

Systematic Review Methodology for Patterns of Offending in Adults with Intellectual Disability

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Abstract

Adults with intellectual disability are disproportionately represented in criminal justice systems, yet evidence on their offending patterns remains fragmented. This systematic review aimed to synthesize empirical findings on offence types, trajectories, associated risk factors, and criminal justice responses among adults with intellectual disability. A systematic review was conducted in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Searches of PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and Criminal Justice Abstracts identified 670 records. After duplicate removal, 192 unique records were screened by title and abstract, followed by full-text assessment of 54 articles. A total of fifteen studies that passed the inclusion criteria were included in the qualitative synthesis. Studies that passed the eligibility criteria included all adult (≥ 18 years) and diagnosed with intellectual disability studies that had quantitative or qualitative offending patterns or justice observations reported. Study selection, data extraction, and quality appraisal were performed independently by two reviewers. The heterogeneity in the study design and outcome measures led to a narrative synthesis. Studies that included had found increased cases of adults with intellectual disability in violent and sexual offending that were mostly correlated with psychiatric comorbidity, autism spectrum disorder, adverse childhood experiences, and social disadvantage. Incidents were usually unplanned and more spontaneous than planned. Institutional and forensic pathways prevailed, and even moderate offences were noted to be held in long periods of detention. There was little evidence on recidivism and the gender-specific route. Modularized cognitive behavioural interventions were shown to be slightly effective, especially in the case of sexual offending. Adult intellectual disability offending is cumulative in vulnerability and systemic as opposed to criminal intent. The community-based interventions and disability-informed practices in justice are required to lessen the criminalization and enhance the results.

Keywords Intellectual Disability, Offending Patterns, Criminal Justice Involvement, Systematic Review, Forensic Psychiatry.

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Introduction

Adults with Intellectual Disability (ID) are disproportionately represented within criminal justice systems across many jurisdictions. The studies have continuously indicated that people with ID have an increased rate of criminal justice involvement at an early age, recidivism, and poor legal results relative to the general population [1]. These differences have been frequently explained by a complicated interplay of personal, social, and structural influences, such as cognitive disabilities, communicative problems, poor adaptive functioning, socio-economic deprivation, comorbid mental health disorders, and susceptibility to exploitation or coercion [2].

The patterns of offending of adults with ID have significant distinctions in comparison with those of non-disabled groups. Prior studies suggest a higher prevalence of minor, impulsive, or reactive offences, such as property-related crimes, public order offences, and interpersonal violence, alongside lower rates of sophisticated or premeditated criminal behavior [3]. Additionally, offending trajectories among adults with ID are often shaped by unmet support needs, inadequate access to appropriate services, and insufficient recognition of intellectual disability by criminal justice professionals. Despite growing attention to these issues, findings across studies remain fragmented, methodologically heterogeneous, and occasionally contradictory, limiting their utility for evidence-based policy and practice [4].

The main aim of the systematic review is to integrate the current empirical data on the trends of offending in intellectually disabled adults [5]. In particular, the review will determine the nature, frequency, and nature of offending by adults with ID, consider the risk and protective variables, and evaluate how the pattern of offending is different in different contexts, study designs, and comparison groups. Through a systematic synthesis of the results of various studies, this review aims to offer a consistent and thorough knowledge of offending behaviors among this population [6].

Despite the fact that a lot of studies have been conducted to explore criminal behavior in adults with ID, the literature is characterized by some significant gaps. First, existing research often focuses on prevalence or over-representation without systematically analyzing offending patterns, such as offence typology, severity, repetition, and developmental trajectories. Second, the definitions of intellectual disability, sampling methods, and comparison groups are diverse in the studies, making it difficult to compare them across studies [7]. Third, it is also deficient in integrative reviews that critically evaluate the quality of the methodology as well as synthesize the results across jurisdictions and justice contexts. Due to this, there is no integrated evidence base which presents a clear description of when, why, and how adults with ID perpetrate offending behaviour [8].

The hypothesis that leads to the selection of this systematic review is that the offending patterns between adults with intellectual disability are qualitatively and quantitatively different compared to those of the general offending population. The theory assumes that adults with ID have higher chances of engaging in low-level or opportunistic and impulse offences, and offending is highly dependent on social vulnerability, unmet support needs, and barriers in the system, as opposed to intentional criminal behaviour [9]. Furthermore, it is anticipated that variations in observed offending patterns are partly attributable to differences in study methodology and criminal justice contexts [10][11].

There are various significant contributions to the discipline made in this review. First, it gives the initial systematic synthesis, particularly on the patterns of offending in adults with intellectual disability as opposed to prevalence alone. Second, it appraises methodological procedures applied in the literature critically, pointing out the sources of bias and inconsistency. Third, the review brings together the evidence body in health, social care, and criminal justice spheres to determine repetitive patterns of offence and factors. Lastly, the findings have practical implications for policy makers, clinicians, and criminal justice professionals and can guide the formation of more informed risk assessment, diversion measures, and specific interventions with adults with ID.

The article is designed to undertake a systematic study of the trends in offending in intellectually disabled adults. The introduction gives the background, rationale, purposes, and assumptions on which the review was carried out. The Literature Survey provides an overview of the important empirical and review-based findings and presents gaps in the known information. The systematic review design, eligibility criteria, search strategy, study selection, quality appraisal, and synthesis strategy have been described in the Materials

and Methods section as per the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The results section includes the characteristics of the study, offence patterns, sentencing pathways, risk factors, and intervention outcomes. Discussion reflects findings in clinical and justice settings. The conclusion brings up the main lessons and provides research, policy, and practice implications.

Literature Survey

Empirical studies always show that adults with ID are overrepresented in criminal justice and forensic psychiatric systems, and their offending pattern is quite different from that of the general population. Population-level and register-based studies offer strong evidence on the type of offence and the results of sentencing. It was reported by [1] that people with ID in forensic psychiatric scenarios were largely convicted of violent and sexual crimes and were given longer or stricter sentences, even for less sophisticated criminal activities. Likewise, [4], based on a large cohort of people with ID, estimated high risks of violent and sexual offending in adults with ID, and much lower rates of victimization, which also makes the adult population with ID vulnerable in both directions.

There is also longitudinal cohort evidence to indicate a huge clinical and forensic service burden. The study of [5] showed that ID persons who committed criminal offences needed a long-term involvement of psychiatric/correctional services throughout the life course, which signified a chronic support requirement instigated by chronic criminal acts instead of a sporadic criminal activity. Findings that have been made on repeat offending support this. A greater prevalence of ID was reported to exist in violent repeat offenders, with offending having a close relationship with comorbid psychopathology, low self-sufficiency, and social disadvantage [6].

Intervention-focused literature sheds light on offence-specific patterns, particularly sexual offending. [3] showed that cognitive-behavioural group interventions for men with ID and sexual offending histories produced modest but significant reductions in dynamic risk factors, suggesting that such offending is amenable to structured support rather than punitive approaches. Complementary evidence from schema-focused and psychological reviews indicates that maladaptive cognitive and emotional processes are common among sexual and violent offenders, although ID-specific pathways remain underexplored [8].

More comprehensive systematic reviews are focused on contextual and systemic effects. Inpatient psychiatric care reviews [12] and forensic service provision reviews [14] represent variability in identifying, providing treatment, and referring people with neurodevelopmental disabilities to safe places. Abuse, victimization, and negative childhood experiences and trauma researchers also show that adults with ID are often the victims of prior trauma, neglect, and abuse, which have a very high correlation with future offending and involvement in justice [10][18].

Despite this growing body of evidence, the literature remains fragmented across offence types, age groups, and diagnostic categories, with many reviews focusing on juveniles, autism, or specific offences rather than synthesizing overall offending patterns in adults with ID. This fragmentation underscores the need for a systematic review that consolidates evidence on offence typology, trajectories, and associated factors specific to adults with intellectual disability.

Materials and Methods

Study Design and Review Framework

This research adopted a systematic review approach in order to generalize available empirical data on the trends of offending among adults with intellectual disability. The aim of the review was to identify, compare, and critically assess types of offences, trajectories, and contextual factors of offending behavior in this group of the population. The used methodology was identified as a systematic review, which used guidance, and the report was presented in line with the Preferred Reporting Items of a Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) 2020 statement to provide transparency, reproducibility, and methodological plausibility.

Eligibility Criteria

All studies meeting the following criteria were eligible: they had to deal with adults aged 18 years and above with a known intellectual disability and provide quantitative or qualitative measures of criminal offending behavior, the nature of offenses, or the involvement of the justice system. Intellectual disability was classified based on the standardized diagnostic criteria, such as ICD, DSM, or other forms of clinical or legal definitions applied within the context of the study. The study designs that were considered eligible were cross-sectional studies, cohort studies, case and control studies, register-based studies, and qualitative studies with offence-related outcomes. The exclusion criteria involved reviews, editorial articles, opinion articles, single-case reports, and studies that dealt exclusively with juveniles or mixed groups of disabilities and did not offer disaggregated information.

Information Sources and Search Strategy

An extensive search of the literature in several electronic databases was carried out in PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and Criminal Justice Abstracts. Search was done up to the latest date before final analysis through the database. The search strategy involved related controlled vocabulary and free-text keywords that related to intellectual disability, offending behavior, crime patterns, and criminal justice involvement. Included studies and relevant reviews' reference lists were manually screened to come up with other eligible articles. The full search strategy was developed iteratively to maximize sensitivity and was adapted to suit the indexing structure of each database.

Study Selection Process

All retrieved records were imported into reference management software, and duplicates were removed prior to screening. Titles and abstracts were independently screened by two reviewers against the predefined eligibility criteria. Full texts of potentially relevant studies were subsequently assessed for inclusion. Discrepancies at any stage of screening were resolved through discussion, and where necessary, consultation with a third reviewer. Factors that led to the exclusion at the full-text level were recorded to promote transparency in the selection of studies.

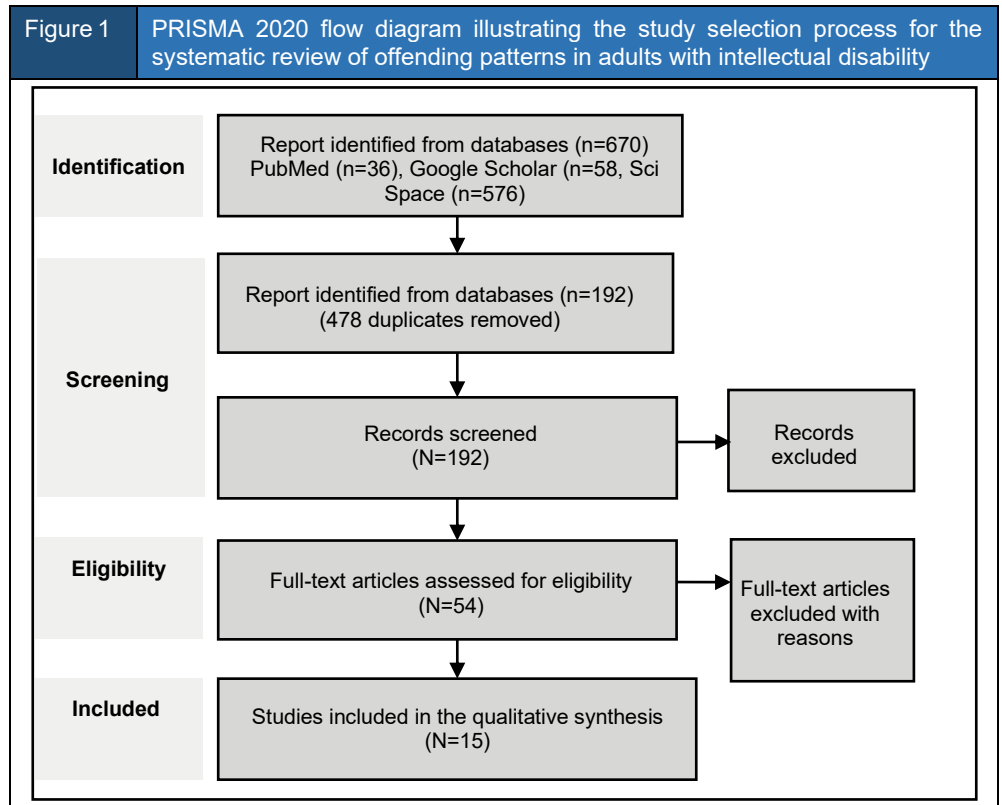


Figure 1 PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the study selection process for the systematic review on patterns of offending in adults with intellectual disability. The figure is the summary of identifying records based on electronic databases, eliminating the duplicates, screening

titles and abstracts, evaluating the full-text articles on the basis of their eligibility, and concluding the inclusions of studies to the qualitative synthesis.

Data Extraction

Data extraction was performed using a standardized and pilot-tested extraction form. The information extracted was the characteristics of the study, geographic area, sample size, demographics of the participants, definition and severity of intellectual disability, source of data, offence type, frequency and patterns of offending, comparison group where necessary, and important findings. In the case of qualitative studies, themes brought out were connected to the offending behavior, contextual factors, and the interactions with the justice system. Two reviewers performed data extraction to reduce the possibility of errors and bias.

Quality Assessment and Risk of Bias

The study quality was not evaluated, but it relied on the relevant appraisal tools according to the study design. Selection bias, measurement validity, confounding control, and reporting quality of quantitative studies, and credibility, reflexivity, and analytical rigor were used to evaluate qualitative studies. Quality rating was given to each of the studies, and results were interpolated in the face of the risk of bias. Quality assessment was not used as a criterion for exclusion, but informed the strength of evidence synthesis.

Data Synthesis and Analysis

Given the heterogeneity in study designs, outcome measures, and offence classifications, a narrative synthesis approach was adopted. The patterns of offending were synthesized as classification of offences was conducted as violent, sexual, property-related, and non-violent non-sexual offences. Comparisons between non-disabled offender populations and those of disabled individuals were described where feasible. The synthesis also studied the relationships between offending patterns and other factors like gender, age, extent of intellectual disability, comorbid mental health conditions, as well as the social or institutional conditions. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize quantitative findings, whereas qualitative findings were combined thematically to add context.

Reporting and Transparency

A detailed documentation of the review process was done in order to make the process replicable. The search results, screening decisions, and inclusion of studies were reported according to PRISMA 2020. Any variations of the initial review protocol were clearly mentioned and explained.

Results

Study Selection

The systematic search across electronic databases identified a total of 670 records. Following the removal of duplicates, 192 unique records were screened based on titles and abstracts. Of these, 54 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. After full-text review, 15 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the qualitative synthesis. Reasons for exclusion at the full-text stage included absence of disaggregated data for adults with intellectual disability, focus on juvenile populations, or lack of offence-related outcomes. The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Figure 1) summarizes the process of the study selection.

Characteristics of Included Studies

The studies included were published between 2020 and 2025 and reflected the studies that were conducted mostly in Europe, with some contributions from Australia and North America. Population-based cohort studies, national register-based studies, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and qualitative or mixed-method studies in the forensic or correctional setting were all eligible as study designs. The sample sizes were also very different, with some researchers having small clinical groups and others having national birth cohorts of more than 10,000 participants. The definition of intellectual disability was developed with the help of clinical diagnostic criteria, legal classification, or service eligibility records. A number of studies looked at intellectual disability as an independent condition, whereas some studies looked at overlapping populations with autism spectrum disorder or as concomitant mental health conditions.

Table 1 provides an overview of the included studies with the disclosure of their geographic coverage, methodologies, study populations, and analytical priority with regard to offending habits and criminal justice engagement among adults with intellectual disability and associated neurodevelopmental disorders.

Table 1	Summary characteristics of included studies			
Author (Year)	Country/Region	Study Design	Population	Primary Focus
Edberg et al. (2022)	Sweden	Register-based study	Adults with ID in forensic psychiatry	Crime types and sentencing
Latvala et al. (2023)	Sweden	Population cohort	Adults with ID	Violent and sexual crime
Hodgins et al. (2024)	Nordic countries	Birth cohort	Adults with ID and mental disorders	Criminal convictions and service burden
Verheijen et al. (2021)	Netherlands	Cross-sectional	Violent repeat offenders with ID	Psychopathology and self-sufficiency
Heppell et al. (2020)	UK	Meta-analysis	Men with ID	Sexual offending and interventions
Collins et al. (2021)	UK	Systematic review	Adults with ID/ASD	Fire-setting behaviour
Tingate et al. (2025)	International	Systematic review	Women with cognitive disabilities	Recidivism and reintegration
Chester et al. (2025)	International	Systematic review	Autistic adults	Forensic and justice involvement
Margari et al. (2024)	International	Systematic review	ASD populations	Sexual offending
Salter & Blainey (2024)	International	PRISMA review	Adults with ASD	Intervention effectiveness

Patterns of Offending Among Adults with Intellectual Disability

Violent and Non-Violent Offending

In both population-based and register studies, adults with intellectual disability were discovered to be overrepresented in violent offending relative to the general population, specifically in assault and threats. Even after the sociodemographic factors were taken into consideration, [4] found a higher risk of violent crime conviction in individuals with intellectual disability. [6] also established that violent recidivists with intellectual disability also had more psychiatric comorbidity and lower rates of self-sufficiency, and this indicated that violent offending was commonly found to exist amid a more general milieu of psychosocial susceptibility. Other non-violent crimes were also reported, such as property-related offences, offences of the public order, often associated with impulsivity, less social knowledge, and a lack of support in the community.

Sexual Offending

Sexual offending was one of the recurrent and specific patterns in a number of studies included. The register-based evidence showed that sexual offences represented a significant percentage of the convictions among the forensic psychiatric populations and intellectual disability [1]. The review of the systematic study on sexual offending emphasized the contributions of cognitive distortions, deficient sexual knowledge, and impairment of social boundaries in people with intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder. These studies emphasized that sexual offending in this population was often characterized by lower levels of planning and higher levels of social naïveté compared to non-disabled offenders.

Specialized Offence Types

Certain offence types were disproportionately represented among adults with intellectual disability. It was found that fire-setting behaviour was a recurrent, and not very common offence, which was often linked to curiosity, emotional instability, and environmental pressures, and not criminal intention [15] [16]. Research into forensic psychiatric and prison populations also found over-representation of people with intellectual disability or autism in institutions, frequently committing moderate-severity offences that led to long-term custody as the institution treated the person as dangerous and had few alternatives for community placement.

Sentencing, Detention, and Criminal Justice Pathways

Various studies emphasized clear sentencing procedures to be used in cases involving adults with intellectual disability. Even similar offences [1] reported an increased risk of forensic psychiatric care and increased length of stay in an institution, as compared to custodial sentences. In [5], it was shown that those with intellectual disability and found guilty of criminal offences posed a disproportionate burden on clinical forensic services, as evidenced by long-term care pathways and not short-term repeated incarceration. Such conclusions imply that the lack of proper institutional containment is systemically relied on within the lack of proper community-based alternatives.

Recidivism and Gender-Specific Findings

The literature regarding recidivism was scarce but showed that there were high chances of recidivism in adults with intellectual disability, especially when post-release support was not well-organized. The pathways of unique women with cognitive disabilities were identified in [13], and offending is usually associated with the experiences of abuse, social marginalization, and mental health requirements, as opposed to chronic criminal behavior. Primary studies were mainly gender-neutral, which demonstrated a major gap in the literature [17][18].

Psychosocial and Developmental Risk Factors

Across studies, offending behaviour was consistently associated with co-occurring mental health disorders, autism spectrum disorder, adverse childhood experiences, and social disadvantage. Population-based and review evidence indicated that early trauma, institutionalization, and unmet support need increased vulnerability to justice system involvement. Reduced adaptive functioning, poor judgment, and inability to comprehend legal proceedings were added risks at various points along the criminal justice pathway [19][20].

Intervention and Treatment Outcomes

The strongest evidence on intervention effectiveness was on the group-based cognitive-behavioural therapy programs for sexual offending. Meta-analytic findings indicated modest but meaningful reductions in offence-supportive attitudes and risk-related behaviours among men with intellectual disability. The studies that concentrated on the autism and intellectual disability populations highlighted the significance of adapting interventions that consider the cognitive ability, communication ability, and the lack of social skills. Nevertheless, the quality of controlled trials was still low.

Summary of Key Offending Patterns

Table 2	Summary of offending patterns and associated factors	
Offence Pattern	Key Characteristics	Associated Factors
Violent offending	Assault, threats, repeat offences	Psychiatric comorbidity, low self-sufficiency
Sexual offending	Socially inappropriate or boundary-related behaviour	Cognitive distortions, poor sexual knowledge
Fire-setting	Low-frequency but high-risk behaviour	Emotional dysregulation, curiosity
Institutional pathways	Long forensic detention	Lack of community alternatives
Recidivism		Limited support, trauma history

Overall Synthesis

The results prove that adult intellectual disability offending is heterogeneous and mainly determined by cognitive, psychosocial, and systemic influences, and not only by criminal intent. Offending patterns are not simply similar to those of the overall population of offenders, but are also more vulnerable, service-involved, and institutionally-reacting. The evidence highlights the importance of customized prevention plans, fair justice, and disability-based interventions to minimize criminalization and enhance outcomes among this group of people.

Discussion

The systematic review summarizes the current evidence of offending trends in adults with intellectual disability and the intricate interaction between personal and environmental risks, as well as criminal justice system reactions to them. As the results show, the offending among this group is not only explainable through the criminal intent but is heavily determined

by the cognitive constraints, psychosocial disadvantage, structural injustice, and care system factors. Violent and sexual offences were the most common types of offences that were studied, which is in agreement with population-based and forensic register studies. Blatant violence offending seems to be firmly correlated with comorbidities with mental health issues, inadequate adaptive functioning, and lack of availability of proper support, as opposed to innate aggression. Sexual offending, while prominent in forensic samples, was often characterized by social naïveté, poor understanding of boundaries, and limited sexual education, reinforcing the importance of distinguishing risk-related behaviours from predatory intent.

Another finding documented in the review is the high propensity towards institutional response, especially the forensic psychiatric detention, even in the case of moderate severity offences. Extended custody and dependence on clinical services are symptomatic of long-term systemic issues with risk management and offering community-based alternatives to adults with intellectual disability. These channels can inadvertently lead to social exclusion and higher chances of reoffending on release, particularly where there is a lack of organized reintegration assistance. The data on recidivism and gender-specific tracking is still insufficient, but the existing material indicates that women with cognitive disabilities follow different paths that are influenced by their trauma, victimization, and social marginalization. This highlights a very important gap in gender-sensitive research and intervention development.

Evidence of interventions is still biased, as the evidence on adapted cognitive-behavioural sexual offending programs shows the most support. Nevertheless, the limited number of quality-controlled trials restricts the conclusions made about the effectiveness in the long term and their generalizability. On the whole, the results underline disability-informed criminal justice, early preventive interventions, and combined support systems as prioritized needs that can contribute to the mitigation of mental and social vulnerability and adaptive functioning. More longitudinal designs, gender analysis, and comparison of alternative forms of community-based care should be the focus of future research.

Conclusion

This systematic review indicates that offending adults with intellectual disability is a product of the combination of cognitive impairments, psychosocial disadvantage, and systemic impact in criminal justice and care models. Violent and sexual offences were most commonly reported across different study designs and geographical locations, with a strong correlation to comorbid mental illness, autism spectrum disorder, adverse developmental exposures, and social disadvantage. The data shows that the offending behaviour among this population is hardly ever detached and is rather influenced by the accumulating vulnerabilities and the lack of proper support. One of the most important conclusions is the outstanding place of institutional and forensic psychiatric pathways that frequently lead to long imprisonment and limited chances of the person re-entering the community. Although these responses are targeted towards the management of risks, they can be unintentionally supportive of the exclusion process and lead to the continued involvement in justice. There is still little evidence on interventions, but adapted cognitive-behavioural strategies are promising, especially with sexual offending, when they are properly adjusted to cognitive and adaptive requirements. The future studies should be based on longitudinal and comparative research to clarify causal pathways and risk of recidivism, and pay more attention to gender-specific experiences and underrepresented groups. One must also have the clear need to measure community-based, preventative, and diversionary interventions that combine the mental health, social care, and justice systems. The disability-informed policies and practices should be strengthened to enhance the outcomes, lower reoffending, and ensure that the responses towards adults with intellectual disability are fair and proportionate.

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