

# Educational Personnel as Reporters of Suspected Child Maltreatment

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In the United States, reports of suspicions of child maltreatment to Child Protective Services (CPS) are more likely to come from educational personnel than from any other professional or nonprofessional reporting source. However, research consistently raises concerns as to the quantity and quality of reports by this important community resource. The study reported in this article examined reports made by schools to CPS, comparing reports from educational personnel across states. Study findings are provided visually through maps using geographic information systems technology. The findings suggest that training efforts need to be evidence based and locally focused to effectively improve the ability of educational personnel to make reports that protect children and assist families in need.

KEY WORDS: *child maltreatment; child welfare; educational personnel; mandated reporting; schools*

Approximately 3.3 million referrals for suspected child abuse or neglect were made to Child Protective Services (CPS) in the United States in 2009 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2010). More than 16 percent of these reports were made by educational personnel, more than any other professional or nonprofessional reporting source (HHS, 2010). The high percentage of reports that come from schools is most likely due to the fact that every state requires educators to report suspicions of child abuse and neglect (Crosson-Tower, 2003), as well as the unique vantage point provided to school personnel by their daily interactions with children and families.

The category "educational personnel," generally consists of individuals who are employed by public and private schools and charged with the education of children. Throughout this article, the terms educational personnel, educators, school, and teachers will be used interchangeably, even though the term "educational personnel" encompasses more than the role of teacher or educator. Although many of the reports made to CPS by educational personnel are made by teachers, school social workers, among other staff, often report suspicions of abuse or neglect. Some schools require teachers to report their suspicions to other school officials, who in turn determine if the teacher's suspicions warrant reporting. Often, the school officials will submit the report themselves in lieu of a

report by the teacher (Duncan, 2001; Kenny & McEachern, 2002).

As an integral part of every community, teachers are essential to the efforts of the community to combat child maltreatment (Crosson-Tower, 2003). By virtue of their position, teachers may be in a privileged position to identify signs of child abuse (Abrahams et al., 1992; Hazzard, 1984; Kenny, 2001b; McIntyre, 1990; Tite, 1993). Teachers have sustained contact with children and repeated access to parents (Crosson-Tower, 2003; Kenny, 2001b; Levin, 1983; Zellman, 1990a). Furthermore, teachers have the opportunity to observe a child's behavior, socioemotional functioning, and cognitive development on a daily basis (Egu & Weiss, 2003; Levin, 1983), and have the ability to compare a child's current behavior with their previous behavior (Crenshaw, Crenshaw, & Lichtenberg, 1995; Kenny, 2001b; O'Toole et al., 1999; Zellman, 1990b). Teachers can also compare the behavior of children to that of their peers (Kenny, 2001b). Children often trust in their relationship with their teachers more so than other non-family members, and thereby feel more comfortable confiding in teachers about their abuse, or that of a classmate (O'Toole et al., 1999). Therefore, teachers who are knowledgeable in the detection of abuse and neglect can do much to protect children and assist families (Levin, 1983).

Unfortunately, the unique position of educational personnel to assess child abuse does not translate into exemplary reporting skills. Research

has consistently shown that teachers report only a very small proportion of suspected child abuse and maltreatment cases (Kenny, 2001b; Kesner & Robinson, 2002). Teachers are often considered the largest source of professional "underreporting" (Crenshaw et al., 1995). This underreporting can be explained by research that found schools are often not adequately prepared to deal with child abuse and neglect (Levin, 1983). Teachers often do not know the signs of abuse and neglect (Hazzard, 1984; Kenny, 2004; Levin, 1983). They struggle with differentiating "parental excesses" from normal parental disciplines (Levin, 1983, p. 18). In addition, teachers often assume that someone else will report the child abuse or neglect (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

Research finds that educational personnel are not consistently knowledgeable about, nor comfortable with reporting procedures (Abrahams et al., 1992; Kenny, 2001a, Kenny, 2004; Levin, 1983). Teachers fear the legal ramifications for logging unfounded reports (Abrahams et al., 1992; Kenny, 2001b). School staff members express concern for the potential lost rapport with a family if they report them to CPS (Abrahams et al., 1992; Zellman, 1990a). Educational personnel also explain their reasons for failing to report maltreatment as a concern for disrupting the functioning of families and sparking conflict with families by reporting their suspicions (Kenny, 2001b; Levin, 1983). The attitude that CPS does not actually help maltreated children and their families is another reason why cases of suspected child abuse and neglect are not reported (Kenny, 2001a; Zellman & Antler, 1990).

Research has found that the type of school, size of the school, the number of students in a class, and the geographic classification of the school's community were related to the expressed willingness of a teacher to report suspicion based on a hypothetical vignette. Catholic school teachers expressed more willingness to report suspicions than public school teachers and private, non-parochial school teachers (O'Toole et al., 1999; Webster, O'Toole, O'Toole, & Lucal, 2005). Teachers with smaller classes and teachers from schools with fewer students both reported being more willing to report suspected child abuse (O'Toole et al., 1999). However, teachers from rural areas expressed less willingness to report cases of suspected child abuse than teachers from urban and suburban areas (O'Toole et al., 1999; Webster et al., 2005).

Not only are teachers responsible for underreporting suspected child maltreatment, unfortunately, they are also responsible for a disproportionately high level of unsubstantiated reports. Reports of suspected child abuse and neglect made by educational personnel are the least likely of all professional reporters to be indicated or substantiated after investigation (HHS, 2010). In 2003, 67.6 percent of reports to CPS by educational personnel were found to lack enough evidence to substantiate the allegations. This rate is higher than any other group of professional reporters (HHS, 2004).

Some unsubstantiated reports are made in an effort to hurt the accused (Besharov & Laumann, 1996). However, intentional false reports are unlikely to come from professional reporting sources like schools, but are more likely to be lodged by disgruntled neighbors, family, friends and acquaintances. Other unsubstantiated reports are often made by concerned service providers, family members, friends or neighbors who believe their call to CPS will provide the family with needed support services (Besharov & Laumann, 1996), even though no abuse or neglect is suspected. Some reports are unsubstantiated not because abuse or neglect is not present, but because CPS could not find adequate evidence to substantiate the allegations (Besharov & Laumann, 1996). Some reports, being well-intentioned or not, result in unwarranted intrusions by CPS into families' lives. However, due to the high rates of underreporting, most public awareness campaigns and related professional training encourage increased reporting so that CPS can intervene with at-risk families before children are harmed.

Despite their role as mandated reporters, the training for educational personnel is often lacking in quality and substance, if provided at all (Kenny, 2007). Inadequate training has been cited as a factor in the failure of educational personnel to report suspicions where required by law (Abrahams et al., 1992). Existing training programs for school personnel are often offered through professional certification programs or during in-service trainings (Kenny, 2007), although these programs are not necessarily required by law, or even evaluated for effectiveness.

This article compares reports made by schools to child protective services across the United States. The goal of this article is to encourage and facilitate improvement efforts in the training of school

personnel on their duties and obligations as mandated reporters of suspected child abuse and maltreatment.

## **METHOD**

This study involves secondary analysis of data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) Child File federal fiscal year (FFY) 2008 (National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect [NDACAN], 2009). NCANDS has become the primary source of information on reports of abused and neglected children in the United States (NDACAN, 2009). NCANDS is administered annually and provides details on every report of suspected child abuse or neglect submitted by participating states. Report details include demographic characteristics of the alleged victim and the type of maltreatment alleged, among other variables (NDACAN, 2009). Data for the NCANDS is collected through case reviews at the state level and states agree to provide data for the given year of the study and are given a list of variables to extract from their own data systems. This analysis includes information on every report of alleged child abuse or maltreatment, including allegations that were later unsubstantiated.

For 2008, NCANDS provided data on reports of suspected child abuse and neglect that reached a disposition during the 2008 fiscal year (October 1, 2007, through September 30, 2008). The NCANDS Child File FFY 2008 includes 3.3 million reports from 47 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico (NDACAN, 2009). For the purposes of this study, reports were aggregated to the state level for analysis.

## **Geographical Information Systems**

This study explores data through technology that is not often used in social work research: geographic information systems (GIS). Esri ArcView 9.3 GIS software was used to produce maps that show distribution of variables across counties. The use of maps to display data for geographic units can have a greater impact than a written description of the information (Ernst, 2000). People understand information more quickly when it is presented in a graphical form, such as a map (Robertson & Wier, 1998). Mapping of data allows for easy visual comparison across geographical units, such as states and counties. Trends are quickly identified when

viewing a map (Robertson & Wier, 1998). Maps can provide "powerful evidence of disparity" (Hillier, 2007). By showing disparity across spatial units, mapping can support the call for policy and practice interventions in a particular community (Felke, 2006).

Social work has been slow to adopt GIS as a tool for research and practice, especially when compared to other fields (Queralt & Witte, 1998; Hillier, 2007). However, social work is not new to mapping. Among the earliest social workers (including Jane Addams herself), settlement house workers and charitable foundations used mapping to document the living conditions of impoverished and disenfranchised communities (Felke, 2006; Hillier, 2007).

## **Limitations**

There are two significant limitations to the use of NCANDS data: its age and missing data. NCANDS data is not provided for independent analyses until the release of the annual Child Maltreatment report published by the HHS, Administration on Children, Youth and Families. As a result, there is a delay of more than a year before the data is made available to outside researchers. Another limitation of NCANDS is the data missing from particular states. Though the number of participating states has rapidly increased over the past 10 years, not all states contribute data to NCANDS.

An additional limitation in this particular study is the comparison of administrative data across states. For instance, categorization of the type of maltreatment and even report disposition are locally determined events that the researcher in the present study did not have control over. It is possible, and even plausible, that a comparison of what seem to be similar reports across states will not be comparable if more carefully analyzed. For example, in one state a report categorized as an allegation of neglect might be categorized as another form of maltreatment in a different state.

In terms of report disposition, states often have different burden of proof standards to indicate or substantiate a report; ranging from a low level of reasonable suspicion to a high level of clear and convincing evidence. In addition, even states with the same burden of proof may categorize similar cases differently. CPS standards for indicating or substantiating cases often varies from county to county and from state to state.

## Results

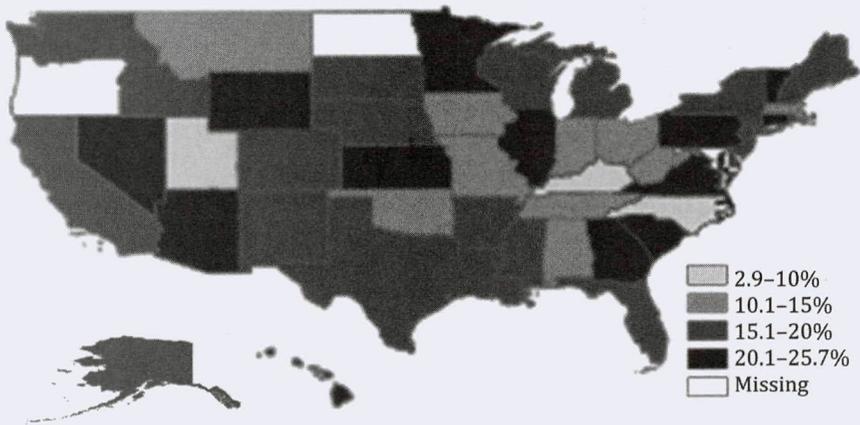
In the United States in 2008, over 3.3 million reports were made to CPS from all reporting sources. Of these, 566,198 reports came to CPS from educational personnel—almost 17 percent of all reports. The percentage of reports made by educational personnel varied widely by state, from 2.9 percent of all reports in North Carolina to 25.7 percent of all reports in Pennsylvania (see Map 1). Educational personnel were the source of the most reports in the United States as a whole, but not in all states (see Map 2).

In 2008, for every 1,000 children living in the country, CPS received 44 reports of abuse, neglect, or maltreatment. Each report represents one child.

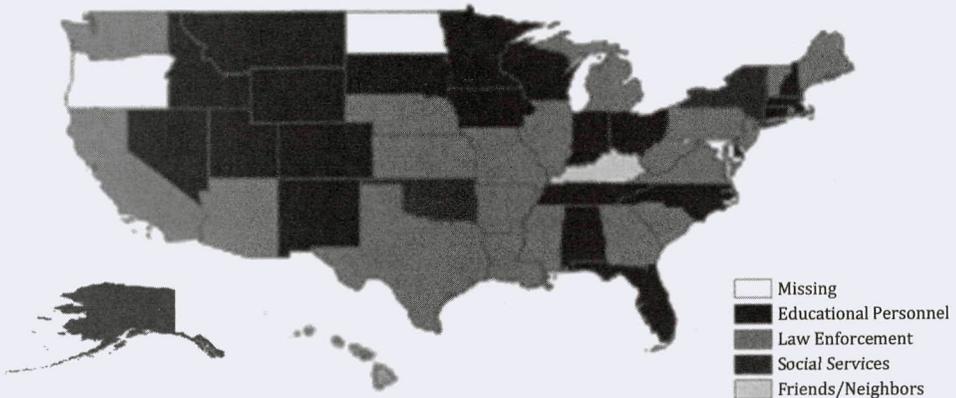
One child can have more than one report over the course of the study period if multiple calls to CPS were made regarding that child. Almost eight reports were made by educational personnel to CPS, for every 1,000 children in the United States. The educational personnel reporting rates ranged from 1.75 reports for every 1,000 children in North Carolina to 18.17 reports for every 1,000 children in the District of Columbia (see Map 3).

Nationwide, 61.7 percent of reports from all sources included an allegation of neglect, 22.1 percent included an allegation of physical abuse, 8.1 percent included an allegation of sexual abuse, 7.2 percent included an allegation of emotional maltreatment, and 2.7 percent included an allegation

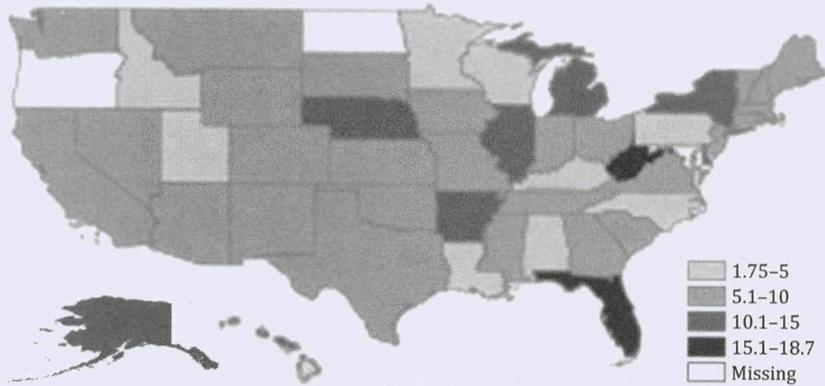
**Map 1: Percentage of Total Reports Made by Educational Personnel, by State**



**Map 2: Source of Most Reports per State**



**Map 3: Rate of Report by Educational Personnel to Child Protective Services, per 1,000 Children in State**



**Table 1: Comparing Type of Maltreatment in Reports by Educational Personnel to Reports from All Sources**

Maltreatment Type Alleged	Reports from All Sources (%)	Reports from Educational Personnel (%)
Neglect	61.7	44.0
Physical abuse	22.1	35.0
Sexual abuse	8.1	6.5
Emotional maltreatment	7.2	6.2
Medical neglect	2.7	3.1

of medical neglect. Reports from educational personnel were more likely to include allegations of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and medical neglect and less likely to include allegations of neglect and emotional maltreatment, as compared with reports from all sources across the United States (see Table 1). There were great differences among states in the percentage of reports by educational personnel that included certain types of maltreatment. For instance, the percentage of reports from educational personnel that included an allegation of neglect ranged from 0.5 percent in Pennsylvania to over 92 percent in New York.

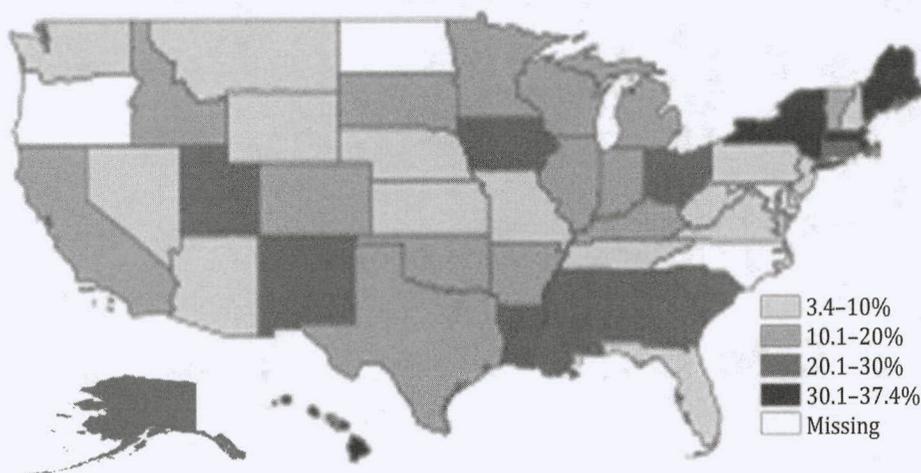
After investigation, only 20.9 percent of all reports made to CPS were substantiated, indicated, or otherwise found to include a child victim of maltreatment. Almost 16 percent of reports made by educational personnel resulted in a determination that the child was a victim of maltreatment.

The percentage of reports made by educational personnel that were later substantiated ranged from 3.4 percent in Arizona to 37.4 percent in Massachusetts (see Map 4).

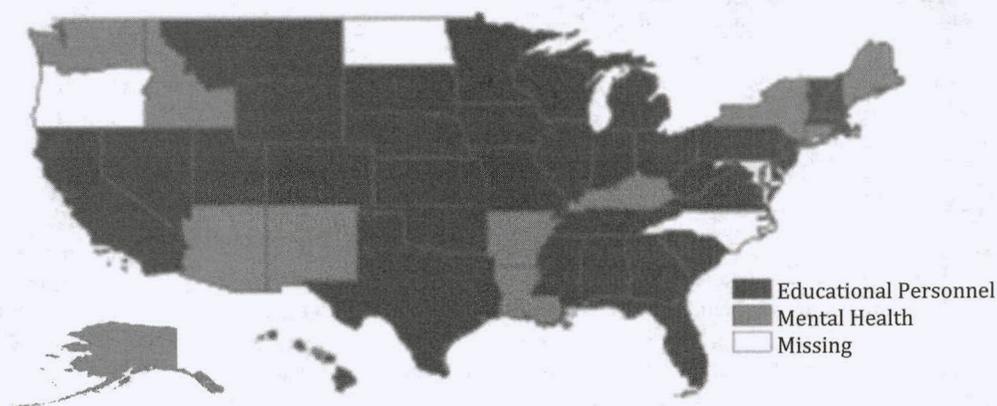
When compared with other professional reporters of abuse and neglect of children, educational personnel reports were the least likely to be substantiated after investigation, on the national level and in most states (see Map 5). In fact, in a few states, reports from educational personnel were the least likely to be substantiated, even when compared to non-professional reporting sources, including neighbors and anonymous sources (see Map 6).

The likelihood that, after thorough investigation, a determination was made that a child was a victim of maltreatment differed depending on what type of maltreatment was alleged in the report (see Table 2). Similar to reports from all sources, reports from educational personnel including allegations of physical abuse were the least likely to be substantiated after investigation compared with allegations of other types of maltreatment (see Table 2). The percentage of educational personnel reports that resulted in a finding of child maltreatment not only differed by the type of maltreatment alleged, but also differed for the same category of maltreatment from state to state. For instance, in North Carolina 95.7 percent of reports to CPS from educational personnel with an allegation of neglect were substantiated. However, in Arizona only 5.3 percent of such reports were corroborated.

**Map 4: Percentage of Reports by Educational Personnel with Victim Status Determination**



**Map 5: Professional Report Source with Lowest Percentage of Substantiated Reports**



## DISCUSSION

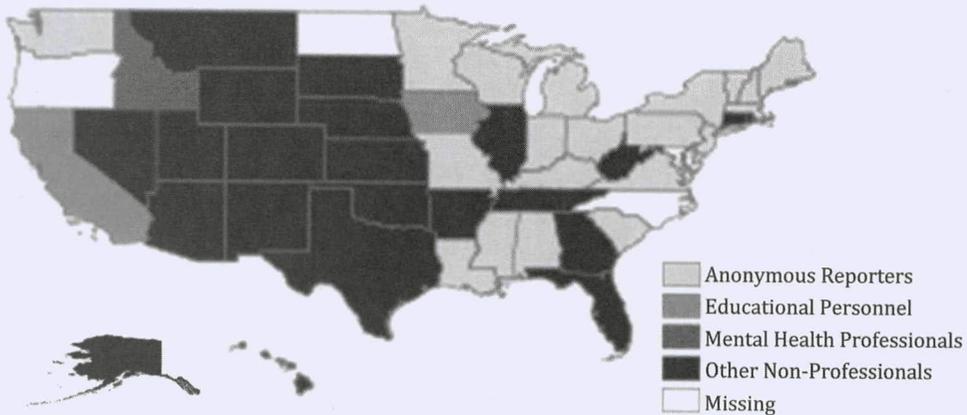
The results of this study suggest that discussion of the reporting of suspected child maltreatment by any and all reporters should be carefully examined beyond the numbers provided on a national basis. Teachers, school personnel, educational administrators, child protective services workers, and child welfare administrators on the local, state and federal levels could improve their services to children and families by reviewing these results and the results of similar analyses in their areas of expertise and modifying their practice in response.

There are many factors not fully explored in this study that could influence the reporting of

educational personnel and other professional reporters, and may explain the differences found across states and localities. Further research should explore the effects of professional education and training on the quality and number of reports to CPS. School policy on reporting abuse and neglect should also be examined, as should the ethics and attitudes of school leadership about the role of the school as a reporting source. Policies, ethics, and personal attitudes may contribute to underreporting or overreporting of suspected cases of abuse and neglect in a particular school, or district.

The results of this study underscore a concern for the rates of underreporting of cases of suspected

**Map 6: Report Source with Lowest Percentage of Substantiated Reports**



**Table 2: Comparing Report Disposition in Reports by Educational Personnel to Reports from All Sources by Type of Maltreatment**

Maltreatment Type Alleged	% of Reports Substantiated/Indicated/Victim Status	
	All Sources	Educational Personnel
Neglect	25.3	23.5
Physical abuse	20.1	15.7
Sexual abuse	27.2	24.0
Emotional maltreatment	25.9	20.7
Medical neglect	22.4	20.4

child maltreatment by educational personnel. The most recent wave of the National Incidence Survey (NIS-4) estimates that 17.1 of every 1,000 children were “harmed” in 2005 and 2006 and 40 of every 1,000 children were harmed or “endangered” (Sedlak, MacPherson, & Das, 2010). However, educational personnel made fewer than eight reports per 1,000 children in the U.S., and this rate varied greatly from state to state. In addition, only a very small proportion of these reports were later substantiated.

The results of this study also confirm a concern for overreporting by educational personnel of suspected cases of child maltreatment. Compared with other professionally mandated reporting sources, reports from educational personnel are the least likely to be substantiated, even though educational personnel are in a privileged position to objectively evaluate families and their needs. There were also

significant differences in report disposition depending on what maltreatment types was included in the report by educational personnel. Significant differences also appeared across states. Further research needs to examine unsubstantiated reports from educational personnel, especially at a local level, to identify trends in these reports that could be addressed through improved training.

The percentage of reports by educational personnel that included certain maltreatment types differed across states. It is unclear from other research whether the actual prevalence of certain types of maltreatment differs significantly across states. Therefore, the findings from this study suggest that future research efforts should be aimed at determining the prevalence of specific types of maltreatment on a local and state level, and focusing on the improved training of educational personnel, and other reporters, on the identification and reporting of suspected maltreatment to the state and local authorities.

**CONCLUSION**

Educational personnel are a vital community resource and serve as a critical link between families and the child welfare system. While current public policy acknowledges the importance of training educators in the identification and reporting of suspected child maltreatment, the findings of this study suggest that more needs to be done to improve the training of these important professionals.

The findings of this study warrant immediate attention by CPS and school administrators alike to

improve training for educational personnel on their responsibilities as legally mandated reporters of suspected child abuse and neglect. The goal of such training should be to improve the overall quality of the reports and to decrease the high levels of unsubstantiated reports.

Instead of training professionals to report any and all suspicions of child abuse or maltreatment, training should be specifically adapted to the experiences and concerns of a particular community so that more families at risk are identified before children are irreparably harmed and fewer families are unnecessarily exposed to an already over-burdened and intrusive child welfare system. **CS**

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