



## **The talk of reparations for slavery moves to state capitols (part 3)**

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**Stateline** — Talk of reparations has cropped up again and again since the Emancipation Proclamation. As the Civil War was nearing an end, Union leader Gen. William Sherman wrote an order setting aside land confiscated along the southeastern coast for the formerly enslaved (the promise of “40 acres and a mule”) only to have it reversed by President Andrew Johnson following President Abraham Lincoln’s assassination.

Most Americans oppose monetary reparations. A national poll this summer from Gallup found two-thirds of adult U.S. residents opposed cash payments to Black descendants of slaves, though, among Black respondents, 73% supported the idea.

But even those who support reparations don’t agree on what that should look like and what role, if any, states should play.

State efforts to offer reparations are problematic because they’re a piecemeal solution to a national problem, said William Darity, a Duke University economics professor, who is heading up the national team of academics exploring reparations.

State resolutions should endorse the development of a national program, Darity said.

“The culpable party is the United States government,” said Darity, who is Black. “They created the legal and authority structure to allow for these atrocities.”

Darity and other supporters of reparations argue it’s not just the institution of slavery for which the nation should be atoning, but also the decades-long thread of its fallout. In 2014, journalist and author Ta-Nehesi Coates, in a landmark essay in *The Atlantic*, demonstrated how the legacy of slavery, along with state-sanctioned discrimination in the form of post-slavery Jim Crow laws, real estate redlining and mass incarceration, served to handicap black Americans, creating a stubbornly persistent racial wealth gap.

For that reason, some lawmakers argue that states have a vital role to play.

“We don’t think of California and these other states as being, quote, ‘the big slave states,’” said California Assemblywoman Shir-ley Weber, the Democrat who sponsored one of the California resolutions, which became law last week.

California wasn’t a slave state, but it did allow Southerners migrating to the West during the Gold Rush to bring slaves with them, she said, and allowed slave catching.

But even those who support reparations in theory aren’t convinced that it’s a matter for state legislatures.

“The scope of the conversation is best done at a national level, given that the impacts of slavery and post-slavery discrimination have been felt by people of color from around the country and not just the folks living in Vermont,” said Vermont state Rep. Sarah Copeland-Hanzas, a Democrat and a member of the House Government Operations Committee, where the bill currently resides.

“Vermont is a small state,” said Copeland-Hanzas, who is White and says she supports the idea of reparations, just not at the state level. “We have very limited resources in terms of money in the state budget.”

Over the years, both federal and state governments awarded reparations for past historical atrocities. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act, which offered a formal apology for the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

Beginning in 2014, North Carolina awarded reparations to the survivors of the state-led campaign of forced sterilization, which happened between 1929 and 1976. Many of those forcibly sterilized were poor, Black or disabled. And in 1994, Florida paid \$2.1 million to the survivors of the 1923 Rosewood massacre for “equity, justice, fairness and healing.” But in all of those instances, reparations were awarded to the victims, not their descendants.

In June, California Gov. Gavin Newsom, a Democrat, issued an executive order creating a ‘Truth and Healing Council’ to apologize for the state’s brutal treatment of Native Americans. The state also allocated \$100 million for the California Indian Heritage Center in Sacramento.

Opponents of reparations argue that awarding monetary compensation to Black Americans will only further ignite tensions in a nation already driven by racial differences.

“It’s a long overdue reckoning with our history of racism in this country,” said Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a right-leaning think tank in Washington, D.C. “Race colors so much of our history and policy.”

Still, Tanner said, large-scale, national reparations aren’t the way to right past wrongs. State-based measures could work if they address specific atrocities, such as what Florida did for the survivors of the Rosewood riots.

But with reparations on a larger scale, “I don’t see a way in which it actually works,” he said.

“Trying to determine who gets reparations, who pays for reparations and what they will receive,” said Tanner, who is White. “Will we go back to the one-drop rule?” He was referring to the practice of anyone with a tiny fraction of African heritage being considered Black and subject to Jim Crow laws.