

# California Panel Calls for Billions in Reparations for Black Residents

A task force recommended that legislators enact a sweeping program to compensate for the economic harm from racism in the state's history.



By Kurtis Lee

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A California panel approved recommendations on Saturday that could mean hundreds of billions of dollars in payments to Black residents to address past injustices. The proposals to state legislators are the nation's most sweeping effort to devise a program of reparations.

The nine-member Reparations Task Force, whose work is being closely monitored by politicians, historians and economists across the country, produced a detailed plan for how restitution should be handled to address a myriad of racist harms, including housing discrimination, mass incarceration and unequal access to health care.

Created through a bill signed into law by Gov. Gavin Newsom in the wake of the nationwide racial justice protests after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the panel has spent more than a year conducting research and holding listening sessions from the Bay Area to San Diego.

It will be up to legislators to weigh the recommendations and decide whether to forge them into law, a political and fiscal challenge that has yet to be reckoned with.

The task force's final report, which is to be sent to lawmakers in Sacramento before a July 1 deadline, includes projected restitution estimates calculated by several economists working with the task force.

One such estimate laid out in the report determined that to address the harms from redlining by banks, which disqualified people in Black neighborhoods from taking out mortgages and owning homes, eligible Black Californians should receive up to \$148,099. That estimate is based on a figure of \$3,366 for each year they lived in California from the early 1930s to the late 1970s, when federal redlining was most prevalent.

To address the impact of overpolicing and mass incarceration, the report estimates, each eligible person would receive \$115,260, or about \$2,352 for each year of residency in California from 1971 to 2020, during the decades-long war on drugs.

In theory, a lifelong state resident who is 71 years old, the average life expectancy, could be eligible for roughly \$1.2 million in total compensation for housing discrimination, mass incarceration and additional harms outlined in the report.

All of these estimates, the report notes, are preliminary and would require additional research from lawmakers to hash out specifics. The costs to the state were not outlined in the report, but totals from harms associated with housing and mass incarceration could exceed \$500 billion, based on estimates from economists.

While the panel members considered various methods for distributing reparations — some favored tuition or housing grants and others preferred direct cash payments — they ultimately recommended the direct payments.

“The initial down payment is the beginning of a process of addressing historical injustices,” the report reads, “not the end of it.”



Kamilah Moore, the chair, and Amos Brown, the vice chair, at the task force meeting on Saturday. Jason Henry for The New York Times

Last year, the task force, which is made up of elected officials, academics and lawyers, decided on the eligibility criteria, determining that any descendant of enslaved African Americans or of a “free Black person living in the United States prior to the end of the 19th century” should receive reparations.

Still, on Saturday, there was sometimes contentious debate over clearly expressing the criteria in certain sections of the report — particularly regarding compensation.

Should lawmakers pass legislation for payments, the panel suggested that a state agency be created to process claims and render payments, with elderly individuals getting priority. Nearly 6.5 percent of California residents, roughly 2.5 million, identify as Black or African American.

“This is about closing the income and racial wealth gap in this country, and this is a step,” Gary Hoover, an economics professor at Tulane University who has studied reparations, said in an interview. “Wealth is sticky and is able to be transferred from generations. Reparations can close that stickiness.”

In voting on its final report on Saturday on the Oakland campus of Mills College at Northeastern University, the panel also suggested that state legislators draw up a formal apology to Black residents. A preliminary report made public last year, outlined how enslaved Black people were forced to California during the Gold Rush era and how, in the 1950s and 1960s, racially restrictive covenants and redlining segregated Black Californians in many of the state’s largest cities.

In emotional testimony for much of the past year, Black residents have stood before the panel often revealing personal stories of racial discrimination, lack of resources in communities because of redlining and trauma that has had negative effects on health and well-being.

While the task force marked the first such effort by a state, a similar measure aimed at creating a commission to explore reparations has stalled in Congress for decades.



Representative Barbara Lee speaking during the task force meeting on Saturday. Jason Henry for The New York Times

In brief remarks before the panel on Saturday, Representative Barbara Lee, a Democrat whose district spans Oakland, lauded the work members have done.

“California is leading on this issue,” said Ms. Lee, who is running for the U.S. Senate. “It’s a model for other states in search of reparative damage, realistic avenues for addressing the need for reparations.”

The median wealth of Black households in the United States is \$24,100, compared with \$188,200 for white households, according to the most recent Federal Reserve Board Survey of Consumer Finances. In California, a recent report from the nonpartisan Public Policy Institute of California found for every \$1 earned by white families, Black families earn 60 cents — the result of disparities in, among other things, education, and discrimination in the labor market.

Assemblyman Reggie Jones-Sawyer, who is one of two state lawmakers on the panel, said he had spoken with Mr. Newsom in recent weeks and expressed optimism that legislation would be approved based on the panel's report.

“The reality is Black Californians have suffered, and continue to suffer, from institutional laws and policies within our state's political, social, and economic landscape that have negated Blacks from achieving life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for generations,” said Mr. Jones-Sawyer, who represents a Los Angeles district. “This really is a trial against America's original sin, slavery, and the repercussions it caused and the lingering effects in modern society.”

Mr. Jones-Sawyer said he expected to present some form of legislation early next year.

But the efforts and support for racial justice that followed Mr. Floyd's death are now confronted with an economy that is shadowed by fears of a recession. In January, Mr. Newsom announced that the state faced a \$22.5 billion deficit in the 2023-24 fiscal year, a turnaround from a \$100 billion surplus a year ago.

Nationwide, opinions on reparations are sharply divided by race. Last fall, a survey from the Pew Research Center found that 77 percent of Black Americans say the descendants of people enslaved in the United States should be repaid in some way, while 18 percent of white Americans say the same. Democrats were even split on the issue, with 49 percent opposed and 48 percent in support. Other polls on the issue have found similar splits.

Even so, cities across the country have moved forward with reparations proposals. In 2021, officials in Evanston, Ill., a Chicago suburb, approved \$10 million in reparations in the form of housing grants.

More recently, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors has expressed support for reparations that could offer several million dollars. And in nearby Hayward, Calif., city officials are hearing proposals for reparations for land taken from Black and Latino families in the 1960s.

Kamilah Moore, a lawyer who is chair of the California task force, said she was confident that the Legislature would “respect the task force's official role as a legislative advisory body and work in good faith to turn our final proposals into legislation.”

“It will soon be in their hands to act,” Ms. Moore said.



**Kurtis Lee** is an economics correspondent based in Los Angeles. Before joining The Times in 2022, he was a national correspondent for The Los Angeles Times, writing about gun violence, income inequality and race in America. [More about Kurtis Lee](#)

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