



THE
SENTENCING
PROJECT

Annual Report

2025





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About The Sentencing Project

WHY WE FIGHT

The Sentencing Project works to end mass incarceration, advance racial justice, and build safe, equitable, and thriving communities across the United States. We pursue this goal through a nonpartisan, evidence-driven approach that integrates research, strategic communications, and advocacy to advance effective and humane policy solutions.

Our Policy Priorities



Our Commitment to Racial Justice

We prioritize ending extreme sentencing, expanding voting rights for people with felony convictions, and advancing youth justice, key policy areas for reducing harm in the justice system and building safer communities. We recognize that lasting change requires confronting the structural racism that has shaped the criminal legal system and continues to drive disparities.

Working in partnership with grassroots organizations, national coalitions, and directly impacted leaders, we help bridge research, policy, and lived experience to advance solutions that create a more just system and stronger communities for all.



Message from The Executive Director, Kara Gotsch

ROOTED IN PURPOSE



**We are here
to protect
progress
and pursue
lasting
change.”**

In 2025, organizations and activists that comprise the movement for criminal legal reform navigated one of the toughest environments we've seen in years.

Sudden funding shifts and mounting pressure on our field led to longstanding institutions closing their doors and dedicated partners being sidelined. National political narratives around crime and punishment were reminiscent of the decades-old talking points that promoted the prison building boom and vilified Black boys. It has been a year that tested the resilience of everyone involved, forcing us all to defend criminal justice reform gains and oppose even harsher punishments.

And yet, even in the face of this adversity, our resolve remained steady and progress was made.



This year's accomplishments are a testament to the power of showing up for one another. By linking rigorous research and evidence-based policy with the tireless work of grassroots

organizers and directly impacted leaders, we helped drive a wave of change that will bend the national conversation toward justice and dignity. Indeed, sentencing changes in Maryland and Michigan in 2025 will extend second chances to potentially thousands of people serving life sentences, setting critical examples for other states to learn from and build upon.



Our work doesn't sit in silos; it is an interconnected effort to challenge harmful narratives, shape better policies, and build an evidence base for a more equitable society. Every win and every step forward is proof of what's possible when we refuse to define any individual by their past, and instead recognize their inherent capacity for transformation and change. We exist to ensure that the facts we uncover fuel the advocacy that shifts policy and improves lives.





ROOTED IN PURPOSE

There is so much we can't predict about the road ahead. The obstacles are real, and the work is hard. But we've also learned that there is an unmatched strength in our community.



As we look forward, we do so with a clear sense of purpose and a deep, unshakable belief that racial justice and ending mass incarceration matter.

We are here to protect the progress we've fought for and to keep chasing the structural changes needed to build a society that truly prioritizes safety, healing, and justice.

Thank you for being part of this movement.

Your partnership gives us the resolve to keep going.

In community,
Kara Gotsch
Executive Director



Where We Work

UNITED FOR JUSTICE

As a bridge organization, The Sentencing Project strengthens grassroots advocacy capacity and connects work on the ground with national policy change. We partner with more than:

80+ & 300+

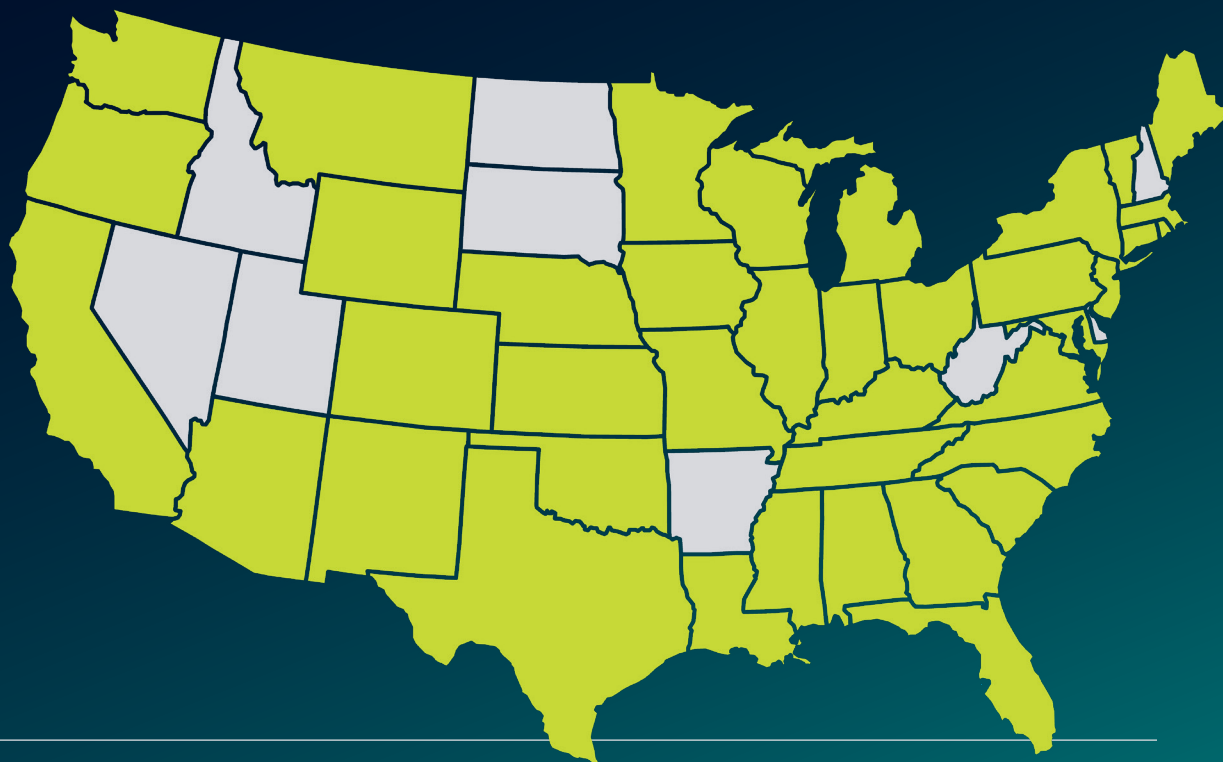
NATIONAL
ORGANIZATIONS

STATE-LEVEL
GROUPS

All working to end extreme sentencing, expand voting rights, advance youth justice, and eliminate racial disparities in the criminal legal system.



Across these partnerships, we are committed to centering the voices and leadership of directly impacted individuals and communities. Their perspectives shape our strategy and ensure that our work reflects the realities of those most affected.



Powering Second Chances

In 2025, The Sentencing Project's Second Look Network continued to strengthen its role as a national hub for advocates working to end extreme sentencing. The Network expanded to nearly...

400 **154**

INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS

ORGANIZATIONS

33

STATES

and the District of Columbia—reflecting both growing momentum and the increasing demand for sentence review nationwide.

techniques, mitigation development in noncapital cases, funding for litigation support such as investigators and mitigation specialists, and the application of recent United States Supreme Court decisions to cases involving women and nonbinary clients and cases in which the impact of a person's prior convictions must be determined by a jury.

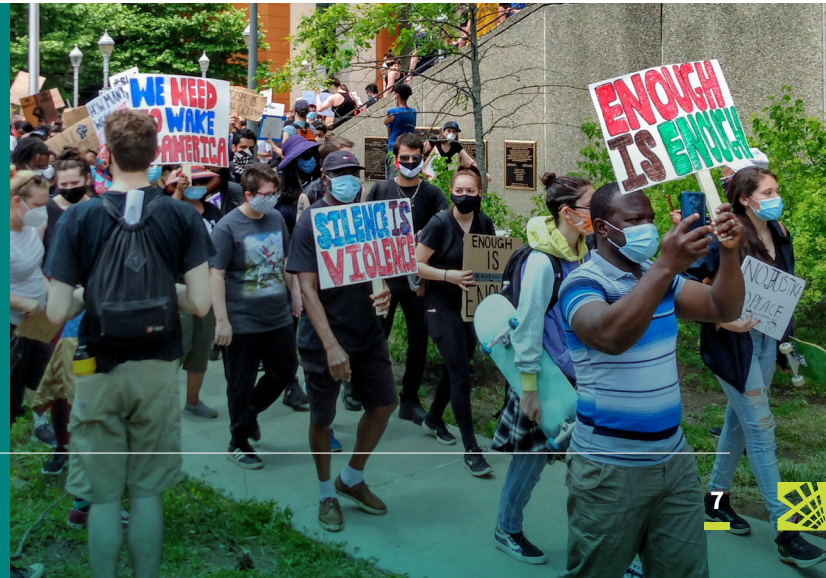
To support its growing membership, the Network also launched a new email listserv and resource hub, strengthening connectivity and expanding access to tools and expertise across the field.

Together, these efforts are helping to build a stronger, more coordinated national movement—one that is increasingly equipped to turn second look opportunities into meaningful outcomes for people serving extreme sentences.

This year marked significant policy progress. Five states—Delaware, Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, and Utah—adopted new sentence review opportunities through legislation, administrative rule, and a court decision.

Second Look Network Members

They continued to receive targeted training, technical assistance, and peer support to advance resentencing efforts. In 2025, the Network hosted multiple virtual trainings and strategy sessions focused on litigation



The Second Look Network

In 2025, the Second Look Network convened its third annual in-person gathering in Detroit, Michigan, bringing together...

105 from **19**
ADVOCATES **STATES**
& the District
OF COLUMBIA

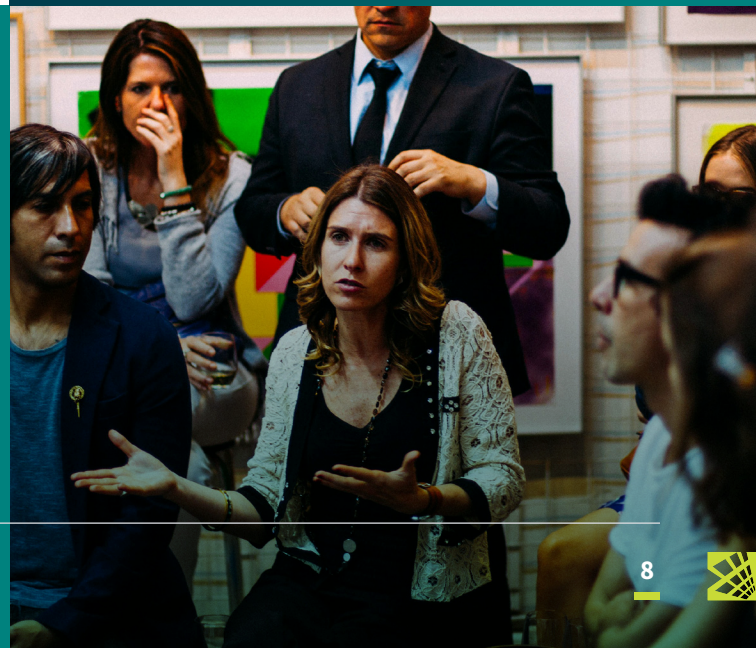
In addition to training, the convening created space for connection, collaboration, and renewal among advocates engaged in complex and often long-term cases. Participants described the experience as both energizing and restorative, underscoring the importance of community in sustaining this work.

As one attendee shared,



Being together reminded me of my 'why' and reinvigorated me to face some difficult tasks waiting back at the office."

The convening featured 18 sessions covering mitigation investigation, holistic defense, reentry planning, defense-initiated victim outreach, and strategies for engaging prosecutors in resentencing efforts. Eight sessions included directly impacted panelists, grounding the work in lived experience and reinforcing the human impact of second look advocacy.



Gathering in Community

→ Civic Power 2025: Democracy Unchained!

In July 2025, Chicago became a hub for "joyful resistance" as The Sentencing Project hosted its third annual Civic Power convening. Bringing together 132 advocacy organizers, researchers, and specialists, the event exceeded attendance goals and centered the expertise of directly impacted leaders. The program was packed with momentum-building sessions:

Highlights included:

- Five plenaries explored voting rights battles, cross-movement intersections, and lessons from winning campaigns.
- Three research panels and over 10 breakout sessions addressed ballot access and shared strategies for rights restoration.
- International collaboration flourished during the first Spanish-language workshop, featuring democracy defenders from Mexico and Chile.

THE IMPACT WAS DEEPLY PERSONAL

92% of attendees forged vital new connections

96% called the space essential to their local advocacy



Between musical performances by formerly incarcerated artists and collaborative strategy sessions, the convening reinforced that collective action is the foundation of a truly inclusive democracy.



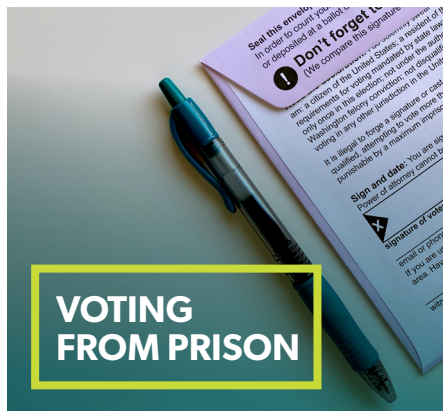
Publication Highlights

SHAPING POLICY



The Scope and Impact of Life and Long-Term Imprisonment in the United States

The United States holds an estimated 40% of the world's life-sentenced population, with one in six people in U.S. prisons serving a life sentence. This report explores how extreme sentences fail to improve public safety while disproportionately harming communities of color and aging populations. Its findings offer a roadmap for policymakers to scale back mass incarceration by abolishing life without parole and implementing meaningful sentence review mechanisms.



Lessons from Maine and Vermont

Maine and Vermont are the only states where citizens never lose their right to vote. This report explores how these states maintain high participation through robust mail-in ballot access and voter education. Their success offers a roadmap for other states to strengthen democracy by ending felony disenfranchisement entirely.



A Better Approach to Addressing Youth Gun Possession

While youth gun possession rates remain steady, justice system responses have become increasingly punitive and racially disparate. The Sentencing Project advocates shifting from incarceration to prevention, urging investment in community-based violence intervention and diversion programs. By addressing root causes like self-protection, these strategies improve public safety more effectively than detention.



Publication Highlights

SHAPING POLICY



Federal Intrusion into State Criminal Law

Federal intrusion into state criminal law has expanded significantly, creating a duplicative "shadow" justice system. This over-federalization often triggers harsher mandatory minimums and worsens racial disparities. The Sentencing Project recommends limiting federal prosecutions for local offenses and reinvesting federal resources into community-based solutions to preserve local democracy and equity.



Centering Women in Justice Reform

The female incarcerated population in the United States stands over seven times higher than it did in 1980, growing at twice the pace of male incarceration. This fact sheet explores how expansive law enforcement efforts, stiffer drug sentencing laws, and systemic racial disparities disproportionately funnel women and girls, many of whom are primary caretakers, into the justice system. Its findings highlight the urgent need for gender-responsive programs, diversion strategies, and the dismantling of post-conviction barriers to reentry.



An Assessment of the Nation's Sentence Review Laws

Officials in 15 states, the District of Columbia, and the federal government have now enacted "second look" judicial review policies allowing courts to reconsider lengthy prison terms. This updated 2025 report explores how the movement has rapidly expanded beyond juvenile cases to encompass emerging adults, elderly individuals, and domestic violence survivors. Its findings offer a roadmap for criminal justice reform by detailing how states can implement safe sentence reductions to curb mass incarceration, save taxpayer resources, and combat deep-rooted racial disparities.



LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR SECOND LOOK NETWORK HERE

www.sentencingproject.org/advocacy/second-look-network



Spotlight on Maryland: A Milestone for Justice

SHAPING POLICY



In 2025, Maryland became a primary battleground for reform.

The Sentencing Project deployed a multifaceted strategy across our three core buckets, combining expert testimony and data-driven advocacy to challenge the state's reliance on extreme sentencing and the criminalization of youth.

1. Extreme Sentencing: A Landmark Victory

The legislative highlight of the year was the passage of the Maryland Second Look Act (HB 853).

EXPERT TESTIMONY:

In March 2025, The Sentencing Project delivered testimony before the Maryland State House, providing the evidence-based rationale for allowing judicial reviews of extreme sentences.

THE IMPACT:

This law establishes a vital pathway for individuals sentenced as emerging adults (ages 18–24) to petition for a sentence reduction after 20 years.

2. Youth Justice: Challenging "Adultification"

Maryland charges over 1,000 children as adults annually, 80% of whom are Black. Throughout 2025, we actively worked with the Maryland Youth Justice Coalition to expose the harms of adultification, the racial bias that leads to Black children being treated as adults. By providing lawmakers with rigorous data, we shifted the narrative toward treating children as children and prioritized ending automatic transfers to adult court.

→ EMPHASIS ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

Implementation of landmark reforms is most effective when the public understands the human impact. To support the Second Look Act, our advocacy was bolstered by a public education campaign that reached over one million individuals. A centerpiece of this effort was a guest commentary in The Baltimore Sun by Executive Director Kara Gotsch, which detailed how the Act infuses humanity into sentencing. The message resonated at the highest levels, with Governor Wes Moore sharing the op-ed on social media. This high-profile engagement helped foster the community understanding essential for the law's successful implementation.



Progress in Michigan



The Sentencing Project partnered with the Juvenile Law Center and the Michigan ACLU to file critical amicus briefs in three pivotal cases before the Michigan Supreme Court: *People v. Poole*, *People v. Taylor*, and *People v. Czarnecki*. Our briefs leveraged brain science and behavioral research to demonstrate that 19- and 20-year-olds possess an immense capacity for rehabilitation and should not face mandatory permanent imprisonment.

In April 2025, the Court issued a landmark ruling finding mandatory life-without-parole (LWOP) sentences for people under 21 unconstitutional. Crucially, the Court cited research from The Sentencing Project and made the ruling retroactive. This historic victory secures resentencing opportunities for hundreds of incarcerated individuals, guarantees individualized sentencing moving forward, and establishes Michigan as a national model for emerging adult justice.



Young people are especially deserving of second chances and individualized sentencing. This decision reflects a growing national movement recognizing that emerging adults deserve special sentencing consideration, and we hope that it will serve as a model to other states.”

— **Liz Komar**, Sentencing Reform Counsel



Federal Spotlight

Defense in the Capitol

DC and Federal Advocacy in 2025

Washington, DC, has spent decades building a fairer, more effective justice system, one that stands as a national model for evidence-based sentencing reform. In 2025, Congress moved to dismantle that progress. At the urging of the White House, legislators advanced a slate of bills that would repeal DC's landmark second look law, lower the age at which children can be tried as adults to 14, impose steep mandatory minimums, including life without parole for minors, roll back other hard-won reforms, and undermine home rule.

The Sentencing Project met this threat with authority. Our relationships on Capitol Hill and the trust we've built with local partners positioned us to lead. Central to our 2025 strategy was a core conviction: the most persuasive advocates are those who have experienced firsthand the transformation these policies make possible. We amplified the voices of second-look recipients, developed critical educational resources, guided local justice organizations in navigating federal strategy, and served as an expert voice in local and national media.



→ THE RESULT

Washingtonians were equipped and empowered to defend justice in their own city, a foundation that will matter as this fight continues into 2026.



Federal Sentencing

Policy in Congress and Beyond

The Sentencing Project co-leads the Justice Roundtable's Sentencing Reform Working Group, a key forum uniting criminal justice, civil rights, and faith organizations. As Congress, driven by politicized narratives around crime and immigration, considered bills that would expand the federal prison population, The Sentencing Project was on the front lines. Working alongside immigration allies, we helped defeat the Stop Illegal Entry Act, a bill that would have increased the federal prison population by more than 40% and was ultimately unlikely to advance to the Senate floor.

The U.S. Sentencing Commission remains a critical lever for reform even when Congress is gridlocked, which is why our engagement in the public comment process was a strategic priority. The Sentencing Project's comment on the career offender guideline, a significant driver of extreme sentences, helped shape continued review of the guideline into 2026.

In a year defined by federal overreach and political headwinds, The Sentencing Project held the line, protecting hard-won reforms, strengthening coalitions, and ensuring that the movement for a fairer justice system remained organized, expert, and impossible to ignore.



Racial Justice Fund: Investing in Grassroots Power

JUSTICE IN ACTION

In the wake of George Floyd's murder, The Sentencing Project launched the Racial Justice Fund to deepen our investment in grassroots leaders driving change in their communities. These targeted grants strengthen the capacity of state advocacy partners and expand the reach of their work. In 2025, our investment focused on a clear, urgent goal: ensuring that a criminal conviction never again serves as a barrier to the ballot box.

2025 Impact Highlight:

The Illinois Alliance for Reentry & Justice, Racial Justice Fund Beneficiary

In Chicago, the Illinois Alliance for Reentry & Justice (IL ARJ) is proving that the fight for voting rights is inseparable from the fight for community safety. While many advocacy groups work in isolation, IL ARJ recognized that reclaiming the vote requires a unified front. In 2025, The Sentencing Project joined forces with IL ARJ as a strategic partner to host the national Civic Power convening. By serving as the community anchor for this event, IL ARJ and The Sentencing Project worked hand in hand to convene organizers, policy advocates, and researchers to discuss the latest in challenging felony disenfranchisement.

→ TOGETHER, OUR PARTNERSHIP MOVED THE NEEDLE ON DEMOCRACY:

- Coordinated a strategic convening to align messaging among national and state partners to support voting rights momentum.
- Amplified the leadership of nearly 500 "inside partners"—individuals currently incarcerated whose expertise, and direct input kept the movement authentic, urgent, and rooted in lived experience.
- Challenged the public narrative by demonstrating that civic engagement is a proven factor in increasing community safety, making the case that a healthy democracy is a safer democracy for everyone.
- Bridged the gap between local grassroots organizing and national policy by identifying the cultural experiences and advocacy strategies that will define the next phase of the voting rights restoration movement.



Our Team

THE SENTENCING PROJECT'S STAFF IN 2025

Kara Gotsch

Executive Director

Warren Allen

Campaign Associate

Dan Barash

Director of Finance and Operations

Celeste Barry

Program Associate

Breanna Bishop

Digital Communications Manager

Kristen M. Budd, Ph.D.

Research Analyst

Sara Cohbra

Second Look Network Director

Jackie Copek, CFRE

Development Director

Becky Feldman

Second Look Network Director

Nazgol Ghandnoosh, Ph.D.

Director of Research

Antonio Gutierrez

National Convening Consultant

Liz Komar

Sentencing Reform Counsel

Joseph Lascaze

Youth Justice Engagement Manager

Bob Libal

Senior Campaign Strategist

Morgan McLeod

Director of Communications

Richard Mendel

Senior Research Fellow

Olivia Naugle

Youth Justice Campaign Strategist

Sabrina Pearce

Research Associate

Leyda Pereyra

Second Look Network Program Manager

Nicole D. Porter

Senior Director of Advocacy

Joshua Rovner

Senior Research Analyst

William “Bill” Underwood

Senior Fellow

2025 FELLOWS

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Mackenzie Darling

Annalisa Fratantoni

Vianney Gomez

Dinesh Napal

Samantha Piszcz

Makhia Polk



Our Team

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Southern Coalition for Social Justice (SCSJ)



2025 Supporters

MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH OUR COMMUNITY

The Sentencing Project’s work is made possible through the commitment and generosity of our community. Thank you for standing with us in our fight for a fairer and more effective criminal legal system. This listing includes all supporters who gave contributions of \$1,000 or more in 2025.

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Williams, William



Revenue & Expenses

REVENUE

72%
FOUNDATIONS
\$3,463,913

25%
INDIVIDUALS/
CORPORATIONS
\$1,176,961

3%
OTHER
\$160,824

EXPENSES

74%
PROGRAM SERVICES
\$3,565,477

13%
DEVELOPMENT
\$637,203

13%
MNGT
& GENERAL
\$607,065

These financials are presented using the Form 990 tax method of accounting. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. Our full audited financial documents are available for review at www.sentproj.org/financials.



Get Involved

Learn

More about the issues, key criminal justice facts, and our recommendations for reform on our website at

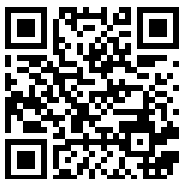
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Donate to our mission today.





Together, we stand for
racial justice and an end
to mass incarceration.

WE NEED YOU
to make it possible

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**THE
SENTENCING
PROJECT**

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