



Who's Leaving Philadelphia—and Why

Jobs, public safety, cost of living among people's top motivations for moving away

Overview

Philadelphia's population has been growing for more than a decade, fueled by immigrants from other countries and by births outnumbering deaths. Yet each year, roughly 60,000 residents leave the city—at least 10,000 more than those who move in from other parts of the region or the country, according to federal government data.

Civic leaders have attributed these departures to several factors, including crime, schools, the job market, local taxes, and dirty streets. But in a first-of-its-kind survey, The Pew Charitable Trusts found that there is no dominant reason why people leave Philadelphia; different people leave for different reasons.

For the most part, their decisions had more to do with what a new place might offer. Most survey respondents did not characterize themselves as fleeing the city. Even after moving out, 70 percent rated Philadelphia a good or excellent place to live.

Jobs led the list of reasons for departing, whether the move stemmed from an inability to find the right position in Philadelphia or the availability of better options elsewhere. Twenty-six percent of the 1,000 people surveyed mentioned the topic; public safety was second, at 14 percent, followed closely by cost of living, housing, and schools.

Reasons for leaving varied widely based on respondents' age, educational attainment, income, ties to the area, and destination—whether they moved to the suburbs or outside the region.

Some key findings:

- Movers who stayed within the Philadelphia area mentioned four main reasons in explaining their decisions: schools, public safety, the cost of living, and housing. For people who left the region, the top motivation was employment, at 44 percent.
- For individuals with school-age children in the household, the desire to find better schools was the top reason for leaving, cited by 31 percent.
- Two groups who cited employment as the top reason for departing were people with bachelor's degrees or higher (36 percent) and those who moved to the region after childhood (41 percent). People with high school diplomas or less schooling, or those with Philadelphia roots, were more often motivated by public safety concerns.

The survey was conducted from Nov. 13 to Dec. 12, 2018. Pew and its polling partner, SSRS, used change-of-address data from the U.S. Postal Service to generate a list of households that had recently moved out of Philadelphia. From that list, households were selected at random, contacted by mail, and asked to complete the survey. The margin of error for the complete set of weighted data is plus or minus 4.6 percentage points.

Who moved out

The people who have moved out of Philadelphia in the past several years differ from those who have remained in several ways.

For one, the movers are younger than city residents as a whole, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. Half of the movers are ages 18-34, a group that represents about 30 percent of the city's overall population.¹

And although African-Americans are Philadelphia's largest racial or ethnic group, the biggest contingent of movers has been non-Hispanic whites. They represent 45 percent of the outflow, with African-Americans at 30 percent, Hispanics at 13 percent, and Asians at 7 percent.

Why they left

The survey asked people who had left Philadelphia (most of them in 2018) to cite their most important reason for moving. The responses to that open-ended question—which ranged from one word to several hundred—were recorded verbatim and sorted based on the topics raised. Some people mentioned several reasons for leaving.

Table 1 lists the topics cited by at least 3 percent of those surveyed. Jobs topped the list, at 26 percent.

Table 1

Reasons for Leaving Philadelphia

All people surveyed

Job opportunities	26%
Crime and safety	14%
Cost of living	12%
Better schools for my children	11%
Housing—type, size, cost	11%
To get closer to friends/family	9%
Wanted nonurban lifestyle	8%
Neighborhood changed	8%
Other personal reasons	7%
Change in household makeup	7%
City taxes	6%
Transportation reasons	4%
To further one’s own education	4%
Unhappy with city government	3%
Weather/climate	3%

Note: Some respondents gave more than one answer. All responses were recorded verbatim and then sorted into categories.

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The explanations for leaving varied among different demographic groups, although each listed a variety of motives. As shown in Table 2, jobs were at or near the top of the list of reasons cited by blacks, whites, Hispanics, and Asians. Public safety was just as important as jobs for blacks and Hispanics.

For people under age 50, employment was the main reason. Job opportunities were much less of a factor for people 50 and over; for that cohort, public safety was the top concern, mentioned by 27 percent of respondents, followed by the cost of living, at 17 percent, and neighborhood change, at 13 percent.

Table 2

Reasons for Leaving Philadelphia

By age and race/ethnicity

	Age			Race/ethnicity			
	Under 30	30-49	50 and over	Black	White	Hispanic	Asian
Job opportunities	34%	26%	11%	21%	28%	28%	26%
Crime and safety	5%	16%	27%	22%	11%	26%	6%
Cost of living	10%	10%	17%	10%	11%	15%	15%
Better schools for my children	3%	21%	4%	14%	11%	15%	6%
Housing—type, size, cost	7%	13%	11%	13%	12%	6%	12%
To get closer to friends/family	12%	6%	11%	5%	9%	9%	19%
Wanted nonurban lifestyle	8%	8%	9%	6%	8%	5%	12%
Neighborhood changed	5%	7%	13%	4%	8%	7%	10%

Note: Some respondents gave more than one answer. All responses were recorded verbatim and then sorted into categories. The top two answers for each group are in bold.

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Why They Left: Jobs

"Better job in a different place."

"The ONLY reason that I moved out of Philadelphia is that my wife obtained a strong promotional job opportunity outside of Philadelphia."

"Job and opportunity to improve my life in ways Philadelphia could not."

Some of the starkest differences in reasons for leaving came when respondents were classified by other metrics, such as educational attainment. For instance, 36 percent of movers with a bachelor's degree or a higher level of education cited jobs as their reason for relocating, three times as many as cited any other category. Among those with a high school diploma or less schooling, only 4 percent talked about jobs; instead, they mentioned a range of issues, starting with public safety, at 23 percent. (See Table 3.)

Table 3

Reasons for Leaving Philadelphia

By level of educational attainment

	High school diploma or less	Four-year college degree or more
Job opportunities	4%	36%
Crime and safety	23%	7%
Cost of living	11%	10%
Better schools for my children	14%	11%
Housing—type, size, cost	10%	9%
To get closer to friends/family	11%	11%
Wanted nonurban lifestyle	6%	7%
Neighborhood changed	7%	5%

Note: Some respondents gave more than one answer. All responses were recorded verbatim and then sorted into categories. The top two answers for each group are in bold.

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Similar patterns emerged when the sample was broken down on the basis of whether people thought the city was getting better or worse, whether they had owned or rented their homes in Philadelphia, and whether they were born and raised in the Philadelphia area or had moved to the city after childhood. (See Table 4.)

For instance, 38 percent of movers who thought the city was getting better said they departed for a job, and only 2 percent talked about public safety. Among those who thought the city was getting worse, 31 percent said they left because of public safety concerns; only 13 percent mentioned jobs.

For renters, employment was the top reason for leaving, at 34 percent. For homeowners, public safety and schools led the list, at 24 percent and 23 percent, respectively.

Among people who moved to Philadelphia after childhood, 41 percent cited jobs as their main motivation for leaving the city—some had presumably come to Philadelphia for a job—followed by family considerations, at 13 percent. For people with Philadelphia roots, public safety was No. 1, at 20 percent, with 12 to 15 percent of respondents citing schools, jobs, housing, and the cost of living.

Table 4

Reasons for Leaving Philadelphia

By view of the city, renters and owners, and personal relationship to Philadelphia

	Opinion of Philadelphia		Housing in Philadelphia		Philadelphia history	
	Getting better	Getting worse	Own	Rent	Spent most of life in region	Moved from elsewhere
Job opportunities	38%	13%	12%	34%	15%	41%
Crime and safety	2%	31%	24%	8%	20%	7%
Cost of living	6%	15%	11%	11%	13%	10%
Better schools for my children	8%	17%	23%	5%	14%	8%
Housing—type, size, cost	10%	8%	9%	12%	12%	9%
To get closer to friends/family	11%	7%	6%	11%	6%	13%
Wanted nonurban lifestyle	6%	8%	8%	8%	8%	9%
Neighborhood changed	1%	16%	11%	5%	10%	4%

Note: Some respondents gave more than one answer. All responses were recorded verbatim and then sorted into categories. The top two answers for each group are in bold.

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Why They Left: Public Safety

"Crime is too high, and I have two small girls."

"Killings. I came home from work, and there was a bullet lodged in my bedroom wall. It came through my window, and the actual bullet was stuck in my wall."

"Unfortunately, I did not feel safe any longer."

After answering the open-ended question about why they moved, participants in the survey were presented with 13 reasons why people might leave Philadelphia, one at a time, and were asked whether each was a major reason, a minor reason, or not a reason at all in their decisions.²

The top four major factors, cited by at least 29 percent of those surveyed, were jobs, public safety, housing, and schools, in that order.

Even though they now live elsewhere, the movers expressed a positive view of Philadelphia. Seventy percent described it as a good or excellent place to live. Some of the highest ratings came from people with no roots in the region (81 percent) and college graduates (80 percent); some of the lowest came from people born in Philadelphia (50 percent) and those over age 50 (55 percent).

Schools

In any conversation about people moving out of Philadelphia, households with school-age children are a group of high interest, given the fiscal challenges faced by the public school system in recent years and the price of private education in the city. The vast majority of households that left Philadelphia—79 percent—did not include school-age children. But among those that did, schools were the top reason for leaving, cited by 31 percent. (See Table 5.)

Table 5

Reasons for Leaving Philadelphia

Households with school-age children

Better schools for my children	31%
Crime and safety	22%
Job opportunities	11%
Housing—type, size, cost	9%
Wanted nonurban lifestyle	8%
Cost of living	7%
To get closer to friends/family	7%
Neighborhood changed	4%

Note: Some respondents gave more than one answer. All responses were recorded verbatim and then sorted into categories.

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Why They Left: Schools

“Better schools for my children in the suburbs of Philadelphia.”

“My son was entering kindergarten. We did not live in a good catchment zone and did not get into any charter schools.”

“To move with my wife and 4-year-old son to a better school district. ... I refuse to do private/charter schools for philosophical reasons.”

After they moved, households with school-age children relied more on traditional public schools (as opposed to publicly funded charter schools, private schools, or religious schools) than they did before leaving Philadelphia. Forty-seven percent of children from these households went to traditional public schools while living in Philadelphia. In their new locations, the figure rose to 75 percent.

Where they came from and where they went

The survey revealed which neighborhoods the movers had lived in before leaving, as shown in Figure 1. Four of the city’s 46 residential ZIP codes provided at least 50 of the 1,000 movers: 19128 (Roxborough), 19147 (South Philadelphia/Bella Vista), 19103 (Center City West), and 19146 (South Philadelphia/Schuylkill).

Why They Left: Neighborhood Changed

“During the past four years, the neighborhood, which was thriving, began to decline.”

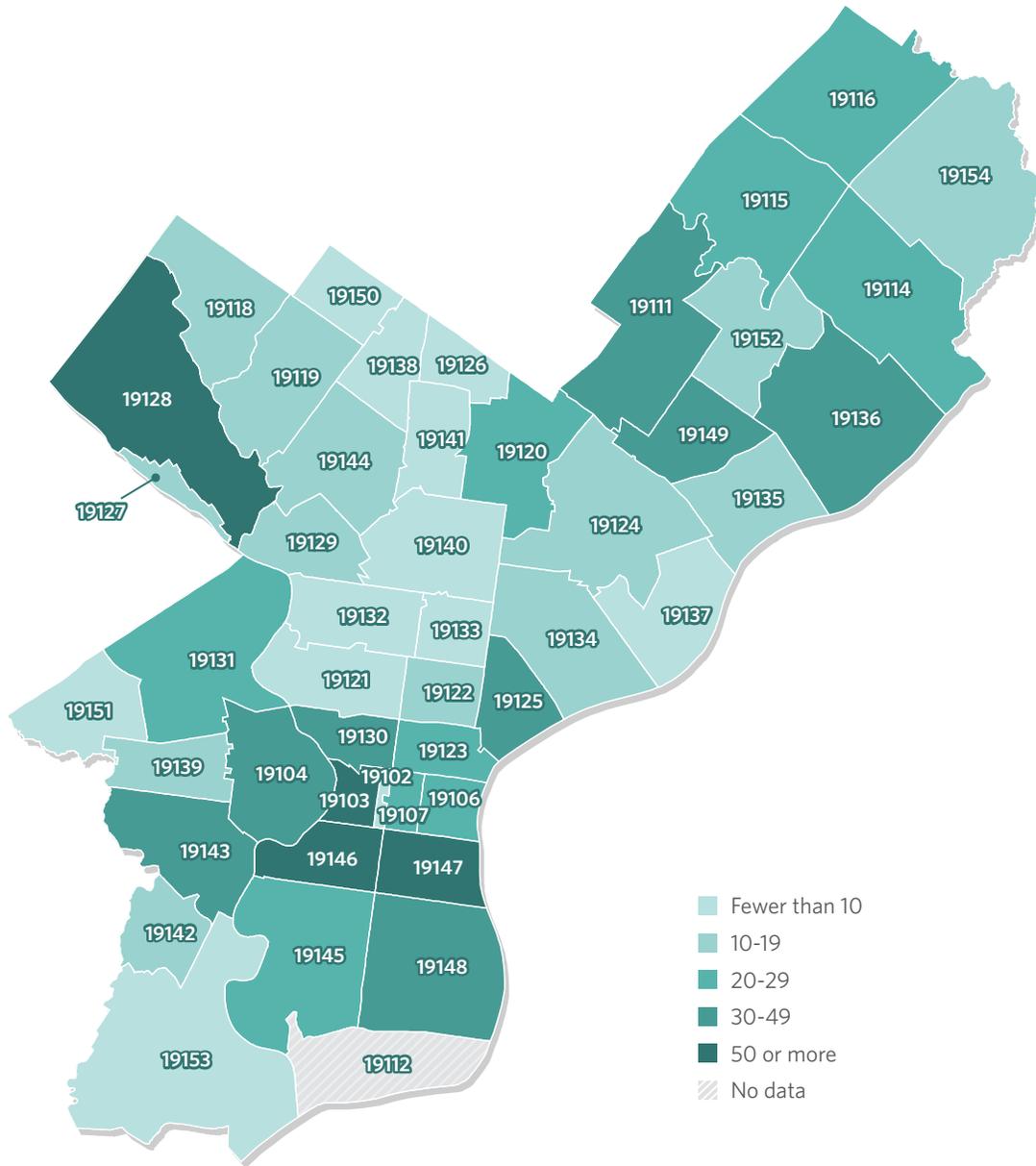
“It was no longer pleasant for us. Too much litter, vagrancy, needles on the ground. It felt stressful to live there.”

“Our block changed dramatically in the last year. Felt isolated.”

Figure 1

The Former Neighborhoods of the People Who Moved Out of Philadelphia

By ZIP code



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About half of those surveyed moved to other locations within the Philadelphia metropolitan area, and about half moved elsewhere. (See Figure 2.) A similar breakdown was reported in a 2016 Pew study based on migration data compiled by the Internal Revenue Service.³

Figure 2

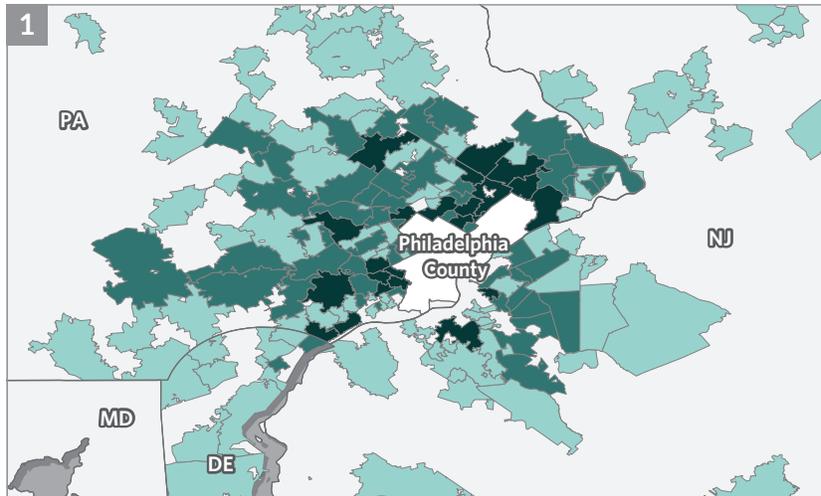
Destination ZIP Codes for Respondents Who Moved Out of Philadelphia

About half stayed in the region

1 Philadelphia Region

Number of movers

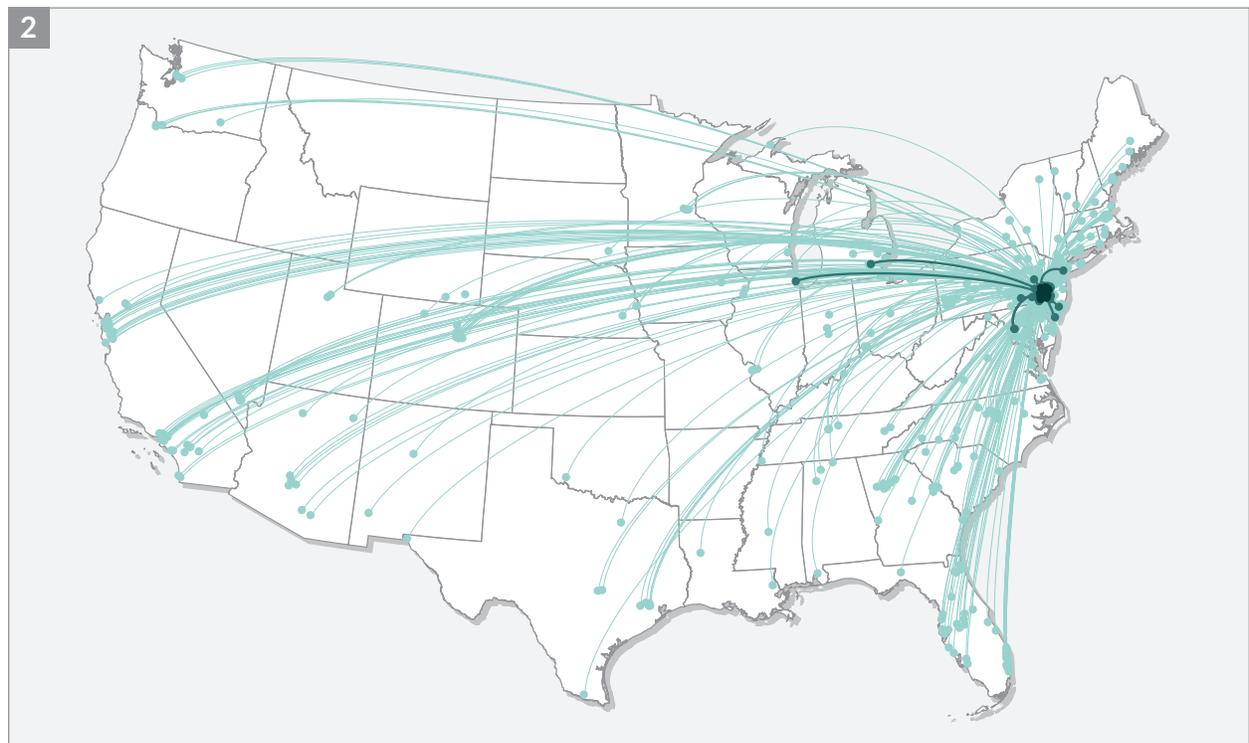
- 1-2
- 3-5
- 6-21



2 Lower 48 States

Number of movers

- 1-2
- 3-5
- 6-21



Note: Map of Lower 48 excludes two movers to Hawaii.

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There were big differences in the reasons for moving between those who stayed in the region and those who left, as shown in Table 6.

People who left the city for places outside the region did so largely for jobs (44 percent) or a desire to get closer to friends and family (11 percent). Those who stayed in the region moved primarily for four reasons that cropped up with roughly the same frequency: schools, public safety, the cost of living, and housing.

Table 6
Reasons for Leaving Philadelphia
 By destination

	Stayed in the metropolitan area	Moved elsewhere
Job opportunities	7%	44%
Crime and safety	19%	10%
Cost of living	17%	7%
Better schools for my children	20%	3%
Housing—type, size, cost	17%	5%
To get closer to friends/family	7%	11%
Wanted nonurban lifestyle	14%	3%
Neighborhood changed	10%	5%

Note: Some respondents gave more than one answer. All responses were recorded verbatim and then sorted into categories. The top two answers for each group are in bold.

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Why They Left: Housing

“We moved to have a driveway and a backyard for a growing family.”

“With my wages, working as a social services professional, I would never be able to afford to buy a house in an area that I would find desirable.”

“I don’t live far outside of the city. It just so happened to be the perfect house for my family.”

How their moves have worked out

For now, at least, those who have left the city seem happy with their decisions. They gave their new communities higher ratings than they gave Philadelphia, with 88 percent ranking their new hometowns as good or excellent. Sixty-six percent said their quality of life had improved as a result of moving, while 8 percent said it had gotten worse. The rest said it was pretty much the same.

Only 6 percent voiced major regrets about moving out of the city. Another 29 percent had minor regrets, and 65 percent had none at all.

At the same time, though, 38 percent said they missed many aspects about living in Philadelphia, and 42 percent said they missed a few important things. Only 20 percent said they missed not very much or nothing at all.

The Impact of Local Taxes

In recent years, some public officials, business leaders, and advocates have highlighted city taxes—on wages, businesses, and more recently on property—as reasons why people leave Philadelphia.

But in the survey, only 6 percent of movers volunteered the word “taxes” in response to the open-ended question about why they left the city. And they often did so in the context of other reasons.

When asked specifically whether “high taxes in Philadelphia” factored into their leaving, 22 percent said it was a major reason. This ranked behind jobs, safety, housing, schools, neighborhood change, and the cost of living. Another 21 percent said it was a minor reason.

Other considerations

Among the 1,000 people who responded to the survey, some additional key characteristics emerged:

- 46 percent said moving out of the city was something they had been planning to do, 33 percent said the move was due to something that came up, and 21 percent said it was a little of both.
- 43 percent described leaving as something they wanted to do, 25 percent said it was something they felt they had to do, and 32 percent cited both.
- 76 percent left Philadelphia in 2018. Ten percent moved out in 2017, 8 percent in 2016, 3 percent in 2015, and 3 percent in prior years.

Conclusion

Because this is a first-of-its-kind survey, there is no way of knowing whether the attitudes reflected in this issue brief are different from those of people who have moved out of Philadelphia in the past or of people who leave other major cities.

What is clear is that there is not one overarching reason for relocating. Most of those who left Philadelphia characterized themselves not as fleeing the city but, rather, as seeking new opportunities elsewhere. For many, these opportunities came in the form of jobs. For households with children, schools were the leading consideration. And public safety, the cost of living, housing, and neighborhood change also factored into many people’s decisions to move.

The survey also found that individuals' reasons for leaving varied greatly based on age, education, income, ties to the region, and whether they moved to a Philadelphia suburb or a new area entirely.

But while many say they miss certain aspects of living in Philadelphia and 70 percent of those who left still rate the city as a good or excellent place to live, the majority seem happy with their decisions to move and say their quality of life has improved as a result.

Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2014-16, Public Use Microdata Sample.
- 2 Pew selected the 13 reasons based on two sources: reasons for moving listed by the census and factors cited as city problems by respondents to previous Pew Philadelphia surveys. For discussion of the Census Bureau's work in this area, see U.S. Census Bureau, "Reason for Moving: 2012 to 2013, Population Characteristics" (2014), <https://www.census.gov/prod/2014pubs/p20-574.pdf>.
- 3 The Pew Charitable Trusts, "A Portrait of Philadelphia Migration: Who Is Coming to the City—and Who Is Leaving" (2016), <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2016/07/a-portrait-of-philadelphia-migration>.

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