

Understanding and Estimating Human Trafficking Prevalence in the U.S.

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Abstract

Human trafficking (HT) is a crime with many complexities. The crime itself involves categories of individuals, intersections with industry, teams of people working to stop trafficking, and those that deal with the aftermath of the crime, to include and most significantly, restitution of victims to a thriving and surviving status. Human trafficking is not a new crime per se, it is often referred to a “modern-day slavery”, however the prevalence of the crime both in the U.S. and internationally seems to illude researchers, practitioners, analysts, and ultimately policy makers. It is well known in the community, that the data used to describe the crime is that of reported cases, not actual cases. Only few efforts have been made to estimate the true prevalence of the crime. The intent of this article is:

- *Identify data sources of human trafficking currently used for reporting in the U.S.*
- *Identify procedures, policies, and mechanisms for reporting HT cases in the U.S.*
- *Identify and evaluate prior contributions to estimate the actual prevalence of HT in the U.S.*

Simply put, we will explore the “knowns” of HT and the efforts to date to understand and estimate the “unknowns”. This exploration will include what data collection efforts have been implemented and how that data is being used for estimations. Additionally, this document will explore the efforts to identify and define the intelligence gap in human trafficking in the U.S. This definition of the gap will ultimately allow for more defined data collection, better estimations, and eventually provide decision makers with actionable intelligence for changes to more effective legislation and other methods to ultimately combat this horrific crime.

Keywords: Human Trafficking, knowledge management, sex trafficking

INTRODUCTION

This document will state multiple times that the crime of human trafficking is complex, and many elements of the crime will be highlighted to include both the human and non-human variables. Statistics and numbers mean very little without the recognition that the commodity being sold is a human, and very often that human is unaware of the entrapment or lifestyle they have been set into very carefully by their trafficker. Data to highlight the victims (the human side) includes demographics, age, risk factors and vulnerabilities to name just a few. Data collection on the non-human side of human trafficking include forms, typology, access points, and recruitment locations of human trafficking.

Who is collecting data on HT currently in the U.S. and what data is collected? Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs)

The Bureau of Justice Statistics compiles data from local, state, federal, and tribal LEAs, Victim Service Providers (VSPs), and prosecution and correction entities. The Combat Human Trafficking Act of 2015 (CHTA) requires the BJS to account for human trafficking offences with a yearly report. The yearly summary provides data on the number of cases of HT arrest, prosecution, conviction, and sentence at each government level (Human Trafficking Data Collection Activities, 2022, 2022). The BJS also notes specifically in the definitions of HT that “The classification of human trafficking offenses varies among state and local jurisdictions”. Reporting requirements for LEAs fall under the Unified Crime Reporting (UCR) Act, extended to include HT cases, the UCR-HT data collection was established in 2013 by the FBI. The definition of HT for the UCR collection is the following (Human Trafficking Data Collection Activities, 2022, n.d.):

- “Commercial sex acts—inducing a person by force, fraud, or coercion to participate in commercial sex acts, or in which the person induced to perform such act(s) has not attained 18 years of age.
- Involuntary servitude—obtaining of a person(s) through recruitment, harboring, transportation, or provision, and subjecting such persons by force, fraud, or coercion into involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery (not to include commercial sex acts)” Recognizing needed improvements from a summary-based reporting system, to an incident-based reporting system, the National Incident-Based Reporting System was (NIBRS) established in 2021 for LEAs. This change helped to identify smaller parts of the crime that may be linked to larger HT issues. For example, the arrest of an individual for prostitution could indicate larger scale human trafficking, so when only categorized by the summary report, no capture of possible HT would be recorded, just prostitution. The Census of Tribal Law Enforcement Agencies (CTLEA) was also established in 2019 to capture policies and practices of tribal LEAs with respect to HT issues. The response rate of tribal LEAs was overwhelmingly positive (in the 90-100% response), indicating a desire for collaboration regarding human trafficking issues. Additional collection and reporting currently in the US are the criminal cases in state courts (CCSC), federal justice statistics program (FJSP) and the national corrections reporting program (NCRP). The BJS has implemented the addition of standardized offense codes for human trafficking in these reporting mechanisms which also includes state offenses for sex trafficking or transport, child prostitution, forced labor trafficking, human trafficking, and similar crimes.

Table 1 below, “Characteristics of human trafficking defendants in cases charged in U.S. district court, fiscal year 2020” (2022 - Human Trafficking Data Collection Activities, 2022.Pdf, n.d.) shows the defendant characteristics and demographics collected by the CCSC reporting system.

Characteristics of human trafficking defendants in cases charged in U.S. district court, fiscal year 2020

Defendant characteristics	Total		Peonage, slavery, forced labor, and sex trafficking		Sexual exploitation and other abuse of children		Transportation for illegal sex activity	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	1,169	100%	208	100%	529	100%	432	100%
Sex								
Male	1,072	91.9%	162	78.3%	490	92.6%	420	97.4%
Female	95	8.1	45	21.7	39	7.4	11	2.6
Race/Hispanic origin*								
White	697	62.6%	52	25.7%	365	72.3%	280	69.0%
Black	196	17.6	100	49.5	46	9.1	50	12.3
Hispanic	187	16.8	43	21.3	79	15.6	65	16.0
American Indian or Alaska Native	12	1.1	3	1.5	6	1.2	3	0.7
Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander	21	1.9	4	2.0	9	1.8	8	2.0
Age								
18–24	169	14.5%	49	23.7%	70	13.2%	50	11.6%
25–34	404	34.6	71	34.3	188	35.5	145	33.6
35–49	422	36.2	66	31.9	199	37.6	157	36.4
50–64	144	12.3	13	6.3	61	11.5	70	16.2
65 or older	28	2.4	8	3.9	11	2.1	9	2.1
Median age	35 years		32 years		35 years		36 years	
Citizenship								
U.S. citizen	1,093	94.6%	174	85.3%	509	97.0%	410	96.2%
Documented non-U.S. citizen	25	2.2	4	2.0	11	2.1	10	2.3
Undocumented non-U.S. citizen	37	3.2	26	12.7	5	1.0	6	1.4
Prior conviction								
No prior convictions	774	66.3%	110	53.1%	369	69.7%	295	68.4%
Prior misdemeanor only	149	12.8	25	12.1	72	13.6	52	12.1
Prior felony conviction	244	20.9	72	34.8	88	16.6	84	19.5

Note: The unit of count was a defendant interviewed, investigated, or supervised by federal pretrial services. Data were missing for the following: sex (2), race/Hispanic origin (56), age (2), citizenship (14), and prior conviction (2).

*Excludes persons of Hispanic or Latino origin, unless specified.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, based on data from the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, Probation and Pretrial Services Automated Case Tracking System, fiscal year 2020.

Table 1: Characteristics of human trafficking defendants in cases charged in U.S. district court, fiscal year 2020

The first problem with HT data is outright stated in the BJS documentation (Human Trafficking Data Collection Activities, 2022, 2022): “Human trafficking data reported by the FBI represent only human trafficking offenses and arrests submitted by states and law enforcement agencies with the ability to record and report them. Consequently, the information available understates the full scope of human trafficking offenses known to local law enforcement.”

Simply stated, within the LEA collection and categorization of human trafficking in the U.S., only known instances of HT are captured, when an arrest and/or conviction has been made. The definition, categorization, and classification of HT offenses based on the jurisdictional levels noted above provides the second challenge to capturing HT data. From the LEA perspective of HT data collection, only known cases are recorded and jurisdictional differences in classification and categorization create inconsistent HT data. The “knowns” are not accurately captured.

Victim Service Providers (VSPs)

A wealth of knowledge regarding details of the HT crime exists within each survivor, but as with other elements of human trafficking, exploring this knowledge is tricky. The chains of this modern-day slavery are nearly always psychological and often brought on by substance abuse, physical and/or psychological abuse, dependency created by the trafficker, debt bondage, control of documents and money, and mental manipulation that trap the victim into the mindset that LEAs will not help, and there are few others that care and/or provide solutions.

The knowledge that could be gained through work with victims/survivors could be extensive. Inexplicably though, victims do not self-identify, often for years. Shame plays a huge role in this mindset of HT victims, and recognition of the trafficking angle often comes from skilled and knowing victim service workers.

The BJS recognized the potential to capture data from VSPs and a new initiative in 2019 was created for this purpose. A national survey of victim service providers (NSVSP) was administered by a representative sample of VSPs to identify resources and services for victims, characterization of victims and staff, and organizational policies and practices. Additional demographics of victims were collected.

NGOs

In the U.S., an excellent resource of HT data has been collected and provided by the Polaris organization, a non-profit NGO based in Washington, D.C. Founded in 2002, Polaris recognized a number of needs to combat the crime of HT, and to date, have created the standard and nationally recognized hotline for anyone to use for inquiries, help, and resources for victims. While the hotline was created to help humans, it also provided a mechanism to collect data about HT in the U.S. This data has been integral to supplementing HT data provided by LEAs and VSPs. Additionally, since the data is national, the compilation does not have the challenges of multiple jurisdictions' standards, categorization, and definitions of what constitutes a crime of HT.

The problem remains, "what is the gap between reported HT cases versus actual cases?". Polaris states outright that statistics do not represent the real problem on their website addressing myths and facts of human trafficking. "In 2021, 10,359 situations of human trafficking were reported to the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline involving 16,554 individual victims. Shocking as these numbers are, they are likely only a fraction of the actual problem."

Literature Review of studies to address HT data collection and estimation of prevalence in the U.S.

Beginning with a review of the previously mentioned UCR-HT reporting act adopted in 2013, the National Institute for Justice sponsored a study to address the following research questions (Capturing Human Trafficking Victimization Through Crime Reporting, n.d.):

- "How are human trafficking cases identified and reported by the police?"
- How are human trafficking cases identified by the police?"
- Once human trafficking cases are identified, how are these cases reported within internal law enforcement information systems?"
- Once human trafficking cases are identified, how are these cases reported to external crime reporting programs such as the state reporting systems or the UCR program?"

- What sources of information about human trafficking incidents exist outside of law enforcement data?
- How could the sharing of information from these data sources improve case identification and increase our understanding of the prevalence of human trafficking within a jurisdiction?
- What are the barriers to sharing information across administrative systems?
- What is the estimated disparity between actual instances of human trafficking?
- How frequently are human trafficking victims identified across multiple administrative data systems in a community?
- What are the reasons for the disparity between reported UCR offenses and the actual prevalence of identified and unidentified human trafficking in a community?"

The authors selected local jurisdictions in the U.S. that had significant population size and fell into one of 3 categories, reported previously reported HT cases through the UCR program, reported cases through the NIBRS system, no reports through the UCR program but had investigated HT cases. Studying cases in the years 2013-2015, the team conducted telephone interviews to identify 3 local jurisdictions identified as “Northeast”, “West”, and “South”. Semi structured interviews were then conducted with members of each jurisdiction with involvement of HT cases or reporting of such cases.

Results of the interviews were coded to identify how the matter came to the attention of the police, type of HT, and offense description. Through this process, each case within each jurisdiction was evaluated leaving either “confirmed” cases of HT, or removed due to mis categorization or data entry errors. The “South” jurisdiction was removed from the study as most offenses were categorized as prostitution.

Further analysis included review of non-trafficking related cases. Each jurisdiction included a random sample of 50 cases that were not reported as HT, but related, such as prostitution, pimping, sex offenders, etc. The various incidents identified and coded were further reviewed with additional sources, such as VSP details on a particular case. All data in the strata was compared to determine any replicas, and identify instances of HT that were not actually captured as such in the LEAs’ reporting. Finally, using multiple system estimation (MSE) statistical analysis, as such methodology has been identified as useful for social problems, the results include the following:

- Accurate data relies on HT identification by LEAs
- ID of labor trafficking victims is very difficult
- Categorization of crime through LEA
- Resistance by LEAs to code incidents as HT
- If reported by local LE, may not be coded by State LE due to time, or different categories
- Service orgs and other challenges to identify and classify as HT

- Service orgs that did id HT, did not have adequate data systems to record
- Only a fraction of HT instances are captured by LEAs or service orgs
- LEA HT records alone, estimated to be even worse (than adding other records)
- UCR – unified crime reporting, undercounts

Highly focused on the statistical method of MSE, the authors recommend several future considerations surrounding that data collection including collaboration of LEA and VSP data for communities that do not work these together, and to capture data such as race, gender, and age. A high emphasis was placed on using MSE for social statistical studies in both the field of human trafficking studies and others to continue to drive this methodology forward in terms of recognition and practice. This article captures timely (2020) data, current reporting mechanisms and promising statistical techniques for estimating this type of social issue.

Implementing a scoping review research approach, Franchino-Olsen et al. (2022) address the prevalence of sex trafficking of children and adolescents in the U.S. The authors provide summaries of 6 studies, methodologies used, estimates provided, and strengths and weaknesses of each study specifically involving domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) and commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) to address the following research questions (*Franchino-Olsen et al. - 2022 - The Prevalence of Sex Trafficking of Children And. Pdf*, n.d.):

- Research Question 1: What methods have been used to estimate the prevalence of DMST/CSEC in the United States?
- Research Question 2: What are the findings of these studies?
- Research Question 3: What are the strengths and limitations of the studies and methods used to estimate the prevalence of DMST/CSEC in the United States? The review followed the PRISMA guidelines for scoping as seen in figure 1 below (Franchino-Olsen et al., 2022):

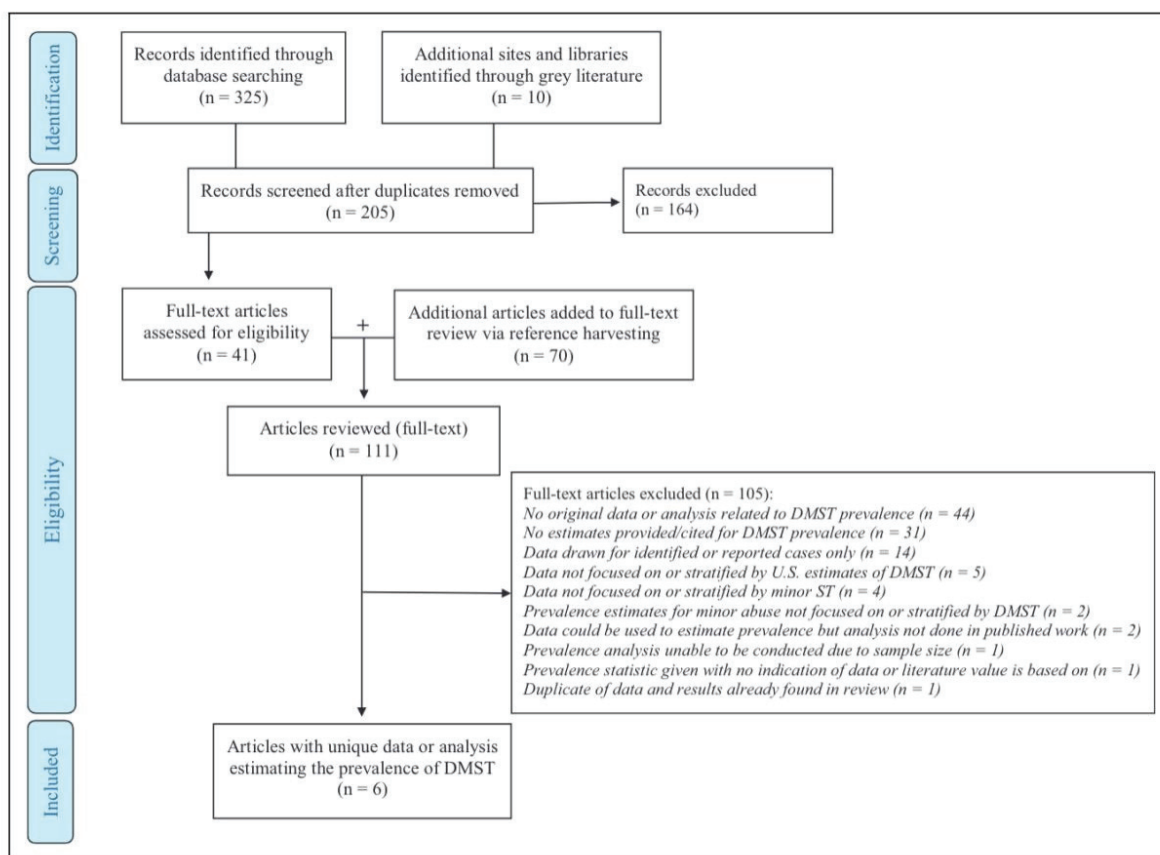


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of search result

The study selection process consisted of database searches of peer-reviewed literature, reference list scans of literature selected, and grey literature search derived from expert knowledge in the HT field. Grey literature included articles and websites with health issues related to victims, domestic abuse, criminal statistics such as BJS, NIJ, and BJS, and Polaris VSP. The scoping selection process yielded 6 studies produced between 1999 and 2017.

Study 1: Greene, J. M., Ennett, S. T., & Ringwalt, C. L. (1999). Prevalence and correlates of survival sex among runaway and homeless youth. *American Journal of Public Health*, 89(9), 1406–1409.

Survival sex of runaways and homeless youth (ages 12-21) include those who conducted a sex act for basic human needs such as food and shelter. The sample population of youth's either living on the street or in shelters in 1992 were interviewed in person by investigators to determine the exact need or cause for the sexual act. A nationally representative sample of youths included 631 living in shelters, and 528 living on the streets. The study did find that 10% of youth in shelters, and 28% of youth on the streets participated in survival sex, noting that the prevalence increased with the age of the youth.

The study's strength was noted as exploring the challenges of a marginalized community that is difficult to measure, and the weakness was noted that this did not apply to other youths that are not without a home. It is the opinion of this author that this type of study is highly valuable in terms of vulnerable individuals to HT, and recommend similar studies of this population in current times as the crime of HT has evolved drastically since 1992.

Study 2: Estes, R. J., & Weiner, N. A. (2001). The commercial sexual exploitation of children in the U.S., Canada and Mexico (Vol. 2001). University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work Center for the Study of Youth Policy.

Similar in nature, the Estes et al. (2001) study identified youth in the at-risk category of CSEC via mail-in surveys disseminated to experts in the fields of LEAs and VSPs to include 268 responses from the U.S., Canada, and Mexico throughout a 27-month period ending March 31, 2001. In addition to the surveys, interviews were conducted with victim survivors, CSEC experts in HT, and traffickers (Canada and Mexico only). Evaluation of this data with other source data provided an estimate of 244k-325k children are at risk in a given year. The findings did not identify the extrapolation from a study of youth at a high-risk level to the general youth population, nor account for duplicates in the data collection. Again, an updated study would be recommended.

Study 3: Edwards, J. M., Iritani, B. J., & Hallfors, D. D. (2006). Prevalence and correlates of exchanging sex for drugs or money among adolescents in the United States. *Sexually Transmitted Infections*, 82(5), 354–358. <https://doi.org/10.1136/sti.2006.020693>

Edwards et al. (2006) study of youth that exchange sex for money or drugs surveyed U.S. youth (grades 7-12) from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health in 2 data collection waves. The first asking if they have exchanged sex for money or drugs, the second wave asking the same as the first, and how many times if so. The estimate concluded that 3.5% had exchanged sex for money or drugs, and 67.9% were boys. While the report was published in 2006, the data was collected between 1994 and 1996, again calling for an updated study.

Study 4: Dank, M. L. (2011). The commercial sexual exploitation of children (M. Mcshane & F. P. Williams, Eds.). LFB Scholarly Publishing. Focusing on youth aged under 18 living in New York City (NYC) in January 2006 to March 2007, Dank (2011) conducted data collection to evaluate the prevalence of CSEC in NYC overall. Through use of random data sampling (RDS) methodology, youths were identified as CSEC victims, and were able to provide additional youths of interest for the sample. Data was also collected and compared from the department of criminal justice to determine instances of “loitering” or “prostitution”. The analysis yielded an estimate of nearly 4k youth in NYC as CSEC victims in the 2006 timeframe. Additionally, the study revealed the existence of social networks among victims, which is a fact traffickers use for recruitment.

Study 5: Williamson, C., Karandikar-Chheda, S., Barrows, J., Smouse, T., Kelly, G., Swartz, P., Lucchin, N., Ballard, M., Tame, C., Perdue, T., Ohashi, M., Sullivan, D., Ross, C., & Gezinski, L. (2014). Ohio trafficking in person’s study commission research and analysis subcommittee report on the prevalence of human trafficking in Ohio. Looking again at a specific geographic region, Williamson et al. (2014) tackle the prevalence and estimation of children aged 12-17 for human trafficking in the state of Ohio. Building from recommendations by Study 2, Estes et. al (2001), the at-risk youth were first categorized and the following sources of data were compiled to cover the 2008-time frame: Ohio’s Missing Children Clearing House (2005–2009), A study of Midwestern states in 2001 (Whitbeck et al., 2002), The National Center on Family Homelessness (2009), The 2008 United States Census Bureau data for Ohio, and the Northwest Ohio Innocence Lost Task Force. The analysis indicated 3,016 Ohio youth are at risk for CSEC and 1,078 had become victims of the crime in 2008. Duplicates were removed, however, the same methodology from Estes et. al (2001) was applied. Use of population data in this study was considered a strength.

Study 6: O’Brien, J. E., Li, W., Givens, A., & Leibowitz, G. S. (2017). Domestic minor sex trafficking among adjudicated male youth: Prevalence and links to treatment. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 82, 392–399. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2017.09.026> O’Brien, J. E., White, K., & Rizo, C. F. (2017). Domestic minor sex trafficking among child welfare–involved youth: An exploratory study of correlates. *Child Maltreatment*, 22(3), 265–274. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107755951770999517>

Estimations of domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) among male youth aged 12-20, within 2 states in U.S., O'Brien, Li et al. (2017) surveyed 800 youth from years 2004-2009 in residential facilities for adjudicated youth. The estimation provided 10.4% of the youth had experienced DMST. This study considered a very specific category, the male gender which can be considered both a strength and weakness. While not necessarily applicable to the wider population of youths at risk, highlighting this subcategory of HT is valuable to bringing awareness to another marginalized community susceptible to predators of human trafficking.

Finally, the book produced by capturing SMEs preceding a workshop to combat human trafficking (Estimating the Prevalence of Human Trafficking in the United States: Considerations and Complexities: Proceedings of a Workshop, n.d.) provides a timely (2020) capture of discussions from a diverse set of experts. The primary purpose of the workshop was to identify and explain obstacles for better data and better estimation of HT within the US. Providing much valued insight, some of the following suggestions were identified as common themes:

1. Value of sharing data
2. Having a common understanding of what is at the core of human trafficking measurement
3. Use of HT definition terms (force or coercion) for consistent measurement among different sectors
4. No defined or common ground for how researcher approach HT
5. Hotline operators have extensive definitions but still struggle to categorize incoming calls (based on the structure they are provided)
6. Need to construct a roadmap of gap analysis of what is not known about human trafficking (and who would be appropriate to do this work)
7. The need for collaboration among a variety of sectors
8. Importance for incorporating data sharing into research strategy
9. The value added from survivor stories
10. Note of additional challenges in labor trafficking versus sex trafficking

Some subcategories of the HT problem set included sessions dedicated to health care, hidden populations, use of data from surveys and sampling, use of MSE, and network sampling

for hard to reach populations. Considered high value by attendees is the need for a gap analysis- what is not known about human trafficking. Finally, considerations of whether analysis will drive legislation was noted.

The subject matter experts from many fields, to include LEAs, Statisticians, and VSPs, "future considerations" calls for a knowledge-based approach, just short of using that terminology. Collaboration, data sharing, collection of knowledge from survivors are challenges that can be addressed through KM strategy. Explicit and tacit

knowledge from each human the crime of HT affects should be cultivated into our understanding of the prevalence of the problem in order to create meaningful solutions to end the crime.

Conclusion

Human trafficking, aka modern-day slavery, has been a crime that has evolved drastically in the last few decades. Many positive implementations have been made to educate and bring awareness, but much work still needs to be done. The challenge with conducting proper studies lies in the data collection at the onset, which makes the estimation of prevalence in its infancy stages. Further research and analysis will need to bring knowledge of HT into both the collection, curation, identification, and prevention strategies.

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