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RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation  
Journal of the Social Sciences

*Black Reparations: Insights from the  
Social Sciences*

*Part II*

VOLUME 10, ISSUE 3, JUNE 2024







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# Black Reparations: Insights from the Social Sciences, Part II

## ISSUE EDITORS

William Darity Jr., Thomas Craemer, Daina Ramey Berry, and Dania V. Francis

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# Black Reparations in the United States, 2024: An Introduction



WILLIAM DARITY JR., THOMAS CRAEMER<sup>ORCID</sup>,  
DAINA RAMEY BERRY, AND DANIA V. FRANCIS<sup>ORCID</sup>

*This introduction seeks to perform two tasks: it provides a roadmap for readers yet to be initiated into the reparations dialogue and provides fresh insights for those already well versed in it. Reparations are a program of acknowledgment, redress, and closure for a grievous injustice. This edition deals with reparations for black Americans whose ancestors were enslaved in the United States for government policies that allowed centuries of chattel slavery and legal race discrimination. The articles in this double issue represent the most up-to-date rigorous social science, policy, and historical research on the topic. This introduction discusses the world history of reparations efforts and the history of movements for black reparations in the United States; compares various plans for black American reparations, including various monetary estimation approaches; and discusses who should pay and what form payments ought to take. It closes by looking toward the future of the black American reparations movement.*

**Keywords:** Black Reparations; chattel slavery; legal race discrimination; reparations for historical injustices; Holocaust reparations; reparations for Japanese American World War II internees; forty acres and a mule; H.R. 40

Slavery in the United States was a brutal, racialized system of forced labor under the constant threat of physical violence. It incentivized the rape of black women by white men seeking to increase their holdings of human property and led to centuries of absolute white exploitation of unpaid black labor.

Slavery created the startup capital for the

U.S. economy's meteoric rise. It therefore indirectly benefits all Americans today, whether from immigrant or non-immigrant backgrounds, seeking economic opportunity in the United States.

Capital accumulated under slavery continues to grow exponentially because of compound interest. It accrues today to white heirs

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of estates accumulated through slave labor. Yet the heirs of the black laborers who toiled for free have been excluded by law from their rightful inheritances. This is a present-day injustice that calls for a present-day remedy.

Tragically, slavery is not the only atrocity visited on black Americans. Racial violence, lynching, and so-called (white) race riots followed on the heels of the abolition of slavery (Craemer et al. 2023). Post-slavery de jure race discrimination produced segregation not only the Jim Crow South but also the New Deal North (Rothstein 2017). Most blacks were denied many benefits introduced during the New Deal era that lifted many whites into the middle class (Katznelson 2005).

This has had disastrous intergenerational consequences for black and white wealth: the majority of white Americans today, 73 percent, own their own homes and hand them down from generation to generation but only a minority of blacks, 44 percent, do the same (Cozzi 2023). Close to 20 percent of blacks bequeath poverty to the next generation relative to only about 10 percent of whites (Statista 2023). White Americans own 85.6 percent of all employer businesses in the United States, blacks only 2.5 percent (Cook, Shepard, and Martinez-White 2022). Twenty-four percent of white households own stocks, versus a mere 8 percent of black households (Bennett and Chien 2022)

Reparations increasingly has been positioned as a solution to these grave historical injustices. In fact, redress has been issued to many peoples around the world, including the U.S. government's compensatory payments to other Americans. Nonetheless, reparations has never been paid to black descendants of U.S. chattel slavery, and reparations for that community of Americans remains highly contested.

Debates over the suitability of reparations are not new. Yet black reparations appear to be especially contentious in the United States.

Race-based slavery only ended in the United States with a cataclysmic and bloody civil war. The depreciation of black lives has continued relentlessly since 1865, and the heated exchanges over black reparations are a function of how black people are devalued in the United States. American racism that produced the conditions that warrant black reparations is a central obstacle to the enactment and execution of a comprehensive plan for black reparations.

For definitional purposes, we adopt the concept of reparations advanced in William Darity and Kirsten Mullen's (2020, 2) study *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*, "Reparations are a program of acknowledgment, redress, and closure for a grievous injustice." Acknowledgment constitutes the admission by the culpable party or their successors of responsibility for the harms inflicted on victims or their heirs, coupled with a declared commitment to undertake redress. Redress is the act of restitution, the specific steps taken by the culpable party or their successors to provide compensation for damages to the victims or their heirs. Closure is the settling of accounts, a mutual agreement (without coercion) between the two parties that the debt has been met. Thereafter, the victimized community will make no further claims on the culpable party or their successors unless the atrocities are renewed or entirely new atrocities occur (Darity and Mullen 2020, 2–4).<sup>1</sup>

From the perspective of the specific case for reparations for black Americans whose ancestors were enslaved in the United States, the claim for redress is predicated on harms rooted in national policies from the formation of the republic to the present day. The most obvious of these is the regime of chattel slavery followed by nearly a century of legal race discrimination, or American apartheid.

After the official end of American apartheid with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the succeeding sixty years have witnessed mass

1. International law provides a definition of reparations based upon five principles: "restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition" (Medicins San Frontieres 2023). Restitution, compensation, and rehabilitation all fall under the category of redress in the Darity and Mullen definition. Satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition mesh with their condition of closure. However, international law does not include the first category in Darity and Mullen's ARC (acknowledgment, redress, and closure) formulation—acknowledgment.

incarceration, ongoing police killings of unarmed blacks, continued discrimination in housing, employment, and credit markers, and a persistent markdown on the value of black lives (Darity and Mullen 2020, 5–6).

The articles in this issue of *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* bring together the most up-to-date, rigorous social sciences, policy, and historical research on the full range of developments and issues with respect to the case for reparations for black Americans.

In this introduction, the team of editors seeks to perform two tasks simultaneously, provide a roadmap to the issues at stake for those interested readers yet to be initiated into the reparations dialogue and provide useful fresh insights for those already well versed in the conversation. Our discussion moves from the past to the present and from the global to the local.

For context, the first section of this article explores the world history of reparations efforts. The second turns to the record of movements for black reparations in the United States. The third provides a comparative examination of various plans for black American reparations. The fourth examines various approaches toward determination of eligibility standards for black reparations, the monetary amounts for black reparations, who should pay, and what form payments ought to take. The fifth and final section looks toward the future of the black American reparations movement.

### **A BRIEF GLOBAL HISTORY OF REPARATIONS**

Black people in the United States sought reparations during slavery and have been fighting for them, at least, since the Civil War. Today's activism around reparations is not a new cause. Enslaved people were the first advocates for redress. They knew from direct experience the injustices imposed on them, and they understood the toll on their physical, emotional, and familial lives. They grasped the devastating impact on their financial futures and the financial futures of their progeny. They fully recognized and understood the dichotomy between their personhood and being subjected to commodification: their humanity became a backdrop

against the monetization of the bodies and theft of their labor for the enrichment of others.

Contemporary debates on reparations can be informed by international evidence of other groups who sought and received redress for collective victimization. Apart from many cases in which defeated nations or peoples were made to pay tribute to the victors, those most relevant to the black American claim involve payments made to victims of atrocities. Those payments have been made either by the perpetrators or their successors or by a third party choosing to take responsibility for the act of compensation. One of the most noteworthy instances of this type involved Germany making payments to the victims of the Holocaust and the state of Israel.

On September 10, 1952, Israel and Germany signed a treaty (informally known as the Luxembourg Agreements) acknowledging “unspeakable criminal acts . . . perpetrated against the Jewish people during the National-Socialist régime of terror.” In Article 1 of this agreement, Germany agreed to pay 3 billion deutsche marks to Holocaust victims. They added another \$1.4 billion to living survivors at the seventieth anniversary of this agreement in September 2022. This brought Germany's “total compensation to more than 80 billion euros,” making it “the first time a defeated power paid compensation to civilians for wartime losses and suffering” (Grieshaber 2022).

Over the course of more than seventy years, not only have the direct victims who survived the Nazi's extermination plan received compensation but so have their heirs and descendants. Financial compensation to the victims also has been accompanied by resources devoted to an educational campaign to ensure that this history is recorded, taught, and never forgotten; some of the funds support Holocaust education at museums and cultural centers worldwide.

Holding Germany accountable via international treaties is just one form of restitution. Yet it appears that even countries who were not the perpetrators of genocidal acts participated in holding Germany accountable. The United States, in particular, has actively supported compensation for Holocaust survivors and also

led efforts, since World War II, to return and protect cultural relics and memorabilia.

In 2009, for example, the U.S. Department of State partnered with the prime minister of the Czech Republic and forty-four other European states and issued the Terezin Declaration on Holocaust Era Assets and Related Issues through the State Department's Office of the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues. The purpose of this act is to support and protect "advanced age" survivors of the Holocaust, to "respect their personal dignity," to "rectify the consequences of wrongful property seizures," and to "develop measures to combat anti-Semitism" (U.S. Department of State 2009).

The declaration included special measures to preserve Jewish cultural property by making sure that "appropriate materials [are] available to scholars," such as archival documents and other ephemera. The expectation to maintain these records at repositories, museums, and cultural societies was an important part of this declaration, along with the encouragement that states create "annual ceremonies of remembrance and commemoration" (U.S. Department of State 2009). American participation in the World Jewish Restitution Organization conferences clearly outline decades of support for Holocaust survivors and their heirs (WJRO 2020).

In part to reward Native Americans for their contribution to the war effort after World War II, Congress set up the Indian Claims Commission in 1946 to hear "Indian claims for any lands stolen from them since the creation of the USA in 1776" (Boxer 2009). However, actual reparations payments have been exceedingly modest. For example, according to CNN (2012), "In 2012, the United States finalized a \$3.4 billion settlement with American Indians for mismanagement of their land and resources," and according to Rebecca Hersher (2016), in 2016, "The U.S. government . . . agreed to pay a total of \$492 million to 17 American Indian tribes for mismanaging natural resources and other tribal assets."

A resolution by the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI 2019) that urges Congress to authorize reparations for American Indians and Alaska Natives acknowledges that "various efforts have been made to settle American Indian and Alaska Native claims," but ar-

gues "those efforts have been woefully inadequate." Native American reparations claims are particularly relevant to black reparations in the United States; in both cases, the historical injustices to be addressed reach back from the present to the founding of the nation.

A more recent example of federal reparations in the United States is the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. The U.S. government made \$20,000 payments to Japanese Americans who had been compelled to undergo mass incarceration during World War II (National Archives 2017). Through this act, the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice established the Office of Redress Administration, which oversaw, acknowledged, apologized for, and offered restitution for, as specified in the Civil Liberties Act, the "injustices of the evacuation, relocation and internment of Japanese Americans during World War II."

A yet more recent example of federal reparations provided by the United States is compensation to Marshall Islanders for sixty-seven U.S. nuclear bomb tests there from 1946 to 1958 (Brunnstrom and Martina 2023). According to the U.S. Department of the Interior (2007), Marshall Islands Nuclear Testing Compensation consisted of "a total of \$1.5 billion in assistance from 2004 through 2023."

Unlike the Japanese American or Marshall Islands examples, where the United States was blatantly culpable, there have been several instances where the national government paid reparations to victims when the U.S. government was not the perpetrator. These include the federal government's payments to families who lost loved ones during the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and \$4.4 million payments to each American citizen held hostage in Iran from November 4, 1979, to January 20, 1981.

Precedents such as the U.S. reparations to Japanese American World War II internees, Marshall Islands nuclear testing compensation, and many other recent programs are of limited comparability to black reparations in the United States. In each of these cases, reparations went primarily, although not exclusively, to direct victims of an atrocity. In contrast, Native American reparations are particularly germane as a precedent for black

reparations in the United States. Both cases represent injustices over long periods from the colonial era to the present.

Outside the United States, reparations have also become commonplace. For example, the South African parliament paid reparations to those who participated in the amnesty hearings sponsored by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Republic of South Africa 1995).<sup>2</sup> In an act first issued in 1993, those who suffered during apartheid or their relatives testified at public amnesty hearings. Those whose testimonies were confirmed received a (very modest) payment of US\$3,910.

Acts of mass violence committed by other government regimes including the British during the Mau Mau Rebellion (1952–1960), the Philippines under Fernando Marcos (1965–1986), and Chile under General Augusto Pinochet (1973–1990), resulted in redress measures years later. In 2013, the British government paid out £19.9 million to 5,228 Kenyan Mau Mau survivors. However, many were dissatisfied with this form of compensation and sued again in 2016, asking also for restitution for false imprisonment, forced labor, and interruption to their right to an education. In 2023, Mau Mau veterans continued lobbying for compensation and demanded substantial additional compensation. It is not clear whether these demands will be met, even in part (Miriri and Ross 2023).

However, redress in the Philippines led to somewhat different results. To “right the wrongs of the past in the Philippines,” President Benigno Aquino signed a law in 2012 to provide \$224 million in compensation to the thousands of people who suffered under the Marcos regime. This new human rights law was “the first of its kind in Asia.” Additionally, the law rolled back the Marcos martial law that had allowed for the practice of abduction of people “by government security forces.”

More than 1,600 people disappeared during Marcos’s rule (Desaparecidos, n.d.). Another thousand have vanished—presumably through government-sanctioned abductions—since the

end of Marcos’s dictatorship, signifying the need for the 2012 law to put an end to the legacy of government engineered disappearances (BBC 2012, 2013).

The Chilean government modeled its plans for redress after South Africa and established a National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation. After hearings and testimonies from more than thirty-five thousand people, two government commissions (one under Raúl Rettig and a second under Bishop Sergio Valech), reports confirmed 3,428 “cases of disappearance, killing, torture, and kidnapping.” Payments were about US\$190 per month, and victims and their relatives received “free education, housing, and health benefits” (Associated Press 2004; USIP 1990).

A number of other countries undertook acts of restitution for human rights violations including Algeria’s payments of €310 million to fifty thousand Harkis, Algerian Muslims who fought with France during the Algerian war for independence in 1962 (Al-Awsat 2022), Canada’s payment of CA\$2.8 billion to indigenous students forced to attend government funded residential schools (Canadian Press 2023), and Colombia’s payment of US\$29 billion to over 7.6 million persons who suffered via state and non-state violence during its civil war (RRVTS, n.d.). In the case of Colombia, the reparations program will likely grow substantially after the government pledged in 2023 to pay reparations to victims of exterminative violence against Patriotic Unity party members in the 1980s and 1990s (Taylor 2023).

Reparations paid to survivors of the German Holocaust, South African apartheid, or human rights abuses in Kenya, the Philippines, or Chile went to survivors relatively soon after the historical injustice had occurred. This temporal proximity between harm and attempted redress may make a reparations process appear more feasible. It should be born in mind, however, that injustices that Native Americans and black Americans suffered stretch hundreds of years into the past. Thus reparations to Native

2. The period of legal segregation in South Africa lasted nearly fifty years, from 1948 to the early 1990s. In this instance, a regime change took place with a post-apartheid government established by a new constitution that took effect in 1997. Such a change does not absolve the new regime from accounting for the damages wreaked by its predecessor.

Americans may serve as a direct precedent for black reparations.

Is it, then, that reparations for slavery lack apparent feasibility, perhaps because the numbers of victims (the enslaved Africans and their black descendants) are simply too numerous? Historical precedent suggests that this is not the case. In at least forty-four countries or territories, including the United States, reparations for slavery have been paid as a matter of course, based on the number of the enslaved. Disconcertingly, however, in virtually all cases where slavery reparations have been paid, the compensation went to the former enslavers for the loss of their property, not to the formerly enslaved.<sup>3</sup> That reparations have been forthcoming to any group of recipients except most of the black descendants of the enslaved anywhere in the world (the United States, the Caribbean, Latin America) suggests that racial considerations rather than questions of feasibility may explain the reluctance.<sup>4</sup>

The global context indicates the black American quest for redress, in principle, is neither unique nor exceptional.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BLACK REPARATIONS MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

The first claims made by blacks in the United States took the form of lawsuits and involved persons who sued for freedom, not necessarily suing for compensation (reparations) for slavery. Although some enslaved people sought

freedom, others wanted both liberty and compensation. For example, Elizabeth Freeman (Mum Bet) filed a lawsuit for freedom in 1781 and won (Jones 2021). She did not seek monetary compensation.

However, eighteenth-century evidence attests to persons suing for both. Quock Walker (Spector 1968) filed a lawsuit in 1781 seeking both freedom and financial compensation for damages. Ten years later, in 1791, Nelly Mumpherd submitted a deposition in New York City to protect her freedom after a man named Henry Hurt tried to assault her. Hurt took money and Mumpherd's freedom papers, and she knew too well the value of those papers. In defense of herself, Mumpherd brought Hurt to court. She won the case, protected her freedom, and received compensation for damages (Jones 2021).

Another black woman, this time an enslaved woman named Belinda Sutton (Royall House and Slave Quarters, n.d.) took her former enslaver Isaac Royall to court in 1783. After Royall, a British loyalist, fled to England, Sutton was left free but penniless. Decades after being brought to the United States, Sutton sued the state of Massachusetts for pensions for herself and her two children—and won (Berry and Gross 2020).

Perhaps the most successful effort to acquire personal restitution is represented by the legal case brought forward in 1870 by Henrietta Wood. Wood was a free black woman living in Ohio in 1853 when she was kidnapped by Zebu-

3. One notable exception is land provided to formerly enslaved blacks by Native American tribes who were allied with the Confederacy during the Civil War: Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Muscogees (formerly called Creeks), and Seminoles. After the war, the U.S. federal government insisted that they provide land to their freedmen and freedwomen at the very same time that same federal government denied land to its own freedmen and freedwomen (Wikipedia 2022).

4. Reparations to enslavers, not to the enslaved, were paid by Haiti, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and French Guiana (Beauvois 2017, 5); Chile (Aurora de Chile, n.d.), Argentina (Coria 1997), Gran Colombia (Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama; Colombia Aprende 2007; Free Womb Project, n.d.b; Fundacion Polar 2007; Patiño 2007), Peru (Valdez and Villamonte 2006), Costa Rica (*Tico Times* 2004), Uruguay (Presidency of Uruguay 2006), Bolivia (Free Womb Project, n.d.a), Mexico (Weltman-Cisneros 2012), Paraguay (Francois 1999, 777), Cuba, and Puerto Rico; Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Belize, Bahamas, Barbados, Saint Lucia, Grenada, St. Vincent and Grenadines, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, the Cayman Islands, Turks and Caicos, the British Virgin Islands, Anguilla, and Montserrat; Suriname, Curaçao, Aruba, Sint Marten, Caribbean Netherlands; Saint Barthélemy; the U.S. Virgin Islands; the United States, in many northern states and in Washington, D.C.; and Brazil (Beauvois 2017, 5). In none of these forty-four countries or territories have reparations ever been paid to the black enslaved or to their rightful heirs.

lon Ward, sold into slavery, and held captive by Mississippi slaveholder Gerard Brandon until after the end of the Civil War. She sued her kidnapper for damages. In 1878, eight years after she filed the suit, the case finally went to trial. An all-male, all-white jury returned a decision in Wood's favor with the largest settlement for enslavement to that date, \$2,500. Still, Woods actually had sued Ward for \$20,000 in damages, nearly ten times the amount she eventually was awarded (McDaniel 2019).

Giuliana Perrone (2024, this volume, issue 2) provides multiple examples of lawsuits involving enslaved persons who were freed through the wills of their deceased enslavers and often granted land or other assets. Nevertheless, they typically had to fight for their freedom and assets after relatives of the deceased contested the wills. Owner manumission seems to have been infrequent, and owner manumission coupled with some form of bequest even more rare. However, Perrone conceptualizes the bequests as voluntary reparations from enslavers and a deeper understanding of this form of atonement might lend support to contemporary calls for reparations.

All of these instances involve individual claims for restitution; they were not class action suits. More than two hundred years later, Deadria Farmer-Paellmann brought lawsuits against FleetBoston (now merged with Bank of America), Aetna, and New York Life for their history of complicity with slavery and slaveholding on behalf of a class of plaintiffs that included "millions of African-American slave descendants."<sup>5</sup>

Farmer-Paellman's lawsuits failed, as have all lawsuits on behalf of black American descendants of the enslaved. In rejecting these claims, judges have either invoked the principle of sovereign immunity or violation of statutes of limitations. Furthermore, when charges of complicity with slavery, including the buying and selling of human beings, are brought against private organizations or institutions, they are insulated to a degree by the fact their actions, at the time, were perfectly legal. This

is without doubt immoral but legal under the laws of the land.

The first, and most significant, class action lawsuit directed at the federal government was brought by attorney Cornelius J. Jones in 1915 on behalf of the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association of the United States of America (MRB&PA). The MRB&PA was an organization pursuing restitution for the formerly enslaved founded by Isaiah Dickerson and Callie House, the latter the most important figure in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black reparations movement.

The lawsuit sought damages in the amount of \$68 million, the value of cotton taxes collected by the U.S. government between 1862 and 1868, an amount Jones argued was due to "the appellants because the cotton had been produced by them and their ancestors as a result of their 'involuntary servitude.'"<sup>6</sup> Faced with determined and vicious opposition from the national government directed with special ferocity at House, the lawsuit failed with the Supreme Court confirming the Court of Appeals of the District of Columbia's decision to deny on grounds of sovereign immunity (Booker Perry 2010).

The judicial route never has been propitious for collective black reparations.

The first major collective claim for restitution was embodied in the unfulfilled promise of forty acres land grants allotted to the freedmen and freedwomen at the end of the Civil War. As early as 1775, Thomas Paine suggested land distribution to the formerly enslaved, perhaps over-optimistically presuming that slavery would come to an end with the formation of the new republic. History confirms that his vision for land distribution never came to fruition.

Four million enslaved black people obtained freedom in 1865 and were left to fend for themselves. Some described freedom as being turned out like cattle. Many did not know where to go or how to negotiate their labor contracts, and economic stability was essential to their success. "One of the country's earliest ef-

5. *Farmer-Paellmann v. Fleetboston Financial Corp.*, Civil Action # CV 02 1862, Class Action (E.D.N.Y. March 26, 2002).

6. *Johnson v. McAdoo*, 45 App. D.C. 440 (1916).

forts to dramatically alter blacks' economic condition" Darity and Mullen (2020, 2) explain, "was the federal government's post-Civil War plan to give at least forty acres of abandoned and confiscated land as well as a mule to each formerly enslaved family of four (or ten acres per person)."

The first phase, outlined in General William T. Sherman's Special Field Orders No. 15, allocated 5.3 million acres of land, stretching from the sea islands of South Carolina to northern Florida bordered by the St. John's River, to the freedmen and freedwomen. But only forty thousand freed people managed to take residence on four hundred thousand acres, less than 10 percent of the land specified in Sherman's order, before being forced off the land under orders of Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson (Darity and Mullen 2020, 158–59).

In 1883, on behalf of the all-black, two-thousand-member Indemnity Party he had formed, John Wayne Niles petitioned Congress for land to be distributed to the freedpeople and their descendants in the western territories. He successfully generated support from an Ohio senator, John Sherman, brother of General Sherman, to present the petition for slave reparations to the Senate, but subsequently the petition was tabled into oblivion (Darity 2021a).

Prior to the cotton tax lawsuit, Callie House (Berry 2005) brought forward a petition on behalf of her chartered MRB&PA for pensions for those who had been subjected to slavery. Her organization, founded in 1898, had a membership of three hundred thousand by 1900. Support was so strong and growing that House, seen as a threat to established interests particularly when the MRB&PA sued the federal government for \$68 million, was prosecuted on trumped-up charges of mail fraud, sending her to prison, and effectively removing her from the movement (Booker Perry 2010).

Nevertheless, the movement did not die. Many of her disciples moved into the various branches of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, founded in 1914, and continued the call for reparations for the formerly enslaved and their posterity. A charismatic and determined Garvey disciple, Queen Mother Audley Moore, brought a petition to the

United Nations in 1957 seeking land and billions of dollars from the United States government as restitution to the freedpeople and their descendants (Mullen 2022b; see also Berry 2005, 237; Blain 2019).

At the time, the petition did not succeed—nor is it apparent that the United Nations had any leverage to make the United States pay reparations, in the first place—although nearly sixty years later, the United Nations Working Group of Experts on Peoples of African Descent explicitly called for reparations for black Americans.

Despite her pan-Africanist orientation, Moore's focus for reparations was directed at the U.S. government's obligation specifically to those black Americans whose ancestors were enslaved in the United States. Hence, in 1963, she formed the Committee for Reparations for Descendants of U.S. Slaves. This effort evolved into the founding in 1968 of the Republic of New Afrika, an organization calling for the formation of a separate nation out of five states of the old Confederacy, peopled and controlled by black Americans (Blain 2019).

In 1969, James Forman seized the podium at New York City's Riverside Church to issue the Black Manifesto, which called for white churches and synagogues to pay "\$500 million . . . for the crimes religious institutions had visited upon black Americans in the United States" (Darity and Mullen 2020, 14; Riverside Church, n.d.; Berry 2005, 239). Ultimately, donations of \$500,000 were forthcoming, only 0.1 percent of the total demanded. The funds were used to create several institutions, including Black Star Publications and the Black Economic Research Center, that have not survived.

The U.S. payments of restitution to Japanese Americans subjected to imprisonment during World War II was preceded by a report with recommendations from the congressionally mandated Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. After passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, Rep. John Conyers (D-Michigan), with persistent pressure from Detroit-based activist "Reparations Ray" Jenkins, introduced legislation, soon to be labeled H.R. 40 as a nod to the unfulfilled promise of forty acres land grants, to create a similar com-

mission to address the matter of black reparations.

Over the next thirty years, the bill's text was repeatedly modified by the leadership of two allied organizations, the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA) and the National African American Reparations Commission (NAARC).<sup>7</sup> Curiously, the bill does not provide for any reparations to descendants of people enslaved in the United States. It only calls for the formation of a commission to investigate reparations, despite the fact that reparations have been studied at length in the extant literature since the bill was first introduced (see, among others, America 1990; Darity 2008; Craemer 2015).

Both organizations, avowedly pan-African, departed from Queen Mother Audley Moore's particular emphasis on U.S. reparations going to black American descendants of U.S. slavery, instead seeking a more global, diasporic reach for compensation coming from the U.S. government.

In addition to lobbying for passage of H.R. 40 on the federal level, the reparations movement is presently devoting great attention to redress projects at the state and local levels. At the state level, California's Reparations Task Force (2023) completed the second segment of its two-part report in June 2023. The state of Illinois now has activated an African Descent-Citizens Reparations Commission, and New York's State Assembly has passed legislation establishing its own commission. These are three states out of fifty, none of them located in the southeastern part of the nation.

A spiraling wave of cities and towns is now taking steps toward reparations. However, the total number of municipalities and townships on this path still is less than 150, a mere 0.1 percent of approximately 20,000 incorporated cities, towns, and villages across the country. In this volume, Olivia Reneau (2024, issue 3) de-

tails the nineteen municipalities that have passed reparations resolutions as of March 2023. Using a mixed-method analysis, Reneau codes the text of each municipality's resolution to pull out themes around sources of injustice and evidence of disparity and then combines the coded data with quantitative data about the municipalities to uncover patterns in the types of reparations programs different municipalities support.

Also in this volume, Monique Newton and Matthew Nelsen (2024, issue 3) provide a case study of the Evanston, Illinois, reparations program. Implemented in 2021, Evanston began providing housing grants of \$25,000 for black residents (up to a total of \$10 million) as redress for past discriminatory housing policies. They explore in depth the tensions and conundrums that have arisen with this local initiative.

Prior to the recent surge in local reparations initiatives, there were three occasions of state level restitution for antiblack atrocities, the Rosewood, Florida, massacre of 1923, the closing of public schools in Prince Edward County, Virginia, from 1959 to 1964 to avoid desegregation, and police torture in Chicago in the 1970s and 1990s.

Indeed, in the case of the Florida legislature awarding payments to victims of the 1923 Rosewood massacre, the lawmakers consciously avoided using the term reparations. They agreed "to award direct cash payments to nine survivors of the event. Descendants of those survivors also received money, in the form of small cash sums and college scholarships" (Luckerson 2020). The Rosewood massacre apparently is the only one of upward of one hundred mass killings of blacks by white mobs between the Civil War and the 1950s for which any form of restitution has been made to the victims or their descendants.

After being ordered to desegregate on May

7. In an opinion piece for Bloomberg, Kirsten Mullen (2022a) details both the structural and substantive weaknesses in H.R. 40, arguing that it will not lead to a true reparations program for black American descendants of U.S. slavery. Going through multiple revisions over the years, largely under the influence of NAARC and N'COBRA, H.R. 40 originally specified seven commissioners but now specifies fifteen, six of whom "shall be selected from the major civil society and reparations organizations that have historically championed the cause of reparatory justice." Effectively, NAARC and N'COBRA seem to have written themselves into the bill to ensure their representation on the commission.

1, 1959, the school board in Prince Edward County, Virginia, chose to close public schools entirely; they were not reopened until 1964. White students were given a lifeline to private all-white academies via county tax credits and state vouchers. Large numbers of black students had to discontinue their education altogether (VMHC 2023). In 2005, the Virginia General Assembly finally established a reparations plan for the black students who were denied access to schooling:

Combining private donations from billionaire John Kluge with state funds, scholarships were offered to the victims of the shuttered school system to enable them to pursue higher education at this much later date. No compensation was offered for past years of lost schooling. Nor was compensation offered to offset the impact of the lost schooling on the affected students' long-term prospects for employment and earnings. (Darity and Mullen 2020, 21)

Given that the beneficiaries of this plan were in their fifties, sixties, and even seventies, by 2005, very few were able to take advantage of the scholarships for study at state-supported institutions of higher education or vocational training.

For almost two decades between the 1970s and 1990s, Chicago officers under the leadership of Commander Jon Burge tortured 125 persons to extract confessions, many of whom were not guilty of any crime. In 2015, the city of Chicago committed to a "\$5.5 million reparations package that included a formal apology from former Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, financial compensation to survivors and their families, waived tuition to City Colleges, a mandatory Chicago Public Schools curriculum to educate students about police torture under Burge, and the creation of a permanent, public memorial" (Jaffe 2020).

The only component of the reparations package that remains unmet is the erection of the memorial. Critics of the plan have argued that it is incomplete because it was not only police under Burge's authority who engaged in torture practices in Chicago. Elizabeth Davies, Jenn Jackson, and David Knight (2024, this vol-

ume, issue 3) take a deeper dive into the Chicago reparations initiative through interviews with local advocates as well as reparations recipients.

The notorious Tuskegee syphilis experiment provides an example of court-recognized reparations. The intentional failure to inform the black men infected with syphilis of their illness and the intentional failure to provide them with treatment, even after effective drugs became available, provided a rationale for reparations persuasive to the courts.

In 1974, the NAACP filed a class action suit on behalf of the subjects of the horrific experiment, who had not been given the opportunity to extend informed consent. The favorable decision resulted in a \$10 million settlement from the federal government given that the U.S. Public Health Service had conducted the experiment (Edwards, Berdie, and Welburn 2024).

In this volume, Linda Bilmes and Cornell Brooks (2024, issue 2) highlight, through a taxonomy of atrocity and redress, the vast number of times the U.S. federal government has compensated individuals for harms across multiple realms, such as environmental damages and vaccine injuries. They argue that this pattern of compensation should normalize reparations, setting precedents that should ease the path for reparations for black Americans.

## REVIEW OF PLANS FOR BLACK REPARATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

In this section, we consider major plans put forward thus far to conduct black reparations in the United States. Among the many proposals for black reparations over the decades, we identify four that have been developed as relatively detailed and concrete. Any substantive plan must address at least four considerations: Who should be eligible to receive black reparations? How much is owed to the eligible recipients? How should compensation be made? Who is responsible for making compensation?

In the current volume, Kathryn Edwards, Lisa Berdie, and Jonathan Welburn (2024, issue 2) set the stage for this discussion by presenting case studies of past reparations policies that have succeeded yet fail to offer important insights into what features should be included in a reparations policy. A key takeaway from

their study is that reparations should have a redress and atonement component to shift the power dynamics between perpetrator and victim. A second takeaway is that the design of the program should be victim led. Finally, the policy should be a “living” policy, open to adjustment and reevaluation as time goes on. In light of these lessons, we review four major reparations plans.

The four major plans we review are tRoy Brooks’s (2004) atonement model, the National African American Reparations Commission’s Preliminary 10-Point Program (NAARC 2015), William Darity and Kirsten Mullen’s (2020) federal program of black reparations, and the California Reparation Task Force’s (2023) proposals. The discussion of the plans is organized under separate subheadings discussing their differing specific goals, conceptualizations of providers, eligibility standards, modalities, administration of funds, and estimated per-recipient amounts (see table 1).

### Program Goals

According to Roy Brooks (2004), the primary goal of a reparations plan (see table 1, row 1), is “atonement from the perpetrator” (140), that is, a formal apology and some form of compensatory action “because they make apologies believable” (142). In his view, “Racial reconciliation should be the primary purpose of slave redress” (141), not necessarily a “preoccupation with compensation” for the victimized side (142).

Brooks (2004, 143) says that once a formal apology and compensation have been rendered, the victimized side may have a civic obligation to forgive. Thus the Brooks model can be characterized as primarily perpetrator focused. In contrast, the other three models focus primarily on redress for, and the well-being of the victimized side and would likely be characterized as instantiations of what Brooks crit-

icizes as the “tort model.” Brooks is critical of the tort model because in his view it is “incapable of generating the one ingredient that I believe is or should be the sine qua non of slave redress—namely atonement, and ultimately, racial reconciliation” (98–99).

In contrast to the focus on the perpetrator side, the other plans center on the victimized side. For example, the primary goal of the NAARC’s Preliminary 10-Point Plan (2015, 1) is to “repair and heal the damages done to Native people and Africans” in the United States. Darity and Mullen’s (2020, 263) plan seeks to close the national average per capita black-white wealth gap because they view the racial wealth gap “as the most robust indicator of the cumulative economic effects of white supremacy in the United States.”

The 2023 California Reparations Task Force (CRTF) plan attempts to achieve a similar victim-centered goal at the state level. However, although the wealth gap works well as an aggregate indicator of black losses on the federal level, a specific state’s racial wealth gap may be influenced by other factors. Hence, the CRTF tasked an expert team—which included Kaycea Campbell, Thomas Craemer, William Darity Jr., Kirsten Mullen, and the late William Spriggs—to estimate some losses due to specific racial injustices for which the State of California was partially or directly responsible, which then can be added up, depending on an eligible recipient’s length of residence in California.

### Proposed Reparations Providers

All four plans agree that some level of government should be the reparations provider rather than exclusively private individuals or organizations (table 1, row 2). Three plans view the federal government as responsible because it allowed slavery to exist prior to the end of the Civil War. Only the CRTF’s (2023) plan treats a state government as the responsible provider.<sup>8</sup>

8. Although NAARC’s 10-Point Plan is predicated on the federal government as the payer, NAARC’s leadership has been an aggressive supporter of the local reparations movement (NAARC 2021). In contrast, Darity and Mullen (2023) say that “this range of initiatives that are being undertaken in a number of municipalities and in a handful of states are intrinsically *incomplete, inconsistent, and inequitable*. By incomplete, we mean that these policies are practices being undertaken by cities and states that are labeled as reparations intrinsically cannot fulfill the amount that is due. The federal government does have the capacity to meet a bill of \$14.3 trillion. We think that’s fully evident as a consequence of what occurred in response to the Great Recession, as well as what

**Table 1.** Four Proposed Black Reparations Plans Compared

	Brooks (2004)	NAARC (2015)	Darity and Mullen (2020)	CRTF (2023)
Primary goal	Atonement of perpetrators and racial reconciliation; benefit all Americans, not just black Americans	Repair and heal the damages done to all descendants of Africans in the United States	Close black-white average per capita wealth gap in the United States	Compensate victims of slavery and discrimination in California for some specific losses due to state action
Proposed providers	U.S. federal government	U.S. federal government	U.S. federal government	California state government
Proposed recipients	Black American children newborn within approximately ten years	All people of African descent in the United States	Descendants of at least one person enslaved in the United States who have self-identified as black (or synonymous) at least twelve years before the enactment of a reparations plan or a study commission for reparations	Californians who are African American descendants of a chattel enslaved person, or descendants of a free black person living in the United States prior to the end of the nineteenth century
Proposed modalities	Formal apology, museum of slavery and twenty-five-year atonement, trust fund for every newborn black American child born within approximately ten years.	Formal apology, black Holocaust Institute, repatriation rights, land, cooperative enterprises, health resources, education funds, affordable housing, funding for black media, black memorials, criminal justice reform	Must include direct payment of cash or its equivalent to eligible recipients but could also include trust funds and annuities	Payment of cash or its equivalent to eligible recipients

Administration	Reputable trust administrators selected by prominent black Americans	National Reparations Trust Authority of "credible" representatives of community organizations	Eligible recipients (monetary payments) coupled with a supervisory board elected by eligible recipients (trust funds)	State Freedman's Affairs Agency to make direct payments and aid with proof of eligibility
Preliminary per-recipient estimates in 2020 dollars	\$69,647	Not specified	\$357,000	\$13,619 per year of California residence for health discrimination; \$2,352 per year of California residence between 1971 and 2020 for overpolicing during the war on drugs; \$145,847 for housing discrimination; \$77,000 for business devaluation, more as further evidence surfaces

Source: Authors' tabulation.

Although California entered the United States as a so-called free state, it did tolerate the practice of slavery in the state by Southern immigrant enslavers, and it was actively complicit in various forms of post-slavery de jure racial discrimination.

### Eligibility Standards

The plans differ in terms of whom they deem eligible for black reparations (see table 1, row 3). Brooks (2004) conceptually equates the demographic category of black Americans with descendants of enslaved people. This leaves the door open for blacks descended from people enslaved elsewhere to demand reparations from the U.S. government. Furthermore, without providing an independent standard for determination of who is black, exclusive reliance on a standard linking a current claimant to an enslaved ancestor also leaves the door open for persons living as white today to make a claim.

The NAARC (2015) plan extends this definition to all people of African descent, including immigrants who voluntarily entered the United States after African immigration was legalized in 1965.<sup>9</sup> Again, presumably, persons living as white in the present who can document African ancestry also would be eligible, further distancing the eligibility standard from a specific community of eligibility consisting of black Ameri-

cans whose ancestors were enslaved in the United States.

Because the Immigration Act of 1965 gave priority to professionals and other individuals with specialized skills, it selectively enabled Africans of elevated socioeconomic status to immigrate to the United States. Among these may be, at least theoretically, some descendants of the African slave traders who sold the ancestors of many black Americans into New World slavery.

Ruling out these possibilities, the Darity and Mullen (Darity and Frank 2003, 327; Darity and Mullen 2020, 258) plan sets two eligibility criteria, a lineage standard and an identity standard. The lineage standard has it an individual must establish they have at least one ancestor who was enslaved in the United States of America.

The identity standard states that an individual must establish that they self-identified on an official document as black, Negro, African American, or Afro American for twelve years before the enactment of a reparations plan or a commission to study reparations. In sum, on these criteria, eligible recipients for reparations will be black Americans whose ancestors were enslaved in the United States. The second condition rules out people abruptly adopting a black identity simply to gain reparations' benefits.<sup>10</sup>

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occurred in response to the pandemic. The federal government amassed significant amounts of funds for expenditure purposes to deal with each of those crises without having any significant change in the level of taxes that people were incurring. So the federal government can do it, but states and localities cannot. Their total combined budgets at the present moment come to something less than \$5 trillion. [One] bill that we've outlined is at least \$14.3 trillion. So that's the incompleteness dimension. The inconsistency arises because these various state and local initiatives are uncoordinated, and they are not interwoven [n]or integrated with one another. . . . there's not a necessary degree of compatibility between them. And then finally, they're inequitable because they are not uniform. . . . eligible recipients in different communities are going to receive different types of restitution. If we indeed want to call it that. . . in fact, we would argue that these local and state initiatives are something that could have value from the standpoint of reducing the impact of the various harms that have taken place. But they do not have the capacity to essentially provide adequate compensation for the magnitude of the range of harms that have been inflicted on the victimized community" (emphasis added).

9. Even more extreme, philosopher Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò (2022) wants to absorb the black American claim for reparations into a global claim for diasporic justice for peoples of African descent for colonialism, linked to the unevenly distributed hazards of climate change.

10. On May 17, 2023, Rep. Cori Bush (D-Mo.) introduced a congressional resolution, the Reparations Now Resolution, shares similar problems (U.S. Congress 2023). Her resolution's eligibility criteria reads, "the Federal Government must compensate descendants of enslaved Black people and people of African descent." Presum-

Darity and Mullen (2020) urge a focus on black American descendants of U.S. slavery because, they argue, this is the community exposed to the long history of atrocities executed or sanctioned by the U.S. government that produced current disparities in health, wealth, employment, political participation, and treatment from the criminal justice system. They contend that this is the community whose ancestors were promised and denied forty acres land grants with intergenerational ramifications creating a debt still unpaid. This is the community that suffered the indignity and terror of legal segregation in the United States.

Furthermore, fewer than 1 percent of the U.S. black population voluntarily migrated here prior to the passage of the civil rights legislation of the 1960s (Berlin 2010). Substantial post-slavery black in-migration to the United States only took place after the 1970s. It is important that the more recent additions to the nation's black population came voluntarily to a nation with a long history of racism, unlike the ancestors of black Americans, who came in chains.

The CRTF's deliberations suggest the eligibility standard they established was intended to prioritize California descendants of American chattel slavery but also the descendants of a smaller group of free blacks prior to the abolition of slavery. The exact CRTF (2023, 1) definition is "African American Descendants of a Chattel Enslaved Person, or Descendants of a Free Black Person Living in the United States Prior to the End of the 19th Century."<sup>11</sup> Without a precise designation of who is African American, the CRTF criteria also open the eligibility window to persons currently living as white.<sup>12</sup>

### Reparations Modalities

In terms of proposed reparations modalities (see table 1, row 4), Brooks's (2004, 157) plan calls for "a museum of slavery and an atonement trust fund." The atonement trust fund would benefit "every newborn black American child born within a certain period of time—five, ten, or more years" (Brooks 2004, 159). This means that not all blacks or descendants of a person enslaved in the United States would receive reparations but only some young members of that category. Presumably, this would keep costs relatively low for the federal government as reparations provider.

NAARC's (2015) plan also contains elements that are free or relatively low cost, such as "a formal apology," the establishment of a "MAAFA/African Holocaust Institute," for those who wish it "a right to return to the motherland to an African nation of their choice," an "African Knowledge Program" funds for black monuments, and criminal justice reform. Other elements of the plan potentially are costly, such as "substantial tracts of . . . public land," "resources to support major Cooperative Enterprises," "Black controlled Health and Wellness Centers, fully equipped with highly qualified personnel," education funds, funding for historically black colleges and universities and free tuition for students attending them, affordable housing, as well as funds for black public media.

The Darity and Mullen (2020) plan emphasizes the importance of a direct monetary component. They state, "While a personal check or its equivalent need not be the only form in which the program makes payments, both the symbolism and the autonomy it conveys will be

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ably persons living as white today who could establish they have an enslaved ancestor or African ancestry would be eligible for reparations. In addition, this standard would include persons who have ancestors enslaved in any part of the world.

11. The presence of the word *or* following a comma produces ambiguity whether the phrase "Living in the United States Prior to the End of the 19th century" applies to "African American Descendants of a Chattel Enslaved Person." If it is not interpreted as applying, then the CRTF's criteria for eligibility can include a person whose ancestors were enslaved somewhere other than the United States.

12. Further complicating matters with respect to the use of *African American* without definition is that the term was not used in the laws establishing legal discrimination in the United States. For example, segregation ordinances referred to separation between "whites" and "negros" or "coloreds," with the latter two terms used interchangeably (see Benson 1915; PBS Learning Media for Teachers 2023).

a key dimension of a black reparations program” (265). The ancestors of many black Americans were deprived of their autonomy throughout the periods of both slavery and post-slavery discrimination.

Direct monetary payments would restore that autonomy to their descendants, albeit not necessarily in the form of a cash transfer. Darity and Mullen’s (2020) plan also considers less liquid forms of money transfer than cash—transfers having more of an asset character than a sheer income supplement, such as trust funds, annuities, or other types of endowments for all eligible recipients. The key for them is the eligible recipients must have full discretion over the use of the funds.

In contrast, the CRTF (2023, 4) plan states simply, “Ultimately, the Task Force recommends that any reparations program include the payment of cash or its equivalent.”

### Reparations Administration

In terms of administration (see table 1, row 4), Brooks’s (2004) proposed trust funds, would be managed by “reputable trust administrators selected by prominent black Americans” (159), and “help fund recipients make the right choices in schools and business opportunities” (161). This restriction smacks of paternalism and may be motivated by an internalized acceptance of ancient antiblack stereotypes.

In his expert testimony to the California Reparations Task Force (California Department of Justice 2021, 8:39–9:14 min), Brooks stated on September 23, 2021, “I am not in favor of compensatory reparations because . . . the individual can take that and go to Las Vegas to gamble it away. And that gives evidence to Chris Rock’s famous quip that the only one who is going to benefit from reparations is Kentucky Fried Chicken.”

Apart from denying the right of the individual recipient to do with the funds as they see fit—in other cases of reparations for members of victimized communities no restrictions have been placed on their use of the funds—no evidence supports the view that black Americans are any more frivolous with their monetary resources than any other group. In fact, the best evidence available reveals, if anything black Americans are less profligate with their money

than white Americans, saving as much, if not more, than their white counterparts (Darity et al. 2018).

Although not explicitly repeated by NAARC (2015), similar stereotype-based considerations may motivate that plan’s insertion of multiple levels of administrative bureaucracy between the federal government as provider and eligible recipients of African descent in the United States. First would be the establishment of a “National Reparations Trust Authority . . . comprised of a cross-section of credible representatives of reparations, civil rights, human rights, labor, faith, educational, civic and fraternal organizations and institutions” (NAARC 2015, 2). Further, an unelected “Boards of Trustees” would manage Cooperative Enterprises (5); there would be an “African American Housing and Finance Authority” (6); media funds would be “administered by the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA) and National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters (NA-BOB)” (7); the National Parks Service would receive funds for monuments (7), and a newly founded “Black controlled Agency for Returning Citizens” would organize the process by which released prisoners would be reintegrated into society as part of criminal justice reform.

No election by eligible recipients to administrative roles is envisioned in NAARC’s (2015) plan. In contrast, the Darity and Mullen (2020, 267) plan holds that “A twelve-member reparations supervisory board will be established, *elected by all those with established eligibility for the reparations program*” (emphasis in the original). The CRTF (2023, 2) envisions that the legislature charge a “recommended California American Freedman Affairs Agency . . . with processing . . . claims and rendering payment in an efficient and timely manner.”

A related theme that emerges from the research of Newton and Nelsen (2024) and Davies, Jackson, and Knight (2024) is the importance of involving the victimized party early in the design and conceptualization of a redress program. In Chicago, early incorporation of victims’ voices helped shape the reparations policy to have direct benefits for the victimized parties, whereas the process in Evanston may have been coopted by elites in a way that left the ultimate reparations policy narrowly ap-

plied to housing and fiscally unattainable for Evanston's most economically vulnerable black families.

### How Much Is Owed?

Variance is also quite considerable in proposed amounts or in whether any estimates are provided at all (see table 1, row 6). Brooks (2004, 163) writes, "Under the capitalization approach, it would take \$50,000 of investment capital [in 2004 dollars] per eligible worker" to close the black-white earnings gap. This would represent roughly \$69,647 per eligible recipient in 2020 dollars (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). The NAARC (2015) proposal names no estimates; the Darity and Mullen (Darity, Mullen, and Slaughter 2022) plan estimates that \$350,000 per eligible black descendant of a person enslaved in the United States will eliminate the black-white wealth gap.<sup>13</sup>

The CRTF's (2023) amount is more difficult to assess given that it may differ from one eligible recipient to the next based on length of residence in California. For example, \$13,619 would be due per year of residence in California for health discrimination and \$2,352 per year of residence in California between 1971 and 2020 for overpolicing during the so-called war on drugs. A lump sum of \$145,847 would be due for housing discrimination and another of \$77,000 for business devaluation. Thus, for an eligible recipient forty-nine years of age in 2020, this would be \$667,331 for health discrimination plus \$115,248 for overpolicing plus \$145,847 for housing discrimination plus \$77,000 for business devaluation, roughly equivalent to \$1 million. None of the four plans has yet been considered by an actual elected body, but the CRTF (2023) plan is approaching this test with the California State Assembly perhaps as early as 2024.

Based on the comparison of the four plans, a joint plan may be envisioned as follows: with victim-centered rather than perpetrator-focused goals—only Brooks's (2004) plan centering on the perpetrating side; with the federal government as the main reparations provider—only the CRTF (2023) plan being state

level; with eligibility criteria derived from a combination of Darity and Mullen's (2020) plan and the CRTF's plan, specifically, black descendants of persons enslaved in the United States or black descendants of free black persons living under permanent threat of enslavement in the United States prior to the abolition of slavery in 1865.

The modalities also could combine Darity and Mullen's (2020) and the CRTF's (2023) recommendations: a meaningful monetary component over which the recipients would have exclusive decision-making power. In terms of fund administration, the CRTF's recommended Freedmen's and Freedwomen's Bureau could be reestablished with the leadership elected by all eligible adult reparations recipients, as Darity and Mullen's plan holds. Finally, in terms of the amounts, closing the current black-white wealth gap might be a minimum demand and represent a meaningful downpayment. As the CRTF's calculations demonstrate, adding losses from individual atrocities can exceed that amount because not every black loss was mirrored by white gain. For example, pain and suffering from generations of enslavement, race discrimination, and intergenerational poverty had no corresponding white gain and therefore are not fully captured by the wealth gap. Further, in the presence of racial discrimination, black Americans are likely to have worked harder to achieve the same level of success as comparable white Americans. Any additional, compensatory black effort would have reduced the observed wealth gap below its full discriminatory level.

### LOSSES TO BLACK AMERICANS FROM U.S. SLAVERY AND THE RACIAL WEALTH GAP

To complicate matters, some estimates of black losses due to slavery in the United States alone (1776–1865) exceed the racial wealth gap. The most recent Survey of Consumer Finances for 2022 (Aladangady et al. 2023) indicates the average black-white family wealth gap is \$1.15 million. Given an average black family size of 3.4 persons and an average white household size

13. The \$350,000 estimate is based on data from the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF) (Darity 2021b). As we demonstrate, the estimate based on the 2022 SCF is more than \$40,000 higher.

of three persons, the average per capita wealth gap by race amounts to \$393,519.

Three main estimation methods have been proposed to estimate losses due to U.S. slavery alone, the price-based method (Ransom and Sutch 1990; Neal 1990; Marketti 1990), the wage-based method (Craemer 2015; Craemer et al. 2023), and the land-based method (Darity 2008; Darity and Mullen 2020). They are cautious measures because they ignore colonial slavery from 1517, when the Spanish Crown authorized the importation of enslaved Africans to what is today Puerto Rico (Asiegbu 2020), to 1775, the year before the United States declared independence from Great Britain.

The price-based method was developed in the 1990s and documented in the groundbreaking volume edited by Richard America, *The Wealth of Races* (Ransom and Sutch 1990; Neal 1990; Marketti 1990). This approach treats the price of an enslaved person as the market signal of how much an enslaver expected to gain from owning that person. However, because the market price was established through negotiations between the seller and the buyer of human property and did not reflect the views of the enslaved, this price is likely to reflect the value of slavery only to the enslaver, not to the enslaved (Berry 2017).

Price-based estimates range from \$17.4 billion (Ransom and Sutch 1990) to \$1.4 trillion (Neal 1990), up to \$4.7 trillion (Marketti 1990), all in 1983 dollars. Further compounded at 6 percent interest, this would represent \$141.8 billion, \$11.4 trillion, and \$38.3 trillion in 2019 dollars respectively. Divided by forty-one million black descendants of the enslaved in the United States (Tamir 2022), this would amount to \$3,458 (Ransom and Sutch 1990), \$278,199 (Neal 1990), and \$933,953 (Marketti 1990) per eligible recipient in 2019 dollars.

The wage-based estimation method (Craemer 2015; Craemer et al. 2023) uses U.S. Census (1975) records about the enslaved population measured every ten years from 1790 to 1860, and historical free-labor-market hourly wages from 1790 (\$0.02) to 1860 (\$0.08) provided by Lawrence Officer and Samuel Williamson (2019). It uses this information to estimate the enslaved population in each year from 1776 to 1860 and computes the number of hours per

year that were available to enslavers by multiplying the annual slave population by twenty-four hours a day and 365 days a year.

This amount is then multiplied by the tiny hourly wage rate in each year and compounded by either 3 percent interest (not making up for inflation) or 6 percent interest (the interest rate specified in the sales contract of Georgetown University when it sold 272 enslaved in 1838 to save the university from financial ruin). The resulting totals are at 3 percent interest \$19.1 trillion in 2019 dollars, and at 6 percent interest \$6.6 quadrillion. The corresponding per recipient payments would be \$465,854 or \$161 million in 2019 dollars respectively. This computational example illustrates the central role the interest rate plays in estimating losses over such long periods.

Alternatively, loss of freedom due to slavery in the United States can be calculated based on the reparations Japanese American World War II internees received in 1988. The Civil Liberties Act of 1988 provided each surviving ex-internee \$20,000 per person and an apology letter from the U.S. president (National Archives 2017). Internment lasted for three years, from 1942 to 1945, and did not involve slave labor. Hence reparations compensated for lost freedom implicitly was a rate of about \$0.76 per hour in 1988 dollars.

The purchasing-power equivalent of that amount can be derived using Morgan Friedman's (2019) inflation calculator, and the total hours available to enslavers can be multiplied by the hourly compensation for lost freedom. At only 3 percent interest, this would yield \$35.8 trillion in 2019 dollars, and at 6 percent a staggering \$17.4 quadrillion. This would work out at 3 percent interest to \$874,139 per person and at 6 percent to \$424 million per person for black Americans. What would still be missing is compensation for lost opportunities to accumulate capital, as well as pain and suffering (Swinton 1990).

The land-based estimation method calculates the current value of the forty acres (and a mule) promised to the freedmen and freedwomen. Land as restitution was the basis for Sojourner Truth's demand for land redistribution (Araujo 2019). Businessman Dempsey Travis developed the proposal for a new Home-

stead Act in 1970 as a form of reparations based on the current land value of forty forty-acre plots (Allen 1998).

Darity (2008, 662) writes, “The unfulfilled promise of 40 acres per family . . . provides a means to gauge the magnitude of reparations owed to the descendants of those enslaved.” He estimates the price of land in 1865 at about \$10 per acre (Mittal and Powell 2000) and notes that “an allocation of 40 acres to a family of four would imply 10 acres per person, hence a value of \$100 per ex-slave in 1865.”

If we also take the total number of formerly enslaved persons who were emancipated at the close of the Civil War at four million persons, forty million acres of land valued at \$400 million should have been distributed to them in 1865. Compounding this sum from 1865 at 6 percent interest to 2019 results in \$3.156 trillion in 2019 dollars. However, white settler families were promised and given four times the amount, 160 acres, by the Homestead Act of 1862.<sup>14</sup> Thus the raw estimate must be increased by a factor of four to \$12.6 trillion with outlays of \$307,921 for each of the estimated forty-one million eligible recipients (Tamir 2022).

However, missing from the ledger would be a host of post-slavery atrocities that could be put on the register as well: the costs in lives and property of the one hundred white terrorist massacres, black excess mortality due to disparities in the healthfulness of living conditions, discrimination in homeownership access and home equity, differential access to quality medical care, employment discrimination, unequal education, and the sheer indignity of segregation.

Laws and policies, ostensibly in place for the general social benefit, have been mobilized for one-sided gains for white Americans. Eminent domain and predatory tax laws have been used widely to expropriate black property and transfer it to white ownership and profit, particularly high-value coastal properties (Kahrl 2016, 2024).

Contract selling schemes produced by the denial of adequate credit to potential black homeowners under redlining conditions served as a mechanism for extraction of black income by white real estate brokers. More often than not, the brokers ultimately retained ownership of the properties and could resell them for another round of exploitation (Satter 2010; Coates 2014). In the aftermath of official redlining, the federal government’s program of guaranteed mortgage support in urban areas under the auspices of the Department of Housing and Urban Development was manipulated to produce sweeping numbers of foreclosures in black communities (Taylor 2019).

Related to recent federally funded and sanctioned discrimination against black Americans, Ann Pfau and her colleagues (2024, this volume, issue 2) embark on an ambitious archives-based analysis of the financial harms suffered by tenants and property owners displaced by local government agencies in the process of implementing urban renewal programs. These harms include inadequate reimbursement payments, lost business and rental income, and higher post-relocation housing costs. In the case of homeowners who became tenants, the authors estimate the present-day market values of individual properties and compare those estimates with the compensation received by displaced occupants. Their project is a roadmap for other communities looking to document and remedy the damages caused by urban renewal.

One difficulty with the enumeration and adding up strategy is the lack of sufficient data to provide a comprehensive calculation for each category (Darity, Mullen, and Slaughter 2022), particularly for loss of life and property during the course of mass killings and violent destruction of black communities. A second difficulty is the question of whether living descendants merit compensation for atrocities they did not experience directly, particularly the atrocity of slavery.

14. Keri Merritt (2016) reports that 1.6 million white families received 160 acres land patents under the Homestead Act of 1862, approximately 10 to 12 percent of the U.S. white population by the first two decades of the twentieth century. In contrast, little more than ten thousand black people received land patents under the short-lived Southern Homestead Act 1866 and the original Homestead Act, less than 1 percent of the four million persons emancipated at the end of the Civil War.

It is justifiable for living descendants to receive compensation for the intergenerational impact on their lives of the brutality imposed on their ancestors. Still, the current value of land not received by the freedmen and freedwomen does not encompass the full range of factors generating the contemporary racial wealth gap. Instead, one can go directly to the current disparity itself to compute the size of a reparations bill.

Distributed to every living black American descendant of an enslaved person in the United States, this amount should suffice to eliminate the intergenerational wealth effects of past atrocities, including the long-term effects of U.S. slavery. If roughly 85 percent of the nation's black population of approximately forty-seven million persons consists of individuals who have at least one ancestor who was enslaved in the United States (Tamir 2022), an estimated forty-one million black Americans would be due about \$16.1 trillion.

Elizabeth Wrigley-Field (2024, this volume, issue 2) argues that the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow was not just lost income and wealth, but also lost time in the form of decreased life expectancies for black Americans. She empirically estimates the relationship between lifespan and measures of slavery and Jim Crow intensity for black Americans and argues that any reparations program should account for differences in lifespan between black and white Americans.

Wrigley-Field's (2024) focus on the racial longevity gap provides an intriguing alternative to the racial wealth gap as a summary measure for computation of the size of the reparations bill. A rough and ready approach to estimation of the amount due for reparations using her concept follows: conservatively, use as a benchmark \$10 million as the value of a statistical life.<sup>15</sup>

If the average black lifespan is seventy-one years, then the average value of a black year of life will be \$140,845. If white longevity runs seventy-six years, the comparative loss in black longevity is five years. Five years multiplied by \$140,845 yields a payout per eligible black recipient of \$704,255. With an estimated forty-

one million black American descendants of persons enslaved in the United States, the total bill will come to about \$29 trillion.

Using closing the black-white wealth gap as the goal post, Asher Dvir-Djerassi (2024, this volume, issue 3) uses counterfactual historic simulations to evaluate the ability of race-neutral baby bonds—wealth endowments bestowed at birth and financed through a progressive wealth tax—to close the wealth gap over time. Although race-neutral policies are by definition not reparations, they may be more politically feasible to enact and, therefore, important to study.

Dvir-Djerassi's simulations demonstrate that race-neutral baby bonds cannot close the mean racial wealth gap over a reasonable time scale. They can, however, virtually close the median racial wealth gap if the wealth endowment is at least \$50,000 for the lowest-wealth children and graduated downward at lower endowment amounts for higher wealth families.

However, Darity and Mullen (2021) argue that elimination of the mean racial wealth gap should be the target for any reparations program to properly embody the intergenerational legacy of past atrocities against black Americans. As Dvir-Dejrassi (2024) demonstrates, baby bonds would have to be redesigned to target equalization of wealth at the national mean to close the wealth gap under race-neutral arrangements.

## HOW TO PAY THE DEBT

Who should be responsible for paying the debt? Darity and Mullen (2022) argue that only the federal government has the capacity to meet the task.

A suitable plan for reparations should have a payment scheme that is sufficient, at least, to eliminate the black-white disparity in wealth, minimize the inflation effect, and minimize any new immediate or deferred tax burden. That combination of objectives can only be achieved by the federal government, particularly because as sovereign currency issuer only the federal government can spend huge sums of money without being constrained by tax rev-

15. This figure is actually very conservative (see Consumer Product Safety Commission 2023).

enue—unlike states and localities. The barrier to additional federal spending is the inflation risk, which can be mitigated by spreading the payments out across several years—no more than a decade—and by giving recipients, at least in part, payments in the form of less liquid assets like trust accounts or annuities (Darity and Mullen 2020, 266–67).

In this volume, Trina Shanks and colleagues (2024, issue 3) argue that evidence from the structure of child development accounts shows that reparations payments can be delivered to eligible recipients of all ages (not just children) through structured savings plans with automatic enrollment that promote asset growth and considerable autonomy for the recipients. The contribution of their article is to demonstrate a practical delivery system for cash reparations payments.

The form of reparations that is most appropriate is direct payments to eligible recipients, though not necessarily solely cash transfers. Ultimately, individual recipients should have full authority over the use of the funds. This has been the case for payments to other communities subjected to collective victimization internationally. Conditions should be no different for black American reparations when the bill finally is paid. Any other route would be unwarranted paternalism and an insult to the recipient community.

## THE FUTURE

What is the future of black reparations in the United States? Ultimately, it will have to be decided by legislative bodies, which, in turn, are heavily influenced by public opinion. Two articles in this volume, by Jesse Rhodes and colleagues (2024, issue 3) and by Kamri Hudgins and colleagues (2024, issue 3), investigate public opinion toward reparations. Rhodes and colleagues examine the historic trajectory of public opinion on reparations and present evidence on contemporary public opinion using four nationally representative surveys administered between 2021 and 2023. They find that in recent polls between 14 percent and 28 percent of white Americans support cash reparations, up from a tiny 4 percent in 2000 (Dawson and Popoff 2004). There appears to be momentum with regard to the least popular form of

reparations—cash payments (but see Craemer 2009a, 2009b). The political feasibility of reparations programs will depend on how fast the momentum in favor of reparations can build. This is notoriously difficult to predict, but examples such as the relatively sudden public opinion swing from majority opposition to majority support for gay marriage suggest that public opinion can change on a dime.

Once white non-Hispanics cease in a few decades to represent the majority in the U.S. electorate, a federal black reparations program may become more electorally feasible. This depends on whether the black reparations movement manages to build meaningful coalitions with other historically excluded nonwhite groups for whom black reparations could serve as a political precedent.

On the other hand, controlling a majority of the electorate does not guarantee political power, as white reparations opponents, who are still likely to control a disproportionate share of U.S. resources continue to lobby for disenfranchising policies (restricting access to the franchise, gerrymandering, and so on). Thus a federal program may not become feasible even after white non-Hispanics have become a minority.

Will local and state examples like those in Detroit, Evanston, and California set the course for other regions to follow? Rhodes and colleagues (2024) contend that “reparations policies may have considerable prospects in states and communities where Democrats—backed by progressive and racially liberal public opinion—are politically dominant.” Will these local and state initiatives ultimately lead to federal legislation by example, or will they be treated as sufficient, removing the need, in many eyes, for federal action? If federal action is the next step, then how will public pressure effectively activate congressional action? We do not have the answers to these questions, but we can speculate on a few likely outcomes based on recent events.

State and local commissions and task forces on reparations are being formed and empaneled; this tendency is not dissipating. In addition to the local studies addressed in this volume, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors recently recommended \$5 million payments to

every eligible black American (Hersher 2016). This came on the heels of the California Reparations Task Force submitting its report to the State Assembly.

Additionally, the city of St. Paul, Minnesota, recently appointed a committee called the St. Paul Recovery Act Reparations Commission to examine racial injustices in the city. Once payouts begin, local and state initiatives will find that they are incapable, singly or collectively, to meet bills of \$29 trillion, or even a “mere” \$16.1 trillion. The amounts proposed in San Francisco and in the California Task Force’s report appear to be far beyond the ken of either their respective municipal or state resources.

States and localities may, finally, turn to the federal government, where they are likely to encounter substantial opposition; however, opposition may be susceptible to accurate information, as Hudgins and colleagues (2024) suggest in this volume. The authors use a representative survey of Detroiters in 2022 and a nonrepresentative national survey administered between 2020 and 2022 to examine attitudes toward reparations. They find a link between an awareness of racial inequality and support for reparations policies, suggesting that public education on racial disparities may increase the feasibility of a reparations program. Thus, education on existing racial disparities in intergenerational wealth, income, health, homeownership, and education may prove crucial to effecting a federal black reparations program.

A study undertaken by Michael Kraus and Chiyei Vinluan (2023) indicates that Asian American support for black reparations increases when Japanese American exposure to mass incarceration during World War II and their subsequent receipt of redress is invoked. This suggests that education about the record of restitution directed at one’s group may stimulate greater approval for “reparative economic justice” for others. Reparations have appeared prominently in political campaigns over the last few years, confirming the relevance of this issue on contemporary national policy platforms. Recent developments provide clues to future debates and possible outcomes. It is likely that the fight for reparations will continue to escalate.

Morally and economically equitable solu-

tions may gather momentum even if they seem politically and fiscally less than feasible at a given moment. This was true for the abolition of slavery at the height of its profitability, and for the ban of de jure Jim Crow discrimination as a result of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Whether black reparations will join these historical examples remains to be seen.

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# **Opinions and Attitudes**

# Why Reparations? Race and Public Opinion Toward Reparations



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*During a period of rising partisan and racial polarization, how do partisanship, ideology, and racial antagonism influence attitudes toward reparations policies directed at the descendants of slaves? In this article, we use a wealth of public opinion data to examine trends in attitudes toward reparations and analyze the correlates of opposition to reparations proposals. We hypothesize that, given the ascendance over the past decade of a powerful racial justice movement and ensuing conservative backlash, racial attitudes should be particularly powerful in determining attitudes toward reparations. Using four original, nationally representative surveys, we show that negative racial attitudes play a central role in determining opposition to reparations, with effects that typically rival or exceed those of Republican partisanship or conservative ideology.*

**Keywords:** reparations, racial attitudes, public opinion

Marking one hundred years since the Tulsa Black Wall Street of Tulsa, Oklahoma—activists with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement called for reparations for African Americans as compensation for past and present racial injustices.<sup>1</sup> “Why Reparations?” the group asked.

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1. Of course, the call for reparations is not new, and can be traced back to the years immediately following the Civil War, when African American activists petitioned for land grants for formerly enslaved people (Berry and Blassingame 1982; Brophy 2006). More recently, numerous scholars, activists, and journalists have made eloquent appeals on behalf of reparations (Allen 1998; Fullinwider 2000; Robinson 2000; Feagin 2000; Coates 2014; Darity and Mullen 2020).

“[Because] Black people in the U.S. have been forced to grapple with structural discrimination—experiencing the highest rates of poverty, unemployment, low wages, health disparities, incarceration inequities, and so much more.” “Without reparations,” they continued, “the structural discrimination that purposely holds Black people back will continue to thrive . . . Reparations directly address the legacy of slavery, acts of violence like the Tulsa Massacre, and decade after decade of discrimination that we still deal with today” (Black Lives Matter 2021).

Arguments on behalf of reparations have a rich history in American politics, but in recent years they have received unprecedented public attention. The ascendance of the BLM movement during the 2010s, the publication of the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project in 2019, and the massive protests following the horrific murder of George Floyd in 2020 have forced millions of Americans to consider what is owed to African American citizens. In Congress, Democrats have pressed for legislation that would establish a national commission to study whether and how to implement reparations for African Americans (Kasperowicz 2023). Several local governments and institutions of higher learning have instituted reparation policies for members of their African American communities; and many others have debated or studied whether and how to implement reparations (Germain 2022; Hain and Mulcahy 2023). Arguably, political momentum on behalf of reparations is stronger than it has been in decades, if ever.

At the same time, however, the case for reparations has been the target of historic political, ideological, and racial backlash stemming from a broader racialized counterreaction to demands from communities of color for recognition and social justice (Jardina 2019; Miller 2021; Mason, Wronski, and Kane 2021). In Congress, Republicans have repeatedly blocked the legislation that would establish a panel to study reparations (Summers 2021). In some instances, Republicans have expressed their opposition to reparations in frankly racist terms. For example, speaking at a pro-Trump rally in October 2022, Republican Senator Tommy Tuberville of Alabama exclaimed, “[Democrats]

want crime because they want to take over what you got. . . . They want reparations because they think the people that do the crime are owed that. Bullshit, they are not owed that” (quoted in Kim 2022).

In this intense partisan and racialized environment, understanding Americans’ attitudes toward reparations is of great importance. Today, scholars and pundits are expressing concern that extreme partisanship, ideological polarization, and racial animus are fostering a “political sectarianism” that is undermining Americans’ support for democratic norms and institutions (Finkel et al 2020; Mason 2018; Lieberman et al. 2019; Bartels 2020). Given that African Americans experience both contemporary discrimination (Pager and Shepherd 2008; Alexander 2012; Lett et al. 2021; Williams et al. 2019) and ongoing harms stemming from enslavement and Jim Crow (Coates 2014; Williams 2022; Williams, Logan, and Hardy 2021), understanding how partisanship, ideology, and racial attitudes affect attitudes toward reparations will shed light on the scope of Americans’ commitment to the key democratic proposition, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, that “all people are created equal.”

In this article, we investigate both historic and contemporary patterns of mass opinion toward reparations. We first extend the pioneering work of Craemer (2009a), and trace public opinion on reparations from 2001 to 2023 in public opinion polls archived by the Roper Center. We find that overall opposition to reparations remains high, with disapproval strongest among White Americans (Dawson and Popoff 2004). Using more recent polls, we find preliminary evidence that White opponents of reparations ground their disapproval primarily in the beliefs that African Americans are undeserving and that achievement of formal racial equality makes reparations unnecessary.

To further investigate patterns of opposition to reparations, we turn to an examination of the determinants of opposition using four nationally representative surveys fielded between April 2021 and January 2023. We hypothesize that, given elite opposition to reparations publicly expressed by prominent Republican elected officials, Republican partisanship and conservative ideology are likely to be associated

with increased opposition to reparations (Zaller 1992; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018; Schaffner 2022). However, given the long associative history between negative racial attitudes and opposition to policies in which African Americans are the chief beneficiaries or advocates, we posit that negative racial attitudes will play the leading role in determining opposition to reparations (Tesler 2012, 2015; Filindra and Kaplan 2016; Cramer 2020; Jardina and Piston 2019).

Across our four surveys, we find that negative racial attitudes have a stronger and more consistent influence on opposition to reparations than do either partisan identity or ideology. Additionally, using data from our November 2022 survey, we show that, among Whites, negative racial attitudes have a stronger influence on opposition toward reparations than do other measures of racial attitudes such as in-group identification, closeness toward African Americans, or beliefs about attainment of racial equality in American society. Given these realities, overcoming opposition grounded in negative racial attitudes will likely require a sustained, mass mobilization of both African American and allied activists in support of reparations policies.

### TRENDS IN ATTITUDES TOWARD REPARATIONS, 2001–2023

Do Americans support reparations directed at the descendants of slaves? In answering this question, we first examine trends in public opinion toward reparations from 2001 to 2023, using survey data from the Roper Center’s iPoll database. The iPoll database is the largest archive of public opinion survey data, with more than eight hundred thousand questions and twenty-three thousand datasets that date back to the nation’s first surveys in the 1930s. Employing this unique and comprehensive data-

base, we searched for the terms *reparations* and *slavery* to identify pertinent questions derived from both probability and nonprobability surveys. Following Thomas Craemer (2009a), we examine support for reparations in each question, while coding for the identity of the provider of reparations (the United States, the federal government, or corporations), the intended recipients (African American descendants of enslaved people or African Americans in general), the modality (cash payments, an apology, educational support, or other), and whether the injustice of slavery was mentioned as a rationale.

Even though differences in question wording make it difficult to make precise comparisons across surveys, we can conclude that since 2001, a substantial majority of Americans oppose reparations, regardless of the modality, provider, or the recipient. However, the results in table 1 also indicate that, consistent with Craemer’s work, support for reparations is stronger when corporations are the provider, African American descendants of enslaved people are the targeted recipient, and the modality is something other than direct cash assistance.

### WHY DO WHITES OPPOSE REPARATIONS? INSIGHTS ON WHITES’ BELIEFS

Next, using three recent polls from the Roper iPoll database for which full datasets are available, and combining these with survey data from the UMass Amherst Poll, we examine differences in support for reparations in the form of cash payments between Whites and African Americans, respectively, in table 2.<sup>2</sup>

As table 2 shows, differences are very stark in support for reparations in the form of cash payments between Whites and African Americans in recent years.<sup>3</sup> Why are so many Whites resistant to reparations? Both recent ethno-

2. We examined attitudes toward reparations in the form of cash payments because relatively recent survey questions tended to ask about this form of support.

3. Differences in support among Whites and African Americans between the ABC/WaPo surveys and UMass Poll surveys are likely attributable to differences in question wordings and response options across the two sets of studies. In the ABC/WaPo surveys, the survey question is “Do you think the federal government should or should not pay money to Black Americans whose ancestors were slaves as compensation for that slavery?” To this, there are only two possible response options: should pay or should not pay. In the UMass Poll surveys, the

**Table 1.** Surveys on Slavery Reparations, 2001–2023, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research

Date	Polling Sponsor or Firm	% Support	% Oppose	P	R	M	I
3/28/2001	Fox News	11	81	1	1	1	1
1/25/2002	CNN/Gallup	14	81	2	1	1	1
1/25/2002	CNN/Gallup	41	55	3	1	2	1
1/25/2002	CNN/Gallup	43	52	3	1	3	1
1/25/2002	CNN/Gallup	20	74	3	1	1	1
2/8/2002	CNN/Gallup	14	81	2	1	1	1
2/8/2002	CNN/Gallup	43	53	3	1	3	1
2/8/2002	CNN/Gallup	20	74	3	1	1	1
2/8/2002	CNN/Gallup	40	55	3	1	2	1
8/25/2015	CNN/SSRS	25	70	2	1	4	1
8/25/2015	CNN/SSRS	18	77	2	1	1	1
3/2/2016	Fusion/SSRS	50	44	2	2	2	1
3/2/2016	Fusion/SSRS	32	62	2	2	1	1
4/27/2016	WGBH/Marist	24	72	1	2	1	1
4/27/2016	WGBH/Marist	26	68	2	1	1	1
4/27/2016	WGBH/Marist	30	65	3	2	1	1
4/27/2016	WGBH/Marist	37	58	3	1	1	1
4/26/2018	Suffolk	36	45	?	1	1	1
4/19/2019	Fox News	33	59	1	1	1	0
6/28/2019	Suffolk	39	43	?	1	1	1
7/15/2019	NPR/PBS	27	62	?	?	?	1
9/20/2019	Associated Press/NORC	29	68	2	1	1	1
9/20/2019	Associated Press/NORC	46	52	2	?	2	1
6/17/2020	ABC News/Ipsos	26	73	2	1	1	1
7/12/2020	ABC News/Washington Post/LRA	31	63	2	1	1	1
9/9/2020	Carnegie Corporation/PRRI	27	71	2	1	1	1
4/18/2021	ABC News/Washington Post/LRA	28	65	2	1	1	1
10/5/2021	Gallup	47	52	2	?	2	1

Source: Authors' tabulation.

Note: P = provider, R = recipient, M = modality, I = injustice; provider 1 = country; provider 2 = government; provider 3 = corporations; recipient 1 = African American descendants of slaves; recipient 2 = African Americans; modality 1 = cash; modality 2 = apology; modality 3 = education; modality 4 = other; injustice 0 = no injustice mentioned as a reason; injustice 1 = slavery mentioned as a reason; ? = missing.

graphic research on the perceptions of Whites (Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2018) and quantitative research on White attitudes toward African Americans (Kinder and Sears 1981; Schuman 1997; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Tesler 2016) provide guidance on likely answers to this ques-

tion. Collectively, this work reveals that many Whites believe that racial inequality is now largely a thing of the past, and therefore resent African American demands for policies that recognize and attempt to ameliorate contemporary racial inequities.

survey question is "Do you think the federal government should or should not make cash payments to the descendants of slaves?" The response options are definitely should, probably should, probably should not, and definitely should not.

**Table 2.** Comparison of White and African American Support for Reparations in Recent Surveys

Date	Polling Sponsor/Firm	% White Support	% African American Support	P	R	M	I
6/17/2020	ABC News/Ipsos	14	72	2	1	1	1
7/12/2020	ABC News/WaPo/LSA	16	80	2	1	1	1
4/21/2021	UMass Poll/YouGov	28	86	2	1	1	1
4/18/2021	ABC News/WaPo/LSA	16	65	2	1	1	1
1/5/2023	UMass Poll/YouGov	28	74	2	1	1	1

Source: Authors' tabulation.

Note: P = provider, R = recipient, M = modality, I = injustice; provider 1 = country; provider 2 = government; provider 3 = corporations; recipient 1 = African American descendants of slaves; recipient 2 = African Americans; modality 1 = cash; modality 2 = apology; modality 3 = education; modality 4 = other; injustice 0 = no injustice mentioned as a reason; injustice 1 = slavery mentioned as a reason; ? = missing.

To investigate whether similar patterns hold with respect to reparations, in our January 2023 survey we asked respondents who expressed opposition to reparations their reasons for doing so. We required respondents to select only one of several options: providing cash payments or benefits would be too expensive; descendants of slaves do not deserve cash payments; African Americans are treated equally in society today; it is impossible to place a monetary value on the impact of slavery; and it would be too difficult to administer a reparations program.

Respondents' reasoning about their opposition to reparations is revealing. Whites who take issue with reparations do not do so primarily because of concerns about perceived costs (selected by only 5 percent of White opponents) or administrative challenges (selected by 16 percent of White opponents). Instead, the most popular reason for White opposition is the belief that African Americans are undeserving of reparations (chosen by 32 percent of White opponents). Another 23 percent of White opponents of reparations base their opposition in the belief that African Americans are already treated equally in American society. In short, our findings are consistent with recent work that presents denialism of contemporary racial inequality and resentment of African American demands as the largest attitudinal obstacles to ameliorative policies among Whites.

### RACIAL POLARIZATION, AFRICAN AMERICAN ACTIVISM, AND ATTITUDES TOWARD REPARATIONS

Even though opinion surveys have consistently found majoritarian opposition to reparations directed at the descendants of slaves, it remains an open question as to what individual-level factors best explain opposition. Research has investigated the influence of socioeconomic precarity on opposition (Reichelmann and Hunt 2022; Woessner and Kelly-Woessner 2006), as well as how beliefs about the impact of reparations on race relations informs individuals' views (Campo, Mastin, and Frazer 2004; Reichelmann and Hunt 2022). Still other work has drawn attention to how the order and wording of survey questions may influence attitudes (Dawson and Popoff 2004; Craemer 2009a).

However, most research on attitudes toward reparations has centered on the influence of racial identity and racial views in shaping public opinions. Michael Dawson and Rovana Popoff (2004) find evidence not only of a stark racial divide on the issue of reparations, but that a host of racial views, most notably skepticism that African Americans are disadvantaged in American society, are associated with reduced support for reparations (see also Mazocco et al 2006; Torpey and Burkett 2010). Another important strand of scholarship has investigated how perceptions of closeness to-

ward African Americans influence attitudes, finding that Whites with stronger feelings of closeness with African Americans—or “self–other overlap”—are more supportive of reparations (Craemer 2009a, 2009b, 2014). A third strand of research finds that in-group identity, specifically pride in one’s own racial identity, informs individuals’ attitudes on the issue (Hunt and Reichelmann 2019; Reichelmann and Hunt 2021; Reichelmann, Roos, and Hughes 2022).

In keeping with the focus on the importance of racial perceptions in shaping public opinion toward reparations, Kamri Hudgins and colleagues (2024, this issue), using both a large representative survey of the city of Detroit alongside a national nonrepresentative survey, find that controlling for a host of demographic and political factors, Latino, White, and African American respondents in Detroit who exhibit a strong awareness of the legacy of racism in accounting for the socioeconomic status of African Americans are more likely to support reparation policies to “counter the impact of slavery and discriminatory policies.” At the national level, the authors find that perceptions of the size of the racial wealth gap as well as views of governmental responsibility structure support and opposition to reparations respectively, particularly among White respondents.

Although this research makes important contributions to our understanding of how assessments of the role of race in society, racial identification, and perceptions of closeness to African Americans influence attitudes toward reparations, it also has limitations. First, many of these studies rely on nonrepresentative convenience samples, samples of single states, or samples of single localities, limiting their ability to generalize to the U.S. adult population (Woessner and Kelly-Woessner 2006; Mazzocco et al. 2006; Reichelmann and Hunt 2021, 2022; Reichelmann, Roos, and Hughes 2022; Hudgins et al. 2024). Second, many of these studies rely on relatively mature survey data (Dawson and Popoff 2004; Mazzocco et al. 2006; Craemer 2009a, 2009b, 2014; Torpey and Burkett 2010), meaning that they are not able to shed light on how either the dramatic intensification of po-

larization on the basis of partisan identity, ideology, and racial attitudes (Mason 2018; Mason and Wronski 2018; Finkel et al. 2020) or renewed attention to the issue of racial inequity (Tesler 2016; Parker 2022) of the past two decades may influence attitudes toward reparations.

Most important, this research has not closely examined the impact of negative racial attitudes on public opinion toward reparations. For decades, scholars of American politics have explored the impact of negative racial attitudes in shaping American public opinion, policy preferences, campaigns, and vote choice (for reviews, see Cramer 2020; Jardina and Piston 2019; Stephens-Dougan 2020; Tesler 2016). Both ethnographic work and quantitative public opinion research indicate that many Americans, and particularly Whites, perceive that African Americans, despite having achieved (what they view as) formal equality, make unreasonable demands on government and fail to conform to norms of individual responsibility and hard work (Hochschild 2018; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Cramer 2020). More recent work adds that many Americans deny that Whites have privileges in American society and perceive that racial problems are rare (DeSante and Smith 2020). We build on this work by integrating the study of attitudes toward reparations into the broader scholarly investigation of how negative racial attitudes are eroding support for basic democratic norms in the United States (Mason 2018; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018; Appleby and Federico 2018; Reny, Collingwood, and Valenzuela 2019; Mason, Wronski, and Kane 2021; Bartels 2020; Schaffner 2020; Newman et al. 2021; Nteta et al. 2023).

Scholars have consistently found that negative racial attitudes structure Americans’, and in particular, White Americans’ responses to policies such as affirmative action, criminal justice reform, and even the payment of college athletes, policies in which African Americans are perceived to be the target or the beneficiary (Gilens 2009; Peffley and Hurwitz 2002; Tesler 2012; Wallsten et al. 2017). According to these studies, when Whites perceive that the policy concerns African Americans, this directly primes White racial attitudes, and these “top of the head” considerations are brought to bear

when expressing their opinion (Zaller 1992; Mendelberg 2001; Tesler 2012, 2016).

The influence of racial attitudes on policies relating to African Americans—like reparations—is likely to be particularly powerful today. In recent years, the political salience of racial issues has grown appreciably (Parker 2016, 2022; Jardina 2019). Partisan and ideological elites have increasingly made racial issues central to their electoral campaigns and political messaging, leading to ever-stronger interconnections between partisan identification, ideology, racial attitudes, and policy preferences in the mass public (Mason 2018; Mason and Wronski 2018; Finkel et al. 2020; Westwood and Peterson 2020; Englehardt 2021). For example, scholars have demonstrated that Barack Obama’s status as the nation’s first black president polarized Americans on the basis of racial attitudes, fostered the spillover of racial attitudes into ostensibly nonracial domains, and led many Whites to link “old fashioned” racist views to their partisan attachments and policy preferences (Tesler and Sears 2010; Piston 2010; Tesler 2012; Tesler 2016; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek 2018; Jardina and Traugott 2019; Jardina 2021). Donald Trump, who made implicit and explicit racial appeals central to his political persona, further exacerbated these trends (Smith and King 2021). Trump’s racialized presidency helped establish a close relationship between racial attitudes and public attitudes toward him, with those with more negative and resentful attitudes expressing stronger support (Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018; Reny, Collingwood, and Valenzuela 2019; Mason, Wronski, and Kane 2021). Trump also helped normalize racism among Whites, making prejudiced attitudes and racist behavior more socially acceptable (Schaffner 2020; Newman et al 2021). However, particularly in the post-Trump era, other people of color may express anti-Black racism and opposition to pro-Black policies, especially when they feel their social and economic position is threatened (Pérez, Robertson, and Vícuña 2023).

We argue that the politics of reparations represents a microcosm of this broader partisan and racial dynamic. In recent years, African American activists, organizations, and intellectuals, along with their allies, have engaged in

unprecedented mobilization to highlight the ongoing reality of racial injustice and thrust conversations about reparations into the political spotlight. Most important, the rise of the BLM movement in the 2010s drew public attention to the struggle for racial justice to a degree unprecedented since the 1960s (Dunivin et al. 2022). The horrific murder of George Floyd by White Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin in May 2020, captured in gruesome video, spurred what was quite possibly the largest social movement action in U.S. history (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020). The *New York Times*’ widely publicized 1619 Project, which sought to reorient the narrative of American history around the reverberating impacts of slavery, also raised attention to the issue of reparations (Hannah-Jones 2021; Silverstein 2021).

However, this wave of antiracist protest and intellectual advocacy sparked a massive backlash among conservative politicians, activists, and movement organizations, which exploited simmering resentment toward African Americans in many sectors of American society (Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2018). During his presidency, Trump consistently denied the legitimacy of the BLM movement, calling it a “symbol of hate” and suggesting that BLM “race riots” were themselves the cause of violence (Liptak and Holmes 2020; Bump 2020). In numerous states, Republicans sought to enact legislation that would criminalize BLM protest activity or protect individuals who violently interfered with BLM protests (Quinton 2021). Similarly, widely circulated claims in conservative media that 1619 Project-inspired critical race theory (CRT) curricula were being taught in American elementary and secondary schools led to enactment of anti-CRT legislation in dozens of Republican-controlled states (Frey 2022).

Thus we strongly suspect that the question of whether reparations should be granted to African American descendants of enslaved people has been drawn into the vortex of partisan and racial polarization that is plaguing contemporary American politics. We expect partisanship, ideology, and racial attitudes to play important roles in structuring American opinion toward reparations with Republicans, conservatives, and Americans who hold conservative racial views more likely to express opposition to any

and all forms of reparations for African Americans.

### DATA AND METHODS

To test our expectations, we rely on three nationally representative surveys of American adults fielded by YouGov between April 2021 and January 2023, along with a fourth nationally representative survey fielded as a module of the 2022 Cooperative Election Study (CES).<sup>4</sup> Our first survey was in the field from April 21 through April 23, 2021. The second was fielded from December 14 through December 20, 2021, and the third was in the field from January 5 through January 9, 2023. For each of these three surveys, we interviewed one thousand respondents, and in each survey propensity score weights were designed to ensure that our sample was representative of the adult population with respect to age, gender, race, ethnicity, education, ideology, and region. Our CES module was in the field from September 29 to November 8, 2022. We interviewed one thousand respondents, and like the other three surveys in our study, the CES module used propensity score weights to provide a representative sample of the adult population. Mindful that people of color may express racist attitudes—especially when they feel that their social position is under threat (Pérez, Robertson, and Vícuña 2023)—we conducted the main analyses presented in this article on all respondents.<sup>5</sup>

We use several variables to measure opposition to reparations. First, on the April 2021 and

January 2023 surveys, we asked respondents, “Do you think the federal government should or should not make cash payments to the descendants of slaves?” We measured opposition on a 4-point scale ranging from definitely should to definitely should not.<sup>6</sup> To provide further insights on public attitudes toward reparations (Campo, Mastin, and Frazer 2004; Craemer 2009a), on the December 2021 survey and in the 2022 CES module we asked whether the federal government should or should not provide various forms of reparations that have been examined in previous work and have been proposed in more recent discussions of reparations programs (Craemer 2009a, 2009b; Hunt and Reichelmann 2019; Reichelmann and Hunt 2022): “make cash payments to the descendants of slaves”; “apologize to the descendants of slaves”; “provide free college tuition to the descendants of slaves”; or “provide housing assistance to the descendants of slaves.” Again, we measured opposition on a 4-point scale ranging from definitely should to definitely should not.

Our first main independent variable of interest, strength of partisan identification, was measured using the traditional 7-point scale ranging from a strong Democrat to a strong Republican. We measured our second main independent variable, the respondent’s ideological identity, with the standard 5-point scale that ranges from very liberal to very conservative.

We measured racial attitudes with several different items.<sup>7</sup> Our first measure of racial atti-

4. Stephen Ansolabehere and Brian Schaffner (2014) show that carefully designed surveys fielded using an opt-in online panel like that used by YouGov produce estimates that are as accurate as a telephone survey.

5. In online appendix 1 and our discussion of the CES results, we replicated these analyses while limiting our sample to Whites. We find that the effect of the FIRE Index, our measure of negative racial attitudes, on opposition to reparations policies among Whites is very strong, typically dwarfing the respective effects of partisanship or ideology. See <https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/10/3/30/tab-supplemental>.

6. We note that, because our survey question mentions the federal government as the provider of reparations and cash payments as the modality, overall opposition may be higher than if we suggested a nongovernmental provider or a noncash modality (Campo et al 2004; Craemer 2009a); moreover, it is possible that the relationship between the main independent variables of interest and opposition may be different than if our question wording had mentioned alternative providers or modalities. However, our question wording indicates that the targets of reparations are the “descendants of slaves,” which, as Craemer (2009a) shows, are a relatively popular recipient group relative to African Americans in general.

7. In modeling the relationship between racial attitudes and opinions toward race-related policies (like reparations) with observational survey data, one potential obstacle to inference is that these may all be manifest indi-

titudes, available on all four surveys, used items from the fear, institutionalized racism, and empathy (FIRE) scale (DeSante and Smith 2020). In our study, we used three items from the FIRE scale: “White people in the U.S. have certain advantages because of the color of their skin”; “Racial problems in the U.S. are rare, isolated situations”; and “I am angry that racism exists.” Christopher DeSante and Candice Smith (2020) demonstrate that the first two statements capture a respondent’s acknowledgment of the existence of racism in the United States, and that the third statement measures a respondent’s affective reaction to the problem of racism in American society. A scale of these three items is now a very common measure of racial attitudes in public opinion research in political science (Schaffner et al 2018; Algara and Hale 2019; Algara and Hale 2020; Benegal and Holman 2021; Schaffner 2022; Nteta et al 2023).<sup>8</sup> On each survey, respondents indicated on a 5-point scale their level of agreement with each statement. On the April 2021 survey, the items have a scale reliability of 0.74; on the December 2021 survey, they have a scale reliability of 0.74; on the module of the 2022 CES the scale reliability is 0.71; and on the January 2023 survey, they have a scale reliability of 0.67.<sup>9</sup>

Although the FIRE index is an important measure of racial attitudes, we also advance research on the relationship between racial attitudes and opposition to reparations by exploring the potential influence of a broader range of attitudinal and behavioral measures relating to race (Cramer 2020). Racial resentment, un-

like the FIRE index, has long been used to measure a respondent’s racial views of African Americans (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Kinder and Sears 1981; Tesler 2016). We measure racial resentment with the following four items: “Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve”; “It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be as well off as Whites”; “Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class”; and “Irish, Italian, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.” Respondents indicated their level of agreement using a 5-point scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree), and the scale reliability is 0.90.

We also examine in the 2022 module of the CES items that have been found in previous research to predict American opinion, and in particular White opinion, toward reparations. Following Ashley Reichelmann and her colleagues (Hunt and Reichelmann 2019; Reichelmann and Hunt 2021; Reichelmann, Roos, and Hughes 2022), we included a measure of a respondent’s in-group identification. Our measure borrows from the work of Ashley Jardina (2019), and asks respondents the following two questions: “How important is being (Insert R’s race) to your identity?” and “How important is it that (Insert R’s race)s work together to change laws that are unfair to (Insert R’s race)s?” Response options to these questions range from “Extremely important” to “Not all that impor-

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catators of the same underlying (latent) construct. If this is the case, we would expect there to be a strong relationship between racial attitudes and opinions toward reparations; but this relationship would be tautological, rather than predictive in a meaningful way. In online appendix 2, we undertake an exploratory factor analysis to assess whether our measures of racial attitudes and our measures of opposition to reparations policies represent the same latent construct. We find that our measures of racial attitudes load on different factors than do our measures of opposition to reparations policies and conclude that our models are not tautological.

8. In online appendix 3, we use exploratory factor analysis to assess whether the three variables comprising the FIRE Index load on a single underlying factor on each of the surveys in our study. We find that they do. Given that the items also scale reliably, this provides empirical evidence in favor of our approach combining these items into a single scale.

9. In online appendix 4, we also examine the independent effect of each of the three variables comprising the FIRE index on opposition to reparations. We find that each of these variables are positive, statistically significant, and substantively strong predictors of opposition to reparations policies, though across the surveys the item “Whites Have Advantages” appears to have the largest effect of the three items.

tant”, and the scale reliability of this index is 0.74.

To capture closeness to African Americans, a key focus in work by Craemer (2009a, 2009b, 2014), we used a proxy item that measures the assessment of the closeness of a respondent’s interactions with racial minorities that asks White respondents, “How distant or close are your interactions with people from racial minority backgrounds?” with response items ranging from very distant to very close.<sup>10</sup> Finally, to measure a respondent’s perception of the achievement of racial equality, a factor identified by Dawson and Popoff (2004) as a key determinant of White opinion on reparations, we included a proxy measure that asked White respondents to indicate their level of agreement (measured from strongly agree to strongly disagree) with the following statement, “The U.S. has already made the changes necessary to give all races equal rights.” Because items that measured a respondent’s assessment of closeness with racial minorities were only asked of White respondents, we restrict our analysis of the impact of these factors to White respondents in the 2022 CES.

In all our surveys, we also measured the standard socioeconomic variables of sex, age, race, income, education, and employment status, using the question wordings and response options employed by the CES. Finally, because

attitudes toward reparations may be influenced by religious views, we measured respondents’ religiosity with a 6-point indicator of the frequency of church attendance ranging from never to more than once a week.<sup>11</sup> To ease interpretation of results, all variables were rescaled to range from 0 to 1. We estimated our statistical models using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression.<sup>12</sup>

## RESULTS

We now present the results of our analyses, starting with models of opposition to cash payments, and continuing with models of opposition to various modalities of reparations.

### Opposition to Federal Cash Payments to Descendants of Slaves

How do partisanship, ideology, and racial attitudes, respectively, influence public opinion toward reparations?<sup>13</sup> Table 3 presents the results of OLS regression models of opposition to federal cash payments to descendants of slaves from our April 2021 and January 2023 surveys, respectively.

The models indicate that Whites ( $b = 0.152$ ,  $p < .001$  in April 2021;  $b = 0.086$ ,  $p < .001$  in January 2023) and older Americans ( $b = 0.256$ ,  $p < .001$  in April 2021;  $b = 0.463$ ,  $p < .001$  in January 2023) are consistently more opposed to federal provision of cash payments, and that more

10. Our measure of closeness to racial minorities is an explicit measure, and is thus quite different from Craemer’s implicit measure of closeness to African Americans. We discuss the implications of, and possible objections to, our measure of closeness to racial minorities in online appendix 5.

11. Because the statistical models presented in the article use observational data, there is always the possibility that coefficient estimates may be attributable in significant part to modeling decisions. To help address this problem, we used the MRobust program (Young and Holsteen 2017) to assess the impact of one critical modeling decision—the inclusion of control variables—on the coefficient estimate for our main variable of interest, the FIRE Index. The MRobust program allows users to assess the influence of the inclusion of covariates on inferences by estimating every possible model including combinations of the covariates and reporting on how the inclusion and exclusion of (combinations of) control variables affect the magnitude, direction, and statistical significance of the main variable of interest. In online appendix 6, we use MRobust to examine the effect of our inclusion of covariates on each of the models presented in the article. We find convincing evidence that our preferred estimates of the effect of the FIRE index on opposition to reparations are not unduly biased by our preferred model specifications.

12. In online appendix 7, we replicate our results using ordered logistic regression instead of OLS regression and our substantive results do not change.

13. In online appendix 9, we investigate whether patterns of relationships between racial attitudes and opposition to reparations are similar to patterns of relationships between racial attitudes and other racialized policies.

**Table 3.** OLS Regression Models of Opposition to Cash Payments, April 2021 and January 2023 Surveys

	April 2021	January 2023
Male	-0.00704 (0.0206)	-0.0136 (0.0195)
White	0.152*** (0.0239)	0.0862*** (0.0248)
Age	0.256*** (0.0519)	0.463*** (0.0583)
Education	-0.0355 (0.0403)	0.00470 (0.0324)
Income	0.00820 (0.0511)	0.158** (0.0486)
Employed	0.0278 (0.0223)	-0.0183 (0.0236)
Party ID (1 = strong Republican)	0.177*** (0.0463)	0.189*** (0.0405)
Ideology (1 = very conservative)	0.289*** (0.0574)	0.225*** (0.0499)
Religiosity	-0.147*** (0.0332)	-0.162*** (0.0332)
FIRE index	0.483*** (0.0507)	0.444*** (0.0515)
Constant	0.0676+ (0.0369)	-0.00491 (0.0393)
Observations	802	779
R <sup>2</sup>	0.487	0.479

Source: Authors' tabulation.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; +  $p < .10$

religious Americans are consistently less opposed ( $b = -0.147$ ,  $p < .001$  in April 2021;  $b = -0.162$ ,  $p < .001$  in January 2023).<sup>14</sup> Additionally, among respondents to the January 2023 survey, more affluent Americans express greater opposition to federal provision of cash payments than do Americans with lesser means ( $b = 0.158$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

More to the point, we find that partisanship, ideology, and especially racial attitudes are each closely related to opposition to federal provision of cash payments on both surveys. In a reflection of partisan polarization on the issue of reparations, we find that Republican partisan identification is statistically ( $p < .001$ ) and substantively associated with greater opposition to federal provision of cash payments on

both surveys ( $b = .177$  and  $b = 0.189$  in April 2021 and January 2023, respectively). Similarly, conservative ideology is associated with increased opposition at the  $p < .001$  level on both surveys. This is a substantively notable effect: moving from very liberal to very conservative ideological self-identification is associated with a  $b = 0.289$  increase in opposition in April 2021 and a  $b = 0.225$  increase in January 2023, holding the other variables at their mean values.

However, the most striking result from the models in Table 3 is the very powerful influence of racial attitudes on opposition to federal reparations. More negative racial attitudes are associated with increased opposition to federal provision of cash payments at the  $< .001$  level

14. In online appendix 10, we explore why religiosity appears to be associated with increased support for reparations.

on both surveys. Moreover, the estimated effect is very large—with coefficient estimates of  $b = 0.483$  in April 2021 and  $b = 0.444$  in January 2023. Notably, the estimated effect of racial attitudes on opposition in both models is much larger than that of either partisanship or ideology, pointing to the central role of negative racial attitudes in determining opposition to reparations in the contemporary era.<sup>15</sup>

### Opposition to Various Modalities of Reparations

In Table 4 we use data from our December 2021 survey to model opposition to a broader menu of reparations policies: cash payments, an apology for enslavement, free college tuition, and housing assistance.

The results in Table 4 are generally consistent with those presented in Table 3, indicating that the patterns in public opinion we have observed are systematic to a wide range of reparations policies, and not just to cash payments. Whites, older Americans, and those with more income are consistently and significantly more opposed to each of these reparations policies; while those with more education, and more religious Americans, are consistently and significantly less opposed to each. More importantly, we again find that partisanship, ideology, and racial attitudes are closely associated with opposition to each of these policies.

Party identification is associated with opposition to cash payments ( $b = 0.089, p < .05$ ), an apology ( $b = 0.188, p < .001$ ), free college tuition ( $b = 0.129, p < .01$ ), and housing assistance ( $b = 0.079, p < .10$ ), indicating that Republicans oppose each of these policies more strongly than Democrats. Meanwhile, ideology is associated with opposition to cash payments ( $b = 0.317, p < .001$ ), an apology ( $b = 0.189, p < .001$ ), free college tuition ( $b = 0.306, p < .001$ ), and housing assistance ( $b = 0.244, p < .001$ ). These results indicate that very conservative individuals are

much more opposed to these forms of reparations than are very liberal individuals.

However, these effects are dwarfed by the influence of racial attitudes. The effect of the FIRE Index is statistically significant at the  $p < .001$  level in each of the four models, and the substantive effect of this variable is very large, ranging from 0.553 to 0.793, holding the other variables at their mean levels. These findings provide further support for our view that negative racial attitudes are central to Americans' attitudes toward reparations in contemporary American politics.

### Examining the Effects of Competing Measures

While our results strongly suggest that racial attitudes, as measured by the FIRE Index, play a central role in predicting opposition to reparations, it is important to note that these models do not take into account other racial attitudes that may influence mass opinion on reparations. To explore the role that alternative racial attitudes may play in influencing opinion on reparations, we turn to an analysis of a module of the 2022 Cooperative Election Study.

Table 5 replicates the models presented above while adding the proxies for each of the three alternative measures of racial attitudes that have been found to predict opinion on reparations in previous work (recall, however, that this analysis is limited to Whites). We find that older Americans express greater opposition to reparations programs, particularly those involving an apology ( $b = .342, p < .05$ ), tuition assistance ( $b = .202, p < .01$ ), and housing assistance ( $b = .216, p < .01$ ). Those with higher incomes are significantly more likely to oppose housing assistance ( $b = .120, p < .05$ ) while those who have higher levels of educational attainment are more likely to support reparations aimed at providing housing assistance for the descendants of slaves ( $b = -.084, p < .05$ ). In line

15. One possible objection to this inference is that, because the FIRE index includes a battery of items, it may contain less measurement error and therefore yield larger and more precise estimates than our measures of party identification and ideological orientation, respectively. To address this issue, in online appendix 4 we re-estimate the models in table 3, swapping in each of the three component measures of the FIRE index for the full scale. We find that each of the three components of the FIRE index is a statistically and substantively significant predictor of opposition to federal provision of cash payments, and that the effect of the item “Whites Have Advantages” is consistently larger than that of either party identification or ideology.

**Table 4.** OLS Regression Models of Opposition to Various Reparations Policies, December 2021 Survey

	Opposition			
	Cash Payments	Apology	Free College Tuition	Housing Assistance
Male	0.0126 (0.0198)	-0.0293 (0.0192)	0.00125 (0.0191)	-0.0207 (0.0193)
White	0.161*** (0.0249)	0.0762*** (0.0211)	0.129*** (0.0227)	0.146*** (0.0232)
Age	0.273*** (0.0642)	0.178** (0.0563)	0.256*** (0.0591)	0.303*** (0.0608)
Education	-0.0611+ (0.0368)	-0.0793* (0.0348)	-0.112** (0.0359)	-0.0874* (0.0375)
Income	0.128** (0.0449)	0.110* (0.0475)	0.163*** (0.0450)	0.167*** (0.0457)
Employed	-0.0129 (0.0231)	0.00458 (0.0209)	-0.0312 (0.0222)	0.00951 (0.0217)
Party ID (1 = strong Republican)	0.0892* (0.0434)	0.188*** (0.0414)	0.129** (0.0418)	0.0799+ (0.0455)
Ideology (1 = very conservative)	0.317*** (0.0550)	0.189*** (0.0493)	0.306*** (0.0519)	0.244*** (0.0561)
Religiosity	-0.0958** (0.0298)	-0.0667* (0.0305)	-0.0807** (0.0301)	-0.0560+ (0.0311)
FIRE index	0.553*** (0.0458)	0.793*** (0.0487)	0.597*** (0.0472)	0.654*** (0.0461)
Constant	0.000597 (0.0410)	-0.0817* (0.0388)	-0.0143 (0.0390)	-0.0531 (0.0400)
Observations	783	783	783	783
R <sup>2</sup>	0.530	0.591	0.568	0.540

Source: Authors' tabulation.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; +  $p < .10$

with our previous analysis, Republicans, more so than Democrats, express opposition to cash payments ( $b = .179, p < .01$ ), an apology ( $b = .207, p < .01$ ), tuition assistance ( $b = .215, p < .001$ ), and housing assistance ( $b = .213, p < .001$ ). Interestingly, unlike our earlier analysis, we find that neither ideology or religiosity emerges as a significant determinant of White opinion on reparations across each type of reparations policy.

Do racial attitudes remain the strongest predictor of attitudes toward reparations among White Americans when controlling for racial group identification, closeness to people of color, and perceptions of racial equality? Here, we find little evidence that in 2022 the strength

of identification with a respondent's racial identity plays a role in structuring opinion toward any of the four reparations policies currently on the agenda. Similarly, we discover that assessments of the closeness to people of color do not appear to influence a White respondent's policy preferences concerning reparations. However, we do find that our proxy that taps a respondent's perception of the achievement of racial equality does consistently predict opposition to cash payments ( $b = .253, p < .001$ ), an apology ( $b = .205, p < .01$ ), tuition assistance ( $b = .277, p < .001$ ), and housing assistance ( $b = .214, p < .001$ ). Nonetheless, we again find that the strongest and most consistent predictor of White opinion is negative ra-

**Table 5.** OLS Regression Models of Opposition to Reparations Policies Among White Respondents, 2022 Cooperative Election Study

	Opposition			
	Cash Payments	Apology	Tuition	Housing
Male	-0.0421 (0.0318)	0.0278 (0.0382)	-0.0284 (0.0215)	-0.0117 (0.0205)
Age	0.115 (0.0884)	0.342* (0.139)	0.202** (0.0612)	0.216** (0.0698)
Education	-0.0651 (0.0467)	-0.0287 (0.0751)	-0.0468 (0.0383)	-0.0841* (0.0381)
Income	0.0260 (0.0617)	0.0298 (0.0773)	0.0521 (0.0569)	0.120* (0.0543)
Employed	0.0135 (0.0230)	0.0314 (0.0496)	-0.0270 (0.0239)	-0.0167 (0.0243)
Party ID (1=strong Republican)	0.179** (0.0581)	0.207** (0.0694)	0.215*** (0.0530)	0.213*** (0.0517)
Ideology (1=very conservative)	0.00489 (0.0596)	0.125 (0.0884)	0.0348 (0.0674)	0.0504 (0.0658)
Religiosity	0.00150 (0.00682)	-0.0107 (0.0124)	0.00519 (0.00637)	-0.00765 (0.00693)
FIRE index	0.281*** (0.0677)	0.423*** (0.118)	0.333*** (0.0673)	0.398*** (0.0595)
Group identification index	0.0459 (0.0627)	0.0775 (0.0643)	0.0532 (0.0422)	0.0540 (0.0400)
Closeness to people of color	0.0944 (0.123)	-0.0624 (0.0904)	-0.0159 (0.0402)	0.00498 (0.0464)
Necessary changes on racial equality	0.253*** (0.0510)	0.205** (0.0788)	0.277*** (0.0547)	0.214*** (0.0450)
Constant	0.308** (0.106)	-0.0958 (0.0963)	0.188** (0.0623)	0.183** (0.0653)
Observations	523	523	523	523
R <sup>2</sup>	0.491	0.499	0.619	0.617

Source: Authors' tabulation.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; +  $p < .10$

cial attitudes as measured by the FIRE index. Whites who hold the most virulent views on race, relative to Whites who exhibit more accepting racial attitudes, are more likely to oppose cash payments ( $b = .281, p < .001$ ), an apology ( $b = .423, p < .001$ ), college tuition assistance ( $b = .333, p < .001$ ), and housing assistance ( $b = .398, p < .001$ ).

To provide further confidence in our argu-

ment that negative racial attitudes drive opposition to reparations, in online appendix 8 we replace the FIRE index with the racial resentment scale (Kinder and Sanders 1996).<sup>16</sup> Using this alternative specification, we again find that negative racial attitudes more powerfully predict opposition to reparations than do measures of White identity, racial closeness, or beliefs about achievement of racial equality.

16. See online appendix (<https://www.rsjournal.org/content/10/3/30/tab-supplemental>).

## DISCUSSION

In this study, we have argued that the subject of reparations has been pulled into the vortex of partisan and racial sectarianism that is afflicting all areas of contemporary American politics. Although this conflict has deep partisan and racialized roots, the increasing salience and divisiveness of racialized matters in American politics makes it likely that attitudes toward reparations are powerfully influenced by racial attitudes. Thus, we hypothesized that, even though Republican partisanship and conservative ideology likely increase opposition to reparations, negative racial attitudes likely have an even larger impact.

We use four original, nationally representative surveys of American adults fielded between April 2021 and January 2023 to investigate the respective influences of partisanship, ideology, and racial attitudes on opposition toward reparations. Across the four studies, we find that though Republican partisanship and conservative ideology are usually associated with increased opposition to reparations, negative racial attitudes emerge as the strongest and most consistent predictor of opposition. Additionally, using data from the 2022 Cooperative Election Study, we show that among Whites, negative racial attitudes exert a more powerful influence on opposition to reparations than other kinds of racial attitudes, such as in-group racial identification, closeness toward African Americans, or perceptions of the state of racial equality. We conclude that negative racial attitudes constitute the largest single obstacle to public support for reparations to African Americans in American politics.

Our work underscores that the politics of reparations cannot be separated from the systemic processes of partisan, ideological, and especially racial attitude polarization that are currently structuring all aspects of politics in the United States today. Enactment of federal reparations thus faces substantial obstacles. In this context, both the history of civil rights struggle in the United States and recent American experience suggest that the most promising—though challenging—path to reparations involves massive popular mobilization on behalf of this issue. Previous civil rights milestones such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and

the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were accomplished in significant part in response to widespread protests by an intensely mobilized African American civil rights movement that gained the sympathy, and sometimes direct participation, of White Americans (Garrow 1978; Andrews and Gaby 2015). More recently, research has shown that the BLM movement, which during its peak in the summer of 2020 gained extensive involvement from sympathetic Whites (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020), has produced significant changes in public beliefs and rhetoric about policing around the nation, as well as changes in police behavior at the local level (Olzak 2021; Shuman et al 2022; Campbell 2023).

However, although reparations have played a notable part in BLM rhetoric, it is yet unclear whether reparations will move to the center of the agenda of either major institutional civil rights groups or of grassroots African American activists (Smith and King 2021). This is understandable given the many crises—from racialized voter suppression to the end of affirmative action—competing for the attention of civil rights activists today. Nonetheless, it seems clear that overcoming the extraordinary partisan and racial obstacles facing reparations will require an unprecedented mobilization of ordinary Americans—both African Americans and their progressive allies.

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# Crafting Democratic Futures: Understanding Political Conditions and Racialized Attitudes Toward Black Reparations



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*As a growing number of states and municipalities consider reparative policies for Black Americans, it is important to understand what shapes support for and opposition to these policies. We explore the role that awareness of racial inequality plays in shaping attitudes. Drawing on data from a large, representative survey in Detroit and one national survey, we find that awareness of racial inequality plays a powerful role in the likelihood of supporting reparative policies. Yet, in follow-up surveys, we find that exposing respondents to information on the rationale for and importance of reparations does not shift public support. These findings suggest that it is the awareness of racial inequality that is cultivated over time that appears to be the dominant force in building support for reparations. These findings are particularly important during a time when many school districts are severely restricting access to information about the history of Black Americans.*

**Keywords:** reparations, United States, racialized attitudes, racial inequality

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After the American Revolution, Belinda Sutton, a Ghanaian-born enslaved woman who labored on the Royall plantation in Antigua before being transferred to Bedford, Massachusetts, registered the first successful petition in 1783 for reparations for years of uncompensated forced labor (Brewington 2021). Years later, Henrietta Wood, who had gained her freedom only to be wrongly resold into slavery, won her suit for reparations against Zebulon Ward, tallying the largest amount ever awarded a former enslaved person (McDaniel 2019). Although these few individual cases of success may be perceived by some as paramount, they are outnumbered by the overwhelming weight of history that followed. After the Civil War, more than four million formerly enslaved Americans sought some kind of apology, restitution, and redress for nearly two hundred and fifty years of servitude, only to see the country turn its back on them. Through the Homestead Act (1862), signed by President Abraham Lincoln, the United States government provided 160-acre plots for mostly native and foreign-born Whites (Dick 1970, U.S. Senate 2020b). He also signed a bill to compensate enslavers up to \$300 in cash for every newly freed person (U.S. Senate 2020a). Yet talk of land redistribution or forty acres and a mule for African Americans disappeared as a policy option almost as quickly as it arose even though former Sea Island planters who repledged allegiance to the United States were compensated for the loss of their human property. This has left the present generation to finally address the unfinished task of reparations for slavery, segregation, and the more recent period of racialized mass incarceration.

Conversations surrounding reparations for

American descendants of enslaved peoples have in recent years resurged in everyday American life, from pop culture to politics. While on the campaign trail, then presidential candidate Joe Biden committed to supporting a study of reparations for African Americans following the mass social movement sparked by the murder of George Floyd in 2020. This made Biden one of many 2020 Democratic presidential candidates openly supporting the study of reparations for Black Americans.<sup>1</sup> In 2021, the U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary Committee voted to move forward with H.R. 40, a bill introduced by Michigan Representative John Conyers in 1989 to study slavery reparations—although the bill was never scheduled for a vote from the full House. The ongoing increase in the visibility of reparations at the local and national stage begets the need for more detailed, nuanced, and empirically based examinations of attitudes about reparations in the United States. Current scholarship confronts the study of attitudes toward reparations generally from the perspective of nationally representative and sometimes nonrepresentative respondent samples (but see also Reichelmann, Roos, and Hughes 2022; Craemer 2009). This direction of scholarly inquiry, though essential to the broader study of reparations, does not place much emphasis on the awareness of and information about racial inequality. Projects are under way using historical methodology to explore race, history, and reparations in communities across the nation, most notably the Crafting Democratic Futures project anchored at the University of Michigan.<sup>2</sup> This project does not fully mobilize a social scientific approach, however. Consequently, the subcategory of local population's general attitudes and

1. During the 2020 election, fifteen of the Democratic presidential primary candidates espoused similar (though sometimes conflicting) views on supporting the study of reparations.

2. Housed within the Center for Social Solutions at the University of Michigan, the Mellon-funded Crafting Democratic Futures (CDF) project is a national network of humanities scholars located at nine geographically and organizationally diverse colleges and universities to develop tangible suggestions for research-informed, community-based reparations solutions. CDF teams span across the central north region of the country, across the Midwest, and down the eastern seaboard. Specifically, CDF teams comprise partners from Carnegie Mellon, Emory, and Rutgers (Newark) universities; Concordia (Moorhead, Minnesota), Connecticut, Spelman, Wesleyan (Macon, Georgia), and Wofford (Spartanburg, South Carolina) colleges; and the University of Michigan campuses. Pittsburgh's public media flagship, WQED (multimedia), is also a key partner, charged with developing a public documentary about reparations and race in the United States.

the attitudinal precursors of support for reparations in relation to broader national attitudes are left underexplored, a gap this article seeks to fill.

Drawing on data from a large, representative survey experiment in Detroit, Michigan, and one national survey experiment, we explore whether support for reparations hinges on an awareness of racial inequality and general political knowledge. We also explore how domain-specific knowledge of racial inequality and perceptions of the magnitude of inequality matter for assessing attitudes toward reparations. Does support for reparations hinge on an awareness of racial inequality? Further, what role does knowledge of racial inequality, and perceptions of the magnitude of inequality play in this process?

To address these questions, we first study variation in support for reparations in two political contexts: a majority-Black city that has already taken steps toward building a reparations policy, as well as a national sample of Black and White Americans. We then evaluate how general political knowledge and awareness of racial inequality affects support for reparations. To what degree is opposition to reparations a function of one simply not knowing the historical, political, and sociocultural context of Black Americans? We examine the magnitude to which a lack of awareness regarding the lasting impact of racism and its effects on American society shapes widespread support for reparations. And, to the extent that greater awareness of racial inequality does affect support for reparations, how effective are simple informational interventions at increasing awareness and support for reparative policies?

Overall, our findings highlight that even though awareness of racial inequality plays a powerful role in the likelihood of supporting reparative policies, one-shot messages are not enough to shift support. It is the awareness of racial inequality cultivated over time and reinforced by multiple institutions that appears to be the dominant force in building support for reparations. This is critical in a context in which education on anti-racism, African American history, and diversity, equity, and inclusion are being attacked and even banned across

the United States (Cammarota 2017; Hartocollis and Fawcett 2023).

### THE CONTEXT AND CASE FOR BLACK REPARATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Since the civil rights movement, the African American community has achieved some progress in various social, economic, and political areas. For example, as we see in areas of education and political representation, the Black high school graduation rate (88 percent) is on par with the national average (90 percent), the number of Black politicians holding elected office is on an upward trend, and growth of the Black middle class is strong (Day 2020; Brown and Atske 2021; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1998). However, despite the progress the Black community since 1964, much more remains to accomplish. Moreover, the country's belief in what psychologist Jennifer Richeson frames as "the mythology of racial progress," fuels the false narrative that the aggregate socioeconomic status of the Black community is experiencing a strong and steady upward trend (Richeson 2020). Belief in this myth is not exclusive to White Americans.

However, the reality for this community is that the gains made in the mid- to late twentieth century have since stalled dramatically. Racial inequities persist and targeted remedies are needed to eliminate disparities that are a consequence of targeted and discriminatory policies of the past and present.

#### The Persistence of Racial Disparities

An examination of the national Black-White wealth gap highlights the ongoing influence of U.S. policies in perpetuating racial disparities across various dimensions, including education and homeownership. These disparities highlight the need for racially targeted redress for the historic impacts of slavery and ongoing discrimination. Between 1900 and 1970, the racial gap in homeownership narrowed at a steady rate, stagnated, then subsequently reversed (Putnam and Garrett 2020). In 1960, according to Census Bureau data, the White homeownership rate was 65 percent and for Blacks 38 percent. In 2022, 74.6 percent of White households owned their homes, versus 45.3 percent of Black households. These rates

reflect that the racial gap in homeownership is larger in 2022 (30 points) than in 1960 (27 points) (Henderson 2022). In education, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data also show persistent racial inequities in college attendance rates. In every year since 2011, the college enrollment rate immediately following high school completion for White students was higher than for Black students (NCES 2022). Also, the six-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began seeking a bachelor's degree from a four-year postsecondary institution in fall 2010 was 64 percent for White students but just 40 percent for Black students; a 24 percent difference (U.S. Department of Education 2019). To address persistent levels of racial inequalities such as those highlighted earlier, government-sponsored interventions and modes of repair and redress are required (Bailey et al. 2017; Williams and Cooper 2019). Activists and scholars alike have long championed reparations as an essential component of the solution to the socioeconomic plight of the Black community (Coates 2014; Darity and Mullen 2022; Darity and Frank 2003).

### Attitudes About Reparations Over Time

American support for Jim Crow-era policies and traditional anti-Black prejudice, often justified by beliefs in biological racism, diminished during the mid- to late twentieth century (for evidence that these trends have been overstated, see Jardina and Piston 2022, 2023). However, policies aimed at increasing opportunities for African Americans continue to face minimal support and strong opposition. When looking specifically at attitudes toward reparations, recent polling data reveals that well over half of Americans oppose the general idea with little variation over time (Reichelmann and Hunt 2021; Sharpe 2021; Blazina and Cox 2022). Despite the country's misguided belief in the myth of racial progress and the public's friction on their support for reparations, the United States currently finds itself in an era of

renewed interest in this policy area. On the 2020 presidential campaign trail, approximately six Democratic party primary candidates, including President Joe Biden, openly supported the study of reparations for Black Americans at the federal level. The long-standing call for reparations in the African American community does not come without precedent. The U.S. government provided reparations to other racial-ethnic groups such as Japanese Americans, Native Alaskans, and (as discussed) White Americans in the mid-1800s. Scholars have further posited that America currently practices forms of restorative justice as compensation for harms individuals have suffered (Ranalli and Hughes 2022). Thus, if the United States is no stranger to reparations, why is the opposition from the American public and government so vehement about repair focused on the harms enacted against African Americans?

Despite the lack of progress on reparations at the federal level, where H.R. 40 has remained stalled for more than thirty years, momentum is increasing at the local level. This highlights the importance of scholarly examination of national and local general attitudes toward reparations. In 2019 in Illinois, the Evanston City Council established a reparations fund aimed at addressing racial inequality around housing.<sup>3</sup> Since then, a range of other states and localities, including Detroit, Michigan, have established reparations task forces or advisory councils to study, develop, and implement proposals for reparations for African Americans living in their respective areas (Hain and Mulcahy 2023; for more on local reparations programs, see Edwards et al. 2024; Newton and Nelsen 2024, this issue; Davies et al. 2024, this issue). It is therefore relevant to further understand local populations' general attitudes and public opinion toward reparations and whether those attitudes differ from national public opinion.

Due to the reality that most Americans endorse the myth of racial progress, the viability

3. In the case of Evanston, the policy is centered as a housing voucher program. Though promoted as a start toward reparations for the city's citizens, many have expressed displeasure with the implementation of this policy initiative (for more, see Darity and Mullen 2020).

of a successful federal legislative initiative targeted around reparations may appear unlikely (Kraus et al. 2019). This pessimistic sentiment is reflected in a recently published nationwide University of Massachusetts Amherst/WCVB poll. Here, researchers found that close to half of Americans conclude the federal government “definitely should not” provide cash payments to the descendants of slaves. Whereas 62 percent of respondents note an opposition to the idea of reparations in general, the strongest justification for the opposition is perception of African Americans as undeserving (Sharpe 2021). In terms of support for reparations by race, 28 percent of White respondents in this poll express support for reparations whereas 86 percent of African Americans express support for compensating the descendants of slaves. Explanations for White opposition to race-targeted policies consider racial resentment, group self-interest, and support for symbolic or race-neutral policies (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Bobo and Kluegel 1993). African Americans generally express support for race-targeted policies; Latino and Asian Americans vary (Lopez and Pantoja 2004). This consensus reflects the racial and ethnic differences noted in partisan and ideological identification over time. Furthermore, consensus in scholarship is established on the need to uncover more factors that underlie racial and ethnic differences in attitudes toward policies (race-neutral or targeted) on addressing racial inequality in America. By uncovering these factors, this realm of scholarly inquiry possesses strong potential to shape the political strategy of reparations movements at the national and local levels.

### **Factors Shaping Attitudes Toward Reparations**

Current literature on White and Black attitudes toward reparations offers mixed results. For White Americans, attitudes toward reparations are affected by their racial identity, among other factors. In an original survey fielded in 2016, Ashley Reichelmann and Matthew Hunt (2022) found that private self-regard predicts opposition to reparative measures, while public self-regard fosters support for such measures. Private self-regard is defined as one’s

own personal sense of self, compared to public self-regard, which is how one is perceived by other people (i.e., the public). In tandem with scholarship surrounding support for race-neutral and symbolic policy implementation, Reichelmann and Hunt (2021) found White Americans are least opposed to selected symbolic reparations and policies designed to ensure “fair treatment” of Black Americans in the workplace. In terms of opposition and form of reparation, White respondents were most opposed to reparations in the form of direct financial payments to Black Americans and to policies involving “preferential treatment” of African Americans in the workplace. In another study, Reichelmann, Micah Roos, and Michael Hughes (2022) yielded similar findings. They found opposition toward race-targeted policies varies depending on how explicit the race-targeting is and whether the policy’s goal is opportunity enhancement or equality of outcomes. Demographically, White respondents who were most opposed to reparations were older and more conservative and viewed race relations as unimportant.

Further aspects of the literature find that attitudes toward reparations for slavery specifically and support for various forms of compensation are mediated by the belief that race relations will be hurt or hindered by awarding reparations (Campo, Mastin, and Frazer 2010). Although these authors found strong opposition to reparations for individuals, they also found more support for other forms of compensation, such as a slavery museum and community development programs. Again, this work highlights one of the largest commonalities across this area of study: public support of reparations, however tepid, is driven by symbolic measures rather than initiatives to alleviate socioeconomic disparities.

Although current scholarship has considered attitudes toward reparations in the United States generally, the focus is around White American attitudes. More inquiry and attention is needed for understanding attitudes more broadly. Additionally, more attention is needed on how current levels of general political knowledge and domain-specific knowledge about the existence or magnitude of racial in-

equality in the United States may or may not mediate support for reparations.<sup>4</sup> This article aims to provide both.

## METHODS

We draw on data from a large, representative survey in Detroit (the Detroit Metro Area Communities Study, or DMACS) and one national survey experiment administered by the Black Truth Project (BTP) at the University of Michigan to explore racial attitudes toward reparations, particularly among Black and White respondents. DMACS is a University of Michigan initiative that regularly surveys a broad, representative group of Detroit residents about their communities, including their expectations, perceptions, priorities, and aspirations. BTP examines attitudes toward racial inequality and how knowledge about the racial wealth gap affects policy preferences among Black and White participants. The project explores messaging strategies for a nationally diverse population. Together, these datasets allow us to conduct a more comprehensive examination of racialized attitudes toward reparations using both local and national data. We are then able to offer timely information regarding the ways in which knowledge of and information about racial inequality impacts attitudes toward reparations. Last, the results of these analyses provide insights about prospects for the adoption of a national program of Black reparations.

### Study One: Awareness and Attitudes in Detroit

Our first set of analyses comes from the city of Detroit. Although studies addressing a nationally representative respondent pool can illuminate attitudes toward reparative policies among a larger, more diverse sample of Americans, it is often difficult to account for variation in the political support of reparative policies across state and local contexts. Understanding the attitudes of local populations toward reparations is becoming increasingly important,

particularly in light of various local movements that aim to raise awareness and explore strategies for achieving reparations.

Such analyses exploring local attitudes are particularly important when political approaches to dealing with America's racial history are moving in dramatically opposing directions. Specifically, some states and municipalities are implementing reparative policies and others are implementing bans on diversity, equity, and inclusion officers, books, and curricula on related themes (Cammarota 2017; Hartocollis and Fawcett 2023; Friedman and Johnson 2022).

In turn, a focus on Detroit offers insights into two elements of context that we believe may be important to consider: the size of the local Black population and local familiarity with reparations. The city has a population that is 78 percent Black according to the U.S. Census, enabling us to examine attitudes toward reparative policies within a majority-Black context—something that has shown to affect political behavior and attitudes toward radicalized issues in the past (Howell, Perry, and Vile 2004; Fraga 2016; Hoston 2007). Additionally, Detroit is among the cities that have launched a reparations task force to study the ongoing and historic harms of slavery and systemic racism. The task force aims to make recommendations for city-level programs to address institutionalized sources of contemporary inequity in the areas of housing and economic development. Thus, a focus on a single municipal context can shed light on how attitudes toward reparations are taking form in the context of unique local political and historical dynamics.

We leverage representative data from Detroit, where residents are asked about their overall support for reparations.

To understand Detroiters' sources of support for and opposition to reparations, we administered a survey to a representative sample of 2,339 Detroit households through the DMACS. Respondents were part of a survey panel drawn from an address-based probability sample of all occupied Detroit households.

4. Here, domain-specific knowledge is defined as knowledge about a specific area. One can have high levels of broad political knowledge (such as knowing the three branches of government or naming the chief justice of the Supreme Court) but lower levels regarding specific areas (such as foreign policy or racial inequality).

Surveys were self-administered online or interviewer-administered via telephone between June 16, 2022, and August 26, 2022. The survey obtained an overall response rate of 26.8 percent (using American Association for Public Opinion Research Response Rate 1), including 67.2 percent for respondents who had completed prior surveys with DMACS and 9.3 percent for new panelists. The responses were then weighted in two stages. In the first stage, we used a poststratification technique to account for the differential selection probabilities due to sample stratification at various points in panel construction. We calibrated the sample to match the estimated population aged eighteen and older in each stratum. In the second stage, we applied raking to adjust the weights to match the estimated distributions on gender, age, race, education, and income based on the Census Bureau's 2021 one-year estimates from the American Community Survey. Our analyses focus on the two largest ethnoracial groups in the city: Black Detroiters ( $n = 1,253$ ) and White Detroiters ( $n = 274$ ).

To measure attitudes toward reparations, we asked respondents the following question: "Some people think that some form of payment needs to be made to Black Americans to counter the lasting impacts of slavery and discriminatory policies. Others do not. What about you? How much do you support or oppose providing some form of payment to Black Americans to counter the impact of slavery and discriminatory policies?" Additionally, to assess the role that knowledge about the level of economic inequality between Black and White Americans plays in attitudes toward reparations, we included a question about beliefs in levels of economic inequality. Referred to as recognition of economic inequality, the ques-

tion asked: "Now thinking about the financial situation of Black people compared with White people today, would you say the average Black person is better off, worse off, or just about as well off as the average White person in terms of income, wealth, and overall financial situation?" Finally, to measure recognition of the legacy of racism, we created an index based on three survey questions assessing respondents' knowledge of the ongoing impacts of slavery and discrimination. This index includes measures assessing whether respondents believe that: "the legacy of slavery and discrimination against Black people continues to affect Black people," "racial discrimination is the main reason why many Black people can't get ahead these days," and "Black people who can't get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their condition." Responses to all items were coded on a 5-point scale so that higher values were associated with a greater likelihood of believing that racial discrimination has significantly impeded access to wealth and economic opportunity among Black Americans. The index, recognition of the legacy of racism, had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.62, indicating reasonable reliability.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to measuring the relationship between knowledge about racial inequality and support for reparations, we also considered whether changes in knowledge could causally affect levels of support for reparations. To do so, we conducted a survey experiment in which half of respondents were randomly assigned to view a brief paragraph about how slavery and the Jim Crow era created barriers to Black socioeconomic well-being before the questions on reparations.<sup>6</sup> The other half did not see that information. Together this allowed us not only to test the relationship between awareness of racial inequality and sup-

5. Recognition of economic inequality and recognition of the legacy of racism are moderately correlated, with a Pearson's correlation of 0.4087.

6. The text that those in the treatment group were exposed to read, "During the time that slavery was legal (1619–1865), and through the Jim Crow era (1877–1968), federal, state, and local governments prevented many Black people from doing things such as earning income, owning property, opening bank accounts, attending school, and accessing health care. With this in mind, Detroit established a task force last year to make recommendations for programs that address historical discrimination against the Black community in Detroit."

port for reparations, but whether exposure to historical facts about government-fostered racial inequality is sufficient to increase support for reparations.<sup>7</sup>

How broad is Detroiters' support for reparations? Our findings demonstrate that support for reparations in the city of Detroit is quite extensive, with 64 percent of Detroiters supporting the provision of some form of payment to Black Americans to counter the impact of slavery and discriminatory policies. Just under a quarter of Detroit households (22 percent) indicated ambivalence or uncertainty about reparations, and said that they "neither support nor oppose." Thirteen percent indicated opposition to reparations for Black Americans. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Black Detroiters were more likely to support reparations for Black Americans than White Detroiters, nearly three of every four Blacks (72 percent) versus significantly fewer Whites (38 percent).

Interestingly, among White Detroiters, higher levels of education and income were associated with greater opposition to reparative policies. Put differently, White Detroiters with more education were significantly less likely to support reparative policies than those with less formal education ( $b = -0.4372$ ;  $p < .05$ ). A similar pattern was found when looking at income: White Detroiters making \$60,000 or more were less likely to support reparative policies than those making less than \$30,000 ( $b = -0.4262$ ;  $p < .05$ ). This pattern of findings is consistent with past work demonstrating that White Americans tend to be relatively unsupportive of race-targeted policies, like reparations, especially when those policies seek to equalize outcomes between Black and White people (Bobo and Kluegel 1993). Perhaps higher-resourced White Detroiters are more resistant to reparations because it threatens their own economic privileges and could possibly raise their levels of zero-sum competition between Black Americans. Further research

about heterogeneity in support for reparations among White people may be a fruitful avenue for future research to better understand what is driving this finding.

Next, we explored how perceptions of racial inequality between Black and White people mapped onto support for reparations for Black Americans, controlling for education, income, age, and gender. Overall, recognition of economic inequality played an important role in levels of support for reparations in Detroit (see table 1). Black Detroiters who said that Black people are a lot worse off economically than White people were more likely to support reparations ( $b = 1.151$ ;  $p < .000$ ). However, this was not true among White Detroiters. White Detroiters' attitudes toward reparations were unaffected by their level of recognition of economic inequality. In turn, efforts to increase these levels might increase support for reparations among Black Americans but would be unlikely to have an effect among White Americans.

Unlike recognition of economic inequality, our other measure assessing awareness of racial inequality, recognition of the legacy of racism, had a broader and more consistent relationship with support for reparations. Among Black ( $b = 0.410$ ,  $p < .000$ ) and White Detroiters ( $b = 0.736$ ,  $p < .000$ ), those who reported high levels of recognition of the legacy of racism were significantly more likely to support reparations for Black Americans than those with lower levels. Interestingly, these findings reveal that recognition of the legacy of racism has a larger impact on White Detroiters than on Black (figure 1).

In our final approach to capturing the effect of knowledge of racial inequality on support for reparations, we explore the effects of providing information about the history of U.S. racism on support for reparations. Interestingly, we find that exposure to historical facts about government-fostered racial inequality had no

7. Given that our measure of support for reparations referenced "the impact of slavery and discriminatory policies" in the question wording, the experimental group received information highlighting the tangible effects of these policies. Because many Americans, and especially White Americans, who do not support structural reforms to address racial inequality are not aware of or do not acknowledge the role of institutional racism, future research should examine additional ways to test the impact of messaging historical facts about racial injustice.

**Table 1.** Relationship Between Awareness of Inequality and Support for Reparations

	Black Detroiters ( <i>n</i> = 1,253)			White Detroiters ( <i>n</i> = 274)		
	Coefficient	SE	<i>p</i> -Value	Coefficient	SE	<i>p</i> -Value
<b>Education</b>						
High school or less (reference category)	0	0		0	0	
Some college/associate degree	0.0822	0.0858	(ns)	-0.4596	0.2226	*
College+	0.0906	0.1010	(ns)	-0.4372	0.2126	*
<b>Age</b>						
<35 (reference category)	0	0		0	0	
35–54	0.1000	0.0989	(ns)	-0.1910	0.2140	(ns)
55–64	-0.0038	0.1237	(ns)	-0.5261	0.2615	*
65+	-0.0239	0.1083	(ns)	-0.2561	0.2072	(ns)
<b>Household income</b>						
Under \$30,000 (reference category)	0	0		0	0	
\$30,000–\$60,000	0.0347	0.0932	(ns)	-0.2850	0.2083	(ns)
>\$60,000	-0.0487	0.1053	(ns)	-0.4262	0.1884	*
<b>Gender</b>						
Male (reference category)	0	0		0	0	
Female	-0.1894	0.0789	*	0.0108	0.1614	(ns)
<b>Recognition of the legacy of racism</b>	0.4099	0.0507	***	0.7357	0.0831	***
<b>Recognition of economic inequality</b>						
A lot better (reference category)	0	0		0	0	
Somewhat better	0.5982	0.3670	(ns)	-0.1943	1.1022	(ns)
Equally well off	0.7819	0.3219	**	-0.1096	1.0508	(ns)
Somewhat worse	0.9217	0.3098	**	-0.4768	1.0490	(ns)
A lot worse	1.1507	0.3094	***	0.5466	1.0553	(ns)
_cons	1.6633	0.3667	***	1.0282	1.0800	(ns)

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: Cell entries report the coefficients of an ordinary least squares regression estimating the likelihood of support reparations, with higher coefficients indicating greater support for reparations. SE = standard error; ns = no significance.

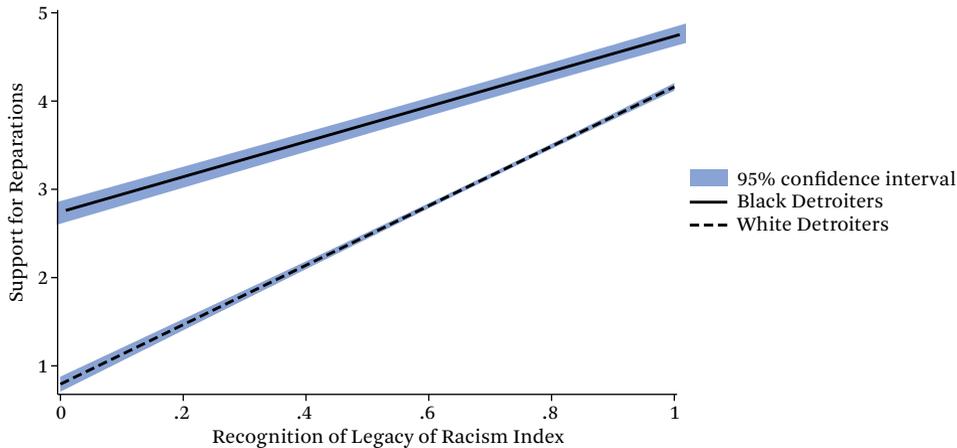
\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

effect on support for reparations among either Black or White Detroiters.<sup>8</sup>

Taken together, these findings show that perceptions about the ongoing and historic harms of slavery and discrimination are

strongly linked to support for reparations. Although recognition of economic inequality is a key predictor of support among Blacks, the targeted beneficiaries of a reparations program, it is not true for Whites. By contrast, rec-

8. It is plausible that our reference to “the impact of slavery and discriminatory policies” in the question assessing attitudes toward reparations essentially “treated” those in the control group with information about institutional discrimination and detracted from any effects of our treatment. However, contemporary forms of racism do not tend to be centered around a denial that slavery or discrimination ever existed—the content referenced in our question wording. Instead, contemporary racism tends to be associated with a lack of acknowledgement that government policies played a central role in creating the racial disparities that persist today (but see Bobo 2011). In turn, by providing examples of both the structural roots of existing racial disparities, as well as specific policies that impeded Black Americans from accessing the traditional tools for accumulating wealth and success,

**Figure 1.** Support for Reparations by Recognition of Legacy of Racism

Source: Authors' tabulation.

Note: Results are presenting the linear prediction for support for reparations, controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, recognition of economic inequality, and recognition of the legacy of racism for Black and White Detroiters, respectively.

ognition of the legacy of racism is a key predictor of support for reparations for both Black and White Detroiters, and the effect is larger in magnitude for Whites. Moreover, although we found support for our hypotheses that inequality perceptions shape support for reparations, experimental findings reveal that prompting Black and White Detroiters with information about the history and ongoing effects of U.S. racism does not affect their support for reparations. These findings shed light on the nuanced role that knowledge and perceptions of racial inequality have on levels of support for reparative policies. Even though inequality perceptions play a role in attitudes toward reparations, especially for potential beneficiaries of a reparations program, basic messaging about historical facts does not appear to be enough to shift such attitudes among either Black or White Detroiters.

### Black Truth Project Results: Understanding Attitudes Toward Reparations Nationally

We next sought to explore the role that political knowledge, both general political knowledge

as well as awareness of racial inequality, play in attitudes toward reparations on a national stage. Is support for reparations a mere function of Americans' awareness of the magnitude of the problem? If so, is it any easier to shift levels of support on a national level than it was in Detroit? Additionally, how do general levels of political knowledge affect support for reparations? General levels of political knowledge are important to consider. Thus the primary goal of our second study was to assess the impact of information about racial inequality on support for reparations for Black Americans among Americans throughout the country. We sought to do so in two ways: first, by administering a standard political information quiz to determine levels of attentiveness to elite political discourse; second, with an experimental design. Political scientists have long relied on political information tests to gauge levels of political knowledge (Iyengar 1990; Zaller 1992). The cardinal logic with this approach is that respondents who are familiar with these basic facts must have acquired the information from reading or watching national news stories.

such as education, property, and investments, our treatment engaged with the specific type of information associated with acknowledging institutional racism. That said, future research should examine additional ways to test the impact of messaging historical facts about racial injustice.

Adopting a strategy employed by the organizers of the American National Election Studies for the last few decades, we measure political knowledge with four questions asking what political office or occupation is held by Nancy Pelosi, Kamala Harris, Boris Johnson, and Benjamin Crump.

General political attentiveness may be associated with support for reparations, but it is also possible that more domain-specific knowledge is required to alter public opinion (Kim 2009; McGraw & Pinney 1990). That is, we sought to determine whether specific information about racial inequality might be necessary to change attitudes about reparations. To test this hypothesis, we randomly exposed some of our study participants to information about the current racial wealth gap between Blacks and Whites based on information from the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances, even as some of our other subjects were merely given a brief definition of the term racial wealth gap.<sup>9</sup>

We present our first set of results in table 2, where we focus first on support for reparations in the form of cash payments to Blacks Americans. The question, similar to what was asked of local respondents, provided historical context. General questions aimed toward assessing attitudes on reparations do not inform respondents that the reparations movement has historically focused not just on the period of chattel slavery but also the lengthy post-Reconstruction period, when it was legally

permissible for government and private individuals to discriminate against African Americans (Darity and Mullen 2022).<sup>10</sup> Even with this additional context, most Whites in our national nonprobability sample (39 percent) oppose or neither favor nor oppose (29 percent) the policy of providing cash reparations to Blacks. Most Blacks however, support (63 percent) or are at worst indifferent (28 percent) to the policy (table 2).<sup>11</sup>

What are the effects of providing individuals with information regarding the racial wealth gap on support for reparations in the form of cash? As in our Detroit study, we find that providing information about the racial wealth gap makes no difference in support for cash payments as reparations. Moreover, and contrary to our expectations, White respondents with higher levels of political knowledge are 20 percentage points less likely to support cash payments. Consistent with previous literature assessing demographic factors in understanding White support for reparations, we found that Whites with higher education, as well as those who identify as liberal, and Democrats, are more likely to support reparations.<sup>12</sup> Black respondents were also unaffected by the experimental treatments. However, those Black respondents with higher levels of political knowledge were more supportive of cash reparations but the results were relatively weaker, at about 6 percentage points between low and high information levels, relative to the effects

9. All participants were provided a definition of the racial wealth gap. The 2022 national experiment had four conditions: four treatment groups and a control group. The treatment groups each received variations on the same information about the racial wealth gap between Blacks and Whites, albeit with slightly different frames. For this article, we have combined all of these treatment groups as our main focus in determining whether any information about the racial wealth gap influences support for reparations. In future work, we intend to explore whether the framing of this information makes a difference for either Black or White Americans.

10. The question was worded as follows: "During the time that slavery was legal (1619–1865), and during the Jim Crow era (1877–1968), federal, state, and local governments discriminated against Blacks and in favor of Whites. Do you strongly favor, favor, neither favor nor oppose, oppose, or strongly oppose the government providing cash payments to Blacks in order to make up for the discrimination that led to the racial wealth gap we see today?"

11. It is difficult to compare these results with the results of national probability samples because most polls on this subject ask only about reparations for slavery, not the near-century of state-sponsored racial discrimination that followed it. Still, it is striking how similar these results are to the results from our Detroit survey.

12. Our results for education here are the opposite of what we find in our Detroit study. It is not clear why we get these discrepant results but it could be explained by sampling differences (such as one study focuses on a single city whereas the other relies on a national sample).

**Table 2.** Effects of Information on Racial Wealth Gap and Political Knowledge on Support for Reparations in the Form of Cash

	Whites	Blacks
No racial wealth information (control)	-.02 (.02)	.00 (.02)
Political knowledge	-.20*** (.03)	.06** (.02)
Female	-.04** (.02)	-.02 (.02)
Education	.15*** (.03)	.04 (.03)
Age	-.01*** (.00)	.00 (.00)
Ideology	.13*** (.03)	.08** (.03)
Partisanship	.19*** (.02)	.11** (.03)
Intercept	.64*** (.04)	.55*** (.03)
Adj. $R^2$	.32	.04
$N$	1,266	1,116

Source: Authors' tabulation based on Litman, Robinson, and Abberbock 2016.

Note: All variables in the model coded 0–1, except for age (eighteen through ninety-four).

+  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

among Whites. As true for our White respondents, identifying as liberal and Democrat is also correlated with support for cash payments among Blacks as well (table 3).

Public discourse surrounding various forms of reparations typically focuses on cash payments; however, cash is only one of many possible forms of reparations. Specifically, in the BTP survey, we asked about reparations in the form of vouchers in addition to cash payments. Again, for both Black and White respondents we found that providing information about the racial wealth gap does not make a difference in supporting reparations in the form of vouchers.<sup>13</sup> White respondents with higher levels of political knowledge were 12 percent less likely to support vouchers, and Black respondents with higher levels of political knowledge were 6 percent more likely (table 4).

What are the partisan differences in the effectiveness of information on the racial wealth gap and political knowledge on support for reparations in the form of cash and vouchers? As reflected in tables 1 and 2, we find that for both White Democrats and Republicans providing information on the racial wealth gap makes no difference in support for cash payments or vouchers. However, White Democrats with higher levels of political knowledge were 16 percentage points less likely to support cash payments and 4 percent less likely to support vouchers. White Republicans with higher levels of political knowledge are 22 percentage points less likely to support cash payments and 23 percentage points less likely to support vouchers (table 5).

In our last set of analyses, we focus on the factors associated with how people account for

13. This question was as follows: "During the time that slavery was legal (1619–1865), and during the Jim Crow era (1877–1968), federal, state, and local governments discriminated against Blacks and in favor of Whites. Do you strongly favor, favor, neither favor nor oppose, oppose, or strongly oppose the government providing Blacks with vouchers that they could use only for starting a small business, putting a down payment on a house, or paying for a child's college education, in order to make up for the discrimination that led to the racial wealth gap we see today?"

**Table 3.** Effects of Information on Racial Wealth Gap and Political Knowledge on Support for Reparations in the Form of Vouchers

	Whites	Blacks
No racial wealth information (control)	-.00 (.02)	-.00 (.02)
Political knowledge	-.12*** (.03)	.06** (.02)
Female	-.04** (.02)	-.02 (.02)
Education	.16*** (.03)	.04 (.03)
Age	-.004*** (.00)	.00 (.00)
Ideology	.14*** (.03)	.07* (.03)
Partisanship	.20*** (.03)	.14*** (.03)
Intercept	.56*** (.03)	.56*** (.03)
Adj. $R^2$	.25	.05
$N$	1,268	1,111

Source: Authors' tabulation based on Litman, Robinson, and Abberbock 2016.

Note: All variables in the model coded 0–1, except for age (eighteen through ninety-four).

+  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$  for two-tailed test

**Table 4.** Effects of Information on Racial Wealth Gap and Political Knowledge on Support for Reparations in the Form of Cash Payments and Vouchers, Whites Only

	Democrats Cash Payments	Democrats Vouchers	Republicans Cash Payments	Republicans Vouchers
No racial wealth information (control)	-.01 (.03)	.02 (.03)	-.04 (.03)	-.05 (.03)
Political knowledge	-.16*** (.04)	-.04 (.04)	-.22*** (.05)	-.23*** (.05)
Female	-.11** (.03)	-.10** (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.02 (.02)
Education	.18*** (.04)	.17*** (.04)	.12** (.05)	.16** (.05)
Age	-.01*** (.00)	-.004*** (.001)	-.006*** (.00)	-.004*** (.001)
Ideology	.05 (.04)	.08* (.04)	.21*** (.05)	.17** (.05)
Intercept	.87*** (.06)	.76*** (.05)	.64*** (.05)	.62*** (.06)
Adj. $R^2$	.24	.16	.27	.17
$N$	541	542	529	531

Source: Authors' tabulation based on Litman, Robinson, and Abberbock 2016.

Note: All variables in the model coded 0–1, except for age (eighteen through ninety-four).

+  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$  for two-tailed test

**Table 5.** Effects of Information on Racial Wealth Gap and Political Knowledge on Reasons for Support for Reparations, Supporters Only

	Whites Improve Relations	Whites Inequality	Blacks Improve Relations	Blacks Inequality
No racial wealth information (control)	-.42 (.91)	-.62* (.27)	-.18 (.21)	-.11 (.20)
Political knowledge	-.91** (.32)	1.73*** (.34)	.22 (.26)	1.52*** (.26)
Female	-.44* (.22)	.55** (.21)	.20 (.17)	.39** (.16)
Education	1.37*** (.39)	.24 (.37)	.19 (.34)	-.67* (.32)
Age	-.01 (.00)	.01+ (.01)	-.01 (.01)	.02** (.01)
Ideology	.06 (.31)	.39 (.33)	-.34 (.31)	.52+ (.29)
Partisanship	-.15 (.29)	.31 (.31)	.00 (.29)	.10 (.28)
Intercept	-1.84*** (.45)	-3.16*** (.47)	-1.00** (.05)	-2.44*** (.37)
Chi sq.	37.15***	64.97***	4.69	68.11***
N	526	526	791	791

Source: Authors' tabulation based on Litman, Robinson, and Abberbock 2016.

Note: All variables in the model coded 0–1, except for age (eighteen through ninety-four).

+  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$  for two-tailed test

their support for reparations and whether these explanations differ by race. Of those Black and White respondents who support reparations, as shown in table 5, we asked what prompted their response. Among Whites with higher levels of political knowledge, the probability of their offer improving race relations as the reasons for their support is about 15 percent. The comparable probability among the least informed Whites is 31 percent. The experimental treatment has no effect on the probability of this explanation. We find stronger results among Whites when it comes to the explanation of confronting persistent racial inequality. Those who support reparations and have the highest levels of political knowledge have a 56 percent probability of offering this explanation. The comparable figure for those at the lowest levels is 18 percent. Also, Whites who do not receive information on the racial wealth gap (the control group) have only a 28

percent probability. Those who are informed about the magnitude of the racial wealth gap, however, have a 42 percent probability. For African American participants, the experimental manipulations were again ineffective at influencing the rationale for support. Still, as with Whites, general political knowledge was associated with a heightened propensity to attribute their support to addressing existing racial disparities. Specifically, the probability that Blacks select this explanation rises by 0.34 points from the lowest to the highest levels of political knowledge.

## DISCUSSION

These results highlight three important takeaways. First, attitudes toward reparations differ between local and national respondents. Second is the racial divide in the effects of higher levels of general political knowledge on support for reparations. That is, higher levels of

political knowledge is correlated with less support from Whites and minimally higher levels of support for Blacks. Finally, perceptions of the existence and magnitude of racial economic inequality matter for understanding predictors of support or opposition to reparations. For Whites, being exposed to information regarding economic inequality and already recognizing the economic inequality that exists in America does not make them any more or less likely to support reparations. This last takeaway is important given the popular belief that opposition to reparations is driven largely by a lack of knowing on behalf of White Americans. Evidence here shows that learning and even already possessing knowledge about the socioeconomic reality of Black Americans does not move White Americans to support reparations.

Despite these findings regarding learning and possessing knowledge about economic inequality, we do find in our local sample that awareness of the legacy of racism does lead to a higher likelihood of supporting reparations among Black and White Detroiters. This silver lining prompts further scholarly inquiry into the role of K-12 and higher education in fostering development of a person's ability to make meaning and understanding of the economic inequality around them. It is very possible that simply knowing or being exposed to information about economic inequality does not equate to understanding how this inequality came to be. Scholarship in the area of political socialization supports this line of inference due to its being a process that begins in childhood during critical developmental stages and continues well into adulthood (Greenstein & Hyman, 1959). Thus, political information digested during this period can have an impact on how individuals come to develop their political attitudes, beliefs, and values. Recent legislative bans on collective efforts to provide this level of understanding of the historic impacts of slavery and discrimination in the United States, including institutional efforts such as diversity, equity, and inclusion programming in higher education and African American history honors curriculum in the K-12 schools further obstruct efforts at helping the public understand the broader history of

racial inequality in the United States. These legislative moves have important implications for future generations' understanding of racial inequality, highlighting the importance of policies that protect or enhance history education. Future research could focus on the role of education increasing support for reparative policies in areas where White respondents have less exposure to material impacts of racial inequity.

Understanding American attitudes toward reparations for African Americans is critical to achieving a successful reparations movement. However, general attitudes of local populations are often left out of the conversation. Given the current geographical racial makeup of the country, any probable federal reparations legislation will effect some cities and or areas of the country more than others. Thus, an inquiry into local attitudes toward reparations is warranted. This is reflected in the differences in support for reparations between nationally representative samples and local samples of respondents. Nationally, nearly half of Americans believe the federal government definitely should not support reparations to the descendants of slaves. Yet, on the local level, we find a majority of Detroiters support the provision of reparations to Black Americans in some form of payment, with the largest group being Black Detroiters. The literature has not yet conducted an extensive examination on the differences in attitudes toward reparations between local and national populations. This work aims to bridge that gap.

Support for reparations appears contingent on a belief that racial inequality resulting from historic and ongoing societal discrimination continues to affect Black Americans today. How people collectively remember historical events in the United States and their awareness of the ongoing impacts of racism shapes how people think about appropriate redress. As a predominantly Black city and one of the most populous metropolitan areas in Michigan, Detroit has a significant impact on electoral outcomes and could prove a bellwether for efforts toward reparations. It also has a long tradition of calling for reparations, making it a strategically relevant area to conduct empirical studies to understand residents' attitudes toward repara-

tions.<sup>14</sup> Taken together, Detroit captures a distinct but relevant illustration of how racial politics and collective memory of racial inequality undergird support for reparative policies. However, the racial demographic of Detroit does not reflect national racial demographics. Thus it is possible that our findings here on support for reparations (64 percent of Detroiters overall) could be explained by the large African American population in Detroit. Despite this being taken into account, White Detroiters (38 percent) are still more likely than White Americans (28 percent) more broadly to support reparations by 10 percent.<sup>15</sup> This difference is likely explained by intergroup contact theory. This theory posits that we can expect higher levels of tolerance and acceptance among White people who have more contact with Black people than those who do not (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998). Previous scholarship contends that a driver of White opposition to reparations is their perceptions of deservingness (Sharpe 2021). However, the literature is not yet settled on why those who perceive African Americans as not deserving feel that way. We provide evidence that White Americans' awareness of the legacy of racism and its impact on Black Americans today is a main driver of support for reparations, at least in the context of Detroit. However, introducing new information about the depths of racial inequality (specifically the racial wealth gap) had no significant impact on reparations support. Additionally, general political knowledge actually decreased support for reparations among Whites in the national sample. These findings suggest that information interventions alone may not be enough to shift support for reparations. Future research should consider how deservingness and responsibility may or may not intersect when an individual is justifying their reasons for opposing reparations.

This work provides evidence that though knowledge about racial inequality can predict support for reparations, it is still possible for individuals to acknowledge racial inequality and the magnitude of said inequality yet still

not support reparations with the exception of awareness of the legacy of racism. Future scholarship on the study of reparations should be cognizant of the difference between believing and not believing racial inequality exists, believing and not believing its magnitude, and further, believing and not believing the negative impact racial inequality has on the socioeconomic trajectory of African Americans.

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14. In 1989 House Representative John Conyers (D-MI) introduced bill HR-40, legislation that would establish a commission to study reparations proposals for African Americans.

15. According to a 2021 UMass Amherst public opinion poll, 28 percent of White Americans support reparations.

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## **IV**

# **Closing the Racial Wealth Gap**

# Closing the Racial Wealth Gap: A Counterfactual Historical Simulation of Universal Inheritance



ASHER DVIR-DJERASSI 

*Since the end of the civil rights movement, the United States has not made meaningful progress toward closing the racial wealth gap. Without deliberate policy intervention, this gap will likely persist. Racial justice activists and policymakers, aiming in part to close this gap, have put forth various reparations programs. Others have proposed race-neutral wealth redistribution policies that also promise to address the gap, but as an indirect consequence of redistributing wealth in general. The potential impact of this second set of proposals on racial wealth inequality remains understudied. This article addresses this deficit through counterfactual historical simulation: By assessing the thirty-year impact of these race-neutral proposals, it finds significant reductions in the racial wealth gap over a generation. Yet these race-neutral programs have limitations vis-à-vis the broader goals of racial justice; this article concludes by emphasizing the unique capacities of reparations programs to address these limitations.*

**Keywords:** racial wealth gap, wealth tax, wealth redistribution, counterfactual historical simulation, baby bonds

In 2014, Ta-Nehisi Coates published a fifteen-thousand-word essay in *The Atlantic* making the case for reparations. In the essay, he sought to move the discussion of reparations for Black Americans from something outside the Overton window to a serious policy proposal (Coates

2014). Since 2014, regardless of the unique contribution of Coates's article, the discourse surrounding reparations for injustices committed against Black Americans has taken a prominent place in public and academic discourse.

During the 2020 Democratic presidential pri-

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mary, for example, the vast majority of candidates pledged their support for a bill to create a commission to study reparations (Jamerson 2019). This bill, H.R. 40, draws its name from the unfulfilled Reconstruction-era promise of forty acres of land for the formerly enslaved. The late congressman John Conyers sponsored this legislation for nearly three decades before it garnered enough support to advance beyond the House Judiciary Committee in 2021 (Hodges, Brown, and Summers 2023). When it did, H.R. 40 had a record 215 congresspeople lending their support (Human Rights Watch 2022).

There are many ways to understand reparations and to characterize the social problem it seeks to address. Like H.R. 40, many cases for a reparations program identify a national reckoning with the history of oppression toward Black Americans as a first step (Coates 2014; Ogletree 2003; Robinson 2001). After recognition, however, and when it comes to redress, a wealth-centric conception of reparations is common. For example, General Sherman's original 1865 promise to the formerly enslaved on the South Carolina coast—arguably one of the first reparations proposals—of forty acres and a mule was a land redistribution scheme and, therefore, a form of wealth redistribution (Sherman 2003, 325–27). A hundred years later, the Black Panthers' Ten-Point Platform called for monetary reparations based on historical theft from Black Americans and Sherman's unfulfilled promise (Newton 1995).

Many contemporary calls for reparations have focused on racial wealth inequality, particularly as measured by the racial wealth gap. For this contemporary camp, current-day racial wealth inequality represents racial injustices of today as well as the continuing legacy of past discrimination (Ogletree 2003) or, as Coates (2014, 23) puts it, the “multi-century plunder of black people in America.” In building his argument for reparations, for instance, Coates emphasizes the postwar exclusion of Black families from widespread homeownership afforded to White families as a particular instance of such discrimination. Exclusionary policies such as these have ripple effects on wealth accumulation over generations. Those who have centered the racial wealth gap in discussions of

reparations argue that this gap expresses a whole lineage of discrimination.

However, even among reparations proposals that target racial wealth inequality, there exist important differences regarding what equality should look like and the form(s) restitution should take. For the 1966 Black Panthers' reparations program, calls for monetary payments stemmed from the identification of a historical debt, but they were not intended to reduce racial wealth inequality through a direct transfer to Black individuals or families nor were they aimed at explicitly closing the racial wealth gap. Instead, as Robert Allen (1998, 3) summarizes, these payments “were to be used to fund a Southern land bank, independent media, training and organizing efforts, and educational initiatives.” In other words, these proposed funds were part of a more general strategy of Black empowerment.

In the decade after the Black Panthers' proposal, the economist and director of the Black Economic Research Center, Robert Browne, argued for a reparations program consisting of a large transfer of wealth to the Black community (Browne 1971). Browne and colleagues made the case that even if ongoing racial discrimination and systemic oppression were to vanish, the legacy of past racial discrimination would intergenerationally continue in the form of wealth disparities. In 1998, Robert Allen, in crafting his own call for a targeted (or graduated) reparations scheme, argued that even though “struggles for civil rights are important . . . [they are] not sufficient. Transfers of capital resources into the African American community must also occur. Such transfers, to be most effective, must be class-based, aimed at benefiting first and foremost the black working class—those who have been most ravaged by the depredations of capitalism and who have benefitted least from . . . the civil rights era” (7).

This line of argument, which emphasizes racial wealth disparities as the central object of a reparations program, also animates this issue of *RSF*. The editors' introduction, for instance, endorses Sandy Darity and Kirsten Mullen's (2020) \$15 trillion reparations program, a proposal designed to fully eliminate the racial wealth gap measured at the mean by distribut-

ing the difference between mean White and Black wealth—roughly \$360,000 in 2019—to descendants of American slavery. This proposal is clearly more expansive, expensive, and ultimately bolder than the programs summarized earlier. In contrast, for instance, Allen’s (1998) proposals called for greater redistribution to poor Black Americans; the graduated design of this proposal would mean that the sheer scale of redistribution would be less than Darity and Mullen’s plan.

In the context of the current lively debate on reparations and the racial wealth gap, policy-makers and scholars have also proposed that various universal tax and transfer policies, which are facially race-neutral, would also make steps toward closing the racial wealth gap. Examples include wealth taxation (Williamson 2020), reforms to capital gains taxation (Holtzblatt et al. 2023), income tax reform (Brown 2022), and baby bonds (Zewde 2020). This article extends this literature by simulating the long-term cumulative impact on the racial wealth gap of two prominent universal inheritance proposals financed by a steeply progressive wealth tax. The article demonstrates that these proposals—which would redistribute resources from predominantly White, affluent households to all children at birth—offer the potential to significantly reduce the racial wealth gap and, given adequate time and specific conditions, potentially even close it.

Moreover, this article further extends this literature by evaluating these universal proposals in light of the policy aims of reparations scholars, many of whom also call for closing the racial wealth gap, but importantly in the service of redressing historical injustice. Universal programs open up a rich set of questions for reparations scholars. Would universal proposals indeed eliminate racial wealth inequality? And if so, are equal wealth outcomes across race enough on their own, or should a reparations proposal do more? Who are the just recipients of reparations? And how does timing affect the integrity of social restitution? These

questions have long roots in debates over reparations. They also touch on the relationship between policy design and processes of social trauma, grief, and healing in the wake of historical injustice.

This article concludes that the universal proposals studied, while substantially equalizing wealth across race, define the just recipients and time horizon needed for restitution differently than race-conscious reparations proposals, ultimately falling short of core policy aims of reparations, including social healing and atonement.

### **SIMULATED WEALTH REDISTRIBUTION PROGRAMS**

Through counterfactual historical simulation, this article investigates the two chief race-neutral wealth redistribution proposals alive in political and academic discourse, models their generational effects, and evaluates the specifications necessary for these proposals to substantially reduce or even close the mean and median racial wealth gap. Both proposals are universal inheritance programs—both would endow all children with wealth at birth; but the two proposals differ in terms of their design. The first is a graduated program put forward by Darrick Hamilton and Sandy Darity (2010), termed baby bonds; it follows in the same tradition as Allen’s (1998) reparations proposal in that it would redistribute more to the children of poorer families, but of course unlike Allen’s reparations proposal, this program would apply to all U.S. resident children, regardless of race. The second is Thomas Piketty’s (2020) universal capital endowment; under this proposal, all young people would receive an equivalent and quite generous wealth transfer. This later program, bracketing its race-neutrality, is similar to Darity and Mullen’s (2020) reparations proposal in terms of its non-graduated design. The historical counterfactual simulation used, treats these proposals as financed by a revenue-neutral wealth tax on the top 1 percent of the household wealth distribution.<sup>1</sup> Given that the top of the wealth distribution is

1. The wealth distribution is defined as the pretax (observed) distribution of household net worth as measured by the Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF) combined with the Forbes 400.

overwhelmingly White, the wealth tax itself would reduce racial wealth stratification.<sup>2</sup>

Although the universal inheritance programs simulated in this article carefully build upon Hamilton and Darity's (2010) and Piketty's (2020) original proposals, particular characteristics of the policies simulated stray from their original design. This is done in order for the simulated programs to be equivalent along all dimensions other than their universal versus graduated design. The simulated programs contrast with their original proposals along the following axes: the sums distributed, the rate of return (RoR) that the wealth endowments garner, and the age at which children are granted the wealth transfer. For example, Piketty's (2020) proposed capital endowment program would guarantee all twenty-five-year-olds a wealth transfer of roughly \$125,000 financed by a highly progressive wealth tax; no particular RoR would be guaranteed on the wealth endowment. Hamilton and Darity (2010), in contrast, called for a progressively distributed, baby bonds program that would grant children at birth up to \$50,000 and guarantee preadult recipients a 2 percent annual RoR.

The policies simulated share the following features: They are modeled as having begun in 1989. The last year for which the effects are analyzed is 2019. All children born in or after 1989 are provided a wealth endowment, such that in 1989 all children age one and younger are modeled to have received a wealth transfer. By 2019, all U.S. residents age thirty and younger would have received a wealth transfer under this

counterfactual scenario.<sup>3</sup> For the universal program, all eligible children receive the same transfer in 2019 dollars at birth. Under the graduated program, eligible children receive one of five transfers denominated in 2019 dollars as a function of their family's net worth according to a schedule shared across all years.<sup>4</sup>

Simulated universal inheritance programs are financed by a revenue-neutral wealth tax on household net worth above the 99th wealth percentile threshold in each triennial Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF) year. The simulation dynamically incorporates the effects of the tax in previous years (that is, the stock of taxable wealth is reduced year-on-year according to the tax rate and threshold in prior years). Wealth tax thresholds are initially calculated in 1989, are last calculated in 2019, and are recalculated every three years between 1989 and 2019. Between triennial survey years (for example, 1990 and 1991), the wealth tax threshold is the same in real terms as the most recent previous survey year (for example, for 1990, the inflation-adjusted 1989 wealth tax threshold is used). Wealth tax thresholds are the same across all programs, although the wealth tax rates do vary as a function of the estimated annual aggregate cost of the transfer programs. The tax is modeled such that the wealth endowment and the returns from the endowment are fully excluded from the wealth tax. Like the decision to make the simulated programs equivalent along all dimensions other than their graduated and universal design, the wealth tax is modeled such that only the tax rate varies between simula-

2. A progressive wealth tax, on its own, would engender greater racial wealth equality per certain metrics (such as the ratio of Black to White mean household net worth), but not for other important metrics (such as the racial wealth gap measured at the median).

3. Under this modeling strategy, U.S. residents who immigrated in adulthood would be assigned a wealth transfer. Neither policy proposal speaks at length about the relationship between the wealth transfer, citizenship, and immigration. However, given that the Black–non-Hispanic White household net worth ratio (the racial wealth gap) is the focus of this article, including or excluding immigrants and non-citizens would not meaningfully change this article's key findings.

4. All monetary values in this article are denominated in 2019 U.S. dollars. Graduated programs could be organized such that the transfer schedule is calibrated to wealth thresholds in each survey year. For comparability across years, however, this modeling strategy was not used. By following a schedule set in terms of constant real 2019 dollars, rather than wealth quintile thresholds, the changing distribution of wealth over time has less of a relationship to the size of the wealth transfer program. Organizing the graduated program as such better facilitates comparison between simulated programs.

tions allowing the focus here to be on the relative impact of size and design of the transfer rather than on the design of the wealth tax program.

For each proposal type—the universal and graduated—a more and less generous version is simulated, for a total of four proposals: a universal program that guarantees an endowment at eighteen of \$50,000; a universal program that guarantees an endowment at eighteen of \$125,000; a graduated program that guarantees, depending on one’s family wealth at birth, an endowment at eighteen between \$10,000 and \$50,000; and a graduated program that guarantees, depending on one’s family wealth at birth, an endowment at eighteen between \$25,000 and \$125,000 (see table 1). Under the graduated versions of these programs, children born into a family with net worth in the lowest wealth quintile (as defined by 2019 quintiles) would be guaranteed the maximum value of the wealth transfer by eighteen—that is, \$125,000 or \$50,000. For each successive quintile of family net worth, the size of the endowment at eighteen would be reduced by one-fifth the monetary value of the maximum endowment.

### Rate of Return on the Capital Endowment

In Hamilton and Darity’s original 2010 baby bonds proposal, the federal government would guarantee a real annual RoR of 2 percent on the capital endowment from birth until age eighteen. This simulation, taking Hamilton and Darity as a starting point, assumes that the federal government would guarantee a real RoR of only slightly more, 3 percent, for endowment recipients from birth until age eighteen.<sup>5</sup> It can be safely assumed that a guaranteed annual RoR may be slightly higher than 2 percent and remain revenue neutral (that is, the federal government would not subsidize the funds in order for them to reach a 3 percent RoR). Average real RoRs of a variety of investments were

higher than 3 percent between 1989 and 2019—S&P 500 (9.27 percent), Baa corporate bonds (6.11 percent), and even ten-year treasury bonds (4.06 percent).<sup>6</sup> In years when the market RoRs are greater than 3 percent, returns on investment would be greater than that needed to maintain a 3 percent RoR on the capital endowment; this extra capital would be used to insure against shortfalls in years when the real market RoR falls below 3 percent.

For the main simulation results, the capital endowment grows at a real 3 percent RoR for adults (when capital endowment recipients are older than eighteen and have autonomy over their capital account). To test the results’ sensitivity to this assumption, an alternative market-based RoR was modeled and the estimates under this specification are compared with the main results in appendix A; assuming a market-based RoR actually reduces the racial wealth gap to a greater extent than the fixed RoR in the baseline specification.

Both the baseline specification and the alternative market RoR specification treat the full endowment as growing at the specified RoR for all years. This effectively assumes that the principal and returns would be reinvested rather than consumed. Such an assumption is in line with the statutory requirements of many state-level baby bonds proposals and enacted state-level baby bonds programs that stipulate the endowment only be dedicated to wealth-generating purposes (Brown and Harvey 2022). Under the recently instituted Connecticut baby bonds program, for instance, recipients may only access these funds on turning eighteen; when the recipient is between eighteen and thirty, these funds may only be used for the following purposes: buying a home, starting or investing in a business, paying for education, and saving for retirement (Connecticut Office of the Treasurer 2023).

As with the Connecticut program, the oldest endowment recipient in this simulation is

5. Eligible children at birth are given an initial endowment equal to what would ultimately accrue to the stipulated value at age eighteen under a 3 percent RoR—for example, \$72,843 for the \$125,000 endowment and \$29,137 for the \$50,000 endowment under the universal design or some value less than equal to this under the graduated design.

6. See Aswath Damodaran, “Historical Returns: Stocks, Bonds & T. Bills with Premiums,” New York University, 2024 (<https://www.stern.nyu.edu/~adamodar/pc/datasets/histretSP.xls>).

**Table 1.** Graduated Program Endowment at Eighteen by Family Net Worth at Birth

Family net worth at birth	Program Type	
	Less Generous	More Generous
Less than \$6,370	\$50,000	\$125,000
Between \$6,370 and \$67,680	\$40,000	\$100,000
Between \$67,681 and \$200,970	\$30,000	\$75,000
Between \$200,971 and \$557,160	\$20,000	\$50,000
More than \$557,160	\$10,000	\$25,000

Source: Author's tabulation.

Note: The graduated programs' family wealth schedule is based on 2019 family wealth quintiles as observed in the Survey of Consumer Finances. The real (inflation adjusted) monetary values of these 2019 thresholds are used for all years.

thirty, which is the age at which the Connecticut legislation no longer requires the endowment to be used for wealth-generating purposes. The results of this simulation can therefore be read as following the same requirements of the Connecticut program, that is, after thirty, the endowment does not need to be used for wealth-generating purposes. Alternatively, the simulation results do not need to be read as the consequence of requiring the endowment to be used for only wealth-generating purposes. Instead, these results may also be interpreted as an approximation of an upper bound. Any program that allows for the capital endowment and returns on the principal to be consumed rather than reinvested will likely tend to see the capital endowment accumulate at a slower pace and likely have a smaller effect on racial wealth inequality.

The baseline simulations explored in this article assume that endowments grow at the same rate for all recipients. However, if Black Americans tended to see lower annual average RoRs, this assumption would bias the simulated outcomes. For reasons related to existing lower levels of wealth ownership among Black families and other features of structural racism, Black Americans may, on average, be more likely to use the capital endowment to buttress economic shocks and may tend to see lower rates of capital accumulation (Shapiro, Meschede, and Osoro 2013; Bhutta et al. 2020). Relative to White Americans, for example, Black American endowment recipients may be more

likely to use their endowment to pay for higher educational expenses in the absence of available family wealth (Addo, Houle, and Simon 2016). Investment in education may tend to be less wealth generating than investment in financial assets (at least before age thirty, the maximum age observed). With respect to non-educational investments, Black Americans may also see lower RoRs. For instance, although Black and White Americans saw highly similar mean returns on real estate from 2000 to 2019, during the Great Recession (2007–2010) Black homeowners saw sizably greater declines than their White counterparts (Aladangady and Forde 2021).

Due to these potential (and even likely) differential RoRs between Black and White endowment recipients, all simulated programs are tested for their sensitivity to equal RoRs. This analysis is conducted via depressing positive RoRs for Black recipients over eighteen by two-thirds and inflating negative RoRs by a factor of 1.33 for both the fixed and market-based RoR simulations. This analysis is explicated in appendix A. In short, though, lower returns for Black recipients tend to reduce the effects of these program on the racial wealth gap but only by a marginal extent; the key takeaways of the baseline analysis still hold when Black recipients garner lower RoRs than White recipients.

#### DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This article draws on data from the Federal Reserve's SCF and the Panel Study of Income Dy-

namics (PSID).<sup>7</sup> The SCF is the gold standard nationally representative surveys of U.S. household net worth. To protect the privacy of respondents, this stratified random sample employs a complex sample weighting scheme and excludes households in the Forbes 400—the wealthiest four hundred U.S. residents. To accurately capture wealth at the top of the wealth distribution, this article follows Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman (2019) in augmenting the SCF to include the Forbes 400.

In addition, this article follows Naomi Zezwe's (2020) example in using the PSID to simulate Hamilton and Darity's (2010) baby bonds proposal. The PSID is an intergenerationally linked panel that allows for the simulated wealth endowments of children to be based on the net worth of their parents at birth. However, its design does not accurately capture the extraordinary skew of the wealth distribution. Therefore, the PSID cannot be reasonably used to simulate a wealth tax, particularly one that is applied solely to the top of the wealth distribution.

To simulate the revenue-neutral wealth tax and its effects, the SCF, augmented by the Forbes 400, is used exclusively. To simulate the transfer component of the graduated programs, the PSID is used; the results are scaled to match the SCF. For the universal programs, the SCF is used. The unit of observation for the PSID and SCF differ; the former uses the family and the latter the primary economic unit (PEU). The PEU is highly similar, but not completely

identical to the concept of a family. However, the Federal Reserve typically refers to PEUs as families in its publications.<sup>8</sup>

The wealth concepts in the SCF and the PSID are approximately equivalent (Pfeffer et al. 2016); both surveys capture roughly the same assets and liabilities. Differences exist in the asset portfolios of respondents in the two surveys, but this is overwhelmingly the result of differences in survey questions and the fact that wealthier households are not as frequently surveyed by the PSID. Variation in asset composition between the surveys is not an issue for this analysis, given that the surveys' overall wealth concepts are closely related. Last, net worth in both the PSID and the SCF+Forbes 400 is adjusted for inflation and is denominated in 2019 U.S. dollars.

The SCF and the PSID both collect information on race. The SCF has several race variables. This article uses the four-category race variable that is reported in the SCF Summary Extract. This variable contains information on the race of the reference person (or the spouse or partner) and takes on one of the following values: Hispanic, Black, White, or Other. Of course, many households are multiracial. The SCF does not allow for a rich evaluation of the incidence of such multiracial households. The PSID is similar to the SCF in that race information is collected for the reference person and the spouse. Future research should address multiracial households and how it affects measures of racial wealth inequality, but this important

7. This article combines the SCF Public Use File (PUF) and Summary Extract Public Data (SCF Extract) to acquire select variables from both versions of the SCF. The SCF PUF contains most original variables from the survey, excluding those the Federal Reserve has deemed capable of identifying survey respondents. The SCF Extract contains a subset of survey variables included in the SCF PUF as well as variables constructed by the Federal Reserve, including household net worth. In lieu of reconstructing the Federal Reserve's net worth measure, the SCF Extract, which includes net worth but not the age of all household members, is combined with the SCF PUF, which contains the ages of all household members but not their net worth. For each household, there are five replicates, each of which have different survey weights. Each household has a unique ID, as does each replicate. By merging on survey year, IDs, and survey weights, each observation in both versions of the SCF is matched.

8. The SCF 2016 codebook defines a PEU as consisting "of an economically dominant single individual or couple (married or living as partners) in a household and all other individuals in the household who are financially interdependent with that individual or couple." Definitionally the PEU and the family are highly similar; however, due to the panel structure of the PSID, the units may differ slightly when members of a sampling unit break off from their family and form their own family.

issue is outside the scope of this article (for more on the race and ethnicity in the SCF, see Bhutta et al. 2020).

### Assignment of the Capital Endowment

The historical counterfactual simulation of these policies includes two components: a simulation of the universal inheritance programs and the wealth tax that would finance them. Each wealth tax and redistribution program is treated as having begun in 1989. The SCF is exclusively used to simulate the universal program and the wealth tax for both programs. The PSID—an intergenerational panel—is used to simulate the graduated program and the estimated results are scaled to match the SCF.<sup>9</sup>

For any year between 1989 and 2019, the maximum eligible age for transfer receipt (the age under which all U.S. residents are universal inheritance recipients) is simply a function of the current year,  $t$ , minus 1989 (that is,  $Max\ Age_t = t - 1989$ ). For those who are over the age of eighteen, the value of their capital endowment in year,  $t$ , is the value of the principal plus the compounded interest earned on the endowment in each year since they were eighteen. Given the structure of the SCF and the PSID, the value of the capital endowment is calculated at the household level. The cumulative value of the capital endowment,  $KE$ , for all members,  $i$ , of household,  $j$ , in each triennial survey year,  $t$ , is equal to the following:

$$KE_{j,t} = \sum_{i=1}^n [KE_i^{Age=18} \times e^{r \times (Age_{i,t} - 18)}]$$

In principle, the assignment of the capital endowment under the universal program is relatively straightforward. However, the SCF uses age categories, rather than a precise and continuous age variable such as the PSID, and these categories vary across survey periods. Appendix B outlines the process by which these coarse age categories were transformed to allow for a reasonably accurate assignment of the capital endowment.

Unlike the universal program, the endowment under the graduated programs is a func-

tion of the recipient's family wealth at birth. The SCF, a cross-sectional survey, does not offer a way of ascertaining an individual's family wealth when they were born; hence the PSID is used to simulate the graduated programs. Family net worth is available for PSID survey respondents in 1989, 1994, and biannually from 1999 to 2019. For children born in a year in which family net worth was not collected, the most recent previous year where net worth was collected is used. Following the schedule outlined in table 1, one of five endowments is assigned under the graduated programs.

As noted, unlike the SCF, the PSID does not capture the full distribution of household net worth. This is a large concern. In the absence of accounting for this downward bias in the PSID, differences in the simulated posttransfer wealth between the universal and the graduated program could be the result of either distinctive effects or disparities between the surveys. To correct for this, scaling factors are found for median and mean family net worth in each year for Black and White families. These scaling factors are the quotient of family net worth in the SCF over that in the PSID. For instance, after estimating posttransfer median Black wealth in the PSID, this result is scaled upward in each relevant year by the following term:

$$Scalar_t = \frac{Median\ Wealth_{Black,t}^{SCF}}{Median\ Wealth_{Black,t}^{PSID}}$$

### Dynamic Wealth Tax Simulation

To determine the distributional impacts of the revenue-neutral wealth tax in each year,  $t$ , between 1989 and 2019, the dynamic effect of the tax is modeled using the SCF such that the stock of taxable assets (assets owned by households above the wealth tax threshold) is successively reduced by the tax over each year. For each year,  $t$ , the wealth tax threshold is equal to the 99th percentile of the household net worth distribution in the triennial SCF survey year,  $t$ , or the most recent previous triennial survey

9. Due to data limitations, Forbes 400 households are not assigned an endowment. Although the proposals do not exclude them from receiving an endowment, simulating it is not possible because Forbes does not provide sufficient information on household structure, including number of children. The effect of this is negligible.

year. Taxable wealth in each year,  $t$ , is defined as the sum of all household net worth greater than the tax threshold in that year for households with net worth above the tax threshold (that is,  $w_j > \text{tax threshold}$ ):

$$W_t^{\text{taxable}} = \sum_B (w_{j,t} - \text{tax threshold})$$

where  $B = \{j \in \mathcal{W} \mid w_j > \text{tax threshold}\}$

The wealth tax rate,  $\tau$ , is equal to the rate that would be required to generate revenue equal to the annual cost of the universal inheritance program; meaning, it is recalculated for each year. For the universal program, the total program cost is the product of the number of children born in that year and the cost per child based on the present discounted value of the endowment at eighteen.<sup>10</sup> This too holds for the graduated program, but the present discounted value of the endowment at eighteen varies depending on the family wealth of the child at birth. For all years, it is assumed that 30, 30, 20, 15, and 15 percent of all children are born into the first, second, third, fourth, and fifth quintiles, respectively. These figures are based on the number of children age one and younger by wealth quintiles per the SCF for the 1989 through 2001 triennial survey years. Across this twelve-year period, the relationship between the number of children born in each wealth quintile is relatively constant.<sup>11</sup>

In the program's first year, 1989, the sum of taxable wealth is directly observed in the combined SCF and Forbes 400 data, allowing for the tax rate to be set trivially as follows:

$$\tau_{1989} = \frac{\text{Program Cost}_{1989}}{W_{1989}^{\text{taxable}}}$$

In 1989, the wealth tax,  $\tau$ , is applied to the sum of taxable wealth to simulate the sum of post-tax taxable wealth in that same year.

Given that the SCF is triennial, the stock of taxable wealth in years between survey years (for example, 1990 and 1991) is found by annu-

alizing the growth rate in aggregate net worth over the tax threshold between survey periods,

$$r_{\{t, t+1\}} = \left(1 + \frac{w_{t+3}^{\text{observed taxable}} - w_t^{\text{observed taxable}}}{w_t^{\text{observed taxable}}}\right)^{\frac{1}{3}}$$

plying the simulated aggregate posttax wealth in the previous year by this annualized term.

To simulate taxable wealth in 1990 (the first relevant year not covered by the SCF), aggregate simulated posttax wealth above the wealth tax threshold in 1989 is multiplied by annualizing the growth rate term,  $r_{\{1989, 1991\}}$ . Posttax taxable wealth in 1990 (simulated wealth exceeding the 1990 tax threshold, accounting for the reduction in taxable assets due to the 1989 wealth tax) is calculated using the following equation:

$$w_{1990}^{\text{post-tax taxable}} = \left( [w_{1989}^{\text{observed taxable}} \times (1 - \tau_{1989})] \times r_{\{1989, 1990\}} \right) \times (1 - \tau_{1990})$$

For all subsequent years (1991 through 2019), simulated posttax taxable wealth is successively calculated as follows:

$$w_{t+1}^{\text{post-tax taxable}} = (w_t^{\text{post-tax taxable}} \times r_{\{t, t+1\}}) \times (1 - \tau_{t+1})$$

Therefore, simulated taxable wealth at time  $t + 1$  incorporates the reduction in the stock of assets above the tax threshold in all prior relevant years, and the tax rate correspondingly adjusts upward to account for the reduction in the volume of taxable assets.

The calculations thus far have focused on aggregates. However, distributional analysis at the household level is necessary to analyze the effects of the wealth tax on racial wealth inequality. Consequently, incorporating these macro-level effects at the micro level (household level) is essential. This entails determining the share of observed household assets exceeding the wealth tax threshold that the simulation estimates would have been directly taxed away or eliminated via the dynamic effects of the tax. This share, denoted as  $\rho$ , is the quotient of the simulated aggregate posttax tax-

10. Statistics on the number of children born are drawn from the United Nation's World Population Prospects (2022).

11. The SCF is used instead of the PSID because the PSID is not fully representative of the wealth distribution; the number of children born in each wealth quintile may be biased toward the middle quintiles if the PSID were used.

able wealth over the observed taxable wealth in SCF survey years. Such analysis is exclusively conducted for SCF triennial survey years since household-level analysis is only reliable for those years.<sup>12</sup> For each household,  $j$ , their post-tax simulated net worth is the product of their observed net worth in excess of the tax threshold (for 99 percent of households this will be zero) times  $\rho_t$ , plus their net worth below the tax threshold:

$$w_{j,t}^{\text{post-tax}} = w_{j,t}^{\text{observed non-taxable}} + w_{j,t}^{\text{post-tax taxable}} \times \rho_t$$

## RESULTS

This section provides a summary of the simulated effects of the universal inheritance and wealth tax proposals. First, it outlines budgetary cost and key characteristics of the wealth tax, providing necessary context. Second, it presents an analysis of the impact of these programs on the mean and median racial wealth gap from 1989 to 2019. Lastly, a closer examination of their effects specifically for the year 2019 is conducted.

### Estimated Budgetary Program Characteristics

Table 2 provides estimates of key characteristics of the four simulated programs across all simulated years. The more universal and the greater the maximum endowment, the greater the cost per newborn. Mean costs per newborn vary between \$21,853 and \$72,844.<sup>13</sup> The cost per child is lower than the amount of the child's endowment at age eighteen because the initial endowments at birth are treated as being kept in a federally insured investment vehicle that would guarantee a 3 percent real RoR until age eighteen. Due to this feature, the inflation-adjusted budgetary cost of the endowment at birth would amount to approximately 60 per-

cent of the accrued benefit to the recipient at age eighteen.

Under the least expensive program (that is, the graduated program with a \$50,000 maximum), the cost per child is equivalent to two years of Head Start, which the Congressional Budget Office estimates at \$10,000 per child per year—or, alternatively equivalent to four years of a Pell Grant, which was around \$5,135 per year in 2018 (CBO 2018). The cost per newborn for the most expensive program is roughly equivalent to nine years of Medicaid for a non-elderly and nondisabled person (CBO 2018).

Average annual outlays required for these proposals would range between \$82 and \$315 billion. The estimated annual program cost for the \$50,000 graduated program is in line with the annual cost estimates of Naomi Zewde's (2020) simulation of the baby bonds program, who estimates that a national baby bonds program would cost around \$80 billion annually. In terms of existing federal outlays, the more modest version of the graduated programs is comparable to the \$91 billion in federal spending for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and child nutrition programs in 2018 (U.S. Office of Management and Budget 2023). The more expensive proposal—the \$125,000 version of the universal scheme—is comparable to one-fifth the cost of Medicare and Medicaid in 2018. In 2019, U.S. GDP was \$21.38 trillion; the cost of the least and most expensive of these proposals range between 0.4 percent and 1 percent of 2019 GDP, respectively.

Additionally, all programs are financed by a revenue-neutral wealth tax. The effect of this wealth tax is incorporated into the overall effect of these programs on racial wealth inequality. The revenue generation from a relatively small wealth tax on the top 1 percent of the family wealth distribution is sufficient to fund all proposed programs. The size of this wealth tax var-

12. For the simulations of the graduated programs, the PSID is used to calculate the transfer effects while the SCF is used to simulate the wealth tax effects. Mean wealth tax effects by race derived from this SCF based procedure are merely added to the PSID based estimated transfer effects to simulate the combined tax and transfer effect by race.

13. The range of average costs per newborn do not vary across years for either the graduated or universal programs. Consistency across years for the graduated program is a mere feature of the SCF's data limitations (where only several years have information on newborns); in a real implementation scenario, the graduated programs would see marginal fluctuations across years in terms of the program cost per child.

**Table 2.** Estimated Program Budgetary Characteristics, 1989–2019

	Simulated Program		Mean	Minimum	Maximum
<b>Cost per newborn</b>	Graduated	\$50K	\$21,853	\$21,853	\$21,853
	Universal		\$29,137	\$29,137	\$29,137
	Graduated	\$125K	\$54,633	\$54,633	\$54,633
	Universal		\$72,844	\$72,844	\$72,844
<b>Annual program cost</b>	Graduated	\$50K	\$88 billion	\$82 billion	\$94 billion
	Universal		\$117 billion	\$109 billion	\$126 billion
	Graduated	\$125K	\$220 billion	\$205 billion	\$236 billion
	Universal		\$293 billion	\$274 billion	\$315 billion
<b>Wealth tax rate</b>	Graduated	\$50K	0.84%	0.44%	1.49%
	Universal		1.17%	0.64%	2.02%
	Graduated	\$125K	2.72%	1.93%	3.99%
	Universal		4.58%	4.20%	5.52%
<b>Wealth tax threshold</b>	All Programs		\$7.52 million	\$4.11 million	\$11.13 million

Source: Author's tabulation.

Note: All amounts in 2019 U.S. dollars. Results are for both universal and graduated programs for all years from 1989 to 2019, even though only relevant Panel Study of Income Dynamics and Survey of Consumer Finances survey years are reported elsewhere. Maximum and minimum refer to the value for the year (1989–2019) when the budgetary characteristic was largest and smallest, respectively.

ies, by policy proposal and year, between 0.5 percent and 5.5 percent of all wealth over the tax threshold. Tax thresholds vary across years given that the programs are simulated such that the tax threshold is equal to the top 1 percent threshold in each triennial SCF survey year. Depending on the year, the tax would apply to the first dollar of family net worth over \$4.11 million to \$11.13 million. The estimated tax rates and thresholds are comparable to the wealth tax programs proposed by Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren during their 2020 presidential campaigns (Saez and Zucman 2019).

### Reduction in the Racial Wealth Gap over Time

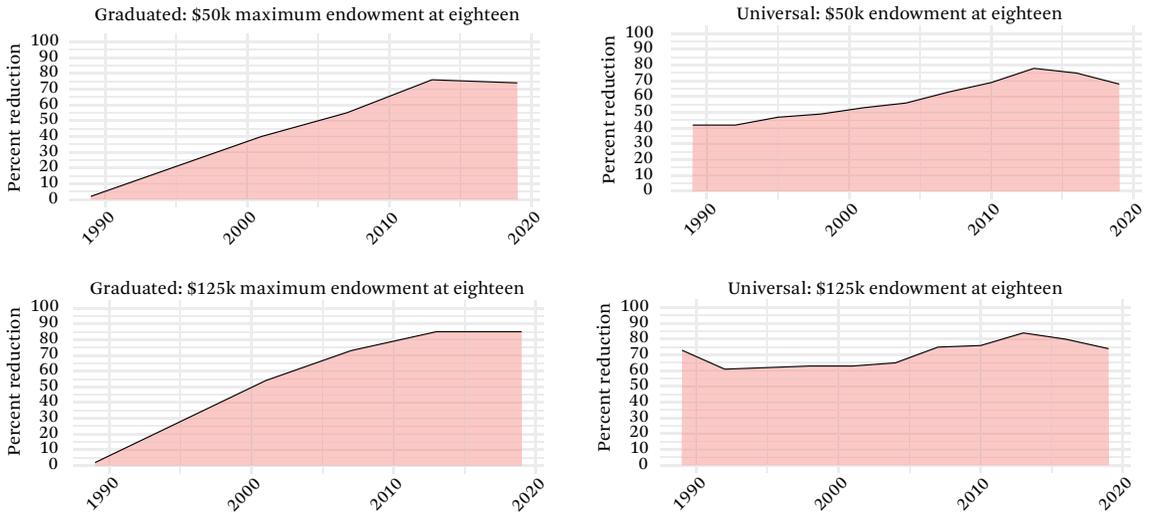
According to these simulations, over the course of a generation, all wealth redistribution programs analyzed would dramatically reduce the racial wealth gap, as measured at both the

mean and the median. Figures 1 and 2 exhibit the percent change in the racial wealth gap at both the median and mean, respectively. Zero percent change would mean that none of the racial wealth gap would have been reduced; 100 percent would mean that the entire racial wealth gap would have been eliminated. The left two graphs in figures 1 and 2 display the results for the graduated programs;<sup>14</sup> the right two graphs display the results for the universal programs.

In the span of generation, had any one of these programs been in place, the median racial wealth gap would have been reduced by between 40 and 75 percent. The scale of this simulated effect is extraordinary. As would be expected, the less generous version of the graduated program has the most limited effect; however, limited is something of a misnomer. For later years, even this most modest program would nearly halve the median racial wealth gap.

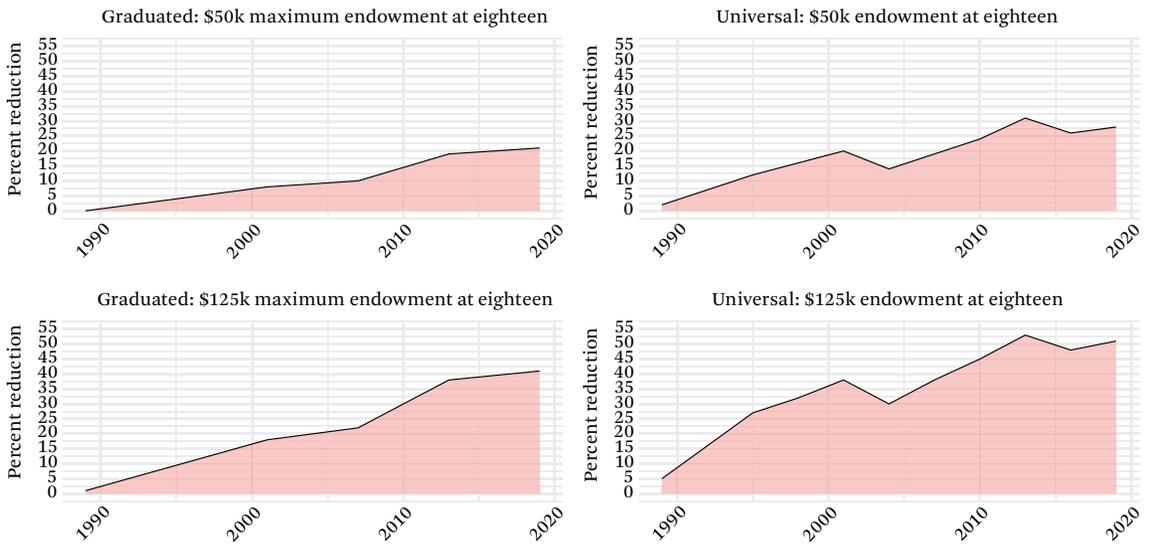
14. For the graduated programs, results are provided for the following years: 1989, 2001, 2007, 2013, and 2019. Only this subset of years is analyzed because these are the only years in which the PSID and the SCF overlap.

**Figure 1.** Simulated Reduction in Racial Wealth Gap at the Median, 1989–2019



Source: Author’s tabulation based on the Survey of Consumer Finances and Panel Study of Income Dynamics.

**Figure 2.** Simulated Reduction in Racial Wealth Gap at the Mean, 1989–2019



Source: Author’s tabulation based on the Survey of Consumer Finances and Panel Study of Income Dynamics.

The results at the mean are equally striking; the simulated programs would reduce the mean racial wealth gap by as much as 50 percent over the course of a generation. As the size of the endowment and the associated budgetary cost increases, the relative effect on the

mean racial wealth gap increases more sharply than the median. The wealth tax is central to this difference. Wealth at the median is not impacted by the wealth tax, only the results at the mean are. As the cost of the programs increase so does the wealth tax rate and, thus, its effects

on the racial wealth gap. Given the relative dearth of Black households in the top 1 percent, the incidence of the tax disproportionately falls on White households. Therefore, the greater the wealth tax, the greater the compound effect on the racial wealth gap over time. For example, the tax effect alone for the costliest program—the universal program that guarantees an endowment of \$125,000—has an equivalent impact to the combined tax and transfer effects of the least costly program—the graduated \$50,000 program. For all four simulated programs, the wealth tax effect accounts for roughly one-fourth of the reduction in the mean racial wealth gap. These results stand in quite sharp contrast to the dominant intuition summarized by Fabian Pfeffer and Robert Schoeni (2016, 16): “Emerging evidence suggests that taxation of wealth . . . may have limited redistributive effects.” Instead, over the course of a generation, the wealth taxes simulated could independently reduce the racial wealth gap by as much 15 or 20 percent.

### Effects on the Racial Wealth Gap in 2019

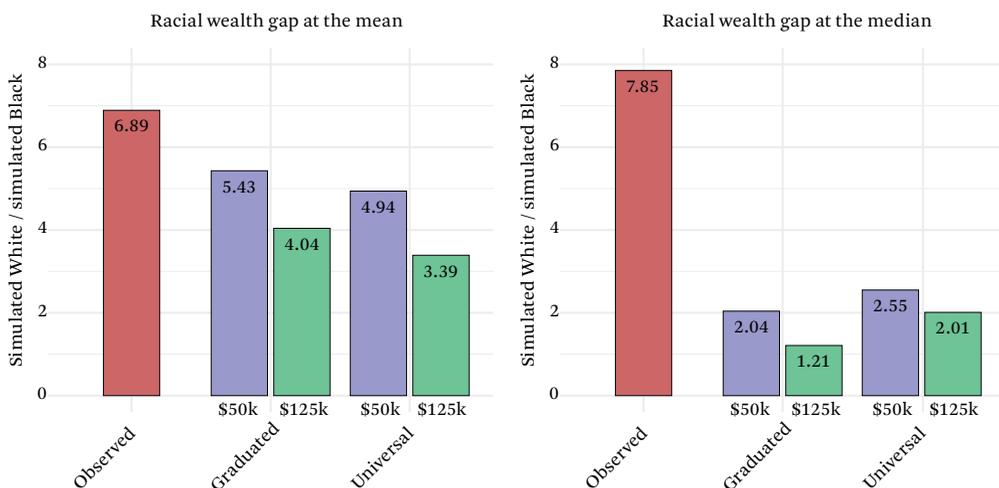
Figures 3 and 4 zoom in on the simulated racial wealth gap in 2019 under all four programs. Like figures 1 and 2, figure 3 displays the racial wealth gap in terms of simulated White posttax and transfer wealth to Black posttax and trans-

fer wealth (at both the mean and the median). For reference, the observed racial wealth gap in 2019 is provided at the far left of each bar graph. The closer the ratio is to 1, the closer the results approximate racial wealth equality.

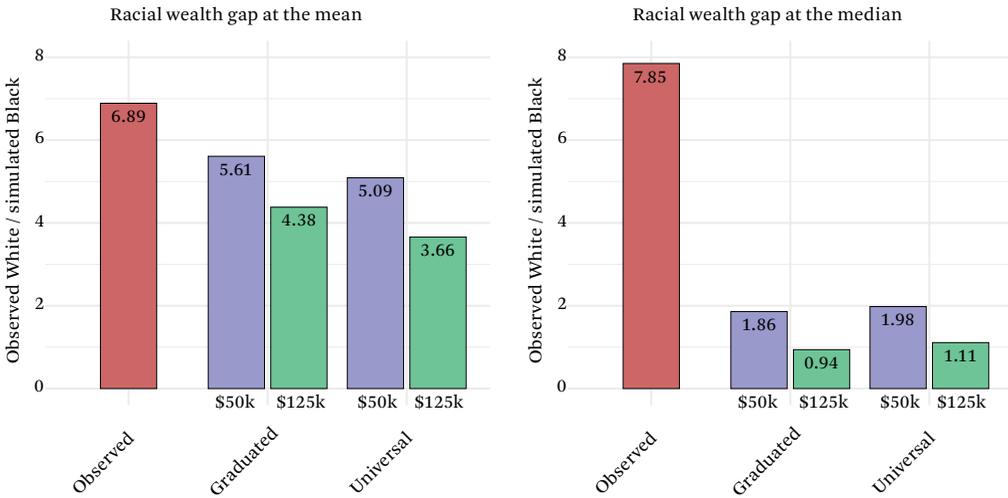
The simulated proposal capable of the deepest reductions in the mean racial wealth gap is the costliest: the universal program. But the program with the sharpest reductions in the gap at the median by 2019 is in fact a less costly program: the graduated version of the \$125,000 program. As established, the more dramatic results at the mean are due to the tax effect. At the median, where tax effects are absent, the \$125,000 graduated program—a program with a budgetary cost of roughly two-thirds of the equivalent universal—would actually have a greater effect.

Turning to figure 4, the ratio of observed White wealth to posttax and transfer Black wealth, the established relationship continues: at the median, graduated programs have a greater effect on racial wealth inequality than universal programs, whereas at the mean we see the opposite effect. When looking at the simulated results from this perspective, an important finding is uncovered: after thirty years, both the graduated and universal \$125,000 programs would reduce racial wealth inequality by such a margin that simulated median Black

**Figure 3.** Ratio of Simulated White Wealth to Simulated Black Wealth, 2019



Source: Author’s tabulation based on the Survey of Consumer Finances and Panel Study of Income Dynamics.

**Figure 4.** Ratio of Observed White Wealth to Simulated Black Wealth, 2019

Source: Author's tabulation based on Survey of Consumer Finances and Panel Study of Income Dynamics.

wealth is estimated to be equivalent to median White wealth observed in 2019.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the span of thirty years, a race-neutral universal inheritance program financed by a highly progressive wealth tax would substantially reduce the mean racial wealth gap and, under certain conditions, even eliminate the median racial wealth gap. From these results, answers can be offered (albeit tentative and partial) to the exploratory question posed at the beginning of this article and highly relevant to this issue of *RSF*: Are these race-neutral wealth redistribution schemes capable of adequately contending with the racial wealth gap and, depending on the answer to this question, what are the unique advantages (both economic and noneconomic) of a strict reparations program?

To answer these animating questions, the following points are discussed and evaluated. First, a summary is provided of the potential and shortcomings these wealth redistribution proposals may have for achieving racial wealth equality; their simulated outcomes are contextualized in question of whether closing the racial wealth gap at median is a sufficient goal or whether closing the gap at the mean is a more complete measure of racial wealth equality

(particularly per the precepts animating the discourse over reparations). Next, the question is posed: Who pays for this wealth transfer? Overwhelmingly, wealthy White households do; this result is evaluated in terms of the normative principles of reparations. Then, the promises and shortfalls of designing a reparations program in the mold of the programs simulated here are considered; as part of this, the economic advantages of a strict reparations program for achieving racial wealth equality are discussed. This section concludes by discussing the ways—particularly noneconomic ways—in which these race-neutral proposals are incapable of achieving certain objectives of strict reparations programs, but also the ways in which these race-neutral proposals may open doors for imagining what reparations can look like.

### Promises and Limitations for Achieving Racial Wealth Equality

Racial wealth inequality is shockingly persistent. Ellora Derenoncourt and her colleagues (2022) show that it has been stagnant since the end of the civil rights movement. How can this persistence desist? This article finds that one answer may be in a universal inheritance program financed by a wealth tax. As established,

all four programs simulated would dramatically reduce racial wealth inequality within thirty years. However, differences between the programs are important. It is clear that the larger the size of the endowment (the larger the transfer payment), the greater the tendency toward racial equality. This is true for both universal and graduated programs as well as for both the racial wealth gap measured at the mean and the median.

Although this article unsurprisingly establishes the greater the endowment, the greater the effect, it does not provide an unambiguous answer as to whether a graduated or a universal program would be better at reducing racial wealth inequality. The universal program would be unambiguously more effective at reducing the mean racial wealth gap (figure 3); this is largely due to the mean capturing the effect of the wealth tax and the greater the program costs, the greater the tax burden. Over a generation, the simulated wealth taxes independently reduce the mean racial wealth gap by as much 20 percent. At the median by 2019, however, the graduated program would be even more effective (figure 3); however, this greater effectiveness comes at the cost of time. It would take thirty years for the graduated program to become more effective than the universal and substantial reductions would be immediate from the universal program. Weighing these pros and cons is outside the scope of this article. These differences, however, raise complicated normative and distributional questions. Future research should look into the effects of such proposals on other distributional dimensions beyond the racial wealth gap (for example, asset poverty, the share of families with negative net worth).

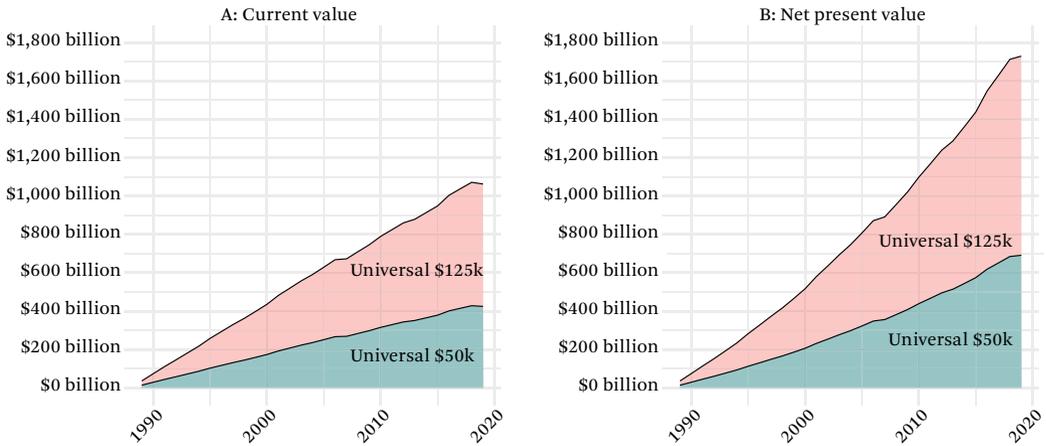
Although these proposals promise to dramatically reduce racial wealth inequality, they would not do so instantaneously (particularly in the case of the graduated proposals). If the simulations were to continue into the future, the effects would continue to compound and, conceivably, all proposals would tend to close the median racial wealth gap and, for some, the gap at the mean as well. However, this time horizon may be too sluggish. And, if the ultimate measure of racial wealth equality is White-Black parity at the mean, these programs' pace

may be of particular concerns. This, for instance, is the opinion of the editors of this issue, who write in the introduction that these "simulations demonstrate that race-neutral baby bonds cannot close the mean racial wealth gap over a reasonable time scale. They can, however, virtually close the median racial wealth gap" (Darity et al. 2024).

William Darity and Kirsten Mullen (2020) view the elimination of the mean racial wealth gap as a crucial normative objective, representing the culmination of cumulative intergenerational discrimination and oppression. Achieving closure at the mean within a single generation would require a distinct proposal. Alternatively, from perspectives such as those advocated in Robert Allen's (1998) reparations program, which prioritize the economic empowerment of the most disadvantaged Black families, targeting the eradication of the median racial wealth gap might be considered a more fitting aim. Universal inheritance proposals could potentially contribute to this objective.

### Who Would Pay for Wealth Redistribution?

Like many reparations proposals, the programs simulated are fully federally financed by a revenue-neutral wealth tax on the top 1 percent. This tax reduces the wealth holdings of White families to such a greater degree than Black families that the financing itself mechanically reduces racial wealth inequality. For any year considered (1989–2019), more than 85 percent of assets above the simulated wealth tax threshold were held by White families; less than 1 percent were held by Black families. Figure 5 shows the cumulative transfer of wealth from White to Black households for the two universal programs simulated under both the current value and the net present discounted value (at a 3 percent discount rate). The cumulative transfer over thirty years ranges from \$400 billion to a whopping \$1.8 trillion. These ostensibly race-neutral taxes fall disproportionately on White households and redistribute wealth from White to Black families. Arguably much of this wealth was intergenerationally accumulated and often accumulated at the expense of Black families.

**Figure 5.** Cumulative Wealth Transfer from White to Black Households, 1989–2019

Source: Author's tabulation based on the Survey of Consumer Finances.

Note: Amounts in 2019 U.S. dollars.

### Can these Programs Serve as a Model for Reparations?

Thus far, this article has explored whether these proposals may achieve comparable ends to those of wealth-focused reparations programs. Now, consider in what ways the organizational form of these proposals may serve as a model for strict reparations proposals (that is, non-race-neutral versions of the proposals considered).

The clearest answer to this question is the financing mechanism. A wealth tax on the top 1 percent would effectively transfer resources (largely, intergenerationally accumulated) from wealthy White households to Black households. For the highest tax rate simulated, the cumulative thirty-year net present discounted value of the wealth tax revenue would approach the budgetary cost of Darity and Mullen's (2020) reparations proposal.

On the other hand, a shortfall of the proposals explored in this article is that, by design, only children and future generations benefit directly. Of course, families transfer resources between members, such that all family members may benefit indirectly. Regardless, though, a reparations program designed as a transfer at birth would not directly serve as redress for most living Black Americans and living ancestors of American slavery. If these important normative considerations could be bracketed,

though, a transfer at birth has two important benefits: first, costs are spread, abrogating significant macroeconomic (inflationary) concerns, and, second, successive future generations of Black Americans or descendants of slaves would be guaranteed recipients of a wealth transfer.

An inheritance design is in line with Roy Brooks's (2004) atonement model of reparations. Under this proposal, an atonement trust fund would be established for all Black children born for a certain period after the reparation program is enacted; Brooks suggested twenty-five years. The fund would transfer resources to these newborns. The results of this article show that such a time-limited fund may have strong effects depending on its design and the transfer allocated, but it would likely not bring forth full racial wealth equality; for this, more time would be needed. Additionally, as the editors remark in their introduction, a time-limited program would affect few Black Americans; a wealth inheritance entitlement that would continue in perpetuity would fall short of targeting adults, yet still would guarantee redress for future generations.

### The Limits of Race-Neutral Programs and the Unique Capacities of Reparations

When asked what reparations should look like, Ta-Nehisi Coates remarked on what he saw as

two keys aspects: documentation of the crimes committed to Black Americans—“You need the official imprimatur of the state: they say this actually happened”—and linking reparations to “specific acts” (*New Yorker* 2019). Coates’s comments point toward a tendency for reparations proposals to consist of both a case for redress and atonement, and the actual compensation that emanates from this.

In line with this tendency for reparations proposals to ask for both an account of past harms and material redress, Brooks’s (2004) reparations proposal calls for financial redress to Black Americans at birth, a formal apology, and a museum of slavery. Like Brooks, Kathryn Edwards and her coauthors (2024) argue that atonement for historical crimes and injustices are key features needed for a true reparations program. For Edwards and her colleagues, this atonement process ought to be ongoing and led by the victimized community. Echoing these positions, Coates argues, “Reparations—by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences—is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely” (*New Yorker* 2019).

The race-neutral programs considered here do not have the capacity to address historical crimes and certainly are not able to speak to atonement; this limitation points to one of the ways a race-neutral program cannot replace full reparations, no matter how transformative their consequences. However, if these race-neutral wealth redistribution proposals were in place and the forms of racial wealth inequality these programs could deal with were being addressed, would this open a door for forms of redress that could only be offered by a strict reparations program? And connected to this question, what alternative ways are on offer to “see ourselves squarely,” to quote Coates?

As explored at beginning of this article, not all calls for reparations have centered or even included the leveling of the wealth divide. In 1973, Yale Law professor Boris Bittker, for instance, argued in *The Case for Black Reparations* for a program to close the Black-White income gap. Randall Robinson, in his book *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*, argued for a repa-

rations program that would create a need-based educational scholarship trust fund for Black Americans. Elizabeth Wrigley-Field (2024) makes a case for a health-based reparations program sourced in the shocking gap in Black-White life expectancy.

If race-neutral proposals were able to accomplish the individual redistributive goals of many reparations programs, namely, closing the racial wealth gap, would space open for alternative forms of redress? Such forms could include a health-based reparations program à la Wrigley-Field (2024), state and local reparations programs—many of which are reviewed in this issue—or other collective and institutional empowerment projects. Such a collective empowerment version of reparations was core to the Black Panthers’ 1966 reparations program, for instance. For them, financial reparations were sought as part of a general program of Black empowerment.

In sum, the revenue-neutral programs simulated here are not reparations; they are not capable of tackling many of the core issues raised in the debate over Black reparations in America. But, of course, these proposals are not designed for this. These proposals do have the capacity to strongly contend with racial wealth inequality, despite their shortcomings, which have been reviewed in this section. The shortcomings of these proposals point to where a strict reparations program can only offer answers; but the promise these proposals have for tackling racial wealth inequality may open doors for alternative versions and conceptions of reparations, many of which are discussed elsewhere in this issue.

#### APPENDIX A. SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS OF ESTIMATES TO VARYING RATES OF RETURN

The baseline estimates assume that the endowment grows at 3 percent per annum in real terms. This assumption, however, may bias estimates on two grounds.

First, the baseline estimates use a fixed RoR rather than a market RoR. To test the sensitivity of the baseline estimates to this assumption, an alternative market-based RoR is applied when the recipients are over

eighteen.<sup>15</sup> Table A.1 shows that the use of a market-based RoR versus a fixed RoR of 3 percent has little effect. The estimated reduction in the racial wealth gap at the mean and the median is actually greater when assuming a market-based RoR versus a fixed 3 percent RoR.

Second, the baseline estimates treat Black and White recipients as garnering the same RoR. To test the sensitivity of assuming equal RoRs for both Black and White recipients (termed homogenous RoR in table A.1), additional simulations are run that assume the RoR in adulthood for Black recipients is two-thirds that of White recipients (and one-third greater in absolute terms when market RoRs are negative). Under this assumption (termed heterogenous RoR in table A.1), estimated reductions in the racial wealth gap tend to be smaller; but, relative to the baseline estimates, the effects are minor and do not change the results and their implications in any meaningful ways.

#### APPENDIX B. TREATMENT OF AGES IN THE SCF ACROSS SURVEY PERIODS

The SCF Public Use File (PUF) includes household member ages for all survey years, with families (PEUs) capped at twelve members. However, the coding of children's ages varies inconsistently over time. In 1989, ages are rounded to the nearest five years for most family members, except for one- and two-year-olds, and the reference person and spouse. From 1992 to 2001, ages are not rounded, except for children under one year, who are assigned a value of  $-1$ . In 1992 and 1998, a few children are assigned  $-1$ . To standardize, these children are coded as age 1.

From 2003 to 2019, the ages of the reference person and spouse remain as reported. For

other family members, ages are grouped non-linearly: up to age 3 is coded as 3, 4–6 as 6, 7–12 as 12, 13–17 as 17, 18–25 as 25, 26–30 as 30, and incrementally by five years thereafter, with the maximum age capped at ninety-five for all years. For all coarse age groups, the capital endowment is multiplied by the midpoint of the age range. In the 1989 SCF PUF, few children have ages less than one. It appears that most children under one were recorded as one year old. Thus, ages equal to one are adjusted to half. For rounded age values, the midpoint of the category is used to calculate the capital endowment. For instance, children listed as age three in the survey years 2004 through 2019 could be under one, two, or three years old. The median value for this age group is two. Given minimal variation in aggregate births between neighboring years, this method is unlikely to significantly skew the simulation outcomes.

For survey years with age categories that don't encompass all members eligible for a capital endowment, a reduced capital endowment is still allocated to all individuals. This reduced value is calculated by dividing the number of eligible ages in the category by the total number of ages. For example, in 2004, the maximum eligible age for a capital endowment is fifteen. Young adults aged thirteen to seventeen are grouped and assigned an age of seventeen. So, three-fifths of this group (ages thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen) are eligible for the endowment, while sixteen and seventeen are not. Each individual in this cohort is assigned the median eligible age (fourteen). The present discounted value of the capital endowment for a fourteen-year-old in 2004 is calculated and assigned to all observations in this age category, but it's multiplied by three-fifths to ad-

15. The market RoR used is the real annual average RoR of defined contribution pension plans as reported on form 5500 and compiled by the U.S. Department of Labor. Defined contribution pension plans are an appropriate analogue for how capital endowments would be invested in the market; defined contribution plans are invested in a variety of financial assets, they typically allow for the plan owner to select different levels of risk (adding variability for risk preference), their returns reflect market conditions, and they are organized similarly to a child development account—a precursor to current baby bonds proposals (Sherraden 1991) and a potential model for large-scale wealth redistribution (see Shanks et al. 2024, this issue). These rates of returns are reported by the Department of Labor in table E20 in the publication "Private Pension Plan Bulletin Historical Tables and Graphs."

**Table A.1.** Sensitivity of Estimated Reduction in Racial Wealth to Assumed Rate of Return on Endowments (2019 Simulated Results)

Program Type	Endowment Type	Endowment RoR After Age Eighteen	Reduction in the Racial Wealth Gap						
			Reduction at the Median			Reduction at the Mean			
			(1) Homogenous RoR	(2) Heterogenous RoR	(1) - (2)	(1) Homogenous RoR	(2) Heterogenous RoR	(1) - (2)	
<b>Universal</b>	\$50K	(a) market	69.22%	65.72%	3.51 pp	30.92%	28.36%	2.55 pp	
		(b) fixed	67.52%	66.87%	0.65 pp	28.24%	27.57%	0.66 pp	
		(a) - (b)	1.70 pp	-1.15 pp		2.68 pp	0.79 pp		
	\$125K	(a) market	76.10%	73.57%	2.53 pp	53.64%	50.58%	3.06 pp	
		(b) fixed	74.40%	73.58%	0.82 pp	50.76%	49.93%	0.82 pp	
		(a) - (b)	1.70 pp	-0.01 pp		2.89 pp	0.65 pp		
	<b>Graduated</b>	\$50K	(a) market	74.20%	73.55%	0.65 pp	23.25%	21.37%	1.88 pp
			(b) fixed	74.05%	74.05%	0.00 pp	21.19%	20.71%	0.48 pp
			(a) - (b)	0.15 pp	-0.49 pp		2.06 pp	0.66 pp	
\$125K		(a) market	83.54%	83.35%	0.19 pp	44.16%	41.50%	2.66 pp	
		(b) fixed	84.52%	84.40%	0.12 pp	41.40%	40.70%	0.70 pp	
		(a) - (b)	-0.98 pp	-1.05 pp		2.76 pp	0.80 pp		

Source: Author's tabulation.

Notes: pp = percentage point. Fixed rate of return (RoR) refers to the baseline 3 percent annual RoR. Market RoRs are derived from the average real RoR of defined contribution pension plans as reported by the Department of Labor's Form 5500 for the years 2008 to 2019 (the years in which at least some fraction of endowment recipients are nineteen and older). The market RoR is only applied to wealth transfer recipients who are nineteen and older. Under all heterogeneous RoR specifications, Black endowment recipients garner a lower RoR. For the specification where RoRs are both fixed and heterogeneous by race, Black recipients garner an annual RoR that is two-thirds the RoR of Whites, that is a real RoR of 2 percent. For the specification where RoR are market-based and heterogeneous by race, Black recipients see a RoR that is two-thirds the average annual RoR in years where average annual RoR were positive; in years where the average annual RoR are negative, Black recipients see a RoR that is 33 percent more negative than average annual RoR.

just for the ineligible fraction. A mixture of eligible and non-eligible ages occur in five age categories for the survey years 2004 through 2016: (1) thirteen through seventeen in 2004, (2) eighteen through twenty-five in 2007, (3) eighteen through twenty-five in 2010, (4) eighteen through twenty-five in 2013, and (5) twenty-six through thirty in 2016.

After obtaining the fraction of ages eligible for the capital endowment in each survey year, the capital endowment,  $KE$ , for each individual,  $i$ , is estimated and multiplied by this eligible age term:

$$KE_{i,t} = [KE_i^{Age=18} \times e^{r \times (Age_{i,t} - 18)}]$$

*Fraction of ages eligible*

This procedure allows for the reasonable assignment of the capital endowment even when only coarse age categories are available.

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# A Policy Platform to Deliver Black Reparations: Building on Evidence from Child Development Accounts



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*Successful Black reparations require a policy for delivering payments, one that provides for effective identification, disbursement, asset protection, and asset growth over time. In this article, we suggest a structural solution (structured wealth accumulation of reparations payments) to a structural challenge (deeply embedded racial wealth inequality). Analyzing evidence from a longitudinal experiment, we find that Child Development Accounts (CDAs)—a carefully designed and tested asset-building policy for children—provide a model that can inform effective delivery and sustainable growth of reparations. CDA policy models a system of potentially lifelong, centralized asset building, with automatic enrollment, sensible investment options, structured asset protections, low fees, asset growth, and investment targets to achieve individual and family goals. Policy and research implications for Black reparations and reduction in racial wealth inequality are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Black reparations, policy delivery, racial wealth inequality, Child Development Accounts, lifelong asset building

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Wealth inequality is extreme in the United States, having increased over the last four decades (Saez and Zucman 2020), and the gap between races is especially pronounced, with Whites holding six or more times the net worth of Blacks (Aladangady, Chang, and Krimmel 2023; Bhutta et al. 2020). Racial wealth inequality is built into the country's history and into current social and economic structures. It is purposeful and persistent. Despite passage of economic reforms and various civil rights bills, racial wealth inequality remains shockingly high (Fergus and Shanks 2022; Shapiro, Meschede, and Osoro 2013).

What might be a solution? A majority of Black adults in the United States (77 percent) think that descendants of people enslaved in the country should be compensated in some way, and 30 percent of all U.S. adults now agree with this position (Pew Research Center 2022). The percentages reflect a notable recent change in public awareness and opinions regarding reparations. Never since the unfulfilled pledge of forty acres and a mule (Oubre 1978) and the uneven allotment of land under the Homestead Act (Williams 2003; Williams Shanks 2005)—during and after the Civil War—have reparations been as much on the table for policy consideration (for a fuller account, see Darity et al. 2024, this issue).

Americans who support reparations were recently asked about particular forms and purposes of repayment. Among surveyed Blacks, 76 percent supported financial assistance in buying or remodeling a home, 77 percent supported financial assistance for starting or improving a business, and 80 percent supported educational scholarships (Pew Research Center

2022). These findings highlight two key suggestions from the Black community. First, reparations should be provided in the form of substantial fund disbursements that are owned and controlled by recipients. Second, a significant number of Black individuals expressed a preference for utilizing these payments to create assets that can contribute to long-term growth and development.

The highest priority of reparations should be autonomy. As noted in the introduction to this issue (Darity et al. 2024) and described elsewhere (Darity and Mullen 2020), a direct monetary component is important because of its symbolism and autonomy given that many Black Americans have been deprived of such self-determination during most of U.S. history. Similarly, the introduction emphasizes that recipients should be allowed to use any disbursement for purposes they choose without paternalistic micromanagement.

In addition, it may be beneficial to support a portfolio of disbursements to enable Blacks to protect and grow their assets, which they could use to develop their families and communities. Ideally, the uses of such funds would be consistent with best practices for expanding postsecondary access and success, supporting homeownership and home repair, and promoting business start-up and improvement while intentionally sustaining Black-run institutions that enable success in these areas (Williams Shanks, Boddie, and Rice 2010; Williams Shanks, Boddie, and Wynn 2015). This study explores different forms for the delivery of reparations and proposes that Child Development Account (CDA) policy—a carefully designed and tested asset-building policy for children—

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provides a structural model that can inform effective delivery and sustainable growth of reparations.

### **DELIVERY VISION AND OPTIONS**

For reparations, it matters how payments and resulting assets will be delivered and controlled by Black families, and what the funds accomplish over time in reducing wealth disparities and generating social and economic development in Black families and communities. The vision aims for sustained advances in equity and long-term well-being.

In this understanding, reparations aim to atone for slavery and to mitigate slavery's economic, social, and political harms, which did not end with slavery's abolition. They have been carried forward and expressed in Jim Crow policies (DuBois 1970), racist policing, mass incarceration of Blacks (Alexander 2010), redlining, voting suppression in many forms, and other discriminatory practices. These conditions continue into the present, severely undercutting the ability of Black families to participate in and benefit from American institutions. In other words, slavery did not merely steal wealth. It also reduced opportunities, lifespans, and freedom of self-determination (see Wrigley-Field 2024). We suggest that reparations should be guided by the large vision that Black families can reach their full potential in access to all of America's institutions. In short, this vision goes beyond a focus on the amount of a direct cash payment. It also attends to effective delivery, protection, and growth of assets over time.

Ultimately, decisions about reparations delivery will determine the policy's objectives, effectiveness, and impacts. Detailed considerations for reparations design have been discussed by others (Darity and Mullen 2022; Logan 2023). What are the policy design options? To set a frame for discussion, we identify three major alternatives: reparations in the form of direct cash transfer without an account structure, reparations in the form of resources held in a trust fund, and reparations in the form of assets held in a savings plan structure. Each has advantages and disadvantages, which we briefly summarize in the next section.

### **Direct Cash Payment**

Many discussions of reparations assume a cash payment or payments (for example, Darity and Mullen 2022; Darity, Mullen, and Hubbard 2023). A large, one-time cash transfer seems to be assumed in many reparations discussions. A possible alternative is a series of smaller payments over time (Darity, Mullen, and Slaughter 2022). The large advantages of cash payments are delivering assets directly into the hands of recipients and making them available for immediate use with no need to design asset holding and investment arrangements. The major disadvantage is risk of asset depletion and losses. In general and on average, humans are not very good at asset management (Frydman and Camerer 2016). This is the reason Andrew Carnegie created TIAA (a savings plan), so that college professors would not be living in poverty in old age. The cash approach to reparations delivery would provide no policy support for asset protection and growth. Thus it is more of a point-in-time distribution than a policy structure. Nevertheless, it is a viable option. If families prefer to take reparations as cash, this choice should always be available.

### **Assets in a Trust Fund**

Some proposals for wealth distribution and holding take the form of a trust fund, which can take many, varied forms and involve diverse arrangements. In general, a trust fund refers to an instrument whereby wealth is held by an overseer (in a federal policy, this would likely be the federal government), to be paid out to individual beneficiaries at some future time. A trust fund may or may not keep track of individual wealth as "notional" individual accounts.

For a historical example of a racial wealth trust fund, we turn to Individual Indian Money accounts, which were originally set up by the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, to manage funds "paid" to American Indians following passage of the Dawes Act of 1877 and to hold other funding flows in subsequent years. However, the accounts were grossly mismanaged by the federal government, with most records severely damaged or lost. Legal challenges arose near the end of the twentieth century, led by Elouise Cobell, a

Blackfeet from Montana. The Bureau of Indian Affairs dragged their feet. In her older years, Cobell finally agreed to a settlement of \$3.4 billion as compensation for lost assets valued at many times that amount. This partial remedy is now being used constructively by Native Americans, but most of the losses will never be recovered (for a chronology of this policy disaster, see Friends Committee on National Legislation 2016).

A parallel to this tragic loss of racial wealth is the failure of the Freedman's Bank during the collapse of Reconstruction and severe depression of 1874. The bank failure was due in part to the largely White board of directors making questionable loans to friends and business partners (Fergus and Shanks 2022; Oubre 1978). These lost deposits were not in a trust fund but instead overseen in a similar spirit by the federal government. Black savers lost all their wealth, and many did not trust banks for generations thereafter. Overall, the U.S. government has an unfortunate history in managing funds on behalf of communities of color. Perhaps this could be different in the twenty-first century, but little policy experience suggests that.

Advantages of the trust fund idea are that it has the appearance of asset protection (via government oversight) and can result in a predictable payout. Also, investments can be purposefully conservative, with the aim of avoiding declining asset values. Disadvantages are that appearances of protection and stability may be misleading; highly conservative investments, such as U.S. Treasury bonds, may not promote long-term asset growth; the government does not have expertise in management of accounts earmarked for specific individuals for investment growth; and practical applications in overseeing a trust fund can be daunting and limit autonomy. For example, identification of trust beneficiaries and effective distribution of funds over long time periods may be easy to take for granted, but are in fact huge practical challenges. For these reasons, clear individual ownership, accounting, and control, along with potential for asset growth over time, may be a better policy design than a government-managed trust fund.

### Assets in a Savings Plan Structure

A third policy option would be for reparations to create or adapt a savings plan structure guided by a public policy but using private-sector asset management with full property rights (control) by individuals. In such a structure, direct cash payments would flow into individual accounts. Good examples are the federal Thrift Savings Plan and state-level college savings (529) plans. Employment-based savings plans, such as 401(k)s and their variations are also examples. Ideally, a savings plan structure for reparations would have automatic enrollment (with an option to opt out at any time), sensible investment options, an experienced and trusted asset manager, low fees, asset growth, and investment targets to achieve individual and family goals. Such accounts would be overseen and regulated by a federal agency charged with administering Black reparations and representing the Black community.

For example, in the SEED OK experiment, one family in more than 1,300 in the treatment group has opted out during the past seventeen years, which may indicate both the importance of this financial autonomy and the potential of a savings plan structure to serve a broad population effectively over time.

Reparations policy delivery is likely to involve larger amounts of money and may have more individuals seeking their funds in cash. These withdrawals should always occur without penalty or loss of funds. At the same time, participants should be informed about the potential for asset protection and growth within the savings plan, and the risks of predatory agents who may emerge to encourage cash withdrawals. The latter is a serious concern, though already familiar in the financial lives of most marginal people, who are typically careful about finance because they need to be.

A key advantage of the savings plan structure is that the assets are owned and controlled by individuals. Also, as with the Thrift Savings Plan and 529 plans, assets in a structured reparations plan would be managed by well-established and trusted asset-management firms chosen through competitive contracting. In the United States, the capacity for such asset

management is highly developed. Large asset-management firms, such as TIAA and Vanguard, offer investment skill, effective delivery, and low fees. They are widely trusted. It is also important to point out that the considerable assets to be managed in any reparations policy would give the reparations agency leverage to negotiate on behalf of participants for both asset-building protections and very low investment fees. Such leverage would otherwise be unavailable to individuals in the marketplace. In sum, a savings plan structure would provide policy support for sustainable asset growth and development while allowing individual access to the funds at any time.

The major disadvantage of such a structure is the potential for poor investment performance. For example, average stock market returns over the past century are about 10 percent per year (about 7 percent after adjusting for inflation), but the average individual investor earns about half this amount, primarily because of individual stock trading. More trading leads to lower returns (Barber and Odean 2000). Most active professional fund managers also underperform the overall market (yet charge fees for this service). In contrast, savings plan administrators have learned to promote account stability by using index funds (minimizing trading of individual stocks) and tools in behavioral finance (especially opt-out instead of opt-in) to reinforce investing practices that build assets over time.

Although no policy design can be perfect, the combination of federal oversight with strong Black representation, contracting with a large and trusted asset manager, and individual ownership of accounts with full property rights creates capacities that can lead to policy effectiveness.

In this study, we explore a savings plan structure for reparations delivery, with a focus on Child Development Accounts as a model for universal asset-building policy. It is important to note that CDAs are not a Black reparations policy and were not designed for reparations delivery. However, the research, development, and implementation of CDAs may offer insights for effective delivery of Black reparations.

### **The CDA Policy Model: Implications for Effective Delivery of Reparations**

CDAs are investment accounts that provide financial access and subsidies to promote wealth accumulation starting with all children, including economically disadvantaged and minoritized children (Sherraden 1991). They target financial exclusion and wealth disparities. The original proposal for CDAs addressed the stripping of Black American assets and other historical harms and recommended substantial public deposits, which would be more than \$30,000 per child in today's dollars (Sherraden 1991). The CDA policy was conceived to accumulate assets for education, entrepreneurship, homeownership, and other development purposes, though most CDA policies in the United States today designate assets for postsecondary education (Sherraden and Clancy 2005; Sherraden, Clancy, and Beverly 2018).

Policy interest in CDAs is growing (GAO 2020). CDAs have been adopted in various forms in Canada, Israel, Korea, Singapore, United Kingdom, and other countries (Huang, Zou, and Sherraden 2020). In the United States, the policies and programs have been created in states, cities, communities, and school systems. Seven states—California, Illinois, Maine, Nebraska, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island—have adopted statewide, universal CDA policies by legislation or administrative rule. All of these policies are built on transformed 529 college savings plans (Clancy, Sherraden, and Beverly 2019a, 2019b). More than five million children in the United States already have assets in CDAs, and this number grows automatically each year with new birth cohorts (Huang et al. 2021; Prosperity Now 2023).

Statewide CDA policies in the United States are characterized by ten core features designed to ensure that the accounts are universal, progressive, potentially lifelong, and built on an efficient, scalable, and stable policy platform capable of promoting asset accumulation for development purposes (Clancy and Beverly 2017; Clancy et al. 2019a, 2019b; Sherraden, Clancy, and Beverly 2018). The features are summarized in table 1, and synergy among them is a foundation for asset building.

CDAs are able to accumulate funds from

**Table 1.** Ten Core Features of the CDA Policy Model

Core Feature	Definition
Centralized savings plan	State-contracted organizations use a central platform to oversee CDAs and investments. In the United States, this has been accomplished through state 529 plans, which allow for statewide partnership, streamlined operations, efficiency, and economies of scale. With 529 plans already established in forty-nine states, they are an ideal financial platform for CDAs. The plans offer state sponsorship for full inclusion and smooth policy operation and implementation, legal and accounting frameworks to facilitate asset accumulation (such as savings protection, account restrictions, and tax reporting), centralized administration for efficient accounting and recordkeeping, and simplified investment options for potential growth.
Universal eligibility	Under a jurisdiction's policy, all children within that jurisdiction are eligible for CDAs. If a national CDA policy were implemented, all children in the country would be included. In addition to eliminating the costs associated with eligibility assessment and recruitment, universal eligibility enables automatic enrollment. Full inclusion promotes program efficiency, public support, and sustainability. This is a universal structure for CDAs, but we are not saying that reparations should be a universal policy. The policy structure lends itself to reparations because all children would be in the program and any targeted flows of funds would go to whomever was eligible.
Automatic enrollment	The CDA program automatically enrolls individuals by default, with the option to opt out. Automatic enrollment relieves participants from the responsibility of actively signing up for the program and eliminates the issue of financial exclusion (Clancy et al. 2019a, 2019b).
Automatic initial deposit	On automatic enrollment, all participants receive a significant initial deposit. This automatic deposit spares participants the burden of having to apply to receive the funds and is a fundamental platform for asset growth over time.
At-birth start and lifelong	State birth records serve as the sole, centralized source of information, allowing CDA administrators to automatically enroll beneficiaries at birth and thereby maximizing the potential for asset growth over time. Furthermore, birth records offer an efficient means of achieving automatic and universal enrollment, which is another valuable benefit. Opened accounts create the potential for lifelong participation.
Automatic progressive subsidy	Children from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds receive additional deposits automatically to enhance asset accumulation over their lifetime. Various options are available—for example, a progressive deposit for each year of schooling completed or for each year of community service, and savings matches.
Investment growth potential	CDA deposits are invested in funds that have the potential for long-term market appreciation so that beneficiaries can access the opportunities presented by such growth. The appreciation in the market can result in significant asset accumulation over time.

*(continued)*

**Table 1.** (continued)

Core Feature	Definition
Targeted investment options	Targeted investment options simplify CDA investments. The use of age-based funds is one of the most effective ways to streamline program investments and facilitate family decision making. These funds are customized to the beneficiary's age and gradually shift investment allocations toward more conservative options as the beneficiary approaches higher education age (Clancy and Beverly 2017).
Targeted withdrawals	Withdrawals of assets from CDAs can be directed toward specific goals and purposes. In state-level CDA policies based on 529 college savings plans, program contributions and earnings may only be withdrawn for postsecondary education expenses. Other CDA policies may have different objectives for asset building. Targeted withdrawals align assets with specific developmental purposes such as higher education, homeownership, business development. Targets can also influence families' attitudes, behaviors, and efforts toward achieving these goals (Clancy et al. 2019a).
Means-tested public benefit exclusions	Policies protect families' assets and public-assistance benefits by prohibiting public programs from considering CDA funds when determining eligibility for means-tested benefits (Beverly and Clancy 2017).

*Source:* Authors' tabulation based on Clancy, Sherraden, and Beverly 2019a.

*Note:* CDA = Child Development Account.

multiple sources. The funds can receive tax or direct benefits from government and can be excluded from eligibility screening for other public benefits. Although not listed in table 1, financial guidance and education services may be provided to improve families' financial capability and functioning within CDAs. Table 2 illustrates adoption of the CDA model features across states with CDA policies. We suggest that a policy with these core features might also be adopted or created to deliver reparations payments.

College savings plans were not originally designed to be rolled out to a very large population and in fact have been elitist and regressive, serving mostly families who are well off, with tax benefits (public subsidies) that are greater for the rich than the poor. But, as we document in this article, the 529 policy structure can be transformed to serve the whole population. If this kind of policy transformation can be achieved at scale, reaching all eligible people with reparations payments and asset building, the results could democratize wealth building institutions and change lives. Impacts could

stretch across generations, as envisioned by early proponents of asset-based social policy (Sherraden 1991; Oliver and Shapiro 1995).

### **THE SEED FOR OKLAHOMA KIDS EXPERIMENT: EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT EFFECTIVE DELIVERY OF BLACK REPARATIONS**

Evidence is fundamental for the development of successful policy delivery. SEED for Oklahoma Kids (SEED OK), a longitudinal, randomized CDA experiment launched in 2007, provides rigorous evidence to inform this discussion.

#### **Design of the Experiment: Sampling, Setting, Intervention**

Currently in its seventeenth year (2007–2024) following a representative cohort of Oklahoma children, the SEED OK experiment is a large-scale test of statewide CDAs, with a probability sample randomly drawn from infants born in 2007 (Clancy et al. 2019b, 2021). The study randomly selected 7,328 children; the primary caregivers (mainly mothers) of 2,704 of those

**Table 2.** Features of State CDA Policies

Design Element	California	Illinois	Maine	Nebraska	Nevada	Pennsylvania	Rhode Island
Centralized savings plan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Universal eligibility <sup>a</sup>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Automatic enrollment <sup>b</sup>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Automatic initial deposit	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
At-birth start	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Automatic progressive subsidy <sup>c</sup>							
Investment growth potential	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Targeted investment options	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Targeted withdrawals	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Public benefit exclusions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: Authors' analysis.

Note: CDA = Child Development Account; ✓ = Yes.

<sup>a</sup> The CDA policy in Nevada excludes kindergarteners not enrolled in public schools.

<sup>b</sup> Enrollment is automatic after parents check a box on the form to register birth certificates. This check-box approach has been called streamlined enrollment (Clancy and Beverly 2017).

<sup>c</sup> CalkIDS, the California Kids Investment and Development Savings program, has a progressive feature that will add to the accounts of school-age students who were born in or after July 2022 and who received the at-birth deposit (Center for Social Development 2022; California Kids Investment and Development Savings Program 2023).

children agreed to participate (a participation rate of 38 percent). They were then randomly assigned into the treatment ( $n = 1,358$ ) or control group ( $n = 1,346$ ). SEED OK oversampled populations of color (African Americans, American Indians, and Hispanics): African Americans were 17 percent of the sample, American Indians 19 percent, and Hispanics 17 percent. SEED OK mothers completed three waves of surveys: the first in fall 2007 through spring 2008, the second in 2011, and the third in 2020.

The design of SEED OK is built on the core policy features discussed. CDAs in the experiment use the centralized account structure of a state's 529 college savings plan. In standard 529 plans, all families are eligible. In Oklahoma, as in other states, only about 6 percent participate, and most are already well off (Clancy et al. 2021; GAO 2012). Investment earnings in 529 plan accounts are not subject to federal or state taxes if withdrawn for qualified educational expenses at postsecondary institutions. In addition, many states offer income tax benefits for contributions to 529 plans.

The Oklahoma treasurer's office automatically opened a state-owned account for each

CDA treatment child through the Oklahoma 529 plan (OK 529), that is, treatment children are beneficiaries, and deposited \$1,000 into each account. We preferred a larger initial CDA deposit, but this is what was possible with funding available for the experiment. Such a program deposit system could also be adapted to disburse reparations payments. Funds in these SEED OK accounts are invested in the age-based option, a mix of stock, bond, and capital-preservation funds. Withdrawals are sent directly to postsecondary educational institutions. Reparations payments could similarly use this fund distribution strategy to support the asset-building purposes of Black families. Assets in these CDAs are not counted against asset limits of means-tested programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Beverly and Clancy 2017).

### Evidence from SEED OK

SEED OK is an experimental test of the CDA policy model. It was intentionally implemented to demonstrate that a simple low-touch model could reach a full population. Many important lessons emerge from this research.

### *Universal Inclusion Built on a Centralized Account*

As the results in table 3 indicate, by the end of 2022, the CDA in SEED OK had a very large impact on OK 529 account holding, the outcome indicator for universal inclusion in a centralized account system. Altogether, 99.9 percent of treatment children and 4.7 percent of control children have an OK 529 account ( $p < .001$ ). (The experiment did not prevent control children from having regular OK 529 accounts.) Thus, SEED OK successfully achieved near-universal 529 account holding among the targeted population sample by automatically opening accounts right after the birth of the children. If this can be done for a random sample, it can be done for all. A strategy similar to the CDA policy model could be used to create an account structure containing and managing reparations funds for all eligible Black individuals and families, with accounts fully owned and controlled by participants.

### *A Long-Term, Stable, Sustainable Policy Structure*

The SEED OK intervention is a very low touch in that the technical aspects of fund delivery—

account opening, deposits, and any future fund distributions—are fully automated. Annual financial data generated from the program over the previous fifteen years document that this account holding structure is both stable and sustainable (see figure 1). Limited administrative costs have been incurred in the program since the accounts were opened, making it also a promising option in terms of administrative and management costs for delivery of Black reparations and building wealth for Black families. Again, this may illustrate the advantage of transforming an existing policy structure to reach a universal population.

### *Successful Fund Accumulation from Multiple Sources*

The data in table 3 illustrate the effectiveness of the CDA policy model in delivering funds from multiple sources to the target population, with treatment children having a mean balance of \$3,939 across all OK 529 accounts. The balance amounts to approximately 3.5 times that of control children (\$1,132). This was made possible through the combination of funds from multiple sources, including automatic initial deposits of \$1,000 for nearly all treatment par-

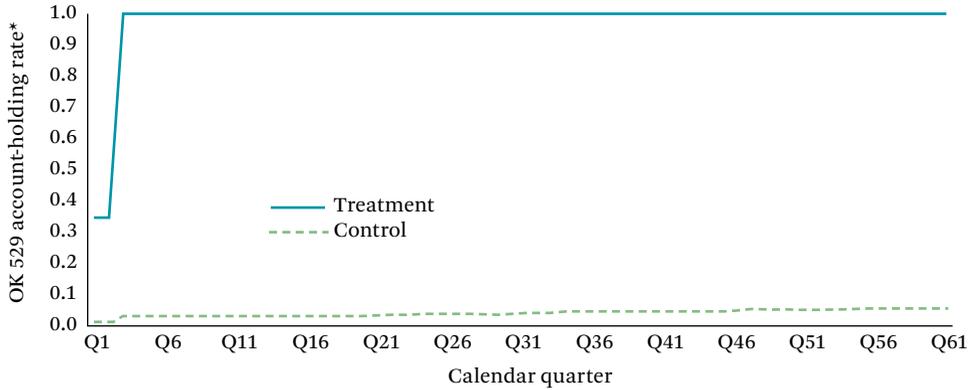
**Table 3.** Financial Outcomes in OK 529 Accounts for SEED OK Children, December 31, 2022  
( $N = 2,704$ )

Outcome	Treatment ( $n = 1,358$ )	Control ( $n = 1,346$ )	Treatment minus Control	$p$ -Value of Difference
<b>OK 529 accounts of any type<sup>a</sup></b>				
Account holding (percentage)	99.9	4.7	95.2	<.001
Mean balance (dollars)	3,939	1,132	2,807	<.001
Median balance (dollars)	2,238	0	2,238	<.001
<b>Multiple funding sources</b>				
Mean program deposit (dollars)	2,245	0	2,245	<.001
Median program deposit (dollars)	2,220	0	2,220	<.001
Mean parent deposit balance (dollars)	1,542	769	773	<.05
Median parent deposit balance (dollars)	0	0	0	
Mean earnings (dollars)	1,520	348	1,172	<.001
Median earnings (dollars)	1,049	0	1,049	<.001

Source: Authors' tabulation.

Note: OK 529 = Oklahoma 529 College Savings Plan; SEED OK = SEED for Oklahoma Kids. Analyses are weighted to make each study group (treatment and control) representative of the full population in terms of a few basic characteristics available from birth records.

<sup>a</sup> OK 529 accounts include state-owned, parent-owned, and other-owned accounts.

**Figure 1.** A Long-Term, Stable, and Sustainable Account-Holding Structure

Source: Authors' tabulation based on SEED for Oklahoma Kids experiment account data.

Note: OK 529 = Oklahoma 529 College Savings Plan. Analyses are weighted to make each study group (treatment and control) representative of the full population in terms of a few basic characteristics available from birth records.

\*OK 529 accounts include state-owned, parent-owned, and other-owned accounts.

ticipants, automatic progressive deposits of \$600 for selected low-income participants, savings matches from the program, parent and family deposits, and investment earnings over time.

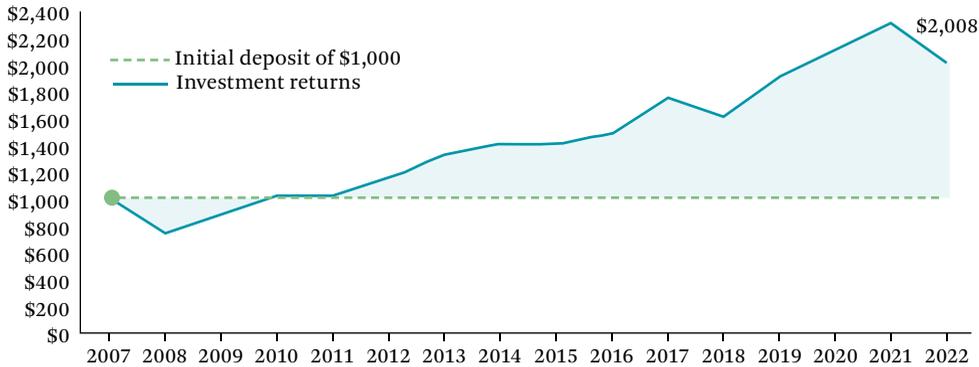
Among these fund sources, we pay special attention to the automatic initial deposits (\$1,000 in SEED OK). Payments for Black reparations could be offered in a similar way via a federal policy or something like it. The delivery of automatic initial deposits in SEED OK shows that CDA policy can distribute funds universally (initial deposits to all treatment participants), as well as create subsidies for selectively targeted groups (matching the savings deposits of low-income participants). This successful fund delivery system could be replicated in a system for Black reparations, and also accommodate possible variations in eligibility by program feature.

### *Promotion of Wealth Building*

Table 3 also presents data on the investment earnings for treatment and control participants over a fifteen-year span (2007–2022). The mean earnings in all OK 529 accounts was approximately 4.4 times higher for the treatment participants than for control participants, amounting to totals of \$1,520 and \$348 respectively. This documents that the CDA policy structure

can promote wealth accumulation through investment options in the market. A closer look at the data reveals that \$1,048 of the total investment earnings (69 percent) for treatment participants were generated from program deposits. The initial deposit amount more than doubled due to investment earnings. That matters a great deal for SEED OK youth with CDAs and would generate even more wealth with a larger initial deposit. This would likely matter even more in the case of reparations payments. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the data, highlighting the potential for wealth growth if program deposits are utilized properly. Under a Black reparations policy structured to accord with the CDA model, payments could be distributed as initial deposits. The CDA experimental data document wealth accumulation over time. (It may be helpful to emphasize that this is not a simulation; the policy experiment has accomplished this.)

Black reparations proposals differ on the amount of cash payments and, therefore, on impacts on asset accumulation and capacity to reduce the racial wealth gap. If a reparation payment equivalent to \$30,000 in today's dollars—the amount specified in the original CDA proposal (Sherraden 1991)—had been deposited into the SEED OK account for an eligible Black family in 2007, the payment would have

**Figure 2.** Wealth Growth of CDA Initial Deposit over Fifteen Years

Source: Authors' tabulation based on SEED for Oklahoma Kids experiment account data.

Note: CDA = Child Development Account.

grown to more than \$60,000 by the end of 2022. This amount would have reduced the 2021 median wealth gap between Black and White families by nearly 40 percent, and the mean wealth gap by about 7 percent.

### *Promotion of Social and Economic Development*

Historical and structural racism have produced racial disparities in both wealth accumulation and human development (Oliver and Shapiro 1995). The pronounced racial wealth gap fuels educational and health inequities by constraining opportunities for development in Black families. In SEED OK, the designated asset building for children's postsecondary education demonstrates the impacts of CDAs on social, behavioral, and mental health development. These positive experimental effects occur even before the CDA assets are used for postsecondary education. Analyses of data from the SEED OK wave 2 survey (conducted in 2011) indicate that the tested CDA policy sustained high expectations for children's education (Kim et al. 2015), reduced the intensity of maternal depressive symptoms (Huang, Sherraden, and Purnell 2014), reduced punitive parenting practices (Huang, Nam, et al. 2019), and improved children's early social-emotional development (Huang, Sherraden, Kim, et al. 2014). The sizes of CDA effects on these outcomes—approximately 0.10—were similar to effect sizes for Early Head Start, Head Start,

and other early childhood interventions (Huang, Beverly, et al. 2019; Huang, Nam, et al. 2019; Huang, Sherraden, and Purnell 2014).

Moreover, some effect sizes were larger for the low-income subsample than for the full sample, indicating that those treatment effects were greater for families with disadvantaged backgrounds (Huang, Beverly, et al. 2019; Huang, Nam, et al. 2019; Huang, Sherraden, and Purnell 2014). This suggests that the policy model may lessen some child-development disparities caused by social, structural, and historical inequality.

### *A Foundation for Building Financial Capability*

The SEED OK intervention does not offer direct financial guidance services to promote participants' financial capability, although some CDA programs have done so. Nevertheless, SEED OK research demonstrates that a universal and centralized account system efficiently creates premises for individuals to develop financial knowledge and skills, accumulate assets, and manage financial resources. For example, financial knowledge and skills are positively related to asset-building outcomes only in the treatment group, such as additional private account opening and deposits (Huang et al. 2015; Huang, Nam, and Sherraden 2013). Moreover, the CDA intervention positively increased both asset- and debt-product use among treatment mothers age eighteen to twenty-four, suggest-

ing improvements in overall financial functioning (Huang et al. 2022). In sum, CDA policy generates opportunities to practice financial knowledge and skills and has positive impacts on financial capability. This suggests that, by promoting financial capability, a similar policy model could support Black reparations families in household finances.

### THE POTENTIAL OF A CDA DELIVERY MODEL TO PROMOTE RACIAL WEALTH EQUALITY

We have used the core CDA features and empirical evidence from SEED OK to demonstrate a potential policy structure for the effective delivery of Black reparations. If adapted for that purpose, the model has the potential to reduce the racial wealth gap and improve family outcomes.

Evidence of this is presented in table 4, which reports findings from SEED OK wave-3 data on the relationships among race (Black versus White) homeownership, retirement account ownership, 529 account ownership, and 529 asset balance, by CDA treatment status. Among the four wealth indicators, 529 account ownership and 529 asset balance are the targeted outcomes of SEED OK, and the results demonstrate no difference by race among treatment households (panel A). Other assets do not show the same effect. These data illustrate how the CDA intervention in SEED OK creates a supportive institutional setting and policy structures to improve the targeted financial out-

comes among Black children and to eliminate the racial wealth gap on these indicators. We do not want to overstate the meaning; CDA policy cannot do everything; but on the targeted intervention, the result is no racial wealth gap.

For the control group (panel B), which might be thought of as business as usual, race was negatively and statistically significantly associated with three outcomes—homeownership, retirement account ownership, and 529 account ownership. The Black-White comparisons on the control-group wealth outcomes reflect historical and ongoing racial wealth disparities.

These results suggest that CDAs achieve the modest wealth effects intended, leading to the observation that the right policies and structures can reduce the racial gap on targeted wealth outcomes. To generalize the evidence, when Blacks are in the same institutional structures as Whites, wealth outcomes can also be the same. And his reasoning can be extended: wealth outcomes for Black children would likely be more positive if a universal CDA policy, or something like it, were paired with targeted reparations.

In sum, the CDA policy model addresses wealth inequality by race with modest yet identifiably positive impacts in 529 account holding and balances. Leveraging public and private funds to open accounts automatically for all children, the policy model has the potential to grow assets through large opening deposits, contributions at life milestones, savings

**Table 4.** Racial Wealth Gaps by Treatment Status, 2020–2022

Wealth Outcome	Panel A: Treatment		Panel B: Control	
	Black ( <i>n</i> = 126)	White ( <i>n</i> = 414)	Black ( <i>n</i> = 139)	White ( <i>n</i> = 386)
<b>Assets with No Child Development Account</b>				
Homeownership (percentage yes)	21.43***	65.70	22.30***	69.17
Retirement account ownership (percentage yes)	49.33***	77.24	47.50***	75.29
<b>Assets with Child Development Account</b>				
529 account ownership (percentage yes)	100.00	99.79	0.60***	7.53
529 median asset balance (dollars)	2,219.79	2,236.04	0	0

Source: Authors' tabulation based on SEED for Oklahoma Kids experiment account and wave-3 survey data.

\*\*\**p* < .001

matches, tax benefits, and exemptions for public-benefit eligibility. CDAs are not reparations, but they offer a policy model with inclusive, positive effects for people of color, a model on which a reparations policy might be effectively delivered with positive long-term impacts.

### **POLICY DELIVERY AS PURPOSEFUL STRUCTURAL CHANGE**

Overall, evidence from SEED OK and CDA research suggests that the model lends itself to a policy for delivering Black reparations. We summarize some key observations.

Centralized accounts can accomplish automatic enrollment of all eligible reparations recipients into an integrated policy system.

With the development of reparations at different levels (such as schools, municipalities, states, and the federal government), the possibility of multiple, overlapping sets of eligibility rules further complicates the difficult process of identifying eligible populations. A single, centralized account system could make the process streamlined, accurate, and synergistic. A centralized policy would ensure efficient and effective delivery of reparations to all who qualify and also create a framework to facilitate policy coherence and growth. For example, a centralized policy might enable multiple municipalities to learn from success of a particular city.

Public oversight of a centralized account structure can ensure full inclusion, protections, low fees, effective delivery, and prudent asset management.

As states demonstrate by state-level negotiation and contracting with 529 asset managers, a centralized account structure affords leverage. States can use it to refine outreach, specify client protections, set low fees, and identify prudent investment options. Nothing like this would occur if individuals were left to negotiate for financial services in the market. States could use such leverage to specify a safe low-cost account option prenegotiated to offer the best financial terms. Note that this would not

detract from an individual's right to opt out of a reparations account and participate directly in the financial marketplace, and some people might choose to do so.

Centralized accounts can receive and manage multiple funding flows.

It is important, in our view, that such a publicly sponsored centralized account system have the capacity to receive funds from multiple reparations programs and multiple sources. Funds for reparations may come not just from public sponsorship, but also from the private-sector contributors, including corporations. Nonprofit organizations, from schools and churches to professional associations and national interest groups, may also contribute. And a reparations policy should become a target of American philanthropy, from community foundations to large national foundations. A centralized account system would make it relatively easy to track funds from all reparations programs and, through regular audits, to ensure that the money was used to support those who were eligible. A centralized account system with public sponsorship would also streamline implementation and increase accountability and efficiency.

Additional funding flows are desirable as long as they are consistent with the reparations goal of closing the racial wealth gap. In this regard, guidelines for direct giving and taxation would be needed. Those parameters would be designed to ensure progressivity and reduce economic inequality. For example, they should require that direct flows be progressive, with more going to the lowest income families, and perhaps impose an income-level cap. Any tax benefits for holding reparations assets would be available only up to a modest income level or with an overall cap.

Reparations funds should be distinct from individual-level funding.

Reparations assets would represent a societal commitment to greater equity, and this value is fundamental. Therefore, a reparations policy should account separately for individual-

level contributions (whether from self, family, or friends). Reparations policy should maintain distinct accounting. Even if the reparations account is part of a larger asset-building structure, it should be partitioned as the reparations account to prevent those with greater resources or personal wealth to disproportionately benefit from a reparations infrastructure. In other words, everyone, rich or poor, has the right to save and invest as they choose, but the reparations policy framework serves a distinct social and economic purpose in seeking to reduce wealth inequality. And those eligible should be able to clearly identify funds that come to them as redress for racial injustice.

Delivery of a reparations policy could take the form of lifelong asset building, with investments for personal and family development.

A reparations delivery strategy does not have to be limited to a single large payment. It can instead be a process for building and using assets over time. A secure financial platform with desirable features could facilitate that process. Additionally, reparations policy could offer different programs and provisions at different stages of life. Multiple, sequenced reparations deposits would require a long-term, stable, and sustainable account system. A lifelong account would provide a sustainable system to support the purposes of Black reparations, and to maximize the wealth and social impacts for account holders. We emphasize that the current 529 policy structure does not have an age limit, and anyone can be a beneficiary across the life cycle from birth to postretirement life. In this way, the 529 structure might be a policy resource for reshaping lifelong asset accumulation and use, though major federal policy revisions would be required. For example, multiple uses of CDA assets are very desirable, and these policy changes will be important (current federal legislation already envisions major expansion of 529 purposes). Because effective asset management and recordkeeping are already in place within the 529 structure, this could be a more efficient and feasible pathway than creating a new policy from scratch.

Reparations can promote narrowing of the racial wealth gap.

The account system for delivery of Black reparations should include key design features, including investments that allow for market appreciation. Such features can, in turn, promote asset building over time and reduce the racial wealth gap.

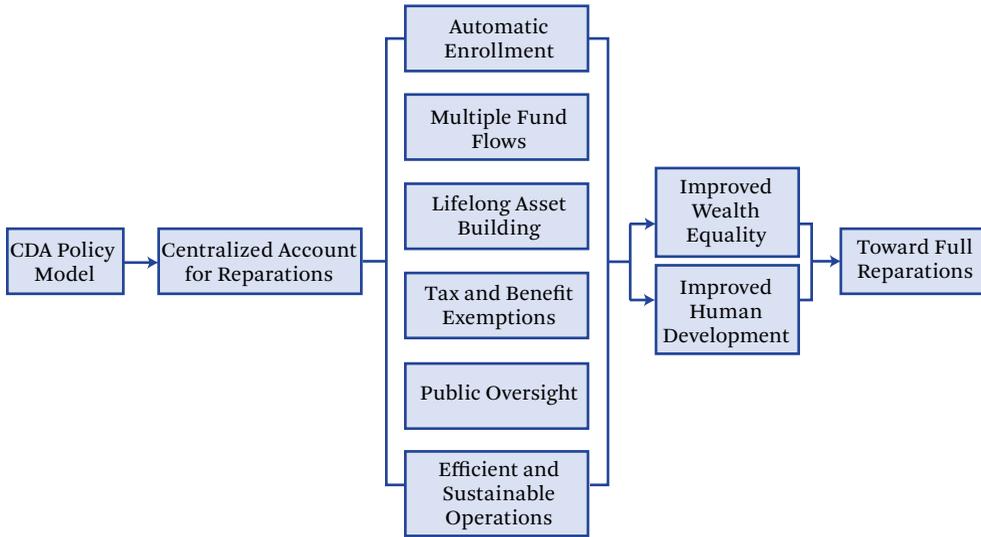
As discussed, Black reparations proposals identify a wide range of asset-building goals and development purposes intended to enable each individual to reach their full potential. Homeownership, higher education, job training and employment, health care, retirement security, and entrepreneurship are among the specified purposes (Darity and Mullen 2022; Darity et al. 2023). The system might include mechanisms to connect reparations accounts with other publicly sponsored financial products for asset building and development (such as retirement savings accounts, college savings accounts, and health savings accounts). Additional programming and incentive policies could be implemented to encourage targeted withdrawals (such as withdrawals for college education, homeownership, and retirement). Significant resource investments in the Black community might in turn lead to institutions and systems that better support Black families and communities.

Asset accounts for reparations should create fair tax benefits.

Reparations payments would ideally not be subject to taxation. Holding the funds in a centralized account system would make tax treatment more straightforward. In addition, the inherently regressive nature of tax benefits should be offset by direct public benefits (a refundable or negative tax) for low-income account holders who have little or no tax liability.

Reparations in asset accounts should offer public-benefit exclusions.

Some discussions have proposed reducing sums paid for reparations by the value of benefits received from social welfare and assistance (Darity and Mullen 2022). The implica-

**Figure 3.** CDAs as a Policy Structure for Black Reparations

Source: Authors' tabulation.

Note: CDA = Child Development Account.

tions of this adjustment are not completely clear and require further investigation. Nonetheless, we suggest that reparations should not interfere with recipients' rights to social-welfare entitlement programs.

These observations are consistent with the core features of the CDA policy model summarized in table 1. As figure 3 illustrates, the model suggests that CDAs with these ten features can support purposeful structural changes toward racial wealth equality through Black reparations.

### BLACK PARENTS' VIEWS ON CDAs AS A POLICY MODEL

A system for reparations delivery should have the general approval of Black families and communities. In the SEED OK wave-3 survey, Black parents reported strong support for the features of the CDA policy. As a thought experiment on creating asset-building policies for children, the survey asked 285 Black parents in both the treatment and control groups to assess the importance of nine policy features. Although those surveyed in the control group ( $n = 149$ ) did not receive CDAs, results from the two groups were similar. More than three-quarters of the Black parents surveyed in

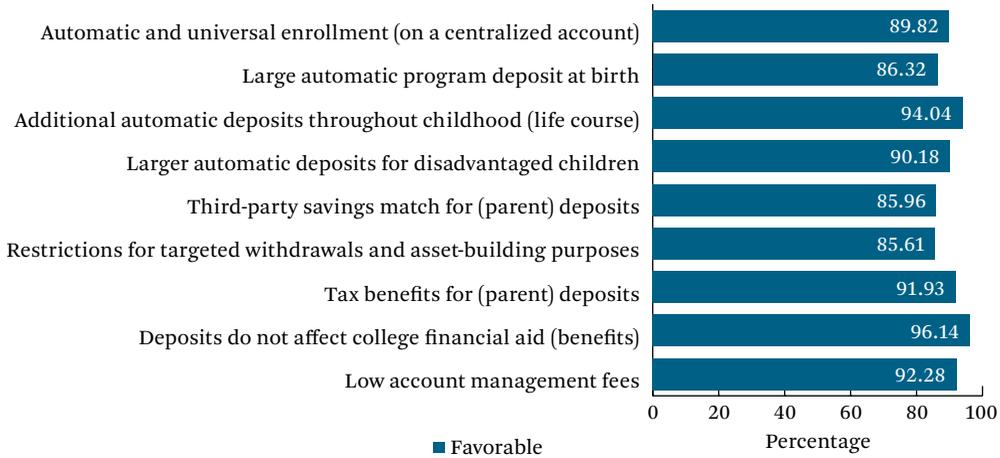
each group endorsed each of the features (figure 4).

One way to interpret these results is that the policy design work paid off; the policy features are popular regardless of the respondents' experience with the SEED OK treatment. The results may also lend strength to the suggestion that this particular CDA policy model might find other productive applications, including perhaps as a platform for delivery of reparations.

### LIMITATIONS

Some limitations should be noted. First, our evidence on the SEED OK CDAs does not lend itself to recommendations for reparations eligibility, the amount of reparations funds, or the identification of eligible families. A delivery structure similar to the CDA policy model, however, may be able to effectively distribute reparations payments to all eligible families.

Second, the ideal reparations delivery system should be based on a federal policy structure that covers all eligible families. The SEED OK CDAs and statewide CDA policies that followed are based on state policy platforms. However, federal legislation oversees state 529 policies, and it is therefore possible to think

**Figure 4.** Black Parents' Views on Importance of CDA Policy Features, Percentage Favorable (N = 285)

Source: Authors' compilation based on SEED for Oklahoma Kids survey data.

Note: CDA = Child Development Account.

about a nationwide CDA policy in this format. Whether a reparations policy might build on this policy option, we do not take a position.

Third, when compared with ideal reparations payments, the \$1,000 initial program deposit in the SEED OK experiment is very small. In this regard, the experimental data presented here does not speak to larger public funding. As noted, the original CDA model proposed a much larger program transfer (approximately \$30,000), but it was not possible to implement this in the SEED OK policy experiment due to resource limitations. However, the data and outcomes do inform an automatic enrollment and deposit mechanisms, which could also be used for reparations payments.

Fourth, some design features in the SEED OK CDAs may not be suitable for a savings plan structure for Black reparations. For instance, CDAs are built on 529 plans, and assets in the plans can only be used for postsecondary education, and this is only one of the asset-building goals of Black families. Other long-term objectives are also desirable, including homeownership, entrepreneurship, and long-term social protection. In this regard, a new federal provision allows rollovers of 529 assets into Roth IRAs for retirement security. Additional policy adjustments would be needed to create a CDA-like policy structure for reparations delivery.

## CONCLUSIONS

The idea of Black reparations is not new, but it has gained renewed momentum due to tragic racial events and ensuing discussions about racial equity. Constructive policy proposals, most notably reparations, are drawing more serious consideration. Several U.S. cities have undertaken Black reparations initiatives. In 2019, the City of Evanston, Illinois, became the first in the country to approve a plan to provide reparations to its Black residents, and the chair of its reparations committee called for a federal policy to address Black reparations (see Newton and Nelsen 2024, this issue; Davies, Jackson, and Knight 2024, this issue). Recently, a city-appointed reparations committee in San Francisco recommended a large cash payment to each eligible Black resident. The committee also suggested guaranteed annual income of \$97,000 and homes for qualified recipients (Har 2023). Other cities—such as Asheville, North Carolina, Detroit, Michigan, St. Louis, Missouri, and Providence, Rhode Island—have passed resolutions to study the issue of reparations and explore potential solutions (Associated Press 2021; Afana 2023; Detroit City Council, n.d.; Salter 2022; Abdul-Hakim et al. 2023). At the federal level, provisions for a commission to study reparations have been reintroduced in Congress over

a long period,<sup>1</sup> and the proposal has gained support from a growing number of lawmakers. Research and publications on Black reparations have been expanding, with scholars and activists exploring implementation strategies. An effective solution might be a nationwide reparations policy that is framed, led, and mostly funded by the federal government but that also welcomes local engagement and participation.

Regardless of the reparations policy design, we have offered evidence from rigorous applied research, and also considerable policy experience, in how to deliver a reparations policy so that it might have positive and sustainable impacts. We suggest a platform that could be adapted for any version of reparations eligibility, funding level, or funding source. Policy flexibility matters because it takes advantage of institutional arrangements that are already in place. Any policy for nationwide reparations would almost certainly require legislative changes, but transformation of existing options may be less daunting than creating an entirely new policy structure. As policymakers are keenly aware, it is usually easier, less time consuming, and less costly to adapt an effective policy platform than to create a new one.

The CDA policy discussed here is built on a transformed 529 account platform. We emphasize the word *transformed* because 529 policies have been highly regressive, serving only a small proportion of the population, disproportionately well-off White people. Through the CDA policy, 529s can be adapted to serve the entire population, starting with all children at birth. Our evidence documents that all children (and over a long period, all people) can be included, and that people of color can benefit as least as much as Whites. In addition, the CDA policy model is efficient, trusted, and sustainable. It enjoys bipartisan support, which will be required to enact federal legislation. Thus, in both practical and political terms, a CDA policy model, or something like it, may be a promising candidate for effective delivery of reparations.

Views about this policy design direction will

differ. Ongoing discussion and debate will be inevitable and necessary. Regardless of policy viewpoint, however, we hope that this article makes it clear that an effective and sustainable design for delivery of reparations will be necessary for implementation, stability, and effectiveness of a future reparations policy.

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**V**

## **Local Reparations**

# The Politics of Expedience: Evanston, Illinois, and the Fight for Reparations



MONIQUE NEWTON<sup>ORCID</sup> AND MATTHEW D. NELSEN<sup>ORCID</sup>

*In March 2021, the city council in Evanston, Illinois, began distributing reparations funds to Black residents in the form of \$25,000 housing grants. In doing so, Evanston became the first city in the United States to provide publicly funded reparations to Black people for generations of racist policies, including redlining. Why did the reparations program first emerge in Evanston? This article provides an in-depth look at the politics of the policy design process and describes the unique political circumstances that allowed this historic policy to pass with near-unanimous support. As communities throughout the United States consider how to deliver reparations to Black Americans, the debate over Evanston's ordinance serves as a cautionary tale for how ambitious historic policies may become watered down when political expedience trumps the political insights of Black residents.*

**Keywords:** reparations, urban and local politics, race, ethnicity, politics, public policy

Initiatives aimed at securing reparations for slavery date back to the American Revolution (Balfour 2023). To date, such initiatives have failed to gain substantial traction in Congress and remain controversial in the broader public (Dawson and Popoff 2004). Recent public opinion data suggest that nearly two-thirds of Americans oppose cash payments for reparations, including 90 percent of Republicans (Cornish 2021). Moreover, public policies that have sought to provide compensation to Black people affected by White violence—such as the residents of Rosewood, Florida—have avoided invoking the language of reparations given the

political weight of the term (Bassett 1994; Samuels 2020). However, evidence indicates that the public and politicians alike are beginning to warm up to the idea of reparations. In April of 2021, the House Judiciary Committee advanced legislation to create a commission to study reparations for Black Americans—the same legislation introduced by the late Congressman John Conyers Jr. in every session of Congress since 1989. Concurrently, municipalities throughout the United States, including San Francisco, Asheville, Detroit, and St. Paul, have started to consider what reparations to Black people could look like at the local level (Hain

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and Mulcahy 2023). This article examines one of these cases.

In March of 2021, the city council in Evanston, Illinois—a northern Chicago suburb—overwhelmingly voted to begin distributing the first phase of a \$10 million reparations fund in the form of \$25,000 housing grants. The grants were earmarked for Black residents who could prove that they or their descendants were victims of redlining or other forms of housing discrimination in the city between 1919 and 1969. The ordinance allowed eligible grant recipients—referred to as Ancestors by the City of Evanston—to use the funds to pay down an existing mortgage, put toward a downpayment on a new home, or make renovations to their homes (City of Evanston, n.d.a). By enacting this ordinance, Evanston became the first city in the United States to make publicly funded reparations for past racial discrimination available to a broad subset of its Black residents. In the pursuit of tackling the city’s staggering racial wealth gap, however, Evanston’s reparations ordinance initially left behind some of the city’s most vulnerable Black residents.

Interestingly, the political fault lines in Evanston did not fall between those who were for or against reparations, but among those who had starkly different definitions of what reparations should entail. As our interview data show, many Black residents noted that the city’s housing grants discriminated against Black renters. After all, many program recipients did not own homes to renovate or have mortgages to pay down. Moreover, in a city where the median sale price for a home was \$410,600 in 2022 (U.S. Census Bureau 2023), a \$25,000 grant was not nearly enough to cover a downpayment for a new home. Thus the recipients who had the most to gain from a policy that sought to rectify the harm caused by redlining—and those most affected by the racial wealth gap—were initially denied access to the reparations housing grants (Felton 2023). Meanwhile, the city’s White residents and predominantly Black elected officials largely supported the ordinance, expressing a sense of pride that Evanston was “the first to reparations” and, most important, that the reparations funds would be creatively levied through a municipal sales tax on recreational cannabis.

We contend that these tensions represent far more than simple differences in public opinion; they reflect instead a difference in the interpretation of a policymaking process that constrained Evanston’s reparations ordinance from the outset.

We argue that many of the unintended consequences of the ordinance—discrimination against Black renters, ignoring other forms of anti-Black racism leveled against current and past residents, ethical questions about partnering with the same financial institutions that sustained redlining practices, and concerns about sources of funding—could have been prevented had supporters of the initiative prioritized the voices of concerned Black residents over the politics of expedience. Put bluntly, in Evanston, doing reparations “first” trumped doing reparations effectively for all eligible Black residents. It is only through the persistent political activism of Black Evanstonians—and Black women in particular—that the city council made amendments to the ordinance that better secured the viability of the housing program.

### **Evanston, Illinois and the Case for Reparations**

Evanston, Illinois, is a racially diverse, suburban community located immediately north of Chicago. The city is majority White (63 percent) but includes a sizable Black population (16 percent) and a growing population of Asian (9 percent) and Latinx (12 percent) residents (U.S. Census Bureau 2023). The city boasts high rates of educational attainment—68 percent of residents hold a bachelor’s degree or higher—and has an average household income (\$87,345) that significantly outpaces both the state (\$72,563) and the nation (\$74,580).

The electorate in Evanston consistently provides high levels of support to the Democratic Party. In 2020, 70 percent of Evanstonians voted in the presidential election, and 90 percent of those votes went to Democrat Joe Biden (Gavin 2020). Although Evanston’s municipal elections are nonpartisan, the city council—a mayor and nine aldermen representing each of the city’s nine wards—tends to support policies promoted by the National Democratic Party. Evanston fits the mold of a progressive and racially

liberal city ripe for reparations policymaking that Jesse Rhodes and colleagues (2024, this issue) discuss in their study of public opinion on reparations.

The city is characterized by a dense network of local institutions, including Northwestern University, antiracist book clubs such as Dear Evanston, and interfaith racial justice networks. One of these organizations, the Shorefront Legacy Center, has played a particularly vital role in providing legal documentation regarding housing discrimination in Evanston. Since 1995, Shorefront Legacy Center—founded by Dino Robinson Jr.—has amassed an archival collection of artifacts, documents, photographs, and family archives that represent and depict the lives of Black residents on Chicago’s suburban North Shore. As we discuss, this collection became incredibly important as the Evanston City Council began to consider how to approach its local reparations initiative.

Although these attributes certainly make Evanston a unique locality in some ways, like many cities throughout the country, it is also characterized by racial segregation and socioeconomic inequality. A majority of the city’s Black residents reside in the city’s Fifth and Second Wards, historically low-income areas

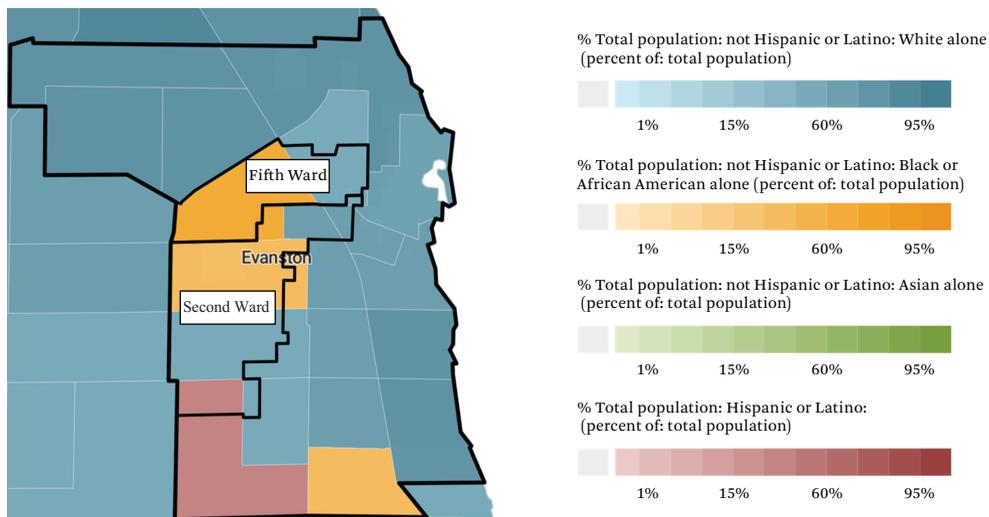
with comparatively higher crime rates than other wards in the city (see figure 1). Evanston’s racial diversity, high rates of educational attainment, Democratic-leaning politics, and justice-oriented civic institutions are crucial for understanding the emergence of the city’s reparations initiatives in 2019.

### The Expedient Development of Evanston’s Reparations Ordinance

Reparations have been discussed in Evanston for several decades. In 2002, Judge Lionel Jean-Baptiste sponsored a resolution, approved by the Evanston City Council, urging Congress to explore reparations to African Americans for the injustices suffered during and after slavery. For many residents interviewed for this study, the memory of this 2002 resolution lives on in the community and informs their contemporary understanding of what reparations should entail. Yet the resolution did not manifest in any tangible policies for Black residents, and efforts to push additional reparations ordinances through the city council came to a halt (see table 1).

After seventeen years of stagnation in the policy realm, Robin Rue Simmons—a Black councilwoman representing Evanston’s pre-

**Figure 1.** Racial and Ethnic Breakdown of Evanston, Illinois



Source: Authors’ tabulation.

Note: The map shows the racial and ethnic breakdown of Evanston by U.S. Census tract. The city’s predominantly Black Second and Fifth Wards are labeled as well.

**Table 1.** Timeline of Evanston’s Reparations Ordinance

Date	Event
June 2002	Judge Lionel Jean-Baptiste sponsors resolution, approved by city council, urging Congress to explore reparations to African Americans for injustices they suffered during and after slavery
February 2019	Robin Rue Simmons begins the push for local reparations
June 2019	Evanston City Council adopts resolution affirming the city’s commitment to end structural racism and achieve racial equity
July 2019	Empowerment Commission for Reparations holds a series of community meetings that identify housing as the top concern for Black residents
September 2019	Empowerment Commission circulates memo recommending that reparations funds be used to provide rental assistance; Robin Rue Simmons introduces Reparations Ordinance
November 2019	City council passes 126-R-19 on 8-1, authorizing a \$10 million reparations fund with rental assistance excluded
November 2020	Evanston City Council passes 102-O-20, amending the city code to codify Reparations Committee, which is expanded to include non-aldermanic representatives
March 2021	Evanston City Council approves the disbursement of \$400,000 in housing grants
August 2021	First Reparations Committee meeting
September 2021	Applications for reparations housing program opens
January 2022	Sixteen ancestor grant recipients selected via lottery from 122 qualified applicants
March 2023	Restorative Housing Program allows Ancestors to receive \$25,000 grants as cash benefit
August 2023	City announces that more than \$1 million reparations funds have been dispersed
October 2023	City announces that more than \$2.2 million reparations funds have been dispersed

*Source:* Authors’ tabulation.

dominantly Black Fifth Ward—observed that the rate of Black homeownership in the city, historically among the nation’s highest, was on the decline (Esposito 2021). She took her concerns to the city’s Equity and Empowerment Commission and recalled that her idea for reparations was “instantly welcomed” (2021). During the summer of 2019, Simmons began attending town hall meetings in Chicago hosted by the National African American Reparations Commission (NAARC) and the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N’COBRA) (Franklin 2022).<sup>1</sup> Since 2015, NAARC and N’COBRA have facilitated town hall meetings of this kind throughout the country to

build support for a ten-point program that aims to secure reparations for Black Americans (NAARC, n.d.a).

In June of 2019, Councilwoman Simmons—aided by these national reparations advocacy organizations—introduced a resolution to the Evanston City Council that would establish a reparations committee in the city (Mitchell and Malveaux 2021; Alexander and Dow 2023). Shortly after, the city council voted to establish the city’s Empowerment Commission for Reparations and began hosting community meetings to explore policies that would remedy the historical and institutional racism experienced by Black residents (City of Evanston 2019). After

1. NAARC was first convened by the Institute of the Black World of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century “after Caribbean nations formed the CARICOM Reparations Commission in 2013 to demand reparations from the former colonial powers in Europe” (Franklin 2022, 623)

a series of community meetings in July of 2019, housing emerged as the community's top concern (Castro 2023a). This policy domain was particularly compelling for members of the city council given that local organizations such as the Shorefront Legacy Center had already amassed the historical documentation needed to highlight how anti-Black housing discrimination had contributed to the racial wealth gap and would allow the reparations ordinance to potentially withstand legal challenges (Franklin 2022). The city attorney, Nicholas Cummings, noted that using a portion of the city's general fund to provide reparations to a select group of residents could be seen as a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution (Castro 2022). However, the Shorefront Legacy's Center's seventy-seven-page report highlighting decades of segregationist and discriminatory city policies (Robinson and Thompson 2021), helped assuage this concern. In *City of Richmond v. J. A. Croson Co.*, the U.S. Supreme Court concluded that policies that aimed to rectify past discrimination had to be supported by a historical record demonstrating that the discrimination took place.<sup>2</sup> According to local officials, the priorities that emerged in public listening sessions—housing and economic development—were best supported by the Shorefront Legacy Center's report: "The strongest case for reparations . . . is in the area of housing, where there is sufficient evidence showing the City's part in housing discrimination as a result of early City zoning ordinances in place between 1919 and 1969, when the City banned housing discrimination" (quoted in Treisman 2021).

The first phase of the funds would be aimed at addressing racial inequities in housing and closing the city's racial wealth gap. Black residents who could prove that they or their direct descendants were negatively affected by redlining or other racist housing policies between 1919 and 1969 would be eligible for \$25,000 housing grants that could be used to pay down an existing mortgage, renovate a home, or make a downpayment on a new property. Black residents largely supported the program (City of Evanston 2023b), but also raised three spe-

cific concerns during listening sessions hosted by the Evanston City Council and the Empowerment Commission for Reparations.

First, what about Black residents who had already left Evanston because of racial discrimination and those who arrived after 1969? For many residents, any comprehensive discussion of reparations also needed to consider the Black people who were pushed out of the city on the basis of racist policies and acknowledge that racism continued to exist after the passage of the Fair Housing Act, which ended the practice of redlining. Second, what about other forms of anti-Black racism in the city? As we show throughout this article, many Black residents noted that other policy domains, including education, might have provided a more expansive reparations policy made available to a wider subset of Black Evanstonians. Finally, regarding the reparations housing grants, what about Black renters? These individuals did not have mortgages to pay down or homes to renovate, and they were not automatically able to purchase a home, even with the program's assistance. The Empowerment Commission for Reparations found this final point particularly compelling, recommending "housing rental assistance to income-qualified, African American residents in Evanston" in a memo circulated to the mayor and city council on September 9, 2019 (City of Evanston 2019).

In November—five months after Simmons initially introduced her resolution—Evanston's city council passed 126-R-19 on an 8–1 vote, establishing a \$10 million reparations fund levied from a municipal tax on the sale of recreational cannabis funds that would be made available to Black residents (City of Evanston 2019). Notably, the ordinance did not initially allow the funds to be used for rental assistance. Even though memos circulated by the Empowerment Commission suggest that allowing the funds to be used for rental assistance was considered (City of Evanston 2019), they ultimately decided against it (Castro 2023a). We discuss this point in greater detail later in the article.

In November 2020, one year after approving the authorization of the funds for the ordinance, the Evanston City Council passed 102-

2. *City of Richmond v. J. A. Croson Co.*, 488 U.S. 469 (1989).

O-20, codifying the Reparations Committee as a body within the local government to oversee the implementation of the ordinance. During this period, national reparations organizations signed off on the proposal championed by Simmons. For example, NAARC released a report “certifying the Evanston Reparations Initiative as meeting the definitions, criteria, and standards for a municipal reparatory justice initiative” (NAARC 2021).<sup>3</sup> Specifically, Evanston’s proposed reparations housing program satisfied one of the NAARC’S ten-point program (NAARC, n.d.b).

On March 22, 2021, the city council again voted 8–1 to release the first \$400,000 of the anticipated \$10 million reparations fund through \$25,000 housing grants. Councilwoman Cicely Fleming—another Black city councilwoman—was the lone vote against the ordinance. Fleming affirmed her support for reparations, but explained that she voted against the ordinance because it conflicted with her understanding of reparations. Fleming described the ordinance as a prime example of White paternalism: “deciding that Black folks are unable to manage their own monies” (Fleming 2021). Instead, she claimed that Black individuals should set the terms of their grievances and determine how those grievances should be addressed.

After approving the release of the funds, policy implementation developed swiftly. Many Black Evanstonians called for additional listening sessions where they could provide input and ask questions about the details of the ordinance. The first Reparations Committee meeting was held in August of 2021; one month later, Black residents were given a two-month window to apply for the \$25,000 housing grants. During this period, local-level nonprofit organizations, including the Shorefront Legacy Center, worked to help applicants gather historical documents proving that they or one of their direct descendants had been affected by the city’s redlining policies between 1919 and 1969.

In January 2022, the first sixteen Ancestor grant recipients were selected via lottery from

123 qualified applicants. Seventy percent of the qualified applicants were residents of Evanston’s Second and Fifth Wards—the only majority Black wards in the city—and more than half of the Ancestors were over seventy. As of January of 2023, only sixteen of the initial group of 123 Ancestor applicants had received housing assistance (Felton 2023); by March 2023, seven other Ancestors had died before receiving their funds (Castro 2023a). Although the reparations debate was celebrated and quickly faded from the minds of many of the city’s White residents, Black Evanstonians—many in their late seventies and early eighties—continued to show up to monthly Reparations Committee meetings to ensure that the policy covered the city’s most vulnerable Black residents and that the reparations ordinance lived up to its name.

Evanston’s path toward reparations is illuminating in that it presents a blueprint for other municipalities seeking to provide reparations for housing discrimination to Black residents. We argue the development of reparations policy in Evanston raises several insights that can help clarify the circumstances under which an innovative historic policy of this kind can emerge and preemptively address policy design challenges.

#### OUR APPROACH

We watched the debate over reparations in Evanston unfold in real time through coverage in local newspapers and observations of Evanston Reparations Committee meetings. Concurrently, we conducted fifty-six in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a racially diverse subset of Evanstonians to examine how participants came to develop their ideas about the city’s reparations ordinance.<sup>4</sup> These individuals first learned about reparations through multiple avenues, including interfaith racial justice initiatives, educational experiences, antiracist book clubs, and parental socialization. Although the experiences of those included in our sample may not be representative of Evanstonians as a whole, the themes that emerged

3. Robin Rue Simmons was selected to serve on the NAARC. Her term began on May 21, 2021, corresponding with the end of her term on the Evanston City Council (NAARC 2021).

4. Our pre-questionnaire and interview protocol are available in the appendix.

from these in-depth conversations helped shape our understanding of the political context in the moments immediately following the historic passing of the reparations ordinance. As a long tradition in political science has demonstrated, the study of local politics enables careful attention to the dynamics of political conflicts and policy development (Dahl 2005; Berleson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). Although such a methodological approach may not be generalizable to a broader population, our interview sample easily clears commonly accepted thresholds for saturation (Hennink and Kaiser 2022) and can help social scientists better understand themes that emerge in reparations policy debates.

We recruited interviewees using both convenience and snowball sampling techniques. (Moseley 2013, 41). Building on our personal connections to Evanston, our primary points of contact—and our initial set of interviewees—put us in touch with their friends and contacts in Evanston whom we subsequently recruited as study participants. However, to ensure that we spoke with individuals who operate within distinct social circles in the city, we never interviewed more than one person per household and never contacted more than three people recommended to us by any single point of contact. We also attended local Reparations Committee meetings and used these events to interview individuals who were directly engaging in the process. When possible, we also draw comparisons between our findings and a survey of 3,500 Evanstonians conducted by Northwestern University’s Center for the Study of Diversity and Democracy between February and June 2023 to alleviate concerns that our small number of participants enrolled in our qualitative study may not be representative of the city as a whole (City of Evanston 2023b).

Because our interview questions address issues of race and collective identity, each interview was conducted by a facilitator who shared the racial identity of the participant in order to avoid interviewer effects (Mosley 2013). Participants first filled out a pre-questionnaire. The form collected demographic characteristics of the sample, determined who had attended Reparations Committee meetings, and directly measured support for reparations for slavery and Evanston’s reparations ordinance. Collecting this information also allowed us to analyze interview responses across various demographic characteristics, such as race, gender, age, income, partisanship, homeownership, and whether respondents attended a reparations meeting.

The participants we interviewed ranged in age from eighteen to eighty-seven ( $\mu=50$ ) and just over half—55 percent—were women. We focused primarily on Black and White residents because they are the two largest racial groups in Evanston, accounting for 80 percent of the city’s population. However, we also interviewed eight Asian and eight Latinx residents to better understand how other racially marginalized groups responded to a reparations policy aimed at addressing anti-Black inequality specifically. Table 2 provides a breakdown of our sample by race, ethnicity, and gender.

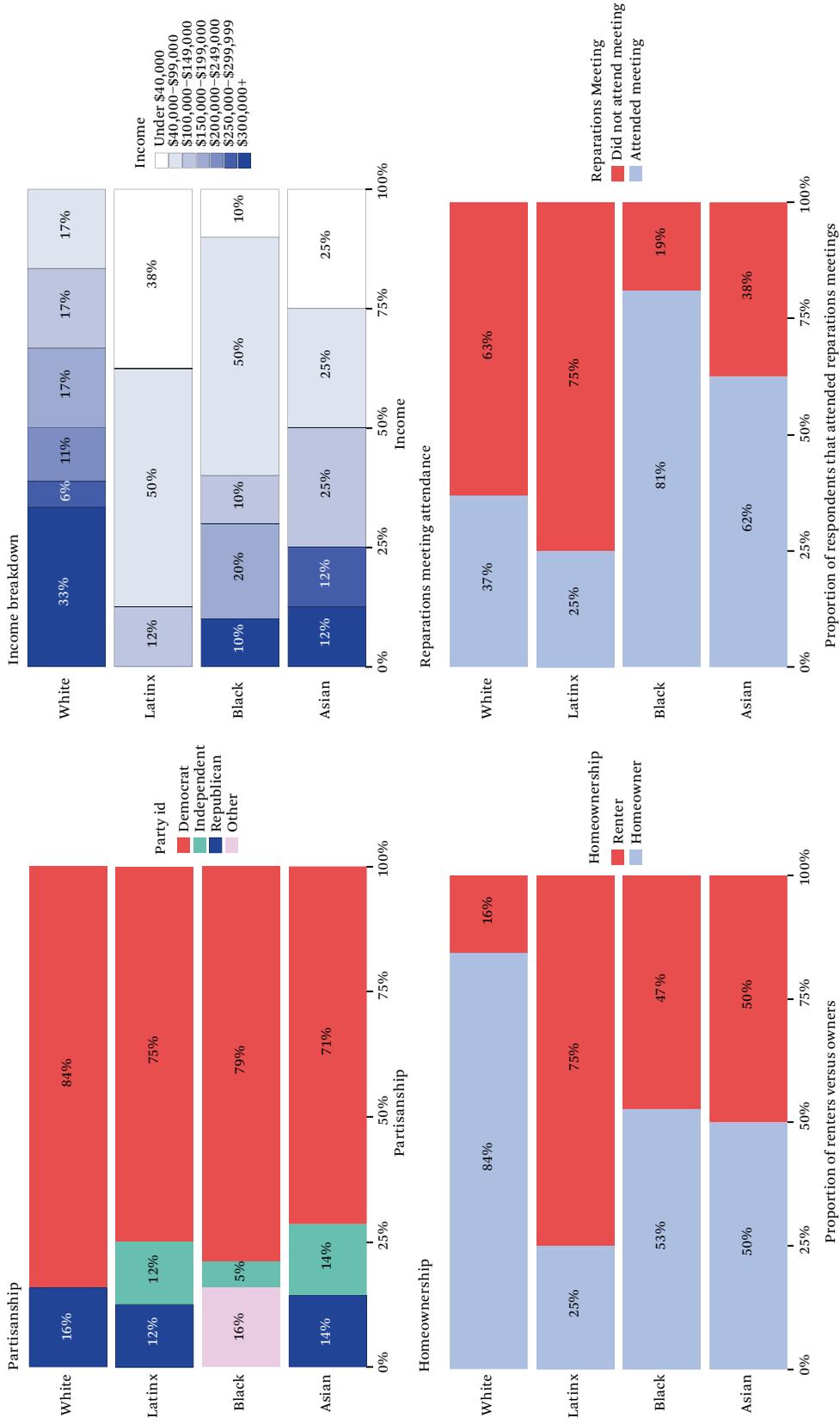
Even though the interviewees all reside in the same suburban community, they provide a glimpse into a diverse set of perspectives and experiences that help contextualize the emergence of Evanston’s reparations debate. Figure 2 summarizes four characteristics of the sample, disaggregated by race and ethnicity: partisanship, income, homeownership status, and reparations meeting attendance. Seventy-five percent identify as Democrats. This is not particularly surprising given that Evanstonians

**Table 2.** Sample by Race, Ethnicity, and Gender

	Asian	Black	Latinx	White	Total
Man	<i>N</i> = 2	<i>N</i> = 9	<i>N</i> = 3	<i>N</i> = 10	<i>N</i> = 24
Woman	<i>N</i> = 6	<i>N</i> = 12	<i>N</i> = 4	<i>N</i> = 9	<i>N</i> = 31
Nonbinary	<i>N</i> = 0	<i>N</i> = 0	<i>N</i> = 1	<i>N</i> = 0	<i>N</i> = 1
Total	<i>N</i> = 8	<i>N</i> = 21	<i>N</i> = 8	<i>N</i> = 19	<i>N</i> = 56

Source: Authors’ tabulation.

**Figure 2.** Partisanship, Income, Homeownership, and Meeting Attendance by Race and Ethnicity



Source: Authors' tabulation.

overwhelmingly support Democratic Party candidates (Gavin 2020). The sample also includes the perspectives of a racially diverse cohort of Republicans, Independents, and Black residents who do not affiliate with any political party.

The sample is also socioeconomically diverse. The average household income is between \$100,000 and \$149,000 per year, well above the city's average (U.S. Census Bureau 2023). That said, a number of the people interviewed fall on the lower end of the income distribution. Notably, more than half of the Asian, Black, and Latinx interviewees reported annual household incomes of less than \$100,000 per year. Consistent with city-level trends, White respondents are the most financially well off, with 33 percent reporting annual household incomes of more than \$300,000 per year.

Nearly 60 percent of the residents interviewed own their home. This is an important factor to consider given that Evanston's reparations ordinance was designed primarily to help Black homeowners. Even though 84 percent of the White residents interviewed own their homes, just over half of Asian and Black respondents do and just 25 percent of the Latinos.

Relatedly, we also wanted to gain a sense of how involved the interviewees were in the city's reparations conversation. Although 55 percent of those interviewed reported that they had attended a reparations meeting, this figure is largely driven by Black residents. Specifically, 81 percent of the Black people interviewed reported having attended one of the city's reparations meetings, a figure that aligns with our own observations of these events.

The individuals interviewed overwhelmingly supported Evanston's reparations ordinance. Figure 3 demonstrates that most of the White Evanstonians in the sample supported the city's reparations ordinance (84 percent) and reparations for slavery more broadly (79 percent). Asian and Latinx residents reported similar rates of support, though external survey

data suggest that this support may be slightly inflated due to the concentration of young Asians and Latinxs in our sample (City of Evanston 2023b). Contrastingly, Black residents are split over whether to support or oppose the local reparations ordinance while simultaneously reporting unanimous support for reparations for slavery (see also Dawson and Popoff 2004). In fact, Black residents reported lower levels of support for Evanston's reparations ordinance than White respondents, a finding mirrored in a recent survey of 3,500 Evanstonians (City of Evanston 2023b).<sup>5</sup>

### Difference in Support for Evanston's Reparations Ordinance

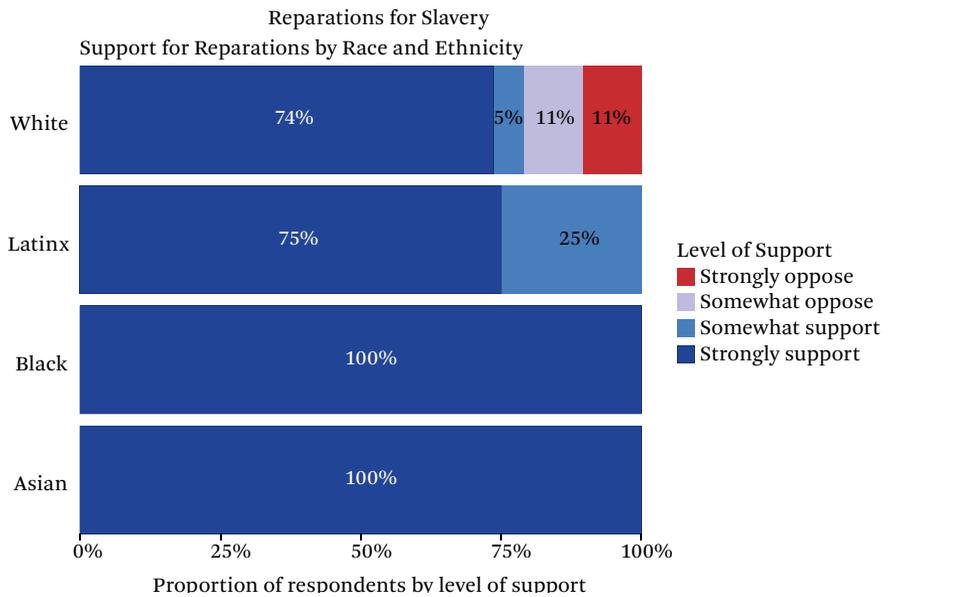
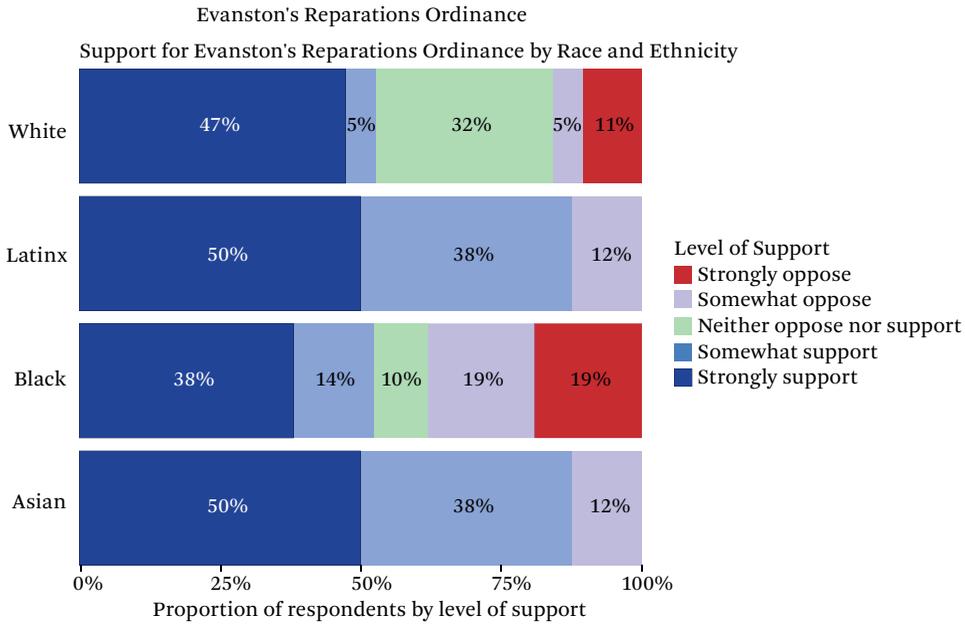
What accounts for this difference in support for Evanston's reparations ordinance? We argue that it is due to competing expectations for what reparations should entail. Black Americans are early claimants of reparations in the United States (Darity and Mullen 2022), and this historically grounded sentiment was prevalent among our respondents. Michael, a fifty-nine-year-old Black resident, characterized reparations this way:

You know, there was a promise of forty acres and a mule . . . And our government reneged on that promise, as it reneged on other promises to other groups. And so we never received any kind of compensation. We never received any, any thought toward the psychological damage or the trauma that comes from the condition of releasing an enslaved people into a world of so-called freedom without any kind of support without any compensation. And so I [support the] push for federal reparations.

Arlene, a seventy-four-year-old Black woman, shared Michael's view on reparations, linking the need for monetary compensation to the unpaid labor of her ancestors. However, she also presented a much broader conception of reparations—one that includes both mone-

5. In our sample, 52 percent of Black participants support the city's reparations ordinance. In a survey of 3,500 Evanstonians, 64 percent of Black residents support the initiative. Interestingly, both our interviews and this supplementary data tell a similar story: White residents are more supportive of the ordinance than Black residents.

**Figure 3.** Support for Reparations Among Interview Participants



Source: Authors' tabulation.

tary compensation and social spending in areas such as education and health care:

Reparations is the U.S. government making me whole, which means on the first level, I expect to be monetarily remunerated for all the suffering that my ancestors did for all the unpaid wages that they worked for and were

never paid. And then beyond that, there are other levels. I want to make sure that [there are] assurances that this will never happen to us again and that I will decide how I will be paid. And I expect some of that would be in monetary forms. And I would accept some level of bonds or whatever. I expect they will end up apologizing. And I'm trying to think

there's at least four areas that need to be fulfilled [including] the monetary, the bonds, education, and health care.

Michael's and Arlene's understandings of reparations are representative of the Black Evanstonians we interviewed. They support multifaceted reparations programs that include cash payments and social spending that aim to multiple manifestations of racial inequality in the United States.

For White residents of Evanston, the reparations ordinance represents a renewed commitment to historic ideals laid out in the city charter. George, an eighty-year-old, retired, White educator who lived in Evanston for more than fifty years, noted that Evanston's town charter explicitly mentions racial and gender equality.

I think about all of these men, these original founders of Evanston. They put in that charter freedom and equality of opportunity regardless of race or sex. Whoa, 1855. That's just, whoa. So the ideals of this town were established very early and they've always remained. I think, generally, if you live in Evanston, you sort of embrace that. Now the realities. You constantly have that tension as you do with the reparations bill between the good heartedness to say yes, there are wrongs that were, especially with housing that should be redressed. But there's also the idealism that's been at work through these various organizations and individuals throughout our history. It has a long history of trying hard to make things equal.

Contrastingly, the objections of the 16 percent of White respondents in our sample who outwardly opposed the ordinance were not grounded in conflicting definitions about what reparations should entail or about implementation, but about racial and economic conservatism. These individuals mentioned the policy would place an additional tax burden on residents, that it was not their responsibility to atone for past racial discrimination, and that Black Americans had already received a sufficient apology. For example, Mary, a seventy-four-year-old resident, explained it this way:

Reparations means raising our taxes and giving that money specifically to Black people who are in need, or not in need, that I don't understand completely. But giving that money to them just because they're Black and because maybe two generations ago their parents were slaves, I think that's nonsense. We've already apologized and dealt with that. What about the Native Americans and any other group that was treated unfairly? That's a part of history. That's all over the world. People have been persecuted all over the world. . . . It's just a fact of history that people have been oppressed and we have to move on. Why should I, who worked hard in my business, give my money to people that had been, you know, oppressed? Sorry. That's a part of life.

Black Evanstonians, meanwhile, were hesitant to characterize the housing grants as a reparations program. Toni, a fifty-two-year-old Black woman, highlighted this point, noting that the strongest supporter of Evanston's reparations ordinance—Fifth Ward Councilwoman Robin Rue Simmons—originally discussed reparations in terms of cash payments before ultimately promoting a housing program: “There was a time where I did support Evanston reparations at the beginning because Robin Rue Simmons was talking about direct cash payments then she said what are some other thoughts or ideas and housing did come up but no one discussed what that looked like. And in terms of reparations for Black people, land was stolen you know. Land was stolen so land should be given back to them.”

In Toni's view, reparations are about returning assets that were stolen and allowing Black people to spend the money in any way they choose. Others presented a view of reparations consisting of ongoing contributions rather than a one-time housing grant. Cherie, a seventy-two-year-old Black woman and lifelong resident of Evanston, emphasized that reparations should be focused on investing in the futures of young Black people:

Keep giving. Make it something that is ongoing for the generations that come along. And that could be scholarships. Programs in the

sciences, in the arts, that are set up for these generations to come. For the kids to help give them something to build on since they are the ones that had a lot taken away from them. [The city] kept them from being what it was possible for them to be if they had treated [us] fairly in the past. So yeah. When you give somebody \$25,000 that doesn't come close to reparations, and then when you tell them what they have to do with it. That's a grant. That is definitely not reparations.

Cherie thought beyond housing when considering what reparations should entail. She characterized Evanston's reparations ordinance as a grant, a one-time payment with strict contingencies for how the fund can be spent. Although White residents frequently affirmed that the city's Black residents should ultimately decide on the form that reparations should take, they consistently expressed strong support for the ordinance, noting the pride that they felt when they heard the ordinance had passed. Brooke, a fifty-seven-year-old White woman, told us this: "So, the vote was eight to one, right? So, I was proud to live in a place where the only vote against it was that it didn't go far enough. I was super proud of that. I was just super proud that like, 'Okay, we're unified in doing something and yeah, we disagree about the best way to go about it,' but how cool is that? And pride is definitely what I felt."

Asian and Latinx residents across partisan identities were largely supportive (88 percent) of the reparations ordinance even though they would not be direct beneficiaries. The Latinx people we interviewed echoed the concerns of many Black residents, suggesting that reparations should consist of both individual, monetary funds but also investment in specific neighborhoods in Evanston. Serena, a twenty-four-year-old Latina, noted that she supported education-focused reparations initiatives that aimed to open an elementary school in the 5th Ward, a predominantly Black part of town: "I know [Black residents] are looking into building a school here just because of how much more accessible it could be to families that live around here. I feel like some people would prefer that over only a couple of people getting

those funds and receiving those reparations." Asian Americans, meanwhile, discussed their support for Evanston's reparations ordinance in light of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which provided \$20,000 cash payments and a formal apology to the survivors of Japanese internment camps during World War II. Hana, a seventy-nine-year-old Japanese American, framed her support for Evanston's reparations ordinance this way: "I support reparations. . . . I've been a recipient of reparations because I'm of Japanese ancestry and I was born in the concentration camp during World War II. My whole family was incarcerated in 1943 after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. They lost everything. They are from the San Joaquin Valley in California. We were placed in Arkansas, and I was born in the camp."

To understand how Black Evanstonians developed such starkly different perceptions of the city's reparations ordinance, it is important to consider the unique political circumstances that allowed the policy to emerge. As this article shows, White residents were quick to celebrate a rather expedient policy win that reaffirmed the city's progressive values. Meanwhile, Black residents were left to sort through the pieces of a policy that initially left many of the city's most vulnerable Black residents behind.

### **The Politics of Reparations Policymaking in Evanston**

An in-depth look at Evanston's policy design process sheds light on the stark racial divides discussed. When we move beyond a simple timeline of events to consider the broader, on-the-ground politics at play, we can better understand the challenges that initially threatened the viability of the nation's first publicly funded reparations initiative (Patashnik and Zelizer 2013; Patashnik 2008). To do this, we pay close attention to the perspectives of the city's Black residents who felt that Evanston's reparations policy initially missed the mark and deepened their sense of distrust toward local government (Michener, SoRelle, and Thurston 2022). We contend that the comparatively higher rates of White support for Evanston's reparations ordinance highlight a cycle of racialized policy feedback whereby racial identity served as an important lens through which res-

idents came to either laud or resent the decision making of local officials (Michener 2019; Rosenthal 2021). Specifically, although Asian, Latinx, and White residents largely supported the ordinance on symbolic grounds (see figure 3), Black residents expressed frustration that a policy bearing the name of reparations appeared to be set up for failure from the outset. It is only because of the persistent political activism of Black residents—and Black women in particular—that the city council amended the ordinance to better secure the viability of the program.

*Window of Opportunity: COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, and the Legacy of Redlining*

Evanston's reparations ordinance originated before the major political events that came to define 2020 (see table 1). However, exogenous shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic—a public health crisis that disproportionately affected African Americans—and a massive wave of Black Lives Matter protests following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery contributed to a unique set of circumstances that allowed policymakers such as Robin Rue Simmons to convincingly make the case for swift approval of the reparations ordinance (Reyes 2020). During the early months of 2020, Simmons acknowledged that she wanted the ordinance to pass within the calendar year and that she was unwilling to compromise on its format, which would have slowed down the approval process: “Learning that local government is most responsive and we’re more nimble and we can make impact quicker than the federal government, and thinking this is a local matter. And I pushed it relentlessly. I was very, very stern in wanting it to happen in *this calendar year*, being the 400th year of Black resilience. That was important to me. So *I was not willing to compromise on any other format to get to this victory. Time is of the essence*” (quoted in Alexander and Dow 2023, emphasis added).

The multidimensional calls for racial justice that characterized the politics of 2020 represent important crises (Kingdon 1984) that interrupted the policy design process. These events created a sense that swift actions needed to be taken within a narrow window of opportunity,

leading to the prioritization of expedience over design. This expedience, while well-intentioned, contributed to a policy that left many questions about eligibility, funding, and implementation unanswered and threatened the very viability of the policy (Patashnik and Zelizer 2013; Patashnik 2008). These themes emerged in our conversations with residents as well.

Many White residents largely supported Councilwoman Simmons's push to pass the reparations ordinance because it reaffirmed Evanston's long-standing commitment to racial justice. In fact, 53 percent of the White residents interviewed reported that the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black Americans, as well as the racial justice protests that occurred in the spring and summer of 2020, made expedient local action on reparations an imperative. Amy, a forty-five-year-old White woman, linked her push for reparations to the murder of George Floyd explicitly:

I got involved in this during the pandemic period, but . . . I would peg it, not surprisingly . . . on the post-George Floyd period. I was looking for something I could be involved in that would be constructively aimed at racial justice. So at that time, everything was on Zoom. So I was in Zoom meetings held by the reparation subcommittee of the Evanston City Council . . . and there were all these questions about “what role is there for non-Black residents,” but I knew it was important for us to join together in this discussion as a community.

White residents, including Amy, celebrated when the city council approved the disbursement of the first \$400,000 in reparations funds in March 2021. In fact, when we asked respondents to explain what they felt when they heard the reparations ordinance had passed, 25 percent of White respondents reported feeling a sense of pride in their community. Dave, a seventy-two-year-old White respondent, went so far as to say that the city should change their “Welcome to Evanston” signs to read “Evanston: First to Reparations.”

Notably, the Black residents we interviewed did not share this sense of pride. Rodney, a

twenty-eight-year-old Black man, reflected on Judge Lionel Jean-Baptiste's 2002 reparations resolution, which he recalled from his childhood (see table 1). He frames his frustrations from a historical perspective, asking how, after twenty years of community discussions about reparations, Evanston's city council arrived at policy that left so many questions about eligibility, funding, and implementation: "There's this dude, as a judge, his name is Lionel John Baptist. And he got something passed when I was little about a reparations bill . . . And so it's just crazy that . . . all these years later, there's still so many questions. There's so much stuff not planned. And so many just, you know, faulty parts of the process."

In Rodney's mind, when Evanston finally arrived at the decision to pursue reparations, questions about eligibility should have been addressed and disbursement procedures streamlined. As discussed, Evanston consistently elects Democrats who espouse their commitments to racial equity while on the city council. Thus, in Evanston, it was not a matter of whether a reparations ordinance had enough votes to get passed but of whether policymakers had the patience to get the design of a groundbreaking reparations ordinance right.

COVID-19 and the high-profile police killing of George Floyd pushed policymakers to act before addressing essential questions raised by some Black residents about eligibility and implementation. These questions were particularly important to address, even if more time was needed to establish the details. Recall that the ordinance initially allowed eligible grant recipients—referred to as Ancestors by the City of Evanston—to use the funds to pay down an existing mortgage, put toward a down payment on a new home, or make renovations to their homes (City of Evanston, n.d.a). In hindsight, the developers of the reparations ordinance used homeownership as an eligibility criterion for Black residents within a context that put significant constraints on the ability of these same residents to become homeowners in the first place. This suggests some degree of shortsightedness during the policy design process.

Discriminatory housing policies such as redlining are particularly nefarious because of their crucial role in perpetuating the genera-

tional racial wealth gap. Black people were denied access to mortgages, credit, and insurance, which undermined their ability to purchase homes and build wealth (Thurston 2018; Rothstein 2017). Yet Black renters in Evanston—arguably those most affected by the city's redlining policies—were less likely than Black homeowners to be able to claim their reparations funds (Castro 2023a). As stated, many of these individuals did not have homes to renovate or mortgages to pay down partially because of discriminatory housing policies. Moreover, the housing grants were not substantial enough to provide most Ancestors with the necessary funds to be able to purchase a home in Evanston's competitive housing market.

Black Evanston residents were quick to highlight that elders in the community who were not homeowners would be unable to use the reparations program housing grants. These concerns continued to be raised by Black residents at Reparations Committee meetings into the early months of 2023 (City of Evanston 2023c). For example, Donna, a thirty-year-old Black resident of Evanston's Fifth Ward, shared this concern: "When you dig into some of the things like the way that this housing program is structured, some of the people who are directly impacted by redlining can't even access this housing program. I'm thinking about the elders in the community who were affected, some of them are not homeowners. So they can't even use this stuff, right? Because it's only for homeowners."

As discussed, memos circulated by the Empowerment Commission suggest that members of the city council considered allowing Black residents to use the funds for rental assistance during the initial stages of the ordinance's development (City of Evanston 2019). Yet the policy adopted in early 2021 did not allow the funds to be used this way. Notably, "the reparations committee and subcommittee never asked the city to research the legality of using reparations funding for rental assistance" nor did they provide evidence to suggest that rental assistance would fail to achieve a primary goal of the program: building the wealth of Black residents (Castro 2023a). Many Black residents shared not only their concerns about eligibility but also their doubts that the

ordinance—levied from a municipal sales tax on recreational cannabis sales—would be adequately funded to ensure its survival.

*Tax Revenue: Cannabis Sales as a Source of Funding*

In January 2020, the State of Illinois legalized recreational cannabis, creating a unique funding stream for the Evanston reparations ordinance. The emergence of this policy alongside Evanston’s reparations ordinance can be viewed as a lateral effect—when one policy’s development is shaped by a seemingly unrelated one (Mettler 2016, 374). The decision to use municipal tax revenue from recreational cannabis sales was critical in garnering support for the passing of the ordinance (Armus 2019). The newly minted 2020 Illinois cannabis tax allowed the city’s policymakers and White residents to support the reparations ordinance without fear that they would have to pay for it through an increase in individual property or sales taxes.

At the time that the measure passed, the funding stream for the reparations program committed the first \$10 million levied through a 3 percent municipal sales tax on recreational cannabis sales (City of Evanston, n.d.a). At the time, it was hailed by major national news outlets as an “innovative solution to funding reparations” (Fies 2020). However, Black residents were highly skeptical of this approach, questioning whether it would be able to adequately fund a \$10 million reparations program on recreational cannabis sales alone. Moreover, they questioned the optics of asking Black patrons of Evanston’s cannabis dispensary to pay a tax that would essentially fund their own reparations. For example, Dorothy, a sixty-year-old Black woman expressed her displeasure with this approach:

Part of reparations is saying, look at this, this is how much money was taken outta the Black stock. This is how much damage and then having a systematic way to pay it back and not just by donations, but by resources. So instead of saying, well, we hope more people smoke weed this year, because then we’ll be able to pay back the reparations. It should be, you know, treating it the way that they treat

their pension fund obligations. It’s okay. We know we can’t pay it all back, but we are dedicating a certain percentage of the Evanston budget.

White Democrats, however, strongly supported this revenue source. Brooke, a fifty-seven-year-old White woman, shared her view: “I also thought the fact that it was being paid for with cannabis proceeds was just genius. I thought that was great both because of the historic oppression in the Black community like over prosecution for small time drug offenses, which has hurt the Black community, and because it’s this brand-new source of revenue. So, you don’t have to take it away from something else. Let’s use this.”

Brooke’s response provides a historical justification to frame her support for using a tax on recreational cannabis sales to fund reparations, but it is also important that such a tax ensured that many White residents would not have to foot the bill through, say, a property tax increase. In fact, half of the White residents we interviewed—including Brooke—claimed that the city’s high taxes had inflicted harm on them:

I mean the only way that I see the city inflicting harm on me is just that my taxes are really high and, I mean, they’re really high, and I don’t know what they are in neighboring communities. You probably know this better than I do, or you will by the time this is all over, but it just seems like unbelievably high and I don’t know how that’s sustainable. And we’re doing okay financially, we’re going to be okay, we’re not going to have to leave Evanston because we can’t afford to pay our taxes. But that’s because we have extra income.

A handful of White residents voiced a more critical view. Some noted that any reparations ordinance should be funded in a way that chips away at the generational wealth gap rather than rely on revenue generated from municipal cannabis sales. For example, Beth, a forty-five-year-old White resident, called on the city’s White residents to voluntarily give up 10 percent of their annual income to fund the ordinance through the Evanston Community Fund but ac-

knowledge that this solution alone was not enough to sustain the policy (Evanston Community Fund, n.d.).

Other White residents echoed the concerns of Black Evanstonians, noting that a municipal tax on recreational cannabis sold from a single dispensary in the city would never cover the \$10 million commitment. For most White residents, however, the tax provided a way for them to distance themselves from the reparations fund financially while providing full support for the ordinance in the wake of major political events in 2020 that elevated the salience of racial inequality in the United States for many White Americans.

### *Black Political Activism and the Expansion of Evanston's Reparations Ordinance*

Two detrimental elements of policy design—preemptively resolved through the persistent activism of Black residents—threatened to undermine the ordinance: inadequate funding sources and overly strict eligibility criteria that restricted reparations funds from making it into the hands of the city's Black residents. Since the release of the first \$400,000 of the reparations housing grants in March of 2021, multiple funding issues have arisen. Regarding the municipal tax on recreational cannabis, the city based its funding model on the assumption that three dispensaries would open in Evanston by the time the ordinance was approved. However, as of March 2023, only one had opened, significantly decreasing the expected tax revenue (City of Evanston 2023c). Just as any Black residents had feared, the reparations program was underfunded even before all the eligible housing grant recipients, or Ancestors, could claim their funds.

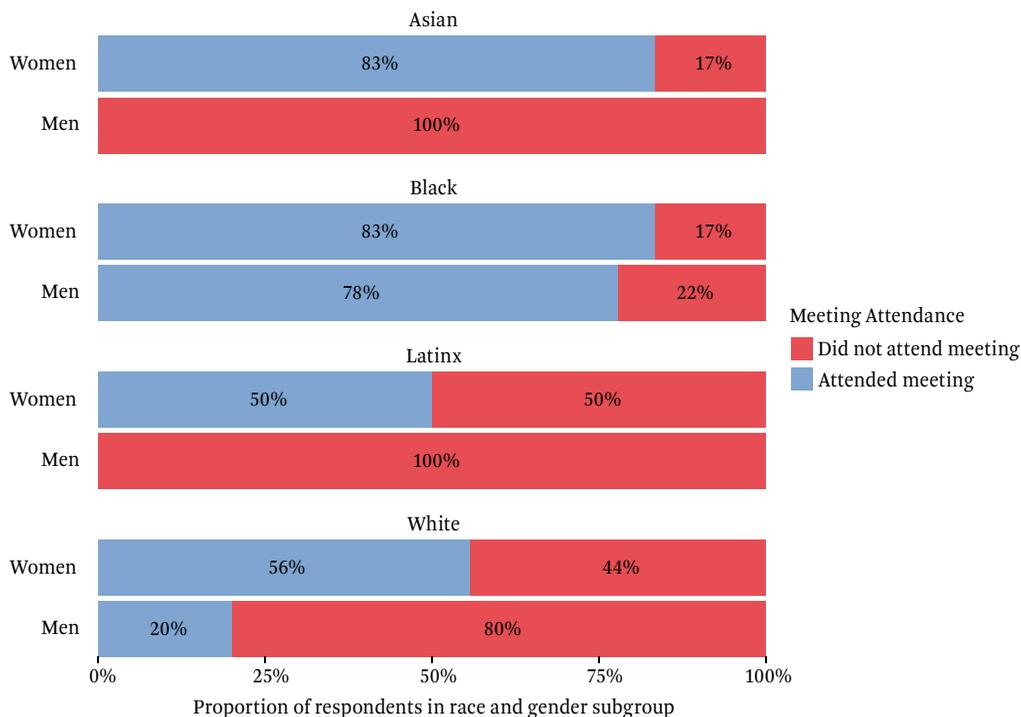
To rectify this funding discrepancy, the Evanston City Council voted in December of 2022 to set aside an additional \$10 million over ten years from a tax on real estate sales in the city over \$1.5 million. Policymakers hope this revision can help account for the funding shortfall resulting from the lack of dispensaries (City of Evanston 2023c). Additionally, funds from private donations, primarily from local churches and synagogues, are now available to supplement the fund.

In addition to the shifting nature of the

funding source of the reparation ordinance, the Reparations Committee has also faced significant logistical challenges resulting from overly strict eligibility criteria that threatened the viability of the program. As of March 2023, seven prospective Ancestor grant recipients had died while waiting to be selected for the housing grants (Castro 2023a). Before their deaths, many of these individuals could not complete the necessary paperwork to pass the reparations housing grant to their children and were unable to claim the funds in the form of cash payments or rental assistance (City of Evanston 2023c). An additional 106 Black residents were still waiting for their housing grant selection as of March 2023. Many of these individuals were over seventy and unable to claim the funds because they were not homeowners.

Since the approval of the release of the first \$400,000 for the ordinance in March of 2021, Black residents have been leading the fight to call out the flaws of the ordinance, yielding a better and more inclusive policy as a result. After passing the historic reparations ordinance, many White Evanston residents and Evanston Black elites, feeling a sense of pride about the city's commitment to racial justice, largely believed that their reparations work was finished. Conversely, for many Black residents, the work had just begun.

The Reparations Committee, created in November 2020, has served as the primary vehicle for Black residents to voice concerns to key stakeholders regarding the reparations housing ordinance. The mayor appoints Reparations Committee members, and being an Evanston resident is the only qualification to serve. Former Councilwoman Robin Rue Simmons spearheads the committee, which currently includes three Evanston councilmembers and four Black Evanston residents. The committee has met monthly in person and by Zoom since August 2021. Every Reparations Committee meeting agenda since its inception includes a public comment item that reserves time for neighborhood residents to voice their opinion about the ordinance and offer feedback to the committee. During this portion of the meeting, residents can relay their concerns about the policy directly to the Evanston government's

**Figure 4.** Meeting Attendance by Race, Ethnicity, and Gender

Source: Authors' tabulation.

legislative decision-making body that oversees the reparations ordinance's implementation.

Concerns over the details of the policy design frequently emerged during public comment at local Reparations Committee meetings and fostered high rates of Black political participation, particularly among women who often took off work or braved winter snowstorms to attend the weekday morning reparations meetings (see also Nuamah 2021). As demonstrated in figure 4, among the individuals we interviewed, Black women were the most likely to report having attended a reparations meeting. This finding is consistent with our observations of these meetings.

During these public comments, faulty aspects of the policy design—including the precarity of the funding source, the growing length of the approved applicant waitlist, the slow speed at which housing repairs are being completed, and the conundrum of how to provide housing grants to residents who do not own houses—are called out directly in a political arena where those with decision-making power

cannot hide. These public comments have effectively pressured Reparations Committee members, including former Councilwoman Robin Rue Simmons, to improve the policy's reach and implementation.

The persistence attendance of Black Evanstonians at the monthly Reparations Committee meetings—coupled with more critical coverage of the ordinance in local and national media—has paid off immensely. In early March 2023, the Evanston City Council voted to allow eligible residents to claim their reparations funds in the form cash payments (City of Evanston 2023a). Although it remains unclear whether these cash payments will be tax exempt, are tied to housing, or represent an entirely different reparations policy (Castro 2023d), the new availability of cash payments is a substantial victory for Black Evanstonians, who have been championing direct cash payments as a form of reparations from the beginning. As of October 2023, the City of Evanston has paid roughly \$2.2 million to qualified Ancestor recipients and is preparing for the next

round of \$25,000 payments to direct beneficiaries (Williamson 2023). This substantial shift in policy is the direct result of the local political organizing of Black residents who preemptively called out the underdeveloped policy design that initially threatened the viability of the nation's first publicly funded reparations ordinance.

## CONCLUSION

The call for Black reparations frequently identifies the U.S. federal government as a primary perpetrator of slavery and suggests that financial investments at the federal level are needed to eliminate the nation's racial wealth gap (Balfour 2023, 296, 300). However, Evanston's ordinance represents a departure from this traditional thinking around reparations: the ordinance focuses on housing discrimination and places the responsibility for mitigating past harm on local government.

At a moment when municipalities across the United States are developing similar reparations initiatives (Hain and Mulcahy 2023), we argue that an in-depth look at Evanston's push for reparations in 2019 and the politics of reparations policymaking helps us better understand how best to deliver reparations to Black people across the United States. Our analysis suggests that the voices of Black residents should guide local conversations about what reparations are, who should benefit, and how to allocate and distribute the funds. This finding is consistent with that of Elizabeth Davies and her colleagues (2024, this issue) in their study of Chicago, both cases highlighting the importance of involving the victimized party early in the design and conceptualization of a reparations program. Moreover, although policymakers are right to leverage the increased salience of structural racism and the persistence of the racial wealth gap within the public discourse about reparations, the politics of expedience should not trump effective policy design.

As demonstrated in this article, many of Evanston's implementation challenges could have been addressed sooner had policymakers slowed down and centered the concerns of Black residents.

There is no question that national momentum continues to build around what Evanston has been able to achieve. The historic passage of Evanston's reparations ordinance has garnered worldwide acclaim and praise for the city and its major political stakeholders. Former Councilwoman Robin Rue Simmons now sits on NAARC and has started a nonprofit organization, FirstRepair, dedicated to assisting other municipalities with the design and implementation of reparations programs of their own. The services of FirstRepair include "sharing best practices, creating tools, and developing a viable model to advance local reparations policy" (FirstRepair, n.d.). Until federal reparations legislation is passed, smaller municipalities will continue to look to Evanston—as well as the national organizations touting the success of this case—as a model for how other cities can pass reparations policies of their own.

As the nation explores how to secure reparations at multiple levels of government, we argue that the interests of Black Americans must be at the core of policy design and the implementation processes. Surveys of local residents, regularly scheduled virtual and in-person town hall meetings, individual and household interviews, and a reparations census are but a handful of tools multiple levels of government can use to prioritize Black opinion throughout the creation of reparations initiatives. After all, the much-needed repair and restorative justice that reparations initiatives aspire to achieve are only possible if we commit ourselves to centering the political concerns and voices of all Black people.

**APPENDIX***Pre-Questionnaire***Pre-Interview Questionnaire**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Interview ID: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Interviewee Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Location of interview (Address): \_\_\_\_\_  
 Time of the Interview \_\_\_\_\_

**Respondent Socio-Demographic Information:**

1. What is your gender?  
 Woman  Man  I identify differently \_\_\_\_\_
2. Which race-ethnicity do you consider yourself? Check all that apply.
  - African American or Black
  - Native American
  - Asian or Asian American
  - Biracial
  - Hispanic or Latino/Latina
  - Middle Eastern or North African
  - Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
  - White
3. If you had to pick just one, which category do you consider yourself?
  - African American or Black
  - Native American
  - Asian or Asian American
  - Biracial
  - Hispanic or Latino/Latina
  - Middle Eastern or North African
  - Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
  - White
4. What is your **household's** combined annual income? When we say household, we mean you and others with whom you generally live and share most expenses.
  - Under \$40,000
  - \$40,000–\$99,000
  - \$100,000–\$149,000
  - \$150,000–\$199,000
  - \$200,000–\$249,000
  - \$250,000–\$299,999
  - \$300,000+
5. If you were asked to use one of these five names for your social class, which would you say you belong in?
  - Lower class
  - Working class
  - Middle class
  - Upper-middle class
  - Upper class

6. What Zip Code do you live in? \_\_\_\_\_
7. What ward do you live in? \_\_\_\_\_
8. What is the nearest intersection to where you live? \_\_\_\_\_
9. What Zip Code did you grow up in? \_\_\_\_\_
10. Are you a homeowner? No  Yes
11. Did your parents own their home in Evanston? No  Yes
12. What Evanston ward did your parents live in Evanston? \_\_\_\_\_

### Education

13. Did you go to public school in Evanston? No  Yes
14. Did you attend all of elementary and high school in Evanston? No  Yes
15. If yes, where did you go to school in the city? \_\_\_\_\_
16. If no, where did you go to school? (City, State, and Zip Code) \_\_\_\_\_
17. What degrees have you successfully completed? Please list the institution where you completed the degree.
- Bachelor's degree \_\_\_\_\_
- Master's degree \_\_\_\_\_
- Doctorate \_\_\_\_\_

### News Consumption and Political Interest

18. How often do you pay attention to what's going on in government and politics?
- Never
- Some of the time
- About half the time
- Most of the time
- Always
19. Thinking about your local community, how interested are you in local community politics and local community affairs?
- Not interested
- Somewhat interested
- Very interested
20. How interested are you in national politics and national affairs?
- Not interested
- Somewhat interested
- Very interested
21. Some people don't pay much attention to political campaigns. How interested were you in the 2020 campaign?
- Not interested
- Somewhat interested
- Very interested

(continued)

22. During a typical week, how many days do you watch, read, or listen to news on the Internet, not including sports?
- None
  - One day
  - Two days
  - Three days
  - Four days
  - Five days
  - Six days
  - Seven days
23. Where do you usually get news about national politics? \_\_\_\_\_
24. Where do you usually get news about local politics? \_\_\_\_\_

### Reparations

25. On Thursday, January 13, the City of Evanston's Reparations Committee approved 122 applicants qualifying as Ancestors for the City's Local Reparations Restorative Housing Program. An Ancestor in this program is defined as an African American or Black individual, at least eighteen years old at the time, who was an Evanston resident between 1919 and 1969.
- The first sixteen applicants will be eligible initially to participate in the Restorative Housing Program, which will provide grants of up to \$25,000 to purchase a home, home improvement or mortgage assistance. How much do you oppose or support this program?
- Strongly oppose
  - Somewhat oppose
  - Neither oppose nor support
  - Somewhat support
  - Strongly support
26. Broadly speaking, how much do you disagree or agree that the government should make amends for past wrongs by paying money to or developing policies that help the African American descendants of enslaved people?
- Strongly oppose
  - Somewhat oppose
  - Neither oppose nor support
  - Somewhat support
  - Strongly support

### Spirituality and Ideology

27. Do you attend church, synagogue, or other religious services? No  Yes
- If yes, where do you attend these services? \_\_\_\_\_
28. When it comes to politics, would you describe yourself as:
- Very liberal
  - Somewhat liberal
  - Closer to liberals
  - Neither liberal nor conservative
  - Closer to conservatives
  - Somewhat conservative
  - Very conservative
  - Other

29. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or other?
- Strong Democrat
  - Not so strong Democrats
  - Independent leaning Democrat
  - Independent
  - Independent leaning Republican
  - Not so strong Republican
  - Strong Republican
  - Other

#### *Interview Protocol*

*Thank you for agreeing to an interview with me. I'm looking forward to learning more about your experiences in Evanston as well as your views about the reparations bill that recently passed. For this reason, I will be very interested in your individual experiences. You are the expert here, and I am the learner. The interview will take between 45–60 minutes and responses from the 40 individuals included in this study will be used to help us better understand how individuals are thinking about reparations and how they came to develop their opinions on this topic. If you don't like one of my questions, you do not have to answer. Do you have any questions before we get started? (Answer questions if they come up) Ok, great, let's get started. I will start the recording now.*

**Note: All subpoints (■) are follow-up questions that can be asked if the primary question does not illicit a rich response. Given the semi-structured nature of the protocol, the interviewer will invoke these questions as they see fit.**

#### **Evanston (10 Minutes)**

*RQ: What is it like to live in Evanston Illinois, the first city in the nation to pass a reparations bill?*

- What is it like to live in Evanston?
  - How long have you lived here?
  - What brought you to Evanston originally?
- What do you like most about living in Evanston?
- What are some of the challenges facing your community?
  - **Probe:** Do issues related to race and racism represent significant community challenges?
- In your experience, is Evanston a community where everyone is a full and equal citizen?

#### **Reparations (10 Minutes)**

*RQ: How are Evanstonians conceptualizing reparations? How are residents reacting to the passage of the reparations bill?*

- What does reparations mean to you?
- What do you think the reparations bill does?
- With this definition in mind, do you think Evanston's reparations bill truly qualifies as reparations?
- What did you feel when you found out the reparations bill had passed?
- Do you feel that legislation of this kind is possible in other contexts or is Evanston unique in this regard?
  - **Probe [If yes]:** Where might those places be?

*(continued)*

**Political Learning (10 Minutes)**

RQ: To what extent are views on reparations shaped by political learning? Has the reparations bill been a source of political learning among residents?

- When did you first become aware of race and racism?
- Where did you develop your ideas about reparations?
  - **Probe:** Did you develop your ideas about reparations prior to the reparations debate in Evanston?
- Has Evanston's reparations bill changed how you think about Evanston's identity or history?

**Trauma (10 Minutes)**

RQ: How does trauma affect political participation? How do prior experiences with trauma by the state impact local political participation?

- Do you believe the Evanston government has inflicted harm on the Black community in Evanston?
  - **Probe: [If yes]:** In what way?
  - **Probe: [If no]:** In what way?
- Are the effects of government decisions in the past still felt by current Black Evanstonians today?
- What does the term trauma mean to you?
  - **Probe:** How would you define a traumatic experience?
  - **Probe:** Have you experienced trauma on behalf of Evanston's government?
  - **Probe:** Do you think your parents have experienced trauma?

**Political Participation (5 Minutes)**

- How involved would you say you are in Evanston politics?
- Has your involvement in Evanston politics increased, decreased, or stayed the same, since the emergence of the reparations bill?

**Partisanship (10 Minutes)**

RQ: To what extent are views on reparations shaped by partisanship? Has the reparations bill challenged or reaffirmed residents' partisan identity?

- I see on your pre-questionnaire that you identify as a [Democrat/Independent/Republican]. To what extent do you feel like your party identity shapes how you've come to think about reparations?
- Do you think your stance on reparations is consistent with other [Democrats/Republicans/Independents] in Evanston?
- Do you think your stance on reparations is consistent with other [Democrats/Republicans/Independents] **nationally**?

*That brings us to the end of the questions I have for you. Is there anything else you think I should know in order to understand your experiences in Evanston or how you feel about the reparations bill? Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today.*

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# Justice Delayed: An Analysis of Local Proposals for Black Reparations



OLIVIA J. RENEAU

*In this article, I document and analyze all municipal, state, and county-level efforts for Black reparations in the United States. Most efforts resemble H.R. 40's exploratory commission model, possibly due to policy path dependency. Few geographies have allocated funding for committee recommendations, but some have allocated funds for committee activities. Only Evanston, Illinois, has allocated and distributed funds to qualifying residents. On average, cities with reparations efforts demonstrated mixed performance on metrics related to Black wealth, with insufficient evidence to suggest local Black-White disparities are more severe than the nation as a whole. Several proposals emphasize the Black-White racial wealth gap as emblematic of slavery-derived disparity, but no municipal or state proposal can rival the scale or potential of a federal program.*

**Keywords:** local reparations, slavery reparations, path dependency

In the wake of the deaths of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, the nation underwent what some have named the “summer of racial reckoning” (Chang, Martin, and Marrapodi 2020). Tens of thousands of Americans took to the streets in protest of police brutality, the disparate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color, and continued disappointment and outrage over rampant racial inequality. Between May 25 and August 22, 2020, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) recorded more than ten thousand protests (Kishi and Jones 2021). More than 80

percent of these protests were directly related to the growing Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement or the ongoing pandemic. In addition to attending public protests, citizens engaged in telephone and mail-in campaigns such as those for police reform, investment in Black communities, and support for H.R. 40 (Campaign Zero 2020; M4BL 2020; NAARC 2020).<sup>1</sup> No level of government was insulated from the swell of public outcry from May through August of 2020.

Founded on existing calls to address racial inequality and hastened by tensions reignited

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1. Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act, H.R. 40, 117th Cong. (2021).

by police brutality, the question of reparations exploded into the political terrain. In July 2020, the city council of Asheville, North Carolina, voted to form a reparations committee to explore compensating the city's Black residents (Burgess 2020a). Providence, Rhode Island, and Evanston, Illinois, seemingly followed suit, the latter of which appropriated \$400,000 in grants for qualifying Black households (List 2020; Treisman 2021).<sup>2</sup> The tide of local reparations only grew in the three following years. Cities from Massachusetts to Oklahoma, from nonslaveholding states to the industrial north, have stepped into the growing spotlight on local disparity, intervention, and reconciliation. Beyond empty commitments to racial equity passed in the wake of the nation's sorrow, cities, counties, and states across the nation have formed commissions, conducted research, and arrived at conclusions about their roles in harm and healing.

The advent of local reparations has not been without controversy. Mere months after Asheville's historic vote, the city's reparations committee failed to meet resident expectations in a short-staffed Equity Office (Burgess 2020b). The city of Chicago's efforts stalled due to political infighting with no clear path for the future (Cherone 2020). Evanston's reparations program, which has garnered significant positive media attention, continues to face criticism for its strict criteria for eligibility (Bosman 2021; Misra 2021). Still, these municipalities are cited as beacons of hope for longtime advocates of Black reparations. The rapid proliferation, alleged underprovision, and controversy of these proposals raise the question of what the current state of local reparations is.

## LOCAL REPARATIONS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The word *reparations* describes redress given for an abuse or injury. Although the colloquial definition of the reparations does not exclude use by other groups, this analysis considers what might be referred to as Black reparations. To define Black reparations, I look to the framework offered by William Darity and Kirsten

Mullen in their book *From Here to Equality*, which defines the process of reparations with the acronym ARC: acknowledgment, redress, and closure (Darity and Mullen 2020). Acknowledgment requires the receipt of a formal apology and commitment to the pursuit of redress by perpetrators and beneficiaries. Redress, which can be in the form of restitution or atonement, should make adequate amends for the injury as defined by the injured party. The process is then ended with closure, in which the injured group affirms their satisfaction with the restitution and formally closes the claim for reparative action.

Arguments for reparations are generally organized around the idea that historic, recent, and present acts of racism are influential in creating modern-day racial inequality. More specifically, reparations today are typically proposed for the purpose of or in concert with closing the Black-White racial wealth gap, which describes the ratio of the difference in wealth between Black and White households at the median, typically measured as the total market value of a household's tangible and intangible assets. Academics have sought to quantify the impact of slavery on the racial wealth gap, with estimates of the cost of slavery and discrimination ranging from \$5.9 trillion to \$16 quadrillion (Craemer 2015; Darity 2008; Craemer et al. 2020). Empirical analyses of the impact of ultrapoverty paint highly racialized pictures of intergenerational mobility from as early as 1880, particularly when a father is initially recorded as low income (Collins and Wanmaker 2017).

Still, Black reparations remain unpopular to the general population (Johnson 2020). Only 5 percent of Republicans and 49 percent of Democrats believe that the government should make cash payments to Black Americans who are descendants of slaves (Younis 2019). Most of America still does not believe that the connection between slavery and its various derivations and Black Americans' economic lag relative to almost all other groups is clear. Equally important to acknowledging the continuing unpopularity of reparations is acknowledging

2. Evanston's pursuit of reparations predates the events of 2020 with the passage of Resolution 58-R-19, Commitment to End Structural Racism and Achieve Racial Equity (City of Evanston 2019).

that the topic has appeared to have grown markedly less unpopular since the summer of 2020. By late June that year, overall opposition to reparations was reported to be only 63 percent, a 14-point decrease from 1997 (Langer 2020). Subsequent polls between 2020 and 2023 typically place opposition from 60 to 65 percent (Sharpe 2021, 2022, 2023).<sup>3</sup>

Reparations policies have gained traction across all levels of government. House subcommittees held hearings on slavery reparations in 2019 and May of 2021. Proposed H.R. 40/S.40 (2023), introduced by the late Representative John Conyers more than twenty times, calls on Congress to “study and develop reparation proposals for African Americans.” Additionally, an increasing number of localities have considered or committed to considering reparations and reconciliation for their role in slavery, though the effect of such proposals remains to be seen.

### The Current State of Local Reparations

Before attempting to analyze the number of current local reparations efforts in the United States, it is important to create a distinction between those efforts explicitly referred to as reparations and those that are reparative. For this research, I use the term reparations efforts to encompass all local, county, and state activity identified as reparations by policymakers. I have not included efforts that did not include the word *reparations* in their reparative resolutions, because their lack of acknowledgment violates the first requirement of Darity and Mullen’s ARC framework. Austin, Texas, and Durham, North Carolina, for example, passed equity resolutions that resembled early repara-

tions resolutions (namely, the establishment of an investigative body to track disparate outcomes for marginalized populations) but failed to identify the proposal’s purpose as in pursuit of reparations or redress for injury.<sup>4</sup> This omission of *reparations* may be an attempt to advance pro-equity policies without the political history that the term reparations commands. Such resolutions are likely to benefit Black populations most (particularly if qualification for a program is predicated on socioeconomic status), but more research is needed to determine whether more universalist framing for reparations-like equity policies reduces public opinion barriers for similar policies explicitly enumerated to be reparations.<sup>5</sup>

Between December 2019 and March 2023, nineteen municipalities introduced and passed reparations initiatives in the United States. These cities include San Francisco, Berkeley, and Los Angeles, California; Wilmington, Delaware; Iowa City, Iowa; Chicago and Evanston, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; Amherst, Boston, and Cambridge, Massachusetts; Greenbelt, Maryland; Kansas City and St. Louis, Missouri; St. Paul, Minnesota; Asheville and High Point, North Carolina; Providence, Rhode Island; and Burlington, Vermont.<sup>6</sup> Nearly all municipalities have passed resolutions related to exploring local reparations through evidence-based policymaking between 2020 and 2023. Evanston, Illinois, is the only local reparations effort to precede this window given that the city committed to pursuing reparations in 2019 (City of Evanston 2019). These efforts are supplemented by Mayors Organized for Reparations and Equity (MORE), a coalition of twelve mayors across the country in support of reparations

3. Although public opinion is crucial to understanding barriers to reparations, responses are sensitive to question order, wording, and framing, making polling data difficult to aggregate (for more, see Rhodes et al. 2024, this issue).

4. The Durham equity resolution does express support for H.R. 40 (City of Durham 2020).

Resolution in Support of Federal Action to Increase Racial Equity.

5. Some participants in local reparations efforts expressed ambivalent feelings toward the term reparations. Shelby County Commissioner, Edmund Ford said, “If you want to despise the word [reparations], fine, but let’s not despise the work we plan on doing.”

6. Washington, D.C., Council Bill 250152, “Reparations Foundation Fund and Task Force Establishment Act of 2023,” was introduced to the D.C. Legislature on February 24, 2023. It is currently under council review after public hearing on July 15, 2023.

to address racial inequity. Member mayors, who represent cities from Denver, Colorado, to Carrboro, North Carolina, agreed to the coalition's three core tenets: support H.R. 40, form reparations advisory committees in their respective cities, and implement a "pilot reparations program targeted at a cohort of Black residents" (MORE 2020).

Overwhelmingly, municipal reparations resolutions originate from city councils rather than mayors or city managers. Providence, Rhode Island, is the only city in which an active reparations proposal originated from the office of the mayor. The cities of Greenbelt, Maryland, and Detroit, Michigan, are the only major exceptions. Rather than having been proposed and passed solely by the city council, the citizens of Detroit and Greenbelt voted to pursue municipal reparations via ballot initiatives on November 3, 2021. The Greenbelt initiative, which the city council voted to include on the ballot in August 2021, called for the establishment of a "21-member council to review, discuss and make recommendations related to local reparations" (Associated Press 2021). Ballot initiatives offer much-needed insight into constituent-level support of municipal reparations in their respective towns. Both the Greenbelt and Detroit initiatives passed with extraordinarily strong support, the former with 62.5 percent and the latter with 77 percent (Associated Press 2021; Williams 2021).

There are three active, state-level reparations efforts in California, Washington, and New York. Six additional states—Georgia, New Jersey, Connecticut, Oregon, Vermont, and Massachusetts—introduced legislation to form a reparations study commission between 2020 and 2023. California Bill A321, creating a reparations task force, was introduced by Black Democrat and Secretary of State Shirley Weber. Washington Bill 1474 deviates from the typical creation of the task force model, creating a home ownership program and fund for communities adversely affected by historic housing practices. Though not discussed at length here, the New York General Assembly passed S.1163 to study reparations in December 2023. No pro-

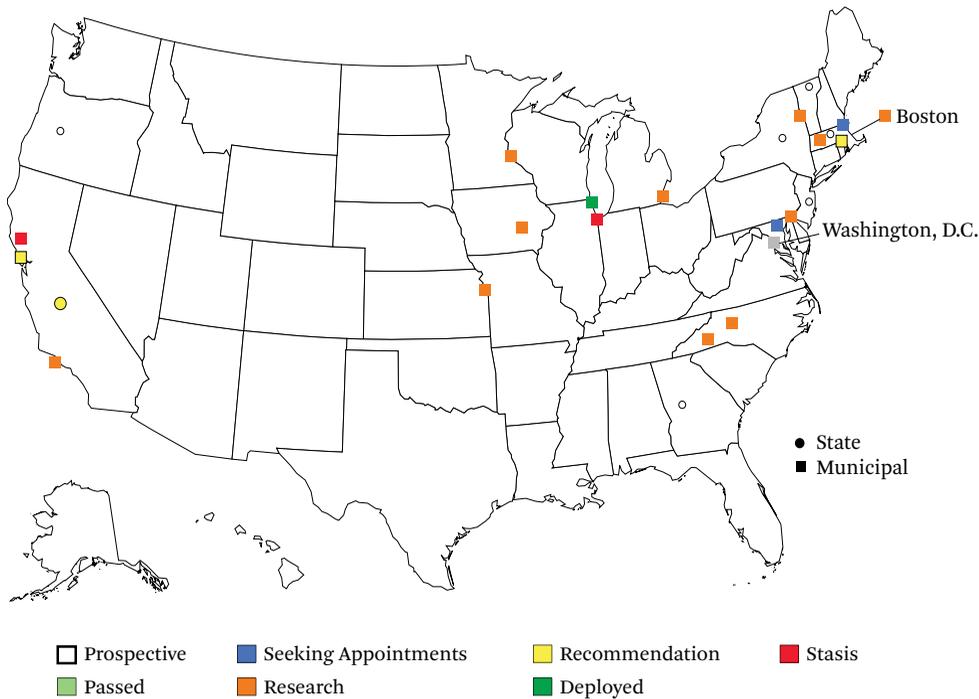
spective or active efforts originate from state governors in the form of executive orders.<sup>7</sup>

Counties, despite their historic significance in the southern United States, have relatively few reparations efforts. Not including those efforts that encompass that are both cities and counties (City and County of San Francisco, and Asheville, Buncombe County, North Carolina), five counties have passed resolutions to create reparations task forces: Alameda County, California; Fulton County, Georgia; Kalamazoo County and Washtenaw County, Michigan; and Shelby County, Tennessee. Given the relatively small number of counties with reparations efforts, they have been omitted from the socio-economic status analysis following this section. Should more counties form reparations task forces or policymaking trend away from municipalities and towards counties, further research is necessary to consider shared characteristics between the emerging group.

As shown in figure 1, municipal reparations efforts are primarily in cities in the northeastern region of the United States. North Carolina and Maryland are the only southern states to have municipal reparations efforts. There were no municipal proposals for Black reparations in the South as of March 2023, though the region still home to most of the nation's Black and potentially slavery-descended population (Tamir et al. 2021). The Fulton County Reparations Task Force is the only reparations effort in the South. State-level efforts are similarly distributed across the Northeast, West, and Pacific Northwest. Georgia, a former Confederate state, is the only exception.

Eligibility varies within reparations resolutions and across geographies. Most local resolutions refer to potential recipients as Black, African American, or otherwise of African descent. Some references are municipality-specific (for example, Black Los Angelenos). Some resolutions use plainly contradictory language. The City of High Point, North Carolina, describes beneficiaries as African American citizens [of High Point] and descendants of enslaved Africans (City of High Point 2022). These two groups may contain a significant overlap,

7. Several states have introduced and passed resolutions in support of H.R. 40, including Illinois, Texas, California, New York, and Connecticut.

**Figure 1.** Current Municipal and State Reparations Proposals Map, March 2023

Source: Author's map.

Note: The optimal way to view figure 1 is in color. We refer readers of the print edition of this article to <https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/10/3/140> to view the color version.

but the former likely includes individuals who migrated to High Point after the Civil War. The resolution lists injustices from enslavement to present, “disproportionate treatment at the hands of the criminal justice system,” suggesting the target recipient group is Blacks or African Americans rather than those descended from slavery. The Burlington resolution uses similarly conflicting language. Whereas at one point the population in need of apology is “African Americans living in Burlington as a result of the institution of slavery,” later language reads “African descendants living in Burlington” (City of Burlington 2020). The latter group, of course, includes post-Civil War immigrants. Although this article makes no attempt to comment on the validity of including post-Civil War Black migrants in reparations proposals, proposal feasibility may be hindered by unclear eligibility.

The Berkeley consulting contract uses the phrases “Berkeley’s descendants of slavery” and “African American community,” but not

interchangeably (City of Berkeley 2021, 1). The language suggests that the two groups are markedly different for the latter’s experience of slavery, and specialized recommendations may be necessary to address harm in both groups. Three resolutions identify eligible populations with similar demarcation (for example, African Americans, with a special consideration for African Americans who are descended from slavery). Only three resolutions restrict eligibility to descendants of American chattel slavery. Providence and Greenbelt also identified Indigenous individuals and people of color as possible recipients (City of Providence 2020, 1).

State-level reparations efforts demonstrated less variation in eligibility. Most perspective efforts emphasized a direct, shared lineage to a qualifying individual and an enslaved person in their reparations legislation. The California Reparations Task Force, in addition to the prospective efforts in Massachusetts and Georgia, used the phrase “African Americans, with a Spe-

cial Consideration for African Americans Who are Descendants of Persons Enslaved in the United States.”<sup>8</sup> Only Oregon and New York would permit eligibility for Black Americans who may not be descended from the enslaved, or otherwise commit to employing different qualifications for eligibility.<sup>9</sup> The tendency toward what Brooke Simone (2021) refers to as “victim-based” reparations over “group-based” reparations may reflect some anticipation of greater potential for legal challenges in the case of the latter. A more cynical interpretation, of course, is that the 57 percent of Black Americans that indicate they believe they are descended from slavery is a smaller beneficiary population than all Black Americans (Cox and Tamir 2022). All five county efforts, in contrast, generally mirrored municipalities’ identification of Black and African American as the target population.

Most municipal reparations efforts have followed the same institutional pathways. First, a municipal government introduces and passes a resolution recognizing Black-White disparity and establishing a volunteer commission to act as a fact-finding body for exploring reparations in the municipality. This may be termed the *reparations resolution*. Individuals are then appointed to the commission after an application period. The commission then enters a fact-finding phase, during which the commission researches the governing body’s role in perpetuating racial disparity. At this point, a commission may be prefunded (meaning commission activities are funded) or funded (meaning funds have been allocated for future policy recommendations). Figure 2 demonstrates these institutional pathways from resolution adop-

tion to recommendation. The City of Berkeley is the only exception to this rule. Rather than a committee, the Berkeley City Council voted to hire a consultant to “develop policy recommendations for reparations in Berkeley” (City of Berkeley 2021, 1).

When funding is designated, funding sources vary wildly. Evanston, Amherst, and Cambridge used revenue for recreational cannabis taxes to create reparations funds. The use of recreational cannabis taxes has long floated in the local reparations policy space and continues to be proposed as funding sources for developing proposals (Tribble 2018).<sup>10</sup> Funding for these proposals preceded commission recommendations, unlike that of the City of Providence.<sup>11</sup> Funding for the Providence, Rhode Island’s recommendations were sourced from the American Rescue Plan Act.<sup>12</sup> Because the recommended interventions use ARPA funding, they may not be restricted to members of a particular identity class. Therefore, qualifying populations include “Indigenous People, African Heritage People, Qualified Census Tracts and Neighborhoods and Residents Facing Poverty” (City of Providence 2022, 6). San Francisco, despite delivering the required recommendations, had not adopted or identified funding for the recommended policies as of March 2023.

The active and prospective state and county-level efforts generally followed the above model. County-level proposals, such as Fulton County’s, were passed after a majority vote on a reparations resolution. All county resolutions established a task force or commission of between five and thirteen members. After introduction to the state’s legislative assembly

8. California General Assembly Bill 3121. <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/JU/JU10/20210217/111198/HHRG-117-JU10-20210217-SD027.pdf>.

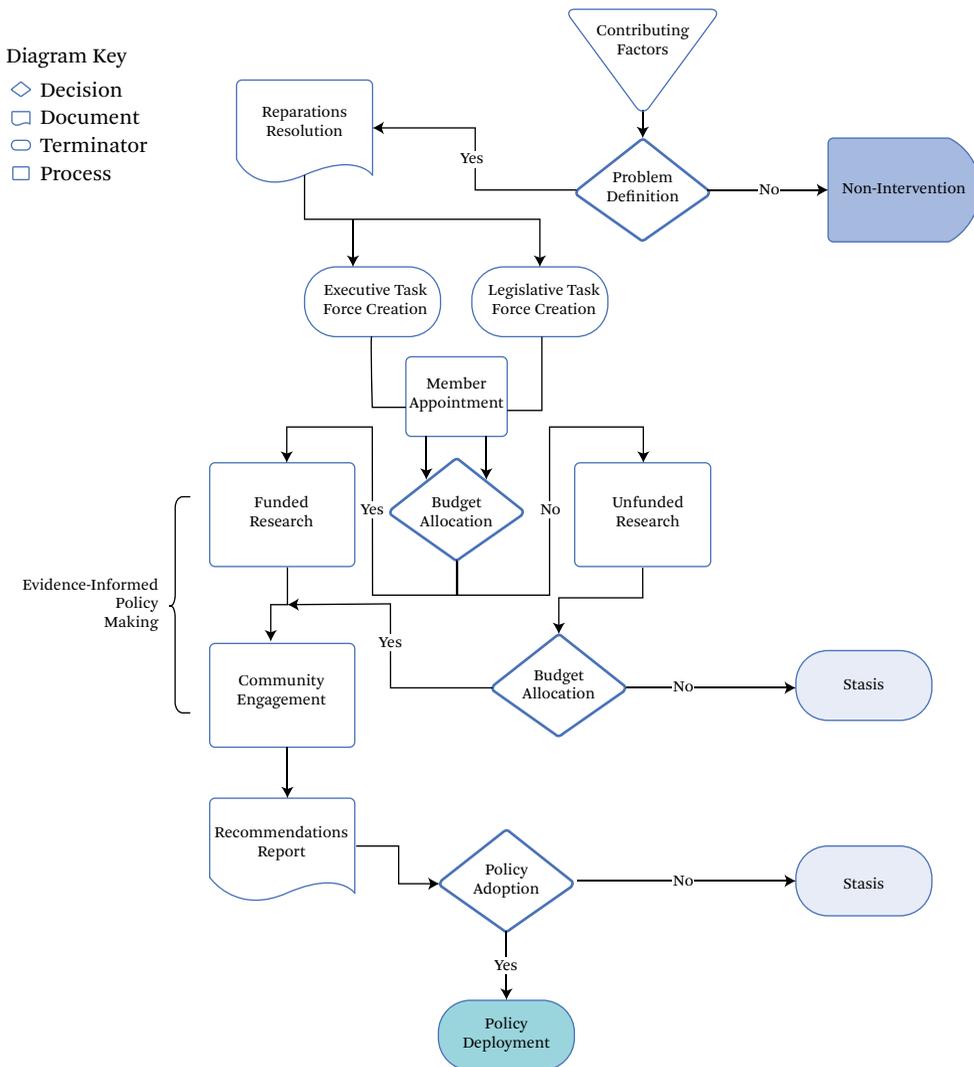
9. For example, San Francisco requires potential recipients meet a series of requirements, including residence in the city at the time of its discriminatory housing policy. Descent from an enslaved American is a possible qualification, but other permutations may also result in qualification.

10. Thomas Babucci’s 2020 unpublished paper “Taxing Marijuana and the Road to Reparations” offers some econometric analysis of the effect of racial justice taxes on recreational marijuana demand.

11. Amherst and Cambridge, Massachusetts, are both set to release final recommendations between June 2023 and June 2024.

12. Public Law No. 117-2. American Rescue Plan Act. H.R. 1319, 117th Congress (2021).

**Figure 2.** Institutional Pathways for Municipal Reparations



Source: Author's diagram.

by a member, state efforts could be referred to any committee from Ways and Means to the assembly's state and local government committee.<sup>13</sup> Like municipal initiatives, relatively few county and state-level reparations efforts were appropriated. The California State Task Force was the only state-level effort to be appropriated as of May 2023, while Fulton, Alameda, and Shelby Counties were appropriated

\$250,000, \$51,000, and \$5 million respectively for commission and research activities. All four task forces were appropriated from the general fund, as opposed to taxes levied on recreational cannabis sales. After their corresponding resolution passed, the commissions were to follow the same appointment, hearing, fact-finding, and recommendation phases as the municipal model.

13. Prospective efforts originated in the lower and upper legislative chambers in equal frequency. Because California is the only active state-level effort, the significance of A3121's origin in the lower house is unknown.

**Table 1.** Reparations Resolutions Coding Themes

Injustice	Black Disparity	Other
Slavery or chattel slavery	housing	noncomprehensive disclaimer
Jim Crow or segregation	health	racial wealth gap
Mass incarceration	economic or financial	H.R. 40
	employment	forty acres and a mule
	education	George Floyd
	entrepreneurship	apology

Source: Author’s tabulation.

**METHODOLOGY**

To analyze nonfederal reparations proposals, I conducted a mixed-method analysis. Reparations efforts were identified using Boolean searching on a combination of the public legislative tracking software, BillTrack 50, and traditional search engines. Boolean search terms included *Black OR African Americans AND Reparations*, with queries periodically excluding known efforts.<sup>14</sup> Results were not filtered for date, but, apart from Evanston, no results indicated local reparations efforts before 2017. Search terms primarily yielded local reporting on the introduction or passage of a reparations resolution, press releases, or original government documents (such as a meeting agenda) related to the same. Although the decision to exclude efforts that did not include the word *reparations* was primarily to adhere to requisite acknowledgment of harm and the redress process in the ARC framework, this search method also necessarily excluded efforts that did not include the word *reparations* for their lack of mechanizability.

After locations with reparations efforts were identified, I compiled each resolution or bill (and any subsequent or amending documents, for completeness) that committed to or established a process for reparations. A coding table was derived from three iterative reviews of each resolution, which I read for recurrent themes shared across three or more founding resolutions. Sources of injustice, evidence of disparity, and resolution language were noted by hand for each iteration. After three iterations,

themes were pooled to form the coding schematic presented in table 1. Reference to a theme was notated X, and the lack of one was indicated with a blank.

Because of the pervasiveness of the term *racial wealth gap* and *Black disparity* in reparations resolutions, I also sought to answer whether cities with reparations efforts demonstrated greater Black-White disparity on metrics related to the racial wealth gap than the nation as a whole. Counties and states were omitted from this portion of analysis due to relatively small sample sizes. I selected metrics that scholars have generally agreed contribute to the racial wealth gap: homeownership, poverty, annual median income, and postsecondary educational attainment (Oliver and Shapiro 2019; Hampton 2016; Muñoz et al. 2015). I tabulated the Black-White disparity for these values in each locality and aggregated them to form a city sample. Additionally, to determine if the city sample had a low Black (and therefore qualifying by most resolution’s definition) population relative to the nation, I aggregated the Black-alone percentage for each municipality as a value in the city sample.

For measurements of Black-White disparity, hypotheses were as follows:

$$H_0: \bar{x}_c \leq \mu_n,$$

where  $\mu_c$  is the population mean difference between the Black and White metric (such as poverty rate) in the city sample, and  $\mu_n$  is the pop-

14. For example, a query to identify county-level task forces was *Black OR African American AND Reparations Fulton Alameda Washtenaw*. This query was increasingly difficult to use as the number of existing entities to exclude grew.

ulation mean difference between the Black and White metric in the nation.

$$H_A: \bar{x}_c > \mu_n$$

For measurements of the Black population share, hypotheses were as follows:

$$H_0: \bar{x}_c \leq \mu_n,$$

where  $\mu_c$  is the population mean percentage of Black individuals in the city sample, and  $\mu_n$  is the population mean percentage of Black individuals in the nation.

$$H_A: \bar{x}_c > \mu_n$$

I then performed five right-tailed one sample t-tests, assuming a normal population and to a significance of  $\alpha = 0.05$ , to determine if the city sample was greater than or equal to the nation as a whole.

### CONCEPTIONS OF LOCAL REPARATIONS

The content of municipal reparations resolutions provides key insights into council conceptions of reparations, including acknowledgment, apology, injustice, modality, reconciliation, and closure. Sixteen municipal resolutions began with preambulatory statements providing justification for the municipality's commitment to reparations. When provided, justification for reparative action often mirrored the chronology of transgressions provided by Darity and Mullen, contextualized to reflect nexus points at which a municipality may have shared culpability for racist policy with the federal or state government. Fourteen reparations resolutions named slavery as an injury in need of remedy. Thirteen resolutions also identified Jim Crow-era discrimination as an injury in need of reconciliation. Specific references were often to segregation, acts of racial violence like lynching or the Chicago Race Riot, and redlining (City of Chicago 2020). Most resolutions named some form of modern discrimination, with mass incarceration appearing in eleven resolutions. Police brutality and overcriminalization also typically appeared in resolutions that name mass incarceration. Green-

belt did not include such language because its municipal reparations commission was formed by ballot initiative and included no preambulatory statements. After the acknowledgment of these injustices, five resolutions explicitly apologized to identified groups for the municipal government's role in harm. Fear of potential legal ramifications—namely, the ability for constituents to establish a claim against government using a codified apology—may contribute to the relative lack of slavery apologies observed in all collected reparations resolutions (Brooks 1999).

Resolutions also quantified the effect of these injustices with contextual measurements of disparity. Disparities in pre- and postsecondary education appeared most frequently in thirteen resolutions. Economic and financial disparity and health were cited in equal volume in twelve resolutions, as seen in table 2. The latter was often epitomized with disparities in annual median income and poverty, whereas the latter was often life-expectancy or fetal mortality. Housing and employment disparity appeared next most frequently, with ten and nine resolutions, respectively. Disparity in entrepreneurship, particularly small businesses, appeared in only four resolutions.

The emphasis on education-related disparity echoes scholarship on the relative popularity of education-related interventions for reparations, though employment and entrepreneurship appeared least of all disparity themes (Craemer 2020). Council resolutions also punctuated events with disparate racial outcomes to justify exploring reparations. Both the murder of George Floyd and the following public protests appeared in four resolutions, inclusive of St. Paul, mere miles from where Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. In the Detroit and Iowa City resolutions, councilmembers readily identified the union of the two subjects as the catalyzing events for the council's discussion about reparations (City of Detroit 2021; City of Iowa 2021).

The inclusion of the foremost forms of discrimination, namely, disparate economic and financial outcomes, may reflect how municipalities imagine both the scope and degree of their involvement in the proliferation of racist policy. Although health, housing, and educa-

**Table 2.** Reparations Disparity Themes (Municipal)

Geography	Housing	Employment	Economic	Education	Health	Entrepreneurship
Asheville	X		X	X	X	
Burlington	X	X	X	X	X	
Chicago		X	X	X		
Evanston	X	X	X	X	X	
Iowa City						
Providence						
San Francisco	X	X	X	X	X	X
St. Paul	X	X		X	X	X
High Point		X	X	X	X	
Greenbelt						
Detroit	X		X		X	
Boston				X		
Amherst			X	X	X	
Kansas City	X	X	X	X	X	X
Wilmington	X	X	X	X	X	
Berkeley	X	X	X	X	X	X
Cambridge	X		X	X	X	

Source: Author's tabulation.

tion are considered the domain of municipal and state governments, the maintenance of policies that influence small businesses, industry, and judicial conditions are often set by the federal government. A generous reading might suppose that the emphasis on education, housing, and health reflect existing federalist structures, aided further by the emphasis of early efforts (such as Evanston's) on housing policies like racist zoning and lending. A cynical reading might suppose that an emphasis on education and health over changes to unjust systems of violence requires mostly symbolic concessions, maintaining the status quo of racial hierarchy.

Few resolutions connected the question of reparations to its political history. Of nineteen municipal resolutions, only three tied their case for reparations in the federal government's failure to deliver the promise of "forty acres and a mule." Nine resolutions made specific reference to the introduction of H.R. 40 and the general federal reparations effort. Five resolutions included what might be termed a disclaimer of noncomprehensiveness, as seen in table 3. This statement, often in the preamble, first recognizes the federal government as

the primary provider for Black reparations, and thereafter declares the commitment to municipal reparations to be in concert with the pursuit of federal reparations. Some cities passed additional legislation supporting federal and state reparations efforts. Amherst, Massachusetts, passed such a resolution in support of H.R. 40/S.40, citing increasing municipal support for reparations as additional cause (City of Amherst 2021). In concert with a disclaimer of non-comprehensiveness, the appearance of H.R. 40 in some proposals suggests that municipal reparations efforts do not aim to replace federal reparations efforts but supplement them. Whether they do so for lack of financial resources or incorrect jurisdiction is not stated.

State and county reparations task force legislation contained slightly less variation. Legislation emphasizes housing and educational disparity most frequently, with seven out of eight states for the former and all eight in the case of the latter (see table 4). All county reparations resolutions emphasized discrimination and disparity in housing, education, health, and employment (see table 5). The cohesion of these spheres of disparity is likely influenced

**Table 3.** Reparations Injustice and Other Themes (Municipal)

Geography	Slavery	Jim Crow	Incarceration	George Floyd	H.R. 40	Racial Wealth Gap	Noncomprehensive
Asheville	X	X	X			X*	X
Burlington	X	X	X		X	X	
Chicago	X	X	X		X	X	
Evanston	X	X	X		X		
Iowa City				X			
Providence	X	X	X				X
San Francisco	X	X				X	
St. Paul	X	X	X	X	X	X	
High Point	X	X	X			X	
Greenbelt							
Detroit	X	X	X	X			
Boston	X	X			X	X	X
Amherst	X			X	X		
Kansas City	X	X	X			X	
Wilmington	X	X	X		X	X	
Berkeley		X	X		X	X	X
Cambridge	X	X	X		X	X	X

Source: Author's tabulation.

**Table 4.** Reparations Disparity Themes (State)

State	Housing	Employment	Economic	Education	Health	Entrepreneurship
Georgia	X	X	X	X	X	
Connecticut	X	X	X	X	X	
Vermont	X	X	X	X		
Massachusetts	X		X	X	X	
New York	X			X		
Oregon	X	X	X	X	X	
New Jersey	X			X	X	
California		X	X	X		

Source: Author's tabulation.

**Table 5.** Reparations Disparity Themes (County)

County	Housing	Employment	Economic	Education	Health	Entrepreneurship
Fulton, Georgia	X	X	X	X	X	
Washtenaw, Michigan	X		X	X	X	
Shelby, Tennessee	X			X	X	X
Kalamazoo, Michigan	X	X		X	X	
Alameda, California	X	X		X	X	

Source: Author's tabulation.

**Table 6.** Reparations Injustice and Other Themes (State)

State	Slavery	Jim Crow	Incarceration	George Floyd	H.R. 40	Racial Wealth Gap	Noncomprehensive
Georgia	X	X	X				
Connecticut	X		X				
Vermont	X	X	X				
Maine	X	X	X			X	
New York	X	X	X				
Oregon	X		X			X	
New Jersey	X	X	X			X	
California	X	X	X				

Source: Author’s tabulation.

**Table 7.** Reparations Injustice and Other Themes (County)

County	Apology	Slavery	Jim Crow	Incarceration	George Floyd	H.R. 40	Racial Wealth Gap	Noncomprehensive
Fulton, Georgia		X	X	X			X	
Washtenaw, Michigan								
Shelby, Tennessee		X					X	
Kalamazoo, Michigan		X	X	X				X
Alameda, California	X	X	X	X				

Source: Author’s tabulation.

by the large volume of shared language between resolutions and H.R. 40. H.R. 40’s preambulatory statements naming harm against Black Americans emphasize “share cropping, convict leasing, Jim Crow, redlining, unequal education, and disproportionate treatment at the hands of the criminal justice system” as the principal harms for which reparations should atone. H.R. 40 also names “debilitating economic, educational, and health hardships” including mass incarceration, high Black unemployment, and a substantial Black-White racial wealth gap as demonstrable of slavery’s continuing effects. Thus, all resolutions influenced by H.R. 40 have the same notions of injustice and disparity. Curiously, no state resolution mentions the resolution by name (see table 6). Similarly, few resolutions emphasize the telling nature of the racial wealth gap in quantifying slavery-originating disparity. Finally, only one county resolution includes a disclaimer of non-

comprehension or references to ongoing federal reparations efforts (see table 7).

**GEOGRAPHIES OF MUNICIPAL REPARATIONS**

As presented in table 8, individuals living in municipalities with reparations efforts generally reported lower indicators of socioeconomic status when aggregated into one reparations municipalities group. The median and mean annual median household income for reparations cities were lower than the national value, the latter demonstrating an \$8,000 difference. Overall poverty was also 6 percent higher in cities pursuing local reparations than the national poverty rate. Owner-occupancy was far lower in reparations cities, with a more than 20 percent deficit relative to the national rate. Cities with reparations, however, are more educated than the nation. The average and mean percentage of persons with a high school

**Table 8.** Reparations Municipalities Overall Metrics

Characteristic	United States	City Median	City Mean
Poverty rate	0.116	0.1735	0.184444
Median household income (in 2021 dollars), 2017-2021	69021	58311.5	65668.44
Owner-occupied housing unit rate, 2017-2021	0.646	0.4555	0.452722
High school graduate or higher, percentage of persons age twenty-five years+, 2017-2021	0.889	0.896	0.900222
Bachelor's degree or higher, percentage of persons age twenty-five years+, 2017-2021	0.337	0.4945	0.495333
Gini coefficient	0.4848	0.5112	0.5048

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2021.

diploma or higher was slightly higher than the national value, but both the median and mean percentage of postsecondary degree holders was greater than the national value by more than 10 percent. Cities with reparations also reported higher Gini coefficients, indicating greater general income inequality. These characteristics are likely influenced by the presence of major metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) in the sample.

When examining Black-White disparity across these metrics, it is apparent that Black individuals in reparations localities are not necessarily representative of the national population. Black individuals, on average, reported lower values on metrics related to wealth. Although the Black annual median income of the nation is \$46,401, that of the city sample was \$39,760. Similarly, reparations cities demonstrated a higher average Black poverty rate of 25 percent, nearly 4 percent higher than national levels. The rate of Black owner-occupancy yields the largest disparity, with the owner-occupancy rate in reparations cities more than sixteen percentage points lower than the national rate. The mean value for postsecondary educational attainment is a small exception to this trend. The mean value for Blacks was nearly 2 percent higher in reparations cities than the national value.

Measurements of Black-White disparity in reparations cities yield somewhat antithetical results to the preceding analysis. As shown in table 9, reparations cities fail all one-tail t-tests of significance for measurements of Black-White difference in annual median income, pov-

erty, owner-occupancy rate, and postsecondary educational attainment. Cities with reparations efforts also fail a test of statistical significance for the percentage of Black individuals with a *p*-value of .46.

If we are to interpret cities with more severe Black-White disparity wealth metrics and higher Black populations as locations for which reparations policies are best suited, there is not enough evidence to suggest that disparity is worse in cities with reparations efforts than in the United States as a whole. There is also not enough evidence to show that cities with reparations have Black population percentages that are meaningfully larger than the national percentage. This is to say, the current cities leading the charge for municipal reparations do not demonstrate greater need than other municipalities, and the existing local reparations proposals will not serve a larger maximum portion of their population than a federal reparations effort might serve the whole of eligible Black recipients.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REPARATIONS POLICIES

Due in part to the temporal limitations of the reparations commission model, few municipalities have published recommendations for reparations policies. The Providence Municipal Reparations Commission proposed its 11-Point Investment Plan to close “the present-day racial wealth and equity gap” (City of Providence 2022, 5) in August 2022. Given Providence’s eligibility cannot be constrained by race, the proposed budget line items extend to a much larger por-

**Table 9.** One-Sample T-Tests for Significance of Black-White Difference

	Black-White Poverty Difference	Black-White Annual Median Income Difference	Black-White Homeownership Difference	Black-White Education Difference
United States	.04	-27132	-.328	-.14
Amherst Town, Massachusetts	-0.005	-5380	-0.27162	-.437
Asheville, North Carolina (city)	.129	-29026	-.1547	-.397
Berkeley, California (city)	.083	-80132	-.19946	-.526
Boston, Massachusetts (city)	.09	-61705	-.12116	-.481
Burlington, Vermont (city)	.16	-33683	-.27002	-.217
Cambridge, Massachusetts (city)	.194	-87370	-.21444	-.469
Chicago, Illinois	.19	-55210	-.18621	-.424
Detroit Michigan (city)	.015	-11070	-.7942	-.23
Evanston, Illinois (city)	.043	-50026	-.30273	-.523
Greenbelt, Maryland (city)	.081	-15839	-.44698	-.266
High Point, North Carolina (city)	.113	-23658	-.30722	-.252
Iowa City, Iowa	.082	-26020	-.42985	-.433
Kansas City, Missouri	0.153	-33962	-0.82518	-0.294
Los Angeles	0.138	-47636	-0.21521	-0.29
Providence, Rhode Island (city)	0.096	-23956	-0.12673	-0.269
San Francisco, California (city)	0.192	-112292	-0.15304	-0.464
St. Paul, Minnesota	0.214	-38408	-0.42501	-0.366
Wilmington, Delaware (city)	0.181	-35584	-0.22019	-0.403
Sample mean	.119388889	-42830.9	-0.27495	-0.3745
Sample standard deviation	.064004723	28029.01	.174506	.103376
Test statistic	.292355621	-.13202	.071648	-0.53467
P-value	.386776385	.551739	.471859	.700099

Source: Author’s tabulation.

Note: Cities were selected from available and consistent geographies across U.S. Census data. For example, although California has both town and a city named Berkeley, because the City of Berkeley passed a reparations resolution, data for Berkeley City, California, was most appropriate.

tion of the population than other proposals. If we (incorrectly) assume all 21,068 Black-alone, adult Providence residents qualify, the maximum budget allocation for each individual is a mere \$474.65 (U.S. Census Bureau 2015):

$$\text{Total Budget Allocation} / \text{Total Qualifying Population} = \text{Maximum Individual Benefit (assuming cash disbursement).}$$

$$\$10 \text{ million} / 21,068 = \$321.12$$

If the qualifying population is limited to individuals of all races below the poverty level (an estimated 37,402 individuals), that number decreases to \$267.36 (U.S. Census Bureau 2021).

This estimate neglects to remove the portions of the budget allocated for immaterial benefits, including but not limited to “reimagining buildings and sites,” “invest in media firms,” “preserve, safeguard & promote cultural programs,” and the “creation of policy and research center” (City of Providence 2022, 5). Other proposals are explicitly universalist, including the creation of a resident scholarship fund and the creation of a “K-12 Curriculum Grounded In Rhode Island & New England History” (City of Providence 2022). Removing these items alone reduces the budgeted funds by \$1.35 million. The largest portion of the budget is the seed funding for the United Way COVID-19 Equity Fund at \$1,750,000. The Prov-

idence proposal thus contains only nine line items related to its purported goal of closing the racial wealth gap, for a total investment of \$6.4 million to all qualifying groups. Even if every Black and Indigenous person received an equal portion of the full amount of the \$10 million, the allotment would have no effect on the municipality's current Black-White annual income gap of more than \$16,000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2019a, 2019b).

The San Francisco Reparations Plan, published in December 2022, offered more concrete recommendations for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. The report recommended all qualifying individuals receive a "one-time, lump sum payment of \$5 million" as compensation for past harm, in addition to economic and opportunity loss (San Francisco African American Reparations Advisory Committee 2022, 33). The proposed financial reparations also include infrastructural and educational reparations, including the introduction of tax credits for recipients, the creation of a public bank (an initiative ineligible populations could also presumably benefit from), financial education, and the establishment of a Black Reparations Trust.

The estimated Black-White racial income gap in San Francisco is more than \$70,000, with median annual income of White households at \$116,000 versus just \$30,000 for Black households (San Francisco Human Rights Commission 2020). If each recipient were to receive \$5 million, this could more than close the racial wealth gap, particularly with households with more than one qualifying individual. It is difficult, though, to estimate how much of a proposed reparation payment would be retained by an individual. The recommendation report is silent as to whether such payment would be subject to state or federal taxes. Generally, settlements related to injury and physical illness are exempt from gross taxable income, except for those awarded for punitive damages.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, some portion of an individual's reparation payment would likely be used to dissolve debt. An estimated 13 percent of communities with more than 60 percent residents of color have debt in collections in San Francisco

(Carther et al. 2022). Despite the relatively small population of Black individuals in the city relative to other racial groups, if we are to assume both higher consumer debt and more debt in collections for Black people, a percentage of reparations payments will merely be used to dissolve outstanding negative wealth. The recommended plan does include the elimination of Black student debt, in addition to a debt forgiveness program. No funding source has been identified for these recommendations because they have not yet been adopted by the Board of Supervisors.

Similarly, the California Reparations Task Force is the only state-level effort to have any publicly available recommendations. The 2022 Interim Task Force Report makes nearly one hundred recommendations on topics from political disenfranchisement to housing segregation and secondary education. Some recommendations would strengthen the civil rights of all Californians with the elimination of policies such as forced penal employment through the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and discrimination against justice-involved individuals in the juror selection process. Others purport more intangible benefits, such as integrating conversations about race and ethnicity into K–12 education. Most are targeted universalist in nature, with a prospective beneficiary class that includes more Black individuals than a race-conscious approach, but failing to exclude those who are not Black or slavery-descended. The report is largely silent on the Black-White racial wealth gap, the only consistently shared metric for efficacy across efforts. The final 2023 report, in contrast, explicitly recommends the use of the racial wealth gap as a metric for calculating reparations payments only for federal reparations efforts (California Office of the Attorney General 2023, 787).

Washington State House Bill 1474, by virtue of never creating a task force, did not include publicly available recommendations. Instead, the bill created a housing fund and program for communities adversely affected by redlining and racially restrictive covenants with a \$100 fine on home purchases. Qualifying individuals can turn to the program for down payment and

15. *Commissioner v. Schleier*, 515 U.S. 323 (1995).

cost assistance. Notably, eligible populations do include ethnicities other than African American, including Jewish, Japanese, and Indigenous Americans (Groover 2023). The bill does not cite slavery reparations in its preambulatory clauses, evidencing the broader issues with the colloquial use of the term “reparations” in reference to its commonly understood definition as recourse for the enslavement of Black Americans. However, the fund’s applicability to ethnicities beyond African American, while under the greater umbrella of reparative policy interventions, might be viewed as a similarly targeted universalist approach as found in the 2022 Interim California Task Force Report.

### REPARATIONS MODALITIES AND PATH DEPENDENCY

The prevalence of reparations recommendations that function to aid poverty and decrease civil rights abuses for a broad community suggests a qualified view of acceptable modalities. The inclusion of financial literacy in the Providence recommendations report demonstrates the pervasiveness of the Black financial illiteracy myth in the reparations policy space. Proponents of the line item argue that the racial wealth gap may be meaningfully narrowed solely by improving financial literacy in Black communities, inclusive of investment, entrepreneurship, and household savings. Scholarly examination repeatedly yields countering findings (Darity et al. 2018; Hamilton and Darity 2017). Additionally, the possible inclusion of White beneficiaries in the Providence recommendations, in addition to the current lack of direct benefit models, constructs a reparations model that is a far cry from its international human rights precedent.

The very model of local reparations begs further examination. All municipal proposals, save for the City of Berkeley’s reparations consultant, mimic the structure of H.R. 40. Four states used the language of H.R. 40 verbatim, including New Jersey, Vermont, and California. Several resolutions reference parallel municipal reparations efforts in preambulatory statements, listing emerging precedent as additional cause to explore reparations in their locality. The proliferation of the commission model does not necessarily signal the efficacy

of such a model. The failure of Chicago’s commission to meet after its Health and Human Services designation is a testament to the importance of administrative will in the progress of commission activities. The member appointment process can take as long as a year in the case of Iowa City (Foley 2021). This assumes sufficient qualification and general administrative efficiency of commission activities.

The duplication of the commission model may be a case of path dependency. As policy-makers approach the issue of reparations with a lack of existing policy options in the policy universe and political hesitancy, adapting the commission model to their locality minimizes risk with both its more than thirty-year precedent and federal-originating policy diffusion. This is not to say that municipalities do not compile commissions or task forces to examine constituent issues. Instead, it highlights municipal conceptions of reparations as a public policy issue rather than a legal one. As opposed to a municipality expressing interest in reparations for its Black or slavery-descended residents, it appears that city governments identify severe Black disparity in their jurisdiction and choose exploratory reparations commissions as an intervention to improve the observed disparity. If path dependency continues to shape conceptions of reparations, we might anticipate forthcoming recommendation reports to emphasize homeownership and urban development in their proposed interventions. The efficacy of improving homeownership alone in alleviating the racial wealth gap, however, is debated (Fu 2022; Darity et al. 2018).

The merit of local reparations efforts despite their limited resources continues to be defended by advocacy organizations notably involved in the development of such efforts. Proponents such as Kamm Howard, former national chair of N’COBRA, advocate municipal reparations in concert with federal reparations for their timeliness. Howard said, “local reparations acts as an emergency triage. You can’t do everything right away, but you do what you can to stop the bleeding” (quoted in Rolfes and Howard 2023). This supposes that municipal reparations efforts are sufficiently resourced to observably improve outcomes and effective at distributing resources. In the case of local rep-

arations, both the latter and the former remain to be seen.

Proponents of local reparations also argue such efforts will diffuse upward to the federal level. In the same interview, Howard likened local reparations to sit-ins and other acts of civil disobedience in the civil rights era (quoted in Rolfe and Howard 2023). This assumes that local reparations will be both effective and not detrimental to the policy diffusion advocates espouse they will facilitate. There is some indication that local reparations policies have a bottom-up effect. As municipal efforts have increased in volume, so have citations of Evanston, Asheville, and Burlington in the efforts of new cities. It is unclear, though, whether the presence of a municipal reparations effort increases the likelihood of a county- or state-level effort. California is the only state with both state and municipal reparations efforts. Massachusetts and Vermont have both active municipal efforts and prospective state-level efforts, but the relationship between these efforts is unclear. In the case of Vermont, it may be significant that the primary sponsor of H432 represents Burlington.

Given local reparations efforts are not occurring where socioeconomic indicators would indicate that Black Americans experience the most severe Black-White disparities and locations with reparations efforts are no more disadvantaged than the nation's Black population as a whole, the value of local reparations proposals is likely not in their proximity to need. Further, many cities with reparations were already politically progressive, boasting equally left-leaning academic institutions like University of California Berkeley, University of Massachusetts Amherst, and Harvard University. These universities occasionally directly influenced the policymaking process, with professors often being representatives on task forces. In liberal bastions when where Black individuals are underrepresented, the value of local reparations may be more political than material. Reparations resolutions analyzed in this article

occasionally cited one another, forming a network that has pushed the boundaries of feasible reparations in public policy. Still, even with a nascent collective identity and continued public interest, local reparations proposals currently lack both the resources and support to yield comprehensive and transformative redress.

#### **LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

This research has some limitations. No comprehensive national data set for the racial-wealth gap in varying U.S. geographies currently exists, making estimating Black-White disparity across a consistent metric a difficult task. Moreover, analyzing Black-White disparity assumes that it is generally meaningful across all cities. Because urban geographies generally demonstrate higher inequality than rural geographies (Bishaw and Posey 2016), the urban-rural divide may have a confounding effect on observed Black-White wealth disparity. How the racial wealth gap differs by urban and rural geographies is in need of greater scholarly consideration. Finally, the severity of Black-White disparity in a municipality may not be related to the introduction of a reparations proposal. Electoral politics, interest group pressures, and public unrest likely influenced the introduction and passage of city-level reparations proposals. The preceding analysis cannot speak to why reparations were proposed in certain geographies,<sup>16</sup> but rather the severity of the disparities most often cited by resolutions in cities with reparations efforts, and the motivating factors, conceptions of reparations, and politics of race that could be discerned from those resolutions.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Between 2020 and 2023, policymakers on every level of government broached the topic of reparations. Municipalities undeniably lead this charge with nineteen cities with current reparations efforts and continuing calls for reparations in the likes of Greenwood, Oklahoma,

16. To some degree, even the distinction of governments into city, county, and state may warrant further consideration. Asheville's Reparations Commission, for example, includes members appointed by both the City of Asheville and Buncombe County, North Carolina. Further research might benefit from analyzing reparations proposals as events that may have had one place of origin but drew elements from or were carried to other localities.

Sacramento, California, and Reading, Pennsylvania. These cities are pioneering local fact-finding and reparative policy interventions for addressing systemic harm at a volume unparalleled by historic reparations efforts to date. Although enterprising, current local reparations efforts are still plagued by several failings. Whereas resolutions to study reparations proposals are often in cities with higher costs of living and lower indicators of wealth, they tend to have relatively small qualifying populations by having few Black residents. There is also not enough evidence to justify reparations on the grounds that local disparities in components of wealth are meaningfully higher than national values. Moreover, cities and counties continue to fail to allocate funding to the necessary quantity and policy intervention type to achieve their occasionally stated goal of reducing the Black-White racial wealth gap.

Even though local reparations efforts have grown in popularity, they still cover a relatively small proportion of Black Americans. The nineteen municipalities with reparations efforts, for example, constitute only 0.0974 percent of all 19,500 incorporated towns. These municipalities may be home to more than two million Black Americans, but they make up only 5 percent of the nearly fifty million Americans who identify as Black or African American (Moslimani et al. 2023). Although it does not appear that the local reparations movement is intended to supplant federal reparations efforts, acknowledgment of the limited resources and scope of local efforts reinforces the importance of advocacy for federal reparations.

In the absence of additional recommendations, the question of reparations is still one of politics rather than policy. Council members are crafting their own definition of reparations while proponents aim to reframe them, hesitant policymakers qualify them, and constituents attempt to redefine them to meet their individual needs. Without a clear unifying creed, a path forward with eligibility, scale, method, efficacy metrics, and cause, the future of local reparations remains to be seen.

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# Limited Scopes of Repair: Black Reparations Strategies and the Constraints of Local Redress Policy



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*We consider two local reparations cases—the Evanston Restorative Housing Program and Chicago reparations for police torture survivors. We argue that the programs are shaped by the differing political opportunities, the local context, and the social location of their advocates given that one was constructed within government systems in Evanston and the other largely by grassroots organizers in Chicago. Furthermore, both programs are criticized to varying degrees as being exclusive in their design and implementation. We term this exclusion a process of deliberative marginalization, whereby some of the most vulnerable and most directly affected beneficiaries of a redress initiative are left out of deliberations and implementation decisions about the initiative’s design. Subsequently, this study shows both the promise and constraints of reparations policy at the level of local government.*

**Keywords:** reparations, social movements, racial justice, local and urban politics, policy advocacy

Reparations for historical injustices to Black Americans is a social movement and policy objective that reaches back centuries in the United States (Brooks 1999; Martin and Yáñez 2007). Defined as “a program of acknowledgement, redress, and closure for a grievous injustice,” reparations have been authorized by the U.S. federal government for

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1. The first author (Davies) conducted the Evanston case research (that included recruiting, interviewing, and coding the data on advocates and recipients), wrote the Evanston case portions of the article, wrote sections of

genocide against Indigenous and Native communities and for the Japanese internment during the Second World War—but, as of yet, not for the centuries of persistent and systematic harms done to Black people (Darity and Mullen 2020, 2). Indeed, decades of public opinion survey research show that vast majorities of the U.S. population consistently do not support Black reparations (Younis 2019). But what was implausible became imaginable after the 2020 protests decrying George Floyd’s murder by Minneapolis police and calling for redress for racial injustices. Since then, the political tide has shifted somewhat as the possibility of Black reparations receives unprecedented attention in public discourse and policymaking, particularly at the local level where cities, states, universities, and religious institutions are implementing racial redress programs for past harms done specifically to Black people (Cornish, Mehta, and Hale 2021).

In this article, we take the growing number of racial redress initiatives at the local level as an opportunity to explore variation in both the vision and implementation of Black reparations. This analysis helps to better conceptualize Black reparations as constituting not a singular or unified vision of redress but instead as constituting diverse visions and evolving strategies that vary depending on political context, political opportunity structures, and the diverse social locations and political priorities held by reparations advocates, activists, and beneficiaries.

At the same time, this analysis demonstrates how even very different approaches to advocating for reparations can suffer from deliberative marginalization, which we define as processes whereby the most vulnerable and central beneficiaries of a racial redress initiative are to some degree left out of critical deliberations and implementation decisions about the initia-

tive’s design. In other words, it is not only local historical legacies of injustice that influence which harms Black reparations programs are and are not designed to address, but also the positionalities and access of the stakeholders involved (for example, movement actors or would-be beneficiaries) and the extent to which those diverse stakeholders are able to participate (that is, to exercise voice and influence) in designing and implementing a reparations policy program. These factors, among them whose experiences are and are not represented in policy advocacy, shape the limited intervention possibilities of Black reparations as facilitated through the state.

We draw out this argument by analyzing two recent cases of racial redress—the Restorative Housing Program that addresses past housing discrimination against Black people in Evanston, Illinois, and the reparations ordinance redressing decades of police torture and abuse done to Black people in Chicago, Illinois, each the first of their kind to exist in the United States. We use mainly interviews with two types of actors: movement advocates for these reparations projects and those who were recipients or eligible recipients of reparations benefits in the programs, in addition to sociohistorical data (for example, city documents and administrative records, news articles, legal documents) to further historicize and contextualize each case. Ultimately, these case studies have implications for equity and inclusion in the design of racial redress initiatives.

## BACKGROUND LITERATURE

The case for Black reparations is not new in the United States. At least since the U.S. government betrayed its promise to transfer lands to formerly enslaved people, a discourse and oral history tradition has endured in Black communities about the U.S. exploitation of Black labor,

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the research design, acquired grant funding to support the study, and led and oversaw the team’s overall research schedule. The second author (Jackson) conducted the Chicago case research (that included recruiting, interviewing, and coding the data on Chicago activists and related stakeholders in Chicago), wrote most of the Chicago case portions of the article and sections of the research design. The third author (Knight) also conducted Chicago case research (that included recruiting, interviewing, coding data on, and writing the sections about survivors of police torture in Chicago), integrated the sections of the article, drafted the concept of deliberative marginalization, and wrote the introduction, background, case selection, part of the methods, and conclusion. All served as editors and revisers.

encroachments on Black freedom, and refusal to repay what is owed to Black people (Biondi 2007; Darity and Mullen 2020). This discourse found focus in the advocacy of the Reparations Committee of Descendants of United States Slaves, founded in 1955 by Audley “Queen Mother” Moore, which provided grassroots education on reparations to communities, activists, and scholars for the next several decades (Biondi 2007, 256–57). Subsequently, reparations discourse gained greater visibility in different streams of Black political thought, for example, among Black civil rights activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. (as cited in McCaulley 2023) and more recently among Black public intellectuals such as Nikole Hannah-Jones (2021) and Ta-Nehisi Coates (2014), notably in “The Case for Reparations.” Reparations has also been a particularly consistent goal and theme among U.S. Black nationalist and internationalist groups, from the Nation of Islam to the Black Panther Party to some segments of today’s Movement for Black Lives. Thus, as both a political project and objective that operates at the intersection of multiple Black political traditions, the contemporary reparations struggle can be said to incorporate two important approaches in the Black Radical Tradition—an economic analysis of White supremacy and the use of internationalist solidarity networks to define structural racism as a human rights violation (Biondi 2007, 258).

Still, despite greater support in the Democratic Party and in the U.S. House of Representatives, overall congressional support for Bill H.R. 40 (the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act) is divided, thereby making Black reparations elusive at best at the national level. Although relatively greater numbers of U.S. citizens supported reparations in 2020, two-thirds of U.S. adults oppose reparations in the form of land or cash payments (Blazina and Cox 2022). Indeed, the public is split regarding whether the United States should issue a formal apology for slavery (Younis 2019).

Some movement has occurred at the local and institutional levels, though at relatively modest scales. For example, the city of Asheville, North Carolina, committed \$2.1 million

toward reparations in July 2021, joining cities such as Providence (Rhode Island), Iowa City (Iowa), and Amherst (Massachusetts) in crafting a racial redress initiative (AP News 2021). Universities across the country have also begun a Universities Studying Slavery Consortium, with Georgetown University implementing a \$400,000 per year reparations plan to pay the tuition of descendants of those it enslaved and Harvard University committing \$100 million for reparations for its ties to slavery. Dioceses within the Episcopal Church have committed millions of dollars in reparations for the Transatlantic Slave Trade. At the state level, the California Reparations Task Force is currently considering several proposals, including one that would provide each Black resident of California with \$360,000 in direct cash payments (Breslau and Butler 2023). These programs are not without their critics. Notably, Darity and Mullen (2023, 201–202) argue that the notion of local reparations is “an impossibility, a virtual oxymoron,” because local and state budgets do not have the financial wherewithal to realize the goal of reparations, specifically with respect to addressing the Black-White wealth gap (for a landscape review, see Reneau 2024, this issue).

That said, reparations programs at the local level offer interesting insights because some local initiatives exist that redress injustices beyond or in addition to slavery. For instance, local initiatives have been implemented to redress racial discrimination and exploitation in the housing sector, particularly as related to redlining and the devaluation of Black property. These different types of reparations initiatives are important to study not only because they evidence the multiple forms that reparations can take, but also because many of these forms of racialized injustice (such as housing discrimination and exploitation and the harms of incarceration) may be traced directly from their origins to families and individuals alive today. This ability to directly trace racialized harms also partly addresses concerns raised in public opinion surveys about the difficulty of attributing responsibility and eligibility for the injustice of slavery several generations in the past (Jones 2022).

## CASE SELECTION

This article investigates two such cases of racial redress initiatives in the Chicago area, an important site in which to explore differing approaches to racial redress given its histories of Black dispossession and racialized state violence. The area is also home to concentrated numbers of activists and organizers who have long advocated for reparations for Black people who have experienced violence and dispossession. The region thus enables the study of not one but two redress cases—one advanced by members of local government and the other by grassroots organizers and advocates. Together, these cases show how the idea of reparations takes on different meanings and emphases even among proximate Black reparative movements, depending on the context, nature of the harm caused, and who is affected. A single case can shed light on the dynamics of a given redress effort, but a dual case study allows for an additional level of analysis through which to examine processes that may persist but go underrecognized across settings, such as political marginalization.

The first case is in the city of Evanston, just north of Chicago, which has committed to providing redress for the city's history of anti-Black discrimination in areas of housing, economic development, and education. This is the first initiative of its kind that is a long-term program, originally a commitment of \$10 million over ten years.<sup>2</sup> Initially intended to be funded with tax revenue from recreational marijuana use, the first iteration of the program is the Local Reparations Restorative Housing Program. This program is designated to repair past discrimination in housing policy specifically. In its first wave of payments, the initiative provided grants valued at \$25,000 each for home repairs, mortgage assistance, or downpayments for a home in Evanston for sixteen recipients. Although city officials have expressed an intention to expand the program into other areas, including economic development and education, the program has received local and national criticism for being too narrowly fo-

cused and not enough of an intervention on the racial wealth gap to qualify as reparations (Mullen and Darity 2021; Perry and Ray 2021). Thus, the city has been criticized as “parading an ordinary housing voucher program as a reparations plan” (Darity and Mullen 2023, 201).

The second case is the city of Chicago's reparations ordinance, approved by the City Council in May 2015, which is the first reparations initiative in the nation to acknowledge and take steps to redress police torture. The “culmination of more than twenty-five years of collective struggle by torture survivors and their allies” (Baer 2020, 11), the reparations ordinance acknowledges that beginning in 1972 at least 120 Black people, mostly but not exclusively Black men, were kidnapped and tortured by Chicago police, coerced to confess to crimes they did not commit, and (for many) forced to endure decades in prison based on these false confessions (Chicago Police Torture Archive 2021; Kitchen, Jones, and McBride 2018; Ralph 2019; Reeves et al. 2019). Ultimately, the Chicago reparations ordinance included \$5.5 million to survivors of police torture (the original proposed amount was reportedly about four times that), free access to the city's colleges for survivors and their family members, the creation of a public memorial, a mandatory curriculum on the subject in Chicago Public Schools, a formal apology, and the establishment of a justice center on Chicago's South Side dedicated to addressing the effects of torture (Chicago Police Torture Archive 2021; Baer 2020, 11; Baer 2018, 771–74). Still, despite these victories, survivors including Mark Clements, Marvin Reeves, Anthony Holmes, and Darrell Cannon felt that these gains failed to constitute true reparations because they have not resulted in exonerating torture survivors who remain in prison and providing support to every torture survivor (Chicago Police Torture Archive 2021). As of January 2019, at least sixty-five known torture survivors remained incarcerated due to fabricated confessions or confessions extracted through torture methods (Pulley 2019).

Together, these two cases showcase a range

2. In 2022, the commitment grew to \$20 million over ten years, sourced from additional revenue from a real estate transfer tax.

of what racial redress policy can look like at the local level as well as equity-related factors that can affect the reach of its design and impact.

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND APPROACH

Our research process consisted of interviews with reparations advocates, movement actors, and recipients and eligible recipients (see tables A.1 and A.2 for a list and description of our interviewees). Between August 2022 and April 2023, we interviewed thirty individuals who occupied one or both roles. Roughly half of the interview participants were advocates, movement actors, or recipients of the Housing Restoration Program in Evanston, and the other half were advocates, movement actors, police torture survivors, or eligible recipients of what became the reparations ordinance for police torture in Chicago. In Evanston, we conducted sixteen interviews with Evanston City Council members, local faith leaders, recipients, bureaucrats, and detractors of the city's reparations initiative by Zoom, by phone, or in person. An additional fourteen interviews were conducted on Zoom or by phone with Chicago Torture Justice activists, movement lawyers, artists, alderpersons, community members, and activists and organizations involved in the We Charge Genocide campaign (Ransby 2018; We Charge Genocide 2014), in addition to police torture survivors who received compensation and who declined compensation. Each interview participant reviewed, signed, and received a copy of a consent form as required by our respective university institutional review boards.

We recruited interview participants through direct email and phone outreach via existing

networks as well as through referral or snowball sampling techniques. During the recruitment process and directly before each interview, we explained our research objectives and reviewed ethics procedures and protocols to protect the confidentiality of interview participants. Each institutional review board at our respective universities assessed and approved our research procedures. Interviews lasted roughly one hour and were recorded primarily on Zoom.<sup>3</sup> Thereafter, with the support of two research assistants, we transcribed and coded the interviews using a mixture of initial coding aligned to our interview protocol and analytic coding based on emergent themes (Deterding and Waters 2018).<sup>4</sup> Guided by the interview protocol, we triangulated our thematic analysis of the interviews with notes and reports from various resources, including newspaper articles, reports from the Reparations Committee, for Evanston, and archival data and reports from the People's Law Office and the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, notably the Chicago Police Torture Archive (2021), for Chicago. Much of this triangulation work focused on the processes of structuring the reparations initiatives, local participation, and political and bureaucratic challenges.

### FINDINGS

Our research into these two local initiatives—one focused on redress for housing discrimination in Evanston, and the other on redress for police torture in Chicago—highlights the contested nature of Black reparations at the local level. We find that the conceptualization, design, and advocacy and implementation strategies used in the reparations movements relate

3. Specifically, after completing a first layer of summative coding to determine the contextual details of the interview and to draw out background information about the interviewees, we engaged in a second layer of coding—thematic coding—to analyze the transcript for themes and concepts which illustrated the power dynamics, decision-making strategies, and challenges facing activists and organizers for Chicago Torture Justice and the Evanston Housing Restoration Program. The final layer of coding—structural coding—drew out key systemic and processual aspects of these reparations advocacy efforts. This final stage also focused on identifying key stakeholders, leaders, and interlocutors. Although most recruitment and interviews were conducted virtually, some research activities were also done in person. One of the authors, Davies, visited a community gathering and panel at Evanston's Second Baptist Church in October 2022 to recruit council members in person. Davies was also invited to an Evanston reparations recipient's home to conduct an interview.

4. Davies used Rev to transcribe her interviews; Jackson had research assistants help transcribe from Zoom interview transcripts; Knight used a transcription company to transcribe interviews with police torture survivors.

in particular to the political context and political opportunity structure, as well as to the extent to which actors of differing positionalities and priorities were or were not involved in the policy design. Across both cases, reparations movement advocates capitalized on political opportunities, or openings in the political structure (McAdam 1999; Meyer 2004; Tarrow 1998), that enabled them to realize many of their political goals.<sup>5</sup> This observation reveals how the actions of reparations movement advocates are best understood in relation to the political context—the constellation of opportunities and constraints—that sparks or inhibits political contention (Meyer 2004, 128).

But even though priorities and strategies differed substantially between Evanston and Chicago, both reparations movements and subsequent racial redress initiatives featured some degree of deliberative marginalization in how responsive they were to those who were most impacted by racialized harm. The Evanston program was championed and shepherded by Black political elites and faith leaders within a more broadly affluent and progressive city. The first issue area of repair in that context was housing, and the strategies of action were to use existing institutional channels to build support and political will despite public concerns and critiques that the program is administratively flawed and not comprehensive enough to be considered reparations (for a detailed examination of how the Evanston initiative mobilized local progressive racial attitudes, see Newton and Nelsen 2024, this issue).<sup>6</sup>

Conversely, the movement for reparations for police torture in Chicago was led by long-

time activists who sought systemic redress by using extra-institutionalized avenues. Therefore, given that these actors were intervening in a broader history of racialized dispossession, the focus of the Chicago reparations ordinance was not only compensation but also investments in a torture justice center to address trauma, a curriculum to educate public school students, and a torture justice memorial to educate the public. Yet the scope of the Chicago reparations ordinance was constrained because incarcerated torture survivors among others were unable to give substantive input on the ordinance.

## ORIGINS

In the next section, we discuss the policy design and advocacy processes for the Evanston and Chicago reparations programs.

### Evanston: Working Within the System

The current redress initiative in Evanston was produced and shaped by a number of advocates and politicians in concert with city government. We can understand the Evanston policy as one that emanated from political officials and that was developed with some community input. The resolution was primarily the brainchild of former Evanston 5th Ward alderwoman Robin Rue Simmons, former alderman Peter Braithwaite, and former alderwoman Ann Rainey. Simmons, however, emerged as the most visible and vocal champion for the legislation. She remarked that coming to reparations as a local project was a revelatory process. She said, “It really was [my] twenty years of work in business and advocacy that made me

5. Social movement theorists propose that changes in opportunity structures, especially “openings” in the political structure, create contexts ripe for contention (McAdam 1999; Tarrow 1998). This framework has been referred to as the political process or political opportunity model. Proponents of this framework hold that political opportunities comprise stable—though not necessarily permanent or official—features of the political system that incentivize or discourage collective action by influencing people’s expectations of success or failure (Tarrow 1998, 77; McAdam 1999). According to this view, potential challengers to the established political structure are often excluded from full access or participation, or the policies that they support are not popular with the general public or those who are in power. That said, significant social change or broad change in the political structure can “significantly undermine the calculations and assumptions on which the political establishment is structured,” thus creating openings for challengers (McAdam 2004, 203).

6. According to Newton and Nelsen, the program appeased White residents’ desires to reinvigorate Evanston’s commitments to racial justice while sidelining Black residents’ concerns about how reparations funds should be distributed.

hyper aware of the oppression, the discrimination, the gaps in the Black community in every area of liveability, not just business and home ownership, but education and overall quality of life.”

When she was elected as an alderperson in 2019, she realized that “no more ordinary public policy, no additional programming without redress or reparations, even at a local level, would get us to the repair, equity, [or] justice that we deserve as a Black community.” As a supporter of H.R. 40 and reparations for slavery, however, she believed that addressing “hyperlocal harms” could be a point of repair for the Black community. In 2019, Simmons requested a memo from the Evanston City Council clerk, formerly Devon Reid, to explore the concept of reparations in Evanston.<sup>7</sup> With the knowledge that Evanston did not have a history of slavery, the memo sought to understand the specific ways Evanston was implicated in anti-Blackness and discrimination.

Simmons then sent the idea to the Evanston City Council Equity and Empowerment Commission, at that time led by former alderperson Jane Grover. After a trip to South Africa, and inspired by their post-apartheid truth and reconciliation process, Simmons returned to Evanston with renewed vigor. The first public meeting on reparations was in April 2019. Simmons came armed with the memo prepared by Reid, as well as additional research she referenced from the Chicago-based think tank Metropolitan Planning Council (2018), a report titled “The Cost of Segregation.” Simmons knew that she needed to build support for reparations, and so she invited “advocates to come out that had been fighting long term for justice and repair,” a housing justice organization, and Chicago representatives from the National Association of Realtors. She also knew that she “needed leaders that people respected.” So, Simmons reached out to Illinois members of Congress asking for letters of support, and she engaged prominent organizations and commu-

nity members including the Thurgood Marshall Law Center, Judge Lionel Jean-Baptiste, and Reverend Michael Nabors of Second Street Baptist Church.

In her research, Simmons learned that, in 2002, the Evanston City Council had passed a supportive resolution for H.R. 40, the national proposed legislation that would consider the process of reparations at the national level (Evanston City Council 2002). Simmons used this history as well as the current reality of the racial wealth gap as a point to galvanize City Council and garner support for local redress policy. Simmons also built relationships with reparations advocates, including the Redress Network, the National African American Reparations Commission (NAARC), and Kamm Howard of the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N’COBRA). Simmons said that learning from these long-time advocates “matured” the work as she learned more about what reparations is and how it differs from typical public policy. She learned about the forms of reparations that are more than just a “cash check,” in addition to “international law standards and five components of reparations.”<sup>8</sup>

In November 2019, the Evanston City Council approved \$10 million dollars for ten years of funding for reparations in the areas of housing, education, and economic development, which would be paid for by a tax on cannabis revenue (Meadows 2019; Evanston City Council 2019). The project, however, hit a roadblock in 2020. Interviewees remarked that Evanston City Council had intended to delay reparations funding in light of the COVID-19 crisis. Simmons continued to push for reparations funding, countering that Black residents in Evanston would be most affected by COVID (Martinez 2020). This crisis, then, exposed the need for and provided an opportunity to advocate for reparations policy. Even so, in the following months, a long bureaucratic process would create new challenges.

7. Devon Reid, “Memo on Reparations,” City of Evanston, memorandum, April 18, 2019, <https://www.cityofevanston.org/home/showpublisheddocument/71150/637854525387270000> (accessed February 2, 2024).

8. Those five components include restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition, as articulated by the United Nations (2005).

### Chicago: Organizing Outside the System

Contrary to the Evanston reparations case was the long-standing activist work outside city government led by members of the Chicago police torture justice movement. These activists used political openings in the city to promote reparations for the torture people experienced. Many of the people with whom we spoke, including organizers such as Alice Kim, Flint Taylor, and Todd St. Hill, noted that they were already active in efforts to end police violence, close supermax prisons, and free those on death row, such as Mumia Abu Jamal, before entering the local reparations movement in Chicago. Therefore, they saw the work of reparations for police torture as a logical extension of their broader efforts to end trauma and harm against Chicago's most vulnerable residents (G. Taylor 2016). Many of the organizing efforts these actors engaged in were also rooted in restorative practices that center the harm against communities rather than the institutions who frequently administer the harm.

These movement efforts had their origins in the 1980s. According to Aislinn Pulley, co-executive director of the Chicago Torture Justice Center, a grassroots community organization called Black People Against Torture formed during that time and constituted “really the very first organizing [effort] around torture in Chicago . . . when there were maybe 5 people at that time . . . that were being publicly acknowledged as torture survivors. It was through that [initial] organizing that [Jon] Burge [the police commander who oversaw many acts of police torture] was [eventually] fired.” Pulley noted that this group worked to expose Burge's torture tactics and centered the experiences of survivors. “They [anti-police torture activists] really did the groundwork,” she said. “They showed up for people's court dates. They were doing the organizing, marching, rallying.”

The dynamic of working outside of, or in contestation with, the existing system shows through the political context and political opportunity structure within which the reparations ordinance was conceived and executed. To raise awareness of a reparations bill before the city, the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials (CTJM), a social movement organization

founded in 2010, supported several public actions in the fall of 2013 and winter of 2014 that included a rally outside of City Hall featuring dozens of volunteers from Amnesty International (Baer 2020, 202). CTJM also worked with We Charge Genocide—a formation of activists that prepared and gave testimony about police violence in Chicago to the United Nations Committee Against Torture—to consciously use and advance the language of reparations as necessary for accountability for police violence (G. Taylor 2019, 15; Ralph 2019; We Charge Genocide 2014).

The movement for reparations also benefited greatly when political opportunities opened after Chicago Mayor Richard Daley retired and former White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel was elected. So, in 2013, activists and organizers were able to put pressure on mayor Emanuel to publicly apologize for torture in Chicago. This acknowledgment was a sign of success for reparations activists. Moreover, as he faced a contentious reelection campaign in 2014 and the nationally publicized police killing of seventeen-year-old Laquan McDonald that year, Emanuel was eager to look progressive on matters of police violence. Subsequently, Emmanuel reportedly suppressed the video depicting the police shooting of McDonald while also beginning to negotiate with organizers about a reparations package (Baer 2020). These events overlapped with the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, after which CTJM launched an insistent reparations campaign that included a protest march from the police headquarters to City Hall to hand Emanuel a forty-thousand-signature petition in support of reparations (Reeves et al. 2019, 286).

Subsequently, in 2015, Rahm Emanuel was forced into a runoff with Jesus “Chuy” Garcia. For Mariame Kaba and other organizers, this was a unique political opening within which to raise the issue of reparations as a potential agenda item for the two political candidates (see, for example, Kaba 2021; Chicago Police Torture Archive 2021). By putting pressure on Emanuel during the runoff season, organizers and activists forced him to engage with their framing of the reparations ordinance. As Pulley

recalled, “We did a targeted six-month campaign, and through that whole six months I did not believe we were gonna win. I was very much used to [the idea that] you fight for the principle of it, you know, and eventually we win. But not right now. I remember even being in City Council as it was being passed. I was just so, [pause] I was in so much disbelief.”

The Chicago reparations ordinance passed in May 2015 and marked a first-of-its-kind success whereby local movements, using the political opportunities available to them, forced concessions from city government in the form of a redress initiative for the harms of police torture and violence (Losier 2019).

Still, the focus on survivors’ lived experiences changed the dynamic around which issues were prioritized. Namely, it led to an emphasis on working for Chicago reparations beyond the constraints of the existing local government and with an eye to the needs and concerns facing survivors. For example, Alice Kim, cofounder of CTJM, was given the role of imagining how to hold the Chicago police who perpetuated torture accountable without relying on existing legal models. This political work was especially important following Burge’s conviction and sentencing. “Survivors are still suffering from the trauma of torture . . . people are still incarcerated,” Kim explained. “These are all things . . . that we knew prior to this. It wasn’t just like, okay, get Jon Burge convicted, and that’s the end of it. But with his [Burge’s] conviction, it [the issue of repair] just was staring us in the face in a way that you just can’t ignore.”

Thus, after Burge’s 2010 conviction for perjury and obstruction of justice in federal court, activists, organizers, and survivors alike were still wondering how to conceive justice and accountability given the models that previously existed. They began organizing to have the state commute the death sentences of those who had been wrongly convicted in relation to the Burge torture tactics. Although some sentences were commuted, most were usually only reduced to life without parole. This did not feel like justice for activists and organizers like Kim. “The system was still left intact in terms

of Jon Burge,” said Kim, who credited Stan Willis with effectively connecting the torture cases with the movement for reparations. According to Kim, Willis suggested that survivors of police torture should receive reparations benefits. This had never been conceived of before, but Kim and others were excited about the possibility. “Anything is possible if you can imagine it,” said Kim. “That’s the whole point. And I think that really helped. It helped free us in terms of thinking about what a reparations ordinance might look like.” From this imaginative process, the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials (CTJM) was born.<sup>9</sup>

These two cases exemplify how the process of local racial redress initiatives emerge directly from the organizing priorities of reparations movement actors who in turn make use of the political opportunities available to them. The design process of the Evanston racial redress program reflected the experiences, learning, and positionality of local Black politicians and other political elites; the conception of reparations for police torture in Chicago was reflected in the organizing history and evolving objectives of police torture justice activists. This comparative analysis shows how access and influence determine the process by which reparations programs materialize at the local level.

## POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

The following section reviews the policy implementation processes for the Evanston and Chicago reparations programs.

### Evanston: Reparations Meets Bureaucracy

When the program passed the Evanston City Council, it was time to figure out how to design the program and distribute reparations funds. Once they had established the fund and committed \$10 million of recreational cannabis sales tax, the Reparations Committee knew that they would, based on community feedback at meetings held in July 2019, prioritize reparations programming around housing, economic development, and education. Simmons remarked, “So then we had to figure out what’s the first initiative? How do we determine eligibility? How do we manage the program? Who’s

9. “Chicago Torture Justice Memorials,” “About,” <https://chicagotorture.org/about> (accessed February 2, 2024).

going to be a program administrator? Staff became very heavily responsible for the success of the roll out of [the program].” Thus the design of the reparations program was in the hands of the city government, and, for that reason, was beholden to the feasibility and legal constraints therein.

Councilmember Bobby Burns asserts that Simmons smartly focused first on securing funding for reparative legislation from the city council. After that, the programming and guidelines were to be determined by city staff in partnership with the Reparations Committee. This included (among others) former Interim City Manager Kimberly Richardson, Assistant to the City Manager Tasheik Kerr, and former Corporation Counsel Nicholas Cummings. City employees were responsible for figuring out eligibility as laid out by the program’s legal counsel and, as Simmons described it, finding a “narrowly tailored remedy” to the harm identified by the Reparations Committee. Cummings emphasized that, for the program to be constitutional, the city government needed to find evidence of historical discrimination against Black Evanston residents.<sup>10</sup> Although Richardson felt some trepidation about the program, particularly how the city government could institutionalize long-term equity-building in Evanston, she proceeded with the work. Leading up to the implementation of the reparations program, she discussed the intense process of design and scrutiny to ensure that the program did not exclude or discriminate. Richardson discussed looking to other redress programs in American history to consider program design, including the “Japanese encampment and their subsequent reparations,” as well as “other communities, especially the Indigenous, and really looking at Indigenous lands that were municipal owned, [asking] how did that transfer happen? And what [were the] legal ramifications?”

After deep research and feasibility studies, Richardson delved into the possibilities of designing a housing program that redressed past

harm. Richardson also stated that in a discussion with another city employee they looked at a redlining map of Evanston and its census tract. Richardson recounted the conversation: “[She said,] ‘Take a look at the redlining map and look at the census tract. What do you see overlap?’ And when she sat there I was like, holy sh—t. It’s almost consistent to our U.S. census tract of where our low-income families still reside. It is almost identical to the redline[d] map. And I said, ‘Oh my goodness . . . I was like, I think we have a path now. I can see it. It’s housing, it’s related to this.’”

Richardson connected with Dino Robinson and the Shorefront Legacy Center and other community historians to ensure accurate historical framing. Robinson recalled putting together a report on Evanston’s history of racial discrimination (Robinson and Thompson 2021). The City of Evanston, he said, came to Shorefront, asking, “What did we do?” With the Evanston History Center, Shorefront responded by providing details about the city’s history of housing discrimination (among other forms of exclusion): Black Americans in Evanston were pushed out of their neighborhoods when a formerly Black residential area was zoned as a commercial district. Evanston also enabled redlining, which local financial institutions also adopted, resulting in the devaluation of property in Black areas and making it difficult for Black people in Evanston to secure home and business loans.

Thus Evanston’s history of racist zoning laws would be redressed through the Restorative Housing Program. The Reparations Committee selected 1919 through 1969 as the period of eligibility, applicable for Black residents that lived in Evanston at the time and their direct descendants. Richardson began to design the program and write the policy, modeling the program after other government housing programs. The city council approved \$400,000 for a racial redress initiative related to housing—allowing \$25,000 per recipient to be used for mortgage assistance, downpayment assistance,

10. Cummings noted in an interview that he relied on the Supreme Court case *City of Richmond v. J. A. Croson Co.*, 488 U.S. 469 (1989) which ruled against Richmond’s requirement that minority businesses be awarded 30 percent of the city’s construction contracts. The Court asserted that Richmond needed to provide clear and compelling evidence of past discrimination to justify the remedy.

funding for home improvements, or for the funds to be passed to a direct descendant (City of Evanston 2021). The program is intended to “Revitalize, preserve and stabilize Black/African-American owner-occupied homes in Evanston; Increase homeownership and build the wealth of Black/African-American residents; Build intergenerational equity amongst Black/African-American residents; and Improve the retention rate of Black/African-American homeowners in the City of Evanston” (City of Evanston 2023b).

However, one council member did oppose the program once it was decided that housing would be the focus in 2021. That was former alderwoman Cicely Fleming, who wrote in a later statement that the program was “reparations in name only” and “restrictive and only allows for limited participation.” Fleming was also concerned that the program was moving forward too quickly without enough community input.<sup>11</sup> Even so, the program moved forward.

The process of applying for housing reparations was open to three categories of individuals: ancestors, direct descendants, or Evanston residents that can provide evidence that they experienced housing discrimination after 1969. Ancestors were living in Evanston between 1919 and 1969 and were at least eighteen years of age at the time. Kerr said that some acceptable evidence includes “contracted purchase of home in Evanston, rental contract release, state check stub, tax return, W-2, social security statement, bills, library card, bank statement, obituary, birth certificates and others.” Direct descendants needed to prove their relation to ancestors living in Evanston during the allotted period. Reparations committee members and staff emphasized that they did not want to make the process complex or burdensome for those who wanted to apply. They also engaged

in public education on the process of applying for housing support. Burns affirmed, “It is not difficult to qualify, which is a good thing. When the application period was still open, I think every community center had at least one staff person that was trained to help people apply.” Ultimately, sixteen ancestors were selected to receive the first disbursement of \$25,000 each in January 2022 (Cahan 2022).

As they were designing the policy, Richardson and others were careful to incorporate the word Black rather than African American. When formulating the policy, Kerr reminded her that Evanston had a community of Jamaican descent that had lived in Evanston during the time frame of the housing discrimination. Richardson wanted to ensure that these individuals were not excluded from the possibility of receiving redress, given that this bill was rooted in housing discrimination against Black people living in Evanston—not reparations for slavery.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, part of the legal scrutiny and protection process meant that the city needed to be cautious about handing out \$25,000 and thereby making people vulnerable to tax liability and possible predation. Richardson says that for this reason, the program was initially designed to pay vendors or banks directly rather than place cash in the hands of recipients. As a result, joint partnerships for reparations were formed between the Evanston city government and private entities to facilitate and expand the opportunities for reparations. To help disburse funds and manage the program, the Reparations Committee decided to work with the Community Partners for Affordable Housing (CPAH), a local nonprofit organization committed to helping people “secure and retain” affordable housing.<sup>13</sup> After recipients were determined, CPAH went to their homes and offered a quote for how much the

11. Cicely Fleming, “Statement on Resolution 37-R-27,” March 22., 2021, <https://www.cicelyfleming.com/blog/reparations> (accessed February 2, 2024).

12. This sentiment is reflected on the Evanston Local Reparations site, which affirms that the Restorative Housing Program “identifies eligible applicants as Black or African American persons having origins in any of the Black racial and ethnic groups of Africa” (City of Evanston 2023a).

13. Community Partners for Affordable Housing, “Our Mission and Values,” <https://www.cpahousing.org/about-us/our-mission-and-values/> (accessed February 2, 2024).

desired home repairs would cost. Contractors would then come and give additional quotes. Burns asserted that sometimes the CPAH quotes and the contractor's quotes were different, causing some frustration among recipients. Furthermore, that the most visible CPAH staff were White also caused suspicion among recipients and criticism of the program (though CPAH itself is a diverse organization). Richardson affirmed complaints that CPAH was not a Black-owned organization.<sup>14</sup>

### Chicago: Building a Model from Scratch

By contrast, the development of the reparations ordinance in the Chicago police torture reparations case occurred outside government control, though in a complicated relationship with survivors of police torture, some of whom identified themselves via a public call by organizers. This meant that, rather than a top-down approach from government actors, the ordinance, which was crafted by those who were not directly harmed by Chicago police torture, was a result of conversations with and among Chicagoans who had stakes in the outcomes of those policies. At the same time, however, torture survivors who were incarcerated reported that they were not involved in nor fully informed about the process of designing the ordinance.

One of the key activists involved in drafting the Chicago reparations ordinance was Joey Mogul, who was embedded in social organizing related to prison abolition as early as 1992. In 1997, after leaving Chicago for a time, the activists returned and reconnected with the People's Law Office, a civil rights-based attorney collective that was fighting against state (including police) violence and working to free incarcerated people. It was in community with other lawyers, and organizers such as Stan Willis of the People's Law Office, that they learned how to conceive of reparations for police torture.

Willis seeded the idea of placing the Chicago torture cases on the international scene by focusing on the United Nations Convention Against Torture in 2006. For Mogul, it was critical to show that, even as grave injustices were being committed against incarcerated people at Guantanamo Bay, similar cases of torture were being committed on U.S. soil against U.S. citizens by the police (Mogul 2016). This exposure to an international framework laid the foundation for what became the reparations ordinance in Chicago. In conversations with international organizers and anti-torture activists, Mogul, who is White, learned ways to expand the vision for what could be considered reparative. Moving beyond cash payouts (one aspect of the reparations process), Mogul came to see that remembrance, archiving, and historicizing the experiences of victims of police torture would be central to the formulation of the reparations ordinance and its administrative processes.

In the late 2010s, members of the People's Law Office and other organizers began putting out a call for reparations. Essentially, they wanted not only to know how the community and survivors conceived of reparations, but also to draw out anyone who had been directly affected by the Burge torture tactics decades prior. Simultaneously, Mogul focused on the memorialization aspects of the reparations effort, initiating a call, along with artist Laurie Palmer, for potential reparations memorials. Before Jon Burge's criminal sentencing, Mogul and others worked to highlight the experiences of survivors. This is when the reparations ordinance was drafted as a potential memorial to survivors. As Mogul explained in an interview, "We ended up having an art exhibit in October of 2012 where we basically invited everyone to submit memorials, and we promised to put everyone's memorials up. And we did. And [we] had this exhibit at the Sullivan Art Galleries in

14. Furthermore, with an eye toward long-term planning for local reparations, reparations advocates constructed a nonprofit to raise and distribute funds for reparations in Evanston, the Reparations Stakeholder Authority of Evanston (RSAE) with logistical support from the Evanston Community Foundation. The RSAE is intended to fund reparations initiatives after the \$10 million over ten years from the Evanston City Government cannabis tax has run out. The RSAE board is term limited and is composed of members of "harmed" individuals in Evanston. The RSAE is composed of Simmons, Reverend Michael Nabors, Pastor Monté Dillard, Alderman Peter Braithwaite, Henry Wilkins, Spencer Jourdain and Dino Robinson.

the School of the Art Institute, and that's when I drafted the reparations ordinance as a speculative memorial. And I never thought in my wildest dreams we'd file it."

This initial draft of the reparations ordinance became the basis on which the final policy was built. Mogul opened the policy design process to community members, survivors, activists, and other organizers invested in the reparations struggle in Chicago. They sought feedback about the types of policies community members found critical to redress harm. One of the early revisions was expanding the reparations ordinance to include language regarding the teaching of Burge's actions and truth-telling in Chicago schools. Even though activists who had not been directly affected by torture had not originally conceived of this policy initiative as a potential way to redress the harm, it was in community with Black Chicagoans, especially survivors, that this aspect of the reparations ordinance became solidified. It was also during this phase that drafters removed any policies from the ordinance that would (or could) potentially feed the prison system. Calls to prosecute Burge's underlings were therefore excluded from the ordinance. In effect, writing the ordinance became at least partly rooted in an abolitionist ethos. And in 2013, the Chicago reparations ordinance was filed "as a way to frame the [reparations] conversation."

### CRITIQUES AND RESPONSES

Though both programs were carefully designed and implemented, both have received critiques from potential beneficiaries. These critiques demonstrate the limits of creating racial redress policies through government systems.

#### Evanston: Pushing Program Alignment with Reparations Goals

Each initiative has received criticism that it falls short of its reparative mandate. In Evan-

ston, an ongoing source of contention revolves around whether the Restorative Housing Program can be considered reparations. One city council member voted against the program because they believed that it was not truly reparations, but most of the dissent has been directed at the design and implementation of the program, particularly its slow disbursement process. In addition, according to former corporation counsel Nicholas Cummings, community members wanted more "holistic repair" even though the city was legally constrained in its options for redress (see Newton and Nelsen 2024, this issue).<sup>15</sup> Some interviewees suggested that the Restorative Housing Program should garner more participation from the local Black community to ensure that the policy's design more appropriately reflects their long-term interests.<sup>16</sup> Others felt that the rhetoric of reparations for a housing-focused program would distract from and undermine more systems-focused approaches to address racial inequities. In addition, cannabis funds alone were not enough to fund the program. To solve this issue, the Reparations Committee sourced additional funds from Evanston's real estate transfer tax, and the financial commitment of the program was able to double to a \$20 million commitment in 2022 (Castro 2022).

City council member Bobby Burns reports that much of the pushback has come from those who prefer cash payments. "They're not wrong," Burns said. "I do think that in order for this to be reparations, that direct cash benefits or something like it . . . needs to be part of it." This is because, in Burns's view, the harmed group ideally must be the one to determine how the repair should look (see also Edwards et al. 2024). This problem also came to a head when two ancestor recipients, siblings Kenneth and Sheila Wideman (ages seventy-seven and seventy-five, respectively) each qualified for the \$25,000 benefit but did not own a home and did

15. Monique Newton and Matthew Nelsen (2024) offer a detailed examination of the Evanston program as an example of a "politics of expedience" that moved the policy through government quickly despite local critiques.

16. For example, advocate and long-time program opponent Bennett Johnson, age ninety-three, has presented his own reparations plan called the Freedom Plan, which would focus on long-term implementation of Black reparations through the establishment of multiple new institutions. Johnson disagreed with the structure of the existing program—namely the home mortgage assistance aspect and whether the structure was durable over time.

not have any descendants to whom they could pass the money (Castro 2023a). After a public appeal from the Widemans, at a Reparations Committee Listening session on March 2, 2023, Simmons proposed a resolution that would grant the Widemans cash payouts of their funds.<sup>17</sup>

On March 16, the committee reconvened to discuss amending the reparations program with the option for cash payment (Castro 2023b). Councilmember Devon Reid pushed for the program to allow for unrestricted cash payments. “Let’s let them make decisions for themselves and for their families that will help them build generational wealth and live their healthiest years to come,” he argued according to the *Evanston Roundtable* (Castro 2023b). The committee therefore decided to open the option of cash payment to all ancestors, and on March 27 the Evanston City Council approved direct cash payments of \$25,000 as a part of the program. This option, as well as additional staff support, cleared a path to the growth of the program. As of that October, the program had spent more than \$2 million and disbursed payments to ninety-one more residents.<sup>18</sup> More than half of this amount (around \$1.2 million) was disbursed in the form of cash payments to fifty Ancestors.

Although this is hopeful news indicating that the program is responsive to critiques, broader questions about the program’s accessibility, efficiency, and effectiveness linger. Over the course of the program, processing the reparations funds has been slow, and seven ancestors passed away before they were able to receive funds from the Restorative Housing Program (Castro 2023c). Furthermore, if Evanston intends to bridge the racial wealth disparity, averaging \$300,000 per person, then the city would need roughly \$3.3 billion for the estimated eleven thousand eligible Black residents; Evanston has an annual budget of \$300 million (Darity and Mullen 2023, 201). Despite the program’s ambitions, it remains to be seen

how the city will meet the scope and urgency of the racial wealth gap.

### Chicago: Missing the Input of Incarcerated Torture Survivors

In Chicago, torture survivors who were then incarcerated shared that they were not asked for input on the reparations ordinance. This absence of incarcerated torture survivors’ voices and priorities mapped onto what the ordinance did not include—a route out of prison. Instead, incarcerated torture survivors were offered only monetary support, and, if they accepted the monetary benefit, forfeited their right to civil restitution in the future. As a result, at least some people declined receipt of the cash payment. As one torture survivor, now exonerated, said, “I didn’t take the reparations, because when they offered me the reparations, I was just transferred to [another prison], and . . . the catch was, ‘Let’s get these guys in prison, and give them this little money and . . . if you take this money, then the city of Chicago is no longer responsible for financial obligations’ . . . And another catch was we’re gonna give you an apology, say ‘Oh we sorry,’ and give you a hundred and something thousand dollars . . . but you still in prison . . .”

Another torture survivor, also now exonerated, also declined the reparations benefit, saying,

I wish I had been part of the original conception because I had some thoughts on what should have been the “ask” as opposed to what turned out to be the “ask”. . . . It [the reparations benefit] was never presented to me in a way for me to contribute to it. It was more presented as these are what’s being sought as opposed to what do you feel about this or that, or what do you think it should be? It was something for me to apply to as oppose to participate in. I was locked up for twenty-five years at that time—and I think it [the reparations benefit] tantamounted to something

17. Councilmember Devon Reid opposed the motion, believing that all Ancestors should have a cash payout option; all others approved and Krissie Harris abstained because she is related to the Widemans.

18. Tasheik Kerr, “Ancestor Reparations Recipients Disbursement Update,” City of Evanston, memorandum, October 5, 2023, <https://cityofevanston.civicweb.net/document/211619/Ancestor%20Reparations%20Recipients%20Disbursement%20Up.pdf> (accessed February 2, 2024).

like \$4,000 a year [for every year of my incarceration]. So to me it wasn't worth the trade-off, plus, again, it didn't offer freedom for me. It didn't offer relief in my situation. It was just a monetary thing in the sense that it really didn't change my living condition . . . so I chose not to take it. It just didn't make sense for there to be acknowledgment of wrongdoing, yet [no] offer a relief [from prison]. There was a monetary relief but not a situational relief. You acknowledge a wrongdoing but didn't correct it. I'd rather [have] freedom than \$100,000.

Statements such as these underscore the mismatch between the priorities of those torture survivors who were most vulnerable and the priorities as outlined by the drafters of the reparations ordinance. Monetary compensation is valuable but, as emphasized, is incomparable to the freedom for which these individuals struggled.

These cases provide critical insights about how reparations relate to conditions of freedom. If, as Elizabeth Wrigley-Field (2024) argues, time is the best proxy for freedom, then a reparations package that redresses police torture and the lack of freedom suffered by imprisonment would necessarily include a mechanism for relief from imprisonment in addition to the other benefits outlined in the Chicago reparations ordinance. The absence of such relief in the ordinance reveals much about how the inclusion and marginalization of different stakeholders' positionalities shape what ultimately is and is not included in racial redress policy.

Other survivors who were not then incarcerated raised related concerns. In July 22, 2015, torture survivor David Bates posted a copy of a letter to the People's Law Office on the Better Government Association's Facebook page that criticized the People's Law Office and City of Chicago for in his view negotiating a deal without knowledge and participation of torture survivors and their legal counsel.<sup>19</sup> This observation was corroborated, for instance, by another torture survivor and cash payment recipient

who said, "Well, to tell you the truth, we [survivors] really didn't have a say so in the reparations package. I didn't even know that they were negotiating a reparations package." In his statement, Bates stressed several exclusions that existed in the negotiated deal. "The deal does not include [or address the imprisonment status of] victims who remain in prison," he wrote. "Furthermore, the offer of clinical services [and] free education for the victims of Jon Burge, as well as teaching the Chicago Public Schools about Jon Burge would not be as important as being given stability and [being] made whole." Many police torture survivors, Bates explained, "are well into their 50's and 60's and for the most part, their children are beyond college and are adults. The majority of the victims of Jon Burge are homeless, poor and have been without employment since returning to society." Although access to the Chicago City Colleges extends broadly to torture survivors' families and the Chicago Torture Justice Center was established to address many of the issues identified above, the veracity of Bates's observations remains.

Notwithstanding the impacts that each initiative and racial redress movement has had on people's lives and local politics, neither the Evanston Restorative Housing Program nor the Chicago reparations ordinance is perfect. Beyond the administrative delays, narrow scope, and usage constraints, the redress program in Evanston is vulnerable to profound critiques that it simply does not take substantial steps at closing the Black-White wealth gap, and thus is not reparations. Conversely, the Chicago ordinance did not include what, for many police torture survivors, was the basis of any reparations package: relief from imprisonment. Surely jurisdictional barriers existed; the reparations ordinance was established at the city level, whereas the Illinois prison system is a state-level institution. A more fundamental concern, though, may be the seeming lack of robust input from incarcerated or formerly incarcerated torture survivors concerning what key priorities should be included in the reparations ordinance. Theoretically, robust partici-

19. David Bates, to Better Government Association, "Burge Torture Reparations Scam," Facebook post, July 22, 2015, <https://perma.cc/ZM3P-Z8W5> (accessed February 2, 2024).

pation from this stakeholder group might have motivated more debate and consideration about what a mechanism of relief from imprisonment could look like and how to navigate the cross-jurisdictional and interagency dynamics of such a policy change.

### CONCLUSION

In short, the proliferation of racial redress initiatives at the local level can be understood as outcomes of racial justice movements that occur outside as well as through government. The Evanston Housing Restoration Program and Chicago reparations ordinance, both the first of their kinds in the United States, are two notable examples of redress initiatives that derived from local advocacy or movements. Both cases demonstrate how local actors, political elites, and long-time racial justice activists, mobilized a defined community of stakeholders to realize policy change that would redress past harm against Black communities. Observing the political terrain, these politicians and activists capitalized on the political opportunities available to them, such as using a past city resolution in support of reparations or a mayoral election, to prevail over local government to invest resources in establishing each racial redress initiative. Whereas the Evanston case illustrates processes of working through local government, the Chicago case demonstrates how those outside the institutionalized power structure can organize to expose harm and sustain that political organizing over time to build popular political power that forces concessions from local government.

Yet these cases also show how reparations movements and subsequent policy programs can reify some of the very dynamics they seek to disrupt. Reparations advocacy and redress policy design in Evanston was elite driven, whereas the reparations ordinance in Chicago did not address the key concerns of the most vulnerable survivors of police torture. We describe processes such as these as examples of deliberative marginalization that ultimately, and perhaps unintentionally, result in a deliberation and design process that is inaccessible to the most affected stakeholders given the constraints of local government and policy processes. These patterns should be unsurprising

in light of what we know about the power dynamics in social institutions and social movements (see Cohen 1999; Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa 2021; Terriquez 2015) and the long histories of racialized exclusion that these movements and hard-won initiatives are confronting (see Losier 2019; K. Taylor 2019). But they nonetheless provide insights on which to build.

Juxtaposed with one another, the redress movements in Evanston and Chicago demonstrate how the social location of movement actors and stakeholders relates to which resources are mobilized, which strategies are deployed, and whose priorities are centered in local movements advocating for racial redress. The example of incarcerated survivors of police torture is a negative case that further underscores this argument. Although some survivors of police torture said that they did not have a full opportunity to weigh in on the design of the Chicago reparations ordinance, incarcerated survivors of police torture also faced profound structural barriers owing to their imprisonment that hindered their participation; these individuals, who have since been exonerated, said they were only presented with the choice of whether to opt into a redress initiative that was missing the feature most important to them—a route out of prison. Consequently, one can observe how dynamics of race, class, and historical exclusion can affect the design and reparative possibilities of racial redress initiatives.

Thus a critical intervention we make in this study is to show how the development of policies based on reparations movement goals and ideals is often limited in its capacity to respond to harms that have remained unaddressed because of White supremacy and anti-Black discrimination. Because reparations policies require institutionalization within the same systems that are often responsible for enacting anti-Black structural violence and legislation, it is difficult to imagine that radical or transformative change will come from these policies alone, especially if they are incremental policy-based solutions. As a result, such policies will often fall short of the expectations of organizers and survivors of injustice even as they remain integral milestones on the path to a more just future.

In the end, a comparative study of these two cases offers several important lessons for research and policymaking. Even as each redress initiative may be viewed as a model to outside reparations advocates, analysts can also observe that each initiative faces profound institutional constraints that need to be further explored. The Evanston Restorative Housing Program has a ten-year commitment from the city but is quite limited in its scope because of its modest level of benefit and slow pace of distribution. There is also a possibility that the Evanston initiative's modest benefit amount, coupled with its focus on homeownership, may place unintended participation barriers on non-middle-class Black beneficiaries. Researchers might explore the participation barriers in racial redress initiatives in greater depth. Reparations advocates and policymakers would also do well to consider these issues and perhaps conduct disparate impact analyses of the implementation of redress initiatives. Finally, given the limited resources of local jurisdictions, advocates and policymakers might wish to make concrete stipulations and plans that address how local redress initiatives would fit in with, and not replace, more robust reparations programs in the future at the federal as well as regional levels (see Darity and Mullen 2023).

The Chicago reparations ordinance and movement from which it derived also offer important lessons for researchers, reparations advocates, and policymakers. Perhaps the most important lesson is that the harms of state violence and criminalization are in fact critical to Black reparations; these harms are a domain where racial redress initiatives can be established and that need to be explored in more depth by reparations advocates, policymakers, and scholars as part of a "legacy of interrelated ongoing harms" (see Bilmes and Brooks 2024; for an example, see McKay 2022). At the same time, the Chicago case also provides a clear example of how structural barriers can shape whose perspectives and priorities are and are not represented in the design of a racial redress policy. Empirical research has been done on related dynamics, revealing that advocacy groups tend to prioritize the interests of the most advantaged (Strolovitch 2007) and that a variety of participatory models are possible that can shift power imbalances (Fung 2006; Jayadev and Moore 2022; Simonson 2016). This knowledge base could be useful to apply and to extend to the case of racial redress and reparations initiatives, given the deep-seated histories of harm and exclusion that these initiatives seek to disrupt.

**Table A.1** Evanston Participant List

Interview Participant	Role or Position
Nicholas Cummings	Evanston City Corporation Council
Tasheik Kerr	Assistant to the city manager
Councilmember Clare Kelly	Councilmember (not on Reparations Committee)
Louis	Recipient, ancestor
Sarah*	Recipient, ancestor
Robin Rue Simmons	Reparations committee member, former Fifth Ward alderperson
Councilmember Bobby Burns	City councilmember, current Fifth Ward alderperson
Morris "Dino" Robinson	Evanston historian, former executive director of Shorefront Legacy
Matthew Feldman	Board of Trustees and Treasurer for Evanston Community Foundation, and Leader of Reparations Group at Beth Emet Synagogue
Rabbi London	Rabbi at Beth Emet Synagogue
Reverend Michael Nabors	Reverend at Second Baptist Church, Evanston NAACP President
Kimberly Richardson	Former interim assistant city manager
Sol Anderson	President of Evanston Community Foundation
Bennett Johnson	Community member
Ella*	Recipient, ancestor
Mary*	Descendant, pending recipient

*Source:* Authors' tabulation.

*Note:* Interview participants included current and former Evanston City Council members ( $n = 3$ ); local faith leaders ( $n = 2$ ); recipients ( $n = 3$ ); pending recipient ( $n = 1$ ); bureaucrats ( $n = 3$ ); critics ( $n = 1$ ); other advocates and supporters ( $n = 3$ ).

\* pseudonym to protect confidentiality.

**Table A.2** Chicago Participant List

Interview Participant	Role or Position
Todd St. Hill	Chicago-based activist
Laurence Ralph	Researcher and anthropologist, advocate, torture justice writer
Alice Kim	Cofounder, Chicago Torture Justice Memorials
Aislinn Pulley	Co-executive director, Chicago Torture Justice Center
Flint Taylor	Attorney
Joey Mogul	Attorney and cofounder of Chicago Torture Justice Memorials
Laurie Palmer	Artist and advocate
John Conroy	Journalist, torture reporter, and advocate
David Yellen	Lawyer, court-appointed to identify reparations beneficiaries
Clarence*	Formerly incarcerated activist who organized alongside police torture survivors
Cecil*	Police torture survivor who accepted compensation
Russell*	Police torture survivor who accepted compensation
Roy*	Police torture survivor who declined compensation
Eli*	Police torture survivor who declined compensation

*Source:* Authors' tabulation.

*Note:* Interview participants included Chicago torture justice activists ( $n = 5$ ); movement lawyers ( $n = 2$ ); We Charge Genocide coalition members ( $n = 2$ ); artists ( $n = 1$ ); scholars ( $n = 2$ ); police torture survivors who accepted and declined compensation ( $n = 4$ ). Some roles are overlapping.

\* a pseudonym to protect confidentiality.

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