## America's Black-White Divide Has Got Worse'

## By David Osborne

**A QUARTER** of a century after a report commissioned by President Lyndon Johnson detailed the extent of lingering racial segregation in American society, a follow-up study released yesterday argues that for the most part the divisions identified then either apply today or have actually worsened.

Known as the Kerner Commission, the panel appointed to investigate black-white disparities after the Watts riot of 1965 concluded in 1968 that America was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white separate and unequal". According to the new report, that warning has become not less but "more relevant".

The new study, compiled specifically as a sequel to the Kerner work, has been published by the Eisenhower Foundation, a body set up by the former president's younger brother. Its finding, which coincide with the start of a second trial of four of the white policemen in the Rodney King case, will come as a fresh jolt to America's troubled conscience.

It will also provide added impetus for the Clinton administration to detail its own plans to address the problems. President Bill Clinton's plans are not so much aimed at blacks themselves but at the decaying urban centres, where a large proportion of blacks live.

Though the report's conclusions - advocating a sharp increase in expenditure on urban renewal and youth education - coincide fairly substantially with President Clinton's own plans for city centres, in some respects they depart form the White House view. In particular, it argues against the creation of special "enterprise zones" in urban centres, where investment is encouraged by tax incentives, arguing they have been ineffective. Mr. Clinton has just promised to spend heavily on extending enterprise zones.

Not everyone will necessarily accept the overwhelmingly bleak tone of the new reports's conclusions. Those with a more optimistic view, point to the progress made, for instance, in integrating police forces and schools since 1968 and to the emergence of a strong black middle class.

"Yes, there have been some improvements," concedes Lynn Curtis, the president of the Eisenhower Foundation. "But, in spite of that, the downside is considerably worse." Altogether, the foundation calls for an enormous spending programme of \$300bn (£212bn) over 10 years to address the problems.

The report candidly places some of the blame for the continuing racial tensions and disparities on the two former Republican presidents and their policies during the 1980s, Ronald Reagan and George Bush. It was a period of "federal disinvestments" in inner cities, when "the rich got richer and the poor got poorer".

While accepting that a body of fairly well-off blacks has emerged in all American cities, the report's authors emphasize that the situation among the majority who remain disadvantaged has, by contrast, worsened. The social tensions fed by this are further exacerbated by new factors not present 25 years ago, such as the arrival of new racial groups, notably the Hispanics, suffering similar disparities and frustrations.

Many of the bald statistics in the report are certain to prompt renewed alarm. Since 1968, the report says, life expectancy among blacks has declined, while broad measures of infant mortality, unemployment and poverty have all risen. Child death rates in cities such as Detroit and Washington, DC in the 1980s were equivalent to those in China and the Soviet Union, it suggests.

Scrutiny of the economic conditions of the black community, as compared to whites, reveals that unemployment is twice as high and the poverty rates three times as great. Black male earnings are less than three quarters those of their white equivalents and the median income of black families is 57 percent of white families.