

Op Data, 2003: Crown Heights, Brooklyn

Community Assessment and Perceptions of Quality of
Life, Safety and Services

Written by

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About the Authors

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Community Perceptions of Quality of Life, Safety, Conflict and Diversity in Crown Heights, Brooklyn

Introduction

Located in central Brooklyn, New York, Crown Heights is an ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse community. According to the 2000 Census, just over a quarter (26%) of the population in Crown Heights is living under the poverty line; 8% of the population over 16 is unemployed. A sizeable portion (70%) of those over 25 have attained at least a high school education; 41% have had at least some college and more than 1/5 (23%) have an advanced degree (associates, bachelor's, or graduate degree). Nearly 40% of the more than 200,000 Crown Heights residents are first generation immigrants; 77% of residents are Caribbean or African American, 7% are Lubavitcher Hasidic Jews, and 10% are of Hispanic descent.¹

The diverse populace of Crown Heights has often faced racial and religious conflict, most notably in 1991, when the deaths of Gavin Cato and Yankel Rosenbaum sparked three days of violence that a government report called, "the most widespread racial unrest to occur in New York City in more than twenty years" (Girgenti Report, 1993 at p.132).

The Crown Heights Community Mediation Center was established five years ago in response to the inter-ethnic conflicts that disrupted the community in the early 1990s. Created through a partnership between the Center for Court Innovation, the City of New York, and the Crown Heights Coalition, an inter-ethnic leadership group convened by the Brooklyn Borough President, the Mediation Center was created to promote peaceful conflict resolution. The Mediation Center sought to create a place where local young people and adults could come to express concerns, settle disputes, and work together to achieve common goals. Since its inception, the Mediation Center has become a hub for neighborhood problem-solving by offering free mediation and conflict resolution services and training to schools, community-based organizations, and police; convening and facilitating forums on issues of concern to the community; providing links to legal, social, and government services; and implementing innovative responses to community needs.

In Spring 2003, the Mediation Center conducted a formal survey to assess the needs and concerns of the community, as well as gauging the community's use and awareness of the Mediation Center. In the future, this initial survey will be utilized as a baseline for assessing change in the neighborhood. The Operation Data survey was designed by the Mediation Center in conjunction with researchers at the Center for Court Innovation and provides a forum for community members to voice

their concerns about issues of quality of life, safety, services, conflict, and diversity in their neighborhood.

Operation Data

The Crown Heights Operation Data project was developed as a mechanism for measuring both the impact of the Crown Heights Community Mediation Center and the opinions of community members on issues of quality of life, safety, and community conflict such as those addressed by the Mediation Center.

The Spring 2003 Crown Heights Operation Data survey was conducted by approximately ten members of the New York City Public Safety Corps, a number of whom had been working primarily in the Crown Heights area and were, therefore, somewhat familiar with the neighborhood.² The Corps members administered a total of 198 surveys with members of the Crown Heights community. The surveys were conducted door-to-door at both local residences and businesses as well as with individuals in public spaces (e.g., parks, bus stops, etc.).³ The 128 questions in the survey covered such issues as quality of life, public safety, services, conflict, and diversity, as well as demographic characteristics of respondents (see Appendix A). The Corps members conducted the survey for two weeks in April 2003.

Respondent Characteristics

Of those interviewed, 63% lived in Crown Heights. An additional 34% were merchants (9%) or individuals who worked (25%) in the neighborhood. On average, respondents had lived or worked in the neighborhood for 9.6 years. The average age of interviewees was 35.5 years and the gender distribution was nearly even, with 54% female respondents and 46% male respondents. Fewer than half (43%) of respondents reported being involved in civic activities such as PTA meetings, tenant associations, block associations, and other community organizations. Just over half (51%) of respondents attended religious services with some regularity. The vast majority of respondents classified themselves as Caribbean American (40%) or African American (35%), with 9% classifying themselves as Caucasian, 3% Native American, 2% Asian, and an additional 11% labeling themselves other or (unspecified) multiracial. Unfortunately, despite special attempts made to gain access to a sample from the Hasidic community in Crown Heights, this population is not represented here.⁴

Just over one quarter of respondents (25.4%) had heard of the Crown Heights Community Mediation Center prior to this survey. Of these, 67% heard about the Mediation Center from a friend or family member, 11% heard about the Mediation Center from a newspaper or poster, and 8% heard about the Mediation Center from another local organization. Of those who had heard of it, 63% said that they were satisfied with the Mediation Center. Only one respondent reported being dissatisfied with the Mediation Center.⁵

Fourteen respondents had actually utilized services provided by the Mediation Center. The most frequently used service reported by these fourteen respondents was the job book (used by eight of the fourteen). Two respondents had attended conflict resolution training, two had attended the Summer of Safety program, one respondent had attended a mediation training session, one had used the immigration law clinic,

one had utilized the Center’s community mediation services, and one had used case management provided by the Center.

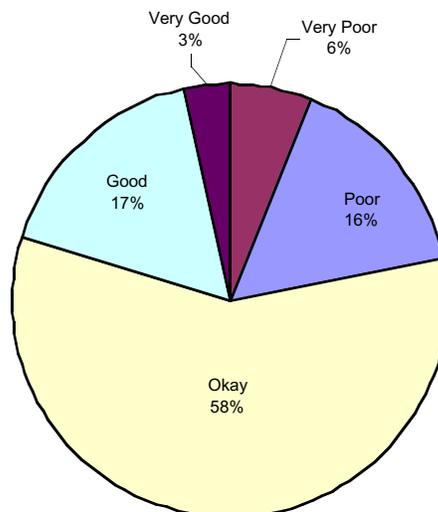
When asked generally whether they saw the existence of a community-based mediation center in the neighborhood as a positive or negative thing, 63% of all respondents saw such a facility as a positive thing. Only 2% saw a community-based mediation center as a negative thing and, of these, only one had specifically heard of the Crown Heights Community Mediation Center.

Neighborhood Public Safety and Quality of Life

When asked to rate the quality of life in Crown Heights, the majority of respondents reported that things were neither extremely good nor extremely bad. Nearly 3/5 (58%) of respondents classified the quality of life as “okay,” while 22% found the quality of life to be poor or very poor and 20% found the quality of life in Crown Heights good or very good (see Figure 1). Although 21% of respondents believed that the quality of life had improved in the past year, the majority of respondents (69%) felt it had stayed the same. Likewise, the majority of respondents (70%) felt that inter-racial, inter-religious, and inter-cultural relations had stayed the same over the past year. When asked whether they felt that inter-racial, inter-religious, and inter-cultural relationships in the neighborhood had improved or declined since 1991, the year of the Crown Heights riots, 74% of respondents reported that relations had remained the same.

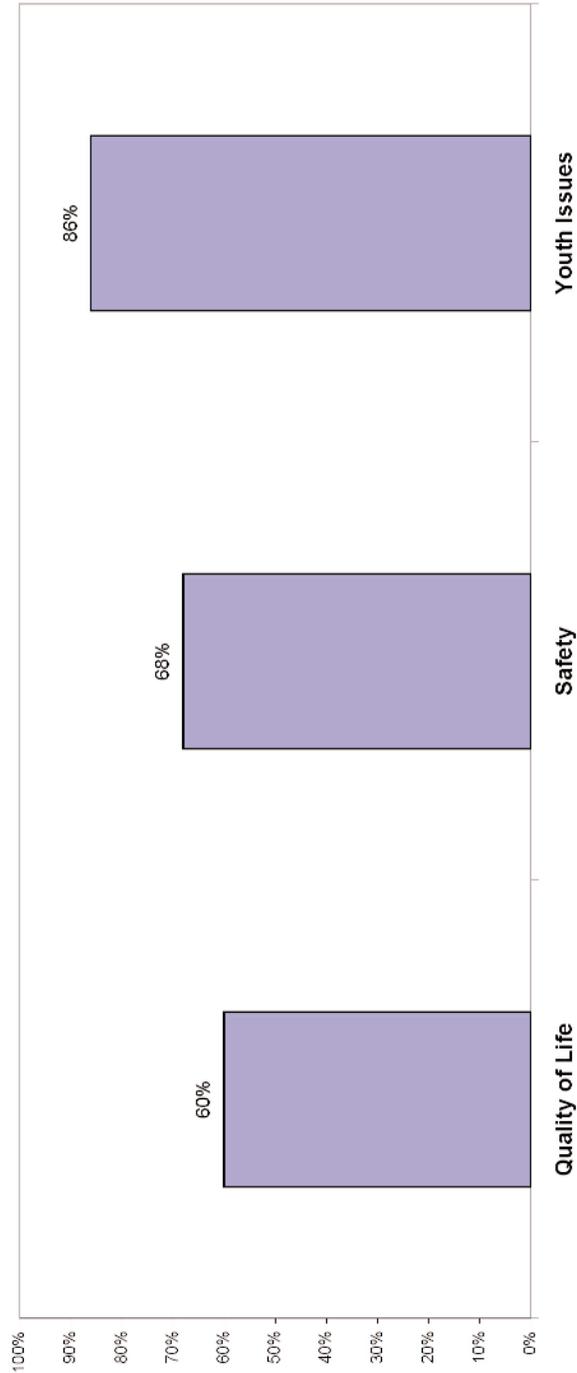
Due to methodological and data quality issues, the group of questions asking about specific quality-of-life issues were collapsed into a single quality of life index, measuring the average score given by respondents. The series included the following items: garbage on the streets, garbage collection, graffiti, run down parks and green areas, illegal dumping, streets in need of repairs, street lighting, turnstile jumping, disorderly conduct, public urination, littering, public drinking, drug selling in public, prostitution, panhandling, vandalism, traffic accidents, and abandoned or dilapidated

Figure 1. Respondents’ Perceptions of Quality of Life in Crown Heights



buildings or houses. As illustrated in Figure 2, when rating the overall seriousness of these quality of life issues, more than half of all respondents (60%) rated them on average either a big or very big problem.⁶ Only 6% believed that the issues included in the index were not a problem at all for the neighborhood. Interestingly,

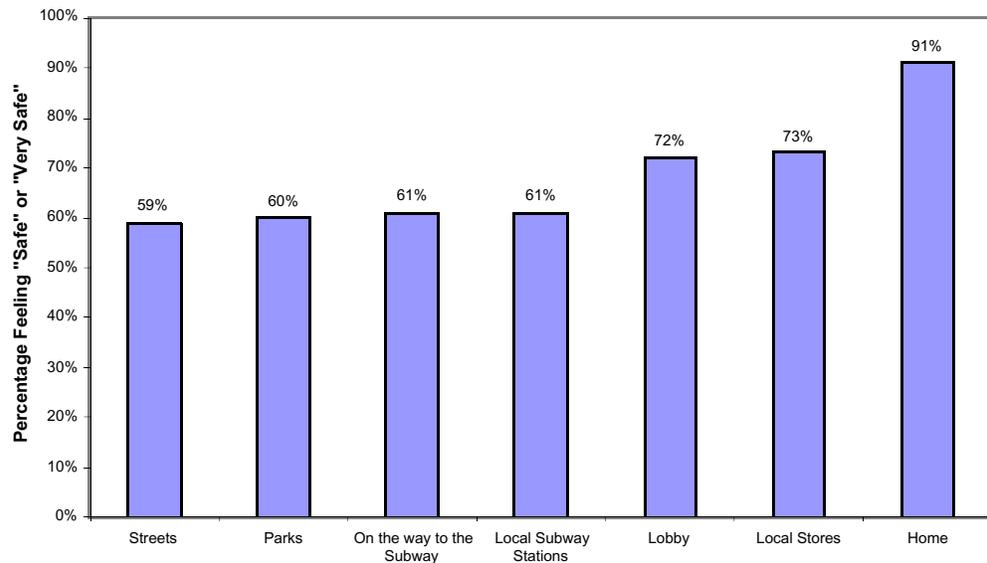
Figure 2. Respondents' Rankings of Community Issues: Percent Rating Quality of Life, Safety, and Youth Issues Problematic



Note: Bars represent percentage of respondents rating community issues as "big problem(s)" or "very big problem(s)". All three measures are indices of multiple community issue questions. The Quality of Life index includes garbage on the streets, garbage collection, graffiti, run down parks and green areas, illegal dumping, streets in need of repairs, street lighting, turnstile jumping, disorderly conduct, public urination, littering, public drinking, drug selling in public, prostitution, panhandling, vandalism, traffic accidents, and abandoned or dilapidated buildings or houses. The Safety index includes fighting in public, drug use in public, mugging, domestic violence, child neglect and abuse, residential burglary, shoplifting, youth violence, gangs, unsafe buildings, car theft, displaying guns, and using guns. The Youth issues index includes teen pregnancy, lack of resources for young people, lack of after school programs, gangs in schools, quality of schools, truancy, youth running away from home, youth congregating in the streets, and fighting in schools.

although the majority (78%) of respondents reported the quality of life in Crown Heights to be good or “okay,” when asked about specific quality-of-life issues, the majority of respondents responded that quality-of-life issues were big or very big problems.

Figure 3. Percentage of Respondents Reporting Feeling Safe in Neighborhood Locations



Safety

Not surprisingly, respondents were most likely to report feeling safe in their homes, with 91% of respondents feeling safe or very safe in their own homes. As illustrated in Figure 3, respondents also felt relatively safe in their lobbies and in stores, with 72% and 73% feeling either safe or very safe in these locations respectively. Respondents were least likely to feel safe on the streets (59% report feeling safe or very safe), in parks (60%), on the way to and from the subway (61%), and at the local subway station (61%).

Similar to the quality-of-life index discussed above, responses to a number of safety questions were consolidated into a single safety index (see Endnote 6). Items included in the index were as follows: fighting in public, drug use in public, mugging, domestic violence, child neglect and abuse, residential burglary, shoplifting, youth violence, gangs, unsafe buildings, car theft, displaying guns, and using guns. Figure 2 indicates that 68% responded that these issues were either a big problem or a very big problem in the neighborhood.

Youth

Respondents were asked to rank a number of youth-related issues. The responses were collapsed into a single index, which measures respondents' average rating of youth problems in Crown Heights (see Endnote 6). The issues included in the index are: teen pregnancy, lack of resources for young people, lack of after school programs, gangs in schools, quality of schools, truancy, youth running away from home,

youth congregating in the streets, and fighting in schools. As illustrated in Figure 2, a substantial majority – 86% – of respondents felt that these issues posed “big” or “very big” problems to the youth in the community.

In addition to questions about youth-related problems, respondents were asked to rate the importance of a number of youth services and programs as very important, somewhat important, or not important. Respondents were also asked if they thought that additional youth services were needed in Crown Heights. Only 11% of those interviewed felt that additional youth services were not needed in the community. More than 75% of respondents felt that each of the fourteen youth services and programs listed were very important (the services listed were family mediation services, counseling, mentoring, tutoring, jobs and job training, conflict resolution training, after-school programs, mediation in schools, and computer training, youth courts, dating abuse education, arts programs, sports, and religious organizations). In general, residents of Crown Heights feel that issues of quality of life, safety, and youth are problematic in their community. In all three indices, at least 3/5 of respondents rated the issues as big or very big problems (see Figure 2, page 4). Youth problems stand out in particular, with 86% of respondents rating them problematic. These findings point to a wide range of potential issues for the Mediation Center and partner organizations to seek to address.

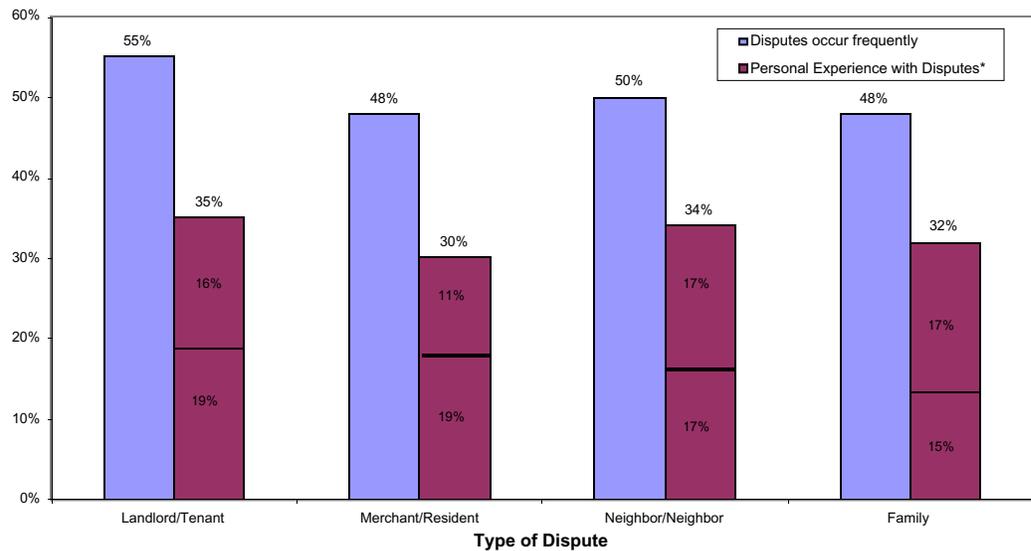
Services

The Crown Heights Community Mediation Center is one of many community organizations and service providers in the Crown Heights area. In order to gauge community opinions of both the Mediation Center and other organizations, a number of questions ask respondents to rate various city institutions as strengths or weaknesses of the neighborhood. Tenants associations, churches, and parks and other public spaces rated highest, with at least 39% of respondents rating each of them as “very strong” or “somewhat strong.” Churches received the highest rating – “very strong” – from 20% of respondents. Stores were also highly rated by many participants; 18% rated stores in Crown Heights “very strong.” Economic and business development programs rated the lowest of the services in Crown Heights; nearly a quarter of respondents (24%) ranked such programs “weak” or “very weak.” The Mediation Center itself was ranked as “strong” or “very strong” by 36% of respondents, 14% ranked it “weak” or “very weak,” and 47% were neutral.⁷

Community Conflict

One of the primary roles of the Crown Heights Community Mediation Center is to train mediators and provide mediation services to community members in conflict. In light of this, respondents were asked to indicate the frequency of various types of conflict within Crown Heights. Slightly more than half of respondents felt that landlord/tenant disputes and disputes between neighbors were common, while just under half of respondents felt that disputes between merchants and residents and disputes within families were common.

While half of respondents believed such disputes were common, 17% or less of the respondents had had any of the four types of disputes themselves in the past

Figure 4. Community Disputes: Perceived versus Experienced

*Note: Percentages above the divided bars represent total personal experience with disputes. The top percentage inside the divided bar represents the percentage of respondents who have personally had a dispute, the lower percentage represents those respondents who have not had a dispute, but who know someone who has.

year. However, when both respondents' disputes and the disputes of their acquaintances are considered, at least 30% of respondents have had some personal experience with each of the four types of dispute. There appears to be a disconnect between estimates of disputes in Crown Heights and respondents' actual experience of conflict, as illustrated in (Figure 4, page 8). For example, while 55% of respondents indicated that landlord/tenant disputes were common or very common in Crown Heights, only 35% of participants had had such a dispute (16%) or knew someone who had had such a dispute (19%).

Diversity

Two sets of questions addressing diversity were included in the survey: one set asked how frequently respondents have contact with people of different backgrounds and the second set asked how safe respondents feel in their interactions with different groups.

More than half (51%) of respondents reported having daily professional contact (defined as non-personal interactions, such as those one might have with merchants or co-workers) with people of a different race and with people of a different nationality than their own. Nearly half (49%) also reported having daily professional contact with people of a different religion than their own. More than 1/5 of respondents reported that they had professional contact with those of a different race (22%), religion (25%), or nationality (24%) rarely or never. Respondents reported more diversity in their personal lives; 60% of respondents reported having daily personal contact with people of a different religion or nationality and 57% reported having daily personal contact with people of a different race than their own.

In general, respondents reported feeling safe with people from different religious, racial, and national backgrounds than themselves. More than 85% of respondents

reported feeling safe or very safe with people from different races, religions, and nationalities.

The findings that respondents in Crown Heights report extensive diversity in their personal and professional interactions and feel safe with members of diverse racial, religious, and national groups may indicate that public perceptions of Crown Heights as a community riddled with racial and ethnic strife do not accurately reflect the experiences of those who live and work in the community. This finding is particularly interesting, given the earlier finding that the majority of respondents did not feel that inter-racial and inter-ethnic relations had improved in Crown Heights since the 1991 riots.

Summary

The results of the Spring 2003 Crown Heights Operation Data survey indicate several trends:

- A majority of the respondents who had heard of the Crown Heights Mediation Center had a favorable impression of it. Only one participant who had heard of the Mediation Center had a negative impression of it;
- The majority of respondents felt that quality of life, safety, and youth issues were problematic in Crown Heights. Youth issues were rated as particularly problematic;
- Nearly $\frac{1}{2}$ of respondents felt that inter-racial and inter-ethnic relations had not improved in Crown Heights since 1991. However, more than 85% of respondents report feeling safe with people from different races, religions, and nationalities;
- Respondents reported that conflicts between community members (e.g., landlords and tenants, merchants and residents, family members) occur frequently, although a minority reported having such conflicts themselves, suggesting that perceptions of conflict exceed their actual presence;
- About half of respondents reported regular professional interaction with individuals of different racial, religious, and national backgrounds than themselves; respondents were more likely to report regular personal interaction with members of different groups.

Notes

1. Census data comes from the New York City Department of City Planning, 2003. As the Census does not ask individuals for their religion, this estimate is based on the 2000 Census count of non-Hispanic whites in Brooklyn Community Board 9 (southern Crown Heights), a reasonable analog to the size of the Orthodox Jewish population in Crown Heights.

2. The New York City Public Safety Corps was established in 2002 and is an AmeriCorps community service program that seeks to improve the quality of life in New York through homeland security, crime prevention, and victim assistance projects. Approximately eighty full-time AmeriCorps members serve in locations throughout the city performing one year of community service, fixing broken windows, painting over graffiti, cleaning local parks and counseling crime victims, and enhancing homeland security by performing a wide range of emergency response functions and providing much-needed support to police, prosecutors, and other criminal justice professionals. In Crown Heights, Corps members are trained in mediation and serve directly at police precincts, schools, and community based organizations where they fill resource gaps and increase the effectiveness of frontline professionals. They promote neighborhood unity and bridge gaps of race, age, and geography. Members work closely with the New York City Police Department's Explorer program to design and implement activities that provide positive interactions between young people and police officers as well as providing citizenship training and character building.

3. Due to issues of non-response and weather, it is suspected that businesses are somewhat over-represented in the current sample. Future Operation Data events will try to correct for this type of disparate sampling. The remaining 3% of respondents had a variety of other relationships to Crown Heights, including attending school in the neighborhood and regularly visiting family in the neighborhood.

4. The Mediation Center reached out the Youth Action Movement (a Jewish youth group), Shmira (a Jewish safety patrol), and the Jewish Community Council in order to increase awareness and participation within the Hasidic community. Information about the upcoming survey was posted on the Jewish Community Council's website and announced at community meetings. In addition, NYC Public Safety Corps members were trained in cultural competency issues that might arise when working with the Hasidic community. Despite these efforts, no surveys were completed by individuals who self-identified as Jewish.

5. The remaining 35% were neutral regarding the Mediation Center's performance.

6. Due to methodological and data quality issues, the group of questions asking about specific quality of life issues were collapsed into a single quality of life index, measuring the average score given by respondents to a number of quality of life questions asking participants to rank each item in the series as a very big problem, a big problem, a minor problem, or not a problem at all.

This method was used because there was reason to believe that many respondents were not asked each specific question in the broad list of issues covered by the quality of life, safety, and youth issues indices.

Instead, respondents were asked generally for their impressions about some of the topics covered in these indices (e.g., rather than ask about garbage on the streets, garbage collection, and illegal dumping, interviewers might just ask respondents if they thought garbage was a problem in the community). Therefore, while it is possible to use these responses to gauge how respondents feel, on average, about the issues covered in the wider indices, it is not possible to look at the data on a more specific level. This problem arose due to both structural issues within the survey and training issues and will be carefully avoided in future surveys.

The quality of life series includes the following items: garbage on the streets, garbage collection, graffiti, run down parks and green areas, illegal dumping, streets in need of repairs, street lighting, turnstile jumping, disorderly conduct, public urination, littering, public drinking, drug selling in public, prostitution, panhandling, vandalism, traffic accidents, and abandoned or dilapidated buildings or houses. Respondents supplying replies to less than half of these questions were excluded from the index.

7. Interestingly, only 28% of those responding to this question reported having heard of the Mediation Center prior to this survey. There does not appear to be a relationship between not having heard of the Mediation Center and neutral rankings – that is, those who had not heard of the Mediation Center did not necessarily reply neutrally to this question.

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