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# How Domestic Violence Perpetrators Manipulate Systems

Why Systems & Professionals Are So Vulnerable  
& 5 Steps to Perpetrator-Proof Your System

*David Mandel, Anna Mitchell  
& Ruth Stearns Mandel*

@SafeandTogether

Domestic violence perpetrator manipulation of systems is a critical problem that undermines responses to family violence and deeply impacts adult and child survivors in many ways. Perpetrators manipulate systems to bolster their own power and abuse, and to control adult and child survivors further. For example, they use false allegations of criminal behavior, parental alienation, and “failure to protect” to target survivors, their children, and the professionals involved with the family. Perpetrators’ successful manipulation of systems compounds, reinforces and legitimizes their power, increasing both the survivors’ sense of their own powerlessness and the perpetrator’s seeming omnipotence. Sadly, the perpetrators’ use of these systems is often successful: Adult survivors can lose their freedom, their children, and their physical and mental health. Harassment via repeated reporting and/or litigation can also deplete survivors’ finances in addition to wasting public resources. As a result, adult and child survivors often lose trust in the systems that are supposed to protect them.

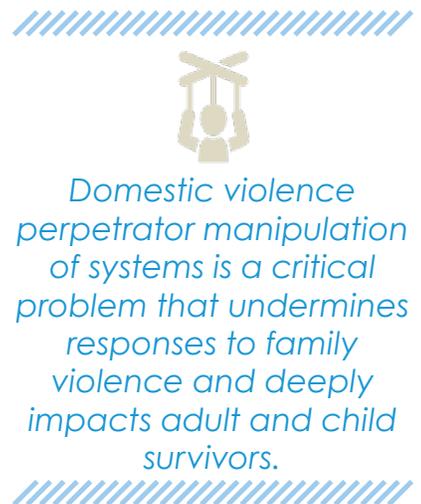
Perpetrators can be prevented in their manipulations when systems, and the professionals within them, are more domestic violence-informed. In this paper, we will explore the following:

- The two different types (Tier 1 & Tier 2) of systems that perpetrators target and how they interact.
- The patterns of behaviors that perpetrators use to manipulate systems and professionals.
- The specific tactics used against Tier 1 systems and their unique vulnerabilities.
- 5 steps systems and professionals can use to protect themselves against these behaviors.

For professionals and systems committed to partnering with and protecting adult and child survivors, and intervening with perpetrators, tackling this insidious aspect of coercive control is essential.

## THE TWO TIERS OF SYSTEMS TARGETED BY PERPETRATORS

At the Safe & Together Institute, we have found it useful to sort entities, like the courts, law enforcement agencies and private/public service providers into two categories. Tier 1 entities, comprised entirely of government systems, have the most obvious and profound impact on the lives of adult and child survivors due to their legal authority to arrest, monitor, incarcerate, remove children from parents, and determine child custody and access. Because of these powers, they are often heavily targeted by perpetrators who seek to gain an advantage over their partner and children as part of a wider pattern of coercive control and actions taken to harm the children. And when those efforts are successful, the cost to survivors is not only financial, emotional, and physical, but also psychological as their trust and faith in public entities is undermined and shattered.





1st Tier Systems – Systems such as police, child protection and family courts that have the most power to directly affect the adult and child survivor.



2nd Tier Systems – Systems including mental health and substance abuse providers, legal professionals and evaluators which feed into 1st Tier Systems and contribute to their information gathering and assessments.

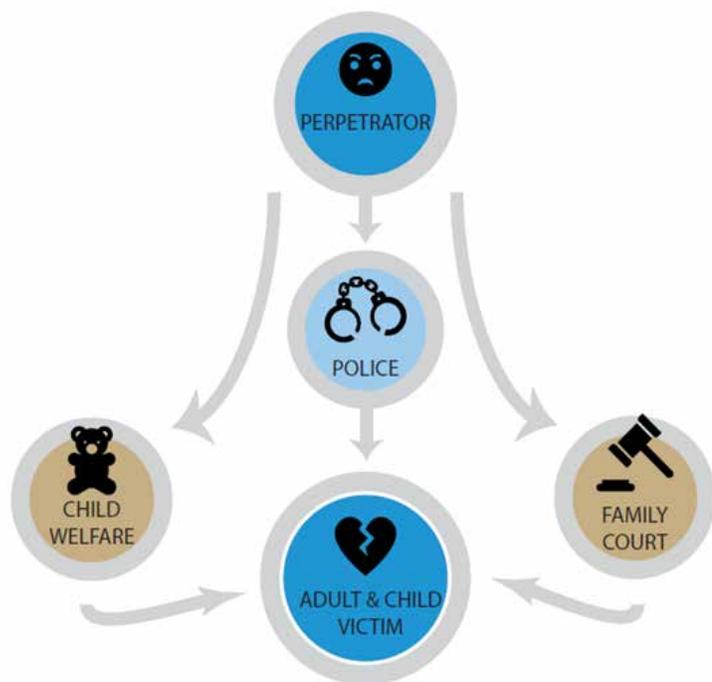
Tier 2 entities, which consist of private professionals and agencies that provide services to families, and other types of organizations like faith institutions, are important for two reasons. First, addiction, mental health, family violence and legal professionals are often providing key information, like evaluations, assessments, progress reports, and notifications of completion of services to Tier 1 systems. Tier 1 decision-makers, like judges or child protection managers, look to these professionals' opinions to help guide their judgments and decisions on cases. Second, Tier 2 professionals, like clergy or couples counselors, often have "soft power" or the influence that comes with defining and labeling a problem or holding authority that is tied to religious communities or professional status. When a counselor or a faith leader is manipulated by a domestic violence perpetrator, it can cause profound and lasting psychological or spiritual damage.

## A FEW WORDS ABOUT PERPETRATOR MANIPULATION OF SYSTEMS AND GENDER BIAS, SYSTEMIC RACISM, AND OTHER FORMS OF OPPRESSION

Perpetrator manipulation of systems relies on unaddressed bias issues that often fall along the lines of gender, race, or other known forms of structural inequality. For example, it is impossible to fully understand how male domestic violence perpetrators are so often successful in accusing their female partners of alienation without appreciating the cultural context of lower expectations of men as parents. And it would be naïve not to factor in the history of children being stolen from indigenous families when evaluating the effectiveness of a perpetrator's threats to report his First Nation partner to child protection. Similarly, a trans survivor's fear of their treatment at the hands of law enforcement can make a perpetrator's threat to call the police even more powerful.

Much of the power of Tier 1 systems to harm survivors relates to their children. The targeting of mothers is heavily influenced by reduced accountability for male perpetrators due to widely-held, low cultural expectations of men as parents (Mandel, 2020). Because the gender of the domestic violence perpetrator and the survivor frequently factor into the perpetrator's ability to manipulate systems, in this paper, we will refer to the perpetrator as male and the survivor as female. This does not mean female perpetrators in same-sex or heterosexual relationships cannot manipulate systems. It does mean that domestic violence-informed systems need to use a perpetrator pattern, gender-responsive approach that considers behaviors and the role of gender in understanding patterns of system manipulation.

## HOW DO PERPETRATORS MANIPULATE SYSTEMS?



Domestic violence perpetrators' manipulation of systems must be seen as part of a wider pattern of coercive control. The concept of coercive control, with its focus on entrapment, loss of freedom, and denial of basic needs, handily explains why perpetrators target Tier 1 systems: because they are powerful vehicles for extending their control over the adult and child survivor (Evan Stark, 2007; Katz, 2016). When a domestic violence perpetrator furnishes his partner with drugs, then reports her to child protection for relapsing and neglecting her children, he depends on state action to achieve his objectives like punishment or removal of her children from a previous relationship from his home. When a

perpetrator threatens to use family court to take children from his partner if she leaves him, he is wielding the threat of government action to keep his partner and children tethered to him. In this way, Tier 1 systems are misled and manipulated by perpetrators to act as tools of terror and agents of torture. There are few experiences more painful to protective parents than having their children taken from them by a court and placed with a person who is harming them.

The following are some of the broad categories of behaviors perpetrators engage in to manipulate systems. Often, more than one is operative in the same situation. For example, research has shown that the rate of false allegations to child protection increases when there is a custody case. The majority of these false allegations are made by non-custodial parents, usually fathers (Trocmé & Bala, 2005).

**Making False Allegations** – Since Tier 1 systems specifically have the power to change lives, control access to children and limit freedoms, false allegations by a domestic violence perpetrator can manipulate the power of these systems to re-enforce their power and control. These can take the form of false reports to child protection, calling law enforcement against the partner when no crime has been committed or claiming “alienation” when what is really going on are reasonable protective efforts. Often, these allegations are completely fabricated without any substance or evidence. These lies, repeated over and over again, can gain traction within systems that are not domestic violence-informed.



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**Exploiting Survivor Vulnerabilities** - Any perceived or real problems that a survivor may have, like mental health or substance use issues, can be exploited by the perpetrator to focus systems on the survivor's "failings" and away from their abusive behaviors and responsibility as a parent. Even behavior that could be perceived as a strength, such as engaging in counseling, can be used as "evidence" of being an unfit parent. Even when the perpetrator has caused the problem – like sabotaging his partner's employment or housing – these losses can be presented as evidence to professionals of her instability and unfitness as a parent. In other circumstances, where the survivor has a real disability or a need for day-to-day support, a perpetrator can leverage the situation to gain backing from professionals to be "in charge" of the situation, e.g., controlling the survivor's medication. In all these situations, the perpetrator is manipulating facts and perceptions to gain an advantage over his partner, and when children are involved, he portrays himself as the stronger, better parent.



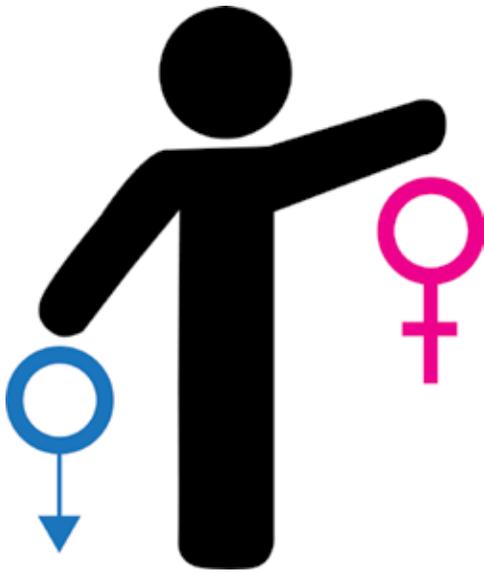
**Using Status, Power, Finances and Privilege** – Domestic violence perpetrators can use their status, power and privilege to manipulate and control the system to further their abuse against the adult and child survivor. This aspect of coercive control may involve active steps to use their privilege, like when an abuser who is a police officer uses his knowledge of the legal system or relationships to avoid consequences or gain more power over his partner. Similarly, a perpetrator who is serving in the military may gain certain deferential treatment if he wears his uniform while interacting with professionals or when appearing in court. It also may involve more passive advantages, like those gained from having a better paying job. In some instances, the status advantages are directly the result of their pattern of coercive control. For example, when a perpetrator limits his partner's ability to work, he will often enter the family court or child protection process with a definite financial edge. In other instances, systemic racism may work in the perpetrator's favor if he comes from the dominant group. Coercive control related to status, power, finances and privilege is often multi-layered. An affluent perpetrator who has controlled his partner for years may present better in court not only because he can hire the best lawyers, more influential mental health experts, and offer a nicer home for the children, but also because he is not weighted down by the trauma effects of years of abuse like his partner.

## OVERALL SYSTEM VULNERABILITIES TO PERPETRATOR MANIPULATION

Domestic violence perpetrators are as successful as they are in manipulating systems because the systems themselves have built-in vulnerabilities. Problematic cultural attitudes, policies, laws, and training practices alongside siloed systems make both Tier 1 and 2 systems ready targets for perpetrators seeking to extend their coercive control. The following are some broad themes related to vulnerabilities that cut across both Tier 1 and Tier 2 systems.

## Failing to View Domestic Violence Perpetration as a Parenting Choice

When professionals view domestic violence and abuse as an “adult-to-adult” issue and fail to see domestic violence perpetration as a parenting choice, they are at a greater risk for manipulation by perpetrators. Child protection systems or family courts often fail to make the connections between coercive control or violence directed at the adult survivor and the multiple pathways by which the perpetrator’s violent and abusive behaviors harm the children. Similarly, criminal court proceedings ignore much of the impact the domestic violence perpetrator’s behaviors have on child and family functioning. Use of the victim’s children as a tool to pressure her to recant is rarely recognized by criminal courts as witnessing tampering and manipulation of both the survivor and the court (Bonomi & Martin, 2017).



## Higher Expectations of Mothers Than Fathers as Parents

Because many professionals and systems have higher expectations of women than men as parents, women are more vulnerable to scrutiny and negative judgments than men when it comes to child protection, custody, and other parenting issues. Similarly, all women, not just mothers, are stereotyped, which makes them vulnerable to being judged as more emotional and more manipulative. Women from marginalized groups often have additional hurdles. As a result, systems may be quicker to dismiss women’s concerns of child abuse and domestic violence, more likely to view their view engagement with counseling for mental and emotional issues as a negative, and more open to allegations of parental alienation lodged against mothers. The invisibility of fathers in the assessments of a community

of providers often means skewed information being returned to referring agencies (Thiara & Humphreys, 2015). The corollary, lower expectations for men as parents, means that fathers’ parenting is less scrutinized and therefore, they need to do less to gain better outcomes in systems with unexamined biases.

## Siloed Responses and Systems

Both Tier 1 & 2 systems can be highly siloed. For example, criminal, family and child protection courts often do not communicate directly with one another. Professionals in each system can have limited to no knowledge about the policy, procedures, practices and limitations of the other system. For example, a judge considering the relevance of domestic violence allegations to custody and access decisions might summarily dismiss those concerns assuming that if there was a child safety issue, statutory child protection would have addressed it. This is far from the reality in many jurisdictions. Child protection practice often ignores or minimizes the danger to children by domestic violence perpetrators. So, in this example, the court’s lack of knowledge of the child protection system allows the perpetrator to gain an advantage in the custody proceedings.



*Survivors' engagement with Tier 2 systems can create additional vulnerabilities while the outcome of a perpetrator's involvement with those providers is often neutral or even increases their ability to control their partner and children.*

In Tier 2, clinicians often focus primarily on the diagnosis and treatment of pathologies. For survivors, this means that their engagement with mental health or addiction services may not be contextualized to the perpetrator's coercive control. Treatment reports from mental health and addiction providers to Tier 1 entities usually highlight survivor pathology, like anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, and ignore the behaviors of the perpetrator that might have contributed to or caused those symptoms. Traditional mental health and addiction frameworks may not include an assessment of the survivor's protective capacities, which is another way the information going to Tier 1 systems may be negatively skewed. Even trauma-informed practices can make systems vulnerable to perpetrators' influence when the emphasis is on the survivor's trauma history instead of the perpetrator's pattern of coercive control and abuse. With perpetrators, a mental health diagnosis or addiction diagnosis may

redirect systems away from patterns of coercive control, especially when those issues are used as an excuse for violent behavior. It may not be an overstatement to say that survivors' engagement with Tier 2 systems can create additional vulnerabilities while the outcome of a perpetrator's involvement is often neutral or even increases their ability to control their partner and children.

### **Lack of Formal Education and Training Around Domestic Violence**

When professionals within systems are not educated in a perpetrator pattern-based approach, they are vulnerable to manipulation by perpetrators. A lack of understanding of how coercive control harms children and how to assess a survivor's protective capacity can contribute to successful allegations of failure-to-protect and parental alienation. Given that domestic violence often intersects with mental health and addiction issues, professionals who are not trained in the complex interaction of these issues may prioritize addressing a perpetrator's addiction or depression over their coercive control and abusive behaviors. Lack of training regarding intersections means a survivor, whose access to services has been sabotaged by her partner's control, is likely to simplistically be labeled "non-compliant," with potential broad repercussions across all of Tier 1. Each of these training gaps makes both Tier 1 and Tier 2 professionals more vulnerable to perpetrator manipulation.

## **SYSTEM-SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF MANIPULATIONS & VULNERABILITIES**

Above and beyond the generic reasons systems are vulnerable to perpetrator manipulation, each Tier 1 system is targeted by perpetrators for specific manipulations and has its own set of vulnerabilities. Each system often has associated Tier 2 agencies who play a major role with families and often share some of the same vulnerabilities.

## Why the Child Protection System is Susceptible to Perpetrator Manipulation

The following are some traits and dynamics which make child protection systems vulnerable to perpetrator manipulation:

- A lack of policies that name the domestic violence perpetrator as the source of harm to the children.
- A history and culture of punitive approaches focused primarily on mothering.
- Physical violence, incident-based definitions of domestic violence that do not include coercive control.
- A history of treating parents as a unit versus understanding the role each parent plays in child safety and well-being.
- A domestic violence response culture that strongly revolves around the idea that “failure to protect” by the non-offending parent, not the perpetrator’s behaviors, are the source of the harm to children.
- Child protection systems that have failed to modernize in response to data that high prevalence rates for domestic violence combined with high correlations between domestic violence and child injury and death.
- A lack of worker skill, confidence, and commitment to focusing on fathers, including abusive fathers.
- Siloed, service-driven systems that focus on referring parents to separate services for distinct problems.
- Heavy dependence on evaluators, attorneys, and best-interested advocates who may have little or no training in domestic violence-informed practice.
- A history of racism that has a differential impact on women from marginalized groups.



### Examples of Manipulation Behaviors in Child Protection:

- Calling child protection systems and making false allegations of child neglect or abuse against the survivor.
- Making false allegations of substance abuse or mental health issues.
- Accusing the survivor of having a new partner who is abusing the children.
- Entrapping a survivor in illegal behaviors then threatening to use those against to have her children removed.
- Using her involvement in treatment for mental health as way to accuse her of being a poor parent.
- Weaponizing real mental health and addiction issues against the survivor.

## Why the Family Court System is Susceptible to Perpetrator Manipulation

The following are some traits and dynamics which make the family court system vulnerable to perpetrator manipulation:

- A poor history of reconciling a “friendly parent” framework with a child safety framework that accounts for the impact of domestic violence on a parent’s concern for their child’s safety and well-being with an abusive parent.
- History of parental alienation being used as an allegation against mothers who are domestic violence survivors.
- A culture of believing that domestic violence is only relevant to children when the couple is together.
- A lack of understanding of coercive control and its intersection with child sexual abuse, child physical abuse and neglect.
- A mistaken belief that if there were child safety issues, child protection would have addressed them.
- Dependence on evaluators, attorneys, best-interest advocates who may have little to no training in domestic violence-informed practice.
- A system that can favor the more affluent, educated, and better-resourced parties.



### Examples of Manipulation Behaviors in Family Court:

- Fabricating allegations of parental alienation against the survivor.
- Using motions and legal processes as a form of harassment, e.g. frivolous or constant motions or threats of motions in court.
- Using mental health diagnosis or addiction issues to smear the other parent, even when the perpetrator’s behaviour may be the cause of the problems.
- Accusing the other parent of being unfit.
- Turning survivors’ protective efforts against them in court, e.g., turning taking the child to safety into kidnapping or alienation accusations.
- Weaponizing real mental health and addiction issues against the survivor.

## Why Law Enforcement and the Criminal Court System is Susceptible to Perpetrator Manipulation

The following are some traits and dynamics that make the criminal justice system vulnerable to perpetrator manipulation:

- The incident-based focus of the criminal justice system can contribute to the wrongful arrests of survivors.
- Emphasis on physical forms of violence, not other types of coercive control behaviors.
- Presence of domestic violence perpetrators in law enforcement or in other positions of power.
- Macho culture of law enforcement.
- A siloed system that only peripherally addresses child safety and well-being in domestic violence cases.

## FIVE WAYS TO MAKE YOUR SYSTEM PERPETRATOR PROOF

Professionals and systems can make it more difficult for a perpetrator to be more successful in their manipulation attempts. As part of the process of “perpetrator proofing” yourself and your organization, it is essential to map out the following:

1. How might perpetrators manipulate my system or organization?
2. How is my system or organization vulnerable to perpetrator manipulation?

When determining how you might be targeted for manipulation by perpetrators, reflect on the kind of decisions and actions your agency makes. What are the actions you take that have the largest impact on the lives of your clients? Is it the mental health or addiction diagnosis that will shape a client’s view of themselves, their life, and others? Or is it the report that your agency will provide child protection or the court? Use the lists provided to start creating your own list of the ways domestic violence perpetrators may attempt to manipulate each of these points of action.



## Examples of Manipulation Behaviors in Law Enforcement & Criminal Court:

- Calling the police and making allegations against the survivor.
- Committing crimes, like fraud, in the name of the survivor.
- Pretending to be the victim and painting the survivor as the perpetrator.
- Coercing survivors into committing crimes, taking the blame for criminal behaviour, or getting into debt.
- Calling the police on a child or family member who intervenes to protect the survivor.
- Harassing or intimidating survivors or children under the guise of “help” or “support” by asking that law enforcement to do wellness checks

To further identify vulnerabilities, consider your “soft” spots for manipulation. For example, is there a tendency to believe the calm presentation of a perpetrator as compared to the more emotional presentation of the survivor? Or does the avoidance of working with fathers make your agency more vulnerable to attributing children’s problems to the mother’s parenting? What are the policies and practices that prevent you from placing the diagnosis of survivor’s addiction or mental health issues into the context of the perpetrator’s pattern of coercive control? Use the list of vulnerabilities provided to help you determine where your practice might be most vulnerable to manipulation.

**The following are five specific steps you can use to “perpetrator proof” your practice and your system.**

1

**Map the Perpetrator’s Manipulation of Systems** – You can identify perpetrators’ manipulation of systems by mapping those behaviors and patterns. How many times has the perpetrator reported the survivor to child protection or filed motions in family courts? Do these reports have any facts to support them? Did this person act in a similar manner in previous relationships? When did the behavior start? Do these reports correlate with the survivor ending the relationship or starting a new one? Perpetrator pattern mapping offers a step-by-step process for connecting the dots between reporting and coercive control.

2

**Map the Perpetrator’s Manipulation onto Child and Family Functioning** – You can map the ways in which perpetrators’ manipulation of systems impact child and family functioning. This highlights the behavior as a parenting choice that has real impact for adult and child survivors. For example, how does harassing litigation impact resources for the household? How does the stress of repeated allegations impact the survivor’s energy, mental health, and parenting capacity? How are the children detrimentally impacted when they are involved in these systems? How do these experiences impact survivors’ trust and engagement with professionals and systems? How do all of these issues create harm to each child in the family? Multiple pathways to harm framework can help identify the impact of the perpetrator manipulations.

3

**Map the Survivor’s Strengths & Efforts to Resist** – Mapping the multiple ways in which survivors resist and respond to perpetrators’ manipulation of systems can support partnering with her and rebuilding trust. Recognizing and mapping how survivors are managing the impact of the perpetrator’s pattern, including their manipulation of system interventions in their lives, can create a fuller appreciation of how hard survivors have been working to maintain the basic household functioning. It can also put their day-to-day parenting and protective efforts into clearer relief, creating a more child-centered narrative than one that solely focuses on mental health diagnoses, trauma or addiction.



**Make Connections and Avoid Siloed Responses** – Making connections between the perpetrator’s behavior patterns and issues like substance use and mental health can prevent the weaponization of diagnoses against survivors. Mental health and substance use services can work with perpetrators in a way that addresses their addictions and mental health diagnosis while acknowledging that the perpetrator is also manifesting a pattern of behavior that is harmful to other people. Similarly, we can acknowledge perpetrators’ trauma histories while also recognizing that acting out in an abusive or violent way does nothing to help them heal their past and may, in fact, compound it. Assessments of survivors can be more holistic – including not only the traditional considerations of mental health and addiction practitioners but also acknowledging current and historic coercive control and assessing for protective capacities. In recognizing these complexities, Tier 1 & 2 professionals can create stronger, more resilient response networks that hold perpetrators accountable and support adult and child survivors.



**Recognize the Importance of Documentation** – Tier 1 systems rely on an amalgamation of case information from a wide range of sources, including documentation from Tier 2 systems. One of the most powerful ways that we can combat perpetrator exploitation of systems is to document all of the information from mapping the perpetrator’s behaviors, impact on child and family functioning, and the survivor’s resistance and strengths. How things are described and documented is critical in systems’ decisions and combatting perpetrator manipulation.



Learning how to assess, map and document are key skills that can make a huge difference. Being conscious of how perpetrators influence your systems makes you better at your job – it creates better assessments, recommendations, interventions and ultimately creates better outcomes for survivors. It’s time to perpetrator-proof our systems.

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