

A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of several modern skyscrapers with glass facades, set against a clear blue sky. The perspective creates a sense of height and scale.

Truth in Los Angeles: Addressing Racial Injustice through Recognition, Responsibility, and Repair

Occidental College Task Force
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Executive Summary

Why? What? How?

Why a focus on racial injustice in a Los Angeles truth-telling process?

There are recurring and unresolved conflicts revolving around racial injustice in Los Angeles that lend themselves to a truth-telling process. This has historical, social-economic, and political dimensions:

Historical: Los Angeles has a recurring history of exclusion and violence against non-white populations. We focus on Black Angelenos, but also recognize the intersecting structures of exclusion of many non-white communities in Los Angeles.

Social-economic: Los Angeles has recurring racial disparities in virtually every social-economic category, from income and wealth, to education and access to home and shelter. Responsibility for these disparities is multi-dimensional, including a national history of slavery and Jim Crow grounded in white supremacy. That said, responsibility at the city level for these disparities must be confronted. Disparities in housing and homelessness, for example, have roots in action and inaction by governing institutions around policies such as red-lining.

Political: Recurring protests around racial issues—from Watts 1965, to L.A Uprising 1992 and BLM 2020—show how this history of racial injustice and continued social-economic disparities remain unresolved by Los Angeles' political structures. New approaches are needed to bring Black Angelenos and other traditionally marginalized communities into the political conversation about how to address and heal past social and economic harms.

In short:

There is no single truth-telling model that can be applied in Los Angeles to solve these historical, social-economic, and political issues. We argue, however, that a truth-telling process specific to a Los Angeles context—and if forged through a city-communities partnership—may produce relevant solutions to the breakdown in trust between communities and city institutions as a result of ongoing histories of racial hierarchies and exclusion.

What would a truth process bring to confronting issues of racial injustice in Los Angeles?

Truth-telling processes have emerged as a way to address the difficulty of transitions from dictatorship and regimes based in ethnic exclusion to more pluralistic societies. For all their variations across countries and now in the context of cities such as L.A., these processes share a common assumption: that facing up to the truth about past historic harms is fundamental to creating a more inclusionary social contract for the future. We suggest that Los Angeles can most effectively face its history of racial injustices through a truth-telling process *constituted* through the following avenues:

Recognition: Advancing historical and artistic narratives that advance collective recognition of past violence, accountability for racialized exclusions, and the possibility of healing.

Responsibility: Taking *active* responsibility for past wrongdoing by not just acknowledging but, more importantly, truly addressing histories of exclusion and violence through substantive institutional reform.

Repair: A commitment to not just acknowledge and take responsibility for past harms, but to repair their consequences both symbolically and substantively.

In short:

What *sort* of truth-telling process is as important of a question as *if* there should be a truth-telling process at all. Los Angeles can take advantage of key lessons learned from global experiences with truth-telling processes: addressing each intersecting element in Recognition, Responsibility, and Repair is essential. Changing dominant historical narratives, having governing institutions take active responsibility for past action and future reform, and engaging in reparative actions that both acknowledge and help heal past wrongs are each fundamental to an effective truth-telling process.

How can a truth-telling process confronting racial injustice be constructed in a way that speaks to Los Angeles' distinct realities?

To have an impact, a truth-telling process needs to be substantively owned by all of a jurisdiction's communities. If we are correct that a truth-telling process' success or failure depends on grassroots engagement, the following principles are fundamental:

City Commitment: Facilitating institutional commitment from city leadership and across city offices, departments, and commissions.

Partnership: A Los Angeles truth-telling process must be convened via community-city partnership(s); city government can stimulate but not lead such a process.

Restorative Justice: Constituting a truth-telling process via Restorative Justice principles and practices is essential to both inviting communities into the process and in maintaining the process' ownership by multiple constituencies.

In short:

How a truth-telling process in Los Angeles is convened is essential to its success. City government commitment is essential, but will only matter if it is combined with true partnership with grassroots leadership and city-wide engagement. Restorative justice practices can facilitate the creation of such partnerships and maintain their inclusivity and focus on shared goals among all Los Angeles communities.

A summary of steps to move forward truth-telling in Los Angeles

To advance a truth-telling process in Los Angeles, we recommend the following specific steps as a complement to the foundational principles listed above in the Executive Summary.

Recognition:

- Use city spaces for storytelling via art and memorialization that embeds public memory around past harms and historical injustice in Los Angeles' physical environment.
- Support and partner with local artists and organizations working on memorialization and art that recognizes racial injustice as part of Los Angeles' ongoing histories.
- Map existing, ongoing, and future public memorializations of L.A.'s history of racial injustice; ensure that this map is accessible and integrated into the city's presentation of itself in a public knowledge platform around historical racial injustice.

Responsibility:

- Institutional apologies: More than broad recognition of past harms there must be proactive acceptance of the ways city institutions have enabled those harms.
- Establish a truth-telling process to serve as a mechanism for institutional actors to take active responsibility for historic and ongoing harms that need to be repaired. Invite representative grassroots leaders as well as both national and international experts to take the lead in constructing such a process.
- Focus such a process on social-economic disparities, especially regarding how a history of racial inequities in housing policies connects to the current housing/homelessness crisis.
- Explore how a Right to Housing and the work of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing could inform an approach to the racial dimension of homeless people.

Repair:

- Reparations should be both symbolic and substantive. Truth-telling and institutional apologies should be combined with programs to tangibly repair past and ongoing harms.
- Environmental and housing initiatives are possible pilots of tangible reparations. Environmental in the sense of investment in renewable energy in underprivileged communities, the promotion of clean air initiatives, and the creation of environmental friendly 'green spaces') in the city. Housing in the sense, as in Evanston IL, of credits to increase Black home ownership. In all fields such reparative processes—per Mayor Garcetti proposal of slavery based reparations—should be victim-centered, i.e, based in conferring with communities on what they see as truly reparative.
- A Restorative Justice City. Utilize funds from Mayor Garcetti's recently proposed Repair LA project to engage alternative forms of justice, including a Restorative Justice City. This could include Implementing restorative practices in schools, the youth justice system, policing and neighborhood councils.
- Reach out to grassroots organizations to inform and facilitate the creation and operation of healing circles and listening centers as spaces for victims' expression and healing.

General:

- Continue mapping existing examples of truth commissions, restorative cities, and other alternative justice and reparative mechanisms around the world and in the US, building upon the map included in the report. Additionally, conduct mapping of existing local organizations in LA whose efforts relate to recognition, responsibility, and/or repair for possible partnership.
- Conceptualize a Los Angeles truth-telling process as an ongoing rather than time-limited process in order to bring about needed structural change.
- Lastly, we would urge that both the principles outlined in our Executive Summary and these more specific recommendations be seen as a holistic package. Piecemeal programming is insufficient and counter-productive to an impactful truth-telling process.