

Pregnancy and Sexual Activity Among Older Teens and Young Adults

Older teens—those age 18 and 19—account for nearly two-thirds of all pregnancies and births to teen girls each year. In addition, although the teen birth rate for older teens decreased 26% between 1991 and 2005, the most recent news has not been so positive—the birth rate for 18–19 year-olds increased 4% between 2005 and 2006.^a

Young men and women — not just teens — experience difficulties in delaying pregnancy and have high rates of unplanned pregnancy. The rate of unplanned pregnancy—that is, the number of pregnancies that were not intended by the woman per 1,000 women—is highest among older teens and young adults age 20–24, and has remained consistently high over the past 10 years.

This *Science Says* research brief focuses on teen pregnancy among older teens and unplanned pregnancy among young adults (age 20–24). In addition to summarizing the available data on these outcomes and the behaviors that lead to them, the brief also offers some suggestions for parents, policymakers, and others who work with older teens and young adults on ways to address teen and unplanned pregnancy prevention

among this population. Please note that for the purposes of this research brief, older teens are defined as those age 18–19 and young adults are defined as those age 20–24.

Population

*Together, older teens and young adults (18–24) account for 10% of the overall population. Approximately half of all 18–24 year-olds are **not** pursuing post-secondary education and the overwhelming majority of 18–24 year olds are not married.*

According to the 2007 U.S. Census estimates, 10% of the population, or 29.5 million people, are between the ages of 18 and 24 (3% are 18–19 and 7% are 20–24). Slightly more than half of the older teen and young adult population is male.¹ Among those aged 18–24, 62% are non-Hispanic white, 17% are Hispanic, 15% are non-Hispanic black, 4% are Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1% are American Indian.²

Two-thirds (65%) of older teens and one-third (35%) of young adults are currently enrolled in school (Figure 1). Combined, that means that almost half (44%) of older teens and young adults are attending high school, undergraduate college, or graduate school.

FIGURE 1. Current Education Status of Men and Women age 18–24, 2006

| | In School | | Not in School | | Total |
|---------------------|----------------|---------------------------|----------------|---------------|-------|
| | In High school | In College or Grad school | Has HS diploma | No HS diploma | |
| 18 and 19 years old | 19% | 46% | 25% | 9% | 100% |
| 20 to 24 years old | 1% | 34% | 53% | 12% | 100% |
| 18 to 24 years old | 6% | 38% | 45% | 11% | 100% |

Roughly one in ten (11%) 18–24 year-olds is out of school and does not have a high school diploma and almost half (45%) have a high school diploma but are not enrolled in school.³

The overwhelming majority of older teens are not married—99% of boys and 96% of girls. The proportion of young adults age 20–24 who are not married is slightly lower—87% of young men and 77% of young women (2005 data).⁴ About half (55%) of older teens and nearly three-quarters (74%) of young adults are in the labor force (that is, they are employed or are seeking employment).⁵

Pregnancy and Births Among Older Teens

*The birth and pregnancy rates for older teens are **three** times the rate for younger teens, and in the past 15 years the birth rate among older teens decreased **half** as much as the birth rate among younger teens. Fully two-thirds of teen births and pregnancies are to older teens.*

When looking at reproductive outcomes for teens and young adults, it is important to consider both birth rates and pregnancy rates (where pregnancies include not only births but also abortions and miscarriages). While data on birth rates are available through 2006, data on pregnancies are available only through 2004.

Among older teen girls, birth rates are three times higher than the rates for younger teen girls. In 2006, the birth rate among older teen girls was 73.0 (per 1,000) compared to 22.0 (per 1,000) among younger teen girls. Birth rates have also declined more slowly among older teens than they have among younger teens. Between 1991 and 2006, the birth rate among those aged 18–19 decreased 22%. At the same time the birthrate among 15–17 year-olds decreased 43%. Furthermore, while the overall teen birth rate increased 3% between 2005 and 2006, the birth rate among older teens increased 4% during the same time period (Figure 2).⁶

The pregnancy rate is also higher for older teens than for younger teens and decreased less for older teens than for younger teens. In 2004 (the most recent year for which data are available), the pregnancy rate for 18–19 year-olds was 118.6 (per 1,000) compared to 41.5 (per 1,000) among younger teen girls. Between 1990 and 2004, the pregnancy rate for girls age 18–19 decreased 29%. During the same time period, the pregnancy rate among girls age 15–17 decreased 46% (Figure 3).⁷

Pregnancy and birth rates also differ by race/ethnicity among 18–19 year-olds. In 2004, the pregnancy rates among Hispanic (210 per 1,000) and non-Hispanic black (203 per 1,000) older teen girls^b were more than double the pregnancy rate among non-Hispanic white girls (79 per 1,000).⁷ According to 2006 data,

FIGURE 2. Teen Birth Rates by Age Group, 1990–2006

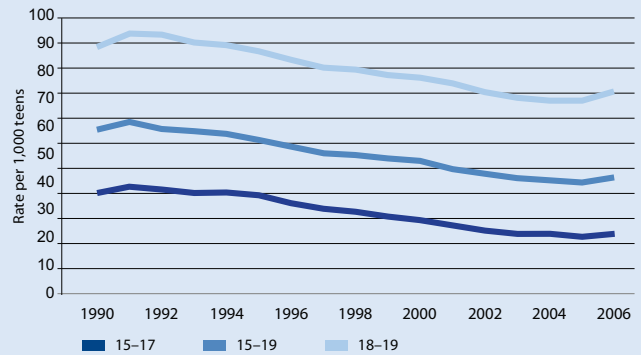


FIGURE 3. Teen Pregnancy Rates by Age Group, 1990–2004

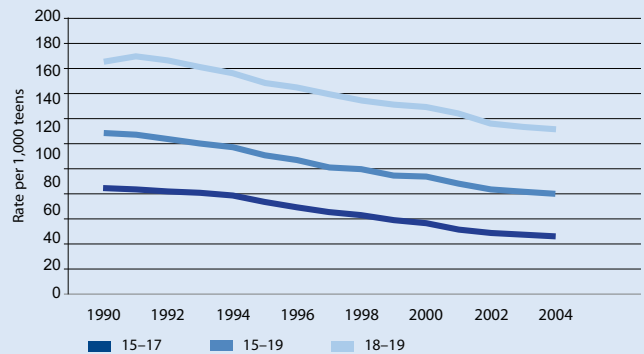
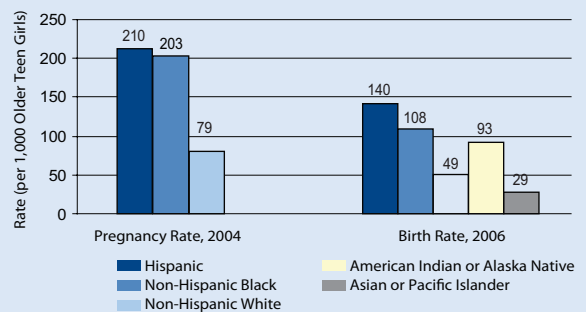


FIGURE 4. Pregnancy and Birth Rates Among Teen Girls Age 18–19 by Race/Ethnicity



Hispanic and non-Hispanic blacks also have the highest birth rates among older teens (Figure 4).⁶

FIGURE 5. Distribution of First, Second, Third, and Higher Births Among Older and Younger Teens, 2005

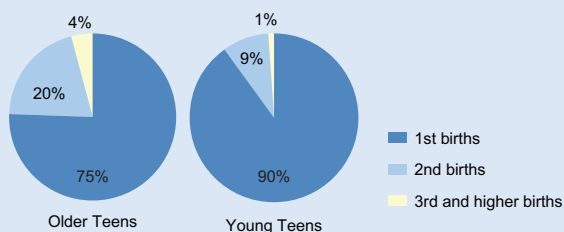


FIGURE 7. Distribution of Unplanned Pregnancy by Age Group, 2001

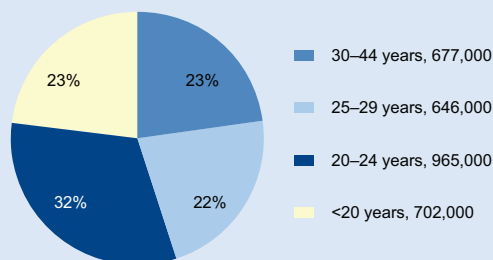


FIGURE 6. Distribution of Pregnancies Among Women Age 20-24, 2001

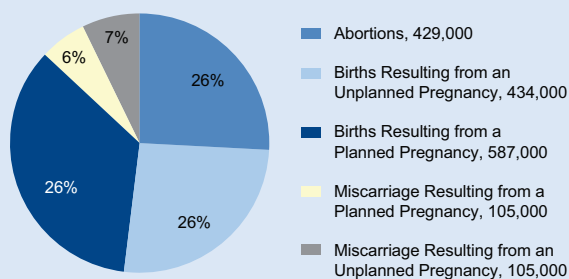
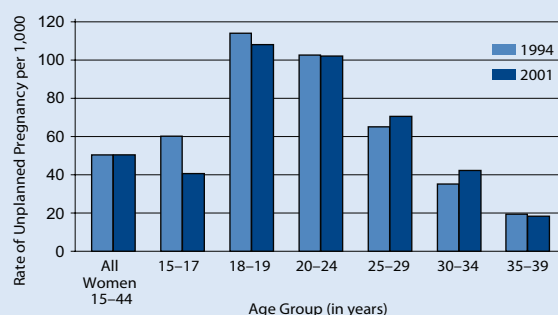


FIGURE 8. Rate of Unplanned Pregnancy by Age Group, 1994 and 2001



The majority of teen pregnancies and births are to older teens. In fact, more than six in ten pregnancies (64%) and fully two-thirds of births (67%) to girls under age 20 are to older teen girls. A majority (59%) of pregnancies to older teens result in a live birth; less than one-third (27%) result in an abortion and 14% result in a miscarriage.⁷

Subsequent Births to Older Teens⁸

One-quarter of all births to older teens are subsequent births.

According to 2005 data, three-quarters (75%) of all births to older teens are first births, 20% are second births and 4% are third births or higher.^c Put another way, more than 68,000 births a year (24% of all births to older teens) are to teens who have already had a birth. Comparatively, among 15-17 year-olds, only 10% of births are subsequent births (Figure 5).

It is also the case that many 18 to 19 year olds having a first birth will go on to have additional births in the near future. Results based on the National Survey of Family Growth, 2002, (not shown) indicate that of those 18-19 year-olds giving birth for the first time, 19% had a second birth within 24 months of the first—3% of these second births were within 12 months of the first and 16% were 13-24 months after the first birth.

Unplanned Pregnancy Among Young Adults⁹

Among young adults age 20-24, more than half of all pregnancies are unplanned. This totals nearly one million unplanned pregnancies each year, and accounts for about one-third of unplanned pregnancies among the overall population.

Of the roughly 1.7 million pregnancies occurring among 20 to 24 year-old women each year, 58%, or 965,000 were unplanned. This includes 26% that were unplanned and resulted in a birth, 26% that were unplanned and resulted in an abortion, and 7% that were unplanned and resulted in a miscarriage (Figure 6).

These 965,000 unplanned pregnancies among 20 to 24 year-olds account for 32% of the approximately 3 million unplanned pregnancies overall (Figure 7).

In 2001 (the most recent data available), the rate of unplanned pregnancy among 20 to 24 year-olds was among the highest of any age group—surpassed only by the rate for 18 to 19 year-olds (Figure 8). Between 1994 and 2001, the rate of unplanned pregnancy among women age 20-24 remained essentially unchanged (105 per 1,000 and 104 per 1,000 respectively).

Pregnancies to unmarried 20 to 24 year-old women are particularly likely to be unplanned. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of all pregnancies to unmarried women age 20–24 are unplanned and more than one-third (36%) of unplanned pregnancies to unmarried women age 20–24 result in an abortion.

Sexual Activity¹⁰

Older teens are twice as likely to be sexually experienced and sexually active compared to younger teens. In addition, non-Hispanic black older teens are more likely to be sexually experienced compared to older teens of other races.

Older teen boys and girls are more than twice as likely to have ever had sex (i.e. are sexually experienced) and be sexually active (that is, they have had sex in the past 3 months) compared to younger teens. About two-thirds of older teens are sexually experienced and half are sexually active (Figure 9).¹¹

Eight of ten non-Hispanic black older teen girls (80%) and boys (79%) have ever had sex. Among non-Hispanic white older teens, seven in ten girls (70%) have ever had sex compared to roughly six in ten boys (62%). Among Hispanic older teens the opposite is true—seven in ten boys (70%) and six in ten girls (63%) say they have had sex.

Older teen boys report having had more sexual partners than older teen girls. Sexually experienced older teen girls have had a lifetime mean of 4.2 sexual partners, compared to a lifetime mean of 4.6 sexual partners among older teen boys. About one-third of sexually experienced older teens (35% of girls and 29% of boys) have had one sexual partner, slightly less than one-third (29% of girls and 30% of boys) have had two sexual partners, and more than one-third of girls (36%) and more than four in ten boys (42%) have had four or more sexual partners.

Contraceptive Use

Older teen boys are more likely than girls to have used contraception the last time they had sex^d, and younger teens report more consistent condom use than older teens. Among older teens, condoms are the most popular form of contraception and among young adults at risk for an unplanned pregnancy, the pill is the most popular form of contraception.

More than eight in ten (81%) sexually active older teen girls and almost nine in ten (89%) older teen boys used some type of contraception the last time they had sex. However, this includes 13% of girls and 17% of boys who used withdrawal at last sex.¹² Among teens who have had sex in the past 12 months and

FIGURE 9. Proportion of Teens Who are Sexually Experienced and Sexually Active by Age and Gender, 2002

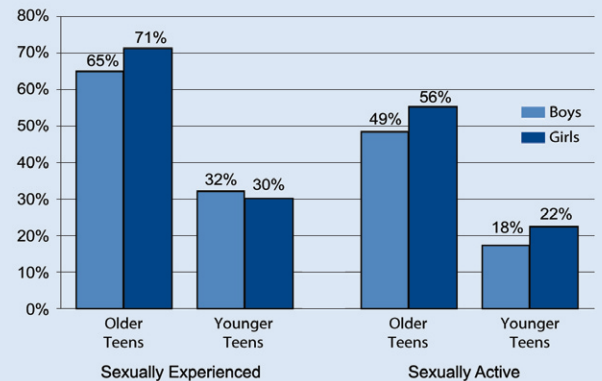
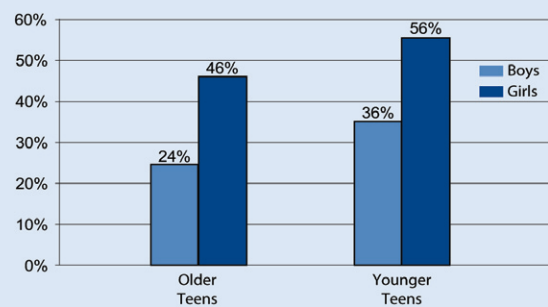


FIGURE 10. Percentage of Teens Who Used a Condom Every Time They Had Sex in the Past 12 Months, 2002



used condoms, only 24% of older teen girls used a condom every time they had sex compared to 36% of younger teen girls. Among boys, almost half (46%) of older teen boys used a condom every time they had sex compared to more than half (56%) of younger teen boys (Figure 10).¹⁰

Older teens use many different methods of contraception. Nearly all (94%) sexually experienced older teen girls have ever used a condom, and almost two-thirds (63%) have ever used birth control pills. At the same time, six in ten older teen girls report ever having used withdrawal as a method of contraception (Figure 11).¹⁰

Among young adults at risk for an unplanned pregnancy,^c almost half (46%) use the pill, one in five (20%) currently use condoms, nearly one in ten (9%) use Depo-Provera, and 12% use no form of contraception.⁸

FIGURE 11. Percent of Sexually Active Girls Age 18-19 Who Have Ever Used a Method of Contraception, 2002

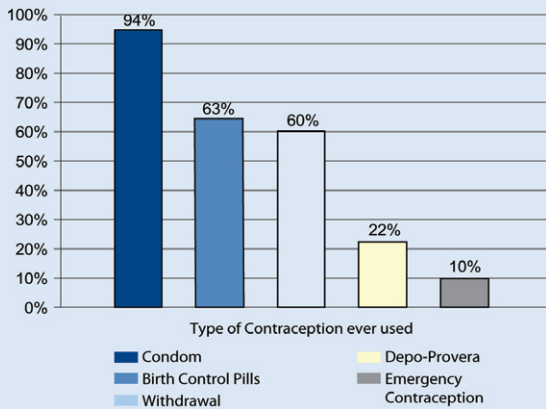
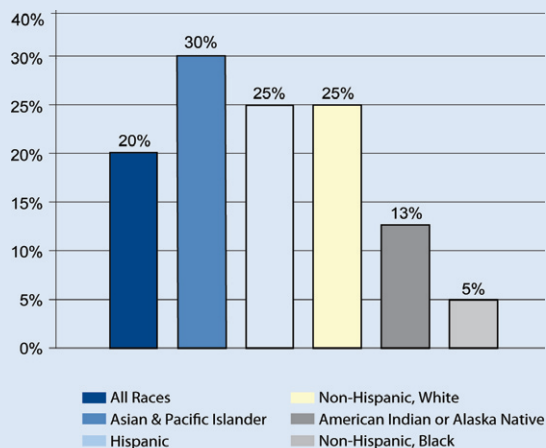


FIGURE 12. Percentage of older teen mothers who are married, by race, 2005



Relationships and Non-marital Childbearing

Older teen mothers are twice as likely as younger teen mothers to be married.

In 2006, 20% of all births to older teen girls were to married teens compared to 8% of births to teens age 15–17.⁷ The proportion of non-marital births to older teens varies by race/ethnicity.

Three in ten Asian or Pacific Islander older teen mothers (30%) are married at the time of the birth. Comparatively, 25% of non-Hispanic-white older teen moms, 25% of Hispanic older teen

moms, 13% of American Indian or Alaska Native older teen moms, and 5% of Non-Hispanic black older teen moms are married at the time of the birth (Figure 12).¹³

Cost¹⁴

Teen childbearing costs taxpayers at least \$9.1 billion annually and births to older teens costs taxpayers \$424 million annually.

Children born to teen mothers are at increased risk for many negative outcomes, including poorer educational outcomes, increased need of child welfare services, and increased risk of delinquency. These outcomes are not only harmful to the children; they come at a public cost as well. Even when compared to children born to mothers just a few years older, the *additional* public costs associated with hardships experienced by children born to teen mothers are staggering. Measured as the net difference in public spending on children born to teen mothers versus children born to mothers age 20 to 21, the average cost of a teen birth is \$1,430 per year, which amounts to \$9.1 billion annually in costs to taxpayers. In 2004, the total public sector cost of births specifically to older teen mothers (age 18–19) was \$424 million. These costs include spending on public health care for children (Medicaid and SCHIP), child welfare, incarceration of sons to teen mothers, and lost tax revenue among adult children born to teen mothers.

Teen childbearing has educational consequences for older teen moms as well. For example, older teen mothers often face challenges in completing their education. Three-quarters (74%) of 18–19 year-old mothers receive a high school diploma or GED. In addition, 10% of 18–19 year-old mothers complete a two-year college program, and 3% attain a college degree by their 30th birthday. Comparatively, among women who delay their first birth until age 20–21, 85% receive a high school diploma or GED, 21% of all older mothers complete a two-year college program, and 9% obtain a college degree by their 30th birthday.

What it All Means

Older teens contribute significantly to the nation’s high rates of teen pregnancy and childbearing. Compared to their younger counterparts, 18- and 19-year-olds are more likely to be sexually experienced and, not surprisingly, they have higher rates of pregnancy and births.

Older teens’ sexual behavior and contraceptive use varies by gender and race/ethnicity. For example, boys are more likely to have had multiple sexual partners than girls; non-Hispanic black

teens are more likely to be sexually experienced than their Hispanic or non-Hispanic white peers; and Hispanic teens—even though they are less likely to be sexually active—are more likely to become pregnant and to give birth than teens in other racial/ethnic groups.

It is also the case that young adults age 20–24 account for nearly one million unplanned pregnancies a year and more than three-quarters of those unplanned pregnancies are to unmarried young adults. Parents who have a birth as the result of unplanned pregnancy are less likely to be in a committed relationship and more likely to have relationship conflict. Other research suggests that children born outside of a committed two-parent relationship are at greater risk of growing up in poverty.

Older teens and young adults are at a pivotal point in their lives. More than two-thirds of older teens and one-third of young adults are enrolled in school, many are beginning their careers, and others are somewhere in between, deciding what to do as they mature. *The Changing Twenties* (available at http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/changing_20s.pdf) by William Galston, documents the huge differences between 20-somethings today and those of previous generations, and suggests that new approaches are needed to fully address the issues that 20-somethings today face with respect to education, career, and family.

Clearly, there is much to be gained by helping older teens delay pregnancy until adulthood and, even then, to avoid becoming pregnant unless they are intending to start a family. Various reviews of effective pregnancy prevention programs, such as *Emerging Answers, 2007* by Douglas Kirby, Ph.D., note that a few existing programs have been effective in delaying sex and/or improving contraceptive use among older teens in high school or college, alternative education settings, vocational training programs, or in a job corps setting. These reviews note, however, that none of these interventions were designed or evaluated *specifically* for older teens.

What Can Local and State Communities Do?

Some suggestions for reducing unplanned pregnancy and childbearing among older teens and young adults include:

- Make teen pregnancy prevention a component of community and state economic development activities to ensure that more young people complete their education and are employed in self-supporting jobs before they become parents.
- Stress the benefits of pregnancy prevention within the context of employment training, workforce development,

and career planning activities in various settings, including high schools, community colleges, and vocational/technical education programs.

- Ensure that pregnant and parenting older teens and young adults are connected with health, education, and job training programs that enable them to work towards self-sufficiency and avoid a subsequent unplanned pregnancy.
- Researchers, policymakers, and program leaders concerned about adolescent well-being should make sure that their efforts address the unique circumstances of older teens. These include their education and career paths, contraceptive experiences, and relationship patterns.
- Parents/guardians should talk with their older teen children about the benefits of delaying sex, using contraception, and the consequences of too-early childbearing. Teens consistently report that their parents influence their decisions about sex more than any other source. Adults should not assume that children are “out of the woods” when they turn 18, particularly considering that the risk of pregnancy actually increases as teens age.

One way to engage older teens and young adults is through community colleges. Community colleges have begun and should continue to play a critical role in providing support services to students and educating them about unplanned pregnancy. Some student support programs offered by community colleges have been particularly successful and could be promising tools for educating students about unplanned pregnancy:

- “First-year experience” courses that many colleges require can address pregnancy planning, relationships, and childbearing alongside greater goals of responsibility and decision-making.
- Peer education and other student run programs can help distribute information on STDs, healthy living, and unplanned pregnancy. Further, many single mothers are enrolled in community colleges and these women can help educate others about the reality of unplanned pregnancy.
- Through a variety of approaches, such as small group discussions, community colleges have an opportunity to spark conversations among students and professors about issues that usually don’t otherwise get a lot of attention. Study circles can be put in place to analyze and learn about unplanned pregnancy and its consequences among students.

About the Putting What Works to Work Project

Putting What Works to Work (PWWTW) is a project of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy funded, in part, by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Through PWWTW, The National Campaign is translating research on teen pregnancy prevention and related issues into user-friendly materials for practitioners, policymakers, and advocates. As part of this initiative, the *Science Says* series summarizes recent research in short, easy-to-understand briefs.

Author Information

This research brief was written by National Campaign intern Hannah Connor.

About The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization supported largely by private donations. The National Campaign's mission is to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

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NOTES

- a. Between 2005 and 2006 there was a 3 percent increase in the overall teen birth rate
- b. Pregnancy data for Indian and Alaska Natives and Asian and Pacific Islander teens are not available.
- c. Due to rounding, percentages do not add up to 100 percent.
- d. Reports on teen use of contraception at last sex may differ for older teens boys and girls because some are having sex with partners outside of their age cohort, because boys are more likely to report having sex with multiple partners, or because boys and girls may have different reporting biases.

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