

# **RACIST VICTIMISATION, COMMUNITY SAFETY AND THE RURAL: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**

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## **Abstract**

Whilst issues of rural poverty and exclusion have received some national media attention in recent years, the problem of racist victimisation in rural areas has been largely overlooked within academic and political discussion of the rural. Drawing upon research conducted by the authors in two rural English counties over a two year period, this paper asserts that racist prejudice is very much part of the reality of rural living for minority ethnic groups whose presence in the countryside tends to be overlooked. The paper discusses the experiences of victims of racial harassment to illustrate the disturbing nature, extent and impact of racism in rural areas, and suggests that the enduring 'invisibility' of the problem is compounded by flawed multi-agency responses to racist incidents. It is argued that agencies need to develop a deeper understanding of racism in the rural arena and this can only occur once they comprehend the needs and characteristics of rural minority ethnic communities.

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## **Introduction: Researching Rural Racism**

On 5 November 2003 residents in the Sussex village of Firle undertook their usual Guy Fawkes Night procession which culminated in the lighting of a bonfire. To the shock and consternation of many who attended the event, the bonfire consisted of a caravan with effigies of gypsies contained within it and the false numberplate 'PI KEY' attached to its rear. The organisers of the event defended their actions, stating that the burning of the caravan was simply part of a Sussex bonfire tradition that stretches back centuries. Each year, in the village of Firle, the effigy of a topical 'scapegoat' is burnt as part of Bonfire Night celebrations, and in 2003, this 'scapegoat' happened to be Gypsy Travellers (Carter, 2003).

The burning of the 'gypsy caravan' highlighted the tensions that existed between the inhabitants of Firle and Travellers who had been camped in the village. It also brought national attention to issues of rurality, racism and intolerance, a rare occurrence as within the media there is a tendency to portray rural England as a problem-free 'idyllic'

*Jon Garland and Neil Chakraborti*

environment (see, for example, Cloke, 1997 or Scutt and Bonnet, 1996). Typically, this conception is encapsulated in the oft-used term of the 'rural idyll', which in the words of Cloke and Milbourne (1992: 359) 'presents happy, healthy and problem-free images of rural life safely nestling with both a close social community and a contiguous natural environment'. Within such an idyllic context therefore, studies of crime, deviance, and more specifically racist prejudice are perceived to be superfluous and better suited to urban environments.

However, the priority given by the British National Party to countryside issues (exemplified by its publication 'The Countryside', part of its 'Land and People' campaign) has brought some attention to the presence of far-right parties and of 'racial politics' in the rural arena. With this in mind, the authors of this article embarked upon research into the nature, forms and impact of racist harassment in the countryside, as well as assessing the effectiveness of mainstream and voluntary agencies in providing services to victims. This research, conducted over two years in the rural counties of Suffolk and Northamptonshire, was designed to develop a body of knowledge about racist victimisation in rural areas. Whilst the forms and extent of such victimisation in these counties did differ in some regards, the aim of this paper is to outline the key themes that emerged from both areas.

The research built upon the work of several small-scale rural projects that have sought to draw attention to the problem of racist prejudice (see, for example, Derbyshire (1994) and Jay (1992)). It has been suggested that for minority ethnic households living outside major towns and cities, racism can in fact be more distressing and prolonged as they find themselves living in a 'double-bind' situation: on the one hand minority ethnic groups are 'invisible', in that their needs are not accounted for within existing policy and service provision; on the other hand they are all too visible to local rural communities as a result of being one of few individuals or families from a minority ethnic background<sup>1</sup>. Accordingly, the lack of interaction with local agencies, as well as experiences of overt and latent racial prejudice, is likely to intensify feelings of isolation and marginalisation.

This article assesses the experiences of victims of racial harassment to illustrate the nature, extent and impact of racist prejudice in a rural context, before moving on to discuss some of the factors behind the continued 'invisibility' of rural minority ethnic populations. The article concludes by suggesting that a lack of understanding of both the importance of racism and nature of rural minority ethnic communities prohibits many key agencies from developing community safety strategies that effectively challenge racism.

## **Background and Methodology**

The research material referred to in this paper is drawn from two rural-based studies broadly similar in scope. The first of these was commissioned by Suffolk County Council and associated partner organisations<sup>2</sup> to investigate the problem of racism in rural Suffolk. Specifically, the research was designed to investigate the nature and extent of racial harassment suffered by minority ethnic families living in rural and isolated parts of the

*Racist Victimisation, Community Safety and the Rural: Issues and Challenges*

county, and to examine agency responses to victims of such harassment. A similar study was commissioned by Northamptonshire's Eastern Area Multi-Agency Group Against Racial Attacks and Harassment (MAGRAH) to undertake research into the effectiveness of services provided by local voluntary and statutory agencies for victims of racial harassment living in the borough of East Northamptonshire<sup>3</sup>. Common to both studies was a belief that such research would elicit further information about hitherto 'hidden' forms of victimisation, thereby helping local agencies to provide fully-informed, and where appropriate improved, levels of support.

The utilisation of similar qualitative and quantitative methodological devices in each study helped to develop a broad base of original material from which detailed findings could be drawn. Of central importance were the 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with victims of racial harassment living in both areas, which were undertaken as a way of gaining a deeper appreciation of the various facets of racist victimisation from households with direct experience of the problem. As a way of establishing a representative selection of victims with regard to their demographic profile and experiences of racism, interviewees were chosen on the basis of recommendations from local agencies and through identification via questionnaire responses<sup>4</sup>. The victims involved in each study were evenly distributed in terms of gender, and drawn from a broad cross-section of visible and non-visible minority ethnic communities, rural areas of residence and age groups.

A total of 33 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were also undertaken with representatives from local statutory and voluntary agencies in both counties. Accessing the perceptions of such a broad range of organisations was a valuable way of assessing levels of inter-, and intra-agency working practice and of identifying gaps in support provision. A further feature of the methodology utilised in each study included the organisation of focus groups and interviews with members of established white rural communities: this, it was anticipated, would help to contextualise victims' own experiences of racism by illustrating how members of minority ethnic groups are perceived in communities renowned for being intransigent.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, in accordance with Bowling's (1993) suggestion that a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods can be the key to establishing a clear understanding of racist victimisation, the methodology also included a postal questionnaire survey of minority ethnic groups living in both rural areas. Essentially, this was designed to provide quantifiable back-up to the other methodological features by gauging respondents' views on a range of issues relating to crime, community safety and racial harassment.<sup>6</sup>

## **The Experiences of Minority Ethnic Communities in the Rural Arena**

The friendly, community-oriented image of English rurality has been challenged by previous studies that have suggested that these values are often absent when it comes to welcoming minority ethnic groups to rural areas (see, for example, Agyeman and Spooner,

Jon Garland and Neil Chakraborti

1997; Malcolm, 2000). Further weight to this argument can be gained through assessing the perceptions of minority ethnic individuals and families living in rural areas. Certainly, interviewees in both Suffolk and Northamptonshire gave the impression that they lacked a true sense of belonging to their locality, arguing simply that their 'face didn't fit' within the immediate surroundings of conventional rural society. Indeed, despite making efforts to form part of established networks, interviewees' attempts at integration had generally proved unsuccessful, thereby leading to suggestions that established rural communities tend only to accept 'their own', as the following quotation illustrates:

There's a chap who lives just down the road from me, he was saying 'It's all right love, we don't see you as one of them. You're one of us.' I don't want to be one of you, thank you very much. I'm me, thank you.  
*Dual Heritage female, Suffolk*<sup>7</sup>

Although some minority ethnic interviewees acknowledged the more positive elements of rural living, such as the relative 'peace and quiet' of village life, those that had previously lived in more diverse, urban environments lamented the small number of minority ethnic rural residents and often felt socially and culturally isolated, as inferred in the following observations:

We moved to our village because we loved the house when we saw it, but we were slightly hesitant because obviously moving to a village you are going to stand out a bit more. I find in some villages you go in and it's almost as though they've never seen a black person.  
*African Caribbean female, Northamptonshire*

This family that we live next to would literally stand in front of the house talking to anybody that would walk by in the village and just constantly point towards our house, trying to instigate the whole village.  
*White American male, Suffolk*

The unexpectedly harsh realities of rural life had prompted a number of interviewees to seek to live in more urban areas where they believed there to be higher numbers of visible minorities and therefore greater acceptance of diversity. Moreover, it was felt that relocating to a city would also reduce the risk of racist victimisation, which many referred to as a constant worry. Direct experiences of such harassment also inevitably had a major impact upon people's quality of life, and it is these experiences, together with their various forms and contexts, that this paper now addresses.

## **Experiences of Racist Victimisation**

Previous studies of racist victimisation (for example Bowling, 1998; Clancy et al., 2001) have suggested that racial harassment is a continual process rather than a series of unconnected events; a standpoint which helps to promote recognition of the continual and multi-faceted problem of racism and its impact upon day-to-day existence. This was

*Racist Victmisation, Community Safety and the Rural: Issues and Challenges*

certainly an appropriate way in which to view racism in the context of the Suffolk- and Northamptonshire-based studies, where most interviewees across the various age and ethnic groups found it difficult to break their experiences down into separate incidents of harassment. For most, experiencing racist abuse was just another fact of everyday living, as the following quotations suggest:

He [grandson] suffers a lot of racist abuse, he's bullied and gets called a white wog, and I get told to go and have a baby my own colour and I've had windows put out. I've had rubbish thrown in the garden and stuff like that.

*White British female living with dual heritage grandson, Northamptonshire*

It never stops. You get more and more and more...It's been going on for years.

*Pakistani Muslim male, Suffolk*

A further noteworthy facet concerning the patterns of racial harassment was that seasonal factors appeared, in some cases, to influence the frequency of victimisation. The extent to which levels of racism vary with the seasons has seldom been a feature of previous investigations. However, several victims living in Northamptonshire villages stated that their fear of harassment was heightened during the summer months, due to the longer and warmer days being more conducive to racist perpetrators 'hanging around' in the streets for substantial periods of time. Although this is an area that would require further research, this increased vulnerability during the summer, whether perceived or actual, is a consideration that should be borne in mind in the provision of support to local minority ethnic families, as the following interviewee stated:

It [racist abuse] is guaranteed to happen all through the summer, so as the light nights come back, they [the perpetrators] will start because they know I don't let him [grandson] out after dark ... it happens every day, I'd guarantee it. Out here or if he goes over to the park to play, they follow him over the park. He's even been playing in his back garden and we've had bricks come across.

*White British female living with dual heritage grandson, Northamptonshire*

Evidence from the research conducted in Suffolk and Northamptonshire suggests that members of minority ethnic groups living in rural areas are likely to have encountered racism in a variety of forms, contexts and manifestations. These experiences may range from the more persistent 'low-level' examples of victimisation (most typically verbal abuse and name-calling, stone-throwing, unnecessary and repeated staring) to the less frequent, but arguably even more serious, examples of property damage and physical violence.

However, the alarming incidents detailed by many of the victims interviewed as part of the research highlight the implications of racist prejudice in all its forms, and show how damaging to a person's physical and emotional well-being such constant experiences are.

*Jon Garland and Neil Chakraborti*

Whilst the harmful nature of serious incidents is often acknowledged, the effects of 'low-level' forms of racism are less commonly appreciated. Indeed, it is contended here that the term 'low-level', oft-used to describe many forms of victimisation, is misleading and in some ways dismissive as it implies a sense of relative unimportance that serves to trivialise the impact that any form of racism can have on its victim. In reality, the damaging physical and emotional effects of racist victimisation are often difficult for any third party to appreciate:

I have heard about people going on antidepressants and I was laughing, but now I'm on antidepressants so why do I have to live like this?  
*Iranian Muslim male, Suffolk*

When you're scared, you can't walk alone. I've tried to do a little bit of walking, but I can't. You are careful: you don't walk, you use a car.  
*Pakistani Muslim male, Suffolk*

The implication then is that *all* forms of racist experience in a rural context are serious in nature with regard to their impact on the victim and their family. Whether agencies that have a responsibility to provide help to minority ethnic families fully appreciate this is a matter of contention, and it is to this issue that this paper now turns.

## **An Examination of Multi-Agency Responses to Racist Incidents in the Rural**

Although partnership working has been advocated by some senior police officers and many crime prevention practitioners since the 1980s, it became enshrined in law only after the enactment of the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act, which placed a statutory duty upon local authorities and the police to undertake community safety and crime prevention work in conjunction with other relevant agencies. This impetus has also impacted upon other contexts, such as tackling racist victimisation, where organisations have come to recognise the benefits of adopting a multi-agency approach. In the cases of Suffolk and Northamptonshire, multi-agency forums have been established, namely the Multi-Agency Forum Against Racial Harassment (MAFARH) in the former county and the Multi-Agency Group Against Racial Attacks and Harassment (MAGRAH) in the latter, that aim to co-ordinate service provision for victims of racism.<sup>8</sup>

Ideally, the key aspects of Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, namely the localised nature of the work, the focus on the prevention of criminal behaviour, including racism, and the emphasis on collaboration should form the basis of similar multi-agency initiatives that combat racism in rural Suffolk and Northamptonshire. Indeed, many of those organizations and individuals involved in providing services to victims of racism in these areas had had experience of participating in effective multi-agency models through the previously established crime and disorder partnerships.

*Racist Victimisation, Community Safety and the Rural: Issues and Challenges*

However, an analysis of the workings of the two multi-agency anti-racist forums highlighted a number of problems that agency interviewees admitted hindered the efficiency of their workings. A key aspect of these difficulties was a lack of clear aims and objectives on the part of each forum, something which created the perception that they were rather 'vague' bodies that did not have a clear sense of direction and lacked a sense of authority, as one agency worker in Suffolk noted:

It [MAFARH] is just a very feeble type of group. It's due to the personalities who sit on that group, and their inability to action anything because the authority isn't there. People are usually representing somebody else who isn't there who really should be there...I think if MAFARH was managed properly, and it had a work programme, it would be far more useful and beneficial.

*Racial Harassment Caseworker, Community Safety Unit, Suffolk County Council*

A particularly interesting aspect of the above quotation is that the community safety worker lamented the absence of certain key individuals from such multi-agency forums. This lack of participation may reflect scepticism amongst practitioners that the forum itself was of any real benefit. It may also be an indication of the lack of priority given to combating racism in rural areas, something noted by a representative from an education agency, Inclusion and Pupil Support, in Northamptonshire:

I was fairly horrified when talking to more than one senior area education officer when I was told to take a book along to MAGRAH because they're really boring meetings...There's no point in people attending meetings concerning racism because someone's told them they've got to be there. They've got to be committed.

This lack of commitment to challenging racism is a criticism that has been levelled at agencies (and particularly the police) in other contexts (see, for example, Rowe, 2004). Victims of racial harassment interviewed for this research were often very sceptical as to whether service providers were genuinely convinced that racism in rural areas was a serious issue, and it appeared to many victims that agencies were instead channelling their resources into tackling other crimes, such as burglary or vehicle crime, that show up more clearly in official crime statistics. As Hughes (2000) argues, such crimes are often prioritised by crime reduction partnerships as their levels can be more easily monitored (and thus any success in reducing them can be more easily demonstrated) than those of hate crimes such as racial harassment, where successful interventions may actually result in a rise in the recorded levels of incidents.

There was also a perception on the part of some agency workers, common to both counties that feature in the present study, that certain statutory and/or voluntary bodies were not 'pulling their weight' when it came to undertaking multi-agency anti-racist work.

*Jon Garland and Neil Chakraborti*

It appeared to some of those interviewed, and especially to those who represented key statutory agencies such as the police, that only a few organisations actually did more than pay 'lip service' to participating in anti-racist initiatives:

If you see how many are signed up to MAGRAH I think it's about fifteen, sixteen agencies, but the majority, the bulk of the work's done by two, and a third one in terms of projects, so that's poor.  
*Racist Incident Officer, Northamptonshire Police*

These feelings of resentment at the lack of involvement of certain organisations may be indicative of other difficulties, including personal problems between individuals or political mistrust between agencies as a whole. Indeed, in both Suffolk and Northamptonshire relationships between organisations represented on the MAFARH and MAGRAH forums appeared to be characterised by a degree of mutual suspicion and wariness, which led to a lack of information-sharing between them:

I think some people [other agency workers] don't even know what we are working with. They know that it's racial harassment, but that's about it. They don't really know our role, and vice versa. I may not know some of their roles.  
*Racial Harassment Caseworker, Community Safety Unit, Suffolk County Council*

There have been isolated incidents in this area of racial harassment and it's picked up that they are regarding housing, yet they come through via somebody else, whether it's social services or the police and it's often 'Why weren't we aware of that?' The information flow could be slightly better.  
*Anti-Social Behaviour Officer, Housing Department, Northamptonshire*

Crucially, this lack of inter-agency co-operation has led to delay in the implementation of assistance to victims. The dearth of knowledge of each other's roles mentioned above has also clearly not been solved by the presence of agencies at partnership meetings. A related but significant issue is the fact that a number of key organisations, including community groups, are not even present at such meetings as they have not been invited to participate. Interviews with members of minority ethnic groups revealed frustration at their absence from multi-agency anti-racist forums and has inevitably led to the feeling that these forums are ineffective and exclusionary:

The African Caribbean Association haven't had a representative at any meeting to do with MAGRAH for the last year and yet they are a member. There's the Indian and Muslim associations, they haven't turned up in the last year to any meetings.  
*Police Racist Incident Officer, Northamptonshire*

*Racist Victimisation, Community Safety and the Rural: Issues and Challenges*

They [MAFARH] or any of their organisations haven't contacted me...I've been living in this town for such a long time. We have no information or contact whatsoever.

*Pakistani Muslim male, Suffolk*

Consequently, members of minority ethnic communities, who may already be feeling isolated, may also feel disenfranchised from the very initiatives that should be supporting them. Whether this is a consequence of deliberate agency actions or merely a product of their thoughtlessness is open to conjecture. It is also, to a certain degree, irrelevant in the 'post-Macpherson' era where policies and procedures that 'disadvantage minority ethnic people', whether deliberate or unwitting, are evidence of institutional racism (Macpherson, 1999: 28).

## **Conclusions – Minority Ethnic Communities and Community Safety**

It is evident from the preceding discussion that the nature and regularity of racist incidents in rural and isolated areas should be a serious cause for concern amongst agencies. Moreover, although the number of racist incidents reported to the police in Suffolk and East Northamptonshire during 2001/02 was comparatively small, just 303<sup>9</sup> and 269<sup>10</sup> respectively, the actual totals may be far higher, since only a fraction, perhaps just one-in-ten, of incidents are ever reported to the police (Bowling, 1998). This under-reporting of incidents, coupled with their alarming effects upon victims, highlights both the significance of racist victimisation in the rural arena and the need to develop effective and compassionate responses.

However, as was illustrated above, the 'loose' partnerships that provide support to victims of racism in both counties studied were criticised by victims and by many of those that work within them. The forums were seen as somewhat vague bodies that did not provide much-needed direction and leadership. They were also criticised for not engaging local minority ethnic community groups; not sharing information efficiently and having, as participating members, organisations whose commitment to the forums was debatable.

Although these problems are notable and worrying, they do reflect concerns that have been expressed about partnership working in other contexts. For example, the Audit Commission has questioned the effectiveness of multi-agency approaches to crime reduction, and concluded in its evaluation of crime and disorder partnerships that they 'had not made an obvious impact on community safety' (Audit Commission, 2002: 1). The Commission also found that whilst some organisations, such as the police, participated fully in such networks, others, such as education and health, were less involved (2002: 19; see also Dhalech, 1999), mirroring the findings referred to in this article.

If there is a reluctance of some agencies to fully contribute to crime and disorder reduction partnerships for which they have a statutory obligation to participate, then it could be

Jon Garland and Neil Chakraborti

argued that they would be even more reticent to become involved in more 'informal' networks, such as the anti-racist coalitions in Suffolk and Northamptonshire. This appeared to be the case with some agencies that were examined during the course of this study which were wary of committing scarce resources to tackling racial harassment when the number of incidents did not contribute significantly to the crime statistics. This attitude reflects Gilling and Pierpoint's (1999: 124) description of the reluctance of rural agencies to commit resources to tackle broader crime issues when they cannot see the material benefits of doing so:

The government view is that successful crime reduction generates savings to pay for itself, but this may not convince those who ... do not forecast great savings because the initial costs of rural crime are not perceived as great, and who are not convinced that savings would accrue to themselves ...

Persuading agencies to commit scarce resources to combating the effects of rural racism, a form of crime that some do not take seriously anyway, is therefore an even greater problem. It is contended here though that anti-racism, including the provision of services to victims, should be a central component of rural community safety strategies. Unfortunately, the comparatively small size of rural minority ethnic populations appears to result in their needs being less of a priority to agencies than those of more substantial communities.

Rather, it may be beneficial to develop such strategies within the framework of the Audit Commission's formulation of community safety (that refers to 'people's sense of personal security and to their *feelings* of ease in the places that they live, work or spend leisure time' (Audit Commission, 2002: 4 (our italics)), since this idea is not predicated upon traditional ideas of community based around geographical notions of significant numbers of people, with shared interests, living in the same location. As Hughes (1998: 109) argues, within much of the contemporary community safety political agenda there is a 'diagnosis of the problem of crime and disorder and the means of their prevention [where there] always appears to be the existence of a tight and homogeneous community'. From the research outlined in this paper it appears as though much of the community safety work in Suffolk and Northamptonshire, including combating racism, is also conducted within this framework. Therefore, the diverse nature of rural communities is missed as they are conceptualised as ethnically homogenous entities, and this may explain why minority ethnic populations become 'invisible' to agencies.

Johnston (2000: 54-55) refers to a 'plurality of communities' which he sees as 'diverse, overlapping, pragmatic, temporary and frequently divided from one another', and when conceived in such a way, membership of communities is not dependent on a shared spatial location. In the same way, though they may have shared cultural and historical interests, rural minority ethnic populations are isolated, fragmented and dispersed, a reality of rural life that is not easily compatible with communitarian notions mentioned above. Instead, these communities are diasporic, spread thinly throughout the countryside and as a

*Racist Victimisation, Community Safety and the Rural: Issues and Challenges*

consequence sometimes become 'invisible' to agencies. They are, however, a significant and important presence within the rural arena and deserve to have their voices heard.

## Notes

- 1 For a more detailed discussion, see De Lima (2001).
- 2 These organisations include: Mid Suffolk District Council; Suffolk Coastal District Council; Waveney District Council; Suffolk Police; East of England Development Agency (EEDA); Learning Skills Council; Youth Offending Service; Education; Suffolk Health; Social Care; Connexions.
- 3 The Suffolk-based research was conducted primarily in the county's designated rural priority area, which, according to available Census figures, has a total minority ethnic population of 3,275 (3.0 per cent of the overall population in that area). The largest minority ethnic groups in this area are black (including black African, black Caribbean and black other, 1.1 per cent), Irish (0.8 per cent) and south Asian (including Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi, 0.2 per cent). The second study was based predominantly in East Northamptonshire, which has a minority ethnic population of 1,332 (less than 2.0 per cent of that borough's total population) according to the latest Census figures. The largest minority ethnic groups there are dual heritage (0.7 per cent), followed by Asian (0.4 per cent), while black and Chinese groups each account for approximately 0.3 per cent of the population.
- 4 All of the potential interviewees contacted by the research team in each county expressed their willingness to take part.
- 5 Due to lack of space, the findings from this aspect of the research are not detailed here, but instead can be found in the authors' edited volume *Rural Racism: Contemporary Debates and Perspectives*.
- 6 As the focus of this paper is on the qualitative aspects of the research, and with considerations of space in mind, the findings from the surveys will not be assessed here, but instead can be found in Garland and Chakraborti (2002) and Chakraborti and Garland (2003).
- 7 The precise location of each victim's rural area of residence has been withheld to preserve their anonymity.
- 8 MAFARH co-ordinates the anti-racist work of a number of agencies in the form of a loose 'partnership' on a county-wide basis in Suffolk, whilst there are several MAGRAHs in Northamptonshire. The present study examined the workings of the Eastern Area MAGRAH. Both forums contained representatives from a variety of organisations, including, for example, local authorities, the police, race equality councils, Victim Support and community groups.
- 9 Source: Suffolk County Council Community Safety Unit.
- 10 Source: Eastern Area MAGRAH Annual Report 2001/02, p5.

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Jon Garland and Neil Chakraborti

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