

## RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Socio Emotional Learning Within Prison Walls: The Effects of GRIP Program (Guiding Rage into Power) as Perceived by Participant and Non Participant Incarcerated Persons

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## ABSTRACT

Long-term imprisonment often results in negative psychological and behavioural effects that hinder effective reintegration into society, exacerbating antisocial behaviour and increasing recidivism rates. In response to a Supreme Court mandate, California, the state with the second-largest prison population in the United States, embarked on a significant prison downsizing initiative. Designed to help violent offenders develop emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and understanding of victim impact, Guiding Rage into Power (GRIP) is an example of a rehabilitation program expanding within California's state prison system in part because it has generated promising results. Building on previous investigations of the same program, this study evaluates the effectiveness of GRIP in altering incarcerated men's self-perceptions and observed behaviours, with a focus on trust and self-control. Employing a mixed-methods approach, including a qualitative photo elicitation task and psychological scales, data were collected from GRIP and non-GRIP participants in two California prisons. GRIP participants demonstrated a profound commitment to self-awareness and transformation, as evidenced by their narratives and photo choices. Differential levels of trust between the two groups also predicted distinct outcomes in the photo elicitation task. While this study has limitations, it underscores GRIP's potential to challenge entrenched identities and foster positive internal changes, paving the way for future research to assess broader program impacts. Please refer to the Supplementary Material section to find this article's [Community and Social Impact Statement](#).

## 1 | Introduction

The United States of America notably hosts the largest correctional population in the world (Bellin 2023; Walmsley 2013). High incarceration rates entail huge social and economic consequences for incarcerated persons and their families—as well

as for the entire society—in part because prosocial attitudes can decline precipitously in prison (Cullen 2017; Maggioni et al. 2018; McKendy and Ricciardelli 2021; Sykes 1958; Useem and Piehl 2006). Long-term imprisonment often leads to ‘prisonization’ (Naderi 2014), a process which produces both psychological and behavioural effects<sup>1</sup> (Haney 2003),

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such as negatively influencing incarcerated persons' ability to trust people (McCorkle 1992) and hampering the possibility of effective resocialization (Zingraff 1975). Crucially, these negative individual psychological and behavioural effects hinder the effective reintegration of former incarcerated persons into (distressed) local communities and, therefore, contribute to social exclusion (Lynch and Sabol 2004; Morenoff and Harding 2014; Wakefield and Uggem 2010). This, in turn, exacerbates (former) incarcerated persons' antisocial behaviour (Twenge et al. 2007) and increases the likelihood of recidivism (Durose, Snyder, and Cooper 2015; Figlio, Sellin, and Wolfgang 1972).

The State of California hosts the second largest prison population in the United States. California represents an especially interesting case since it has embarked, together with New York and New Jersey, on one of the most relevant prison downsizing experiments in US history (Newman and Scott 2011). Facing a US Supreme Court decision which ordered California to reduce its prison population by a quarter within 2 years, in 2011, Governor Jerry Brown signed the Public Safety Realignment Act which propelled several measures aimed at achieving this target by transferring lower-level offenders from state to county prisons and supporting several evidence-based community corrections programs (Petersilia 2014) meant to serve as alternatives to incarceration. As such, after decades of explosive growth in incarceration rates, thanks to this US Supreme Court finding that California's overcrowded prison system was unconstitutional, the 'golden state' drove 36% of the nation's overall decline in prison population between 2009 and 2016.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the sheer size of the incarcerated population in the United States, what are the main elements of the backdrop against which such decarceration measures were enacted? A baseline recidivism rate of about 50% has been described across multiple prison systems and jurisdictions, in both Canada (Bonta, Ruge, and Dauvergne 2003) and the United States (Durose, Snyder, and Cooper 2015)—despite heterogeneous criminal justice procedures (Liebmann 2010; Webster and Doob 2007). Factors such as early childhood trauma, socioeconomic status and a history of substance abuse have been implicated in individuals' propensities to reoffend (Arbour 2021; Hanson and Morton-Bourgon 2009). Recent economic literature has explored various potential mitigators of recidivism: improving social and economic conditions of parolees (Yang 2017), providing work opportunities (Agan and Starr 2018), introducing a gradual reimposition of punishments (Mueller-Smith and Schnepel 2021) leading eventually up to reincarceration (Bhuller et al. 2020). Prison-based programs, such as those providing education or training, or various forms of psychological and behavioural therapy, have also been examined for their promising potential to improve readiness for reintegration (Auty, Cope, and Liebling 2017a, 2017b; Bhuller et al. 2020; Hjalmarsson and Lindquist 2020; Kuziemko 2013; Macdonald 2020). However, many of these programs are reportedly expensive and associated with inconclusive results pertaining to certain populations of incarcerated individuals (Arbour 2021; Beaudry et al. 2021). A promising exception is GRIP—a program offered almost entirely to men serving long sentences after being convicted of violent offences—that is spreading through California's state prison system. According to managers of the GRIP Training

Institute, since its inception in 2012, 421 graduates of the GRIP program have been released while only two have returned to prison, generating a remarkably low recidivism rate (cf., Paulle and van der Zeeuw 2021). Drawing from these encouraging data and informed by earlier research on this program, the present paper is intended to offer a preliminary evidence-based study of the effectiveness of GRIP, as a first step in view of a future evaluation based on a randomised controlled trial.

## 2 | The GRIP Program

Guiding Rage into Power (GRIP) is a year-long, comprehensive Offender Accountability program based on a trauma-healing- and somatic-awareness-centered model (GRIP Course Manual 2018). The GRIP program aims to help violent offenders by (i) stopping their violent behaviour, (ii) cultivating mindfulness, (iii) developing emotional intelligence and (iv) increasing awareness about victim impact. The program is designed to help participants understand the origins of their violence and develop tools to manage situated impulses associated with deeply habituated and often ultimately detrimental response patterns. At the most foundational level, key program goals involve helping incarcerated men learn to recognise bodily sensations, emotions and thoughts (i.e., potential 'triggers' of destructive reactions) in real time and real space (i.e., in the 'heat of the moment') before they lead ('blindly') to destructive reactions. By extension, GRIP is also meant to teach participants how to channel or release potentially dangerous sensations in non-destructive ways.

GRIP utilises a range of educational methods, including traditional entire class lessons (i.e., roughly 30 men sitting in a circle around a whiteboard or flip over), smaller group-work (e.g., groups of four to six classmates and one graduate turned incarcerated persons' trainee facilitator), individual work (e.g., journaling and other writing assignments) and work with external guests (e.g., victims/survivors who can serve as proxies). To achieve the program's four previously outlined goals, GRIP students are given specific assignments, flash cards and examinations meant to track their progress (for more detailed descriptions of GRIP, see Paulle 2017 or Paulle and van der Zeeuw 2021). GRIP's program design is consistent with other psychoeducational programs informed by Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Cognitive Behavioural Theory (see for a systematic review of these programs, Auty, Cope, and Liebling 2017a, 2017b).

Upon completion of the yearlong GRIP cycles, during graduation ceremonies, the former students receive diplomas recognising them as 'peacemakers'. Graduation ceremonies are typically attended by other incarcerated individuals, the graduates' relatives, program facilitators, non-incarcerated participants such as proxy victims/survivors and the prison's warden. Waiting lists for GRIP often exceed 500 incarcerated men, managers of the GRIP Training Institute point out.

The GRIP program was started by Jacques Verduin in 2012 at San Quentin State Prison. Between 2016 and 2017, GRIP expanded to other five correctional institutions in California. Since GRIP's inception, 1233 students have graduated and 421 have been released. Only two students have returned to prison, resulting in a recidivism rate of 0.2% (GRIP 2024).

### 3 | The Study

The present study intends to provide an answer to the following central question: what is the effect of GRIP on participating incarcerated men's perceptions of themselves, and on their observed behaviour according to other incarcerated men who have not participated in the program?

Given the aims and scope of the GRIP program, our analysis focuses on the commitment to self-awareness and transformation through a qualitative method including both narratives and photo choices. While the use of subjective scales is a standard procedure to verify the potential effects of a program (Auty, Cope, and Liebling 2017a, 2017b), the use of qualitative tools, particularly the photo-based methods utilised here, is still underutilised (Copes et al. 2018). We believe that incorporating visual tools into the research process can improve the richness of the collected data. In particular, the use of photos with incarcerated persons has been proven to promote discursive reflection, to facilitate access to symbolic language—similar to that of the unconscious—and to facilitate the communication of emotions that could not be expressed in any other form (Loewenthal 2013; Loewenthal et al. 2017; Saita et al. 2014). Especially in the prison context, pictures not only provide incarcerated persons with a 'physical' and 'solid' base to start their narration, thus reducing anxiety and favouring 'grounding' (Kopytin 2004), it also gives them a new starting point from which to reconstruct their life stories and integrate past, present and future.

In addition, we also collect information on two different behavioural attitudes: trust and self-control, measured using standard validated psychological scales. While increasing self-control can be directly tied to the program's explicit aims (as illustrated above), trust cannot. In terms of the program's four stated goals, that is, increasing trust can be understood as an implicit 'resocialization effect' or a potentially significant and positive (i.e., prosocial) knock on effect. Such an effect might be considered a plausible outcome because, most basically, GRIP participants are meant to engage in trustful relationships. That is, participants are meant to experience trust from—and to demonstrate trustworthiness towards—their peers and the program's staff. In the shorter term, increased trust(worthiness) may contribute to a smoother functioning of the GRIP program, the participants' well-being, and, more generally, to the bettering of the general 'climate' and security of entire prison yards. In the longer term, the ability to trust others and to be trustworthy is a social skill that can prove to be vitally important—for former participants themselves, for their family members, and for their communities—once former GRIP students are released. Therefore, including trust and self-control measures to complement the qualitative study offers a potential explanation on the mechanisms predicting the differential in self-perception.

In the interest of contextualising the present study, let us turn now to findings from earlier peer-reviewed articles on GRIP. Through a formal difference-in-difference analysis based on behavioural situations, one previous survey, based on a different sample of subjects, has shown that GRIP participants exhibit higher levels of trust after completing the program (Maggioni

et al. 2018). Yet another article, based on ethnographic interviews and direct observation of the GRIP program, found that—in large part due to the trauma-treatment model GRIP follows—even inmates who are critical at the outset of the program end up buying into what the program offers. What is more, even these initially sceptical participants end up 'doing the work' that helps enable skillful responses in situations that could otherwise easily escalate into belligerent confrontations (Paulle 2017). Finally, a more recent qualitative study used audiovisual data to interrogate the sequenced, second-to-second micro-interactive foundations of the embodied behaviours (e.g., synchronisation) to which GRIP contributes (Paulle and van der Zeeuw 2021). This paper documents that two processes—the diffusion and the re-directing of attentional focus/mood—appear to be the building blocks of GRIP's success.

The present analysis, focusing more squarely on the incarcerated men's stated perspectives, explores whether the earlier findings can be expanded upon by making use of a qualitative approach, complemented by some quantitative information. The qualitative part is based on the involvement of participants in a specific activity involving the choice of, and commentary on, a series of photographs. The quantitative part is based on the administration of psychological scales about trust and self-control.

### 4 | Methodology

#### 4.1 | Ethic Approval

The study was approved by The Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) through a continuing review approval (Project Number: 2017-085). CHPS serves as the institutional review board (IRB) for the California Health and Human Services Agency (CalHHS). The agency that oversees departments and offices that provide a wide range of services in the areas of health care, mental health, public health, alcohol and drug treatment, income assistance, social services and assistance to people with disabilities in the State of California. The role of the CPHS (and other IRBs) is to ensure that research involving human subjects is conducted ethically and with minimal risk to participants.

#### 4.2 | Procedure

During the spring of 2018, GRIP Training Institute, the California non-profit organisation formerly known as Insight-Out, expanded its offerings of the GRIP program in Avenal State Prison (ASP)<sup>3</sup> and the Correctional Training Facility at Soledad (CTF).<sup>4</sup>

We obtained permission to enter each facility for 4 days, on two yards at each prison. This amounted to two of the four Level Two yards in ASP where GRIP was being offered, and both of the yards at CTF where GRIP was being offered, one Level Two and one Level One.

Our methodology for recruitment was to ask all of the men in each (randomly, in ASP) selected GRIP class to come to an informational meeting about the study. GRIP facilitators initially presented the research study in class, and distributed

recruitment materials developed by the researchers that distinguished it from further GRIP affiliation or crossover. The researchers conducted the introductory meetings, during which further information was presented about the purpose and process of the study. The researchers emphasised that participation was completely voluntary, and that the researchers would not have any bearing on status in or graduation from the GRIP class. The researchers made clear that they would not be able to help or hurt non-GRIP participants' chances of getting into future GRIP classes, or any participants' parole board hearing outcomes.

## 5 | Participants

In total, we surveyed 114 subjects, including 53 GRIP participants and 61 non-GRIP participants (in ASP, 25 GRIP participants and 28 non-GRIP participants; in CTF, 33 GRIP participants and 28 non-GRIP participants).<sup>5</sup>

The socio-demographic characteristics of the participants are detailed in Table 1. About 41% of incarcerated persons were below 40 years of age in both GRIP and non-GRIP participants, with a slightly larger proportion of people above 50 in the non-GRIP group (29%) as compared with the GRIP group (19%). As to marital status, the proportion of married people is almost identical in the two groups (about 19%), while single individuals are more present in the non-GRIP group (48% vs. 40%). The GRIP group displays a larger proportion of divorced (41%) as compared with non-GRIP participants (27%). Finally, GRIP and non-GRIP present a very well-balanced ethnicity mix, with almost identical proportions of all ethnic groups.

The data collection processes in ASP and CTF were quite different. In ASP, the scales were administered while the GRIP class was still in process—they had one remaining class session to attend before their graduation. To participate in the research study, the men signed up on a list so that they could be docketed by the prison staff for attendance at the introductory meeting. At the introductory meeting, the research process was explained, then those incarcerated persons willing to participate, completed surveys before being asked to choose a time to do the photo elicitation task. For the recruitment of non-GRIP participants we obtained permission to post a list on each selected yard where men could sign up for the introductory meeting. We asked the GRIP men on each of those yards to encourage non-GRIP men to sign up for the meeting.

In CTF, surveys were administered a month after the completion of the GRIP program on the relevant yards. Facilitators presented the research study towards the end of the GRIP program and asked the men to indicate their interest in attending the introductory meeting. Because of the time delay between graduating from GRIP and the arrival of the researchers, the men who had agreed to come to the meeting were also sent a letter reminding them of the date of the meeting. Since it had been difficult to manage the posting of the list for non-GRIP participants in ASP, the GRIP men in CTF were asked to bring with them to the introductory meeting a non-GRIP man who could also choose whether to participate in the study. We asked the GRIP men to bring someone who was

not necessarily interested in doing the GRIP program, or who might even be opposed to it.

The men who finally agreed to participate signed consent forms for the study. These consent forms emphasised the voluntary nature of participation, the lack of any information-sharing with GRIP personnel, and the freedom to refuse to answer any given question or to curtail the interview at any time.

The anonymity of the study participants was ensured by assigning a code to the instruments used—psychological scales and talking pictures (psychological scales from the questionnaire could be matched to photo elicitations but never linked to the identity of an individual participant). The codes indicated which yard a participant was on and whether they were 'GRIP' or 'non-GRIP', and then sequential numbers were used. The men were offered their choice of pre-coded survey instruments, so they could see that there could be no 'secret' coding of identity in the numbers. The consent forms were not numbered, and they were detached from the survey after they were signed and kept in a separate sealed envelope from the surveys, which had only the code numbers of the participants on them. The men were given an information sheet that included the study's and IRB directors' identities and contact information, and they wrote down their code numbers on that sheet. In the photo-elicitations, the men were asked to state their code, but to not introduce themselves or refer to any other subjects by name. No list combining the men's names with their code numbers was ever created. The seals of the envelopes containing consent forms, like the researchers' promises about anonymity, remain unbroken.

### 5.1 | Measures

The main outcome of the study is obtained through qualitative technique, meant to generate deep insights into incarcerated persons' feelings and thoughts about the GRIP Program. The tool adopted was the following:

*Talking picture:* this instrument is based on a phototherapeutic technique successfully used within prison settings (Loewenthal 2015; Loewenthal et al. 2017). This involves a photo-elicitation activity that allows incarcerated persons to talk about themselves using a direct and unobtrusive way to enter their inner world. For the aim of this study, GRIP participants were asked to choose from among 20 photocards the one that was most representative of their identity before starting GRIP and then a second one, from the same group of 20, showing who they were at the moment of the interview taking place close to the end of their year-long GRIP program. A sample of non-GRIP men were asked to accomplish the same task, but with a difference in the instruction: they were asked to select 'before and after' photos referring not to themselves, but, rather, to a GRIP participant they knew. All the respondents were also asked to explain in a non-directive and non-interpretative manner, their choices and the feelings arising.

The photocards were taken from a pool of photos previously used in a prison setting (Saita, Accordini, and Loewenthal 2019). 5 photos were assumed to elicit positive emotions, 5 to correspond to negative emotions and 10 were assumed to correspond to ambivalent

**TABLE 1** | Mean, standard deviations, *t*-test between GRIP and non-GRIP participants on outcome measures and background characteristics.

	GRIP			Non-GRIP			Tests		
	Mean	SD	Obs	Mean	SD	Obs	diff.	<i>t</i> -stat	Chi-sq.
Psychological scales									
Trust in people	1.983	1.221	58	1.089	1.100	56	0.893	4.10***	
General trust	3.686	0.544	58	3.281	0.463	56	0.406	4.28***	
Self-control	2.888	0.864	58	3.113	0.888	55	-0.225	-1.37	
Personal characteristics									
Age									
34 and younger	0.172	0.381	58	0.232	0.426	56	-0.060	-0.79	4.71
35-40	0.241	0.432	58	0.179	0.386	56	0.063	0.82	
41-45	0.241	0.432	58	0.143	0.353	56	0.099	1.33	
46-50	0.155	0.365	58	0.161	0.371	56	-0.006	-0.08	
51-55	0.155	0.365	58	0.179	0.386	56	-0.023	-0.33	
56 and older	0.034	0.184	58	0.107	0.312	56	-0.073	-1.52	
Ethnicity									
API	0.034	0.184	58	0.036	0.187	56	-0.001	-0.04	0.95
AA	0.172	0.381	58	0.143	0.353	56	0.030	0.43	
CAUC	0.241	0.432	58	0.268	0.447	56	-0.026	-0.32	
HIS	0.379	0.489	58	0.429	0.499	56	-0.049	-0.53	
MIX	0.034	0.184	58	0.018	0.134	56	0.017	0.55	
N/D	0.052	0.223	58	0.036	0.187	56	0.016	0.41	
Other	0.086	0.283	58	0.071	0.260	56	0.015	0.29	
Marital status									
Divorced	0.414	0.497	58	0.268	0.447	56	0.146	1.65	5.36
Married	0.190	0.395	58	0.196	0.401	56	-0.007	-0.09	
N/D	0	0	58	0.018	0.134	56	-0.018	-1.02	
Single	0.397	0.493	58	0.482	0.504	56	-0.086	-0.92	
Widow	0	0	58	0.036	0.187	56	-0.036	-1.45	
Children	0.649	0.481	57	0.661	0.478	56	-0.012	-0.13	0.02
Siblings	0.966	0.184	58	0.911	0.288	56	0.055	1.22	1.48

Note: Summary statistics for GRIP and non-GRIP. Statistical tests include: *t*-test for equality of means for all variables; chi-square test of association for categorical variables, as a group. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

emotions. The different emotional valence of the photocards was assured by two psychologists' independent evaluations.

However, as the pictures could be interpreted in different ways, the explanations behind their choices were essential to understanding the differences in selections. Therefore, we focused only on the sub-set of participants for whom we have a complete dataset, meaning picture choices and corresponding explanations of the choices. Finally, we had relevant data from photo elicitation activity with 38 men in ASP and 20 men in CTF, for a total of 58 participants. In CTF 19 were GRIP participants and 1

non-GRIP participant. In ASP there were 18 GRIP participants and 20 non-GRIP participants.

To complement the analysis and provide descriptive differences in individual psychological attitudes, three quantitative scales have been included in the survey:

*Trust in people scale* (Election Study 1964), is a 3-item questionnaire designed to measure individuals' general level of trust towards other people. Each of the three items provides a dichotomous choice. One of the two choices is the high trust response

(which is given 1 point), the other is considered the low trust response (and is given 0 points). The three choices are then aggregated (through addition) into a 0–3 scale, with 0 indicating *low trust* and 3 *higher trust*. Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.78$ .

*General trust scale* (Yamagishi and Yamagishi 1994), is a widely used six-item questionnaire that uses general statements to measure participants' beliefs about honesty and trustworthiness of others, in general. Items are rated on a 5-point scale, anchored from 1 *very low trust* to 5 *very high trust*. Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.68$ .

*Self-control scale* (Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone 2004) measures people's ability to control their impulses, alter their emotions and thoughts, and to interrupt undesired behavioural tendencies and refrain from acting on them. In this study a reduced 10 item version of the original scale has been used. Items are rated on a 5-point scale, anchored from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.84$ .

Both the trust in people and the general trust scale assess trust in others when they are unknown. However, while the former requires a discrete choice for each dichotomous item, the latter provides a more nuanced level of agreement or disagreement, hence providing a more nuanced indicator of trust. Since trust is an important element in the study we provide two distinct scales as a robustness test.

## 6 | Results

### 6.1 | The Sample: Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the summary statistics of the variables included in the analysis for both the GRIP and non-GRIP subsamples, as well as a first statistical comparison between the groups for the psychological scales. The upper part of the table displays information about the psychological scales as shown in the 'Tests' columns, a simple *t*-test reveals that the mean values of both trust scales are different between the GRIP and non-GRIP group, and that this difference is statistically significant at the 0.01 value, while no statistical difference is found for the Self Control scale. This first straightforward test suggests that participants in the GRIP group record higher levels of trust.

The section relating to personal characteristics shows that the GRIP and non-GRIP subsamples can be considered identical, from a statistical point of view, with reference to participants' individual characteristics. From this preliminary inspection of the sample, we can conclude that the GRIP and non-GRIP subsamples are comparable in terms of the individual characteristics (age, ethnicity, etc.) about which we were able to collect data. This information indicates the success of efforts made by GRIP staff in offering the program to incarcerated men coming from all walks of life. Additionally, if the program is shown to have positive and significant effects, such effects occur irrespective of specific participants' personal characteristics. Thus, in terms of socio-demographic variability of the general prison population in their respective institutions—at least with regard to the background characteristics for which we were able to

control—the program can be considered general in scope and application.

### 6.2 | Talking Pictures

The results of the main outcome, namely the photo-elicitation activity, by prison, are presented in Table 2.

As one could expect, the great majority of GRIP participants in CTF (75%) and in ASP (60%) chose negative images to express their past identities (before GRIP). Only two participants had an initially (before GRIP) positive image of themselves, while about 25%–30% had more ambivalent initial views (see Table 3). The results of the non-GRIP participants also align in the same direction. In ASP, 70% of the non-GRIP participants, thinking about GRIP participants prior to joining GRIP, chose negative images.

Clearly, participants' narratives and self-evaluations of their past would be linked to negative images.

The choice of images sheds light on the feelings and thoughts of the participants. The picture most cited (17 times) shows a bolt of lightning in a dark blue sky (see Picture S5) and, as the interview data makes clear, it was easy for the men to identify with:

[B]ecuz that's how I reacted to things, chaotic, out of control ... uh ... I mean I was just like ... uh uh ... lightning rod y'know?

—CG6.

I was all electric and flashy.

—NN460.

Destructive nature ... anything and everything that I touched uh, especially those closer to me, they were ... they were hurt by my attitude, behaviours, actions. That's what ... I was a tornado. I was uh hurricane, lightning.

—CG31.

[T]hat's my anger, just snapping at people for no reason, just attitude.

—CG5.

The other most frequently chosen photos are a black-and-white photo of a prison window (eight times, see Picture S15) and a black-and-white photo of a ruined home (seven times, see Picture S8).

The ruined home could be understood to represent one's own real past home and/or, at a symbolic level, the perception of one's own isolated self. The data reveals that the empty window

**TABLE 2** | Photo elicitation activity—GRIP and non-GRIP participants in CTF and ASP ( $N = 58$ ).

Content of the photos	CTF	
	GRIP (= 19)	
	Number of photos selected before GRIP	Number of photos selected after GRIP
Negative	14	0
Positive	0	7
Ambivalent	5	12
Content of the photos	Non-GRIP (= 1)	
	Number of photos selected before GRIP	Number of photos selected after GRIP
	Negative	1
Positive	—	1
Ambivalent	—	—
Content of the photos	ASP	
	GRIP (= 18)	
	Number of photos selected before GRIP	Number of photos selected after GRIP
Negative	11	2
Positive	2	6
Ambivalent	5	10
Content of the photos	Non-GRIP (= 20)	
	Number of photos selected before GRIP	Number of photos selected after GRIP
	Negative	14
Positive	—	6
Ambivalent	6	13

elicited feelings of reclusion, of being trapped, and a kind of self-trapping:

[A]n old home that seems to [be] out in the middle of nowhere ... It's just ... looks like if you desecrated, like it felt ... it looks as if ... I guess if I can probably attach myself to this.

—DG3.

[T]his one is like destruction; it's just a messed-up picture.

Trapped, secluded.

—CN9.

[T]hat's what I was. I had this barrier ... this front that I had to be, this evil (unclear) person, some body as ugly as (unclear). There's no life, there's no colour, there's nothing ... there's nothing, it's just pain.

—CG9.

... [I]t wasn't crazy, but it was ... it was sustained, but it was controlled, but it was still ... it still ... inside ... inside this ... this ... encapsulated inside this brick, old structure that needed to be changed.

—DN120.

As far as the present is concerned (after GRIP), the overall picture is more complex. In CTF 40% of photos chosen are positive and 60% are ambivalent. In ASP 32% of the photos are positive, 60% are ambivalent and 8% are negative.

Interestingly, with regard to the present, there are no significant differences between GRIP and non-GRIP participants' choices. To represent the here and now, in ASP 33% of GRIP participants and 30% of non-GRIP participants chose positive images; 55% of GRIP participants and 65% of non-GRIP participants chose ambivalent images about GRIP participants.

In other words, there is no prevalence of positive images regarding one's identity or, for non-GRIP participants, the identity

**TABLE 3** | The choices of photos representing past and present according to their valence—GRIP and non-GRIP participants in CTF and ASP.

Emotional valence of the photos		Prison		
Before GRIP	After GRIP	CTF	ASP	Total
Negative	Positive	7	6	13
Negative	Ambivalent	8	17	25
Negative	Negative	—	2	2
Ambivalent	Positive	1	6	7
Ambivalent	Ambivalent	4	5	9
Ambivalent	Negative	—	—	—
Positive	Positive	—	1	1
Positive	Ambivalent	—	1	1
Positive	Negative	—	—	—

of the GRIP participant they have in mind. As such, in both prisons, most participants, both GRIP and non-GRIP, selected images that elicit emotions and thoughts requiring further interpretation.

To understand the individual changes in self-perception, we have paired the choices of the images according to their emotional valence. As the size of differences between GRIP and non-GRIP participants were not very significant, we worked on the whole data set.

As we can see in Table 3, several trends emerge. The most frequent trend—which we find in the cases of 43% of all respondents—is characterised by the joint choice of negative images for the past and ambivalent images for the present. In order to understand the personal meanings of these self-reported changes, it is necessary to look carefully into the explanations given for these choices.

As for the ambivalent images, 11 men chose the image of two birds: one standing at the top of a bare tree and the other flying in the sky with open wings (see Picture S19); an additional six men gave their preference to the image of a lighthouse (see Picture S12).

These pictures can elicit different and contrasting emotions. One bird is flying in the sky and seems to have no constraints, but it is not clear where and why it is flying: maybe it escapes or just wanders around with no direction, or perhaps it is teaching the other smaller bird how to fly. The tree, as mentioned above, is bare. The fact that it has no leaves might be said to evoke a sense of desolation. The lighthouse can enlighten and serve as a guide for the ships at sea, but, at the same time, it stands alone and could, therefore, symbolise isolation. It might be said to show no empathy or closeness, and it might be interpreted as being exposed to beatings from waves and harsh weather.

The transcripts indicate that subjects quite successfully resolved questions about how to interpret ambivalent images: according to their narratives, these images reflect positive thinking and evaluations of (their own or others') personal trajectories, thanks to GRIP.

The meanings associated with the lighthouse might therefore refer to positive concepts, like the acquisition of knowledge, the hope for the cessation of suffering and personal disorders, and a sense of steadiness in spite of turmoil. For all these reasons, this choice might be interpreted as an acknowledgment of being a source of inspiration for others, and/or that there is a light in one's own life that is now showing the way.

I have a better understanding of myself, have a better outlook on life, have a better understanding of what I wanna be in life, what I want my life to be and in Picture S12, it's a lighthouse, and I believe a lighthouse represents somewhat of a beacon of hope.

—NG434.

Well, I guess ... I was in a cave. I was isolated a lot ... (unclear) tried to isolate and now, I am a beacon of light.

—NG445.

Everybody gets an opportunity to know that someone loves 'em, that you're loved. A good lighthouse, you could see the light from 40 miles away. It only takes one candle to light up a whole room.

—NG441.

In spite of everything that is happening, um, that tower cannot change the situation or anything, but it's able to ... to see everything as it is, and stand still. I can do what the tower does—stand and witness everything that is going on. Everything that is going on around, it's not me. I'm the tower.

—CG31.

The Lighthouse represents afterwards, becuz there ... that there is ... just represents for me, personally, that there is light at the end of the tunnel. There is a better way and through GRIP, I found that better way and I'm thankful.

—CG16.

The image of the birds is linked to the idea of freedom and the ability to move away from dangerous situations or (towards) comfort zones. Yet this image is also associated with

challenges in the future, and the need to put things in new perspectives.

I kinda like to see myself as kind of doing my own thing and out of the group. I'm the only one taking the college courses that I've ... the guys that I've talked to and I kinda stepped off, it's something that ... it's outta my comfort zone.

—CN15.

I chose the bird becuz my spirit—now that I've been able to learn and use the tools of GRIP—my spirit flight's freer, now. I'm more at peace and while my physical body is still incarcerated, my mind and my spirit is freer than it's been, even when I was.

—CG19

Free as a bird.

—SG381.

I know myself, so I have to bite my tongue and just walk away and not even argue back ... so, I see the bird, I see him flyin' away, y'know? I mean, that's why I kinda like went for the bird.

—CN11.

[T]hey're able to spread their wings, fly, soar, (unclear) higher level, higher attitude.

—DG4.

Similar considerations can be applied to other ambivalent photos, like that describing of two people climbing a rope, chosen by several men. It doesn't seem to be easy or safe climbing. The risk of falling appears high. Nevertheless, the men recognised the positive aspect of the behaviour.

I see two people interacting, they're doing something different. I guess to me ... like I said, I've broken that barrier that ... come out [of] that shell and ... doing more things with other people, doing things I wouldn't normally do.

—DG1.

In some cases, photos that were assumed to be negative, were instead interpreted in positive ways. For instance, two men chose, for the present-time photo, an image classified as negative that represented a shadow of children playing soccer, an image that looks stark and looming and somewhat menacing. The explanations are in contrast with the assumed negative content of the picture because the men stress the relational benefit of soccer for them, underlying how GRIP was also a tool to improve relationships.

In sum, especially if we take this into account that several of the putatively ambiguous or even negative 'present state' pictures were interpreted by the incarcerated men as being quite positive, GRIP was evaluated as a profoundly transformative and beneficial experience. Embracing this simple yet provocative technique of photo choice, the men reported positive transformations of their own identities. And this seems to be true in the non-GRIP participants' evaluations of their fellow subjects as well. When they recall GRIP participants they know, they tend to see positively transformed men.

## 7 | Discussion

There is an urgent need to understand how programming inside prisons can facilitate rehabilitation and reentry processes. Having proven methods for effecting lasting positive transformation would benefit countless families and communities, as well as governments and taxpayers. GRIP is one of these programs. For many years, those responsible for designing and implementing GRIP have reported that GRIP participants learn to intervene in their own, and potentially others', cycles of violence early enough in the reactive process to stop repetition of their violent behaviour patterns (cf., Paille 2017; Paille and van der Zeeuw 2021). More to the point, program staff have observed, over 10 years, that gaining an understanding of these cycles transforms GRIP participants into agents for peace and nonviolence in their communities, both inside and outside prison. We therefore sought to understand how GRIP participation could affect men in prisons outside San Quentin, where the GRIP program was initiated in 2016, in places where programming has been less extensive due to their geographical location. Our research aims at offering three potential contributions: supporting the mission of the California Corrections and Rehabilitation Department (CDCR), providing insights about how the inner functioning of GRIP is perceived by prisoners and contributing to pave the way for a broader study—based on randomly selected treatments and control groups—to further clarify the empirical effect of GRIP, thus supporting its expansion to more prisons in California and beyond.

Our study, complementing quantitative and qualitative approaches, allowed to learn some important findings.

First, the descriptive analysis of the data collected through scales of trust shows that the GRIP men did differ significantly from the non-GRIP participants in relation to their perceptions of trust. Trust is the foundation of all positive interactions and relations in every social setting, and different theoretical perspectives have shown that trust is a pivotal factor paving the way for stopping or, at least, reducing ongoing conflicts and hostility and promoting prosocial behaviours (Cozzolino 2011; Rotter 1980). Prisons as institutions seem all too often to educate incarcerated persons in untrustworthiness and distrust (Maggioni et al. 2018). This, in turn, makes the incarcerated less suitable for eventual reintegration into society, where mutual trust serves as a form of social capital. As Ugelvik (2022) points out 'the architecture, routines and layout of prisons are all shaped by the fact that prisoners are seen as unworthy of trust (p. 629)'. While prison culture and structure strengthen a vision of others—both prisoners and correctional officers—as

potential threats to their own safety, GRIP seems to mitigate this hostile view and build a trustworthy context in which prisoners are recognised as human beings, capable of healing, rather than as violent offenders, capable of lashing out again.

Second, there is no significant difference between GRIP participants and non-GRIP participants in the self-control scale. At first glance, this result might appear detrimental to the assessment of the program's effectiveness. Here however, one should consider that, differently than was the case in Maggioni et al. (2018), for the present study we used psychological scales which basically measure the *self-perceived* behavioural attitudes. In this case, a lower value on the self-control scale, far from being evidence of a lower ability to control oneself, may be a signal of a more acute perception in GRIP members of the work still to be done to achieve a satisfying level of self-control.

One should consider that GRIP participants are trained for a year to see clearly (1) that they lost control of themselves when they committed violent crimes and (2) how this loss of self-control is deeply rooted in, for example, childhood trauma, toxic masculinity and gang culture. In other words, keeping control of yourself in 'hot' moments is, they are trained to see, extremely difficult. As such, what 'self-control' means to GRIP participants and to non-GRIP participants may be radically different. Similarly, perhaps feeling more confident about what the future will bring, GRIP participants may feel more able to honestly report their own shortcomings in the past as well as their current struggles. Non-GRIP men, on the contrary, have had fewer opportunities to develop such increased sensitivity and awareness.

Finally, the honesty of the participants' journeys through the program is supported by the results of the photo-elicitation activity. In many cases, the GRIP men chose images for their current self that reflect their continuing internal struggles rather than only the best photo in the collection. In the interviews, they were honest in describing their former self, and in some cases their initial scepticism and plans to falsely represent their participation, as well as what their struggles are. In fact, as we look at the details of all the combinations of the selected before and after photographs, it seems clear that a consistent trend emerges in the stories of the GRIP participants and that these stories are reinforced by non-GRIP participants: in the language associated with Maruna's influential theoretical framework (2001), we can say that what prevails is the movement towards "reflection" stories characterised by dramatic changes from negative to positive perspectives. In several photos, classified as positive or ambivalent, the element of light is recognisable. The light of the sun behind the clouds, the light of a beautiful day outside a cave, the light of a sunset, a small light shining on a dark building. GRIP enables a new vision of one's own inner life and this is the reason why the photos with light connotations are so attractive for the men.

All these results further validate the overall findings and demonstrate the GRIP participants' profound commitment to self-awareness and candour. In the introductory meetings we emphasised that we wanted their honest assessments and feedback. The results above indicate that this is what we received, and they also underscore our interpretation surrounding self-control ratings among GRIP and non-GRIP men.

There are several limitations to this study. First, the sample is not statistically representative and was formed through a self-selection process that may have significantly influenced the results. Additionally, the instruments used to complement the qualitative analysis rely on scales that, albeit widely used in the literature, would require specific adaptation to the prison context. Despite the fact that photocards were taken from a pool of photos previously used in a prison setting (Saita, Accordini, and Loewenthal 2019), participants could choose from a limited range of photocard options instead of being able to provide an image completely freely chosen. Additionally, as already mentioned in previous research on this topic (Copes et al. 2018), the use of photocards chosen to represent participants holds the risk of improperly portraying them as one-dimensional characters.

Furthermore, to avoid cognitive and emotional overload, scales measuring only some of the dimensions underlying the model were employed. The analysis of emotional intelligence dimensions, mindfulness, as well as the assessment of violence reduction, requires dedicated assessment tools, including self-report, observational and behavioural measures. At last, the data were collected at a single time point, whereas a longitudinal observation over a more extended period would allow for a more robust and reliable substantiation of the findings highlighted in this study.

Given the obvious limitations built into it, this pilot study was from the outset meant to help set up a subsequent, larger, random-assignment impact evaluation study with at the very least baseline and endline measurement moments. We strongly recommend that, in such a future investigation into the effects of GRIP, psychological scales be complemented with behavioural observations and/or games.<sup>6</sup> Such games are often used (in controlled environments) because, as the saying goes, 'actions speak louder than words'. To this we would add that, in a future study, randomization procedures should consider more background variables including, if possible, those based on information from the participants' confidential files (revealing, for example, the types of offences for which they were committed).

Despite the aforementioned limitations, this pilot study, combining qualitative approaches with quantitative scales, provides insights on the potential of the GRIP program. We hope that a more in-depth study involving randomization into treatment and control populations will allow us to pinpoint the programs (longer-term) effects on participants and to better understand if—and to what extent—the program's beneficial effects may extend outward to other incarcerated men and even outside prison walls.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>These effects are not necessarily pathological, rather normal adaptive processes to abnormal demands due to the highly insecure and stressful prison's environment. See Haney (2003) for a detailed survey of the psychological processes occurring during long-term imprisonment.
- <sup>2</sup>These figures come from an official US government website: <https://nicic.gov/weblink/decarceration-strategies-how-5-states-achieved-substantial-prison-population-reductions>.
- <sup>3</sup>ASP is a Level II state prison located near the city of Avenal. Avenal, a city in the Central Valley of California with 14,000 inhabitants' people is situated roughly half way between San Francisco and Los Angeles. ASP hosts about 4000 inmates. The facilities consist primarily of open dormitories with a secure perimeter, which may include armed coverage. In level II prisons, inmates usually live in open space dormitories instead of cell blocks. There is usually an armed, secure perimeter fence and there may or may not be armed guards in the common spaces (but never in the actual housing areas).
- <sup>4</sup>CTF is a Level I and II, so-called 'General Population' prison consisting to three separate facilities located near the city of Soledad. Soledad is located some 80 km Southeast of Monterey, in the Salinas Valley, California. CTF hosts about 5000 inmates. Level I prisons are minimum security. Inmates live in dormitories and there may or may not be a perimeter fence and, typically, there are no armed guards.
- <sup>5</sup>GRIP participants in Avenal had completed 11 out of 12 class sessions before the survey, while participants in Soledad had completed the whole program. However, both groups of participants had completed all the required coursework and assignments prior to our study activities.
- <sup>6</sup>By 'behavioural games' we refer to incentivised situations widely adopted in the fields of experimental and behavioural economics to elicit preferences, especially pro-social preferences such as altruism, interpersonal trust, and inter-temporal discount rates. As we did in this pilot study, combining incentivised tasks with subjective psychometric scales may improve the understanding of programs' effects, since they allow to elicit preferences in settings in which some valuable stakes (incentives) are involved.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.