

March 5, 1998

Heed the Warnings

By Brenda Payton

This time the report has the title "The Millennium Breach." Thirty years ago, it was called the "Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," better known as the Kerner Commission Report, compiled in the wake of the 1966 and 1967 summer riots.

The name may be different, but the news is about the same. In fact, the new study, released on the 30th anniversary of the Kerner Commission report, concludes the 1968 warning has come to pass- "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white - separate and unequal."

The new report, compiled by The Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation and The Corporation for What Works, takes a broad look at today's economy and society. While it finds some areas of improvement - the African-American middle class has grown - it also finds increasing inequality. The number of children living in poverty has increased by more than 20 percent; the unemployment rate among African-Americans is more than twice the national rate; neighborhoods and schools have resegregated; African-Americans and Latinos are disproportionately represented among the poor.

While unemployment is at a low of 4.7 percent, for African-Americans, the rate is 9.9 percent. An estimated 30 percent of Latino families and 28.4 percent of African-American families live below the poverty line that's three times the percentage of white families that are poor.

The causes of the continued inequity are complex but not difficult to see. The report cites continued job discrimination, documented in numerous studies, and an exodus of jobs from the city to the suburbs. For example, for the first three years of the 1990s, in 77 cities, 97 percent of the new businesses and 87 percent of the new entry-level jobs were in the suburbs.

And the prospects for African-American and Latino children trapped in the inner cities aren't very promising. According to the report, two-thirds

of African-American students and three-fourths of Latino students attend schools that are predominantly non-white.

The combination of racial segregation and concentrated poverty is daunting. Educators point out that schools with large numbers of poor students have lower test scores, higher dropout rates, inadequately prepared teachers and a small number of students headed for college.

The report's findings on the criminal justice system may be the most startling. Today's incarceration rate for African-American males is four times higher than the rate of black men in South Africa during apartheid. Four times. If current policies continue, that rate could get higher. In the early 1990s, one out of every four young African-American men was involved in the criminal justice system; by the late '90s, the ratio jumped to one in three.

The report places the poverty of urban minority communities in the context of the nation's expanding economy. It points out that between 1977 and 1988, the incomes of the richest 1 percent increased by 120 percent while the incomes of the poorest 20 percent decreased by 10 percent. The report attributes the widening income gap to the supply-side economics and tax breaks for the rich.

The news from "The Millennium Breach" isn't all discouraging, however. The report offers several concrete proposals based on successful programs. It recommends the full funding of the Head Start program and the continuation of that approach after children enter public school. It suggests the creation of federal job training, job creation and economic development programs.

Thirty years later, we would be well advised to heed the warnings of "The Millennium Breach." Unless we are willing to face further racial and class division well into the next century.