

How to Evaluate Choice and Promise Neighborhoods

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“If poverty is a disease that infects an entire community in the form of unemployment, violence, failing schools, and broken homes, then we can’t just treat those symptoms in isolation; we have to heal the entire community.” —Presidential candidate Barack Obama, August 6, 2008

Living in concentrated poverty stifles the life chances of adults and children. People living in such neighborhoods have a greater risk of delinquency, unemployment, poor health, and substance abuse. Efforts to transform neighborhoods of extreme poverty and dysfunction into places of opportunity must grapple with concentrated disadvantages including distressed housing, failing schools, joblessness, poor health, and violence. A comprehensive community initiative attempts to address these multiple neighborhood deficiencies simultaneously.

Philanthropic organizations and local organizers have long turned to comprehensive approaches for combating poverty in targeted communities. However, policy interest in comprehensive community initiatives has surged recently, exemplified by two new federal programs: the U.S. Department of Education’s (ED’s) Promise Neighborhoods effort, modeled on the acclaimed Harlem Children’s Zone,¹ and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD’s) Choice Neighborhoods program. Both programs are place-based initiatives intended to transform neighborhoods by coordinating improvements across multiple sectors, such as housing, education, employment, transportation, and health. These multidimensional saturation models of community development are supposed to reflect local opportunities,

needs, and objectives, with considerable input from—and coordination with—residents, community leaders, and local institutions.²

Choice Neighborhoods builds on HUD’s HOPE VI program, providing funds for housing and economic development in communities with concentrations of public and assisted housing. HUD has identified three primary transformation targets under Choice Neighborhoods: distressed housing, people, and neighborhoods. Neighborhoods are to be transformed into communities of opportunity with good-quality affordable housing, high-performing schools, services, transportation, and access to jobs that support positive outcomes for all residents. The main focus is revitalizing public or assisted housing, but the revitalization must be coordinated with economic self-sufficiency activities and link to local education.³

The primary focus of the Promise Neighborhoods program is education. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stresses, “The Promise Neighborhoods program brings all of the Department’s strategies together—high-quality early learning programs, high-quality schools, and comprehensive supports to ensure that students are safe, healthy, and successful.”⁴ Local sites are supposed to foster a “college-going culture” in the neighborhood and build coordinated community development efforts that create a “cradle-through-college-to-career” continuum supporting children and families (U.S. Department of Education 2010). The continuum should promote positive outcomes across sectors and build services to prepare neighborhood young people for long-term success.



Do Comprehensive Community Initiatives Work?

Coinciding with the increased interest in comprehensive efforts is an increased federal focus on using data and supporting primarily evidence-based programs. This shift means that important questions about comprehensive community initiatives such as Promise and Choice Neighborhoods will be, “Do they work?” or “How do we know they work?”⁵

These seemingly straightforward questions are difficult to answer because the community development envisioned for Promise and Choice Neighborhoods raises several evaluation challenges, including the following:

- **Place-based approach:** Assessing an effort that sees its focus on a geographic place, such as a specific neighborhood, as pivotal to its approach implies that change will be large enough to detect across an entire neighborhood. In addition, it makes “resident” definitions challenging as households move in and out of a development or neighborhood.
- **Service saturation:** Choice and Promise flood a neighborhood with various services, making it difficult to identify which components are particularly effective (or ineffective) and to identify comparison neighborhoods where only some or no comparable services are provided.
- **No standard treatment:** Each individual may receive no, few, or many services of varying types for different amounts of time. It is also difficult to ensure consistency in service delivery and quality.
- **Comprehensive objectives:** The intention to transform implies dramatic, sweeping change. Indeed, the desired outcomes are multidimensional (health, housing, education, transportation) and include goals for places and people. These different objectives imply very different units of analysis.
- **Locally driven goals:** Each effort is supposed to be built on local opportunities, markets, and relationships designed to meet the needs of individual neighborhoods. The resulting site-specific approaches can make any cross-site evaluation very challenging.

Given the planned public investment in Choice and Promise Neighborhoods, the federal government intends to evaluate these initiatives rigorously; Congress included evaluation requirements in the legislation authorizing these ambi-

tious programs. This directive is important but difficult to implement precisely and rigorously for a reasonable cost because of the complexity of these efforts.

The Aspen Institute’s Roundtable on Community Change has led a broad effort over two decades to think about strategies for evaluating comprehensive place-based initiatives. After reviewing 48 major community change efforts, the roundtable concludes that implementing such efforts is feasible and residents who participate in services see a benefit (Kubisch et al. 2010). However, it notes that programs did not produce discernable “population level” changes across the neighborhood, saying, “Most CCIs and related community change efforts have not produced the degree of community transformation envisioned by their designers” (Kubisch et al. 2010, vii). One area of progress in evaluating community change is in “more realistic expectations for measuring impact,” with a growing understanding that establishing causality is difficult.

This brief provides a framework for designing evaluations of Choice and Promise Neighborhoods. The ideas presented here were informed by a panel of experts from multiple organizations with varying perspectives convened at the Urban Institute in July 2010. The brief describes key research questions to keep in mind when evaluating place-based, saturation community development efforts and reviews how different evaluation approaches can address these core research questions. It concludes with recommendations on an evaluation strategy and the components needed to assess Choice and Promise Neighborhoods.

How Can We Tell If Choice and Promise Neighborhoods Work?

Choice and Promise Neighborhoods both intend to tackle a range of difficult, seemingly intractable problems. It is not surprising, therefore, that devising a strategy to measure success will be complicated. However, despite the complexity of the interventions, a successful national evaluation strategy will need to identify a few main research questions geared toward core outcomes and goals. Diluting limited resources by spreading them across a wide field of inquiry is particularly tempting when assessing such sweeping efforts as Choice and Promise Neighborhoods, but it will weaken evaluation results. Successful evaluations of these programs must carefully target the most important questions. Core questions will help mitigate the difficulty inherent in comparing unique local programs and neighbor-

hoods, and they will add comparability across sites. Local programs will determine specific strategies and inputs but push toward common, federal outcomes.

The core research questions will need to address what happened at each site, how the program was implemented, who benefitted, what happened to the neighborhood, and what it cost. Each of these questions is described below.

What Mix of Services and Investments Was Implemented and Delivered?

This question asks about the specific programs and services undertaken to achieve broad neighborhood objectives. This question focuses on the counts, amounts, and costs of all program investments, including housing (both private and publicly assisted), education, public services, infrastructure, transportation, safety, and employment, depending on the required activities for Choice and Promise and the eligible activities undertaken by each site. For example, in a Choice Neighborhood, evaluators might ask how the program delivered deeply subsidized and affordable housing and whether it offered comprehensive supportive services to assisted housing residents. In a Promise Neighborhood, evaluators might ask whether the program delivered both school-based services and community services, such as prenatal care, health care, and early childhood programs.

How Was the Transformation Implemented and Managed?

This question deals with how the local effort was envisioned, implemented, and maintained. It captures the systems change, organizational development, capacity-building, and collaboration required to implement the comprehensive community initiative. For example, in a Choice Neighborhood, it would be helpful to document how efforts to transform public and assisted housing moved to include broader community goals and actors. In a Promise Neighborhood, evaluators might look at the contextual dynamics of the local educational system that shaped the transformation effort.

Did the Intervention Improve Specific Outcomes for People Receiving Services?

This question focuses on whether the intervention improved the lives of people who participated in specific program activities. Different

attention may be placed on certain groups of people. Recipients of different types of services may be more central to the goals of the overall neighborhood effort. For example, HUD's Choice Neighborhoods notice of funding availability makes it clear HUD is interested in tracking metrics for two groups: baseline residents—those living in the targeted public and/or assisted development at the time of application; and revitalized development residents—those living in the targeted public and/or assisted housing after redevelopment. Evaluators will be interested in how Choice influenced housing quality, physical and mental health, safety, education, and employment for these residents. Similarly, evaluators of Promise Neighborhoods might be interested in outcomes for families involved in educational programs or early childhood services. However, given the broad range of services expected in both Promise and Choice, evaluators might be interested to understand how the mix of services a household receives influences outcomes (such as those related to education, employment, health, and stability).

Did the Intervention Improve Specific Outcomes for Neighborhood Residents?

Part of the claim of comprehensive community initiatives is that the place-based focus means life improves for residents regardless of whether they specifically access a service or program. If improving the overall quality of life for neighborhood residents is a prominent goal for Choice⁶ and Promise,⁷ then it is important to assess whether such improvement occurs. Neighborhoods are dynamic places with daily changes in resident composition. Evaluating what happens to households who live in the neighborhood throughout the intervention period is important, but it is also important to know what happens to those who leave the neighborhood and those who move into it. Evaluators might ask whether community residents saw improvements in physical and mental health outcomes, or other outcomes such as employment or educational attainment over time. Evaluators may also want to analyze the effective “dosage” or amount of time a person needed to live in the neighborhood to see a benefit.

Did the Intervention Improve Neighborhood Conditions?

Choice and Promise Neighborhoods seek to transform distressed communities into neighborhoods of opportunity. In Promise Neighborhoods, this

means a place where students are prepared to succeed in college or careers. Credible evaluations of these programs must assess community change. Depending on local goals and federal objectives, neighborhood conditions of interest could include composition, school performance, student mobility, safety, public amenities, transportation, and property values. For example, a specific question might be whether the intervention reduced rates of crime and social disorder and whether property values increased as a result of the intervention. For Choice, this includes community-level changes within the targeted public and assisted housing developments as well as the surrounding neighborhood.

Were the Impacts Worth the Cost?

Final funding amounts for both Choice and Promise Neighborhoods are unclear, but comprehensive community initiatives are expensive. The gains achieved will need to be assessed in light of the investment made in the community. The Choice Neighborhoods program has identified financial viability and ongoing sustainability as an objective and measure of long-term success.⁸ While this refers to the ability of the effort to move forward after federal funds are no longer available, it also suggests the need for detailed cost analysis to understand what is being spent in order to assess relative benefits and the resources needed to continue service. Unless the evaluation includes an experimental design measuring impacts or a strong quasi-experimental design with a matched comparison group, it will not be feasible to conduct a definitive cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness analysis because these analyses require a statistically equivalent comparison group. For most Choice and Promise Neighborhoods programs, evaluators will be unable to achieve this goal and will therefore need to carefully track the costs of specific services per participant over time in order to be able to present the most comprehensive analysis possible.

What Are Possible Evaluation Approaches?

There are many approaches to program evaluation, each using different (albeit often overlapping) strategies and methods. Five major evaluation strategies that offer lessons for an evaluation of Choice and Promise Neighborhoods are performance management, process study, experimental design, quasi-experimental design, and theory of change. All these approaches would ideally begin

before program activities start in order to capture baseline information on resident characteristics and neighborhood conditions as well as to establish program and experiment structures to generate and gather information over time. All would continue to operate over the life of the program but fluctuate in intensity at different stages.

The strengths and limitations of each research strategy guide its ability to answer specific research questions. Table 1 summarizes which question can be answered by each method when undertaken in a Choice or Promise Neighborhoods setting.

Performance Management

In performance management, program managers assemble and review selected performance indicators on a recurring and frequent basis (e.g., monthly, quarterly, yearly) and use these measures to adjust resource flows and make midcourse corrections in program operations (Smith et al. 2010). The process often collects a substantial set of ongoing measures capturing inputs, outputs, and activities. Information collected might target such program elements as participants and services but could also include neighborhood and institutional characteristics.

Performance measurement can be a way for local practitioners to see a timely benefit to evaluation because it can help managers monitor program activity, adjust where needed, and think strategically about future needs. It builds in the notion that managers need to collect and use data. Performance management data are often vital to assessing core research questions, particularly as performance management systems can gather ongoing information on the services delivered, recipient characteristics, neighborhood conditions, and cost. Substantial common core measures are extremely helpful in looking at performance across sites, particularly if evaluators inform the design of the performance measurement system, including identifying key measures.

While such performance information is important and often fundamental to evaluation, it is insufficient. Performance management may detect that a change occurred, but it cannot explain *why*. While performance data may be critical in addressing questions of impact (on people or places), these data alone cannot do so, nor can they assess causation or attribution. For example, a performance indicator might show that students in an after-school program increased their reading scores by 20 percent. But it cannot tell the reader if this occurred because of participation in the program. Unlike performance man-

TABLE 1. Evaluation Strategies by Key Research Questions for Choice and Promise Neighborhoods

	Performance management	Process study	Experimental design	Quasi-experimental design	Theory of change
What mix of services and investments was implemented and delivered?	X	X			X
How was the transformation implemented and managed?		X			X
Did the intervention improve specific outcomes for people receiving services?			X	X	X
Did the intervention improve specific outcomes for neighborhood residents?				X	X
Did the intervention improve neighborhood conditions?				X	X
Were the impacts worth the cost?	X		X		

agement, evaluation should deal with questions of attribution and causation. Moreover, evaluation often focuses on long-term questions and overarching outcomes, while performance management can have a more short-term, local outlook.

Process Study

Process studies document how local programs are envisioned and implemented apart from intended outcomes. Most process studies observe program startup and implementation activities, track program data, and document participation. This information may be reviewed throughout the course of a program. As part of a process study, researchers often review written program materials (meeting minutes, mission statements, public notices), analyze performance management data, and interview program administrators, partners, and participants. Such studies can provide interesting information on institutional change, collaboration and partnerships, and service delivery. Moreover, information on costs can be incorporated to review implementation activities in light

of their expense. In efforts such as Choice and Promise Neighborhoods, where the expected timeline for change is 3, 5, 10, or more years, the short-term implementation and collaboration achievements documented in an early process study may be some of the only “outcomes” for a considerable period. In addition, such studies may provide program administrators with opportunities for continuous learning and the information needed to correct and adjust midcourse.

Process studies do not measure impacts or relate intended outcomes to actual experience. Key research questions assessing outcomes for residents and neighborhood conditions are not part of implementation or process studies.

Experimental Design

Evaluations with an experimental design can measure whether a specific intervention causes an outcome. Such designs randomly assign participants into two groups: a treatment group that receives the intervention and a control (or comparison) group that does not. The two groups

are comparable in all ways except the treatment received. If effectively designed and implemented, this structure allows researchers to test whether the presence of the treatment or intervention produced a given outcome. Such assessments can definitively answer research questions related to whether a program caused changes in resident outcomes or neighborhood conditions. Further, since this method assesses impact, it provides the information needed to conduct a full cost-benefit analysis.

Evaluations with experimental designs provide rigorous, defensible measures of causality because they compare differences between a treatment and a control group. However, they are expensive, complex, and difficult (sometimes impossible) to undertake because they require strict control over all aspects of an environment and study participants.

In experimental designs, people are usually randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. However, previous evaluations of public policy initiatives have used places as the unit of analysis. HUD used an experimental design to evaluate its place-based saturation employment initiative, Jobs-Plus. Cities were selected to participate in the program, then large public housing developments in each city with high joblessness and welfare receipt were randomly assigned to experimental or control groups. Developments in the experimental group offered all working-age residents employment services, rent incentives, and work supports. Developments in the control group did not offer residents additional incentives or supports, but residents could participate in existing services and programs. Given that both control and treatment communities were public housing developments, the local housing authority was able to control the provision of additional on-site employment services and supports, including rent incentives. Resident data from treatment and control communities were compared to measure the impact of saturating public housing communities with employment supports.

The strength of experimental design relies on randomly assigned, comparable treatment and control groups. But neither residents nor neighborhoods will be randomly assigned to participate in Choice or Promise Neighborhoods. Instead, applicants target specific neighborhoods when they apply to participate in the programs. Identifying comparable neighborhoods is troublesome, but even more difficult to overcome is controlling the treatment of the control neighborhood's environment. Evaluators cannot direct all program and service delivery in entire neighborhoods or provided to neighborhood residents. Even if the effect

of a saturation of services (like that provided in Promise and Choice) is being measured, it will be difficult to establish compelling treatment and control groups because of the inability to isolate development activity in these neighborhoods.

An experimental design could be used in Choice or Promise Neighborhoods to evaluate the impact of a specific service provided within the larger comprehensive community initiative. This strategy would be particularly viable if a natural experiment was identified, perhaps through a lottery to receive a specific service (leaving a treatment group of those who gained access to the service and a control group of those who did not).

Quasi-experimental Design

“Quasi-experimental design” refers to evaluations that cannot provide the strict rigor required of random assignment in experimental design but that seek to systematically evaluate treatment effects by comparing treatment outcomes with outcomes of an untreated group. Quasi-experimental designs may be limited in their ability to draw causal inferences because of potential differences between the groups compared and unmeasured forces external to the experiment. In some cases, however, it is possible to construct very good controls, and quasi-experimental designs can speak powerfully to outcome-related research questions for residents and neighborhood conditions.

Like experimental designs, quasi-experimental designs can be expensive, complex, and difficult to execute because they require control of the environment, identification of treatment and comparison groups, and systematic data collection for both groups. However, where random assignment is not possible, they may offer a rigorous alternative. Various evaluation structures can be regarded as quasi-experimental designs, but many involve time-series data for a treatment and matched comparison group. Possible effects are measured by comparing a participant characteristic in both groups before receiving treatment (pretest) and after treatment (posttest). The comparability and reliability of the comparison or untreated group determines the strength of a quasi-experimental design. Multiple methods can account for selection bias in order to strengthen the reliability of results, including difference-in-difference estimators, instrumental variables, propensity scoring, and regression discontinuity. Long-term trends on community-level measures can be used to assess neighborhood change.

Like experimental design, quasi-experimental design is focused on impact rather than imple-

mentation. Studies using this approach can address questions related to recipient, resident, and neighborhood impacts when it is possible to identify both a treatment group and a matched comparison group. For cost questions, quasi-experimental design can perform cost-effectiveness (not cost-benefit) analysis if evaluators successfully create matched comparison groups.

Theory of Change

Given the difficulty of implementing experimental and quasi-experimental designs, other methods may be used to evaluate comprehensive community initiatives. Theory-of-change approaches to evaluation first focus on the desired outcomes, then develop detailed logic models of what is needed to achieve those outcomes. Evaluators interpret program performance data within the context of the logic model, comparing actual experience to expectations. If change data are consistent with expectations, then the evaluators conclude that the logic model (or theory of change) and its assumptions are correct.

This strategy seeks to convincingly address questions of outcomes and impact without employing random assignment or other experimental and quasi-experimental design characteristics. As indicated in table 1, theory of change can provide information on resident and neighborhood outcomes, but this evidence is not as rigorous as that gleaned from experimental and quasi-experimental designs.

The theory-of-change approach organizes complicated contexts, strategies, and organizations through a focus on outcomes, vision, and goals. This strategy can speak powerfully to research questions associated with outcomes for residents and neighborhood conditions. For example, a theory of change might assert that expanding time in school would lead to less crime committed by young people. Proponents might claim success if a neighborhood school system significantly lengthened the school day and the surrounding community saw a decrease in juvenile crime. While compelling, this type of assessment makes it difficult to rule out alternative explanations for why change happens.

Theory-of-change approaches often involve local stakeholders in the evaluation. Stakeholders capture the original project vision and logic, which is helpful in documenting the effort and understanding original goals. However, a focus on a specific site's experience makes it difficult to generalize across jurisdictions. Moreover, local practitioners may find the detailed theoretical

conversations needed to document the local theory of change burdensome, and the critical thinking required may not connect with the pragmatism of some program managers. Indeed, sometimes such activities take place after community development activities are well under way, and evaluators run the risk of incorrectly imputing the intent of local actors.

Evaluators often gather program cost data as part of this approach (depending on expected outcomes), and such information can be used to address research questions related to cost (such as cost per participant). Rigorous cost-benefit analysis is not possible because this method does not establish measures of causality for each participant variable.

Recommended Components of an Evaluation Strategy

Creating change or transforming neighborhoods is the main goal of most comprehensive community development efforts. Evaluations of such initiatives must balance the desire for rigorous causal evidence with political, economic, and methodological realities. The Aspen Roundtable notes that

As evaluators have grown more aware of the multiple causal factors at play within the complex ecology of community change—and as their clients have grown more interested in learning how to *create* change, not just proving that it has occurred (Behrens & Kelly 2008; Westley 2006)—they have begun to use multiple methods and sources of data to “make a compelling case” that links the change effort with intended outcomes or lack thereof. (Kubisch et al. 2010, 96)

We agree that multiple methods will be needed to adequately evaluate Choice and Promise Neighborhoods and recommend four components of an evaluation strategy that could make “a compelling case” when assessing the effectiveness of these initiatives:

1. **High-quality performance measurement.**

A sound performance measurement system must be in place at (or before) baseline to gather recurrent and ongoing information on the type, amount, and cost of program activities. Such information should be provided to program managers throughout implementation. Ideally, program evaluators would help design the performance measurement systems to ensure needed data are targeted for collection and maintained in a reliable and accessible database over time.⁹

2. **Locally focused process study.** A process study can gather implementation information as well as document experiences and decisions that can interpret performance data. Information on intended goals and outcomes is important when comparing actual with expected results. Implementation information gathered from managers, partners, and participants can be critical feedback for local administrators.
3. **Linked chain of causality hypotheses.** Guided by a few focused research questions, systematic and careful theories of change can make compelling cases for causality. To be persuasive, such efforts must create a chain of causality hypotheses that clearly links goals to outcomes so expectations can be compared and assessed in relation to actual experience. This chain of linked hypotheses would address the overarching goals of Choice and Promise Neighborhoods. It would be poised to answer questions about the effectiveness of a place-based saturation model of community development. For example, a site could hypothesize that development of a strong citizens association, demolition of a large blighted property, and outreach to the business community will increase retail venues in a neighborhood. This type of hypothesis chain would influence the performance management indicators to be collected.
4. **Rigorous evaluation of selected links in the chain.** Specific links in the logic chain can be rigorously evaluated experimentally or quasi-experimentally. Using such methods to evaluate all aspects of a comprehensive initiative is problematic given how difficult it is to establish neighborhood counterfactuals, randomize assignment of households, and control all aspects of neighborhood service delivery. However, a mini-randomized trial embedded in a comprehensive initiative is potentially feasible. Programs with waiting lists or those that select participants through a lottery could identify both treatment- and comparison-group households. In this way, information can be gathered that tests how well a specific strategy or program within the Choice or Promise Neighborhood helps further progress toward the desired outcomes for the entire effort. This would be particularly informative if it is believed that a particular outcome is more effectively achieved in a community context, such as crime reduction through community youth engagement and support.

Notes

1. The Harlem Children's Zone has created a pipeline of accessible, interconnected programs and high-quality schools for neighborhood children and young adults from 0 to 23 years old, starting when parents are pregnant and finishing when children graduate from college. This pipeline includes additional programs to support parents, families, and the larger community.
2. There is no standard definition of neighborhood across comprehensive community development initiatives, and federal programs often rely on local definitions. The Choice program indicates that HUD will rely on applicants to identify boundaries that are generally accepted locally as a neighborhood (but must extend beyond public or assisted housing). Under Promise Neighborhoods, a neighborhood is a locally identified "geographically defined area."
3. Per the Department of Housing and Urban Development Appropriations Act of 2010, PL 111-117, enacted December 16, 2009. This appropriation authorized the secretary of HUD to make up to \$65 million of HOPE VI monies available for a Choice Neighborhoods demonstration. A notice of funding availability (NOFA) for Choice Neighborhoods pilot grant applications appeared in the *Federal Register* on August 25, 2010. Applications were due December 9, 2010.
4. U.S. Department of Education, "U.S. Department of Education Opens Competition for Promise Neighborhoods," press release, April 30, 2010.
5. While the Choice and Promise Neighborhoods efforts both encourage place-based saturation models of community development, they have fundamental differences with implications for evaluation. Choice is driven by housing, resident, and neighborhood transformation, while Promise focuses on education outcomes with place change as a mediating objective. Strategies presented here can apply to either program, but detailed evaluation plans will reflect these different priorities and objectives.
6. It is interesting to note that while HUD's Choice Neighborhoods Round 1 NOFA says one of the three core goals of the program is to "support positive outcomes for families who live in the target development(s) **and the surrounding neighborhood**" (emphasis added), it does not include this group in later listings of people or neighborhood metrics for measuring success.
7. ED's Promise Neighborhoods application package includes suggested indicators and associated results measured for all neighborhood children (may be sampled), regardless of school or program association. The package also discusses requirements to collect data for both program participants and a comparison group of nonparticipants.
8. Department of Housing and Urban Development, "HUD's Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 NOFA for the Choice Neighborhoods Initiative—Round 1 NOFA," released August 26, 2010.

9. For a detailed listing of possible performance measurement indicators and sources of data, see Smith et al. (2010).

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