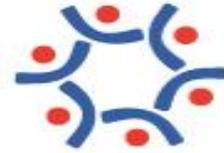




**Institute for  
Research on  
Poverty**

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT  
**Prevention Board**



# **Fatherhood During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

November 4, 2021

Webinar begins at 3pm EDT/2pm CDT/1pm MDT/12pm PDT

# Outline of Presentation

“The pandemic made it (im)possible”: How the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped father engagement and wellbeing

--Tova Walsh, Sandra Rosenbaum School of Social Work, UW-Madison

Fatherhood during the COVID-19 pandemic: Insights from the Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative

--Darryl Davidson, City of Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative

Being a father during a pandemic: Stories of new father experiences during the pandemic

--Derek Miller, 4Dad Fatherhood Initiative, Kalamazoo County

Supporting fathers during COVID-19

--Shawna Lee, University of Michigan School of Social Work

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**"THE PANDEMIC MADE IT (IM)POSSIBLE":  
HOW THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS SHAPED  
FATHER ENGAGEMENT AND WELLBEING**



# Experiences of expectant and new fathers early in the pandemic

Purpose: This study aimed to explore ways the pandemic has impacted father involvement during pregnancy and infancy, father engagement in perinatal services, and fathers' mental health and wellbeing.

Method: Mothers ( $N= 60$ ; mean age 32, 2/3 white, all married or partnered, 3/4 intended pregnancy) of babies born in 2020, recruited from online mothers' groups. Individual, semi-structured interviews via zoom addressed:

- Experiences of pregnancy, birth, early parenting, during the pandemic
- Personal and partner wellbeing
- Access to support

Thematic data analysis, informed by principles of grounded theory.



# Results

## 1. FATHER INVOLVEMENT

- More time with partners and infants
- Added time is both meaningful and stressful

## 2. SERVICE ENGAGEMENT

- Reduced participation in prenatal and pediatric care
- Reduced access to supportive services

## 3. PATERNAL WELLBEING

- New or amplified stressors – family responsibilities, financial pressures, losses and worries about loved ones with COVID
- Reduced social support and increased isolation



# Father Involvement

*When we got home from the hospital, all of the caregiving that we had expected my husband to do was like tripled, quadrupled. You know it was just, we expected my mom and best friends to come... lactation support... And so when we got home from the hospital ... he had to do everything, right, that he really hadn't expected to do, and I hadn't expected to have him do. He stepped up in ways that I, neither of us would've ever dreamed that he would've done or had to do.*

# Service Engagement

*They only allow one adult, so he'll come and like sit in the parking lot... He was disappointed that he couldn't go, because it's like a, you know, it's a part of parenting. I think he wanted to feel like he was involved.*

# Paternal Wellbeing

*When the pandemic hit and him not being able to go back to work, you know, because they shut down... I think it was really hard for him... He really struggled with coming to terms with fatherhood... I felt like if he could have left the house and have more alone time to figure out his new identity and, you know, feel like he's more than just a father at this time, [it would have helped]... He developed um, postnatal depression um for fathers...*

# Experiences of fathers with low income and less than full custody of their kids

Purpose: This study aimed to explore the ways the stresses and uncertainty posed by COVID-19 compound existing economic instability and family pressures for low-income and noncustodial fathers.

Method: Survey ( $N = 75$ ) and focus groups ( $N = 40$ ) with fathers participating in programs of the Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative and other father-serving organizations in Milwaukee, to learn about new or heightened financial and parenting / coparenting challenges during the pandemic (e.g., challenges related to loss of employment, hours, or income, child support obligations, visitation or shared custody, father-child relationships).

Data collection and analysis are ongoing.

# Preliminary results (qualitative data)

- Extensive losses of family and community members
- Employment disruptions and child support challenges
- Brought us closer / Made us more distant
- New dimension to parenting and co-parenting – navigating different COVID beliefs, practices, exposures
- New recognition of importance of presence
- Isolation and trauma

# Importance of presence

*You know prior to the pandemic, [I was] always working, like you know and in some cases 50 and 60 hours a week... One thing I learned through the pandemic, ...I have a 7-year-old... [and] like in the middle of the pandemic when everything shut down, you know we were doing his at home lessons, you know which aren't always easy, but he said something to me and it just really, really, really struck home. And he was like, he said Dad, I'm glad you're spending time with me now.*

# Made us more distant; New dimension to co-parenting

*Well for me it's been um, distant. Extremely distant because of the pandemic. You know the [other] parent was, um, was just nervous about, you know, like the company I was keeping. And so, so seeing my kids was like none and void. The relationship fell apart and, you know, just been starting to work on building that back with them. ... Because we aren't together, she don't know, you know what I'm saying. ... And just, you know, being nervous about what's going on.*

# Isolation and trauma

*It's been hard because um, I think it's, you don't have anybody to talk to, or a outlet so you keep everything internally. Um, being a father and a man you have to keep the peace... and be strong on the outside, but on the inside, you know you're falling apart... I'm sure that's going to have a lot of long-term effects... [because] when you suppress trauma, you know, it comes out in different ways*

# Enhancing support for fathers and families

- Increase support for those who entered parenthood during this exceptionally challenging time
- Address informational and socio-emotional needs for all parents, regardless of gender or residential status
- Normalize a range of feelings and emotions related to parenting during a pandemic
- Actively encourage father involvement in prenatal and pediatric care, in children's schooling
- Engage new parents in considering pandemic-incurred practices they want to maintain, and pandemic-incurred practices they want to disrupt



# Fatherhood During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Insights from the Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative



During the pandemic there was a rise in interest in fatherhood phone discussions and dads' groups. Not necessarily in declaring a need for services but more questions and commentary about what to do when spending more time with children. The Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative received more calls from both mothers and fathers.



## Men:

- Reported taking on more around the clock childcare than ever before
- Asked about finding supports for children's education, first aid, online income and discussing what it means to be a dad
- Stated not considering the importance of work-life balance until recently
- ***Asked about websites for safe activities or events for children***



## Women:

- Asked what fatherhood services were available
- Inquired about transportation and social services stating they were on hold with calls to other resources
- Help for behavior changes in children (especially related to home schooling)



# Relationships

- Increased discussions about schoolwork and performance with children
- Increased discussion about future career decisions with children and family
- Noncustodial fathers who had no relationship with court system expressed desire to introduce their case to the family court
- \*\* Fathers noted that they saw information about domestic violence but no information about being more positively engaged as a father with their children\*\*

# Opportunities

- Opened avenues for fathers to state need for long-term flexible work policies
- Redefined how men perceive their value as ‘head of household’ or “breadwinner”
- Promoted discussion of shared caregiving roles between women and men especially with non-custodial fathers who could not access family court system



A close-up photograph of a Black man with a mustache, smiling warmly. A young child with curly hair is sitting on his back, also smiling broadly. The man is wearing a blue polo shirt, and the child is wearing a denim jacket. The background is a blurred red wall with some text and posters.

# BEING A FATHER DURING A PANDEMIC

STORIES OF NEW FATHER EXPERIENCES  
DURING THE PANDEMIC

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## AREAS OF FOCUS



PARENTING TIME



HOUSING



PRENATAL  
VISITS



## PARENTING TIME

- COVID-19 being used as an excuse.
- Changes to Work, Daycare, and School schedules



## HOUSING

- Limited emergency housing for men and their families.
- Apartments not accepting new tenants for fear of exposure to COVID-19.

## PRENATAL VISITS

- In the beginning of the pandemic fathers weren't allowed to attend prenatal visits with their partner. Some couldn't attend the birth of their child either.
- Feeling of isolation from their families.



# **SUPPORTING FATHERS DURING COVID-19**

Shawna J. Lee, PhD, MSW

University of Michigan

School of Social Work



**PARENTING IN CONTEXT RESEARCH LAB**  
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

# MENTAL HEALTH

Pre—pandemic data show that anxiety and depression are common

- 19% of U.S. adults will experience at least one episode of generalized anxiety disorder in a year
- 7% of U.S. adults will experience at least one episode of major depressive disorder in a year

Levels of anxiety and depression during the pandemic are 3x pre-COVID levels (Twenge & Joiner, 2020; Cai, Woolhandler, Himmelstein, & Gaffney, 2021)

## PARENTAL WELLBEING DURING COVID-19

- High levels of parenting stress during the pandemic (American Psychological Association, 2020; Lee, et al., 2021; Patrick et al., 2020):
  - Parents struggled to support their children's at-home education
  - Difficult to manage childcare and work remotely
  - Parents experienced financial and food insecurity
  - Children experienced increasing behavioral and mental health problems



## DATA SOURCES

### **Stress and Parenting During the Pandemic**

- Online survey – convenience sample of U.S. adults
- 3 waves in late March and early April 2020

### **U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey (Phase I)**

- 12 weeks – April 23, 2020 – July 21, 2020
- Nationally representative data from U.S. households

## METHODS AND SAMPLE

- N = 683; parents ( $n = 468$ ) and non-parents ( $n = 215$ )
- Race and ethnicity
  - White: 71%
  - Black: 10%
  - Hispanic: 9%
  - Other: 9%
- Male: 37%
- Average Age: 33.32 ( $SD = 8.87$ )
- Percent with Bachelor's degree: 44%
- Experienced employment change: 21%

## RESULTS

### **Anxiety**

- T1: 38%, T2: 36%, T3: 30%

### **Depression**

- T1: 34%, T2: 39%, T3: 35%

### **Worry Domains**

- Relatively high levels of financial worries

# PROLIFIC SURVEY: RESULTS

## **Anxiety**

- Parent status was associated with *increased* anxiety

## **Depression**

- Parent status was not associated with depression

## **Worry Domains**

- Parent status was associated with *increased* financial worries

## **Sex (male/female) x Caregiver Interaction**

- No statistically significant interactions by sex



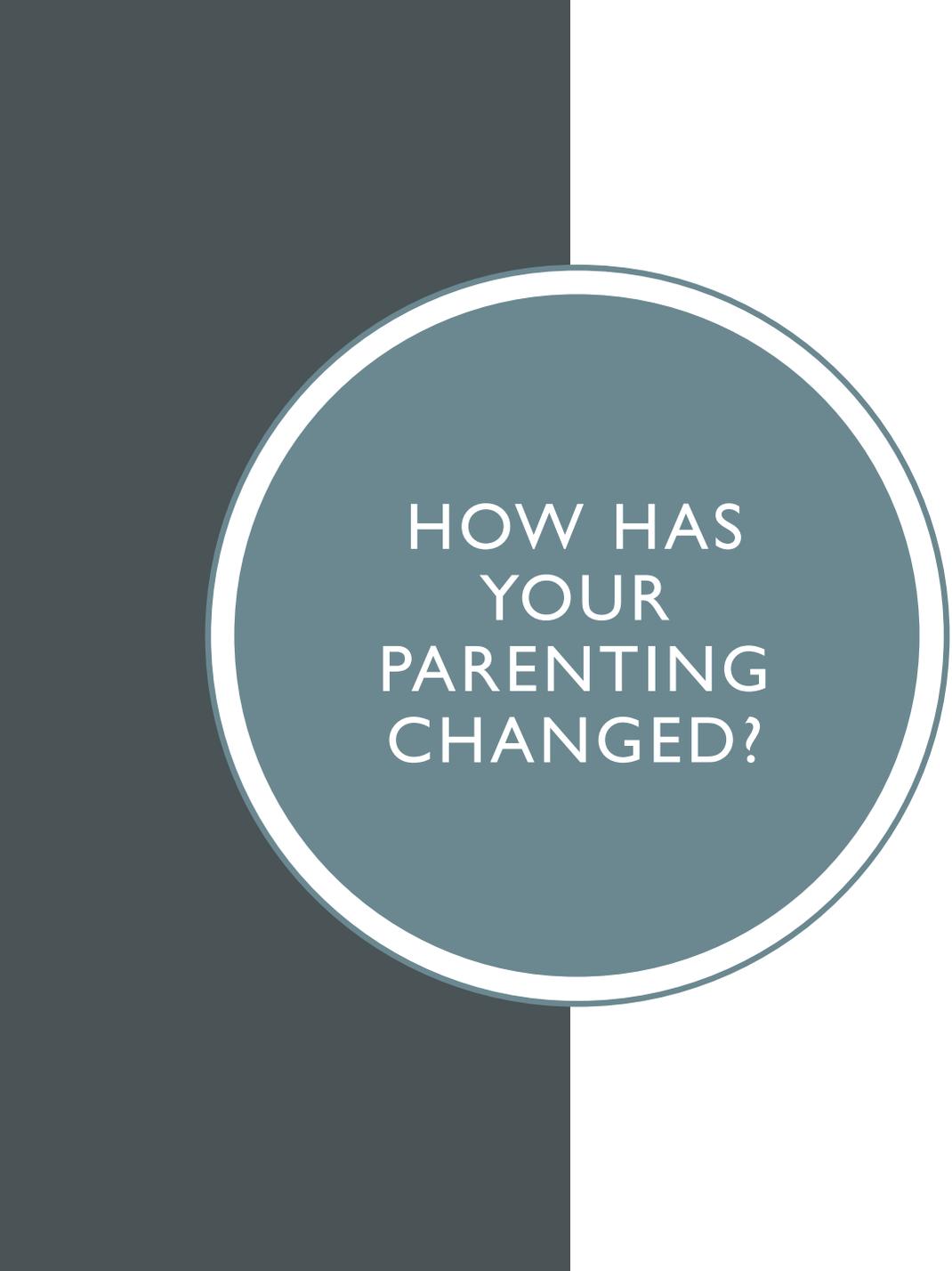
## POSITIVE THINGS

- Within the last week or two my Step Daughter and I have become a lot closer. She has even helped my Daughter and I work on building a Reptile enclosure.
- I haven't been working at all. But I've been trying to spend more time doing fun stuff with the kids... Like planting a garden..
- She likes being home with dad and getting to sleep in and watch her favorite shows often
- Takes this time with the children as a blessing, its definitely time you will not get back.
- I love that I am able to be around them so much. Though it can be frustrating, I am glad I can help them with their homework.
- Overall they have become more thankful and helpful, and I feel closer to them as they do to me and my wife, we talk about it directly with each other.



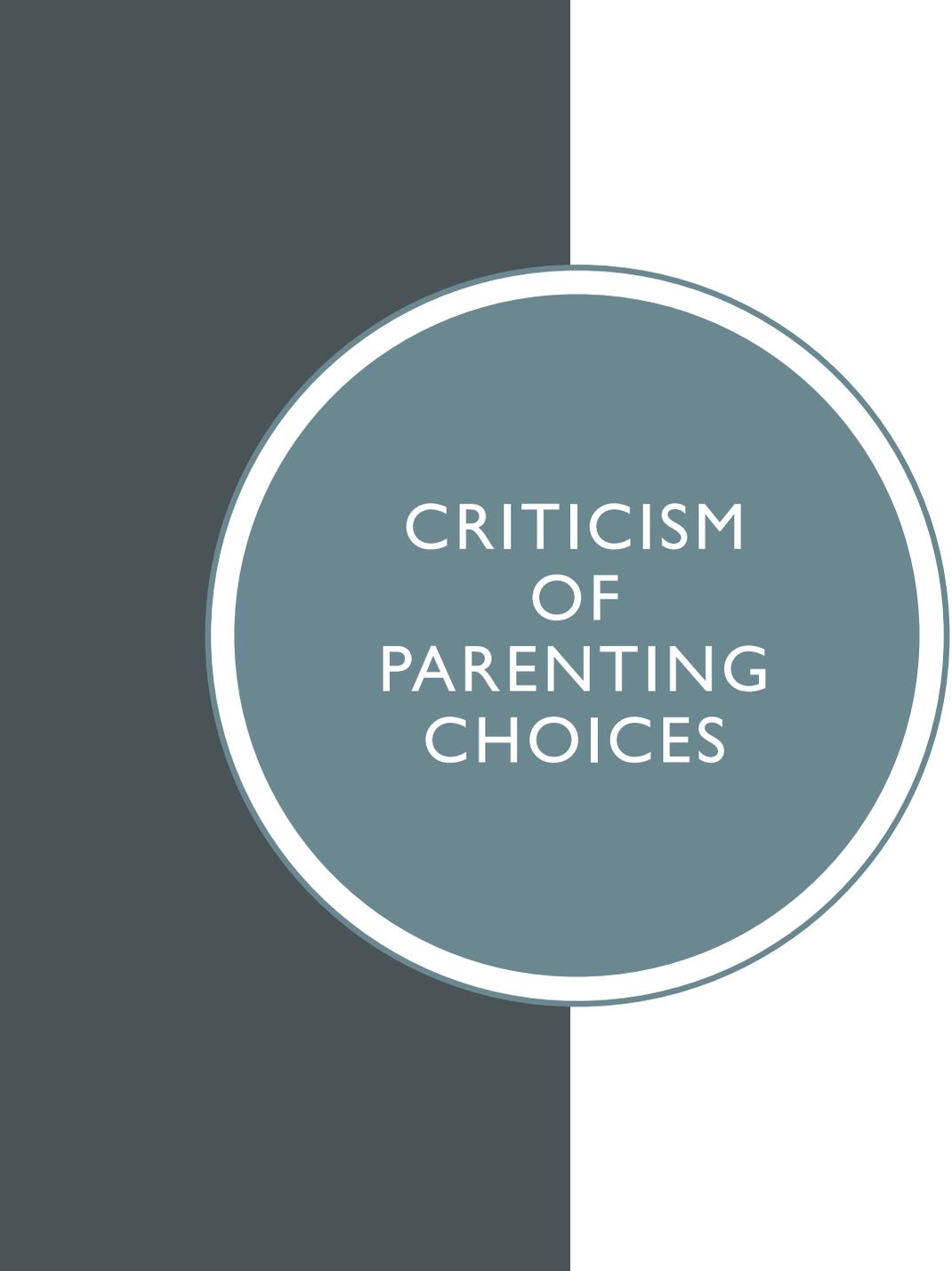
WHAT HAS  
HELPED YOU  
DURING THE  
PANDEMIC?

- Everything is cancelled and closed. I am a part time stay at home parent besides driving a school bus and everything else is closed for kids and families (no art museums, history museums, science centers, etc.).
- My wifes work has been supportive in a work from home situation.
- It's been pretty easy to balance everything because my work/school hours were drastically reduced so I've been spending a lot of time with my family!
- I feel I have to be in two places at once.
- I am living a clean and sober lifestyle to the best of my abilities to better my chance of seeing my daughter
- My in-laws and my spouse have blamed me for not being active enough in their lives and for not giving enough of my paycheck to my spouse



## HOW HAS YOUR PARENTING CHANGED?

- I spend more time educating my daughter and trying to come up with fun indoor activities.
- I don't think it really has. Other than finding creative to wear out toddler energy now since we can't go to the park.
- I think I am more aware of little things, how my children respond to stress, their real concerns, how my actions influence how they feel.
- I have become more apt to give my children space, to let them do their school work, support and help them, but also let them use social media and their computers more to stay connected.
- I'm more patient and more open minded/relaxed about how they're spending their time. That said, I'm also a little bit more protective of concerned about their well-being.
- I feel much more tired with no outside activities and schools.
- I've tried to be more attentive and understanding, even when I can't fully explain what's going on to my child. I do feel very distracted at times, and as mentioned previously, my underlying mental health issues have been exacerbated by the pandemic situation.



## CRITICISM OF PARENTING CHOICES

- We have been quarantining our child away from visitors, since we do not want the virus to spread. We don't live with my parents or in-laws, which has made them upset that they can't see their granddaughter.
- I cut off access to my parents and my wife's parents early on in the process, so that for a time caused some issues but they have resolved now since that is standard practice now.
- In general, my ex and I just have different parenting styles and we occasionally clash.
- Disapproval of taking them with me to buy essentials.
- Just common disagreements between my wife and I that are being compounded by the virus. Arguments about nutrition and bed time.
- I need to take care of him more apparently

# CRITICISM OF PARENTING CHOICES

- **Mothers reported experiencing more criticism about their parenting than did fathers**
- **Criticism of parenting choices was associated with increased anxiety and depression**
- **Interaction Effects**
  - Association between Criticism → Anxiety was stronger for Dads
- Criticism may have a **stronger effect on fathers**, in some cases

# U.S. CENSUS HOUSEHOLD PULSE SURVEY

*<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/data.html>*

# PULSE SURVEY

- Phase I of the U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey
  - 12 weeks from April 23, 2020-July 21, 2020
- Adults living in households with children
- Large (N = 592,545) and diverse sample
- **Anxious: 35%**
- **Depressed: 24%**
- **Married: 58%**
- **Average Age: 44.65 (SD = 11.7)**

# PULSE SURVEY: RESULTS

## Caregiver vs. Non-Caregiver

- Caregiver status was not associated with meeting anxiety criteria
- Being a caregiver → *decreased* likelihood of being depressed

## Robust Protective Factors

- Being male → decreased likelihood of being anxious and depressed
- Higher income → decreased likelihood of being anxious and depressed
- Being married → decreased likelihood of being anxious and depressed

# PULSE SURVEY: RESULTS

## **Sex (male/female) x Caregiver Interaction**

### **Anxiety**

- Caregiver status was a (very small) protective factor for females, but a (very small) risk factor for males

### **Depression**

- Caregiver status was (moderately) protective for females, with a (slight) protective effect for males

## KEY POINTS

- High levels of anxiety and depression across both samples
- Parents experienced higher levels of anxiety and financial worries compared to non-parents
- However, overall, parents/caregivers did not seem to be faring worse than other U.S. adults when examining the Pulse survey
- At the population level, fathers may be especially vulnerable to anxiety at during the pandemic
- Caregiving status (or being in a household with children) may in fact be a (slight) *protective factor* for depression at the population level – especially for mothers



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**THANK YOU!  
I LOOK FORWARD TO YOUR QUESTIONS...**

# Thank You!

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**Alameda County Father Corps' Fatherhood Photo Bank**

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