

Public Fear and Perceptions of Sexual Assault and Battery on a College Campus

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Abstract

Sexual assault on college campuses is a topic of great discussion. The current study explores students' perceived fears of becoming victims of sexual assault on Fresno State campus grounds and their perceptions concerning current sexual assault prevention policies and methods.

Participants were asked to complete a survey to assess the effect that their gender and race had on their fear of being sexually assaulted and their beliefs about Fresno State's ability to protect them from sexual assault. Results revealed that gender and race did not have a significant effect on a person's level of fear. Results also concluded that a person's gender did not have a significant effect on a person's perceptions of current campus efforts, however race did in some cases. As for questions about possible improvements that could be made to the campus's security, race and gender had no substantial effect on the responses.

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There are horrific atrocities that occurs on nearly every university campus that can have damaging effects on students; both male and female university students find themselves victims of heinous acts of sexual battery and sexual assault. According to a report, by Roebuck and Murty (2017) 12 million American women between the ages of 18 and 24 believed a college campus to be a dangerous place. The report even states that former U.S. President Obama concurs with this assessment and believes sexual assault is a problem on university campuses. Another report states that a campus that enrolls 10,000 female students could have over 350 reported rapes a year (Jordan, 2014). There are two purposes of the current study, the first being to examine college students' overall fear of becoming a victim of sexual assault and battery within their own campus. The second purpose is to investigate the students' views on current policies to keep students safe and to inquire if there can be improvements made to such policies. Understanding who fears becoming a victim the most can help lead school administrators and policy makers to create opportunities to help students feel safer, as well as seeing what we can improve within the current system. These ideas have been touched upon before by another study that was rather similar to the nature of the current study in a few ways.

The Oklahoma study examined college students' perceptions about both sexual assault and their thoughts on a campus wide sexual assault education system. The authors found that student views varied from person to person based on personal experiences and were solidified based on their race, gender and other perceived views (Worthen & Wallace 2017). The study also found that though white heterosexual women supported the campus wide education program, they were also the most critical of the program. Unfortunately the study only looked into whether

the students believed sexual assault to be a problem, under reporting and feelings about a campus wide educational program (Worthen & Wallace 2017). They neglected to look into who was more fearful of being attacked. It is also worth noting that the Oklahoma study stated in its limitations that the study was limited by using a sample mostly composed of white heterosexuals and recommends that studies be carried out within universities that have a more diverse population with a variety of experiences. The current study intends to rectify these limitations by obtaining more diverse samples within the population of Fresno State and looking at perceived fear.

In 1999 there was a study that measured fear and was even stronger in similarities to the current study. The study was conducted on two different college campuses within an urban population (Kristen Day 1999). The researcher looked into three types of perceived fears that are shared between individual women. Such fears included the fear of being attacked by a stranger, fear of strange places and people, and the fear of inappropriate or unwanted touching. The study sampled 38 women from a variety of backgrounds that attended the surveyed universities in the mid-west. The universities that the participants originated from were named in the report as All Saints University (a private religious liberal arts campus) and City Engineering School (a nonprofit public institution). The study involved the use of interviews of the participants where certain social and physical cues, such as body language, were examined to investigate perceived fears. On top of this, participants were asked to photograph places on the university's grounds that they associated with their own personal sense of fear.

When disclosing the findings it was reported that the women used in the study willingly described their fears and social cues with relative ease (Day 1999). It was observed that the fear

of being sexually attacked by a stranger was the top fear or concern. One female student reported that she could care less of what race the male stranger is and that her first fear would be that of being sexually assaulted before other crimes like robbery. It was also reported that women from the All Saints campus stated their fear of sexual crimes more than the engineering students. Perhaps the reason is religious ideology, and this should be investigated further. The fear of becoming a victim of sexual assault by a date or by an acquaintance was rarely mentioned by the participants, despite the fact of them knowing people (sometimes on a personal level) who have been victims that knew their attacker. The study did not mention if the participants knew that being sexually assaulted by a stranger is unlikely in comparison to being attacked by a person that the victim knows. However a student from the engineering school reported a greater fear of stranger assault, despite the fact that this particular participant had been assaulted by a male student that she knew.

In regards of the limitations of this study it is important to acknowledge that such results can be considered outdated, due to the fact that this was a study conducted nearly two decades ago (Day 1999). The study also had no male participants, so the perceived fear of male students is unknown to this particular study. This study would also need to be conducted in many other universities of both the private and public nature, since the study only visited two campuses. In hopes of rectifying at least one of the limitations, the current study will evaluate both male and female students.

A study conducted in 2017, examined the factors related to students reporting sexual assaults (Chelsea Spencer, Sandra Smith, Jaraed Durtschi, and Michelle Toews, 2017). The study used a sample of 266 sexual assault survivors and had them respond to an online survey that was

sent out to all the students at the university. Though the university used within the study was not named directly it is reported that the sample originated from a southern university. The study examined the likelihood of victims making a formal or informal report if they had training regarding sexual assault. Other factors were also examined, like the relationship between the victim and perpetrator. The study found that students who had received training in responding to sexual assault were more likely to report the incident than students who did not. It was also found that students who knew their attacker were less likely to report the attack. Finally it was found that if students had a positive perception of their university, then they would be more likely to report the crime. This study had provided factors that were taken into consideration when conducting the current study. However like the previous studies there were limitations. The authors of the study state that the sample size was small and only from one university, along with the fact that the type of sexual assault training the students received remained unknown. With this in mind the study suggests that multiple types of sexual assault training be compared in the future.

To avoid any possible confusion, the current study will be based off of the California Penal code, meaning that the definitions used to describe sexual assault and battery will originate from California law. According to the book *California Criminal Law Concepts* (2015), sexual battery is described as, any person who touches an intimate part of another person's body, such as a sexual member, while being restrained against that person's will. The touch is also considered to be unwanted by the victim (Derald D. Hunt & Devallis Rutledge 2015). The book also gives the actual penal code for forcible rape (P.C 261(a)(2)) and rape with the use of drugs and intoxicants (P.C 261(a)(3)). Rape by intoxicants and drugs is described as a victim becoming

overcome by a substance without their knowledge before a sexual assault (Hunt & Rutledge 2015).

As mentioned before there are two purposes that guide the current study. The first purpose is to measure both male and students' perceived fear of sexual assault and the second purpose is to investigate students' views on current university policies and prevention methods. The goal is to answer the question of which groups, such as different races of students, are more fearful of becoming victims of sexual assault and how can the university improve their current policies to fit the needs of the students who have a greater fear of being assaulted. With all the current data that was collected, two hypotheses can be formed. The first hypothesis is that students who are white females will be more fearful of becoming victims of sexual assault. The second hypothesis is that students who are white females will have negative views on current policies and will want changes to be made to them. With the information from the current study, university administrators may be able to create policies to help reduce fear and create a safer campus.

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were a convenience sample that was collected from within three classrooms that contain 30 to 40 students. Out of the selected classes 96 students participated in the study. The sample was made of 38.9% male students and 61.1% female students. In regards to race, the sample consisted of 71.6% hispanic students, 12.6% white students 3.2% African American students, 7.4% Asian students, and 5.3% of students declared themselves as Other. However after

further analyses, the Asian, African American, and Other student groups were grouped together because of their small numbers. The independent variable of sexual orientation had to be dropped, due to the lack of a decent minority sample of both homosexuals and bisexuals. It was made clear that participation in the current study was completely voluntary. Participants included persons from all genders, ethnicities. Since the participants were gathered from different types of classes, students came from a wide variety of backgrounds, majors and socioeconomic statuses. This study utilized a quasi-experimental design, with gender and ethnicity as quasi-independent variables. Main dependent variables included the level of fear of becoming a victim of sexual assault and perception of current university policies.

Materials

The current study utilized a survey that was issued out to all the participants in their respective class rooms. The survey consisted of yes or no questions along with questions rated on a ten-point scale. The survey concludes with open-ended free response questions about the participant's thoughts and views on current sexual assault prevention methods.

Survey Design

The survey's purpose was to evaluate students' perceptions of the likelihood of becoming victims of sexual assault on campus and students' views on the current policies that the university has concerning sexual assault. All of the participants in the study were issued identical copies of the survey that included 12 questions, five of which asked about the participant characteristics such as race, sexual orientation, and sex. The remainder of the questions included yes or no questions that measured specific aspects of fear, along with one free response question

and questions that measured agreement with a particular statement (see appendix). The agreement questions were based on a scale from 1-10 (1 being that the participant was in total disagreement with the statement and 10 being in total agreement with the statement).

Questions

After the demographic questions the participants were asked a series of questions to evaluate the specific level of fear. The first question was a yes or no question that asked, "Do you believe sexual assault is a problem on campus". The next question was asked in order to measure the participant's level of fear of being a victim of sexual assault on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 having no fear and 10 being very fearful). Following this the participant was asked if, "Are you more fearful of becoming a victim of sexual assault as opposed to being a victim of other crimes such as robbery, theft, assault and battery". This was asked to assess if the fear of being sexual assaulted was more of a concern to the participant as opposed to other common crimes. This was asked to give a better understanding the level of overall fear. The survey then turns from assessing fear to assessing the participant's views of the university's policies. The next question asked students if they had faith in the university's ability to protect them against sexual assault. Participants responded with a yes or no answer along with a brief description why they felt that way.

Participants were presented with the following statement and asked to indicate their answer on a scale of 1 to 10. The statement read, "I feel like the university is doing all it can to stop sexual assault". Once again if the participant answered with a 1 then they were in total disagreement with the statement and a 10 meant that they were in total agreement. The

participants were then asked, “Do you feel that the campus cares about sexual assault prevention” which they responded yes or no to. This was followed up by asking the participant why they answered yes or no. Finally, the participants were presented with a free response question asking, “What can be done to better protect students from sexual assault”. Such answers were reviewed to examine student perceptions on the current university policies, as well as to gather feed back from the students to improve the policies.

Procedure

The survey was issued to all the students in the selected groups in printed form, along with large envelopes. Following the deployment of the survey, it was explained to the students that this was a study to assess college students’ fear of becoming victims of sexual assault, as well as their own views on current sexual assault prevention methods at the university. The participants were also instructed that participation was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point without the fear of suffering any penalties. A point was also made to stress the fact that the survey was anonymous and that no one would know how the students answered. The students were instructed that once they had completed the survey, that they were to put the completed document inside the issued envelop to ensure anonymity. The student will then wait until all surveys were completed before the examiner would collect the completed surveys. If a student withdrew from the study, they would still place the incomplete study inside the issued envelop. After all surveys were collected, the participants were debriefed and thanked.

Results

Participants' Level of Fear

An ANOVA was used to test the participants' level of fear of becoming a victim of sexual assault based on their gender and race. The independent variables that were tested consisted of the participants' race and gender, whereas the dependent variables was the participants' level of fear of becoming a victim of sexual assault. There was a significant effect on the level of fear, [$F(1,89)=24.818, P=0.027$] with female participants having the more fear of being sexually assaulted ($M=4.24, SD=1.6$) as compared to their male counterparts ($M=1.45, SD=1.6$). However race had no effect on the participants' level of fear of becoming a victim of sexual assault (see Table1). Table 1

Participants' Fear of Sexual Assault Versus Other Crimes

In a similar manner an ANOVA was used to test the effects of participants' race and gender on their fear of becoming victims of sexual assault in comparison to their fear of being victims of other crimes, such as murder or theft. Once again the participants' gender had an effect on how they answered the question, but their race had no effect. Females had more fear of being a victim of sexual assault in comparison to becoming a victim of a crime such as robbery or murder ($M=4.2414, SD=2.40$) in contrast to the males in the sample who had minimal fear ($M=1.70, SD=1.74$) (see Table 2).

Participants' Faith in the Campus's ability to Protect Students

A chi-square test was conducted to test if the independent variables of gender and race had an effect on the participants' faith in the Campus's ability to protect them from sexual assault. There were no significant differences in responses between the different races or genders. Meaning that neither race nor gender had an effect on the way the participant answered the question.

Participants' Views On Campus Efforts Against Sexual Assault

The participants were presented with a statement that read, "I feel like the University is doing all it can to stop sexual assault". The statement was designed to explore if the participants believed that the campus was utilizing all available resources and efforts to protect them against sexual assault. An ANOVA was used to test if the participants' gender and race had an effect on the participants' responses to the statement and found that responses differed depending on the participant's race and gender [$F(2,88) = 3.21, P=0.045$]. The test revealed that the White females' responses ($M=4.33, SD=2.01$) differed from the Hispanic female ($M=6.1, SD=2.4$) and Other groups ($M=6.8, SD=2.8$) responses and members of the Hispanic Female group and members of the Other Female group were very similar (see Table 3).

Participants' Answers to "Do you Feel Like the Campus Cares about Sexual Assault Prevention"

An ANOVA was run to test the participants' responses to the statement of "I feel like the campus cares about sexual assault prevention". However neither race nor gender had an effect of the participant's answers. Males ($M=4.0$, $SD=3.09$) and females ($M=4.29$, $SD=3.20$) answered to similarly for there to be any notable difference.

Elaboration Inquiries

The current study utilized free response questions that were used to elaborate on answers to the previous questions. Two free response questions (see appendix) were inserted into the survey to provide the study with more detailed information. All responses were coded into separate categories for their respective question. Responses for question 8 were used to clarify why a participant answered the previous question (see appendix) the way they did. The responses were then categorized as "I feel safe", "I don't feel safe" "I feel safe because of the current level of security" "The current level of security does not make me feel safe", "I see actions being done", or "I don't see actions being done". Out of the 96 participants, 35.5% of participants reported answers that fell under the category of "I feel safe", 15.8% of participants gave responses that fell under the category of "I don't feel safe", and 14.7% gave responses that fell under the category "Because of the level of security makes me feel safe". Along with these responses, 14.7% of participants gave responses that were classified under "The level of security dose not make me feel safe" with 7.4% of participants reporting responses that were classified as "I see actions being done" and 4.2% of participants reporting responses that fall under the

classification “I see actions being done”. A crosstab test and a chi-square test concluded that there were no effects on the responses that were caused by the participant’s race or gender.

For question 11 (see appendix) the categories were “Pleased with policy”, “Not pleased with policy”, “Don’t believe the campus could do anything”, or “Policy is decent but can be better”. Out of the 96 students who participated in the study, 45.3% of participants gave responses that fell under the classification of “Pleased with policy” 7.4% of participants gave responses that were under the classification of “Not pleased with policy” and 5.3% of participants stated that they felt that the campus could not do anything to stop sexual assault. Along with these responses, 34.7% of participants reported responses that were classified as “Policy is decent but can be better”. However after a crosstab test and chi-square test were conducted, it was found that the participant’s race nor their gender had an effect on their responses to the free response question.

Yes and No Questions Related to Sexual Assault

Two questions were utilized by the current study (see appendix) to assess the participant’s views on the problem of sexual assault and the campus’s ability to protect students. Question 4 asked the participants’ if they felt that sexual assault was a problem on campus. There were no apparent effects due to the participants’ gender ($\chi^2 = 2.06, P > .05$), however a chi-square test revealed that race did have an apparent effect ($\chi^2 = 9.26, P < .05$). Participant’s who were White answered differently than those who were Hispanic or classified as other. The greater majority White group felt that sexual assault was a problem, whereas both Hispanic and Other groups were divided on the issue.

For question 7 (see appendix) chi-square test revealed that neither race nor gender had any significant differences on the participants' responses ($\chi^2 = .32, P > .05$) ($\chi^2 = 2.6, P > .05$).

Student Ideas for Improvement of the Current Sexual Assault Policy

The current study included another free response question (question 12) that seeks to find out what the participants believed could help improve the current level of security and police on Fresno State campus. Once again the free responses were coded into categories based on the nature of the responses. The categories being, "More security patrols and systems", "Need personal security", "More open discussion/ more education about sexual assault", "I don't know", "better lighting", or "Nothing". It was determined by a crosstab test that there were no differences between the groups and their responses. However it was discovered that 32.6% of the participants (15 males, 16 females) believed that more security patrols and security systems were needed to improve campus safety, making it the most popular response. Out of the 96 participants, 26.3% participants (10 males and 15 females) believed that the campus needed more open discussion and education about sexual assault, making it the second most popular response. The third most popular response was the request for better lighting, with 12.6% of the participants (2 males and 10 females) stating the same improvement idea. The rare responses came in the form of the categories "I don't know", "Nothing", and "Need personal security". 6.3% participants (3 males, 3 females) answered that they did not know what could be done to improve campus safety, 4.2% participants (2 males, 2 females) believed that personal security was needed (Personal security defined as pepper spray, self-defense courses, and the ability to carry firearms on campus), and 4.2% participants (2 males, 2 females) believed that there was

nothing that could be improved.

Discussion

Sexual assault on college campus is a wildly talked about and debated issue, however not much is known about how the students of a campus fear and feel about the issue. Therefore the current study was implemented to take a step to explore this idea further. The study sought to find out if race and gender influenced the students' level of fear of being victimized and their feelings towards campus wide prevention methods. Originally the study was going to take sexual orientation as an independent variable, however due to the fact that the sample only contained one bi-sexual female, sexual orientation was removed as a variable. The study also investigated if students believed that sexual assault was a problem on campus and if they felt that the campus cared about preventing sexual assault. As for the effects that race and gender had on the responses of these questions, it was found that race did play a role in determining if the participant saw sexual assault as a problem, however gender did not have any effect, and neither race nor gender had any effect on the participants' responses to the question if they believed the campus cared about sexual assault. As mentioned in the results gender had an effect on the level of fear that the participants' had of becoming victims of sexual assault, with females being the most fearful, however race had no effect on the responses. Though the study had proved itself able to get results, it is not without limitations. Due to the use of a paper and pen survey and the fact that only three classes were available to be surveyed, the sample size was

small by comparison to other studies. This is why sexual orientation was excluded from being a variable and the African American group and the Other group were combined. Future studies should take caution and use online surveys, while also finding ways to specifically recruit minority groups to gain a well balanced sample. Also the current study was conducted at one University in California with a high hispanic population, which means that variables could have a different effect in other areas of the state and the country. In conclusion females have the greatest level of fear of being victims of sexual assault, though it dose not matter what race they are. The results of the study also indicates that the null hypothesis must be accepted since race and gender did not have any effect on student perceptions of current campus policy. The current study is definitely a step in the right direction and has provided data that can help campus officials make improvements to keep students safe and assure them that they are safe on campus grounds from those who harbor ill will towards them.

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Table 1

Between-Subjects Factors

		Value Label	N
Gender	1.00	Male	37
	2.00	Female	58
RaceNewIV	2.00	White	12
	3.00	Hispanic	68
	5.00	Other	15

Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: Ivlfear

Gender	RaceNewIV	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Male	White	1.0000	.00000	4
	Hispanic	1.6154	1.89899	26
	Other	1.1429	.37796	7
	Total	1.4595	1.60891	37
Female	White	4.8750	2.64237	8
	Hispanic	4.1429	2.39483	42
	Other	4.1250	3.22656	8
	Total	4.2414	2.51529	58
Total	White	3.5833	2.84312	12
	Hispanic	3.1765	2.52711	68
	Other	2.7333	2.76371	15
	Total	3.1579	2.58603	95

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Ivlfear

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	180.728 ^a	5	36.146	7.182	.000
Intercept	405.100	1	405.100	80.495	.000
Gender	124.901	1	124.901	24.818	.000
RaceNewIV	.831	2	.416	.083	.921
Gender * RaceNewIV	4.368	2	2.184	.434	.649
Error	447.904	89	5.033		
Total	1576.000	95			
Corrected Total	628.632	94			

a. R Squared = .287 (Adjusted R Squared = .247)

Table 2

Between-Subjects Factors

		Value Label	N
Gender	1.00	Male	37
	2.00	Female	58
RaceNewIV	2.00	White	12
	3.00	Hispanic	68
	5.00	Other	15

Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: fearVSothercrims

Gender	RaceNewIV	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Male	White	1.0000	.00000	4
	Hispanic	1.8846	2.02636	26
	Other	1.4286	.78680	7
	Total	1.7027	1.74587	37
Female	White	4.0000	2.20389	8
	Hispanic	4.3571	2.35632	42
	Other	3.8750	3.09089	8
	Total	4.2414	2.40839	58
Total	White	3.0000	2.29624	12
	Hispanic	3.4118	2.52885	68
	Other	2.7333	2.57645	15
	Total	3.2526	2.49667	95

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: fearVSothercrims

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	151.051 ^a	5	30.210	6.183	.000
Intercept	388.224	1	388.224	79.451	.000

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Gender	88.934	1	88.934	18.200	.000
RaceNewIV	5.331	2	2.665	.545	.581
Gender * RaceNewIV	.668	2	.334	.068	.934
Error	434.886	89	4.886		
Total	1591.000	95			
Corrected Total	585.937	94			

Table 3

Univariate Analysis of Variance

Between-Subjects Factors

		Value Label	N
Gender	1.00	Male	36
	2.00	Female	58
RaceNewIV	2.00	White	12
	3.00	Hispanic	67
	5.00	Other	15

Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: iscampusdoingitsall

Gender	RaceNewIV	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Male	White	4.5000	1.00000	4
	Hispanic	6.4400	2.93087	25
	Other	7.0000	2.70801	7
	Total	6.3333	2.77746	36
Female	White	4.2500	2.43487	8
	Hispanic	5.9048	2.17311	42
	Other	6.7500	3.24037	8
	Total	5.7931	2.42616	58
Total	White	4.3333	2.01509	12
	Hispanic	6.1045	2.47493	67
	Other	6.8667	2.89992	15
	Total	6.0000	2.56528	94

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: iscampusdoingitsall

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	50.221 ^a	5	10.044	1.573	.176
Intercept	1718.147	1	1718.147	269.140	.000
Gender	1.517	1	1.517	.238	.627
RaceNewIV	40.978	2	20.489	3.210	.045
Gender * RaceNewIV	.370	2	.185	.029	.971
Error	561.779	88	6.384		
Total	3996.000	94			
Corrected Total	612.000	93			

Appendix A

A Study of Public Fear and Perceptions of Sexual Assault and Battery on a College Campus

Participants please read:

This is a survey evaluating level of fear of becoming a victim of sexual assault, as well as student thoughts on current sexual assault prevention policies that are used on Fresno State's campus.

Please note your participation in this study is completely **VOLUNTARY**. There are no foreseen risks to the participant, however if you feel any discomfort **you may WITHDRAW** and stop participating in the study at anytime without fear of any penalties. Please **DO NOT** identify yourself on the survey. You will remain anonymous so please answer truthfully. Your answers will not only benefit the research, but also your fellow compatriots as well. Once complete please follow the following directions.

1. Once complete put survey in the envelope provided
2. Put your pencil on top of the envelope
3. Note: even if you have decided not to participate please put the survey inside the envelope provided. Thank you for your time and your cooperation.

1. What Gender are you ? (Circle one) Male, Female, Other
2. What race do you identify under? (Select one) Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, Other
3. What is your sexual orientation? (Select one) Heterosexual, Homosexual, Bisexual, Other
4. Do you believe sexual assault is a problem on campus Yes, No
5. What is your level of fear of becoming a victim of sexual assault (1 no fear 5 moderate 10 very fearful) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
6. Are you more fearful of sexual assault in comparison to other crimes like robbery, assault, murder, and theft? Yes, No
7. Do have faith in the University's ability to protect students against sexual assault Yes, No
8. Why did you answer number 7 the way you did?

9. I feel like the University is doing all it can to stop sexual assault (1 disagree 5 indifferent 10 total agreement) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
10. Do you feel that the campus cares about sexual assault prevention? Yes No
11. Why did you answer number 10 the way you did?

12. What can be done to better protect students from sexual assault? (Free response)

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