

# EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND INVOLVEMENT IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

BY PHELAN WYRICK AND KADEE ATKINSON

A collection of studies finds that children and youth who witness or are direct victims of violence are at risk for later offending and justice system involvement.



A dangerous or life-threatening experience may become a traumatic event for a child. The child may see the event as an intense threat to his or her safety and will typically experience a high level of fear or helplessness.<sup>1</sup> Trauma may result from a wide range of events, including accidents and natural disasters. Of great priority to those in the public safety and justice fields, traumatic experiences may be caused by exposure — as a victim or a witness — to community violence, domestic violence, sexual abuse, or terrorist attacks.

Trauma experienced during childhood may result in profound and long-lasting negative effects that extend well into adulthood. The direct effects may be psychological, behavioral, social, and even biological.<sup>2</sup> These effects are associated with longer-term consequences, including risk for further victimization,<sup>3</sup> delinquency and adult criminality,<sup>4</sup> substance abuse,<sup>5</sup> poor school performance,<sup>6</sup> depression,<sup>7</sup> and chronic disease.<sup>8</sup>

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) has supported many studies over the years to help increase our understanding of the complex dynamics of childhood exposure to violence.<sup>9</sup> The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has also supported research, programs, and training to better understand and improve responses to children exposed to violence and childhood trauma.<sup>10</sup> Together, these efforts help inform the development and enhancement of programs, practices, and policies designed to prevent violence, reduce the impact of violence on children and youth, and improve the capacity of the criminal and juvenile justice systems.

In 2016, OJJDP funded seven research projects in response to a competitive solicitation titled Studies Program on Trauma and Justice-Involved Youth (see exhibit 1).<sup>11</sup> These studies — now managed by NIJ<sup>12</sup> — look at trauma and justice system involvement from multiple perspectives to provide a better understanding of the pathways from violence exposure and trauma to involvement in the justice system. They also explore possible protective factors that reduce the likelihood of delinquency as a negative consequence of trauma, as well as the effectiveness of trauma-focused interventions for youth. This article

discusses findings from this collection of studies and their implications for the field.

## Exposure to Trauma Among Juvenile Offenders

Five studies examined the relationship between childhood trauma and juvenile justice system involvement. Three of these studies drew on existing longitudinal research on justice-involved or high-risk youth. Another study analyzed linked administrative datasets from multiple systems in Chicago. The final

Exhibit 1. Trauma and Justice Involved Youth Project Descriptions			
Study	Project Title	Research Grant Recipient	Area of Focus
1	A Longitudinal Investigation of Trauma Exposure, Retraumatization, and Post-Traumatic Stress of Justice-Involved Adolescents	University of Maryland	The evolution of exposure to violence and psychological distress among justice-involved adolescents who are serious offenders
2	Violence Exposure, Continuous Trauma, and Repeat Offending in Female and Male Serious Adolescent Offenders	Loyola University Chicago	The prevalence and longitudinal patterns of continuous trauma exposure (during and after justice involvement) in serious adolescent offenders
3	Exposure to Violence, Trauma, and Juvenile Court Involvement: A Longitudinal Analysis of Mobile Youth and Poverty Study Data (1998-2011)	The University of Alabama	Whether traumatic events increase the risk of juvenile justice system involvement for vulnerable adolescents
4	Trauma Exposure, Ecological Factors, and Child Welfare Involvement as Predictors of Youth Crossover Into the Juvenile Justice System	University of Chicago, Chapin Hall Center for Children	Pathways from trauma exposure to juvenile justice involvement for children and youth who have been involved in the child welfare system
5	To Understand the Role of Trauma, Exposure to Violence, and Retraumatization for Justice-Involved Youth, Particularly for Clients Who Identify as LGBTQI or GNC	Hennepin County	Trauma and violence experienced by justice-involved lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/unsure, asexual, and gender nonconforming youth
6	Maltreatment and Delinquency Associations Across Development: Assessing Difference Among Historically Understudied Groups and Potential Protective Factors	Child Trends Incorporated	Potential protective factors at the peer, family, school, and neighborhood levels that disrupt the relationship between childhood maltreatment and later offending
7	Trauma-Informed Interventions for Justice-Involved Youth: A Meta-Analysis	George Mason University	Review of available research on trauma-focused interventions for justice-involved youth and at-risk youth who experienced some form of trauma in their lives

study involved primary data collection from justice-involved youth in a Minnesota county.

### **Exposure to Trauma and Trauma Trajectories**

Researchers at the University of Maryland used data that were originally collected for the Pathways to Desistance study, which analyzed multiple waves of interview data gathered between 2000 and 2010 from 1,354 justice-involved male and female participants. Participants in the Pathways to Desistance study were serious youth offenders in Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania, and Maricopa County (Phoenix), Arizona, who were between the ages of 14 and 17 at the time of their offense.<sup>13</sup>

Using the Pathways to Desistance data, the University of Maryland researchers examined the prevalence and patterns of trauma exposure, as well as the most strongly associated psychological symptoms. They also identified and described trajectories of trauma exposure and trauma symptoms from adolescence into early adulthood (i.e., ages 16 to 23).<sup>14</sup>

These justice-involved youth witnessed and experienced high levels of violence likely to cause trauma. For example, almost one-half (49%) witnessed someone being shot, and 30% witnessed someone being killed. The symptoms most strongly associated with exposure to violence were hostility and paranoid ideation.

The researchers categorized participants into four groups:

- Minimally exposed to violence.
- Witnessed gun and non-gun-related violence.
- Exposed to non-gun-related violence.
- Exposed to gun and non-gun-related violence.

These groups differed in important ways. For instance, in comparison to those minimally exposed to violence, all other groups had significantly higher scores on depression, hostility, paranoid ideation, and psychoticism.

Across all study participants, the average level of exposure to violence and psychological distress decreased slightly over time. However, this pattern was not uniform across participants. For example, white and Hispanic youth experienced a significant decrease in exposure to violence that was not experienced by African American youth.

### **Facility Exposure and Continuous Exposure to Violence**

Researchers at Loyola University Chicago also analyzed data from the Pathways to Desistance study to examine issues related to exposure to violence within correctional and residential facilities, as well as continuous exposure to community violence.<sup>15</sup> Seventy-five percent of study participants reported witnessing violent encounters between other residents in correctional and residential facilities, and 17% reported being victimized by other residents. Almost two-thirds of participants witnessed violence between staff and residents, and almost 10% reported being victimized by staff, with 5% reporting being beaten by staff.

To better understand the effects of multiple traumatic experiences, the researchers focused on a series of six interviews that occurred at six-month intervals over a three-year period. They used the term “continuous exposure to violence” to characterize the experiences of those who reported witnessing violence or being victimized in more than one interview during this period. Of the 1,354 study participants, 83% witnessed community violence at more than one time point, and 43% were direct victims of violence in the community at more than one time point.

Exposure to violence in the community during adolescence significantly increased the risk for rearrest. Similarly, the researchers found that continuous exposure to community violence during adolescence predicted higher levels of self-reported reoffending during early adulthood. This relationship was particularly pronounced for those who displayed callous unemotional traits. That is, adult reoffending was more likely to occur for adolescent offenders who experienced continuous exposure to trauma and

## Researchers found that adolescents who witnessed violence or were victimized by violence were more likely to be charged with a crime against a person at a later time.

exhibited a lack of emotion or who learned emotional detachment as a method of self-protection from trauma.

### Exposure to Violence and Juvenile Court Involvement

Researchers at the University of Alabama examined exposure to violence and juvenile court involvement among African American adolescents living in extreme poverty.<sup>16</sup> They performed a secondary analysis of 9,215 adolescents between ages 9 and 17 living in Mobile, Alabama, who participated in the Mobile Youth and Poverty Study. Data sources included annual surveys of youth, school records, and juvenile court records from 1998 to 2011.

The researchers found that adolescents who witnessed violence or were victimized by violence were more likely to be charged with a crime against a person at a later time. Court outcome severity was higher for this group — that is, youth exposed to violence in this sample experienced more adjudication, were more likely to be assigned to residential placement, and were more likely to be put on probation. The researchers included statistical controls for previous levels of crime and court outcome severity, which, together with the temporal quality of the research, increases confidence in the primary finding that exposure to community violence is associated with changes that lead toward more court involvement and more severe court outcomes.

The researchers also identified factors that influence the strength of the relationship between exposure to

violence and juvenile court involvement. They found that academic progress reduces the strength of the relationship between exposure to violence and juvenile court involvement, while psychological symptoms of hopelessness as a result of exposure to violence strengthen the likelihood of court involvement.

### Trauma and Crossover From the Child Welfare System to the Juvenile Justice System

Researchers from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago examined how exposure to trauma may be related to later involvement in the juvenile justice system.<sup>17</sup> The study focused on 1,633 Chicago youth born between 1996 and 2002 who had one or more out-of-home foster care placements, had completed an intake assessment that included measures of traumatic experiences, and had no prior juvenile justice involvement at the time of intake. Using linked administrative data from multiple state and local agencies (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, Chicago Police Department, Cook County Juvenile Probation and Court Services Department, and Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice) available through 2017, the researchers conducted survival analyses<sup>18</sup> to identify the timing of, and factors related to, initial justice involvement.

The researchers found evidence to suggest that some specific types of traumatic experiences may increase the risk for juvenile justice involvement for those who are involved in the child welfare system. Specifically, when youth experienced violence in the community and at school, their likelihood of crossing over into juvenile justice system involvement increased. However, this study did not find evidence to support the broader hypothesis that greater total trauma exposure is related to increased probability of justice system involvement among youth in the child welfare system. In this sample, trauma exposure as a whole showed no significant relationship with arrest, detention, court filing, probation, or juvenile corrections when controlling for other factors such as youth characteristics, child welfare history, community characteristics, and individual risks and strengths.

## Trauma Exposure for Justice-Involved LGBTQA and GNC Youth

Researchers at the Department of Community Corrections and Rehabilitation in Hennepin County (Minneapolis), Minnesota, examined the role of trauma and violence exposure on justice-involved lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/unsure, and asexual (LGBTQA) youth and gender nonconforming (GNC) youth.<sup>19</sup> A total of 150 surveys and 60 in-person interviews were completed by youth ages 14 to 20 who were involved in Hennepin County corrections.<sup>20</sup> The researchers examined findings for two groups: one that included only LGBTQA and GNC youth, and another that included only heterosexual, cisgender youth.<sup>21</sup> Youth in both groups had similar levels of child welfare involvement, human services placement stays, prior detention and correctional placements, and criminal history scores.

LGBTQA and GNC youth appear to have significantly more pronounced experiences of trauma and victimization than their heterosexual, cisgender peers. This group reported more cumulative trauma and victimization on a scale of adverse childhood experiences. LGBTQA and GNC youth were also more likely to report harassment by peers, verbal abuse by adults, and neglect by a caregiver. The largest differences were reported for exposure to sexual trauma and violence. LGBTQA and GNC youth were more likely to report having experienced forced intercourse, sexual assault by a known adult, and other forms of sexual assault.

## Protective Factors and Treatment Programs

The remaining two studies focused on issues that may directly inform prevention and intervention efforts with youth who have been exposed to violence and other forms of trauma.

## Factors That Reduce the Strength of the Relationship Between Maltreatment and Offending

Researchers at Child Trends, a nonprofit research organization that focuses on children's issues,

carried out secondary analyses of data collected in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) to further examine the relationship between childhood maltreatment and delinquent and criminal behaviors. The researchers analyzed three waves of Add Health interview data for a sample of 10,613 respondents at different stages from adolescence to young adulthood. These waves of interviews occurred when respondents were 13 to 19 years old, then at 18 to 26 years old, and later at 24 to 30 years old.

The study found that a history of childhood maltreatment was associated with higher frequencies of overall violent and nonviolent offending.<sup>22</sup> Violent offending was nearly three times as high for those who experienced childhood maltreatment compared to those with no history of childhood maltreatment, and these differences continued from adolescence into adulthood. The relationship between maltreatment and offending did not differ by race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. However, males with a history of childhood maltreatment were more likely to be involved in later delinquent and criminal behavior than females with a similar history.

The researchers identified a number of protective factors that reduced the likelihood of violent and nonviolent offending. In multiple cases, these protective factors had positive effects, regardless of whether the individual had experienced childhood maltreatment. Specifically, a strong connection to school, high-quality relationships with a mother or father figure, and high levels of neighborhood collective efficacy all had protective effects that reduced the likelihood of violent offenses, regardless of whether the individual experienced maltreatment during childhood. For nonviolent offenses, neighborhood collective efficacy had protective effects that did not vary by childhood maltreatment status. However, for those who experienced childhood maltreatment, a strong connection to school and high-quality relationships with a mother or father figure were especially protective in reducing the likelihood of nonviolent offenses. None of the protective effects varied by sex, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

### **Effectiveness of Trauma-Informed Treatment Programs**

Lastly, researchers at George Mason University carried out a meta-analysis to assess the effectiveness of trauma-informed treatment programs for justice-involved youth and youth at risk of justice system involvement who experienced some form of trauma in their lives.<sup>23</sup> Trauma-informed treatments include specialized interventions that focus on treating symptoms of trauma, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and other affective disorders. The researchers set out to analyze data from a number of independent studies on the subject in an effort to examine overall trends. They searched 24 electronic databases and identified 29 publications that met the eligibility criteria. Eligible studies included evaluations of trauma-informed programs for youth who were involved in the juvenile justice system. Also eligible were evaluations of trauma-informed programs for youth who were not involved in the juvenile justice system, but that included delinquency as an outcome, or that included an outcome highly associated with later delinquency (e.g., aggression, substance use, antisocial behavior). Both experimental (random assignment) and quasi-experimental studies that included a credible comparison group were eligible.

The 29 publications included 30 programs for analysis. Six of the programs focused specifically on justice-involved youth. The researchers found that the evidence base from these studies did not allow for any strong conclusions about the effectiveness of the trauma-informed programs for youth already involved in the justice system. The remaining 24 programs served at-risk children and youth who experienced trauma. Findings suggest that these programs as a whole can produce meaningful reductions in problem behaviors and may reduce future delinquency among youth with histories of trauma.

The researchers highlighted cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) — specifically trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) — as an effective approach for reducing problem behaviors in youth with histories of trauma. But, they noted, the evidence base is insufficient to assess the

effectiveness of CBT and TF-CBT for justice-involved youth.<sup>24</sup>

### **What We Have Learned**

The seven OJJDP-funded studies further our understanding of the relationship between childhood trauma and juvenile justice system involvement. They provide strong evidence to support and further refine knowledge about the high levels of childhood trauma that justice-involved youth experience.

Within samples of justice-involved youth, the studies found high levels of previous trauma as well as ongoing exposure to trauma during and following justice system involvement. Researchers at Loyola University Chicago highlighted how continuous exposure to violence was related to reoffending and rearrest in adulthood. Another study shed light on the differences in traumatic experiences for justice-involved youth who identify as LGBTQA or GNC.

Three studies started with broader samples of youth and examined how trauma was related to offending and juvenile justice system involvement. One found strong support for the relationship between trauma and justice system involvement, and another found support for the relationship between trauma and later offending. Researchers at the University of Chicago found more limited support for the relationship between specific forms of trauma (community-based and school-based) and justice system involvement with a sample of youth in the child welfare system.

Researchers identified several potential prevention or intervention points for youth exposed to violence and trauma. Researchers at Child Trends found that a strong connection to school, high-quality relationships with a mother or father figure, and high levels of neighborhood collective efficacy were protective factors that reduced the likelihood of later offending. Similarly, researchers at the University of Alabama found that academic progress was a protective factor, while psychological symptoms of hopelessness appeared to strengthen the relationship between trauma and court involvement. Another study highlighted that a lack of emotion or learned



emotional detachment — which are coping methods resulting from trauma — were associated with higher levels of reoffending.

A study in Minnesota highlighted the importance of addressing potential exposure to sexual assault with youth who identify as LGBTQA or GNC. Finally, researchers at George Mason University found that trauma-informed practices as a whole produced positive results with at-risk youth who experienced trauma and highlighted CBT and TF-CBT as programs with particularly strong evidence of effectiveness with this group.

All of these findings underscore the importance of preventing child maltreatment and children's exposure to violence as victims or witnesses. One conclusion that may be drawn from several of the studies is that it will likely require coordination across sectors, including, but not limited to, the justice system, to carry out effective strategies for mitigating the harm from childhood trauma and reducing the link to justice system involvement. Policymakers and practitioners can help by focusing on prevention, intervention, and treatment modalities across child-serving systems that address factors known to influence the relationship between childhood exposure to violence and later justice system involvement.

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## For More Information

Learn more about NIJ's research on children exposed to violence at <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/children-exposed-violence>.

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This article discusses the following awards:

- "A Longitudinal Investigation of Trauma Exposure, Retraumatization, and Post-Traumatic Stress of Justice-Involved Adolescents," award number 2016-MU-MU-0070
- "Violence Exposure, Continuous Trauma, and Repeat Offending in Female and Male Serious Adolescent Offenders," award number 2016-MU-MU-0067
- "Exposure to Violence, Trauma, and Juvenile Court Involvement: A Longitudinal Analysis of Mobile Youth and Poverty Study Data (1998-2011)," award number 2016-MU-MU-0068
- "Trauma Exposure, Ecological Factors, and Child Welfare Involvement as Predictors of Youth Crossover Into the Juvenile Justice System," award number 2016-MU-MU-0069
- "To Understand the Role of Trauma, Exposure to Violence, and Retraumatization for Justice-Involved Youth, Particularly for Clients Who Identify as LGBTQI or GNC," award number 2016-MU-MU-0066
- "Maltreatment and Delinquency Associations Across Development: Assessing Difference Among Historically Understudied Groups and Potential Protective Factors," award number 2016-MU-MU-0064
- "Trauma-Informed Interventions for Justice-Involved Youth: A Meta-Analysis," award number 2016-MU-MU-0065

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## Notes

1. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, "About Child Trauma," <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma>.
2. Vincent J. Felitti et al., "Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14 (1998): 245-258; and Emily M. Zarse et al., "The Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire: Two Decades of Research on Childhood Trauma as a Primary Cause of Adult Mental Illness, Addiction, and Medical Diseases," *Cogent Medicine* 6 no. 1 (2019): 1-9.
3. Katie A. Ports, Derek C. Ford, and Melissa T. Merrick, "Adverse Childhood Experiences and Sexual Victimization in Adulthood," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 51 (2016): 313-322, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.08.017>.
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  6. Elizabeth Crouch et al., "Challenges to School Success and the Role of Adverse Childhood Experiences," *Academic Pediatrics* 19 no. 8 (2019): 899-907, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2019.08.006>.
  7. Kathryn L. Humphreys et al., "Child Maltreatment and Depression: A Meta-Analysis of Studies Using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 102 (2020): 104361, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104361>.
  8. Leah K. Gilbert et al., "Childhood Adversity and Adult Chronic Disease: An Update From Ten States and the District of Columbia, 2010," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 48 no. 3 (2015): 345-349, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2014.09.006>.
  9. National Institute of Justice, *Compendium of Research on Children Exposed to Violence (CEV) 2010-2015*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, June 2016, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/249940.pdf>.
  10. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, "Children Exposed to Violence," <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/programs/children-exposed-violence>.
  11. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention funding opportunity, "OJJDP FY 2016 Studies Program on Trauma and Justice-Involved Youth," grants.gov announcement number OJJDP-2016-10040, posted May 9, 2016, <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh176/files/media/document/OJJDP-2016-10040.PDF>.
  12. In October 2018, the juvenile justice and delinquency prevention research, evaluation, and statistical functions of the Office of Justice Programs moved from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to the National Institute of Justice.
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  14. Unless otherwise noted, all data in this section come from Thomas A. Loughran and Joan Reid, "A Longitudinal Investigation of Trauma Exposure, Retraumatization, and Post-Traumatic Stress of Justice-Involved Adolescents," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, grant number 2016-MU-MU-0070, August 2018, NCJ 252015, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/grants/252015.pdf>.
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  16. Unless otherwise noted, all data in this section come from Anneliese Bolland and John Bolland, "Exposure to Violence, Trauma, and Juvenile Court Involvement: A Longitudinal Analysis of Mobile Youth and Poverty Study Data (1998-2011)," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, grant number 2016-MU-MU-0068, January 2020, NCJ 254496, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/grants/254496.pdf>.
  17. Unless otherwise noted, all data in this section come from Leah Gjertson and Shannon Guiltinan, "Youth Trauma Experiences and the Path From Child Welfare to Juvenile Justice," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, grant number 2016-MU-MU-0069, December 2020, NCJ 255928, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/grants/255928.pdf>.
  18. Survival analysis refers to a set of statistical approaches used to investigate the time it takes for an event of interest to occur. In this case, the event of interest is initial justice involvement (e.g., arrest).
  19. Unless otherwise noted, all data in this section come from Andrea Hoffmann et al., "Understanding the Role of Trauma and Violence Exposure on Justice-Involved LGBTQIA and GNC Youth in Hennepin County, MN," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, grant number 2016-MU-MU-0066, January 2020, NCJ 254495, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/grants/254495.pdf>.
  20. Surveys were completed by youth at the Hennepin County Juvenile Detention Center and the County Home School, and in juvenile probation.
  21. Cisgender is a term that applies to a person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth.
  22. Unless otherwise noted, all data in this section come from Andra Wilkinson et al., "How School, Family, and Community Protective Factors Can Help Youth Who Have Experienced Maltreatment," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, grant number 2016-MU-MU-0064, December 2020, NCJ 255937, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/grants/255937.pdf>.



23. Unless otherwise noted, all data in this section come from David B. Wilson, Ajima Olaghere, and Catherine S. Kimbrell, "Trauma-Focused Interventions for Justice-Involved and At-Risk Youth: A Meta-Analysis," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, grant number 2016-MU-MU-0065, December 2020, NCJ 255936, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/grants/255936.pdf>.
24. More information about cognitive behavioral therapy and trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy is available on [CrimeSolutions.ojp.gov](https://www.crimesolutions.ojp.gov).
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