

CARR CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL

The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre

Carr Center
Discussion Paper



The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre

Carr Center for Human Rights Policy
Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard University
June 8, 2021

A Carr Center event co-sponsored with the African American Intellectual History Society (AAIHS)

The views expressed in the Carr Center Discussion Paper Series are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the John F. Kennedy School of Government or of Harvard University. Faculty Research Working Papers have not undergone formal review and approval. Such papers are included in this series to elicit feedback and to encourage debate on important public policy challenges. Copyright belongs to the author(s). Papers may be downloaded for personal use only.

The Panelists



KEISHA N. BLAIN

Associate Professor of History, University of Pittsburgh; Carr Center Fellow



REP. REGINA GOODWIN

State Representative & Chair, OK Legislative Black Caucus



DREISEN HEATH

Researcher & Advocate, Human Rights Watch



KARLOS K. HILL

Regents' Professor & Department Chair, Clara Luper Department of African and African-American Studies, University of Oklahoma



SUSHMA RAMAN

Executive Director, Carr Center; Panel Facilitator

Introduction

May 31, 2021, marks the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre, when a violent white mob nearly destroyed the formerly thriving and prosperous African American community in the Greenwood District of Tulsa, also known as Black Wall Street. Over 300 African Americans were killed, and thousands were displaced. Hundreds of homes and businesses burned to the ground.

At the time, Greenwood, like so many African American neighborhoods and townships across the United States, was situated in a particular spatial and temporal context marked by both progress and promise, as well as violence and discrimination.

In the decades since, the Massacre was covered up, local officials obstructed the redevelopment of Greenwood, and the local chapter of the KKK became one of the largest in the US.

We spoke with a group of leaders, policymakers, academics, and researchers to discuss the historical legacy of the Massacre, its effects on current-day policy and organizing debates related to racial justice, and the movement for reparations.

What are some of the continuing impacts today from the Tulsa Race Massacre?

DREISEN HEATH The continuing impacts from the Massacre are the impacts of redlining. Tulsa was one of 239 cities across the US that was redlined. Much of the area in the Greenwood District was redlined to clear the way for urban renewal efforts. These are federally financed projects that the local government is carrying out to displace Black families and businesses and push people further into areas of deprivation in north Tulsa where high populations of Black Tulsans live. Why is it that 100 years after this atrocity, Black Tulsans are still reeling from it? The psychological impacts have not been addressed, as well as the material conditions that people are living in, the under-resourced schools in north Tulsa that primarily serve Black and brown students, and the lack of access to healthcare. Black Tulsans are policed in a more abusive way than their white counterparts, which is connected to life expectancy, health outcomes, education access, and food access. We're continually seeing the impacts of the Massacre and subsequent racist policies.

At Human Rights Watch, we issued a series of reports on Tulsa, the first being an in-depth look into policing, poverty, and racial inequality in Tulsa, which really stems from a legacy of structural violence from the Massacre, and even pre-Massacre. Over time, a lot of the details about the aftermath of the Massacre are still not as widely talked about, such as the promises by the Chamber of Commerce to provide full restitution and reparation, and the actions by city officials to collude with the real estate exchange (white businessmen) to turn Greenwood into a railroad site and an industrial site. This land has not been given back to its Black rightful owners. There are numerous economic development efforts that are posing as efforts for Black Tulsans, but many of them have been developed without consultation with the community, which is key to the outcomes actually being beneficial to Black Tulsans.

REGINA GOODWIN Quite often, I'm driving down Greenwood Avenue, the very street that I grew up on, and I see what has become a gentrified area. You can talk about it as a new kind of massacre, if you will, as it relates to the erasing of a culture and businesses that once were. In 1921, you had Black folks living there who were industrious, Black folks who had ingenuity and resilience in the face of hatred and laws that said Black folks and white folks were not allowed to live together. And even today we're challenged with issues of race.

The initial removal of Black persons from land and the taking of land continued with urban renewal — which is urban removal of Black persons. We were displaced from homes and land, underpaid, homes bulldozed, and the land was banked by government authorities. Controlling and diminishing populations and businesses occurred with the I-244 expressway cutting through the heart of the Greenwood community. The community and businesses

were bypassed. Additionally, policing disproportionately and adversely impacted the Black community in 1921, and the disparate treatment of the Black population by some law enforcement still occurs today in 2021.

Today, we spoke on a Congressional hearing to ask for reparations and to talk about the importance of remembering and repair. There have been remedies sought for more than 30 years, and there have been discussions about the need for HR 40 in Congress. One hundred years have passed, and we can talk about the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, we can talk about HR 40, we can talk about a victim compensation fund — we can talk about a number of remedies, but the quickest remedy is a right heart and a right mind, to just do the right thing. We are at a crossroads here in America where racism has been amplified, and it was that same racism that triggered the total devastation of that Greenwood community where Black folks were doing well, even in the midst of segregation, and so we have to grapple today with the question of race. When are we going to stop just talking about it and only hearing about remedies and actually enact and implement good policy that gets us where we need to be? Will we pass on from this world without seeing real justice?

KEISHA BLAIN As someone who has thought a lot about the politics of public memory, one important aspect of this work is trying to understand, despite all that has been done up until this moment, why so many people still don't know about the Massacre. There's another angle to this, and it's the concerted effort of local and state officials and various players in making sure that the history of the Tulsa Race Massacre would be hidden. For decades, scholars and journalists have been working against so many obstacles just to unearth the truth of the Massacre. Media and official accounts have gone to great lengths to conceal information. For many years, the Tulsa Tribune and the Tulsa World newspapers absolutely refused to mention that the Tulsa Race Massacre even happened. Oklahoma history textbooks erased the Massacre, and in the 1920s and 1930s you would be hard-pressed to find references to what took place in 1921. These are just a few examples of how not only law enforcement but also journalists, university officials, and so many other individuals have played a hand in concealing the history of what took place in 1921.

I also want us to think about the psychological and emotional impacts of the Massacre. Even today, challenges in the Greenwood District remain. All of these efforts that were made to hide the history need to be discussed openly, and newspapers, journalists, and law enforcement officials — all the players who ultimately contributed to concealing the history — need to be confronted as we think about reparations. We should think far beyond just the millions of dollars that were lost and even more about the kinds of repair needed to address not just what happened in 1921, but what has happened since 1921 to this very day.



Havoc wrought in a black residential area of Tulsa, Oklahoma, following the race riots, June 6, 1921.

What are your thoughts on the importance of reparations and the current efforts to provide reparations to the Tulsa Race Massacre's victims, survivors, and their descendants?

REGINA GOODWIN As folks who have studied this issue will know, there were no reparations, there was no redress, there was no restoration, there was no reclamation of land. And even until this day, we're still seeking the same reparations as were talked about in HR 40 and were talked about regarding enslaved persons and their entitlement to reparations. We have that tenacity, we have that remembrance of the souls that were lost, because these aren't just black and white facts. These are people who had children, who are mothers and fathers and never returned to their homes, there were children who never saw their uncles and aunts again — and this is something that we carry with us every day.

Reparations remain owed to survivors and descendants. Mrs. Viola Ford Fletcher, 107; Mrs. Lessie Benningfield Randle, 106; and Mr. Hughes van Ellis, 100, are known survivors and are past due for cash payments. My great-grandmother, Carlie Marie Goodwin, and great-grandfather, James Henri Goodwin, sought reparations after the 1921 Race Massacre and were rejected. Members of the Goodwin family were also plaintiffs in the 2003 reparations lawsuit led by Attorney Charles Ogletree. The third reparations lawsuit launched in 2020 states public nuisance and ongoing harm and is not hampered by time barred language. We must keep pressing the issue. There can be no justice without reparations.

KARLOS K. HILL We need to provide reparations and enact legislation that deals with not only the reparation demands that are just and necessary, but it also has to be about the community today. A reparations program is owed to the community because the Massacre was not just the deadliest attack on a Black community, it also represents a liquidation of intergenerational Black wealth. There are some current estimates that tell us that if you were to put the Greenwood District on the open market today circa its 1921 value, it would be worth \$600 million in today's dollars. But in less than 24 hours, all of that wealth was liquidated. If we take the basic math of today's investment landscape and consider if Greenwood would have grown even 1 percent yearly, on average, for the last 100 years, imagine what that could be. This is why the call for reparations is so urgent. It's not just reckoning with some of the most polarizing legacies around the Massacre, such as the mass graves, but it's also about justice. If the hundredth anniversary is to mean anything, it should mean mustering the courage, for once, to do right by America's victims of white supremacist violence.

DREISEN HEATH Reparations are the right thing to do. Financial reparations to the survivors, financial reparations to the descendants, and an economic enterprise zone — not one that doesn't benefit Black Tulsans directly, but one that is made in their likeness and image with their consultation, from start to finish. We're at a critical moment, a defining moment. We cannot pass up this opportunity to do right, and doing right is to provide comprehensive reparations. There is no other way to put it. Symbolic measures are not enough for the destruction that has occurred for over

a century. Within international human rights law, there are various forms of repair that need to be administered, but reparations are a victim-centered approach. It doesn't mean that government authorities will come and tell you what the reparations are to be. It means that the people who have been impacted — the survivors, victims, and the broader Black community — need to be a part of the design and implementation of what reparative justice looks like in Tulsa. There need to be institutional and legal reforms that end the abuse in Tulsa, there needs to be targeted programming that is separate from public policy, and there need to be targeted investments that not just level the playing field but restore Tulsa's Black district to the prosperous community that it once was.

There is currently a sentiment among many elected officials around the notion that teaching critical race theory or about African American history is harmful to students and should be banned. How do we think about rebuilding and restoring memory and reclaiming narratives?

KEISHA BLAIN So many people say, "Let's talk about race, let's talk about racism, let's talk about our history, and let's confront our history." Granted, there will always be people who never want to talk about the full extent of our history because if you sugarcoat the history, you don't have to deal with redress. If you don't confront the fact that local newspapers were complicit, if you don't confront the fact that law enforcement helped in the devastation and didn't protect Black citizens, if you're not honest about the role that university officials played, if you're not honest about the role that writers and historians might have played in making sure that those narratives were not included in textbooks, then you're able to sidestep redress and you're able to, at best, talk about some kind of symbolic gesture, which is what we've seen over and over again. And that's easy to do. But what's not easy to do is for a newspaper to come out and say they did conceal what happened and intentionally did not speak about it.

KARLOS K. HILL We could make this simple: the attacks on critical race theory, Black studies, and ethnic studies, both in higher education and in secondary education, is about whose history we center in the discussion of American history. Do we center it on people of color — their experiences, their voices — and highlight the trauma, the suffering, the oppression, and the ways in which there needs to be historical redress today? Or do we privilege perspectives that would deny those realities and write histories that don't talk about slavery as chattel slavery and as a brutal institution? Or, in talking about the Massacre, do we not mention the mass graves, the loss of lives, and the destruction without restitution? That's what this debate is about: whose history, perspectives, and narratives

get centered. When you center victims, survivors, and descendants, you have to talk about it as a Massacre at a minimum. This is why, for me, if the 100th anniversary is to mean anything, it has to be about centering the voices and narratives of victims, survivors, and their descendants.

REGINA GOODWIN When you talk about centering narratives, it's the dominant culture that decides what is centered. The dominant culture decides, by and large, that the majority will do what the majority will do. It doesn't mean that it's fair, it doesn't mean it benefits all of humanity. It's this mob mentality that says, "We are right, and the majority rules." We hear people talk of the "Sorry Concept" all the time, yet nothing is done. The "I'm sorry" comes out of the same mouth of someone who doesn't want accurate history taught, who doesn't want a small white child to be discomforted because little Black children's homes and families were destroyed and decimated, and they don't want a small white child made uncomfortable by that teaching or language. So, they use the "I'm sorry" language as a way to deflect and distract, to make something disappear. They say, "I'm sorry about the tragedy, however, we're not going to deal with reparations. I'm sorry, however, we don't want you teaching in this classroom at any level, because you might happen to teach accurate history that makes me, as someone who has been an offender, actually look at myself."

I voted and argued against Oklahoma HB1775, which is now signed into law. It is another attempt to confuse proper discussion on the racist wrongs of America. Folks don't like to look at our racist history, but America is absolutely steeped in racism. This argument about not wanting individuals to be uncomfortable is white privilege, in a white-male-dominated society, and it's the predominant culture dictating who we are to be and what we are to be discussing.

How can we make HR 40, the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act, a reality? What needs to be done?

DREISEN HEATH As someone working to pass HR 40, the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act, I watched it receive its first ever vote at a House subcommittee in its 32-year history. Keep in mind that this is not for implementation or cash payouts — it's a study and remedy bill. It's progress that we've gotten here, but there is still a stalling factor in politics to delay it. There is an overwhelming support for HR 40. We have 185 co-sponsors in the House of Representatives. Most bills don't ever get that many or even get floor time for discussion. We have mobilized grassroots national organizations across the country, many of whom are seeing reparations processes pan out in their own communities

and wonder why it's not happening at the federal level. Now, there's a clear pathway toward action. Will white comfort and ignorance be put aside for the broader benefit of this country? We'll have to wait and see.

REGINA GOODWIN What keeps us disconnected and not moving forward is getting into intellectual conversations about where we start, and how it's so difficult to conceptualize because there are millions of folks that we would have to compensate. Just begin, and I guarantee you will have millions of folks who are willing to start in a certain phase, and in a particular group. HR 40 seeks a study, but beyond studies, impacted Black descendants and citizens should in large part contribute workable plans, and these good plans can be phased in a timely fashion and should be implemented. Compensating generations and immediate investments in Black communities and the eradication of harmful policies are overdue. This idea that we have to be paralyzed and do nothing because the issue is so large and we don't know where to start is a tired argument, it's been said for decades. The beautiful thing is that there are communities now that are beginning to talk about and distribute reparations, whether it's land, apprenticeships, public-private relationships as it relates to businesses, or tax credits.

Carr Center Discussion Paper

**Carr Center for Human Rights Policy
Harvard Kennedy School
79 JFK Street
Cambridge, MA 02138**

Statements and views expressed in this report are solely those of the author and do not imply endorsement by Harvard University, the Harvard Kennedy School, or the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy.

Copyright 2021, President and Fellows of Harvard College
Printed in the United States of America



**This publication was published by the Carr Center for
Human Rights Policy at the John F. Kennedy School of
Government at Harvard University**

Copyright 2021, President and Fellows of Harvard College
Printed in the United States of America

79 JFK Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

617.495.5819
<https://carrcenter.hks.harvard.edu>

