

REPARATIONS for Racial Justice Challenge

Reparations are restitution payments for slavery that are paid to the descendants of enslaved people. In theory, American slavery reparations would be paid by those entities that participated in slavery and benefitted most from the institution. Those include federal and state governments, corporations, and academic institutions. These payments would be intended to compensate Black Americans for the lost wages and suffering of their ancestors, American slave laborers.

The history is complicated, but the overall principle is simple: Slavery helped the United States become a formidable economic power. However, it had the opposite effect on enslaved people and their descendants, stripping them of wages, property, civil rights and freedom. Since the 13th Amendment to the Constitution was passed and ratified in 1865, ending legal slavery in the U.S., no sustained attempt has been made to correct this disparity, adding further weight to the strong case that reparations would still be beneficial today.

Central to the idea of American Dream is the assurance that, as Americans, we all have the same opportunity to generate the kind of wealth (assets and investments minus debt) that brings meaning to the words “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” The American Dream promises that with hard work, a person can own a home, start a business, and grow a nest egg for future generations to draw upon. Sadly, this belief has not extended to Black Americans.

Did you know that the average white family has roughly 10 times the amount of wealth as the average Black family? And that white college graduates have over seven times more wealth than Black college graduates. Wealth, not income, is the means to security in America. Wealth is what enables people to buy homes in safer neighborhoods with better amenities and better-funded schools. It is what enables you to send your children to college without saddling them with tens of thousands of dollars of debt. It is what provides you with the money to put a down payment on a house. It is what prevents family emergencies or unexpected job losses from turning into catastrophes that potentially leave you destitute and homeless. Wealth is security and peace of mind. It is not incidental that wealthier people are healthier and live longer. A recent Yale study states that wealth “is the most consequential index of economic well-being.” Important to note is that wealth is not something people create solely for themselves. Instead it is accumulated across generations.

A system of redress for egregious injustices of the past, the concept of reparations is not new to the United States. Native Americans have received land and billions of dollars for various benefits and programs to compensate for their being forcibly driven from their native lands. In the case of Japanese-Americans, \$1.5 billion was paid to those

interned during World War II. Additionally, following World War II, via the Marshall Plan, the United States helped assure that Jews received reparations for the Holocaust.

Opportunities for atonement for slavery have existed in the past with the most well-known attempt occurring right at the end of the Civil War and known as “40 acres and a mule.” Union leaders including General William Sherman concluded that each freed Black family should receive 40 acres of land and a mule left over from the war. But after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, President Andrew Johnson reversed the field order and returned the gifted land to former slave owners. In fact, the government actually paid some slave owners reparations for their lost property...that being the formally enslaved.

More than 200 years later, slavery reparations face an uphill battle. The idea isn't popular with the American public. A 2020 poll from [The Washington Post](#) and ABC News found that 63% of Americans don't think the US should pay reparations to the descendants of slaves. Unsurprisingly, there is a racial divide to this. The Post-ABC News poll found that 82% of Black Americans support reparation, 75% of white Americans do not.

[The Case for Reparations- The Atlantic \(PDF\)](#) Written by Ta-Nehisi Coates in June 2014, this article presents a powerful argument that African Americans are owed compensation for their treatment in the US.

<https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/bigideas/why-we-need-reparations-for-black-americans/> A well-written summary from the Brookings Institute about why we need reparations for Black Americans.

<https://www.npr.org/2020/06/24/882773218/a-call-for-reparations-how-america-might-narrow-the-racial-wealth-gap> A recent NPR's Fresh Air episode with Nikole Hannah Jones, New York Times magazine writer and creator of the award-winning [1619 Project](#).