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Growing race gap reported: Kerner panel's 68 prophecy came to pass, new study finds

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WASHINGTON - Thirty years after a presidential commission declared that "our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white - separate and unequal," that dire warning has become reality, according to a report to be released today.

"The Kerner Commission's prophecy has come to pass," states the report from the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a group founded to continue the work of the commission, which was appointed by President Lyndon Johnson to investigate the causes of rioting in urban America in the 1960s.

The report suggests that the prediction has materialized in large part because poverty has become entrenched in the nation's inner cities, creating an ever deepening cycle of crime, lack of education, unemployment and hopelessness.

"The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer, and minorities are suffering disproportionately," said the report, co-authored by foundation President Lynn A. Curtis and former Oklahoma Democratic Sen. Fred R. Harris.

The report, however, has its critics. Robert S. Woodson Sr., an African American conservative who heads the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, said the report rehashes earlier Kerner Commission findings and offers recommendations that are too general to be useful. He accused the authors of being "stuck in the '60s," and seeing the world through a "prism of race."

The new report does note that substantial racial progress has occurred in the three decades since the Kerner Commission released its groundbreaking report. The African American middle class has grown to unprecedented levels, African American business has expanded, and the number of African American elected officials continues to increase. But even with those gains, inequalities with troubling racial dimensions are becoming more deeply rooted in American society, the report concludes.

It lists an array of racial and economic statistics to back its bleak conclusions. While the American economy is booming, most adults in many inner cities do not work in a typical week, the report says. The top 1 percent of Americans have more wealth than the bottom 90 percent, and the United States is first in the world among industrialized nations when it comes to wage inequality, it says.

In addition, 40 percent of minority children attend urban schools, where more than half of the students are poor and fail to reach even "basic" achievement levels. With 1.5 million prisoners, the United States incarcerates more people than any nation in the world, and one in three young African American men are in prison, on parole or probation, it says.

"The private market has failed the inner city. The prison system is a symbol of discrimination. A class and racial breach is widening again as we begin the new millennium," the report said.

Its conclusions parallel those of two reports issued by the Eisenhower Foundation that update the Kerner Commission's work. As a remedy, the foundation, a liberal-leaning urban policy group financed by government and private donations, called on the nation to use this time of prosperity to redirect resources toward programs that have shown success at educating disadvantaged children, keeping them in school and out of trouble, and helping their parents gain the education they need to hold jobs.

The report points to a plethora of programs that use a combination of government, foundation and private resources to help the very poor gain a foothold in the workplace. It recommends an investment of \$56 billion by the government to replicate these efforts.

The foundation's report attributes the deterioration in the urban poor's condition to the legacy of supply-side economics of the 1980s, increasing hostility toward affirmative action, and what it asserts is the failure of several social programs popular in Washington - such as enterprise zones and the Job Training Partnership Act - to help poor people in the inner cities. And it says volunteer work - something the administration promoted at a 1997 summit in Philadelphia - can't be expected to single-handedly rebuild poor neighborhoods.

Critics called the report pessimistic and dismissed its central findings as out of sync with the nation's increasingly complex social and racial realities.

"At the core of the Kerner report is the notion that blacks are trapped in the inner city and poverty, and whites are in the suburbs. But there is no mention of the fact that you have had a massive movement of blacks from

inner cities to suburbs" since 1968, said Stephen Thernstrom, a Harvard University professor and co-author of "America in Black and White," which charts the nation's racial progress over the past half century.

"If you look at social contact, it has increased markedly. Interracial dating it up. Interracial marriage, the same," Thernstrom said. "Whatever the fault lines are in our society, the idea that it is the old-fashioned black and white seems to me fairly simplistic."

While it is true that there is a growing African American middle class, the new report cites statistics showing that the overall division between the rich and poor has widened.

In 1968, about one in eight Americans was living in poverty. Today one in seven, nearly 14 percent of the population, lives in poverty. Thirty years ago, about 50 percent of the poor lived in metropolitan areas. Today, 77 percent do, and the percentage of poor in central city areas, which tend to be minority neighborhoods, also has grown, the report says.

The result is that despite a national unemployment rate below 5 percent, the unemployment rate for African Americans is nearly 10 percent. The employment gap translates into an income gulf between minorities and non-Latino whites: Nearly 30 percent of African American and Latino families live below the poverty line, three times that for non-Latino whites.