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VOICES

After decades of failure to close the wealth gap,  
Black Americans need reparations

BY MICKEY DEAN *SPECIAL TO THE STAR*

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Mickey Dean, retired deputy director of the Kansas City Human Relations Department

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Dramatic events during the last several months have once again laid bare the glaring racial inequities that exist in this country. The murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis policeman enraged the country as another unarmed Black man was executed by law enforcement. The uprising that resulted occurred in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic that exposed how the racial disparities in our health care system have left Black people most vulnerable whenever there is a health crisis. The ongoing conflict has forced policymakers to reckon with this country's history of racism in a manner that we have not seen for decades.

The disparities that are now being discussed are certainly nothing new. They existed when we were enslaved, during the Jim Crow era, during the civil rights and Black Power movements, and they exist today. The disparities manifest themselves in just about any comparative data that might be examined — education, affordable housing, mortgage lending, health care, jobs, police brutality, mass incarceration, environmental racism and more.

Many remedies have been recommended and tried — integration, civil rights bills, voting, affirmative action programs, diversity and inclusion initiatives, enterprise zones, race relations task forces and so many others. So far, in spite of these efforts, equality among the races has proven elusive. In many regards, Black people are as far behind today as we were decades ago. However, there is another proposed solution that many white people, including so-called well-meaning liberals, and some Blacks, refuse to consider: reparations for Black people.

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Black and white Americans. According to a study done in 2016, Black families have an [average net worth of \\$11,000, compared to a white family's average net worth of \\$141,900](#). This wealth gap exists at every income level.

The wealth gap is an indication of how past injustices breed present suffering. This same study predicted that based on the current racial wealth gap, it would take 228 years for the average wealth of Black people to match that of whites. A family's net worth is important because wealth is needed to purchase a home, start a business, help children attend college and secure retirement.

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The study noted that without major intervention, the wealth gap will continue to expand. To eliminate the gap requires pursuing policies that exclusively target and assist Black people until such time that the goal of equality is achieved. Reparations are the only intervention that has any chance of evening the wealth landscape.

Paying reparations to groups for past mistreatment is not a new phenomenon in this country. Native Americans have received reparations, as have the Japanese who were interned during World War II. Black people were promised reparations immediately after the Civil War. General Sherman's Special Field Order 15 promised former enslaved Blacks 40 acres and the use of a government mule. That promise was eventually reneged on.

The fight for Black reparations has been a continuous one since emancipation. Various individuals and organizations — notably Callie House, Queen Mother Moore, the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America and others — have pressed for Black reparations consistently over the years. However, the issue gained significant traction after Ta-Nehisi Coates penned [“The Case For Reparations,” published in the June 2014 Atlantic magazine](#).

More recently, several candidates in the Democratic Party primary election contest expressed support for exploring reparations as a remedy for past injustices. Last year, U.S. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee of Texas introduced an updated version of HR 40, the legislation originally introduced by the late Michigan U.S. Rep. John Conyers on reparations. The new version of the bill calls for a commission to study and develop proposals and remedies to repair the damage done to Black people during slavery and its aftermath. U.S. Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey has introduced similar legislation in the Senate. A hearing will likely be scheduled soon.

Some people see reparations as a pipe dream. However, some major universities, church organizations and corporations have already seen the need to provide reparations to descendants of enslaved people upon whose labor the wealth to build

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tax relief, scholarships, community development funds and other remedies to be determined.

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This is an issue whose time has come. Any discussion that purports to consider justice and equality for Black people in the long term but does not include reparations is simply not honestly addressing the problem.

*Mickey Dean is retired deputy director of the Kansas City Human Relations Department.*



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