

# The New York Times

## *After Unrest and Protests, N.Y.C. Creates Group to ‘Dismantle Structural Racism’*

A new racial justice commission will make policy recommendations that could include baby bonds, a jobs guarantee or reparations for Black residents.



The group will make recommendations that may go before voters, with hopes of altering the City Charter, the document that serves as the city constitution. *Byron Smith for The New York Times*



**By Emma G. Fitzsimmons**

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After a year where the pandemic and protests over police brutality underscored New York City’s broad racial inequities, Mayor Bill de Blasio will launch a sweeping initiative to examine and remake the City Charter to correct imbalances.

The mayor will announce on Tuesday the formation of a Racial Justice Commission that will be empowered to make policy recommendations that he said would be designed to “dismantle structural racism for all New Yorkers.”

The 11-member commission could propose bold policies like a jobs guarantee for all residents, or reparation payments to Black residents. The commission is expected to make its recommendations this year, the last of Mr. de Blasio’s eight years in office; some of the proposals could go before New Yorkers next year as ballot measures.

The idea is modeled after reconciliation commissions in countries like South Africa, Canada and Argentina that have addressed legacies of racism and violence.

The group will seek to make changes through the City Charter, a document that serves as the city's constitution. Mr. de Blasio, a Democrat, said it was the first commission of its kind in the United States.

**Here is what you need to know:**

### **The commission aims to dismantle structural racism for New Yorkers.**

The group's mission statement says it will "seize the transformative potential of this moment in history" to recommend "structural changes and significant policy reforms that will advance racial justice and equity."

What does that really mean?

Broadly speaking, the commission intends to take "steps toward reparation of harms" that could include a public apology from the city, according to the mayor's office.

The mayor did not name specific ways that might happen, but members of the commission have supported ideas like baby bonds, a government-funded savings account for every child.

There may be proposals related to police reform and voting changes. The commission could also look broadly at areas of the city that have been impacted by racism, from the inequitable distribution of everything from city parks to bus lanes.

The commission's chair, Jennifer Jones Austin, [the executive director of a major anti-poverty group](#), said in an interview that the commission would certainly consider reparations as it examines systemic racism.

"We should have conversations about reparations and what that could look like," she said.

### **Its members include union officials, educators and nonprofit leaders.**

The vice chair is Henry Garrido, executive director of District Council 37, a union that represents thousands of city workers.

One prominent member is Darrick Hamilton, a professor of economics and urban policy at The New School who has pushed for establishing baby bonds, [canceling student debt](#), and a [jobs guarantee](#) that would provide a job for all residents who want one.

Each baby would receive a grant that they could use in the future for college or a down payment to buy a home.

"Without capital, inequality is locked in," [Mr. Hamilton said in a TED Talk](#) that has been viewed more than 1.5 million times.

## **Past commissions have led to changes in New York.**

The panel is formally known as a charter revision commission, which means it will be empowered to examine the City Charter, with its recommendations leading to ballot referendums.

These commissions have done important work in recent years: This year's local primary elections, for example, will make use of ranked-choice voting, a result of a charter revision commission. Instead of selecting one choice for mayor, for example, voters can rank as many as five choices.

Other changes born out of commissions have included increasing the size of the Civilian Complaint Review Board; establishing new limits on campaign contributions; and setting term limits for community board members.

## **Protests against police brutality inspired the idea.**

Mr. de Blasio first proposed creating a commission to examine racism last year, as protests over the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others rocked the city. Some activists were disappointed that it took so long for the commission to come together, but city officials said they wanted to get it right and assemble the best group possible.

In December, Mr. de Blasio made a rare apology for his response to the protests against police brutality and said he agreed with a [report by a city oversight agency](#) that found the police had badly mishandled the protests.

Mr. de Blasio is now pushing to spearhead major change in New York — much like universal kindergarten helped level the playing field for all children — before he leaves office.

Ms. Jones Austin, the commission's chair, said “the devastation that Covid has brought upon low-income communities of color,” and the killings of Mr. Floyd, Ms. Taylor and others, had highlighted racial disparities that can no longer be ignored.

“How can we begin to make systemic change?” she said. “You can do one-offs. But you've got to look at the document that lays out how government works and how it needs to be revised to make sure that it is inclusive.”

Still, the next mayor will likely have a say in the debate. Several leading candidates running in the Democratic primary in June have proposed their own ideas to help poor New Yorkers, and it remains to be seen if the next mayor will embrace the commission's recommendations.

## **Other cities are also trying to address longstanding injustices.**

While New York is believed to be the first major American city to form a reconciliation commission like this one, other cities are taking steps to address racism.

The city of Evanston, Ill., just north of Chicago, is moving to become the first American city to offer reparations to Black residents. The plan calls for spending \$10 million raised from a tax on legalized marijuana to pay for housing and economic programs.

There has been growing momentum for a national campaign to establish reparations. A subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee held a first-of-its-kind hearing on reparations in 2019 that featured the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Other cities are grappling with police reform, and some have embraced the defund the police movement. But even in Minneapolis, where Mr. Floyd was killed by the police last May, efforts to dismantle the police department collapsed. A far less ambitious move — cutting the police budget by 4.5 percent — was approved in December, disappointing those who had pushed for defunding.

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