

**The 120 Initiative**  
**White Paper on Gun Violence Reduction**  
**A Collaborative Publication of the**  
**Consortium of Universities of the Washington**  
**Metropolitan Area**  
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**CONSORTIUM OF UNIVERSITIES**  
OF THE WASHINGTON METROPOLITAN AREA

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction from the President of the Consortium .....	3
Executive Summary .....	4
Initiative Recommendation Descriptions.....	5
<i>Community Engagement and Violence Interruption Programs</i> .....	5
<i>Communication and Education Campaigns</i> .....	6
<i>Intersecting community engagement and education</i> .....	9
<i>Use of Safety Devices and Safety Training</i> .....	11
<i>Other Recommendations</i> .....	12
Closing .....	14
Initiative Expert Participants.....	15
References.....	20

## INTRODUCTION FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE CONSORTIUM

In June 2022 the Board of the Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area, the Presidents of our eighteen voting member colleges and universities, charged the Consortium with bringing together experts from across our institutions to identify the most practical, actionable, and preferably non-legislative solutions to reducing gun violence.

Since then, more than 100 faculty and practitioners have joined the initiative contributing their time, talent, and expertise through meetings and online exchanges. Discussions have been frank, open, and at times contentious, reflecting the broad range of expertise and backgrounds we were able to engage from our extraordinary institutions. What follows reflects the collective output of those efforts. In those interactions, a few framing issues emerged:

- More research is needed to specifically address reducing gun violence. Despite the tremendous impact on our citizens and economy, as well as being the leading cause of death for children in the United States, there is surprisingly limited investment in studying gun violence.
- As firearms are the leading method for suicide in the United States, these efforts must be paired with expansion in mental health services, though limiting firearms access for someone experiencing a crisis is a critical part of reducing the largest source of firearms fatalities.
- These proposals by no means replace the need for legislation on the issue. In fact, the experts were near consensus that most interventions to reduce gun violence are far more effective when paired with wise legislative action.
- Some of the most effective ways to reduce gun violence require addressing root causes such as poverty and reducing inequities. Increasing access to education, housing, food, and medical services is crucial to reducing every kind of violence. Since most of those efforts are necessarily longer term in their impact, they are not included in the Initiative's top proposals – but this does not diminish their importance, or alter the fact that reducing inequities may be among the most effective ways to reduce gun violence.

While every recommendation in the initiative has compelling justification, our experts demonstrate a fairly wide range of opinions about them. This reflects higher education at its very best – bringing experts with disparate backgrounds and beliefs together to reflect on the most challenging issues, and our D.C. area institutions have a history of fostering research that offers practical solutions to such challenges. I am grateful to serve a visionary group of presidents that have provided the space for such collaborative discussions.



Andrew Fligel, PhD

President and CEO

Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To enact the changes necessary to address the country's epidemic of gun violence and its tragedies, the Presidents of the Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area collaborated to launch the 120 Initiative, named in memory of the on average 120 deaths from gun violence each day. Under this initiative, more than 100 subject-matter experts from the Consortium's member universities worked together over several months to review a plethora of gun violence research and create a list of viable, actionable, and generally non-legislative ways to address the problem. This subject evoked lively—at times heated—debate among these experts, while also sparking wide agreement of the value of a holistic, multi-channel approach. Alongside the recommendations, the consensus was that such approaches will work best in combination with smart policy and legislation, facilitating and funding in-depth scholarship, supporting expansion of mental health services, and investing in long term approaches to addressing systemic inequities.

A range of ideas were explored, many of which have wide support, others that engendered stronger debate. It is important to note that the recommendations are research-informed, with a need for longitudinal, thoughtful study and evaluation. Gun buyback programs, for instance, were recommended, but many of our experts also felt strongly that those programs had very limited impact on reducing gun violence.

A rubric was created to compare proposals, measuring the likely scope of impact on reducing gun violence on one axis, and on the other, practicality – time and cost of implementation. Ultimately, this led the researchers to focus on three key areas as the most promising ways to reduce gun violence:

1. Expand and build upon effective community engagement and violence interruption programs.
2. Explore anti-gun violence prevention messaging and education campaigns, without vilifying law-abiding gun owners.
3. Expand use of safety devices and safety training.

While these were identified as the **top recommendations**, Consortium experts created a comprehensive collection of additional solutions seeking to reduce gun violence. What follows is the result of these experts' proposals, noting that these were discussed as areas where the research is far from clear on efficacy, and where some raise concerns of further community harm if not appropriately implemented.

- ✓ Limit gun purchases and manufacture through tax and business structures
- ✓ Increase gun tracing and proactive crime prevention technology i.e. Shot Spotter detection systems, etc.
- ✓ Multiply and expand gun-buyback programs
- ✓ Make illegal weapons charges prosecution and sentencing priorities; Integrate with educational, restorative justice approaches

- ✓ Increase evidence-based searches and arrests targeted at high risk repeat firearms offenders

Based on research-informed ideas, these recommendations could be strong parts of a holistic approach to reducing gun violence. As noted above, despite very diverse perspectives among Consortium experts, it is unanimously agreed upon that **more research is essential** to understanding how best to stem gun violence. An increase in research will lead to a greater understanding of gun violence and its dynamics, including the ways in which it is impacted by community engagement, social awareness, and widespread education.

## INITIATIVE RECOMMENDATION DESCRIPTIONS

### **Community Engagement and Violence Interruption Programs.**

To reduce gun violence, communities should be empowered and active in solutions. This holistic approach prioritizes community engagement, awareness, and education regarding gun violence, particularly among the underrepresented communities that are more vulnerable to gun violence tragedies. The Consortium also recognizes the role of community inequities in perpetuating gun violence. Bridging these inequities by increasing access to education, housing, food, and medical services is critical to reducing gun violence and its impact on vulnerable demographics. It is with this context that Consortium advance the following recommendations:

#### ***Expand the D.C. People of Promise program***

[The People of Promise \(POP\)](#) Initiative for the District of Columbia targets approximately 200 residents who have been identified by the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR) as being at highest risk of involvement in gun violence in the District. Each person has been assigned a multidisciplinary team to include: a Credible Contact, a Pathfinder, and a member of Mayor Bowser's cabinet. The primary goal of the initiative is to disrupt cycles of violence, poverty, and incarceration through consistent engagement with individuals and connections to supports and services. The goal is to advance: 1) social, human, cultural and intellectual capital; 2) micro-credentialing; 3) valuable social, educational and cultural experiences by integrating the POP into the social fabric of our campuses.

This idea bridges university resources in human, social, cultural, and intellectual capital with individuals identified at the highest risk of engaging in gun violence as perpetrators and victims as well as their support teams.

#### ***The University of the District of Columbia (UDC) Violence Prevention/Intervention Certification***

The only program of its kind at an HBCU in the country, UDC’s Violence Prevention/Intervention Certification (VPCWI) course develops a common language, infuses evidence-based content, and utilizes virtual reality as a method to showcase community trauma in a way that allows relationships to be constructed and resources to be targeted to those most in need.

Since its creation and inaugural cohort in July 2022, the UDC VPCWI has graduated 4 cohorts of a myriad of professionals involved with violence prevention & intervention efforts in the DMV. The framework and curriculum cover the following topics (based on input from UDC faculty, local experts, and D.C. agencies in September 2021):

- Mindfulness and Meditation
- Violence Prevention
- Gang Intervention Partnership
- Cease-Fire
- Restorative Justice
- Professionalism
- Street Law
- Youth Development

***Continue exploration of hospital-based violence intervention programs (HVIP’s)***

[Hospital-based violence intervention programs \(HVIPs\)](#) are defined as programs within hospitals that utilize hospital resources to provide “safety planning, services, and trauma-informed care to violently injured people, many of whom are boys and men of color” (The Health Alliance for Violence Intervention).

(HVIPs) are not a new concept—these innovative programs that aim to reduce trauma recidivism among survivors of violent injury have existed since the 1990s. Although research on the effectiveness of HVIPs is still in its nascent stages due to the lack of funding support for gun violence research, these programs have shown evidence of being effective. Currently, there are 40 hospital violence intervention programs in the world, including six in the D.C. Metro area, that work to engage patients during hospital recovery, lowering the chance of retaliation and diminishing gun violence overall. These programs have evolved into essential community outreach efforts, and it is vital that they continue, though it is widely agreed that more research and funding is needed to study their effectiveness over time.

**Communication and Education Campaigns**

A leading goal of the 120 Initiative is to change community culture as it relates to gun violence by altering the societal messaging and narratives with which guns are portrayed to the public. The Consortium experts also recognize the need for further research in this area, with the long-term goal of utilizing such research to facilitate educated anti-gun violence campaigns. Ultimately, the objective of these campaigns is to reorient the landscape of communications as it

relates to gun violence, supporting a widespread awareness of gun violence and those affected by it.

It is important that the community most impacted by gun violence leads the efforts to reduce it through grassroots solutions that disrupt what has become normalized around gun violence and its impact on victims, families, and the broader community. This includes challenging the long-accepted image of power and strength that has been associated with guns and altering that narrative to promote safety and peace. Public awareness is critical in this goal and can be facilitated by creating and promoting public service announcements directed at reducing gun violence.

Guiding examples should come from grassroots solutions and the best successes in the public health sector, such as lessons learned from vaccination campaigns, fluoridation, and health mother/child efforts. 120 Initiative researchers highlighted additional examples from motor safety ranging from speed limits to seat belt compliance.

***Education campaign that provides guidance for safety and intervention***

- Safe storage of guns
- Report lost or stolen guns
- Promote gun safety courses
- Promote a 24-hour crisis hot line through which people can call and talk to a qualified person before choosing violence.

***Education Campaign(s) highlighting the impact of gun violence***

It's important that the community most impacted by gun violence lead efforts to reduce it, generating solutions from the ground up. The impact of gun violence on victims, families, and the broader community has become too remote. Strong messaging campaigns can disrupt what has become normalized around gun violence by focusing on the social, economic, emotional, and other costs.

***Education campaign pushing back against extremist group efforts to incite violence, especially in youth***

Campaigns can be developed to produce "attitudinal inoculation." Videos and collateral material can demonstrate how extremist groups incite violence through emotional manipulation and rhetorical tactics, increasing media-literacy that counters such propaganda.

***Education campaign to dissociate owning guns/gun violence with power and strength***

This model addresses culture as much as policy. Gun ownership and carrying of firearms are often perceived as part of one's identity—particularly among men. Research indicates that there is a perception of gun ownership, and even violence using guns, as signs of strength and symbols of power. This creates a portrait of gun violence perpetrators that conflates with protectors who uphold law and order. For the most unstable or stressed, that identity can be used as a justification to commit violence.

Reshaping the narrative about guns could dissociate owning a gun with power and strength, which could potentially reduce violence. This could mirror a campaign in Australia that took on the problem of young men speeding and driving recklessly—which it succeeded by suggesting that those who speed are overcompensating. This approach brings attention to behavior indirectly through identity and image, whereas many of the drinking and smoking campaigns mostly address the behavior directly. Another successful campaign is from the UK on the dangers of texting and driving; this campaign simply shows the folly of texting and driving. It is notable that these campaigns do not demonize car ownership or legal use of vehicles, but focus on negative behavior and its confluence of views of one’s image and identity in its relationship to car ownership.

***Education campaign for violence perpetrators involved in the Justice system with education on social determinants of health and ways they impact violence***

The nearly 6 million adults on probation and parole supervision typify the social determinants of health given the minoritized and impoverished backgrounds. Addressing the social determinants of health will serve to reduce violence, improve quality of life, and reduce public safety risk factors. Social determinants of health can be integrated into assessment and programming tools, which provides the tools for justice and health actors.

This campaign will include messaging on the social determinants of health (SDOH), including the prevalence and evidence-informed solutions, providing violent-prone individuals understanding how the SDOH affect their behavior, and how key factors (i.e. housing, food security, mental health) can reduce violent prone behavior. The effort will seek integration into police, prosecutor, judicial, supervision, health organizations, and jails, using policies and training materials to equip justice and health actors to use SDOH, and enhancing anger management curriculum to include social determinants of health.

***Reframing Coverage of Homicide/Mass Shooting Events***

Using similar principals involved in coverage of suicide events, the media can assist in refocusing the public on the experience of the victims and not on glorifying the perpetrators in mass shooting events. The reframing of coverage should minimize the spread of contagion events and remove factors like shooter manifestos, “going out in a blaze of glory.”

***Heuristic for Journalists-***

Witnesses, Harm, Influence, Missing side, Missing information

**W-** are the witnesses reliable;

**H-** does the benefit outweigh the harm; are you influencing the audience;

**M-** has a side of the story not been covered;

**M-** is any information missing or not available

This approach should include informing the public why changes are necessary, and how coverage early on can produce misinformation and cause further harm to victims.



Our 120 Initiative experts argued that the following proposals are an intersection between community engagement and education/communication campaigns:

### **Initiate Health Care Provider Training**

#### ***Lethal Means Counseling***

[In 2020, suicide was the leading cause of gun-related violence in the United States](#), with 24,292 cases that made up 54% of all gun-related deaths. Suicide is a serious and often overlooked tragedy of gun violence that can be affected through lethal means counseling, a process that healthcare providers undertake to help patients and their families or friends find ways to reduce access to lethal means of suicide attempt, at least temporarily, during times of elevated risk of suicide. Healthcare workers first determine if a person at risk of suicide has access to lethal means, like firearms. The provider then works with the person and their family or friends to reduce access until the risk of suicide decreases. Though mental health is not a predictor of violence towards others, [it is a predictor of suicide](#). Lethal means counseling should be required for everyone under care for mental health conditions or taking medications with side effects that may cause suicidal thoughts, thus acting preventatively against gun violence.

#### ***Teach Health Care Providers to Screen for Gun Access***

Even though many recognize gun violence as a public health issue, most healthcare providers avoid talking about it with patients because they don't know if they are allowed to, don't know how to have the conversations, or don't know what to do about positive screens. Training providers to screen for gun access and safety and to use their trusted and regular relationships with patients and families offers an upstream opportunity to educate and influence gun ownership and use. It also has the potential to depoliticize conversations around guns more generally by normalizing concerns across sectors. This can be accomplished by gathering support and from schools, medical associations, students, etc., developing curricula for the screening process, launching a pilot program to gauge effectiveness, and developing a metric of assessment. More research that identifies best practices for discussing gun access and safety is also essential.

### **Implement School-Based Conflict Resolution and Violence Prevention Training Programs**

Comprehensive and developmentally appropriate violence prevention education is necessary for all student age groups. To prevent gun violence, it is essential to begin early in development before behaviors and attitudes are too ingrained and become difficult to change. Because violent behavior tends to be intergenerationally transmitted, mobilization of the education system to help develop non-violent and healthy interpersonal skills is critical. This can be accomplished by focusing curriculum on healthy relationship skills, social-emotional skill building, emotion regulation and

distress tolerance, and bystander intervention. This shift would require scaling up existing programs and tailoring them to all age groups, funding mental health programs in schools, working with state education departments to mandate this curriculum in the K-12 school systems, and applying for grant money to implement this curriculum.

***Conflict Resolution instruction/training in grades K-3***

Implement conflict resolution skill building classes in early grades (K-3) that are then reinforced through modules used in a variety of classes grades 4 - 12. Such effective training modules would need to be designed to be easily adopted by teachers for various subjects and ages. These skills, such as effective communication and active listening, should be taught in early grades and reinforced throughout the educational journey.

***K-12 Violence Prevention Curriculum***

Appropriate violence prevention education in the K-12 school systems focuses on:

- Healthy relationship skills
- Social-emotional skill-building
- Emotion regulation & distress tolerance
- Bystander intervention

***Prepare parole supervision staff to address violence/become violence interrupters***

With nearly 6 million adults on probation and parole supervision, many individuals are likely to be perpetrators and victims of gun violence. Supervision is not included as an intervention point for public health interventions. Yet officers are positioned to know who is affected, offer assistance, and provide avenues for desistance.

Developing tools for supervision officers (i.e., screening and intervention tools) can advance efforts to reduce the harm from gun violence.

Offering individual opportunities to become interrupters focuses on building the conflict resolution skill set.

This effort provides probation/parole agencies with materials on how to identify, address, and engage individuals exposed to gun violence. It engages supervision, criminal justice reformers, academic programs in efforts to integrate tools to identify, prevent, and treat gun violence.

## **Expand Use of Safety Devices and Safety Training**

Spreading awareness of gun safety is essential in stemming gun violence. To protect the most vulnerable, it is essential that gun safety becomes a prioritization in anti-gun violence efforts by supporting education, awareness, and training in gun safety under all circumstances.

According to the National Safety Council, there were 535 deaths in 2020 that were attributed to preventable causes. Another 400 deaths were undetermined. These numbers call for action at a grassroots level in the form of gun safety education, like offering free gun safety courses to registered firearms owners and their family members, requiring a free gun safety course prior to receiving a driver's license, and creating both an in-person and virtual version of the course. These actions require the collaboration of the public, local governments, and federal funders, with the long-term goal of spreading information about gun safety and educating gun owners. With that education, gun violence—particularly accidental tragedies—can be dramatically impacted.

### ***Provide Safe Storage for Guns***

Safe gun storage that permits access to guns and ammunition by authorized persons has the potential to reduce gun-related injuries and deaths. Such storage includes securing all types of firearms unloaded, locked up in a lock box or a gun safe separate from ammunition, with keys and/or combinations to firearm locking devices inaccessible to children, unauthorized users, and others at-risk. Safe storage also includes advancing “smart gun” technology to limit discharging the firearm by the authorized user only.

Gun-related violence can be addressed by a requirement for universal safe and secure gun and ammunition storage with limited controlled access to prevent illicit weapon and ammunition access by children, at-risk or impulsive individuals, and thieves. These safe storage devices include lock boxes, biometric lockboxes, gun safes, cable locks, and technology like smart phones. Safe storage requires collaboration between gun owners, gun sellers, state and local legislation, law enforcement, and health professionals. Gun owners must be educated on effective safe storage mechanisms and devices, while sellers should add safe storage packages with gun purchases and offer financial incentives for such packages. Law enforcement and health professionals would act as promoters for safe gun storage.

### ***Offer (or even require) Education Materials for Gun Sales***

Safety training on guns is widely accepted as a useful practice. Initiative experts strongly encouraging making gun safety courses available for free to registered firearms owners and their family members. The experts also discussed exploring additional incentives rather than legal requirements, such as discounts on gun locks, ammunition, or related equipment. Other suggestions included linking free gun safety courses to receiving a driver's license or as part of driver's education programs. There is a clear need for both in-person and online/virtual versions of such courses.

***Post Warning labels on packaging and signage where guns are sold***

Research indicates that such signs are successful in reducing negative behavior related to alcohol consumption/driving; cigarettes and pregnancy; and foods and obesity, all without demonizing the products. A similar approach focusing on warnings about violence could be deployed to similar effect.

***Require suicide hotline and prevention information in gun safety classes, in new gun purchase packaging, and new ammunition packaging***

**Other Recommendations**

***Limit Gun Sales***

Taxation and regulation are key functions of the government, and they could be better leveraged to reduce gun violence. Firearm and ammunition taxes can be imposed to accurately reflect the costs of their use on society – a “social harms” tax, generating funds for violence rehabilitation and prevention.

This “social harms” tax should be levied on gun sales and ownership which includes sales/special taxes, import duties and export bans. Taxation of the industry can result in higher revenue for local governments if there is coordinated action among counties and states. Otherwise, this can lead to mere relocation of the industry which will maintain status quo. It is agreed that more analysis by academia and NGOs should be directed at communicating the expanding the range of taxation and regulatory steps available to local governments.

***Increase gun tracing and proactive crime prevention technology.***

Shot Spotter detection systems, hot spot mapping, and intelligence-led policing has potential to reduce gun violence. The goal is to reduce gun violence by providing law enforcement agencies with “state of the art” preventative and quick response tools. There was robust discussion throughout the 120 Initiative meetings on ways to expand these systems without creating greater disparities in how groups are treated, especially for communities of color.

***Multiply/expand gun buyback programs***

120 Initiative experts felt this was among projects that are often used with very limited research. There was a broad feeling that getting guns off the streets was generally a net positive, much as allowing community members to dispose of old prescriptions and toxic substances is important. It was noted at several junctures, however, that the effort is unlikely to have a significant impact on the number of guns available, especially those used illegally.

***Make illegal weapons charges prosecution and sentencing priorities, integrating with educational restorative justice approaches***

Homicides are usually an impulsive result of interpersonal conflict, and the vast majority of homicides are committed by a small portion of the population (even in high-crime jurisdictions). Stronger enforcement of gun possession statutes must be thoughtfully coupled with rehabilitation and education programs. The goal is to reduce gun violence through enforcement of existing gun laws followed by a more determined effort to reorient the offenders with law abiding practices.

***Increase evidence-based searches and arrests targeted at high risk repeat firearms offenders.***

Many members raised concern that including policing in the proposal increases the likelihood of negative impact on our communities. It was strongly advanced that to be successful any such work should be performed by law enforcement officers with expertise in intelligence (investigators) and community policing.

Increases in lawful, evidence-based searches and arrests for illegal weapons and weapons violations should be a priority, without inappropriate targeting of minority communities. Any such initiative must reflect safety-based policing principles, focusing on truly the most high-risk individuals, as well as an awareness of the degree to which targeted efforts have been prone to abuse and inappropriate targeting. This requires increased training for police to provide guidance in these models. Results have potential to be accomplished through better federal-local partnerships, as local governments often lack resources for adequate violence interruption services. Federal grants and implementation of federal firearm statutes are needed at the local level, but all such efforts are best made when integrated with community involvement and engagement programs, such as those recommended by the Initiative.

**Legislative Recommendations**

While generally the 120 Initiative efforts focused on non-legislative, or at least local, efforts to reduce gun violence, there need for expanded “red flag” laws came up numerous times from many of our experts. One such proposal focused on individuals who were perpetrators of domestic violence, including those under protective orders.

There was more contentious discussion of the potential for requiring gun licenses similar to those required in Europe.

## CLOSING

This initiative highlighted what higher education does best – bringing together experts with a wide range of backgrounds and beliefs to address our most challenging problems. This is especially true for our Washington, D.C. area colleges and universities, where experts and students focus every day on applied research. Over 100 faculty and staff members across our Consortium colleges and universities spent countless hours reviewing the research and recommendations in this report. The compiled results reflect a tremendous level of debate, discussion, and collaboration.

Throughout the discussions, Initiative experts returned to the reality that firearms are more commonly used in suicide than homicide (particularly handguns). One of our faculty teams pointed to The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, whose “research shows that most people in suicidal crisis who don't have easy access to a lethal suicide method **will not** simply find another way to kill themselves. Removing access to firearms and other lethal means allows time for both the moment of intense suicidal crisis to pass, and for someone to intervene with potentially lifesaving mental health support and resources.”

It is also critical that these recommendations are not meant to alleviate the urgency for wise policy and legislation. To the contrary, these recommendations will be most successful alongside the enactment of laws supporting these efforts.

The recommendations suggest at least two crucial higher education roles in addressing gun violence:

The Initiative experts agreed that the recommendations should be termed, “research-informed” – that further research is crucial to determining which efforts are most likely to succeed in reducing gun violence. Research funding – corporate and government, should match the scope of the issue to do the crucial studies to understand what works in communities, and to study those who commit gun violence.

Additionally, educational opportunity is a critical avenue through which gun violence can be addressed. Making education more accessible and attainment more possible for everyone, particularly those of the demographics that are most vulnerable to gun violence, has the potential for long-lasting effects on societal dynamics as they relate to gun violence. This shift in focus can be facilitated by creating educational pathways for victims of gun violence and their family members. To that end, support for these individuals is essential as they engage in a degree, certification, or badge program.

Support for these two key recommendations can also be facilitated by providing scholarships, free access to colleges and universities for victims of gun violence and their families, services that connect students to other learning opportunities, and the creation of gun-safety specific courses that prioritize violence prevention, safety, trauma, and liberation-based healing practices,

among others. These pathways will turn individual focus towards educational attainment, increasing college enrollment and encouraging community engagement.

In conclusion, there is one inescapable fact that we must address. **Firearms are the leading cause of death for children and adolescents (1-19 years of age)**. If it was a disease, our researchers would be funded to explore every option. If it were any other public health challenge, we would strive for every possible avenue, community based, communications, educational, safety, and yes, legislative, to address the scope of this tragedy. The 120 Initiative experts have proposed a range of paths forward. Together, we can make a difference, we can make change – and we can save lives.

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