



The Four R Strategies for Healthy Youth Relationships

ABSTRACT

The Fourth R Healthy Relationships Plus Program (HRPP) is an evidence-informed small groups program that promotes healthy relationships, positive mental health, violence prevention, and skills development. A previous study evaluated the feasibility of the program in youth justice settings and identified necessary revisions. The present study piloted the adapted program (*HRPP-Enhanced*) and examined youth outcomes. The adapted program was piloted in youth custody facilities in Manitoba and Ontario. Results indicated that overall, youth described many successes associated with the program. Exploratory analysis of outcomes indicated significant improvements in youth self-reported problem solving, drug resistance efficacy, assertiveness, and self-control. This study highlights the importance of implementing social emotional learning program in youth justice settings.

BACKGROUND

Juvenile offending is linked to many negative outcomes for youth, including psychological, emotional, physical, social, academic, and employment challenges. Many youth who engage in delinquent behaviors disengage from school cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally. These youth are at greater risk for truancy, suspensions/expulsions, and drop out (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). Unfortunately, youth involvement with the justice system often serves to increase this disengagement. Promoting the development of social-emotional skills among youth offenders can help them effectively manage the academic and social demands of school. These skills can also extend beyond the classroom and can help youth navigate difficult emotions and situations in correctional facilities and the community.

The HRPP-Enhanced is a small groups program developed for youth justice settings. It was designed for youth ages 12 to 18 and consists of 16 sessions targeting: peer and dating violence, substance use, unhealthy sexual behaviours, mental health, resiliency, and suicide prevention.

OBJECTIVES

The study employed a mixed methods quasi-experimental design to pilot the adapted program in youth correctional facilities. A repeated measures time series design was used to examine youth outcomes.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What were the successes and challenges of the adapted program?
2. Did participation in the program impact mental health outcomes, communication skills, problem solving skills, and drug resistance efficacy?
3. Are there gender differences related to youth outcomes?

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

Two youth custody facilities in Manitoba and one youth custody facility in Ontario, Canada piloted the programs.

Facilitators

Eight program staff (37.5% female) employed by the youth correctional facilities. Facilitators received in-person training and implemented the program.

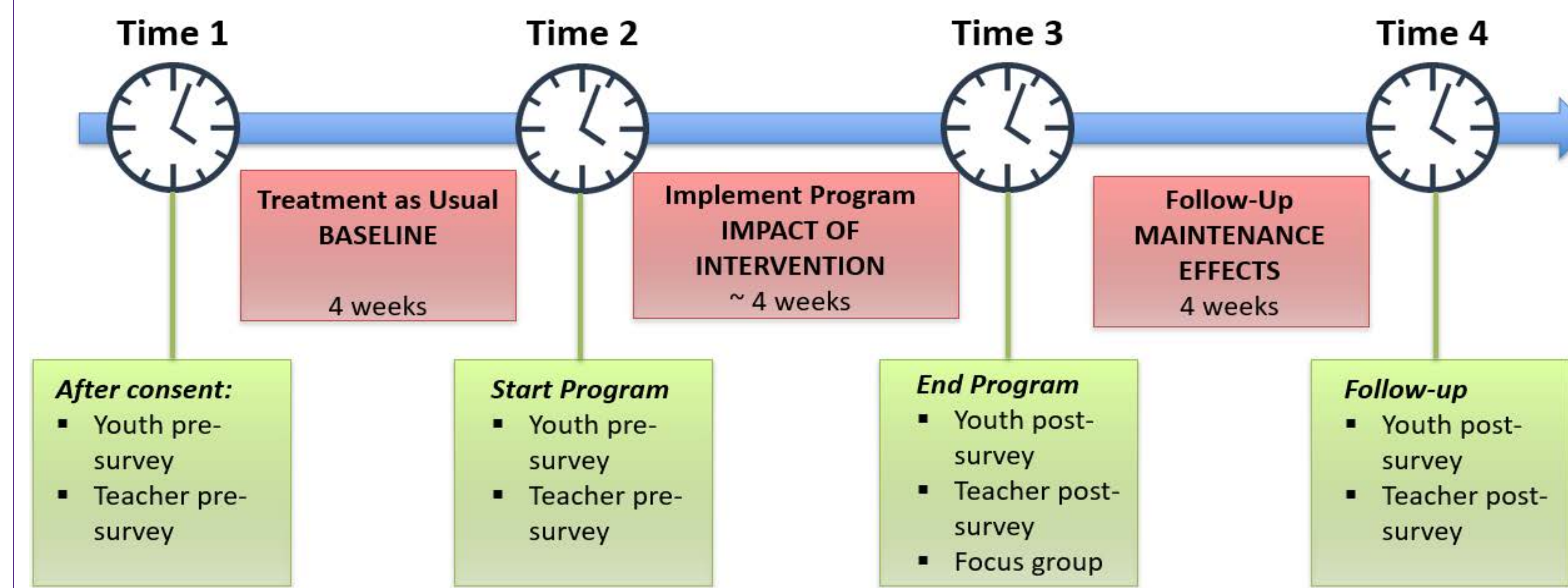
Teachers

17 teachers (72.2% female) from the schools within the custody facilities. Teachers completed the research surveys.

Youth

Overall, 87 youth (39.1% female) participated. The average age of participants was 16.6 years ($SD = 1.34$). Not all participants completed the sessions.

REPEATED MEASURES TIME SERIES DESIGN



DEMOGRAPHICS OF YOUTH GROUPS

Overall, 10 HRPP groups (6 male groups and 4 female groups) were implemented. The average group size was 7.7 youth.

MEASURES

Questionnaires:

- TCU Adolescent Thinking Form B
- Social Skills Rating System-Self Report
- Social Skills Rating System- Teacher Report

Youth Focus Groups: to gather more descriptive data about the pilot study.

SUCCESSSES

The youth highlighted many successes including:

Relevant content

"Most of this relates to my life because everything that it states in there, I've been through it all. So I don't know, it's like kind of like my life story. Everything related in some sort of way." (16 year old male)

Interactive program

"I like how we're able to move lots or like use our hands instead of sitting around all the time and just writing. We're actually able to like go hands on with some of the activities." (18 year old male)

Developed healthy communication skills

"It help me communicating in my relationship. I still yell, but not like as crazy. Before I would just freak out and just start crying. I actually talk about things now." (16 year old female)

CHALLENGES

The youth also identified key challenges including:

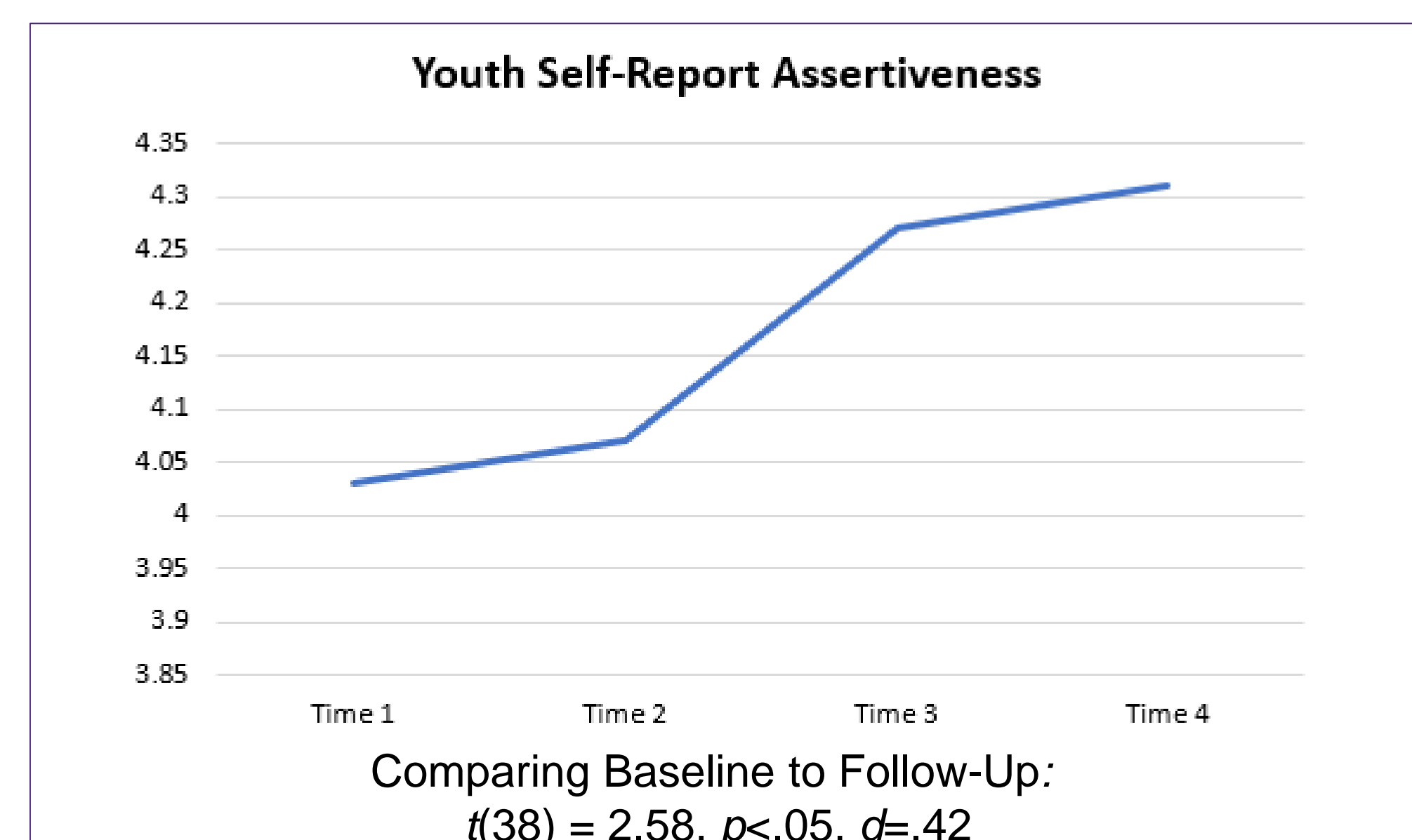
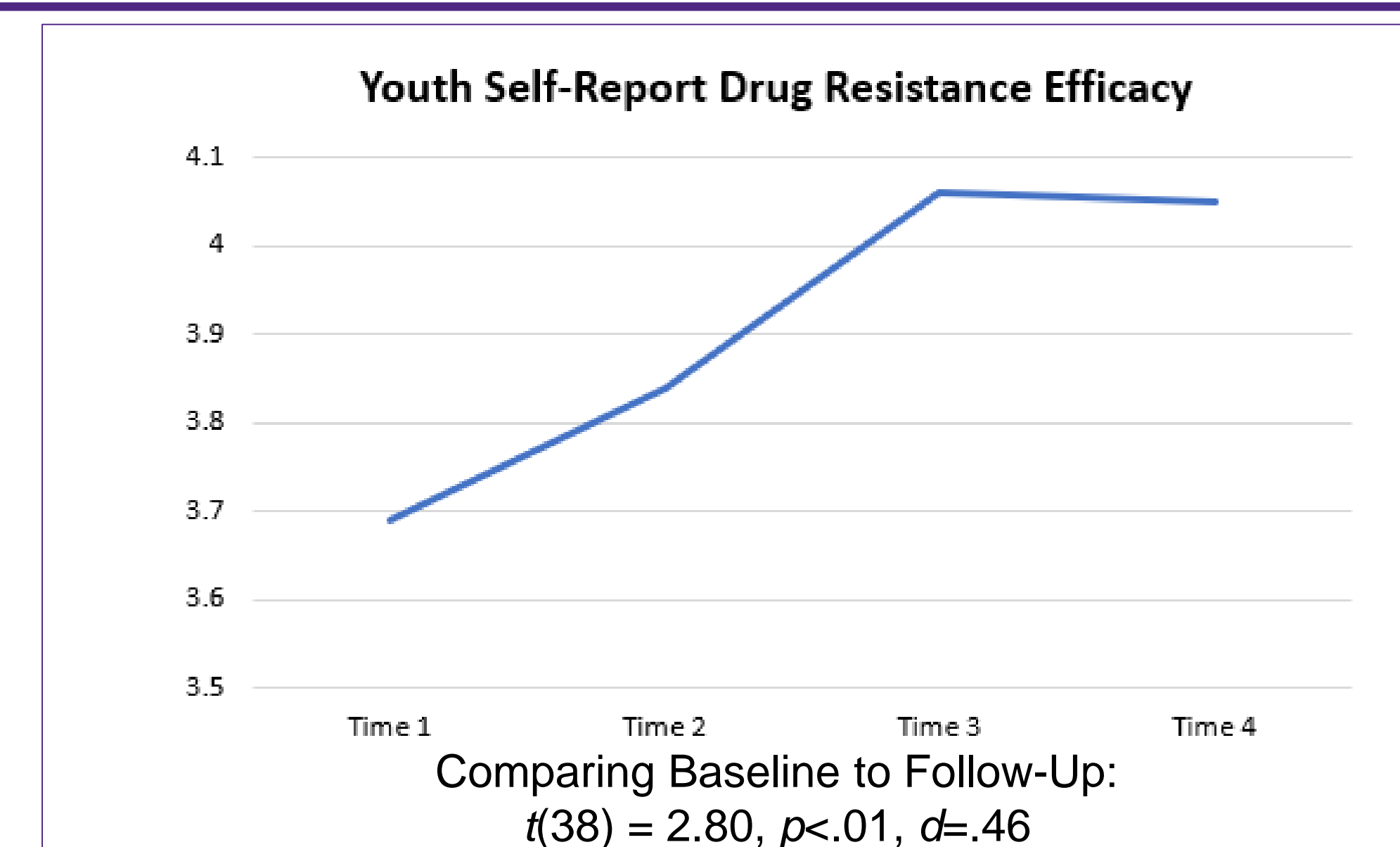
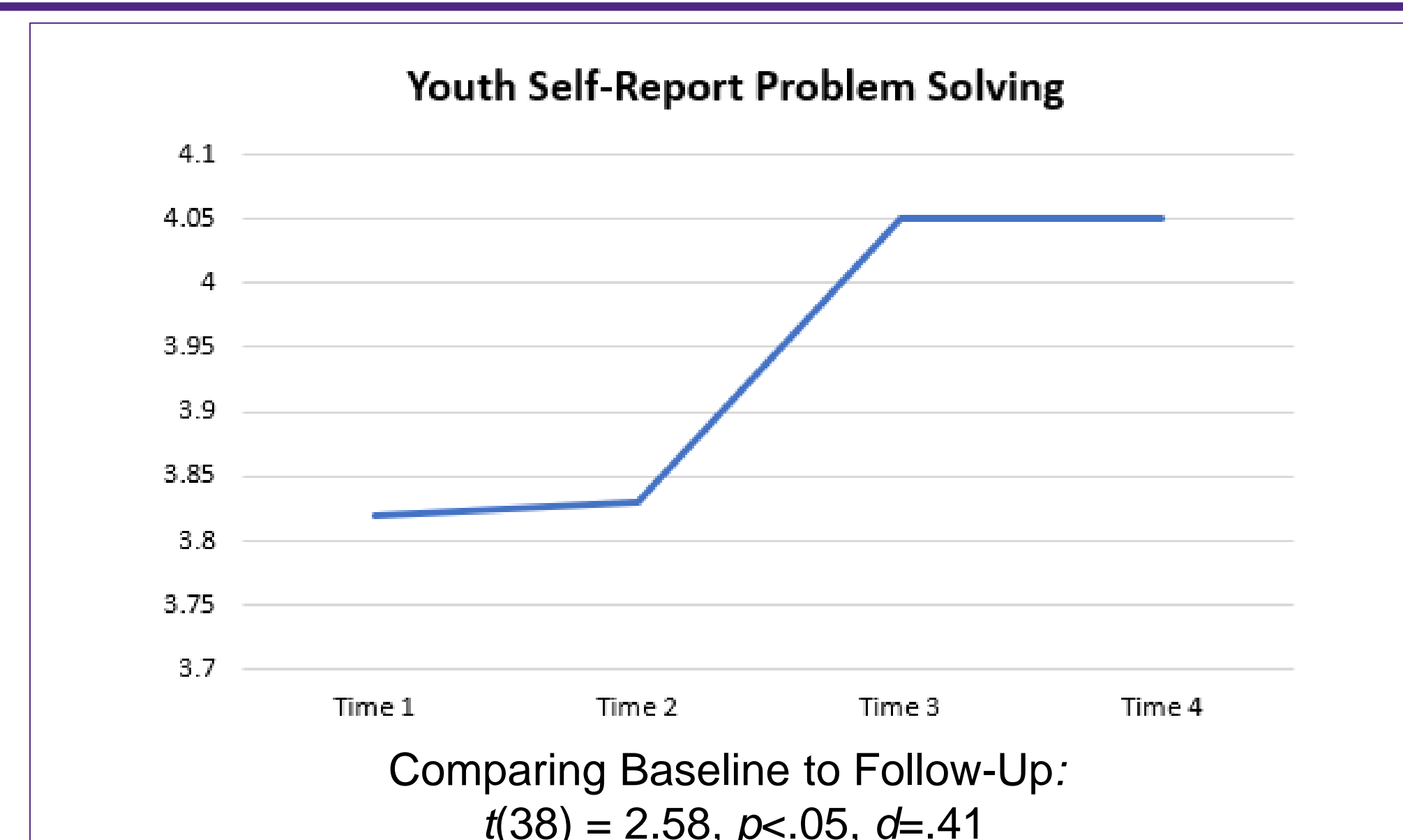
Small group size

"We had a small group so we couldn't really do the little games. It would have been way more fun if there was more people probably." (16 year old male)

Sensitive topics

"There's just like a lot of abuse in my family so that's why I didn't like the subject. That really stood out to me because that's not something I'm comfortable talking about with others." (17 year old female)

RESULTS



CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

Overall, the pilot implementation was successful. The youth reported significant improvements from baseline to post-test and these gains were maintained at follow-up. Ongoing data analysis is being conducted to explore potential gender differences.

To date, most studies examining social-emotional learning (SEL) programs have focused on mainstream schools. These studies have found that school-based SEL programs increase self-efficacy, coping strategies, conflict resolution skills and decrease substance use (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). The current study extended these positive findings with justice involved youth.

Research examining school-based SEL programs have also found increased academic motivation, academic achievement, high school graduation rates, as well as reduced truancy and suspensions (Durlak, et al., 2011 & Snyder et al., 2010). Future evaluation research should explore if participation in SEL programs promotes justice involved youths' engagement and performance at school in custody facilities, as well as their motivation and achievement when they re-integrate to community schools.

Stakeholders and policy makers who influence the youth justice system should consider incorporating SEL programs into the rehabilitation framework.