The American prison population continues to grow. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, as of December 31, 2006, there were 2,258,983 people in American prisons and jails. The Federal Bureau of Prisons is the largest prison system in the United States. As of February 2008, the Federal Bureau of Prisons listed 114 institutions with a total prisoner population of 200,931. The majority of federal prisoners are housed in institutions miles away from their last place of residence, serving extremely long sentences for non-violent offences (Mumola, 2000). Research has found that one major impediment to visiting loved-ones in prison is the distance to the prison (Casey-Acevedo and Bakken, 2002). Visitors face transportation and financial barriers to visiting (Tewksbury and DeMichele, 2006). It is an exhausting, resource-intensive process for a family member to make one visit to a prison (Christian, 2006). Consequently, 41.1 percent of federal prisoners never receive a visit from their family (Mumola, 2000), and are more likely to serve their time in social isolation and feel the pains of imprisonment more acutely. One way to reduce those pains for federal and state prisoners is through volunteer prison visitation work, which is shown to help prisoners cope with life in the penitentiary and build relationships (Duncan and Balbar, 2008).

People may decide to volunteer to visit prisoners for religious, spiritual, moral, ethical, social, personal or professional reasons. Numerous religious organizations sponsor and encourage volunteers to visit prisons. Visiting prisoners is consonant with religious principles that encourage service to others. In a similar way, people who share a more secular world view might volunteer to visit prisoners because they believe that they have a moral or ethical obligation to provide assistance to those who are deprived of their freedom. Research suggests that visiting promotes empathy, tolerance and an appreciation of one’s own quality of life (Duncan and Balbar, 2008). Further, prison visits initiate the process of reintegrating prisoners into society by acknowledging the intrinsic worth of men and women placed in prison, which aids in strengthening the bond between individuals in prison and society.

Academics may find volunteering to visit prisoners is a convenient way to enter prisons to study prison conditions and to provide a form of accountability for the prisons (Duncan and Balbar, 2008). Indeed, the Convict Criminology perspective (Richards and Ross, 2001; Ross and
Richards, 2003) supports the idea that researchers enter prisons to learn from prisoners. The experiences of entering the prison, interacting with guards and the conversations with prisoners cannot be found in a textbook or research article. These experiences may be shared with students to enlighten, and enrich their knowledge of prisons and the treatment of prisoners. In fact, some prisoners have conveyed their hope that their story will be told, their voice will be heard and somewhere along the line, having been heard, someone will declare the ineffectual “war on crime and drugs” to be over.

Ex-convicts may volunteer to visit prisoners as a way to heal themselves. Since ex-convicts have experienced the desolation of prison, they might become a volunteer visitor to help men or women who are currently incarcerated cope with such feelings. Whatever the reason for visiting, there is no doubt that visits reap benefits to all involved. This paper discusses the benefits of prison visitation based on the experiences of three volunteer prison visitors. While we have been visiting men and women in numerous federal prisons for many years, the focus here is on what we have learned from male prisoners at one federal prison. The institution will not be named to protect the prisoners.

**Benefits of Prison Visits for the Prisoner**

Prisoners benefit from volunteer prison visits in a variety of ways. In particular, prison visits give the prisoner something positive to anticipate which helps prisoners cope with the amount of time to be served. Volunteer prison visitors may provide emotional support and educational guidance, as well as promote pro-social values. They help prisoners stay connected to the outside world, particularly those prisoners who do not receive visits from anyone else. Volunteers may also help prisoners cope with disappointment, model commitment, promote trust and develop a sense of hope for the future.

**Visiting Helps Prisoners Cope with the Slow Moving Pace of Prison Time**

Prisoners tend to have a profoundly different sense of time and space. Some prisoners report that the prison world moves in slow motion, with very little changes from one day to the next. Behind the wall or inside the fence, they live in a miniature artificial world that you walk across in a few minutes, devoid of variation in sensory stimulation. Recently, one prisoner explained to us how such sensory deprivation creates a sense of timelessness within prison. Thus, a day in prison is much longer than
a day in free society. Consequently, for the prisoner, a visit is a special event that changes the individual’s perception of time and makes it move just a little faster. The visit is especially important for prisoners who are housed in administrative segregation and experiencing a more severe type of sensory deprivation.

On any given day, federal prisons confine countless individuals in disciplinary or administrative segregation – what the prisoners call “the hole”. The first type is used as a response for violating prison rules and can last from one day to months. This may be for missing count, failure to obey an order, defending oneself in a fight or failure to make one’s bed. The second type is decided by the warden and has no specific limit. This form of isolation may be inflicted on prisoners with gang affiliations, a need for protective custody, or, as we have observed, on those who are being punished for filing lawsuits. Many federal prisons also routinely sequester prisoners with infectious diseases (e.g., HIV, AIDS, Hepatitis C) in segregation cellblocks. If they bleed, have sex or share other bodily fluids with others or threaten staff with contact, they go to the hole. Prisoners that complain about the lack of medical attention, inadequate medication and the inability to navigate hallways or stairs because of infirmities or injury may also be sent to the hole. Administrative segregation also houses prisoners that have psychological problems. In large and crowded federal penitentiaries where older prisoners are doing life sentences, many elderly men request time in the hole as sanctuary, a break from the action on the tiers, hoping for a little peace and quiet. They are tired of all the drama and games of the young men that seek to dominate cellblocks. Provided the hole is quiet, assuming the mentally damaged prisoners contain their screaming and pounding on cell doors, they might get a little rest in solitary confinement and then politely ask to return home to their cell in general population. During their imprisonment, many federal prisoners spend time in segregation – some even die in segregation alone.

We have especially enjoyed the smiles of the men we have helped release from segregation, since the only time they are allowed to leave their cells is when they receive a visit. The men from segregation arrive at the visiting room wearing “carrot suits” (orange jump suits), handcuffs and leg irons. We ask the correctional officers to remove their restraints. Our first visit with one man was very emotional, as it was the first time he had been out of his segregation cell in many months. This elderly man, who had just undergone heart bypass surgery, was so grateful to be out of his cell that he wept through most of the visit.

Volunteers can also engage in minor actions that help reduce the prisoner’s sense of deprivation and encourage their dreams. For example, our group of volunteers has mailed print-outs of internet jokes, trivia,
instructions on card games and information about new cars. Additionally, instead of notifying prisoners of our visit dates by letterhead, members of our group pick up various state post cards or use pictures that they have taken as note-cards. We have been told that these cards and pictures are used to decorate their cell. We also send holiday and birthday cards to remind the prisoners that we are thinking about them, even when we are not visiting.

Prison Visitors Provide Emotional and Educational Support

Prisoners benefit from the emotional support, as well as the pro-social interaction that takes place during visits. Additionally, prisoners may benefit when visitors are able to provide educational guidance and advice about exiting prison to enter college (Richards, 2004; Rose et al., 2005). Our group, for example, has sent college enrollment information, donated college textbooks to the prison library, sent college level books to prisoners, provided letters of references for college entrance and assisted several prisoners in entering graduate school. One even completed his doctorate.

Providing a sympathetic ear to prisoners who are experiencing problems – other than being incarcerated – is a way to demonstrate emotional support. Crying with a man who had learned on Christmas day that the mother he had not seen in ten years had died, as well as providing an ear for his expression of anger and feeling of injustice that he would not be able to attend her funeral, is an example of such support. Likewise, listening to the concerns of men that have been torn from their children, and who are expressing their sense of frustration and helplessness at not being with them to celebrate happy times or provide guidance during difficult times is another case in point. Our particular group has two female visitors that hug the men at the beginning and end of the visit. This simple human interactive touch may be the only positive touch they receive throughout their sentence.

Helping Prisoners Maintain a Connection with the Outside World

Being in prison, of course, means being cut-off from direct contact with the larger world. For many prisoners, this loss of contact can produce a profound sense of impotence, dislocation and being boxed in within the small world of the prison. Volunteer visitors can help broaden the prison social world by providing a connection to the outside social world, particularly for those prisoners that do not receive visits from family or friends. Volunteer visitors can also help prisoners stay abreast of the various
changes that take place beyond the walls of the prison. For example, while it may be difficult for prisoners to obtain information on changes in the law that influence release dates, volunteers may easily obtain and share this information during visits. Prisoners share their anxiety over being released and their fear about not being able to adjust to a world that has experienced such change. They also discuss the fear of being in a free world and uncertainty about how to interact with disappointed family members. A conversation with an individual who was recently released from prison revealed his fear of open spaces and being touched. Another conversation with an individual (only 22 years old) soon to be released revealed a sense of worthlessness and being unsure how to interact with his family because of the shame he felt. Volunteer prison visitors may be able to help prisoners talk through these fears and reduce their anxieties.

Finally, prisoners benefit when visitors are able to provide post-release guidance to help prevent individuals from returning to prison for technical violations. Engaging in discussions with prisoners about global and local changes may be helpful in reducing anxiety, particularly for prisoners who have been in prison for a long time. Promoting trust through such discussion may help prisoners discuss other issues that create anxiety about re-entry. Such discussions are especially important for prisoners nearing the end of their sentence, as the information learned and the support provided may help reorient them to the outside world.

Volunteer Visitors Can Model Commitment which May Help Prisoners to Develop Trust

Many prisoners have faced rejection and have been let down by others, both within and outside the prison. Moreover, because prisoners are aware of the hidden agendas maintained by other prisoners and correctional staff, prison tends to breed a certain cynicism about the intentions of others. The result is that prisoners are constantly on guard. They have learned through experience that trusting others too much creates the potential for disappointment and under some circumstances may be detrimental to the prisoners’ physical well-being, even leading to suicide or murder. By being consistent and committed in visiting prisoners, volunteer visitors may help promote the prisoner’s ability to trust.

Our group visits the prison once a month, consistently. We have maintained a regular presence in one particular institution for fifteen years. The least experienced visitor in our group has been visiting for over two years. If life circumstances such as illness or bad weather prevent one of us from visiting, the rest of the volunteers always show up on visiting
We visit family style, meaning we visit as a group with the prisoners sitting in a small, intimate circle in the visiting room. Visiting as a group helps to promote trust, as we share our lives with each other, creating a social support group of volunteers and prisoners for each prisoner in the group. For example, when we are visiting the prisoners, not only talk with the volunteers but they talk with each other sharing information about such things as jobs in the institution, recipes, which people in the institution might be useful or supportive and who to avoid. Such conversations are particularly helpful to new prisoners. The relationships the men form within our group extend beyond the visiting room, providing the prisoners with support and information beyond the visit.

The prisoners that we visit change from month to month as the men are transferred to other institutions, released to community custody or die. Since the prisoners in our group keep in touch with each other outside the visiting room, they are able to share with us what has happened with a member of the group if he is not present for a visit. By staying in touch with each other within the institution, the prisoners in our group promote a sense of commitment to each other as they strive to provide the volunteer with information to be used to follow-up on the prisoner that is absent. This sense of group connectedness may provide some sense of emotional security for prisoners living in such an unstable environment.

Over the years, we have two to five visitors meeting with five to fifteen prisoners in the prison visiting room. The list of men requesting a volunteer visit is never-ending. Unfortunately, the number of volunteers is small. To promote the commitment to visiting with each man in the group, we base the number of male prisoners that we visit on the number of visitors. For example, currently, we have about three prisoners for each volunteer visitor in the group. There have been times when the ratio of prisoners to volunteers was larger and times when it was smaller, but a ratio of three-to-one seems to promote better conversations. We also change seating arrangements at least once during the visit, so that each of the volunteers has a chance to visit with each of the prisoners.

Volunteers may Help Prisoners Cope with Disappointment and Develop a Sense of Hope for the Future

Perhaps one of the most difficult realities faced by prisoners is the sense of hopelessness and despair that incarceration creates, particularly for long-term prisoners. Because we have visited these men over a number of years, we have witnessed the swings in emotions, the ups and downs that prisoners experience including disappointment over a visit that did
not materialize, a death in their family, a divorce, an unanswered letter, a failed parole hearing (for prisoners sentenced before 1984), the lack of caring by other prisoners and correctional staff, and the fear of what will happen upon release. Prison is about disappointment and fear, including fear of the unknown.

By visiting, prison volunteers have an opportunity to provide support in times of disappointment. Volunteers can provide encouragement, alternative perspectives on events, condolences or just hugs, which can help prisoners cope with negative events. In our group, the visitors also share their feelings, life’s disappointments and listen to the advice of the prisoners. Through sharing positive life events and hardships we develop a bond that is mutually supportive. This bond allows us to engage in discussions with prisoners that focus on their educational, employment and other goals they may have for life after prison. As we discuss their goals, the volunteers serve as a sounding board and may provide helpful guidance or make them aware of resources that they can use once they are released. Through continued commitment to visiting, mutually reinforcing care and concern, our group has promoted trusting relationships and have demonstrated to prisoners that there is a world beyond the walls where some people are willing to give them a chance. When volunteers and prisoners engage in discussions that focus on the future, an increased sense of hope can be developed.

**Benefits of Prison Visits for the Volunteer Visitor**

Volunteer visiting creates a sense of community and by serving others, volunteer visitors receive both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. Extrinsic rewards include, for example, the gratitude the prisoners express. Service to others, in itself, provides the intrinsic benefits that are embedded within the visiting experience.

*Volunteers Receive Inexplicable Gratitude*

The prisoners that we visit always express a heartfelt appreciation for our time. Their gratitude is at times overwhelming and very difficult to articulate. As prisoners enter the visiting room, their smiles stretch from ear-to-ear and their exuberance uplifts the entire group – prisoners and visitors alike. During group conversations, prisoners mostly try to set a positive tone for conversations, the exception being when there has been a death or divorce in their families. When there has been a disturbing event that someone needs to share, all are respectful and supportive.
The prisoners only miss a visit when they are extremely ill, which occurs rarely.

One of the most touching gestures that the prisoners engage in to show their appreciation for visits is to do their best, given their limited resources, to present themselves well for the occasion. For example, the men iron designs (criss-cross seams) into their uniforms, are always freshly showered, smiling, guard their language (particularly with the female volunteers) and have usually saved some special interest topic to discuss. Special topics for conversations include news items from media sources, movies, family events and books they have read. Of course, we have regular conversations about sports, sometimes politics, the poor quality of prison food, prison rumours and legal proceedings related to their sentence. While some may spend a good deal of their time “venting” about their particular situation, most show their appreciation for the visitor by asking about the visitor’s life. They also comment on any difference in our appearance, follow-up on comments we may have made during the last visit and apologize for our wait to get into the prison or any other impediment we may have encountered on our journey to the visiting area.

Volunteers Are Introduced to the Realities of the Prison System

Although there is much to learn from studying academic research on prisons, no amount of reading can prepare one for the realities of the prison visiting experience. This experience begins with the first glimpse of the razor wire perimeter, ends with being locked between two sets of bars waiting to be processed out and includes all that is learned in between.

Gaining entrance into the visiting room can be difficult and demeaning for visitors. One of the consequences of prison overcrowding is prison visiting room crowding. When the visiting room is crowded, families (including children), friends and others may spend hours waiting in line to enter the visiting room. This wait takes place outside the prison, in all types of weather, with no protection from the elements. On holidays the visiting room will always be packed, as many prisoners receive visits only once a year usually around Christmas time. Additionally, the Patriot Act and Homeland Security measures have generated greater restrictions on visiting and on freedom of movement for prisoners.

More recently, federal law for entering prisons has become more restrictive which has led to visitors being detained, and being subjected to body and cavity searches under certain conditions. There are also restrictions on the type of clothing visitors may wear. Such rules may
change without prior notice and result in visitors being turned away after traveling long distances or subjected to a strip search. A female member of our group was forced on her first visit, despite the fact that she is a member of a professional volunteer organization, to remove her clothing from the waist up, don a hospital gown with no ties and undergo a search after her under-wire bra set off the metal detector. In one prison that we visit, a new restriction against wearing tan slacks was recently posted and those wearing this color of pants were asked to leave. If they lived or were staying nearby, they could go home or to their motel rooms to change their attire. But if they did not live nearby, they either had to skip the visit or go to the store to buy new clothing. Also, some female guards appear to be severe in their treatment of female visitors. For instance, they regularly arbitrarily tell female visitors to wear appropriate clothing and make inappropriate comments on hemlines or blouses.

When our group arrives at the institution we wait in line, on a good day, approximately thirty to forty-five minutes to enter the main building. Although visiting time begins at 2:30 p.m., the prison does not begin processing visitors until that time. Upon entry we sign-in, show identification, and lock keys, wallets and purses in a locker. We also remove shoes, belts, watches, ear rings, rings and so on, before we walk through a metal detector, present our hand to be stamped by the prison guard and line up to proceed down a hallway to the “sally port” entrance to the visiting room. The first set of metal bars clang open and a correctional officer directs us into the sally port. The bars clang shut, locking us inside, between two doors. Then, another officer from the visiting room instructs us to place our stamped hands under a black-light. The second door then squeals open as an officer directs us into the visiting room with an iron door clanging shut behind us. We proceed forward and present our visiting list to the officers stationed on a platform overlooking the visiting room. The room is filled with tables barely two feet high and plastic chairs. There are restrooms for men and women, a row of vending machines, a separate space for children to play and at the opposite end of the room, another sally port from which the prisoners enter. The prisoners must submit to strip searches entering and leaving the visiting area. We collect a few tables and chairs, arrange them together and take our seats to wait for the men to arrive.

Although our treatment by correctional staff is often cordial and professional, some staff appear to make it their duty to inconvenience visitors. Staff presiding at the front desk at the entrance to the institution may relate to visitors in a very mechanical manner and
give a not-so-subtle reminder that they are in control. The guard at
the desk determines how long you wait to enter the prison and how
quickly visitors are processed into the visiting room. In general, we are
reminded that anyone who visits prisoners deserves to be punished too.
Despite our treatment, however, we rarely voice strong complaints, nor
do other visitors to the prison. Both visitors and the men inside know
that if there is a major problem created by a visitor, the people who will
pay the most are the prisoners. For example, if visitors complain about
treatment by correctional staff, a prisoner may have privileges taken
away inside the prison after a visit.

Federal prisoners must have all visitors authorized and listed on their
official visiting list. This is a list approved by their case manager and
limited to five to ten people depending upon the security level of the
prison, which may include immediate family, other relatives, friends and
associates. All visitors are also subject to criminal background checks
and federal investigation, which is standard procedure for any visitor
entering U.S. federal prisons.

In addition to the difficulties faced by visitors entering the prison, the
prisoners also face many challenges to visiting. If a prisoner is suspected
of receiving contraband during a visit the prisoner’s cell may be “tossed”
(searched). Over the years, we have learned from the people we visit that
prisoners receiving frequent visits are more likely to have their living
quarters searched. They are also subject to disciplinary proceedings if
any unauthorized item – not issued by prison, sold in commissary or in
their approved property list – is found in their possession or living space.
The rule is that prisoners will not enter or leave the visiting room with
“anything” (i.e., scraps of paper, pen or pencil, food, personal items)
except their uniforms. Creating further difficulties in visiting, some
correctional guards may deceitfully impose a reduction in visiting time,
a method of informally imposing additional punishment. For example,
despite the fact that the prison is notified in advance of our scheduled
visiting day along with the prisoners waiting to be called out for the visit,
the visiting room correctional officer may delay calling the prisoners to
bring them to the visiting area.

Visiting can be further complicated by the fact that prisoners are
frequently transferred to other institutions, without notice, for seemingly
obscure reasons, making visits impossible. Many times these are
involuntary or “midnight transfers” where the prisoners are bussed out in
the middle of the night with no warning or opportunity to tell their family
or friends that may be visiting that week. The prisoners call this “diesel
therapy” as they are transported on prison buses all over the country. While in transit – by car, bus or plane – they are in holdover status, with no access to commissary accounts to pay for phone calls. They receive no mail and depending upon the security level may not be allowed to mail letters. It may be weeks or months before they have an opportunity to notify their family of their relocation. Over the years, we have had many men on our list transferred to distant corners of the federal prison system. They disappear into the vast network of U.S. Government jails, detention centers, correctional institutions and penitentiaries, and we never see them again.

In general, a prisoner may fear a transfer, being placed in a new environment where he or she must start over making friends, forming alliances and replacing personal property lost during the process. After months on the bus, sleeping in “holdover units” at prisons along the way, they finally arrive at their designated institution. Once assigned to “general population” in the new prison, it may take them weeks to see a case manager, re-establish an officially sanctioned “visiting list” and receive permission for family, friends, attorneys or volunteers to schedule visits with them. Often times, when prisoners find out they are being transferred, they leave a verbal message with another prisoner, thanking the volunteers for their time, apologizing that they did not have the opportunity to say goodbye, and asking that the volunteers try and track them through the system in order to send them a new prison volunteer visitor to check on them.

Environmental conditions in the prison can make visiting physically uncomfortable. Prisons lack a sufficient amount of air-conditioning and heat, even in the visiting room. In the summer, the air-conditioned prison visiting room is hot. In the winter, the heated visiting room is cold. The prisoners tell us their housing units have no air-conditioning, maybe a few fans and the summer temperature in the housing units can reach upward of 100 degrees. They also have inadequate heating in the winter. Prisoners insist that the visiting room is the most comfortable place in the institution. Further, prisons are infested with rodents and roaches – we see them in the visiting room. The prisoners also tell us that when more prisoners are packed into cellblocks and dormitories, the population of rats and bugs increases. In some institutions, the kitchens have been closed by the board of health, due to roach infestations.

In addition to the sensory deprivation and restrictions on freedom inherently imposed through incarceration, prisoners are subjected to further punishment when, for example, searches of cells or lockers
are conducted within the prison and prisoners lose personal clothing items they have purchased, family photos or legal papers. We have also visited with blind, crippled and desperately sick men, some in wheel chairs, who complain about the lack of medical attention, forcing them to manage such medical problems as diabetes through nutritional control. Such nutritional control is made difficult, since prison food, for the most part, is so bad – rotten meat, fruits and vegetables – that most prisoners work to buy their food from the commissary at an increased price compared to prices outside the prison. Prisoners tend to keep commissary food (e.g. canned tuna, soups, snacks) in their lockers. When they run out of these items they resort to eating what they can find in vending machines, if they can afford the prices. We have also discovered that handicapped prisoners, who have been released early to half-way houses, may be returned merely because the half-way house is not handicap-accessible.

Most importantly, what we have learned from visiting prisoners is that being removed from society is only the beginning of the punishment. One of the true pains of imprisonment is grief. These men grieve, on a daily basis, over the loss of interaction with their families and friends. They grieve over the loss of the ability to share with their loved ones life’s special moments such as birthdays and holidays, and they grieve most profoundly over the loss of the ability to share in the final days of a loved one’s life. Most of these men experience a sense of shame over their circumstances, and as a result, are constantly trying to engage in self-improvement through work, reading and education. Although these men want their freedom, some are afraid of being set free because they have become so institutionalized.

**Benefits of Prison Visits for Society and the Prison**

Both prison and society benefit from prison visits, since prison visits are correlated with reductions in recidivism. More than 600,000 men and women were to be released from America’s prisons in 2004 (Nolan 2004). For every prisoner released, two out of three will violate their parole conditions or be re-arrested within three years (Bureau of Justice Statistics Report, 2002). There is almost universal consensus among state correctional agencies and legislatures that quality visitation reduces recidivism (Kupers, 1999). For instance, Florida’s 1999 Statute 944.8031 reads as follows:

The Legislature finds that maintaining an inmate’s family and community relationships through enhancing visitor services and
programs and increasing the frequency and quality of the visits is an underutilized correctional resource that can improve the inmates’ behavior in the correctional facility and, upon an inmates’ release from a correctional facility, will help to reduce recidivism.

We know that prison visits help to reduce recidivism and this is supported by research (Ohlin, 1954; Holt and Miller, 1972; Kupers, 1999). Jacoby and Kozie-Peak (1997) found that mentally-ill prisoners benefited from a higher quality of life after release if they had quality visitation, supporting the findings of Bonta et al. (1998) which showed that the major predictors of recidivism are the same for mentally-ill prisoners and for those without a mental illness. Research has also indicated that prison visits help prisoners adjust to the prison environment and to the broader social world after they are released from prison (Casey-Acevedo and Bakken, 2002). It is with these points in mind that we argue that prison authorities ought to facilitate prison visitation rather than continue enacting obstructionist policies which make the process unnecessarily difficult.

**Conclusion**

We have shared the personal observations of our group of visitors. If you were to ask the prisoners being visited, we are sure they would have their own observations. As professors of criminology, in many ways we owe them a debt of gratitude, as they schooled us on prison realities. These realities can be shared and this sharing may improve prison conditions by promoting volunteer visitation, as well as highlighting impediments to family visits, medical care, poor nutrition and lack of appropriate preparation for release. In a more profound sense, like Kafka’s (2002) “Hunger Artist”, these men have taught us humility, patience and to appreciate what freedom we may have.
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