

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS:

# THE NOWNESS OF REPARATIONS FOR BLACK PEOPLE IN NEW JERSEY

A REPORT  
FROM THE  
NEW JERSEY  
REPARATIONS COUNCIL





Slavery was not just a sin of the south.

It flourished in the north, growing some of its deepest roots in New Jersey.

Although slavery shaped almost every aspect of New Jersey, from its founding through today, too many believe it never happened here.

In 2023, the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice partnered with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to convene the New Jersey Reparations Council to confront this reality.

Through an intensive two-year study, the Council engaged deeply to tell the story, from an evidence-based perspective, of New Jersey's deep but often overlooked history of slavery and its enduring impact on the contemporary life of Black people in our state.

*For Such a Time as This: The Nowness of Reparations for Black People in New Jersey* is the product of that study – and an urgent call for transformative change through reparative justice.

This report draws a throughline from New Jersey's deep embrace of slavery, through its own Jim Crow period and the state's systemic racism in more modern times, to the Two New Jerseys today, which are characterized by a staggering \$643,000 racial wealth gap between Black and white families.

The report invites us into a period of self-discovery, to see through our perception of a New Jersey that is a northern progressive state, to one that was, and is, also profoundly shaped by its original sin of slavery and its enduring legacy.

That self-discovery will be the foundation for the repair that is urged by the report's bold and transformative

policy and investment recommendations.

These recommendations are designed to help create a new New Jersey where Black people are empowered to finally be free, to be whole and to flourish.

In addition to the Preface, Introduction and Conclusion, this report tells New Jersey's story in thematic sections:

- **NEW JERSEY: SLAVE STATE OF THE NORTH:** New Jersey's commitment to slavery was so complete that historian and Council member Elaine Buck has called it the "slave state of the North."

This section provides a detailed examination of New Jersey's embrace of slavery; describes how the forced labor of enslaved Black people built New Jersey and laid the foundation for its wealth; documents the brutality and inhumanity enslaved people endured, as well as the many ways they resisted, fought and escaped; and exposes the New Jersey laws and practices that authorized, defended and clung to slavery even when other northern states turned away from it.

- **NEW JERSEY AND THE JIM CROW ERA:** Despite the official end of slavery and Black people obtaining "freedom" and "equality" under the law, and at a time when other groups benefited greatly from American prosperity, New Jersey's policies and practices held Black people in a status of second-class citizenship that thwarted their ability to pursue opportunity and build wealth for future generations.

This section discusses the growth of New Jersey's Black population during Reconstruction and the later Great Migration, and examines the racially discriminatory policing, violent intimidation and widespread segregation that the state's white officials and white communities developed in response.

- **TWO NEW JERSEYS:** Today, New Jersey at once embodies both the success of one of the wealthiest states in the country and the shame of staggering rates of racial disparity. From life expectancy and maternal and infant mortality, to rates of segregation in the state's public schools and neighborhoods leading to disparate exposure to environmental toxins, to racial gaps in wealth and income, to devastating disproportionate rates of incarceration, New Jersey's Black communities, by design, have largely been separated from the benefits of the state's wealth and prosperity.

This section examines how this reality is a direct legacy of the eras of slavery and Jim Crow, and New Jersey's ongoing failure to address those generational harms through reparative action.

- **THE STORIES NEW JERSEY TELLS ITSELF:** New Jersey, taking comfort in its identity as a northern state, has failed to confront its own history and present-day reality when it comes to slavery and racial inequality.

This section reviews the stories we have told ourselves through past and present historical scholarship, state reports, school curricula and public memory sites to illustrate how we have obscured the truth. These lessons reveal valuable insight into the need to see ourselves clearly and the new stories that will be required to empower Black people to flourish through reparations.

- **A BLUEPRINT FOR REPAIR: ADDRESSING THE HARM AND EMPOWERING BLACK PEOPLE TO FLOURISH:** Building on a foundation of truth and acknowledgment, this report draws a blueprint for a new story – a new New Jersey – by outlining recommendations for bold, strategic and transformative policies and investments to not only repair the enduring harm of slavery, but also to answer this affirmative question: What kind of reparative system does New Jersey need to build and invest in for Black people to finally be free? To be whole? To flourish?

Black people flourishing is at the heart of reparations, and history shows us that when Black people flourish, everyone benefits.

The report proposes policy recommendations in the following areas: Democracy, Economic Justice, Social Programs and Well-Being, Health Equity, Desegregation, Higher Education, Environmental Justice, Public Safety and Justice, Public Education and Narrative, Faith Institutions and Accountability. The recommendations include strategic policies that would lead to systemic, sustainable change, commensurate in scope with the widespread and lasting harms of slavery and its aftermath, to be implemented in tandem with direct payments.

The policy recommendations are transformative - not just in the impact they will have on Black people in the state, but in how some will require a shift in our current legal and social presumptions. Some of the recommended policies require race-conscious remedies that would require a reimagining of current constitutional jurisprudence. We therefore urge New Jersey to pass a constitutional amendment reflecting the Fourteenth Amendment's original purpose to empower lawmakers to pass remedial legislation, as well as federal constitutional interpretation consistent with that. This kind of transformational change will take time, but so does all transformational progress. This report plants the seeds for that long-term change, even as it also recommends policies that are achievable sooner.

It is the Council's and Institute's intention that this report, built on an evidentiary record of truth, will serve as a blueprint for New Jersey to become a robust multiracial democracy where Black people, and everyone, can flourish.



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