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# Relationship between Social Support and Psychological Well-Being among Prisoners: A Case of Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, Nairobi County, Kenya.

*Mutua Jacob Musyoki Mbaya, Henry Tucholski, Phyllis Muraya*

Tangaza University, Institute of Youth Studies (IYS)

### ABSTRACT

Imprisonment is commonly viewed as a deterrent to reoffending; however, incarceration often exacerbates psychological distress, manifesting as depression, suicidal ideation, self-harm, and aggression. Such challenges necessitate targeted psychosocial interventions, particularly from family, peers, and significant others. Social support (SS) is widely recognised as a crucial determinant of psychological well-being (PWB), warranting an empirical investigation into their relationship. This study examined the association between SS and PWB among inmates at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, Nairobi County, Kenya. Anchored in Social Support Theory and Ryff's Six-Factor Model, the study employed a positivist, correlational survey design. Data were collected using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and the Psychological Well-Being Scale. A multi-stage sampling approach, combining proportionate stratified and simple random techniques, yielded a sample of 320 from a population of 1,207. Data were analysed using Pearson's correlation and simple regression. Demographic variables age ( $p = .878$ ), marital status ( $p = .918$ ), education ( $p = .152$ ), and time served ( $p = .166$ ) showed no significant relationship with PWB. Most participants reported moderate levels of SS (73.2%) and PWB (90.4%). A statistically significant positive correlation was found between SS and PWB ( $r = .193$ ,  $p = .001$ ), with SS emerging as a significant predictor of PWB ( $F(1, 311) = 11.97$ ,  $p = .001$ ). Findings underscore the importance of enhancing social support systems through family contact, peer engagement, and supportive relationships to foster psychological resilience among inmates.

**Keywords:** Social Support, Psychological well-being, Prisoners, Prison, Kamiti Maximum Security Prison.

### INTRODUCTION

Imprisonment is widely practised as a strategy for deterring individuals from committing crimes, primarily by isolating offenders from the public and thereby promoting public safety and rehabilitation (Akwaji et al., 2024). While incarceration may serve these purposes, it often exposes prisoners to psychological distress stemming from the harsh realities of prison life, such as antisocial behaviour, depression, aggression, and suicidal ideation. These issues are often linked to the difficulty many inmates face in processing their imprisonment and adapting to life behind bars. The absence or inconsistency of visits from family, friends, or significant others has also been associated with feelings of abandonment and social exclusion among inmates. Without adequate emotional connection, prisoners may begin to perceive themselves as outcasts, leading to further psychological deterioration (Burns et al., 2024). Life in prison is associated with a variety of psychological challenges. In prison, by nature, prisoners are not given enough time to talk to their relatives due to security reasons, time and space. Therefore, due to limited interaction with family, friends and significant others, prisoners are compelled to internalise a sense of rejection, thus developing psychological problems (Morgan and Leeson, 2024).

The subject of psychological well-being has received increased attention in recent years due to its visible effects in contemporary society. Gottlieb (2015) emphasised the importance of understanding how social support influences prisoners' psychological well-being. In a study conducted in Indonesia by Moedak (2024), it was found that family support contributed 17.1% to prisoners' psychological well-being, while 82.9% of the influence came from other sources. Similarly, Rogers and Esterhuysen (2024) discovered that 86.4% of the inmates who received regular visits adjusted more easily to prison life, while those with limited social support, 13.6% exhibited aggression and difficulty coping. In addition, an investigation piloted by Rogers and Esterhuysen (2024) in South Africa, which looked at coping, aggression and perceived social support among prisoners as variables that predict the adjustment of offenders into prison life among 418 respondents. The findings of this research indicated that 87.3% of prisoners who were constantly visited by friends and family members adjusted swiftly to prison life more than members who were hardly visited. In the Kenyan context, Museve et al. (2020) found that 63.4% of inmates in a sampled population ( $n = 364$ ) showed signs of psychological disorders, including general anxiety and psychotic symptoms. The study also revealed a statistically significant relationship between marital status and psychological well-being ( $p = .017$ ). These findings emphasise the importance of social bonds in maintaining psychological stability during incarceration. Similarly, Pamungkas (2024) found that in Indonesian prisons, emotion-focused coping was more prevalent (67.8%) than perceived social support (51.5%), suggesting that inmates often turn inward or to emotional

regulation rather than to interpersonal networks. These trends mirror the findings at Kamiti, where high levels of social support were reported by only 17.6% of participants.

Sari et al. (2022), in a review of studies on resilience and social support, similarly concluded that social support is generally limited in prison environments. The results of the current study were: 73.2% reported moderate, and only 9.3% reported low support reiterates that while some support is present, it is insufficiently mobilised as a strategy for mental well-being. McFadden, Davidson, and Butler (2024) reported moderate levels of support among inmates in Northern Ireland, with support networks often limited to occasional visits from at least one individual. The similarity with Kamiti suggests a broader trend within correctional institutions, where the structure and restrictions of incarceration hinder the full development of support systems. Gruber et al. (2021) and Mehdi et al. (2021) emphasised the increasing scientific interest in the relationship between social support and psychological well-being. Mehdi et al. (2021) findings in Iranian prisons showed a statistically significant relationship ( $r = 0.327$ ) between social support and psychological well-being. Compared to Kamiti, where most prisoners reported only moderate levels of support, these findings suggest a need for enhanced family and community engagement strategies within Kenyan prisons. The positive influence of family support was also affirmed in studies conducted in Nigeria and Cameroon. Akwaji (2024) found a significant relationship between familial connections and prisoner well-being in Nigerian correctional institutions. Likewise, Ndengue et al. (2024) demonstrated significance between emotional ( $p = .001$ ), informational ( $p < .001$ ), and material support ( $p = .04$ ) and inmates' psychological well-being in Cameroon. These results emphasise the global relevance of social support as a rehabilitative factor for offenders. The findings regarding the psychological well-being of prisoners in Kamiti Maximum Security Prison showed that the majority of inmates, 90.4% ( $n = 283$ ), fell within the moderate range. Only 6.7% ( $n = 21$ ) reported high levels of psychological well-being, while 2.9% ( $n = 9$ ) were categorised as having low psychological well-being.

The reviewed studies reveal a substantial gap in research that directly links social support to psychological well-being among prisoners in Kenya. Although several studies have focused on rehabilitation programs such as vocational training and religious support, there is limited empirical research on how social support influences the psychological well-being of prisoners (Kipkemboi, 2024; Museve et al., 2020). Without empirical evidence to guide intervention, the psychological needs of inmates risk being overlooked. In order to address this gap, the present study employed a quantitative approach to examine the relationship between social support and psychological well-being among inmates at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison in Nairobi County, Kenya.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a positivist epistemological stance. The total target population for this study consisted of 1,207 inmates serving various sentences at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. A probability sampling technique, a multi-stage sampling technique and a simple random sampling procedure were used. Krejcie and Morgan's (1979) formula for sample size determination was used to attain a sample size of 320. Ultimately, structured data from 313 respondents was successfully collected. Data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, and Pearson's correlation coefficient and simple regression. Ethical approval for the study was permitted by the Tangaza University Ethical Review Committee (TUREC) and subsequently by the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). Data was collected using standardised instruments: the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Don Drennon-Gala and Cullen, 1994), comprising 12 items with 7 Likert-scale responses and the Psychological Well-Being Scale (Caro Ryff, 1989), comprising 48 items with 6 Likert-scale responses. Before the main study, a pre-test, which involved 29 respondents from an annexe prison (Kamiti Medium Prison), with an attrition of 10% of the sample size, was conducted to assess the validity and reliability of the instruments. The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support demonstrated outstanding internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .822, while the Psychological Well-Being Scale exhibited strong reliability with a coefficient of .731. These results confirmed the psychometric robustness of the instruments and their suitability for the primary study. Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 25. The dataset that supports the findings of this research is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, in accordance with ethical guidelines and data protection standards.

## RESULTS

This section gives an outline of the findings of the study in stages. Foremost, it presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. Secondly, it gives a description of the levels of Social Support (SS) and levels of Psychological Well-being (PWB) among Prisoners at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. This approach is essential in providing contextual comprehension of the distribution of the variables, fostering a correlational analysis. Finally, the section presents the results of the Pearson correlation analysis used to examine the relationship between SS and PWB.

### Participant's Demographic Characteristics

The study collected significant information on respondents to contextualise the results. These demographic characteristics included age, gender, marital status, level of education, and period served in prison. Table 1 summarises the distribution of these characteristics across the sample population.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics.**

	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Age</b>		
18 - 25 years	13	4.2

	Frequency	Percentage
26 - 35 years	80	25.6
36 - 45 years	107	34.2
46 - 55 years	76	24.3
56 and above	37	11.8
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	313	100
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	234	74.8
Not Married	79	25.2
<b>Education Level</b>		
Secondary	226	72.2
College	58	18.5
University	29	9.3
<b>Period Served in Prison</b>		
1 – 5 Years	145	46.3
6 – 10 Years	70	22.4
11 – 20 Years	57	18.2
21 to Life	41	13.1

As shown in the table, the age distribution revealed that 80% or above of the respondents (34.2%) were between 36 and 45 years old. This was followed by those aged 26–35 years (25.6%) and 46–55 years (24.3%). Only 4.2% were aged between 18 and 25 years, and 11.8% were aged 56 years and above. All respondents were male (100%), reflecting the population of Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, which is a male-only facility. These demographic characteristics offer a comprehensive view of the respondents, underlining that mostly prisoners aged between 35 and 45 are more prone to crime, with the married mostly associated with crime (74.8%). In addition, the results showed that prisoners with the least educational level (secondary) were associated with crime (72.2%) more than college (18.5%) and university (9.3%). According to this study, participants who had served between 1 and 5 years were the majority of the sample size.

#### Levels of Social Support among Participants.

In the endeavour to find an analysis of the relationship between the variable under study, data were collected and analysed to define the levels of social support among respondents. Table 2 presents the distribution of different levels of social support.

**Table 2: Levels of Social Support**

Levels of Social Support	Range	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High Social Support	76 – 84	29	9.3
Moderate Social Support	36 – 75	229	73.3
Low Social Support	12 – 35	55	17.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>12 – 84</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>100.0</b>

As presented in Table 2, the findings indicate that while a considerable number of prisoners perceive themselves as receiving moderate social support (73.3%), high Social Support (9.3%), a notable segment of the population (17.4%) perceives very limited social support. This observation highlights the importance of strengthening family ties, enhancing peer relationships, and providing meaningful social interventions to improve the overall psychological well-being of prisoners.

#### Levels of psychological well-being among participants.

To measure the relationship of psychological well-being among prisoners, data were collected among the sampled population to assess the levels of PWB. Table 3 gives a summary of the distribution of PWB among participants.



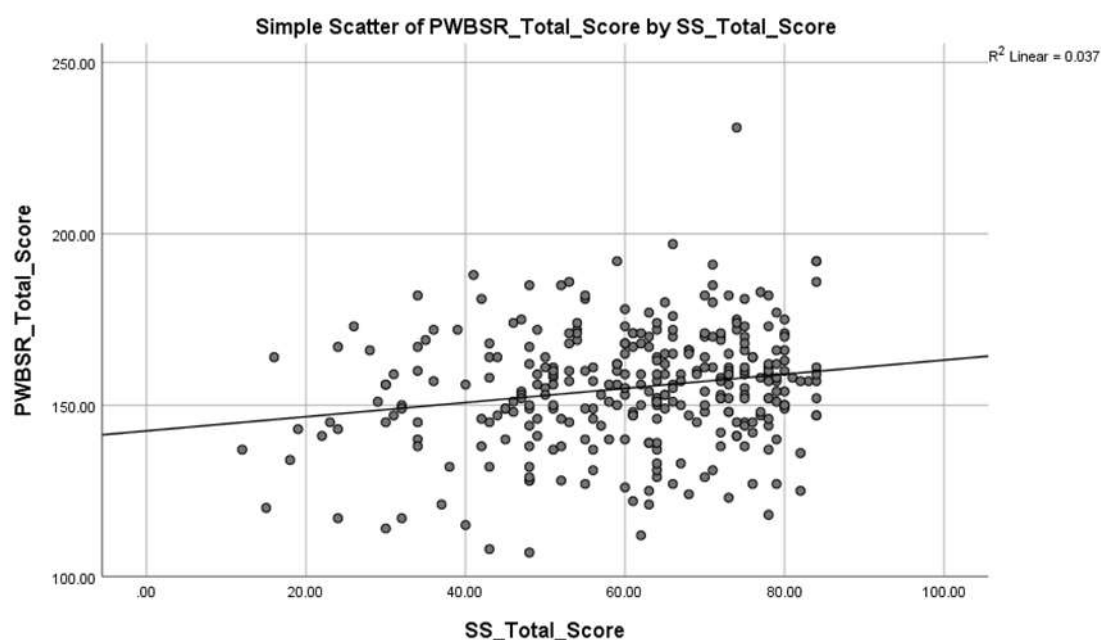
**Table 3: Levels of Psychological Well-Being**

Levels of PWB	Range	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High PWB	181 – 252	21	6.7
Moderate PWB	121 – 180	283	90.4
Low PWB	42 – 120	9	2.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>42 – 252</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 3 presents findings on the level of psychological well-being among prisoners at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. The results show predominantly moderate (90.4%), with a small proportion demonstrating either low (2.9%) or high (6.7%) levels of psychological well-being. This is an indication that prisoners at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison received moderate social support from family, friends and significant others. These findings prompt the necessity to foster prisoners' social connections in order to promote psychological well-being.

#### **Relationship between Social Support and Psychological Well-Being among Prisoners in Kamiti Maximum Security Prison.**

The objective of this study was to examine the relationship between social support and psychological well-being among prisoners at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison in Nairobi County, Kenya. To evaluate this relationship, Pearson's correlation and simple linear regression analyses were conducted. A scatter plot was generated to visually inspect the relationship between the two variables: Social Support and Psychological Well-Being. Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship between SS and PWB among the prisoner population in this study.

**Figure 1: Scattered Plot on the Relationship between Social Support and Psychological Well-Being among Prisoners.**

The scatterplot in Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship between total Social Support (SS) scores and total Psychological Well-being (PWB) scores among Prisoners at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. Visual inspection of the scatter plot reveals a slight positive trend, suggesting that higher levels of perceived social support were generally associated with higher psychological well-being scores. The x-axis represents social support scores with a range from 12 to 84, reflecting varying levels of social support from family, friends and significant others. The y-axis shows psychological well-being scores, which range from 42 to 252, indicating different levels of PWB. Every dot in the Scatterplot gives a correspondence between the Prisoners' social support and psychological well-being. This was supported by a regression analysis that yielded an  $R^2$  value of 0.037, indicating that 3.7% of the variance in psychological well-being could be explained by social support.

To the endeavour to find out the relationship between SS and PWB among prisoners at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, Pearson's correlation coefficient was employed to assess the strength and direction of the association between the total SS score and the total PWB score.

Table 4 presents the results of the Pearson correlation analysis, shedding light on how the variables were related based on the respondents' responses.

**Table 1: Pearson's Correlation Coefficient for the Relationship between Social Support and Psychological Well-Being**

Correlations		SS Total Score	PWB Total Score
SS Total Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.193
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	313	313
PWB Total Score	Pearson Correlation	.193	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	313	313

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results in Table 4 indicate a positive and statistically significant correlation between Social Support and Psychological Well-Being,  $r(311) = .193$ ,  $p = .001$ . Although the correlation is statistically significant, the strength of the relationship is weak, suggesting that while greater social support is associated with better psychological well-being, the magnitude of this effect is modest.

To further explore this relationship, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine whether Social Support could significantly predict Psychological Well-Being scores.

**Table 6: Regression Analysis**

ANOVA <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	3317.556	1	3317.556	11.973	.001 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	86171.288	311	277.078		
	Total	89488.843	312			

The ANOVA results indicate that the regression model was statistically significant,  $F(1, 311) = 11.97$ ,  $p = .001$ , meaning Social Support significantly predicts Psychological Well-Being. However, the model explains only 3.7% of the variance in Psychological Well-Being scores ( $R^2 = .037$ ), suggesting that Social Support is a modest predictor.

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether Social Support significantly predicts Psychological Well-Being among inmates at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. As shown in Table 6, the regression model was statistically significant,  $F(1, 311) = 11.97$ ,  $p = .001$ , indicating that Social Support is a significant predictor of Psychological Well-Being. Although the model reached statistical significance, the strength of the relationship was relatively weak, with Social Support explaining only 3.7% of the variance in Psychological Well-Being scores ( $R^2 = .037$ ). This suggests that higher perceived Social Support is modestly but significantly associated with better Psychological Well-Being outcomes in this population. The standard error of the estimate was 16.65, reflecting the average distance of the observed scores from the predicted regression line.

## DISCUSSION

The study focused on the levels of Social Support (SS), the levels of Psychological well-being (PWB) and the Demographic Characteristics, which included age, marital status, level of education, and the period served in prison. The age distribution showed that the majority of participants were in mid-life, with 34.2% aged between 36–45 years, followed by 25.6% aged 26–35 years, and 24.3% aged 46–55 years. Only 11.8% were aged 56 and above, while the youngest group (18–25 years) accounted for 4.2% of the sample. These findings suggest that involvement in criminal activities is more prevalent among individuals aged between 20 and 45. This is consistent with Bevin (2024), who reported that the age range of 21 to 30 years is most associated with criminal behaviour globally. Similarly, Prost et al. (2021), in their study in Canada, found that the majority of incarcerated individuals were under 35 years, though they also noted a considerable population aged above 65. These findings highlight that criminal behaviour cuts across age groups but is more prominent among younger adults both locally and globally. However, in this study, there was no statistically significant difference between age and psychological well-being ( $\chi^2(8, N = 313) = 3.76$ ,  $p = .878$ ). In terms of marital status, the majority of participants (74.8%) were married, while 25.2% were not married. These findings align with Awopetu (2021), who found that married male prisoners in Nigeria reported higher psychological well-being than their unmarried counterparts. This supports the idea that family connections may offer emotional stability even during incarceration. However, in contrast to this study, there was no significant relationship between marital status and psychological well-being ( $\chi^2(2, N = 313) = 0.17$ ,  $p = .918$ ). With regard to educational attainment, 72.2% of participants had completed secondary education, 18.5% had attended college, and 9.3% had attained university education. These results suggest that most prisoners in the study had basic educational exposure. In the previous studies, education has been associated

with better coping mechanisms and psychological adjustment, and thus may play a role in psychological well-being. However, in this study, there was no significant relationship between level of education and psychological well-being among prisoners at Kamiti. Regarding the period served in prison, 46.3% had served between 1–5 years, 22.4% between 6–10 years, 18.2% between 11–20 years, and 13.1% had served 21 years to life. Most participants had therefore served substantial time in prison, providing them with experiences relevant to assessing long-term psychological effects of incarceration. These findings differ slightly from those reported by Rogers et al. (2024) in South Africa, where the majority had served sentences exceeding 15 years. In contrast, this study's participants had comparatively shorter durations, which may influence how they experience and report psychological well-being. Thus, in this study, no significant difference between the period served in prison and psychological well-being.

Theoretically, Social Support Theory has provided useful insights in interpreting the results. According to SST, psychological well-being depends on the four core dimensions: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support (Cullen, 1994). The findings of this study imply that family, friends and significant others are key contributors to the psychological well-being of prisoners. Concerning the levels of social support, 73.2% ( $n = 229$ ) reported experiencing moderate levels of social support, 17.6% ( $n = 55$ ) reported high levels, while 9.3% ( $n = 29$ ) reported low levels of support. According to Galvan and Galvan (2017), social support is a critical coping mechanism through which individuals derive emotional and psychological strength from family, friends, and other significant individuals. This interpretation aligns with Pettus-Davis et al. (2015), who noted that prisoners often struggle with reintegration after incarceration, and social support serves as a key buffer against psychological distress. The predominance of moderate social support in this study suggests that while prisoners benefit from some contact with their social networks, this support is not always robust or consistent. If social support were strengthened, the psychological resilience of inmates could be improved, potentially reducing reliance on maladaptive coping mechanisms such as substance abuse. Grounded on the Six Factor Model Theory (Ryff, 1989), the findings emphasised that prisoners who receive social support from family and friends tend to show stronger internal motivation and greater emotional stability (Anggarwati & Thamrin, 2020).

In order to explore the relationship between social support and psychological well-being, a Pearson correlation analysis was employed. The results indicated a statistically significant, though weak, positive correlation between social support and psychological well-being,  $r(311) = .193$ ,  $p = .001$ . This finding is consistent with the work of Walton et al. (2025), who observed that peer support initiatives in correctional facilities significantly improved inmates' psychological well-being ( $p < 0.01$ ). Similarly, Ibrahim (2025) found that both dispositional traits and perceived social support significantly predicted psychological well-being, affirming that interpersonal relationships play a meaningful role in enhancing inmates' psychological well-being. The Six Factor Model Theory of Ryff's framework outlines six core dimensions that are fundamental to an individual's psychological well-being: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, personal growth, purpose in life, autonomy, and environmental mastery. The observed positive correlation between SS and PWB raises important theoretical considerations. Support systems, provide companionship, empathy, material assistance, and guidance are critical for helping prisoners cope with the emotional demands of prison life, thus fostering psychological well-being. The overall findings of this study present social support (family, friends and significant others) as a buffer tool for enhancing psychological well-being among inmates. The presence of support systems: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support is a concrete foundation for promoting the psychological well-being of prisoners.

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## CONCLUSION

This study explored the demographic characteristics, the levels of Social Support (SS) and psychological well-being (PWB) among prisoners at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. A relatively large number of respondents reported having received moderate social support from family friends, and significant others, with only a small percentage reporting high or low levels of social support. These resources have been affirmed to be protective buffers against the psychological effects of stressful life events, which shape incarcerated individuals' emotions, perceptions, and behaviours. Although the correlation between the variables under study was statistically significant, the strength of the relationship was weak. This suggested that while greater social support is associated with better psychological well-being, the magnitude of this effect was modest. In conclusion, social support has statistically shown a significant relationship with psychological well-being, and therefore, in the endeavour to upgrade the psychological well-being of those living behind bars, family members, friends, and significant others should be encouraged to visit their relatives unconditionally.

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## RECOMMENDATION

The findings of this study indicated a significant difference between social support and psychological well-being among prisoners at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. This was an indication that when prisoners are visited by family, friends, and significant others helps improve their psychological well-being. However, given the relatively weak predictive power of social support alone, it is evident that other factors such as environmental conditions, institutional support structures, and individual psychological resilience must also be considered in future studies. This study underscores the importance of fostering meaningful social connections for incarcerated individuals since they play a relevant role in enhancing inmates' capacity to cope with the challenges of incarceration. This study affirms that interpersonal relationships play a meaningful role in enhancing inmates' emotional health. The study further recommends the incorporation of mixed research methods in order to explore the observations, expectations of prisoners to their families, friends and significant others and also their experiences with prison life.

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