How Social Science Research Can Inform a National Reparations Research Agenda

LesLeigh Ford and Rekha Balu

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The American public is increasing demands for policymakers to take national action to end racial inequality. This demand is part of a larger national and global movement seeking accountability—"truth, redress, and reform"—for historical racial injustices. One policy remedy that assumes this accountability for America's history of enslavement is a national reparations program, which has been proposed in various forms over the years, most recently in Senate Resolution 40, The Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act.

A national reparations program grounded in human rights principles is unprecedented in the United States. The research to inform such an effort is complex: it requires analyzing the connections between historical and contemporary public policies and past and present human suffering; developing and examining eligibility criteria and documentation processes that relate to fundamental questions of ancestry and identity; estimating the potential impact of reparations models for closing the racial wealth gap between white and Black Americans; and translating findings into evidence-based proposals for monetary and nonmonetary forms of reparations and other present-day policy reforms that end ongoing harm. Reparations research also includes developing projected cost estimates to improve key outcomes across multiple policy domains, including health, wealth, and education. Cost estimates for different models and forms of reparations and what these approaches will achieve in the short and long term are critical for policymakers and their constituents to consider when developing a national program.

This brief documents the progress made on reparations-related research for Black people in America, highlights areas that require new or additional inquiry, and identifies ways that researchers from various disciplines can inform the development of a national reparations program. Established and emerging researchers can build upon and strengthen research that connects the economic, social, and psychological injustices and harms that Black Americans have experienced and can evaluate program models or policies designed to help correct or address these long-standing harms. A national effort of this scale also requires large-scale applied policy research and program evaluation experience to inform design, implementation, and engagement and to assess its viability and effects. Researchers and policymakers will need to join with communities to negotiate the numerous logistical and conceptual issues that lie ahead.

Although this brief focuses on reparations for Black Americans because of the particular harms of enslavement and its legacy, we note that other groups have called for reparations as well. Reparations approaches have been proposed for members of Indigenous tribes who endured genocide, forced displacement, and ongoing systemic violence; implemented to some extent for Japanese Americans interned during World War II; and discussed for other groups who have been harmed by federal policies.

Dimensions of a National Reparations Program

A fundamental question for a reparations program is how to measure past and ongoing harm. The call for reparations for Black Americans is based in the need to provide appropriate compensation and restitution for the eras in America's history during which Black Americans contributed to the American economy through their uncompensated labor and production. Although enslaved people and their descendants created valuable products, services, and systems, federal and state policies prevented Black Americans from amassing wealth and equity individually, passing it down intergenerationally, or generating it through businesses, housing, and other industries because of anti-Black policies and practices. Such policies and practices that continue today include disproportionate sentencing in the criminal justice system and mass incarceration, racial disparities and algorithmic bias in home valuations and predatory lending in the mortgage and homeownership systems, discrimination in creditworthiness in personal and business finance, diminished economic returns on education, and racial discrimination in education and employment practices. We provide examples below of different ways of documenting past harm and then quantifying it on economic, psychological, and social dimensions.

One dimension of a national program is the legal framework it uses. A framework grounded in universal human rights principles posits that reparations are obligatory, not optional. Many research groups and advocacy organizations use the United Nations human rights standards to conceptualize reparations for Black Americans. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights outlined such principles in its 2005 resolution on the rights to remedy and reparation for victims of gross violations of human rights (United Nations General Assembly 2005). These five principles correspond to international standards emerging from efforts by several countries (e.g., Brazil and South Africa) to address their histories of enslavement or apartheid:

- **Restitution.** The restoration of substantial nonmonetary losses, including identity, culture, and geographic location
- **Compensation.** Proportional monetary payment for harms done, including financial compensation for physical and mental harms, lost earnings, and lost earnings potential
- **Rehabilitation.** Delivery of appropriate medical and mental health care and legal and social services
- **Satisfaction.** Remedial actions, including public disclosure, acknowledgment of responsibility, formal apology, memorialization, and public education
- **Guarantees of nonrepetition.** Preventive actions, including effective civilian oversight of policing forces, multisector human rights training, and public policy reform

We see US efforts attending mainly to restitution and compensation. It will take time for the conversation to expand to incorporate all five universal principles of human rights.

Another dimension of a national program is the framing and goals. Two primary models exist to address the rights-based framework and various elements of reparations, including financial restitution, community development and economic development, and investments to address psychological and social injuries.

First is the compensatory model, which primarily focuses on economic compensation, restitution, and investments to close the racial wealth gap and improve economic inclusion for Black Americans. The compensatory model's theory of change is that someone could estimate the economic harms inflicted upon Black Americans by examining the roles that private institutions and the government played during enslavement and in the periods of racial oppression and discrimination that followed. The approach seeks reparations for African American descendants of enslaved people, specifically for profits private institutions and the federal government earned.[1]

The compensatory model was called for by Professors Charles Ogletree and Randall Robinson, then-president of the TransAfrica Forum, who convened the Reparations Coordinating Committee in July 2000. The committee, cochaired by Ogletree and Professor Adjoa Aiyetoro, comprised prominent trial lawyers and activists. In 2003, the committee filed a complaint against the City of Tulsa and the State of Oklahoma on behalf of survivors of the Tulsa Race Riot.[2] An example focused on the private sector's role in perpetuating harm to Black Americans is reflected in the work of researcher and human rights advocate Deadria Farmer-Paellmann, who discovered that Aetna Incorporated wrote life insurance policies on enslaved Africans in the 1800s with slaveholders as the beneficiaries.[3] These policies compensated slave owners for financial losses when the individuals they enslaved died. Farmer-Paellman's research exposed at least 60 companies that profited from slavery and led to a public apology from Aetna in March 2000.[4]

In the compensatory model view, scholars would examine the federal government and private institutions, including universities and corporations, that benefited from profits or grants that can be traced to slavery. The research would raise awareness about how private institutions and the government benefited from the systems and then would propose solutions that require the government and the organizations to provide compensation or make restitution. Under this model, there is some disagreement about who should receive monetary reparations. Some call for reparations to be paid to all descendants of enslaved Black people, while others call for reparations to be paid only to "the poorest of the poor" or the most economically disadvantaged.

Second is the transformational model, which prioritizes a serious analysis of the psychological impact of racial subordination, "dignity wrongs," exclusion, and trauma on Black Americans and what steps must be taken to promote healing and well-being among Black individuals, families, and communities. These efforts might take several forms, including funding for culturally appropriate therapy and mental health services, community empowerment exercises, an accurate retelling of Black history in the United States, and other investments and opportunities that promote healing for Black Americans.

The transformational model's theory of change, articulated by legal scholar Emma Jordan and others, is that the harms caused by enslavement, Jim Crow, and different forms of segregation are not limited to economic losses, financial harms, and deeply entrenched racial wealth disparities. Rather, "race-targeted institutional action" was "destructive of the group's social, economic, political, and cultural standing or its power to engage in self-governance" (Miller 2019, 4). Jordan (2004, 25) explains that it is foundational to document, revisit, and confront the atrocities of slavery and Jim Crow. She explains that while white Americans may seek to repress memories of the harm and injustice, Black Americans remember the harm and make connections between the past harms and present social conditions. She writes, "The project involves internal healing. We must address the psychic, economic, social, sub-definitional injuries that we have sustained and currently sustain…. These psychic wounds are issues to which we must attend."

In testimony to the House Judiciary Committee during a hearing on H.R. 40 in 2019, Professor Eric Miller (2019, 4) wrote that "the destruction of social, political, economic, legal, and cultural institutions" and a government's action to harm a particular group based on race, or "inaction" to protect groups from race-based targeted attacks, constitutes harm that differs from economic injustice. These factors contribute to the psychological and "psychic" harms that government must address for a collective group to heal.

Similarly, Margaret Urban Walker (2006, 8) and others call for "restorative justice," which was "introduced to many for the first time when it was invoked as the guiding conception of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission." Walker and others call for "the return of lost goods or by compensation that is proportionate to the victim's losses and suffering." In her work, Walker outlines six central restorative justice values (which were developed for application in the criminal justice context) two decades before South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. One example of restorative justice from Walker's work that can be applied to the US Black reparations context is a national apology, which Walker describes as "the most minimal but unambiguous and foundational gesture of repair" (Walker 2006, 16). Other approaches that can contribute to restorative justice in the context of Black reparations include “gestures of recognition, acknowledgment, atonement, memorializing, social support and guarantees of prevention” (Walker 2006, 5).

Example reparative approaches

- Reparations as economic payments or investments to redress the economic impacts of enslavement and colonialism
- Reparations as economic and social investments for ongoing and persistent racial injustice in the United States
- Reparations as policy changes or actions to end present-day harms and as commitments not to repeat past harms
- Reparations as resources and investments to address present inequalities in housing, health care, education, employment, income, and wealth
- Reparations as investments and resources to support the psychological, emotional, and psychic healing and well-being of Black Americans
- Reparations as investments in public education, awareness raising, and efforts to acknowledge, memorialize, and honor the lives and contributions of Black Americans and the descendants of enslaved people

Different approaches or frameworks suggest different ways to study reparations, design targeted interventions, and develop specific outcome measures.

Types of Research That Could Inform the Design of a National Reparations Program

One type of research that government-sponsored commissions studying reparations pursue (including the State of California’s commission and the federal commission proposed in H.R. 40 and S.R. 40) is to compile and interpret the **evidence** base linking slavery and other forms of structural racism to present-day racial inequities. An illustrative example of such research comes from Derenoncourt and colleagues (2022) that combines economic history with econometric analysis. The authors explain that as a direct consequence of the vastly different starting conditions under slavery, white and Black people have never in US history shared comparable wealth. An example of assessing slavery’s impact on health outcomes comes from Kramer and colleagues (2017), who estimate the association between the concentration of slavery by county and heart-disease mortality in the 1860s, using age-adjusted and race- and county-specific mortality rates for heart disease from 1968 to 2014 for all Southern US counties. The authors find that the legacy of slavery provides a foundation for understanding racial differences in heart disease and that Black mortality persisted or declined slower in counties with higher concentrations of enslaved people. They also find that the association between slavery and heart disease for Black people was stronger in the Deep South than in the Upper South, which they attribute partially to intervening socioeconomic factors.

Time is an important consideration for these impact analyses. According to the framers of H.R. 40 and other proponents of a national reparations program, the starting point for measuring slavery's impact is 1619, the year marking the start of slavery in the 13 original colonies. For example, analyzing the impact of slavery on intergenerational wealth requires understanding what wages Black people would have earned at different points in time during slavery, adjusting for shifts in the US labor market over time, and the present value of lost wages.

Example research questions on the impact of past harm

- What are the past and present harms of slavery and other forms of structural racism from 1619 to the present?
- What quantitative and qualitative research methods are appropriate for measuring these harms? Which methods are appropriate for which outcomes (e.g., material, physiological, and sociocultural)?
- What are the methodological and psychological consequences of measuring harm beginning at different starting years?

A second type of research that commissions pursue involves simulating or projecting whether financial compensation via reparations would improve different outcomes. As an example, Richardson and colleagues (2021) project how COVID-19 transmission rates could have been lower if reparations had been implemented before the pandemic. Focusing on the first wave of infections in Louisiana in spring 2020, the researchers use microsimulation techniques to model the public health effects of a specific form of monetary reparations ($250,000 per individual or $800,000 per household for the descendants of enslaved Africans in Louisiana) if the policy had been implemented 10 years earlier. They find that the wealth redistribution associated with that compensation would have reduced COVID-19 transmission rates 30 to 60 percent across the state, by projecting that reparations would have significantly reduced the proportion of Black people living in overcrowded housing, where it is difficult to socially distance; reduced the number of Black people forced to work in high-risk, frontline jobs; and increased Black people's ability to access masks, hand sanitizer, and other preventive modalities. The authors also find that reduced transmission among the highest-risk group could have led to reduced transmission throughout the entire population.

Example research questions on modeling and measurement of outcomes

- Which methods can best project the potential outcomes of reparations programs and policies? What assumptions are required?
- What present-day policy parameters are important to include versus exclude?

A third research area that commissions examine relates to the design, distribution, and frequency of **compensation amounts**. In addition to direct cash transfers, compensation could take the form of down payments for homes or business grants for start-ups (Ray and Perry 2020), investments in social programs, or trust funds.[5]

Popular media coverage of reparations tends to refer to compensation for the consequences of slavery alone, typically defining these consequences as unpaid wages or factors that contribute to the racial wealth gap. But H.R. 40 calls for a more comprehensive investigation of the ongoing consequences of slavery *and* other forms of structural racism, such as de jure segregation, redlining, and ongoing racial inequities in health care, education, housing, and criminal justice. Therefore, researchers tasked with designing compensation policies could address the fuller scope of the consequences of slavery and other forms of structural racism and their implications for both monetary and nonmonetary compensation. Researchers also may need to adopt methods from multiple disciplines to avoid reducing notions of compensation just to dollars.

Example research questions on compensation structures

- What formulas could be used to calculate and distribute monetary compensation?
- How might debts be adjusted for inflation?
- Could compensation go to individuals, groups of people, or organizations and institutions?
- Could payments vary based on factors such as evidence of impact or need?
- What governance structures are necessary? Should there be a National Reparations Trust Authority managed by a board of trustees, with funds directed to equity-focused programs serving Black Americans? What are the different consequences of setting up trust accounts or endowments versus direct transfers?
- How might other nonmonetary initiatives achieve cultural restoration? What role do national apologies play? What can the US government learn from other governments to offer an apology for slavery and structural racism on behalf of its citizens?

A fourth type of research would address questions related to eligibility for different forms of monetary and nonmonetary compensation. Eligibility criteria can be a gate opener or a barrier and are tied up with questions about the purpose of reparations: is it for the history of enslavement, or is it for ongoing harm via mass incarceration and other policies with disproportionate impact? The criteria proposed thus far vary among researchers, policymakers, and advocates, and they include race, ancestral lineage, proof of harm, income, place of residence, and education status. The text of H.R. 40, which identifies “African Americans” as the group to receive reparations, leaves eligibility details for a reparations commission to determine.[6] Even among proponents of reparations, there is disagreement on eligibility criteria. First is determining which Black populations are eligible: (1) direct descendants of enslaved Africans or (2) direct descendants and other Black populations that have migrated to the US from the Caribbean, Africa, or other regions. Second is deciding whether present-day economic or physical well-being (or harm) should be part of the criteria for receiving financial compensation. Third is evaluating whether all Black Americans should receive reparations irrespective of their current income or wealth or whether monetary reparations should be made only to economically disadvantaged Black Americans.

These persistent debates suggest that research on the potential consequences of different forms of eligibility is necessary.

Example research questions on eligibility

- Who is eligible for reparations payments versus services? Are all Black people eligible or only certain groups of Black people?
- What methods and documentation are localities using to establish eligibility? Should a national program use them?
- What are the governance considerations if a national program relies on localities to determine eligibility and distribute funds (the way the national government does for some social benefit programs)?

Related to compensation and eligibility is the question of whether reparations should be directed to individuals or to groups. The group- or community-level framing relates to patterns of county planning that concentrated poverty and segregated people by neighborhood or between cities and suburbs. In *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Urban Underclass*, Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton (1993, 194) write, "This extreme racial isolation did not just happen; it was manufactured by whites through a series of self-conscious actions and purposeful institutional arrangements that continue today." Robert Sampson, another sociologist, examined how neighborhood effects condition residents' experiences. These neighborhood effects comprise three factors: low economic status, ethnic heterogeneity, and residential instability. Sampson (2012, 22) writes, "This book shows that a 'kinds of people' or compositional explanation of neighborhood disparities and social processes that turns on individual selection fails to answer the questions." In other words, people living in neighborhoods or communities are affected by racial segregation, isolation, disinvestment, and other social processes. Most important, in examining the level at which reparations should be administered—individual, group, or community—neighborhoods and communities matter greatly to residents' well-being.

In sum, research already exists to motivate a national reparations program for Black Americans. Researchers in such disciplines as economics, sociology, psychology, and medicine have examined the connections between past harms and present economic conditions for Black Americans (Marable 2015; Oliver and Shapiro 2013), the persistence of the racial wealth gap (Derenoncourt et al. 2022; Hamilton and Darity 2017), the estimated monetary costs of Black reparations (Craemer 2015, 2018; Darity, Mullen, and Slaughter 2022; Feagin 2004), and the potential economic and social benefits to Black Americans (Coates 2015) and all Americans by increasing the nation's gross domestic product (Noel et al. 2019). Scholars have also documented the precedents of farmers, fishermen, people who have lost their pensions, veterans and descendants of veterans, and others who have received monetary reparations.[7]

Approaches to Studying a National Reparations Program

A national reparations program could systematically evaluate the federal government's involvement in historical and present-day economic, psychological, and cultural harm against Black Americans. Local reparations efforts are important guides and can inform a national approach but differ in scope and potential impact. Local reparations initiatives seek to redress racial injustice in a single domain (e.g., housing) or in a single geography (e.g., a city) or for harms committed by a single entity (e.g., a municipal government), but municipalities and state governments do not have the financial resources to implement comprehensive reparations approaches for Black Americans. A national reparations program could address multiple issues or domains, and the federal government has the financial resources to compensate Black Americans for multiple harms (Darity and Mullen 2022).[8] A national reparations program would create an evidence-based framework for how the federal government can make amends for past and present-day harms for all Black Americans.

Research on reparations already covers several areas, including eligibility criteria, cost estimations, and potential benefits of reparations for Black Americans and all Americans, but it is unclear how much of it has been translated into policy development. Building upon existing research and providing social scientists with the funding, training, and resources necessary to advance new research could catalyze new investments and inform policy actions to close the long-standing racial wealth gap and make amends for the harms caused by more than 400 years of racial injustice in the United States.

This section outlines how different conceptual frameworks and goals raise different research questions and how social scientists from different disciplines can begin to think about answering these questions. It also describes how local reparations efforts and initiatives can inform study of a national reparations program.

Reparations as Investments and Capital to Help Black Individuals and Families Build Wealth and Pay Down Debt

It is important for researchers to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of different monetary reparations designs or configurations. Some scholars have advocated for one-time wealth transfers estimated at $800,000 to Black American households (Darity and Mullen 2022) to reduce the average wealth gap that persists between Black and white Americans today. The wealth inheritance gap between white recipients and Black recipients is approximately $200 billion annually (Stewart et al. 2021). At the same time, Black households are more likely to have student loan debt and hold almost 80 percent higher student debt than their white peers four years after college (approximately $23,000).

Evidence also suggests that one-time wealth transfers may be insufficient to close the racial wealth gap. Instead, Boerma and Karabarbounis (2022, i) note that "investment subsidies toward Black entrepreneurs are more effective than wealth transfers in permanently eliminating the racial wealth gap." Researchers have found that alternative policies can alter the trajectory of the racial wealth gap and help racial wealth outcomes converge in the long term.

Building upon Massey and Denton and Sampson's work on residential segregation and neighborhood effects, and other scholars' work on disinvestment and racial inequities in community and economic development, some social scientists, such as Dania Francis, have suggested that "cash reparations payments should be coupled with the development of an investment infrastructure that could provide opportunities for recipients to invest in black communities and black-owned businesses and to create black-owned financial institutions."[9]

BOX 1

How Local Efforts Can Inform a National Reparations Program

Recent municipal reparations efforts are already adopting an assortment of different commission structures, definitions of reparations, policy goals, and research priorities and methods. The efforts, some of which are being evaluated, could provide some guidance for a national program.

There is a historical precedent for local reparations initiatives, though not for Black Americans. The District of Columbia Compensation Act, signed by President Abraham Lincoln, allocated $1 million from the US Treasury to pay reparations to white enslavers in Washington, DC, during the Civil War.

Recently, local and state governments in places such as Evanston, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; Providence, Rhode Island; Asheville, North Carolina; and the State of California have established reparations commissions to evaluate and address the impact of racist municipal and state policies on wealth building for Black Americans and their descendants. Most of these efforts have focused on a single domain—for example, housing discrimination or persistent racial inequity in homeownership. In Evanston, Illinois, for example, 16 residents were given $25,000 to make a down payment on a home, pay toward an existing mortgage, or make home repairs.

Local and state reparations initiatives are important and help acknowledge past and present harms, document injustices, educate the public, and raise awareness about the historical injustices, trauma, and exclusion that Black Americans have experienced in local communities and cities. Local efforts can also help support targeted investments in housing, education, entrepreneurship, and other areas to support wealth building for long-time residents and families.

One way to approach research and evaluation is to test, replicate, and expand these efforts in other cities to understand what a national reparations program will have to include and address in implementation. A national program is distinct from local efforts or initiatives in that it is designed to examine, estimate, measure, and address the US government's role in and responsibility for the economic, social, psychological, and emotional trauma and harm that Black Americans have experienced. Local remedies cannot adequately address the cumulative effects of enslavement, Jim Crow, segregation, and economic exclusion and ongoing harm to Black Americans and their descendants. Local and municipal governments do not have the financial resources or capital or the resources to coordinate efforts that provide direct payments, investments, or other forms of compensation to all Black Americans and their affected descendants.

What we can learn from evaluations of these local initiatives is how local governments structure and implement community engagement and whether these approaches led to full participation of community members (e.g., the ability to provide feedback, weigh in on compensation design, or follow up to examine the impact of the reparations payment or action) who are most affected by ongoing harm. We also can learn how investments in a single domain (e.g., housing) affect overall economic security or help families build wealth over time, the benefits and limitations of a single-domain approach and whether more comprehensive investments help people achieve better economic outcomes, and whether policymakers conceptualize reparations from a cost-first perspective or a harm-first perspective—in other words, do policymakers prioritize keeping costs low, or do they prioritize maximizing the economic or social benefits for affected community members—and its consequences?[a]

[a] Gina Castro, "Reparations Grants Expiring, Elders Seek Use of Money for Rent," Evanston RoundTable, February 28, 2023, https://evanstonroundtable.com/2023/02/28/reparations-grants-expiring-elders-seek-use-of-money-for-rent/; and Stephanie Kulke, "Northwestern Scholar Establishes Reparations Research Collaborative," Northwestern University, October 11, 2022, https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2022/10/northwestern-scholar-establishes-reparations-research-collaborative/.

Social scientists with expertise in economics, finance, and related disciplines are well positioned to answer the following questions:

- What revenue and financing mechanisms are available to fund reparations? What are the advantages of different instruments, such as bonds or taxes?
- What are the potential participation and financing consequences of making reparations universally available to all self-identified Black Americans? What are the consequences of requiring verification that someone is descended from an enslaved person or persons in the United States? What are the potential economic and social consequences if reparations benefits vary based on lineage?
- What impact could reparations to individuals or households in the form of wealth transfers have on Black wealth over time? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this approach? What are some unintended consequences?
- What impact could reparations-based investments in entrepreneurship have on Black American heads of household in different age cohorts?
- How can we measure the impact of reparations as investments in Black Americans' wealth, health, education, and other key outcomes? What do insights about research designs to estimate impact suggest about program design?
- What impact could reparations payments have on the student loan debt crisis facing Black Americans?

Reparations as Investments to Promote Equitable Community-Level Outcomes

In addition to household-level disadvantage and stripping of wealth and opportunity that can be traced to America's history of enslavement, there are community-level disadvantages. Thus, there is debate about whether reparations should be used to close these community-level gaps as well.

Examples of ongoing targeted deprivation and disadvantage at neighborhood or community levels include the following:

- School finance reforms have contributed to disparities in school spending by socioeconomic status and race (Jackson, Johnson, and Persico 2015).
- Black youth experience more disadvantages than their white peers and are more likely to experience traumatic events such as polyvictimization (i.e., multiple victimizations, such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, exposure to family violence, and bullying) and losing a loved one (Douglas et al. 2021). They are more likely than their white peers to experience neighborhood disadvantage, an important social determinant of health and risk factor for youth neurocognitive performance and brain structure (Hackman et al. 2021).
- In many US cities, Black neighborhoods and communities, including thriving businesses and schools, were razed to make way for highways, interstates, and new developments. In Providence, Rhode Island, for example, 30 acres' worth of homes and businesses owned by Black families were bulldozed, yet families were not compensated for their losses. Now, policymakers in Providence are establishing a reparations-style intervention to atone for what happened to Black and Indigenous communities in Lippitt Hill (Providence 2022). In 2022, California's reparations task force released its preliminary report, which documented, among other racialized harms, the impact of a "so-called blight law from 1945."[10] In San Francisco, California officials used "eminent domain to destroy Black communities," resulting in more than 800 businesses closing and 4,700 households being displaced starting in the 1950s. Later, in Pasadena, California, Interstate 210 was constructed through a Black business district, and officials offered displaced residents "less than the minimum cost to buy a new home in the city—for their old homes."[11]

Social scientists with expertise in education, sociology, urban planning, community and economic development, and related disciplines are well positioned to build on this research and answer the following questions:

- What criteria should determine the appropriate level for reparations investments if the goal is to improve outcomes for families? Is it the neighborhood, community, city, or some other geographic, cultural, or structural organization?
- To what extent could community- and neighborhood-level outcomes related to health and economic well-being be improved through concentrated investments in Black neighborhoods and communities? What criteria should determine community selection?
- If reparations were designed to invest in public schools, which investments would have the greatest returns on student achievement and attainment? Is the best way to direct resources to public schools based on a school's racial composition? Should these investments be based on the share of Black students in a school, historical or current Black student performance on standardized tests, or a measure of school health?

- What impact have monetary and fiscal actions (e.g., banking services such as lending practices, interest rates on business loans, and the decline of African American depository institutions) had on Black-owned business creation, development, growth, and closures? How can reparations be designed to support Black businesses now and in the future?
- What impact could reparations designed as investments in community assets—including mental health facilities, community health centers, community recreation centers, and support for unstably housed residents—have on communities or cities?
- How can reparations investments be designed to support Black youth through childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood? Are investment structures such as baby bonds sufficiently reparative?
- What impact can reparations have on Black youth access to educational, employment, extracurricular, and enrichment opportunities?

Reparations as Rehabilitation of Past and Present Psychological and Socioemotional Harm

Scholars caution against reparations being used in the same systems that have upheld racial hierarchies and extreme capitalism. Without cultural transformation, policy change, or a reimagining of the social structure or social order that has contributed to racial wealth inequity, historians understand that participating in the same system will mean that wealth building will continue to advantage some groups and disadvantage others.

Psychologists examine how trauma is transmitted intergenerationally; how the loss of culture, home, and familial ties have affected individuals and families; and how the impact of the relationship to domination affects Black people. In "Reality Matters: The Shadow of Trauma on African American Subjectivity," psychologist Janice P. Gump (2010, 48) writes, "There is little in slavery that is not traumatic: the loss of culture, home, kin…sense of self, the destruction of families through sale of fathers, mothers, and offspring, physical abuse, or even witnessing the castration of a fellow slave. Yet subjugation was not its most heinous aspect, as it sought nothing less than annihilation of that which is uniquely human—the self." In addition to describing the ways that enslavement was deeply traumatic, scholars have used "historical trauma" to conceptualize the intergenerational trauma that a group who has been systematically oppressed in previous generations might experience (Sotero 2006). In public health specifically, historical trauma theory seeks to explain how "populations historically subjected to long-term, mass trauma—colonialism, slavery, war, genocide—exhibit a higher prevalence of disease even several generations after the original trauma occurred" (Sotero 2006, 93). According to Sotero (2006, 95), "A key feature of historical trauma theory is that the psychological and emotional consequences of the trauma experience are transmitted to subsequent generations through physiological, environmental and social pathways resulting in an intergenerational cycle of trauma response."

Historical and psychosocial research could inform ways to create an evidence-based public education initiative to inform people of all races and ethnicities about the impact of slavery, Jim Crow, and ongoing structural racism and to help the public understand the monetary and nonmonetary provisions of reparations policy. Historians examine and document how racist policies and practices were adopted, upheld, and transformed over time. Public health researchers can make connections between social epidemiology and the links between physical and psychological stress or trauma that can be transmitted intergenerationally and describe the relationships between persistent racial inequity and the structural and social determinants of health for Black individuals and families.

In *Freedom Dreams*, historian Robin Kelley (2002, 133) centers the call for monetary reparations within the larger space of social and cultural transformation and cautions against a one-dimensional view of reparations: "Imagine if reparations were treated as start-up capital for black entrepreneurs who merely want to mirror the dominant society. What would really change?"

Social scientists with expertise in psychology, sociology, and related disciplines are well positioned to build on this research and to answer the following questions:

- How could reparations investments be designed to support youth and student safety, belonging, and overall well-being?
- What impact could reparations have on Black mental health or race-based trauma? How can reparations be used to train or educate Black teachers, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and therapists to provide support and services to Black Americans?

Reparations Research as a Policy Investment

To help increase support for reparations research, including how to better understand Americans' support of and opposition to reparations[12] and to compare the potential impact of different frameworks and models for implementing reparations as a federal policy initiative, it is important to bring together scholars from different disciplines to examine different aspects of reparations policy.

Despite widespread support for reparations among Black American adults (77 percent), according to Cox and Edwards (2022), and slightly increasing support for cash payments as reparations to Black Americans among white Americans between 2014 and 2021 (UMass Amherst 2021), most Americans still hold negative views about reparations (Cox and Edwards 2022). Political discourse that focuses on reparations as compensation or restitution for slavery only, with less attention paid to the ways that Black Americans and their descendants have faced ongoing economic exclusion and social harm throughout American history, is shaping the way policy design proposals and research unfolds.

Even reparations proponents disagree about the appropriate criteria for determining eligibility. Some researchers, policymakers, and journalists advocate for lineage-based reparations (e.g., California Assembly Bill 3121),[13] and other groups, namely the National African American Reparations Committee, believe that lineage-based reparations is an inadequate approach[14] for addressing the impacts of enslavement and centuries-long discrimination, disenfranchisement, and economic harm.

Social scientists with expertise in political science, political psychology, sociology, and other disciplines are well positioned to build on this research and answer the following questions:

- Is it possible to proceed with different reparations models or frameworks to determine eligibility during a trial or pilot period, or is it important to achieve agreement among reparations proponents before implementing any national criteria?
- Does advancing reparations research mean settling on a single approach, or does it suggest multiple approaches should be implemented to address the range and complexity of harm and disadvantage to Black Americans?
- What has contributed to increased support for reparations among white Americans? What lessons can be learned from other political movements or national campaigns to strengthen political support for reparations for Black Americans?
- Which tools for public education or awareness raising have most effectively increased support for controversial or race-based policy solutions?
- Which features of public campaigns and awareness building have most effectively built support for national initiatives? What can the reparations movement learn from successful public education initiatives?

The Private Sector's Role in a National Reparations Program

Much of the focus on the potential of a national reparations program today refers to the federal government's role in creating and maintaining racial inequities through legislative actions. Margaret Urban Walker (2006) notes that federal government policies alone cannot compensate for America's history and legacy of racial violence, discrimination, and ongoing inequitable policies affecting Black Americans. Walker also calls for an admission of wrongdoing by all those involved in perpetuating racialized harm, accountability for those responsible, and inquiry into the ways this harm has affected Black Americans and their descendants.

Some researchers and business leaders have called on US corporations to invest "reparative" capital in Black businesses as a form of restitution. Building on Boerma and Karabarbounis's (2022) findings, which suggest that direct wealth transfers to Black households will not eliminate the racial wealth gap in the long run, researchers can test what types of reparative investments or policies can support Black entrepreneurs and business owners and examine what types of investments can close the individual- and family-level racial wealth gaps without exacerbating other racial inequities.

Social scientists are well positioned to examine the role US corporations and nonprofits (including banks, insurance companies, and universities) played in accumulating wealth by directly or indirectly supporting slavery or slaveholders; benefiting from the lack of, closure, or destruction of Black-owned businesses; and persistent exclusion and racial inequities in business, including hiring, retention, and promotions, especially in the most senior, most influential positions in organizations. To address these deep racial and economic inequities in business, Robert F. Smith, the chief executive officer of Vista Equity Partners, proposes that the nation's largest corporations spend 2 percent of their net income over the next 10 years funding Black-owned banks and businesses in communities comprising people of color (a "2 percent solution"). From Smith's perspective, this reparative capital from the private sector could "strengthen healthcare infrastructure in minority communities, equalize broadband access, fund STEM education at historically Black colleges and digitize minority small businesses." He suggests "the federal government could supercharge the effort by leveraging up the provided capital with the Term Asset-Backed Securities Loan Facility the Federal Reserve established to support consumer and business credit during the pandemic."[15]

Possible Research Tasks

To build on research about corporate underwriting and profiting from slavery, such as Farmer-Paellmann's work and others' research, social scientists could contribute by

- calculating how much revenue or wealth corporations generated from policies or practices that supported slaveholders or the institution of slavery and
- expanding the list of corporations that directly benefited from slavery and working with external engagement partners to discuss corporate plans for reparations projects and guarantees of nonrepetition.

Social scientists can evaluate Smith's proposed solution and others' work by

- estimating the precise dollar amounts that US corporations could contribute to this reparative capital approach and calculate what types of investments (e.g., creating new Black-owned businesses, investing capital in existing businesses, offering debt relief, or subsidizing or eliminating loan repayment) would be most effective in strengthening Black business ownership and closing the racial wealth gap;
- evaluating the potential impact of a national reparations program funded either solely by the federal government, solely by US corporations, or a hybrid government and private-sector approach (e.g., researchers could estimate how the federal government might strengthen or accelerate corporate investments to improve Black business outcomes and the racial wealth gap between white and Black Americans);
- examining the potential drawbacks of a federal government, a corporate, and a hybrid government–private-sector approach, including whether one approach is more likely to result in fewer individual- or community-focused investments (e.g., public education, individual- or family-level wealth, boosts to middle-class or upper-middle-class Black Americans and fewer dollars going to systematically and structurally excluded populations);
- conducting ongoing county-level or regional analyses on the growth of white wealth compared with Black wealth to compare the impact of capital, earnings, and other investments on wealth

in counties or regions where people were enslaved compared with geographies that never enslaved Americans;

- engaging with Black business owners and entrepreneurs in majority-Black cities across the country to learn more about the barriers and challenges they face and how reparative capital can be best used to improve their experiences as business owners (e.g., start-up funds, payroll support, and business debt repayment programs) along with what would help them grow, expand, and prepare their businesses for acquisition or inheritance that benefits Black households (e.g., succession planning, business development planning, legal support such as contract and procurement reviews, board management training, corporate mentorship, and mutually beneficial procurement arrangements);
- testing different policy approaches or solutions and combinations of solutions that can help address labor and capital market exclusions and improve Black business owners' access to networks and social capital or that can improve labor market outcomes by making organizations, banking and lending practices, and business ownership–related policies, including tax policy, more transparent and inclusive for Black business owners and employees; and
- translating knowledge that city, state, and federal governments can use to evaluate and implement monetary programs (e.g., cash payments, cash transfers, baby bonds, and child savings accounts) and nonmonetary programs (e.g., community healing, emotional and psychological supports and services, developing new narratives, such as shifting Black people as economic beneficiaries to economic contributors,[16] and investments in majority-Black public school systems).

Conclusion

Reparations for Black Americans calls for payments to be made to account for past harms, present-day inequities, and investments in the future to close gaps in health, wealth, education, and other key outcomes. Through new communities of practice, peer and mentored learning opportunities, academic conference sections, reparations-focused workshops in academic departments, and other opportunities to develop research on Black reparations, more and better research can be generated to improve public education on reparations, strengthen existing policy in support of Black Americans and their descendants, and inform how researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders understand what research and action are required to develop a national reparations program for Black Americans.

While more scholars are exploring reparations, the government has not been widely funding reparations-focused research. Some philanthropies, such as the MacArthur Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, have made initial forays of support. The calls for the authorization of a commission to study reparations in both the US House of Representatives and a companion bill in the Senate could catalyze new federal, corporate, and private funding for researchers examining different aspects of a national reparations program, including eligibility criteria, compensation design and implementation, the potential impact of monetary and nonmonetary forms of reparations, and policy reform to end policies that exacerbate racial and economic inequities and prevent future race-based harms.

Notes

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[16] See Jordan (2004).

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About the Authors

LesLeigh Ford is an associate director in the Office of Race and Equity Research (ORER) at the Urban Institute, where she leads and contributes to research and policy advising projects that explore sources of and solutions to racial inequities. Ford has led research in ORER on topics such as diversifying the health care workforce, expanding the Black maternal health workforce, and improving access to leadership development programs for racial equity–focused leaders of color. She currently leads an ORER initiative that focuses on advancing wealth equity. Her previous work includes evaluations of philanthropic and government-funded grant programs and research and advising to inform funder decisionmaking and practice. Ford earned a bachelor's degree in political science and English from the University of Michigan, a master's degree in education policy and management from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and a doctoral degree in sociology from Duke University.

Rekha Balu is co–vice president of the Office of Race and Equity Research (ORER), leading work on structural racism in social policy domains, measurement and modeling of structural racism and social inequity, assessment of federal equity initiatives, and strategies for building wealth equitably. She spent more than a decade as a program evaluator and intervention designer for various federal, state, and local education and human services agencies, including while director of the Center for Applied Behavioral Science at MDRC. Balu served as a fellow with the US Office of Evaluation Sciences, on the board of the Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness, and as an adviser on several technical working groups and policy advisory committees for national nonprofits. She earned her bachelor's degree from Northwestern University, a master's degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and a master's degree and doctoral degree from Stanford University.

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500 L'Enfant Plaza SW
Washington, DC 20024
www.urban.org

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