

U.S. state of California unveils first slave reparations report

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The document details the harms perpetuated by the state against Black people and recommend ways to address those wrongs [File: Janie Har/AP]

Sacramento, June 2 (RHC)-- California's task force on reparations for Black people in the United States -- the first-ever in the nation -- has released a report documenting in detail discrimination perpetrated by the state and recommending steps to address those wrongs.

The 500-page document released on Wednesday lays out the harms suffered by descendants of enslaved people long after slavery was abolished in the 19th century, through discriminatory laws and

actions in all facets of life, from housing and education to employment and the legal system.

“Four hundred years of discrimination has resulted in an enormous and persistent wealth gap between Black and white Americans,” according to the interim report of the California Task Force to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans.

“As the following chapters will show, these effects of slavery continue to be embedded in American society today and have never been sufficiently remedied. The governments of the United States and the State of California have never apologized to or compensated African Americans for these harms.”

The report is a major step towards educating the American public and setting the stage for an official government apology and the case for financial reparations. Its release comes amid a recent openness by the U.S. government towards addressing the question of reparations for the descendants of African slaves.

In April, President Joe Biden met with Black U.S. legislators in the White House and expressed his support for the creation of a commission tasked with studying how the United States as a nation could compensate the descendants of Black slaves.

The California task force makes sweeping initial recommendations, including within the prison system: Incarcerated people should not be forced to work while in prison and if they do, must be paid fair market wages. Inmates should also be allowed to vote and people with felony convictions should serve on juries, according to the report.

The group recommends creating a state-subsidised mortgage programme to guarantee low rates for qualifying Black applicants, free healthcare, free tuition to California colleges and universities and scholarships to Black high school graduates to cover four years of undergraduate education.

The committee also calls for a cabinet-level secretary position to oversee an African American affairs agency with branches for civic engagement, education, social services, cultural affairs and legal affairs. It would help people research and document their lineage to a 19th-century ancestor so they could qualify for financial restitution.

California Governor Gavin Newsom signed legislation creating the task force in 2020, making California the only state to move ahead with a study and plan. Cities and universities are taking up the cause with the Chicago suburb of Evanston, Illinois, becoming the first US city to make reparations available to Black residents last year.

Members of the task force started meeting in June 2021 and will release a comprehensive plan for reparations next year. The task force voted in March to limit reparations to descendants of slaves, overruling reparations advocates who want to expand compensation to all Black people in the United States.

California is home to the fifth-largest Black population in the US, after Texas, Florida, Georgia and New York, the report said. An estimated 2.8 million Black people live in California, according to the report.

Black people make up nearly 6 percent of California's population yet they are overrepresented in jails, youth detention centres and prisons. About 28 percent of people imprisoned in California are Black and in 2019, Black youth made up 36 percent of minors ordered into state juvenile detention facilities.

Nearly 9 percent of people living below the poverty level in the state were Black and 30 percent of people experiencing homelessness in 2019 were Black, according to state figures.

Black Californians earn less and are more likely to be poor than white residents. In 2018, Black residents earned on average just less than \$54,000 compared with \$87,000 for white Californians. In 2019, 59

percent of white households owned their homes, compared with 35 percent of Black Californians.

Despite it being a “free” state, an estimated 1,500 enslaved Black people lived in California in 1852, according to the report. The Ku Klux Klan flourished in California, with members holding positions in law enforcement and city government. Black families were forced to live in segregated neighbourhoods that were more likely to be polluted.

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