
Homelessness and Housing Exclusion in Sweden

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- **Abstract** *Housing exclusion and homelessness is an increasing problem in Europe. Norway and Finland are the only two countries where there has been a reduction in the homeless population. The aim of this article is to analyse and discuss the key results from the Swedish homelessness count in comparison with the previous homelessness surveys. The results show that they resemble some of the trends that are emerging in other European countries. On the one hand we can see a growing exclusion of the poor and an increase in social-spatial inequalities. On the other hand, we can also see that the profile of people experiencing homelessness has changed. A growing number of people experiencing homelessness are children, or children growing up with lone mothers. There is also a growing number of young people that cannot get housing on the ordinary housing market and an increasing number of families with a migration background. Many of the people experiencing homelessness do not have any other problems than the lack of housing. Due to low incomes and poverty, many people cannot get a lease of their own and thus are dependent on the social services for housing arrangements within the secondary housing market. But the article also shows that the lack of housing is not enough for being eligible for help. Another challenge is that being homeless is often seen as an individual failure due to bad choices rather than a situation caused by the effects of the financial crisis, housing shortage, or the ever-increasing rental costs of newly produced housing. An integrated, housing led, homelessness strategy, with a strong focus on housing provision and homelessness prevention should be the way forward.*
- **Keywords** *Homelessness, Homelessness Count, Sweden, Housing Exclusion, Moral Geography, Integrated Homelessness Strategy*

Introduction

Housing exclusion is an increasing problem in Europe. The extreme effect of housing exclusion is the growing population of homeless people in most of the EU countries (FEANTSA and the Fondation Abbé Pierre, 2018).¹ Only Norway and Finland stand out with a reduction in homelessness numbers. In previous years, Finland has been the only country where there has been a reduction in the homeless population. But now, Norway has seen an impressive reduction of homeless people between 2012 and 2016, where the number recorded dropped by 36 per cent (Dyb and Lid, 2017).

Punitive measures – in order to control and regulate the urban space – have a long history, and we have recently seen a resurgence of regulations and restriction on begging and sleeping in public places (Cassiers and Kesteloot, 2012; O’Sullivan, 2012). Another alarming trend in Europe is that the profile of people experiencing homelessness has changed. We can now see a growing number of people experiencing homelessness that are children, or children growing up with lone mothers, or young people that cannot get housing on the ordinary housing market and an increasing number of families with a migration background. The Swedish homelessness figures that were published at the end of 2017 confirm this picture. This article will present some of the trends that are evident in a Swedish context. The analysis will also show some of the challenges Sweden is facing with a growing exclusion of the poor and social-spatial inequalities.

Definition of Homelessness

The Swedish definition resembles ETHOS (European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion). ETHOS consists of four types of homelessness situations or conceptual categories: *roofless*, *houseless*, *insecure* and *inadequate* (Edgar, 2009). The definition of homelessness in Sweden is also divided into four situations:

1. Acute homelessness.
2. Institutional care and category housing.
3. Long-term housing solutions (e.g. the secondary housing market).
4. Short-term insecure housing solutions (NBHW, 2017).

¹ <https://www.feantsa.org/en/report/2018/03/21/the-second-overview-of-housing-exclusion-in-europe-2017>

There have been five national homelessness surveys in Sweden, commencing in 1993 (1999, 2005, 2011 and 2017). The definition has changed every time a survey has been conducted, which of course makes it problematic to compare the data. The biggest change was in 2005 when the definition was divided into four different situations. The definition from 1999 was criticised for being too narrow. Professor Ingrid Sahlin translated and adapted the ETHOS-definition to a Swedish context, so that the Swedish definition in 2005 would reflect ETHOS (NBHW, 2005, p 22). Before 2005, situations 3 and 4 were not included, which explains part of the increase in the homelessness figures (see Table 1). In 2011, a few clarifications were made. Firstly, people who were supposed to leave an institution, but couldn't due to housing shortage, were made more explicit in the definition compared to the previous one. Secondly, the third situation was not clear enough in the definition from 2005. The consequence was that the more long-term housing solutions were not included. Therefore, this was written more explicitly in the definition from 2011. The fourth situation is more or less the same, but in 2011 it was clarified that it also included people who stay with private individuals. The difference between the definition from 2011 and the most recent one is small, mainly the names of different forms of housing alternatives have changed in accordance with the terminology that the municipalities use today.

Another complicating matter is that some municipalities use their own local definitions of homelessness even though they use the definition adopted by the National Board of Health and Welfare when they report the total number of homelessness cases for the national survey. Unfortunately, homelessness was not counted within the register-based census that was conducted in 2011 by Statistic Sweden. The national surveys are based on questionnaires that are sent out to relevant organisations. It is therefore important not to rely too heavily on the accuracy of the numbers, but rather view them as estimates. It is difficult to measure homelessness, but the national counts do indicate some emerging trends that give us knowledge on the challenges the country is facing and also the local variations between municipalities. Classifications tend to include certain individuals but exclude others. Therefore, it is useful to take a critical starting point (Sahlin, 1994; Thörn, 2001; Knutagård, 2009). Some of those groups that are not included are "hidden asylum seekers", EU-migrants sleeping rough or unaccompanied minors. It is important to include place and space in our analysis of social problems. Both time and place are key aspects of a "moral geography" which specifies that certain locations are meant for particular categories of people, who are also excluded from other locations (Cresswell, 2005; Knutagård, 2013).

About the questionnaire

In the latest national homelessness count in Sweden the data was collected during one week (3–9 April 2017). The questionnaire was sent out to organizations that have contact with people experiencing homelessness. In total, 2,450 different actors were contacted. The social services constitute the largest share of the respondents. Other informants were, for example, voluntary organizations, treatment institutions, correctional and probation offices, jails and prisons, psychiatric hospitals, clinics and emergency rooms. A difference from previous counts is that this time an electronic survey was used. The social security numbers of each individual make it possible to take away those who have been reported more than once.

Individuals tend to be in a homelessness situation for varying periods of time. One clear limitation is that the survey is more likely to target people that have been homeless for a long period of time. People who are homeless for a shorter period run the risk of not being included in the survey during the reference week. This is especially evident for women. Research shows that they tend to be excluded from surveys because, even though they live in an insecure housing situation, they tend to live with others and therefore don't get reported as homeless. Another limitation is that there are no registers at the national level that provide current information on the organizations that work with or encounter people who are homeless in Sweden. Some homeless people do not have any contact with agencies or organizations and will therefore not be counted. It is also a very time-consuming task to fill in questionnaires.

Key Results of the National Homelessness Count

The key results from the Swedish count show that they resemble some of the trends that are emerging in other European countries. In the national homelessness survey in 2017, 33,269 people were reported homeless (in 2011, 34,000 people were reported homeless, NBHW, 2011). The data shows a slight decrease, but 20 per cent of Sweden's 290 municipalities didn't send in their questionnaires. The national homelessness survey from 2017 shows that homelessness has increased in two of the four homelessness situations compared to the previous survey conducted in 2011. There has been an increase in the number of people sleeping rough, but the largest increase was within situation three (see Table 1.).

Table 1. Homelessness in Sweden 1993–2017

Year	1993	1999	2005	2011	2017
Total	9,900	8,440	17,834	34,000	33,269
Situation 1	-	-	3,600	4,500	5,935
Rough sleepers	1,045	350	950	280	647
Situation 2	-	-	2,000	5,600	4,899
Situation 3	-	-	6,400	13,900	15,838
Situation 4	-	-	4,700	6,800	5,726

Source: National Board of Health and Welfare 1993, 1999, 2005, 2011, 2017

The survey shows that women are more likely to be homeless compared to the previous count (see Table 2. and Table 3.). Men are still overrepresented in the homelessness figures (62%). There is, however, an alarming trend that the amount of people in acute homelessness has grown. More people in acute homelessness are parents to children under the age of 18 (21 per cent of the persons in situation 1 were parents) (see Table 6 and Table 7). Compared to the previous survey, this is an increase of 60 per cent. The number of women has especially increased. Most of them have children (60%) and have a migration background (almost two thirds). Compared to the previous count, persons with a migration background have doubled. For one third of the women, domestic violence was reported as the main cause of their homelessness. In situation 1, a total of 5,935 (4,500 in 2011) people were reported as being acute homeless and 647 (280 in 2011) were reported sleeping rough. It is extremely hard for people that are sleeping rough to enter the ordinary housing market. For some, Housing First has been a solution, but Housing First is still a very small service compared to the traditional homelessness services (Knutagård, 2015).

Table 2. Proportion (%) of Men and Women in Homelessness Counts 1993–2017.

	1993	1999	2005	2011	2017
Men	83	79	74	64	62
Women	17	21	26	36	38

Source: National Board of Health and Welfare 1993, 1999, 2005, 2011, 2017

Table 3. Proportion (%) of Men and Women in the Different Homelessness Situations 2005–2017.

	2005	2011	2017
Situation 1			
Men	74	67	59
Women	26	33	41
Situation 2			
Men	77	79	78
Women	23	21	22
Situation 3			
Men	73	55	55
Women	27	45	45
Situation 4			
Men	74	68	66
Women	26	32	34

Source: National Board of Health and Welfare 2005, 2011, 2017

Table 4. Proportion (%) of Homeless People with Migrant Background 2005–2017.

	2005	2011	2017
Situation 1			
Swedish	70	60	42
Migration Background	30	40	58
Situation 2			
Swedish	78	78	76
Migration Background	22	22	24
Situation 3			
Swedish	78	65	57
Migration Background	22	35	43
Situation 4			
Swedish	70	62	57
Migration Background	30	38	43

Source: National Board of Health and Welfare 2005, 2011, 2017

Table 5. Type of Accommodation in all Homelessness Situations, 2005, 2011 and 2017.

Type of accommodation	2005	2011	2017
Situation 1			
Public space / outdoor	950	280	647
Tents, car, caravan, camping site	670	300	343
Shelters	1,800	1,100	1,229
Hotel / hostel		1,100	1,903
Temporary accommodation		1,400	1,325
Women's emergency centres	140	430	464
Total in situation 1	3,600	4,544	5,935
Situation 2			
Supported housing	1,900	3,300	2,452
Institutions – discharge within 3 months		1,700	1,397
Correctional institution	850	710	705
Health care institutions			345
Total in situation 2	2,000²	5,647	4,899
Situation 3			
Social lease/municipal lease	2,000	11,700	11,942
Training flats		2,200	2,615
Transitional supported housing			1,036
Housing First			245 ³
Total in situation 3	6,400⁴	13,866	15,838
Situation 4			
Involuntary staying with family	2,100	2,600	2,383
Involuntary staying with friends	1,900	2,300	1,981
Private sublet		560	802
Temporary renting a room	430	1,400	560
Total in situation 4	4,700	6,825	5,726
Total	17,800	34,039	32,398⁵

Source: National Board of Health and Welfare, 2005; 2011, p. 23; 2017, p. 18.

² It is difficult to compare the numbers with the survey from 2005. In the 2011 report, the National Board of Health and Welfare compared the data and concluded that there were 3,000 homeless people in situation 2 in 2005, but I have used the data from the 2005 report on the total number of homeless people in situation 2, so that it corresponds with Table 1. I have used the data from the 2011 report regarding the comparison of the different housing situations in situation 2. It is evident though that the categorization of different housing situations is not the same between the two counts.

³ This number includes those Housing First units that do not have a first-hand contract.

⁴ Unfortunately, other categorizations are used here, so the only possible comparison is between social lease.

⁵ This number doesn't include the individuals where the accommodation type wasn't stated, the total number of homeless including loss were 33,269.

The housing provided in the Housing First projects are scattered houses in the ordinary housing market. For the target group, this is a contrast to the more segregated housing solutions that homeless people are normally referred to (see Table 5.). The moral geography, here contrasted by Housing First services, challenges our conventional way of thinking. Shelters are usually seen as places that are considered suitable for homeless people (Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007; Knutagård and Nordfeldt, 2007). Shelters and other forms of provisional accommodations are legitimized as a temporary solution to an acute demand. It is a quick solution to bring people in off the streets. To provide apartments for homeless people without requiring abstinence exposes the moral geography. The social worker must consider who should be placed where and why.

In situation 2, 4,899 (5,600 in 2011) people were living in institutions or in different forms of category housing. An interesting difference here is that 76 per cent of the persons in situation 2 were born in Sweden (see Table 4.).

Table 6. Proportion (%) of Homeless People that are Parents to Children 18 Years and Younger 1993–2017.

	1993	1999	2005	2011	2017
Men		28		30	29
Women	17	43		50	48
Total	5	33	31	33	36

Source: National Board of Health and Welfare 1993, 1999, 2005, 2011, 2017

Table 7. Number of Homeless People that are Parents who Live Together with their Children or Alternate in the Different Homelessness Situations 2017.

Situation	Number
Situation 1	1,480
Situation 2	96
Situation 3	4,285
Situation 4	729
Other/Not known	77
Total	6,667

Source: National Board of Health and Welfare 2017

More than one third of all persons reported as homeless are parents to children under the age of 18. At least 24,000 children have parents that are homeless. The most common reason why parents were homeless was that they didn't have an income that would qualify them as tenants on the ordinary housing market. In the total homelessness population, 20 per cent were reported as not having any other problems than lack of housing. Most of the homeless population lived in the so-called secondary housing market (see situation 3 in Table 5.). The secondary housing market consists of scattered apartments, within the regular housing market, that the social services lease from housing companies and that are then sub-let to homeless clients. The lease is often a short-term contract without security of tenure (often one month at a time, with one-week notice). If the client doesn't comply with the rules, he/she can be evicted without any involvement of the enforcement agency. The clients often have to prove that they are housing ready by living in the apartment for a trial period up to two years. In total, 15,838 (13,900 in 2011) persons belonged to situation 3 (see Table 5.).⁶ There is a discrepancy compared to the number that The National Board of Housing, Building and Planning found in their survey of the secondary housing market the same year (23,800 apartments) (NBHBP, 2018). Many of the homeless population in situation 3 are lone mothers with children. Of the total figure, 49 per cent were parents with children under the age of 18.

Income support is the main income for most people that experience homelessness (45%). Only 8 per cent of the total homelessness population had an income from employment (see Table 8.).

Table 8. Proportion (%) of Homeless People with Income Support 1993–2017.

	1993	1999	2005	2011	2017
Income supp.	40.1	48	44	49	45

Source: National Board of Health and Welfare 1993, 1999, 2005, 2011, 2017

Another trend is that more people that are homeless are born in a country other than Sweden. In total, 43 per cent, but for women 48 per cent, were born in another country (see Table 4 and Table 9). Of those who are born in another country, more than half have lived in Sweden for more than five years.

⁶ The National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (NBHBP, 2014) has followed up the development of the secondary housing market since 2008. Then there were 11,700 social leases. In 2013, the number of apartments on the secondary housing market had risen to 16,386. In January 2018 there were approximately 23,800 apartments (NBHBP, 2018).

Table 9. Proportion (%) of Homeless People with Migrant Background 1993–2017.

	1993	1999	2005	2011	2017
Swedish	76.7	74	74	66	57
Migrant	23.3	26	26	34	43

Source: National Board of Health and Welfare 1993, 1999, 2005, 2011, 2017

In a study by Kuhn and Culhane (1998), three groups of homeless people were identified among shelter residents: transitionally, episodically and chronically homeless. The first group is those who occasionally live in a shelter. Eighty per cent of the shelter population belonged to this group. The episodically homeless used shelters on several occasions. The last group were found to use half of the shelter nights. Research from Denmark shows very similar results (Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015), but there is no evidence from Sweden. However, in the national survey one in ten have been homeless for more than 10 years, indicating that they belong to a group of long-term homeless people. More than half of the total homelessness population had been homeless for more than one year.

The Swedish Enforcement Authority collects statistics regarding the number of evictions. They have a special focus on the number of children that are affected by evictions. According to the Swedish Enforcement Authority (2016), nine out of ten evictions that affect children are caused by rent arrears. In 50 per cent of the cases, the evictions are carried out for rent debts lower than SEK 10,000 (€964.40). The average rental debts are SEK 19,000 (€1,832.30).⁷ For almost 20 per cent of the homeless population, eviction was the main cause of their homelessness. However, the number of evictions has decreased. In 2010, there were 3,116 evictions, while in 2017 there were 2,091 evictions. The number of children who have been affected by an eviction also decreased from 632 children in 2010 to 392 children in 2017 (Stenberg *et al.*, 2010).⁸ It is not primarily evictions from the ordinary housing market that causes homelessness among families with children, but rather the difficulty of getting into the housing market (Nordfeldt, 2012).

The survey asked where the person had lived prior to their homelessness episode. For 20 per cent of the total number of homeless, they had lived in their own apartment or house. For a relatively large share of the homeless population, the respondents did not know where the person had lived prior to their homelessness.

⁷ Source: <https://www.kronofogden.se/48476.html>

⁸ Source: https://www.kronofogden.se/download/18.28b9f2671590d52c89b9a2a/1486977618012/Barnavh_2008-2016.pdf.

The lack of information is especially problematic when it relates to children, since the social services have an obligation to always consider the child's perspective when making a decision that affects their lives. For almost 1,800 individuals, there was no information at all concerning whether they had children or not.

Housing insecurity is evident in situation 4, where 42 per cent of the group lack any form of contract. In situation 4, 5,726 (6,800 in 2011) people were reported as living in short-term insecure housing solutions. The average age is lower in this group (56% under the age of 35) and of those who live together with their children, 75 per cent have a migration background. Almost 60 per cent needed help with income support or debt counselling. A fifth of the group had been homeless for less than 3 months prior to the survey and only 18 per cent had received some form of intervention from the social services. This shows that the people in situation 4 have to sort out their situation by themselves. There is, however, a lack of data on those individuals who ask the social services for help, but are denied help because their circumstances are not severe enough.

Many families with children are forced to lodge or to live in substandard housing. These are often provided by so-called slum lords at a high cost with very unsecure rental contracts. Being housed on the black market makes it impossible to apply for housing allowance (Lind and Blomé, 2012).

If we take a look at the Swedish homelessness figures and try and compare them with other Nordic countries, we see that Sweden has the highest number of homeless people per 1,000 inhabitants. It is a difficult task to compare the figures, but all countries in Table 10 have recently conducted a homelessness count. In Norway, sub-let apartments are not included in the definition of homelessness. In Finland, quite a large share of people live temporarily with friends or family and more than half of the total number of homeless people live in Helsinki. If we include the secondary housing market in the comparison, Sweden has figures almost three times higher per 1,000 inhabitants. The secondary housing market must be seen as a unique Swedish housing market. (Benjaminsen and Dyb, 2008).

Another explanation of the differences between the countries is the great influx of refugees to Sweden during the humanitarian crisis. According to the Migration Agency, Sweden had 162,877 asylum applications in 2015.⁹ During 2015, 35,300 unaccompanied minors were registered in Sweden (40% of all unaccompanied

⁹ <http://www.migrationsverket.se/download/18.7c00d8e6143101d166d1aab/1451894593595/Inkomna+ans%C3%B6kningar+om+asyl+2015+-+Applications+for+asylum+received+2015.pdf>

minors registered in the EU member states).¹⁰ In March 2016, a new act was introduced. It forces municipalities to house newly arrived immigrants (Act (2016: 38) on the reception of certain newly arrived immigrants for settlement). In a recently commenced research project called *Scanian homes: Reception, settlement or rejection – homelessness policies and strategies for refugee settlement* – we will try and investigate the practice, interaction and results of municipal homelessness policies and refugee reception strategies in Skåne county, in order to identify policy elements that are helpful for providing secure and adequate housing for these groups.¹¹

Table 10. Homelessness in the Scandinavian Countries

Country	Population	Homeless	Homelessness per 1000 inhabitants
Sweden (2017)	9,995,153	33,269	3.3
Denmark (2017)	5,748,769	6,635	1.2
Norway (2016)	5,258,317	3,909	0.75
Finland (2017)	5,503,297	7,112	1.3

Looking at the national data will hide local variations. We have seen a reduction in homelessness in some municipalities. There is also a big difference in the profile of homelessness. One example might elucidate this. If we compare the three largest cities in Sweden – Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö – we can see a clear difference especially between Malmö and the other two. In Malmö, more women are homeless. There are also more people that have children and more people that live with their children. The homelessness population is younger, and more people have no other problems than the lack of housing. For Stockholm, the figure was nine per cent, in Gothenburg, 17 per cent and in Malmö, the figure was 29 per cent. In Malmö, 34 per cent of homeless persons had a migration background from the Middle East. In Stockholm, it was only nine per cent and in Gothenburg, 15 per cent. There is also a big difference regarding how long the person had lived in Sweden. In Malmö, many had lived in Sweden for a shorter time, while in Stockholm and Gothenburg, more than half of the migrant homeless population had lived in Sweden for more than eight years.

¹⁰ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7244677/3-02052016-AP-EN.pdf/19cfd8d1-330b-4080-8ff3-72ac7b7b67f6>

¹¹ <https://www.soch.lu.se/en/research/research-projects/scanian-homes-reception-settlement-or-rejection>

Conclusion

The main discourse in Sweden and in most European countries today is positioned around competition and on individualization and consumer choice. This has led to an increased usage of market mechanisms in the production and distribution of public services and public-private partnerships connected to market mechanisms. The national housing policy in Sweden changed in 2006 from everyone's right to good housing at a reasonable cost – to creating long-term well-functioning housing markets where consumer demand meets a range of housing that meets the needs (Bengtsson, 2013; Sahlin, 2013). The withdrawal of state responsibilities in housing policy is clear, but on a municipal level the deregulation is a lot more complex. The State has very clearly put the responsibility of housing provision on the municipalities. At the same time new legislation has been put in place in order to make municipal housing companies more business-like and operate for-profit. This makes it even more difficult for marginalized groups to enter the regular housing market. Another consequence of the privatization trend is that some municipalities have decided to sell a large share of their municipal housing companies. Coupled with a very low production of new public housing or other forms of rental apartments, the housing shortage is evident in more than half of Sweden's 290 municipalities (Olsson and Nordfeldt, 2008; NBHBP, 2018).

The major explanation for the growing number of people experiencing homelessness is the housing shortage, especially within the rented sector. Research reports show that the barriers to enter the regular housing market have increased (NBHBP, 2010). In the past few years, municipal housing companies have stopped recognising income support as a steady income. This means that a large group of people that have income support cannot sign their own lease on the regular housing market. Having lived in different forms of temporary housing or specialized housing for homeless people can also minimize your chances of getting your own lease (Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007, p.79). Landlords might question your ability to live in an independent flat if your last housing reference is from the night shelter. If a client fails within the staircase model it is a high risk that this is seen as an individual failure due to bad choices. Being defined as 'the other' seems to strip you from your civil rights. The results are that a lot of people cannot get a lease of their own and thus are dependent on the social services for housing arrangements within the secondary housing market. Research has shown that around eight per cent of the apartments on the secondary housing market are turned into first hand contracts during a year. This means that the number of homeless people on earlier "steps" in their housing careers is growing.

The rental apartments that are newly produced are usually directed towards the upper segment of the housing market subgroups (Magnusson-Turner, 2008). The average rental cost of a newly produced rental apartment is a lot higher than the norm for the highest acceptable housing cost that the social services will pay. Newly produced apartments are also exempted from the user value system that exists in Sweden. This is sometimes referred to as “presumption rent”. This type of rent is valid for the first fifteen years, after which the tenant is entitled to have the rent tested against the value of use. The direct effect of this is that the rental costs in newly produced housing is increasing rapidly.

In many EU member states, homelessness strategies have been produced. This is also the case in Sweden, both on a national and on a municipal level. Even though research clearly points out that the main cause of homelessness is a lack of affordable housing, the implementation and responsibility for carrying out the homelessness strategies lies on the Social Welfare Committee rather than on the Municipal Executive Committee. This indicates that homelessness is constructed as a social problem that should be handled by the social services even though the social services don't have the possibility to or the resources for building new houses. Instead their role is circumscribed and in order to get access to housing, negotiation is the key word (Jensen, Johansson and Löfström, 2006).

Both in the national homelessness survey and in a recently published White Paper (SOU, 2018: 35) there is a call for an integrated housing provision strategy, where the state, the regions and the municipalities all take a joint responsibility in the provision of housing. There is very little evidence that we will see a reduction in the homelessness figures in Sweden in the near future. Hopefully, an integrated homelessness strategy can be put in place, with a strong focus not only on housing provision, but also on homelessness prevention. It is about doing things right, but also doing the right things. This would be beneficial for all of those who are experiencing homelessness, but also for the country as a whole.

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