Slavery reparations can happen. Some states are adopting their own versions

Years ago, the idea of slavery reparations was debated only in small circles, generally being brushed off as a long-shot proposal. Now, the idea that had once been viewed as an impractical absurdity is gaining traction on the national stage and slowly being implemented in cities and institutions around the United States.

While the mere mention of race-based reparations still triggers defensiveness and controversy on both the left and right, more politicians are opening up to the idea and beginning to have serious open discussions on race and national accountability. Last year, Congress held its first hearing on the topic in more than a decade. U.S. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee introduced a federal reparations bill calling for a national apology for slavery and the formation of a commission to study the issue and develop proposals to assist African Americans. The bill was dismissed by Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who said it was unnecessary and would be too hard to implement. But even with reparations heading to the forefront of the national discussion, debates over its fairness and practicality persist.

Though the country has been discussing the possibility of reparations since the official end of slavery in 1865, the idea wasn’t brought into mainstream debates until relatively recently. In fact, most reparations plans didn’t even begin to take shape or be introduced at state or federal levels until 2019. So, why is the idea of reparations just now becoming part of the mainstream discussion? Writer Ta-Nehisi Coates reintroduced the idea in a 2014 cover story in The Atlantic, “The Case for Reparations.” The column focused on reparations for slavery, Jim Crow, housing discrimination, and other 20th-century forms of anti-Black oppression. Since then, several presidential candidates have also embraced the idea of reparations and introduced their own plans. Former presidential candidate Sen. Cory Booker introduced an idea to study reparations, Marianne...
Williamson called for $100 billion in reparations over 10 years, and presidential candidate Sen. Elizabeth Warren is openly considering the idea.

Though activists around the country have been fighting for reparations as a form of direct compensatory payments to slave descendants, it’s been difficult getting the rest of the country on board. An Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll found that overall, only 29% of Americans believe the government should pay cash reparations to slave descendants. Ambivalence by the public has prompted many lawmakers to take a more creative approach, hoping to funnel resources into programs meant to economically prop up the Black community. Universities are also beginning to hop on the bandwagon. Nearly 60 institutions have joined Universities Studying Slavery, a Virginia-led association, to research their ties to slavery and brainstorm what action should be taken to make amends.

“I think that many of these initiatives, particularly the steps that are being taken by seminaries or colleges and universities, seem to be trying to bring their own complicity into direct contact with individuals who they can identify as direct victims,” said William Darity, a professor of public policy at Duke University and author of From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century. “I think that’s a mistaken approach. This whole issue of the impact of white supremacy on Black Americans is not a matter of individual or personal guilt. It’s a matter of national responsibility. And so these piecemeal efforts, I think, push us back to this notion that what’s the stake here is whether or not somebody’s personal guilt is absolved. And I think that’s absolutely the incorrect way to approach this.”

Though reparations legislation hasn’t yet been approved at the federal level, several cities are moving forward with small efforts to atone for slavery. Some movements are started by grassroots organizations like the Movement for Black Lives, while others have been introduced at the city level or by local politicians. But while each city and institution has used different methods for gathering funds, they all have one goal that unites them: repairing the continued harm caused by the enslavement of African Americans. Below is a list of cities, states, and institutions that have passed—or have aggressive movements to pass—one form of slavery reparations.
Chicago, Illinois

Residents in and around Chicago have been pushing for various forms of reparations for years. The movement is gaining traction in the city, which has a Black population of roughly 30%. Even residents outside of the Black community are taking steps to support the movement. In December, the Union for Reform Judaism, a major Jewish denomination, voted to pass a resolution supporting reparations for slavery. URJ is the first major Jewish institution to come out publicly to support it. The resolution encourages the creation of a federal commission to study and review the harmful effects slavery still has on the Black community today.

The fight for reparations in the city didn’t stop there. Last September, then-mayoral candidate Willie Wilson called for the City Council’s Committee on Human Relations to create a commission that would work toward creating specific and direct strategies to ensure equality for African Americans in Chicago. Wilson, who is the former chair of the City Council’s Black Caucus, had initially proposed a more aggressive approach that would have taken resources from financially strapped city agencies and funneled them into a reparations programs for residents. The initial plan would have called for free transportation, free water filters, free education, free job training, and more. But after criticism from city leaders who said the proposal was too expensive and ambitious, Wilson was forced to amend his proposal and turn it into a less aggressive plan. The newly proposed commission would include 16 members and remain in place for 20 years.

Georgetown University—Washington, D.C.

In 2019, Georgetown University students voted to raise tuition by $27.20 per student per semester in order to create a reparations fund for nearly 4,000 descendants of enslaved Jesuits. The school, which was formerly known as Georgetown College in the 1800s, heavily relied on Jesuit-owned plantations. In order to keep the institution afloat, the school’s presidents, both of whom were Jesuit priests, sold their 272 slaves. For years, descendants of those slaves have been fighting for a $1 billion foundation that would assist them with needs like housing, health care, and finance. They argued that the school wouldn’t exist today without the labor from their ancestors.

Months after students voted in favor of the increase, administrators announced their approval of the reparations, but said they wouldn’t
tack on the additional tuition. Instead, administrators said they will seek to raise $400,000 each year through donors and alumni. That amount is higher than what would have originally been raised with a student fee. Though descendants have been hoping for individual financial support, the proceeds from Georgetown will go toward supporting projects related to education and health care in Louisiana and Maryland—the states where a majority of the descendants currently reside.

**Virginia Theological Seminary—Alexandria, Virginia**

In September, Virginia Theological Seminary became the first theological institution in the nation to establish a reparations program. The school, which began admitting Black students in 1951, has several buildings that were erected by slaves. The funds will be used to address the issues brought up by slave descendants working at the institution, elevate the voices of Black alumni, and create other programs that aim to promote inclusion.

*In a statement*, Rev. Ian S. Markham, the school’s dean and president, wrote, “Part of our past is explicit racism. We were a Seminary where enslaved persons worked. We participated fully in segregation. So we apologize; so we commit to a different future; but we need to do more. This fund is our seed—the first step.”

**Princeton Theological Seminary—Princeton, New Jersey**

Months after the Virginia Theological Seminary approved their reparations plan, Princeton Theological Seminary followed suit and dramatically surpassed the dollar amount. The institution committed $28 million to finance a reparations plan. The Seminary’s trustees unanimously approved the reparations plan after a 2016 historical audit found the institution had a deep history of participating in slavery. Initially, the Association of Black Seminarians gathered more than 600 signatures in support of disbursing 15% of the school’s endowment for reparations for Black students—roughly $15.3 million per year. They also called for the creation of a Black Church Studies program. In return, they got more than they asked for.

The institution plans to use the funds to create 30 new scholarships for slave descendants, change the names of some buildings to honor African American history, and hire a full-time director to run the Center for Black Church Studies.
Vermont

In March 2019, lawmakers in Vermont introduced House Bill 478, introduced by Rep. Brian Cina. The bill proposed an 11-member task force, considers issuing a state apology for slavery, and calls for evaluation of the shift from slavery to systematic oppression and racism. Though the bill didn't meet the deadline in order to reach a vote last year, lawmakers believe the discussion will eventually take place in the state again—especially considering the broader reparations discussion happening at the national level.

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania has a deeply entangled history with slavery dating back to the mid-1600s, which is why some state legislators believe it's time the state began taking responsibility. Democratic Rep. Christopher Rabb says the current system makes it difficult for African Americans to be treated as equal members of society. In August, he authored state-level legislation that would evaluate the state’s role in the slave trade and offer up some form of reparations to atone for it.

“Our commonwealth can adopt resolutions recognizing historical dates such as Juneteeth and eras in Black history, but it’s not enough to account for its complicity in the physical, mental and financial trauma of an entire race of people at the hands of actual bondage and policies laced with racism,” Rabb said in a memo. “Pennsylvania must do more to wholly and sincerely uphold the declaration in its constitution that ensures certain and indefeasible rights for all residents.”

Rabb’s plan calls for the state to issue a formal apology for its involvement in slavery and its treatment of African Americans since its abolition, acknowledge the current state of racial and financial inequality, provide financial support to African American residents in the state, and establish a commission to address the impact slavery still has on residents today. African American residents seeking financial assistance would be required to opt-in and prove they have identified as African American through past government records.

New York

The New York State Assembly has proposed a community commission to study slavery reparations. The bill appropriates...
Slavery reparations can happen. Some states are adopting their own versions $250,000 for the commission, calls for the formal acknowledgement of the inhumanity of slavery, and takes responsibility for the state's entanglement in slavery practices. Last year, the Diocese of New York also established a task force to examine ways it can create a meaningful form of reparations. At its annual convention, it committed $1.1 million to fund the efforts of the task force and passed four resolutions condemning slavery.

Despite progress in the fight for reparations over recent years, its level of impact and effectiveness still need to be evaluated. "When I look at these various kinds of initiatives that are taking place on a scattered basis around the country, my question always is: to what extent will it actually bring about a reduction in the wealth gap for all Black Americans?" said Darity. "I'm very skeptical that any of these individual initiatives will get us very close to that objective."

Still, many activists applaud many of the cities, states, and institutions for taking a step in the right direction. But until more reparations plans are formally introduced at the state level and existing plans are proven to economically prop up the Black community at high levels, lawmakers and citizens will continue to challenge the concept.

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