



Original Research

Levels of support for legislative bans to end physical punishment in schools and homes in a national sample

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Physical punishment of children remains quite common and yet has only negative effects on children's health, making it an important public health problem. This study was designed to assess positive attitudes about and perceived normative support for the use of physical punishment with children, as well as attitudes regarding prohibition of physical punishment in homes and schools.

Study design: This was a cross-sectional national survey of a diverse sample of US adults ($N = 3049$).

Methods: This survey, conducted in Fall 2020, assessed attitudes and perceived norms regarding physical punishment use using continuous measures as well as support and perceived support for policies prohibiting physical punishment in homes and schools in the United States.

Results: Respondents who had positive attitudes toward physical punishment (39%) and who perceived normative support for physical punishment (41%) were not in the majority. While 65% agreed that there should be a federal ban on physical punishment in public schools, only 18% perceived that most US adults would support such a ban. Persons who were older (aged ≥ 55 years), men, living in the southern United States, or who themselves were hit more frequently as children were significantly less likely than their counterparts to support a federal ban in schools.

Conclusions: Based on a national sample, there is strong support for a federal ban on physical punishment in US schools; yet this normative belief is unrecognized. Social norms campaigns should capitalize on this pluralistic ignorance to increase mobilization toward policy reform and reduction of harm to children through bans of physical punishment in public schools.

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Introduction

Physical punishment of children has been linked with solely negative outcomes for children, including increased risk for physical abuse, mental health problems, aggression, and antisocial behavior,^{1–3} making it an adverse childhood experience and important public health problem.⁴ Physical punishment refers to the 'use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control of the child's behavior'⁵ (p. 3) and is known by many terms (e.g. spanking, popping, smacking, whooping, slapping, and corporal punishment). While the use and acceptance of physical

punishment has declined over the past 30 years in the United States,^{6,7} it remains a common practice. More than half (60%) of American parents with children aged 3–4 years and 37% of parents with children aged <18 years report some use of physical punishment in the past year.⁸ Furthermore, approximately 55% of all adults in the United States agree that sometimes it is necessary to give children 'a good hard spanking.'⁷ Physical punishment is also allowed in public schools in 19 states and is administered to over 68,000 children in these states annually.⁹ However, the last available data, dating from 2005, found that 77% of US adults disagreed with the use of physical punishment in schools.¹⁰

Legislative bans as a method for changing attitudes and norms related to physical punishment

Given both the harms of and declining support for physical punishment, it is critical to understand current public opinions

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about bans on physical punishment in the US Legislative universal bans of physical punishment (i.e. including in the home and in schools) have been implemented in 65 countries across the world.¹¹ There is evidence that countries with universal bans experience reductions in support for and use of physical punishment and have significantly less youth violence compared with those that do not.^{12,13} In addition, given that reducing the use of physical punishment can reduce the risk for adverse health outcomes over the life course and reduce healthcare-related costs,¹⁴ a federal ban may be a particularly effective strategy for improving population health and well-being. Hence, it is worth exploring the political feasibility of physical punishment bans in the United States to reduce children's exposure to violence and consequent harms.

Perceived social norms as an important potential lever for change

Changing social norms regarding physical punishment has been identified as a key strategy for preventing child abuse.^{3,15} Of relevance, parents who perceive community norms in support of physical punishment themselves have positive attitudes toward and use of physical punishment.^{16–18} However, individuals can misperceive that certain attitudes and beliefs of society at large are significantly different than their own, an idea known as 'pluralistic ignorance',¹⁹ which can lead to group members conforming to a norm that does not actually exist. For example, college students' binge drinking behavior can be significantly impacted by how comfortable they perceive their peers to be with binge drinking, despite their perceptions being inaccurate.^{20,21} Perceived norms, or perceptions about the social acceptability or prevalence of a behavior, have been found to play a significant role in predicting a range of health-related behaviors.^{22,23} Perceived norms and pluralistic ignorance can be changed, and interventions that target pluralistic ignorance have been successful in reducing alcohol use and increasing outspoken support for a ban on certain activities on campus among college students.^{24,25} Leveraging pluralistic ignorance has also influenced several other public policy issues such as the utilization of paid family leave,²⁶ gun safety,²⁷ and climate change.²⁸ It would be helpful to know if norms about physical punishment are similarly misperceived; if so, those misperceptions could be targeted to impact policy change to reduce physical punishment use.

The present study

The purpose of this study was to assess public opinion among a diverse sample of US adults about physical punishment in homes and schools and about support for policies to prohibit the use of physical punishment. Findings could provide important insights into shifting support for physical punishment use and how to make strides in policy changes to reduce physical punishment, and consequent harm to children, in US homes and schools.

Methods

Study procedure

The sample for this study was identified through YouGov, an international online market research agency that maintains a highly engaged panel of respondents who have specifically opted in to participate in online research activities. Panelists are recruited via a variety of formats (social advertising, referrals, and so on) and undergo a thorough profiling and multistep validation process to ensure the responses they are providing are valid. The panel is maintained through security questions throughout the surveys, and panelists are rewarded with points, which they can exchange for a variety of prizes (e.g. Amazon gift cards). A randomly selected

cross-section of panelists was contacted to complete the survey for the present study. To ensure a diverse sample based on certain respondent demographics, including race and ethnicity, gender, age, income, education, marital status, and region of the country, as specific demographic quotas filled, those not filling the criteria still needed for the study were screened out and redirected to other YouGov studies. Invitations to participate in the online survey were distributed via email as well as via the YouGov app to panelists who were aged between 18 and 95 years, were US residents and citizens living in the United States, and spoke and read English. Surveys were sent in October 2020. The final data collection ended on November 9, 2020. A total of 3453 individuals began the survey, with 3049 respondents completing the survey. All responses remained anonymous. No personally identifying information was collected. The study was approved by the Tulane University Institutional Review Board.

Measures

At the beginning of the survey, participants were told that physical punishment would be defined as 'spanking, hitting, slapping, swatting, whipping, whooping, popping, smacking and/or paddling.'

Positive attitudes toward physical punishment

A five-item version of the Attitudes Toward Spanking (ATS) questionnaire was used.²⁹ All participants were asked, 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?' followed by these items: 'Sometimes it is necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard spanking,' 'Spanking a child is necessary to instill proper moral and social conduct,' 'I believe it is a parent's right to spank their children if they think it is necessary,' 'Sometimes spanking is the best way to get a child to listen,' and 'Sometimes it's ok to discipline a child using an object such as a belt, switch, cord, or hairbrush.' Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, with average score of items calculated. A mean score was calculated with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes toward physical punishment (mean = 2.77; standard deviation [SD] = 1.17); the scale had strong internal consistency, $\alpha = 0.90$.

Perceived normative support for physical punishment use

The ATS questionnaire²⁹ was again used to ask about perceived injunctive norms regarding physical punishment. Participants were provided with the same statements used to assess personal attitudes about physical punishment, but with the following start to each statement: 'Most adults believe that' Items were rated on the same 5-point Likert scale, with a mean score calculated and higher scores indicating more perceived support for physical punishment use (mean = 2.93; SD = 1.06); the scale had strong internal consistency, $\alpha = .90$.

Support for bans on physical punishment

Respondents were asked about their level of support for federal and state policies to ban physical punishment using the following items: 'I would support a U.S. law that prohibits school personnel from paddling or spanking children,' 'I would support a U.S. law that prohibits all spanking, including by parents,' and 'I would support a law in my state that prohibits all spanking, including by parents.' Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Items were examined individually.

Perceived normative support for bans on physical punishment

Participants were asked about perceived normative support for federal and state policies to ban physical punishment with three

items that mirrored those regarding personal support and included the following start to each: ‘Most adults in the U.S. would support ...’ Each item was scored on the same 5-point Likert scale and was examined individually.

Demographic characteristics

Respondents reported their gender, race and ethnicity, geographic region of residence, age, annual income, level of education, and experience with physical punishment in childhood. These variables were included because they have been shown to be associated with the use of physical punishment.^{8,30} Participants were also asked if they were a parent or guardian for at least one child.

Data analyses

Data analyses were performed with Stata/SE 16.0. Descriptive analyses included frequency distributions for categorical variables and means and SDs for continuous variables. Multivariable linear regressions were used to analyze demographic variations in both ‘positive attitudes toward physical punishment’ and ‘perceived normative support for physical punishment use.’ Demographic variations among the six personal and perceived policy support variables were analyzed using multivariable ordinal logistic regressions. No significant differences between parents and non-parents were found; therefore, this covariate was excluded from the final regression models.

Results

Participants

A total of 3049 US adults participated in the online survey. More than half (51%) of the respondents identified as female. Most participants identified as White (65%), followed by those who identified as Black (12%), and Other (7%). Approximately 16% of the sample identified as Hispanic or Latinx. More than one-third (37%) lived in the South, 25% lived in the West, 19% lived in the Midwest, and 19% lived in the Northeast. Approximately one-third (31%) were aged between 18 and 34 years, 30% were aged between 35 and 54 years, and 39% were aged ≥ 55 years. Household income levels reported were $< \$40,000$ (41%), between \$40,000 and \$80,000 (30%), and $> \$80,000$ (29%). Most participants held a high school degree or less (40%) or some college (33%). Most (64%) had experienced physical punishment as a child at least once a year.

Descriptives of physical punishment attitudes and perceived norms

Table 1 presents respondents’ positive attitudes toward and perceived normative support for physical punishment use and their personal and perceived support for three types of bans on physical

punishment. While 42% of participants did not support the use of physical punishment, fewer (34%) perceived that most US adults felt the same way that they did. A majority (65%) agreed or strongly agreed with a federal ban on physical punishment in schools; however, much fewer (18%) perceived that most US adults felt the same way, Chi-squared (1, $N = 84$) = 8.9, $P < .001$. In contrast, support for universal bans was much lower, with only approximately one-third supporting a federal (32%) or a state ban (33%) on all physical punishment and even fewer thinking that most US adults would support such a ban at the federal (26%) or state (28%) level.

Demographic variations in attitudes, perceived norms, ban support, and perceived support of bans

The results from multivariate models assessing variations in attitudes and perceived norms regarding physical punishment by participant characteristics are presented in Table 2. Respondents who identified as male, were non-White, were aged ≥ 55 years, had below a bachelor’s degree, or experienced physical punishment in childhood had significantly higher odds of reporting positive attitudes and perceived positive norms toward physical punishment compared with their referent groups.

Variations in participant support for policy bans on physical punishment at the federal and state levels by sociodemographic characteristics were assessed (Table 3). Respondents who identified as female (vs male), lived in the West or Northeast (vs in the South), were younger (vs ≥ 35 years), or who were never spanked as a child were more supportive of all proposed federal- and state-level physical punishment bans. In addition, Latinx/Hispanic participants were more supportive of universal physical punishment bans than any other racial/ethnic group.

Variations in perceived normative support regarding policy bans on physical punishment at the federal and state levels by sociodemographic characteristics were also assessed (Table 4). There was very little demographic variation in perceived support for federal bans on physical punishment in schools: only females (vs males) and those living in the Western United States (vs the Southern United States) perceived less support for this ban. In contrast, there was a great deal of variation and some similar patterns in perceived support for universal bans. Latinx/Hispanic (vs White) respondents, those from the West (vs the South), or those who were never spanked as children (vs those spanked most frequently) were *more* likely to perceive support for universal bans; in contrast, respondents aged ≥ 55 years (vs < 35 years), or who had some college education (vs high school only) were *less* likely to perceive support. For state-level universal bans only, additional variations were reported as follows: those who did not identify as Black, Latinx, or White (vs White) or those from the Northeast (vs South) were *more* likely to perceive support; and those who identified as Black (vs White) were less likely to perceive support.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics regarding positive attitudes about and perceived support for physical punishment and support for policies banning physical punishment.

Measures	N	Strongly agree/agree	Neutral	Strongly disagree/disagree
1. Positive attitudes toward physical punishment ^a	2941	39.19%	19.31%	41.50%
2. Perceived normative support for physical punishment ^a	2958	41.29%	25.10%	33.61%
3. Support federal ban on physical punishment in schools	3049	65.43%	16.69%	17.87%
4. Perceived support for a federal ban on physical punishment in schools	3049	18.33%	22.43%	59.23%
5. Support for a federal ban on all physical punishment	3049	32.24%	20.99%	46.77%
6. Perceived support for a federal ban on all physical punishment	3049	26.43%	29.98%	43.59%
7. Support for a state ban on all physical punishment	3049	33.09%	20.83%	46.08%
8. Perceived support for state ban on all physical punishment	3049	28.30%	29.85%	41.45%

^a Sample *ns* are less than the total sample size ($N = 3049$) due to missing values ($< 10\%$).

Table 2

Positive attitudes toward and perceived normative support for physical punishment regressed on sociodemographic characteristics and history of being spanked as a child.

Sociodemographic characteristic	Positive attitudes toward physical punishment (<i>n</i> = 2650)			Perceived normative support for physical punishment (<i>n</i> = 2664)		
	<i>B</i>	SE	β	<i>B</i>	SE	β
Gender (reference = male)						
Female	−0.41	0.05	−0.17***	−0.25	0.04	−0.12***
Race (reference = White)						
Black	0.48	0.07	0.13***	0.32	0.07	0.10***
Latinx/Hispanic	0.26	0.07	0.08***	0.16	0.06	0.05**
Other	0.21	0.09	0.05**	0.14	0.08	0.03
Region of United States (reference = South)						
Midwest	0.05	0.07	0.01	0.02	0.07	0.01
West	0.15	0.06	0.06**	−0.04	0.06	−0.02
Northeast	−0.09	0.07	−0.03	0.12	0.06	0.06*
Age (reference = 18–34 years)						
35–54 years	0.16	0.06	0.06**	−0.09	0.05	−0.04
≥55 years	0.21	0.06	0.09***	−0.12	0.05	−0.05*
Annual household income (reference = >\$40,000)						
\$40,000–80,000	−0.05	0.06	−0.02	−0.03	0.05	−0.01
>\$80,000	−0.09	0.06	−0.03	−0.11	0.06	−0.05
Education (reference = high school or less)						
Some college or 2-year degree	−0.10	0.06	−0.04*	−0.00	0.05	0.00
Bachelor's degree	−0.32	0.07	−0.10***	−0.17	0.06	−0.06**
Graduate degree	−0.45	0.08	−0.12***	−0.20	0.08	−0.06**
Spanked as a child (reference = a few times a month or more)						
Never	−0.99	0.08	−0.27***	−1.01	0.07	−0.31***
Once a year or less than once a year	−0.31	0.06	−0.12***	−0.38	0.07	−0.16***
Every 2–6 months	−0.04	0.06	−0.01	−0.15	0.07	−0.06**

SE, standard error.

Sample *ns* are less than the total sample size (*N* = 3049) due to missing values (<10%).**P* < .05; ***P* < .01; ****P* < .001.

Discussion

The present study provides updated estimates of US adults' support for physical punishment in the home and school setting. Most importantly, it also provides the first national estimates of US adults' support for federal and state bans on physical punishment

as well as perceived normative support for such bans. Pairing findings of support with perceived support allowed us to assess possible targets for social norms change and campaigns. Respondents were overwhelmingly in favor of a federal ban of physical punishment in schools; yet, they did not perceive that most US adults supported such a ban, highlighting an important case of

Table 3

Support for physical punishment bans regressed on sociodemographic characteristics and history of being spanked as a child.

Sociodemographic characteristic	Support federal ban on physical punishment in schools (<i>n</i> = 2723)		Support federal ban on all physical punishment (<i>n</i> = 2723)		Support state ban on all physical punishment (<i>n</i> = 2723)	
	aOR	95% CI	aOR	95% CI	aOR	95% CI
Gender (reference = male)						
Female	2.01	1.62–2.49***	1.28	1.08–1.52**	1.23	1.04–1.47*
Race (reference = White)						
Black	1.06	0.75–1.48	0.87	0.66–1.15	0.82	0.62–1.08
Latinx/Hispanic	1.11	0.79–1.55	1.36	1.04–1.77*	1.31	1.01–1.71*
Other	0.94	0.62–1.42	1.05	0.76–1.46	0.91	0.66–1.27
Region of US (reference = South)						
Midwest	1.31	0.98–1.76	1.10	0.87–1.40	1.16	0.91–1.48
West	1.58	1.19–2.09**	1.26	1.01–1.57*	1.39	1.11–1.74**
Northeast	2.05	1.48–2.84***	1.38	1.08–1.75**	1.46	1.14–1.85**
Age (reference = 18–34 years)						
35–54 years	0.78	0.56–1.03	0.57	0.46–0.70***	0.57	0.46–0.71***
≥55 years	0.55	0.41–0.70***	0.36	0.29–0.45***	0.36	0.29–0.45***
Annual household income (reference = >\$40,000)						
\$40,000–\$80,000	1.12	0.87–1.45	0.89	0.72–1.09	0.89	0.72–1.10
>\$80,000	1.29	0.97–1.73	0.97	0.77–1.22	0.94	0.74–1.18
Education (reference = high school or less)						
Some college or 2-year degree	1.10	0.85–1.42	0.82	0.67–1.01	0.80	0.65–0.98*
Bachelor's degree	1.08	0.78–1.49	1.16	0.90–1.51	1.06	0.82–1.37
Graduate degree	1.21	0.81–1.81	1.33	0.97–1.82	1.35	0.99–1.85
Spanked as child (reference = a few times a month or more)						
Never	1.49	1.01–2.21*	2.90	2.12–3.98***	2.96	2.16–4.06***
Once a year or less than once a year	1.09	0.83–1.43	0.90	0.73–1.12	0.95	0.77–1.19
Every 2–6 months	0.99	0.76–1.30	0.73	0.59–0.91**	0.73	0.58–0.90**

aOR, adjusted odds ratio; CI, confidence interval.

Sample *ns* are less than the total sample size (*N* = 3049) due to missing values (<10%).**P* < .05; ***P* < .01; ****P* < .001.

Table 4

Perceived normative support for physical punishment bans regressed on sociodemographic characteristics and history of being spanked as a child.

Sociodemographic characteristic	Perceived support federal ban on physical punishment in schools (n = 2723)		Perceived support federal ban on all physical punishment (n = 2723)		Perceived support state federal ban on all physical punishment (n = 2723)	
	aOR	95% CI	aOR	95% CI	aOR	95% CI
Gender (reference = male)						
Female	0.63	0.53–0.75***	1.02	0.86–1.20	1.10	0.93–1.30
Race (reference = White)						
Black	0.92	0.70–1.20	1.19	0.91–1.56	1.36	0.62–1.08*
Latinx/Hispanic	0.81	0.62–1.05	1.40	1.08–1.83*	1.54	1.01–1.71**
Other	1.03	0.76–1.42	1.32	0.95–1.83	1.67	1.19–2.33**
Region of US (reference = South)						
Midwest	0.83	0.67–1.03	1.11	0.87–1.41	1.16	0.91–1.47
West	0.69	0.54–0.88**	1.37	1.08–1.74*	1.64	1.29–2.09***
Northeast	0.86	0.68–1.09	1.14	0.92–1.42	1.59	1.28–1.98***
Age (reference = 18–34 years)						
35–54 years	1.15	0.93–1.41	0.93	0.75–1.15	0.94	0.76–1.16
≥55 years	0.99	0.80–1.22	0.53	0.43–0.66***	0.61	0.49–0.75***
Annual household income (reference = >\$40,000)						
\$40,000–80,000	0.86	0.70–1.06	0.82	0.67–1.01	0.88	0.72–1.08
>\$80,000	0.95	0.76–1.19	0.78	0.63–0.99*	0.93	0.74–1.17
Education (reference = high school or less)						
Some college or 2-year degree	1.10	0.85–1.42	0.68	0.55–0.83***	0.69	0.56–0.85***
Bachelor's degree	1.08	0.78–1.49	0.78	0.61–1.01	0.69	0.54–0.89**
Graduate degree	1.21	0.81–1.81	0.86	0.63–1.17	0.78	0.57–1.06
Spanked as child (reference = a few times a month or more)						
Never	0.90	0.67–1.19	2.17	1.60–2.92***	2.15	1.60–2.91***
Once a year or less than once a year	0.97	0.78–1.20	1.03	0.82–1.27	1.18	0.95–1.47
Every 2–6 months	1.14	0.91–1.41	0.92	0.74–1.14	0.99	0.79–1.23

aOR, adjusted odds ratio; CI, confidence interval.

Sample ns are less than the total sample size (N = 3049) due to missing values (<10%).

*P < .05; **P < .01; ***P < .001.

pluralistic ignorance. The near majority (47%) difference we found between actual and perceived support for a federal ban was similar to the findings from a recent study on climate change, which found actual support to be much higher than perceived support for climate change measures.²⁸ Social norm interventions, such as educational campaigns targeting norm misperceptions, have had success in addressing problems, such as binge drinking and school bullying.^{31–33} Similar strategies may be successful in promoting support for banning physical punishment in public schools. However, our findings suggest that garnering even greater support for a federal school ban may also require a more targeted campaign to convince those in strongest opposition to such bans: namely, persons who are older (≥55 years), men, from the South, who themselves were hit more frequently as children.

The support we found for such bans is aligned with trends in respondents' attitudes toward physical punishment. There were no significant differences between respondents' personal attitudes and perceived normative support for physical punishment, which is consistent with past research.^{16,17} Only 39% reported attitudes supportive of physical punishment. This finding was lower than the latest General Social Survey finding that 55% of US adults agreed 'it is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good hard spanking.'⁷ However, we used a multiitem measure inclusive of behaviors beyond only spanking to assess physical punishment attitudes.

In contrast to the strong support for a federal ban on physical punishment in schools, we found less support for universal bans on physical punishment, including in the home. There may be states where support is in the majority, but state-wide surveys are needed to confirm this. Further research is also needed to understand why Americans oppose bans and to identify any areas of mistaken beliefs about physical punishment or how bans would be operationalized. Advocates working for universal bans on

physical punishment in the United States and elsewhere will need to do more education about the harmful effects of physical punishment, positive parenting options, and the 'normative' (vs criminal) impact of bans to build support.

Efforts to reduce parents' use of physical punishment would do well to promote the many positive parenting options available to guide and teach children. Multiple prevention levels should be employed to achieve the needed level of education, for example, clinically through family and pediatric health services, through early family support strategies, such as home visiting, organizationally through 'No Hit Zone' policies and staff training, as well as through public health education campaigns and the promotion of children's rights. Indeed, the United States remains the only country that has not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, largely because of the opposition for supporting a federal ban on all physical punishment of children.³⁴

Limitations

This study used a cross-sectional survey, which captured data at one point in time but not over time. A convenience sample was used through YouGov. However, the sample was intentionally diverse based on 2019 U.S. Census Bureau population estimates. Data were self-reported, leaving room for social desirability and other types of measurement bias. Finally, the survey did not capture all sociodemographic characteristics that could be tied to support for physical punishment bans (e.g. political affiliation).

Implications for policy and prevention

The findings from this study have the potential to inform policy change efforts aimed at ending the use of physical punishment in US schools. Almost half (47%) of those surveyed misperceived the

high level of normative support for a federal ban on physical punishment in US schools – similar to what has been found in the gun safety²⁷ and climate change²⁸ policy arenas. Prior public health successes, in areas such as reducing binge drinking on college campuses³² and bullying in schools,³³ have leveraged such findings to develop social norms messaging campaigns to reduce high-risk behaviors. One step toward actionable policy change would be for the American Public Health Association to update and disseminate their statement about physical punishment in schools, which has not been updated in nearly a decade,³⁵ citing these new findings as indicative of public support for federal policy change. Furthermore, child health policy and school reform advocates in many arenas could use these findings to inform the public as well as policy-makers about this important public health issue and a way to address it on a national scale.

Author statements

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This study received Institutional Review Board approval for all research activities. The authors have no competing interests to report.

Ethical approval

None sought.

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Competing interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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