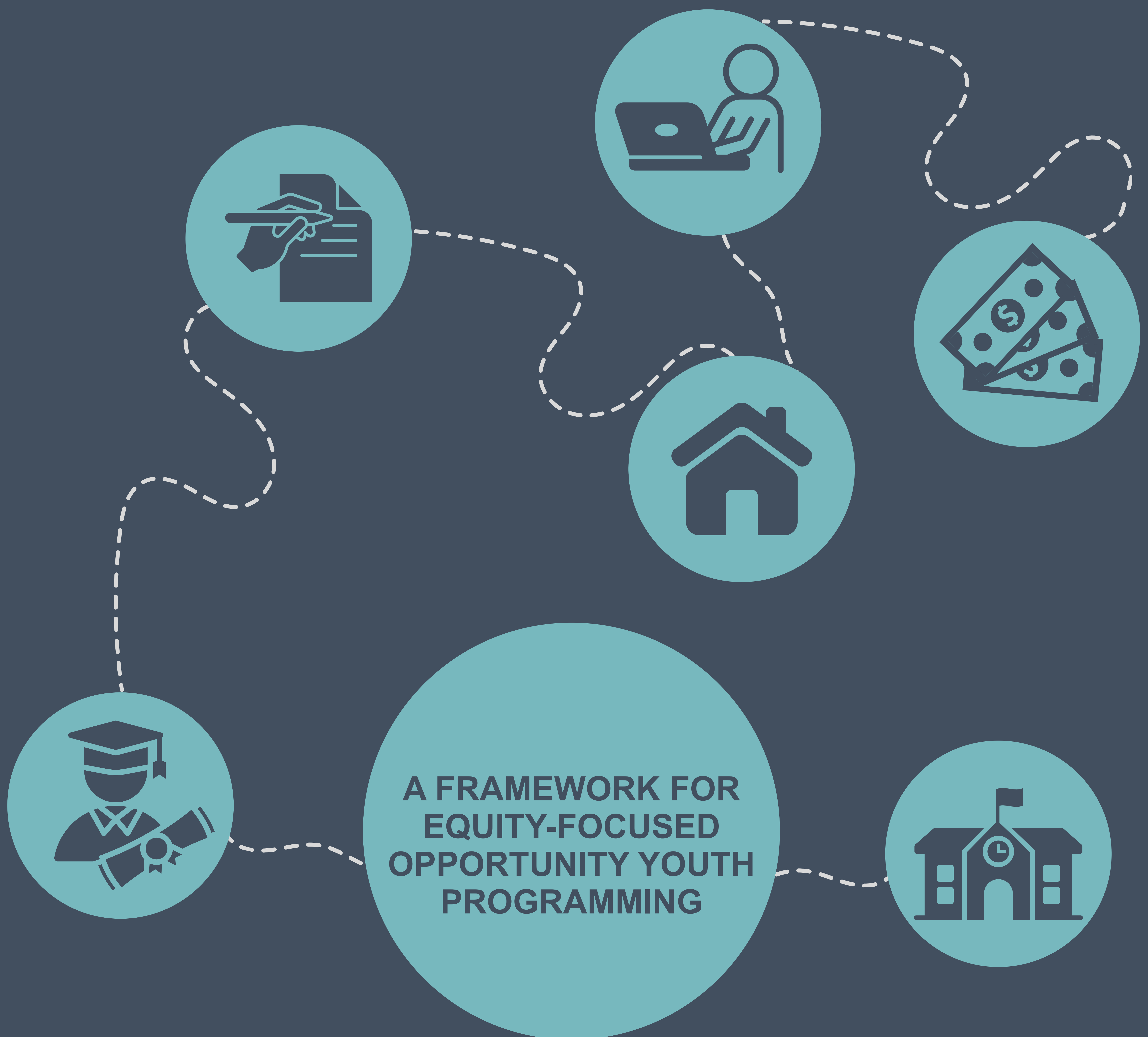


# OPPORTUNITY YOUTH LANDSCAPE

NATIONAL INSTITUTE TO UNLOCK POTENTIAL





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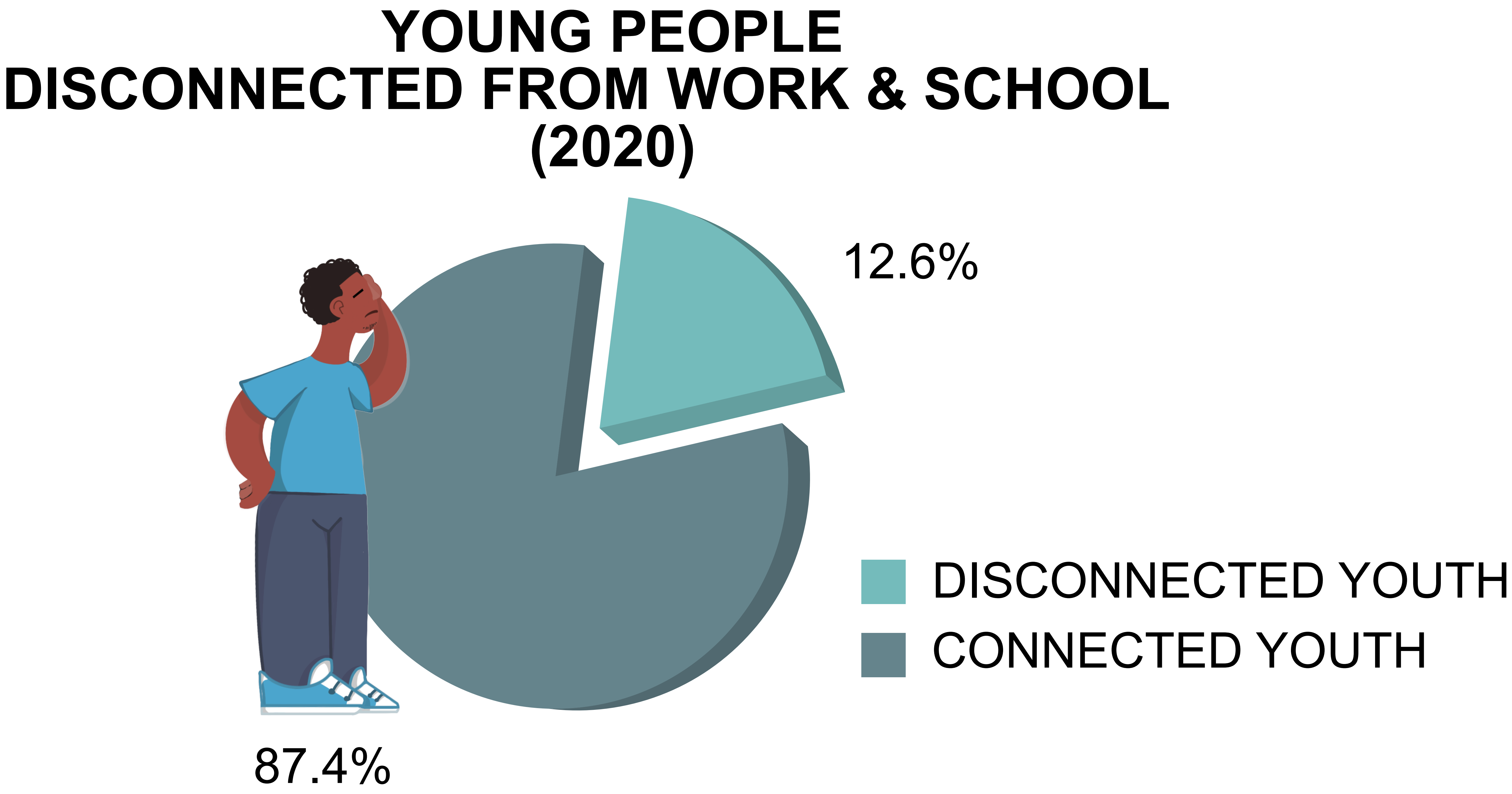
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# Introduction

As of 2020, 12.6% of all young people in the US in that age group were disconnected from work or school (Lewis, 2022). This population of young people is referred to as Opportunity Youth, and as will be described throughout this paper, they face significant challenges created and sustained by our current systems. To grapple with how communities are currently responding to these conditions and how to move forward in the journey towards changing our systems to work for all young people, the National Institute to Unlock Potential (NIUP) convened a diverse group of stakeholders, including young people, community based organizations (CBOs), and employers. These partners worked to develop a framework for collaborative, equity-focused employment programs for Opportunity Youth. The NIUP specifically focused on Black and Brown Opportunity Youth who had experienced parental incarceration, the foster care system, the criminal legal system, or human trafficking and have the most significant risk of experiencing incarceration. The result of this work is the *Unlocking Youth Potential: A Pathway to Inclusive Hiring* is a framework for equity-focused Opportunity Youth programming. It outlines the vision NIUP partners craft for advancing Opportunity Youth workforce development programming.



The framework is intended as a foundational resource for ongoing work to translate these best practices and guiding principles into concrete, actionable tools for practice. The NIUP recommends communities and funders pursue collaborative, equity-focused programs in which young people, CBOs, and employers co-create a program that uniquely responds to local context.

To guide the development of such collaborative efforts, NIUP has identified 10 Areas of Practice that all stakeholders are called on to engage, supporting one another to actively learn and adapt. This framework builds on the expertise and experience of our young people and the many partners who do this work each day.

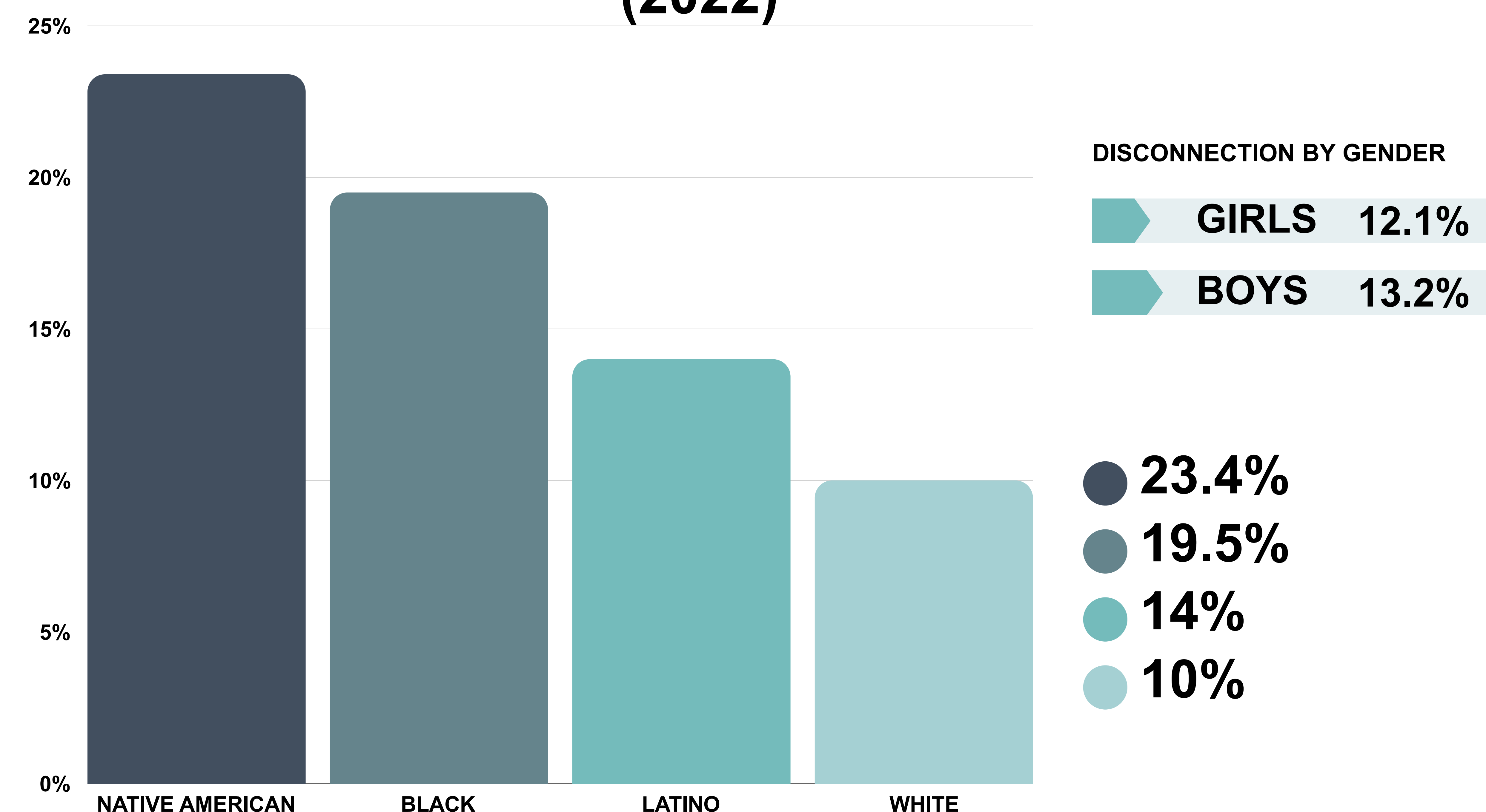
This paper provides a review of the landscape and current state of Opportunity Youth nationally and the four focus populations of this framework. The information here served as a foundational input in the work of the NIUP as they developed the framework for programming.



# Opportunity Youth Nationally

Across the United States, 4.8 million young people aged 16 to 24 were neither enrolled in school nor participating in the labor market as of 2020 (Lewis, 2022). Youth within the above age ranges that are disconnected from work and school are referred to as Opportunity Youth. Opportunity Youth represent 12.6% of all young people in their age range, the highest rate of disconnection among this population in a decade due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Lewis, 2022). Nearly one quarter (23.4%) of Native American young people are disconnected, more than double the disconnection rate of 10.6% among White young people (Lewis, 2022). Black and Latino young people have the next highest disconnection rates, 19.5% and 14% respectively (Lewis, 2022). Boys and young men have a higher rate of disconnection (13.2%) than girls and young women (12.1%) (Lewis, 2022). LGBT youth are also impacted by disconnection however, the percentage is unknown due to some youth not disclosing their sexual orientations and gender identities (Dworsky and Hall, 2013). **Opportunity Youth are more likely to live in poverty, have a disability, and to be uninsured compared to their connected peers (Lewis, 2022).**

DISCONNECTED OPPORTUNITY YOUTH  
DEMOGRAPHIC  
(2022)



**Our youth are not defined by their disconnection. Despite facing various systematic barriers and challenges, they continue to hold dreams and aspirations for themselves. Young people are experts in their own experiences and know-how our systems have failed them. They know what it takes for the systems to meet them where they are and to support them meaningfully. Our youth are creative and resilient and have the knowledge of how best to support themselves. They have the power to change the system so that all young people can thrive. To create a future with equitable, high-quality education and employment pathways for all young people, we must actively center and partner with the youth we seek to uplift.**

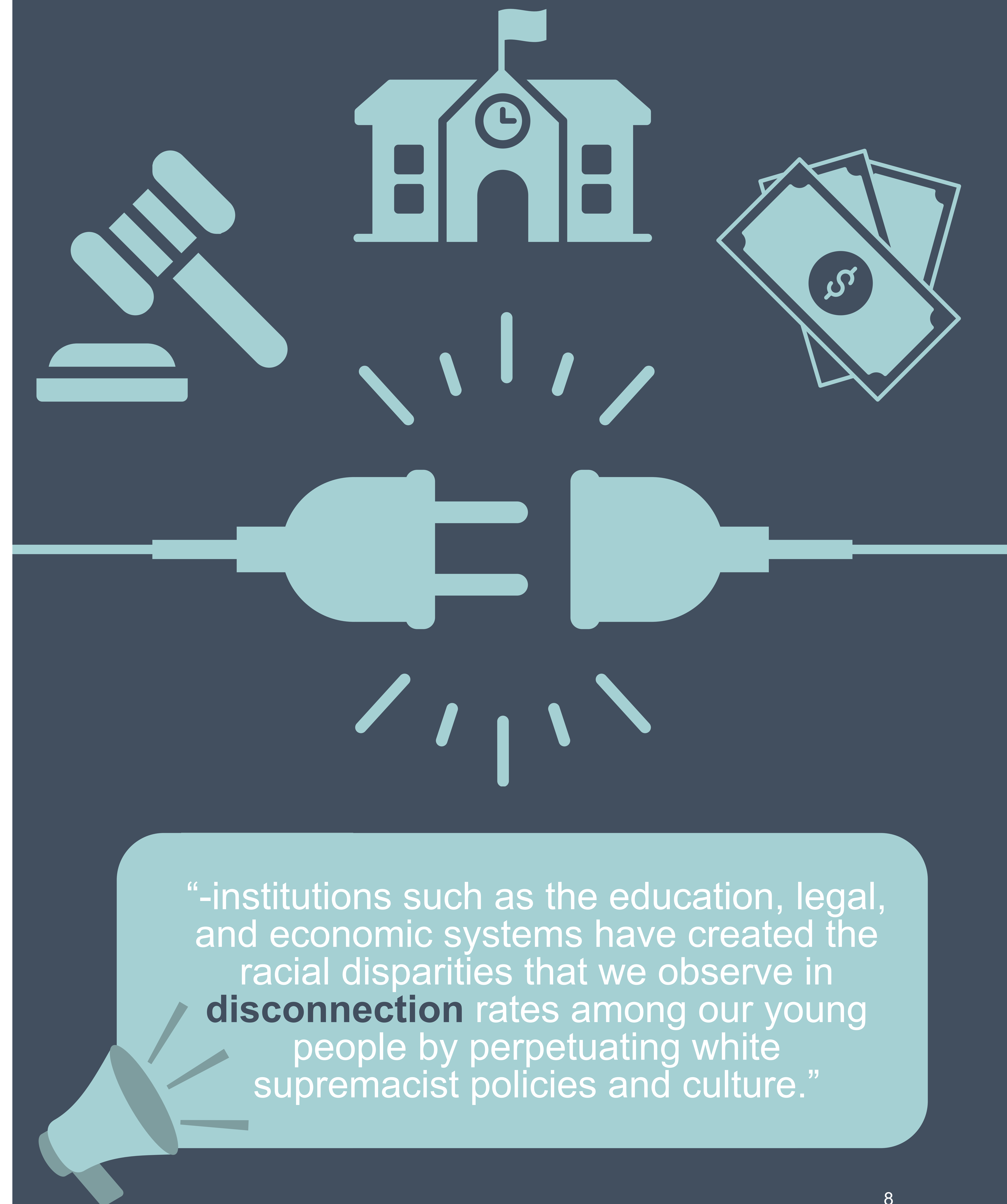




# Our Systems Create Disparities

Disconnection is complex. The decision of a young adult to drop out of school or work may appear to be an individual choice, but it is often the outcome of a series of circumstances and barriers that are deeply rooted in institutionalized racist policies and practices. These policies and practices limit access to and investment in resources available for low-income and minority communities at the community level. **The NIUP recognizes that institutions such as the education, legal, and economic systems have created the racial disparities that we observe in disconnection rates among our young people by perpetuating white supremacist policies and culture.** White supremacy can be understood as an institutionally perpetuated system of oppression and exploitation of people of color, for the purpose of maintaining and defending systems of wealth, privilege, and power for a select group of individuals (Martinez). The legacy of explicitly racist practices and policies across the US continue to create barriers and limit resources for communities of color.

**Our commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion implores us to reimagine all systems that contribute to youth being disconnected, to design systems that intentionally work to close racial disparities in education and employment.** Our systems must center on young people's needs, values, and voices to achieve outcomes and promote opportunities for current and future generations. Furthermore, in order to see meaningful change all six conditions of the system change model must be reimaged (i.e. policies, practice, resource flows, relationships and connections, power dynamics, and mental models). Currently, policies rooted in racism continue to shape the organizations that seek to serve our young people, with these dynamics most visible in the funding dynamics of service organizations and in how our culture values and positions service organizations and their work. These dynamics further perpetuate systems that promote racial inequity, high barriers, and low resources for communities of color, specifically Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latino communities, hindering or blocking pathways to advance social and economic wellbeing.



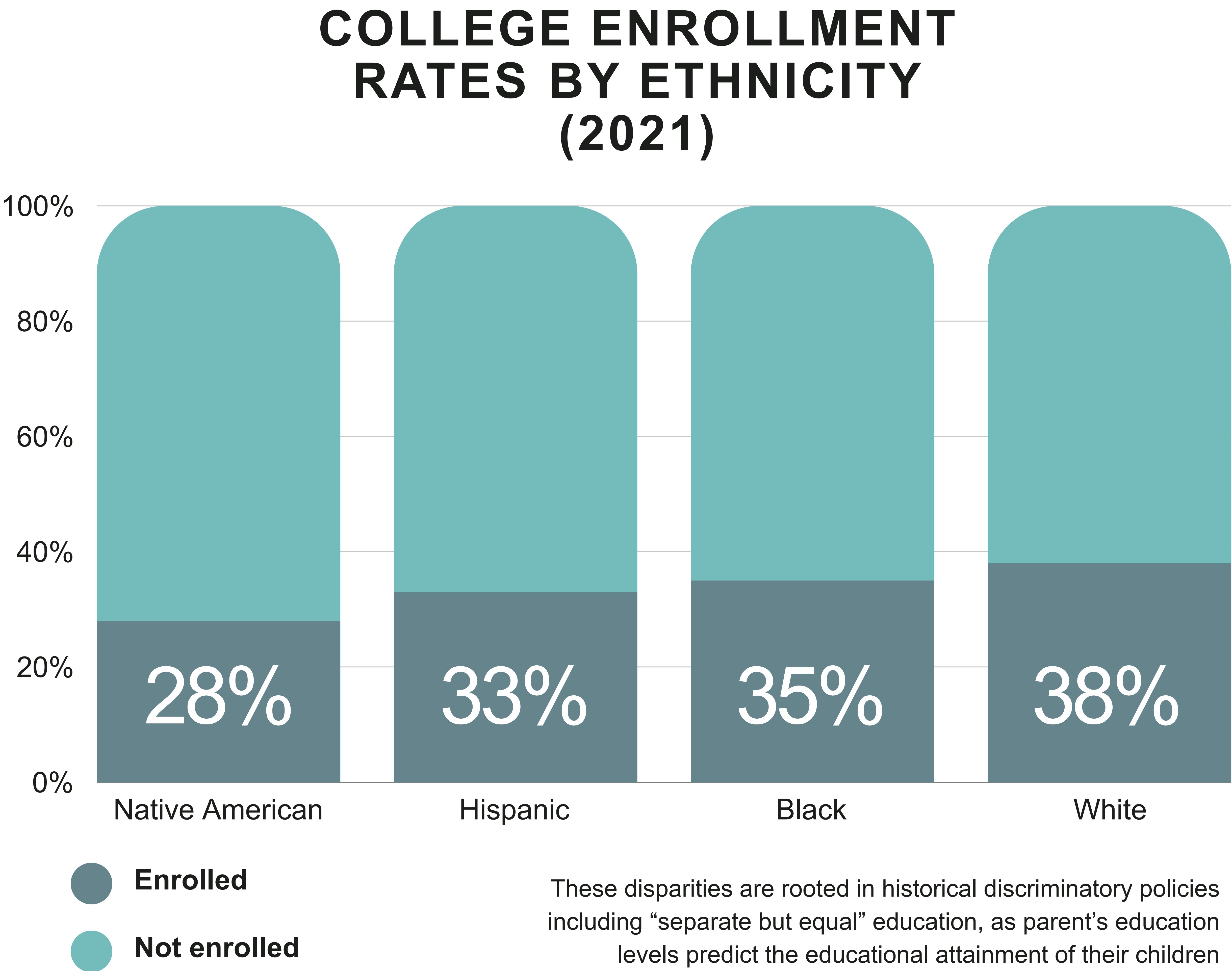


# Education Disparities

Nationally, Black, Hispanic, and Native American children are less likely to graduate from high school compared to their White counterparts (Lewis, 2022). In 2021, the percentage of 16 to 24 year-olds who were not enrolled in school and had not earned a high school credential was 5.2% nationally, with the highest rates among Native American (10.2%) and Hispanic youth (7.8%) (Lewis, 2022). Similarly, college enrollment rates for 18 to 24 year old adults in 2021 were lower among adults who were Native American (28%), Hispanic (33%), and Black (35%) compared to adults who were White (38%) (Lewis, 2022). **These disparities are rooted in historical discriminatory policies including “separate but equal” education, as parent’s education levels predict the educational attainment of their children (Sullivan et al., 2015).**

Research further indicates that students whose parents have not attended college often face increased challenges in accessing post-secondary education, completing a degree, and succeeding academically once they enroll (Cataldi et al., 2018). In addition to education policies, residential segregation through redlining contributes to these gaps as school districts in low-income communities are chronically underfunded (Sullivan et al., 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these disparities, as low-income students with unreliable or no access to remote learning experienced disproportionate learning loss (Dorn et al., 2020).

**Youth who are returning from juvenile detention, in the foster care system, or who are experiencing homelessness are more likely to be disadvantaged or disconnected educationally. For incarcerated youth, their academic progress is often delayed or undone. Two in three youth drop out of school upon exiting the juvenile legal system (Lewis, 2022).** Youth within the foster care system are more likely to be suspended or expelled, score lower on standardized tests, and are less likely to attend and graduate from college (Children’s Defense Fund, 2021). In addition to this, youth who experience homelessness are 87% more likely to drop out of school than their non-homeless counterparts (Children’s Defense Fund, 2021).



## SCHOOL DROPOUT FOR YOUTH EXITING THE JUVENILE SYSTEM (2022)





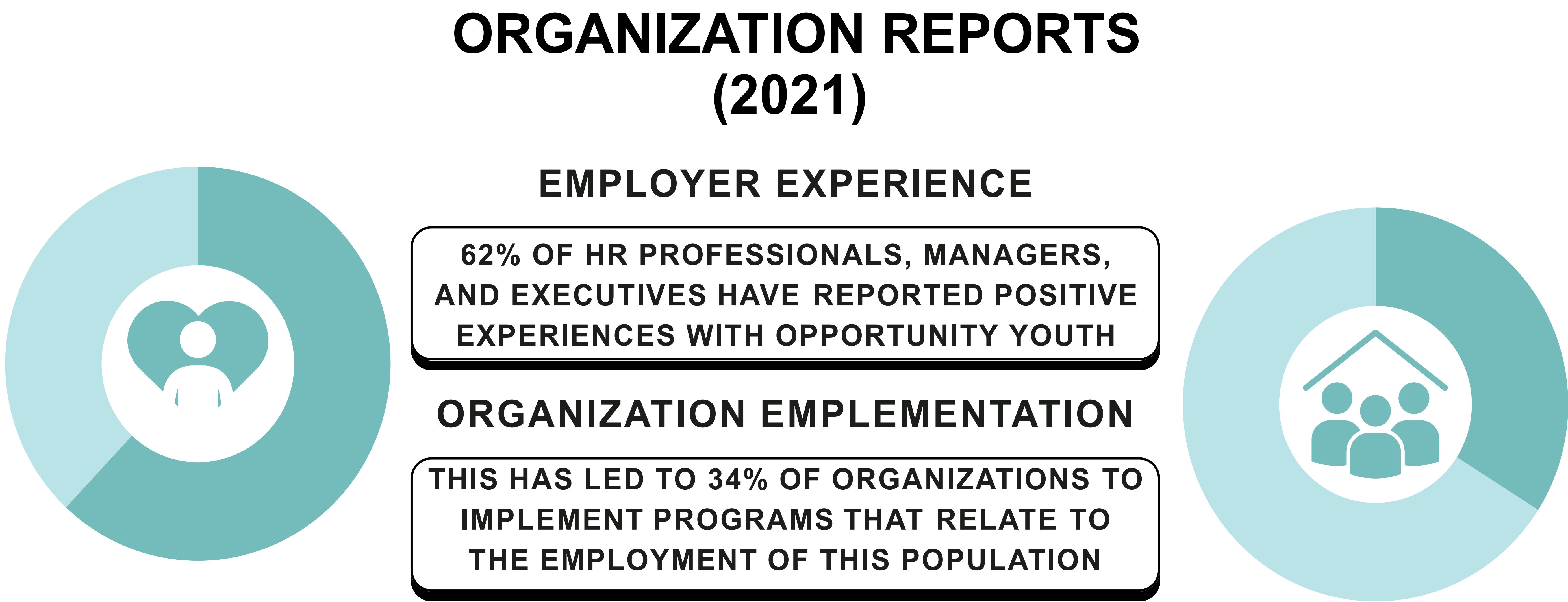
# Employment Disparities

Black and Latino workers are compensated less than their White counterparts and are more likely to be employed without key benefits such as health coverage, paid leave, or retirement plans (Sullivan et al., 2015). Nationally in 2019, Black workers earned \$0.76 relative to every \$1 earned by White workers; Hispanic workers earned \$0.73 and Native American workers earned \$0.77 (Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs, 2020). **The racial wealth gaps that minority groups experience are linked to the public workforce system and its reinforcement of economic disadvantage by guiding Black and Brown workers into jobs that offer lower earnings (Camardelle, 2021)** Furthermore, the digitization of jobs has contributed to the racial employment divide which has put 76% of Black employees and 62% of Latino employees at risk for being unprepared for jobs (Walia and Ravindran, 2020). In December 2023, the unemployment rate among Black adults (5.2%) and Hispanics/Latinos (5%), were higher than their White counterparts who had an unemployment rate of 3.5% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

National Earnings Disparity Relative to White Workers				
Race or Ethnicity	Number of Workers	Share of Workers	Average Weekly Earnings	Earnings per Dollar
WHITE	97,484,953	62.67%	\$1,046.52	\$1.00
BLACK	17,781,185	11.43%	\$791.02	\$0.76
HISPANIC	26,849,181	17.26%	\$762.80	\$0.73
NATIVE AMERICAN	1,037,819	0.67%	\$801.99	\$0.77

Similarly, in December 2023 the youth unemployment rate was 11.9% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Despite the unemployment rates for minority workers being higher than the national average, recent trends suggest that these unemployment rates may be dropping but for the wrong reasons. This drop of unemployment among Black workers could be reflecting a lack of participation in the labor force rather than an increase in employment (Lindsay and Jacobson, 2023). **In addition to wage and employment inequality, mental health and reduced psychological wellbeing can also play a role in the employment disparities that Opportunity Youth encounter.**

While the systems continue to try and devalue minoritized populations, employers have recognized and acknowledged the true talents of Opportunity Youth. **Sixty-two percent of HR professionals, managers, and executives have reported positive experiences with Opportunity Youth (SHRM Foundation, 2021).** In addition, Opportunity Youth are known to bring high levels of enthusiasm, a willingness to learn, and innovative and creative ideas to their workplaces (SHRM Foundation, 2021). These positive experiences with Opportunity Youth have led 34% of organizations to implement programs that relate to the employment of this population (SHRM Foundation, 2021).





The National Institute to Unlock Potential focuses specifically on Opportunity Youth who are system-impacted and have the most significant risk of experiencing incarceration. Young people who experienced parental incarceration, the foster care system, the juvenile legal or carceral systems, or who are victims of human trafficking have unique needs and often encounter higher barriers because of their system involvement.

**1 in 9** Black children have incarcerated parents

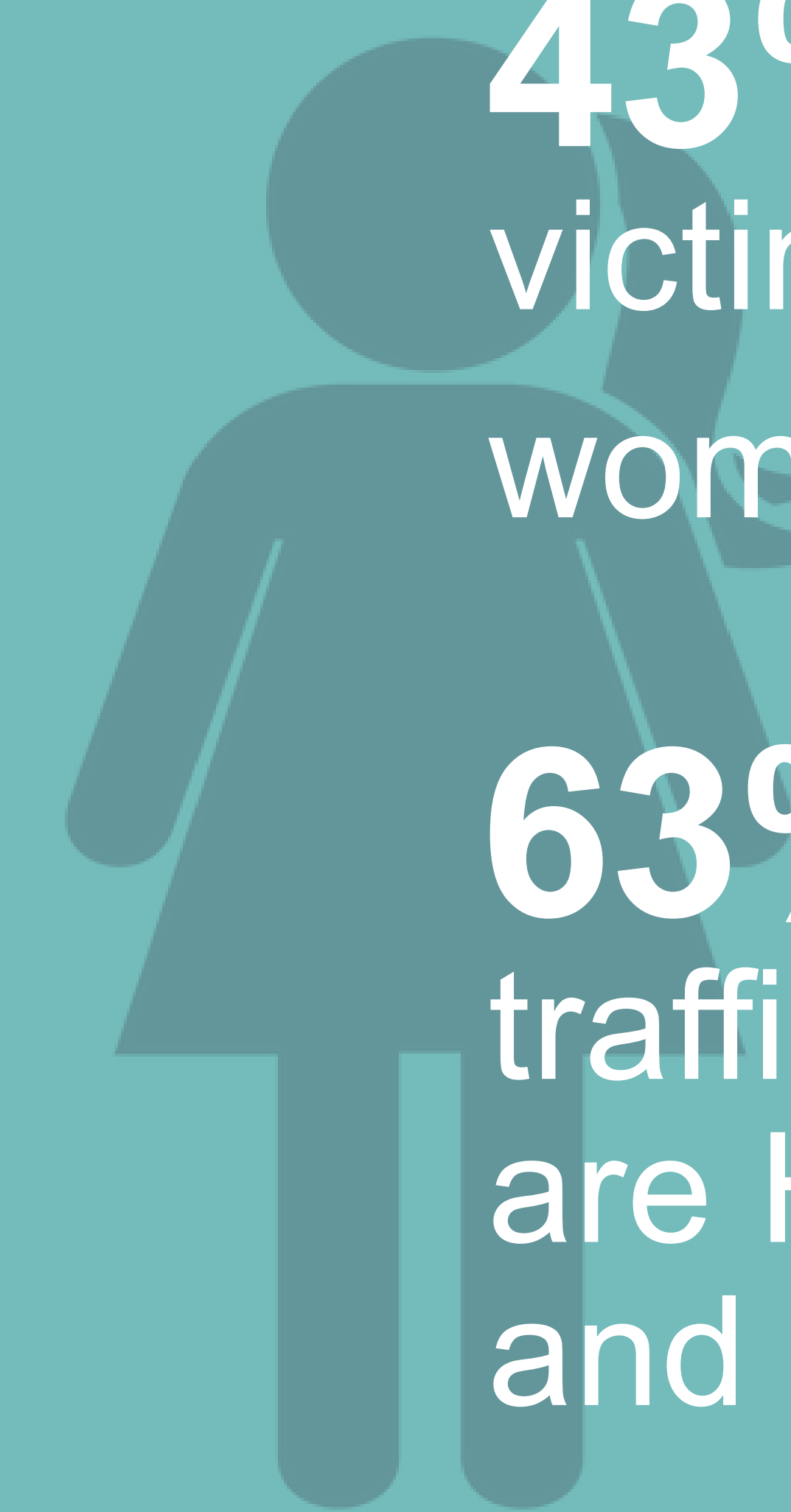


**40%**

of Hispanic youth are more likely to receive an adult prison sentence



**43%** of trafficking victims are Black women and girls



**63%** of labor trafficking victims are Hispanic women and girls

**80%** of all men in foster care will be arrested by their mid-20s



Black children are **4x** more likely to become justice-involved

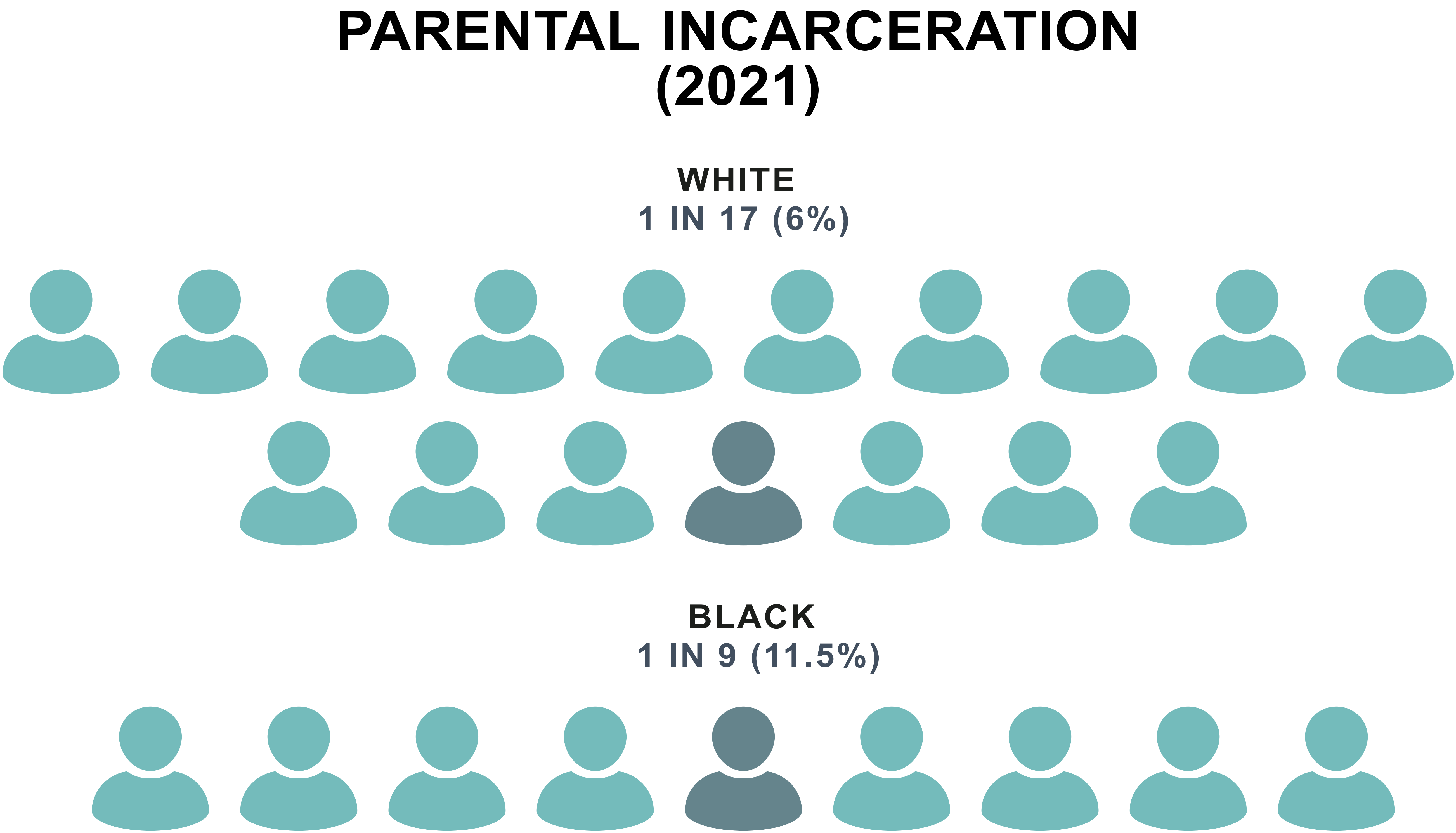
Black youth are arrested at a rate of **2.5x**





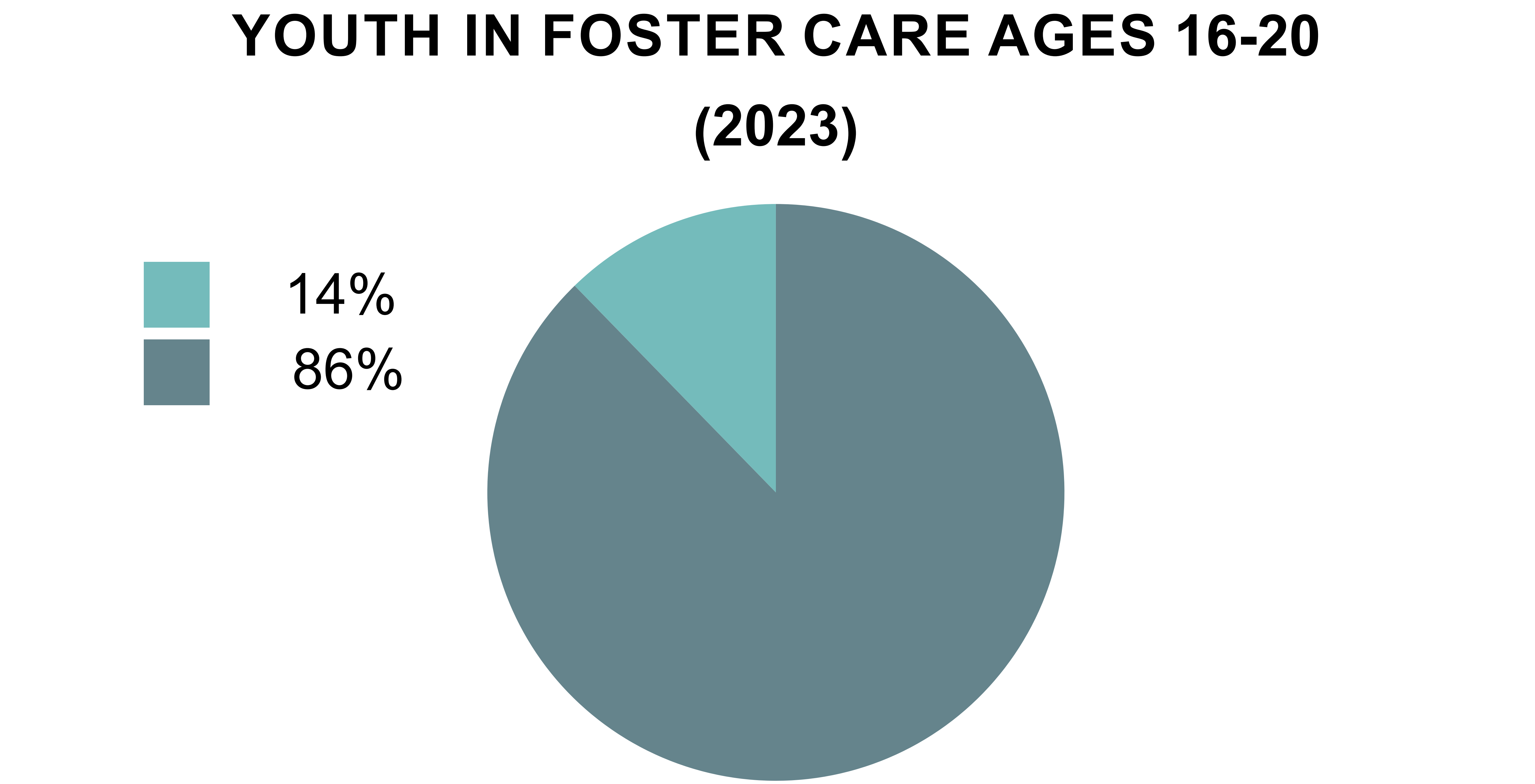
# Disparities Among Young with Incarcerated Parents

Youth with incarcerated parents are at a high risk for disconnection due to the disruptions and instability that parental incarceration can cause within their family units (Shlafer et al., 2019). In 2018, it was estimated that more than 5 million children experienced parental incarceration nationally (Child welfare, 2021). Youth living in rural areas and those living in poverty are more likely to have a parent that is incarcerated (Child Welfare, 2021). Black children are disproportionately impacted, with 11.5% of Black children in a nationally representative survey indicating they had experienced parental incarceration, compared to 6% of White children (Child Welfare, 2021). The consequences of parental incarceration can include residential mobility, difficulties in familial relationships, and economic instability (Shlafer et al., 2019). Parental incarceration impacts the socioemotional and psychological well being of the child whose parent is incarcerated (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016). The trauma that is endured from having an incarcerated parent is considered to have the same magnitude as abuse, domestic violence, and divorce (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016).



# Disparities Among Youth In Foster Care

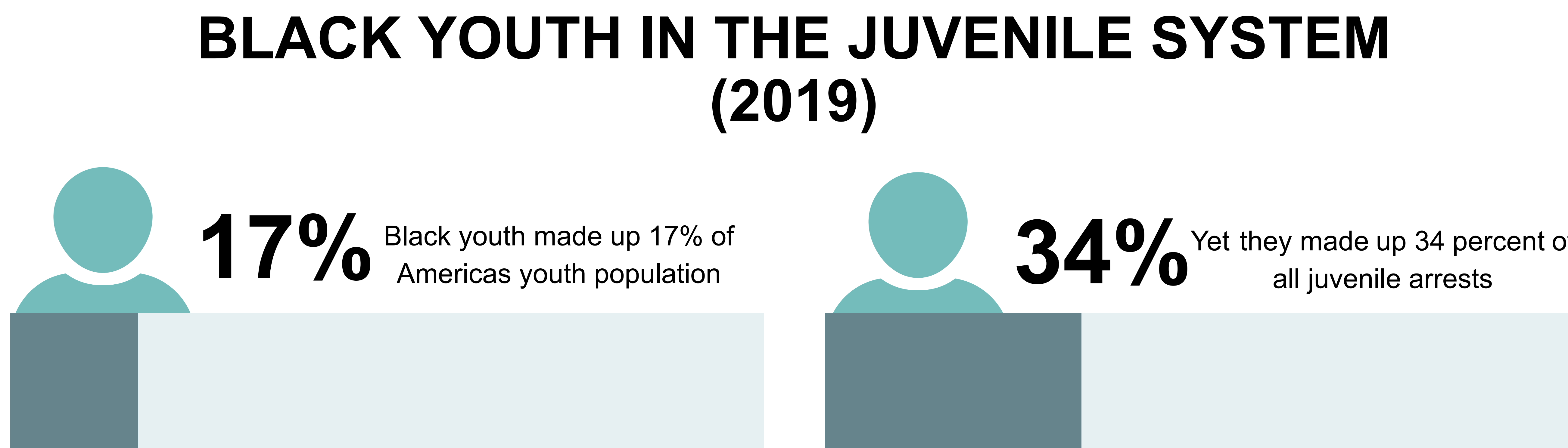
In 2021, there were 55,396 young people between the ages of 16 and 20 in foster care in the US, accounting for 14% of the foster care population (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023). **Youth with foster care histories experience higher rates of disconnection from work and school than the national rate, with 30% of foster care youth neither working nor in school at age 21.** Instability in foster care placement decreases post-secondary education attainment at 21; however, employment prior to exiting care decreases this risk (Geiger and Okpych, 2022). In a longitudinal study with transition age foster youth, 54% of seventeen year olds, 37% of nineteen year olds, and 42% of twenty-one year olds had reported histories of high-risk behaviors that could lead to higher disconnection rates (National Youth in Transition Database, 2019). Many former foster care youth report feeling unprepared to live independently upon aging out of foster care (National Youth in Transition Database, 2019). Compared to young adults with no foster care histories, full financial independence commonly occurs in the later half of their 20's, as 54% of young adults have reported moving back home before the age of 27 (Dey & Pierret, 2014). This puts into perspective the amount of pressure that is put upon foster youth to be fully independent by the age of 24.





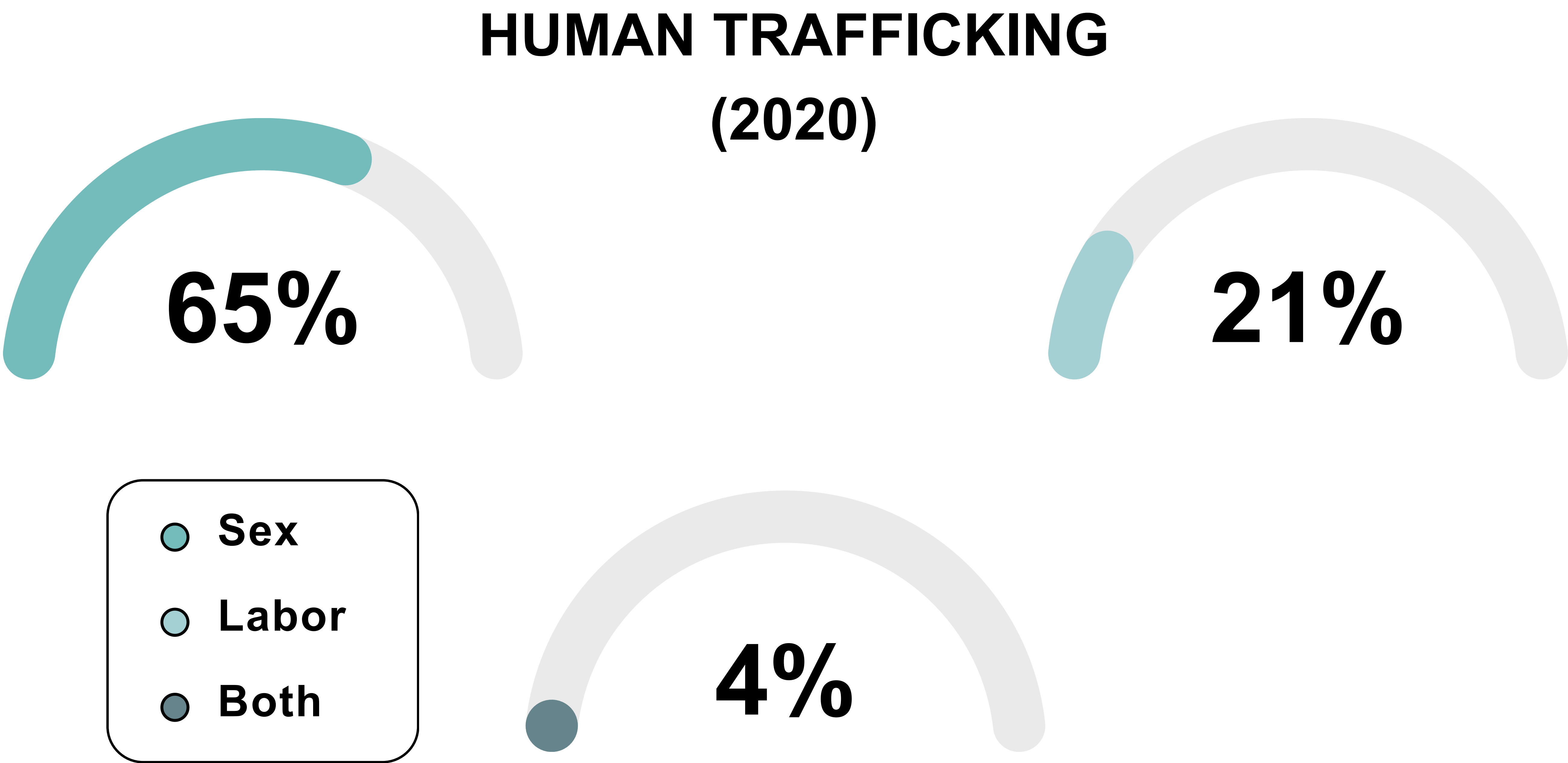
# Disparities Among Youth Impacted by the Juvenile Legal and Carceral System

While the total number of juvenile delinquency cases has declined between 2005 and 2019, young people of color and lower income individuals are more likely to be arrested, convicted, and given longer sentences than their White counterparts (Opportunity Youth United, 2021). As of 2019, Black youth made up 17% of the American youth population yet they made up 34% of all juvenile arrests (Puzzanchera et al., 2022). Additionally, the delinquency case rate for Black youth was three times the rate for White and Hispanic youth, more than double the rate for Native American youth, and roughly 12 times the rate for Asian youth (Puzzanchera et al., 2022). The over representation of Black youth is in part due to the implicit and explicit biases of decision makers within the system who often view Black youth as aggressive or prone to violence (Abrams et al., 2021; Peck and Jennings, 2016). Youth who return home from incarceration often face challenges reintegrating into society. Although re-entry programs and resources exist to help youth with this re-entry process, many youth find themselves feeling segregated from civic life (Smith, 2013). This segregation can cause many youth to become closer to similarly alienated peers which may increase the risk for re-incarceration (Smith, 2013). The re-incarceration cycle negatively impacts families and communities due to the amount of occurred fees and costs of the juvenile justice system, while also weakening social ties, and removing earners from households and the job market (Shapiro, 2019).



# Disparities Among Youth Impacted by Human Trafficking

Youth who have been victims of human trafficking are likely to become disconnected as they have experienced disruption within their lives. In 2020, the National Human Trafficking Hotline identified 16,658 victims of human trafficking within the United States. Of the identified victims, 21% were victims of labor trafficking, 65% were victims of sex trafficking, and 4% were victims of both (Polaris, 2021). Furthermore, a recent study found that youth who are victims of sex trafficking are more likely to have mental health issues/ diagnoses, self-harming behaviors, negative contacts with law enforcement, and more school expulsions than non-victim youth (Middleton et al., 2018). Traffickers often recruit youth within the foster care and juvenile legal systems which creates reinforcing barriers to connection (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Intimate partners and family are the most common recruiters of sex trafficking whereas employers are the most common recruiters for labor trafficking (Polaris, 2021; U.S. Department of State, 2020). With cases continuously on the rise, the need for more education and training on how to recognize signs of human trafficking has become prominent.





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*~Persevere and the Guiding Team of the National Institute to Unlock Potential*

