

Opinion: Evanston, Ill., approved ‘reparations.’ Except it isn’t reparations.

Opinion by **A. Kirsten Mullen** and **William A. Darity Jr.**

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Once a political hot potato, the label “reparations” suddenly is being applied to a variety of acts of individual and community atonement. But we continue to await the serious effort needed to make full restitution for Black American descendants of slavery in the United States.

On March 22, the Evanston, Ill., City Council approved what it terms a “[Local Reparations Restorative Housing Program](#)” meant to compensate for discriminatory policies and practices in the city’s past. Under the program — touted in the media as historic — qualifying Black residents can receive up to \$25,000 grants for repairs or down payments on homes.

That’s a good step for the city to take, but let’s be clear: This is a housing voucher program, not reparations — and calling it that does more harm than good.

The cause of justice demands proprietariness about the meaning of “reparations,” and we object to these kinds of piecemeal and misleading labels. True reparations only can come from a full-scale program of acknowledgment, redress and closure for a grievous injustice.

Where African Americans are concerned, the grievous injustices that make the case for reparations include slavery, legal segregation (Jim Crow), and ongoing discrimination and stigmatization. What would get us there? We believe that four features are essential to a true Black reparations plan.

First, the plan must carefully delineate eligibility. Two conditions are critical: Eligible recipients must have at least one ancestor who was enslaved in the United States. These are the individuals who bear the burden of the cumulative intergenerational effects of all three periods of racial atrocities. Recipients also must show that they self-identified as Black, Negro or an equivalent designation on an official document for at least 12 years before a reparations program was set in motion.

Second, any true reparations plan must erase the nation’s staggering Black-White wealth gap. Black American descendants of slavery are about 12 percent of the nation’s population but possess less than 2 percent of the nation’s wealth. The wealth gap is simply the best cumulative economic indicator of the damages caused by American racism across generations.

Third, payments must be made directly. As in previous cases, such as German payments to Holocaust victims and U.S.

payments to citizens and noncitizens of Japanese descent for their internment during World War II, recipients must have discretion over funds received as restitution.

Finally, and critically, the bill will have to be paid by the federal government.

Bringing the Black share of American wealth in line with the Black share of the population would ultimately require an expenditure of \$14 trillion. Collectively, the sum of the annual budgets of *all* state and local governments is \$3.1 trillion. Individually, local municipalities such as Evanston generally do not have the resources to pay Black reparations in a meaningful way. But a sufficiently committed federal government — one that found more than \$5 trillion in a single year to answer the covid-19 emergency — can achieve it.

And that's the core problem with Evanston's initiative, its merits as a housing program notwithstanding. Such local efforts can divert the nation's momentum from a long-overdue comprehensive federal program. And the misapplied label "reparations" can only lead to confusion over the scope of what is required for genuine restitution.

A few details of the Evanston initiative help to illuminate this point. The program will be funded by the city's cannabis excise tax, creating funding uncertainty. By constraining the use of the funds for homeownership, the Evanston plan ignores deficits in other asset categories that beset Black Americans, such as nonresidential real estate, business equity, retirement accounts, savings, and stocks and bonds. Indeed, restricting spending to housing disempowers recipients, denying them choice over how best to use the funds.

Further, the Evanston plan neglects the huge gap in equity in Black- and White-owned homes, a legacy of segregation and redlining. Nationally, the median appraised value of a home in a White neighborhood is \$155,000 greater than the median price of a neighborhood with a majority of Black residents.

And that's why Evanston's history of housing discrimination unequivocally reinforces the need for a national program of restitution. Redlining was applied nationwide; it calls for a national remedy. Moreover, many Black victims of Evanston's practices are not current residents of the city — how will they get restitution without a national program?

Virtually all states and municipalities in the United States share a role in the nation's sustained record of injustice, but none of them can meet the bill on their own to erase the gulf in Black and White wealth. The federal government established the legal and authority framework that enabled atrocities to occur at the state and local levels.

States and localities certainly need to dismantle and address systemic racism, but reparations are and always will be a national imperative. Let's get on with it.

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