Original Research Article

My Future Self: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis of Juvenile Detention Stories

Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice
2026, Vol. 0(0) 1–26

DOI: 10.1177/15412040261438673
journals.sagepub.com/home/yvj
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Abstract

A growing body of criminological research centers on the "future self," examining how young people link their present behavior to who they would like to become. Within juvenile justice, evidence suggests that the more clearly youth can imagine their futures, the more likely they are to make thoughtful, goal-directed choices that reduce delinquency. However, little is known about how justice-involved youth envision their future selves. This study draws on narrative stories written by 277 youth in a short-term juvenile detention facility in the southwestern United States, collected through the social learning platform Journey.do. Leveraging the lens of narrative criminology, an inductive thematic analysis identified four main recurring theme categories from youth responses: (1) Values That Guide Career Choices; (2) Personal Improvement Goals; (3) Family Participation; and (4) Educational Goals. The findings indicate that youth in detention hold optimistic future aspirations in several spheres of life that the system should utilize to promote desistance and positive outcomes. Areas for future research and policy, such as elevating youths' voices and redesigning system opportunities to support their idealized and individualized future selves, are discussed.

Keywords

juvenile detention, future selves, narrative criminology, qualitative analysis

Introduction

In 2020, approximately 424,300 youth were arrested in the United States (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2022). While arrest rates have fallen dramatically since the 1990s (Rovner, 2024), the juvenile justice system continues to rely heavily on punitive custody. In

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2021, over 24,800 youth were held in detention, correctional, or residential facilities (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024). Among the many kinds of juvenile punitive custody is short-term juvenile detention. Short-term juvenile detention functions as a temporary holding location, a structured yet physically restricting environment, for youth who await juvenile court decisions, placement, or transfer to other locations (National Center for Juvenile Justice, 2025). In 2023, over 9,800 youth resided in short-term detention facilities (Puzzanchera et al., 2025). The high custody rate and restrictive nature of short-term detention urge an in-depth analysis of the youth held in these facilities, as the vast majority reenter the community in a short amount of time.

Because youth in detention hold both a confined and minor status, they are a uniquely vulnerable population. Being in detention acts as a stigmatized identifier for youth, in addition to their status as minors, which reflects their lack of complete physiological maturity. Furthermore, youth in custody face unique hardships that justice-involved youth on probation, diversion, or in other community-based programs do not. Youth in well-established community-based programs, for instance, can foster lasting positive relationships outside formal processing and isolation (Community Connections for Youth, 2014). In contrast, youth in custody are at significant risk for physical and psychological harm as they are separated from their families and peers, their education is disrupted, and they are exposed to trauma and violence in confinement (Children's Defense Fund, 2023). Moreover, scholars have often criticized the use of detention for its association with youths' adverse future outcomes, such as increased likelihood of recidivism, lower continued education, and poorer mental health (Holman & Ziedenberg, 2006; Walker & Herting, 2020). Alternatives to formal processing, such as diversion, however, have shown promising outcomes including a lower likelihood of re-arrest and greater school enrollment (Cauffman et al., 2021). Instances of detainment are often problematic, as they can isolate youth from their broader developmental context, place them in environments that can negatively impact their futures, and contribute to youth having a doubtful outlook towards new beginnings.

In light of their unique hardships and short-term status, youth in detention must be supported by programs that help promote resilience and prepare youth to consider what they want their future to look like upon reentry. Previous research has demonstrated how positive future expectations and life outlook can promote desistance (Clinkinbeard, 2014; Mahler et al., 2017; Prince et al., 2019). In contrast, when youth lack high expectations for the future, they are more likely to be involved in risk behaviors associated with delinquency (Prince et al., 2019), affiliate with delinquent peers (Jackman & Macphee, 2017), and exhibit more problem behaviors (Chen & Vazsonyi, 2011). By helping youth identify what kind of prosocial future they might desire and taking actionable steps toward making that dream a reality, youth in detention can be supported in moving past previous mistakes and toward a more positive life after confinement. Such research highlights a need for exposure to and investment in prosocial future-oriented thinking in juvenile detention facilities.

However, few studies have explored how youth envision their own futures. Before we can develop interventions that focus on improving youth outcomes, it is essential to gain insight into the goals of justice-impacted youth. This study fills that gap in the literature by studying the prosocial futures youth envision for themselves upon leaving juvenile detention. Through understanding the futures youth envision for themselves, we gain vital insight into how the juvenile justice system could better support youths' rehabilitation, foster resilience, and promote meaningful system reform. Ultimately, these insights could help the system better support youth in becoming the person *they* want to become, as opposed to forcing them into programs that lead to life paths they may resist. To properly frame this inquiry, we draw upon two key theoretical frameworks in the literature review. The "future self" literature provides a psychological basis for why envisioning the future can alter behavior, while narrative

criminology offers a lens through which the responses youth construct about these futures can be understood.

Future Selves

The emerging "future self" literature, largely attributed to philosopher Derek Parfit in the 1970s and built upon by researcher Hal Hershfield, describes how an individual's future self-perception can impact current decision-making (Hershfield, 2011). It begins with the basic concept of a "future self", referring to how people imagine the person they want to become over time (Hershfield, 2011; Parfit, 1987). This self-concept encompasses the goals, values, and traits individuals want to hold in the future, as well as the emotional connection they feel toward that version of themselves (Hershfield, 2011; Parfit, 1987). A strong sense of connection to the future self can serve as a motivational bridge between present and future actions, guiding behavior toward long-term well-being and benefit (Hershfield, 2011; Parfit, 1971, 1987). Research suggests that even though individuals might see the future less vividly than the present (Ganschow et al., 2025; Hershfield et al., 2018; Loewenstein, 1996), when they are encouraged to imagine and interact with their future selves through perspective-taking exercises such as 'two-chair' role play (Ganschow et al., 2025), they are more likely to follow through with their future intentions (Ganschow et al., 2025). That is, "future selves" research highlights the importance of visualizing your future self for the execution of intentions to actions.

The "future selves" literature is a vital framework in criminology because it explains the psychological mechanics behind deviant decision-making, particularly among youth. Research by van Gelder et al. (2015) suggests that the clarity with which a young person perceives their future self directly influences their current behavior. Youth who possess a vivid mental image of their future selves are significantly less likely to engage in antisocial or criminal activities because they feel a sense of responsibility toward that future person. In contrast, when the future is vague or disconnected, an individual is more likely to choose immediate gratification through crime, as the abstract consequences feel less relevant than the instant reward. Ultimately, fostering a vivid connection to the future acts as a powerful deterrent, promoting desistance and empowering youth to begin achieving their long-term potential.

Although preliminary findings suggest a link between the vividness of one's future self and delinquency, the literature remains nascent, leaving many critical theoretical and empirical gaps. In particular, little is known about how justice-involved youth actually *envision* their futures—what they hope for, fear, or strive toward. Gaining a deeper understanding of these self-perceptions can help juvenile justice professionals more effectively support youth in identifying meaningful, prosocial pathways to achieve their goals, let alone starting to take steps towards becoming that future version of themselves. While prior studies highlight the importance of strengthening the connection between the present and future self (Ganschow et al., 2025; van Gelder et al., 2015), the field still lacks an applied framework for analyzing the *content* and *meaning* of those imagined futures. To address this gap, we draw on narrative criminology to examine the stories youth tell about who they are, who they hope to become, and how those identities shape their decisions and trajectories.

Narrative Criminology

An individual's actions are often explained and justified through one's personal narrative. A personal narrative is not only a culmination of past events, but also a guide utilized to direct future life choices (Presser & Sandberg, 2015, 2019). A recent theoretical perspective informing the field of criminology, narrative criminology suggests that rewriting one's narrative can lead justice-

impacted individuals down a new path (Presser & Sandberg, 2019). Personal narratives give quality context into the decision-making of participants, showcasing their self-spoken thoughts, offering researchers insight that other methods of inquiry may not allow. Sandberg (2010) details how narrative criminology focuses on the stories themselves, and not the accuracy of the events behind the stories. Regardless of the truth of these stories, this theoretical approach captures the writer's intent, a key factor in supporting emerging prosocial motives. The stories in the present study not only provide insight into the future aspirations of justice-impacted youth but also allow youth to create a new narrative for their futures. Writing about one's own desired future thus becomes a way to express one's agency and demonstrate not simply who they want to be, but who they are becoming.

Personal narratives are heavily influenced by one's place within society. Socioeconomic status and gender norms, for example, play a meaningful role in the manifestations of personal narratives (Fleetwood, 2014). By more deeply understanding the factors that shape personal narratives told by justice-impacted youth, greater assistance can be provided in shaping new narratives that lead these youth down a more prosocial pathway. In practice, narrative criminology has provided promising insight into the issue of substance abuse to enhance behavior change, focusing on how individuals construct processes of addiction and recovery (Kougiali et al., 2017). Additionally, other research has found an emancipatory potential within narrative construction for stigmatized or victimized populations (Fleetwood et al., 2019). Self-stigmatization can be corrected with guided narrative reconstruction that allows flexible young minds to re-envision their place within society.

Despite a substantial decline in juvenile arrest rates, youth custody rates remain high (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024; Rovner, 2024). This temporary removal from society often negatively impacts growth by depriving youth of key developmental connections to their family, friends, and learning institutions (Children's Defense Fund, 2023) and is associated with adverse future outcomes (Holman & Ziedenberg, 2006; Walker & Herting, 2020). While this removal from their typical developmental contexts can be a negative turning point in their life and increase the likelihood of future offending, these could also be opportunities for prosocial growth if youth are provided with the proper interventions. Before growth is possible, however, it is necessary to understand the futures youth actually want so that they can be connected with appropriate resources and programs that allow them to begin making their dreams a reality. Therefore, this study explores the narratives that youth construct about their desired futures.

Current Study

In the present study, youth were asked to describe their future selves- brief, forward-looking texts that reveal how they make sense of who they hope to become. We analyzed short narratives youth experiencing short-term detention wrote within Journey.do, a social growth and learning application. In these prosocial reflections, youth described who they hoped to become and the steps they believed would help them achieve their goals. Through thematic analysis, we examined how detained youth envision their possible futures and identities, seeking to identify patterns that could inform efforts to support their prosocial development. Our guiding question was: *How do youth in juvenile detention picture their futures?* This question was modeled upon the prompt provided to youth in short-term detention, as will be described further in our Measures section. With this research question, the term "picture" was carefully selected over the term "describe", as we hoped to ascertain and expand upon concepts articulated in youth responses. As descriptions remain a product of internal thought and reflection, we sought to capture the raw ideas and aspirations of youth. This exploratory inquiry

represents an initial step in understanding how justice-involved youth articulate aspirations and define their roles in imagined future lives.

Method

Data

We used data from stories youth submitted in Journey.do, an online social learning platform that encourages personalized growth in a variety of life domains for justice-involved youth. Journey.do can potentially support future-oriented and prosocial thinking by encouraging youth to engage with lessons that cater to their life needs and unique areas for growth. While general internet access is restricted within the detention facility, youth have the opportunity to participate voluntarily in a secure, closed instance of Journey.do. In the Journey.do platform, justice-involved youth choose from learning categories called *Journeys,* distinct life domains in which they can learn and grow, such as Owning My Past Actions, Having a Positive Attitude, Making Good Choices, Building Strong Relationships, Pursuing Health and Wellness, Growing My Future, Avoiding Substance Abuse, and Strengthening Families. Each *Journey* has 8-10 modules, which contain specific learning content that helps the youth develop targeted skills in the overarching *Journey.*

Within each module, there are three stages: Connect, Grow, and Apply. In the first stage, Connect, justice-involved youth are invited to interact with their peers by connecting with others' prompt responses within their chosen module. In this activity, they can react from a prespecified set of simple emoticons. In the second stage, Grow, youth gain valuable knowledge by completing lessons related to the topic within the module. This stage involves reading sections of text, watching relevant videos, and interacting with hands-on activities on the module topic. Finally, in the third stage, Apply, youth are invited to write a personal response that is guided by a short prompt, allowing youth to establish firm connections between the module's concepts and their own lived experiences. Prompt responses, further referred to as "stories", allow for text customization, titling, and other forms of expression, such as the ability to insert images or media. These 3 stages are repeated throughout each module in a *Journey.*

Once youth complete the modules in a specific *Journey*, they receive a certificate that acknowledges their dedication and growth in that life skills area. It is important to note that there are no other incentives for justice-involved youth to complete modules or participate in Journey.do as a platform. In other words, participation in the application is completely voluntary, and there is no requirement to participate or any direct benefit gained from participation. However, Journey.do certificates can be utilized for various personal reasons, such as illustrating to a judge one's active efforts to adjust various behavioral patterns that may have led to contact with the juvenile justice system.

For the current study, we used Journey.do stories collected from a large short-term, pre-adjudication juvenile detention facility in the southwestern United States. The current study focused on the *Journey*, "Owning My Past Actions." Specifically, we chose this *Journey* because it seeks to help justice-involved youth reflect on their current situation and prepare for the next steps toward their future. Modules within this category offer youth a new perspective, growth in their sense of self, advice for their current situation, and skills to propel them into life outside of the justice system. Within this particular *Journey*, there are nine modules. Stories were gathered from the module that was most directly applicable to the research question described previously: "My Future Self."

Youth on Journey.do are permitted to submit one story for each module. In total, we utilized 287 youth stories from the "My Future Self" module, submitted between June 2021 and May 2025. Ten youth stories were eliminated from the analytic sample due to repetitive material found

within other stories. Of the 277 retained stories, 212 (76.5%) were submitted by boys and 65 (23.5%) by girls. The racial breakdown of the youth sample was the following: 35.84% Hispanic, 32.26% White, 22.58% African American, 5.74% Native American, 2.15% classified as Other, and 1.43% Asian/Pacific Islander. Approximately 31.9% of youth had never been detained, and 68.1% of youth had been detained at least once previously. The age of participating youth ranged from 12 to 18 years old, with an average age of 16.06 years old.

Measures

In the module, "My Future Self," youth were asked to apply their knowledge and respond to the following prompt: "Picture who you want to be in the future and make a plan to get there. First, explain who you want to be when you grow up (like a musician, a social worker, a YouTuber, a great family member, a teacher, or anything else you dream of) and why. Second, list three steps you can take to become that person. For example, if you want to be a chef, step one would be getting a food handler's license." Stories varied in both detail and length, ranging from a few sentences to an extended paragraph. Word counts ranged from 28 to 312 words, with an average of 94.89 words per story.

Analytic Plan

For the purposes of this qualitative study, responses from Journey.do were thematically analyzed to obtain more knowledge of the prosocial contents of youth aspirations and future goals for themselves. An inductive coding strategy analyzed raw data without a pre-existing coding frame to identify categories through interpretation and decision-making (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dey, 1993). To avoid potential bias in data interpretation due to individual beliefs, backgrounds, or experiences, the inductive coding process outlined below involved the work of two coders. The presence of two coders helped to establish intercoder reliability, a numerical measure of agreement between individuals on how identical data should be coded (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Thematic analysis was completed using six recursive phases: (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for possible themes, (4) reviewing established themes, (5) defining themes, and (6) producing results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Utilizing this guide, we first reviewed 92 (33.2%) youth stories, observing basic features such as length and common terminology to orient ourselves with the data. Only 33.2% of youth stories were examined to ensure both coders shared a thematic foundation while preserving independence in thought. In this phase, stories were not always read in their entirety but were rather browsed. Next, both coders carefully read through the 92 stories to identify and propose initial emerging themes. These initial themes were broad, common ideas obtained through repeated reading, and were observed by both coders. In the third phase of thematic analysis, these initial themes were evaluated in discussion by examining the differences between stories in each theme. These discussions molded the initial themes to be more specific, which were then reviewed to verify their accuracy. In the fifth phase, following theme identification, revisitation of the initial 92 youth stories and further discussion served to refine how the themes were quantified or defined, providing a measure for the inclusion or exclusion of stories in particular themes. In all, these five steps established an initial codebook, which was a preliminary list of themes to guide the coding of the remainder of youth narratives. Following the sixth step of thematic analysis, after the initial codebook was established, each coder examined the remaining 185 youth stories (66.8% of the total stories) independently.

Upon reviewing the remaining 185 youth stories, both coders agreed that larger themes could be further refined and specified into smaller concepts that more appropriately captured specific groups of our sample. It should additionally be noted that, on occasion, potential themes arose

from remaining story content that did not yet exist in the initial codebook. When this occurred, theme prevalence was assessed by both coders, and new theme parameters according to conceptual distinctiveness were defined. Before appending them to the codebook, it was crucial that the coders independently agreed upon the frequency and necessity of the proposed theme. In this sense, the recursive phases specified previously (Braun & Clarke, 2006) for the initial codebook were applied to the remaining 185 stories. Finally, intercoder reliability was calculated through Stata 17.

The initial kappa scores for the 16 codes ranged from 0.48 to 0.96. Fourteen of the codes had kappa values over 0.70, indicating substantial or almost perfect agreement. Following the calculation of intercoder reliability, two of the sixteen themes were revisited and refined to ensure strong coder agreement: *familial careers* and *uncertain careers*. After revising definitions for these two themes and addressing remaining discrepancies, the intercoder reliability metric of kappa for all codes was 1.00, indicating perfect agreement. This process of calculation and consensus fulfilled the sixth and final phase of thematic analysis, producing the results of the current study.

Results

Thematic analysis of youth stories resulted in four overarching categories of subthemes: (1) Values that Guide Career Choices; (2) Personal Improvement Goals; (3) Family Participation; and (4) Educational Goals. It is crucial to emphasize that, with the intention of capturing the diversity and complexity of youths' future pictures, one youth story could be coded for multiple themes.

Table 1. Category/Subtheme Story Numbers and Percentages

Theme category	Youth stories	Overall percentage (%)	Within category (%)
Values That Guide Career Choices	215	77.62%	–
Interest careers	85	30.69%	39.53%
Profitable careers	78	28.16%	36.28%
Autonomous careers	71	25.63%	33%
Altruistic carers	53	19.13%	24.65%
Uncertain careers	47	16.97%	21.86%
Memorial careers	29	10.47%	13.49%
Familial careers	13	4.69%	6.05%
Personal Improvement Goals	158	57.04%	–
Emotional or motivational development motivated by self	87	31.41%	55.06%
Emotional or motivational development motivated by others	69	24.91%	43.67%
Remain outside of the justice system	74	26.71%	46.84%
Sobriety	25	9.03%	15.82%
Family Participation	103	37.18%	–
Visualizing future family	68	24.55%	66.02%
Providing for current family	44	15.88%	42.72%
Educational Goals	179	64.62%	–
Obtain high school diploma/GED	120	43.32%	67.04%
Specialized training	67	24.19%	48.6%
Pursue higher education	87	31.41%	37.43%

Note. Youth stories may fall under more than one category. Percentages will not add up to 100%.

However, for the clarity of the viewer, each overarching category and its respective subthemes will be described individually below. The total number of stories in each category and subthemes in each category are presented in Table 1.

Values That Guide Career Choices

The largest category of themes was Values That Guide Career Choices and was present within 77.62% of youth stories. Broadly, this theme captured the driving principles of youths' workforce involvement. In most stories, youth described not solely their intended industry but what benefits or motivations drew them towards it. Within this theme, there were seven subthemes, which encompassed the different values youth identified as driving their work aspirations: (1) *interest careers*; (2) *profitable careers*; (3) *autonomous careers*; (4) *altruistic careers*; (5) *uncertain careers*; (6) *memorial careers*; and (7) *familial careers*.

Interest Careers. The first subtheme, *interest careers*, was present within 85 youth stories and constituted 39.53% of Values That Guide Career Choices. Of stories within *interest careers*, 52 were submitted by boys and 33 by girls. This theme portrayed youth who built their career goals around their passions. Whether it was a lifetime hobby or an activity more newfound and exciting, youth in this category looked forward to pursuing a job that was presently making them feel fulfilled. Language such as "[I] like to work on robotics" or "[I] dream of working on cars" often qualified stories for this theme. In many cases, these careers were fulfilling psychologically,

> "I lowkey want to make music because music is a big help for me I listen to the melody n let me sink in the beat n js feel myself, feel good, feel great, feel like nothing can stop me, i hear a lot of rappers say the microphone is there therapy n that's what I think too."

Profitable Careers. The second subtheme, *profitable careers*, was present within 78 youth stories and constituted 36.28% of Values That Guide Career Choices. Of stories within *profitable careers*, 65 were submitted by boys and 13 by girls. Within these stories, youth prioritized a stable source of income because they recognized how it could enhance their lives. Job positions that brought in enough income to sustain a comfortable lifestyle for youth were ideal, so as to "never have to worry about money or food again." However, youth rarely considered only themselves when they specified salary goals. One participant wrote, "Get a nice 2-story house and end up starting my own business that i can leave to my kids, so they won't worry about money when I'm gone." Rather than solely hoping for a comfortable living, some youth looked for an abundance of leisure, "My future self I want to be successful and wealthy. I want to be able to provide for myself and my family. I want to be able to purchase anything i want without looking at the price tag." Ultimately, youth stories in this theme sought after careers that could provide financial peace of mind and a sense of security.

Autonomous Careers. The third subtheme, *autonomous careers*, was present within 71 youth stories and constituted 33% of Values That Guide Career Choices. Of the stories within *autonomous careers*, 62 were submitted by boys and 9 by girls. These stories indicated that youth sought a sense of freedom and independence in their employment. Through owning a business or starting a business, for example, youth highlighted the potential to "be [their] own boss" and avoid working in commonly rigid hierarchical structures. Youth stories in this subtheme highlighted that some strategic career choices would allow them to create their own rules, or rewrite the script, "after that I meant to save money to buy my own shop and open that so I can hire other kids who

want to learn and have backgrounds because I know how hard it is to get a job when your a felon." Included in this theme were youth who wanted to pursue social media or YouTube as a career, as these routes allow for unique work conditions such as flexible schedules, control over production stages, and creative liberty through content choice.

Altruistic Careers. The fourth subtheme, *altruistic careers*, was present within 53 youth stories and constituted 24.65% of Values That Guide Career Choices. Of stories within *altruistic careers*, 15 were submitted by boys and 29 by girls. This theme captured youth who wanted specific careers grounded in their ability to serve others and make a positive impact. Creating a positive impact was articulated in a variety of ways. For instance, some youth wanted to provide physical aid through the medical field, some wanted to inspire others through creative avenues, and some wanted to be motivational speakers. For youth who showcased this theme, the main draw of the career was its strong influential nature,

> "The reason is because the music I make people have said that they can relate to it n that it helped them understand more of how they felt. I want to be able to let people know that their not alone in this world n that they will always have someone that will be there n support them."

Ultimately, youth who prioritized *altruistic careers* placed others' well-being before their own, highlighting a strong humanitarian tone.

Uncertain Careers. The fifth subtheme, *uncertain careers*, was present within 47 youth stories and constituted 21.86% of Values That Guide Career Choices. Of stories within *uncertain careers*, 42 were submitted by boys and 5 by girls. This theme was titled after the draw youth felt towards recognizing the various positional offers professional life can provide. Youth valued careers that would be fitting for their needs, wants, and circumstances, urging exploration to find the right choice for them as individuals. The youth narratives within this theme spoke to the foundational importance of pursuing a career that would lead to overall fulfillment; however, youth expressed the apprehension that uncertainty can cause. For instance, one youth said, "To be honest I've never really thought what I wanted to be when I grow up." Youth in this theme often felt that they did not know enough about a career, had not explored alternative options, or knew a general area but could not identify a specific route. Ultimately, the theme captured the importance of pursuing a career path with confidence.

Memorial Careers. The sixth subtheme, *memorial careers*, was present within 29 youth stories and constituted 13.49% of Values That Guide Career Choices. Of stories within *memorial careers*, 16 were submitted by boys and 13 by girls. This theme captured youth who wanted their professional positions to honor a memory significant to their growth and development, such as a moment from childhood and the life lesson they obtained from it. However, we believed that a period longer than an isolated event qualified as a memory. Circumstances specific to a youth's upbringing, for instance, often were formative to professional goals and conveyed their lived history. One youth discussed the neglect faced by Native Americans on the reservation where she was raised,

> "I wanna do this bc living n growing up on da rez I've noticed that nobody really cares bout the native Americans on da rez struggling each day, da government doesn't pay no mind bc they think this is der land… Da Rez is a real struggle where I'm from."

In another story, a youth reflected on how his past mental health struggles informed his desire to help others,

> "What I want to be when I grow up is a BHT (behavior health technician)... I want to pursue this job because i have had mental health struggles myself and I want to be able to help connect with these kids to help them like how they helped me."

It was not infrequent for other youth who expressed this theme to mold their career goals around traumatic life events that were outside of their control. In these cases, youth often sought work that could prevent what happened to them from happening again,

> "I want to be a travel nurse ever since I saw my grandpa in a nursing home in Mexico and saw how they mistreated them. I felt like I could help people and I would treat them better than those people who just do it for the money."

Familial Careers. The final subtheme, *familial careers*, was present within 13 youth stories and constituted 6.05% of Values That Guide Career Choices. Of stories within *familial careers*, 12 were submitted by boys and 1 by girls. Although appearing smaller than other subthemes at first glance, *familial* stories contained strong implications. Narratives that contained this theme depicted family trades as the logical career pursuit, one set in practice. It was often discussed as if no other options were worth pursuing, "I want to do this because the men I have be raised by all did work in those categories" as if the most obtainable route was to follow in the "family's footsteps." There were cases where youth did identify careers outside of their family's influence; however, in these cases, family trades were still a fallback, "...but if things don't go my way I'll just hop into one of the family businesses like the rest of my family n get into landscaping, tiling or something in that area."

Personal Improvement Goals

The second category was Personal Improvement Goals. In total, this theme was present in 57.04% of stories. This is the only category in which subthemes will not be ordered by prevalence, as two of the subthemes are mirrored in nature. Broadly, this theme explores the objectives youth had for themselves that they believed would be beneficial to growing out of past patterns of behavior. This theme contains four subthemes, which all capture youths' self-image goals: (1) *emotional or motivational development motivated by self*; (2) *emotional or motivational development motivated by others*; (3) *remain outside of the justice system*; and (4) *sobriety.* Segments of youth stories that fall within this category were often articulated as stepping-stones along the route to their future outcomes, whether such goals were career-based or not.

Emotional or Motivational Development Motivated by Self. The first subtheme, *emotional or motivational development motivated by self*, was present within 87 youth stories and constituted 55.06% of Personal Improvement Goals. Of the stories within this subtheme, 71 were submitted by boys and 16 by girls. This theme captured youth who wanted to acquire new character traits, coping mechanisms, emotional regulation skills, and more. In contrast to the following theme, however, this goal originated within youth alone; in other words, no outside individuals instilled motivation for them. Youth recognized a need for an internal shift and planned out the course independently. For example, one youth discussed how insecurity regarding his identity had ruled his life, "im gonna stop worrying about what other people think so much so i can be comfortable in my own skin." Another youth identified how he will adjust his coping strategies, "I want to be

someone who shows grit and perserveriance in the face of doubt or hardship. Someone who can keep there anger and emotions in check and not give up or give in."

Emotional or Motivational Development Motivated by Others. The second subtheme, *emotional or motivational development motivated by others*, was present within 69 youth stories and constituted 43.67% of Personal Improvement Goals. Of stories within *emotional or motivational development motivated by others*, 57 were submitted by boys and 12 by girls. Rather than wanting to establish new character traits, coping mechanisms, or emotional regulation skills for themselves, the youth in this category were motivated by influential figures in their lives. Whether it was to care for their future kids or make their parents proud, youth identified internal growth goals out of love and appreciation for others. One youth articulated the prominent role his younger brothers played in his life,

> "I don't want my little brothers to be like me ima change I want them to be successful in ther life cs I know they be watching and I don't want them to mess up cuz this ain't worth it this is not good it's good to be free."

Another youth discussed the legacy he will leave on his existing family, "a better brother and son I won't to be remembered as a good brother and son I don't want to let my family down I just want to work on my self and getting back to my family." As a whole, this theme expressed how youths' lives are shaped by others and the role outsiders can play in youths' pictured future identities.

Remain Outside of the Justice System. The third subtheme, *remain outside of the justice system*, was present within 74 youth stories and constituted 46.84% of Personal Improvement Goals. Of stories within this subtheme, 88 were submitted by boys and 8 by girls. Rather than articulating wanting to exit their current detainment situation solely, youth included in this theme had to want to stay out of contact with the criminal justice system permanently. Youth recognized involvement with the system as a barrier between them and their future aspirations, their loved ones, or their sense of self. For instance, one youth felt a strong compulsion to "be a mechanic, but I can't do that when I'm in detention," while another felt a need to "stay out of trouble, so I can see my kids." For some kids, justice system involvement led to a shift in mindset,

> "I have made bad choices in my life and me being in [detention] is a wide awakening for me because this is not something i would want for a everyday lifestyle. But i also feel like it's a wake-up call.Me being able to experience being in jail makes me wanna change my whole life most definitely."

Sobriety. The final subtheme, *sobriety*, was present within 25 youth stories and constituted 15.82% of Personal Improvement Goals. Of stories within *sobriety*, 20 were submitted by boys and 5 by girls. In this subtheme, *sobriety* was defined as an intent to stay away from substances indefinitely. Intending to become sober was often articulated as stemming from a sense of unwanted dependence on drug use, "The future Thomas will be … kind to the peole around the, and they will solve issues with words rather than drugs." Many youth also recognized that substance use can be detrimental to physical health: "my last step is to quit using substances because it's not good for my general health and I don't make good choices when using drugs." Ultimately, youth who expressed this theme wanted to pursue *sobriety* because it would facilitate the accomplishment of other goals, "I can avoid using substances to keep my head on a straight path."

Family Participation

The third category was Family Participation, which was present in 37.18% of youth stories. This theme conveyed the way family roles and family structures manifest in youths' pictured futures. This theme contained 2 subthemes, which both show how youth prioritized family involvement: (1) *visualizing future family*, and (2) *providing for current family*. Many youth wrote narratives that outlined both existing family and idealized future family members, showcasing the extent to which youth valued family participation.

Visualizing Future Family. The first subtheme, *visualizing future family*, was present within 68 youth stories and constituted 66.02% of Family Participation. Of the stories within *visualizing future family*, 54 were submitted by boys and 14 by girls. Within this theme, marriage and children were frequently mentioned. There was a holistic nature to the 68 stories in which this subtheme was present, which articulated future family as fulfillment for spots that current family may have left empty,

> "I also would want to be a better father than my dad because I don't want my kids to go through what I went through I would want to show them that my Love is genuine and they can rely on me to be there for them Regardless the situation."

Future family manifested as expectations or wants with recognized responsibility. Because of its undeniably fulfilling nature, *visualizing future family* was often articulated with definitiveness, "So in the future I want to have a family."

Providing for Current Family. The second subtheme, *providing for current family*, was present within 44 youth stories and constituted 42.72% of Family Participation. Of the stories within *providing for current family*, 35 were submitted by boys and 9 by girls. Although most youth discussed financial aid, some youth also articulated wanting to invest emotional time and other resources into family. For instance, one youth discussed wanting to make a home for his mother, who had cared for him since the start: "i will buy a house for me and one for my mom she broke her back to give me a good life." In contrast, one girl expressed an emotional investment in her child, "When I get out I'm going straight back to my daughter, a raising her the best I can." Recognizing family as a foundation, this theme highlights that youth were not confined in the ways in which they seek to care for their families. The variety in youth stories shows the strong, fulfilling nature that family can have, motivating youth to go to any means necessary to ensure their well-being.

Educational Goals

The fourth and final category was Educational Goals, which was present in 64.62% of stories. Aiming to represent the specific educational standards youth identified as necessary for their idealized career paths, Educational Goals captured a variety of pursuits depending on career choice. The theme encompassed three subthemes, which all represented stepping-stones to career attainment: (1) *obtain high school diploma/GED*; (2) *specialized training*; and (3) *pursue higher education*.

Obtain High School Diploma/GED. The first subtheme, *obtain high school diploma/GED*, was present within 120 youth stories and constituted 67.04% of Educational Goals. Of the stories within *obtain high school diploma/GED*, 85 were submitted by boys and 35 by girls. This theme showcased youth who intended to continue their educational journey that was halted by juvenile punitive detention, indicated by phrases such as "go back" or word choices like "finish." Of all subthemes in the current study, this subtheme was the most prevalent, showcasing the profound

impact juvenile detention has on the lives of youth. Many stories listed *high school/GED* as a goal early on in their stories, reflecting the necessity for completion at the start of a career path,

> "I say I don't really know what I want to be when I grow up. First, I still have to get my GED and finish school, then after that I think I will join the army or navy, even the marines. I want to be in the navy, so I can have a name and become someone."

Some youth additionally set goals beyond continuing high school or obtaining their GED. These youth discussed striving for high academic achievement through grades and honors. One youth detailed how she will become an EMT in adulthood, "I wont to graduate high school with a degree mainly valedictorian and go to a school that I know will be good for my career path."

Specialized Training. The second subtheme, *specialized training*, was present within 87 youth stories and constituted 48.6% of Educational Goals. Of stories within *specialized training*, 67 were submitted by boys and 20 by girls. Included in this theme were youth who articulated distinct qualifications that were achieved outside of traditional secondary and post-secondary education: trade school, an apprenticeship, certifications, and licensing, for example. Rather than stressing college or graduate school, these youth focused on less familiar routes that were more unique to their specialty. One youth captured the niche paths of certain careers, "In the future I see myself. Installing A. C units, I will have to go to a special school that teaches you how to install them." After attributing his inspiration to work on cars to his dad, another youth said, "I can learn the basics of how to fix a car. From there, after I graduate high school, I will go to trade school and get licensed to be a mechanic." Among the many fields mentioned were welding, cosmetology, cooking, barbering, tattooing, and more, reflecting the great variance in youth aspirations.

Pursue Higher Education. The third subtheme, *pursue higher education*, was present within 67 youth stories and constituted 37.43% of Educational Goals. Of the stories within *pursue higher education*, 34 were submitted by boys and 33 by girls. This theme captured those who strove to attend a college or university past high school level. Outside of undergraduate careers, this theme also included youth who wanted to attend graduate school, medical school, or law school. Many youth specified how higher education played a role in their career paths; for instance, one youth talked about attending medical school to fulfill her goal to become a gynecologist. Included also were youth who had broad college interests, but not specifically outlined routes, "Then after that go to collage i don't know what i want to study yet but i know i want it to do with computers." Another youth discussed wanting to attend college, but did not specify how it would assist him in achieving his career goals, "Im working on my education my job and my personality so i could be that man in the future. I wanna grauduate highschool and then goto college."

Category Overlap. Because many careers require a high school diploma to progress to the following stage, a majority of stories that fell within this overarching category included more than one subtheme of Educational Goals. An example of high school as a frequent precursor to most careers is shown by one youth who discussed his route to becoming an immigration attorney for children,

> "Then, I can graduate from high school by studying and paying attention/applying to myself and college, by studying and putting all my effort into the work and preparing for the LSAT or bar exam and making healthy decisions, by maintaining my integrity and asking myself what is important."

An additional example shows how high school and specialized training were frequently combined, "as a tattoo artist the three steps im going to take is first to continue highschool second is to also

continue the apprenticeship and third is to practice consistently to get better." These combinations in youth stories reflect the increasing complexity in career attainment in today's workforce.

Discussion

Juvenile detention is typically a disruptive period in a young person's life. However, it also presents a critical period of possibility, in which proper support and intervention can promote positive youth development and foster positive change. It can serve as an inflection point where youth begin to reimagine who they are and who they want to become. Understanding how young people in these settings think about their futures is essential for designing interventions that nurture agency, hope, and prosocial growth. The present study explores this potential by analyzing written expressions of future selves from youth in short-term detention. Drawing on theories of the future self and narrative criminology, we examine how youth articulate their aspirations and self-concepts during confinement, offering insight into the ways they construct meaning, imagine possibility, and express readiness for change even in constrained environments.

Through using qualitative thematic analysis and inductive coding, we established four broad categories within youths' stories: (1) Values That Guide Career Choices; (2) Personal Improvement Goals; (3) Family Participation; and (4) Educational Goals. Through all of these categories, youth expressed vivid and varied visions for their futures. Youth articulated in detail their desired outcomes, whether professional or personal, and youths' imagined futures differed largely from one another, indicating strong aspirations unique to youth as individuals. Additionally, present within the findings was a strong overlap between certain subthemes, providing further nuance to the findings through a reflection of the complexity of youth dreams and sources of inspiration. The most notable of these points of overlap was between *altruistic careers* and *memorial careers*. This indicates that recommendations provided to juvenile justice professionals in the following sections often urge a combination, according to the specific youth's goals and needs. The content of youth imaginations advances the future self literature, as such literature recognizes the relationship between future visualization and tangible outcomes (Ganschow et al., 2025; van Gelder et al., 2015). The following sections discuss the findings within each of these themes.

Values That Guide Career Choices

Many youth in the current study pictured careers of *interest*. Studies have illustrated the statistically significant positive relationship between job interest fit and job satisfaction, in addition to the relationship between interest fit, positive outcomes, and overall career satisfaction (Hoff et al., 2020). In order to promote job retention and stability in youth as they rapidly approach adulthood, juvenile justice professionals could remind youth of what positive outcomes can result from basing future goals on current interests. Doing so could help youth feel a personal connection to their future selves. Two possible ways this practice could manifest include working with youth one-on-one to ask them about their favorite activities or by utilizing career mentorship programs intended to target recidivism risk factors (Varghese et al., 2024). Existing research on art programs for juveniles facing incarceration, for instance, indicates promising evaluation results of decreased recidivism and behavior problems as youth are granted the opportunity to explore personal expressions of interest (Miner-Romanoff, 2014, 2016). Ultimately, qualified mentors could proactively make youth aware that what currently fufills them can continue to do so professionally.

A central theme in youths' visions of their future selves is the desire for stable, *profitable careers*. Given that low socioeconomic status is a strong predictor of juvenile delinquency (Rekker et al., 2015), many justice-involved youth have experienced significant economic instability and

the stress of living paycheck to paycheck. By helping youth conceptualize a clear pathway to a career that covers their expenses, practitioners can provide a viable alternative to crime as a means of resource gathering. To turn these career goals into reality, justice system professionals should prioritize job training and workforce preparation within facilities. This includes providing access to vocational certifications, resume-building workshops, and "soft skill" development, such as professional communication and conflict resolution. Furthermore, because a criminal record often creates systemic barriers to employment, instruction should focus on how to navigate the workforce with a record and identify "second chance" employers.

Certainly, while career training provides the means to earn an income, it could be paired with foundational financial literacy. Instruction on budgeting, understanding modern banking, and navigating the costs of stable housing ensures that once youth secure employment, they can maintain their independence. Research confirms that combining workforce readiness with financial education leads to better success (Lusardi et al., 2015). By investing in both the skills to get a job and the knowledge to manage a paycheck, we empower youth to achieve upward mobility and lasting desistance from crime.

Youth also frequently envisioned futures defined by professional autonomy, or *autonomous careers*, such as business ownership or content creation. This trend aligns with the "normative desire" for independence that characterizes adolescent development (Fleming, 2005), but it is likely amplified for justice-involved youth whose lives are defined by the restrictive nature of detention (Gilman et al., 2021). By picturing themselves as entrepreneurs or creators, these individuals are often expressing a desire to escape the demands of traditional authority and maximize their personal freedom in adulthood. To help youth bridge the gap between the dream of independence and the reality of self-employment, justice professionals should focus on building foundational self-management and accountability skills. As Caldwell and Joseph (2014) demonstrated, structured self-management procedures significantly improve productivity and on-task behavior, traits that are essential for the self-sufficiency required in autonomous careers. Equipping youth with these practical tools, alongside education on the mechanics of starting a business, could make their idealized future self actually feel attainable. When professional independence feels like a realistic possibility, it provides a powerful incentive for positive behavioral change and long-term goal pursuit.

The gender breakdown for *altruistic careers* stood apart from others; despite approximately 77% of our stories being submitted by boys in the overall sample, 29 female youth submitted stories for this theme compared to 15 by male youth. Here, a discussion on the common socialization of boys and girls in upbringing is relevant. Compared to boys, girls are traditionally expected to be attentive to others' needs, while simultaneously expected to achieve self-fulfillment (Baumeister, 2013). Perhaps this finding indicates the power of gender socialization, so much so that female youth pictured their careers around it or presented their career interests in a serving-of-others way. Furthermore, it should be noted that work stress is considered to be a significant problem in the community services sector, with social workers enduring years of "compassion fatigue" (Dollard & McTernan, 2011; Ratcliff, 2024). For youth who want to have impactful careers, professionals in the juvenile justice realm could equip youth with the proper skills and coping strategies to approach not just their careers, but various life strains with confidence. Skills-based interventions such as Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) have been previously implemented in juvenile correctional and detention facilities (Fasulo et al., 2015; Fox et al., 2020; Walden et al., 2019). For instance, a study of a 12-week program for youth in long-term juvenile detention prioritized strong therapeutic alliances between group members and therapists, facilitating acknowledgements of past maladaptive behaviors and instilling psychological and behavioral tools for managing traumatic experiences and chronic stress (Fasulo et al., 2015). While implementing such programs,

professionals could determine how to combine a youth's interests with related causes to strengthen continuity between the current and future self. By creating a larger overlap between a youth and their idealized self, professionals may be able to encourage youth to avoid recidivism and choose to pursue progress.

The fifth subtheme was titled *uncertain careers*. Career uncertainty, often driven by limited labor market access and low self-awareness (Guo, 2025), can stall the professional development of justice-involved youth. This lack of a clear trajectory frequently results in lower educational goals and a fragmented work history, preventing youth from benefiting from the compounding wage increases associated with career longevity. The problem is particularly acute in financially strained communities where the immediate need for income often overrides long-term planning. To combat this, juvenile justice professionals should focus on building career self-awareness through reflective exercises and exposure to diverse vocational paths. By introducing youth to various occupations and helping them identify their individual strengths, practitioners can facilitate the visualization of a concrete professional future. Transforming an uncertain outlook into a vivid, attainable career goal could provide the necessary roadmap for youth to navigate the labor market and achieve long-term economic stability.

Many youth also envisioned *memorial careers*, which are professional roles chosen to honor a memory significant to their growth and development, such as a formative moment from childhood and the life lesson derived from it. This theme aligns with established research suggesting that early life adversity often motivates individuals toward helping professions as a way to find meaning in their own history (Black et al., 1993; Bryce et al., 2023). From a narrative criminological perspective, these aspirations highlight the resilience of justice-involved youth who refashion their past challenges into a purposeful future identity. While practitioners cannot erase a youth's history, they can utilize trauma-informed and strengths-based interventions, such as the TARGET model, to help reconcile past pain with professional goals (Marrow et al., 2012). Within facilities, trauma-informed models and care by trained professionals can support youth at any point in the healing journey, while building pathways that acknowledge ongoing challenges.

Many youth referenced *familial career* aspirations. Certainly, entering a family business can offer significant advantages, including a streamlined hiring process, job security, and a flexible work environment (Walden University, 2025). However, the motivation to follow in these familial footsteps is often complex; youth may pursue a family trade due to an innate desire, a sense of obligation, or a perceived lack of alternative opportunities (Schröder & Schmitt-Rodermund, 2013). While professionals should respect these interests, they must also ensure youth understand that their future self is not limited to a single, predetermined outcome. To support this, Park-Taylor and Vargas (2012) propose an integrated counseling approach that utilizes the concepts of multifinality, work hope, and possible selves. By exposing youth to a wider spectrum of career routes, practitioners can foster vocational hope and help them pursue trajectories that previously seemed unattainable (Park-Taylor & Vargas, 2012). Ultimately, by identifying individual strengths and encouraging active exploration, professionals can help youth build a more authentic and lasting bond with their future selves.

Personal Improvement Goals

Although the subtheme *emotional or motivational development motivated by self* specifically focuses on self-motivation, research suggests that this motivation is still closely related to one's perception of self within the greater social body (Lickel et al., 2014). Youth who have fractured relationships with their family often look to their community as an end destination for their reformed self. Moreover, youth in juvenile detention centers have broken the laws that are agreed

upon by their peers, which could make them perceive themselves as outcasts. Regret of previous actions has been identified as a primary emotional component that motivates people to change (Lickel et al., 2014). Motivated in part by past regrets, 31% of youth in our sample said they wanted to change their ways. Once youth have recognized their future self needs to change, justice system professionals could supply them tools and skills to work toward this goal. Mental health professionals could work closely with youth who have offended to ensure that they recognize they still have a place within their community if they can improve themselves. With a pro-social reward of community re-entry presented in their future, more youth might utilize the skills they are given to change. While minimal research exists on community re-entry for youth in detention, existing literature has done extensive research on community re-entry for incarcerated youth. For instance, Bullis et al. (2004) found that the first six months of release are crucial in re-integrating youth into the community. The study concluded that youth who participated in academic or vocational programs within their community had more successful community adjustment but still required continued support beyond the first six months to have a long-term positive impact. Additionally, if these youth can meet with previous offenders who have since reformed and rejoined their community, it may aid the visualization process that motivates youth to redirect their goal pathways.

The theme *emotional or motivational development motivated by others* captured youth who wanted to change because of people in their lives. Most youth captured in this theme cited their family as their primary external motivation, which aligns with existing research that describes the importance of familial relationships for delinquent youth (Agnew & Brezina, 2017). When they are part of a family that sets specific standards for them, it helps youth avoid reoffending. For a youth to pivot their mentality and shift their ways, it may help them to believe that the future version of themself will be better accepted by their family and social community. To maximize these benefits, juvenile justice programs could work closely with the families of justice-involved youth. Additionally, family visitation could be an accessible process that helps low-income families cover transportation costs. Connecting with families may be a way to help youth envision a positive future self.

Many youth aspired to *stay out of the justice system* in the future. The rate of juvenile re-offending in America has concerned scholars, practitioners, and community members; in some jurisdictions, the recidivism rate can be as high as 75% within 3 years (Seigle et al., 2014). Menon and Cheung (2018) discuss the power of desistance pathways for youth reintegrating back into society. In particular, desistance-focused service components such as professional mentorship, risk and needs responsivity, pre-release preparation, and positive external support can promote juvenile reintegration successes. Due to the noteworthy relationship between desistance pathways and successful reintegration, youths' motivations should be supplemented with vivid pictures of what such pathways can look like for them. However, the intention-behavior gap in the future selves literature suggests that positive intentions alone are often not sufficient to motivate action (Sheeran, 2011). Therefore, when youth picture themselves removed from deviant lifestyles, professionals could equip them with the right tools to make their ambition a reality. Inside detention centers, professionals could connect youth with influential mentors. As an example, since 2013, the Juvenile Reentry Mentorship Project (JRMP) in Nebraska has sought to pair justice-impacted youth with mentors to provide future-oriented support (Davis, 2023). Trained students from the University of Nebraska Omaha work with youth from the Nebraska Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers, uplifting youth throughout their time in the facility and continuing their mentorship after release (Davis, 2023). When surveying youth in the JRMP program, 97% articulated that they found their mentors to be highly impactful (Davis, 2023). To address not only youth but also adult recidivism rates,

professionals must do more than just inspire youth to desist from deviant behaviors; they must help them visualize its rewards.

Sobriety emerged as a central pillar of the future goals envisioned by youth, which is a critical finding given the high prevalence of substance use in justice-impacted populations (McClelland et al., 2004). Because recidivism rates are significantly higher among youth with substance abuse problems (van der Put et al., 2014), achieving sobriety is often an essential prerequisite for those seeking to permanently exit the legal system and realize their idealized future identities. While youth frequently use substances to enhance positive emotions or cope with negative states like depression and anxiety (Dow & Kelly, 2013), justice professionals can facilitate recovery through evidence-based practices like Motivational Interviewing. This approach has been shown to decrease substance use (D'Amico et al., 2013), increase resistance confidence (Slavet et al., 2005), and reduce risky behaviors (Schmiege et al., 2009). However, because high depressive symptoms can moderate treatment efficacy, practitioners must ensure that interventions are sensitive to individual life histories and mental health needs (Clair-Michaud et al., 2016; Stein et al., 2011). Ultimately, by working with trauma-informed professionals, youth can learn to replace substance reliance with healthy self-regulation strategies that foster internal peace and long-term stability (Marrow et al., 2012).

Family Participation

The next subtheme is *providing for their current family*. Family dynamics are foundational to the development and rehabilitation of justice-involved youth (Agnew & Brezina, 2017). Many youth expressed a strong desire to provide for their families and repair damaged trust post-release; however, this restoration requires a bidirectional effort. When youth engage in delinquency, parents may respond with increasingly harsh disciplinary strategies that can further strain the relationship (Glatz et al., 2011). Because families provide the essential safety net required for successful reentry, maintaining connection during custody is vital, as family members often seek meaningful ways to remain engaged (Amani et al., 2018). Case workers can facilitate this process by coaching parents on rebuilding relational trust and modeling healthy dynamics. Since parents often serve as a "living representation" of a youth's future self, establishing functional familial patterns is more predictive of long-term success than external demographic factors (Kumpfer, 2000). Ultimately, fostering a healthy home environment is a critical component in reducing recidivism and ensuring that youth remain on a positive trajectory.

Visualizing future family was the second subtheme within our Family Participation category. Research has shown that visualizing goals, like a future family, is an important step in creating self-discipline (Silver & Ulmer, 2012). Many justice-impacted youth grapple with disciplinary issues (Clark, 2007). Activities such as the Journey.do reflection process may be vital in reckoning with past experiences. It is important for youth in detention to visualize the goals they want, like a family, so that once they are released, their consequence analysis process will compare present pathway options toward their final goal. In an experiment using non-offending youth, participants were asked to free-associate their future life and describe their greatest points of concern. Family was an immediate point of focus for many participants, representing a shared common goal for their future, something that could be leveraged to help motivate people toward more prosocial outcomes. (Carabelli & Lyon, 2016). Post-release, if youth who have offended are faced with a decision between doing something unlawful or continuing to reform, they may have to reckon with the fact that the unlawful behavior will most likely push them farther away from their goal. By encouraging the visualization of future goals, youth detention centers could help chart out the pathway of decision-making required to achieve those goals.

Educational Goals

Many youth pictured continuing an education that may have been disrupted by detention. Research demonstrates that academic goals can lead to a sense of control in youth with negative life events and can lead them to associate less with delinquent peers (DiPierro et al., 2016). For this reason, encouraging youth to achieve academic goals, such as to *obtain a high school diploma/ GED,* has the potential to deter delinquent behaviors. Due to the short-term nature of detention facilities that house pre-adjudicated youth, facilities are primarily focused on security over programming (Koyama, 2012). There is considerably less research on the state of education in short-term juvenile detention compared to juvenile incarceration; although most short-term facilities are required to provide educational support to youth, the quality to which it is applied varies greatly in the nation (Koyama, 2012). However, research indicates that exposure to quality education can have valuable outcomes; in an incarcerated sample of low-risk offending youth, Blomberg et al. (2011) found that involvement with high-quality educational programs in residential facilities increased the likelihood of return to school after release. In light of this, justice professionals in carceral settings could motivate youth by advocating for consistently applied educational programs that make academic achievements more attainable. In addition, professionals could encourage education by investing resources into detention education programs, providing youth with better quality materials and instruction. To encourage further education outside of detention, there could be follow-ups with recently released youth to check on their educational progression, and guardians can be advised on how to assist youth transitioning back into schooling.

Several youth also discussed *specialized training*. Providing accessible career pathways is essential for raising the aspirations of justice-involved youth, as employment often serves as a primary site for reforming self-identity and building self-esteem (Ploeger, 1997). For youth who do not envision their future selves in a traditional collegiate setting, technical and vocational training offers a robust alternative for developing professional trade skills. Programs like Project CRAFT demonstrate that detention-based vocational training can effectively prepare youth for apprenticeships and long-term employment (Ameen & Lee, 2012). These specialized careers often provide greater financial stability and higher wages than entry-level roles that lack prerequisites. By clearly presenting these options and assisting with the application and preparation process, justice professionals can help youth bridge the gap between their current circumstances and a more ambitious, economically secure professional future.

The final subtheme of Educational Goals measured how many youth wished to pursue higher education. In order to help detained youth achieve this goal, detention centers could provide classes that educate youth on the college application process, the benefits of college, and how to pick the right school, which could aid youth in visualizing their educational goals. By expanding on the benefits of college, more youth might set that as a goal for their future self. Allen and colleagues (2004) did extensive research on youth who failed to stay on the academic track of high school, followed by college, something that pertains to the vast majority of our sample. They found that for most disconnected older youth to smoothly enter secondary education, they needed long-term program support by professionals strongly committed to successful outcomes. The authors also stressed the importance of additional funding for these programs, noting how that while the federal government provides billions of dollars of support for people already attending college, it provides little support for those who struggled to complete their educational goals their first time around. The reflection process could also help youth narrow down which areas of study they would like to pursue. When someone is personally interested and invested in a goal, they will expend more energy towards it and find the results even more meaningful.

Future Directions and Limitations

This study represents a critical first step in understanding how youth in short-term juvenile detention view their future selves. However, this study is not without limitations. First, the sample consisted solely of youth experiencing short-term, pre-adjudication juvenile detention in a single jurisdiction in a southwestern state in the United States. As previously noted, youth in detention face several challenges unique to their situations, such as separation from their social circles and interference with connecting to their communities (Children's Defense Fund, 2023). Their stories may not reflect the experiences of youth on probation or in diversion programs, for example. The findings may also not be generalizable to youth in different jurisdictions. As such, research of this nature could be expanded to justice-involved youth outside of custody and youth in different jurisdictions to enhance understanding of how the perspectives, aspirations, and values of these groups differ.

In addition, it is crucial to note that the analyzed youth responses are derived from a specific module within Journey.do, and each module includes its own lessons and goals. As the prompt emphasized positive future outcomes, responses may have been tailored by youth to be perceived as "correctly" answering the prompt by utilizing a prosocial tone. Youth responses may have also adopted a positive tone due to the Journey.do platform being moderated by detention center professionals. However, although we recognize the prompt question was of a guiding nature and the presence of professional surveillance, the substantive content from youth narratives reflects thoughtful and unique aspirations, unrelated to the structure of the prompt or the presence of Journey.do professional moderation. Relatedly, youth voluntarily chose to share their future aspirations on the Journey.do website; due to the inability to implement random assignment, the possible impact of selection bias must be addressed. It is plausible that participating youth on Journey.do pictured their future to a more vivid extent than youth who did not engage with the platform, as they were posed with a future-oriented question. Although we believe that all youth are more than capable of envisioning their future when provided the same resources, it is possible Journey.do empowered youth to reflect to a further extent.

Finally, due to the wide age range of participants (12-18 years old), the recommendations provided in the current study must be tailored to each youth based on their age-readiness for adulthood. An average age of 16.06 years indicates that a large number of participating youth were on the precipice of adulthood; however, juvenile justice professionals must examine the unique circumstances of youth when hoping to foster prosocial outcomes. Future research should conduct in-depth interviews with youth experiencing detention, which would place greater emphasis on more individualized and open-ended accounts of youth aspirations to capture the variety of their goals. For instance, to better understand why some youth prioritize salary over career interest, in-depth interviews with youth in detention centers would be beneficial. Here, in-depth interviews would enable more targeted discussion and analysis, revealing the complexities of youth aspirations and their roots.

Conclusion

This study offers insight into how youth in short-term juvenile detention envision their futures, including their goals, values, and sense of purpose beyond confinement. The futures youth described were often anchored in family, education, and personal growth, revealing both hope and a desire for meaningful change. These findings underscore the inherent value in providing justice-involved youth with programs that actively cultivate future-oriented thinking. By asking youth to look beyond their current situations, further insight can be gained into what resources and opportunities could help them take concrete steps towards their aspirations. Because extant research

on future selves suggests that vividly imagining one's future can strengthen motivation and support positive outcomes, integrating opportunities for forward-looking exploration, skill development, and goal-setting within detention may play a vital role in rehabilitation. Centering youth perspectives in this process is essential; their voices can be the ultimate guide toward their genuine empowerment and transformation.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the youth for their voluntary participation and for sharing their experiences with the platform, as well as the partnership with Lifelab Studios, and the National Science Foundation for supporting this project. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation. Further, this project would not have been possible without the support and consent of the Juvenile Probation Department and the Superior Court in Maricopa County. Their willingness to share information and engage in thoughtful reflection on processes and practices is deeply appreciated and essential for systems improvement and impact.

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Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: National Science Foundation; 2238991.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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