

Holding America Accountable: Reparations for African Americans

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ABSTRACT

This research paper delves into the enduring presence of racism in the United States and its infiltration into the nation's laws and institutions. It aims to shed light on the imperative for reparations to address historical and ongoing injustices endured by Black Americans, while also examining the barriers that have hindered meaningful discussion and progress in this area. The data collection is a combination of primary and secondary research methods with an emphasis on meta-analysis, school-wide surveys on public knowledge of the topic, analysis of charts from the Federal Reserve, and an interview with Dr. Menna Demessie, Ph.D., former Vice President of Policy Analysis and Research for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. Drawing from a wide array of sources, this research paper uncovers systemic and structural manifestations of racism, persistent in the United States. It critically examines how racial disparities in education, housing, criminal justice, and employment continue to perpetuate racial inequality. The research findings highlight the urgent need for reparations and the moral imperative to acknowledge and redress the enduring harm caused by slavery, segregation, and ongoing systemic racism. Through the exploration of existing reparations programs in other countries and the examination of potential models, this study offers insights into the practical implementation of reparations within the United States. Furthermore, this paper investigates the suppression of the discussion surrounding reparations by analyzing the historical, political, and social factors that have hindered the advancement of reparation initiatives, including institutional resistance, racial bias, and the perpetuation of divisive narratives.

Introduction

Systemic and structural racism is defined as “forms of racism that are pervasively and deeply embedded in systems, laws, written or unwritten policies, and entrenched practices and beliefs that produce, condone, and perpetuate widespread unfair treatment and oppression of people of color, with adverse health consequences” (Braveman, et al. 2022). In the present society, racism is not as easily identified because it is less blatant, but these subtle forms of racism can ultimately be more destructive. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on racism in the United States that is creating several barriers for African Americans in their fight for reparations. With racist legislation that dates to the slavery and Jim Crow era of this country’s history, African Americans have been at a significant disadvantage for the lack of compensation they have received from the country that profited on the back of their enslavement. Due to the lack of compensation, in addition to the racism that still exists, the growth of African Americans has and continues to be hindered by the unnecessary hurdles that disproportionately affect them. Racism embedded in our country has created several barriers for African Americans not receiving reparations for the injustices they faced throughout American history.

Review of Literature

Even after the formal abolition of slavery in 1865 and the end of the Jim Crow era in the 1960s, systemic and structural racism is still clearly visible in modern society. These forms of racism come in several different forms now, some being ostentatious such as the murder of George Floyd, to the more unnoticeable such as denying Black people in government financial assistance programs. Hanks et al., (2022) described how, “From slavery to Jim Crow, from redlining to school segregation, and from mass incarceration to environmental racism, policies have consistently impeded or inhibited African Americans from having access to opportunities.” Slavery was the most outright form of racism in American history; however, it has progressed to infiltrate the country’s laws and institutions in such an inconspicuous manner. Generational wealth functions as a steppingstone that older generations pass on and future generations benefit from. Yet this opportunity was not awarded to African Americans because the American experience began with slavery that was profited by White Americans, and that wealth has been passed down through generations. More than 150 years since the abolition of slavery, America has yet to fully cope with how to atone for what people associate the country’s “original sin.”

Black Americans have struggled to keep pace with their white counterparts. It seems that no matter how hard they work, African Americans still remain several steps behind with the law, seemingly never on their side. For example, the US Department of Veteran Affairs helped millions of veterans become educated and purchase homes following World War II. This practice disproportionately helped white men and resulted in fewer loans for Black veterans. Similarly, the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 used taxpayer dollars to build highways running throughout the country and created the suburbs. While the intentions of this act were seemingly unknowing, it created more isolated, predominately white-occupied suburbia (Hanks et al., 2022).

Black or African American households have significantly less wealth than white households, regardless of important demographic factors

Inflation-adjusted median wealth in 2016, by race, marital status, age, and income level

Demographics	White	Black or African American
Education		
No college	\$81,650	\$9,100
College or more	\$325,600	\$57,250
Marital status		
Single	\$61,000	\$5,800
Married	\$212,080	\$40,310
Age		
25–34 years	\$31,610	\$2,750
35–44 years	\$98,000	\$6,530
45–54 years	\$211,400	\$36,000
55–64 years	\$272,790	\$18,900
Income level		
Bottom fifth	\$11,700	\$1,300
Second fifth	\$37,100	\$9,620
Middle fifth	\$74,000	\$22,770
Fourth fifth	\$162,250	\$77,500
Top fifth	\$785,250	\$243,500

Note: All dollar figures are in 2016 dollars. Nominal dollars are deflated by Consumer Price Index for Urban Consumers Research Series. Sample includes all nonretired households 25 years and older.

Source: Authors’ calculations based on data in survey year 2016 from Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, “Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF);” available at <https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/scfindex.htm> (last accessed October 2017).



Figure 1. Black or African American households have significantly less wealth than white households, regardless of important demographic factors.

Focusing on the present, while higher education and increased income certainly offer benefits, they are insufficient to close the substantial wealth gap. The data in Figure 1 indicates that Black or African Americans with higher education levels, married households, and obtain higher incomes still have significantly less wealth than their white counterparts who lack those qualifications. These can be attributed to the mounting systematic obstacles, such as mortgage-market discrimination and labor market segmentation, that increased the wealth gap as African Americans neared retirement. 41% of Black Americans owned their homes in 2016, while an astonishing 71.8% of White Americans owned their homes in 2016 (Hanks et al., 2022).

It is an undeniable fact that action must be taken to combat the issue of slavery and the lasting impact it has had on Black Americans. Minimal research has been done on reparation plans because of society's discomfort and inconvenience in discussing the subject. The case of reparations brings up an inhumane time in American history that is so crucial to the shaping of American society today that it simply cannot be brushed over. Its lingering impact on African Americans today has been indisputable. Countless arguments have been made both for and against giving African Americans reparations. Though the path is unclear, the government must exhaust every option to reach the destination no matter how long it takes because nothing will truly make up for the hundreds of years of slavery. Still, the country must come as close as humanly possible. These issues must be recognized, and actions must be taken to even the playing field for African Americans today.

The first question asked about reparations is, "where to start?" "Slavery ended over 157 years ago and even after all this time, Congress has not yet made an official apology" (Medish & Lucich, 2019). Before beginning the rehabilitation journey, the government must formally apologize for the institution of slavery because it was state sanctioned since the country's founding. The abolition of slavery in 1865 did not magically dispel racism in the country. Cox & Edwards (2022) explain, "79% of Black adults say they occasionally or frequently experience unfair treatment because of their race or ethnicity." Racism existed then, and it still exists now.

The debate about the number of "due reparations has ranged from zero to \$6 trillion to more than \$14 trillion" in the past years, with each party giving their reasoning (Blazina & Cox, 2022). To start, the discomfort of conversation has prohibited even the talk of reparations and the discussion about a possible plan to change the country for the better. There have been several wake-up calls in history, including the government-sanctioned Tuskegee syphilis studies, where government doctors infected over 600 black men with syphilis for 40 years and studied their body's reaction to the disease.

In the case of reparations, accountability is a pressing issue. "I don't like the question about accountability because it almost relegates a certain group when we're all responsible for the perpetuation of the Jim Crow era, for the system that continues to perpetuate both structural and institutional racism which comes out of slavery, that's the democracy that we live in." Dr. Menna Demmsie (personal interview, December 28, 2022), the former Vice President of Policy Analysis and Research for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, noted, "The entirety of the nation is complicit in this democracy and has all benefited from the institution of slavery. The only people who haven't, are slaves and the descendants of slaves. Dr. Demessie even explained that "as opposed to saying, 'who's accountable?' we need to say there are still programs that exist in this country where every person doesn't benefit" (M. Demessie, personal interview, December 28, 2022). The questions that are being asked in defense of a lack of reparations need to change because the evidence still proves the vast disparities of coverage by government programs and legislation between White and Black Americans is undeniable. "It never started out as fair in 1776, it was not for all people, and that's not my opinion; that's a fact, and there is also a movement to suppress a discussion about reparations by starting with this question of 'I didn't do it, and you didn't do it' yeah, you know 'I wasn't around WWII'" (M. Demessie, personal interview, December 28, 2022). This argument about accountability is used to suppress the discussion of reparations.

Data Collection

“68% of Black adults cite racial discrimination as the main reason many Black people cannot get ahead today” (Cox & Edwards, 2022). Racism is perpetuating and hindering the ability of African Americans to thrive by not giving them the same opportunities as their White counterparts. A survey administered to high school students in grades 9-12 at River Hill High School in Clarksville, Maryland, found that 46.2% of high school students in grades 9-12 believe that the biggest problem of racism is not found in laws or institutions but rather between individual people. This represents the lack of knowledge people have about the topic and how society as a whole is still not seeing the bigger picture.

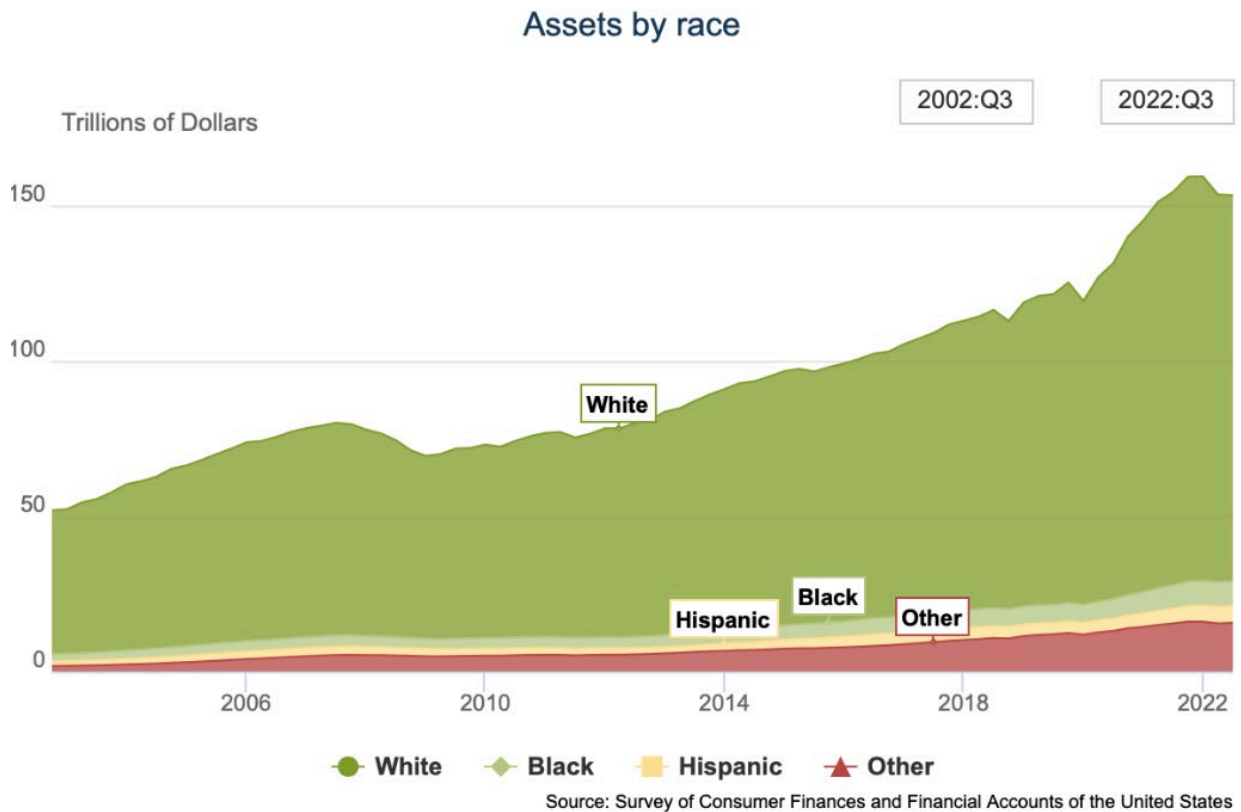


Figure 2: Assets by Race in the United States (2002-2022)

In addition, a raw data analysis by the Federal Reserve (Figure 2) showed that in Q4 2002, total assets owned by White Americans was worth close to 50 trillion dollars, with Black Americans having 2.3 trillion dollars’ worth of combined assets. This means the amount of total assets owned by White Americans is nearly 22 times higher than those owned by Black Americans. Similarly, In Q4 2021, the total assets owned by White Americans was worth nearly 130.58 trillion dollars, with Black Americans having 7.9 trillion dollars’ worth of combined assets. This means the amount of total assets owned by White Americans is around 17 times higher than those owned by Black Americans. This was very surprising because as the country progresses more, it is expected that the racial wealth gap will decrease to the same ratio of the percentage of each race in the United States.

The lack of discussion on the topic is unsettling because it allows it to be overlooked out of mere discomfort. Dr. Menna Demessie, the former Vice President of Policy Analysis and Research for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, noted, “I think there needs to be a paradigm shift in how we talk about this issue because that is a problem, which actually, to me is indicative of our still level of discomfort talking about

race and race relations.” People are uncomfortable talking about it because it brings up an inhumane time in American history, further emphasizing that it cannot be brushed over. These problems must be recognized, and something must be done about them. The public is “uncomfortable talking about the issue because they don't want to do anything about it, and if you apologize, then you have to do something about it” (M. Demessie, personal interview, December 28, 2022). The complete disregard for the topic is because the government does not want to accept responsibility and because of the idea of constant power and control that they must feel they must maintain. It is human nature that when people accept that they are wrong, they lose power, and if they recognize their wrongdoings, then they lose their power and must do something about it.

Discussion

The next step is the call to action and reluctant steps in the right direction. Research by Schaeffer and Edwards (1994) states that 65% of US adults believe that when it comes to racism against Black people in our country today, the bigger problem is racism by individual people rather than laws. 23% believe that racism in our laws is the biggest problem, and 10% believe there is no discrimination against Black people in our country today. This is what makes passing reconstructional legislation incredibly difficult, with one-third of the population denying the facts of the effects of slavery on modern-day Black Americans. There have been several attempts, such as John Conyers attempting to pass a bill every session of Congress since the 1980s. His efforts were not to pass reparations but to pass a commission to investigate the issue of reparations. Efforts that have passed already have produced findings that need to be recognized as crucial steps in the right direction.

The California state legislature passed Bill 3121, establishing a task force to study and develop reparation proposals for Black Americans and to study the institution of slavery and its lingering negative effects on living African Americans. The task force will also recommend appropriate remedies of compensation, rehabilitation, and restitution for African Americans (“AB 3121: Task Force”, 2022). Slavery was constitutionally and statutorily sanctioned from 1619 to 1865, which deprived more than four million Africans and their descendants of life, liberty, citizenship, cultural heritage, and economic opportunity. Even after the emancipation proclamation, the business of slavery continued to be perpetuated. This legacy of slavery and racial discrimination has resulted in debilitating economic, educational, and health hardships that are uniquely experienced by African Americans.

The HR 40 Bill is another initiative introduced by Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee and passed by the United States House of Representatives. The HR 40 bill established a commission to “develop reparation proposals for African Americans, by examining slavery and discrimination in the...United States and identifying the role of the federal and state governments in supporting the institution of slavery, forms of discrimination in the public and private sectors against freed slaves and their descendants, and lingering negative effects of slavery on living African Americans and society” (HR 40, 2021). The establishment of a commission could provide legal justice to ensue and tear down some of the other obstacles that are being faced by African Americans.

Conclusion

In the present society, racism is not as easily identified because it is less blatant than it was in the past. Still, these subtle forms of racism can ultimately be more destructive. These forms of racism and the lack of reparations for African Americans have put them in a race with others with several extra hurdles only in their lane. The purpose of this paper is to show the reader how reparations are a bare necessity for African Americans in the apology for the hundreds of years of slavery they were forced into. It also sheds light on racism in the United States that is creating several barriers for African Americans in their fight for reparations. As the reader finishes

this paper, one should be aware of the types of racism that may not be visible in everyday life. However, looking at the statistics, racism is very much still present in the framework of this country because it was built on the back of racism. Due to the lack of compensation, in addition to the racism that still exists, the growth of African Americans is being hindered by the unnecessary hurdles that disproportionately affect them. Racism embedded in our country has created several barriers for African Americans not receiving reparations which need to be recognized, and action must be taken to repair this flawed system. If the country wants to work to repair fairness, this is not a fight about equality but equity, which is what is needed to succeed. Given all this information, there are still ignorant people who find a way to deny the facts that have been corroborated by several sources.

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