BUILDING EVIDENCE IN SCOUTING TOGETHER

BSA **BEST** STUDY

FINDINGS

February 7, 2020

Retention of Scouts

BEST Study: How We Collected Our Data

BEST Surveys

624 Scouts BSA troops were recruited for Wave 1 of the BEST Study between late 2018 and May 2019. Only troops registering at least 5 Scouts were enrolled in the study. From April to June 2019, Scouts and Scouters of enrolled troops were asked to take an online survey; the youth participants were asked questions related to basic demographic information, their Scouting experiences, and a host of program outcome constructs such as sense of purpose, commitment to duty as a citizen, and leadership skills.

BEST Interviews

110 Scoutmasters and assistant Scoutmasters were recruited from four regions of the country: Northeast (n = 24), Central (n = 28), Southern (n = 30) and Western (n = 28). Adult participants were purposively selected from each region to receive a wide range of responses and experiences. For example, we interviewed male and female adult leaders, leaders with varying years of experience, from diverse or homogeneous troops, with high and low socioeconomic status, and from diverse religious and racial backgrounds. 103 adult leaders returned for their Wave 2 interviews, and their responses were included in the current analysis.

For the current analysis, Scout survey data and adult Wave 2 interviews were analyzed to understand how tenure in Scouting affects youth outcomes, and the challenges adult leaders see in retaining Scouts in the Scouts BSA program.

Retention findings from Scout Surveys

Quantitative survey data were analyzed from 3,495 Scouts to understand the relationship between years in Scouting and youth outcomes, controlling for youth age. All youth outcomes were regressed on age and years in Scouting (so any effect of years in Scouting is net of developmental age of Scout) with a sample of 3,495 Scouts.

Many outcomes were (predictably) related to age, however two outcomes were related to years in Scouting: Commitment to Doing One's Duty as a Citizen and Leading at a Higher Level. The size of the effect was small, but significant, and indicates that **youth who have more years in Scouting score higher on Commitment to Doing One's Duty as a Citizen and Leading at a Higher level.**

One finding related to age, and which may be important for retention, is that **younger Scouts report more joy/fun in Scouting than older Scouts.**

Further details about the quantitative analysis are found in the appendix.

Retention Findings in Adult Leader Interviews

A team of experienced coders read all 103 Wave 2 adult leader interviews (Wave 2 interviews were chosen because there is a question which focuses directly on retention, though retention themes were often found in the rest of the interview text as well). Themes were generated through an inductive analysis and researchers coded interview text according to the list of themes. The research team read a subsample of interviews, identified themes that arose, and then expanded the list to include themes from research on retention and attrition in youth-serving programs.

In addition to thematic coding, researchers also wrote reflective memos about each interview they read, highlighting the retention themes in the interview, areas of uncertainty in coding, and any significant ideas about retention relating to the interview.

Across all of the interviews, it was clear that the adult leaders hope to keep youth involved in Scouting. **Adult leaders strongly believe in the value of the Scouts BSA program, and know youth will only benefit from it if they keep attending**—they are therefore very concerned about Scout retention and motivated to find ways to recruit and retain Scouts in their troops.

The retention issues noted by adult leaders mainly fall into several broad categories: **Scout-specific factors** (e.g., competing youth activities, loss of interest or engagement, academics, youth employment), **issues of fit between Scout and troop** (e.g., Scout/family switched to another troop, Issues in troop, Scout or family asked to leave troop, Scout needs not met by troop), and **family or parent-related factors** (e.g., money/cost, family relocation, family commitments, lack of parent commitment, parental difficulty letting go). There were also several leaders who talked about BSA policies (or policy changes) leading youth/families to leave the troop, and issues around diversity/inclusion.

Scout-specific factors

Competing youth activities emerged as the most frequently cited Scout-specific factor in retaining Scouts. More than half of adult leaders **(55%)** reported that **youth leave Scouts because it conflicts with other activities** they are involved in, such as sports, music or hobbies. Focusing on **academics** and increasing academic demand were also noted as reasons for Scouts to leave **(16%)**, as well as **youth employment (8%)**. The next most common Scout-specific factor affecting retention was a lack of interest, or a **loss of interest** in Scouting over time (**20% of interviews**).

> *"Yeah, so lot of it has to do with school events and sports. A lot of overlapping of the schedules so that as well. I mean, just the overall busy-ness of the kids these days is just … getting busier and busier."*
>
> *"There's always going to be Scouts who are like, "Well, this isn't for me," after they cross over a couple of years into Scouting, "this just isn't for me anymore.""*

Goodness of fit

Goodness-of-fit between the Scout and the troop was another theme that came up repeatedly; adult leaders commented that they want youth to find a troop that is a good fit for them, even if it is not their troop. The **Scout or family switching to a different troop** arose in **10%** of interviews as a retention issue, and the process of choosing a troop was also mentioned in the context of recruitment. Fit between Scout and troop also arose under the **Issues in troop** theme **(10%).** These included instances of bullying, the adult leadership style not being a good fit for the Scout (or, more commonly, their parents), and friction between adults (between leaders, or between leaders and parents) in the troop around how the troop should be run, as well as personality conflicts between adults. Adult leaders also told stories of **Scouts being asked to leave** a troop **(6%)**.

Family factors

By far the biggest family-related factor affecting both retention and recruitment was the **cost of Scouting**, which arose in **20%** of interviews. Several leaders commented that Scouting can be quite expensive when accounting for membership fees, uniform and supply costs, and the costs of summer camps or high adventure experiences. They especially note that this is challenging for families who have multiple children involved in Scouting, and for families who are of lower socioeconomic status. Additionally, because Wave 2 interviews were conducted in the Fall of 2019, a number of adult leaders spoke about the impending membership fee increase.

> *"If you look at the time of the cost of rechartering, Summer Camp, going to camp out, merit badges and then buying a couple of personal gears, things every year, it can get quite pricey in a hurry. And that's not even trying to be expensive at it."*
>
> *"Obviously if the dues just go to something completely unaffordable, we can't provide Scouting to anybody, so that's a big concern."*

Relocation (11%) and **family commitments (7%)** were two logistical factors that arose as challenges to retention; in particular, leaders reporting family commitments as a challenge to retention noted that it can be hard for families, not just Scouts themselves, to balance the many activities and priorities in Scouts' lives.

Recruitment and troop lifespan challenges

Based on the preliminary reading of adult interviews, themes were developed not only around retention issues, but also around problems around recruitment of Scouts and around issues that might indicate the troop would not survive long-term. Nearly a quarter **(24%)** of adult leaders noted **problems with recruitment**, the two most common issues being **not having a crossover pack (6%)**, and a **drop-off in Scouting after Cub Scouts (7%)**. With regard to concerns about the lifespan of the troop, only four percent of adult leaders noted issues that would threaten the longevity of their troops, and nearly all of them were issues of **not having enough adult volunteers (3%)**.

Program elements beneficial to recruitment/retention

The final category of themes captures comments made by adult leaders about **elements of the Scouts BSA program which they feel contribute positively to Scout retention**. **Camping and other outdoor activities** were the most commonly cited elements of the program that adult leaders felt contributed positively to retention **(11%)**, followed by **leadership opportunities (9%)** and **high adventure experiences (9%)**. Adult leaders also mentioned that the opportunity for new or rare experiences in Scouts BSA contributed positively to retention of Scouts.

> *"I know as far as retaining Scouts, it's extremely important to have an activity, at least every month. Camp-outs and outings and stuff."*
>
> *"As they get older you have to keep them engaged with activities that are age appropriate, that are exciting, that are more high adventure than things that they've done as younger Scouts."*

A table of the retention themes, the percentage of interviews they arose in, and exemplary quotes can be found in the appendix.

Recruitment and retention strategies

A quarter of adult leaders **(25%)** brought up retention and recruitment **strategies that they use within their own troops.** Of these, the most common strategies used by adult leaders to help keep Scouts in Scouting are **flexibility around attendance and uniforms (23% of troop-specific strategies)**, **offsetting issues of cost (19% of troop-specific strategies)**, and **working with 'challenging' Scouts (15% of troop-specific strategies)**.

With regard to attendance, many adult leaders recognize the importance of youth being able to participate in other activities and do well in school; because of this, they have developed flexible attendance policies that allow youth to attend when they can around other commitments, and have developed strategies within the troop to keep things running smoothly while some youth are absent due to sports or activity seasons. Flexibility around uniforms was cited both as a way to improve attendance and as a cost-saving measure for families who are not able to afford the cost of a full Scout uniform.

Offsetting cost emerged as an important theme in troops being able to recruit and retain Scouts. **Money/cost arose as a retention problem in 20% of interviews**, and several leaders talked about findings ways to offset the cost of Scouting, such as through fundraising, scholarships, and subsidizing membership fees as ways to address retention.

Finally, adult leaders also work hard to keep individual Scouts in the troop who are considered challenging; whether the challenge is their behavior, inattentiveness, or lack of commitment to Scouting, adult leaders are dedicated to finding ways to work with these Scouts to help keep them in the troop.

Other key findings

Several other important themes also emerged throughout this analysis; although these arose in only a handful of interviews, they are still meaningful. First, a number of leaders commented on the **challenge of recruiting and retaining Scouts in light of negative public perception of BSA as an organization**. All of these leaders expressed frustration that the image of BSA is so negative when the program is so valuable.

Another theme that arose was a desire from adult leaders for **BSA to market the Scouts BSA program more**, and more effectively; some of these comments were tied to combatting the issue of the negative public perception of BSA, though other leaders expressed a general wish that the marketing for the program was more effective.

> *"I know that there's a lot of negative, but mostly I think it is affecting some of our recruitment, especially at the Cub Scout level. But at the same time, I still think that there's no better program that we can offer to youth, that's out there today."*

> *"I think there's a lot of misconceptions about what's happening within Scouting and I wish the BSA were maybe more aggressive or more proactive in telling the story of Scouting and helping try to curb some of those misconceptions about issues that have happened in the past, legal issues that are being overcome."*

Finally, cutting across several themes, **adult leadership transitions emerged as a time of vulnerability for troops in terms of Scout retention**. Changes in adult leaders or adult leadership style arose as a reason for Scouts to leave the troop.

Girls joining Scouts BSA and Scout Retention

Although some leaders noted that some Scouts or families do not like girls being part of Scouts BSA, and have even left Scouts BSA as a result, others commented that girls joining has helped their troops with recruitment and retention of boys as well.

Adult leaders expressed concern about recruitment and retention for girls' troops as well. Several leaders reported that their linked girls' troop has not been able to recruit and maintain enough Scouts, and some also speculated that the separation between girls' and boys' troops may result in recruitment/retention issues as parents have to decide which meetings their children are able to attend if there is not a linked troop nearby.

"And the girls that have joined are... it's worth noting that the girls that are in BSA right now are there because they want to be there, right? […] That's tremendous because some of the boys aren't. They're there because they were Cub Scouts and this is what you do next. You can leverage that tremendous enthusiasm. And it feeds back to the boys, right?"

APPENDIX:

Quantitative analysis of survey data

Summary of results:

All youth outcomes were regressed on age and years in Scouting (so any effect of years in Scouting is net of developmental age of Scout) with a sample of 3,495 Scouts.

NOTE: b = standardized beta coefficient

1. Outcome: Mean Youth Communication
   a. Years in Scouting: b=-.03 (ns)
   b. **Age: b=.10 (p<.001)**
   c. **Older Scouts have better communication skills than younger Scouts.**
2. Outcome: Mean Youth Ability to Make Ethical and Moral Decisions
   a. Years in Scouting: b=-.03 (ns)
   b. Age: b=-.01 (ns)
3. Outcome: Mean Youth Opportunities to Practice Leadership Skills
   a. Years in Scouting: b=.02 (ns)
   b. Age: b=-.02 (ns)
4. Outcome: Mean Youth Sense of Connection
   a. Years in Scouting: b=.01 (ns)
   b. Age: b=.02 (ns)
5. **Outcome: Mean Youth Commitment to Doing One's Duty as a Citizen**
   a. **Years in Scouting: b=.07 (p<.01)**
   b. **Age: b=.09 (p<.001)**
   c. **Older Scouts are more committed to doing their duty as a citizen than younger Scouts AND Youth who have been in Scouts longer are more committed to doing their duty as a citizen than youth who are newer to Scouts.**
6. Outcome: Mean Youth Sense of Purpose: Meaningfulness
   a. Years in Scouting: b=-.02 (ns)
   b. Age: b=-.01 (ns)
7. Outcome: Mean Youth Sense of Purpose: Goal Orientation
   a. Years in Scouting: b=-.02 (ns)
   b. **Age: b=.06 (p<.01)**
   c. **Older Scouts have higher scores on sense of purpose: goal orientation than younger Scouts.**
8. Outcome: Mean Youth Sense of Purpose: Beyond the Self
   a. Years in Scouting: b=.02 (ns)
   b. **Age: b=.04 (p<.05)**
   c. **Older Scouts have higher scores on sense of purpose: beyond the self than younger Scouts.**
9. Outcome: Mean Youth Sense of Purpose: Overall
   a. Years in Scouting: b=-.01 (ns)
   b. **Age: b=.04 (ns; p<.10)**
   c. **Older Scouts have higher scores on sense of purpose: overall than younger Scouts.**
10. Outcome: Mean Youth Joy/Fun
    a. Years in Scouting: b=-.04 (ns; p<.10)
    b. **Age: b=-.06 (p<.01)**

      c. **Younger Scouts report more joy/fun than older Scouts.**

11. Outcome: Mean Youth Respect for Others' Beliefs: Humility
      a. Years in Scouting: $b=.04$ (ns; $p<.10$)
      b. Age: $b=-.02$ (ns)

12. **Mean Youth Lead at a Higher Level**
      a. **Years in Scouting: $b=.06$ ($p<.01$)**
      b. **Age: $b=.24$ ($p<.001$)**
      c. **Older Scouts lead at a higher level than younger Scouts AND Youth who have been in Scouts longer lead at a higher level than youth who are newer to Scouts.**

Retention Themes found in Adult Leader Interviews

Retention Issues:

Theme	% of interviews	Exemplary Quotes
Competing youth activities	55%	"Yeah, so lot of it has to do with school events and sports. A lot of overlapping of the schedules so that as well. I mean, just the overall busyness of the kids these days is just … getting busier and busier." "Then, it becomes a huge conflict between soccer, football, baseball, Boy Scouts, dance club, or whatever." "I mean oftentimes there's just not enough hours in the day. These Scouts are playing sports, they may have a job, they may be in a band."
Lack or loss of interest or engagement	20%	"Unless they move or something like that, they just say, "I'm not really interested in doing this anymore."" "We've seen Scouts... There's always going to be Scouts who are like, "Well, this isn't for me," after they cross over a couple of years into Scouting, this just isn't for me anymore." "I think there's, some kids it's just not their cup of tea and they're testing the waters, they're going to be there for a little bit."
Academics	16%	"[…] one was just felt overwhelmed in school and other activities." "A lot of our boys are very academic, so they're studying crazy hours because they're doing five AP classes or something silly, so they just run out of time." "And then, as our troop has gotten older, many are in high school now and their schoolwork and work workloads have increased, which makes it more difficult for them to attend."

Money/cost	20%	"I think money was a concern for them the past year, as we're doing our re-charter and having to pay the new dues for the upcoming year." "But they were concerned because the annual cost of participating in Scouting can reach close to a thousand dollars. If you look at the time of the cost of rechartering Summer Camp, going to camp out, merit badges and then buying a couple of personal gears, things every year, it can get quite pricey in a hurry. And that's not even trying to be expensive at it." "I honestly don't know totally what the finances look like, but we do know there's a big dues increase coming and everyone's just scared because we don't know how big it is. […] Obviously if the dues just go to something completely unaffordable, we can't provide Scouting to anybody, so that's a big concern."
Family relocation	11%	"No, I think the ones that leave are mainly for moves, moving out of the area." "Now last year, we had a whole pile of them move. Parents were moving out of state and different jobs and just all over. I think we lost six or eight boys in one year for moving, which was very unusual." "I've had Scouts that have moved to Pennsylvania. I had a Scout that went to Florida, and more recent one that went down in North Carolina. So those are transfers."
Scout or family switched to another troop	10%	"The parent took the child out of Scouting, out of the troop went to a different troop." "When we were at that troop, the Scoutmaster's son was a real jerk and that never changed [laughs], but that was an impetus for us to go to a different troop, eventually." "So, like I said, the charter paperwork is supposed to be getting signed with our district executive tonight at 5:00. So, we're really hopeful that all that goes smoothly and everybody can have their transfer stuff. And then pretty soon, we'll be a new troop."
Issues in troop	10%	"Sometimes there can be parental and leadership clashes of what they want and how they want their children... I don't want to say trained. But learning the different skills that Scouting is to help pass on."

		"In the past, with the bad leader, we had Scouts leaving in droves. They weren't going to deal with this nonsense, this bully." "Like I said, parents telling me that I'm unapproachable, and they're going to go find another troop."
Scout or family personal issues	9%	"If he wants to take time, he can do that. Of course, it's when he is interested in coming back, we'll be there for him. But to take the time that he needs and that he wants, if he's not feeling okay with Scouts right now." "I had one boy drop out because of a personal issue, and I had one boy that had to drop because of the academics weren't doing real well and the parents wanted to have him focus on that." "I mean, it's sad because he kind of sat in a soft spot in my heart because I just wanted him to do well. And to see him struggling outside of Scouts and stuff, it's bothersome."
Youth employment	8%	"As they get older they get jobs or whatever, right?" "I've run into that, where Scouts just like, you know, I got too much homework to do, or I've got too much, I got to go work." "A lot of times the boys and all, they start... They get 16 they start driving, they get a job, they get a girlfriend, they're involved in other school things and yeah, just a lot more pulling at them."
Family commitments	7%	"I think the Scout would adapt and do whatever he could, but the parents feel overwhelmed because they have to go to six trainings, like baseball." "That's a case where a Scout is not necessarily the Scout losing interest, it's reality of the situation. From a logistics perspective, the parents just can't do it. We've had Scouts that…so we had those where they left for that reason."
Scout or family asked to leave troop	6%	"We very, very reluctantly asked a Scout to leave our troop, last Tuesday night we had to do that. It's a very painful experience. […] he was screaming and yelling at younger

| | | Scouts, he was physically grabbing them, when he did that and sometimes shaking, he was interrupting [...]"

"In all the years I've been involved in Scouting, I can only... in this troop, too, I can only think of one time that we had to ask a youth to leave, and that was because of behavior." |
|---|---|---|
| **Lack of parent commitment** | 4% | "And sometimes a kid will leave us just because he's not real comfortable in the environment, or the family's not supportive."

"Sometimes it's the parents themselves that's just not interested in having their Scout involved. Even though the Scout likes it, the parent doesn't really want to participate." |
| **BSA policy** | 4% | "Obviously, there's been, under Boy Scout policies, about sexual preferences and genders and things like that ... had a lot of people leave Scouting ... a lot of leaders, and took their kids with him."

"But... and I'm certain that some of it too has been becoming more of a challenge with allowing girls into Scouts. Some parents are very strongly against that." |
Friendships/romantic relationships	3%	"And the other problem with retention, of course, is the fact that the kids get to around 16 or so and girls and cars get into the way."
Diversity/inclusion issues	3%	"I was involved with another troop as a Cubmaster. It was another troop with an older son when he was younger. And the middle one, we had a lot of problems with retention. I think they started out as a specific religious group."
Scout needs not met by troop	2%	"In a big troop, when you don't have enough leaders, you can't really give all this special attention to the special needs Scouts that they need to have. They almost sometimes need a one-on-one situation."
Parental difficulty letting go	2%	"A lot of times it's the parents don't have an easy transition from hovering over their kid to allowing their kid to go on a camp out without them being with them in the tent and stuff like that."
Being a Scout is undesirable	1%	"[Scouting is] something that's more of an oddity in a sense. When it's like that, then maybe that doesn't encourage the Scouts that we have or other Scouts that could help

		recruit to come into Scouting. Scouting in the high school years, at least in my area, may not necessarily be viewed as particularly cool to do."

Retention issues themes with a frequency of 0:

- Home responsibilities—literature review indicated this was an issue for youth serving programs, but this was not found in coding
- Scouting is boring— literature review indicated this was an issue for youth serving programs, but this was not found in coding
- Poor connection with adult leaders— literature review indicated this was an issue for youth serving programs, but this was not found in coding
- Scouting related struggle—interviews read while developing the dictionary indicated this might arise, but this was not found in coding (e.g., on closer inspection, it was not clear from the interview that Scouting struggles were the cause of youth leaving)
- Distance—interviews read while developing the dictionary indicated this might arise, but this was not found in coding (e.g., on closer inspection, it was conflicting family commitments rather than distance that caused the retention issue)

Troop Lifespan Concerns:

Lack of adult volunteers	3%	"I don't know if we're going to ... I think it's all about adult leaders stepping up and making it happen. And, like I said, with my troop, we barely have a committee." "We're not going to re-charter the troop. I'm going to merge the guys into another troop. […] Yeah. Because what we don't have is any 40 year-olds replacing 65 year-olds."

Lifespan concerns with a frequency of 0:

- Lack of money or resources—interviews read while developing the dictionary indicated this might arise, but this was not found in coding; Wave 1 interviews and some responses from Scoutmasters who were not able to participate in the study (due to not having enough Scouts in their troop, or their troop having shut down) indicated that money and cost are not only issues for individual families and Scouts, but also for the troop as a whole, if they are not able to cover the costs of re-chartering, equipment, activities, etc. In the Wave 2 interviews, this came through only as family or Scout financial challenges. In other words, individual Scouts left due to financial concerns, but none of the troops whose leaders were interviewed seemed to be in danger of closing due to lack of troop funds.

Recruitment Issues:

Drop off after Cubs	7%	"Some of them join and it's hard to get them to crossover. The whole thing with the Boy Scouts and crossing over from Cub Scouts to Boy Scouts, it's difficult. You don't retain a lot of those." "It's kind of early on when not only the boy is in transition to a Boy Scout versus Cub Scout arrangement, but that the parents are also transitioning to a different kind of a Scouting experience. So some make it, some don't."
No crossover pack	6%	"Since there's three or four less Cub Scout packs, there's nobody coming in over these bridges." "There's a small group... See we have two troops in town and there's only one Cub pack. So it's, we don't always get Scouts crossing over or to build our membership up."
Diversity/inclusion issues	2%	I think that the biggest suggestion that I feel, like for all of Scouts BSA and other troops is that in my experience there's so many kids in the inner city that just need something to do. I think that the Scouts BSA program just lacks kind of the knowledge of how to interact with those kids appropriately and how to get them excited about stuff.

Beneficial to recruitment/retention:

Troop-specific recruitment retention strategy	25%	"And we've had to maintain a policy with our kids that we'd rather you show up for 30 minutes then not show up at all because it keeps them at least a little bit involved." "So the things that we do to compensate it is when fall and spring sports happen, we don't it mandatory for the sports players to come in uniform. Just come as you are." "I know with the money situation, our troop does try to put money aside from our fundraisers and stuff to help pay for, because we do believe inherently that Scouting is a really good program for everybody and that we don't want money to be a financial issue."

		"And some kids, honestly, they can't afford it. So, we have a really good troop because say one boy doesn't have enough in his account to go to camp, all the boys will pitch in and make sure that that boy doesn't go without." "It's kids a lot of times that have less modeling at home, more difficultly at home, more struggles in other areas. We try not to give up on those kids. It's a lot more work. They're more emotionally-demanding for us, but the kids that are doing really well, that we really love, they don't really need Scouts." "We developed a troop brochure and we developed a PowerPoint presentation for new parents prior to summer camp. So we do a parents night prior to summer camp and it's really focused around new parents and kind of talk them through the experience for the week, what to expect."
Camping or outdoor activities	**11%**	"I know as far as retaining Scouts, it's extremely important to have an activity, at least every month. Camp-outs and outings and stuff." "You just keep doing your courts of honor, you get the kids to summer camp or to a high adventure and or Order of the Arrow, summer camp staff, something that's beyond your troop and leadership that would keep themselves on fire for Scouts."
Leadership opportunities	**9%**	"A lot of them like camping but more than that, a lot of them they come initially for the camping and they want to, they're interested in learning leadership skills and getting their [sounds like 'Eagle" 00:18:43] but they stay because of the friendships they make."
High Adventure	**9%**	"As they get older you have to keep them engaged with activities that are age appropriate, that are exciting, that are more high adventure than things that they've done as younger Scouts." "I mean the big draw for us is, we do a lot of High Adventure. We do a lot of cool things." "Now the thing that I think that entices the older Scouts is high adventure, or outings that we go to that are not really Scout skill-based."

New or rare experiences	4%	"And I think the way you get around that is you keep them engaged, you keep them excited, you keep them interested in new activities, new adventures, things like that, that they can't get from other participatory activities."

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