**The use of sonification for physiotherapy in human movement tasks: a scoping review**

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(1) Objectives: This review aims to: 1 - map the use of sonification in human movement tasks for physical therapy; 2 - identify methods of data capture, tasks and its effects on human subjects; 3 - suggest future research directions.

(2) News: Sonification can be described as a technique to translate data into sound. It has been used for human motion analysis tasks however it is not part of most physical therapist’s lexicon.

(3) Prospects and Projects: Identify and analyze publications where sonification was used as an audio-feedback technique in physical therapy. 35 papers were included, 13 randomized-control-trials. 13 papers reported an investigation on a specific dysfunction, while upper limb movements were investigated in fifteen papers. Inertial measurement units were the most common technology used to capture human movement, 10 papers report improvements in motor control and/or movement quality. Gaps in the literature were identified: (1) absence of sonification framework for rehabilitation, (2) no long-term comparison with gold-standard interventions for specific populations, (3) approaches for cardio-respiratory physical therapy and injury prevention were absent.

(4) Conclusion: Sonification has the potential to support rehabilitation for physical therapy. Effects of sonification were varied and ranged from improvements in movement quality/control, increased movement and body-awareness to improvements in performance when compared with activities with audio-visual or non-specific audio-feedback among others. Data for sonification was mainly captured using inertial measurement units, smartphones and optical tracking devices but others are also commonly used. Well-designed clinical trials supported by current promising results need to be developed. We recommend testing different sonification techniques in common physical therapy disfunctions using significant outcome measures to understand and maximize its effects on motor learning and control while scoping for further benefits.

Keywords: Sonification; Physical therapy; Physical Therapy Modalities; Movement; Scoping Review

# 1. Introduction

Technological solutions have enabled important progress and innovation in physical therapy by supporting assessment and intervention [1, 2]. For example, the use of motion analysis tools and audio-feedback systems to support rehabilitation has become more widespread [3, 4, 5].

Sonification is a technique to transform data into sound so that the properties and relationships between data variables are communicated using audible signals and understandable by the listener, while being systematic, objective and reproducible [6]. It can communicate sounds’ multiple variables which can be manipulated to express quantitative parameters such as data from inertial measurement units (IMU) [7]. Sonification can be described as type of audio-feedback which can be used to support movement and assist exercise with or without supervision. This is done by sound which can enhance movement awareness and reproduction in rehabilitation tasks even if motor control or proprioception has not been affected. In general terms, data sonification is the use of audio signals to convey information or perceptualize data [6]. Sonification is a particularly powerful tool as auditory perception of large, complex, multidimensional data can be more refined than visual and statistical analyses. Sonification has been successfully employed in several scientific domains, examples include: the Geiger counter, whose rate of clicking is a quantitative representation of the level of radiation in the immediate vicinity of the device; the detection of plasma waves in planet atmospheres, whose oscillations are in the audio range [8]; or its use as an alternative analytical method in DNA sequencing [9].

In physical rehabilitation, patients generally only rely on proprioception, a mirror image or to the therapist’s advice; in those situations, other displays are difficult to integrate as the person moves freely in space [10]. Furthermore, during a therapy session, the clinician often has limited access to quantitative information, for example the applied forces, pressure and weight distribution.

Supporting rehabilitation through sonification is a relatively uncultivated domain in physical therapy. Although physiotherapists have used audio-feedback techniques in their intervention, it mainly focused on verbal or sound feedback during a certain task (ex.: verbally cuing a Parkinson’s patient during gait training) and not necessarily the by-product of data from human movement transformed into a relevant and informative sound. In addition, auditory perception of complex, structured information could have several advantages in terms of temporal, amplitude, and frequency resolution when compared to visual representations and often opens up possibilities for an alternative or complement to visualization techniques, when available [7]. These advantages include the human ear capability to detect patterns, recognize timbres and follow different strands at the same time. This would offer, in a natural way, the opportunity of rendering different, interdependent variables related to human movements in the sound in such a way that a listener (the patient or the therapist) could gain relevant insight into the represented information or data.

The key to this is that sonification is the process of taking quantitative data and turning it into sound. The use of technology to capture quantitative data is now increasingly used in physical therapy. For example, optical motion capture systems and portable IMU’s can harness data from a moving segment or during a functional task. Characteristics of this movements can be communicated in the form of audio-feedback delivered to both clinician and patient. This can provide insights regarding human movement that current approaches are not able to capture, for example by informing (through audio) on a joint range of movement, segment orientation and/or muscle activation during a specific assessment or rehabilitation task. Therefore, the use of sonification is becoming increasingly more relevant in physical therapy.

The present scoping review aims to: (1) identify current research that has used sonification for physical therapy or that has the potential to be used for physical therapy (thus on populations who might undergo rehabilitation) in healthy individuals and/or those with a specific movement dysfunction. Moreover, this scoping review aims to identify technological approaches used to date, and functional tasks/movements investigated; (2) its potential effects on human subjects particularly in motor control, (3) map literature pertaining to the current use of human movement sonification to identify gaps in the literature and directions for future research.

# 2. Method

Scoping reviews are a great approach to address the aim of this work where mapping current knowledge in an emergent area is the main goal. Particularly, when trying to understand what are the key characteristics within a research field, it allows researchers to identify gaps in the literature and where methodological quality assessment is not mandatory which is a characteristic of systematic reviews [11].

The framework present in this scoping review was proposed by Arksey & O'Malley [12]. Several steps were followed to ascertain methodological consistency: "1. Identifying the research question, 2. Identifying relevant studies, 3. Study Selection, 4. Charting the data, 5. Collating, summarizing and reporting the results" [12].

The research question for this paper is "How has sonification been used in Physical therapy for rehabilitation and to assist motor control?"

The papers were categorized according to the study type, the technology used to capture human movement, the movement or tasks being performed and the reported effects of sonification. To capture most advances in the field, it was decided to chart the data from all papers, regardless of methodological quality, and to fully report randomized-controlled-trials (RCT). Therefore, relevant information regarding new approaches in the area could be mapped for future reference.

Data from included studies were compiled on an Excel spreadsheet with information collected regarding study aims, participant characterization, activity investigated, technique used for movement analysis, sonification approach and effect on human movement.

## 2.1 Databases and Search Process

Databases searched: Web of Science, Science Direct, IEEE Explore, SportDiscus, Scopus and Pubmed. Each database was searched for the following keywords: “Sonification” AND “Physical therapy”, “Sonification” AND “Physical Therapy”, “Sonification” AND “Rehabilitation”, “Sonification” AND “Motor Control”, “Sonification” AND “Exercise Therapy". These keywords were selected to guarantee broad and relevant search results from Health and Technology related databases.

Key words "rehabilitation" and "exercise therapy", were included to cover a wider area of movement science research to increase results regarding human movement sonification.

## 2.2 Eligibility

To maximize results in order to scope the field, any study that used sonification about human movement with the aim to develop or which could be used in physical therapy practice were included, however the technology had to be tested in human subjects and not only a prototyped idea under development. Object sonification and guidance tasks was excluded as these are usually more relevant for visually impaired people, although these can have relevance for some professionals.

The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were used.

**Inclusion**: Sonification as an audio-feedback technique to provide information about human movement; sonification that has been tested in human subjects; peer-reviewed journals; books; thesis or conference presentations.

**Exclusion**: Sonification of human movement that does not relate to physical therapy, rehabilitation or motor control; object sonification; guidance tasks.

These criteria were selected to maximize the information collected and there is no restriction on language, type of sonification or subject.

## 2.3 Screening

The screening procedure follows the system suggested by [13]. To select papers the title was analyzed for relevance and duplicates were excluded. These papers were reviewed by two researchers to achieve uniformity in the inclusion criteria. The two authors reviewed 30% of the excluded papers and achieved 100% of agreement on paper inclusion/exclusion criteria.

RefWorks Software was used to manage and exclude duplicates. The remaining papers had their abstract examined to meet the inclusion criteria. As per previous scoping reviews, selected papers were not studied for methodological quality.

# 3. Results

The search covered literature published until the 3rd of January 2018. The total number of papers was: Web of Science - 57, Science Direct - 149, IEEE Explore - 111, SportDiscus - 6, Scopus - 702 and Pubmed - 33. The total number of papers identified from the search was 1058.

After duplicates and irrelevant titles were removed, 264 papers were left. All the abstracts of these papers were reviewed by the first reviewer and a list of 73 papers was obtained, see figure 1. [figure 1 near here] These were reviewed by two reviewers and 100% agreement was achieved. At the same time, 30% of the rejected papers were also reviewed and a 100% agreement was reached. After reference list review five papers that were not present on the initial search were included: Wallis et al [14]; Bruckner, Bartels & Blume [15]; Schmitz, Kroeger & Effenberg [16]; Newbold, Bianchi-Berthouze & Gould [17]; Singh, Bianchi-Berthouze & Williams [18]. The final list is thus composed of 35 papers which were included in this review, see table 1 for detailed analysis.

## 3.1 Study type

34 were experimental studies, 13 were RCT, 21 published in full-text peer-review journals and thirteen in conference proceedings, one was an observational study published in conference proceedings. The results showed an increase in literature in this area since 2012, with only nine studies published on or before 2011. Overall, 25 studies have focused on motor control in healthy participants and 13 studies investigating sonification effects on patients with a medical condition. In these, stroke was the most common condition with four studies [14, 19, 20, 21], three in low back pain subjects [18, 22, 23], one with shoulder dysfunction diagnoses [24], one with Osteoarthritis [25], one with deafferented individuals [26] and lastly one with Parkinson’s Disease [27]. The remaining studies, four, used healthy participants but did not disclose the number of individuals [15, 28, 29, 30]. The total number of experiments reported here are superior to the total number of papers included in the review as some authors described more than one experiment.

Researchers investigated several activities. Upper limb movements were the most commonly investigated (15 times), with activities such as hitting a target, bi-manual task, and writing [14-16, 19-21, 24, 26, 28, 29, 31-35].

Trunk movement [18, 22, 23, 36] and standing balance [37-40] were investigated four times each. Rowing was investigated twice [41, 42], while activities such as a counter movement jump [43], running [44], sit-to-stand [45], squat [17], golf swing [30], pedaling [46], ankle movement [47] and walking [27] were investigated once.

## 3.2 Data capture

There have been different approaches to how to capture and analyze movement, leading to a number of results; as technology advances more approaches will appear in the future. More than 13 types of techniques were used to analyze human movement. Data to be sonified was captured using a great variety of techniques. IMU’s were the most common technique (eight) [15, 16, 20, 21, 29, 32, 37, 39], followed by smartphones with embedded IMU's (seven) [17, 18, 22, 23, 29, 36, 44], optical tracking such as Vicon or Qualysis (five) [14, 24, 30, 31, 35],  however approaches like gaming consoles are also possible such as the use of Microsoft Kinect (three) [23, 40, 45], force plate (three) [27, 37, 43], researchers also investigated the use of Grip/Footrest Forces and/or sliding seat movement (three) [41, 42, 46], EMG data (two) [25, 48], electronic goniometers (two) [33, 47] and tablets (two) [26, 34]. Other techniques demonstrating how far-reaching this field can be were used only once: USB mouse [19]; Custom build Platform [38]; Breathing sensors [23], Instrumented insole [27].

## 3.3 Effects of Sonification

When using sonification either alone or as part of a multimodal system there were reports of: improvements in motor control and/or movement quality [14, 16, 17, 20, 21, 23, 27, 44-46], encouraged movement [18, 20, 22, 23, 24, 31, 36], improved body awareness in space [18, 38] increased performance executing complex movements when compared with (no audio) [20, 26, 34, 35, 42], audio-visual [41] and non-specific audio-feedback [31]; facilitating conveyance of data relevant for physiotherapists and patients [25, 46, 48], decrease energy expenditure [34, 44]; supports postural control [37, 39]; improved range of movement [24, 45]; increases self-efficacy [18]; decrease joint pain in stroke patients [21]; adequate movement perception from audio information [32] and increased perception accuracy of sport related movements [43].

Specific issues were found that should be considered by future researchers: sounds are advised to be perceived as simple and aesthetically positive [24], device calibration can be used to increase the subjects’ confidence on the set-up [22] and how more frequent audio-feedback (100% feedback compared with 50% feedback) improves retention for an upper limb task [33]. Melodic sonification seems to be superior to rhythmic sonification which did not appear to improve learning compared with no-audio [35].

Regarding prototype development, researchers should consider the work already developed by, Brock et al [28], Anlauff, Cooperstock & Fung [40] and Bruckner, Bartels & Hume [15].

# 4. Discussion

Based on the results of this scoping review, sonification has the potential to support Physical therapy in several ways. Our results demonstrate that the literature regarding physical therapy and sonification provides significant positive indicators but has limited scope. Several limitations should be taken into account in future research: (1) reduced number of investigations on populations with a specific movement dysfunction, (2) reduced sample size, (3) lack of detail regarding retention of learned movement/task over time when compared with a typical approach. These issues limit the ability to draw definite conclusions of the effectiveness of sonification as an audio-feedback tool for rehabilitation.

We recommend that high quality, scientifically rigorous studies are needed to investigate the effects and effectiveness of sonification in rehabilitation specific tasks by exploring different sonification mappings in common movement dysfunctions. Less than a third of studies used patients to investigate the effects of sonification. For sonification to be useful in clinical practice, research should provide a concrete case of effectiveness with specific populations by investigating different intervention areas of Physical therapy, namely cardio-respiratory but also in addressing other issues such as falls and injury prevention. We recommend researchers to use gold standard outcome measures in long-term RCTs, hence permitting comparison with typical rehabilitation programs. Therefore, capturing changes in patient’s function throughout intervention as well as data regarding retention of functional improvement with the use of sonification.

In most papers authors have chosen IMU’s and smartphones, likely owing to its ability to capture kinematic and kinetic data in various settings, being less expensive and portable when compared with optical motion capture systems. However, optical motion capture systems are more reliable and accurate which can have implications on the reported results. It is also interesting to notice the use of Microsoft Kinect as a cheap solution for optical capture, which might facilitate its deployment in health services. Although Kinect is not as accurate as other commonly used optical systems [49] progress has been made to improve its accuracy [50]. Researchers should focus on an accessible procedure while improving the accuracy of kinematic and kinetic information collected. At the same time they should focus on testing different sound attributes for each data parameter in order to optimize effects for functional tasks.

Upper limb tasks were more commonly investigated, with several studies investigating stroke patients and testing manual tasks, with special interest in motor control tasks. Current research indicates that sonification appears to facilitate motor learning when compared with other types of feedback (visual) or a sham sonification on complex motor tasks [20, 21, 41]. Most effects are reported from small experimental groups with reduced statistical relevance for the results to be extrapolated for clinical practice however they are positive indicators for future research [21, 24].

Sounds attributed to data categories should be assessed in their ability to transmit relevant information for the user. Our results show, as Dubus & Bresin [51] in their systematic review, that this is not common practice. This might have impact on the effectiveness of the final sonification as other sound attributes might be more relevant for the selected data. Scholz et al [19] are a good example of how sonification should be tested in advance, as the authors explored what sound attributes were more effective for an upper limb task, before proceeding to their follow-up studies to improve upper limb motor function in stroke patients [20, 21]. The novel use of sonification for rehabilitation should encourage authors to explore how different sounds might be attributed to kinetic or kinematic data to maximize treatment effects, which should facilitate the establishment of a sonification framework for rehabilitation.

Our results also show that sonification has benefits for an upper limb retraining task [16, 20, 21, 31] as well as on sports complex movement training [41]. Sonification seems to positively affect movement perception and action by influencing the mirror neuron system while engaging subcortical structures such as parts of the striato-thalamo-frontal motor loops when the auditory stimulus is congruent with the visualized movement [52]. Retention regarding the learned task is another important issue which needs to be addressed for rehabilitation use, which we will aim to investigate in the future. However, subjects using sonification appear to be able to retain information more easily with increased feedback during an upper limb complex task [33].

In our view, these questions need to be answered in future research:

What sounds attributed to kinetic and kinematic data aids motor control and facilitates learning for rehabilitation related tasks?

Is sonification use relevant for rehabilitation for musculoskeletal conditions if there is no major neurological deficit?

How do sonification effects compare with other current techniques on motor control and retention?

The answer to these questions will support the development of technical and theoretical solutions in human movement sonification for physical therapy.

## Strengths and Limitations

This review does not encompass literature that focus on the technological development of sonification devices but more on the grey area where physical therapy and sonification merge. We did not search for papers that refer to the term *audio*-*feedback* to exclude results that were not sonification, however it is common in the literature to find these terms mixed. These facts might have contributed for an absence of some papers that might be beneficial for some researchers in the future. At the same time studies are heterogeneous considering its population, scope and objective. Therefore, careful considerations about the reported results should be considered. However, this report conducts the first study of its kind in the area which can support the growth of sonification in physical therapy by providing a wide perspective of current research practice while serving as guidance to address existing issues in current practice.

# 5. Conclusion

Sonification is a new and growing technique in the area of rehabilitation. There are promising results on the use of sonification to support human movement for physical therapy, however very few studies used reproducible techniques with potential to be used in a clinical setting.

Effects of sonification were varied and ranged from improvements in movement quality/control, increased movement and body-awareness to improvements in performance when compared with activities with audio-visual or non-specific audio-feedback among others. Data for sonification was mainly captured using inertial measurement units, smartphones and optical tracking devices but others are also commonly used. Well-designed clinical trials supported by current promising results need to be developed. We recommend testing different sonification techniques in common physical therapy disfunctions using significant outcome measures to understand and maximize its effects on motor learning and control while scoping for further benefits. Researchers and technological development teams should focus on solutions that can ultimately serve the practitioner and the patient.

In conclusion physical therapy can benefit from sonification in three different areas, first as a way of analyzing data either from human movement or from physiological parameters. Secondly as it allows for audio-only data conveyance during a physical assessment and/or intervention. Thirdly, allowing the development of tele rehabilitation tools for assessment and treatment. Promising results have been obtained in neurological rehabilitation and for motor learning which should encourage further investigation.

# Declaration of interest.

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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Table 1. Description of Randomized Control Trials

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Author(s) | Country | | Study Outline | Sample | | Intervention | Key Findings |
| Effenberg, 2005 [43] | | Germany | Assess perception and action, subjects to estimate and reproduce countermovement jump using video and sonified feedback. | 2 exp. – 2 groups 40 healthy subjects | | Exp. 1 - Movement assessment of 2 consecutive countermovement jumps. Exp. 2 - Subjects observed reproduction of a single jump of different heights. | Exp. 1 - Movement sonification helps improve perception accuracy of sonified sports movements; Exp. 2 - Additional convergent auditory stimulus can enhance reproduction accuracy of sports movements in comparison with the video-feedback. |
| Giansanti et al, 2009 [39] | | Italy | Assess trunk postural movement induced by audio feedback using a wearable device. | 9 healthy subjects | | 5 trials of 50s each in 6 different conditions: 1-eyes closed on solid surface; 2- eyes open on foam cushion; 3- eyes closed on foam cushion; 4- Eyes closed with audio feedback; 5- eyes open on foam with audio-feedback; 6- eyes closed on foam with audio-feedback. | Subjects able to save energy while using the audio-feedback system. Facilitates postural control in conditions with reduced sensorial input. |
| Pauletto & Hunt, 2009 [25] | | United Kingdom | 2 exp. using large datasets: explore interactive sonification with recorded data and real time data (from EMG sensors) | 2 Exp.: 1- 21 2-57 (17 with OA) | | 1- Subjects listened to sonified datasets; 2- EMG data sonified, users asked for feedback about roughness, overall loudness, speed of sounds’ attack. | Complex data can be used in sonification especially if the user can interact with the sound display. The system might also be used as a rehabilitation tool in the future. |
| Dailly et al, 2012 [31] | | Switzerland | Assess learning accuracy of a new task using error sonification and music in an upper limb movement | 12 healthy subjects | | Subjects traced a pre-defined trajectory on a table surface. | Concurrent error sonification appears to be more beneficial than repetitive training in healthy subjects learning a new upper limb movement. |
| Vinken et al, 2013 [32] | | Germany | Investigation on types of sonification use for upper limb gross movement | 28 healthy subjects | | Individuals listened to sonification of human movements 126 times in total. 3 times to 6 upper limb actions sonified in 7 different ways. | Sonification might be used for motor control and rehabilitation as it improves the perception of human movement even in subjects not familiar with sonification. |
| Scholz et al, 2014 [19] | | Germany | Develop a sonification based stroke rehab protocol which provides additional sensory input in upper limb movements. | 26 healthy subjects | | Subjects randomized to start the procedure with one of two different conditions which had different grid orientation on brightness and pitch. Two conditions were tested. The pitch and brightness representation were swapped for the second condition. | As reported in previous studies pitch benefits from being set on the vertical axis and brightness on horizontal axis. This was done using only bi-dimensional sonification. |
| Schmitz, Kroeger & Effenberg, 2014 [16] | | Germany | Develop a sonification based mobile rehab system to support stroke patients. | 7 patients | | Subjects performed upper limb movements of different complexity for 5 days with each session up to 20 minutes each. 4 of the subjects were included in the sonification group while 3 were part of the control group. | Improvement on gross motor skills although sample was small and heterogeneous. However, the system developed provides a good example of how these can be built. |
| Scholz et al, 2015 [20] | | Germany | To develop a solution for stroke rehabilitation using music sonification therapy. | 4 stroke patients | | 2 groups that received 9 days of music sonification therapy or sham sonification training. | Music sonification therapy appears to have beneficial results for this small sample of subjects as it is highly motivating and can support sensorial input affected by stroke. Subjects improved more than the control group in the motor function test. |
| Fujii, Lulic & Chen, 2016 [33] | Canada | | Subjects asked to hit a target in an upper limb movement sonification task. | | 20 healthy Subjects | All the participants had 25 trials to learn a "reaching movement". One group received sonification in 100% of the trials (100 times) and a second group exposed to sonification in 50% of the trials (100 times), both groups had 25 testing trials to assess retention on day 1 and on day 2 with 25 more trials, no feedback was given in the retention tests. | Upper limb complex motor tasks might benefit from more concurrent knowledge of performance audio-feedback (100%) than (50%) of the trials the while learning of a movement pattern. | |
| Newbold et al, 2016 [36] | | UK | Technical solution of mobile sonification to facilitate and guide movement in patients with chronic pain. | 17 healthy Subjects | | Smartphone attached to subjects’ trunk in order analyse trunk displacement (forward) and to provide audio-feedback about movement quantity, time of return and self-reported measures. | This study shows that music based sonifications can be used to provide feedback on range of movement and how it can be perceived as more rewarding by healthy subjects. |
| Scholz et al, 2016 [21] | | Germany | Music sonification therapy for stroke patient’s rehabilitation | 25 stroke patients | | Patients with moderate impairment in upper limb motor function randomly assigned in two groups that received an average of 10 days sonification therapy or sonification sham. Assessed pre and post training in different parameters (upper extremity function; psychological state and arm movement smoothness). | This type of sonification in the rehabilitation of stroke patients seems to be beneficial due to its improvements on gross motor function and decreased joint pain, however more studies are needed to evaluate treatment outcomes. |
| Dyer, Stapleton & Rodger, 2017 [35] | | UK | To investigate the advantages of melodic sonification in a new bi-manual motor skill task. | 60 healthy subjects | | Three groups with three different sound feedback, randomly distributed. Terminal feedback was provided to all groups (graph). 1 - Control 2 - Melodic sonification 3 - Rhythmic sonification. | Melodic sonification was more effective than rhythmic and control group for motor task learning. There was no significant difference between the control group and the rhythmic sonification which was unexpected. |
| Newbold, Bianchi-Berthouze & Gould, 2017 [17] | | UK | To exploit music's qualities in a squat sonification task | 20 healthy subjects in each experiment | | Participants were asked to squat while using a mobile smartphone attached to the thigh. 1st exp. explored musical expectancy; 2nd exp. subjects squatted (once) at a steady pace to each chord until the end of the movement while hearing the "stable" or "unstable" sonification only. | 1- Results show differences between the musical sonifications with the non-musical/no sound, with more movement past the target point, slower return and better motivation. 2- No significant effects on additional squat or time of return. However the "stable" condition individuals thought they had moved more than they really did, while in the "unstable" condition individuals felt more motivated to continue movement. |

Exp. = Experiment, OA = Osteoarthritis

**Figure 1.** Flow chart of studies throughout the review

Total records from database search (n=1058)

Articles included (n=35)

Records added from other sources (n=5)

Full-text articles assessed (n=73)

Records screened (n=1058)

Duplicates and irrelevant titles removed (n=794)