Female offenders’ recidivism and factors that may lower the likelihood of recidivism attracted considerable scholarly interest (Alward, Caudy & Viglione, 2020; Durose, Cooper & Snyder, 2014; Fazel & Wolf, 2015; Link, Ward & Stansfield, 2019; Miller & Miller, 2015; Mowen & Boman, 2019; Wesely & Dewey, 2018), as female recidivism rate, still poses as one of the most significant challenges facing the criminal justice system (CJS), penitentiary systems and society in general the world over (Beall, 2018; Bronson & Carson, 2019; Butorac, Gracín & Stanic, 2017; Moles-López & Añaños, 2021; Sawyer, 2018). The correctional facilities are not adequate and what compounded the challenge is a lack of corresponding increase in female programmes to rehabilitate female offenders. The increasing recidivism rate, despite various efforts by government and non-government organisations (NGOs) to reduce it, provided with challenges for the CJS (Cooper, Durose, & Snyder, 2014). Every woman irrespective of her specific offenses is subjected to the same rehabilitation programme. For example, a woman who committed a theft is subjected to the same programme as the one who committed a murder. This practice has no significant impact in terms of effective rehabilitation. Another observation by the authors is the fact that female offenders are subjected to the already male existing rehabilitation programmes. They are rehabilitated as male offenders failing which to recognize the gender disparities. The needs of the female offenders are different from their male counterparts (Miller 2021, Moles-López & Añaños, 2021; Morash, Bynum & Koo, 1998).
The above is supported by Fretz, Erickson and Mims (2007) (cited in Miller 2021:13) posit that “Gender-responsive programming begins with an assessment of each offender’s individual risks and needs and considers gender-specific variables particular to female prisoners, such as parent-child relationships, familial reunification, substance abuse, and mental and physical health needs”. The above is supported by Tillson, Dickson, Webster and Staton (2022) that Gendered pathways frameworks (and relational theory) also highlight relationships as a crucial factor during women’s reentry process. Manjoo (2013) cited in the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2022) posits that these pathways include: a strong correlation with experience of prior violence and abuse; coercion into crime by an abuser or a person of influence; abortion in countries where it is illegal or legal only under limited circumstances; the commission of ‘moral’ crimes such as adultery; running away, for example, to escape violence; being held in prison for protection purposes (protective custody or detention); long periods of pretrial, immigration and/or refugee detention; and human trafficking. The South African correctional centres have no tailor-made rehabilitation that is designed for specific types of crime. A specific type of crime must have a specific type of rehabilitation that is designed to curb its future occurrences. The criminal motives and offenses of female offenders differ in various ways. Therefore, their rehabilitation must be specific to the needs of the female offender. The impact of the female offender is influential to future generations. It is crucial that rehabilitation is practical and prevents recidivism. As their recidivism can be traced to the blanket approach used by the correctional department when rehabilitating them (female offenders).

This paper focuses on women offenders’ recidivism due to the lack of tailor-made rehabilitation programmes available to rehabilitate female offenders in South Africa. The authors perceived that the currently available rehabilitation programmes within the South African correctional services lacks an umbrella approach. This study also seeks to address gaps in knowledge on the rehabilitation programme that is not tailor-made to crimes committed. This gap was noted by Gaum, Hoffman and Venter (2006), postulating that who postulated that the Department of Correctional Services (DCS)’s Corrections programmes aim to provide needs-based correctional sentence plans and interventions to offenders, however, there are no well-structured programmes to rehabilitate offenders, as well as Probation Officers, are not equipped to implement rehabilitation programmes as they apply “one size fits all” approach. They apply the same programmes to different offenders who committed different crimes. It is within this realisation of the gap this study was conducted.

Little attention has been paid by South African researchers in this area. Even though researchers such as Agboola (2014) conducted a study on female experiences of prison life, her focus was not on a tailor-made rehabilitation programmes to crime compared to the current study. Steyn and Booyen (2017) study focused on female offenders profiling. As much as they have looked at rehabilitation initiatives to inform policies and practice, they were not focusing on the nexus of rehabilitation and crimes committed by offenders. Another study conducted by Prisloo (1996) focusing on recidivism, looked at both genders’ recidivism and never focused on only female ex-offender’s rehabilitation programme that is not tailor-made to the crimes they committed. His focus was not on how rehabilitation can precipitate recidivism. Even though Gaum, Hoffman, and Venter (2006) noted that rehabilitation programme is a “one size fits all” approach where the same programme is applied to offenders who committed different crimes, their focus was on factors influencing the recidivism of male offenders’ offers not on the experiences of female offenders as in the present study. A study conducted by Haffeejee, Vetten, and Greyling (2005) explore violence in the lives of women and girls incarcerated at three prisons in Gauteng Province, South Africa. Even though their study focused on women and girls’ incarceration, it explored the women’s history of abuse both during childhood and adulthood and the relationship between such violence and engagement in unlawful activities. Whereas the present study focuses on female recidivism due to lack of tailor-made rehabilitation programmes for the crimes they committed.

A study conducted by Nelani (2020) in the South African correctional centre focuses on the role of reading in offender rehabilitation and reintegration into the community in the Western Cape Metro, South Africa. As much as this study looks at rehabilitation through reading and how that transforms the inmate preparing his reintegration, the study doesn’t address the issue of rehabilitation as this present study. Another study conducted by Khwela focused on the effects of incarceration on recidivism in South Africa. Thus, it is evident from all the above-mentioned studies that the current study was necessary to be conducted. To provide female offenders’ perspectives and experiences on the limitation of a tailor-made rehabilitation programme to curb recidivism. All the mentioned studies have opened gaps of this current study seeks to address.

Despite mounting evidence suggesting that female offenders’ recidivism still poses as one of the most significant challenges facing the criminal justice system (CJS), penitentiary systems and society in general the world over, there is still a gap regarding an understanding among criminal justice professionals regarding the actual need required for this level of service. Most of the previous studies in South Africa have addressed a range of topics related to recidivism and yet, there are limitations to consider and implications for future research. The most notable limitations are also identified in this study is the basis of past practices concerning the gender programme design, or lack thereof, for women offenders in South Africa. Identified is a void that exists from the lack of gender responsive treatment and services available for women offenders. Highlighted in the findings of this study is about the magnitude of the lack of understanding among most criminal justice professionals regarding the actual need towards female offenders. Thus, in future research it will be important to explore more variables that play into the successfullness of treatment and how it impacts the recidivism rates among women offenders.

The research reviewed has offered many different reasons why the recidivism rates are so high, making it clear that women offenders and recidivism rates require the attention of criminal justice policy makers. Policy makers as well as relevant stakeholders’
involvement with the women offenders would have a broader and deeper understanding of what best practices should be incorporated from the views offered by the actual offenders involved with the justice system. This study therefore serves to add to the previous research by exploring offender’s own opinions and beliefs about what has kept them from recidivating since their most current release.

The following research questions directed this study:

i. Are female offenders prone to recidivism because there is no specific rehabilitation programme designed for the crimes they committed?
ii. Are these blanket rehabilitation programmes effective to curb the recidivism of female offenders?

The below section addresses the literature review consulted regarding provisions of offender rehabilitation programmes, followed by an understanding discourses of offenses committed by females in South Africa; Female Offender Experiences in the Correctional Centres and Female Offenders’ Reintegration Experiences. The Theoretical Framework provided with the lens through which this study was followed, followed by the research gap and then, the methodology followed.

**Literature Review**

**Theoretical and Conceptual Background**

**Systems Theory**

This study was analysed through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological system theory (EST), which has provided a background for this study. Bronfenbrenner's EST is one of the most accepted explanations regarding the influence of social environments on human development (Renn & Arnold, 2003). The basis of EST are that a lifelong development and functioning of an individual are influenced by four connected environmental systems with the individual existing at the centre (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). Those five systems are as follows: (a) the microsystem, which consists of the individual’s primary environment made up of elements, such as family, friends, school, and church; (b) the mesosystem, which involves connections between the microsystem and the individual’s family, church, or school; (c) the ecosystem, which is composed of interactions between two or more social settings that impact the individual, neighbourhood, or governmental agencies indirectly; (d) the mesosystem, which is made up of the individual’s cultural environment, including customs, beliefs, social systems, and resources and (e) chronosystem, which is composed of the stage of life that the individual is in regarding the situations they are going through. Bronfenbrenner asserts that development across the various contexts is likely to shift over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979; Renn & Arnold, 2003). The authors utilized the EST as a lens through which to understand how female ex-offenders’ experiences with re-entry programmes influenced their transition back into society. The EST has been used to understand offenders in previous studies. Hagedorn (2014:1-10) cited in Mciver (2020) used the ecological systems model to discuss prison re-entry trends to gain insight into the challenges that former offenders face. Hagedorn highlighted the importance of the macrolevel in understanding the role of the criminal justice system in improving re-entry outcomes and found that reentry programmes that offered mesosystem-level solutions provided more effective positive outcomes for former offenders. Hagedorn also posited that basic human needs in re-entry requires further research on the micro level (Mciver, 2020).

**Provisions of gendered-responsive rehabilitation programmes**

Dadashazar (2017) posits that rehabilitation comprises a multi-layered progression and inmate experiences from the time of inception all the way up to release from prison. The Thailand Institute of Justice (2021:35) posits that “the provision of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for people in prison is inconsistent from one country to another. Where punitive approaches are pursued, or resources are dire there are few opportunities. Some systems however have comprehensive rehabilitation programmes which are central to prison life and involve delivery from many stakeholders.” Ultimately, it is incumbent upon prison officials to begin the process of reintegration of offenders as early as possible in order to avoid possible institutionalisation and continuously strive to promote successful reentry (James, 2015). Despite this, criminal justice policies, practices, and programmes have historically been designed for men and applied to women without consideration of women’s distinct needs (Blanchette, Gobei & Stewart, 2016; Fleming, Wright, Wurzburg, Ney et al., 2021).

While gender-neutral approaches, if evidence-based can be effective in reducing recidivism for both men and women, research has shown that gender-responsive approaches result in far better outcomes for women. Gender-responsive and trauma-informed policies, practices, and programmes recognize that women have distinct histories, pathways to offending, and experiences in the CJS (Fleming et al., 2021; Walmsley, 2017). Although gender-responsive treatment has been acknowledged as effective, this style of treatment remains to be the exception rather than the rule in treating female offenders. Barriers to provision of gender-responsive treatment are multi-layered (Ondeng, 2018). These approaches address issues that may contribute to women’s involvement in the justice system, such as domestic violence, abuse, and victimisation; family and relationships; trauma; and poverty, mental illnesses, and substance use disorders. Therefore, during incarceration, inmates have access to services, which help to support the safe and secure housing operations and the demands of the dynamic prison culture (Freudenberg & Heller, 2016).
An Understanding Discourses of Offenses Committed by Females in South Africa

South Africa is ranked 177th with female offenders making up 2.6% of the prison population (World Prison Brief, 2021). This is evident that South Africa is counted amongst the countries that are experiencing crime even committed by females. That paints a differing picture of how social injustice perpetuates the pushing and pulling factor to crime not only by men but by women as well. There are 243 functional correctional centres in South Africa; however, only 22 cater to female offenders' housing. The low population of female offenders’ results in the marginalized group being often neglected when comes to rehabilitation as the focus and resources are devoted to the male correctional facilities. This void leaves female offenders without proper rehabilitation hence the emergence of the single approach to rehabilitate all sorts of crimes committed by them leading to their recidivism. According to Gendreau and Cullen (1989), when rehabilitation programmes are based on the principles of effective treatment, this reduces the rates of reoffending. Meta-analysis technique implemented to gather evidence on the effect of rehabilitation programmes on offenders assessed over a hundred studies to conclude that rehabilitation programmes reduce recidivism by 10% compared to non-treated groups (Cullen & Gendreau, 1989). This means that if a control or non-treated group had a recidivism rate of 35%, the rehabilitated or managed group would have a recidivism rate of 25%. All of these depend on a strong, practical, and doable rehabilitation programme that might curb the recidivism of more than 25%.

According to a report by the National Institute for Crime Prevention and the Reintegration of Offenders (NICRO) (2020), the types of crimes that females commit or are incarcerated for are as follows:

Table 1: Crimes committed by females in South Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of crimes</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic crimes,</td>
<td>44.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive crimes</td>
<td>35.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcotics crimes (possession of narcotics)</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual offenses</td>
<td>0.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child abuse cases</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault with the intent to cause the body harm</td>
<td>22.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic violence</td>
<td>18.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder or attempted murder</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public violence public violence</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-specified crimes</td>
<td>6.84%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (NICRO, 2020)

Table 1 above depicts statistics of crimes committed by the female offenders (it should be noted that this might be the tip of an iceberg as some of the female offenders are not apprehended even if they are some are never tried in the court of law). Such statistics highlight the need for accurate offender assessment and individual intervention planning. The assessment of female offenders can also be an intensive task. There are assessment tools available. However, some have proven to indicate those female offenders are at a higher risk than they are (NICRO, 2020). NICRO (2020) further reported that the most common crimes committed by female offenders include shoplifting, theft, attempted theft, common assault, malicious damage to property, and trespassing. There are various views on what propels females to perpetually commit these acts of criminality. One view by Stayne and Booyens (2017) is that female criminal behavior is instigated by the fact that they are socially, economically, and otherwise excluded and are forever marginalized and remained oppressed by society. Steyne et al (2017) further note that female offenders are apprehended for property and economic crimes such as theft and shoplifting, drug distribution, and commercial sex work as a way of supporting their families.

On the other hand, Van Dieten, Jones, and Randon (2014) assert that female criminality is a result of violent offenses committed against them in a form of intimate partner violence. There is a strong correlation between the crime committed by females and violent crimes committed against them. This notion was researched by Haffeejee, Vetten, and Greyling (2005). They found in their study that there is a strong relationship between female offenders and prior experience of violence. For example, trauma, anger, parenting-related issues, and mental health are salient predictive factors in female offenders (Haffeejee, Vetten, & Greyling, 2005). The intimate partner violence female endures which will later result from them committing crime includes economic abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, severe threats, the extent of the perpetrator killing himself or the victim and kids. Other forms of violence include pouring petrol over her, tying her to a moving car, or throwing her into an ice bath. The violent behavior left many female offenders with severe injuries; over 70% of females did not report such incidences to the police (Haffeejee, et al., 2005). These forms of atrocities can make any female be angry, violent and kill the conscience within her. Haffeejee, et al. (2005) further postulates that violence committed against females during their childhood is an instigator of violence they would depict when they become adults. Many female offenders were raised by their grandparents, other relatives, foster care, or reformatory environments and these milieu one way or other contributed significantly to a female becoming an offender.

The research conducted within the three correctional centres in Johannesburg concluded that female offenders convicted of murder or attempted murder were more likely to have experienced sexual violence in a past relationship. In addition, female offenders who have committed theft were more likely to have experienced economic abuse in a past relationship. Females are offended,
dismayed, and mistreated. Therefore, the act of crime is something that spontaneously occurs after accepting years and years of abuse. Female offenders also reported that correctional centres are means of escaping the violence they endure within their environment. Therefore, the rehabilitation programme must be tailor-made to these specifics of the crime they tend to commit. It is evident that some are the victims of long years of abuse therefore it wouldn’t be advisable to use the same umbrella approach of rehabilitation. This can somehow limit the number of recidivism after reintegration. Females have specific social reintegration needs that differ from that of male offenders (NICRO, 2020). The reintegration needs of female offenders include family reunification, foster care support, financial support, safety, parental stress, child and family services. The sad reality there are a limited number of programmes available within correctional centres that can assist a female offender in meeting the needs of her reintegration.

**Female Offender Experiences in the Correctional Centres**

The purpose and/or a correctional centre amongst other things aims to rehabilitate offenders to reform so that we can be reintegrated back into society as changed individuals (DCS, 2021). Offenders must carry out their sentence whilst learning to realize their mistakes and how that has affected the communities they strive in. However, the adaptation and acceptance of sentencing are complicated for the female offender to come to terms with immediately. Thus, they project aggressive behaviour. This aggressive behaviour is justified as an expression that they turned to crime due to their societal backgrounds marginalisation and to care for themselves they are required to commit crimes such as theft or prostitution. In other cases, crime is a means of self-defence (Hatton & Fisher, 2009). Although crimes are justified by offenders, incarceration must take place.

This incarceration must be inhumane manner, however, female offenders expressed that they are treated in an inhumane manner in correctional facilities with an improper rehabilitation programme that will arm them with the necessary skills to strive upon reintegrating back into society (Agboola, 2016). The situation under their incarceration devours them the status of human dignity. They are often degraded and treated lesser than human beings. Their right to physical, educational, occupational and social conditions in correctional centres is compromised which might enhance their abilities to survive soon after their reintegration. Physical conditions include overcrowding, healthcare, food, hygiene, and sanitation; academic requirements provide access to education and reading materials; functional requirements included prison work and skills acquisition; social conditions included exercise and recreational facilities and contact with the outside world.

These conditions are often not met and if some are met, females must go through a series of abuse in order to obtain their rightful conditions. The conditions they strive in is worsened by the day. For example, In April 2016, Constitutional Court Justice Edwin Cameron visited Pollsmoor and wrote a scathing report on the remand sections – male and female. ‘Ninety-four women were crowded into a poorly aerated room. The mattresses were stinking. There was no working toilet, clogged sink drains, and only cold-water Sheets and blankets were infested with lice [and] the cell was infested with cockroaches.’ (Hopkins, 2017). Resources for self-care, such as tampons, sanitary pads are not adequately provided, there is a limitation to the details provided (Agboola, 2016).

**Female Offenders’ Reintegration Experiences**

According to a study conducted by Agboola (2014), female offenders face numerous challenges post-release. These challenges include unemployment, the stigma of criminality, psychological trauma, family isolation, and the reality of a criminal record. They also experience culture shock, depression, anger, social stigma, and the hardship of having a criminal record (Prison Fellowship Organisation, 2021). Cultural shock is experienced by offenders released from correctional centres. It is the feeling of disorientation that an individual gets when they suddenly must adapt to unfamiliar ways of life such as technological advances, social changes, and environmental changes. Facing the new “normal” will be a challenge.

The experience could be harsher if the length of the sentence were longer. If they can’t bear to strive in these new normal, they are prone to crime again to return to their usual comfort and familiar environment which is the prison cell. Some female offenders succumb to recidivism because of the frustrations they experience upon being released with limited rehabilitation.

The challenges post-release can be frustrating; the offender may feel isolated and judged. Readjusting to life can be difficult and finding employment with a criminal record possess enormous hardships (Prison Fellowship Organisation, 2021). All these hardships serve as a contributory factor to recidivism other than poor rehabilitation programmes. The released offender needs to seek psychological help to deal with such challenges. Alternatively, the released offender should set small goals and aim to reach them. During incarceration, anger may have been used by the offender as a defence mechanism. The offender may have to practice anger management (Agboola, 2016).

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

This study uses a qualitative research design. Data were collected by interviewing women ex-offenders who have been incarcerated for more than a month or have had more than two arrests. Interviews allowed for a depth of understanding better understanding of the lives and experiences of the female offenders during their incarceration period, their rehabilitation programme offered during their incarceration, and their virtue of recidivism. Also, to attempt to identify new knowledge, new insights, new understandings, and new meanings and to explore factors related to the topic from the female offenders who were incarcerated from South African
correctional centres (Brink & Wood, 1998:312; Brink 1996:11). The results from this study won’t necessarily be generalizable to a larger population due to sample size but will provide a better understanding of the sample being examined, their experiences, and the ordeals they are faced daily from their communities and the time they were incarcerated (Burns & Grove 1999:296) cited in Neil (2013).

Even though lack of proper rehabilitation programme as a contributory factor to recidivism is not an entirely new social science issue, the researchers seek to bridge the gaps by bringing new insights on the lack of tailor-made rehabilitation programmes with the crimes committed by the females as machinery to solve the recidivism cases and provide solutions to this problem. Therefore, the exploratory nature of the study avails the researchers to gain insight into the plight of female offenders succumbing to recidivism because there is no specific tailor-made rehabilitation programme designed to help them and whether the use of blanket rehabilitation programmes is effective to curb recidivism of female offenders. Furthermore, the qualitative method was used to explore experiences and individuals’ opinions, feelings, and subjective data from female offenders who were incarcerated from SA correctional services. This approach enabled the collection of in-depth and detailed data from female offenders. It provided sound descriptive data essential to explicate the phenomenon under study.

Subject Selection and Participation

The authors approached the DCS to request the list of all the female ex-convicts that were reintegrated back into society. From the list that was provided by the DSC the researchers managed to sample 10 released female offenders who were incarcerated who fit the prepared selection criteria. These participants were sampled by using a purposive sampling technique. This technique of sampling helped in choosing the most relevant or knowledgeable respondents regarding the topic under study. The criteria for inclusion in this study were: (i) they must have been incarcerated for at least 2 years; (ii) they must be released from the correctional service; (iii) from any socio-economical and ethnic group; (iv) must be between the ages of 18-50 years, and (v) they must show readiness and willingness to answer questions about their lives in correctional centres. These respondents were chosen according to their knowledge of the research content and their experience in the context studied.

Protection of Human Subjects

All participants were ensured protection first through the approval of the DCS. Background information on the focus of the study, description of the interview, research procedures, risk and benefits to participating, and protection of confidentiality was all provided to the individuals interested in participating. This information was given to the individual in a consent form that was provided and reviewed prior to the interview to ensure any questions the participant had were answered and so voluntary participation was ensured. The interviews were held in a public places (i.e. a public parks where there are chairs and a table, public library in a study room) as preferred by the individuals choosing less populated areas not full of individuals. If another person walked closer to where the seat or the table during the interview, the interview was paused to ensure confidentiality. The main interview questions related to pre- and post-justice system experiences. This public locations were used for two purposes. First, it was expected that the participants will feel more comfortable in a public, familiar location and secondly, these public venues will ensure the safety of the authors.

Before the start of the interview, the authors and participants reviewed the consent form and each participant was required to state their approval. The participants were made aware that at any time they were free to skip any question. In addition, they were informed that they could end the interview at any time with no consequence. Confidentiality was upheld by not recording any identifying information on both the recordings and in the transcripts. Any identifiable information that accidentally made its way onto the audiotapes during conversation was removed at the point of transcription. Initial audio recordings were made on a password protected cell phone and then transferred to a computer and erased from the phone within 24 hours of recording. All the transcripts and audio recordings were held on the authors’ computer in a locked password protected file.

Procedure

The data were obtained from 10 female offenders through face-to-face semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes per interview. The interview focused on questions about the how the participants’ experiences regarding their incarceration, rehabilitation, and reintegration. The interview was recorded using Easy Voice Recorder cell phone application on the authors’ phone in order to later transcribe the information. Prior to the interview the authors read through the consent form with each participant and asked questions to ensure that they understood the content of the form. Participants were given a copy of the consent for their records. The consent form contained contact information for the authors. The interview took place in a public location as described within the human subjects’ protection section of this study. The participants were requested to share their experiences and revealed circumstances and perceptions relating to the phenomenon under investigation (Punch, 2014). Following the interview, the participants were asked if they had any questions. Finally, the authors asked the participant if they would like to be contacted to view the final copy of this research study.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were coded using a grounded theory approach. This approach searches for themes that repeat across the interviews. The methods of data analysis were open and axial coding (Bohm, 2004). For this study the authors used open coding to look at the what, who, how, when, and where. Through using a systems theory approach it allowed themes to emerge from the data collected in
the interviews. Systems theory was used as a lens through which the authors were able to organize emergent data. Systems theory recognizes how subsystems operate within a larger system, thus looking from a holistic standpoint. Once data was gathered it was read through and major themes that emerged were highlighted. Once all 10 interviews were highlighted the authors then compared the interviews to find major themes among all 10 interviews. After the major themes that appeared across all 10 of the interviews were highlighted, the authors narrowed it down to two major themes that seemed to be the most significant across the interviews.

Empirical Data and Analysis

The question for the current study is: What do previous female offenders believe have kept them from recidivating When exploring this question many themes emerged regarding what the ex-female offenders deemed helpful or not helpful this study concerning the gender programme design, or lack thereof, for women offenders in South Africa. The findings from the 10 interviews were be looked at through a systems theory lens. The main themes that emerged from the current study were 1.) Chronicles of females to correctional centre and 2.) Rehabilitation programme as a pathway to redemption. The following discussion focuses on the data analysis, presentation, and interpretation.

Theme 1: Chronicles of Females to Correctional Centre

Table 2: Duration of participants’ incarceration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Years of incarceration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 above depicts the duration these females spent in correctional services. The longest-serving in our sample are 2 participants who served 15 years each in correctional centres. Another 2 participants served 10 years, another 2 serves 4 years each, another 2 serves 3 years each. One participant served 5 years and only 1 served 1 year in the correctional facility. This reveals that not only men serve a longer sentence, but females also as well depending on the nature of the crime committed. It is evident that those females who served longer sentences were incarcerated for more serious offenses compared to those with minimal sentences. Even though some of these women were incarcerated for a longer period they feel that the programmes they were subjected to have not been of much help given their criminal records.

Table 3: Type of crime committed and reasons thereof

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Participant responses (Verbatim)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Robbery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Murder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>Murder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Fraud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>Fraud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>Murder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>Robbery with the aggravating circumstance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>Robbery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>Fraud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>Murder</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 depict various crime these female offenders have committed. These types of crimes ranging from serious violent offenses to less serious nature. The study shows that most women in the sample have committed mostly murder, followed by robbery and fraud. The murder committed could be the result of retaliation from the abuse perpetrated against them and in turn, they tend to murder the source of their ordeal. They were asked what made them commit such crimes. Those who committed murder responded to say, they were under severe abuse by their partners and as such, they were forced to defend themselves by killing the source of the abuse as a self-defence mechanism. Other alluded anger was the result of their crimes. Negligence, peer pressure, greed was also mentioned as contributing factors. 2 participants indicated that they were framed and maintained their innocents.
The participants were asked about common risk factors predisposing females to commit crimes. The participants have noted a plethora of factors that push/pull females into becoming criminals. They vary from socio-economic factors, social ills, and gender-based violence and femicide (GBV&F). They remarked as follows:

‘Other offenders do crime because of poverty, hunger, unemployment. They steal clothes and food because they can’t find work, they don’t have experience’ (P2).

‘Majority of women are in for murder, they kill their husbands or boyfriends because of abuse. Some are in for theft, they come from poor families, they steal food for their families. Some are in for drugs mixed with a dagga’ (P4).

‘Females mostly often with shoplifting, it is due to peer pressure, new friends, smoking weed. People that murder, do it out of anger and abuse. Others just have greed’ (P8).

‘They have a background of abuse, sexual abuse, anger, abusive relations lead to the murder, unemployment, poverty’ (P10).

The participants were also asked if the interaction with other female offenders can predispose them to recidivism. Most of the participants reported that the interaction with other fellow inmates doesn’t contribute to further criminality. They alluded that recidivism is a choice and has nothing to do with interaction with other inmates. This finding is completely different from the male perspective. As male inmates learn more criminality from fellow cellmates however when comes to female inmates’ interaction means family values. They comfort each other during this difficult time of incarceration, influence each other positively, and help each other. It is more of a family orientation than being violent and learning more criminality. Conversely to male inmates, they learn more criminality, motives, and modus operandi in prison to use when they are released. To female inmates, the interaction is more of a sisterhood circle, where prayer and positive regard are emphasized. They alluded as follows:

‘No, we are family. When interacting with others we learn to be positive, we learn the right path, when you are inside you must make positive decisions’ (P2).

‘These interactions motivate and encourage us. There is no hate and no revenge We pray together, we teach each other’ (P6).

‘No, it is helpful. It changes our way of thinking. It assists you in thinking about who I was, and I don’t want to commit a crime. We learn for officials to be better people’ (8).

‘It becomes beneficiary, smaller groups become friends’ (P9).

Interaction with fellow cellmates means womanhood. These interactions to a certain extent strengthen one own survival in a correctional centre. For them to survive and kill the time of incarceration, they need to have mutual friends as a supporting structure for the frustrations and hardships of the incarceration period.

**Theme 2: Rehabilitation Programme as a Pathway to Redemption**

The participants were asked about the programmes they were subjected to when in correctional services. They have provided a variety of programmes used by the official to rehabilitate them. The most common programmes highlighted by the female offenders were human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) programmes, Anger management, Pre-release programmes, Counselling, Self Esteem, Family Life, National Beadwork training, Chat set – Spiritual, New Beginnings, Changing Love, Fast Image, Crossroads Program, Mandela Blanket Project, My life, my money, finance, education programmes, Peace Education, Alpha Course, catering service, sewing, restorative justice. Participants said:

**HIV/ Aids, Counselling, Building Stigma** (P1).

‘Traditional Beads, Sewing, Dress Making, Cooking and Catering Services’ (P2).


‘Anger management, restorative justice, heading, sewing, catering services, craftwork, cooking’ (P7).

Judging from the provided programme, female inmates are provided with a plethora of programme that is designed to help them not to re-offend again. Most have indicated that these programmes have been useful however, these programmes are cumbersome and umbrella approach. All the offenders are subjected to these programmes irrespective of the nature crime they have committed.

Therefore, the participants were asked what programme they would prefer to have been subjected to when they were incarcerated. The following are some of the responses:

‘Teaching Courses, English Courses’ (P3).

‘Workshops, Tiling or building programmes, programmes that can help us design uniforms, clothing’ (P4).

‘Self-image, how to deal with family, facing life after prison is way harder, we need to be prepared for family interactions’ (10).
As much as social skills programmes are offered, offenders need more of a practical skillset. Also, they need an integration programme that will take care of them after release from prison. After-care programme is a necessity that will help them deal with the stigma of incarceration and lack of employment due to criminal records.

The female offenders were also asked if the programmes they attended helped them to transform and prevent recidivism. Five participants have indicated to have been rehabilitated by the programme and these programmes helped them not to resort to crime again (recidivism). They reported that the programmes helped them to think positively as a result they learn to appreciate the wrongfulness of their behaviour, through counselling, they got to accept the situation they strive under whilst trying to survive in prison. They also indicated that the programmes helped them to be independent, use the skills they learned to generate income. They remark as follows:

‘Yes, they helped me create a positive mind-set, it allowed me to accept the situation and everything I was experiencing’ (P1).

‘Yes, they help, they assist to make life easier, it helps bring in money, it helps us survive, it helps us to learn to do things, like communicate and be friendly’ (P2).

‘Yes, it prevents me from going back to crime’ (P3).

‘Yes, they provide an income’ (P4).

Yes, beading for example changes your mind-set, it requires you to focus, and pay attention (7).

On the other hand, five participants have rendered the programmes offered to them in the correctional services futile. They alluded that, these programmes have not helped them at all as they have experience crime again even though not caught, trialled, and incarcerated again. They attest to the fact that, as much as they go through these programmes, they are not helping to generate income and cannot find employment. Their criminal record plays a significant role in not having the same employment opportunities as everyone without a criminal record.

‘No, they need to design programmes that link to the crime. Courses that help. Call it a crime, the impact of crime to family or communities’ (P8).

‘Re-offending happens after the courses, people come back are redo the same courses. They do them for the parole board, to meet parole requirements’ (P9).

The participants were further asked whether the offered programmes helped them to reform from the crime they initially committed. The researchers intended to find out if the programmes these women undertook helped them not to succumb back to the same crime they committed initially that led them to prison from the first instance. Most of these women have attested to having been helped by these programmes not to commit the same crime that landed them in correctional facilities initially. However, the programmes did not provide an indefinite solution to committing other crimes. It is as if, they resorted to crimes other than those they were initially arrested for. Participants believed the programmes provided an opportunity to make the right choice whilst still incarcerated. These programmes gave hope, and positivity to their prison life. They responded as

‘Yes, you learn positive things. The right way of life. When you are inside, you must decide on the right choices’ (P4).

‘Yes, it has improved me’ (P7).

However, some participants felt that programmes were not helpful in any way. They say these programmes are not helpful to reform because they do not fit the crime committed, these programmes are not designed to focus on each crime. They are a blanket approach for all types of crime. They are not tailor-made hence rehabilitation is not effective and it is leading to recidivism. Offenders who committed similar crimes should be grouped and be separated from those who committed a different crime. Then each group must be rehabilitated according to the crime that they committed. One participant commented by saying:

‘No, not really, the crime doesn’t fit the programme. Everyone has different situations. They should select people. they should group offenders’ (P5).

Participants were also asked if the programmes offered prepared them for the outside world and/or reintegration. This question was particularly asked to understand if the programme helped the female offender when they were released. Most participants attested that these programmes helped them when released from correctional services not to succumb to recidivism. They remarked as follows:

It prevented re-offending (P1).

Yes, they help, they assist to make life easier, it helps bring in money, it helps us survive, it helps us to learn to do things, like communicate and be friendly (P2).

Yes, beading for example changes your mind-set, it requires you to focus, and pay attention (P4).

Yes, anger management helped me to calm down and walk away (P10).
Participants alluded that some of these programmes helped them not to re-offend, helped them to make money through the beat work, and taught them anger management, to walk out of the altercation situations. The programmes also taught them to be friendly and have communication skills.

However, some participants felt that these programmes are not helping at all. They alluded to the fact that these programmes are not linked to the specific crime hence it is easy to commit a similar crime or another crime simply because these programmes are superficial. They do not deal with the crime causation and/or genesis but treat and focus on the symptoms. Most importantly one participant remarked to say, these programmes are not working at all. Offenders pretend as if they are rehabilitated to secure parole. It is all in the name of pretence. They pretend until they are believed to be rehabilitated to be given parole. This is surprising because the very same people who claim to be rehabilitated succumb to the crime again. Whether been caught or not.

‘No, they need to design programmes that link to the crime. Courses that help. Call it a crime, the impact of crime to family or communities’ (P5).

‘Re-offending happens after the courses, people come back are redo the same courses. They do them for the parole board, to meet parole requirements’ (P9).

This recalls the question of true rehabilitation and whether all the inmates and ex-convicts are truly rehabilitated. The evaluation is needed before and after the programmes have been offered. A pre-release and after reintegration evaluation and assessment are needed to determine if rehabilitation was effective to prevent recidivism.

The researchers wanted to find out from the participants if there are any shortcomings with the rehabilitation programmes they attended. Some participants realised no shortcomings. According to them, these programmes help them to meet the parole board requirement. This means that they are biased toward the programme because it is their bus ticket to be released. Therefore, they alluded that the programme has no shortcomings without providing valid reasons to substantiate their response even when being probed. On the other hand, some participants felt strongly on the issue of post-released. They alluded that the programme’s shortcomings are the lack of care after release, facilitators are not experienced and properly trained to offer these programmes, they don’t fit the crime as the blanket approach is being used, lack of psychologists to deal precisely with the depression and traumatic experiences and the fact that they don’t receive the certificates for the programmes or courses attended, etc. there is an outcry of the post-release care as to have these ex-convicts feel the need to be needed and cared of to prevent recidivism. They remark like the following:

Don’t fit the crime. Facilitators are not experienced. Programmes like self-image and anger management are done by pastors, they come and speak of GOD, which changes the focus of the programmes (P5).

There are courses done by officers. They don’t have time. It takes three days for a post-release course, there are things we need to know like, relationships, how do we deal with them (P1).

‘They should allow us to complete even after we have been released. They should offer programmes such as driving license and driving schools’ (P8).

They do not help, e.g., self-image is for someone that is depressed; however, the person needs to see a psychologist. We need to express how we are coping and feeling. There needs to be assistance, so we stay out of trouble (P9).

‘Programs should be extended post-release. People that are released also need development’ (P10).

The participants were asked for any suggestions to the correctional services on the improvement of their programme. Most participants remarked that correctional services should assist them in finding employment since they have a criminal record. They alluded that the programmes that they’re doing in the corrections should earn them certificates which will earn them employment. The lack of employment is the contributing factor to recidivism. They alluded that the programme has no shortcomings without providing valid reasons to substantiate their response even when being probed. On the other hand, some participants felt strongly on the issue of post-release. They alluded that the programme’s shortcomings are the lack of care after release, facilitators are not experienced and properly trained to offer these programmes, they don’t fit the crime as the blanket approach is being used, lack of psychologists to deal precisely with the depression and traumatic experiences and the fact that they don’t receive the certificates for the programmes or courses attended, etc. there is an outcry of the post-release care as to have these ex-convicts feel the need to be needed and cared of to prevent recidivism. They remark like the following:

They should help people to find jobs and get settled, this will prevent us from going back to crime (P1).

Help us deal with the stigma of corrections. We need help to find jobs, we want to work. Even if they can help us become cleaners in hospitals (P2).

They should create jobs for us when we are released. There should be a programme for ex-offenders Instead of supervisors coming to us to sign registers. We should do Agriculture or plant with the criminal record it is hard to get help or employment (P4).

Unemployment, it is hard to find a job with a criminal record. Even if you have a degree and experience. There is a need for community interventions, going back to the community and not being accepted by them. The community needs to be educated (P5).

It would help a lot if we invested in ourselves. DCS should help us set up businesses (P7).
Extend rehabilitation programmes till post-release. The government needs to subsidize, to stop re-offending we need to find work (P9).

They also alluded that the corrections would help them to deal with the corrections stigma when reintegrated. They are labelled and discriminated against simply because they come from prison. Community members distance themselves against these ex-convicts due to their criminal record, similarly, companies won’t hire them due to stigma and their criminal record. They are unwelcome and unaccepted by their communities.

**Results and Discussion**

The study finds the common risk factors among the female offenders, which included the following poverty, abusive relationships, unemployment, peer pressure, substance abuse, and greed. These risk factors contribute to women being involved in criminal activities. The factors predispose women to be vulnerable to commit crimes. However, not all these factors are casting stones for women involved in crime. The study further finds that other women are incarcerated due to self-defence in abusive relationships or marriages. They endure abuse in their everyday existence they end up taking matters into their hand as a defense but end up killing their partners. Van Dieten, Jones, and Randon (2014) assert that female criminality is a result of violent offenses committed against them in a form of intimate partner violence. Socio-economic factors on the other hand coupled with greed, and peer pressure during substance consumption precipitate the involvement of women in crime. The combination of these factors makes it a high probability for women to be involved in criminal activities. The future researcher may wish to interrogate the criminal genetic factor in women as having a significant role to play in facilitating women to be involved in crime.

The study finds that these women’s incarceration period has been frustrating and depressing. However, some of the programmes offered in the correctional centre help them to deal with the reality of their incarceration. Some of these programmes improved their spiritual and emotional well-being and helped them deal with their impulsive and angry behaviour. These programmes are scheduled daily which allowed time to pass and ease their frustration of being incarcerated. The programmes identified include HIV/AIDS, counselling, building stigma, traditional beads, sewing, cooking anger management pre-release programmes, self-esteem, family life, spiritual programmes, new beginnings, changing lanes, self-image, crossroads, Mandela Blanket Project, my-life, my-money, my-education, YMCA, peace education, Alpha course, restorative justice, craftwork, hospitality, decision making, and economic crime. It is imperative to note that many of the programmes offered were skills programmes. Offenders with higher-level education were allowed to further their education or continue their studies within the Centre. The findings painted a bleak picture due to a void that exists from the lack of gender responsive treatment and services available for women offenders. Furthermore, highlighted in the findings is the magnitude of the lack of understanding among most criminal justice policy makers regarding the actual need for this kind of service to the women offenders. To close the literature review, the current ideology of gender-responsive treatment is discussed to provide insight of its importance in regards to the successful reintegration of female offenders.

The programmes are not toiler made to crime specifications. The findings of this study identify also, the importance of knowing and understanding of the best practices to be adopted by the criminal justice professionals towards development of gender responsive treatment and services for women offenders. Every woman entering the correctional facility is subjected to these programmes irrespective of the nature of her offense(s). These programmes do not help in dealing with the core root of the problem that led these women to prison in the first instance. This was even reinforced by the participates stating that even though the programmes are successive to an extent. They lack individualisation attention which matches their offenses. These programmes are not linked to the specific crime hence it is easy to commit a similar crime or another crime simply because these programmes are superficial. They do not deal with the crime causation and/or genesis but treat and focus on the symptoms of the crime. They do not provide an indefinite solution to committing crimes. Consequently, these women will attend these programmes to meet parole requirements rather than being rehabilitated. This is very detrimental to the true nature of rehabilitation when inmates attend these programmes s for the sake of securing parole. This has the implication of recidivism that is highly experienced. For example, someone that shoplifts shows not to be attending anger management; she needs to follow something that will prevent shoplifting, she does not have an anger problem (Ragophala & Mofokeng, 2014).

A lack of tailor-made programmes has an impact on the true nature of rehabilitation and recidivism. Offenders were asked to propose programmes that they think would benefit their integration back into society. Their suggestions include programmes demonstrating ways to deal with family or social interactions post-release, as *life after incarceration is more difficult than rehabilitation centres*, Inmates need practical skills to address their socio-economic programmes, not to say they don’t need social skills programmes, however, these combined can make a great impact. Even so, these social skills programmes had some positive outcomes in some offenders as they refrained from reoffending. These programmes created a positive mind-set, acceptance of past, present, and future. It helps the inmates to deal with depression, enhance better communication, provided survival skills, financial education, and anger management. However, a very significant response stated that the programmes recycle offenders. For example, if a shoplifter does not have the skills to provide for herself, she undergoes anger management programmes. When she is released, she goes back and reverts to crime to feed her needs. This concludes in her back in correctional custody, repeating the similar rehabilitation programmes, released only to find herself back again. This recidivism could be traced to the shortcomings of the programmes s and the fact that they are cumbersome and do not deal with the crime specification.
According to Dissel (2008), recidivism in South Africa will remain high because the type of rehabilitation available in the country’s prisons is not effective and is almost non-existent. This is confirmed by Gaum, Hoffman, and Venter’s study of women incarcerated in Pollsmoor Prison in the Western Cape Province (South Africa) that demonstrated that the type of rehabilitation administered in prisons is having little positive outcome (Gaum, Hoffman & Venter, 2006). The DCS’s Corrections programmes aim to provide needs-based correctional sentence plans and interventions to offenders, however, there are no well-structured programmes to rehabilitate offenders, as well as Probation Officers, are not equipped to implement rehabilitation programmes as they apply one-size fits all approach. They apply the same programmes to different offenders who committed different crimes. This method creates more problems that end in recidivist behaviour. Gaum, Hoffman, and Venter (2006) further explain that rehabilitation programmes are often not effective because they continue to focus more on process than results. In other words, there is a focus on offenders attending programmes rather than on whether the programmes have the desired effect of changing the individuals’ behaviour.

The findings of this study have identified shortcomings of rehabilitation programmes administered to the inmates as follows: There is a lack of care after release, facilitators are not experienced and properly trained to offer these programmes, they don’t fit the crime as the blanket approach is being used, lack of psychologists to deal precisely with the depression and traumatic experiences, they don’t receive the certificates for the programmes or courses attended, some programmes are spiritually aligned, lacking logical, practical aspects of incarceration, which they have been forced to face, fail to help ex-convicts to settled during reintegration, and fail to help them deal with the stigma of criminality. These were some of the shortcomings alluded to by the participants. There is an outcry of some of these courses to be extended post released. There is a realisation that once released there is no care and follow-ups. They feel neglected as a result they find themselves prone to crime again. The transition from correction centres to society is not pleasurable. There are no extended rehabilitation programmes post-released, such as counselling, to help them adapt to new societal roles. As noted by Agboola (2014), female offenders face numerous challenges post-release. These challenges include unemployment, the stigma of criminality, psychological trauma, family isolation, and the reality of a criminal record. They also experience culture shock, depression, anger, social stigma, and the hardship of having a criminal record (Prison Fellowship Organisation, 2021).

**Conclusion**

This study looked at the pathway’s factors contributing to women becoming criminals and explored current rehabilitation programmes offered within South African correctional centres, as well as explored the experiences of female offenders within correctional centres. It was found that socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment coupled with other factors such as greed, substance abuse precipitate women to be involved in criminal activities. Most importantly this study notes that some women act in self-defence from abusive relationships by committing crimes of passion. The permanent eliminate the source of their abuse by killing their partners in self-defence. Given the heightened nature of GBV&F in South Africa, most women are compelled to take law into their own hands to protect themselves. The study also presented various rehabilitation programmes offered in the centres that are aiming to change the behaviours of incarcerated women. These social skills programmes afford the women an opportunity to turn from their old ways and become rehabilitators to be prepared for the reintegration back into society. Amongst these programmes are psychotherapeutic interventions, anger management, life skills, recreational and business skills. It was noted by the study that these programmes are not tailored-made to specific crimes each woman committed and have various shortcomings. They are generic and offered to any woman entering the correctional centre irrespective of the nature of her offense. These programmes are viewed and/or seen by the offenders as a gateway ticket to earn parole then be rehabilitated. The study notes the lack of monitoring and evaluation of these programme posts released ensuring a greater impact on the lives of the ex-convicts to prevent recidivism. This study also depicted the service provider of these programmes as not capacitated well enough to carry out this facilitation to the inmates. This needs to be revisited by the centres as it has an aversive to the effectiveness of rehabilitation to the inmates.

Female offenders expressed that the biggest challenge post-release is finding employment with a criminal record. Many stated that it is even hard to find a simple job as a cleaner, which doesn’t solicit any qualification. Their criminal record tent their image in an aversive way and enables them to enter the cooperate world to work for their families or at least to meet their basic needs. It is the very same challenge that precipitates a high number of recidivism. Even though these women could obtain qualifications in the correctional centre, their criminal records nullify those qualifications. They cannot use those qualifications to earn employment. This perpetuates this vicious circle of arrest and rearrested. For example, if an offender is unable to find employment, she will resort to crime to meet her needs, after that end up back into a correctional centre, repeat the same rehabilitation programme she attended, get parole, not find employment, and this would conclude in another crime to survive. “It is an unending vicious circle”

This study recommends a crime tailor-made programme rather than a blanket approach. Each programme must address each specific crime. A programme that will deal with the genesis of the problem rather than treating the symptoms. All the programmes must be revised to be crime-specific. Practical skills programmes must be factored into the already existing programmes. All the programmes facilitated must be capacitated well enough to be able to offer these programmes. Research posits that that correctional programming and other community services should address the needs of women; which in turn, would open the door for positive outcomes in terms of reducing recidivism, offer the chance of a better quality of life, and gain greater incentives to avoid the criminal lifestyle (Joiner, 2011). The findings of the review by the Florida Tech (2019) suggest that the CJS should be more attentive to the needs of prisoners who are released. Interventions that address mental health, ensure education and job training at prisons, as well as provide social
support post-release represent the most comprehensive approach to recidivism prevention. There must be a post-released programme that will monitor and evaluate the behaviour of ex-convicts to ensure proper rehabilitation. Inmates should obtain the certificates for the programmes they attended and be able to use them to apply for the peer education programmes.

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