Safe Routes to New Jersey's Disadvantaged Urban Schools

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Abstract

The New Jersey Safe Routes to School program has been most successful in middle and upper-middle class suburban communities. However, success has been limited in disadvantaged, urban cities. Recognizing this, in 2008 the New Jersey Department of Transportation sponsored an Urban Demonstration Program in three of New Jersey's largest cities - Newark, Trenton, and Camden. This report describes lessons learned from the Demonstration Program on the applicability of Safe Routes to School initiatives in urban areas and challenges and opportunities unique to urban communities. Hypotheses include the challenges, needs and strengths as to what makes these places substantively different than the wealthier suburban communities throughout the state.

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Introduction

The federal-aid Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program devotes millions of dollars to infrastructure and non-infrastructure projects that accommodate and encourage children in Kindergarten through eighth grade (ages 5-12) to walk or bike to school. The program has been steadily growing in the United States.

One of the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) main objectives for SRTS is to "make the program accessible to diverse participants" and ensure that the program is easily accessible to schools and communities in rural, suburban, and urban settings, particularly those with fewer local resources and limited ability to afford new initiatives. This is particularly important because school zones in low-income areas often have higher than average child pedestrian crash rates. FHWA recommends that in school areas with higher than average child crash rates, targeted outreach and technical assistance efforts may be required to ensure that low-income communities can fairly compete for SRTS funds. Assistance may be needed with technical assessment, preparation of grant applications, or capacity development.

In a majority of cases in New Jersey, SRTS has been successful in middle and upper-middle class suburban communities. Why the program does not seem to be taking hold as well in disadvantaged communities (which, in New Jersey, are often urban) is likely due to a wide range of issues. It is with this in mind that the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) initiated the Safe Routes to School Urban Demonstration Program. The program aims to empower inner city school communities with tools and strategies to overcome barriers to walking and bicycling to school by addressing the issues that are important to them. The Urban Demonstration Program was envisioned as a way to enable the urban school communities to take ownership of their SRTS program and achieve the goals specific to getting their kids to school safely on foot or bicycle.

NJDOT assembled a Project Team including The RBA Group, The National Center for Bicycling and Walking and the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center (VTC) at Rutgers University. The Urban Demonstration Program was initiated in the New Jersey cities of Camden, Newark, and Trenton. Two schools were chosen in each city. Each of the six school communities that participated took part in a collaborative problem solving approach to identify their community's specific issues and assets.

The New Jersey cities of Newark, Trenton and Camden were selected by NJDOT to be part of this program because:
- They were in the top ten cities in New Jersey for pedestrian fatalities
- They met the State designation of urban disadvantaged area
- Each city and/or school district had unsuccessfully applied for federal SRTS funds in 2007
- Each city/school district had approached NJDOT with concerns about students walking and bicycling to/from school

Understanding the Challenges

In most SRTS programs, traffic safety and fear of crime are top issues of concern. The Urban Demonstration Program has shown that these two concerns are critical in urban environments as well. Poverty, violence, and a lack of resources are also key concerns in urban areas.

Poverty
As shown below in Figure 1, all three cities in the Urban Demonstration Program have poverty rates that are dramatically higher than both the state and national average. Of the three cities, Camden has the largest reported percentage of poverty.

It should also be noted that New Jersey's high median income translates to elevated prices for basic necessities that further burden lower income residents. At the same time, official measures of poverty do not accurately account for these geographic differences or other variations that affect the costs faced by New Jersey families living in a state with a high cost of living, particularly for housing and child care.

Figure 1: Percent of Population Below the Poverty Line, 2005[1]
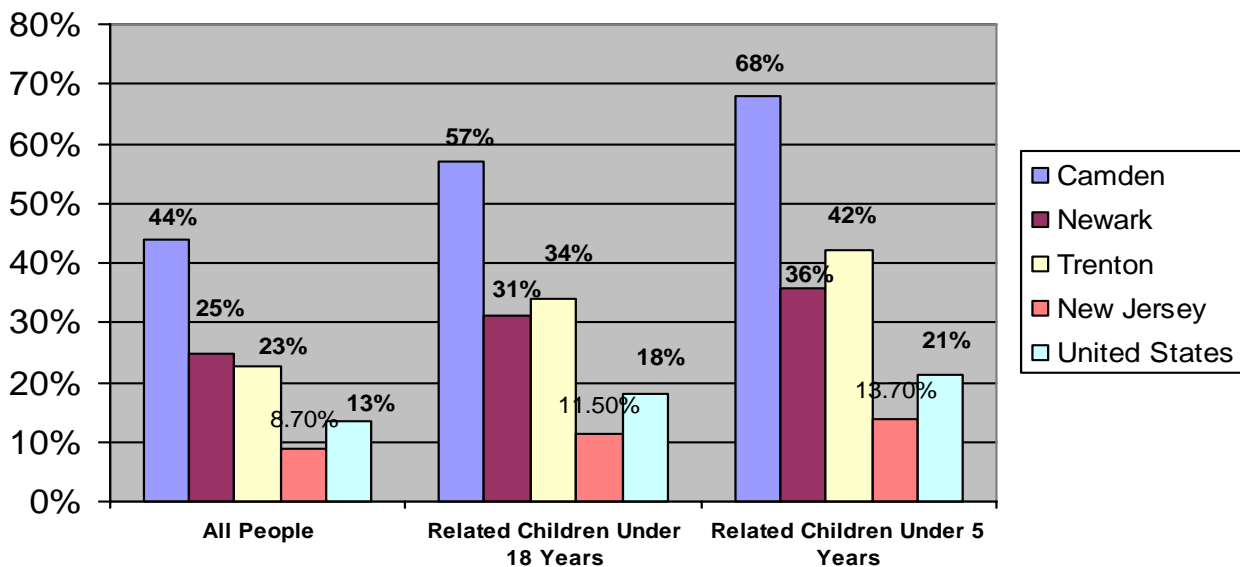
Lack of Resources
In New Jersey, local property taxes are responsible for a large proportion of school funding. Camden, Trenton and Newark all have low levels of local tax funding, largely because home values in these cities are assessed at a low level. The prevalence of tax-exempt non-residential properties such as government buildings and religious institutions also leads to lower tax revenues. As a result, these cities receive less property tax revenue compared to wealthier communities. This leaves fewer municipal tax dollars that can be devoted to schools; the cities are reliant on State funding for education.

**Figure 2: School Revenue: Comparison of Percentages by Source** [2]
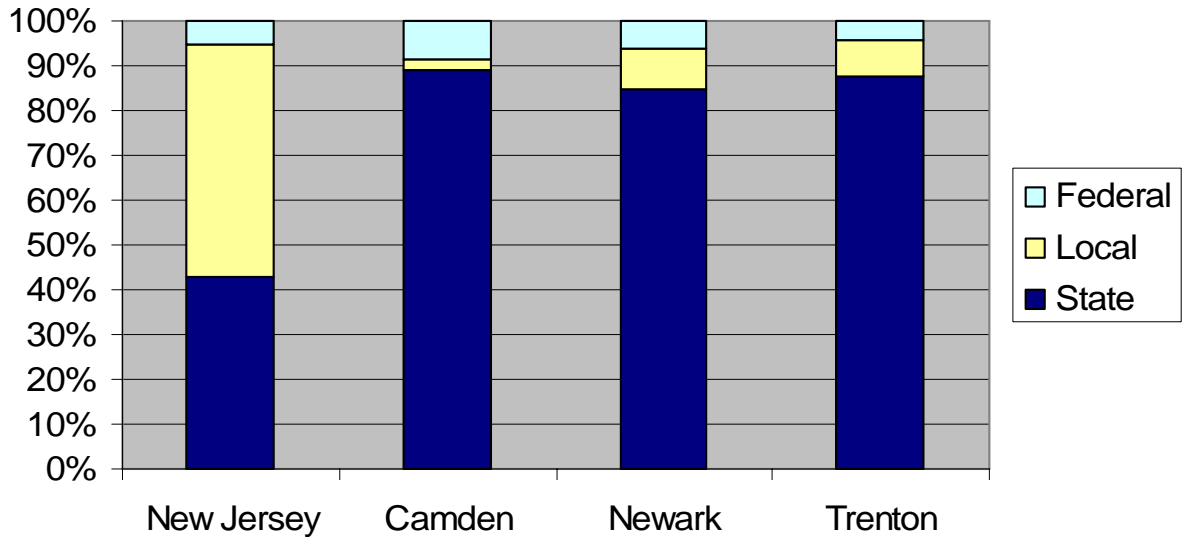
Crime and Violence

High crime rates make walking and bicycling considerably less safe and attractive, and make parents less willing to allow their young children to walk or bike to school. According to community leaders in all three cities, gang activity and recruitment are frequent concerns. A New Jersey State Police survey[3], indicated that over half of the municipal law enforcement respondents reported gang activity on school property. Also, it has been suggested that schools are used for gang recruitment, especially since almost half (43%) of gang members are under 18 years of age. Camden, Newark, and Trenton are three of the eight municipalities in New Jersey that reported having gangs with 200 or more members living within their municipality.

As can be seen in Figure 3, the violent crime rate per 1,000 residents in each of the three participating cities is higher than New Jersey's overall rate. Non-violent crime is similarly high in these three cities.

Figure 3: Violent Crime Rate per Thousand Residents, 2007[4]
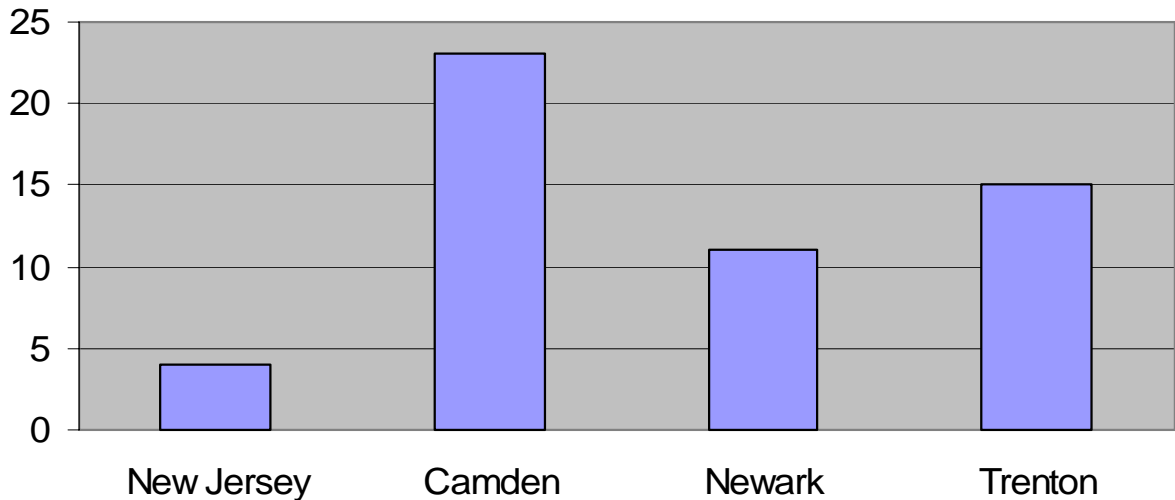
Based on interviews of parents, concerns about sexual predators contribute to the reluctance in allowing children to walk to school. These concerns are borne out in the statistics as can be seen in Table 1. Each of the cities has a much higher percentage of its share of the state's sex offenders. These statistics are particularly shocking in Camden; a city representing only 1% of the State's total population contains 15% of the State's total number of sex offenders.

**Table 1: Registered Sex Offenders in Camden, Newark, and Trenton, 2007[5]**

City	Registered sex offenders	% of total sex offenders in state	City population	% of total state population
Camden:	388	15%	79,904	1%
Newark:	254	10%	273,546	3%
Trenton:	109	4%	85,403	1%

Traffic Safety

As mentioned earlier, traffic safety is a common theme in nearly all SRTS programs. This common issue becomes magnified in urban areas. As can be seen in Figure 4, the rate of bicycle and pedestrian crashes in the three Urban Demonstration Program cities is higher than for New Jersey as a whole.

Furthermore, according to the Plan4Safety Data Center at the Rutgers Center for Advanced Infrastructure and Transportation, most of these crashes occur from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. and from 2 p.m. to 7 p.m., corresponding with times when children are most frequently outside, either traveling to/from school or otherwise spending time outside of the home during daylight hours.

Figure 4: Pedestrian & Bike Crashes per Thousand Residents under Age 16, 2005[6]
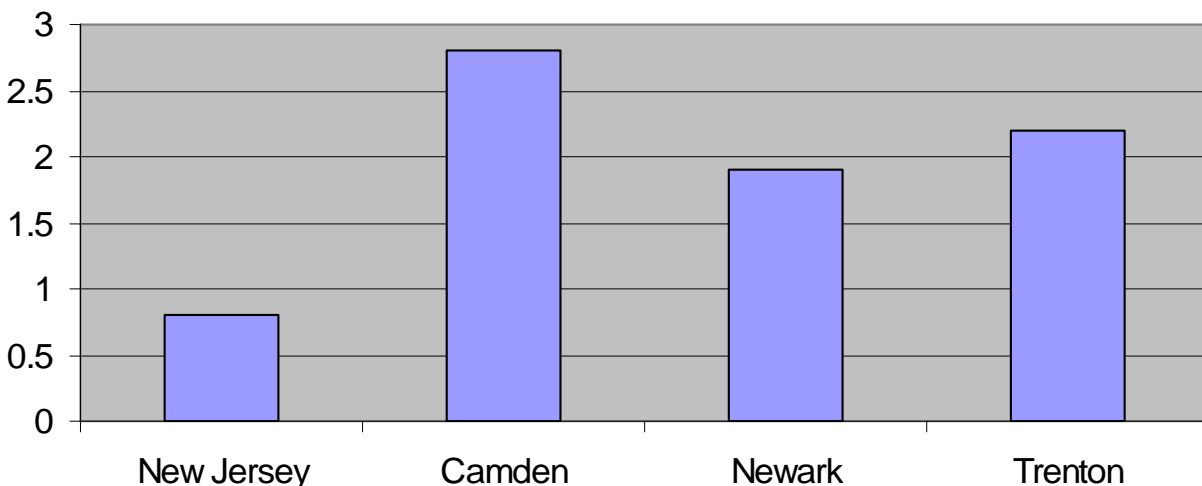
Another important issue for urban schools is the availability of crossing guards. As part of the data collection for the Urban Demonstration Program, the Project Team contacted the Traffic Safety Officer in charge of crossing guards in each city. As demonstrated in Table 2, shortages of guards were found in all three cities.   According to the Traffic Safety Officers, crossing guard positions are

hard to fill. Reasons include: the position has limited work hours at inconvenient times of the day, guards are exposed to varying weather conditions, impatient commuters run stop signs and lights, endangering guards and students, and the job requires a high amount of responsibility. In short, the job is high risk with low pay.

Table 2: Crossing Guard Data for Camden, Trenton, and Newark, 2008

	CURRENT # OF CROSSING GUARDS	CITY CROSSING GUARDS TO BE FILLED
Camden	85	106
Trenton	85	95
Newark	180	210

Large Cities with Large Bureaucracies
Big cities have many levels of government. There are city councils, ward councils, neighborhood groups, boards of education, and charter schools, each with their own policies and concerns. The bureaucracy is further complicated in Camden. Camden's takeover by the state in 2002 gave the city a state-appointed chief operating officer with broad powers over the city's operations and more power than the democratically-elected school board, city council, and mayor. This substantial bureaucracy often hinders progress of programs like SRTS because there are so many stakeholders involved in the decision-making process. Competing priorities make it more difficult to get SRTS issues on the radar.

Strengths and Needs in Urban Areas

Each city had opportunities and benefits toward making walking and bicycling to school safer and accessible. Input from community members in each city was crucial to identifying and prioritizing areas for improvement.

Students are Already Walking
The Project Team gathered information from classroom surveys using a student travel tally form developed by the National Center for Safe Routes to School. The student travel tally form is intended to help track the number of children walking and biking to/from school through the use of a "hands-up" classroom survey. Students in each classroom at each participating school were asked how they got to school each morning, and how they planned to get home after school. In each school, a large percentage of students walk to and from school. For example, at one school in Newark sixty-seven percent of students indicated they walked to school during a cold week in January. Therefore, the emphasis of an urban SRTS program should be on improving safety through facilities, education and enforcement rather than on increasing the number of walkers through encouragement. In addition, measures of success should be expanded to include improvements in safety.

Commitment from City Leaders
Starting an effective SRTS program requires getting to the right people. A key element of the program was to establish a Safe Routes to School Task Force for each school to aid in conducting outreach efforts. The aim of each Task Force was to engage active community groups and local organizers who would work to support and sustain the SRTS program over time. The Project Team was fortunate to have top level municipal and school officials interested from the start. The Task

Force for each city is comprised of government staff, school officials, teachers, police officers, transportation management associations, and representatives from a variety of local and regional non-profit organizations with an interest in promoting health, safety, and walking and bicycling.

At initial meetings, Task Force members identified issues they believed compromise the safety of students on their way to and from school. This insight helped facilitate the development of individual programs at each school. Following the formation of local SRTS Task Forces, the information gathering process at each school continued, with the Project Team conducting stakeholder interviews, collecting secondary data, conducting student travel surveys, mapping neighborhoods, and conducting a community workshop. Together, these steps allowed the Project Team to develop a list of preliminary recommendations to improve conditions for students on their way to/from each school.

While supportive of the program, Task Force members' time constraints were often a challenge. Often a large-scale or high profile crisis would temporarily halt the progress of the outreach and program. Task Force members were pulled away to take care of the crisis, but acknowledged the need to get back to work on the SRTS program when the situation improved.

Needs Identified by Students and Teachers[7]
Needs were identified through two methods: an evening community workshop was held at each school and the Project Team worked with students as part of a class assignment. On the day of the evening workshop, the Project Team was present throughout the entire school day, observing arrival and dismissal, and interacting with students in both a classroom session and a neighborhood walkabout to get their perspective on their trip to school. The student perceptions set the context for the evening's discussion with the rest of the community.

Project Team members met with small groups of students in the school to discuss obstacles to walking and bicycling in their neighborhoods. When asked about general safety concerns in the school neighborhood, typical responses from students and school officials included:
- Personal security
- High number of registered sex offenders in the surrounding neighborhood
- Loitering/drunks
- No safe place to store or ride bicycles
- Stray dogs
- Street litter
- Speeding vehicles

After giving the children a brief background on the Safe Routes to School program, the Project Team asked them to participate in a visual preference survey. The survey used images to help students focus on how they would like to see changes to their school neighborhood. Students were asked how they would improve their neighborhood if they were Mayor. This gave students a chance to think and dream "big." Typical responses included:
- Add bike racks
- Add benches
- Add trees
- Provide bus shelters at all stops
- Remove litter from the streets
- Add more stop signs and pedestrian signals
- Add trash cans on every corner
- Add crossing guards
- Remove drunks that leer at girls as they walk by
- Add security cameras around the school

- Add red light cameras
- Turn vacant lots into community gardens
- Add flowers and planters
- Add better, more visible crosswalks throughout the neighborhood.
- Provide secure parking for teachers
- Install speed bumps in the area of the school
- Organize student drop-off/pick-up zone to improve the safety for kids that walk
- Create bike groups to allow students to ride together to school

Following the exercise, the students led the Project Team on a walking audit around their school neighborhood, where they recorded and photographed positive and negative aspects of the walking environment. Walks lasted about an hour, making frequent stops to discuss problem locations including dangerous crosswalks, streets where speeding was a problem and abandoned houses. Although students were quick to identify areas where they did not feel safe walking, identifying areas where improvement could be made were also paramount. In each city, students pointed out areas where quality of life improvements like more trees, flowers, cleaner streets and art could make their neighborhood better.

Needs Identified by Community Members[1]
The evening community workshops were designed to bring together parents/caregivers, teachers, police, and community leaders to brainstorm about how to make students' trips to school on foot and bike safer and preferable to car travel. The number of participants at each workshop varied at each school. Task Force members at some schools were able to rally a number of participants while other workshops had only a handful of attendees.

The Project Team's goal for the workshops was to present the audience with information on SRTS programs as well as issues mentioned in earlier discussions with students and the Team's own observations of the school's arrival and dismissal. One outcome of the workshops is that it stimulated discussion and provided the audience with a forum to voice their concerns. Another was allowing the Project Team to offer possible solutions and allowing community members to discuss what actions could be taken (and by whom) to combat the problems.

Workshop participants identified barriers, areas of concern and opportunities for change in the school environment in their discussion and in a mapping exercise facilitated by the Project Team.

Key concerns included:
- Child abductions
- Bike theft
- Stray/loose dogs
- Blind spots at local intersections
- Need for flashing beacons, signs, or speed bumps to slow vehicles in the school zone
- Few students using helmets when biking
- Heavy traffic, blind spots, illegal parking, and heavy truck traffic in the school area
- Drinking in local parks
- Speeding on local roads
- Men approaching young girls
- Gang activity
- Faded crosswalks
- Prostitute hang-outs and go-go bars along school routes

Solutions included:
- Creating volunteer parent patrols

- Patrolling parks
- Adding school zone signs and pavement markings
- Installing high visibility crosswalks
- Hiring more crossing guards
- Increased pedestrian and bicycle safety education in the schools
- Increased coordination between school and municipal staff

In some cases, getting school and community members to identify problem locations was more difficult than working with the students. Although larger areas of concern like speeding and crime were easily identified, it often took prodding and/or discussing the student's concerns to get the discussion going. Adults had grown accustomed to some of the negative aspects of life in the neighborhood. For example, at a school in Trenton, the principal was happy to report that the number of kids getting "jumped" or beaten-up on their way home from school had dropped dramatically. It was almost an hour into the conversation when she noted that she had received twenty-three notices of registered sex offenders living within a quarter mile of the school. Community members also expressed frustration and fatigue over past safety programs that were started and then cancelled due to lack of funding.

Lessons Learned

The SRTS Urban Demonstration Program has provided NJDOT and the Project Team with several lessons about working with urban communities:

- Typical SRTS programs emphasize in increasing the number of students that walk and bike to school. Although modal shift is an important goal for many communities, in urban areas the numbers of students walking is often already large. It is the safety of the students along with their walk to and from school that is the key issue. General safety can be more difficult to measure than increasing numbers of students walking. A larger evaluation discussion on the national level needs to take place on how to measure improved walking and bicycling conditions along with modal changes.

- Frequent turnover on every level of government is a challenge. Primary contacts in large cities or schools are often re-assigned, dismissed or leave, making it hard to maintain continuity of the program. However, each city has had at least one dedicated non-profit organization and there are many parents, teachers, and community groups that want to help and become partners. Finding the connections to the right groups can be time-consuming but rewarding.

- There is a lack of resources, both funds and staffing. As one city government official stated, "We don't have funding to apply for the SRTS grant and if we got the grant, we don't have the manpower to see it through." Multiple layers of bureaucracy make it hard to get a program going. However, city and school leaders are committed and understand the value of the program.

- The bar for improvements is set low – broken sidewalks, speeding cars, drunks and gangs are often seen as way of life. However, children in these communities are not always jaded. They want flowers and other nonessential amenities and can't see why their neighborhood can't be improved.

- In all of the cities, many good safety programs start, but are unfunded shortly after they get off the ground. Parents indicated that they get worn out talking about problems that never get addressed. There is mistrust on multiple levels. Programs must be responsive, flexible and make a long-term commitment. It is best to work with local community groups and

cultural groups that already have credibility (neighborhood groups) — Boy Scouts, local churches, uniformed police all help to alleviate fears and show support.

- Efforts to address chronic problems are often trumped by the crisis of the day. The program schedule was delayed at times as the schools or city government dealt with critical situations like school violence or school closings for excessive heat, flu outbreaks, etc. Flexibility is needed to allow for crisis situations to pass. It is important to dedicate staff time to following up.

- In low income areas where kids are already walking, the emphasis needs to be on improving physical safety, providing pedestrian and bicycle safety education and walking in groups. As one city parent stated, "Without good experiences for students who walk and bike now, they will never see it as a safe alternative to driving nor will they fight for better facilities later in life."

Next Steps

Though the School Travel Plans have been distributed to the school communities that participated in the program, the SRTS Urban Demonstration Program is not yet complete. Using the information gathered thus far, the Project Team will continue to take an active role in the SRTS programs in each city, scheduling follow-up meetings and offering ongoing support with specific non-infrastructure programs. The NJDOT will guide each city in completing a strong application for future SRTS funding and because of their participation in the Demonstration Project, these cities will be granted extra points on their future SRTS grant applications.

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