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Opinion  OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

The Unmet Promise of Equality

By FRED HARRIS and ALAN CURTIS  FEB. 28, 2018

“ Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal.”

Fifty years ago, on March 1, 1968, these were the grim words of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, called the Kerner Commission after its chairman, Gov. Otto Kerner of Illinois.

President Lyndon Johnson had established the commission to examine the disorders and violent protests in Detroit, Newark and well over 100 other American cities during the summer of 1967, and earlier. What it found was searing. “What white Americans have never fully understood – but what the
Negro can never forget – is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto,” the commission concluded. “White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.”

Mostly moderate and mostly white men, the members of the bipartisan panel carried the imprimatur of the political establishment. Their recommendations attracted widespread public debate. The paperback edition of the report sold over two million copies.

Occupied by the Vietnam War and concerned about the legacy of his Great Society domestic agenda, Johnson distanced himself from the “two societies” warning. But the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert Kennedy strongly endorsed the commission’s findings and recommendations before they were assassinated and before more protests erupted during that traumatic year of 1968.

The Kerner Commission recommended “massive and sustained” investments in jobs and education to reduce poverty, inequality and racial injustice. Have we made progress in the last 50 years?

**A Return to Segregation**

In many ways, things have gotten no better — or have gotten worse — since 1968. Public schools have been re-segregating for decades.
Not Just a Problem
In the South

The 10 most segregated states are mostly in the North. Percentage of each region’s black students in schools with a student body that is more than 90 percent minority, 2011-12.

1. NEW YORK 65%
2. ILLINOIS 61
3. MARYLAND 53
4. MICHIGAN 50
5. NEW JERSEY 48
6. PENNSYLVANIA 46
7. MISSISSIPPI 45
8. CALIFORNIA 45
9. TENNESSEE 45
10. WISCONSIN 43

Border states: Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Oklahoma, West Virginia. Source: “Brown at 60,” University of California Civil Rights Project

Today the gap between poorer and richer American students in access to qualified teachers is among the highest in the world. Fewer African-Americans have access to majority-white (read: generally better financed) schools.

Progress Erased

By another measure, segregation has returned to Kerner-era levels across the South. Percentage of all black students in the South who attended majority-white schools, 1968-2011.

The 10 most segregated states in 2011-12, by the same measure, are scattered throughout the country.

1. CALIFORNIA 8
2. TEXAS 13
3. NEW YORK 13
4. MARYLAND 14
5. NEVADA 15
6. ILLINOIS 15
7. CONNECTICUT 19
8. GEORGIA 20
9. NEW JERSEY 21
10. FLORIDA 21

Source: “Brown at 60,” University of California Civil Rights Project
We know why. One reason: When schools are released from court-mandated desegregation, that progress gradually is reversed.

**When the Courts Step Away**

After being released from court oversight, this group of 159 school districts across the South wound up as segregated, on average, as they were before the mandates began.

For less than three years, segregation stabilized.

That small improvement was soon wiped out; segregation eventually matched levels from decades prior.

**Inequality That Would Shock the Commission’s Members**

The disheartening percentage of Americans living in extreme poverty — that is, living on less than half the poverty threshold — has increased since the 1970s. The overall poverty rate remains about the same today as it was 50 years ago; the total number of poor people has increased from over 25 million to well over 40 million, more than the population of California.

Meanwhile, the rich have profited at the expense of most working Americans. Today, the top 1 percent receive 52 percent of all new income. Rich people are healthier and live longer. They get a better education, which produces greater gains in income. And their greater economic power translates into greater political power.
Five Indicators
America of the 1960s contrasted with the most recent available data.

Source: Economic Policy Institute

The Tragedy of Mass Incarceration

At the time of the Kerner Commission, there were about 200,000 people behind bars. Today, there are about 1.4 million. “Zero tolerance” policing aimed at African-Americans and Latinos has failed, while our sentencing policies (for example, on crack versus powder cocaine) continue to racially discriminate. Mass incarceration has become a kind of housing policy for the poor.
Fifty Years Later, We’ve Figured Out What Works

Policies based on ideology instead of evidence. Privatization and funding cuts instead of expanding effective programs.

We’re living with the human costs of these failed approaches. The Kerner ethos — “Everyone does better when everyone does better” — has been, for many decades, supplanted by its opposite: “You’re on your own.”

Today more people oppose the immorality of poverty and rising inequality, including middle-class Americans who realize their interests are much closer to Kerner priorities than to those of the very rich.

We have the experience and knowledge to scale up what works. Now we need the “new will” that the Kerner Commission concluded was equally important.
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<td>Reduced health care for workers and low-income Americans</td>
<td>Insured health care through a single-payer system</td>
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<td>Small, grudging increases to minimum wage</td>
<td>Substantial increases to minimum wage</td>
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<td>No new tax credits or child allowances</td>
<td>Expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit to reduce gaps in wealth and income</td>
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<td>Supply-side, trickle-down economics for the rich and corporations; enterprise zones with corporate tax breaks</td>
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<td><strong>JOBS</strong></td>
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<td>Unrestrained corporate globalization</td>
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<td>Fewer and weakened labor unions</td>
<td>More labor union power</td>
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<td>No or minimal job training; “welfare reform”</td>
<td>Job training tied to job creation and placement</td>
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<td><strong>EDUCATION</strong></td>
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<td>Racial segregation in schools, neighborhoods</td>
<td>Racial integration</td>
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<td>Vouchers, choice and charter schools</td>
<td>Investments in public school equity, quality teachers, early childhood education, community schools and other proven models</td>
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<td><strong>HOUSING</strong></td>
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<td>Subsidized housing that reaches only one-quarter of eligible low-income citizens</td>
<td>Subsidized housing for all eligible citizens</td>
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<td>Continued neglect of fair-housing laws</td>
<td>Rigorous enforcement of those laws</td>
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<td><strong>THE JUSTICE SYSTEM</strong></td>
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<td>Zero-tolerance policing; excessive use of force</td>
<td>Community-based policing; partnerships with local nonprofit youth development groups</td>
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<td>Continued mass incarceration</td>
<td>Alternatives to incarceration, especially for nonviolent offenders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of investment in proven ex-offender reintegration programs</td>
<td>Funding and wide use of these programs</td>
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Fred Harris, a former senator from Oklahoma, is a professor emeritus of political science at the University of New Mexico and the lone surviving member of the Kerner Commission. Alan Curtis is the president and chief executive of the Eisenhower Foundation, the private-sector continuation of the 1968 Kerner Commission and the 1969 National Violence Commission. The two are the co-editors of “Healing Our Divided Society: Investing in America Fifty Years After the Kerner Report.”