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## Why Chicago used the word ‘reparations’

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The Chicago City Council votes on a \$5.5 million fund to compensate victims of police torture, Wednesday, May 6, 2015, in Chicago. The “reparations” package approved Wednesday would pay up to \$100,000 each to dozens of men who claimed they were tortured by the detective crew of notorious former police commander Jon Burge. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)

This week, Chicago officials decided to make amends to people who had been tortured by police during the 1970s and 1980s, establishing a \$5.5 million compensation fund, among other gestures.

But they didn’t use the word “compensation” or “settlement” or “restitution.” They used the word “reparations,” a term with connotations that evoke some of the worst abuses carried out against African Americans in the United States.

That wasn’t an accident. More than 100 African American men were subjected to beatings, electric shocks, mock executions and other abuses by police [under the direction of Jon Burge](#), a white former detective. The actions of Burge and law enforcement officers under his command led to false confessions, and Burge ultimately served a prison sentence for lying about the torture while under oath.

On Wednesday, the Chicago Council, with the blessing of Mayor Rahm Emmanuel (D), approved a reparations ordinance that not only provides the fund for torture victims, but offers psychological counseling and job assistance to victims and their families, and makes this chapter in the city’s history a part of the high school curriculum. A memorial will also be built in honor of the victims.

The term “reparations” reflects the fact that it is a type of compensation meant to make amends for abuse at the hands of the state, and underscores that race and bias were at play, said Mariame Kaba, a juvenile justice activist who was a leading advocate for the measure.

“The racial component of this is an essential part of the torture itself,” she said, explaining that victims were subject to repeated racial epithets.

“The whole box that was used to electrocute them was called the [‘n—‘ box](#),” she said. “It was painted black.”

Advocates debated whether to use the term “reparations” when asking for the package in October 2013, said Joey Mogul, a partner with the People’s Law Office, which led the campaign for the ordinance.

“There have been so many unanswered calls for reparations. And we didn’t want anyone to think we were in any way appropriating the term,” she said. “We decided to proceed in using the term because we decided having it called that would be quite significant and profound, and it complements other calls for reparations.”

The term has been used sparingly in the past, typically describing efforts to repair abuses directed by the state at an entire class of people. It is used to describe the compensation [paid out by Germany to the victims of the Holocaust](#). The United States provided [reparations to Japanese Americans who were confined in internment camps during World War II](#). The state of Florida gave reparations to survivors of [the Rosewood Massacre](#), in which at least six African Americans and two whites were killed and the predominantly black town of Rosewood was razed.

For most Americans, the term has a more specific connotation — the calls for compensation for African Americans because of the abuses they endured under slavery and Jim Crow.

Some wonder if in the case of Chicago, a less grandiose term might have sufficed.

“Compensation is a broad, useful term. It would be just fine as a term here,” said Walter Olsen, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute. “They want to paint in these broader strokes in hopes of advancing a conversation which has generally stalled because the reparations proposals [for African Americans over slavery] were so unpopular.”

William A. Darity, a professor at Duke University who is working on a book calling for broader reparations for African Americans, said he worries that using the term could harm that overall goal.

“You could argue that there could be a positive spillover effect in terms of trying to address other injustices, but on the other hand, you could also be creating a situation where people say, enough’s been done. Chicago’s done it,” he said.