**Bridging the Gap: The Impact of Social Worker Shortages on Vulnerable Populations in Nigeria**

**Abstract**

This study examined how the shortage of social workers in Nigeria, a country with a lot of social, economic, and political problems, hurts vulnerable groups in the most important ways. People who are vulnerable, like children, women, the elderly, people with disabilities, people who have been forced to move within their own country, people with mental illness, people who use drugs, and people who are in jail, have trouble getting skilled social services and are often left out. Nigeria's social work industry has a shortage of trained professionals, bad infrastructure, and underdeveloped institutions, even though the number of people who need social protection is growing. This shortage makes it much harder to provide psycho-social support, advocacy, and community-based programs that are necessary to boost well-being and inclusion. The study examines the causes and effects this shortage and suggests ways to make the field stronger, with the goal of closing the gap between Nigeria's socially vulnerable people and its responsive care systems. It comes to the conclusion that vulnerable groups will continue to face higher levels of neglect, exclusion, and deprivation unless policy changes are made to institutionalize and grow the social work profession, the government invests more in training and jobs, and awareness campaigns are run across the country.

**1 Introduction**

Social work is a profession dedicated to enhancing human well-being and helping meet basic human needs, with particular attention to empowering vulnerable populations . Globally, social work is seen as an important part of social safety systems. But in Nigeria, it is still a new field trying to deal with big problems in society in a postcolonial way (Grey & Amadasun, 2023-2). Nigeria has a lot of people who are socially vulnerable because of economic, political, and cultural problems that are all connected and affect each other. Aluko et al. (2023) note that about 40% of the population lives below the poverty line, which makes them economically vulnerable because they have limited access to resources, schooling, and job opportunities.

Society is more likely to be harmed by political instability, problems with government, and regional wars. This is especially true in the northern areas where the Boko Haram insurgency has forced millions to leave their homes. Garba et al. (2024) argue that religion beliefs, gender roles, and traditional practices make marginalised populations more likely to be hurt. In this complicated world, social workers are very important to the growth and safety of Nigeria as a whole. They are the first ones to help in social tragedies, fight for the rights of under-represented groups, and come up with community-based solutions that make society stronger and more stable.

Nigeria has a big problem with not having enough trained, certified social workers. This means that there is a big gap between the growing needs of vulnerable people and the professional help that is available. This lack makes it harder for the country to set up effective social safety systems and deal with long-standing socioeconomic problems (Amadasun, 2020). The study aims to investigate into the effects of a lack of social workers on vulnerable groups in Nigeria, figure out what causes this professional shortage, and suggest ways to fill this important gap. By understanding these factors, stakeholders may be able to come up with better ways to improve the social work field and help Nigeria's most needy people.

1. **Vulnerable Populations in Nigeria: Who Are They?**

 **2.1: Children**
Children are one of Nigeria's most susceptible demographics, with millions confronting multifaceted difficulties that undermine their well-being and development. Approximately 17.5 million Nigerian children are designated as orphans or vulnerable children (OVCs), having lost one or both parents due to HIV/AIDS, violence, or other factors (Ofem et al., 2024). Street children represent a considerable vulnerable demographic, with almost 10 million involved in street vending, begging, or residing alone on the streets without adult oversight or safeguarding. Child labour persists significantly, with more over 43% of Nigerian youngsters involved in perilous employment that disrupts their schooling and subjects them to exploitation (Ofem et al., 2024). Notwithstanding legal safeguards, child abuse persists extensively, with inadequate reporting systems and interventions accessible to survivors.

**2.2: Women**
Women in Nigeria have several vulnerabilities stemming from patriarchal systems and gender disparity. Gender-based violence impacts almost 30% of women across the nation, with increased incidence in conflict-affected areas. Single moms encounter specific difficulties, characterised by constrained social support and economic prospects, particularly those ostracised by families owing to premarital pregnancies (Aluko et al., 2023). Women in conflict zones face increased vulnerability, especially in the northeast, where the Boko Haram insurgency has resulted in abductions, sexual violence, and displacement. Restricted access to education, healthcare, economic resources, and decision-making roles intensifies the vulnerability of women in both rural and urban environments.

**2.3 Elderly and Persons with Disabilities**The elderly and individuals with disabilities experience considerable marginalisation in Nigerian society. Due to inadequate pension provisions and a deteriorating traditional family support framework, numerous elderly individuals face neglect, impoverishment, and social isolation. Merely 5% of elderly Nigerians obtain formal pension benefits, resulting in the majority relying on familial assistance or community philanthropy (Aluko et al., 2023). Individuals with disabilities, numbering over 25 million in Nigeria, face systemic discrimination, restricted access to education and employment, and insufficient accommodations, notwithstanding the enactment of the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act in 2018 (Rahman et al., 2024). Both populations have a deficiency of specialised services, characterised by a scarcity of residential care facilities, community-based support programs, and qualified specialists to meet their distinct requirements.
 **2.4 Internally Displaced Individuals (IDIs)**
According to (Lawal et al., 2025a), Nigeria accommodates one of Africa's most substantial internally displaced populations, exceeding 2.7 million individuals compelled to leave their residences owing to conflict, community violence, and natural calamities. The ramifications of displacement encompass not just physical relocation but also trauma, loss of livelihoods, interrupted schooling, and diminished social networks. Notwithstanding the endeavours of humanitarian organisations, assistance for internally displaced persons (IDPs) is insufficient, characterised by congested camps, restricted access to essential facilities, and poor psychosocial support (Aluko et al., 2023). Women and children in displacement contexts have heightened risks of exploitation, trafficking, and gender-based violence, while prolonged relocation engenders new vulnerabilities as coping resources deplete over time.

**2.5 Mental Health Patients and Substance Users**Mental health patients and drug users constitute significantly stigmatised vulnerable populations in Nigeria. Fewer than 150 psychiatrists cater to a population over 200 million, resulting in severely constrained mental health services, while stigma hinders many from pursuing available treatment (Ramaswamy et al., 2024). Conventional beliefs sometimes ascribe mental disease to spiritual origins, resulting in detrimental behaviours and postponed treatment. The prevalence of substance use disorders is increasing, especially among adolescents, whereas specialised rehabilitation options are limited and predominantly located in metropolitan regions. Both groups encounter isolation, discrimination, and restricted intervention alternatives, with families frequently shouldering the responsibility of care without professional assistance or direction (Lawal et al., 2025b).

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**2.6 Incarcerated Individuals and Former Offenders**

The incarcerated population in Nigeria experiences significant vulnerability because to overcrowding, inadequate facilities, and insufficient rehabilitative services. Approximately 70% of detainees are awaiting trial, with many enduring years in imprisonment without conviction (Alamu, 2022). Former criminals have substantial reintegration obstacles following release, such as societal stigma, restricted career prospects, and fractured familial connections. Legal assistance programs are inadequate, leaving the majority of convicts without access to competent legal representation. Rehabilitation and reintegration social support services are inadequately established, resulting in elevated recidivism rates and the continuation of cycles of incarceration and marginalisation (Lawal et al., 2024).

T**able 1:Vulnerable Populations in Nigeria and Social Work Intervention**s

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Vulnerable****Group** | **Estimated** **Size** | **Key** **Vulnerabilities** | **Essential** **Social** **Work****Interventions** | **Current****Availability** |
| **Children** | 17.5 millionorphans &vulnerable children;10 million streetchildren | Neglect,abuseexploitation,traffickingimited access toeducation | Case management,familystrengthening,alternativecare placementpsychosocial support | Very Limitec(1:15,000 children) |
| **Women** | 30%experiencegender-basedviolence | GBV,economicexclusion,discrimination,limitedaccess to justice | Crisis intervention,shelterservices,legal advocacyeconomic empowerment | Limited (primarilyurban centers) |
| **Elderly** **8****Persons** **with****Disabilities** | 25+million persons with disabilities;5%of elderly wittpension coverage | Neglect,povertydiscriminationisolation,inaccessibleservices | Community-basedsupport,assistive deviceaccess,caregiver supportinstitutional caremonitorinc | Severely Limited(1:30,000) |
| **Internally****Displaced****Persons** | 2.7+millior | Trauma,loss oflivelihoods,unsafeshelter,exploitation | Protection monitoring psychosocial supportfamily reunificationreintegration assistance | Gap-filling(primarily byhumanitarianagencies |
| **Mental** **Health****Patients** **&****Substance****Users** | Estimated 20%withmental healthconditions | Stigma,limitedtreatment optionshuman rights abusessocial isolation | Clinical counselingcommunity reintegrationfamily education,rehabilitation referrals | Critically Limited(<150 psychiatricsocial workersnationwide) |
| **Prisoners** **&Ex-****Offenders****4** | 70,000+(70%awaiting trial) | Overcrowding,rightsyiolationsreintegratiorchallenges,recidivism | Legal advocacyrehabilitation programsreintegration supportfamily mediation | Minimal (fewcorrectional sociaworkers) |

***Sources:Compiled from Ofem etal.(2024),Aluko etal.(2023),Rahman et al.(2024),Ramaswamy et al (2024),and* *Alamu* *(2022)***

**3 The Function of Social Workers in Assisting These Populations**

**3.1 Direct Provision of Services**

Social workers are essential in providing direct services to disadvantaged communities throughout Nigeria. They offer psychological help to trauma survivors, including victims of conflict, gender-based violence, and displacement, through professional counselling. Case management is fundamental to social work practice, allowing practitioners to evaluate client needs, formulate intervention strategies, enable service access, and track progress over time (Cox & Maschi, 2022). Trauma-informed care is a crucial service, especially for displaced individuals and survivors of violence who necessitate specialised methods for healing and rehabilitation. Social workers implement family strengthening programs to reconstruct support structures and bolster resilience within households impacted by poverty, war, or disease.

**3.2 Advocacy and Protection of Rights**Not only do social workers help people directly, but they also fight for their rights and respect. They try to make it easier for disadvantaged groups to get justice by connecting clients with legal services, walking them through the legal system, and helping them figure out how to use it (Zakour & Harrell, 2003). Social workers fight for people's welfare rights and make it easier for poor people to get help from the government with things like healthcare costs and schooling. They deal with unfair treatment that makes things harder for disadvantaged groups, especially disabled people, racial minorities, and other groups that are looked down upon. Through both individual and institutional lobbying, social workers improve the participation of marginalised people in policy discussions and the distribution of resources (Ndubueze et al., 2025).

**3.3 Enhancement of Systems**

Social workers play a big part in improving the processes that affect groups that are already struggling. Through multi-sectoral teamwork, they improve coordination between the legal, health, education, and social service sectors to offer more complete support networks (Winnett et al., 2019). They make it easier for institutions and groups to connect with each other and set up referral networks. This helps vulnerable people find their way through complicated service environments. Social workers help build people's skills by teaching other professionals about trauma-informed practices, child safety standards, and ways to include people with disabilities. Also, they improve quality assurance and tracking systems, which makes it easier to judge how well programs work and encourages service providers to keep getting better at helping people who are at risk.

**3.4 Community Engagement**Community-level interventions constitute a significant part of social work practice in Nigeria. Social workers perform community awareness on important protection problems, from child safeguarding to gender-based violence prevention, helping transform harmful norms and behaviours. They implement early warning systems to detect nascent protection issues prior to their escalation, especially in conflict-prone areas (Muchacha et al., 2020). Social workers educate community volunteers who act as primary responders and referral sources, therefore expanding professional outreach into regions with few official services. By mobilising community resources, social workers facilitate the development of sustainable local solutions to social issues, utilising indigenous knowledge and pre-existing support frameworks.

**3.5 Institutional and Policy Functions**
At elevated systemic levels, social workers facilitate institutional advancement and policy creation. They offer technical expertise in policy formulation, including field-level insights to influence national frameworks for child protection, gender equality, disability inclusion, and other domains impacting vulnerable people. Social workers facilitate the design and execution of social safety nets, guaranteeing that interventions target the most vulnerable populations and tackle the underlying reasons of their susceptibility (Irele, 2019). They participate in national planning procedures, including social welfare viewpoints into development goals and budget allocation choices. Social workers document protection issues and effective treatments via research and evidence gathering, therefore enhancing the information foundation for more responsive social policies and services (Okafor et al., 2025).

**4. The Extent of the Shortage**

**4.1 Labour Shortage**

There aren't enough qualified social workers in Nigeria for the number of people who need them and the needs of society. Even though exact data is hard to come by, estimates show that there are serious problems with the workforce. Nigeria has more than 200 million people, but only about 5,000 registered social workers. This means that there is only about one social worker for every 40,000 people living in the country, which is much lower than the world standard of 1:5,000 for adequate service coverage (Amadasun, 2021). Unfortunately, social workers are mostly based in big cities and southern states, which makes this imbalance even worse. This means that rural areas and conflict-torn northern regions get very little help.

There isn't a central database to keep track of the number, qualifications, and locations of social workers across the country, so the sector's data collection and workforce plans aren't good enough. Agwu and Okoye (2021) note that Nigeria's lack of complete information about its social work workforce makes it harder to make plans and decide how to use resources. This lack of data makes it harder to develop and employ the workforce effectively, especially when new needs come up, like during the COVID-19 pandemic, when there were big shortages of health social workers.



***Figure 1: Comparison of Social Worker to Population Ratios***

**4.2 Educational shortage**
Nigeria has a shortage of social workers, which is partly because of poor training facilities and quality. Nigeria only has a few schools with approved social work programs, even though the need for them is growing. Only about 30 universities offer undergraduate programs, and even fewer offer graduate-level specialisations (Amadasun, 2021). There are often holes in the curriculum in current schools, with not enough attention paid to developing areas like trauma-informed care, disability inclusion, and using technology in social work practice. Ladan (2024) says "Social work education in Nigeria is primarily theoretical, lacking adequate practical training and field placement opportunities to equip graduates for real-world challenges."

Financial problems make education even less good because there aren't enough resources for classrooms, field supervision, and study projects. Few funding opportunities and low earning potential in the field discourage enrolment, especially among students from low-income families. There are more problems caused by the gap between the classroom and the workplace, since the curriculum doesn't always react to the changing needs of workers and the needs of the area (Oseghale et al., 2024).

**4.3 Challenges in Structural Integration**

Structured integration into Nigeria's institutional systems is very hard for people who work as social workers. Even though their jobs are very important, social workers don't always get much official recognition in some countries. This is because most government offices and departments don't have a professional service plan for them. When areas like health, education, justice, and social welfare don't work together well, it can hurt social workers' professional identities and how they're used, which limits how well they can do multiple interventions.

Even though there has been a lot of noise about the need for a Social Work Regulatory Council for a long time, it has been hard to standardise qualifications, practice standards, and professional growth paths. As Alamu (2022) says, "In the absence of regulatory support, social work in Nigeria faces challenges in defining its professional boundaries, ethical standards, and quality assurance mechanisms." Because of this regulatory flaw, people who aren't qualified can work as social workers, especially in non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This lowers the level of services and hurts professionals' reputations.

**4.4 Professional Acknowledgement**

The Nigerian Association of Social Workers (NASOW) has made notable strides in promoting the profession, yet it continues to face challenges in gaining widespread recognition and impact. Limited membership, financial constraints, and challenges in organisational capacity impede NASOW's effectiveness in advocating for the profession at national policy levels (Amadasun, 2021). Social workers are noticeably missing from various government-led development planning initiatives, such as poverty alleviation strategies, health system improvement projects, and educational reforms that have a direct impact on vulnerable populations.

The field faces ongoing public misconceptions, marked by a narrow understanding of the specialised knowledge, skills, and ethical standards that define the work of social workers. A participant in Amadasun's study (2021) stated, "Many Nigerians view social work as a form of elevated charity that anyone with good intentions can engage in, rather than recognising it as a profession that requires specialised training and expertise." This viewpoint presents obstacles for decision-makers and institutional authorities, consequently limiting investment in professional social work positions and career advancement.

**5. Consequences of the Shortage**

### 5.1 Increased Marginalization

The shortage of trained social workers has terrible effects on vulnerable groups, making them more likely to be left out and ignored. Vulnerable groups lose their defences when professionals aren't involved. This makes them more likely to be exploited, abused, or have their rights violated. Children who need to be protected are often not found or helped, especially in rural places where social services are not very common. As said by Ofem et al. (2024), "The absence of trained social workers leaves orphans and vulnerable children without critical psychosocial support, case management, and advocacy necessary for their wellbeing."
Women who are victims of gender-based violence often can't get help from trained experts who can offer trauma-informed support, safety planning, and legal help. People over 65 and people with disabilities are often left alone and ignored for long periods of time if social workers don't help them find the right tools and support networks. So, the lack of professionals makes existing weaknesses worse and creates new ones. This widens social gaps and hurts national efforts to grow in a way that includes everyone.

### 5.2 Overburdened NGOs and Informal Systems

### In response to the professional shortage, non-governmental organizations and informal community systems have attempted to fill critical gaps, often becoming severely overburdened in the process. Local NGOs frequently engage untrained staff in quasi-social work roles, leading to quality concerns, inconsistent approaches, and potential harm to vulnerable individuals (Agwu & Okoye, 2021). Staff burnout is common in these settings, with high turnover rates disrupting service continuity and relationship-building with vulnerable communities.

The shortage creates significant coordination challenges, with fragmented interventions across numerous small-scale initiatives rather than coherent, systems-level approaches. Traditional and religious structures increasingly assume welfare responsibilities beyond their capacity and expertise, sometimes reinforcing harmful practices or discrimination in the absence of professional guidance. As Gray and Amadasun (2023) observe, "While community-based responses demonstrate impressive resilience, they cannot substitute for professional social work interventions, particularly for complex trauma, protection cases, and systems-level change."

### 5.3 Barriers to Accessing Services

The social worker shortage creates formidable barriers to service access for vulnerable populations. Legal aid services remain inaccessible to many, with insufficient social workers to connect vulnerable individuals to legal resources, explain procedures in understandable terms, and provide support throughout legal processes. Healthcare access is similarly compromised, with few medical social workers available to facilitate hospital navigation, discharge planning, and continuity of care, particularly for chronically ill patients and persons with disabilities (Ladan, 2024).

Educational support suffers from the limited presence of school social workers who could address barriers to attendance, identify learning difficulties, and intervene in cases of abuse or neglect that affect educational outcomes. Housing instability and homelessness receive inadequate professional attention, with few social workers specialized in housing case management and homelessness prevention. Across all service domains, the shortage leaves vulnerable individuals to navigate complex systems without professional advocacy and support, significantly reducing their ability to access entitled benefits and protections.

### 5.4 Societal and Economic Costs

The shortage of social workers generates substantial societal and economic costs that extend beyond immediate service gaps. Cycles of poverty become reinforced as vulnerable households lack professional interventions to connect them with economic opportunities, build financial capabilities, and access social protection mechanisms (Aluko et al., 2023). Social exclusion intensifies without professional efforts to challenge stigma, promote inclusion, and build community acceptance of marginalized groups.

The shortage contributes to political and social instability, particularly in conflict-affected regions where limited psychosocial support and reintegration services undermine peacebuilding efforts. Economic productivity suffers as vulnerable individuals remain unable to participate fully in education and employment due to unaddressed psychosocial needs and protection concerns. As noted by Irele (2019), "The insufficient investment in professional social services represents a false economy, as the long-term costs of unaddressed social problems far exceed the resources required to build an adequate social work workforce.



***Figure 2: Social Worker Shortage Impact Cycle***

**6. Existing Interventions and Gaps**

### 6.1 Government Initiatives

The Nigerian government has established various structures potentially relevant to social work practice, though significant implementation gaps remain. The Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development, created in 2019, oversees several social protection programs but faces challenges in deploying professional social workers to implement these initiatives effectively. State-level Ministries of Women Affairs and Social Development vary widely in capacity and approach, with most operating with minimal professional social work staff despite broad mandates covering vulnerable groups (Irele, 2019).

Social welfare departments exist within local government structures but typically function with limited resources and few qualified personnel. Legal aid schemes operate through the Legal Aid Council and some state justice departments but lack sufficient social work integration to address the non-legal needs of vulnerable clients. Government social interventions such as N-Power and conditional cash transfer programs operate with minimal social work input in design and implementation, reducing their effectiveness in addressing underlying vulnerabilities rather than just symptoms.

### 6.2 NGO and Donor Engagement

International organizations and NGOs play significant roles in filling social service gaps, though coordination challenges persist. UNICEF supports child protection systems strengthening, including training for social welfare officers, but coverage remains limited relative to needs. Save the Children implements community-based child protection mechanisms in several states, focusing on prevention and early intervention strategies. International Organization for Migration (IOM) delivers psychosocial support to displaced populations but faces challenges in transitioning to sustainable, locally-led approaches.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) integrates mental health and psychosocial support into medical interventions, highlighting the interconnection between health and social needs. Local NGOs and faith-based organizations provide crucial front-line services but often operate without professional social work supervision or standardized approaches. While these interventions address critical gaps, the sector-wide shortage of professional social workers limits their technical quality, sustainability, and alignment with global best practices in social service delivery.

**6.3 Disintegration and Absence of Coordination**

The social service sector in Nigeria is characterised by considerable fragmentation among government, NGO, and community-based initiatives. Inadequate coordination mechanisms lead to redundant efforts in certain areas while creating significant deficiencies in others, especially in inaccessible places and among highly stigmatised groups. Data systems for at-risk groups are isolated and incompatible, hindering thorough analysis of requirements and service availability. Amadasun (2020) observed that "The COVID-19 pandemic revealed enduring coordination deficiencies in Nigeria's social service sector, with disjointed responses inadequately addressing numerous vulnerable populations."

Donor reliance engenders more coordination difficulties, since foreign financing frequently dictates priorities instead of national strategic planning. Short-term project cycles prevail, compromising continuity of service and lasting capacity development. The restricted leadership of government coordination results in service delivery being significantly shaped by the mandates of implementing organisations and donor goals, rather than a thorough evaluation of population requirements and planned staff allocation.
**6.4 Obstacles in Sustainability**Sustainability is a significant difficulty within current social work initiatives in Nigeria. Funding instability hampers long-term planning, relying heavily on overseas donors whose interests and degrees of commitment may fluctuate. Political will varies with electoral cycles and shifting governmental goals, resulting in uncertainty for social welfare initiatives and professional workforce development. Chitereka (2009) noted that "Social work in numerous African contexts, including Nigeria, faces sustainability challenges due to erratic government commitment and excessive dependence on external funding."

Employee retention is a significant sustainability problem, characterised by elevated turnover rates among qualified social workers, attributable to restricted career progression, insufficient remuneration, and challenging working environments, especially in rural and conflict-affected regions. The lack of formalised professional development routes undermines sustainability, depriving numerous practitioners of opportunity to cultivate specialised skills or progress in their careers while continuing in direct practice employment.

**7 Recommendation**
The study emphasises how important it is to improve social work education, make social work an official part of many different fields, and make sure that professionals are recognised and that employees are trained better. It suggests that Nigeria should put money into making new social work departments in higher education schools, reviewing the standards for accreditation, and laying an emphasis on real skills, hands-on learning, and chances to specialise in areas of practice that are growing. Scholarship programs for social work students could help people from under-represented groups and places get the skills they need while also lowering the cost of professional education.

There should be a coordinated effort to make social work duties official in many areas, including healthcare, schooling, the legal system, and frameworks for humanitarian action. Regulatory systems should make professional norms and ethical rules official. This will build public trust and make professionals more responsible.

The commitment and funds of the government are also very important for the growth of the social work staff. Minimum staffing standards for social workers should be put in place by changing the law in important organisations that help vulnerable people. At the national and state levels, strategy plans should be made with clear goals, timelines, and ways to measure success.

It is also suggested that a national alliance be made up of government agencies, academic institutions, professional clubs, civil society groups, and development partners to encourage people from different backgrounds to work together. This partnership can coordinate efforts, push for changes to policies, and keep an eye on progress made to ease the worker shortage.

**8. Conclusion**
Nigeria has a serious shortage of trained social workers, which makes it harder for the most vulnerable groups in the country to get the services they need and keeps them on the outside. This study shows that there is a bigger gap between what society needs and what skilled social workers are available to help. It stresses that untrained replacements or pieces of solutions can't do the important jobs of professional social workers. Nigeria needs a strong social work field with enough resources because of its growing population, economic problems, and changing social issues. Improving the skills of this workforce will not only help disadvantaged people, but it will also help society and development as a whole. To close this gap, the government, universities, professional organisations, civil society, and foreign partners must work together to make social work an important part of Nigeria's national development and social protection plan.

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