

YOUTH OUTSIDE EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND TRAINING: POLICY CHALLENGES FOR INDONESIA FROM INTERNATIONAL EVIDENCE

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ABSTRACT

The increasing number of individuals who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET)—especially among young people—represents a segment of the population that is not optimally integrated into economic activities and skills development. This condition poses significant social and economic risks if not handled properly. This study aims to examine this phenomenon through a comparative analysis of the experiences of several countries, namely China, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The discussion focuses on the causal factors, structural challenges, and policy approaches implemented in each country. In the context of Indonesia, this analysis also highlights the “Kartu Prakerja” policy as one of the government's instruments for addressing the problems faced by youth who are not in education, employment, or training. The results of the study show that although international evidence provides essential insights, differences in demographic characteristics, labor market conditions, and institutional frameworks require Indonesia to adjust the design and implementation of policies to better align with the target group's characteristics.

INTRODUCTION

The global population is expanding, accompanied by a rise in the number of youth globally. In 2015, the population of individuals aged 15 to 24 was 1.2 billion, with projections indicating an increase to 1.3 billion by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). This youthful demographic is progressively attaining higher levels of education over time. The World Development Indicators indicate that lower secondary school completion rates rose from 58.7 percent in 1995 to 76.1 percent in 2015 (Pattinasarany, 2019). This increase has the potential to offer important opportunities for the future, especially for developing countries with increasingly high youth populations. However, in many cases, existing job

opportunities fail to keep pace with population growth, especially opportunities for better quality jobs. O'Higgins (2017) reports that the global unemployment rate is 12.8 percent among people aged 15 to 24. Many workers in this age group work in low-quality jobs, especially in the informal sector.

The global labor force participation rate (LFPR) decreased from 62.5 percent in 2010 to 60.7 percent in 2024. A decrease in the labor force participation rate (LFPR) does not necessarily indicate a rise in the number of NEETs (Not in Employment, Education, or Training). In numerous emerging and middle-income nations, the reduction in the Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) among youth is frequently attributed to extended educational pursuits and postponed labor market entry. This structural shift is linked to increased school enrollment rates and higher demand for higher education. Therefore, NEETs represent only one segment of those not participating in the labor force, and distinguishing between the two is crucial for accurate interpretation. Originating in the United Kingdom in the 1980s, the concept of NEET has become increasingly recognized globally and was explicitly adopted in SDG 8, which focuses on decent work and employment growth (Orbeta et al., 2021; Pattinasarany, 2019).

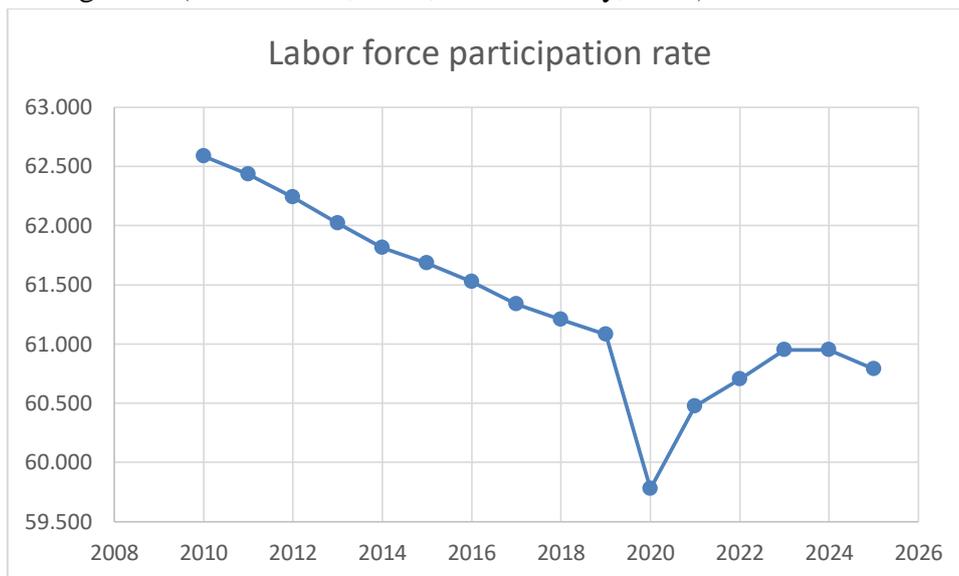


Figure 1. Labour Force Participation Rate Global

Source: ILO (2025), processed by the Authors

NEET, an acronym for Not in Employment, Education, or Training, denotes young individuals who fail to acquire human capital via education or employment as they transition into adulthood (Orbeta et al., 2021). NEET assesses the efficacy of youth in transitioning from education to employment, as well as the degree to which they remain disengaged from both education and the labor market (Adioetomo et al., 2014). Elder (2015) associates the NEET notion with the capacity to mitigate several vulnerabilities faced by youth, including unemployment, premature school departure, and labor market

disenfranchisement. Individuals classified as NEET can impede the work and income opportunities for youth, resulting in sustained economic detriment. Furthermore, NEET youngsters face potential negative social repercussions, including melancholy, diminished social participation, and the likelihood of deviant conduct, primarily due to their low-income status and insufficient skills to enhance their economic circumstances (OECD, 2018; Orbeta et al., 2021).

Although Indonesia has implemented the Pre-Employment Card Program to support unemployed and vulnerable youth, its effectiveness in meeting the needs of individuals who are not involved in education, employment, or training remains unclear. Existing studies often assess this program from the perspective of participation in employment or training, but the attention given to its relevance for structurally excluded youth remains limited. Furthermore, while international experiences provide useful references, it is unclear how differences in policy design can explain varying outcomes across countries. This study therefore addresses the question of whether Indonesia's current policy framework—particularly the Pre-Employment Card or “Kartu Prakerja” program—adequately responds to the characteristics of NEETs, and how its limitations can be understood through comparison with international policy approaches.

Rather than proposing a new policy framework, this paper focuses on identifying the limitations of existing policy designs by placing them in the context of broader international experiences. The countries selected for comparison include China, Australia, and the United Kingdom, which represent three different labor market systems: China reflects a rapidly developing emerging economy with structural labor market transitions; Australia represents a flexible labor market with strong vocational pathways; and the United Kingdom provides a model of a mature welfare state with extensive NEET monitoring mechanisms. Although these countries do not fully mirror Indonesia, their diverse experiences allow for comparative insights into policy effectiveness, structural challenges, and youth labor market integration. This approach enables the study to highlight why certain policy instruments may not be optimal when applied to structurally excluded youth.

Literature Review

The term “NEET” emerged in the late 1990s when the UK Government's Social Exclusion Unit published *Bridging the Gap – New Opportunities for 16-18 Year Olds Not in Education, Employment, or Training* (Private Equity Foundation IMPETUS, 2014). This report observed that “... when life goes wrong, or continues to go wrong, for young people in this age group, social exclusion later in life is a disproportionate outcome. They are more likely to be unemployed, dependent on benefits, living in unstable family structures, and experiencing depression in their lives.” Therefore, focusing on NEETs among young people—rather than NEETs across all age groups—is useful in creating targeted policies to prevent various misfortunes among the most educationally vulnerable young people in the

UK. The UK omitted those aged 16-18 from the official unemployment statistics due to amendments in social security regulations in 1988, thereby circumventing an information deficit concerning youth not engaged in training, education, or employment. Bridging the Gap introduced the NEET concept to address this information gap and became a public policy concern in the UK and later across OECD countries. Starting from the original NEET classification for young people aged 16-18, this range was later expanded to 16-44 years (Bartley et al., 2006) and to 15-29 years in OECD publications related to the NEET phenomenon in developed countries (Coles et al., 2010).

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines NEET as the proportion of young people who are not in education, employment, or training and recommends measuring it using labor force survey data.

$$\text{NEET} = \frac{\text{Youth} - \text{Youth in employment} - \text{Youth not in employment but in education or training}}{\text{Youth}} \times 100$$

(1)

Individuals aged 15-24 are classified as youth, whereas employment refers to a person's engagement in activities that generate commodities or deliver services for the purpose of earning pay or profits (ILO, 2018). The ILO standards classify the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 2011 into formal, non-formal, and informal education for the purpose of educational participation. The ILO defines the NEET indicator as encompassing individuals engaged in formal or non-formal education, excluding those involved in informal education. In this context, informal education refers to intentional yet non-institutionalized learning occurring within familial, occupational, communal, or everyday settings (Orbeta et al., 2021). The ILO advises that only school-based vocational and technical training should be regarded as training activities for the NEET indicator (ILO, 2018).

The European Union characterizes NEET youngsters as individuals within a specific age cohort who are neither employed nor engaged in formal education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey (European Commission (EC), 2019). The unemployment statistics are presented in two variables: EDUCSTAT and COURATT. EDUCSTAT ascertains if an individual aged 15 years or older—within the survey age range of 15-34 years—is a student or apprentice during the four weeks before the survey. Simultaneously, COURATT assesses whether individuals aged 15 or older participated in courses, seminars, conferences, or received private instruction outside the formal education system in the four weeks preceding the survey (Orbeta et al., 2021).

The various definitions of NEET developed by various international institutions such as the ILO, the European Union, and the Bridging the Gap initiative show that despite variations in their approaches, they all highlight the same issue: the disconnection of individuals from the education system, the labor market, and skills training. A comprehensive understanding of this concept is important for identifying common patterns and specific characteristics that emerge in various national contexts. Therefore, the next

section will discuss case studies from a number of countries to provide an empirical overview of the causes, challenges, and strategies for addressing NEET at the global level, which can later be used as material for reflection and reference in the Indonesian context.

METHOD

This study uses a literature-based qualitative approach combined with comparative policy analysis. It focuses on examining how youth inactivity in education, employment, and training is addressed through policy interventions, with a particular focus on Indonesia's Pre-Employment Card program.

Academic articles, policy reports, and official publications from international organizations such as the International Labor Organization (ILO), the World Bank, and the European Union were systematically reviewed. Countries such as China, Australia, and the United Kingdom were selected to represent different labor market structures and policy systems. These cases were used to identify variations in policy design, target groups, and implementation mechanisms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

NEETs in a Global Perspective: Case Studies from Various Countries

Many countries around the world are experiencing the NEET phenomenon. The global distribution map of NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) rates shows that the proportion of young people aged 15–24 who are not working, not attending school, and not participating in training is very high in Sub-Saharan Africa, marked by a predominance of dark red. Meanwhile, countries in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Latin America show moderate to high NEET rates. In 2012, the OECD reported that the number of young people aged 16–29 in countries belonging to the organization reached 212 million, with around 18.1 percent or 38.4 million of them not having a job, education, or training (Carcilo et al., 2015).

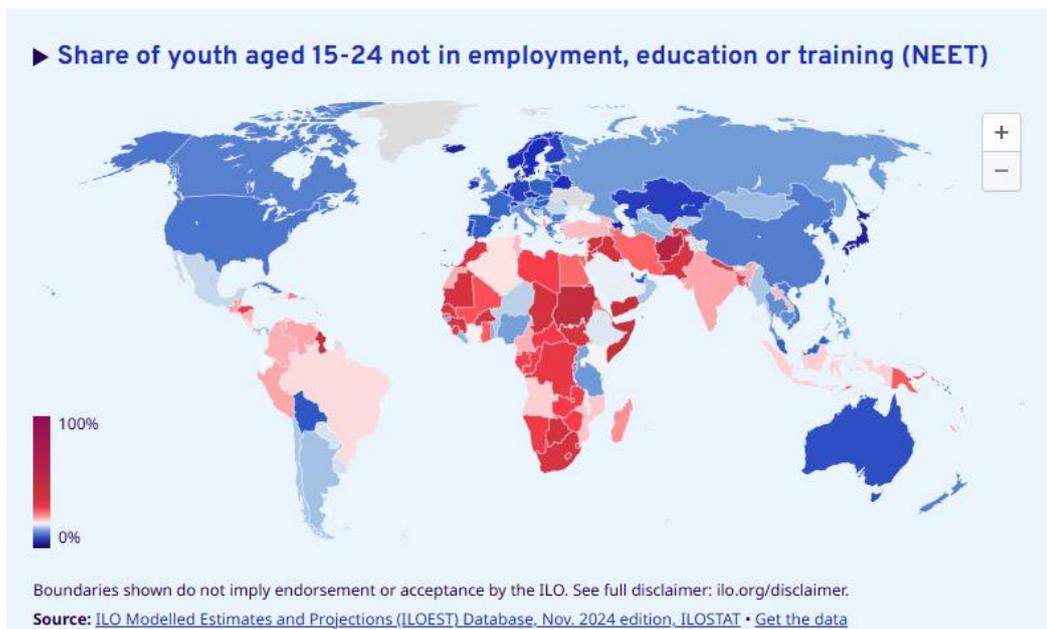


Figure 2. Share of youth aged 15-24 not in employment, education, or training (NEET) Global

Source: ILO (2025)

China

Yang (2020) analyzed the prevalence and characteristics of individuals aged 16-35 who fall into the NEET category and the risks they face in China. The study found that migration status plays an important role in NEET. Male migrants are less likely to become NEET than non-migrants, whereas female migrants have a higher risk of becoming NEET. Non-migrant men are more likely to become NEET because they no longer participate in agriculture and do not have farming skills, unlike their parents. Thus, migration provides opportunities for men to explore new job opportunities.

Another gender aspect is that married women are at a greater risk of becoming NEET than males. This may be attributed to married women and migrant women being more inclined to remain at home, engaged in domestic duties and childcare. Furthermore, Yang (2020) identifies institutional impediments in China that restrict young women's engagement in the paid labor market. Discrimination against women in the labor market can exacerbate the vulnerability of migrant women to becoming NEET. This study indicated that greater education considerably decreases the chance of women becoming NEET, particularly among vulnerable populations such as migrant and married women. These findings underscore the significance of education, particularly higher education, in empowering young women in China.

Australia

In 2015, Australia, which was minimally impacted by the Great Recession of 2008, reported 580,000 young individuals who were not engaged in education nor employment, constituting 11.8% of the nation's overall youth demographic (Pattinasarany, 2019). Mitrou et al. (2021) broadened the scope of NEET to encompass the entire working-age demographic in Australia. Their research indicated that NEET status continues to be significant beyond the age of 15-29, and that the substantial population of NEETs over 30 may pose a greater issue. Approximately 80 percent of the working-age NEET demographic in Australia is aged between 30 and 64 years.

Individuals with disabilities are almost six times more likely to be NEET, with older NEETs exhibiting a greater likelihood of requiring assistance compared to their younger counterparts. The educational attainment of NEET individuals does not exhibit a uniform trend among the three age categories: young NEETs (15-29 years), middle-aged NEETs (30-44 years), and elderly NEETs (45-64 years). Individuals under 30 are more prone to becoming NEETs if they have small children in the household, in contrast to those over 30. Individuals from older age demographics are more prone to becoming NEET when they offer unpaid care to family members, whereas younger individuals are more susceptible to becoming NEET when they provide unpaid care to a child. Moreover, individuals who lease accommodations from governmental or philanthropic housing entities—particularly younger demographics—exhibit a higher propensity to become NEET. The classification of NEETs into three age categories enables the government to sustain its emphasis on young NEETs while enhancing targeted assistance for older NEETs.

United Kingdom

Maguire (2015) critiques the term NEET, which encompasses those aged 16 to 24, including those actively seeking employment who are classified as formally unemployed and receiving social assistance. The issue lies in the fact that this expansive definition lacks a comprehensive grasp of the characteristics and requirements of this group, which is crucial for formulating effective policies. The UK has implemented many strategies to tackle the NEET issue among its youth. The Youth Contract initiative was initiated in 2012 to assist individuals aged 16-24 who are disengaged from education, employment, or training in re-engaging (HM Government, 2011). This program encompasses policy initiatives executed by the DWP and DfE in the UK, concentrating on benefits for those under the age of 18. The program implementation strategy employs a results-based delivery system (Payment by Results - PbR), focusing on the supply of essential services to meet performance targets for recruitment, retention, and sustainable outcomes for participants.

The approach used in this program has been commonly used in welfare programs for adult groups in countries such as Australia and the United States (Finn, 2010). However, this model is still uncommon in programs aimed at young people that prioritize supporting early engagement or return to education or training, as well as achieving sustainable outcomes. This program was implemented without prior testing to assess its suitability for the target group. YC, through its Payment by Results approach, was identified as problematic. Under limited budgetary conditions, the allocation of £126 million in public funds only reached less than 20,000 young people, and only about 2,500 achieved long-term outcomes (Work and Pensions Select Committee, 2012).

Another major challenge of this contract-based public service model is the emergence of unfair practices known as cream skimming, creaming, and parking. These terms describe strategies used by contractors or subcontractors to maximize profits from the programs they run. For example, cream skimming and creaming refer to the act of selecting the easiest participants to help—such as those who are most ready to work—so that the program appears successful. Meanwhile, parking is when participants who are considered difficult are simply left alone without serious guidance, just so they remain registered in the program and generate payments. These practices make the program unfair because they neglect the participants who need the most help (European Commission (EC), 2012; Finn, 2010; UKCES, 2010).

This problem can lead to unfair participation in the program and other issues related to administration and the reward system. Although evaluations show cost savings and efficiency from similar models implemented in other countries, data showing that these savings do not compromise the quality of services or programs, especially for the most disadvantaged groups, is still limited. This presents a dilemma for policymakers in ensuring the participation of hard-to-reach groups in certain programs without compromising the quality of services provided (Maguire, 2015).

In comparison, the European Union introduced the Youth Guarantee Initiative (YEI), which requires member states to ensure that all young people up to the age of 25 receive a job offer, training, or further education within four months of leaving school or becoming unemployed. The program is supported by €6 billion in EU funding. Although the UK began implementing the YEI in some regions in 2014 (House of Lords, 2014), the UK government has not fully adopted the Youth Guarantee, unlike local governments in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, which are already implementing it.

Another important question is: should the PbR system only focus on immediate outcomes such as successful entry into work or education? For some young people, mastering soft skills such as confidence, communication, and motivation is often an important first step before they are ready to return to work or education. Therefore, the incentive system should also reward this non-formal progress, not just the end result.

Indonesia and the Public Policy

In line with SDG 8, Indonesia has integrated SDG goals into its Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJM), with the aim of creating employment opportunities through the Pre-Employment Card Program (APEC Economic Committee, 2021). Launched in 2020 under Active Labor Market Policies (ALMPs), the pre-employment card was designed as a response to the problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The program aims to improve work skills, productivity, and competitiveness, as well as encourage entrepreneurship in the community (Peraturan Presiden No 76, 2020). This program has special significance, as Indonesia is entering a demographic dividend phase, with its population expected to peak between 2020 and 2030. During this period, the productive-age population will be twice as large as the dependent population, presenting both opportunities and challenges if workers cannot be fully absorbed into the labor market. This could exacerbate existing labor market challenges, including the existence of NEETs among Indonesia's youth population. Therefore, the Pre-Employment Card Program, although not explicitly targeting NEETs, serves as a potential instrument to reduce their numbers.

Active Labor Market Policies (ALMP) have long been a key strategy for reducing unemployment and improving labor market outcomes, especially for vulnerable groups such as youth and women (Escudero et al. 2019). The Worker Card Program represents an ALMP initiative designed to address the worsening unemployment crisis. This program combines skills training with financial assistance, providing access to unemployed or underemployed individuals to participate in online training in various fields, such as digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and sector-specific skills. Pre-Employment Card participants also receive allowances to support their living expenses during the training period (Peraturan Presiden No 76, 2020).

Anggara (2024) examined how the Pre-Employment Card program impacts skill development, productivity, and entrepreneurship among vulnerable groups such as youth and women. Several factors explain why women benefit more from this program than men. Women, especially younger ones, generally have less prior work experience than male workers, making them more dependent on training programs to develop marketable skills (Bernhard & Kruppe, 2012; Dengler, 2019; Kruppe & Lang, 2018). Specifically, the development of digital skills and literacy has encouraged women to acquire the competencies needed to overcome traditional barriers to entering the labor market, especially in sectors where they are underrepresented. The shift to digital and remote work, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has opened up new opportunities for women, especially in the e-commerce and online services sectors (Presisi Indonesia, 2022). Sectors such as e-commerce and online services have become new entry points for NEET youth, especially women, to engage in productive activities.

However, the effectiveness of Prakerja in directly addressing NEET is still limited, as its implementation faces a number of obstacles that undermine its effectiveness. First,

the majority of program recipients are those who are already employed, thus blurring the initial target of the unemployed and victims of layoffs. Second, the low training completion rate means that participants' competency improvement is not optimally achieved. Third, the digital-based self-registration mechanism creates access bias towards the middle and upper classes, while coverage for the poor and marginalized groups is very low. Fourth, the shallow training design and fully online format without face-to-face sessions or on-the-job training are considered inadequate for the skill needs of the workforce. Although in 2023, the government changed the scheme to a hybrid and more vocational one, a number of experts said that this was still not substantive enough (Maharso & Ayu, 2023; Wibisono, Y. 2023).

Criticism also came from supervisory agencies such as the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), which highlighted a number of serious weaknesses: inefficient use of budget for technical features such as face recognition, platform partnerships without transparent public auctions, and indications of conflicts of interest between digital platforms and training providers. The curation of training materials was deemed poor quality and, in many cases, merely repeated free content already available on the internet. Furthermore, online training methods risked being symbolic, fictitious, and having no real impact, especially in the context of NEET targets who require intensive and personalized intervention. Additionally, an approach that is overly oriented towards instant results (completion of training), without ongoing mentoring and mapping of individual needs, risks repeating the weaknesses of the "Payment by Results" model, as seen in the Youth Contract in the UK (Maguire, 2015).

A comparison with other countries such as Vietnam shows the importance of industrialization and export sector development strategies in creating formal and quality employment for young people. The high level of education and low gender gap among Vietnamese youth, supported by labor-intensive industrial growth and foreign direct investment (FDI), has enabled them to absorb young workers into the formal sector with decent wages (McKay et al., 2018). This contrasts with Indonesia, where most NEET youth still work in the informal sector or are not working at all, and there is no guarantee that short digital training can lead them into the formal workforce.

Thus, the Pre-Employment Card needs to be redesigned as a more inclusive, community-based program with a multi-layered approach. Successful strategies for reducing NEET in other countries do not only focus on technical training, but also create meaningful job opportunities, encourage industry-education connectivity, and strengthen individual mentoring to build psychosocial readiness for work. Without these reforms, the potential of Prakerja to reduce NEET will remain limited and Indonesia risks missing the golden moment of its ongoing demographic bonus.

CONCLUSION

Cross-country studies show that the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) phenomenon is not only an employment issue, but a multidimensional structural and social problem influenced by factors such as gender, migration status, education, policy design, and the readiness of the labor market system. In Indonesia, the Pre-Employment Card Program represents a progressive step as part of Active Labor Market Policies (ALMPs) in responding to the impact of the pandemic and increasing labor competitiveness. However, its effectiveness in reducing NEET rates is still limited due to weaknesses in targeting, training design, class-biased access, and potential conflicts of interest and budget waste.

The UK experience highlights the importance of evidence-based policy design and piloting, as well as the need for incentives that focus not only on end results (such as employment) but also on incremental progress such as soft skills development and social reengagement. On the other hand, Vietnam provides a positive example that export sector growth, strong education, and women's participation in the formal industry can significantly reduce NEET rates. Conversely, studies in China and Australia show that NEET vulnerability is strongly linked to gender, family status, migration, disability, and caregiving responsibilities, requiring more inclusive and specific policy responses.

In China in particular, migrant and married women face double structural barriers, highlighting the importance of higher education in empowering vulnerable groups. In Australia, the expansion of the NEET concept to include those aged up to 64 years shows that relying solely on the 15–29 age category is no longer adequate. Therefore, future policy approaches need to be adapted to social realities and individual limitations, including unpaid caregiving, housing conditions, and long-term support needs.

Against this backdrop, Indonesia needs to refine its NEET management strategy with a more targeted, adaptive, and evidence-based approach, strengthening the link between training and formal employment opportunities, and ensuring equitable access for the poor, women, and other vulnerable populations. Without structural reforms in program design, such as the Pre-Employment Card, Indonesia's demographic bonus potential risks not being maximized and instead widening the socio-economic gap between generations.

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