

Secondary Migration

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*The **Knowledge Brief Series** is produced by the University of Ottawa Refugee Hub. The Briefs are intended to briefly summarize the global state of knowledge on topics related to community-based refugee sponsorship.*

I. Summary

Community sponsorship (CS) is increasingly of interest to a number of states seeking to expand or enhance the support available for refugees. This knowledge brief aims to illuminate one particular aspect of sponsorship, often referred to as secondary migration. It seeks to understand why some sponsored refugees choose to stay in their initial community of settlement, while others decide to move on during or shortly after the end of the sponsorship period.¹ This brief uses a comprehensive review of relevant literature to respond to the questions: what are the factors that lead to secondary migration of refugees and what impact, if any, does sponsorship have on these decisions for sponsored refugees?

As this is an under-researched topic, an expansive view will be taken of CS programs, to include those where community members are involved in the integration of refugees. The brief opens with an overview of the available evidence on secondary migration for resettled refugees—both government-led and sponsored—and before turning to an analysis of the unique push and pull factors inherent to sponsorship. After considering key discussions on the topic, the brief concludes with knowledge gaps and suggestions for further research.

II. An overview of secondary migration

Refugees are often seen as a homogenous category of migrants for whom resettlement is supposed to be the end of movement and impermanence. However, once the period of sponsorship has ended, many refugees leave their community of resettlement and relocate to a different place ([Shaffer and Stewart 2021](#): 10). This topic is of interest to the sponsorship community in part because “secondary migration can fundamentally alter outcomes for both refugees and the communities that host them” and yet policy makers do not have systematic data on the extent or nature of this secondary migration by refugees whose sponsorship period has ended ([Mossad et al 2019](#): 1).

There is considerable discussion in the literature on the push and pull factors that lead refugees and other immigrants to move. Some of the main factors that contribute to the onward movement of refugees and immigrants include “employment gains, family reunification, and the desire to live within co-ethnic communities” ([Shaffer and Stewart 2021](#): 10). Tuzi argues that the perception of insecurity can drive not only primary migration, but may trigger further movements within the country or in an area of free movement after their initial resettlement. Using the example of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in Europe, Tuzi shows that refugees may choose onward movement at particular points in their lives when their aspirations are not being fulfilled ([Tuzi 2019](#): 554).

II.1 The context: policies discouraging secondary migration

While resettled refugees generally have the right to onward movement, state policy has often discouraged secondary migration during the initial months. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has acknowledged there has been a historical belief within the refugee resettlement framework that secondary migration signals a failure of integration ([Ott 2011](#): 4). In many resettlement countries, funding and policy decisions are often based on the assumption that refugees will or should aim to stay in their initial community of settlement, at least for the first year, so as to access certain services ([Ott 2011](#): 5-7).

From a government perspective, secondary movement can lead to additional costs. For example, resettled refugees in Canada who moved away from their community in their first year of settlement led to additional work for service providing organizations, who had to ensure there was no duplication

¹ Other terms may include onward migration or subsequent migration, when referring to movement within the country or area of free movement after arrival in the resettlement community.

of services (IRCC 2016: 25). In the United Kingdom, secondary migration can cause issues for the sponsor group as housing and other services are provided at local authority level. Therefore, there is a vested interest in ensuring that sponsored refugees remain in their initial community of settlement where support is available ([Home Office 2021](#): 13).

Another dimension of secondary migration to consider is that which occurs within the European Union (EU). The recent “refugee crisis” in the EU and the onward movement of asylum seekers and resettled refugees between member states has challenged the functionality of the EU’s system of refugee reception (Tuzi 2019: 553). Some EU states discourage this movement through imposing certain sanctions on onward migration, for instance, by withdrawing certain rights entitlements and benefits from resettled refugees who seek to move ([European Commission 2016](#):7). This angst around the movement of refugees both across and within borders is crucial to understanding this topic (Shaffer and Stewart 2021).

There are other inherent tensions that impact the discussions on secondary migration. The rise of nationalism, increasing xenophobia and securitization of borders, as well as debates around responsibility sharing, all shape the highly contested context in which resettled refugees choose to engage in primary or secondary movements (Shaffer and Stewart 2021). This brief cannot meaningfully engage with all of these important contextual dimensions of secondary migration, but will explore how CS programs can more effectively respond to the secondary movements of sponsored refugees through better understanding and planning for the unique factors affecting their decisions to move onwards or to stay in their initial community of settlement.

III. Evidence on the secondary migration of resettled refugees

III.1 Government resettled refugees

Refugees arriving through traditional government resettlement programs tend to pursue secondary migration within the resettlement country for similar reasons to other immigrants. These include educational and work opportunities, previous experiences living in an urban versus rural area, the existence of transport connections to larger centres, and the presence or absence of meaningful social connections ([Patuzzi, Andriescu, and Pietropolli 2020](#): 39).

Detailed and disaggregated data on the secondary movement of resettled refugees is not easily accessible. Movements of resettled refugees from rural to urban centres have been tracked mainly in the contexts of Canada, Australia, the UK and the United States. In the UK, refugees have been shown to move for employment opportunities, to join family members, and to join pre-existing ethnic communities that can provide material, financial, and emotional assistance (Shaffer and Stewart 2021: 345). A 2016 study from Immigration, Refugees & Citizenship Canada (IRCC) reported that 11% of government assisted refugees moved from their initial community of settlement in their first year, and sought support from another service providing agency ([IRCC 2016](#): 25). The top reason for movement given by these refugees was for employment, followed by wanting to be close to friends or family (IRCC 2016: 25). In the United States, it was reported that in fiscal years 2012 and 2013, around 70,000 resettled refugees arrived; within one year over 21,000 —a number likely to be underestimated—had moved out of their initial resettlement community ([Bloem and Loveridge 2017](#): 26).

A recent study from [Kaida, Hu and Stick \(2020\)](#) of administrative data from Canada indicates that government assisted refugees are slightly more likely to move than economic immigrants, a difference possibly be explained by the fact that refugees often arrive to non-gateway cities where there are fewer economic opportunities ([UNHCR 2020](#): 22). A different study in the United States measured administrative data of resettled refugees from 2000 to 2014 and found that a large proportion migrated to a different state, but rates of internal migration varied by origin, family ties, and arrival state (Mossad et al 2019: 1). The authors concluded that the major drivers of secondary migration were the desire to be closer to co-ethnic networks and labour market considerations (Mossad et al 2019: 1). It is worth noting that very little data was found on the subsequent movement of resettled refugees in Europe, with most available studies instead focusing on asylum seekers.

III.2 Sponsored refugees

The evidence on secondary migration within CS programs globally is scarcer, in part due to the small number of arrivals, and short timeframes of the majority of these programs. Sponsored refugees face some of the same push and pull factors outlined above, with the addition of the unique factor of sponsor support. The little data available on secondary migration within community sponsorship is rarely comprehensive or segregated by refugee stream. For example, a 2019 study of Syrian refugees in Canada reported that 10% of recently arrived refugees had moved outside their province of settlement, but this study did not differentiate between government assisted refugees and sponsored refugees ([IRCC 2019](#): 15).

One of the few studies to directly address secondary migration came from [Kaida, Hu and Stick 2020](#)), and compared the onward migration of government assisted refugees and sponsored refugees using the immigration database of immigrants to Canada from 2000 to 2014. They found that while the vast majority of resettled refugees stay in their initial area of settlement, they were slightly more likely to move onwards from their initial community of settlement compared to other immigrants (Kaida, Hou, and Stick 2020). When further disaggregated, the data showed that sponsored refugees were slightly less likely to move than government assisted refugees (Kaida, Hou, and Stick 2020: 15). Most interestingly, they found that “for [sponsored refugees], unemployment was not significantly associated with leaving the initial destination city, probably because they were more attached to their adopted community” (Kaida, Hou, and Stick 2020: 6). This may indicate that sponsor support could have a positive impact on sponsored refugees choosing to stay in their community in spite of other factors such as greater employment opportunities that may influence secondary migration in other cases.

There is also anecdotal evidence of secondary migration of sponsored refugees in the New Zealand context. It was reported that at least 2 out of 6 families resettled to the South Island under New Zealand’s Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship (CORS) pilot moved after the period of sponsorship to larger cities in search of employment opportunities or closer² ([New Zealand](#): 31).

There is added complexity within the EU as, depending upon the status granted to the sponsored refugee upon arrival, refugees may choose to live and work in any European country (Shaffer and Stewart 2021: 10). Of the 318 refugees participating in Italy’s Humanitarian Corridors (HC) between 2017-2019, 38% had left Italy as of March 2021 (von Wartensee 2021). About half of the participants in the HC program had moved before the end of the sponsorship period, making it difficult to fully measure the success of the program ([Share 2021](#): 15). In another study of HC, the possibility of future secondary migration is evident; 82.7% of participants reported having family elsewhere in Europe, and of those, 45.8% intended to join them one day ([European Union 2020](#): 33). In Poland, which ran an ad-hoc sponsorship scheme based on religious affiliation, it was reported that the lack of preparation of sponsor groups may have led to quite high levels of secondary migration to other EU Member States ([European Commission 2018](#): 81).

III.3 An example of a community-based refugee welcome project

There is evidence from other types of refugee welcome projects such as the Riace Model that may shed light on the intersection of citizen support and onward migration. Asylum seekers were settled in Riace, a small ‘ghost town’ in Southern Italy, in “an approach whereby original inhabitants and refugees are together responsible for community development” ([Driel2020](#): 149). The goal was to have a win-win situation where the local area would be revitalized which would at the same time promote the socio-economic inclusion of asylum seekers (Driel 2020: 150). Over 6,000 asylum seekers passed through Riace over the years but only around 100 permanently remained; others would stay one to three years waiting on their asylum procedure, and then move on to more prosperous areas (Driel 2020: 156).

² Key informant interview with a participant from New Zealand

While the program evidenced increased support for migrants and economic benefits for the local community, the lack of sustainable employment opportunities meant that when government benefits ran out, refugees had to move on or risk getting stuck in low wage jobs, or becoming homeless (Driel 2020: 164). The temporality of the program, including the need to wait in the first country of asylum due to the Dublin Regulation, was identified as the main barrier to long-term settlement (Driel 2020: 166). This example shows that while the involvement of the community in the settlement of refugees has a number of benefits in the short-term, there are often compelling reasons connected to long-term integration that influence refugees' decision to move on.

IV. Unique factors influencing secondary migration for sponsored refugees

There are a number of unique push and pull factors that may impact a sponsored refugee's decision to move onwards from their initial community of settlement.

IV.1 The community welcome of sponsorship

Sponsored refugees report that sponsorship helped to positively impact their sense of inclusion and belonging, and to foster a strong sense of connection to the local community. The results from a number of studies with Syrian refugees in Canada ([Drolet and Moorthi 2018](#); [Haugen 2019](#)) indicate that “the ability to establish and sustain strong community ties, partly enabled through community sponsorship, plays an important role in strengthening an initial sense of social inclusion” (UNHCR 2020: 45). In her research from rural Nova Scotia, Canada, Rachel McNally found that refugee families reported wanting to stay in the community in part due to “building strong relationships with sponsors and the broader community” ([McNally 2018](#): xiii). When sponsors in the study were asked why they thought refugees were staying in their community, they also talked about the family-like relationships they had developed with sponsored refugees (McNally 2018: 31/40). In the New Zealand CORS pilot evaluation, it was reported that “all sponsored refugees were very positive about their relationship with their sponsors... They credited the practical and emotional support they had received from their sponsors as what helped them most in these first few months of settlement” (The New Zealand Government 2019: vi).

While there are plenty of examples of the positive aspects of the community welcome that sponsorship can provide, this does not necessarily mean that it is less likely to result in secondary migration than other types of resettlement. There can be great variability in the pre and post migration experiences of refugees, types of sponsor groups, and level of resources and social networks available, which make it difficult to measure the impact of sponsor support on a sponsored refugee's decision to stay in their community ([Hynie et al 2019](#): 47). One study from Canada suggests that a sense of belonging in a community may not be affected so much by sponsorship as by other factors, such as the city where the refugees are resettled, or the connections they can make to similar ethnocultural groups (Hynie et al 2019: 45). Sponsor provides a number of short-term benefits for the refugees and the community as a whole (UNHCR 2020: 44), although however the impact sponsorship has on secondary migration is more difficult to ascertain.

IV.2 Access to services for sponsored refugees

Another unique factor for sponsored refugees is that sponsors are often primarily responsible for their orientation and provision of services in the first number of months. Sponsored refugees, in particular those settled in smaller cities or rural areas, have been shown to rely heavily on their sponsors to understand and access the support to which they are entitled ([Phillimore and Dorling 2020](#): 10). In Canada, anecdotal evidence shows that “sponsors fill in the gaps when services are limited, both general public services like public transportation and specialized settlement services like English as an Additional Language training” (McNally 2018: xiii). However, in some cases sponsors may also lack awareness of certain services such as social protection services (Finn 2020: 35) leading to some inconsistency in support. Access to services is an important consideration for refugees in their

settlement. For example, an older study from Canada reported that a number of refugees in smaller areas who expressed dissatisfaction with employment support and language instruction chose to move to larger centres to improve their access ([Agrawal 2018](#): 945).

IV.3 Using sponsorship to disperse refugees

Many refugees end up in cities, but because resettlement allows for placement of refugees there is an interest among governments in settling resettled refugees in smaller communities ([Tardis 2019](#): 7). Sponsorship can widen the geographic area where refugees are settled as sponsors agree to take on filling service gaps like language learning or other services where traditional government resettlement supports may not be present ([FratzkeandDorst2019](#): 8). From a government perspective, this also has the added benefit of lessening pressure on housing in cities (Tardis 2019).

A number of states, such as France, have used sponsorship programs as a kind of ‘dispersal’ policy in order to revitalize smaller places, or to avoid more pressure on services in cities ([Research Colloquium 2021](#)). In New Zealand, sponsored refugees are required to settle outside Auckland, the largest city, due to pressures on accommodation and infrastructure there (New Zealand Government 2019: 4). In Australia, additional priority is given to sponsored refugee applicants who are willing to live and work outside the major urban centres ([Australian Government 2021](#): 6). The Australian government is committed to increasing humanitarian resettlement to these rural regions, with a target of 50% of all humanitarian entrants being destined to these areas by 2022 (Australian Government 2021: 6). The United States recently announced a new [sponsor-like program](#) to allow volunteers to help with the reception of Afghan refugees. The [need for sponsor support to widen the geographic regions](#) where housing and services have reception capacity was acknowledged. While the priority of dispersal policies is to lessen pressure on services, the impact of these policies from a sponsored refugee’s point of view is rarely studied.

IV.4 Factors for sponsored refugees in smaller cities or rural areas

There are both benefits and challenges to living in rural areas that may determine whether sponsored refugees either choose to settle permanently or to move on. Services provided in smaller cities may be more innovative and coordinated, allowing easier orientation to services, and a clearer division of roles between sponsors, government, and service providers (Tardis 2019: 9). In the UK, the evaluation of the CSS program indicated that the emotional bonds between sponsors and sponsored refugees may be closer in a smaller or less diverse places ([Hassan and Phillimore 2020](#):19). In the Canadian context, there are reports of sponsored refugees finding more affordable housing options and attaining home ownership, using sponsors’ informal networks to find appropriate employment, and choosing to stay in their smaller community due to the welcome and opportunities small places afford ([Haugen 2019](#): 62).

With regard to challenges, smaller cities may be less accustomed to refugees and may not have the human resources and financial capital to support them (Tardis 2019: 9). Other challenges reported include endemic issues facing many residents in rural places such as fewer economic opportunities and a lack of transportation options, easy healthcare access, interpretation services (Research Colloquium 2021). The possibility of belonging to a larger family due to housing or being a good fit in terms of available lower skilled jobs provide incentive for refugees to settle in rural areas (Tardis 2019: 11). Ultimately, the suitability of smaller cities or rural areas for the long-term settlement of sponsored refugees largely depends on their individual situation or preferences.

IV.5 Time-limited housing support from sponsors

Inherent to most CS programs is the reality that sponsor support eventually ends; on average official sponsor responsibilities last only one or two years. This may mean the settlement of sponsored refugees in the community may become untenable in the longer term when support is no longer available from their sponsors. For example, participants in the Riace model in Italy reported that the temporary nature of the financial support and lack of other opportunities in the area made onward migration necessary for the vast majority of refugees, after benefits were removed (Driel 2020: 164).

The main reason for this instability is related to housing. Housing support from sponsors is usually not permanent, and after the sponsorship period there is a transition to independent living. Securing affordable housing is one of the largest challenges reported by sponsors across different CS programs. For example, participants in Ireland's CSI program reported feeling uncertainty about the long-term security of their housing situation, a problem exacerbated by the national housing crisis caused by pressures on affordable housing (Keppel 2020: 51). Employment opportunities are highly concentrated in the city of Dublin and so there is a sense that at the end of the sponsorship period, a move will likely have to be made either to a more affordable area within Dublin or for rural dwellers, a move to the city.³

Sponsors may also face challenges in finding the right balance in supporting sponsored refugees to secure accommodation that is affordable yet adequate over the long-term. In the UK context, sponsors reported fears that "...after the two years of support with accommodation, the families would not be able to afford to remain in their home or even in the same area and would be forced to move, creating a new period of instability" ([IRIS 2020](#): 4).

IV.6 The connection between sponsorship breakdown and onward migration

Sponsorship breakdown is a term used to refer to instances when sponsors are unable to support the sponsored refugee(s), and the relationship ends early. Sponsorship breakdown may be caused by refugees moving away during the sponsorship period, and sponsors are therefore no longer able to fulfill their responsibilities. Or, conversely, if sponsored refugees are not getting the support they need from their sponsors, they may choose to move away to find the support or connections they need. Stakeholders in Canada identified sponsorship breakdown and family breakdown as the top reasons for secondary migration of sponsored refugees (European Commission 2018: 81). Evidence on the incidence of sponsorship breakdown is scarce, though it is estimated to be around 1 in 400 in the UK context, and 1 in 40 in Canada ([Tan 2020](#): 23). A 2016 Canadian study reported that approximately one-quarter of Sponsorship Agreement Holders surveyed had experienced at least one breakdown of a sponsorship relationship in the past five years. (IRCC 2016: 26). A 'Sponsorship Agreement Holder' is an organization that contracts with the Canadian government to sponsor a certain number of refugees each year and that manages multiple refugee sponsorships at a time ([RSTP, 2021](#)).

There are established procedures for a number of CS programs regarding the possibility of secondary migration or breakdown during the sponsorship period. In Canada, if a new sponsor cannot be found in the new location to which the sponsored refugee has moved, [a no-fault sponsorship breakdown is declared](#). In the UK's CS program, if the sponsorship breaks down, the local authority is responsible for supporting the sponsored refugees. However, if the sponsored refugee moves to a new area where the local authority has not consented to their support, alternative arrangements need to be made such as securing support from a local organization, a new sponsorship group, or another local authority (Home Office 2021: 13). In France, one sponsoring group has even planned ahead and set up an emergency fund to cover accommodation should the refugees move to a different city (European Commission 2018: 82). While there is a connection between secondary migration and sponsorship breakdown, further research and disaggregated data exploring the relationship between these two events is necessary.

² Interview with key informant from Ireland

V. Lessons to consider

While there is currently insufficient research on this topic to identify promising practices, there are a few lessons that warrant consideration when designing policies or practices in community sponsorship that take secondary migration into account.

V.1 Setting expectations prior to arrival

Sharing information and setting expectations about secondary migration and the community of sponsorship prior to the arrival of the sponsored refugee may be beneficial for a more satisfactory sponsorship experience. In the UK, refugees reported disappointment upon arrival with certain aspects of the CS program including the limited ability to move within Europe, the sponsorship location, and barriers to family reunification. In response, it was strongly recommended that in the future, more detailed information be shared with sponsored refugees before arrival to set more realistic expectations (Hassan and Phillimore 2020: 26-27).

Communicating with refugees about their preferences and expectations in advance of their arrival may lead to a better fit in their placement and long-term satisfaction with their local community. Sponsored refugees arriving in more rural places may integrate more easily if they have previously lived in a rural area or have work experience in agriculture or small industries (Research Colloquium 2021). Housing is another area where there is often a mismatch in expectations. For example, of the participants in France's Humanitarian Corridors, 40% expressed dissatisfaction with their housing as they had to share accommodations or live with their sponsors (European Union 2020: 112/113). While communicating with refugees in advance is considered a best practice, there is rarely effort put into expectations setting or considering refugee preferences within CS programs.

Setting expectations also includes training sponsors on the possibility of secondary migration, as well as what to do in the case of sponsorship breakdown. The [SHARE Network's sponsor training materials](#) includes a module on managing expectations that highlights the possibility of secondary migration in the European context. In Canada, the [Canadian Council for Refugees has information for sponsors](#) on the rights and responsibilities of refugees in regards to secondary migration, and the [Refugee Sponsorship Training Program](#) trains sponsors on managing expectations and avoiding sponsorship breakdown. In the [Guide for the new Sponsor Circle Program in the United States](#), a positive example of secondary migration is included, setting the expectation for sponsors that onward movement of refugees may be a sign of independence and empowerment as refugees search for work or to join family members.

V.2 Building the possibility of secondary movement into policies

Preventing secondary migration is often a policy preference of states designing sponsorship programs; however, secondary migration should not in itself be considered a failure of sponsorship. One alternative is to think of refugee integration more holistically, accepting that it “may be better conceptualized as multifaceted, national-level integration” rather than conceived of as a policy focused on the local community level, and emphasising stability for integration on a national level (Ott 2011: 8, 31). Bloem and Loveridge agree, suggesting that “perhaps the answer is to redesign resettlement to be more dynamic and to account for changing preferences” (Bloem and Loveridge 2017: 28). They suggest one option could be to consider the initial community as a launching pad where refugees receive core services before possibly moving onwards (Bloem and Loveridge 2017: 28). Such a framework would, however, have several implications for local services and infrastructure, and therefore more study is needed.

⁴ This study occurred prior to the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union in 2020, therefore findings may not be currently accurate in regard to freedom of movement expectations

⁵ Key informant interview with a participant from New Zealand

Secondary migration may in some cases even be considered a measure of success as the sponsored refugee moves towards independence from their sponsor group and in search of economic or other opportunities. The treatment of refugees as monolithic entities instead of individuals with their own aspirations and expectations may hinder the creation of a more sustainable system of refugee hospitality, and may itself instigate further secondary movements (Tuzi 2019: 559). In recognizing the autonomy of refugees to relocate, policies are more likely to respond effectively to the real-life variability in experiences and choices made by sponsored refugees.

VI. Knowledge gaps and areas for further research

Understanding the impact that sponsorship has on the secondary migration of sponsored refugees is challenging. In addition to the typical push and pull factors faced by all refugees and immigrants, sponsored refugees have additional factors such as the support from and connection to their sponsors, location of settlement, and housing insecurity that may affect their decision to move on. While some preliminary data from Canada may indicate sponsored refugees are slightly less likely to pursue secondary migration, comparisons to other immigrant cohorts or other national contexts is scarce. Ultimately, more research is needed on the link between sponsorship and secondary migration so that in the development of CS programs globally, accounting for secondary migration can be “a link in holistic solutions for refugees” (Ott 2011: 31).

A robust evidence base on the intersection of sponsorship and secondary migration is largely lacking. Throughout this brief, a number of knowledge gaps and areas for further research have been identified:

- The need for improved tracking of the secondary migration of sponsored refugees including through longitudinal studies; in particular, for programs outside of the Canadian context, and over a longer period of time, and with larger sample sizes.
- More qualitative studies to hear directly from sponsored refugees on the impact of sponsor support as it relates to other push and pull factors, including the impact of dispersal policies.
- The identification of promising practices to assist in a smooth transition from sponsor support to after the sponsorship period, including how to mitigate against the instability the transition causes for sponsored refugees.
- Further evidence specific to the experience of sponsored refugees in rural and small communities, including exploring how to ensure effective matching of sponsored refugees to their community of sponsorship.
- Improved understanding of the intersection of sponsorship breakdown and secondary migration.
- An evidence base for policies that build the possibility of secondary migration into planning; such as a national integration framework or launch pad concept.

Outside of qualitative and longitudinal studies, these gaps can also be addressed through strengthening the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of CS programs. This is important because “integrating M&E into refugee sponsorship systems will build the evidence base on what does and does not work at different stages in these programmes, making them more resilient in times of unprecedented uncertainty” (Beirens and Ahad 2020: 2). Filling these knowledge gaps could strengthen support available to sponsored refugees, ensuring it is responsive to their needs should they choose to move.

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