

# **Journey.do and Justice-Involved Youth in the Southwest: An Early-Stage Evaluation**

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## Introduction

Traditional juvenile justice approaches have often focused on compliance and behavioral management. In a fundamental shift away from this model, the Journey.do platform reimagines rehabilitation by centering the youth's own internal growth and agency. Instead of a top-down, one-size-fits-all program, Journey.do provides a structured yet self-directed digital environment where youth actively choose their path toward building skills in key life domains. The question is: does it actually work?

This white paper presents a preliminary evaluation of this novel approach, assessing its impact on youth's feelings of responsibility, support, and pride—metrics that capture the internal change at the heart of the platform's mission.

## Methodology

### Participants and Procedure

The data for this evaluation were collected between March and July 2025 from approximately 250 youth (Appendix A) involved in the juvenile justice system (i.e., in detention, on community supervision) in a large county in the southwestern United States.

Upon entering the program, youth completed an onboarding pre-test. Following this, they selected one of eight "Journeys" (e.g., Owing My Past Actions, Building Strong Relationships, Pursuing Health & Wellness) to begin. The core of the platform is a growth cycle where youth:

1. **Connect:** Read stories submitted by peers and respond with pre-approved emojis.
2. **Grow:** Learn new skills and concepts within the selected Journey's content modules.
3. **Apply:** Respond to prompts by applying the new skills to their personal experiences.

Youth repeated this cycle until they achieved mastery in a Journey. Upon completion, they were eligible to take a post-test for that specific domain and then select a new Journey. This process continued until they were released from detention or supervision, at which point they had the opportunity to take a final, comprehensive post-test covering all eight life domains.

### Measures

The **Life Inventory Tool (LIT)** was developed for this study to assess youth's feelings across the eight life domains. The LIT consists of 24 items, with three items assessing each domain (Appendix B). An example prompt for the "Owing My Past Actions" domain is:

- *"I have been... taking responsibility for my past actions."*
- *"I have felt supported in... taking responsibility for my past actions."*
- *"I am proud of how I have been... taking responsibility for my past actions."*

All items were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 0 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). These three items, gauging feelings of responsibility, support, and pride in that domain, were averaged to produce an overall mean score for each of the eight domains.

Cronbach's alphas ( $\alpha$ ) ranged from .79-.96 (average = .89) for youth in detention and .81-.88 (average = .85) for youth on community supervision, indicating that the items within each domain are highly consistent, which supports the validity of the averaged domain scores.

## Analytic Approach

To comprehensively examine the platform's possible effectiveness, we conducted three sets of paired-sample t-tests using version 18 of Stata. Each analysis was designed to answer a specific research question (Table 1). Our analysis was guided by the following questions:

1. **Question 1: Does completing a Journey create immediate, short-term growth?** To answer this, we conducted paired-sample t-tests comparing youths' pre-test scores to their post-test scores taken immediately after earning a Certificate for a specific Journey. This analysis isolates the direct impact of completing a Certificate.
2. **Question 2: Does the program create overall growth from start to finish?** To assess overall and longer-term change, we conducted a second series of paired-sample t-tests. This analysis included all youth in the program and compared their initial pre-test scores to their final program post-test scores, which were administered just before discharge. This provides a broad view of the platform's cumulative effect over time.
3. **Question 3: Is completing a specific Journey linked to greater long-term growth in that same area?** Finally, to understand the specific contribution of each Journey to long-term success, we focused on a *subgroup* of youth who had completed a specific Certificate and also completed the program. We compared their initial pre-test scores to their final program post-test scores *for that domain only*. This helps determine if mastering a Journey's content translates to sustained growth in that area by the end of the program.

Table 1. Research Questions

Analysis	Question Answered	Who Was Included?	What It Tells Us
1. Certificate Completion	Does completing a Journey create immediate growth?	Youth who completed a specific Journey and took the post-test right after.	The short-term impact of a single Journey.
2. Program Completion	Does the program create overall growth from start to finish?	All youth who took the pre-test and the final program post-test.	The cumulative, longer-term impact of the entire platform experience.

3. Certificate & Program Completion	Is completing a Journey linked to greater long-term growth in that area?	A subgroup of youth who completed both a specific Journey and the final program post-test.	Whether a specific Journey's impact is sustained over the long term.
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## Results

The results of the three primary analyses are presented below, illustrating the platform's impact at different stages of youth engagement.

### **Certificate Completion: Does completing a Journey create immediate, short-term growth?**

The first analysis examined the immediate impact of completing a Journey and earning a certificate. As shown in Figure 1ab, seven of the eight domains showed a statistically significant increase in youth's feelings of responsibility, support, and pride from pre-test to the certificate post-test. The only domain that did not show a significant change at this stage was "Avoiding Substance Abuse."

When youth completed a specific Journey and earned a Certificate, effect sizes ranged from  $d = 0.10$  (*Avoiding Substance Abuse*, nonsignificant) to  $d = 0.51$  (*Making Good Choices*). Small effects ( $d \approx 0.20$ – $0.29$ ) were observed for *Building Strong Relationships* ( $d = 0.27$ ) and *Strengthening Families* ( $d = 0.26$ ). Moderate effects ( $d \approx 0.30$ – $0.49$ ) were seen in *Growing My Future* ( $d = 0.31$ ), *Having a Positive Attitude* ( $d = 0.44$ ), and *Pursuing Health & Wellness* ( $d = 0.46$ ). Large effects (approaching  $d = 0.50$ ) were found in *Making Good Choices* ( $d = 0.51$ ) and *Owning My Past Actions* ( $d = 0.36$ ), although the latter is on the cusp between small and moderate.

Figure 1a. Certificate Completion: *t*-test Results

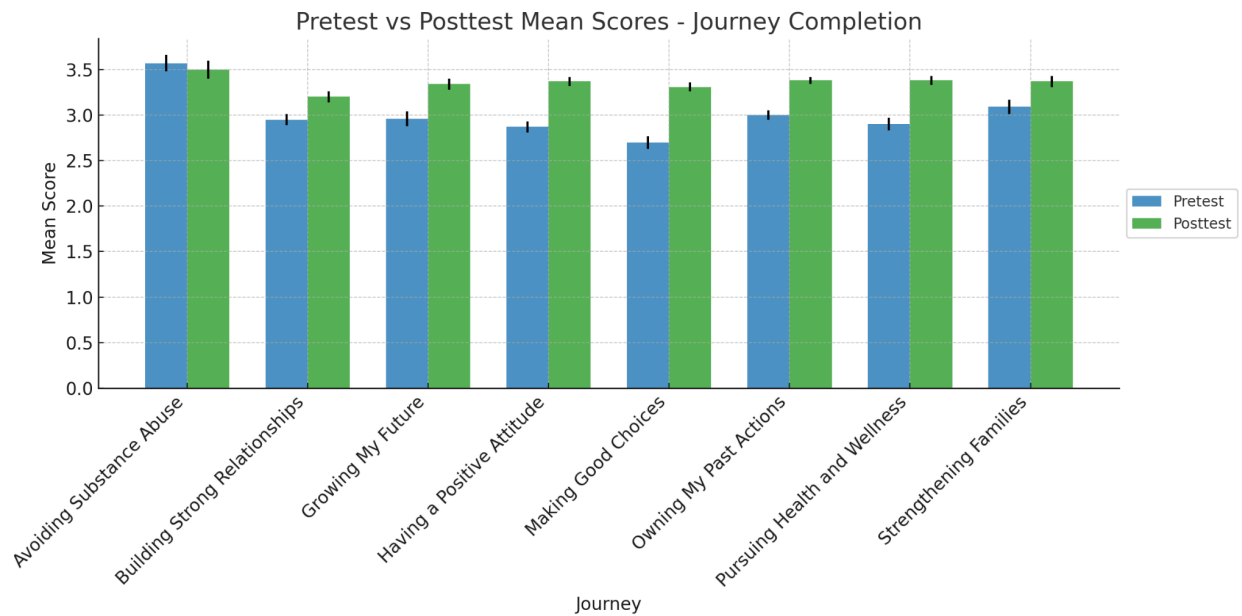
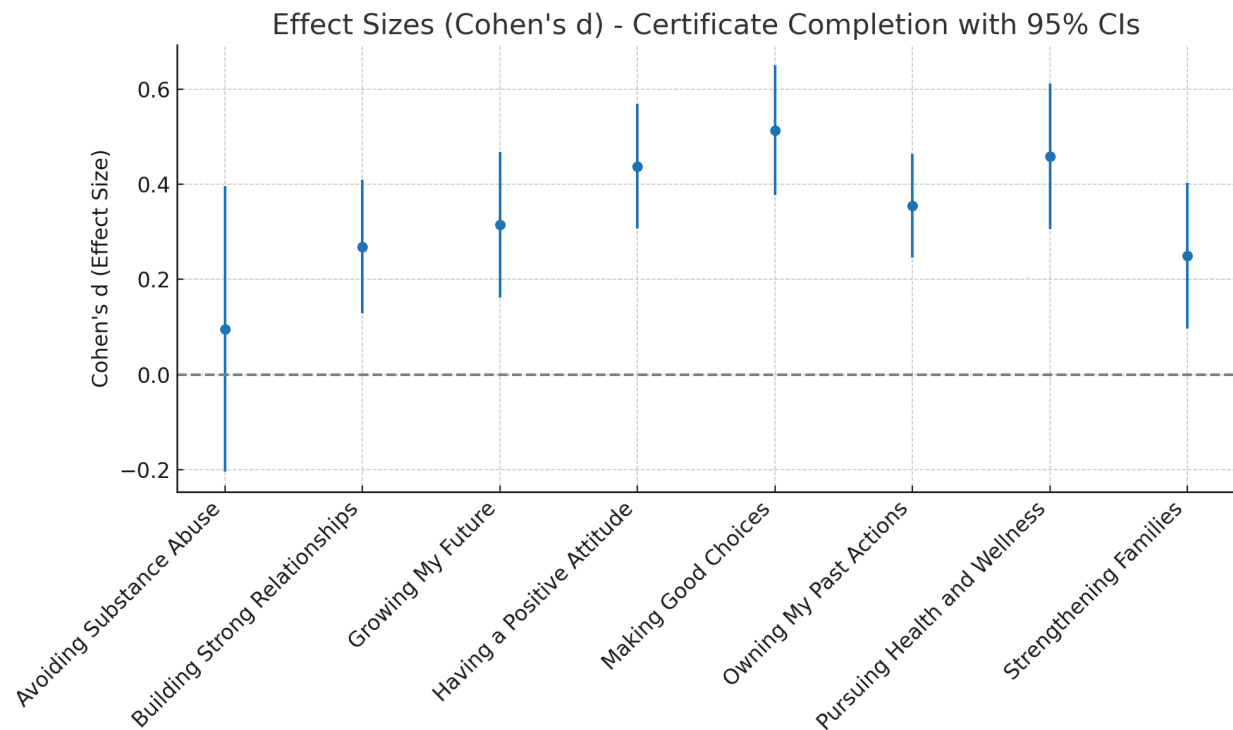


Figure 1b. Certificate Completion: Effect Sizes



## Program Completion: Does the program create overall growth from start to finish?

The second analysis assessed the change in feelings from the initial pre-test to the final program post-test for all youth. The results, displayed in Figure 2ab, reveal a similar pattern of broad effectiveness. Seven of the eight domains showed statistically significant growth by the time youth were discharged. In this analysis, "Owning My Past Actions" was the only domain that did not show a significant change over time.

When measured at the point of completing their justice modality, effect sizes tended to be larger than for Certificate Completion. Cohen's  $d$  ranged from  $d \approx 0.00$  (*Owning My Past Actions*, nonsignificant) to  $d = 0.61$  (*Making Good Choices*). Moderate effects were consistently seen in *Avoiding Substance Abuse* ( $d = 0.45$ ), *Building Strong Relationships* ( $d = 0.38$ ), *Growing My Future* ( $d = 0.43$ ), *Having a Positive Attitude* ( $d = 0.56$ ), *Pursuing Health & Wellness* ( $d = 0.40$ ), and *Strengthening Families* ( $d = 0.35$ ). The largest effects emerged in *Making Good Choices* ( $d = 0.61$ ) and *Having a Positive Attitude* ( $d = 0.56$ ). These patterns suggest that the longer-term accumulation of experiences in the program may produce more substantial shifts in self-perceived responsibility, support, and pride compared to short-term Journey completion.

Figure 2a. Program Completion:  $t$ -test Results

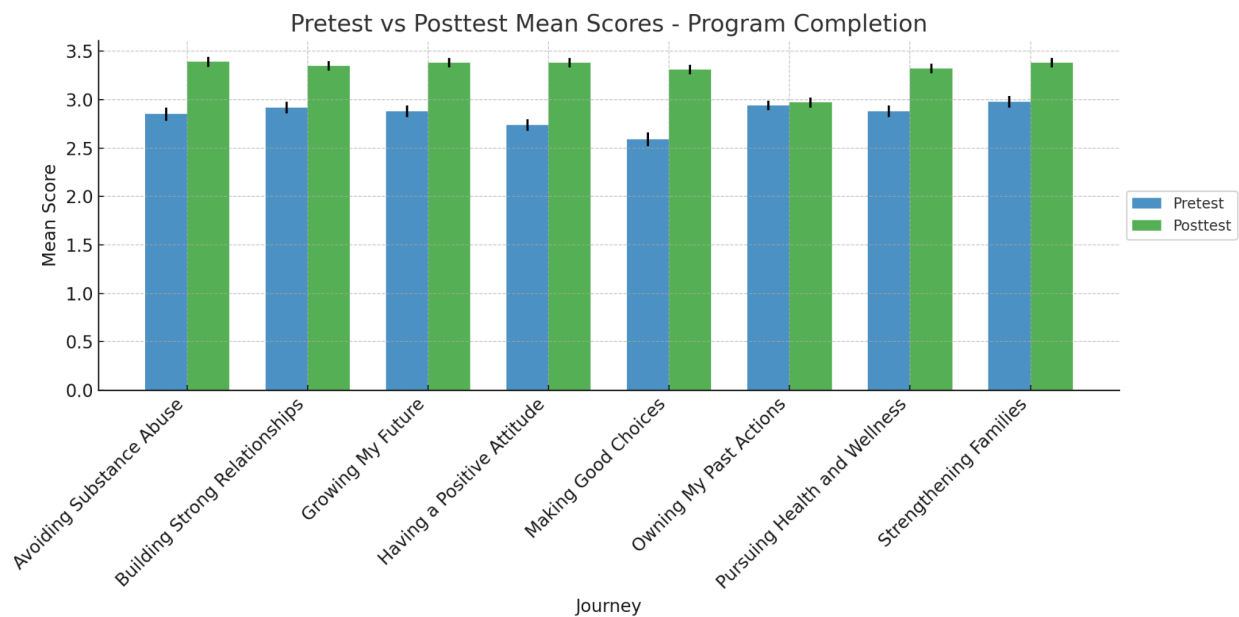
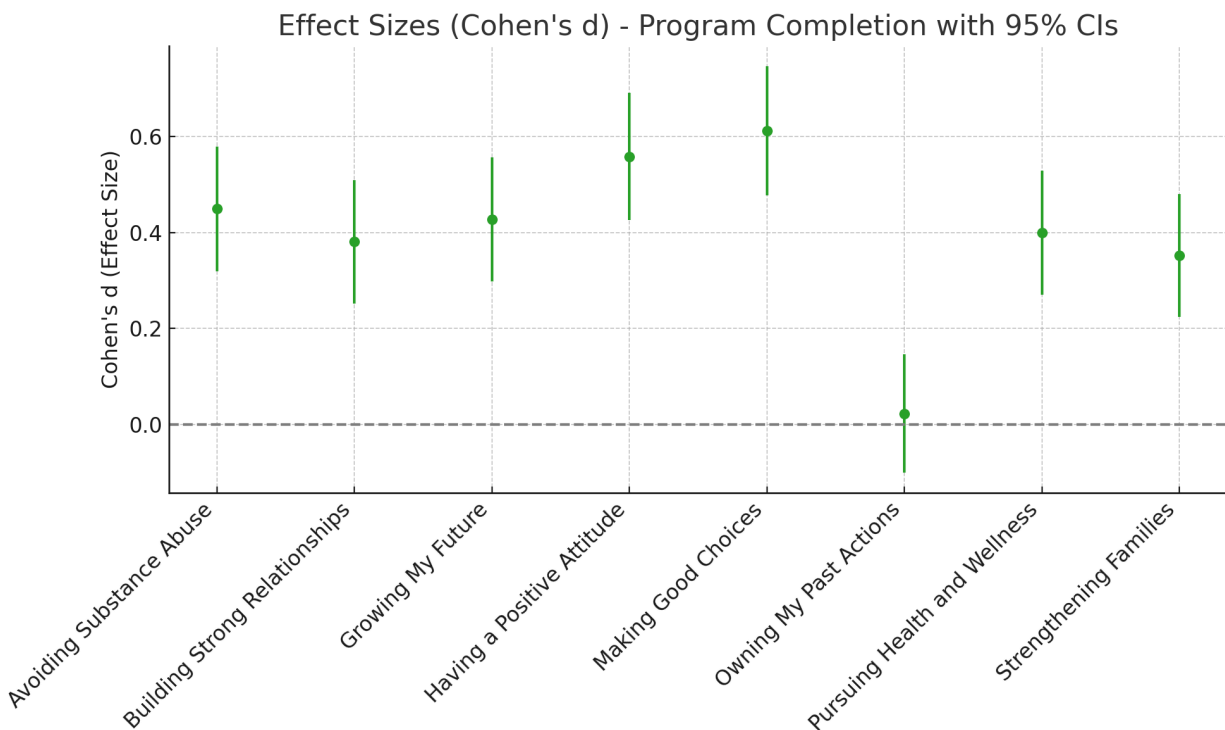


Figure 2a. Program Completion: Effect Sizes



### Certificate and Program Completion: Is completing a specific Journey linked to greater long-term growth in that same area?

Finally, the analysis focused on the subgroup of youth who completed a specific Journey *and* also took the final program post-test. As seen in Figure 3ab, the findings indicate significant growth in six of the eight domains. In this specific subgroup analysis, the "Avoiding Substance Abuse" and "Owning My Past Actions" domains did not show statistically significant changes from pre-test to program post-test.

When youth both completed the program and the related Certificate in that domain, effect sizes ranged from  $d \approx 0.01$  (*Avoiding Substance Abuse*, nonsignificant) to  $d = 0.59$  (*Making Good Choices*). Small effects ( $d \approx 0.20$ – $0.39$ ) were observed for *Building Strong Relationships* ( $d = 0.38$ ) and *Strengthening Families* ( $d = 0.26$ ). Moderate effects ( $d \approx 0.40$ – $0.55$ ) appeared in *Growing My Future* ( $d = 0.42$ ), *Having a Positive Attitude* ( $d = 0.55$ ), and *Pursuing Health & Wellness* ( $d = 0.41$ ). The largest effect size was again for *Making Good Choices* ( $d = 0.59$ ), underscoring the robustness of this domain's impact. Interestingly, *Avoiding Substance Abuse* and *Owning My Past Actions* again showed negligible changes, mirroring results from the other two analytic sets.



Figure 3a. Certificate and Program Completion: *t*-test Results

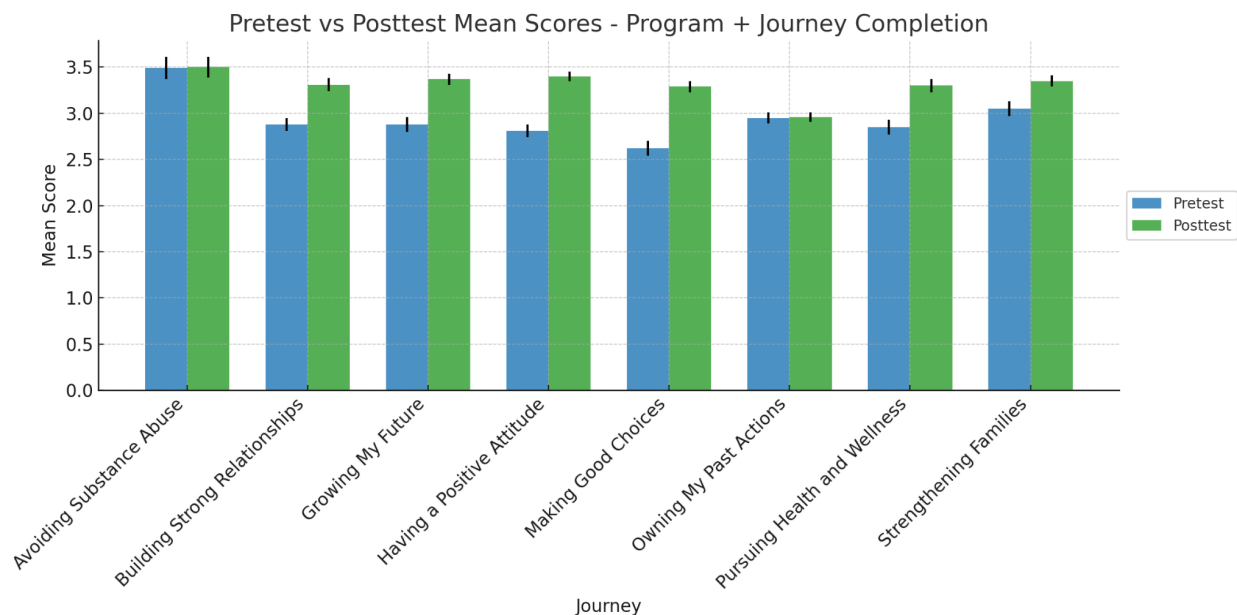
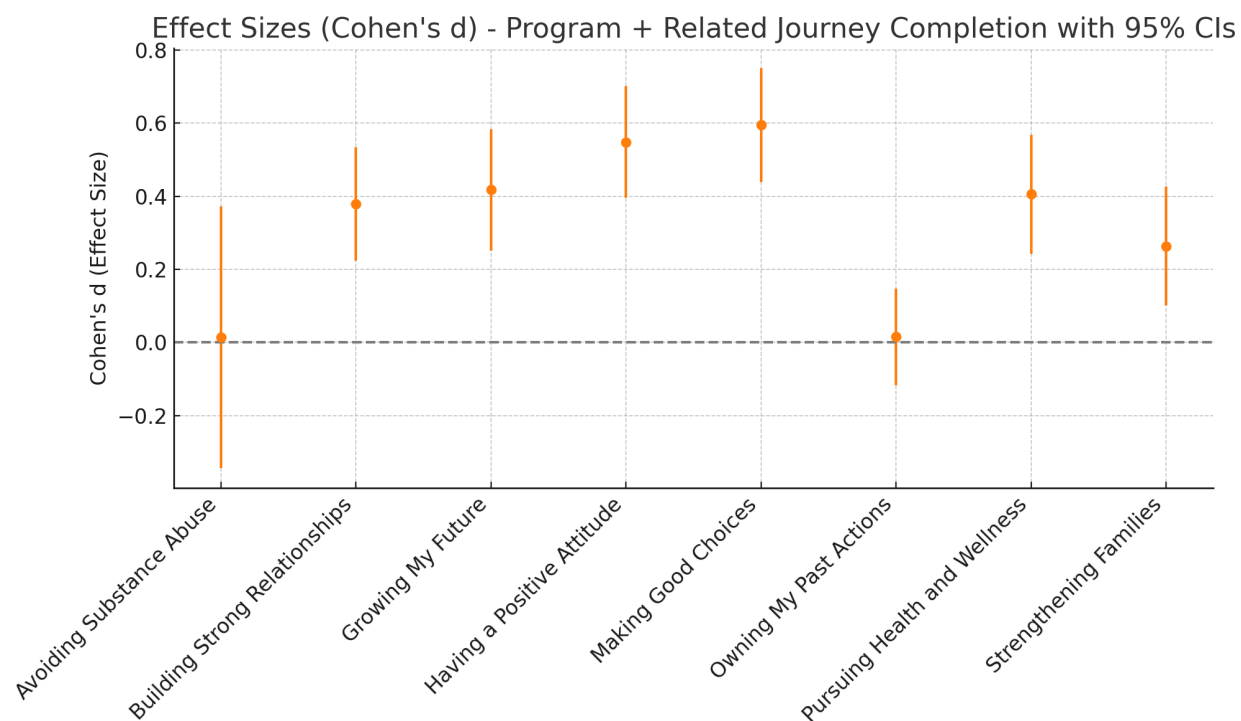


Figure 3b. Certificate and Program Completion: Effect Sizes



## **Preliminary Summary**

Overall, the largest and most consistent effects across all analyses were found in Making Good Choices and Having a Positive Attitude, while Avoiding Substance Abuse and Owning My Past Actions consistently showed negligible or nonsignificant changes.

## **Discussion**

### **Overall Effectiveness**

The findings from this preliminary evaluation suggest that the Journey.do platform is a valuable tool for fostering positive development among youth in the justice system. Across all three analyses—at the point of Certificate completion, at program completion, and for the specific subgroup of youth who completed both—the platform was associated with statistically significant growth in multiple core domains, including feelings of responsibility, support, and pride. The fact that significant improvements were observed in the majority of life domains indicates the platform's broad-based effectiveness. This consistency underscores the potential of a self-directed, digital-first approach to empower youth and promote meaningful internal change, representing a promising departure from more traditional, compliance-focused models.

### **Widespread Positive Impact Across Domains**

A key takeaway from this evaluation is the breadth of the platform's positive impact. The success was not isolated to one or two areas; rather, youth demonstrated significant growth across a wide spectrum of life domains. Specifically, areas like Building Strong Relationships, Growing My Future, Having a Positive Attitude, Making Good Choices, Pursuing Health and Wellness, and Strengthening Families consistently showed significant improvement across the different analyses. This pattern suggests that the platform's core model—empowering youth to choose their own path and engage in a cycle of connection, learning, and application—is robust and adaptable enough to foster development in everything from interpersonal skills to future planning.

Effect size patterns suggest that the Journey platform produces measurable and meaningful growth in several life domains, particularly in areas related to decision-making and personal mindset. The consistently moderate-to-large effects for Making Good Choices and Having a Positive Attitude indicate that these domains may be especially responsive to the platform's approach. Conversely, domains such as Avoiding Substance Abuse and Owning My Past Actions yielded minimal or nonsignificant effects, suggesting a potential need for enhanced or alternative content in these areas. These findings highlight the importance of tailoring interventions to domain-specific challenges and reinforce the value of using effect sizes—not just statistical significance—to evaluate program impact.

The preliminary results so far provide support for validating the platform's foundational premise: when youth are given the tools and agency to work on areas they deem important, they are capable of making meaningful progress. The consistent increase in feelings of responsibility,

support, and pride across these varied domains indicates that the platform is not just teaching skills, but is also successfully fostering the internal mindset shifts that are crucial for long-term positive development.

### **Immediate vs. Long-Term Impact**

A more nuanced story emerges when comparing the short-term gains with long-term outcomes. The "Owning My Past Actions" domain provides a key insight: youth reported significant growth immediately after completing the Certificate, but this effect was not significant for the larger group at the end of the program. This pattern could suggest that while the Journey provides an initial boost in motivation and perspective, the skills required to consistently take responsibility for past actions may be more challenging to maintain over time without continuous, focused reinforcement. It's possible the initial feeling of accomplishment fades as youth face new challenges or as they near exiting their justice modality and move beyond their justice-involvement. Relatedly, it is plausible that a dose-response relationship exists, such that youth may require additional dosages to achieve better and more lasting results in core areas.

Conversely, the "Avoiding Substance Abuse" domain showed no significant growth upon Certificate completion but did show significant growth for the overall group at the end of the program. This may indicate that the skills related to substance abuse are developed more slowly and are influenced by a combination of factors over the entire duration of a youth's time in the program, rather than being the direct result of a single, short-term module. The platform may be one of several influences contributing to this positive, long-term change. Moreover, note that Avoiding Substance Abuse was available to all youth, regardless of whether that is something they actually struggle to control. As such, the results may differ markedly if youth actually have a substance use issue. This is worth examining more closely in the future.

While the overall results are positive, the evaluation also highlights areas for targeted improvement. The "Owning My Past Actions" and "Avoiding Substance Abuse" Journeys consistently demonstrated a weaker impact compared to other domains, particularly in the analyses focusing on long-term and subgroup effects. This does not necessarily indicate a failure of these modules, but rather an opportunity for iterative refinement. The content, framing, or activities within these Journeys may not fully address the complex, deeply personal nature of these topics. Future development should prioritize a review of these specific modules, potentially incorporating different therapeutic approaches or more direct guidance to enhance their effectiveness and ensure all domains are equally impactful.

### **Limitations**

It is important to interpret these promising findings within the context of the study's limitations. First, the evaluation did not include a control group of youth who did not use the platform. Therefore, while we can observe a positive association between platform use and personal growth, we cannot definitively attribute these changes solely to the Journey.do experience, as other factors (e.g., maturation, other interventions) could have contributed. Second, the data are based entirely on youth self-report. While this provides valuable insight into the youths' internal

states, it is also susceptible to social desirability bias, where participants may respond in a way they believe is more favorable. Future research should aim to address these limitations to build a more robust evidence base.

### **Conclusion & Next Steps**

In conclusion, this preliminary evaluation provides strong evidence that the Journey.do platform is a promising and effective tool for supporting youth in the justice system. Its innovative, youth-centered approach appears to foster significant growth across multiple critical life domains. The findings warrant further investigation and development to maximize the platform's potential.

## Appendix

### Appendix A. Sample Sizes

Pre (N)	Matched Pre-Cert (N)	Matched Pre-Post (N)
1465	43	251
1465	203	250
1466	172	251
1467	247	252
1465	233	251
1467	341	254
1466	181	251
1465	170	251

## **Appendix B. Life Inventory Tool-24**

The Life Inventory Tool (LIT-24) was developed by Dr. Adam Fine at Arizona State University. The recall windows are intentionally different between the pre-test survey (“Over the last 2 months”) and the post-test survey (“Since I started using Journey.do”) to anchor responses within the appropriate time frame.

### *Avoiding Substance Abuse*

1. I have been ... making smart decisions about using substances.
2. I have felt supported in ... making smart decisions about using substances.
3. I am proud of how I have been ... making smart decisions about using substances.

### *Building Strong Relationships*

4. I have been ... developing healthy relationships with friends.
5. I have felt supported in ... developing healthy relationships with friends.
6. I am proud of how I have been ... developing healthy relationships with friends.

### *Growing My Future*

7. I have been ... making progress in my education or job.
8. I have felt supported in ... making progress in my education or job.
9. I am proud of how I have been ... making progress in my education or job.

### *Having a Positive Attitude*

10. I have been ... doing things to become the best version of myself.
11. I have felt supported in ... becoming the best version of myself.
12. I am proud of how I have been ... doing things to become the best version of myself.

### *Making Good Choices*

13. I have been ... making good life choices.
14. I have felt supported in ... making good life choices.
15. I am proud of how I have been ... making good life choices.

### *Owning My Past Actions*

16. I have been ... taking responsibility for my past actions.
17. I have felt supported in ... taking responsibility for my past actions.
18. I am proud of how I have been ... taking responsibility for my past actions.

### *Pursuing Health and Wellness*

19. I have been ... taking care of my physical and mental health.
20. I have felt supported in ... taking care of my physical and mental health.
21. I am proud of how I have been ... taking care of my physical and mental health.

### *Strengthening Families*

22. I have been ... developing healthy relationships with the people I call my family.

23. I have felt supported in ... developing healthy relationships with the people I call my family.
24. I am proud of how I have been ... developing healthy relationships with the people I call my family.