

Handout: Reparations 2

Reading: What Do Reparations Look Like?

Direct payments

Some have proposed that the U.S. government provide direct payments to descendants of formerly enslaved people. Reparations scholar William A. Darity Jr., an economist at Duke University, suggests that reparations could be provided to anyone who has at least one ancestor who was enslaved in the U.S., and who has identified themselves as African-American on a legal document for at least a decade.

[Darity has proposed](#) that the amount paid could be based on the famous broken promise by Union General William T. Sherman in 1865 that freed Blacks would receive “forty acres and a mule.” Darity calculates that the value of that land would now be about \$80,000 per person, at a total cost of \$2.6 trillion. Another scholar, Thomas Craemer from the University of Connecticut, uses the same 40 acres-and-a-mule starting place but a different calculation to arrive at \$16,200 for each descendant of formerly enslaved people, a total of \$486 billion.

Broader Investments

Other proposals for reparations call for broader social investments. The Movement for Black Lives, a collective of more than 50 organizations representing Black people from across the country, includes reparations as a plank in its [platform of issues](#). They call on the government to remedy the harms caused to Black people by ensuring that they have free access to lifetime education; a guaranteed minimum living income; access and control of food sources, housing and land; and “mandated public school curriculums that critically examine the political, economic, and social impacts of colonialism and slavery.”

Truth and Reconciliation

Before its democratic elections in 1994, whites in South Africa, a small minority, had ruled the country through a racist system of apartheid. In 1995, the government of Nelson Mandela, South Africa’s first post-apartheid president, established the South African “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (TRC) to investigate the human rights violations perpetrated during apartheid. Some 21,000 victims testified in nationally broadcast hearings, and together they created a clear picture of the horror of apartheid for Black South Africans. The South African government later provided reparation payments to those who had testified and announced a set of community reparations programs to support Black communities as a whole

– but did not provide payments to all those who had been harmed by apartheid. Nevertheless, argues [Ereshnee Naidu-Silverman](#) in the Washington Post, “The TRC successfully shattered the silence and denial about the past, questioned the apathy of bystanders and opened spaces for continued dialogue about racism and ongoing inequalities — lessons that may be relevant for the United States today as the question of reparations reemerges on the political stage.”

Commission to Study Reparations: HR 40

Many members of Congress – and many 2020 Democratic presidential nominees – have voiced support for [H.R.40](#), the “Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act.” The stated purpose of this bill, and its companion bill in the Senate, is: To address the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery in the United States and the 13 American colonies between 1619 and 1865 and to establish a commission to study and consider a national apology and proposal for reparations for the institution of slavery, its subsequent de jure and de facto racial and economic discrimination against African-Americans, and the impact of these forces on living African-Americans, to make recommendations to the Congress on appropriate remedies, and for other purposes.

Discussion Questions

1. What are your reactions to the ideas outlined in the reading?
2. Of the approaches described, which do you think would be most effective in addressing the injustice of slavery? Why?
3. Some people argue that the U.S. can’t afford to pay billions or trillions in reparations. How would you respond to such an argument?
4. Do you support passage of HR 40? Why or why not?
5. Why is the topic of reparations for Native Americans generally left out of the discussion on reparations?