

INSIDE THE RESEARCH

# UNDERSTANDING HARM

Exploring the ideas, methods, and people at the heart of cutting-edge prevention research and translating complexity into clear, meaningful insight.

April 2026

# INTRODUCTION


Welcome to the inaugural edition of **Inside The Research**, Prevention Global's new digital magazine. Each edition will explore the ideas, methods, and people at the heart of cutting-edge prevention research. Our aim? To bring meaning and clarity to complex and nuanced research. Too often research remains behind a paywall or left on an academic shelf. The value of high-quality research is too great to leave unrealized.

This edition explores the topic of child sexual abuse perpetration as part of the launch of **Understanding Harm** – an ambitious, multi-year research initiative to generate the highest quality data on the scope and nature of perpetration. These data are necessary to drive better prevention policy and practice and to ensure more robust funding for prevention. Simply put, we seek to understand harm to end child sexual abuse.



## **Elizabeth J. Letourneau, PhD**

Moore Family Professor, Department of Mental Health  
Director, MOORE | Preventing Child Sexual Abuse  
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health



Explore an overview of how much is currently known aboutperpetration prevalence, a perspective on the drive for quality data in Brazil, what gold standard prevalence looks like, and how we met and navigated a range of ethical and legal complexities associated with researching child sexual abuse perpetration.

Welcome to **Inside The Research.**

# The nature of perpetration

How? How often? Where? Why?

Revealing the nature of perpetration is confronting and difficult for society – for all of us. And yet, this understanding is the key to better policy and practice to stop children from being harmed. We are seeking to understand harm so that we can better prevent child sexual abuse.



**Ian McPhail, PhD**

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## “PGPS examines different forms of perpetration, as well as risk and protective factors.”

valid estimates of child sexual abuse perpetration in countries across the Global North and South. The Prevention Global Perpetration Survey (PGPS) examines different forms of perpetration, as well as

risk and protective factors. We have attended to methodological principles of epidemiology to address several of the shortcomings in past research.

At present, our team has completed a survey in the US—having recruited a sample of over 6,000 adult males—and launched a survey in Brazil.

In addition, we are collaborating with colleagues in Germany—at the University Medical Centre Hamburg-Eppendorf—and Spain—at the Universitat de Barcelona—to complete two further national prevalence surveys. Furthermore, in 2024 the Violence Against Children Survey (VACS) was conducted in Tanzania. Focusing on youth 13-24, the 2024 Tanzania VACS was the first ever to include questions about child sexual abuse perpetration, which the Prevention Global team developed in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

PGPS is world-leading and will provide the first accurate and valid estimates of perpetration prevalence in our communities.

### What do we know about perpetration prevalence?

Summarizing what we know about the prevalence of child sexual abuse perpetration is straightforward: we simply don't know much. This is because, at present, there are no accurate, valid estimates of perpetration prevalence. Several past studies—that make claims about prevalence rates—have not used methods capable of providing accurate and valid prevalence estimates (see 'Good Science is Hard' for more on the challenges of prevalence research). One study<sup>\*1</sup> with a large sample of adult German males reported rates of a range of perpetration behavior (e.g. accessing child sexual exploitation material, having sexual contact with a child, travelling to have sexual contact with a child), yet the sample in that study was not truly representative. Another study<sup>\*2</sup> used a large sample of young adult males in Sweden that focused on only one form of perpetration and the sample representativeness was unclear. A more recent study, while collecting perpetration data in a large sample, utilized a non-representative online sample, which is a kind of sampling method that cannot provide valid prevalence estimates.

Over the past 2+ years, the Prevention Global team has been building a study that will provide accurate,





## **Building a picture of perpetration**

Child sexual abuse perpetration is not simply one kind of illegal and harmful behavior. Rather, there are a wide range of behaviors that qualify as perpetration and that PGPS sets out to measure – including: in-person involving sexual contact with a child, in-person that is non-contact (e.g. voyeurism or exhibitionism), online involving accessing and viewing child sexual abuse material, online involving creating or distributing child sexual abuse material, online involving soliciting sexual behavior from a child, and the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism.

There may also be a range of different risk factors for perpetrating these different types of abuse. PGPS was designed to measure a wide range of possible risk factors, 15 in total - including: general criminality, general self-regulation problems and low self-control, sexual interest in children, sexual self-regulation problems, significant problems in personal relationships (like loneliness and unstable relationships), being hostile and aggressive, cognitions that support sexual offending against children, employment/educational instability, and alcohol abuse.

Asking about many perpetration behaviors will move us beyond simply answering questions about how many people have perpetrated child sexual abuse to understanding the frequency of different types of specific behavior. By asking about risk factors, these surveys will also allow us to understand some of the reasons why individuals perpetrate these different types of abuse.

## **The benefits of perpetration prevalence research are practical, substantive, and long lasting**

In the coming years, we will have established valid estimates of prevalence for a wide range of perpetration behaviors in countries across the globe. We will also be able to provide some of the first population-level data on the risk factors for different forms of perpetration. Both of these forthcoming insights offer great hope for more effective prevention.

Prevalence estimates will tell us how many



people in society we need to reach with prevention programs, how much funding is needed to deliver them, and how many professionals need to be trained to make them work. In addition, programs themselves can be enhanced, using knowledge on risk factors to improve impact through more refined targeting and reduce cost and testing time by discarding factors that do not elevate risk.

Understanding the nature of perpetration over the medium- and long-term is also essential to inform any systematic approach to preventing child sexual abuse at a national level. Beyond baseline data, we need to be able to repeat prevalence surveys to assess the population-level impact of myriad

prevention programs and initiatives. Trends in online and harmful sexual behavior amongst youth are cautionary tales of how child sexual abuse perpetration is shifting and evolving in our societies. Reliable, robust, and nuanced prevalence data will unlock our ability to plan for, and respond to, the changing nature of perpetration.

We seek to understand harm so that we can better prevent child sexual abuse.



# The drive for data in Brazil

In 2009, while living in Brazil and never imagining I would one day become a child sexual abuse prevention scientist in the U.S., I wrote a commentary on a Brazilian book about child sexual abuse prevention. The commentary, published in 2011, pointed out how the word 'prevention' was used to characterize programs that teach adults how to identify and report abuse to authorities, as well as programs that instruct children on how to recognize, respond to, and report abuse.



**Luciana Assini-Meytin, PhD**

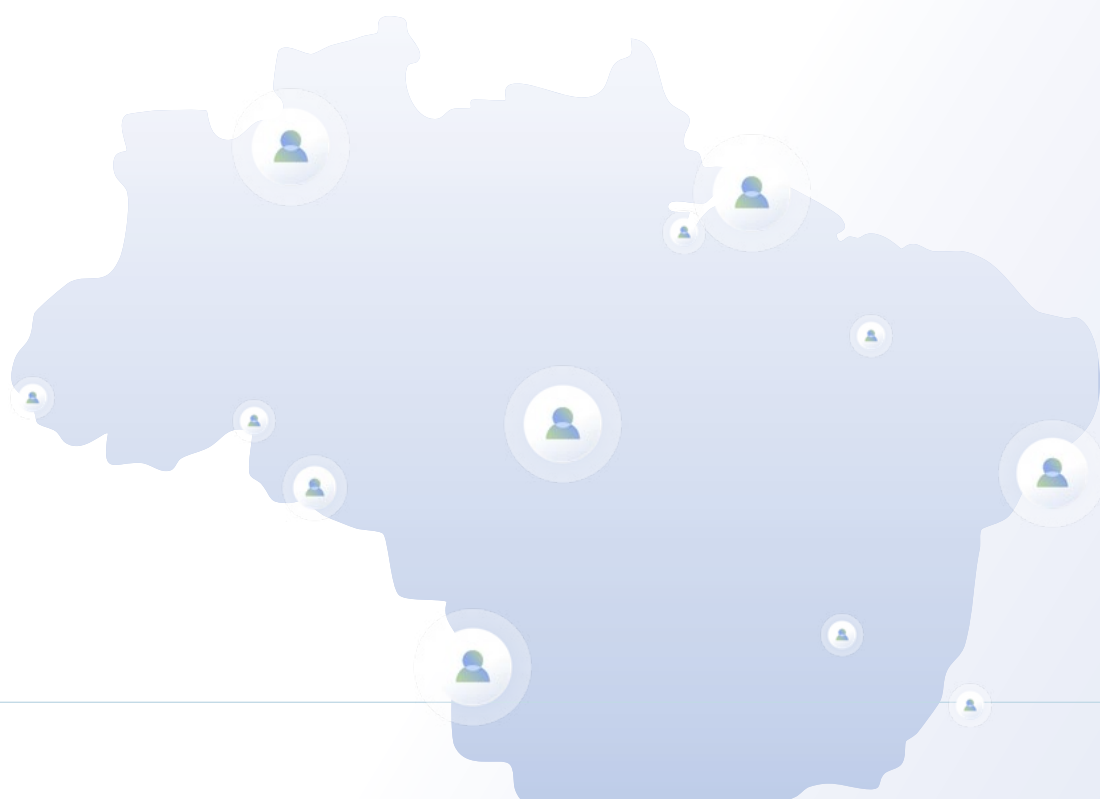
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While these two approaches are important, they are not sufficient to effectively protect children. In one approach, the child is already a victim – it's too late. In the other, we place the unrealistic expectation, and unfair responsibility, of protection on the shoulders of children. This is an expectation we do not even place on adults for their protection from sexual harm. Responsibility lies with society.

It was clear to me that this interpretation of 'prevention' would never be enough. Understanding how to effectively prevent people from sexually harming children in the first place was and is needed. As with any public health problem, effective prevention begins with an understanding of the scope of the problem, as well as the risk and protective factors that prevention programs should target. In Brazil, and across Latin America, reliable data is as essential as in any other region. Inevitably, we face a particular mix of barriers that make prevalence research a difficult mountain to scale.

## **The state of prevalence data in Latin America**

Much like many regions of the world, we have insufficient prevalence data in Latin America. This is true of both victimization and perpetration prevalence. In a comprehensive global analysis of child sexual victimization prevalence published at the Lancet, Cagney and colleagues\* reveal the low number of data sources and low frequency of publication of contemporary data in Latin America, particularly in comparison with the US and Australia. These disparities in victimization prevalence data underscore broader issues, including insufficient government investment in scientific research and public health surveillance systems, as well as the limited availability of research funding. Where victimization prevalence data is lacking, perpetration prevalence data is nonexistent.



## Overcoming barriers in Brazil

In many ways the Brazilian context mirrors that of the rest of Latin America. However, two stark differences caught my attention.

Firstly, in a vast country like Brazil, obtaining accurate and robust prevalence data using online panels that can be generalized to the wider population is extremely difficult. While some survey companies maintain probability-based panels, they lack participants from very low-income groups and remote areas. Significant parts of the population are very hard to reach – literally and socially.

Secondly, there is a notable lack of support resources for participants completing the surveys. These resources are essential in creating a safe environment for participants, and to encourage participation. In the prevalence survey our team conducted in the US, we included resources for

survivors and victims of abuse, and for individuals concerned about their thoughts and behaviors regarding children. These resources were tailored for individuals of different ages (e.g. adults, youth and young adults). In contrast, the only online resource available in Brazil was a general hotline for those experiencing emotional distress or suicidal thoughts. This limitation underscores a major gap in accessible preventive resources. This matters for two reasons: we have a duty of care to all respondents and particularly those who have suffered abuse, and survey research also presents an opportunity to deliver prevention services. With perpetration prevention in mind, including resources in a large prevalence survey is a significant opportunity to interrupt someone's pathway to perpetration, and consequently safeguard children. Without tailored Brazilian resources available, it is an opportunity missed.

## **An emerging picture**

However, strides are being made in the direction of understanding harm and preventing adults from sexually abusing children in Brazil. For example, World Childhood Foundation Brazil has prioritized the phenomenon of child sexual abuse on Brazil's highways. Through an ambitious research initiative, they have collected data on truck drivers at three points over 10 years (2005, 2010, 2015). This data collection is part of a campaign to change truck drivers' attitudes towards the sexual exploitation of children and has engaged with more than one million

**“Survey research also presents an opportunity to deliver much needed prevention services.”**

truck drivers across the country. Advances have also been made in the understanding of father-daughter incest in Brazil, with a survey of over 1000 Brazilian fathers carried out by Seto and colleagues\*.

However, quality and reliable data on the scale and patterns of harm is only emerging. Our understanding of the perpetration of in-person and online sexual abuse and exploitation in Brazil is nascent. We are very excited to be adding the findings from PGPS-Brazil to this emerging picture of evidence later in 2026. Still, it is crystal clear that more is needed. In Brazil, like elsewhere, a dearth of data limits our ability to act and delays the moment at which society must reckon with, and commit to preventing, child sexual abuse.



# Good science is hard


We need good data. But very often that is neither easy nor straightforward. This is particularly true in the pursuit of reliable prevalence data on child sexual abuse perpetration.

There are many reasons to do prevalence research and good prevalence data provide vast benefits to society – helping us to understand the scale and nature of a social problem so we can do more to prevent harm.



**Ian McPhail, PhD**

Research Associate, MOORE | Preventing Child Sexual Abuse  
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## “Through Understanding Harm, we are navigating potential research pitfalls in real time.”

Gathering reliable data is hard, and the pitfalls are many, but quality really matters. Inaccurate prevalence estimates have real-world consequences, misinforming public perception, skewing policy responses, and compromising the design of prevention programs.

Through the Understanding Harm initiative, we are navigating potential research pitfalls in real time. Our aim? To contribute to a gold standard for perpetration prevalence methodology for the global sector.

### **‘Gold standard’ methodology and why it matters**

At the outset, it is important to make this clear: doing gold standard research is complex, time intensive, and costly. Yet going through the pain and effort is worth it to ensure good science is the foundation for major decisions. Here are the three main features of gold standard prevalence research:



# 1

## **Representative Recruitment**

*The people recruited into the survey are representative of the target population.*

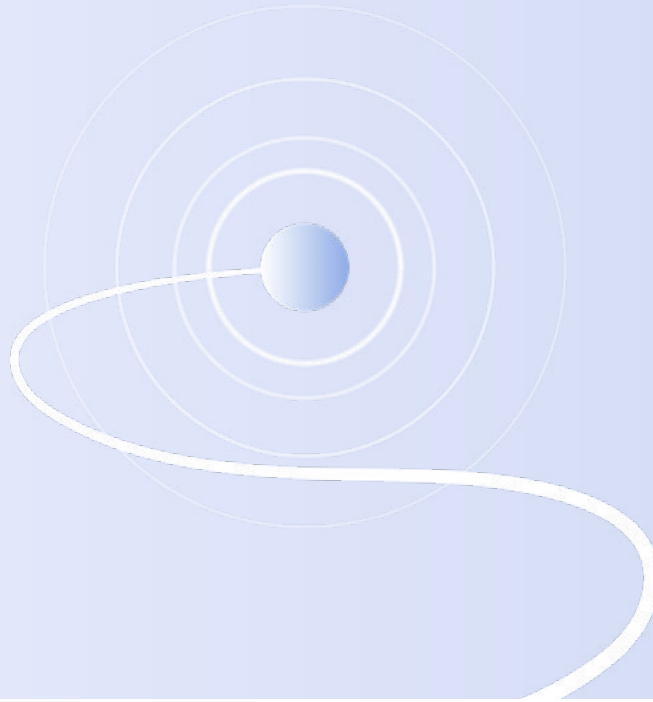
Good prevalence research recruits a sample that is representative of the population. This requires two things. One, researchers have access to a list of members from the target population that is representative of the target population. That is, everyone in the target population has some chance of being included on this list. Two, participants are recruited at random from this list. Commonly used recruitment methods—like using quota sampling or sampling large samples online via social media—do not result in gold standard prevalence data because these methods fail to recruit a representative sample.

# 2

## **Representative Responses**

*The people who responded to the survey are representative of the target population.*

Not everyone who is invited to participate in a survey will complete it. A good prevalence study will (a) have a low rate of people who don't complete the survey, typically under 30%; and (b) show that these incompletions are not correlated with important participant characteristics. For example, if someone is doing a prevalence study for depression, they do not want to find that people who didn't complete the survey experienced a lot of risk factors for depression or all came from a certain age group. A scenario like this would suggest a survey design that impeded a representative range of responders.



# 3

## **Valid Outcome Measures**

*The outcomes are measured in a valid way.*

Researchers want to use measures that are valid and provide a good, accurate assessment of the outcomes they are interested in. Mainly, a good prevalence survey will use measures that do not risk misclassifying people as having or not having the condition under study.

## **Interpreting ‘gold standard’ in the child sexual abuse prevention field**

In addition to these requirements for good prevalence research, researchers wanting to estimate child sexual abuse perpetration prevalence rates face several additional issues. Child sexual abuse is not a single kind of behavior. There are many forms of behavior that are exploitative, harmful, and illegal. Child sexual abuse can range from in-person sexually abusive behavior to online behavior, which itself can range from viewing child sexual exploitation material to requesting sexual pictures from children and paying to view live streamed child sexual abuse.

Gold standard prevalence research in this area will ask about a wide range of behaviors to ensure we understand the prevalence of many different forms of child sexual abuse. Different perpetration behaviors require different approaches to prevention, so detail and accuracy matter.



## **Navigating varying ages of consent**

Scientifically robust research on the prevalence of child sexual abuse perpetration will also take into account issues arising from age of consent laws. It is easy not to take this complexity into account when designing a prevalence survey. For example, sexual behavior between an 18-year-old and a 17-year-old is not considered illegal in most jurisdictions and not typically considered problematic from the perspective of harm and preventing harm. Yet some research makes this methodological mistake.

We would expect it to be developmentally normative and relatively frequent for individuals who are just entering adulthood (i.e., 18, 19, and 20-year-olds) to have intimate and sexual relationships with older adolescents who are their peers (i.e., 17-year-olds). Labelling such normative behavior child sexual abuse will serve to inflate the prevalence of perpetration in the population. For instance, in one of our national surveys, the rate of non-illegal sexual contact was between 5 and 20 times higher than illegal child sexual abuse. ++

## **Revealing risk factors**

High quality prevalence research will also measure multiple risk factors for perpetration. For example, a prevalence survey could ask about having a sexual interest in children, experiencing pervasive problems in emotion regulation, or having significant problems establishing and maintaining relationships with adults. Child sexual abuse has multiple causes—with sexual interest in children playing a role in perhaps 30–50% of cases—and assessing these other causes is vital to understanding why abuse occurs. Robust research will use measures with evidence to show that they are effective at gathering the right information. Assessing for risk factors is of central importance because the evidence base simply lacks data on how prevalent these risk factors are and nor do we know how strongly each risk factor is associated with offending behavior in the general population. To be effective, prevention efforts need to address risk factors that are empirically linked to perpetration.



## **What are the consequences of doing prevalence research poorly?**

Good science is hard. Conducting gold standard perpetration prevalence research is difficult to accomplish. Yet, failing to meet these demands will lead to estimates that are at best untrustworthy and at worst, inaccurate and misleading. Untrustworthy estimates leave society in the same position as it was before the study was done: no closer to understanding the actual prevalence rate of child sexual abuse perpetration. Inaccurate estimates skew our understanding of how pervasive perpetration is and the scale of different types of harm. Given our current state of knowledge, where we completely lack reliable perpetration prevalence estimates, any research that purports to provide prevalence estimates will attract substantial media attention. In this context, researchers have a significant responsibility to get it right.

Perpetration prevalence research offers an incredible opportunity to better understand harm so that we can more effectively prevent abuse. To maintain political momentum and funding support in the long term, we must build from solid data foundations. In order to truly further the prevention of child sexual abuse, researchers need to meet the difficult demands prevalence research places on them, head on. There is no shortcut to good science.



# Walking an ethical and legal tightrope

Child sexual abuse is a critical and global problem that requires a comprehensive, multi-sector response involving public policy, law enforcement, science, and practitioners. A fundamental starting position is good data. Good data is necessary to inform the best evidence-based policies and practice. But it is difficult to do this research because child sexual abuse is one of the most sensitive and stigmatized topics in society.



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the public and policymakers still tend to focus on ‘stranger danger’ when talking about the risk of online child sexual exploitation and abuse, which can lead to the prioritizing of stranger-focused items in short surveys. But more recent research suggests that perpetrators are often known to victims\*.

## **Reporting and survey anonymity**

There is also confusion about the impact of mandatory reporting laws on research. These important laws exist to protect identifiable children from abuse. Many jurisdictions have laws that mandate reporting. For example, in my home province of Ontario in Canada, we are legally

**“The public and policymakers still tend to focus on ‘stranger danger’ when talking about risk.”**

obligated to report if we are aware of an identifiable child at risk of child maltreatment, including child sexual abuse. Simultaneously, an obligation to report could be triggered if the identity of a perpetrator is known, and they report engaging in sexual offenses involving children. In this scenario, authorities could theoretically determine if the participant

Studying child sexual abuse perpetration in particular is difficult because many cases are underreported and thus clinical and criminal justice research studies produce incomplete pictures of this phenomenon. And, the collection of perpetration data from community samples is difficult because potential respondents are often concerned about self-incrimination and consequently reluctant to participate.

## **Survey value and feasibility**

The first tension comes as we consider how to ask about the myriad ways in which child sexual abuse can occur. There is an inherent tradeoff here between scientific value, policy value, and feasibility. For example, a survey with all the forms of child sexual exploitation and abuse, and follow-up questions such as age of victim or relationship to victim, would be of the highest scientific value, but this kind of survey would be challenging to conduct. It would be very expensive and it would be very long – which would have a negative impact on the recruitment and retention of survey participants. On the other hand, quick surveys with a short set of questions can miss important context and nuance. For example,

lived or worked with children who might therefore be at risk. For these reasons, the degree to which one can gather data on perpetration from survey participants is heavily dependent on perceptions of anonymity. Surveys that are intentionally designed to minimize the likelihood of obtaining information that triggers mandatory reporting provide the most convincing assurance of anonymity to potential survey participants. We and others have found that this type of survey design is necessary to obtain any responses at all, and certainly to ensure that those responses are honest, and accurate. Honest and accurate data is the only data that gives us the opportunity to develop better evidence-based policies and practices to prevent harm.

In our experience, some research ethics board members and survey companies are unclear on the limits and feasibility of mandatory reporting. For example, obligations do not, and practically cannot, extend to anonymous reports of perpetration or reports that do not identify children. Why? Because no research party involved holds any identifiable data. The data is not actionable.

This disconnect has a major bearing on research approvals of survey modules that include questions about perpetration. To produce better and more data, we need to have honest conversations about how to ethically gather high-quality but sensitive data, in the service of protecting children from sexual abuse.

## **Secondary stigma and reputation**

Perhaps the most ubiquitous challenge to this critically needed research is the secondary stigma associated with the topic of child sexual abuse perpetration itself. While there is growing recognition that perpetration prevention is absolutely necessary if we are to stop child sexual abuse at scale, some research institutions and funders remain concerned about public perceptions of their involvement in this work. Institutional Review Boards, responsible for the ethical conduct of research, can be wary of approving research about child sexual abuse perpetration because members are concerned about public perceptions of

**“We need honest conversations about how to ethically gather high-quality but sensitive data.”**

approved research, and worry if this might harm an institution's reputation. Furthermore, market panel companies, who have proven to be key partners of our Understanding Harm research initiative, can be concerned about the impact of conducting surveys about perpetration for two principal reasons: brand reputation, and the trust of their panel members.

Underpinning all of these concerns is pervasive social stigma associated with child sexual abuse. At Prevention Global, we continue to emphasize that stigma is nuanced. The stigmatization of perpetration is essential and plays an important role in reinforcing our social norms. However, the stigmatization of perpetration prevention as a professional area of focus or topic of study has a negative impact on the very research designed to help us prevent harm from happening in the first place.

## **A pathway to understand harm**

For these reasons, it has historically been extremely challenging to conduct perpetration prevalence research that provides the required level of accuracy and quality. Often, researchers have had to rely on anonymous surveys conducted using convenience methods; for example, by posting ads on social media. Though feasible, these studies are less scientifically useful than market panel surveys because they do not obtain representative samples and the generalizability of results is unclear.

But there is hope! Despite the challenges, this research is possible and Understanding Harm is plotting a path to ethical research that can support the generation of quality perpetration prevalence data across the globe. We've done it in several countries and have plans to continue this critical work. These data are essential if we are serious about preventing child sexual abuse at scale, around the world.





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