

Urbanization and Internal Labour Migration in Abuja, Nigeria: Assessing their Implications on Security and Development

Joseph Emmanuel ^{1*}, Iddo Sharon Binkam ², Hauwa Mohammed Nyalun ³, Enoch Hassan Kure ⁴, Nathan Daniel Dogoyaro ⁵

¹Center for Peace and Security Studies, Modibbo Adama University, Yola, Nigeria.

²Department of Architecture, Federal Polytechnic NYak Shendam.

³Department of Mathematics, Federal Polytechnic, Nyak, Shendam

⁴Center for Peace and Security Studies, Modibbo Adama University, Yola, Nigeria

⁵Department of General Studies, Taraba State Polytechnic Suntai

*Corresponding Author: Joseph Emmanuel

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Article History	Abstract	
Original Research Article	<i>This study investigated the complex security and development challenges arising from rapid urbanization and internal labour migration in Abuja, Nigeria. Employing a descriptive survey research design with a sequential explanatory approach to examine migration patterns, living conditions, and security dynamics. The study was conducted in the Federal Capital Territory, focusing on both formal districts (Asokoro, Maitama) and informal settlements (Nyanya, Karu, Kubwa). From a target population of approximately 850,000 adult residents, a multi-stage sampling technique was employed, incorporating stratified sampling to ensure proportional representation of settlement types and systematic random sampling to select 450 households (determined with 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, adjusted for non-response). Data collection involved structured questionnaires administered to households to gather quantitative data on demographic profiles, migration history, safety perceptions, and crime experiences, supplemented by systematic review of policy documents and urban development plans. Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical software (SPSS) to generate descriptive statistics and inferential analyses, while document analysis provided policy context and institutional insights. The findings revealed that economic factors (87.3%) and regional insecurity (42.1%) serve as primary drivers of migration, resulting in the proliferation of informal settlements characterized by severe service delivery gaps. These conditions correlate strongly with elevated crime rates, as residents of informal settlements reported significantly higher experiences of property crime (68.3% vs 15.2%) and violent crime (42.7% vs 8.3%) compared to formal districts. Crucially, the study identifies a crisis of institutional legitimacy, with only 18.4% of informal settlement residents expressing trust in police forces, highlighting the limitations of current enforcement-oriented security approaches. The research concluded that urban insecurity in Abuja is fundamentally rooted in governance failures, spatial inequality, and socioeconomic exclusion rather than mere law enforcement deficiencies. The study recommended that: implementing an integrated urban development framework, adopting community-centered policing strategies, enhancing livelihood opportunities for youth, and strengthening institutional coordination.</i>	
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1. Introduction

The 21st century has been marked by an unprecedented global shift towards urban living, a trend particularly pronounced in the Global South. Africa stands as the

fastest-urbanizing continent, with Nigeria at the forefront of this demographic transformation. As the most populous nation in Africa, Nigeria is experiencing rapid urban growth, a phenomenon driven largely by internal labour

migration as individuals and families move from rural areas to cities in search of economic opportunity, education, and escape from poverty and environmental distress. This mass movement towards urban centers, while a potential catalyst for national development, often occurs faster than the capacity of city authorities to provide adequate infrastructure, housing, and services. This disconnect between rapid population growth and urban management capacity creates a nexus of socio-economic vulnerabilities that frequently manifest in complex security challenges.

The Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Abuja presents a critical and unique case study of this dynamic. Conceived as a meticulously planned, modernist capital to replace Lagos, Abuja was designed for order, functionality, and symbolic national unity. Its master plan envisioned a controlled and regulated growth pattern. However, its status as the seat of political power and perceived centre of wealth has made it a powerful magnet for internal migrants from across Nigeria's diverse ethnic and regional landscapes. This has resulted in an explosive population surge that has drastically outpaced the original plan, leading to the proliferation of extensive informal settlements and satellite towns such as Nyanya, Karu, and Kubwa. These areas, characterized by inadequate housing, poor sanitation, and a severe deficit of basic amenities, stand in stark contrast to the affluence of the city's central districts, creating a palpable landscape of inequality.

It is within this context of planned intent clashing with unplanned reality that the core of this study is situated. The security implications of this urban transformation are multifaceted and profound. The convergence of rapid, unregulated urbanization and large-scale internal migration creates conditions ripe for insecurity. High rates of unemployment and underemployment among the migrant youth population, coupled with the stark visibility of relative deprivation, can foster frustration and provide a pool of recruits for criminal activities. Furthermore, the transient and socially heterogeneous nature of these new urban settlements often leads to weakened social cohesion and a breakdown of traditional community control mechanisms, a state sociologists refer to as social disorganization.

The physical environment of these peripheral settlements itself can be criminogenic; poor urban planning, a lack of street lighting, and inadequate policing presence create opportunities for crime, including armed robbery, burglary, and kidnapping. Beyond conventional crime, the lack of state presence and governance in these areas can create vacuums that may be exploited by organized criminal networks and even non-state armed groups for recruitment and logistics, posing a threat to national security. Furthermore, the concept of security itself must be

broadened to encompass human security, including the threats of forced evictions, health crises from poor sanitation, and food insecurity, which are daily realities for many residents.

While existing literature has documented urbanization trends in Nigeria broadly, there is a distinct gap in focused research that specifically investigates the intersection of internal labour migration and the unique urban security landscape of Abuja. This study aims to fill this gap by critically examining how the drivers and patterns of migration interact with Abuja's fractured urban structure to produce specific security outcomes.

Statement of the problem

The rapid and largely unplanned urbanization of Abuja, driven by intense internal labour migration, has created a significant disconnect between the city's original master plan and its current socio-spatial reality, resulting in the proliferation of informal settlements characterized by severe infrastructure deficits, socio-economic exclusion, and weakened community structures; this environment fosters a complex security crisis manifesting in rising rates of violent and property crime, provides potential footholds for organized criminal and non-state armed groups, and exacerbates profound human security challenges, thereby threatening the stability and safety of Nigeria's capital and necessitating a critical investigation into the specific linkages between migration patterns, urban management failures, and these multifaceted security implications.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to investigate the security and development implications arising from rapid urbanization and internal labour migration in Abuja, Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the drivers of internal labour migration to Abuja.
2. To assess the living conditions and service delivery in Abuja's informal and formal settlements.
3. To analyze the crime patterns in formal and informal areas of Abuja.
4. To evaluate the institutional capacity responses addressing urbanization and security challenges.

Research Questions

1. What are the drivers of internal labour migration to Abuja?
2. What are the prevailing living conditions and service delivery in Abuja's informal and formal settlements?
3. How do crime patterns differ between formal districts and informal settlements in Abuja?

4. How adequate are existing institutional frameworks in managing the security challenges stemming from urbanization and migration?

Literature Review

The Global and National Context of Urbanization

Urbanization is a defining global trend of the 21st century, with over half of the world's population now residing in urban areas. This demographic shift is particularly acute in the Global South, where cities are expanding at an unprecedented rate, often outpacing the capacity of municipal authorities to provide adequate infrastructure, services, and governance (United Nations Human Settlements Programme [UN-Habitat], 2022). Africa is the world's fastest-urbanizing continent, and Nigeria is at the epicentre of this transformation. As Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria has an urban growth rate of approximately 4.3% per annum, and its urban population is projected to reach 60% by 2050 (World Bank, 2021).

This rapid urbanization is intrinsically linked to internal migration. Individuals and families move from rural areas to cities in search of economic opportunity, improved access to education and healthcare, and escape from agricultural poverty and environmental degradation such as desertification in the north and coastal erosion in the south (Ajala, 2020). This movement, known as internal labour migration, is a powerful engine of economic growth and national development, supplying the workforce for industries and services. However, when the process is unmanaged and the receiving cities are unprepared, it exacerbates existing pressures and creates a nexus of vulnerabilities that can manifest in significant security challenges.

The Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Abuja embodies this dynamic in its most potent form. Conceived as a purpose-built, modernist capital to replace Lagos, Abuja was designed for order and functionality. Yet, it has become a powerful magnet for internal migrants, leading to explosive growth that has strained its original master plan and given rise to extensive informal settlements.

The Abuja Project: Planned City, Unplanned Growth

The decision to relocate Nigeria's capital from Lagos to Abuja in 1991 was driven by the need for a more central, ethnically neutral, and less congested administrative centre. The Abuja Master Plan, developed by the International Planning Associates (IPA), envisioned a city with controlled density, ample green spaces, and segregated land uses (residential, commercial, administrative) (Mabogunje, 2021). This plan was predicated on a regulated and gradual population influx, primarily of civil servants and diplomats.

However, the reality deviated sharply from this vision. Abuja's symbolism as the centre of political power and national wealth acted as an irresistible pull factor. The city became associated with employment opportunities not only within the government but also in the burgeoning construction, hospitality, and informal service sectors that support a growing elite and expatriate community (Ezeadichie, 2019). Consequently, internal migration into Abuja has been relentless, driven by what scholars term the "bright lights" theory—the perception of cities as places of limitless opportunity (Tacoli, McGranahan, & Satterthwaite, 2015).

The result has been a dramatic population surge. From a modest population at inception, the FCT's population is now estimated to be over 3.5 million, with growth rates far exceeding national averages (National Population Commission [NPC], 2018). The formal, planned sectors of the city could not accommodate this deluge of people. This failure of the housing market and urban planning to keep pace with demand led to the proliferation of informal settlements, locally known as "satellite towns" such as Nyanya, Karu, Kubwa, and Lugbe (Aguda, 2022). These areas, which fall outside the official master plan, are characterized by inadequate housing, poor sanitation, limited access to clean water, and a severe deficit of social amenities. The disparity between the opulent, well-serviced districts of the city centre (e.g., Maitama, Asokoro) and the overcrowded, underserved satellite towns creates a stark landscape of inequality that is a fundamental driver of insecurity.

The Nexus of Urbanization, Migration, and Security

The security challenges in Abuja are not merely a function of population increase but are rooted in the socio-economic and spatial exclusion experienced by a large segment of the urban population. The theoretical framework linking rapid urbanization to insecurity often draws upon concepts of relative deprivation, social disorganization, and the frustration-aggression thesis (Shaw, 2022).

Firstly, the phenomenon of relative deprivation is critical. Internal migrants often arrive with high expectations of economic mobility. However, the formal job market in Abuja is limited and highly competitive. Many migrants end up in the vast informal economy as okada (motorcycle) riders, street hawkers, domestic staff, or security guards—jobs characterized by low and irregular incomes, no social safety nets, and high precarity (Ibrahim, 2021). The daily confrontation with the affluence of the city centre, juxtaposed with their own struggle for survival, fosters a deep sense of frustration and injustice. This perceived gap between expectations and reality can create a fertile ground for criminality, as individuals seek alternative, often illicit, means to achieve their aspirations (Adeboye, 2020).

Secondly, the structure of the satellite towns leads to social disorganization. These settlements are often transient and socially heterogeneous, comprised of people from diverse ethnic, religious, and regional backgrounds who lack the strong social bonds and traditional kinship structures found in their places of origin (Alemika, 2019). This weakening of social cohesion undermines informal social control mechanisms that would traditionally help to regulate behaviour and prevent crime. The anonymity of these crowded settlements provides a cloak for criminal elements to operate with reduced risk of detection or community sanction.

Furthermore, the physical environment of these informal settlements directly facilitates insecurity. Poorly planned layouts, lack of street lighting, inadequate policing, and insufficient public spaces create environments that are criminogenic—that is, they are physically designed in ways that encourage criminal activity (Agbola, 2020). The daily commute for millions from these satellite towns into the city centre creates immense pressure on transport infrastructure, leading to notorious traffic gridlocks, which themselves become hotspots for opportunistic crimes like theft and harassment (Jibo, 2021).

Manifestations of Insecurity and Emerging Threats

The security implications of this urban dynamic in Abuja are multi-faceted. The most visible manifestation is the rise in conventional urban crime, including armed robbery, burglary, carjacking, and kidnapping for ransom. The satellite towns and the corridors linking them to the city centre are particularly vulnerable (Premium Times, 2022). The prevalence of these crimes is directly linked to high unemployment, urban poverty, and the presence of a large population of disaffected youth.

Beyond conventional crime, the rapid, unregulated growth has also created vulnerabilities to more organized and ideological violence. The lack of effective community policing and state presence in informal settlements can allow criminal gangs and even extremist groups to establish footholds, using these areas for recruitment, hideouts, and logistics (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2020). While Abuja has not faced the scale of insurgency seen in the northeast, its status as the national capital makes it a high-value target, and its permeable, rapidly expanding periphery presents a significant security challenge.

There is the critical dimension of human security, which expands the concept of security beyond physical violence to include threats to well-being and dignity. For many migrants, insecurity is also about the daily struggle for shelter, facing the constant threat of forced evictions as the government attempts to reclaim land for planned development. It is about health security, living in

environments with poor sanitation that are prone to disease outbreaks. It is about food insecurity, with a high cost of living consuming a large portion of already meagre incomes (Amnesty International, 2021). This broader human security perspective is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by the urban migrant population.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey research design. This strategy was selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between variables, allowing for both the quantification of phenomena like crime rates and the in-depth exploration of lived experiences and institutional contexts. The research was conducted in a sequential explanatory fashion, where quantitative data were first collected and analyzed to identify broad patterns, which were then explored in greater depth through qualitative methods.

The study was conducted in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), with a specific focus on a purposively selected sample of formal districts (e.g., Asokoro, Maitama) and informal satellite towns (e.g., Nyanya, Karu, Kubwa). The target population for this study comprised approximately 850,000 adult residents across both formal and informal settlements in the selected areas of the FCT. This population included both migrants and non-migrants, community leaders, officials from relevant government agencies (e.g., Abuja Metropolitan Management Council, Nigerian Police Force, FCT Department of Urban and Regional Planning), and members of local security outfits.

A multi-stage sampling technique was used to select a representative sample from this population. First, stratified sampling ensured proportional representation from both formal and informal settlement types. Subsequently, systematic random sampling was employed to select households within these strata for surveys. Using a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%, a sample size of 384 households was determined as statistically representative. To account for potential non-response and ensure robustness, this was increased to 450 households.

Data collection utilized several instruments. A structured questionnaire was administered to the selected household sample to gather quantitative data on demographic profiles, migration history, perceptions of safety, and experiences with crime and service delivery. Furthermore, a systematic document review was conducted to analyze existing policy documents, urban development plans, and official crime statistics where available.

Data analysis involved both descriptive and inferential techniques. Quantitative data from questionnaires were

coded and analyzed using statistical software (e.g., SPSS) to generate frequencies, means, cross-tabulations, and correlations to address objectives related to prevalence and patterns. The document review provided a framework for contextualizing the primary data within existing policy and

institutional frameworks, enabling a robust evaluation of current responses.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: *What are the drivers of internal labour migration to Abuja?*

Table 1: Drivers of Internal Labour Migration to Abuja

(N = 450)

Driver Category	Percentage (%)	Mean	Standard Deviation
Economic Opportunities	87.3	4.6	0.8
Escape from Insecurity	42.1	3.9	1.2
Educational Pursuits	31.4	3.5	1.4
Family Reunification	25.6	3.2	1.5

The findings indicate that the overwhelming driver of internal labour migration to Abuja was the pursuit of economic opportunities, reported by 87.3% of respondents with a high mean score of 4.6. This suggests Abuja is perceived as a hub for employment and livelihood prospects. Escape from insecurity was the second major factor, influencing 42.1% of migrants, reflecting the displacement effects of violence in other regions. Educational pursuits (31.4%) and family reunification (25.6%) were less prominent but still significant, suggesting that Abuja attracts migrants not only for work but also as a relatively stable environment for learning and family life.

Research Question 2: *What are the prevailing living conditions/service delivery in Abuja's informal and formal settlements?*

Table 2: Living Condition/Service Delivery Comparison Between Settlement Types

(N = 450)

Service Indicator	Informal Settlements Mean (%) (SD)	Formal Districts Mean (%) (SD)	Difference (%)
Water Access	22.4 (SD = 4.1)	92.7 (SD = 2.8)	70.3
Electricity Supply	28.9 (SD = 5.2)	94.5 (SD = 2.1)	65.6
Sanitation Access	15.2 (SD = 3.8)	95.3 (SD = 1.9)	80.1
Waste Management	12.7 (SD = 3.5)	97.8 (SD = 1.2)	85.1

Living Condition/Service Delivery in informal settlements was found to be alarmingly poor compared to formal districts. Water access in informal areas was just 22.4%, a 70.3% gap relative to formal districts. Electricity and sanitation followed similar patterns, with informal settlements recording only 28.9% and 15.2% access respectively, compared to over 90% in formal areas. The widest disparity was in waste management, where informal settlements had a mere 12.7% coverage versus 97.8% in formal areas. These stark inequalities highlight a systemic neglect of informal communities and underscore the vulnerability of migrants who settle there.

Research Question 3: *How do crime patterns differ between formal districts and informal settlements in Abuja?*

Table 3: Crime and Security Perception Comparison

(N = 450)

Indicator	Informal Settlements	Formal Districts	t-value
Property Crime Rate	68.3% (SD = 5.2)	15.2% (SD = 3.1)	15.73*
Violent Crime Rate	42.7% (SD = 4.8)	8.3% (SD = 2.7)	12.94*
Safety Perception	2.8 (SD = 1.4)	7.2 (SD = 1.6)	-18.26*
Police Trust Level	18.4% (SD = 3.9)	65.2% (SD = 4.2)	-13.87*

*Note: *p < .001

Crime rates were significantly higher in informal settlements compared to formal districts, with property crime at 68.3% versus 15.2% and violent crime at 42.7% versus 8.3%. Residents of informal settlements also expressed far lower perceptions of safety (mean = 2.8) compared to those in formal districts (mean = 7.2). Trust in the police was equally polarized, with only 18.4% of informal settlement residents expressing confidence compared to 65.2% in formal areas. The large and statistically significant differences confirm that informal settlements are disproportionately affected by crime and insecurity, likely exacerbated by weak policing and poor infrastructure.

Research Question 4: *How adequate are existing institutional frameworks in managing the security challenges stemming from urbanization and migration?*

Table 4: Institutional Framework Adequacy Ratings

Institutional Dimension	Mean Rating	Standard Deviation	Percentage Rating $\geq 3/5$
Urban Planning Capacity	2.3	1.1	28.7%
Housing Policy	1.8	0.9	15.2%
Security Policy	2.6	1.2	32.4%
Inter-agency Coordination	1.7	0.8	12.6%
Service Delivery	2.4	1.0	26.3%

The institutional framework ratings suggest a widespread inadequacy in addressing security and urbanization challenges. Urban planning capacity and service delivery were both rated below average, with fewer than one-third of respondents considering them adequate. Housing policy and inter-agency coordination were weakest, scoring 1.8 and 1.7 respectively, with adequacy ratings of only 15.2% and 12.6%. Even security policy, the relatively strongest dimension, achieved only a 2.6 mean rating and 32.4% adequacy. These results indicate systemic institutional weakness, poor coordination, and inadequate policy responses, thereby worsening the vulnerability of migrants and informal settlements.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that economic imperatives constituted the driver of internal migration to Abuja, with 87.3% of respondents citing employment and livelihood opportunities as their main motivation. This aligns with contemporary migration theories that emphasize the role of economic disparities and opportunity structures in shaping migration patterns (IOM, 2023). The predominance of youth migrants (78.2% aged 18-35) reflects broader demographic trends across African cities where urban centers serve as magnets for young people seeking economic mobility amid limited rural opportunities (UN-Habitat, 2022). This pattern is particularly pronounced in Nigeria, where rapid urbanization continues to outpace job creation, resulting in intense competition for formal sector employment (NBS, 2023).

The severe infrastructure deficits documented in Abuja's informal settlements represent a critical governance challenge that has been exacerbated by rapid urbanization. The statistical disparities in living condition (service delivery) between formal and informal areas—exceeding 70 percentage points for basic services like water access—illustrate what contemporary urban scholars term "infrastructural violence" (McFarlane, 2022). These conditions not only violate fundamental human rights but also create environments where vulnerability to various forms of insecurity becomes embedded in the urban fabric (Adelekan et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and intensified these urban inequalities,

demonstrating how service deficits in informal settlements can exacerbate public health crises and undermine human security (World Bank, 2022).

The security disparities between formal and informal settlements highlight the complex relationship between spatial inequality and safety outcomes. The elevated crime rates in informal settlements (68.3% experiencing property crime) coincide with what contemporary crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) literature identifies as criminogenic environments—spaces where poor urban design, inadequate lighting, and limited natural surveillance facilitate criminal activity (Cozens, 2021). More significantly, the crisis of police legitimacy reflected in the low trust levels (18.4%) among informal settlement residents represents a fundamental challenge to urban security governance. Recent studies on policing in African cities emphasize that security strategies relying primarily on enforcement rather than community engagement often exacerbate rather than reduce urban insecurity (African Policing Civilian Oversight Forum, 2023).

The inadequate institutional capacity reflected in the poor ratings across all governance dimensions (particularly inter-agency coordination at 1.7/5) illustrates the persistent challenges of urban governance in rapidly growing cities. Contemporary research on African urbanism suggests that effective management of urbanization requires innovative governance approaches that bridge institutional silos and incorporate informal settlement communities into planning processes (Pieterse et al., 2023). The continued reliance on demolition rather than upgrading strategies represents a failure to adopt the inclusive urban development approaches advocated by the New Urban Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (UN-Habitat, 2022). Recent studies emphasize that cities experiencing rapid urbanization require integrated approaches that connect security interventions with broader urban development and social inclusion strategies (OECD, 2023).

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the rapid urbanization of Abuja, driven primarily by internal labour migration, has generated complex and interconnected security challenges.

The research reveals a clear pattern of migration motivated by economic imperatives and flight from insecurity, resulting in the growth of extensive informal settlements characterized by severe infrastructure deficits and service delivery gaps. These conditions have created a landscape of profound inequality between formal and informal areas, which in turn has fostered environments conducive to criminal activity and undermined trust in state institutions. The findings indicate that existing institutional frameworks have been largely inadequate in addressing these challenges, with reactive approaches such as demolition and enforcement-focused security measures proving counterproductive. The study concludes that the security implications of urbanization in Abuja are not merely law enforcement issues but are fundamentally rooted in problems of urban governance, spatial inequality, and socio-economic exclusion.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The Federal Capital Territory Administration (FCTA) should move beyond punitive demolition campaigns and develop a comprehensive Integrated Urban Development Framework that formally recognizes informal settlements and incorporates them into city planning. This should include a city-wide slum upgrading program focused on providing basic infrastructure—water, sanitation, electricity, and waste management—in partnership with residents and community organizations. Regularizing land tenure and investing in affordable housing options are essential to improving living conditions and reducing vulnerability.
2. The Nigerian Police Force and other security agencies should reform their approach in informal settlements by implementing a genuine community-oriented policing model. This requires recruiting officers from local communities, establishing permanent police posts within settlements, and creating structured platforms for regular dialogue and collaboration between residents and security providers. Training should focus on human rights, de-escalation, and building public trust. Security strategies must be integrated with social development initiatives to address the root causes of crime.
3. Given that economic opportunity is the primary driver of migration, the FCTA in partnership with private sector actors should create targeted economic empowerment programs for youth in informal settlements. This vocational training

programs aligned with market needs, support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and the creation of job centers that connect residents with formal employment opportunities. Public works programs focused on improving urban infrastructure can also provide immediate employment while enhancing the urban environment.

There is an urgent need to break down institutional silos and improve coordination between the numerous agencies responsible for urban management, including the Abuja Metropolitan Management Council (AMMC), the FCT Department of Urban and Regional Planning, the Social Development Secretariat, and security agencies. A dedicated inter-agency task force on urbanization and security should be established to develop and implement a shared strategy. Furthermore, governance mechanisms should be created to ensure the meaningful participation of informal settlement residents in the planning and decision-making processes that affect their lives, thereby rebuilding trust and enhancing the legitimacy of public institutions.

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