

# How Youth Are Put At Risk by Parents' Low-Wage Jobs

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## Executive Summary

# How Youth Are Put At Risk by Parents' Low-Wage Jobs

It has been well documented that growing up poor is deeply harmful to children and youth. While some countries use social programs to reduce child poverty, US government policy has increasingly focused on employment of low-income parents as a key route to reduce the nation's high rate of family poverty. In particular, government programs have focused on jobs for single mothers whose children experience the worst economic hardships of all. Yet jobs as the solution to young people's poverty depend on the kind of work available to their parents. With the 30-year decline in higher-paying manufacturing jobs and, simultaneously, significant growth in low-wage service employment, many jobs do not provide the wages or flexibility that any parent needs to raise a family in safety and stability. *In fact, there is evidence that low-wage jobs can cause harm to young people's health, education, and overall development.*

Today, there are 16 million families headed by working parents in jobs that pay low wages. These workers are cashiers, nurses' aides, janitors, salespeople, food servers, and elder care attendants, and, along with other low-wage workers, they struggle to protect and care for their families. Further, low-wage work is projected to account for *two of every three new jobs in the United States over the next decade*. Beyond the low pay, many of these jobs are also considered "low quality," with few if any job benefits, unreliable schedules, and little flexibility that would allow parents to tend to their children's needs. Additionally, most of these jobs do not offer career ladders that might build family stability and result in future opportunity for children. The recent recession has put increased pressure on parents to keep or take this type of job, even though they sometimes create untenable conflicts with family needs.

Researchers only recently have started to examine poverty dynamics in working families, primarily focusing on the impacts of low-wage work on young children — clearly the most vulnerable of all. Yet without a doubt, adolescents also need resources, stability, and parental attention to support their wellbeing, do well in school, be safe, and move on to pursue healthy lives. In fact, today there is ample evidence that low-income youth are facing disproportionate challenges to their overall wellbeing.

They are seven times more likely to drop out of school than are higher income youth, are more likely to be among the one in five American teens who are obese, and are far more likely to become parents in their teen years. It is vital that we address the effect of parents' low-wage, low-quality work on the future of millions of the nation's young people.

In this report, we present a first-ever overview of what is known about the relationship between the status of youth and their parents' low-wage jobs. Of the 20 million adolescents with working parents, 3.6 million (one out of every six) are in low-income families where parents have low-wage jobs. We identify several ways that young people are harmed by their parents' low-wage, low-quality jobs that point to the urgency of this issue. This report examines the following key findings.

### ***Parents' low-wage jobs:***

- Many low-wage parents' earnings are so low they cannot cover the basics, and certainly cannot pay for after-school or other programs that protect and promote the development of children and adolescents.
- Low-wage jobs often have inflexible schedules that conflict with or disrupt family time. Parents are thus denied the critical time to monitor and encourage their children and adolescents.

### ***Effects on young people:***

- Youth in low-wage families are more likely to drop out of school.
- Low-income youth have a greater likelihood of experiencing health problems, including obesity, and they are more likely to bear children at a young age.
- Youth in hard-pressed low-wage families who have younger siblings are likely to grow up very fast and take on adult roles thus diverting time and attention from their schooling, extracurricular activities, and personal development.

We identify three core approaches to addressing the important link between youth development and parents' low-wage work. First, focusing on policy-makers and advocates, this report points out that parents' work and young people's lives are profoundly linked. Leaders in research, public policy, and advocacy for low-income workers and those who

promote investment in youth development *should seek opportunities to collaborate*, and thus increase their effectiveness. Second, we identify specific, *current policy initiatives* that could improve outcomes for children and youth, including current efforts to promote parental job benefits and sick leave; efforts to allow more flexibility for all working parents; and efforts to increase hourly wages. In terms of youth policy, there is a critical need for programs and resources for low-income youth including after-school programs, summer programs, mentoring initiatives and other opportunities that ensure that young people get adult attention that supports their academic progress and health, and also protects

them from growing up too fast. Finally, we point to specific groups of low-wage youth and families who face higher risks and who need focused attention and opportunities.

For decades, the U.S. policy solution to lowering family poverty has been to promote parental — particularly maternal — employment. Yet, as it stands, the fastest-growing jobs do not fulfill the promise of work as the way out of harmful poverty because they do not provide working parents with the pay or flexibility necessary to protect and promote the nation's millions of young people.

# How Youth Are Put At Risk by Parents' Low-Wage Jobs

## Overview

There is a great deal of research documenting the complex and long-lasting harm that children and youth experience when they grow up in conditions of economic scarcity. Yet researchers only recently have started to examine poverty *dynamics in working families*. In fact, for decades employment was posed as the solution to the harms of poverty in America. Employment-promotion has been highly successful in that today more mothers are employed than ever before, including low-wage mothers. But the success of jobs as the solution to economic hardship for families depends on the kinds of work available.

Today, one out of four workers is in a low-wage job, and there are 16 million families headed by low-wage working parents. These workers are cashiers, nurses' aides, janitors, salespeople, food servers, and elder care attendants and, along with other low-wage workers, they struggle to protect and care for their families. Low-wage work is projected to account for *two of every three new jobs in the United States over the next decade*. Beyond the low pay, many of these jobs are also considered "low quality," with few if any job benefits, unreliable schedules, and little flexibility that would allow parents to tend to children's needs. Additionally, most of these jobs do not offer career ladders to build family stability and future opportunity for children. The recession has put increased pressure on parents to keep or take these types of jobs, even though they can create untenable conflicts with their family needs.

Given the percentage of workers holding low-wage jobs, it is not surprising that a large proportion of U.S. children are low-income. In 2012, the National Center for Children in Poverty reported that 44 percent of all children live in families that are poor or low-income. In response, social scientists and public policy makers have begun to pay attention to interactive relationship between low-wage work and children's well-being. Foremost, there has been considerable research and policy discourse about how parents' low-pay/low-quality work affects *young* children, recognized as the most vulnerable family members. Yet there is ample evidence that adolescents too need economic stability

and parental attention to develop their strengths and interests, do well in school, be safe, and move on to pursue satisfying and economically stable work. We know very little about how youth are affected by their parents' employment in low-wage jobs. It is vital that we address the effect of parents' low-wage, low-quality work on the future of millions of the nation's young people. This paper summarizes key attributes of low-wage work that affect family life as well as existing knowledge about the disproportionate challenges facing low-income youth. The crux of this report is the intersection between parents' low-wage work and young people's development. We point out that these two pivotal aspects of family life are deeply linked and constantly interactive. Creative new lines of research and advocacy that directly connect these key elements of family life promise more coherent and effective programs for low-income youth and responsive policy for their working parents. We call for research, advocacy, and policy efforts that address the link between parents' work and young people's futures.

## Introduction

Policy, advocacy, and research foci about the well-being of low-income youth are rarely linked to policy discussions, advocacy, or research on parental employment in low-wage jobs. Traditional research on adolescents has focused on school achievement, early childbearing, risky behaviors, and pathways to employment. But, beyond noting youth socioeconomic status and pointing to the need for parental engagement and supervision, there has been very little attention paid to the interaction between youth status and the nature of parents' employment.

Over the last two decades a growing body of social science research has investigated young children's well-being with the increase and permanency of women's employment. Initially, this literature focused on dual-earning couples and the effects of maternal employment on the child development as well as on women's careers (e.g., Hochschild 1997; Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, and Crouter 2000; Smolensky and Gootman 2003). Recent research, particularly in the aftermath

of welfare reform, increased attention to employment dynamics in poor single-mother families and the effects on children's well-being (Duncan, Huston, and Weisner 2006; Furstenberg et al. 1999; Kalil and Dunifon 2007). The most robust and systematic of these studies followed samples of families after they left welfare and entered the fast-expanding low-wage labor market (e.g., Gennetian and Miller 2002; Johnson et al. 2010; Yoshikawa, Weisner, and Lowe 2006). The findings reveal both negative and positive effects among children and youth when parents entered the labor market—the outstanding goal of welfare reform (Quane, Rankin, and Joshi 2009; Chase-Lansdale et al. 2003). Most of these studies, however, focused on younger children with a small number of post-welfare studies suggesting that low-wage employment of mothers may have some negative outcomes for teens (Gennetian and Miller 2002; Johnson et al. 2010).

In this report we outline major characteristics of contemporary, low-wage parental employment as a critical context for youth development and well-being. We start by describing the scope of the issue and draw out the elements of low-wage work known to affect parenting. We then turn to the status of low-income youth and explore the interaction between parental employment and well-being of young people, with a particular focus on youth schooling, health, and early *adultification* through family care work or employment that young people do to fill in for adults (Burton 2007; Dodson and Dickert 2004). Here we also integrate some early research into how parents, youth, and young children try to cope and attempt to meet mainstream expectations. In this vein we draw out family strengths as well as hardships, emphasizing “positive youth development” as well as the disproportionate challenges (Damon 2004). The paper closes with a focus on areas in need of additional study and understanding, emphasizing the necessity of policies and programs to integrate the deep connections between parents, youth, and children that call for family rather than individual strategies.

The issues outlined in this paper are taking place within the larger landscape of growing national

inequality that is shaping conditions and constricting the opportunities of tens of millions of families in the United States. The well-documented disparities in health and education correlated with young people's socioeconomic status, like the persistence and growth of low-wage work, is part of this larger context of escalating economic inequality. Illuminating the connections between ever-more stratified earnings and the future of our young people calls for policy makers, children and youth advocates, labor supporters, and work/family advocates to link their efforts, redoubling support for lower-income families.

## Parenting and Low-Wage Work

**“It's your child or your job,  
and no one's gonna get that but you...”**

Young people are deeply affected by the quality of their relationship with their parents. Not surprisingly then, the contours of low-wage work, which dictate the ways in which parents spend a good portion of their days, have access to income, and can spend time with children are an important factor in the characteristics of these relationships.

In 2010, there were 41 million low-wage workers, accounting for over 28 percent of all workers. One-quarter of low-wage workers are parents and, of those, two out of every three are also low-income (i.e., with family income less than 200 percent of the federal poverty income threshold) (authors' calculations using the March 2011 Current Population Survey).<sup>1</sup> Relative to other countries, the United States has a very high share of workers in low-wage jobs (Schmitt 2012) and provides fewer employment-based and government protections for families with children (Gornick and Meyers 2003), leaving many families supported by low-wage parents with low levels of resources.

Almost one out of every five children (18 percent) ages 12-17 lives in a low-income family supported by a low-wage parent (authors' calculations). While a large share of these low-wage, low-income parents of adolescents are single mothers (36 percent), they are certainly not the only parents who find themselves increasingly in

<sup>1</sup> We define low-wage as earning an hourly wage that is less than 2/3rd the state median hourly wage.

this position. The share of single mothers and fathers as well as married mothers and fathers who earn low-wages and have low income has steadily increased over the last thirty years (Albelda and Carr 2012). Two trends help account for this increase: employment-promoting changes to welfare programs and falling or stagnating wages for those at the bottom of the labor market, especially among men. The scale of this issue promises to persist without improvements to jobs in the lower rungs of the occupational ladder. Yet such improvements will be difficult to achieve, given that it is predicted two of every three new jobs in the United States over the next decade will not require more than a high school diploma (Lockard and Wolf 2012).

Against the advent of an expanding low-wage workforce and the growing likelihood that a large share of adolescents will be raised by a low-wage parent or parents, we briefly identify and summarize key elements of parents' low-wage jobs that interact with family life and thus the development and well-being of young people. These elements include low levels of family income, a time squeeze created by employment, and the quality and stability of low-wage work. It is this combination of low income, time poverty, and poor job quality that makes juggling employment and family responsibilities particularly difficult for low-wage parents.

Of course, all parents make complex decisions about employment. They weigh the various benefits and costs of employment in light of the implications for their children. In addition to income earned, depending on the type of job held, there are several benefits often associated with employment, such as elevated self-esteem and economic independence. Workplaces can provide networks of support and interaction, just as some jobs are stimulating and physically- or mentally-rewarding. Performing one's job well provides a sense of accomplishment and dignity, and these effects may spillover into family life in positive ways. Employment, however, also means less time and energy for other things, including time with children, friends, and relatives. Furthermore, some jobs are stressful, some are mind-dulling, and some are even dangerous. All

parents face various tradeoffs when deciding whether, where, and how many hours to do paid work. But the choices available, and with them the consequences, differ by the gender, marital status, and income levels of parents (Williams 1990). Here, we primarily focus on the specific issues that parents in low-wage work face.

### ***Low earnings make it hard to provide for children and youth.***

Low-wage work provides employment income, but often it is not sufficient to stave off high levels of financial stress. Researchers consistently find that low-wage workers have difficulty paying their monthly bills, making needed home and car repairs, and paying for the things they feel would enrich their children's lives (e.g., Dodson, Manuel, and Bravo 2002; Osterman and Shulman 2011). Studies of women who left welfare for employment, even those that see incomes improve, point to a very substantial proportion of them experiencing a low-level of income and with that financial stress (e.g., Kalil and Dunifon 2007; Scott et al. 2004). Public benefits directed toward poor and near-poor families are intended to help improve family resources, but many low-wage workers do not benefit, in part, because eligibility for many of these programs phase out with relatively low levels of earnings and also because the program benefits can be difficult to get and retain when employed or are just not funded at sufficient levels to meet the demand for them (e.g., Albelda and Boushey 2007).

Monetary resources are important far beyond merely the ability to purchase basic needs. They are also necessary for parents to purchase children's safety and opportunity, out-of-school lessons and activities for young adolescents, and supplemental materials needed for school, after-school activities, books, athletic equipment, computer software, etc. (Carlson and Magnuson 2011). Moreover, economic security not only provides material well-being, but also reduces parental and child stress (Magnuson and Votruba-Drzal 2009). Financial stress is associated with depressive symptoms in mothers. Depression leads to

more difficulty in parenting (Gupta and Huston 2009; Jackson et al. 2000). In addition, low levels of income are associated with lower school achievement and attainment, higher rates of criminal behavior among boys, and higher levels of non-marital births compared with other children (Magnuson and Votruba-Drzal 2009).

***Low-wage parents face a time squeeze but have a hard time paying for substitutes for their time at work.***

For many parents, time spent at work crowds out time at home. Unlike higher-income parents, low-income employed parents find themselves less able to purchase their way out of their time squeeze through buying time substitutes like high quality out-of-school care or quick but healthy meals. Since the 1990s employment-promoting changes to welfare, low-income parents, especially mothers, have fewer opportunities to “opt-out” of employment altogether to take care of family needs, without very severe financial consequences. The inability to substitute money for time promotes several strategies among low-income employed parents, often with costly trade-offs:

- Low-income dual-earning couples are more likely to do “tag-team” parenting (i.e., work different shifts), which allows for more parental time with children, but places stress on a couple’s relationship (Presser 2004).
- Some low-income parents work long hours, but rely heavily on relatives to help take care of younger children, including pressing older children into this role (Gennetian et al. 2008; Laird et al. 1988; Williams and Boushey 2010).
- Parents leave young people to “self-care” that results in a lower likelihood of adolescents participating in structured activities (enrichment as well as employment) after school (Smolensky and Gootman 2003).
- Work less and reduce family income even further.

Some low-income mothers, trying to find ways to construct family time, creatively infuse parenting into other activities and even overlap work with family time “under the table” (Dodson, 2007). Parents who cannot

set aside or “craft” time specifically to nurture family relationships find themselves squeezing parenting into moments that are not optimal or while doing other tasks, and sometimes pass parenting to other family members (Tubbs, Roy, and Burton. 2005).

***Low-wage work conditions conspire to make it very hard for parents to juggle family needs and employment.***

All employed parents face the difficulties associated with juggling family and work responsibilities, but the characteristics of low-wage work make that task much harder. We identify three, sometimes overlapping, aspects of low-wage work that create particular burdens on low-wage parents as they seek to take care of children and youth. These job qualities are non-standard work hours, inflexible work times, and few employer-based benefits. While not all low-wage jobs have these qualities, unfortunately, many do. We know this, in part, because low-wage work is concentrated in particular industries in which employers require working nights or weekends and provide those workers with very little control over their time at work (Henly, Shaefer and Waxman 2006; McCrate forthcoming; Osterman 2006; Presser and Cox 1997). These same jobs are the least likely to provide employer benefits like paid time off for illness or vacation and employer-sponsored retirement plans or health insurance.

For those who have access to them, standard work hours and flexible work schedules facilitate managing work and family. These work attributes allow parents to work around children’s schedules and enable them to more easily attend to emergencies or perform routine yet vital tasks like children’s dental or doctor’s visits, without missing work. Yet low-wage workers are the least likely to enjoy either of these job attributes. One-third of all low-wage parents are in just 10 occupations (of 456 detailed occupations used by the Census Bureau), many notorious known for their non-standard and unpredictable hours. For example, one out of every five low-wage parent works in one of the following occupations: cashier, maid, cook, home health aide, and janitor (authors’

calculation using the CPS).

There are some advantages to non-standard work hours if they are intentionally chosen by parents in order to spend time with children at crucial times of the day (such as when they get home from school). But if parents do not choose such schedules, non-standard work hours make it exceptionally difficult to attend to a host of arrangement necessary for children, forcing parents to rely heavily on other family members (Henly and Lambert 2005; Perry Jenkins 2005; Presser 2004). Many low-wage occupations, including those listed above, not only require non-standard hours but are also part-time, temporary, or have variable hours even on a week-to-week basis (Henly and Lambert 2005). Especially in retail and some service industries, employers seek to schedule workers only at high volume times, which vary over the year.<sup>2</sup> Variable hours over which you have no control can play havoc with family budgets, but also with family time.

Employer benefits that make working and caring for family members easier, such as vacation time, paid sick days, paid family and medical leave, and health insurance are all much less available to low-wage workers (Ross Phillips 2005; Williams, Drago, and Miller 2011). In particular, paid time off for parents, especially low-wage parents, is an important family safety valve. Reflecting this, over the last decade numerous national women's and workers' research and advocacy groups (including the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), the National Partnership for Women and Families, the Center for American Progress (CAP), and Family Values at Work) have provided mounting evidence of the positive family impacts of paid time, including fewer visits to the emergency room and fewer sick children at school. The choices facing parents without paid time off are stark and stressful. On the one hand, there may be serious consequences for families when parents who

lack access to sick days or who can ill-afford to take extended family leave do not leave work for a host of health-related or other reasons (Williams 2010). On the other hand, parents who do take time off of work and receive no compensation face serious economic consequences. It means even less family income, but taking too many unpaid days in low-wage jobs leaves, as Joan Williams (2010) puts it, places many low-wage parents "one sick child away from being fired." In a similar vein, parents without health care coverage for themselves face physical and financial risks. Healthy adults are better parents, yet almost one-third of low-wage parents (32 percent) do not have any form of health insurance (authors' calculations).

Though less easy to measure and thus correlate with family outcomes, the quality of work also has an important impact on the quality of family life. Research examining relationships between work and depression indicate that the kinds of jobs to which low income parents are constrained are associated with higher rates of depression (Link, Lennon, and Dohrewend 1993). While all parents are affected by their work and some of that effect—positive and negative—will spill over into family life and parenting, the dramatic rise of low-wage and low-quality jobs filled by millions of parents suggests that low-wage jobs may represent an important and erosive effect on children and youth.

***Low-wage work creates more job instability and fewer opportunities for upward advancement for parents than for other workers.***

Parenting makes certain types of jobs hard to hold or pursue other career opportunities. Most people do not perform low-wage work for their entire work life, however, in the current job market, increasingly this work will be long-term. For many parents in low-wage work, moving up the job ladder is a long and uneven process. During the boom of the mid-1990s, Andersson, Holzer, and Lane (2005) looked at a set of adults who had been low-wage workers for at least

2 McCrate (forthcoming) finds that finds 11 percent of all workers say that their start and stop time varies and they have no control over those times, with the highest percentages working in leisure and hospitality services and wholesale and retail trade.

three years. They found that only half of them showed modest improvement in their earnings over the following six-year period. Many mothers adjust work hours as well as occupations to accommodate attending to their children. But this accommodation comes at a cost: low-wages and fewer avenues for promotion. It is not only lawyers who need to work long hours to move up in their firm. For example, Carré and Tilly (2010) find that retail clerks moving into manager positions not only need to work more hours, but also must be willing to work variable hours to fill in for workers who do not come to work. Many parents might like to take advantage of these types of opportunities but find doing so interferes too much with family responsibilities. Seefeldt (2008) interviewed women six years after they left Michigan welfare rolls and found many of them had the opportunity to advance but did not take higher-paying jobs because it would require more or different hours that conflicted with the times they needed to be available to their children. Similarly, Williams (2010) finds many women leave their jobs because they cannot combine work demands with family ones, losing their line in the job-ladder queue. Henly and Lambert (2005) report that low-wage workers in part-time jobs are not afforded the same job training and skill development opportunities as full-time workers. Further, they report very high rates of turnover in low-wage jobs, some of which is because of the nature of non-standard employment.

Researchers often report that many jobs held by low-income mothers after leaving welfare are stressful, demanding, and provide little autonomy or control. Those work-related conditions are associated with maternal depression, unresponsiveness, and inconsistent parenting (Gennetian, Lopoo, and London, 2008; Kalil and Ziol-Guest 2005 ). Thus, aside from the elevated work and family conflicts that low-wage parents face, they also face work that is more likely to be demoralizing, affecting their emotional status as they head home to care for family.

***Not all alike: Single parents, parents of color, and immigrant working parents face particularly acute work/family problems that affect their children.***

Subgroups of low-wage working parents face particular challenges. Low-wage single parents—largely mothers—are typically the main or sole earner, so being low-wage almost always means heading a low-income family.<sup>3</sup> Single mothers also account for the majority of low-wage parents of adolescents. Single parent families not only have low income, but also less capacity to earn more than workers in households with other adults. Because single parents are primarily responsible for earning and assuming family responsibilities, they are most likely to suffer from time poverty (Vickery 1977).

Furthermore, it is well documented that low-wage parents of color—particularly African American and Latinos—have historically faced workplace discrimination and less opportunity for advancement, and are more likely to have greater levels of unemployment and employment instability than white workers (e.g., Darity and Nembhard 2000; Lui 2007; Pager, Western, and Bonikowski 2009; Price 2003; Royster 2003). In addition, African-American low-wage parents are more likely to be single parents than are white, Hispanic, or Asian low-wage parents (Kids Count 2010). Immigrant low-wage parents, especially non-citizens and those who are learning English, face greater challenges at work. Immigrants are much more likely to be in low-wage work than native-born workers.<sup>4</sup> Almost two-thirds of low-wage immigrant workers are not proficient in English and two out of every five are undocumented (Capps et al. 2003), which makes them subject to worse work conditions than other low-wage workers.

In examining the low-wage employment of working parents, not all are alike and some face more obstacles than others. Sole-parenting, race, and citizenship or immigrant status are critical considerations for fully understanding the challenges these families face.

<sup>3</sup> In 2010, just below 40 percent of all employed single mothers earned low wages and, of those, 94 percent were also low-income. One quarter of all fathers were low-wage, with 93 percent of those also being low-income. Conversely, 12 percent of married fathers are low-wage, while 25 percent of married mothers are. Of all low-wage married fathers, 68 percent were also low-income, while 41 percent of low-wage married mothers were also low-income (authors' calculations from March 2011 CPS).

## How Youth Are Affected by Parents' Low-Wage Work

### “You grow up fast”

Researchers looking at youth and child well-being and development consistently identify “family environment,” communication, and the parental relationship with children and adolescents as major influences (Aufseeser, Jekielek, and Brown 2006; Zarrett and Lerner 2008). Elements of parenting documented as important contributors to a positive relationship with youth include respect, listening to youth, eating meals together, and attentiveness to young people’s social lives and school days (Waldfogel 2006). Yet parents’ own emotional health, sense of efficacy, and optimism are also intrinsic to their capacity to provide young people with the support, patience, and engagement that promote child well-being. Interestingly, while other factors affecting parenting quality in low-income families have received a good bit of attention (including authoritative parenting, harsh discipline, single parenthood, family conflict and violence, etc.), the effects of parents’ employment have been largely overlooked.

Youth development is negatively influenced by low levels of monetary resources. A wide and diverse body of scholarship has established that constant material scarcity—often associated with family instability—has several acute as well as long-lasting effects on the developing child. Research across disciplines reveals the effects of economic deprivation on children’s physical health, overall development, schooling, and emotional well-being (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997; Ludwig and Sawhill 2007; Schroeder 2007). Furthermore, while the worst effects are seen among the poorest children, all low-income children are undermined by the welter of stresses and hardships that low-wage families face every day (ASPE Research Brief 2009; Redd et al. 2011).

Beyond the ways in which low-income children and youth are harmed by economic hardship, a small body of research has sought out “lived experience,”

or how parents, children, and communities try to manage, move ahead, and take care of one another despite the litany of obstacles (Chaudry 2004; Dodson 2010; Edin and Kefalas 2005). Thus, to derive a full picture of low-income families in the United States there is much to learn from in-depth research and the more intimate portraits of parents’ and children’s efforts and interactions. We draw on a combination of quantitative as well as ethnographic and qualitative accounts to explore the interaction between parents’ work and children’s well-being. From diverse and interdisciplinary youth research, we identify three key areas that have to varying degrees included some examination of the link between parents’ low-wage employment with young people’s development and opportunities. These include: schooling progress, health status, and youth adultification, both family care work responsibilities and youth employment.

### ***High drop-out rates among lower-income youth can be linked to parents’ low-wage jobs.***

Low-income youth face far more challenges than do higher-income youth staying connected to and graduating from high school, continuing on to post-secondary school, and becoming consistently engaged in the labor market—all essential to future opportunity and economic stability. In fact, each year about 1.3 million students do not graduate from high school and, of these, more than half are students of color and most are low-income (Alliance for Excellence 2010).

Across the socioeconomic class spectrum, this disparity in graduation rates is considerable. National research estimates that about one third of youth from low-income families (29 percent) failed to graduate from high school, a rate almost three times the dropout rate of middle-income families (10 percent) and six times that of higher-income youth (5 percent). In post-high school years, less than half of low-income young people remain consistently connected to school and/or the labor market between ages 18 and 24. In contrast, youth from middle- and high-income families were connected at a rate, respectively of 67 percent and 75 percent. In fact, about one in five youth

4 Thirty-two percent of foreign-born parents are in a low-wage job versus 19 percent of native-born parents.

from low-income families (18 percent) never connect consistently to the labor market, while only one in 50 youth from higher-income families face this kind of future. (Office of Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) 2009).

The effects of non-high school completion are profound. In 2008, the median annual income of people 18-67 who had not obtained a high school diploma was about \$23,000, while those who had done so was almost twice that (Chapman, Laird, and KewalRamani 2010; U.S. Department of Commerce 2009). Furthermore, not completing high school is associated with worse health (Pleis, Lucas, and Ward 2009). The combination of lifelong income loss, diminished health, and more likely reliance on publicly-funded services results in considerable societal expense (Levin and Belfield 2007). Yet, arguably, the greatest cost to society is the loss of talents, abilities, and affiliation of millions of young people who, without a high school diploma, are barred from almost every traditional pathway to a satisfying and self-sufficient adulthood.

Given what is at stake, not surprisingly, there is extensive research that seeks key variables associated with retention and success in secondary school. It is clearly established that disengagement from high school is affected by attending inconsistently, falling behind in classwork, and doing poorly academically. Being left back a grade (or more) is a major precursor to eventually dropping out. Completion of high school, however, is a multi-faceted process, and patterns of disengagement are a complicated mix of relationships between student, family, school, and community, all of which affect the decision to leave school early. Research suggests that disruption in schooling is generally not a sudden or isolated event, but rather a confluence of factors unfolding in the lives of low-income youth (Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison 2006; Rumberger 2004).

### **Parent involvement in youths' schooling**

One factor consistently identified as being of great significance in young people's schooling success is the context and involvement of their families. Researchers, education scholars, and young people reference

communication with family and "parent involvement" as influential in students' progress in school. Yet this important ingredient for student success is often framed as a matter of parental awareness and choice. In examining parent involvement in children's schooling, scholars have analyzed "parental role construction" and "parental sense of efficacy" as influencing the decision to get involved (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1995). This perspective frames involvement as a parent's personal commitment to monitor homework, meet regularly with teachers, and volunteer for school activities. These actions are identified as aspects of positive parental involvement, but seldom is the nature and pattern of parent engagement juxtaposed with other intractable demands, foremost, the demands of parents' employment. As examined above, much low-wage work requires work at non-standard hours with inflexibly and sometimes unpredictable schedules.

Time-use studies find that parents who work non-standard shifts are less likely to eat the dinner meal with children and provide less help with homework than other parents (Connelly and Kimmel 2010; Presser 2004). In ethnographic research with low-income families, a constant concern voiced by parents is that their jobs do not permit leave-time, making involvement in children's schools unfeasible. Rather than a matter of "choice," these data reveal that the interaction of low pay with non-standard work schedules and no flexibility determine parents' availability at home, at children's schools and, in fact, to monitor youth at all. As the mother of a 13-year-old boy in Boston told researchers, "I know they think I can't be bothered to come in and call them [referring to school administrators who requested she arrange meetings when her son's grades began to decline]. But I have this job by a string and if I lose it, we're on the street" (Dodson 2010). With a younger child with health problems who consumed all her leave-time from work, she could not comply with the school's expectations of parent involvement in her son's education.

Despite the obstacles in their way, families are identified as crucial support for young people in

their planning for college and post-secondary lives. The 2010 paper, *Hear Us Out: High School Students in Two Cities Talk About Going to College*, reports that, “Families are the biggest source of motivation for students when it comes to college and the place they turn most for help. Three-quarters of the students in our survey put family as their top source for college support, even when parents or guardians have not been to college themselves.” Yet, particularly among parents who do not have college experience or social capital that higher income families possess, having time and resources to support their youth’s post-secondary ambitions is critical. These are precisely the resources that low-wage parents are without.

#### **Maternal hours of work and youth school performance**

Some research has revealed that when low-income mothers increase hours of work—often a critical way to try to supplement low wages—it may have a negative effect on their adolescents’ education. One multi-city study following families post-welfare find a statistically significant relationship between increased maternal hours of work and an increased likelihood that youth will skip school (boys more than girls); that parents are more likely to be contacted by school for behavioral issues; and that youth are less likely to perform well, although no more likely to perform poorly (Gennetian, Lopoo, and London 2008; Gennetian 2008). Ample parental presence gives preadolescents and adolescents the knowledge they are being observed, are valued, and have a source of support as they start to navigate the outside world. If parents cannot be present in teens’ everyday lives, even if youth understand and are proud of their parents’ work for the family, their absence can have eroding effects.

Another study with a diverse sample of students examined factors that affected students’ leaving high school before graduating (Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison 2006). Various forces were identified as influencing dropout patterns, including disengagement from school and demands outside of high school that eventually interrupted attendance. Yet interestingly, 38 percent of the young people queried thought they had too much freedom or not enough structure. While some of this may include lack of structure within

schools, increased and consistent parental availability during the hours that students are home—as well as parents’ availability to meet with teachers—might have an effect on these schooling outcomes, as parent involvement research has documented. In fact, 71 percent of the young people who left school early said that there needs to be more communication between parents and schools and more parental involvement in children’s schooling experiences (homework, grades, tardiness, and advances) and not just in crises or disciplinary problems (Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison 2006).

The need for focus on young people’s education is not lost on most low-income parents, as exemplified by a single father in Boston. Federico explained that he quit a successful career development program because he found he could not keep up with the program activities—despite the gains he was making—and keep up with the lives of his teens, who “need a lot of attention when they start going out into the world” (Dodson 2010). Seefeldt (2008) found that, like Federico, many mothers refused promotions or stayed in otherwise undesirable jobs because they knew the cost would be not being home when school-aged children got home from school.

Employment research with low-wage parents reveals that the non-standard schedules and rigidity in the low-wage labor market preclude the kind of attentive involvement that these young people need—and higher-income youth receive. This consequence has been documented in earlier ethnographic research. Urban education scholars Michelle Fine and Nancie Zane (1989) quote a high-school age girl saying that she is “wrapped too tight” because of all the family and school demands she juggles. The researchers conclude that many low-income youth, and particularly girls, may drop out primarily in response to family context.

#### ***Young people’s health can be harmed by parents’ low-wage work.***

#### **Increased obesity associated with maternal work in low-wage jobs**

The Centers for Disease Control (2010) report that childhood and adolescent obesity has more than

tripled in the past 30 years. By 2008, the percentage of adolescents aged 12–19 who were obese increased from 5 percent to 18 percent. Nationally, obesity has become a leading health problem, and socioeconomic status is correlated to rates of obesity, with higher rates among lower-income families (Black and Macinko 2008). “For adolescents ages 12 to 19, non-Hispanic black girls and Mexican-American boys have the highest rates of obesity, 29.2 percent and 26.7 percent respectively. In 2007, the prevalence of overweight and obesity was greater among publicly insured children ages 10 to 17 than their privately insured peers” (National Center for Children in Poverty 2011). Aside from undermined health and well-being throughout life, the morbidity and mortality associated with increased, early obesity will become a major healthcare cost in the years to come.

Recent research has established a relationship between maternal employment and children’s body mass index (Institute of Medicine 2004). Furthermore, there is some direct evidence that the intensity of maternal employment (or hours worked) is associated with poorer nutritional intake (Fertig et al. 2009). There is also some evidence that an increase in maternal work decreases children’s physical activity (Anderson and Butcher 2006). Another theory linking maternal employment to obesity among children and youth is the likelihood that youngsters will stay inside and watch more television, a version of self-care when there are no adults available (Fertig et al. 2009). While higher-income youth are likely to be engaged in organized (and often expensive) after-school activities, these are not an option for young people in low-wage families (Lareau 2003).

One study that used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth points to an association between non-standard hours and young adolescents’ increased body mass index (Miller and Han 2008). Some child development researchers conjecture that when mothers work non-standard hours, they are not available during key periods of the day when children are not in school. These periods include early morning, after school, dinnertime, post-dinner times, bedtime, and weekends.

### **Early sexual activity and childbearing**

Lower-income adolescents, who are more likely to initiate sex early and less likely to have access to birth control, have a higher rate of early childbearing relative to higher-income teens (Moore, Kinghorn, and Bandy 2011; Singh, Darroch, and Frost 2001). While the U.S. teen birth rate had been declining for years, it recently increased by 3 percent. The National Center for Children in Poverty identifies early sexual activity as being associated with dating abuse that can lead to unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV infections. About 10 percent of adolescent females experience non-voluntary first sex (Schwarz 2010).

In a synthesis of research on early sexual activity and childbearing, among other important variables, parental presence and involvement in teens’ daily lives were identified as an important factor (Miller et al. 2001). The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy recently pinpointed parental involvement and availability to monitor teens as a critical prevention strategy. Parental closeness, connectedness, and presence to supervise and communicate with young people are established ingredients to support young people as they seek out peers and establish dating behavior (Miller et al. 2001). An alternative to parents’ presence, research has indicated, is participation in programs and opportunities after school that may reduce teen births (Manlove et al. 2004).

Yet parents working in low-wage jobs often cannot be present nor easily afford to purchase alternative sources of attention, structure, and engagement. As a result, young people may be left unsupervised for many hours each day and on weekends. Thus, aside from other opportunities and advantages that higher income teens enjoy and that emerge as protective in avoiding early childbearing, simply having access to parents is a critical protective element for youth.

If teens do become parents, they face a tough road. Early parenthood is associated with education disruption. In one study, 26 percent of students dropping out of high school had become parents with care obligations (Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison 2006). Research

also indicates that early family formation, coupled with the low job quality that accompanies limited schooling, increases the work-family conflicts among young families (Ammons and Kelly 2008). This is not only the case for young mothers. Research indicates that teen men who are fathers are less likely to graduate from high school and continue to college, and more likely to experience long-term poverty (Smeeding, Grafinkel, and Mincy 2011). Currently, teen fathers experience unemployment at levels comparable to those during Great Depression and, overall, more than half of men fathering a child before age of 25 are unmarried (Smeeding, Grafinkel, and Mincy 2011). There is very little research that singles out the presence of low-income fathers and impact on early childbearing among teens. Yet it is reasonable to argue that, as with mothers, fathers' positive and engaged relationship with their teenage children could be a protective factor in delaying childbearing and promoting alternative venues for transitioning to adulthood.

***When there is no time or money, low-income youth become adultified, having to grow up fast to help take care of their families.***

In many low-income families, youth may be called upon or feel compelled to fill what is generally considered adult roles in providing large amounts of family care or working long hours in a job to help meet family expenses. Family researchers and youth development scholars point out that young people who must provide significant care to others or work long hours may lose opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities, expand their social networks, and pursue individual interests towards personal development. In some cases, they may even lose critical time and focus to do well in school and develop a pathway to post-secondary options. Yet these working-class youth may also gain a sense of self-reliance, maturity, an awareness of other people's needs, and their importance in a family network, and avoid negative peer influences. In fact, this is an element of working-class youth development that, it could be argued, contrasts with the intense "self-cultivation" or self-interest-only culture that

dominates upper-income youth development (Lareau 2003). Some scholarship points out that an ethic of mutual caring and shared responsibility—when it does not stifle individual development—may enrich young people, their families, and communities (Burton 2007; Dodson and Luttrell 2010; East 2010).

Research that has examined family outcomes post-welfare found negative schooling outcomes among adolescents in the state welfare-to-work programs, which also entailed increased the use of sibling care among families with adolescents and a younger sibling (Hsueh and Gennetian 2011). Earlier research examining children's work in families reveals that in low-income families, some mothers "...claimed they could not manage the household without inducting children into house/family labor..." and thus there was no choice in the matter (Goldscheider and Waite 1991, p. 814).

Research also suggests that to some extent, sibling care work is gendered. "There is a wide consensus that girls routinely provide more family care than boys and begin a year or two earlier" (East, 2010, p. 56). Ethnographic research on "girls' family labor" outlines specific elements, including sibling and other kin care, household management and chores, and emotional labor for family members in the absence of parents (Dodson and Dickert 2004). Yet other research suggests that both boys and girls may be pressed into adultified family roles, when low wages and parent absence are a way of life (Burton 2007). Some studies point to a correlation between family income and the number of hours that parents work, and use of adolescent care work for younger siblings (Capizzano, Main, and Nelson 2004).

The context of the family needs may have a bearing on the degree of "parentification" or the need for youngsters to assume extensive adult responsibilities (Earley and Cushway 2002; Jurkovic 1997). For example, the health status and particular needs of younger children also have a large bearing on youth responsibilities for family care work. Low-income children have more health problems than do higher-income children—in general—while simultaneously

their parents have much less sick-leave. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that some teens may be diverted from school and personal development to provide care for their siblings (Hsueh and Gennetian 2011). In fact, in a study of teens who dropped out of school, 29 percent cite family concerns as being related to leaving school before graduating (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006).

In general, studies of student employment and effects on schooling or other developmental attributes ignore parental employment. The conventional model suggests a version of preference or choice—students choosing to put more time into jobs versus schooling. Another version of this model suggests, given that lower-income students tend not to achieve academically, they are therefore more focused on entering the labor market early. Yet growing up in a family in which employed parents (or parent) simply cannot earn enough to sustain the family, despite full participation in available labor markets, suggests the possibility of another important motivation for early youth labor. A young person who is working long and intense hours could provide the margin for additional income that enhances family well-being.

While some employment appears to be good for adolescents, students who are employed long, intensive hours are more likely to do poorly in school and more likely to drop out of high school or not go to college. Students who are from higher-income backgrounds, who have better grades and test scores as sophomores, and who are placed on a college track, are also less likely to work intensively (Warren, LePore, and Mare 2000). Marsh and Kleitman (2005) found negative effects of youth employment on outcomes such as achievement, coursework selection, educational and occupational aspirations, and college attendance, after controlling for the background of the students. Singh (1998) finds work patterns and academic achievement may have reciprocal effects, so students that have high academic achievement are more likely to work fewer hours, while those with poor achievement work longer hours. Staff, Schulenberg, and Bachman (2010) find that youth who work intense hours had lower GPAs,

gave less effort in the classroom, had lower college completion expectations, and were more likely to misbehave at school, be suspended, skip school, and fail to turn in assignments than when they worked only moderate hours. Beyond school achievement, Steinberg and Dornbusch (1991) found that long work hours during the school year were associated with lower investment and performance in school, greater psychological and somatic distress, drug and alcohol use, delinquency, and autonomy from parents.

But not all the research indicates negative impacts of youth employment. For example, Ruhm (1997) finds that high school seniors who work can expect 22 percent more in annual wages six to nine years after graduation, compared with their nonworking counterparts. In an ethnographic study, Newman (1996) examined the lives of black and Latino urban youth who work in the service sector and found that although the work is tiring, stressful, and poorly compensated, it is a strategy to contribute to household needs, personal needs, and financial independence and literacy, and avoid violence and drugs in the neighborhood.

Importantly, ethnographic research suggests that school authorities may not always be aware of the connection between family needs and school attendance and performance among youth in low-wage families. In 2002, a special education teacher in Milwaukee described how she had regarded a young girl—Davida—as being careless and tardy all the time. She then “...discovered that ‘When Davida is late [because she drops her baby sister off at a family day care before going to middle school], she never says why, she just takes the punishment. . .she doesn’t want to tell’ that her family is reliant on her...” (Dodson and Dickert 2004, p. 326). The desire to protect parents’ image and avoid negative public judgment may conceal the full extent of youth contributions to the stability and care of low-income families.

Parentification theory conceptualizes youth care work and intensive employment as the result of family dysfunction, conducted in a context of parent neglect or abandonment, alcoholism, or drug abuse (Chase

1999; Earley and Cushway 2002; East 2010; Jurkovic 1997). Yet traditional research on “normative” versus deviant youth development may not take into account family life in which employment demands that parents put their jobs first and family second, even as the family remains wage poor (Dodson and Luttrell 2010; Williams and Boushey 2010). Under these conditions, young people may recognize their parents’ plight, intervene to support their families, and accept the attributes of adultification that assists families but incurs personal costs in terms of school completion and career options.

Children of immigrants may face even more complex family demands. They often serve as translators for their parents when negotiating with personnel in health, school, and other important settings, creating very significant demands on the children. (Orellana 2010) They may also have to balance dual cultural roles, bridging family and public life, and helping parents navigate a world they do not know. This work is unrecognized, and may be punished, rather than being seen as an asset to families and communities. In addition, while children of immigrants are not more likely to be engaged in self-care when parents work than children of native-born workers, they are more likely to be taking care of younger siblings (Greene, Hynes, and Doyle, 2011).

There are complex effects of growing up fast, having to manage without parents’ presence and attention, and focusing on providing attention to others while still very young. Understanding the considerable liabilities and risks involved, but also the potential gains of less self-oriented upbringing and early maturation is of great importance for those working for the development of working-class/low-income youth. Some ethnographic research points to young people’s recognition of how their low-wage parents may be viewed as inadequate by school authorities, alienating these youth who see, every day, how hard their parents work for the family (Dodson and Luttrell 2010; Luttrell, in press) Importantly, it is also a major issue in work and family policy for working-class parents, who face both time

and money poverty, despite employment. Perhaps most revealing, an examination of adultification and collaborative care strategies illuminates the profoundly interactive effects within families when wages are low, work is demanding, and family needs are significant. Parents, youth, and children in families are very likely to treat each as mattering most, putting family members before personal advancement in school and work, and other opportunities for social mobility.

## Conclusions and Future Directions

We conclude this report with the assertion that, based on a review of relevant information, parents' low-wage work can undermine young people in multiple and potentially cumulative ways. As others have exhaustively researched, poverty alone (including wage poverty) is harmful to children and youth. Yet for working-poor families, material scarcity is coupled with family-disruptive schedules, unpredictable hours and home absences, no career opportunities, lack of parents' control over work, lack of benefits, and job instability. At a time when so many parents are in low-wage jobs and the majority of new jobs being created are low paid, the effects on children and youth are an urgent policy matter. We identify three core areas for addressing the important link between youth development and parents' low-wage work.

First, focusing on policy-makers and advocates who are concerned about these issues, this report points out that parents' work and young people's lives are profoundly linked. Leaders in public policy, research, and advocacy for low-income workers, as well as those promoting investment in youth education and development, should seek opportunities to collaborate. Recognizing this profound link will increase the effectiveness of a range of policy initiatives. In our view, breaking down the policy, advocacy, and research silos that separate important work on behalf of low-income youth from work on improving low-wage work reflects an acknowledgement of the real lives of millions of working poor families who juggle work and children's needs, every day. Collaborative initiatives that recognize and link structural and institutional forces that have such powerful effects on parents' ability to provide, protect, and affect young people's opportunity and development would significantly advance efforts for these families. The Labor and Education Collaborative for Low-Wage Worker-Parents and K-12 Education Reform in Los Angeles (at UCLA's Center for Labor Research and Education) is a promising example.

Second, we identify specific, current policy initiatives that could improve children and youth outcomes, including: efforts to promote job benefits and sick leave; efforts to allow more flexibility for all working parents; and efforts to increase hourly wages. In terms of youth policy, there is a critical need for programs and resources for low-income youth—as well as young children—including after-school programs, summer programs, and other opportunities that ensure young people, whose parents are away from home working—still get adult attention, thus supporting their academic progress and health, and also protecting youth from having to grow up too fast.

For our third area, we point to heightened demands and risks facing particular populations of low-wage youth and parents that have not received adequate attention. Specifically, there is a great need to recognize and explore the effect of fathers' (and stepfathers') work in low-wage jobs on their children as well as the barriers that those men face to obtaining any kind of job at all. One important impact that has been identified is the association between men's income or economic status and the time they spend with their children. The lower the level of father's financial contribution, the less time he spends taking care of and visiting children (Coley and Medeiros 2007; Edin and Kefalas 2005). Both mothers' and fathers' low-wage work are important areas for policy and research.

Additionally, there is an acute need to understand more about youth concerns about safety that emerge as a real force in young people's lives. We found very little literature that linked the safety risks, including violence, that low-income youth may experience and could reasonably be linked to parental absence to the lack of family resources to purchase protective alternatives to children and youth being left alone. Nonetheless, members of our advisory board who work on youth issues pointed out that low-income young people might be particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse or violence as well as neighborhood crime. They may also be in danger of being targeted as criminals in their ordinary public lives, if the young people go largely unsupervised while parents are at work, particularly

young men of color. Similarly, undocumented immigrant youth as well as children of undocumented workers face acute safety issues related to themselves or their parents being arrested, detained, or deported.

In this vein, young people in single-parent families, low-wage immigrant families, and families of color face exaggerated challenges and responsibilities, related to issues of race, social exclusion, and citizenship standing that may demand more of their parents' time and attention to assist family needs than other youth. Furthermore, there is copious research on racial disparities in terms of various health factors, including rates of infant mortality, low-birth weight (which calls for significantly more vigilant care for the first year of life, making high demands on all family members), incarceration (particularly among young males of color), and other risk-to-health factors. Immigrant youth, specifically, face particular challenges, which include providing both language and cultural translation as they try to assist their families in becoming established and advancing in a new society. While there is a great deal of research on the economic impacts of immigrants on low-wage labor markets as well as assimilation processes among low-wage immigrants, there is little that links these issues directly to youth outcomes. Based on the research just surveyed, it would be reasonable to argue that these subgroups of youth—particularly black and Latino youth—face safety issues that might be mitigated by parents' higher income and by greater flexibility in work schedules that would enable parents

to be available more to protect and monitor their adolescents.

#### **A Final Note**

Despite considerable publicity about the expanding low-wage labor market, along with extensive public awareness of how much attention and encouragement all young people need to flourish, the dominant explanation for problems of low-income youth remains a narrative of parental irresponsibility—not the effects of the stresses and deprivations of low-wage jobs that we have just outlined. Particularly among single mothers and parents of color, the disproportionate problems that their children experience have long been analyzed through the lens of maternal or family deficits and a culture of poverty. The legend of personal irresponsibility, as opposed to the impact of low-wage, low-quality jobs, continues to dominate policy debate and the public imagination. The alternative we seek is not non-employment for low-income parents supplemented by government support, although for some families there may be times when that is the only or best solution. Yet, as we have demonstrated here, the current policy of families being solely reliant on parental employment in low-wage jobs carries a high cost that often goes unrecognized and uncounted. Our careful examination of life at the intersection of children's needs and parents' work instead suggests—above all else—that working families need decent, sustainable jobs and parents must have the freedom to take care of their children, not only for their sake, but for the good of the nation.

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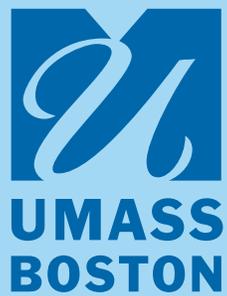
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