Peace Polls as a Source of Inspiration for Homelessness Research

Jan Váně[1] and František Kalvas

Department of Sociology, University of West Bohemia, Czech Republic

Introduction

In the present study, we aim to acquaint the public with the results of the research on those experiencing homelessness in the city of Pilsen, which is the fourth largest city in the Czech Republic. The significance of our contribution is in the application of the methodological approach of the so-called Peace Polls used to address the issue of homelessness. This research note introduces the environment and situation in which the research was conducted. We also describe in great detail our research design, work progress, and findings.

A number of studies focusing on homelessness have been carried out in the Czech Republic over the last decade. Almost all of them concentrate on one specific city, comparing two at most. In principle, these studies are primarily focused on the largest cities in the Czech Republic, such as Prague, Brno, Ostrava, and Pilsen (cf. e.g. Vágnerová et al., 2018; Váně and Kalvas, 2021; Vašát, 2021), all of which have areas of homeless encampments. The most extensive quantitative research in the Czech Republic so far was carried out in 2019, conducted by Nešporová et al. (2019). It was a representative finding of the basic characteristics of the census categories for people experiencing homelessness, such as gender, age, place to sleep, and length of stay "without a roof" and without a home. The results of this survey show that there are 21 230 adults experiencing homelessness in the Czech Republic, as well as 2 600 homeless children, most of whom lived in shelters. This research did not factor in individuals accommodated in temporary commercial hostels and in residential facilities for refugees.

[1] Direct all correspondence to: Jan Váně (ORCID 0000-0002-5109-505X), Department of Sociology, Faculty of Philosophy and Arts, University of West Bohemia, Sedlackova 15, 306 14 Plzen, Czech Republic, email: vanejan@kss.zcu.cz.

The Czech Republic, with 10 million inhabitants, has approximately 21 000 people living on the streets. At first glance, this seems to be a rather small group, relative to the total population. However, sociological research estimates that 10% of the population live on the brink of income poverty. Additionally, throughout the nation, people experiencing homelessness represent the poorest relational class, which comprises *the vulnerable class and the 'in need' class*. Both social classes make up almost 40% of the Czech population. In principle, people experiencing homelessness are almost exclusively those working in unskilled jobs, such as factory workers or sales people. Education and the conditions under which this education takes place have the strongest influence on (un)successful life trajectories and the chances of maintaining/losing housing. Homelessness in the Czech Republic is principally associated with low levels of education (Prokop, 2019; Váně and Kalvas, 2021; Vašát, 2021).

In addition to this brief outline of the situation from which homelessness arises in the Czech Republic and the size of the homeless population, the fact that the Czech Republic has long been associated with the highest level of homelessness results in a stigma among European countries, which plays a key role in efforts to address their situation. For example, while in the Czech Republic almost 36% of respondents think that it is best not to help the homeless at all, in other European nations, this opinion is shared by only approximately 20% of the adult population (Vávra, 2013). These attitudes then influence both official proceedings and everyday interactions between those experiencing homelessness and the majority of society (Vašát, 2020). A clear example of this influence was the declaration of a state of emergency on 12 March 2020 in response to the spread of Covid-19 and the need to address the pandemic through Constitutional Act No. 110/1998 Coll. on the Security of the Czech Republic. The announcement set a number of restrictions, such as a ban on free movement and restrictions in public places, which directly affected all citizens, including those experiencing homelessness. In response to the declaration of a state of emergency, some Czech cities decided to set up temporary camps for their homeless populations. Despite the widespread stigma, the experiences throughout the camps varied, with different results in different cities. In the city of Pilsen, however, it was true that the implementation of the tent city only strengthened the public's negative reactions. Overall, there was an escalation of tension between city officials and the NGOs dealing with homelessness.

Researching Homelessness: Peace Polls

In this strained climate, the City of Pilsen decided to turn to the Department of Sociology (University of West Bohemia) in Pilsen, or more specifically, to the authors of this research note, to prepare a project that would improve the situation. Previous research on homelessness in the Czech Republic used some qualitative (ethnography, interviews) or quantitative approaches (questionnaire—census, quota collection, etc.), but overlooked the important perspective of the public. The surveys were either focused on policy makers or those experiencing homelessness, and there was a lack of knowledge and support concerning public attitudes. Politicians do not typically want to make radical, if any, decisions when it comes to tackling the problems associated with homelessness, mostly with reference to the negative public attitudes towards those experiencing homelessness. Therefore, in preparation for our project, which resulted not only in hard data and findings, but also in the design of a solution concept, we were inspired by the research and conflict resolution that was presented and developed by Irwin (2012; 2020). Given the limits of the text, we will summarise the ideological basis of Peace polls, including: "(1) all parties to a conflict should draft and agree to all the questions, (2) all the communities and peoples to the conflict should be asked all the questions, and (3) all the results should be made public" (Irwin, 2020, p.4).

Peace polls is a useful tool for communication and the search for consensus between groups that do not otherwise communicate with each other, and therefore do not have a chance to find a consensus. Peace polls represent a comprehensive system that consists of a combination of public opinion research and public/mass communication. Opinion polls look at the problem in groups that do not communicate with each other, and who therefore have no chance of reaching a consensual solution. This research focuses both on the perception of the problem itself and on the preference for its solution by each of the affected groups, which is to participate in the process of finding a consensus. Furthermore, the research can be focused on the conditions in which individual groups live, and what difficulties the problem causes them.

However, research alone is not enough. The next necessary step is to publish it, so that all of the groups concerned may learn about the views, conditions, difficulties, and preferred solutions of all of the other groups. The method of publication must be subject to the nature of the problem and the groups concerned, e.g. the problem approached by Peace polls in our text – solving the problems of those experiencing homelessness – cannot just be published in the press and on the internet; these are tools that are sufficient for just two sides of the problem: the public and the

policy-makers. For those experiencing homelessness, we chose a public exhibition in the open air, near places where people experiencing homelessness often meet and congregate in the centre of Pilsen.

If the Peace polls do not identify an appropriate degree of agreement after the first iteration, it is advisable to repeat them. The next iterations therefore show how the opinions of the affected groups develop, depending on the published/communicated opinions of the other groups from the previous iterations. Peace polls therefore become a communication platform; a bridge that connects otherwise disconnected groups. The whole process of Peace polls ends at the point where the groups concerned agree, to a sufficient extent, on solutions to their common problem.

We framed the situation in the city of Pilsen utilising Irwin's Peace polls as reference to an ideological Belfast. There are irreconcilable opponents to offering any help to those experiencing homelessness, who are perceived and interpreted as 'spongers'. Conversely, there are those who approach the issue of homelessness with a strong messianic undertone, blaming the situation on the city representatives (structural impacts), calling for help to be offered without any conditions with reference to humanity and humanitarianism. We therefore established the following objectives:

(a) Address the attitudes of the general public, because without the public and in spite of it, the situation will not be possible;

(b) Address the attitudes of those experiencing homelessness as they are directly affected; and

(c) Address the attitudes of policy makers[2], because without them it will be impossible to improve the situation in the city.

The aim of the study was to find intersections between the groups concerned, establishing points of contact that would be acceptable for all the actors in some form, and would make it possible to change the homeless populations' situations so that all parties to the conflict were willing to participate in the agreement. In other words, we were looking for elements of (possible) co-existence, which all parties agree on, provided that there is an equal right to comment on the situation and the proposed solutions. The aim was to establish a dialogue between the parties in an environment of a stalemated, highly strained situation. We asked ourselves the following questions, which framed the research preparation process:

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[2]   This group includes both NGO staff and politicians, whose agendas include those experiencing homelessness in the city (representatives of the municipality—social policy department, safety department, housing department), mayors, and their authorised employees in individual districts of the city of Pilsen. Pilsen has 10 departments and a total of 170 000 inhabitants. The estimated number of people living on the street oscillates between 300-500 people (Váně and Kalvas, 2021).

(a) Under what conditions would the majority of society be willing to reconsider, at least in part, its attitudes, and allow the situation of those experiencing homelessness to improve?

(b) Under what conditions are those experiencing homelessness willing to reconsider, at least in part, their attitudes and participate in the rules conformed to by the majority society?

Research Field, Methodology, and Results

Based on the preceding ideological parameters, we prepared the following research design, which took place from November 2020 to September 2021. In the first phase of the research (November 2020–April 2021), we conducted in-depth interviews with people experiencing homelessness, social workers for non-profit organisations, municipal staff, politicians, and police officials. In addition, there was a meta-analysis of documents—the current concepts of the city—and previously processed research. We conducted a total of 29 in-depth interviews with policy makers (politicians, experts—a total of 1 665 min). Furthermore, we conducted 15 interviews (635 min) with people living on the streets. This was followed by data analysis, for which we used thematic analysis. A total of 219 primary codes from 2 846 coded segments were analysed. The topics that appeared in the interviews were as follows: education, competences, time on the street (or hostel), life trajectories, feelings, current situations, public access to people experiencing homelessness (and for the homeless, on the contrary, their relationship to the public), the role of the police, requirements, needs, solutions proposed by those experiencing homelessness, and obstacles. The most fundamental problems from the perspectives of the interviewees include: who should deal with the problem of homelessness in the city, detecting existing sources of help, the locations/places where homelessness occurs and the most popular places where those experiencing homelessness gather, reciprocal behavioural expectations (which applies to both the public/homeless populations), possible problems/silent assumptions, and experiences in the tent city during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In keeping with the principles of Peace polls, the knowledge we acquired was continuously published and presented to the public. We subsequently created three focus groups (FG). The selection criterion for the FG was to create one composed of opponents to helping the homeless, and one composed of people with an ambivalent or more positive approach to addressing homelessness. The findings of the in-depth interviews and the FG subsequently served as the basis for the

preparation of the survey. The most important aspect of the research was finding solutions. There were a little over 50 proposed solutions, and we will present several examples to illustrate the situation.

Those experiencing homelessness suggested the possibility of occupying unrepaired houses, participating in repairs, having a contract with the city, moving to a smaller city, setting up hostels in the city, increasing social housing, legalising the drug market, offering support through municipal jobs, and providing container housing that they could take care of and stay in.

Politicians mostly proposed, for example, a law banning residence after three offences, banning alcoholic drinks in public, introducing a law on home rights, increasing the capacity of social services, introducing a so-called wet house (an asylum for working with people on the streets who are dependent on alcohol), increasing non-governmental organisations due to mutual competition, increasing the city budget in favour of social services, introducing container houses and social hospitals, securing work (cleaning work), expanding shelters, controlling employment agencies, strengthening the city police (so-called "beat cops"), and taking a more proactive approach to the enforcement of public peace.

Experts, primarily social workers, proposed creating shelters with a low-threshold in combination with a day centre and site selection for a day centre, creating a women's shelter and day centre, creating a soup kitchen using surplus food, establishing a wet house, actively implementing the Housing First concept, educating the general population to improve their understanding of the role of public space, ensuring hygiene is maintained in public spaces, controlling hostels, changing the framing of the problem (it is not a security matter, but a social issue), increasing the number of shelters/hostels, supporting the construction of social housing, increasing the amount of warm places for people without homes, providing street medicine, and forgiving part of the homeless populations'debt effectively motivating efforts to actively reintegrate into mainstream society.

Based on continuous feedback from the homeless and public populations regarding the ongoing publication and presentation of our findings, and specifically based on the results of the public FG, we included in the questionnaire and survey nine solutions. As these solutions were based on the qualitative portion of the research, it seems likely that there was at least a degree of approval from respondents. These were the solutions:

> SOLUTION 1: Low-threshold day centre—a place where people experiencing homelessness could go during the day, heat their food, sit, wash, or have a shower. The location would have a small library, but social workers would also be present and able to work with the homeless.

SOLUTION 2: Soup kitchen— people experiencing homelessness could go to a mobile kitchen for one hot meal a day, every day, and meals would be available during the winter (October 30th – March 30th).

SOLUTION 3: Shelter/overnight hostel—the city would set up and provide more shelters and hostels, where people experiencing homelessness could sleep for CZK 50 (approximately €2) per night.

SOLUTION 4: Wet House—an asylum house with intensive social therapeutic work leading to a reduction in alcohol consumption and a return to society and the labour market.

SOLUTION 5: Social housing—the city would significantly increase the number of flats intended for people experiencing homelessness or those at risk of losing their homes. They would pay the rent, be in regular contact with social workers, and maintain good relations with their neighbours.

SOLUTION 6: Container house—the city would provide people experiencing homelessness with container housing, which they would have to take care of, maintain, and repair.

SOLUTION 7: Free showers—the city would set up several free public showers where people experiencing homelessness could wash at any time, without having to report in advance and make an appointment.

SOLUTION 8: Low-threshold day centre for women—a place where women experiencing homelessness could go during the day, heat their food, sit to keep warm in the winter, wash or have a shower, etc.

SOLUTION 9: Alcohol-free zones—a space in a city where no one is allowed to drink any alcohol.

The survey consisted of two parts: a survey of both people experiencing homelessness and the public. We interviewed people experiencing homelessness in front of the food and clothing bank on Cukrovarská Street in Pilsen, on Wednesday June 2nd and Wednesday June 9th, 2021, the days when food and clothing are given to individuals in need. We chose this strategy to interact with those that depend on the help of institutions to support their diet and nutrition. Above all, their opinion on potential solutions was of interest to both us and the research sponsors. Another assumption was that those who rely on food aid live mainly on the streets and lack housing. This assumption was proven correct, as the results showed that 87.3% of the respondents lived on the streets. Only 12.7% declared in our survey that they live somewhere, even in uncertain conditions (in a hostel, with friends, etc.). We contacted all the individuals who came for food or clothes and offered them 100 CZK (approximately €4) for an interview and a reward. On both days, we contacted a total of 325 people, 43 rejected

us and 282 people were interviewed. We asked the sample of 282 about their demo-graphic, street time, livelihood, work experience and interest in specific jobs, their physical and mental health, their experiences and relationships to drugs and alcohol, their relationships, and, above all, their views and interests in possible solutions to their situation and ways of helping from the public.

The public sample consisted of two parts: a representative sample of Pilsen citizens aged 18–65 years, constructed using an online panel (313 respondents), and face-to-face (F2F) interviews using four quota samples. These four quota samples were collected in the four largest districts of Pilsen and constructed using bound age and gender quotas. Respondents were interviewed personally with the help of trained interviewers (F2F) and are representative of each district, aged 18–80 (441 respondents). Public participation was not financially remunerated in any way. The two parts were finally combined and weighted into a single sample. Based on the district of their residence, age, and gender, each individual was assigned a weight. The total sample was representative of the inhabitants of Pilsen (resp. Municipal Districts 1–4) aged 18–80. In addition to residence and other demographic data, all respondents were asked about the type of housing they live in, their household financial situation, willingness to contribute to people experiencing homelessness, contact and experience with people experiencing homelessness, conditions of support for individual solutions to problems people experiencing homelessness face, preferences for these solutions, and finally, whether they are inclined to solve the obstacles that people experiencing homelessness face and thereby save, or deal with, the problem and allocate resources towards it.
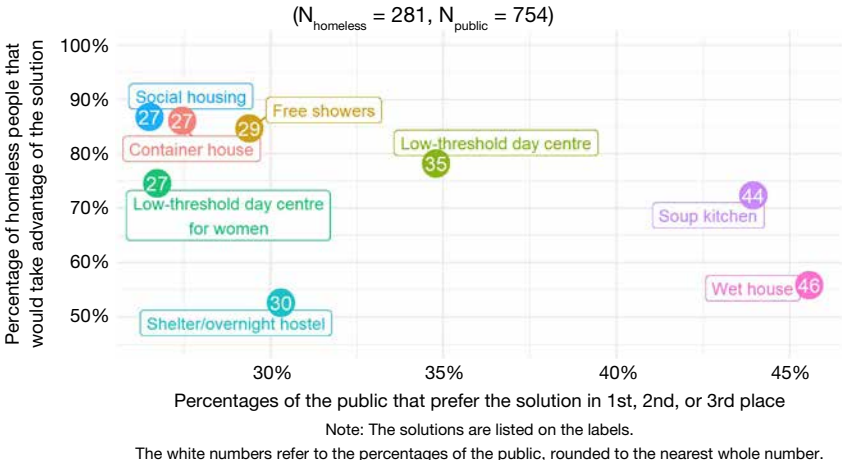
The online aspect of the study was carried out by Nielsen adMosphere from June 15th to July 1st, 2021, using its own online panel of respondents to recruit even more respondents that were randomly selected so the resulting sample would be repre-sentative of the inhabitants of the city of Pilsen, aged 18–65 years. Other questions included in the questionnaire established whether the respondent lived in one of the four largest districts where solutions would be implemented, or whether they often travel around at least one of these districts. If the person did not move or stay in the perimeter often, they were excluded from the sample. In total, 313 people were sampled from the online panel.

Personal interviews were conducted by our trained interviewers, mostly students from the Department of Sociology at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen. The surveys took place from Tuesday, June 29th, to Thursday, July 1st, 2021 in the four largest districts of Pilsen. Interviewers contacted people on the street, moving smoothly through the districts to avoid possible spatial distortions. When selecting people, the interviewers adhered to the bound quotas according to age and sex, determined according to the population data from each district as of December

31ˢᵗ, 2020, so that at least 100 respondents were selected from each area. The resulting sample was representative of the relevant districts by age and sex for people aged 18-80. A total of 108, 109, 120, and 104 interviews were conducted in Municipal Districts No. 1–4. However, the interviews were not conducted exclusively with the inhabitants of the relevant city districts, but also with those who often move around the districts. The number of such interviewed inhabitants of individual Municipal Districts No. 1–4 was therefore 121, 111, 106, and 73; the population surveyed in this way from other districts (No. 5-10)[3] was 30. This aspect of the public survey thereby ensured sufficient and representative views of the relevant 441 respondents—people staying or often moving through districts where solutions to homelessness would be implemented.

The results and findings are represented in over 116 graphs, formed and based on the variables created during the questionnaire surveys. We will present our most important findings concerning the intersections and agreements in preferences for anticipated solutions on the part of the public and people experiencing homelessness.

Figure 1. Solutions for homeless people, according to the percentages of the public that prefer the solution in 1st, 2nd, or 3rd place, and the percentage of homeless people that would take advantage of the solution

$(N_{homeless} = 281, N_{public} = 754)$

Note: The solutions are listed on the labels.
The white numbers refer to the percentages of the public, rounded to the nearest whole number.

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[3] Pilsen has 10 Municipal Districts.

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Respondents were asked about nine solutions, but in the last part of the battery, they were asked to determine which three solutions they preferred. As the public chose three solutions out of nine potential solutions (see their presentation above), the average solution support was about 33%. The ninth solution, 'an alcohol-free zone', is not shown in the graph.

From our perspective, we consider it most important that the 'wet house' and the soup kitchen have the highest public support, with more than half of the people experiencing homelessness declaring that they would use these solutions ('wet house' 55.9% and soup kitchen 72.4%). This finding is very significant. Sufficient public support meets here with sufficient interest from people experiencing homelessness. The fact that people experiencing homelessness show relatively little interest in these two solutions, which are a priority for the public, does not change anything—although it has almost the least interest, there is still enough interest among people experiencing homelessness, and it is suitably complemented by public support. We can say that Peace polls here find a point of agreement and a peaceful solution that one party sufficiently supports and the other party will make sufficient use of.

Another point of agreement concerns shelters/overnight hostels. Respondents experiencing homelessness indicated that shelters/overnight hostels were the solution they wanted to use the least, and the public offered the solution low levels of support. Both parties agree that they do not want shelters/overnight hostels, although we must not lose sight of the fact that it was still one of the nine profiled solutions taken from more than 50 proposals during the qualitative part of the research.

Furthermore, in the graph, we notice the trend of indirect proportionality: the higher the interest among people experiencing homelessness concerning the solution, the less public support it has; the higher the public support, the less interest there is among people experiencing homelessness. An exception to the trend is the shelter/overnight hostel option, which has low interest and low support. Social housing, container houses, and free public showers are solutions that would be used by approximately 85% of people experiencing homelessness, but only 27% or 29% of the public support them. Day centres (both general and for women-only) would be used by approximately 75% of the people for whom they are intended, but public support is average (35% for general) to below average (27% for women). We have already mentioned solutions with high public support and relatively little (but absolutely enough) interest from people experiencing homelessness. No systematic influence can be observed behind the trend of indirect proportionality between the interest in the solution and its support. We find both ends of this trend organisationally challenging, time-consuming, and financially demanding solutions (social housing [homeless: 86.8% / public: 26.5%]

versus 'wet houses' [homeless: 55.9% / public: 45.6%]), but also cheaper and less demanding solutions (showers [homeless: 84.7% / public: 29.4%] versus soup kitchens [homeless: 72.4% / public: 43.9%]).

The results and findings were repeatedly presented to the public and the groups concerned. As a supporting argument, we enclosed Graph No. 2 (see below), which shows that the public is very sensitive in its support of solutions. The financial side is only secondary, although still important. Public support is very much dependent on whether the solution really helps homeless people, whether the homeless will really use it, and whether the solution disturbs the order in which it is implemented (the average value on a scale of 0-10 was very close to the maximum).

Figure 2. The importance of the selected criteria for supporting the selected solutions

$(N_{public} = 754)$
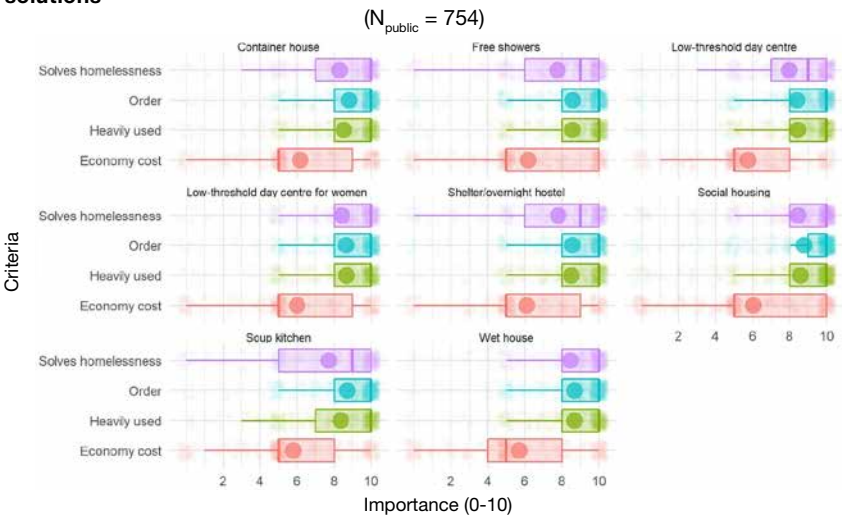
Note: Large dark circles represent averages, the boxes show distribution, and small, light circles show individual observations

Conclusion

In addition to presenting the results to the public, which includes publication in the media, the research also included an educational exhibition focused on addressing public knowledge and prejudices against people experiencing homelessness. While conducting research, photo documentation was created, which was transformed into a large exhibition in a well-exposed location in the city centre.[4] Its aim was not only to visually represent fellow citizens who are experiencing homelessness, but also to redirect the exhibition visitors to a specially created website via QR codes on the panels. Through the website, they could become acquainted with more detailed information on homelessness, including key research results in the form of interactive graphs. The idea behind the exhibition was to present the three basic forms of homelessness (progression, regression, and cyclicality) and the causes of these processes. We believe that the approach we present here can inspire other researchers around the world, and that Peace polls achieve far more than simply public support. In our opinion, its significance lies in the following: Peace polls first appeared during the resolution of the tense situation in Northern Ireland in the 1990s. All of the cases so far have one thing in common – it is a conflict between two very strong groups that do not communicate with each other. However, we present here an application to the problem of people experiencing homelessness, where the public and policy-makers are undoubtedly a much stronger group than the people experiencing homelessness. Therefore, our text can be seen as an attempt to apply the proven method of Peace polls to the area of problems between groups whose power is very asymmetrically distributed. We show how it could be possible to apply Peace polls to problems where some of the groups concerned are forgotten, and either do not get a vote, or their voice is not heard.

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[4]   Homelessness in Pilsen – What do we see? What do we want to see? (bezdomovectvi.cz). The authors of the exhibition are Jan Váně, Nikol Kubátová, Jakub Václavů, and Petr Vašát. The title of the exhibition was "Homelessness. What do we see? What do we want to see?" and the exhibition space was in Šafaříkovy sady in the City of Pilsen, from 29.9 – 5.11.2021.

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