Final Summary Overview:
Understanding the Impact of School Safety on the High School Transition Experience:
From Etiology to Prevention

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Chris Melde and Jennifer Cobbina
School of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University

Justin Heinze and Marc Zimmerman
School of Public Health, University of Michigan

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Contact Information

Applicant Organization
Office of Sponsored Programs
Contract and Grant Administration
Hannah Administration
426 Auditorium Road, Rm 2
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI 48824
Phone: (517) 355-5040
E-mail: awards@osp.msu.edu

Principal Investigator
Chris Melde
School of Criminal Justice
Michigan State University
655 Auditorium Road
East Lansing, MI 48824
Phone: (517) 353-0850
E-mail: melde@msu.edu

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Project Purpose

The purpose of the current project was to garner a better understanding of the causes and consequences of school violence, especially as these factors relate to the transition into high school. The transition to high school is a critical juncture in the life course. Whether or not students are successful in making the transition has a lasting impact on well-being given the critical importance of this stage of development on the accumulation of social and human capital. Research suggests the transition to high school is especially difficult for students from impoverished communities, and that a major factor in this difficulty concerns student safety (Queen, 2002). Annual monitoring of national patterns of student victimization and exposure to crime and violence suggests students entering high school, typically in the 9th grade, reported among the highest rates of involvement in violence, both in school and away from school (Musu, Zhang, Wang, Zhang, and Oudekerk, 2019). Furthermore, prevalence of exposure to multiple forms of victimization and victimization across context, sometimes referred to as polyvictimization, increases dramatically (from 4% to 9.5%) as youth enter junior high school (between the ages of 10 and 13), and then again as they enter high school (13% between the ages of 14 and 17). Polyvictimization is associated with serious and long-term consequences, and is even more strongly associated with trauma symptoms than repeated experiences of a single victimization type (Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2010). Given the confluence of risks adolescents face as they transition to high school, and the critical importance this developmental stage plays in the life course, the following three research objectives were developed in order to better understand and respond to issues students face.

Research Objective 1: Survey youth to identify patterns of violence exposure and victimization among youth, identify the prevalence and seriousness of polyvictimization

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among youth, and determine the distribution of resiliency factors across the student population.

Research Objective 2: Conduct longitudinal, in-depth interviews with students to better understand how students cope with risks associated with school and community violence as they transition into high school, school influences on polyvictimization, and the etiology of violent incidents on school grounds.

Research Objective 3: Present the findings from Objectives 1 and 2 to Flint-area stakeholders for guided translation.

Project Design and Methods

Study Design and Sample

To accomplish these research objectives, the investigation utilized a mixed-methods study that focused on the role of school safety in the transition of students from elementary schools in the Flint Community School (FCS) system to middle and high schools located in and around Flint, MI. With the permission of the FCS superintendent, we focused our efforts on studying the school safety experiences of students within two grades of making the transition from elementary school to high school. FCS is somewhat unique in that due to declining student enrollment the lone public high school left in the city included students between 7th and 12th grade. Therefore, many students in the district began attending the local high school in the 7th grade, although three of the eight elementary schools included students up to the 7th or 8th grades, and thus students from these schools began attending the local high school in 8th or 9th grade, respectively. The principals of 10 schools (8 elementary and 2 high schools) in the FCS were contacted and 8 (7 elementary and 1 high school) agreed to allow their students to participate. The high school that did not participate had already stopped accepting new students

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the previous academic year, and thus had few students who transitioned to the school in the previous year, and is now closed. While the principal at the remaining elementary school was contacted and originally agreed to participate, this school became non-responsive and eventually had to be excluded from the study.

Active parental consent was required for the study. To obtain a high response rate, the current study followed the methods recommended by Esbensen and colleagues (2008). First, researchers visited participating schools and spoke with administrators, teachers, and staff to address any questions they had about the study and the active parental consent process. Second, we provided teachers with $2.00 for every signed consent form returned, whether or not the parent/guardian provided permission, as well as an additional payment of $10.00 if their classroom return rate reached 70 percent, $15.00 if it reached 80 percent, or $20.00 if they reached 90 percent or above. All money earned was utilized to purchase communal school supplies for the classroom. We also provided students a lanyard, commonly used to hold keys or a student ID, if they returned a signed parental consent form, whether or not their parent/guardian allowed for their participation. Parental consent was provided for 329 of the 730 eligible students, for an affirmative active consent rate of just over 45 percent. Just under 5 percent of parents refused to allow their child to participate, while roughly 50 percent of youth did not return a signed form.

Quantitative Data

In order to accomplish research objective #1, a cross-sectional survey was administered to students in grades 5 through 7 in participating schools. The surveys included a host of items related to attitudes and emotions related to school safety, as well as measures of both lifetime and recent experiences with victimization across school and neighborhood contexts. Measures

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of victimization and exposure to crime and violence were drawn from national surveys of youth experiences with polyvictimization (Finkelhor et al., 2011) to allow for broader comparisons of youth from the Flint, MI area and the United States as a whole. Surveys were administered by the research team in the classroom setting to ensure consistent data collection processes were followed and to maintain respondent confidentiality given the sensitive nature of the data. Each question was read aloud to the participants who were then given time to answer accordingly.

Qualitative Data

To accomplish research objective #2, a panel of students was followed over the course of a year-long period and were interviewed on three separate occasions. The focus of these interviews was on the role of school safety in their transition to a new school. In order to be included in the qualitative portion of the project, students had to have returned a signed affirmative active consent form and be in the final year of elementary school in the spring of 2017, and thus were set to transition to a new school the following fall of 2017. These criteria resulted in 93 eligible students for participation in the in-depth interview portion of the study, which began at the end of the spring 2017 semester. In total, 91 of the 93 eligible students (98%) assented to be interviewed at Wave 1 while they were still in elementary school. The first interview was conducted prior to students making the transition to a new school in order to examine factors such as whether and how students were preparing to transition to a new school, how they felt about the impending transition, and whether they were familiar with the school they were going to attend. These initial interviews also touched upon the respondent's experiences with crime and victimization in their neighborhood to determine whether or not students had similar experiences with safety in their community and school. The second interview was conducted approximately two months into the following school year, after

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students had some time to acclimate to their new school. These interviews allowed researchers to gather information on how students were adjusting to their new school, how they felt about their personal safety, and how these feelings compared to their expectations prior to their arrival. Finally, students were interviewed for a third time at the end of their first year in their new school, approximately 1 year following their initial interview. These interviews focused on experiences with crime and victimization in their first year in a new school, how student conflict arose in their new school—with specific examples described in detail—and how their views on school safety changed from the beginning of the school year.

Qualitative, in-depth semi-structured and open-ended interviews were conducted that allowed for considerable probing. Interviews took place in private offices, classrooms, or libraries within the participating schools. Participants were incentivized to participate in the qualitative portion of the study and were paid $20 for their first interview, $25 for their second interview, and $30 for their third interview.

Stakeholder Translation

Research objective #3 was accomplished through the formation of a stakeholder group made up of teachers and administrators that have been part of a school transition team in the preceding three years. After all quantitative and qualitative data was collected, and initial products and draft reports were finalized, two products were provided to this stakeholder group to initiate the guided translation process. First, this group was provided with a 13-page brief that described the findings associated with three projects directly related to the aims of the study: (1) How do students cope with risks of school and community violence during their transition to a new school, with a particular focus on what makes these students feel safe at their new school; (2) How did students' feelings of safety related to their school transition change across time,

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from pre-transition, short-term follow-up after the initial transition, and a full academic year post-transition, and (3) what is the rate of polyvictimization in the student body? Second, the stakeholder group was provided with a link to a video where the PI on the project described the study results. After two weeks, the stakeholder group met with the research team to discuss the study results and to get their feedback on how these results can be utilized to guide efforts to improve the transition experience of students moving forward. Along with detailed notes from the research team, this meeting was audio recorded and transcribed for later review.

Project Subjects

For the quantitative portion of the study, survey data was collected from 302 of the 329 (92%) respondents who provided active consent to participate in the study. These respondents were in grades 5 through 7, with 28 percent in 5th grade (n = 85), 36 percent in 6th grade (n = 110), and 35 percent in 7th grade (n = 107). The respondents were split evenly by sex, with 51 percent responding as being female (n = 154) and 49% responding as being male (n = 147). Roughly 11 percent of the sample reported being white (n = 32), 58 percent reported being black (n = 176), 16 percent reported being of mixed race (n = 49), and 13 percent reported being another race or ethnicity (n = 38). The mean age of the respondents was 11.80 (standard deviation = 1.10), with a range in age from 9 to 14 years old.

Interviewees for the qualitative portion of the study were a subsample of those with parental permission to participate in the quantitative portion of the study. There were 93 eligible participants for the qualitative portion of the study, and all 93 participated in at least one in-depth interview. There were a total of 91 interviews completed at wave 1, 64 interviews were completed at wave 2, and 63 interviews were completed at wave 3. The substantial loss in the sample at wave 2 was due to students transferring out of the FCS after completing elementary

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school, and the research team was unable to find these students enrolled in neighboring school districts. The mean age of the interviewee sample was 11.74 (standard deviation = .77), with a range from 11 to 14 years old. There was a slight majority of females (52%; n = 48) over males (48%; n = 45) in the interview sample. From a race/ethnicity perspective, 12 percent of the interview sample was white, 54 percent were black, 24 percent were mixed race/ethnicity, and 8 percent reported another race/ethnicity. There was no significant difference in the population of interviewees and the general survey sample across sex (Chi-square = .242; df = 1; p > .05) and race (Chi-square = 9.39; df = 4; p > .05).

There were a total of 5 members of the stakeholder translation team. Four of these members were teachers with experience in developing and delivering student transition programming in the FCS, while the last member was a former high school administrator with experience in the development of school transition programs in urban school settings.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics concerning rates of polyvictimization and protective factors were carried out in SPSS version 25 (IBM Corp., 2017).

Qualitative Analysis

Interview with students were audio recorded, transcribed, formatted, and read into NVivo software for analysis. The transcripts were examined to identify reoccurring themes and categories, which were compared and refined across coders (Holsti, 1969). Once the categories were agreed upon, two researchers coded 15 transcripts for the initial themes in order to develop interrater reliability and assess any discrepancies. Cohen's Kappa was established at .73 for 15 cases. Given this, the remaining cases were independently coded for these initial themes.

The stakeholder translation meeting was audio recorded and transcribed. Detailed notes were also taken during the meeting. Themes from the meeting were discussed among research team members.

Findings

What are the patterns of violence exposure and victimization among youth with respect to the prevalence and seriousness of polyvictimization?

Polyvictimization refers to experiencing multiple victimizations such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, bullying, and exposure to family and community violence (Finkelhor et al., 2009). Victimization experiences explored in the survey included school-based victimization, community and family victimization, as well as observed violence. Results of the cross-sectional student survey suggested that 90.3 percent of students had experienced at least one form of victimization in their lifetime. Just under 11 percent of respondents reported having experienced an isolated type of victimization, such that 79.4 percent of the student population surveyed in the FCS were victimized in multiple ways, or across multiple contexts. Just over 26 percent (i.e. 26.22%) of those surveyed reported having experienced between 2 and 4 different types of victimization, 34.5 percent reported having experienced between 5 and 9 types of victimization, and 18.7 percent reported having experienced between 10 and 20 types of victimization. To put these results in context, recent data from a nationwide survey focused on polyvictimization (Turner et al., 2016) found that roughly 21% of students reported school-based victimization and an additional 18% were defined as polyvictims. Data from the current study indicate much higher rates of both victimization, in general, and polyvictimization, in particular, among FCS students. In fact, over 18% of students reported extreme levels of polyvictimization (between 10

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and 20 victimization types), which is comparable to the national level of polyvictimization more generally. These figures did not differ by grade level, sex, or race/ethnicity of the respondent.

What is the distribution of resiliency factors across the student population?

Despite high rates of victimization and other risks among the Flint population, promotive and protective factors thought to contribute to adolescent resilience against harmful influences were also present. Promotive factors are constructs that operate in opposition to risk factors, including school commitment, prosocial peer relationships and activities, parental attachment and family milieu, and future orientation (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Researchers have consistently found that positive relationships at school and an overall positive school climate can reduce the likelihood of violence and associated injuries. Similarly, positive parent and peer relationships early in development are associated with less deviant behavior. The current study focused on three domains of resilience factors: 1) individual-, 2) interpersonal- and 3) school-related constructs. Individual resilience factors in this study included future orientation and prosocial activities. Participation in prosocial activities was high among the sample (mean = 15.97, S.D.=5.07). Future orientation among the sample was quite high (M=4.17, S.D.=.66; 5-point Likert scale). Interpersonal factors included maternal attachment and family climate, as well as prosocial peer relationships. Maternal attachment among participating youth was similarly high across the sample (M=4.24, S.D.=.76). Family climate - a 12-item composite of three subscales including participatory decision making, activities together, but also family conflict – was generally positive (M=3.61, S.D.=.63). Engaging in activities as a family were more commonly reported than youth participating in family decision making. Contrary to expectations, reported deviant peer behavior was relatively low in the sample (M=1.25, S.D.=.42; 1 = none of my friends engage in negative behaviors). While not in and of itself a

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promotive factor, it was coupled with reports that 'a little over half' of participants' friends engaged in prosocial activities (M=3.4, S.D.=.88). Finally, school-related factors included school self-efficacy, school commitment, and school climate. Although some students acknowledged they are 'doing really well' in school, the majority trended to the middle of a 3-point scale (M=1.9, S.D.=.33). In contrast, school commitment was relatively high in the sample (M=3.87, S.D.=.65; 5-point scale). School climate perceptions were slightly lower (M=3.40, S.D.=.80), but were positive overall. In summary, a key finding from our survey results is that the presence of risk factors alone does not preclude or overshadow the presence of positive influences. There is clear evidence that both risk and promotive factors co-occur within the sample. Moreover, initial examinations of bivariate correlations between risk (e.g., fear of victimization; school disorder) and promotive factors suggest relationships act in the expected directions. This suggests counteracting influences that may help students exposed to violence continue a positive developmental direction.

How do students cope with risks associated with school and community violence as they transition into high school?

There was a total of 218 interviews completed among 93 students across 3 waves of data collection. There were 60 students who were interviewed across all three waves. Of these 60 students, 43 transitioned from an FCS elementary school into the lone high school in the district, while 17 of these students transitioned to one of 5 other schools in the area. Given a key question for the study concerned how students' views of safety evolved as they transitioned to high school, we focused our initial analysis on these 60 students with full data on their experiences with victimization, school safety, and the transition to a new school.

Results concerning how students felt about their safety in their new school before the transition, upon their initial arrival in the new school, and at the end of their first year in a new school environment was somewhat unexpected. While space constraints limit a full discussion of results concerning the qualitative experience of students interviewed, we describe some quantitative figures to reflect the underlying valence of the themes generated by student interviews. In particular, the students who anticipated and ultimately attended the local FCS high school following elementary school reported mixed feelings about their impending transition. In total, of these 43 respondents, 22 generally reported feeling positive about their new school environment, and believed their experience in the new school would be safe. Five of the 43 students expressed mixed feelings concerning their new school, and were coded as being relatively neutral in their assessment of their future safety in the local high school. Thirteen of the 43 respondents reported concerns about student safety and their comfort in transitioning to the local high school. For the 17 students who ultimately attended a school outside of the FCS, which were more traditional middle or junior high schools, 13 expressed positive feelings about the transition and did not envision issues with student safety. Only 1 student expressed generally negative feelings about their upcoming transition, while 3 students did not know where they were going to school the following year, so had difficulty describing their expectations.

Students interviewed at wave 2, approximately 2 to 3 months after their transition to a new school, reported distinct changes in their attitudes concerning student safety issues in the FCS high school. Specifically, while 13 students expressed distinct concerns about their safety before the transition, only 2 students expressed consistent negative feelings about their new school environment post transition. Instead, 28 of the 43 students expressed positive sentiments about the new school. Further, 31 of the 43 students reported that their new school was a safe

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place, with 25 of these students even suggesting that their new school was safer than their elementary school. Of the 17 students who left the FCS for other schools in the area, they maintained a generally positive outlook on their school, and believed their new school was safer than their former elementary school (13 of 17 suggested their new school was safer, and 1 said it was less safe).

By the 3rd wave of interview data collection, students once again described a very different experience with school safety overall. Whereas student perceptions of the FCS high school environment were better at wave 2 relative to wave 1, student descriptions of their level of safety and general feelings about school diminished at wave 3. While 19 of the 43 students remained generally positive about their experiences, 10 students described mixed feelings about their experiences in high school, and 13 students expressed negative experiences. Thus, while many students' views concerning the FCS high school improved early in the school year, students described noticing greater levels of disorder and conflict as the academic year progressed. In contrast, students who attended schools outside the FCS remained generally positive about their school experiences, similar to their overall pattern across all three waves.

A second theme to emerge from the qualitative interviews concerning student responses to experiences of victimization was that students frequently minimized the impact of victimization on their lives. That is, students frequently responded to questions about their own victimization experiences and how they believed it impacted them by suggesting it was not something that negatively affected them, or that they thought of regularly after the incident(s). To put this in perspective, examination of responses associated with the interview questions that focused on student experiences with physical and verbal altercations at school revealed that the most commonly used term in student responses across all three waves of interview data was

"just." This term was used a total of 526 times in response to two questions that asked about their own or a close friend's experiences with verbal or physical altercations.[1] This term was most often used to downplay the seriousness of altercations, as well as the aftermath. For instance, the following is an exchange between an interviewer and interviewee about an altercation he witnessed between one of his friends and another student that demonstrates the minimization of the seriousness of student fights:

> Interviewer: How did you feel after? Because you saw this, right? How did you feel after you saw this eighth grader come up and start swinging on him? What did you do?
> Anthony[2]: What did I do? I just sat there because I don't really care if they fought or not. It's just a fight, so I don't really care.

Interviewees also tended to suggest that there were minimal lingering issues after altercations, such as the events described below, one about a heated exchange that occurred at a local basketball court, and the next about a physical altercation that occurred in school:

> Interviewer: How did you feel about it after?
> Eric: I just continued to play basketball. When he said that I was just like, okay man.
> Interviewer: How do you feel about it now?
> Eric: This is the only time I've thought about it because I just forget about all the bad stuff.
>
> Interviewer: How did you feel right after he tried to choke you?
> Michael: I don't know why. It didn't hurt or anything. But it ... I think it was like the first time I ever got in a fight. I started crying, like when we went to the next classroom
> Interviewer: How do you feel about it now?
> Michael: I don't think anything of it. I don't think anything of it. It doesn't bother me anymore.

What is perhaps most interesting about the pervasive minimization of the seriousness and lasting impact of student altercations is whether these responses are truly indicative of how these students felt about their experiences with conflict, or whether it served as a coping mechanism.

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[1] The next most frequently used word was "verbally," which was used 445 times, but appeared in the text of the question and arose in student responses in a way that affirmed the type of altercation for the interviewer.
[2] All names used in this report are pseudonyms.

That is, downplaying the frequency with which they think about past fights or the impact they have on them emotionally or socially may in and of itself be a way to cope with what appears to be a relatively frequent occurrence in the lives of students in the FCS given the quantitative findings in this regard. Alternatively, such responses may also be a consequence of the developmental stage of the respondents. Talking about one's feelings, and how particular events impact future feelings and interactions may require a level of introspection and expression that students in 5th through 7th grade are not yet comfortable. Perhaps if they engaged in more frequent interviews with the research team, where they were able to build more rapport with the interviewers, they may have felt more comfortable speaking about the influence of victimization on their daily lives. That said, current results suggest students in the FCS do not feel their altercations with other youth are serious or have a lasting impact on them personally.

With respect to the etiology of student conflict, a particularly important theme that emerged from the data was the importance of social media and the internet in the generation and escalation of interpersonal conflict. Students routinely described how "beefs" between youth would start or escalate because of social media exchanges. Beef is a colloquial term used to mean some form of disagreement between people or groups. For most of these conflicts, beefs would start on social media and then potentially progress to the real world. For example, Hunter observed that people "usually say something bad about other people, and then at school the next day, they'd argue or more." Likewise, Alexis detailed the effect of a disagreement that started through social media: "This boy he came up to one of my friends and just started yelling at her and cussing her out because he got mad over nothing…Over something that happened on social media." One of Kiara's friends got into an argument that started online and moved to the real world, saying "So they went outside and my best friend was like, 'So you steady talking all that

stuff on Facebook and you always saying this or that.' Or whatever, and the girl's like, 'Okay, just shut up and run up.'" Directionality of the conflict was sometimes muddled to where it was hard to tell where the conflicted originated, as illustrated by DeShawn, who stated "Most of the time the fights lead to stuff that's on Facebook and stuff and they were talking about it at school, then it happened." Youth in our study systematically recognized the role of social media in the etiology of interpersonal conflicts.

How do FCS stakeholders interpret these findings, and what are the implications for policy and practice in the district?

Members of the stakeholder group were not surprised by the high rates of victimization reported by the students in our sample. This group described past experiences with students who have either shared their stories of victimization with them personally, or they have become aware of pervasive victimization through word of mouth in the school. They agreed that student victimization at school was a problem, but described much of the on-site victimization as being less severe than those students are exposed to in their neighborhoods and at home. A particularly poignant response to this reality shared by the group was the positive role school could play in the lives of youth most affected by polyvictimization, as the school could serve as a safe place for students to rest and relax. In this way, the stakeholder group recommended added resources be put in place to not only hire more social workers for the school, but to put more resources into retaining them after they are hired, as these positions suffer from high turnover.

The stakeholder group was also not surprised by the findings concerning a change in student perceptions of student safety over the course of the academic year. They suggested a potential issue with student perceptions of safety may be due to the persistent change in administrators in the high school, as well as the impact of teacher turnover. Teachers also

appeared to agree with the assertion made by a single respondent that students become cognizant of the failures of security the longer they remain in the school, including the ineffectiveness of student pat downs and metal detectors.

Implications for Criminal Justice Policy and Practice

Broadly, the implications of the current study for criminal justice policy and practice are clear. Students in the FCS experience rates of victimization that are far in excess of the general U.S. population of school-aged youth. Given evidence of the ramifications of polyvictimization on student health and well-being, coupled with the extremely high rates of polyvictimization in this population, targeted resources focused explicitly upon mitigating harms experienced by students are necessary, along with measures aimed at the prevention of future victimization. The role of social media and the internet in the etiology of violence and conflict cannot be ignored, suggesting programming and interventions aimed at this social venue may help reduce victimization rates. These resources should come in the way of evidenced-based practices for responding to victimization in ways that can influence multiple domains in the child's life. Given the pervasiveness of the issue in the FCS, non-targeted interventions are also likely to produce widespread benefits. Few students were unaffected by crime and victimization, and as such there is little concern with respect to the efficacy of implementing programs and practices that target the general school-based population. Finally, stakeholders in the FCS suggested stable and effective leadership targeted at the development and sustainment of programming aimed at the successful transition of students into high school is needed, along with personnel and programming that can respond to the needs of students who are faced with unique challenges. The stakeholder group was consistent in their description of the negative consequences of persistent administrator, teacher, and staff turnover in the district. Inaction due

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to inconsistent messaging and leadership on core issues associated with student safety and well-being was described as a particular challenge associated with frequent changes in leadership.

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