

Slavery Reparations In The US: How can it be done?



Students listen to Dr. Thomas Craemer talk on slavery reparations at the African American Cultural Center in Storrs, Conn., On Feb. 19, 2026.
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A University of Connecticut professor and reparations expert spoke to the African American Cultural Center (AACC) about his research on U.S. reparations for slavery on Wednesday.

Dr. Thomas Craemer is a professor of public policy at UConn. He began his lecture by explaining where — as someone born and raised in Germany — his interest in U.S. slavery reparations began. He said he learned about the Holocaust extensively in high school, which filled him with shame.

Craemer said when he got older, he met Miecú Langer, a Jewish man who survived five concentration camps and a death march. Despite the horrors Langer withstood, he returned to Germany and benefited from a monthly pension equivalent to \$2,500 in 2022. Craemer said he could not believe Langer would return to Germany, but his pension made him curious about quantifying extreme loss.

“There is no amount that can actually represent his losses,” Craemer said. “What price tag

do you put on losing your entire extended family? When your loved ones and your own life and suffering and your health, no price. But it’s a gesture.”

From this, Craemer said he determined that reparations “can’t repair the past,” but if done correctly, they can “repair the relationship between the victimized side and the perpetrator side.” He identified specific elements that he thought reparations required to be successful.

Craemer determined that first, any injustices must cease with a promise to never resume them. Then, a formal apology must be made, one made credible with a “token of sincerity.”

Craemer said this token, which can be monetary, should mean something to whoever’s receiving reparations. He said the final element was establishing a “culture of memory,” which ensures the injustices stay talked about through things like education, dialogue, research, museums and more.

Afterward, Craemer gave an overview of historical reparation efforts, which were often imposed after wars, like Germany and its allies paying other countries after World War I. But after World War II, repara-

tions for human rights abuses became more common, notably with Germany’s self-imposed reparations to Holocaust victims. Craemer highlighted that the U.S. also began engaging in reparation efforts by compensating Indigenous Americans and Japanese Americans who were impacted by internment camps, though not until 1988.

Craemer then narrowed in on specific reparation efforts made in the U.S. because of slavery. He started with George Washington’s decision to free his slaves in his will and called it a “naive idea” that never caught on. Craemer said the first relevant example was “40 acres and a mule,” a promise made during the Civil War that would redistribute Confederate land to freed slaves but got overturned by President Andrew Johnson.

More recently, some places, like the state of California and Georgetown University, have made active efforts toward reparations, Craemer said. However, the federal government has not acted. Craemer said a bill about reparations has been introduced to Congress every year since 1989 but never passed.

“It’s a double standard,”

Craemer said. “Why are African American reparations not treated with the same urgency as other reparations?”

Much of Craemer’s reparation work focuses on how to calculate financial losses for reparations. He broke these cost areas down into four categories: lost wages, lost capital, loss of opportunity for capital and pain and suffering.

To calculate the economic losses, Craemer converted past wage prices to their equivalent in 2022 dollars and factored in a 24-hour workday for slaves. To calculate pain and suffering, Craemer said he multiplied the economic loss by 1.5, though he said other estimates sometimes multiply by five instead. By compiling the total number of slaves between 1776 and 1860, Craemer calculated a total loss cost of \$71.3 quadrillion.

“That’s astronomical,” Craemer said. “But that’s not just a made-up number, that comes from the hours that were lost.”

Craemer said the ripple effects of slavery and subsequent racism in the U.S. could justify reparations for African Americans for other losses, like health and education disparities, mass incarceration,

redlining and the war on drugs.

The talk ended with some logistical questions to keep in mind when it comes to slavery reparations. Craemer said it can be complicated to determine who should pay, as it could be the federal government, state governments, descendants of slaveowners or others who benefited from slave labor historically most directly.

Angela Adu-Boateng, a fourth-semester biology major who works at the AACC, said she was surprised by how Craemer’s reparation model took into account conditions like pain and suffering.

“It went beyond just the labor aspect and was inclusive of experiences that can’t necessarily be quantified,” Adu-Boateng said.

The event was organized by Eric Meade, a second-semester graduate student studying public administration. He said he is helping Craemer, who is his advisor, with a book about slavery reparations research.

“It’s the 100th year anniversary of Black History Month, so it would be cool to show reparation studies and put it at the forefront of minds,” Meade said. “A lot of people aren’t too knowledgeable about that.”

