

Essay: *A Tale of Two Connecticut*s

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times . . .

— Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

For many people in Connecticut, the past decade has indeed seemed like the best of times. Despite the current recession, for most people in Connecticut, life is pretty good. The state enjoys the highest per capita income in the nation.¹ Connecticut and the nation as a whole have enjoyed the longest peacetime period of uninterrupted growth in our history. The state's public schools boast some of the highest test scores in the nation.² Most residents own a home, homeownership is growing, and the value of homes is growing far faster than inflation.³

In fact, Connecticut ranks eighth best out of the 50 states on ten child well-being indicators used in the 2002 national KIDS COUNT Data Book published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Connecticut has the second-lowest rate of childhood poverty in the nation, the third-lowest child death rate, and the eighth-lowest rate of children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment.⁴ Of the fourteen indicators included in CAHS's 2003 Data Book, twelve include trend data, and nine of those trends moved in a positive direction, while only two were down and one was virtually unchanged.

And yet . . .

The current recession is making life difficult for some, especially for the 42,000 residents who have lost their jobs since 2002, and for older residents who have lost a sizable portion of their retirement nest egg. And for those who do not share in the state's overall prosperity, and for poor children in particular, these are the worst of times, as the gap between rich and poor grew significantly in the 1990s.⁵ Incredibly, while the state enjoys the nation's second *lowest* rate of childhood poverty, and poverty statewide has declined slightly since 1990, our capital city has the second *highest* rate among major cities (population over 100,000) for both childhood and adult poverty. An astounding 41 percent of children in Hartford live below the poverty level. The 2000 Census also found that Hartford has the nation's second-lowest homeownership rate for a large city.

The story of the "Two Connecticut" is not new. But instead of bridging the divide between the worlds of the rich and the poor, current policies are widening and deepening the gap. The common view that only Connecticut's "big four" cities—Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, and Waterbury—are experiencing problems is not accurate. Smaller cities like Windham and New London, and even some suburbs like East Hartford, did not share in the good times of recent years, at least not to the same degree as the rest of the state. Their residents are living in the "Other Connecticut," suffering from low school test scores, high poverty and crime, and poor health and safety. A recent report, *Connecticut Metropatterns*, written for the CenterEdge Coalition, organized by the Archdiocese of Hartford's Office of Urban Affairs, characterizes 59 towns, comprising 59 percent of the state's population, as "severely stressed," "stressed," or "at-risk."

Because these inequities have been around so long, they no longer strike many Connecticut residents and policymakers as dramatic or newsworthy, even as our problems spread and multiply. To a great extent, many residents accept that there is a huge divide between the wealthy and the poor, despite a long history of egalitarianism in America that has its roots in New England. It sometimes appears that the public gives little thought to the long-term effects of generations of children growing up in poverty, with poor schooling leading to weak job prospects. In today's political environment, where top elected officials in Washington and Hartford are talking about the "need" to cut back on some school aid and health insurance, even advocates can feel beaten down rather than outraged. Meanwhile, poor academic test scores spread from Hartford to Bloomfield, and the rate of low birthweight soars in Hamden and Stratford.

So let's look at what our future could hold, if we fail to narrow these gaps. Today's urban high school dropouts should be tomorrow's workforce. Since Connecticut has three times as many adults

as children, the state's economy can't afford to write off the 10 percent of students who fail to graduate in Bridgeport, or the 11.5 percent who drop out in New London. To prevent this from happening, we need to intervene early. Our failure to provide sufficient, high quality early education for lower-income children, a positive influence on later school and life success, will come back to haunt taxpayers. These children are more likely to require more special education, to be held behind a grade or two through their early academic years, and eventually, to end up incarcerated in our corrections system, rather than working in our insurance or biotech industries.⁶

Furthermore, the widening gap between rich and poor in Connecticut and nationally has serious consequences for the middle class. The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer, and many in the middle are stagnating. Economic policies from the 1930s through 1960s accelerated middle class income and wealth nationally. The economic boom of the 1990s, however, masked a continuing trend since the 1970s of concentrated wealth in the top 10 percent and especially the top one percent of Americans.⁷

Meanwhile, Connecticut's municipalities are becoming more economically stratified, leaving many towns with inadequate tax bases to support growing needs. In fact, the disparity between Connecticut's low- and high-tax base communities increased by more than 50 percent during the 1990s.⁸ The impact of this stratification is only beginning to be felt, primarily through rising property tax rates in those towns least able to afford them.

It does not have to be this way. Smart public policy and strategic investments—like the HUSKY health insurance program, School Readiness, and the Care4Kids child care subsidy program—make a huge difference. Investments like these helped Connecticut achieve its high ranking on the national KIDS COUNT indicators. But given the state's wealth—the highest gross state product per capita in the nation—Connecticut should be ranked first or second nationally, rather than eighth. Instead, we are cutting the very programs that help kids most in need. We have the economic capacity to invest in our future—but do we have the political will to do so?

While it may appear that the middle class has continued to hold its own, many gains made over the past few decades are attributable not to general economic growth or higher hourly wages, but to longer work hours and more women in the workforce. Connecticut's median household income, adjusted for inflation, actually dropped 0.4 percent in the 1990s, according to the 2000 Census. As you read through this year's KIDS COUNT Data Book, think about your life compared to that of your parents. Do you or your spouse work longer hours than your parents did? Do you rely on two incomes, when your parents needed only one? Will you be able to retire with a pension and health insurance, as many people in your parents' generation did?

■ The Widening Gap

Stark economic, educational, and health disparities in the state can be found in the data in this year's Connecticut KIDS COUNT Data Book. Indeed, the data are more dramatic, disturbing, and far-ranging than we anticipated when we began the analysis. Residents of the big cities are not the only ones losing ground.

Data from the indicators in this book clearly demonstrate where the disparities lie and where investments are most needed. This year's Connecticut KIDS COUNT Data Book includes 14 indicators, and for the first time includes data for all 169 municipalities. To illustrate the geographical nature of inequities in the state, each indicator is broken down by (1) the state as a whole, (2) each county, and (3) the 14 Priority School Districts.⁹ Sixty-nine percent of the state's children living below the Federal Poverty Level reside in these 14 districts, which comprise 32 percent of the state's total population under 18.

Among the indicators we report, we found that:

- Many of the gaps are most acute for the state's four large central cities: Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, and Waterbury. (Stamford, the only other Connecticut municipality with a population over 100,000, does better on almost all indicators.)
- Children in Hartford and New Haven are almost five times more likely than children in

the state as a whole to receive Temporary Family Assistance (TFA).

- Children in Bridgeport and Waterbury are almost four times more likely than children in the state as a whole to be eligible to receive Free or Reduced Price School Meals.

On some indicators, children in smaller cities and even some rural towns fare worse than their big city counterparts:

- New Britain's (2000 Census population 71,538) rate of births to teen mothers is triple the state average, and Windham's (pop. 22,857) is just slightly lower. Only Hartford has a higher rate.
- New London (pop. 26,185) has the state's second highest rate of infant mortality, and East Hartford's (pop. 49,575) is fourth.
- Children in Putnam (pop. 9,002) are 25 percent less likely than those in the state as a whole to have preschool experience. North Canaan (pop. 3,350), Columbia (pop. 4,971), and Scotland (pop. 1,556) have some of the lowest preschool experience rates in the state.
- Killingly (pop. 16,472), Putnam, and Canterbury (pop. 4,692), all in Windham County, have some of the state's highest rates of substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect, similar to those in the state's larger cities.

Other indicators, especially in education, illustrate that the largest cities universally lag far behind not only suburban towns, but the state as a whole.

- Despite some gains over a five-year period, the lowest rates for meeting goals for the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) that are administered to elementary school students, are still found in New Haven, Bridgeport, Waterbury, New Britain, and Hartford. The same is true, with the order changed slightly, for meeting Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) goals, administered to 10th graders.

The disparities between urban school systems and the state as a whole are spreading to the inner-ring of suburbs surrounding the central cities. This occurs as parents seek the greener pastures of the suburbs, in part to escape failing school systems and

move to municipalities with better schools and job opportunities and lower crime rates. Often, however, the inner-ring suburban school districts themselves have low rates of students meeting test standards, although higher than the central cities. In many ways, the problems of the central cities are spreading to older, inner-ring suburbs, especially those with a substantial stock of multi-family housing affordable to central city residents. For example,

- Bloomfield and East Hartford have two of the state's lowest CMT scores, after the big cities.

In some cases, there is good news and examples of success stemming from focused efforts by government to close gaps in access.

- Children entering kindergarten in Bridgeport and New Haven are almost as likely as their peers statewide to have had a preschool experience. The state's School Readiness Program, aimed at providing preschool for three- and four-year-olds in the Priority School Districts, is partially responsible.

There is also some good news in the trend data: on nine of twelve indicators the trends were positive. (The only exceptions were Eligibility for Free and Reduced Price Meals, which was virtually unchanged, Low Birthweight, and Child Deaths.) This should not be surprising, since most of the data compares the *late* 1990s (economic boom) to the *early* 1990s (long recession). Gains on the CMT and CAPT should be singled out: the rate of students statewide meeting the CMT goal rose from 24.2 percent to 49.7 percent over a five-year period. The percentage meeting the CAPT goal also doubled, from 14.5 percent to 28.3 percent over four years. Urban rates more than doubled, but from a lower starting rate.

Some disparities actually narrowed in recent years, especially in areas where the state or particular municipalities made a concentrated effort to address a problem. Hartford and New Haven, for example, saw significant decreases in their still-high teen birth rates. Bridgeport, New Haven, and New London saw significant gains in the rate of students with preschool experience. Unfortunately, there are relatively few such positive trends in the data.

GOOD FENCES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS?

*Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out
And to whom I was like to give offense.*
— Robert Frost, “Mending Wall”

Our unwillingness in Connecticut to shift from the “home rule” system of municipal government to any regional system compounds the state’s inequities in income, property tax base, and racial and ethnic concentrations. The gap between Hartford and its suburbs is well-documented, but these urban and suburban gaps exist all around the state, and across the full range of indicators in this book.

Compare the following central cities and bordering towns:

Bridgeport and Fairfield

A child born in Bridgeport is almost twice as likely as one born in Fairfield to have a low birthweight. Less than 5 percent of Bridgeport tenth graders met the CAPT goal, compared to almost 32 percent in adjoining Fairfield. And the child abuse and neglect rate is six times higher in the city than the suburb.

New Haven and Woodbridge

Almost one in four New Haven children received Temporary Family Assistance, compared to less than one in one hundred in adjacent Woodbridge. New Haven’s infant mortality rate is 9.8 per 1,000 births; Woodbridge’s is zero. Only 14 percent of New Haven elementary school students met the CMT goal, compared to 75 percent in adjoining Woodbridge.

New London and Waterford

Over 60 percent of children in New London receive Free or Reduced Price School Meals, a significant indicator of child poverty, compared to less than 5 percent in neighboring Waterford. Over 20 percent of births in New London were to women who received late or no prenatal care, compared to less than 9 percent in Waterford. And New London’s annual dropout rate of 11.5 percent, noted earlier, is almost six times higher than Waterford’s.

■ A Note on Racial and Ethnic Inequities

Racial and ethnic disparities go hand-in-hand with Connecticut’s geographic inequities. Since this book shows most data by municipality, these gaps are not immediately evident. Connecticut is among the seven most segregated states in the country, a list that includes New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Michigan, and Illinois.¹⁰ The 14 Priority School Districts, with 32 percent of the state’s total population under 18, are home to 64 percent of the state’s minority students. “Connecticut’s communities are highly segregated, with people of color disproportionately located in its large cities and stressed communities—places with the highest shares of affordable housing and low and slow-growing tax bases,”¹¹ according to a new study on the impact of sprawl.

These disparities are most apparent in education and healthcare. Only 5 percent of whites in Connecticut are uninsured, compared to eight percent of African-Americans, 10 percent of Hispanics, and 19 percent of Asians.¹² Infant mortality was twice as high for African-Americans as for whites in 2000.¹³ Statewide, the percentage of non-Asian minority students attending high-poverty schools was 72 percent, compared to just 12 percent for whites and Asian students.¹⁴ Dropout rates for whites and Asians were less than half that of African-Americans in 1999-2000, and only a quarter of the Hispanic rate.

■ Public Policies Foster Disparities

Connecticut’s inequities pose a serious threat to our state’s livability and economic health, and should concern us all, not just advocates for the poor or children.

- The wealth gap is widening not only between rich and poor, but between rich and middle class. State tax policies—including the institution of the flat income tax in 1991, and taxation of dividends at the same rate as income, instead of a higher rate—have helped to concentrate wealth at the top. This has come at the expense of the middle class: state median income actually dropped slightly during the 1990s, even as incomes for the wealthy rose.

- Other state policies, including chronic underfunding of education costs compared to goals, have resulted in higher property taxes for those towns with weaker tax bases. This problem now affects municipalities with a majority of the state's population, and not just the poorest cities. Even wealthier towns are hurt by the state's property tax system, as they frequently accept landscape-scarring sprawl in order to strengthen their tax base.
- Meanwhile, state lawmakers often make choices that are less expensive in the short run, but that ultimately cost taxpayers more, while exacerbating inequities. Failure to adequately fund early care and education programs, and support for enormous expansion of the prison system—the population of which has more than doubled over the past decade—are two examples.
- Finally, an economy able to compete in the global marketplace requires a well-educated workforce. Increasingly, young people educated at schools in affluent suburbs go out-of-state to college and then to work (hence the “You Belong in CT” campaign, which aims to keep 20-somethings in the state). The students most likely to stay are those attending urban schools, with their lower test scores and higher dropout rates. This is the workforce of the not-too-distant future, and the state's employers and tax base depend on improving their educational outcomes and matching their skills with employers' needs.

■ Some Modest Proposals

We dare not seriously suggest the closest thing to a silver bullet to resolve Connecticut's growing disparities. Proposals to create regional systems of government that could lessen the impact of inequities in income, property tax base, and racial and ethnic concentrations by spreading them over a larger area, have met with indifference at best. Having abandoned the last vestiges of county government in the 1960s, most Connecticut residents appear to believe that any regional proposals will create an expensive, unnecessary additional layer of government, rejecting notions of cost efficiencies, fairness, and reduced sprawl.

Income Changes

The communities that experienced the greatest gains and losses in median household income during the 1990s, adjusted for inflation. (Rank is the income ranking among all Connecticut cities and towns for 1999.)

GAINS

Roxbury
+31.0%

1989: \$67,012 1999: \$87,794 Rank: 13

Easton
+28.6%

1989: \$87,646 1999: \$125,557 Rank: 5

Darien
+26.5%

1989: \$116,022 1999: \$146,755 Rank: 1

Wilton
+24.3%

1989: \$113,804 1999: \$141,428 Rank: 4

Lyme
+22.6%

1989: \$59,504 1999: \$73,250 Rank: 106

LOSSES

North Canaan
-16.3%

1989: \$46,522 1999: \$39,020 Rank: 162

Windsor Locks
-13.7%

1989: \$56,578 1999: \$48,837 Rank: 142

Hartford
-13.6%

1989: \$28,735 1999: \$24,820 Rank: 169

Waterbury
-13.5%

1989: \$39,628 1999: \$34,285 Rank: 165

Bloomfield
-13.4%

1989: \$62,107 1999: \$53,812 Rank: 120

Still, there are numerous public policies and programs that have worked in other states and cities which could address a broad range of the inequities recounted in this book, provide children with better opportunities, and simultaneously help improve Connecticut's economy and its overall quality of life.

Such proposals fall under five broad categories:

- State budget reform, including income and property tax reform
- Investments in the future, including quality early education and K-12 public education
- Connecting families with the tools they need to succeed
- Workforce training
- Land use reform

While solutions for eliminating or narrowing disparities between the wealthy and poor can seem overwhelming, in part because the inequities are so broad-based, there really is quite a lot that we can do. Connecticut is small in scale, and wealthy. While many of the problems are national in scope, the state level is the perfect place to experiment with innovative solutions. Best of all, many of these solutions do not require massive new resources, but modest increases or a re-allocation of existing resources.

■ **State budget reform, including income and property tax reform.**

State budget cuts over the past several years have devastated social service programs and will lead to further inequities unless they are reversed soon. For example, funding for Care4Kids, the state's subsidized child care program, has already been reduced, is targeted for further cuts, and intake is frozen for low-income working families. Eligibility for Medicaid programs and HUSKY has been restricted, leaving tens of thousands of adults and children with no health coverage, and others with reduced services and increased costs.

Meanwhile, the state has *reduced the level of increase of direct municipal and education aid* even as school costs continue to climb. Big cities with the highest concentrations of poor people have taken the biggest hit, re-

sulting in raised local property taxes and reductions in municipal workforces. There are already direct impacts on school budgets, with layoffs of paraprofessionals and even teachers in some towns.

The state budget crisis is real and multi-faceted. At its heart, it is a revenue crisis. Revenues have declined precipitously with the economic downturn, the stock market decline in particular. No group should bear the sole burden of the crisis, but it is clear that wealthy individuals, who saw the greatest gains during the 1990s economic boom, have a strong ability to bear a greater share of the income tax burden. *Connecticut needs to replace its current flat income tax structure with a progressive system that places the highest rates on those with the highest incomes, as in most states with income taxes.* This will generate a major portion of the revenue needed to restore and expand necessary and successful programs like HUSKY and Care4Kids.

Political leaders need to restructure the corporate tax system. Corporate tax rates dropped significantly when the state income tax was instituted in 1991. Since then, the legislature also has adopted numerous tax credits and loopholes that completely eliminate the income tax for many corporations. The two Native American casinos now contribute more to the state budget annually than all corporations combined. While it is important that the overall corporate tax rate remain low to ensure that Connecticut is competitive with other states, *the state needs to ensure that corporations pay their fair share*, beginning with a comprehensive review of corporate tax expenditures.

Finally, *the state needs to cover at least half the costs of local education expenditures.* This would help not only the central cities, but the many financially stressed municipalities that have difficulty providing quality K-12 education. Further efforts are needed to determine other ways to reform the state's property tax system, which now places the

greatest burdens on those least able to afford them.

■ **Investments in the future.**

The nature of government budgeting is to save money in the short-term, even if expenditures could reduce costs in the long term. Early care and education is an excellent example. Studies in Connecticut and nationally have shown that *investments in early care and education reduce retention in early grades, reduce the need for special education, and improve academic performance.* Long-term studies in Michigan and North Carolina show that every dollar invested in child care saves \$4 to \$7 by the time the child reaches adulthood.¹⁵ Nonetheless, Connecticut has never adequately funded the School Readiness program, which provides quality care and education for three- and four-year-olds, and other early childhood education programs. Only cuts are now being proposed.

There is a growing movement to *analyze long-term investments in children, in ways that reduce budgetary expenditures for the state, while improving child outcomes.* The Connecticut Commission on Children has taken the lead with the creation of the State Prevention Council in 2001, creation of a state prevention budget, and continuing efforts to encourage research-based early intervention strategies. The Commission is specifically seeking to create state goals that directly address the gaps detailed in this book, including ensuring that: (1) pregnant women and newborns are healthy, (2) children are ready for school, (3) children succeed in school, (4) youth choose healthy behaviors, (5) youth become successful working adults, and (6) communities are safe and supportive of families.

New thinking is also needed about how we educate our children, particularly in the state's urban centers. *Local school systems need to support all children in their efforts to succeed and, in concert with state policymakers and administrators, develop policies and practices to make this happen.* This is truly possible. Amistad Academy, a charter middle

school in New Haven, has a student population with similar demographics as those in New Haven public schools. After just a few years in operation, its test scores were far higher than New Haven's, and are gaining on those of suburban towns. The Connecticut Center for School Change is leading efforts in the state to reform public school curriculum and inculcate the belief that all students can succeed.

■ **Connecting families with the tools they need to succeed.**

Many Americans and state residents suffer from “compassion fatigue,” unwillingness to support government programs (and in some cases charities) targeted to low-income people, because they feel that the money is wasted—the problem never seems to improve. In fact, many government programs dating to the New Deal and War on Poverty have resulted in tremendous improvements, including a huge drop in elderly poverty, improved housing conditions, health care, and nutrition. Still, the view persists, and new thinking is needed if families are to break the cycle of poverty.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, (which began its innovative KIDS COUNT project in the early 1990's) is now taking the lead in constructing a different framework for thinking about the nation's poorest families, focusing on connecting them to the opportunities, tools, and relationships they need to succeed. These resources include well-paying jobs, credit- and equity-building opportunities, responsive schools and support services, strong social networks, a safe and secure environment, and organized cultural and recreational activities. These are basics that many of us take for granted, but they are often lacking in the “Other Connecticut.”

Hartford is one of 22 cities the Casey Foundation selected for the *Making Connections* initiative. The Foundation is making a long-term commitment of investments in Hartford to bring people together, serve as a catalyst for change, and achieve improved results for low-income families. *Making Connections*

is an excellent example of an emerging effort to connect government and private resources directly to families and neighborhoods where they can truly transform lives. No single program can address all issues and people, but changes in the ways issues are addressed can make a real difference.

■ **Workforce training.**

Connecticut continues to suffer from a disconnect between the skills of its workforce and the needs of employers. The situation is worst for residents of central cities, who are often the products of the weakest K-12 educational systems, and have limited access to jobs that are increasingly located in the suburbs. As state resources diminish in the face of the budget crisis, Connecticut needs to improve its system of workforce training in ways that meet the needs of the client population, as well as employers.

The state recently reconfigured the workforce development regions of the state, reducing the number from eight to five. This may provide an opportunity to bridge gaps between the cities and suburbs. It also presents an opportunity for advocates to ask more critical questions of state and regional workforce planning agencies, which provides often-overlooked opportunities for public comment.

■ **Welfare reform.**

The evolution of Connecticut's family welfare program, Jobs First, reflects national trends. The program, adopted in the mid-90s, emphasizes time limits and paid employment over cash assistance. A booming economy coupled with strict time limits and sanctions policies resulted in many families leaving the cash assistance program for employment without any income support. The declining number of families receiving cash assistance does not necessarily reflect increased well-being for Connecticut's families. Studies have shown that many families struggle to maintain employment or remain in poverty while working. The program provides very limited access to training and education, even as experience demonstrates that many parents receiving cash assistance lack the skills neces-

sary to get adequate jobs or suffer from serious disabilities that prevent them from getting and retaining employment.

Jobs First should be reformed to reflect the realities facing low-income families with children in Connecticut. Rather than emphasizing immediate employment, the program should assess the potential and needs of families shortly after they enter the program and develop a comprehensive plan to provide needed assistance with food, health care, transportation, child care and income support while addressing the education and training needs of all family members.

■ **Moving Toward One Connecticut**

The proposals outlined above are not original—but in combination they could form a solid first step toward eliminating, or at least significantly narrowing, the inequities detailed in this book. Fortunately, many advocates and policy analysts are thinking creatively about ways to reduce Connecticut's outrageous disparities, including One Connecticut, a collaborative effort of over 100 nonprofit, religious, and labor organizations committed to reducing poverty and building economic security. The CenterEdge Coalition, organized by the Archdiocese of Hartford's Office of Urban Affairs and representing a broad array of over 50 organizations, recently published *Connecticut Metropatterns: A Regional Agenda for Community and Prosperity in Connecticut*. Connecticut Voices for Children, the Connecticut Commission on Children, the Connecticut Center for School Change, and the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund are among many entities focused on erasing the gaps that exist between poor and wealthy children across a broad range of indicators.

In addition, prominent business leaders and top state officials have publicly stated the imperative of addressing the startling academic gaps between cities and suburbs. Connecticut Education Commissioner Ted Sergi has stated that "Closing the achievement gap is the issue of the decade." Recently, Governor John Rowland testified before Congress regarding early childhood programs: "We have found that these programs have proven themselves a success in closing the achievement gap—particularly in our urban

centers, where the promise of America still remains harder to grasp.”

These efforts and statements give reason to hope that Connecticut may be close to bringing together the broad spectrum of academic, business, labor, political, and religious leaders needed to address the real and legitimate needs of all state residents. Recent experience, however, especially regarding the state budget, is very discouraging. Eloquent words are

not enough: elected officials need to be held accountable for the long-term ramifications of their short-term actions, and need to remember that Connecticut’s children cannot wait for a better economy before they see the necessary investments that can ensure their successful future.

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