

**Reparations**

**Selected Evidence Set**

**Debatable Issue**

**Should the United States pay reparations for slavery and the historical legacy of anti- black racism?**

**These passages can be used as evidence to build arguments and counter-arguments on either side of the debatable issue.**

The U.S. Should Pay Reparations

“The lives of black Americans are better than they were half a century ago. The humiliation of Whites Only signs are gone. Rates of black poverty have decreased. Black teen-pregnancy rates are at record lows—and the gap between black and white teen-pregnancy rates has shrunk significantly. But such progress rests on a shaky foundation, and fault lines are everywhere. The income gap between black and white households is roughly the same today as it was in 1970. Patrick Sharkey, a sociologist at New York University, studied children born from 1955 through 1970 and found that 4 percent of whites and 62 percent of blacks across America had been raised in poor neighborhoods. A generation later, the same study showed, virtually nothing had changed. And whereas whites born into affluent neighborhoods tended to remain in affluent neighborhoods, blacks tended to fall out of them” (Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Atlantic Monthly*, June, 2014).

“As the historian Roy E. Finkenbine has documented, at the dawn of this country, black reparations were actively considered and often effected. Quakers in New York, New England, and Baltimore went so far as to make ‘membership contingent upon compensating one’s former slaves.’ In 1782, the Quaker Robert Pleasants emancipated his 78 slaves, granted them 350 acres, and later built a school on their property and provided for their education. ‘The doing of this justice to the injured Africans,’ wrote Pleasants, ‘would be an acceptable offering to him who “Rules in the kingdom of men”’ (Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Atlantic Monthly*, June, 2014).

“Having been enslaved for 250 years, black people were not left to their own devices. They were terrorized. In the Deep South, a second slavery ruled. In the North, legislatures, mayors, civic associations, banks, and citizens all colluded to pin black people into ghettos, where they were overcrowded, overcharged, and undereducated. Businesses discriminated against them, awarding them the worst jobs and the worst wages. Police brutalized them in the streets. And the notion that black lives, black bodies, and black wealth were rightful targets remained deeply rooted in the broader society. Now we have half-stepped away from our long centuries of despoilment, promising, ‘Never again.’ But still we are haunted. It is as though we have run up a credit-card bill and, having pledged to charge no more, remain befuddled that the balance does not disappear. The effects of that balance, interest accruing daily, are all around us (Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Atlantic Monthly*, June, 2014).

“By 1840, cotton produced by slave labor constituted 59 percent of the country’s exports. The web of this slave society extended north to the looms of New England, and across the Atlantic to Great Britain, where it powered a great economic transformation and altered the trajectory of world history. ‘Whoever says Industrial Revolution,’ wrote the historian Eric J. Hobsbawm, ‘says cotton.’ The wealth accorded America by slavery was not just in what the slaves pulled from the land but in the slaves themselves. ‘In 1860, slaves as an asset were worth more than all of America’s manufacturing, all of the railroads, all of the productive capacity of the United States put together,’ the Yale historian David W. Blight has noted. ‘Slaves were the single largest, by far, financial asset of property in the entire American economy.’ The sale of these slaves—‘in whose bodies that money congealed,’ writes Walter Johnson, a Harvard historian—generated even more ancillary wealth” (Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Atlantic Monthly*, June, 2014).

“The popular mocking of reparations as a harebrained scheme authored by wild-eyed lefties and intellectually unserious black nationalists is fear masquerading as laughter. Black nationalists have always perceived something unmentionable about America that integrationists dare not acknowledge—that white supremacy is not merely the work of hotheaded demagogues, or a matter of false consciousness, but a force so fundamental to America that it is difficult to imagine the country without it. And so we must imagine a new country. Reparations—by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences—is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely. The recovering alcoholic may well have to live with his illness for the rest of his life. But at least he is not living a drunken lie. Reparations beckons us to reject the intoxication of hubris and see America as it is—the work of fallible humans” (Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Atlantic Monthly*, June, 2014).

“No race, no ethnic or religious group, has suffered so much over so long a span as blacks have, and do still, at the hands of those who benefited, with the connivance of the United States government, from slavery and the century of legalized American racial hostility that followed it. It is a miracle that the victims—weary dark souls long shorn of a venerable and ancient identity—have survived at all, stymied as they are by the blocked roads to economic equality. . . . Solutions must be tailored to the scope of the crime in a way that would make the victim whole. In this case, the psychic and economic injury is enormous, multidimensional and long-running. Thus must be America’s restitution to blacks for the damage done. As Germany and other interests that profited *owed* reparations to Jews following the holocaust of Nazi persecution, America and other interests that profited *owe* reparations to blacks following the holocaust of African slavery which has carried forward from slavery’s inception for 350-odd years to the end of U.S. government-embraced racial discrimination—an end that arrived, it would seem, only just yesterday” (Randall Robinson, professor of law, Penn State University, *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*, 2000).

“We the black people assembled in Detroit, Michigan for the National Black Economic Development Conference are fully aware that we have been forced to come together because racist white America has exploited our resources, our minds, our bodies, our labor. For centuries we have been forced to live as colonized people inside the United States, victimized by the most vicious, racist system in the world. We have helped to build the most industrial country in the world. We are therefore demanding of the white Christian churches and Jewish synagogues which are part and parcel of the system of capitalism, that they begin to pay reparations to black people in this country. We are demanding $500,000,000 . . . . the[se] reparations [are] due us as people who have been exploited and degraded, brutalized, killed and persecuted. Underneath all of this exploitation, the racism of this country has produced a psychological effect upon us that we are beginning to shake off. We are no longer afraid to demand our full rights as a people in this decadent society” (National Black Economic Conference, Black Manifesto, New York Times Book Review, July, 1969).

The U.S. Should Not Pay Reparations

“When asked during a campaign event whether he would support reparations, [Senator Bernie] Sanders responded with characteristic bluntness, saying that ‘its likelihood of getting through Congress is nil,’ before adding that a push for formal reparations for slavery would be politically divisive. Instead of reparations, Sanders argued, ‘what we should be talking about is making massive investments in rebuilding our cities, in creating millions of decent paying jobs, in making public colleges and universities tuition-free, basically targeting our federal resources to the areas where it is needed the most and where it is needed the most is in impoverished communities, often African American and Latino’ (Cedric Johnson, *Jacobin Magazine*, February 3, 2016).

“The great white lie America tells itself is that the passage of civil-rights laws in the 1960s and '70s lifted the burden of the racial past. But racial subjugation imposed over 350 years could not and was not alleviated over a single generation. Today’s white Americans inherit financial assets and human capital accumulated over a long span of time—and very possibly by robbing or cheating victims of color. In refuting that lie, however, Ta-Nehisi Coates advances an error that also does harm: that black Americans can build their future by debunking white Americans’ illusions about their past. It does not work that way. Racism may have turned the TV set on. Anti-racism won’t turn the TV set off. The government of the United States could trace the genealogy of every white family and send a massive bill to the descendants of every slaveholder and every slumlord who did business from 1619 through 1968. It could redistribute that money in a princely lump sum. But that money won’t change unhealthy dietary patterns, or enhance language skills, or teach the habits on which thriving communities are built” (David Frum, *Atlantic Monthly*, June, 2014).

“Affirmative action ranks among the least popular thing that U.S. governments do. When surveyed, [white Americans crushingly reject race preferences, Hispanic Americans object by a margin of 2 to 1, and black Americans are almost evenly divided, with only the slightest plurality in favor](http://www.gallup.com/poll/163655/reject-considering-race-college-admissions.aspx). Now imagine how Americans will feel when what is redistributed by racial calculus is not university admissions or workplace promotions but actual, foldable cash” (David Frum, *Atlantic Monthly*, June, 2014).

“The reparations idea—so long politically outlandish—has become thinkable today because of the gathering power of the Obama political coalition. But nothing would blow that coalition apart faster than the internal redistribution Coates contemplates from some constituencies to others. And if the idea is that the newest arrivals to America will be persuaded to accept paying reparations as a cost of immigration—or that new Americans can be cajoled to pay a symbolic something because the bulk of the burden will be carried by the dwindling white majority (a majority that already feels ever more culturally insecure and economically beset)—well, that’s a prescript for an even more dangerous political explosion” (David Frum, *Atlantic Monthly*, June, 2014).

“As a result, we cannot say that slavery made *current* blacks’ lives go worse because they would not have existed but for slavery and early Jim Crow laws. This might seem to suggest that Jim Crow and slavery were right or morally just because they caused current blacks to come into existence and they have lives that are well worth living. This is a misinterpretation. Past American racial oppression was a horrible injustice that harmed past blacks. Because current blacks would probably never have existed but for the historical injustice, it did neither wronged nor harmed them.

If something does not make a person’s life go worse than it otherwise would go, it does not harm him. By analogy, a child with Down Syndrome cannot claim that her parent harmed her by conceiving her with that syndrome, assuming she has a good life, because her life would not have gone better for her had she never existed. The idea here is that a person’s original genetics are essential to her” (Stephen Kershnar, professor of philosophy, State University of New York, *The Critique*, July 14, 2016).

“If one thinks that utilitarianism or something like it is true or that it should govern public policy, there is good reason to oppose reparations, even if it is owed as a matter of justice. This is because political capital is a scarce resource and what is put into passing and implementing a reparations system will likely displace capital that could be put into reforming or replacing the public schools and the prison-industrial complex. Consider the incarceration rate. It is surprisingly variable. Since the early 1980’s, the incarceration rate has exploded. It has increased by almost six-fold since 1975 despite the fact that crime has dropped and the rate of non-violent crimes is relatively low compared to other countries. The U.S. has 5% of the world’s population, but almost 25% of its prisoners. Were far fewer black men subject to the criminal justice system, aggregate black economic performance and likely well-being would increase significantly. In terms of black well-being, a far greater return on an investment of political capital would likely result from a concentrated attempt to improve or, better yet, replace the current public-school system than on reparations” (Stephen Kershnar, professor of philosophy, State University of New York, *The Critique*, July 14, 2016).

“But dealing with that reality [that millions of whites live in poverty] inescapably entails treating people as individuals, and treating people as individuals makes reparations morally and intellectually impossible — even if we accept in toto Mr. Coates’s argument that the brutal imposition of white-supremacist policies is the entire basis for the relative social positions of blacks and whites in the United States in 2014. Which is to say: Even if we accept the facts of aggregate advantage and disadvantage with their roots in historical injustice, the aggregate cannot be converted into the collective inasmuch as neither advantage nor disadvantage is universal on either side nor linked to a straightforward chain of causality. Some blacks are born into college-educated, well-off households, and some whites are born to heroin-addicted single mothers, and even the totality of racial crimes throughout American history does not mean that one of these things matters and one does not” (Kevin Williamson, *National Review*, May 24, 2014).

“Reparations probably wouldn’t accomplish what they’re meant to do: Place black Americans on a permanently raised economic plateau, one near that of white Americans. Statistics about the economic disparities of these two groups are grim, and shocking: As of 2012, for instance, the median household net worth of white Americans was [more than twenty times](http://money.cnn.com/2012/06/21/news/economy/wealth-gap-race/) that of blacks. Median adjusted [household income](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/08/30/black-incomes-are-up-but-wealth-isnt/)  for blacks is only 59 percent of that for whites. The reparations plans that have been suggested, however, would work a lot like lotteries [where all African-Americans sudden win the lottery and have a large sum of money given to them] . . . . What happens to lottery winners? Do they and their descendants go on to a permanently higher socioeconomic bracket? A [survey](http://www.marketwatch.com/story/why-lottery-winners-go-bankrupt-1301002181742) of Florida lottery winners shows that this group is twice as likely to go bankrupt as others. The primary difference between winners of large sums and those who won smaller prizes is that the winners of large sums isn’t in bankruptcy rates but in timing: big winners took a bit longer to go bust. Lottery winners (contrary to myth) are actually older and more affluent than the typical American, but the [Wall Street](http://www.forbes.com/wall-street/) Journal summarized the research as follows: ‘Sudden wealth only exaggerates your current situation. If you’re unhappy, bad with money and surrounded by people you don’t trust, money will make those problems worse. If you’re fulfilled, careful with money and enjoy a life of strong relationships, the lottery could make those strengths better’” (Kyle Smith, Forbes, June 4, 2014).

“I would suggest that freeing ourselves from the weight of an entire history of white supremacist teachings would be the priority instead of leading the majority to redemption through forcing them to acknowledge what they move mountains to ignore. For us to demand reparations, we must know in our bones why they are owed.  When African-Americans have the tools in place to teach ourselves the facts of our history—some of which were so skillfully imparted in Coates’ “Case for Reparations”—then we will be better armed to demand that this nation acknowledge its crimes, its debt, and pay the cost. If we know the facts of our American situation from our own Afro-American point-of-view, the spear of white supremacy will be blunted, we will be far less likely to internalize its poison, and better positioned to acknowledge and fight for our due” (Leonce Galter, Are Ta-Nehisi Coates and Bernie Sanders Both Wrong on Reparations, HuffPost, January 22, 2017).