

Bringing an Inquisitive Mind to Inequality

A lifelong curiosity guides Sandy Darity's influential work on the



Caption

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William (Sandy) Darity Jr. says his wife Kirsten Mullen, who is a writer and folklorist, compares researching complicated societal issues to placing pieces of bread on water. The bread represents ideas one's research unearths. Bobbing on the surface, the pieces wait for something to swoop down and snatch them.

For 45 years, Darity, the Samuel Dubois Cook Professor of Public Policy, African and African American Studies, Economics and Business, has studied racial inequality. As the nation's wealth gap grows, Darity's work, and potential solutions he's researched – such as reparations for Black Americans – have found hungry audiences.

"I didn't expect the bread on the water to necessarily be picked up while I was still living," said Darity, 69. "I don't anticipate reparations to happen in my lifetime, but I hope I've put resources out there that people can use to move the cause forward."

A Duke faculty member since 1999 and director of the [Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity](#) since 2015, Darity carries a lifelong curiosity about inequality and race. Growing up, he saw how access to the nicest beaches of Alexandria, Egypt – where he lived while his father worked at the World Health Organization – was determined by financial status. Accompanying friends to both

desirable, and less-desirable beaches, Darity wondered why families with similar intelligence and ambition had differences in wealth.



Graphic by Zaire McPhearson, an instructor in the Duke Department of Art, Art History & Visual Studies.

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Darity, who spent most of his adolescence in Massachusetts, recalls visiting his grandmother in Wilson, North Carolina, where railroad tracks divided Black and white neighborhoods, and his parents refused to patronize a movie theater that confined Black customers to the balcony.

Seeing economics as a way to understand inequality, Darity found most theories failed to fully explain why some populations build wealth, while others don't. Darity saw how systemic obstacles to building and sharing wealth left generations of Black Americans behind.

With current Federal Reserve data showing the average difference between white and Black household wealth at approximately \$841,000, Darity proposes closing the gap by the federal government making reparations payments to Black Americans whose ancestors were enslaved in the United States.

Recently, reparations were discussed in primary debates prior to the 2020 presidential election. In 2020, Darity and Mullen published their award-winning book, [*From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*](#), now in a second paperback edition.

At Duke, the Cook Center, which Darity founded, continues the conversation through research, collaboration and, since 2021, an Inequality Studies minor administered jointly with the Department of History. In 2022, Cook Center Director of Strategic Initiatives and Collaborations **Gwendolyn Wright**, Associate in Research **Lucas Hubbard** and Darity co-edited the book, [*The Pandemic Divide: How COVID Increased Inequality in the United States*](#), featuring research from Cook Center scholars.

"With the timeliness of the issue and the skills that our scholars have, we felt we it was important for the center's voice to be expressed in the context of the pandemic," Darity said.

Through his work, and that of his colleagues, Darity keeps unearthing bold ideas, leaving more bread on the water.

This story is part of Working@Duke's "Working Toward Racial Justice" series. Please send your ideas for this series through [our story idea form](#) or write working@duke.edu.