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Newark offers visiting scholars portrait of inner city

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After speaking to a group of high school students recently, Roland Anglin asked what their dreams were.

One responded that he wanted to be "the biggest, baddest drug dealer in the neighborhood," said Anglin of the Edward J. Bloustein School for Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University.

"Until we can find ways to give that young person a chance, we cannot expect anything different," he said.

Thus began a day of testimony before the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a nonprofit continuation of the Kerner Riot Commission, born following the civil unrest in large cities -- including Newark -- during the 1960s.

The commission concluded then that "our nation is moving towards two societies, one black, one white -- separate and unequal."

Gathering yesterday at the New Jersey Historical Society on Park Place in Newark, scholars, law enforcement officials, community leaders and the public were invited to comment on how Newark and its residents are fairing 40 years later.

In the summer of 1967, following the arrest of a black cab driver who was beaten while in police custody, many of the city's residents took to the streets for six days battling with police, the national guard and each other. When it was over, 23 people were dead and more than 700 injured.

Whether they referred to the event as a riot or rebellion, the nearly 30 people who testified yesterday before the foundation all agreed that change is still needed in the city and surrounding areas.

Going further than just the two societies addressed in the original report, many scholars added a new, third society to include Latinos and said that many cultures and neighborhoods have become hyper-segregated, meaning that young people will never come in contact with someone not like them or be exposed to new and different thoughts.

Others spoke of the need for a third political party, one that gives a voice to the inner city.

Their testimony is being gathered in advance of a new report to be released by the foundation early next year.

Though invited by both the foundation and the Historical Society, Newark Mayor Cory Booker did not attend the event, nor did he send a deputy in his absence.

A spokeswoman who first said the mayor had a scheduling conflict later said Booker had never received an invitation. Regardless, his absence was felt and did not sit well with many attendees.

Former U.S. Senator Fred Harris, the chairman of the group, said yesterday that "it's important people see the emotion that people have with this issue."

Testimony has already been heard in Detroit, Los Angeles along with other cities and will continue over the next few weeks.

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