

# Parenting Programs for Incarcerated Fathers

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## Introduction

This Fatherhood Research & Practice Network (FRPN) brief examines parenting programs for incarcerated fathers. Before discussing programming, we discuss the effects of the incarceration of fathers on communities, families, and children. Next, we briefly review research that has examined the experiences of fathers before, during, and after their incarceration. Finally, we examine programs for incarcerated fathers that have demonstrated positive impacts for fathers, families, and children.

## Incarceration in the United States

Incarceration is defined as confinement, typically within a jail, prison, or detention facility. According to Wagner and Rabuy (2017), the United States (U.S.) incarcerated more than two million people in state, federal, and local prisons and jails, as well as juvenile and immigration detention centers.

Jails typically imprison individuals for relatively short periods of time (up to three years, in some instances); jails serve specific communities, and the people who are incarcerated in jails are often residents of that community. People incarcerated in jails also may be sentenced (adjudicated), but some may be awaiting trial or bond (pre-adjudication). Prisons, in contrast, may be run by the state or federal government and involve longer time periods of incarceration. Prisons are more often than jails located in more remote areas, which can be far away from where the incarcerated individual and the family resides. Oftentimes the terms "prison" and "jail" are used interchangeably, but there are

important differences in policies and procedures that have implications when parents are imprisoned. For instance, visitation may be more feasible for parents incarcerated in a local jail than for those incarcerated in a state or federal prison facility located far away from their family. However, programming may be more available and accessible at prison facilities.

In 2015, it is estimated that the U.S. incarcerated approximately 2.17 million people in state and federal prisons and in local jails (Kaeble, Glaze, Tsoutis, & Minton, 2016). Incarceration in the U.S. steadily increased throughout the 1990s through 2008 (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), though it may be declining (Kaeble et al., 2016). The high incidence of incarceration has affected millions of children and families. More than half of incarcerated men reported having children under the age of 18, and many of these fathers reported living with and being active in their children's lives before their incarceration (Glaze & Marushak, 2008). Despite the fact that men comprise over 90 percent of the incarcerated population, the majority of research on incarcerated parents has focused on mothers (Dyer, Pleck, & McBride, 2012).

The experience of parental incarceration is a multifaceted risk factor, and research has demonstrated that there are heterogeneous impacts on children and families (Turney & Wildeman, 2015). Children's experience of this adverse childhood experience varies considerably in duration (e.g., how long a father is incarcerated), age of onset (e.g., child's age at time of the father's incarceration), amount of disruption to their daily lives (e.g., if fathers cohabitated with their child before incarceration), as well as a number of other factors. Most research has examined proximal or person-level impacts; however, incarceration impacts communities and families as well. The following sections will review research examining the impact of paternal incarceration on communities and families first, then will examine the impact on fathers and children.

### **Community-level impact of paternal incarceration**

Poor, urban communities are most heavily impacted by incarceration and the movement of residents both into jail and prison and back into the community (Morenoff & Harding, 2014). Community-level rates of prison admission and release have been linked to higher crime rates (Clear, 2007; Hip & Yates, 2009), and as young men in these communities accrue police and prison records, their opportunities for mainstream employment and their ability to contribute to the economic vibrancy of their communities and families diminishes (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999). Furthermore, when a large portion of the community is incarcerated, there are fewer male role models for children and youth. Parker and Reckdenwald (2008) found that the presence of traditional male role models in disadvantaged urban areas reduced rates of African-American youth violence.

Incarceration also impacts non-incarcerated community residents. Residents of neighborhoods with high incarceration rates endure disproportionate economic, emotional, psychological, and physical stress. Hatzenbuehler, Hamilton, and Galea (2015) found higher rates of major depressive disorder and anxiety disorder among non-incarcerated residents of high-incarceration neighborhoods. Other researchers have also documented the impact of incarceration on homelessness in urban communities (Gowan, 2002).

### **Family-level impact of paternal incarceration**

Incarceration of a father does not have the same impact on all families. Some may be minimally influenced, whereas others are forced to make significant adjustments to this transition. Western and Wildeman (2010) noted that the impact of a father's incarceration on the child and family can vary depending on whether the father lived with the child prior to incarceration and other factors related to the quality of the parent-child relationship. Geller and Franklin (2014) found that mothers' housing security is threatened after the incarceration of the children's father. Even if a father did not live with a family prior to his incarceration, he often contributed financially to the family (either formally or informally) and would provide other forms of support to the family (Hairston, 1998). When fathers are incarcerated,



they can no longer provide this support and the resulting financial stress may lead to housing instability. For men, incarceration tended to lead to both asset loss and barriers to reacquiring assets in the years following release, while their female partners mainly tended to lose assets.

### Individual level impacts of paternal incarceration on fathers and their children

#### *Impact on fathers*

Research indicates that compared to non-fathers, incarcerated fathers were less likely to be incarcerated for a violent or property crime (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Incarcerated fathers were also more likely than non-fathers to report a more lengthy criminal history and previous incarcerations. They were also less likely than incarcerated mothers to report living with their child just prior to incarceration and less likely than incarcerated mothers to report providing daily care for their children. Glaze and Maruschak (2007) reported that 54 percent of incarcerated fathers



reported providing financial support to their children. Western provided a higher estimate of 66 percent (Western, 2006; Western & Pettit, 2010). These differences highlight the heterogeneity in experiences and outcomes among incarcerated fathers and their children. Importantly, many children may have been exposed to domestic violence in the home prior to their father's incarceration. In fact, Paat and Hope (2015) examined relationship quality between parents and its relationship to incarceration. They found that couples reporting higher relationship quality were less likely to enter the criminal justice system, and fathers who report higher frequency of physical attack and control behaviors within a relationship were more likely to enter the criminal justice system.

We know relatively little about how incarcerated fathers perceive themselves as fathers during their incarceration. In their review of the literature, Dyer and colleagues (2012) noted that many research studies with incarcerated fathers actually examined how the father's incarceration impacted other aspects of family functioning (e.g., strain on marital relations), and did not address the experience of being an incarcerated father. When fatherhood was examined directly, incarcerated fathers viewed their role as a father as extremely important (Hairston, 2001; Martin, 2001) and incarceration impeded their ability to fulfil that role (Arditti, Smock, & Parkman, 2005). The stress associated with being unable to assume the tasks of fathering may lead to devaluation and less commitment to the role of being a father. Understandably, fathers may distance themselves emotionally from their fatherhood role to help them cope with the pain of separation from children during their incarceration (Palm, as cited in Roy & Dyson, 2005). Tripp (2009) suggested that being connected to the fatherhood identity during incarceration may protect against



"institutionalization," sometimes called "prisonization," which is the process by which incarcerated individuals are socialized by the institutional environments in which they live (Haney, 2002).

### *Impact on children*

Children's experiences with their father pre-date the incarceration, and inevitably these experiences vary from warm, close father-child relationships to more difficult and contentious relations. Other children may not have had a meaningful relationship with their father.

It has been documented that children and adolescents with incarcerated mothers and fathers are prone to a diverse array of maladaptive developmental outcomes, including aggressive and antisocial behavior (Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper, & Mincy, 2009; Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012), depression (Wilbur et al., 2007), attachment insecurity (Poehlmann, 2005), and diminished educational attainment (Foster & Hagan, 2009; Turney & Haskins, 2014; Murray & Farrington, 2005). Increasingly, evidence suggests that youth with a history of maternal or paternal incarceration also show detrimental effects on physical health and other chronic conditions (Gjelsvik, Dumont, & Nunn, 2013; Lee, Fang, & Luo, 2013). Paternal incarceration has also been linked into early initiation into sexual behavior by adolescents (Nebbit, Voisin & Tirmazi, 2017), particularly boys. There is also evidence of an intergenerational impact of incarceration. Specifically, compared to youth with non-incarcerated parents (mostly fathers), youth with incarcerated parents are more likely to commit crimes and be incarcerated themselves (Mazza, 2002; Murray, Bijleveld, Farrington, & Loeber, 2014).

Parental incarceration can introduce a number of unique risk factors into a child's life, and it can be difficult to empirically differentiate the impact of separation from a father due to incarceration from preexisting risk factors. Murray and Farrington (2005) examined father's incarceration as a causal risk factor and a risk marker using the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development. They evaluated 411 males, ages 8 to 9, in which 23 were separated from their parents due to imprisonment during the first 10 years of their life, 17 had parents who were imprisoned before they were born, 227 who had not experienced separation from their parents, 77 who experienced separation from their parents due to death or hospitalization, and 61 who experienced separation because of other reasons. Most children who experienced parental incarceration experienced the incarceration of their father. It was hypothesized by Murray and Farrington (2005) that a father's incarceration was a marker of risk and that children separated from their father due to incarceration would experience the highest average number of individual, parenting, and family risk factors. They found that not only does parental incarceration lead to a group of risk factors (i.e., home transitions), but parental incarceration adds and predicts negative outcomes when assessed on its own. Children whose parent had been incarcerated during the first 10 years of their life had the highest average number of risk factors across individual (e.g., low IQ), parenting (e.g., poor supervision), and family-related outcomes (e.g., low family SES). The results of the study suggest that children separated from their parents due to incarceration were significantly more likely to experience multiple types of risk factors, as well as exhibit antisocial and delinquent behaviors.

Later work has replicated and extended this seminal work and has led researchers to better understand the complexity of paternal incarceration and factors which impact children's adjustment during this time. For instance, research by Haskins (2015) using the Fragile Families and Child Well Being (FFCWB) dataset showed that children whose fathers are incarcerated between their first and ninth birthday display more behavioral problems (acting out, depression) and early juvenile delinquency than their peers whose fathers are not jailed. However, these findings are moderated by preexisting conditions, like socio-economic status and the father's violence before incarceration. Specifically, Washington (2018) found that children whose non-abusive father was incarcerated showed greater declines in social and emotional functioning than children whose abusive fathers were incarcerated.

It is also worth noting that children of different ages will be impacted differently by their father's incarceration (see Miller, 2006). Fathers separated from infants will not have the opportunity to form a strong bond or attachment



relationship with them. Similarly, young children may not be aware of the father's incarceration. Myers et al. (1999) and others (Chui & Yeung, 2016) have described the decision many caregivers make not to reveal the incarceration to the child. Chui and Yeung (2016) found that children's age was an important factor in determining whether the child was aware of the parent's incarceration. Research examining children's reactions to paternal incarceration should be sensitive to children's developmental stage. For example, older children with incarcerated parents may experience feelings of separation and loss of an attachment figure (Poehlmann, 2005). Parents of school-age children likely miss important school-related events and conferences, and it is much more difficult to hide a parental incarceration from school-age children (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). Adolescents are at risk for school dropout, delinquency, and risk-taking behavior (e.g., Murray & Farrington, 2005).

## Parenting During and After Incarceration

### Parenting during incarceration

Parents cite the separation from their children to be the most stressful aspect of incarceration (Houck & Loper, 2002). Incarcerated parents are permitted limited opportunities for contact with their children during their incarceration (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, & Shear, 2010). Maruschak, Glaze, and Mumola (2010) reported that 75 percent of parents incarcerated in state and federal facilities report having mail contact with their child, and about half report having phone contact or visits with their children during their incarceration. Contact can help preserve and maintain a father's bond to their child and help relieve stress (Loper, Carlson, Levitt, & Scheffel, 2009). Contact with children and family members during incarceration has also been linked to better adjustment following release from incarceration (Bales & Mears, 2008).



Visitation at a correctional facility is governed by rules and regulations specific to a facility. Some local jails have a policy that no minors under the age of 18 can visit the facility (Poehlmann et al., 2010). Although most state and federal correctional facilities allow some type of contact or face to face visit between parents and children, the contact is typically limited to embraces at the start and end of a visit (Poehlmann et al., 2010). Contact visitation is not typically allowed for parents incarcerated in jails (Poehlmann et al., 2010; Shlafer, Loper & Schillmoeller, 2015). Most correctional facilities require visitors to pass through a security screening station, and few have child-friendly facilities (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003). In observations of children visiting their parents in jails that had a non-contact barrier policy (e.g., plexiglass separating the visitors from the incarcerated family member), researchers noted that, although children expressed positive affect when seeing their parent initially, there was an increase in distress and negative affect as the length of visit increased (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2017), likely because of these non-contact and family-unfriendly visitation policies.

Little research has examined the impact of contact on children's well-being. Poehlmann (2005) found that visitation with an incarcerated mother was associated with more insecure attachment representations as assessed with the Attachment Story Completion Task (Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990). Similarly, Dallaire and colleagues



(2012) found that children who reported more visits with an incarcerated parent (most incarcerated parents in this sample were fathers) displayed more role reversal in their family drawings, indicating that perhaps these children are expected to take on more adult-like responsibilities when their parent is incarcerated. Both Poehlmann (2005) and Dallaire et al. (2012) suggested that the context in which visitation at correctional facilities occurs may undermine and may activate the children's attachment system, which can be triggered in times of stress (Bowlby, 1982). Dallaire, Zeman, and Thrash (2015) examined the impact of mail, phone, and physical contact with an incarcerated mother on children's internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. Physical contact was associated with increased internalizing behavior problems; phone and mail contact were associated with decreased internalizing behavior.

Few studies have examined phone and mail contact between incarcerated parents and their children. Parents and relatives report that phone calls are expensive (Christian, 2005; Christian, Mellow, & Thomas, 2006). Letters and mail contact are less expensive means of communication but may present developmental challenges to young children.

For an incarcerated father to maintain contact with his child, he must maintain a relationship with a non-incarcerated adult who can facilitate contact with the child. Oftentimes this is the child's mother. When fathers are incarcerated, children usually remain in the care of their mother (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). The work that has examined co-parenting relationships has been focused on incarcerated mothers. For example, using qualitative interviews with incarcerated mothers and grandmother caregivers, Strozier and colleagues (2011) examined the complex coparenting alliances between incarcerated mothers and children's grandmothers. Although many of their participants showed solidarity in their alliance, many coparenting relationships were fraught with conflict and other problems, including worries about drug relapse and re-incarceration.

### **Parenting after incarceration**

People who have been incarcerated face a number of barriers to successfully reintegrating into society and into their role as parent. Rates of recidivism and re-arrest are high. Returning citizens may find it difficult to secure adequate housing and employment. Massoglia, Firebough, and Watner (2013) examined housing changes following incarceration and found that there is often a decline in neighborhood quality following release from jail or prison. Although most incarcerated parents state that reuniting with their children is a top priority following their release, reunification can be difficult and challenging (Brown & Bloom, 2009). Even when parents reunify with their children, household roles sometimes need to be renegotiated and an acting caregiver may be the more central parental figure. Family conflict following a parent's incarceration may impact child and family well-being. For instance, Aaron and Dallaire (2010) found that higher levels of familial conflict following a parent's release from custody was associated with juvenile delinquency. Fathers also struggle to find and maintain employment and resources. Among men, recent incarceration reduced the likelihood of owning a bank account and vehicle (Turney & Schneider, 2016).

### **Promising interventions for incarcerated fathers**

To address many of the concerns associated with paternal incarceration, the federal government authorized in 2007 and reauthorized in 2017 the Second Chance Act (SCA) Grant Program. The SCA supports state, local, and tribal governments and nonprofit organizations in their work to reduce recidivism and improve outcomes for people returning from state and federal prisons, local jails, and juvenile facilities. The SCA has allowed for more programming options for both incarcerated fathers and fathers reentering their communities.

The Second Chance Grant Act funding has led to development of training programs on parenting in prisons and jails (Burriss & Miller, 2017). In a survey of key personnel from state correctional departments, Pollock (2003) reported that 38 of the reporting states had some form of parenting classes for incarcerated parents. Hughes and Harrison-Thompson (2002) gathered information directly from 315 participating state prisons and learned that approximately half of the institutions offered parenting programs. While these data indicate that programming designed to provide





parenting skills training is available in correctional settings, the numbers may overestimate the percentage of participants in those programs. Glaze and Maruschak's (2008) survey of incarcerated parents revealed that only approximately 12 percent of the parents in state prison participated in parenting or child rearing classes during incarceration, including approximately 22 to 30 percent of the mothers and 9 to 12 percent of the fathers.

To date, there have been a handful of literature reviews on this topic (see Dallaire & Shlafer, 2017; Eddy & Burraston, 2017; Dallaire, Loper, & Novero, in press) and

a single published meta-analytic review assessing the effectiveness of parent education programs for incarcerated populations. The meta-analysis by Armstrong and colleagues (2017) of 16 empirical investigations indicated a positive impact of programming across different types of correctional settings (e.g., jails and prisons), despite the use of different program curricula. Specifically, Armstrong et al. (2017) concluded that there was a small to moderate effect on parent knowledge and improved quality of parent-child relations over comparison groups.

More empirical investigations that include pre/post designs and random assignment need to be done, particularly for programs designed for fathers. [Table 1](#) includes references to 16 empirical studies assessing the impact of a parenting program for fathers. In general, results of these studies are consistent with meta-analytic results, such that the programs tend to have positive impacts on parenting knowledge and skills and more modest impacts on behavioral and child outcomes.

Parenting programs for incarcerated fathers differ from community-based parent education courses in important ways (see Dallaire et al., in press). First, because children are generally not included in the program and the father has very limited opportunity for contact with the child, the typical skills covered in community-based parenting interventions may not be immediately applicable. Learning how to handle tantrums and other misbehaviors may have a limited shelf life for the incarcerated father who has no opportunity for practice. Likewise, there are unique skills addressed in parenting programs for incarcerated fathers that are largely irrelevant in parenting programs for the non-incarcerated. Topics such as instruction in specific communication avenues during incarceration (letter writing, phone calls, and personal visits), strategies for better collaboration with at-home caregivers, awareness of legal rights concerning children, and ways to deal with intense emotions regarding separation and incarceration would not ordinarily have a place in interventions outside of the carceral environment.

Below we have selected a few programs to highlight. InsideOut Dad<sup>®</sup> was selected because it was designed specifically for fathers. Parenting Inside Out was selected for review because it was the subject of a high-quality evaluation, and the Fathering Court was selected because it was designed to assist fathers during reentry.

[InsideOut Dad<sup>®</sup>](#) is an evidence-based fatherhood program designed specifically for incarcerated fathers covering twelve core topics such as the role of fathers, coparenting, emotion regulation, stress and anger management, discipline, and reentry. Using a quasi-experimental, mixed-method approach, Block and colleagues examined 307 fathers' gains in parenting knowledge and skills (2014). Pre- to post-tests comparisons showed increases in parenting self-efficacy, knowledge, attitudes, and contact with children among fathers who participated in the intervention



relative to those in the comparison group. Qualitative interviews with fathers in the intervention group indicated overall high levels of satisfaction with the program. When program participants were asked about potential program improvements, participants expressed interest in involving family members in the program, such as during the program's graduation.

[Parenting Inside Out](#) (PIO) is an evidence-based program for incarcerated parents, which covers topics such as communication, problem-solving, monitoring, and positive reinforcement. The results of a longitudinal randomized control trial of 359 incarcerated mothers and fathers and their families suggested that at one-year post release, intervention group participants were less likely to have been rearrested, report involvement in criminal behavior, and report substance abuse. Intervention group mothers and fathers, who had more total family contact, were both more likely to use positive reinforcement, and have less parental stress than those in the control group one year after release from prison. Data were collected from incarcerated parents, children, children's caregivers, children's teachers, and official records (Kjellstrand, et al., 2012).

In most states, child support obligations continue to accrue at pre-incarceration levels unless they are formally modified (National Conference for State Legislatures, 2016). [The Fathering Court Initiative](#) is a program designed to support recently incarcerated, noncustodial parents who are delinquent in child support payments (Lee, 2012). This program helps to adjust fathers' child support payments, assists with job training and placement, hosts family-focused events, and mandates program participation in coparenting communication classes. Although no program evaluation data are available, one participant said that Fathering Court "get[s] dads the support they need to be there for their children" (Lee, 2012, p. 59).

## FRPN Research Brief Summary

Our review of the literature suggests that community-level rates of prison admission and release deeply impact non-incarcerated community residents, and that parental incarceration is a multifaceted risk factor for children. We also found that incarcerated fathers encounter substantial challenges and stress related to the separation from their children; yet, fathers who maintain contact with children and family members during incarceration report improved adjustment following release. Furthermore, following release, formerly incarcerated fathers may face barriers to reintegration with their children and families due to difficulties with housing and employment. Our review of the literature on parenting programs for incarcerated fathers highlighted several promising interventions, including InsideOut Dad®, Parenting Inside Out (PIO), and the Fathering Court Initiative. In general, program evaluation studies suggest that parenting programs for incarcerated fathers tend to have a small to moderate positive effect on parenting knowledge and skills. Future empirical research on parenting programs for incarcerated fathers should incorporate rigorous research designs, including pre/post designs and random assignment.



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**Table 1. Empirical Evaluations of Parenting Programs for Incarcerated Fathers\***

Author	Participants and Program	Results
<i>I. Pre-Post Designs</i>		
1. Bushfield (2004)	23 fathers in 30-day daily parenting class	Improved attitudes (corporal punishment and child expectations).
2. Czuba et al. (2006)	76 fathers and 13 mothers in 10-session People Empowering People	Increase in self-assertive efficacy, sense of mastery, parenting satisfaction, and family problem-solving communication.
3. LaRosa & Rank (2001)	23 fathers in 5-session Real Life Parenting Skills Program	Improved attitudes (child expectations).
4. Maiorano & Furtis (2005)	74 males in 9–17 session Fit 2-B Fathers Program	Improved parenting attitudes (participants felt better about themselves, felt in control of their lives, better understood effective discipline practices, and were more likely to recognize play as an important way of learning for children and the importance of giving children choices); no difference in recidivism rates.
5. Palusci et al. (2008)	169 women and 324 men (jail) in adaptation of 10-session Nurturing Parent Program	Improved parenting attitudes (child expectations, empathy, corporal punishment, parent/child roles).
<i>II. Nonrandomized Comparison Group Designs</i>		
6. Block et al. (2014)	309 fathers in 12-session InsideOut Dad® program (control n = 104)	Relative to the comparison group, fathers who participated in programming were more likely to report calling their children more after participating and gains in parenting knowledge.
7. Barr et al. (2011)	20 fathers in 10-session Just Beginning Program	Scores increased across five of the six subscales looking at emotion engaging, parental involvement, following the lead, joint attention, child involvement, and turn taking.
8. Robbers (2005)*	56 fathers in 10-session parenting education program (control n = 31)	Increased contact, improved parenting knowledge and attitudes (select items); no change in relationship with caregiver.
9. Skarupski et al. (2003)*	84 fathers in 12-session Long Distance Dads (control n = 60); 37 caregiver reports	No change in knowledge, skills, or attitudes; increased child contact (findings not corroborated by caregivers).
10. Lindquist et al. (2016)	4 couples-based programs for fathers across 4 states (IN, NY, NJ, OH)	Indiana intervention had sustained effects on partnership/parenting relationships but results in the three other programs (NY, OH, NJ) in parenting/coparenting and intimate relationship measures were not significant compared to control groups.
11. Wilczak & Markstrom (1999)	21 fathers in 8-session adaptation of STEP (control n = 21)	Increased knowledge, internal locus of control, and parent satisfaction.

Author	Participants and Program	Results
<i>III. Randomized Comparison Group Designs</i>		
12. Bayse et al. (1991)	27 fathers in 4-session How to Keep Your Family Alive While Serving a Prison Sentence (control n = 27)	Reduced narcissism and improved attitudes toward present and ideal family functioning; no change in adaptability.
13. Eddy et al. (2013); Burraston et al., 2017	359 parents in 36-session Parenting Inside Out (PIO) (control n = 177)	Self-reported significantly less stress and lower levels of depressed mood than the control group; reported more positive interaction with their children. 41.4% fewer arrests following release than those participants in the control condition.
14. Harrison (1997)	15 fathers and children in an 18-session parenting class (control n = 15)	Improved parenting attitudes; no change in inmate or child self-esteem.
15. Landreth & Lobaugh (1998)	16 fathers in 10-session filial therapy training class and 16 children (control n = 16)	Improved parenting attitudes; decreased parenting stress; improved self-concept among children.

*\*Note: Articles marked with an asterisks are not published in peer reviewed formats*

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