



PATHWAYS TO POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

Maximizing Opportunities
for Youth in Poverty

RESEARCH BRIEF

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Educational and Employment Profile of California Youth

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The recent economic recession has underscored the need for policies and programs that increase and equalize opportunities for our nation's youth. The *Pathways to Postsecondary Success* project, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, recognizes this need and seeks to maximize the educational and economic prospects for California's racially diverse population. To that end, and as part of the broader project, this brief highlights the postsecondary educational and employment experiences of the state's 18- to 26-year-olds. Focusing on young people who are out of high school provides us with insights into their future trajectories, and can thus inform the state's educational, economic and social policies.

The figures presented in this brief draw on data from the 2009 and 2010 American Community Survey (ACS). Each year, the United States Census Bureau administers the ACS to approximately 3 million households in order to provide current socioeconomic data at the community, state and national levels. The survey provides a valuable window into the pathways of young adults once they leave high school. This brief draws on survey data collected from California residents. Because of the range of factors that are introduced when considering the experiences of young adults who have received all or most of their K-12 education outside of the United States, these analyses exclude any young adults who arrived in this country after the age of 16, whether as immigrants or international students.

This brief first offers an overview of the demographic diversity of all California young adults between the ages of 18 and 26. The research presented here examines the experiences of young adults from a

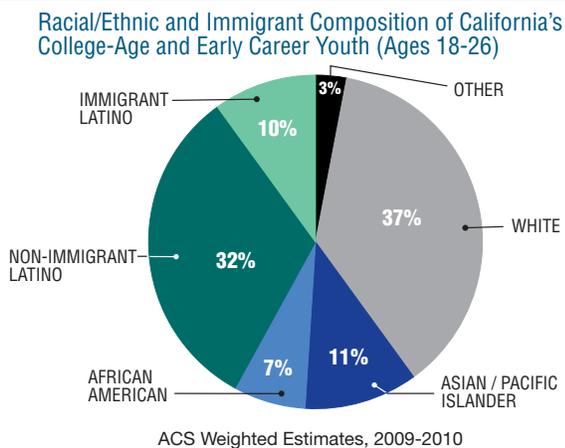
range of socioeconomic backgrounds. It focuses on educational attainment and employment patterns, separating college-age youth (ages 18 to 22) from early career youth (ages 23 to 26) because they are at different phases of their lives and are therefore likely to show distinct patterns in their postsecondary enrollment and labor market participation. Within each age range, differences between racial/ethnic groups are highlighted and, where relevant, differences between men and women are noted.² The brief concludes with a summary of key findings for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners who are committed to improving college and labor market opportunities for diverse youth.

Demographic Profile of California's Young Adult Population

There is no majority racial group in California's youth population. Young adults in the state are incredibly diverse and, as **Figure 1** shows, youth of color (i.e., non-whites) make up nearly two-thirds (63%) of this population.

Latinos comprise the largest racial/ethnic group in California. Approximately one-third (32%) of the state's young adults are non-immigrant Latinos, and an additional 10% are Latino immigrants. This brief offers separate analyses for Latino immigrants, in part because they represent a significant portion of the entire 18- to 26-year-old population, and also because they face particular challenges. For example, many immigrants come from lower-income families and encounter blocked pathways to citizenship, both of which can have effects on educational and employment trajectories.³

Figure 1



Nearly three-fourths of Latino young adults in California are of Mexican descent. Most are the children of immigrants or are immigrants themselves. Individuals of Central American descent make up the next largest group (just under 10%); many of these young adults are economic migrants, or are the children of refugees or economic migrants.

Asian/Pacific Islanders, who make up 11% of the young adults in California, are a very diverse group. Individuals of Chinese and Filipino descent make up the largest proportions of this group—nearly 45% combined—but the state is also home to young adults of Korean, Japanese, South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islander descent. About one in three Asian-descent youth is foreign born, and while immigrants from Asian countries still face prejudice and bias in many settings, overall they do not encounter the same levels of poverty and blocked pathways to citizenship that Latino immigrants do. Separate analyses for Asian immigrants are not shown here because their patterns of postsecondary enrollment and employment are similar to those of their non-immigrant peers.

The vast majority of white and African American young adults (approximately 95%) were born in the United States. In contrast, approximately 76% of Latinos in this age group were born in the United States.

The gender distribution of California's young adults is slightly imbalanced. According to ACS estimates, men slightly outnumber women, comprising just under 52% of the state's young adult population.

Postsecondary Education and Employment Trends Among College-Age Youth

Although individuals may attend college at any point post-high school, the years that immediately follow traditional high school graduation (i.e., ages 18–22) are especially important. Research has shown that students who transition to postsecondary education shortly after high school are more likely to achieve their degree goals. Findings are therefore presented for this age group separately.

Postsecondary Enrollment Rates of College-Age Youth

Over half (57%) of college-age youth are enrolled some sort of postsecondary education but there are disparities across racial/ethnic and gender groups.⁴

- Asian/Pacific Islanders are the group mostly likely to pursue higher education, with 83% reporting postsecondary enrollment. However, these figures mask the challenges that low-income Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander youth encounter in accessing postsecondary education.
- Latinos, particularly Latinos who were born outside of the United States, have the lowest rates of postsecondary enrollment. While 51% of non-immigrant college-age Latinos are enrolled in postsecondary education, this figure drops to 28% among those who are immigrants (Figure 2).
- More than half of African American college-age youth are enrolled in postsecondary educational programs (53%), but African American men lag far behind their female counterparts (Figure 2).
- Overall, women are more likely to be enrolled in college than men. This finding holds true across all racial/ethnic groups except among Asian/Pacific Islanders, where enrollment rates are equal (Figure 2).

Employment Rates of College-Age Youth

Half of college-age youth (50%) are employed, but rates of employment vary across demographic subgroups. These findings are most useful when

they are interpreted in relation to the higher education enrollment rates presented earlier in **Figure 2**.

- College-age Latino immigrants have the highest employment rates of all racial and ethnic groups (57%), though they tend to find work in very low-paying jobs. Because of financial need and limited K-12 schooling opportunities, they are significantly more likely to join the labor force than they are to enroll in college (**Figure 3**).
- Asian/Pacific Islanders in this age group are less likely to be in the workforce (**Figure 3**), but they are also the most likely to enroll in college (**Figure 2**).

Nearly one in five college-age young adults (19%) is both out of school and out of work; African American and Latino immigrant youth are disproportionately represented in this category (29% and 28%, respectively). As **Figure 4** shows, these rates are twice those of whites (14%), and over three times as high as Asian/Pacific Islanders (8%). Young adults who are neither in school nor in the labor force immediately following high school may encounter challenges to their future economic success because, unlike their peers who enroll in college or find employment, they miss out on important opportunities to increase their job qualifications.

Postsecondary and Employment Rates Among Early Career Youth

As young adults reach their mid-twenties, many have finished postsecondary education while others are still completing degrees or have gone on to graduate programs. Still others have entered the workforce. This section describes the postsecondary enrollment, four-year college degree attainment, and employment rates of young adults in this age group in order to shed light on these varied trajectories, again making relevant comparisons by racial/ethnic group and gender.

Postsecondary Enrollment Rates of Early Career Youth

While 57% of college-age young adults are enrolled in postsecondary school (Figure 2), just over one quarter (27%) of youth between the ages

Figure 2 COLLEGE-AGE YOUNG ADULTS (AGES 18-22)

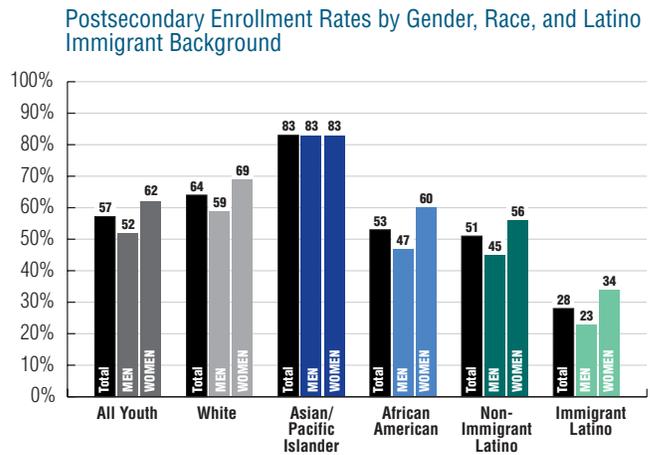


Figure 3 COLLEGE-AGE YOUNG ADULTS (AGES 18-22)

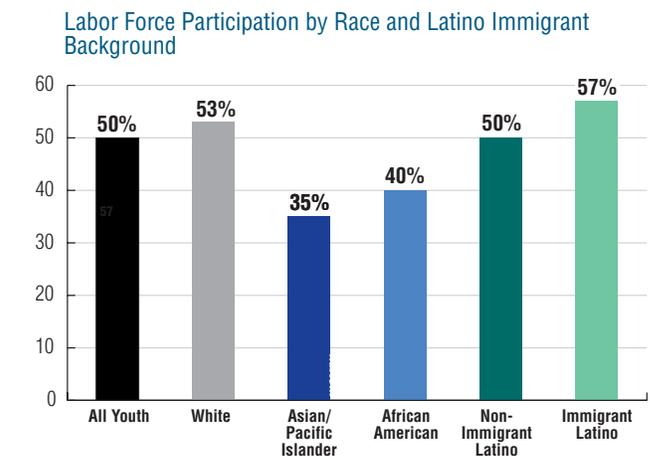


Figure 4 COLLEGE-AGE YOUNG ADULTS (AGES 18-22)

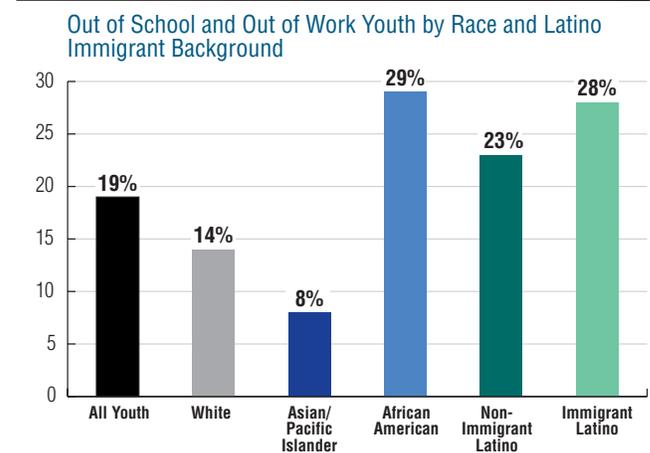


Figure 5 EARLY CAREER YOUNG ADULTS (AGES 23-26)

Postsecondary Enrollment Rates by Gender, Race, and Latino Immigrant Background

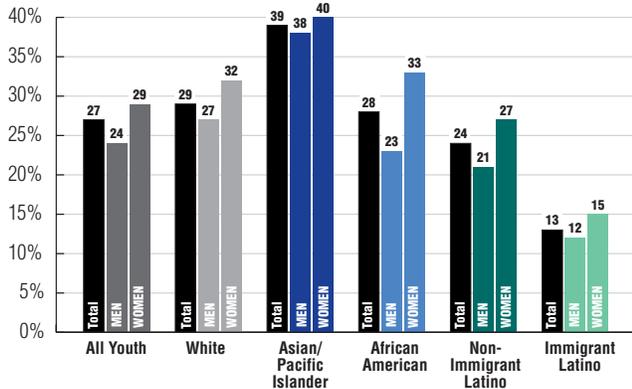


Figure 6 EARLY CAREER YOUNG ADULTS (AGES 23-26)

Degree Attainment

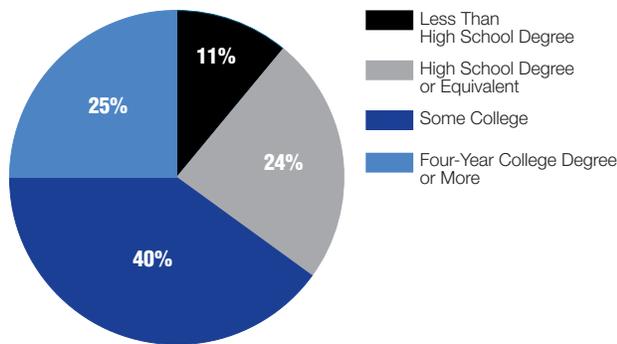
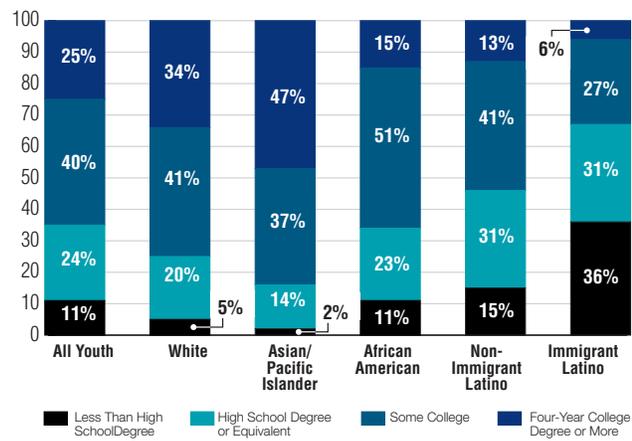


Figure 7 EARLY CAREER YOUNG ADULTS (AGES 23-26)

Degree Attainment by Race and Latino Immigrant Background



of 23 and 26 are enrolled (Figure 5). Arguably, these findings are not surprising, given that young adults traditionally attend college before they reach this age range. The results are especially telling, however, when more closely examined by subgroup.

- Asian/Pacific Islanders (39%) in this older age range are much more likely than other subgroups to be enrolled in school, while Latinos (24% of non-immigrants, 13% of immigrants) are less likely to be enrolled. Indeed, immigrant Latinos have by far the lowest rates of enrollment of all groups.
- As was the case with college-age women, early career-age women are more likely to be enrolled in postsecondary education than their male counterparts (Figure 5). In fact, women are represented in education in greater numbers across all ethnic/racial groups, but this is especially true among African Americans.

Educational Achievement of Early Career Youth

In comparison to young adults who do not pursue postsecondary education, youth who have earned four-year college degrees are likely to have a wider range of career options and greater earning potential, and are in a better position to contribute to the economic and social well-being of the state. Degree completion rates vary significantly, however, by race and gender.

Sixty-five percent of early career-age young adults have earned four-year college degrees (25%) or completed some college (40%).⁵ Another 24% have earned high school diplomas or GEDs, but have not attended college. The remaining 11% have not obtained high school degrees or the equivalent (Figure 6).

Extreme racial disparities exist in college completion.

- Asian/Pacific Islanders are far more likely than young adults from other ethnic groups to obtain bachelor's degrees. Nearly half of the young adults in this group (47%) have obtained college degrees, compared to about one in three (34%) white young adults (Figure 7).

- Latinos in this age group—especially those who were born outside of the United States—have the lowest levels of educational attainment. More than one-third (36%) of Latino immigrant early career young adults have obtained less than a high school degree at this point, and only 6% have earned four-year degrees.
- Although the majority of early career African Americans have attained some postsecondary education, they have very low rates of four-year degree completion. About half of African Americans in this age range have obtained some postsecondary education, but only 15% have completed bachelor's degrees by age 23–26.

Across all racial/ethnic groups, women are more likely than men to earn college degrees.

Approximately 29% of women aged 23 to 26 have earned college degrees, compared to 21% of men (Figure 8). Across all racial/ethnic groups, women are more likely than men to obtain four-year college degrees. This pattern is in line with nationwide trends in recent decades stemming, in part, from boys' lower overall academic performance and higher rates of suspension and expulsion while in high school.

Employment Rates of Early Career Youth

Nearly seven out of ten (69%) early career-age young adults in California are employed, but African American young adults are by far the least likely to be in the labor force. As shown in Figure 9, 73% of white early career youth are employed, compared to 54% of African Americans.

Overall, gender differences in employment rates are small, but African American men and Latino immigrant women are disproportionately absent from the labor force. More precisely, as shown in Figure 9, African American women (58%) have a somewhat higher rate of employment than African American men (51%), who have the lowest employment rate among all groups. Meanwhile, Latino immigrant men are more likely to be working than their female counterparts (78% versus 59%, respectively).

Approximately one-fifth (21%) of early career age youth are both out of school and out of work, but

again, the figures for African American men and immigrant Latinas are particularly striking. More than one-third of each of these subgroups falls into this category (Figure 10). In both cases, the figures are slightly worse than for 18- to 22-year-olds (Figure 4).

Summary and Implications

Drawing from the 2009 and 2010 American Community Survey, this brief demonstrates the persistence of inequalities in educational outcomes and employment patterns in California. It is clear that race, ethnicity, immigrant status, and gender all, to varying degrees, correlate with the educational and employment trajectories of the state's young adult

Figure 8 EARLY CAREER YOUNG ADULTS (AGES 23-26)

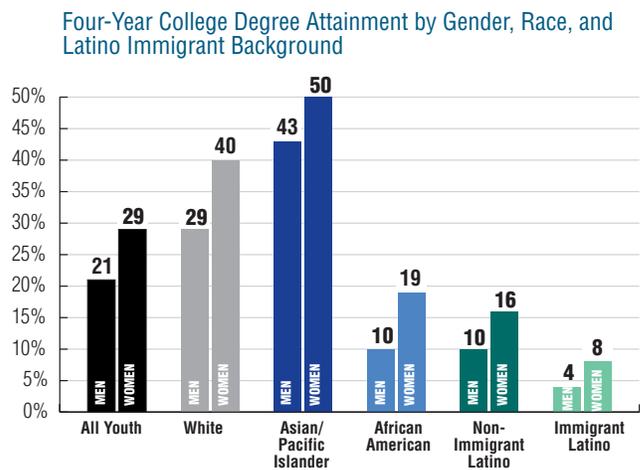


Figure 9 EARLY CAREER YOUNG ADULTS (AGES 23-26)

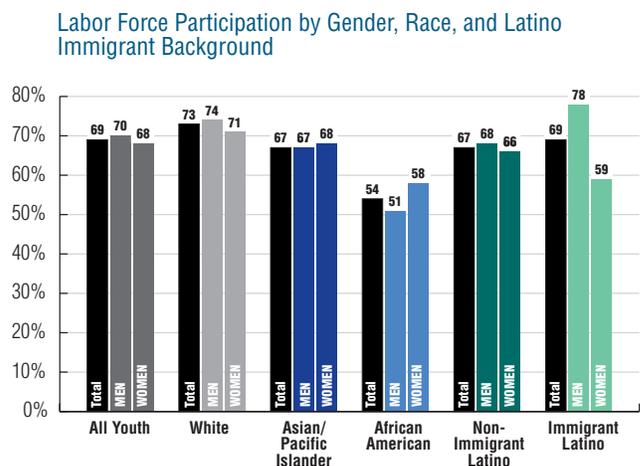
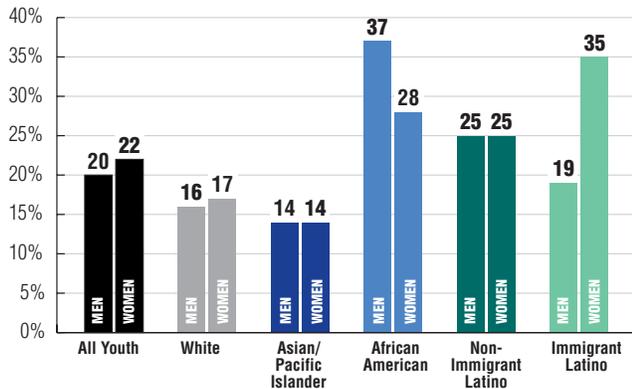


Figure 10 EARLY CAREER YOUNG ADULTS (AGES 23-26)

Out of School and Out of Work Youth by Gender, Race, and Latino Immigrant Background



population. In particular, African American and Latino (especially Latino immigrant) young adults tend to fare less well than their white and Asian American counterparts in terms of educational outcomes. And African Americans, particularly African American men, encounter challenges as they seek to establish themselves in the labor market. Unfortunately, ACS data do not lend themselves to analyzing the extent to which racial inequalities persist after accounting for parents’ socioeconomic background, but other research has established that these racial disparities can, in part, be attributed to the low average family socioeconomic background of Latinos and African Americans. Nevertheless, several racial and gender disparities revealed through the current analyses are worth highlighting:

- Latinos, who make up the largest racial/ethnic group in the state, have the lowest rates of postsecondary educational enrollment and degree attainment. Latino immigrants who arrived in the United States as minors encounter significant obstacles to accessing higher education and, as such, their education levels remain disproportionately low. In contrast, they have the highest employment rates in both of the age groups described here.
- African American males are particularly disconnected from postsecondary educational institutions and the job market: among both college-age and early career young adults,

about one-third are out of work and out of school. Moreover, while roughly one-half begin postsecondary educational programs, only 10% graduate with bachelor’s degrees by age 23 to 26.

- In general, women are more likely than men to obtain college degrees. Their employment rates are similar to those of men, with two important exceptions: early career-age African American women are more likely to be employed than their male counterparts, and Latina immigrants in the same age range are less likely to be employed than their male counterparts.

These inequalities point to the need for continued attention to the experiences of men and women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds as they transition out of K–12 education and into their adult lives. For example, we must gain an even greater understanding of the short and long term effects of immigration on young people from all backgrounds as they explore their options beyond high school. Similarly, we must better understand gender differences in college enrollment and degree attainment to ensure that both men and women are gaining equal access to postsecondary education. At the same time, it is important to recognize that while women may be earning four-year college degrees more frequently than men, there are still too many fields where women remain underrepresented—for example, in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) fields. And all of these issues must be understood in terms of how they relate to the socioeconomic backgrounds of our nation’s young adults. Together, these findings offer a useful preliminary understanding of a set of complex issues, but they also raise many questions that must be explored.

At a policy level, it is clear that any interventions aimed at leveling outcomes should be attentive to the socioeconomic inequalities and disparate access to quality K–12 educational opportunities experienced by African American and Latino youth, especially immigrant Latino youth.⁶ Furthermore, programs and interventions should target the particular needs of young men, especially African American men, who enter college at relatively high rates but then encounter barriers to both degree attainment and

jobs, and Latino men, very few of whom graduate from college.⁷

California's diverse youth population holds enormous potential for the future of the state. Investing in the young people who currently face the most significant obstacles to educational and economic success will enable a larger segment of California's youth population to contribute to their local communities and to the broader economy. Opening opportunities for these groups will ultimately benefit all residents of California.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Kevin Platt, Nancy Guarneros, Caitlin Patler, and Claudia Solari for their help with this research brief. A special acknowledgement goes to Karen Jarsky and Laura Zakaras for their editing assistance and insightful feedback on the final stages of this brief.
- 2 Inequalities in these young adults' socioeconomic backgrounds contribute to the racial and gender disparities described here, but unfortunately the ACS data do not lend themselves to analyzing the role of family socioeconomic background in structuring opportunities for young adults.
- 3 For further reading, see Fortuny, K., Capps, R. & Passel, J.S. (2007). *The Characteristics of Unauthorized Immigrants in California, Los Angeles County, and the United States*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.
- 4 For the purposes of this analysis, students in post secondary education and "college students" include individuals enrolled at the undergraduate, graduate, or professional school level.
- 5 Individuals with associate degrees are included among those with some college.
- 6 For further reading, see Duncan, G.J., & Murnane, R.J. (Eds.). (2011). *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- 7 For further reading, see Edley, C., & Ruiz de Velasco, J. (Eds.). (2011). *Changing Places: How Communities will Improve the Health of Boys of Color*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

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PATHWAYS to Postsecondary Success is a five-year set of mixed-methods studies focused on maximizing opportunities for low-income youth to earn higher education credentials.

The aims of the project are to advance research on poverty; produce useful tools that improve educational opportunities; and shape the U.S. policy agenda on the relationships between poverty and education.

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WEBSITE: pathways-ucaccord.org

All Campus Consortium On Research for Diversity (UC/ACCORD) is an interdisciplinary, multi-campus research center devoted to a more equitable distribution of educational resources and opportunities in California's diverse public schools and universities.

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