Crime, Class, and Community—An Emerging Paradigm

Structural Variations in Juvenile Court Processing: Inequality, the Underclass, and Social Control

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This article develops a macrolevel framework on inequality and juvenile court processing by integrating ideas drawn from conflict theory, research on urban poverty, and recent race-specific trends in drug enforcement. Using 1985 data for more than 200 U.S. counties, we examine how structural context—especially racial inequality and the concentration of "underclass" poverty—influence the formal petitioning, predisposition detention, and out-of-home placement of juveniles. The data are generally consistent with the hypothesis that underclass blacks are viewed as a threatening group to middle-class populations and are thus subjected to increased control by the juvenile justice system. We discuss the implications of our results for a better understanding of the relationship between larger societal forces of increasing poverty and racial inequality and local systems of formal social control.

Although there is a rich body of theory on crime causation, development of general sociological theory on criminal

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justice has been sparse (Hagan 1989). A major reason is that the criminal justice literature is dominated by a focus on individual-level case processing, in particular how "extralegal" factors such as race, social class, and gender influence court decisionmaking (for reviews see Hagan 1974; Hagan & Bumiller 1983; Gottfredson & Gottfredson 1988). The theoretical significance of these studies for criminal justice theory—especially at the macrolevel—has not been well developed. Hagan (1989) contends that the lack of theory is also related to the fact that criminal justice in the United States is organized as a "loosely coupled system," resulting in a seeming randomness in criminal justice decisionmaking (see also Hagan et al. 1979).

When one turns attention to the juvenile justice system, the theoretical landscape appears even more barren. Indeed, there is a surprising lack of research on the structural context of the juvenile court—the predominant mode of inquiry concerns individual-level variations *within* courts rather than macrolevel variations *between* courts (see Liska & Tausig 1979; Dannefer & Schutt 1982; Eisenstein et al. 1988:5; Feld 1991). Moreover, because of its long-standing commitment to individualized decisionmaking, the juvenile court can be characterized as more "loosely coupled" than the adult system. Studies of juvenile justice decisionmaking thus tend to leave more variation unexplained than comparable studies in the adult arena.

In addition to a theoretical bias in favor of individual-level explanations of juvenile case processing,[1] there is a distinct lack of quantitative data on juvenile courts that are comparable across a large number of jurisdictions. Until recently, juvenile courts have been notoriously unsystematic about recordkeeping in a fashion that would facilitate cross-jurisdictional comparisons of case processing. For example, there is only a handful of quantitative studies focusing on structural-level variations with the community or juvenile court as unit of analysis (e.g., Stapleton et al. 1982; Hasenfeld & Cheung 1985; Feld 1991). Moreover, even these existing studies have been severely restricted in the number and representativeness of communities sampled and in the measurement of key dimensions of juvenile processing (see, e.g., Hasenfeld & Cheung 1985:811).

In fact, there is little research on the structural context of crime control in general. As Liska has argued (1987), most macrolevel research in this area has focused on deterrence (i.e., the effect of crime control on crime rates). Only recently have sociologists used collectivities as the unit of analysis and examined how crime control patterns are influenced by social

[1] A bias toward individual-level explanations is not limited to research on the juvenile court. A general failure to conceptualize and examine contextual influences is found in criminology at large (see Sampson & Wilson 1993).

structures (e.g., Liska 1992; but see contextual studies by Sampson 1986; Myers & Talarico 1987). There are excellent ethnographies (e.g., Emerson 1969) and historical case studies on macrosocial aspects of crime control (e.g., Erikson 1966), but these "illustrate rather than test sociological perspectives on crime control" (Liska 1987:68).

This article addresses the lack of a macrolevel focus on juvenile justice by providing a theoretical framework and empirical assessment of the structural context of juvenile court processing in the United States. Specifically, we derive a macrolevel theory on inequality and official social control that poses the question: How does structural context—especially racial inequality and the concentration of "underclass" poverty—influence formal *petitioning*, predisposition *detention*, and *placement* (confinement) of juveniles? These three dimensions of juvenile court processing, classified by crime type and race, are analyzed in conjunction with structural data for U.S. counties in 1985. Our goal is to lay the groundwork for a better understanding of the relationship between larger societal forces of increasing poverty and inequality (Wilson 1987, 1991) and formal systems of juvenile social control.

Theoretical Framework

We argue that the juvenile court may be fruitfully analyzed by taking an explicitly macrostructural approach to official social control. As Empey (1982:320) has argued, juvenile justice is not a monolithic concept which operates uniformly throughout the United States. Instead, a fundamental fact is that the juvenile court is organized at the local (i.e., county) level, giving rise to potentially important *community-level variations* in juvenile justice (see also Eisenstein et al. 1988:22–27). Many other official decisions regarding budgets, criminal justice personnel, and construction of detention centers are also organized at the county level.[2] Consequently, Feld (1991:208) has argued that analyses and interpretations that ignore structural variations across court jurisdictions in justice administration may be systematically misleading. For example, while research has recognized diversity between courts with regard to a "due process" vs. "therapeutic" orientation (e.g., Cohen & Kluegel 1978; Stapleton et al. 1982), we know little about "the structural sources or administrative consequences of . . . [such] organizational variation" (Feld 1991:161–62).

Although "randomness" may be typical in individual case processing, recognition of structural variations at the macro-

[2] This situation contrasts with research on the etiology of criminal offending where macrolevel units of analysis (e.g., cities, SMSAs, counties) are often arbitrary and weakly linked to the causal dynamics under theoretical investigation.

level opens a new window on the juvenile court. Generally speaking, a macrosociological perspective suggests that systematic differences in case processing will arise from the social attributes of the communities in which juvenile courts are located (Dannefer & Schutt 1982; Hasenfeld & Cheung 1985; Eisenstein et al. 1988; Myers & Talarico 1987; Feld 1991). This structural orientation has an analogy in research showing that styles of policing vary according to the demographic, organizational, and political structure of cities (Wilson 1968; Sampson & Cohen 1988). To organize our specific theoretical expectations with respect to juvenile court variations across structural contexts, we integrate three bodies of research.

Conflict Theory: Threatening Populations and the Social Control Response

Most criminal justice research has drawn on consensus and conflict theories of society (Hagan 1989). In the consensus view there is an assumption of shared values, where the state is organized to protect the common interests of society at large. Criminal law is seen as an instrument to protect the interests of all and punishment is based largely on legal variables (e.g., seriousness of the offense, prior record, etc.). In contrast, conflict theory views society as consisting of groups with conflicting and differing values, and posits that the state is organized to represent the interests of the powerful, ruling class. Criminal law is thus viewed as an instrument to protect the interests of the powerful and the elite, with punishment based largely on extralegal variables (e.g., race, social class, etc.).[3]

One proposition drawn from conflict theory is that groups which threaten the hegemony of middle- and upper-class rule are more likely to be subjected to intensified social control—more criminalization, more formal processing by the criminal justice system, and increased incarceration compared with groups that are perceived as less threatening to the status quo (see e.g., Brown & Warner 1992). Furthermore, conflict theorists have argued that minorities (especially blacks), the unemployed, and the poor represent such threatening groups (Liska & Chamlin 1984; Greenberg et al. 1985; Jackson & Carroll 1981).[4] Irwin (1985:xiii) defines population groups that are deemed as threatening and offensive to the dominant majority as the "rabble class"—"detached and disreputable persons." Irwin argues that the primary purpose of jails is to manage soci-

[3] For a full description of conflict theory see Quinney 1970, 1977; Turk 1969; and Chambliss & Seidman 1971.

[4] There is some evidence to suggest that the relationship between percentage black and increased social control is curvilinear (see e.g., Jackson & Carroll 1981). Liska and Chamlin (1984) suggest that when minorities become so large as to represent a majority, the criminal justice system takes on the stance of "benign neglect."

ety's rabble class and hence that this group will be subject to higher rates of confinement.

Although conflict theory has been applied to the realm of juvenile justice, it has been applied less often than to adult criminal justice. Extending the ideas of Platt (1977), Carter and Clelland (1979) argue that since its creation the juvenile court has sought to control lower class and minority youth in accordance with dominant class values:

> The juvenile courts' emphasis on the control of morality functions to secure the social, economic and political order by giving sanction to the system of class domination. Therefore, the class bias of the juvenile system of justice is revealed in the functions and consequences of the institutions and policies of that system in relation to the material conditions of capitalist society and subsequent system of class domination, rather than in the conscious class control motives of those who support or directly participate in the juvenile system. (P. 99)

However, like research on the criminal justice system, virtually all the research on juvenile justice processing has involved microlevel studies of individual case processing or studies of contextual effects on individual cases (see e.g., Barton 1976; Liska & Tausig 1979; Smith et al. 1980; and Tittle & Curran 1988 for extensive reviews).

In one of the more comprehensive studies relating macrovariables to micro-outcomes, Tittle and Curran (1988) examined juvenile justice dispositions in 31 Florida counties. They found differential sanctioning depending on the relative size of the nonwhite and young population, arguing that "nonwhites and youth symbolize to white adults resentment-provoking or fear-provoking qualities like aggressiveness, sexuality, and absence of personal discipline" (p. 52). In a study of contextual characteristics of social environments and individual case decisionmaking, Dannefer and Schutt (1982) also found racial bias in police processing of juvenile cases in urban counties containing a large proportion of black residents.

In our view, what is important in these studies is the symbolic aspect of social threat. For instance, Tittle and Curran (1988:53) emphasize the perceptions of the threat that "provoke jealousy, envy, or personal fear among elites" rather than the actual threat these groups represent to the political positions of the elite. Similarly, Irwin (1985:17) notes the importance of the subjective perception of "offensiveness, which is determined by social status and context." Revising conflict theory, we argue that "the poor," "the underclass," and "the rabble" are perceived as threatening not only to political elites but to "mainstream America"—middle-class and working-class citizens who represent the dominant majority in American soci-

ety. As such, we suggest that an assessment of the macrolevel response of the juvenile justice system to the evolving stereotype of threatening young black males dealing drugs in poor neighborhoods across the United States (see below) is especially timely and necessary.

Drugs and Minorities: A Symbolic Threat

Peterson and Hagan's (1984) analysis of drug enforcement activity during the 1960s and 1970s documents the shifting concerns with drugs and crime in society and illustrates the need to consider historical context in understanding criminal justice operations related to race. More recently, Myers (1989) found increased punitiveness for nonwhite drug dealers, underscoring the need to examine race in conjunction with drug use and drug trafficking in a particular historical context.

Two trends emerged during the 1980s that reinforce these claims. The first was the increasing number of black males under correctional supervision (see Mauer 1990) and the second saw increasing punitiveness toward drug offenders, especially blacks and users of cocaine (Belenko et al. 1991; Blumstein 1993). In the 1990s, then, race, class, and drugs have become intertwined; it is difficult if not impossible to disentangle the various elements of the problem. Moreover, the "war" on drugs in the 1980s embodied a different persona than earlier wars, leading to racially discriminatory practices by the criminal justice system (see also Jackson 1992; Feeley & Simon 1992:461–70). Particularly relevant to our thesis, Tittle and Curran (1988:52) found the largest discriminatory effects in juvenile justice dispositions for "drug/sexual offenses which represent overt behavioral manifestations of the very qualities [that] frighten white adults or generate resentment and envy."

Data from the 1980s support these concerns about the changing dynamics of race and drugs. For instance, while the number of arrests for drug abuse violations for white juveniles declined 28% in 1985 compared with 1980, the number of arrests for drug abuse violations for black juveniles increased 25% over the same time period (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1981, 1986). Furthermore, data on arrest rate trends by race show that in 1980 the rates of drug law violations were nearly equal for whites and blacks; however, during the decade of the 1980s, white rates declined while black rates increased markedly (Snyder 1992). Juvenile court data show that the number of white youth referred to court for drug law violations declined by 6% between 1985 and 1986; the number of referrals for black youth increased 42% (Snyder 1990). The disproportionate increase in the number of black youth detained also seemed linked to the increased number of black drug law viola-

tors referred to court (see also McGarrell 1993). More generally, Blumstein (1993) has shown that the dramatic growth in state prison populations during the 1980s was driven in large part by increasing admissions of blacks on drug convictions.

These trends suggest a recent and increasing punitiveness toward drug offenders—especially those perceived to be "gang" members from a growing "underclass" population (Jackson 1992:98–100; Feeley & Simon 1992:467–69). The existing studies are less clear, however, as to the nature of the juvenile justice system response to drug offenders, especially at the macrolevel. We fill this gap with an examination of the structural context of juvenile justice processing of drug cases.

Urban Poverty and Inequality: The Changing Urban Landscape, 1970–1990

Wilson (1991:1) has documented "the rise of social dislocations in inner-city ghettos" over the last 25 years. As Wilson writes, "poverty in the United States has become more urban, more concentrated, and more firmly implanted in large metropolises, particularly in the older industrial cities with immense and highly segregated black and Hispanic residents" (ibid.). Reviewing a host of census data as well as focused studies on poverty, Wilson shows that "the 1970s witnessed a sharp growth in ghetto poverty areas, an increased concentration of the poor in these areas, a substantial rise in the severity of economic hardship among the ghetto poor, and sharply divergent patterns of poverty concentration between racial minorities and whites" (pp. 3–4). Sampson and Wilson (1993) also link an increase in poverty and joblessness to social dislocations in family life, community disorganization, and even lower feelings of self-efficacy.[5]

In short, research on urban poverty suggests that the social transformation of inner cities has resulted in a disproportionate concentration of the "truly disadvantaged" segments of the U.S. population—especially poor, female-headed black families with children. Urban minorities have also been vulnerable to structural economic changes related to the deindustrialization of central cities (e.g., shift from goods-producing to service-producing industries; increasing polarization of the labor market into low wage and high wage sectors; and relocation of manufacturing out of the inner city). And with the rise in segregation and income inequality by race, the social milieu of urban life has changed a great deal in the past few decades (see also Massey & Denton 1993).

An extension of Wilson's (1987) concept of social isolation

[5] For an excellent discussion of whether or not the underclass and related social dislocations have in fact increased see Jencks 1992:143–203.

in inner-city areas of concentrated poverty to the larger macrolevel context of metropolitan areas and counties is supported by Land et al.'s recent (1990) findings on the relationships among structural covariates of homicide in the United States. Using principal components analysis, two clusters of variables were found to consistently covary over time and space (i.e., 1960, 1970, and 1980 for cities, SMSAs, and states). The first factor was termed a *population structure component* and consisted of population size and population density. The second factor was labeled *resource deprivation/ affluence*, and included three income variables—median income, percentage of families below the poverty line, and the Gini index of income inequality—in addition to percentage black and percentage of children not living with both parents. Although these variables seem to tap different concepts, Land et al. (1990) found they could not be separated empirically.

Land et al.'s results go beyond Wilson by suggesting that the clustering of economic and social indicators appears not only in 1980 and in neighborhoods of large cities but also for the two previous decennial periods and at the level of macrosocial units as a whole. Moreover, Land and his colleagues present evidence in support of Wilson's argument (1990:945) that concentration effects grew more severe from 1970 to 1980—"the numerical values of the component loadings of percentage poverty, percentage black, and percentage of children under 18 not living with both parents are larger in 1980 than 1970." Recent data also point to the existence of a large underclass population in rural areas, especially the South.[6] Therefore, indicators of disadvantaged "underclass" populations appear to be increasing in their ecological concentration and are present in macrosocial units such as counties and SMSAs—in highly urbanized as well as in rural areas.

The ideas of Wilson (1987, 1991) and the empirical research of Land and associates (1990) have not been integrated with the literature on criminal justice and juvenile justice processing. We believe this is a mistake, for the profound social changes taking place in the wider urban society have distinct ramifications for the major mechanisms of formal social control, namely, criminal and juvenile justice systems. The interesting question that emerges is: What effect do increasing concentrations of poverty and accompanying social dislocations have for juvenile justice processing? Although we plan to ex-

[6] Using data from the 1990 Current Population Survey, O'Hare and Curry-White (1992:7) found a larger underclass population in the South than the Midwest and Northeast combined. They conclude that there is a large rural underclass that has not been recognized by researchers in the past, and that blacks in the rural South "actually have a higher prevalence of underclass characteristics than do blacks in the large cities of the urban North" (p. 8).

amine the effects of increasing "underclass" populations on changes in juvenile justice processing in a larger project, for now we assess the relationship between the concentration of "underclass" populations and juvenile justice processing, especially out-of-home placement. In light of the trends regarding drug offenders discussed above, an examination of the macrolevel confluence of race, underclass concentration, and actions by the juvenile justice system seems especially interesting.

Hypotheses and Strategy

Our theoretical integration of these heretofore separate research areas yields a core idea related to the macrostructural context of juvenile justice. That is, the rising concentration of the underclass corresponds precisely with that population perceived as threatening and the population at which the war on drugs has been aimed. Hence our major thesis is that, all else being equal, counties characterized by racial inequality and a large concentration of the "underclass" (i.e., minorities, poverty, female-headed families, welfare) are more likely than other counties to be perceived as containing offensive and threatening populations and, as a result, are subject to increased social control by the juvenile justice system. We further hypothesize that the concentration of racial poverty and inequality will exert macrolevel effects on punitive forms of social control that are larger for blacks than whites and for drug offenses than other delinquencies. As argued above, the dual image of minority offenders and the "drug war" appears to have formed a symbolic yet potent threat to the middle class population.

To test these ideas we examine three post-intake decisions in the juvenile justice process that involve the increased penetration of official social control. Although the first step in the juvenile justice system is referral to the juvenile court, the vast majority of these cases (>75%) stem from police referrals (Snyder et al. 1989:12). Drug offenses are most likely to be referred by the police (91%). The remainder are referred by other social control agencies (e.g., probation officers, schools) or by informal parties (e.g., parents). Hence variations in rates of juvenile court referrals are shaped largely by differences in delinquent offending and police decisionmaking, the latter a topic of considerable prior research. By contrast, our purpose here is to study the more "hidden" and unexplored arena of macrostructural variations in postreferral decisionmaking by the court, especially decisions that involve coercive control and deprivation of liberty. To accomplish this goal our strategy is to focus on formal *petitioning*, secure predisposition *detention*, and

adjudicated *placement* (confinement) of juveniles. We now turn to a description of the data and more explicit definitions and rationale for these three dimensions of social control.

Data Sources

Our data stem from a larger project in collaboration with the National Juvenile Court Data Archive (NJCDA), located at the National Center for Juvenile Justice in Pittsburgh. A comparative, multijurisdictional approach to the study of the juvenile court was made possible by transforming raw juvenile case records into a common format at the individual level. Specifically, each individual record in the national files created for the Juvenile Court Statistics project (see Snyder et al. 1989) was recoded as a case disposed, eliminating interjurisdictional problems in case definitions. A case disposed represents a youth processed by a juvenile court on a new referral regardless of the number of charges contained in that referral. "Disposed" means that some definite action had been taken, ranging from release to out-of-home placement. Since it is possible for a youth to be involved in more than one case in a calendar year, the unit of count is not people but cases, thereby taking into account repeat offending.

By aggregating these individual-level records within each juvenile court of jurisdiction, a data base was created with counties as the unit of analysis. Counties with a minimum population size of 6,000 youth aged 10–17 formed the sample. This cutoff corresponds to a total population of about 40,000, and was selected to avoid unreliable demographic-specific data in small counties with few juveniles. The states and original number of counties are Alabama (23), Arizona (1), California (39), Connecticut (8), Hawaii (3), Iowa (7), Maryland (15), Minnesota (15), Mississippi (15), Missouri (16), Nebraska (3), New Jersey (19), New York (50), North Dakota (4), Ohio (1), Pennsylvania (45), South Dakota (2), Tennessee (3), Utah (5), Virginia (24), and Wisconsin (24). All regions of the country are represented, and there is a wide range in population size across the 21 states (Sampson 1989).[7]

Approximately 538,000 individual juvenile case records were aggregated to form theoretically specified variables characterizing these 322 counties in 1985. The general format re-

[7] Criticism has been directed to the weighting and estimation procedures the National Center for Juvenile Justice uses to make national estimates of delinquency referrals based on the states and counties that report to the NJCDA (e.g., Krisberg et al. 1989:56–57). However, these criticisms center on the accuracy of point estimates and the "true" volume of delinquency cases. We have not focused on point estimates but rather on between-county variations in juvenile justice administration for participating jurisdictions that have a common recordkeeping structure. Thus, weighting schemes are not at issue.

sulted in the construction of variables relating to the key dimensions of *reason for referral*, *detention*, and *disposition*. Then, to the extent the data allowed, variables were classified by crime type and demographic characteristics of the juvenile (e.g., age, race, sex). We rely here on the fourfold classification of crimes developed and validated in Snyder et al. (1989: 120–23)—*crimes against property* (burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, arson, vandalism, and stolen property offenses), *crimes against persons* (criminal homicide, forcible rape, robbery, and assault), *drug offenses* (unlawful sale, distribution, manufacture, transport, possession, or use of a controlled substance), and *public order offenses* (drunkenness, disorderly conduct, contempt, weapons offenses, prostitution, statutory rape, probation and parole violations). Because of wide fluctuations across counties in reporting procedures for status offenses, the latter were excluded in the creation of court-processing variables and hence all rates refer to delinquency cases. The county-level juvenile court data consisting of both petitioned and nonpetitioned cases were merged with relevant sociodemographic and population data from two other data sets. The first was the Bureau of Census file on County Population Estimates by Age, Race, and Sex (1980, 1982, 1984). This data source provided detailed population estimates of age-race-sex breakdowns needed to create referral rates for counties. The second data file is the 1983 *County and City Data Book* (*CCDB*), which contains social and economic variables describing each county in the United States.[8]

Variable Construction

Petitioning of Cases

Cases may be placed on the official court calendar in response to the filing of a formal petition, a process that usually involves a hearing before a juvenile court judge. Alternatively, a case may be treated informally through a procedure whereby cases are screened out for adjustment prior to the filing of a

[8] Numerous steps were taken to check and verify these data (see also Sampson 1989). For example, in consultation with NJCDA staff we determined that the county-level court data were both internally consistent and in line with national court estimates (Snyder et al. 1989). Also, inspection of census data revealed that the 322 counties are similar to the national average on important factors. There are about 1,000 counties in the United States with a population greater than 40,000, and thus the NJCDA sample represents about a third of all counties having the specified population size. To assess whether NJCDA counties differ systematically from counties at large, we created a set of key variables on the full sample size of 957 U.S. counties with available census data. Differences in means were for the most part minuscule and insignificant (e.g., the racial composition, median age, unemployment, and family structure of the 322 counties were virtually identical to other counties in the United States with populations over 40,000). It appears that while not a random sample, the counties included in the final file are broadly representative of the country as a whole.

formal petition. Depending on the court, this screening is conducted by judges, referees, probation officers, or other designated court personnel (Snyder et al. 1989:120).

Although less serious cases carry a higher likelihood of nonpetitioning (ibid., p. 54), there is still considerable variation across counties in the decision to petition a case formally even within the same crime type. When we control for crime type and "input" (i.e, referral rate), we argue that counties which channel a high proportion of cases to the juvenile court via a petition may be conceptualized as having a more formalized, bureaucratized system than counties which treat the same cases informally through a nonpetitioned procedure. In other words, the rate of formal petitioning or what Hasenfeld and Cheung (1985:806) call "judicial handling," may be seen as a quantitative indicator of the extent to which a county has formalized procedures for processing juveniles (see also Feld 1989). To capture these variations we created crime-specific variables representing the proportion of petitioned cases.[9]

Secure Predisposition Detention

Before a case is disposed, a juvenile may be held in secure detention. Although this issue has been explored at the national level (see Schwartz 1989; Krisberg et al. 1989), it is central to the operation of juvenile courts at the local level. To address these county-level variations, we constructed proportions of secure detention by dividing the number of cases detained in a county by the total number of referrals in that county. As shown in Snyder et al. (1989:56), detained youth are twice as likely to be petitioned as youth not detained. In fact, many jurisdictions require a formal petition before a youth can be detained. As Snyder et al. thus argue, the decision to detain is closely intertwined with the decision to formally petition the case. As such, logits of secure detention were calculated separately for petitioned and nonpetitioned cases. This eliminates the confounding of the petition-detention decision and allows analysis of the factors that discriminate counties with high rates of detention from counties with low rates of detention among both petitioned and nonpetitioned cases. Because of our focus on the underclass and juvenile confinement, we also created race-specific logits of secure detention.

[9] The analysis of formal petitioning in 1985 is restricted to the 226 counties that reported data on both petitioned and nonpetitioned cases. Because proportions have a lower and upper bound, they violate assumptions of ordinary least squares regression. Logits of proportion petitioned were thus taken (i.e., $\{\ln [p/(1-p)]\}$), as they were for detention and placement. To avoid dividing by or taking the log of zero, .001 was added where appropriate.

Placement

Analogous to adult imprisonment, the most serious form of social control exercised by the juvenile court is placement outside of the home. Virtually all such placements (99%) result from formal petitions. Therefore, to explore county-level variations in placement we constructed proportions that divided the number of petitioned cases placed out of the home by the sum of nonreleased, petitioned dispositions (i.e., placement, probation, referral, fine/restitution, and transfer to adult court). Placement rates were classified by type of crime and population subgroup in the same fashion as detention and then transformed into logits.

Structural Inequality and Control Variables

Theoretical considerations coupled with principal components analysis of census data led us to construct three macrolevel variables relevant to assessing our explanatory framework on inequality and symbolic threat. The first is the concentration of resource deprivation, or what many have conceptualized as "underclass" poverty (Wilson 1987; Jencks 1992). To represent this dimension with respect to extant theory, we created a standardized scale from six interrelated indicators that, taken together, represent underclass concentration. The specific constituent variables in this scale are defined in Table 1. As was true of Land et al.'s (1990) findings, these variables were very highly correlated, clustered together on a single factor, and could not be separated empirically with statistical efficiency.

The second was a racial inequality dimension measured by two variables—the ratio of black to white poverty and the proportion of black families below the poverty level. We created a composite scale where a high value indicates black economic disadvantage relative to whites. Our third inequality-related measure taps the high end of the economic distribution—specifically, the wealth and economic resources of a county (see Table 1).

The juxtaposition of wealth, racial inequality, and underclass poverty provides a unique opportunity to disaggregate the symbolic threat hypothesis. That is, to the extent that poor minorities and racial polarization represent a visible symbol of threat to the middle class, then inequality and underclass poverty should emerge as the major sources of variation in juvenile court processing. On the other hand, if the official social control of juveniles is more responsive to upper-income elites, then a county's wealth should prove the dominant predictor.

To account for competing theoretical perspectives we con-

Table 1. Definitions and Intercorrelations for Structural Characteristics of U.S. Counties

A. Definitions

Underclass poverty	= % AFDC + % black + % female-headed families with children + % persons in poverty + % families < $5,000 income + % nonmarried households + % female-headed families in poverty
Racial inequality	= Ratio of black to white poverty + % black families in poverty
Wealth	= % families > $50,000 income + median per capita income
Residential mobility	= % moved households in past 5 years + % county population change 1980–84 + net county migration
Urbanism	= % population in urbanized area + population size + population per square mile
Youth	= % 15–18 + ratio of juveniles to adults
CJS $$$ resources	= Per capita county revenues + per capita spending on police + per capita spending on state and local corrections
West	= Dichotomous variable where 1 indexes Western region
South	= Dichotomous variable where 1 indexes Southern region

B. Intercorrelations for Structural Characteristics of U.S. Counties

	Inequality	Wealth	Mobility	Urbanism	Youth	CJS $$$	West	South
Underclass	.27**	−.20**	−.20**	.34**	−.00	.12**	.02	.34**
Inequality		−.10	−.16**	.08	−.06	−.04	−.11**	.14**
Wealth			.11**	.46**	−.19**	.33**	.14**	−.12**
Mobility				−.05	.04	.03	.55**	.12**
Urbanism					−.30**	.30**	.20**	−.14**
Youth						−.06	−.16*	.19**
CJS $$$							.37**	−.28**
West								−.23**

NOTE: Multi-item scales were constructed based on *Z*-scores.
**Significant at the .05 level.

trol for seven key variables. First, Feld (1989, 1991) has uncovered important urban-rural differences in juvenile justice administration. As Feld (1991:156) writes: "In urban counties, which are more heterogeneous and diverse, juvenile justice intervention is more formal, bureaucratized, and due process-oriented. By contrast, in more homogeneous and stable rural counties, juvenile courts are procedurally less formal and sentence youths more leniently." Given the importance of urbanism in the history of the juvenile justice system (see Platt 1977; Sutton 1988) and in recent studies of "justice by geography" (Feld 1991), we examine *urbanism* as a control variable (see also Myers & Talarico 1986, 1987).

Because of our focus on juvenile justice, it is possible that the proportion of youth in a county exerts a contextual influence on court processing. To control for this potential variation we thus created a second composite variable that measures the relative *density of youth* in a county.

Regional variation has always been an important aspect in

the historical development of the juvenile justice system (see Sutton 1988), and there is contemporary evidence of the influence of region in both criminal and juvenile justice processing (Liska et al. 1981; Krisberg et al. 1984). Hence region (*West* and *South*) is controlled.

Extant theory further suggests that the referral rate will affect the response of the juvenile justice system. According to Hasenfeld and Cheung (1985:807), the higher the rate of referral, the more demand there is on court services. This creates the need for a "flexible processing technology" and results in more nonjudicial handling of cases. From an organizational perspective this is "the most effective and efficient way of handling large service demands without overburdening organizational resources or undermining court legitimation" (p. 817). On the other hand, Hasenfeld and Cheung argue that the more serious the caseload, the less informality in processing, resulting in the filing of more formal petitions. Whatever the exact relationship, it is crucial to account for *input* in assessing juvenile justice processing. When analyzing formal petitioning, detention, and placement, we thus control for the most relevant input to the system—crime and demographic-specific referrals. This strategy provides a test of the independent effects of social structure on juvenile processing.

In a similar vein, we take into account the *capacity and resources* of the crime control system in assessing the processing of cases. As Hasenfeld and Chueng found, factors relating to the external economy of the court—especially the level of resources—are significant in shaping case processing across decision points in juvenile courts. Although data are unavailable for resources allocated specifically to the juvenile court, we constructed a composite variable that taps per capita county revenues and resources allocated the police and corrections (see Table 1). In all likelihood criminal justice system (CJS $$$) resources are highly correlated with juvenile justice resources. In support of this notion, the wealth of a county is significantly correlated with our CJS resource variable ($r = .33$).

Finally, research from social disorganization theory has identified mobility as an important correlate of crime (Byrne & Sampson 1986). Preliminary analysis by Sampson (1989) on the structural sources of variation in juvenile justice processing has also shown that mobility is an important factor in juvenile justice decisionmaking at the macrolevel. We thus include *residential mobility* of the county as the seventh control variable.

Results

Panel B of Table 1 displays descriptive data that provide an overview of the patterning among structural characteristics. Overall there are low levels of collinearity—the largest correlation is between mobility and Western region (.54). Importantly, correlations for our key structural variables show evidence of both construct and discriminant validity. For example, underclass poverty and inequality are positively yet modestly related (.27) in the expected direction, while underclass and wealth are negatively correlated (–.20). The control variables are also related to the theoretical variables in the expected fashion. For instance, urbanism is correlated with both underclass and wealth (.34 and .46, respectively) and criminal justice resources is correlated with both wealth and urbanism (.33 and .30, respectively).

The significant relationships between structural characteristics and region (both West and South) are noteworthy. Although Western region is not significantly related to underclass, the correlation between Southern region and underclass is .34. The underclass is often associated with large cities in the Northeast, Midwest, and West, yet these data remind us that underclass poverty is also rural and in the South (see Jencks 1992:252 n.4; O'Hare & Curry-White 1992). We would add that tests of conflict theory have also been limited largely to urban areas, truncating the full range of variation in the macrostructural contexts that are found in the United States.

Petitioning

Table 2 presents a multivariate regression of the logits of formal petitioning by type of offense. The variable most consistently related to formal petitioning is racial inequality, with all offenses but drugs showing significant positive coefficients. Racial inequality has the largest effect of all variables on personal and public order offenses. Somewhat surprising, neither underclass nor wealth is significantly related to formal petitioning for any of the four crime types. Also notable is the lack of explanatory power for key control variables such as criminal justice resources, youth density, urbanism, mobility, and Western region. Southern region exhibits large significant effects for property and drug offenses, while referral rates display significant negative effects for personal and property crimes. As anticipated by an organizational perspective, the proportion of variance explained across each of the four types of offenses is relatively low.

Table 2. Structural Sources of Variation in Judicial Handling of Juveniles: Formal Petitioning by Type of Offense, U.S. Counties, 1985[a]

	Formal Petitioning			
	Personal (N=219)	Property (N=220)	Drugs (N=196)	Public Order (N=217)
Underclass	−.00	−.10	−.09	−.16
Racial inequality	.22**	.19**	.10	.25**
Wealth	−.02	−.07	−.04	−.05
Referral rate[b]	−.22**	−.29**	−.14	−.06
Mobility	−.10	−.10	−.19*	−.13
Urbanism	.09	.08	.04	.06
Youth density	−.04	−.04	.04	−.03
CJS $$$ resources	.13	.14	−.11	.11
Western region	−.08	.04	.20*	.10
Southern region	.06	.25**	.29**	.14
R^2	.10	.17	.15	.08

[a] Entries are standardized regression coefficients (betas).
[b] Control for referral rate is offense specific.
* Significant at the .10 level ** Significant at the .05 level

Confinement

Table 3 presents results for the structural sources of two types of predisposition confinement—petitioned and nonpetitioned secure detention. The juvenile detention experience, especially for nonpetitioned youth, symbolizes a critical albeit largely invisible and unexplored step in the process of confinement. More generally, jail and juvenile detention represent the "hidden component" of the criminal and juvenile justice systems (Irwin 1985; Shover & Einstadter 1988). In panel A of Table 3, we find that "underclass" poverty is significantly related to secure detention among petitioned cases only for drug offenses (B=.26). However, its effect is clearly larger than all other variables, supporting the theoretical framework on drugs and symbolic threat. Moreover, racial inequality is significantly related to both personal and public order offenses ($p<.10$). Once again the level of explained variance is relatively low, and most control variables show inconsistent or weak effects on detention. The exception is Western region, which appears strongly related to detention for all offenses except drugs.

The results for nonpetitioned detention in panel B are quite remarkable in their consistency. Controlling for referral rate and eight other characteristics of counties, underclass concentration is significantly and positively related to detention for all four offenses. For personal and property offenses, racial inequality and wealth significantly increase the detention rate as well. The consistent effects of underclass and also Western region are reflected in the noticeably larger proportions of ex-

Table 3. Structural Sources of Variation in Secure Predisposition Detention by Type of Offense and Petition Status, U.S. Counties, 1985[a]

A. Secure Detention, Petitioned Cases

	Personal (N=188)	Property (N=189)	Drugs (N=167)	Public Order (N=187)
Underclass	.12	.13	.26**	.09
Racial inequality	.15*	.12	.01	.17*
Wealth	−.01	−.06	.12	.02
Referral rate[b]	.06	−.08	.19**	.01
Mobility	.04	.06	.13	.02
Urbanism	−.01	−.00	.04	.02
Youth density	−.05	.04	−.02	−.06
CJS $$$ resources	−.02	.16	−.01	−.01
Western region	.25*	.25**	.11	.30**
Southern region	−.23**	−.08	−.13	−.01
R^2	.16	.17	.23	.14

B. Secure Detention, Nonpetitioned Cases

	Personal (N=183)	Property (N=188)	Drugs (N=173)	Public Order (N=187)
Underclass	.19*	.29**	.22**	.25**
Racial inequality	.16**	.17**	.04	.09
Wealth	.19**	.24**	.13	.07
Referral rate[b]	.19**	.01	.21**	.17*
Mobility	.00	.16*	.00	.06
Urbanism	−.13*	−.13*	−.02	−.01
Youth density	−.09	−.01	.03	−.04
CJS $$$ resources	−.31**	−.10	−.25**	−.29**
Western region	.72**	.42**	.67**	.51**
Southern region	−.00	−.10	−.08	−.09
R^2	.36	.30	.46	.27

[a] Entries are standardized regression coefficients (betas).
[b] Control for referral rate is offense specific.
* Significant at the .10 level ** Significant at the .05 level

plained variance for nonpetitioned compared to petitioned cases. Interestingly, then, the data suggest that for the more informal and hence largely hidden processing entailed by nonpetitioning, youth face a heightened risk of being detained prior to case resolution in counties characterized by racial inequality and underclass concentration.

Table 4 turns to the most serious sanction by the juvenile justice system—out-of-home placement. The results yield positive relationships between underclass poverty and two offense types—personal crimes (B=.35) and drug offenses (B=.24). Racial inequality and wealth of counties exhibit insignificant effects on rates of out-of-home placement. Of the control variables, mobility shows a strong positive effect for both personal

Table 4. Structural Sources of Variation in Petitioned Out-of-Home Placement by Type of Offense, U.S. Counties, 1985[a]

	Out-of-Home Placement			
	Personal (N=219)	Property (N=220)	Drugs (N=196)	Public Order (N=217)
Underclass	.35**	.11	.24**	.09
Racial inequality	.02	.05	−.01	.10
Wealth	.07	−.09	.13	−.02
Referral rate[b]	−.05	−.05	.10	−.12
Mobility	.27**	.04	.37**	.10
Urbanism	.04	.00	.09	−.04
Youth density	.04	.08	.03	.05
CJS $$$ resources	.03	.14	−.03	.19
Western region	−.14	.07	−.21*	.09
Southern region	−.39**	−.19**	−.30**	−.14
R^2	.16	.09	.17	.08

[a] Entries are standardized regression coefficients (betas).
[b] Control for referral rate is offense specific.
* Significant at the .10 level ** Significant at the .05 level

and drug offenses while Southern region exhibits strong negative effects for all crime types except public order offenses. Similar to the results for detention, key control variables like urbanism, youth density, and criminal justice system resources reveal insignificant effects on rates of out-of-home placement.

Race-specific Processing

A major hypothesis stemming from our theoretical framework looks to interactions of structural context with the race of those processed by the juvenile justice system. To examine these interactions Table 5 displays the structural sources of variation in secure detention by race and type of offense. Based on the results in Table 3, we focus on nonpetitioned cases.

Although not substantially different, the R^2 statistics for all four offenses are larger for blacks than whites, suggesting that the detention of black juveniles is more tightly linked to county-level characteristics than it is for whites. One of these characteristics is clearly structural inequality—the concentration of underclass poverty is unrelated to white juvenile detention but has significant positive effects on the secure detention of black juveniles for personal, property, and public order offenses. Furthermore, racial inequality has a positive effect on black juvenile detention for drug and property offenses. Although the detention of whites for personal and property offenses is also influenced by variations in racial inequality, the raw coefficients reflecting inequality's effect on black property and drug detention are more than double the respective coefficients for whites. Even the upper tail of the economic distribu-

Table 5. Structural Sources of Variation in Nonpetitioned Secure Detention by Race and Type of Offense, U.S. Counties, 1985[a]

A. Nonpetitioned Detention, Whites

	Personal (N=156)		Property (N=161)		Drugs (N=145)		Public Order (N=160)	
Underclass	−.04	−.07	.02	.05	−.00	−.00	.04	.07
Racial inequality	.43*	.16	.34*	.15	.15	.06	.35	.14
Wealth	.07	.04	.20	.12	.03	.01	.00	.00
Referral rate[b]	.15	.11	.01	.03	.38**	.28	.07*	.15
Mobility	−.04	−.03	.13	.11	.01	.01	−.06	−.05
Urbanism	.24	.13	.09	.06	.26*	.15	.31*	.17
Youth density	−.14	−.07	.12	.07	.10	.07	.02	.01
CJS $$$ resources	−.51*	−.29	−.26	−.17	−.37*	−.23	−.43*	−.25
Western region	6.84**	.76	4.87**	.62	5.82**	.71	5.67**	.65
Southern region	.85	.11	.12	.02	−.04	−.01	.13	.02
R^2	.35		.35		.58		.34	

B. Nonpetitioned Detention, Blacks

	Personal (N=119)		Property (N=138)		Drugs (N=71)		Public Order (N=119)	
Underclass	.18**	.39	.10*	.19	.11	.21	.15**	.28
Racial inequality	.30	.10	.91**	.30	.84*	.24	.35	.10
Wealth	.36*	.21	.55**	.29	.42*	.25	.37	.18
Referral rate[b]	.06*	.16	−.00	−.03	.30**	.21	.05	.10
Mobility	.28*	.21	.07	.05	.21	.13	.09	.06
Urbanism	.50**	.27	.27	.13	.75**	.39	.16	.07
Youth density	−.03	−.02	.22	.12	.48**	.25	−.10	−.05
CJS $$$ resources	−.80**	−.46	−.26	−.14	−.47	−.25	−.47	−.24
Western region	5.38**	.61	4.72**	.53	5.68**	.69	6.93**	.72
Southern region	−.95	−.12	−.37	−.05	.61	.07	.83	.10
R^2	.44		.42		.60		.39	

[a] Entries are metric coefficients and standardized regression coefficients (betas).
[b] Control for referral rate is offense and race specific.
* Significant at the .10 level ** Significant at the .05 level

tion is salient in explaining differential variations in detention by race—wealthy counties detain more black juveniles for personal, property, and drug offenses, whereas county wealth has no relationship to white juvenile detention.

Some of the crime-specific models in Table 5 may suffer from collinearity among independent variables. For example, in the reduced sample of counties with valid data on black secure detention, underclass poverty is correlated .60 ($p < .01$) with racial inequality. We thus estimated reduced models of race-specific secure detention where the major explanatory variables were referral rate, region, urbanism, mobility, and underclass (table not shown). Consistent with Table 5, there was a significant ($p < .05$) effect of underclass concentration on the nonpetitioned detention of blacks for personal, property, drug,

and public order offenses (Bs = .25, .25, .29, and .28, respectively). By contrast, among whites underclass was significantly related at the .05 level only to public order detention, and the raw coefficient was approximately half that of blacks. Underclass had a weaker relationship to petitioned detention as expected from Table 3 but was significantly related to the confinement of blacks (but not whites) for property crimes.

In Table 6 our race-specific analysis of confinement turns to the social structural characteristics that predict rates of out-of-home placement, independent of the referral rate. Like Table 5, the results show important differences by race and crime type. For whites (panel A) we find that both underclass and wealth are significantly and *negatively* related to out-of-home placement for property offenses ($B = -.29$ and $B = -.20$, respectively). Racial inequality, on the other hand, is not significantly related to confinement among whites for any of the four crime types. Moreover, all control variables show weak or inconsistent effects for rates of white out-of-home placement.

The results in panel B again show that the explained variance is higher for blacks than whites in three out of four crime types. Substantively, the data suggest that despite controlling for "input" to the system (i.e., referral rate), criminal justice resources, and other county characteristics, concentration of underclass poverty increases the placement rates of blacks for both personal offenses and drug violations. The positive effect of underclass poverty on drug placements of blacks is by far the largest ($B = .56$), and the unstandardized coefficient is seven times greater than for whites (difference significant at $p < .01$). Note also that county wealth is strongly related to the placement of blacks for drug offenses ($B = .42$) and the only variable significantly related to black placement rates for property crimes is racial inequality ($B = .23$). Moreover, the effect of underclass poverty on placement for public order offenses is significant at the .05 level ($B = .22$) when the equation is reestimated dropping racial inequality (underclass and inequality are correlated .54 in this subset of counties). Consistent with the symbolic threat hypothesis, then, counties characterized by inequality and/or the presence of a large underclass produce the highest rates of confinement for blacks, particularly blacks adjudicated for drug offenses.

Discussion

Our major finding is that structural contexts of "underclass" poverty and racial inequality are significantly related to increased juvenile justice processing. This pattern is especially pronounced for secure predisposition detention and adjudicated out-of-home placement. Moreover, our results reveal that

Table 6. Structural Sources of Variation in Juvenile Confinement: Out-of-Home Placement by Race and Type of Offense, U.S. Counties, 1985[a]

A. Out-of-Home Placement, Whites

	Personal (N=179)		Property (N=182)		Drugs (N=157)		Public Order (N=180)	
Underclass	−.05	−.11	−.07**	−.29	−.04	−.06	−.02	−.04
Racial inequality	.16	.07	.10	.08	.39	.12	.28	.12
Wealth	−.13	−.08	−.17**	−.20	.21	.11	−.02	−.01
Referral rate[b]	.08	.08	.00	.00	.13	.09	−.02	−.04
Mobility	−.02	−.02	−.02	−.05	.16	.11	−.00	−.00
Urbanism	.11	.10	.03	.04	.12	.09	−.06	−.06
Youth density	.17	.10	−.01	−.01	.31*	.14	−.05	−.03
CJS $$$ resources	.24	.15	.25**	.31	.55**	.28	.35*	.22
Western region	−.20	−.02	.21	.05	−.11	−.01	1.31	.16
Southern region	−2.42**	−.36	−.25	−.07	−1.04	−.12	−.26	−.04
R^2	.18		.13		.24		.10	

B. Out-of-Home Placement, Blacks

	Personal (N=147)		Property (N=162)		Drugs (N=84)		Public Order (N=144)	
Underclass	.22**	.43	.05	.10	.36**	.56	.10	.19
Racial inequality	.12	.04	.66**	.23	−.32	−.06	.19	.05
Wealth	.21	.11	.08	.04	.83**	.42	−.07	−.04
Referral rate[b]	−.01	−.03	.01	.10	.25	.17	.02	.03
Mobility	.42**	.28	−.08	−.06	.35	.19	−.16	−.10
Urbanism	.17	.13	.16	.14	.10	.08	.04	.03
Youth density	−.16	−.08	−.09	−.05	.30	.13	−.33*	−.16
CJS $$$ resources	−.21	−.11	.21	.13	−.13	−.05	.24	.11
Western region	−1.26	−.13	.78	.09	1.99	.19	3.04*	.29
Southern region	−2.06**	−.25	.34	.05	−.32	−.03	.95	.10
R^2	.15		.18		.32		.18	

[a] Entries are metric coefficients and standardized regression coefficients (betas).
[b] Control for referral rate is offense and race specific.
* Significant at the .10 level ** Significant at the .05 level

the effect of macrolevel structure is generally larger for blacks than whites and appears for drug offenses as well as other delinquencies. Given this higher explained variance, it appears that juvenile justice outcomes are more tightly coupled when targeted against blacks.

Particularly striking are the strong relationships exhibited for rates of black out-of-home placement, the most intrusive intervention possible by the juvenile justice system, for personal, property, and drug offenses. This pattern is consistent with the idea that underclass black males are viewed as a threatening group to middle-class populations and thus will be subjected to increased formal social control by the juvenile justice system. On the other hand, a county's wealth and criminal jus-

tice resources offer little to the explanation of juvenile justice processing. This implies that racial polarization and "underclass" poverty are more important than resources as elements of the symbolic threat hypothesis. Nonetheless, it may be premature to dismiss wealth completely given its positive effect on detention and placement rates for blacks processed for drug offenses (see Table 6).

Although intriguing, these findings should be treated as preliminary. We recognize that our models need to be more fully specified and that in general the variance explained in each model was relatively low. One missing dimension concerns information on the administrative structure of the juvenile court. There is a growing body of research suggesting that organizational structure of the court and resource allocations are important in understanding court variations in detention and commitment. To illustrate, Hasenfeld and Cheung (1985: 809) have argued that because of community pressures and the possibility of being voted out of office, elected judges respond differently to "dangerous youth." Courts with elected judges may thus have higher commitment rates compared with courts with appointed judges, indicating the necessity of examining court organizational structure in some detail (see also Stapleton et al. 1982; Laub & MacMurray 1987).

Along similar lines, Krisberg and colleagues (1984) examined variation in juvenile incarceration rates by state and found that the best predictor of pretrial detention was bed space. This demonstrates the need to control for capacity of the system (i.e., number of beds per referral) as well as reported crime rates. In this regard, Krisberg and his colleagues found that violent and property crime rates had little influence on rates of detention and postadjudication incarceration. Such findings suggest the need to examine the extent to which detention and placement are driven by both organizational structure and resource allocations independent of "input" to the system. These issues must be addressed in order to fully delineate the macrosocial context of juvenile justice processing.

Equally important for future research is the study of change in juvenile justice processing during the last decade. The 1980s saw remarkable changes in many aspects of American life (Wilson 1987, 1991; U.S. House of Representatives 1989); however, researchers have not yet come to grips with the effects of these changes on formal systems of social control like the juvenile justice system. Our future research will expand the present analyses by examining how macrolevel structural changes have reshaped community contexts and local juvenile justice processing from 1980 to 1990.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, we believe that our results have implications for both theory and policy regarding juvenile justice system processing in the United States. As for theories of social control, our work on the structural context of juvenile justice decisionmaking provides a new dimension in understanding the official social control of juveniles. Until now the juvenile justice system has been largely overlooked in theoretical accounts of formal social control systems at the macrolevel (see, e.g., Liska 1987, 1992). As for policy, our preliminary results of cross-sectional data suggest that the structural characteristics of counties, especially indicators of underclass poverty and racial inequality, are important in explaining variations in juvenile justice processing. Our article thus demonstrates that macrolevel structural context is an important element in understanding local patterns of juvenile justice processing across the United States.

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