

Can Reparations Contribute to Peace and Stability Following Violence and Human Rights Abuses?

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Survivors often perceive that reparations contribute to their sense of accountability following atrocities. When justice and accountability efforts are meaningful to survivors, it may help interrupt cycles of violence or instability that can emerge from unaddressed harms, desires for revenge, or desperate situations.

Justice mechanisms that are designed to mitigate affected communities' grievances—particularly when they are focused on addressing individual harms—can contribute to lasting peace. When damages are directly addressed, it can signal that the government or other authorities are serious about peace, and it can decrease the mobilization or recruitment of people to turn to violence to address their needs (Loyle and Appel 2017).

A Right to Repair

Reparations are a core pillar of justice and accountability in the wake of human rights violations. They are designed in many different ways, but the overarching goal of a reparations mechanism or policy is to repair harm. In international law, including a UN resolution adopted in 2005, victims have a right to "full and effective reparation." This includes:

<i>Restitution</i>	Restoring victims to their original situation, as much as it may be possible
<i>Compensation</i>	Providing economic recognition of harms and lost opportunities
<i>Rehabilitation</i>	Addressing victims' needs through medical, psychological, legal, and social services
<i>Satisfaction</i>	Seeking closure, such as through the disclosure of information, public apologies, sanctions on those responsible, return of remains
<i>Guarantees of non-repetition</i>	Putting military, judicial, and other protections in place to prevent future abuses

Survivors Want Reparations

In many contexts, survivors share that they want reparations to help address the wrongs they experienced, and they have preferences for how reparations should be designed to meet their needs. For example, when CVT conducted interviews with survivors in northern Uganda, they overwhelmingly expressed hope for reparations (Golden et al., 2025). One young man who was born in captivity, after his mother was abducted as a child, explained that justice must involve a personal focus, improving the lives of survivors, including himself:

Justice is repairing *me*. To a very low extent, it is taking someone to court, maybe to answer for their crimes. But I see that has little impact on me; repairing *me* is justice because it has a greater impact on me, it will change my life. I will not have to worry about everything that happened to me, or think about the perpetrator or anything because my life will be better off and I will be happier. If I am repaired now...I don't have to look at what happened, I will just look forward...I think it is most important to focus on repairing the lives, the human repair...I think that is the most important thing to me because...even when the perpetrators are prosecuted, the survivors and the victims stay in their same states.

In a nationally representative survey of Ethiopians (Pham et al. 2023), respondents were asked what “holding someone accountable” means to them. The most common response was that accountability involved compensation for the victim. About two-thirds of respondents said that it was very or extremely important that there are reparations mechanisms. They were particularly interested in individual reparations, with fully 90 percent of respondents saying that it would not be acceptable if there were community reparations only.

In northern Iraq, Yazidi survivors of ISIS atrocities perceive financial, legal, and other reparative support as an essential component of justice. Survivors shared how this support is directly related to compensating for the money they spent trying to secure their loved ones’ release from captivity and to their needs for re-establishing normalcy in their lives today. Women, in particular, face precarious economic situations and expressed the need for reparative support (Akhavan et al. 2020).

Survivors prioritize certain types of repair, and explicitly do not want other types, depending on their situations and the harms they endured. For example, wives of disappeared victims in Nepal did want reparation, but did not want it to distract from their claim to pursuing truth about the missing. They were resistant to framing reparations as “compensation,” but welcomed relief to address their economic needs and provide acknowledgement of their loss (Robins 2011).

Support for reparations does not mean that survivors do not also want other types of justice mechanisms. But for many survivors, in these cases as well as in other contexts, reparations are the most direct and tangible expression of attempting to remedy the wrongs they endured.

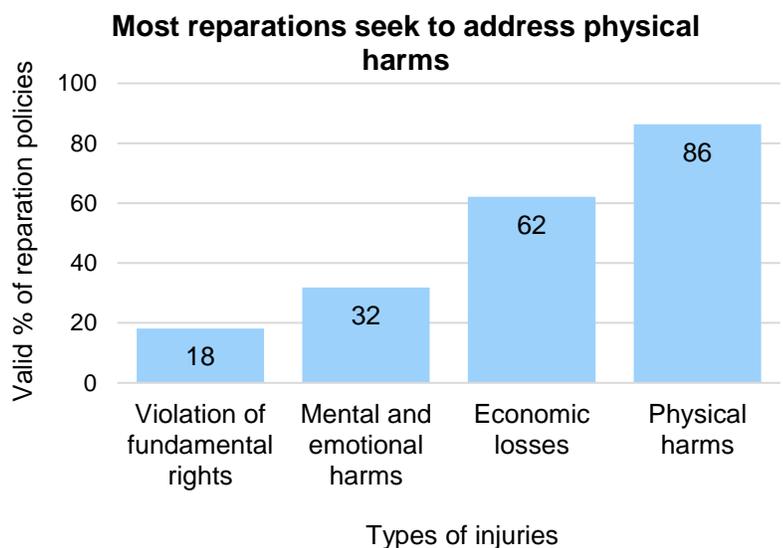
Many Forms of Reparations

A primary strength of reparations as a transitional justice mechanism is that they can be customized to fit the needs of the survivors and the particularities of the context. This results in significant variability in how reparations can be designed and implemented.

According to the [Transitional Justice Evaluation Tools](#) database (Dancy et al. 2024), there have been 73 state-sanctioned reparations policies in 50 countries, created from 1977 to 2022, to address human rights violations that occurred before a democratic transition or as a result of intrastate conflict (this doesn’t include those ordered by court rulings, such as in [DRC and Mali through the International Criminal Court](#)). The stated aims of these policies are compensation (43%), recognition (15%), and reconciliation (14%).

The number of survivors receiving benefits through these mechanisms ranges from just a few hundred, such as Croatia’s [reparations law](#) intended to [support victims of sexual violence](#), to over a million people through Colombia’s [ongoing implementation](#) of the [2011 Law on Victims and Land Restitution](#) (Law 1448).

The reparations mechanisms in the TJET database are designed to address physical harms (such as death or injury), economic losses (such as loss of income or assets), mental or emotional effects of violations, and violations of fundamental rights (such as rights of citizenship or freedom of expression).



Almost all include individual reparations. The policies almost always provide survivors or families of victims with compensation (93%) for damages that can be assessed in economic terms. Individuals also may receive rehabilitation services (51%) and efforts at restitution, to restore the victim to their original situation (35%).

Just 29% of policies include collective reparation, and this is most often symbolic measures like memorials or apologies (75% of collective reparation policies were symbolic). Additionally, collective reparations include provision of social services in victim communities (50%), building physical infrastructure (45%), and lump sum compensation provided to a community (35%). People may be eligible for collective reparations through a shared historical experience, suffering a particular type of violation, sharing a social identity (such as a particular cultural group), or a common geography.

There is also variation in how reparations mechanisms interact with survivors. In the TJET dataset, 67% of policies do not include outreach to affected communities. For most mechanisms, survivors submit applications directly, though they may also be identified through a truth process or other mechanism. In 58% of the policies in the TJET dataset, different types of harms or victim groups qualify for different reparations policies. Many policies (37%) have been altered after adoption to adjust eligibility requirements. For at least 62% of policies, victims need to prove their citizenship, document the crime they experienced, pay fees, or provide other information. Finally, according to the TJET dataset, 33% of reparations policies have not actually paid out to beneficiaries—a key outcome of interest to most affected communities.

Do Reparations Work?

Reparations are a nuanced mechanism, focused on the needs of survivors. As such, expectations are high that reparations can contribute to lasting peace. However, despite assumptions by practitioners and hypotheses by researchers, there is light empirical evidence directly linking reparations to peace and stability.

The variation in reparations packages and the contexts in which they are implemented makes it challenging to rigorously evaluate outcomes and elucidate the underlying causal mechanisms to determine the relative role of reparations in lasting peace and other outcomes.

Intended positive outcomes

A foundational goal of transitional justice is that violence will be less likely to reoccur. However, the literature on non-recurrence of violent armed conflict very rarely focuses on reparations as an explanatory factor (see Brief #1).

Relatedly, a second intended outcome of reparations is that there will be improved human rights conditions, rule of law, and civic trust. There is also little research in this area that isolates the effects of reparations within TJ, and often reparations are excluded from quantitative models that analyze effects associated with trials, truth commissions, or amnesties.

Another common transitional justice goal is that there will be increased social cohesion and reconciliation (which in turn may contribute to the macro-level outcomes above). There are particularly strong theoretical linkages assuming that repair mechanisms will lead to stronger social relationships. There is some evidence in this area, particularly through qualitative studies, but findings are mixed, with some research suggesting reparations can actually hinder unity.

Compared to other transitional justice mechanisms, reparations in particular are intended to have positive effects on individuals, improving the well-being of survivors. There is some evidence in this area, suggesting reparations can strengthen survivors' economic well-being (through employment, education, land access) and physical and psychological health (through access to services, and through therapeutically designed elements of the reparations program).

Unintended consequences

Despite their potential for positive impacts, reparations can lead to unanticipated negative consequences. For example, reparations may give rise to political or social contestation over who is a victim and who fits into which category of victim, especially if there are different packages for different groups or violations. Reparations may also exacerbate anger and frustration as survivors navigate bureaucracy and experience barriers to accessing benefits. Some survivors may experience humiliation or stigma, if being associated with particular violations has negative social connotations (such as sexual violence).

Identifying victims and survivors, applying for reparations, and verifying eligibility may also raise concerns about protecting survivors' well-being. For example, some reparation mechanisms, such as those that require specific monetary valuations associated with particular experiences, may require survivors to recount traumatic events in detail. While voluntarily sharing difficult experiences can foster healing, especially when shared in supportive environments, the opposite is also true. Feeling coerced into sharing as a precursor to receiving reparations, especially if happening in an insensitive manner or setting, can result in increased distress.

Examples of evidence of reparation outcomes

Reparations policies are associated with more robust **political engagement** and do not seem to contribute to the global trend of democratic backsliding of transitional states, according to Dancy and Thoms (2025).

In post-dictatorship Chile, Balcells and colleagues (2022) find that symbolic reparations through transitional justice museums were associated with more **support for democracy** and democratic institutions.

Despite a stated aim to promote reconciliation, Firchow (2017) found **no evidence** that reparations through Colombia's Law 1448 were associated with more **community reconciliation**, and in some ways exacerbated tensions.

In Cyprus, reparations orders attempt to remedy housing, land, and property crimes, but de Waardt and colleagues (2021) found their individualized approach contributed to **intergroup mistrust** and also **threatened ingroup identity**.

Delivering services to promote repair through the ICC Trust Fund for Victims' assistance mandate, practitioners reported to Dutton and Aoláin (2019) that **survivors' well-being** improved, including their connections with others, participation in economic activities, sense of hope, and self-acceptance.

Q'eqchi victims accessing reparations in Guatemala experienced **revictimization** due to financial burdens and discrimination, and **guilt** in feeling like they were being paid for the loss of their loved ones, according to an ethnographic analysis by Viaene (2010).

Building Research on Reparations

A more robust evidence base is needed to understand if and how reparations work to achieve their intended outcomes. As substantial resources are devoted to reparations, researchers and evaluators must focus on understanding the effects of these policies. Future research could focus on:

Conducting longer term studies that are able to differentiate immediate programmatic outcomes and long-term impacts.

At the individual level, it would be helpful to understand how reparations may continue to affect survivors and their communities as time passes. At the macro-level, studies are more likely to use a retrospective lens and would benefit from analyzing more proximate effects of reparations on indicators of peace, stability, and democracy.

Developing contextually sensitive analyses, including rigorous single and comparative case studies.

The effects of reparations mechanisms may depend heavily on factors such as political regime type, how the violence ended, institutional strength, trust in government, perceptions of legitimacy, inclusive participation, types of harms committed, and the identities of victims and survivors. What works in one setting may not in another. The [Global Survivors Fund and their local partners](#) are modeling this deeply contextualized approach to collecting evidence to inform program design for conflict-related sexual violence.

Identifying causal mechanisms and processes associated with positive outcomes and harmful effects.

Ongoing research should not only disaggregate reparations from other TJ mechanisms, but disaggregate reparations mechanisms, beyond indicating their presence or absence. What are the levers that help achieve the goals? Consider variation timing and sequencing, material and symbolic forms, individual and collective models, and methods of reaching survivors and determining eligibility when assessing outcomes.

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