



## Is Guaranteed Income a Stepping Stone Towards Reparations?

Cities around the country have started piloting guaranteed income programs aimed at addressing income inequality—an issue that disproportionately impacts Black and brown families. In this episode, we explore the policy implications of guaranteed income programs and whether they could function as a bridge to reparations. We hear from Dr. Cheryl Grills, a clinical psychologist and member of [California's Reparations Task Force](#), Ebony Burroughs, a recipient of a guaranteed income program in Atlanta, Yvette Carnell, president and founder of [American Descendants of Slavery \(ADOS\) Advocacy Foundation](#), and Afua Atta-Mensah, Chief of

Programs for [Community Change](#). Reported by Patrice Mosley.

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Pamela Kirkland:

I am Pamela Kirkland, a reporter and producer. The conversation around reparations can seem both overwhelming and contradictory. On one hand, it's hard to imagine how our country could ever fully atone for the centuries of injustice and atrocities committed against Black and brown citizens. On the other hand, there's the belief that reparations are not only achievable, but essential to healing and moving forward. What we know is that reparations are owed to the descendants of the enslaved, and frankly, the bill is past due. This episode is reported by Patrice Mosley.

The concept of reparations and guaranteed income are two highly charged topics. Combining these two concepts can either continue the debate on intersectional equality, economic justice, and historical redress, or it could be a game changer. The idea of compensation for the descendants of the formerly enslaved is overall widely opposed by majority of Americans, according to a UMass Amherst poll.

There's similar opposition to the concept of the government providing a basic universal income. According to the Pew Research Center, 54% of American adults are against the federal government providing a guaranteed income. But a closer look at those numbers shows a generational divide. Adults under 30 favor the idea nearly two to one. Among older adults, 72% of those 65 and older oppose the proposal. Guaranteed income is a policy proposal where all individuals receive a regular, unconditional cash payment from the government. The idea behind it is to provide everyone with a minimum level of economic security, regardless of their employment status or income level.

Supporters of the program argue that it can help alleviate poverty and reduce income inequality. However, critics raise concerns about the potential cost, its impact on work incentives and its sustainability. But cities and states are moving forward with several versions of universal income. Birmingham, Houston and Atlanta are piloting guaranteed income programs to address wealth and income

inequality gaps. And states like California are moving forward with plans to address reparations for descendants of the formerly enslaved. Reporter Patrice Mosley investigates whether guaranteed income could be a bridge to reparations.

Crowd: George Floyd.

Speaker: Say his name.

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Speaker: Say his name.

Crowd: George Floyd.

Patrice Mosley: In 2020, after the killing of George Floyd, a nationwide movement where racial justice and equality was reignited.

Speaker: I can't breathe.

Crowd: I can't breathe.

Speaker: I can't breathe.

Crowd: I can't breathe.

Mosley: Floyd's death brought to the forefront longstanding issues of systemic racism and police brutality, prompting a reckoning across the country. It sparked widespread protests, demands for police reform, and a broader conversation about the urgent need for racial equity. In California, the protests helped push forward bipartisan approval of a law that would pave a path to reparations and make the state the first in the nation to do so. The law established a task force to study the impact of slavery in California and provide recommendations for compensation. Dr. Cheryl Grills, a clinical psychologist and professor at Loyola Marymount University, was appointed to the board by then Governor Gavin Newsom.

Dr. Cheryl Grills: We are supposed to detail harms done to people of African ancestry, from the past to the present. I think one of the things that we were able to do at the end of that first year was to come up with an interim report that detailed our findings on the harms. And so this nearly 500 page report, with 13 chapters, identified 12 major categories of harm that were meticulously researched and documented and verified. It's, I think, one of the most sweeping summations of the extent of the harm.

Mosley: While California was admitted to the union as a free state, the Gold Rush era that started in 1848 attracted people from all over the country. Some gold seekers from the south brought their enslaved workers with them to mine for gold. More than 4,000 enslaved Black people were taken there between 1850 and 1860. The recommendations from the task force for the state to atone for its wrongdoings include a number of programs and financial compensation. The programs address racial terror, housing segregation, the criminal legal system and more.

The committee also recommended the establishment of an updated version of the Freeman's Bureau to run the programs. The California American Freeman's Affairs Agency is based on the original created in 1865 after the Civil War to support formerly enslaved individuals in their transition to freedom.

Dr. Cheryl Grills: Unfortunately, the media wants to focus in on compensation, and the monetary compensation is one area out of 115 plus. But that's what people don't even seem to understand with the compensation component is that we never offered a dollar figure. We never said that monetary compensation is the most critical aspect. In fact, just the opposite. And then there's not just one form of monetary compensation. There's the collective compensation for the group harm, and then there is individual compensation that is to address individual claims for things like lost land or lost wages, et cetera, where evidence will have to be brought forward. But you could actually get the collective compensation and you could pursue an individual compensation.

Mosley: The commission conducted a series of public hearings over a two-year period. These hearings gave individuals and communities a platform to voice their concerns and perspectives. Some of them became very tense.

Grills: There's an awful lot of emotion around the topic of reparations because, as a country, we have not provided airspace for the conversations that needed to have been happening from back in the 1800s to the present. So America has ducked and dodged this issue at its own peril. So as a society, we don't know how to have the conversation and people are deathly afraid of the conversation on all sides. And what ends up happening when you become threatened, because being afraid means that there's a sense of threat, people stop hearing each other, people dig their heels in. People are less likely to kind of negotiate and find middle ground, and you end up with highly conflicted interactions that can emerge.

Mosley: The California Commission voted last year that any compensation be limited to descendants of the formerly enslaved, living in the United States before the end of the 19th century. They also voted to require individuals to have resided in California for a minimum of six months when discriminatory practices and policies were in effect. We spoke with Grills just before the taskforce released their final recommendations. The timeline for implementation of the taskforce's plan is still not finalized. And while the killing of George Floyd helped get the original bill moving, Grills worries the momentum gained from the movement in 2020 may have faded.

Grills: So our attention span can be really short and our ability to track things can be really limited. So I would say that moment that opened a portal for actual action in this country has narrowed some. And unfortunately, I think when we've had major change in this country, it has been at the price of a sacrificial lamb, like Jesus had to, in order to save our souls, sacrificed himself.

I think we've had a number of individuals that we can point to in this country whose lives are sacrificed in order for this country to stop and take notice, and then for then, us in the community to rush in and try to maximize that moment of consciousness and that moment of humanity. Because that's the other thing that people look at this stuff and they say, I kid you not, that our desire for reparations is silly. And I'm always confused by that because how do you say loss of life,

massive losses of lives, is silly? How do you say that generations of oppression is silly? How do you say that prolonged suffering among a group of people is silly? The only way you can say that is either, A, you are woefully ignorant about what happened to Black people, or B, you have lost your sense of humanity. Either of those is problematic, the second one is worse because I'm not sure how you fix that.

Mosley: The idea of universal income has roots in the civil rights movement. In 1968, just weeks after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., his Poor People's Campaign took protest to a new level by organizing a massive demonstration on the National Mall in Washington DC. They created a tent city known as Resurrection City and occupied the space for 42 days. Protestors like this one demanded federal funding for full employment, anti-poverty programs, and guaranteed annual income.

Protestor: We are going to plague the pharaohs of this nation with plague after plague until they decide to give us some meaningful jobs and a guaranteed annual income.

Mosley: More recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in guaranteed income as a way to combat poverty, as well as to address growing wealth and income disparities. Mayors for a Guaranteed Income is a coalition of mayors from across the United States who are advocating for guaranteed income pilot programs in their cities.

Ebony Burrows: That \$500 was a big help to me. I was able to do a lot with that, more than what I thought I was going to be able to do.

Mosley: Ebony Burrows was a recipient of a pilot program in Atlanta. In 2021, Atlanta announced it had partnered with the Urban League of Greater Atlanta to launch IMPACT, the income mobility program for Atlanta Community Transformation. It was Atlanta's first citywide guaranteed income pilot program.

Burrows: I had ability to be able to breathe for a second, financially, and that was important. Just for a second, not having to move things around like chess pieces in my life.

Mosley: Ebony says the \$500 monthly payments helped her start her business and give her some additional flexibility in her finances.

Burrows: Everybody had a different way of doing what they do with their money. Mine, it varied month to month. I always act as though I didn't have it. I based my life around the income that I have already. So that income that came in, I was able to tackle down things on my credit, get my finances together, pay down debt.

Mosley: Atlanta is just one of multiple locations where guaranteed income programs have launched. Across the country, similar programs are a study in the effects of providing a universal basic income. Stockton, California made headlines with its Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration. Over a period of two years, a group of randomly selected residents received \$500 per month, no strings attached. In San Francisco, a reparations plan to compensate descendants of the enslaved included cash payments and a guaranteed income to atone for centuries of harm.

As the idea of guaranteed income moves from pilot to programs, the case to include them in reparation plans is also gaining momentum. Afia Atta-Mensah is

the chief of Programs for Community Change. The organization focuses on improving conditions for people struggling to make ends meet, especially those in the most marginalized communities. I spoke with her about reparations and the potential benefits of including guaranteed income in the plan.

Hi, Afia. Thank you so much for speaking with me.

Afia Atta-Mensah: Thanks for having me. Super excited to talk with you.

Mosley: In your opinion, what are some of the main arguments supporting the idea of UBI as a form of reparations?

Atta-Mensah: I appreciate that question and I don't want to make it seem like the only issue was changing mindsets, right? Then there's a whole idea of once people think it's palatable, how do we go about the organizing that's needed to make it happen? There should be a portion of reparations argument that deals with a reinvestment of the money that's been extracted generationally from families, individuals, and entire communities. UBI or guaranteed income can be a portion, clearly not the whole, but a portion of a reparations case that, again, allows money to be directly reinvested to individuals in households without, for lack of better term, strings attached to allow individuals to make the best decisions for them and their families.

And clearly as structured, if we're doing it to places with individuals who have been most harmed, it'd be African American, Black American or Black identified individuals who have suffered the greatest harm having being the first in line for guaranteed income or UBI investments. So that'd be low income, poor Black folks who would have that first piece of getting those direct investments.

And like I say, we have examples about this when we're talking about reparations, the idea of repairing some harm. I want to just take a moment, one of our partners at Community Change Equity and Transformation in Chicago is working to make Chicago the first city in the country to actually fund a permanent guaranteed income program from cannabis tax revenue. And it would provide a much needed foundation for economic opportunity in the city. And equally important, it would directly compensate folks in the community who have been the victims of the racist war on drugs. So we have some great examples of organizations that are already looking to do this work, which is really exciting, particularly under a bit of a reparations framework.

And I think there's a deeper realization that came through the deep trauma of COVID and the pandemic where we saw the federal government, in fact, making targeted investments through things like the child tax credit, frankly, putting money in people's hands and, shocker, they took care of themselves and their families. All the stereotypes, like people didn't buy all the lobster tails in the land that day. No, they paid rent, right? They bought groceries. Folks might have done something crazy, put a little something in the bank. If we strip some of the excess verbiage, the intentional stereotyping around it, and if we're honest, the federal government invested in their own type of large scale, targeted income pilots, mostly through the child tax credit and other pieces, that allowed a wide swath of this nation to be able to have cash so they can make decisions for themselves and not being thrown deeper into crisis because of the COVID pandemic.

Mosley: How can this impact be measured to see the effectiveness of it, to kind of see if it's successful or if it's failing in some areas?

Afia Atta-Mensa...: If I'm honest, I think it's going to be an ongoing journey. So we can have some immediate metrics, does this allow folks to better bring food into their household, particularly if we're targeting populations by both demographics, but within zip codes. We have the child poverty limits, right? This disbursement of a guaranteed income allows that money to go up in their household that brings people off poverty or lowers poverty rates. That's one indicator. But I would also say the intention around this is to have some long-term benefits that allows folks to be set up, not just to be making it, but to be able to actually be able to live in a type of dignity. So I think we have the immediate metrics of things like poverty limits. Does that allow us to lessen the needs of SNAP and other things because people have more money that can be measured fairly quickly.

And we have that again, when we saw what happened just recently with the child tax credit when that was happening, it was the lowest child poverty recorded on record, exponential lessening of child poverty in Black and Latinx communities. But long term, I think there are different types of metrics that community-based organizations and communities could set that allows us to move from the day-to-day to the systemic. And I would hope that some of those metrics include also like mental health and wellbeing. We know what it looks like day-to-day about what poverty means, but also what that does to people. I would also err us to think differently of how we think of our metrics as well for both the short term to make the case, but also the long term about what this could mean for individuals, families, and their communities.

Mosley: What is the difference with this going against other proposed programs, because there's a lot of other ones out there as well, but what would make seeing something in the reparations form any different from the other programs that are out there?

Atta-Mensah: The guaranteed income, I think, one, we shouldn't think of either or as part of the reparations framework, I think yes, and. Because I think given the magnitude of the harm that's been done to us as Black people, it's going to take a whole lot of different pieces coming together. And so I think a piece of this though is an aspect that sometimes is undersold, the idea about self-determination and dignity.

Often programs have certain strings attached to it. Part of the reparations frame is that you just need to bring your entire self because our communities have been harmed. And the idea under guaranteed income is allowing folks to make choices and decisions, which is one of the things that both poverty and racism erases from us so often. The idea to be able to make decisions for your family and yourself as an individual, you have limited choices. Clearly poverty limits your choices. And we know clearly being Black in America limits your choices at times. And so how do we allow individuals to regain and restore dignity? By allowing them to make choices and trusting them to do so, as anyone else is able to.

Mosley: How would you respond to people who argue about guaranteed income as a form of reparations, that kind of perpetuate the culture of dependency or undermining being able to continue with individual responsibility?

Atta-Mensah: No, it's true. There are a lot of folks, as I said, have uncomfot with this idea, and I would lift up a few things. Usually when we try and solve a problem, we try it and

solve for the many and not for the few. And I think the biggest misconception is that if and when as guaranteed income projects happen, that is to your point, going to be a disincentive to work or a disincentive to do certain things has not borne by just the data and the pilots that we have.

But I would also just add part of what this is, it should scare folks, right? This should have larger structural consequences about how we work in this nation, to be frank. How folks are working often two and three jobs as well as the gig job, and you're still barely making it. You made just enough to pay the babysitters for while you were out. Just enough to pay for that happy meal because you were too tired to cook by the time you got home. And again, I'll lift up COVID. When we think about, and I don't mean to gender this, but particularly working mothers or individuals that identify as women who have children, gender discrepancies really came out about who was doing most of the care while still holding the work. And it forced questions or continued longstanding questions, let me be clear, that should rock structural values because people are getting the short end of the stick in a real way.

And so I would say that a good thing about the idea of guaranteed income and living it is that it should absolutely make people who benefit from making all of us think that if we're not spinning on that hamster wheel forever, that we won't be able to eat and that we shouldn't eat. I want them to be scared. I want more of us to think that maybe just for being in this world, you deserve to be able to eat, that there are certain basic things that folks need to survive. Since there is not an even playing field for folks to get it, that there needs to be a collective action to allow everyone to have at least a starting point, if not more, to be able not to just survive, but to thrive and live in dignity.

And we have had hundreds of years of this type of, for lack of a better term, like apartheid economy that does not serve clearly Black people. But if we're honest, hasn't served American culture in a real way. Our country has a lot of ailments right now, of God knows, I don't like to go too far off, the shooting up schools, things are just not happening anywhere else. So I think we are at a time where we need some real things that shake up the current status quo and shake up structures. And naysayers should listen, but I say it's far time that we start questioning some of our structures of work and how we're doing it and who it benefits.

Mosley: Some critics argue that guaranteed income could be difficult to sustain. Others feel that while a guaranteed income could ignite an economic agenda to uplift the Black community, it's a bridge too far to be considered true reparations. Yvette Carnell is president of the ADOS Advocacy Foundation. ADOS stands for American Descendants of Slavery. The Georgia based organization has advocated for reparations since 2020.

Yvette Carnell: If we can write billion dollar checks for war and in a number of ways, I don't care whether you go back to Afghanistan, if we can do that in terms of our military, I don't think we can have another conversation about constraint or budgetary constraints. It's only when we come and we talk about making American descendants of slavery whole that we start talking about, oh, we can't pay for it.

Mosley: While recognizing it could be a step toward addressing economic disparities, Carnell argues that guaranteed income falls short of true reparations.

- Carnell: I have no problem with class-based policies in general. What I will say though is class can't fix race. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said that something specifically done against a group of people, you have to do something specific in order to kill that harm, show something specific was done to us in terms of the creation of race, and that relegated it to the bottom as a racialized bottom cast. Now, something specific has to be done for our group. And I worry, even if we're talking about universal basic income, I would rather a federal jobs guarantee than universal basic income.
- Mosley: She emphasizes the need for reparations to specifically target historical wrongs and the continued harm inflicted on descendants of the enslaved.
- Carnell: It's not enough to fix us. It's not enough to close that racial wealth gap, which we really consider as a lineage wealth gap. It's not enough for that. It's not a reparations plan. It's not a redress plan.
- Mosley: According to the 2020 census, Black people in the U.S. are more likely to live in poverty compared to their white counterparts. Guaranteed income programs have been proven to help reduce poverty, according to researchers at Columbia University. Afia Atta-Mensah believes there is potential in using guaranteed income as a tool to make substantial investments in Black households.
- Atta-Mensah: I think there can be conversations and curiosities about, because guaranteed income is not a race phase, it's focused on folks who have the lowest amount of money and how we make those direct investments. And clearly there's more poor white people in this nation than there are poor Black people given our population numbers. What would it look like as a targeted tool for either deeper investments in Black households? So I can see discord intention about what that looks like either way, as it's currently standing now as a program that's used specifically in regards to class or poverty as opposed to race. I think we should look at how this could be used and attuned because there has been a definite benefit for Black individuals and families who have been able to be a part of guaranteed income pilots and programs.
- Mosley: They always say money is power, right? So I'm just curious if that's another underlining fear. It's just that statement right there, money is power. Are we going to give more power along with giving money?
- Atta-Mensah: I think there's always a fear of organized, clear Black folk, and when you don't have to worry about putting food on the table, you're surprised how much more time and space we have for other things. I don't want to make it all seem like the cure to this is more capitalism or more money. But what I am part of a amazing movement that is challenging the conception that poverty is an individual failure as opposed to a policy choice. That there are things that we can absolutely do right now to make people's lives better and to change their material conditions.
- Mosley: In some ways, the idea of a guaranteed income is not that far off from the federal government providing reparation payments to descendants of the formerly enslaved. Supporters of the plan agree that guaranteed income on its own is not enough to atone for the wrongs committed during slavery, but supporters hope it could be a first step.
- Kirkland: Special thanks to Afia Atta-Mensah, Yvette Cornell, Ebony Burrows, and Dr. Cheryl Grills.



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