



California could soon give reparations to Black people. Here's what that could look like

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After publishing a sweeping historical account linking Black oppression from the slavery era to systemic racism today, the California Reparations Task Force now faces its most challenging task: figuring out the structure and the cost of a reparations plan for descendants of enslaved people.

In a nearly 500-page interim report, the task force laid out a detailed history of slavery, Jim Crow segregation and continuing discrimination and how that created structural racism that persists, as evidenced in the huge wealth gap between Black and white Americans.

The panel and its report were to be recognized Thursday when the California Legislature memorializes Juneteenth, a federal holiday commemorating the emancipation of enslaved Black Americans. Meanwhile, across the country in Washington, D.C., a coalition of civil and human rights groups will hold a Juneteenth press conference to call on President Joe Biden to issue an executive order to develop reparations proposals.

Financial reparations, along with an apology, would acknowledge an oppressive history and show an effort to atone, necessary elements for reconciliation, said California state Sen. Steven Bradford, a member of the task force.

"It will never make people whole who are the descendants of slaves, but understanding that America and California does owe a debt to African Americans" is significant, he said. "There is a debt still owed to African Americans who built this country."

People line up to speak during an April California Reparations Task Force meeting at Third Baptist Church in San Francisco. The panel released an interim report in early June detailing the historical oppression of Black people in the U.S. and California and will now work to develop a reparations plan for the nation's largest state.

The panel has received praise for its extensive historical report, but faces hurdles going forward, from opposition nationally to reparations to the complexity of logistics: Who is eligible? How will money be distributed? How much will the plan cost?

All eyes on California

California, whose task force was established by the Legislature and governor, is the first state to explore a reparations program but it is not the country's first experience with reparations.

In 1988, under the Civil Liberties Act, the federal government approved a formal apology and a payment of \$20,000 to more than 80,000 Japanese Americans who were incarcerated in internment camps during World War II.

In 2008, the U.S. House of Representatives apologized for slavery and Jim Crow and the next year the Senate also apologized. Neither body included reparations and the Senate action, which received a mixed reaction, featured a disclaimer saying nothing in the resolution authorized or supported any claim against the United States.

In recent years, individual cities, including Evanston, Illinois, and Asheville, North Carolina, have approved reparations plans, with the money focusing on such areas as housing grants and business and career support for Black residents and not direct payments. Last year, Detroit voters approved establishing a reparations commission by a wide margin, Greenbelt, Maryland, created a study commission; and Amherst, Massachusetts, started a reparations fund.

Other countries have established reparations programs, such as Germany's payments to Holocaust survivors.

Still, a first-in-the-nation state task force considering reparations for Black Americans in the nation's largest state is being closely examined by those considering reparations plans in cities, states and in Congress, where a bill to establish a reparations study commission has been introduced since 1989, achieving passage by the House Judiciary Committee for the first time last year.

"I hope and believe (the California report) can serve as a kind of booster shot to the national reparations effort, because (it) is making the case for the need for reparations, starting with laying out the multi-fold harms that have been done," said Cheryl Grills, a psychology professor and task force member.

Reparations supporters say a national program is the ultimate goal but there is some disagreement over state and city efforts. Advocates of local reparations programs say they provide more immediate help and build momentum toward a national program, but others say they divert from establishing a true reparations program for the nation, which is ultimately responsible for slavery.

The federal government is the only government entity that could afford the cost of reparations, said Thomas Craemer, a University of Connecticut political psychologist who focuses on reparations. In a 2020 paper, he and other experts estimated the cost of slavery and discrimination to Black descendants as anywhere from \$12 trillion to nearly \$20 trillion.

Even before getting into the financial complexities, the task force already has done a service by detailing slavery and discrimination and the role of Black Americans over the centuries, topics that often have been ignored or whitewashed, said Craemer, who is among a group of experts advising the California panel. The report offers extensive details about the deep history of racial discrimination in California, which entered the Union in 1850 as a free state.

"The fact that this history is being unearthed is a clear benefit of the reparations discussion," he said.

Reparations: Majority opposes but support grows

A national majority opposes reparations, the word leading to a visceral reaction by some. Black Americans strongly support while white Americans lean heavily against, according to polling organizations. However, percentages vary, with opposition strongest to direct cash payments but less so when reparations take other forms, such as educational aid.

At the same time, support for reparations in the form of cash payments to the descendants of enslaved people has grown over the years. A 2002 Gallup Poll recorded 14% support, with that number jumping to 29% in a 2019 Gallup survey. A December 2021 University of Massachusetts-Amherst poll found 38% in favor. In that UMass poll, 43% of respondents supported providing educational and housing aid, with 52% backing an apology. Support for reparations also is higher among younger adults.

Then-California Assembly Member Shirley Weber authored legislation creating a first-in-the-nation task force to study and propose a reparations system for Black Americans after centuries of discrimination. Weber is now California's secretary of state.

After studying 33 surveys conducted between 1997 and 2021, Craemer projects that a majority will support cash reparations by the 2040s if trends continue at the current rate.

The top reason cited by opponents in the most recent UMass poll is that present-day recipients aren't deserving of cash reparations designed to make amends for slavery and other past harms, according to Tatishe Nteta, a University of Massachusetts-Amherst associate professor of political science who oversees the school's poll.

"For African Americans, (there's) the belief that the current socioeconomic inequalities and inequities are a reflection in some sense of the continued legacy of the institution of slavery," Nteta said. "Whites don't view the issue in this particular fashion. They're looking at it not in a historical lens primarily. The majority of whites are looking at it in terms of African Americans today have done little to deserve those types of" compensation.

Another argument is that slavery is now too far in the past for reparations payments today. In a recent podcast, writer Coleman Hughes said payments should go to "living victims of any government-sponsored atrocity," including people, such as his grandparents, who grew up under Jim Crow segregation.

"It would make perfect sense to pay them reparations for having grown up in an apartheid system that we now look back on in horror. To give someone like me reparations for being six generations removed from slaves, that makes no sense," Hughes said.

Slavery and other past transgressions do connect to present-day inequality, argued Bradford, who also expects the reparations effort will face "pushback" from those fighting against a more detailed teaching of the nation's troubling racial history.

"There's going to be plenty of folks on that side of the line who say, 'We don't need to be talking about this. That was so long ago. Forget about it,' " he said. "(But) I hope we're at a point where we realize that many of the benefits that most Americans are able to enjoy are because of the sacrifice and suffering and abuse (resulting from) slavery."

Some opponents argue that reparations would be too expensive and too difficult to implement, but task force member Grills said such objections are revealing when the program's cost isn't even known.

In September 2020, California Gov. Gavin Newsom signed into law a bill creating a task force to study and create a plan to provide reparations to Black Californians. The task force issued an interim report on June 1, 2022. A final report, which will include details of a proposed reparations program is due in 2023.

Michael Tanner, senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, said there is a "very strong" case for reparations based on "400 years of mistreating African American citizens" and the history detailed in the task force's report is enlightening.

However, he said direct payments could raise taxes and reduce jobs, causing more harm than good, and that determining who is eligible would be difficult. He favors programs designed to improve housing and education opportunities, such as the elimination of exclusionary zoning, an increase in school choice options and criminal justice reform. The task force report makes recommendations in those areas and others.

Benefits of past reparations

The panel has received praise for its report, including an endorsement from the Japanese American Bar Association (JABA), a legal group that includes descendants of Japanese Americans who were incarcerated during World War II.

The reparation process offers benefits, said JABA President Staci Tomita, whose four grandparents were incarcerated during the war.

The effect "was largely a restoration of dignity, humanity and respect," she said. "There was a sense of relief for the community that ... the grave injustice against Japanese Americans had been acknowledged by the government, not just with words but with something to back that," even if the financial piece couldn't make up for what had been lost.

Don Tamaki, who worked to achieve Japanese American reparations in the 1980s and is the one non-Black member of the California panel, said the financial aspect is important but it isn't the only reason for reparations.

"What we found in the Japanese American effort and I think this is true for Black Americans as well, is that unpacking this erased history that even the victims of it and their families had no idea how bad, severe and wrong it was, is healing," he said, while acknowledging the details, size and length of discrimination and oppression differ greatly in the two cases.

What's next for the California task force?

Halfway through its two-year term, the California panel will collect more public comments via listening sessions and surveys, including a statewide random sample outreach, as it gets down to the challenge of deciding on a workable reparations program to recommend to the Legislature and governor.

It already made a difficult choice, voting 5-4 earlier this year to limit reparations benefits to descendants of people who were enslaved or free in the United States during the 1800s. Critics of the narrower approach say it puts the onus on individuals to prove lineage, often a difficult task, and excludes other Black people who experience discrimination today.

Task force members interviewed said the price of a state reparations program remains to be determined, although Bradford estimated it would cost less than 1% of California's budget, which is slightly more than \$300 billion in the plan being considered for the upcoming fiscal year. The state has a nearly \$100 billion surplus, with half available for discretionary use.

Cato's Tanner said he doubted California's legislature would approve an expensive program. Task force member Grills maintains a glass-half-full approach, hoping that a combination of "facts and compassion" will lead to a California reparations program.

"My ancestors had to act as if one day this country would come to its senses and be guided by virtues and morals and values and stop the carnage of Black life," she said. "I have to believe that once again, like my ancestors, people will come to the right decision."

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