Gender Differences in Criminal Recidivism

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Abstract: Gender plays a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of criminal behaviour and its recurrence within society. While the study of recidivism often focuses on general trends and risk factors, understanding how gender influences these patterns provides deeper insights into prevention and rehabilitation strategies.

This article examines gender differences in criminal behaviour and recidivism through a comprehensive review of the existing literature, empirical analyses of recidivism data, and qualitative insights from stakeholders within the criminal justice system. It also provides a review of relevant literature, synthesizing theoretical perspectives and empirical findings on gender differences in criminal behaviour.

Understanding the pathways to recidivism requires considering the unique challenges faced by male and female offenders upon release from incarceration or supervision. For men, recidivism often stems from factors such as peer influence, substance abuse, and difficulties in finding stable employment, while women are more likely to experience recidivism due to issues such as trauma-related disorders, a lack of social support, and limited access to resources for mental health treatment or housing. Moreover, the reintegration process for female offenders is complicated by responsibilities such as childcare and family reunification, which can influence their likelihood of reoffending. These gender-specific pathways highlight the need for tailored intervention programs that address the underlying causes of criminal behaviour and recidivism and provide support systems conducive to successful reintegration into society.

Keywords: criminality, criminal behaviour, recidivism, gender.

Graphical abstract
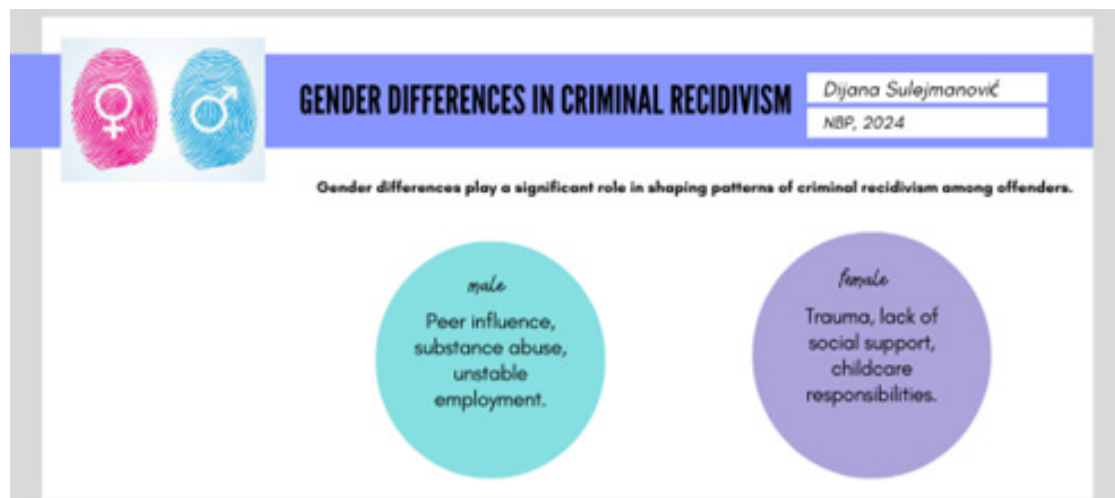
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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the study of criminal behaviour and recidivism has increasingly turned its focus towards understanding gender differences in offending patterns and reoffending rates. This exploration is crucial not only for the field of criminology but also for policy-makers and practitioners seeking effective interventions and rehabilitation strategies. The disparities observed between males and females in their propensity to reoffend are significant and multifaceted, influenced by biological, social, and psychological factors that intersect in complex ways.

Recidivism, broadly defined as the relapse into criminal behaviour after conviction and sentencing, presents a profound challenge to both societal stability and individual rehabilitation efforts (Petersilia, 2003). The measurement of recidivism varies across studies, encompassing rearrests, reconvictions, and reincarcerations within a specified timeframe post-release. This paper focuses on examining these measures through a gendered lens, aiming to uncover the underlying dynamics that contribute to differential outcomes between men and women involved in the criminal justice system.

METHODS

In methodological terms, this review study of gender differences in criminal behaviour, specifically focusing on criminal recidivism – that is, the recurrence of criminal behaviours after an individual has already been convicted and served a prison sentence for similar or related offenses in a correctional facility – will utilize a combination of several research methods.

A comprehensive search strategy will be used to identify relevant literature, with studies selected based on their relevance, methodological rigor, and focus on gender-specific factors influencing recidivism. Relevant literature will be reviewed by accessing academic databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, PsycINFO, and Web of Science, applying filters related to publication year and recency. Inclusion criteria will encompass research containing keywords like "criminal recidivism", "gender and criminal recidivism", and "criminal behaviour", limited to English-language publications from the past two decades to ensure relevance and currency.

Subsequent steps will involve a detailed examination of the results, where qualitative research will be analysed to identify and categorize topics related to how gender impacts recidivism. A comparative analysis will then assess findings across different studies to evaluate how gender-related factors contribute to recidivism in various contexts and to highlight significant gender differences. Each of these methods offers unique perspectives and will be integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of how gender influences criminal recidivism. Finally, a theoretical analysis will interpret these findings within the context of gender-related determinants of criminal recidivism, examining the underlying mechanisms driving gender disparities in criminal behaviour.

GENDER AND CRIMINAL RECIDIVISM: THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Gendered criminal recidivism encompasses the complex interplay of psychological, social, and environmental factors that influence patterns of repeated offending among different genders. This chapter explores the theoretical frameworks within psychology that contribute to our understanding of why and how men and women engage in criminal behaviour differently and how these factors impact recidivism rates.

Historically, criminology has predominantly focused on male offenders, leading to a gap in understanding the unique pathways to crime and recidivism for women. Men are statistically more likely to engage in violent crimes, property offenses, and drug-related activities compared to women (Streb et al., 2022). Early theories posited that female criminality was an anomaly, largely explained by deviations from traditional gender roles or influenced by male counterparts. When women do commit crimes, their offenses often differ significantly from those of men. Female offenders tend to be involved in crimes such as prostitution, drug offenses related to addiction, and crimes driven by coercive relationships or survival strategies (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 2021). However, contemporary research has increasingly acknowledged the distinct factors contributing to female criminality, highlighting the importance of gender-responsive approaches in criminal justice policy and practice (Bloom et al., 2004; Van Voorhis et al., 2010; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013).

Various theoretical frameworks offer insights into the gendered nature of recidivism. Psychological theories propose that men and women may engage in criminal behaviour through different pathways influenced by societal expectations, psychological traits, and life experiences. According to cognitive-behavioural theories, individuals learn criminal behaviours through social interactions and may differ in their responses to stimuli based on gender norms and roles (Bandura, 1977). Social learning theory suggests that criminal behaviour is learned through interactions with others, influenced by gender-specific socialization processes (Bandura, 1977; de Carvalho & Ossorio, 2021). This perspective suggests that gender-specific socialization processes contribute to differential risk factors for recidivism among men and women. Social learning theory posits that individuals learn behaviours through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Also, gendered expectations and roles within families, peer groups, and communities shape criminal behaviour patterns differently for men and women. For example, men may receive reinforcement for aggressive behaviours, whereas women may learn criminal behaviour through relational aggression or survival strategies in marginalized communities. Differential association theory posits that criminal behaviour is influenced by the intensity, frequency, and duration of interactions with deviant peers, which may vary between genders (Alduraywish, 2021). Intersectional perspectives further emphasize how race, class, and other social identities intersect with gender to shape criminal outcomes (Blasdell, 2015).

The causes of recidivism are multifaceted, encompassing a range of individual, social, and systemic factors (Yukhnenko et al., 2023). For men, factors such as substance abuse, prior criminal history, and socioeconomic disadvantage often play prominent roles (Durose et al., 2020). In contrast, women's pathways to recidivism may be shaped by experiences of trauma, victimization, mental health disorders, and caretaking responsibilities (Bloom et al., 2004). Understanding these differential risk factors is essential for developing targeted interventions that address the specific needs of each gender group.

The motivations behind criminal behaviour also vary by gender. Men often commit crimes driven by power, dominance, or financial gain, whereas women may engage in criminal activities as a result of trauma, abuse, or to meet the needs of their families (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013). Understanding the pathways to recidivism requires considering the unique challenges faced by male and female offenders upon release from incarceration or supervision. For men, recidivism often stems from factors such as peer influence, substance abuse, and difficulties in finding stable employment (Van Voorhis et al., 2010). In contrast, women are more likely to experience recidivism due to issues such as trauma-related disorders, lack of social support, and limited access to resources for mental health treatment or housing (Bloom et al., 2004).

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN CRIMINAL RECIDIVISM AMONG YOUNG OFFENDERS

Understanding criminal recidivism among young offenders requires a nuanced examination of how gender influences offending behaviours, reoffending rates, and the effectiveness of intervention strategies. Understanding criminal recidivism among young offenders is crucial for developing effective interventions and policies aimed at reducing repeat offenses and promoting rehabilitation. Research consistently shows that males are more likely than females to engage in criminal behaviour across various types of offenses. Violent crimes, property crimes, and drug-related offenses are particularly prevalent among young males (Turnbull, 2019). Young males are at higher risk of recidivism due to a combination of social, psychological, and environmental factors. These include (Aalsma et al., 2016; Cernkovich & Giordano, 2017):

– **Social Influences**: Peer relationships and exposure to deviant peers play a significant role in shaping criminal behaviour and increasing the likelihood of reoffending;

– **Economic Factors**: Unemployment and economic instability contribute to the likelihood of young males returning to criminal activities as a means of financial support;

– **Psychological Factors**: Issues such as impulsivity, aggression, and a lack of effective coping mechanisms increase the risk of recidivism among young males.

In adolescence and young adulthood, males are more frequently involved in criminal activities such as violent crimes, property offenses, and drug-related offenses compared to females (Cernkovich & Giordano, 2017). The motivations behind these behaviours often differ by gender, with males typically driven by factors such as peer influence, thrill-seeking, and status enhancement. Young male offenders are often at higher risk of recidivism due to factors such as persistent antisocial behaviour, substance abuse issues, and challenges in educational and vocational attainment (Hoeve et al., 2013). In contrast, while females generally have lower rates of criminal involvement, female offenders at a young age may be more likely to engage in criminal behaviour due to experiences of abuse, victimization, dysfunctional family environments (Zahn et al., 2010), mental health issues stemming from trauma or adverse childhood experiences (Schubert et al., 2011), or substance abuse (Goodrum et al., 2022).

The transition from adolescence to adulthood poses additional challenges for both genders, including difficulties in securing stable employment, housing instability, and maintaining positive social relationships (Aalsma et al., 2016). These factors can impede successful reintegration into society and increase the risk of continued criminal behaviour. Understanding gender differences in criminal recidivism among young offenders is essential for developing targeted interventions that address the unique needs and challenges faced by both males and females. By adopting gender-responsive approaches that take into account socio-economic, psychological, and environmental factors, policymakers and practitioners can work towards reducing recidivism rates and promoting successful rehabilitation outcomes.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN CRIMINAL RECIDIVISM AMONG ADULTS

Gender-related criminal recidivism reflects the complex interplay of individual factors, social environments, and systemic challenges within the criminal justice system. By acknowledging and addressing these gender differences, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can develop more effective strategies for reducing recidivism rates and promoting successful reintegration for all offenders. Future research should continue to explore gender-specific pathways to recidivism and evaluate the effectiveness of gender-responsive interventions in fostering positive outcomes. Ultimately, fostering a more equitable and supportive criminal justice system requires a nuanced understanding of how gender influences criminal behaviour and recidivism patterns.

Unlike men, females commit less serious criminal offences, such as theft, handling stolen goods, drug offences, prostitution, fraud, forgery, and minor motoring offences (Burman et al., 2001). Also, women who commit crimes, in most cases, do so for the first time and only a small number of women could fall into the category of professional perpetrators.

Criminal recidivism among adults varies significantly by gender, influenced by distinct pathways to offending and reoffending behaviours. Understanding these gender differences is crucial for developing effective interventions and policies aimed at reducing recidivism rates and promoting successful reintegration into society.

Historically, males have been overrepresented in criminal behaviour, particularly in violent crimes, property offenses, and drug-related offenses (Van Voorhis et al., 2010). Their offending patterns often reflect a propensity for risk-taking, aggression, and involvement in criminal subcultures. In contrast, female offenders tend to engage in less violent offenses such as property crimes, fraud, and drug-related offenses driven by different motivations such as poverty, substance abuse, or coercive relationships (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 2021).

Adult males are more likely to recidivate due to factors such as persistent antisocial behaviour, substance abuse disorders, and difficulties in securing stable employment and housing (Van Voorhis et al., 2010). Peer influence and association with criminal networks also contribute significantly to male recidivism rates (Piquero & Bouffard, 2007). For adult females, recidivism risks are often exacerbated by experiences of trauma, victimization, mental health issues, and challenges related to childcare and family responsibilities (Bloom et al., 2004).

The re-entry process for both genders presents significant challenges, including stigma, limited access to supportive services, and barriers to employment and education (Richie, 2012). Addressing these gender-specific pathways requires tailored interventions that address underlying causes and provide comprehensive support for successful community reintegration. Gender differences play a significant role in shaping patterns of criminal recidivism among adults, influencing offending behaviours, pathways to recidivism, and the effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts. By adopting gender-responsive approaches within the criminal justice system, policymakers and practitioners can enhance the outcomes of re-entry programs and promote successful community reintegration for all offenders.

Future research should continue to explore the intersection of gender, criminal behaviour, and recidivism among adults to inform evidence-based practices and policies. Ultimately, fostering a supportive and equitable approach to rehabilitation is essential in reducing recidivism rates and promoting the long-term well-being of individuals involved in the justice system.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF CRIMINAL RECIDIVISM

Social contexts significantly impact the likelihood of criminal recidivism among both genders. For men, the influence of peers and exposure to criminal subcultures can perpetuate a cycle of criminal behaviour. In contrast, women often experience social isolation and stigmatization upon release, which can hinder their efforts to desist from crime (Richie, 2012). The lack of gender-responsive programs within the criminal justice system further exacerbates these challenges, limiting opportunities for rehabilitation and reducing the effectiveness of re-entry initiatives.

Addressing the impact of social contexts requires a holistic approach that considers the specific needs of male and female offenders. Programs that promote community engagement, provide vocational training, and offer mental health support tailored to gender-specific issues are essential in reducing recidivism rates and promoting long-term success.

In the research of criminal behaviour and recidivism, understanding the intricate interplay between individuals and their social environment is crucial. Social networks play a pivotal role in shaping an individual's behaviour, including their propensity to reengage in criminal activities. For many offenders, returning to familiar social circles after release from incarceration can either support their rehabilitation or reinforce deviant behaviour. Peer influence, particularly from those involved in criminal activities, can exert significant pressure on individuals, making it challenging to break free from patterns of offending. Research indicates that strong family and community ties can act as protective factors, reducing the likelihood of recidivism (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Conversely, individuals who lack stable social support systems may face heightened risks of reoffending. The quality of relationships, levels of social integration, and the availability of positive role models all contribute to shaping post-release outcomes.

Economic disadvantage and limited access to resources are closely linked to higher rates of recidivism. Individuals from low-income backgrounds often confront barriers such as limited job opportunities, inadequate housing, and insufficient access to healthcare or education (Lazar & Davenport, 2018). These structural inequalities not only hinder success-

ful reintegration but also increase the likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviour as a means of survival or coping with adversity. Furthermore, disparities in access to rehabilitation programs and legal assistance can perpetuate cycles of recidivism among marginalized populations. Addressing these socioeconomic inequities is essential for promoting long-term rehabilitation and reducing recidivism rates (Balafoutas et al., 2020).

The stigma associated with a criminal record can present significant challenges for individuals attempting to reintegrate into society. Discrimination in employment, housing, and social interactions can create barriers to opportunities and increase feelings of alienation and hopelessness. Consequently, some individuals may revert to criminal behaviour as a result of limited legitimate options or perceived lack of acceptance. Successful reintegration efforts require a multifaceted approach that includes providing support services, promoting community acceptance, and combating negative stereotypes. Building inclusive communities that embrace diversity and offer second chances is instrumental in fostering positive outcomes for individuals with a history of criminal involvement. The social context of criminal recidivism is multifaceted and deeply intertwined with individual experiences, community dynamics, and systemic factors. By recognizing and addressing the complex interplay of social influences, policymakers, practitioners, and communities can work together to create supportive environments that promote rehabilitation, reduce recidivism rates, and foster positive outcomes for individuals transitioning from incarceration to society. Through collaborative efforts and evidence-based practices, we can strive towards a more equitable and just criminal justice system that supports the long-term success of all individuals.

PERSONALITY DIFFERENCES AMONG MALE AND FEMALE CRIMINAL RECIDIVISTS

According to Beaver et al. (2017), personality refers to the stability of individuals in regard to patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Personality traits play a significant role in shaping behaviours, including criminal conduct and recidivism. Understanding how personality differences vary between male and female recidivists can provide insights into the underlying factors contributing to repeat offending. Research indicates that certain personality traits are associated with increased risk of criminal behaviour and recidivism (Tharshini et al., 2021). For example, traits such as impulsivity, sensation-seeking, and low empathy are common among individuals with a history of criminal offenses (Miller & Lynam, 2012). These traits may manifest differently in males and females, influencing their pathways to criminal behaviour and reoffending.

While there is considerable overlap in personality traits between genders, differences exist in their expression and prevalence among male and female recidivists. Male offenders often exhibit higher levels of aggression, dominance, and risk-taking behaviours compared to females (Archer, 2004). These traits are associated with violent and property crimes, as well as antisocial conduct that contributes to recidivism. In contrast, female offenders may display traits such as dependency, relational aggression, and emotional dysregulation, which are linked to offenses related to survival, substance abuse, or exploitation. The interplay of these personality traits with environmental factors such as trauma, poverty, and

social marginalization further influences women's pathways to criminal behaviour and recidivism (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 2021).

Understanding the personality profiles of male and female recidivists is essential for designing effective intervention and rehabilitation programs. Gender-responsive approaches that address the specific personality traits and underlying motivations for criminal behaviour can enhance treatment outcomes. For example, cognitive-behavioural therapies tailored to address impulsivity and aggression in males, and trauma-informed care and emotion regulation strategies for females, have shown promise in reducing recidivism rates (Bloom et al., 2004).

According to personality theories, criminal behaviour is linked to the presence of certain personality traits or a specific criminal personality. In the study of criminology, understanding the interplay between personality traits and criminal behaviour is essential for comprehending the complexities of human actions and motivations. Personality traits, often considered stable patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving, can significantly influence an individual's likelihood of engaging in criminal activities.

Central to the exploration of personality and criminal behaviour are the Big Five personality traits: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (OCEAN model). Each of these traits represents a spectrum along which individuals can exhibit varying degrees of characteristic behaviours and tendencies. Studies consistently show that low Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, but high Neuroticism predicts antisocial behaviours (O'Riordan & O'Connell, 2014; Sleep, 2021), apropos increase of aggression, mental distress, and antisocial behaviour among individuals.

Therefore, high *Openness to Experience* implies that these individuals are imaginative, curious, and open-minded. They are often drawn to novel experiences and ideas. In terms of criminal behaviour, high openness may manifest in risk-taking behaviours or experimentation with illicit activities. *Conscientiousness* as a trait reflects self-discipline, organization, and goal-directed behaviour. High conscientiousness is associated with reliability and adherence to rules. Conversely, individuals low in conscientiousness may exhibit impulsivity and a lack of self-control, predisposing them to criminal acts such as theft or substance abuse. *Extraversion* means that extraverts are outgoing, sociable, and energized. They often seek stimulation from the external environment and enjoy social interactions. This trait has been linked to certain types of criminal behaviour, such as crimes of passion or crimes committed in social settings (Miller & Lynam, 2012). Studies show also that prisoners show lower *Agreeableness* than non-prisoners (Eriksson et al., 2017), and **h**igher levels of *Neuroticism* have been linked to emotional instability and impulsivity, which can contribute to criminal behaviour.

Beyond the Big Five, certain personality disorders have also been implicated in criminal behaviour. For instance, individuals diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder (APD) often display traits such as deceitfulness, impulsivity, and a disregard for the rights of others, which can predispose them to engage in criminal acts (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Research suggests that while certain personality traits are associated with criminal behaviour regardless of gender, there are notable differences in how these traits manifest between men and women. For example, gender differences in Conscientiousness are relatively small but may contribute to variations in criminal tendencies (Costa et al., 2001),

while women generally tend to score higher on neuroticism compared to men (Feingold, 1994). Societal norms and gender role expectations can influence how personality traits are expressed and how individuals interact with their environment. Traditional gender roles may influence the types of criminal behaviours individuals are more likely to engage in. Understanding the nuanced relationship between personality traits, gender, and criminal behaviour is crucial for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies.

In addition to the OCEAN or Big Five theoretical model of personality, the HEXACO model is widely applied today. This concept introduces the dimension of Honesty/Humility, which was not present in the five-factor models of personality, while retaining the other dimensions – Emotionality (analogous to former Neuroticism), Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience (Ashton & Lee, 2007). The HEXACO model offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how personality traits contribute to criminal behaviour, with gender differences adding a layer of complexity. By examining these dimensions, researchers can better tailor interventions and strategies to prevent crime and rehabilitate offenders based on gender-specific personality profiles. Research into personality traits and criminal behaviour using the HEXACO model suggests nuanced differences between men and women in how some of these traits relate to criminality:

Honesty-Humility – Individuals scoring low on this trait may exhibit tendencies towards deceitfulness, manipulation, and entitlement, which are associated with increased likelihood of recidivism. Research indicates that low honesty-humility predicts higher rates of reoffending due to continued engagement in dishonest or exploitative behaviours (Lee & Ashton, 2012).

Emotionality – High emotionality is associated with anxiety, fearfulness, and vulnerability to stress. While women generally score higher on emotionality compared to men, its direct link to criminal behaviour may involve emotional impulsivity or reactive aggression. These traits may contribute to impulsive behaviour and difficulty managing emotions, increasing the risk of recidivism, especially in response to stressful situations.

Conscientiousness as a trait reflects a lack of self-discipline, reliability, and goal-directed behaviour. Individuals low in conscientiousness may struggle with impulse control and adherence to rules, contributing to repeated criminal behaviours. Studies have consistently found low conscientiousness to be a significant predictor of recidivism (De Vries et al., 2009).

The HEXACO model provides a comprehensive framework to understand how personality traits influence behaviours, including criminal recidivism. Recent research continues to explore how HEXACO traits interact with environmental factors to influence criminal behaviour and recidivism rates. Understanding these personality dimensions provides valuable insights for developing targeted interventions aimed at reducing recidivism. Studies examining the HEXACO traits in relation to criminal recidivism provide valuable insights into the underlying psychological mechanisms influencing repeated criminal behaviour. By understanding these personality dimensions, interventions can be tailored to address specific risk factors associated with recidivism. Understanding how personality traits contribute to criminal behaviour is a complex and evolving area of research. While personality alone does not determine criminality, it provides valuable insights into the predispositions and motivations behind criminal acts. Future research should continue to explore these relationships to develop effective strategies for crime prevention and rehabilitation.

CONCLUSION

Recent studies confirm that men are more likely to reoffend than women (Collins, 2010; Maden et al., 2018; Bell et al., 2019), with male recidivism rates significantly surpassing female rates in violent and property crimes. Researchers found that male criminal behaviour is often linked to a combination of socio-economic factors and psychological traits such as antisocial personality disorder (Fakhrzadegan et al., 2017; Wong, 2023). In contrast, female criminal pathways are more frequently associated with experiences of trauma, abuse, and economic marginalization (Comack, 2018). Women are more likely to commit offenses related to survival, such as theft or drug-related crimes, often as a response to socioeconomic pressures and personal hardships.

Understanding gender differences in recidivism has important policy implications. Gender-responsive rehabilitation programs have been shown to be more effective in reducing recidivism among female offenders. Covington (2008) argues that programs tailored to address the specific needs of women, such as those incorporating trauma-informed care and gender-sensitive approaches, significantly improve outcomes, and this includes developing support systems that address trauma and economic instability. For male offenders, policies should focus on effective behavioural interventions and support for substance abuse recovery, and rehabilitation strategies often focus on behavioural interventions and cognitive-behavioural approaches. Mpofu et al. (2018) found that such programs, which emphasize skill development and cognitive restructuring, are effective in reducing recidivism among men. However, there remains a need for programs that also address socio-economic factors and provide comprehensive support for reintegration into society.

In summary, the gender differences play a significant role in shaping patterns of criminal recidivism among offenders. Men are generally more likely to reoffend, with their criminal behaviours often driven by different factors compared to women. Women's recidivism is closely linked to trauma and socio-economic challenges, necessitating specialized rehabilitative approaches. By recognizing these differences and implementing targeted interventions that address the underlying causes of offending behaviour, policymakers and practitioners can enhance the effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts and promote positive outcomes for males and females involved in the justice system. Prevention of criminal recidivism should certainly be based on treatments that include restructuring the existing patterns of thinking, reacting, and behaving, and future research should continue to explore the intersection of gender, developmental pathways, and recidivism among offenders to inform evidence-based practices and policies.

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