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FATHERS FROM THE FAMILY TO THE FRINGE

Practice, Policy, and Public Housing

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Here, Kirk Harris focuses his attention on the challenges facing black men in public housing. He argues that fathers are an essential resource for public housing families, but that public policy has systematically undermined their role and their potential contribution. This essay discusses how black men can and do contribute to the well-being of their families, not only by providing material support, but also by engaging with their children and becoming involved in their development. In addition, Harris recommends specific changes in the public housing, child support, and welfare policies that currently pose barriers to more constructive father involvement.

There are two strong areas where government has unwittingly driven a wedge into families, especially those struggling against poverty: in public housing and in welfare. Within both of these poverty-related programs, unintentional impediments have been set up that have prevented families from remaining whole. The result has been a dramatic and often devastating destruction of entire families, particularly in low-income areas. (Cisneros 1996, 102)

Much attention has been given to how public policy should be designed and implemented to strengthen families. Housing and welfare reform policy are two areas of public policy that are of considerable importance to the support and sustainability of low-income families. Over the past decade, the HOPE VI program has represented a multimillion-dollar initiative to address the housing gaps of low-income families while attempting to move families, primarily women with children, to self-sufficiency. Also during this period, the welfare reform initiative sought to heighten the engagement of fathers with the goal of fortifying their

contribution to the well-being and economic stability of their families. In fact, as recently as May 18, 2006, the Department of Health and Human Services announced a \$50 million grant program in support of fatherhood initiatives at the state and local levels. This grant is but one example of the federal government's efforts over the past decade to promote father involvement and engagement.

Yet, despite the significant commitment of resources by the federal government to strengthen low-income families, there has been a gulf between the strategic coordination and direction of housing policy and social welfare policy. This gulf has missed opportunities for leveraging fathers as a resource to low-income families. To understand and address this dilemma, this commentary will (1) explore the trends in social welfare policies affecting fathers and families; (2) identify the emergent issues that underlie the formation of public policy related to low-income black families and fathers; (3) uncover challenges in existing housing policy that undermine father involvement and engagement; (4) offer a perspective on the potential benefits of father involvement and engagement; and (5) offer policy and practice recommendations that seek to better integrate housing and welfare reform policy to enhance outcomes for low-income fathers, mothers, and children.

The Dimensions of Public Policy and Its Implications for Fatherhood

In 1935, Congress passed the Social Security Act. Included in the act were funds for states to help the destitute elderly, the blind, and children. Title IV of the act, known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), typically offered assistance solely to destitute widows with children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2006). In 1952, an amendment to the act requiring states to provide appropriate law enforcement officials, usually the local district attorney's office, with prompt notice of when the provision of aid to an abandoned or deserted child took effect. The rationale for this amendment was to find the nonsupporting parent, thus initiating legal action to coerce the noncustodial parent to provide financial assistance to his noncustodial child(ren).

To make it easier to legally extract support from noncustodial parents, in 1967, Congress required states to establish programs to determine paternity. Congress also authorized the first attempt to establish a "parent

locator" service, where states would provide lists of noncustodial parents to the IRS. The IRS would in turn furnish the addresses of those parents to the states. The enforcement efforts targeted at noncustodial parents for lack of child support payment escalated, and by 1975 the Child Support Enforcement program was enacted as the new part IV-D of the Social Security Act. Families receiving assistance under AFDC were required to assign their rights to child or spousal support to the state as a condition of AFDC eligibility. Families were also required to cooperate with the state in establishing the paternity of a child born outside marriage. Ultimately, child support payments made on behalf of an AFDC child were paid to the child support agency rather than directly to the family.

The AFDC system was under constant attack in the 1980s and 1990s. In response to myriad claims of a broken welfare system, on August 22, 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was enacted, which ushered in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Under the law, no person could receive welfare payments for more than five years, consecutive or nonconsecutive. TANF also raised the requirements for work.

To date, welfare reform initiatives have, at their core, an overall desire to lessen long-term governmental support for families. They emphasize increasing child support enforcement and collections and place heightened pressure on individuals to move to immediate and often low-wage work opportunities. These social welfare policy trends put tremendous pressure on low-income men who already find themselves caught in the structural disjuncture of unemployment, have been failed by educational systems that do not effectively support the completion of a high school education, are targeted disproportionately by the criminal justice system, and finally, are subjected to subtle but broad-scale discrimination and social isolation (Twenty-First Century Foundation 2005). All of this notwithstanding, the public policy discourse has been largely lodged in an analysis that points out the gross failure of black men to be effective financial providers for their families and children, thus demanding of them something they cannot practically accommodate without intervention and support (Mincy and Sorensen 1998; Sorensen and Zibman 2001).¹ Research findings have suggested that by focusing solely on a father's instrumental function as a provider, where emphasis is placed on aggressive child support enforcement, a significant risk exists of diminishing the opportunity for low-income fathers to make sustainable physical and financial connections to their families. There is a greater

probability that low-income fathers, in an effort to negotiate the child support system and mitigate the risk of failing to comply with system mandates, will operate covertly to remain undetected (Norland 2001).

In many instances, the low-income family dynamic is confounded by complexities associated with the family's inability to navigate a public assistance system that does not support nor recognize a family's adaptive efforts to stabilize the integrity of the family unit. The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a national demonstration project conducted within 12 large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000, followed a cohort of nearly 5,000 low-income, primarily African American and Latino children and their parents to understand the challenges and opportunities in mitigating the social and economic fragility of low-income families. The Fragile Families (2000) research found that unmarried fathers typically had much more than a casual relationship with the mother of their child, that fathers overwhelmingly expressed an interest in being involved in the child's life and had some financial connection to the child, and that approximately 93 percent of the women in the study indicated they wanted the father to be involved in raising the child. These findings offer an important basis for building public policy that acknowledges and supports low-income father engagement, while meaningfully contributing to opportunities to strengthen the viability of familial support systems for low-income children.

The Black Man and the Family in Public View

The contemporary perception of black men as individuals who are uncommitted to their families and children differs dramatically from the historical role that black men have played within the context of their families as providers, protectors, compassionate partners, and integral components of their community. Over the past 30 years, the image of the black husband and father narrowly found its way into the public psyche. Sitcoms such as *Good Times* and *The Cosby Show* appeared to be a window into positive roles that black men play within low-income/working-class and middle-class black communities, respectively. But these positive portrayals have not assuaged a public perception that characterizes black men as hypermasculine, financially irresponsible, and uninvolved with their children and families (Marsiglio 1995). The range of images that define the contours of black men as committed partners and fathers is

limited. Further, black men as fathers tend to be viewed more negatively than their white counterparts. Low-income black fathers bear the greatest burden of public disdain and suspicion in that race bias intersects with class bias to intensify public suspicion and ire.

Interest in the plight and circumstance of black fathers and their relationships with their families has been episodic, and academic attention and inquiry has ebbed and flowed over the past 40 years.² At no time in American history did the public and intellectual discourse on the black family receive as much national energy and focus as in 1965. That year, Dr. Daniel Moynihan released his famous report on the black family titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. This report, promoted by President Lyndon B. Johnson under his Great Society initiative, grew from a set of dialogues that sought to explicate the root causes of urban poverty.³ Moynihan's report wrestled to reconcile America's oppressive history with the impending challenges of securing a socially safe, sound, and economically stable African American family. Moynihan posited the complexity of the institutional and social forces that defined the dilemma confronting the black family. He argued that "the social and economic system in the United States was ultimately responsible for producing unstable poor black families," and that, in turn, "this instability is the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate, the cycle of poverty and deprivation" (Wilson 1997, 172).

Moynihan articulated his conceptual understanding of the circumstance of black families, which included an emphasis on single-female-headed households, out-of-wedlock births, and absentee fathers, all brought on by the effects of brutal racism and segregation. Others sought to focus on the resiliency of the black family in the context of more than 200 years of economic and social subordination (Rainwater and Yancey 1967). Nonetheless, the focus on black "family malfunction" dominated the public policy conversation with black men and placed their fatherhood roles under intense scrutiny.

The 1990s ushered in a public policy agenda preoccupied with welfare reform. A resurgence in the focus on the black family as a critical item of public policy debate and action was framed by calls for personal responsibility and family self-sufficiency. Fatherhood became a focal point for the most intense public policy discussions regarding the black family since the Moynihan report. Today, policymakers and the general public continue to rhetorically ask the questions, "What's wrong with those

black families?" and "Why can't black men do the right thing?" This critique defines an essential underpinning of what has become the "Responsible Fatherhood" movement. Yet, much to-do has been made of the fragile nature of the low-income black family and the precarious social and economic position that black men occupy in American society.⁴ Alarming statistics outlining the socioeconomic vulnerability of black men purport to tell the story of the disappearing, endangered, and on-the-verge-of-extinction black male, impacted by economic instability, educational inequity, incarceration, violence, and discrimination. Paradoxically, there appears to be a dichotomy in the discourse regarding black men in their roles as fathers and in their grappling with the daunting issues confronting them generally. *New York Times* columnist Erik Eckholm posits that while public policy efforts have produced some gains for black women, black men are increasingly disconnected from their families and society.⁵ The marginal gains and subsistence supports experienced by low-income black women in their mothering roles and the declining economic and social status of black men have produced a deeply disturbing picture of family instability and black father marginalization.

Other challenging trends are occurring within communities. The declining incidence of marriage and escalating divorce rates within U.S. society as a whole have had particular salience for African American families. It has been argued that there is a causal relationship between family formation and positive developmental and social outcomes for children. Marriage within the African American community was at its all-time high in the 1940s and '50s, when the rates of African American male participation in the labor market were also at their height. Research over the past 20 years has made an explicit connection between the declining incidence of marriage within the African American community and the low employment and labor force participation rates among African American men (Wilson 1987). The realities of today's global economy, the declining availability of living-wage jobs, and the proliferation of temporary low-wage employment have placed family formation at odds with what had been a common expectation that economic stability and social mobility were attending benefits of family formation. Declining workforce participation among African American men has decoupled economic stability expectations from family formation for many African Americans. This presents a huge dilemma for low-income families that want to stay intact but must navigate social support systems that are neither flexible enough to accommodate nor practically predisposed to assist working-poor fam-

ilies when a father is present in the life of his family but unengaged or marginally engaged in the formal workforce.

Fatherhood, Families, and Public Housing

Housing is a basic necessity, the quality and availability of which significantly influence the stability and health of a family. However, circumstances facing low-income families have placed fathers outside the door of housing opportunities while creating an uneasy tension that does not support the full engagement of the father within the household. In its early iteration, public housing served as a support for the social mobility of families and embraced the intact family. However, it is also true that federal housing programs favored white families and supported their mobility into homeownership, while African American families were systematically excluded or redlined out of home ownership opportunities (Massey and Denton 1993). Also, low-income families often fall victim to social policy and program practices that uniformly constrain father presence. Therefore, when speaking of family in the context of public welfare support programs, we are nearly always speaking exclusively of a mother and her child(ren) (Baron and Sylvester 2002).

This has certainly been true for the HOPE VI program. In a report published by the Urban Institute, the authors point out that the HOPE VI program was primarily devised to address the desperate living conditions of minority women and children living in public housing. Ninety percent of the households living in HOPE VI public housing are African American and female headed (Popkin et al. 2002). This public housing is situated in communities subject to the most extreme instances of economic and racial segregation. Although often not permanently housed with the family, many low-income fathers function within the same communities and are connected to these families both formally and informally (and often covertly). These men must navigate the very same economic and social isolation their families experience, but with virtually no support. HOPE VI architects had a vision for the program, and researchers at the Urban Institute posit the vision for HOPE VI as follows:

The HOPE VI program was intended to fundamentally transform public housing by combining the physical revitalization of distressed public housing properties with community building and supportive services. HOPE VI funds covered capital costs to reconstruct replacement units, fund Section 8 vouchers, and improve

management practices. Reflecting the commission's focus on community building and resident empowerment, the law also set aside 20 percent of the initial \$300 million appropriation for community service programs and for supportive services, including literacy training, job training, day care, and youth activities. (Popkin et al. 2004, 13)

A number of the low-income men, many of whom are fathers and connected to families within HOPE VI public housing, receive little or no support from the program. To qualify for the benefits and supports offered by HOPE VI, qualifying adult participants must have their name on the lease of an apartment within a HOPE VI public housing complex. Many fathers operate covertly in their connection to their families so their presence does not jeopardize the arrangements the mother of their children has secured with public assistance agencies—arrangements largely based on an assumption of father absence. Additionally, low-income fathers are presented with a number of social challenges that effectively frustrate their ability to be visible and “legitimate.”

Low-Income Fathers' Contact with the Criminal Justice System

About 2 million people are in state and federal prisons, and 2 million children have a parent in jail or prison. Ninety-three percent of those imprisoned are men, with 46 percent of the prisoner population of African descent and 16 percent Latino (Adalist-Estrin and Mustin 2003). There are a disproportionately large number of low-income African American and Latino fathers among the 698,459 leaving federal prisons and 9 million leaving local jails who return to their communities each year only to find significant legal impediments frustrating their successful reentry into their families and communities (Urban Institute 2008). Federal housing policy, beginning in 1988 with the amendment to the U.S. Housing Act, denied admission and mandated evictions for alleged criminal activity. Public housing authorities then expanded their efforts to lessen criminal activity and enhance public safety in public housing by instituting criminal background checks before admission. By the 1990s, at the height of the war on drugs, the federal government implemented the one-strike policy to bar admission to anyone with a criminal record who lives in, or wants to live in, federally funded housing (Hirsch et al. 2002). This public policy has tremendous implications for individuals who have presumably served their debt to society and

who wish to reenter the lives of their families and be integrated back into their communities. It places a tremendous amount of strain on their relationships with their families while making them virtually unavailable to their children, many of whom are living in public housing settings.

Low-Income Fathers and Child Support

In 1997, the Urban Institute reported that of the 2.8 million poor, non-residential fathers, 90 percent failed to pay child support (Baron and Sylvester 2002). Declining employment rates have been well documented for low-income, less-educated black men, many of whom are noncustodial fathers (Mincy 2006). The economic disjuncture that defines the day-to-day reality of these fathers suggests that appropriate distinctions should be made between those men who can pay their child support and refuse to versus those men who want to pay their child support but lack the financial stability and wherewithal to do so. Increasingly, low-income fathers are confronted with growing issues of child support arrearages and legal sanctions stemming from the former. Unfriendly enforcement systems make no distinction between those fathers who seek to avoid their financial responsibility and fathers whose marginal employment status makes it virtually impossible to pay child support. As fathers find the environment hostile and punitive, they tend to withdraw from their families as a survival mechanism to avoid being identified and sanctioned by an indiscriminate system.

Over the past decade, innovations within some child support agencies have resulted in programming that aids fathers in becoming more financially viable so they can be more financially committed to their children. These programs help fathers find jobs, secure a GED, and/or obtain job training. These programs also help fathers navigate the child support system by lessening the punitive impact that child support enforcement may have on low-income men who are making a genuine effort to fulfill their financial obligations to their children.

Family Survival, Income Factors, and Father Presence

The precarious labor-market status of low-income fathers creates yet another tension for the low-income family receiving public housing assistance. Low-income African American women are the primary recipients of HOPE VI housing opportunities and services, and they typically qualify

as eligible for the maximum benefit afforded under the program because of their marginal income and female-headed household status. In public housing, as the family's income increases, its share of the rent payment also rises. As a result, families are careful not to create circumstances that would suggest that they have increased their income or earnings. If such a discovery were made, the program would be required to adjust the family's rental payment contribution upward. The public housing program allows for a temporary, 18-month income disregard for two-earner households; however, the precarious labor-market participation and instability of these families is such that a temporary disregard of income may not address their long-term needs. For example, if the father's employment status changes after the disregard period has lapsed, the unintended consequence is that families potentially are obligated to pay more rent even if their employment and income picture worsens over time, thus further compromising the family's fragile economic standing.

This reality has created an uneasy family dynamic whereby mothers, who are typically the lessees, are cautious if not reluctant to put their partners on the lease. While certainly not a practice that would be looked upon favorably by public housing administrators, the practical reality of program requirements and eligibility with which families must comply requires a level of creativity and obfuscation that allows the family to navigate a system that would make it choose between receipt of the benefit or the presence of the father. Further, as a result of their limited faith and trust in governmental services or systems, low-income fathers—many of whom who have had less-than-desirable experiences with law enforcement, child support, or other governmental systems—are reluctant to be formally named or identified in lease documents (Baron and Sylvester 2002).

Father Engagement

Historically, social service supports for families have not embraced or contemplated the role of fathers. From their early inception, welfare programs have factored out fathers in their definition of "family." Thus, for the purpose of service delivery, the concept of "family" in practice and policy has meant support for mothers and children. Even as TANF offered new flexibility for states through block grant funding to broaden the applications and use of TANF resources, deeply ingrained practices, beliefs, and biases severely limited innovation and the practice of considering fathers

in local program design. Although there has been tension regarding the recognition of fathers as appropriate recipients of service under the continuum of welfare program supports, a discourse about the role of low-income fathers as assets to their families and children is gaining some momentum. A growing body of literature and research suggests that even in the face of low workforce participation and economic instability, fathers can play a critical role in the nurturing and developmental support of their children. Some research suggests that fathers who find themselves in difficult economic circumstances often place a high priority on their nurturing and caregiving activities (Hamer 1997). National data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (2000) found that an overwhelming number of fathers (99.8 percent in the sample) indicated that they wanted to be actively involved in raising their children. In the same study, 93 percent of mothers indicated they wanted the fathers to be actively involved in raising the child.

Father involvement can play a critical role in easing the overall parental stress associated with raising children while simultaneously making a unique contribution to a child's growth and development. Dr. Kyle D. Pruett (2000) points out that while fathers parent differently than mothers, those differences support unique and vital physical, cognitive, and emotional developmental outcomes for children. Mounting research offers insights into essential roles that fathers play in strengthening families and children. For example, father involvement has been associated with the development of a child's receptive language skills, fewer child behavior problems, and increased cognitive skill development (Black, Dubowitz, and Starr 1999). Additionally, study findings have supported the idea that father involvement among school-age children has contributed to a higher level of confidence, competence, and emotional, intellectual, and social well-being (Biller and Lopez-Kimpton 1997).

A combination of supports and safety also has been suggested as something that low-income fathers provide to their families and children, including in-kind child support in the form of diapers, clothes, and food; household labor; home repairs; reading to the children; escorting children through dangerous neighborhoods; and monitoring the child's overall well-being (Rasheed 1998). The practice of father involvement in the context of the child's welfare has been seen as an emerging and important strategy for promoting better outcomes for children, as well as an approach to divert children from entering the child welfare system in the first place (Scalera 2001). A study by Smith and Morgan (1994)

found that the presence of a father within the family delayed sexual activities by adolescent girls. This finding has particular salience given the growing concern and public attention to out-of-wedlock childbearing by adolescent girls.

Fatherhood and Public Housing: Practice and Policy

A growing body of research shows that fathers are a genuine resource to families even if the fathers are minority and low income. This fact requires policymakers to ask how they can create systems, including public housing, that provide support to low-income families and recognize the importance of including fathers and honoring their presence within the family. Systems that support low-income families presume the father's absence and then function in ways that discourage their visibility, participation, and unique contributions.

The policy and practice recommendations outlined below seek to create a better integration between public housing support, such as that provided under the HOPE VI program, and welfare-reform supports provided under TANF. Within these policy and practice recommendations, particular consideration is given to policies and practices that promote and strengthen father presence within families in public housing.⁶

Practice Recommendations

- Treat fathers with equality and respect and recognize the unique gifts they bring as parents.
- Organize fatherhood education and support groups.
- Establish programs that work with incarcerated fathers to help them learn to stay connected with their children while in prison and become better parents when they are released.
- Build opportunities for fathers and mothers to develop listening and collaborative parenting skills.
- Develop parenting programs for fathers that also emphasize education, employment, and training.
- Direct low-income men and women to legal services to help them overcome barriers to employment (such as suspended driver's licenses).

- Recognize the numerous services mothers require to obtain jobs, including child care, education, transportation assistance, and life-skills training, and commit the same provisions of support to fathers with similar needs.
- Increase fathers' awareness of services, and use other fathers to actively recruit them.
- Provide more opportunities for fathers to interact with their children.
- Shift social services agencies' focus to redefine the family unit to include fathers as well as mothers and children.

Policy Recommendations

Housing

- Public housing authorities should evaluate evictions and admissions on a case-by-case basis to determine if mitigating circumstances exist as well as to weigh the consequences of a family losing its subsidized housing.
- Public housing authorities should use a "best interest of the child" standard when determining whether to grant admission to an ex-offender or to evict families based on criminal activity.
- Increase the stock of subsidized housing so parents reentering the community after incarceration can begin to rebuild their lives.
- Establish policies that encourage family formation and minimize the impact of income eligibility on two-parent, low-income households.

Child Support

- Require state and local courts to refer men with child support arrearages to employment programs.
- Require child-support enforcement offices to pursue modification orders for low-income fathers who are trying in good faith to find and keep a job.
- Reinstate state child support pass-throughs or strengthen existing pass-throughs to allow at least some child support paid by low-income fathers to go directly to their families.
- Forgive or decrease TANF-related child support debt owed to the state for fathers who participate in programs designed to increase their earnings and improve their parenting skills.

- Rewrite state child support guidelines to allow self-support reserves for noncustodial working parents.
- Advocate the amendment of state earned income tax credits to give fathers credit for the child support they pay.
- Suspend or forgive child support debt owed to the state when parents reunite or marry.

TANF

- Advocate for setting aside a percentage of TANF and welfare-to-work funds for programs serving low-income, noncustodial parents.
- Revise and simplify eligibility requirements for noncustodial parents to participate in TANF-funded programs.

Conclusion

Public policy that offers some potential to help low-income fathers, particularly low-income African American fathers, is emerging. The Second Chance Act signed into law by President Bush on April 9, 2008, offers, under certain circumstances, new relief from various impediments created by incarceration and provides reentry supports to formerly incarcerated individuals and their families. The Second Chance legislation promises to significantly affect access by formerly incarcerated individuals to public housing, employment, education opportunities, and governmental benefits. Additionally, the Bayh/Obama bill (S. 1626) and its companion bill in the House, H.R. 3395 (both of which are pending), focus on strengthening employment and training opportunities for low-income individuals, facilitating the management of child support by low-income individuals, and making family-support services available to low-income fathers and their families. These pieces of legislation represent good examples of efforts to create comprehensive interventions that will improve the integration of low-income fathers into the lives of their children, families, and communities.

If we expect to build strong families, the United States must build a public policy framework that reflects Americans' overall desire to support and strengthen families. Social welfare initiatives and housing initiatives must find common ground in creating a context for embracing families and family formation in new and innovative ways. This repre-

sents an opportunity not only to build sound public policy, but also to build sound families and healthy children.

NOTES

1. See also Jason DeParle, "Welfare Overhaul Initiatives Focus on Fathers," *New York Times*, September 1998.

2. For example, see Morehouse Research Institute and Institute for American Values (1999).

3. The United States emerged from World War II with a booming economy. During the 1950s, Michael Harrington wrote a bestseller titled *The Other America*, which raised the consciousness of Americans to the fact that not all Americans were benefiting from the booming economy. The book caught the attention of President Kennedy, who was troubled by the poverty he had witnessed firsthand in the Appalachian region of West Virginia. Kennedy instructed his Council of Economic Advisers to study the problem and recommend policies. After Kennedy's assassination, President Johnson greatly accelerated the council's work. In his first State of the Union address, Johnson declared war on poverty and launched his "Great Society" program.

4. See the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a joint effort by Princeton University's Center for Research on Child Wellbeing and Center for Health and Wellbeing, and Columbia University's Social Indicators Survey Center and the National Center for Children and Families. The study followed a cohort of nearly 5,000 children born in the United States between 1998 and 2000. See also a recent commentary by Michael A. Fletcher, "At the Corner of Progress and Peril," *Washington Post*, June 2, 2006, that highlights the various issues.

5. Erik Eckholm, "The Plight Deepens for Black Men, Studies Warn," *New York Times*, March 20, 2006.

6. Policy and practice recommendations compiled from Baron and Sylvester (2002), Hirsch et al. (2000), and Sylvester and Reich (2000).

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