



## ISSUE BRIEF

# Forty acres and a mule? How Flint residents believe the government should repay Black Americans

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## Overview

This report is from the University of Michigan's Center for Racial Justice (CRJ) and explores Flint residents' attitudes toward reparations for Black Americans with data from a recent survey of the Michigan Metro Area Communities Study (MIMACS). The survey was fielded between January 26, 2023, and March 29, 2023, and captures the views of a representative sample of 570 Flint residents.<sup>1</sup> Results have been weighted to reflect the population of the City of Flint. You can find [all CRJ research here](#) and [full results from MIMACS surveys here](#).

## Key Findings

- Flint residents are more likely to support specific reparative policies than they are to support the general idea of reparations. Just over half (53%) of Flint residents support the idea of governments making amends to Black Americans. However, a much larger share of Flint residents (71%) support at least one of the specific reparative policies targeted towards individuals.
- Race, education, and income figure prominently into Flint residents' attitudes toward reparations, with Black residents, higher-income residents, and more educated residents showing higher levels of support for efforts to make amends to Black Americans. Support for reparations did not vary by respondent gender or age.
- A majority of Black Flint residents, the intended beneficiaries of the reparations policies under consideration, support cash payments (73%). However, an even greater proportion of Black residents (78%) support reparations in the form of financial assistance for buying or improving a home, financial support for postsecondary education (77%), or financial support for Black businesses (75%).

## Introduction

Calls for reparations - or actions to make amends to Black Americans for enslavement and ongoing discriminatory practices - date back to the years immediately after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. The "nation's earliest architects of reparations," the formerly enslaved, asked explicitly for land and monetary compensation as a pathway to economic independence and restitution for the dehumanization of enslavement.<sup>2</sup> Early (failed) promises from the federal government led to the common conception of "[forty acres and a mule](#)" as reparations for Black Americans. More recently in the United States, local leaders have developed [other proposals that expand the concept of reparations](#) beyond land and cash payments and address the effects of systemic racism in the realms of housing, neighborhoods, education, health, and criminal justice, among others. These different ideas about what racial restitution means and how it should be enacted reflect an important policy challenge: **How should a nation atone for the atrocities of enslavement, systemic racial violence, and ongoing discrimination?**

Residents and community leaders in Flint, Michigan, are in the early stages of brainstorming what reparations for local Black Americans might look like, as part of a [national reparations project](#). Through this project, the University of Michigan is working with local leaders in Flint to develop community-based reparations initiatives that could mitigate some of the harms caused by structural racism in Flint, including the city's [ongoing water crisis](#). This brief explores Flint residents' attitudes toward potential reparations initiatives. In the MIMACS survey, reparations are defined as governmental action to make amends to Black Americans for the ongoing harm caused by slavery and more recent discriminatory policies. We explore attitudes towards the general idea of governments making amends, as well as specific reparative policies that are either targeted toward individual Black Americans or larger systemic changes.<sup>3</sup>

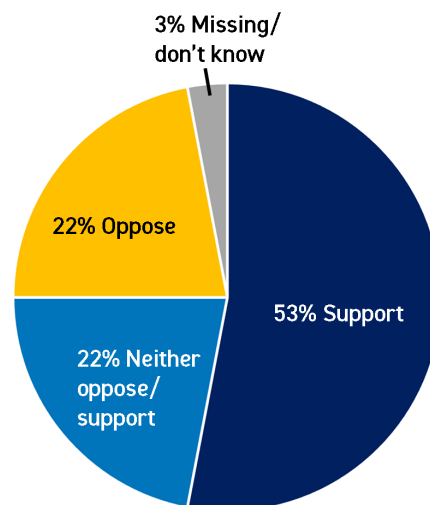
Joining a growing body of evidence showing support for reparative policies at the national and local levels, we find that more than half of Flint residents support the idea that the government should make amends to Black Americans for historical and ongoing injustices, with higher levels of support among Black, higher-educated, and higher-income Flint residents. We have found [similar patterns in the City of Detroit](#), where 72% of the city's Black residents support reparations, compared to 38% of the city's White residents. Importantly, our findings demonstrate the powerful role that language plays in shaping attitudes toward reparations. Many Flint residents who did not support the broad concept of "governments taking action to make amends to Black Americans" subsequently indicated that they did, in fact, support specific policies through which governments could make amends to Black Americans. This analysis offers timely insight into the diverse approaches that local and national leaders can employ to begin the process of making amends to Black Americans living in Flint.



# Flint residents are more supportive of specific reparative policies than they are of the general idea of reparations, illustrating that language matters for one’s understanding of amends.<sup>4</sup>

- About half of Flint residents (53%) say they support the idea that the government should make amends to Black Americans for the harms caused by slavery and discrimination.
- When asked about support for **“specific ways for government to make amends to individual Black Americans,”** including cash payments, financial support for postsecondary education, or money toward buying or repairing a home, more than two-thirds (71%) of Flint residents say they support one or more of these policies.
- About 1 in 5 (22%) Flint residents did not have firm views on reparations and indicated that they “neither support nor oppose” the idea that the government should make amends to Black Americans.
- Twenty-two percent of Flint residents oppose the government taking action to make amends to Black Americans. But, almost one-third of Flint residents (30%) who opposed the general idea of reparations supported the specific action of governments offering financial assistance for buying or improving a home.
- More than 1 in 4 Flint residents who oppose the idea of government amends to Black Americans actually supported financial support for postsecondary education (26%) and free health care (26%) as specific ways the government could take action to amend the impacts of slavery and discrimination.
- Seventeen percent of Flint residents who said they opposed the idea of governments taking action to make amends to Black Americans said they did support distributing cash payments to Black Americans.

**Figure 1. How much do you support or oppose governments taking action to make amends to Black Americans?**



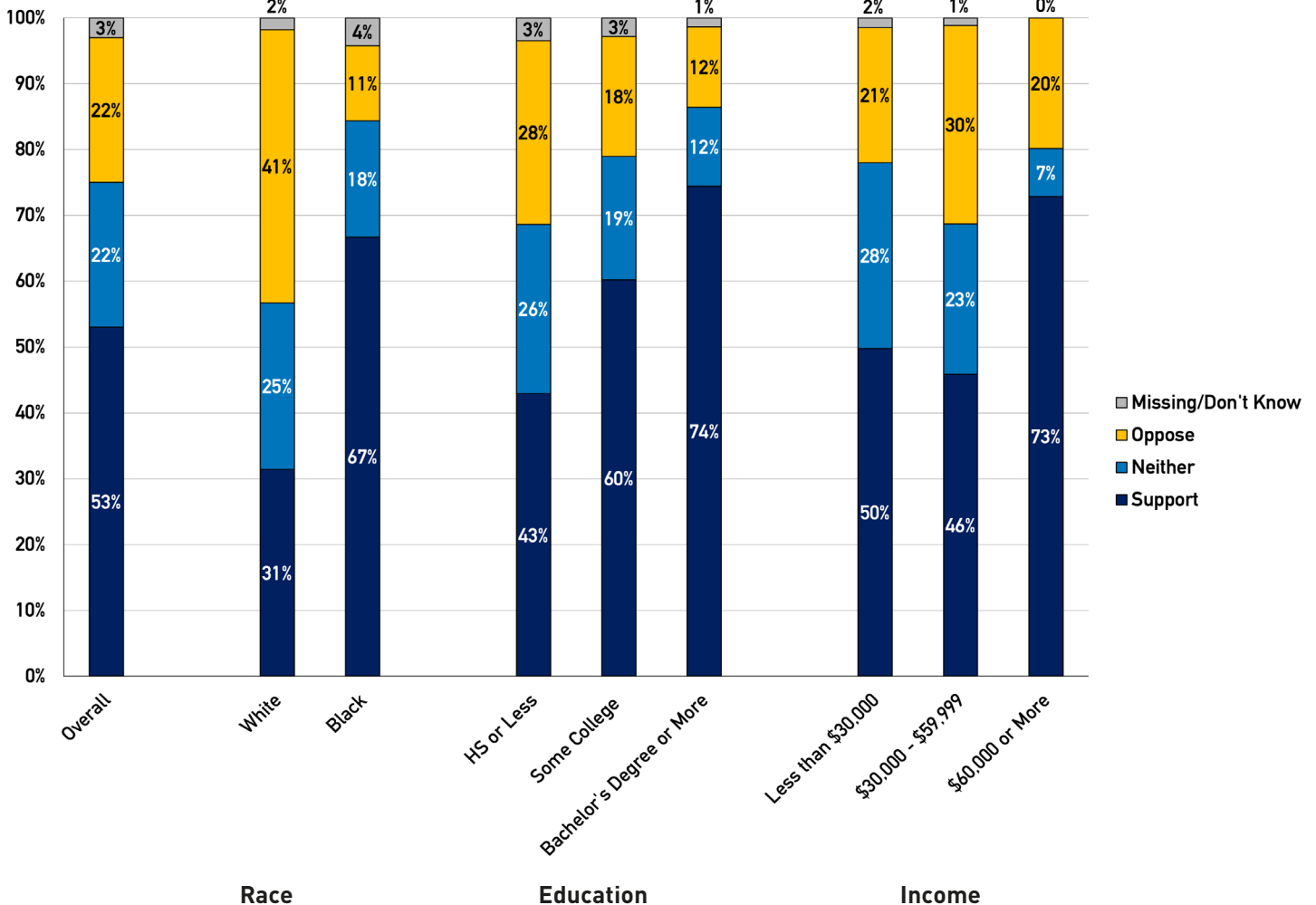
# There are stark differences in support for reparations in Flint by race,<sup>5</sup> educational attainment, and income.

Figure 2. Flint Population Quick Facts	
Racial Demographics	Income and Educational Attainment
<b>Total Population:</b> 79,854†	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Percentage of residents with a bachelor's degree or higher: 12.1%</li> <li>Median household income: \$32,358</li> </ul>
<b>Percentage of Black residents:</b> 56.7%	
<b>Percentage of White residents:</b> 33.2%	
<b>Percentage of Asian residents:</b> 0.5%	
<b>Percentage of Hispanic or Latino residents:</b> 4.5%	
<b>Percent of Other residents:</b> 5.1%	

Source: Data in this table is drawn from the American Community Survey (ACS) 2017-2021 five year estimates and the †2022 1-year estimates.

- Black Flint residents are more than twice as likely as White residents to support reparations. More than two-thirds of Black Flint residents support reparations (67%), compared to just under a third (31%) of White Flint residents.
- Opposition to reparations among White Flint residents outpaces opposition among Black residents by 30 percentage points. Forty-one percent of White Flint residents oppose reparations, compared to 11% of Black residents.

Figure 3: Support for reparations by race, educational attainment, and income

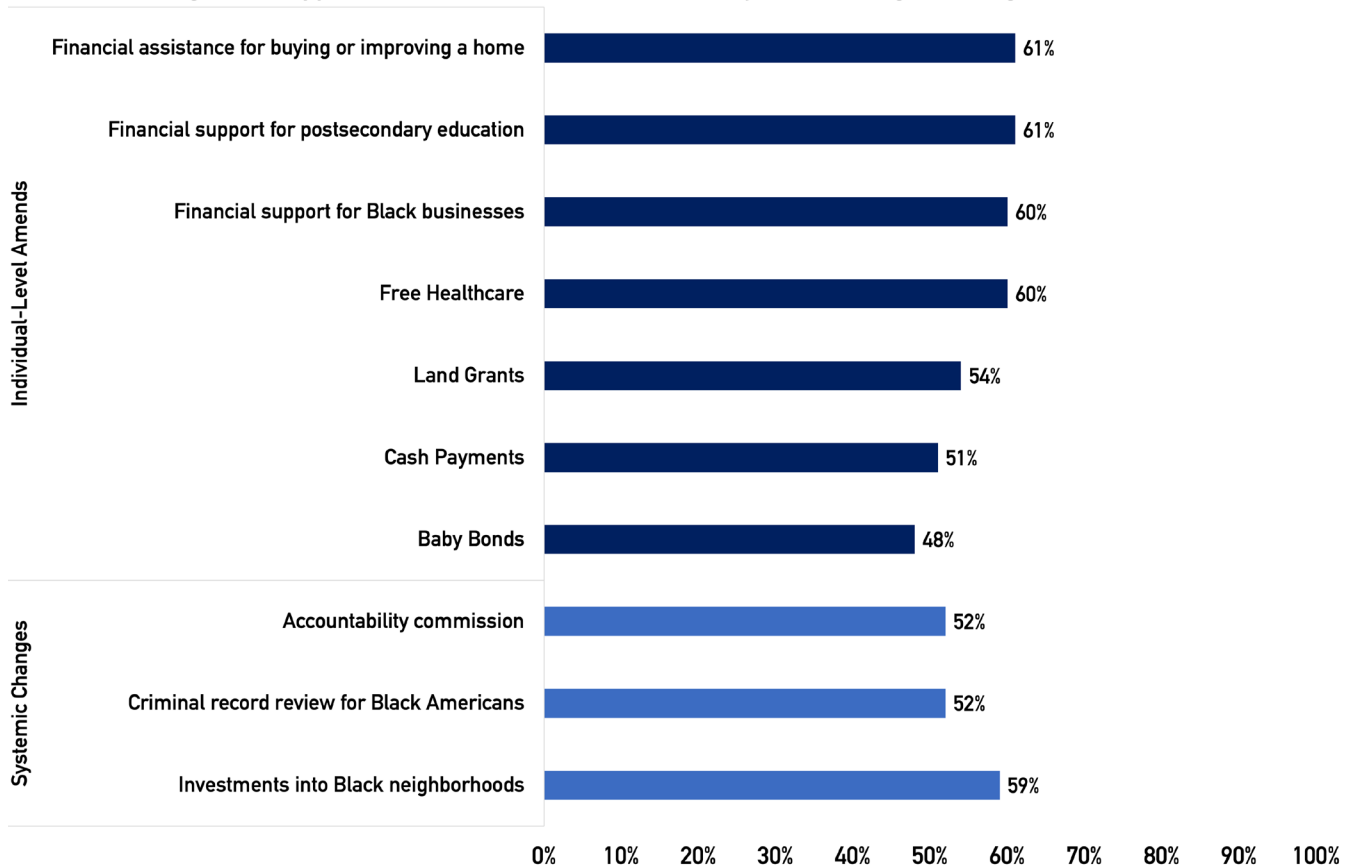


- Flint residents with a bachelor's degree or greater are more likely to support reparations (74%), compared to residents with some college (60%), and residents with a high school education or less (43%).
- Flint residents with a household income of at least \$60,000 are more likely to support reparations (73%), compared to residents with an income between \$30,000 - \$59,999 (46%) and those with an income of less than \$30,000 (50%).
- Support for reparations remains relatively consistent when comparing men and women, and when comparing different age cohorts.

## Among Flint residents, financial assistance for buying or improving a home and financial support for postsecondary education and training were the most widely supported forms of reparations for individual Black Americans.

- When asked about levels of support for **“specific ways for governments to make amends to individual Black Americans”**, residents were most supportive of providing financial assistance to buy or improve a home or providing funding for postsecondary education. About 6 in 10 residents supported the idea that the government should make amends to Black individuals by offering financial assistance to buy or improve a home (61%) or to put towards postsecondary education (61%). Similarly, 60% of residents supported financial support for Black businesses as a way to make amends to Black Americans.
- Baby bonds – where the government establishes a savings account for a child shortly after their birth and invests in the account over their childhood – were the least popular of all of the types of reparative policies considered, garnering the support of less than half (48%) of all Flint residents.
- Just over half (51%) of Flint residents supported providing cash payments, one of the most familiar forms of reparations, as a way of making amends for the impact of slavery and discriminatory policies.

Figure 4: Support for individual-level amends and systemic changes among Flint residents



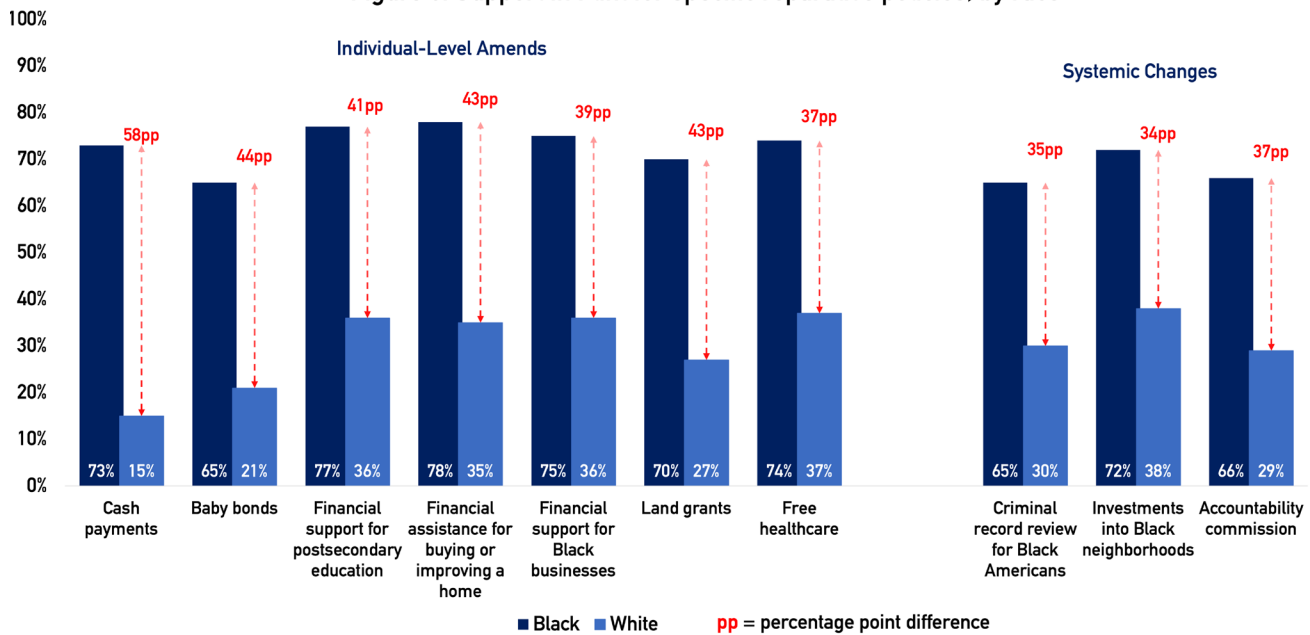
**Among Black residents, the most popular individual-level amends were policies providing assistance with purchasing or improving a home. Cash payments were also widely supported among Black residents, but garnered the least support among White residents.**

- The most popular options for making individual-level amends among Black Flint residents were the same as the most popular options among the broader Flint population: financial assistance for buying or improving a home (78%), financial support for postsecondary education (77%), and financial support for Black businesses (75%).
- These forms of reparative policies also saw large gaps in support across racial groups. Compared to White Flint residents, Black Flint residents were 43 percentage points more supportive of providing assistance for buying or improving a home, 41 percentage points more supportive of providing financial assistance for postsecondary education, and 39 percentage points more supportive of providing financial support for Black businesses.
- Seventy-three percent of Black Flint residents also supported cash payments, compared to just 15% of White Flint residents. This 58 percentage point difference in support between White and Black residents is the largest racial gap in support across all ways to make amends considered in this survey.

# Black and White Flint residents were more closely aligned in support for systemic-level amends compared to individual-level amends. However, Black residents were still more likely than White residents to support systemic-level amends.

- Respondents were asked how much they support or oppose “approaches for making amends to Black Americans for the impact of slavery or discriminatory policies that involve systemic changes by governments.”
- There was the least disagreement between Black and White Flint residents on these systemic forms of reparative policies, such as neighborhood investments and changes to the criminal justice system, but there were still significant differences in support by race.
  - Neighborhood investments were the most popular policy among the systemic reparative policy options presented. Seventy-two percent of Black Flint residents supported “targeted neighborhood investments into historically Black neighborhoods harmed by economic and environmental discrimination” as a way to make amends to Black Americans, compared to 38% of White
  - Flint residents – a 34 percentage point difference between the two groups.
  - Sixty-five percent of Black Flint residents supported changes to the criminal justice system, specifically, “expedited review and expungement of eligible criminal records for Black Americans” as a way to make amends to Black Americans, compared to 30% of White Flint residents.
  - 66% of Black Flint residents supported the idea of an accountability commission that would broadly “hold governments accountable for the ways that slavery and discriminatory policies have harmed Black Americans” compared to 29% of White Flint residents.

Figure 5. Support in Flint for specific reparative policies, by race



## Endnotes

- 1 The sample of Flint respondents was drawn in February 2022 from an address-based probability sample of all occupied Flint households. For this second survey wave, we invited all 5,000 Flint households that were invited to the first wave, including the 628 Flint residents who completed the first survey and the 4,372 who were invited to the first survey wave but did not complete it. Surveys were self-administered online or interviewer-administered via telephone. We report results for the 570 Flint residents who completed the survey. We obtained an overall response rate of 13.0% (using AAPOR Response Rate 1); 60.0% for existing panelists and 5.4% for new panelists. [Additional information about the sample can be found here.](#)
- 2 Darity Jr, William A., and A. Kirsten Mullen. *From here to equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the twenty-first century*. UNC Press Books, 2022; McDaniel, W. Caleb. *Sweet Taste of Liberty: A True Story of Slavery and Restitution in America*. Oxford University Press, 2019.
- 3 To capture support for individually-targeted amends, the survey asks: Now we are going to list some specific ways for governments to make amends to individual Black Americans. How much do you support or oppose each of the following ways of making amends for the impact of slavery or discriminatory policies? Likewise, to capture support for amends made through systemic changes, the survey asks: Now we are going to ask about other approaches for making amends to Black Americans for the impact of slavery or discriminatory policies that involve systemic changes by governments. How much do you support or oppose these ideas?
- 4 We do not view the distinction between general support for amends and specific amends as contradictory, but rather an indication that policy preferences are complex and filtered through language. The concept of governments making amends in an abstract sense appears to be perceived differently than when residents are given specific policies about **how** the government would make amends. Although we are not able to explain these differences, highlighting them is important so that a broad range of political actors – voters, politicians, organizers, etc. – can better understand that people might be hearing different things when abstract concepts vs. specific policy recommendations are discussed in the public sphere.
- 5 In this report, those who self-identified as Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Multiracial, or of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin were included in overall estimates of support for the government making amends to Black Americans. However, we are not able to report support levels among these racial and ethnic groups due to small sample sizes.

**Individuals who would like to learn more about reparations in Flint can send an email to [info@flintreparations.com](mailto:info@flintreparations.com). If you'd like to learn more about reparations or the Flint Water Crisis, we recommend the following resources:**

- The Case for Reparations, Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Atlantic*
- From Here to Equality: Reparations in the 21st Century, by William A. Darity Jr. & A. Kirsten Mullen
- [The National African American Reparations Commission](#)
- [The Flint Water Crisis: Systemic racism through the lens of Flint](#)



## Glossary

Types of Individual-Level Amends to Black Americans	Survey Question Text
Cash payments	Cash payments
Baby bonds	A trust or investment account provided to newborns
Financial support for postsecondary education	Vouchers or scholarships for postsecondary education (e.g., college and trade schools)
Financial assistance for buying or improving a home	Financial assistance for buying or improving a home
Financial support for Black businesses	Financial assistance for starting or improving a business
Land grants	Land grants
Free health care	Free health care
Systemic Changes to Make Amends to Black Americans	Survey Question Text
Criminal record review for Black Americans	Expedited review and expungement of eligible criminal records for Black Americans
Investments into Black neighborhoods	Targeted investments into historically Black neighborhoods harmed by economic and environmental discrimination
Accountability commission	A commission that seeks to hold governments accountable for the ways that slavery and discriminatory policies have harmed Black Americans

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Learn more at [www.michiganceal.org/research-outreach/mimacs](http://www.michiganceal.org/research-outreach/mimacs)

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