

## What are ... REPARATIONS

“So, what is most important in this bill has less to do with property than with honor. For here we admit a wrong; here we reaffirm our commitment as a nation to equal justice under the law.”

Ronald Reagan, August 10, 1988, on signing the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 providing restitution for the Internment of Japanese-American civilians during World War II.

### What are reparations?

The [Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary](#) defines reparations as: “the act of making amends, offering expiation, or giving satisfaction for a wrong or injury.”

Economic disparities are a central legacy of discrimination occurring over many generations. For example, in 2016, the median net worth of Black households was about \$13,000. For white households, the median net worth was more than \$140,000 ([Amadeo, 2022](#)). For this reason, reparations are often thought of in economic terms and financial payments are a central part of reparations programs. At the same time, [Reparations in Theory and Practice](#) (a document published in 2007 by **The International Transitional Justice Center**) says that “reparations should serve as a vehicle for acknowledging past violations and state responsibility for harms as well as a public commitment to respond to their enduring impact.”

William A. Darity and A. Kirsten Mullen (2020) use the acronym **ARC** to include these various elements into a reparations program:

- **Acknowledgement**, in the form of recognition and admission of wrong by the perpetrators or the beneficiaries of the injustice.
- **Redress**, in the form of:
  - **Restitution**: described as restoring survivors to their condition prior to the injustice or to the condition they might have attained except for the injustice.
  - **Atonement**: described as meeting conditions of forgiveness that are acceptable to the victims, reached through “good faith” negotiations between perpetrators and beneficiaries.
- **Closure**, in the form of mutual reconciliation in which all parties “come to terms over the past, confront the present, and unite to create a new and transformed United States of America.”

Like many reparations programs, Darity and Mullen highlight economic disparities. They describe, in detail, a program of financial payments (the “restitution” element) intended to reduce these disparities for the present and future.

### Are there examples of reparations in the US?

Yes, throughout US history and at all levels of government. Here are 4 brief examples:

[Japanese-American internment World War II](#). In February 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 authorizing the internment of Japanese-Americans in “relocation centers.” Approximately 122,000 people, including 70,000 American citizens were relocated during the next 6 months. Years later, President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. The law acknowledged the “grave injustice” done to Japanese-Americans and Aleut residents who were relocated during World War II, pardoned those wrongly convicted of crimes, and provided financial payments to eligible individuals.

[Indian Claims Commission](#). The Commission began in 1946 with the passage of the Indian Claims Commission Act. It was ended in 1978 and the unresolved cases were transferred to the US Court of Federal Claims. During its tenure, the Commission resolved more than 350 complaints with awards totaling more than \$800M.

[Rosewood, FL](#). On January 1, 1923, a white woman in Sumner, FL claimed that a Black man had entered her house and assaulted her. In response, a growing mob of white citizens from Sumner and the surrounding counties gathered and searched for the presumed assailant. The actions of the mob eventually resulted in the destruction of Rosewood, a predominantly Black community. The story of Rosewood disappeared until the 1980s. Following a story published in the *St. Petersburg Times*, Rosewood survivors demanded restitution from the state of Florida. In 1994, Florida approved a \$2M fund for the survivors of the attacks, created an educational fund for their descendants, and called for an investigation of the incident.

[Discriminative housing in Evanston, IL](#). Beginning in 2019, the city of Evanston, IL has worked to implement a Restorative Housing Program as reparations for past discrimination in the city’s housing and zoning codes. The program provides financial grants that selected recipients can use to pay for housing benefits (including down payments, home repairs, or interest and late penalties).

It’s worth noting that Representative Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX), along with 195 of her House colleagues, has sponsored [House Resolution 40](#) during the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress (2021-2023). The resolution calls for Congress to establish a Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans. H.R. 40 was first proposed in 1989 by Representative John Conyers (D-MI), who reintroduced the proposal during each of the following 30 years, until his death.

### **What are the main arguments for and against reparations?**

Proponents often emphasize a debt that is moral as well as financial; a debt that is owed not only to victims of the injustice but to ourselves, in the form of a “moral identity” influenced by honest “truth telling” about our past and present. Refer to:

- Kelly Brown Douglas. (July 2020). [A Christian call for reparations](#). *Sojourners*.
- Ta-Nehisi Coates (June 2014). [The case for reparations](#). *The Atlantic*.

- Democracy Now (2019). Writer [Ta-Nehisi Coates makes the case for reparations at historic congressional hearing](#) (video, 8:14).

Opponents often emphasize issues of:

- Responsibility: People living today did not cause the injustices of the past and should not be held responsible for them.
- Utility: It would be virtually impossible to determine who is eligible for financial reparations. And financial reparations would be prohibitively expensive.
- Practical impact: Reparations are unlikely to solve current problems affecting Black communities such as health and healthcare, education, housing, and employment. And reparations would likely to create new forms of inequality related to who receives financial reparations and how much.

Refer to:

- Richard Epstein (May 17, 2014). [The case against reparations for slavery](#). Hoover Institution.
- David Frum (2014). [The impossibility of reparations](#). *The Atlantic*.

### Where can I learn more?

- Blakemore, Erin (August 2019). [The thorny history of reparations in the United States](#). History Online.
- Darity, William A., Jr. & Mullen, A. Kirsten (2020). *From here to equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the twenty-first century*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Roos, Dave (2019). [7 key questions in the US slavery reparations debate](#). howstuffworks – culture.
- Gross, Terry (June 24, 2020). [A call for reparations: How America might narrow the racial wealth gap. An interview with Nikole Hannah-Jones](#). NPR Fresh Air (audio, 42:00).