



# ADVANCING CORRECTIONS

Journal of the International Corrections and Prisons Association



**Excerpt from Advancing Corrections Journal  
Parenting from Prison: Innovative Ways of Maintaining  
Connection with Children, Families and Significant  
Others (ACJ15-A010)**



**ICPA**  
International Corrections  
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## **What is Effective Reintegration?**

Edition #15 - 2023

[www.icpa.org](http://www.icpa.org)

## **PARENTING FROM PRISON: INNOVATIVE WAYS OF MAINTAINING CONNECTION WITH CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND SIGNIFICANT OTHERS**

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### **Abstract**

This article describes and discusses 'Invisible Walls' (IW), a pioneering 'whole family' approach to enhancing imprisoned fathers' ties with their children and families. It summarises earlier evaluation findings on the Lottery-funded *Invisible Walls Wales* (IWW) project in HM Prison and YOI Parc, Wales, UK, outlines its influence on policy, and discusses how the model has since evolved. In Parc, partnerships with schools now play a significant part; a further important development has been efforts to break down silos and make 'family' services available to all people in prison and their 'significant others'. The paper also addresses the problem of replicating or adapting successful local projects on a much larger scale: experience from IW suggests that this can be helped by individual establishments exchanging ideas, but achieving and sustaining high volumes of beneficiaries requires commitment and investment by government, combined with culture and attitude change at local level.

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## Introduction and Background

A substantial body of literature over many years has provided evidence of the harm caused to children and families by parental imprisonment, showing that it can lead to severe financial pressures and sometimes loss of the family home, emotional and behavioural problems among children, stigma and disengagement from social networks, and increased risk of marital breakdown (Codd, 1998; Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999; Mauer and Chesney-Lind, 2002; Murray, 2005; Smith et al., 2007; Murray and Farrington, 2008; Siennec et al., 2014; Turanovic et al., 2012).

Specific problems frequently identified in children with imprisoned parents include anxiety, depression, truancy and poor school attainment, aggression and anti-social behaviour (Arditti, 2012; Boswell and Wedge, 2002; Dallaire, 2007a; Minson, 2019). Imprisonment of a household member is also one of ten Adverse Childhood Experiences known to negatively impact long-term health, well-being and outcomes in later life (Beresford et al., 2020; Felitti et al., 1998) and is indicated as a risk factor in the likelihood of intergenerational offending (Besemer and Farrington, 2012).

The benefits of helping people in prison to maintain family ties during a prison sentence have likewise been recognised for some time in the academic literature (Losel et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2012) and periodically highlighted in official reports and policy recommendations (see, for example, Social Exclusion Unit, 2002; COPE, 2017; Council of Europe, 2018). However, major investment by government or prison authorities to put good intentions into practice remains rare. Rather, apart from their obligations to conform to rules on, for example, minimum entitlements to visits or telephone calls, individual establishments have generally been left to decide for themselves whether or how to help people in prison maintain relationships with partners and children. Innovation in this area, too, has largely come through local rather than central initiatives, elements of which have then been copied or adapted by other prisons and, occasionally, taken up by national or regional prison authorities.

One such initiative, which has begun to have an influence on national policy in England and Wales – and indeed on practice in a number of prisons in other countries – is Invisible Walls (IW) developed in HM Prison and Young Offender Institution Parc, located in Bridgend, South Wales. Parc is a Category B (medium-high security) establishment with over 1,600 male prisoners, operated privately by Group 4 Security (G4S). IW has a focus on enabling meaningful involvement in parenting by incarcerated fathers. It is based upon a comprehensive 'whole family' model aimed at producing positive outcomes for incarcerated fathers, their partners/significant others and children alike (the term 'family' is used very broadly in this context, to include anyone close to the prisoner, particularly those involved in care of his or her children). This paper will briefly describe the aims and main elements of the scheme and summarise the results of an evaluation of its processes and outcomes. It will also examine and assess developments elsewhere which have been to some extent influenced by the pioneering work at Parc, including the publication of a major review commissioned by the UK Ministry of Justice (Farmer, 2017) and efforts to implement a number of its recommendations. Particular attention will be paid to the challenges of 'going to scale': what attempts have or could be made to translate ideas and lessons from this or other small-scale local projects into policies and practice to help much larger numbers of people in prison and families?

## Invisible Walls and the 'Whole Family' Approach

IW was initially set up in Parc prison in 2012 under the name 'Invisible Walls Wales' (IWW) following

the award of a large grant by the Big Lottery. It represented a step-change in the provision of family services in the prison system, in that, for the first time in the UK, a multi-agency project team provided an intensive and comprehensive programme of joint support to imprisoned fathers, those caring for their children, and the children themselves - both during the prison sentence and continuing after release. It was based on a 'whole family' model which rested on three main 'pillars': a specialist wing for fathers, family-focused visits, and work with fathers and families 'through the gate' in partnership with community agencies. These will be described in more detail below.

It is important first to note that the project was not suddenly set up 'out of the blue' or delivered in isolation. It was the culmination of, and embedded within, a progressive family focused philosophy and strategy initially developed in 2006 and already well established in the prison. For example, the Family Interventions Unit (FIU) or 'fathers' wing' had been introduced in 2009. This 64-bed drug free unit for fathers emphasises the reparation and maintenance of family relationships and aims to improve outcomes for all family members. A wide range of group and individual interventions are delivered, some of them attended jointly with children and families. The FIU has a very different atmosphere to other wings; it is smaller and more peaceful, the walls are covered in inspirational literature and artwork (much of it produced by the men themselves), each cell has a telephone and, perhaps most importantly, every man on the wing has applied to reside there. These ingredients combine to create a form of 'therapeutic community' whereby the entire focus of the wing is upon fathering and 'being a better family man'. Residents support one another in a safe space within this large medium-high security prison, where they can show emotion and vulnerability and often share very personal revelations as they come to terms with the impact of their offending on their families and children. They are also helped to develop their fathering skills and sense of paternal identity (Clancy and Maguire, 2021).

A further key step had been the transfer of responsibility for prison visits from security staff to the Parc Supporting Families team in 2010, which enabled the development of 'intervention-led' visits, an approach whereby staff are encouraged to see each visit as a potential opportunity to engage and support the father together with his family or significant others. Improvements were also made to the physical environment of any space where interactions between fathers and their families could occur. Finally, efforts had been made over several years to develop 'through the gate' partnerships with a range of statutory, private and voluntary agencies which provided services to families and/or children, some of which came into the prison periodically to deliver interventions or advice.

In short, the basic principles of the whole family approach, and ways of putting them into practice, had evolved gradually over a period of several years. At the heart of the approach was the belief that fathers in prison, partners and children should all benefit from the services and assistance provided. Its core aims came to be seen as enhancing the quality of family and community life for all three parties; to reduce the risk of re-offending by the fathers; and to help prevent their children becoming involved in crime – the problem of 'intergenerational offending' (Besemer and Farrington, 2012; Flynn et al., 2017). Its core elements, or 'pillars', had become a specialised family/parenting wing for imprisoned fathers; intervention-led visits; and partnerships between the prison and child/family focused community-based services. It was upon this bedrock of ideas and practice that the IWW project was established in 2012.

IWW was initially funded by the Big Lottery for a period of five years. It was designed as a service with strictly defined parameters to provide intensive support to a selected group of imprisoned fathers, their children and carers in the community, in each case for a period of 12–18 months. Close monitoring and evaluation of the project were built in from the start, with the aim of identifying process issues as well as outcomes for participants, and to consider whether the model, or elements or adaptations of it, could be usefully replicated elsewhere.

To be eligible for the project, imprisoned fathers had to have no restrictions on child contact, one or more children living in South Wales, 6–12 months left to serve, and an identified need for parenting or resettlement support. Priority was given to those whose partner (or person caring for their child/ren) needed support in the community, and/or whose child/ren were experiencing behavioural, emotional and/or social difficulties. They also needed to be drug-free in prison.

The project both expanded previously existing elements of the whole family strategy in Parc and introduced new ones. It was delivered by a multi-disciplinary team working with each imprisoned father and his family during the custodial period, then as the father transitioned ‘through the gate’ and for up to six months in the community post release. The core G4S team were based in offices directly on the FIU and comprised four Family Integration Mentors (FIMs), a substance misuse worker and an Education/Training/Employment/Volunteering specialist. G4S also employed an IWW Project Manager and a Business Support Officer. Community partners, including staff from a children’s charity and housing and social work agencies, worked closely with the mentors and shared a satellite office in the grounds of the prison (for more details on the above arrangements, see Clancy and Maguire 2017a, b).

Apart from the overall increase in staffing and resources, perhaps the two most important additions to the pre-existing services in Parc were the FIMs and a transformation of the visiting facilities and arrangements. Indeed, the FIMs were often said to represent the ‘lynchpin’ of the IWW project, providing a bridge between the fathers and their families, fulfilling a case management function, and co-ordinating the work of partner agencies in the community to deliver parenting support, child advocacy, play therapy, Family Group Conferencing and one to one counselling for older children.

At the same time, the visits hall underwent a process of transformation to a more family friendly environment, including the addition of a ‘family lounge’. This effectively enacted the principle of normalisation by replicating a family home with soft furnishings, games and minimal staff presence to encourage natural family interaction and connection. Extended family visits also provided the vehicle to deliver ‘whole family’ interventions including ‘Learning Together’ club, Baby Bathing for new parents, Five to Thrive and Rhyme Time. Innovation was encouraged and other interventions included Scouts Groups, Firefighter for a day, and a ‘Come Dine with Me’ experience to enable those in prison to cook a special meal for their families. In 2014, the Interventions-led Visitor Centre was opened, providing visiting families with a welcoming environment in which to wait, book in for visits and engage with a range of child-friendly activities and support. In 2016, too, Barnardo’s Children’s Charity took over the running of the centre.

Understandably, there were some initial concerns among staff that the more relaxed approach to visits might adversely affect prison security. However, such worries dissipated quite quickly in the





*Figure 1: Firefighter for a Day intervention - in partnership with South Wales Fire and Rescue, dads in prison and their children learn about fire safety in the home and spend the second half of the day engaged with command tasks together.*



*Figure 2: Invisible Walls mentors engaging with two children of a prison in the visiting hall.*



*Figure 3: Halloween themed family day visit.*



*Figure 4: Engagement activity in the prison's Family Intervention Lounge*

light of experience with the new arrangements. For example, it soon became apparent that the number of 'hands-on' incidents in the hall – i.e., incidents requiring alarms and officer intervention – was falling substantially. Similarly, prison security noticed a drop in positive drug-dog indications on visitors. These trends continued over the next five years, which saw a particularly striking reduction in the monthly average number of recorded hands-on incidents, from around 4 to under 0.3.

### **Evaluation of IWW**

Between 2012 and 2017, two of the current authors conducted an evaluation of the IWW project. The methodology and results have been described elsewhere (Clancy and Maguire 2017a, 2017b) and will be summarised only briefly here.

The IWW service was delivered to 20 imprisoned fathers and their families each year, resulting in work with a total of 83 fathers, 94 adult family members (or other adults caring for the children) and 172 children over the five years. The evaluation set out to include as many of the above as possible in the evaluation, subject of course to consent. A mixed methods approach was utilised, including: semi-structured interviews with fathers (on joining the scheme, at point of release, and up to six months

later), with their partners/those caring for their children, with IWW managers and staff, and with members of partner agencies (most in these other groups being interviewed twice or more); question sessions with groups of children; analysis of casefiles; psychometric assessments and indicative measures of change in fathers' attitudes to crime, criminogenic needs, and parenting skills; and parent and teacher perceptions of child wellbeing at home and in school. Change in attitudes to crime was also measured for a comparison group of 76 non-IWW imprisoned fathers housed elsewhere in the prison.

The findings indicate that IWW provided participants with greater frequency and enhanced quality of family contact during the prison sentence compared with imprisoned fathers not participating. The FIMs helped to facilitate this contact, often acting as a conduit for improved communication between fathers in prison and their families. Qualitative analysis of interview data also indicates that the opportunity to interact as a family and for men to enact the role of 'good dad' improved family relationships and for many, acted as a catalyst for change, reinforcing their commitment to their role and identity as fathers. Scheme records further indicated there were high levels of voluntary post release contact between released fathers and the FIMs.

Results based on the quantitative data collected have to be treated with caution, as the sample sizes were small, and although a comparison group was created, it did not prove possible to match it carefully to the intervention group, nor to collect sufficient outcome data to make many meaningful comparisons. Nevertheless, most of the evidence was strongly indicative of positive change over time. Compared to their pre-sentence situation, clear improvements were evident in the accommodation and employment status of both released fathers and adult family members, together with marked reductions in levels of substance misuse. Moreover, there were strong improvements in fathers' scores on attitudes to crime and perceived life problems, as measured by the CRIME PICS II tool (Frude et al, 1994); by contrast, very little change was evident in the comparison group of non IWW imprisoned fathers. Unfortunately, re-offending data on the two samples is still not available due to delays caused by the pandemic.

Where outcomes relating to children are concerned, too, all the evidence points towards a positive conclusion. For example, significant levels of positive change between joining and leaving the project were apparent in 'Family Star' parenting scores for both imprisoned fathers and family participants. There were also strong indications of improved child wellbeing at home and in school as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) tool (a brief behavioural screening tool for children aged 2 – 17 completed by parents and teachers), increased school attendance and attainment, and a fall in the number of children requiring support from Social Services. It is of course impossible to know whether this will eventually reduce the risk of intergenerational offending, but the short-term impact appears to have been considerable.

### **Evolution and Influence of the IWW project**

Since the charitable funding for the IWW project ended in 2017, HMP Parc has continued to operate what is now known simply as 'Invisible Walls' (IW), the funds coming primarily from G4S and government grants. With savings through efficiencies and reductions in peripheral posts, much of the core model remains in place. In particular, the intervention-led visiting arrangements and external partnerships continue, and there are still five funded FIMs delivering 'through the gate' mentoring

services for up to 30 families per year. Importantly, too, some new services have been developed and access to elements of IW has been opened up to many more men in Parc. Links and partnerships with local agencies have increased and strengthened, some of which have generated innovative joint practices regarding children of men serving sentences. Notably, what was originally a small-scale IWW experiment with inviting teachers from local schools into the prison has burgeoned into a partnership system involving over 300 schools and numerous children across South Wales with a parent in prison. This involves the school making a partnership agreement with the prison under which information can be shared about the children of men serving sentences. As well as offering support to many of those who fail to meet the threshold for help from Social Services, this initiative includes giving fathers timely updates on their children's progress at school, in some cases through direct parent-teacher meetings held either in prison, or remotely.

Bike zone is one particularly innovative element of this work with schools, which provides an avenue for imprisoned men to 'give back' to local schools and children by repairing and upcycling unused and locally donated bicycles to achieve a City and Guilds qualification in bicycle maintenance. All bikes are donated to children in the community following referrals from their teacher.

In addition, Parc has now developed a prison-wide 'family casework model' for managing information about and interventions with every one of the 1,600+ men in the prison and their families or significant others. It is important to emphasise that 'family' is defined here extremely broadly, to include not just partners, children or close relatives, but anyone that the individual feels close to and is important in his life. A family work database, accessible to all staff (with varying levels of access depending on their role) provides a central log of all family work undertaken, case notes and any important issues being experienced by the person in prison or their 'family'. Importantly, the database connects with others used at Parc, thereby facilitating information-sharing and minimising risks of duplication. It also operates as a 'knowledge hub' with links to key policy documents, research and other resources to support staff in delivering the family agenda and helps staff to prioritise and target resources. While all are able to access minimum services, smaller numbers are eligible for different levels of more intensive assistance or interventions, with the top of the pyramid – the 'gold standard' of residence in the FIU and work with the family mentors - reserved only for those in greatest need for support.

### Children's Showcase Event in the main visits hall



Figure 5: Overview shot of a parent-teacher event



As well as these developments in Parc (some of which involve other prisons and agencies in South Wales), IW has had an influence on family work in prisons elsewhere in the UK and indeed a 'ripple effect' in a number of other countries around the world. In many cases this has followed visits to Parc by prison governors or other senior managers, resulting in efforts to replicate elements of the IW model in individual establishments where they have some authority. In some prisons run by G4S, such as HMPs Oakwood and Altcourse, this began quite early in the history of IW, but this influence has gradually expanded into the public sector, stimulating similar initiatives in, among others, HMPs Erlestoke, Birmingham, Low Moss, Winchester, Wandsworth, Hull, Leicester, Berwyn, and Eastwood Park. Further afield, one or more pillars of the model have been replicated at prisons in, among others, the Netherlands, Uganda, Malta, Northern Ireland, Australia and Singapore (Clancy and Maguire, 2017b).

Important as this informal spread of ideas and practice between individual establishments undoubtedly is, significant and lasting reform to family work in prisons on a national and international scale depends most of all on the genuine commitment of governments and prison authorities to strategies of change, concrete plans and policies, efforts to change cultures - and of course the provision of sufficient funding to sustain them. Of course, the IW whole family model is only one of a number of innovative approaches to work in this area, but it has already had some direct influence on prison policy in the UK. In 2017, Lord Farmer's Review of 'The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties' drew extensively on the Parc model as an exemplar of effective practice. Farmer made 19 recommendations, most of which were accepted by the Ministry of Justice. Subsequently, HM Prison and Probation Service developed a *Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties Policy Framework* (HMPPS and Ministry of Justice, 2019). This creates the obligation for each prison in England and Wales to have a Family and Significant Other Strategy and an associated development plan available to all people in prison, staff and visitors. Those designing performance measurement and audit systems, as well as HM Inspectorate of Prisons have also adapted their expectations and standards to include greater emphasis on practice relating to children and families.

More recently, 60 new 'Family Service Contracts' have been let to deliver services in prisons across England and Wales. Five of these – covering HMPs Usk, Cardiff, Prescoed, Bedford and Littlehey – were won by G4S Invisible Walls Family Services, soon (2023) to become an independent non-profit Community Interest Company managed by the founder of Invisible Walls. In these establishments, slimmed down versions of IW's whole family model are being implemented. Although the funding does not support the full 'through the gate' family mentoring approach, support workers are providing a range of family focused activities and support, both in visit centres and on special visits. These are still small beginnings, and there is no guarantee that sufficient funding will be provided for long enough to embed this work firmly within the participating prisons. However, the contracts represent one of the first government-led initiatives in the UK to focus entirely on developing family interventions across the prison estate, and as already intimated, there is evidence that once they see the effects of such work, prison staff generally support it and culture change in this area may be less difficult than is often believed.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The evaluation of the IWW project provided strong indicative evidence that the 'whole family' approach at Parc not only improved imprisoned fathers' resettlement outcomes but also substantially

benefited their children and partners (or others caring for their children). Indeed, feedback from partners provided several examples of the development and strengthening of released fathers' paternal identity, offering the promise of sustainable change in the family dynamic and potentially a long-term positive effect on the children's behaviour. The project's recruitment of several local agencies as partners to work with imprisoned fathers' children and families in the community has also helped to increase these agencies' awareness of the particular needs of children with a parent in prison. This in turn has led some - notably schools - to make substantial changes to their policy and practice.

These positive findings should be seen in the context of the longstanding Cinderella status of family work among the range of interventions employed by agencies with responsibility for the rehabilitation of people who have offended. In England and Wales, although it was identified in the government's ground-breaking Reducing Re-offending National Action Plan (Home Office, 2004) as one of seven key 'resettlement pathways', work with children and families has so far received far less attention than interventions in pathways aimed at problems with, for example, substance misuse, accommodation or employment.

Part of the reason for this neglect may be that, although such work is generally viewed in a positive light, it has not always been purposive or underpinned by a clear vision of what principles it should be built upon and what form it should take. A major strength of the IW 'whole family' model is that it has been carefully thought out, with clear aims and a rationale for how positive change can be brought about, each element having a well-defined purpose. However, the full model as tested and evaluated in the IWW project was expensive to implement, and most prison establishments cannot afford to replicate it in full, let alone maintain it over a long period. The question therefore becomes: if it is accepted that this model provides a blueprint for effective family work, how can it be adapted and sustainably 'mainstreamed' so that many more people in prison and their families can benefit from it into the future? This question, of course, is by no means unique to this particular project or topic; it applies to numerous pilot or demonstration projects which produce successful results or 'proof of concept' but come to an end without any guarantee that this will be built upon.

As described earlier, Parc prison itself has been relatively successful in keeping much of the whole family model in place. However, even in Parc, where the profile of the IWW project was unusually high, it came to be realised that family work was still taking place to some extent in a 'silo' and that many staff not involved with the family wing or visits had only a vague understanding of the importance of family ties and how best to help fathers in the prison maintain them. The introduction of the 'family casework' model and database has widened awareness, knowledge and enthusiasm for such work throughout the prison by involving many more officers in the identification of residents' family problems and needs, thereby making it everyone's responsibility to contribute rather than just those employed specifically to deliver family services. Another key aspect of this system is that it is highly inclusive, aimed at helping *all* men in the prison - whether or not they have partners or children - to maintain ties with their 'significant others', or people close to them. We do not know of any similar system elsewhere, but it is likely to be extended through the new IW Community Interest Company to other prisons covered by its Family Service Contracts and it is hoped that other establishments will eventually consider adopting the idea in some form.

Where extending the benefits of the basic IW approach to people in prison and families elsewhere is concerned, it is clear that so far most of the prisons that have replicated elements of the model have introduced only one - though occasionally two - of its three main 'pillars' (a specialist family wing, intervention-led visits and/or community partnerships with relevant agencies). Moreover, through the gate family mentoring, although often described to us by IWW staff as the 'glue' holding the project together, has rarely been adopted elsewhere due to the high cost of employing skilled FIMs (and even in Parc is provided now to only 30 families annually). Even so, evidence from informants familiar with replication efforts in other prisons indicates that considerable benefits can be generated by adopting or adapting only one pillar. This can act as a 'quick win' and can significantly raise awareness throughout the establishment of the value and importance of enhancing fathers' relationships with their children (as one manager put it, 'They suddenly get it', thereby triggering shifts in culture, attitudes and behaviour. The most commonly adopted element of the IW model appears to be the creation of more welcoming and family-friendly visiting arrangements, sometimes including the idea of intervention-led visits where every contact is viewed as an opportunity to engage and support people in prison and their families. Visits constitute the situation which sees the most three-way contact between staff, people in prison and families, and relatively small changes can have a visible effect on the mood of those present, including the happiness of children. In one establishment, seeing this was said to have had a surprisingly strong positive effect on staff attitudes, fuelling enthusiasm and ideas for finding more ways of helping to improve family ties. Indeed, a general lesson that seems to be emerging from recent experience is that it may be less important to replicate every element of a successful prison project than to generate an establishment-wide shift in culture and attitudes to support the intentions behind it.

Finally, however, valuable as the spread of new ideas and practices through contact between individual establishments can be, successfully implementing and sustaining them depends primarily on the interest and commitment of individual prison governors, who not only change posts quite frequently, but some of whom may have different priorities and relatively little enthusiasm for family work. The obvious conclusion from experiences in England and Wales over the last few years is that much more than this is needed in order to 'go to scale'. If reforms are to be made that offer widespread, consistent and effective support to enhance relationships of people in prison with their children and families/significant others, it is essential that these are given impetus and direction from government and/or prison authorities – which may first need to be spurred into action by some form of advocacy or pressure. In England and Wales, it was the Review by Lord Farmer - itself influenced by the success of the IWW project among other evidence - that supplied the spur to the Ministry of Justice to place higher priority on, and begin to invest more resources in, developing family work in prisons. Whether this bears fruit over the longer term will depend on the one hand on continuing commitment from central government through adequate funding, formal policies and effective systems of audit, inspection and performance measurement; and on the other, on prison cultures at local level, including attitudes among managers and staff towards family work and understanding of its potential value.

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in the UK and internationally to achieve replication of the model. Corin also designed and established the Invisible Walls Wales service; initially lottery funded in 2012, now, due to its success, working to become a distinct, not for profit, Community Interest Company. Corin has shared his family approach model with correctional services across five continents, and now oversees the Invisible Walls Family Services strategy for the G4S group of prisons in the UK, as well as more recently delivering new family services in a number of public sector prisons in the UK. Contact: [corin.morgan-armstrong@uk.g4s.com](mailto:corin.morgan-armstrong@uk.g4s.com)

ISSN 2517-9233 (Print)  
ISSN 2789-5246 (Online)



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