

From Analysis to Action:
**A Collective Approach
To Eliminate Youth Violence**

A Report Prepared for the Youth Anti-Violence Task Force

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Executive Summary

Youth violence has plagued Toronto for far too long. This report advocates for a collective approach between government, private sector, community/social service agencies and city/faith leaders to effectively address the root causes of youth violence. A huge amount of work is happening across the City that has prompted increased interest from City leaders and highlighting the need for a more thoughtful, strategic approach to effectively reduce youth violence. Community leaders are developing campaigns, organizations are going to other jurisdictions to identify best practices, and youth are organizing in their communities with a myriad of innovative projects all in attempts to get a handle on this matter. It has become clear that it is not for a lack of trying that makes youth violence such a resilient issue in Toronto, but it is the lack of collective action.

There are some groups of young people who experience violence more frequently than others; youth coming from socially isolated and financially deprived families are most often impacted by violence. It is also important to note that those who have the highest risk factors of engaging in violent crime are identified as racially marginalized male youth living in low-incomes communities. Risk factors of engagement in violent activities are identified by inadequate supports in the areas of employment potential, educational attainment, family wellbeing and social inclusion. While there is recognition that all youth need supports, some have been proven to be at a disadvantage and systemic attention is required to enable them to reach their full potential and make a positive contribute to their city.

This report argues that youth violence is best addressed through a collective action approach, towards achieving these four outcomes: improved employment/economic opportunities, increased educational attainment, a healthy family wellbeing, and social inclusion. Although at present there is important work focused on these four areas, there is no central place that all stakeholders can plan, discuss, share and track city-wide impacts. This report argues that sustainable youth violence reduction can only be achieved through creating and fostering meaningful cross-sector partnerships, as it is further-reaching and more efficient, effective and long lasting.

An action plan of how the public, private, and nonprofit sectors of our city can collectively bring their skills to the table to reduce violence perpetrated by and against young people is also presented in this report. We show how a collective approach is properly situated to address the root causes. The key contribution of this report is that

true impact will be made when government, private sector, and community/social service agencies of our city communicate, plan and lead together in saving and improving the lives of young people. Toronto needs a Youth violence reduction-collective impact table focused on the most marginalized youth bringing all stakeholders together to coordinate and act!

Keywords: collective impact, youth violence, root causes, social isolation, supports, education, employment, poverty

Introduction

In response to the youth violence that continues to impact our communities, For Youth Initiative (FYI) convened a non-partisan, cross-sector, citywide Youth Anti-Violence Task Force to reduce violence by shining a critical light on the need for a collective approach to the issue. This report provides a framework for an action-based and collective strategy built on the continuing research that has shown that the best methods to address the causes and impacts of youth violence incorporate an understanding of its root sources.

Youth violence is an important issue that affects *everyone* in the City of Toronto. The social and economic exclusion that takes place in marginalized communities in Toronto has dire consequences for the quality of life and the social and economic well-being of the entire city (Galabuzi, 2004). The Task Force has identified these 4 key areas to address to avoid violence and crime:

- Reducing Social Isolation - the growing concentration of violence in communities that are highly impoverished and demarcated along racial and ethnic lines has denied the youth who are living in these communities access to strong education, employment, and social resources and opportunities (Curling & McMurtry, 2008).
- Educational Attainment - youth violence is typified by youth who have dropped out of or disengaged from school and thus have been ill-prepared with the skills to succeed in academic and/or work environments. Active engagement in the education process has been shown to be a key indicator in the reduction of youth crime (Hankivsky, 2008).
- Employment Opportunities - meaningful employment, especially in racially marginalized communities, has been a major concern for social service agencies which have shown that youth require not just meaningful jobs but the skills

necessary to build better career opportunities (Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2005).

- Family Wellbeing - healthy families built on strong supports are a key source for healthy communities. Strong role models are necessary for youth whether they are in the family structure or as part of the larger community (Curling & McMurtry, 2008).

Based on this context, the final report will contend that reducing youth violence will require a collective and focused effort to open up opportunities for youth in marginalized communities. Results have the best chance of being achieved by embracing this collective impact model of action. Therefore, this report is aimed at public policy stakeholders, nonprofit and private sector stakeholders so as to provide a rationale for prioritizing a collective impact approach to addressing youth violence as well as put forward specific actions and targets for addressing youth violence. For the general public, this report will seek to raise awareness and develop broad public support for policy action that reduces violence among youth.

It is also important to note that a collective approach is ultimately the best approach because a broad incorporation of the unique skills of different sectors will facilitate the process of identifying solutions (Kania and Kramer, 2011). We are all implicated in the reduction of youth violence and can no longer ring the alarm bells only when the violence spills into highly-trafficked public areas. We now have an opportunity to take real action by engaging in real solutions that provide a better life for all youth, with particular attention to racially marginalized youth living in low-income communities.

Youth Violence in Perspective

By all accounts the homicide rate in Toronto has remained fairly steady over the last 30 years. Some point to recently decreasing levels of violent crime as proof that growing public fears concerning safety and sensational media accounts of violence are over-exaggerated. But the fact is that the nature of violence in Toronto is undergoing some disturbing changes. Serious forms of violence such as homicide and aggravated assault are now increasingly concentrated among youth. In 2012, forty-eight people – mostly young men – were victims of homicide in Toronto. Most of these victims were under the age of thirty and disproportionately large numbers were young Black men as well as members of other racially marginalized communities (Toronto Police Service Crime Statistics, Year-to-date, 2013; CBC Toronto Homicide Map). Black men under the age of thirty make up a third of shooting homicide victims (Toronto Police Service Crime Statistics, Year-to-date, 2013; CBC Toronto Homicide Map). The disturbing nature of this trend is that Black male youth under 30 years old make up 7% of the male

population under the age of thirty in Toronto (2011 National Household Survey). Furthermore, several of these homicides in 2012 occurred in the City of Toronto's racially and economically marginalized "Priority Neighbourhoods" (Social Policy Analysis and Research Section, City of Toronto, 2008; Chapman-Nyaho et. al., 2011; Kipfer & Petrunia, 2009) which are areas of the city that account for less than 20% of the City's population (Social Policy Analysis and Research Section, City of Toronto, 2008; 2011 National Household Survey).

Homicides and shootings are the most publicized forms of violence involving youth but do not reflect the extent of the damage brought by violence among young people. According to several studies, youth are frequent victims of violence both inside and outside of the home – and the least likely to report their victimization to police and other adults (AuCoin, 2005), therefore pointing to vicarious trauma/mental health as key information to understanding youth violence. According to Toronto Police Data, the average age groups for charged offences involving violence is 17 years of age (Toronto Police Service, 2011, p. 105) and among all youth charged with violent offences there are disproportionate numbers of youth who are not in education, employment or training (Toronto Police Service, 2011, p. 77), a situation that disproportionately affects youth that are racially marginalized (Walcott et. al., 2008). Moreover, the mapping of this data indicates that the distribution of violent offences by youth is concentrated in the most economically vulnerable areas of the city. Clearly, violence in Toronto is disproportionately affecting the most marginalized youth in our communities.

Causes of Youth Violence

Several decades of research has emphasized that youth violence is a complex issue that requires a multi-faceted response. No one program or policy can put an end to violence and we cannot exclusively police/incarcerate our way out of this issue either. In light of the complex nature of youth violence, we need a collective focus on this issue to build better understanding of the environmental determinants of youth violence.

The lack of public awareness of solutions to this issue hampers the public's ability to become aware of the large body of evidence providing directions for meaningful action (Henry, 1999; Henry & Tator, 2003; Foster, 2011). Researchers have argued, for example, that we cannot exclusively police our way out of this issue and that investing in early childhood well-being and opportunities for youth in the most marginalized communities is a more fiscally and socially responsible path to reducing violence (Vallée and Caputo 2008; Walcott 2008; Wortley, 2008).

The public needs to be better informed about solutions to this issue to build a stronger public connection to youth violence with particular attention to racially and economically marginalized communities. We need to encourage more proactive and

constructive – rather than reactive and disempowering – public dialogue in order to enable more substantial support for constructive efforts to reduce violence.

A review of crime trends in Toronto has shown that crime generally, and serious forms of violence specifically, overwhelmingly involves young men across racial and class lines (Toronto Police Service, 2011) which has seen much research taken up on the subject (Allen, 1989; Ogilvie, 1996). Yet the concentration of this violence within marginalized communities points to a convergence of the roots of violence around issues of alienation, economic inequality, and growing anger and resentment, especially among young low-income racially marginalized men. A considerable amount of research has confirmed that there is entrenched and growing inequality in Toronto across several dimensions including education (Anisef et. al., 2010), employment (MISWAA, 2006), income (United Way Toronto, 2007), housing (United Way Toronto, 2011) and health (Access Alliance, 2011). These disparities are often drawn across geographic lines (United Way Toronto, 2004) but more cogently evident along racial, class and gender lines.

The 2011 Statistics Canada study, *Seeking Success in Canada and the United States: The Determinants of Labour Market Outcomes Among the Children of Immigrants*, showed that racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately unemployed and underemployed and that second-generation Blacks and other racially marginalized groups face a wage gap of about 10 to 15 per cent compared with other Canadians. Picot & Hou (2011) further emphasizes the stark reality of racial and class inequality that typifies the Canadian labour market. In the last 20 years, we have witnessed racial and ethnic minorities disproportionately remaining stagnant in the labour market. High rates of unemployment, a double-digit income gap, and a growing racially segregated labour market continue to make up the norm and occur regardless of educational level (Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2005; Al-Waqfi & Jain, 2008).

The potential for the cycle of youth violence is not only based on the labour market but also how youth experience education before they even enter the labour market. Youth violence is further exacerbated by the number of students that are dropping out. The danger in the dropout rate can be seen in a study carried out by the Canadian Council on Learning, which showed that based on Correctional Services Canada, Grade 7 is the average education level of newly admitted offenders who are serving sentences of two years or more. Non-graduates, who represent 34% of the Canadian population, make up 74% of the prison population (Hankivsky, 2008). When we consider these numbers in combination with other aspects that point to high risk factors identified earlier we can see the possibility for the continuation of a disturbing

trend.

The Toronto District School Board has attempted to address this crisis by instituting several alternative and culturally sensitive school programs to address a variety of learning methods (Ferenc, 2013). That work must now be connected with larger metrics and be in concert with other stakeholders under a collective impact umbrella. There is no all-inclusive theory that can explain every act of violence, but there are some solid precepts that provide a template for action.

We can see that youth violence does not happen senselessly and without reason but rather is concentrated among youth who are typically disconnected from good employment opportunity, strong educational attainment, and a healthy family life. The lived reality entails a sense of hopelessness and desperation from a lack of economic opportunities, and high drop-out rates and disengagement from school. A new perspective built on collective impact is imperative.

It is important to acknowledge that violence occurs across all socio-economic groups – no specific groups are naturally predisposed to violence – but it is often concentrated among youth in areas where entrenched poverty and a lack of opportunities coincides with social exclusion and a deep-rooted sense of alienation.

Economic Impact of Youth Violence

We are losing potential entrepreneurs, talent and ideas through poverty and prison. Youth unemployment combined with a lack of educational attainment is a serious problem that is especially prevalent in low-income communities. Our city's future as an affluent economic centre will depend on improving the educational and employment opportunities of young people living in marginalized communities. If we do not act to address the widening opportunity gap between youth, we could see our city become more divided.

Leaving the root causes of youth violence (isolation, education, employment, and poverty) unaddressed places intense strain on our criminal justice system. For example, the Canadian Council on Learning shows that there are extreme costs that can be associated with dropping out of high school. The annual costs to the criminal justice system are estimated at over \$220 per high school dropout, or \$350 million per year (Hankivsky, 2008).

Furthermore, social determinants associated with crime are strongly correlated

with dropping out. The average public cost of providing social assistance (e.g. benefits for food, fuel, shelter, clothing and special needs, as well as work incentive programs) is estimated at over \$4,000 per year per high school dropout, or \$969 million per year (Hankivsky, 2008).

At the individual level, a high school dropout enjoys fewer years at a reasonable quality of life. This is because there are strong associations between education level and quality of health. It is estimated that the morbidity and mortality costs to high school dropouts average \$8,000 per year (Hankivsky, 2008). A high school dropout can expect an income loss of over \$3,000 per year when compared to individuals with a high school diploma and no post-secondary education (Hankivsky, 2008).

These realities have dire consequences for an economic system that is becoming increasingly strained. The resulting poverty causes great strain on social assistance programs as well as greater demands on already drained health care and legal systems (Laurie, 2008). Moreover these reactive systems do not address youth violence at its core and money would be better spent on preventative front-end initiatives.

Youth Violence and Community Deprivation

Public perception of youth violence – as a short-hand for crime and social disorder – is undermining social cohesion in Toronto. With the growing concentration of youth violence parts of the city are now perceived as ‘no-go areas’ by others (James, 2012); and for residents, this labeling feeds into their sense of exclusion from civic life.

It is difficult to measure the complete social impact of violence but it can be understood as the tragedy of young lives lost to death or imprisonment, and the loss of quality of life from living in fear. The social cost of violence can also be understood by the fiscal cost of policing and imprisoning offenders as well as the lost social investments in youth (e.g. education and health care).

This deprivation is further witnessed in the numerous discussions that have occurred on the role of families in preventing or exacerbating youth violence. The enduring theme that is presented in Canadian news outlets is that fatherless Black children are doomed to a life of poverty and violence (Diebel, 2007, A1). However, academic research has challenged the mainstream assumption that fatherlessness is a direct correlation to violence in marginalized communities by offering a critical view of the multiple intersecting factors affecting these families (Coley, 1998; Dua, 1999; Brand, 1999; Bush, 2004; Lawson, 2012). This research has recognized that while fathers play a

crucial role in the lives of their children, examining the levels of poverty, alienation, marginalization and family wellbeing is a far more accurate approach to determining risk for youth violence (Lawson, 2012).

The Strong Neighbourhood Task Force points out that poverty, which is concentrated in specific areas of Toronto (i.e. Priority Neighbourhoods), has a snowball effect, especially when these pockets of impoverished areas are clustered beside each other. This means that the constraints on progress for individuals already experiencing difficulty are increased exponentially because of their similarly situated social environment (Freiler, 2004).

This concentration of poverty in combination with “anti-social behavior” and health problems among individuals living in these neighbourhoods needs to be understood in an intersectional manner. The possible effects on children’s development and future life prospects are particularly worrying (Freiler, 2004).

This concentration of poverty has serious implication for the City of Toronto’s Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2020. Building from City Council’s 2005 identification of “Priority Neighbourhoods”, the City of Toronto is undergoing a joint effort to reclassify these neighbourhoods as “Neighbourhood Improvement Areas”. The City will partner with residents, businesses and agencies to identify where the neighbourhood is thriving and where improvement is needed. The goal is to meet the needs of the neighbourhood with investments of staff time, partnerships, enhanced programs and services, and targeting funding (Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy, 2011). This strategy to move Toronto to a better future in the coming years, while showing promise of a collective impact approach, can be significantly hampered if steps are not taken to address the growing gulf between those who have to live in the communities where youth violence is concentrated and those who do not (Hulchanski, 2007).

A Collective Impact Approach to Reducing Youth Violence

Collective impact works to understand diversity by accepting that while groups and individuals do things differently, they need to be mutually supportive to achieve a common goal. The five conditions of collective impact include a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication and a backbone organization (Kania and Kramer, 2011). The central tenant of collective impact is the alignment of objectives; there must be coordinated conversations about our work at a collective impact table.

Collective Impact is an important development in light of the current thinking of "isolated impact," because the underlying premise is that no entity can create meaningful change alone. There is no 'saviour' solution to systemic social problems, and these problems cannot be solved simply by duplicating other initiatives. Strong organizations are necessary but are not effective alone in large-scale social change (Kania and Kramer, 2011).

Within the context of Toronto, there have been numerous organizations, institutions, programs, campaigns, and initiatives across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. However, the communication between these different sectors needs to become more intentional to address the root causes of youth violence.

Employing a collective impact approach allows for a re-orientation for key stakeholders to understand that acting collectively *within* the process is more impactful than rushed and fragmented solutions. This means that a common agenda must be understood but from the different perspectives of the key stakeholders. Collective impact allows for multiple partners to engage with complex issues such as the root causes of youth violence (Weaver, 2013).

Using a collective impact approach successfully requires a complete unpacking of the issues. Understanding the root causes of violence as part of the systemic nature of Toronto life is the beginning step to building a common agenda (Weaver, 2013). It allows for an understanding of how the issues play out in marginalized communities and the unique context of these communities (Weaver, 2013). The Youth Anti-violence Task force has done some of this work and the action items for private, public and nonprofit to follow must be executed working around *the same* table and using the same sets of metrics.

According to police reported data, accused youth were more likely to live in decentralized neighbourhoods with greater economic vulnerability, less access to resources, and more incidents of adult crime (Charron, 2012). As Bania (2007, p. 101) points out "when combined with other forms of social marginalization, such as a lack of meaningful ties with family and friends, discrimination based on gender, race/ethnicity, ability, and/or the stigma of having been in conflict with the law, some youth and young adults are left with a sense of exclusion and pessimism about the future".

This makes collective impact ultimately ideal because youth are involved in many systems or points where change can happen such as school, work, sports, and home (C. James, 2012) implicating public, private, and nonprofit sectors. Combined

with the reality that many youth are changing and have to hear messages many times to have them resonate and become actualized (Tyler, 1949; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002) and that they pick who they trust very carefully (Fraser-Thomas et. al., 2008) makes collective impact paramount to successfully addressing root causes. The multiple layers of impact require a network of system thinkers with elements of engaged community and family leaders all organized around common outcomes and indicators; there are too many intersections, multiple layers of analysis, and areas for action to do this alone.

Conclusion

Very little of the substantial evidence about both the causes and solutions to youth violence is known to the public. Too often media accounts written in the aftermath of violence fail to inform the public about what can be done to reduce violence. We need a new attitude to this issue, one that focuses on **constructive dialogue and action** – solutions rather than despair.

We need to think outside of the usual narrowly-defined solutions to social problems. Youth violence is too complex to solve through one approach led by one sector or institution. We need a **collective impact** approach that brings together leaders from all sectors that have a role in the opportunity structure of our city, this is what the Youth Anti-Violence Task Force represents and what this report advocates for.

Moving in the Right Direction through Collective Impact: Action Plan Goals

Complex problems require multifaceted solutions. In order to reduce youth violence, we need to mobilize stakeholders from across the city and across different sectors to contribute to solutions. As identified at the beginning of this report, based on a review of the evidence the Youth Anti-Violence Taskforce has identified four key areas that solutions need to be built around: Family Wellbeing, Social Isolation, Educational Attainment, and Employment Opportunities. The Youth Anti-Violence Task Force proposes a series of action items that involve the public, private, and non-profit sectors in light of the research identified in this report. These are not designed to be chosen from but require an active instituting of all these action items from all sectors together.

Public Sector

From the public sector, action needs to be taken to expand efforts to reduce poverty and create opportunities for marginalized youth; this means working with

nonprofit sector stakeholders to implement a system of shared measurement of violence prevention programs that allows the tracking of their impact and comparison over time. This should involve a team of city staff and key community organizations that have a track record of addressing youth violence. The province has established a baseline to engage in this type of collaboration through the *Stepping Up* initiative which establishes a strategic framework to help guide, focus and maximize collaborative actions to support young people. At its core, this is a collective impact approach with a set of 20 outcomes that can help service providers, foundations, community groups, governments, young leaders and families better align work with what research and youth themselves say is important for their success (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2010).

Furthermore, educational attainment is a strong correlate of youth violence so greater focus needs to be given to educational policy and operating procedures. Several action items that the Youth Anti-Violence Task Force proposes include:

- Offering youth opportunities for internship and mentorship in post-secondary schools and other educational spaces at an early age
- Focusing on the Grade 8 to Grade 9 transitional period with the goal of better educational outcomes for vulnerable youth. Greater attention to providing youth with supports in their early school years so that they are better prepared to transfer to high school.
- Identification of youth who are transferred to high school without passing grade 8, and supporting them with tailored extra supports.
- Providing stable funding for alternative programs to ensure that youth who have dropped out of school are provided mechanisms to achieve their diploma
- Instituting supports that help youth finish secondary school and successful transition to post-secondary education and work

As part of the City of Toronto's plan to strengthen neighbourhoods by 2020, a greater focus needs to be given to stronger community development. Our action items propose:

- Increasing library hours for priority areas, more library programming for youth after school, and a study of when people use and would like to use the libraries.
- Update libraries with more open access computers to service Priority Neighbourhoods (Freiler, 2004).
- Encouraging economic development (community benefit agreements) to complement the current emphasis on social infrastructure development in marginalized communities
- Increasing transportation options in priority areas to facilitate travel to

employment opportunities

The city of Toronto had engaged in a pilot project, Prevention and Intervention Toronto (P.I.T.), where interventions were created to reduce gang-activity in 3 Priority Neighbourhoods. The project was funded by the National Crime Prevention Centre through the Youth Gang Prevention Fund. The City of Toronto managed the pilot, while JVS Toronto delivered the services and the University of Toronto's Centre of Criminology evaluated the progress and outcomes (P.I.T., 2009).

- In light of this and through a current scan of current violence prevention programs in Toronto, there are currently no programs that focus on all 4 outcomes (Family Wellbeing, Social Isolation, Educational Attainment, Employment Opportunities) identified through evidence that will reduce youth violence. Governments should look to invest in this type of program tracking these four outcomes, accompanied by strong evaluations and metrics. Again, a collective impact model must be used within this intervention.

Nonprofit Sector

For the nonprofit sector, focusing of energy and resources on a greater commitment to delivering programs that are evidence-based and that can be and are evaluated:

- The creation of shared metrics that are validated and tracked across programs looking to reduce youth violence should be developed at a collective impact table with public and private sector

On top of this action, community agencies need to re-focus their operational outlook. Our action items propose that this can be done by:

- Shifting hours of operations to times when racially marginalized and underserved youth are involved or show risk factors of becoming involved in violence and other crimes.
- Having a greater focus on equipping frontline workers with skills to access and engage the youth, which again are identified as usually racially marginalized and are involved or show risk factors of becoming involved in the violence activities and crime. Frontline workers, although extremely passionate about the work, should be equipped with evidence-informed techniques and tools to build positive and appropriate relationships while connecting the young people to supports

- Giving considerable attention to intervening in conflicts that arise in communities between youth and other community members with an eye to preventing potential violence and/or conflict.
- Actively engaging media stakeholders to properly report on the roots of violence through evidence-based data with the goal of providing better information to the public and moving away from alarmist depictions of youth, youth violence, and marginalized communities.

Private Sector

A strong leadership role should to be taken up by the private sector regarding targeted employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for youth in marginalized communities; this means being open and fully participating in more meaningful collaborative efforts between the private and youth-serving sector. Through the work commissioned by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) through CivicAction, we believe the below can be explored:

- Create mentorship opportunities for young adults who do not have the networks to access higher paying/skill focused jobs to shadow older workers preparing to leave the workforce. This can happen through a transition program for older workers planning to leave the work force through a reduction of hours. The money saved on the reduced hours can be used to hire the youth who can then be mentored and trained.
- A greater focus needs to be given by corporate media stakeholders to properly report on the roots of violence using evidence-based data to promote policy solutions with the goal of providing better information of youth violence, and marginalized communities. To this end, the Youth Anti-Violence Task Force Executive need to engage the editorial boards of the major media outlets to progressively address the ways the root causes of youth violence need to be reported.

Again, all the above action items cannot and should not be done in isolation. Collectively, all sectors must collaborate to develop a set of metrics within all four outcomes areas and map out current programs that meet those outcomes, while jointly developing other supports that are lacking. This collective impact table should hold itself to a higher standard by challenging what is not working, building frames that are evidence-informed and ensuring that all young people, especially the most marginalized (as defined above) have access to economic opportunities, are completing high school and going on to further training and education, and have a strong family unit and other support systems to reduce social isolation.

All of us have different strengths and resources that we can apply to make a positive impact. Working collectively allows us to mobilize these strengths. If we want to ensure that Toronto is a safe place of opportunity for everyone, we need to pursue collective action on this issue. We need a call to action for the public, private and nonprofit sector stakeholders to work together to address the roots of violence. **We need to become proactive rather than reactive.** This issue is too complex to address alarmist responses in the aftermath of tragedy. We need to acknowledge that addressing this issue will take a concerted effort over time.

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