



National Institute to Unlock Potential

OVERVIEW: According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the Black incarceration rate at the end of 2020 was 3.5 times the rate among whites. Research shows that between 58% (Doyle 2007; Yang 2021; Rosato 2008) and 68% (Yi, 2016) of Black Americans with criminal records are former foster youth, victims of trafficking, formerly justice-involved youth, or had a parent in prison when they were under the age of 18. An intentional focus is needed at an earlier stage in this pattern to address the drivers of systemic racism, create avoidance of justice-system engagement, and correct the inequitable outcomes for black and brown individuals.

This earlier stage should be focused on investing in Opportunity Youth, young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are disconnected from school and work (often referred to as “disconnected youth”). This population encompasses many young people, including juvenile justice and foster care systems, the youth of incarcerated parents, human trafficking, teenage mothers, and homeless young people. This group is:

- *Disproportionately male and from minority groups*
- *5 times more likely to have a criminal record when compared to connected youth*
- *20 times as likely to live in institutionalized group quarters, including psychiatric and correctional facilities*
- *Likely to have a mental or physical disability*
- *Likely to have emergent bilingual status*
- *Likely to have significant family obligations*

Leading estimates report that the number of Opportunity Youth will reach over 6 million in the U.S. and could grow to represent one-fourth of all youth (Measure of America). By meeting these young people before they’ve had the chance to make mistakes with lifelong impact, we can potentially save generations from the cycle through the criminal justice system. These youth represent a social opportunity but also an economic one.

To learn more, visit:

[Home - Persevere Now and Unlock Potential \(unlock-potential.org\)](https://www.unlock-potential.org)
or contact us at InstiruteUP@perseverenow.org

Walmart’s efforts in criminal justice prevention initiatives include activating and sustaining change programs that prevent people from entering the criminal justice system in the first place. This is part of Walmart and the Walmart Foundation’s \$100 million commitment over five years through the Walmart.org Center for Racial Equity (CRE). The center complements the work of the Walmart criminal justice Shared Value Network (SVN), focusing on areas where business intersects with the systems that make up criminal justice reform: prevention, intervention during incarceration, and aftercare post-incarceration. The center bolsters the SVN’s efforts by supporting networks that amplify emerging best practices and connect organizations on the local level. Persevere, a national 501(c)3 nonprofit organization serving justice-involved men and women through technology education, is a recipient of Walmart’s investments in preventative and rehabilitative infrastructure. Together, they will create opportunities and encourage enhancements to policies that lower incarceration rates in BIPOC (black, indigenous, and people of color) communities, which will significantly impact Opportunity Youth.

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT: Walmart’s grant to Persevere exemplifies the CRE’s commitment to supporting networks of stakeholders who are scaling efforts to slow the rate for communities of color entering the criminal justice system. Avoiding justice system engagement for Opportunity Youth, particularly those in BIPOC communities, is a critical step in turning the tide of mass incarceration. A national network that enlists communities to help these young adults avoid the criminal justice system by unlocking their potential through workforce development may deflect them from justice involvement and change their lives for the better.

GRANT FOCUS SUMMARY: Persevere will create a National Institute to Unlock Potential; a network of national, state, and grassroots organizations and experts, practitioners, youth-led organizations, and advocates focused on the development and implementation of a data-informed and racially equitable approach to workforce development for Opportunity Youth. Through a collaborative process we will explore the systemic issues that negatively affect disconnected 16–24-year-olds, avenues to increase access to education and employment leading to meaningful

NETWORK BUILDING AND CONVENING

- Establish and convene a steering committee to develop a plan for first chance hiring and advise the Institute as key informants
- Identify and convene community organizations from across the country who will be key in supporting businesses and first chance seekers
- Develop infrastructure for communication, data sharing, and resource development to function as an internal community of practice for network participants

DEVELOP AND PUBLISH A FRAMEWORK

- Conduct a comprehensive assessment of risks, needs, and resources related to implementing workforce development strategies for unlocking the potential of Opportunity Youth
- Analyze labor market data, surveys, and focus group interviews on gaining a broad understanding of the nature and depth of the existing best practices and resources
- Develop, publish, and distribute a framework for identifying accessible resources to improve employment and earnings opportunities for the initiative's target groups

IMPLEMENT NATIONAL PILOTS

- Develop community solutions pilot grants to non-profit organizations utilizing the tools, lessons learned, and resources created by the Institute to leverage training, paid apprenticeships, and employment opportunities for disconnected youth, especially in the technology field

careers, the delivery and funding of these and other services, policies and programs that support the positive engagement of young people, and systematic approaches to the testing and scaling of preventive and reengagement interventions. Persevere will also create a permanent department to lead the Institute's efforts and activities beyond this grant to demonstrate our long-term commitment to this work.

Persevere will identify or create equitable, innovative services and funding opportunities to support initiatives based on our learnings. In that case, we can influence a young person's future trajectory, positively affecting their overall economic well-being and mobility, the potential for financial freedom, mental, physical, and emotional health,

To learn more, visit:

[Home - Persevere Now and Unlock Potential \(unlock-potential.org\)](https://www.unlock-potential.org)
or contact us at InstiruteUP@perseverenow.org

strengthen relationships/social capital, and disrupt cycles of incarceration and poverty.

OTHER PARTNERS: In developing the Walmart Foundation's inaugural criminal justice grant program, the Center for Racial Equity tapped into a diverse group of funders and policymakers to guide its efforts. With this approach, the thought partners and potential grantees mirror the great diversity of the criminal justice field mentioned above. They include:

- **ACT-NOW!** — Founded by John Bridgeland, who served as the Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council under President George W. Bush, ACT-NOW is an initiative to reimagine policing and public safety for the 21st century by harnessing the energy and ingenuity of the American people. The project invites local leaders from 15 cities representing civil rights, law enforcement, government, education, young people, business, social services, faith, and more to develop better approaches to protecting and serving their communities and preventing violence.
- **The Responsible Business Initiative for Justice (RBIJ)** is a nonprofit organization working to engage, educate, and equip businesses — and their leaders — to participate in advocacy on criminal justice issues, support policy-specific reform campaigns, and use their resources and operations to be a force for good in society. This work includes supporting members of the BRT and 2nd Chance Hiring Business Coalition to shape its hiring initiative.
- **The Prison Fellowship (PF)** works to restore America's criminal justice system and those it affects by advocating for justice reform. In addition to direct work in prison, they care for prisoners' families and help strengthen the bond between children and their parents behind bars by connecting them to over 5,000 churches and community organizations through its Angel Tree programs.
- **The National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR)** works to reduce incarceration and violence, improve the outcomes of system-involved youth and adults, and increase the capacity and expertise of the organizations that serve these individuals. The organization provides technical assistance, consulting, research, organizational development, and advocacy in juvenile and criminal justice, youth development, and violence prevention. NICJR works with various organizations, including government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and philanthropic foundations. NICJR is working in cities nationally to guide the implementation of practical approaches to community-based gun violence prevention.

- The University of Southern California Race & Equity Center is home to a dynamic research and organizational improvement engine that works with professionals in educational institutions, corporations, and other contexts. They help partners strategically develop and achieve equity goals, better understand and correct climate problems, avoid and recover from racial crises, and cultivate sustainable cultures of inclusion and respect.
- The University of Arkansas at Little Rock William H. Bowen School of Law (UALR) actively works diversely. Bowen has adopted racial justice initiatives that include diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts for its faculty, students, and staff. Two tenured law professors led the law school's new Center for Racial Justice and Criminal Justice Reform (the "Center"). Its mission is to create a more just and equitable criminal justice system in Arkansas.
- The Health Alliance for Violence Intervention (HAVI) [Under Review] is the only national organization working to heal systemic and interpersonal violence cycles through the advancement of HVIPs. They offer training and technical assistance to roughly 85 cities that seek to start or sustain HVIP work; growing a network of hundreds of interventionists who focus on trauma and transformation in the lives of boys and men of color; shifting narratives about the public health approach to violence and trauma to advance racial equity and advancing policy that promotes broad systems change.

To learn more about philanthropy at Walmart, visit <https://walmart.org/diversity-equity-and-inclusion/center-for-racial-equity>



To learn more, visit:
[Home - Persevere Now and Unlock Potential \(unlock-potential.org\)](https://unlock-potential.org)
 or contact us at InstiruteUP@perseverenow.org