

# CommonWealth

MONTHLY JOURNAL OF POLITICS, IDEAS & CULTURE



RACE/RACISM / OPINION

## Why Boston should pursue reparations

A way to address past wrongs and racial wealth gap



JAMES JENNINGS and



AJAMU BROWN

Jul 24, 2021

ON JUNE 9, 2021 Boston City Councilors Julia Mejia and Kenzie Bok submitted an order calling for “a hearing on reparations and their impact on the civil rights of Black

Bostonians, in order to both form a common, shared history regarding Boston's involvement in the enslavement of Black people as well as to explore the possibility of Boston issuing reparations.”

Several other cities are also mulling the question of reparations. Mayor Jorge Elorza of Providence, Rhode Island, recently signed an executive order to pursue a “truth-telling and reparations process.” In a policy brief for the Brookings Institution, Rashawn Ray and Andre M. Perry review several kinds of reparations that are being discussed in many places, including college tuition, student loan forgiveness, down payment and housing revitalization grants, and business grants. At the national level, the House Judiciary Committee passed a motion this past April to advance a bill that would establish a commission to examine slavery and discrimination in the United States from 1619 to the present and develop appropriate remedies.

Internationally, Human Rights Watch has called for reparations for Black people in the United States. “In the United States, egregious human rights violations against Black people—including slavery, lynchings, Jim Crow laws, and Black Codes—have been followed by policies and practices that continue to harm Black communities today,” the organization said. “The US government has never adequately accounted for these wrongs, which continue to impact Black people via structural racism and pervasive racial inequality. Under international human rights law, governments have an obligation to provide effective remedies for human rights violations, including through reparations.”

Reparations have been proposed as a tool to both acknowledge the immorality and violence of US slavery and rectify the racial inequalities resulting from slavery and post-slavery policies. The essence of the idea is that the descendants of slaves should receive a national apology for slavery as well as compensation for the unpaid slave labor that built massive US wealth for Whites.

While the focus has been on reparation payments to individuals who can prove some familial connection to slavery, discussions should also consider how collective reparations can be linked to Black community empowerment and community development strategies. This is not necessarily an argument against reparations to

individuals, but confining the discussion to payments to individuals overlooks continuing racial wealth gaps born of both slavery and post-slavery policies.

We propose that justification for reparations should include the ripple effects of decades-old racist policies and practices rooted in slavery which resulted in persistent racial inequalities and contributed to today's racial wealth gap. In considering reparations, let's not give a pass to decades of federal policies that confined Black Americans (and other people of color) to urban neighborhoods with significantly lower quality of life compared to White Americans. The targets of racism included individuals but also Black communities.

Black communities did not arise happenstance. It has been widely documented that segregated Black communities emerged based on federal, state, and local policies aimed at maintaining White privilege at the expense of Blacks. At times policies and practices such as redlining were openly racist in identifying and targeting Blacks and their communities. Other policies such as urban renewal targeted Black communities for physical devastation in the name of economic progress.

Policies could also be "color-blind" but implemented in racist ways, such as the G.I. Bill or the earlier Social Security Act, which initially exempted domestic and agricultural workers from coverage thereby denying benefits to thousands of Black workers in the South. The private sector was also culprit through real estate practices and job discrimination throughout the nation. And, of course, frequently white violence was utilized to control Black mobility in many places, violence often condoned or winked at by local and federal governments. This history, too, is part of the justification for reparations. Black communities like Roxbury and others were created and molded by slavery and post-slavery policies and practices. Many examples of this can be found in Boston's history.

Economist William Darity, Jr., one of the leading voices on reparations, emphasizes that "Black reparations must be designed, at minimum, to eliminate the racial wealth gap." This is a guidepost that should be followed in Boston. Reparations can both atone for past impacts and address the ripple effects emerging from slavery and post-slavery

policies.

In an essay titled “Reparations is not about cutting a check. It’s about repairing a community,” Erika Alexander and Nina Turner explain that in addition to direct financial compensation, “reparations can mean fixing a policing system that disproportionately profiles, arrests, and kills Black people; reforming an incarceration system that has disproportionately put Black people behind bars; changing an educational system that still segregates children based on race; addressing discrimination in housing that prevents Black people from qualifying for home loans or exposes them to predatory lenders...”

After the mass demonstrations over racial injustice and police brutality sparked by the killing of George Floyd, Evanston, Illinois, became the first municipality in the US to pass a local “reparations plan” to eligible Black residents and focused attention on “the harm caused to Black/African-American Evanston residents due to discriminatory housing policies and practices and inactions on the City’s part.”

The Evanston City Council established a reparations fund with the first \$10 million in revenue from the city’s tax on the sale of recreational marijuana. The first phase of spending will provide funding for home repairs, mortgage assistance, or down payments toward a new home to residents who show that their ancestors were victims of redlining or other discriminatory housing practices.

Scholars such Charles Ogletree Jr. and Randall Robinson have advocated for reparations as major social and economic investments in Black communities in response to the historical and contemporary human rights violations toward African Americans. In Boston this could mean using reparation funds to significantly increase and sustain homeownership by eliminating down payments and subsidizing very low-interest mortgage and refinancing loans for areas in the Black community with low homeownership rates.

Targeted to increasing Black homeownership, including cooperative housing and community land trusts, reparations could ensure an economic recovery for African

Americans happens in a sustainable way and with positive inter-generation benefits. And by targeting Black communities for reparations, other groups such as Latinx households could benefit. (Latinx households have a lower homeownership rate than Blacks.)

Funding could also be used to expand the growth and capacity of Black businesses located in these same areas through direct subsidies and grants. Reparation funds could also be used for long-term operational grants and endowments for Black civic organizations, or in the form of educational scholarships for young people who live in areas that have suffered the consequences of historical redlining and predatory lending. These kinds of efforts could contribute to reducing the racial wealth gap and grow productively local economies, benefiting other groups and the entire city.

Reparations are not a panacea, but just a step towards redressing immoral wrongs forced upon Black people for hundreds of years and as a way to begin undoing harms imposed on Black communities as a consequence of ripple effects of post-slavery, racist policies and practices. Though not a panacea, it is an important step towards achieving racial and social justice in Boston.

*James Jennings is professor emeritus of urban and environmental policy & planning at Tufts University and Ajamu Brown is a New York City-based community development specialist and graduate of the Department of Urban and Environmental Policy & Planning at Tufts University.*

Tagged in: race and ethnicity/ Reparations

---

© 2021 CommonWealth Magazine. All rights reserved.