

Social Determinants of Justice

**A Practice Guide for
Community-Led and
Place-Based Initiatives**

PRISM



UNSW
SYDNEY



This guide is for people working in community groups, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), for purpose organisations (FPOs), governments and philanthropic foundations who are working on place-based and community-led initiatives and want to understand and apply the Social Determinants of Justice framework in their work. It draws on research developed at the UNSW Social Determinants of Justice Research Hub and on the experience of organisations already using the framework in practice.

The guide is intended to share knowledge about the research and practices that address the Social Determinants of Justice. We hope it could help at all stages of work, design, implementation, partnering, evaluating, advocacy and funding, by making explicit different ways of thinking and working. The examples and questions might be used to understand and apply the determinants with staff, communities, partners and funders.

This guide does not provide answers about what any particular initiative should do but we hope that it helps ask better questions and validates and supports the realities of criminalisation that many communities already understand all too well.

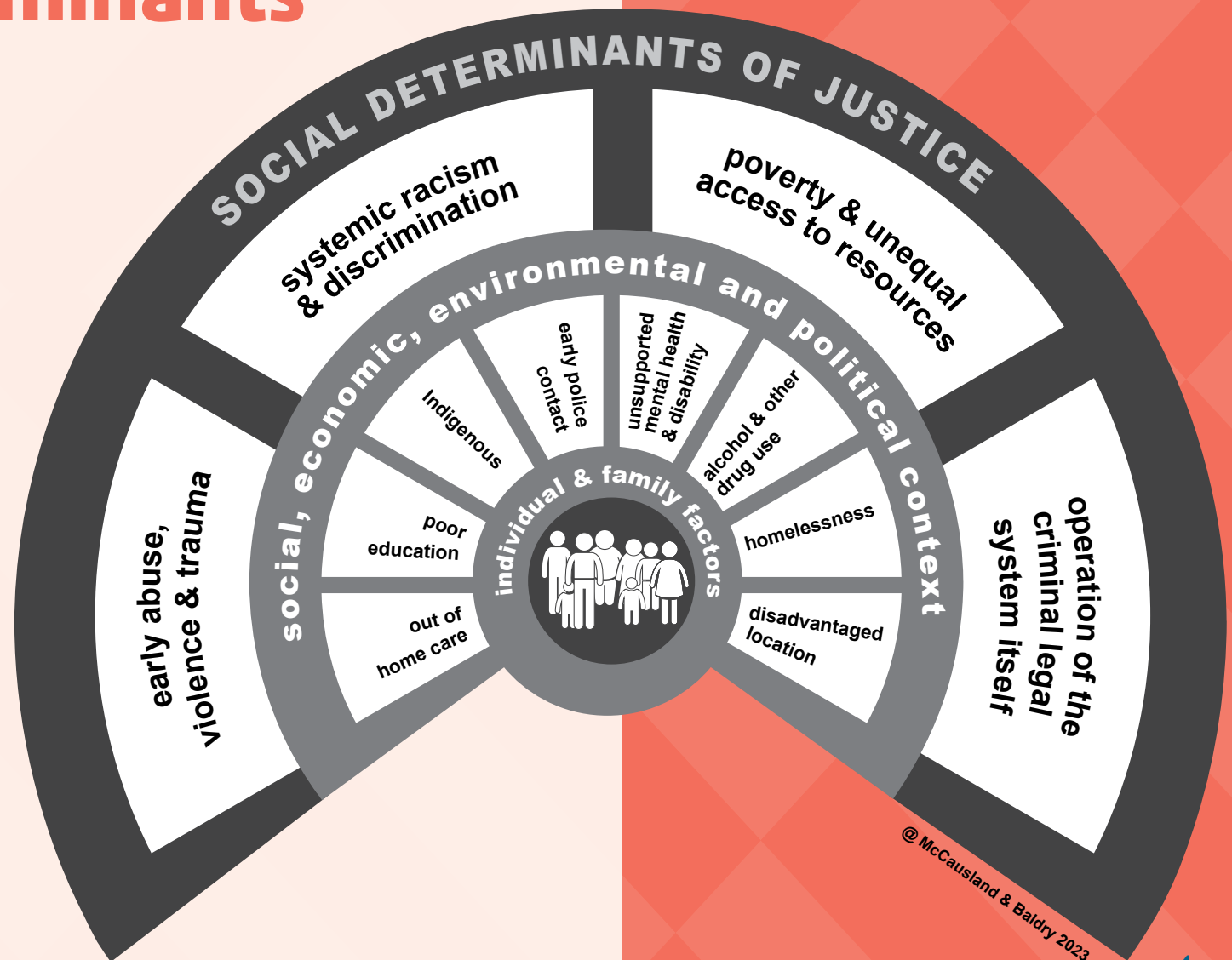
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1

What Are the Social Determinants of Justice?

The Social Determinants of Justice framework, developed by Ruth McCausland and Eileen Baldry through analysis of a linked government administrative dataset covering 2,731 people incarcerated in NSW, identifies the factors most strongly associated with a person's initial and ongoing contact with the criminal justice system. The research demonstrates that criminal justice involvement — like health outcomes — is largely shaped by systemic and social factors, not individual behaviour alone.



Eight individual and family determinants were identified:

- Having been in out-of-home care
- Receiving a poor school education
- Being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- Having early contact with police
- Having unsupported mental health and/or cognitive disability
- Problematic alcohol and other drug use
- Experiencing homelessness or unstable housing
- Coming from or living in a disadvantaged location

Crucially, **the more of these factors experienced, the greater the likelihood of criminalisation and incarceration**. People in the dataset were often cycling through custody on remand for minor offences across many years often because the health, education and human services systems had failed to provide timely and appropriate support (McCausland & Baldry, 2023).

Underneath these individual determinants are four structural drivers
— the 'causes of the causes

- **Entrenched poverty and unequal access to resources in families and neighbourhoods**
- **Structural racism and discrimination, in particular experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people with disability**
- **Failure to adequately respond to the abuse, violence and trauma experienced by many children and young people**
- **The operation of the criminal legal system itself, which is criminogenic**
— it increases rather than reduces the likelihood of future incarceration

The more of these factors you experience, the more likely you are to be incarcerated



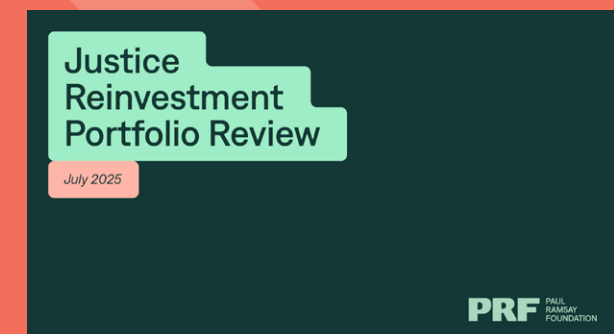
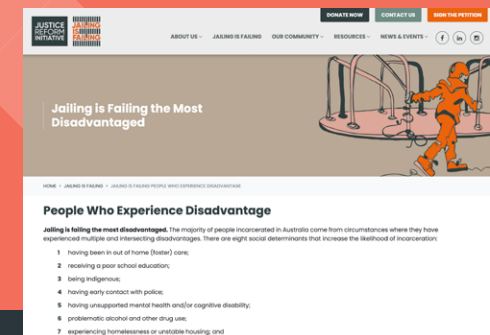
You can type
your own notes
into these boxes
throughout the
practice guide and
save on your device.

The Social Determinants of Justice framework has already been adopted, adapted or used by a growing number of government inquiries, advocacy organisations, community organisations and funders in Australia.

For example:

- The **Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee Australia's** Interim Report into Australia's Youth Justice and Incarceration System (2025) used the Social Determinants of Justice as a central framework in analysis of the impacts of youth detention and recommended role of the Australian Government.
- The **Australian Human Rights Commission's** [Help Way Earlier!](#) report and the [Commonwealth Senate's report on Australia's youth justice and incarceration system](#) both draw on the Social Determinants of Justice as an explanatory and reform framework (AHRC, 2024)
- The **Justice Reform Initiative** has used the Social Determinants of Justice to highlight the ways in which [jailing is failing the most disadvantaged people](#) in Australia.
- The **Paul Ramsay Foundation** has adapted and incorporated the Social Determinants of Justice into their design and analysis of their [Justice Reinvestment Portfolio](#).
- The **Dharriwaa Elders Group** through the Yuwaya Ngarra-li initiative in partnership with UNSW have shaped the framework and been able to create approaches to supporting children and young peoples' wellbeing that directly respond to the causes of the causes of incarceration.

We'll explore these and further examples as we go through this guide.



2

Who Are You Working With and For?

One of the most important, and often uncomfortable, questions the Social Determinants of Justice can be used to ask of organisations is: are we actually reaching the children and young people who most need support?

Children and young people who are criminalised typically experience multiple overlapping challenges: histories of trauma and family disruption, involvement in the child protection system, school disengagement, undiagnosed cognitive disability and mental health conditions, and inadequate access to culturally appropriate services.

Most children and young people in contact with the criminal legal system start as victims of violence and crime, over time they move from being seen as “at risk” to “a risk” (McCausland & Baldry, 2023).

Are we actually reaching the children and young people who most need support?

When health, education, disability and community services fail to appropriately engage and support these children and young people — or actively exclude them — the justice system becomes the default response.

As the data shows, 92% of the cohort in the NSW dataset had been diagnosed with mental health disorders, 46% had intellectual disability, and those who had been in out-of-home care as children had three times the likelihood of youth incarceration (McCausland & Baldry, 2023).

This pattern is predictable. It reflects what the Social Determinants of Justice framework calls 'deep punitiveness': a tendency across systems, including education and community services, to exclude and punish certain children and young people rather than support them. Expulsion from school, exclusion from programs due to 'behavioural' issues, and referral to police rather than social supports are all expressions of this tendency.

Organisations working with children and young people experiencing multiple and complex disadvantage who have been failed by mainstream services report how difficult it is to secure resourcing to provide appropriate support.

Police and justice agencies are too often the default response to children and young people experiencing disadvantage.

On the next page is a case study about the challenges of securing funding to work holistically with young people with intensive support needs

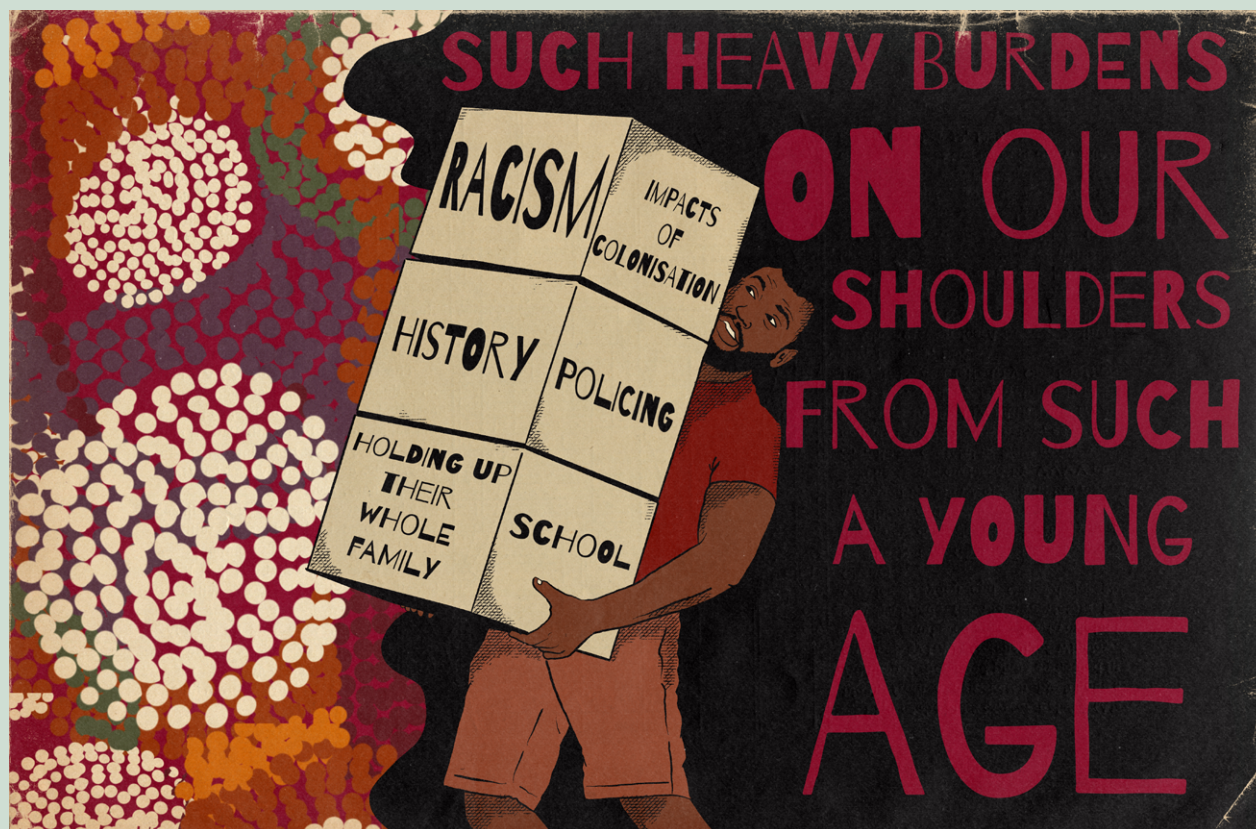
Mounty Aboriginal Youth & Community Services

– the challenge of segmented, short-term funding

Mounty Aboriginal Youth & Community Services is an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation in Mount Druitt, NSW, working with young people and families.

In consultations with the SDJ Research Hub (2025), the organisation identified that current funding structures make it very difficult to work with young people who need the most intensive support. Funding tends to come in small, segmented grants, for specific activities like transport and pick-up, for example, but rarely supports the kind of sustained, long-term, relational work that is essential for young people experiencing multiple, compounding disadvantages.

This is a common pattern: the young people most at risk of criminalisation are often those who are hardest to engage, require the most intensive support, and are least well-served by time-limited, activity-specific grants.



Artwork by Oumoula Mckenzie for Mounty Aboriginal Youth & Community Services

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Who are the children and young people or families who are missing out on services, including your own? What are the barriers to their engagement?



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Does your organisation work with children and young people who have had early police contact, including as victims or witnesses of crime? If not, why not? What would it take?

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What are the values or understanding your organisation has about working with children and young people?

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Are there ways your program's eligibility criteria, intake processes or funding requirements might contribute to certain children and young people missing out?

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What would it take to work differently to reach those missing out on existing services and systems?

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How could you or your organisation play a role in working with others to make sure these children or young people are supported?

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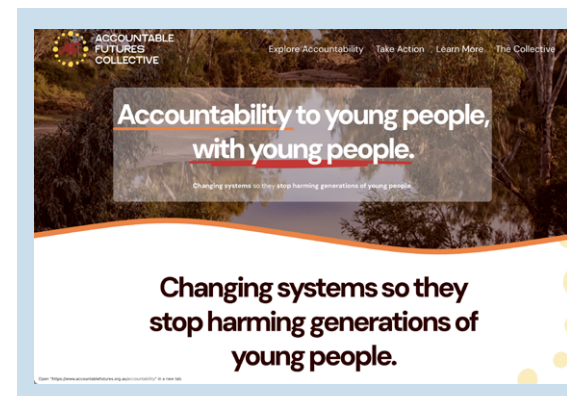
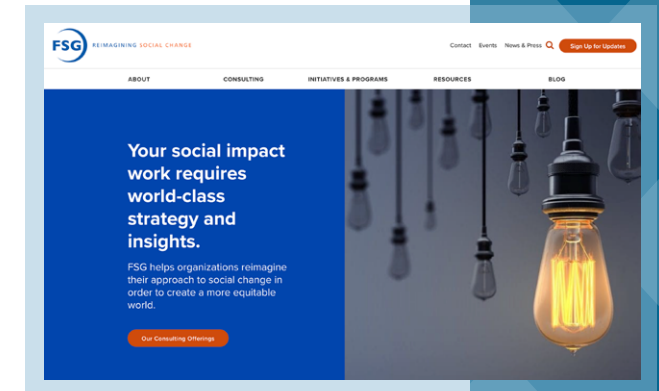
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USEFUL RESOURCES

There are many different methods and tools for considering who is involved in change and how to relate to and engage with them. Here are some potentially useful resources to consider

- **Thriving Queensland Kids** have collated a set of resources from and on engagement with children and families in Queensland and across Australia
tqkp.org.au/childrens-voices
- An option for thinking about who you are or could be working with is **Actor Mapping**. for example, this tool from FSG.
fsg.org/resource/guide-actor-mapping
- Young people involved with the **Accountable Futures Collective** have created resources around partnership and accountability mechanisms – read more at
accountablefutures.org.au/accountability



3

How Can You Contribute to Addressing the Social Determinants?

The Social Determinants of Justice framework points to a number of practical ways that community organisations, ACCOs, national for purpose organisations and funders can contribute to reducing the criminalisation of children and young people, even when their work is not explicitly focused on justice.

Understand how your work relates to the determinants

Start by mapping your work against the eight determinants and four structural drivers.

Even if your organisation does not see itself as part of a 'justice' response, understanding these connections allows you to explore how your work contributes (positively or negatively) to justice outcomes.

For example:

- An organisation working in early childhood education is directly addressing the 'poor school education' determinant.
- A housing organisation is working on homelessness, which is one of the determinants
- A cultural program for Aboriginal young people is working on structural racism and its effects.

Importantly, the structural drivers including racism and disadvantage cross all sectoral boundaries and so are relevant and important for all of us to consider and seek to address in any work in support of children, young people and families.

In this section, start thinking about how your work relates to the social determinants of justice.

What are the needs and experiences of the children and young people and their families in your community?

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Start by mapping your work against the eight determinants ...



Act on multiple determinants simultaneously, with others

The Social Determinants of Justice research makes clear that single-issue interventions are unlikely to divert children and young people from the justice pathway. The more determinants experienced, the greater the risk therefore effective responses needed to address multiple factors at the same time. Some organisations take a more holistic and relational approach to working with children and young people, such as the Dharriwaa Elders Group highlighted below, and all organisations are part of broader systems meaning that how they coordinate and collaborate to support members of their community matters deeply.

This means taking a holistic view of children and young people that you work with, building partnerships, developing pathways, and most importantly, acting collectively to make sure that families, children and young people are meaningfully supported.





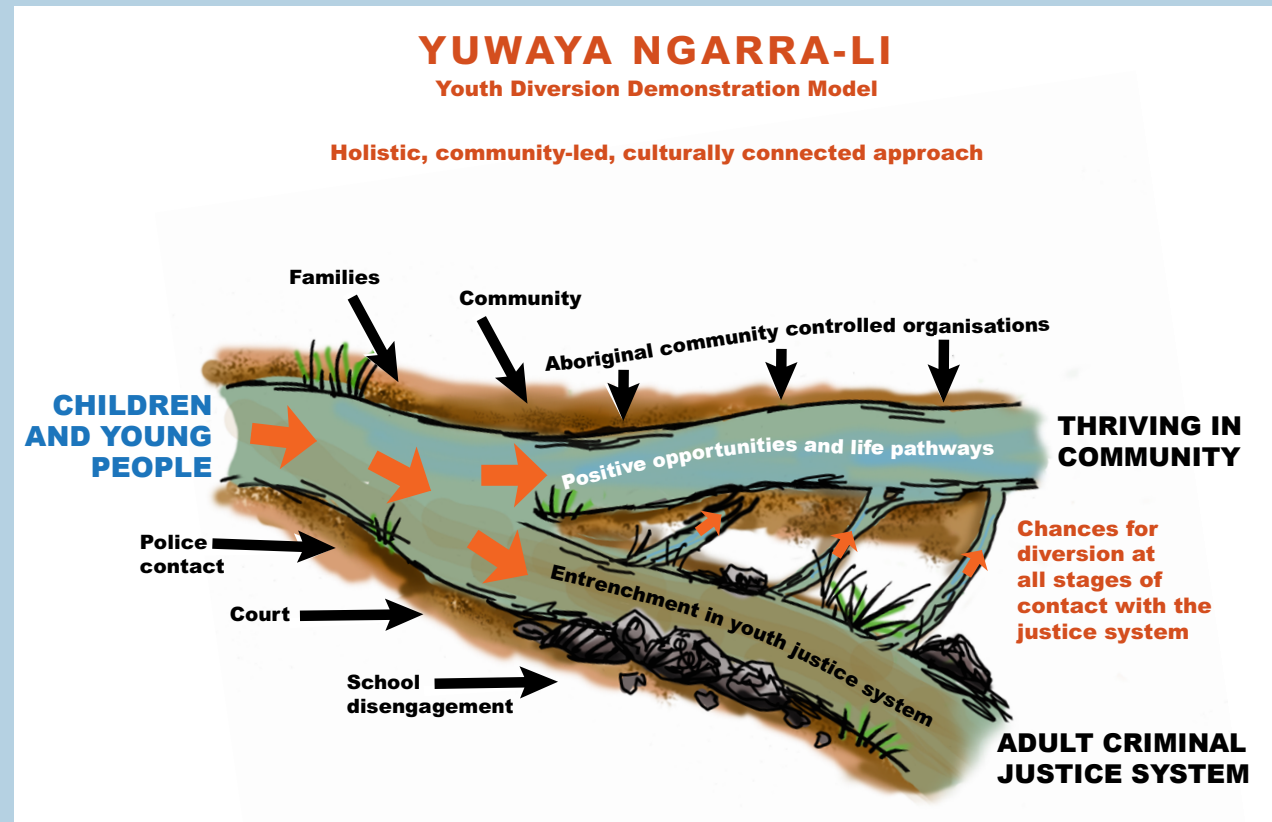
Yuwaya Ngarra-li – multi-level, holistic action



The Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership between the Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG) in Walgett, NSW, and UNSW Sydney demonstrates what it looks like to act on multiple determinants simultaneously.

The Two River Pathway to Change diversion model developed through Yuwaya Ngarra-li operates at three levels: influencing system accountability; building community leadership through ACCO collaboration; and providing direct youth support through outreach, wellbeing checks, case support and culturally connected activities for children and young people.

Outcomes include a reduction in Aboriginal children and young people appearing in Walgett's Children's Court and improvements in wellbeing. The Dealing with Fines program has cleared more than \$500,000 in debt, directly preventing poverty-driven criminalisation. Over 85% of DEG staff are Aboriginal, and the model is grounded in community-led practice (McCausland et al., 2025). Yuwaya Ngarra-li demonstrates that change requires simultaneous action on structural conditions, community-level systems and individual support, not just one of these.



Waruwi Burranba-li-gu: 'Two River Pathway to Change' Yuwaya Ngarra-li Youth Diversion Model, excerpted from Peta MacGillivray, Zoe Sands, Ruth McCausland, Wendy Spencer & May MillerDawkins (2024). Yuwaya Ngarra-li Briefing Paper: *Lessons from the Two River Pathway to Change Diversion Model 2018-2023*.

Centre community leadership and strengthen Aboriginal Community Control

The Social Determinants of Justice framework consistently points to community-led and ACCO-led responses as most effective, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This echoes commitments in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and findings from the Productivity Commission and the Australian Human Rights Commission about the importance of self-determination and the ability of ACCOs to deliver better results for their communities (Productivity Commission, 2024, 49; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2024, 67-8).

The above Yuwaya Ngarra-li example sits within governance by an ACCO and an explicit commitment by UNSW in its partnership to follow and support the community leadership and Aboriginal Control exercised by the Dharriwaa Elders Group.

Centering community leadership means governance, decision-making authority and resourcing flowing to communities themselves, not just consultation.



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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Which of the eight determinants does your work address, directly or indirectly? Are you capturing this in how you talk about and evaluate your work?

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What are the opportunities to collaborate with organisations working on other determinants to better support children and young people and their families?

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How is community leadership or Aboriginal Community Control reflected in the governance, decision-making and funding arrangements of the work you're involved with?

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What does a 'whole-of-community' response to a young person experiencing multiple determinants look like in your context?

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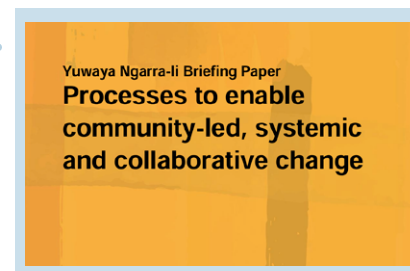
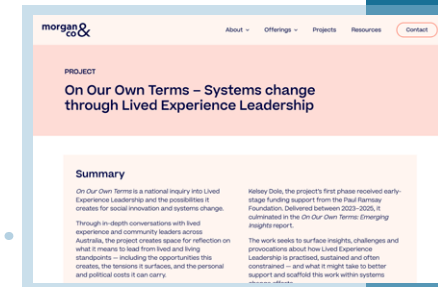
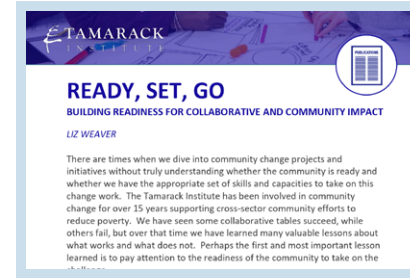
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USEFUL RESOURCES

In thinking about how to work together and with government agencies there are a range of resources to draw on including:

- a **tool on readiness to collaborate** by Canadian Tamarack Institute
tamarackcommunity.ca/hubfs/Resources/Publications/ReadySetGoLizWeaverpaper.pdf
- a **guide to Shared Decision-Making** by PLACE Australia
placeaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Sharing-the-power-to-make-change-A-guide-to-shared-decision-making-PLACE.pdf
- an **introductory practice guide to collaborative governance** on Changefest's Platform C
platformc.org/publications/collaborative-governance-introductory-practice-guide
- a research report on **lived experience leadership** by Morgan and Co. and a **guide to leading Justice Reinvestment** in your community.
 - morganandco.au/project/on-our-own-terms
 - justicereinvestment.net.au/leading-jr-in-your-community
- **Yuwaya Ngarra-li's Briefing Paper** on Processes to enable community-led, systemic and collaborative change
unsw.edu.au/content/dam/pdfs/edi/2024-03-yuwaya-ngarra-li-team-processes-briefing-paper.pdf



4

How to Learn and Evaluate

The Social Determinants of Justice framework highlights that learning and evaluation needs to focus on structural conditions, not just program outputs.

Evaluating across the eight determinants

When designing an evaluation, the Social Determinants of Justice framework suggests that progress should be measured across multiple determinants (and the causes of the causes) not just the primary focus of your program. For example, a housing program might track not only housing stability, but also school attendance, health service engagement and justice contact among the young people it supports, as well as paying attention to the structural factors that are shaping young people's access to housing such as racism or disadvantage. This requires longitudinal thinking and data systems that can capture change across domains over time.

For individual organisations, looking at the eight determinants can help better understand the systemic context and realities of criminalised peoples' lives and help understanding of what is shaping outcomes of specific approaches. For collective or collaborative efforts such as place-based initiatives, there are opportunities to genuinely look collectively at change across the determinants (and structural causes of the causes, as discussed below) to be able to understand what is and isn't changing over time.



Learning and evaluation needs to focus on structural conditions, not just program outputs.

Creating a holistic picture may include through community research efforts, service data collection, sharing de-identified insights or data across services, drawing on publicly available government data and/or developing linked administrative data sets (see more on this below).

A critical consideration in learning and evaluation efforts is Indigenous Data Sovereignty or Governance, recognising the right of First Nations peoples and communities to govern data relevant to them. Dr Skye Trudgett's PhD research led to development of the OCCAARS Framework so that "Communities, initiatives and individuals can develop clear and actionable protocols that ensure their data is used ethically, responsibly and in ways that benefit their communities."

www.kowacollaboration.com/ids-g

Evaluating the structural 'causes of the causes'

Kowa Collaborations supports organisations to understand and implement Indigenous Data Sovereignty through the OCCAARS Framework and its embedding into the Understanding, Measurement and Evaluation Platform, Wathaga. These resources, amongst others, are supporting more place-based initiatives to deeply consider and put into practice their commitments to Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

Evaluations could consider not only whether individual young people are faring better, but whether the systems around them are changing, whether schools are becoming more inclusive, whether police are using diversionary options available to them, whether child protection is offering earlier family support. These systemic shifts are harder to measure but are ultimately what determines whether change is sustainable.

These kinds of questions are particularly important for collaborative or place-based initiatives that are looking to support families, children and young people in a particular place to understand if there are meaningful shifts occurring in the systems that shape their lives.



Systemic shifts are harder to measure but are ultimately what determines whether change is sustainable.

Using evaluation for advocacy

Evaluation findings are only valuable if they are used. Evidence from your work including what happens when young people do not receive adequate support, as well as what works when they do can be powerful advocacy tools.

Using administrative data

Government administrative data, held by agencies such as child protection, health, education, housing and justice, when linked can provide insight into the trajectories of children and young people across multiple systems over time. The Social Determinants of Justice research was built on exactly this kind of linked dataset. All Australian Governments have committed to share access to locally relevant data and information under [Priority Reform 4 under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap](#), and there a number of community data projects underway. However, in most jurisdictions it remains extremely difficult for community-based initiatives to access relevant data.

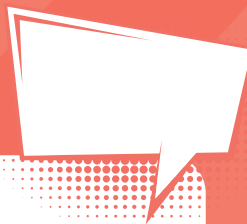
While many place-based or community initiatives are drawing on publicly available government data, very few have secured access to linked government administrative data that tracks data for a specific population across administrative records to, for example, understand the relationship between the education experience of children and young people and their contact with the criminal justice system.



Government data, when linked can provide insight into the trajectories of children and young people across multiple systems over time.

While access to this data at the local level is often difficult and requires advocacy, it holds significant potential for community organisations to understand who in their community is on the pathway to criminalisation, where the gaps are, and whether interventions are making a difference (McCausland et al., 2026). When developing access to administrative data, there's important thinking and work to do around protocols that align to agreed values, such as Indigenous Data Sovereignty or Indigenous Data Governance.

The Social Determinants of Justice Research Hub at UNSW is applying for access to NSW Human Services Dataset data to enable deeper analysis of determinant associations for criminalised children, aligned to agreed Data Linkage Protocol – various resources are linked below (McCausland et al., 2026).



**Government
administrative
data can be very useful in
understanding gaps in service
provision and what is making
a difference for criminalised
children and young people.**





QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Is your current evaluation framework capturing change across multiple social determinants, or only the primary focus of your program?

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How are you involving young people, families and community members in evaluation and who owns the data collected? Is it aligning to principles of Indigenous Data Governance?

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How are you capturing evidence of systemic change, not just individual outcomes, in your evaluation?

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How might you work with partners, to agree appropriate measures for changes in mindsets, relationships and power dynamics as indicators of progress on the structural determinants?

How are you learning about the relationship between social determinants in your community?

Can appropriate community-led initiatives or organisations access government administrative data, such as school attendance or child protection contact with appropriate consent and privacy safeguards?

Are you sharing your evaluation findings in ways that support broader advocacy for a social determinants approach? Are you connecting your local evidence to the national research base?

USEFUL RESOURCES

There are a range of resources available to help think through your approach to learning, evaluation, data and Indigenous data sovereignty:

- **Kowa Collaboration** shares knowledge about UMEI (Understanding, Measurement, Evaluation and Learning) approach to understanding change and important insight into **Indigenous Data Sovereignty** on their website kowacollaboration.com
- **Clear Horizon Academy** provides a set of practical resources and guides including on **place-based learning and evaluation practices** learn.clearhorizon.com.au/resources
- **PLACE Australia** created a tool to consider the different types of **place-based data** and how they enable change placeaustralia.org/resource/empowering-communities-through-data-3/
- **Queensland Kids Partnership** shares resources and data access around children and family wellbeing in Queensland [qkp.org.au/data-hub/Indigenous data sovereignty](http://qkp.org.au/data-hub/Indigenous%20data%20sovereignty)
- **Mapping progress on collaboration** platformc.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/CCC%20Progress%20Mapping%20Tool%20A3%20.pdf
- Yuwaya Ngarra-li Initiative documents around the **experience of working to create a linked administrative dataset** and the Protocol that has been agreed: unsw.edu.au/walgett-partnership/current-programs/data-linkage-project
- Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations have an overview of **Closing the Gap Priority Reform 4** and projects underway: coalitionofpeaks.org.au/priority-reform-four



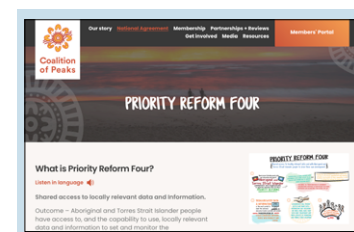
Clear Horizon



Queensland Kids Partnership
every child thriving

Change Cycle Progress Mapping Tool

We want to understand which phase of the Collaborative Change Cycle we are in overall, and what we can do to make further progress.



5

How to Advocate Using the Social Determinants of Justice

The Social Determinants of Justice framework is not only a tool for understanding and practice, it can be used as an advocacy framework. It provides an evidence-based way to argue that the solutions to youth criminalisation lie not only inside the justice system but also outside it, and to push for health, education, housing, child protection and community services to be at the table when decisions are made about reducing youth crime.

Calling for a holistic response

A recurring theme in consultations with community organisations is the difficulty of getting non-justice agencies, particularly education departments and health services, to see themselves as part of the response to youth criminalisation. The Social Determinants of Justice framework offers a way to make this argument using government's own data. When 80% of young people who have been incarcerated left school without qualifications, and 92% have mental health conditions, these are not just 'justice system' failures they are education and health system failures (McCausland & Baldry, 2023).

In consultations with community based groups we've heard consistently about the use of suspensions or short school days for behavioural challenges, and particularly for Aboriginal children, contributing to the 'school to prison' pipeline. Dr Archie Thomas

and Dr Samara Hand's recent research demonstrates that in NSW "government schools are suspending students in rising numbers" and "in 2024, 1 in 4 suspensions were of Aboriginal students and 1 in 4 of disabled students, making them approximately 2.5 time more likely to be suspended" (Thomas & Hand, 2025, 5). In Victoria, a 2017 Ombudsman inquiry highlighted the ways in which children with disabilities and Aboriginal students were overrepresented in expulsions and how these lead to increased contact with the criminal justice system. Grace O'Brien and Michelle Trudgett (2018) have published research highlighting the relationship between school exclusion and incarceration for young Aboriginal males in Queensland.

Alternatives to incarceration

During the COVID-19 pandemic, crowded prisons were seen as a public health threat and magistrates were encouraged to avoid custody, parole was oriented to keeping people out of prison, and funding was allocated to support vulnerable groups (Pratt and Lutyens, 2022). This demonstrates that alternatives to incarceration are possible.

The Social Determinants of Justice draws attention to the fact that criminalisation and incarceration is the result of accumulating failures to address disadvantage, abuse, racism and to support children, young people and families in difficulties. It's an advocacy tool that is already being used by national organisations such as Justice Reform Initiative to call for alternatives to incarceration and investment instead into addressing social determinants.

The Social Determinants of Justice has also been referenced in the Commonwealth Senate's interim report on Australia's youth justice and incarceration system (2025) and the Australian Human Rights Commission's Help Way Earlier! report (2024), providing community organisations with a platform to connect local evidence to national reform debates.



**The Social
Determinants of Justice
highlights that criminalisation
and incarceration result from
failures to address social,
economic and health needs.**

Place-based advocacy

Place-based initiatives have found the Social Determinants of Justice framework particularly useful for local-level advocacy.

Place-based initiatives have used the Social Determinants of Justice aligned ideas or evidence to encourage education and child protection departments or agencies to participate in community-led efforts to prevent children and young people having contact with the criminal justice system. The framework corroborates local community knowledge with insight drawn from government's own data.

Communities and place-based initiatives know and are living with the realities of the Social Determinants of Justice, and advocates are using the framework and evidence to reinforce their local insight and knowledge.

State and National advocacy

In the recent NSW Inquiry into Youth Justice, several groups used the Social Determinants of Justice to highlight the need for more investment in community-based support for children and young people, rather than police and justice based responses. Dharriwaa Elders Group and Yuwaya Ngarra-li Partnership highlighted this in their [submission](#) and appearance at the NSW Youth Justice Inquiry, alongside mentions of Social Determinants of Justice with associated research by [NSW Advocate for Children and Young People](#), [NSW Council of Social Service](#), [Raise the Age NSW](#), [Youth Action NSW & Miyay Birray Youth Service](#), [Justice Reform Initiative](#), [KWOOP](#), [Community Restorative Centre](#) and [Just Reinvest NSW](#).



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Think about who in your area or sector has responsibilities for children and young people. How can the social determinants of justice show them how to step up in relation to children and young people at risk of criminalisation?

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How could you use social determinants of justice evidence including government data to make the case for those agencies to participate in a more holistic response?

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Are you connected to broader advocacy coalitions such as justice reinvestment networks, closing the gap coalitions, or place-based governance tables where the social determinants of justice framework could strengthen shared advocacy?

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How do you ensure that the voices and priorities of Aboriginal communities and children and young people with lived experience are at the centre of your advocacy?

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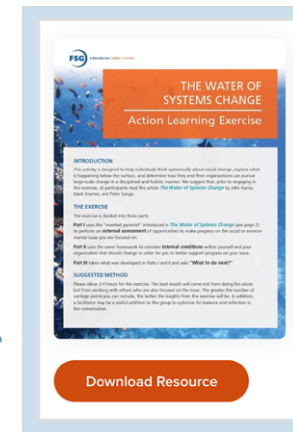


USEFUL RESOURCES

In thinking about your contribution to influence change to consider the Social Determinants of Justice, you can draw on a range of resources around power, advocacy and systems dynamics:

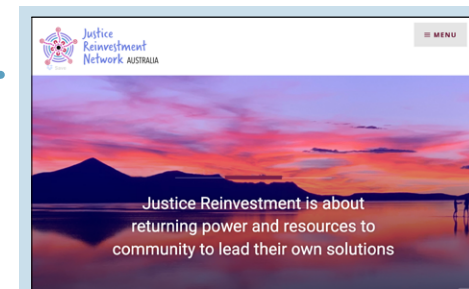
- Using the **Water for Systems Change** framework, this tool from FSG supports **reflection on approaches to change and influence**

fsg.org/resource/water-systems-change-action-learning-exercise



- **Justice Reinvestment Network Australia** (JRNA) has supported creation of video resources about community-led efforts and advocacy for justice reinvestment

justicereinvestment.net.au/community-led-advocacy-for-justice-reinvestment

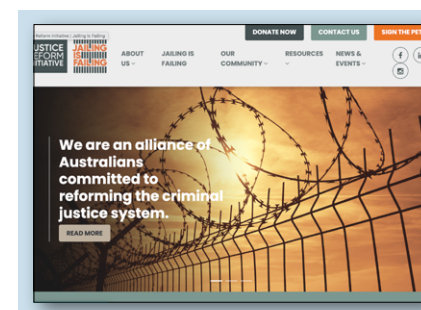


- This resource developed by Liz Skelton and Geoff Aigner can support you to reflect on the **power you are bringing to a situation or initiative**

[platformc.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/How to Use Power More Effectively.pdf](https://platformc.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/How%20to%20Use%20Power%20More%20Effectively.pdf)

- **Justice Reform Initiative** is an alliance of Australians committed to reforming the criminal justice system

justicereforminitiative.org.au



How to Use Power More Effectively

We want to use our power more effectively.

5

How to Think About Funding

The Social Determinants of Justice framework has implications not only for what is funded, but for how funding is structured and understood. It challenges the dominant model of short-term, activity-based, single-issue grants in favour of longer-term, flexible, holistic investment.

The case for SDJ-informed funding

Erin Gough, previously at the Paul Ramsay Foundation (PRF), describes how the SDJ framework informed PRF's approach to funding in the justice reinvestment portfolio:

"At PRF we work with organisations and communities to invest in, build and influence the conditions needed to stop disadvantage. We recognise that people experiencing disadvantage have disproportionate contact with the criminal justice system, and that such contact — especially incarceration — further entrenches disadvantage. What can be difficult to articulate about our work — to governments, other funders and philanthropic boards, for example — is why the answers to the 'justice' problem fall outside the criminal justice system. The social determinants of justice help us do this. They provide a clear, evidence-based explanation of the relationship between criminal justice contact and its root causes, and why it's important to focus our efforts in areas like stable housing, education and mental health support to reduce rates of incarceration." — Erin Gough, Paul Ramsay Foundation (2025)

The Social Determinants of Justice framework challenges the dominant model of short-term, activity-based, single-issue grants in favour of longer-term, flexible, holistic investment

The Paul Ramsay Foundation has used the Social Determinants of Justice framework in reviewing its justice reinvestment portfolio and as a strategic framework for funding decisions. This includes investment in place-based work, ACCO-led services, and initiatives that address the structural drivers of criminalisation, not only direct justice programs. Another Australian Foundation moving into funding in the justice area has used the Social Determinants of Justice as the framework for assessing proposals going to their board for funding.

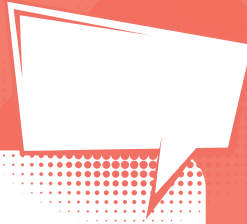
Addressing the gap in how funding is structured

The Social Determinants of Justice framework highlights a persistent problem with how services working with the most vulnerable young people are funded. As discussions with organisations like MAYCS have identified, funding for services often comes in small, segmented grants for discrete activities rather than sustained relational work. A young person who needs regular transport assistance, mental health support, school re-engagement and intensive case management may be served by multiple organisations each funded for only one of these elements, with no one funded to provide the ongoing, holistic relationship that holds it all together. This fragmentation is itself a structural driver of criminalisation.

For funders, this points to the importance of long-term, flexible funding that trusts organisations to work holistically with children and young people and families including those presenting with multiple, complex needs.

An important question is whether funding eligibility criteria are (unintentionally) excluding the most at-risk young people, including by requiring certain outcomes in short timeframes that encourage working with a cohort of young people that are more likely to reach those outcomes.

Another important change, particularly for government funding, can be moving towards place-based collaborative commissioning processes that enable local groups to collectively redirect resources where they are needed.



Another important change for funding, can be moving towards place-based collaborative commissioning processes that enable local groups to collectively redirect resources where they are needed.



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Does your funding support sustained, relational, holistic work with children and young people experiencing multiple disadvantages or does it fund discrete activities?

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How might funding terms, reporting requirements or eligibility criteria be inadvertently excluding the most vulnerable children and young people from services? And how might you use the SDJ framework to discuss this with funders?

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If you are a funder, how does your current portfolio map against the eight determinants? Are there significant gaps?

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What would long-term, flexible, place-based investment in addressing the social determinants look like in your context and what would it take to move towards this?

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How do you ensure that ACCOs and community-led organisations which are often best placed to work with the most at-risk young people are adequately resourced?

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USEFUL RESOURCES

There are a range of resources sharing thinking around forms of funding, contracting and commissioning that can better support and enable community-led efforts, including around the Social Determinants of Justice

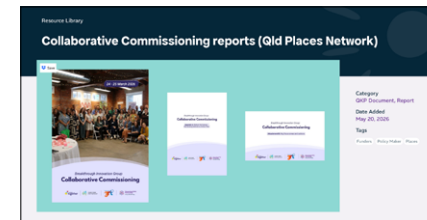
- **Woor-dungin** is a living model and advocate for strong, respectful funding relationships with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

woor-dungin.com.au



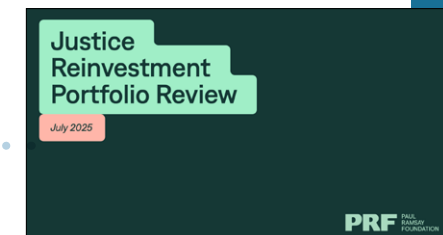
- **Queensland Kids Partnership** shares resources from a Queensland Places Network workshop hosted by Logan Together to explore the current collaborative commissioning landscape and opportunities to work together to create commissioning that better supports communities, families and children

tqkp.org.au/resources/collaborative-commissioning-report



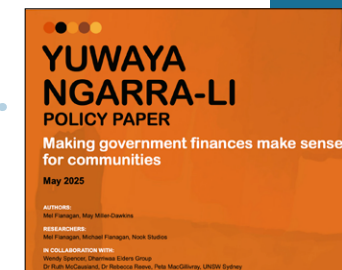
- The Paul Ramsay Foundation's **review of its Justice Reinvestment Portfolio**

cdn.prod.website-files.com/661f556bbce30a1afe4ad03c/689d20d1d1be33c97be40961_JR-Portfolio-Review.pdf



- **Yuwaya Ngarra-li** has published a set of policy papers on contracting and budgeting including proposals and international examples of devolved commissioning

www.unsw.edu.au/news/2025/05/yuwaya-ngarra-li-policy-papers-government-finances-to-improve-aboriginal-community-control



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