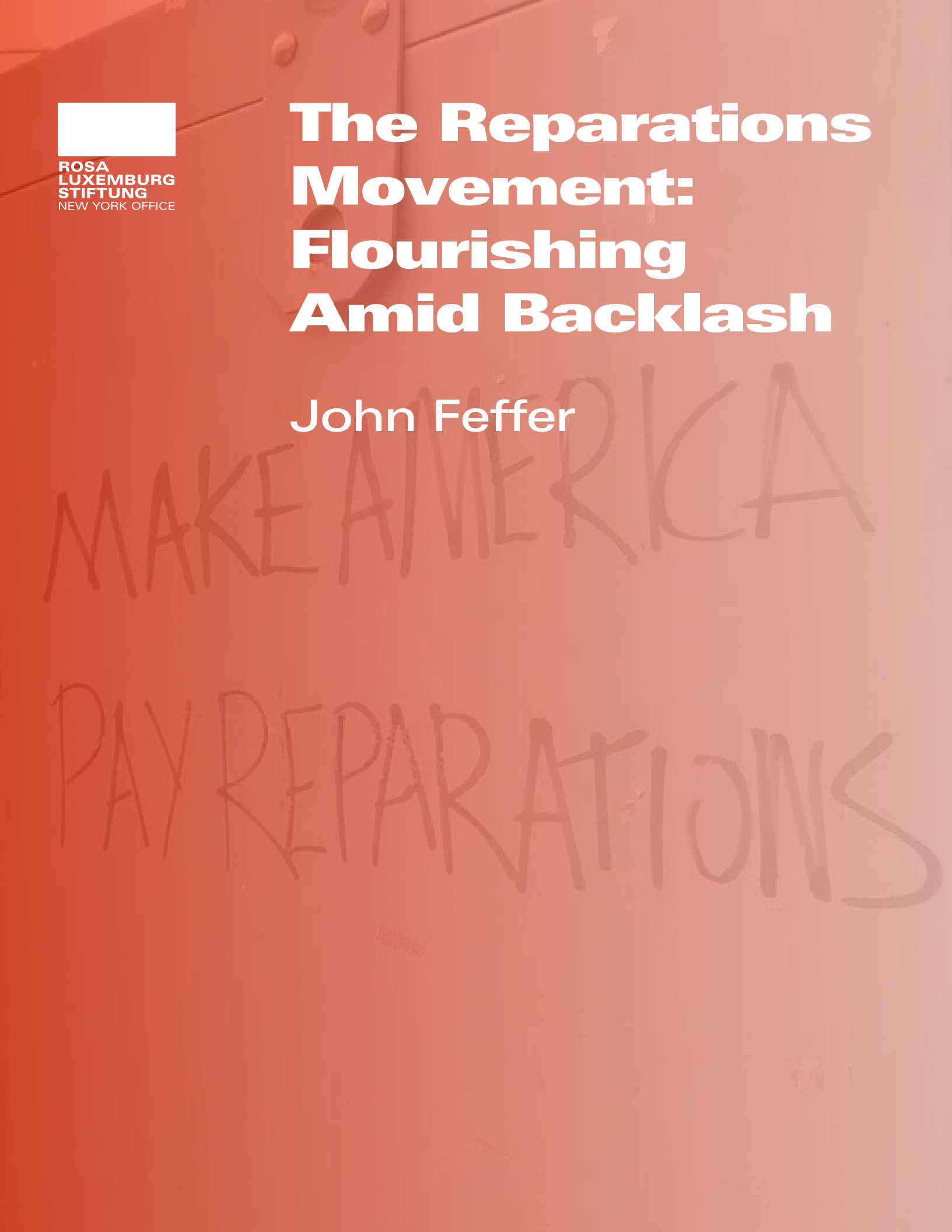

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The Reparations Movement: Flourishing Amid Backlash

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By John Feffer

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The Reparations Movement: Flourishing Amid Backlash

Under the Trump administration, the United States has taken a giant step backward on civil rights. The administration's efforts have gone far beyond the cancellation of the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts of the Biden years. By rolling back the enforcement of civil rights law—in employment, education, housing, and environment—the administration has effectively said that the victimized segment of the population that requires redress is the White majority, not the African-American minority.

But there is one significant exception to this MAGA-inflected national trajectory: the reparations movement at the state and local level.

The epicenter of this movement is Evanston, Illinois.

In 2025, Evanston reached a milestone. The city, located just north of Chicago, has provided $6 million in reparations payments to the descendants of residents who experienced discrimination in housing from 1919 to 1969. It is the first in a

series of efforts undertaken by Evanston's city government, religious institutions, and citizen groups to repair the injustices suffered by African American residents. Reparations advocates there are already preparing the ground to expand into the realms of education and economic development.

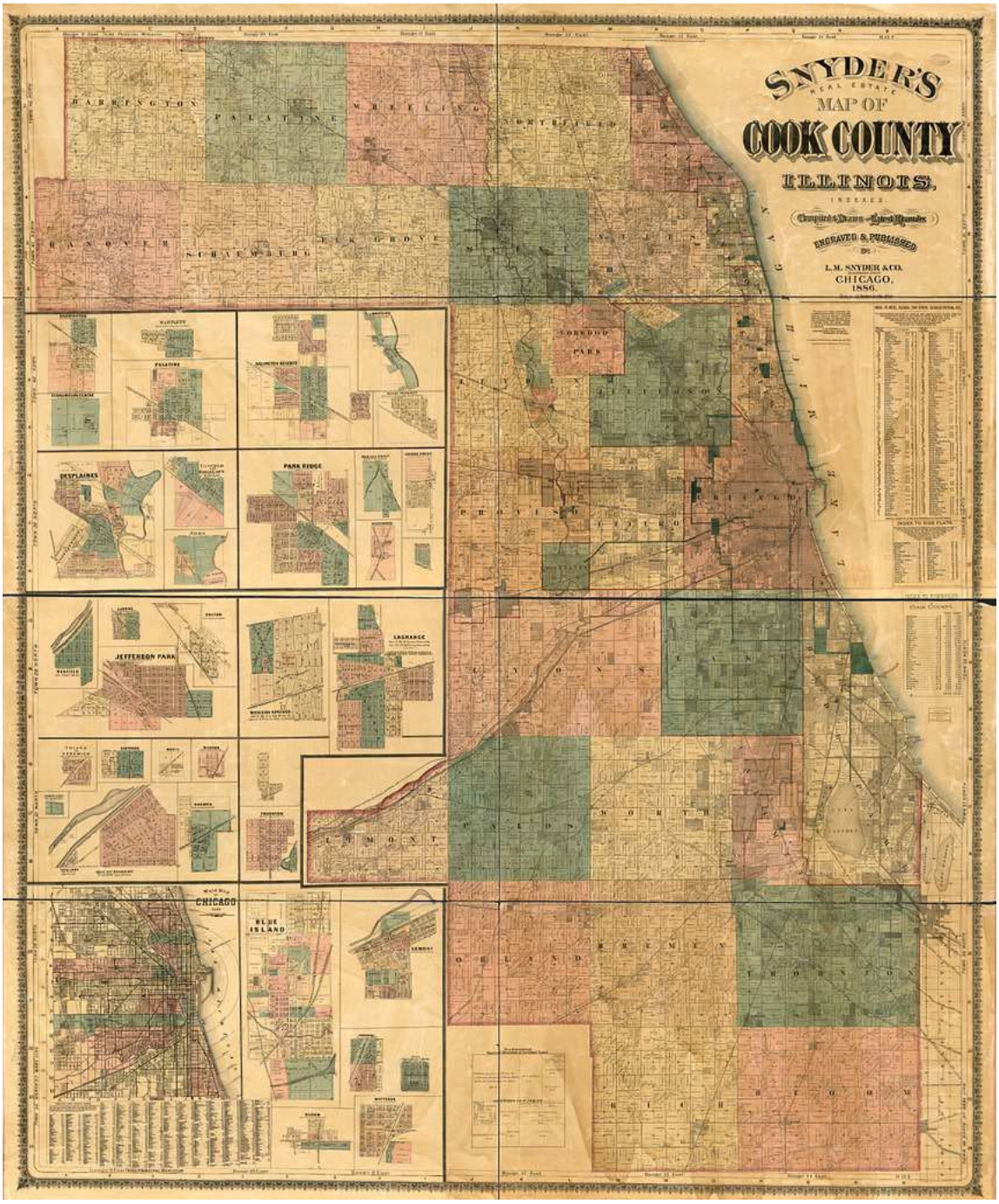
Evanston's achievement goes far beyond the symbolic. "I can't explain to you the feeling of meeting a neighbor that has received a direct reparations benefit with an apology and acknowledgement from their mayor and their city council and been celebrated and appreciated at a ceremonial dinner," explains Robin Rue Simmons, who has been a key leader in the effort in Evanston and nationally. "I don't know if I'll ever find words to describe how satisfying it is, especially when it is our elders."

The municipal reparations movement, which gathered momentum in Evanston in the late 2010s, has now spread to 30 cities, along with more than a half-dozen states and four counties. Fueled in part by the movement for Black lives in the wake of George Floyd's murder in 2020, reparations campaigns take different forms around the country. City councils are looking into land grants and redress for historical atrocities. Studies have been commissioned, apologies have been issued, and communities have been mobilized. In some cases, money has finally begun to be allocated.

Meanwhile, public opinion has inched toward greater support. In 2019, only 5 percent of Republicans and 49 percent of Democrats favored reparations for African-Americans. By 2025, those numbers had increased to 16 percent of Republicans and 65 percent of Democrats.

The movement for reparations, however, has encountered numerous challenges. Some promising initiatives have gotten bogged down in bureaucracy or political infighting. Funding has been difficult to pin down in many cases. Reparations advocates have struggled with identifying the class of beneficiaries—descendants of slaves, for instance, or those who have experienced racial discrimination in housing or education. And there have been internal discussions over whether benefits should be disbursed on an individual, a group, or an institutional basis.

"I underestimated how challenging the question of reparations is," observes Freke Ette, who serves on the city council in Amherst, Massachusetts, which has funded a study on the subject but not yet implemented its recommendations. "It's challenging on just a logistical level, which is what we're grappling with. It's challenging on a historical level – in this town, a progressive New England town with its unique history. It's challenging just based on the fact that when people agree on the need for reparations it can mean completely different things in terms of concept and implementation."



1856 Real Estate Map of Cook County, Illinois

Another obstacle is the environment in the country as a whole. During the Biden administration, the reparations movement seemed to be part of a nationwide narrative of repair. That administration's Justice40 initiative, for instance, mandated that 40 percent of all funding related to climate, clean energy, and affordable housing go to underserved communities. Though not identified as reparations, Justice40 was one of the largest federal efforts, across virtually all agencies, to right historic wrongs. On March 1, within little than a month of taking office, Donald Trump canceled Justice40.

In this new era of rollback, conservative challenges to civil rights initiatives—and reparations in particular—have proliferated. Conservative legal groups have challenged reparations legislation in court, arguing that race-based initiatives violate the Constitution's equal protection clause. The backlash strategy in some states includes an effort to suppress reparations discussion altogether, such as the 2023 law passed in North Carolina limiting discussions of racism in state government.

Federal resistance to reparations did not begin with Trump. A federal reparations bill, HR40, has languished in Congress for four decades. Reintroduced into the House in February by Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) and Sen. Cory Booker (D-NJ)— and attracting 130 co-sponsors in the last congressional session—the legislation would only commission a study, yet it still has little hope of passing in a Republican-controlled Congress.

Despite these various obstacles, however, the reparations movement seems stronger now than ever before, energized by the advances made at the state and local levels. Indeed, the scale of the backlash and the varieties of resistance speak to how enmeshed reparations have become in American politics. Such are the challenges of success.

Determining Beneficiaries

Reparations are not unusual in the United States, as Cornell William Brooks and Linda Bilmes of the Harvard's Kennedy School point out. Coal miners, veterans, workers injured on the job, those who lose their homes to natural disaster: all of these individuals—and classes of individuals—receive compensation for harms done to them. But African-Americans, the largest group that has experienced collective harm throughout U.S. history, has perversely been left out of the reparations process.

There are four cases of discrete reparations in the United States that can serve as precedents for the current African-American reparations campaign. Japanese who experienced internment during World War II received compensation in two tranches--$38 million in payments after the Claims Act of 1948 and approximately $1.6 billion in individual payouts of $20,000 each after the 1988 Civil Liberties Act. The federal government has also paid out approximately $10 million to the Black men whose syphilis went untreated in the infamous Tuskegee experiment between 1932 and 1972. At the state level, Florida has provided several million dollars in compensation to the survivors of the Rosewood race riot of 1923, and North Carolina has paid out around $50,000 each to 177 living victims of the state's forced sterilization program (the only one of 33 states to pay reparations thus far).

The original federal reparations bill, HR40, defines the intended beneficiaries as the descendants of the millions of enslaved people in the United States from 1789 to 1865 and freed slaves and their descendants who suffered discrimination from the end of the Civil War to the present. But the reparations movement has long debated this question of beneficiaries. Should African-Americans who came to the United States after 1865 also be included among the potential beneficiaries on the basis of the discrimination they suffered in areas of housing, education, and employment?

Rosewood Florida Historical marker commemorating 1923 Race Riot

In other words, should reparations be defined by lineage or by harms suffered? This question is complicated by court cases challenging affirmative action as unconstitutional for not upholding the "equal protection" clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. So, some reparations efforts have removed references to Blacks or African-Americans as potential beneficiaries to avoid challenges by conservative groups.

"We are looking at repairing harms and unlawful acts to a community, and the community happened to be Black," notes Robin Rue Simmons. "So, it is difficult to get through a conversation around our reparations without mentioning our Blackness. That's the reality. But the lawsuits have made us be careful. So, we follow the legal framework that has allowed us a path forward, one that is narrowly tailored and focused on harms."

California, by a vote of 5-4 in the state's Reparations Task Force, decided to limit outlays to descendants of slaves, linking financial compensation to lineage rather than more broadly to harm. Though lineage is not race-based—since some non-Blacks were enslaved as well—conservative groups in California are nevertheless mounting a challenge based on the state's Proposition 209, which bans race-based affirmative action in the areas of education, contracting, and employment.

"They're going to argue that a lineage classification is basically a proxy for race," Kamilah Moore, a member of California's Reparations Task Force, points out. "Initially we thought that talking about 'injury' helps us to evade strict scrutiny, which is the highest level of judicial review that courts use when they scrutinize governmental policies that on their face look like they're giving a preferential treatment or benefit to one group. But we know that the injury comes from racism. So, we're having a race conversation."

Another potential fault line has been around the question of providing reparations to individuals, to groups of individuals, or to communities through institutional changes. But here, too, the distinction is not so clear-cut. For instance, the funds disbursed in Evanston go to individuals to address historic housing discrimination, but these payments have ripple effects.

"If we have a direct housing benefit of $25,000 that's intended for home improvement," Robin Rue Simmons explains, "we are convening our harmed community contractors to do that work. So, now we have a minimum of $25,000 in equity, which is wealth, and we have $25,000 in business revenue, which is wealth, and those harmed community contractors are more likely to employ others in the community that is harmed. Those dollars live beyond the first transaction, and the wealth continues to build in the community."

Another way to look at the issue is through the lens of the "curb cut effect," where an action taken to benefit a specific group of people trying to negotiate sidewalks with their wheelchairs turns out to be a boon for a wide range of other people—bicyclists, people pushing baby carriages, tourists wheeling luggage. "I've always been of the belief, if you do things right, everybody benefits from them," former Evanston City Council member Kristian Harris comments. "If you make the rules fair and equitable, everybody benefits from that, not just one group."

Formulating Demands

The reparations debate is taking place in the United States at several levels: national, state, county, and municipal. The ultimate goal is to engage the national government in the reparations effort—to apologize, to pay some form of compensation, but

above all to have a conversation about the wrongs that were done.

"Perhaps no number can fully capture the multi-century plunder of black people in America," wrote Ta-Nehisi Coates in a 2014 Atlantic article that catapulted the issue into mainstream discourse. "Perhaps the number is so large that it can't be imagined, let alone calculated and dispensed. But I believe that wrestling publicly with these questions matters as much as—if not more than—the specific answers that might be produced."

Author of The Case for Reparations Ta-Nehisi Coates

Part of the strategy at the state level is to build momentum in Washington. "We really need to be able to change things at the state level if we're going to move things at the federal level," observes Torre White-Garrison, the executive director of the Reparations Shareholder Authority of Asheville (North Carolina). "At RSAA, we've been working through how we can pay attention to different bills, having communications with different state representatives, and talking about where reparations are showing up in the conversations that we're having."

Perhaps the most vigorous action at the state level is in California, where the California Reparations Task Force released its final report with 100 policy proposals on June 29, 2023, the very day that the Supreme Court banned affirmative action in higher education. Eventually, 14 reparations-related bills were introduced in the state legislature, and seven were signed into law by the governor. These include no-cost or low-cost initiatives like banning discrimination by hairstyle and disaggregating some state-collected data by race. The most symbolic measure in the package was an apology, which Gov. Gavin Newsom issued in September 2024. The state set aside $12 million from general funds

for the implementation of this legislation, none of which has been spent (an additional $500,000 has been allocated for a plaque to be installed in the State Capitol Building that details the apology).

Direct cash payments were at the top of California's Task Force report. Vice President of the state's Congressional Black Caucus Stephen Bradford estimates that a minimum of $350,000 for eligible recipients would be needed to close the average wealth gap between Blacks and Whites. But the report came out at a time of a surplus in the state's budget. Today, a deficit— plus a radical reduction in federal outlays to states—has created a different financial environment.

Internal politics has also complicated the path to implementation at the state level in California. Governor Newsom vetoed legislation that would have provided compensation for property unfairly seized or unfairly compensated as a result of discrimination. His argument was sound—the legislature had failed to pass a bill that would have created the agency to adjudicate these claims. had been unfairly taken—but the veto set the stage for an unfortunate inter-party fight within the legislature that split the Black Caucus and muddied the political waters. Currently pending are two pieces of legislation that would enlist the California State University system to determine genealogical claims of lineage to descendants of slaves and a bureau to assess claims of discrimination around eminent domain seizures.

A number of other states—New York, Illinois, Washington—have commissions studying reparations. The Maryland legislature passed a bill authorizing such a commission, only for the governor to veto it. His promises to replace a study with concrete action, though it reflects a certain frustration with the age-old political strategy of studying an issue to death, nevertheless disappointed reparations advocates.

Municipal reparations, meanwhile, are not uniform. Most have been initiated at the city council level. But it was the mayor's office that pushed reparations in Providence (Rhode Island). In both Greenbelt (Maryland) and Detroit (Michigan), citizens overwhelmingly backed reparations initiatives through ballot initiatives.

The actions taken at a municipal level have generated new institutional arrangements. In Evanston, for instance, the Reparation Stakeholders Authority (RSAE) was activated when contributions, largely from 17 religious congregations in the city, hit $1 million. The RSAE is developing cultural programming that complements the work of the city's formal reparations initiatives. For instance, it has held a playback theater, "where people come and share their stories about life in Evanston," reports Vanessa Johnson-McCoy of the RSAE. "The actors play it back, and then we have a dialogue." The playback theater has dramatized experiences of discrimination and also performed the city council's historic vote on reparations.

Evanston Illinois Lakeshore historical district

A similar Reparations Stakeholder Authority operates in Asheville, North Carolina, where it too doesn't depend on funding from the government. It has focused on land issues and successfully negotiated the transfer of a historic property worth $4 million that it plans to remodel to create a space that "centers Black voices, where we can feel safe, where we can come in and feel represented and really a part of the community," says Torre White-Garrison "Being able to do something like that showed us that reparations can still happen even as the government has tried to figure out ways to stall it."

Perhaps the most prominent national organization working on reparations is FirstRepair, headed by Robin Rue Simmons of Evanston, which tracks the progress of the movement across the country. Every year, FirstRepair hosts a gathering of reparations advocates from around the country to share experiences and build momentum at the municipal, state, and federal level for reparations.

Realizing Reparations

There is no single template for putting reparations into practice. "If you talk to 50 different Black people, each of us would prescribe a different path to full repair," observes Robin Rue Simmons.

Yet, certain strategies have emerged. In Amherst, Freke Ette reports, "two areas that our report touched on were education and housing. The reason is that these have the best possibility of changing lives and creating wealth for generations to come."

Evanston decided to focus first on housing. "It's very easy to show harm with very well-documented zoning laws and eminent domain, racial covenants, and all types of exclusionary practices," Simmons notes. "Also, most of our communities are still racially segregated—and that's in addition to all of the racial gaps in wealth."

In Evanston, more than 250 eligible individuals received $25,000 each, which is earmarked for house purchase, mortgage paydown, or home repairs. When it turned out that some of those eligible neither owned homes nor, because of the elevated cost of houses in the area, could realistically buy a home, a more flexible category of cash payout was added.

Aftermath of the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot

Palm Springs, a desert community in California, approved a deal to disburse $6 million in payments to residents and their descendants who were evicted from their downtown homes in the 1960s (though the process has been delayed by challenges associated with the verification of claims). It has also set aside $20 million to make home ownership more affordable to first-time buyers and to establish a community land trust for low-income residents. Washington state has also instituted a program to facilitate home purchases for first-time homebuyers.

Housing is also at the center of the $105 million reparations package readied by the local government in Tulsa, Oklahoma, location of the racially-motivated destruction of the African-American neighborhood of Greenwood. According to The New York Times:

> The Greenwood Trust resources will be divided into three general areas: a $24 million housing fund for homeownership and housing assistance; a $60 million cultural preservation fund for building improvements and cleaning up blight; and $21 million for

land acquisition and development, small business grants and scholarships. As part of the program, the city intends to release 45,000 pages of historical documents related to the 1921 massacre, including Greenwood property records.

The Tulsa initiative comes out of a community-led process anchored in the Beyond Apology Commission, which made recommendations to the mayor. The housing proposals were modeled on Evanston's program and come on the heels of the city's decision to invest $75 million in taxpayer funds in affordable housing—"because we, as a city and certainly as a nation, are facing a housing crisis," explains Vanessa Hall-Harper, who serves on the Tulsa City Council as well as the Beyond Apology Commission.

Education has been another focus for reparations advocates. At Georgetown University, students voted in 2019 to increase their tuition fees by $27.20 per semester to create a fund for the descendants of the 272 slaves that the Jesuits who founded the institution sold to bring the institution back from the brink of bankruptcy. The number of descendants of those slaves is in the range of 13,000 people. The university went on to launch a $400,000 annual fund, with input from descendants, to support community-based initiatives. A reconciliation trust, funded with $10 million from the university, is dedicated to "providing scholarships for descendants from early childhood through postsecondary education, helping elderly and infirm descendants, and funding efforts at racial healing, reconciliation and truth across the country."

The Jesuits were involved in other educational institutions that profited from slavery. St. Louis University was prepared to issue a formal apology to descendants of the 70 people enslaved by the university in March 2025, but the descendants pulled out because they felt it was merely a photo op, not backed up by anything substantial.

Other educational reparations efforts have focused on scholarships, afterschool programs, and initiatives for young people focused on African-American cultural pride. San Francisco has put out bids for a satellite campus of a historically Black college like Tuskegee or Howard. In Evanston, an elementary school in a historically Black community, which closed in 1967, is now being revived. In 2012, voters rejected a $45 million effort to fund a new school. "But after the reparations discussion," Robin Rue Simmons says, "there was more political will for that, and now the school is soon to open."

But education also applies to disseminating information about harms done. In Tulsa, a major part of the reparations movement is educating about the 1921 massacre. "By design, and very intentionally, it was to be forgotten, starting here at the local level," Vanessa Hall-Harper recalls. "I matriculated through Tulsa public schools, and I was in my thirties before I learned of the massacre." Thanks

to the efforts of Tulsa residents, the city, the country, and even the world now knows what happened to the Greenwood community in 1921, which was part of a wave of violence that peaked between 1917 and 1923. To achieve reparations at a national level, she adds, will require such educational efforts to create "a new generation of people willing to do the right thing."

Economic development is a third category of reparations considered by a number of cities, including Evanston, Asheville, and Tulsa. In Asheville, the Community Reparations Commission has identified four projects. An economic hub would provide "commercial space for entrepreneurs, job training services, financial education, and a financial institution that is designed for and led by Black residents of Asheville and Buncombe County",—and be modeled on a Black business hub being constructed in Portland, Oregon. A second priority is to support ongoing neighborhood improvement plans. A third priority is a guaranteed income pilot project, similar to ones conducted in Durham and Los Angeles, though the state legislature is trying to take this option off the table.

The first Black Mayor of Tulsa, Monroe Nichols

Paying for Reparations

It's impossible to put a cash value on all the harms done to African-Americans from slavery to the present day. Prof. William Darity of Duke University has tried to do just that, estimating that a federal reparations effort would cost $10-12 trillion. Former Rep. Cori Bush introduced congressional legislation in 2023 calling for $14 trillion in payments to African Americans.

The reparations committee in California, meanwhile, put the state's bill at over $800 billion. "It was a huge thing in the media where they spun it as $1.1 million per person," notes Kamilah Moore. "But, we're actually not saying that the state should give this money away to Black folks. Rather, this is what the state owes through its own actions, its discrimination against this particular group of people across five categories."

The San Francisco reparations commission also made headlines when it included on its list of proposals a $5 million payout to every eligible adult (not only did the mayor's office not take up any of the commission's recommendations, it defunded the reparations office).

In some cases, reparations programs receive direct payments from governments. But at times of budget cuts, government sources can be unreliable. So, the reparations movement has diversified its funding, often identifying categorically appropriate sources. Georgetown raised some of its educational reparations from students themselves, through their school fees. Evanston's housing reparations, for instance, are funded in part by a transfer tax on home sales that exceed $1.5 million.

In addition to the $1 million raised in this way, Evanston's reparations program takes a cut from the sale of cannabis. This, too, is a form of reparative justice. "Cannabis was an obvious area where we were over-policed," Robin Rue Simmons explains. "Seventy-one percent of our marijuana arrests—at the time that I pulled the report from the chief of police—were in the Black community, and we were only 15 percent of the population."

The Tulsa initiative will be focusing on charitable contributions, not government funding, because, as Vanessa Hall-Harper notes, "Oklahoma is a racist state, and Tulsa is a racist city. Black lives don't matter. Even when there's clear injustice carried out by government, they still don't care." The Tulsa mayor has therefore created a $105 million charitable trust to raise private money through June 2026.

Individual donations play a part in other cities as well. Torre White-Garrison sees an important role for "shape shifters," allies from outside the African-American community who want to make a difference. She tells the story of an older African-American woman at risk of losing her house to foreclosure.

"A young individual said, 'Hey, I have a lot of wealth, I really love what you're doing, and I want to invest. But the thing that I'm most passionate about is housing.' And that's how we were able to save that woman from getting foreclosed on," she recounts. "There are people in the system that really want things to change, and you have to be able to communicate with them."

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