



I N S T I T U T E O F
child nutrition
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Research Brief



Child Nutrition Programs, Fall 2021: Challenges Faced and Solutions Found

A Publication for Child Nutrition Professionals from the
Applied Research Division • The University of Southern Mississippi

Overview

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 presented a myriad of immediate challenges to child nutrition programs (CNPs) operating amidst abrupt nationwide school closures and distance-learning education. A year later, with many schools reopening during the ongoing pandemic, CNPs continue to face ongoing or new complications. The Institute of Child Nutrition Applied Research Division (ICN ARD) reached out to CNP professionals via a rapid-response survey between August and September 2021. The purpose of this survey was to gauge the continuing or new hardships CNPs could face going into fall 2021, to explore actions CNP professionals took to meet challenges, and to identify solutions they found.

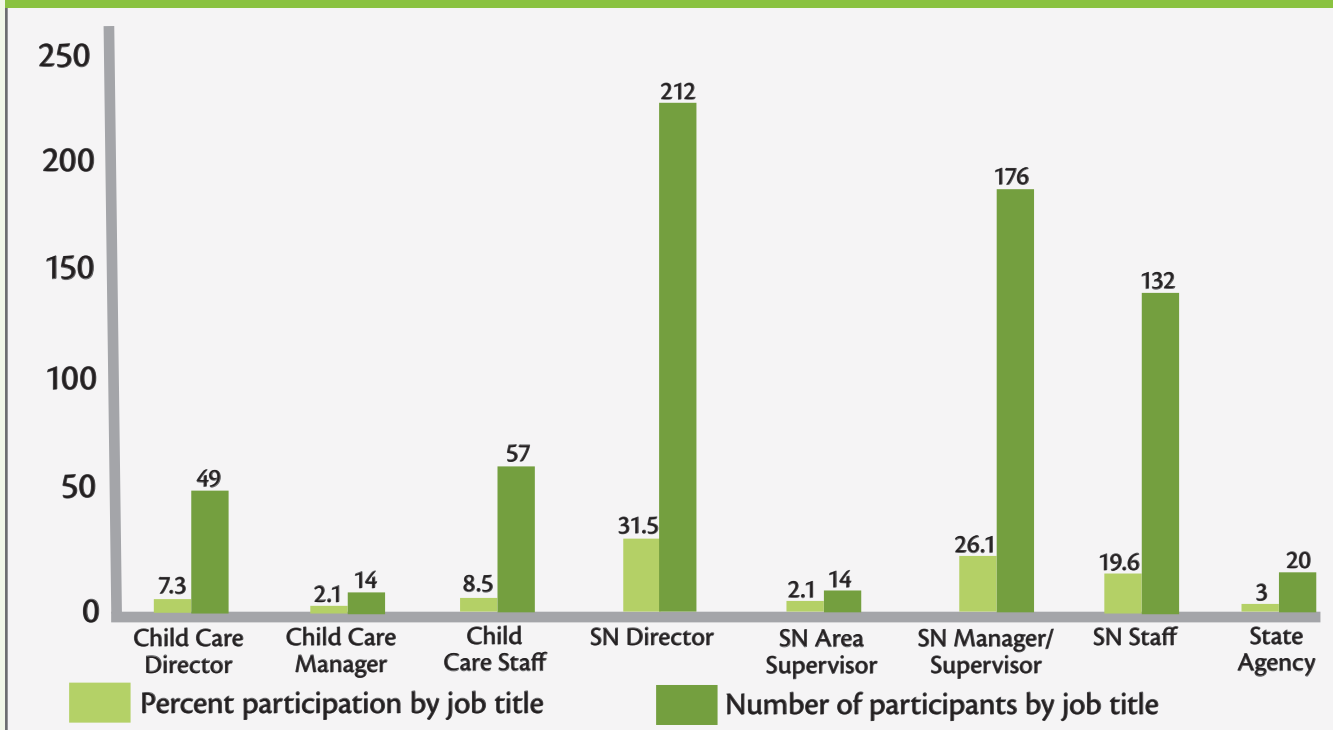


Study Participants

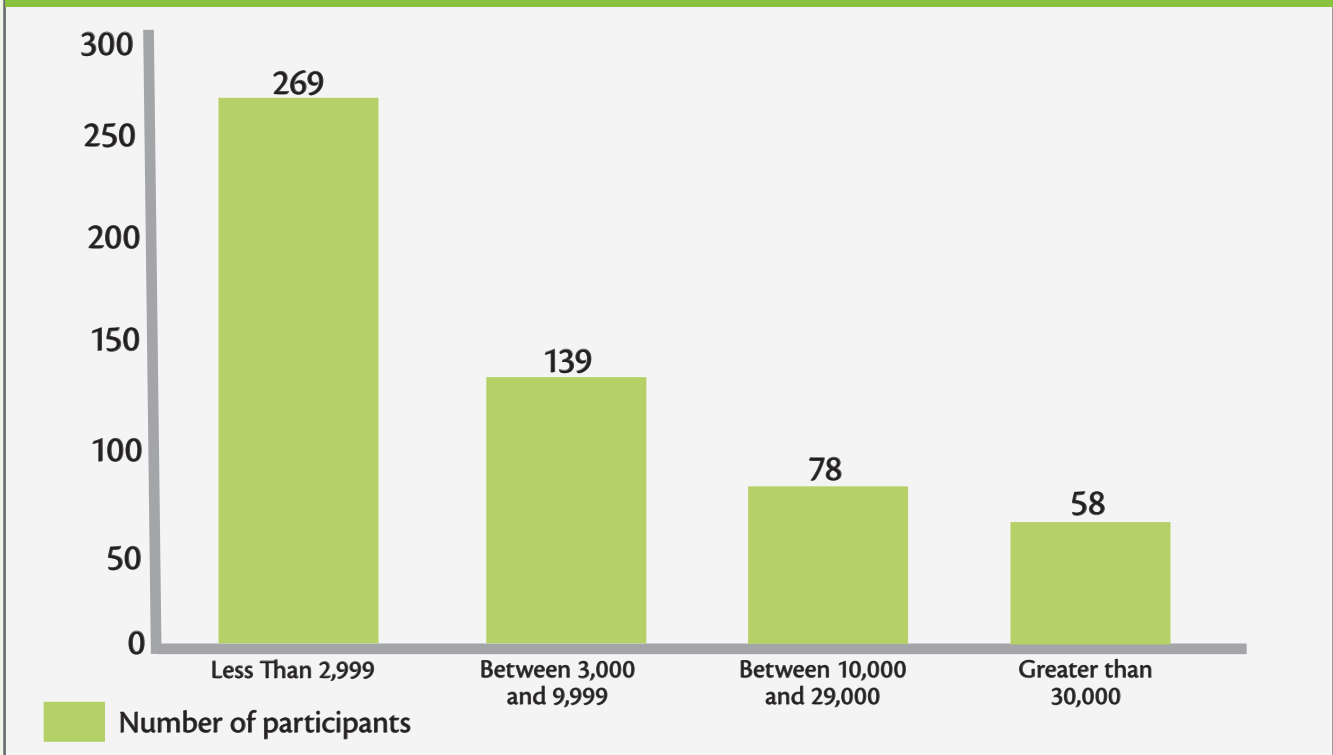
Six hundred seventy-four (674) individuals completed this survey from August to September 2021. The largest number of respondents represented school nutrition programs (SNPs); however, respondents also represented Child and Adult Care Food Programs (CACFPs) and State agencies. The figures on the following pages show the distribution of respondents based on CNP job titles, school enrollment, child care enrollment, and the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services (USDA, FNS) region.



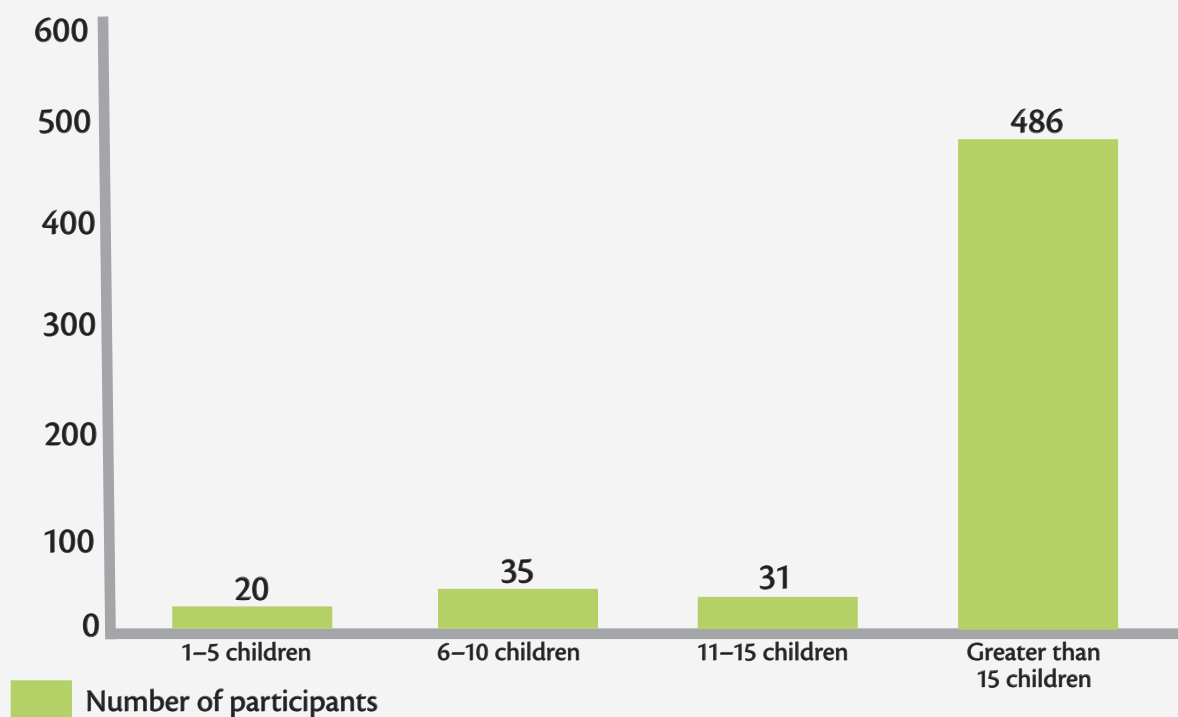
Percent and Number of Survey Participants by Job Title



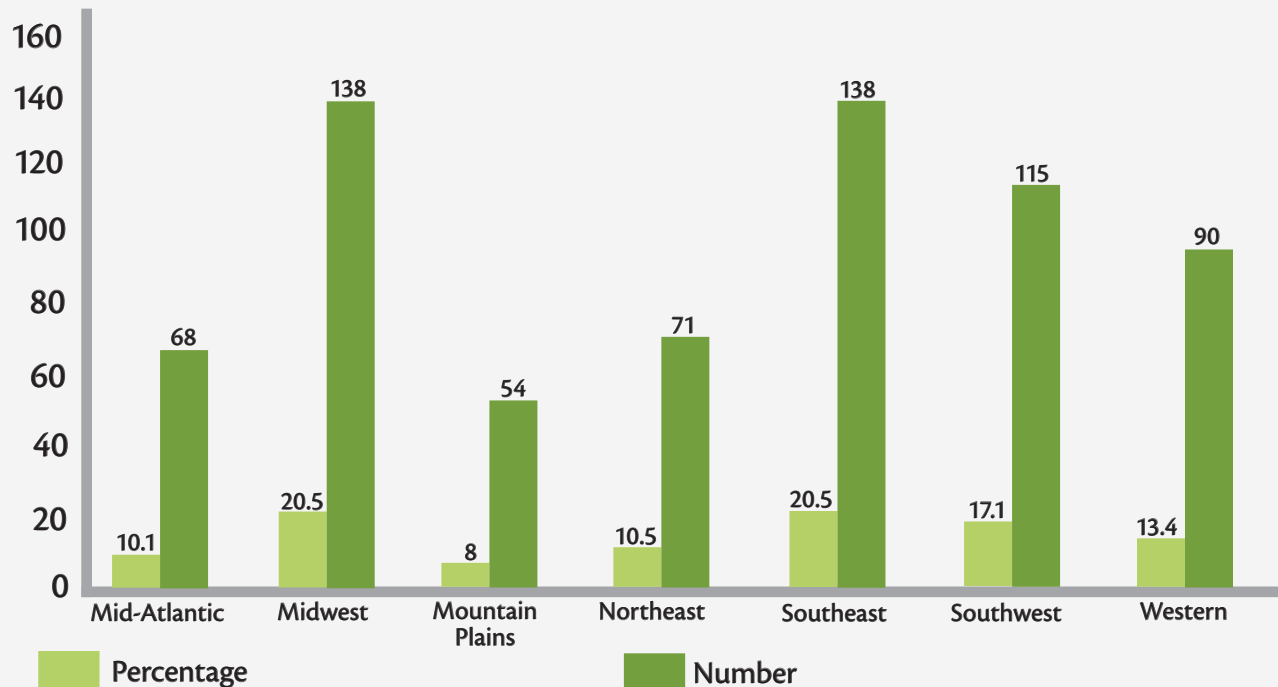
Survey Participants by School Enrollment Size



Survey Participants by Child Care Enrollment Size



Percent and Number of Survey Participants by USDA, FNS Region



Key Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a significant impact on program operations for CNPs across the country. The financial and programmatic impacts on SNPs and CACFPs have been alarming.

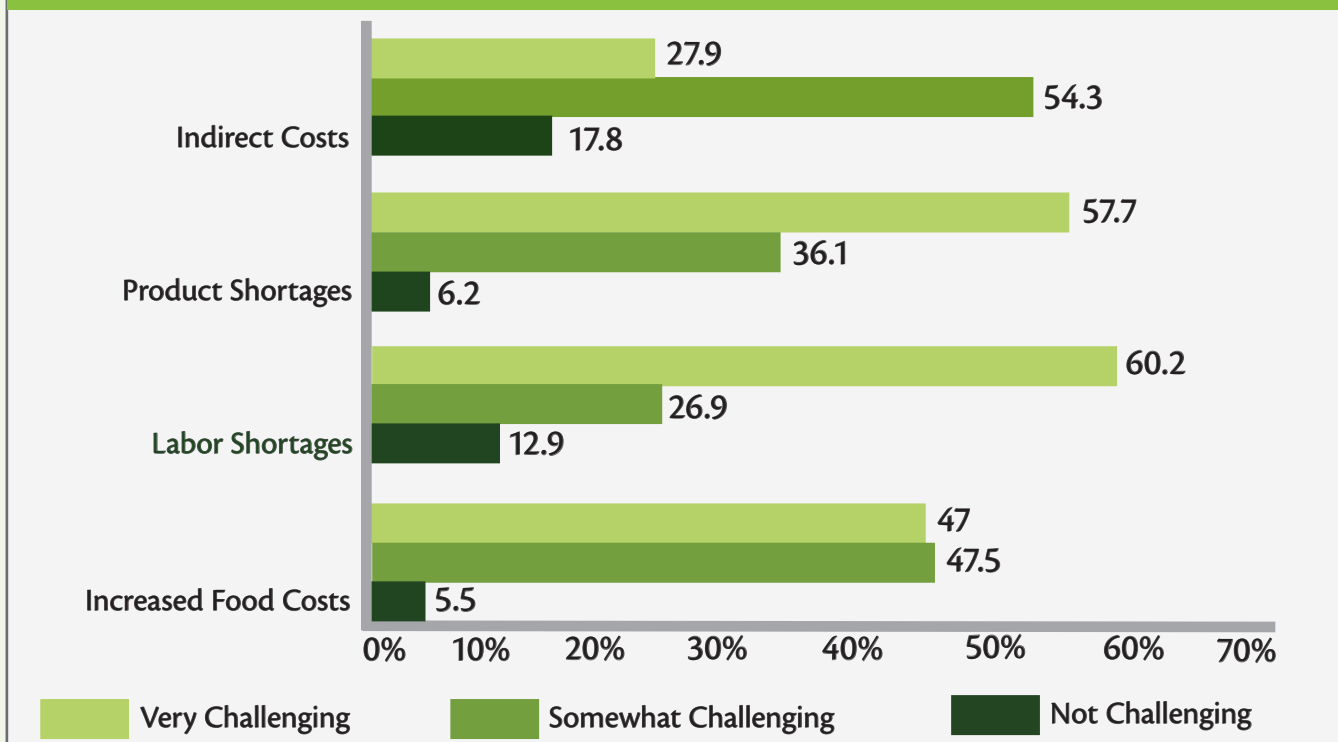
Respondents were asked to indicate how challenging four areas of foodservice operation would be as they enter into fall 2021. The four areas included increased food cost, labor shortages, product shortages, and indirect costs.

In all four areas, an overwhelming majority of the respondents indicated that they expected, or were experiencing, challenges. Almost all the respondents (94.5%) indicated that increases in food costs were either somewhat or very challenging for their CNP.

Eighty-seven percent (87%) of respondents noted that labor shortages were somewhat or very challenging. Not surprisingly, nearly 94% of respondents shared that product shortages were somewhat or very challenging. Of those individuals responding to the survey, 82% indicated that indirect costs were challenging for their operations.



Child Nutrition Program Foodservice Operation Challenges for All Groups



Addressing Labor Shortages



The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are broad and far-reaching, and include product availability, disruptions in service, loss of staff, and loss of revenue. Child nutrition program operators have taken, or are contemplating taking, a wide variety of actions to address the new circumstances. The participants in the current study were asked to share methods they will use to address the labor shortages CNPs face.

The tips and strategies the respondents shared to address labor-shortage issues facing CNPs in the fall of 2021 resulted in six primary themes or categories:

- **Recruitment and Advertising**
- **Salary, Bonus, and Benefits**
- **Meal Planning and Preparation**
- **Procurement, Forecasting, and Serving**
- **Management**
- **General Tips**

Strategies Used to Address Labor Shortages

Recruitment and Advertising

Respondents plan to use two recruitment methods to attract new staff to the CNP—standard advertisement or active recruitment. *Standard advertisement* includes school signs and banners, social media outlets, school websites, school or school lunch program newsletters, job search engines, general online outlets, and local newspaper announcements. *Active recruitment* methods include word-of-mouth recruitment by CNP staff, relying on district recruiters, using temporary staff agencies, recruiting through parent/volunteer organizations (e.g., Parent-Teacher Associations), recruiting retired staff, soliciting assistance from student workers, soliciting aid from volunteers, hosting job fairs, using special events for recruiting, and expanding hiring criteria.

Salary, Bonus, and Benefits

The respondents to the survey are either addressing or considering changes in compensation for new hires and return hires through salary, bonuses, and benefits beyond hourly wages. Many respondents suggested creating an *incentive program* for new hires and returnees, as well as incentives for employees who recruit new staff. As for benefits, respondents suggested adding additional *non-wage benefits*, including insurance and paid vacation leave. Respondents also suggested promoting the benefits of working in the CNP beyond wages, such as an opportunity for career growth and development, community outcomes, and work-life balance.

Meal Planning and Preparation

Respondents indicated that they have had to make *significant changes to the CNP menu planning and meal preparation* processes. The changes to the menu included decreasing menu offerings, shorter menu cycles, limited entrée choices, eliminating à la carte options, simplifying the menu offerings, and removing labor-intensive items.

Strategies Used to Address Labor Shortages

Procurement, Forecasting, and Serving

Respondents shared that they either intend to or currently *alter services offered* to students or *use different procurement strategies*. Participants in the survey recommended decreasing the number of serving lines in the cafeteria. Others suggested modifying their current services, such as offering more grab-n-go items, using pre-packaged convenience food that does not require as much labor to prepare, using shelf-stable items to minimize loss of inventory over time, ordering from different companies, and ordering in bulk.

Management

In a broad category of recommendations or current practices to address labor shortages, survey respondents indicated the need for CNP administrators to foster *teamwork within the CNP*, encourage *teamwork among CNP and other school/daycare staff*, offer *training and development for current CNP staff*, modify *current work schedules*, modify *hiring practices*, and *encourage employee wellness*. Based on the response, these changes would include encouraging CNP staff members to work together to complete tasks; pulling staff from other kitchens in the district, as needed and appropriate, to address labor shortages; recruiting non-CNP personnel to assist in meal distribution; cross-training CNP staff to do other jobs in the operation; modifying work schedules to accommodate all scheduling needs; encouraging health and wellness with current CNP professionals; and hiring subs.

General Tips

The respondents also provided general tips to address labor shortages that CNPs face. Many participants indicated the need for CNP staff and leadership to be flexible and to do the best that they are capable of under the circumstances.

In Their Own Words:

Quotes from Survey Respondents on Strategies for Addressing Labor Shortages

*Due to short staffing, we had to **close the à la carte line** at our high school.*

*We are going back to our COVID-19 menu, which was **a simplified version of our menu** that cut the higher labor-intensive menu items like soups, chicken tetrazzini, hoagies, and pasta dishes. This is until I can get someone else in the kitchen.*

*I **move my employees around to different schools** to help cover the shortages.*

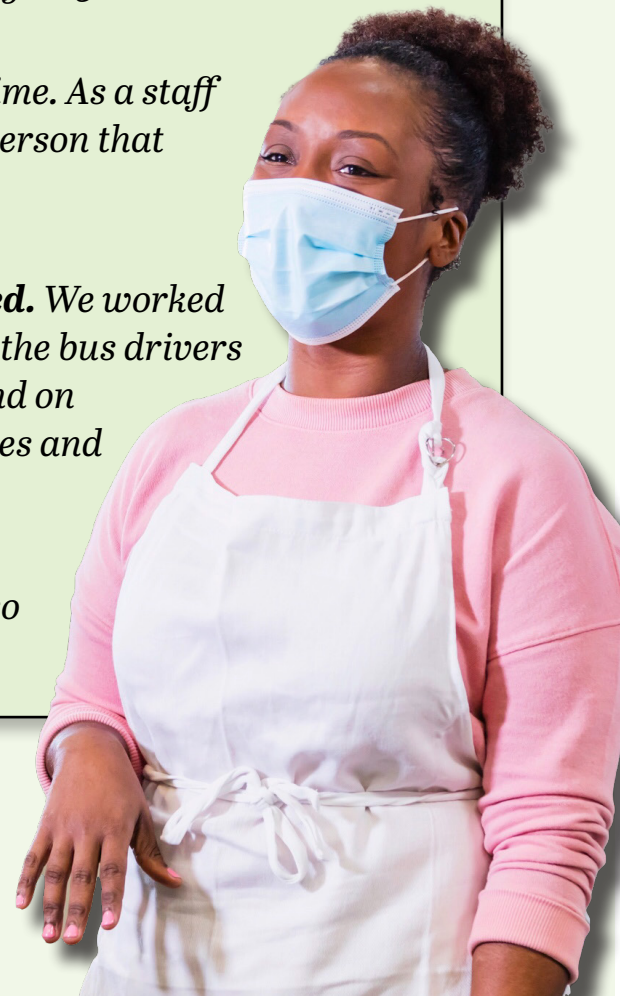
*Our district **gave a pay increase** to entice workers to apply in our township.*

*We **added a new bonus** for candidates that work the fall. They will get \$250 in January, and staff that work until the end of the school year will receive another \$250 bonus. Returning staff at the end of the year will get \$500.*

*We **work together** to ensure meals are prepared on time. As a staff member finishes their task, they move on to the next person that might need help.*

***Multiple avenues to recruit new FSAs were explored.** We worked with the district's transportation department to see if the bus drivers wanted to serve when they were in between routes, and on our social media we communicated the higher purposes and benefits of working with our program.*

*We have **changed our employees to working shifts** so that everybody doesn't finish at the same time.*



Conclusions



Overall, CNP operators and staff viewed indirect costs, increased food costs, product shortages, and labor shortages as challenges as they entered fall of 2021. The survey sought to identify strategies for improvement in one of the more challenging areas—labor shortages.

Survey respondents provided the following recommendations to address labor shortages: (a) recruitment and advertisement; (b) salary, bonus, and benefits; (c) meal planning and preparations; (d) procurement, forecasting, and serving; (e) management; and (f) general tips. This research provides insight into the brevity of the issues CNPs are facing in the current pandemic environment. The solutions recommended by the CNP professionals show the effort some CNP professionals are making to maintain their programs and recruit additional staff.

For More Research Information

Please contact ICN ARD Interim Director [Marjuyua Lartey Gibson](mailto:marjuya.lartey@usm.edu) (marjuya.lartey@usm.edu) for more research information.



Visit the Institute of Child Nutrition [Applied Research Division](http://www.theicn.org/research)
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projects and research conducted.

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