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Recalling a look at nation's problems

"It is a sad day when we must have metal detectors in our schools," said Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Henry G. Cisneros, referring to the recent barrage of gunfire at Dunbar High School in Northwest Washington. "[However,] we must do all we can to deal with the guns in our schools, and we must talk with children about guns."

Mr. Cisneros was the keynote speaker at the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation Presidential Commission Anniversary Dinner and Policy Forum Thursday night at the Mayflower Hotel.

About 300 guests braved the treacherous weather and icy roads to attend the dinner and a policy forum commemorating the anniversaries of three of the major commissions on crime, violence and the decay of inner cities during the 1960s.

The commissions - all convened by President Lyndon B. Johnson - were the 1967 Katzenbach Crime Commission, the 1968 Kerner Riot Commission and the 1969 Eisenhower Violence Commission.

No one present needed a history lesson to be reminded that the cities are once again in crisis, with crime supplanting jobs and the economy as Americans' No. 1 issue of concern.

Before being lauded for his work carrying out the spirit of the Kerner Commission, award recipient Roger Wilkins was careful to note the inescapable connection between the two: "Crime is going to continue until unemployment goes down," the journalist, civil rights historian and professor of history at George Mason University said during the pre-dinner reception. "People do bad things when they are disconnected from the economy."

Among the others receiving awards were Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, a former attorney general and chairman of the eponymous crime commission; former Sen. Fred R. Harris, who served as a member of the Kerner Commission; and lawyer/lobbyist and former Carter advisor Lloyd N. Cutler, the Eisenhower Violence Commission's executive director.

Guests listened intently to a host of distinguished speakers, many of whom, more than two decades ago, had addressed and proposed solutions for problems that continue to plague the nation's inner cities. After dinner, Yvonne Scruggs, director of the Urban Policy Institute at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, spoke of a misperception that is common among many Americans today:

"The increase of youth violence should concern our society . . . [but] violence among young people is not exclusive to young black males."

Addressing such concerns is part of the Milton Eisenhower Foundation's mission. Founded in 1981 by key members and staff of the three commissions, the foundation works with nonprofit, community-based organizations throughout the United States to improve the conditions of children and promote reconstruction in inner-city neighborhoods.

- Denise Barnes