

Illinois Nontraditional-Hour Child Care Study (INCCS)

A Research-Policy Partnership

Nontraditional-Hour Child Care in the United States: What Is Known About Supply and Demand

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There is growing policy interest in addressing the nontraditional-hour child care challenges of parents and providers.² Labor market trends, together with demographic and family structure changes, have heightened demand for nonparental child care during early mornings, evenings, overnight, and weekends. At the same time, the supply of nontraditional-hour care remains limited, especially in centers and licensed family child care homes. Family, friend, and neighbor caregivers—a highly unregulated, unpaid or marginally paid workforce—provide most of the child care to accommodate nonstandard and variable hour work schedules of parents.

This topical brief provides a summary of existing knowledge about the supply and demand of nontraditional-hour child care.³ A range of information sources—including journal articles, research reports, and policy memos, briefs, fact sheets, and white papers—were examined as part of a broader scoping review⁴ and informed the

development of the topical brief. These sources vary in their original purposes, empirical bases, and intended audiences, and reflect a range of research methodologies, data sources, and samples.⁵ The wide reach of materials examined revealed many gaps in knowledge that require further investigation to advance an evidence-based policy agenda in this area.

The brief is organized in four sections that summarize (1) how nontraditional-hour child care is defined in the literature, (2) key findings regarding the demand for nontraditional-hour child care, (3) key findings regarding the supply of nontraditional-hour child care, (4) and a proposed research agenda to further knowledge about the nontraditional-hour child care needs of families and the providers who serve them. A table summarizing the primary sources that were reviewed for this document is included in the Appendix.

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1. Definition of Nontraditional-Hour (NTH) Child Care

Nontraditional-hour (NTH) child care is described in the literature as care that is offered outside of daytime weekday hours. Although not all studies use the same definition of NTH child care, there are consistencies across the literature (see Table 1). The most common approach is to define NTH care by the particular time that care is provided, for example before 7 a.m. (early morning) or ending at 7 p.m. or later (evening) (Alexander & Stoll, 2019). A similar approach defines NTH child care as care provided outside the hours of 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday and on weekends (Sandstrom et al., 2018). Some studies use more differentiated periods, identifying care during evenings (between 7 and 11 p.m.), overnight (between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m.), or weekends (midnight Friday through midnight Sunday) as distinct periods of NTH care (National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team, 2015). In one study of NTH care, Sandstrom and her colleagues (2018) refer to facilities that operate on a 24-hour basis as NTH child care programs.

Along with these approaches that focus on the particular timing of care, some studies also consider care at variable times (e.g., variable hour care or flexible care) or arrangements that are arranged with short notice (e.g., drop-in care, last-minute care, or

emergency care) as part of their definition of NTH child care (Dobbins et al., 2019; National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team, 2015).

2. Demand for NTH Child Care

NTH child care is used by families for a number of reasons, but especially in response to parental work hours and school hours that fall outside of daytime weekday hours or work schedules that are unpredictable and variable (Carrillo et al., 2017). Health care and social assistance, retail, accommodation, food service, and manufacturing are examples of industries that typically require employees to work nontraditional hours and, therefore, may create NTH child care needs for workers who are parenting young children (Dobbins et al., 2019; Sandstrom et al., 2018; Smith, 2021; Start Strong PA, 2022).

National census data from the American Community Survey indicate that approximately one-third of non-school-age children have parents who work during nontraditional hours (CCEEPRA, Research Translation). Children who live with single parents, who are Black or Latine, and whose parents have high school education or below are more likely than other children to have parents who work during nontraditional hours (CCEEPRA, Research Translation). These numbers suggest that there is considerable demand for NTH child care.⁶

Table 1

Before 7 a.m.; after 7 p.m.	Alexander & Stoll, 2019
Before 7 a.m.; after 6 p.m.; on weekends	Sandstrom et al., 2018
Evenings (7–11 p.m.); overnight (11 p.m. to 6 a.m.); weekends (midnight Friday to midnight Sunday); flexible schedules (care schedules permitted to vary from week to week)	National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team, 2015
Hours and times vary from week to week (variable-hour care; flexible care); short notice (drop-in care; emergency care)	Dobbins et al., 2019

Another way of estimating demand for NTH child care is by measuring the use of child care during nontraditional times. This approach provides a snapshot of the arrangements that families use during nontraditional hours, but it excludes families who may need care during nontraditional hours but are unable to find it. The most complete national data for identifying use of NTH child care are in the National Survey of Early Childhood Education (NSECE) Household Survey. The 2019 NSECE indicates that 40 percent of non-school-age children are in NTH child care arrangements. Children in low-income families, Black children, children in rural communities, and children living in medium- or high-density poverty communities are more likely to be in NTH child care than other children (Lou et al., 2022).

Studies reveal that parents who use NTH child care primarily rely on informal providers—such as license-exempt, home-based child care or family, friend, and neighbor caregivers—and they routinely package together multiple arrangements to accommodate their NTH care needs (Ben-Ishai et al., 2014; Boyd-Swan, 2019; Carrillo et al., 2017; Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Development, 2017; Henly & Adams, 2018; Hunts & Avery, 1998; National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team, 2015; Schilder et al., 2022; Stoll et al., 2015). Unpaid relative care is especially common during nontraditional hours (Sandstrom et al., 2019).

Parents use informal arrangements rather than center-based arrangements during nontraditional hours for a number of reasons. Importantly, there is limited availability of formal care options, resulting in a restricted choice set of possible child care arrangements in the formal market during nontraditional hours (see next section on Supply of NTH Care). Moreover, a few studies suggest that families with NTH care needs may prefer care in a child's home and by relatives or friends (Schilder et al., 2022; Stoll et al., 2015). Informal arrangements may also offer greater flexibility than formal care

options in terms of payment arrangements and schedules and may be preferred by some parents because of prior familiarity, trust, and cultural and linguistic congruence (see also Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Development, 2017; Boyd-Swan, 2019; Schilder et al., 2022).

Parents who work nontraditional hours may use multiple arrangements to meet both their daytime and NTH care needs and to respond to frequently changing schedules and unreliable caregiving arrangements (Schilder et al., 2022). Most existing studies that provide insights into the reasons for the NTH arrangements that parents choose are limited to nonrepresentative samples; thus, more research is needed to better understand parental decision making on types of care during nontraditional hours.

Only a few studies examine how parental preferences vary depending on the timing of their NTH care needs. For example, especially at night, families may prefer family child care or home settings over center-based care (Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Development, 2017; Rodrigues, 2018). In one qualitative study, parents report wanting their children to have a stable, secure, and routine schedule that includes sleeping in their own beds, getting a good night's sleep, and having unrushed meals (Schilder et al., 2022). This same study found that when children are in center or licensed family child care homes during the day, and when parental day time hours cross over into evening, parents prefer an extension of hours at the daytime arrangement rather than a second arrangement in another setting. When formal care is used during the week, however, parents may prefer children to be in home-based settings on weekends. In situations where children are taken care of by unfamiliar caregivers, parents report preferring that providers are given training in child health and development (Schilder et al., 2022).

Research on parents' search strategies for NTH child care is especially limited. Like the search strategies of traditional hour working parents, word of mouth is likely a common approach to securing a child

care provider (National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team, 2014). Some research suggests that the search process for NTH care can be hindered because of precarious work hours and schedules, affordability concerns, and challenges accessing subsidies (Ben-Ishai et al., 2014; Brodsky & Mills, 2014; Henly et al., 2017; Illinois Action for Children, 2012; Start Strong PA, 2022). These work schedules may be especially challenging for single-parent households without other adults to care for children during the search (Dobbins et al., 2019).

Given limited NTH care supply, there is likely little room for parents to negotiate prices (Brodsky & Mills, 2014). Findings from one study suggest that receiving subsidies was insufficient to afford high-quality NTH child care (Start Strong PA, 2022). Importantly, however, there is limited information available on the out-of-pocket costs for parents who use paid providers during nontraditional hours.

Overall, research is clear that families disproportionately use informal care arrangements during non-traditional hours. However, there remain considerable gaps in knowledge about (a) what parents pay for these arrangements, (b) whether the arrangements parents use align with their child care preferences and needs, and (c) the search strategies that parents employ to find NTH care arrangements.

3. Supply of NTH Care

Research indicates that the supply of NTH care is limited, especially in centers and licensed family child care homes. For example, according to the 2012 NSECE survey data, only 8% of centers and 34% of listed homes provide some type of NTH care, either weekends (3% centers/23% listed homes), evenings (2% centers/16% listed homes), or overnight (6% centers/19% listed homes).⁷ Instead, the supply of NTH care is concentrated in unlisted homes, especially unpaid unlisted homes: 63% of unlisted paid home-based providers and 82% of unlisted unpaid home-based providers offer some type of NTH care (NSECE Project Team, 2015).

In terms of average hours of NTH care provided (for the subset of providers who offer NTH care), unlisted paid providers offer fewer hours than other settings, with an average of 9 hours of NTH care per week, compared with 13 or 14 hours on average for centers, listed homes, and unpaid unlisted homes (NSECE Project Team, 2015).⁸

Families sometimes seek care that offers flexible hours and payment. According to the 2012 NSECE data, flexible scheduling options are available in 45% of centers, and typically during daytime weekday hours only. Flexible payment arrangements are somewhat less common, with 40% of centers allowing them. Flexible scheduling and payment schedules are most often accepted by unlisted paid providers, with 78% offering flexible scheduling options and 57% accepting flexible payments (NSECE Project Team, 2015). Smaller, nonrepresentative samples support these national findings, and in one study, centers are also reported to impose monetary penalties for unplanned fluctuating schedules (Collier et al., n.d.).

Most NTH child care is offered in unregulated settings (Collier et al., n.d.; Dobbins et al., 2019). License-exempt, home-based providers are not subject to the same regulations as licensed homes and centers; thus, there is limited monitoring of the health, safety, and quality of care that is delivered in most NTH care settings. Moreover, there is a lack of consensus in the literature about what “quality” means for NTH care or which regulatory processes related to quality might be appropriate. Bromer and her colleagues propose a conceptual model of child care quality during nontraditional hours that emphasizes the importance of recognizing the unique activities that constitute care during nontraditional hours in our definitions of quality (Bromer et al., 2024).

A study of child care supply in Illinois indicated that there was an increase in quality-designated programs from 2011 to 2016 that accept subsidized families. The supply of centers and homes that

offered care during nontraditional hours (before 7 a.m. and after 7 p.m. in this study) also increased slightly; however, the vast majority of programs continued to limit care to daytime weekday hours, and very few of these programs were quality rated. In most cases, such programs were farther from families' homes than non-quality-designated programs (Alexander & Stoll, 2019).

Overall, the review of studies of supply indicate that most centers and family child care homes do not accommodate the NTH care needs of families. There is limited research on (a) the reasons that providers do not extend care to nontraditional hours and (b) whether providers would respond to policy incentives targeted at encouraging them to do so. There is also a dearth of knowledge about the providers that do offer care during nontraditional hours and their reasons for doing this.

4. Research Agenda for Understanding Supply and Demand of Nontraditional-Hour Care

This overview of the supply and demand of NTH child care has revealed key gaps in knowledge that may serve as a guide for future research. On the demand side, national data indicate that millions of children have parents who work nonstandard hours and that these children are primarily cared for by family, friend, and neighbor caregivers while their parents work. Less is known about how parents select these arrangements, whether the arrangements that parents use align with their preferences for child care, or how NTH care preferences may depend on a parent's daytime weekday care arrangements.

We also do not know how these preferences may vary if care is needed early mornings, evenings, overnights, weekends, or to fill variable and last-minute care needs. Qualitative studies have begun to shed light on these questions; however, much more research is needed to responsibly guide policy.

Moreover, there is limited research on whether parents perceive an alignment between the work support and child developmental goals of the arrangements they use and how they evaluate the quality, stability, affordability, or adequacy of their NTH care arrangements for meeting their families' needs.

On the supply side, it is clear that informal caregivers are providing most nonparental child care hours during nontraditional times. Next, it would be fruitful to understand the reasons providers do not extend care hours to nontraditional times and what kinds of policy incentives might effectively encourage them to do so.

There is also a need to better understand the business models and practices that can support the provision of NTH care in centers and family child care homes: Their programming, staffing, operating costs, and revenues, as well as the strengths and challenges experienced by directors and providers in these programs.

Similarly, given that family, friend, and neighbor caregivers provide most NTH care, it is critical that research advance our understanding of this diverse provider population: their motivations, characteristics, and experiences offering care during nontraditional hours as well as their physical, mental, and financial health and well-being.

In addition to advancing empirical research on the supply and demand of nontraditional-hour child care in these ways, the scoping review that motivated this topical brief revealed a need to develop a more differentiated understanding of what quality looks like in nontraditional child care settings. It also showed how definitions of quality that are meaningful may vary in significant ways from daytime weekday care and may even vary depending on the timing, duration, and purpose of care during nontraditional hours and days.

Endnotes

- 1 Suh Kyung Lee, MA, is a PhD student at the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice, where she studies precarious employment, work and family policies, and public programs serving families with low incomes. Julia R. Henly, PhD, is the Samuel Deutsch Professor and Deputy Dean for Research and Faculty Development in the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice at the University of Chicago. Her research focuses on poverty, low-paid employment, and families' work-child care management strategies with the aim of informing the design, implementation, and effectiveness of work-family policies and public benefits, especially child care policy.
- 2 There are several examples of the increased policy attention to the caregiving needs of nontraditional hour working parents. For example, nontraditional-hour child care was recognized as a priority need in the 2014 reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (see Final Rule, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2016-09-30/pdf/2016-22986.pdf>). Proposed bipartisan legislation (After Hours Child Care Act, S. 976) would, if enacted, aim to establish and expand child care availability during nontraditional hours (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/976/text?s=1&r=1>). The Off-Hours Child Care Program was enacted in Illinois, effective July 2023 (Public Act 102-0912) to increase the supply of nontraditional-hour child care to accommodate the care needs of first responders and other workers whose schedules require care outside of daytime weekday hours (<https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/fulltext.asp?Name=102-0912>).
- 3 The report is not an exhaustive review of the empirical literature but rather a high-level summary of key findings across a broad range of literature.
- 4 Scoping reviews are especially appropriate when a topic has not received extensive or rigorous study and when the information that is available includes a wide range of materials that are varied in their objectives, empirical bases, and publication outlets. (Munn et al., 2022).
- 5 The studies included qualitative and quantitative projects. Some were national in scope, whereas others used focused, local samples; some studies analyzed representative samples while others relied on convenience samples; and the data themselves were diverse: interviews, surveys, and administrative records.
- 6 Because an unknown fraction of parents working nontraditional hours will not need nonparental care during these hours and because some parents also need NTH care for reasons other than work hours, NTH-work prevalence is not an accurate measure of demand for NTH child care.
- 7 At the time of this scoping review, no published analyses of 2019 NSECE data on child care supply during nontraditional hours had been published; however, a private communication (September 22, 2023, email) with the NORC 2019 NSECE team suggests that the supply of nontraditional-hour care offered by centers has changed little between the two surveys. NORC's preliminary analyses suggest a slight increase in center providers offering weekend care and overnight care, constituting less than a 1% change.
- 8 More detailed analysis of home-based child care arrangements that use the NSECE provider data is available here: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/hbccsq_secondary_analyses_fs3-jan2023.pdf.

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Appendix

References	Data/Methodology	Key Findings
Alexander & Stoll (2019)	Administrative data of subsidy-eligible parents in Illinois.	Finding nonstandard hour, quality-designated child care is harder for subsidized parents, and they must travel longest regional distances when it is found. Quality, subsidy-accepting programs rarely operate before 7 a.m. or after 7 p.m., but the number did grow between 2011 and 2016.
Boyd-Swan (2019)	National Survey of America's Families repeated cross-sectional data from 1999 and 2002—compared those using parental care (e.g. “tag-team” parenting) with those using nonparental care during nonstandard hours with children ages 0–11.	Generally negative relationship between nonstandard child care and measures of a child’s cognitive, behavioral, and contemporaneous well-being. Children in informal care arrangements, compared with center-based or in-home nonparental care, are much more likely to have declining well-being.
Brodsky & Mills (2014)	Data from a literature review of NTH best practices, social and economic aspects, policies, and availability and demand across the nation; web-based surveys with center and family child care providers within the state; mailed surveys to parents in EEC database and interviews with parents.	Options for parents requiring overnight or weekend care are extremely limited and are usually more expensive if found, forcing parents to accept less desirable options or rearrange work/school hours.
Carrillo et al. (2017)	25 in-depth interviews of parents employed in San Francisco Bay Area social services.	Approaches of parents with nonstandard work schedules were grouped into tag team parenting, relying on one family anchor, or scrambling to accommodate changes. Stable and predictable schedules versus unpredictable and unstable schedules allowed for more stable informal child care arrangements.
CCEEPR Research Translation (2023)	Compilation of findings from studies on nontraditional-hour child care conducted by the Urban Institute and NORC. Most of the findings are analyses of the NSECE surveys and the American Community Survey from the U.S. Census.	Summarizes national statistics on prevalence of NTH work schedules among families with young children and the kind of NTH care these families use. Also summarizes findings on prevalence of providers across settings that offer care during NTH hours. This is a synthesis of prior work and provides references for the original studies.

References	Data/Methodology	Key Findings
Collier et al. (n.d.)	Fact sheet using national reports and published articles—no study methodologies.	Potential strategies to increase nontraditional child care access are loosening restrictions on subsidies, incentivizing NTH child care, making high-quality care more accessible, and increasing support of workplace child care aid.
Dobbins et al. (2019)	Fact sheet using national reports and published articles—no study methodologies.	NTH child care can also include varied schedules between weeks, not just daily hours. These child care settings tend to be more unlicensed and thus unregulated. There are many common industries that create demand for inconsistent child care needs.
Harknett et al. (2022)	2017 and 2018 survey data from the Shift Project, looking at parents with Just-in-Time schedules.	Just-in-time scheduling demands and practices are likely to have consequences for children’s development and safety—older siblings must become caregivers, or young children have to be left at home alone.
Henly & Adams (2018)	Research report using Child Care and Development Block Grants data—no methodologies.	Children with parents who work at least some hours during early mornings, evenings, weekends, or overnight represent 58 percent of the 4.77 million low-income children under 6 with working parents; a smaller yet significant share have parents who work most of their hours during these nonstandard times. There are few centers available to these parents and even fewer that are cost-effective. Even if not from a center, these children may especially benefit from more stable care.
Henly et al. (2017)	Book chapter—no methodologies to report.	The search process, itself, for NTH child care can be hindered by working NTH, as can accessing subsidies and finding affordable care.
Illinois Action for Children (2012)	Illinois Action for Children interview data from 2012 of 50 single, poor, or near-poor Chicago mothers who work some type of nontraditional schedule.	There are four specific challenges related to working nonstandard hours that are identified: finding care, arranging care according to schedule, securing a reliable caregiver, and affording care.

References

Data/Methodology

Key Findings

<p>Lou et al. (2022)</p>	<p>2019 NSECE data.</p>	<p>A number of disparities among children who require NTH care exist: nearly half of young Black children in nonparental care before kindergarten experience it, a third of children with high family incomes compared with half of children in low-income families were in NTH care, children of rural communities are more likely to need it than those in urban areas, and children living in communities with less poverty made them less likely to be in NTH care.</p>
<p>National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team (2015)</p>	<p>Fact sheet using 2012 NSECE data—no methodologies.</p>	<p>82% of unlisted, unpaid, home-based providers offer some care during nonstandard hours. This is followed by 63% of unlisted, paid, home-based providers and only 34% of listed, home-based providers. Flexible payments are more common among unlisted, paid, home-based providers (57%) than among listed, home-based, or center-based providers (about 40%). While center-based providers are almost equally likely to offer flexible scheduling (45%) and flexible payments (41%), home-based providers are about 20% more likely to allow flexible schedules than flexible payments. Center-based early childhood education providers are least likely of all providers to offer any type of care during nonstandard hours.</p>
<p>Rodrigues (2018)</p>	<p>Fact sheet using data pulled from NWLC reports and other published articles—no methodologies.</p>	<p>Finding NTH child care or ways to accommodate unpredictable schedules is demanding.</p>
<p>Sandstrom et al. (2018)</p>	<p>Multiple sources (records, surveys, interviews related to providers, parents, stakeholders).</p>	<p>Preferences for care location and facility type are not uniform, but they pertain to safety concerns and transportation costs.</p>
<p>Sandstrom et al. (2019)</p>	<p>2012 NSECE data specifically concerning children under 13 with one or more parents who had their first child before age 25 and are currently working while in education or training.</p>	<p>Unpaid relative care accounts for over two-thirds of the time children spent in nonparental care during nontraditional-hours, and relatives tend to provide critical support to parents attending school on top of working.</p>

References

Data/Methodology

Key Findings

<p>Schilder et al. (2022)</p>	<p>American Community Survey 2014–18 data, Survey of Income and Program Participation 2016 data, plus parent and stakeholder interviews, and document review.</p>	<p>Depending on the hours worked by parents, views of quality care differed: early morning and evening or overnight care in the child’s own home or the home of someone familiar; if the child is already in licensed care, prefer extended hours; for unpredictable/varying schedules, prefer in-home care; those with weekend care needs preferred centers with planned activities.</p>
<p>Smith (2021)</p>	<p>2021 BPC and Morning Consult survey of 800 households with children under age 5 where all parents were employed.</p>	<p>Families working in specific professions or belonging to minority groups are more likely to need NTH care, and their household income appears to affect the types of care available to them.</p>
<p>Start Strong PA (2022)</p>	<p>Policy brief using data pulled from other reports and published articles—no methodologies.</p>	<p>Given that receiving subsidies does not necessarily make high-quality nontraditional-hour care affordable for families, suggestions for making child care access more equitable are laid out along with notes on where more guidance and research are still needed.</p>
<p>Stoll et al. (2015)</p>	<p>Telephone interview data from 50 Chicago single mothers working nontraditional hours.</p>	<p>Those interviewed said families, friends, and neighbors account for a high percentage of their care providers. Changes identified as needed within child care were affordability (2/3 of respondents said paying was at least somewhat challenging), socialization opportunities, longer hours, including weekends, convenient locations, and educational environments.</p>
<p>Virginia Department of Social Services (2017)</p>	<p>Needs-assessment survey and anecdotal evidence from Virginia residents.</p>	<p>Finding child care during NTH was a problem for 7% of respondents, but the demand is still not high enough for most centers to make it a viable option. Family day homes emerged as the common solution. Employers and students can be helpful partners in locating and providing care.</p>

About us

The Illinois Nontraditional-Hour Child Care Study (INCCS) is a collaborative research-policy partnership led by Erikson Institute in collaboration with the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy and Practice, and Illinois Action for Children. The study addresses critical gaps in knowledge about what quality looks like in nontraditional-hour (NTH) child care; the experiences of families who search for and use NTH child care; the lived experiences of providers who offer care during these hours; and the types of supports needed to maintain, sustain, and grow the supply of NTH care. This research project will provide new knowledge to inform policy development aimed at building supply and increasing equitable access, enhancing quality, and sustaining a thriving NTH child care workforce. All products will be shared with our state partner, the Illinois Department of Human Services.

Learn More

This report is available to download at: <https://www.erikson.edu/inccs> or <https://voices.uchicago.edu/policylevers/studies/nth/>.

For more information about this study, contact: hbccprojects@erikson.edu.

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A partnership of

**Erikson
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Home-Based
Child Care Research

 **THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO**
**CROWN FAMILY SCHOOL
OF SOCIAL WORK, POLICY,
AND PRACTICE**
Advancing a More Just and Humane Society

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