

## Ending Our Silence: Promoting H.R. 40 to Study Slavery and Redress Institutionalized Racism

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**Abstract:** *The U.S. has never fully addressed the legacy of chattel slavery and institutionalized racism. H.R. 40 – Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals/Processes for African Americans Act presents an opportunity to engage in a national discourse on the topic of federal reparations for the injustices of slavery and the present-day impact. The intent of the bill is to establish a commission to examine remedies for slavery and institutionalized discrimination. Enacting this bill is an important step in acknowledging the fundamental injustices of slavery. Social work, as a profession, has yet to acknowledge a position on this important issue. The historical context of reparations and institutionalized discrimination are presented to initiate a dialogue and call to action among social workers. Social workers are in a unique position to play an integral role in addressing the issues challenging passage of H.R. 40. The advocacy expertise of social workers situates them to support reparations as a policy priority that aligns with the cardinal values of the profession. Through capacity-building, the social work profession can dispel the myths and fears associated with reparations and move H.R. 40 forward.*

**Keywords:** *Reparations, H.R. 40, social justice, advocacy, institutionalized racism*

Since 1989, H.R. 40 has been proposed to establish the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans (Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act, 2019; National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations, 2020). The bill would authorize the establishment of a commission to examine remedies for slavery and discrimination. The proposed commission would identify “(1) the role of federal and state governments in supporting the institution of slavery, (2) forms of discrimination in public and private sectors against freed slaves and their descendants, and (3) lingering negative effects of slavery on living African-Americans and society” (Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act, 2019, para. 1). However, to date, the only legislative actions on H.R. 40 have been subcommittee hearings and House Judiciary Committee markup in 2021.

Through its Code of Ethics, the profession of social work has a commitment to social justice and the empowerment of vulnerable populations. Therefore, social workers are well situated to contribute to the advancement of H.R. 40. The bill serves as a first step in examining the logistics of reparations as a form of redress for the residual inequities created by slavery and systemic racism. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the largest professional social work organization in the world, represents the voices of more than 600,000 social workers (NASW, 2020a). Through its publications, social media, and other communication modalities, NASW has the resources to identify H.R. 40 as a policy priority with the potential to eliminate many of the social and economic barriers that hinder

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the collective productivity of the African American community. A call for professional scholarship and action on reparations for African American descendants of chattel slavery is long overdue.

NASW and other professional social work organizations are in a key position to advocate for H.R. 40 through their membership roster, stakeholders, and constituents. Successful implementation of the provisions of H.R. 40 presents an opportunity to begin a national discourse on the residual impact of chattel slavery and institutionalized discrimination. NASW has a history of advocacy for policies that empower vulnerable populations, such as the Civil Rights Voting Act, Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay, and the Affordable Care Act (NASW, 2020a, 2020b). The expanding debate around reparations for African American descendants provides a venue for social work to operationalize core values and ethical principles in support of this important social and economic justice issue.

The economic harm of 200 years of forced and unpaid labor as well as the denial of wealth-building opportunities post-emancipation have contributed to the persistent financial disparities and wealth divide between African Americans and their European American counterparts (Darity & Mullen, 2020; Robinson, 2000). U.S. chattel slavery led to physical, mental, social, and economic injuries to millions of African Americans. These human rights violations and systemic injustices requires a systemic response. H.R. 40 provides a process to determine how reparations can be used as a reparative mechanism to address the legacy of slavery and dismantle systemic racism. Social workers have a pivotal role in advancing reparations as a social justice issue and a policy priority. Support of H.R. 40 is an essential step in the process.

To date, NASW has not issued a position statement on H.R. 40. Given the current social climate, it is imperative that the social work profession articulate an actionable stance in support of H.R. 40. This article examines the historical development and rationale for support of H.R. 40. The violations of human rights associated with chattel slavery and the legacy of institutionalized discrimination are major economic and social justice issues that warrant the attention and deliberate actions of the social work profession. Social workers and social work organizations have the potential to serve as powerful proponents in the quest to advance H.R. 40 through Congress.

### **Historical Development of H.R. 40**

In November 1989, Representative John Conyers Jr. (D-MI) introduced H.R. 3745, a bill to establish a commission to study the impact of slavery on African Americans. The preamble of the bill stated the purpose of the proposed legislation was:

To acknowledge the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery in the United States and the 13 American colonies between 1619 and 1865 and to establish a Commission to examine the institution of slavery, subsequent de jure and de facto and economic discrimination against African Americans, and the impact of these forces on living African Americans to make recommendations to the Congress on appropriate remedies, and for other purposes. (National African American Reparations Commission, 2022, para. 3)

H.R. 3745, entitled the Commission to Study Reparations Proposals for African Americans Act, did not progress to a House vote (Brooks, 2004; Conyers, 2013). However, Conyers vowed to continue efforts to get the bill passed. Following recommendations from the National African American Reparations Commission (NAARC), the bill was retitled the “Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act,” (National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America [N’COBRA], 2018). The revised bill became H.R. 40. Conyers stated that he selected the bill number as a symbol of the forty acres and a mule that the U.S. government promised freed slaves (Conyers, 2013). Since its introduction, H.R. 40 has gained support from more than 127 co-sponsors in Congress, as well as numerous organizations, including the Black Farmers Association, Institute of the Black World, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), N’COBRA, and more recently Black Lives Matter (King, 2019). Congressional proponents of H.R. 40 include Joseph Kennedy (D-MA), Shelia Jackson Lee (D-TX), Maxine Waters (D-CA), Terri Sewell (D-AL), Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), and Ilhan Omar (D-MN; King, 2019). Additionally, a number of books, such as Randall Robinson’s (2000) *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* and a number of journal essays such as “A Case for Reparations” by Ta-Nehisi Coates (2014) emerged supporting reparations for African American descendants of chattel slavery.

Based on growing support and the recommendations of the NAARC, Congressman Conyers introduced a revised H.R. 40 bill in 2017 during the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress of the United States. The new bill was drafted to reflect advances in legal and societal discourse around reparations as a mechanism to redress the damages of chattel slavery and institutional racism in shaping present day conditions. While the earlier version of the bill focused on the need to study reparations, the revised H.R. 40 bill emphasized the development of reparations proposals, programs, policies, processes, and initiatives (Kruppa & Burke, 2019).

The retitled bill, H.R. 40, “Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals/Processes for African Americans Act,” called for the following provisions:

- Acknowledgement of the fundamental injustices and inhumanity of slavery;
- Establishment of a commission to study slavery and the subsequent racial and economic discrimination against freed slaves;
- Research studies to document the impact of historical forces of slavery on living African Americans; and
- Establishment and sanction of a commission to make recommendations to Congress on appropriate remedies to redress the harm inflicted on living African Americans. (Commission to Study and Develop Reparations Proposal for African American Act, 2021)

Conyers introduced the bill in every Congress from 1989 until his resignation in 2017. Two years later, John Conyers passed away at the age of 90 without realizing his dream of a bill to examine reparations as a means to address the injustices of slavery and the ongoing legacy of racial and economic discrimination (Kruppa & Burke, 2019). Shelia Jackson Lee (D-TX), the new sponsor of H.R. 40, has continued to carry on the work to pass the bill in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Reparations became a central topic in the 2020 presidential campaign. As a result, H.R. 40 garnered significant momentum and popularity during the presidential primary. Democratic presidential candidates Cory Booker (D-NJ), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Tulsi Gabbard (D-Hawaii), and Beto O'Rourke (D-TX) individually announced their support for H.R. 40 while on the campaign trail. Additionally, Representative Karen Bass (D-CA), leader of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), announced her support for H.R. 40 during this period. The majority of proponents, including Bernie Sanders (D-VT) and Kamala Harris (D-CA), supported the idea of forming a commission to study reparations. However, Marianne Williamson was the only presidential candidate in the primary who announced clear support for monetary compensation. Williamson also offered a detailed plan for granting reparations to African Americans (King, 2019). While Shelia Jackson Lee took up the charge in the House of Representative, Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ) introduced a companion bill (S. 1083) in the U.S. Senate. Currently, S.1083 has 12 senatorial co-sponsors (U.S. Senate, 2019).

In the midst of racial tension and the novel coronavirus pandemic in the U.S., there is growing recognition of the need to bring awareness and support for H.R. 40 as a mechanism to begin a national discourse on systemic racism. Evidence of systemic racism is made apparent in the persistent wealth gap between African Americans and their European American counterparts. Darity and associates (2018) noted that median wealth among African American families is significantly lower at every education attainment level. Overall, European American families have 10 times the wealth of the average African American family (Ray & Perry, 2020). Scholars suggest that if current economic trends continue, the average African American household will need 228 years to accumulate the wealth of their European American counterparts (N'COBRA, 2018). In other words, if current trends prevail, European Americans would need to stand still on economic measures for 228 years in order to level the playing field for African Americans.

Absent deliberate and systematic changes in the U.S. economy, data suggest that African Americans are unlikely to achieve economic and social equality. Correcting racial wealth inequality and economic uplift will require a major redistributive effort on a national scale. Darity and Mullen (2020) assert that "Blacks cannot close the racial wealth gap by changing their individual behavior i.e., 'by assuming more personal responsibility' or acquiring the insights associated with [financial] literacy" (p. 3). According to the authors, racist policies, not lack of labor, created the persistent wealth gap between African and European Americans. Reparations have the potential to redress the socioeconomic damages of chattel slavery and institutional discrimination. However, without the passage of H.R. 40, the feasibility of reparations to address systemic racism remains speculative. H.R. 40 presents the potential to reverse current socioeconomic trends and racial inequities impacting living African Americans. A major feature of H.R. 40 is the establishment of a commission to propose appropriate remedies to redress the lingering effects of slavery and prevent future inequities.

The novel COVID-19 pandemic is likely to place additional burdens on the sparse economic resources of the African American community. According to Jones (2020), the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on African Americans "is due to a sustainable historical context, namely racial discrimination and capitalism that has restricted their

social mobility to largely frontline work” (para-17). As a result of chattel slavery, African American communities are starting from a 250-year deficit of wealth-building, opportunity, and access. In order to fulfill the mission of social work to advance human rights and advocate for social justice, the profession must broaden its lens to focus on community-based approaches aimed at collective equality. H.R. 40 has the potential to redress racial injustices and human suffering for a large segment of the U.S. population. Social workers have an ethical responsibility to identify appropriate ways to inform the public and advocate for a means to reverse and redress the social and economic injuries created by chattel slavery and its legacy. The vestiges of slavery continue to hinder the upward mobility of African Americans and their communities. The consequences are seen through enormous damages in long-term loss of income and other wealth-building opportunities.

Professional organizations such as the NASW, Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), and Influencing Social Policy (ISP) have the collective knowledge and influence to propel H.R. 40 forward. Thus far, the National Association of Social Black Workers (NABSW) is the only professional social work organization that has articulated a position on reparations and H.R. 40. A policy statement by NABSW makes it clear that the organization supports reparations and H.R. 40 (NABSW, 2020). The social work profession has the power and knowledge base to use its collective voice to foster increased awareness and support for passage of H.R. 40. The Delegate Assembly of NASW is responsible for adoption, collection, and promulgation of the positions and actions of the profession on various public policy and professional issues (NASW, 2020b). *Social Work Speaks* represents the collective voice of social workers from across the nation, and therefore can be an influential tool to advocate for the enactment of H.R. 40. The history and development of the 12 Grand Challenges of Social Work also serves as a prime example of how to begin the essential work toward the profession taking a pivotal role in the reparations movement (American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, 2013).

### **Rationale for Support of H.R. 40**

Perhaps the greatest difference between the values of social work and other human service professionals, such as psychology, nursing, and medicine, is recognition of the impact of broader societal issues on human well-being. Awareness and acknowledgement about how societal and cultural issues impact people’s ability to fully realize self-determination is represented in the core value of social justice. Social workers promote social justice through advocacy, raising public consciousness about social issues, and organizing communities. Social workers are ethically obligated to advocate for more equitable resources for vulnerable and marginalized populations. The NASW Code of Ethics state that social workers have a dual responsibility to clients and to the broader society (NASW, 2020c). Standard 6.01 defines social workers’ professional responsibility to promote the general welfare of society. This standard indicates that social workers should promote the development of people, their communities, and environments. In essence, social workers are obligated to seek full equality, social justice, and empowerment of vulnerable populations.

Similarly, Standard 6.02 advises social workers to “facilitate informed participation by the public in shaping social policies and institutions” (NASW, 2020c, Section 6.01, para. 1). Standard 6.01 encourages social workers to advocate on behalf of the public, while standard 6.02 encourages social workers to empower members of the public to advocate on their own behalf. Social workers can support H.R. 40 by educating and raising awareness among clients and stakeholders on the major tenets of the policy. Likewise, Standard 6.04 obligates social workers to:

- Ensure equal access to resources, employment, services, and opportunities.
- Expand opportunities and choices for all people, particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.
- Promote policies, practices, programs and knowledge-building that respect cultural and social diversity.
- Take actions necessary to prevent and eliminate domination or discrimination. (NASW, 2020c, paras. 1-4)

Social workers should use their advocacy skills to dispel myths related to reparations and advocate for passage of H.R. 40. Through their interaction with individuals, organizations, and communities, social workers have a “unique, bottom-up knowledge” about the impact of social problems and public policies (Weiss-Gal, 2017, p. 285). Coupled with the professional values and capacity to collaborate with communities, social workers are critically situated to advance or oppose policies. The Education Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) mandated by CSWE require that students are trained to engage in practices to advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice (CSWE, 2015). Social workers are taught to recognize the sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and cultural significance of systemic injustice. Advancing social justice through political participation and civic engagement is an ethical principle of the profession and a competency standard of CSWE. Therefore, social workers, social work educators, and social work organizations have a responsibility to study H.R. 40 and to educate others about the potential benefits of repairing the damages of slavery and systemic racism. African Americans are the only racial minority group that has had to fight to be considered human (Three-Fifths Compromise) and the only ethnic minority group that has not received reparations for government-sanctioned racial discrimination.

### **Systemic Oppression and the Legacy of Slavery**

In 1619 Africans were forced into the American colonies, not as valued members of society, but as chattel slaves for a life of permanent servitude based solely on race (Christopher, 2006). The institution of slavery was sanctioned and protected by the American government. It took a civil war to resolve the issue of slavery. However, the hardship for African Americans did not end with the Emancipation Proclamation. Freed slaves lived in a new form of bondage. As Freeman (2002) described:

...within all the history, there is a lie. The lie, told to southerners and everyone else, is that slavery disappeared after Appomattox. It did not. Slavery existed well into the twentieth century in America, in the form of peonage, whereby blacks

were fined for vagrancy or other supposed crimes and then forced to work off the debt on local farms for what often became a lifetime of brutal conditions. For those trapped in peonage, the technical distinction between themselves and the slaves of previous generations was meaningless. (xi)

Reparations have been proposed to recompense for the institution of slavery and subsequent, ongoing systemic oppression faced by African Americans. Brooks (2004) described the reparations movement as occurring in three waves—pre-Civil War, post-Civil War, and post-Holocaust. The first major effort toward reparations was the establishment of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, frequently referred to as the Freedman's Bureau. The Bureau was established by Congress in 1865. Field Order 15 authorized the allocation of 400,000 acres of land confiscated from Confederate states to be distributed to former slaves. However, few African American families actually received 40 acres and a mule (Ray & Perry, 2020). Shortly after Lincoln's assassination, his successor, Andrew Johnson, reversed Field Order 15 and confiscated land was returned to former slave owners (Winbush, 2003). The Bureau was completely dismantled in 1872, having attained few successes. Factors in the failure of the Freedman's Bureau include staunch opposition from White Americans in the south and the terrorist acts of the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) and similar racist groups (History.com Editors, 2020).

Following the collapse of the U.S. Freedman's Bureau, African Americans organized self-help groups for their own cause. The ex-slave pensions and bounty movement emerged to address the socioeconomic needs of recently freed slaves. According to Winbush (2003), between 1890 and 1917, more than 600,000 ex-slaves lobbied the American government for uncompensated labor. The movement constituted a collective effort by recently freed slaves to address their socioeconomic needs. The best known of the various groups that emerged is the Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association of the United States of America (MRB & PA).

Walter R. Vaughan, a White American newspaper editor in Omaha, Nebraska, published a pamphlet entitled "Freedmen's Pension Bill: A Plea for American Freedmen." As an editor of a major newspaper, Vaughan influenced Congressman William James Connell (R-NE) to introduce a bill in 1890 that modeled the pension plan for Union soldiers. Born in Selma, Alabama and a loyalist to the south, Vaughan's motivation was rooted in a belief that pensions to former slaves would increase financial viability and bring economic stability to the New South (Perry, 2010).

Isaiah Dickerson, an African American employed by Vaughan as a distributor of the Freedmen Pension Bill pamphlet, would later join with Callie House, a single mother and former slave from Nashville, Tennessee, to launch their own reparations effort. Assisted by Vaughan, Dickerson and House established the MRB & PA in 1897 (Perry, 2010). The Association became one of the first organizations to campaign for reparations. The organization's mission was to advocate for congressional legislation to grant financial compensation to former slaves in the form of a pension payment program (Perry, 2010). House became the national spokesperson with Nashville, Tennessee serving as the headquarters for the movement. For nearly 30 years House struggled to secure a pension program for the uncompensated labor of ex-slaves and their descendants. By 1917, the

MRB & PA efforts were thwarted by accusations of mail fraud and the conviction of leading reparations activists, including Callie House (Berry, 1972; Francis, 2020; Perry, 2010).

Following the Emancipation Proclamation, institutionalized racism took the form of Black Codes, convict leasing, peonage, Sundown towns, and Jim Crow laws. These forms of de jure and de facto practices continued to inflict harm on African Americans for more than 100 years after emancipation (Blackmon, 2008; Evans & Wilkins, 2019; Freeman, 2002). Scholars agree that the residual effects of slavery have contributed to the socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and psychological oppression of African Americans (Billingsley, 1968; DeGruy, 2005; Wilkins et al., 2013). Racially-driven and divisive policies that have excluded or disadvantaged African Americans post-reconstruction include the G.I. bill and the Social Security Act (Ray & Perry, 2020).

The transgenerational damages of systemic oppression are evident by the persistent financial and health disparities between African Americans and European Americans. African Americans are overrepresented on measures of adverse health outcomes, the racial wealth gap, and mass incarceration, including the school-to-prison pipeline (Alexander, 2010; Bond Huie et al., 2003; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005; DeGruy, 2005; Skiba et al., 2014). Health, education, and economic outcomes are strongly correlated with income and wealth. Possession of financial assets (e.g., stocks and bonds, home ownership, retirement savings, etc.) provides a safety net across the lifespan and has the potential to set up future generations for success. A personal safety net reduces vulnerabilities for future generations. Contemporary discrimination alone does not adequately explain the persistence of economic and health disparities of African Americans compared to other racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. Therefore, scholars must look for effective remedies to repair past and present damages.

The U.S. government has paid reparations to some groups, but African Americans have not received restitution for egregious injustices and human rights violation. In contrast, Japanese Americans were paid \$1.5 billion post-World War II for their internment during the war (Ray & Perry, 2020). With the assistance of the U.S. government via the Marshall Plan, Holocaust survivors received financial reparations from West Germany. Native Americans have received land and other financial benefits for forcible removal and exile from their homelands (Ray & Perry, 2020).

### **Atonement and Making Amends**

The case for reparations can be made on economic, social, and moral grounds. Primarily a political concept, the term reparations means to repair. Reparations typically involve a government or an official entity's efforts to compensate for inflicted harm or social injury upon a group of people (de Greiff, 2006). Restitution for social injuries committed upon a community by a government or an official entity may take several forms such as direct monetary compensation, formal apologies, or social services and programs (Aiyetoro, 2002; Robinson, 2000). Historically, there are documented cases of successful compensation for social injuries, such as those received by Jewish survivors of the German Holocaust and Japanese Americans after World War II (Roht-Arriaza, 2004).

Reparations are an internationally recognized means of restitution and atonement for survivors of egregious acts and their descendants. The dual purpose of this form of redress is to acknowledge the wrong that has been committed and to atone for the injury. Reparations allow victims to receive compensation for preventable and avoidable social injuries, while simultaneously requiring legal accountability of perpetrators who commit or reap the benefits of social injuries and human rights violations (Roht-Arriaza, 2004). According to N'COBRA (2020), full reparations involves five major components: *cessation* (discontinuation of the offensive action), *restitution* (reversing injuries), *compensation* (identifies who is eligible and to what or how much), *satisfaction* (formal apology for the perpetration of gross human rights violations), and *rehabilitation* (identification of the form and measure of healing warranted). Full reparations aim to ameliorate all consequences of the harm caused by gross violations of human rights. N'COBRA has proposed potential resolutions in each of the five areas. For example, *restitution* could take the form of restoring stolen land, intellectual property, and artistic creations, among other possibilities. Tax exemption similar to what has been afforded to Native Americans is presented as a method of *compensation*. Removal of the confederate flag and statues commemorating the institution and perpetrators of slavery may be viewed as a form of *cessation*.

## Discussion

Reparations can take multiple forms such as direct monetary payments, formal apology, truth-telling, or social service programs. Passage of H.R. 40 would authorize the legislative branch of the American government to form the groundwork for the possibility of a reparations program. The bill would establish a congressional commission to investigate the transgenerational effects of slavery and assess the feasibility of recompense. Under the current bill, the commission would be known as the Commission to Study and Develop Proposals for Reparations for African Americans. Members appointed to the commission would make a formal recommendation to the U.S. Congress on the issue of reparations. A similar commission was established by the U.S. Congress to investigate the circumstances of mass internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. H.R. 40 calls upon the federal government to acknowledge that the issue of slavery and the abuses inflicted upon African Americans warrant investigation and consideration for recompense. Atonement by the American government for its part in the institution of slavery and ongoing discrimination might go a long way in repairing past injustices and give credence to the current call to end white supremacy.

As a profession keenly aware of the social and economic disparities that exist in contemporary society, social workers should have a moral and ethical interest in passage of H.R. 40. The potential exists for social workers to mobilize support for passage of H.R. 40. Social workers' education and training provides them with a unique understanding of the challenges that oppressed and economically disadvantaged communities confront. Understanding how public and social welfare policy contribute, maintain, or ameliorate human suffering is an important component of social work. The profession is also guided by an ethical value of social justice in order to pursue social change and challenge social injustices (NASW, 2020c). The fundamental issue for social workers is examination of

opportunities to correct the unequal and inequitable quality of life experienced by individuals and communities.

A first step in raising awareness and support for H.R. 40 is acknowledgment and recognition that many of the social programs introduced in the 1930s as a safety net were structured to exclude African Americans from benefits. African Americans did not get full access to the federal safety net until 1965. Moreover, the safety net excluded benefits for domestic and agricultural workers, occupations in which a majority of African Americans were employed (Darity & Mullen, 2020). Such past injustices continue to impact the socioeconomic well-being of African Americans. Structural inequities are a major factor in the current efforts to eradicate COVID-19. Recht and Weber (2021) reported that the vast majority of vaccination sites are concentrated in communities where predominantly European Americans reside. Moreover, compared to African Americans, European Americans are vaccinated at two to three times higher rates. The disproportionate effects of COVID-19, along with the national outcry to end police brutality (Crabtree, 2020), illuminates the necessity to reject the ideology of white supremacy and anti-blackness.

At the core of many social problems that social workers are called upon to address is structural and systemic inequities based on race. In many instances, the needs of people of color, particularly, African Americans have been neglected, undervalued, and exploited. Traditional social service programs have not eliminated the socioeconomic disparities that exist between African Americans and European Americans. Historically, many of these programs excluded individuals and communities most in need. Therefore, racial disparities and disproportionality have continued to persist. For example, McDaniel et al. (2017) identified racial disparities throughout service delivery (access, service, and treatment) for programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Child Support Enforcement Program, Child Care and Development Fund, Head Start, and Family and Youth Services Bureau. Research has also documented the ongoing racial disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system, with African American children and families most significantly impacted by institutionalized racism (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020). The ultimate goal of a comprehensive reparations plan is to redress the socioeconomic inequalities associated with race. Interpretation of the NASW Code of Ethics would certainly seem to align with this goal. Social workers have an opportunity to make their voices heard and raise awareness about the potential for H.R. 40 to improve the lives and communities of an oppressed population. Therefore, it seems social workers should be involved in advocacy, political activism, and public education to ensure passage of H.R. 40. A fundamental component of social work that sets the discipline apart from other helping professions is the quest for social justice. Social workers should be engaged in this legislation and become knowledgeable enough about the topic to have an appointment on the commission once the bill is passed.

## **Conclusions**

The human rights of African Americans were violated for more than 400 years. As a result of slavery and its residual inequities, African Americans continue to endure structural oppression across social, health, and economic systems. While the debate about reparations

for African American descendants of chattel slavery is not new, social workers' position on this issue is largely unknown. The social work profession has a broad reach to positively impact awareness and expand knowledge on reparations and H.R. 40. Educating students and other constituents about the legacies and present-day impact of slavery and systemic racism is greatly needed to begin a dialogue on the passage of H.R. 40. As the profession evolves toward the ideology of cultural humility and anti-racism, acknowledging and challenging systemic inequities are essential to dismantling white supremacy and domination.

Many social workers are comfortable with micro-level interventions that involve working directly with individuals from vulnerable and impoverished populations. What must come into clearer focus is engagement in macro-level work that improves population-based outcomes. A study by Apgar (2020) found that only 13% of 474 graduate level social work students indicated an interest in macro practice at the time of admission. Social work curricula must emphasize the need for social workers in administration, community organizing, policy development and evaluation, and other macro-level work (Russell, 2020). Social workers must not abdicate their responsibility to work toward social reform. Through both policy practice and legislative action, social workers can claim a pivotal role in the quest for social justice for African American descendants of chattel slavery. Social justice advocacy is driven by policy. H.R. 40 has the potential to usher in an unprecedented level of social reform in the U.S. Full participation in the 'American Dream' has not been practical for a large segment of the U.S. population. Passage of H.R. 40 presents an opportunity to repair the racial divide and injuries perpetuated by slavery and institutionalized discrimination. The preamble of the NASW Code of Ethics establishes an underlying assumption in the inherent dignity and inalienable rights of all human beings.

Reparations provide a framework to restore the collective dignity and worth of populations impacted by human rights violations. The movement for reparations will depend on support from an array of diverse individuals, groups, and organizations. Boris Bittker was born 1916 and lived until 2005. He was a Yale Law School professor and European American who penned the first book on African American reparations, *The Case for Black Reparations* (Bittker, 1973). The groundbreaking work has been described as ahead of its time. It will take continuation of this type of bold scholarship, courage, and commitment to ensure passage of H.R. 40.

The historical context for reparations for African American descendants of slavery and the significance of H.R. 40 are the focal points of this article. Of primacy is the recognition that social workers can play an integral role in addressing issues and challenges faced by reparation advocates. Moving forward, the social work profession can employ its powerful voice to:

1. Garner support for passage of H.R. 40 through the dissemination of information and consciousness-raising through organizations such as NASW, CSWE, and ISP.
2. Initiate an educational campaign to promulgate knowledge and dispel myths associated with reparations and H.R. 40.

3. Draft a policy position on H.R. 40 for dissemination through *Social Work Speaks*.
4. Dedicate a special issue of the profession's flagship journals to advance literature, research studies, and scholarly work on the topic of reparations.
5. Develop a curricular guide as a resource to encourage social work faculty to teach content on reparations as both a social justice issue and policy priority.

The vestiges of slavery and systemic racism continue. The consequences are seen through long-term loss of income, opportunity, and premature loss of life. The violent deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other recent abuses of unarmed African Americans at the hands of police officers have galvanized Americans into unprecedented conversations about systemic racism. This national dialogue presents an opportune time to introduce H.R. 40 and reparations into mainstream thinking as there is growing support for this bill. For example, the iconic ice cream brand Ben & Jerry announced the company's support for H.R. 40 in 2019 (Taylor, 2020). Social work is a profession dedicated to advancing human rights and social justice. It is vitally important that reparations become a central component of the social justice discourse among social workers. Social workers are uniquely situated to promote an understanding of the importance of H.R. 40. This is the time to aggressively support the movement of H.R. 40 on Capitol Hill. It is imperative that the profession articulate a clear stance and disseminate information to stakeholders and constituencies on H.R. 40 and reparations. This is a call to action.

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