

Children of Incarcerated and Criminal Parents: Adjustment, Behavior, and Prognosis

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The population of incarcerated individuals in the United States has risen dramatically in the last decade. There is very little information available about the psychological reactions or adjustment of the children of these incarcerated individuals, although it is likely that this population of apparently high risk children also has increased. This article reviews the literature on the behavioral problems and adjustment of children during the time of their parent's incarceration. It discusses these children and their behavior in the context of their family characteristics, their prognosis, and their current clinical needs.

According to the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics,¹ at the end of 1990 there were over 770,000 prisoners under federal or state jurisdiction. The total increase in prisoners from 1980 to 1990 was 134 percent, representing a rise in the number of inmates from over 329,000 to over 770,000. There were 293 prisoners with sentences greater than one year per 100,000 residents of the United States at the end of 1990.

If one considers that these figures represent only state and federal prisoners, and not county or city inmates, the number of incarcerated individuals per year is even higher. The number of children of these incarcerated individuals

presumably is well over a million children per year. An unknown number of additional children have had parents who were, but are no longer, incarcerated.

Given that the population of incarcerated individuals has increased so dramatically in the last several years, that large numbers of inmates in federal and state prisons and in jails are reported to have been involved with drugs, as users or through a drug related crime,¹ and that the prison population is probably overrepresented with child abused and child abusing individuals,² it is reasonable to assume that the number of children who have sought, or will be seeking, mental health services in the near future is likely to include large numbers of children of incarcerated parents.

Despite the likely need and possible utilization of mental health services by

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children of parents who are or have been incarcerated, there are surprisingly few reports about the children of incarcerated parents in the mental health literature. This article will review the literature on the adjustment and behavior of children of incarcerated and criminal parents. The first section will deal with the behavioral and emotional reactions of children during the time of parental incarceration. The Discussion will focus on the family background and prognosis of these youth. It will emphasize both future research and current clinical needs of children who have (or have had) incarcerated parents.

Children of Incarcerated Parents- Adjustment and Behavior

This section examines the literature on the behavioral and emotional reactions of the child during the time of parental incarceration. Much of the literature in this area is descriptive and anecdotal (e.g., refs. 3-11). Case studies, advocacy articles, and a few clinical reports describe a diverse group of problems that may be experienced by children of incarcerated parents, emphasizing problems due to separation itself, identification with the incarcerated father, social stigma, and attempts to deceive the child about the parent's situation and whereabouts. This review will focus on work that has evaluated larger groups of children and families through survey techniques and more empirical approaches. When appropriate, some reference to clinical studies will be made. There will be two parts of this section divided between reports that treat pater-

nal incarceration (one report includes maternal incarceration also) and reports that address issues related solely to maternal incarceration (a much smaller group).

The Effects of Paternal Incarceration Morris,¹² in a classic report, studied several hundred male English prisoners and their families. The most common problems reported on interviewing wives of prisoners who were living with their husbands at the time of the latter's arrest, in decreasing order, were money (41.6%), managing the children (or occasionally dealing with the loss of children who had been placed in institutions) (34.1%), personal loneliness, including sexual frustration (32.9%), and fear about the home situation after the husband's release, including not wanting more children and being afraid if the husband was a drinker or violent (23.1%). The management issues of the children that were problematic included truancy, enuresis, eating and sleep problems. Only 4.4 percent of the wives reported shame, remorse, or guilt as problems; and only 5.4 percent were concerned with community hostility, although, as described later, social stigma has been reported to be a major problem in other reports. Interestingly, wives of prisoners who had separated from their husbands before imprisonment seemed to have fewer problems than wives living with their husbands at the time of the imprisonment. Morris' impression was that children of separated wives also appeared less delinquent or pre-delinquent than children of non-separated wives. She argues that poor

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relationships and a delinquent home seem more conducive to producing delinquent children than does a broken home, impressions that agree with the literature on the repetition of criminality over generations to be cited later.

Morris¹² later studied a small group of these prisoner's families more intensively. Shame and stigma were felt almost entirely by wives of first time offenders, and then only fleetingly, and in the first stages of the imprisonment. For those families in which imprisonment was a crisis, the crisis was one of separation, and the impact on the wife depended directly on her own personality. In assessing the behavior of children, it seemed that two-thirds of the children had little or no behavior change that could be attributed to the father's imprisonment. About 20 percent of the children had a deterioration in their behavior attributed by the wives to the father's imprisonment, and 8.5 percent had an improvement in their behavior with the father's imprisonment. This latter phenomenon occurred when the child's adaptive functioning improved with the father leaving the home or when the children experienced relief with the father out of the home (e.g., in some incest cases).

Friedman and Esselstyn¹³ studied teacher's perceptions of children whose fathers were imprisoned compared with children of fathers who were not imprisoned. The study was undertaken in California in the 1960s, and involved ratings on children whose fathers had been incarcerated for over six months. Two control groups of children from the same

grade distributions as the experimental group were also chosen. The groups were not entirely comparable, however, because there were more Mexican-American children in the experimental group than in the control groups. This was because there were more fathers in prison who were Mexican-American. Teachers who were blind to the child's placement in the imprisoned father versus nonimprisoned father groups completed a student adjustment inventory that evaluated children on a variety of scales, e.g., attitude, sociability, companions, self-concept, view toward school. Friedman and Esselstyn's findings were that the children of imprisoned parents were rated below average on social and psychological parameters more frequently than controls, although they do not provide sufficient data to assess statistical significance. They also do not provide data on changes in "adjustment" *per se*, because there were no before-imprisonment ratings. Furthermore, while the utilization of control groups is a positive (and rare) feature in studying these children, the control group does not appear to have been adequate, for the reason noted above.

Sack¹⁴ presents a clinical study of six lower middle class white families seen over a three-year period in Boston, Massachusetts, in one of the few reports of children of incarcerated parents in mental health treatment. He emphasizes the suddenness of the father's departure to be incarcerated, its publication in the community, and its stigmatization as being detrimental to family members affected. In each of the families studied,

there was a sudden emergence of aggressive or antisocial behavior in a male child between 6 and 13 years of age within two months of the father's imprisonment. There were 24 children in the six families, 12 of whom showed behavioral problems apparently related to the separation. Fewer girls than boys in the families were symptomatic behaviorally. The male child between 11-13 years of age who was usually the oldest in the family, was apparently most vulnerable to being affected. When divorce accompanied incarceration, there were added stresses. Problems were always part of a general family crisis and a part of longstanding family difficulties, but major change occurred around the time of imprisonment of the father. Problems with the law, stealing, running away, breaking and entering occurred. Sack offers the view that the boys' antisocial behavior seemed to be a defensive attempt to continue their relationships with their fathers and maintain their identification with him by altering the internalized, previously positive qualities of the father to a new identification with the negative or "bad" aspects of the father.

Fritsch and Burkhead¹⁵ asked inmates, both male and female, at a minimum security prison, about the behavioral reactions of their children to the parental separation. They report on the responses of 91 inmates who had a total of 194 children. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents reported that their children had behavior problems since their incarceration. Inmates who had been living with their children before incar-

ceration or who had seen or interacted with their children during their incarceration were more likely to report problems. Male and female inmates reported almost exactly the same number of problems per child, but the types of problems reported by male and female offenders were different. Male offenders reported more problems related to hostile behavior, use of drugs or alcohol, truancy, running away, discipline problems, and delinquency. Female offenders reported more problems such as withdrawal, acting "babyish," fearfulness, poor school performance, excessive crying, and nightmares. These, of course, are areas in which mothers and fathers traditionally seem to be most involved in terms of child rearing. Unfortunately, without control groups or other outside raters, it is difficult to interpret these findings, or to argue that they are not due to parental bias.

Swan¹⁶ studied a group of 192 black prisoners' families living in Alabama and Tennessee to determine the problems they faced during different stages of the imprisonment process. Swan found that most of the women said that the children knew about their fathers' imprisonment, but 28 (15%) said that they did not know. Fifty-four (28.1%) of the wives said that their children had been unaffected by their father's imprisonment; 53 (27.6%) felt the effect was slight; but 59 (30.8%) felt the children had been very much affected. The majority of wives felt that the children's schoolwork had not been affected, but about seven percent felt it had been very much affected. The percentage of moth-

ers who believed that the imprisonment had affected peer relationships was about the same. About 11 percent of the women felt that their children had been upset by stigmatizing remarks of other children in the community, although half of the women reported that this had not been a problem for their children.

Lowenstein¹⁷ studied reactions of children to paternal loss through incarceration and attempted to identify salient marital and family factors that might relate to differences in adjustment. A stratified random sample of 210 criminal first-time offenders in Israel was selected. All of the offenders were Jewish. The sample consisted of married offenders serving terms of 13 months to life imprisonment. One hundred eighteen prisoners' wives participated in the study. The remainder were either childless (38), unavailable (20), refused to participate (9), or did not have children living at home (25). Nearly 50 percent of both spouses were under 30 years of age. There was an average of 2.6 children per family, ranging in age from 1 to 17 years. Seventy percent of the participants were considered lower class, based on income, housing, etc. Thirty percent of the participants were middle and upper class, most of whom had been incarcerated for white collar crimes.

Semistructured interviews with the wives of the prisoners focused on three areas as predictor variables: a) background information such as age, education, occupation, type of crime committed, estimate of father/child relationship before incarceration, mother's attitude toward the father's imprisonment and

criminality, etc. Also included were family characteristics such as length of the marriage, number of children, mother's assessment of the quality of the marriage before the separation; b) family system functioning as assessed by the Family Resource Inventory; and c) mother's adjustment, as assessed by the role adjustment problems experienced during the time of the separation and the Coping with Separation Inventory. The criterion variable studied was the child's adjustment as assessed by the Children's Adjustment Inventory that was developed for the study and completed by the mother. Child-related problems were divided into three areas: a) physical and mental health, b) interactional relations, and c) behavior problems.

By wives' reports, most problems were in the areas of physical health and deterioration in school work. Other prominent problems included relationships with others in and out of the family, discipline problems and aggressive behavior in school, truancy, withdrawal, and keeping delinquent company. In examining the relationship between the independent variables and the child's adjustment to the father's incarceration, Lowenstein¹⁷ found that variables related to the coping resources of the mother and family were important, as were various imprisonment-related variables. In the first group, for example, was maternal age, family solidarity before imprisonment of the father, and family support networks. In the second group of "imprisonment"-related variables, factors such as the nature of the father's crime (white collar or "moral"

crime), the child's degree of "preparedness" for the imprisonment of the father, and the effects of stigmatization were all important. Stigmatization was an especially difficult problem for children of fathers imprisoned for white collar crimes, who often had no prior experience with paternal criminal involvement. Stigmatization was also an important difficulty for the child and family when the father has been imprisoned for a sexual offense.

Lowenstein¹⁷ includes in her definition of preparedness the degree to which children know about the whole process of their fathers' imprisonment, including the explanations provided by the parents. She feels that partial deception, at least, was practiced with most of the children, and most were not fully prepared for the event. This lack of preparedness of the children was connected to the stigmatization that was felt by families, especially in middle and upper class families in which the father had committed a white collar crime.

Overall, Lowenstein found that emotional and interactional problems were experienced in about 40 percent of the families and that behavioral problems of the children were present in about 20 percent of the families. Problems in children were ameliorated when there were more personal and familial resources available to the mother, including the degree to which there had been family solidarity before the incarceration, better quality to the marriage, network support, etc. The children's adequate "preparedness" for the situation was also important in facilitating coping. Imprisonment-related variables such as white

collar or "moral" crimes were most negative in terms of the child's behavioral adjustment. Perceived stigmatization due to this "non-normative" separation was an especially important contributant to the child's maladjustment.

The Effects of Maternal Incarceration Female offenders, as a group, have been studied less frequently than male offenders. Since women are commonly the primary caretakers for their children, the incarceration of female offenders raises additional questions about the status and well-being of their children during the separation. Glick and Neto¹⁸ performed a national study of female inmates, compiling data from several sources. They found that approximately 25 percent of female inmates had never borne children; approximately 25 percent of those inmates who had borne children did not have their children under age 18 living with them before incarceration, but about 50 percent of the female inmates did have dependent children living with them before incarceration. The average number of children for those women who had had children was 2.48. The large majority (about 75%) of children of incarcerated mothers were cared for by the woman's parents or other relatives during the incarceration. Less than 10 percent were cared for by husbands. About 15 percent were cared for by friends or were in foster homes.

McGowan and Blumenthal¹⁹ conducted a mail survey with questionnaires sent to both administrators and to residents of 77 correctional agencies who

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were reported to have responsibility for 25 or more female offenders. They received data from 74 institutions in which over 9,000 women were confined. Approximately two-thirds of the women in the facilities from which information was obtained were mothers. The mean number of children per inmate mother was 2.4 in the facilities that provided the number of children; two-thirds of the children were under 10, and about one-fourth were under four years of age. At the time of the survey, while the women were incarcerated, about three-quarters of the children who had been taken care of by their mother were taken care of by relatives; approximately 12 percent were in foster care.

Henriquez²⁰ studied a group of incarcerated women at a women's correctional facility in New York. The sample was not randomly selected. It included 30 incarcerated women (both sentenced and "detained") who had volunteered to be a part of the study, 15 of their children and other individuals involved with these women in some way (e.g., guardians of the children, outside agency personnel, institutional personnel). The mothers were almost entirely minority; nearly three-quarters were black, and one-quarter were Puerto Rican. The thirty women had a total of 75 children. Nearly 60 percent of the children of the mothers in the study were aged 6 years or under. Two-thirds of the women had been arrested at least once previously, and 40 percent of the women had been incarcerated at least once before. A third of the natural fathers of the women's children had been incarcerated.

All of the children of these mothers who were interviewed were living with relatives of the incarcerated woman, most often (66.6%) with the maternal grandmother. Interestingly, a quarter of the children had lived with these guardians since they were born. Most of the children had not had contact with their father. The guardians of the children reported that the children often had difficulty coping with the separation from their mothers; often being, for example, sad, angry, or having difficulty sleeping. All of the children in this small nonrandom sample who were felt old enough to understand knew that the mothers were incarcerated. The guardians of the school-aged children (only about half of the 15) reported that most of those attending school were having various problems in that setting.

The incarcerated mothers identified separation from their children as being their primary concern (in 44% of the cases); about the same percentage expressed concern about their children's current placement. Mothers were very concerned about the ramifications of separation from their children and how it would affect their relationship with the child and the child him or herself. Thirty percent of this small sample of mothers expressed concern about the behavioral adjustment of the children during the mother's incarceration.

Discussion

Children whose parents are incarcerated are reported to experience a wide variety of behavioral and emotional problems during the time of the parent's

incarceration. These problems include school difficulties, antisocial behavior, anxiety, and depression. On the other hand, most of the children, by parent report, seem to do relatively well despite the other parent's incarceration. Many of the problems that children of incarcerated parents experience during the parent's incarceration, based on clinical reports, have been linked to a number of factors, including: 1) separation, 2) identification with the incarcerated parent, 3) social stigma, and 4) deception of the child about the incarcerated parent's whereabouts or reason for the incarceration.

Some children undoubtedly do experience adjustment difficulties and behavior problems with parental incarceration although, for the most part, the studies to assess and clarify the extent and nature of these problems that are available in the literature on the impact of parental incarceration are methodologically limited. Control groups are almost never employed. Standardized assessments of children are uncommon. Observer ratings other than that of the incarcerated parent or the caretaking parent at home are also rare. Parents who are incarcerated or caretakers at home with children may have important biases in reporting their children's behavior. Furthermore, there are no longitudinal studies that have followed children of incarcerated parents from the point of view of assessing particular children's reactions before, at the time of the parent's incarceration, on release from incarceration, and then subsequent to release to assess differential reactions or adjustment.

The question of whether the caretaking of children, one of whose parents is incarcerated, becomes better, worse, or stays the same during the incarcerated parent's tenure outside of the home is unanswered and probably highly variable. The children's reported distress during parental incarceration is important and merits intervention, but at present has not definitely been linked to long-term disorder. Given the large number of incarcerated individuals with substance abuse problems,¹ the reported association between substance abuse in parents and child abuse,³⁵ and the increased risk of emotional and behavior problems in children of substance-abusing³⁶ and child-abusing parents,^{37, 38} it may be that some children with incarcerated parents are better off than they had been with the parent at home. Interestingly, Morris¹² mentions the concerns of a sizeable number of wives of male prisoners who have a variety of fears related to their spouses' return home. Other studies do not emphasize this point, although clinical experience suggests that it must be fairly common.

Findings from mental health literature on family dysfunction and parental criminality in relation to juvenile delinquency (e.g., ref. 21), on consequences of the separation of parents from their children, in, for example, father absent families,²²⁻²⁶ on parent management practices in relation to antisocial behavior in boys,²⁷⁻²⁹ on marital conflict in divorced and nondivorced couples as this relates to childhood behavior problems,³⁰ and on the repetition of antisocial or criminal behavior in successive

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generations³¹⁻³⁴ can be employed to draw tentative conclusions about the longer-term prognosis and apparent clinical needs of children with incarcerated parents.

Separation itself does not seem to be the major or most salient point in the prediction of future antisocial behavior.^{22, 23} Studies related to separation, father absence, and parents of juvenile delinquents seem to be in agreement that a major variable overall appears to be the home and family environment. Parental discord, poor management of the child, and parental substance abuse seem to be important predictors of juvenile delinquency. It may therefore be that a parent's having been incarcerated, while important, may not be as important as the home characteristics and parent management style to which the child is exposed. As Lowenstein¹⁷ has found, and as Morris¹² has also suggested, the environment of the home, as strongly influenced by the remaining parent, is crucial in the child's adjustment during the other parent's incarceration.

It is for these reasons that parental incarceration, from a mental health perspective that addresses the needs of children, should be understood from the point of view of its meaning for the individual child, family, and for parent management practices. It may be that for some children a parent's incarceration will be period of psychological distress, especially if the home had been a nurturing one. For others, parental incarcerations may be a time of stability and growth, albeit with some difficulties or distress around the separation.¹²

Some children may experience the return of the parent as an extremely negative event overall. This would be expected in cases in which the returning parent continues significant substance abuse, child abuse/maltreatment, or resumes his or her part in marital discord and harsh and inconsistent management of the child. It would be in these latter cases that a child would apparently be more likely to become delinquent and antisocial in his own behavior than in cases in which the home situation is stabilized and effective parent management approaches are instituted and maintained by the remaining parent. Other children, finding themselves in abusive or neglectful guardianship or foster care arrangements, may do better on release of the incarcerated parent, depending of course on that individual's stability and parenting capabilities.

These considerations lead directly to further suggestions for research and clinical treatment. Most of the remarks in this paper and in the literature reviewed pertain to the effects of paternal criminality and its effects on boys who become antisocial. We know much less about the sizable number of boys in such homes who do not become severely antisocial. There is also much less known about the effects on girls of marital discord and paternal incarceration. There is now also increased interest in the effects on children of maternal incarceration, but unfortunately the already methodologically limited and sparse literature on parental incarceration is especially so in the area of maternal incarceration and its effects on male or female

offspring. As noted, there are no longitudinal studies that have followed children before a parent's arrest and subsequent arraignment, through incarceration and release. It would be expected that this would be methodologically difficult. Nonetheless, more limited but important studies that address the child's reactions and behavior after arrest, during imprisonment, and after release seem feasible. Standardized assessments by outside observers (such as teachers), control groups, structured interviews, evaluations of parent management practices, and emotional climate of the home environment are crucial in such endeavors. Home assessments of these types have been done, and the methodology for such assessments is available.^{27, 40}

From a clinical standpoint, the lack of empirical evidence that children of incarcerated parents suffer substantial psychological and behavioral difficulties should not be taken to indicate that treatment for many children in these circumstances is not needed. A reading of the literature on children with currently incarcerated parents leaves the impression that there is a deemphasis on the criminality of the parent as an indicator of possible poor parenting style, while placing great emphasis on the stress of separation on the children. Other evidence cited in this article suggests that greater clarity about the homes, parent management practices, psychological difficulties, and behavioral practices of incarcerated individuals would lead one to think that many children who have lived in these homes would need a great deal of intervention,

largely because of the parenting they have received. This intervention, if properly targeted and performed, might be of considerable value to these children, their families and to the society. The author's own work with children who have had histories of incarcerated family members suggests that parental incarceration may be a useful index of overall family dysfunction, instability, parental substance abuse, and reported child abuse/maltreatment.

The types of intervention such children and families need vary. Some children may require little or no intervention and adjust well to the separation from the parent, especially if the relationship was a particularly difficult one. Other children, even in the face of a difficult or abusing parental relationship will have some distress on separation from the parent and may benefit from short-term support and therapeutic intervention. Attention to the psychological effects of stigma (in certain populations) and to the detrimental effects of parental deception seem important.¹⁷ Other children who are themselves vulnerable based on preexisting psychological and behavioral difficulties (an expectedly high number in such families) would probably benefit from intensive work around issues of separation and psychological sequelae of abuse or maltreatment. Developmental issues are also important to consider. Some prepubertal or prepubertal male children may need active help to forestall the onset of aggressive or antisocial behavior on the incarceration of their fathers.¹⁴

Because there is fairly good evidence

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that many children's ultimate adjustment is based on the nature of the home environment in which they live, attention to the parenting practices of the remaining caretaker is crucial. It would be expected that many mothers of antisocial fathers would themselves be antisocial or depressed and would have inadequate parent management approaches. Intervention for the mother's psychopathology, if present, as well as help with parent management approaches during the time of paternal incarceration, seems crucial for the benefit of the children at home. Maternal warmth, consistency, monitoring, and supervision of her children's behavior have seemed helpful in various studies in preventing antisocial behavior.^{23, 26, 27, 32} Behavioral family treatment^{41, 42} has shown some success in the treatment of antisocial children and may be of value in such families.

The incarcerated parent, from the point of view of the children left behind, also merits therapeutic intervention if feasible. Substance abuse treatment and therapeutic intervention around possible child abuse (as former victim or as recent perpetrator) would seem to be important for those incarcerated individuals who may reunite with their families. Careful prerelease and subsequent to release therapeutic intervention around a difficult adjustment, changed family interaction patterns, the need for appropriate parent management skills and for the individual parent's own therapeutic needs would seem to be important for future psychological and behavioral benefits to the child.

Visitation with the parent during his or her incarceration should be carefully considered. In this regard, the preexisting relationship between the parent and child, the immediate goals of the visit, support for the child before, during, and after the visit, and postrelease family plans related to the child are all important to review.

In summary, children with currently incarcerated parents are reported to experience a variety of behavioral and emotional problems. Although intervention for such problems appears justified, the exact nature and extent of these problems and their long-term significance is not known. The literature on children's reactions when a parent is incarcerated does not emphasize the apparently frequently abusive or discordant home environments in which such children are raised, which itself may have important long-term consequences for their psychological well-being. The more extensive literature on father-absent families and antisocial behavior across generations suggests that parents who are criminals are inadequate as parents in many cases, and for a variety of reasons, expose their children to child abuse, substance abuse, and poor management practices. This suggests that children of incarcerated parents merit therapeutic intervention not only because of what may be varying degrees of distress subsequent to the incarceration of their parents but also because of the significant long-term impact that such parents may have or have had on their children. Incarceration of a parent appears to be a strong indicator of potential

family instability, parental substance abuse, and child abuse/maltreatment. For these reasons, intervention with the remaining caretaker (and the incarcerated offender, if possible) around these issues is important in the attempt to prevent antisocial behavior and juvenile delinquency in children of incarcerated and criminal parents.

It should also be noted that the mental health literature on antisocial behavior, juvenile delinquency and violence, although historically rich and empirically impressive,³¹⁻³³ seems to have decreased in scope and vision over the last decade or so. Extensive computer searches through several literatures were required to locate the rather small number of studies on children's reactions during the time of parental incarceration referred to in this article. Most of these reports are dated and newer studies, using current research methods, are unavailable. With few exceptions,⁴³ much of recent mental health research related to antisocial behavior and violence seems to have gone toward areas such as family studies of antisocial behavior⁴⁴ or toward the study of biological correlates of aggressive behavior and conduct disorder,^{45, 46} which are certainly important. Larger social programs and public efforts that should have professional mental health involvement from both research and clinical perspectives, however, seem to have lost the interest of many in the mental health community.

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