

Evidence-Based Policing: A Review of its Adoption and Use by Police Forces in England and Wales

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ABSTRACT

Policing is changing in response to increased demands from the community, the need to do more with less, fiscal austerity, the varying nature of crime, new technology, the loss of legitimacy, and the need for more transparency and accountability. One strategy that has been identified that could assist the police in responding to these challenges is evidence-based policing. This research examines the adoption of evidence-based policing by police forces in England and Wales. The research found that while most officers understand what evidence-based policing is and are amenable to its adoption and use, the methods that agencies use to communicate and disseminate information, internally, were inadequate and the current organisational structures cannot support evidence-based practice.

Keywords: *Evidence-based policing, police research, police reform*

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, Neyroud and Weisburd (2014) noted that the period of investment in the police and policing in the United Kingdom and United States was over and the police were entering a period of austerity. An even darker picture was painted by Karn (2013), who claimed that the police were “facing major socio-economic, demographic and technological changes affecting contemporary patterns of crime”, which would demand new forms of responses by the police (p. 5). Karn also warned that rapid changes were occurring in society, and there was more inequality and transnational crime. These factors have all placed pressure on the police to become more effective and efficient in delivering their services (Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005; Guilfoyle, 2013; Savage, 2007).

One strategy that police forces have adopted to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their services is evidence-based policy and practice (Goode & Lumsden, 2016; Sherman, 2015). Sherman (2013) described evidence-based policing as a methodological concept that is strengthened by the “belief that

greater use of research could help transform policing into a more legitimate and respected profession” (p. 5).

The movement for evidence-based policy and practice began in the United Kingdom in the 1990s (Lumsden, 2016), after it had been adopted earlier by the health, educational, and social work sectors. Following the election of the Labour Government, some government department reviews were undertaken to ‘modernise’ the methods that were used to develop policy and programs (see White Paper, 1999). The methods were updated and designed to support evidence-based decision-making and would be used in a new program that the government devised called What Works Network (Her Majesty’s Government, 2011; Puttick, 2012). The College of Policing has, as one of its core functions, to “develop the research and infrastructure for improving evidence of ‘what works’ for policing in England and Wales” (College of Policing, 2020; Telep & Somers, 2019, p. 172) and is the primary advocate for evidence-based policing in the United Kingdom.

Although evidence-based policing has been touted as an approach that provides reliable and methodologically-sound evidence upon which decisions can be made, there are some arguments against it. These arguments centre on its use of a limited number of statistical approaches (Greene, 2014, 2019), whether it can be seen as a ‘movement’, a program or a tactical level methodology that focuses on ‘what works’ in policing (Punch, 2015), and whether police officers have the skills to understand its application and findings (Greene, 2014; Wood et al., 2017).

This article seeks to examine whether police forces in England and Wales have adopted evidence-based policing practices and to further earlier research undertaken by researchers such as Telep and Lum (2014) and Telep (2017). The first section of this article discusses the concept of evidence-based policing and whether its use improves the delivery of police services. The following sections explain the methodology used in the study and the results of an electronic survey. The final sections present an analysis of the survey and the relationship between the survey findings and the literature.

EVIDENCE-BASED POLICING

Evidence-based policing originated from evidence-based practice, a concept based on using quantitative methodologies and randomised experiments. It is a scientific approach that can improve the delivery of services because it de-emphasises intuition, unsystematic experiences, and general theoretical assumptions about the causes of problems (Evidence-Based Medicine Working Group, 1992). Evidence-based policing arose because the police needed a better way to reduce crime (Thacher, 2001).

Evidence-based policing emphasises the methods used to research a specific policing strategy and the subsequent interpretation and implementation of

the research findings (Huey & Ricciardelli, 2016). It consists of two dominant approaches, experimental criminology and crime science (Brown et al., 2018). As envisaged by Sherman (1998), evidence-based policing is associated with experimental designs, particularly those used in medical science, such as randomised controlled trials (RCTs). Sherman's concern was the disconnection between the crime reduction strategies used by the police and the outcomes of these strategies and argued that such strategies could only be assessed using high-quality, scientific experimental research that could provide the best evidence to assist in police decision-making (Brown et al., 2018).

Police forces have sought "value for money" in the deployment of their resources and 'what works' in reducing crime (Greene, 2014), and this has resulted in an increase in the use of evidence-based policing. One of the benefits for the police in adopting an evidence-based approach to policy development is that their service will become more professionalised. It also raises the status of police research, as much of the research into policing has been criticised as insufficient (Skogan & Frydl, 2004).

The principles of evidence-based policing have been intentionally used in more than one hundred studies that have examined what works in relation to a wide range of topics (Huey & Ricciardelli, 2016). These topics have included hot spot policing (Braga et al., 2012), domestic violence (Davis et al., 2007), and countering violent extremism within communities (Murray et al., 2015). While the approach appears to have assisted with advancing our knowledge of policing in some ways, it is not only about creating more or better research for the police but is also concerned with how research is "received, interpreted, understood, translated, and implemented" (Telep & Lum, 2014, p. 360).

However, the theory of evidence-based policing does not consider how police forces adopt the concept, the organisational structures they use, or the methods they use to develop their policies (Greene, 2014). Nor does it consider the processes that the police use to disseminate information. As noted by researchers, police organisations are paramilitary (Waddington, 1991), with strategic decisions made at the top of the organisation, but with operational decisions made by supervisors and constables (Mastrofski, 2007). For police forces to benefit from adopting evidence-based policing, information and research findings must be disseminated across the organisation (Sherman, 2015).

One of the main limitations of evidence-based policing is that it is based on the findings of a limited number of studies, which generalises the benefits of adopting the approach (Eck, 2017). Furthermore, evidence-based policing is primarily linked to the strategy of Hotspots Policing and has not been used to evaluate other areas in policing, such as command structures.

Another limitation is that the capability of evidence-based policing in practice is narrower than initially conceived (Lum & Koper, 2017). One reason is that

the research has focused primarily on crime control (Telep, 2017) and program evaluations (Greene, 2014). Limitations have also been expressed about the relationship evidence-based policing has with crime science (Brown et al., 2018). Both Haggerty (2007) and Punch (2015) claimed that crime science places an over-emphasis on crime control at the detriment of other services provided by the police and, as a result, distorts the knowledge base of policing.

METHODOLOGY

The research examined whether police forces in England and Wales were being influenced by evidence-based policing practices. The goal was to study whether these police forces had started to adopt the wider elements of evidence-based policing; for example, by increasing the education of officers, using research findings to assist with decision-making, and increasing the flow of information across all levels of their organisations. Two research questions that related to evidence-based policing were of interest to the study:

1. Have police forces in England and Wales been influenced by evidence-based policing practices?
2. How has this influence affected the forces' processes to use the findings from research to improve the delivery of their services?

The study was based on a 27-question survey that was approved by the Walden University Independent Review Board (08-26-19-3658472) in September 2020. The survey instrument was adapted from those used by Lum and Telep (n.d.), Telep and Lum (2014), and Telep (2017). The link to the survey was sent to an email list of 500 England and Wales-based members of the United Kingdom Society of Evidence-Based Policing (UKSEBP) by the society secretary on 10 May 2021. By 21 June 2021, 66 participants (approximately 13.2%) had completed and returned the survey. Membership in the society is free and open to any member of the police or any researcher who has an interest in research on the police (United Kingdom Society of Evidence-Based Policing, 2021).

A DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

The survey's return rate of approximately 13.2% was low. However, as noted by Nix et al. (2017), surveys that are not undertaken in person have, over time, a decreasing number of responses and "a low response rate on its own is an insufficient reason to dismiss a study's merit" (p. 530). A similar study undertaken by the author (den Heyer, 2022) that examined the use of evidence-based policing practices in law enforcement agencies in the United States had a similar return rate of approximately 15.6%.

Characteristics of the Survey Respondents

The 66 survey respondents consisted of an array of senior ranked officers (18), supervisors (24), constables (10), heads of research and planning units (8), academics (5) and one person who worked in the Home Office. The respondents worked in 22 different police forces across all regions of England and Wales. When asked if they had heard of 'evidence-based policing', all 66 respondents said they had.

Evidence-Based Policing Knowledge

Following the introductory questions, participants were asked about their knowledge and understanding of strategies that had been introduced to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the delivery of police services and their understanding of evidence-based policing. The first question asked participants how they would define the term 'evidence-based policing'. Forty-three respondents (65%) said they would describe it 'as a scientific approach to developing strategies for the police' and 50 respondents (more than 75%) stated they would define the term as 'attempts to ensure that police practice and decision-making is guided by good quality evidence'. While 42 respondents (approximately 63%) claimed that they would define the term as 'looking for and being able to evaluate the best available evidence to underpin police duties'. Nineteen respondents (29%) said they would use the definition that was created by the England and Wales College of Policing and 13 respondents (20%) said that they would use the definition proposed by Sherman (1998).

The survey participants were then asked whether the eight response strategies that had been presented in the survey were very effective, effective, somewhat effective, or not effective for reducing crime and disorder in their areas. The respondents' answers to this question are presented in Table 1. Only six of the strategies had high scores (more than 50%), which indicated that they were very effective or effective. Preventive Patrol (about 37%) and Rapid Response (about 45%) were not regarded by the respondents as very effective or effective. The most effective strategy was Intelligence-led Policing, with 59 respondents (89.4%) stating that it was either very effective or effective, followed closely by Problem-oriented Policing with a score of 54 (81.8%). The lowest scores were for Preventive Patrol, Rapid Response, and Restorative Justice. When all three categories (very effective, effective, and somewhat effective) were added together, Problem-oriented Policing was considered the most effective, with a score of 66, followed closely by Intelligence-led Policing and Hotspots Policing with scores of 65. The lowest scores were for Community-oriented Policing (63) and Neighbourhood Policing (62), Restorative Justice (61), Preventive Patrol (58), and Rapid Response (57).

Table 1: Perspective of Strategy Effectiveness

	Very Effective	Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not Effective	Number Answered
Preventive Patrol	6 (9.2%)	18 (27.7%)	34 (52.3%)	7 (10.7%)	65
Hotspot Policing	20 (30.3%)	32 (48.5%)	13 (19.7)	1 (1.5%)	66
COP	20 (30.7%)	31 (47.7%)	12 (18.5%)	2 (3%)	65
Neighbourhood Policing	17 (25.8%)	23 (34.8%)	22 (33.3%)	4 (6.1%)	66
POP	19 (28.8%)	35 (53%)	12 (18.2%)	0	66
Intelligence-Led Policing	20 (30.3%)	39 (59.1%)	6 (9.1%)	1 (1.5%)	66
Rapid Response	8 (12.1%)	22 (33.3%)	27 (41%)	9 (13.6%)	66
Restorative Justice	10 (10.1%)	27 (41%)	24 (36.4%)	5 (7.6%)	66

The next section of the survey examined how participants gained information on new policing methods and strategies. The first question asked participants whether they had read any articles from academic journals, police practitioner magazines or websites in the past 12 months. Sixty-four respondents (87%) said they had read articles from these types of journals and websites, and two respondents (13.1%) said they had not. The second question asked whether participants had attended or participated in any professional policing conferences, other than training courses delivered by their own force, in the previous 12 months. Thirty-nine (59.0%) stated they had attended a professional conference and 27 respondents (40.9%) said they had not.

Of the conferences attended, the most popular was the Society of Evidence-Based Policing Conference, with 34 respondents (51.5%) stating they had attended this conference. Ten respondents (15.2%) had attended a conference run by the United Kingdom College of Policing and 13 respondents (19.7%) had attended a policing conference organised by a university or research institute. The third question asked participants whether they had received any formal training (from their force or otherwise) in evaluating policing tactics or strategies that were found to be effective in reducing crime. Twenty-nine respondents (43.9%) said they had received this type of training and 37 respondents (56.1%) said they had not.

Police Officer Education

Participants were asked two questions in this section of the survey about the education of police officers. The first question asked how important it was for police officers to pursue a higher level of education (university level education). Twelve respondents (18.2%) said it was extremely important, 15 respondents (22.8%) said

it was very important, 28 respondents (42.4%) said it was somewhat important, eight respondents (12.1%) said it was not so important and three respondents (4.5%) said it was not at all important. The second question related to research on the police being undertaken by people outside the police, such as academics, and asked at what rank do you think an understanding of research undertaken by people outside the police about policing becomes essential for daily work? Fifteen respondents (22.7%) said an understanding was needed at the officer level, 15 respondents (22.7%) said at the supervisor (sergeant) level, 22 respondents (33.3%) at the mid-management (inspector) level, nine respondents (13.6%) at the senior management (superintendent) level, and seven respondents (10.6%) stated at the executive (chief) level. Twenty-six respondents (39.4%) said an understanding was required at all levels.

Research into Policing

The third section of the survey contained questions about research into policing and its practical usefulness. The first question asked participants to what extent they found information from research (conducted by universities or research organisations) regarding police tactics useful? Nineteen respondents (28.8%) said they found such research extremely useful, 22 (33.3%) said they found it very useful, 23 (34.8%) said they found it somewhat useful, and two respondents (3%) said they did not find it useful. The second question asked participants what they thought the balance should be between the use of scientific research or knowledge and personal experience in their day-to-day decision-making. The survey offered five categories for participants to base their answers on. Just under half of the respondents (30, or 45.5%) said decision-making should be based on an equal contribution from experience and scientific knowledge, while 11 respondents (16.7%) said experience should be more important than the scientific contribution. Twenty-six respondents (39.4%) said scientific knowledge should be more important and that experience should make some contribution to decision-making. None of the respondents thought that scientific knowledge made little contribution to decision-making.

Delivery of Police Services

The fourth section of the survey included questions about the force the participant worked for and how it delivered services to the community. The first question asked participants to describe how their force reduced crime. Twenty-one respondents (31.8%) said their force mainly used traditional tactics, such as Random Preventive Patrols and case-by-case investigations and 12 respondents (18.2%) said their force mainly used traditional tactics supplemented by Community-oriented Policing conducted by a separate unit. Two respondents (3%) said their force had adopted a departmental-wide Community-oriented Policing approach and 32

respondents (48.5%) said their force used a mix of traditional tactics and more innovative tactics, such as Problem-oriented Policing or Hotspots Policing. Only one respondent (1.5%) said the force they worked for mainly used innovative tactics.

Change Management

The second question in this section sought to gather information about change management in policing and asked participants what they thought the main factor was that inhibited innovation and reform in policing? The respondents expressed one predominant factor and four other factors that inhibited innovation and reform. The main factor was culture, with 56 respondents (84.9%) identifying this factor. The other factors were management (47 respondents, or 71.2%), organisational structure, and a lack of time (32 respondents, or 48.5% each). The other factors that inhibited innovation and reform and the number of respondents are presented in Table 2. Sixteen respondents (24.2%) claimed their forces were always introducing new methods and process.

Table 2: The Main Factors Inhibiting Innovation and Reform in Policing

	Number	Percentage
Culture	56	84.5%
Management	47	71.2%
Lack of time	32	48.5%
Too complicated	10	15.2%
Legal issues stop innovation and reform	8	12.1%
Organisational structure	32	48.5%
We are always introducing new methods and processes	16	24.2%

Undertaking Research and its Dissemination

The next section of the survey asked four questions about the undertaking and dissemination of research in the force the participant worked for. The first question asked whether their force had a research unit. Thirty-four respondents (51.5%) said their force had a research unit and 32 respondents (48.5%) said their force did not. The second question sought information on whether forces undertook their own research or experiments that used new policing strategies or methods. Forty-six respondents (69.7%) said the force they worked for undertook their own research and 20 respondents (30.3%) said their force did not. The next question sought to clarify why a force undertook their own research. The responses to this question are presented in Table 3. The most common reasons were to develop and use new

operational tactics or strategies (44 respondents, or 91.7%) and to develop and use new administrative strategies or processes (39 respondents, or 88.6%).

Table 3: Reasons for Forces Undertaking their own Research*

	Yes	No
With the assistance of consultants or academics	44 (93.6%)	3 (6.4%)
The development and use of new administrative strategies or processes	39 (88.6%)	5 (11.4%)
The development and use of new operational tactics or strategies	44 (91.7%)	4 (8.3%)
The development and use of new weapons	11 (28.2%)	28 (71.8%)
The development and use of new uniforms and accoutrements	20 (47.6%)	22 (52.4%)
The use of new motor vehicles	16 (40%)	24 (60%)

*Each reason had a different total number of respondents. Respondents could provide an answer for more than one reason.

The final question in this section asked those respondents who had indicated that their force undertakes its own research, how the findings were disseminated to other police forces. Sixty participants answered this question, with the most common method being via professional societies or groups (12 respondents, or 20%), by presentations at conferences (8 respondents, or 13.3%), through word of mouth (7 respondents, or 11.7%), by publishing in practitioner journals (5 respondents, or 8.3%), and by using external media (2 respondents, or 3.3%). Nine respondents (15%) said their force used all these forms of dissemination and 15 respondents (25%) said their force did not use any of these forms or disseminate any of its research findings.

Acquiring Information and the use of Research

The sixth section of the survey examined how forces access new research findings and how such findings are used within the force. The first question asked participants about the processes and structures used in their force to access new information in policing. Nineteen respondents (28.8%) said the force they worked for did not have any processes and structures for accessing new information, 20 (30.3%) said new information was managed by senior management, 16 (24.2%) said the force they worked for had a researcher or research unit that handled new information, and 25 respondents (37.9%) said any member of their force could

approach management about a new method. Eleven respondents said the force they worked for did not use any of these methods.

The second question asked participants how their force acquired information or gained knowledge about new methods in policing. Twenty-nine respondents (43.9%) said the force they worked for acquired information by sending officers and employees to training courses, 34 respondents (51.5%) said information was acquired from other police forces, 21 respondents (31.8%) said information was acquired from conferences, 16 respondents (24.2%) said the force they worked for gained information from practitioner journals, 15 respondents (22.7%) said from academic journals, and 23 respondents (34.8%) said from hiring consultants or academics. Twenty respondents (30.3%) said the force they worked for used all these methods for acquiring information.

The third question asked survey participants how information on new policing methods was disseminated throughout the force they worked for. The most common method of dissemination was internal media channels (42 respondents, or 63.6%); 16 respondents (24.2%) said they received this type of information from emails written by the Chief or Commissioner. Thirty-one respondents (47%) said such information was disseminated when the force they work for developed and implemented a new policy, while 21 respondents (31.8%) said the information was disseminated when a new strategy was developed and implemented. Three respondents (4.5%) said they received this type of information from channels other than those identified in the question.

The fourth question sought to understand how new policing research evidence impacted extant operational practices of a force. Nineteen respondents (28.8%) said the force they worked for was always adopting new ideas, but 23 respondents (34.9%) said their force waited until an idea had been successfully adopted by other forces, and eight respondents (12.1%) said the force they worked for did not adopt new policing ideas. Sixteen respondents (24.2%) said their force did not use any of these methods.

The fifth question in this section examined why information did not flow freely throughout a force and asked how the vertical channels in a force affected the diffusion of research or information. Thirty-six respondents (54.5%) said the rank structure made it difficult for information to move freely up and down the organisation while 12 respondents (18.2%) said supervisors and mid-level managers controlled what information was released. Another 18 respondents (27.2%) said the staff in their force were only told what management wanted them to know and 13 respondents (19.7%) said information flows were inhibited in the force they worked for because of concrete ceilings at different levels of the organisation. Five respondents (7.6%) said information did not flow throughout their force because of all these reasons and five respondents (7.6%) said information did not flow because of any of these reasons.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE SURVEY RESULTS

Research has identified three factors that can predict the successful implementation of evidence-based policing (Brown et al., 2018). The first is the strength of an individual's capacity to undertake evidence-based practice. The second is the level of organisational support for implementing evidence-based practice and the third is the level of an officer's education. Brown et al. (2018) claim that the age, length of service or rank of an officer is not important for accepting evidence-based policing. These findings are important in the context of change management because it means that evidence-based practice needs to be promoted to all officers and staff at all levels of the organisation.

Accepting evidence-based policing can take many different forms (Lum & Koper, 2017), and the receptivity to research by officers does not start when research is used in some way by an organisation. Instead, it is on a continuum (Nutley et al., 2007) and officers are receptive to research when they are aware of it and understand it and have a change in attitude towards research. The survey supports this literature with many respondents stating that they read either practitioner or academic policing journals. If readers of practitioner or academic journals analyse the information that is presented in journals, then they would acknowledge that more modern policing strategies appear to be more effective in reducing the occurrence of crime (Sherman, 2015).

Furthermore, most responses to the question about what rank participants thought that an understanding of outside research about policing becomes essential for daily work was that it was essential at all ranks. According to National Research Council (2004), most improvements can be made at the lower levels of an organisation because officers can recognise weaknesses in police service delivery. Education will increase an officer's analytical ability, which would assist them in interpreting the findings documented in practitioner and academic journals and applying the findings to operational policing (Telep & Lum, 2014).

The main barriers to adopting evidence-based policing are the culture and management in a police agency. Such barriers to reform may arise for several reasons and often include the control and dissemination of information (Chan, 1996). This problem was noted by 54.5% of the survey respondents, who said the rank structure made it difficult for information to move freely up and down the organisation; a further 18.2% of respondents said supervisors and mid-level managers control what information was released. These findings indicate that some forces do not appear to have structures or policies in place that formally disseminate research findings to personnel. Policing is an information intensive institution and needs information to make appropriate decisions, allocate resources, and develop research-based strategies and policies. Not having such

information easily disseminated limits the capability of the police to provide equitable and just services to the community (Sparrow, 2016).

The literature highlights that the police are generally reluctant to change their structures and processes. This reluctance is often attributed to a lack of ownership of the change process (Duncan et al., 2001), or because police executives identify with the current structures and practices, even if how they are doing things is ineffective (Maguire et al., 2003; Marks, 2000; Mastrofski & Willis, 2010). However, the survey results indicate that change is taking place in the police with just under 70% of respondents stating that the force they work for uses traditional tactics that are supplemented by Community-oriented Policing that is undertaken by a separate unit or by using a departmental-wide Community-oriented Policing approach, or a mixture of traditional tactics and more innovative tactics such as Problem-oriented Policing or Hotspots Policing. Respondents also said some problems inhibited innovation and reform; the main factors were police culture and management. James Q. Wilson (1978), identified these same barriers, as did Janet Chan (1996) approximately 20 years later. This problem was also noted by Sherman (2015), who explained that the resistance arises mainly because the police see their role as being a craft and that it does not need scientific evaluation. Similarly, Skogan (2008) claimed that the barriers that impede change from taking place within police organisations were because of the internal processes that the police used.

According to Karn (2013), efforts by the police to become more effective in reducing crime are “few and far between” (p. 3). According to Knutsson and Thompson (2017) and Sherman (2013), as a critical mass of support for using evidence-based policing has been reached, it is now time for police forces to consider adopting the practice. This view appears to be supported by the findings of the survey. Although there are variations in some of the responses, the theme of the responses is that evidence-based policing is influencing individual officers, forces, and the delivery of policing services.

The survey results are also in line with the findings of Travis (2018), who claimed that “the policing profession has made strides toward evidence-based practices” and these “are truly impressive”. Travis discussed some earlier research projects that were based on random control trials (e.g., the Kansas City Patrol Experiment) but also noted that policing is approaching its next frontier where evidence-based policing will be important in assisting police forces to analyse data and develop new performance matrices that will increase transparency and public confidence in the police.

CONCLUSION

This research has examined whether police forces in England and Wales have been influenced by evidence-based policing practices. There have been some calls for the strategies that the police use to reduce crime to be based on best practices and “on the best evidence of ‘what works’” (Ritter & Lancaster, 2013, p. 458). What works in each situation, in a specific location, with a set number of resources can only be found from a comparative analysis of the application and evaluation of specific police response strategies and tactics. This analysis, however, is a more complex task than just one application of a strategy or tactic and must be applied a number of times under similar circumstances (Sherman, 2015).

The survey results identify that police forces in England and Wales are adopting aspects of evidence-based policing. While the low participation rates may be a limitation of the survey, the study’s participants represent 22 different police forces in England and Wales. The results provide a foundation for further research to examine how police forces have adopted and used evidence-based policing and the research methods used by police forces to develop policies and strategies to improve their services.

Evidence-based policing is possibly a contemporary watershed in the development of the profession of policing (Dunham & Alpert, 2015; Lum & Koper, 2015). However, for the police to make the best use of the concept, police forces need to develop the organisational structures and process that enable information to be disseminated throughout their organisations and systems. This will ensure that information is made available for operational staff and will help improve the effectiveness of the delivery of policing services.

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