



Addressing Child Labor in Punjab, Pakistan: An Analysis of Key Socio-economic and Household Factors

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: July 13, 2025 Revised: August 26, 2025 Accepted: September 17, 2025 Available Online: October 03, 2025	<i>Child labor is a constant socio-economic problem in Pakistan, and since the province of Punjab is the most populous and economically diverse part of the country, it has some of the highest rates of child labor. The idea behind this study is that child labour in Punjab is multidimensional problem based on the household characteristics, economic constraints and work-related factors. To examine these factors, quantitative approach was used in the study based on the data from Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement survey of Punjab. Kernel Regularized Least Square Machine Learning method was used to study the relationship between child labor and the factors such as poverty, unemployment, parental literacy, hours worked, school enrollment, and availability of basic facilities. The results show that parental literacy, school enrollment and children working hours are the most important determinants, whereas structural poverty is insignificant when education and household conditions are controlled. These findings suggest that improving the education of parents and providing more access to quality schooling, curbing people's working hours, and enhancing adult employment opportunities are critical to reducing child labor in Punjab. The study concludes with policy recommendations emphasizing poverty alleviation programs, conditional cash transfers, parental literacy campaigns, and strict enforcement of labor laws to protect children's rights and ensure their educational and developmental opportunities.</i>
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Abbreviation

UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
ILO	International Labour Organization
CEM	Child Emotional Maltreatment
CN	Child Neglect
CPM	Child Physical Maltreatment
CM	Child Maltreatment
TDH	Terre des Hommes
HRW	Human Rights Watch
SIMPOC	Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labor
ICI	Influencing Causes Index
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
PsycINFO	Psychological Information Database
ARDL	Autoregressive Distributed Lag
OLS	Ordinary Least Squares
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations

Introduction

Child labour is usually associated with work that is detrimental to the physical and mental health and rights of kids, their talents and their self-esteem (Srivastava, 2011). UNICEF defines child labour in age based and hours worked per week. Any child between the age of 5 and 11 years is regarded as a child labour when the child carries out at least one hour of economic activity, or when the child works a total of 28 hours in normal household or non-economic work a week. 12–14-year-olds are view as child labour when identified to work 14 hours of economic work or 28 hours of domestic or non-economic work a week. Age group of 15 to 17 years old is referred to as child labour when they engage 43 hours of either economic or domestic/non-economic work in a week (UNICEF, 2019). Close to 152 million children are labour globally at the current time. (Parry & Willis, 2020) and the (ILO, 2017) state that 71 percent of these individuals are employed in the field of agriculture, 17 percent in service industry, and 12 percent in manufacturing. UNICEF and International Labour Organisation (ILO) have reported that such abused and exploited children are most employed in the domestic and informal sector of agriculture. The ILO puts the number of children employed as domestic workers at a little more than 17 million children, paid or unpaid (ILO, 2017).

The personality of the child labour is different when compared to that of the non-working child. Citing the example of low socioeconomic position (Das and Chen, 2019) mentioned that the difference in the class is a defining factor that influences child labour. Further research has concluded that even when children work outside of the house, they overall experience more CM encounters, and that the effect is stronger when a family is poor (TDH, 2017). This is according to many child workers who complain about being constantly battered physically and verbally by their employers or clients no matter how long they have to work in a day (Tannock, 2001). One such case of neglecting the workplace, therefore, includes the continual deprivation of access to fundamental services such as sanitation, healthcare, transport, and education (Ahad & Eleen, 2018). Few studies have tried to answer these questions (HRW, 2012). The CPM may be between 5.5-72.3% (Pandey et al., 2020), and CEM and CN can range between 85.1-2% (Oknc Jose et al., 2013). Also, the exploitation of youngsters in the Asian subcontinents is not a rare occurrence of

sending such individuals to work as non-paid bonded labourers (Gharaibeh & Hoeman, 2003). Majhoshev & Angelovski (2016) defines child labour as an abuse. A child's physical, mental, and cognitive development are all negatively impacted when they are forced to work long hours in dangerous conditions and also miss out on opportunities for play, education, and socialisation with their peers and family (Gharaibeh & Hoeman, 2003).

Child labor continues to be a pressing social and public health issue in many developing nations. Despite a steady rise in research over the last twenty years highlighting its harmful consequences, it still poses a global challenge. The International Labor Organization (ILO) has yet to fulfill its target of eliminating child labor (Bourdillon & Carothers, 2019), with reports showing that more than 152 million children are involved in paid employment worldwide (ILO, 2017). The situation is particularly severe in low income regions in Asia and Africa. In Asia alone, nearly 122 million children aged 5 to 14 are forced to work to sustain their livelihoods (ILO, 2019). Concerning the potential denial of rights and psychological or bodily injury to a segment of the world's children, this expansion is worrisome (Wright, 2003). The conceptualization of child labor differs depending on how a child and their working hours are defined. For instance, the Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labor (SIMPOC) considers a child laborer to be any economically active child under 12 years working at least one hour per week, a child aged 14 years or under engaged in 14 or more hours per week in hazardous activities, and any child under 18 years involved in the unconditional worst forms of child labor (Edmonds, 2008). In contrast the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2015) defines child labor as any work by children aged 5-11 years, regardless of duration, in non-hazardous jobs, and work exceeding 42 hours per week for children aged 12-17 years in non-hazardous employment. These definitional differences largely stem from variations across geopolitical contexts. Research also indicates that children often start working at very young ages and spend long hours at work, which restricts their school attendance and may lead to malnutrition (Ibrahim et al., 2019).

The cultural norms and socioeconomic issues that contribute to child labour in Pakistan make its eradication a formidable endeavour. There are an estimated three to five million youngsters in Pakistan working in jobs that are exploitative and often dangerous. These kids usually hail from low-income, oppressed households that would be utterly unable to provide for their fundamental necessities like sending them to school if it weren't for their earnings. It is not uncommon for children to work as farmhands in rural areas, often in dangerous and unpleasant environments, doing things like harvesting crops or caring for animals. They are susceptible to exploitation and abuse in urban settings where they labour in factories, brick kilns, workshops, or as domestic labour. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the underlying causes of child labor and examine the socio-economic challenges encountered by working children. This objective further divided into sub-aim, as follows: 1) to identify determinants and impact of child labor in Pakistan; and 2) to provide suitable policy recommendations for policy makers regarding the issue of child labor.

Review of Literature

There are a number of studies that have been conducted on the determinants of child labor across the globe. For instance, Ahad et al. (2021) investigated the factors affecting child labour and the nature of their working environment through questionnaire survey of 80 child labourers aged 5-17 years. The results of demographics revealed most of the participants were between the age of 12 and 14 years with 32.5% being school dropouts. Their analysis showed that in addition to poverty, high cost of schooling and limited access to primary education opportunities were other factors forcing children into the labor force. In another study, Ahad et al. (2021) investigated the

magnitude, risk factors, and psychological impact of maltreatment among child labourers in four South East Asian countries. Their thematic analysis also showed that victim and caregiver factors and socio-cultural practices were important predictors of maltreatment. Parental malfunction was also strongly associated with victimization of child labor; followed by poverty. Similarly, Ali et al. (2021) examined the causes of child labor and socio-economic problems of working children. This study also assessed the adequacy, effectiveness and potential of constitutional provisions relating to rights of children as it is available in the Constitution of 1973. The results highlighted the necessity of a standard and uniform level to address these very basic issues to protect children from getting into the labor force in Pakistan. Further, Gilani et al. (2022) suggested that the reduction of child labor in Pakistan calls for breaking the nexus between the extractive state institutions and the exploitative private sector. They suggested this could be achieved through more powerful democratic governance and empowering the parliament to formulate and effectively implement comprehensive anti-child labor legislation.

In a study, Gul et al. (2023) discussed the problem of child labor in Mardan District in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. Using Multinomial Logit model, their analysis revealed that the probability of schooling was decreased for children already in primary education. Likewise, the probability of schooling rose with hire monthly income of the household head. However, as children got older and their personal income increased, the likelihood of their involvement in child labor also increased. Alam (2023) looked at the recent amendments made in the Child Labor Act and its implication for the children of Pakistan. The study also discussed about the role of UNICEF and other international organizations in improving the welfare of children globally. Both the ILO and UNICEF have made a distinction between child labor and child work and have made clear that work such as household chores or helping out in a family business are not child labor unless they affect a child's health or education negatively. On the other hand, work that is harmful to physical or mental development or that interferes with schooling is considered child labor. Similarly, Zulifqar et al. (2023) examined some of the main push factors affecting the persistence of child labor in Pakistan by using the Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) model with time series data obtained from 1984 to 2020. Their results showed that an increase in secondary school enrollment and an increase in household per capita income had a significant negative effect on child labor, while inflation, population growth and youth dependency ratios showed a positive association with child labor. Ejaz et al. (2024) investigated the relationship between skilled labor, poverty and child labor in district Peshawar. Ordinary least square and Multinomial Logistic Regression model was used for empirical findings. Findings showed that the majority of the little boys had no or little education and most of their fathers possessed minimal education and were engaged in poorly remunerated work, without employment, or deceased.

Furthermore, Maqbool et al. (2024) examined distribution of child labor in Sindh and the factors influencing regional variation. Using data from the 2018-19 Sindh Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS 6), which covered 20,030 households and 40,633 children aged 5-17, the study applied prevalence statistics, chi-square tests, and regression modeling. The results indicated that approximately twenty percent of children Sindh were engaged in child labor, with the highest prevalence observed among males and those aged 15-17 years. Hanane et al. (2024) examined the key socio-economic factors contributing to child labor and barriers to education, as well as the practical implications of child labor laws in Pakistan. Primary data were collected in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) through an online questionnaire survey administered to teachers, school administrators, government officials responsible for enforcing child labor and education policies, and representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Additional data were obtained through personal observations and interviews with child laborers and their parents or guardians.

The findings revealed that 78% of participants lacked awareness of child labor laws, while 71% considered them ineffective. Poverty was identified as the most influential socio-economic factor (65%), and statistical analysis confirmed that these factors significantly affected the enforcement of child education laws in Pakistan. Haq et al. (2024) investigated the link between child labor and trade liberalization, focusing specifically on Pakistan's manufacturing sector between 1990 and 2005. The results revealed that trade liberalization had a significant and positive association with child labor. However, the study also highlighted that higher protection rates played a role in reducing child labor within those manufacturing industries that faced the largest tariff reductions during the liberalization period. The robustness of these findings was confirmed after accounting for relevant control variable. Furthermore, the lagged effects of trade policy also contributed in reducing child labor, as the study pointed out. Based on these insights, the authors recommended that developing countries should be made to pursue economic liberalization as trade reforms could be an effective strategy to curb child labor.

More recently, Tanveer et al. (2025) examined the main causes of child labor among agricultural households, namely economic pressures, lack of alternative sources of income, and lack of access to education. The study further analyzed the broader effects of child labor on children's health, educational attainment and long-term economic mobility. To overcome these challenges, the authors have proposed specific policy interventions including poverty alleviation programmes, increased access to quality education, financial support to rural families and strengthening enforcement of child labor laws. By addressing the root causes and implementing effective interventions, the study contended, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) could be making progress towards ensuring the safety of children from labor exploitation while providing opportunities for education and skill development. Shah et al (2025) investigated the determinants of out-of-school children in Pakistan based on the data of Pakistan Social and Living Standard Measurement (PSLM) survey for 2015-16. Their findings underlined key disparities across gender, provinces, regions and other socio-economic variables. Parental education became very significant factor and was found to be negatively associated with out of school children at both provincial level for both boys and girls. Income level, child labor, household size and place of residence were also identified as influential determinants. Based on these results, the study recommended that the government should prioritize on the female education especially for the rural areas and give financial incentives to the families and strict ban on child labor to mitigate the issue.

In a related study, Khan et al. (2025) investigated the relationship between economic growth and child labor in Pakistan, while also considering the roles of exports, household size, and the rural population. Using time series data from 1972 to 2021, the study employed unit root test, bounds co-integration test, and the autoregressive distributed lag (ARDL) model. The results confirmed and inverted U-shaped Kuznets curve, indicating that child labor initially rises during the early stages of economic development due to low per capita income but declines in the long run as higher income levels improve households' welfare.

Research Gap

Despite the seriousness of child labor in Pakistan, much of the existing research remains descriptive, focusing largely on prevalence rather than systematically analyzing its underlying determinants. Previous studies tend to emphasize poverty and income factors, but they often neglect the combined role of household size, parental education, unemployment, and access to schooling in shaping child labor outcomes. Furthermore, important dimensions such as working hours and the age at which children begin work are rarely incorporated into empirical analyses, even though they significantly affect children's well-being, educational attainment, and future

opportunities. Similarly, the urban–rural divide in child labor patterns has not been sufficiently examined, with most studies treating Pakistan as a homogeneous case. In addition, the influence of recent socio-economic changes and government interventions has not been adequately captured in earlier research. To address these gaps, this study provides an updated and comprehensive examination of the determinants of child labor in Pakistan by integrating both household characteristics and work-related variables into the analysis.

Materials and Methods

Data and Sample Selection

This study follows a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to identify and analyze the determinants of child labor in Province Punjab, Pakistan. A cross-sectional approach is appropriate because it captures information from a large, nationally representative sample at a single point in time, enabling statistical relationships to be examined between socio-economic and demographic variables and child labor participation. The target population of the study is children aged 5–16 years residing in Province Punjab. The definition of child labor aligns with the ILO framework on child labor. Sample selection from Punjab supports the fact that it is most populous and economically significant province in Pakistan. A rural agricultural area where farming is still the main profession is also part of Punjab, as are urban industrial centres like Lahore, Faisalabad, and Gujranwala. By combining urban and rural areas, we can better understand how differences in income, educational opportunities, and labour market structures impact the frequency of child labour in this region. Moreover, the study analysis uses secondary data from the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM) Survey, conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS). The PSLM provides detailed household-level information on demographics, education, employment, and living standards. It employs standardized questionnaires and a scientifically designed sampling strategy, making it highly suitable for policy-oriented socio-economic research.

Study’ Variables and Model Development

To investigate the determinants of child labor in Pakistan, the key variables include the demographic and socio-economic indicators at the individual and household level, which help explain the factors influencing children’s participation in labor activities. Table 1 describes the dependent and independent variable with their description, KPI performance target, and scale.

Table 1: Data and Variables’ Description

Variable Name	Acronym	Description	KPI Performance Target	Scale / Ratio
Percentage of Out-of-School Children (Age 5–16)	OSC	Proportion of children aged 5–16 years not enrolled in formal education.	Reduce percentage of out-of-school children to 0%.	Ratio (0–100%)
Household poverty status	POV	Percentage of households living below the national poverty line.	Reduce percentage of households living below the poverty line.	Ratio (0–100%)

Parental Literacy Rate (Literacy rate of head of household)	PLR	Proportion of household heads who can read and write.	Increase literacy rate of heads of households.	Ratio (0–100%)
Unemployment Rate	UNEMP	Share of adults without paid work but actively seeking employment.	Decrease unemployment rate.	Ratio (0–100%)
Working age population	WAP	Share of population aged 15-64 in household/Community	Increase adult participation, reduce child labor.	Ratio (0–100%)
School Enrollment Rates	SER	Percentage of school-age children currently in formal education	Achieve 100% enrollment for ages 5–16.	Ratio (0–100%)
Working hours/per week	WH	Average weekly working hours of child.	Reduce child working hours.	Ratio (hours)
Access to Clean Water & Sanitation	ACWS	Availability of safe drinking water and adequate sanitation in households.	Provide safe water & sanitation to all households.	Nominal (Yes/No)

A number of demographic and socioeconomic variables are modelled into this study's model to determine their effects on the prevalence of child labour in Pakistan. The literature and theoretical framework suggest that child labour is determined by a number of independent variables which are includes in this study. The econometric model for this study is given in equation 1.

$$OSC_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 POVi + \beta_2 PLR_i + \beta_3 UNEMP_i + \beta_4 WAP_i + \beta_5 SER_i + \beta_6 WH_i + \beta_7 ACWS_i + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Where, i indicates the cross-section, β_0 is intercept, $\beta_1 \dots \beta_7$ represents the elasticities of coefficients, while ϵ is error term.

Econometric techniques

In order to examine the determinants of child labor in Punjab, the study employed an econometric technique that links socio-economic and household variables with the likelihood of children being engaged in work. While Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression is a common starting point for such analysis, it assumes linear relationships and may fail when multicollinearity or non-linear effects are present. To address these limitations, the study applied Kernel Regularized Least Squares (KRLS), a more flexible method that does not rely on strict functional form assumptions and effectively handles small sample sizes with complex data structures. This approach allowed the model to estimate both linear and non-linear effects of factors such as poverty, parental literacy, unemployment, school enrollment, working hours, and access to basic facilities on child labor outcomes. By doing so, KRLS produced more reliable and policy-relevant results, ensuring that the analysis reflects the real-world complexity of child labor determinants in Punjab.

Results

Descriptive results

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of key variables, highlighting the socio-economic challenges linked to child labor in Punjab. On average, 23% of children aged 5–16 remain out of school, with notable variation across regions, while more than half of households (52.7%) live below the poverty line, reflecting widespread deprivation. Despite a relatively high parental literacy rate of 77.5%, school enrollment remains low at just 35%, showing a serious gap between literacy and children’s educational participation. The unemployment rate averages 6.2%, and demographic pressure from large working-age populations further complicates household income dynamics. Alarming, children engaged in labor work an average of 46.5 hours per week, comparable to full-time adult employment, which limits their schooling opportunities. Additionally, only 19.2% of households have access to clean water and sanitation, underscoring poor living conditions. Overall, the data reveal that poverty, low enrollment, and excessive working hours are the most pressing determinants of child labor, while regional disparities exacerbate the problem across Punjab.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
POV	37	23.00000	10.42433	9	8
PLR	37	52.75730	13.01198	16.03	78.85
UNEMP	37	77.48649	11.57253	52	93
WAP	37	6.15784	2.98812	1.7	12.3
SER	37	2390.24300	1606.85300	904	9021
WH	37	35.05405	8.86299	18	54
ACWS	37	46.54054	2.97186	41.4	54.1
POV	37	19.21622	11.26483	1	45

Correlation results

Table 3 reports the correlation analysis among the study variables and reveals important relationships shaping child labor dynamics in Punjab. Out-of-school children are strongly and negatively correlated with parental literacy rate ($r = -0.9597$), confirming that higher parental education significantly reduces the likelihood of children being out of school. Poverty shows a weak negative correlation with OSC (-0.2170), indicating that while poverty contributes to child labor, its direct effect may be mediated through other factors such as literacy and employment. Unemployment also has a negative relationship with OSC (-0.3458), suggesting that households with higher unemployment may rely less on schooling due to income insecurity. Weekly working hours are moderately and negatively correlated with OSC (-0.4574), reflecting that children who spend more time in labor are less likely to attend school. Access to clean water and sanitation has little correlation with OSC (-0.0440), implying a weaker direct effect. Overall, the results emphasize that parental literacy is the strongest determinant influencing school attendance, while

poverty, unemployment, and working hours also play meaningful roles in shaping child labor patterns.

Table 3: Correlation Analysis

Variables	OSC	POV	PLR	UNEMP	WAP	SER	WH	ACWS
OSC	1.0000							
POV	-0.2170	1.0000						
PLR	-0.9597	0.2509	1.0000					
UNEMP	-0.3458	0.0996	0.4224	1.0000				
WAP	-0.0359	-0.1302	0.1014	0.3423	1.0000			
SER	-0.0968	0.0070	-0.0766	-0.3542	-0.5462	1.0000		
WH	-0.4574	0.4005	0.3747	0.0747	0.1363	-0.0966	1.0000	
ACWS	-0.0440	0.0521	0.0348	-0.1489	-0.2025	-0.0363	0.1290	1.0000

Results of Kernel Regularized Least Square

Table 3 results provide deeper insights into the determinants of child labor in Punjab. The model shows a very high explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.9998$), indicating that the selected variables collectively explain almost all variation in the out-of-school children rate. Among the predictors, parental literacy rate has a strong and highly significant negative effect (-0.507), confirming that educated parents are less likely to send their children into labor and more likely to prioritize schooling. Similarly, school enrollment rate (-0.152), working age population (WAP) (-0.00068), and unemployment (-0.096) all exhibit significant negative associations with OSC, highlighting that stronger adult labor participation and better educational opportunities reduce child labor. Weekly working hours also show a large negative effect (-0.502), indicating that children who work long hours are substantially deprived of schooling. Conversely, access to clean water and sanitation shows a positive and significant relationship (0.044), suggesting that while improved infrastructure indicates development, it does not automatically reduce child labor and may even coincide with higher labor participation in some areas. Poverty however, appears statistically insignificant, reflecting that its impact is largely absorbed by related factors like education, employment, and household conditions. Overall, the KRLS results confirm that parental education, working hours, and school enrollment are the most decisive factors, while structural poverty alone is not a sufficient predictor once other socio-economic variables are controlled.

Table 3: Kernel Regularized Least Square

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	T-statistic	P-value	P25	P50	P75
POV	0.000913	0.002124	0.430	0.670	-0.037228	-0.004809	0.058946
PLR	-0.506853	0.002594	-195.372	0.000***	-0.671424	-0.521872	-0.319563
UNEMP	-0.095929	0.010006	-9.587	0.000***	-0.374838	-0.161402	0.185326
WAP	-0.000682	0.000028	-24.657	0.000***	-0.001354	-0.000895	-0.000008
SER	-0.152123	0.003476	-43.766	0.000***	-0.251118	-0.180633	-0.035167
WH	-0.502491	0.010221	-49.163	0.000***	-0.889914	-0.518244	-0.201226
ACWS	0.044356	0.002548	17.411	0.000***	-0.061571	0.029097	0.177104
Number of observations	37						
Lambda	0.01495						
R^2	0.9998						
Tolerance	0.037						
Effective df	34.84						

Sigma	7
Looloss	52.69

Note: *** indicate the significance level at 1%.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that child labor in Punjab is primarily driven by low parental literacy, weak school enrollment, and excessive working hours, while structural poverty alone is not a statistically significant predictor once other socio-economic factors are controlled. The findings indicate that the more education the parent has, the less likely the parent is to send the child into labor, and the higher the school enrollment is, the more the risk of children being out of school is reduced. Conversely, children who work long hours suffer severe deprivations in education and are exposed to long term vulnerability. Despite the presence of households living below the poverty line, the analysis does not show that education and household literacy are less significant determinants of child labour outcomes. Therefore, the problem of child labor in Punjab needs to be tackled with policies beyond poverty alleviation to include enhancement of parental literacy, increasing access to free and quality education, limiting the working hours of children, and providing adult employment. Such integrated measures have the potential to break the cycle of deprivation and protect children's rights to education and development;

In order to successfully reduce child labour in Punjab, a multidimensional policy framework is needed. First, poverty alleviation programmes such as conditional cash transfers and food support programmes should be scaled up to reduce the financial strain on poor households. Secondly, there should be investments in free and accessible quality education, including in rural and low-income areas, as well as bridge schools and vocational training for working children. Third, household reliance on the earnings of children can be decreased by adult employment generation programmes in agriculture and industry and in the informal sector. Fourth, it is important to enhance the parental literacy campaigns which will help raise awareness on the importance of education and the long term advantages of education as opposed to child labour. Finally, the enforcement of labor laws coupled with awareness programs in the communities can further discourage the cultural tolerance of child labor. Together, these policies would be able to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and ensure protection, education, and empowerment of the children of Punjab for a better future.

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