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A Lawsuit Demanding Reparations, 100 Years After the Tulsa Race Massacre | The Takeaway | WNYC Studios

13-16 minutes

[music]

Arun Venugopal: In 1921 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, an incident of racist violence took place and its impact can still be felt today. That summer, mobs of white rioters stormed through the Greenwood neighborhood in Tulsa. It was known as Black Wall Street and it was predominantly made up of affluent Black people. As the rioters made their way through the neighborhood, they attacked, and killed members of the community. They burned buildings to the ground. Historians believe that as many as 300 people may have died.

Survivors of the massacre were never compensated for their losses, but this week, nearly a century after the fact, people in Tulsa filed a lawsuit demanding reparations for victims and descendants of the Tulsa race massacre. The lawsuit is led by one of the last remaining survivors of the massacre, 105-year-old, Lessie Benningfield Randle. Earlier this summer, the massacre received renewed attention when President Trump planned a campaign rally in Tulsa on Juneteenth, a day celebrating the liberation of enslaved people in the US.

[people rioting]

The backlash was swift for members of the community who saw the planned rally as a slap in the face to the memory of those who had been killed. The president moved his rally to the following day. I'm Arun Venugopal, in for Tanzina Vega. Today, on The Takeaway, we break down the fight for reparations in response to the Tulsa Massacre and how this summer's protests might influence the reparations debate moving forward. I'm joined now by William Darity, better known as Sandy. He's a professor of Public Policy at Duke University and co-author of *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*. Hi, Sandy.

William "Sandy" Darity: Thanks for having.

Arun: I'm also with Tiffany Crutcher, founder of the Terence Crutcher Foundation and descendant of a survivor from the 1921 Tulsa Massacre. Tiffany, thank you for joining us.

Tiffany Crutcher: Thank you so much. I'm glad to be here.

Arun: Tell us, Tiffany, what is the case for reparations in Tulsa?

Tiffany: Well, the case for reparations is simply this, almost 100 years ago, my great grandmother's beloved community Greenwood, also known as Black Wall Street, was burned to the ground by mobs of white rioters. I'm sure you have follow-up questions, but it was never atoned for. We never received compensation, retribution, and they robbed us of our generational wealth and here we are almost 100 years later fighting for those survivors. Fighting for the descendants, fighting for the last known living survivor, one of the last know, Lessie Benningfield Randle, in hopes that she would see some form of justice or abatement before God calls her home.

Arun: Well, your great grandmother was a survivor, as you said. Can you tell us her story?

Tiffany: Yes. Rebecca Brown Crutcher is my father's grandmother and shamefully, unfortunately, I didn't know she endured what she called at the time, the Tulsa race riot. I left and went to college and people would ask, "Where are you from?" And I would tell them, "Tulsa, Oklahoma." People from Chicago, LA, New York would immediately say Black Wall Street or the Tulsa race riot. After the third time, of course, I played it off because I didn't want people to think I didn't know about my own city.

I went home and I said, "Dad, what are these people talking about? What are my classmates talking about?" That's when he told me about what happened to, we call her mama Brown, Becca Brown Crutcher. She had to flee in fear of her life. She had a business on Black Wall Street, a barbecue pit, her

and her family, and she jumped on the back of a truck to get out of harm's way. As she was fleeing, I think she went off to some Creek land, to Muscogee, Oklahoma, which is about 40 miles East of Tulsa. She saw the burning and the killing of unarmed people.

I often stop and ponder, "What was she feeling? What was she thinking? What was going through her mind?" A few years later, she whispered to my dad, when Martin Luther King was killed and the riots broke out all over and she whispered to my dad, "That happened here." My dad had just got back from Vietnam. My dad said, "Why are you whispering?" She said, "Well, they told us if we ever said anything about it, it would happen again." That's the fear they instilled in our ancestors, in those survivors, in our beloved community. They never talked about it, which is why we never knew about it. You'll hear that story throughout our community. They didn't teach us in middle school or high school in Oklahoma History, we learned about the *Trail of Tears*, but they never taught us what happened to our thriving Black community. I played on that sacred land and didn't know I was playing on sacred ground.

Arun: Sandy, it's interesting we hear this term Tulsa race riot, which really, I guess annoys me. I saw in *The New York Times*, that phrase, it seems to me, to really remove the agency of the rioters if you will, the mob of white people who I guess, acted, and destroyed these businesses, killed hundreds of people. It was more like what we would refer to as a pogrom, or a massacre, or even ethnic cleansing. Am I right?

Sandy: I prefer to use the term massacre to describe what happened in Tulsa. Unfortunately, what happened in Tulsa was one of the more extreme instances of a series of these white terror campaigns that took place across the United States from the end of the civil war up until the 1940s, which resulted in intimidation of Black Americans particularly intended to prevent them from participating in the political process. It resulted in the destruction or theft of their personal property, which is something that happened on an extensive basis in Tulsa, and it was as accompanied by a series of outright murders of Black people.

The year 1919 in particular, two years before the Tulsa Massacre featured upwards of 30 to 35 of these pogroms that took place, both North and South in the United States and led to that particular year, summer being referred to as the red summer of 1919. It's interesting that the only instance that I believe some form of restitution has actually been made, is in the case of Rosewood, Florida, a massacre that took place in 1923, where the state of Florida has made some limited restitution to the victims and their descendants, but that's interesting in another way because the state of Florida was actually one of the bloodiest States in the United States with respect to these massacres and no restitution has been provided for the white mob violence that took place in other parts of the state.

Arun: Sandy, Tiffany referred to the loss of generational wealth, which is an idea that's really, I think, gained momentum in recent years. How do we understand, how do we quantify this loss when we're talking about reparations?

Sandy: The beginning of the intergenerational loss actually, starts with the deprivation of the formerly enslaved. The deprivation of the 40-acres in restitution that they were promised, at the same time, the federal government was providing 160-acre tracks of land to white families that "settled" in the Western part of the United States. These tracks of land, these allocations went to upwards of 1 million white families that resulted in a situation where today, 45 million living white descendants, are beneficiaries of those land grants, at the same time, the formerly enslaved were given nothing, therefore did not have an opportunity to transfer wealth across generations. The net effect is that we observe a situation today, where Black Americans constitute about 13% of the nation's population, but only possess about two and a half percent of the nation's wealth. This translates into an average differential across households of \$800,000 in a gap in net worth between Black and white households.

Arun: That's an average, you're saying?

Sandy: That's an average.

Arun: That's profound, isn't it? Tiffany, what is the racial wealth gap like in Tulsa today?

Tiffany: Oh, wow. Well, whites make 50% more than Blacks here in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It's just evident and we make up about 15% of the population here, but if you come to Tulsa, Arun, you'll see that those same railroad tracks that divided the white side of town from the north side of town from Black Wall Street, those same railroad tracks still symbolize the same thing today. We live in a tale of two cities. A child's life expectancy in North Tulsa, which is the Black side of town is 10 years less than a child's life expectancy in another zip code.

We live in a food desert. There's blight everywhere. Gentrification Black Wall Street 35 to 40 where blocks were burned to the ground. Now our beloved community has been reduced to one block and the only Black-owned entity is the historic Vernon AMA church in that heart of Greenwood and that's why we're filing lawsuit.

We're not just filing for a monetary suit. We want abatement. We want for descendants of survivors to have scholarships for the next 99 years. We feel that we shouldn't have to pay utilities for the neck or taxes for the next 99 years. We want to sue the Tulsa Development Authority and do a forensic assessment of all of the land because when I think about Dr. A. C. Jackson, a prominent Black doctor who was coming out of his home during the massacre, as Professor Sandy said, who took over his land? Why don't we own it? Why doesn't one of his descendants who is a part of this lawsuit, why don't they own that land? It's so much bigger than the monetary portion of this.

I think about the descendant of JB Strafford. JB Strafford owned the nicest hotel as a Black person in the nation. Just think about what he could have become? He could have been the Hyatt Hotel. He could have been Marriott. He could have been Hilton. They robbed us of our potential, of our dreams. They stripped us of our spirit. It's so much bigger than the monetary and it was the white supremacy policies and tactics and white people controlling the narrative. That's why they called it a riot because there's a statute of limitation on right. That was by design and it should have been called a massacre from the beginning because there's no statute of limitation on murder.

Arun: Sandy, we've seen the reparations debate really enter the mainstream, I think, just in the last year or so. Are you surprised?

Sandy: Yes, I am surprised. I'm somewhat taken aback and excited about the prospect of there being a serious national conversation about reparations for Black American descendants of US slavery.

Arun: Is it easier to talk about this in regard to particular episodes of violence in Tulsa than it is talked about in the abstract at a national level, when we're talking about tens of millions of people and centuries of history bearing down on the present?

Sandy: I think specific episodes of atrocities really made tangible to the American people, the horrors that have been inflicted on Black Americans. I don't think it's that difficult to really appreciate the national atrocities collectively without itemizing each individual and the event. What we've argued in from here to equality is that there are three phases of injustice that have to be taken into consideration.

The first phase is obviously the period of slavery. The second though, is what people do not pay as much attention to when thinking about reparations, which is nearly 100 years of legal segregation accompanied by these waves of mob violence that we've been talking about, best exemplified by what happened in Tulsa. Then the third phase is the post-Civil Rights Act period, where we have continued to have mass incarceration, ongoing police executions of unarmed Blacks, the persistence of discrimination in employment, housing and credit markets, as well as the subject that I emphasize this enormous racial wealth disparity between Blacks and whites in the United States.

Arun: Given that context, what would reparations actually look like in practice?

Sandy: From the perspective that we advanced and from here to equality, we argue that the primary objective of a reparations project would be to provide Black Americans with the material basis for full citizenship in the United States, full citizenship that's been continuously denied. That would require eliminating in its entirety, the Black-white wealth differential.

We estimate that this would require a national expense of \$10 to \$12 trillion to provide adequate restitution to erase the wealth differential, that these funds should be distributed to individual eligible recipients and the eligible community should be individuals who have an ancestral connection to chattel slavery in the United States and who are living their lives in the context of being Black in a society that has a long history of races.

Arun: William Darity is a Professor of Public Policy at Duke University and the author of *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*. Tiffany Crutcher is the founder of the Terence Crutcher Foundation, and a descendant of the 1921 Tulsa massacre. Thank you both for joining us today.

Tiffany: Thank you.

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