

Article

Sexual offences prevalence and trends, England and Wales: year ending March 2022

Prevalence, long-term trends and types of sexual offences experienced by adults, based on data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales, and police recorded crime.

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1 . Other pages in this release

- [Sexual offences in England and Wales overview: March 2022](#)
- [Sexual offences victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2022](#)

2 . Main points

- The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) year ending March 2022 estimated that 2.3% of adults aged 16 years and over (1.1 million) experienced sexual assault (including attempts) in the last year.
- There was no significant change in the prevalence of sexual assault experienced by adults aged 16 to 59 years in the last year compared with the year ending March 2020 survey, a year largely unaffected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the last time the data were collected.
- The police recorded 193,566 sexual offences in England and Wales in the year ending March 2022, the highest level recorded.
- The number of police recorded sexual offences has increased over the last decade, with the latest figure 31% higher than the year ending March 2021, and 19% higher than the year ending March 2020.
- As the survey showed no significant change when compared with before the coronavirus pandemic, the increase in sexual offences recorded by the police reflect a number of factors, including the impact of high-profile incidents, media coverage, and campaigns on people's willingness to report both recent and historical incidents to the police.

CSEW data for the year ending March 2022 survey are not badged as [National Statistics](#). They are based on six months of data collection between October 2021 and March 2022. Caution should be taken when using these data because of the impact of the reduced data collection period and lower response rates on the quality of the estimates.

3 . Understanding sexual offences

Sexual offences are often hidden crimes that are not always reported to the police. This, combined with changes in reporting trends can have a significant impact on the numbers recorded. One of the strengths of the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) is that it covers crimes that are not reported to the police and provides important context to the police figures.

On 17 March 2020, face-to-face interviewing for the CSEW was suspended because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, leading to a pause in the collection of data on sexual assault. On 4 October 2021, face-to-face interviewing for the CSEW resumed, enabling the collection of data on sexual assault through the self-completion module to restart. Caution should be taken when using these data because of the impact of the reduced data collection period and the lower response rates on the quality of the estimates.

On the return of face-to-face CSEW interviewing in October 2021, the upper age limit of respondents completing the self-completion modules was removed (it was previously increased from those aged 59 years to those aged 74 years in April 2017).

4 . Sexual offences from the Crime Survey for England and Wales

Sexual assault in the last year

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) year ending March 2022 estimated that 2.3% of adults aged 16 years and over (estimated 1.1 million) experienced sexual assault (including attempts) in the last year (Figure 1).

Unwanted sexual touching was the most common type of sexual assault experienced by adults in the last year (1.7%; Figure 1). Rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) was experienced by 0.6% of adults.

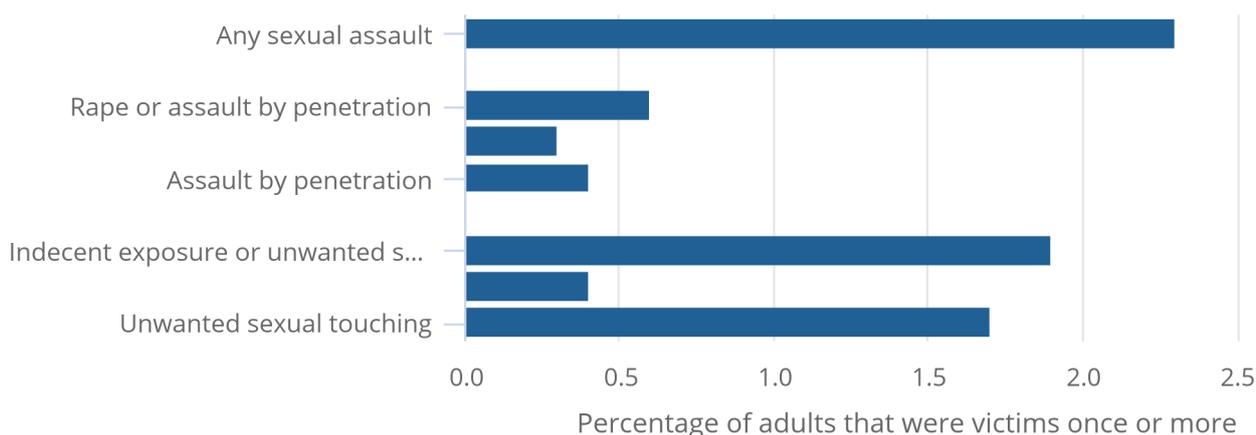
Information on the prevalence of sexual assault by demographic variables such as sex can be found in our [Sexual offences victim characteristics, year ending March 2022 article](#).

Figure 1: Unwanted sexual touching was the most common type of sexual assault experienced in the last year

Prevalence of sexual assault in the last year, among adults aged 16 years and over, by type of abuse, England and Wales, year ending March 2022

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Prevalence of sexual assault in the last year, among adults aged 16 years and over, by type of abuse, England and Wales, year ending March 2022



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Data for the year ending March 2022 are not badged as National Statistics. Caution should be taken when using these data because of the impact of the reduced data collection period and lower response rates on the quality of the estimates.
2. The categories “any sexual assault”, “rape or assault by penetration”, “rape” and “assault by penetration” include attempts.

Following the removal of the upper age limit for survey respondents in October 2021, when analysing data over time, we use the 16 to 59 years age range to give a comparable time series. The prevalence rate of sexual assault among adults aged 16 to 59 years has fluctuated between 1.5% and 3.0% over the last 17 years, with a significant increase seen between the year ending March 2014 (1.5%) and the latest data for the year ending March 2022 (2.7%).

The latest figure was not significantly different to the year ending March 2020, a year largely unaffected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and the last time the data were collected (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Sexual assault prevalence has not changed significantly compared with the year before the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

Prevalence of sexual assault in the last year, among adults aged 16 to 59 years, England and Wales, year ending March 2005 to year ending March 2022

Figure 2: Sexual assault prevalence has not changed significantly compared with the year before the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

Prevalence of sexual assault in the last year, among adults aged 16 to 59 years, England and Wales, year ending March 2005 to year ending March 2022



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Data for the year ending March 2022 are not badged as National Statistics. Caution should be taken when using these data because of the impact of the reduced data collection period and lower response rates on the quality of the estimates.
2. No data are available for the year ending March 2021 because the Crime Survey for England and Wales was suspended because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.
3. The categories “any sexual assault” and “rape or assault by penetration” include attempts.

Sexual assault since the age of 16 years

The year ending March 2022 CSEW showed that an estimated 7.9 million (16.6%) adults aged 16 years and over had experienced sexual assault since the age of 16 years (Figure 3).

Unwanted sexual touching was more common than any other type of sexual assault, with 13.0% of adults aged 16 years and over experiencing it since the age of 16 years, equivalent to an estimated 6.2 million victims.

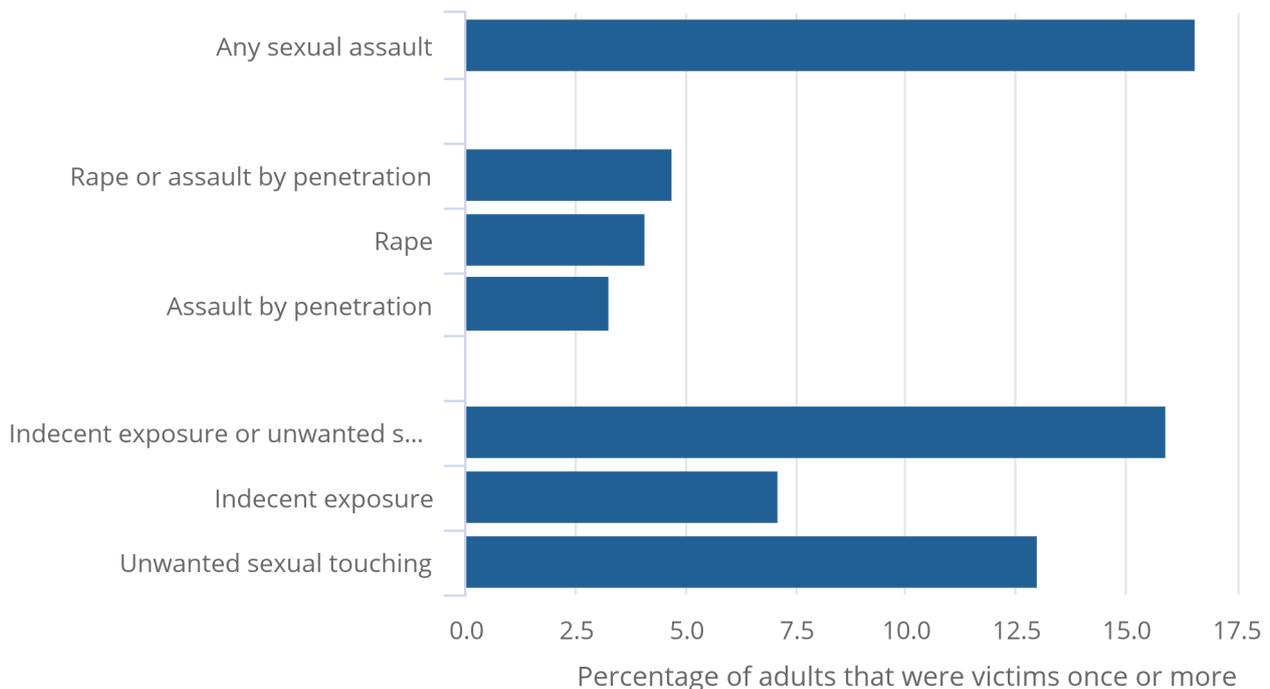
Rape (including attempts) was experienced by 4.1% of adults since the age of 16 years, an estimated 1.9 million victims. More information on rape can be found in our [Nature of sexual assault by rape or penetration, England and Wales: year ending March 2020 article](#).

Figure 3: Unwanted sexual touching was the most common type of sexual assault experienced since the age of 16 years

Prevalence of sexual assault since the age of 16 years, among adults aged 16 years and over, by type of abuse, England and Wales, year ending March 2022

Figure 3: Unwanted sexual touching was the most common type of sexual assault experienced since the age of 16 years

Prevalence of sexual assault since the age of 16 years, among adults aged 16 years and over, by type of abuse, England and Wales, year ending March 2022



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Data for the year ending March 2022 are not badged as National Statistics. Caution should be taken when using these data because of the impact of the reduced data collection period and lower response rates on the quality of the estimates.
2. The categories “any sexual assault”, “rape or assault by penetration”, “rape” and “assault by penetration” include attempts.

In terms of the victim's relationship to the perpetrator, since the age of 16 years, 5.7% of adults had experienced sexual assault (including attempts) perpetrated by a partner or family member. More than three times as many adults experienced sexual assault (including attempts) by a partner (4.9%) than by a family member (1.5%; see Table 1 in the year ending March 2022 edition of our [Domestic abuse prevalence and victim characteristics dataset](#)).

5 . Sexual offences recorded by the police

In the year ending March 2022, the police recorded 193,566 sexual offences in England and Wales, the highest level recorded. This was an increase of 30,322 compared with the year ending March 2020 and an increase of 45,731 from the previous year (Figure 4).

Sexual offences recorded by the police do not provide a reliable measure of trends. Improvements in police recording practices and increased reporting by victims have contributed to increases in recent years. The figures do, however, provide a good measure of the crime-related demand on the police.

Although decreases were seen in the years ending March 2020 and March 2021, likely because of national lockdown restrictions, the number of sexual offences recorded by police has been increasing since the year ending March 2012. Therefore, the most recent increase is in line with trends seen before the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Sexual offences remain a relatively low proportion of all crimes recorded by the police (3% in the year ending March 2022).

For more recent police recorded crime data on sexual offences updated quarterly, see Table A4 of our [Crime in England and Wales: Appendix tables dataset](#).

Figure 4: Increase in police recorded sexual offences following decreases in recent years

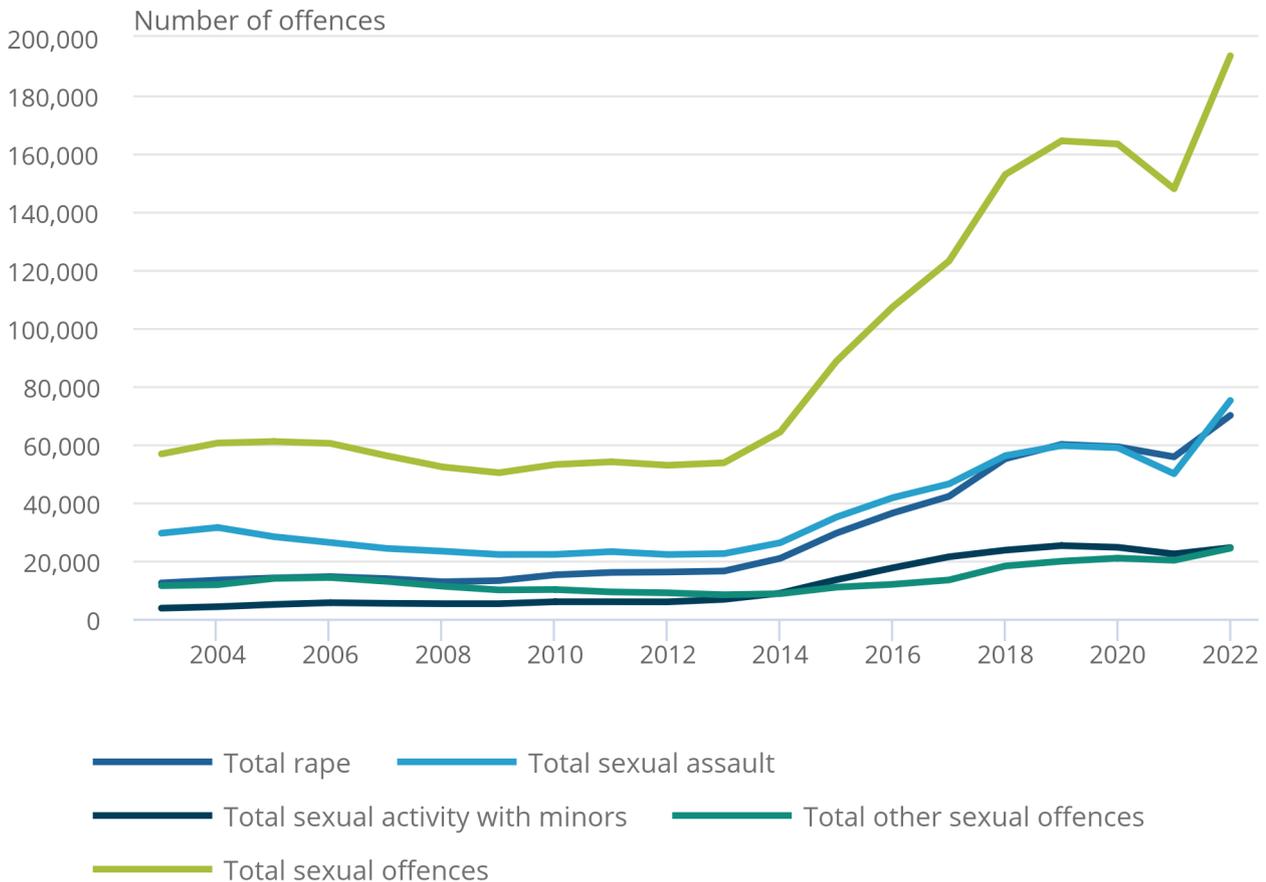
Police recorded sexual offences by offence type, England and Wales, year ending March 2003 to year ending March 2022

Figure 4: Increase in police recorded sexual offences following decreases in recent years

October 2012: Operation Yewtree critical report launched highlighting significant under recording of sexual offences

December 2014: HMICFRS published

April 2020 to present: Periods of national lock during the coronavirus (pandemic)



Source: Police recorded crime from the Home Office

Notes:

1. Police recorded crime data are not designated as National Statistics.
2. The Sexual Offences Act 2003, introduced in May 2004, altered the definition and coverage of sexual offences.
3. From July 2016, the Home Office counting rules in regard to rape were changed to record rape on a per offender basis.
4. Operation Yewtree is the police investigation into allegations of sexual abuse, launched in the wake of the Jimmy Savile scandal.

The increases in police recorded sexual offences seen in recent years largely reflect improvements made by the police in how they record these crimes and an increased willingness of victims to come forward and report. High-profile incidents, media coverage and campaigns are likely to have affected people's willingness to report both recent and historical incidents to the police.

For a subset of forces providing data to the Home Office Data Hub, 24% of sexual offences recorded by the police in the year ending March 2022 were non-recent offences (those that took place more than 12 months before being recorded by the police).

Although the total number of sexual offences reported decreased between the years ending March 2020 and March 2021, the proportion of non-recent offences increased from 23% to 28%. The total number of offences increased in the latest year ending March 2022, but reports of non-recent offences recorded by the police (23%) returned to the same level as the year ending March 2020 (see Table 23 of our [Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics dataset](#)).

Rape (a subcategory of sexual offences) accounted for 36% of recorded sexual offences in the year ending March 2022. In comparison, around 14% of Crime Survey for England and Wales victims had experienced rape. This highlights that victims may be more likely to report rape to the police than other sexual offences.

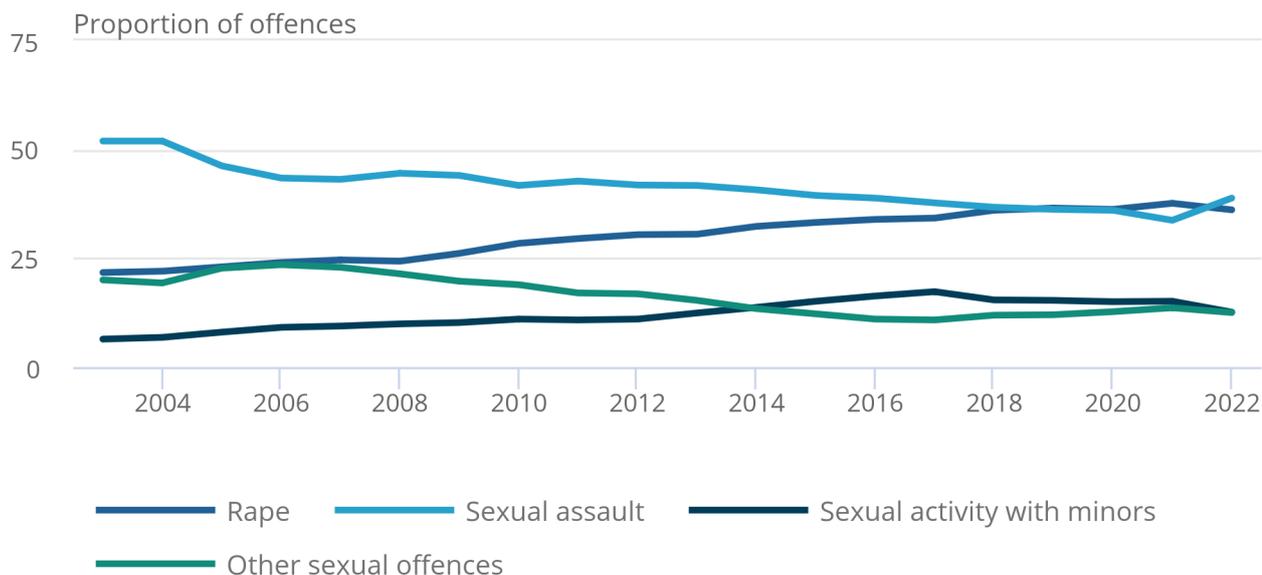
Despite increases in the total number of offences recorded, the proportion of each offence type has remained similar when compared with the year ending March 2020 (Figure 5).

Figure 5: The proportion of all sexual offences recorded as rape has increased over time

Percentage of total police recorded sexual offences by offence type, England and Wales, year ending March 2003 to year ending March 2022

Figure 5: The proportion of all sexual offences recorded as rape has increased over time

Percentage of total police recorded sexual offences by offence type, England and Wales, year ending March 2003 to year ending March 2022



Source: Police recorded crime from the Home Office

Notes:

1. Police recorded crime data are not designated as National Statistics.
2. The Sexual Offences Act 2003, introduced in May 2004, altered the definition and coverage of sexual offences.
3. From July 2016, the Home Office counting rules in regard to rape were changed to record rape on a per offender basis.

Information is also available on the number of rape incidents the police have recorded. To get a total picture of the demand on the police that relates to rape, it is necessary to consider both rape incidents and offences together. Of the 94,145 rape incidents and crimes recorded in the year ending March 2022 by the police in England and Wales, 18,029 (19%) remained as incidents. Of these incidents:

- 62% (11,195) remained as incidents because the victim (or third party acting on their behalf) did not confirm the offence or could not be traced
- 12% (2,079) remained as incidents because of additional credible evidence existing to the contrary
- 26% (4,755) were transferred to another force for investigation

6 . Sexual offences in England and Wales data

[Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics](#)

Dataset | Released 23 March 2023

Sexual offence numbers, prevalence and victim characteristics, including breakdowns by type of incident, sex, victim-perpetrator relationship and location based upon findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales and police recorded crime.

7 . Glossary

Police incidents

Incidents that were reported to the police, but following investigation, do not amount to a crime or offence according to the National Crime Recording Standards.

Sexual assault

The term "sexual assault" in the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) is used to describe all types of sexual offences measured by the survey. It includes rape or assault by penetration (including attempts), and indecent exposure or unwanted sexual touching. The term "sexual assault" in police recorded crime refers to one type of sexual offence, that is, the sexual touching of a person without their consent.

Sexual offence

Sexual offences recorded by the police cover a broader range of offences than are measured by the CSEW including rape, sexual assault, sexual activity with minors, sexual exploitation of children, and other sexual offences. There are a number of different offence codes used for rape and sexual assault, depending on the age and sex of the victim.

8 . Data sources and quality

Further quality and methodology information can be found in our [Sexual offences in England and Wales overview: year ending March 2022 bulletin](#).

Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)

For reasons outlined in Section 3, CSEW estimates for the year ending March 2022 are not badged as National Statistics and should be treated with caution.

Sexual assault, as measured in the self-completion section of the CSEW, combines the following different types of abuse:

- rape (including attempts)
- assault by penetration (including attempts)
- indecent exposure
- unwanted sexual touching

The CSEW collects information on these types of assault carried out by a partner (including a former partner), a family member other than a partner, someone else known, and a stranger.

The CSEW term "sexual assault" differs from the term "sexual assault" used in police recorded crime data.

More information about the CSEW can be found in our [User guide to crime statistics for England and Wales: March 2020](#).

How the police measure sexual assault

The Home Office collects data on the number of sexual offences recorded by the police. Sexual offences are grouped into the following four main categories:

- rape
- sexual assault
- sexual activity with minors
- other sexual offences

Some data tables provided by the Home Office combine the last three categories to create an "Other sexual offences" category. This category covers a broader range of offences than the CSEW, for example, sexual exploitation of children, incest and sexual grooming.

The CSEW uses the term "sexual assault" to describe all types of sexual offences measured by the survey, whereas police recorded crime refers to one specific type of sexual offence – the sexual touching of a person without their consent.

9 . Related links

[Nature of sexual assault by rape or penetration: year ending March 2020](#)

Article | Released 18 March 2021

Information from the Crime Survey for England and Wales on the amount, type and nature of sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) experienced since the age of 16 years.

[Sexual offending: victimisation and the path through the criminal justice system](#)

Article | Released 13 December 2018

An overview of sexual offending in England and Wales, using a range of National Statistics and official statistics from across the crime and criminal justice system.

[User guide to crime statistics for England and Wales: March 2020](#)

Methodology | Last revised 4 November 2021

Quarterly statistics on crime levels and trends in England and Wales. This user guide contains detailed information on the datasets used to compile crime statistics published by Office for National Statistics (ONS).

10 . Cite this article

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