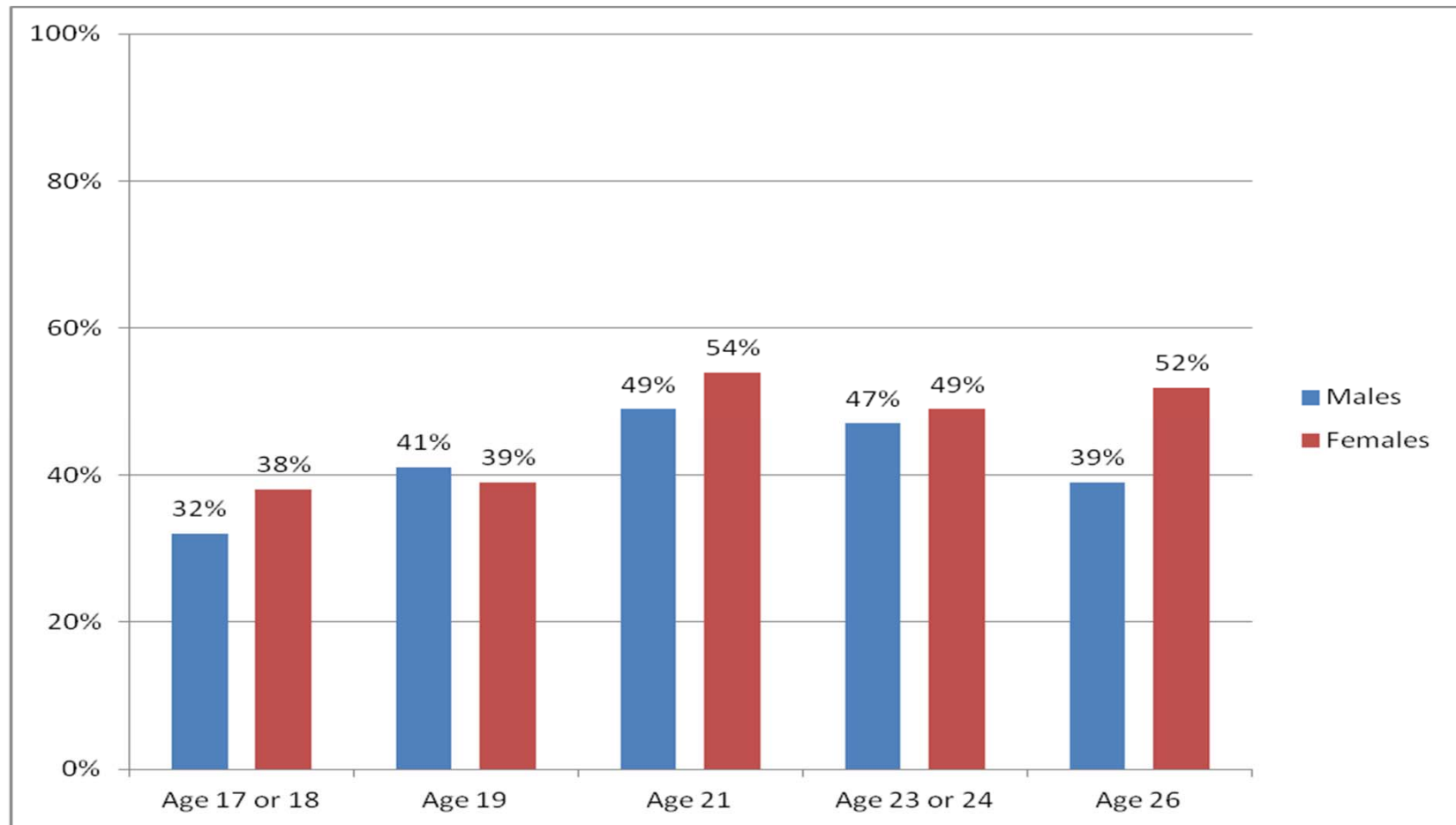
# Young Women's Educational Enrollment



# Young Men's Educational Enrollment

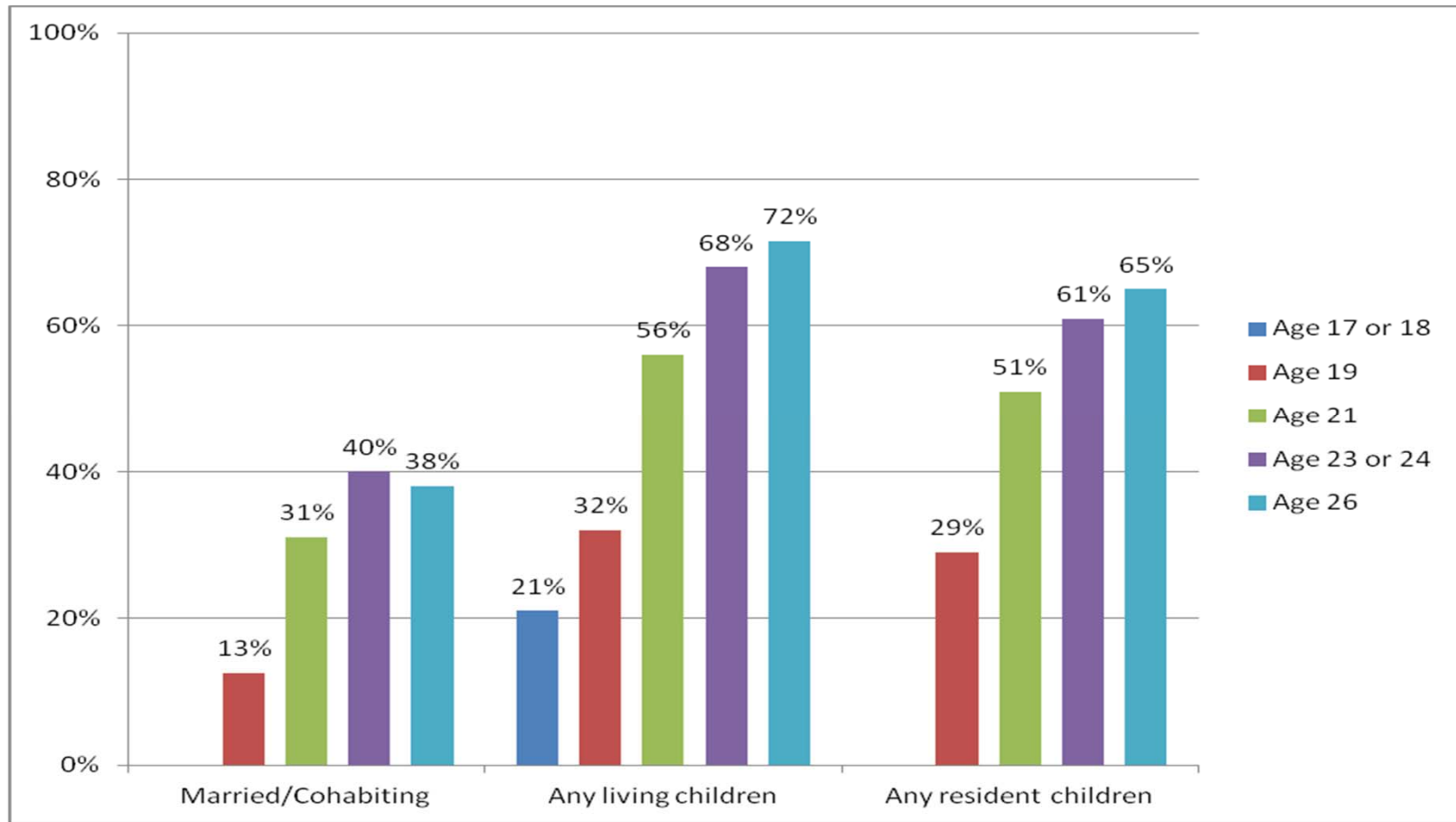


# Young Men's and Young Women's Employment



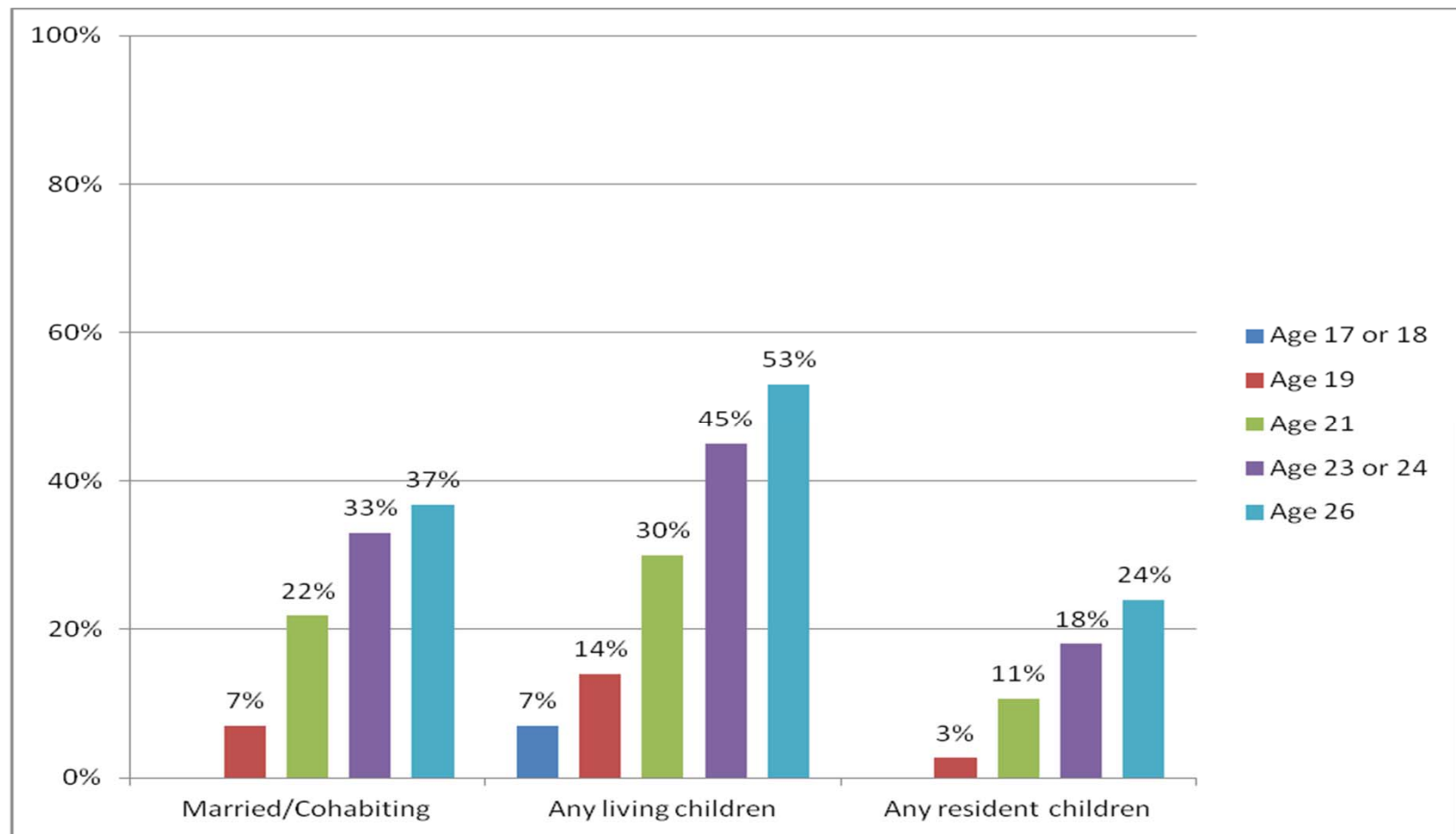
72% employed during year; mean earnings among employed = \$13,989

# Family Formation Among Young Women



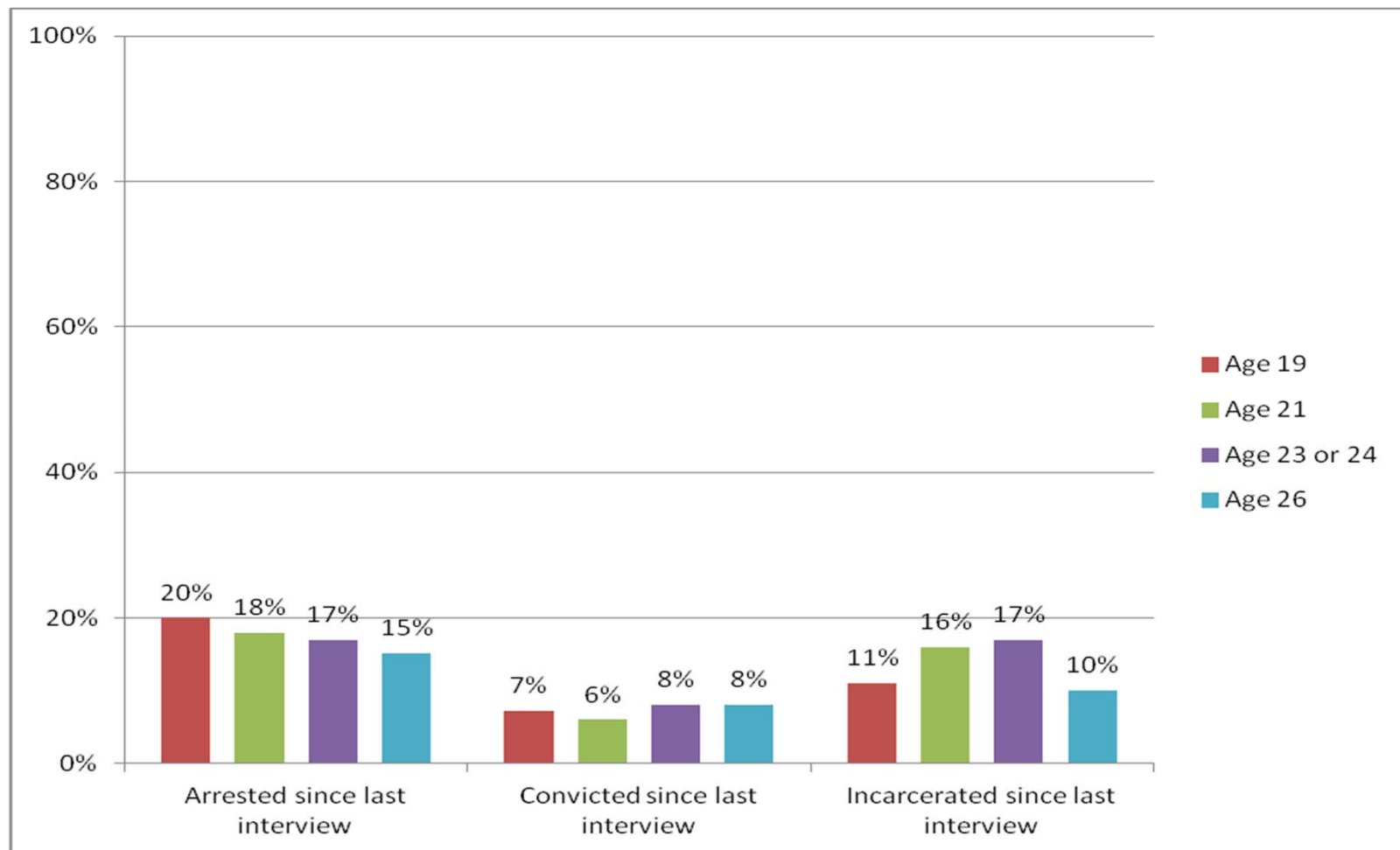
19% of women with children have a nonresident child

# Family Formation Among Young Men

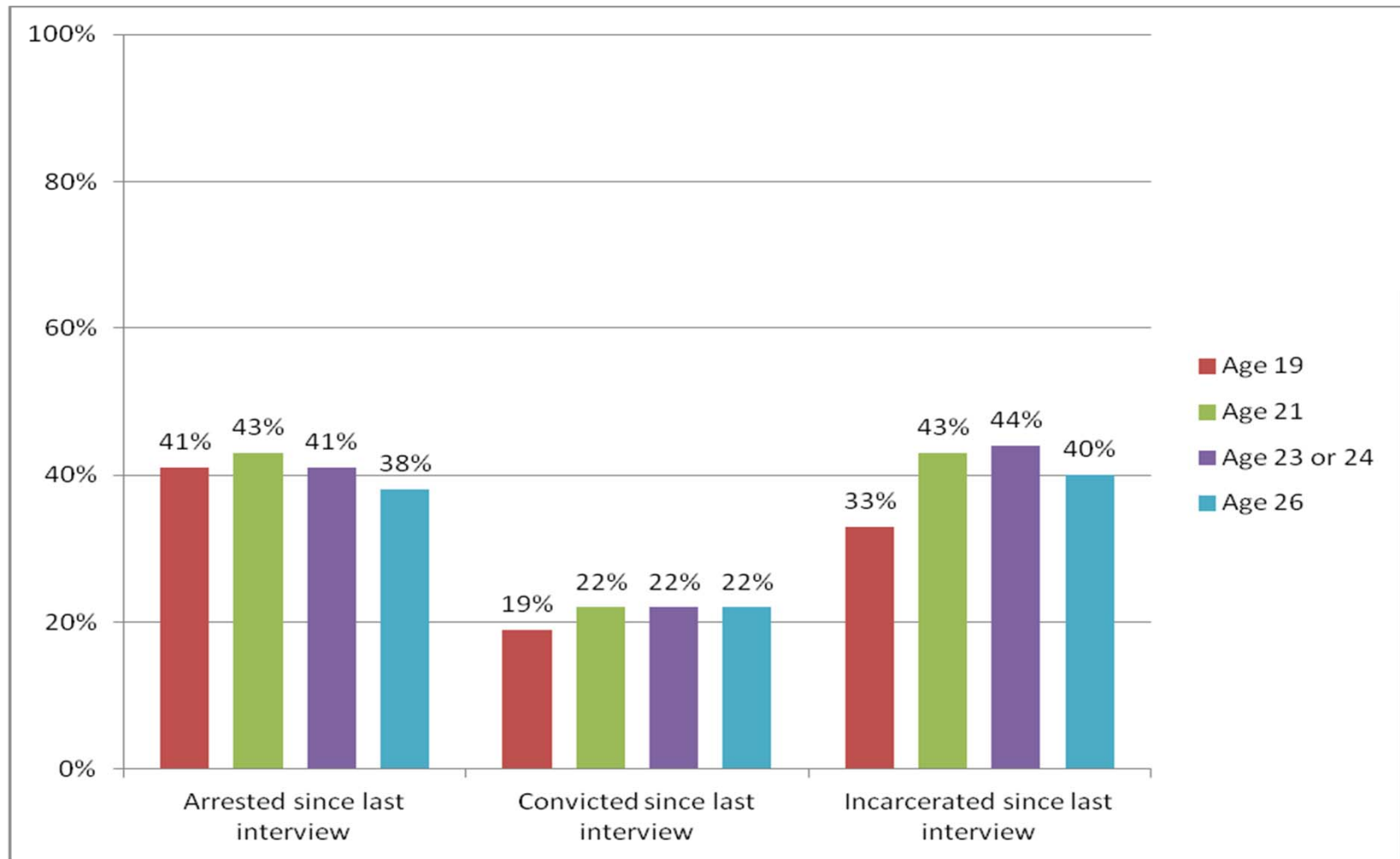


66% of men with children have a nonresident child

# Young Women's Criminal Justice System Involvement



# Young Men's Criminal Justice System Involvement





# Evidence regarding protective factors for foster youth in transition

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- Being on track in school before the transition
- Work experience before the transition
- Sound mental health before the transition
- Avoiding delinquency before the transition
- Educational aspirations before the transition
- Relations with family of origin
- Staying in care past age 18 (i.e., having the state continue its parenting role)

## Common themes across the studies

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- Improving well-being enhances safety and permanency
- Safety and permanency are ultimately necessary for well-being
- Collecting data on well-being is central to identifying policy and practice innovations needed to improve well-being, and safety and permanency
- Since other institutions are involved in co-parenting the state's children, the child welfare system needs data from those institutions to do its job well, particularly with respect to child well-being!

## Early Lessons from Efforts to Assess Well-Being

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- There will be initial reluctance on the part of system managers
- Good to start simple/small and build on successes
- Think broadly in terms of how to collect data (caseworkers; parents; youth; other systems)