

Business

Reparations, rebranded

South Carolina Congressman James Clyburn proposed a race-neutral anti-poverty program a decade ago. Presidential candidates recast it as compensation for slavery.



Rep. James E. Clyburn (D-S.C.), right, discusses local issues with Gerald Wright, mayor of Denmark, S.C. The town has benefited from Clyburn's 10-20-30 anti-poverty program and is applying for funding again to upgrade its

water system. (Photos by Logan Cyrus for The Washington Post)

By [Tracy Jan](#)

FEBRUARY 24, 2020



DENMARK, S.C.

This is what one of the most powerful African Americans in Congress and some presidential candidates are calling a form of [reparations](#): \$315,000 in recent federal investments in a rural, predominantly black town where more than a third of the 3,000 residents live in poverty.

The school received new buses. An emergency medical center got an ultrasound machine and lifesaving equipment. And the mayor is expecting more federal dollars to overhaul the aging water system.

House Majority Whip James E. Clyburn (D-S.C.), whose district encompasses eight of the state's poorest counties, has long opposed cash payments to African Americans whose ancestors were enslaved.

He believes it would be too difficult to determine who deserves to be compensated. But a race-neutral anti-poverty program he conceived a decade ago is now catching fire among candidates for the Democratic nomination as a way to provide practical restitution for slavery.

Several of the leading presidential hopefuls, including Bernie Sanders and Amy Klobuchar, have sought to rebrand Clyburn's program as a vehicle for [reparations](#), which remain politically contentious. Clyburn's idea, with strong bipartisan support, was originally adopted in 2009 by just one federal agency.

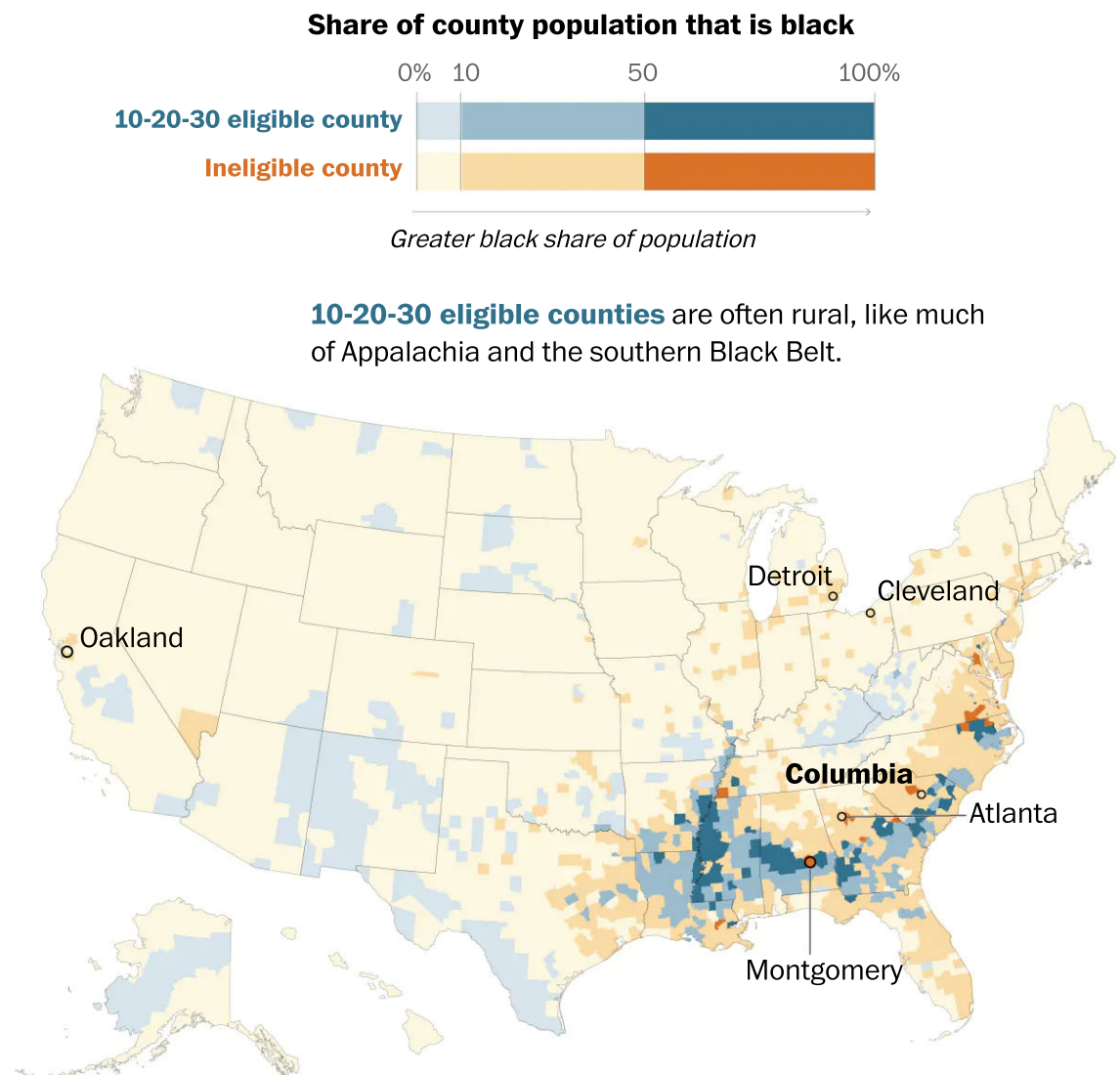
But framing the program, which targets federal spending on certain high-poverty areas, as reparations has drawn criticism from African Americans living in poor urban neighborhoods — some in Clyburn's own district — that do not qualify for the funding, as well as longtime advocates for reparations. The critique underlines the difficulty of finding a solution that would satisfy those demanding redress and be politically viable.

"I think it's good, unifying public policy. It's not reparations," said Ron Daniels, convener of the National African American Reparations Commission, who has been

working with congressional Democrats on a bill to study reparations proposals.

Despite being rebranded as reparations, 10-20-30 program misses pockets of urban black poverty

The anti-poverty program allocates federal funding to persistently poor counties. 10-20-30 was designed to be race-neutral, but Democratic presidential hopefuls describe it as a form of reparations.



Poor neighborhoods in cities like Columbia, Cleveland and Oakland are often **not eligible for 10-20-30** because they sit within more-affluent counties.

Source: American Community Survey

ALYSSA FOWERS/THE WASHINGTON POST

Clyburn's plan — known as “10-20-30” — allocates at least 10 percent of funding from any given federal program to counties where 20 percent of the population has lived below the poverty line for 30 years or more. It was originally intended to address entrenched poverty among all Americans, directing billions across the country, including to the swath of the rural South known as the “[Black Belt](#)” and predominantly white hamlets of Appalachia.

Of the [460 counties](#) now considered eligible for the money, 18 percent are majority black and 58 percent are majority white, according to an analysis by The Washington Post.

Amid the renewed debate about how to atone for slavery and centuries of systemic racism, Clyburn has embraced the rebranding of his program as a politically palatable form of reparations.

“I really believe that this whole issue of reparations ought to be studied and ought to be dealt with. But it ought to be dealt with in realistic terms,” Clyburn said during an hour-long drive from his district headquarters in Columbia to Denmark.

“I’m never going to individualize reparations. It needs to be applied institutionally, across the board,” he said. “It should be systemic, benefiting communities inhabited by those who have been neglected.”

Even if that includes white Americans?

“It’s not just about black people,” Clyburn said. “But it is also about black people.”



Clyburn, center, says farewell to teachers and staff at Denmark-Olar High School. The school recently received new buses funded by Clyburn’s 10-20-30 anti-poverty program.

Clyburn, 79, proposed his 10-20-30 formula following the Great Recession as a way to include historically neglected communities such as those in the Black

Belt in the 2009 economic stimulus package.

A former high school history teacher, Clyburn said he was wary of history repeating itself: President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal to help the country recover from the Great Depression had largely neglected poor African American communities, he said.

"The New Deal was a raw deal for many of the communities I represent," he said, citing the 1939 construction of two lakes to dam the Santee River and generate electricity.

White landowners were compensated for their flooded farmland, he said, but black sharecroppers were forced to leave their homes and communities with little to no compensation. The grave of his late wife's grandmother now rests at the bottom of one of the lakes.

And in the Jim Crow South, jobs created under the New Deal invariably went to whites, he said.

"The white folks benefited and black folks did not. We got crumbs," Clyburn said.

"How do you make up for all that stuff — to make sure these communities left out of

the last recovery from the Great Depression don't get left out of this one?"

And so, when President-elect Barack Obama convened his first meeting with congressional leaders amid the depths of the financial crisis, Clyburn proposed 10-20-30. Lawmakers initially applied the formula to just a few programs funded by the Agriculture Department. That initial \$1.7 billion disbursed under the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act helped build water and wastewater infrastructure, expand community health centers and extend broadband service in rural areas around the country, according to a [report](#) by Clyburn's office.

"I felt communities like this one, if we didn't put in some safeguards, some guarantees, would get left out of the recovery," Clyburn told teachers and

administrators during his visit to Denmark-Olar High School last month. “Now fast-forward to this whole issue of reparations that’s been discussed in this campaign: Several of the candidates are saying they’d deal with it using the 10-20-30 formula. That is a way to deal with this whole issue.”

By 2017, Clyburn’s funding formula was expanded by Congress to programs managed by the departments of Commerce and Treasury, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Clyburn said he was able to attract bipartisan support to expand the program during annual appropriations because two-thirds of the nearly 500 counties that qualified for the funds were represented by Republicans.

But other House colleagues — notably those representing black urban communities — pointed out that his formula overlooks low-income neighborhoods surrounded by wealthier demographics.

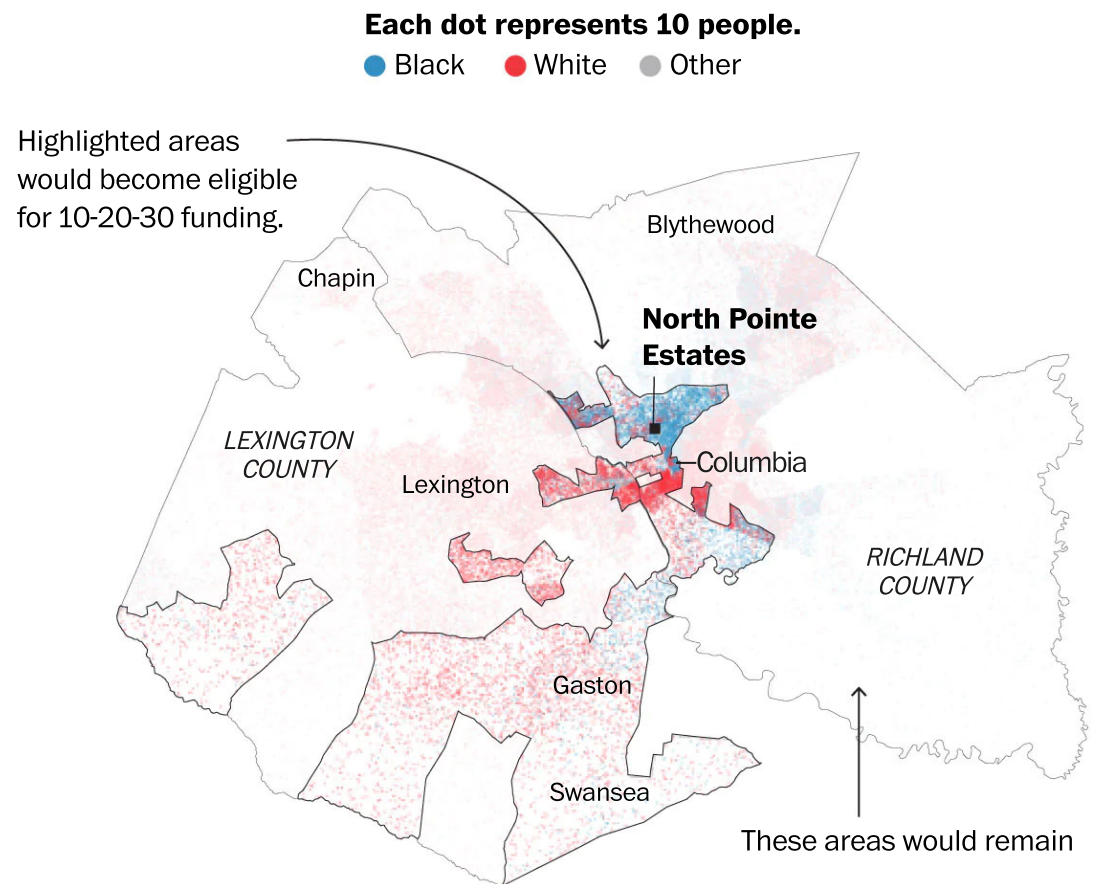
“I got hit upside the head for using countywide poverty levels,” Clyburn said.

Reps. Marcia L. Fudge (D-Ohio) and Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), among others, lobbied him to include high-poverty census tracts such as the ones they represent in Cleveland and Oakland, as well as those in Clyburn's own district in Columbia, he said.

Clyburn introduced a [bill](#) in 2018 with [Sen. Cory Booker](#) (D-N.J.) to do just that. The [proposed legislation](#), which has yet to make it out of committee, would also extend the formula to education, housing and other federal programs.

10-20-30 changes could benefit parts of Columbia, S.C.

High-poverty census tracts across the country could become eligible for federal anti-poverty funding under Rep. James Clyburn's proposed legislation.



“Other” represents less than 10 percent of the population and includes residents that are Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, multiple races and other races.

Source: American Community Survey

ALYSSA FOWERS AND ARMAND EMAMDJOMEH/THE WASHINGTON POST

In South Carolina, adding high-poverty census tracts to the formula as Fudge and Lee propose would triple the number of African Americans living in 10-20-30 communities, The Post’s analysis found. The change would benefit whites even more, quadrupling their numbers in such areas.

Several Democratic candidates have embraced the bill.

Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), who [opposed reparations](#) as “divisive” during his 2016 presidential run, pointed to Clyburn’s program when pressed on reparations during a [CNN town hall](#) last year as a way to “end institutional racism in this country” and “improve lives for those people who have been hurt from the legacy of slavery.”

Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) told the [New York Times editorial board](#) that “investing in communities that have been in poverty” for decades could be a form of reparations. “Representative Clyburn has

a bill that Cory leads in the Senate and as president, this is something I would want to get done,” she said.

And while campaigning recently in Orangeburg, S.C., former vice president Joe Biden vowed to help pass Clyburn’s 10-20-30 initiative if elected, saying it “will go a long way to ending the legacy of systemic racism” — without specifically tying it to reparations.

Clyburn said he never thought to frame his funding formula as reparations until Sanders began casting it that way.





TOP: In South Carolina, the town of Denmark has received \$315,000 in federal investments through Clyburn's 10-20-30 formula. BOTTOM LEFT: A vacant home a few blocks away from the Amtrak station in Denmark. Mayor Gerald Wright says the town's top challenges include "just keeping people here" because of the lack of jobs. "We have a lot of vacant homes." BOTTOM RIGHT: Kevin Odom, owner of Big Kev's barber shop in Denmark, gives Tim Wright a haircut. "How does reparations apply to me? We need something for the youth, something for them to do," he said. Odom said he would consider 10-20-30 a form a reparations, even if the funding also goes to white people.

His rural, black constituents are focused on getting clean water, broadband access, school buildings with roofs that don't leak, he said — not on what he characterized as an "esoteric," academic debate happening in Washington over reparations.

"The problem we've got, most Democrats, is that we get hung up on all these highfalutin phrases," he said. "Reparations shouldn't just be some intellectual discussion. You've got to make people see what it means to them in their everyday lives. 10-20-30 is simple for people to understand."

In Denmark, black residents — a barber, a college student, a mother of three — said they had a difficult time envisioning how

reparations would apply to their lives. Their priority, each said in separate interviews, is keeping children safe after school, away from the street violence plaguing their town.

“Reparations don’t matter,” said Courtney Broxton, a housekeeper walking with her 8-year-old son along the desolate main street, past a storefront plastered with Sanders campaign signs. “What matters is investments in this community.”

During a lunchtime visit to the Bamberg-Barnwell Emergency Medical Center, which opened last spring after two rural hospitals shut down, Clyburn told hospital administrators that he had only recently begun to think of the \$100,000 in federal grants the center received in the context of reparations.

He paraphrased 19th-century French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville: The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults.

“If you consider slavery a fault, how do you repair that fault?” Clyburn said.

“Reparations are about repairing. 10-20-30 is a great way to repair a fault.”

Clyburn said he was slow to sign onto the three-decade-old [House bill](#), introduced in 1989 by then-Rep. John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.), to study reparations proposals — doing so most recently at his staff’s urging last spring. (The bill, [H.R. 40](#), was numbered to reflect the “[40 acres and a mule](#)” that the U.S. government promised enslaved people after the Civil War — and later rescinded.)

And he remains skeptical of the most commonly discussed remedy: cash compensation to African American descendants of slavery.

“There’s no way you’re going to be able to monetize reparations — you’d split

families,” said Clyburn, recalling his late wife’s great-grandfather, who was white, and the difficulty of determining who would qualify for reparations given people of mixed-race heritage and the number of light-skinned African Americans who have lived “passing” as white.

“You set up some kind of a cash system and one of them people who’ve been passing can lay claim,” he said, even though they “have never suffered the indignities” of being black.

The “realistic” way to address reparations, he said, is to do so systemically by infusing resources into low-income communities like Denmark. Many of the country’s impoverished communities became poor and black by government design, he said.

“Race is the reason income is what it is,” he said. “This is by design. So attack the design.”



Clyburn visits an outdated computer lab at Denmark-Olar High School, which will use federal dollars obtained through the 10-20-30 formula to purchase new computers.

Daniels, the reparations advocate who helped manage the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson's 1988 presidential bid, which made the call for reparations a central plank, said he has been surprised the debate has gained as much traction as it has in the 2020 Democratic campaign.

“The reparations conversation is happening in a way that I would not believe I would see in my lifetime,” said Daniels, 77.

The remedy, though, should be defined and administered by black people, he said: “A lot of people want to call everything reparations. But reparations should be

race-specific because the injury was race-specific.”

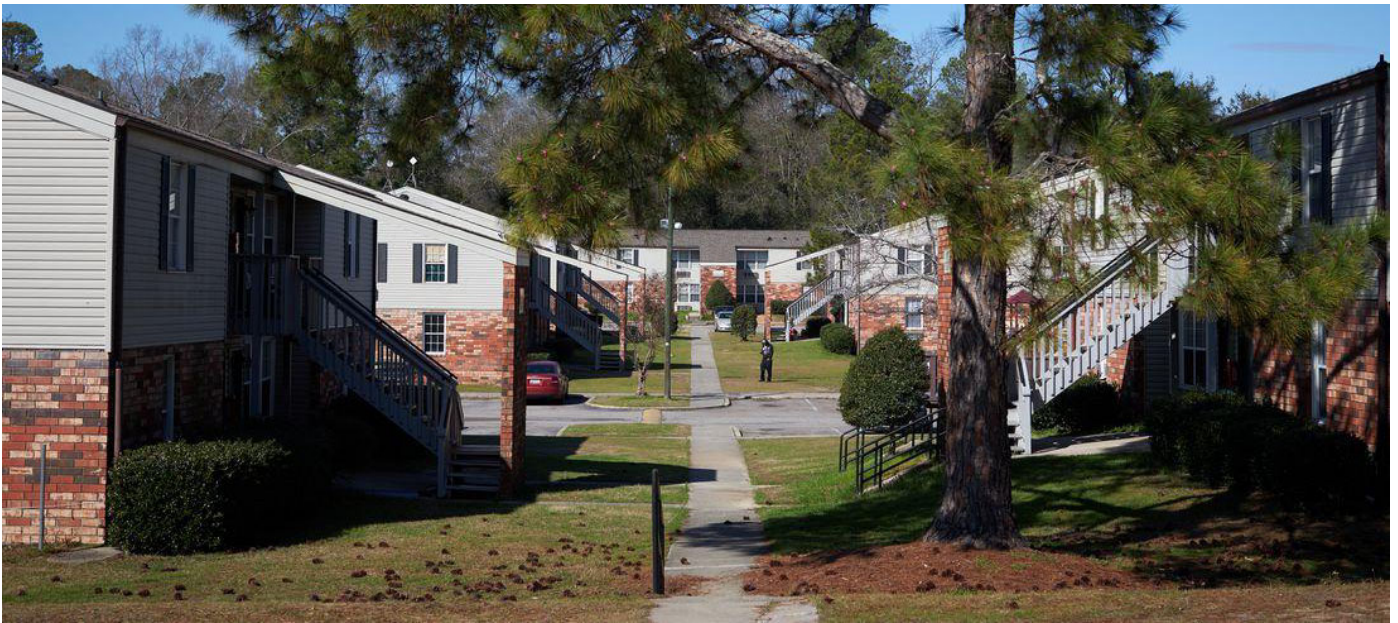
William Darity Jr., a Duke University professor whose research focuses on the [economics of reparations](#), said Clyburn’s funding formula “does not begin to qualify as a reparations program” because it does not ensure black wealth accumulation to address pervasive economic inequality.

“It’s a way of ducking the question,” he said.

A typical black family has only [one-tenth the net worth](#) of a typical white family, according to the Federal Reserve.

Darity, who has enlisted other black academics and activists in what he calls a “[Reparations Planning Committee](#),” said a comprehensive reparations program should raise the black share of the nation’s wealth to their share of the nation’s population. That will require increasing black wealth by at least \$10 trillion, he said.





TOP: A man walks between buildings at the Gable Oaks Apartments in north Columbia, S.C. A man was recently shot and killed at the complex. BOTTOM LEFT: The Save-A-Lot grocery store recently closed in north Columbia's Edgewood neighborhood, giving residents fewer options for buying fresh food. BOTTOM RIGHT: Ashley Page, who works with low-income communities as chair of the Columbia Food Policy Committee, stands outside her grandmother's old apartment at Allen Benedict Court in north Columbia. The complex was shuttered last year after two residents died of carbon monoxide poisoning.

In north Columbia, where the average life expectancy in one predominantly black neighborhood is 20 years shorter than a white, wealthy area two miles away, black residents of the most impoverished communities say reparations, to them, represent equity in opportunity, and not being trapped in a system of dependence

upon federal assistance. It's investment in the future.

This is where one neighborhood of subsidized housing dead ends into another, dubbed by the local newspaper in 2018 as [the most violent block in the city](#).

At North Pointe Estates, where grandmothers are afraid to sit on their porches because of gunshots, residents say they would welcome greater government investment through Clyburn's program in the absence of reparations.

For Tonya Isaac, a 40-year-old Sunday school teacher who spent her teen years in the subsidized housing complex and has lived there with her husband and children for the past 12 years, reparations cannot be disentangled from poverty and race.





TOP: Tonya Isaac leads a peace march last month through the Colony Apartments, a housing complex that neighbors hers, in response to an uptick in violence in north Columbia. BOTTOM LEFT: Isaac talks with her 9-year-old son Stacey, one of her four children. She helps lead a group to empower young black women, including single mothers who've escaped domestic violence and homelessness. BOTTOM RIGHT: Her husband, Dana Isaac, volunteers as a coach in a neighborhood youth sports league. Her 73-year-old mother has lived in the complex for 25 years.

While she and her neighbors — nursing assistants, cooks, fast-food workers — receive government subsidies in the form of housing and food stamps, Isaac said the safety net does not lift anyone out of poverty. She makes \$8.50 an hour working part-time as a home health aide and said she risks losing her federal assistance if she earns more, even though working full-time would not raise her family above the poverty line.

“You are kept at this level,” she said, her hand lowering to her waist.

But even if Clyburn were able to expand his program to invest in long-impoverished urban neighborhoods like hers, Isaac said the extra federal dollars would come nowhere close to being considered reparations.

“There’s so much more to the 40 acres and a mule that should have been given, that still can be given,” Isaac said. “Reparations should be a way to give us a sense of ownership that was ripped away from us when they ripped us from our homelands.

“If my ancestors had a home on the fields they tilled, if we had that 40 acres that was promised, we would have a better sense of ownership as a people,” she said, “and our children wouldn’t feel like they’re still running for their lives.”

Alyssa Fowers and Andrew Van Dam contributed to this report.

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