



REMEMBER, RECKON, REPAIR: WHY FEDERAL REPARATIONS CANNOT WAIT

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2026 marks the **250th** anniversary of the United States, and this February brings the **100th** anniversary of Black History Month. The Association for the Study of African American Life and History, which founded Black History Month, **calls us** to celebrate Black history across the African Diaspora and how that history is tied to Black people's current material conditions. Those conditions have become more precarious as the Trump Administration enacts its agenda to "**Make America Great Again.**"

Considering these two anniversaries, we should ask ourselves what great means, and great for whom? In the **first year** of Trump's second term, his administration has enacted explicitly discriminatory policies **reversing** the progress made by civil rights leaders and activists in the struggle for equity. These actions disproportionately harm Black communities and destroy measures implemented to right historical wrongs.

Acknowledging the past through reparations is a necessary step toward building a future where the white supremacy undergirding the MAGA movement is stamped out. While there has

been abundant research on racial inequality, more direct examination on how best to address harm and evaluate the impact of existing reparative policies and programs is needed. We can learn from those that have gotten off the ground so that all communities, especially ones still dealing with the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, can thrive.

Reparations is Not a New Concept

Determining the damage from racist government policies or procedures is not a simple process. It requires extensive research, cost estimates, and data collection on feasible actions that feel reparative to decedents. While there have been congressional efforts to address reparations through legislative measures such as **H.R.40** and **H.Res.414**, these proposals have not resulted in the enactment of a comprehensive federal reparations program for Black Americans. However, local and state governments have stepped in to address harms that they've enacted themselves or enforced on behalf of the federal government. These initiatives demonstrate both the moral urgency and political feasibility of reparations when federal action has been limited.

State and Local Initiatives

Reparations is not a new concept, and local and state action has long shaped the moment. In 1783, **Belinda Sutton** became the first person to successfully petition a state legislature for reparations from her former enslaver. Today local action continues across the country through initiatives such as **Reparation Generation** in Detroit or **Santa Monica's** reparations program for displaced Black families.

In 2019, the Illinois legislature legalized recreational marijuana use. Evanston's city council then voted to create a reparations program that would send the first \$10 million of tax dollars generated from cannabis purchases and real estate taxes to Black residents. The first program created from this funding allocated \$25,000 per household for Black families that had lived in the city between 1919 and 1969. So far, more than **\$6.8 million** has been distributed to Black Evanstonians. Many of those who are eligible to receive money remain on a waiting list as the city collects tax revenue.

Last year, California lawmakers set aside **\$12 million** in the state budget for reparations. While specific plans for distributing the funds have not yet been finalized, the money is expected to go toward supporting Black residents. Also in 2025, the Washington, D.C. City Council allocated **\$1.5 million** to establish a reparations task force charged with addressing the harms of slavery and developing recommendations for restitution.

Local reparations initiatives are an important step toward accountability and are deeply meaningful to the communities they serve. But without federal action that delivers material, systemic, symbolic, or monetary outcomes, efforts will remain limited in scale and impact. Reparations must be durable, scalable, and national. Anything less leaves too many families behind.

National Movement

Reparations are the process of the federal government making **amends** for anti-Black policies. The demand for federal reparations in the United States has deep historical roots. As early as the 19th century, formerly enslaved Black Americans organized to seek compensation for generations of unpaid labor and systemic harm. One of the earliest documented leaders was **Callie House**, who founded a membership-based mutual aid organization that pushed Congress to enact legislation providing reparations to formerly enslaved people. Her national advocacy tour challenging the legacy of slavery drew fierce backlash, and she was ultimately convicted by an all-white jury on fraud charges and sentenced to one year in prison. Though House's movement was suppressed, the call for reparations did not disappear; instead, it is being carried forward by each generation determined to see justice carried through.

There is also historical precedent for the federal government **directly acknowledging** and remedying historical harms. Survivors of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study received financial settlements, and approximately 60,000 Japanese Americans interned during World War II were granted a formal apology and monetary compensation. These actions demonstrate that the federal government has the knowledge, authority, and precedent to go beyond legislation and enact tangible reparative measures. The question is no longer whether reparations are possible—it is whether this nation is willing to rebuild existing systems to deliver them.

How Reparations Can Support an Equitable Public Benefits System

Reparations extend beyond financial compensation to include material, systemic, and symbolic repair for victims, their families, and broader society. Reparations require the United States to rebuild systems that were intentionally designed to exclude Black Americans from financial security and wealth-building opportunities. A truly just public benefits system must recognize that Black communities have been denied access to land, home ownership, and economic security for centuries. Repairing this harm requires both direct investment and structural reform. An **equitable** public benefits system should be paired with reparations for those who have been economically marginalized and systematically deprived of resources and opportunity.

The nation's agricultural system is a clear example of how public benefits and reparations can be paired. Black farmers once made up nearly 14 percent of all farmers in the United States; today, they account for less than two percent. This decline is not accidental. It is the **direct result** of **discriminatory lending from the Department of Agriculture**, land theft, **heirs' property laws**, and decades of federal neglect. Reparations in the nation's food system must include **land retention programs**, debt relief, access to **capital**, and priority access to federal agricultural grants and contracts.

Just as land loss has undermined Black agricultural wealth, **housing discrimination** has systematically blocked Black families from building generational wealth through home ownership. Home ownership remains one of the primary sources of wealth for most families, yet Black Americans have been excluded through redlining, racially restrictive covenants, predatory lending, and other forms of de jure and de facto discrimination. As a result, over half of Black people living in the U.S. rent their homes, **compared** to a quarter of white people. Reparations must include policies that support renters and policies that increase ownership rates among Black people. The U.S. needs to invest in public housing, universal rental assistance, and national tenant protections. A comprehensive federal reparations system would also increase ownership rates among Black households by building a more robust government infrastructure to develop social housing, such as community **land trust models**, and other home ownership assistance programs. Taken as a whole, these policies would prevent displacement and increase home ownership among Black households.

Reparations are not separate from public benefits; rather, our public benefits system is a tool for delivering reparations. We've outlined just two examples of how this could work. A society that claims to value equity must be willing to invest in targeted repair for communities that have been and continue to be intentionally stripped of opportunity. Without reparations, public benefits merely manage inequality. With reparations, they can finally begin to undo it.

Reparations Are Ineffective Without Safeguards Against Beneficiaries of Racial Inequality

Wealth-building through educational opportunities, especially in higher education, is also linked with reparations. In 2021, racial and socioeconomic inequities in higher education were estimated to have cost the economy **\$956 billion** annually; these inequities also affected the country through loss of non-monetary benefits, like the improved health outcomes and higher civic engagement that come with having a more educated populace.

Enrollment rates for Black students have been **growing** in recent years, but that growth is dominated by private institutions; specifically, private **for-profit institutions** whose primary goal is to deliver profit for shareholders and owners, even at the **expense** of providing quality educational and job training outcomes for students and communities. These numbers present dual risks to Black education and higher education overall, especially as the Trump Administration continues their mission of aggressively **privatizing** the entire educational system.

One risk is of valuable federal and state educational assistance being siphoned off to for-profit institutions that **often fail** to meet their end of the bargain in providing high-quality educational experiences to students. Another is that current and future Black students, who largely **recognize** the socioeconomic value of obtaining a postsecondary education, will associate all higher education with their dismal experiences of these institutions, like the **65 percent** of for-profit attendees who currently hold or formerly held student loan debt. This pushes away a vital community of students who could otherwise help mitigate the “**enrollment cliff**,” the projected demographic drop-off of 18-24-year-old students enrolling in higher education.

Percentage of Black Students Making Up Total Enrollment by Institution Type (National Student Clearinghouse Estimate, Fall '20 - Fall '25)

Institution Type	Fall Semester Enrollment Year					
	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Private For-Profit	19.1%	18.9%	19.4%	20.7%	21.8%	23.6%
Public 4-Year	9.6%	9.5%	9.3%	9.4%	9.5%	10.1%
Private Nonprofit	9.4%	9.1%	9.3%	9.7%	9.9%	10.5%
Public 2-Year	12.0%	12.0%	11.9%	12.1%	12.3%	12.9%
Public PAB	12.4%	11.3%	11.0%	10.8%	11.1%	11.2%
Overall	11.0%	10.8%	10.8%	11.0%	11.2%	11.9%

Higher education is a wealth-building pathway and therefore a central component of reparations. Reparative efforts like **Virginia’s** pass financial aid through public institutions, via a reparations fund, to “qualifying” descendants of enslaved people. A similar model exists at **Georgetown University**, though since the university is private, the entire process is operated by Georgetown itself without involvement from the District of Columbia. However, one consideration for reparative programs focused on increasing postsecondary education attainment rate is filtering which

institutions are committed to supporting and providing pathways for socioeconomic mobility for Black students and thus deserve to receive reparative funds meant for Black students. Many for-profit institutions have directly fueled racial injustice in education by selling false promises to marginalized populations, and their very terms of existence incentivize profit through the exploitation of Black students.

For-profit institutions should not receive the funds created to resolve the injustices they championed, or any public education funding at all. The federal government has direct experience in preventing predatory institutions from accessing education-focused federal resources. From the immediate **aftermath** of passing the Servicemen's Readjustment Act to measures like closing the **"90/10 loophole,"** federal policymakers have long recognized the danger of for-profit institutions accessing funds meant to support veterans in postsecondary education. Any hesitation to implement similar protections for reparations funds, or any other source of financial aid utilized by Black students, cannot be blamed on what is perceived as a challenging federal policy **environment** that has resulted following **specific Supreme Court decisions**. Inaction comes from policymakers simply not wanting to protect Black students.

100 Years of Words are Meaningless Without Policy Action

Anniversaries are meant to mark moments of reflection. We as a country have over 250 years of **systemic prejudice** against Black Americans and 100 years of dedicating every February to documenting its consequences. In 2026 we are once again confronted with the question of what, and who, America has truly been great for. Yet we continue to kick the can down the road on reparative policy actions and fail to act with the grave urgency needed centuries ago.

Reflection without action does not drive progress. These milestones should prompt us to remember, reckon, and repair. The responsibility to do so rests with the federal government, which has both the authority and infrastructure to deliver reparations at scale. Targeted investments in our country's public benefits systems and halting the ways that for-profit institutions siphon financial aid from thousands of Black students every year are immediately available pathways to produce measurable outcomes in wealth, land retention, home ownership, educational attainment, and more. Policymakers must move beyond rhetoric and toward dedicated and consistent action that materially improves Black communities' lives.

We cannot afford to spend the next 100 years continuing to beg for restoration.