

# From incarceration to community: Re-entry goals of adults living with HIV in South African correctional facilities

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**Background:** People living with HIV (PLWH) face disruptions in care following release from incarceration, yet understanding of client re-entry priorities remains limited in South Africa and globally. We describe re-entry priorities of incarcerated PLWH in South Africa to inform continuity of care interventions.

**Method:** Adults living with HIV ( $\geq 18$  years) on antiretroviral therapy (ART), scheduled for release ( $< 3$  months), were enrolled in a randomized controlled trial from 19 correctional facilities in Gauteng Province, South Africa (2024–2026). During pre-release sessions, intervention arm participants completed structured goal-setting worksheets. Worksheets were digitized using artificial intelligence-assisted transcription and verified by the research team. Conventional qualitative content analysis was conducted to characterize patterns in self-identified priorities and anticipated challenges.

**Results:** Participants ( $n=77$ ) were predominantly male (92%), median age of 38 (IQR 33–44). Prior to incarceration, 38% were unemployed and 29% had used opioids. Most (62%) had prior incarceration history, with median age at first incarceration of 21. Over half (55%) were diagnosed with HIV in correctional facilities, including 40% during current incarceration. Participants identified a median of 2 re-entry priorities (range: 1–4), yielding 163 discrete priorities across 9 mutually exclusive categories. Employment and income generation was the dominant category (55% of priorities; 79% of participants). Common planned ventures included food vending, car-related businesses, skilled trades, and small-scale resale activities, reflecting low-barrier income opportunities. Other categories included administrative/documentation needs (10%), family reconnection (10%), and housing (8%). Health-related priorities, such as clinic access and ART adherence, comprised only 4% of priorities.

**Conclusion:** Among PLWH returning from incarceration, economic stability was the predominant priority, while health-related concerns were rarely cited. These findings underscore the importance of individualized goal assessment. HIV-focused re-entry programs may be strengthened by integrating participant-identified priorities, including income generation and financial literacy, with treatment support to promote sustained engagement and health outcomes.