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**Joining the ‘Discretionary Homeless’: A Reporter’s Decision to Live in
a Walmart Parking Lot and What He Found.**

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Report

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Abstract

Joining the ‘Discretionary Homeless’: A Reporter’s Decision to Live in a Walmart Parking Lot and What He Found.

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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I lived eight months of my final year of graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin as a homeless person, sleeping in my car. I parked overnight at various Walmart store locations across Austin. There was a group I have come to think of as the “discretionary homeless” who also regularly parked on Walmart lots. Being a member of the discretionary homeless means living in your car and being mobile - an option that many homeless people do not enjoy. Not unlike many members of the country’s struggling middle and working classes, they may have had trouble finding steady work, failed to meet payments on a mortgage or opted not to deplete their financial resources to zero. It’s unclear how big a subset such people make up of the country’s 610,000 homeless but what I learned from my reporting is that there are a sizable proportion of people who have made a conscious decision to become homeless. And perhaps it is a good prism through which one can examine these discretionary homeless – to get a sense of the logic behind their decision, and to see how they are being handled or offered help. Discretionary homeless people are

not likely to come in frequent contact with city residents and will likely continue staying on Walmart parking lots. We are generally self-sufficient and usually not a nuisance – able to blend in with everyone else on the road and in public.

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Introduction

Not everyone who lives on the street feels “unsuccessful” – and not everyone seeks aid. In America today, the image of homelessness is changing. It now includes a group I’ve come to think of as the “discretionary homeless.” These are the people I observed and lived among during the eight months I spent sleeping in the back of my SUV in various Walmart parking lots in and around Austin, Texas. Not unlike many members of the country’s struggling middle and working classes, they may have had trouble finding steady work, failed to meet payments on a mortgage or opted not to deplete their financial resources to zero. It’s unclear how big a subset such people make up of the country’s 610,000 homeless but what I learned from my reporting is that there are a sizable proportion of people who have made a conscious decision to become homeless. And for a number of weeks I was one of them.

In my case, I was not desperately poor to the point of having to live in a homeless shelter or a dangerous encampment. I could afford to put gas in my car, but yet I spent my second year of graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin sleeping in that car at various Walmart parking lots in a city that is, according to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2014, the [third fastest growing metro area](#) in the nation, with 2 million people and reporting a population increase of 740,830 since 2000.

The decision to take to the streets was initially a financial one. Mostly broke, living off student loans, and with a volatile job market looming after graduation, I could not afford to pay the \$900 per-month rent on my apartment. And though I had offers to stay with people, I decided not to, because living with someone is often a tremendous burden. I was not about to put good friends in a position where they would be obligated to invite me into their home as a roommate or houseguest.

This was my choice. I was responsible for my own actions and where I ended up. Finishing school, despite myriad uncertainties, seemed like a challenge that could someday get me out of debt, with a chance to never face homelessness again.

Being a member of the discretionary homeless means living in your car and being mobile - an option that many homeless people do not enjoy. Some of the discretionary homeless chose to park in the woods at night. But many others, like me, choose to sleep in Walmart parking lots because they are plentiful, convenient and cheap. You don't have to fill out paper work, fit a certain demographic, or wake up at 6 a.m. just to be there - as you would at many homeless shelters. It gives those struggling to maintain their dignity a real sense of independence and a chance to not feel so needy.

Today, overnight stays on Walmart lots are a widely accepted practice across the United States, though not every location allows it.

"To me it's easier to get a car now. Gas can be a killer. But it's cheaper than paying rent," said Bill Grayson, 58, who had been staying at the Norwood Park Boulevard Walmart lot, on the far north side of Austin, a few times a week during the winter of 2015.

Grayson has been disabled for 16 years and said he collected an insurance check every couple of weeks for an injury he sustained working as a maintenance man. A native of Tyler, Texas, Grayson is single with no children and had been living out of a car, at least part-time, since October, 2009.

"I used to stay with my sister. But we don't talk anymore," said Grayson.

He echoes a common problem mentioned by the discretionary homeless that end up at Walmart parking lots or encampments: They have a tendency to burn bridges with the only housing options that are readily available to them -- family or friends.

The discretionary homeless whom I interviewed in the Walmart lots talk about different things that now define their lives: Low-paying jobs that don't allow them to afford housing; selling everything and starting over; limited access to adequate healthcare and other services.

Seemingly, everyone has a different story in the Walmart lots, but many say they have come to stay in Austin – they are not passing through. The city is the [highest ranked metro area for job growth](#) in the country. Most folks expressed a lack of employment and it seemed to me that they weren't accustomed to having it stay that way. And perhaps it is a good prism through which one can examine these discretionary homeless – to get a sense of the logic behind their decision, and to see how they are being handled or offered help.

First Night on a Walmart Lot

I first heard, through some Internet research, that Walmart parking lots were safe havens for the homeless who had cars. Walmart is the [world's largest company by revenue](#), according to the [Fortune Global 500](#) list in 2014, as well as the [biggest private employer](#) in the world with 2.2 million employees. The stores, of course, are ubiquitous – peppering the American landscape.

I did my homework: There are eight Walmarts in Austin. Every weeknight I drove to four of them that line Interstate Highway 35, the major north-south artery in the city – and a road that actually connects drivers to three countries. You can ride I-35 from the border with Mexico to the border with Canada.

I scouted all four and finally decided to park overnight for the first time on August 27, 2014, at the Norwood Park Boulevard Walmart. It was close to 11 p.m. by the time I rolled in and I was nervous. I had never done anything like this before and had no idea what to expect. Dotting the expansive asphalt were at least 10 cars whose owners also appeared to be calling

these slabs of asphalt “home.” It was something I would see nightly for the next eight months that I lived out of my car – there were often up to 30 vehicles each night that clearly did not belong to shoppers or employees.

Staying close to my school was paramount, if only to extend the life of my 10-year-old Nissan Xterra. I had bought the SUV in 2005, as a young land surveyor along the Texas coast. I had always loved the interior space – and now it seemed easy to envision the 6x5x3 foot cabin as the place where I would sleep, contorting my body at sharp angles to fit comfortably behind the front seats.

The Walmart’s on Norwood Park Boulevard and East Ben White Boulevard are the closest in proximity to the UT Austin campus. I stayed at these two parking lots the most, but occasionally opted to stay at the Slaughter Lane location.

After 10 p.m., Walmart lots, most of which remain open 24 hours, are less than half as full as they are during the day. Instead of taking advantage of the additional spaces, the “homeless” drivers often park a considerable distance away from the store entrance. Many have windows covered up from the inside - or belongings filling every inch of available space. And I did the same.

One sunny morning, I met Jenna Paulson, 29, and David Cook, 32, after they had washed themselves up with bottles of water on a deserted edge of the Norwood Park Boulevard Walmart parking lot. They had slept there a couple of times before. They rearranged their belongings in a small, crowded truck with New Jersey license plates for several minutes. It was a daily routine for the couple that had only been in Texas for a few months.

“You get used to the limited space. We can only carry so much stuff with us, so we only keep what’s important,” said Cook.

The couple now struggles to manage life with very little money. Being tied to a house payment or apartment lease had not been part of their plan, or even a possibility lately. Cook stopped getting work on a construction crew and Paulson only worked sparingly on the weekends at a farmers market.

“We’ll be heading out of here if we can’t find something soon,” said Paulson.

They added that they shop at Walmart when possible and only see staying in the lot as a steppingstone to better things.

Safety Concerns

Though it is often quiet at night, the lots are far from friendly, inviting places.

Many people, including officials at my university, had said the situation would be too dangerous for me to continue as I entered a second homeless semester, my last one before I graduated. But, to me, it was always a worthwhile gamble, emerging from necessity and from curiosity.

One thing was clear: The first few nights in my car, drenched in sweat under a late August moon, were tense. I spent hours clenching a knife while sitting in my front seat. But the fear subsided with each dawn that arose without incident.

A routine was perfected - with strategic parking a top priority. It made sense to have numerous “escape” routes in the event of an emergency. The only acceptable spots on the lot were the ones that had lights and that were well populated – and I learned to map out at least three routes to race away if necessary.

It also became increasingly vital to compartmentalize my living space – to carry less and live a more simplified life. The need to live an inconspicuous existence on the asphalt wasteland

of corporate America, or anywhere, became progressively clear. Windows are covered not from shame, but for protection from a world rife with unpredictability and lack of empathy.

I decided that my things must remain hidden to stay safe.

“Sometimes I’ll have my doors open during the day, no one bothers me,” said Joey Fuentes, a 46-year-old man who parks at the Walmart on East Ben White Boulevard. He was more worried about finding work. Fuentes had been living out of his car ever since he had a bad experience at an Austin shelter. “They stole my bag, so I reported it to the main office,” said Fuentes.

He said no one helped him locate the bag or did anything to replace it. Now, he will never use any shelter or public welfare service.

“At least out here [on the Walmart parking lot] I can lock my doors,” said Fuentes.

By doing some research on Walmart policy, I discovered that overnight parking on the East Ben White Boulevard lot was prohibited by the store and I stopped staying there. Fuentes and many other discretionary homeless people did not. Overnight parking continued to happen at this location, because employees apparently didn’t pay attention to the parking lot -- aside from regular maintenance. It appears, at least in Austin, that Walmart workers often look the other way.

“Some stores let people park at night, but not ours. I can’t tell who’s still doing it, though. And I’m not about to scare off potential customers to find out,” said James Rush, store manager for the Walmart on East Ben White Boulevard.

The Police Perspective

Dealing with street people and where they decide to stay is an issue local law enforcement knows all too well. Austin Police Officer Shelly Borton is focusing her work on the homeless and any crimes they are associated with. She says that a lot of the homeless-related problems are referred to as nuisance crimes – involving city ordinance violations like consuming alcohol or soliciting for money. Often it is property or business owners who call the police with complaints.

The Austin Police Department has assigned six officers to deal exclusively with the homeless, sending them to different areas of the city. “On average, we probably receive anywhere from two to five calls per week. And those are from people who have reached a point where they don’t know what to do,” said Borton.

Other officials with the Austin police say there is not a high volume of criminal activity at night on the Walmart lots. There have been domestic disturbances and loitering for several consecutive weeks, but they are not common among the discretionary homeless population.

“If a Walmart allows overnight parking, it is not illegal,” said Borton.

People can be issued citations or have their vehicle towed from the private lots if a complaint is filed. The Walmart corporate office in Bentonville, Arkansas, did not respond to email or voicemail when asked specifically about the company’s overnight parking policy or any issues associated with it. The store manager at the Norwood Park Walmart location, Eulalio Sanchez, said: “It’s up to each store to decide whether they’ll allow overnight parking. We allow it here, for the most part, but if that ever changes, there’ll be signs everywhere. You’ll know.”

Devona Kandoll is a former Walmart employee in Denver, Colorado. She noticed how consistently people slept on the lot when she worked early mornings. She was told by

management to report anyone suspected of violating the overnight policy by staying for consecutive days.

“It was happening enough for them to mention it in our meetings,” said Kandoll.

Homeless and Feeling Disconnected

During my months on the street, I often stared at the third floor of The Paddock at Norwood apartment complex while lying in my backseat in the Walmart lot.

I wondered what it would take to have a balcony. It turned out to be less than I thought. The Paddock at Norwood is a 228-unit affordable housing apartment community that serves Texas families earning no more than 60 percent of the area’s median income.

It was almost symbolic, because it was also becoming apparent to me that since I was unable to help others or myself, most street and discretionary homeless people are faced with seemingly endless and even innocuous obstacles:

In an “instant information” age, many homeless people are simply out of the loop. They have no WiFi, Internet, smartphones. They are lost somewhere in Austin 3.0, never able to set foot on the high speed, computational highway. Some old-timers in Austin talk about the longtime city slogan – “Keep Austin Weird” – being turned into “Keep Austin Wired.” It is the headquarters of the Silicon Hills in Texas, and yet there are many homeless people missing out on the information revolution. They don’t Tweet, they don’t buy apps, and they don’t “do social media.” They are more concerned with finding a place to bathe – to change their child’s diaper.

Not everyone has the capacity to search Google for all the answers.

There is no marketing campaign to fill low-income housing. The forgotten faces of street dwellers are often difficult to reach. They want it to stay that way. But there are people working diligently, each day, to see that that changes – permanently.

Charlie Duncan and others at the Texas Low Income Housing Information Service work to provide low-income housing across the city – something that critics say will only raise a firestorm among folks who don't want the homeless “in their backyard.” Duncan said it is difficult to get the word out to the poorer folks about new or existing low-income housing. And he says that public funds are being used incorrectly:

“We want public money spent in the best possible way. In some cases there's just a really bad use of millions of tax dollars,” said Duncan. “Sometimes they propose [an affordable housing unit] that's already in a terrible area where there's a lot of subsidized units -- or the socioeconomic conditions are very unfavorable. And so we'll oppose it, sometimes very vehemently.”

Counting the Homeless

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has tried to gather an accurate count on the number of homeless people in various cities – and in Austin they rely on a local nonprofit organization, Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO), to take to the streets and shelters and count heads.

In January, over 500 volunteers canvassed homeless campsites and other areas of Travis County and some [667 homeless were documented as completely unsheltered, while an additional 1,210 homeless sought shelter](#). The numbers fluctuate with the weather and overall economic climate, yet are critical in assessing the need for housing and federal funding. Five years ago in

Austin, there were 2,087 homeless people – and experts say there are different reasons for the changing numbers.

Similar surveys are also conducted in other Texas towns, and Sheryl Tynes, a sociologist at Trinity University, helps run the one done in San Antonio, which is now America's 7th largest city. She learned a few things that seem to show up in many cities in Texas: Shelters – some of which are reserved only for men, women or families -- are busiest at night. Most have on-site health clinics, but few offer dental services. Also, it is common for street people to leave major medical problems untreated for far longer than they should.

“The top five services that they said they needed and weren't getting were job placement, dental care, veteran's benefits, food stamps and transportation,” said Tynes.

The issues and concerns in Texas are ones that echo around the country. Dr. Jim O'Connell of Health Care for the Homeless has been treating people on the streets of Boston for 30 years, studying a particularly elusive and vulnerable sub-group of the homeless population that has been shielded from any studies.

“When you follow them over time you start to realize that they probably have the highest crude mortality rate of any sub-population we know in America,” said O'Connell.

Crude mortality rate refers to the number of deaths over a given period divided by the person-years lived by the population over that period.

In 2000, he focused on 119 hardcore street people throughout the Boston area (with a median age of 45), who had been consistently on the streets at least six months or more.

“When we looked at that group five years later, 40 percent were dead,” said O'Connell. “We looked at data over a five-year period, from 1999 to 2003, and that group of 119 had 18,334 emergency room visits.”

As a result, O’Connell now spends two nights and one day a week helping Boston’s homeless. He provides food and blankets out of a van driven by people who were once homeless – people who will understand homelessness. “They’re out every night, so they become the people we depend on to win the confidence of people outside, and we piggyback on that confidence,” said O’Connell.

A primary care doctor also often joins O’Connell, along with a psychiatrist, a nurse practitioner and a case-worker. They consider street people *their* patients, whether they be at a Walmart storefront in Boston or in a back alley.

“In interesting ways, street people have taught us what I believe is the way the mainstream system should go. I think they have such problems that they really teach us early on where the weaknesses of the mainstream healthcare system are first. Because it becomes so clear what’s wrong,” said O’Connell.

He has not noticed a large group of discretionary homeless people on Walmart parking lots. His team does know that some homeless people with cars are inclined to stay there, but they are not considered “high needs” patients. If their numbers grow, he added, that could change.

CommUnityCare - Servicing the Homeless on the Street

Patricia Barrera works with mobile and street medicine teams that treat the homeless in Austin.

“Anybody who’s ever been homeless has been traumatized. Those who are chronically homeless tend to have more of a history of trauma,” said Barrera, with CommUnityCare, a nonprofit that has been in operation since 1971.

Barrera's street team consists of a doctor, nurse and a case manager. The team has been operating since February. They go out from eight to five, three days a week, sweeping various sections of the city that are known to have concentrations of homelessness. Daily routes are mapped out based on new information from various relief agencies in the city.

The team did test runs beginning in October of last year.

And on one of their runs...they met me.

Part of their regular route is the Walmart parking lot on Norwood Park Boulevard, where I was living on the night of October 21, 2014.

It started with a knock, which can be a very terrifying sound if you can't see out your car windows.

When all you have is 30 square feet, the sound seems amplified and hollow. The location of my knife came to mind. I reached for it. Held it close. One morning on the Walmart lot it appeared danger was knocking - and I was not prepared to answer. Sheets were masking the inside of my vehicle from the outside world. I had not showered in days. A life or death situation was not on the morning agenda.

"We're here to help you," I heard someone say.

A panicked anxiety was overriding my ability to communicate like a rational human being. Frozen, I sat motionless, unable to respond.

The person then circled my car, peering in a back window before walking away. It was not a police officer or a Walmart employee, so I slid the key into the ignition. Once the person's footsteps had faded, I started the car and drove off. Immediately, I passed a truck with a CommUnityCare decal on the door. There were several people loitering around it.

Austin's only street medicine team sees approximately 10 street people a day. I would have been one of them had I not been so spooked and driven off in a paranoid fit of hysteria.

Homeless culture is notoriously difficult to track and serve because social conditions and the environment are constantly changing. Monica Saavedra, marketing director for CommUnityCare says the street medicine team is out to cater to a population that must always adjust to its surroundings.

“If somebody finds out they're there and they're scared, they'll move. So, it's not like we can be at that same location every time, because they're transient,” said Saavedra.

The street medicine team is a little transient too. They are working to establish patterns across the city and build trust within the community. The team is so new that it has not had the necessary time to compile enough data to establish trends on the street people it sees - including those at Walmart lots. Plans are to expand its reach and grow from every experience on the street. To learn from it, much like I have.

“It is not the most difficult thing to become homeless, honestly, but there is hope. Coming here, it kind of humbles you. It makes you feel more grateful for what you do have in your own life,” said Barrera.

She and the other people that work with the homeless seem to be tireless champions. They have a passion and dedication to go beyond basic healthcare. Barrera says it is a true labor of love.

“You're not going to get rich doing street medicine,” said Barrera.

Permanent Supportive Housing

Some discretionary homeless people could qualify for “Permanent Supportive Housing,” a program in Austin that offers subsidized rental housing for people coming out of chronic homelessness. The program began in Austin in 2009 and is aimed at so-called “high needs” homeless – folks who have the hardest time crawling out of the homeless lifestyle.

Marti Bier, planner for the City of Austin Neighborhood Housing and Community Development Office, said this particularly vulnerable population often uses high amounts of extremely costly public services. They fill up emergency rooms, jails and ambulances at a much higher rate.

“If we can shift the funding for housing people at emergency departments, into housing them in their own home, with some supports behind it, then it’s going to be cost neutral to the public system. It’s even been shown to have cost savings,” said Bier.

This eases the burden on the average taxpayer, while getting people off the streets and into a supportive, stable environment. Permanent supportive housing is for life, or until a person reaches some level of self-sufficiency where they do not want or need assistance any longer.

This is not the type of theory that is accepted with open arms across the city. People often recognize the need to help, so long as it is done far away from wherever they call home. Because homelessness is frequently synonymous with crime and filth, low-income housing developments are repeatedly met with resentment from neighboring communities. No one wants to live in a poor neighborhood.

There are strong feelings of “NIMBYism,” or “not in my back yard.” Some argue that property values could decrease and crime could increase as a result of low-income housing being placed nearby.

Amanda Lewis, 29, is a first time homeowner in Austin who purchased a house two years ago for \$112,500. She feels lucky to have found a place so cheap – and so she sympathizes with the lack of affordable housing in Austin, and also happens to support some low-income housing units less than a block away from her home.

Homelessness is something she sees every day: “There’s a couple of homeless camps in my neighborhood and depending on where I walk, I might see some,” said Lewis.

She concedes that there is crime in her area, and that it might be tied to the dozens of homeless who move in and out of the zone.

“With a lot of the crime, the victims or perpetrators are homeless, which is really sad. Honestly, the danger is not so much for me, it’s for the low-income folks in the neighborhood,” said Lewis.

Way south, on the other side of town, Francis Villarreal, 56, says she is seeing crime related to homelessness. “They crawl into empty houses and nobody knows they’re there. It’s not safe for my grandkids, so they play inside the fence,” said Villarreal, who has lived in the city for 15 years.

It is easy to speculate why homeless people cannot simply find someplace to stay, especially if you consider the high price of housing in Austin. Residents on both sides of the city deal with a considerable homeless presence almost daily.

The average home price in Austin is [\\$261,923, according to the Local Market Monitor](#). The [average rent is \\$1,501 per month](#). These numbers can hardly be considered affordable when almost [42 percent of single-member households in Travis County make less than \\$35,000 per year, compared to 23 percent for families](#) that fall in the same income bracket.

“The last several years, the cost of housing in Austin, whether it be for rent or for sale...has exceeded the increase in incomes,” said Eldon Rude, with 360 Real Estate Analytics.

Mental Illness Link to Homelessness

Mental illness inside the homeless population also remains a top priority for experts and observers.

Austin Travis County Integral Care (ATCIC) is a behavioral health organization that provides various mental health, substance use and recovery support services. It also has an outreach team that works at various campgrounds or homeless sites. But, despite the good intentions, many mentally ill people fall through the cracks.

“In terms of a comprehensive outreach program for across the city, we are not seeing a lot of people that we should,” said Niki Paul, with the ECHO agency in Austin, the group that tries to conduct the homeless head count on behalf of the federal government.

This sentiment is heard nationally. O’Connell sees street patients in Boston who often have multiple problems. They will usually have a major medical problem, substance use and mental health issue making them very vulnerable and at high risk of dying on the streets.

“I would say anywhere from 40 to 80 percent of people who live permanently on the street suffer from a significant mental illness,” said O’Connell.

Police and emergency medical responders see it as a very real part of street life. They deal with it almost daily and admit it does take up a serious amount of time and resources to handle, which costs money.

Mental illness and substance abuse are the two highest issues associated with homelessness in Austin, according to Officer Bolton with the city police.

It is, again, not isolated to Austin: “Most of the homeless we have around here are mentally ill and just don’t have the right medication. Otherwise, they’d be perfectly normal, but that’s just not the case,” said Brian Pike, a fireman and first responder in Corpus Christi.

Data collected in other parts of the state shows that people on the street are often suffering from multiple health problems. Tynes’ survey in San Antonio found that the link between those with physical disabilities and mental illness was significant.

“There was a lot of overlap between the two populations. Fifty-five percent of the individuals that had a physical disability also reported having a mental illness,” said Tynes.

Closing

Discretionary homeless people are not likely to come in frequent contact with city residents. We are generally self-sufficient and usually not a nuisance – able to blend in with everyone else on the road and in public.

But, I will admit there were times I simply felt crazy as a discretionary homeless person: Transitioning into this lifestyle required lots of understanding from my mom, and a bit of deception on my part. I told everyone at school I was staying with a friend. People I had met in Austin were kind and extremely well meaning – they would have insisted to help – but this was a personal choice and, ultimately, a solitary one.

It took weeks to establish an effective time management system in order to stay productive. I was a teaching assistant managing three separate discussion sessions for classes at the university -- coupled with a full-time class load.

No one ever asked where I had slept or suspected a thing because I was punctual and almost always prepared. The days were exhausting, and the nights became a battle to not forget the little things and still have the strength to shield the windows before bed.

Today's homeless population has struggles that are far greater than mine. As a discretionary homeless person, I was fortunate enough to have a working car and an education. Others are struggling with mental illness or joblessness that could lead to living on a Walmart parking lot, a random street corner, a bridge or an encampment.

There are people in Austin and other major metro areas, like Boston, taking the initiative to get out on the street and help. Corporations like Walmart may even, informally, help some needy people along the way.

My time on the lots was a success because nothing horrible happened to me. I woke every morning feeling free, happy to be alive. I have learned that is not the case for everyone, and will never lose respect for those who slept in their cars beside me.

I appreciate Walmart's willingness to accept the wandering nomad. There is a network of others that are thankful for it too, even though the company's not inclined to say you're welcome.

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