



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**CHICAGO**

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SERVICE ADMINISTRATION

Research on the Transition to  
Adulthood from Out-of-Home  
Care:  
Implications for  
Developmentally-Appropriate  
Policy and Practice

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# My Purpose Today

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- *Point out the importance of understanding normative transitions to adulthood for developing policy and practice for youth in care*
- *Describe what research says about the transition to adulthood from foster care*
- *Discuss the implications of the research for crafting developmentally appropriate policy and practice*

# How does the transition to adulthood look for young people generally in the US?

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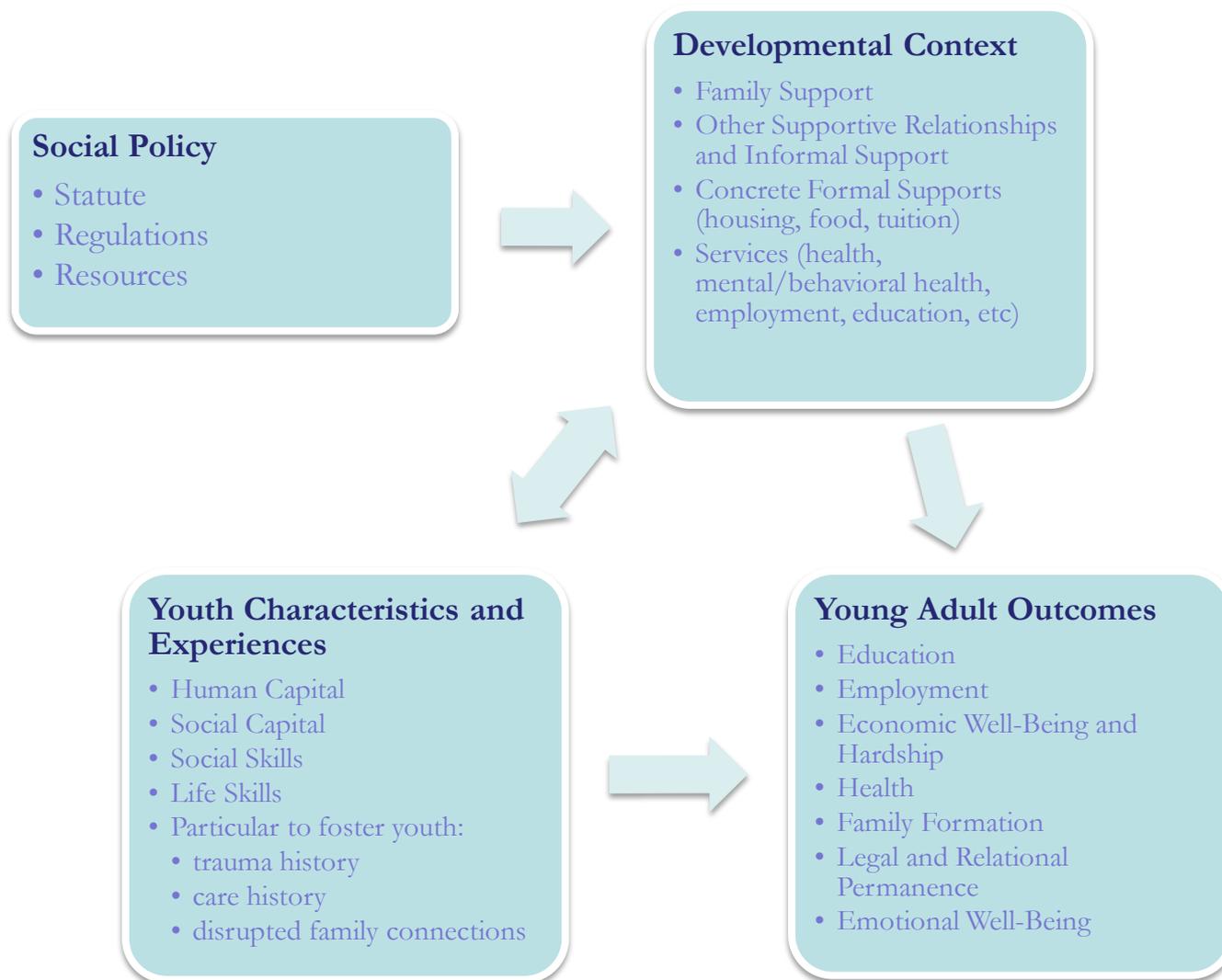
- *Demographers and developmental scholars describe the transition:*
  - Markers of the transition are happening later; half of young people between 18-24 live with a parent (US Census 2010)
  - \$38k in direct support between 18-34 (Schoeni & Ross, 2004)
  - Developmental psychologists describe a new period of “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2004)
  - Media attention to the so-called failure to launch
- *Yet, U.S. policy provides little support for young adults*
- *Little attention has been paid to the “other half”*

# Why pay attention to the transition to adulthood for youth in foster care?

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- *They exhibit all of the characteristics of other so-called vulnerable transition populations*
  - Poor education and employment histories; early parenting; mental and behavioral health problems; disabilities; justice system involvement; limited and/or problematic relations with parents
  - This makes interventions targeting the population potentially relevant to a wide range of vulnerable youth
- *We know where they live!*
- *Federal (and state) policy explicitly focuses on this group and provides considerable resources*

# Relationship of Social Policy to Young Adult Outcomes for Foster Youth



# The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth

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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)

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	596	83%	26

# Selected Baseline (17-18) Characteristics

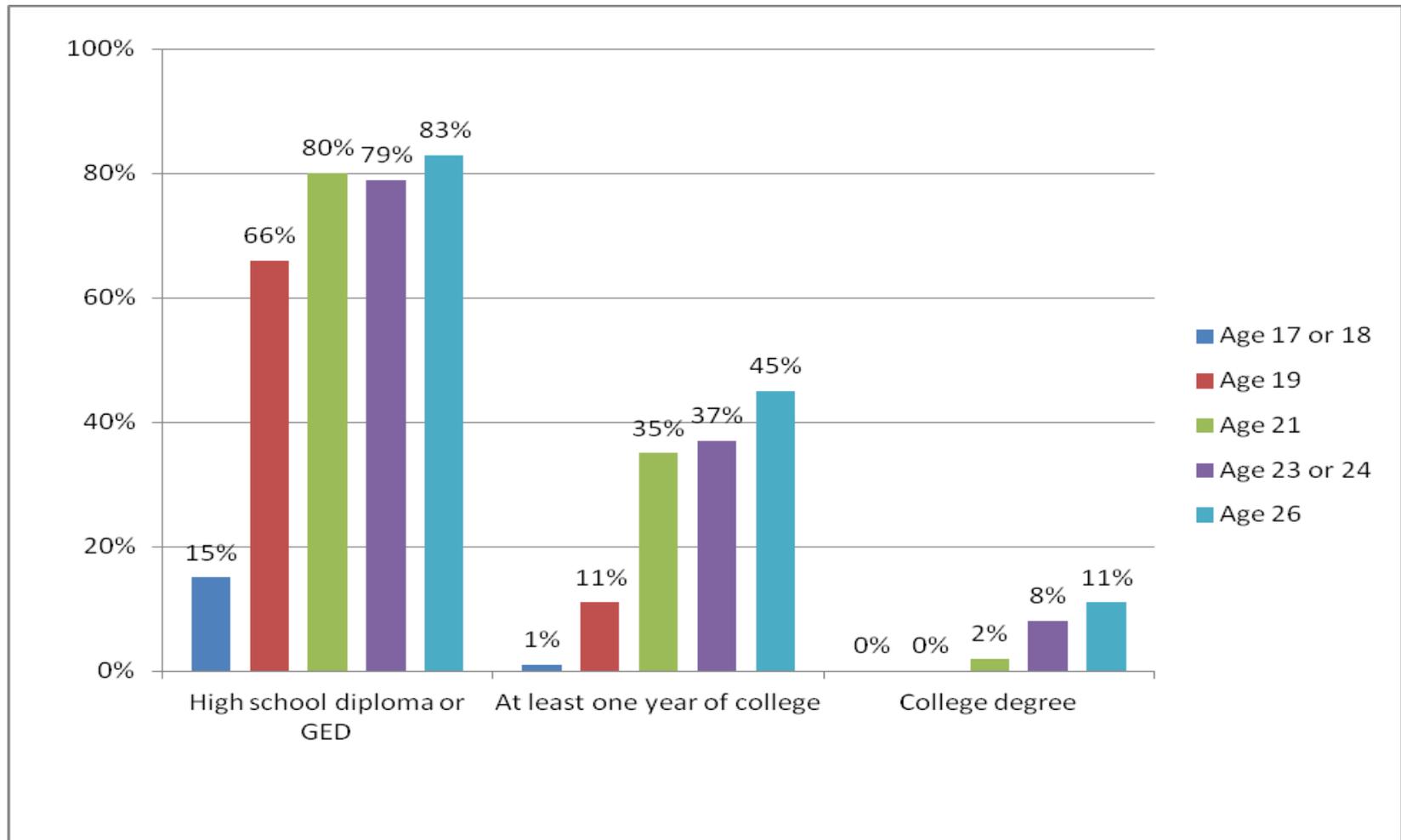
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- *Most entered care as adolescents*
- *Vast majority experienced abuse/neglect prior to care*
- *About 2/3 in kin or non-kin foster homes with remainder in group care or supervised independent living placements*
- *Poor educational attainment; high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

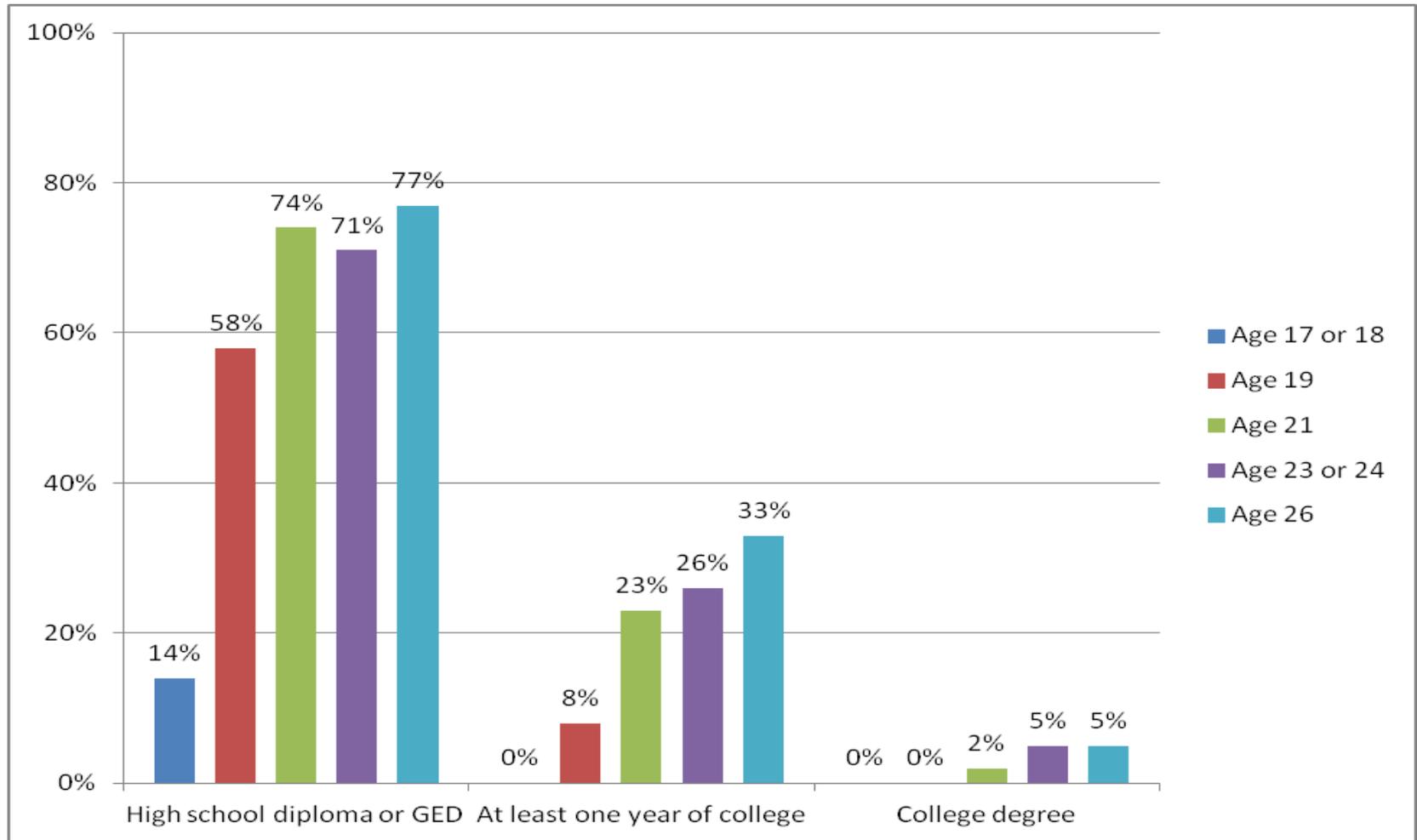
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*How do foster youth fare during the transition to adulthood?*

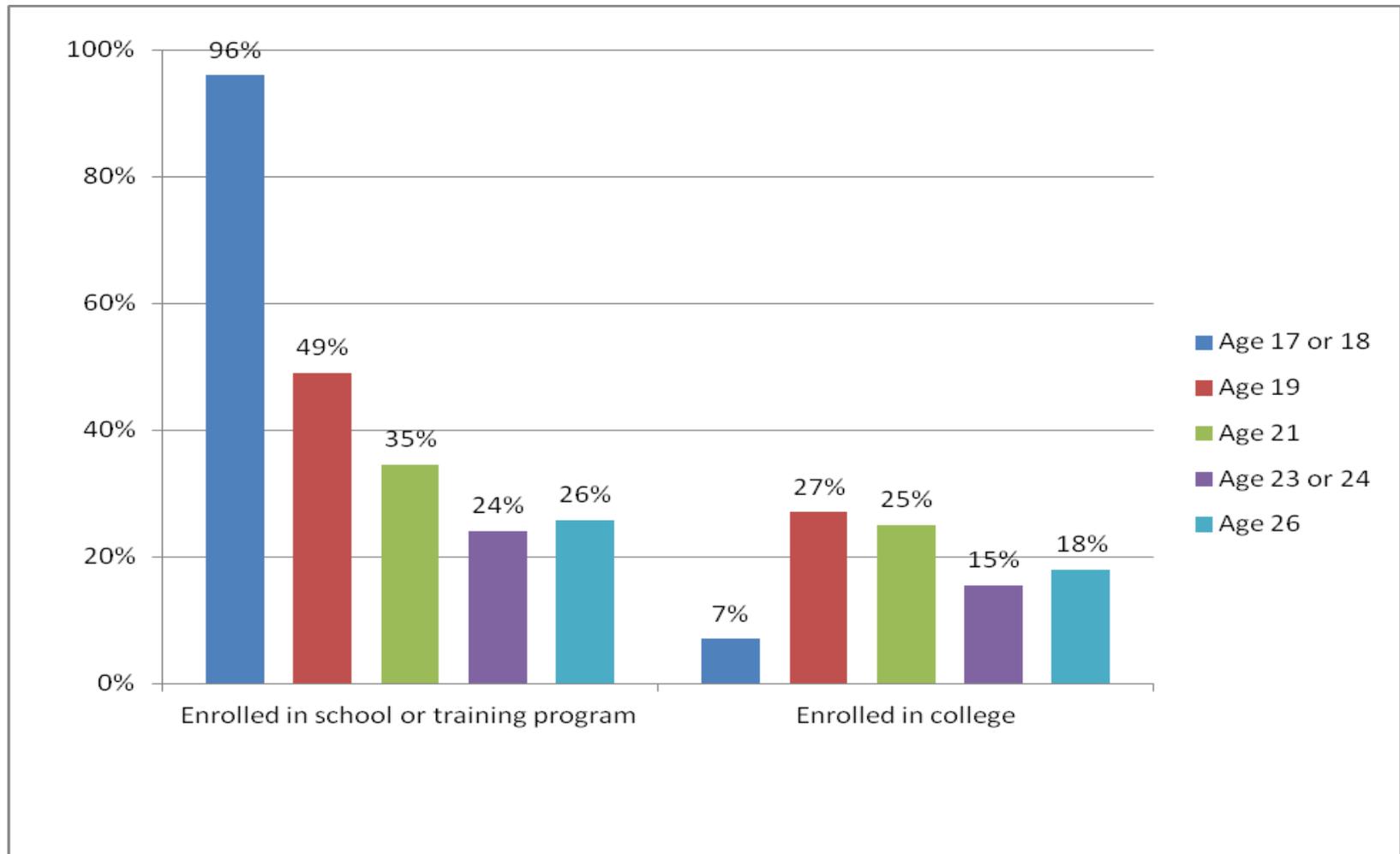
# Young Women's Educational Attainment



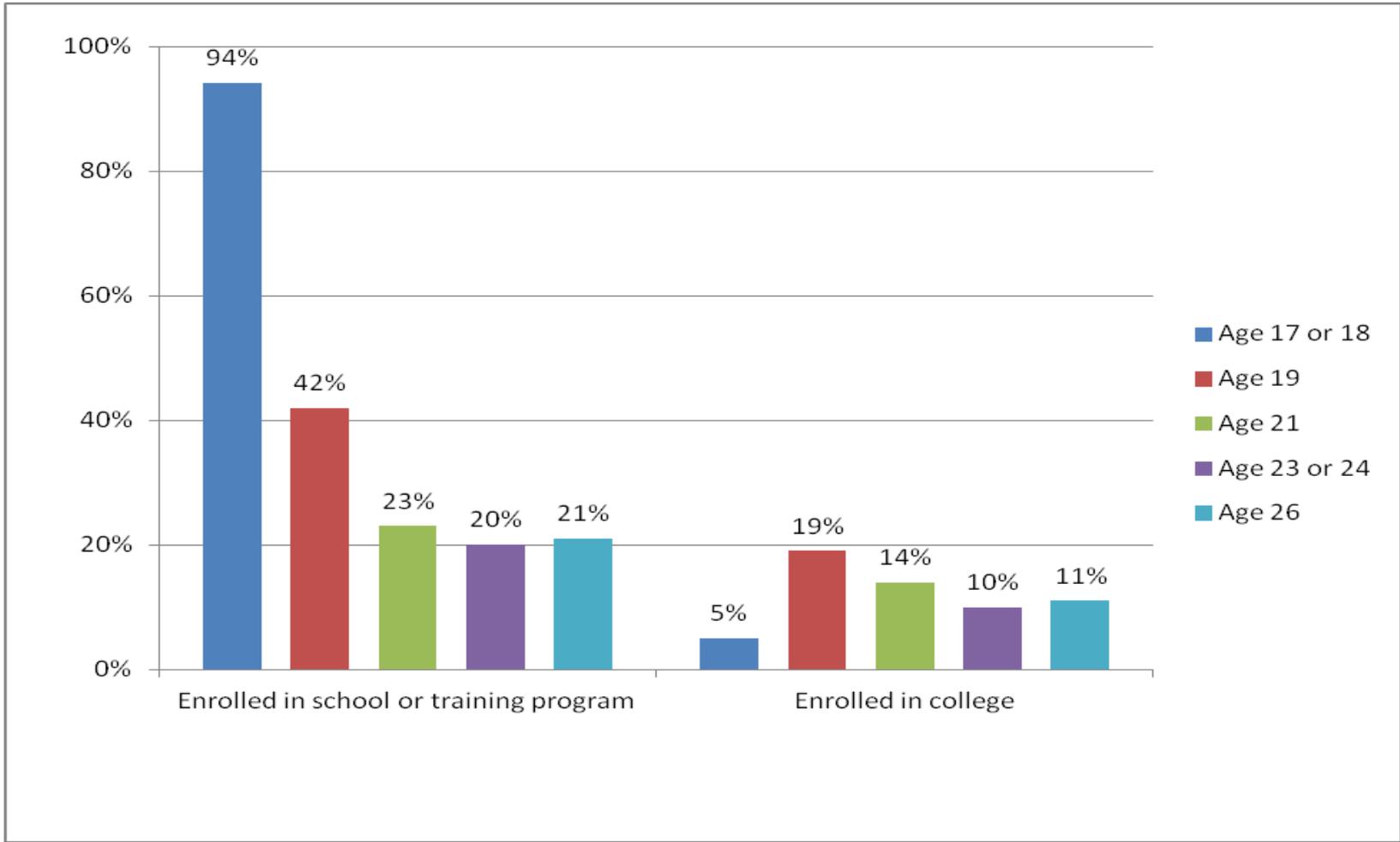
# Young Men's Educational Attainment



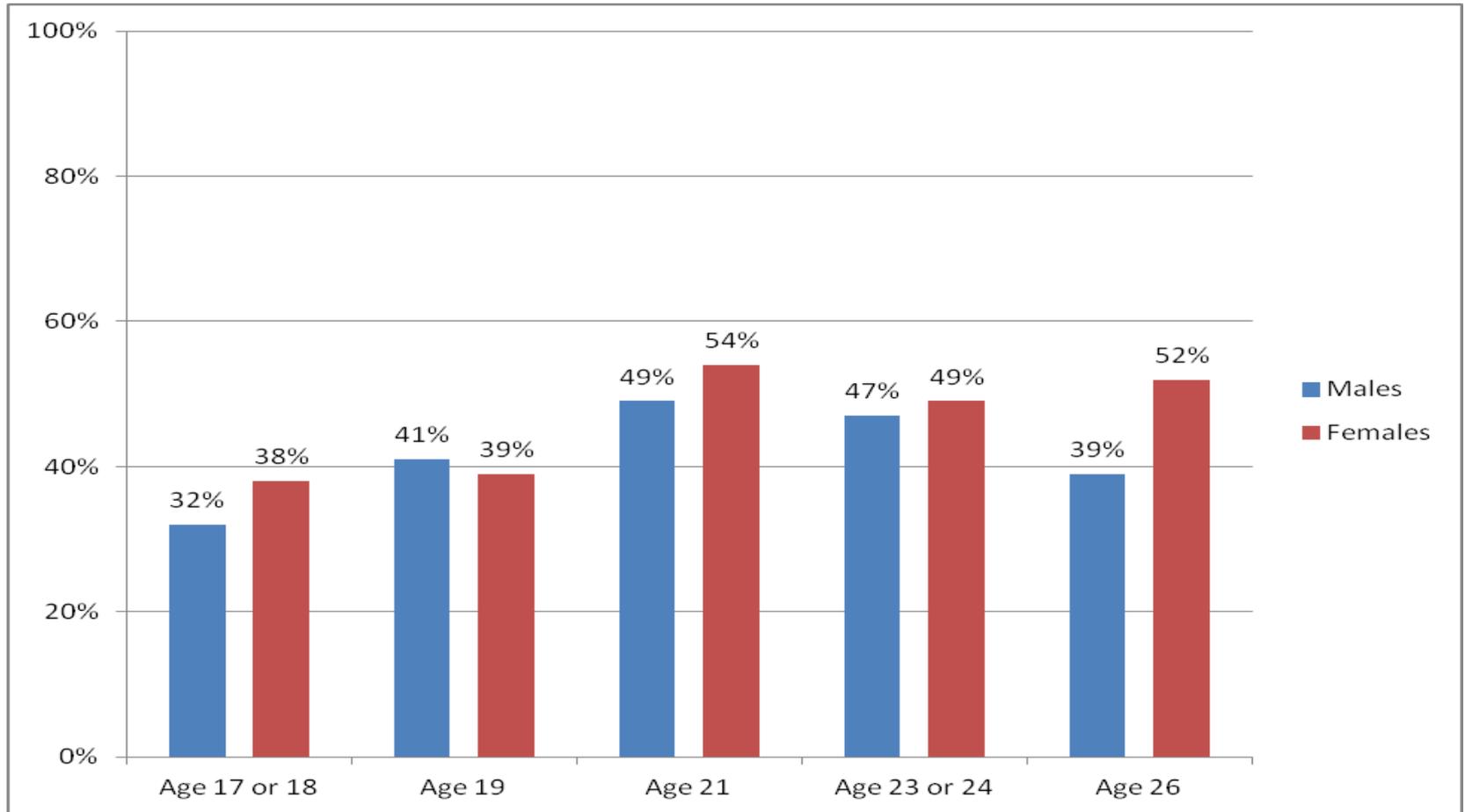
# Young Women's Educational Enrollment



# Young Men's Educational Enrollment

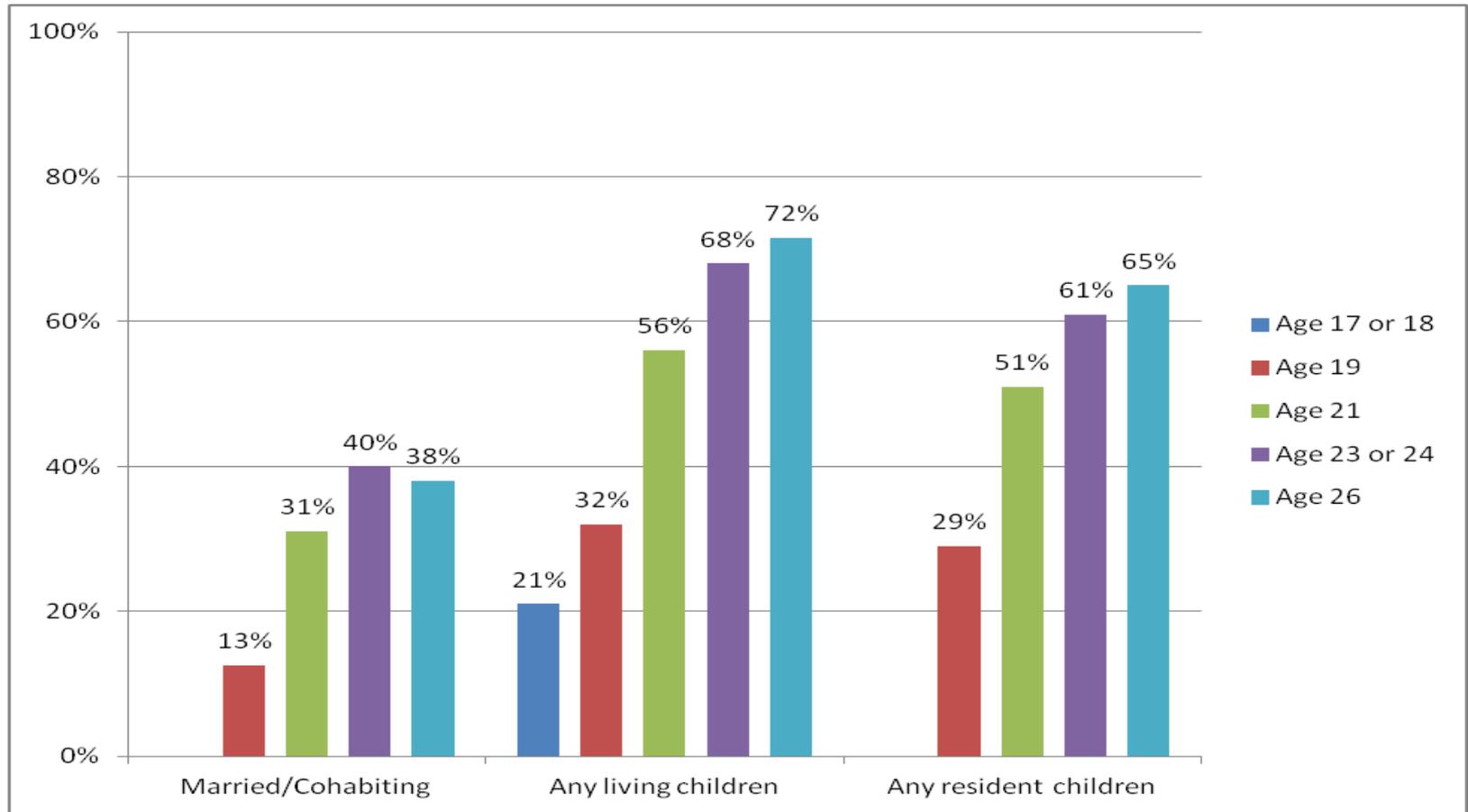


# Young Men's and Young Women's Employment



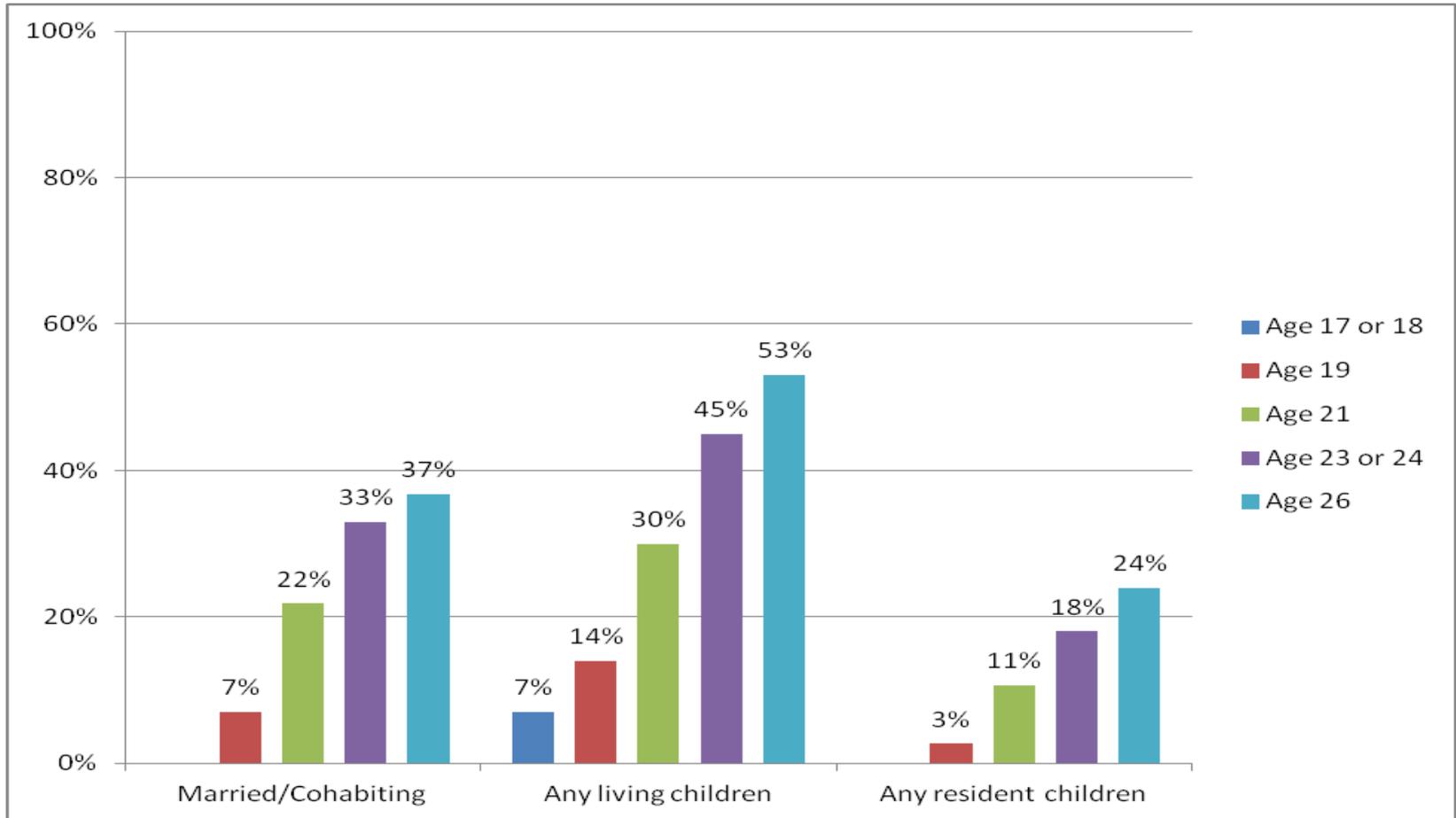
72% employed during year; mean earnings among employed = \$13,989

# Family Formation Among Young Women



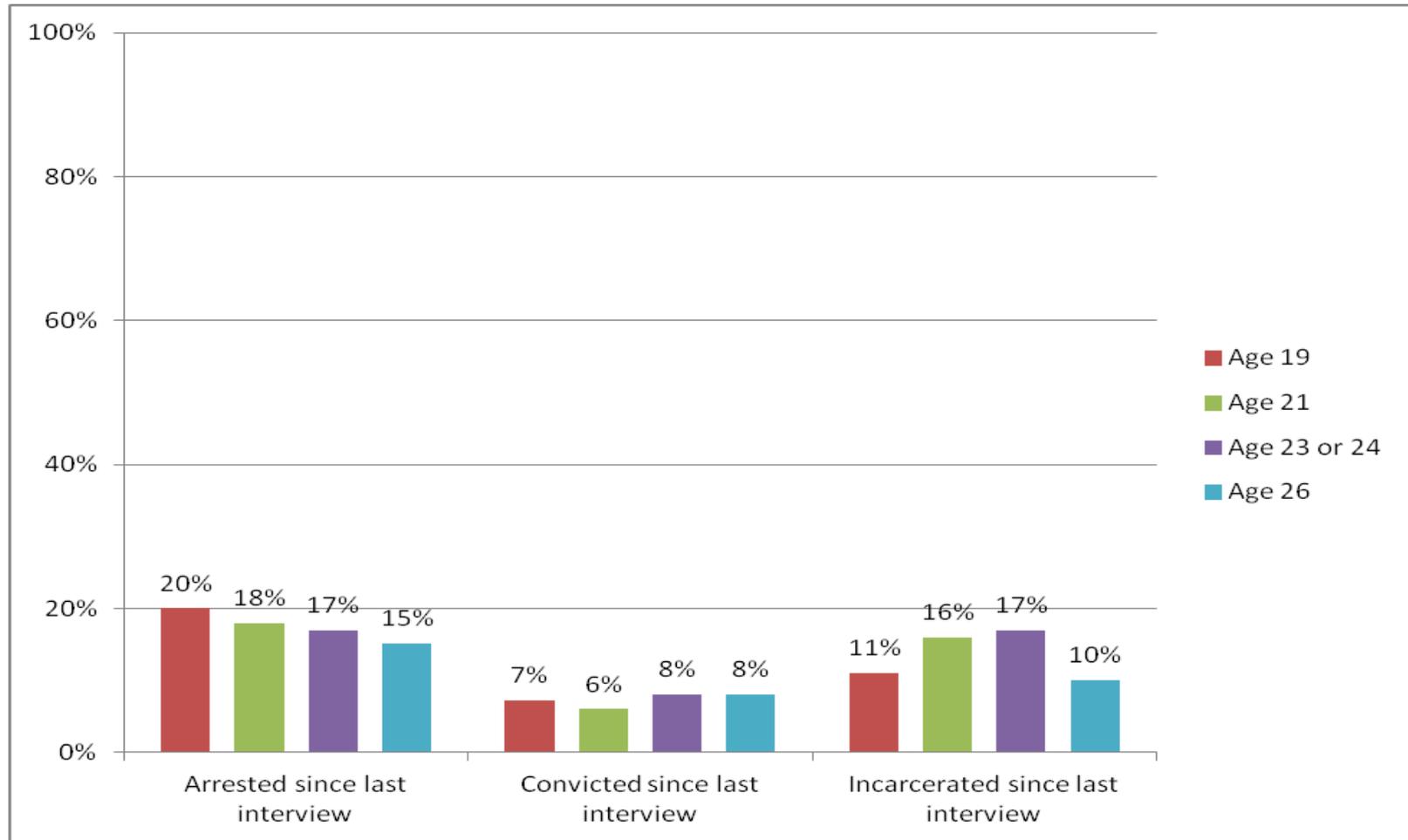
19% of women with children have a nonresident child

# Family Formation Among Young Men

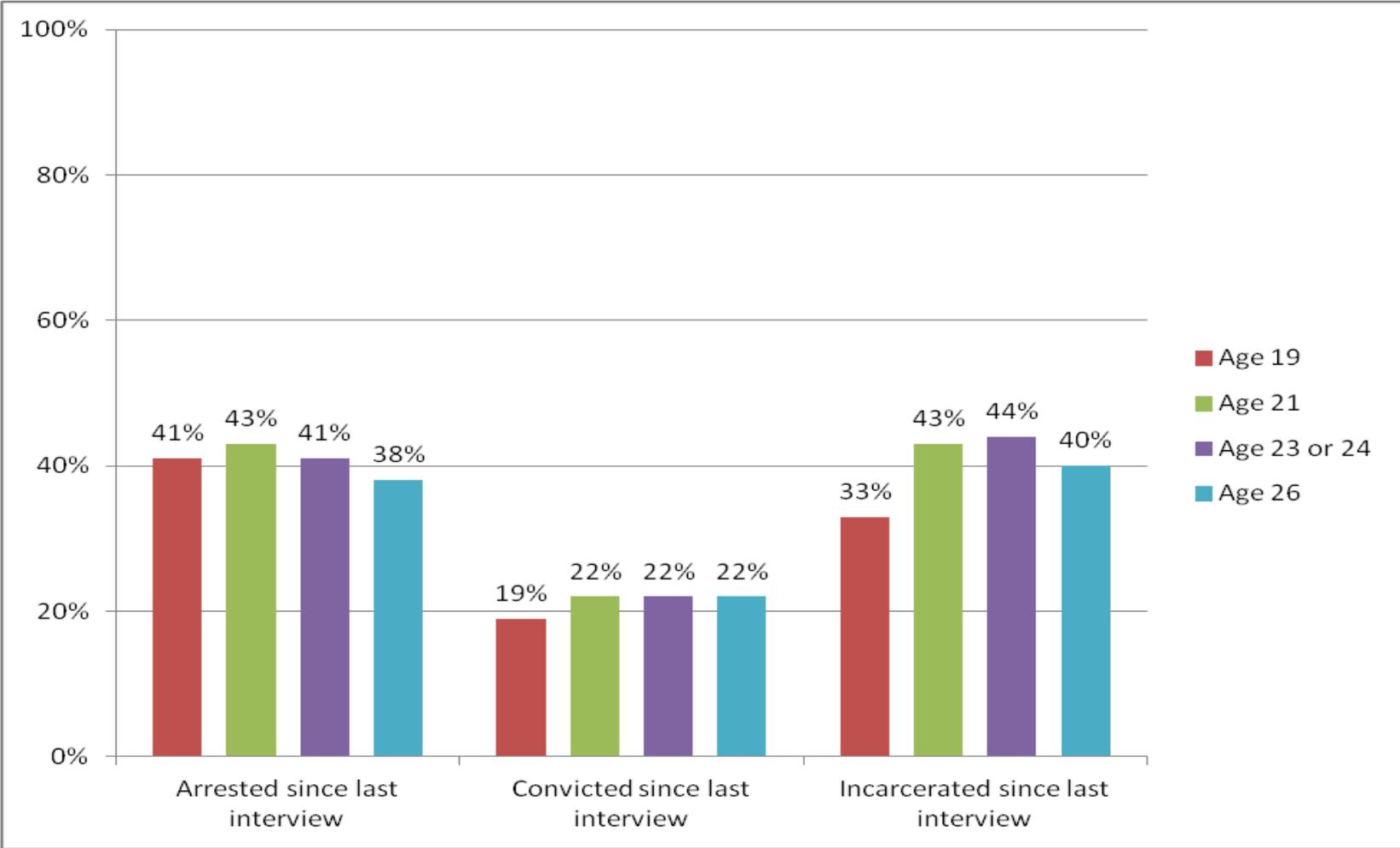


66% of men with children have a nonresident child

# Young Women's Criminal Justice System Involvement



# Young Men's Criminal Justice System Involvement



# Summary of What We Know About Early Adult Outcomes Post Chafee

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- *Outcomes are relatively poor across a variety of domains*
- *Trends are generally problematic, but with some bright spots:*
  - Low but stable rate of engagement in education, still in college at age 26!
  - Persistently poor engagement in the workforce
  - Many non-resident children
  - Troubling levels of justice system involvement continuing through early 20s, but some evidence of decline in mid 20s
- *Outcomes vary by gender; males fare worse*
- *Despite a sobering picture overall, many young people leaving the care of the state do well*
- *Overall outcomes obscure important between-jurisdiction differences; policy does matter!*

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*One Size Does Not Fit All:  
Transition Subgroups*

# Subgroups Provide More Clarity for Policy and Practice

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- *Keller, Cusick, & Courtney (2007) used Latent Class Analysis (LCA) to identify subpopulations at age 17-18 (n = 732) defined by distinctive profiles on indicators reflecting multiple domains of life experience*
- *Analysis resulted in four distinctive groups: Distressed and Disconnected 43%; Competent and Connected 38%; Struggling but Staying 14%; Hindered but Homebound 5%*
- *Group membership at 17-18 is strongly associated with several distinct transition outcomes at age 21: education; employment; parenthood; incarceration*
- *More recent study used key transition indicators to classify youth at age 23-24 (n = 584) using LCA: living arrangement; educational attainment; employment; resident and non-resident children; conviction since 18*

# Group 1: Accelerated Adults (36%)

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- *Most are female (63%)*
- *Most likely to live on their own in fairly stable situation*
- *Almost all (98%) have a HS degree or more; 52% have some college*
- *Most likely to be currently employed*
- *Nearly half (46%) has resident children*
- *Relatively low rate of conviction (14%)*
- *Group does not stand out on other indicators of functioning (e.g., social support; health; MH and AODA problems; economic hardships)*
- *Summary: This group is most likely to have made key transitions relatively early in adulthood*

## Group 2: Struggling Parents (25%)

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- *Most are female (74%)*
- *Nearly all (91%) have resident children and relatively few (8%) have a non-resident child*
- *About equal numbers have their own place (46%) or live with relatives/friends (44%)*
- *Most likely not to have a HS degree (44%) and only 3% have any college*
- *Only one-quarter currently employed*
- *Lower than average rate of conviction (14%)*
- *Also...least likely group to be currently in school, most likely to be married or cohabiting, second lowest reported social support, and most likely to experience economic hardship*
- *Summary: This group's experience is dominated by their parenting, under difficult circumstances*

## Group 3: Emerging Adults (21%)

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- *Slightly over half are male (55%)*
- *All are living with friends, relatives, or in other settings that are not their own*
- *Vast majority (91%) has finished high school and they have the second highest rate of having at least some college (46%)*
- *They have the second highest rate of current employment (63%)*
- *They are least likely to have children (27%) and over two-thirds of those with children have non-resident children*
- *Lowest rate of conviction (6%)*
- *Also, they are least likely to have ever been married, to have ever dropped out of high school, and to have ever been homeless*
- *Summary: This group most resembles Arnett's (2000) "emerging adults" in that they are delaying some transition markers (e.g., living on their own; finishing school; having children) while generally avoiding hardship*

## Group 4: Troubled and Troubling (18%)

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- *Vast majority is male (83%)*
- *Are most likely to be incarcerated, otherwise institutionalized, homeless, and/or to have experienced high residential mobility (72%)*
- *Two-fifths have not finished high school or GED and only 11% have any college*
- *Least likely to be currently employed (10%)*
- *48% have non-resident children; none have resident children*
- *82% report a criminal conviction since age 18*
- *Also, least likely to have felt prepared to be on their own at exit from care, most likely to report mental health and/or substance use problems, lowest reported levels of social support, highest rate of victimization, four-times higher rate of non-violent crime and doubled rate of violent crime compared to other groups*
- *Summary: This group experiences a wide range of psychosocial problems and poses challenges to the community*

# Implications for Policy

- *Distinct subgroups at the age of majority and during early adulthood suggest the need for targeted, developmentally appropriate policy and practice*
  - Subgroup status at 17-18 *does not determine* later status, but is *predictive*; Distressed and Disconnected youth were nearly four times more likely than the Competent and Connected youth to be in the Troubled and Troubling group at 23-24
  - A large group mainly needs support making the transition to higher education and succeeding there
  - About one-fifth needs significant intervention, perhaps for many years, with a range of psychosocial problems
  - Parents as a distinct group arguably need distinct kinds of support
- *A wide variety of public systems should be accountable: **corporate parenting** that includes active participation of **young adults** (Courtney, 2009)*

# Summary of Findings on Extending Care

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- *Strong evidence that allowing foster youth to remain in care until age 21 increases their likelihood of pursuing post-secondary education; though few youth have completed a degree by age 26, many remain in college*
- *More qualified evidence that allowing foster youth to remain in care until age 21 is associated with increased earnings, delayed pregnancy, and reduced crime (among females)*
- *Extending care appears to delay homelessness, but not prevent it*
- *Allowing foster youth to remain in care until age 21 also increases the likelihood of receiving independent living services after age 18*

# Implications of research for practice...the good news

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- *Handful of longitudinal studies have identified some predictors of later outcomes, mostly fairly obvious risk and protective factors (e.g., prior education; prior employment; mental and behavioral health; connections to supportive adults)*
- *Qualitative and descriptive studies have identified some of the strengths and needs of foster youth in transition (e.g., broad conception of “family” and lasting connections to family of origin; connections to other foster youth)*
- *Studies seeking the opinions of young people and professionals who serve them have identified promising practices and programs*
  - Supports for transitions to higher education
  - Asset development programs
  - Transitional housing
  - Mentoring

# Implications of research for practice...the bad news

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- *Cochrane collaboration review of evaluation research on IL programs (Montgomery et al, 2006) found no rigorous studies: “Further research incorporating randomized designs is both feasible and necessary”*
- *Recent ACF-funded randomized evaluations :*
  - No impact of life skills training, tutoring/mentoring, and employment support
  - Massachusetts Adolescent Outreach had some positive effects, but those appear to be mediated by the program’s impact on youth remaining in care past age 18.

*The bottom line: Too many programs are poorly targeted, have poorly developed logic models, and are not intensive enough to influence outcomes for youth making the transition to adulthood from foster care.*



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For more info:

<http://www.chapinhall.org/research/report/midwest-evaluation-adult-functioning-former-foster-youth>

[http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse\\_neglect/chafee/index.html](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse_neglect/chafee/index.html)